

A Love Story in East Germany

by Jeff Rodgers

Puk
COMICS



© Copyright Jeff Rodgers 2015

All rights reserved.

Published by Puk Comics in Edwardsville, Illinois. The name and logo are trademarks of Puk Comics.

www.pukcomicstrip.com

Quote from *Le Cimetière marin (The Graveyard by The Sea)*
by Paul Valéry

A Love Story in East Germany

Written by Jeff Rodgers

Before you begin...

This is a story that I had written in 2014 as a creative writing assignment. The assignment was to write a story during a certain time period. I had originally wanted to do a story in WWII, but the story ended up being too long. I decided to rewrite it and have it take place in 1970s Germany. During that time Germany was separated into two countries; East Germany and West Germany. The West was controlled by the US and Europe, while the East was controlled by the Russians. The one thing that separated the two was the Berlin Wall, built by the GDR (German Democratic Republic) in East Germany. Many East Berliners tried defecting to the West, a number of deaths were the result of these escape attempts. To my knowledge, there hadn't been a love story taking place within that time period (though I am more than willing to be wrong) so I decided to write it and this is what came of my efforts.

The story is mostly unchanged aside from a few edits that I have made to improve the story a bit. Any grammar or spelling errors are intentional and part of the story.

Apart from the setting and certain elements, the story and characters are fictional. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Sometime in 1974

East Berlin, Germany

I awoke to the sound of dogs barking in the distance, I rubbed my eyes and look toward the window. The wind flowed through, moving the curtains. It was still dark out. I got up from the couch and closed the window. I saw a woman wearing a revealing outfit on the street below, looking up and down the street. She was clearly a prostitute. She was always there, across the street, throwing her pride away just to make more money. Normally I'd call the authorities and let them take care of it, but I let it slide, knowing that the Stazi would punish her severely.

I walk away from the window, put on my blue silk robe and walk to the bathroom. I look into the mirror and at my face reflecting back at me. I remember wondering if I should dye my hair blonde. I had long brown hair, my friends had told me that I probably would look better blonde. I looked down at my body and realized that my body slightly thinner. The store didn't have food the day before, so I couldn't eat while I was at the school. I walked over to the kitchen and open my cabinet to find an unopened package of crackers. I open up the package and begin to eat. I ate about 5 crackers then I forced myself to stop. Food was scarce in those days, you couldn't eat everything in your house otherwise you would run out quickly.

I put the crackers away when I heard a knock on the door. I jumped, almost screamed, when I heard that knock. I looked at the wall clock nearby and saw that it was 2:00AM. I was confused, there was only one person who would show up this early in the morning. Another knock from the door, this time a word was spoken.

“Anna?” The voice wasn’t familiar to me, I couldn’t place it. How did he know my name? I hesitantly walked over to the door and opened it as far as the chain could extend. I saw an older man with long gray hair and beard. It was Johann, a man who had been working at the school for almost a year. It was strange seeing him there in front of my apartment door.

“Guten Morgen,” he said in a polite tone, “we need to talk.”

“Johann? can it wait till we’re at the school?”

“No, it can’t.”

I sighed, closed the door, undid the chain, and opened it this time allowing him to enter. He walks in holding a bag.

“What’s in that?” I asked. He grabbed inside the bag and pulled out a small tub of ice cream. My jaw had hit the floor. “How did you get that?”

He smiled, “I’d been saving it for a special occasion.” I grabbed a spoon from a drawer nearby and we both sat down at the kitchen table.

I asked, “What’s the occasion?” as I opened the tub.

“I’m having to make a difficult decision tonight, I thought I’d talk to you.”

I gave him a puzzled look, “Is it a risky decision?”

“Something like that.” He said, with a slightly more serious tone.

I looked at him, he seemed distracted looking around the room.

“Are you all right?” I ask. He put his finger over his mouth, telling me to be quiet. He got up and walked over to the air conditioner, which I barely used, and turned it on. The fan began making a sound as if it were hitting something. He walked over to the kitchen sink and turned on the water. He went to the bathroom and did the same thing to the sink in there. He returned to the table, sitting down right in front of me. I stared at him for a moment, before asking. “What’s wrong?”

“You and I are friends, right?”

I began to laugh, I stopped myself when I realized he was being serious. I said, “Of course, we are.”

He shook his head, not pleased with my answer. “Do you trust me?”

I looked at him in shock, he was not behaving like himself. Nonetheless, I looked at him with as serious expression as I could make and said, “Yes.”

“How is Hans these days?”

I became extremely confused, “We haven’t seen each other in three months.”

He produced a cold stare, a stare that I had never seen from him before. “We both know that’s not true.”

I was starting to become nervous, why was he asking about Hans? Why was he calling me a liar? I kept as much of my composure as I could. “What are you talking about?”

“You don’t have to play this charade anymore, Anna.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It’s not working anymore.”

“You’re scaring me, Johann.”

He sighed dejectedly, “I know you’re trying to protect him.”

I froze. “What?”

“You helped Hans plan an escape to the West and you’re pretending to not know of his whereabouts, even though you know exactly where he is.” I was speechless, looking him up and down, trying to figure out what he was getting at. I thought this was some kind of cruel joke, but he was not laughing. He pulled out a small pad of paper and a pen, the pen holding the seal of the Stasi. “Now, as you said, you and I are friends, so I’m going to give you something that they would punish me for.”

Hesitantly, I ask, “What’s that?”

“A chance at staying out of prison.”

I looked at him, at the pen and paper sitting in front of him. I didn’t know what to say, my mouth hung open in shock. The ice cream on the spoon had melted and was just liquid at that point. I looked at the spoon, put it in the tub and pushed it away from me. He looks at the tub as I do so.

“Aren’t you hungry?” He asks.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“you look famished.”

I just stared at the man who used to be my friend, my only friend, and said nothing. Headlights shined through the window as a car drove past the building. The silence was deafening. He broke the overdrawn silence, “You want a cigarette?”

I kept my mouth shut. "Here, take one of mine." He says as he pulls out a carton of cigarettes and puts it in between us. I stared at the carton for what seemed to be a long time. I grab the carton and take one of the cigarettes out. Johann produces a lighter from his coat and lights my cigarette. I took a drag of my cigarette as Johann walked to the kitchen counter and grabbed my ashtray, which he put at the center of the table. I blew smoke toward his face, he didn't react.

Finally, I ask, "What do you want?"

"Your version of events." He grabs a cigarette and lights it.

"As I told you, I've not seen him in three months."

"No, I'd like to start from the beginning," he said, with a smile as if he had won. "Where did you two meet?"

"I thought you would start with my family history?"

"You're an orphan, your foster parents died just as you left school. You forced yourself to participate in the FDJ."

"I wanted to be part of the Free German Youth."

"By choice or necessity?"

I just looked at him, giving a blank expression. "What do you think?"

He writes something down on the pad and looks back at me, asking again. "Where did you two meet?"

I sighed, "We met three years ago, at Qadmous, down the road from here."

"I know where it is."

"I was eating my breakfast when he asked if he could sit at my table. I almost turned him away, but I said yes. I asked him if he was gonna order anything, he said no. When I finished my breakfast and went to the school, he just sat there and didn't stop me. This happens for three days, and on the third day I ask him why he was always sitting at my table."

"What did he say?"

I smiled. "He smiled and told me that he needed to sit with the most beautiful woman in East Germany in order to be happy in life." I remembered his beautiful blue eyes, his smooth light skin, his black hair which he parted to show off his best side. I remember hearing his voice telling me that sentence as if it were spoken by a true angel. The smile that came afterwards, no words could express. Realizing that I was lost in

thought, I stopped smiling and continued. “After that, we started to see each other more and after two weeks we started dating.”

“What did you two do?”

“Walked, ate, took a bus, read, whatever we could to pass the time. Mostly we just talked.”

“What did you talk about?”

“His job as a farmer, my job as a teacher, what we both like, what we don’t like. When we ran out of things to talk about I would tell him about my stories.”

He interjected, “Yes, I forgot you were wanting to be writer.”

I continued, undaunted. “When I told him the stories he listened to every word, every detail that I gave him. He always listened to the very end, he always told me that I was an amazing writer, no matter how odd it was. He was always very charming.”

“What happened next?”

“We had our daughter, Hanna.” I pointed to a picture across the room, sitting on the bedside table. The picture was of you, three months after you were born. “He was ecstatic when he found out he was going to be a father.”

“He must’ve been proud.”

He was. When you were born he worked harder and longer to get the things that we needed to raise you. He always made sure that you were fed, making sure that you were happy. He was a great father.

I turned away from the picture. “After we had Hanna, he changed.”

“In what way?”

“He started talking about West Germany, how much better life would be over there. I kept telling him that it was good here, but he didn’t believe me. He started listening to different music, reading different books, meeting different people.”

“What kind of people?”

“I wouldn’t know, I never met them.”

A horn honks outside, johann gets up and looks toward the window. The girl must’ve found a client. I smiled at his expense. He sat back down and asked me, “Did you tell anyone about it?”

“No,” I tapped ashes into the ash tray, “I didn’t want to waste people’s time with my sob story. I figured I could try and see what was wrong for myself.”

I put out the cigarette in the ash tray and grab another one, he lit it. I continued, “I asked him what was going on, what he was doing, who he was seeing. We got into an argument, I told him that I wanted to stop his pointless dreaming. He...” I trailed off.

Johann leaned forward a little, putting his arms on the table. “Go on.”

I breathed heavily, choosing my words carefully. “He told me that he wanted to see Hanna grow up to be whoever she wanted to be. He wanted her to be free. I told him that she could do that here, he told me that living here was like living in a cage. He said the Communist party is full of idiots and that I was a fool to be on their side.” I felt something building in my chest, I took at a long drag of my cigarette to keep it from showing.

“What did you say to him?”

“I told him that we had no choice. He didn’t accept that, so I told him to go.”

He wrote in his note pad as he had been doing ever since I started talking. “And this exchange happened three months ago?”

I say, “Yes.”

“Where is Hanna now?”

“Why don’t you ask your Stasi friends where she is? I’m sure they know!”

“Please-“

“Why don’t you ask them where my father went while you’re at it? Why are you asking all these questions? Aren’t you the one that’s supposed to know everything?” I continued, undetered, “Your people have been around for all my life. You’ve taken my home, you’ve torn my family apart. You’ve made my friends disappear, some of their families don’t even know they are gone! You know where I work, where I eat, where I sleep, and you can’t find my daughter? Ha! Hans was right, you people are nothing but ficken scharlatane!”

He swept his hand across the table, throwing the ashtray across the room, and stood. “You want to them to come here and take you to prison where you will die, so be it!” he yelled. “I won’t stop them! I am

the reason that you still have a roof over your goddamn head. If you don't want me to help you, just say it and I will leave you here for my friends to find! They'll shoot you for just speaking to him, let alone helping him try to escape."

"I did not help him!"

"That won't matter when they put a bullet in the back of your head." He let his words sink in as he sat back down, his face red from his yelling. He asks slowly "Where is Hanna now?"

I look him in the eye and say, "She's at Victoria's."

"How do you know them?"

"Her mother and I are friends, our daughters started school around the same time."

"Does Hans know Victoria's mother?"

"Yes."

He sighs. "She's not at Victoria's."

I was confused, "How would you know?"

"We went to the house and she's not there Hans took her."

My eyes went wide with fear. "Well what are you doing here then? Why aren't you out there looking for him?!"

"Because he is not my main concern, you are." he said coldly. "Besides, we already found them."

I stared at him in disbelief. "What?"

"they were going through a tunnel to West Berlin. When 'my friends' found the tunnel it was collapsed." He put a silver ring on the table and pushed it toward me. "They found a body in the rubble, I need to know if this belonged to Hans."

I looked at him, then at the ring. I picked up the ring and examined it more closely. Your father wore a silver ring which he wore for good luck, it had a saying that he always stood by. I looked on the inside of the ring, my heart sank. At first I felt anger, toward the Stasi, toward Johann, even toward your father. I read the saying a few more times and I began to relax, knowing well that this was what your father wanted. I looked at Johann with a somber expression as I put the ring down.

I tell him, my voice shaking, "This was his."

"Did he wear it on his left hand?"

I almost looked up at him in surprise, but I quickly lowered my head and nodded. I felt him looking at me for a moment longer, unsure of whether to believe me or not. Finally he closed the pad and retracted the pen. He stood up, pointing at the ring. "You can keep it, I have no use for it." He went around my apartment, he said, "I'm sorry this happened."

a minute after the door closed, I looked at the saying again. I remember your father smiling at me as he told me what it said and began to cry.

Le vent se lève! ... il faut tenter de vivre!
The wind is rising! ... We must try to live!

Paul Valéry

Where you can find me...

You can find me on Twitter ([@JTeam95](#)), Tumblr ([jteam95.tumblr.com](#)), and Instagram ([@jteam95](#)). If you want to speak to me directly you can email me at: puk@jteam.us.