

Ruth DyckFehderau

Jericho*

GETTING THE BEARINGS

My student escort meets me at the airport. We lug my luggage, heavy with teaching materials, across Warsaw, in and out of cabs, up and down stairs, under busy streets, and across train tracks. The sidewalks, broken and rubble, pre-date World War II; my suitcase wheels are useless here. Finally, we arrive at the train station for the last leg of the journey and swing our burdens onto a train that stops for less than thirty seconds.

After collapsing into our seats, the student says, between gasps, "You're lucky we're both strong."

"Lucky? Why wouldn't we be strong?"

"Women are useless," she says, and massages blood back into her hands. "They don't lift anything. They just stand there, waiting for men to do the work."

I say nothing. What can I say? I've never met women like that.

The train pulls out of the station. Out the window, Warsaw, once flattened by Hitler, now a simulacrum rebuilt to an imagined, glorious, pre-War state that never was, slides blurry past my eyes.

My escort finds a pen and draws for me, overtop the fine print on my train ticket, a detailed map of gay and lesbian meeting places in the city in which I'll live, two hours away from Warsaw.

"You might need this," she says. "But please don't say I gave it to you. I'm not out at school."

Late the next evening, I sat slouched up against a sweaty, dark, restaurant window and twirled my fork in a plate of warmed-up *bigos* (sausage stew). I was still weary from days of travel, hadn't yet settled into my flat, but had to attend an academic conference at this mountainside hotel, my first duty of term. Sessions started in the morning. I ate my *bigos* slowly, savoring this one slow-cooked pleasure at the end of a very long day.

Off to the side, a self-important-looking man in a suit with name-tagged lapel waved from his chair and struggled to catch my eye. Undoubtedly a fellow conference-goer wanting small talk. I was jet-lagged, in no mood for pleasantries. I ignored him and focused on the oily swirls of cabbage in my *bigos*.

He persisted, gesturing broadly, and announced to no one I could see that the weather was fine.

My *bigos* became wholly fascinating.

Finally, he scraped his chair legs across the traffic-worn linoleum and got to his feet.

“You must be that woman teaching Queer Literature at the University.” He stood directly before me now, where I couldn’t ignore him, and wiped his smiling gaze on whatever parts of my body he could see around the tabletop.

I ignored the gaze and nodded reluctantly, my mouth full.

“This will be an interesting experience, I’m sure” (his grin widened), “because this is a Roman Catholic country. Even when the Russians were here, we taught our children right and wrong. We don’t have Queers in Poland.”

I almost choked on cabbage – not twenty minutes earlier, a woman had offered to lick me to sleep that night.

I put down my fork.

“Well, sir,” I said, confident in my queerness, comfortable outside the mainstream, “if you can say that, then you have records of the private thoughts of every Polish individual. Anything less would be the kind of assumption no self-respecting academic would make.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “I’m Professor So-and-So,” he said, and he extended his hand. “You’re a spirited woman. I like you. What you need is a good fuck.”

Jetlag chased away sleep that night and I couldn’t get his comment out of my head. After an hour of laying awake, I got up, tied on my runners, and lurched down to the hotel pub. On one end of the room, a brightly costumed dancing troupe – not my scene. At the other, a haphazard vodka-soaked circle of about twenty name-tagged academics. I couldn’t muster up that much collegiality just then and headed for a

seat at the bar when someone waved to me through the cigarette haze – a group of queers, also name-tagged, their wooden table heaped with beer mugs. This I could manage.

After I introduced myself and we laughed about the cross-cultural triumph of gaydar, an American professor leaned over and laid his hand on my arm: “Tomorrow, you must come to the American Lit panel. We’ll witness the making of Polish academic history. I’ll save you a seat.” The Chair of Philology at an important Polish university, he said, was giving a paper on camp in two novels. She was known for terminating teaching contracts of gays who refused to mount a heterosexual front. Her paper was a political act, he said, a reluctant admission that, even in Poland, compulsory heterosexuality would have to end.

Two beers later, he told me my invitation to Poland was part of this complicated agenda:

“You’ll teach queer material,” he said, “and then-“

“I’m teaching four Canadianist courses,” I interrupted, “but people here are talking only about the queer one.”

“It’s why you’re here, honey, get used to it. You’ll teach queer material,” he said, sliding the last bit of foam down his throat, “and then you’ll leave. They’ll have paid their lip service to tolerance without changing a bloody thing.”

“Do they have to change, though? Doesn’t that assume our way is better? Do we have to transform Polish academia into a Western model? Isn’t that a little like

colonization?” I was a seasoned traveler, accustomed to biting my tongue when in different cultures, to interfering as little as possible.

A smile played on his lips. “Let’s see what happens to your easy tolerance after a few months here,” he said.

I did go to the Philology Chair’s presentation. Unlike other papers at the conference, this one was poorly researched, badly written, and the writer gave little credence to camp. But the room was packed and we all listened carefully as she pushed terms like “cross-dressing” and “gender subversion” from her stiff lips. And even though distaste dripped from every word, and even though we feared she was scouting more gays to vilify, we all clapped politely at the end of her paper, pretending it was a job well done.

SETTLING IN, STANDING OUT (DIFFERENT FOR YOU)

From the outside, the Philology building would have looked like yet another nondescript structure from the Russian era were it not for the imposing figures cut by two massive statues of the miner’s wife and her husband, vestiges of a former life when the building had been a theatre for Communist rallies. Inside, most things Communist had been removed. The high-ceilinged Reading Room, the wide echo-y hallways, the easily swept wooden floors laid in a tweed pattern, the place might always have been a University.

I pushed open the Department door – and met effusive, unreserved warmth. Within minutes, I had invitations to local events, festivals, and homes. Clearly, I was welcome.

And just as clearly, I was an oddity, a curiosity, an exhibit. A few days into term, a student approached me in the hallway.

“Professor, I don’t want to insult but I must ask. Are you A Lesbian?”

“I’m not insulted,” I said. “Why do you ask?”

“You’re a professor,” she said, “and you wear comfortable shoes.”

I had not yet noted my colleagues’ shoes. There, in my flats and loose jeans, I looked around at the women in the hallway. The professors *were* dressed to the nines. Skirts and blouses and jackets and stockings and lipstick and bracelets and scarves – and excruciating heels. Most woman students wore tourniquet jeans, also underpinned by stilettos. The student standing before me, I noticed, teetered precariously on four-inch spikes, narrow straps slicing angry creases into her bulging toes.

“Our class is on the fourth floor,” I said, “and you have to walk all those stairs! Don’t your feet *hurt?*”

The next day, thinking back, I realized I hadn’t answered her question.

At the local fitness centre, phrasebook in hand, I ask for a pass to the weight room.

“Aerobics room, you mean,” the receptionist says, through the phrasebook.

“No, weight room. I lift weights.”

“Wait here.” She leaves me at the counter and runs into the weight room, returning a minute later with a young man.

“I am schoolteacher,” he says. “I speak English small bit. You want aerobics room.”

“No, I want a three-month pass to the weight room.”

“Weight room, man. Aerobics room, woman.”

“This woman, weight room.”

A phone call has to be made, then another one. The receptionist’s giggles into the phone betray her discomfort in asking these questions. Eventually, permission is granted, and I have several forms to fill out.

When I finally enter the weight room, the first thing I see is the walls – bedecked in yellowed, Scotch-taped, Playboy centerfolds. The second thing I see is that a small crowd has gathered.

The best thing to do, I decide, is to ignore them and go about my workout as usual. I reach for a barbell. Eleven male arms immediately stretch out, offering chivalrously to hoist it for me.

“That really is not the point,” I say.

The schoolteacher translates and eleven men step back, laughing uncomfortably. I continue my workout, followed from station to station by this small crowd of men who talk amongst themselves in Polish, count out loud the reps in my sets, and point without reservation to my muscles and tendons straining under the weights.

I try to ignore the gazes. I focus instead on the barbell in my hands and notice that, despite attempts to file them off, the words "Property of the USSR" persist there in four languages, iron remnants of a bygone occupation.

The schoolteacher periodically brings me lighter weights and asks me please to lift them instead. Each time, I politely say no, thank you, and reach for the heavy weights to which I'm accustomed.

Finally, he lays a hand on my sweaty arm and says, "Men, big weights, big muscles. Women not big muscles. Women, slim, sexy." He gestures an appropriate woman shape with his hands.

I am fed up. I lower the weights to the ground and, hands on hips, face him directly.

"Are you saying," I ask, "that I'm not sexy??"

He apologizes, profusely, and retreats into the crowd. On my way out of the gym later, he approaches me shyly and asks if I have a boyfriend and whether he can take me to dinner.

“Multiculturalism is important to Canadian identity,” I lectured one afternoon several weeks into the term. The fall weather was warm; I slipped off my jacket and continued in the sleeveless shirt I wore underneath. “but many writers say it’s been ghettoized, relegated to Heritage festivals and – Yes?”

Seven hands waved in the air.

“Professor Ruth, why do you make your arms big with muscles? Do you want to be a man?”

“A man??? I don’t understand. Why do you think I’d want to be a man?”

“I want to be boy,” she says. We’re on a train again, my student escort and I, travelling to Warsaw.

“What do you mean by that? Do you want to stand to pee? Do you want testicles and a penis?”

Revulsion washes over her face. “Penises are Dis-Gusting.” Spit flies from her lips as she says it. “But women have no power. Nobody takes women seriously.”

“What are you talking about? I’m a woman; I’m a powerful person. People take me seriously.”

“Yes,” she says, slowly, leaning her head against the window, “but you’re Canadian. It’s different for you. Here, heads of businesses or schools are always men, even if women are more qualified. I hate men, but being a man must be better than being a woman. I want to be a man. A man with no penis.”

When two women walk by our compartment, she whispers, “Look at those chicks. Did you see the knockers on that dark one? She just wants someone to fuck her and show her what’s what.”

Students in other degrees and from other universities came to my lectures to see “the Canadian” even if they couldn’t receive credit. Soon I had twice as many students as I had been hired to teach, and almost all were women.

At every opportunity, they asked about Canadian families, marriages, and relationships. My answer was always the same: “Canada is diverse. Everyone approaches these topics differently. There’s no Canadian standard.”

“But everyone wants to be married. Everyone wants children.”

“No –“

“You’re old enough – where are your children?”

“I don’t want children.”

“You’re just saying that. Everyone wants children.”

I’d shake my head, we’d return to course material, and the next class, they asked the same questions again.

Everywhere, I saw traditional values – and alongside them, a thriving subversive movement. One colleague, who had lost contracts for refusing to pretend heterosexuality, stated, calmly over breakfast, “I’m planning a queer syllabus. It

might get me fired. I won't hide or compromise good teaching just because this is a Catholic country.”

It dawned then, eggshell in hand. In Canada, I'm protected by academic freedom, and in Poland, I was the one professor who taught queer material with limited repercussion; by accident of nationality, I'd never have to teach with that much defiance, under the conviction that each class might be the one that ends my career. I stared, silent, at my boiled egg.

Students became my tour guides. They took me into cozy corners and underground pubs I never would have found alone. They showed off city walls and town wells pre-dating the English language and shiny cinema multiplexes under gaudy Golden Arches. They told legends of dragons in underground lairs and brothers killing each other over church steeples and cited statistics of how many złoty a new shopping complex had cost to build. They said the Philology building in which I taught was once Gestapo HQ, and the basement classrooms, where they studied German, interrogation chambers.

What they did not show me was anything built between 1949 and 1990. When I asked about the Cyrillic alphabet signs painted over in Polish or about the mining statues and relics or about the Communist concrete tenement flats everywhere, everywhere, everywhere, they called them “ugly. Russian.” and changed the subject – usually to ask more questions about Canadian marriages, families, and relationships.

MOUNTING RESCUES

In early November, I walked into a classroom a few minutes early. Four women students were already there, chatting, rubbing their feet, looking at a pen. I asked what was interesting about the pen. “It’s hard work to be thin,” one student said. Her finger didn’t work for purging anymore – she now triggered her gag reflex with a pen. Without compunction, she mimed her method. The others nodded enthusiastically.

I must have looked surprised.

“Look,” she said matter-of-factly, in the “we” voice my students often used as if they all thought alike. “We don’t want to be fat. We want to be beautiful. Like Julia Roberts.”

“Beauty doesn’t require an eating disorder!”

“Maybe not for you,” she said. “But here, we have to do it. There’s no other way to get a man.”

Later, I realized that moment was a turning point. After watching that pen disappear down her throat, I began to change. I incorporated into my teaching stories of women making their own lives on their own terms with, or, more often, without men. Like a feminist from the 70s, I used photos of women in comfortable clothing, women with many wrinkles, or women who were heavy-set. I worked queer material into each of my courses, expecting students to resist. I bought the chunkiest pair of boots I could find. I stuffed body-hugging clothes into the bottom of my suitcase. I wore sleeveless tops that exposed the muscles in my arms. I took woman students to weight rooms and showed them the ropes. I moved with large movements. I took up space. When

one student boasted that her lunch consisted of half a banana, I placed my own lunch bag, open, on the desk so that my students could see its (considerable) contents. And as often as possible, I ate in public places on campus. I stuck out like a missionary at a pornography convention.

WEARING DOWN

Men in grocery stores approach me and gesture for blowjobs. They pull out their dicks and masturbate openly when I walk by on the sidewalk. One day, as I walk alongside the Autobahn-highway, where speeds regularly exceed 200 kmph, a blue Fiat pulls over. I yell to the driver, without really looking, that I don't speak Polish; he'll have to ask someone else for directions. I keep walking. He backs up – on the highway! – and pulls beside me again. I repeat myself, this time in German, but he gestures frantically. His pants are down, he's erect, he wants me to finish him off.

I give him the finger and keep walking.

And yet, I'm strangely invisible. When my partner visits me there, six men mug him (unsuccessfully) on the Gdansk train. I stand nearby, ready to fight if necessary, and am untouched, unnoticed. I'm carrying all our money but it doesn't occur to them to mug me. Women don't carry the money.

“Oh, you're not a lesbian! Your 'partner' is a man! You're straight!” My students seemed relieved when they met him.

“No, I’m not lesbian, but I’m definitely not straight.” I said no more – my personal life had nothing to do with my teaching; my students’ continued generosity didn’t entitle them access to my sex life.

And yet, for women there, the University was a place where boundaries between personal and professional fizzled away and ultimately dissolved. My dean burst from his office when I laughed in the hallway to say that it sounded like I was having an orgasm and he had to come watch. I refused a colleague’s request for sex – he turned and asked the same question of a student ten minutes later. They disappeared into a classroom and the door clicked shut behind them. Several students offered “favors,” as if exchanging “favors” for grades was a commonplace transaction. Even if I thought personal lives were private, separate, italicized, my students and colleagues clearly did not. Many women put up with harassment, or if necessary solicited it, every day. To them, harassment was a given, an unavoidable part of life, like the acrid, ubiquitous pollution or the rusty water that ran iron-red from every tap. They said I should learn to live with it.

I thought back to the Philology Chair who had terminated contracts of gay professors. What must it have been like, her journey to the top of that small academic heap? How much of her homophobia was a defense against misogyny, a redirection of oppression sent her way? How would it have felt to give a paper on a queer topic like camp and so publicly endorse the very thing you had so publicly, and for so long, shunned, scorned, resisted?

I'm standing outside a gay bar in a small Polish city. I'd never expect it to be an establishment of any sort – it doesn't even have a sign. It's just the first floor of an old house. The bouncer recognizes my companion and nods us inside. After my eyes adjust to the light, I see a makeshift bar in the foyer, cases of beer and vodka stacked in the kitchen, wobbly tables and chairs leaning against walls in the living room. The dining room has been designated a low-ceilinged dance floor. The walls are sponge-painted in an apricot blend and hung with framed paintings of Romantic figures languishing in placid landscapes. The place fills up quickly and the air turns blue with smoke. But this is a house – it's not designed for pounding music and crowds of drunken dancers: a section of sponge-painted drywall, jiggled loose by vibrations, abandons its moorings from time to time and floats down, exposing crumbling mortar and brick behind. No matter – the people sitting beneath the wall raise their arms to catch it. The owner comes running with a rubber mallet and Scotch tape, taps the drywall back into place, tapes it there, and hopes for the best. The wall stays in place for no more than thirty minutes. The owner's one roll of Scotch tape must last the night.

I'm here tonight because I've been told drag queens are coming. I assume this means a staged performance of some kind and I wonder if they'll lip-sync Polish, German, or English songs. I've heard that some post-Communist cities are developing elaborate drag communities that push at the boundaries of drag convention.

This is not one of those cities.

The queens show up around midnight. But they're nothing like drag queens I know – huge, brash, glittery life forms sucking up all the space in any given room. No, these

are two frightened men wearing stark makeup with women's dresses that don't quite fit, bowed and hairy limbs sticking out from underneath and planted into heavy men's shoes. They glance constantly over their shoulders to see if the place is being raided. They don't perform; they try to hide, a surprisingly difficult thing to do in a crowded house with so many nooks, crannies.

Word is out that a foreigner is there. Soon one of the queens asks to speak to me and a translator is summoned. We take the corner table by the unstable wall, ready to catch it periodically. S/he wants to know about Canadian drag. I've spent a lot of time with queens. I know the etiquette: when he's in drag, I should, without hesitation, call her "she." But this "drag" is so tentative, so unconvincing, that I have a hard time buying in and trip up over my pronouns. Uncomfortably aware of the ironies of the situation, I describe Canadian drag to this young...man.

"The Canadian drag queens I know don't want to be women," I say. "They don't want even to look like women. The queens I've met generally want to wear women's clothing and makeup, but in such a way that they look like drag queens. Their drag is about conscious performance; it has its own style, it is its own fashion."

"What if you want to be a woman?" he asks.

"Well, if you actually want breasts and a vagina and menstruation" (I watch his face closely; he lights up on "breasts" and cringes on "menstruation"), "then in Canada you'd probably be a transsexual." I hear myself essentializing a complicated community.

By now, a crowd has gathered, and I'm getting more questions than I do in a classroom. They tell me about drag they've seen in far-off Polish centers, and I tell

them about Canadian drag shows and diva music, about empresses and queens adopting daughters and showing them their tricks.

“For instance,” I say, “an older queen might tell a younger one that four pairs of nylons will cover up his hairy legs.”

Someone runs out to a late night drugstore to buy four pairs of nylons for the queen across the table.

“Or,” I continue, “she might show him how to use a glue stick to blot out his eyebrows altogether and draw them on thin and high. Or that a stick foundation will cover his rough complexion.”

By now, several men are taking notes on pieces of cardboard ripped from beer cases.

I begin to talk about drag kings – and they cut me off.

“Drag KINGS???” (they’re almost in unison), “HAW HAW HAW!! How riDICulous! Women are so stupid!”

And the wall comes a-tumbling down.

Halfway through the semester, students began asking to meet me privately. Soon my office hours and free time were booked, and even more students lined up outside my office, hoping to catch me between appointments.

Nearly every one of them wanted to tell me a secret. One woman ate more than she wanted, thinking that no one would marry a fat woman and she'd be able to "live in peace." (I didn't think her overweight but, given her motivations, thought it best not to say so.) Three women showed me baggy pants they had purchased and now wore in private. One of the few male students shyly lifted his pant legs to reveal red socks. In his circles, he said, they signaled homosexuality. Two women were cutters and showed me their scars, one woman was pregnant, and another hated her father for his working-class origins – she boasted of killing his kitten with her bare hands and called herself a dragon-slayer, the kitten a monster, and the act itself like squeezing warm bread.

But most secrets went something like this:

"I've known for many years that I'm a lesbian. I don't love men, I love women. Of course, I'll marry a man whom I'll probably grow to hate and have children. I have no choice, but my children will have a choice. I want someone in the world to know who I really am. You leave soon. You can take my secret to Canada with you."

So many students said some version of this that I wasn't convinced they were all lesbians. I didn't think they were lying – the risks were too great to lie about such a thing. But I wondered if some of them saw lesbianism as the only option other than marriage and a life they knew they would hate, the life of their mothers.

I suggested options outside marriage, but most of them would rather live unhappy lives than disappoint loved ones. At the very least, I wanted to out them to one another so they could talk with someone of like mind – but that would be disrespectful. All I could think to do was to tell them about the few gay venues I had

found, the few “safe” spaces available, knowing that even these were likely misogynistic, and hope they would eventually run into one another there. All the while, I was uncomfortably aware that these frustratingly insignificant actions would explode their lives. Would they ever again feel secure? And who was I – protected Canadian with little use for traditional gender roles – to advise them on anything?

My student escort runs her hand along the brick wall, feeling for a hidden latch. A door opens, and then another, the bouncer nods, and we're inside another gay club. Disco lights bounce off black walls, the room throbs. Never have I seen a dance floor so awash in abandon. Two startlingly beautiful young men approach and usher me to a speaker in the corner, the best seat in the house. As the music moves the room, they half-undress and perform for me in a spectacularly gymnastic way: more than half their dance is done on their hands. When they're finished, they buy me a beer, bow awkwardly, and disappear into the crowd. A striking woman in the corner catches my eye and smiles. She's a few years older than me and has the look of someone who's at home here but who lives a different life outside these walls. I glance across at my student and see she's dancing happily, doing fine. Life is good; my guard is down.

I'm on my way to ask the woman in the corner to dance when two men beckon – “Dance with us. We are gay” – and they pull me into a sandwich between them, tight enough to feel erections in front and behind. The larger man, who is very tall, reaches around and pushes his partner into a kneeling position in front of me. And then he spoons me, taking my body weight onto his huge backward-leaning torso. Wanting to experience Polish nightclub culture, I don't resist this unfamiliar dance –

until I realize he's using my body to masturbate and his partner is miming eating me out. I consider myself neither sexually conservative nor naïve, especially when it comes to complicated queer scenarios. But here, with two self-professed gay men plying me into overt heterosexual acts, I'm admittedly . . . confused.

I disengage, and look for that woman. A well-spoken Russian man intercepts my path, asking for a dance. As we dance, he tells me that he's straight and owns the club. He and his Russian-mafia friends went to Canada and learned that gay clubs tend to be financially stable because of their guaranteed clientele. They've set up gay clubs in three Polish cities, he says, and they're all flourishing. I'm not sure I believe him, but he seems a nice enough man. When the song ends he thanks me, kisses my hand, and disappears through a black door behind the bar.

I see that woman again, catch her eye. We meet in the middle of the floor, and dance for a long, long time. I don't speak Polish or Russian, and she speaks no English, but we manage in German and a smattering of French. She's from a large Polish city, she says, and moved here when she married. It turns out that I've met her husband – I remember him vividly – but we move away from that topic quickly. Eventually, we stop talking altogether and move less and less, until our feet barely stir.

Another man kisses his boyfriend at the bar, approaches us, and asks me to dance. The change of pace is startling as he whirls me around the floor and dips me back often. In the last dip, at the moment I rely on him to hold my weight, he plunges his hand down my v-neck, between my breasts, and wipes a handful of sweat off my abdomen. Before I can respond, still holding me in the dipped position, he tips my

chin so that I look him in the eye, and he licks my sweat off his hand, one salty finger at a time.

I stop dancing, stand up straight, open-mouthed at this brazenness. He tries to pull me into a kiss. My elbows come up, stopping him.

“But you’re gay!” I say.

“I did not say I am gay,” he says, in broken English. “You assume because I kiss the man.”

For the second time that night, I’m speechless.

I turn around and find the woman again. We dance wordlessly, as I wonder what has become of my queerness, my resistance to categories, that which has for so long been part of my very identity.

The snow was falling in the mountains, filling the town with intimate stillness. We were here for the last conference of the semester and were staying in an old, colossal house. The steps were grooved from thousands of feet, the rafters smelled of a century of wood polish, the beds were heaped with down quilts. Everything about the place bespoke a solemn comfort.

I’d screened a film for everyone that night, and now we squeezed into worn couches upstairs. I buried my nose in the steam of my mulled wine and smiled. This was how I wanted to remember Poland – a roomful of contented people singing along with the guy with the guitar, dancing half stooped under low rafters, collapsing in laughter

over jokes I couldn't understand, while the whiff of marijuana seeped through floorboards from a daring student's basement transgression. I'd come to love these people, this complicated passionate culture where Old and New Worlds, locked in battle, regularly united to undo a Communist past. I stayed until the guitar guy stopped playing. When someone hauled out a ghetto blaster with scratchy speakers at 1 AM and put on Leonard Cohen, I heeded the call of the quilt downstairs. I fell asleep to the slow swells of "Hallelujah" coming through the ceiling.

Suddenly a burst of cold air – my blankets yanked back – a tongue in my mouth – a hand under my shirt – a heavy body squirming on top of me, pushing air out of my lungs.

I sat up quickly, tumbling the intruder to the floor. The clock read 4 AM.

It took a second for my eyes to adjust. I groped about my sheets for the mouthguard that had been in my mouth. And then I saw, in the moon- and snowlit night, that he was a colleague, one with some authority over me at the university. I was repulsed, but knew it would not go well with me if I let him know that. My visitor's privileges wouldn't extend that far. I swallowed bile, bit my tongue, and lied:

"You know," I said, "You're an attractive person."

"Well, yes," he said.

"But I'm not interested in this. I don't sleep with colleagues or students." This much, at least, was true.

He was polite, apologetic. As he collected himself, I asked if I'd misled him.

“Oh no,” he said. “That sexy film – it put me in the mood. You screened it, so I knew you would be, what is the word, game.”

He left me alone. The music upstairs moved on to bouncy Polish pop. I turned over, buried my head in down, and tried to sleep. His matter-of-fact explanation was still replaying in my head when “Hallelujah” swayed the house again.

THE END OF TOLERANCE

The next day, we crowded under the rafters for a conference session. Every sofa was full and twenty people sat on the floor. In her presentation, a student referred to Poland’s abortion laws.

I interrupted her mid-paper, mid-sentence, in front of sixty Polish professors and students: “Abortion is *illegal* here?! Don’t women in this country have even *basic* human rights?”

It was extremely rude – the room changed instantly. Faces fell, heavy with the look of being demeaned by someone they cared about. I thought of the American professor who had predicted the erosion of my tolerance – and I didn’t care. After the student finished her paper, I pretended to listen to lame defenses of the abortion law, but I was fed up. Despite being surrounded by people who fought the system, by evidence of a flourishing underground, I wanted to muscle traditional Poland into changing faster. And I wanted the last word – one that would put these, these *men* in their place.

A few years ago, Polish citizens voted in a right-wing government that legitimizes and legislates homophobia. The Ministry of Education proposed a law that “prohibit[s] the promotion of homosexuality and other deviance” and punishes, fines, fires, and imprisons those who “allow gay organizations into schools.”¹ The queer underground reacted immediately, fast, strong, focused: the law was never passed. Instead, the government disallowed “homosexual propaganda to youth” without defining “propaganda,” claiming that gay teachers homosexualize students. The activists are working hard.

I still communicate with several Polish lesbian students. A few did as they said and settled into married, child-centered lives. Others became skilled activists, some staying to do what it takes, some leaving Poland for countries where they can more safely live queer lives, quickly becoming leaders in European queer politics. One left, but couldn't function away from her family; she moved back home, back into the closet. One came out to her parents and was put under lock and key (she and her girlfriend eventually managed to leave Poland), one grew tired of being closeted and is preparing to give up her schoolteacher career so that she can come out, and one married her boyfriend on the condition that she keep her girlfriend. Most, I've never heard from again.

It's laughable to suggest that Canada is discrimination-free; in the end, this is not an Us-and-Them story. I'm still confident in my queerness, comfortable outside the mainstream, convinced traditional gender and sex categories are dangerous. But the

¹ “Ministry of Education: Directors will lose their jobs if they invite gays,” *Campaign Against Homophobia*, March 16, 2007, <http://kampania.wordpress.com/2007/03/16/ministry-of-education-directors-will-lose-their-jobs-if-they-invite-gays/>

“Orzechowski: Punishment for homosexuality and other deviance,” *Campaign Against Homophobia*, March 16, 2007, <http://kampania.wordpress.com/2007/03/16/orzechowski-punishment-for-homosexuality-and-other-deviance/>

oppressor/oppressed boundary isn't so very clear. I'm uneasy with the struggle between cultural tolerance and human rights. And I'm deeply troubled by how quickly I redirected oppression sent my way, how swiftly my behavior changed under the old smog of sexism when my usual supports and safe spaces were gone.

THE LAST WORD

Every now and again, I think about Professor So-and-So and his claim that Poland has no Queers. Perhaps one day he'll learn, some panoptic representative will tell him, about that night in the gay bar when I danced and danced with his beautiful wife.

**Details have been changed to protect identities of people involved.*

Author Bio

Ruth DyckFehderau (PhD) teaches in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She has published fiction and creative non-fiction in anthologies and literary journals such as: *Out Here: Local and International Perspectives in Queer Studies*; *Edmonton On Location: River City Chronicles*; *Torquere: Journal of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Studies Association*; *Prairie Fire: A Canadian Magazine of New Writing*; *Flaming Prairies: The Queer Issue*; and *Work of Arts*, among others. Ruth has also published scholarly writing and a number of her short plays have been professionally produced.

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