

ALL THIS WOOD BETWEEN US

Romania, 2010

Sophie van Llewyn

Between Victor and me lay thirty-one years and a wooden table. We stare at the muddy waters of the Danube, avoiding each other's eyes.

His eyes were all I thought of in the interrogation room of Border Security. The communist authorities kept me there for a day, prodding me with questions, taking my car apart, searching for clues that I was trying to defect instead of vacationing in France. Swallowing down my fear, I wondered what would happen if I stood up and walked back instead of forward.

Victor isn't what you'd expect from a former agent of the Secret Services. White receding hair, oversized glasses – he looks like a grandparent. I don't. My hair is cut in an impeccable bob and dyed the colour of amber. I wear contact lenses, coloured ones. Nowadays, nobody knows the true colours of my eyes.

I tell Victor about the cleaning company I own in Germany. I don't tell him about the old-lady arses I wiped for twenty years.

He says, 'I always knew you had it in you. If it weren't for your brother, you'd have graduated from the Uni. Never ended up as a village teacher.'

'I never told you that,' I say. 'We didn't talk much when you visited, remember?' He looks down at his hands, takes a sip from his coffee. 'You know this from your files.'

Victor kept an eye on me after my brother was arrested.

He says, 'After communism fell, I quit the Services. It was a dead end. I began driving into Turkey, I loaded my trunk with children's clothing. Here, it sold like crazy. I made a small fortune.'

'A dead end?' I say. 'How so? You thrived there.'

He throws another lump of sugar into his coffee. 'When you left, Border Security called us. I'd been sitting by the phone the whole day. Waiting. I told them to let you go.'

He lays his hand on the table, an open invitation. Mine moves slowly towards his, but it's too far. There is now no point in crossing all this wood between us.

SPRING COMES TO LATVIA

Amanda O'Callaghan

Under the grey-blue ice, she is floating. A long plait, her heavy red coat, those useless mittens. From the upstairs window, I watch the trees for tiny fingers of green. Soon, the birds will return. In the distance, the lake is relenting, melting its icy heart.