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Berlin, May 1946



Hans W. Claussen, 1946 (Berlin Stadtmuseum Modearchiv)

West of the Tierpark on Ku'damm, among the half-ruined buildings, the cafés had reopened, lining the seven metre wide sidewalks cleared for round tables and mismatched chairs. At first it was quite the spectacle.

After all, out of the 235 buildings that lined Kurfürstendamm only forty-three were inhabitable, the rest were ruins. But soon the theatres and the cabarets reopened, along with the hairdressers and the tailors.

The GIs brought Lucky Strikes and jazz. Sitting at a street café near the *Burgkeller* restaurant on a warm summer evening a gal could usually count on one of the fellows in uniform to buy her a cup of coffee and sometimes even a whole pack of cigarettes or a chocolate bar. A lucky strike indeed, considering how much they were worth on the black market. A pack of American cigarettes equalled a week's supply of potatoes and bread. With or without the ration cards, the feeling of hunger never went away — the cigarettes helped to suppress it, but they were too valuable to be smoked.

In the evenings, the cafés and cabarets filled up with men in uniforms and young women. Most of the girls were not even eighteen. Some looked weary and tired but freshly washed after a day of hard work in the rubble. Others managed to look as if they hadn't worked a day in their lives, with perfectly curled hair and manicured nails. In the smoke-filled bars the girls smiled and sipped their drinks, or danced with the boys into the small hours, pretending not to need any sleep, pretending to be carefree and restless.

Where did you learn to speak English like that, the boys ask. In London, before the war, she answers. That amuses them immensely; they become more at ease, as if suddenly talking to one of their own, and they buy new rounds of drinks. Of course, then more questions come her way. Where do you work, where do you live, what did you do before the war? As long as they're entertained by her stories, they keep ordering more food and drinks. Then the other questions come. Do you have a boyfriend, what types of men do you like, which one of us is your type?

Both of her parents died during the bombings, she tells them. Before the war, her father was lecturing at the university — he was an English literature professor. Whenever he travelled, he took her sister Elke and her along to different cities in Europe. They spent a lot of time at the British Museum while he gave guest lectures. Now Elke is working as an interpreter at the British command headquarters. Her husband was killed on the eastern front in 1943.

Since the arrival of the Allied troops she's had many jobs. The first few weeks were the hardest: no food, no electricity and Soviets creeping behind every corner, attacking women, raping, pillaging. All women were

ordered to clear the rubble in their neighbourhoods, so she and her sister joined the rubble chains, passing the buckets of dirt and stones, day after day, for weeks, until their backs hurt and their hands had blisters and cuts. Elke broke down first and decided to look for other ways to get ration cards. She exchanged a bookcase full of English books that their father had collected for a sewing machine and started making dresses out of curtains and sheets. The elderly woman who took the precious book collection was probably going to burn them for heat in the wintertime, along with the antique bookcase. Elke made and traded two dresses, but she could not find any more fabric. There was a serious shortage after the Soviets had confiscated all the fabrics they found and shipped them to Moscow, along with everything else that they could get their hands on.

Every day she would come home from the rubble sites and help Elke with some clothes. Manipulating the needle through the fabric after carrying buckets of bricks and shoving carts of debris all day was painful. Elke started using all of the materials that she could find, dishrags, tablecloths, army blankets. She traded more furniture for the neighbours' curtains.

One day Elke put on one of her new dresses and went to all the newspaper editors in the Western sector asking for work. A paper in the British zone took her as a typist. She continued to sew late into the night. As long as she dug up fabrics or cut up old clothes, she had something to trade with. After a while other women in their building started coming to Elke with their own fabrics, asking her to make them new dresses.

As soon as the paper needed another typist, Elke brought her sister in and they were both free from the hard rubble labour. But the paper couldn't pay them as much and the food cards were worth less than those issued for clearing rubble. However, with the sewing business at night and occasional good bargains, they made do. Then Elke met a British officer and he found her the interpreter job at the command headquarters.

Unlike Elke, she figured out a way of not having a boyfriend who would take care of her in exchange for whatever she would yield. Most of the boyfriends had wives and children back home. She also couldn't stand seeing some of the other girls at the newspaper being passed around among the young officers and then left with nothing, only to start all over again, making themselves pretty and going to the dance halls to meet someone new. It was easier to clear the rubble for ration cards, she

thought. Instead, she managed to avoid this game by never talking to the same group of guys twice. Whenever she ran into someone that she had already talked to, she would hurry off, saying that she was meeting someone else. That way she remained elusive but still got her share of coffee and cigarettes.

She stayed with the newspaper and helped out in the photography lab as well. One of the photographers asked her if she would be interested in posing for some fashion shots. Who on earth is interested in fashion pictures nowadays, she asked him. Several ateliers reopened on the Ku'damm, he told her, and the dressmakers were receiving orders from the Allied officers' wives. Fashion magazines had been in print again since October 1945 and now also featured photographs along with the illustrations.

From the newspaper articles she helped type, she knew that the first fashion shows on Ku'damm resumed in the fall of 1945. Only a year later over 200 stores had reopened there, with many fashion stores among them. She agreed to pose for a fashion picture and was introduced to Hans Claussen, who was designing a whole new collection and wanted her to pose in three different dresses. Two other girls were also photographed. Both of them worked at the atelier, modelling the ready-made dresses for the Allied customers, while helping with the sewing. When one of them became pregnant, she was called to replace her.

She juggled between the newspaper and the Claussen atelier on Ku'damm and sewing with her sister at home on the weekends. The wages were low, but at least she didn't have to clear the rubble all day.

The young officers buy another round of drinks and ask her to dance, but she refuses. She has to go, she tells them. She has to look rested tomorrow. There is a photo shoot by the Reichstag first thing in the morning. The young officers don't believe her, but she manages to escape them anyway, taking one of the boys' cigarette packs with her.

Outside, it is dark but still warm. She runs along the partially-lit streets. Two couples come towards her, soldiers and young women, strolling down Ku'damm, headed for a dance hall.

Her sister is asleep by the time she comes home. Elke is older and wiser and knows better than to fraternize with the Allied boys — unless they are high-ranking officers, that is, and can get her into the right circles. For every pack of cigarettes that she manages to dig up, Elke brings a month's

supply of matches (crucial in the winter and sometimes worth more than coal), or a bag of apples, or flour. What would she do without Elke? How they survived the past winter is still a riddle to her. If it weren't for Elke's officer friends and the new job, they would have starved to death. They had sold almost everything non-essential to make it through that winter. They were lucky to have things to sell or trade. Their parents' flat remained mostly intact and the double doors kept the burglars out. They prayed not to catch colds because no one survived them that winter.

She was four years younger than Elke. They have always been close and became even closer when it was just the two of them left. During the bombings they sat close together in the dim cellar and talked of all the things that they would do after the war. Take long baths, lie on a beach somewhere, eat ice cream, dance.

There was certainly enough dancing around now — yet it was not the same as they envisioned in their girlish dreams of peacetime. Peace had come, but with it came the troops. First the Soviets, then the Americans, then the rest. The rubble women helped each other, supported each other. After months of hard labour there was no time for dreaming. The world was broken down into ration cards, cigarettes and fabrics.

She unlocks the double doors and lets herself in. She goes into the kitchen, looks out the window and lights a cigarette from the pack of Lucky Strikes she got from the officers tonight. She knows it is wasteful to smoke even one, but it is both empowering and relaxing at the same time. Their street and the whole city is badly damaged and filled with rubble. Yet somehow everyone makes do.

She looks at her hand holding the cigarette and the smoke rising up. How can a cigarette make one feel empowered? It's worth a lot these days — it has become the currency — but it has always served a ritualistic function and rituals are powerful. They provide structure in solitude and an element of bonding in social settings. She was too young before the war to have picked up any rituals of her own, so this is her first. She was used to the loneliness and hardship, the long work hours and the different jobs. But she also knew that her life was ahead of her and somehow she had more freedom now than women ever had before. Among all that rubble, occasionally she felt there was a glimmer of hope. All the hardship and the hard work would one day pay off and perhaps even mean something in some way. She had no idea how, but she really wished for that to be true.

She finishes her cigarette and goes into her bedroom and undresses. They are shooting the new dresses for Claussen tomorrow. She's been fitted for a white evening gown. An absurd thing to pose in, in the ruins, she thinks. Only women who were spared the horrors, dangers and pain of the war could fathom putting on a white evening gown and facing the ravaged world, or even pretending to face it, as if everything was all right now. As if they weren't all shell-shocked anymore and could potentially have any conversations that did not revolve around material goods and things. The idea of that dress was laughable, almost cruel in its pretense, but in some ways it was also something else.

The dress was the ultimate commodity and thus a part of a survival mechanism that became the driving force of the economic miracle era. As long as you had or tried to get things, especially valuable things, you could forget the grief and the trauma. So these things became empowering. A part of her couldn't wait to wear that dress. A well-tailored dress is like armour, she knew that; it gives one a sense of invincibility. It provides more than desirability and a sense of chic, or a hint of glamour long forgotten by most women during the war. It provides more than just the power of allure, the only instant power allotted to young women. One of its mysterious side effects was a sense of confidence and a sense of self-esteem that no amount of cigarettes could buy or trade — the rarest of all commodities on and off the black market. She goes to sleep, alone and energized, knowing that she will be getting up early and working hard tomorrow at all of her jobs and that even in this rubble-city life goes on and good things are possible and somehow, she doesn't know how yet, she can have some meaning, even by posing in a silly gown.

“Yours is a regenerative descant.”

— Haki R. Madhubuti, “Quiet Mountains to Your Elegance” (1998).

NOTE

Inspired by many books and photographs at the Berliner Stadtbibliothek, Zentrum für Berlin Studien and at the Berlin Stadtmuseum Modearchiv, especially by a particular photograph of a woman in a long, white evening gown designed by H.W. Claussen, photographed against the background of ruins and rubble in 1946, for more see: bit.ly/1pjH2CP