



[www.visionsofthecity.com](http://www.visionsofthecity.com)

## THE WATCHTOWER

Lisa Selvidge

Klaus continued to watch the white flakes drifting down to the control strip of deserted land when Dietrich's rifle clattered to the floor behind him.

'Scheisse,' said Dietrich.

'Okay?' Klaus asked, picking up his binoculars. It was careless of him, he couldn't help thinking. He wore his rifle across his chest so he wouldn't drop it.

'Fine,' Dietrich said. 'Except my fingers have frozen.'

Klaus didn't help him; it was bad enough that one of them was rummaging around the floor. Although, now that it was snowing, only a madman would attempt to cross. Of course, only madmen and criminals would attempt to cross the Berlin Wall at any time. Between the two 3.4 metre high walls protecting the Deutschland Democratic Republic were rolls of barbed wire and antitank barricades, and the whole area was wired with alarms. As well as the watchtowers.

However, madmen and criminals did exist. Not here, but other sections of the Border had been recently violated. Only a month ago, on 25 December, in Pankow a man had been spotted near the outer wall. He was shot at, of course, arrested and taken to hospital, but later died. There had been no incidents so far in 1984 but it was only the middle of January. Klaus knew he needed to be vigilant, though he dreaded the time he would have to shoot someone.

Only when Dietrich was upright again, with rifle slung over his shoulder, did Klaus pour some coffee from his thermos flask. He had to admit the heaters under the wooden seats beneath the watchtower windows were not very effective. He took several sips and passed the cup to Dietrich.

'Thanks. It is too cold tonight.'

Klaus agreed even though he liked the cold. It kept him awake, and the snowflakes dancing under the arc lights gave him something to watch, other than rabbits and the occasional nocturnal visitor to an apartment. Some parts of the Border were narrower than others and, here, the houses on each side of the Wall were so close it almost looked as if you could jump from East to West. But, of course, you couldn't. He could easily peer into the windows though if he wanted. Not that he did, particularly. Besides, it looked like there had been a power failure in the East and Dietrich was watching the West.

Klaus already knew a small percentage of the people in the West were rich, that they could afford things he could only dream of. He had been warned of that. From other watchtowers, he had seen people getting out of large shining cars, arriving home laden with shopping bags. He had seen their brightly lit rooms, big televisions, sofas and large dining tables with bowls of real fruit even in winter (although his postenführer – the one in charge – that night had suggested they were plastic). He had seen bookcases full of books and heard telephones that would ring.

But he had also seen the true film documentaries about the bright lights, cafés, restaurants, nightclubs and casinos of West Berlin, while people slept in doorways wrapped in newspaper. And he had peeked into apartments without curtains or lampshades, without carpets or rugs, without even beds. Once, he had accidentally focused on one room where five people were living: three men and two women together. They all looked thin and pale. One girl's hair was all knotted and another one had the sides of her head shaved. Maybe she had come out of hospital. He had watched them sharing a cigarette.

He felt some sympathy for these people in the West, the homeless, the unemployed; people existing without the support of the State. It wasn't fair how some people could have so much while others could have so little. It must cause such envy and hatred.

'Dietrich?' he said, letting his binoculars hang around his neck but they banged against his rifle so he picked them up again.

'Yes, Klaus.'

'Have you ever had to shoot anyone crossing from the West?'

'From the West? No.'

Klaus hesitated. He knew he had to be careful about what he said. But most of them happily talked about shooting and Dietrich seemed quite laid-back. Too laid-back perhaps.

'Don't you think it would be difficult? I mean, you can't blame people for wanting to come to our democratic socialist state, can you?'

Dietrich shrugged. 'We have our orders. It is not about where people want to go, it is about the violation of our Border.'

'I know that,' Klaus said quickly, 'but it must be terrible for them, not having a choice.'

'Yes, I suppose so, but more people attempt to cross from our side to the West. Why do you think that is?'

Klaus laughed. 'Propaganda, of course. They see the Western television which shows the consumer goods and the high life of the few and they think that everyone lives like that!'

'I suppose so,' Dietrich said. 'But don't you ever want to see for yourself?'

Klaus knew that this was dangerous territory. He was surprised at Dietrich. He must be careful.

'Well, from what I have seen, no, not really. I mean, perhaps for the day, but I would hate to have to live there. I do not see why anyone would want to.'

They fell silent again and watched the snowflakes spotting the dark buildings on either side of the Wall.

'How long have you been here?' Dietrich asked him.

'Three months. And you?'

'Just over a year,' Dietrich said.

'Where are you from?'

'Leipzig. And you?'

'Dresden.'

'Dresden is a good city. I visited once.'

Klaus liked it but he'd never really been anywhere else before his military service. All his family lived in Dresden. His father was a successful engineer and his mother worked in a nursery while his sister, Olga, was still at school.

Dietrich whistled.

'Hey, Klaus, a woman is undressing... Come and have a look! A wall stripper!'

Klaus hesitated. Dietrich, as the postenführer, was responsible for their watch. Even so. Their Commander would be furious. And what if it were a trick? Perhaps Dietrich was testing him? But a wall stripper? He had heard other guards talk about them. He double checked that there was no movement his side and went to join Dietrich. He focused his binoculars on a bedroom window on the fifth floor to the right of the watchtower. A young woman, early twenties, with dark, curly hair down to her shoulders, a pale face, red lips, with long curvy silky legs and small feet standing beneath a naked bulb facing the window. The curtains were open. Either she had forgotten to draw them or... Klaus imagined the alternative as she unbuttoned a long, white shirt.

'Ach, yes...' Dietrich said.

The shirt slipped to the floor where she left it. Standing in only a pair of white lace knickers and bra and dancing up and down, she stretched upwards revealing the dark hair beneath her white arms. Then she folded her arms behind her back and unhooked her bra strap.

'My God,' Klaus whispered.

'Shut up.'

Her breasts were huge. Klaus had never seen anything like them. They were like giant snowballs, smooth, perfectly round snowballs. She was beautiful, a goddess, a beautiful snow goddess whom Klaus wanted to marry. He was sure of it. He ran his binoculars up and down her body, fiddling with the focus, trying to get closer. He fiddled so much the figure that bent over and stepped out of her knickers and emerged completely naked was blurred, but there were two of her. By the time Klaus had got her back into focus he was erect and she was walking towards the window. Klaus didn't know where to look most.

'My God.'

When she got to the window, she stopped and reached across for the curtains. Then, as if she had a second thought, she let go of one side with her right hand and turned towards them and stuck up her middle finger before slamming the curtains shut.

Dietrich laughed while the world slowly collapsed around Klaus. She wouldn't marry him, she would never know him, never meet him. She hated him. It wasn't fair. His erection shrivelled like a popped balloon.

'Isn't she something? Did you see those tits? Imagine. Scheisse.'

They both fell silent, both imagining. Klaus didn't trust himself to speak. This sort of thing didn't happen every night and he knew he was lucky, but that didn't help. In fact, it somehow made it worse. His binoculars kept wandering to the West, to Dietrich's side, towards the lit bedroom, but the curtains remained firmly closed. Only a chink of light reminded him of the woman inside. He might as well be on the moon.

The snow stopped but Berlin remained white, unusually bright. Klaus looked up at the moon that was glaring at him from behind a hole in the clouds. He imagined it to be white, barren and empty like the strip of land below. He dipped his binoculars. On the Western side, a very tall man with, what appeared to be, blue hair was walking towards the Wall carrying something. A table? Behind him a giant woman, in a square fur hat and an old fashioned long, black coat tapered at the waist, followed. She was speaking to him and laughing loudly as they came closer to the Border. Klaus thought she spoke English.

'Dietrich, look!'

'I see them.'

Dietrich picked up his Very light pistol and went towards the door. The Westerners disappeared from view as they stood against the Wall. They looked fairly desperate but they wouldn't, would they?

A black glove appeared on the tubular top of the wall, groping at the lumps of frozen snow. Klaus felt his stomach yo-yo down to his boots and back. How could they have got up there? There must have been two tables. Or a ladder.

'Hold your fire,' Dietrich said.

Klaus held: they weren't allowed to fire into the West or until the Border was violated.

'Shouldn't we alert the patrollers?' Klaus said. Surely this counted as a breach of security? The hand was still there, stuck to the snow. Then slowly, blue hair appeared, bobbing up above the Wall like a kite.

Dietrich pressed the button and fired his pistol towards the moon. The piercing shot reverberated through the white night. A woman screamed and the face tumbled away. For a second, Klaus thought that Dietrich had hit them but then he saw the two giant violators running away. They stopped at the end of the street and looked back, holding onto each other. Perhaps they couldn't see the watchtower, but they were staring straight at him. Klaus looked through his binoculars and saw their pale faces under the streetlight. They were young, his age maybe. They turned to each other and smiled or laughed – he couldn't tell. The fools. They could have been killed. They began kissing as the snow started to fall again, like confetti, before sinking into the shadows as the patrollers arrived.

Dietrich explained what had happened and pointed to the area of the Wall that had been violated. The area was declared safe and the Commander praised their action. Klaus took the opportunity to go and piss against the inner wall while the patrollers were there.

'I wonder what kind of lives they have?' Klaus said, once the patrollers were gone.

'Who knows,' Dietrich said. 'But that's the first time I've ever known someone try-

ing to cross from the West. Hey, look.'

Klaus looked again towards the woman's bedroom. She had put a lamp in the window. For a second, Klaus burned at the thought of her naked behind the window, lying on the bed picking at a bowl of cherries. He imagined himself lying next to her, watching her take the pips out of her mouth. But there in the window above the lamp hung a white banner. On it was written, 'ass holes'.

As Klaus tipped out the last of his coffee, he suddenly felt homesick.

\* \* \* \* \*

Excerpt from *The Last Dance Over The Wall* by Lisa Selvidge.

Lisa Selvidge completed a BA in Russian Language & Literature at the University of London, with Portuguese as a subsidiary. After travelling and teaching English as a Foreign Language for several years in Japan and Russia, she went on to take an MA in Creative Writing (Prose Fiction) at the University of East Anglia in the UK. She subsequently taught at the Norwich School of Art & Design for five years and then at the University of East Anglia where, in 2001, she became the Academic Director for Creative Writing in the Centre for Continuing Education.

In 2004, she moved to Portugal where she is currently living for most of the year. She still teaches online prose fiction courses as well as doing freelance work and running workshops in the Algarve. She is the author of *The Trials of Tricia Blake* (fiction) and *Writing Fiction Workbook* (non-fiction).

For more information visit [www.lisaselvidge.com](http://www.lisaselvidge.com)