

The First Stroke

By Elias Siqueiros

The January sun struck Zwyrtala hard on the face. The past week had been cold and gray but there was a break in the clouds today. He tried to keep pace with the many people coming and going this busy Saturday morning on Manhattan Avenue and had to move up against a wall now and then to catch his breath. He was getting fatter, he thought to himself. At fifty-four he would be dead before long if he didn't change his lifestyle.

The passing faces on the Brooklyn street never glanced at him. It was as if he wasn't even there. Some of the people he recognized, having lived in this neighborhood since most of them were children. Zwyrtala arrived in '83, still a young man back when the neighborhood was full of expatriates who'd fled from Communism. He wasn't running from Communism though. He came to America because he was running from himself. He never held any illusions about that. He knew that his old self, the puppet master that entertained children on Sunday mornings at the Paris Commune Theatre and who packed houses with officials and their wives from Warsaw to Kursk, died that evening with his eight year-old boy in a small hospital outside of the capitol.

The faces came and went. Seagulls cried out in the air. The neighborhood was changed, diversified. He lit a cigarette and smiled at a small blonde girl whose hand was held by a young Polish father. The little girl's eyes squinted at the old man and she did not smile back. Instead her thumb moved to her mouth before the father corrected her and pulled it out.

Zwyrtala smiled as the father and young girl crossed the street but then his thoughts turned to the rent and his smile vanished. He walked toward Green Street with both hands in his pockets, cigarette hanging from his mouth. He had no intention of paying this month's rent, on principal. He did not like his landlord. Besides, he had no money. He

was still drunk from his late night out and the ground swerved beneath him. He steadied his head, leaning against another wall as a pretty young woman who worked at the grocery store passed him. He tried to say something but nothing came out. He smiled instead. "I still could probably manage one night," he thought. "A few less drinks, a few less cigarettes, but love does not come easy these days."

He turned the corner on Green Street and ambled toward his building. It was one of those wood-paneled buildings that sprang up around the younger neighborhoods of Brooklyn, an inexpensive substitute for the red brick that gave the city its identity. The building was four stories and painted blue with two tall flowerpots posted at either side of the stoop. He made his way toward home. The sun reflected off the cement. It strained his eyes and his temples throbbed. As he reached the stoop the front door opened and a man exited, closing the door behind him, his back toward the street. Even in Zwyrtala's inebriated state he was at once able to recognize the form – the large shoulders beneath a green windbreaker and the balding gray head of the man he did not want to see. Zwyrtala was just about to keep walking down the pavement as if duty took him elsewhere, further off near the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. That had worked once before when he didn't have the rent. Sometimes, as everyone in a pinch can attest, you can make yourself invisible if you truly will it. But Zwyrtala had no time for willing as the landlord had already turned and seen him. The landlord's face changed as he caught sight of Zwyrtala, tightening as if dreading the encounter, then loosening when he equated the conflict with that of a grown man slamming his fist down on a fly.

Neither man spoke at first. Zwyrtala tried to squeeze by his landlord. His back rubbed against the mailboxes. This didn't work either.

"Nice morning for a drunken stroll, isn't it Zwyrtala?"

Zwyrtala mumbled something without turning around. He fumbled with his keys, trying to find the right one; a task made more difficult when one is escaping a threatening situation.

"I have gotten complaints, Zwyrtala, about your all night escapades. Someone said you walked around the halls with your pants full of piss... Really, Zwyrtala. Of all things...a grown man not changing his pants. When it comes to that point..."

Zwyrtala cursed, having almost dropped the keys.

"When it comes to that point," the landlord continued in Polish, "all parties involved must find a solution that benefits the greater whole, don't you think? Another tenant said you speak to yourself all night. All night, arguing with yourself at the top of your voice." The landlord took the keys from Zwyrtala's hand. He found the right door key and gave the set back