

The Motorman's Coat

by John Kessel

John Kessel's last *F&SF* story, "Pride and Prometheus" (Jan. 2008), masterfully melded two literary classics. His new story came about after he spent two summers teaching in Prague, and as befits that historic city, it follows from a very different literary tradition than his last tale.

Mr. Kessel reports that his current project is an anthology entitled *The Secret History of Science Fiction* that he is coediting with James Patrick Kelly. We could tell you about the book, but then it wouldn't be secret.

When they opened the shop in Michaelska Street, Frantisek swore it would be the making of them. Veronika protested that the mortgage would leave them in penury, but he countered that a Staré Město address was necessary to attract the clientele that would be interested in—and could afford—the merchandise they would have for sale. Veronika said they would just see tourists, not real monied people.

"Tourists have money, too," Frantisek would explain. He would be wearing a chef's jacket of nucotton twill with a double row of buttons down the front, or perhaps a Victorian cutaway with a red waistcoat, or even a synthetic denim shirt whose shoulders were embroidered with poppies.

"But will they pay a thousand euros for some old pitcher?"

"Tourists especially will pay."

She would only sigh, her dark eyes glistening so much Frantisek wanted to kiss her. Veronika was willowy, with long chestnut hair and a full mouth. "I hope you're right," she said.

Within a year she had left him.

As agent for InVirtu GMBH, Frantisek had established a large network of the most knowledgeable suppliers in Europa and the Caliphate. His shop, situated between a music store and a small restaurant, was full of exotic *objets d'art* dating from before the Die-Off. A seventeenth-century astrolabe. Roman glassware. A functioning late-twentieth-century Atari computer. Marlene Dietrich's hand mirror. A perfectly preserved tabla, with drumhead of genuine animal hide. The bicycle that had won the 2012 Tour de France. And Frantisek's specialty: antique clothing of materials ancient and rare. Despite lanolin-resistant bacteria and the bioengineered cotton smut, Frantisek could sell you a pre-collapse jacket in one

hundred percent genuine wool and put a 1950s sateen handkerchief in its breast pocket.

On the shelf behind the counter stood a photograph of Frantisek and Veronika from nine years before. Frantisek had had the photo done in the style of a century ago, in black and white. It was from early in their marriage, when they still thought they might have a child. The two of them were about to cross Zitna Street, on their way to the Museum Dvůrák, leaning into each other, her face in profile smiling at him. A strong wind blew her hair back like a flag. He wore a polo coat; she had on the beautifully tailored redingote he had bought for her the day after they had first slept together.

Now Veronika was gone.

She had not been able, she claimed, to handle the stress. She did not care about antiques, and never valued the things that he considered valuable. Frantisek had known that from the beginning of their relationship, but he had told himself that his love for her would overwhelm such matters of temperament. Instead, as his savings dwindled and their customers remained few, Veronika came increasingly to blame him for everything that dissatisfied her.

As Frantisek dusted the row of vases at the rear of the store, he heard the bell of the shop door chime. He turned to find an attractive black woman entering.

“Dobry den,” the woman said, nodding to him.

“Dobry den,” he said.

The woman idly circled the shop. Frantisek tried not to follow her with his eyes, letting her have her time. She possessed the lithe slenderness of a dancer. Had he seen her at the ballet? She stopped to examine a purple ceramic elephant, the product of some child’s primary school class a hundred years ago. Beside it a Peruvian bird totem, fired red clay, glazed black, inscribed with intricate lines.

“You have interesting merchandise,” she said.

“Thank you.”

She turned to face him. “But your shop is not busy.” She smiled.

“People do not always recognize quality,” Frantisek said.

“Perhaps it would help if you had some item of transcendent interest.

Something so rare as to attract even the purblind.”

“Perhaps. Such items are hard to come by.”

“I have one,” the woman said. “A motorman’s coat.”

Frantisek laughed. “I don’t believe you.”

The woman laughed as well. Her laugh was light, sexy. “I don’t blame you. Nevertheless, it is true.”

“A motorman’s coat? A Czech coat?”

“Praha Transportation Company, 1911, regulation issue, dark blue wool with solid brass buttons.”

How did she know—did she know?—that Frantisek was a descendant of Frantisek Krizik, the engineer who in the 1890s established the second electric tram line in Praha. “Where did you find this marvel?”

Before she answered the door chime rang again, and in came two young people. In halting Czech the man asked if he could buy some matches. The woman took a glance around the store with indifference and turned back to the front window. “These things are old,” she said in English.

Frantisek gave the man a box of Kafkas and turned back to the black woman. “Is this coat for sale?”

“For the correct price.”

“I would need to see it.”

“Of course.”

“Do you have any cigarettes?” the man asked.

Frantisek lost his temper. “Does this look like a tobacconist’s shop?”

The man looked confused. He muttered something to his companion that Frantisek could not make out, then turned back. “You’re right. It looks like a bunch of crap,” he said in English. He took the woman’s arm and they walked out the door.

The black woman had observed this calmly. Frantisek colored at her slight smile. "You should not have to deal with such people," she said.

"I have little choice."

"One always has choices," she said. She stuck out her hand. "My name is Carlotta Olembe."

"Frantisek Lanik. I would like to see this coat."

"Meet me tonight, Mala Xavernova Twenty-seven, at ten p.m." The elegant woman touched his wrist with her finely manicured hand. Her fingertips were warm. "Ciao," she said, and left.

Frantisek stood there wondering what had happened. The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully, and unprofitably. At seven he closed the shop and went to his flat in Vinohrady. He washed, shaved, changed his shirt, and put on a jacket, then walked down to Dert Dünyasy, a Turkish restaurant in his neighborhood. He wondered whether this coat could be what Carlotta Olembe claimed. He wondered if she had felt the same sexual charge from him that he had gotten from her. He had not thought of a woman in that way since Veronika had left.

Just past nine he took the tram south, then across the Vlatava. The buildings shortened as the tram climbed the bluff above the river. The address Carlotta had given him was in Smíchov, an industrial district in the mid-twentieth which had been renovated after the fall of the Communists, only to suffer another decline in the disasters that had depopulated the city in the mid-twenty-first. Now it was coming back again. Biological buildings, edible ornamental hedges, brick walkways.

Mala Xavernova was a street of tree houses, underground clubs, new gardens. Frantisek wandered with groups of idlers out for the evening. Most of the people here were Czech, not tourists. Luminescents grew among the branches of fruit trees laden with fragrant blossoms. Number 27 was an organic building that must have been planted thirty years ago, in the aftermath. Between the building's massive buttress roots, beneath a neon sign announcing Ne Omluva, stood an open door. Frantisek heard the sounds of jazz as he stepped into the club. Smoke swirled over small tables in the crowded room. He spotted Carlotta sitting on a stool by the bar.

"Ciao," she said, kissing him on the cheek. She wore a tight green acrylic

dress, a line of faux pearls dangling from its sleeve. She pushed a liqueur glass toward him. "Have a drink."

Carlotta did not look like a woman who indulged in emotigens. He sipped. Some sort of tincture. It tasted like peaches and alcohol. "I would like to see this motorman's coat."

"Is that what you would like to see?"

"Among other things. If I can afford them."

"You can afford the coat. I am not able to tell you if you can afford any other indulgences."

"Is it all a matter of sale?"

"No. Some things are not for sale. Some are free."

If Frantisek had come to understand anything from his relationship to Veronika, it was that nothing came free. He plucked a cherry from the dwarf tree that grew out of the middle of the bar. "So, why do we meet in this club?"

"My flat is just below," Carlotta said, pointing down. "In the roots."

The jazz trio ground to a halt in a flurry of tortured sax triple notes. Polite applause. Frantisek finished his drink. He felt dizzy. "Let's see it."

"So businesslike." But Carlotta rose from the stool and wove through the crowd to a stairwell. He watched her hips swing as he followed her.

They descended into the roots of the building. The stairwell had been engineered out of the taproot, the spiraling treads shiny as mahogany. More luminescents gleamed from the organic surfaces of the walls. They might have been descending into the bowels of some animal. He was impressed with the condition of this building: no sign of the house blight that had destroyed whole neighborhoods as it swept through the city a decade before.

On the first landing, Carlotta took the polished faux-ivory handle of a door and opened it. Her apartment was elegant, sparsely furnished. A false window showed a night scene of the Charles Bridge and the castle. In the soft light, beside a sofa, stood a mannequin with a blank silver face, wearing the motorman's coat.

Frantisek slipped past Carlotta and examined it. The sleeve was flawless, the

stitching tiny and precise, a typical product of the first machine age. The hand that had formed the drawing-in stitches along the roll line of this collar moldered in the grave now for close to two centuries. Yet the brass buttons gleamed. The worked buttonholes were in perfect condition. He ran his fingers along the lapel. On a cold night the man who had worn this coat would have been snug and warm, the fresh air on his face as the tram moved noisily through the stone city, on the electric magic carpet of his generation. Frantisek had a vision of Praha as it had been, of elegant women, proper men, churches filled with believers while artists, con men, and prostitutes crowded the nighttime cafes under yellow incandescent lights.

“How much?” he asked her.

Carlotta named a large number. It was more than he could afford. He would have to borrow against his equity even to consider it. But, with this coat in his shop, he knew he could reverse his fortunes. It was a gift. An opportunity not to be passed by.

“Would you like to try it on?” she said. “It looks to be made for you.”

It was true—the mannequin was precisely as tall as he. He touched the coat. “Go ahead,” Carlotta said, putting her hand on his arm. He could smell her faint perfume.

Frantisek removed his own jacket. Carlotta took the coat from the mannequin and held it out for him. He turned his back to her, his face flushed, and slipped his arms into the sleeves. She lifted the coat toward his shoulders, and lowered it onto them. He pulled his shirt collar straight. The coat felt comfortable. Its scent, ancient but not unpleasant, filled his nostrils. He stretched out his right arm, slowly, feeling the weight of it, as if he were exercising tai chi.

“It’s perfect,” he said.

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The shop was crowded the day of the showing. He’d had the party catered, another expense, but by now he was falling free and money did not matter. A steady, cold rain dulled the street, but inside candles glowed, light piano music played softly, and the turnout made Frantisek giddy.

Many important people had come. Here was the actress Dusana Melk, and her director Javed Mostaghim. There stood industrialist and notorious collector of antiquities Josef Bondy, silver-haired, elegant, and slender in black. The monk Vavrin Cerny, down from his Moravian retreat with two of his acolytes in white

robes. The mayor herself, Nadezda Markovic.

Carlotta was there, dressed in red, a good color for her. Frantisek had sold his flat, cleaned out his bank account, and taken out a loan from the bank against the accumulated assets of the shop in order to pay her. In return he had the coat, which stood displayed, under a pin spot, on a mannequin in the center of the shop floor.

He had worn it all day the previous day. It was by no means a miracle of tailoring—it had been, after all, only a uniform, one of many manufactured in its time. It was not the coat of a rich man, not even as plush as the camel hair jacket he had once worn for three minutes. But the destruction of most organic fabrics had left such items as this so rare as to give them an aura. When he wore the motorman's coat, Frantisek felt taller, handsomer, smarter, and more acute. He could discern the future with a knife's edge clarity and plot his course through it as agilely as a dancer.

Of course, Carlotta was the dancer. She approached him. "Are you happy with the turnout?"

"Very. Do you know Josef Bondy?"

"I have made his acquaintance."

"Why didn't you sell the coat to him?"

"You assume he wishes to buy it."

"Why otherwise would he be here?"

"Perhaps because I asked him?"

"You did?"

"Did I?" She touched her slender finger to the tip of his nose, then whirled away toward the table where a servant in a white coat poured champagne.

Frantisek lowered the music, then tapped his fingernail against the side of his champagne flute to get the people's attention. "My friends, and good people of Praha. I welcome you to my humble shop. Thank you for coming out on this wet evening. It does me honor to look around and see so many of the most discerning citizens of our great city.

“The city of Kafka and Rilke and Capek, Havel and Klima and Kundera, beloved of the mystical Rabbi Loew and the brilliant Mozart and a dozen others too familiar to us all. It is a city of stories and of storytellers. And we tonight are here to continue a story. This coat that brings us together tonight—” he gestured with his glass to the motorman’s coat, “—is a piece of history that persists, miraculously undamaged, into our quite different present. It provides us a way to connect with the past, and implies a future, both for me personally, and for all of us. We live in history, which is a tale we create out of events that happen—”

As he spoke, the door of the shop opened and a gust of wind flickered the candles. Through the door came Veronika.

She wore a long black coat over a blue dress cut to the knee. Her hair was loose on one side and pulled back with a comb above the opposite ear. Frantisek, disconcerted, stopped speaking, and a number of people, following his gaze, turned to see who had entered.

“—that story does not end,” Frantisek continued. “That story takes what we know is real—our troubles, failures, mishaps—and transforms them into meaning. Our losses are put into a context that gives them purpose and proportion, so that, in the end, we are not overwhelmed, we do not despair, we are reconciled. That story creates joy.”

A look of weariness and distaste flashed across Veronika’s face, and Frantisek, though he had rehearsed this speech obsessively for weeks, forgot what he was about to say. Temporizing, he held his hand out toward her. “Ladies and gentlemen, my wife. Herself a creator of stories.”

Nervous laughter. Frantisek saw Carlotta, head inclined intimately, speaking softly to Josef Bondy. “And now, please enjoy each other’s company, and the rebirth of our city.”

The people applauded politely. Frantisek did not want to have to deal with Veronika, and she, thank God, after her abrupt appearance did not seem to want to speak with him. Perhaps she felt ashamed. If so, that would be the first time. She went over to the mannequin and examined the coat—reached out and fingered the lapel. He wanted to rush over and tell her to keep her hands off, but was interrupted by Mrs. Staegers, who complimented him on his redoing the décor of the shop.

By the time Frantisek had extricated himself, Veronika was leaning against a shelf, sipping from a glass of champagne. Frantisek decided to have a word with

Mr. Bondy.

“Mr. Bondy, let me say how honored I am to have you visit my shop,” Frantisek began.

“Call me Josef.”

“Josef. I believe you are acquainted with Ms. Olembe? It was she who discovered this coat.”

“Ms. Olembe obtained the coat from me.”

Frantisek’s hopes for a sale were dashed. He tried not to show it. “Ah. I am surprised that you would part with such a unique item.”

“There is a season for everything, and then it passes. I have my eye on new things. This astrolabe, for instance. Did you know that I named my sons Tycho and Johannes?”

“I did not.”

“Visionaries are my hobby.”

“Well, if you are interested in the astrolabe, I can certify its provenance.” And, thought Frantisek, perhaps get back some of the money that ended up in your pocket. Yet why had Bondy used Carlotta as his go-between?

Bondy smiled. “Not just a visionary, but an entrepreneur. You will excuse me?” The collector snagged another flute of wine from the tray of one of the caterers, and turned to speak with a very young woman in gray who was playing with a long beaded necklace that hung to her waist.

As Frantisek mingled with the others, gradually a heaviness settled over him. He could not say exactly what it was. Certainly he could not have asked for a better turnout. The fact that Bondy would not buy the coat, that he was in fact the seller of the coat, was a surprise and disappointment, but he could not reasonably have counted on the industrialist’s interest. Reason, of course, has little to do with want.

He looked at the motorman’s coat. It glowed in the lights, the brass buttons gleaming. It belonged to him now. If he wanted to, he could walk over, remove it from the mannequin and put it on.

Looking around the room of strangers, he realized that Veronika was not there. He would have noticed if she had left. Had she come simply to discomfit him publicly, then run off without ever exchanging a civil word?

Frantisek found her in the back room, bent over an open drawer in his desk. Her bateau neckline exposed her breasts. "What are you doing back here?"

She looked up, startled. She slid the drawer closed.

"I could not stand to watch you abase yourself to those people. Did you ever find my red scarf?"

Frantisek sighed, and sat on the edge of his desk. "Veronika, I'm glad to see you, but as usual, I can't fathom your behavior. You know how hard I have worked. All that happens here tonight is for your benefit as much as mine. So have some wine, meet these people, and please, please, do not hurt me anymore."

"Frantisek, I am not hurting you. I'm trying to keep you from making a pompous ass of yourself. You hang your entire future on a coat?"

"This venture will save me. It could save us both, if you loved me."

"I don't need saving."

She had always needed saving, from the moment he first saw her overdosed on theostimulants in the nave of St. Vitus's, her pupils as large as saucers as she stared at the stained glass image of the blessing of St. Cyril. How that trembling girl had turned into this judgmental bitch was beyond him. He took her by the hand and pulled her to him, pressed his face to hers and crushed his lips against hers. She did not resist. He felt her nerveless body beneath the sheath of her dress. But, passive as a martyr, she did not kiss him back. He let her go.

"When all this ends, call me," she said. She took her coat and walked out.

It was several minutes before he could make himself go back in to the front of the store. The crowd of people had thinned. Carlotta was leaning forward, examining the coat from a few centimeters away, as if she were hypnotized by the weave of the fabric. She looked up as he approached. "Has this gone as well as you hoped?"

"Why didn't you tell me that Bondy was the seller of the coat? What was the purpose of this charade?"

A nearby man stood very still to eavesdrop. “There is no charade,” Carlotta said. “Josef sought to sell the coat. I acted as his agent.”

“Why did you lead me to believe he might buy it, then?”

“I lead you to believe nothing of the sort.”

Other people had stopped their conversations to listen, now. In the sudden stillness, Frantisek became aware of the music—Mozart’s Piano Sonata in F Major—in the background. “Why did you bring him here, if not to mislead me of his intentions?”

“He came because I asked him to, in order to help your business. Which I begin to regret.”

Frantisek took her wine glass from her hand and put it aside. “The deal is off!” he shouted. “You will take it back. Take it—now!” He began to unbutton the coat to remove it from the mannequin. As his fingers fumbled, the brass button came off in his hand. Angrier still, he moved to the next button. Rather than slip through the buttonhole, the brass disk tore through the fabric around it.

People had put on their coats and were leaving. Carlotta stood watching him.

When Frantisek reached up to open the coat and pull the sleeves off the mannequin’s arms, the lapel tore like wet tissue paper. When he tugged at a sleeve, it came off in his hands.

He fell back in dismay. As he and the remaining, startled guests stared, the coat began to slide into pieces, disintegrating before him. The facing of the lapel mottled like a time-lapse video of fruit molding. A second button fell to the floor and clattered across the hardwood. The sleeve in his hands fell into shreds that floated in the air like down. In minutes all that was left of the motorman’s coat was a heap of fragments on the floor, and some bluish dust on Frantisek’s numb fingertips.