

The Smuggler

Retold by Caroline Feller Bauer

In 1945, after the Second World War ended, Germany was occupied and divided into four sectors run by the British, Americans, French, and Russians. Berlin was divided into sectors, too. West Berlin was controlled by the US, Britain, and France; East Berlin was controlled by the Soviet Union. To pass from Western Berlin to Eastern Berlin, one had to go through control gates. Guards at the gates inspected identity cards and packages to guard against smuggling goods from one area to the other.

Each day, Peter arrived at “Checkpoint Charlie” riding his bicycle on the way to work. Resting on the handlebars each morning was a large muslin bag filled with sand. Every morning, Eric, the American guard, stopped Peter. “May I see your identity card, please?” he would ask. “Have you anything to declare?”

Peter always answered no, but still Eric was suspicious. Every morning he would eye the large bag of sand. And nearly every morning, but not every morning, he would dump the sand out onto a piece of burlap and run it through his fingers looking for something illegal. Eric was certain Peter was a smuggler, but he never found anything in the bag of sand, no matter how carefully he searched.

For three months, five days a week, Peter crossed through “Checkpoint Charlie” on his bicycle carrying a muslin bag of sand on the handlebars.

The search became a morning ritual.

“*Guten tag*, Herr Peter.”

“*Grüss Gott*, Herr Eric.”

“May I see your identity card, please?”

“Certainly.”

“Anything to declare?”

“No, sir.”

“What’s in the bag?”

“Nothing, sir, only sand.”

“Sand? I will empty it here and I will see for myself . . . Everything seems in order. You may pass. Have a good day.”

“Thank you. *Auf Wiedersehen*.”

The months passed. One day, Peter arrived on his bicycle carrying a large muslin bag on the handlebar. This time Eric talked to him in a low whisper. Eric was to leave that day to return to his home in the United States. He was to return to civilian life.

“Please,” begged Eric, “before I leave, tell me what you have been smuggling all these months. I promise to tell no one.”

“Certainly,” answered Peter. “BICYCLES!”