

## ***Boots***

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And this is how on this late pre-Christmas Boston afternoon, just twenty minutes after she bought them, Martina returns the Italian boots in question along with the till receipt for over \$450 and asks for her money back.

“But please, is there something wrong?” asks the nice concerned girl behind the counter, but knows that whatever the answer, one way or another she is legally obliged to return the client’s money.

“Well...” Martina begins, but realises afterwards that there is no way that she can explain it to her.

There is no way to explain how on leaving the shopping centre suddenly and without any obvious reason she remembered how just a little more than ten years ago instead of shining shops with beautiful sales girls and sophisticated consultants, she went with her father to choose shoes among the epic and almost mythical stalls of Iliantzi, just when last year’s trainers had totally worn out on both feet. Could the sales girl understand at all what it meant to shove yourself into a tram from one end of the town to the other in anxious fear of those kinds of ghastly low grade Turkish trainers Nice or Adibas that with a little more care (which she did not lack at all) could pass for originals, at least until they began to unglue by the third week... Absolutely impossible and pointless. She didn’t even know where Sofia is.

And could she explain the blocks in Sofia to her? Could she explain to her at all how important it was for one to have a cellar and that precisely because of this, in the tall blocks in Bulgaria, there was a specially constructed intermediate floor of cellars so every inhabitant had access to this supreme treasure. Whether the sales girl in question could possibly imagine what it meant to live in such a place with a two metre high ceiling, little twenty centimetre windows, surrounded on all sides by pipes and leaks. Did she know what it meant never to have held a birthday party because you were always afraid that your classmates might find out where you live (and constantly lying that you have a house in Dragalevtsi and sometimes adding yet another one in Koprivchitsa).

And because now she gave \$450 for some pathetic shiny boots, could the girl on the other side of the counter imagine what \$450 dollars meant to Martina in 1996? That back then it was money for the whole family for six months ahead! And that while in America she played Scrabble and Monopoly, Martina and her classmates engaged in the following pastime – spotting the exchange rate for the dollar and mark in the local area and competing in predicting by how much it would rise by the time they got to the centre (and afterwards buying pastries in pairs, because there was hardly any child who had enough money for a whole snack).

Actually the school, in spite of deprivation, was excellent, just as, by the way, were her marks, mixed in with an additional complement of Olympiads and competitions. “I’ll buy you new trainers only if you get a full six for the year” – her father said to motivate her, and look she actually succeeded. Every year at the beginning of July, they set out on the tram, crossed the entire city and found themselves in Iliantzi’s mazes of stands, warehouses and stalls. Afterwards they walked everywhere to the furthest and most out of the way corner, to assure themselves that they had found the strongest, cheapest and smartest trainers, her father paid readily, she immediately put them on and they went somewhere to drink a Fanta....

“Well...” Martina said again to the sales girl and unconsciously continued in Bulgarian. “They don’t feel comfortable for me to wear.”

“I beg your pardon?” The girl turned towards her, baffled.

Afterwards things got better. At last they built their new flat, her father found a much better job and even bought her normal shoes for her birthday, which at last she was able to celebrate normally with her fellow pupils. After that they accepted her here in America, she graduated again with excellent marks and here she is now – a young economic analyst with the kind of prospects to make your head spin....

“Sorry” Martina recovered herself. “I simply don’t feel comfortable in these boots, that’s all.”

**Translation from the Bulgarian: Christopher Buxton**