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BERLIN

Last month, I turned forty, and my husband took me to Berlin. It is a city that is many cities, or so my husband promised. And, though we went in June, it was winter too. It was cold, and the sky was like the spoked underside of a gray umbrella.

We went to Alexanderplatz, and to the Tiergarten. We went to the zoo. At night we took the train.

My husband and I have been married for thirteen years. On the Berlin train, the lights flicked on and off and he held my hand. When the teenage inspectors stepped aboard, speaking my language, calling "Tickets, tickets," I closed my eyes and pretended it was wartime. I pretended I couldn't get off the train. I didn't tell my husband.

Anyway, it was true. I couldn't get off.

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When I was a girl, I asked my mother: "How did you know you should marry Dad?" And my mother, whose hair was the color of cigarette ash even at twenty-eight, said: "I knew. I had no doubt." Later, after I met my husband, I asked my mother again: "How did you know?" Her answer was the same.

I had met my own husband. But I did not know. When I had a daughter, I would answer as my mother had.

• • •

I have no daughter. In Berlin, I was forty and my husband clasped

my hand, and I looked at our two hands on my lap. The train lights flicked on and off.

Once, as we argued in the kitchen over something (I don't remember now whether it was Shannon or Jane) I picked up a triangular shard of china (I had broken a dish) and drew blood from my palm with its tip. I pressed the tip to my skin as if it were pencil lead, and sketched a neat white star. "You see?" my husband said. "What if we had a child? What if we had a child and she saw that?" He knew I wanted a daughter.

My mother used to call my father her "sworn enemy." She would smile as she said it. Later, when I was married, I visited my mother at home. We drank coffee from striped cups, and my mother asked after my husband. I winked, complicitous. "Alan?" I said. "My sworn enemy?"

• • •

My husband and I grew up in the same Pennsylvania town. We gazed at identical views through our separate windows. Square lawns, fenceposts like mean fingers. Other windows, evening windows, their pretty, boxed light.

As a teenager, I spent most of my time in cars. Sometimes my husband was there. He was not yet my husband and he wanted to touch me. Other times, I was alone. I clutched the steering wheel. After fighting with my not-yet-husband, I drove through nights heavy as velvet drapery, pounding the steering wheel with my fists.

"This is life, little girl," I rasped, aloud. My voice was viscous with tears. I did not know who I was talking to.

Now, I have no daughter, but I speak to other women. I know who

they are. They are Jacqueline and Lily and Michelle. They are my women friends and we speak each day on the telephone. In May, I told my friends about my husband's gift to me. "Berlin," I said. "He has always wanted to go." I smiled grimly, and though I couldn't see them, I could tell that Jacqueline and Lily and Michelle smiled too, in just the same grim way.

• • •

Berlin. We went to Alexanderplatz and to the Tiergarten. At night, we took the train.

My husband was drunk. We had eaten a rich dinner in the Charlottenburg district, and I could smell Bordeaux and onions as the train rattled my husband in his seat, pushing him close to me.

The train was a long hallway, benches pushed flat against its walls. A man and woman sat facing us. They did not touch. They did not speak. But my husband was drunk, and his mouth was rubber at my temple. "Happy Birthday," he said. "I'm glad we're here."

On our wedding night, my husband said, "Shouldn't you be harder to get?" At least I believe it was our wedding night. It might have been another. This is not self-pity, little girl, this is life. Sometimes, even now, I don't know who I'm talking to.

• • •

On the train, my husband was drunk, and I was embarrassed. The man and woman faced us—their gazes straight, their faces stricken—as my husband puzzled his way into my neck, nosed my jaw, and whispered happy birthday. "Kiss me," he said.

I closed my eyes. I didn't want to see the stricken man and woman;

I didn't want to watch them, watching me. So, as we flew past Weberwiese and Strausberger Platz and Schillingstrasse, I made my way back to the morning, to the Tiergarten. Where I had raised my chin and watched a piece of sky, leaves like green airplanes, airplanes like crossed fingers. My husband had walked beside me.

Some nights, I lie next to him, and though I am repulsed—by the kelp inside his seashell ear, by the diameter of his neck—I want him to touch me. No one is watching. He doesn't. This is not self-pity, little girl. For I know I am complicit in this and many things.

• • •

On the train he touched me, and I was embarrassed. I didn't want the man and woman across the aisle to see.

We flew past Klosterstrasse and Spittelmarkt and Hausvogteiplatz, and my husband pressed his face to mine, his cheeks wet as a dog's nose. Finally, I leaned in.

The man across the aisle looked down at his bright blue shoes. The woman beside him fished a slim book from her purse.

• • •

At Potsdamer Platz, the train stopped. Men swarmed the aisle and blocked the windows. They looked like the navy curtains in my mother's living room, stopping the light with their dark suits. Just before the doors closed, the man in the blue shoes slipped quickly up, laced his way through the crowd. The woman beside him did not appear to notice. She was reading her book, folding and unfolding the upper corner of a page.

I watched the man flee, but I was thinking about my husband. We

will ride to the Artim Hotel, I thought. We will ride the elevator to our room, where the heater will hum one note. I thought, too, of ovarian cysts. Of an article I'd read describing cysts so nearly alive they'd grown hair and teeth. Much of the time now, I think many things at once. It is not like when I was young.

• • •

Soon, the man in the blue shoes was outside the train. He stood on the platform, and peered through the window, at the woman's hunched shoulder, her back. His face was very still. He raised his hand, and knocked on the glass.

The woman turned then, and I knew. As they knew. As they had known all along. They had been secretive as criminals. Still, all along, they had known each other, as husbands and wives do.

The man knocked. The woman looked back at him in grim, habituated surprise. I saw then that she was young. Her skin was pink and her hair was the hair of all young women. Blond and copper and brown. Darkest at the roots. She looked at the man. He waved at her through the glass. He smiled, cruelly. He was young, too.

She shook her head. He waved: goodbye, goodbye. She shook her head: no: no, please. The train pulled away from Potsdamer Platz. The woman turned from the window.

My husband was drunk. He was leaning in, sniffing my clavicle. "Shh," I said to him. I wanted to say "stop," but the word did not emerge. The woman flipped open her cellular phone, and spoke softly to it in German. Was she speaking to the man? To her maybe-husband? My own was fixing his hand to the small of my

back, pushing me even closer, and saying it again: happy birthday, happy happy. The woman closed her phone. She began to cry.

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Last month, I turned forty and my husband took me to Berlin. We went to Alexanderplatz, and to the Tiergarten. At night we took the train.

On the train, I watched a woman. She spoke German in a soft and waterlogged voice. She cried for three minutes.

My husband—the man whose affairs would have put scars on my palms and inner arms, scars shaped like ampersands and jagged mountain passes, if ever I'd been brave enough to push—leaned close. The abandoned woman watched us. She had stopped crying.

My husband—my enemy, my accomplice—kissed me. He kissed my nose, my dry mouth. "I love you," he whispered. I wanted to say, "stop," but the word would not emerge. The girl watched my husband kiss me. I caught her eye. I knew her, but I did not reveal myself.