

The Poison of the Honey Bee

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[Excerpt from the end of Chapter 1. The year is 1995, and Christina has just arrived in the former East Berlin with a Fulbright Scholarship. Her research topic is *Berlin Utopia: The City as Political Text*. In the computer center at Humboldt University she exchanges emails with her old friend Ethan back in New York City.]

That's the attitude I can't stand—take a year off in Europe “before it's too late.” Before you start your “real life.” Next year my roommates will all be going to Harvard Business School. Oh, but first they can write papers about “markets in transformation” and go clubbing every night for the cheap beer. So once they're “venture capitalists” they can tell stories about East Berlin's “underground scene.” You know what they call those people? “Young leaders,” I wrote Ethan.

And you? came the reply.

I told you I'd go to Berlin and never come back.

Right. That's so much more mature. By the way, this summer I'm taking two weeks off in Europe before it's too late. Before I start the new job at the biotech company. Two whole weeks vacation. And I've got a twentieth of my student debt paid off. His \$50,000 of debt, I remembered, cringing. I was debt-free—talk was cheap. He'd wanted to go to grad school in genetics. Instead he was temping as a technical editor. Paris and Prague. And as it happens, I change trains in Berlin. I was thinking—maybe I can smuggle you out to Prague. With a counterfeit passport, that kind of thing.

I'd known Ethan since 7th grade, a shy boy with a sardonic smile, even at twelve, even back when he still had his sidelocks. He cut them off a few years later, and his father threw him out of the house. From then on, quiet and determined, he went to the reform synagogue.

At the time I never knew what he was going through. For me he was just one of my clique's peripheral science nerds, with an ironic detachment I admired. We ended up at the same college, where he took English and biology and had a work-study job; his parents couldn't or wouldn't pay tuition. Now we'd become friends, and I saw what a struggle everything was for him, how fateful each decision, not just the outrageous gesture when he raised the scissors to his hair before his father's eyes—every yes and no had unforeseeable consequences. He took a semester off in the psychiatric clinic, but he graduated on time.

And now Ethan, of all people, was going to board a plane, just like that, and take a train all the way from Paris to Prague. His courage was contagious. Right away I wrote him back, the long e-mail I "hadn't had time for" all these past weeks: Of course I'd come. And wouldn't he spend a few days in Berlin?

I had worried he'd ask how I liked Berlin, but he hadn't—so evidently it went without saying.

In the evenings I walk around Mitte, the old city center, in the East, where the old Jewish quarter is, I wrote, and for the first time I felt cool for doing it. That's where I'd want to take you. The moment it gets dark everything seems fast asleep, as if it were almost morning again, but suddenly you're standing in front of a bar, all full of warm light and people, it's like they have speakeasies everywhere, and inside they look like secret laboratories set up by kids. I don't think the bars even have names. And the moment you go on walking the street is deserted, everything's flat and stuffy like a stage set. Suddenly you think you see the moon over the roofs, but it's the dome of the synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse, all lit up, silver-gold like an Assyrian helmet.

No thanks, he wrote back. Nice description, but I might as well stop off in Theresienstadt. That's on the way to Prague too. When I think of Berlin, I think of pain and death and German shepherds barking. Why torture myself on vacation? The train ride will be bad enough, thank you.

Oh, for chrissake! I thought, looking around as if in appeal. The glum hum of the university computer center, the rows of blank faces at the terminals, scarred Prussian edifices hulking in the dark outside the window—there was nothing here to contradict him. Nothing to prove that the dogs weren't barking for Ethan. I'd stumbled into a trap, his trap, his black pit. Wasn't I allowed to write him about the synagogue? Then again—why had I felt the need to write about it, and in such purple prose?

I walked out onto Clara Zetkin Strasse, and the city drew near again. Behind the Maxim Gorki Theater a sycamore stretched its stout boughs over the wall, and in their bends the silken yellow underbark wrinkled like skin. Snow lay on the branches, but they didn't feel the cold.

I did, so I went to a club. It was much too early, and I sat at the bar, craning my neck to stare at nothing, the empty dance floor. That reminded me of Ethan, how we stood around at fraternity parties with sarcastic smiles while our classmates dutifully lost their inhibitions. How I griped about the punch, Kool-Aid with vodka, and the guys, who would never measure up to Joseph Cotten. Though to be honest, good-looking men had always scared me away. Why had I kept running off to Kreuzberg my first time in Berlin, on the high school exchange program? Because I had a crush on a guy from Renate's class, the class heartthrob no less, and I hated tagging along with the clique after school to watch him guzzle beer and sing *It's a ... it's a ... it's a sin*.

Renate... we'd lost touch, I hadn't told her I was back in Berlin. She might even have been happy to hear from me. But the more time passed, the more embarrassed I was, until the embarrassment was insurmountable.

A few people were dancing now. They weren't attractive, they weren't happy, they weren't approachable, *they're like Berlin*, I thought, but that was a cheap shot. I made a real effort to drink enough. Enough to change, because I knew I was the one with the problem. I was the monster here. And for a moment I felt as though I could slip out of my monster skin. I

looked around wildly, ready to throw my arms around everyone—but I'd turned invisible, I was a fly on the wall. I walked out of the club and got on the night bus. Suddenly I was visible, and a drunk felt provoked. *Hey baby, come on over here! I know what it's like to be lonely. Well, fuck you, stuck-up bitch.*

I went back a few times to that club, then another club, the whole thing kept repeating, down to the accusatory drunks in the night bus, down to the awful thought that drunks and psychos are clairvoyant. I wanted to go back to the club in the old factory. The people had been friendly there, and I'd run away from them. But I couldn't find it, I didn't know its name, didn't want to ask my roommates, and kept on going to the wrong clubs.

Meanwhile the semester had started. The vaulted corridors resounded, I stood in line, sat on the floor, vanished in the crowds. The main buildings on Unter den Linden were as intimidating as ministries. But who or what presided here? The Brothers Grimm or Humboldt or Karl Marx, whose words gleamed in gold on the foyer's grand staircase?

The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.

There was no one to tell me how the system worked. I was ready for Prussian discipline, but it was nowhere to be found. The students were disappointing. In class they were passive, guarded, taking notes but rarely showing interest. In the seminar on *Berlin Alexanderplatz* no one bothered to read the book, so I set it aside half-read. Back home the prof would have kicked us all out! I thought. I couldn't find an opening for my theories on utopia. Everyone seemed preoccupied with other things entirely. Cafeteria conversations, indignant or gleeful, about professors who'd been fired, demoted, replaced by West Germans, a general sense of upheaval. When class was over the others hurried away as if they had places to go, off to real apartments, real jobs, or they'd suddenly decided to go to the seaside. I wanted to follow, to find out what their real lives were.

I never thought I'd end up following Meta. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, before our seminar on *Berlin's Jewish Intellectual History*, I'd see her sitting with the Goths under the chestnut trees in the courtyard, the only one who didn't look like a child playing dress-up. Her black clothes were well cut and she had no piercings whatsoever. I liked that—I was too much of a coward to get any. Her long hair, dyed black, made her look even paler and thinner, and several years younger than me. But she radiated energy, she seemed to hurl it out over the others with the sweeping gestures she made. The first time I saw her sitting there, I stopped a safe distance away, as though the group, under her spell, were about to set out on some escapade, or even whirl up into the air. But a moment later they dispersed like billiard balls gently struck by the cue ball, Meta, who glided on ahead of me into the classroom.

In our seminar she had ideas on everything, impetuous questions that left everyone stumped. It got on their nerves: *She likes to hear herself talk*. But I felt that Meta wanted *them* to talk just as heatedly—so that someone at least might make the breakthrough we needed. But no one accepted her challenge, her enthusiasm embarrassed them. She was snubbed like a gifted child. She would swallow the disappointment and stride off afterwards with her anklets jangling. At last I got up my nerve and disagreed with her in class. She grinned at me.

She volunteered for the oral report on Jewish mysticism, I followed suit, and the professor let us prepare it together.

“You don't have the Kabbalah by any chance?” she asked me. I wasn't even sure what the Kabbalah actually was. I couldn't ask Ethan, I still hadn't answered his last e-mail. “I bet my neighbor has it. Are you free right now, do you want to come along? It's right nearby.”

This was the way I walked home, along the elevated tracks, across the Museum Island and Hackescher Markt, where a faded mural advertised the defunct socialist Museum of German History: a woodcut peasant from the Peasant War, waving a flag that said *Freedom*. Whenever I saw him, I wanted to follow him into battle.

“To be honest I don’t have much use for religion,” said Meta. “When I was a kid my mother dragged me to church, I hated it. Oh, sorry, you’re an *Ami*, aren’t you? You’re all—”

“I was raised as an atheist. I’m from New York. When I was a kid I was afraid to go into churches. My parents like churches for the architecture. But I always felt like we couldn’t go in. Because people in church think atheists go to hell. I thought we’d go to hell if we went inside a church. But now I like churches, and maybe that’s why.”

“With us it was the other way around. If you went to church, you went to socialist hell.”

She asked how long I’d been here, how old I was, what my plans were. As for her: since 1988; 28; wanted to *do something with art*, was looking for inspiration. “This summer I’m going to Israel for six months, one of those things that just came up by chance. I’ve never taken that long a trip, I’ve never been on a plane, I’ve never thought about Judaism, it’s a whole new world opening up, and now the mysticism. *Art as golem*, there’s an idea—or spirits, ghosts, death could be the medium...” What does she know about death? I wondered. “The material is the artist’s medium, but the artist is the ‘medium’ of the material...”

She was 28 already. The age I’d be at the turn of the millennium. Did that mean I’d still be young then, as young as she seemed? Her grey-blue eyes protruded, as large as though they’d outgrown her face. She had a little girl’s skin, every shadow like a bruise. But her hands were rawboned, chapped and red, as if she knew real manual labor.

I knew this empty lot along Rosenthaler Strasse, where I always walked, I knew the row of grey buildings behind it where one stood out, butter-yellow. When you walked on, the yellow house slipped behind a crumbling back building that had a footpath leading to it, winding through the weeds. We took the footpath. The closer we came, the more immaculate the yellow house seemed, like a computer simulation. Its terracotta patio jutted into the wasteland. Just off the patio, in the tall grass in front of the back building, there stood chairs

and a table: cups with coffee dregs, the wooden cutting boards Germans eat their breakfast from, half a loaf of bread. The door to the ruin was open.

“Is it really okay to go in?” I asked.

“All property belongs to the people,” said Meta. “Besides, I live here.”

It looked just like my favorite bar: worn floorboards, tattered Turkish carpets, wallpaper hanging in shreds, family photos from the flea market, treadle sewing machines for tables, a tile heating stove like an ornate white skyscraper. Behind a massive wood counter, mirrors and bottles caught the light.

The yellow house and the back building had stood vacant for years; the squatters had moved in shortly before the Wall fell, Meta told me after making espresso and taking it back outside. She had moved her jewelry workshop into the ground floor of the ramshackle back building, where no one else ever lasted for long. The yellow house had just been renovated, but the back building, its ownership unclear, had been spared. During the year-long renovation the former squatters, housed elsewhere in the meantime, went on hanging out in Meta’s salon, watching the façade of the front building be replastered and painted yellow. The tiles stoves were torn out and the tiny flats merged to make larger ones. In January everyone had moved back in with socially subsidized leases. They’d gotten soft—they’d never dream of squatting the back building now. Only Meta persevered, with her salon. It wasn’t what it used to be, but at least it was a real community. When they wanted a drink, they came to her, when they wanted a book, they went to Wölfchen. Well, she’d just run up to ask him about the Kabbalah and so on—and she vanished into the yellow house.

She was gone for a good fifteen minutes, waving at me once from the second floor, where strange music came faintly out the window. Were there people besides me who listened to Gesualdo? Swallows wheeled over the wasteland; the smell of lilacs, the sound of hammering and sawing drifted up from the horizon. The squatters had been... what was the opposite of *expropriated*? With their communal breakfasts they had earned the right to the

house. *This* was utopia, small and habitable. A door slammed, steps clattered, Meta appeared with a book and a power drill.

“I always thought the Kabbalah was a book. But actually it’s lots of books. Wolfgang only has *The Book of Splendor*. Why don’t you take it? I can’t read it this weekend anyway. Just don’t bend the spine. Okay, I have to kick you out now.”

I gave her my phone number, and she gave me Wolfgang’s, because she didn’t have a phone. At her front door she hugged me goodbye. That was a thing the Germans did, nothing but a gesture, I’d always thought, like a handshake. But her hug had so much verve, it was as though I’d been snatched up, whirled around and set down somewhere else entirely. I went out through the stairwell of the yellow house and around the corner to the streetcar stop where I’d waited so often. But this time I was sober.

The telephone rang as I unlocked the door to the flat.

“I always think of things too late. Want to come camping with us? Tomorrow night at 11 at my place. Do you have the address? C...strasse 24.”

The name of the street doesn’t matter. You could say it no longer exists, you could say it never existed.

I was so excited, I could hardly sleep. When I woke up, exhausted, the invitation seemed like an onerous duty. That night I took the streetcar to Mitte, but with a hankering, the strongest in a long time, for *my* Mitte, for wine, for a walk in the rain, for the streetcar ride home and the return to my desk. When I got off the streetcar, the rain was coming down hard. The front door of the yellow building stood ajar in the draft. If it hadn’t been open, I would have gone on walking. I was supposed to ring Wolfgang’s doorbell, and I’d never met him before.

Secret Spartakist meetings in the 1920s must have looked like this, I thought as I peered through the salon window: candlelight, Meta in a leather jacket gesticulating to a

shadowy group. She poured me a tea. Did I have a sleeping bag? I was completely unprepared.

A mutter from the corner, a dialect I'd never heard: "I'm not coming anyway, she can take mine." That was Wölfchen. They were trying to talk him into coming, but he kept resisting—all this fuss for one night's camping, it was raining, and tomorrow he wanted to go to the flea market. He ducked his grizzled head warily.

By the time we set out, just before midnight, to catch the first train with the special weekend fares, the sky was clear: it would be the first fine weekend of the year. Wolfgang, still undecided, walked with us to Alexanderplatz, and then didn't want to walk home alone. So he came after all. On the train, I asked Meta where we were going. I didn't understand the answer.

"Poland," she explained. It was sheer luck that I had my passport on me. Wolfgang insisted that if we were going to go to Poland, it had to be—another name I didn't understand—that place where the forest was, he'd seen it on TV, Europe's last primeval forest. Otherwise there was no point in going to Poland.

The others smoked and let him talk. They were infinitely indulgent. They didn't know I hadn't slept, never did sleep, couldn't stand cigarette smoke, wasn't human without coffee in the morning, I was a monster and the problem was mine—no one knew, so maybe it wasn't true. I had the *Book of Splendor* in my backpack. Meta lay with her head in the lap of the Russian who played the violin in the underpass at the Friedrichstrasse. His name was Volodya, and he used to be the first violinist of the Irkutsk Symphony. I had given him money once.

Wolfgang sat across from me. He had the face of a young man. He opened a tin of herring and handed it to me, and I ate as if I ate herring every day. When they passed around the vodka, I took a swallow and leaned back in the corner. The door between the cars was open, the night wind blew in, the summer with schnapps on its breath.