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Oranges

NINE YEARS AFTER my mother died, I saw her in Berlin. She was Turkish this time, religious too from the look of it so there was a headscarf. Her skin was slightly darker but it was her, no doubt. The same shocking blue eyes, almond at the edges, and the same huge belly she'd had in the final, dandelion-puff phase of her life: round and fragile, apt to blow away. Luckily, I knew a bit of Turkish from two trips to Istanbul.

"Good evening," I said in Turkish.

She smiled at my politeness. She had raised me right. "Good evening, David," she said in English, though lightly accented.

"So. Turkish this time?"

She shrugged. Turkish. "I liked the scarf. At my age it doesn't seem repressive so much as a blessing to hide thinning hair."

Her hair had looked thin toward the end.

"And what age is that? Seventy-three or . . . what would it be now? eighty-two?"

"Seventy-three," she said. "Too young."

Indeed.

"But many die younger." Not empathy, like it might sound, but boastfulness. She hadn't lost her spark of vanity.

"Your first time in Berlin?" I asked.

"It is. Not yours."

"No. Sixth time for me."

"And your German is progressing?"

"It is. I make mistakes but I can read *Der Spiegel* now. That's something."

"That is. Your father would be very pleased."

She sighed. I saw sweat had darkened the rim of her veil. Hijab, if I remembered the word. "Sorry, I just need to catch my breath." She sat down at the picnic table where I was having a beer, in front of my favorite café. She used the corner of her veil to wipe her forehead. She'd been carrying a large bag of oranges, I now saw.

"May I?" I asked and she nodded. I bit into the side of the fruit, an old habit to get a first wedge of skin to peel the rest from. Sometimes I eat

the peel too, though I'm never sure why. I hate the taste. This is possibly the same part of me that rips my nails.

"It's been what? Two years?" I said. "San Francisco last time?"

"San Francisco."

"Did you go see Josh while you were there?"

My brother lives in San Francisco. She shrugged: no. I knew of their troubles but I had hoped death had eased things, or at least clarified them.

"Too many memories," she said. She chuckled: "Too many *ghosts*. I'm sorry, can we just sit here? I'm exhausted."

We sat.

"Berlin," she said. "I get what you see in it. I resisted it for so long. It was hard for people of my generation. Not to forgive, I didn't blame the living. But to see anything *but* Nazis. Maybe I needed all the Nazis to die."

"They're making new ones, I hear."

"Not like they used to." Was that rue I heard in her voice? I didn't push it. "Where's Samuel?"

Samuel is my partner of thirteen years. "He's in New York." Her old, suspicious eyes were quick as ever to see mischief. "Look, he's *home*. We just traveled to Greece together. We had a wonderful vacation, and he wanted to go home right after to work, and I didn't. And the round trip to Berlin from Athens was, like, 130 euros. Anyway, you were hardly an expert on long-lasting relationships."

I didn't count on the edge of accusation in my voice. She loved it. Maybe we'd get to have a fight like the old days.

"And who says I didn't make my marriage last?"

"Being too afraid to divorce is not the same as making love last."

The air grew heavy. The late afternoon light of the Berlin summer made our faces look sharp, like we'd been photoshopped in. Finally, she grinned. There would be no fight.

"You're right. I *was* too afraid to divorce. I see that now. You're afraid too."

"Of leaving Samuel? Nah. He's everyone's favorite thing about me."

She looked past the young Arab men next to us, past the Swedes next to them. She grew soft: "You're scared. What are you going to do about Gun?"

GUN WAS A MAN I'd met one year earlier, on my fifth visit to Berlin. He asked me to call him "Gun" the first night we met, before he realized my German was actually okay. "Gun" being a nickname he used strictly with Anglophones, to impress us and amuse us.

We met in Prenzlauerberg at a gay bar called Stiller Don, famed for being open in the East before the fall of the Wall, one of the few gay places in that benighted half-city my generation was sure would last forever. The bar remains, though the heat of external repression no longer makes the tables (kitschy black vinyl) glow, or the patrons for that matter. But a two-meter-tall painting of Lenin in a gloriously open, nearly winged trench coat still greets you as you enter, and there are few tourists like me to muck up the place.

“Prenzl’berg” had been where I had fallen for this city, twenty-two years earlier. Prenzl’berg and Mitte, which were then still soot-covered, bullet-ridden from World War II, filled with the lost, the radical, and the dregs. We were all sure that now that everything was open, Berlin would oxidize and crumble, that we were living through the last era of true coolness, but there was still hope for something to emerge worthy of this city, wasn’t there? To that end, we’d come out of our flats at 4 a.m., dance to techno played on crappy speakers, and yell about Helmut Kohl and the first George Bush. Back then everyone had a story. Just to live in Berlin meant you’d survived epochs. And the old! The Nazis with canes! The Sallie Bowles who’d lived through Hitler and firebombings and mass rapes, through babies thrown to freedom off Bernauerstrasse balconies and 1989. How tame Paris appeared, where I’d first landed on an air-courier ticket, after Berlin. In Paris all the cafés looked the same and no one had a story about anything.

One year ago, after a fifteen-year break from the place, I was back in Prenzl’berg and it, like me, had become rather bougie. The buildings had been repainted, the once haunted Potsdamer Platz was now a mall. There were Eclectic Cafés and well-loved bookstores. There were moms with strollers, dads with strollers, double strollers, and I was forty-three. I had purchased the plane tickets for Samuel and me from a fat savings account instead of charging them and we had recently reestablished monogamy. *Bougie*.

Samuel and I had flown to Berlin for a five-week stay. We both had the summer off. I said I wanted to work on my German, and secretly to rescue the relationship, which seemed to be foundering. We had been fighting over the question of whether to have a kid—not to adopt, but to make one of our own, which became a fight about doing a Kickstarter campaign to raise \$100,000 for an egg and a surrogate—was it tacky? Samuel thought it was tacky. (I thought it so, too, but I desperately wanted Samuel to disagree or, barring that, to grieve with me over the reality that we were now

forty-something gay men with enough money for a trip but not enough to make a kid. But he was happy just being *him and me*. It was awful.)

Samuel spoke no German. He spent the early days of our trip working on a set of watercolors, which he said “were going well” but to my eyes looked just like the work he’d done a month before that was “revelatory.” Five days in Berlin of museums and reading novels cuddled together on a couch and the night in question he wanted to stay in *again*, saying he was still jet-lagged, which was plausible, but as he crawled into bed he asked woundedly:

“Hey, where you going?”

“I want to go out. I want to practice my German.”

“Can’t it wait till the weekend?”

“You can come if you want . . . I’m just feeling, I dunno, *restless*.”

In that “restless,” he had heard “you’re boring,” which—was that the subtext? I don’t think that was the subtext. Anyway, he pouted, he slept, and the next day we fought.

In retrospect, perhaps I hadn’t come to rescue the relationship at all.

“HI. I’M GUN.”

The bar was dark, but there were some oldie-timey lampshades on bar lamps which made his eyes glow amber. His eyes also went crinkly at the edges when he smiled, as he was doing now, but was he being friendly? Or mocking me?

“Uh . . . *Gun*?”

“Short for Günther. But all my friends call me this.”

“How did you know I was American?”

“I didn’t. I just knew you looked out of place. Also, I start in English with everyone. You can’t count on anyone in Berlin speaking German.”

“That’s not really true. *Also, I can speak German.*”

“*Oh. Cool. Pretty good. Bit of an accent though. Why on earth would you learn German?*”

“*Why not? I’m a—what is the word? A ‘language nerd.’ Also, my mom married a German . . . refugee, is that the word? But, uh, that generation of Jews never raised their kids with German. So it’s a . . . life quest to master it?*”

Most of my statements in German ended as questions.

“*And your dad is here now, too . . .?*”

“*My dad is now, um . . . not on this earth?*”

“*My sympathies. My father is in Brazil, the bastard. I don’t speak to him. He came here in 1989 to take down the Wall and went back when it was all gone.*”

“So you were born in 1990?”

“1990. Yes.” A flicker of swagger across his eyebrows.

I switched back to English. “You said I looked out of place here. What gave me away?”

Gun pondered this. He looked up. In the front of his neck, chest hair struggled to escape, wispy promises of what was underneath. His T-shirt said “Poor but Sexy,” Berlin’s unofficial motto.

Gun was a half head taller than me. He had wavy black hair, a hard face you might not fall for at first, but after a few drinks it rearranged itself, softened into, say, a young Mark Ruffalo. And after we’d kissed, after we’d decided there was really only one road for two gay men to take and blissfully, mercifully we’d taken it, after we woke up together at 4:02 in his coal-heated Kreuzberg apartment, and I’d said, *Shit, shit, I gotta get home*: I looked at him clear and sober and: somehow the rearranged face stayed.

“Why have you come to Berlin again?”

“*Can we in German? I want to work on my German.*”

“Naja, I want to work on my English. Maybe we can exchange numbers and meet and speak together, or . . . ? Wait, where are you going?”

“I gotta get home to my Airbnb. I mean, um. . . Samuel’s and my Airbnb.”

“Ahhhh. And who is this Samuel?”

(How do you handle this question? None of their business, right? But what would he do now, throw me out? Cry?)

“Samuel is my boyfriend.”

“Ah. Cool *But you should have mentioned this to me before.*” The angular accent but crinkly-eyed smile. He was definitely mocking me now. “*How long have you been together?*”

“*Twelve years.*”

“*That was, like, how old I was when you met.*” Again, that flicker of swagger. “. . . *Great.*”

I pulled on my jeans. I felt a wave of nausea. The booze, of course, but also, what the fuck was I doing? I loved Samuel. I love Samuel. Am I a sex addict? I needed, what, attention from a stranger? I’m a sex addict. Yet beneath the nausea was also, one might as well say, pride: for he was hot and nearly half my age. And after a cool bath of self-forgiveness, only a trace of residual shame remained. Shame at the memory of my old wrecked body crashing into Gun’s twenty-four-year-old lithe one.

“Is Samuel your first boyfriend?”

“The first who counted. There were others.”

“How old are you, anyway?”

(Germans. No manners.) “Forty-three.”

“Not so old. Any other half-German/half-Brazilians?”

“None so identified.”

He switched to German. “. . . *If you were single, maybe you could be my first boyfriend.*”

“*You’ve never had a boyfriend?*”

Mark Ruffalo traced the outline on his pillow where my head had rested. He repeated me, as if laying down tracks for language acquisition: “None . . . so . . . identified. I’m glad your father didn’t raise you speaking German. You smile speaking German. You’re not so sure of yourself. You don’t smile in English.”

WHEN I GOT HOME Samuel was asleep. There were new watercolors drying on the floor, which I narrowly missed in a drunken two-step. He must have gotten back up to paint. I was terrified that when I awoke, I’d see they were blood red, dripping with accusation. Or worse: blue-black puddles of self-hatred.

At 8:30, I got up and made breakfast. Samuel was still sleeping. I sat with my tea and gave his paintings a good look in the blue-white daylight. I was relieved: they were just careful, clean studies of the view from our balcony. They felt easy, as though sketches for a larger work, unburdened by having to be anything more than what they were. He’d either painted them from memory—it had been night when he was painting—or from photos he had taken on his phone. They were full of green. I hadn’t realized how green Berlin had become.

“HAS BERLIN become greener?” my mother asked.

“I think so. But you know, maybe twenty years ago I was just looking more for sites of atrocity. There are a lot here, you know.”

“I know. I went to Holocaust Memorial. Eh. A bunch a stones.”

“I think that’s the idea.”

“I didn’t like it. And why do we always have to talk about the Holocaust? What about what’s going on in Syria? In Palestine.”

“I think you’re taking this Muslim thing a bit far.”

“Your father wouldn’t have liked it either.”

“Dad? Do you see him?”

My mother said nothing. She and my father met in the ’60s, married in their thirties, late for their generation, and were happy for a decade

according to my brother, who remembers some of the years in question. By the time I could observe them, it was all rants and sobbing late into the night, invading my nightmares. Epic fights over my dad's lack of a job, his lack of initiative, and—I'd learn while he was dying, because my mom decided that over his deathbed would be an excellent time to mention it—his lack of a working penis. Anyhow, around the time I was nine, as I suppose happens, one side won: my mom grew miserable in her victory and my dad zen in his defeat, retreating to our basement to start businesses that went nowhere with his best friend Mamu. Had the Jews of that generation drunk, perhaps he would have become a drunk; instead he bought an endless supply of Entenmann's cinnamon filbert rings and died happy at sixty-six, a full-blown diabetic.

"If you *are* going to leave Samuel, don't make my mistake. Leave now. Before the Entenmann's starts."

"I'm not leaving him. Besides, Samuel's the opposite of diabetic. He weighs 125 pounds."

"Do it now if you're going to. I waited for your father to die and by then my breasts were long flaps of skin."

"What, and come with you?"

"Don't be silly, you're alive." She slid my beer closer to her. "May I?" She tipped it back into her mouth, a ladylike sip from the foot-tall, swan-necked glass. The Muslims one table over glared at her. "Oh, that's good! What is that?"

"Some lager *am Fass*. I could order you one."

"I really shouldn't drink." She burped. "You know David, and I can see the hurt in your eyes, but it wasn't easy for me. I never understood how much honesty I was supposed to show your father. Every day, I'd swallow all the mean things I thought because I believed it would hurt too much. Then at night they would all come vomiting out at the precise moment they would do the most damage. Why did I do that?"

I grew soft. "I promised I'd never be like you to Samuel."

She grew soft. "I'm glad you're not."

"Do you see Dad?"

And in almost a whisper, "I don't think he wants to see me."

So it was true: Josh would not consent to her hauntings and my father didn't want to see her. She looked at the Arab teens next to us, and the three young Swedes beyond them, chattering merrily in their Muppet-German. "You're the only one I see, David. I don't know why." Sadness in her voice; it was definitely less than what she felt she deserved. She

smiled, fake but a good punctuation. “So. You’re seeing Gun today?”

“In half an hour. At ‘our place.’”

“What will you say?”

Now it was my turn to shrug. My mother and I both have what my seventh-grade piano teacher called “expressive shoulders.”

“*Is she bothering you?*”

It was the waiter, alert to what he assumed was a homeless Turkish woman. It was possible he was also watchful against all Turks, though I suspected he might be Turkish himself. “No, no, it’s fine,” German momentarily escaped me. The waiter’s face showed no sign of understanding. “*Check please.*”

The faintest flick of a nod as he left. When I turned back, my mother was collecting her things.

“Come on, carry my bag.”

She got up and her weight was unsteady. I felt an old twinge—part fear for her, part embarrassment that her body somehow reflected on mine. I felt shame to feel embarrassed nine years after her death. Her walking had been terrible for more of my life than not. It had been, in retrospect, the first symptom of an early decline.

I stood up too.

“You’ve gotten taller.”

“Ma, I’m forty-four. I haven’t grown.”

“You’re taller.”

“I am not. You just used to be five feet four.”

“I am *still* five feet four. I still can’t believe you have a beard, let alone one that’s gray.”

“My beard isn’t gray. It’s *graying*. Slightly.”

“In the sunlight it looks white.” She walked, ungainly and still in some pain. On her third step, she tripped on a cobblestone, and by reflex I grabbed her arm and righted her. She was so light. I’d forgotten that “dandelion puff” had meant more than how her belly looked. “Let’s get you to your date. I want to see what he looks like, this *Mark Ruffalo* trying to break up you and the nice one.”

“We’re not breaking up. And ‘the nice one’?”

“You know. *Samuel*.”

In the distance one of the Swedes told a joke and the other two laughed. Yes, a Muppet language. Someday Swedes will all raise their kids in English and be done with it.

“Samuel’s not that nice.”

THREE DAYS AFTER we'd met, Gun and I had our first language session back in Stiller Don, which looked tragic by day. It had that secondhand-smoke-in-the-fabric smell any New Yorker over the age of thirty-five remembers.

Gun and I would speak mostly in German but he made sure we worked on his English, too. He loved teasing apart English words, so it was fun speaking with him. Also, he was pretty and there was always the thrill and expectation of sex, though it didn't happen many times. Mostly it was fun just to pretend I was his age again and naïve and hopeful about life. That we were two young men anxious to see what the world would throw our way, hopeful it would be just rough enough to test us, to set the stage for our inevitable triumphs. And yet, truth be told, also I loved that it was now, that I was grown up and more confident than I'd ever been in my twenties. That the crush I was developing would be manageable this time, nothing like the weeks of ecstatic gloom they'd been in my teens and twenties.

Through it all, I had the sense I would have time to figure him out. I'm not sure why; the weeks swept on, inexorable.

THINGS GUN AND I DISCUSSED IN ENGLISH:

- Sex. Mostly straight sex. It turns out Gun identified as “mostly straight.”
- Why does a person identify as “mostly straight” if he sleeps with guys?
- How bad a word in English was “asshole”?
- Was it an asshole move to identify as “mostly straight” while meeting gay guys in bars and letting them fall for you?
- . . . Or did it make you hotter?

THINGS GUN AND I DISCUSSED IN GERMAN:

- Was there a relationship between *schlecht* (terrible) and *Geschlecht* (sex) in German?
- What does it mean that Gun had never considered this?
- Who was this Danish girl he had a crush on and wanted advice about?
- Was he planning on sleeping with me again?
- What is the colloquial German way of saying: “Is it an asshole move to identify as ‘mostly straight’ while meeting gay guys in bars and letting them fall for you?”

Gun *was* pretty straight, I had to admit. An only child raised by his mom, his college apartment still had the look of a teenage boy: posters of girls, of soccer players midflight. Underwear was squidged up in the corner next to the soccer ball next to the pipe full of half-charred pot. Did he miss having a dad? Did he love any of the girls he dated? The boys he'd fucked? His reserve (was it his, or was it just German?) was so strange to me, blended as it was with such sexual freedom.

He was pretty straight except for one thing: he had sparkly eyes. Straight men from where I'm from cultivate a dead-eyed look ("Yo. What's up?" That look.) But Gun looked at me like a kid. Gun smiled wide open. Gun only went glassy-eyed when I was on top of him.

THE FINAL NIGHT of our trip, I did something stupid. I invited Gun to meet Samuel. The stupid part was I let Gun choose the place.

The evening started well. Samuel had long since created a daily routine — one atrocity memorial, one new park, one session at home painting. He had made peace with my long absences and we didn't fight. He was packing when Gun came by, and in the same room, both looked smaller. Surely this would be manageable.

Together we hopped on the S-Bahn, then walked to Berghain — the revered Temple to Techno where one wing, one night a week, became an event called Trashy or Locker Room or some such. These were the rules of Trashy/Locker Room: you strip to your underwear, check your clothes, and someone sharpies a number on your shoulder to keep track of your bill, which you pay on your way out.

Once in, we stripped in a side room. Samuel said, "Hey, it's nice to meet you finally," as he adjusted his cock in his sexy green underwear. "David says you're fun to talk to. How's his German?"

"It's okay. He still has an accent. His 'r' diphthongs for instance are terrible."

"I tell him the same thing myself all the time."

Gun's half-German/half-Brazilian package was just as big as you'd imagine. I stood with my hands over my groin. I had forgotten both Samuel and Gun were bigger than I was. For the first time since seventh grade, I felt self-conscious.

Gun winked at me, "You have a *Blutschwanz*, that's all. It needs blood to be big. Samuel and I have *Fleischschwanz*. They look big all the time. *Naja*, your cock is good."

Samuel said: "Gun is helping your German vocabulary immensely."

WE WADED into the crowd, sheens of sweat on us refracting red and yellow, shimmery Christmas lights on our snowy backs. In the center of the room we sat on a black cube, beers in hand. To our left and right, the Germans did sleaze industriously; in Berlin, it's always 1979, and someone is always getting fisted in a sling. I imagine some Americans come here and think, "How repressed we are in New York. You can drink a beer there and not even *one* person is getting a blow job on the bar." As for me, a place like this touched me nowhere deep. Nothing seductive, nothing truly treacherous.

"Do you hate it here?"

"No, no, it's fine," I answered in English. "Just, um, not our usual speed."

"I like it here," lied Samuel.

"Some gay friends brought me once here so I assumed . . . but that's stupid of me."

"You're not gay?"

"I'm mostly straight." That flicker in his eyebrows.

"He's mostly straight," I concurred.

Samuel narrowed his eyes, "What does 'mostly straight' mean?"

I turned to Gun, curious too: I had some skin in this game. But he just winked at Samuel, "It means I wouldn't turn down the right guy." And in that wink, Samuel blushed and my body shivered. Was I jealous? Was I turned on? "Berlin is very free," he continued. "There's even a supermarket with a darkroom attached, have you been?"

Samuel snorted some beer. "That can't be true!"

"Berlin bleibt noch Berlin, they say."

"Berlin stays Berlin," I repeated.

"Whatever the era, Berlin pushes it to the limit." I couldn't tell if Gun was proud.

Maybe it was Gun's quote, but suddenly Samuel had an idea: "Hey. I wanna hear you talk German."

". . . What?"

"You and Gun. I wanna hear."

"Let's show him what we've been up to," said Gun.

And when I look back at the night, I wonder: did Gun know what he'd say once liberated to speak in his own tongue? Is there another version of the universe where we speak only English and it ends in hugs? Another where it ends in a three-way? Or is there just this one, where Gun starts speaking German, my father's language, my life quest:

"Is this weird for us to speak in front of Samuel like this?"

"A little . . ." I replied. *"But he asked."*

“He did. Ach, this place. I’m sorry. I can be so stupid. Maybe it was homophobic of me to assume you both would like it.”

“Nah, it’s okay. But fuck you about my r-diphthongs.” I punched his shoulder. I smiled at Samuel. I tried to keep it light. Gun did not try and keep it light:

“So. You haven’t told your boyfriend, have you?”

“Did you think I had?” Gun was slowing down. He went through a ritual of consideration, though I knew he’d known our setup. I repeated what I’d said the first night. *“We’re open. But he prefers not to know details.”*

Samuel seemed to enjoy observing us. Gun leaned forward, so close there was no mistaking his intent.

“Can he really not speak German?”

I nodded.

Gun tilted his head even closer, till his forehead rested above my ear, skull on skull, hard. I stared ahead, eyes on Samuel, froze my face in some simulation of calm while every muscle clenched, tried to breathe but couldn’t as he whispered:

“Because tonight is killing me . . .”

Breathe.

“. . . I think I’ve been falling for you for weeks now . . .”

Breathe.

“. . . I think I could love you actually, and I know that sounds silly.”

Breathe.

“...And I was thinking if he doesn’t want a child, maybe we could think about that—yes I know, crazy, and these are not promises. I am not saying we would. But I am saying I can picture this. I am saying I picture this. I think you would be a good papa.”

Breathe.

“...And if you agree maybe you should kiss me now.”

I turned and our eyes met and I felt like I was sinking, like I was floating (were these the same?) and the music in the club didn’t go quiet, but somehow the space between the beats grew wide, became articulated.

“What’s he saying?” Now there was muted panic in Samuel’s voice.

“Nothing?” Terrible poker player, I.

“What did he say?” Now anger. And now I was starting to breathe, too fast, too fast, my face glowing red, visible even in the red light.

“He’s, um, being weird.”

“Have you fucked?”

“What?”

Samuel stood up now, his small body tense with rage, ready to fight me, asking though he knew the answer.

“So fucking tacky. You know, I don’t mind that you fucked, although I do question why you invited us all together for drinks on our last night. And I am sorry I got jealous the first week and I don’t want to feel like your jailer but what the fuck, David? He’s twenty-four and obviously straight and what, he has daddy issues? His dad and he weren’t close and now he wants to fuck it out with you?”

“His only daddy issues are he actually *wants* to be a dad. Like a normal fucking human!” My rage surprised me. Hadn’t we settled this? We hadn’t settled this.

“Good for him!”

“He wants to be a dad with *me*! What do you want?”

“Have you fucking lost your mind?”

I turned to Gun, who’d gone mute, who looked younger and younger and more wounded by the minute. I saw the ten-year-old in him, the five-year-old I might have walked by in the nineties.

“He didn’t say we were *having* a kid: he said he can *picture* it.”

“Do you honestly think you’d be a good dad? How would we ever afford to come to Berlin again if you were a dad? How would you fuck twenty-four-year-olds and lie about it to me repeatedly? You know, fuck off, I’m leaving.”

He was crying with rage.

He stormed out crying with rage.

He only stopped crying when the bouncer jumped on top of him for attempting to leave without paying (Germans: jumping on skinny naked Jews with numbers written on them in 2015? Bad idea) and Gun rushed in, paid for us both, and slipped away into the night, saying he was sorry, so sorry, he didn’t know what had come over him.

MY MOTHER AND I stood in front of Stiller Don. The sun was starting to sink, a pink dusk that starts late in Berlin and can drag on till midnight. I pondered how far away the year before felt, how many lovely moments Samuel and I had had since, how with the introduction of a new couples counselor and old routines, familiar pleasures had returned. How together we’d made a home for thirteen years. I thought of Greece. I pondered all this and yet somehow still there was a restlessness in me standing there in front of Stiller Don, a demon restlessness I hated yet couldn’t bear to lose.

“Have you talked to Gun this year?”

“Just e-mails.”

“Flirty, I imagine.”

“You know. *E-mails*. They start out well considered with paragraph breaks, and before long it’s all penises and declarations of love.”

“He said he loved you?”

“He said he was sorry how last year ended. But if I were here we could explore dating.”

“Really. They didn’t used to make straight men like that.”

“I know!”

Through the window, I saw him at once. His hair was longer and starting to curl, he had a small belly but he looked beautiful as ever. She whispered:

“Go now, if you’re going to go.”

I looked through the glass and pictured the drama of betrayal my mother feared and fantasized for me. I thought of the freedom Samuel and I had given each other, not fuck-anybody-it’ll-be-okay exactly, like a straight person might think. It was full of complications and love but also, our relationship wasn’t the strange Victorian straightjacket so many men wanted their wives and girlfriends cosseted in, the fidelity so many women felt they had a right to expect from a man. It wasn’t the erotic death spiral that had been my mother’s and father’s doom, nor the plot point in a thousand plays and movies where I felt like I was watching a tenth-century Noh drama. (“Wait, she thinks a man will never have sex with anyone but her. *Ever?* What a strange culture!”) It wasn’t any of those things. I wondered then: what was it?

“What are you thinking?” she murmured.

“You don’t know?”

“I can’t get inside your head, David. I never could.”

“You should have cheated. You should have had more sex. Before your breasts collapsed.”

“But how could I hurt your father like that?”

I turned to her and saw she was actually crying at the idea, big viscous tears that pooled in her eyes and traced the circumference of her apple cheeks, annoying me with their demand for empathy, although also settling a longstanding question: Can ghosts cry? Do they moan because they *can’t* cry?

It turns out ghosts can cry.

Somehow I was crying too. Germans walking past us gave us a wide berth. It was expected that Americans might make a scene.

“I said I love you too. In the e-mails. It was stupid. But in context, I don’t know, it felt right.” I laughed at myself. At being forty-four. At standing with my mother in Berlin in front of this Tadzio. And just like that, Gun saw us and waved. His face brightened, a flower opening, an actor finding his spot. The same sparkly eyes. My breath dropped out of me. I put one finger up. *Wait.*

“You should go, if you’re going to.”

I turned to her. I kissed her on the forehead, a parent’s kiss. Her head was so small. I felt a lightness rise in me and I smiled: “You with your moony ideas about love, Ma. I told you, I’m not leaving Samuel. I’m gonna figure this out. And I won’t be scared, like you were.”

She looked at me closely. A parent’s gaze can make you feel truly naked.

“Are you lifting weights? You look good.”

“Thanks Ma.” I handed her back her bag of oranges. “Where do you go, when you’re not here?”

She looked away; for all I knew she didn’t know herself. Then she kissed my cheek, a quick peck. And with that, she ambled off.

I felt a chill in the evening air. God, Berlin was far north, even summer couldn’t change that. I stood outside the café pondering my entrance, when at once he was in front of me.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Look at you.” I smiled fully, in English.

“Look at *you*. Who was your Turkish friend?”

I didn’t answer. He kissed me on the lips. It was good to feel his affection for me, whatever the precise ingredients.

“Hey. I got us two beers.”

“Actually, sorry but: could we stroll a bit first?”

“Oh. But.” He looked at the bartender inside from whom he’d gotten our drinks, not wanting to be rude. Then his shoulders relaxed. “Sure.”

Gun and I held hands and walked in the opposite direction from my mom. I bought an orange from a wooden fruit stand next to the bar, but I didn’t eat it. I tossed it up and down like a baseball, like I was a scrappy American kid in some forties movie. It gave me a strange comfort, the orange, and I thought—but where do these thoughts come from?—that if the apocalypse were to come, I’d be okay. *At least I’d still have some fresh fruit.*

That night Gun and I had sex, which was a relief as I hadn’t been 100 percent sure it would happen. And after, and the following evenings, there wasn’t a serious talk or a fight, much less a breakup, but somewhere in the long week I was there we both saw it was all a game, a sweet game,

and that whatever our friendship would be, however romantic, this part was ending.

I am back in New York. But sometimes when Samuel and I fight, or I'm feeling particularly blue, I think of that week in Berlin, of walking arm in arm with Gun, holding an orange in my hand as a hedge against imagined scarcity. And when I do, I feel relieved, as though I escaped through a door that had trapped my mother. I think of strolling among the Turkish and Syrian and Serbian immigrants of Prenzlauerberg with that bright, common thing in my hand. I remember I felt close to them all, and I wondered who their ghosts might be.