

CROSSING BORDERS

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Manfred was eager to introduce me to his “little sister,” who lived in West Berlin with her boyfriend. But he was not looking forward to driving through East Germany to get there. Just talking about it put him on edge.

“Once we cross the border, we can’t leave the autobahn,” he explained slowly, and not for the first time, as if I couldn’t understand him. I understood his dialect well enough after living among Schwabens for over a year. On the long drive north from Karlsruhe to the border between the two Germanys at Marienborn, we hadn’t exchanged one word in English.

A double row of high barbed wire fencing extended in either direction as far as we could see, broken only by the border station straddling the autobahn in front of us. Armed soldiers in the guard towers watched our approach through binoculars. Manfred’s old Deuxchevaux rattled to a crawl behind a line of cars.

This would be my first excursion behind the Iron Curtain, and I was eager to get across and look around. I took the camera from my handbag and was focusing on one of the guards when Manfred abruptly pulled my arm down.

“If they see you take a photo, they’ll confiscate the film, and we won’t get a transit visa.”

“We’re still in West Germany,” I protested.

“We won’t be in a few minutes.”

“So what happens now?”

“Look them straight in the eye and pretend you don’t understand German.”

“Got it,” I said and quickly tucked away my camera.

Manfred sat up straighter, cut the engine and coasted to a border station. We had to get out of the car and put our luggage on a conveyor belt that went in and out of a small wooden office where a bored and sleepy customs official examined our passports, took a cursory look at our possessions and stamped the visas. It wasn’t much worse than American customs, aside from the barbed wire and guns, and took about fifteen minutes.

“Welcome to the socialist brotherland,” the guard said and waved us on.

We still had to drive 200 kilometers through the brotherland before we could get off the autobahn in Berlin. The exit ramps were strictly patrolled, Manfred assured me. Cars from everywhere in Europe, plus dumpy Russian-made Ladas, were streaming in both directions.

It was a sultry day, and we were roasting in that tinny little car. Manfred drove at top speed. He was hyper-alert, with his high forehead, narrow nose and thin lips proud and stony. He looked like a carving I'd seen of a medieval Teutonic knight, battle ready. I snapped a photo of him, and he raised an annoyed eyebrow.

"Wouldn't you like to get off and drive around?" I asked.

"What for?"

"To see what it's like."

"I already know what it's like."

"Oh Manni, you've only read about it."

"I don't need to experience everything I read about."

We lapsed into silence. When he was peevish, I could see what he might look like as an old man—the tufts of blonde hair sticking out above his ears would be gray. Or maybe he'd be bald. Maybe I wouldn't be sticking around for that.

I turned from him and stared out the window. I had to admit the scenery here looked no different than in the Bundesrepublik. Flat monotonous fields of wheat and hay, dingy green under an overcast sky, the villages grey and somber.

Maybe I'll go back to San Francisco sooner than later, I thought. I'm not going to settle down here with a grump, no matter how good he is in the sack. I was on edge now, too, barreling through a grim alien land with my uptight boyfriend.

But when Manfred glanced at his watch and suddenly brightened, so did I.

"We'll be in Berlin quite early, after all," he said, turning to smile at me.

"Perhaps we should call Greta from the next checkpoint," I suggested.

"No, we'll surprise her. She likes surprises."

I had studied the photo of his half-sister Manfred carried in his wallet. Greta was seven years younger than her brother, with the same bright blond hair and cobalt blue eyes, but full-bodied instead of lean. She resembled her mother, Manfred said; that is, his step-mother, and he, his father.

He never spoke of his birth mother, whose whereabouts were a mystery. She'd left before he was three and hadn't been heard from since. He didn't

remember anything about her. His father remarried within a year. But Manfred had little good to say about his step-mother.

Greta was another matter. “She’s beautiful and talented,” he bragged. “My little sister is on her way to an acting and singing career. You can’t help but admire her, you’ll see.”

“What’s her friend like?” I asked, and Manfred shrugged.

“I’ve never met Kurt. He’s a psychology professor, a lot older than Greta. Probably about your age. Which isn’t old, of course,” he hastened to add. “But Greta’s still a young girl.”

§

Checkpoint Bravo, where the autobahn, at last, entered West Berlin, was also no problem. Again, we were waved through.

We found Kurt’s flat in the Albrechtstrasse and parked nearby. It was mid-afternoon and still hot. I was looking forward to a cold drink and possibly a shower. Manfred rang the bell several times.

He was about to give up and look for a phone booth when the intercom clicked on.

“Halloo,” a man said. “Who’s there?”

“It’s Greta’s brother, Manfred. And his *Freundin*, Nora. Can we come up?”

After a moment's hesitation and some muffled whispers, the buzzer rang and the gate swung open. We climbed four flights of stairs with our luggage and knocked on the door to the flat. It opened, but we saw no one at first.

We stepped into a dimly lit alcove. I made out two shadowy forms. I blinked. Greta and Kurt were holding hands, and they were entirely naked.

"You can't come in unless you strip!" Greta's voice, low and melodious, rippled with laughter. She went over to her brother and, briefly, embraced him. Manfred stood there like a stick. He didn't know where to look.

At a glance, I took in Greta's luxurious body and gold burst of pubic hair, the heavy breasts, and Kurt, tall and lean with a bit of a paunch and hairy chest.

"And here is Nora, just as I pictured you." Greta hugged me, too. Her skin was cool and lilac scented.

"I hope you are not embarrassed," Kurt said. "Greta convinced me it would be fine to stay as we are. Please, come in. We're drinking this lovely Riesling."

"You really must take off your clothes, too," Greta pleaded. "It's too bloody hot for clothing. Don't be a prude, Manni. I think Nora will. She's from San Francisco."

I had to laugh. "I will join you, only if Manni is comfortable, and I think he isn't."

"I'm comfortable enough," he stuttered.

"We'll put on our robes," Kurt said.

"No, no!" Manfred protested. "We're the visitors. This is your home. We'll be fine. Don't change anything for us."

We four sat at the kitchen table, one couple clothed and the other in the buff. On the table were a ceramic bowl filled with rose petals, a bottle of Riesling Kabinett and a hashish pipe. We made small talk and sipped wine. Kurt lit the pipe and passed it around. They must have just made love, I decided. Or maybe were about to. And now we'll be here for three days.

Kurt was quiet, watching Greta, who did most of the talking. Manfred examined his fingernails in an attempt to be nonchalant.

Greta was excited because she'd landed an important supporting role in a new play in Berlin. She was also trying out for a part in a TV soap opera, and she talked about that for a while.

"Berlin is where it is all happening," she said. "Kurt will tell you why. He's lived here 12 years."

Kurt cleared his throat and spoke as if to a classroom, in what I believed was broadcast-perfect *Hoch Deutsch*.

“Berlin has long been a vibrant cultural center,” he said. “But now it is like an island inside the DDR, surrounded by dangerous elements, and that sharpens everything here. We feel we live on the brink.”

“San Francisco is similar,” I offered. “It’s on the brink of the Pacific and the earthquake fault lines.”

“I’d like to go there.” Kurt put an arm around Greta’s waist. “What do you say, *Schatzi*? Shall we visit the Barbary Coast?”

“Super. We can stay with Nora. If you go back there. But maybe you’ll stay in Germany? That would also be super. Manni? I’ve never known you to be so quiet.”

“It isn’t easy to get a word in, *Fraulein* Chatterbox.”

She pelted him with rose petals.

Manfred yawned. “It was a long drive through dangerous elements,” he said. “We should freshen up and then, can we take you out for dinner?”

§

The *Stüble* where we had dinner was over two hundred years old. We were in a low-ceilinged oak-paneled room with gilt-framed mirrors on the

walls. A waiter with green streaks in his hair took our order. “*Du*,” he called me. We hadn’t been introduced, and he was using the personal you. This would not happen in provincial Karlsruhe, where Manfred and I lived.

“I like it here,” I said. “*Ich bin ein Berliner.*”

“*Ick*,” Manfred corrected me. “If you’re a genuine Berliner you say *Ick* not *Ich*.”

Greta was wearing a short white cotton tunic, with probably nothing on underneath, the neckline cut low. She kept her dark sunglasses on indoors.

“Are you practicing to be a movie star?” Manfred asked.

“You are such a pest.” She slapped his cheek playfully. “I’ve missed you, big brother.”

They leaned toward each other and rubbed noses. They’re like puppies in a litter, I thought. Manfred draped an arm around his sister, and she put her head on his shoulder.

Kurt was watching this display of sibling affection with eyebrows slightly raised. When he realized I was checking him out, he turned away and drummed on the table with his fingers. “Where did our waiter go?” he murmured.

Greta disengaged from her brother and focused on me.

“What do you want to do while you’re here, Nora?”

“I especially want to see East Berlin.”

“Why bother?” Kurt said. “It’s dull and provincial. Like a sickly, undernourished distant cousin. I went there once, eight years ago. I couldn’t wait to leave.”

“That is so harsh, *Liebling*,” Greta breathed. “I’ve not been to the East myself. I’ve been too busy. We should all cross over with Nora. When will you have time?”

The waiter arrived with platters of food and a pitcher of Berliner Weisse, a welcome distraction, it seemed, for Kurt. He entertained us with a history of the beer, which dated to the 16th century, and the regional specialty I’d ordered, Koenigsberger Klopse.

“My great-grandparents immigrated from a small village in Lithuania, near Koenigsberg,” I said, forking up what looked like meatballs in a white sauce.

“*Wunderschoen!*” Greta approved. “Didn’t our father’s family originate from that region, Manni? Maybe Nora is our distant cousin.”

Finally, we organized ourselves for the next day. Kurt agreed to meet us after work in East Berlin at the fountain in the Alexanderplatz, the “Alex,” he called it.

We went back to his flat, where the siblings nuzzled some more and pretended to wrestle. They tussled and rolled over each other on the floor, Greta giggling like a toddler. I bade everyone goodnight and toppled into bed in the guest room. Much later, I woke to Manfred’s embrace. His arms and legs were wrapped snugly around mine, fitting me in a tender hammerlock.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” he murmured in my ear and almost immediately fell asleep.

Now I was wide awake, wondering if Greta had supplanted Manfred’s missing mother in his affections. Or was that my role now? I squirmed in his embrace, but he didn’t budge. Why had the mother left, anyway? Had she felt trapped by a suffocating marriage? A needy child? Surely Kurt had noticed something overheated about the brother-sister relationship. I remembered a story I’d read by Thomas Mann. What was it called? I couldn’t get to sleep till it came to me—“Blood of the Walsangs.” If I mentioned that story to Kurt, would he say Greta and Manfred are simply affectionate? And I’d say, maybe

so, or maybe they just don't realize what they are feeling. Maybe Greta is acting yet another role. Manni would be horrified at the notion of incest, even if it were subliminal.

At bottom he really was a prude, though he admired anyone unconventional and, I think, relished being shocked. When we first became lovers, how astonished he was by what I considered normal foreplay. He didn't even have the vocabulary for it, *auf Deutsch*.

§

Manfred and Greta and I rode a tram that trundled along wide boulevards lined with tall shade trees and elegant eighteenth-century row houses. "They were restored after the war," Greta explained. I was surprised by the number of canals and green belts.

"West Berlin is much lovelier than I'd imagined," I said. "Wouldn't you like to live here, Manni?"

"No, I'd hate to live here. I feel like I'm in a cage."

"But you'd be free to come and go as you please."

"It's how I feel," he replied a little stiffly.

We got off near a sign that announced in German, English, French, and Russian, "You are leaving the American sector," and walked past a row of

boarded-up apartments and storefronts to the Wall. It was a high cement barrier that had been spray painted or stenciled all over with political slogans, along with declarations of love and miscellaneous slander. "Achtung! Fascist occupied territory." "Whoever writes such lies is really a fascist." "For a good fuck call Hilda."

Further along, we came to a strip of park and a wooden viewing stand. We climbed up, and this time I could take a photo of the border unimpeded. There were really two Walls with a few hundred meters of no-man's land in between. Down the center of this weedy strip were rolls of barbed wire and a series of guard towers. Inside them East German soldiers armed with machine guns stared back at us. On the other side of the other Wall were some ordinary looking apartment blocks. The brother Wall was identical to this one except, I assumed, for the graffiti.

Manfred took a flat white stone out of his pocket, aimed carefully and hurled it over the Wall into no-man's land. He had strong arms from throwing soccer balls for years. The stone soared far and high and finally disappeared in the long yellow grass, not far from one of the guard towers. A guard peered out of the window and said something to someone I couldn't see. Oh *Scheiss*,

I thought. Manni is triggering an international incident. But the guard shrugged and moved out of sight.

Triumphant, Manfred turned to us. His sister gave him two thumbs up.

§

At the Oberbaum Bridge pedestrian checkpoint, we waited in a long slow line in stifling heat to get to the border agents, where a 24-hour visa was stamped into our passports, and then we endured another line for purchasing East German marks.

“We have to spend all of this worthless money before we leave,” Manfred grumbled.

The “Alex” wasn’t far from the bridge, a largely empty plaza once the center of the city, now a sterile showcase for tourists visiting the Soviet sector. We went into a few shops where the wares were dismal. No one was tempted to spend any *Ostmark*.

The Neptune fountain where we would meet Kurt was near the town hall. Off to another side loomed the needle-like TV tower, also called *Spergelturm* or asparagus tower for its shape. The round sphere at the top was meant to resemble a sputnik.

“We could go up to the top,” Greta suggested. “There’s a viewing platform and a revolving restaurant.”

“I’ll pass on that,” I said. I was mildly acrophobic.

“There isn’t much to do here,” Manfred grouched. “Kurt is right.”

“Can’t we get on a bus and go out to the neighborhoods where people live?”

“We wouldn’t get very far.” He pointed to some police who were patrolling the square on foot. “The damn *Bulle* are everywhere.”

We went back to the fountain and they splashed each other. Greta pretended she was the statue of the Elbe River and Manfred was Neptune. “Come on, Nora,” she urged. “You can be a Rhine princess.”

Manfred put an arm around each of us and held us so tightly over the lip of the fountain I gasped for breath. “Now I’ll take my little princesses for a swim,” he teased.

“Let me go, Manni.” I broke away.

But Greta laughed and embraced her brother. “All things flow from you, my king,” she trilled.

By the time Kurt arrived at the fountain, we had located a *Stüble* nearby that served Russian vodka, and that is where we decided to spend our *Ostmark*.

The Posthorn was a steel and concrete structure in the heart of East Berlin with plate glass windows all around, packed wall to wall with young people, talking and laughing.

“Nothing can be hidden from the *Stasi* in a glass box,” Kurt observed.

This was no tourist enclave. As my friends and I entered, the noise level dropped dramatically. People turned to stare. I heard someone stage whisper, “*Amerikaner!*”

That means all of us, I realized, astonished, not just myself. We were all considered Americans here. We were all foreigners.

“We should go,” Kurt murmured. But Greta took his arm and propelled him to the bar, and Manfred and I followed. My friends seemed subdued, even the ebullient Greta. They weren’t accustomed, as I was, to feeling alien.

“What is the problem?” I asked. “You are all Germans.”

“It’s a totally different culture here,” Manfred hissed, barely moving his lips.

“Nonsense,” Greta said. She turned to the nearest man and tapped his arm.

“Hallo friend. My name is Greta. We’re all strangers in town.”

That broke the ice.

We ordered *Wursts* and vodka, and we bought rounds for our new East German acquaintances. Everything was cheap. We had plenty of funny money. The shots went down like water.

Greta and a beautiful mulatto woman named Johanna sang “All We Need Is Love” in two-part harmony, which I thought was ethereal. Johanna told us her father was an American soldier who didn’t know of her existence, and that was all right. She wouldn’t want to be a black woman in racist America.

I don’t know if it was the vodka or the *Gemutlichkeit* that cheered me so. At one point I broke into song myself and sang a few verses from the “Ode to Joy.” No one but Manni heard me above the din, and he joined in. *Alle Menschen werden Bruedern*, we chanted, with our arms around each other.

When the Posthorn closed and we all spilled out into the night, it occurred to us that we had spent every single *Ostmark*, and now we had to get to Checkpoint Charlie, which was a few kilometers away.

“No problem,” Johanna said. “You can travel on the U-Bahn *Schwarz*. Everyone does.”

She came along to show us how to ride public transit without paying all the way to Checkpoint Charlie, where she waved us off.

In the subway car, laughing and fortified by alcohol, we traveled “black” to the checkpoint. A transit cop came into the car, and I broke out in a sweat. But he smiled and joked with us.

We were all thrilled by our encounter with East Berlin’s counterculture, even Kurt. He swore he’d come back to the Posthorn once a month.

“They are our brothers,” he said. “And our sisters.”

Greta elbowed him. “Especially that Johanna, *nicht wahr?*”

§

Once again we lined up at a border crossing. I drifted along behind my friends. In the corridor leading up to the checkpoint, I noticed a few couples embracing. Cross-border love affairs, I figured. And I saw a tall, skinny man with two suitcases staggering behind me. He looked quite drunk. Suddenly I was in front of the first official. I smiled and said, “*Guten Abend,*” and snapped open my passport.

He inspected the passport and asked me to open my purse. I hated him instantly, a fat man with a shaved skull. He looked like a Nazi. There was nothing in my purse to interest him, finally, and he let me go on. But I’d had a bad moment, a souring of the bliss I’d felt at the Posthorn.

In the dimly lit subterranean passage between the two lands, Greta grabbed her brother and performed a kind of victory dance, a comical vigorous polka. The tall drunk with two suitcases toppled into them.

“Sorry, so sorry,” he mumbled. He had an accent I couldn’t place, or the words were slurred. “Did we cross the border, please?”

“We crossed out of East Berlin,” Manfred said, out of breath and annoyed.

“You are certain?” He put the suitcases down and looked around, confused. I could smell the alcohol on his suit as well as his breath. He really was stinking drunk. “Where I go now?” he asked.

“He could use some help,” I suggested. Kurt and Manfred just stared at me.

“What are you waiting for?” Greta demanded. “Shall Nora and I help him?”

They each picked up a suitcase and supported the man between them. At the West Berlin checkpoint, they released him and prodded him forward. We all passed through without incident and then helped the man into the first subway car.

“Now am I in West Berlin?” he asked, and when assured he was, a slow look of joy and relief spread across his face. He reached into a pocket of his jacket and pulled out a pouch with several passports in it, and flipped them open. Each one bore his photo and a different name.

We all thought at first the man must be a political refugee, an East German *Fluchtling*.

Greta said, "This is fantastic. We must celebrate your freedom."

"I must go to Bahnhof Zoo station," he said. "My colleagues are waiting for me."

"We have to celebrate." Manfred pumped the man's hand.

Kurt looked dubious. I was wondering where Bahnhof Zoo was anyway, when the train took off from a station and I saw the sign. "Oh oh," I said. "That was his station."

"You may as well come to Templehof with us," Greta urged. "We'll buy you a drink."

Another drink? I thought that unwise. So apparently did Kurt, who declined to join us. We piled off at the Templehof station, pulling our refugee guest along, and Kurt strode toward the flat. Greta stuck her tongue out at his departing back.

"Which is your real name?" I asked when we'd settled down at an outdoor café.

"I am Sven Lindstrom," he said and offered a damp hand to shake. "I am Swedish. I work for Amnesty International. I must go to Bahnhof Zoo." He

patted the suitcases. "To deliver these to my colleagues. Do I make myself clear?"

"Amnesty International?" Manfred sounded skeptical.

"You are not from the Soviet block?" Greta frowned.

"What is in the suitcases?" I asked. Was he smuggling something? Booze? Drugs?

"Some very heavy paper." Sven hiccupped and grinned. "Please excuse my condition. He's another drunken Swede, they think. If they open my luggage at the border I go back to jail, and all our work is lost."

"What work?" I was perplexed. "What jail?"

"It is difficult to explain," he said with a heavy sigh. "My German is not so good."

"How's your English?"

"Worse."

Greta leaned toward him, eyes luminous, voice like velvet. He'd have to be dead drunk to be impervious. "This is so fascinating, Sven. You must tell us more."

A waiter appeared just then.

"Perhaps you need some food?" I said.

“Food, yes. Not beer, please.”

I ordered a Koenigsberger Klopse for him, and a coffee. A lemonade for me. Manfred and Greta wanted beer.

He told us in a mixture of broken English and German what was in the two suitcases. They were stuffed with transcripts of interviews with Soviet political prisoners, which he was carrying back to Amnesty International. He had already been apprehended and jailed for three months in East Germany, but the interviews had been safely hidden meanwhile with friends. His colleagues expected him to arrive at the Bahnhof Zoo station.

“Can you phone them?” I asked.

“Yes, I have the number.” He got to his feet. “Where is there a phone?”

“Sit down, friend” Greta said. “After you eat, we’ll find a phone.”

Sven ate quickly with gusto. He might not have had a good meal in a while if what he was telling us was true.

“Now can we go?” He opened his wallet and looked at the bills with dismay. “All East German marks,” he said. “I am so sorry.”

“Of course we’re treating you,” I said, and pulled out my wallet. But it was almost empty.

“You’re a hero,” Greta added. “We wish to celebrate your courage. Right, Manni?” She elbowed her brother.

“Absolutely.” He fished some bills out and passed them to Greta. “My sister has a loving heart,” he said. He was drunk, too.

“Oh, she is your sister? I thought girlfriend.”

“That would be me,” I said.

The lights went out in the café. Sven staggered to his feet and picked up the suitcases. He began walking away from the café down a dark street. We looked at each other, uncertain.

“He doesn’t know where he is,” I said. “We can’t let him go off alone.”

Greta hesitated. “Let’s take him home with us. He can use the phone,” she said slowly. She was probably thinking about Kurt. “There aren’t any pay-phones nearby. Manni, stop him.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes!”

He trotted off and we followed. Manfred managed to turn Sven around, and Greta convinced him to follow us to the flat, where he could use the phone.

We dragged the suitcases up the four flights, bumping into walls, Greta and Manfred giggling and making such a racket, doors opened and closed at the landings along the way. It was almost midnight.

Kurt was waiting before the open door, arms crossed over his chest, his face a stern mask.

“What is this circus?”

“*Liebling*, I can explain,” Greta called out, and aside to me murmured, “You help with the phone call, Nora.”

Sven put a suitcase down and stuck out his hand. “Very pleased to meet you,” he burred.

Kurt looked with distaste at the proffered hand. “We met earlier, I believe.”

“Sorry, so sorry.” Sven dropped his hand and stood in the entrance hallway, bewildered. “Please, I must go to Bahnhof Zoo,” he pleaded.

“That again, like a broken record,” Kurt scoffed. “You are all totally soused.”

“Oh Kurt, don’t be rude.” Greta pulled him away down the hall.

“The phone is in the kitchen,” Manfred pointed, and he went after his sister and Kurt.

I shepherded our guest to the phone and waited while he fumbled in his wallet for the number, then dialed. The phone rang and rang. There was no answer and no answering machine.

“They are waiting for me at the station,” he said, and he sank into a chair.

“I must go there.” He looked exhausted.

“Wait here,” I said. “I’ll make sure you get to Bahnhof Zoo.”

I heard voices clashing in the living room and went there reluctantly.

“You believe that nonsense?”

“I’m sure it’s true. We can’t put him out on the street.”

“He can’t stay here. He’s a drunken stranger. And you are ridiculous to even think it. Your family is more than enough.”

“My sister is not ridiculous,” Manfred snapped. “You are ridiculous.”

When I crept into the room, he was glaring with shoulders squared, standing between Kurt and Greta, one protective arm on his sister’s shoulder.

“Why are you so mean?” Greta admonished. “Do you have to be in East Berlin to experience brotherly love?”

Kurt stared at them. “Perhaps there is altogether too much brotherly love right here at home,” he said, and he glanced at me. “What do you think, Nora?”

Dead silence. Manfred's face was flushed. He looked ready to blow up. Greta had gotten several shades pinker, too.

"I think it is our responsibility to get Sven to Bahnhof Zoo," I said, "since we distracted him from getting off the train at his station. His colleagues are not at home. They must be waiting for him in the U-Bahn station."

No one paid attention to me.

"You, you," Greta spluttered. "You Freudian pervert!"

"Oh? And why would I be the pervert?"

"We don't have to stay here and be insulted," she spat out. Greta turned and strode back down the hall. Manfred hurried after her, without so much as a glance at me. They went out the front door, slamming it behind them. Kurt winced at the sound. He regarded me wearily.

"So here we are," he said. "And your drunken friend in the kitchen. He really can't stay here, *verstehen Sie?*"

Stung by his addressing me as *Sie*, I replied with careful formality.

"I do understand. I will take him where he needs to go on the U-Bahn. However, neither of us has any West Marks. Can you lend me enough, *bitte?* I will cash a traveler's check in the morning."

"You believe his improbable story, too?"

“Who else would have seven passports? Why don’t you inspect his luggage if you don’t believe him?”

Kurt took a twenty-mark note out of his billfold and handed it to me.

“I’m not comfortable with strangers in my home,” he said, avoiding my eyes.

“I am a stranger.”

“You’re Greta’s guest.”

“I think we’re both uncomfortable about the same thing.”

He looked at me directly then. “Your boyfriend has abandonment issues,” he said. “Greta told me about his mother.”

“Really, *Herr Doktor*? And what would be your girlfriend’s problem? And yours?”

He shrugged and turned away without further comment.

§

Sven didn’t want me to accompany him. “I won’t get lost,” he insisted.

But I felt so guilty about what had happened, I couldn’t let him wander off alone, so I hefted one of the suitcases, and we set off through deserted streets to the eerily quiet Templehof station.

Sven's colleagues were waiting for him at Bahnhof Zoo, exactly as he'd said. A man and a woman, both tall and lanky with long pale faces, scurried toward us. They were surprised to see him emerge from an eastbound train.

"I'm sorry my friends and I have delayed, Sven," I apologized.

"It was an unexpected and entertaining interlude," he said, bowing over my hand.

§

At dawn, Manfred crashed into the room. I hadn't slept much. I'd been thinking about the scene at Bahnhof Zoo. Sven's friends had looked a little bedraggled, perhaps because they'd been up for days worrying about him. But maybe they were not what he claimed. Maybe Kurt was right to be suspicious and I was wrong. What if he were smuggling something other than paper in those suitcases? When finally I slept, I dreamed the *Stasi* were about to capture me.

Manfred tumbled into bed, totally naked. He was beautiful and still sloshed.

"Where did you go?" I asked. "Did Greta come home with you?"

"She's not coming back here. Let's get some sleep. We'll leave in the morning."

“Where is she?”

“At her girlfriend’s flat. We can stay there, too, for a couple of days.”

“It was an awful ending to the day, Manni. We were all so drunk. Kurt and Greta said things they didn’t mean. Maybe they’ll both think it over and it will be all right. Manni? Don’t you think so?”

But he was already falling asleep with his arms and legs wrapped much too tightly around me.

“I need my own space,” I told him, and he grunted.

I struggled free.

Jo-Anne Rosen’s fiction, long and short, has appeared in *Other Voices*, *The Florida Review*, *FlashQuake*, *The Summerset Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Valparaiso Fiction Review*, *The Rush*, *Amsterdam Quarterly* and several other literary journals. Excerpts from her stories have been performed locally and at the New Short Fiction Series in North Hollywood, California. She is a book and web designer living in Petaluma, California. She also publishes *Wordrunner eChapbooks*, an online journal of fiction and memoir (at <http://www.echapbook.com>) and co-edits the *Sonoma County Literary Update* (<http://www.socolitupdate.com>). *What They Don’t Know* (published 2015) is her first fiction collection. More details: <http://joannerosen.us>