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Bernkastel

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The first time I ever really talked to Debbie was the Saturday we all drove down to the Mosel. It had been Richard's idea--a pleasant day-trip, an *Ausflug* as we called it then after three years in Germany. An *Ausflug* with a British colleague from the Institute and his British wife.

No doubt Richard still has the pictures he took of the four of us--me in my black-and-yellow dress; Richard himself with his neatly trimmed German beard and the rimless German glasses he had to use when he drove; her husband Peter, wearing one of those dark brown leather jackets that cost lots of money and didn't keep you warm; and Debbie herself--young, beautiful, with wild eyes and black hair down to her waist such as no one wore in Germany, or, for that matter, anywhere, now that the Sixties were over.

It was a perfect October day as we drove through the ancient valley. The sun was golden over the river and the grapes--little green bunches of curls--climbed in steep rows up the near-vertical hills. The road was narrow, and truck after open truck filled with grape-pickers passed us on the narrow curves. They were Italians and Yugoslavs, mostly, short, swarthy men and women with kerchiefs over their heads.

After a while we stopped in the town of Bernkastel and looked for a restaurant on the river to have lunch. We had just settled into our chairs as a passenger boat, when the *Bernkastler Rundfahrt*, a passenger boat from further up the Rhine, pulled into view filled with drunken tourists. A glance

at the menu had told me that the restaurant was far more expensive than any of us could really afford. I was trying to figure out a way to suggest that maybe we should go somewhere else when Debbie put her hand on my arm and fixed me with an earnest gaze.

"Tell me," she cried. "Do you want children?"

"Yes," I said, startled.

I was not sure which was more shocking to me—her question or my answer.

She smiled in a friendly way, reaching over and putting her hand atop mine. Peter, who had not heard the conversation, motioned to the waiter that we were ready to order.

As we ate our fried trout and sipped at our glasses of Mosel, we made gestures of getting better acquainted. It surprised me how easily they admitted to being lower class. Debbie had worked in a bakery before she had married Peter, then a scholarship student at Cambridge. Her father had opposed her marrying, as he put it, "a penniless Jew." She had no university degree--her father had thought school a waste of time--but she learned things easily. She had a black belt in karate, she said, and she had picked up some Russian at an evening school, "just for fun." At the Institute where Peter had worked in Holland, she had learned drafting to get hired as an apprentice, but just before they came to Germany, she had been fired and replaced with an unemployed Dutch youth.

After lunch, while the men smoked, we went down to the ladies room together. As soon as we were alone, she asked me whether we had been "Sixties" people" and what we thought of President Carter, and then, without waiting for me to finish my answer, she said she thought I was very brave.

"Brave?" I said, hoping she would realize the sneer in my tone was for me, not for her.

"Yes, brave. It's true, isn't it—that you drink cognac, drive a hundred miles an hour on the autobahn, and hold a job in a different city from your husband? That's what Peter told me."

She brushed her long black hair over one shoulder.

"But of course it's different for you," she said. "You have a proper education. A woman like you has a chance."

I smiled and muttered something about things maybe not being quite as simple as she thought.

"You know," she said, setting a little tortoise-shell comb carefully above each ear. "I was pregnant once. I was in labor for almost twelve hours. You can't imagine how awful it was. Peter tells me I swore in Russian and the doctors were all quite horrified." She smiled a tiny half-smile. "Well, one thing's for sure"--she put the brush away--"I will always keep my hair long even when I am an old, old woman."

I thought I understood what she meant. There was not much in our lives that might not disappear at the end of our husbands' time contracts, when we would have to move to some other land, some other city. But my own unhappiness paled beside her loss, and I thought her far more courageous for having dared to do something so normal as to have a baby.

After lunch we strolled through the town. The cobblestoned streets curved upward past shop windows filled with cheap wine in green bottles, each with a picture of a golden-haired cherub holding a harp above his white, bare bottom—the "Naked Ass" wines we had been here long enough to know we should avoid. Everything was as quaint as in the dozens, maybe hundreds, of other German towns we had been in over the years; everyone as cheerful and rosy-cheeked. Yet just then all the bright, pleasurable surfaces of the town felt to me like a facade over something evil, and I had to take myself firmly in hand not to have the old feeling of apprehension I had had when we first came to Germany, a feeling of being unsafe.

After a while I grew tired of walking. From the wan looks on their faces Richard and Peter seemed tired too, but Debbie walked on with seemingly boundless endless energy. Peter engaged

Richard in a long conversation about their scientific work, the kind of conversation I knew from experience would go on after we returned to the car and perhaps all the way back along the Mosel. Soon we had left the town behind and were climbing up the steep hill towards the sky.

Wanting to rest for a moment, I leaned up against a fence and called to the others to go on without me. Across the path was another fence, and behind it a graveyard with mostly old stones, half-sunk into the earth. At one end, half-hidden in the tall grass, I saw ten or so large new black gravestones, all marble. There could not have been more than thirty graves in all. After a minute I walked over.

"Abraham Rabinowitz," I read. "Geboren 1892 Wissendorf Gestorben November 1935 Kristallnacht." Below were some Hebrew characters.

It was the graves of two families, Rabinowitz and Herrtenstein--grandparents, parents, children. The old graves were harder to read but seemed to be of two other families, going back to the eighteenth century. There were no old Rabinowitz or Herrtenstein graves. Far below, the blue, jewellike Mosel ran through the valley, and only an occasional breeze ruffled the grass, breaking the silence.

I could see Debbie and Peter coming towards me, a bright smile on her face. Her hair had fallen down again, combs askew. Slowly she walked over to one of the marble stones.

"This must have been the town of Wissendorf," I said. "There are some buildings just a little below. They must have all lived together their whole lives in this tiny town. They must have all been neighbors."

Richard was frowning in the way he did when I suggested we watch one of the many documentaries on the Third Program about the how all the members of the Cologne resistance had been hung in a basement or how Polish children with blue eyes had been kidnapped and sent out for adoption.

"Fascist pigs," I said with feeling.

And then stopped, remembering that Peter had far more reason than I to be outraged.

But he merely looked out over the valley, his leather jacket open and his hands in the pockets.

"It's getting late," said Richard in a firm voice. "Shall we go back now?"

Sunday evening Richard took me, as always, to the train station. A sleepy Sunday afternoon, with the inevitable gray sky overhead. The scent of coal fires was rising up all over the city, as happened every afternoon this time of year, as had happened every autumn for centuries. On a square of grass some boys were playing ball, trying not to fall over a tiny dog. A man in a green loden suit, Bavarian-style *kitsch* complete with a white scarf, was rested on a bench, leash in hand. At the far end of the allee, rimmed on all sides by large, magnificent oaks, stood the old baroque Schloss, now painted a fashionable eighteenth century mauve, that served as the city hall. I had a feeling of being swallowed up in the scene--so old, so quiet, so ordinary.

"Are you sure you won't think it over?" I asked Richard. A big iron train was lumbering towards us up the Rhine, making its way carefully through the switches just outside the station. I had just asked him if he would give up the last year of his contract and come north to live with me.

He shook his head vehemently.

"Well, maybe then I should stop after this semester and come back here."

Richard shook his head, frowning. The conductor was blowing his whistle. Richard put my suitcase up on the little steps of the train.

"You know how bad for you it is not to work," he said. "It's better for you to be working even if it means a short separation."

"I wouldn't call a year and a half short exactly," I said, but the train had begun to move. I put my arms around him and hugged him through the familiar scratchiness of his grey wool coat.

As the autumn wore on, we got busier. Between Richard's having to write up his experiments and me having papers to grade, and he did not suggest inviting Debbie and Peter back. Peter had gotten Debbie a drafting job at the Institute, and when she saw Richard, she was always friendly and told him excitedly how they were trying to have a baby and how she hoped it would not take too much longer. We ran into them once, on a Saturday morning when the narrow streets of the old downtown were filled with shoppers. She had the same bright smile I remembered, and both of them giggled when they told us that they had just ridden the tram without paying.

"Such fun, such fun," she said, her eyes shining. She had on a red wool coat with a white fur muff-like thing around her throat and her black hair streaming down the back. Peter was wearing the same leather jacket, a scarf his only concession to the winter cold. He had one arm around her and seemed happy.

"You can't imagine. An old man got on who looked like one of those people who check for tickets, but he wasn't. They wouldn't do anything to us anyway, though, would they Peter? I mean, we could always say we were foreigners."

They waved and moved off in the crowd. I remarked to Richard that we had been here much too long to even think about being *schwarzfabrer*. To my surprise, I found myself horrified by their gaiety and did not want to think about them any more.

We did not hear of them again until my birthday party in the winter. We had invited several other couples from the Institute--mostly Americans, at least the men were American--and we were having brandy and cigarettes at about one when the talk finally turned to Institute gossip.

"We really don't know all the circumstances," said one of the men.

"Of course not, but what does it matter?" said another. "He's a good scientist, he'll make it."

"What doesn't matter?" I asked.

"They had a child when they were in Holland," said the first man. "It had a congenital heart failure, very rare, the kind of thing that would require a whole series of operations if it were going to live at all."

"Not the kind of child you want to have when you change countries every two or three years," said the second man wryly.

"No," the first conceded. "Anyway, it was too much for her and she got--what you call it? I mean she went crazy."

"Postpartum depression," I said.

"Yes, and while she was crazy he took the child back to some relatives in England, and there it is to this day."

"But why is she always talking about how they're trying to have a baby, then?" I said. "Do you think it's true?"

I finished the last of the cognac and filled the glass with a pale yellow Yugoslavian liqueur that was much stronger, much more vile. The next thing I knew it was morning, and someone had put me in the armchair by the window, with a blanket over my lap.

"You know," said Richard, "it never fails to amaze me how intelligent you are. Even when you drink, you're intelligent. When you realized you were going to pass out, you lay under the coffee table with one hand over your head so no one would step on it."

"Why don't you just shut up," I said. "I want to go home. I can't stand it any more. People do things here--"

"People do things everywhere. It has nothing to do with place."

Tears spilled over my hands; I was sniveling. I could not get hold of myself. I made a funny little sound that came from somewhere in my throat.

Richard picked up another paper napkin and rubbed at the coffee table. His face had gone gray.

"I'm going out to do some Christmas shopping," he said. "It's long Saturday today, you know."

Some months later, I told my German lover the story. His family had lived in the town where I was working for several centuries.

"Exiles," he said, wrinkling up his nose. "What a dreadful life."

I believe he had never gone in the autumn to Bernkastel.