

Copyrighted Material

I

A Fresh Start

I ARRIVED IN BERLIN at the beginning of February, before the shame and guilt brewing somewhere low in my stomach turned symptomatic. These feelings were disproportionate to the events that had engendered them: the unreciprocated drunken confession to a man I had pined after for a year; an argument with a flatmate about a neglected kitten; an unexplained resignation followed by a refusal to even read my boss's hurt emails. Nothing that will loom large in the retrospective of my life, nothing I will remember much longer – just the kind of routine negligence and behaviour that slowly taints everything. I was ruining my life a little every day, and although I see now that these things were redeemable, I've always found starting on a clean page more inviting than amending an imperfect first attempt.

I moved from London without telling anyone that I was leaving, without saying goodbye to the people I knew there. Berlin is an easy place to start anew, as everyone seems to have just arrived. People even dress as if they are perched on the sill of a long journey, with belt bags and bandanas and tin bottles clipped to rucksacks with complex infrastructures. When I first arrived, I found the city shockingly dirty. Not in

a picturesque, old-fashioned way – don't think of mud or pastoral dung, the kind of organic crud that calls for a thorough satisfying scrub-down with a hard bar of soap after a long cheek-reddening day. I mean depressing, modern trash, the quotient of the paradox of too little and too much: ugly corners of yoghurt pots and immortal plastic bags, trainers and soaked old spongy mattresses covered in glittering bottle shards.

My first flat was in Kreuzberg, a poor part of the old West, a *Szeneviertel* (cool neighbourhood) near Kottbusser Tor. Berliners affectionately nicknamed the area 'Kotti', which came in handy as a mnemonic when I was trying to remember the German word for vomit: *kotzen*. The flat was above a methadone clinic, and my comings and goings were witnessed by a quiet group of straw-haired addicts with strong blue pupils that rolled loosely in quivery egg-white eyes. They didn't smell of anything, and never tried to catch the door as it swung closed behind me. They would shuffle together or stand to let me past, and then re-settle in the warmest configuration the doorstep allowed.

It wasn't nice there. The staircase had no windows at all and smelt sewery. The shower curtain dragged, as if weighed down by mould, and the toilet flushed only half-heartedly. The plumbing was so old that the water tasted of blood. There weren't any cupboards, only repurposed ladders stacked with clothes and books, with a few rungs cleared for me. The boy I rented it from was an Austrian ballerina, who had once been at university with someone I knew vaguely from the London coffee-circuit. He was the same size as me, and so I wore all his shoes and jumpers, and quickly felt at home as a raven in Kreuzberg's dark flock of Adidas and bad-boy sweaters.

In the first days there, my existence was very narrow: I took

the U-Bahn eastwards to my German class. The first two hours were grammar, then we had our break, and the last two hours were dedicated to hearing and speaking exercises. There were only seven students in A1.1, the absolute beginners' class, and three of them were called by some variant of the name Catherine. Katya was from Saint Petersburg and winkingly referred to her Spanish baker-boyfriend as her 'Chorizo'. When I first met her, she had thick, waist-long chestnut hair that she played with constantly – picking out split ends, or fluffing it up like a restless, glossy sparrow – but after a few months she bobbed it, and looked far more 'Berlin', though she had lost her gestural preening charm. There was Catalina from Caracas, who had escaped Maduro's communism with her boyfriend, Luis. He was her physical opposite: she, small and dimpled and voluptuous; he, tall, angular and sparse. They were both doctors but didn't have the license required to practice medicine in Berlin, and so instead worked alternating shifts in the McDonald's on Hermannstraße, a busy intersection close to our language school in the working-class district of Neukölln. The old woman from whom they rented a room was intolerant of smells, and had forbidden them from cooking anything in oil. Frying was the only kind of cooking they knew, and in those first weeks they looked so depleted that Katya took to bringing them leftover bread rolls from Chorizo's bakery. And then there was Kat from Sweden, with a fringe clipped to the quick, and an uncomplicated sexless body. She only became important later.

After class I would ride the U-Bahn west towards home, and memorize ladder lists of words in the ballerina's bedroom. When I was bored, I would go down to Karma Rösterei, the coffee shop around the corner. It was an unremarkable vegetable-milk kind of place – though it stood out on the street of shisha bars and kiosks, which all sold

reliably average coffee for a third of the price of Karma's espressos. I would go to Karma and order a foamy oat latte, half mortified and half thrilled by my solitude. I memorized sentences that I found poetic – *'Ich konnte den Glute des Feuers spüren'* (I could feel the glow of the fire) – hoping to delight future German interlocutors. I repeated slang-y sentences I overheard on the U-Bahn – *'Ich flitze mal zum Spandau rüber'* (I'm popping by Spandau). I liked the sound of places in Berlin, particularly the consonance of Pankow and Spandau, the ends of the U-Bahn line that to this day remain only names to me. I arrived in a winter I found too cold to walk around in, so for the first couple of months I knew the city in skewed constellations of U-Bahn stops. It was only later, when the weather turned warm quite suddenly on the night of the 3rd of April, that I started to colour in between the lines.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I was describing my routine in those delicate incubative months. After coffee, I would very often go to the cinema and practise how to ask for a single ticket: *'Ein Ticket bitte! Und ein kleines süßes Popcorn.'* I would always eat dinner late, after the cinema. Always the same: *Rotkohl* (pickled cabbage) with mustard, followed by raw oats and sweet oat milk, all from Denn's Bio Supermarkt. I spent a lot of time on my phone, clicking and swiping and refreshing, pacing the reassuringly familiar landscape of apps. This was my life when I first arrived. I relived the same day each day, the possibilities corseted by my taut German. I enjoyed myself very much. I liked repeating precisely the same thing, feeling like a powerful ballerina or horse, knowing how much youth shimmers and lust fizzes close to the surface – but keeping it in check, turning in early and alone, delighting in the precision of the coming day's choreography, choosing to do only this, with symmetry – over and over.

Not ad infinitum, however. By now it was March and my lease was nearly up, the ballerina was returning from Vienna, and I had to find a new place to live. I thought it might be a good idea to live with other people, so I had applied for a number of *Wohngemeinschaften*, or WGs.* Most of the ads were the standard kind of thing you'd expect: 'Looking for someone clean and responsible, professionals only (sorry, students), 420-friendly',† and I quickly found a spacious room around the corner from Kotti. I shared the two-bedroom apartment with a Polish woman called Ewa who was very nice on the days she didn't take crystal meth. The rest of the time she was either absent, thrashing to techno in a dark room somewhere, or too present, pacing the flat during her horrible comedowns. The meth made her paranoid and accusatory. She would send me texts in the middle of the night – 'Hey, have you seen my red hoodie? If you borrowed it I hope it isn't lost, my dad gave it to me. Also, I'm missing a jar of sunflower seeds. Did you take it?' She would check the stove was off and the door was locked and scrub the sink as if she were scouring her soul. I made the mistake of googling 'side effects of meth addiction' and came upon an article about meth-induced psychosis and violent behaviour. After that, I began to lock my bedroom door at night, waking from sleep to check it was properly secured, increasingly unsure which of us was more paranoid. After a two-week 'trial' period, I gave up on the idea of a flatmate, and started looking for a place of my own.

I soon found out that the ease with which I'd found the ballerina's apartment and Ewa's room had been a bit of

* This is what Germans call a flat-share, though *Wohngemeinschaft* literally means a 'living-community', which sounds rather utopian.

† Slang for cannabis.

beginner's luck. I visited a number of flats, and had to suffer countless odd interactions and conjure convincing false smiles in places that stank of sweat or thawing frozen prawns. A tall man with pale legs covered in black hairs showed me around a luminous studio while his girlfriend hid herself beneath a tipi of bedsheets. A beautiful eyebrowless Italian man showed me a flat he had gutted and furnished from IKEA. Finally, I met a woman who, for the purposes of this story, shall be referred to only by her initials, EG. She was looking for someone to take over her studio for six months, while she moved to Seattle to attend a Blood Spatter and Distribution course at the University of Washington as part of her criminology degree. She advertised a 'cuddly nest in a nice neighbourhood' near the Hermannplatz U-Bahn. She claimed that the flat had a wooden floor and '*Hinterhof* charm', meaning that it looked on to the inner courtyard rather than the street. The old buildings in Berlin are several courtyards deep, and living in a *Hinterhof* is a trade-off of sorts – the flats are sometimes quieter, usually safer, but little sunshine penetrates the entrails of those courtyards. EG specified, however, that not only was her flat very quiet and safe, it was also very light, because it was lined with three very large windows.

There was a whole lot of planning and scheming I had to do in order to secure the flat. It began with this email.

Dear EG,

My name is Daphne, and I am a PhD student in Philosophy, moving to Berlin from London.* I am interested in your flat, am responsible and I take good care of people's homes and

* A lie. I was at the time recovering from a round of rejections from master's programmes in Philosophy. I had been accepted nowhere.

possessions.* I am non-smoking and quiet.† Let me know if you are still looking for someone.

With best wishes,

Daphne Ferber

P.S. I apologize for the email in English. My German is very basic.‡

This email was well received, as I knew it would be. People always seem to trust philosophers. Belonging to that particular faculty is a kind of stamp of respectability. What most people don't know is that philosophers (who are mostly men) are dirty maniacs. If a philosopher responded to an ad of mine, I wouldn't even answer. I would assume that he was aesthetically stunted and sexually frustrated, and that he ate horrible, fishy, bristly things for breakfast.

In this case, I took full advantage of the misplaced credit given to my faculty, and EG granted me an interview. I visited her place at night, and so I couldn't really tell about the light and the windows. The flat was on the first floor. The entrance smelt of raspberries and white chocolate. EG was very beautiful: she had dark-red hair and extraordinary green eyes that looked painted with acrylics – thick and dauby with glistening whites. She was a head smaller than me, with a round, friendly face that made her seem kinder than I would later find out she was. She was originally from Münster and in the last year of her PhD in criminology, but her secret, dearest wish (I discovered later, when I read her diary) was to become an actress.

‘Daphne, right?! Do I pronounce it well?’

* Aspirationally true, but in fact, a lie.

† True, except when someone I find attractive offers me a cigarette.

‡ At this point in the story, very true indeed.

‘Yes, that’s absolutely perfect.’

She stretched out her hand; it was tiny and bony and a little moist, and fluttered nervously in mine like a bird caught in a trap.

‘Please come in, welcome to my cosy nest.’

Apart from the corridor and a small windowless bathroom, the flat consisted of one large room lined by three very tall windows facing – as promised – the inner courtyard. It held a small kitchen outfitted with very specific equipment – something to heat chocolate, a device to core apples, a special saucepan in which to cook asparagus. Germans are very particular about asparagus. They wait impatiently for the first appearance of the white asparagus, which marks the start of *Spargelzeit*, the harvest season between April and June. EG explained how to steam the white asparagus lightly to preserve its scallop-y texture, and then showed me her cookery book.

‘This is the best asparagus recipe, my Oma’s *Spargel* with bacon croutons and cream sauce. I will leave this for you. Please don’t get any stains on it, but if you look after it, you can use it.’

‘Yum! Looks so good! I definitely will!’ I lied. It was full of recipes for apple and cream dishes that I wouldn’t cook even if my life depended on it. Her cupboards were crammed with heirloom-esque items – thick-bottomed, ugly crystal things, painted plates and tureens. The rest of the room comprised a table-cum-desk pushed up against the window, a plain wardrobe and a double bed. The lampshades were made of pink polka-dot material, the general mood one of cosy frou-frou. We ate heart-shaped chocolates and drank mint tea. I told her about my philosophical interests and my German language ambitions. She suggested that upon her return from abroad, we could set up a language

tandem together: she would help me with my German and I would help improve her English. I sensed that she liked me, and the next day she told me I could have the flat if I wanted.

But the flat did not belong to EG, she was only renting. It belonged instead to a Frau Marie Becker, of 42 Cicerostraße, 10707 Berlin-Lichtenberg, whom I had to meet before I was given the final blessing. I arrived flustered, five minutes late with a runny nose. Frau Becker offered me a tissue immediately and kept pressing more on me. At first glance her sitting room looked cosy and full of the markers of a happy life: surfaces cluttered with photographs of grandchildren, pencil marks on one of the doorframes marking their heights over the years. She had gone to some trouble to prepare for my visit, and had readied a lace-lined tray with a jug of apple juice and a bowl full of Kinder Eggs. But the flat was cold, the sink in the toilet was full of frothy spit-out, and when I sat at the kitchen table, I found myself absentmindedly scratching flecks of old food off the greaseproof tablecloth. She began to peel one of the Kinder Eggs and asked me where I was currently living.

‘I live just around the corner from Kotti – Kottbusser Tor?’

‘Ah *ja, ja*, I know Kotti.’ She made a face. ‘Not many Germans there!’ She corrected herself, remembering that I was not German: ‘I mean, not many Europeans, like English and German. And you came to Berlin to learn German, no?! You’re not here to learn Turk! You are moving to the better Kreuzberg, the European side.’

She offered me some apple juice and poured it into a wine glass, filling it to the very top, so that I had to lower my face over the glass and suck it up to avoid spilling it. While I drank, she told me about her visit to London, and asked me about the state of various famous museums. She wrongly

attributed my dishevelled appearance to a bohemian chic. She clearly thought I was some kind of artist, even going so far as to praise Bridget Riley and the op art movement, which I knew nothing about, but urged me to refrain from painting directly on to the walls, and told me where I could buy good art supplies. I could not think of how to correct her politely in German, and so responded instead with a vague smile and bewildered silence. This seemed to have been effective, because EG told me a few days later that Frau Becker had decided to accept me as a sub-tenant. I think the real reason she wanted to meet me in person was to make sure I was a 'real', white European. For all the assertions people made that Berlin is a 'diverse' and 'accepting' place, there are still shameless racists here.

EG and I celebrated my new sub-tenancy the following week, with *Sekt* (German sparkling wine) from the supermarket, and the rest of the heart-shaped chocolates which she had somehow not touched since the last time I had visited her, exhibiting the kind of self-control I've never been capable of. I found out that she had a boyfriend and was on the pill, that she loved *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*, that her favourite person in the world was Audrey Hepburn (followed closely by Elizabeth Taylor), that she was an avid cinema-goer, and that her grandfather had been in prison for war crimes after World War Two. She asked about my own family, and I was vague, mentioning London, French parents, a big brother. I asked her about the neighbours. She knew the men directly above and below her. Her relations with them were friendly, and she claimed that they were both quiet. This was a lie, I was to discover the third night after I moved in: the man upstairs, Günter, regularly had very loud sex. He was so theatrically loud that I feared he might have been playing some kind of one-sided erotic game with me.

The man downstairs played heavy metal music most evenings, which filled my room with a low-grade malevolent buzzing. EG did not warn me of these disturbances, but she did mention a slightly awkward incident involving the downstairs neighbour.

‘It was the day I moved in, and my boyfriend stayed. We were in bed and then I heard someone knock on the door. We ignored it because, well’ – she broke into a rather coy smile, from which I surmised that they had been enjoying an ‘intimate moment’ – ‘well, because it was late, but then I heard it again and I got up and asked who was at the door. A man – I don’t think he was German, but I’m not sure – shouted through the door, and said he lived downstairs, and that he wanted to give me a welcome gift. Well, I shouted through the door, thank you, but it’s nearly midnight, I won’t open the door for a stranger at night. And then I saw him once in the staircase and I said hello, but he ignored me. I mean, maybe he was offended but he can’t expect a woman to open the door to a stranger late at night. I mean, this is a good building with professional people living in it, but still. What would you have done?’

‘You were right, I wouldn’t have opened the door either,’ I told her, but I privately judged her behaviour as very un-neighbourly. I made a mental note to go and introduce myself to this neighbour, perhaps even to bring him a small gift. I wanted to make it clear that I am a much friendlier kind of person.

I moved in on the 3rd of April, which was the day the weather turned suddenly warm. I trekked several times backwards and forwards on the U-Bahn like a solitary mule, laden with supermarket bags stuffed with running socks, proud, independent and self-contained. I was glad to be rid of Ewa, whom I planned never to speak to again. I love a fresh start.

It was magic to feel my self-reliance, and these strongly muscled legs and tight bags swinging against my torso as the train rattled. What a compact adult package I had become!

As I was coming and going, I noticed that there were small brass plaques on the pavement outside EG's building. Each square was engraved with the name 'Cohen', a date of birth, a date of deportation and Auschwitz as the place of death. I looked them up on Google and found out that the plaques are memorials called *Stolpersteine*, or 'stumbling stones', and that they identify each building from which Jewish families were deported. Once I'd noticed the *Stolpersteine* outside my door, I realized they were everywhere, a seemingly random scattering of bronze squares outside bars, cinemas, run-down flats and grand old buildings. It was jarring, at first, to see Berlin's lively streets filled with so many little graves, but after a few weeks they became part of the scenery and I stopped noticing them altogether.

105 Huberstraße is the first place I have ever moved into in which I did not feel the urge to douse everything with 100 per cent alcohol. I unpacked all my clothes and hung them obediently on the hangers that EG had cleared for me, next to her dirndl Heidi-dress and her shoulderless dresses which were too small for me. I put my running shoes next to her woefully tiny Converse, and then I threw away the contents of her fridge and store cupboards. The bins were in the courtyard. I have always had a lot of anxiety around waste disposal and found it embarrassing that the bins were so exposed, making furtiveness impossible. I am convinced that not only do I consume the wrong kinds of food, but also that I dispose of my waste in quite the wrong way, too. I cannot figure out if a yoghurt pot can *really* be recycled and if the smooth soft mirror lid can go along with it – or whether it belongs somewhere else altogether. So I threw away her packets of biscuits

and pasta and a full jar of raspberry jam under the cover of darkness, and I felt purged, with the fridge and cupboards wonderfully bare.

EG had told me that her flat received a lot of natural light. I was not able to corroborate this claim until I had moved in, but she hadn't been lying. In the mornings the room was dark, but in the afternoon the sun was so powerful that the air seemed to swim. At times the flat was so flooded with light that it looked like those cells we slid under the microscope's lens in biology class – the ones that seem empty, or to contain only an inanimate smudge, until you get the focus right and suddenly you can see something moving, and you can identify the freshwater zooplankton *Daphnia magna* – its pulsating heart and quivering digestive organs terribly exposed. On sunny days all the crumbs and smears I had made would spring into unforgiving relief. Then I would feel a little guilty, and try to make the flat as clean as I had promised EG I would keep it. The problem was that I am not a gifted cleaner. It isn't that I don't notice things. I always notice that odd cluster of hair that people overlook on the back of the toilet seat, and I hate the feeling of my skin kissing the sticky surfaces made by greedy hands closing kitchen cabinets. I'm also not a phlegmatic cleaner. I am a good hooverer, and a good mopper because I actually *lift* the chairs and tables, and push furniture around, while most people make do with going respectfully around them, as if weeding around a sacred tree. The problem is that I just can't make sense of cleaning products. I'm always rubbing the windows with Pledge, scrubbing the stove with something for the toilet. This is strange, as I was a rather talented chemist at school, but somehow these various solutions and functions remain opaque and I seem to rub dirt into a chemical permanence, rather than to scour it off. The point is that with

regards to the light, EG was true to her word. That first afternoon the room was graced by a spotlight of sunbeams. I lay on EG's bed until dark, full of a nervous and giddy optimism for this new chapter, the true start of my new life in Berlin. The ballerina, Ewa, the missing hoodie, all that was behind me. I slept soundly. I had no presentiment of what was to come.

An Enemy in the City

AT 3 A.M., I WAS woken by shattering glass. First an indiscriminating clumsy *clap*, and then a delicate tinkling of shards falling to the ground. The reverberation of the smash was inside my body as well as outside, and I knew straight away that something violent was happening. My curtains were drawn and so I could not see if my window had been broken, as I suspected. I didn't know whether the noise was directed at me personally, or whether this sort of thing often happens in Berlin apartment buildings.

This probably has nothing to do with you, I repeated to myself as adrenaline bled into my lower abdomen and started to congeal. The smokers are not scrutinizing the contents of your bins while pretending to smoke. The Austrian ballerina is not ignoring your last email because you ate some of his cooking chocolate. Ewa has not come for you on a meth-crazed killing spree. Not everything is about you, and this loud noise is none of your business. It is probably a generic disturbance. I did not move from my bed to try to get a view of the courtyard because I hoped that if I just lay there and waited, time would do its work quickly, and string together enough moments that the terror of the present would end.

I reached for my phone and googled ‘how to call the police in Germany if you don’t speak German’. My phone reception was poor, and I couldn’t move near the window for better reception in case the smashing started again. Sweat was trickling down my ribs and my fingers were numb. The prospect of having to call the police distracted me from the fear of the incredibly loud noise. How could I explain what had happened? I knew the words for ‘window’ and ‘accident’, but not ‘stone’. Could I try to speak to them in English? I started googling ‘very loud explosion in the night’ and discovered a series of threads about a sleep disorder called exploding head syndrome:

If you have exploding head syndrome, you’ll hear loud explosion-like noises as you’re drifting off to sleep or around when you’re waking up. The former is a type of hypnagogic hallucination, and the latter is a type of hypnopompic hallucination. Although they’re only hallucinations, which are imagined, the noises in exploding head syndrome feel very realistic at the time they occur.

The cause of the syndrome is disputed – it is unclear if it is neurological or psychological. It is often treated with antidepressants. I have been fending off prescriptions of antidepressants for most of my adult life, because, as W. H. Auden said, ‘I don’t want to get rid of my demons, or my angels would fly away too.’ But if I have exploding head syndrome, maybe the time has come to give them a try . . . At some point the train of these thoughts petered out into sleep – and suddenly it was morning, and everything was boring and normal again, my terror in the night as foolish as a child’s nightmare. I drew the curtain, and saw that the

window was indeed smashed, which refuted the exploding head syndrome hypothesis.

I still went for my scheduled run first thing that morning. I ran four 2.5km loops of the Hasenheide, a wonderful patchwork park that EG had recommended. It had an open-air cinema, a skate park, a smelly petting zoo and littered lawns, threaded together by dusty paths. It was much warmer that day. After months of frost, the air was gentle on my skin. I checked my time and distance and number of calories burnt once a minute. The Gambian dealers drank coffee from thin-skinned plastic cups and unzipped their parkas and swivelled their heads to the rhythm of my loops.

On my return I ran into the upstairs neighbour in the courtyard.

‘Hi . . . I am Daphne,’ I stammered, embarrassed by my childish German, and the sweat rings and the dark hairs visible between my leggings and socks.

‘Günter, a pleasure to meet you. Ah, you run? Me too, this year the Berlin Marathon. So you are from America, or where?’

He was blond and handsome, but he looked a little pig-gish, as if someone had scrubbed him pink before sending him off from the farm to the big city. He was a close-talker, and I could smell something meaty on his breath. He was friendly, however, and when I made an excuse to leave he told me to knock on his door if I ever needed anything.

I had a shower and took my time combing a chemical-smelling conditioner through my hair. I felt light, purged of the night’s drama. The 4th of April must have been on the weekend, because I did not go to German class. Instead, I let my thoughts drift on waves of social media. I never posted anything on Facebook or Instagram. I worried that my

pictures or status updates would go ignored and receive no likes or comments and that I would fail at being ‘visibly popular’ on the internet, something I thought was beneath me to want but which I craved like everyone else. Instead, I lurked on the pages of others, mainly women, old romantic rivals from school or university whose photos I would scroll through, terrified that I would accidentally ‘like’ one of their pictures and they’d know that Daphne Ferber had nothing better to do. That day, I spent hours stooped chimp-like over the glowing shell of my Mac, opening and closing internet windows automatically, repeatedly boiling the kettle to top up paling dregs of Nescafé. I had by this point examined the spiderweb scar on the window, and used Google to formulate a new possible cause: ‘fracturing in glass induced by sudden temperature change’. With this in mind, I composed the following email to Frau Becker:

Sehr geehrte Frau Becker,

I am the sub-tenant of EG (April–September).

Last night the outer glass layer of my rightmost window exploded. I am not sure why . . . maybe the sudden change in temperature overnight broke the glass. How should I proceed?

Do you have someone you can call for repair?

Please excuse my rudimentary German!

Yours sincerely,

Daphne Ferber

She answered me the same morning, with a promise of a visit from the repairmen three days later. That same evening, students from my German class came over for a small house-warming party. Kat arrived early, and everyone else arrived very late. She wore tight black jeans and a halter top. Her hair was tied back in messy bunches, revealing an elegant neck.