

Serhij Zhadan

Big Mac

Geschichten

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Stories

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Sample translation by Reilly Costigan

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STATIONS

I've never lived by a train or bus station even though I've always wanted to. I can picture it now—having a train station right in my backyard or peering out the window at the hot buses cooling off at night. It really is a shame that never panned out. I'm not one to regret things, but those train and bus stations, they're just different. They lead their own secretive and detached lives, always resurfacing in your mind like presents you once re-gifted and now you're worried they might not be in good hands. If I lived next to a train station I'd walk the streets, so boisterous during the day and so silent at night. I'd buy bread at the kiosks and greet the local cab drivers who wouldn't even think about offering me a ride. After all, my house would be just around the corner, right next to the first platform.

In the middle of the night train stations resemble cities after a mass evacuation— closed ticket counters and underground crosswalks are still filled with departing passengers' warm breath, the air is still bitter from the train smoke and sporadic alcohol vendors peer into the abyss of darkness hoping to catch a glimpse of a thirsty traveler. But a blanket of silence has already settled on the buildings and parking lots and the moon is perched up above, gloomily staring at the train station. Even the random passengers who are stuck there until dawn keep quiet,

sprawling out on a bench or leaning up against a wall. Come morning they hit the road, leaving this ownerless and transient place behind them.

I could get up early and come to the station just as the morning trains are arriving, packed with students and travelling salesmen. And watch how they groggily spill out onto the asphalt, damp from the receding fog. I'd make way for the women holding their purses and the men lugging heavy suitcases as they rush towards the exit where inevitably someone just can't wait to see them. Gradually the surrounding neighborhoods would fill up with life and activity—people yelling, street markets popping up in the shade and next to the post office and gruff voices announcing the departure of international express trains that would whisk away hundreds of strangers, lifting the soft burden of their presence in the city.

By lunchtime their voices would gradually rise up, while specks of priceless dust would flutter through the station's high windows—maintaining a perfect equilibrium between noise and heat. And after lunch all the carriers who so vigorously shuffled around between the business class passengers in the morning would mosey over to the shade, smoke their strong tobacco and tell each other the same old didactic stories from their past about women, adultery and inevitable justice. And vendors selling colorful toys and Chinese dishware would be walking outside the trains, trying to sell just about anything sent by the tight-fisted providence of the train God.

Evenings would be the most interesting. In the evening train stations light up like lamps and come to life, just like zombies after a brief death. Just like the children sleeping in the underground crosswalks, the women selling flowers, the cops panting like dogs in the oppressive heat and the pickpockets with holes in their pockets—all of them would tap out the rhythmic railway beat in unison amidst the powerful spotlights. And thousands of weary, exiled travelers, hundreds of transferring passengers and dozens of foreigners would be in sync with them—all of them would wander the train station's halls and back alleys, taking off one by one and leaving us behind in this simmering city where the train station has always been the safest refuge because it's a hideout for all of the city's criminals and ticket scalpers.

Meanwhile, bus stations keep their own pace; they operate like factories or super markets. They get up early to make their morning routes. And after setting off you drive around the city a bit, stopping at intersections, by familiar buildings and places that are closely intertwined with your life. Sometimes you even come across one of your acquaintances who is striding anxiously

down the street. It's as if you're taking a trip inside your own psyche since no matter how you spin it the cities we live in penetrate our psyche. This kind of travelling puts you in an uncanny state where you're not really leaving the city. Instead you're just moving from house to house and intersection to intersection all within a familiar area, along the city transit routes. Then the bus leaves the city, and that sense of familiarity quickly deserts you. And all the subsequent random bus stations along the way leave you with a sweet taste of transience, decay and death that emanates from the dispatcher's booth.

That's just it—bus stations have a different ambience. As soon as yet another overloaded bus takes off one is overcome by a feeling of desertion and complete emptiness. Flickering and exuding bright colors in the mornings, by the afternoon bus stations quickly thin out and quiet down. And even the old and dilapidated buses servicing the suburbs hardly change a thing, just like a teenager's squeaky voice. The evening sun floats above the roofs, the grass quietly pokes through the concrete slabs, the vendors pack up shop and the dogs rest on the steps and doze off as they guard the bus station entrances to the otherworld. At night bus terminals look like markets deserted by their vendors—anxiety and signs of destruction are everywhere. Just like decorations that someone forgot to clean up and don't serve any practical or aesthetic purpose. I'd still like to live next to a bus station so I could stop by from time to time, see off the last buses and lazily sit on the bench under the clunky clock missing a second hand all while sipping some beer with my friends, the locals. I'd like to know that I could always drop by, even if I had nowhere to go.

I've always looked on at the passengers with admiring envy. I've always envied those who are leaving, and those who are coming back even more so. Simple little details from their everyday lives have always intrigued me—how they pack their bags, nervously wait for their taxi and check their purses and wallets for the last time. Their haste, tears, jolly shouts, fatigue and anxiety all intrigued me. But most of all I was intrigued by the vast black void that unravels before you at the beginning of the trip. Just around the bend you could sense the incredible otherworldly drafts breathing down your back, as well as the blinding light ever so present inside the inner compartments of reality. Only passengers who have removed themselves from typical circumstances make their way to this place, just like moths that are no longer being hunted.

Countless times I've watched as heavy, dusty cars drive by to the east or west. Countless faces have graced me with detached and self-confident glances, paying no attention to me or the ever-changing landscape. Each time I've wanted to go along for the ride. Simply the names of the homely stations along the way made me want to join their trip which I was convinced would definitely have a most pleasant and unexpected ending. That fleeing transient state that causes your heart to skip a beat, justifiably so, appealed to me, not so much the trip itself. Frankly, sojourners' movements possess a deep inherent logic and their movements develop a secret pattern as if they are taking part in a series of terribly important events that could happen to any of us, but we're not always aware of it. Naturally you won't be able to feel all of that without a ticket and a travel bag in your hands. That blissful detachment from the real world can only come to you on the train platform, and it recedes as soon as you come home. Otherwise all you have left is to see off other passengers' buses, patiently waiting for them to return.

Most importantly, all these stations are unique. There's no such thing as two identical stations—the notion that they all look roughly the same only confirms the fact that we're too careless or unwilling to take a minute to carefully examine them, top to bottom. Even the seemingly uniform Soviet structures with their gray exteriors and drab baggage rooms differ from each other ever so slightly. Each of them contains countless traps and secret chambers with doors that are always kept locked; each one conceals uncountable tragic developments connected solely by their witnesses' unwillingness to recount them. Train and bus stations are odd pieces of architecture that often tear us apart, although theoretically they ought to bring us closer together and form a tight-knit bond. But they're no longer capable of uniting us. Their incoherent announcements that we strain to hear out of habit and currents of stale air divide us. Probably the church once experienced something similar back in the day.

I'd like to push on from one station to the next, stopping at each one, transferring, slipping out of the boiling hot train cars, standing at the ticket office, fidgeting, suspecting, mistrusting, roaming the halls and cafeterias, falling asleep in damp chairs and looking out the window, barely making out the rough contours of foreign cities and countries as I slowly approach my final destination; I'd like to keep waiting for more stations to pop up in the morning twilight and leave them behind amidst the thick early spring darkness. I'd like to rediscover them after an extended absence, all while getting lost in a maze of otherworldly crisscrosses. Their very existence is enough for me to feel grounded and needed—moving trains make up for the futility of living, the fickleness of the future and our selective, irresponsible memory.

There are the hopeless concrete jungles in Ukraine's industrial cities, unkempt and overcrowded, with pigeons perched on the roof and 24-hour kiosks. The black and empty train stations of Poland, minimalistic and in need of repair. It's as if the train stations' employees have gone AWOL. There are the post-socialist and post-apocalyptic train stations of Hungary with names that you can't even pronounce, let alone remember. Their names are like the names of women you like who you just didn't have the chance to get to know. The spotless and gloomy train stations of Austria that only come to life for an instant when passengers walk along the platform only to disappear around the next bend. Then after lunch the sound of silence ensues. The hectic stations of Italy, the cozy stations of Switzerland, the insane stations of Moscow and spooky stations of Berlin. I'd like to wait around on their platforms, drink in their bars, make friends with the baggage-men and station operators, all the while losing umbrellas and gloves and finding inner peace.

And there's that barely detectable sadness that accompanies you. What is a train station after all? It's a trap with multiple doors, each of which leads into the abyss of the night. It's a ripe vegetable pumped with juice, a glow, silence and people crying. It's a toy for the little ones, for joyful precocious kids who know all the ins and outs of this finely-tuned mechanism, as well as its secret passageways and codes. On breezy July mornings they crack all the codes, committing them to memory and keeping them in their holey pockets.

Children are privy to particularly vital information since adults have simply lost the ability to understand the simplest and most important things. Travelling means a lot more to children than it does to adults. On the road parental control becomes more lax because the road makes everyone equal. Children hide out in the waiting rooms where time freezes and space shrinks and the air gives off an earthy and smoky smell. Vagrants, seemingly possessed by the devil, try to grab a hold of the children and return them to their parents. Once they've eluded all the guards and other obstacles the kids wind up on the train platforms where they see trains fading away into the inky darkness as their fake gold-embroidered lights flicker. I often reminisce about those happy times when I'd bump into my old friends, carefree and youthful, at my good ole' train station. Although I didn't actually live next to it something happened one night and I had to set up camp in the poorly-lit hall, awaiting my train that emerged from the east at about 4 a.m. after it had crossed a few borders.

The snow was melting, sucking in electricity. An extended thaw was roaring outside at the main entrance. The wind, so fresh and damp, knocked the wind out of me. The birds had difficulty taking flight and the bottle-collectors, focused and absorbed in their thoughts just like fishermen, came out of the darkness, silently. They were waiting around, sitting on plastic chairs—she was sleeping, resting her head on his lap; he was reading some ads in the paper. Once he saw me he waved and I sat down next to them. He started telling me in a whisper that they ran away from home because they're sick of everyone. Nobody gets them. Alice said 'screw it' and now they're going to the beach. Mike went along with her right away because together they can do anything. They could care less about everyone else. And it's great that I showed up so they could tell me all this. So, they'll wait for the morning train heading south and they'll never come back, no matter what. They'll settle down there, somewhere by the beach. He'll take care of her and she'll support him. And in the spring they'll come to the train station in their remote beach town to part with the trains heading off into the night.

Well you know, the roofs are covered in snow, their Keds are soaked and Alice has been a bit under the weather, murmuring something from her homework assignment in her sleep. And while he was telling me all of this Alice smiled, without opening her eyes, as if she couldn't believe what he was actually saying. Exhausted, Mike rested his head up against the wall. Then I got up and went over to the bar so as not to disturb their dreams. And at about 4 a.m. when my train was just about to pull up I caught a glimpse of how Alice, stiff from sitting, got up and took Mike by the hand, leading him out into the city. She was wearing funky gloves with finger holes and a kid's size Rasta hat.

I thought to myself, 'that's just how it should be.' Train stations can't rid us of our demons. They just give us temporary relief. They protect us from the stink eye for a brief moment, distancing us from the outside world and dunking us in the black waters of an odd transient place. They keep us warm like ovens and feed us like bakeries. We sleep there like we're staying at the YMCA and we leave them like prisoners being released on parole. They light up in the dark—enticing the most troubled and dissatisfied souls, those who aren't willing to sit by and wait for things to take a turn for the better. Train stations warm us to the core and we run inside them as if we just got caught in a downpour. As soon as we start looking around inside we try to flee as quickly as possible, grasping onto the faint whispers that will undeniably lead us towards the sea.

Kharkiv 2010

THE LOSSES THAT MAKE US HAPPY

Time has passed; uncountable time has passed—a great deal of the matter called time has passed. It passed, smooth and unnoticed, and sometimes its passage gave us great satisfaction, while sometimes it made us tense. We wondered, ‘what’s next? What’s going to happen when it’s all gone, finished? When will it expire? What will we be left with?’ Over time I’ve started to notice that the majority of the routes I have to take run a particular course, all leading to train stations or abruptly ending in the same old city squares. Actually we’ve all got a set of maps outlining our movements—from one country to another and one city to the next. And when you’re asked if you have any favorite places you say that you do—they’re the cities you just can’t seem to avoid; a gravitational force makes you stick around there no matter how much you don’t want to.

The most interesting things happen during your first trip; the houses seem haunted, the streets are flooded with morning sunlight and the voices of locomotives fly through the fog like seagulls at the port. The men are absorbed by anxious thoughts, while the women carry purses, hiding away sea pebbles and keys to rooms that faintly smell of tenderness and risk. And you step out onto the platform, eluding crowds of passengers, right in the middle of unknown buildings and unfamiliar street names. But all of this carefree treachery and mysteriousness, sharply angled streets and secretive dampness blanketing the park bushes quickly passes, vanishing into thin air. As soon as you make your way back to that same train station, all those warm and exciting feelings disappear somehow, and you’re left with street vendors and closed shops, empty bars and women’s cold glances that you desperately try to cling to. It’s not worth coming back to cities you initially liked since there’s always the danger that you’ll get to know them all too well.

It seems as though the ceaseless migration of peoples, beginning in the late 80’s and continuing until this day, has irrevocably transformed us all, uprooting us and chucking us into the black darkness of transiency. How does it all start? Maybe it all starts with a persistent, nagging feeling that forces one to leave one’s hometown, cut ties with one’s friends and change one’s environment. It forces one to move out west, stopping at train stations and hotels and seeking out a nice, cozy place that won’t remind one of losses endured and feelings hurt. Uncertainty and a heightened sense of injustice can be rectified by starting anew—in another country with a new landscape and circumstances. Over the past ten years I’ve been around so many

immigrants that I'd venture to claim that they are a separate people in their own right. They exist outside the bounds of conventional geography, nestled somewhere between state borders and neutral waters, in a shady, civilized faintly dark area where the days trickle by, and its inhabitants' sole desire is to leave this place behind and jump through all the necessary hoops to wind up in the thick of things, in the heart of the city to feel its deafening and intoxicating pumping. And if you grew up in an immigrant community and stayed there, the majority of stories you heard, saw and can tell others will in some way or another be related to travelling and navigating in foreign lands, crossing the border illegally and facing inevitable deportation. Objects and actions, names and addresses, toys and clothing, receipts and business cards will form a large collection of epic immigrant poetry, long stories about patience and perseverance, adultery and faithfulness, stories about great escapes when people run from their own shadows. Lately I've seen far too many émigrés that it'd be odd not to tell you about them.

The story is about what they took with them, what they concealed and decided not to show to anyone and the secrets they kept in their breast pockets and at the bottom of their leather purses. Their undying faith that not all is lost, that everything can be destroyed and rebuilt and their firm conviction that their venture will eventually end successfully. Their faith that guided them all these years, forcing them to get married and divorced, lie and confess their sins, study other languages and forget their own. Maybe it's just that—their faith that made their hearts rock-hard and invulnerable and their eyes dry and deep. It was this faith that helped them navigate through the wastelands of Poland and Hungary and the small towns of Romania and Slovakia to a place somewhere near Berlin, the epicenter of thousands of routes and train stations all ending up on sweet river banks and shady hills rolling into faraway, highly-desired cities—cities promising peace, tranquility and new jobs. All one needs is the courage and will to move forward, discarding the past and counting on a better future. Because every century produces its own batch of refugees and exiles, with their blood, fresh and cold, like river water. Well, our century has just begun. And now we're set to begin our voyage, our new America is awaiting us, peering across the Atlantic at our endless human stream that has deluged defenseless European cities. We have reached the Berlin train stations and does anyone actually know what sacrifices it took to get there?

Berlin, assembled as if from a kit and then broken down into its constituent parts again, like a bullet with a shifted center of gravity, lacks a distinct center; instead, it's endowed with a few hearts and thousands of hideouts. Over the past nine years I've had the chance to arrive in Berlin

from the east and west, as well as the north and south. It so happened that I've flown into its aerodromes and stepped out onto its railway platforms, taken bus after bus and hitchhiked there, driven through it without even stopping, and I've gotten tied up in the city for a long time. During my first trip here, with my odd group of friends and unclear intentions, I could hardly have foreseen how long and complex my relationship with this city and its inhabitants would wind up being. Back then, nine years ago, I so foolishly believed that I could trace its movements, observe its ecosystem and comprehend its patterns and scale. After that I came back dozens of times, gradually committing more street names and public transport routes to memory. However, that odd and magical sensation of attachment, close involvement and understanding that I experienced during my first visit had vanished, and all my attempts to rekindle this feeling turned out to be futile and unnecessary because it's impossible to reenact the actualization of something particularly important, unexpressed, elusive and not fully processed. The most important events occur spontaneously; they can't be programmed or easily recreated. The first image of a city's architecture remains forever etched in our mind and our first impression and picture of a city sticks with us. Subsequently this definitive landscape can merely erode away or be supplemented by superfluous details, extra lines, and nagging duplicates that burden our memory, making it unwieldy and vulnerable like a loaded barge.

Every once in a while one can detect a hint of excitement and mistrust in newcomers' eyes; their movements and gait give them away. You experience something similar when explaining to random passersby how to get from the main train station to the airport or what to take to get from one end of the city to the other. Because in such cases it's not really a matter of topology. In actuality I'm talking about something completely different—the flow of invisible pathways taken to flee your home country, pit stops made along the way, exile and re-entry, our bewilderment and temporary stays in foreign lands, our attempts to become one of them and accept their customs and habits and the futility of repeating those attempts. I'm talking about black Babylonian train stations. Upon leaving them we apprehensively survey our surroundings. The warm Babylonian sky stalks us, bearing down on all the refugees and repatriates, veterans and merchants, tourists, lawyers and border runners.

What risks are you willing to take just for the stars to perfectly align, bursting open the floodgates and singeing all the stoplights from the Black to the Baltic Sea an abrasive green? It is really worth trading your life away for these dubious operations? Thousands of immigrant

tales prove it's worth it. And it's best not to bargain with fate too much since it's all about simply overcoming nominal obstacles; it's all about how they search for their happiness, like for a lost dog, despite being utterly exhausted and beat down. They've forged on through snow and pitch black nights, inventing hundreds of thousands of methods to trick the guards and transport their bodies across the border, all the while changing their gender and political views, fingerprints, hair color and religion, as well as getting married to dead people. There is an insane number of opportunities and options; you just need to take a leap of faith. Fearlessness makes you invulnerable to bullets and knives; faith makes you invisible at the border to customs officers, and the rest depends on pure luck and the weather conditions. Brimming with faith and lacking any sort of fear, they sold furniture and bought identities, stole passports and inserted useless gold crowns, made friends with the scum of the earth and broke ties with their childhood friends. They've realized that the most important thing is to take that first step; deprive oneself of everything, make a clean break with the past, say goodbye to all of its specters, erasing all incriminating evidence and anything worth coming back for. Only after ridding oneself of all those superfluous things and coming face to face with an imminent feeling of emptiness, being dirt poor and soaking up unemployment, they could move on, passing through fire, ice and the supermarket's glass doors.

There are numerous ways of getting into forbidden places. For instance, you can get there by train since it's a well-known fact that all trains have attached, invisible cars; well even in the visible ones, the economy and business class cars, there are dark and mute areas where one can disappear to for hours. One can hide on the roof and in between cars, in the bathroom and in the train attendant's room, pretending to be an attendant on break. You can bury yourself in sheets and mattresses; you can blend into a crowd of tourists on a pilgrimage, children, musicians and soccer teams. You can go by foot, taking your time and not wandering off too far, avoiding minefields, poisoning the border dogs, covering your tracks, confusing search groups, taking a cold weapon and hot food with you, loading up on patience and local maps, all while tuning into the Boeings flying towards the ocean. Also, you can get there by hiding under the floor of a bus or getting lost amidst passengers' luggage, diving into a gas tank or a bag full of clothing, or kneeling down before Mother Mary, or laying down in a coffin next to a deceased person, or standing on your head amidst frozen cow carcasses, or freezing in mid-air while they search the train cars from top to bottom for tobacco, or disintegrating into separate atoms while they're checking the terminal, or evaporating in the salt water on the beach, or becoming part of the environs and falling like summer rain out of the sky onto Europe's emerald, grassy parks.

There is an abundance of such stories that end happily, or at least have a moral to them. I'll try to tell you a few of them when I can.

Newcomers embrace all the new friendships formed, the random glances exchanged and the conversations overheard, giddily observing how they're accepted into new social circles and jotting down new addresses and telephone numbers in their contact list. Fresh off the boat, they're thrown into a pleasant frenzy of remembering names and faces and running errands. The worst will come in time—the time that erodes away your memory like water on a sandy bank. And every subsequent trip, especially if you come back often, will be an attempt at recalling and reconstructing that first trip; you'll seek out those who witnessed the glory days in this magical land and in all the bars and hotels you frequented with people just like you, refugees heading westward. It's a dubious venture, a dubious and unfeasible one, because time keeps pushing on. And there's no sense in counting on some sort of stability or permanence. We make our way to foreign cities, stop in the middle of unfamiliar squares, find loud and obnoxious drinking buddies, get into arguments with passersby and become best pals with strangers, solidifying our newly-formed bonds with blood and more alcohol only to forget it all the next morning or throw it all by the wayside, erasing notes and burning bridges and clearly acknowledging that the past can't be reconstructed.

What do I remember about my first trip to Berlin? The wind blowing into the car, the lights dangling on top of the construction sites and the morning sun shining down onto the dry grass at the bus stops along the Autobahn. Just what I saw during each trip to follow. Just what remained there, in the past, making it concrete and definitive. Berlin—the music they played back then, the language they spoke back then and the streets we roamed. It was all still there; it hadn't gone away and I hope it won't anytime soon. But it all remained there; I'm completely estranged from all that now—the midnight yelling, those soccer victories and my amazing and totally insane friends who now have their own lives and cruise along the Autobahn. Time is all too capable of making us look silly, sentimental and contented. Moreover, it's best to love certain friends at a distance.

Well, it just so happened that I met this one family a few years ago. Their story is one of hundreds of thousands about the great migration, one documenting a family's struggle and subsequent flight. What a wonderfully odd couple—she came from a poor, but honest family

of village idiots. Her dad, a real oddball and dreamer, collected bottles and dug graves, while her mother was out driving a tram all day long. She had just graduated from high school and one could say she was on the verge of adulthood, but not exactly dying to take that last step. They had two rooms in a big communal apartment, downtown in an old building in which the lights went out from time to time. Everyone, even the cockroaches, had already moved out. But they hadn't, although they weren't counting on anything in particular. They met during summer break when the city was drowning in green grass and gold sparks flew off the trams at each turn. He was a few years older than her, so he was immediately overcome by a sense of responsibility. He had to take care of this uncanny girl who lived with her wacko parents. He on the other hand had been hiding out at friends' place for the past few months, trying to dodge the army. I'd say that she liked his childish, brash desire to avoid his problems by completely ignoring them. Her parents didn't like him; they felt their daughter deserved a better match—her dad would say so while toying with his bottles. He didn't even think about introducing her to his parents, explaining that he was 'a member of the wolf pack', so it was best to skip the official meet-and-greet. He'd come over when her dad was off in the neighboring city parks and her mom was driving the tram along the city's sunny streets. She'd throw a mattress, that her pops had picked up somewhere, on the floor, and they'd make love for hours, discovering and reaching new heights. Thick, yellow streaks of sunlight dropped down onto the cracking hardwood floor, and the furniture swayed laboriously to the rhythm of their persistent motion.

"Let's run away," she suggested.

"Ok," he agreed, without putting up a fight, "we can go wherever you want."

"Let's go to America," she suggested.

"Sounds good, let's go to America," he couldn't object. "The only thing is...I don't have a passport."

There was no chance of him getting a passport since any attempt to register his identity and get documents would end with grim army service. He didn't want to join the army, especially now when she was waiting for him every morning in her hot, sunny apartment, sitting on the big, unpainted windowsill and dangling her long, sad legs off the ledge. But who can stop you if you really want to go?

Events from the distant, blurry past acquire a bizarre tint, just like your favorite movies that you don't even try to watch again since you know in advance that it's best not to watch anything a

second time; it's best to keep things the same because you remember what's worth remembering and you forget what obviously wasn't. Any attempts at reliving this feeling, any return trips and heroic acts can't reconstruct the most important thing—that feeling of the damp, March sky perched up above you, nudging you into the dark night across river and cities, past checkpoints and over borders. And since it's impossible to recreate the past it's not worth expending the energy on this. It's best to limit oneself to reminiscing in detail. Our past is worth recounting, just like the future that we're crafting with our persistence, obstinacy and our invincible daily madness.

She got pregnant in the fall. He was glad despite not being able to marry her officially. The fall was warm and bitter; suburbanites were burning leaves, causing low-hanging smoke to stretch out along the tramlines. Her pops practically never left the apartment anymore, so they primarily met in the evenings in old neighborhoods and sat in the tranquil light spilling out from the surrounding houses.

“It'd be great to get to Berlin,” she said.

“Yep,” he agreed.

“Could you take me there?”

“Of course.”

“Are you sure?”

“I said I would,” he replied.

“I could find myself some sort of job there,” she added.

“No,” he retorted, “you aren't going to work there. In Berlin there's no need whatsoever to work. Baby, it's a special place, a special and carefree place. I know what I'm talking about—the guys told me. They lived there in a commune with some environmental scientists. Baby, they told me what kind of city it is—it's a magical city. You're not going to work there. We'll have more than enough and so will our child,” he added pensively.

In the winter her parents realized what was going on. Her dad cried and her mom sat there gloomily, not saying a word. Dad strictly forbade her from dating that deserter, while mom wanted to get her a job as a tram driver. In the spring, when she was just about to give birth, they told her parents they were leaving. Her folks got scared, but they calmed down after being told that this was the best possible option—they'd cross over to Poland and make it to Berlin from there where she would give birth because a child born in Berlin is an incredibly special

child; a child endowed with special rights and privileges, a child afforded unique opportunities. The child would bask in federal aid and angels would hover above her head, putting wild flowers in her hair. In reply her parents said they would personally turn him in to the armed forces if he wouldn't quit putting wild ideas in their insane daughter's head. She incurred her parents' wrath; they vowed to cut her off and write her out of their will. But that couldn't stop them and in May, by the time she was just about to go into labor and the child was running a serious risk of not being born in Berlin, he finally pushed through the bureaucracy and got them both passports. They got on a bus headed west and set to make a few transfers, skillfully concealing her pregnancy. Things were going so smoothly; just as they were running over baby names and as soon as they agreed that if it was a boy they'd call him Jordan and if it was a girl she'd be Paris, and just as they were making their last transfer before Berlin, she suddenly felt it was time.

"Hold on a bit," he pleaded her, anxiously peering out the bus window onto the Polish highway whipping by, "just don't give birth before Berlin. Don't deprive our child of a future."

"Ok, ok," she cried, "I'll try."

"We'll be in Berlin soon," he assured her, "and everything will be ok."

"Sure," she agreed, "everything will be ok."

She gave birth on the bus. The bewildered drivers, who were a mere hundred kilometers or so shy of the Polish-German border, were forced to call the police because they simply didn't know what the Poles generally did in such situations. Police officers took the young parents to the hospital where they eventually told the happy family—dad, mom and their newborn Paris, that they had violated Poland's visa regulations and somehow or another they would have to return to their homeland.

"Sorry," she cried, "it's all my fault we didn't get anywhere and it's all because of me."

"Don't worry about it, babe," he calmed her down best he could, "let's try to hang around here. It's nice here—the hospital has a vending machine that sells cola and there's a waterpark next door; they have discounted tickets too. The most important thing is that we love each other. And when Paris grows up she'll realize all of that."

"No," she continued crying, "it's all my fault. I blew our chance. I blew our Berlin and what are we supposed to do now around all these pregnant women?"

In the morning he called her parents. Her dad picked up the phone. Upon hearing about the birth of his granddaughter he got all flustered and overwhelmed by emotions and said that he and his wife were missing them and just dying without them these past three days. He asked them to come back and forget about all the good and bad things that had happened, especially because they didn't remember anything good from the past. He added that him dodging the army, her dropping out of college and them giving their child such a ridiculous name was all water under the bridge—the most important thing was that they were a family, therefore they should be together, supporting each other and helping each other to live long and happy lives and eventually die on the same day in the same bed. At this point pops lost his train of thought and hung up. He returned to his ladies and joyfully declared that they're all going back, the three of them, to a place where their loved ones are awaiting them.

Then they renamed their daughter Angela.

And although so much time has passed, although it continues to pass, not even thinking about coming to a halt, I still revisit all of these stories that exist in a different dimension regardless of whether or not anyone besides me remembers them. I love to recall all of these stories and go over them again in my mind, definitely realizing that all of these stories had a happy ending. All of the characters therein have been poorly and hopelessly fabricated and everyone, including the narrator, was harmed in the process. They were harmed, but they didn't give an inch since they were convinced that remembering everything is paramount. Forgetting the past is the most serious act of treason that simply cannot be forgiven. Therefore I keep all these stories in my mind, recalling their names and habits and coming back to their cities from time to time—the cities are filled with clouds and comets and fog floats above the morning train stations as young girls (they're always young) walk along the freezing platform with a tender feeling in their hearts and fruity candy in their pockets.

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