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## The Purple Heart

~~Berlin Spandau became famous for its prison housing high Nazi officials. Rudolf Hess was the last of them to die there in 1987. Nobody bothers to go to this farthest neighbourhood of Berlin except for the people living there. And the ones who seek shelter in Germany. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees Berlin-Spandau was the kind of neighbourhood that you didn't visit, you only lived in. For a while it was vaguely famous because of the Spandau, the prison where the highest ranking Nazi officials were kept, but by 1987, the last of them was dead, and by 2003 (or whatever year Marco would have started), when Marco started his job, The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, seemed even more isolated than Spandau itself. He'd started the same year that his third kid was born and his wife had her first attack of multiple sclerosis, but a dozen years later the ugly, cavernous building had come to feel familiar.~~

~~That afternoon, after finishing his paperwork, is a huge, ugly building even more isolated than Spandau itself. Marco signed his federal work contract twelve years ago when his third kid had just been born and his wife had had her first attack of multiple sclerosis. After signing today's last order, he went to the window and looked down at the backyard courtyard. He stood there while his colleagues were slowly marching to their cars and~~

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen1]:** I'm not sure that this is particularly better, but I want you to start us a little closer to the story. Particularly with the Nazi prison, we want the reader oriented as completely as possible, and the point is that Marco's office is worse than the prison, so we want to make sure that it's not the prison itself getting attention.

the janitor was clearing the trash bins. He was still there when ~~the backyard~~ was deserted and the pigeons took over. At five fifteen he went back to his desk and reached for his briefcase.

On the stairs, he ran into Iris, who was speaking to somebody on her cell phone. He sped up.

“Marco,” she called. “You’re going to the bus?”

He looked up. “I have to copy something.”

She dropped her cell into her bag and said, “Me, too.”

They had to wait until the secretary was done. Marco went to the next room and reached for the yellow paper, but then put it back again. He sighed and joined the others.

“You guys have a lovely weekend,” the secretary said, pushing for the door.

“You, too,” Iris said. She turned to Marco. “You can go first.”

Marco stepped back. “No, go ahead,” he said.

She held up Fehling’s Cases and Comments. “I haven’t found the right precedent yet.”

“Well,” he said and opened his briefcase. “I won’t be long.”

Iris touched his sleeve. “Take your time.”

He cleared his throat and took out a single sheet. He made sure that she was occupied with her book and quickly put the sheet onto the machine. He closed the lid, pressed the button, waited for the light to pass and quickly removed his sheet again. When he caught the copies they were still warm. He stuffed them into his briefcase and said, “Your turn.” He reached for the door handle. “I better be going now.”

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen2]:** I don't know what this means. Why is he reaching for the yellow paper? What for (literally)?

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen3]:** you want to give the reader enough information so that they feel like this is a real place, but not so much that they are confused. Perhaps you should say "a book of case law" or something?

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen4]:** why would he be so secretive about this? Surely, even at a government agency, it can't be that big of a deal to make a dozen copies of something personal?

"Give me a minute. We can take ~~the bus together.~~" Iris ~~threw-put~~ her book onto the machine, ~~saying~~, "Just two pages, okay?" She pressed the start button and frowned. "No paper."

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen5]:** there's no reason for her not to say it, and she likely would

"Sorry," Marco said and went to the shelves in the back of the room. Office policy required to make sure that the copy machine was filled with paper after usage. "Hold on a sec," he said. Iris had already opened the drawer. He put the whole pile into it.

"Don't do that," Iris said. "You don't want to have a paper jam." She took half of the pile out again and placed it on the table.

Marco closed the drawer. "~~True~~Okay." He smiled ~~at her and~~ said, "There you go."

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen6]:** why does he smile. He's supposed to be uncomfortable, right?

She pressed the start button again and closed her book. Then she reached for the copies and looked at them. "That's not mine," she said, handing him the first one.

"Right." He quickly rolled up the sheet and said, "My son's celebrating his birthday."

"It's a nice drawing," Iris said.

He smiled. "~~I'll~~ tell him."

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen7]:** for this, the smile makes sense - it's reflexive from a compliment for his son.

Iris put her book into her bag and said, "You're ready?"

"Yes," he said.

They walked past the pigeons which covered the ~~backyard~~~~courtyard~~. He startled when one flew close to them.

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen8]:** backyard would be a place behind a residence. Behind a business, you'd have parking lots or, if there is a mixed greenspace and concrete, likely you'd call it a courtyard

Iris laughed. "Stupid motherfuckers." She shooed them away. "I was once hit by one. Flew straight into my face."

Marco smirked. "~~My~~ wife loved them. She used to feed them with bread crumbs."

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen9]:** smirking is a sort of smile that has a malicious intent. Wrong word here. Perhaps have him "gently waved his hand at the birds."

At the bus station Iris took out a pack of cigarettes. "How are the kids?"

~~He said,~~ "Since when are you smoking?"

She laughed. "Since first grade," she said. "I quit after Leon was born and now that he is moving out, I thought I might start again."

Marco looked at the sign indicating that the next bus would leave in five minutes and said, "I could use one of those, too."

She held up the packet and said, "I don't know. I suddenly feel like it again."

"Me, too," Marco said.

Iris looked at him, frowning, "I'm so sorry," she said and slowly blew out the smoke. "I really am."

He reached into his briefcase for his cell phone. He looked at the time and said, "~~I Didn't~~ ~~didn't know that it's~~ realize it was so late."

She flipped her cigarette onto the street. "You can call me anytime."

"There's the bus," he said.

"I'd love to help," she said, and then she bit on her lower lip.

"Thank you."

"I'm a single mom, remember?" She touched her lips and said, "Gosh, what am I saying?" She shrugged. "What I mean is I can look after your kids. I know how it is. You gotta organize and everything. Anyway, I'd love to do that. If you need a rest, you know?"

"Thanks," he said.

Iris entered the bus. She showed her ticket to the driver and turned around. "Marco?"

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen10]:** I would suspect a single father who was worried about childcare and getting his kids would be extremely concious of the time

He cleared his throat once more.

She smiled. "Are you coming?"

He took a last drag, and then dropped his cigarette onto the ground. He put it out with his shoe and then he said, "I am."

"Let's sit down," Iris said and let herself fall onto a free bench. He sat down next to her.

"I'm so happy for Makela," she said.

"Who?"

She frowned. "The Syrian (or whatever) girl you saved today you granted asylum to today (or whatever)? Remember?"

He pressed his briefcase to his upper body and said, "That one."

"Only one year to go for her A-levels," she said.

He nodded.

~~"I'm so happy to work with you," Iris said.~~ "It's really hard to see these families everyday." She shrugged. "I know that it's pathetic but girls like her make me feel that my work makes sense." She smiled and said, ~~"And I like that you aren't one of the bastards. That you haven't forgotten they are real people. I couldn't stand it without you, you know?"~~

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen11]:** make her a little more subtle. Have her talk about him through her own work rather than overtly be going for him.

Marco looked at the kid standing next to him. His gaze wandered from the kid's head to the sneakers, to the loosened laces blackened from dirt and rain.

~~"You're the only one who cares." Iris held up her hand, thumb and index finger nearly touching each other.~~ "The first week I was so close to quitting." She sighed and said, "But then I thought that it would be worth it if we could at least save some of them." She winked at him and said, "Like the Mbuvis. Remember them? The father has finally got a work permit.

They got their own place now.” She rummaged in her bag and produced a pack of chewing gum. “Want one?”

He nodded and tried to draw out a stick. His trembling fingers fumbled ~~with the package~~ without success.

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen12]:** why are his fingers trembling?

“Wait,” she said. “Let me do it.” She passed him a stick and said, “I always hated clerks with bad breath. I hate ~~d~~-all clerks.” She started to laugh. “I ~~didn't~~-~~don't~~ mean you.” She put her hand on his thigh and said, “You’re doing a great job, Marco.” She smiled. “~~It's you who saves them from going back there. I'm just talking, but you act~~You save a lot of families.”

He looked at her hand on his pants. He breathed in. “I sign the orders, ~~that's all,~~” he said.

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen13]:** because of this line and the way it echoes the Nazi "following orders" defense, you really don't want to hit the Nazi prison thing too hard in the first paragraph

Iris removed her hand and said, “I’m sorry.”

He breathed out. He looked at the bus that was just passing them. He looked at the faces that were looking in his direction.

Iris sighed. “It must be hard for you.”

He stood up and said, “You’re staying in here?”

“No,” she said, smiling. “I thought of taking the subway for a change.”

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen14]:** there is a LOT of smiling. It's okay to just have "No," she said. "I thought of..."

The subway was crammed full of people at this time of the day. Since they had started construction work on the new line to the Reichstag, trains were delayed constantly. Plus, the beginning of winter had added a large number of people who'd left their bicycles at home. A group of Spanish tourists with maps in their hands ~~swallowed-crowded around~~ them, making every attempt of conversation difficult. ~~by their loud chatter so that~~ Iris and Marco just stood

next to each other in silence. Then, the Spanish tourists left and other people left, too, and Iris said, "Shall we take a seat?"

He followed her and sank down next to her. She smiled and said, "There is this guy from Cameroon I'll have to interview tomorrow."

Marco turned his face to the window.

She went on, "His first application was turned down. He's got tuberculosis, and he's gay." She opened her bag and took out a folder. A sticker saying *Stop Deportation Now* was attached inside. "He is a poet." She held up a booklet and said, "This is in his original language, Duala. The title means, 'My father'. He was ~~KIA~~killed in some war. Threw himself on a group of children to protect them from shelling. You don't get the Purple Heart over there, though."

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen15]:** KIA means killed in action and is applicable only to soldiers - was the father a soldier?

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen16]:** but you don't in Germany, either, right? Would this be the right phrase?

Marco fumbled with the handle of his briefcase.

"This guy is the only one from his family to survive," Iris said. "If we sent him back they will kill him on the spot."

Marco moaned.

"Sorry," Iris said. "Work's over for today, I know."

He opened his briefcase and took out a bunch of papers. "See these?"

She frowned. "You're taking them home?"

"What do you think?" He flipped through the pages and said, "Ngala, Tokewa, Koye.

~~I'm taking them home cause I'm a lifesaver on weekends, too~~It's like a faucet that doesn't turn off." He drew a pen out of his shirt pocket. "Watch this," he said and scribbled on the bottom of a page. "Saved." He also signed the other papers, "Saved," and then passed them to her. "Feel better now?"

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen17]:** this is a lovely moment - you have this tension that has been very slowly building, so slowly that it wasn't clear that it was there, and then BAM! This.

She dropped her gaze and said, "I'm sorry."

"Can you please stop?" He closed his eyes. "Can you please stop saying that?"

She looked at the ads above the windows that were offering advice, jobs and master programs at private colleges. She sighed and said, "I began to study law because I wanted to change something. They were deporting all these people back to their countries where there would be starving or tortured or killed as soon as they left their planes. It wasn't easy being a single mum and everything." She put the papers ~~in order~~back in her bag and said, "I really wanted to help."

"It's a job," he said. "I'm just a desk criminal."

"I thought you cared for these people," she said.

"Of course you do," he said.

The subway came to a halt. He looked out of the window. The sign said *Bismarckstrasse*. Two more stops to go.

"I understand," she said and smiled. "You've got other things on your mind now."

He snorted and said, "Like what?"

"Marco," she said. "I know it's hard."

He checked his cell ~~for the time~~ again and said, "Do you?"

"My mother died two years ago. I still haven't gotten over it." She looked at him and said, "Since then I hardly open my mails without someone writing me that his best friend is dying. I don't know. Sometimes I ask myself why there are still so many people laughing and chatting on the streets as if everything would last forever."

He stood up. The doors were closing. He sat down again and said, "I didn't want to be rude."

She fumbled with the sleeve of her coat. "I know," she said.

The train was rattling along through the tunnel. He looked up and said, "Your son's moving out?"

She nodded. "He's going to live in Hamburg." She straightened her skirt and said, "He wants to study law. I told him not to, but you know how it is."

Marco straightened himself and said, "Back to freedom."

"It's not easy," she said. "Letting go, I mean."

"Well," he said. "Any plans for the weekend?"

Iris shrugged. "Nothing special." She fumbled with the collar of her blouse and said, "I thought of going to the theatre. My son's worrying about me being by myself too much."

Marco looked at the teenage boy wearing earplugs ~~opposite to him who was absorbed in~~ and watching something on his tablet. He was sitting opposite of Marco and holding the hand of a girl with fake fingernails done in French manicure.

Iris smiled and said, "I told him that I don't mind, but you know how it is. Kids want their parents to be happy is all."

Marco cleared his throat. "I didn't want to be rude," he said. "I really appreciate working with you. I guess, I worry that if I start thinking about it I would go crazy." He stood up and extended his right hand. "I hardly look at them anymore, ~~you're right~~. I did in the beginning though. And I told myself too that it would be worth it if I could only ~~say~~ fe this or that guy. But there were so many."

"You're right," she said, ~~taking his hand~~.

~~"See you on Monday," he said.~~

The lights went off ~~and the subway gave a jolt and began to slow. They were still holding hands when the subway slowed down and came to a halt.~~ “Oh,” Iris said. She reached to him and found his hand.

“It’s all right,” Marco said.

The other passengers were talking loudly to each other. It was pitch-dark. Iris said, “Don’t let go off my hand.”

He laughed. “Are you afraid of the dark?”

“That’s not funny,” she said.

Minutes passed. The other passengers had started to shout. Some were rattling at the doors. One was already trying to break a window when a voice coming out of the speaker warned them not to get off the train and to keep the windows shut. After a while the emergency light went on.

“Thank god,” Iris whispered.

“Please stay calm,” the speaker’s voice said. ~~“We got~~We have a minor problem here but we’re working on it. There is no immediate danger if you keep the windows shut.”

“That’s all we needed,” Marco said, sitting down again.

~~The His~~ papers had fallen to the floor. ~~Iris looked at their entwined hands~~He pulled his hand back, took the papers off the floor, and then reached for his cell phone again. ~~He took his hand away, reached for his cell phone and said,~~ “Excuse me.”

“It’s a bomb.” Iris said, “It sure is a bomb.”

He shook his head and said, “Daria? Dad here.”

Iris kneeled down to pick up the papers. She whispered, “Oh, my god.”

**Kommentiert [Alexi Zen18]:** okay, this is the moment where I feel like the story gets away from you. I’m going to address it more fully in the comments in the email, so look to that - I’m not going to do more line edits past this point because I think this is the pivot that requires significant revision / reconception for this story.

Marco put his free hand on her shoulder and said, "Listen. I'm coming home later. Call the pizza service." He fumbled through the pockets of his jacket for a paper tissue and said, "Nothing to worry about. Talk to you later, honey." He dabbed his forehead and said, "It's getting damn hot in here."

Beads of sweat were on her front. "I'm scared," she said.

Marco took off his jacket. "It'll be all right." He grinned and said, "Like a fucking sauna."

The speaker's voice announced that they shouldn't worry about the heat either.

"What if it's gas?" Iris took off her cardigan and held it in front of her mouth.

"If it's gas that won't help," Marco said. "You only hyperventilate."

She let her hands sink and whispered, "Please tell me that it's a dream."

Marco grinned. "Too hot for that." He said, "I should have brought a thermometer."

"Thirty-eight," a man shouted. He held up a digital thermometer. The woman next to him was undressing their baby.

"Must be more than that," Marco said.

Iris rolled up her sleeves. "The climate control must be down."

Marco unbuttoned his shirt and said, "Guess so."

She looked at her legs. "It's still getting hotter." She looked at the other people who had started to undress, too. She got up from her seat and giggling, she took off her shoes and her tights. "It's not what it looks like."

Marco also got rid of his shoes and socks. Then he rolled up his pants, saying, "Where are the drinks?"

Iris sat down again. "What now?"

He shrugged.

The speaker's voice said, "Don't panic. It's just a technical problem that will be solved shortly."

A woman next to them said to her teenage son, "Somebody jumped on the tracks?"

Her son shook his head. "That's called personal damage." He turned around to her and said, "They wouldn't do it in the middle of a tunnel. Too much hassle."

His mother said, "How do you know?"

He shrugged. "I just."

His younger brother said, "Gotta pee."

Then the sirens went on. "There you go," the old man behind Marco said. He was holding his wife who was crying. "Calm down," he said.

"It's the war," the wife whispered.

Marco lowered his head and started to giggle.

"Marco?" Iris put her arm around him and said, "Don't cry. Please don't cry."

He looked up. "I'm not crying. I'm having the time of my life." He leaned back, still shaking and laughing. "I haven't had so much fun in years." He stood up and took off his pants. He waved them above his head, shouting, "We're all gonna die."

The mother next to them said, "Can you please make him sit down? He's freaking everybody out."

Iris took Marco's hand and said, "Sit down, will you?"

He looked at her, grinning, "You want me?"

She shouted, "Sit down! Now!"

"Okay," he said. He let himself fall onto the seat and said, "Okay."

The sirens went off again. The youngster opposite to them plugged out his earphones and turned up the volume of his tablet. “Let’s dance, honey.”

“Stop it,” his girlfriend said.

“He’s right,” Marco said and stood up. He yanked Iris from her seat and held her close. “Let’s dance. Can you do that? Can you?”

Iris looked around. No one was watching. Most of the people had gone back to their seats and sat there, staring silently at the speaker. “Stop it,” she whispered.

Marco let go of her and stepped back. “Here’s a real party killer.” He turned around and reached for the window. “I need air.”

Iris shouted, “Don’t!”

“Stop me,” he said, grinning.

She turned around. “Help me, please. Somebody help.”

Several men stood up. They forced Marco to sit down again. A man held him at his arms and turned to Iris. “Can you handle him?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “His wife died last month. He doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“The fuck I do,” Marco said.

“You better keep calm, mister,” the man said.

Iris sat there shivering. She waved at the man. “It’s all right,” she said. “You can leave him.” She inhaled deeply, keeping her eyes on the speaker. The other people were watching them for another while, and then returned to what they were doing before. Some took out their books or magazines, others opened their laptops.

“Listen,” Iris said. “I understand that you’ve had a lot of stress lately. But please calm down now.”

“You understand nothing.”

“Marco,” she said. “I’m not your enemy.”

“You better listen to me now. What if I was glad when she died?”

Iris cleared her throat.

“You want to know the truth?” Marco said, “No, you don’t. Because people like you never want to know the truth. But that’s how it is. I wanted her to stop breathing. I was praying each night that she would just stop breathing.” He leaned back and said, “Now you know. Because you got it all wrong, see?”

She sighed. Then she said, “Are you done?”

“I’m done.”

“You stay away from that window?”

“I stay away from that window.” He put both of his hands on her cheeks and said, “You don’t need to worry. Cause I’m a fucking lifesaver, remember?”

Iris turned her head away.

Marco yawned and pressed the right side of his face against the window. “I’m sick and tired of it,” he said and closed his eyes.

Iris leaned back and looked at the speaker. Then she looked at her watch. The siren went on again. The old woman behind them screamed. “That’s it now,” Iris whispered. She gave Marco a push. “Talk to me,” she said. “I’m going to freak out if you don’t talk to me.”

“What do you want me to talk about?”, he mumbled.

“It sure is a bomb,” she said.

Eyes still closed he put his arms around her and said, “Come here, honey.”

“Marco, it’s me.”

He held her closer. "My god, that feels so good."

"I'm Iris."

He buried his nose in her neck. "I know."

She breathed in. "You shouldn't."

He put his right hand on her breast. "So good."

"It's a bomb." She closed her eyes, too, and said, "We are all going to die."

"Mh," he groaned. "You smell so good."

The subway started to move and the people cheered and the lights turned on again. The speaker's voice said, "Sorry for the inconvenience."

Iris opened her eyes. "Thank god, we're safe," she said.

The subway came to a halt at the next station. Marco looked at the passengers who streamed out of the subway and said, "Are we?"

Iris grabbed her bag. "We have to get out here."

He shrugged.

"Security will check if the train is empty," she said.

He ran his fingers through his damp hair. "Let's hide."

She offered her hand. "Come on up."

He said, "No."

"Please."

He smiled, and then he put on his jacket.

"Ready?" she said.

Marco got up and opened the window. He held his face against the air that was pushed inside by another subway approaching.

Dear Jessica,

*I think there are things that are working very well here. For me, the moment that I most felt had a certain heat was when Marco pulls out the documents on the train and signs them all, saying he saved them, saved them, saved them. It works extraordinarily well because there is this subtle tension building through the story, gentle enough that it's not even truly clear that there is a tension, and this action brings it to the forefront. It also sets up the idea that perhaps he isn't as good of a man as she wants him to be, and allows him to essentially say, what if I'm happy my wife died? I do think you need to tone down some of her interest in Marco before that, however. She can be giving him compliments, but she's a grown woman and needs to be a little more subtle in the way that she is flirting with him. This is particularly true if his wife has only died a month ago. I'd think of it as something that she maybe isn't 100% conscious of doing - he is perhaps a man whom she's always found attractive, and she really does believe these compliments, and maybe she isn't thinking "I want him tonight," but rather that he might be somebody, as he recovers from the death of his wife, she could be with.*

*The story, to me, becomes extremely problematic with the introduction of the fear of terrorism. I think having the subway break down is fine, and perhaps even terrific, but there is no actual need for the bomb scare. It forces the story into a sort of melodrama that isn't necessary (it's also a problem because time isn't handled well - it gets hot so quickly, he breaks down so quickly, etc.). The thing is, the tension that Marco has is already on the page, and we don't need this elevation. You already have the elements of what would work - and work well in this story - in these last five pages, and the things that work are completely independent of the threat of terrorism. It is enough, simply, to have the train stop, to have the emergency lights flicker on, to be stuck. If you have her uncomfortable, if you have her grab his hand, if you have her say some version of, this makes me nervous, that is enough. You can have a few of the people on the train grumble - a child starts to cry, a man stands up and paces a little bit. And then - and you have this gesture already - as she starts to get more nervous, you can have Marco stand up and pull her to her feet and say, come on, let's dance. At that point, you actually want her to be resistant - she's embarrassed. "Here? You want to dance now?" And Marco isn't crazy or losing his mind, he's simply trying to reassure her, because despite what he is about to say, he's actually a nice man. Because while they are dancing, that is when she would calm down and laugh and say something about how nice he is, how thoughtful he is, and he would say, this feels nice, just to hold somebody, and then he would say to her that he isn't like she thinks he is, that he was relieved when his wife died. That's what he felt. Relief. But they can keep dancing, at least for a few more moments, until the train starts up again.*

*The point of this, is that you are resorting to external stimuli and difficulties for a scene that is almost entirely NOT about that. You really have all of the emotional stuff, and the attempt to make it somehow more important through this threat doesn't work for two reasons: the first is that it just isn't necessary, and the second is because you haven't set it up from the beginning of the story. The terrorism story comes from nowhere, and thus it feels like the author's hand.*

*The thing is, this is a pretty good story right up until the moment when "bomb" is written. You bring tension and tension and tension, build and build. But all of this tension is about Marco essentially trying to figure out how to keep himself together and who he really is, and why this day and all of the days since his wife's death feel so similar to the days before.*