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To Forget Berlin (Novel excerpt)

GWEN EDELMAN

In Berlin 1945, a city in ruins, a man and a woman fall in love. Rudi and Renate, both young, he an Austrian Jew, she a German Jew have barely survived the war. Their love affair takes place amidst the rubble, the hunger, the danger of Berlin, now occupied by the Russians who cook horse meat over open fires in the street and steal everything in sight. Renate becomes pregnant. Rudi is not happy. He tells her he cannot have a child. But she wants the child. For her it means new life in the midst of destruction and loss. In Paris in 1959 the trees are in bloom. The child, now a fourteen-year-old boy named Anton, has tracked down the father he has never seen and made plans to meet him in Paris. Despite her resistance, Rudi also attempts to see once again the woman he loved all those years ago. The war is over, but not for Rudi and Renate, still haunted by what they lived through. In Paris 1959 past and present will collide and the three, mother, father, child will be transformed.

It was an old-fashioned hotel in St. Germain with red flocked wallpaper and copies of old black and white etchings on the walls. A young woman with dark frizzy hair looked up. What can I do for you? The boy said to her: my mother and I are staying here and I want to call up to her room. The woman pushed the house phone toward him. She consulted the book and said room 35. The boy dialed. Mama, he said to her in French, I'm downstairs. Well, I'm not alone. I'm with…He looked at the woman behind the desk who was looking at him attentively. I'm with my father. Ask her to come down, said his father. She wants me to come up. Well go up and get her and bring her down. He went to sit in a brocade covered chair and lit a cigarette.

They used to dance together in the kitchen in Berlin. Between the old wooden table and the wall where a few blackened pots and pans hung from nails. Our narrow ballroom, he called it. He held her tightly and pressed his mouth against her neck. In the beginning she was so thin that her ribs stuck out. I'm going to fatten you up, he told her. Then I'll no longer fit in our narrow ballroom, she said. And we'll be dancing with the pots and pans. He laughed and lifted her up. That was in the beginning. When times were still good.

He looked at his watch. The boy had gone up fifteen minutes ago. What in God's name was taking so long? He got up and went to the desk. I'd like to ring upstairs. What was the number? The woman examined him suspiciously and then dialed it and handed him the phone. It rang and rang. Had they gone out the window? he wondered. Were they about to escape over the roof? At last he hung up. The woman was looking at him. He glanced at the elevator and saw by the skipping white numbers that it was on its way down. He stood without moving and waited. He heard the girl behind the desk laughing on the phone with a friend. The conversation went on and on.

The brass cage of the elevator groaned and stopped at last on the ground floor. The doors opened and there she was. He dropped his cigarette into a standing ashtray. She stood there in a flowered sundress cut low in the front so that first he saw the smooth tanned skin above the line of the dress. He looked up and stared at her wide forehead, her deep blue eyes, the thick sweep of her dark hair held back by tortoiseshell combs. Even after all these years her face was more familiar to him than anything. Only the expression in her eyes was not. Her eyes were veiled. There was no love there.

Hello Rudi, she said. The boy came out behind her, his arms moving with excitement. I got her to come, he said triumphantly. It wasn't easy. The boy had slicked back his hair with water and changed his shirt and his pants. How elegant you look, said his father. The boy smiled shyly. Hello Renate, he said. Long time. He saw her large straw bag, her tanned feet in gold sandals. He had held those feet in his hands. He had felt those feet pressing against his chest when they made love. I'm in Paris, said the boy excitedly. Are you ready to see Paris by night? asked his father. Yes, I am, said Anton. Where are we going? We are going, my friend, to a brasserie I like very much. Chez Jacques. Renate walked to the desk and laid the key with the brass ball at the end on the desk. He watched her. He would have to get her back. Merci Madame, said the girl, holding her hand over the phone. Bonne soirée.

They came out into the soft Paris twilight. The street lamps along the boulevard cast yellow light onto the pavement. The horse chestnut trees were heavy with leaves, the cafe tables set up on the sidewalk were full of people smoking, drinking, eating. Waiters circulated. Men and women in light summer clothes, the women

with red lipstick and full skirts, walked in the street among the slow crawl of automobiles. I'm in Paris, said the boy with wonder.

Rudi bought a newspaper from a young Algerian boy hawking papers. Anton stared at the boy. Well well, said Rudi looking at the headline. Nothing changes. He folded up the paper. When they had walked a few steps Anton said: that boy was my age. He's helping his family, said his father, selling newspapers at rush hour. Does he go to school? Well that I don't know, said his father. Is he poor? His father shrugged. Plenty of people are poor in this world. We can't help them all. The boy considered. Can we give him a coin? No, said his father, he's not a beggar.

The evening air was fragrant with the scent of lilac. Renate stopped suddenly. Do you remember? In Berlin in April of 1945 lilacs were growing in abandoned gardens, up through the rubble. In the midst of the ruins the scent of lilacs was everywhere. It cheered us up for a moment. It seemed as though maybe life would return. She looked unthinkingly at Rudi. Of course I remember, he said softly. Look over there, said his mother. That's the Eglise St. Germain. They began building it in the sixth century. Soon they'll be ringing the bells. That's the church where I married Jean-Pierre. He didn't yet know I was Jewish. What? said Rudi. How could you do that? I wanted to be safe, she said. I was so tired. We stopped in Paris and he said on the spur of the moment let's go and get married. And he brought me here.

Rudi shook his head. You shouldn't have done that. It's like a desecration. After all we went through? Besides, you were married to me, he said. Not then I wasn't. We were divorced in Berlin at the end of 1945. I pleaded abandonment. Why did you divorce? asked the boy. Why didn't you stay together? In the street a car horn was stuck. At the corner a blind man played Sous les Ponts de Paris on an old accordion whose leather straps were nearly worn through. Here, said Rudi to Anton, give him a coin. Anton bent carefully and placed the coin in the man's upturned soft hat. Is he a beggar? asked the boy. No, replied his father. He's a musician who plays his accordion for tips. His upturned hat is the signal for that. Well here we are, he said and they turned in at a large brasserie with sheer white ruffled curtains and a sign painted in black on a large smoky mirror: Chez Jacques.

The maitre d' came over, his body in motion, arms, legs, neck craning to see who had come in. He passed his hand over the shiny black hair that lay plastered to his head. Bonsoir, Rudi! Come. I have a good table for you. He was motioning to a waiter. Where have you been? Madame. He inclined toward Renate. A pleasure. And who is this? he wanted to know. His cheeks were ruddy, he smiled, he bowed, his constantly turning head took in waiters, clients, the antics of small dogs. This is my son Anton, said Rudi after a moment's hesitation. Well well, said the maitre d' jovially, where have you been hiding him? He shook Anton's hand. Welcome, young man, he said. You look just like your father. Are you as wild as he is? No sir, replied the boy.

He and his mother sat on the red velvet banquette, his father opposite. The boy looked around, dazzled. The walls were mirrored and the chandeliers threw off shards of light that were reflected over and over. He saw the reflections of the animated faces of men and women, their mouths opening and closing as they talked and drank and laughed. Like a funfair, he said excitedly. Mama, he said gripping his mother's arm, I'm in Paris. Paris by night, said his father. It's about time. He sat back in his chair, his chest thrown out, blowing smoke rings up into the smoke-filled air. He put up a hand. A cadaverous waiter hurried over. Yes, Monsieur Rudi, what can I get you? A good bottle of Pomerol, he said. Everyone knows you, said the boy. Yes, I come here often. The boy settled back happily. I'll have a poire, he said. His father laughed. What? said his mother. Since when do you drink poire? Since this afternoon, he said. His mother shook her head. Really, Rudi, she said, he's fourteen. Good, said his father, let him learn. Besides, it's a big occasion. The waiter brought the wine, uncorked it and poured out a taste for Rudi. Rudi swirled the wine in his glass and drank. That's fine, Louis. Everyone gets some.

Now, said his father, let's have a toast. He raised his glass. Here's to reunions, here's to returns, here's to righting wrongs. Renate looked at him and shook her head. Don't, Renate, he murmured. Let it go. It's only a toast. How do you like it? asked Rudi. The boy made a face. That's all right, said his father, touching his glass to Anton's. You'll get used to it. And soon, like every Frenchman, you won't be able to live without it. He clinked his glass with Renate. She wore a gold linked bracelet with a round gold charm which slid down her wrist when she drank. I thought I had gotten rid of you, he said in a low voice. It seems I haven't gotten rid of you at all. She had filled out from the bone-thin woman he had known back then. Didn't I fatten you up at the end of the war? Do you remember how thin you were? Everyone

was thin back then, she said. Have you forgotten? There was no food except in the countryside. He had loved her voice. I want to lie down in your voice he had told her back then. She had gone out to the countryside to buy food from a farmer. First the farmer wanted to kiss her. Later he wanted more. But she went back to the city with a burlap bag of salted pork and recently dug potatoes and she ate for a week.

Why wasn't there food? asked Anton. It was wartime, darling. So your father bought food on the black market. That's where you went to buy food. The farmers brought it in from the country and sold it for a lot of money. They made so much money they were hanging priceless oriental carpets on the walls of their pig styes. The black market was your father's home away from home. Rudi smiled. I knew my way around the Tiergarten. You could get anything there. Pork, forged papers, diamonds. Clocks, and wheels, and china dolls, and old fur coats with the monogram still inside.

They knew me there. I had diamonds. I had brought them all the way from Amsterdam. In the sole of my shoe. People hid their money inside their shoe. This was not a good idea. You had to put it inside the sole. I knew a thing or two, he said. I had learned. Anton leaned forward. Where did the diamonds come from? Rudi looked briefly at Renate. From my girlfriend in Amsterdam. She traded in diamonds. I lived with her and I was a courier for her. She got very expensive false papers for me and I made deliveries for her all over Amsterdam. In those days your instinct for danger became highly developed. One day I had a delivery to a house on a canal. There were two ordinary men hanging around outside, but something alerted me to them. What was it? The expression in their eyes as they scanned the cobblestone street. I did not make my delivery but continued on. The next day we learned that everyone in the house had been arrested, caught as they returned home.

Why did you need false papers? asked Anton. I was a Jew, wasn't I? replied Rudi. At that time all Jews were condemned to death. Me included. Why? asked Anton. That's the way it was then, said Rudi. You had to be very clever. And even then...

Rudi smoked. One day when I came back Lotte wasn't there. Hours later she was still not back. Where was she? asked Anton. That evening the neighbor crept down and scratched on the door. They took her away. What for? I asked her. Lotte's not Jewish. For hiding a Jew, said the woman. And who told them? The woman

shrugged. There are informers everywhere, she said. I looked for her for days. And at last I learned that she had been shot and her body thrown in the canal. Rudi! pleaded Renate. At that time the canals were stuffed with dead bodies. Anton stared at his father. Well never mind, said Rudi. All that is over. Let's talk about something more cheerful.

Rudi, said Renate. These wartime stories are too grim. Why should he hear them? Born after it was all over. He's fourteen, said his father, already past the age of a man. I want to know, said Anton. Even if it's frightening. For what reason? asked his mother. Why be miserable? Because otherwise, said Anton, tracing designs with his knife on the tablecloth, I don't have a past. No grandparents, no aunts and uncles, no cousins, no stories. No one to tell me about what happened. Only my mother and father. If you don't tell me, I won't know where I came from. I won't know my father. And not even you, he said to his mother. Well put, my son, said his father. You're a Jew after all. Don't be upset, Renate. Better to look at it. I have tried not to, she said. I wanted to construct a new life that was not based on horror and loss. I wanted to forget about being a Jew. You're undoing everything, she said to Rudi. He reached a hand across the table. Renate, he said softly. She pulled her hand away. It's time, he said, for things to be spoken.

He smiled. Now let me tell you an old Russian story to cheer you up. Shall I? An old peasant woman once allowed me to spend the night in her barn when I told her this story. It's a joke about axe soup. Have you heard it? he asked Anton. One afternoon a soldier was on his way home from the wars. He carried a small bag of items, and an axe. He was starving. He had not eaten for days. He knocked at an old peasant woman's house. When she saw the axe, she was terrified. No no, Mother, said the soldier. Don't be frightened. At last she allowed the soldier to come into her hut.

The peasant woman was cooking soup which was bubbling away in a cauldron on the stove. The soldier nearly fainted it smelled so delicious. He looked into the pot. It smells very good, Mother, he said. Well there's none there for you, stranger, it's for me. He thought for a moment. Have you ever had axe soup? he asked. Let me make some for you. This is the best soup you will ever taste, so fragrant, so flavorful, delicious. Give me a pot. He filled it with water from the bucket and stuck the blade of his axe in. Oh Mother, he said, give me some of those carrots to make it even better. She did. You know what would be good? A few potatoes, just to add to the flavor. She gave him several potatoes. Soon he had asked for parsley and other

herbs. Now the woman was curious. The axe soup began to boil. She peered into the pot. It smells very good, she said. An hour later the soup was done. Now he said, I remove the axe, and we eat. They sat down and ate the axe soup from clay bowls. The peasant woman agreed that axe soup was the best she had ever tasted. Very good, cried Anton. Renate smiled wryly. Your father thinks that charm makes the world go round. Doesn't it? he asked.

Renate picked up the large menu with the red tassel. Already her cheeks were flushed from the wine. I know what you want, he said softly. She didn't look up. You want the coq au vin. Do you remember how we used to say that when the war was over we would go to Paris and have coq au vin at Chez Jacques? She ran her eyes down the list and closed the menu. Well here we are, she said. It's only fourteen years later. That's not so long, is it? It's a lifetime, said Rudi. I'm going to have steak, said Anton. With French fries. I'm beginning to like wine, he said, drinking. Not so fast, said his mother. Ach, leave him, said Rudi. Let him live.

What have you been up to since I saw you? he asked. She lit a cigarette with a small gold lighter. Who gave you that? he asked irritably. My second husband, she replied. She smokes a lot, said Anton. So do I, replied his father, so do I. A habit left over from the war. When did you go to Nice? he asked her. At the end of 1946, she said. He looked at her long graceful fingers as she smoked. She wore a wedding ring on her fourth finger. Where's my ring? he asked. Jean-Pierre was demobilized and by then we were together. Did you meet him while you were still with me? he asked. Yes, she replied. Did you...? She shook her head.

The French occupying forces were leaving. Jean-Pierre was very fond of Anton and he said we should come back with him. I was on my own with a small baby. France seemed like a paradise. But I did not know about French mothers. Particularly his mother, a rigid Catholic bourgeoise who took one look at me and turned away. For good. Here her son comes back with a German wife and another man's child. I must say the man had courage. He did not yet know that I was Jewish. His mother hated the Germans. They had shot her cousin, and it was as though I myself had pulled the trigger. There was nothing I could do to ingratiate myself with her. In the beginning Jean-Pierre took my side. But he became tired at a certain point. It was all so difficult. My French was not like it is now.

Jean-Pierre was good to me, said Anton. He told me to call him Papa, and he brought me presents sometimes. I think, said Renate, putting out one cigarette and lighting another, that it was harder for him to leave Anton than to leave me. I made their friends uncomfortable. Their relatives were disapproving. How long did it last? Rudi wanted to know. Four years before we gave up. But I stayed in Nice. And he left. Not because of me, but because he was offered a job in Boston. And after that we didn't see him. Did you love him? Rudi wanted to know. I was very fond of him, she said. You said he could be boring, said Anton. She laughed. Did I say that? What about you? Did you remarry? No, he said. Just a lot of girlfriends. Do you have another son? asked Anton. No, said his father. You're my only child. Anton smiled and lifting his glass, began to swirl the wine in the way he had seen his father do it.

How did you end up in Paris? she asked. Because of a woman, he said. How else? Her name was Lucie, said Anton. How do you know that? inquired his mother sharply. My father told me, he said. Rudi what in God's name. How much did you tell him? Just that. That I came to Paris with a woman named Lucie. She was French, she was light and amusing, like champagne, bubbly, effervescent. But of course one tires of champagne at a certain point, it goes flat, and that's what happened. And then? I had other friends. And now? I still have other friends, he said. Serious? What's serious? he asked.

The food arrived on a large platter held aloft by a waiter in black pants and a white shirt who deposited it on a stand and began to distribute the plates. Anton looked at his steak and the pile of frites next to it. He held his knife and fork ready. The waiter placed Renate's coq au vin in front of her, and set down Rudi's cassoulet. Renate looked down at her plate. In Berlin at the end of the war this seemed an unattainable fantasy, she said. And here that longed for coq au vin arrives fourteen years later. I hope he has not been traveling all that time, said Rudi. Ha ha, cried Anton. Rudi raised his glass. Here's to happy times. And to unexpected reunions. You're giving a lot of toasts tonight, she said.

Seated on the red velvet banquette, Renate was cutting her chicken. In the smoky mirror behind her Rudi watched her back press slightly against the flowered material of her dress as she ate. Her smooth tanned arms moved, her hands moved. It seemed as though she had long ago left the ruins behind. When he first saw her her face was smeared with dirt, she wore a peasant's kerchief and a baggy dress

that hung on her. She was so thin. But he was enchanted by her deep blue eyes and thick black lashes. Wash your face, he had said to her. Let me see what you look like. She had looked at him with disdain. Do I know you? she said. You barge in here and start giving orders. Pretend I am your commanding officer, he had said to her softly. Ha, she said. Leave me alone. Rudi cut into his stew and raised a forkful to his mouth. He trailed a piece of bread through the beans in their thick soup.

Anton reached for a piece of bread. Here darling, said his mother, have some butter, and she handed him the small white dish. He ran his knife over it and slathered it on the bread. Anton... she began. Leave him, said his father, he's dealing with a lot. Anton looked at his father in wonder. I wanted to see you more than anything, he told his father. I asked my mother again and again. But she wouldn't tell me where you were. I thought of sneaking out one night and going to Berlin. Without telling me? asked his mother. You wouldn't have let me go. That's true, she said. So you knew where I was, said Rudi. I only found out when Anton did. You knew I was in touch with Ilse. Yes. But I didn't ask. Her neck had flushed. Maybe there was still some love for him there after all.

[...]

About the author

Gwen Edelman was born in New York. She graduated from Sarah Lawrence College and spent several years in Paris on their Exchange program studying with professors from the Sorbonne. She returned to New York where she worked in Publishing for many years, at Simon & Schuster, and later started a literary agency. She gave up the agency and moved back to Paris to write a novel. That novel was *War Story* (Riverhead) which was translated into ten languages and won the Prix du Premier Roman Etranger in France for best foreign novel. Her second novel *The Train to Warsaw* (Grove) about a couple who were in the Warsaw Ghetto and return to Warsaw after forty years was also translated and adapted for the stage. Edelman's third novel *To Forget Berlin* is about a man and a woman who meet and fall in love in wartime Berlin in 1945. Scarred by memories of the war, they meet again in Paris after many years. It is excerpted here for the first time. Her first three novels take place during the Second World War. Her latest novel, just completed, *The Song of No Return*, is the story of Clytemnestra and takes place at the time of the Trojan War. She has just moved back to New York after living in Paris for twenty years.