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The Germans

Relaxed-looking Germans in jeans and colourful shirts were reading their phones and sipping coffee from heavy white cups. Bicycles abounded, cars were few. It was August. The linden trees shimmered. The day was young, cloudless, not yet hot. And here he was, among them.

Anyway, said Judith. I can't see what the problem is. We should do Sachsenhausen while we have the chance. We can always pick up Dachau later.

I don't want to go to Dachau.

Why on earth not?

The gas chambers were never even used. It says right here. He tapped his *Lonely Planet*.

Ok. So, Sachsenhausen.

We should really be going to Auschwitz.

It's in *Poland*.

We could do a side trip.

It would take *days*.

How could she not see this. He tried to sound calm. This is our one chance to go to a concentration camp. We have to get it right.

Judith put on her sunglasses.

Sachsenhausen. He sighed. He'd never even heard of the place. He found the entry, propped the guide up against the juice jug. *Original buildings . . . Gays, Jews, Gypsies, POWs . . . executions, death march . . .* and, yes, a gas chamber, and yes, it had been used. Surprisingly, it seemed to tick all the boxes. He wondered why the place wasn't better known. All right, he said, Sachsenhausen.

Judith nodded. She gave him a quick smile. Friends again. How do we get there?

He flipped some pages. Ah, here we are . . . *Getting There and Getting Away* . . . oh, of course, there's a train.

The Hauptbahnhof was big and new and bustling and the train

was exactly on time. They found a backward-facing bench seat and sat side by side. Judith had taken over the *Lonely Planet*. She was reading with the book open in her lap, her sandalled feet crossed, head tucked down. He seemed to remember this pose from days gone by. Judith the Mysterious, reading mysterious books, listening to mysterious music. Judith who came and went, who never quite had time.

He opened his bag and got out a banana.

She closed the book on her finger and looked at him over her glasses. You're not going to eat that, are you? It'll bind you up.

I'm hungry.

It's your funeral.

Oranienburg Station was older and the underpass from the platform was vaulted brick, painted green and crumbling. They came out in the middle of a small busy town. Ugly buildings with a 1980s look to them. A supermarket, a patisserie, a souvenir shop, a chemist. A tattoo parlour. The sun was high and the heat was really starting to kick in. He was in shorts and sandals but he could feel himself starting to sweat. The *Lonely Planet* said the best thing was to walk from here, so off they went. They walked through the town centre and turned right. Then they walked down a leafy residential street with apartment buildings, all three stories high, all the same. They turned again and walked a long block past smaller single-storey dwellings with neat little gardens. Sweat was trickling into his eyes. The light slammed up off the pavement.

God, said Judith, I need a drink of water.

They'll have water at the camp, said Leon.

They came to another corner and walked down another street just like the last one. Halfway down it Judith stopped. Are you sure this is the way?

Yes, yes, come on.

I have to rest. She sat on a low wall. Her face was flushed. Leon offered to carry her bag but she wouldn't let him. It was typical. She seemed to move so slowly nowadays, which was fine, she was getting on, she was 61. But she wouldn't let him help. Never was he allowed to help. He was forever standing around watching her struggle with

heavy suitcases, stiff handles, recalcitrant doors.

When she was ready to move, they continued, slowly, halting at intervals. At long last they came to the death march memorial. It wasn't very grand. It was just a headstone with an explanatory plaque where the inscription would have been. *Todesmarsch . . . April 1945*. His German wasn't too good. Come on, said Judith. Can we just get there?

There was a visitor centre where you could hire an audio guide and rent a locker, but there was no water to be had. *Wasser*, said Judith to the woman at the desk, *wasser*, but she just shrugged and smiled. So they went into the toilets and drank from the taps. There was a guy at the urinal when Leon went in, and another was checking his hair in the mirrors. He had a comb and he was slicking it down flat in gleaming oily arcs from forehead to nape. Leon felt the guy glancing his way as he ran the tap and bent down. He didn't care. He shoved his face under the tap and gulped. Then he stood up, gasping for breath, his face wet and dripping.

Judith was waiting when he came out. She had an audio guide but he didn't want one. They left the visitor centre and went back out into the blazing sun. They followed the outer wall towards the main gate. Crowds of high school kids were milling around, talking and laughing loudly. The girls were in short shorts and the boys were in singlets and baseball caps. The crowd thinned out and there it was. A gatehouse vaguely resembling a farm building and in the arched entrance was a familiar wrought iron gate. *Arbeit Macht Frei*.

Jesus, said Judith.

What?

She pointed at the plain angular lettering. I never realised. It's Bauhaus.

They walked through the gates. Leon didn't want to see, not yet. He kept his eyes down, took a few more steps, turned to face back the way he'd come. There were the gates again, but seen now from the inside, the words were in mirror writing, and in the guard house was a machine gun nest. To one side was a section of reconstructed fence: rolls of barbed wire, the wall, and a sign in German and English—if you cross this line you will be shot.

Now he turned to face it. It was big. Three football fields at least, encircled by a high brick wall with towers. Most of it was empty space, but there were a few low barrack-style buildings, and in the distance a huge ugly memorial, like a factory chimney.

People were standing around in shorts and sun hats. People were strolling, in groups. Some were staring at the ground, some at the sky. Some were reading the signs, some were pointing, or listening to their guides. Judith was a long way off already. She was standing near the middle of the empty space before the barracks. He went up to her, his shoes crunching on gravel. It seemed to take forever. When he got there, she was looking at two small holes in the ground. She paused her audio guide.

This is where they put the gibbet. They'd hang them here at morning parade.

What for?

She looked at him, blank.

I mean what sort of offences.

She shrugged. Anything.

There was a lot to see. The Jewish barracks was a small plain wooden building about the size of a prefab classroom, with a bunk room, a dining room, an extremely basic washroom and a few toilets. It was tongue and groove throughout with beaded joins. It was workmanship you didn't see nowadays. It was cool in here and quite peaceful, and the wood grain finish had a contemporary look.

How many people do you think they had in here? Judith had her audio guide.

Just to spite her, he made a wild over-estimate. A hundred.

Four. Four hundred. It was designed for a hundred and fifty. See that, said Judith, pointing to a broom cupboard in a corner of the washroom. They killed people in there.

Next they visited the special punishment block.

What the hell, said Leon. Since when did a concentration camp need a punishment block?

Judith paused her guide. What? she said.

Nothing, said Leon.

They crossed to the other side of the camp. He had to stop to wait

for her twice. They came to a gap in the wall. Through here, said Judith, is Station Z.

What's that?

The ovens, said Judith.

Oh, fuck, said Leon.

Do you know why they called it that?

Do I want to know?

It's a sick joke. The gatehouse entrance was called building A, so it was, you know, the last stop. Station Z.

They went through the gap and found themselves walking past a big wide trench. This is where they shot people, said Judith. She'd become quite the expert. They'd line them up at that end in front of those logs and stand at this end with their rifles. And—

Shoot them, right, got it.

They came to a big white shed, a bit like a barn.

This is it, said Judith. This is Station Z. It was blown up by the Russians but it's been partially reconstructed and they built this big cover right over the whole thing in 2004 when they reopened it as a museum.

The Russians?

They used this camp after the war.

What did they use it for?

What do you think?

There was a queue. More high school kids, baseball caps, singlets and shorts. They shuffled forward. The walls of the enclosing shed were translucent and as they moved inside the interior was lit up with a soft ethereal glow. There wasn't a huge amount left of Station Z. None of the walls were still standing, though the concrete floor was still there and you could see where the walls had been. A walkway with guide ropes snaked through the site.

Up ahead were the ovens. He caught sight of them as he shuffled along, and they got closer and closer and then there they were, right there. He could have reached out and touched the nearest one. There were four of them, in a row. They looked pretty much like pizza ovens; arched brick with cast iron doors. They were somehow smaller than he'd expected; but then, how big did they have to be?

There was a metal stretcher leaned up against the closest oven. It was just the right size. It would have been used to slide the body into the flames.

The line moved on. They saw where the execution room had been, where they shot them in the back of the head. They saw the gas chamber, which was just a concrete floor with drains. The drains were fake, to keep up the pretence of a shower room. To prevent panic. They saw where the bodies were stacked, then burnt, where the ashes were shovelled into trucks and taken away. Then they were outside again, in the sunshine.

Let's get out of here, said Judith. She was looking flushed again.

We haven't seen the medical experiments.

Fuck the medical experiments.

Fair enough.

They started back across the main compound. They went back through the gatehouse, along the outer wall, to the visitor centre. Judith handed in her audio guide. They headed back to the train station. The heat had gone out of the day and there was a slight breeze, but still Judith kept stopping and it took them forever. They got on the train and they rode back almost in silence. Leon stared out his window and Judith stared out hers. Just once he turned back to her.

Are you alright?

I'm fine. She kept her eyes on the window.

They got a taxi back to the hotel. They showered and changed and went out to eat. They ordered pigs' knuckles and *weissbier*. They were both very, very hungry and they ate until they were stuffed and then they ate some more. Then they sat back and ordered coffee and *schnapps*.

So, said Judith. How was it? Did it come up to your high standards?

Leon didn't speak.

Tell me, said Judith. What did you think?

I didn't think anything.

Well think now. I want to know.

He tried, but there was nothing. He was 64 years old. He had seen the Taj Mahal, he had seen Pompeii, the Colosseum, Big Ben.

And now he had seen this. I'll tell you how I feel, he said.

How do you feel?

I feel pissed off. And I'll tell you another thing.

What's that?

I'm never going to one of those places again.

Amen to that, said Judith.

Leon undid his belt a notch. He watched the Germans. They were all around him. Young Germans, old Germans, big and small. Fat and thin, smooth and hairy, boy and girl. Here was one now, female, blond, healthy, child-bearing hips and a bored expression. She was coming to bring him the bill.