

## The Other

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Translated by Katy Derbyshire

In the year I finished my dissertation, I found it difficult to view death as anything but symbolic. The Romans threw the bodies of the men sentenced to fight in the Coliseum into the Tiber. It may have been a pragmatic approach but I saw it as an allegory: a person has to leave Rome via a body of water that soaks up the dirt of the stifflingly steaming city and mixes with the lye of the Cloaca Maxima. It was this and little else that my thoughts revolved around that summer. I didn't allow my mind to stray, less out of academic vigour than because I was scared of what they were running from, not light-footed and shimmering, the way we like to think of thoughts, oh no. It was an act of great effort. Out of sheer exhaustion, I didn't realize I was filling page after page with explanations of how the corpse of the felon, the Christian, the scapegoat was publicly destroyed, then disposed of, how *the Other* is removed for the purpose of self-confirmation and self-preservation.

I didn't think about Björn.

Instead *bread and circuses*. The new scholarship holder came into the colloquium discussion with the theory of glamour to distract the masses, just as I was quietly standing up to leave. My professor nodded over at me. A bereavement, I'd told her, in South Germany. I didn't get anything out of the distraction theory and I'd have liked to stay in the stale air of the seminar room for another hour or an hour and a half, but I had to check in at Tempelhof Airport by 16:10.

A bereavement in South Germany was rather vague. My phrasing conjured up people expecting me, communal grieving and rituals. In actual fact, however, the funeral had already taken place without me being informed. Björn had wanted it that way, his mother wrote, and I knew she wasn't lying.

The 183 bus sped across the crossroads and past the stop just as I was leaving the institute. The short walk to Rathaus Steglitz station was fine by me; I've always sorted my thoughts while I walk. But the stumbling of the wheels soon put me off my stride. It was before the advent of cheap flights, when the rattle of wheeled suitcases wasn't yet part of the city soundscape. As I pulled my case across the kerb, I weighed up the (not terribly original) idea of opening with Suetonius. 'On the last day of his life,' began the quote that I ended up using as a preface to my dissertation, 'Caesar Augustus called his friends and asked whether it seemed to them that he had played the comedy of life fitly, adding the tag: "Since well I've played the part, all clap your hands And from the stage dismiss me with applause." And then he passed away.' Cited after Zanker – I had his *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* tucked into the side pocket of my wheeled case.

It was just like Björn not to let me decide for myself whether to come to his funeral. It said in his will that I was not to be informed of his death until three weeks after his death. There was no other mention of me.

Entering the airport, I had a momentary feeling of having ended up inside a faded postcard. I pulled my case onto the smooth PVC flooring and walked once around the hall before I found the check-in: 16:40 to Augsburg. There were mainly business travellers around me, no doubt some of them politicians; it was the year when the government moved to Berlin. The waiting men's bustling standstill echoed around the high-ceiling space and spilled over to me, briefly making me one of them, a specific destination in mind, a task, a deal, the evening off *back home*.

I met Björn in my seventh semester. It was a warm day in early July. At that time I had several different conditions, which I was having treatment for. If I was to hold a presentation in a seminar I spent days and nights polishing my text, expending less effort on the flawless content than on the spontaneous colloquial interjections that I committed to memory so that I could insert them at the right, most natural points. A certain measure of absent-mindedness couldn't do any harm either, as it does reveal a true thinker – here a repetition of a clause, there a pause at the right moment, and none of it genuine. That got better with Björn. Whether it was down to him or not.

Before Björn, there were times when I didn't manage to open the blinds all day long. Sometimes I went out in the evening, at night, to Charlottenburg or Mitte, made myself up like Anita Berber in the Otto Dix painting and looked rather mysterious.

Although it had been possible for years, it was the first time I had gone out to Brandenburg. I found no answer to the question of how I had managed to make my way to Buckow on a Sunday morning, as I entered Bertold Brecht and Helene Weigel's former house as reverently as possible and looked out at the lake and the garden through the large glazed wall. Brecht, whose theatre theory I admired although I had never felt comfortable with his plays, had never seemed so *bygone*.

All I knew about Björn's marriage was that it was unhappy. He considered leaving his wife for me a sacrifice, one that I did not sufficiently appreciate. Now I was waiting for a plane to his hometown, heading there for one sole purpose: not visiting Björn's grave. I could do that in Berlin as well, but *down there*, as he used to say, I could do it all the better.

I don't like it when people take decisions out of my hands, you see.

I was certainly strong enough, no question about it. Stealing a dead man's final triumph may well be impious, nonsensical or petty. But I had had more than enough of Björn making decisions on my behalf. That was all I was thinking about.

'On business,' I said when the hunched man ahead of me in the queue, having told me about visiting his son and grandchildren in Kreuzberg, asked me why I was travelling. I told him about Jesuit drama and Jacob Bidermann, the baroque dramatist who taught theology and phi-

losophy in Dillingen. I talked a lot, in complicated sentences, and the instant I said it, it became logical and true. I almost had myself believing that I'd be offering a seminar on the celebratory character of Jesuit drama in the winter semester. I felt caught in the act when the man nodded vehemently, in amazement that a big-city woman would travel to his part of the world for such matters.

I couldn't help thinking of Björn, who found my compulsive obsessions unbecoming for a Berliner – I could only get onto a train if someone else had pressed the greasy button to open the compartment door ahead of me. He was one of those people who thought it was their nonchalance, or at most their ability to take their drink, that entitled them to live in the capital city, otherwise they'd be sent back to the provinces. I found that amusing, or at least it must have looked that way, because Björn called me arrogant. But on the contrary, his belief that an address in the borough of Prenzlauer Berg was a personal achievement made me feel rather embarrassed and curious.

Once, Björn had invited me *back home* over Christmas, and I'd only just come up with an excuse in time. His South Germany was to remain forever unfamiliar to me, his strange mixture of truculent pride and sporadic escapes, the R that he rolled so sharply I thought at first he was Russian. He said *back home* and I thought of the Saturday afternoon when I ran into my mother in the *Bijou Brigitte* store on Ku'damm, four years after I'd left home at the age of sixteen. She put on a show of sentimentality and apologized, which didn't do any good either. It was all over with the guy, she murmured; either murmuring or yelling, there was nothing in between for her. It was all over with that guy, she repeated, and I merely nodded. She may well have said it a third time, but by then I'd already stormed out of the shop.

In Buckow village, where I was waiting for a vacant table in the garden of a café, it smelled of freshly mown grass. A smell I didn't know, unlike Björn. Later he'd go to great lengths to explain how much he abhorred everything that reminded him of people like his parents and their neatly kept lawns, who had made him an unhappy person – I thought to myself: a person who takes pride in being unhappy.

A woman signalled at the waiter for the bill and then stood up, smoothing her skirt, and disappeared inside the café. Left behind, to judge by the familiarity of the gestures, was her husband or partner; I could only see him from the rear. He was just leaning back to blink at the light past the sunshade as I stepped up to the table and asked whether they'd be vacating it.

'Take a seat,' said the man.

And I took a seat. I think that sealed it all.

I handed my ID card across the check-in desk, put my case on the luggage scales and was soon holding my boarding card. I knew I'd be strong. Strong enough to spend the weekend thinking about Jesuit drama, wandering cobbled streets and not letting it affect me that Björn had walked the same streets for nineteen years, dawdling as a child, skipping and dreaming now and then, as a teenager dragging his heels, cool, perhaps with a girl beside him, what did I know, about him? I'd view baroque altarpieces, the golden hall in university of the old Jesuit college, the university church, the monastery church, the chubby rococo putti, and the very

thought was enough to turn everything rigid inside me, freezing it into a postcard. I was suddenly incapable of taking another step.

The hunchback with the Kreuzberg grandchildren gave me a concerned look and whispered that this was his first flight too, or well, his second.

‘Take a seat,’ he’d said.

His face submerged from the sun into the shade as he turned to me and opened up the chair towards me, which his wife had pushed up to the table. The gravel crunched. I’d almost hesitated because it seemed rather too assertive to sit down, too intrusive, but something in Björn’s smile simply wiped out that thought. I gripped the back of the chair and sat down. Björn didn’t remove his hand in time, stroking my arm. Whether that was deliberate, I didn’t know. I’d have liked to know, later too, especially later, but I never dared to ask.

Björn took off his sunglasses, presumably in anticipation of the bill, which the old waiter brought to our table and placed in front of me. He didn’t notice it was another woman who’d waved him over. Björn hesitated, amused, then pressed his lips together in a grin. Our eyes met. The waiter eyed me impatiently, jingling the coins in his wallet.

‘My husband will pay,’ I said.

For Björn, those were the words with which it all began. It all – as I realized much later – was nothing more than those forty or fifty seconds under the sunshade of a Buckow café. Our smiles, the not yet cleared coffee table and our silence made us think of some other life.

The two of us, he and I. Whoever he was, whoever I was. A life that was in some way lighter, a more Sunday kind of life, with no artificial worries and no fear of a new day that wouldn’t let me get up in the morning even though I’d had more than enough sleep.

I showed my boarding card and went through the security check, a few more steps closer to the place where there was a gravestone bearing Björn’s name. Two numbers beneath it, perhaps engraved in gold, between them a hyphen meant to hold a life together. That was precisely why I had to go to Dillingen: to know that this grave existed at walking distance, and to be strong. To hold my own life together, or what remained of it.

I didn’t love Björn any more.

All the times he’d triumphed had become one. I didn’t think of the details of our arguments, which were much more *his* arguments, because there was no *our*, not even in arguments, only my helpless muteness and his accusation that I was hiding behind my science; no, I didn’t think of that. I didn’t want to think of Björn, wouldn’t let myself. Not of the T-shirt he liked to wear, the dark red one printed with the motto *I don’t care, I’ll just leave it like this*, not of the paper-thin scar extending the curve of his upper lip and seeming to open his mouth like an invitation, like a promise, which I found instantly attractive in Buckow.

His wife returned to the table, her sunglasses in her hair, asked whether he’d paid the bill as she slung her bag across her shoulders, and nodded a goodbye without looking at me while Björn got up.

I knew perfectly well I’d have forgotten him in a few days’ time.

It was a coincidence that I ran into him in the State Library at Potsdamer Platz that same week. The congruence of the last figures in our library card numbers meant we had to look for the books we'd ordered on the same shelf. His mouth and the scar were the first I saw of him, then he was hidden by a pile of books, with the shelf between us. He paced its length, less practiced than I was, took a step back, checked over again, and his fingers tapping on the shelf made the metal quake. I felt it as I took out my books from the other side.

He was wearing a T-shirt I'd have found ridiculous on any other man, bearing a motto that went against my own convictions: *I don't care, I'll just leave it like this*. The titles of the books he was borrowing looked technical, and meant nothing to me. When he spotted me everything went almost automatically, right up to his 'Come on, let's go.' I fetched my backpack out of the locker and followed him.

It's not often that paths cross twice in Berlin. Björn lived in Prenzlauer Berg, I lived on the other side of town in Steglitz. Nothing had ever seemed clearer to me than those four words: 'Come on, let's go.'

A panel at the gate announced the flight to Augsburg. I took a seat and there was no clarity other than this: Björn wanted me to feel guilty. *De mortuis nil nisi bene* – fine by me. But I was certain that Björn had pictured me collapsing at his graveside three weeks after his death. I wasn't going to do him that favour, oh no. I wanted to win back the decision he'd taken out of my hands. He must have imagined me realizing with great pain at the moment of my collapse why he'd refused me a chance to say my farewells. But I knew it already.

His mother is convinced to this day that I left Björn because the cancer was eating him alive.

'Come on, let's go...'

We spent all night talking in the Schwarzes Café and the city belonged to us. In the early days we went on a lot of walks, found *our place*, and another one, and we stopped every ten metres to kiss. Björn told me about his job, which was something technical, sound engineering for a record company. He never talked about it without pride but I didn't care, I listened to him but not to his words; instead I just laughed, a lot and out loud, and he did the same. We talked about our families, our brothers and sisters, I mentioned my mother, Björn his father, and we quietened down.

His wife travelled frequently for work and all I knew about his marriage was that it was unhappy, as he told me without me having asked. To begin with things were not bad at all with Björn and me.

I really did get a better grip on my compulsions. In my eighth semester I provided the decisive twist, spontaneously, without having prepared my words beforehand, in a seminar discussion on the theatrical dimension of the German naturist movement in the 1920s. Shortly after that I began my Master's thesis, loving the research and the archives. I felt comfortable in the stacks, in the system behind them, in this order that seemed to tally with my new life: I loved and was loved. Everything was perfectly simple, there was an end to the chaos, no loose ends any more, no Anita Berber, instead the scent of old books, the flap of the card drawers and the

even flickering as I read the microfiches. I liked Björn's joking mockery of *my naked people*. We were doing fine.

Until Björn left his wife. For me, as he said. And suddenly I owed him something.

'Death comes in a fraction of a second, people simply vaporizing in the blaze,' I read two years after completing my thesis, in a report on the burning Twin Towers. When I found out a few years later that there were undertakers in Switzerland who pressed diamonds out of dead people's ashes, I thought about it again, about people who turned to nothing in death, people who turned to diamonds. I called the essay *The Body of Death: Notes on Dying in a Postmodern Age*, and before I even noticed I'd dedicated it to Björn. Seconds after typing those five letters, forty or fifty seconds afterwards, my fingers hovered motionless above the keyboard. Everything was rigid, all over again.

It seemed wrong to me to process people into diamonds. As if people were like that: transparent, glittery, smooth.

We had been separated for seven weeks when I stepped out of my office into the corridor on the second-last Friday of the winter semester (my second as a research associate), to ask the next student in for her consultation. There stood Björn. He must have been waiting in the doorway; I felt his breath gliding over my cheek. He instantly took a step back, but the moment in which we shared a breath, a tremble, didn't break off until I looked into his eyes and read bare fear in them. I jumped with shock.

*Take a seat. My husband will pay. Come on, let's go.* Is that what remains? Eleven words, two encounters, one coincidence? Those were the beautiful things that remained.

The ugly things began when Björn turned up at my front door in Steglitz with two full suitcases and the superiority of a person who has made a sacrifice, from then on demanding more time and attention from me than I was prepared to give him. My feelings for him had stayed the same, but his expectation antagonized me. He wanted to be compensated for leaving his wife, with whom he had been through four years of marriage and a series of unsuccessful attempts at artificial insemination; he wanted to be compensated, if not rewarded. By me. By the great love we had dreamed up silently for ourselves in Buckow. But what kind of love is it if one person says, as soon as they don't like something about the other: 'I can go back whenever I like'? Björn's wife hadn't yet agreed to the divorce. His threats led to arguments, at the end of which he usually triumphed and made decisions that I quietly evaded, which provoked the next argument. He had left his wife, so I was deeply in his debt and it had to be perfect with me, I had to be perfect or at least make him happier than his wife ever had.

Björn didn't understand what the post-graduate programme I'd been on for a few weeks meant to me, while I failed to understand why he wanted to move in with me in the first place. Being loved by two women at once seemed to me to be absolutely ideal for a man like him. He was good-looking in a slightly unconventional way and had expectations of life as sensual as they were simple. A down-to-earth man, his body so robust that the disease came across as a mockery. To begin with I really didn't believe his cancer story, thinking it was another gambit to blackmail we with. I'd already left him by then, after all.

And yet I needed him, actually. Aside from the nights when I played the femme fatale and felt like Anita Berber, I'd always been stiff, shyer and more cerebral than others, until Björn gave me the feeling of being normal enough to be loved by a man like him, and get invited *back home* over Christmas. Now I was making that very journey under entirely different circumstances, sitting by the high glass windows facing the Tempelhof runways for well over half an hour now.

'It's cancer,' said Björn, 'of the pancreas.' And, 'I'm going to die.' The corridor was empty, my students presumably gone for the weekend, and the walls enclosed us. I thought a lot of things at that moment: *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag, the symbolism of my Roman dead, all that. Björn began to cry. 'You mustn't come back to me out of pity,' he said as we walked side by side through the newly fallen snow along Grunewaldstrasse. The streetlamps went on. One flickered nervously; I looked away. 'Or just so I don't have a guilty conscience later,' I added. Björn nodded. We were sensible, we were adults and we knew what was best for the both of us: no more arguments, no exaggerated expectations and unjust guilt. 'I'll get through it,' he said, 'I'm strong.' The snow muffled every sound. Perhaps our conversation would have gone in a different direction in the rain. Certainly. I've often asked myself how sleet would have changed the course of events.

We said goodbye at Rathaus Steglitz station, as I took the bus and Björn took the train. We embraced, so very intent on avoiding any *too long* that it was almost only a fleeting touch. I couldn't help thinking of Buckow. I watched him go from my bus; if only he'd turned around one more time, a single glance along the windows of the 183, even a hesitant pause on his way would have been enough to make me get off the bus in an instant. I'd have walked after him, perhaps I'd have had to run. As the bus pulled out I envisaged myself standing in front of Björn, my cheeks slightly rosy. Or he could have simply rung at my door in Lauenburgerstrasse; I waited for him that evening. I'd have smiled and said I'd come back to him, I'd go to chemotherapy with him and help him through the whole bloody thing, because I loved him.

It probably wouldn't have worked. That's the phrase I've been clinging to since that evening. Wasn't his will the best proof, so brazenly depriving me of any decision? Björn didn't ask, like Augustus, whether he'd played the comedy of life fitly. Instead he unceremoniously determined that this play held an epilogue of guilt in store for the second protagonist. And he ended with the tag: 'Since well I've played the part, all clap your hands And dismiss me from the stage with applause. Be glad of life, for it is not true that death is only bad for those who remain behind. You live on, make yourselves up like Anita Berber again and habilitate in Amsterdam, where I wanted to take you, only a six-hour train journey but the essay had to be finished on Monday. I have to play dead, play the no longer existent; I am no more. I am no more and that makes me puke. I don't give a shit about what allegedly comes afterwards, and I certainly don't give a shit about Nothingness. Death is worst for the one who dies, believe me.' And then he passed away.

'Come on,' said the hunchback, looking at me, uncertain whether he ought to touch my arm. I'd hardly realized the first passengers were already boarding the plane when I tasted tears on

my lips. Shocked, I put my hands to my cheeks: I was really crying. And I never cry. I looked at the man, turning away as I stood up and walking back towards the departure hall. Björn was dead. He wasn't alive any more. He wasn't thinking any more, loving any more, talking any more. His body was decomposed, his spirit obliterated. In the year I finished my dissertation, I found it difficult up to that day to view death as anything other than symbolic. Suddenly Björn was dead, not there any more, nothing there, gone for ever, and I am not strong.