

THE TAXI DRIVER

Bodies lay scattered across the stage and Hamlet was dying in his best friend's arms. Fortinbras arrived in Nazi uniform to declaim the final lines. The lights went down on the backcloth: a photographic image of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate.

'But why Germany,' the taxi driver asked. 'I thought "Hamlet" was set in Denmark?'

'It was the director's interpretation,' Mary replied, 'and it worked really well. Even the critics approved. We did the whole 'play within the play' scene as a sort of Berlin cabaret, a mixture of Lotte Lenya, Liza Minelli and the "Blue Angel". It was great theatre.'

'And who were you?' the taxi driver's eyes flicked to the rear view mirror.

'Oh, I played Ophelia. Polonius was disabled so in the mad scene I pushed an empty wheelchair round the stage doing goose-steps. It was very effective actually.'

'Really?' He didn't sound convinced.

'I was just trying to explain why I fell in love with Berlin.'

'But what has Berlin to do with it?'

Mary was beginning to get exasperated.

'Don't you see. The whole flavour of the production was pure Christopher Isherwood, at least to me. Berlin in the 1930s, the arrival of Nazism, the end of the Weimar Republic.'

The driver's eyes seemed to glaze over.

Why should he be interested anyway. She was just talking too much. Trying to make conversation. And all because she enquired about his accent and he said he was from Berlin.

They had reached her destination. Mary extracted fifteen dollars from her wallet and asked for a receipt.

'Goodnight' she said.

'Goodnight' he replied.

It was two days later and midnight. Once again Mary had only just finished work. She was tired, tired of typing, tired of trying to eke out a living in a foreign country. She was missing her friends and the world of theatre. And she hadn't acted for months.

But she had always wanted to visit Australia: all those stories about her maiden aunt who studied with Germain Greer and was part of the Sydney Push. The opportunity arose: a supporting role in a West End farce. It wasn't Shakespeare but the proceeds paid for her flight. Mary had visited the major cities, she had been to the Outback and climbed Ayres Rock. But now she was bored. At this time of night she often felt homesick.

Wearily she turned off the lights, locked the office and took the lift down to the foyer, eerily dark and empty. She had worked an extra hour to justify a taxi home. Across the road was the famous Adelaide pie cart, offering sustenance to the city's nocturnal population. Steak and kidney pies floated on green pea soup. Mary could never quite understand why this was considered a delicacy.

The scene reminded her of *Imbiss* stalls in Berlin, those havens of nourishment where a plain *currywurst* tasted inexplicably delicious and a mug of steaming *gluwein* offset the cold. The Berliners were friendly and never intimidating, however late the hour. There were too many misfits at the Victoria Square pie cart who looked at Mary oddly when she passed. She was never tempted to stop.

She wondered why Berlin had such a hold on her. It wasn't as though she even spoke the language.

She reached the taxi rank to see the same driver she had had the other evening. The Berliner. It was a surprising coincidence. He seemed pleased to see her.

'The computer again?' he asked.

'Yes' she said, opening the rear seat door, 'I'm exhausted.'

'Same place?'

It was rather odd not to have to give directions to a taxi driver. He obviously had a good memory. They began to chat, almost as if they were old friends, and this evening he seemed more prepared to talk. He told her he had been married to a lawyer, also an East German, and that they had arrived in Australia fifteen years ago.

'I always feel I should make up some story about being shot at by border guards,' he admitted. 'People seem to expect it. In fact it was really easy. My wife used to go to conferences in Vienna and one time we simply never went home. It seems strange to think there is no wall there now.'

'I was there in 1989,' said Mary.

'I thought you would be.' The taxi driver suddenly smiled, turning to look at her. She was somehow surprised to see he was attractive. He had seemed so dour the other evening. He had piercing blue eyes, a straight nose and hair which was just beginning to turn grey. She guessed he was in his forties.

She remembered that New Year so vividly. Standing there in front of the Brandenburg Gate with what seemed to be the whole population of West Berlin. The city was empty. Everyone had gone to the Berlin Wall to welcome in 1990, the dawn of freedom in this divided country.

On the stroke of midnight there was a sudden explosion of fireworks and the sound of popping corks as bottles of *sekt* were passed amongst the crowd. Take a sip and hand it on. This was a real street party, a genuine celebration.

Mary remembered slipping through the crowd until she had reached the wall itself, the surface now full of pock marks where hammers and chisels had been hard at work. Everyone wanted a piece of the Berlin Wall, to sell, to give to friends, to keep as a tourist memento or as an enduring symbol of the end of political repression.

The ground at the base of the wall was covered in shards of glass. She looked up to see hands reaching down, encouraging her to join those who were already on the top. She grabbed a proffered arm and scrambled up the vertical graffiti-covered barrier. This particular section of wall was quite wide and the summit was packed with smiling people: soldiers in uniform, tourists, students, east and west Berliners. Everyone was deliriously happy. The euphoria was intoxicating.

A mass of humanity stretched to the east, along the road Mary knew to be Unter den Linden. The communist housing blocks looked grim and dreadful but the East Berliners were on the streets, celebrating too. So many people from the same city, with families perhaps forcibly separated by the artificial concrete partition, land mines and soldiers. At long last able they would all be able to mingle freely and reclaim Berlin as their own united home. It was an emotive moment. Mary would never forget she too had witnessed the miracle of the end of the Cold War.

‘Yes, I was there’ she repeated. But the words seemed inadequate.

By the end of the journey Mary knew that the taxi driver was divorced. His wife had left him for an Australian businessman; they lived in Queensland.

He was now trying to further his education, studying English Literature at Flinders University.

'Better late than never.'

'But if you drive a taxi all night, when do you sleep?' Mary was curious.

'In the afternoons. I doze through much of the night anyhow, there aren't many people wanting a taxi. Read a bit, sleep a bit, wake up a bit when someone like you comes along.'

Mary could sense a change of attitude. He was giving her the sort of attention she liked. But they had reached her home. It was time to say goodnight.

'That's twelve dollars,' he said as she fumbled for her wallet.

'But it was fifteen the other night.'

'No twelve is enough. I've enjoyed your company.'

'Good night.'

One didn't expect to have the same taxi driver twice.

A week went past before she again worked late and needed a taxi. Mary went to the same rank outside the Commonwealth Bank but her German driver wasn't there. She acknowledged a feeling of disappointment.

Mary considered her reaction. It was somehow significant. Was she attracted to this man simply because he was born in Berlin? Did he remind her of a Europe she missed? She had certainly enjoyed their conversations. They had exchanged a certain amount of personal information and they had many interests in common.

'Why don't you go to live in Berlin then?' he had asked.

'I'd love to,' she admitted, 'but what would I do? How could I earn a living. After all I'm English. What you might call 'linguistically challenged'!

He laughed. 'You could always learn. They say pillow talk is the best way.'

Had that been a chat-up line? If so, she had missed her cue.

The days passed. Her visit to Australia was almost over and Mary had never seen the Berlin driver again, despite several late night taxis. She ceased to look out for him but in her imagination the romantic interest lingered.

It was a Tuesday lunchtime when she checked the mailbox. She discarded the inevitable advertisements from Foodland and nearly threw away a scrap of white paper, hidden in the folds of cut price produce.

'Do you remember me?' was written in capitals. 'I would like to see you. You don't work late any more? Or you can't afford a taxi? Or perhaps you have left the country? I will be at the taxi rank at 11.30 this evening. Will you join me there? Werner.'

So that was his name. Werner. Pronounced with a 'V' of course. She knew that much about the language.

For a moment Mary wondered how he knew her address. But of course, he had driven her home. Well then, why didn't he ring the bell? But perhaps he was shy. This way there would be no embarrassed confrontation. If she didn't turn up, he would know where he stood: she wasn't interested.

But of course she was.

There was excitement in the air that night, she even found the typing enjoyable. The other night staff were amused. 'You look smart tonight' said Tracey. 'Off somewhere afterwards?'

'Perhaps,' said Mary. 'I don't really know. I have rather an unusual assignation.'

At twenty past eleven she left the office. She dawdled over locking up and walked down the stairs instead of taking the lift. She almost felt tempted to stop at the pie cart. Procrastination was in the air. For all her usual confidence she was nervous about meeting Werner. Even the name sounded odd. It was

all very well to talk about German adaptations of "Hamlet" and experiences of Berlin to an anonymous taxi-driver. But he was not so anonymous now. She knew his name. And, more worryingly, she had been dreaming about him.

The car was waiting at the taxi rank. He got out and opened the passenger door. Was this old fashioned courtesy or to prevent her from sitting in the back seat, as she usually did in taxis?

'Thank you' she said, feeling uncomfortably tongue-tied.

He seemed equally non-plussed.

'Shall we go for a drink? There is a bar in Norwood which is open.'

She had forgotten how German his accent was. But he was certainly good looking. She was relieved that her imagination had not been too inventive. He had long fingers, artistic hands which tightly gripped the steering wheel. He was nervous too. The meter was not in operation. But of course this was a social excursion, not a taxi fare.

They drove in silence and parked outside the Cafe Buongiorno on Norwood Parade. The bar was as busy as ever. Football played silently on the television and there was the usual buzz of animated conversation. Mary decided to take the initiative.

'I'm afraid I'm starving. Can I order a pizza?'

Werner smiled, that warm open smile which she had registered before. Even teeth, a dimple in his cheek. She found it overwhelmingly sexy. What would she say this time if he mentioned pillow talk? She blushed at the thought. He noticed.

'Penny for them. Isn't that what the English say?'

She blushed even more. And desperately hoped he couldn't read her mind.

Werner spoke quickly.

'It is good to see you. Really. I have missed our conversations, your talk of plays, of Shakespeare, your Berlin "Hamlet". You made me feel so homesick for my birthplace. For my parents, who are dead. All the years in Australia, even with a German wife, I never thought about it. Not really. The past was the past. I was here to start a new life, in a new country.'

He looked away and then focused intently on his wine glass.

'And then I meet you, late one night, a girl from England going on and on about my city. With such enthusiasm. It was extraordinary. And for the past six weeks I have thought about nothing else.'

He put down the glass and looked at Mary.

'So I booked a ticket.'

He hesitated.

'In fact I have booked two.'

Another pause.

'You see, I would like to invite you to Berlin.'

Mary was shocked into speech.

'But I've already got a ticket, a return to England.'

'On the 21st - I think you said?'

So he had remembered that too.

'I know you must think this is a liberty. And I can't really explain. It's just a hunch. That we could get on. That you could show me the things about Berlin that you love. And if you would allow me, I could perhaps show you another side of the city.'

Mary was silent. In reality things were going much too fast.

'I leave tomorrow to stay with my cousin and her family in Lichtenberg. Perhaps you will join me later.'

He produced a brown envelope from his inside jacket pocket.

'Here is a ticket, from London to Berlin. The date can be changed of course.'

So this was German directness, Mary realised.

'But how did you find out my name? Did I tell you?'

'No, you didn't. But a letter in your mailbox did.'

'And how did you know I would turn up tonight?'

'I didn't. But I hoped you would.'

He smiled again and Mary's stomach turned to jelly. She was sure he could read her mind.

'It would give me such pleasure,' he said. 'Really. You have no idea what it meant to talk to you. And then meeting like that, here in Adelaide. Two journeys in three evenings. Was this just a coincidence do you think?'

Mary mumbled something incoherent about fate. Which he heard of course.

'Fate. Yes. I believe in fate. Do you?'

'I don't know.' She was cautious. After all, she had all that English reserve.

'It will only be for two weeks. A small adventure. I think you said you liked adventures. Then you will return to England, I to Australia. After we have been to Berlin. After that, who knows.'

He looked serious for a moment.

'In the meantime, I might - if I'm lucky - get to teach you some German.'

He grinned.

'Of course, you know the best way to learn....'

The unsaid words dangled provocatively in the air.

Mary laughed, so loudly that even the couple at the next table gave her a quizzical look.

And the taxi driver smiled too, that glorious sensuous smile.

She suddenly felt deliriously happy. Berlin. Yes, it would be wonderful to go to Berlin. With him. Even if he was a stranger - for the moment. Such a romantic stranger.

'All right,' said Mary, suddenly making a decision. 'If you really want me to come, I will.'

Werner picked up her hand and kissed it.

'*Danke Schön*' he said.