

A TIME TO
FORGET IN
EAST BERLIN

A NOVEL

C.G. FEWSTON

2022

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used factiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

The book uses American, German, and Italian spelling and language. A huge thanks to the Hemingway Society, to the Royal Society of Literature, to the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), to Fraser Place and to CM+ Serviced Apartments for giving the author tranquil places to write and work, and to everyone who gave their support at the American Academy in Rome (Italy) while the author worked on this book. A special thanks to my close friend Franziska, who was born in East Germany in 1979, for being a consultant on this book.

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A TIME TO FORGET IN EAST BERLIN REVIEWS

“A spellbinding tale of love and espionage set under the looming shadow of the Berlin Wall in 1975... A mesmerising read full of charged eroticism.”

~ Ian Skewis, Associate Editor for Bloodhound Books, & author of best-selling novel *A Murder of Crows* (2017)

“*A Time to Forget in East Berlin* is a dream-like interlude of love and passion in the paranoid and violent life of a Cold War spy. The meticulous research is evident on every page, and Fewston’s elegant prose, reminiscent of novels from a bygone era, enhances the sensation that this is a book firmly rooted in another time.”

~ Matthew Harffy, prolific writer & best-selling historical fiction author of the “Bernicia Chronicles” series

“*A Time to Forget in East Berlin* is not only an engrossing story of clandestine espionage, but it is also a testament to the lifestyle encountered in East Berlin at the height of the Cold War. Author C.G. Fewston does not color the story as anti-Communist or pro-Socialist but describes life in East Berlin with a matter-of-fact approach... Overall, *A Time to Forget in East Berlin* provides insight to life behind the Iron Curtain and is told in a way that fully immerses the reader into the story.”

~ *Lone Star Literary Life*

“There is no better way for readers interested in Germany’s history and the dilemma and cultures of the two Berlins to absorb this information than in a novel such as this, which captures the microcosm of two individuals’ love, relationship, and options and expands them against the blossoming dilemmas of a nation divided.”

“This stand-alone story is both a powerful compliment to its predecessor and a testimony to the strength of a writer who allows the personal and the political to intersect along the road of life in delightful, refreshingly evocative ways recommended for literary, historical fiction and novel readers alike.”

“John is supposed to be retired. But he can’t retire from love, and he can’t turn his back on the storm which rises to embrace them both... Fewston injects literary, philosophical, psychological, political, and social inspections into the story to add further depth; from references to Faust and Proust to concerns about the Stasi who might quell the one light he’s been able to follow in this dark time.”

“Readers who enjoy poetic prose and descriptions that go beyond an action-oriented or political inspection focus will relish this story — which means that it will reach beyond the usual audience of war fiction epic readers to tug at the hearts of those who may not have anticipated such a compelling blend of descriptive prose and psychological inspection.”

~ D. Donovan, Senior Reviewer, *Midwest Book Review*

OTHER BOOKS BY C.G. FEWSTON

LITTLE HOMETOWN, AMERICA

A TIME TO LOVE IN TEHRAN

VANITY OF VANITIES

THE MYSTIC'S SMILE ~ A PLAY IN 3 ACTS

THE NEW AMERICA: A COLLECTION

A FATHER'S SON

FOR
AXTON
&
THOR

A TIME TO
FORGET IN
EAST BERLIN

1975

APRIL

Beyond a birch tree in a courtyard, the sun rose in the east to a young woman at a window facing the Wall. When I imagine her there by the window in the morning, it's as though I conjure her from a dream I once had as a child. Her name is Nina, and her love had a strange Germanic power that held the fulness of hope, as swift and as fair as time. And in that dream, she was my Brunhilda and I her Sigurd. She was my air and I her fire. Now that I think back on it, now that I know all that has happened, now I understand her the better. She came to be reconciled with her life and the fate that came with it. She once told me that it was the cultivation of her humanity that taught her that it was far more difficult to fight a regime than to live under one.

Back then in 1975, nearly everyone could be summed up in a sentence or two, and they were, by the *Stasi*. Yet there was this wonderful feeling of love and depth to Nina. All she wanted was love. To love. To *be* love. To have been loved in return. To conquer the hardships of life and to find the beauty, and so it began on that one gentle night in spring when I found her waiting for me.

The night Nina came into my life I was a little melancholic because I was ready to give up finding the Heads of Leonidas — the covert organization I'd been tracking since Tehran. I was feeling as though East Berlin had become a dark ocean, as though I were swimming farther from the solace I'd known in childhood. I felt alone, abandoned. I'd been thinking of how most days I

didn't even see people. Surrounded by them, I still couldn't see them. I'd look at them. I'd watch them. I'd follow them. I'd analyze and contemplate them. But when it came to *seeing* them, seeing a man-woman-child for who they were to the rest of the world, I feared my morality was blind. As blind as Doctor Faustus. There was no way for me to see people. For me to look them in their eyes and give them all the pain and loss I had suffered. It would've been too much, for them and for me. I thought of the East and the West as I walked home, a little drunk, down a cobbled street lit by yellow lamplight.

Then I walked up two flights of stairs and found Nina sitting on the staircase across from my apartment door. The oddity of having a strong, young woman in the damp-light of the hall left me with a throbbing in my chest. Her thin arms folded around her bare knees; she wore tan shorts and a gray T-shirt with a word I couldn't yet read. Her blue eyes wanted my full attention, and that was all I could give her for the moment. Her long, blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail and it left her in a state of underappreciation, but I knew she sought some small kindness from me.

Nina didn't seem startled to see me approach. We had met briefly a few times in passing. Long enough though to become friendly and introduce ourselves. Other than our names we knew little about one another.

'Jacob? Is that you?' she said. Her voice was low, uncertain, and disarming. 'Are you drunk?'

'A little,' I said. 'But could be worse.'

She explained her unexpected presence, as though she could read my thoughts. She spoke of how she had lost her key and that a locksmith was coming, but not until the

morning. She had no other place to go. Could she wait, safely, with me inside my home?

When she spoke, I saw her. I mean I could *see* her and all that she was worth. I felt myself stretching into forever. The ice floes of my soul melting beneath the blazing sun of Her. My arms, my legs, my face spread thin across the decades, centuries, millennia. I was gone but not forgotten. I sensed my essence, as thin as a cloud, over all history and time. I told her that she was more than welcome to wait in my place until the locksmith arrived, whenever that might be. That Boxer would enjoy her company.

‘Boxer?’ she asked, sounding a bit amused. ‘Is that your friend?’

‘My German Shephard.’

‘What a strange name for a dog. You Americans are funny.’

When Nina stood from where she was sitting on the bottom of the staircase, outside the door to my apartment, I could read the black letters more clearly on her gray T-shirt; the word ran from right to left, mirrored in block lettering as *isɹǝM*.

The keys jangled in my hand as I unlocked the door to my apartment and Boxer came bounding out onto me. Nina tentatively followed and startled back when my dog, like a boxer, stood on its hind legs and pawed at her stomach. The childlike dog appeared delighted to have her as a new friend.

As Boxer settled to our new companion, Nina spoke of how her apartment upstairs was far messier than mine, which she deemed to be stark, bare, spartan. She enjoyed

using the adjective ‘spartan,’ she said, because she’d learned it only two weeks before from an English class she was taking in the evenings. They had visited the *Museum für Deutsche Geschichte*, the Museum of German History.

Nina moved from furniture piece to furniture piece like an inquisitive fox moving between the cool shades of trees. She lightly touched the mantle, then the lamp shade, then the window full of her reflection. Boxer followed her around the room as I boiled water for tea. From the kitchen I could see Nina thumbing a worn copy of *Anna Karenina* by the bookshelf.

She said in a soft, twittering voice, ‘Love stories, like this one, always begin the same way.’

‘They do?’ I asked. ‘Really? How so?’

‘Girl meets boy.’ Her English, she would later tell me, was patterned after her late father, who had also spoken Russian and French. She continued, ‘Great love stories always end the same way too.’ She said this as if she were speaking to her reflection on the window. ‘Never happy.’

‘Do they?’ I said, handing her a cup of Earl Grey tea. ‘You think so?’

She thanked me for the tea and added, ‘Did you forget about Juliet and Romeo? Daisy and Gatsby? Estella and Pip? Albertine and Marcel? Jenny and Oliver? Should I name some more?’

‘But Pip and Estella are all set to marry at the end of *Great Expectations*,’ I said. ‘Or did I miss something?’

‘They don’t in the writer’s version,’ she said with a confidence of a Dickensian aficionado. She sipped her tea and set the cup on the coffee table. ‘The original is the true ending,’ she said. ‘An editor had dear old Charles change the ending for a happier one.’

‘Okay, okay,’ I said. ‘I get it. Trust me. I get it. Love sucks.’

Nina’s eyes squinted as though she wanted to throw Tolstoy’s book at me. Instead, she placed *Anna* down next to her cup of tea on the coffee table. ‘Do you believe in ghosts,’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean the kind of ghosts we read about in *Wuthering Heights*?’ She was by the window staring into the darkness. I couldn’t see her face or whether her eyes were open or closed. I thought them closed. ‘Do you think lovers could come back after death?’ she said with a steady voice. ‘The way Catherine did?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I said. ‘But I believe you read too much into things. Sometimes stories are simply stories. They can’t mean that much, can they?’

‘I disagree,’ she said. She faced me then.

‘Oh, you do, do you?’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘one can never read too much.’

When she said that, I couldn’t help but see a truth in her eyes. A shape of truth that came from childish but noble beliefs we have agreed on as adults to call fairness, justice, honesty, happiness. I knew better than to trust anyone but she had a worldshine about her, and so it was only natural that I felt a sudden zest of life. She was like those two young women one can find in oil paintings by Caspar David Friedrich.

‘Have you always loved reading?’ I asked, changing the subject. ‘You seem to know a great deal about foreign literature.’

‘Sometimes I can get a few books from Springer Publishing over in West Berlin. There’s not much else to do in the Deep Dirty Rut.’

‘Deep Dirty Rut?’ I asked, sipping my tea, still a bit too hot.

‘The DDR,’ she replied, with a playful shine in those blue eyes of hers. ‘You know, *Stasiland*.’

‘You’re mischievous, aren’t you? Trouble.’

‘I’ve been known to be.’

‘Caposhi?’

‘Wouldn’t you like to know.’ Nina moved to the sofa and sat. Boxer hopped into her lap and relaxed, as though they had done this routine a thousand times over the last thousand nights. ‘I must be honest with you. I’m not locked out at all,’ she confessed.

‘You’re not?’

‘No,’ she said, rubbing the back of Boxer’s neck. ‘They found another dead body over in the ruins. *Deutscher Dom* on the *Gendarmenmarkt*.’

‘I know of it,’ I said, joining her on the sofa. ‘Terrible news. Tragic.’

‘I didn’t, I mean I couldn’t be alone tonight. Not with a murderer out there on the loose. Imagine. A maniac like Jack the Ripper prowling the streets of our beloved city. Insane.’

‘Trust me. I get it. I do.’

‘What do you want to do now?’ she said.

‘I’m sure we’ll think of something.’

Like the gods who forgot they had lived, Nina and I talked late into the night. When it started raining around two in the morning, I should’ve known then the rain was a portent of things to come.