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Then We Take Berlin

Written by John Lawton

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JOHN LAWTON

THEN WE TAKE BERLIN



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for

Gore Vidal

1925–2012

Who helped kick me into shape.
The planet has lost its
most barbed critic.
The job of world-class
pain-in-the-arse is now vacant.

" . . . Never tell all you feel, or (a better way still), feel very little . . . at any rate never have any feelings which may make you uncomfortable, or make any promises which you cannot at any required moment command and withdraw. That is the way to get on . . ."

William Makepeace Thackeray: *Vanity Fair*

1847

"Wer spricht von Siegen? Überstehen ist Alles."

Rainer Maria Rilke: *Requiem, für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth*

1908

"The warriors are dead. The warriors died in two world wars. Those who remain are the barterers. They know the price of coffee and cocoa and sugar and flour in a defeated country."

Kay Boyle: *The Lovers of Gain*

1950

I

First We Take Manhattan

"The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world."

F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*

1925

§1

West Berlin: May 1963

Christina Hélène von Raeder Burkhardt had too many names, so was known simply as Nell. She was attending the first of her twice weekly meetings with the mayor to agree an itinerary for the impending visit of President Kennedy.

"McGeorge Bundy gives me a headache."

"You don't get on with Bundy, Nell?"

"I get on very well with Bundy—one of the best—"

"Or the brightest . . ."

"Whichever . . . I get on well with him, but it does seem to me that his job is simply to say 'no.' Whatever I suggest he says cannot or should not be done."

"Such as?"

"I suggested a visit to Bernauer Straße . . . where the wall began, as it were . . . and where it claimed its first victims."

"Not a bad idea."

"Bundy won't let the president do it—instead we get JFK's sister. She'll visit Bernauer Straße."

"We agreed to that?"

"Of course—it's better than nothing."

"Nell . . . what is it you want?"

It was a generous question. Mayor Brandt had his agenda for this visit—everyone had, from the man who swept the streets to the Chief of Police—yet still he was asking to hear hers.

"I want President Kennedy to visit *all* the Berlins—all the Berlins I know as a Berliner. Berlin new and Berlin old. I would ask that he visit the city we rebuilt . . . to look at the Kurfürstendamm as well as the Reichstag ruins. I would ask that he see and be seen. I would ask that he visit Berlin West and Berlin East."

"The East?"

"Through Checkpoint Charlie. He has every right to pass through."

"Imagine the embarrassment when he's asked to produce his passport."

"Would they dare?"

"I don't know. Nell, have you actually suggested a visit to the Soviet Sector?"

"Oh yes. Ages ago."

"And?"

"And Bundy said it would be the one idea he'd never put before Kennedy."

"The Russians never pass up a chance for a stunt. And if we did that we'd be pulling a stunt too. And the only point to a stunt is not to be upstaged. Going East would give them every opportunity to upstage us. And if we don't go East . . . if we stay 'home' and peer over the wall they'll still stage something. There'll be an 'incident' of some sort. Imagine. Kennedy waves to Berliners through the Brandenburg Gate and Khrushchev waves back."

Nell smiled at the image. So often Willy Brandt cracked a joke only as a prelude to the deadly serious.

"Everything is ambivalent," Brandt was saying. "Kennedy visits a Berlin renewed and a Berlin divided. A Berlin defiant and a Berlin besieged. Everything about this visit is double-edged. Except this . . . it's going to be the biggest public spectacle Germany has seen since the Nuremburg rallies. And a Nuremburg rally is that last thing it can ever look like. The world will be watching. Nothing should remind them of the Reich. Ideally, this visit should pass without 'incident.' The world will be watching Berlin."

Incident.

Vorkommnis.

He'd been emphatic.

§2

London: May 1963

John Wilfrid Holderness had had many names. John to his parents—naturally as they had chosen the name, and indeed had had him christened so in a Stepney church in the autumn of 1927—Wilf to his schoolmates—Joe to his old RAF pals . . . and Wilderness to his women.

He would not have answered the phone that night. It was gone ten, they were in bed, they'd made love and he was sleeping it off. His wife wasn't. She answered.

She nudged him.

"Wilderness. It's Frank Spoleto."

Wilderness pretended to be asleep, but she wasn't having any of it.

She nudged him again.

"Can't be Frank," he said through a yawn. "Last I heard he went back to Washington. Tell whoever it is to fuck off."

One hand curled around the mouthpiece to muffle their voices.

"It's Frank. He's in New York, calling you person to person. It must be costing him a packet!"

"Person to person? What's that?"

"Bastard to bastard. Here, take the bloody phone!"

Spoleto's voice boomed at him, more like five feet than five thousand miles away.

"Joe. You old bugger!"

It was one of Spoleto's delights from his time in London to use anglicisms, often at the wrong moment—his confusion between twit and twat had caused many a blush.

"Frank? It's nearly midnight."

"It's ten of eleven, Joe. Clock on my desk has faces for London, Paris and New York—"

"Sounds like a bottle of cheap perfume to me, Frank."

"And there's a barman two blocks away getting ready to serve me my first martini of the weekend."

"Don't let me keep you."

Spoleto laughed loudly at this. Wilderness held the phone away from his ear.

"Joe, I need to see you."

"No problem, I'll be here."

"I need to see you in New York."

Wilderness didn't know why, but it was like a surge of adrenaline, hearing Spoleto say New York. He sat up. Switched the phone from one ear to the other, looked around for his wife, heard the sound of water running in the bathroom.

"Er . . . say again Frank."

"I need you here. I've booked you out on the one o'clock Pan Am to Idlewild on Tuesday. Tickets, and everything else you need to get here will be at the embassy on Monday morning. First class. All paid for. Hell, I even got you a room at the Gramercy."

"You couldn't afford the Waldorf?"

The only New York hotel of which he had ever heard.

He held the phone a moment or two after Spoleto had hung up, if only because it was never obvious with Frank when a conversation was over—it was over when Frank said it was over, no goodbyes, just his sense of an ending and the clunky silence on the line. He put the phone down, shuffled naked to the bathroom door. Tapped it gently open with his foot.

The wife sat naked on the lavatory, a wad of loo roll in her right hand, poised. Early in their marriage, six or seven years ago, he had to get over the fact that she would walk in while he pissed, and didn't give a damn if he walked in on her. He chalked it up to their different backgrounds—the public nature of a private education (hers) versus a home which knew no privacy (his)—the only door with a lock had been the loo, and the loo had been out in the yard. He'd hardly ever not had a room to himself, and only at sporadic moments in his life had he ever been in dorm or barracks, but a room he could call his own (in the sense that if you put an object down in said room, it would still be in the same place the next time you looked, in the sense that you could lock the door and not be asked why) that had been rare, that had been precious and he'd given that up to marry Judy. And given it up gladly.

She blotted herself, flushed the loo and settled in the bath.

"What did the bastard want now?"

"That's a tough one. He wants me in New York next week."

"That kind of tough I can live with. It's not as though you're a jetsetter is it? New York on expenses. Yeah—sounds really tough."

"How did you know it was on expenses?"

"Would you even be thinking about it if it weren't?"

Wilderness settled on the edge of the bath.

"I just thought . . . out of the blue after all this time . . ."

"It's three or four years isn't it? Can't be much more. The two of you came back from Helsinki together."

"I just thought . . . this wouldn't have anything to do with Alec would it?"

"Get in the bath, Wilderness. You'll feel better and you'll sleep better."

"Er . . ."

Just a grunt. Non-committal, out of nothing more than tiredness.

"Just get in. You know what you're like when you're too tired to sleep. Those nights when your legs twitch. You'll feel better. Trust me."

He slipped in at the blunt end, the rounded knobs on the taps cold against his back. Her toes found their way to his armpits. Her nipples peeked at him through the foam.

"Trusting you isn't the problem. It's trusting Frank."

"And my father?"

"Nah, I was just asking. Alec's been good to me—I didn't mean . . ."

"Didn't mean what? Pa's been good to you. Of course he has. But do I detect a hint of too much of a good thing?"

It was a moment to sink beneath the water and blow bubbles at her, but only Hollywood had baths big enough for that.

She took the unspoken words from his silent lips. Pushed her breasts together and made an irresistible waterfall flow between them.

"Coochie coo," she said, and he knew he was off the hook. Subject changed.