

‘So, are you well?’ Harry asks me.

‘Yes, thank you. I’m still studying. You know, I was planning to go to Berlin this year.’

‘Oh, yeah? Why would you want to do that?’

‘I want to go back to where you lived when you were young. With your parents.’

He contemplates this. ‘Berlin ... Berlin is alright. Just a big city. I haven’t been there in a long time.’

‘I’m writing a lot about your life, Harry. I’m very interested in your history.’

‘Yes, well. There’s not much to say about it, really.’

Each time I see Harry, I tell him that I am gathering information about his life and the family’s history. He asks me why, and I tell him that I am writing to preserve a part of his story. His reaction is usually the same: he says he’s happy to share with me what he can remember, but I don’t think he understands why I am so interested. Perhaps it is a symptom of my generation, a conditioning, to be captivated by people who have witnessed the historical events we constantly see portrayed on our screens and newsfeeds. To Harry it is his life, unextraordinary, marked by light and dark, as all lives are. And the part that I’m interested in, the very beginning, happened so long ago. It is buried beneath 100 years of other experiences, memories, emotions. It is the distance between this old life and the present that is enthralling to me, yet tricky for Harry. There is much that his mind will not allow him to access, despite his best efforts.

But there is also much that he remembers in vivid detail, and if I’m lucky I’ll see a quick flash of the young man I’m trying to find. I often wonder if I am asking too many questions or, worse,

Dear Mutzi

forcing my own projections onto the man who has so generously shared everything he can with me. Sometimes I feel as if I am an intruder wandering through a space in which I don't belong, that isn't meant for me. And for what, to what end? I am free to wander back out the same way I entered, unburdened by the weight of direct memory. For Harry there is no such exit.

*There's not much to say about it, really.*

'We went back there, years ago. To Berlin,' says Lynn from the kitchen. 'Harry, do you remember when we went back to Berlin?'

'Yes.'

'This was back in the 1970s,' says Lynn. 'I remember we went into a shop and the man said, "Where do you come from?" I pointed to Harry and said, "*Er ist Berliner!*" The man looked at us like we were idiots. He didn't believe Harry was from Berlin because he wouldn't speak a word of German, not for the whole trip! I had to speak for us.'

'How did you feel when you went back?' I ask Harry.

He shrugs. 'I didn't have any particular feelings about it.'

'You must be disappointed that you can't go to Berlin anymore,' Lynn says to me, as she walks out to the balcony and places a plate of ham, sliced tomato, lettuce and cheese on the wooden table.

'Yes and no. I wouldn't want to be there now, with everything that's going on.'

'Too right. Best to stay put until this craziness is over.'

'It could be a lot worse,' says Mum. 'We're not at war.'

Harry picks up the small, brown photo album next to him and begins to flick through it. The pictures are from another time: smaller than palm size, sepia, mostly snapshots of Harry's

adolescent life in Germany. Streetscapes, iconic monuments, bustling intersections at Alexanderplatz and Unter den Linden. The animated Kurfürstendamm esplanade, hundreds of citizens crossing footpaths and sitting at street-side restaurants. Train stations decorated with the Olympic rings of 1936. The pictures are vibrant fragments of metropolitan life, turned sinister by the banners and flags branded with swastikas in nearly all of them.