

# UNDER BERLIN

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Berlin is like a theme park.  
You got your Nazi Land —  
with its huge war monuments,  
stone eagles staring you down,  
and gold bricks in the ground  
telling you how many Jewish folks  
from your building died in the war.  
You have your Commie World,  
all gray and rectangle blocks  
of boring buildings,  
old Karl Marx statues,  
and leftover parts of the Berlin Wall  
standing next to a Starbucks.

Then you got Futurama,  
 where you can ride around on those weird  
 Segway people movers,  
 zipping past gleaming towers  
 and lit-up pyramids  
 (like Las Vegas but more classy),  
 all built in the empty space  
 where the Wall came down.

It's all interesting, I guess.  
 We're only here  
 a year for Daddy's work,  
 so I can put up with anything —  
 even starting high school  
 in a place that never heard of  
 homecoming.  
 What makes it okay is the food.  
 There are these amazing gelato stands  
 (only eighty cents a scoop!),  
 bakeries on every corner with sweets  
 you wouldn't believe,  
 and the currywurst —  
 that's bratwurst with curry ketchup —  
 man, I could eat that *forever*.  
 I'm thinking of opening  
 a chain of my own

when we get back to the States.  
 It's that good.

But there are things that suck, too.  
 German is *hard*,  
 and nobody ever smiles and says,  
*Hey, wassup, girl?*  
 When it's cold,  
*everybody* seems grumpy —  
 I guess complaining about winter  
 must be like a national sport here.  
 And then there're the subways. . . .

Me and my family head down  
 the subway stairs  
 past the stone eagles  
 and homeless musicians,  
 past the currywurst stand  
 where we usually get a snack.  
 No stopping today,  
 it's wall-to-wall  
 people —  
 all Germans —  
 tall and pale,  
 towering over me  
 like Euro-gods with tiny glasses.

“Why can’t we take a taxi?” I ask.  
 “You all gonna pay for it, Reina?” asks Daddy,  
 his southern twang  
 more out of place  
 than we are.  
 We move slowly across the platform,  
 pushing into the overcrowded train car.  
 “Sure, I’ll pay,  
 just as soon as I start my own  
 currywurst stand.”  
 I can still smell it from here.  
 My brother, Oscar, laughs. “Yeah, right.”  
 I stare at his pudgy face,  
 trying not to get squished  
 by the rush-hour stampede.  
 “What’s so funny?” I say.  
 Oscar laughs again.  
 “A black American girl  
 servin’ up German sausage?  
 Sure, that’s not funny  
 at all.”  
 “I’m not *black*,” I say.  
 An old punk rocker,  
 all leather and tattoos,  
 laughs when I say that.  
 I shoot him a look.

My dad is black,  
 in a real southern way.  
 But Mom is a light-skinned Hispanic  
 from Puerto Rico,  
 so I’m as black as Obama, I guess,  
 which is only half.  
 My bro rolls his eyes. “Sorry.  
 I meant ‘*mixed* American.’”  
 His eyes light up —  
 “Or how about ‘*mixed-UP* American?’”  
 Mom makes a face.  
 “That doesn’t even make sense, Papito.”  
 Oscar shrugs, like she ain’t  
 hip enough to get it.

The doors start to close,  
 so I give Oscar one last shove  
 ’cause we still sticking out  
 the train door a bit.  
 We make it in  
 as the doors seal shut,  
 but now he’s squashed up  
 against a pole,  
 looking like he wished  
 he didn’t have a sister.  
 “You should thank me

for saving your butt," I say.  
 "You coulda got cut in two  
 by them doors.  
 I heard it happened once."  
 He's thinking of a comeback.  
 "I pretty sure your *big* butt  
 woulda stopped those doors  
 from closing," he mutters.  
 I laugh in his face. "Dude,  
 so weak. Move on  
 before you embarrass yourself.  
 Oops, sorry, too late."  
 Then we ignore each other,  
 standing like sardines  
 in a tin can with windows.

Mom's feet ache.  
 So do mine.  
 Too much walking here,  
 not like in the States.  
 Guess that's why  
 they ain't all fat here.  
 All they do is walk  
 and take the subway,  
 or the *U-bahn*, as they call it.  
 I wish we had a car,

but Daddy says the subway  
 is a good way to  
 "mingle with the people."  
 That's the only way  
 to get into a strange culture,  
 he says — dive in,  
 headfirst.  
 So we ride them,  
 morning  
 to night.  
 No taxis for this *familia*.

The subway's kinda like  
 watching reality TV —  
 you see all kinds.  
 I've seen the clothes change  
 from season to season since we got here:  
 shorts and porkpie hats and flip-flops  
 in summer  
 become heavy coats and fur caps and boots  
 by winter.  
 There's funny-looking people:  
 hipster artist types trying to act all Euro-cool,  
 workers reading big ol' novels,  
 students bopping to their iPods,  
 tourists looking lost and confused.



But most of all,  
 old people.  
 Lots of 'em.  
 I don't think I ever seen  
 so many old people before.  
 Daddy says they ain't that old —  
 they just look it.  
 Ex-Communists  
 who lost their way of life  
 when the Wall came down.  
 You'd think they'd be happy,  
 but the older ones aren't.  
 They like making your life  
 miserable  
 'cause they can't have it their way  
 anymore.  
 Daddy says, *Just kill 'em*  
*with kindness.*  
 But they never smile  
 or give *us* the time of day.

Daddy looks around for a place  
 to park our butts.  
 The train is jam-packed —  
 no place to go.  
 But he smiles,

winks at me,  
 and nods toward  
 two older women,  
 all uptight with little glasses  
 and what they think passes  
 for style: beige pants, beige jackets,  
 colorful scarves,  
 and poofy colored hair.  
 To me, it seems  
 they all dress the same,  
 like they in the same old people's club  
 or something.  
 There is one empty seat  
 between them.  
 Or at least  
 Daddy thinks there is.  
 It's more like a small gap,  
 but it'll do.  
 "Honey, it's *on*," he says,  
 pointing to their row.  
 "Not funny, Papi," Mom says,  
 frowning.  
 I look at the old ladies,  
 especially the one  
 with a bright-red mop of Lola hair  
 who holds a small dog

as sour as she is.

I laugh. "Good luck with *that*."

Daddy shrugs. "I didn't invent the rules.

I just play the game."

"Some role model," Oscar pipes in,  
taking Mom's side.

"Mama's boy," I say.

"Daddy's *girl*," he says, all cutesy  
'cause he knows I hate that.

Daddy puts his hands  
on our heads.

"Y'all missed

the freedom-bus protests,  
so you have no idea," he says.

Mom clears her throat.

"Papi, you were two years old back then,"  
she says, blowing his cover.

Daddy gives her a look and shrugs.

"Just sayin'. Now, let your man  
go to work."

He adjusts his tie,  
smooths down his goatee,  
and heads toward the two old ladies,  
all smiles and southern charm.  
He tips his invisible hat

and says in his best Alabama-German,  
"How y'all doin', *fraw-lines*?"

then motions to the empty spot.

They grimace,

like they just swallowed  
something bad.

"*Dan-ka*, ma'ams," he says politely,  
not waiting for an answer.

He wiggles between them,  
clears his throat,

and waits

for the next move. . . .

I try to make eye contact  
to see if I can make him  
laugh.

But he doesn't.

He has on

his most saintly face,  
like he just got baptized  
by the pope.

The ladies are  
squirming on either side of him.

Even the dog

is jumpy.

It's like Daddy has a disease

or something.  
 They're looking around,  
 trying not to be too obvious  
 about their discomfort,  
 but he can't help but rub shoulders  
 with them.

My guess is they watch  
 American TV and think  
 if you sit next to a black man,  
 it's only a matter of time  
 before he robs you.  
 Even if he's wearing a suit,  
 he could still be one of those  
 Malcolm X brothers.

*Ach, mein Gott!*

It's like watching popcorn  
 pop —  
 sooner or later  
 they're gonna blow.  
 I look at my watch.  
 Thirty seconds.  
 Mom catches my eye,  
 frowning at our game.  
 I ignore her like I don't know  
 what she's on about.

It used to bother me  
 when we first arrived in Berlin.  
 I mean us getting on the subway.  
 I know these folks  
 can't quite figure us out.  
 Daddy's dark skinned;  
 Mom's light tan.  
 Oscar looks like a white boy.  
 But me, I look like an overcooked  
 mini Jennifer Lopez with nappy hair.  
 Back home, we ain't no big thing.  
 But here, they don't know  
*what* to think.

I think Daddy made up  
 this game,  
 to show us not to sweat it —  
 it's all a big joke.  
 We're doing  
 social experiments is all.  
 "See, America's an immigrant country,"  
 he told us when we first got here.  
 "We're used to rubbing shoulders  
 with all kinds.  
 But here,  
 they *never* had immigrants



until recently.  
 They're just *now* learning. . . ."  
 Not so well,  
 as far as I can see.  
 When the Germans brought the Turks  
 over to do all the manual labor jobs  
 fifty years ago,  
 they probably didn't think  
 Berlin would turn into  
 the third-largest Turkish city  
 in the world!  
 Seems they're sorry  
 they opened *that* door now.

"Hey, pup, what's your name?"  
 Daddy's trying to make nice  
 with the little mutt  
 in the red-haired lady's lap.  
 It growls back.  
 The lady shushes it,  
 but when Daddy tries to pet it,  
 she pulls her dog away  
 and looks up at the announcement board,  
 like her stop is coming.  
 She struggles to get to her feet,

then makes her way  
 to the door,  
 out of Daddy's sight.  
 But I keep my eyes on her.  
 When she thinks  
 he can't see her anymore,  
 she spots an empty seat  
 and slides in next to a nice-looking  
 German couple.

Daddy spreads out a little more,  
 his elbow almost touching  
 the other lady.  
 He makes eye contact  
 with me.  
 I stick my tongue out,  
 thinking just one  
 don't count.  
 If you can't clear out seats  
 for all of us, then —

Suddenly, the other lady  
 takes out her cell phone  
 and acts like it just rang.  
 Pretends



she can't hear  
 and has to get up  
 to walk to another part  
 of the train for better reception.  
 But I happen to know  
 the phones don't work  
 down here.  
 Least mine don't.  
 Still, she gets points  
 for her acting.

Daddy smiles  
 and waves us quickly over.  
 Mom disapproves  
 but is too tired to argue.  
 He stands as we squeeze in,  
 grateful to be sitting  
 after all that walking.  
 "Under a minute —  
 that's pretty good," he says, leaning over,  
 waiting for my concession speech.  
 It ain't coming.  
 "That last one  
 should become an actor —  
 she got mad skills," I say instead.

Me and him crack up,  
 even as a couple across from us  
 listens in.  
 I know they know what we're saying,  
 but I'm just gonna pretend  
 they don't.  
 "People here  
 sure like to move about,  
 don't they? These seats  
 must be bad  
 or something."  
 I fiddle with mine,  
 like it's broken.

Mom frowns again.  
 "I wish you two wouldn't do that.  
 If this was Montgomery  
 or Selma in the sixties,  
 it wouldn't be so funny,  
 would it? Back in Puerto Rico —"  
 Daddy cuts her off. "You sitting,  
 aren't you?  
 That's like some southern kung fu move —  
 take all that bad energy  
 and rechannel it to advance

the cause.”

Mom doesn’t buy it.

“I’ll give you kung fu, Papi,” she says,  
holding up her hand  
to his face.

But he just smiles  
that grin of his,  
the one that always  
melts her heart.

She shakes her head and  
finally cracks a smile, too.

Next thing you know,  
he leans down and  
they kissing.

How can they do *that*  
in public?

We sit for the longest time,  
making our way across  
Berlin.

Turks are starting to board,  
and some of the Germans  
get off.

When those two ladies  
bust a move for the door,

I smile and wave,  
even though they ain’t looking  
my way.

“See ya next time!” I call out.  
Mom playfully slaps my hand.  
“Stop it. They can’t help it  
if your Papi is so handsome  
it hurts to sit next to him.”

Dad pats his hair  
and throws us a grin.

Now a couple of Muslim girls  
in head scarves sit next to me.  
I gotta admit,  
it makes me feel weird,  
them having to cover up an’ all.  
Mom notices my face.

“Want to move?” she whispers.  
That’s what she likes to call *irony*.  
I don’t play that game.  
My brother leans over.  
“You might look good  
in one of those scarves, Reina.  
Especially the ones  
that cover your face.”

I take the high road  
and ignore him.  
Mom's impressed.

Another ten minutes pass  
and I look around.  
No Germans left —  
mostly Turks,  
Chinese,  
Vietnamese,  
Africans,  
and us.  
They all smiling,  
looking around like *this*  
is how  
it should be.  
Talking and laughing,  
dancing to a Greek guy  
playing his crazy violin for money.  
They all just biding their time,  
waiting for the Europeans  
to accept them for who they are.  
But things are changing,  
a little too fast for some  
and way too slow for others.  
But someday,

they'll see:  
sometimes  
you just gotta squeeze your way in,  
rub some shoulders,  
and hope  
they'll rub back.  
For that,  
I'd be willing to stand.

Just not next to my brother.