

## Berlin, Spring 1925: A Walk Through the City

You step from the tram onto the Kurfürstendamm and the afternoon catches you at once, broad and unhurried, the light coming in clear and golden from the west, the kind of light that makes even soot-streaked stone look momentarily beautiful. The plane trees lining the boulevard are in new leaf, the first pale candles of blossom beginning to open, that particular fresh green which will deepen through the coming weeks but which now, in these first days of May, seems almost luminous against the grey bulk of the city. You stand a moment and breathe it in. Coal smoke, always the permanent bass note of Berlin. But over it today something cleaner: blossom from a florist's display, the faint green smell of the trees themselves, and below everything the particular damp warmth of stone that has been cold all winter and is only now beginning to yield.

The Kudamm carries itself with a kind of polished ease you will not find on the older boulevards further east. The stone here is newer, the lines straighter, the shopfronts wider and more deliberate in their ambition. A motorcar glides past, long and dark, with a chauffeur whose cap brim is level as a spirit measure. Behind it a tram swings around the curve, its bell bright and imperative, the overhead line giving off a brief blue spark where the collector loses contact. The smell of warm metal and ozone cuts through the blossom for a second, then is gone on the breeze.

The shop windows are theatres this afternoon. Mannequins in drop-waist spring frocks pose behind glass with the serene indifference of royalty, their pearls catching the light and throwing it back. A young woman, in a pale cloche hat and calves that flash below the knee of her skirt, moves past you at a brisk, self-possessed pace, a slim book tucked under her arm, her eyes forward, her stride carrying the particular confidence of someone who has decided the pavement belongs to her as much as to anyone. A few steps behind her, a veteran moves more slowly, one sleeve folded and pinned neatly at the shoulder, his cane finding the pavement with a careful precision that speaks of long practice. He does not beg. He watches the street with the expression of a man keeping his own accounts.

You head east. The Kudamm's polished confidence begins almost at once to thin. The air thickens: coal smoke from basement boilers, frying fat from a snack stand where sausages sweat in a pan, damp wool from a coat left too long on a hook in a room with poor ventilation. A boy darts between pedestrians with a stack of newspapers under his arm, his voice launching headlines like stones. You catch only the cadence, urgent and practised, before the tram bell swallows it.

Before Nollendorfplatz, the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church rises ahead and the afternoon light does something almost theatrical with it, falling on the neo-Romanesque tower at an angle that deepens the shadows in each arch, that makes the soot-darkened stone look older and more solemn than even the architects intended. The church braces itself against the sky as if it knows what is happening at its feet.

On the corner of Tauentzienstrasse you see them. Two women working the pavement, an older one and a younger, standing close enough together that no explanation is needed for their relationship, or for their presence. They are dressed alike, same hair,

same manner, the same slight angle of the head when a man's pace slows. They will claim to be mother and daughter, and who knows, perhaps it's true. They are known in this neighbourhood simply as the T-girls, for the street, and they and others like them have been here long enough that the local shopkeepers look past them with the indifference of custom. A man in a grey coat slows and stops and there is a brief exchange of words, quiet, businesslike, and then he follows the younger woman down a side alley without hurrying, without looking back, with the compressed purposefulness of a man attending to a piece of necessary business.

Beyond the corner and the disapproving church lies the Romanisches Café. You notice it first by the windows, those tall glowing panes filmed with tobacco haze, amber-lit against the afternoon brightness outside. You stop on the pavement and look in at the door. The tables are pushed close together, marble tops crowded with coffee cups, beer glasses, newspapers jabbed with impatient fingers, notebooks fallen open, ashtrays that have not been emptied. A waiter threads between the chairs with the stoic resignation of a man who knows the literati rarely tip generously. In the front room the coats are hung properly, the hats placed with a degree of care. But further in, where the bodies shift and reassemble, the artists' corner churns at its own furious temperature: a man with round wire spectacles leans forward, arguing in a voice kept deliberately low, every syllable precise; a woman with sharp eyes and dark lipstick laughs without her eyes joining in; someone scratches furiously in a notebook, stops, relights a cigarette from the stub of the last, scratches again.

You hear names used like currency. You hear the word *Politician* delivered with contempt. You hear four lines of something that might be a poem, launched too loudly into a gap in the noise, met with silence, then with a murmured response you cannot make out. No one glances in your direction; no one asks who you are. Outside, students hover at the edge of the pavement, watching the lit windows with hunger. A thin young man stands alone and rehearses a sentence under his breath before attempting to enter.

Berlin is being written in there, line by line, argument by argument, while trams clang past and the afternoon slides toward evening.

You move on, through Nollendorfplatz where the square presents a different cultural aspect from the Romanisches Café's tense intellectualism. Here the business of pleasure is more open. The Metropoltheater anchors the north end of the square with its ornate facade, its billing boards advertising a revue that promises considerably more than most revues are able to deliver, as they all must promise, since Berlin has become demanding in this particular respect. Around the square and along the side streets the signs multiply: club names painted above basement stairs, arrows pointing down to bars that do not begin their real business until the small hours. The neighbourhood around Motzstrasse, a few minutes' walk to the south, has become something of an institution for those who know what to look for: clubs where women dance together without apology, and transvestite shows which are currently considered fashionable places to spend an evening, the audience as much of an attraction as the performers. In the afternoon, it is all relatively decorous: a pair of young men walk close together along the pavement without attracting more than the most routine attention. A woman in a man's suit emerges from a basement staircase and lights a

cigarette with the assurance of someone who has long since decided that other people's opinions are not her concern. As with most of Berlin's arrangements, the city extends its tolerance with the pragmatic ease of somewhere that has rather too many problems to spend much energy on disapproval.

The city changes texture as you leave Nollendorfplatz behind and turn toward the Tiergarten's edge, following the broad streets that lead down toward Potsdamer Strasse. The buildings here are solid, respectable, their facades neither grand nor shabby, the street life a little quieter, clerks rather than artists, steady shoes rather than interesting ones. The air carries something new: from a side street, the warm yeasty breath of a bakery, dark bread, poppy seeds, something sweet underneath that you cannot quite place.

Then, before you are quite ready for it, Anhalter Bahnhof announces itself.

The facade rises from the surrounding streets with the composed authority of a building that knows it commands one of the great arteries of the continent. The sandstone is the colour of old bone in this light, the afternoon sun catching the pediment with its carved figures and the broad arch of the entrance bay. Above the central portal the statuary observes the street below with that particular expression of civic confidence that German public architecture of the Wilhelmine era perfected: noble, unsentimental, not quite human. You stand before it and feel the scale of it properly. Trains are moving somewhere inside, invisible but audible, a low reverberant thunder that travels through the stone and up through the soles of your shoes. A couple emerge from the entrance with a single large case between them, the man in a dark travel coat, the woman holding her hat against the sudden press of a warm southerly gust. Behind them come businessmen, a family with three children pulling in three directions, a porter bent nearly double under a mountain of luggage. The pigeons work the pavement with professional indifference.

You are close enough now to smell it: the characteristic smell of a great railway terminus, coal smoke and steam and something mineral, the particular ozone of iron under heat, cut with the brief sweetness of a flower seller's bucket near the entrance. It is a smell that belongs entirely to this decade, to this city, to this particular piece of the century.

From Anhalter Bahnhof you head north along Königgrätzer Strasse, toward Potsdamer Platz, and as you approach Potsdamer Bahnhof the second great terminus presents itself with a quieter but no less substantial confidence. Where the Anhalter announces itself theatrically, the Potsdamer Bahnhof is more restrained, more northern in its bearing. The facade is red brick, articulated by pilasters and round-arched windows in a rhythm that gives it something of the look of a Renaissance palazzo translated into Prussian practicality. The afternoon catches the brick warmly, that particular warm red you see all over Berlin's civic architecture, a colour that somehow manages to look both institutional and inhabited at once. Cabs are ranked along the street outside, drivers leaning on doors, smoking, talking, one reading a newspaper folded to the racing page. A porter wheels a trolley loaded with trunks. Someone whistles, two notes, to catch another's attention, and does not receive an answer.

Potsdamer Platz is a mechanism. You feel it as you enter the square, the way the whole space seems to function rather than simply exist, as if its purpose is not to be a place but to process movement. Trams swing through in long, confident arcs, their overhead lines weaving a web of wire against the spring sky. Cars nose forward, stop, creep forward again. Bicycles find gaps that seem designed for something smaller. In the centre of it all, the new traffic control tower stands on its island with the self-satisfaction of a new idea very pleased with itself, the policeman at its top directing the flow with signals that the city is still learning to obey.

The smell here is hard and composite: petrol, hot metal, the faint sourness of many bodies in a confined space, and underneath it all the persistent ghost of horse, because Berlin is still both cities, the old one and the new one, sharing the same air without quite reconciling.

And there, on the southeastern edge of the square, Haus Potsdam.

The building is long, six storeys of stone-faced steel frame running nearly a hundred metres along its frontage, and at the northern end, where it presents its face to Königgrätzer Strasse, a great drum-shaped structure rises, its copper-clad dome climbing thirty-five metres above the pavement with the blunt confidence of a structure that was built to be noticed and intends to remain so. The dome sits above the drum like a helmet, its copper green against the spring sky, the whole form somewhere between a railway terminus and a concert hall, grand without being quite graceful, emphatic rather than refined. The same architect gave Berlin the Anhalter Bahnhof and the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, and you can see the hand in it: a taste for the monumental, for scale over delicacy, for buildings that fill their corners of the city with mass and assurance. In a few years, people say, the building is to be transformed entirely, the Kempinski family apparently planning something extraordinary inside. For now, it is what it is: Haus Potsdam, containing the Café Vaterland, the former Café Piccadilly renamed with patriotic urgency at the outbreak of war and still answering to the new name a decade later. People move in and out of the entrance with the ease of regulars, the smell of coffee and cigarette smoke drifting out whenever the door swings wide, beneath it the faint strain of a band working its way through a waltz that the afternoon has already heard several times.

You push north up Wilhelmstrasse and the city's face changes without warning, the way a man's face changes when he puts on his professional coat. Here the buildings stand with a different kind of authority: broad-fronted, ministerial, heavy with stone that seems to say not merely 'I am important' but 'I will remain so regardless of your opinion on the matter'. The Reich Chancellery, the Foreign Office, the various ministries behind their high windows, their discreet guards positioned where you might not notice them until you did. The motorcars parked along the street are cleaner than those elsewhere, their drivers more precise in their movements. Men in dark coats walk with purpose, folders tucked under their arms, conversations brief and private.

Even the sound is different on Wilhelmstrasse. The tram bell becomes a distant thing. Footsteps are more audible: the crisp, regular percussion of leather soles on clean stone. A voice drops when a uniform passes. Through an open window on the first floor you hear the brief, decisive sound of a telephone being set down, and then silence.

But even here, in the shadow of ministries, the city asserts its other nature. In the doorways of certain establishments whose signage is deliberately vague, young women and young men stand with the studied casualness of people doing the opposite of what they appear to be doing. A girl in a red dress leans against a door frame and studies the middle distance with an expression of magnificent boredom, one shoulder angled just so. A young man further along, his collar turned up despite the mild afternoon, makes brief eye contact with a passer-by and holds it a half-second longer than strangers ordinarily do. Their business and the ministry's business coexist without acknowledgement on either side, which is, in its own way, a very Berlin arrangement.

Unter den Linden opens out ahead of you and the city breathes differently, more theatrically, as befits an avenue that was designed to make an impression and has spent two centuries practising. The linden trees run in double rows on either side of the central promenade, and this afternoon, in early May, they are at their best: the new leaves translucent in the slanted light, the air beneath the canopy filtered and green and faintly sweet with the first of the blossom just beginning. You turn east, away from the Brandenburg Gate, and walk in a kind of dappled, moving light that makes the whole boulevard feel like a stage. The stone along here is imposing: banks, embassies, hotels, institutions, their facades carrying ornament with the ease of men who have always worn decorations.

The Hotel Bristol presents itself on the right with the considered magnificence of an establishment that has been receiving significant people for long enough to find their significance unremarkable. The facade is all restrained splendour: dressed stone, tall windows, the canopy over the entrance a lacquered dark green against the pale stone above. A doorman stands before it with the posture and expression of a minor deity assigned to this particular temple. A motorcar draws up and he moves forward with a practised inevitability; the door is opened, a woman in a pale spring coat descends with a small, exquisitely brushed dog under her arm, the doorman's expression does not waver. From somewhere inside, faint and precise, a piano plays something French and unhurried. The sound drifts out through the revolving door with the warm air of the lobby, carrying with it a brief suggestion of coffee, fresh linen, and money that does not need to advertise itself.

Further east, the Staatsoper rises behind its classical colonnade with the assurance of an institution that survived the war by pretending it had nothing to do with any of it. The portico is Schinkel's: clean, severe, six great Ionic columns supporting a pediment that the afternoon sun strikes nearly head-on, throwing the relief into sharp relief. The building is between performances at this hour, quiet, its doors closed, and there is something about that closed grandeur that is almost more eloquent than the building in use. A woman stands on the steps with a score tucked under her arm, studying a notice posted by the door, her finger tracing something on the paper. Two men in coats argue cheerfully nearby, their voices carrying the exaggerated disagreement of people who are not really at odds. A pigeon lands on the cornice above and regards the square below with the philosophical indifference of something that has been here longer than the republic.

You move eastward until the Spree comes into view, and the city does something unexpected: it opens. After the dense accumulation of stone and noise and intention, the river appears as a kind of punctuation, a pause, the light falling on the dark water with a winter-into-spring quality, the surface metallic and slow, catching the afternoon in long, broken reflections. You cross the bridge toward Museum Island and stop at the parapet between classical statues to look down. A coal barge moves beneath you, low in the water, laden, its wake barely marking the surface. The bargee stands at the stern with his shoulders hunched, his pipe trailing a thin thread of smoke that unravels almost at once in the river air. He does not look up. The Spree smells cold still, and slightly mineral, with the ghost of something organic carried down from upstream, snow-melt, perhaps, the last of the winter finding its way to the sea.

Museum Island rises before you on the far side of the bridge and asserts itself with a cultural gravity that is only slightly theatrical. Schinkel's Altes Museum presents its face to the Lustgarten with a classical severity that makes the surrounding city feel improvised by comparison. Eighteen great Ionic columns run the full width of the building in a single unbroken colonnade, their fluted shafts rising to a straight entablature above which the roofline is clean and unadorned, as if the architect considered ornament and decided it petty. A broad flight of steps ascends to the colonnade from the square below, and in the afternoon light the whole facade has that quality of composed certainty that Schinkel was incapable of not achieving: proportions that seem inevitable, a building that does not argue its case but simply states it. Behind the columns, in the shadowed depth of the portico, the main entrance waits. You can almost hear it from the street: the imagined hush of marble corridors, the soft scuff of respectful shoes on ancient floors, the particular quality of silence that large institutions manufacture and sell to the public as transcendence.

And then, completing the scene, the Dom.

The Berlin Cathedral stands against the spring sky with an insistence that borders on the aggressive. The great green copper dome commands the view from half the city, and from close to, the scale of the whole building is almost oppressive: the facade bristling with carved detail, the paired towers on either side of the main dome rising in tiers of pilasters and arched windows, every surface doing work. In this light, late afternoon, the stone and copper and gilt details catch and hold the warmth in a way that softens the building's overbearing quality, makes it momentarily magnificent rather than merely massive. A group of tourists consults a guidebook on the steps, the guide gesturing upward with the proprietary enthusiasm of a man showing off someone else's house. From inside, very faintly, an organ is being played, a single line of something, exploratory, the organist trying a phrase and stopping, trying it again, as if composing in the moment.

Before the Dom and the Altes Museum, stands the Lustgarten: a public space that has been park and parade ground by turns, and which this afternoon is simply what it appears to be, a place where people are sitting in the spring sunshine because the spring sunshine is there to be sat in. Office workers finished early for the day, their faces turned up to the light with the slightly desperate gratitude of northerners who know how brief such afternoons can be. A child throws bread at pigeons with more enthusiasm than accuracy. Two elderly men play chess on a portable board, their

coats folded carefully on the bench beside them, their dispute over a move conducted with the elaborate courtesy of men who have been arguing for forty years and developed a protocol. A pair of students from the university sit close together on the grass, fingers entwined, a book open between them forgotten.

The Lustgarten smells of new grass and fresh earth and, from a vendor working the path at the garden's edge, of warm, sugared doughnuts.

Turning right away from the museums and the park, you skirt the western façade of the Berliner Schloss and encounter what the old empire left standing before it.

The Kaiser Wilhelm National Monument occupies the open ground between the water and the palace, where the Schlossfreiheit meets the canal, and it announces itself with a scale that demands you stop and acknowledge it. At its centre, nine metres above the polished red granite base, Wilhelm I sits his horse in bronze, the equestrian figure large enough to be seen from three streets away, the emperor's gaze directed at the Eosander portal of the palace behind you as if reviewing a parade that ended thirty years ago and has not been formally dismissed. Around the base, four Goddesses of Victory hover on their bronze spheres at the corners of the pedestal. On the steps below, the stone figures of War and Peace recline with the composure of allegories that no longer expect to be taken literally. The whole ensemble is enclosed on three sides by a sandstone colonnade of paired Ionic columns, the corner pavilions solid and massive, and the entire complex carries with it a certain internal contradiction: it was built to celebrate power and has ended up suggesting its absence. The Weimar Republic has left it untouched, which may be its own kind of statement. Berliners pass it daily without looking up, as they pass most things that have been there long enough to become invisible. But the pigeons have not failed to notice it, and the bronze emperor bears the evidence of their indifference with a dignity that is, under the circumstances, impressive.

Overlooking the monument, the Berliner Schloss confronts you with its sheer mass, ornate and immense, the carved scrollwork and statuary and heavily dressed windows constituting a language of power written in stone. The monarchy it celebrated has been gone since 1918, but the building has not received the message or has decided to ignore it. It stands as it has stood, speaking the old dialect fluently and loudly, its facades still asserting a significance the republic has not quite managed to translate into anything else.

Around it the street life carries on without reference to the palace's pretensions. Two men in work clothes shelter a match against the wind at a corner. A woman with a basket steps around a puddle left by a morning shower with the practised economy of motion of someone who knows which parts of the pavement are honest and which are traps. You hear the hollow clop of hooves, then the squeal of a tram rounding a curve, then the particular metallic hiss of a bus's brakes applied a little too firmly.

You push east onto Königstrasse and the city becomes busier and more municipal. The architecture here is the practical kind, older buildings shouldering newer ones without ceremony, facades patched and reworked, signs bolted on and replaced until the surfaces carry their commercial history in layers like geological strata. Shopfronts

crowd the pavement. From a bakery the warm breath of dark bread and caraway. From a side passage, the sharp, immediate smell of pickled cabbage, someone in a kitchen above having opened a window to let the steam out. Posters cover every available vertical surface: theatre bills for productions at the Deutsches Theater and the Volksbühne, film advertisements, political notices with their edges already curling where the rain has got under them, their surfaces thickened by successive layers of paste until they have acquired the density of old bark.

The Rote Rathaus comes into view with its characteristic red brick, dark and dignified, the tower rising with a finger-pointing certainty from the surrounding rooflines. In the damp of the afternoon the brickwork has deepened in colour, almost like a bruise, the mortar between courses dark with absorbed moisture. A few men cluster near the entrance, smoking, talking in the abbreviated manner of men conducting public business: short bursts of speech, pauses, nods. Someone descends the steps with papers tucked to their chest and their coat blowing open, already composing their next thought before they have cleared the last step.

Passing the shopfronts of Fr. Pfingst & Co and Wertheim, Alexanderplatz announces itself before you arrive. You hear it first, then feel it: the density increasing, the noise building, trams multiplying, voices sharpening, the whole city seeming to funnel toward this square as if pulled by some municipal gravity. Then you are past Aschingers and in it, and it receives you without ceremony, because Alexanderplatz has no interest in ceremony.

It is not pretty. It is, instead, comprehensively alive.

Trams cross in every direction like the shuttles of a great loom. Conductors lean from platforms and shout. A blue uniformed policeman stands at the track edge wearing the expression of a man who reached the end of his patience before his shift started and is managing without it. People surge and slow and surge again: clerks with ink on their fingers, women with parcels, men with toolboxes, a priest moving at his own considered pace through the general hurry as if insulated by vocation. You are jostled, an elbow, a shoulder, no apology offered and none expected, just the physics of too many bodies in a finite space. On the north side of the square, Hermann Tietz looms, its great display windows rippling with the reflected movement of the crowd outside, the glass making the people into something fluid and continuous, a city perceiving itself. The smell out here is soot and petrol and the fat-and-pepper smell of sausages from a vendor whose cart sits in a position of such commercial confidence that you suspect he has been there since the square existed. A woman selling flowers works the crowd near Berolina, her blooms improbably bright against the general grey of the street, small acts of colour among the practical business of the afternoon. Berolina herself stands above the traffic and the noise on her plinth, the city's personification, her expression steady and unrevealing, accustomed to the sight of Berlin being itself.

And then there is the other red building.

The Polizeipräsidium stands on Alexanderstrasse with a mass and a deliberateness that make the Rote Rathaus look modest by comparison. This is the Rote Burg, the Red Castle, and the nickname is fully earned: the facade is red brick from its

foundations to its roofline, uncompromising in its colour, the kind of red that deepens in damp air and darkens at dusk until the whole building seems to absorb the surrounding light and give nothing back. It occupies more ground than a small village. Its courts and wings and annexes extend back from the street in a complex that speaks not of a single decision but of an institution that has been adding to itself for decades, accumulating space the way a bureaucracy accumulates power: steadily, without drama, and apparently without limit. It is the third largest structure in Berlin, after the Schloss and the Reichstag, and from certain angles it feels larger than either, because it lacks their ambitions toward beauty and so seems more purely about scale and intimidation.

The windows look inward rather than outward. That is how it feels, at least. The glass does not catch the afternoon light the way the shop windows on Königstrasse do; it absorbs it, flattens it, turns it into something neutral and institutional. Guards are visible at the entrance on Alexanderstrasse, not theatrical guards, not ceremonial, but the working kind, whose attention is specific and unhurried. You notice that some people on the pavement angle slightly away from the building without seeming to intend to, as if their bodies are following a calculation that their minds have already made and set aside.

You head east and the commercial surface of the city peels back.

The streets narrow and the horses return. Not metaphorically: actual horses, more of them than you have seen since the Kudamm, their hooves loud on the cobbles, their breath warm in the afternoon air, the smell of dung collecting in the gutters where the drainage is poor. The carts they pull are heavy-laden, the drivers bundled against a chill the spring has not entirely removed. A motorcar is a rarity here. The road is cobbled and uneven and the carts have learned its logic. Berlin is still this city too, underneath the trams and the motorcars and the traffic control tower at Potsdamer Platz, this older, slower city of horses and cobblestones and gaslit streets that have not been cleaned this morning and will not be cleaned this evening.

You enter the Scheunenviertel and the air changes at once, and not pleasantly. The smell of cooking is here, yes, onions and cabbage and potatoes, but underneath it something older and harder to name: damp stone that has never quite dried, drains that serve too many people for their design, the particular compound sourness of a street that is overcrowded and that the rain, when it comes, washes inadequately. You pass a doorway where the smell of urine is sharp and specific and recent. Further along, a courtyard entrance exhales a breath of layered damp that has the quality of something that has been accumulating for years. You breathe through your mouth for a moment and then stop pretending it helps.

The courtyards open off narrow passages and when a door swings wide you glimpse staircases worn smooth through many winters, laundry lines strung above cobblestones, a child's boot on a step, a bucket left where it was set down and not retrieved. The children who appear at a passage entrance are thin, visibly thin, with the particular thinness that comes not from recent shortage but from a lifetime of it. They assess you in a second with scavengers' eyes and are gone.

The faces here carry travel in them. Men with beards, women with scarves tied tight against the spring chill that still comes off the stones in the shade, eyes that scan the street with a practical economy of motion, reading it the way you read a text you have consulted many times and know to be unreliable. A man in a doorway calls to someone across the street, his voice carrying the cadence of somewhere far away and entirely other. A small group conducts a negotiation near a market stall in at least three languages, none of them German, hands rising and falling in a choreography of offer and counter-offer, patient and precise.

Other sounds here are different too. Less tram bell, more shouting. The slap of a broom on stone. The clink of glass. Somewhere above you, at a window you cannot identify, a gramophone plays something thin and tinny, a jazz tune from a city that is not this city, carried across the ocean and now infecting every corner.

You pass a pawnshop window full of objects that tell stories by their presence: a pocket watch, spectacles, a pair of wedding rings on a card, the cased violin whose owner you find yourself imagining, a pair of military field binoculars still in their leather housing. The glass is slightly fogged on the inside. A man stands at the window too long, his hands in his coat pockets, his shoulders drawn in against a cold that is mostly not the weather.

And still Berlin is Berlin. A woman laughs as she argues over a price and the argument ends in the laugh's favour. A boy runs to catch a rolling onion before it reaches the gutter. A dog investigates a pile of refuse, sneezes with great conviction, and trots away offended. A cartwheel finds a rut and the driver swears without heat, the way you say something you have said so many times it has ceased to carry any real weight.

As you walk deeper into the Scheunenviertel, the avenues you came from feel like a different city: the stone authority of Wilhelmstrasse, the performative culture of Museum Island, the imperial persistence of the Schloss, the organised chaos of Alexanderplatz. And now this, streets that do not perform for visitors, that have no interest in whether you find them picturesque, that smell of work and cooking and damp brick, where the past is not displayed but used, daily, without consideration.

The afternoon light is failing now. Shop lamps come on in ones and twos, yellow and soft, warming the faces of the people passing under them. The sky above the rooflines retains its spring pallor, pale blue fading to something silvery in the east. From a window somewhere behind you, a gramophone plays a different tune now, louder, a trumpet that does not care what hour it is.

You keep walking. Berlin does not allow you to stop for long. Not if you are the kind of person who notices things. Not if you understand that every doorway, every lit window, every face turning briefly into the light and then away again, is the beginning of a story. The city offers itself in fragments, and the fragments, taken together, refuse to resolve into anything as simple as a picture.

This is its seduction. Not beauty, though beauty is present, but density: the sense that a greater story is always already underway, that you have arrived in the middle of it, that something significant is happening in every direction at once, and that if you

simply keep moving, keep looking, keep listening to the voices and the trams and the music arriving from no fixed point, you might eventually understand what it is.

You probably never will. But the attempt is worth the walk.