



EXCERPT

Hausfrau Honeymoon

Love, Laundry, and Other Misadventures in Germany

By Beth M. Howard

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote *Hausfrau Honeymoon* twelve years ago. Publishers told me then, "If it were about France or Italy, we would buy it. But Germany isn't romantic enough."

"I know!" I replied. "That is *exactly* the point of my story!" The title might as well be *Why Couldn't I Have Fallen in Love with a Frenchman or an Italian?*"

Germany may not be "romantic enough," but this book is full of romance. You will learn a lot about the country, both the good and the frustrating parts. And though it may not make you want to *move* to Germany, hopefully the story will make you want to at least visit. It really is a magical place, complete with enchanted forests and castles. And, remember, France and Italy are close by!

I recognize that *Hausfrau Honeymoon* may offend some. (And not just the people in it, even though I have changed their names.) It isn't exactly a love letter to Germany and likely won't be well received by Germans at all. They might not even let me back into their country! But it's my story, my own personal and unique experience, my own perspective, and in spite of the risks, I couldn't shake the desire to share it.

Lastly, if the ultimate outcome of my marriage to Marcus is already known to readers, I hope the story will still resonate because, location and language barrier aside, it is ultimately a love story about two people and their dogged determination to merge their disparate lives. Love may not conquer all, but there is nobility in the effort. I'd like to think that is worth something—at least the \$14.99 cover price. (If you don't know the ultimate outcome, read my memoir *Making Piece*. And have your Kleenex ready.)

Thank you for reading and for believing in a happy ending—even when it's not a perfect one.

“There is always some madness in love. But there is also always some reason in madness.”

—*Friedrich Nietzsche*

“If the Romans had been obliged to learn Latin, they would never have found time to conquer the world.”

—*Heinrich Heine*

Chapter 1—You Can't Help Who You Fall in Love With

As the plane descends, clusters of red-tiled rooftops emerge through the summer haze. Lush vegetable fields, mingling with the brick-and-stucco houses, create a Christmas card patchwork of red and green. Beyond the fields are forested hills, too low to be called mountains but high enough to want to drive up, not walk. The hills brim with more red-roofed houses, church steeples, and meadows like an illustrated page out of *Hansel and Gretel*. With every lost foot of elevation, the landing strip comes more clearly into focus, along with the flurry of activity on the ground. Cars zip along next to the 767 on roads paralleling the runway, service vehicles with blue emergency lights on top and words like *Polizei* and *Unfalldienst* in blazing letters on their sides.

I've spent the entire flight imagining this new chapter of my life and how it will go. While I've lived and traveled all over the world, I have never moved anywhere for a man. Passion, however, is a powerful motivator and love can make you do things you said you'd never do. But will love be enough to make this work? I give my seatbelt an extra tug, as if it will secure me for what's to come.

The landing gear is set, the flight crew is seated, and, at last, fourteen hours after setting off from Los Angeles—ready or not—I have arrived.

Released from immigration, I claim my bulging blue duffel bags and wheel my cart past *der Zollbeamte* who gives me a nod that I'm free to enter my new country without paying customs on my freight of worldly possessions.

Heart racing, eyes wide, expectations as high as the television signal towers on the city's skyline, I scan the arrival area's waiting crowd: a military mother cradling a fidgety baby, several limo drivers holding up signs, a burly blond man holding a bouquet of pink roses.

He's not here.

Out on the curb, I search the line of double-parked cars for his 1988 white Volkswagen Golf. For the next thirty minutes, the steady stream of traffic includes many Golfs—though none of them his—dozens of tan Mercedes-Benz taxis covered in advertisements, and several smaller makes of Volkswagens not sold in the States. Surprisingly, I see no Beetles, but maybe it's just as well.

I sold my own Beetle just days before. It was my first new car, a silver one with leather seats, that I could finally afford after a dot com job rescued me from a lifetime of credit card debt; I'd driven it straight off the showroom floor.

"But you're moving to Europe. You are making room for the new," my sister told me as I watched my beloved Bug pull away with its new owner. "You're living your dream to get married and live overseas. You're going to have new adventures."

My co-worker Wendy had stated it more firmly: "You have to go for the whole thing. If you keep your car it's like keeping one foot out the door. Besides, you'll be in Germany. You can get a Mercedes."

A touch on my elbow causes me to spin around, coming face to face with the purpose of my journey: Marcus. His striking features—thick, brown hair, green eyes shaped like oversized almonds, full lips, a complexion hinting at a trace of Spanish blood, and a soccer build that fills out his hand-tailored wool suit—conspire to dissolve my

apprehension. His hand on the back of my head pulls my mouth to his long enough for me to fall under his spell.

“My meeting went late,” he says as casually as if we were meeting for coffee.

“That’s okay,” I lie. “I wasn’t waiting long.”

We reach the car—in immaculate condition for its age—and I grab one of my bags, preparing to heave it into the hatchback.

“No, let me do it,” he says, prying my hands off of the nylon straps. While he’s forcing my first bag to fit, thus too distracted to protest, I pull the second beastly duffel off the cart.

At the parking lot’s exit, huge yellow signs point in three directions—to Munich, Karlsruhe, and Stuttgart. Marcus steers the car toward Stuttgart.

The first time I heard of this city I was sixteen and living in Davenport, Iowa. My dad was driving me to school in the physical manifestation of his mid-life crisis—a cherry red Porsche 911. It was a week after my parents were summoned to the principal’s office to resolve my “increasingly disruptive behavior” so that I might complete my Catholic education. The three-mile drive began with, “I don’t think hanging around with that Troy Martin is good for you,” referring to my bike-racer boyfriend.

I looked down at my wrinkled plaid uniform and ran my fingers over the “It’s Better in the Bahamas” patch—sewn over the hole I burned from holding the iron down too long against the polyester. “How does Kathy Stemlar get *her* pleats so perfect?” I wondered as my dad continued.

“You’re a smart girl and you like to travel; you could be a dental hygienist or an executive assistant.”

I raised my eyebrows, but didn’t utter what I was thinking: “Why not a dentist or CEO, Dad?”

Averting my attention to the dashboard, I fixated on a tiny metal plaque attached to the glove box. Closer examination revealed it was a coat of arms dominated by a rearing black stallion and the car’s brand name painted in block letters above. I squinted to read the smaller letters above the horse’s head, the name of the town where the car was made.

“If you marry some poor farm boy, Boo, you’re gonna have your ass in a sling,” he went on.

Stuttgart. The birthplace of the automobile. The industrial manufacturing center of Germany. The capital of the country’s most conservative state, Baden-Württemberg. The bombing target of allied forces during World War II. My new home.

“I always forget how beautiful it is here,” I say, opening the sliding glass door and stepping out onto the balcony. Marcus, who has already removed his tie and opened a bottle of pilsner, moves in behind me, wrapping me in his arms.

His one-bedroom bachelor pad sits on top of a vineyard; green, leafy vines cling to the sides of a steep valley whose bottom is a slow-moving, murky river called the

Neckar. The river divides our village of Bad Cannstatt from Stuttgart's city center. On its near shore, the smokestack of the regional power plant puffs steam into the sky. On the far shore, high-rise offices and apartment blocks, along with a few historical remnants of churches and castles, cram together in a disorganized sprawl.

"I can't see your office," I say to Marcus, searching the cityscape for the giant revolving illuminated logo of his employer. "There's the factory, but I don't see your star."

"You can only see it in the winter from here." He guzzles half his beer and after a few more minutes of silent gazing—mutual wonder of what promise lies ahead out there—he says, "Oh! I have a present for you." He rushes inside and returns with an envelope. I pull out a certificate that reads *Deutsch für Anfänger, 1.Juli bis 1.August*. "It's an intensive German class, to help you get settled. Welcome to Germany. Or, I should say, *Willkommen in Deutschland*."

"Thank you!" I say. "I was hoping to find a beginner's class exactly like this." I look at the card closer. "Wait, does that say it starts July 1st?" He nods. "That's next week. Well, I might as well dive right in."

A breeze from France rustles the leaves of the chestnut tree in front of the building. We kiss as the church bells clang eight times to mark the hour, then he whispers in my ear the words we've both been anticipating for a month: "Let's go to bed."

We met at Crater Lake National Park eighteen months earlier. I had just finished dinner in the Crater Lake Lodge, an imposing structure of stone and timbers built on the rim of the hollowed out volcano. I was on a soul-searching road trip from Los Angeles after September 11, accompanied by my shaggy, twenty-pound dog Gidget, my road bike, my tent, and my down comforter. My destination: Bend, Oregon. Sixty miles south of Bend is a fork in the road. One direction leads, of course, to Bend; the other—though I didn't know it at the time—to my destiny. I saw a signpost for the national park ten miles before the turn off and spent the next 9.99 miles deliberating whether or not to stop. When the fork appeared it was as if some spiritual force grabbed my steering wheel and spun me into the park.

I pulled into the first parking lot marked "Scenic Overlook" and there it was—a vision of pristine blue water nestled in an amphitheater of snow-capped mountains. All was silent except for the soft whoosh of the pine-scented breeze and my own voice that whispered, "Thank you, God, for preserving this peaceful place."

When I returned to my car, an SUV whipped into the parking lot, screeched to a halt, and a woman jumped out screaming, "Beth! Beth!"

I recoiled into defense mode as if she were a charging bear. No one knew I was here. I didn't even know I was coming here until five minutes earlier. After a moment of utter confusion, I realized it was my friend Kim from L.A.

"What are you doing here?" I panted, still recovering from the shock.

"I'm here to see my client in Sun River. We're sneaking in a side trip so Laz and Gabe can see the lake," she explained, pointing to her husband and one-year-old son in the car. "We're going to watch the sunset, then have dinner in the Lodge. Come with us. Get in."

After the sun dipped below the jagged ridgeline, leaving a chill in its wake at the 7,100-foot elevation, we drove to the Lodge. We hurried inside to warm up by the fire blazing in lobby's six-foot-tall stone fireplace, where other weekend travelers dressed in plaid flannel and fleece already occupied the oversized, Mission-style leather chairs and sofas. We found empty chairs—outside. A long row of wicker rockers lined the veranda, each supplied with its own wool blanket, and overlooked the lake where the moon was rising over the now-black basin.

"Merlot?" Kim asked when she saw a cocktail waitress in a down jacket taking orders.

"Definitely," I answered, pulling the scratchy blanket tighter around my neck.

As we reminisced about the days we used to work together in Hawaii, I was aware of a dark-haired man hovering near our chairs. He could have been eavesdropping or just searching the inky sky for shooting stars.

By the time we finished our wine, Laz had found us lobby chairs. We ordered french onion soup from the bar menu and talked way past the baby's bedtime. Meanwhile, in some other corner of the lobby lounge, a gay waiter was asking the dark-haired man if he needed a place to stay. "No, just the check, please," he replied, avoiding eye contact, his credit card already in his hand.

"Here, hold Gabe while we go to the restroom," Kim instructed and thrust her bundle of joy into my arms.

For the next five minutes I stood in the middle of the reception area twirling, bouncing, and—unaware anyone was watching—enjoying my motherhood fantasy. In reality, I was a road-weary car camper who at thirty-nine had recently been dumped by her latest boyfriend in a recent string of unsuccessful relationships. My blond hair was in a messy ponytail and I was dressed in an Ecuadorian wool sweater—orange with a giant daisy on the front and back—jeans, and trail running shoes.

"Who's a good baby?" I cooed to Gabe, holding him up to the ceiling as he smiled down at me.

"This is a beautiful place, isn't it?" the dark-haired man ventured, his voice confident with a hint of a British accent mixed with something else, something European.

I turned to look at him. "Yes, it is," I replied. He had a shadow of a goatee and inquisitive green eyes. "Are you staying here?" I asked, shifting Gabe to the other hip.

"No, I tried to get a room but they're sold out." He was wearing a funky combination of a traditional Austrian gray boiled-wool sweater with big silver coin buttons, surfer-style cropped jeans, and brown leather hiking boots that laced on the sides, and he had a book by Thomas Mann tucked under his arm.

"I know. I tried too. It's getting a little cold for camping."

"You're camping? I wish I had my camping gear," he said. "I would love to sleep by the lake."

"I'd love to sleep with *you* by the lake," I wanted to say, but instead I asked, "Where are you from?" to keep the conversation with this sexy stranger going.

"Germany," he replied.

"Where in Germany?"

"I was born in Bremen, but raised in the South."

"Bremen . . . That's where they import coffee for Europe," I remarked.

His eyes widened. “I caahn’t believe you know where that is! I’ve been here for three months and find that most Americans don’t know their geography very well.”

I surprised myself remembering this tiny fact; I hadn’t thought of it since I worked on a Kenya coffee farm fourteen years earlier. “And what brought you here?”

He ran his hand through his hair. “An assignment in Portland with my company,” he answered as Kim appeared.

“We need to get going,” she announced.

“Hi Kim,” I said, quickly passing her the baby. I looked back to my new acquaintance. “This is . . .”

“Marcus,” he said. He extended his hand to Kim, but just smiled when he realized her hands were too full to shake.

“Nice to meet you, Marcus,” Kim said, adding playfully, “I leave her alone for a few minutes and, what do you know, she meets a hunk.”

He turned back to me. “And you are . . .?”

“Beth.”

“By the way, Kim,” he said, “you have a very nice baby.” He looked back at me with a wink.

Laz joined us and we all walked out to the parking lot together. The night had turned colder, our breath visible underneath the dim streetlamps.

“Kim is giving me a ride back to my car,” I told Marcus. “I’m sorry, I have to go.”

With Kim and Laz observing, there was nothing more we could say. I watched him stroll back to his rental car, wondering if there could have been something more between us, if he was “the one” instead of the one who got away.

With a pang of resignation, I opened the car door and Gidget jumped out. Normally not one to stray, she ran straight to Marcus who was already at his car. He bent down to pet her, scratching her behind her gray and white ears, then scooped her up. We walked toward each other, meeting halfway. “Good job, Gidget,” I said to myself, my hopes restored.

“This is Gidget,” I said, holding her up to give him a closer look. Then we just stood there, eyeing each other, immobilized by a pull of energy. Until Laz revved the engine. In my unbarred, soul-searching state, I figured, what the hell, and handed him my card. “If you want to stay in touch, here’s how to find me.”

And that was it. The fifteen minutes and the fork in the road that would change my life.

“If you’re ready, I can drop you off at the tram stop,” Marcus yells from the bathroom where he stands in front of the mirror rubbing wax on his hair to keep it in place.

It’s my second week of German class. My *Passwort Deutsch I* textbook lies open on the dining room table, my photocopied vocabulary of strong verbs next to it. My pencil taps impatiently on the glass tabletop, while my café latte grows cold.

“You might want a ride. It’s already thirty-two degrees outside,” comes his voice from the bathroom again.

I calculate the Celsius to Fahrenheit: eighty-nine degrees. It's 8:15 a.m., the sliding glass door is open its widest and, though there is a light wind, the rising sun—already high over Poland to our east—has begun its blazing assault. The month of my arrival coincides with the worst heat wave in history. Two hundred people have died so far and the number is expected to rise along with the temperatures. I pack up my books into my backpack, slug down the rest of my coffee, and wait by the front door.

"I thought you said you were ready," I say, beginning to pace.

Once in the car we roll down our windows immediately; he starts the engine. My watch reads 8:35, the exact time at which the scheduled tram pulls away from my stop, pushing my new ETA at the *Volkshochschule* past the class starting time of nine o'clock.

"Shit!" he says, turning off the ignition. "I forgot my I.D. I'll be right back."

The *Volkshochschule*—or People's College—is a government-funded school for adult continuing education. Summer classes listed in its phone-book-thick catalog range from wine tasting to jewelry making to computer skills to *Fremdsprache*—foreign languages. Housed in a sleek five-story glass and steel building with concrete walls, it sits on the prominent Rotebühlplatz corner in Stuttgart's city center. An inner atrium is filled by a massive open metal stairway. A handful of café tables fill one corner of the ground-floor lobby, where a pair of elderly men sits, concentrating on their newspapers. Glass elevators are accessible in both the front and back of the grand hall. My classroom is on the fourth floor. I take the stairs—two at a time.

Two weeks after Crater Lake—after visiting Bend, where I knew within five minutes it was not the town for me—I returned to L.A. My email backlog contained mostly spam. I deleted one after another, but hesitated when I came to one with a strange address ending in dot de. I took a breath, weighing my chances of whether it would crash my computer or be the surprise job offer of a lifetime. I opened it.

I hope you enjoyed the rest of your weekend. I know I sure did. The sunsets were beautiful. If you're in Portland maybe we could meet for a drink. Please say hello to Gidget from me.

—Marcus

That same day, a job offer did come—by phone. I moved to Seattle two weeks later to work as a web producer for the Winter Olympics. Only a two hour-drive from Portland, I emailed Marcus to meet up for that drink. He replied with a phone call, leaving a voice mail to say his project was over and that he had returned to Germany.

Five months later, after no contact, he called again. I recognized his accent immediately. "I'm calling you from the bathtub," he started off.

"Oh, really? Well, I'm pumping gas at a truck stop," I said. It was true. I was driving to San Francisco for a second date with Scott, a forty-year-old billionaire who made his fortune in voice mail technology. Scott flew to Seattle for our first date—a blind one. He picked me up in a limo and seduced me with his impeccable midwestern manners. It was my turn to impress him by driving thirteen hours just to have dinner at his favorite sushi restaurant.

"I watched the Olympics so I figured your assignment was over," Marcus said. "Germany won a lot of medals."

“Yes, but you lost one in the biathlon because of illegal doping,” I teased.

“We deny he’s German,” he shot back. “He recently changed his nationality to Spanish.”

I laughed. “Funny you should call,” I said. “I’m going to be in Europe next month for my friends’ wedding. It’s in Tuscany.”

“That’s not too far from Southern Germany. Come visit me.”

I replied quickly, “No, you come visit me in Italy.”

Just as quickly he said, “Okay.”

When I hung up, I had lost my hunger for sushi.

Seventeen students sit, sweating, at long tables arranged in a horseshoe. The windows are wide open, but only the sun’s heat gets through. Two Turkish women are wrapped up in headscarves, but they aren’t complaining. A craggy-faced Iraqi woman wearing a knit cardigan, wool skirt, and stockings doesn’t seem bothered either—at least not about the heat.

Today’s lesson is compound nouns—like *Hitzewelle* (*Hitze* + *Welle* = heat wave). Though not as complicated as they first appear, they are best taught when temperatures are not hot enough to melt your brain. Herr Keyser, our thirty-something, wannabe-actor teacher explains that nouns always start with a capital letter, and thus are easier to identify than verbs.

He deconstructs one—*Fussballweltmeisterschaftsqualifikationsspiel*—and segues into how German nouns are the bane of advertising copywriters. “Try fitting *that* into a newspaper column,” he says, drawing vertical chalk lines on the green board to make his point. A Japanese classmate types the word into her electronic translator. “*Nein!*” Herr Keyser says. “First try to find the individual words in it. And if you’re still unsure, *then* use your dictionary.” We finally learn that the seven-word, supersize combo means “soccer world championship qualification game.” Six words in English since foot + ball = soccer.

I returned to Seattle after my dinner date in San Francisco, where it became obvious that the billionaire and I didn’t have a future. We just didn’t have enough in common other than our midwestern upbringings and an appreciation for raw fish. I made my travel arrangements to Milan, Italy, where Marcus would meet me.

In spite of Malpensa Airport’s poor napping conditions with florescent lights and impossibly hard plastic orange seats, I struggled to keep my eyelids open. Three hours had passed since my flight from Seattle landed and the slice of pizza I just ate was fueling my jet lag. It was nearing 10 p.m. and the waiting area had grown deserted. A man dressed head to toe in black leather, steel-toed boots, and a white motorcycle helmet entered. He looked around until a security guard chased him out, ordering “No helmets inside the building!”

Thinking it could be him, I picked up my duffel bag and followed his trail. I found him right outside the door standing next to a fully loaded black Suzuki.

“Marcus?”

“Hi,” he said, removing his helmet to reveal his dark hair, green eyes, and wide smile.

“How was your trip? Did you have good weather?” I asked. In our phone conversation a week prior, he said he would come by motorcycle if there wasn’t too much snow in the Alps. I packed light, cramming a black velvet dress, silk blouse, wool suit, strappy sandals, and black high-heeled boots into one duffel bag that could double as a backpack, just in case.

“Great! Excellent scenery,” he said. If he was tired after his seven-hour journey of high-speed concentration, he did not let it show. “I had lunch on a mountaintop in Switzerland,” he beamed.

We hugged to consecrate our improbable reunion. I waited for him to let go, but he didn’t. He smelled of grimy leather and gasoline; his unshaven face was rough. He waited for me to let go, but I didn’t. My scent was a combination of Givenchy perfume and airplane must. We pulled our heads apart for a light kiss that soon involved tongues. His mouth, as gentle and delicious as I had envisioned, tasted of chocolate. Mine still tasted of marinara sauce from the pizza. Our kiss went deeper and longer. I felt him getting hard against my jeans, even through the thickness of his leather motorcycle pants. “Displaying affection in public is impolite; it’s socially unacceptable,” ran the tape of my mother’s voice in my head. “I didn’t raise you kids to behave indecently!” If only she had seen how the Italian taxi drivers gathered to watch, and how they were cheering—for us. *Mama mia!* We needed a hotel room, quickly.

Herr Keyser’s five-hour grammar session ends with a homework assignment.

“*Hausaufgaben für Morgen ist Kapitel Fünf zu lesen,*” he says. Chapter Five.

The entire class moves like a unit; we stuff our *Passwort Deutsch I* books into our backpacks and bags and shuffle toward the door simultaneously. The Iraqi woman, who knows I’m American, blocks my way. “What do you think about the war in Iraq?” she asks, though it’s more of an accusation than a question. She brings her face so close to mine I can see the cracks in the plastic frames of her glasses.

Before I can answer, the two blond girls from Poland and Greece interrupt. “Come downstairs with us for a cappuccino,” they insist.

“Yes, thanks. I’m coming.” I brush past the old woman, but look back at her over my shoulder. I want to scream, “IT’S NOT MY FAULT! I VOTED FOR AL GORE!” Instead, I say to her softly, “I’m very sorry about it and I’m very much against it.”

Marianna and Halina stir several cubes of sugar in their coffee. Halina met her German boyfriend while waiting tables in Warsaw. Surely he wasn’t the first customer to fall in love with her long blond hair, blue eyes, and lean twenty-year-old body. Marianna, fair-skinned and more Northern Italian-looking than Greek, met her boyfriend when he was vacationing on Mykonos. “Is there anyone in our class who isn’t here because of a relationship with a German?” I ask them.

Halina smiles, then shakes her head. “The two Turkish women are married to Turks who came here as guest workers for the factories,” she says. “There’s a whole

population of them in Stuttgart and many, even those who are born a second or third generation after their parents immigrated, don't learn German."

"But they have to learn it to get jobs," adds Marianna. "Are you going to get a job?"

Marianna and Halina are both aiming to become *die Übersetzer*—translators. Already fluent in English, French, Polish, and Greek, they have a good shot at getting hired by one of the international corporations in town.

"I want to," I reply, "but my German will never be good enough to be a journalist here. I'll probably just keep writing for American magazines, maybe do some PR."

Halina chimes in. "But your husband has a good job. You won't have to work."

"I'm not giving up my career just because I'm getting married," I say a little too forcefully. We sip the last of our coffee. The girls light up cigarettes. I stand to leave. "Sorry, but I need to get going. It will take me the rest of the day to do my homework." They wave goodbye and continue puffing on their Marlboros.

The Milan morning was balmy, the Italian air fertile with spring. A layer of dew covered the Suzuki and its bulging travel cases.

"Look, everything fits," I said to Marcus, modeling the oversized hand-me-down motorcycle gear he brought for me.

He was wiping down the bike. "You'll be glad you have it. It's important for safety," he said. "Now are you sure you're not too tired?" We had spent the night in a hotel room in Milan but slept no more than two hours.

"There's no way I can fall asleep on a motorcycle," I insisted. But after the first hour of humming along on the expressway, when my helmet tipped forward tapping his as I dozed off, he pulled into an Autogrill fuel stop to buy me a double espresso.

"It should take about four more hours to reach Florence," he said, knocking back his coffee in one gulp. "Let me see the directions to your friends' place." He read the printout once and handed the paper back to me.

"Don't you want to hang on to this?" The route was complicated, listing multiple turns through tiny villages to reach their rented villa on a vineyard. The directions filled an entire sheet of paper.

"No. I'll remember them," he said.

"Really? Let me test you."

I held the paper so he couldn't see it and followed the words as he recited them. "From Florence, follow the A1 south. As it turns east look for Route SS67 and go northeast. After passing through the village of Pontesieve take Route SP2 to Rufina, then after crossing the bridge at the end of town turn right at the pizzeria onto Route SS556. Keep going for another five kilometers, then after the village of Londa you'll be climbing uphill, and after the fourth switchback look for a stone barn on the right."

"Oh my God! Do you have a photographic memory or something?" He grinned as I put the paper back in the pocket of my borrowed jacket. "I guess we should get going then. I need to call Laura before we get back on the road."

"You're here!" squealed the bride when she answered her cell phone.

"Yes, but there's one thing, Laura. I'm not alone."

“Oh? That’s fine. There’s plenty of room.” Then she asked, as if she already knew the answer, “Are you going to want one bed or two?”

Marcus, tightening the chinstrap on his helmet, was safely out of earshot, but I turned away so he couldn’t see the giddy look on my face. “Oh, definitely one!”

A *trennbar* verb is one whose prefix can be separated, depending on the verb’s conjugation, and moved to the end of a sentence. Herr Keyser uses *abholen* as an example: *Ich hole mein Buch ab.* I’m *picking* my book *up*. In German, “to pick up” is one word. Apart from the twist of moving the prefix, this paring down of words might seem to simplify a language. But no. There are *seven* different German verbs to designate what *kind* of picking up you are doing—are you cleaning up, collecting, fetching, meeting, calling for, claiming, or reclaiming? I follow along with his lecture, eagerly copying his chalkboard sentences into my spiral notebook. But then he adds a few adjectives in between the broken verb and it becomes a mind-bending memory test. “I’m picking my yellow German language book with the dog-eared pages and beer stain on the cover . . . up.” I can’t write fast enough. I’m scribbling illegible notes and am left behind in a Spirograph maze of ink as he moves on to the next topic.

He calls on Marianna to answer a question. “*Was ist blah blah blah blah?*” he asks.

“*Es ist blah blah blah blah,*” she answers.

I’m so lost I can’t even tell what they’re saying.

“*Richtig!*” he says. She gets it right.

Halina is his next victim. “*Richtig!*” he says, applauding her correct answer.

I don’t join the girls for cappuccino after class. My brain is so saturated I go straight home.

I’m still only half way through my homework when Marcus comes in the door. “Hi my love,” he says, already removing his tie. “Have you eaten yet?”

My books and papers cover the dining room table. I look up at him. “Does it look like I’ve eaten?”

“Oh boy, what’s wrong?” he asks.

“These stupid *trennbar* verbs are what’s wrong,” I say, glaring down at my notebook. “And I have to make ten sentences from the verbs on this list.” I wave my handout at him.

“*Trennbar* verbs? I’ve never heard of them,” he says.

“You know, when you separate the prefix from the body. Like *aus-steigen* or *ein-steigen* or *um-steigen* or *über-fucking-steigen*.”

“Okay, okay, take it easy.” He sets his briefcase down and grabs a beer from the refrigerator before sitting down next to me at the table. “I know what you mean, but I never learned the term because I grew up speaking the language.”

“I just wish I would have fallen in love with a Frenchman.”

“So he could cheat on you?” he asks.

“No, so we could speak a Romance language. French and Spanish were so much easier for me to learn. This German grammar sucks.”

"Learning English is hard too. You have inconsistent pronunciations in your alphabet. Why do you say 'bow' like in ship but 'bow' like in crossbow? And how do you explain the difference between 'height' versus 'weight'?"

"Yeah, sorry," I reply. "You're right."

"Let me help you finish this, then we'll go out for dinner. I feel like having a steak at Mezzo Giorno."

I kiss him on the lips. "*Sì, grazie amore mio.* Italian food sounds great."

Sambuca is an Italian anise-flavored liqueur. It's also a flammable substance that can be poured onto a spoon, lit with a match, and swallowed while still burning. This is one of the activities that dominated our nights during the week in Tuscany. But the wedding festivities were not only about drinking. Our days began at noon with a breakfast of *latte macchiato*s and *pane* with butter and marmalade on the stone terrace overlooking miles of vineyards. Our late breakfasts were followed by quick dips in the swimming pool—quick because the water was the temperature of snow melt. Afternoons were spent on the motorcycle touring the twisting roads of the Apennine Mountains. I ached with envy when I saw so many athletes riding road bikes through the canyons, wanting to be pedaling myself, but my yearnings were quickly suppressed by wrapping my arms tighter around Marcus' waist. Late afternoons included naps, showers, and dressing up for dinner. And evenings were an indulgence of food, with dinners of lamb and penne, pecorino and olives, panna cotta and tiramisu, red wine and limoncello. And sambuca. Until four in the morning. Every night.

The wedding party grew to about sixty people. Friends and family of the bridal couple traveled from San Francisco, Cleveland, Boston, and Vancouver. And Stuttgart. The wedding may have been in Europe, but Marcus was the only European in the group. But fitting in was hardly an issue. The night of the rehearsal dinner he dressed in a black suit and white shirt with no tie. When we joined the rest of the group for champagne on the stone terrace a roar of laughter erupted as the groom arrived wearing the exact same outfit.

"You're looking pretty studly there, Marcus," John told him, putting his arm around him.

"So do you," Marcus replied. The twins posed for pictures.

The villa was reserved for a week, but Marcus and I had planned on spending only three days together. I hadn't invited him to stay for the wedding, but the mothers of both the bride and groom pleaded with him. "Please stay, Marcus," they insisted. "We love having you here. You have to stay for the wedding." I kept quiet and let them do the begging for me.

When Marcus called his boss to ask for the extra days off, it was the first time I heard him speak German. I pretended not to listen as he walked with his cell phone to the edge of the terrace. His voice, even in his mother tongue, sounded as smooth and soothing as a DJ's for a jazz radio station. When he hung up, he turned to me and smiled. The answer sat right there on his raised cheekbones.

Yes!

The fifteenth-century stone castle, perched on a hilltop in Fiesole, stood guard over the red mosaic of the Florence Cathedral and brick towers. On its sweeping

manicured lawn, a string quartet played Pachelbel to announce the bride and groom. Marcus rubbed his hand on the back of my velvet dress, occasionally running his fingers along my pearl choker and up into my ponytail, as a minister chanted, “John, do you take Laura . . .” I dabbed my wet eyes with a handkerchief. “I now pronounce you . . .”

Following the post-ceremony commotion, Marcus found me on the castle’s terrace. “Here, you need to eat something,” he said, placing a bacon-wrapped hors d’oeuvre in my mouth. “Grease is the best cure for a hangover.”

“So is champagne,” I said. “Cheers.” We clinked glasses as the ancient city prepared to draw its velvet curtain on another day. The sky glowed in dusky hues of pink and blue. The villas on the hills opposite radiated the sun’s Mediterranean warmth in earthy yellows and oranges. Even the sharp edges of the arrow-like Cyprus trees softened. I had visited Florence three times before, but its beauty had never resonated like this. I dabbed my eyes again.

“Hey you two love birds, let me get a picture of you.” Using the stone balustrade and red geraniums as a background, John’s friend Andrew snapped a photo of us—Marcus had his arm draped around me and I, wrapped in a black cashmere shawl, was snuggling into his embrace, our faces illuminated by the setting sun. “Gorgeous,” Andrew said, holding up his camera.

Dinner was an event for nobility in a round room with baby-angel frescoes covering the walls and ceilings. In between sips of Brunello di Montalcino, I left my body and viewed the scene from above. The loud voices and clanking silverware became a mere hum. The crowd blurred and only our table was in focus: Marcus laughing at someone’s joke, his head tipped back, his teeth gleaming white, his hand gracefully poised on a Cuban cigar. I was laughing too, my fingers wrapped around the stem of my wine glass, the other hand resting on Marcus’ thigh. “I haven’t seen you this happy in a long time,” I told myself. “But don’t get ahead of yourself. Just enjoy the moment.”

With every week of German class—three down, one to go—my comprehension of the language grows exponentially less. In English there is one way to say “the.” In French and Spanish there are two (feminine and masculine); four if you include the plural versions. In German, there are sixteen. The article used with a masculine noun is *der*, as in *der Mann* (man); *die* is for feminine nouns, such as *die Frau* (woman); and *das* is for words of neuter gender like *das Kind* (child). But that’s just Herr Keyser’s introduction; the logic stops there. The remaining five hundred million German nouns have no rule to designate their gender or which article to use—bread (*das Brot*) is neuter; a loaf of bread (*der Brotlaib*) is masculine; and a slice of bread (*die Brotschnitte*) is feminine—and therefore each one must be memorized.

Along with the gender changes, noun endings change, depending on how the noun is used in a sentence. Herr Keyser scribbles a chart on the board as fast as he talks about the four noun cases—nominative, dative, accusative, and genitive. From what little I gather from his discourse—not easy when the class is taught entirely in German—the varied word endings designate whether you’re giving or taking, pointing at, staying in one place, or possessing something. The complexities involved in creating just one sentence—the correct combination of article + subject + verb + preposition + object +

perhaps, a *trennbar* verb ending—make me think I’m back in the hell of Sister Margaret’s algebra class. “I didn’t sign up for math,” I want to cry. “And I got straight As in English!”

“How on earth am I ever going to learn all these?” I complain to Herr Keyser after class.

“There’s no secret formula. It will only come with practice,” he says.

When Marcus strolls through the door at 8:45 p.m., my first words to him are, “My teacher says we have to speak German at home.”

“That’s a good idea. We should,” he says—in English.

“If we speak German then I’ll never get to talk to you. I barely see you as it is,” I say.

“Herr Lehman needed my help preparing slides for his meeting with a board member tomorrow.”

“Herr Lehman! The guy is your own age. You drink beer with him. And you still call each other ‘Mister?’”

“He’s my boss. I don’t mind it; it helps us keep our professional distance.” He carries on with his nightly coming-home ritual: remove shoes and tie, open beer. “What are you working on?” he eventually asks.

“Don’t ask,” I reply. I close my textbook.

“Do you want me to check your homework?” He comes over to the table where I’m sitting. I don’t answer him. “Oh, my cute little thing, I know you don’t think so, but your German really is improving. Be patient with yourself.” He pulls me out of my chair and leads me to the bedroom—the *Schlafzimmer*—*der, die, das, dem, den, des Schlafzimmers*.

“Are we going to have pillow talk?”

“Yes.”

“In German?”

“Ah ja, meine geile Schlampe. Ja.”

The magical week came to an end; the wedding party dispersed, flying back to their respective American homes. I was going to visit friends in Bern, Switzerland whom I had met twenty years earlier during my first trip to Europe; Marcus was riding his motorcycle back to Germany, alone.

The parking lot of the Florence train station was jammed. Car horns honked and Vespa engines sputtered as Friday night commuters arrived from, and departed to, Rome and Bologna. My train was scheduled to leave in a few minutes. With Marcus’ motorcycle helmets and my duffel bag bouncing against our legs, we sprinted to the platform.

“Thank you for this very nice time,” he said, breathing hard.

“I had fun too,” I panted as sweat ran down my back.

“Okay, you better get on board.” He reached for me and we kissed like it was the last kiss of our lives, because for all we knew, it was.

I stood at the window in the narrow hallway outside my sleeper car. When Florence, along with my motorcycle man, disappeared from sight, the dam burst. I was crying so hard a conductor offered me a tissue after punching my ticket.

When I stepped off the train the next morning Uschi greeted me. “Bethli, darling, it’s so wonderful to see you!” she cried. But upon seeing my eyes, swollen to the size of golf balls, she said, “Oh, what’s happened to you? Tell me all about it, honey.”

After regaling her with the stories of my romantic interlude—ending with the melodrama of how I found my true love only to watch him ride off into the sunset on his motorcycle with no talk of seeing each other again—I took a nap. When I woke, Uschi drew me a hot bath and cooked me dinner. The phone rang while we were still eating. Uschi answered it and said, “It’s for you.”

“I’m at a fork in the road. I can either keep going to Germany or come see you in Bern.”

It was his voice.

Before he could say another word, I pushed the phone back into Uschi’s hand, shrieking, “He’s coming to Bern! Give him directions!” I jumped up and down while she talked, ecstatic that he found the note with her phone number that I’d slipped into his motorcycle tank bag.

When Uschi hung up she smiled at me and said, “There is no fork in the road.”

Marcus arrived at 45 *Effingerstrasse* with hands stiff and frozen from his Alps crossing. We prepared him a plate of leftover pasta and poured him a beer.

“I missed you on the back of my bike,” he said later as we laid down on the futon together. My heart raced as he spoke. “That’s never happened to me before.”

We fell asleep with our bodies locked and stayed that way for the rest of the night.

The boxy yellow *U-Bahn* ride takes twenty minutes from the Obere Ziegelei stop to Rotebühlplatz. The electric tram has green velour seats, large windows, wide aisles, and is graffiti-free. It travels above ground until it crosses the Neckar River and passes the mile-long city park—sensibly named Stadtpark (City Park)—before submerging beneath Stuttgart’s city center. My last day of German class, I use the air-conditioned time to increase my vocabulary. My dictionary—whose plastic yellow cover matches the tram—gets no rest from its boot-camp workout.

“I am not going to live here and feel like an idiot every day,” I accidentally blurt out aloud. A woman with hair dyed a popular shade of magenta glances my way, but keeps talking to her friend; the mechanic in blue coveralls doesn’t look up. I go back to my notebook and write down today’s new words—*Hochzeitseinladungen* (wedding invitations) and *Hochzeitskleid* (wedding dress). With my German course finished, I can start building my *neues Leben*—new life—one gender-specific noun and separable verb at a time.