

The Hanses Who Came in From the Cold

*Ask not what a Kennedy can do for Germany, ask
what Germany can do for a Kennedy.*

JOSHUA COHEN

Ah, Berlin, city of liberty and possibility, peace and prosperity! Babylon, Thebes, and Nineveh, you can't hold a Roman candle to this sprawling megalopolis, this modern Mesopotamia invigorated by the wild winding waters of the Havel and the Spree. Berlin, you miracle town where walls have been destructed (if previously erected), where graffitied dwellings house tattooed bodies, where gum-mottled pavements lead to dog-turded playgrounds. Berlin the beautiful, where you'll find reading groups discussing *Das Kapital* in Kreuzberg and white supremacist neo-Nazis sporting skull-and-bones speedos in Weissensee!

Berlin, Berlin, let's get on the train to Berlin!

There was hope and joy on this train, but not for Hans Sr., not for his son, and not for his grandson, both of whom were, of course, also named Hans—Hans Jr. and Hans Jr. Jr. Strange? Yes, but it was a strange time, this present, a time of austerity and pandemonium, of exhaustion experienced and salvation expected—and where better to find salvation than in a storied city of freedom.

Hans Sr. turned to his son, Hans Jr., as the world pollocked past his face, and asked, “You said that we'll be saved in Berlin?” The son nodded. “But who will save us?”

“Kennedy,” Hans Jr. murmured without looking at his father.

“Of course,” Hans Sr. said, and a wave of warmth washed through him. “Kennedy.” The name was a solvent that seemed to wash away the grime of this era, that seemed to snuggle up

against you from the inside. Hans Sr. nodded again. Once more, he murmured to himself, “Kennedy.”

But Hans Sr. had forgotten why exactly his son was taking him to Berlin, and he was ashamed to ask yet again. His son would only make him feel small, smaller than he already was with the lead of old age weighing him down. But his son never took him anywhere—why this trip, why now? Unanswered, the question floated around his brain like a tiny, trapped worm shimmying around beneath a microscopic slide, and then it disappeared. What was the question?

Hardly anyone on the train spoke, which made Hans Sr. nervous. He couldn’t see very well, and it often seemed like he only emerged from a muddy sleep for a few moments of the day to look at the world wistfully or fearfully, before it silently faded back into murkiness, before it wordlessly closed in on him forever, when the dull dust of oblivion settled over everything. He looked around himself, and he couldn’t read anything on people’s faces, their masks. When they did speak, their voices were frequently muffled, their expressions hidden. Only their sad eyes stared at him, their opaque gazes directed at him for no reason and for just the blink of an eye. They were full of terrifying terror, full of lamentation or guilt.

And then, when the blessed hand of clarity led him out of the swamp of old age into the glare of reality, the people around him suddenly seemed so real that he was at first shocked and then disappointed. He wondered if people had always looked so sad, or if it was this time, this gloomy atmosphere of the present, which gave their eyes their lost and forlorn look. How could he think through and answer this question today? After all, the present is the shadow of the past, not vice versa.

Hans Sr. had no idea what was going on around him. He felt as if he didn’t ‘have all the cups in his cupboard,’ as the bourgeois German neatly puts it, as if he’d lost his marbles.

Strange, he thought, that the English tea-enthusiasts hadn't adopted the German saying. Maybe they had, in the spirit of détente after the war. How long ago was all of that? Surely, these were peaceful times, no? Despite all the protests cropping up everywhere.

Hans Sr.'s didn't ask his son any questions. Hans Jr. could hardly have explained the present world to his father. Not because he was a bad communicator, he just wasn't very good at thinking. No matter how bad things become, there's one thing you never forget: that sons are the disappointment of the fathers, even if the impression for sons must be the exact opposite.

For years, Hans and Hans Jr. hadn't had a conversation like other families had (or had they?). Hans Sr. was surprised that his son had come along on this trip. Or was it actually Hans Jr. who had suggested the trip, and was Hans Sr. in fact the one who had been invited along? One fact, however, has no alternative: they were going to Berlin to see the 35th President of the United States of America.

Hans Sr. looked at his son and wondered why he didn't have the style to dress better for such an important occasion. And why did he always sweat so much? And why was Hans Jr. Jr. invited along? Did he even know who the President was? Would this trip to the divided city mean anything to the child? Hans Sr. looked at Hans Jr. and at Hans Jr. Jr., and he thought they seemed like a lively, spirited family, despite the unimaginative choice of first name. Hans Sr. remembered thinking that he'd been disappointed in his son, when he named his son Hans also. It seemed even more foolish than his erstwhile decision to give his son his own name. Hans Sr. could no longer remember his own reasons for doing so. Everything was so long ago. But Hans Sr. was even more upset that his son had also named his child 'Hans Jr.' According to the law of series, the little one shouldn't be called 'Hans Jr. Jr.' but 'Hans III', even in Germany, and so Hans Sr. preferred to refer to his grandson as 'Hans-Hans.'

The silence was broken by Hans Sr.'s sudden outburst: "He's a little emperor!" The sad-eyed masks stared at him in confusion and disbelief. His son seemed embarrassed, and little Hans-Hans said: "Papa, what is grandpa talking about? Is he being silly again?" Hans Jr. silenced his son, then spoke sharply to a woman with greasy hair a few rows ahead, who was staring at him: "What are you looking at?"

Hans Jr. never understood why his father called the child 'Hans-Hans,' not even today of all days, not even on this special occasion. Hans Jr. himself said many times that today was a 'historic day.'

The grandfather's nickname always made the little boy laugh. "Call me what I'm called twice again," Hans-Hans would sometimes say to his grandpa. The grandfather liked his grandson, even if he sometimes didn't know who the boy was.

As the train came to a stop, he now also wondered who this bald, chubby man next to him was, whose name was apparently Hans Jr. He also wondered why the man called his son by the same name, whether out of indifference or ignorance.

"Here we are," grumbled Hans Jr., and he grabbed his father by the arm, as the train stopped in a large futuristic-looking building. Hans Sr. wasn't keen on being held by the arm like a child. That's what the carers sometimes did, when he was supposed to come along to a craft lesson, egg-blowing or basket-weaving. "Just tinkering, not really tinkering," one of the inane carers always joked, to an absence of mirth. There was never really any laughter in the home, as they called it, though it wasn't his home at all. Laughter seemed verboten there, and the silences were sometimes broken by a cry or a scream from another room, where a bed was nothing but a training coffin.

The balding, knobbly orderly next to him on the train was now actively pulling his arm and saying that they had to get off. “What can I do for you, sir?” Hans Sr. asked the man with the sweat-stained shirt, who was quite overweight.

“Papa, this is our stop. We have to get out now, otherwise you can forget about Kennedy. Please.”

“*Please*, son, I won’t forget Kennedy,” said Hans Sr. and followed the orderly, who vaguely resembled his son. “Who would miss the president’s great speech?”

“What’s wrong with grandpa?” Hans-Hans asked as they got out of the car.

“Nothing, he’s just not quite himself sometimes,” said the man, who seemed to be the boy’s father and therefore had to be his son. Yes, that’s right, alas. Hans Sr. looked at the man from the side for a second, sucking in his lips as if he were thinking. Hadn’t Hans Sr. always been worried that he’d end up with an idiot for a son? Doesn’t fear usually disperse when the object of fear materializes?

As they strolled through the sunny streets of the bright big city, Hans Sr. gushed about John F. Kennedy, whom he greatly admired. But his son hardly listened, he even rolled his eyes once.

“What’s grandpa talking about?”

“Grandpa’s talking about a great man,” Hans Jr. said to the boy in a cheerful voice. Hans Sr. also spoke in a breezy tone, and he was reminded of what his son had done for him. “Thank you for taking me along with you,” Hans Sr. said to his son, his voice catching. He even put his hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Okay, Papa,” he said, but kept his eyes fixed straight ahead.

The President of the United States had come to the big city, and they, three generations of German men, would be at his feet, hanging on his lips and listening in silence, rapt. “You’re a good boy, Junior,” Hans Sr. said, even though he wasn’t quite himself. Hans Jr. nodded and they made their way through the sunny city streets. It was a pretty town, the streets were emptier than he remembered, and he wondered if he remembered them correctly. It felt like the city was sealed off, but remember, it was a divided city after all. They had to pass through various checkpoints. Security for the President, no doubt. Better safe than sorry, better watch out for a book depository.

It was a warm day, and the city was dressed in its summer finery, the sun so bright it seemed about to burst. As they walked along the wide bright avenues, Hans Jr. told his father things that, since we are in the realm of stories, might be called ‘expository.’ He should have mentioned them on the train, Hans Sr. thought, when the story began. Not now in the middle of things. But Hans Jr. knew nothing about stories, nor about history. He was saying things that were completely wrong, utterly devoid of fact. What he did get right was the President’s name at least, even if he was now talking about his brother. “Kennedy’s still got influence,” said Hans Jr. “He can unite the country again, I think.”

“Who?” asked Hans Sr. shaking his head. “*Robert?*”

His son chuckled and rolled his eyes again.

Hans Sr.’s thoughts were lost in a fog of gloom, where stories and history mingle, then disperse. But even today, as Hans Sr. was thankful for his son’s willingness to let his father participate in world history, the thought that lingered was that his son remained a disappointment. His son knew next to nothing. Walking next to one another, they both knew it. Hans-Hans didn’t know anything either, but he was a child, and he could still learn, and the only

thing he seemed to know now was that his dad loved his grandad just as much as the boy loved his grandpa. Hans-Hans had helped boost Hans Sr.'s opinion of his son, Hans Jr., and sometimes Hans Sr. thought that the father of such a clever boy couldn't be all bad. If he was able to think further, he would correct himself. You could breed a mule from a horse, but you could never breed a horse from a mule. Hans Sr. was – or rather, used to be – a clever man, but even he had only managed to produce Hans Jr., a moron. Hans Jr. had dropped out of school as a young man and had only come into some money and a semblance of respectability through luck and peasant cunning. Today, he said things like: “Kennedy’s a rummy in politics,” and: “Undoubtedly, Kennedy is a suppository of wisdom.”

As they were walking, they could hear a large crowd of people in the distance. They were on the right way. Hans Sr. felt the need to look up repeatedly, to look for snipers in windows. What was the origin of that thought, what was its history?

On one of the buildings, high up, the rooftop tickled by the sun, there flew a flag that he didn't recognize. The police were pointing up there, their hands in thick gloves, which gave them the look of crusaders, Teutonic knights. Some passers-by applauded this strange flag. What could it possibly represent? The three colors – top to bottom, black, white, and red – didn't mean anything to him, but the way the flag moved in the wind, torn to and fro without ever getting ahead, made him melancholy. The reason for his persistent sadness was hidden inside him, hidden beneath the ashes of time. So, where were they off to now? He felt a wave of confusion welling up inside him again.

“Let's head back now, shall we?” he suggested to the strange young child who was guiding him. How long had the boy been here? He had a friendly face, the sun sparkling in his bright green eyes.

“No, Opa,” said the child. “We’re going to see Kennedy!” The child laughed and jumped for joy beside him in his tiny sneakers.

Hans Sr. wished they’d had time to look in the store windows, but he wondered where all the bookshops were in this free city, which he used to love to browse as a young man. Suddenly an uneasy feeling enveloped him, as if he was having a premonition. He had the feeling that they were going the wrong way. “I’m tired now,” he said in a fearful tone. “I think we’d better head home now.”

“But you really wanted to go to Berlin,” said Hans Jr., whose mouth was suddenly visible. Had it been hidden before, on the train? But what could have hidden it? The mouth moved in a strange way, out of sync with the rest of the face, as the lips said: “Now you’re here. To see Kennedy.”

Hans Sr. felt isolated. Nobody could understand him here. These two people weren’t going to take him home. He was scared. He thought these strangers were kidnapping him, not leading him to his home. He wondered where they were taking him and where his hopes had departed to. They passed another checkpoint, and suddenly there was a party atmosphere in front of a large makeshift stage. What was this place? Where was the town hall? Nobody here was wearing a suit, let alone a hat. Some people were holding banners aloft, full of frustration and anger.

Little Hans-Hans was carried on the shoulders of the fat man. It looked like a leprechaun was riding a Minotaur. The people around them were using a word that he repeatedly misheard. It sounded like ‘plandemic’, but what could that nonsense possibly mean?

Suddenly, the crowd went wild, when a man with a square head, nutcracker chin, and beady narrow eyes, wearing just a shirt and tie, shuffled onstage. Was this a famous person?

Where had he seen his face before in history, the shadow of this face? Had he been on the news before? Who was he? Next to the man on stage, there was a person with a hairstyle like Jackie Kennedy, holding onto a microphone and translating something the English-speaking orator had said. Was this Jackie a man? They called the speaker “Kennedy.” Hans Sr. wanted to ask what was happening, but he was afraid of what it all might mean. He felt like he was in the wrong story, as if someone in history had made a mistake. The story is almost finished, can’t it be fixed yet?

Sometimes the ashes trickled backwards out of his head, like the film of an hourglass running backwards, and then the brain sludge thinned, and sometimes he saw things more clearly then. “That’s not John F. Kennedy,” he said firmly to Hans Jr. Some of the people around them turned to look at him and laughed, and Hans Jr. laughed so hard that Hans-Hans almost fell off his shoulders. The little boy looked worried. “Why did you bring me here?” Hans Sr. asked. He knew he had to hurry, because the shadows could descend any second again. “What are we doing here?”

His son explained he was overjoyed that he was finally able to experience history with his father. “You taught me to think for myself,” he said. “And I just think that’s easier when you’re in a group. I mean, we’re all in this plandemic boat together.” Hans Jr. took in the crowd with a wave of his hand, which made the noise seem even more aggressive to Hans Sr. “This is the freedom we need right now. Right here. They wanted to take it all away from us. And they almost did it. But this man up there can help us get it back. He might be the President someday. President of the free world.”

“Right on,” said some guy with a double-chin both in the front and the back of his neck. He also had a hand full of rings. The man turned to Hans Jr. and said: “Can you believe a Kennedy showed up to our protest?”

“Damn straight, I can believe it,” Hans Jr. said to the man, “because he knows guns don’t kill people, vaccines kill people.”

The crowd heard what was being said and they cheered and chanted something in rhyme (but without reason), something that Hans Sr. couldn’t quite make out. His son and the man with multiple chins high-fived each other.

Hans felt the ashy veil of fog creeping over his eyes again. The shadows were coming back. He felt a weight building up inside him, as if he was being pulled down to earth. He thought he was going to fall, but he couldn’t reach for anything to hold on to. The sun in the sky cracked open like a perfectly round egg, it split apart, as darkness and silence poured out of it, leaking onto the world. For a moment, the silence was perfect, like the silence the day after our death. When the crowd finally started making noise again, everything seemed different, as if it had been warped or distorted somehow. He couldn’t take his eyes off the people in the crowd. Their words came out as harsh as hatred, and their movements seemed stuttering and hectic, like the movements of a trembling puppeteer. Their eyes were like black holes, full of smoke, enraged, wretched and pitiable.

Some people laughed, others shouted, and some listened intently. Hans Sr. was lost in this crowd of people with functional clothes, hiking backpacks, linen dresses, and mirrored sunglasses. He wondered if he was in a vacation resort. Was this where they were supposed to end up? Then, everything went back to night. He peered over at his son for help. But Hans Jr.

was looking up at his prophet, rapt, sucking in his lips and nodding in agreement with the speaker's words.

Hans Sr. reached for his son's hand, but he couldn't get hold of him. Meanwhile, the man on stage said something about Nazis, to which the crowd reacted angrily. With smug confidence, the speaker said that he didn't see any Nazis around. The crowd cheered with delight.

A simple thought suddenly occurred to Hans Sr. Those who are rejected must reject the old order to be able to sell themselves as the new. And those who don't know their history are happy to buy into an ideology that's long past its sell-by date. But Hans Sr. couldn't finish thinking this through, and so it didn't exist. And was Hans Sr. not just an old man himself who didn't know his history, if for very different reasons than this shouting mob?

What was the connection between this man on stage and JFK?

All Hans Sr. could see was this world, worn out and tired, trying to keep up with the passing of time. It seemed to him as if a dark cloud had gathered above the cheering and roaring people, which now rolled through him in one fell swoop, like a miasma of dread.

"What's wrong with grandpa?" asked Hans-Hans from his perch on his father's shoulders, and then he turned to his grandpa: "Opa, why are you so different now?"

"I'm not different," said Hans Sr. "I'm in the wrong place. Or the wrong story." With his trembling hand, he pointed to the man on stage. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"I told you everything, Papa. You didn't want to believe me that John F. Kennedy wasn't coming here. But that man is greater than JFK. He's Robert F. Kennedy's son. He's going to help us fight this lockdown shit." He shrugged. "I just let you believe it was JFK, so you'd have a good time. I know how much you loved JFK." He shrugged his shoulders again, and Hans-Hans nearly fell off once more. "You already met the real Kennedy here once when you were as

old as Hans Jr. Jr. Don't you remember that at all? I mean, how could you see him here again today? You know, it doesn't make any sense."

"I'd like to please leave now. Please."

"But RFK Jr. is just getting started telling us about the vaccines. We need him."

The crowd continued to cheer, and little Hans-Hans became more and more restless. He was whining on his father's shoulders, afraid he would fall to the street.

Hans Sr. observed his grandson. How innocent he was, how his tiny hands were clapping at something he couldn't possibly understand. Here we are, dovetailed generations, together and oblivious to the world. May someone save us all.

The voice on stage trembled with emotion. Quickly, Hans Sr. looked at the stage. Then he remembered. Yes, it was true. The speaker was Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Robert F. Kennedy's son, and he had accepted an invitation to a gathering of what seemed like a bunch of fringe clods. How could this be Bobby's son? How could Bobby be that man's father? When Martin Luther King Jr. was shot, RFK spontaneously and nobly quoted Aeschylus as a mandate to his country to tame the savagery of man in order to make life on earth more livable. Hans Sr. looked at his son next to him.

Despite everything, it was hard for Hans Sr. to feel bitterness toward this person who was his son, it was difficult for him even to feel unchecked resentment toward the crowd. Would they go through all this trouble if they weren't lost, if they weren't desperate, and in desperation, did they not simply grasp at any straw of hope, no matter how flimsy, how false? And how was this worse than outright cynicism?

The last clear moments were often more difficult for him than the moments of sinking back into the fog, beneath the shadows. He knew he hadn't been a great father. He'd neglected

this son of his, and he hadn't taken him by the hand the way Hans-Hans had led him through the city today.

He looked around again. He wasn't surprised that they had all come here to make history, to leave their annotations in the story of time, as their fathers had done (or hoped to do) before them. Many of them had brought along their kids. Many of them must have been disappointed fathers and even more of them must have been disappointed sons.

He looked at the stage where the son of Bobby Kennedy, who had been in his grave for such a long time, was smiling as he ranted against people he didn't know. He looked a bit out of place on stage, as if he'd been forced to be up there, as if there was a man somewhere behind one of the big speakers pointing a gun at him. Hans Sr. felt sorry for this Kennedy up there, and he felt sorry for the man's father. Bobby Kennedy knew what it was like to have a son who was a bit of an idiot, who had, it seemed, worms for brains.

"I'm leaving now, Junior," Hans told his son without addressing him by his full name. Hans Jr. couldn't hear his father amid the din of the crowd. Some people even broke into a cheer so loudly, they jumped for joy so violently that Hans Sr. was separated from his son and grandson. A plump woman in a serape dress and wooden beads in her hair had squeezed in between them in the heat of the shouting. Hans Jr. was chanting something at the stage. As he shouted, some spittle flew out of his mouth and sparkled in the summer light.

Only Hans-Hans looked at his Opa, his eyes welling up with tears as Hans Sr. slowly melted into the crowd. The boy extended his hand above the other people's heads and shoulders towards his grandpa, his lips moving silently, but his words were lost in the tumult. Finally, Hans Sr. saw Hans-Hans slapping his father on the head, perhaps to make him realize that grandpa was leaving.

Hans Sr. left the demonstration, the noise of the crowd dying down behind him. He went through a big gate and came to an empty shady street. At the end of the street, the blue lights of a police car came on as it sped towards him. He felt a strangeness closing in on him again, and he wished he could have concentrated enough to finish a single thought, a significant thought that could explain what had just happened and what this story was all about, what this strange moment in history might signify. The police car shot past him. The thought had vanished, lost at the bottom of his broken mind, unthought and unconsidered. Untold. He didn't know where he was.

The story must end without him, now that history has been made.

I'm Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and I approve this message.