



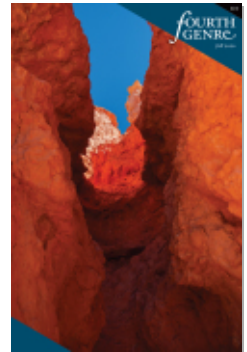
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Jacqueline Doyle

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On Being Told That Her First Husband

JACQUELINE DOYLE

There was a time in my early twenties when just the title of Tess Slesinger’s story “On Being Told That Her Second Husband Has Taken His First Lover” thrilled me with its world-weary sophistication. I wanted to claim more than one husband and refer casually to lovers. I wanted to live abroad (or anywhere but suburban New Jersey where I’d grown up). I believed in independence and dismissed jealousy as bourgeois possessiveness.

By the time my first husband took his first lover, I’d already realized that the excitement of travel has its limits, sophistication can be a mask for heartbreak, philosophical convictions can be a flimsy defense against actual feelings. In my late twenties and thirties, I began to value stability and fidelity over adventure. In my forties and fifties, I barely traveled, occupied with teaching and academic publications, day-to-day life with my second husband and our growing child.

Now I’ve arrived at a different stage in life, slowly and also rapidly, sliding into middle age and beyond almost without noticing the transition. In my sixties I’ve reached the time in life when retrospect and consciousness of mortality become inescapable. My story title would be “On Being Told That Her First Husband Has Died.”



I was roaming the internet when I was stopped short by the discovery, almost six months after Hartmut’s death. Not an American-style obituary, but a death notice from a German newspaper, with birth and death dates and names of

immediate family members. No mention of me, of course, or of his second wife. No reference to a fuller obituary or service. He was seventy-one. That alone was a shock. I double-checked the math. He was older than me, but could my ex-husband possibly be that old?

Even though I haven't been in touch with her for decades (easily measured by the age of my son, product of my second marriage, who just turned twenty-nine), I immediately wanted to write a condolence email to Hartmut's younger sister Margot. She was close to Hartmut, morbidly dependent on him, I thought. I came between them. Repeatedly and successfully. So I don't know why I would want to contact her now, or why she'd want to hear from me. She certainly wouldn't expect it. My story of the past would be very different from hers.

Hartmut and I met in Germany after my junior year abroad and spent a month camping in Greece. I was attracted by his intensity, his leftist political convictions, his wild long hair, his leather jacket and motorcycle. He was living in an apartment at the time with his girlfriend and Margot and her boyfriend. (His girlfriend's existence didn't really register with me.) He came to the U.S. to visit me the following winter and ended up staying. For the next few years we moved back and forth between the U.S. (where I finished my university degree and later started another) and Germany (where he was studying for a degree he never finished). We saw Margot daily in Germany, but she never traveled to the U.S. Or did she come to see him in Ithaca after we broke up? She might have.

After so much time, it's hard to remember. I can recall frequent arguments with Hartmut over Margot and her demands on his time in Göttingen. I remember one fight in particular when she'd just moved into a new studio apartment and wanted Hartmut to come and unroll her carpet. She was bitter that her older lover had to take the time to do it. ("He's much busier than you are. He's an important man.") Was I overly possessive of Hartmut's time and attention, or is that the kind of thing that happens in lots of relationships? In retrospect, it seems quite ordinary. I resented Margot and admired her too. She was serious about politics. She engaged in serial doomed romances that required a great deal of discussion. She had upscale Ikea-style-long-before-we-had-Ikea furnishings, floor-length drapes with bright geometric patterns. She was in therapy. (I'd never known anyone in therapy.) She smoked a pipe. I thought her very worldly.



A few months after Hartmut and I broke up, I had a breakdown, dropped out of grad school midsemester, and moved to New York City. It was a hard time in my life. Several years passed before I returned to school, where I've always felt at home, fell in love with an MFA student, finished my PhD, got a tenure-track job in California, married the MFA student, had a child. Hartmut and I didn't stay in touch.

Just once I sent him a card, for his sixtieth birthday (the dates of our marriage and of his birthday stayed engraved in my memory). He called me, on my office phone at the university in the San Francisco Bay Area where I teach, though I hadn't given him a phone number. It was summer, and I was just there by chance. We talked for several hours. He seemed flattered by the questions I had about his life. "You can write to me with more questions," he said, "and I'll call you back and answer them." Which seemed massively self-absorbed to me in a way I'd forgotten. He had few questions about me and my life, indeed seemed to steer the conversation away from my husband and teenaged son whenever I mentioned them. He claimed he'd been thinking about me a lot lately, feeling remorse. He appeared to want my forgiveness, and I felt annoyed.

Did I mention that he left me after less than a year of marriage? We'd been together for six or seven years, had just moved back to the States, where he wasn't able to land more than a menial job at the university library. He ran off with a library coworker who was headed for Taiwan and broke up with her soon after. When he returned to the U.S. to reconcile, I refused to take him back. (His second and only other marriage, to a Filipina with whom he had two sons, also broke up over his cheating.) Our breakup derailed my life, at least temporarily. I almost didn't return to school to pick up where I'd left off. It was a very hard decision at the time.

I told him I was very happy. I couldn't say, "I forgive you."

"Who would have guessed you'd be so happy!" he exclaimed, near the end of our conversation.

"You're just like I remember you," I said.

We paused, much more than an ocean and three decades separating us, though he didn't seem to notice.

"Yes, who would have guessed," he repeated.



Below the newspaper death notice, there was an area for replies or notes, and I wrote a reply on the spot, without pondering my message first: “Dear Family, Hartmut and I were married a very long time ago, but I have strong memories of Germany and all of you. I am shocked and saddened to hear of his passing. My condolences, Jackie.” I left my email address, though I don’t know where the message went (the newspaper office?). It didn’t appear to be a roster of messages like the ones maintained by American funeral homes, and it was six months after the fact. It was a strange message to leave, and I immediately regretted it.

But it was true. In that moment I had memories of all of them. Margot, sour-faced and serious, hair cut in a fashionable fringe, trendy in her tailored black leather jacket. Her clandestine affair with her middle-aged thesis adviser, a married professor. Hartmut’s older siblings, all married with children, very hearty and suburban. His many nieces and nephews. One sad, overweight niece in particular who admired me inordinately. His mother, sturdy and kindly, still alive when we talked on the phone but not included in the list of surviving family members. She spent her days in the kitchen, her hair pinned up in a French twist (I never once saw it down), wore old-fashioned dresses and aprons. Her house overflowed with knickknacks and dishes displayed in glass-faced cabinets, trailing philodendron plants, small rugs piled on larger rugs. His oldest sister, competent and managerial, headed the list, so she must have survived her cancer. Hartmut was a tai chi instructor, into holistic medicine, and I heard from a friend years ago that his sister was very angry when he told her that she’d brought the cancer on herself.

I wrote to a friend in Germany, hoping to find Margot, and she told me she’d ask around. I didn’t question my impulse to contact Margot, which was immediate, and neither did my friend. Did I want to communicate with Margot because she was always with us, a witness to our years together? Was she the only way I could think of to reconnect to my past?

After a few months my friend managed to locate Margot’s email address for me. She also found out that Hartmut had died of cancer himself. “Nach kurzer schwerer Krankheit” (“after a short, severe illness”) is all the death notice said. He must have been very pissed off, given his holier-than-thou attitude toward everyone else’s health.

Hartmut was autocratic, Marxist, frequently dictatorial. When we lived together in a three-story house with six other students in Providence, we fought every time it was our turn to cook dinner. I was nineteen and knew nothing about cooking, but I still didn't want him telling me what to do. He always knew better. He continued to know better in the years that followed, but I don't remember whether we continued to fight. Mostly, he was charming and charismatic, fun to be with. I recall my years in Germany after graduating from Brown as happy years. I was blissfully disburdened of my dysfunctional family back in New Jersey and what I saw as their bourgeois expectations for my future. We had a lot of friends. We had various part-time jobs that somehow supported us comfortably without too much effort. Göttingen was a beautiful city, with narrow cobblestone streets and picturesque half-timbered buildings with tile roofs. When Hartmut got a job tutoring a baron's kids, we moved to a spacious, romantically spartan apartment in a country village nearby. We had our wedding on the grounds of the baron's stone castle. Friends slept on piles of hay in the barns. Margot was so upset that she drove home in the middle of the night.



That's how I remember it. Margot drove home because she was upset. Perhaps because we were both leaving for the States where I was about to start a PhD. Or because he was marrying me. I don't know why she'd want to hear from me, but now that I have her email address, I've become obsessed with writing to her and what I will say.

I could keep the email short and scan a photograph to go with it. A photograph that includes Margot, because in the end what may interest her most is her memory of her past self, not her memory of Hartmut forty years ago, certainly not her memory of me.

I have a lot of photographs from those years of my life. I never look at them. I remember thinking after our breakup that I'd kept the photo albums, making me the memory-keeper. I wondered whether Hartmut would find it convenient to forget our years together.

I suddenly recall that I sent Hartmut a picture of me when I was pregnant, so we must have stayed in touch longer than I remember now. I was standing on the patchy grass in front of the small bungalow my husband and I had

rented in Fresno, where we'd moved for my first teaching job. I was wearing a black T-shirt dress. The picture was in profile. Pregnancy agreed with me. I was laughing, proud of my swelling stomach.

Photographs have a way of replacing memories. So when I think of the summer vacation in Greece at the start of our relationship, I picture Hartmut crouched on a craggy cliff, looking out over the Aegean, the water impossibly turquoise, the sky impossibly blue, his hair windblown, not because I remember being there but because I remember the photograph. His bare back is smooth and brown. He's wearing faded red-plaid bathing trunks. I do recall more, as I think of it. The hot white sand on the deserted beach where we camped in his VW bus. The strange skeletal structure there: a gargantuan luxury hotel that had been abandoned mid-construction. The freshwater hole nearby where an old Greek man surprised the two of us naked. How he cackled with glee. My rare tan (usually I turn lobster red). My long brown hair made lighter from the sun. The bottle of champagne that Hartmut ordered in the Athens restaurant the night before I flew back to the States. I wore a sleeveless white dress, tight and very short, and rope-soled espadrilles. The headwaiter set up a pyramid of glasses, and the champagne was supposed to flow into them, row by row, like a cascading fountain, but it didn't work, his hand was trembling, the glasses tipped, and he was embarrassed and brought us a new bottle of champagne.

I liked being a foreigner for three years in Göttingen. It made me feel special. I loved learning German, the theatrics of intonation, the nuances of sentence structure and vocabulary and how they differed from English, creating meanings impervious to translation. I found it easier to socialize in a foreign language. Small talk that would have seemed trivial to me at home was fun in German. But my life felt unfinished. I didn't expect to stay, and in retrospect the marriage became something like the abandoned hotel on the Greek coast, a blueprint set aside in favor of other plans.



My first thought when I saw the news of Hartmut's death was that I was glad we hadn't stayed married, not exactly something I could tell Margot. The end of our relationship was painful, but I gained so much more than I lost by following through on my graduate studies and career, marrying a man I love deeply, raising a son. It felt strange, however, to know that the only other person who shared intimate memories of my twenties was no longer alive. I

also wondered whether I should have forgiven him in that phone call ten years ago. Did I still need to blame him? Was I so blameless myself? (Have I ever accepted my own complicity in the breakup of Hartmut's relationship with his live-in girlfriend, Inge, which didn't occur until well after our carefree vacation in Greece?) His death was also a reminder of pending mortality. Several of my friends, including my best friend from college, have died of cancer in the past few years. My younger brother is dying of cancer.

None of this would interest Margot.

After mulling it over for several months, I've become suspicious of my motives for contacting Margot. Do I just want her to know how well my life has turned out? That I more than survived the breakup with her brother? Or maybe I want to know more about her life. Hartmut told me in our phone call, surprise in his voice, that she'd done very well for herself, with a lectureship at a university, a long-standing marriage (to someone with OCD who, Hartmut complained, wouldn't allow the windows in their flat to be opened). No, whatever connection I feel is not to Margot, who seems to be doing fine. Whether it's even to Hartmut, or primarily to the girl I once was, is hard to say. In "On Keeping a Notebook," Joan Didion observes, "I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends."



What was she like, that girl in her twenties? Incandescent. Buoyant. Adventurous. Thrilled with her glamorous life in Europe and wide-open future. Naive and inexperienced. Sometimes heedless of others. Since then I've had ample experience, lovers who've meant something to me, good years and bad years, and a second marriage that's survived some very rough patches. But I wouldn't call myself sophisticated. Or world-weary. Marriage and motherhood have taught me a lot about responsibility and about love. And yet, I don't dislike the young, inexperienced girl who knew none of these things.

True, I was careless of his girlfriend Inge's feelings. I hardly knew Inge and spoke with her only twice that I can recollect. The first time, my relationship with Hartmut had just started. I was about to leave Germany to tour Europe

with a Eurail pass. Hartmut wanted to meet me in Greece, my final destination. I was sitting on the low twin bed in a tiny, high-ceilinged room in a friend's communal flat. (Back at Brown in the fall, I called it a "Marxist commune," a somewhat self-important description.) The walls and ceiling were white, the doors and window frames painted in bright primary colors: red, blue, yellow. There were leftist political posters on the walls; they were all over the flat, variations of raised fists against red backgrounds with bold lettering in black (*Solidarität!*). You had to walk through the only bathroom to get into the room, and everyone seemed completely unembarrassed by that, beckoning me through while they sat on the toilet or lounged in the claw-footed bathtub. The resident of the room, a friend of Inge's, was in the hospital, I think, so I had a private space to myself for two weeks. Hartmut drove a taxi at night and dropped by after his shift. Inge, who'd learned of the affair, was standing in the doorway. All I remember is her opening line as she surveyed the room: "This was convenient, wasn't it?"

Inge was older than me, auburn-haired and sensual, slightly plump. She tried to hold on to Hartmut. She made the trip to Greece with him, so she'd be there if I didn't show up, but I did, fresh from adventures in Holland, France, and Italy. She remained in their apartment in Göttingen when he left to visit me. When he wrote to her that he was staying in the States, she smashed all of the dishes in their kitchen. Margot, who was living there too, said she was afraid to come out of her room that night. And when Hartmut and I returned to Göttingen together the following summer, Inge rushed out of the apartment with a plastic bucket of cold water held high and drenched the two of us. I remember the shock of the freezing water and my goose bumps, my thin Indian muslin shirt plastered to my skin. She came to me later that day to apologize and said that the water was meant for Hartmut, not me. She was magnificent, full of passion. I looked her up online some years ago and discovered that she had become a doctor, as planned. She was not a woman who gave up easily or allowed unexpected obstacles to prevent her from achieving her goals. I don't know why I remember someone I barely met so vividly. Is it because I wanted to be like her? Years later, I felt so unequipped to deal with Hartmut's betrayal.

It's not guilt over my behavior with Inge that bothers me. Or guilt about driving a wedge between Margot and Hartmut either. I wonder now whether it's guilt over not forgiving Hartmut when it could just as well have been

me who left. Looking back, I can see that I wasn't as fully committed to our relationship as I believed myself to be.

I was drawn to one of Margot's lovers, a student-musician she was infatuated with. I still remember my astonishment as he pressed his leg against mine under the table when the four of us were at a noisy bar, ever more insistent. It was inexperience and not conscience—not any sense of moral obligation to Hartmut or Margot—that kept me from responding. I hitchhiked to Berlin with an American I had a crush on (such a strong jaw, such wild, jet-black hair). “What would you do if I kissed you right now?” he whispered in the dark. I pulled up the blanket and turned away on the musty velvet couch in the living room where we were crashing, too shy to reply. And another crush, languid and slender—a coworker at the *Sprachlabor*, the language lab where I was teaching. We spent hours cocooned in the office one afternoon, engaged in the kind of soulful conversation that overcomes the young, dizzy with each other. I can't remember a single word we said, only the pale delicacy of his skin, his angelic looks (not my usual type at all). When his fiancée arrived, she gave us a sharp glance and moved behind his high-backed desk chair, reaching forward to envelop his chest with possessive arms. And she was right to do so, for either one of us might have run off to Taiwan or some other faraway locale that day, had the other suggested it.

Hartmut, it should be said, attracted many women and always had a roving eye, if not outright infidelities before the one that put an end to our marriage. One time he left me at a New Year's Eve party while he walked a girl home. I remember my miserable self-consciousness when I realized I was alone. The party was winding down, guests saying their merry goodbyes. A light snow was falling outside. I was curled in an armchair in the corner of the darkened living room, embarrassed, sure that everyone was looking at me. Minutes felt like hours. I didn't know whether Hartmut was coming back. I didn't know whether I should wait. Most of the partygoers had left by the time he returned, proud that he'd delivered the girl to her door without going inside when she invited him. “I don't know why you're upset,” he said. “You should be glad.”

Is it possible that I was relieved when we later parted ways? That I might have run away with someone myself, had I been more adventurous, more experienced and self-aware? Maybe we were both on the brink of infidelity for years.



What once seemed the inalterable logic of cause and effect shifts over time. New patterns emerge, new understandings along with them, and the element of chance becomes more prominent. Only now does my inability to interpret events as they first unfolded become obvious to me. I don't judge the younger Hartmut anymore, or the unformed girl I once was, with all her flaws. I'm not nostalgic either. My first marriage is an early chapter that's no longer essential to my life story or my conception of myself. "What is hardest to accept about the passage of time," John Irving writes, "is that the people who once mattered the most to us are wrapped up in parentheses."

Even a memory-keeper shuffles memories, foregrounding some, losing sight of others. My photo albums from Germany are stored on an almost inaccessible bookshelf behind a desk in our family room and haven't been opened in years. I'd have to move furniture to get to them. Somewhere in cardboard boxes in our garage are a bundle of Hartmut's love letters, in English, which I have no desire to reread, and some journals of mine, written in German during those years, which I doubt I could decipher now. (How alien my former self has become, fluent in a language I no longer understand.) I don't know whether I've really gotten to the heart of it, what his betrayal meant to me at the time, how surprising it is to me now that I've forgotten so much.

There's a memory I haven't mentioned. A visual fragment of a memory. Hartmut and I had just walked into our tiny house in Ithaca, and he set down the folded newspaper he'd been carrying on the corner of my thrift-store desk. I must have opened the newspaper. Inside was a letter he'd been writing to a mutual friend back in Germany. The letter must have been in German, but I remember it in English, and only the opening line. "I'm in love!" What he wrote after that was incomprehensible to me. How could he possibly be in love with someone else? I don't remember whether we broke up that night, or what I imagined would happen next. I don't remember any before or after, just the folded newspaper on the corner of my desk, the handwritten letter inside. The complete unexpectedness of what I read, a shocking blow to everything I believed I knew about the universe. I can still feel it in my body—my stomach twisted into a knot, the long moment when I couldn't breathe.



It's been a year since I decided not to send a condolence email to Margot

after all. What could I say that would interest anyone but Hartmut? And if she replied, what could Margot say that would interest me? It was such a long time ago. We were peripheral to each other's life stories.

I thought about the unsent email on a warm afternoon last summer, when I was sitting alone in the El Jardin in San Miguel de Allende. My husband and son had gone on a long, hot trip to a nearby pyramid, and I'd elected to spend the day on a shaded bench in the leafy park instead, reading Cristina Garcia's *Here in Berlin*. Her fictionalized vignettes of Germans involved in World War II brought back memories of Hartmut's father, a riding instructor in the army in Poland during the war, and how reluctant his father and mother had been to say anything about Hitler or their war experiences. And Hartmut and Margot and others in their generation, so angry about their parents' Nazi past, so politicized. I thought, really for the first time in years, that I should write to Hartmut because he would definitely enjoy this book. And then I thought, but I can't write to him. His absence became real to me. Maybe that is why I was so struck when one of the characters remarks, "Sometimes, kind Visitor, I long to send letters to the past . . . but who would write back?" I considered sending the book to Hartmut's address in Kiel anyway, with no return address, but the thought disappeared along with my fading memories of our long-ago marriage, a parenthesis in the late summer day.