

## Forgotten Dreams

On his first night in the apartment, Petra sat Hassan down in the kitchen with a pot of Syrian tea the man at the Middle Eastern grocery store on Sonnenallee picked out for her. She wore a baggy cable knit sweater with a small hole on the left shoulder, both cuffs slightly frayed, her hair pulled back, exposing the gray mixed in with the ash blonde.

“I hope you’ll be comfortable here,” she said in English. She tore the paper from the tea bag into little pieces underneath the table, the shreds of paper with Arabic writing on them falling like snow onto her lap. Hassan looked thinner than in the pictures she’d seen on Facebook. He had a boyish face and a small, heart-shaped scar above his left eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, you must be tired,” Petra said when the pot was nearly empty. What was she thinking, talking the poor boy’s ear off?

“No, no. But my German class starts early tomorrow.”

Petra blushed. “Of course.”

She showed Hassan to Teresa’s room, handed him two towels and a wash cloth and left him alone. By nine he was already in bed, asleep under Teresa’s pink and blue striped comforter.

Teresa didn’t approve of Hassan. She called Petra from Munich as soon as she heard about her plans.

“Mom, you can’t have a Syrian man living alone with you in the apartment. You know what their culture is like.”

Petra sighed. She’d sent her daughter to a Steiner school with an urban apple orchard and classes on interpretive dance, her holidays spent on Bavarian farms, petting goats and milking cows. But Teresa preferred gray flannel and pearls earrings to batik and Acai beads.

She wanted to be lawyer like Petra, but planned to specialize in corporate law; the kind of law that makes you money.

“He's not a man. He's a year younger than you are.”

Petra had been lonely since Teresa left to study in Munich. If nothing else, Hassan would be someone to come home to.

The language school's registration office where Hassan had been assigned his German integration course was in a once-stately building on Motzstraße, the massive wooden doors at the entrance now covered in tags.

“This is it,” Petra said. She was dressed in a navy pant suit and heels for her morning court appointment, her clients a group of Bulgarians who'd broken into a clothing donation bin in Moabit. Her heels echoed in the stairwell, the chipped marble stairs covered in worn red hemp carpeting, while Hassan trailed behind her.

At least forty people were waiting in the registration office, all ages and shades of skin, their head coverings ranging from baseball caps to kufi to hijab in a rainbow of colors. The school registrar, an older German woman, sat behind two towering house plants. “*Es ist mir egal, ob Sie kein Deutsch können, sie müssen den Test trotzdem machen,*” the woman yelled at a tall African in a white collared shirt. She pushed a stack of papers at him while the man shook his head, his hands in the air.

Petra looked at her watch. “I'm sorry, I have to go. Are you ok?”

“I'm fine.”

The registrar was now scowling at an Asian woman holding a small child in her arms. Poor Hassan. Who knew how long he'd have to wait until that woman yelled at him in a language he couldn't understand? “You're sure you'll be ok?”

“I'm sure.” Hassan looked so determined, she believed him.

On the weekends, Petra took Hassan around Berlin. She took him to Grunewald, where they saw a wild boar in the forest by the sand pit, the boar so close they could smell its musky stench. They circled the World Time Clock on Alexanderplatz and Hassan stopped to take a picture of Petra standing under the current time in London, Lisbon, Casa Blanca. She was squinting in the photo, her shoulders slouching and her head slightly bowed, as though she were in a room with ceilings not tall enough to support her height. She wondered what they looked like together, a middle-aged German woman with boyish hips and a twenty-year-old Syrian boy with a similar build and serious eyes the color of sandalwood.

It had just stopped raining when they hopped on the double decker Bus 100 at *Zoologischer Garten*. They climbed the steep, spiraling stairs to the upper level where they snagged two seats at the very front by the window. The floor and the seats vibrated underneath them while Charlottenburg rushed by outside the window, the white, ornate buildings like rows of wedding cakes. “We’ll get off at *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*,” Petra said.

Most locals stayed downstairs in the double decker buses, but kids and tourists loved to sit at the top. Petra used to sit up here with Teresa when she was small, her daughter pretending the rail in the front was a steering wheel and she was the bus driver. An Italian woman was sitting in the seat Teresa always wanted, holding a fussy baby in her lap.

“Berliners call *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* the *schwangere Auster*, the pregnant oyster. The building has a very unusual shape, you’ll see.”

But Hassan didn’t say anything. He was watching the Italian woman and her baby. The baby had a rash on its cheeks. It kicked and whined while the mother rocked it, singing a lullaby in Italian.

When the baby cried louder, the woman sitting behind them started to complain. “*Wie kann man mit so einem Kind in einen Bus steigen? Unmöglich, diese Touristen.*”

Stupid woman. Petra was glad Hassan couldn't understand her. The baby was screaming louder, its entire face now red. The mother continued to sing and rock, but the baby wouldn't be comforted. When the bus barreled past Brandenburg Gate, the child was finally quiet. A few seconds later it threw up all over the window, the milky vomit pooling over the driver's top mirror.

The driver slammed on his brakes; the passengers lurched forward.

“*Wir fahren nicht weiter bis jemand meinen Spiegel reinigt,*” bellowed the bus driver from his seat below. “*Wir fahren nicht weiter!*”

“*Tja, was hab' ich gesagt?*” said the woman behind them.

The Italian woman looked at Petra and Hassan, her baby limp and whimpering in her arms. “What's happened? Why has the bus stopped?”

“The driver said you have to clean up your child's mess or he won't drive,” Petra told her. “It's blocking the mirror.”

The woman lay her baby down on the seat and started rummaging through her diaper bag; she was trying hard not to cry. Hassan stood up.

“Please, sit down. I will clean it.” He took off his sweatshirt and wiped up the vomit, while the woman sat in her seat, cradling her baby's head. When he was finished, he helped her put her baby in the carrier strapped to her chest. “Thank you so much,” she said, and got off the bus.

“*Endlich,*” said the woman behind them.

Hassan sat down again next to Petra, his sweatshirt balled up on his lap, smelling like sour milk.

They had coffee and cake on the veranda of the café in *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*. Hassan washed out his sweatshirt in the bathroom and hung it to dry on the back of one of the chairs at their table facing the Spree River.

“Would you prefer to go inside?” Petra asked. “You must be cold.”

“It’s fine. I like looking at the water.”

They sat a few minutes in silence, the pigeons gathering at their feet where they bobbed their heads, hoping for stray crumbs, but they didn’t offer them any.

“That was a kind thing you did for that woman on the bus.”

Hassan poured sugar into his coffee and stirred. “She needed help.”

Petra had done a weekend training course with the organization who arranged the home stay on how to deal with trauma: *Let them talk if they need to, but call us if you're getting overwhelmed.* But Hassan didn't want to talk about what he'd been through. He told her a little about his family. His father, a doctor, had been killed in an airstrike in Damascus and his mother and younger sister were at a camp in Lebanon. He never talked about his journey and Petra never asked him any questions.

But Hassan did talk a lot about music. In Syria, before the war started, he had been preparing for the entrance exams to the Higher Institute of Music. When his German was good enough, he wanted to study guitar and composition at the conservatory in Berlin, or some other city in Germany. Petra told the organization and they gave him a guitar someone had donated a couple of weeks ago. The guitar had a deep scratch down its side, and wasn't the best quality to begin with, but he was happy to have it.

But Hassan's true love was the Oud. “In the Oud is a universe of sound,” he told her. Petra googled Oud and found pictures of an instrument that looked exactly like the lute flung over the shoulder of a minstrel in a Renaissance tapestry.

Later that evening, they shared a pot of Syrian tea in the kitchen and Hassan played her songs by his idol, the Oud player Adnaan Baraky. The Oud's sound reminded Petra of a more sonorous harpsichord.

“This one is my favorite.” Hassan put on Baraky's song *Forgotten Dreams*. *Forgotten Dreams* was slow at first, almost maudlin, like a poet with a broken heart, a Werther relishing in his suffering. The song changed a minute later, the new sound strange and magical, and

Petra imagined the poet's surprise when a genie suddenly rose out of his bottle of wine. The song switched from Goethe to Karl May, the Oud sounding like a banjo in a western get-away scene, a love story told on horseback, drunk cowboys starting a fight before giving in to a fit of laughter, a line of can-can girls closing out the dream someone somewhere had forgotten.

She poured Hassan another cup of tea, the steam rising from the cups billowing into scrolls. "My father gave me an Oud made of rosewood, with beautiful inlays of mother of pearl. It belonged to his uncle, he was a professional musician. I left it at my grandmother's house, so who knows where it is now."

Weeks turned into months. When Petra came home from work, Hassan was sitting at the table with his German books, ploughing through accusative, digging into dative, delving into declination. She cooked dinner and he tried to talk to her in German, but got frustrated after a while and switched back to English. He stayed up later most nights, practicing the guitar on the sofa in Teresa's bedroom.

One day, when he came home from school, Petra surprised him with an Oud, a yellow ribbon tied around its neck. Hassan shook his head. "No, this is too much." She told him someone had donated it to the organization like the guitar, and they had thought of him. He sat down and started to play, turning away from her so she wouldn't see him cry.

But Petra lied. She bought the Oud herself and paid almost six hundred euros for it. She bought it out of guilt because, try as she might, she couldn't get him out of her head.

Before her accidental fall into celibacy, Petra had slept with a total of nine men. The list started with Tilo, her boyfriend in *Gymnasium*, a red-haired, semi-professional tennis player everyone called Baby Boris. On a class trip to Hamburg they'd slipped away and had sex against the exposed bricks under a bridge on the Elbe, inspired by the peepshows they'd walked past on the Reeperbahn. The others were spaced out unequally between university and

her late thirties, the most important being Alejandro, not because of the length or depth of the relationship, but because he got her pregnant.

Petra met Alejandro in the Pyrenees on the Way of Saint James, both determined to walk all the way to Santiago de Compostela. Alejandro had a deep voice and broad hands he gestured with when he quoted Coehlo and recited poems, many of them his own. In the evenings they checked into one of the *albergues* where they stayed up late, drinking cheap Rioja in the common room. They slept together for the first time in their fourth *albergue*, trying to be quiet so they wouldn't wake up the person sleeping on the bottom bunk. One night they splurged and got a private room with a sloped ceiling and exposed beams, the headboard of the queen-sized bed made of twisted ornate wrought iron, the bathroom decorated with scallop shells pressed into the tiles.

Neither of them made it to Santiago.

Alejandro moved to Berlin shortly after Teresa was born. Since he didn't speak German, he stayed at home with the baby while Petra went back to work. But, poetry and ponytail aside, Alejandro was an incurable macho. Petra would come home from work, completely exhausted, only to find him vegged out on the couch, his t-shirt flecked with pizza stains, watching television he could barely understand. He'd feed Teresa, but forget to change her diaper, leave stacks of dishes in the sink and piles of laundry on the bed. No matter how much they fought, he couldn't understand why Petra didn't want to come home and cook dinner for him. He moved back to Madrid when Teresa was six months old.

Three of the nine came after Alejandro, but each time things fizzled out fast. Teresa always came first.

Petra talked about sex with her friends and some of them also weren't having any, though most of them were married. Maybe sex stops being important once you reach middle-age, but people are just too embarrassed to talk about it. At this point in her life, sex and, so

help me god, love, sounded like nothing more than a hassle and a chore. If it weren't for Hassan, she wouldn't barely be thinking about it at all.

It all started the night Hassan played *Forgotten Dreams*. They did the dishes together before bed, she rinsed, he dried. His arm brushed against hers a few times and, when it did, a jolt went through her body, one she hadn't felt for so long she was surprised she even recognized it. In bed, she closed her eyes and pictured his face. What she wouldn't give for him to come into her room and crawl in bed with her, his skin warm like the sand under her feet on a beach in early summer.

The next morning at breakfast, while Hassan slathered butter on to a bread roll, she felt like sinking into the ground. What was wrong with her? The boy was a year younger than her daughter, a quarter of a century younger than she was; he was vulnerable and in her care. She wasn't attracted to him. How could she be? But when his knee briefly met hers under the table, it was there again: the jolt. She held her breath, wanting more than anything to kiss him.

She couldn't get him out of her head.

When she met the Bulgarians standing under the limestone arches in the lobby of the *Kriminalgericht* in Moabit for their second court appearance, wearing clothes they probably stole from the donation bin, Petra thought about Hassan. She thought about him when she met with a friend, one of the undersexed married ones, for lunch at Café am Neuen See. They sat near the pond, a mistake because of the mosquitos.

"How are things going with your refugee?" Her friend asked. She took a bite of tagliatelle, a spot of tomato sauce falling onto her blouse.

"Fine," Not fine. I want more than anything to lay with him and not leave the bed for days. "How are things with you?"

That night, when Hassan played the guitar in Teresa's bedroom, Petra touched herself for the first time in years. But she felt bad about it afterward. Something was obviously wrong with her. She just had to find a way to fix it.



To ease her guilt, Petra went to a shop for oriental musical instruments on Adalbertstrasse. She chose out an instrument with striped ribs, its pick guard shaped like a cloud, and listened patiently while the shopkeeper gave her a ten-minute lecture on the differences between an Arabic Oud and a Turkish one. She walked home smiling, the Oud hanging over her shoulder, tucked safely away in its case. *See, I'm a good person. Not some middle-aged pervert lusting over a poor refugee boy from Syria.*

But the Oud didn't help. When Hassan played it at night, those beautiful, mournful sounds coming from behind the door to Teresa's bedroom, Petra felt like screaming: *Please, for god's sake. Stop.*

She called the organization and told them Hassan couldn't stay with her any longer.

"I'm sorry, but he has to go."

"Can't you make it work?" the girl on the phone said. Petra could hear the judgement in her voice. "There has to be a way you can." She pictured the girl: a nose ring and long hair tucked into a hoodie, a volunteer at an organization for refugees who had a subscription to the *taz*, the kind of girl she used to wish Teresa would be someday.

"I'm sorry, I just can't. It's me, not him. Please don't tell him I put in the request."

The girl scoffed. "As if we ever would."

The organization sent Hassan an e-mail to let him know he'd been reassigned to a dormitory with twelve other boys in Weissensee. "I don't understand. Why can't I stay here?"

"I'm sorry, I don't have a say in these things."

"But I want to stay here."

"I wish there was something I could do."

They shook hands outside of the dormitory, the social worker standing beside them.

"Be sure to keep in touch," she said.

He promised her he would.

Petra turned 46 two weeks after Hassan moved out. On the morning of her birthday, she stood naked in front of the mirror. Not bad for 46. Not bad at all. She rubbed lotion into her skin, her body soon smelling of lavender.

Men started noticing her. Their eyes lingered longer than usual on the U-Bahn; colleagues started flirting over lunch. Men hadn't looked at her like that for years. Or maybe they had, and she'd just stopped paying attention.

Either way, something had to give.

Petra didn't see Hassan for another eight months, but she kept tabs on him over Facebook. She read his updates when they showed up on her feed, written in Arabic, English and, increasingly, in German. Occasionally she'd like something or write a comment and he'd like what she said or write a comment back. But, besides Facebook, they had no other contact.

Then, one morning in the U-Bahn on her way to work, who should get on the train but Hassan. His hair was longer than when she'd seen him last, his wool coat open, showing a blue collared shirt and dark jeans. The Oud she'd bought him was strapped to his back in its black canvas case. When she called out his name, he smiled and made his way through the crowd.

By this time Petra was seeing Andreas, a soft-spoken man with a well-trimmed salt and pepper beard who worked at a school for naturopaths located in the same building as her office. It wasn't love, at least she didn't think it was, but he was nice. The sex was nice. They went on a cycling tour around the Baltic Sea in October, Andreas collecting the bright orange berries from the sea buckthorn bushes which he cooked into a syrup, giving her some later in a decorative terra cotta pot. Teresa met him when she came home for Christmas and the two hit it off. "I'm happy for you mom," she told her later over the phone. "I really am."

Hassan stood in front of her, holding onto the pole while they talked in German. Petra couldn't believe how well he spoke. He told her his mother and sister might be coming to

Berlin in the spring; he was sorry he hadn't kept better in touch but he thought of her often. He was playing the Oud at Südblock in a month and he hoped she would come. Hassan wasn't dressed warm enough for the winter. Petra had the urge to hop off the train and buy him a hat and a scarf.

The woman sitting next to her got off the train at Prinzenstrasse and Hassan sat down in her place, propping the Oud up on his lap.

“I hope you will come to the concert and hear me play the Oud. Petra. *Mein Schatz.*”

*Mein Schatz.* He must not know what that means. Petra smiled. “Send me an invite over Facebook.”

When they arrived at Gleisdreieck station, Hassan got up to switch trains. He shook Petra's hand goodbye, the Oud cradled at his side.

But when the train doors opened, he didn't walk through them. He turned around, sat back down and took her hand again.