

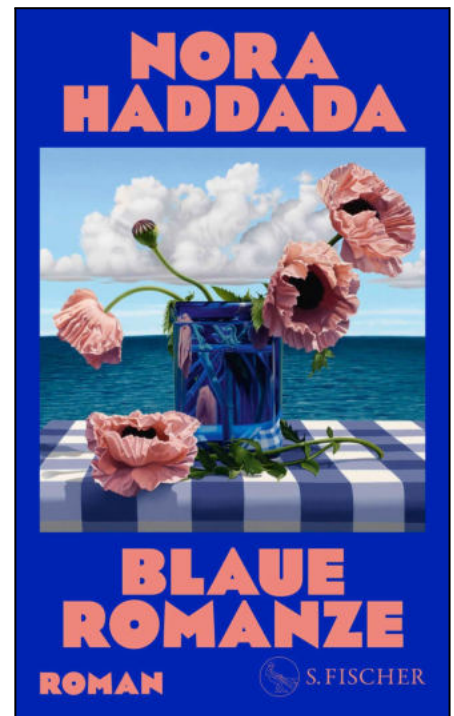
Such Sweet Sorrow

Nora Haddada

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A modern-day Romeo & Juliet within today's fraught political discourses

When Julian spots Myriam in a Marseille karaoke bar, he can't look away. A conversation, a duet, and an illicit climb on a scaffold later, their connection remains unyielding. Both are young, well-read, and critical, with the enchantment of Marseille as their backdrop. But as life pulls them back—Myriam to Paris and Julian to Berlin—their contact fades. Their paths cross again in Berlin when Myriam arrives for her PhD. Yet, post-October 7, their worlds are divided, each standing on opposing sides. In "Such Sweet Sorrow," Nora Haddada masterfully weaves a tale of love, political discourse, and the tragedy of our times.



Nora Haddada, born in 1998, studied Creative Writing and Literary Studies in Hildesheim, Berlin, and Paris. Her debut novel "Nichts in den Pflanzen" was published in 2023 by Ecco/HarperCollins. She lives in Berlin and Paris.

Sample Translation: Fiona Graham
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Part One

Chapter 1, pp. 4–9

They'd met two years earlier in the summer of 2022, on one of the warmest nights of the year up to then. He'd travelled from Berlin to Marseille, a tad behind the Berlin trend of holidaying in Marseille, though that didn't bother him, it being mainly external pressures rather than any intrinsic motivation that made him yield to the dictates of fashion. Hence the decision not to plan this holiday with his Berlin friends, but to call on some close friends he'd known since his schooldays, for whom nothing was ever really *passé*, just mostly *good fun*.

His recently ended stint as an assistant director had been like many previous jobs, leaving him out of pocket, with an almighty sleep deficit and the insight that he had no aspirations to a career in theatre. He was struck by the dismal realisation that he'd tried out nearly all the professions in which he had any interest. His experiences at a museum, in academia, at a culture zine, and now in theatre had left him disillusioned, sucked dry and suffering from a serious dose of the malaise that afflicts the privileged. So getting together with friends for whom such concerns were remote and whose lives were generally quite happy and carefree helped stave off the crisis that would certainly have hit him that summer if he'd stayed in Berlin.

On day one they toured the harbour, where they ate bouillabaisse and played cards. On day two they walked out to the calanques during the day and suffered from moderately serious sunburn in the evening, despite having conscientiously applied lavish amounts of sun cream (even behind their ears). On day three they visited the *Musée des Civilisations*, whose name initially troubled Julian, as the concept of

'civilisation' was now discredited in some of his social circles on account of its colonialist connotations. Although (or perhaps because) he'd – again – taken this on board under external pressures rather than through any intrinsic motivation and so had a merely superficial understanding, he'd bowed to modish mores in avoiding any engagement or association with the concept, though without any serious thought as to whether he subscribed to those mores. But as he knew his school friends took no interest in the debate – indeed, didn't even know of its existence – he was soon entering the museum scruple-free, ready to steep himself, full of innocent curiosity, in Mediterranean gastronomic culture.

In this casually carefree mood, he was soon drawn into a tourist trap with his friends, a bar where he secretly enjoyed ordering a piña colada – a piña colada! – and, following the instructions of a Spanish girl, essayed a belly dance to the strains of *Waka Waka*. The piña colada led on to four beers, a little bar where three tequilas were rapidly upended and downed, a further dance session in the Cours Julien neighbourhood and, finally, in the company of a French crowd who'd taken them under their wing (Julian wasn't sure when anymore), a karaoke bar.

For as long as she could recall, Myriam had spent almost every summer in Marseille, staying in her aunt's small flat near the harbour. She had childhood friends in Marseille, though they weren't a very good match for the student friends she'd put up at her aunt's this summer. Her childhood friends were a mix of her aunt's Franco-Maghrebi friends and the Maghrebi-French neighbourhood kids she'd got to know playing ball on the city beach. Their ball game included the rule that the winner of each round could pick a name for themselves. If you won several times, the names mounted up. And that was how Myriam, an ace at throwing, running and hiding, won a full eight times one summer, after which she bore – in select circles – the proud moniker Myriam-Kyriam-Blussem-Russem-Cola-Fanta-Zidane-je l'aime.

Myriam loved the summers she spent racing about on the beach, her permanently salty skin, the grilled fish and grazed knees; those summers that seemed so endless, yet which slipped by in the way of all tragedies – first slowly, then suddenly. The blazing sun, noisy ball games and covert coca-colas gave way to hot nights, pounding music and concealed cigarettes; to kisses and quarrels, jealousy and hangovers, eternal love and continual break-ups.

At seventeen, Myriam embarked on the prestigious and competitive *classes préparatoires* – a prerequisite for applying to an elite university – at the even more prestigious and competitive Lycée Henri IV. In those two years she didn't visit Marseille once, but spent all her time studying in her tiny room beside the Panthéon. She liked very few of her fellow-students, nearly all of whom were scions of the Parisian intellectual elite, nearly all from the fifth, sixth or sixteenth arrondissements, and nearly all part of the twelfth generation on a mission to acquire vast amounts of knowledge: overwhelmed by the sheer volume and driven by parental expectations, it hardly even occurred to them anymore to ask – why? Myriam was very lonely during this time. She felt unable to cope with the pressure at the institution and was convinced she couldn't live up to her classmates' standards. She could only have ended up here by mistake, here, within the venerable walls of the former Benedictine abbey, its corridors once bestrode by Sartre and Foucault, as nobody tired of repeating: the greatest of the great, les grands hommes, and among them herself, Myriam-Kiriam-Blussem-Russem, who came bottom of the whole year in her first examination.

She avoided the corridor where the list of marks with the corresponding names was pinned up after the examination. And she avoided the courtyard with the tower, the key to which was held by the year's top students, allowing them to spit down on their less successful fellows: this, rumour had it, was tolerated out of reverence for tradition. She suffered from stomach ache during all her lessons and stood two steps back from the others whenever they stood talking in the courtyard. To cap it all, someone (she was sure it was Marie-Anne, President of the Catholic Association) described her in racist

graffiti on a toilet door as a *salope métisse* for having slept with Jean-Louis, who had then proceeded to ignore her. All in all, it was a not atypical though bad start to her academic career, which, albeit after a failed suicide attempt and ensuing therapy, was soon to reach unexpected heights.

During the same period, she stumbled more or less by chance across James Baldwin's essay *The Fire Next Time*, which she read one mild evening sitting on her bed and then immediately reread as soon as she'd finished it. She read Baldwin's short letter to his nephew a third time. Myriam had a vague memory of her early days at secondary school, when they'd learned about the US civil rights movement. She recalled her sense of impotent outrage, less at the reality of segregation and oppression (omnipresent in history lessons) than at the hypocrisy surrounding that reality at the time, in the twentieth century. And as she sat reading Baldwin's descriptions of Harlem, of the life of a Black man in the Land of the Free, of the claims of acceptance and integration, of the reality of racist policy and violence, this feeling came back as if she'd experienced it only recently. Afterwards she sat for a long time on her bed, staring at the bare wall. Then she took out a pen and a notepad and wrote down the sentences that kept repeating themselves in the silence:

there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. [...] You must accept them and accept them with love.

She didn't have a clue what that was supposed to mean. She thought she knew what acceptance was, and she thought she had a vague notion of love. However – here she was quite honest with herself – acceptance had nothing to do with love in her book. For her, acceptance implied distance, difference, whereas love meant that any such distance had long been overcome. But Baldwin's words had a fine ring to them all the same.

Anyway, no matter whether it was the therapy, or Baldwin, or the configuration of the stars, something in Myriam's inner makeup underwent a sea change. The flow of her thoughts became more lucid, more orderly. And everything changed when, shortly afterwards, she won a national philosophy contest on the subject Can one deceive oneself, yet be aware nonetheless? Her tutors saw her differently, her fellow-students saw her differently, and – quite unexpectedly – she saw herself differently. The nerdy, uptight, curious, upper-middle-class Parisians with whom Myriam made friends at this time, a significant number of whom were virgins, decided five years later to holiday together in Marseille. And, as outsiders, they were thrilled when Myriam got a call from a childhood friend at two in the morning to say they were in karaoke bar 'S' and that she had to show up right now for a farewell party.

So Myriam set off with her pale-faced posse while her arrival was announced in karaoke bar 'S', this information being relayed teasingly by a tall, doe-eyed man whom Julian thought very handsome. In persistent anticipation, Julian turned in sync with the handsome man each time the door opened, only to turn back immediately in disappointment. Finally, when it opened for the twelfth time three quarters of an hour later, a loud, wildly gesticulating crowd came in, apparently in the throes of a debate. In their midst – he identified her instantly – was Myriam. Her forehead was smooth, her cheeks pursed, her hair ruffled, her eyebrows severely arched. She laughed loudly, expressed amused outrage, then stopped abruptly when the voice of the handsome man tore her attention away from the debaters. Thus her expression remained curiously animated for an instant before – to his astonishment – her gaze flitted to the left (to him!), eliciting a smile that came far too late given his dumbfounded state; the friends hurrying to greet her were already pushing in between, covering Myriam with their bodies and *bisous*, so she didn't see Julian trying to spot her behind the backs of the Marseille crowd – although the handsome man certainly did.

But soon the wave of greetings had swept Myriam into the middle of the bar, where the handsome man smiled at her with a tenderness that Julian had seldom if ever seen. 'Alain,' said Myriam: she planted kisses on his left and right cheeks and smiled in her turn, albeit with a certain awkwardness, revealing a slightly crooked lateral incisor on which Julian's gaze lingered briefly. Noticing this and thinking (hoping?) he was one of the group, Myriam turned towards him with a smile, expecting that Alain would introduce them. When it became apparent that no such introduction was forthcoming and that Julian himself didn't know what etiquette Myriam was following, she finally asked him who his friends were. And since Julian's French was worse than he was willing to admit, he replied, '*Oui, j'ai des amis.*'

Myriam gave him a puzzled look, laughed, and thought him rather mignon with his calm self-possession and his high cheekbones. Spotting her crooked incisor again, he thought: that tooth, it just kills me. She couldn't see that he was blushing, or grasp that it was panicky intuition which made him say, in his bad French, '*Je suis de Berlin. J'étude la philosophie.*'

Myriam laughed again. '*Ich liebe Berlin.*' Which she regretted the moment she heard herself utter the words. Julian, who, to his own surprise, found this not cheesy but flattering, said, 'Oh, you speak German.' And she replied (now revealing a faint accent): 'Yes, my father's German, but I live in Paris.'

'Ich liebe Paris,' said Julian, and felt instantly embarrassed. But Myriam, who, to her own surprise, found this not cringe-inducing but (again) cute, smiled and said, 'Really?', though it made little sense. And he said, 'Yes, really. I haven't been there for ages, but I really like the city.'

'I like Berlin too. I haven't been there for a while either, just over to visit my grandma in Frankfurt.'

'Oh, nice, I've got friends in Frankfurt!'

A brief pause ensued in which they both sought and avoided one another's eyes until Myriam asked, 'So, do you sing?'

'I was in a choir once, but only as a child.'

'No, I mean ... here?'

'Oh, I see!' was on the tip of his tongue, but he cleared his throat and continued nonchalantly, 'Yeah, karaoke, I love singing karaoke, yeah.'

'Oh, really, I hardly ever do it.'

'Yeah, I don't do it often either.'

She laughed again (which he liked). 'Want to sing something?'

'The two of us?'

'Yes, I mean ...' She lowered her voice. 'If you want to.'

'Yes, sure, it would be great to sing together, I didn't mean to sound ... unenthusiastic.'

'Ah! I was already thinking duets probably aren't your thing.'

'Oh, they are, I only ever sing duets really.'

'Like in the choir.'

'Exactly, ha ha,' he said. And he racked his brains in despair for something amusing to say, but again there was nothing. Rien.

'Which song shall we sing?'

[...]

pp. 56-67

'You remember Myriam?'

Matthias looked at him, dumbfounded. 'The one who's always insulting you?'

'God, no.'

'Oh, no, wait a moment, it's coming back to me now. The mephedrone girl.'

'What? No. The one from Marseille.'

'Ohhh,' said Matthias slowly, clearly baffled to begin with, until there was a second 'Oh!' as the penny dropped. 'The karaoke girl.'

'Yes, her.'

'But wasn't that back in the last millennium? Anyway, I thought she lived in Paris.'

'She did, but not anymore. She's in Berlin now.'

'But you didn't have ...' – Matthias clicked the fingers of his left hand three times –
'her number, did you?'

'We bumped into each other by chance.'

'By chance? In Berlin?'

'In the humanities library.'

'Fate,' said Matthias, lighting his cigarette again after a raindrop had extinguished it.
'I mean ... that's one hell of a coincidence.'

It was raining harder now, they pulled their coats around them, and Matthias pointed out a doorway where they took shelter. The streets emptied as footsteps hurried away, while the cars drove on, swishing through puddles.

'And I think ... We get on really well – I mean, it feels different somehow. It's so easy, but somehow serious at the same time, you know?'

'Somehow.'

'And she's just phenomenal, she's doing a doctorate and she's twenty-four, but she's really fun too, and, er, so ...'

'Uncomplicated.'

'No, I wouldn't say that,' said Julian, taken aback at his own enthusiasm. 'What I was going to say is, she's got high standards.'

'High standards mean high-maintenance, to judge by the words you use when you're sober.'

'It's a pity she's not free tonight, or I'd introduce you. I don't know, Matthias, it's a feeling I have, I ... I've never felt this way before, it's just so ... well, different somehow.'

'He's going to break into Singing in the Rain any moment now,' said Matthias sotto voce through his cigarette, but Julian, who didn't hear him, leaned against the wall and gazed out at the lights of Neukölln. The rain grew lighter and the first cyclists pedalled

past in their rain capes. A man hobbled off towards the underpass. Matthias checked his phone.

'I had a dream last night,' said Julian.

'Go on, so did I.'

'What did you dream?'

'That nobody needs dreamers.' Matthias jerked his head towards the street. 'OK, Romeo, let's go and do Alex's dirty work for him first, there'll still be time for you to chase French girls afterwards.'

Julian grinned. Then he remembered where they were going. 'So what's this Alex thing all about? Not some dodgy business again?'

'Oh, you know Alex.'

'That's just it.'

In the meantime, Myriam had been telling Amine about Julian – again, as Amine never tired of pointing out. She'd mentioned several times that she wanted to write to him, then she thought she shouldn't, so as not to seem too pushy, and finally she said it was a good thing she still didn't have his number.

'How come you haven't got his number yet?' Amine asked, and Myriam said there was something she liked about this slow pace. Though finally she admitted in some frustration that it was a pity, as they could have done something together this weekend.

'Have you at least got his surname now?'

Myriam said no. They were still lounging in the low-slung leather sofa, Amine smoking while Myriam watched a portly older man edge precariously along the back of the couch facing them, to avoid having to squeeze round or over or behind it.

Myriam grasped Amine's arm with a groan and buried her face in it for a second. Disengaging herself, she looked at her friend. 'Amine, I'm completely ... how can I put this? ... obsessed ...'

'Don't say that.'

'I just can't think of anything else. It's no good, you've got to help me clear my mind.'

Amine stroked her head. 'What mostly helps is looking for flaws and shortcomings in the other person. Then you focus on those and you convince yourself there's no future in it.'

'Ah, that's why they call Berlin the city of love,' said Myriam, again watching the man perform his balancing trick along the back of the couch. Then Amine froze and said quietly, 'Don't look now, but – omigod, I think those two guys over there were involved in the Talia thing.' Myriam gave Amine a look and whispered, 'Omigod, are you sure, are they genuine anti-Germans?'

Amine nodded, but didn't find it as amusing. Myriam whispered, 'Are they eating Big Macs?'

'No, finger food.'

'Finger food?'

'Yep, finger food.'

'What?'

'Nibbles. You know.'

'What are they doing?'

'I think one's a Twitter pundit who basically cancels anyone who says too many people are dying. And the other writes for a conservative paper, I think. He does the same, only a bit less, and he's a bit more mainstream.'

'No, I mean what are they doing here?'

'Oh, got you. Well, the one with the finger food is checking out the bookcase. And the other's looking around at nothing in particular, with a gormless grin on his face.'

'Omigod, Amine, can I look now?'

'Be discreet.'

Myriam turned her head. The reading room was so crowded that she couldn't see anything at first. No one in particular. Then she did, and without thinking she exclaimed

– in a loud, shrill, cheery voice, like someone who’s just bumped into a childhood friend on holiday – ‘Julian!’ Amine stared at her in shock, and Myriam stared back as the penny dropped, and in the instant when her face crumpled, Julian turned and mirrored her expressions as if in slow motion. Matthias, with a book in one hand, looked from Julian’s frozen face to Myriam’s, understood immediately, and blurted out ‘Ha! Fate!’

Part Two

Chapter 1, pp. 60–67

So Myriam looked at Julian and Julian looked at Myriam. He gave her a lopsided smile and slowly raised a hand in greeting after a moment’s pause. In her turn, Myriam, who’d had her arms crossed in front of her chest, lifted a hand slightly. In the same instant, the man who had been edging along the back of the sofa fell with a shriek onto the mahogany table in front of Myriam and Amine, breaking it in two with an almighty crash. The whole room turned to look at him and rushed towards the table. Myriam and Amine had leapt to their feet. Julian had taken a couple of steps towards the crowd, while Matthias had stayed in the doorway, observing the scene imperturbably. The man’s breathing was laboured now; he seemed to have damaged a lung, and he was twisting and turning in the panicked expectation of imminent death in front of a gawping crowd of bystanders. Racked by loud coughing, he was as helpless as a bug on its back, with tears streaming down either side of his beetroot-red face. The press was such that Myriam and Julian couldn’t see the three people who’d set about treating the man’s physical and psychological symptoms: at any rate, they were now being pushed out of the room along with the rest of the guests. They were swept along by the slow but steady outflow towards the two swing doors, and seeing Amine disappear through the door on the left from which Matthias had photographed the book a moment ago, Myriam grasped Julian’s hand and drew him against the current towards the one on the right. The room they found themselves in now was stuffy and

full of the guests who'd been squeezed out of the reading room. As they let themselves be swept into the corner beside the windows, holding each other's hands tightly, Myriam spotted the door to the balcony, hung with a heavy velvet curtain. In the general hubbub, she pulled Julian unnoticed behind the curtain, opened the door – just a fraction so as not to touch the curtain – and stepped out onto the narrow French balcony outside.

It had stopped raining, and now a strong wind was blowing the water that had gathered on the window ledges of the floors above onto the two motionless figures. Myriam closed the door. Once the concerned murmurings of the partygoers were blotted out, they could hear the wind and the occasional swish of a passing car.

It was on the tip of Myriam's tongue to say, 'What are you doing here?' And, 'What a coincidence!' She wanted to start the ball rolling with innocent curiosity, but such smiling insincerity felt toxic, and she said nothing. Julian, who had registered Amine's expression, wondered what was going through her head. He felt like a child who'd been caught stealing, and was suddenly ashamed of the deal with Alex and of having come in the first place, despite not even knowing exactly why. Or, if he was honest with himself, of suspecting the reason why. They looked down at the floor, at the street, at each other, smiled briefly, unsure at first, then confused, and finally downcast.

'What are you doing here?' Myriam asked finally. And Julian, who wanted neither to lie nor to tell the truth, said nothing.

'Do you know Camila?' She had wound her arms around her body. The wind was cold. Julian shook his head.

'Is she your doctoral advisor?' he asked, and Myriam nodded.

'What are you doing here?' she repeated, irritated at the sadness in her voice. After all, she really didn't know the answer. The nascent hum of an approaching car, growing louder, growing quieter, tailing away. Julian said nothing. He was looking at his feet and Myriam was looking at the floor, or vaguely downwards, where shapes and visual impressions merged into a murky grey.

'Is it because of Talia?' she said, not daring to look at him. Then they were both silent.

'I really don't know,' he said finally. 'I just came with a friend. I don't know.'

She looked at him, he looked at her. They looked down at the street. Suddenly she felt infinitely sad. She looked at him again, trying to divine something in his face, but saw only concerned affection and a tender shyness, and she thought: no, it's inconceivable. She had no idea what to ask: it all sounded so stupid, so stereotypical, so wide of the mark that she hardly dared think it.

'Have you written an article about Talia?'

'I ... no, I haven't written an article about Talia specifically ... though I did refer to her, and a few other people, in another article.'

'What kind of article?'

'About anti-Semitic arguments.'

She looked at him.

'What?' he said after two more cars, reminding himself that there was nothing wrong about what he'd written. He told himself so silently, in his thoughts.

'Nothing,' she said in a low voice.

'You think there's something wrong with that?'

'What?'

'Criticising anti-Semitism?'

She frowned, alert once more, surprised, no, shocked, angered by the unexpected harshness of his tone, by the swift reproach. 'Are you accusing me?'

He said nothing. She said nothing.

'No,' he said finally, his voice low. A car.

'I don't think there's anything wrong with it, I just think it's wrong to misuse the term to shut down any kind of criticism of a ...'

'Please don't say genocide.'

Again, neither said anything.

'So you're ...' She couldn't bring the word to mind. There were lots of things she couldn't bring to mind. Just nonsense, maybe. What had she been meaning to say? She cleared her throat.

'Er ... do you like McDonald's?'

'What?'

'What I mean is ...' She really couldn't bring anything to mind at the moment. 'You like ... McDonald's?'

'Er,' he said, initially puzzled, then doubtfully accepting the unexpected change of subject, 'not really. Maybe as a teenager, but now ...'

She was relieved. He noticed. Felt better.

'I prefer Burger King,' he said and considered pretending to shoot himself, but refrained on seeing her horrified look. He cleared his throat. 'Though I don't like it as much as ...' He tried to excavate a memory of popular fast food chains in France, but drew a blank. 'Pizza Hut?' 'KFC?' 'Le Crobag!'

She was looking at him as if he were mocking her. As if she were in some way insulted, but worse: outraged.

'I don't get it ... Why, what are your favourite ... burgers?'

'I'm not talking about burgers.'

'Yes, you are. For some reason.'

He was about to laugh, take a step towards her, touch her arm, but he just stood there, and she just stood there, and they looked at each other: undecided, confused, downcast.

'I'm talking about the ... contra ... Germans.'

'What?'

'Counter-Germans.'

'Anti-Germans, you mean?'

'Yes.'

Julian laughed – scornfully?

‘That’s just a stick to beat people with these days.’

Another car drove through a puddle. He hadn’t said yes. Come on, what did she actually know for sure, she was thinking, and he was thinking too – why her, why her of all people: first sad, then furious at the vagaries of chance, then just plain furious, then sad again.

‘Though actually,’ he went on, in obedience to a sense of duty that was obscure even to himself, ‘I do think the anti-Germans raised some important issues, and also that a lot of their criticisms are justified. Anti-Semitism among the Left, I mean, and anti-Semitism in relation to Israel ... Those were significant developments – anti-Semitism was completely under the radar before that, and it was a huge problem in society ... and within the Left.’

Myriam looked down. She wanted to ask him something, but then it occurred to her that their discussion wasn’t really about politics. She didn’t really have a clue what they were talking about. About him, about her: what was it all about? But the implicit hostility, the hint of reproach or even menace in his voice weren’t lost on her; neither were the self-assuredness, the practised fluency with which he’d spoken. Amine’s words suddenly seemed distant, and Myriam felt unsure of herself again. Confused. Small.

‘I’d say my own position is more nuanced – but you’re right, that’s my background, my political home, my Heimat, so to speak.’ He regretted using that word, which sounded much more right-wing than he’d intended, and he hoped Myriam wasn’t aware of the debate over the concept of Heimat. ‘Er, not Heimat, what I mean is, my peer group as a teenager was kind of anti-German – but I really don’t have a clue where you got hold of the word, and take it from me, nobody calls themselves that. And okay, maybe they wouldn’t understand this in France – but my grandfather was in the Waffen-SS, just so you know. With that background, I just feel I’m under some sort of obligation ...’

'To stand up for universal humanist val ...' said Myriam, again unsure why she was saying this. Suddenly the whole conversation struck her as ridiculous, clichéd. They stood on the balcony staring at their feet. Julian didn't know what he was doing anymore either. His thoughts were confused, and a single question flashed briefly through his hazy musings: what had happened?

One thing was clear to him: his emotional state was due largely to the pure and simple fact that he was standing here on the balcony beside Myriam. And he had only a vague physical intimation of the reason for this sudden, apparently so unbridgeable distance. After all, what did he know about what she thought? What did she know about what he thought? Was there really a problem? Maybe it was all just a huge misunderstanding. Seven cars swished past before they spoke again, while the political shock gave way, swish by swish, to anxiety about Myriam's affections. In a quiet, gentle tone, he said, 'I mean ... like you, I think some aspects of this ... I don't know how you see things, but I don't think ... I don't think we're fundamentally ... I think it's all very complicated, and ... what I want to say is, I like you. I really like you.'

Myriam raised her head, her cheeks warm, flaming, despite the wind that continued to blow into her face, lift her hair, ruffle it. She was trying to hold it off her face so that she could look at him when she felt his hand coming to her aid, brushing strands of hair behind her ears. She felt his fingertips, and for an instant that was about the only thing she felt.

Meanwhile, the people in the room next door had established that although the man who'd fallen off the sofa hadn't seriously damaged a lung, he had broken an arm. So they'd called an ambulance, which cast its blue light over the forlorn faces of the pair on the balcony. Looking down into the street, they realised the partygoers were leaving the building calmly but rapidly, so they looked at each other, suddenly embarrassed again, and she said, 'I think we'd better go.'

'Let's talk for a bit longer,' he said.

Myriam looked down again. She saw Camila, Amine, Talia and Samira stepping out into the street, buttoning their coats.

‘Just got to say goodbye.’ She looked at him again.

‘There’s a bar down the street on the right ...’

‘In half an hour?’

Then she went down, thanked Camila for the evening, and said goodnight to Talia after swapping numbers and making vague plans to meet for coffee. Finally, she said goodnight to Amine, who asked why she wasn’t going home with her. Myriam mumbled some nonsense in reply, Amine raised her eyebrows, and Myriam said, ‘I just want to talk to him.’

Amine grimaced and Myriam, taken aback at her own sudden defensiveness, said, ‘What is it about Germany? Why can’t anyone bear to talk to anybody who doesn’t have the same opinions?’

And Amine said, ‘*Talking’s* one thing.’

‘Just being friends with people because you like them on a human level, even though their opinions are different from yours – is that some sort of crime?’

‘Oh, people who like criminals because of their inhuman opinions ...’

Myriam’s hand flew to her head. Amine tilted hers slightly. ‘I get it, he’s good-looking. But you can *talk* to someone without being *friends* all of a sudden.’

‘I think friendship is the basis for any kind of discussion. In democracies, it’s really ... as Derrida says ... you can’t ... you’ve also got to ... see the good in ... look at the best, not the worst arguments ... empathy, understanding ..., good vi..., er, I mean goodwill...’

‘Oh, I’m sure. And once you trust each other, you’ll still be thinking about his best argument while he’s writing down your worst one for a newspaper.’

‘I can’t believe how suspicious you are!’

‘I can’t believe how randy you are!’

So she met Julian in the bar. He was sitting at a table with a big glass ashtray, a recipient for the tobacco that fell out of his small, crumply cigarette; he looked

downcast, pensive, and then, raising his head when Myriam entered, briefly glad. Julian had ordered two beers: he pointed at the second and said, 'I've ordered for you.'

She said thank you and sat down. They needed to talk. They needed to talk. Talk, talk, talk. But they were silent again. She had no idea what she wanted to ask him. She was confused, more than anything. Confused about what Amine had told her. Confused that someone like Julian could have written such an article about Talia. Amine's words echoed inside her head: I think you're just a racist – but looking at him, at the warm grey eyes in his melancholy face, which was also (she couldn't help thinking) very handsome, she thought: no, no, no.

He wanted to ask her what she knew. Did she realise Talia had described the 7th of October as an act of resistance, did she agree with that, did she herself ... but each time he was about to speak, each time he looked up, it seemed to him that the situation couldn't be any more tragic, that she'd never (never!) looked so beautiful, that he felt moved each time she smiled. It was inconceivable. But maybe her views were quite different. Maybe she'd ended up in those circles by chance; maybe she really hadn't grasped what they thought ... what they stood for. Who knows, he thought, maybe she's writing her doctoral thesis on ... Walter Benjamin! What did he know?

And so they sat there musing. She was thinking she must have misunderstood something about this weird phenomenon. Maybe he'd been right to criticise Talia? She couldn't imagine that – either that he'd criticised her, or that any such criticism could be justified. She knew Talia a little and was well acquainted with her writings; her articles showed such intelligence, such breadth of reading, such humanity. A voice of reason, an extraordinary clarity of vision, a crystal-clear line of argument that no one – no one – who'd read her writings could deny, thought Myriam. It was inconceivable. There must be some possibility that both were right, she thought. A footnote, a quantum possibility, a tree in the forest.

And while they sat thinking and drinking – though looking more than thinking – they concluded that things couldn't be that bad. How could that intelligent forehead

harbour stupid thoughts, those clear eyes see indistinctly, those straight arms do evil, those fair lips utter ugly sentiments? So they thought.

And he had such a nice smile, and she too had such a nice smile, and as neither had said anything for a long time, she said, 'I hope that man's doing OK.' And he said, 'Yes, so do I, it really didn't look good.' They fell silent again.

'How did he fall then? I didn't see a thing,' said Julian.

'I think he was trying ... There was a crowd in front of the sofa.'

'Ah,' he said. 'So he was trying to take a short cut.'

'Yes, he thought it would be quicker.'

'Mmm ...' he said.

'Yeah ...' she said.

A pause.

'So what else are you up to this week?' she said.

'I think ... I'm meeting an editor ...'

'What do editors actually do?'

He laughed. 'What do editors do?'

She laughed. 'Yes, it's just occurred to me I don't know.'

He laughed. She went red. Why had she said that? Why, she thought, and – you idiot!

Quite a sensible question, he thought. Obvious, perhaps, but there were so many ordinary things people didn't know. It was honest, he thought, and endearing. 'Joke!' she cut in then. 'As if I didn't know.' Her face had gone very red. 'Tee hee!'

'Mmm-hmm!' He grinned.

'Who cares anyway ...' She scraped her beer mat with a fingernail. 'So what else are you doing ... this week?'

'Gymnastics ...'

'You do gymnastics?' said Myriam, amused in her turn.

'Yeah, with rings and bars and so on. I've just started again.'

'I've always wanted to try that!'

'You can come along some time,' he said, immediately thinking how stupid that sounded, how embarrassing. 'What are you doing this week?'

'I ... well, I'm working on my thesis, and apart from that ... I was thinking about trying a dance class.'

'Ah, yes, of course. What are you writing about?'

'Er ... the question of the legitimacy of violence in a ... a resistance movement.'

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