

bleeding so I tried to cover his wound, while the other boys stood around me, staring in anger. I roared at them, "What the hell are you doing?" The tallest one replied as he backed away, "We're wiping the cross off his hand 'cause he's a Christian."

I asked them if they were Muslims. When they nodded, I let go of the boy's arm and ran after them. I wasn't able to catch them before they got to the other side of the square. They were too far away. They started hurling rocks, which they got from God knows where, and though I had no problem dodging the rocks, I couldn't stop their taunts: "Dirty Christian!"

What was weird, and surprising, was that I never told Marcia that story, despite the fact that we'd been together a long time, and I usually just told stories to tell stories. I'd told stories that were more pointless. Yet, despite my love for her and our strong connection, or whatever other term described our relationship, I'd never told her; even after we'd begun working together on a project about these kids, I hadn't even used that as a pretext to tell her.

Translated by Adam Talib

Hamid Abdel Samad

from Farewell, Heaven

BEFORE I WENT TO the country, 'Germany' conjured up contradictory names and events: the Germany of Goethe and Rilke and the Germany of Hitler and Goering; ravished post-war Germany and the Germany of the economic miracle and reconstruction; Germany divided between East and West and its reunification without a single drop of blood. The Germany of work, order, and the signature phrase "Made in Germany"; not to mention the German soccer team that wins every game regardless of whether or not the team plays well. Germany, the land of Martin Luther and the land of freedom and unbridled desire; Germany, the land of the Franks—my relatives. Germany, the land of poets, philosophers, and heroes—a country that is no longer allowed to have heroes.

The only images of Germany I had seen on television were those of neo-Nazi protests in the streets and of the arson of refugee homes—and those of the collapse of the Berlin Wall in total peace. I had other impressions of

Germany from the film *al-Nimr al-aswad*, which showed us that any ignorant Egyptian could travel to Germany, become a millionaire, and marry the most beautiful women in the course of a few short years.

I read a lot of German literature, but I didn't know a thing about the current political and social conditions there. My general idea of Germany was positive, especially since they have no history of colonialism in our region. Even the Holocaust, the darkest moment of their history, is seen by us as a boon rather than a scandal, since the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

My first direct contact with Germany was full of bitterness and disgrace. I went to the German embassy in Zamalek to submit a request for a visa when hordes of young men gathered unexpectedly in front of the embassy gates and waited there as if they were circumambulating the Kaaba. Out of the thousands waiting outside, the embassy was only allowing fifty applicants to enter, and only a few of those would actually get a visa to enter the 'promised land'—those fifty had camped out in front of the embassy during the previous night, before the arrival of the flocks of pilgrims. The embassy security staff tried to drive the mobs away but they were unsuccessful since the men waiting in front of the embassy had nowhere else to go—it was easier for them to pursue a soothing mirage than to face their own painful reality.

I returned to the embassy after nine o'clock that night and found that there were twenty people already in line—I was number twenty-one. One of them wanted to visit his sister in Berlin and then 'disappear' there. Two of them, like me, wanted to study. Another wanted to marry an old German tourist he met at the hotel where he worked as a waiter. As for the others, they had no idea what they wanted to do in Germany or even why Germany in particular. Most of them were waiting in front of the German embassy for one reason alone—the line at the German embassy was far shorter than the lines at the American, French, or English embassies.

We were all promising young men whom Egypt could have needed, but instead our country had ignored us: our education was handed out to us like candy and we had received our diplomas in a staged spectacle. However, there was also an older man in his seventies among this group of young men. I wondered what this old man wanted in Germany. He wore a simple gallabiya and couldn't have been a businessman or someone who wanted medical tourism. "Maybe he needs to check up on one of his sons there," I thought to myself.

The young men began to chat and joke around to kill time, while the old man leaned against the wall of the embassy without saying a word. Most of the young men were ready for a long night and had brought blankets and pillows with them. They offered a pillow and blanket to the old man, but he refused

angrily. I noticed that he didn't have a folder for submitting embassy requests and I wanted to tell him, but I feared the same violent response. Suddenly a man in his forties—I think his name was Khamis—appeared out of nowhere and in a matter of minutes erected a small kiosk in front of the embassy and began to sell tea and sandwiches to those who were waiting. I remember that Khamis' tea was delicious despite the filthiness of the cup it was poured in. I've always been amazed by the resilience of our people in the face of bureaucratic hurdles—they do not accept the label 'unemployed.' Even if the world collapses around one of them, he won't worry and sit at home all day—instead he will grab some tissues and sell them at stoplights and call himself a 'businessman.' It seemed that Khamis had found himself a job, something thousands of Egypt's young men had failed to do—one man's misfortune is another man's gain.

The young men began to talk about what they would do in Germany as if they had already received their visas, even though they all knew that the chance of actually getting a visa was very slim. Their laughter awakened the old man leaning on the embassy wall, and he gave them a bitterly fierce piercing stare. I wondered what the old man thought of us. Was he rebuking us for trying to leave our country at such a young age? Did he know that we cursed the West in our hearts, but could only find hope at the doors of its embassies? Or perhaps we reminded him of his son who had left and gone to Germany?

The old man leaned against the wall again and fell asleep sitting. One after the other we all fell into a deep sleep that wouldn't end until the first rays of sunlight. Khamis passed out cups of tea and some breakfast sandwiches before he disassembled his kiosk and disappeared just as he had come, before anyone from the embassy or the police saw him.

While the first man in line slept clinging to the iron door of the embassy to establish his precedence in line, the old man opened his eyes and stared into the nothingness. He then stood and came to take his place in line in front of me. Minutes before the embassy opened its gates, an elegant middle-aged man carrying a black bag came and stood in line in front of the old man. I became infuriated and went to him and said "Excuse me! We've been waiting here all night. What do you have against this hajj? Why do you want to take his place in line?" I expected some sign of gratitude or acknowledgement from the old man, but his face of stone-like despair turned to one of punishment and heartbreak.

"Sir, you don't understand . . . hold on a minute," said the elegant man. He then gave the old man five pounds and told him, "Now head on home, Amm Ahmed!"

The man took the petty cash and shuffled away, muttering incomprehensible words to himself. He hadn't wanted to go to Germany—perhaps he didn't

even know where Germany was. He was merely reserving a spot for a 'better' man. I was incensed—no, ashamed—when I saw this. Had the elegant man exploited the old man, or had he merely presented him with an opportunity to earn five pounds?

I didn't have time to dwell on these issues of social injustice since my turn finally came to enter the 'embassy of deliverance.' I walked through the door of the stronghold and stopped in front of an Egyptian embassy employee who began to speak to me in German.

"Sorry . . . my German isn't . . ." I said, filled with disappointment that my future was still in Egyptian hands. I gave the arrogant employee all the necessary documents for my travel to and residence in Germany, including my letter of acceptance from the University of Munich, my credentials for a German language course at the university, and health insurance documents, among other things. The employee meticulously examined my papers as if he was looking for an excuse to refuse my request, but in the end he approved my file and informed me that the visa procedure would take six weeks. I left the embassy reciting from the Qur'an, "Oh Lord! Deliver us from this land whose people are oppressors!"

Six weeks later I went back to the embassy and received an entrance visa to the land of Karl Marx and Mercedes. I was one of the few who had this 'good' fortune bestowed upon them. I left the embassy and began to wander the streets of Cairo, and my feet involuntarily led me to the street where my grandfather lived and where I hadn't been for nineteen years. I don't know why I went there or what I was looking for in that place where I spent the happiest and saddest moments of my childhood. Perhaps I was looking for an old wound to take with me as a souvenir from Egypt, or maybe I was looking for an excuse for my escape. My grandfather's house had collapsed years before and the foundations of a new house stood in its place. These foundations heralded that more prestigious and higher quality construction would replace the buildings that had collapsed, but they also proclaimed that these would be buildings without any spirit. I stood in front of the place for a long time, watching over the bakery, the coffee house, and the mechanic's workshop. I marveled that the distance between my grandfather's house and these three places was so close when it had seemed so vast during my childhood. I didn't cry and I felt no pain. Memories both beautiful and dreadful began to flood my mind without corresponding to any negative or positive emotions.

I then went to my village to bid farewell to my family.

Translated by Andrew Heiss