

Unexpected Sunlight

It has rained for three days straight, and Berlin remains relentlessly grey, except in this corner of Kreuzberg, where a refugee family brighten every morning. The man - who always wears a well-pressed shirt - plays the fiddle, the boy plays an accordion and the teenage girl sings. They live in a small apartment block opposite my hotel, and when I set out in the mornings to explore the city I often follow them to their pitch in the entrance of the U-Bahn station. Their playing skills are only average, and a few keys on the boy's accordion stick now and then, but the chemistry between them is uplifting; the way the boy watches the man so closely, taking his cue from the nod of his head, the roll of his eyes, the tap of a toe. Their obvious affection for each other, the girl's haunting voice, her fragile beauty, all bring a smile to the faces of passers-by.

I give them money most mornings, dropping euro coins into the battered felt hat the girl holds out. Today, I notice the bracelet she wears is a little like my own. Plaited leather, wrapped twice around her left wrist, darkened by time and sweat, strung with a handful of silver-coloured charms, separated by tiny white stones, dull and smooth like river pebbles.

'I like your bracelet,' I say, unsure if she will understand.

Her right hand flies up to cover her wrist. She looks me up and down, and pauses before answering.

'I wear to remember my family and my home,' she says at last.

'Isn't this your family?' I ask.

She frowns, shakes her head.

The close family unit, it turns out, is fake. Alika's place here is assured by her pretty smile; the illusion of a happy family is good for business.

In halting English, peppered with German, she tells me that her mother fled Syria for Europe three months before Alika followed with her father. Yet she has never heard from her mother in the months since. She travelled with her brother's family, but her mobile phone is now answered by a man. A stranger.

'But I know one day she will come, like the blue sky will return!'

Alika was at university back home, studying medicine, but left with her father when their home and business were bombed. The boat they set out in went down within a whisper of the Turkish shore, and although most of the thirty-two refugees on board survived, Alika's father didn't.

'He could not swim, there were no life vests. I could not find him in the water.'

Her gaze is steady when she tells me this, yet I can hear the quiver in her voice.

'And the boy, this man?' I ask, gesturing to her fellow musicians.

She met them in a hostel when she arrived, she says, and now they are neighbours.

'Seb works in a restaurant in the evenings, and he has found me work there too. I study English also, and soon maybe medicine. I have hope. Things are getting better, but we play music to help pay the bills.'

I ask about her bracelet again. She tells me she collected the tiny stones from the riverbed back in her village, and a neighbour drilled each one so she could thread them onto the leather thong. The cheap charms were given to her by a woman in Turkey - a bird for her mother, a fish for her sister, and a star for her father. I hold up my own wrist to show her the charms I wear to remind me of my late parents. Yet as the silver and crystals catch the light I realise I have experienced a different kind of grief to Alika's. I let my wrist drop, suddenly embarrassed to have assumed our similarities, and for a moment we stand in silence in the station entrance, watching the relentless rain.

Two days later, I wake early, unexpected wedges of sunlight streaming in between the slats. I drift back to sleep, only to be woken again an hour later by the sound of voices and laughter in the street. I part the blinds to see a small group gathered in a circle outside the apartment block. There are hugs and tears.

I rush my breakfast and head out to the station, anxious to learn what has happened. But when I arrive, I find only Seb and the boy. There's no sign of Alika.

Seb speaks limited English, yet he knows what I'm asking.

'Mother!' he says, beaming. 'She here! She find Alika!'

Because, just sometimes, life really does work like that. Word gets around. People are found. Rain stops, and the sun appears - or someone's mother - completely out of the blue.