

Sheila Madary

Light Adjustments

LIGHT FROM ONE NAKED lightbulb in the bathroom thinned out in every direction during those first several nights. The five of us—my husband, three daughters and I—had enough light from the hallway to change clothes in our bedrooms and flop onto our sheetless mattresses. After we moved from New Orleans to the German countryside, we learned that most German landlords lease their rentals without kitchens and without fixtures. We began assembling our new household without a stove, kitchen sink, car, internet or fluent German. Even after we bought light fixtures and covered blue and red wires dangling from ceilings, we fumbled around in the dark for a long time.

Strangers lit the way during our first few weeks and months in this small town surrounded by vineyards. Our chain-smoking real estate agent volunteered his wife, a stocky baker with dyed, thinning black hair, to drive me on a car ferry across the Rhine River and pick out a refurbished washing machine, dishwasher, stove and oven. A couple of days after we arrived, Charlotte, a squat, square-faced German woman in her sixties showed up at our door with a picture of her sofa. *The pattern will match your Scandinavian look*, she said after scanning our other used Ikea furniture. Later, she brought it over in her trailer and hoisted it up the front stairs with my husband. She had patched some tiles in the kitchen for our landlord, so she knew we had nothing but our suitcases, mattresses, a table and chairs. Over the next few days, while we waited for our container to clear customs, she offered us more stuff: plates, silverware, her mother's old curtains (*now you can get a glass of milk in your underwear at night*), an antique wooden bed frame for our seven-year-old, an old TV. We borrowed her car, used her internet connection and

bought a used Toyota after she negotiated a deep discount with the car salesman. I felt indebted to her and wondered what she wanted from us in return.

Months later, Charlotte asked us for a ride home from the airport after a trip to the U.S. We invited her over once for homemade pizza on a winter evening, and she told us about her new millionaire status. A farmer's daughter, she had profited tremendously from selling her parents' land to the town, which, in turn, resold plots to families for new homes. Over the next few years, properties in a planned community for upper middle-class families replaced asparagus and wheat fields. We would see Charlotte now and then, but the initial warmth between us cooled the more we settled in to our new life.

FIVE YEARS LATER, when Angela Merkel opened Germany's borders, several Syrian families trickled into this same small German town. Neighbors, friends and teachers rolled up their sleeves to follow through on their leader's stunning act of generosity: retired teachers taught German; bicycle enthusiasts repaired castoffs to help with transportation; housewives measured curtains; engineers installed new operating systems on old computers. Curious to know how integration looked in our small village, I attended a monthly meeting in the town hall on a chilly Tuesday evening. Volunteers, mostly over the age of sixty, sat around the wooden board room table to report on progress with the families they were helping. They complained about bureaucracy at the immigration office and about refugees' strange habits. *They keep the thermostat in the apartment so high, but they walk around barefoot!* At the meeting, I met a local woman who was helping a family from Damascus, and she told me how the family's twelve-year-old daughter would have to wait until the end of the school year and until the end of summer break before she could attend school since the local schools were full. A week later, my daughters and I met Safaa,

her husband, Samir, and their daughter, Layal. Fortunately for them, their apartment already had a kitchen and light fixtures.

MONTHS LATER, I see Safaa and Layal walking toward our house. I was supposed to pick them up at 10:00, but I'm late, so they have come looking for me. We kiss cheeks and Layal hands me a bag stuffed with two loaves of day-old bread from the bakery and a bottle of elderflower syrup. I had promised to give them a ride to the next town where Safaa's adult daughter lives with her children. They want to spend the night there to celebrate the end of Ramadan, Eid, the festival of sweets.

Layal climbs in the backseat and Safaa sits next to me in the passenger seat. Safaa's square jaw yields to a broad, toothy smile. She adjusts her casual hijab, a loose scarf that barely restrains her grey strands. Layal, on the cusp of puberty, leaves her dark, tight, shoulder-length curls for anyone to admire.

I wonder if Safaa is used to riding in a car as I remind her to buckle up on our way up the hill and out of the village. She turns toward me. Her brown eyes and hand gesture ask me how to say "seatbelt." *Gurte*, I say. I add the verb: *anschnallen* (buckle up). Layal and her mother practice saying those words as we drive past asparagus and strawberry fields. Clouds that had streaked a blue sky this morning are now stacked up, one upon the other. "It's been raining, but now the sun is trying to break its way through the clouds," I say in German, as though the scenery needs an explanation. Safaa turns to me, smiling broadly and says, "I love *deine Kinder*." I teach her how to say the sentence all in German—*ich liebe Dich; ich liebe deine Kinder* (I love you. I love your children). Safaa repeats these phrases five times, and we laugh since we are unable to communicate beyond these few phrases.

After we pass a shopping center and wind through vineyard-and orchard-hills, Layal shows me a photograph on her phone of a street sign that says *Birkenstrasse* (Birch Street). I pull over

to put in the street name in my car's GPS. None of us know the street number, and I wonder where we're headed. We crest the top of a hill, veer right, then head back down another hill, and Layal reacts with an *Ab-ha* of familiarity. *Ja Ja*, she says. The GPS tells us to go a bit farther and take the third right.

We pull up to a large duplex, and a middle-aged woman opens the door. Layal and Safaa kiss her cheek. Then Safaa introduces her daughter, Rouaa, who greets me with kisses on both of my cheeks. I take off my shoes and follow them through the hallway to the living room, furnished with two faux-leather sofas, a coffee table, a large-screen TV, a glass-top table, dining chairs, a baby's crib and a bed. Layal is talking to Rouaa's five-month-old baby girl who is lying on the bed.

"*Ein baby!*" I say, surprised. I had heard but, in the confusion, already forgotten that Rouaa had a baby named Angelina. She had been changing the baby's diaper when we rang the doorbell. She gives Layal the dirty diaper in a plastic bag and finishes snapping up the baby's onesie.

We coo and smile at Angelina. Then I ask about the rest of their family. I find out that Safaa has eight children—six girls and two boys. Rouaa, her eyes large and dark, her hair piled atop her head, tries to explain something about her brother: She gestures—an arrest, handcuffs. *Boom* she says, lifting her hands. She rubs her palms in opposite directions, as my mother would on finishing a kitchen task. I understand that she's miming her brother's death. Tears fall before I can try to hold them back. With more gestures and phrases, she explains that her brother was killed when a police vehicle exploded in Damascus. We embrace and sit down on the sofa.

Rouaa mimes a swollen pregnant belly and tells me of her shock when she discovered she was pregnant in Turkey while she was waiting for a passage to Europe. With only a few scraps of German, expressive eyes, and her hands, she explains how they slept, shivering on the ground after their boat trip from

Turkey to Greece. *Mein Gott*, she says. Her palms are next to her temples, gesturing outward to explain her stress, as though her head were exploding.

“In Germany, we can sleep now,” she says. She speaks to me in broken German with a few English words tossed in. She nurses Angelina; her large breast is exposed in plain sight, and she explains how she and her family fled with nothing but the clothes they wore. *Ahh*. She ducks her head, describing the danger and violence in the streets of Damascus with the *boom* of explosions and *tat-tat-tat* of a gun. She pantomimes ISIS’s all-black, head-to-foot women’s dress code and the military uniforms of Assad’s men. Her German is simple, and her manner so animated that she can’t hide behind any form of subtlety.

Nor can I. In this country, when I open my mouth to speak, I betray my foreignness. And if I keep quiet, my children usually blow my cover. Two semesters of German fifteen years ago laid a soft foundation—a loose layer of syntax and vocabulary. I acquired some grasp of verb tenses during a language course ten years ago. My strength is not in memorizing but in mimicking sounds. I usually fool a native speaker for the first few volleys in a German conversation. Inevitably, I trip over grammar, which I never properly learned, and my secret is out. Over the past eight years, I have learned that planning my German verb tenses and article-case declensions is of little use. I’m forced to plow through this language with whatever my brain can call up in the moment. Diving into a sea of humiliation is the key to learning another language.

I imagine how many un-apprehended German innuendos, subtleties, idioms and adages have sailed past my ears these eight years. Marveling at my German friends’ intricate tapestry of language, I miss the content of their vacation plans or trouble with their floor plans. I dwell too long when I hear a new word or expression by savoring it or translating it back into

English. Despite their sophisticated combinations that contain complaints about jobs, cleaning ladies and kids' teachers, I don't hear about much loss or grief.

After finishing a thick cup of instant cappuccino, I explain to Rouaa and her parents that I'm due at a hair appointment, and I agree to return the next day after grocery shopping. I remember the advice that someone gave me at one of those refugee-sponsor meetings: *When you arrange to meet, name a time that's on the hour. Three o'clock causes less confusion than quarter to three or quarter past.* "I'll be back tomorrow afternoon at 4:00," I explain, as I go down the front steps to my car. Safaa calls out in English: "I love you."

I never thought to say this to the strangers who gave me rides and furniture.

THE NEXT DAY, Rouaa greets us with a smile. She is happy to see that I have brought my youngest daughters along, one of whom was born four years earlier in Germany. Rouaa looks tired and disheveled: her jeans' zipper is open. She introduces her teenage daughter, ten-year-old son and eight-year-old son, and I realize that she has four children as I do. Someone explains that Rouaa's husband stayed behind in Turkey. From the muddled details, I gather that he's working to earn another fare for his passage. Her slender teenage daughter, clad in shorts, sets snacks out on the coffee table: cashews, peanuts, figs, cookies, orange Tang-like juice for my daughters and, again, thick, sweet, instant cappuccino for me.

The doorbell rings, and a woman named Cecilia arrives. She is petite, perhaps fifty years old and dressed in a khaki mini-skirt, tight burgundy scoop neck t-shirt, heeled sandals and remarkable teeth—somehow too white and too straight. She explains in a Spanish accent that she is Rouaa's landlady and lives next door. Originally from Lima, Peru, she's married to a German man. She turns to me and explains that she used to

work as a TV producer in Peru. She tells me about an event that she organized in town to enable refugee children to tell their stories to other local children—to explain how they had fled Syria and arrived in German wine country. When she mentions something about finding a second-hand vacuum, I understand that she tries to help Rouaa's family as she can. Cecilia tells me that other locals who help refugees do so quietly or anonymously because of politics in this small town.

Before the 2016 state elections in Rhineland Palatinate, I had seen a placard with a bloody, red handprint on the main road every time I drove into the town where I live: *Get out criminal foreigners!* I tried to imagine the person who attached the placard to the pole. Who wanted to conjure up this town's brown-shirted past? The placard reminded me of a tale I had heard: Around 1930, people had suggested renaming the village, *Hitlerhausen*. They even printed a post card before they decided against this proposal. The greeting on a panoramic photo of this town said, "*Grüße aus Hitlerhausen*" or "Greetings from Hitler's Houses," something that would disgust everyone I know here. Still, I could sense a general German discomfort with an uncertain future about how to integrate a million refugees.

After we talk for a while, Cecilia complains, "Germans are always planning, always saving. You know when I first came to Germany, I thought 'Oh how cute—they're so organized with their calendars.' Now it just drives me crazy. You know when I lived in Peru or when I visit my daughter in the U.S., I always have time for me; I have time to enjoy life. Somehow, we work longer hours in Peru and in America, but when we have time off, we enjoy our time; we go out and spend our money. Here, people work and save and save and plan—so they can take it with them to the grave." I understood her complaint. Germany is a foreign place, especially for expats like us, coming from places of extremes like New Orleans and Lima, so it's hard to

adjust to a too-perfect place. But my family had also benefitted from living in a society of extremely organized citizens.

Another doorbell interrupts our conversation. A tall pregnant woman with fair skin and long curly hair walks in with her husband and an older woman. I discover that she and her mother are Iraqi Christians and had also fled ISIS. She explains in near-perfect English that she had been visiting her sister a year before in the U.S. and requested asylum at the airport in Frankfurt on her way back to Mosul. Her mother, who had recently fled Mosul and just arrived in Germany, brought a few dishes for Rouaa's meal-stewed chicken with warm spices and tomatoes, rice and green salad. While we wait for Rouaa's sons to return with French fries for the kids to eat, someone mentions moving the laundry rack out of the way of the dining table. Rouaa replies in German, "*Egal*". (It doesn't matter). Her deference to imperfection comforts me.

Thirteen people sit down at Rouaa's table. As the sun's late-afternoon rays stream through the kitchen window, we pass serving dishes and plates around the table. And together, we break the long fast.

I stopped back to see Rouaa and her children a couple of times that summer. Layal, Safaa and I went out for ice cream once, and they asked me for a few favors as they continued to settle in and navigate German bureaucracy. I knew about their search for housing in a saturated market, their need for transportation to doctor's appointments and the help Layal would require in adjusting to school. Despite our communication barrier, I could sense their increasing discouragement. Their asylum was secure; now they faced the steeplechase of integration: intensive German language classes, job training and a search for a less expensive apartment. Landlords in the countryside knew to set the rent higher than the refugees' housing allowance from the government.

At the end of the summer, my husband lost his new job at a research firm headquartered in the U.K., two months after Britain

had voted for the Brexit. Because most of the firm's budget was grant money from the European Union, they laid him off three months after he was hired. We were stunned, and we knew that as non-E.U. citizens, our days in Germany were numbered. Immigration officials didn't care whether we had learned the language or that our daughters' lives were rooted in this place. If we could not line up permanent work contracts or prove that we could support our family of six, we would have to leave. In the meantime, a new school year had begun, and our children wanted to finish their year, so I increased my hours to work full-time as a freelance teacher. The anguish of leaving this place and uncertainty of our future proved a crushing weight. I withdrew from Safaa and her family as our own problems multiplied.

On a frosty morning the following winter, after I bought bread during a break from work in a neighboring town, I ran into Safaa and her husband. They had just finished language class for the day, so I offered them a ride home. I felt Safaa's cold hands as we walked back to the car; her coat was too thin for this weather. We exchanged only a few basic words in the car. When I pulled into the parking lot, Samir invited me to come up to their apartment above the butcher's shop. Raising a mimed cup to his mouth and holding his other hand flat for a saucer, he asked, "*Café?*"

"*Ich muss wieder arbeiten,*" (I have to go back to work) I said.

"*Danke,*" they said. Safaa mimed a phone to her ear. I understood they meant something like, "Another day. Give us a call when you have time."

I should have gotten out of the car, kissed Safaa's cheeks and shaken Samir's cold hand or echoed Safaa with an "I love you."

"*Tschüss,*" (Bye), I said. They waved as I backed out onto the street and drove away.

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, Layal texted me a greeting card—a luminous Christmas tree in front of the Roman Colosseum. I texted back to thank her, but I didn't hear anything else until after

her family had moved away from our village to Mainz, a nearby city. I wonder if they found an apartment with a kitchen or a place with enough light to see their way in the dark.