



Excerpt from

Jana Hensel's

Keinland

©Wallstein Verlag, 2017

Translated by Erin Palombi,

Gutekunst Prize of the Friends of Goethe Recipient 2019

Noland: A Love Story

“Hideouts”

This morning, you flew home. I must have still been in a deep, sound sleep at the time. At some point, you got up, took your suitcase, and left. Your silver roller bag was in the hall by the door. That’s where you put it when you arrived, and that’s where it stayed. And I didn’t notice. I was still sleeping the way people in movies often sleep when someone leaves them, silently pulling the door shut. It wasn’t until much later that I saw it on Twitter, but by then you were gone. We’d spent half the night sitting at the kitchen table, arguing. There was nothing left on the kitchen table but a bowl of fruit and two glasses. We eventually switched to water. You kept getting up to refill our glasses from the faucet behind you. About Munich, about the man with the mustache, about everything, about nothing. About our nothingness. Not a bit abstract: completely concrete. Your nothingness. It had all started with the man with the mustache. No, it had all ended with the man with the mustache. The end had begun. Probably. After that, I was so exhausted that I went over to the sofa and must have fallen asleep there. And now Martin is already back home, at home in his Holy Land.

Before boarding at Tegel Airport, he took a quick photo of the rising sun. Along the bottom edge of the picture, I can just make out the gangway railing. To some, it may look like a symbol of hope, a new day. Nice weather, at the very least. Seventeen followers liked it, which isn’t bad, but I don’t like it. The photo doesn’t suit him. Anyone

can take a photo like that. The rising sun doesn't suit him. Or shouldn't I think that? Should I keep that to myself because there's always hope, because there must be? Even if not here, even if not now, even if not for us.

I had broken the rules; I had violated our agreement. It was my fault. But I'll keep that to myself, too. No, Martin, I won't tell anyone about our agreement. You can trust me.

Why? you ask.

Because I don't want to blow our cover, I say.

No, Nadja, I want to know why I should trust you.

Because I trust you, too, Martin. Simple as that.

And because it's better to keep up a façade. I learned that from you, you know. You're the one who taught me that. Most people hide behind some sort of façade; that's what you always said. They must be leading a happier life than ours.

It's already so late. I should get off the sofa, go to the kitchen, and make myself a coffee. Outside, the sun is shining and it looks mild, nothing at all like summer, yet. Making coffee was always your thing anyway. You'd even foam the milk. I had to laugh at that; it always struck me as so fiddly. You were still here this morning. Why didn't I hear you leave, for God's sake? I should shower, dress, and get to the editorial office. We've got a paper to publish tomorrow, after all. As if today were nothing but a normal day. Even Giovanni is already in position on the street below, setting up chairs and tables in front of his café. And from all the way up here on the second floor, I can hear

the mothers who come by nearly every morning with their strollers. They laugh but stop as soon as one of their babies starts to cry.

There are plenty of days when Giovanni is the first person I talk to. As soon as I leave the building, he calls to me loudly, Buongiorno, Nadja! He waves at me with outstretched arms and a white dish towel, as if I were far away—as if he were worried that I might miss him, even though he's standing right in front of me. And sometimes, if I try to sneak by unnoticed, because I'm in a hurry or I don't want to talk, he calls after me even more loudly. Come stai, bella? But that's how he greets almost every woman who lives here. This block is pretty quiet. It isn't until a little farther down our street—where the supermarket is—that it gets a little livelier, and bigger, somehow. There are more cars there and more wine stores, more whiskey stores and natural food stores. And they aren't as friendly to each other as we are here. Giovanni is like a big kid. His black hair reminds me of you. No, Martin, I don't mean that he's like you. You were never a kid, after all. It's only his black hair that reminds me of you, and his black eyes, too.

Before I can even say yes or no, Giovanni runs back into his café and behind the counter. He calls to me over his shoulder—How are you, my love—makes two espressos, and assumes, as always, that I'll stand at the counter with him for a moment or two. The coffee machine's metallic filter bangs loudly against the rim of the trash can. I don't like that noise; I never have. Today, however, I'd like to actually cover my ears. Should I tell Giovanni that I've always waited for you? From the first day to the last. That I'll

keep waiting, even though I know you won't be coming back to me anymore. But if I wait, I'll be close to you. If I wait, you'll let me be near you, and you won't shoo me away like some pesky animal. That's the way it's always been. I've always waited. For your messages, your calls, your hands, your words, your questions. For your truth. Which won't exist for me from now on. Does Giovanni understand that? Probably not. He'll probably just look out at me from behind his dark eyes and say nothing. And I'll look into those eyes one more time, as if I'm looking into yours.

Some other time, Giovanni. Thanks anyway, Giovanni, I call back to him. But I'm in a hurry, and I'm already running late for work! Giovanni! I laugh in the process, or try to, but I'm really just trying not to look unhappy. To laugh a little. To smile, at least.

I hop onto my bike and ride toward the little cemetery at the end of our street, which hasn't been a cemetery for a long time. I pass it on the right, ride up the street, and bear left onto Prenzlauer Allee. From here, I can see all the way down to Alexanderplatz and the TV Tower. On the ride back down toward Mitte, I think, as I often do, about the early days when Berlin's city limits hadn't extended even this far. Back then, there were only fields and cemeteries here, only windmills. Such scenes can still be found on old postcards. The city always looks so soft and childlike in those pictures, and sleepy, too, as if it belonged somewhere in the South. The little cemetery on our street was turned into a playground a couple of years ago. Now it's called Peace Park, and I'm not sure whether the name refers to the children or the dead. They left the old headstones standing, and now the children can play house or build hideouts

among the abandoned graves. I should turn around. I should ride back and take cover in one of the hideouts, myself. Better yet, I should just disappear. But can you ever truly abandon a grave? Can a person simply escape life the way you did?

You stayed with me for longer than you wanted to. Much longer, for that matter—nearly an entire year. In fact, you wanted to leave immediately.

Will you come back to me, Martin?

No, you say.

Yes, I say.

It's always been this way. From our first evening on the beach in Tel Aviv to this morning. That evening, I wore the short black silk skirt and too-high heels. You always said no, and I always answered you with yes. Love will be enough, I thought. Love is always enough, I said, as I waited for the next day. I had undoubtedly learned that from the movies. Love stories, of course, with happy endings, naturally. I had believed my life could be like a movie, too. But love isn't always enough. Would I finally understand that now? That all my waiting wouldn't be enough, just as my love hadn't been enough? Understand what really happened, I mean. I know that Martin thinks no one will ever understand what happened to his people. What's still happening to him. Will continue to happen, from this day forward.

Is that why you hate most people so much, Martin?

What gives you that impression, Nadja?

...

I don't care about most people. None of them is my concern; you were my only concern. You aren't like them.

We often spoke this way. Yes, no, yes, no, yes. Myland, Yourland, Noland. Ourland, perhaps. Slightly more than nothing at all. On the phone, in the car, in hotel rooms, on the beach, in bed. In Berlin, in Tel Aviv, in Munich, in Jerusalem. In every city in the world. To someone who didn't know us, it must have seemed like we hardly ever agreed on anything, as if we were constantly getting our wires crossed. We often did get our wires crossed. Yes, no, yes, no, yes. But that's not the case, it really isn't. We both believed that love would be enough. To each his own. With love, we could come to grips with what was: the fact that my people sent his people to their deaths. Children, women, men, the elderly, children, women, men, the elderly, children, women, men, the elderly, over and over again, more and more and more and more—it really wasn't so long ago—until there were to be no more, until he might never have existed, until I might never have been able to meet someone like him. We never should have met. But in the end, I had to admit that he was right: love isn't enough. It wasn't enough for us. I have to wrap my head around that, once and for all. Why he couldn't stay but stayed anyway. Why I waited for him. Until this morning. Always.

I leave the Soho House behind me and ride past the Volksbühne. I always think of Bettie here, because Bettie worked as a set designer at the Volksbühne. Back then, we saw practically every production together and collected the little playbills as if they were individual chapters of a journal. It's not far from here to the Spree River. I

continue along Rosa-Luxemburg Straße, then briefly down Münzstraße, and finally, Rochstraße, where I ride behind the Plattenbaus on Alexanderplatz and nearly as far as Hackescher Markt. I like these prefab apartment buildings and actually always have. To me, they gleam, despite their looming modesty. They aren't showy. Maybe that's why so many people dislike them. But in a way that's hard to describe, these postwar structures are honest buildings, and isn't ugliness invariably bound up with the truth?

I have to stop at the bridge in front of the Alte Nationalgalerie, a bridge whose name I can never seem to remember, a bridge whose name I don't think anyone actually knows. A crowd has formed and is blocking my path, which is fine by me. In the middle of the bridge, what looks to be a Turkish couple is set up to be photographed on two empty fruit crates, and in such a way that the Spree is clearly visible behind them. Looks bigger than it is. The photographer has laid the long white veil across the bridge, and a Japanese tour group wants to take pictures of the couple, too. Again and again, the petite Japanese tourists circle hurriedly around the couple. There's something funny about how busy it all looks, but I don't feel like laughing. I stand there with my bike and wonder how many pictures these tourists will go home with: pictures of the Wall, the Brandenburg Gate, the TV Tower—no, probably none of the TV Tower—of Angela Merkel at Madame Tussauds, of the Holocaust Memorial, and now these of the Turkish bridal couple on the empty fruit crates. They must think, as I do, that these pictures could represent our country. They must think, as I do, that these pictures could represent us.

I sit down on the curb and wait. The bride looks so happy in her white dress with the long veil, and the groom has placed his hand proudly on her back, pushing her, as far as I can tell, a little farther forward so that she'll be even more prominent in the picture. I wanted to found a country with Martin, too. I had already imagined all of it in detail, just as I had often imagined things. To be honest, I had always preferred to imagine things. Being old, being young, being nothing. I lie in bed for hours, just imagining, paging through newspapers or the occasional cookbook, reading. I sit at the kitchen table or on the balcony and look at the crooked cherry trees on my street without missing anyone. Bettie says it's sometimes as if a thin pane of glass separated me from reality—I even preferred to imagine life, as well as love, war, and sex—but no one could see the glass, Bettie says, not even I noticed it. Imaginary sex is best, I think. Even our sex was best in my imagination.

Let's found a new country, I said to Martin—I wanted to say to Martin. A small, slender, nearly invisible country. We have to found a new country! Our country. Please. With a table and two chairs, a bed and a closet. We don't need anything more; we have each other. Finally, a country for you. Finally, a country for me. How lovely that sounds! Finally, a country for us. I imagined falling into his arms and hanging on his neck and kissing him the way a daughter kisses her father: quick, and at the same time, a little uncertain. Surely, the Japanese tourists would have encircled us, too. Surely, they would have stayed to take our photos. But Martin doesn't stay; he just keeps going, away from me. Almost as if he doesn't want anyone coming to the conclusion

that he and I belong together. Not even me. He and I. Exactly, I say. That's the thing; we did belong together.

Martin, I call after him loudly. I believe in the future. It's because of my past, you know? I want to believe in the future at all costs. I say. He finally pauses, reflecting for a moment. I can tell that's what he's doing, although he still has his back to me. How he still has his back to me. That he still has his back to me. Then he turns around and says—without putting his hands on his hips, without taking off his sunglasses, he just stands there and says—But I don't believe in the future, Nadja. And that's because of my past. Then he turns around again and keeps walking. And it suddenly occurs to me that he left this morning, that he must be home by now, and that he isn't here anymore. That he won't be coming back to me again.

The bride, meanwhile, has taken her veil in both hands and climbed into a big black car, as if she's Lady Di. Even the tour group has continued on with hurried steps. I grab my bike and push it a while. Past the Pergamon Museum, whose name also often fails me, and which I then refer to as the Pentagon Museum. My co-workers are already sitting in the conference room, discussing tomorrow's paper: Germany, World, Business, Culture, Sports, Lifestyle. Every morning at ten, topics are presented in precisely this order. But by the time the discussion turned to Business, if not before, nobody was really paying attention anymore. Newspapers were being read and texts typed, and it wasn't until the Sports staff took over that the discussion gained momentum again. It was basically the same every day. By the time Lifestyle rolled around, the first few

staff members began trickling out of the conference room and heading to their desks, apparently with more important things to do. I always stayed in my chair until the end, since I wrote pieces for everything but the Sports section. My co-workers joked about journalists like me, saying that we covered everything but had no clue about anything. Maybe they were right. On a day like today, they might have a point. As far as I'm concerned, there's no need to publish a paper tomorrow. I didn't have any ideas for tomorrow's paper. Newspapers aren't much for dreams. You were still here yesterday. By tomorrow, you will have already left yesterday. Future perfect. Now the opposite of the future.

I wanted to found a country with Martin, even though we'd had enough of countries. One, two, three, four. Maybe that was a mistake, maybe it was too much, maybe there wasn't enough room left among all those countries for a new one. First: his big country in the West, the one I call the Real Country. Martin loved it, but he hated it, too. I think he loved it in a way that defied explanation. Second: my little country in the East, which I call the Fake Country. I know people don't think you can miss fake countries, but that isn't true. There wasn't a lot that I missed about that country, but I longed for it, anyway. I longed for it in a way that also defied explanation. Third: this big, and as I see it, somewhat confusing country that's grown up out of the other two. The Real Fake Country. No, that's no kind of name for a country. Let's call it the New Country, instead. At the very same moment that I first set foot in this new country, Martin escaped it: yet another reason we never should have met. And

fourth: the Holy Land, his Healing Country. It was supposed to save Martin, the way I never could save him, and probably never would have been able to save him.

Martin, were you afraid of my people in those days?

How do you mean?

I'm wondering if you left because we came?

That's nonsense, Nadja. Don't be ridiculous. I've already told you, I don't want to hear it anymore.

Once, at the very beginning, almost exactly one year ago, Martin called me at the office. I was sitting at my desk, looking at the TV Tower through the little window in the corner of the room. The TV Tower that was our Eiffel Tower. Martin laughed at that. He was in a car, driving through Tel Aviv, his city, a city that I didn't know well at the time. While we spoke, I tried to pay attention to street sounds so that I could imagine his surroundings, exactly where he was, what was going on. Interrupting a longer moment of silence, Martin asked me, Who are you? Where do you come from? What are you afraid of? Do you really love me? He wanted my answers in precisely this order; I remember it like it was yesterday. No man had ever asked me so many questions at once before. No man had ever asked me those questions before. Of course I love you, I answered, without pausing to think about it. Of course I love you, Martin. I was almost afraid of myself.

Who are you, Nadja?

Where do you come from?

What are you afraid of, my girl?

Do you really love me?

I didn't have such a quick response ready to the first three questions, so we grew quiet for a while. Although, no, that's not right. I wasn't being quiet; I was listening to Martin listen.

Another time—it wasn't in Berlin, it was in Munich, on a very hot day in August, after a violent storm—Martin walked with me from the hotel on Kurfürstenstraße to a small café on Elizabethstraße. Not a pretty café, not an old café, just a café. I was almost a little disappointed. The heat was still dreadful, and the humidity still felt like a heavy fabric, but Martin steered me past the big puddles like a child. It must have been at that moment that I first thought, I should leave; I should just walk across the water. I should leave Martin. One of us had to leave, in any case. Away from him. Across lakes, seas, oceans, if need be. Away from you, away from me, forever and always and never.

But I didn't walk away, not at that moment and not at any other. I kept on holding tightly to his hand. I always waited for him. If my father had taught me how to leave, how to say goodbye instead of simply disappearing—never to be seen again, stealing away, leaving everything behind—then you wouldn't have had to leave this morning, I think to myself. Martin. Then I would have already gone, would have been able to go, would have needed to, by now—or even earlier—before it was too late.

The meeting is over and my co-workers are already pouring down the hallways and back into their offices. Luckily, they're passing mine by for the time being. None of

them wants to lean around my door to ask, So, Nadja, how's it going? Running late? Everything okay? Luckily. I don't want to talk yet or tell anyone our story. I want to keep waiting, just as I've always waited. Bettie is the only person I'd tell everything to, just as I've always told her everything. And Robert, too, of course. Bettie, who understood me better than anyone else in the world. Robert, who had known me longer than anyone else in the world. Maybe you'll come back to me after all, just as you've always come back. Any moment now the telephone will ring and you'll be on the other line telling me that you've landed, that everything's okay, and you'll tell me how happy you are to be home again. To finally be home again. You'd laugh in the process, sending your loud, beautiful, sometimes carefree laughter all the way across the Mediterranean to me. The people who hide behind a facade must be leading a happier life than ours.

I hang my jacket over the back of my office chair and can't help but think of a co-worker of mine who once told me that the hanging of jackets over office chairs was frowned upon, that there wasn't anything more uncool than hanging a jacket over the back of an office chair. After he had explained this to me, we both laughed and proceeded to hang our jackets over the backs of our chairs. Then we laughed again. I liked that co-worker, but he's at another paper now. I could laugh with him in a way that I can't with anyone else in the office. I start up my computer and first open Facebook and then Twitter. I want to see if you've posted or tweeted anything new: another picture of the sun, perhaps, or a new Haaretz article. If you have, I could

speculate about what you want it to mean, what you want it to mean to me, what message you're sending to me.

Once every morning, afternoon, and evening, I've looked you up to see how you're doing, what you're doing. Sometimes, if I've woken up in the night, I've checked to see if you're sleeping, if you really can sleep. For twelve months, I've done this while imagining your face and hands. Now, I'd like nothing more than to lay my hands in yours, to lay my head next to yours again. But, unfortunately, that can't be done via Twitter or Facebook. I scroll down through your timeline and see you in Tel Aviv again, in Jerusalem, with friends on Yom Kippur, at the Gaza border, you alone on the historic Platform 17 in Grunewald. At the time, you didn't want to take me with you to Grunewald; you wanted to go there alone.

I should finally find the courage to go to the place where the rest of my people have already gone, you said to me once. You can't come with me, Nadja. I won't be able to take you there. I want to be alone there, alone with my people. You wouldn't understand it, Nadja. You, of all people.

What I'd really like to do right now is lay my head on my desk and sleep. By tomorrow, you'll have already left yesterday. My co-workers won't wake me, as there's no need to publish a paper tomorrow. If it were up to me, the world would stop for a few days and take a break. It wouldn't need to continue turning. Nothing else will happen now; everything has already been said. I want to sleep, until tomorrow, until next week, until next year. Forever. Simply sleep away the memories. From now on,

everything will become a memory, and I hate memories. I don't need any more memories; I've already got too many of them.

This morning, at the crack of dawn, you flew home while I was still in a deep, sound sleep. Were you actually as tired as I was? You crept out, quiet and unnoticed, the way people only do in movies, silently pulling the door shut. But first you put both glasses into the dishwasher, almost as if you wanted to erase any trace of yourself. From my bed, from my room, from my life. Even from the face of the earth. You left behind a note on the kitchen table. I only saw it when I sat at the table to drink my coffee. No one saw you; no one was with you. Even I didn't know until I saw it much later on Twitter. I only saw it once you were gone. But wasn't that always your greatest desire, Martin? To leave. To go. To cease being. To arrive. For God's sake, finally just arrive somewhere. Nadja, do not betray me, the note read. I knew exactly what you meant.