

Frank

Berlin

At some point it had ceased to bother him that he pretty much knew the evening before how the next day would unfold. On the contrary, Frank had come to appreciate the unchanging contours of his existence. Sometimes he remembered the past like some crap film he had seen ages ago. The shaky efforts he had made to actively shape his life. The depressing feeling of not being able just to hang around the house on a sunny day on the off-chance that something might be happening out there. Feeling obliged to join the thousands converging on the few green spaces that only served to make the absence of nature even more glaringly obvious. Passing the rows of dismal ochre family houses that had all but driven everything homely out of the city. Spending his evenings nervously standing around in bars, anxious that someone might start talking to him, which of course they never did.

Frank lived in Berlin, where no one talks to you unless they're out to rob you, and even then they make do with the bare minimum. Never had anything out of the ordinary happened throughout the years of unrest. Life had failed to keep any of the promises it had seemingly held out to him. People he got to know in bars lost their attraction come the daytime. But mostly they just disappeared again, somewhere in this big city. Frank could now understand why on the whole people didn't think Berlin much of a draw because the city was definitely extremely ugly. Who would ever have believed this clump of fenced-in dirt could ever have become anything approaching a metropolis again?

But now it was one, complete with all the luxury shops, neighbourhoods and never-intersecting parallel worlds that go hand in hand with being a big city. Sure, there were a few nice-looking bits, but they were always so far away that you never bothered to seek them out. After all, you don't spontaneously decide to spend an hour on public transport just to drink one last beer for the road. So as they got older, people narrowed their radius operandi and got used to the pubs, shops and patches of green in their own districts, which were no bigger than a village really. People apparently can't cope with anywhere bigger than a small town.

You knew all the stupid gits in the neighbourhood, had grown old with those that were still talking about changing the world, but Frank knew that if they hadn't left by now, they never would.

Frank's former friend Peter with whom he had wanted to form a band – an idea soon abandoned in favour of standing in bars and talking about getting a band together – had travelled around half the world and was perennially unhappy. The places stubbornly refused to match up to the pictures in his mind. He was currently in Sri Lanka for some reason, still not happy.

Pia, Frank's neighbour, with whom he had sometimes sat on the balcony in companionable silence, was currently in Myanmar and was planning to go on to London. Helena, the fat hippy-dippy woman who Frank was always sure to run into just when he didn't feel like meeting anyone – when going for his paper in the morning, or in the evening when all he wanted was to get home unnoticed – and who always had to regale him with her latest spiritual experiences, was in Manaus, but that wasn't much to write home about either. Miki from Tel Aviv who had worked as a waitress round the corner for a long time was now living in Los Angeles and doing something in the film industry.

Waitressing probably.

Frank hooked up with them all on the internet and promised to visit. Promises he then promptly forgot about again as he urgently needed to speak to some other friend having a crisis somewhere in the world because something hadn't worked out with their visa, identity papers, job or a perfect apartment.

Frank had few older friends who, like him, had carried on living in the city because they had gotten used to it, or knew that where you live becomes unimportant because things were much the same everywhere and the older you got, the harder it was to begin again, once you had passed 40.

Why should an unglamorous guy like him wander around a city when no one was interested in him anyway?

Frank would never have dreamed of referring to Berlin as his home town. Frank had never really thought of anywhere as home.

For most people he knew, the penny still hadn't dropped. They were still waiting for a place to come along that was eager to have them. Somewhere ready to take them in that they could wrap around themselves like a well-fitting coat. You don't find a home like that on the internet or by desperately charging around all over the place.

Home is for people who grew up in the mountains in one of those picturesque villages with animals running around where you know everyone and everyone knows you. Where the air is incontrovertibly divine, and where instead of going to the cinema everyone goes to watch the sunset.

Frank noticed he was getting a bit of a paunch. Everyone was getting a paunch. Hidden in all the paunches of all the old men were perhaps children that would one day be set free when the men were buried. And then go on to become street urchins in Peru. Frank worked

in an unattractive office piled high with old Ikea furniture and dog-eared files and it really didn't matter what he did. He had long since given up any idea of being able to change the world. Though 'give up' was much too active – the idea had simply quietly fallen by the wayside. Frank had come to understand that nothing would change the world, except perhaps something involving great violence, but that wasn't his cup of tea at all. He had become tired, but in a pleasant way, like gently becoming drowsy in summer, stretched out on a white sun lounger in an Italian garden. A horse would be there too. Dead.

Every lunchtime Frank went to the café next door to his office. Over the years the old regulars had disappeared, driven away by the brainless brigade of ever so eco-friendly 30-something mothers. To show what incredibly relaxed mothers they were, these women sipped lattes and looked on while their offspring terrorized the customers. Frank sat there and tried to like the kids who were running around him shrieking, throwing things in his coffee and stepping on dogs. He found it easy when he forgot himself, and the peace he had been seeking, and just looked at the children as yet unaware of what lay in store for them. Those few years of blissful ignorance!

Frank had become forgiving with age, and was often unable to hold back a tear when he observed people trying to live their lives amiably. They sang in amateur choirs, danced in public parks and carried small animals around with them. Frank regretted that he had hated people so much when he was younger, it hadn't made his life any better.

Every day at five o'clock Frank locked up his office, stopped off at the supermarket on his way home to buy a newspaper and stuff to throw together for his evening meal, then happily returned to his apartment. He cooked while listening to music, then if by some miracle it was warm enough, he would sit on the balcony and read a comic, all the while being astonished at how easy it had become to be content. Maybe it had something to do

with the absence of expectations. For example, Frank had long ago ceased to wait for love to come along. All his love affairs had ended unhappily ages ago. If he thought about women these days, he was more likely to remember the loud unpleasant moments. And he couldn't say anymore why he had always quarrelled with a particular girl or what the arguments had been about.

He hadn't been in a relationship for around ten years now. Since he'd acquired the paunch. Or perhaps the other way round. Occasionally, sitting on the balcony in spring, he would revisit old feelings. That sense of eternity you felt when you were head over heels in love, that was never going to come again, he mused while watching the swallows who always cried so beautifully in spring before the rain came. After these moments of reminiscing on the balcony, he usually felt like going for a walk. Strolling in this vaguely maudlin mood through streets washed by the spring rain, he consciously became aware of the ugliness of the city he normally no longer noticed. Lovely buds on bushes that imitated nature understored by plastic bags and dog dirt. And then he went on searching until it dawned on him that you didn't find love this way, at night, in spring, on the street, and so he went back home, lay down on the sofa, read a comic, listened to a demanding record, until he was calm again. No, he was unlikely to find love again, and it was a waste of energy lamenting that fact.

In this way Frank imbibed spring at an agreeable temperature, every evening crossing off a day in his life, right up to the moment when, from one second to the next, everything could have taken a different turn.

It had been another one of those evenings with swallows and sighing on the balcony then going for a walk and the rain coming on. Frank heard a loud mewling coming from under the usual miserable bushes. He stared at the bush and spotted a tiny bird. Fallen from the nest

and too witless to fly. Frank noticed that he wasn't alone. A woman, presumably about the same age as himself, Frank thought as he scanned her quickly, was also staring at the bird. 'I've no idea,' she said, 'what to do with baby birds'. 'Is it like with baby deer, that the mother will reject them if a human handles them?' Frank asked. Both shrugged and contemplated the chick uncertainly. 'Maybe we should just go away,' the woman said, 'as otherwise the mother might not feel safe to go to it'. They walked on a few metres and then stopped again, because there was no let-up in the bird's crying. 'Even if the mother was around, how could it manage to get the chick back into the nest, they don't exactly carry small rucksacks around with them, do they? Pouches, though, you do see that now and then. Birds with pouches.'

They both returned and Frank fished the bird out from under the bush, which then strangely settled down in his hand quite happily, squawking only now and again, with hunger. 'What do little birds eat?' asked the woman. 'Pre-chewed worms, if you would be so kind,' Frank ventured. The woman crouched down in front of the bush again and a couple of seconds later came back with a worm. A mother with a pram shot past them, briefly bristling because they hadn't made space for her on the pavement fast enough. Ruth glared at the woman, who looked like a former model for mail order catalogues, with a degree of disgust normally reserved for particularly unattractive animals.

'I think I'll skip the chewing though,' she said. 'Maybe it'd help if we put it through a blender?' Frank suggested. In unspoken agreement, they both went to his apartment and chopped up part of the worm and stuck it in the chick's mouth. Wow, hats off to her, thought Frank, you don't meet a woman who chops up worms every day.

They then fashioned a warm nest from some socks, the bird fell asleep and they settled down on the balcony with a bottle of wine. That's what older people do. They're continually

schlepping bottles of wine around, perhaps to make them feel grown up, for life's big secret is that hardly anyone knows how to be a grown-up. Most are embarrassed about it and start to act like they think grown-ups are meant to behave. That was what made the world such a desolate place. All those people who are not their true selves, who put on a disguise, talk like an automaton, boring grown-up automatons.

The night began raining softly. Frank fetched an umbrella, which he held in one hand while he warmed bits of Ruth with the other. They talked, drank, sat in silence, and the swallows went to sleep.

When morning came, very easily, Frank knew that he had fallen in love, in a way that was nothing like the rushing tsunami of hormones experienced in youth. He wanted to have Ruth in his life, read to her from his comics, play his music to her, lay her across his stomach to sleep. And at the point when Ruth had to go, because it had become much too light for things to go on in this way, she said: 'I'm moving to Tel Aviv soon. To live with my friend. Will you look after our little bird?'

The chick died on the third day.

And Frank resumed his life as usual.

He lay on the sofa, read comics, went to his office, and sat on the balcony in the evenings when the weather allowed. Occasionally he thought of Ruth and didn't understand why she hadn't stayed with him. They could've sat here side by side, the bird would've learned to fly and it would've been a good life, the two of them together.