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Where Johannes Brahms Was Born

Eric Gabriel Lehman

Joel pauses on the little terrace before Hanne's front door. She'll certainly shoot him a look with those large eyes of hers when he waltzes in at 11 in the morning, even if it is Pascal, her wild 14-year-old, who needs the talking-to. But Hanne has been around the block. She understands what it means to search for love.

The courtyard is strewn with bottles and plastic cups from last night's Bastille Day celebrations. Buildings on either side of the courtyard are laced together by strings of colored bulbs, their light feeble in the sun. Once a third building enclosed the courtyard but it didn't survive the war and now the yard opens to the street like a window. Hanne claimed to have rented the house because of the yellow plum tree that arches over it and bears translucent, golden fruit.

"*Morgen.*" Pascal sits naked, framed by his window, writing in a notebook, song lyrics for his band perhaps. The sill is where he used to chat with Sybille, his girlfriend from across the courtyard until she dumped him the week before. One leg shields from view what is not meant to be seen, but only just, an arrangement of discretion and tease executed by someone who knows people look at him. A shell hangs from a leather thong around his neck and a sliver of earring shines through thickets of hair. He is tall for his age, lithe, and dark-eyed. His position has him lit to the best advantage; sunlight burnishes his calf and dabs a shoulder. Joel imagines standing close enough to breathe in the naked Pascal as he might a handsome stranger waking beside him. Pascal's knowing smile reads Joel's mind. "Congratulations. You're the first *schwul* American I've met," he had said after Joel moved in. He let Joel know that he'd had erotic encounters with male friends, even if he is drawn to women "at the moment." It is hard imagining a kid his age in Dubuque speaking with such poise, and Pascal clearly enjoys playing the enlightened northern European. He returns to his writing, allowing Joel—and Sybille—to observe him so engaged. He'll be the first thing

she sees when she looks out of her window, part of Pascal's plan to get her back, Joel supposes.

Joel feels like a native with a paper bag of *Brötchen* from the local bakery, ordered in German, more or less. He has been in Hamburg for a little over a year and sleeps on Hanne's couch in return for hauling cases of mineral water down to her basement cabaret, working the espresso maker and sweeping up, and he fills in if a singer needs a pianist, too. Hanne's cabaret is stuck in an anarchist/hippie-flavored time warp of the sort Joel associates with college coffeehouses. Last night Beate Schumacher sang blues with a distinctly Prussian lilt: *Sommertihme, when ze living ist easy* . . . Hanne has asked her back in a couple of weeks. Germans love *die Blues*. Beate Schumacher told Joel that when she goes to New York in the fall she will head straight to Harlem and not waste time in museums. "Blacks, zey are ze real Americans," she says. "Zey have soul."

The large front room is clear of last night's debris left over from post-show carousing; so Hanne must have gotten up especially early that morning, a bad sign, because it also means that Todd hadn't stayed over. Pascal's artwork fills the living room walls and an entire corner is taken up by his drum set. A radio crackles in the kitchen. "*Bonjour, mon petit.*" Hanne's French is left over from her time in Lyon when she still lived with Pascal's father. Her cigarette is gummed between her lips as she heaves a large cooking pot into the dish drainer. "You look half asleep, Liebling. There's coffee." Her henna-red hair is the color of the velvet used to line jewelry boxes and is pulled back, shiny as an LP. Large marcasite earrings dangle on either side of her face, and she wears a matching neck chain, ballerina slippers and a dark dress. She has thickened in her early 40s but moves tautly, still the European hippie-goddess. "Me too," she says as Joel pours himself a cup. "So where were you last night?"

"Rudy's."

"*Mein Gott!*" Her eyebrows arch in exaggerated horror. Rudy's Night Club on semi-sleazy Steindamm, near the main station and a stone's throw from Hansaplatz's open-air drug market, is a kind of drain that collects people from other bars: lecherous, middle-aged civil servants in baggy corduroys, droopy sweaters, and gold-buckled loafers as well as randy 20-year-old plumber's apprentices in stonewashed jeans and mullets, and the occasional hustler. Its magenta carpeting, wall sconces, and circular bar might have been the brainchild of a syndicate boss.

"I wasn't there long. And afterwards I went to see where Johannes Brahms was born," he says as much to arouse her curiosity as to lend his exploits some class. "Is Todd here?"

Hanne grabs some soapy silverware, runs it under the water and crashes it into the drainer in response. Todd is in his early 30s, not much older than Joel, but a good ten years younger than Hanne and quite handsome. He has been in Hamburg since his college days and now works for a bank. He and Hanne have been seeing each other on and off for the past three years. "Have you eaten?" Hanne asks. Joel holds up the bag from the bakery. "*Wunderbar*. Help me finish with this and we'll have breakfast. Get the bucket, will you? It should be in the bathroom."

Joel came to Europe when a friend offered him an unused plane ticket that a travel-agent aunt was able to reassign. He arrived in Hamburg, a refugee from an East Village summer of humidity and Fourth of July fire-crackers starting June first. Germany was not the first European country that Joel Meyerson of the Bronx, alumnus of the Jewish Center of Highbridge's Talmud Torah, would have chosen; Germany: the land of *Hogan's Heroes* and Zyklon-B and everything in between. Still, a free trip to Europe cost nothing. Hamburg had a train station and Germany bordered France and Holland; he would not go to Deutschland to settle there, only to sojourn, and unlike his forbears he would outwit history by self-deporting. But Hamburg grew on him, with streets named Beim Schlump and Bäckerbreitergang and Steintwietenhof and canals that fingered past old brick warehouses like blind men feeling their way. The city was snug, simple, unfussy, including many bars. Suburban trains clattered peacefully below viaducts and further out they slipped past little forests that stopped, politely, just short of the tracks. Hamburgers—it's what they called themselves—weren't back-slappingly friendly, but they were Europeans, after all. On some days, however, a street sign's ur-German *ß* or the sight of old men wearing yellow armbands—wounded war veterans—conjured up spectral thoughts. His eyes perversely sought the swastika and eagle capping the entrance to a leftover bomb shelter, now a bar. On such days train tracks gleamed ominously and the crowd rushing into the gigantic plaza supermarket was a relentless, goose-stepping horde.

He hasn't been able to snag a boyfriend, either.

She makes her way with the little boy who clamors down the Passerelle Saint Vincent. He will be tired a third of the way up the hill, but it doesn't pay to ask him to slow down; he is always seeking to delight her, impress her, and in any case they will rest once they reach the top. She loves the old part of the city; they go there often. The basilica is up ahead. *Komm! Viens!* She and Michel speak to the boy in both languages. He looks more like his father, large, dark eyes and lips stained the color of Burgundy. *Komm! Viens!* Is her child French or German? Her mother keeps asking, and she tells her that it makes no difference. Lately she has begun to wonder. The boy wants her to hurry up, but she is content to stroll. It is the first day that is warm enough to wear only sandals, and her flea-market peasant dress flounces around her. Michel will be at the university most of the day. The little boy loves the view of the city from high up, its two rivers snaking through it. Later she will have a cup of coffee and head off to the market. She thinks about getting some kind of work, but her French isn't that good. Still, Michel doesn't pressure her, and the apartment he rents through the university is cheap and big enough for the three of them. She has sewn a curtain around their corner of the apartment for some privacy, even if it never stops the boy, whose curiosity and energy are boundless. He is like his father. He waits at the foot of the stone steps, although she would prefer to continue by way of the road, since it passes through a pretty park. She is in no hurry to reach the top, because when she does, she will come to a decision about whether or not she will remain in France.

"Don't you believe in knocking?" Joel recoils from the sight of a naked woman in the bathtub. Gabi is a wet island ringed by a coral reef of soap bubbles. She is thickly set and frankly maternal, around 20.

"Entschuldigung." The long word is hard to get out when under stress. Joel begins to leave.

"*Ach*, don't worry about it, I'm just giving you a hard time," she laughs. "Be careful." She points to two-year-old Elsabet, nestled in a mound of blanket on the floor. "But while you're here, you might as well learn something." She cups her right breast and jiggles it like custard.

Joel glances only briefly before looking away. Gabi enjoys taunting him about his preference, although sometimes it feels like flirting. The pail is beside the tub, and reaching for it brings him within inches of her face.

The breast flops back into the water like a fish given a second chance. "And this," she says as her fingers circle her mound of pubic hair, darkly dense as soil after a rainstorm.

"I've been with women, Gabi."

"Yes? How many times? What did you do with them?" Just as Joel reaches for the bucket, she gives him a little splash.

"Stop!"

"It's just water. You're not made of cotton candy, are you? So who's your new lover?" She uses the English word, which she pronounces *luh-vah*.

"How do you know there is one?"

"Your face. Your *mouth*. Women can tell these things."

But he doesn't want to talk about the previous night. He doesn't quite know what to make of his encounter with Heinz, a clarinetist studying at the music conservatory with a face like polished stone of the sort easily smudged. His hair was bleached a stringent yellow-white and his eyes were the gray of metal submerged in water. Their gazes locked in Rudy's and moments later they were leaving, but instead of getting into a cab Heinz suggested that they go down to the harbor to watch the sun rise.

"Did you do it?"

"Gabi!"

"Gabeee," she imitates. "So tell me: yes or no?"

They didn't, but to his surprise it doesn't bother him. This might have made him feel cheated in New York, but in the Old World it leaves him oddly elated. Heinz's finely honed voice rills deep within his brain. He still feels their long walk in his legs. "Hanne doesn't seem too happy."

"Todd was here last night, what do you expect? It was still mobbed long after you left. Beate brought her friends along. Do you think she can sing? I don't. I told Hanne to break things off with Todd a long time ago. She never knows where she is with him. Always ready to go back to England. He's made passes at me, too, you know, but I won't have any of it. Men like him can never make up their minds. At first I thought they were getting along. Hanne was sitting in his lap and laughing. Finally everyone left, it was just the two of them. I was in my room with Elsabet, but I heard them. All right, I listened. I wanted to know what was going on. Hanne's like my sister, and I worry about her. The next thing I knew there were shouts and something crashed. Hanne must have thrown something at him." Gabi lifts a heavy leg to inspect what looks to

be a bruise and water pours off like a log. Elsabet lets out a little whimper. “*Na, mein Süßlein?* Are you hungry? We’ll eat soon. Hand me the scrub brush, will you? Better yet, would you mind—” She sits up to offer him her back and her belly settles around her. “That feels good,” she coos as he works the suds into her skin. Elsabet looks anxious as she tries to figure out what is being done to her mother.

“Do you think Hanne wants to marry Todd?”

Gabi’s hands ripple through the water. “*Ach*, I don’t know.”

“What ever happened to Pascal’s father?”

“Michel, you mean? Still in France, I guess. They never married. Pascal likes to joke about being illegitimate. He is too wild sometimes. Hanne likes you. She’d marry you if you weren’t *schwul*. You say you have been with women, so how do you know you are really *schwul*?”

“Gabi—”

“You still haven’t told me about last night.”

The door pushes open. The naked Pascal stands there. “*Oopla!*” he cries but doesn’t retreat.

“Hoopla,” Elsabet imitates, clapping her hands in delight.

“Pascal, go back before your mother catches you like that,” Gabi tells him.

“She knows what I look like. She gave birth to me, remember? We used to take baths together all the time when I was younger.” He climbs onto the rim of the tub and begins walking around its edge as if it were a tightrope, arms airplaned on either side.

“Get down from there, will you?” Gabi laughs as she splashes between his legs.

“Stop, it tickles!” Pascal rounds the rim with a dexterous flick of his heels. He hits a wet spot, his foot slips, and he teeters against the wall.

“Watch out, *verdammte!*” Gabi leans out to grab Elsabet and sets her out of danger in a far corner just as Pascal rights himself with a foot on either side of the tub, a teenaged Colossus at Rhodes.

Elsabet starts crying. “See, you’ve scared her. Now get out of here and wait until I’m done, will you?”

“What’s this?” Hanne stands in the doorway. Her eyes meet the boy, poised monumentally above her. “Get down from there!”

“I want to take a bath but Gabi’s hogging the tub.” He looks right at her, his *schwanz* dangling playfully.

"That's enough." Hanne lowers her eyes and points to the door. Her son slithers past his mother, narrowly escaping her slap on his bare rump.

"You too," she says sharply, gesturing for Joel to scam.

They sit around a table on the terrace beneath the yellow plum tree. Thin crusts of bread like eggshells litter their little wooden breakfast boards. Hanne wears a jester's cap, its bells tinkling merrily each time she has some coffee. Sunlight through the trees patterns her bare arms like lace. Elsabet snuggles in Gabi's lap. A hint of green soap wafts from the mop dripping on its nail on the side of the house. The courtyard is quiet; the traffic of nearby Grindelallee has lessened, for it is almost one o'clock and stores are shut for the weekend. The city is calm as no American city ever is.

"Todd was here last night," Hanne says.

Joel and Gabi exchange glances.

"He asked me to go to England with him again. I reminded him that I had a son, and do you know what that man said? It was time I accepted that Pascal wasn't a baby anymore. How dare he tell me what I am to accept? He's never been a parent. He's never been a *mother*. What do men know about children, anyway?"

"Todd's right," Gabi tells her. "Pascal's no baby anymore. He's sitting for his *Habitus* next month."

"Todd has no right telling me what I should do."

"If Pascal gets into that acting school he'll be living in Hannover anyway."

"Not if he doesn't pass his *Habitus*."

"It almost sounds as if you'd rather he not go."

"Are you saying that I should just pick up and go with Todd? I've known Pascal far longer than I've known Todd, you know." The jester cap bells reflect sharp points of sunlight.

There are early photographs of mother and son where they might be brother and older sister. Their eyes swim with the same mischief and they look ready to play a joke on the person behind the camera. Hanne has filled her house with Pascal: his artwork, his drum set, his will. It's hard to imagine a man fitting into all of it. Joel has met Todd, who is nice enough but clearly no Michel, a free-spirit literary type who fathered Pascal one a night on a hillside overlooking the ocean in Brittany. For Hanne, accepting

that Pascal is no longer a baby means accepting that France and Michel are gone forever. Joel spies a girl at a window a story above the uppermost branches of the plum tree, so still she might be a statue; her blonde hair is nearly white. In her nightgown she is a fairy princess in her tower.

Hanne turns to Joel. "You never finished telling me about last night."

After watching the sun rise Heinz proposed taking Joel to his favorite spot in Hamburg. They made their way through the older parts of the city past Bismarck Monument and the blackened ruin of the Nicholai Church until they came to a parking lot behind the *Stern* magazine building. "The birthplace of Johannes Brahms," he announced, gesturing to a field of asphalt painted with grids of thick white lines. A solitary Opal was parked at the far end. A white plastic shopping bag danced in the breeze. His house once stood here but was destroyed in the war, Heinz explained. Joel knew the usual about Brahms from his piano-lesson days: the heavy face with its Biblical beard, the Hungarian dances, his infatuation with Robert Schumann's wife. Joel said it was a shame about the house, but Heinz said he preferred it this way, since if the house still stood, it would have become a museum; it would have become kitsch. This way it remained a concept, an idea: pure. Brahms was very German; for the true German sought the symbolic in everything. "A missing house and *Stern* magazine. Destruction and advertising. Dialectical, yes?" Heinz said.

Joel says nothing, only smiles.

"Look at him," Gabi says. "*Die Liebe*. I remember that."

"You're only 20," Hanne says. "You talk like you'll never fall in love again."

"I don't have to. I have you, don't I?" She gives Elsabet a snuggle. "We don't need men, anyway, you and me, now do we?"

"Any coffee?" Pascal stands barefoot in the doorway wearing tight jeans and a clinging t-shirt that stops just before his navel, no more than a nick in the taut wall of his stomach. Curls of damp hair mass on either side of his face.

"There will be coffee if you make some." Hanne gestures to the Melitta pot, doing her best to sound firm. Pascal shrugs, takes the pot and goes back inside. Coffee for a 14-year-old? Joel once thought. But Pascal was Hanne's child.

"All he does is listen to music, play the drums, and hang out with his girlfriend," Gabi says. She points to the window, empty now, where Joel had seen the girl in white. "He should be studying for his exams."

"I know. I let him get away with too much." Hanne looks at the window. "The girl's mother calls me," Hanne says. "'Tell your son to stop coming over all the time,'" she imitates in a high, unpleasant voice. "'My Sybille must study.' As if I didn't care about my child doing well in school. Let her try raising a child by herself and see how easy it is. The little *Prinzessin*. I don't know what he sees in her."

"She's pretty," Joel suggests.

"Sybille, what a horrible name, a name for a poodle. But she's broken things off, so that's the end of that."

"Where are the filters?" Pascal's languid slouch in the doorway is almost feminine.

Joel thinks he might have misplaced them while helping Hanne earlier and is about to stand up, but she gestures for him to stay put. "Let him find them himself," she says, talking to Pascal via Joel.

Pascal emerges with the Melitta pot, its ceramic cone filter wobbling. "Your mother has already asked you not to carry it that way," Gabi tells him. "It's how the last one broke, remember?"

"*Calme toi*," he says. He sets the filter onto the table and replaces it with the lid.

"By the way, when do you propose to start studying for your exams, young man? What about your French, *par exemple*?"

"You used to speak French with me all the time, *ma chère Maman*. How am I supposed to learn a language if I don't hear it?"

"I actually don't like speaking French anymore," she says to Joel confidentially. She turns back to the boy. "But what about maths? What about German? You don't study any of that, either."

Pascal pours himself some coffee and leans back in his chair. "School bores me. And besides, wasn't it you who once told me that most of your teachers just wanted to brainwash you into conforming, *chère Maman*? Didn't you take off right after *Gymnasium*?" He stretches out his legs and rests them on the table, exposing long, white soles.

"*Stop*," says Hanne, referring as much to what he says as his position. "Joel doesn't need to look at the bottom of your feet over breakfast."

Pascal smiles at Joel. "I'm sure he's seen the soles of a man's feet before."

"I need you to help me unpack a delivery later," she tells him.

"He can help." Pascal winks at Joel. "I have a date with Sybille."

"I thought that was over. Her mother told you to stay away, remember?"

"Temporary setbacks. I have plans." He has a sip of coffee as his eyes float toward Sybille's window. His head tilts back; he stretches his long legs in the sun and he smiles, savoring his thoughts, looking ready to receive the girl when she magically descends from the window. Hanne watches him, and soon Joel is watching too, drawn to Pascal's reverie. Gabi alone remains unaffected as she nuzzles Elsabet.

"I came back to Germany because of him," Hanne says after Gabi and Pascal have left the table. She yanks off the fool's cap, which falls to the table with a sad jingle. "His father wanted us to stay and I loved France. But I didn't want to raise a child there. I had left Germany without even telling my parents. I ran away, actually, and then I had a child without bothering to get married. I didn't want to live in Germany anymore, I was sick of it. But I started feeling a little homesick after all, or maybe I felt guilty, so I returned. Only when I got here did I realize how much I missed France, but by then it was too late to go back. I opened a cabaret because there was one I went to in the old part of the city. In France people knew how to smile, so I thought that I would have a place in Hamburg where people could smile, too. I would have a place where it would be acceptable to smile for no reason at all."

A little later Pascal appears with a soccer ball that he kicks around the courtyard, his concession to his mother's request that he stay close to home, even if he refuses to help out. Each bounce echoes between the blank walls. It is not long before Sybille's mother throws her head out the window to complain about the noise. Pascal goes inside and starts playing the drums, and for the next hour the apartment rumbles. Hanne invites Joel into her room for a joint, lights a candle or two, and lies back onto her bed's many little pillows. Gold-threaded fabric is draped from the ceiling and Pascal's watercolors cover the walls. He is everywhere; Hanne cannot escape him, a constant reminder of her regrets. She has reached the age when decisions settle and become too heavy to move. Joel begins to feel the joint. Johannes Brahms walks across the empty parking lot, mumbling into his beard as he looks for his Opal. Heinz is nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe you have the right idea, not having children," Hanne says, staring at the ceiling as if it held an explanation, all the while Pascal's drumming brims just outside the door, ready to spill over.

The boy likes the metal radio tower, so they climb the many steps that approach the basilica from the rear just to pass by it. The little boy loves heights because up high he is able to understand everything. Soon they are on the top of the hill overlooking the city. She wraps her shawl around her against the chill and worries that the boy's thin jacket is not enough. He runs to the railing, enraptured by the view. She will miss all of this when they leave. The bells of the basilica chime as if a great cage has been flung open. The river glistens. Perhaps she and Michel will work something out, but for now her decision seems clear. *Pascal, komm! Viens!* She must get to the market while the old woman selling spices is still there. The boy clutches the railing until it looks like the bars of a prison. What if he doesn't like Hamburg? She thinks of the spice woman and her magnificently oily oregano, her marjoram. Hanne can taste them upon her tongue. She will never find such spices in Hamburg. People in Hamburg do not concern themselves with how things taste. The city is flat. There is little to see from on high. She will take the boy to where St. Pauli overlooks the harbor, behind the brewery. On a clear day they will look out and see all the way to the Four Lands. They will see as far as it is possible to see in Hamburg. It is already decided. *Pascalchen, komm hier!*

"I like the music of water," Heinz says when Joel appears.

It is just after nine in the evening. Heinz sits on the granite lip of a fountain below the ornate statue of a woman holding a trident high over Hansaplatz. The florid sculpture and its fountain are sentimental holdovers from the turn of the century, now surrounded by concrete apartment buildings. Heinz's brilliant yellow hair is a chemical hue in the blue of the streetlamps. He wears what he'd had on the other night in Rudy's: leather pants, t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, and something heavy and shiny punched into one earlobe. The square is deserted but for a cluster of Turkish teenage boys in one corner.

Joel had waited two full weeks without hearing from Heinz before seeking him out. He looked up Heinz's address and telephone number and called but no one ever answered, nor was there a machine, so he went to where

Heinz lived but never saw a light in his window. Did he really exist, or was he a manifestation of Joel's longing, another German symbol, right down to the blue eyes and blond hair, even if Heinz's was bleached? Maybe he was no different from the other men Joel has met in Hamburg, often distant and inscrutable, virile yet sterile. But Joel couldn't quite put him out of his mind. He took a detour through Hansaplatz to put off returning to Hanne's. These days she is moody whenever Todd calls but moody if he doesn't. Pascal is too preoccupied with Sybille to study for his *Habitur*. He has tried going up to where the girl lives, only to have the door slammed in his face, once by the girl's mother and then by Sybille herself. But he is undeterred. The girl's mother is brainwashing her, he says. She is too *spießig*, too bourgeois. He will triumph in the end. Love will have its day. He will get up there somehow. He has written a song about it entitled "I Will Break Open Your Heart."

"Sit down." Heinz takes out tobacco and papers to roll a cigarette. "You don't smoke, right?" He seeds the paper with dark brown flakes, rolls and draws his tongue across the seal. After a long, satisfied drag he studies Joel. "You are taller now than before. You are very tall, in fact."

Does Heinz like tall men? He doesn't say. He exchanges glances with one of the Turkish kids. "Do you know him?" Joel asks.

"Hansaplatz is a village."

Heinz seems even quieter than the first night, or perhaps he is stoned. Joel yearns to put his arms around him, to run his fingers through his yellow-white hair. He hopes Heinz will not start talking about symbols and suggests going for a walk. Heinz thinks for a moment and says yes but stays where he is. He glances in the direction of one of the boys.

"Who is he?" Joel is irritated.

"We all know each other here." Heinz gets up. "We go and eat something, yes?" Joel's mood lightens until the Turkish boy comes near as if he has been waiting for a signal. "This is Ahmed." Heinz throws what is left of his cigarette into the fountain. Ahmed's face is the color of cocoa, and his hair is very dark. "Joel is an American," Heinz says, and the boy nods appreciatively. Heinz suggests that they go to his house and he will cook something for the three of them. But Joel isn't hungry. He hasn't come to watch Heinz ogling this boy.

"Wait," Heinz calls after him when Joel starts walking away.

Joel doesn't stop until reaching the edge of the Alster, which has turned the color of slate.

What is he doing in Hamburg? It was nice at first: the novelty of Europe, the change from New York, the pleasant privacies of the foreigner. He loved staying put at Hanne's instead of traipsing across Europe on a railpass. But Hamburg is chilly. No wonder the sensitive Brahms fled to gentler Vienna: people don't smile here. Hanne had to open a cabaret where people might do it. Pascal's search for love seems doomed in a city that needs an excuse to smile. Joel misses New York's static electricity; Hamburg feels wired to a switch that turns the city off when not in use. He keeps walking until he's back at the Brahms parking lot. It is empty as before. The asphalt's many painted lines resemble stick figures, skeletons of the unreachable and inaccessible: Heinz. Michel. Sybille.

Hanne is sitting on the terrace smoking a cigarette when he gets back. Before her are a half-filled bottle of red wine and two glasses, one untouched. "Todd left for England," she says. "Tonight, on that new tunnel train." When Joel puts his arms around her she weeps softly. "I guess it's better like this." The house rumbles like a ramshackle heart with Pascal's drumming. "Here." She pours some wine into the second glass for Joel. "Right after I got the call from Todd I asked Pascal to help me get the piano onto the stage and he told me to ask my boyfriend. I thought I would lose my mind. I slapped him. I have never, ever lifted a hand to Pascal until today. Now he won't speak to me. Not a word."

"Hanne—"

"Regret is worse than shame. Far worse. Hungry?"

At the mention of food Joel realizes that he hasn't eaten anything since the afternoon. Hanne picks up the bottle of wine. "Get the glasses, will you?"

Pascal doesn't look up from his drumming as they pass. Hanne keeps her eyes grimly forward. She closes the kitchen door to dampen the sound and starts making omelets. Her many bracelets clack against the bowl as she whisks the eggs.

"I wanted Heinz to fall in love with me," Joel says as they eat.

"Who's Heinz?"

He realizes that he hasn't told her anything about him. "Just some guy. I was wondering. What if that French man had agreed to come to Germany?"

"You mean Michel? I don't know. I left Germany to get away from myself but I wound up coming along anyway." The eggs slide from the

bowl and hit the melted butter with a sizzle. Pascal's drumming becomes a solid drone. Hanne throws her head through the doorway and shouts, "Enough!"

The drumming ceases instantly, but something in the air keeps going, like people thrust forward in a car after braking. Mother and son look at each other for a single, fragile moment. Joel isn't sure what they'll do, what they'll say. "I'm making eggs," Hanne says quietly, "If you want any." Pascal looks at Joel as if to say 'Look after her, will you?' He shakes his head no. Hanne pulls back into the kitchen. "I'm so tired, Joel. So very tired. Please. Stay with me tonight, will you? Oh, don't worry. I'm not like Gabi. I just need someone nice to fill up the rest of the bed. I don't snore. *Bitte*." Joel says he will. He's glad not to be sleeping alone that night. "You know, only afterwards did I realize that when Pascal referred to my boyfriend he might have been referring to you and not Todd." She kisses him on the forehead. "I'm a fool. So, do you sleep in the nude? You don't snore, do you?"

"I'm a fool, too," Joel says.

Joel comes upon Pascal sitting on the terrace steps when he goes for a glass of water later that night. He sits down beside him, both of them in their underwear. The lights strung across the courtyard color Pascal's skin. "The sky is so bright from the moon," the boy says. They look upward but their eyes stop at the girl's vacant window.

"I'm not angry at my mother anymore, if that's what she sent you to find out."

"She didn't. She really loves you." Joel pauses. "People only bother being angry at those they love," Joel says. Or at those who don't love them, he adds silently.

"How about you? Who do you love?"

"I love Brahms. He used to live in Hamburg, you know."

Beate Schumacher's accompanist cancels the day before her gig, so Joel agrees to fill in, and they spend one whole afternoon rehearsing. *Sommertihme, ant ze living ist eassy*. . . Her large front teeth clap the mike, but Joel's German isn't up to the delicate task of telling the touchy Frau Schumacher about it.

Hanne asks where Pascal is. Joel hasn't seen the boy since the night before and volunteers to look for him but Hanne throws up a braceleted

hand. "Pascal can take care of himself," she says, but Joel hears worry in her voice. He goes out for some air before the show begins. He's always found the cabaret's ceiling a bit low—it is a basement, after all—but tonight it suffocates. The night before as they were tidying up the cabaret Hanne recalled scurrying down to the basement of her family's apartment with her mother and the neighbors after the air raid sirens went off. It was stifling, and on the third day they ran out of water. The portable radio broadcast nothing but military music and news of German victories. Hanne asked why they had to stay down there and a neighbor said that the city was being cleaned. When everything was all nice and clean, they would go back outside.

Almost all of the dozen or so tables in the cabaret are taken, each with its candle and single carnation in a small San Pelligrino bottle: La Schumacher has a loyal following. Hanne is in full regalia: black dress, armloads of noisy bracelets, a string of bright-colored stones around her neck, darkly lidded eyes. The audience quiets down and Beate begins slowly, thinking about each word, each *syllable*, overly poignant and *Weltschmerz*y, but the audience eats it up, especially when she throws back a glass of whiskey onstage, part Joplin, part Tom Waits. Hanne's eyes keep returning to the door, on the lookout for Pascal, who often wanders down in the middle of a show, but there is no sign of him. No wonder Todd split: as long Pascal is around Hanne needs no other man.

They're in the middle of "Since You Went Away" when a scream from the courtyard hits Beate's high note, and her voice flutters down like something shot from the sky. People in the audience rush outside to a figure sprawled below the yellow plum tree. It's Pascal, who has fallen below Sybille's window. His face is perfect except for an error of blood down one temple. The blonde-haired girl from across the way rushes toward him, followed by Gabi, but only when Hanne appears do the boy's dark, heavy lips begin moving, since she alone will understand what her son did in the heartless city of Hamburg and why.