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Adams Erbe ('Adam's Legacy')

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They always told me my father was dead, when actually he'd just left my mother. Although you can't really call it 'leaving', as they were never really together. They hardly knew each other. To be precise, they only slept with each other once. And by the time my mother realised that she was pregnant, my father was already long back home.

I was eight years old when one of my mother's friends persuaded her that it was extremely important for my psychological development that I should know the truth about the man who spawned me. And the earlier, the better.

The truth wasn't much to speak of. My father was called Sören or Gören and came from Sweden or Denmark or Norway. My mother couldn't remember any more details. "Eddy dear, I'm sure that your father is a really great man, and on that evening, when we... when you... you know... We liked each other very, very much."

The story with the dead father always appealed to me more than the one with the great Sören or Gören from Scandinavia.

Although my conception wasn't down to the love between two people, but rather to the disinhibiting effects of two ice-cold bottles of Gorbatschow vodka, I was the child my mother had always wished for. From the age of fourteen she had longed for nothing more fervently than a baby. She was already past thirty when the Scandinavian sperm helped her towards that goal. In the fourth month of her pregnancy, when my father had already left Berlin, she resigned from the bookshop where she worked and moved back in with her parents. Her friends pitied the poor Magda Cohen, who had to give up her career and independence for the bastard in her belly. They tried long and hard to persuade my mother to continue working despite the child. But Magda Cohen was the Antichrist of the women's movement. And if somebody had married and impregnated her in good time, then she would never even have hit upon the idea of having a career in the first place.

On a sunny afternoon in March, Magda squeezed me out and named me after one of the protagonists in her favourite novel by Jane Austen: Edward. On that spring day, I looked like all other babies, but as each year passed the similarity grew. Adam's eyes, Adam's mouth, Adam's nose.

My favourite pastime was playing in front of the stove in the living room. It was white, decorated with scrolls, and on top were three chubby cherubs, holding hands and smiling benignly. Next to the stove there was a box full of cars. I loved my cars, I considered myself a specialist and wanted to do something with cars when I grew up, probably like most six-year-old boys. There was really nothing original about me. And it was just as the golden Jaguar, the jewel of my collection, rammed the white Mustang that I heard my grandfather sobbing. He was sitting on the floor behind me. That in itself was confusing, as normally Grandpa Moses sat on the sofa or on a chair, but not on the lino. And then the tears in his eyes. I put my arm around him, but he pushed me gently away and stroked my head with trembling hands.

“Adam”, he said.

“Grandpa?”

He groaned and sighed. “A long time ago, a boy who looked just like you sat there. He didn’t have any cars, only tin soldiers. He was called Adam and he was my little brother.”

“Where is he?”

Moses didn’t answer.

“Where are his soldiers?”

“Soldiers die young.” He wiped his hand over his face. “Edward, let’s pray to the one God that you have inherited only Adam’s external features and not his character.”

Grandpa prayed constantly to this ‘one God’, went regularly to the synagogue in Pestalozzistrasse und insisted on kosher food. Grandma and mum hardly ever prayed, went to the synagogue very rarely, and ate whatever they felt like.

We crouched on the floor. Grandpa’s Hebrew prayers sounded like a goat bleating. He’s getting worked up about something, I thought to myself, as the tears streamed down his face again.

Finally, my mother came home and put an end to the scene: “Dad? What are you two doing there?”

“We’re praying, because of Adam”, I answered, because Grandpa still seemed to be in a trance, speaking to his one God.

My mother sighed, took Grandpa by the arm and pulled him up. “Dad, come here.”

Silently, he let himself be led away.

The Mustang flipped over. I threw it back into the box and pulled a Land Rover out, which would now race the Jaguar. It had no chance, of course, because I’d never let the Jaguar lose.

I would probably have forgotten the thing with Adam straight away, but that evening Grandpa didn't eat with us. He stayed in the library, which is what we called the attic above our flat. It wasn't a proper library. Sure, there was a shelf with books on it, but we actually used the huge space, which you reached by a spiral staircase, as a storage room. Old suitcases, old furniture that we didn't want to part with for sentimental reasons, cardboard boxes full of photos, clothes, my cot. Just stuff.

Moses Cohen, my grandpa, spent a lot of time in the library. Because of the quiet, he said. I was only rarely allowed up there. Because of the dust, said my grandma, Lara Cohen.

So the three of us sat at the kitchen table, and Grandma stretched her neck. She had a long neck like a swan's, and she was very proud of it. "What's wrong with Moses, then?", asked my mother.

"Adam", was the simple answer.

Grandma's neck turned in my direction. "I always hoped that it would gradually fade. Tja..."

"He'll get over it", my mother said.

Lara Cohen gave a short laugh. Her laugh was always pointed, short and brief. It didn't come from her belly or her heart, it was like the exclamation mark on a keyboard. Pressed once and then gone.

"Magda dear, your father thinks more about the dead than the living, if you know what I mean." Bitterness vibrated in her voice.

"Is Adam dead?", I wanted to know.

"We hope so." That laugh again.

"Mum, don't say things like that in front of little Eddy."

"Is he dead?", I persevered.

"Let's just say, Edward, that he deserved to die. He was a bad person, he..."

"Mum, please stop that."

"Did he break something?"

"Yes, he did. His grandmother and his mother."

"Mum." My mother slammed her fist down onto the table, she never did anything like that.

"Magda dear, this is no reason to destroy the furniture."

My mother stood up and cleared away the plates, although we hadn't yet finished. I had tasted blood. Somebody who had broken his mother and grandmother, you didn't hear that every day.

Grandma pulled her coat on and said goodbye, she was going to a concert or the theatre. Sometimes mum and I accompanied her, but Grandpa never came. He hardly ever left the house, full stop.

I lay awake that night. I heard my grandmother coming back, then it was quiet, except for the creaking of the floorboards above me. I had been waiting for this moment. I slipped out of my room, crept up the spiral stairs and opened the door. Moses was sitting in an old armchair. A book lay open in his lap, but he wasn't reading, he was just staring into space. I stood next to him, ran my hands over the backrest and tugged on the armchair to make him notice me. Grandpa smiled sadly. "Shouldn't you be asleep, Eddy?"

"I can't."

"I understand. I often have trouble sleeping, too."

And before his gaze became fixed again, before he could forget that I was there, I pulled on his sleeve. "Grandpa, tell me about Adam."

It lasted a long time until he began to speak. He told me about Hitler and the war, and that as a Jew you were dealt a particularly bad hand, and that the whole family wanted to emigrate. They needed papers that were very expensive. And shortly before the departure date, Adam disappeared with the family's fortune. They had the papers, but nothing else. Moses' and Adam's grandmother and mother stayed in Berlin, they didn't want to go to England with the rest of the family. "I believe that they were waiting for Adam to come back. But he never did."

"Grandma told me that he broke them. How did he do that, if he wasn't even there?"

"You can break a great deal if you fail to do certain things."

"So he didn't do it?"

"Not directly."

At this point I started to find it all a bit boring, and I left Grandpa alone in the attic.

To Lara Cohen's annoyance, Magda had inherited neither her sharp mind nor her swan-like neck. According to my grandmother, mum was weak-willed and much too sentimental. And while Grandma, although she was no longer a spring chicken, volunteered for a dozen charities and indulged in a formidable range of cultural interests, Magda Cohen didn't have a single hobby and not even the most basic appreciation of art. Mozart, Elvis or Roland Kaiser, trashy novels, Goethe or Thomas Mann, she just divided everything into two simple categories: I like or I don't like. Nobel Prizes were neither here nor there. She couldn't even tell the difference between cheap sparkling wine and champagne. But when she did like something, then her adoration knew no bounds. When she liked something, then she liked it with her whole heart. My mother could really love.

Magda had lots of friends. They all thought her simple-minded, but they were always visiting and pouring their hearts out to her in our living room, because Magda had time and was a good listener. I think they all underestimated my mother.

The first man she introduced me to was Hannes. At least, he was the first one I can remember. He was a butcher and six years younger than my mother, who was fast approaching forty. But there was still something girlish about mum, something innocent that she was never to lose.

Hannes sat in our living room and grinned as stupidly as the cherubs on the stove. Regardless of what was said, he always raised his eyebrows in astonishment. Everything seemed to surprise him.

“Hannes, would you like another cup of tea?” And Hannes was gobsmacked.

“A butcher, Magda. How charming”, my Grandma said when Hannes had left.

Mum ignored her mother’s barbed comments, or she didn’t even feel the barbs any more. My Grandpa didn’t say anything at all, he just withdrew to the attic.

“Eddy dear, did you like Hannes, then?” mum asked with such hope in her voice that I could not but reply “Yes”, although I had no opinion of the bearded butcher whatsoever.

Hannes invited my mother and me out to dinner the following evening, and there the fundamental problem of this new relationship came to light. None of us was a born talker. My mother was a trained listener, I was a child, and the only thing that Hannes could talk about was meat. But when my mother was around, “in the presence of a lady”, as he put it, Hannes held back on this topic. So, after a few comments about the best way to make blood sausage, the table fell silent. I felt at least partially responsible for the evening, because I had insisted on pizza and we were therefore at an Italian restaurant, which was actually a Greek’s. Perhaps it would all have been easier in a steak house. Perhaps a piece of grilled meat would have so animated Hannes that he might have told us a bit more about slaughtering. And then I asked him, “Have you ever shot at an animal?” Just to break through this painful silence.

“Yes.”

“At a deer, too?” I was thinking about Bambi’s father.

“Oh yes, a huge one, at that.”

“Did you eat it?”

“Yes, I did.” He laughed, and his belly wobbled.

“I don’t like venison, it tastes of old sponge.”

Now Hannes was in his element and explained to us why game had such a musty taste. It was to do with sexual maturity and with something else, but I can’t remember what, I’d already

stopped listening. I painted pictures with the wax crayons that the Greek Italian had put on the table.

They only met twice after that evening. It was Hannes who left my mother. Just as all men had left her at some stage. She was always prepared to drain the cup to the dregs, regardless of how stale or bitter it tasted.

I was eight and already knew the truth about my Scandinavian father when the next man popped up. That was when things were really going downhill with Grandpa. He hardly ever left the attic any more. He even slept up there. The more confused and miserable Moses became, the stricter Grandma seemed to become, and she had always been a tough nut in any case. Once, as he was struggling down the spiral staircase, I heard her say, "Have a wash, you smell unpleasant. And pull yourself together, Moses."

He didn't answer, he just looked at her so sadly that it made you dizzy. Then he turned around and went upstairs again.

Grandma wouldn't let me visit him in the library. "Edward, you're old enough to understand that looking at you upsets him too much. If he wants to see you, he can come down, can't he."

But sometimes, when Lara Cohen wasn't at home, I went against her orders. Grandpa was mostly sitting in the old armchair, or standing at the window. When I knocked, peered through the door and begged to be let in, he smiled.

"Your great-great-grandmother once lived up here. My Grandma."

A few years after the end of the war, my grandparents had returned to Berlin with their little daughter Magda. There wasn't a wall yet, but the city was already divided. The block of flats had survived all the bombing raids and was now in the American sector. After much to-ing and fro-ing, Moses once again became the lawful owner of the family flat. Lara would have preferred to stay in England, like her sister, but Grandpa longed for his old homeland. For his home.

"Your great-great-grandmother was a proud woman. And she liked Adam best of all." Moses patted my head, and I, Edward, disappeared behind the past.

The fondness that had just lit up Grandpa's eyes now turned into fury. He no longer saw me, he saw Adam, his loved, his hated brother. I heard my grandmother's steps downstairs and slipped out of the attic. Relieved.

The thing with Adam started to annoy me. Sören's or Gören's genes had failed completely. The Scandinavian genotype had surrendered to Adam one hundred percent.

Before mum's new man appeared, we got a cable TV and a piano. Grandma thought it was about time that her grandchild learned an instrument. But it was mum who tinkled away on the keyboard on a daily basis. "Oh, it would be so nice to be able to play it properly", she

said. But Magda Cohen would never have thought that this lay within the realms of the possible. For everyone else, sure, but not for her.

The piano didn't appeal to me at all. But on Grandma's orders I marched bravely to Frau Nöff's, my piano teacher, twice a week. She had long black hair, shot through with grey strands, which hung down sadly onto her shoulders. She looked old, although she was younger than my mother. Frau Nöff had a moustache, which I found very distracting, and however much I tried to avoid it, I couldn't stop myself from constantly staring at it. She was the only woman with facial hair I'd ever met.

She ended my first piano lesson with the words, "No musicality, Edouard. No ear. No feeling."

I nodded and pressed the 23 Marks into her hand. At first I pointed out that I was called Edward and not Edouard, but I soon gave that up.

In the Nöff residence, a one-bedroom flat in a pre-war block, it smelt of lost dreams, and I mean that literally. They smell. Unmistakeable.

Nöff suffered from severe mood swings. Sometimes, when she was in a good mood, she made some tea that tasted of piss. With rum for her. Without for me. Then she told me about her time at the *conservatoire* in Vienna. And when the rum started to have its effect, she dug out an old newspaper article bearing the headline *Christina Nöff. A New Wunderkind?*. The contents didn't interest me. But I always looked at the blurry black-and-white photo, to see if she had already had her moustache by the age of fifteen. After a second cup of rum without tea you couldn't stop her talking. Chopin this, Chopin that.

"And once, there was this *nouveau riche* cobbler..." She thought a moment. "Now, what was his name again?" She groaned, disgusted at her own poor memory. "Never mind, anyway, this cobbler asked Chopin to sit at the piano and said, "You needn't play for long, my dear. Just a bit of la-la-la, so as we can see how it's done."

Shortly after that, Chopin invited the cobbler over, and after dinner passed him a hammer, nails, leather and an old shoe and said:

"Please, dear master, won't you give us an example of your skill? You needn't sole the whole shoe, of course. Just a bit of bit of bam-bam-bam will be enough. Just so as we can see how it's done." Nöff smiled.

And the way she smiled made me think she must have been at that dinner. "Typical Chopin", she said, and shook her head. "Just like him."

It was quite a while before I realised that Chopin was a long-dead composer and not my piano teacher's best friend.

When Nöff was in a bad mood, she didn't speak at all, but just listened to my miserable tinkling. Without saying a word, she made it clear that she despised every inch of my being and would gladly hack my fingers off, one by one.

I didn't make much progress, but after three months of lessons I was able to teach my mother a waltz. Unlike Nöff, mum was deeply impressed by my talents.

"Eddy dear, listen again." Trembling with excitement, she thumped the keys. "Was that right?"

"Mmmh, yes, not bad", I answered critically. The truth was that she was better than me, but she wouldn't have believed that anyway. She'd have thought I was making fun of her.

It was my Grandma who brought Hannes' successor into the house: Professor Strombrand-Rosselang. I don't know his first name, I never did, because although mum's liaison with this man lasted a few months, it didn't reach first-name terms. Not for mum and not for me.

"Professor Strombrand-Rosselang is coming over for coffee this afternoon", said Grandma and smiled.

"Is he a doctor?", I asked.

"Yes."

"Is Grandpa ill?"

"Of course not. Professor Strombrand-Rosselang is a gynaecologist."

I'm not sure how many eight-year-olds know what a gynaecologist is. I didn't, in any case.

"A gynaecologist investigates women, Edward, it's a doctor for women", Grandma explained impatiently.

Mum and I learned that my grandmother had met the professor at some charity function, and that the professor was single, and that the professor was deeply sorry not to have any children of his own, and that the professor was dying to meet mum and me.

"Magda, Professor Strombrand-Rosselang is a thoroughly wonderful man. Educated. Well-travelled. Entertaining." Grandma stretched her swan's neck, looked at me and said once again, accentuating the words so that I would understand it too: "A really, really wonderful man."

The professor was tall, and there was grey mid-length hair sprouting from the bottom half of his crown. His forehead stretched out into a vast, shiny expanse. He spoke over-clearly and over-loudly. And, if anything in order to demonstrate the full breadth of his knowledge, he jumped from one topic to another: the attack on Pope John Paul II, which had deeply shocked him. The real estate prices in Florida, which drove him to distraction. Margaret Thatcher, of whom he was suspicious. Finally he got onto the subject of the womb.

While Grandma could follow his explanations without any trouble, throwing in a comment here or a question there, mum and I just shovelled cake into our mouths.

“That issue was the subject of my doctoral dissertation”, he concluded his speech on the womb. A clearing of the throat, and then he looked at my mother: “Mrs Cohen, you have fantastic hands. Fantastic.”

A longer sample translation is available from NBG – please contact Charlotte on
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