

Vines of Change

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[Scene One -Tracing Home]

It's Sunday afternoon in a small town in German wine country. The room is crowded with Syrian refugees and Germans who want to welcome their new neighbors—men and women who've fled their war-torn homes. During the coffee hour, refugees and locals take turns—local groups sing and dance, and refugees share their stories of how they came to Germany.

The men's acapella group starts with a song about wine. They've changed the words to a German pop song into an ode to Germany's largest wine-growing region, called Rheinhessen.

[Schnorresänger singing]

You could translate the refrain like this:

"Please... gimme just one glass...please, please, one more glass of wine."

It's funny to me that they chose this song since half of the people here are practicing Muslims who don't drink alcohol. But, if you look outside, you see-- we're surrounded by vineyards. People have made wine here since the Romans were here. In this part of Germany--Rheinhessen, wineries here are almost as common as fast food joints in America.

For a minute, I start to wonder where I am when they start their next song.

[singing. "Country Roads"]

German men are crooning John Denver to people who've fled Assad's brutal regime and ISIS. Then again the song fits the occasion—we're out in the countryside and the refugees in this room have a long journey behind them. And they have a long road ahead of them—language courses, job training, bureaucracy. They're certainly longing for home too—the one they left and the one they hope to build here.

The *Schnörresänger* sing at almost every event in this small town. It's nice to see locals reach out—to see my daughter's friend's dad welcoming strangers with his wit and song. I remember meeting his family in the weeks after we moved here from the U.S. six years ago. His daughter befriended our middle child at the local kindergarten well before she could speak German.

This event kind of feels like a church picnic, an awkward social event where you feel compelled to speak to people with whom you normally wouldn't. So, I approach one of the refugees and introduce myself.

"I'm Muhannad."

I ask him almost immediately about his journey. I want to hear his story. How did he end up in this town-- in Stackeden-Elsheim?

"Things in Syria were getting worse and worse. After I got married, I wanted to search for a better life, and I thought about leaving Syria. Although I grew up in Damascus, I'm a Palestinian

citizen. I thought for a long time about where I should go since I can't enter most other countries in the Middle East. One night, I paid a smuggler 300 Euros to help me cross the Turkish border. We waited for 12 hours in the dark to avoid being caught by the police. Once I reached Turkey, I paid another smuggler 6000 Euros to book my passage on a ship to Italy. Many have died trying to get to Europe, so I wanted to find a safe passage. The smuggler assured me. This man only wanted our money. It turns out, the boat was overcrowded with 227 passengers. There wasn't enough water. We were served moldy bread and had to bathe with sea water. We slept back to back on the ship's deck. I drank half a cup of water a day and decided I would only use the bathroom once a day—It was so crowded I was afraid my spot would be taken if I left it. At one point, the ship broke down, so another boat towed us to an engineer who was able to fix the boat. The last two days were awful. There were many many big waves. When the ship lurched to one side, we all had to run to the other side of the deck. Back and forth, back and forth. I didn't think I would survive. People's faces were yellow—they were so afraid. The whole time I had one thought. I kept thinking of my mother. I wanted her to know I was ok. On the last day our boat was rescued by a Red Cross ship, which brought us to Crotone, Italy. I can't forget those nine days I spent on that boat.”

I introduce Muhannad to my daughters and husband. His green eyes glance toward his cell phone, and he shows me a picture of his 12-year-old sister in his family's old apartment in Damascus.

“This is the only trace I have left of our home”

Everyone here sees the challenge of integrating more than a million refugees. Despite criticism, Angela Merkel stands by her decision to open Germany's doors to Syrian refugees in 2015. After the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, the sexual assaults on New Year's Eve in Cologne and a string of brutal attacks in Germany and France—~~anxiety~~ is mounting.

Now, my adolescent daughters realize that terror could strike them on their way to school. For the first time in the six years we've lived here, my girls doubt their safety. Fears of attacks have fueled the the growth of xenophobic political parties and attacks on refugee shelters. Many doubt Merkel's now famous phrase of reassurance: "*Wir schaffen das,*" (We'll manage.) Germans are used to having a more detailed plan about their future.

Muhannad and his wife, Hanen, admit that they can sense Germans' fear.

"People are suspicious. They look at us when we walk down the street. We haven't done anything wrong. We just want to live a good life. We want to learn German and find good jobs."

[SCENE TWO: Nature's Whim]

My car ascends a steep inclining bend on a two lane country road. I want to find out more about wine growing in Rheinhessen, so I'm on my way to speak to Dr. Eva Vollmer, a local vintner. One newspaper described her this way: "[she] resembles her wine-rugged, always authentic and not at all introverted." I nearly miss the dirt road that takes you to her home and winery. Birch, apple trees and a weeping willow line the driveway next to her

family's stucco house -- home to four generations.

Dr. Vollmer emerges from a small office with blond hair swept hastily back into a small ponytail. Her shirt spans an impossible distance across her pregnant belly-- a contrast to her small stature. She shakes my hand and greets me:

EV: "Hi, I'm Eva Vollmer."

We sit down in the tasting room next door to talk about her approach to making wine:

EV: "We produce sixteen wines from six different grape varieties and harvest every grape by hand. "Just as a chef carefully chooses her menu, I select just a few grape varieties."

SM: "Dr. Vollmer what have you learned from Nature?"

EV: "You think you know her. You think that with enough experience, you can predict how things will go and plan for similar situations. But Nature does as she pleases. Every day, every month, every year is different, so much so, that you just can't prepare for anything because, in the end, she'll play a trick on you. There is no recipe. You have to react spontaneously and make the best of what you have.

One year, our very best pinot noir grapes were intended for a *blanc de noir* (a white wine made from a red grape variety--where the juice is pressed out and separated from the skins). Frost crept in and killed half of them, so, instead of a *blanc de noir*, we made a totally different wine -- a *Dornfelder* rosé. We called

it, '*die Laune der Natur*' (Nature's whim).

I have to think hard about what to do when Nature plays her tricks. I have no free time; my head is always occupied with our winery. Frost, drought, hail, torrential rain, continuous rain, heat—these problems keep me awake at night. I lie there thinking until I can figure out a solution. You just have to deal with the situation as it is."

SM: "How has climate change affected wine making in this part of Germany?"

EV: "We live in the lap of luxury here. We need to move away from luxury back toward normalcy. Too little is being done. Right now, German wine is profiting from climate change. Over the last few decades, temperatures have risen, so German winegrowers are now able to produce excellent Pinot Noir. This trend just didn't exist thirty years ago. I'm afraid that eventually, the scales will tip. German Riesling will be endangered. Nature can be pretty rough. The climate is getting more extreme, and I worry about our existence."

[SCENE THREE: Nature's Tricks]

Nature plays plenty of tricks, and humans continue to taunt her. Just over ten years ago, when my family lived in New Orleans, flood waters caused by Hurricane Katrina, levee failures and climate change, destroyed all of our family's belongings and devastated several neighborhoods in New Orleans. Water, chemicals and mold warped and destroyed the remnants of our past.

Katrina's devastation first brought our family to Germany since, at the time, the German government offered research grants to displaced scholars; my husband was a fortunate recipient. Both of our moves to Germany were improvised solutions to secure our family's livelihood, done on a month's notice. We tossed our four girls into German schools and kindergartens. Because of their immersion and subsequent integration, they are able to speak and understand the language, as well as the cultural subtleties of this place.

They favor German over English to argue with each other and tell each other jokes.

[Girls arguing, singing, laughing...]

They have climbed outward from their roots, like cordons that stretch along a vine trellis. Though they cling to this place as vine tendrils to a training wire, they still long for home.

[SCENE FOUR: Grafting a Solution]

Later, I ask Dr. Vollmer about pests. As an organic winegrower, she's got to be clever about fighting them. Instead of *Roundup*, she uses baking powder and grows herbs in between rows of vines. I also ask about *phylloxera* -- the grape louse. This expat pest, who's originally from the Mississippi River valley, feeds on grapevine roots and leaves and cuts off the flow of nutrients to vines.

In 1863, someone brought some wild American grape vines cuttings, which have evolved to resist the vine louse, to a greenhouse in London. Whoever brought them to Europe had no idea the lice were

along for the ride. Nor did they realize the devastation they would bring to Europe's grapes. over the next three decades. By the turn of the twentieth century, they had destroyed 70 percent of vineyards in Europe. Desperate for a cure, the French government offered enormous sums for anyone who could find one. A French botanist and an American entomologist, put their heads together and found out that if the European *vinifera* vines were grafted onto the American grape roots, which have naturally evolved to resist the louse, they could control her but not eradicate her.

Over a century has passed, and there's still no cure—just a treatment. Nowadays, before vines are planted out in European vineyards, they attend what the Germans call “vine school” — a sort of kindergarten, if you will. Rows and rows of twiggy vines are planted out with white bandages to join the stock and scion until the graft has taken.

[SCENE FIVE: The Owl Spreads Her Wings]

Grafting vines in the nineteenth century saved one of Europe's most important cultural and agricultural treasures. Likewise, Germany's ambitious and difficult process of integration in the twenty-first century will be the key to securing Europe's livelihood over the next few generations. Even prior to the refugee crisis, I noticed how German society frowns upon the idea of parallel societies. The underlying idea is that parallel societies breed suspicion, and, in order for a society to thrive, diverse groups of people should intermingle. Integration is the treatment for warding off extremism.

Only in hindsight will Europe's refugee crisis be fully understood. The German philosopher, Hegel offers us a bit of wisdom: "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk," In other words, history can only be analyzed in hindsight. Until then, people just have to deal with the situation as it is.

At the coffee hour, after the *Schnorresänger* finish singing, a young Syrian man sits down to play a song on the keyboard. We find out that today is his birthday. He begins and our ears pick up an exotic melody.

[INCLUDE MELODY]

The others in the room rejoin his music as they clap to the beat. Afterwards, Muhannad and two other young men go to the front of the room and begin telling their stories of how they left Syria and came to Stadelken. Yussef tells the crowd about dashing to the shore in Greece to get a spot on a boat. He explains how his friend was caught at the last minute by the Greek police. The police let Yussef go since he happened to know Greek. Eventually, he was smuggled into Germany on a tractor trailer headed to Munich.

A third young man tells his story. Afraid he would be stuck at the Hungarian border, he turned back and took a different route through Austria. After he spent a few nights sleeping on the street in Frankfurt, hunger, thirst and fatigue set in, so he turned himself in to the police.

"Smiles are what strike me here as I walk down the street, he says, "after five years of war and then, leaving Syria, we've forgotten how to smile. Thank you for your humility. I hope somehow, someday, we can pay you back."

Later, as we head home pedaling slowly past the kindergarten on our bicycles, our friends call out to us. They're standing under a chestnut tree, quiet but waving eagerly for us to stop and take a closer look.

"Da oben in den Baum sitzen ganz viele Eulen!" our friend says softly. ("There are tons of owls sitting up in the tree!) I don't see them at first since they're obscured by the leaves. After a few seconds, I finally notice more than half a dozen owls roosting in the branches. The longer I look, the more I detect. In absolute stillness, their gaze pierces through the tree's thick leaves as though their farsighted marble eyes were contemplating a serious matter.

It's just two days before the autumnal equinox, when the sun crosses the celestial equator. Winemakers, like Eva Vollmer, are standing guard, measuring the sugar content of their grapes, preparing for harvest. The sun casts hues of red, gold and purple on the vineyard slopes that surround this medieval town. I expect the owls will roost a while longer, mindful of this last hour of light. Then, they'll spread their wings and fly in magnificent silence.