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**Sibylle Berg**  
**The Journey**

**Translated by Franklin Bolsillo Mares**

## **Frank**

### **Berlin**

At some point it had stopped being a drag not to know the night before what was going on the next day. In fact, Frank had actually come to appreciate the uniformity of his existence. Sometimes he thought about the old days like a bad movie he'd seen years ago. All that effort he'd once put into actively fashioning his life made him shiver. That humiliating feeling of not being able to spend one bright, sunny day at home for fear of missing out on something. Forcing himself to congregate with thousands of other people on one of the few available patches of grass, which only made the absence of nature even more apparent. Passing, on his way there, those other apartment buildings that had pretty much banished all sense of coziness from the city. Or standing around in the bars at night, insecure and worried that someone would strike up a conversation with him, which, of course, never happened.

Frank lived in Berlin, and in Berlin no one talks to anybody, unless it's to mug you, and even then people tend to keep it fairly short. In all those anxious years nothing spectacular ever happened. Not one single promise that life seemed to have made him was ever kept. The people he met in bars lost their allure by the next day. But usually they just vanished, somewhere in this expansive city. Frank could now understand why Berlin was usually considered unattractive since it was without a doubt one seriously ugly beast. No one could ever have imagined that this fenced-in pile of manure would once again resemble a metropolis.

And yet it was one, with all its attendant luxury shops, neighborhoods, and parallel universes that never intersected. A few places were actually aesthetically pleasing, but they were always located so far away that you'd never bother to go there. Like, you're never going to spend an hour in public transportation just for a beer. And so as people got older, their orbits grew smaller and smaller, and they simply grew accustomed to the restaurants, stores, and little parks around where they lived, an area amounting to not much more than a village. It seems people are just naturally overwhelmed by any settlement larger than a small town. You knew all the idiots in your

area, and you aged alongside all those who were still claiming they were going to change the world. Frank knew, however, that if they hadn't left by then, they never would.

Frank's old friend Peter, whom he'd wanted to start a band with before giving up the idea so they could stand around in the bars at night and talk about starting a band, had traveled half-way around the world and was still miserable. The places never conformed to how he'd pictured them. That sucked. At the moment he was in Sri Lanka for some reason, and he wasn't happy there, either.

Pia, Frank's next-door neighbor who sometimes spent a pleasant hour or two in silence with him out on the balcony, was in Myanmar and then wanted to continue on to London. Helena was in Manaus, which was bound to be lousy, too. She was the fat esoteric lady who was constantly telling Frank about her latest spiritual experiences. He always ran into her whenever he didn't want to run into anyone, like when he was getting the paper in the morning or hoping to get back home at night without being seen. Miki from Tel Aviv, who'd worked in the restaurant around the corner for a long time, was now living in Los Angeles and doing something in film.

Probably waiting tables.

Frank met up with all of them on the Internet and promised to visit. But he always ended up forgetting because of some urgent talk he had to have with somebody else who was somewhere else in the world and currently having a crisis. Typically about something not panning out – a visa, the perfect apartment, papers, or a job.

Frank had few older friends who, like himself, had remained in the city, either because they'd gotten used to it, or else because they knew it didn't matter where you lived since the older you got, the more you knew what everywhere looked like and that it was hard to start over once you hit 40.

What should a thoroughly unglamorous person like himself run around town for when no one cared much about him?

It never occurred to Frank to call Berlin home. He'd never had what you would call a home.

Most of the people he knew had not yet heard their calling and were still waiting to be beckoned to that one special place. Somewhere just for them that would envelop

them like a long cloak. Home is nothing you find on the Internet or by frantically traveling around the globe.

Home is for people who grow up in high mountain villages. How enchanting, to know everyone. The animals. The air above all suspicion. And instead of going to the cinema, everyone sits and watches the sunset.

Frank noticed how he was getting a paunch. Everybody was. Maybe in all the paunches of all the old men there were children, set free at the time of their burial. Only to end up as street urchins in Peru. Frank worked in an unattractive office stuffed full of old Ikea furniture and tattered folders. It didn't even matter what he did there. He'd long since given up the idea of changing the world – though *give up* was putting it too actively. It was more like the idea just passed away. Frank had understood that nothing would ever change the world, except perhaps for something really violent, but that was not his cup of tea. He'd grown tired, but in a pleasant sort of way, like when you get sleepy in summer and you're relaxing on a white deck chair somewhere in a garden in Italy. There's a horse there, too. Dead.

Every day at noon Frank went over to the café right next to his office. All the old customers had disappeared over the years, chased away by the 35-year-old mothers who were all so environmentally conscious and just plain embarrassing. The women drank lattes, the children terrorized the customers, and the mothers ignored them to demonstrate how unbelievably relaxed mothers they were. Frank sat there and tried to like the kids who were screaming and jumping all over the place, throwing stuff in his coffee and stepping on dogs. It was easy for him as long as he forgot about himself and the peace and quiet he'd hoped for, and instead just watched the children who had no idea what was in store for them. Those few precious years of innocence!

Frank had become tolerant as he'd grown older, and he very often had to cry when he saw people trying to carve out a little happiness in their lives. By singing in amateur choirs, dancing in parks, or carrying little animals around. Frank regretted how he'd once despised his fellow humans so much. It hadn't made his life any better.

Frank locked up his office every day around five, stopped off at the supermarket on his way home to pick up a few items that would soon become his dinner, bought a paper, and gladly headed for his apartment. He cooked, listened to music, and afterwards,

if by some mistake it was warm out, he would sit out on his balcony and read a comic book, struck by how easy it was now to be content. Maybe it had to do with the absence of all expectation. Like falling in love, for example, was something Frank no longer counted on. His romances had all ended less than favorably years ago. Nowadays, whenever he thought about women, it was usually the loud and unpleasant moments that came to mind. Though he could no longer even say what all the fuss had been about.

He hadn't had a thing going with anyone in about ten years. Ever since he started developing a paunch, or maybe it was the other way around. Every now and then, in springtime, he would stand on the balcony and muse over bygone sentiments. The boundlessness he'd felt when in the throes of some foolish love would probably never come again, he thought, watching the swallows which cried so beautifully in springtime before a rain. After such recollections on the balcony he often felt the need to take a walk, and so, vaguely lamenting, he'd stroll through the streets, freshly washed by the spring rain, and feel the ugliness of the city, something he hardly ever noticed anymore. The lovely buds on the bushes which were a gross imitation of nature with the plastic bags and piles of dog crap lying beneath them. And then he continued searching until he remembered that that wasn't how you found love, wandering around the streets at night in spring. So he'd return back home, lie on the couch, read a comic book, and listen to a complicated record until he finally calmed down. No, he'd probably never stumble upon love again, and it'd only be a waste of energy to even begin worrying about it.

So with a cool head Frank dragged his feet through springtime, X-ing off at night another day of his life, until the moment when, from one second to the next, everything could have taken a new course.

It was another one of those evenings, standing there sighing on the balcony, the swallows, the subsequent walk and the incipient rainfall. From beneath one of those bushes that you knew were harboring more dog shit, Frank heard a loud whining sound. He looked down at the bush and saw a tiny bird. It'd fallen out of its nest and was still too dumb to fly. Frank noticed he wasn't alone. A woman, who Frank figured was about his age after scanning her over, was also standing there looking. "I have no idea," she said, "what you're supposed to do with baby birds." "Is it like with deer babies, where the mother doesn't like them anymore once people touch them?" Frank asked. They both

shrugged their shoulders and continued looking indecisively at the little bird. “Maybe we should just go,” said the woman. “The mother might not come down otherwise.” Then they both walked away a few feet, but stopped because the bird didn’t stop crying. “Even if it has a mother, how is she supposed to get her baby back up in the nest? It’s not like they have backpacks. If anything, maybe luggage. You see that every once in a while. Birds toting luggage.”

They both went back, and Frank scooped up the bird from under the bush. It was strange how content it became sitting there in his hand, only giving a peep out of hunger every once in a while. “What do little birds eat?” the woman asked. Frank thought: “Pre-chewed worms, if you don’t mind.” The woman bent down by the bush and stood back up a few seconds later with an earthworm between her fingers. A mother pushing a stroller barreled by them, angry that they hadn’t gotten out of her way in time. Ruth stared at the lady, who looked like a former model for a mail-order catalog, with a disgust usually reserved for very unattractive animals.

“On second thought, I don’t think I’ll chew it,” she said. “Maybe it’d help if we put it in a blender,” Frank suggested. And as if they had discussed it, they both went back to his apartment. They chopped up part of the worm and put it in the baby bird’s mouth. Not bad, thought Frank. It’s not every day you meet a woman who’ll cut worms up.

Then after they built a warm nest out of socks for the bird and it fell asleep, they went out on the balcony with a bottle of wine. Once people reach a certain age, that’s what they always do, drag out a bottle of wine. Maybe to act like adults. After all, that is one of life’s great secrets: that hardly anyone knows how to be a grown-up. Most people are embarrassed, and so they start acting like how they think grown-ups are supposed to act. Which is what’s made the world such a boring place. All these people lip-syncing some prefabbed text and dressing and talking like machines. Boring grown-up machines.

It began to rain softly at night. Frank got an umbrella, which he held in one hand while warming parts of Ruth’s body with the other. They talked, drank, and sat in silence. And the swallows went to bed.

When morning arrived, very dimly, Frank knew that he’d fallen in love. But in a way that had nothing to do with the hormone tsunamis of his youth. He wanted Ruth to be in his life, to read her his comics, to play her his favorite music, to lay her head down

on his stomach to sleep. And when at some point Ruth had to go because it was getting too light out for things to progress, she said: “I’m moving to Tel Aviv soon. To be with my boyfriend. Will you take care of our bird?”

On the third day the little bird was dead.

And Frank continued on with his life as usual.

He lay on the couch, read comics, went to work, and sat out on the balcony in the evening, weather permitting. Every once in a while he thought about Ruth and couldn’t understand why she hadn’t stayed with him. They could have been sitting here, the two of them. The bird would have learned to fly, and it would have been a wonderful life. Together.

[...]

## **Ruth**

### **Tel Aviv**

Ruth sat in an empty apartment in Tel Aviv. Although – there’s empty, and then there’s empty. There was a mattress and a few white boxes from Ikea, a coffee machine, a pot.

In a bottle there were little branches. She didn’t know what kind they were. Ruth thought that, aside from bamboo, branches were the only acceptable form of flowers. It was very appealing, little flecks of green poking out of the dark sticks. But now they’d turned into little branches with buds like fat insects sitting on the trunk of a tree. It was a great feeling of unfamiliarity – branches you didn’t comprehend.

Ruth sat in the empty apartment in a state of utter disorientation. The nerves in her body were vibrating so much that out of complete shock her body responded with a sort of coma. Well, scientific explanations were never quite her thing. Ruth didn’t actually know if nerves could really vibrate.

In order to calm down, she thought about when she had experienced a similar feeling of desperation, a feeling where suicide was almost as much of an option as pressing on.

But for suicide you needed a precise act, and that was just as hard to imagine as doing what people otherwise generally do. Eat, run around, read, pass the time.

She remembered the one time, ten years ago, when the great love of her life had left her in a foreign country. She'd felt the same way then, lying on a hotel bed and completely unable to move a muscle. A friend saved her, telling Ruth over the phone exactly what to do next. Her friend had since died, and a new one failed to sprout up in her place.

Thinking allowed her panicking to thin out somewhat. Ruth was breathing almost normally again, and soon, real soon, she'd be able to go out for a little bit and run, run around, take her mind off things, press on. That's just what people do...

If you take away a person's habits and reference points, there's not a whole lot left of him. Ruth had always found it extremely difficult to get situated in new surroundings. That was why she also hated vacations. In places where no one needed her, she felt like she wasn't there. The delightful discoveries and amusing sensation of being on unfamiliar terrain was a fabrication which demanded of her such great mental effort that after a few days she would wind up exhausted on her hotel bed, wherever it happened to be, watching television in languages she couldn't understand with the drapes closed.

In the nearly empty apartment in Tel Aviv there wasn't a TV. From outside came the sound of a steady rain falling on thick-leaved plants. Holidays were as boring in Israel as anywhere else, if you didn't have a big family or have to cook because you had a big family or were religious and had a big family. The Jewish new year began, Yom Kippur, Sukkot. One dreary day followed the next, one month long.

Ruth went out from her empty room to sit out on her empty balcony. The rain was quieter now. It had let up, and something was reminding her of something, but she couldn't figure out what it was that was suddenly making her feel so wistful.

She had been in the city for a month now, had looked for an apartment, wandered around with maps in her hands, hoping to buy some furniture, but only finding Ikea.

Ruth had tried to learn her way around as fast as possible so she could continue on with her life as usual.

In the meantime she'd learned what Israelis mean by a designer apartment (windows with lead glass and oddly yellow floor tiles), modern (adjustable windows), and lively (the main drag and buses – there was this thing with buses). She knew what parts of the city were okay (the center) and which weren't at all: Bat Yam (looked like Rumania), Bnei Brak (looked like a synagogue), Jaffa (looked like a train station in Rumania). She now lived around the corner from one of the main avenues filled with cafés, stores, restaurants, the whole bit. And on the other side, behind a few dilapidated Bauhaus buildings, lay the sea.

Ruth had quickly learned not to be too friendly because being friendly in Tel Aviv made men think: let's fuck, and the women think: she's either mentally ill or wants to fuck my husband. She learned to fear cars more than terrorists. There were 6,000 traffic deaths per year, compared to only 200 from terrorist attacks. Ruth wondered whether it was all the stress that caused the people here to be the shittiest drivers in the world, or if they all had bad eyes. The high number of optometrists seemed to suggest the latter.

During the day Ruth had run around, scurrying across the street like over a minefield. She tried avoiding piles dog crap, roaches, and the heat.

At night Tel Aviv was hardly bearable for all of its swankiness. With its dilapidation submerged in darkness, apartment lights casting onto trees coiled with climbing plants, the scent of foreign, everybody seemed so much more interesting than back home. The food was better and the sea at your feet. Every now and then, rarely, and never when she needed it, one of her friends would call who already seemed to be from her distant past, and Ruth always had the feeling she had to defend herself. Her friends acted worried, maybe because they couldn't think of anything else to say, or maybe they were just feigning concern to cloak their anger that Ruth had left them behind and was now living in what they considered to be an exciting country and enjoying a new life.

How could she possibly explain to them that it was basically just like back home, except with a few climbing plants? Ruth didn't have the slightest idea of what Perth was like, or the Fiji Islands, but she had a hunch that everyday life wasn't all that thrilling anywhere.

What most people knew about Israel had already been filtered by the media down to a scant few characteristics, namely, politics, the wall, and exploding buses. You want

to go there?, her friends asked. It doesn't matter, she thought. At some point you know you can live wherever there's Thai food and where women don't have to cover themselves up. Unless you have bad luck and happen to live where it really sucks, like in Chechnya or Sudan. But she, too, only knows from the media what it's like there. More or less everybody wants to live the same way. Some peace and quiet, something to eat, a family, and something good on TV. But when people had bad luck and lived in Sudan or Chechnya, even these modest privileges were hard to come by.

Ruth began to grow a little numb, like most people here. How could you get all wound up day after day in a country in which many areas had 18 percent unemployment, the currency continued to be worth less and less, the economy was falling apart, the educational system, once one of the best in the world, was going down the tubes, a new case of corruption was exposed daily, and where fear passively dictated your life. There were 3,838 terrorist attacks last year; 40 attempted attacks were thwarted daily. Repression was the only way to get by. The young kids, all the attractive kids, were at the beach. European, Middle Eastern, African and Indian parents had given birth to people who didn't seem to exist elsewhere in such an abundance of wondrous genetic combinations. They ran around on the beach, played matkot (ping-pong without a table), flirted, and were loud, which was the main thing. Here, you honked, screamed, slammed doors, and your dogs barked – screw being quiet.

Ruth walked back from the sea, which appeared strangely gray, and went to one of the thousand cafés to observe life. On the other side of the street more people were in the process of getting married. Nowhere else was there such a wealth of stores selling wedding apparel, and it seemed that getting married here was more about the video you made than about love or whatever other goofy things.

Ruth worked as a translator, something she'd been doing for a long time without the least bit of joy. Twenty years ago she'd craved literature, searching for just the right expression and hoping to become the best translator in the world. Nowadays, she sometimes felt melancholy when she recalled the passion she'd once had.

Ruth hadn't craved a single thing for a long time now. Maybe that was just something that inevitably happened as you grew older and everything became the same.

Ruth was able to support herself with her work, and she had dependable clientele. It was just a routine now.

Passion, however, was missing.

Ruth didn't really know what she was going to do with the 40 years that she perhaps had left. A relationship wouldn't be bad, she'd thought. And just like everybody else who'd never had an actual relationship, she dreamed that her life would change through the presence of a person who wasn't herself.

In Ruth's favorite café an old lady from Poland baked burekas, and a few remaining yekkes, German Jews, meanwhile all over 180 years old, sat at their stamntisch every day. Ruth sat towards the edge to better observe the retirees. Old folks in Israel were nothing if not charming. Ladies with colorful hair, hats, gloves, and painted lips who caressed fetching old gentlemen. A few of them had even founded kibbutzim and believed in a prosperous future. Some didn't believe in anything anymore. You could sometimes see the seniors in their apartments, which resembled prisons. There they'd sing strange songs or cry. Nobody was interested in their stories. Whenever Ruth was bored, all she had to do was go stand in her doorway. There was always something going on, as long as it wasn't a holiday. The supermarkets were open 24 hours, all the cinemas and bars, and it was loud – always. Everyone in Tel Aviv said that Tel Aviv wasn't Israel. Jerusalem was for the orthodox, the settlements for the right-wingers. Tel Aviv, the city's inhabitants said, was the most beautiful city in the world – and not Israel.

Whenever Ruth was tired from all the noise and from how everybody just thought of themselves and how that you should avoid being friendly if it was at all possible to be unfriendly, there'd always be one thing or another that made Ruth think: maybe I can make this place home.

An old man who acted like a bird in the wind, a fat man who changed his pants in the middle of the road, people she didn't know who would let her taste something in a restaurant, old couples smooching. She was always coming across so many charming things.

Evening came, and outside the new year was getting underway. Families everywhere. Which meant a minimum of 30 people sitting together and screaming at each other – to hell with being quiet. Ruth, lacking relatives, walked through the pleasantly

empty streets of her new life, glimpsing into the apartments. In each and every one of them she saw the same thing: bright lights and people yelling. And she knew that each and every person wanted exactly what people everywhere want: to eat a lot, to fall in love, to go to the movies, to listen to music, and to grow old wearing funny hats and holding hands. As simple as that.

And just as difficult. Because there was always something getting in the way. A bomb, a war, stupid neighbors, or men who leave you before things even get started.

In the apartment Ruth noticed that Jakob's bag was gone, just like Jakob. As of yesterday, after arguing about his idea of living in a kibbutz, which made her hair absolutely stand on end. She had no intention of going out into the desert and milking goats.

That was not how she thought it was going to be.

Life with Jakob. Whom she'd met on the Internet and with whom she'd felt so complete during the one month she was here in summer and the three weeks he visited her afterwards. She thought she'd finally found someone to keep her from sitting alone in her life, which may have been nice, but was often so boring on Sundays. Something new in her life, one last time before she was finally too old to want to change anything. And now here she was, alone and a bit tired because she already knew all about being by herself. If her life was going to change, she was going to have to do it without anyone's help. How unbelievably exhausting that was.

Ruth stared out at the rain, and the man came to mind whom she'd met a week before moving here. He was so relaxing to be with. He warmed her feet. She had to laugh. Life was so stupid. She'd never found a man, and then all of a sudden there were two of them, and now they were both gone. Suddenly she knew that she was going to stay here. Jakob would come back. Or not. And if not, she'd just continue on as always, only in another country. She sat down on the balcony with her instant soup, in the rain, and stared at the old-age home on the other side of the street. In the cafeteria a trio was playing songs she didn't know. A couple of old ladies were dancing together, and of course they were wearing funny hats. They were smiling. Only an occasional tone from the violin carried over to her, to Ruth, in the rain, on the balcony.