The Boy with the Robber's Hands

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[All his stuff and everything of hers worth saving
is packed in boxes and stored in our garage. My
parents helped me. Nine cardboard boxes, fourteen rubbish bags.
It took nearly three hours.]

My parents love Samuel. And he loves them. Sometimes when Samuel winds me up I call him their *adopted child*. That's his sore point, so to speak. Samuel and I have been friends ever since we were put in the same class. That was nearly seven years ago. And since then, Samuel's stayed at our house almost every night. He's had his own bed in my room for a long time now. It was a present for him from my parents. They asked me first, of course, if it was OK with me – they'd never decide something like that behind my back. But it's not as if I mind. I'm not jealous; Samuel's my best friend, and if my parents hadn't asked me I'd have asked them, probably.

They love Samuel, and they've taken him in. He's part of our family. For one thing, they love him because he sweeps the crumbs off the table with his hands after he's eaten. 'Nobody else does that,' they say when they tell friends about Samuel. And another thing they like is the way Samuel wipes his feet outside the front door and lines up his shoes, the bloody overpriced sneakers they bought for him, perfectly straight and parallel in my parents' neat, but not too neat hall. They like that. The way he treats things. The things you can love people for. 'Especially considering his socialisation…' they say. 'Not meaning it negatively and not to sound derogatory, but it's certainly not what one would expect.' What they don't want to say is that Samuel's mother Irene is a loser. She's a tramp. Not a real one, because she doesn't live on the street – thanks to Samuel, she still has a flat. But she's out of work and hangs around drunk with the real tramps all day long. Usually under the tree outside the supermarket. They all sit around there and drink wine out of cartons and live their loser lives. Irene looks fucked up, jaded. Her flat is on the estate at the edge of town. It's full of trash, and you can kind of smell that tramp smell. Almost like when a tramp sits down next to you on the underground. But Samuel lines his shoes up neatly and carefully in my parents' hall. Who'd have thought it?

Samuel's not disgusting or scruffy at all. He knows how often to take a shower, he brushes his teeth three times a day and keeps both hands on the table at mealtimes. He's too neat for my taste, in fact, too careful. He can't walk past a mirror without checking his clothes look OK. He makes his bed every morning. He irons his trousers. There are things about Samuel I don't understand. But he's certainly not a loser.

A couple of weeks ago: Samuel and me at Stambul. That's what we call our allotment with its little wooden house. I painted the name on an old piece of cloth and hung it up above the door: Stambul. The cloth hung there for a couple of months, went a mossy shade of green in autumn, got soggier and soggier, fell down in the dirt at some point and ended up in the bin. But our hut, our garden is still called Stambul. We spend all our time here.

It's called Stambul because Samuel thinks he's Turkish, has done ever since his mother told him his father is Turkish, apparently. Ever since then, Samuel's been at least half-Turkish, from one day to the next. I'm amazed he doesn't find it a bit stupid himself. Samuel makes a bit much of the whole Turkish thing – it makes me laugh.

We're sitting on the rusty old swing seat outside Stambul and staring at the flowerbeds in front of us. They'll need planting soon. Samuel swipes a sweep of brown curls out of his face and behind his ears, grins and holds a cigarette under my nose. This is our A-Level revision. Only a couple of weeks to go now. Dogs are barking, pensioners are weeding, somewhere further behind us someone is mowing their tiny bit of lawn, German flags click and clack against their flagpoles here and there. Every twenty minutes or so, a train thunders along the tracks that form the boundary of the allotments to the West.

Samuel says he wants to grow figs at Stambul this year. I just laugh at him. He's been trying for three years. All his expensive little trees have frozen and withered to death.

'Siktir lan,' says Samuel, 'I read somewhere there's new varieties that can survive up to minus twenty.'

'Great!' I say and light my cigarette. He gives me a dirty look, his pretend evil eye. He really means it though – it's a sensitive subject for him, the big issue of *origin and identity;* it's not a laughing matter. Samuel doesn't like that at all.

He's been fixing our little house up for years. By now it looks like a Turkish-German intercultural centre, a mixture of a Muslim cultural association and a *Wurst* stall. And this is where we're sitting, like every day after school, and smoking. Samuel rummages in his rucksack and chucks his € 7.99 Turkish course on the seat between us. He leans back, arms behind his head, and blows slow smoke rings. Looks like a cinema ad. Samuel starts to sing,

his eyes closed: *'Haberin yok ölüyorum.'* As if he understood what he's singing. He's been learning Turkish for a few months now and all he listens to any more is Turkish music, Turkish radio. It's stupid; he hardly understands a word. When we go out for kebabs he orders in Turkish. He sings and dances like he thinks Turks or half-Turks dance and sing, his face contorted. That's supposed to mean, I'm in unison with this music, I'm in unison with this feeling, I finally understand this longing in my heart. He really means it too, the waster with his everbrown skin, doey eyes and almost black hair. Samuel, who doesn't need to put on this whole show; the girls are crazy enough for him as it is, the melancholy half-Turkish dreamer. Samuel acts like he's not interested in girls any more. Since he's been Turkish, he's been searching for his one true love – as if that was typically Turkish. It just makes him even more interesting, I'm sorry to say.

Samuel takes great care of his appearance; only his fingers are bitten up. That's probably the one place where his neatness crumbles away most obviously: the chaos at the end of his fingers. The nails chewed back, the skin bitten bloody, standing up in tiny rags around the exposed nerve endings. There's hardly any skin left at the side of his nails. It's his robber's hands that give him away. I know his movements: he puts his hand to his mouth. He taps each of his fingertips against his upper lip in a secret rhythm. He does it all the time, no idea why, then he bites into the skin of his fingertips in tiny, rapid movements. He always starts with the thumb of his left hand and ends with the little finger on his right.

My twentieth birthday. It seems like it was a whole different summer, a whole different time. Like every other summer, there was a street party in town. Samuel was stood in front of me in the doorway. He bit off a piece of skin from his finger and spat it out at my feet. I was watching him and when he noticed, he smiled and buried his hand with its chewed-up fingers in his much too curly hair and scrabbled around in it.

'Got something for you,' he said and dug around in his pocket with the other hand. A little tin. He shook it and widened his eyes.

And that's how it started. Sometimes Samuel has ideas that are completely alien to me. His present was one of those ideas. It's not all my fault. None of it would have happened, under normal circumstances.

My eyes are closed, my head leaning back comfy on the back of the swing seat, the sun blazing down on my face. I'm lying back and enjoying our revision. 'Sim sala bim,' says Samuel. 'Sim sala bim – and it was so!' I blink at him. Sometimes you might think he's not quite right in the head. He grins and says in his know-it-all voice: 'D'you know where that

comes from? Sim sala bim? From my people! Because we were miles ahead of you in the Middle Ages and here in Europe the people thought the Muslims were magicians.'
'Right.'
'No really, d'you know, real Muslims are always saying *bismillah rahman i rahim*, right, *in the name of God the most gracious*, before they do something really important. And your people back then really believed that was a magic spell and they copied it, d'you get it: *bismillah – sim sala bim*.'
I say, 'You really know the score. In the Middle Ages.' I go over to our bikes, and Samuel comes after me. 'Where d'you get that shit from this time? From your bargain bucket Turkish book?' Samuel grumbles something or other. I say, 'Abracadabra – that really means Amen, I read it…'
'Just shut it, OK?' he says.

At home, we stuff food into an old plastic bag out of the fridge and the larder. Bread, tinned meat, milk, fruit and veg, juice. Then we take the bag with us into town to the supermarket and give it to Irene. We do it almost every day. My parents know, of course, and they plan generously for it when they go shopping. They never mention it. That's what my parents are like: give generously and never mention it. I can just imagine them sitting together in the staff room on their free period, Mr and Mrs High School Teacher, drawing up a secret shopping list together and thinking – just thinking, they'd never say it out loud – *actions speak louder than words*. Then they get to the action, they get stuck in, they save the world as best they can, they give the tramps their daily bread.
Irene beams from ear to ear every time we turn up. She claps her hands together, stands up and sways. A bit like a little kid, only drunk. And everyone else is happy too, all her tramp mates. Because Samuel's brought the food. He says hello to every one of them and they pat him on the back and try and stand up straight and look sober. Bag in hand, Irene hands out the food and everyone knows it's Irene's well-brought-up boy they have to thank for it. Everyone likes Samuel. They like me too, I think. When I come the food comes. Conditioning. That's how they teach parrots to talk: they do the same activities while saying the same word, over and over again. At some point they start to join in. Most of them don't know my name. They can't remember it. Janik's not even a difficult name, not in Germany anyway.
Irene's pride at that moment reminds me of my mother when I walked to her school after I got my third-year report and knocked on the staff room door and held my report under her nose. Best in the class, seven A's and three B's. She was probably really embarrassed afterwards,

but she showed off the paper all round the staff room. Irene stumbles from one tramp to the next too, handing out the food. She must have done something right in her life, then. She sways so proudly at that moment.

We jump back on our bikes and feel good, riding towards the new part of town, the fast-fading shouts of the tramps at our backs. We're on our way to Lina's. Sometimes Samuel comes along and stays in her room, does something on the Internet. Lina and I hang out in the garden. She turned eighteen a couple of days ago; she didn't have a party of course – she might have got stains on the carpet. Sometimes there's something unpleasantly stiff about Lina and I don't like her when I imagine her twenty years older, but I know I don't want to spend my whole life with her – just this summer. Even if I have to tell her one thing so the other works out. That's OK. We've been together nearly a year, gorgeous Lina and me. It's alright with her, we talk a bit and kiss a lot. Her parents are strict and incredibly anal. But because my magnificent father happens to be Lina's teacher and I happen to be the son of my magnificent father, it's OK. Got to be grateful again. I come from a good family, I'm well brought-up and educated, I can come round whenever I want and even stay for dinner. They shake my hand and smile at me and always tell me to say hello to my parents. I hate the way they pick up the cheese at dinner with their forks and use napkins. I hate the way they use ironed cotton handkerchiefs and have a cover on their toilet lid. I hate their imitation oak kitchen and their strenuous conversation, at the table and at the door. Only the teacher's son is good enough to kiss Lina. No one else.

I should have told Lina about Istanbul ages ago. But we didn't say a single word today either, just lay there, looked at the sky and snogged. I tried to thread her hand into my trousers. She didn't want to.

Later I go into the kitchen to say goodbye to Lina's mother, polite as ever at their house. She offers me a peeled piece of apple and of course I take it and put on a friendly smile. My top lip twitches; I'm sure she notices.

'Say hello to your parents,' she says.

'Yeah, I will, they'll be pleased.'

'Oh, yes,' she holds up another piece of apple, 'take one for Samuel too.' She smiles. She's even got a piece of fruit for the tramp's son.

'Oh, thanks.'

When I hold the piece of apple up to Samuel he rubs his tummy. 'Mmm, yummy! I think I'm going to puke.' He opens the window and I throw the apple out. We laugh and Lina joins in.

‘Bubu, as in shit,’ said Bubu when he introduced himself. A truly fucked-up guy. I’ve known Bubu longer than I’ve known Samuel. Of course Samuel’s known him longer than I have, through his mother, but I know him better. And I discovered him myself, when I was eleven or twelve. My mother had sent me out for milk. I was standing at the chill cabinet at the supermarket and Bubu was just one or two steps away. He opened up a tub of chocolate milk, drank it down in one and put the packet back. I picked up a carton of milk and walked after him. Bubu picked grapes at the fruit, radishes at the veg. At the sweets he tore open a packet of biscuits and shovelled his mouth full a couple of times. I went to pay for the milk and waited for him outside. When Bubu came out of the door I gave him half a block’s head start and then tailed him. I followed him for so long I got scared of getting lost. Then I turned around and took the milk back home to my mother. I kept meeting Bubu over the next few weeks. Partly because I was hanging around outside the supermarket. We started saying hello to each other, and then at some point I told him who I am.

I keep my feet off the ground and Samuel does too, because the smooth, freshly polished floor of the big departures hall squeaks and gives off loud creaks with every step you take. We’re sitting down and looking at the pale grey floor. ‘It could at least have a pattern,’ says Samuel. He means the floor. I laugh and don’t know what to answer. It’s even quieter now he’s said something. I open my mouth slightly so I don’t breathe through my nose. It’s over the top, but I breathe as quietly as possible so as not to attract any attention.
In about thirty minutes, our flight takes off for Istanbul, the city of Istanbul. In Turkey. In around thirty minutes, one thing will end and another one will start. We talked about it for ever and ever, but I’d never have thought we’d really be sitting here, not even a week after our A-Levels. So we’re flying to Istanbul, we’ll open a café or a kebab shop or sell corncobs on the Bosporus. Whatever, as long as we get away from here, where everything reminds me of those few minutes when things went wrong; away from Lina too, thank God. Samuel doesn’t reproach me; we hardly talk. Sometimes we try and make a joke. It’s a good thing we’re flying away and starting something new. Maybe it’s what we need.
I want to touch Samuel, just touch him a tiny bit, as if by accident. But I don’t dare. It’s suddenly very different and no longer safe. I haven’t got the guts I’d need. Even if only to stand up, take a puffing breath and shred up our silence in this noisy waiting hall with a creaking dance on the shiny plastic floor.

He could have told Lina and my parents too, could have sat down on their favourite sofa and cried and reaped the sympathy. He'd have every right to, as hurt as he was and maybe still is. But the boy with the robber's hands said nothing, quite matter-of-fact, not a word.

On the plane, Samuel is a little kid. He sits by the window and watches everything closely. He makes sure nobody notices him, of course. Nobody must spot his excitement, his curiosity. But I can see it. By the way he can't take his eyes off the little window in all his put-on nonchalance, by the way his hands are cramped together, by the way he jumps at every announcement and reads the safety card over and over again. He tries out the fold-down table on the seat in front, folds it down, feels the surface, folds it back up, and raises his left eyebrow briefly and almost unnoticeably. This is Samuel's first flight. He takes a pack of two disposable cameras out of his rucksack, which is on his lap. In a complicated procedure, he takes one of the plastic cameras out of the packet and gives me a grin. He follows all the instructions: fastens the seatbelt around his hips, places his seat in the upright position, says a friendly thank you to the stewardesses. He shows me something out there every ten minutes: a cloud that looks like it's growing out of the ground, a lake or the sharply focused edges of the different fields. When we pass through the last layer and you can see across a huge sea of white clouds it takes a few seconds for him to find the right words. Then: 'Look, there are mountain tops poking through over there.' I hear a hoarse rattle, and then Samuel has his disposable camera in front of his right eye. He takes what must be the worst photo in the world: the clouds from above, shot through the little round window. The camera clicks its plastic click; at least it doesn't flash – that would have made me laugh. I have to conceal how touched I am, but I can't help seeing it before me: the tramp's son showing his mother a photo of the clouds from above. And I want to stroke the back of his head, but I don't of course. I'm not my parents.