

Abdullah Alqaseer
A Lie Named Germany

Translated from Arabic to German
by Mustafa Al-Slaiman

Translated from German to English
by Veronica Cook Williamson

She has changed. Oumaimah's gaze is not as alert as before. Sometimes she does not even notice what it is that moves her ten-year-old son, Farid, as if she were indifferent to it. Perhaps that is due to how constantly she had worried about her family in Syria, to all the tears shed and the perpetual prayers asking that the hail of bombs finally stop. Perhaps it is because she had steadily hoped to save her loved ones from death, the death that ravaged the region from which she came from in all directions.

Now she had arrived in a safe place, she thought, a place where she could finally find peace and have no need to worry about her child anymore. Yet this peace did not set in: she missed Amer, her husband, and her daughter, Ayah, too much. So she was often absentminded and pictured in her mind the longed-for reunion with the whole family after the long separation. If she was confronted with reality, however, she wept heartrendingly and spoke to those absent as if they were with her; she asked her husband and daughter how they had been faring since she and Farid had set off on their journey and when they would finally be on their way.

—Is that Germany, Mama?

—Yeah, Farid, that is Germany. We are in Germany now. Don't you like it here?

—Yes, I do, but I have a feeling that it is not the way that people described it to us in Syria. Whatever. The main thing is we finally do not hear bombs, cannons, or missiles anymore.

The words of the child weighed like boulders on Oumaimah's ears. How could she lie to her own child like that? Why had she not realized that the truth would come to light one day and that bad things would follow?

—Dear God! Don't they say that paradise lies at the feet of the mother? For all I care, you can throw me in Hell, but please, please turn this place into the Germany that they told us about. Are you not the sublime and the almighty!

One year had passed since the separation of Oumaimah's family. On the last evening they spent sitting together as a family, they were united foremost by the candle light and the dream of Germany. Farid, of course, could not care less about German human or animal rights; he could also do without his father's long-winded lectures on

the economically advanced Germany, the social system, the unemployment benefits, and refugee relief. He was far more interested in his mother's promises that he would get a room full of toys once they arrived in Auntie Merkel's country—as they called it then. On the condition that he, on the long journey to her—from Syria through Turkey, with the death boats to Greece, then all the way into the land of dreams—stayed nicely patient.

—Mama, didn't papa always say that the most important thing is to learn German really fast?

—Yes, that's right, son. The language . . .

— . . . is the key to the country, he always said.

—Yes, exactly, son. (She laughed.)

—But Mama, then why does nobody here speak German?

Oumaimah went pale and her throat went dry.

—You're right, my son. We have so far only met people who are just like us. Be patient! We all need to be patient.

—But why? I want to play with German kids. I want to tell them about the airplanes, about the MiGs and F-16s. Do you know if they have such airplanes too?

—They definitely also have such planes, but they don't see them as often as we do.

—I want to tell them that my sister was so scared (with that he spread his arms and eyes wide open) when she saw the amputated leg of our neighbor Aby Ibrahim lying on the street.

—You'd better not do that, you'll only scare them with such terrible stories.

—But what else should I tell them about?

—Farid, sweetie, as long as you don't speak German, they won't understand you anyway.

With each of the child's questions, the mother's lie grew, along with her worry, how to ever find her way out of this lattice of lies. That she had lied to her son lay heavy on her, and she constantly feared that the moment of truth had arrived. Repeatedly she tried to tell him the truth, but she never had the heart to do it. Then she thought again, time will fix everything and it is better this way.

Her sole distraction was those who newly arrived from Syria. She

hurried to them again and again in order to look for her husband and daughter. But once again the two were not among the refugees. Suddenly she recognized a woman in the mass of people: it was her neighbor Um Saraj, the tailor. She ran to her, hugged her, asked about her journey—which route she took and how the journey had been. But Um Saraj was curt and merely answered, “I was led here by what led you here too. I took the route that you took too. Be patient, they who have not come, will still come.” And she went on.

Oumaimah stopped dead in her tracks. She laid a hand on her chest. Then she heard a voice from farther away, “Oumaimah, Oumaimah!” She turned towards the sound of the voice and saw him: Amer. Actually Amer! At first, she did not trust her eyes. Then she was overcome by a feeling as if someone were pulling a too-tight sweater off her, with her head getting stuck. But strong like a bull-fighter, she leaped towards him, when suddenly her daughter Ayah’s face appeared in her mind. She held his face in her hands and cried out, “Where’s Ayah? Did Ayah not come with you? Where is she?” He closed his eyes, lowered his head, and said:

—Ayah stayed behind. Ayah’s still alive.

—What? Who did you leave her with?

—I don’t know. I can’t remember anymore. When the barrel bombs fell, I grabbed her and ran. Her legs were broken, and her face was smeared with blood. She was screaming her head off. The paramedics took her from me and brought her to the hospital. I was only slightly injured. I went back to help the others, who were lying under the rubble. But there was nothing we could do, for another barrel bomb fell, and it brought me here.

Silent tears ran down Oumaimah’s cheeks as she heard Amer’s words. She relentlessly kissed her husband, soaking his shoulders with her tears. They remained intertwined until they caught sight of Farid behind them.

—Mama, I knew that we weren’t in Germany.

—Farid, sweetie!

—Are you not afraid of God, mama? Do you want to go to hell and leave me behind, all alone? Is this paradise, papa? In paradise, are there only us, our neighbors, and children from our neighborhood?

—Farid, you were asleep when we . . .

—When I died, right? Why haven't we seen God yet, mama? We've been here so long already. Does God not care?

—Farid, calm down, please.

—I'll demand that God teach me German. I'll tell him about the MiGs and the F-16s. I'll ask him if he, too, has such airplanes. I'll tell him about my sister's fear when she saw our neighbor's amputated legs on the street. And about my sister's broken legs and the blood on her face, about the ambulances, the barrel bombs, and the place where my sister is now. I promise you, I'll tell him everything.

Farid moved away from his parents and disappeared into a mass of children until he could not be seen anymore. And the faces of the children formed a cloud that rose into the sky until it rained tears.