

Susanne Heinrich

# Faces and names

*Faces and names*

*I wish they were the same*

*Faces and names*

*Only cause trouble for me*

[Lou Reed & John Cale]

I am woken up by a bang. The young people who meet up outside the late-night shop next door still have some firecrackers left over from New Year's Eve. They chuck them on to the street and take pleasure when people are startled. I look at the display on my mobile. In two hours it'll be dark.

At the precise moment I step out of my room there's a man sneaking across the hall. He pretends not to have seen me but he can't get the apartment door open. I say "hello", and, embarrassed, he says "hello" back. I unlatch the door and watch him leave. I hear the house door shut behind him. I go into the kitchen, turn on the radio and start doing the washing up.

At some point Hanna comes into the kitchen and fries herself an egg. She looks in a bad mood, as if she hadn't slept very well, but she always looks that way. "Was that guy yours?" I ask. "Which guy?" asks Hanna. "The one in the hall." "No, she says, "that must have been Peter." "Peter?" I ask. "Or Martin," she says, "a name like that. Anyway I've lost track with all these men." "Me too," I say, and laugh. "We should charge everybody

who sleeps here five euros,” says Hanna. “That way we could pay the gas bill for the whole year.” She sits down next to me and starts to eat her egg. I drink some coffee and smoke and say: “Would you mind not eating while I’m smoking? That’s really asking a bit much.” I don’t know how old this joke is, but I think it pre-dates my moving in. It still makes us laugh, but we don’t actually roar with laughter any more; we laugh quietly and in a spirit of complicity. Just as Hanna finishes eating, Tim comes into the kitchen. “Morning,” he says, and flops down on a chair. “Do you want a bread-roll?” I ask. “I’d love one,” says Tim. While he’s eating, I can’t help staring at the poem Tim has hung up on the wall under the photos of Björk and Jean Reno. It’s not one of Rilke’s best. It starts like this: I greatly fear the word of men/They express everything so clearly/And this is a dog and that is a house/And here’s the beginning and there’s the end.

Hanna rolls herself a cigarette. Tim bites into his bread-roll.

That evening Amir finally calls. “What are you doing?” he asks. “Nothing important,” I say. “Are you coming round?” he asks. I throw on a jacket, shout, “See you later”, and pull the door to. I walk along Sonnenallee with my head down and my hands clenched to fists in my pockets. The snow has almost melted, only a few dirty heaps are still left. I press the bell and walk up the stairs. The door is ajar. I cross the hall and go into Amir’s room. He kisses me on the mouth. “So,” he says and helps me take off my jacket, “do you want tea and a chocolate heart?” “Yes,” I say. Amir goes into the kitchen. I sit down on the bed and try out various positions. In the end I lie on my side, stretching out my legs and resting my head. As Amir comes in, I smile. He puts the tea and the chocolate heart in my hand and watches me drink. “Want to see something funny?” he asks.

I nod. He grabs his laptop from his desk and sits down next to me on the bed. He opens a website showing a dancing figure from a cartoon. In place of the drawn head Amir has put a photo of his own head. "Suits you," I say. "What, the dance?" asks Amir. "Yes, and the whole idea of doing something like that, going on to a website and putting in your photo and that." Amir looks annoyed for a moment, then he says: "Will you help me put up the bookcase?" "Sure," I say. We sit down on the floor and he presses the instructions into my hand. We assemble the bookcase together and then he puts his books in it which previously he had kept in piles in a corner of the room. Amir stands before it, turns round and smiles. "Great," he says. We lie down again on the bed and watch a film. Amir puts his head on my shoulder and strokes my hand. When the film has finished and I'm almost asleep, he starts playing me a song on his guitar. The refrain goes: *You belong to me, you belong to me, you always belonged to me*. When he puts the guitar to one side, I undress down to my knickers. Amir lies down naked on my back. This wakes me up again. Amir moves his hand on to my left breast and presses down lightly. I turn my head around and kiss him. The condoms are right there next to the bed. Amir rubs my clitoris while we sleep with each other. He knows any number of possible positions which I didn't know before him. It's like dancing the tango; I just let myself be led. We come almost at the same time, and Amir keeps stroking my hand for a long time, until I fall asleep. In the morning, for a short time I don't know where I am. Amir held me all through the night; he's still holding me even now. When he realises I'm awake, he says, "Do we want to conjure up a glass of water?" "Yes," I say. "OK, you say the magic word first, then I will." My magic word sounds like Finnish, *Ärekättönen*. His is *Lalula*. He bends down over the edge of the

bed and lifts up a glass of water. We swig it down. Amir jumps around naked on the window sill, proud and supple like a panther. He draws back the curtains, and the sun makes his silhouette shine. "I've got to go," I say.

I do some sport exercises and watch *VIVA Get the clip*. Amir has already been online for two hours when he finally starts chatting with me. He writes: "I'm worried that I was too nice to you, you know what I mean." I place my fingers on the keyboard, but don't answer. They play a song by Diddy Dirty Money. Wasn't his name P. Diddy only a short time ago? At the bottom of the screen there's a love barometer programme running. You send in your name and your partner's name as a text message and are given a percentage and a forecast. Right now it says: "Anna and Falk, 10%. Falk doesn't love you, Anna. He wouldn't have you even if you were the last woman on earth." It often happens that the programme doesn't recognise which are men's names and which are women's. Then you get: "Tobi will say yes, Jule. Go on, ask her." I move my finger. "Oh, it's OK," I key in. Amir sends me back a pattern made up of graphic emoticons. I remember when we stood together at the bus stop and this perfect snow flake landed next to me. Amir asked me whether I wanted come to his place, and I said "yes". We were waiting for the bus, and suddenly Amir took my hand and said: "I'm not the type of man you'd want to marry." I laughed. "Do I look like the kind of person who wants to marry the next person to come along?" I asked back, and Amir shook his head. As we got on the bus, I asked, "Are you a womaniser?" Amir thought for a moment, then nodded. Later, in his bed, I told him that recently I had been meeting a lot of men who hadn't cried for years and who were incapable of any kind of elevated feelings. It was as if they had no emotional highs

or lows, just middles. "I think I am one of them," said Amir. That same night he also said that for him there was only love at first sight, and if nothing happened in that first moment, then it never would. He never slept with any woman more than a couple of times, for when the excitement of the new had passed and he had no feelings, all closeness only felt like he was taking his heart for a ride. That was three weeks ago. So why are you still sleeping with me? I want to ask. But I hold my finger in midair, and ten minutes later Amir is offline. I make myself some tea in the kitchen and knock on Tim's door. "Yes?" calls Tim. "Can I come in?" I ask. Tim turns round on his desk chair. "Shall we watch *The little mermaid*?" I ask. "Good idea," says Tim. "I can't work at the moment anyway." We sit close to each other on Tim's couch and eat sweets out of already opened packets. We sing along loudly with the song that Ariel sings in her treasure chamber: *Look at this stuff Isn't it neat? / Wouldn't you think my collection's complete?* We know each siph by heart and murmur the last line softly and with our voices breaking: *Out of the sea / Wish I could be / part of that world.* At the end of the film I cry, as I do every time, and Tim too is teary-eyed. I am almost at the door when Tim asks: "How're you doing anyway?" I turn round. "Hmm, not that good," I say. "How about you?" "Me neither," says Tim. "Do you want to meet up later in the kitchen for a cigarette? A few friends of mine should be coming round, and Jessica will be there too." "Love to," I say. "See you then."

As we wait for the guests and for the lasagne to be ready Tim and I dance to Paul Kalkbrenner in the kitchen. "Where's Hanna got to?" I ask. "I haven't seen her all day." Tim shrugs his shoulders. "Recently she's been staying in her room for days at a time. I keep on asking her whether she

wants to come along when I go someplace, but she never does. She only ever meets the same people. I'm beginning to get really worried about her."

The first to arrive is an American Tim used to know some time ago. He holds out his hand. "Claus," he says, "like Santa Claus." Then, one after the other, two more friends of Tim's arrive; one is Greek. The doorbell rings again. Tim swans to the door and picks up the interphone handset. "Jessica?" Antje's steps come closer. I hear her greeting Tim in the hall. "Jessica!" Then she comes into the kitchen. "Jessica," she calls, "you're here too!" We embrace, and as the others look at us in a strange way, Tim laughs and says: "When Antje comes to see us, we're all called Jessica." I start cutting up the lasagne and Tim hands out the plates. Then Hanna comes in and joins us, a morose look on her face.

Later we drink some crème de menthe and turn the music up. Our sentences get shorter; almost everything we say is a joke. We drink to life, to this kitchen and to the fact that I've moved in, and Tim re-tells the story of how Hanna and he sent the names of the three candidates on the shortlist to all their friends on Facebook, asking them: "Who should we have as our new flatmate?" Almost everybody was for Adina, but in the end the two of them decided to go for me instead. "To you," says Hanna. "To us," I say. I keep the crème de menthe in my mouth for a long time, until the peppermint taste has spread everywhere, and only then do I swallow it.

I have a chat with the Greek guy. He tells me about Athens, where policemen stand on street corners with machine-guns, about the food his mother cooks for him when he goes home. He has just come back after spending a few days there, and on his return he realised that Berlin was not a city to grow old in. I nod. "It's a good place between the ages

of twenty and forty,” I say. “*This city is like a one-night stand,*” he says. “*Like a love affair,*” I say. “Like a love affair,” he says, “*you are so right.*” Later we meet in the corridor, as I’m coming out of the bathroom and he’s going in. He says: “I like you”, and then starts kissing me. I’m not the slightest bit interested but I don’t want to make an issue out of it, so I let it happen. Before he goes, he asks me my name so that he can find me on Facebook. “*Sorry,*” he says, “*I am bad with names.*” I write him my name on a piece of paper and he smiles as he holds out his hand. Finally only Hanna, Tim and me are left. Since all the bottles are empty, we put some sad music on and sing along softly to the odd word. Outside the night has reached its deepest black.

I wake up when Hanna knocks at my door. “Yeah?” I ask. “I’ve made some fish,” she says. “You’ve got to eat something.” “What time is it?” I ask. “A little after three,” says Hanna. “OK, I say, I’ll get up now.” She’s put the plate outside my door. I sit down on my desk chair and eat. Later I observe Amir going online. Tim starts chatting with me from the room next door: “Can I roll one of your cigarettes?” “Sure,” I write, “come on over.” He knocks gently on the door and steps in, and I watch him roll a cigarette in his practised way. “Do you feel like going out with me today?” he asks. “I’ve got to find someone tonight, at least for a bit of a snog. I feel so lonely at the moment, maybe it’s the winter. I’m really not very good at being alone.” “What about Peter?” I ask. “You mean Martin?” says Tim. “Oh, there’s nothing’s really going on.” My phone rings. Amir asks brightly if we’re going to meet. “Yes,” I say, “but this evening I’ve got something on.” “Then come round now,” he says. I stand up and say: “I must be off again.” “Amir?” asks Tim. I nod.

The world outside the main door is as hostile as ever. I take everything personally, even the sleet falling down the back of my neck. About halfway there the face of the Greek guy who kissed me yesterday comes to my mind and something Hanna said: "You're too, how do you say, obliging." "No, I'm not," I said, "I'm too understanding." "And you're not very good at watching out for yourself," Hanna retorted. "Hmm," I said, "I'm just not cool enough."

Amir opens the door with a smile and helps me out of my jacket.

"Do you fancy having a beer with my flatmates?" he asks. We join them in the kitchen. They look me over, I crack a few witty jokes, and after five minutes they're raising their glasses to me and patting me on the shoulder. Amir gets up abruptly and says: "Come on, let's go to my room." I take a book out of the bookcase and lie down on the bed. Amir sits down next to me and folds up something made of aluminium foil. It becomes a ring; he puts it on my finger and laughs. "I've been thinking," he says. "I don't think I am that incapable of committing myself to a relationship." "But that would mean that's not the reason you have no feelings for me. It would mean I'm simply the wrong person." "That's right," says Amir, and puts his guitar on his lap. He plays the same song he played the day before yesterday: *You belong to me, you belong to me, you always belonged to me*. I imagine him having a folder on his computer with love songs for certain moments, in the same way as he has a pair of women's pyjamas next to the bed, just in case. Amir leans against me and shoves his leg between mine. We lie there like that for an hour. Then I say: "I'm off now." I avoid his look, a look that seems to be so clear, and accept his kiss with my eyes closed.

I'm standing in the late-night shop when I get a text message: "I had a really nice time with you. See you, Amir." I stick my mobile back in my pocket and feel strangely relieved. I stop in front of a pet shop and light a cigarette. A tortoise in the window cranes its neck and stares at me without moving. Neither of us takes our eyes off the other. I go into the shop and buy the tortoise complete with a terrarium and carry both home. As I turn the key in the lock, I hear Hanna and Tim talking in the kitchen. Tim is saying: "But she's making herself unhappy," and Hanna says: "Let her do what she wants, none of us is that happy." I close the door noisily, and Hanna and Tim fall silent. "Hello," I shout. "Hello," they shout back. I join them in the kitchen and put the terrarium with the tortoise on the table. Tim leans forward and taps on the glass. "Oh, isn't it sweet." Hanna smiles. "Is it for us?" I nod. "It hasn't got a name yet." "Is it a he or a she?" Tim asks. "I don't know," I say. Tim lifts it out carefully and turns it on its back. "It's a she," he says. "What about Heidi?" asks Hanna. "No," I say, "that always makes me think of the TV series." "Emma?" asks Tim. "That's my gran's name," says Hanna. "Jenny?" I ask. "Sounds like a bimbo," says Hanna. "Why don't we just call her Mrs Tortoise?" "Mrs Tortoise," I say, "I like that." "So do I," says Tim. We clink glasses. "I was thinking I wouldn't go out tonight after all," says Tim. "We could watch a film," I say. "Yes," says Hanna, "I'll join you."

We sit on Tim's couch and watch *The Lion King*. Our knees touch. We pass the wine bottle between us. Next to us on the floor Mrs Tortoise crawls slowly around a piece of paper. The TV image has a slight bluish tinge. We sing along: *On the path unwinding / In the Circle, the Circle*

*of Life*. When the film is over, I see that Tim is crying too. Hanna has fallen asleep, her head is lying on my shoulder. Tim and I smoke another cigarette. "I've decided to take a break," says Tim softly. "I've got to take time out for myself, I think. I've deleted all the contacts on my mobile where the name doesn't mean anything to me." It's quiet. The television screen glows blue into the room. "Hanna told me today that she's been in love with her best friend's boyfriend for five years. Incredible, isn't it?" "Yes, incredible," I say.

We stub our cigarettes out. "Amir and me are history," I say. "Are you OK?" asks Tim and puts his warm hand on mine. "Yes," I say. "Good," says Tim. "Come on, let's carry Hanna to bed."