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The Fortune Teller's Babblings

The Incredible Stories Behind The Classifieds

Researched and told by Sarah Khan

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Unglaubliche Geschichten hinter Kleinanzeigen.)

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Sample translation by Anne Stokes

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May I have a word?

The idea of viewing a market place like Ebay classified ads as a source of stories came to me after I bought an old village school house in Brandenburg, a district characterised to this day by contrasting large estates and small villages where the families of former estate workers live. The uninhabited, hundred-year-old house with a stone plinth was offered to my family at a reasonable price. The sellers were the children of a village teacher. They had grown up in the house but had built their own homes a while back or had moved away. In GDR times, up until the seventies, the large room with the windows onto the garden had served as a classroom for a mixed-age class. The outline of the blackboard was still visible through the wallpaper. The teacher's family had occupied all the other rooms. The garden still contained the old outhouses for the pupils and the teachers as well as a dilapidated barn, which had been a pupils' washroom. The teacher couple had expressed a particular sense of order in the garden. Everything was laid out sensibly and harmoniously, fruit and vegetables, shrubs and flowers, but it had all become overgrown since the two had died a few years back. Only a hundred metres away as the crow flies, the couple lay in the village cemetery. One of their heirs said during the viewing of the house: "Welcome to the child beating establishment - "Pupils were thrashed here?" - "On the contrary," he said, "my father was very popular with the village youth. He only took his hand to his own children." With new owners surprising stories are unearthed, and an old house is full of surprises. The son told us about his forefathers, the Prussian master-builder Haeberlin, who built the victory column in Berlin after the Wars of German

Unification (1864-1871). And then there was a woman who emigrated to Kenya to run a farm. Soon I was imagining that the exotic trumpet tree in the garden, whose leaves were as large as elephants' ears, only grew so splendidly because it had a history that linked Kenya to Brandenburg. Without stories the place would be much poorer, and with the stories it was almost too much. One of the daughters commented during the second viewing: "Sometimes I had the impression that I was only born to turn lights on and off for the others. At night, when my brothers and sisters had to go to the loo, they'd shout: "Ella, the lights." Then I got up and turned on the lights. And when they were finished, they'd shout: "Ella, lights out." Only after that could I finally get back to sleep, until the next one had to go to the john."

The first floor was particularly eery. Below the roof was a smoke box, which was attached to the chimney. The ham from the pigs was cured there. The pigsties were in the garden, next to the pupils' washroom. The house was damp and run-down, but the walls looked at one expectantly, and in the garden the bumblebees were soon buzzing. The house had to be renovated and furnished. Since we would only be using it at the weekend and during the holidays, rustic furnishings from flea markets and objects with verdigris would work. And so I discovered Ebay classifieds as well as the fact that the entire population of Berlin was trading its private property as though their lives depended on it.

In theory, you could furnish your home entirely with free furniture, if your sense of taste didn't hold you back. (Currently in Berlin there are 15, 132 ads in the category "for free or exchange"). And provided you were willing to turn up at a certain time at a certain place, which was usually on the fourth or fifth floor of a building with no lift, to dismantle and then carry down all the gifts of a generous donor without any help from said donor, you could also kit yourself out with free fridges, washing machines and wardrobes. For a time, I looked daily for tools, household appliances, tiles and furniture. I bought a cooker for 50 euros, teak garden furniture for 140 euros, a stainless steel pan for 3 euros, a famous actress's sofa, transportation included, a ceramic double-bowl sink with taps for 140 euros, and three fishing rods for 6 euros. Hundreds of new ads are posted daily in the Berlin inner-city area. Soon I noticed that there were not only things to be discovered but people and their circumstances and stories, and through the ads I came into brief, intensive contact with them. That's nothing new, it's just that a private sale doesn't always go as planned or very pleasantly. You make an arrangement, undertake a journey - including long distances into unknown territories - just to view something. You enter a strange flat, carry on a conversation, bargain in the living room or on the doorstep. It was particularly obvious that haggling annoyed many private sellers. I started testing people by asking them to cut their price. Some reacted calmly, others became hostile. On one occasion, I sensed downright xenophobia, as though it was deeply unacceptable to ask a German woman to subject her previously fixed price to

negotiation. A chain-smoking doting female cat owner berated me, but you should be prepared if the sentence “from a pet-free, no-smoking house” is missing from an ad.

I started to dream about classifieds. Furniture appeared to me, doors opening, doors closing, half-dead Ikea sofas, very heavy washing machines, waiting like Rapunzel on the top floor for someone to carry them down.

Since classifieds no longer appear in newspapers, where the space was limited and each line was too costly, not only have abbreviations disappeared; many advertisers are now particularly creative, describe their situation or the many advantages of the “much loved jeans” in great detail, or wax lyrical in an attempt to breathe new life into an old fridge with a broken freezer compartment:

Fridge looking for a new opener, 50 euros o.n.o.: Hello, I'm a 3-year-old fridge. I'm looking for a new home and for someone to open me every day, whom I can endow with many treats. I was unfortunately replaced by a larger fridge and am just standing around. I'm still relatively intact, apart from the fact that it's pretty dark inside of me, and the door of the freezer compartment got broken unfortunately, but I still cool very nicely. You can pick me up in Köpenick and I'd be very happy to have a new owner. If I've awoken your interest, just get in touch;) I'm 85 cm tall, 47cm wide and 47cm deep.

I started collecting the most interesting ads (copy & paste) and began categorising them: funny, bewildering, outrageous.

Two pots, stainless steel, €10 each: I've got two pots with lids for sale. The small one's in great shape, the large one needs another scrub. Anyone who can't write a sentence shouldn't bother applying.

Yesterday at 22:56 I messaged: *Good evening, I could use good, cheap pots. What make are your pots, do you know? And what kind of dregs are in the large one? And why do you place such importance on correct grammar, but don't scrub the pots yourself? “If everyone sweeps in front of his own door / every district will be clean.” (Johann W. v. Goethe)*

Finally, I wrote to those who placed striking ads and asked to talk with them. I varied the letters of request, not knowing if people would react better if I appeared cultured or artistic? With some people I never got beyond a written exchange, and I learned a lot about the keeping and care of royal pythons (there are currently 1211 royal pythons for sale across Germany on Ebay) or how difficult it can be to arrange a mutually agreeable time to collect eight dessert bowls. Before long I used Ebay ads in two ways: to buy things for our weekend home and to track down stories. My intentions were not always clear. Did I really want a pair of used boots, or did I want to spend time with the woman who was selling them under tragic circumstances? I also bought services and special experiences: A

dental prophylaxis from the trainees of the Philipp Pfaff Institute; fortune telling with tarot cards; an introduction to the art of making kefir from kefir mushrooms. Once I responded to a young woman who was offering to clean in exchange for a night on a sofa.

<http://kleinanzeigen.ebay.de/anzeigen/s-anzeige/suchecouch-nettes-bett-fuer-1-2-naechte-in-berlin-ab-heute/> ... *Who has a couch or bed for me (female, 30 years old) at short notice for 1-2 nights? Please no lewd offers, and I'd also prefer my own sleeping place, if possible. Would also clean etc. in return. I've split up from my boyfriend and don't have anywhere to sleep right now, have to get sorted out first... BW*

At 11.15 Sarah K. wrote via Ebay classifieds: *Hello, I'm called Sarah and could offer you 1-2 nights' stay. We (a family with 2 kids) can offer you a bed in our guest room. You don't have to clean. Since I'm a writer and happen to be writing a book about classifieds, I'd like you to tell me your story in return.*

At 14.42 Franzi wrote: *Hi Sarah, thanks a lot for your message. I'd like to take up your offer, if that's okay? I'll also tell you my story of course:-) When could I come by your place? BW Franzi*

At 14.48 Sarah K. wrote: *Dear Franzi, you're welcome to come by early eve. But just one more question before I give you the address. Since, as a mother, I also have a responsibility towards my children, I need to ask if you're a drug addict or if there's anything else I should know in advance.*

At 14:58 Franzi wrote: *Your question is totally justified. And I'm not addicted to drugs and don't have any other problems apart from my separation. Here's my mobile number in case you want to give me a buzz.*

She sounded nice. She said that “only weird men” had responded otherwise. I asked why she had to organise an overnighter via Ebay classifieds of all things, didn't she have any friends or relatives? She didn't get along with her mother, she said, and she'd tell me the rest in the evening. But Franzi didn't come. She wrote to say that she was going to stay with a female friend. Did Franzi really exist? Hadn't her photo been much too alluring, flirtatious? Was she perhaps of the same ilk as myself, someone working with Ebay classifieds? Was she a tabloid journalist wanting to name and shame predatory men; a prostitute trying out a new scam; or was she ripe for the women's crisis centre? My imagination was limited so it was disappointing not to have met Franzi.

Soon I began to place ads myself, to get a better understanding of the seller's perspective: Who gets in touch, how much bother was it to sell things from your own home? Does every ad meet with success, no matter how used, old and shabby the item is? Can you get rid of anything at all via Ebay ads? But no, selling is an art.