

Closeted

Julia Walker

Torsten hated coffee. He didn't like going downtown, and he didn't like jazz, either. But Anja liked drinking coffee downtown and listening to jazz, and so he agreed to meet her later that night. Earlier that day, when he Wikipedia'd Thelonious Monk and Googled "artisanal coffee," he wondered if she'd realize he was a huge fake. No one ever really did notice, though, at least not as far as he could tell. People seemed to like him well enough. Anyhow, it was easy for him to get them to do what he wanted, but he supposed that was only because he always knew what was best for them, even when they didn't know themselves.

Anja was sitting in the far corner of the café, slightly slumped over with her long auburn hair loosely tied on the top of her head. Her olive sweater slid down one shoulder and she left it there. He stood for a second in the doorway, and someone pushed past him. He glanced over, the guy kept walking, and Torsten moved to lean against one of the old beams that kept the sloping paneled ceiling from collapsing and crushing everyone to death. He thought, briefly, about what it would feel like if it fell. He saw a video, once, of an entire wedding party posing for photos on a third story balcony right before it crashed into the Atlantic. While everyone wailed and flailed wildly, the photographer, or whoever, kept right on filming. Didn't even say anything! Just kept

his lens focused on the scene that played out before him while the whole crowd tumbled down and crushed into each other. Into the water they all went, like a screaming sea foam and coral avalanche pouring down a mountain. At a distance, their bodies moved slowly as they fell in waves like the water before them. The

cameraman's hand was steady all the way to the end.

If the ceiling crashed down around them now, there'd be no distant ebbing and flowing, and there'd be no far-removed voyeur capturing the claustrophobic catastrophe. It's funny what a lens can do in that way.

Torsten made his way across the crowded room, slipping past warm bodies and loud laughter. The air was hot and thick like the crowd, and he loosened his scarf as he weaved between the sea of sweating foreheads and coquettish smiles. Someone was wearing too much Aqua Velva. He curled his lip as he tried to breathe in through his mouth and out through his nose, but he felt like an idiot, so he closed his lips and rolled his tongue along the roof of his mouth. He needed a drink.

The bar top was made of ancient wood that had petrified and darkened. Its smooth surface was cool when he rested his nervous palms upon it. He raised his thumb and forefinger in a gesture toward the bartender. The man was thick and broad all over, with furry, trunk-like arms and a wide face that looked sort of smashed into a permanent

*If the ceiling crashed
down around them
now, there'd be no
distant ebbing and
flowing, and there'd
be no far-removed
voyeur capturing the
claustrophobic
catastrophe.*

dumfounded expression. He gave Torsten a curt nod and turned around to bustle about the beer taps. He quickly returned with two frosty golden glasses that were spilling over with foam. "Sechs euro," he grunted as he slid the wet mugs across the bar, sloshing the beer so that it tick-tocked back and forth inside the glass. The froth slid down the sides of the glasses as Torsten pulled a single gold and silver coin from his front pocket and slid it across the counter. "Danke," he replied and grabbed the mugs by their handles.

Torsten couldn't see Anja from where he was, but he began his way across the building, toward the back where he knew she was last sitting.

"Torsten!"

He turned toward the voice and beamed. "Hallo, Anja."

There she sat, golden under the dim glow of the old mercury lamps. "Torsten! It is good to see you. Wie geht's?" She looked down at his hands. "Is one of those for me?"

"Aah, no, I was planning on having them both, actually." He laughed and set the heavy mugs down on the table and slid into the mahogany booth across from her. She tilted her head to one side, still smiling. He pushed one mug toward her and nodded. "But I suppose you could have one, this time."

"I thought we were having coffee," she answered.

"I forgot to tell you that I hate coffee." He smiled.

Anja lifted the stein to her lips and tilted her head back. She drank in long, smooth gulps that drained the whole pint. She wiped her mouth with her sleeve and slammed the mug back down with gusto.

"Impressive," he marveled.

"I was thirsty."

"I'm sorry I'm late, Ani. I was tied up. We

are working on a deal with a new client, and there were some unforeseen kinks that we had to work through." He took a nervous sip. It filled his throat and soothed his nerves, so he took another one.

"It's all right. You're American," she teased. "We know how you guys always are. Always working, always going, always late." Anja rolled her eyes and tucked a stray wisp of hair into her bun.

Torsten chugged his beer and asked Anja if she'd like another one. She looked around the room. "I do, but do you want to have another beer here or at my place?"

Torsten and Anja had met at a benefit dinner raising money for an organization that she worked for, assimilating refugees and integrating their children into schools in Berlin.

They were auctioning off one of her art pieces when he first noticed her. Her piece was a mixed-media surrealist painting of a mother with her child tied to her back in a sarong, and the trees that surrounded her path were engulfed with fire. Instead of the mother's eyes, there were shadows, and her hands hung limply.

There was a viral clip circling the web that showed women and children standing guard in front of insurgents, acting as human shields. In the front, there was a woman clutching her two children. The one in her arms was matted with blood and her vacant eyes showed nothing. They were empty. Just two black holes etched into a blank, pale canvas. He pictured the gaunt expressions of the men in Civil War photographs and the Nazi concentration camps and wondered what it was that made humans so devilishly thirsty for destruction. Torsten had a mutual friend of theirs break the ice for him, and when he and Anja had their first conversation, he couldn't help but notice the way she bit the edge of her lip as she carefully chose her words

*There was an
inherent sadness
about her,
an intrigue.*

before she spoke. There was an inherent sadness about her, an intrigue. Even through her smile he could see something lurking behind it.

He couldn't remember if this was their fourth or fifth time meeting. What he did remember was the way the corners of her eyes ticked upward with every laugh, and how she said "Sank you" instead of "Thank you" when he held the door open for her. He looked into her lightening green eyes and said, "Your place sounds perfect."

They gathered their coats, and he helped her into hers. "Oh, such a gentlemen," she smiled and jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. He caught her elbow and hooked her to his side.

"No one can resist my American charm." He grinned as she cocked her head back dramatically and shielded her face with a white hand.

"It's too much! I can't handle it!"

He noticed a mark on her forearm. It looked like a bruise, maybe, but she quickly looped her arm around the small of his back, and he just as quickly forgot about it. Her fingers slid under his coat, and he felt her cool hands as they burned against him.

They left the bar and made their way outside. The night air was damp, and there was a heavy fog hanging lazily around the street lamps. The old cobblestone wound its way between buildings that leaned like tired old men on canes. In the distance they could hear the triumphant sounds of a party underway. "My flat is around the corner. We are not far," Anja said as she curled her hand into his. It was so small.

As they walked, they listened to the sounds

of Berlin at night. Someone, somewhere, was singing tunelessly out of key, and someone else yelled for them to shut the hell up. A dog barked at them from a bay window overhead.

"Here we are!" she exclaimed, pulling a set of keys from her pocket. She unlocked the heavy front door and pushed it inward. It heaved with a groan and creaked open. "Come inside! I don't want to let the cat out." She pulled Torsten behind her and shut the door. It creaked shut and settled back into place. She flipped a light switch, and Torsten looked around the room.

There were stacks of books and paper on every available surface. A dying leather couch covered in colorful oversized pillows and patterned blankets was shoved against the wall across from the door. An easel stood in the corner, and all around it were sketches and paintings taped to the industrial brick walls. He smelled burnt sage and oil paint, and something else that was vaguely familiar, but he wasn't sure what. He felt a soft bump against his legs, and when he looked down, he saw the roundest, orangest cat he'd ever seen. "That's Pizo." Anja beamed like a proud mother. "He's 17 years old, now. He smells a little bit funny

because he doesn't clean himself much anymore, but he doesn't like me when I do it, so I'm sorry for him if he tries to sit in your lap." She laughed. "Here, let me have your coat. Möchten Sie noch ein Bier?"

"Ja, bitte," he answered. "Where is your bathroom?"

"Down the hallway and to the left."

Torsten made his way down the narrow hallway. There was an umbrella tree in a large blue pot at the end of the hall with a doorway beside it. He noticed an extra lock on the outside of the door, a padlock like the ones used for outdoor storage units. He thought it

He noticed an extra lock on the outside of the door... He thought it was strange, but didn't think much else about it.

was strange but didn't think much else about it. Maybe she was storing something valuable in there. He turned to the left and entered the bathroom. It was small and well-lit, with white subway tiles lining the floor and walls. It was scrubbed clean except for the sink, which was streaked with paint and charcoal.

After he washed his hands, he let the water run as he ever-so-quietly popped open the door of her medicine cabinet. Nothing weird inside, thankfully, just your run-of-the-mill creams and toothpaste. He turned a prescription bottle around and read the label. He didn't recognize the name, so he took mental note of it and opened the little drawer below the sink. Just makeup. He closed the drawer and turned the water off and reached for the towel that was hanging on the wall beside the sink.

Something stirred in the room beside him. A strange thwacking sound, soft and rhythmic, was echoing through the floorboards. He paused, transfixed, before turning the door knob and leaving the room. He squinted at the locked door before heading back down the hall.

"Torsten, I'm in the kitchen," Anja called.

He found her bent over, digging through her fridge. On the large, worn butcher block in the center of the room were two glasses, a loaf of dark, heavy bread, and a bowl of olives. He thought he smelled feet when Anja turned around with two green glass bottles and a white paper packet.

"Do you like Limburger?" She set the glasses and the sachet on the table and unwrapped it. The pale-yellow cheese stuck to paper as she peeled it away. "A lot of times the smell bothers people, but we love it."

She grabbed a sharp knife from a drawer beneath the countertop. As she sliced the sticky cheese and arranged it on a board, he thought about the sound he heard and wondered if it would be impolite to question her. Germans are, paradoxically, very warm and equally distant, and he knew if he asked too many questions, or not the right ones, that Anja would quickly

shut down, and he'd lose any hope of pursuing a more meaningful relationship.

"It's okay," Torsten answered. "It's not my favorite cheese in the world, but I do enjoy it on occasion."

She popped the caps off the bottles with swift precision and expertise. She grabbed one glass and tilted it as she poured the beer down its side.

"You're good at that, Ani," he joked. "Like a pro!"

She told him she bartended her way through college. It was a good job; it paid well and the owners were nice, but it was physically and, at times, emotionally exhausting. "I didn't know that by serving beer that I'd also be a therapist. Do you know how many secrets I've heard? Hah! So many! Men cheating, women lying, a lot of fighting about money. Always the money! Such drama!" She sighed. "But it was good for me, in the end. I was able to see another side to people that I hadn't seen before."

She handed him a glass and stuck the other in the air with an outstretched hand. "*Prost!*" she exclaimed.

Torsten did the same and clinked his glass against hers. "Zum Wohl!"

He sipped his beer and set it down. "Hey, Ani?"

"Yes?"

"I heard something weird while I was in the bathroom. Do you think there may be an issue with your pipes?"

Anja cocked one eyebrow and observed him over the rim of her glass. "My pipes?"

"Yeah, those metal tubes in your walls..."

"I know what pipes are, Torsten," she interjected.

"Sorry, I just thought I heard something, and I wanted to make sure everything was all right." He felt his face growing hot, and he already regretted mentioning anything about it at all.

"It's all right. My pipes are fine. That sound you heard was Janis." She watched his face as she continued. "Jani is my freak."

Torsten tried hard to maintain a straight face. He didn't want his bafflement to show, and he cleared his throat and asked, "You keep your freak locked in a closet?"

She laughed loudly. "She's not in a closet! It's a bedroom. There *is* a bed in there." She seemed amused at his discomfort, which was steadily growing. She reached up to her hair and pulled out a pin. Her hair was the deep-red color of the slick clay that lined the riverbeds. She shook her head so that it tumbled softly around her shoulders. Her eyes sparked, and he thought of the dragons that were painted in his favorite book as a child. "Where do you keep *your* freak?" she asked incredulously.

"I don't have one anymore." Torsten marveled at the small beauty before him, so full of surprises. He wasn't sure if he should stay, but Anja was beguiling, and charm oozed from every pore.

"What did you do with him? Or her..." she asked mischievously.

"Him. I put in a home for troubled freaks."

"Why did you do that? Aren't all freaks troubled? Don't you ever miss him?"

Torsten shifted uneasily. None of these questions were easy to answer, and he very deeply regretted ever asking her anything about it, now that he was in the interrogation chair and not her. "I do miss him sometimes, but he was causing so many problems in my life. I was married, once. I'm not anymore, and it is because of him. No matter what I tried, I could not maintain control over him. He escaped, constantly, he drank all the time, he liked to play guitar naked at 3 a.m. on Tuesdays. I don't know how many times the cops were called because of him." Torsten stared emphatically at his now-empty beer glass. "I guess I just made the decision to put him somewhere where he could be safely monitored and controlled, because I was unable to do so for him."

Anja wordlessly refilled his glass, and after a pause she mused, "It's a terrible shame when handlers lose control of their freaks. I've been lucky. My freak is fairly antisocial, so for the most part, she will avoid other people. I am able to let her out on occasion with no problems." She corrected herself, "Well, almost no problems. We have had a few embarrassing incidents, but it was nothing that most people don't do at some point in their early adulthood."

As if on cue, the doorknob down the hall rattled. Janis wanted out. "Hold on, Torsten. I'll be right back." She turned the corner; her bare feet thudded quietly on the floorboards. Torsten heard Anja muttering something, and a loud crashing sound ensued. He was growing more uneasy by the second.

He looked at the old wooden front door and wondered what would happen if he snuck out while Anja wasn't paying attention. He heard the metal lock pop and slide open, and everything went eerily silent. He heard Pizo scratching himself behind him. Just as he turned to pet the cat, Anja called, "Hey, Torsten, I want to show you something..."

"What is it?" His heart throbbed so forcefully that he could hear it in his head. He wondered if it were possible that Anja was completely insane.

"You have to come here if you want to see."

The sound of rushing blood filled his ears, and he lifted one heavy foot in front of the other. Every alarm was sounding off; he knew better than this. But he moved, anyway, by some unseen force. He thought of Anja and her trembling lip and her eyes like sparks and her fiery hair. He moved down the hall toward the open back door. He stared into the room but saw nothing.

"Come on, it's okay. What are you so worried about?"

Torsten stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him. ❖

*"You have to
come here if you
want to see."*