

The volume of a rural German flat is, as you may expect, not so different from its American equivalent. That kind of space is where the two of them found themselves, surprised the other had held up their end of the arrangement. Perhaps it was a testament to their iron resolves, or maybe they were just stubborn. Such a comradery was made possible only by the wonders of the twenty-first century and a common proclivity to replace the faces in “face-to-face” with screens. They were both quite regular and routine in their lives, but only so far as to brag of a respectable amount of self-discipline.

Ian was the one who had instigated the idea to stay in Germany, taking advantage of his foreign friend as an excuse to broaden his worldliness. Being the youngest child in his family, his parents were already siphoned of motivation and savings to do any travelling with him, so—as was typically the case—he had to find his own means. It’s not that they were incompetent, just incompetent in all the things he was interested in. At least, this was the impression of a bachelor (both in conceit and degree-level) fresh out of college.

His friend Julien was a man he had known through the latter half of his time in school. They met through online antics as strangers and awkwardly established some mutual rapport over the following months. Despite similar interests, Jul had close to a decade over Ian’s age. Relative to the demographics they represent, their outlooks were not particularly remarkable—both had been scammed in life, scammed in love, and had done some scamming of their own.

It was one day a while after Ian had gotten settled in to his European escapade. Jul had returned from a routine workout (as indicated by his tank-top and revealing tights). This was normally not noteworthy, but he set his mail on the counter of the kitchen with *statistically significant* indignation. Jul had a Masters in Applied Mathematics, but he wouldn’t be humored by such joking jargon if spoken aloud. Ian took the opportunity to indulge his curiosity after Jul headed to the shower. Jul was fluent enough in English to entertain Ian’s willing ignorance of German, but luckily Google exists; he gathered the equivalent of “Restraining Order” from the document that lay open. Ian figured the newfound outlaw

couldn't hear over the water, and didn't stop himself from chuckling for a minute. He had heard the stories of how Julien totaled his girlfriend's car because she paid more attention to it than him, so this was no surprise. He queued this black mail for their next round of banter and returned to the corner of the living room that was designated for him during his stay.

Ian made an effort to minimize his presence. He had a decent amount of money saved up from his internship during school, but he didn't know enough German to hold a job reasonably. In fact, the legality of this situation was questionable at best—as far as any bureaucrat could tell, he was still living in America. All he asked for was the Wi-Fi password and a mattress by an outlet. Having no distractions like a job or school, he was finally able to address all the ideas for projects he amassed over the years that he felt were worth exploring but didn't have the time for. Because of this, he was mostly an animatronic typing on his laptop whenever he wasn't being toured around by Julien.

Jul finished with his shower and appeared to console himself by preparing a dessert instead of a usual meal of balanced macros. He was burly and hairy, but him cooking in just his favorite tights overstated this. He had joined the *Luftwaffe* when he was young to fly planes in combat for Germany as well for some excitement, and an artifact of his service was his invention of the "*LuftWaffle*" (composed solely of water, flour, butter, and salt—more or less guaranteed ingredients even in combat) which he was now preparing as comfort food.

While he was cooking, he broke the silence:

"You know, I am the Scam Master. Just got a deal done making a website for the next-door tiny supermarket owned by some Turk. I just installed WordPress for him. He was satisfied. Got five-hundred euros." He fanned himself with the bills. It was likely he had them on hand just for that gesture.

"You should have referred him to me, I would have developed something less shitty. Maybe I could create a startup out here for web applications."

"Where would you put your office?"

“Somewhere over here in the suburbs. I'm kind of autistic, I don't function well in a city. I grew up on a mountain, so having things being so orderly and populated gives me anxiety.”

“I grew up in the mountains as well, always been on the country side, and that's why I still live on the outer rim of Bremen. I couldn't function in the city either.”

“We are pretty similar guys.”

“No, you are just autistic. I am not.”

Ian's face went from focused to smug, “Well I'd rather be autistic than have depression.”

“Wow. How will I recover?” Jul poured a new waffle with a weak smirk.

Ian continued, “What does *your* company even do exactly besides math research?

“Simulations lately,” he said as he flipped the flour patty in an arch that suggested some knowledge of aerodynamics.

“What kind?”

“Fluid dynamics for Airbus. Guess who will work on the next Ariane?”

He paused for the punchline, “Not me, but Airbus, right here.”

“What's Ariane?”

“They make rockets for civilians.”

Ian stood up and approached the kitchen, curious to see how fried flour-water turns out, “That sounds pretty cool.”

“Yeah, I was thinking about taking my ex on one of them maybe.”

He snidely leaned on the counter that backed the stovetop, “Seems like now you only get love letters from the Police.”

Julien chuckled dismissively—It's not like it was a surprise that Ian found out. He acknowledged the revelation, “You want to hear the story?”

“A little.”

“Well, we just met up and then she started to yell at me, and I yelled at her, and we yelled. I grabbed her arm and someone already called the police.”

“You just met up?”

“Well, I ‘trapped’ her. I talked to an old friend of her who also liked me, so I asked that old friend if she could try to convince her to meet her. So, my ex would think that *they* would meet, but then there was me. Genius, right?”

“Why...would you do that? Why not just get with her friend? If she was willing to be a pawn in your mind game, she probably would have slept with you.”

“I’ve got some issues, okay?”

“Well, at least you’re honest about it.”

Jul slid a grid of dough down the counter to Ian. He flayed some of the cubicles with his fork, inspecting the consistency. The lack of effervescence from baking powder looked unappetizing.

“You know I’m trying to avoid carbs,” he slid back.

“Well, unless you want to go to the market, this is all I’m cooking.”

He took a reluctant bite. There was actually something aesthetically pleasing about the bland flavor, though his theory was that it was some residue from the frying pan never getting a proper wash. As he found out, the point of the *LuftWaffle* is that they fill you up quick and for a long time with few resources—the perfect soldier food. Julien had only cooked two, but neither one was fully consumed.

They lounged on the sofa in digestive maternity. Their innards growled that they would have preferred to starve.

“I think I would have rather had noodles,” Jul mustered, “but we don’t have any and I forgot to stop by the market on my way back.”

“Well let’s at least head to the bar and give these dough balls something to sponge up. I’m meeting a lady there tonight and it’d help if I was loosened up beforehand.”

Julien chuckled, his engorged gut bobbing jovially, “You’re not so bad at speaking German after all. Is this the ping-pong girl down the hall you mentioned?”

“Yeah, Leonie. The ping-pong was my idea. She actually agreed to play a couple matches with me.”

“Only you would come up with such a stupid date.”

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Stereotypically, Julien insisted on Jägermeister. No grimace spawned on his stubbly face after his shots, though the same couldn’t be said for his American underling. The bartender remarked that he was impressed the Jul finally brought a friend instead of his MacBook. Julien made a weak, conversational laugh. Ian downed his remaining Jäger and winced. He motioned toward the ping-pong table near the center of the bar, hoping Julien would oblige that instead of another round. This would also help him warm up for his date, not that he really intended to beat her. Luckily, Julien took most opportunities to demonstrate his talents for accurate trajectories.

They were only a handful of serves in to the game when Jul landed an overexcited paddle against the skull of a bystanding meathead. Things were about to get as ugly as that meathead. Ian could barely hear the exchange over the saturated acoustics of the bar, not that he could understand the angry German they lashed at one another. German is already an angry sounding language, so spoken with genuine fury makes it all the more intimidating.

The bartender eventually intervened, escorting the two of them out the door. Having no ping-pong opponent, there was little reason for Ian to stay. He found Julien in a bench near the bar and asked what happened.

“I said he couldn’t squat 150 kilos. Ass-to-grass, like a real man. And he can’t. I see him in the gym. He doesn’t even go past ninety-degrees.”

“Well, what are you going to do now? I’m not supposed to meet her here for another forty-five minutes.”

“Let’s take a walk.”

So, it was time for another of Julien’s famous impromptu tours. On tonight’s agenda was his favorite spot to go when he was feeling particularly empty inside. They walked through the cold winter night into the more rural part of town, up to a corral. Julien made some squirrely noises with his mouth, and a donkey came up to greet him.

He began to explain himself, “This ranch is owned by Spaniards. They train abused horses to sell. One of their batches from Spain had this donkey for no reason. They just keep him since no one will buy him. He’s a sweet guy.”

“You’re practically writing the jokes for me. You comfort yourself with an ass?”

“Hey, HEY. This is no regular arse. We have an understanding. He’s all alone, no one to love him.”

“I guess that’s a little poetic. But it’s not like you aren’t partly responsible for your own loneliness.”

“Maybe I don’t get girls. Maybe I will get a love doll.”

“May as well stick your dick in a DVD—at least a hooker is warm and self-lubricating.”

“No, no, not a sex doll. A love doll is a very refined kind of love. It’s a far cry from a ‘Dutch wife.’ It’s a very high-quality product. It’s designed to be loved and held dear. Someone like you who thinks of it as nothing more than a tool to satisfy sexual urges wouldn’t understand.”

“Seems kind of dangerous to get lost in a maze of such an insular love. Maybe such pure affection isn’t possible for us normal people?”

The donkey had tired of his petting and moved over to a decaying patch of grass.

Julien leaned against a fencepost, looked up at the stars, and continued to defend himself, “It’s the perfect partner. She would be very beautiful and never complain. I could pamper her, take her on any

date,” he shadow-waltzed, “and teach her to dance. No drama. No cheating. No fights. We could settle down and raise a family.” He laughed in a sad, drunken way that tried to play off any sincerity as a joke.

Ian realized how a market for love dolls could exist. For those who are neurotic and controlling, and probably a little bitter and jaded, a love doll is not that farfetched. It’s a receptacle of affection that won’t argue or leave. He supposed, for some, trading personality for cooperation was a deal worth taking.

He continued his train of thought outwardly, “At the very least she couldn’t file a restraining order.”

“Don’t you have some ping-pong to play?”

“Yep, it’s close to that time. I’m going to head back.”

“I’ll meet you back at the flat.”

The donkey lifted its neck from eating to notice the sudden movement. It and Julien shared a longing gaze. After a few meters, Ian thought up a plan to remark that Jul should just buy the donkey instead. A love doll may sound nice, but in the end it can’t play ping-pong with you.