

Aesthetic Statement for *Bread & Circuses*

For full transparency, this story was a big inside joke. Julian is a real person, and I have plans to visit him sometime after graduation after considering your advice to live outside the country for a while. My peer reviews saying “Ian seems like a younger Julian” (while a great realization to fit in the revised piece) also gave me good reason to reflect on who I am. A lot of my stories are taken at least partly from real events, and this was an experiment to take that to the extreme. A lot of the problems with this strategy that I’ve observed in my own and others’ pieces from similar influence is that truth is indeed stranger than fiction. Things that can exist as consistent in real life may not—and usually *do* not—translate well to a narrative. This was the source of the inconsistent characterization that most of the reviews commented on. Lots of details make sense in real life where there’s ample backstory and context, but when distilling that into a short piece there’s a lot that has to be sutured during translation. I guess the “goal” I was trying to achieve with this is capturing the ridiculous essence of Julian’s character and share it with others, but something I neglected during the first draft is that the most potent characterization is a response to events. I focused too hard on recreating our interactions true-to-form instead of true-to-story. Funny thing is I was actively trying to avoid making this mistake, but it’s a difficult balance to strike. Killing your darlings is much more difficult when your darlings are facts. As for the ending, I think I miscommunicated in the dialog that the whole love-doll thing was a new, experimental thought of Julian’s and not something he had believed previously, to represent some subtle turn of character. It wasn’t the best way to end things, and I executed it poorly, but no longer trying to honor the “real” people these characters represent gives you much more freedom. I keep getting hung up on trying to make the dialog and interactions fun but neglecting the weight of the story. Even now after I’ve (I think) made the “action” more involved and the turn in the characters a bit less subtle (though I think it’s still too subtle) I still can’t shake that this is still mostly a situation than a story. I think I’m too attached to preserving the original vision that I need to let this story sit for a while so I become less attached to what I want it to be and can meld it into what it *can* and *should* be. What exactly that *is* is a mystery to me as of the time of writing this. Hopefully we’ll see.

Bread & Circuses (Revised)

This might actually be the end for that big oaf. Maybe he can squat a hundred-fifty kilos ass-to-grass, but I don't think he can take the four-thousand Newtons of meat-head punch to the chin. I just wanted to play some pool. I step in to pull him back from what would inevitably escalate to him getting his teeth kicked in. I couldn't understand very well what degree of profanity was being shared in their German shouts, and that may be for the best. The dainty girl that was probably dating the other guy pulled him back to. I wrestle my buddy out of the bar and onto a bench directly outside.

"Julian," I start at him, exhausted from containing his eager lust for violence, "it's one thing to hit on a man's girlfriend, but *accidentally* whacking him over the head with a pool cue is deserving of a good sock on its own."

He musters a good chuckle, as if his brawny abs were a bellows, but, like his talking, it somehow came out slurred.

"I know, that's why I did it. You think I have fun playing pool with someone who's so autistic? If you want to measure angles why not just come work at Airbus with me? Besides, I see that douche at the gym all the time, he deserves to have some teeth knocked out."

"Then do it when I'm not trying to just have a fun night out. I came to stay with you to see what it's like in another country, not some knockoff MMA shit."

"This is what it's like in this country. Whenever I am flirting online with a woman, out of ten, eight got children. What the fuck is wrong with this place."

"I don't see what that has to do with being a confrontational asshole."

"That's just how we are here. Maybe you would have a girlfriend by now if you were more like me." He shot me a snide smile.

"I'd also have a restraining order if I were more like you."

"Hey now," he stood up drunkenly, using the bench as support, "maybe she should have paid more attention to me than her stupid car."

I pulled his arm over my shoulders to ease carrying him.

"Maybe you should have told her that instead of crashing it."

"I have issues, okay?"

"It only took a couple dozen shots to get you to admit it."

I dragged him back to the flat. By the time we got back, he was decently balanced enough to start cooking. He mumbled about wanting something to soak up the booze. I took to the spot he had generously offered me for free, a nice spare mattress in the corner of the living room by an outlet. I didn't need much more, as most of my time not spent keeping Jul out of trouble was spent working on ideas for projects I had queued up during my studies.

"Say, I don't think I've cooked this for you yet," he said from the kitchen.

"Cooked what?"

"I call it a *LuftWaffle*. It's a pun with *LuftWaffe*. It's something I came up with while I was in our air force. We ran out of food a lot but typically had a lot of flour and butter so I made something for my troop with it."

"Flour and butter? Sounds bland as hell."

"Oh it is. But it's...what's the word? Oh—nostalgic. Here come try." He slid a plate onto the counter that separated the kitchen and living room. It didn't look appetizing from afar, and especially so up-close. Just as he had described, it was a crispy glob of wet flour.

"You know I'm trying to avoid carbs," I said, flaying the surface with a fork to see if anything about it was enticing.

"Yes, I'm also hosting you for free and trying to cut costs. If you want to run to the market and buy some stuff yourself then feel free, but this is all I'm cooking tonight."

I took a reluctant bite. Surprisingly, there was something oddly satisfying about the vapid flavor and powdery texture. I quickly found out why this was a popular treat amongst the soldiers—these things fill you up almost immediately with very little resources. I couldn't even eat half. What a life it must be to live off of something so plain.

"This is hardly a waffle. But it's a good metaphor for your personality. Bland and bloated."

"Ouch, how will I recover? At least I know how to talk to women."

"You mean single mothers?" He tossed a butter knife at me.

"You know, the reason I hate that guy at the bar is because of his girlfriend. She and I used to see each other and had a falling out. I really liked her."

"I take it she liked her car more?"

Julian spouted another hearty chuckle, though it seemed choked up due to the glob of flower in his belly.

"Well, we got into a fight. Afterward 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 hers 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?"

He shrugged, and collapsed the brawn of his weight onto the sofa.

"It's likely I just don't understand women."

We sat for a while as our intestines groaned at the labor of dissolving the lazy dough in our guts.

He neglected to mention that the waffles usually make you sick, but they at least stop the hunger. He stood up and sauntered closer to the mattress.

"Let's go for a walk, I'm feeling sober enough now."

"If you mean a walk back to the bar, no thanks. I've done enough babysitting for one night."

"No, something better. Maybe even poetic. I think you'll like it. It's a special place I go when I'm feeling depressed."

"Why aren't you there all the time, then?" He kicked the mattress. "Alright, alright, I'll tag along. Not like laying here suffering is any fun."

We walked through the night into the more rural part of the town. There was a wimpy brook that paralleled the rutted path that ran between many pastoral properties. The night sky was clear and the air was cool, a nice change of pace from the neon bar scene. Although the path was serene in its own right, we had yet to arrive to our destination. Eventually Julian stops by a fence that outlines one of the properties.

"Here," he starts, "this is it."

"I don't get it. It looks just like any of the other places we walked past."

He starts making some squirrelly noises with his mouth and clapping. A smallish 4-legged creature walks up wearily to the gate and let's Julian pet it.

"A donkey?" I ask in disbelief. "You're practically writing the jokes for me. You comfort yourself with an ass?"

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. 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."

The donkey snorted delightfully at the simple pets.

"Sure, I've realized." He looked up at the sky stereotypically. "It's not worth the trouble. Girls, anyway. If it wasn't that bald douche, it'd be someone else. Not like beating whose ever ass it is that's with her will change anything."

I took a turn petting the donkey. It was definitely cute.

"I mean, that's right I think. But that's probably common sense to most other people."

"Yes, but it feels good to just pummel some asshole. I got into a lot of fights before you stayed here."

The silence lingered. I didn't feel there was anything I could say that would mean anything. He would probably continue in his ways, despite his realization, even after I've returned home. He will probably get himself killed prematurely. Some stars just burn hotter than others. Maybe that's some part of his charm.

"Why not buy the donkey?" I tried.

"Heh, where the hell would I put a donkey?"

"In the flat. It's small enough to write off as a big dog."

"I'm not keeping a donkey in the damn flat."

"You two could cuddle."

"No, no. This isn't America, we're civil here. You can't just live with a donkey in your flat."

"You already share it with one ass."

"You?"

We smirked as if we had both won the shit-talking. The donkey was sick of us by now and returned to where it was laying before we disturbed it.

Julian laughed again, "Well he's cute enough that I'll consider it. I am an ass-man after all."

The volume of a rural German flat is, as you may expect, not so different from its American
[2] [1] equivalent. That kind of space is where the two of them found themselves, surprised the other had held
[3] 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
[4] 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
[5] 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
[6] 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,
[7] 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
[8] 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

Summary of Comments on annotated-Bread%20and%20Circuses%20-%20Michael%20Bartlett.pdf

Page: 1

- T Number: 1 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 2:54:41 PM
Usage? Volume--technically correct, but seems odd phrasing--square feet?
- T Number: 2 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/2/2018 12:54:26 PM
Title?
- T Number: 3 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 2:55:19 PM
Interesting approach--teaches us that there is a 'past' we will discover. Great tension.
- T Number: 4 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 2:55:58 PM
Need this clarified.
- T Number: 5 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 2:56:34 PM
Give us specific things--this builds the character up from thin to full.
- T Number: 6 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 2:57:09 PM
Why not place us in scene as you reflect? For instance, "Ian occupied the bumpy couch, set haphazardly against a far wall, while Julien stood at the window, his back to him. He had known Julian...."
- T Number: 7 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 2:59:03 PM
Might be a bit too glib so early in the narrative.
- T Number: 8 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:00:19 PM
Hmmm. Sudden shift from reflection to scene makes me think this is actually the start to your story--the rest of the previous material could easily be placed within the following scenes--as contextual evidence.

couldn't hear over the water, and didn't stop himself from chuckling for a minute. He had heard the [1] 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 [2] this. He had joined the *Luftwaffe* when he was younger to fly planes in combat for Germany as well for [3] 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?"

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[T] Number: 1 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:01:39 PM

CLARity--read this aloud so you can hear the odd phrasing--joking is especially hard to do if it isn't absolutely clear.

[T] Number: 2 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:03:16 PM

ABstract versus concrete. Think about showing this: "He was burly and hairy anyway, but his choice of tights made him bulge at the seams like an overstuffed burrito" Give us vision.

[T] Number: 3 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:05:26 PM

So he is in his 80-90s?

“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.”
[1]

“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 [2] 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.”

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Number: 1 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:06:34 PM
Funny.

Number: 2 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:07:15 PM
We want to hear the story too, but hopefully the whole setup for this is not just to tell the tale--a reader would feel tricked--make sure there is a stake here for the reader too.

"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 hers 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 [1] 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."

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[T] Number: 1 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:08:54 PM

So far, I like these characters, and am interested in them--at this point, however, I am starting to wonder 'what is the point' as it begins to feel more like situation rather than story.

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."
[1]

"Only you would come up with such a stupid date."

* * *

Stereotypically, Julien insisted on Jägermeister. No grimace spawned on his stubbly face after his [2] 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 [3] 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 bystander 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."

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[T] Number: 1 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:10:34 PM
Really like how they talk to one another--they are the only friends they have, so are forced to hang.

[T] Number: 2 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:11:12 PM
PASSive voice

[T] Number: 3 Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:11:54 PM
WHo is the speaker, this person who is giving judgements as things move along? Be careful that the speaker isn't more interesting than the plot!

"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."
[1]

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 squirrelly 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

[T] Number: 1

Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:12:50 PM

So, the scenes are interesting, and we like the characters, but what is at stake--if a reader was forced to tell you what the story is 'about' right now, they wouldnt know what to address...

[1] 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.

[T] Number: 1

Author: Seth Tucker Subject: 9802000000004758 Date: 4/3/2018 3:13:57 PM

So, that was quite a turn--the story seemed to be about two characters 'out of place' in a strange land; but now it is about how a sex doll stacks up to the real thing... You need to find that connection!