

## **Berlin Syndrome**

A city with a pulse like this must have a heart somewhere and this bar was probably it. It was like the beat from the electronic music inside attracted people from all corners of Berlin. It lay in the intersection of two pedestrian streets and they both branched out into smaller streets, cul-de-sacs and alleyways, forming the centre of the vast street network of the city. New people arrived while others left towards some Bahnhof further on, either quietly alone or exultantly paired up. The bar was bursting with people who spilled out on the streets through relentlessly swinging doors. I had arrived just after the stroke of midnight and watched all this take place with my own eyes. It was as if the hot summer night had rendered people crazy.

I stood looking at the place from across the street, waiting for my colleagues to bring me a drink from inside. After a while I realised that they must have given it away to one of the strangers they surely were busy chatting up at the bar, and no wonder. Every night on this trip, after our meetings, we had gone out drinking and their only aim seemed to be to find someone new to lure into their hotel rooms. I on the other hand found it useless to chase strangers with whom the only thing I had in common was a human anatomy and the fact that I happened to be present in the same place as them.

The disco lights inside cast their glows through the windows and speckled the sidewalk with red, green and blue rays. Up above the moon was out in all its glory, making people staying out longer, getting drunker. Inside the bar people were madly moving their bodies with and against the beat of the music and outside they were almost shouting to make themselves heard while putting out cigarettes in plant pots or discarded bottles on the crowded tables.

Someone knocked a bottle to the ground but the general noise swallowed it up and nobody so much as flinched. A mating ritual of scale but little sophistication was taking place before me and I saw sweat pearls break out across their young faces as the air filled with pheromones, perfumes and tobacco smoke. They were gesticulating wildly and tearing at their clothes as if driven by impulses to escape them.

They tried to remedy the collective heatstroke with a never-ending stream of cold drinks and colourful shots which alas did little to calm their carnal drives. The fever was slowly ramping up to a frenzy and I laid eyes on women who had long since lost their innocence conspiring with men untouched by it, soiled by brute intentions and some so worked up they were covered in a thin film of their own perspiration. They were not even aware of all the pyramids we could have built, had we not been so restrained by these, our urges. I showed my teeth to the crowd in a contempt perhaps barely mistaken for a smile. A few eyes landed on me then for the first time since I had gotten there but they quickly looked away disinterestedly, chased by my own judgemental stare.

It was frustratingly impossible for me to truly renounce this behaviour myself, however. I thought that to be human is to fight for survival, and we fight for it so that we can reproduce. To reject this double-edged sword of human nature would mean, quite literally, that I had to throw my childless self upon its blade. But

the more I watched, the more distant I felt from all of it. Minutes went by and after a while I realised that there was not a trace of temptation left in me.

For once, the repulsion was stronger than the desire to participate. I wondered if I had finally overcome my instincts. Another quick glance at the crowd confirmed the suspicion and now, unexpectedly, my face settled in a serene smile at the idea that I had tamed the animal within. I turned and observed myself in the dark shop window behind me. My calm smile and business-like appearance contrasted with the scandalous scenes playing out in the background. Then something flickered in the corner of my eye and drew my gaze.

A girl had just turned out from a side street up ahead and walked slowly towards the bar over the uneven cobblestones with a balanced elegance I would have thought impossible in high-heeled shoes like hers. Her skin was light brown and her lips painted red. She wore a long green dress which seemed to shift colour with every step she took. As an evening breeze unsettled her black hair it also showed the contours of her shapely legs embraced by the dress. Her black purse hung on a thin golden chain over one shoulder and when she walked, with a dancer's light steps, the nuance of her dress kept subtly changing. In one instant it appeared to be made of the finest jade silk, shimmering brightly and illuminating her entire figure in a saint-like way. Seconds later, in the street light twilight, she faded into a dark emerald contour seemingly absorbing all light as she passed.

The smile lingered on my face as I saw, for the first in a long time, in hers the look of innocence. Her expression was almost childlike, eyes wide open to take in everything around her, as if she observed a spectacle like the one in front for the very first time. She looked amazed and at ease at once, curiously strolling along as if nothing could hurt her, protected by a sense of safety owing to her ignorance of the evils of this world. I thought that this was the face of uncorrupted youth, one which had known neither hardship nor sorrow. The same impression seemed projected upon all those who saw her, as if this manifestation of virtue reminded them of theirs, long lost.

My face locked in a smile as I observed her, transfixed by the sight of such a rare pearl in this place of all, when her eyes met mine. She shyly returned the smile but then, as after a brief thought, it spread to her eyes too. I tucked in my shirt and straightened it, watching her dress flutter noiselessly in the August breeze while a whole palette of green shades played upon it all at once. She stopped short just outside the bar, almost within reach of me. She stood there hesitating and I knew I had to say something or this moment would be lost.

"That's a very nice dress" I said.

She turned her head, then the rest of her followed. Facing me, I saw the smile spread again but this time it permeated her entire body. Her shoulders dropped, her balance shifted and I would have done anything for another smile like that.

"Thank you" she said, looking me up and down, at the white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, grey pants and brown shoes polished to a shine.

"Where are your friends?" she asked in a slight, sublime accent that I couldn't pin-point.

“My colleagues are inside” I could hear myself saying. “I just preferred to stay out here.” My voice almost broke but her expression revealed that I had not yet said anything I would later regret.

“Is this not for you then?” she asked.

“No, I like.. different sorts of places. Calmer ones”

“I feel the same. This place is too loud and too..” She looked at the people outside the bar. “Too crazy.” And I wondered if she’d read my thoughts or if they were written on my face.

“Are you from around here?” she asked, tilting her head to one side.

“No, I’m here on business.” though I had momentarily forgotten exactly what my business here was.

“Yes, you don’t look like you’re here to enjoy yourself. But that doesn’t mean you cannot. I’m heading somewhere else, somewhere quieter. I can’t walk very far in these shoes though, so I’d like to take a shortcut. But some of these streets can be a bit rough at night. Would you accompany me?” she asked, shifting her weight from one leg to the other, divinely swaying from side to side.

I was enchanted beyond any trace of inhibition. I’d been wanting to leave in any case and our brief conversation was already the highlight of my evening. I blinked and muttered “Sure”, and she turned with a playful half pirouette. She led the way and I stood dumbfounded for a second before looking one last time at the bar and then catching up with her in a few quick steps.

My pulse settled but my mind raced all the while. We were walking calmly onto a side street, then took a right onto another. Her dress kept shifting colours as the light altered and the streets became smaller, darker. Eventually I felt obliged to break the silence.

“Where are we going?” I asked, slowing my pace in anticipation of her answer. This all felt so surreal, and I wondered why she had chosen me to accompany her when she could have had men fighting for the privilege.

“It’s not far now, we’re almost there. I know a quiet rooftop bar I think you’ll like.”

The idea of taking in a nice view with her by my side did make my heart jump. What little doubt I still harboured was swept away as the wind brought her tantalizing scent from up ahead. She urged me on and I found myself running spellbound around yet another corner.

The gloomy alley we then found ourselves in had garbage cans and containers stacked along the length of it. The moon could no longer be seen and clouds had gathered overhead. All I heard was the echo of her heels bouncing against the buildings on either side, and my own heart pounding in my ribcage. Then she sped up her pace and I watched her, entranced by the sway of her hips.

With a rustling of garbage bags, two men detached from the shadows in the alley. They blocked the path forward with intimidating postures, eyes shining with furious impatience. I struggled to comprehend what was happening, but the realisation forced itself on me. I could have tried to fight or flee but instead I just stood there, dazed and disoriented. One of them gestured at me to hand something over. Up ahead the girl had turned to watch and I beckoned her to intervene when I received a hard push from behind. There was a third man I had not even noticed, well-dressed like the others and with an equally intimidating body language. Then a hand reached into my pocket for my wallet while another grabbed the watch off my wrist.

It was over in a heartbeat and before I knew it, I was alone again as the entourage rounded a corner with her in the lead.

I stood fixed to the spot, adrenalin pumping as I began to make sense of what had happened. Then came over me a sense of the deepest disappointment. If she wanted anything from me, all she had to do was ask. There was no need for violence. But the men had been doing the asking for her.

I knew it was all an error on her part. She needed money and that's no crime. I could help her, I was sure of it. I could guide her, protect her, and keep her out of trouble.

I felt my pockets and realised not all of them were empty. My hotel room key was still there, and I felt the roll of cash I had withdrawn a few hours earlier. I hadn't yet put it in my wallet and the men had not done a very good job patting me down. I thought of her again. I knew she could use it better than I. And it might buy me time to win her over. I started running after them with the roll of cash in my hand.

As I caught up with them a couple of blocks away, the men turned at the sound and fanned out to meet me with force. But when they saw the cash I was waving in front of me they stood down, as if they knew my intentions. She stopped too and let me approach, taking the cash and saying "Thank you" with an approving nod. She put it in her purse and inside I could see several other watches, wallets and rings. She took my wallet out and emptied it of cash but handed it back with my cards still in it. As she placed it in my hand, ours touched for an instant and the sensation was electric. Seeing, hearing and smelling her was heavenly on its own accord. Touching her was a step closer to paradise. I thought that only one of my senses were left for her to conquer and wondered if my lips would have time to land on her before the other men tore me to pieces. But before I finished the thought she was already walking away and the others pushed past me.

I had been so close to her and now with her every step the gulf widened again. I had glimpsed something transcendental at the thought of kissing her and if anything, I only wanted to help.

I don't know what possessed me then, but I knew that I had more to give. As the group rounded a corner, I followed, falling in at the rear of the pack. The men looked at me as I tailed them but I wasn't worried anymore. I knew it wasn't up to them.

The whole time I was staring at her figure, ready to meet her gaze and follow her every whim if she ever turned around and wished it so. Soon we were in another unlit alley and in the middle of it, next to an old parked car and some debris, she stopped. I approached unchallenged and she said "Wait here", addressing us all. "Hide. I will be right back". She walked off again and seconds later I was alone with the others, exchanging wild, abandoned looks with them. Then I found a dark spot and started blending with the shadows. All I could do, all I wanted to do, was to obey.

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