

Our Man In Berlin

Epiphany Interrupted

By Farish A. Noor

What a start to a column. This was meant to be a column about a Malaysian living in Berlin; offering what I had hoped would be a view of the contemporary Occident seen through the somewhat particular lens of a young(ish) cosmopolitan urbanite schooled in the mores of the world and a tad too smart for his own good. I had hoped that it would be a racy little niche where I could at least write to woo and impress, if for no other reason than to get my weekly sugar-cube of vanity.

But no, life or fate has a funny way of disrupting one's settled assumptions and even the best laid plans are often laid to waste by variable circumstances beyond one's control. So to commence on a rather downbeat note, I begin my Berlin despatch with a rather lurid episode that befell me in Berlin recently.

Not that Berlin is lurid, mind you. The lakes of Berlin have been my refuge for the past three years. Oddly enough for an earth-bound Taurean I find myself curiously attracted to water and the stillness of lakes. Time and again I have found myself wallowing, bull-like, in its waters awaiting some deliverance from above while the fish nibble on my toes below. Once during a particularly pensive moment where exhibitionism and contemplation were happily reconciled I experienced an epiphany of sorts: Staring at the still water of lake Nikolassee I realised that the lake, the fish, the breeze, the sun, would all be there with or without my intrusive presence and disruptive gaze. The permanence of nature and life's obliviousness to our own petty existence offers the strange comfort of simply passing through life and reminds us that we each need to keep our madness to ourselves, to burden others less with our neuroses and to breathe a little more.

Last week I found myself on a bench in the middle of Tiergarten Park in central Berlin, looking upon the ripples on the lake as the breeze blew through the leaves and envying the sun for the slowness of its descent. How I long for such stillness in myself.

But that was not meant to be, at least for now. The rustling of the leaves behind me marked the raising of the curtains: Next thing I knew I felt an arm around my neck and was pushed to the ground. Its odd how one re-arranges one's affairs in the midst of an attack. In the course of a few seconds a mental hand comes along and sweeps all of one's mental paperwork into the drawer, clearing one's mental desk for the task at hand: 'The young man who is on you now, pinning you down and choking you with one hand and punching you with the other is someone you dont know. By the way, you are being attacked. Respond now.'

He was indeed young, possibly in his late teens. His hair cut short but not really in skinhead mode. He was wearing a jacket of some kind, light khaki or duff coloured. His friend (or were they friends?) was all in blue, in some kind of sports outfit and he held my legs while kicking me in my thighs and back. The latter had the look of absolute hatred in his face that was all contorted, grimacing and painful-looking. The assailant on top of me however had the look of absolute terror on his face. Perhaps it was because I was screaming and fighting back. Perhaps because their plan had gone all wrong and they failed to pin me down to the ground, face-down. As he bashed my head on the wet earth again and again I could not help but stare back at his face that was an image of horror. The soft ground helped prevent me being knocked out, and Ive developed an appreciation for compost since.

Time stands still during such episodes so I honestly cannot tell how long the attack lasted. But then a third man (older, all in black but with the same short hair) appeared out of nowhere. He picked up the attacker who was on top of me in a business-like manner, his expression deadpan and lifeless like a bin man picking up the garbage cans in the morning. Confusion reigned as I wasnt sure if the third man had come to rescue me or to rescue his mate. In a flash it was over, all three ran off in different

directions and I gave chase to one – though my heart was pumping fast and the veins in my head were throbbing. A hundred meters further and I fell to my feet, hysteria and shock finally catching up with me and telling me the drama was over.

Why this recounting you may ask? The search for answers has proven futile till now. I honestly do not know how or why it happened; though at night I often thank my luck that they didnt come at me with a knife or pipes, as I was caught totally unawares. The worst thing about such unsolicited encounters with contingency is that one is left puzzled and forced to live with it. The police asked me if I thought it was a racist attack, but honestly I was not – and still am not – able to say anything with certainty, as the three men were silent in their conduct of calculated battering. No clues were left save for my broken glasses and bruises on the left side of my body. For all I know they took objection to the fact that I was reading the Times Literary Supplement that afternoon.

But the point of this article is to recount what happened afterwards. Five ordinary folk of Berlin chanced upon me on the joggers path and came to my rescue. They covered me with their jackets, carried me to the bench, called the police and the ambulance and even lit the cigarette that shook in my trembling hand. Each of them stayed with me until the ambulance arrived. Each uttered the same refrain: ‘Please dont think that all Germans are like this. We hope you dont think badly of Germany. Berlin is a nice place to live.’

Damn right, Berlin is a nice place to live. And no, I certainly do not think that all Germans are like the young men who attacked me. No, I do not, cannot and will not associate this incident with Germany and Berlin, the city I chose to live in for the past three years. This is a column about a Malaysian living in Berlin, in the heart of Europe today. Yet Europe is having teething problems at the moment and life has become complicated for many. I hope to write more about this city that I have come to love and the people I have met here. But this opening despatch has been an opening of another kind as well: To love a city and a place means loving it because of its quirks and despite its faults. Warts and all, the image of Berlin that I have and which I intend to relate is a place that is over-determined, complex, contested and rich in its ambiguities. In the face of this muddied reality of life we choose what we want to see and what we wish to keep. Between the quiet hours of contemplation (that I am embarrassed to label as beatific) and the thirty seconds of punches and kicking, I choose the former. The bruises will heal, but the epiphany remains. I thank Berlin for that.

End.

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