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Sprache der Wolken

by

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I point out a cloud that looks like a person, limbs outstretched, falling from the sky. We're sitting outside a restaurant at a small table that lists dangerously when leaned on. There is a little tea candle in a frosted glass cup on the table between us. Daytime still stretches overhead, even though it's sneaking on eight o'clock. Mid-summer days last forever.

"Is that a nose?" He's pointing up, comically. Pointing at the piece of infinity we can see, framed by old rooftops that lean heavily over the cobblestone side street.

"No, that's an ear. See? He's falling right on top of us."

"Oh, I guess I see it."

We both watch as the wind disperses the legs below the knees and the cloud becomes an amputee.

Around us on the street, there's the slow churn of unhurried passersby. Everything here seems unhurried. I try to spend my days in a similar relaxed pace, but I still feel the need to get my coffee to go.

"I wish I could understand this place like you do." It sounds annoyingly wistful and almost sickly saccharine – a word I earlier tried to explain to him as 'corny,' with minimal success. I want to take it back, keep our conversation light and in the clouds. I encourage it to blend in with the voices from the family at the neighboring table, hitch a ride with a person walking by, and slip away unnoticed.

He notices. He asks, "Why don't you?" as though I just pronounced a lack of motivation rather than a lack of ability.

"I can't."

"Why do you say that?" He's concerned and amused, concernedly amused, amusedly concerned. Leaning closer to me across the table, he continues, as though he's telling a secret: "You can probably get to know it better than I do. You'll have a different way of seeing it. Everything is normalized to me. But you're able to see it for what it actually is."

We've had these discussions before about the differences between us, the different worlds that raised us. His statement seems plausible, but I'm unconvinced. His smile sends out an invitation for me to continue, to see where this conversation will take us before our meals arrive. I open my mouth to fill the space between us.

"Ok, yes, there are probably some details that you're used to and don't even notice," I agree. I sit up in my chair and lean on the table and he gets closer, too, in a faux-argument, our hands folded around the bases of our beer glasses "...And I suppose there's a chance I might be able to point out those details since they're natural to you but unusual to me, as someone just

visiting. But most of the things I observe, I can't truly see, you know? I can't really understand them: I only see the surface of them."

"Meaning...?" An eyebrow rises.

"I can't feel the full weight of anything: I don't get the fully historical context."

"Yeah, but is that important?"

It's unclear to me whether I'm more attached to my original statement than I realized, or if I'm simply trying to entertain us while we wait for our dinner, but I continue as though I'm defending my deepest moral philosophy.

"Of course it's important! You're embedded in it, you're stuck in it, even if you don't notice it or see it or feel it. So no random 'outsider' can ever experience that, because it just *is*, you just have to just *have* it to begin with. You have all this historical context that you don't even realize you have, but that's the key to actually understanding a place fully. I have it too, just for a different country."

"But what do you mean by this historical context? You can get that the same way I did, through history books, by learning about it. You can get the same feelings and experiences I have just by walking around. So couldn't you just soak it in if you live here long enough?"

"I fundamentally don't think it's possible." We're both smiling, but there's a slight tension, like we're on the edge of something bigger, like this isn't just silly banter but we each actually want to convince the other that we're right. "It's not like it's in the air and we can just sponge it up wherever we go. You get this unique perspective based on where you come from, and that will influence every other thing you do and see. So, maybe I could soak up a little bit of this world, but I would never be able to know it like you do."

“How small-scale does this get? Is this between continents? Between countries?” He asks this question with a quizzical look, as though it could break the whole foundation of my teetering theoretical structure.

“Maybe it’s on the super-micro level! For example...” I think for a moment. “How can I ever truly understand a guy who sleeps in a cardboard box in Central Park, even though we grew up in the same city? We live in different worlds!”

He laughs. I feign seriousness: “Wait. Here we go. I’ve discovered it. The truth. Are you ready?”

“I have no idea,” he laughs.

“No one can ever understand anyone. And here I was thinking it was on the macro scale. Ha! And all along the simple truth is we’re all alone.” Shit. That was perhaps inappropriately depressing for a romantic dinner setting. I shoo the sentence away, hopefully before he hears it.

He hears it. He leans back in his chair and shakes his head.

“There’s this German singer who’s born in Spain. And his second language is German, but he can do all these wordplays and use language in ways that ‘Muttersprachler’ wouldn’t be able to figure out, because they’re so— to use your word—embedded in it, they don’t see the same patterns or understand it the same way that he can.”

“Is that the same?”

“It’s exactly the same. You don’t have to have the same background or experience to really truly understand a language. Or a person.”

I remain unconvinced. Later we’ll find out whether or not we can really understand each other. But for now the conversation dissipates with the arrival of our meals.

By now, night has covered up all the clouds.