

THE THINGS I FOUND

LOST THINGS AND THEIR STORIES

CINDERELLA AND THE PRECIPICE OF HOPE

a story by Sam Beebe

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I should've known when she told me she was a squirrel. I should've realized then that I might not ever see her again, but I was too enamored by the moment, by the flush and flurry of heat that radiated between us. I should've asked for her number—at the very least, her last name. But I was a novice in the game of finding love in this wild world. In schools and on campuses, I had never needed to rely on the logistics of those most basic of details—the simple question: How, and when, can I see you again? I would've asked her eventually, but I never had the chance.

It was my first time at the Oktoberfest, and I was sitting at a table with some colleagues from the international school I was teaching at. I had bought the most affordable lederhosen I could find, and dressed them up with an old wool fedora I'd brought with me from the States that seemed to fit the part. The live band honked out their oom-pah from the bandstand in the middle of the tent, the waitresses in their dirndls whisked armloads of enormous beers tucked beneath their cleavage like it was a national pastime they'd perfected years ago. Spirits were free and rowdy, the energy of hundreds of happy people wafting up to the canvas ceiling of the tent and tumbling around up there, then falling back down upon us like confetti made from shreds of joy. It was all better and more than I'd anticipated, the whole scene at once an embracing and transcendence of all the stereotypes. Communal goodness, pulsating with the beat of our laughter.

The group that had been sitting beside us got up and left, and a new group immediately took their place. I was turned away, raising my glass for a prost, when she slid onto the bench next to me. I'm tempted to say it was love at first brush. A rush of well-being swept through me as her ass sidled up to mine, before I'd even turned to see her face. And then I turned and saw her face. "Sorry," she said. Stunned by the zap of her eyes, I paused. "No worries," I said, then lifted my glass—"Prost!"

She smiled big and raised her beer to mine. "Prost," she said. Our glasses clinked with heft and sprite, and we both took a swig.

The truth is, after that, I ignored my colleagues almost completely, and for that I'm a little sorry. Though I know they forgave me my distraction.

Her English was perfect, my German was infantile, but I tried here and there and it seemed to make her happy when I did.

"Schön, Sie zu treffen," I told her, fucking up the "s" and "z" sounds, and of course manhandling the umlaut.

She laughed, but I could tell she was charmed. "Very formal! Auch schön, Sie zu treffen," she nodded.

Her friends, she told me, said I looked like a real Bavarian, that I could've come down from the Alps from my herd of sheep, what with my crumpled old wool hat. I took it as

a compliment. I wanted to be Bavarian in that moment. But I was distracted by a guy who was watching her seriously from across the table. He seemed to lurk outside of the fun. I wondered if he was her boyfriend, or in love with her, or one of those people who feel it's their duty to temper the wilder feelings of their friends. He made me uneasy, but not enough to turn me away.

When we finished our beers we ordered more, and by the time we finished those, we knew a fair amount about each other. Her father was Bulgarian, her mother German, she'd grown up outside of Munich and had gone to York University in the U.K., where she'd studied Sociology. She had returned after her studies to figure out what was next and was waitressing for the time being. More importantly, she was luminous and full of life, and electricity sizzled and popped in the air between us like old-fashioned flashbulbs. That's a real thing, I know now.

At some point I asked her what she thought her spirit animal was. I told her I thought mine was a black bear.

She thought about it for a second, then said, "a squirrel."

I laughed. "Really?" My mind had to calibrate to the unexpected. "How come?"

"Well, I dart around... I'm here and I'm there, collecting..." She was really considering it. "I collect and I bury, and it might seem random, but I know where everything is buried." She smiled big again and laughed like she'd just said something ridiculous. But she hadn't.

Not long after that she and her friends were paying their bill, suddenly sober enough to calculate exactly their portions of the check, each one paying the waitress independently, as European custom dictates. I wondered at the clarity of their expertise, while frantically playing out my options in my buzzing mind. I could follow my eager heart and slip my colleagues some euros for my own beers and latch myself to her, or I could play it cooler and ask for her name and number, letting her sway off into the unknown. It was clear to my gut which one I preferred. I turned to my nearest colleague, pulled out my wallet and shoved more than enough money into her hands. We exchanged a knowing look, and she wished me luck. I thanked her. In that moment there, I was teetering on the precipice of hope.

We surged and stumbled out onto the grounds. The Wies'n, they call it. The Oktoberfest is more than a phenomenon of beer-drinking—it's a full-on carnival, with rides, roller-coasters, vendors, and booths hawking opportunities to win prizes for feats of focused physical prowess. At first I was a few steps behind, watching her in this larger context, the bounce and sway of her small body amidst the bustle and pomp. Abruptly, the mysterious guy from the table grasped her arm and pulled her close, speaking into her ear. From the sharp intensity of his brow it seemed to be some kind of mini-lecture, a warning. She leaned in to hear him out. At first she was smiling, but then for a moment she looked troubled. After he finished talking, he watched her face. She seemed to gaze past him toward the ferris-wheel, the slow spin of white lights reflecting in her eyes. For a second, neither spoke. My spirit hung in the air, somehow knowing this was a

crucial exchange. She leaned back in and spoke, and I'll probably never know what she said but what mattered was that I could see that it pleased her, and it displeased him. She laughed gently and touched his shoulder. He turned away. I knew then that I had a chance.

It's crazy how you can get to know someone before you ever learn their name. This happens sometimes on planes, or at bars, anyplace you might strike up a conversation without the pretense of introduction. And it had happened here. I found myself looking at this girl, imagining she might be a savior from I don't know what, a future, and realizing that I didn't know her name. I rushed up beside her and touched her elbow. She turned and beamed. She'd been waiting.

"I don't know your name," I said.

"Viki," she said.

"Viki," I said back to her, and to myself, for safekeeping.

"And I don't know yours."

"Sam."

"Sam." She elongated the 'a' slightly, turning my name carefully in her mouth. When she said it it sounded like an evolved version of me. It felt like she knew something I didn't know myself. We held a shared gaze for a few beats, taking in this next layer of seeing each other.

We were passing a booth lined with the traditional gingerbread hearts that Oktoberfest is known for—big heart-shaped cookies with romantic phrases iced onto them, like: "Ich liebe Dich" (I love you), "Ich bin total verrückt nach dir" (I'm totally crazy about you), or "Gib mir mein Herz zurück" (Give me my heart back). They're laced on a ribbon, to be worn around the neck and then hung as a keepsake once you get home. It seems people rarely eat them. I realized this particular booth was an air-rifle shooting game, and the hearts were being offered as prizes. A tired-faced man caught my eye and called to me. I didn't understand the German, but I essentially understood what he was saying to me: Come over here and try your luck, young stallion. Win a heart for your sweetheart. I swayed toward him, pulling her with me.

Suddenly I had a rifle in my hands, and she was there by my side. The wall of bullseyes was about three to four meters away, and each tiny target was no bigger than a coin. "Four shots," the man said. "Three hits to win."

Gripped by an urgent yearning to succeed, to impress, I took aim at one of the targets. I felt her heat at my hip. I pulled the trigger, and as the butt of the gun kicked lightly into my shoulder, the little metal bullseye knocked back and disappeared, like a drunk slapped stupid off his barstool. I couldn't quite believe myself, and neither could Viki. She squeezed my arm and yelped. A flush of confidence rushed through my bones.

“Al-zo!,” said the man. “Now two more!”

I decided to go for the target directly above the one I’d hit, only a slight shift of the posture that had worked the first time. I steadied and aligned the notch of the sight and the little fin on the muzzle with the bullseye. I held my breath, fired, and hit again! Another squeeze on my arm. “Wow!” she exclaimed. This time I didn’t look away, intoxicated by the success. I took aim at the next target up, feeling like a hunter in a way I never had before. The thrill of possible success wiggled down my arms to my trigger finger. I held my breath, fired, and shot. Nothing fell.

“Shit,” I said, dropping the muzzle to the counter.

I turned to her with a look of apology. Her eyes promised she would be with me no matter what happened. The unconditionality crushed me. I knew I could fail and she’d still stay there on my arm. I loved her for that. It made me want to win her one of those hearts even more. I raised the gun and took aim at one of the targets. My ligature was steady and a warm surety washed through me. As I pulled the trigger I knew it was a hit—and it was.

I looked to her and she was beaming. I knew it wasn’t because she was impressed by a manliness, but because she recognized that I had surprised myself by rising to the occasion. She sensed, I think, that she had brought something out of me that I wasn’t familiar with. We laughed. The booth man hooted, making a show of it for the passersby, trying to draw more people in. He spoke with rehearsed excitement and motioned to the wall of gingerbread hearts. I considered the choices, having at that time only a vague sense of what most of them said. I wish now in retrospect that I had chosen one of the hearts with a romantic expression on it, but in a lapse of self-consciousness I pointed to one that simply said “Oktoberfest,” with two heart-shaped balloons drawn underneath. The booth man plucked it off its hanging nail and held the ribbon necklace open out in front of her. She ducked her sweet red-haired head into the loop, and the heart fell down onto her chest. “Thank you!” she exclaimed, with total sincerity. I nodded, barely able to contain my giddy grin. I made a motion of thanks to the booth man and he nodded back at me. We turned and began to walk. After a few steps, she took my arm firmly and swung her face in front of mine. It only took a second to read what her eyes were saying. We kissed. Like setting out on a journey and coming home at the same time. When we parted, we shot light into each other’s eyes. Then she pulled me along into the electric throb.

We were still amidst her group, and the mysterious guy was still keeping uneasy tabs on us. I don’t know that he’d seen us kiss, but he definitely could see that she latched onto me. I was sure by now he wasn’t a boyfriend, and probably not an ex. My best guess is he was a good friend who was in love with her, veiling his love and jealousy under a protective, brotherly concern. Having been in that position before, I had an inkling of understanding and pity for him, though not enough to keep me from being annoyed by his vigilant disapproval. You don’t get in on this one, I thought. This could be it. This could be one of those times when people who are supposed to find each other actually find each other. I wanted him to be gone.

We approached a small roller coaster called the “Wildemaus.” Everybody in the group talked excitedly in German and I could tell from their nostalgic swoon and squawks it was a ride they’d all been on many times. We were steering toward the line for it. For a moment I was thrilled—we’d be squished together in a little old-fashioned roller coaster car for two! There would be gripping and laughing, thumping hearts and flushed cheeks. But as we added ourselves to the end of the line, a problem was dawning on me. I had to pee.

One of the many banes of my humanly existence is that I have both a small bladder and weak capacity for holding it in. Once it dawns on me that I have to go, it’s not long before I just really have to go. Knowing this, and looking at the three-minute line wait and roller coaster ride ahead of us, I knew without a doubt that I would have to find a way to relieve myself before any of that. I hashed over my options, but that didn’t last long before the immediacy of my bladder made the call for me. I turned to Viki and, embarrassed by my own sudden bodily necessity, and legitimately afraid of pissing in my lederhosen, said only: “I’ll be right back!”

Then I ran off and left her there. I didn’t tell her where the fuck I was going. I can only imagine what she might’ve thought.

I knew right away, as I scuttled off to look for the nearest bathroom or dark corner, that it was the stupidest thing I’d done in years, to not just tell her I had to pee, but know only now that it was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done in my life. I surged through the crowds, looking frantically for a place to piss. There were people and lights everywhere, no dark corners. As I passed the shooting booth I shouted at the man, asking him for the nearest toilet, trying to seem in control. He pointed back in the direction I’d come from and I swiveled, half-jogging now. Finally I saw a sign with the European symbol for a bathroom, a double-zero or double-o—I’ve never known which, or why. I followed that sign to another sign, to another sign, and finally into an alley between stalls that led me into where I needed to be. Hallelujah there was no line, and I was able to rush right up to the piss-trough, crazily unbutton the complex crotch on my lederhosen and let it fly. The relief was immense but brief. The panic survived. I knew I’d been away longer than it would’ve taken them to get on the ride, so my hopes were that either she’d waited for me to go on, or that I would catch her exiting and be able to greet her apologetically, just tell her the dumb truth and make it up to her somehow. She would’ve understood, I know it.

But I feared that I’d been gone too long, that they might have already finished with the ride a few minutes ago. Would her friends be willing to wait around with her for me? What would they all think? The disapproving face of the mystery guy flashed in my mind, shaking his head, telling her I was no good, wasn’t to be trusted. I saw her defending me, but not able to hold the whole group from leaning onwards into their night.

And as I ran back through the crowds, I foresaw the nightmares I’ve had ever since. I got back to the roller coaster, and she was gone.