

Johanna Nuemburg, Martyr

by

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It ate her face. An instant before it attached itself, the size and shape of its mouth changed. The bulbous appendage first looked like a Venus flytrap made of foil and filled with helium, a creepy party balloon for creepy children who like plants that kill insects more than happy birthday smiley faces. Below the terrible closed-mouthed smile, a narrow tube swayed like a charmed cobra, attached to the bottom of the appendage. On a balloon, it would have been string or pink curling ribbon. When the mouth opened, she saw infinitely repeating circular rows of teeth. Never-ending teeth. Fractal teeth. Then it sprang forward, opening wide enough to swallow her head. It bit down and clamped itself to her face, and then it changed.

Its shape, its skin, whatever it was made of, transformed instantly into something that looked like hot wax. It poured over her forehead, under her jawline, curled behind her ears. Stopped there, gripping the back of her ears like handles - not going anywhere, let's say - an anchored mirror that matched every wrinkle, bump, pore, and scar. Her head was covered in a something like a waxen death mask, so precise and flawless a partial vacuum formed between it and her skin. Someone could have used it to make a bronze cast of her face, put it in a museum on display - if they wanted to - attach a little label underneath it explaining it all: This was the face of Johanna Nuemburg, martyr, before it ate her face.

But its mouth wasn't made of wax and she wasn't a martyr. Not yet. The immediate reality was far worse.

When it attached itself, a wet, meaty slap came with it. A busy restaurant sound. From the kitchen. A slippery-fingered chef dropped a raw steak on the floor.

After that, it began.

It drilled. That's how it ate, if it had to eat and she didn't think it did. Not to survive anyway. Ausländer did things like this for pleasure, she figured, but whatever. It didn't matter. Because it led to the obvious, inevitable conclusion: Her murder. Its core purpose, of that she was certain.

Its teeth started to spin and a high-pitched whir accompanied it. The sound made her think of a dental drill. It was the dentist - super-intelligent, highly sophisticated, and made of... to steal from her favorite poet, such stuff as dreams are made on - its mouth was the drill, and her face? All tooth.

She felt pressure, followed by pain she never knew existed. She screamed after that. Or what amounted to screaming, anguished gurgling pushed through the bloody meat and shattered bone that used to be her face.

The instant before its drilling mouth reduced her brain to the consistency of a fruit smoothie (blend until the bones are crushed and the mixture has thickened), she remembered. Not everything. Her life did not flash in front of her eyes from beginning to end. No. It was scattered buckshot, a panic of memory clusters. She remembered what led to this. She remembered old hate and new love. She remembered him, and then, at the very end, she experienced something... else. Not memory. Not thought. Transition.

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It's on my face! I can't breathe! Oh my God! Oh my God! It's on my face!

Intense pressure, so powerful she can hardly comprehend it, right in the middle of her forehead. She feels a hole form as the teeth drill into the barrier between it and her brain. The pressure increases, if that's possible and it is. Frontal bone splinters. The hole grows. Her forehead is like a dam wall about to undergo structural failure.

Screaming.

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Gomer Pyle loves me, she thinks.

Surprise, surprise, surprise.

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Johanna Nuemburg, German surname, derivative of Nuremberg, Bavaria. Ancestors lived by the Pegnitz River and once frolicked with Hitler and the Nazis. Not so long ago. Good times, her ancestors said. Back when everything made more sense, some family said these days. Out loud. Brave. Or insane. In either case, she never bought the argument. When Hitler and Nazis make sense? She figured it's time to order a lobotomy for the entire family and move to Canada. Start over. Fresh as a daisy. No familial connections. A nice Irish last name like Duffy. Johanna Duffy. She liked that. From British Columbia, Canada. Heaven. And, yeah, good to dream.

But dreams don't come true. Not in Germany. If they ever did. She could vouch for that because she tried. She didn't lobotomize her family or move to Canada, but she started over, fresh as a daisy, by smashing all the pieces of her life with a hammer until she got what she wanted. For a while she lived the dream. Too many years too late she learned that forgiveness doesn't come easy in Germany either. If asked about it today, all she'd say is, "I am Johanna Nuemburg, destroyer of worlds."

Hell, she thought, and tightened her grip on the throttle. Knuckles showed through torn black leather - skinned, as if she punched a concrete wall. And maybe she had. She gave it gas, feeding the BMW's 998cc. The race bike lurched forward, speedometer blasting by 200 kilometers in seconds. That's called "extraordinary acceleration" and she lived for it.

She had to stop it. She had to try. Who else would, right? No one - and she didn't have time to wait for volunteers. Now or never. When she presented her plan to David, he said she was suicidal. She would do it without him if she had to. Whatever it took, even if it meant sacrificing her life.

Roadway jammed with vehicles, most of them driverless. Made needling in and out easy, sewed her way through the controlled safe zones in between miles and miles of grills and bumpers. Leaned hard left, hard right, crazy-fast on the corners. Helmet so close to the ground sometimes she thought she felt the asphalt through it. Hot, on a day like this. Baking. Uneven bituminous pitch racing by.

She loved to zoom-zoom-zoom. One of the last pleasures she knew.

Sparked the pavement. Heard the knock and knew where it happened the second it happened. Picture perfect inside her mind, saw the white-hot instant the left foot-peg touched the road. Spark! And snapshot, good as a digital photo. The cycle shuddered. A less talented rider would have lost control and had an unscheduled get-off, next stop the morgue. She counter-turned, accelerated, and leaned deep in, kissing the asphalt with her knee, sanding off the top layer of abrasion resistant leather.

The feel and sound of it teleported her back in time.

For a millisecond, Johanna wasn't carving through bumper-to-bumper traffic on the A9. She was ten years old, in her father's wood shop. She had just placed her fingertip on the surface of his electric orbital sander. Curiosity drove her to it, powered by a full tank of she didn't care. She wanted to see what would happen.

Knew the risk. The hell with it - and she learned a couple of things she would never, ever forget: It felt dangerous (she liked that) and the sound it made was short and stupid (followed by blood splatter and her scream, which she didn't hear but her father did and came running).

The sandpapering sound filled her ears back then and it's all she heard now. The past and present mixed together, bouncing from inner ear to inner ear. The echo of mortality.

Careful, Jo, she told herself. Don't wanna die before you save everyone.

She eased the throttle back and Veldensteiner Street shot by on the right, nothing but a painter's palette, smear of browns, greens, reds, whites. Pegnitz proper, she realized.

Wow.

A little surprised - the way she was riding, knew she'd get here fast - but it seemed sudden. The town's center roundabout was only a turn or two away. Be there in no time flat.

She stood on the pegs. The body suit squeaked as she stretched her spine to see further. She liked the sound of leather and friction, found it sexy as hell. Took comfort in it too. Reminded her of her second skin. If she glanced down, she'd see the forearm LED displays indicating that the tech and body suit-airbags were functioning. But the squeak reassured her that if she had to lay it down at 321 kph her second skin might let her walk away with her real skin intact - walk away being the key point.

Sometimes she couldn't tell the difference between her second skin and her real skin. She felt that way about the bike too, didn't know where she ended and it began. Sometimes. On good riding days, she'd say. Like today.

She raised her chin and narrowed her eyes. Zeroed in on her target. The IVS helmet (matte black, same as her suit) had a polarized chrome visor. Couldn't see in, but she could see out, and it improved her vision. She didn't have to go all steely eyed-missile-man (as David liked to say), could see it in ultra hi-def thanks to the visor, but squinting made her feel more determined than ever. The chrome reflected what she saw in picture perfect detail, better than a mirror: Pegnitz Tower, her destination.

Built on the Schlossberg, the 544-meter mountain north of town. Even from here, its corroded copper rooftop caught sun rays and threw them back, glimmering off her visor like secondhand moonlight. The radio and cell antennae on top inspired her Star Wars nerd. Made her think of a weird alien probe straight out of Empire, the way the observation deck peeked above the treetops.

Germans built big in 1923, and well. Damn thing was still around after all these years.

How many times had she climbed it? The go-to place for bored and horny Pegnitz teenagers. She'd done it all up there, the place for firsts: Kiss, dick, weed, booze, lather, rinse, repeat - most of it forgettable, and what she remembered she wished she could forget. Nothing romantic about it. Her teenage years in Pegnitz

were like the sound of sanding her finger when she was ten, a short and stupid time in her life. She caused a lot of suffering.

I am the Destroyer of Worlds...

A thousand years ago, felt like. Far as she was concerned, not long ago enough.

But here I am, back in Pegnitz.

She decelerated the cycle to a match the town's speed limit. 30 kph. Low speed, intermittent traffic. She dragged the back brake, kept a steady, light pressure on the foot pedal. No wobbles. Made it look easy. Other riders would have killed for her sense of balance.

I'm home.

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“Don't laugh. I was raised Reformed Calvinist, otherwise known as the Evangelical Church of Germany. The EKD,” she says. Confident English, fluent, but heavy on the German accent. “Way back when, before the Kirchenkampf. Thanks to my mother and father, I was a total anomaly. Eight percent of us believed in the existence of God. It's even less now, of course.”

She watches him try the word, stumble over it. Give up. “The Church...? The Church what?”

“Struggle.”

“Riiight. Kirchen-kampf.”

“And you understand I’m not referring to the times of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church, the Christian resistance against Nazism. Not that Kirchenkampf. I mean the new - ”

“Struggle. Yeah, yeah, got it.”

But he didn’t. Not really. How could he? He’s American. The struggle happening there is so new.

“I mean, yeah, I get what you’re saying,” he says. “The Global Kirchenkampf. But I can’t really understand it, can I? Not as familiar with it as you are. You guys have been dealing with stuff like this a lot longer than we have.”

A sudden look to the floor. Wished she were wearing dark sunglasses. Used her eyelids instead, hide what just appeared there. But it’s useless. She can’t. Cheeks have flushed, an instant body shot of shame coursing through her veins. She fights it. It’s dumb and she knows it, but she fights it. Tries to conceal it. Knows he can see it. See right through her.

“I’m sorry, David,” she whispers.

“What for...?”

It’s me. It’s always me.

“You don’t have to say that.”

Her expression is locked in place, made of unforgiving concrete. If she clenches her teeth any harder, she’ll break a molar. Nothing unusual here, same-oh same-oh, let the beatings continue.

“Hey. JoJo. Stop it. Look at me.”

She shakes her head, trying to break free. Hard to do, a small, brittle movement that takes real effort, but she fractures the concrete. That's good. Progress. Truth is, she's tired of doing this to herself, and even more, to him. She wishes she could own it and explain, say, "I don't have the right to reduce your suffering because you are American. Because you have, compared to the rest of the world, suffered less."

Settled. She is going to say it, but when she raises her head and the concrete breaks apart and falls away, her features soften. He silences her - the way he always does. Peace comes crashing in. It is, in every way possible for Johanna, beyond her understanding.

It's a mystery. One she loves.

"You don't need to explain," he says.

Such a good man. What are you doing with me?

A single tear escapes. Somehow. He wipes her cheek with a thumb. Before she can.

She kisses him. It's sudden, passionate and deep. Intense and hungry. Afterwards, she doesn't pull away. Her lips linger there.

He whispers, "Holy cow, the EKD. Liberal as hell." Voice full of pounding heartbeat and potential. She thinks, This is what love feels like. This is love. I'm in love. His lips brush against hers as he speaks. She doesn't pull away.

“Don’t be unkind,” she replies. “They tried. We all tried. I’m trying hard now. To be good.” She suppresses a strong urge to giggle. Or kiss him again. Unsure which. Both maybe.

“Huh, I see how it is. So they would’a been cool with your wild hair and crazy Euro biker lifestyle. It’s the American they would’a had a hard time accepting, that it?” He throws his head back and laughs out loud, all belly and throat. For some reason he found that funny. She doesn’t get it. He didn’t even attempt to bury it in good manners.

“Kirchenkampf,” she says, grabbing his lapels and pulling him back to her. “Say it with me.”

Lips this close, they inhale one another’s breath, warm, sweet, a hint of bitter almonds and coffee. She feels his teeth and tongue, but only in teasing glimpses, when they speak. She doesn’t want this closeness to stop. She doesn’t want him to pull away again.

He says it with her and she can no longer contain it - with an accent like that, brutal. What he does to my beautiful German language, she thinks, then laughs. Like him. Head back, out loud, good manners be damned.

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“They’re going to purge the town,” he said.

Her town. Pegnitz.

“In two days.”

66.5 kilometers from Nuremberg on the A9. Already calculating the ride, how fast she could get there.

“We have to do something,” she insisted. Warn her family, friends, anyone who hadn’t sold their souls and bowed to the IEU and the Ausländer.

“I know, but...”

“But what?” she growled in German, stopping mid-stride - so sudden the guy behind them had to jump out of the way. Smartphone in hand, texting, he spat out something nasty. She didn’t hear him. Didn’t care. Downtown Nuremberg, face to face in the middle of a busy sidewalk, and they could have been alone in the forest outside Pegnitz. The sudden shift from English to German made it clear.

She waited for David’s answer, craned her head back, eyes defiant, hands set on her hips. Daring him to compromise or, worse, back down. The top of her head reached his deltoid. Compared to him, she was faerie-like, the embodiment of a delicate water sprite, an enchanting beauty - but dangerous, the wholly feminine spirit that lured men astray. Her fiery orange hair confirmed it. It glowed above her shoulders like a candle flame.

He smiled. She saw so much love there, and patience. So much it still blew her mind, but sadness filled most of it now. Not sentiment. Inevitability. He didn’t know what she was going to do. Neither did she. Yet. But he knew she was going to do something and when she did, it would almost certainly lead to the end of their story - his smile said all that. It revealed the truth. He accepted it, she saw and she

knew, even though it cut his heart. He cupped her elbow and got them walking again.

“Let’s not draw attention to ourselves, ja?”

Every possible scenario raced through her mind. What could they do? Pegnitz would be a ghost town in 48 hours.

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