

## The Breadwinner

You get used to feeling really skinny, looking like a kid in your own clothes. And it has an energy of its own, to a point. I remember one of my profs talking about fasting being literally tooled by writers to achieve a sort of urgency and lucidity in their process. I kind of get it now, but I'm well focused on something else.

Today though I'm wearing Mum's old T-shirt 'You Looked Better on Myspace'. I have no idea what it means to be honest - been meaning to ask her. I think it has something to do with the early days of the Internet, which is kind of why I'm wearing it really, because I really miss the Internet. I miss it like a lover.

One thing you definitely get sick of is looping on the whole past-present ravine, like "who was I before?", and "how did I end up in this place, covered in flour, with this feeling in my chest?". Still, looking out from this cellar window at a husk of a square called Boddinplatz, I feel lucky.

I got this gig scooping flour because of loneliness really. Matthias was a media-studies lecturer at Humboldt and because of my own studies we had all these things we could talk about; we could escape to 'the before'. I looked forward to Tuesdays, he obviously did too, and I made excuses to stick around by helping

him clean and tie down sacks with the knots he taught me. We did just fine in English, and he was helping me with German, so we got by. He signed me up for full-time *Vergabestelle für Grundnahrungsmittel und Sanitäre* and things got better for Mum and I overnight. Sugar, black tea, shampoo, baking powder the week round.

But today, as Matthias deftly deals with yet another dispute over portions with the hungry queue, I take the opportunity to sneak another look over the pavement - a glance from my trench - at that store; that store that's always new and luminous in this filthy city; that store where rich folk that refused relocation buy the world's last chocolate and coffee, lab wine and, most importantly meds - meds the rest of us never see. Here I am again looking out from a slit across the pavement, thinking how I'm going to roll that store.

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It wasn't like we didn't see it coming, it's just that we didn't admit it to ourselves. Everything was mostly fine. We were all like "So far, so good. So far, so good".

I was 12 when the fires in Sweden had us rush up to Jokkmokk to pick up Grandpa and bring him down to Goteborg. Even if the fires weren't exactly knocking on his door, his lungs and the stress of it all were too much. It wasn't the fires though, but droughts that were the beat of the drum, that we had to get ready. Farmers killing horses because they knew they couldn't feed them through the winter, I mean that wasn't normal.

Sure the planet was a mess, but Europeans only seemed to wake up when the rich countries started to buckle. London, much of Britain, going on lockdown after water riots, border brawls with Ireland; civil war in the south of Spain, Italy, Turkey, millions of dispossessed joining millions of others from Africa, India and the Middle-East. U.S declared a state of emergency and in the same breath started picking fights with Canada. Even indomitable Germany was starting to keel over, 30% crop yields for 3 years running, core-pollinator collapse fueling tensions with France over grain, the EU bailout cascade in turn. Germany where I never dreamed I would be living...if you could call this living.

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In 2018 the Swedish gov distributed flyers to every home to help them "Prepare for war". Some parents hid them from kids for fear of scaring them. I mean if it wasn't obvious already Russia was a threat - subs in Stockholm's archipelago, jamming NATO GPS on the Finnish front. To be honest I think us kids back then took it all much more seriously than our parents, and I just know those of us that made it will be so pissed, looking back. Old people going on and on about bloody robots taking our jobs one day, that we need "systemic change" to stay below 2C - all the while doing sweet nothing but vote about it. Like that was ever going to be enough.

Mum was different though. She saw things for what they were.

It was pure luck that her and Grandpa were visiting me in Malmö at the time, when Sweden was on its knees. Her face changed when she was watching the news that Finland had moved all their troops to the border. She does this thing where she flushes up and her eyes

go a bit apart when it's properly serious. And that was it really: we were in the EV, and over the bridge to Copenhagen. Four days later the Swedish border popped. My country put up a good fight, but it wasn't a long one. As Russia settled in with little more than a scratch we were already in a caravan of first-wave Swedes and Danes descending upon Northern Germany.

All of us were crying in the back of that truck watching Panzers riding these massive Mercedes transporters going the other way, on the other side of the highway. It was too real. It was done.

We were in a shelter in Berlin when Grandpa finally died, the same day 20 thousand angry farmers and hungry masses rushed the Bundestag. *Der Tag der Angst* they called it, forever now the day they called in the Bundeswehr. The day they called in the army.

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The strength of Berlin is that it's already been through it all before and I swear you can feel that toughness in her streets. Only us refugees seemed surprised they isolated the city into Bezirks when they locked it down. I was telling the kid I got my army boots from that Neukölln, Friedrichshain, Prenzlauer Berg and Kreuzberg are like worlds of their own to me and he laughed, saying they always were; that as a 'Neuköllner', Prenzlauer Berg might as well be Poland.

For sure it was easier when Mum and I were holed-up in a center near Tempelhofer Feld as I only had to cross the Schiller-Kiez to visit Matthias, but I'm glad we got to see a bit more of this city. Matthias had to fight to keep me when we were relocated, exaggerating my abilities in German, citing Swedish as an

advantage. The shit thing now though is I have to scan through this new IBM *eDGE* system they're trialling, each and every time I cross the Oberbaum to Friedrichshain, or risk a spotcheck by Ordnungsamt, half of them AWOL on milspec meth, all of which have the nasty habit of chipping off-record refugees and sending them to work the fields in Baden-Württemberg.

I mean they know my face. Or at least their fucking cameras do. I really hate this performance of law.

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Last Thursday it basically monsooned and so we had to lift all the bags and boxes up off the palettes and seal the cellar. It was a bit after noon when Matthias let me off, saying that we'd bump over Thursday's handouts to the morning. I went into the Hof to take advantage of the rain to wash the flour off. It was warm and I was going to get soaked on the way home anyway.

And there it was, laying over the sill on the second floor. An officer's coat.

I knew that this Italian refugee calling himself 'Gigio' living upstairs was hooking, and I'd exchanged nervous glares with the same officers more than once coming down the stairs. Seemed someone else was taking the afternoon off...

The drain pipe coming down the side of the building was rough galvanised steel and so I knew I wouldn't slip in the wet. As I climbed up I could hear them getting off and the plan was that I would just grab the jacket, shimmy down and make a run for it. But when I was up there I did a crazy thing - I mean I'd gotten that

far after all. I looked over the sill and there was Gigio staring right at me mid-act, making all the right sounds. He just lay there, watching me take the coat and the pants, pants I just knew were there, from the back of the seat, a guy with sores on his back in an undulating heap ontop of him. Gigio, I'd buy you a beer if hops still existed!

I only just got down the pipe and back inside when I could hear the swearing, a door crashing. Stuffing the uniform into a wheat sack I'd shaken out only half an hour before, I was on the street, swiping into the metro.

Man, Germans can swear.

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I don't want to give myself flowers but if there's one thing studying media art taught me it's doing a lot with a little. I can rustle up just about anything from trash, a soldering iron, glue and some spray. The best pieces come when you take your time to discover their parts. You let things in your every day reveal themselves as the story of your build. Hoarding's good and all, but sometimes just a good wander, a dumpster dive and some fresh eyes on your day-to-day are enough. And this is how my grenade got looking so right.

It's not a real grenade of course, it's not about that. It's about pulling off the look. And now with this uniform, baby *I got the look.*

The particular one I was after is on just about every field officer's belt. The DM53 is a 'Splitterhandgranate' - a term I

learned from a totally misplaced ad by Diehl Defense during a *Support Our Troops!* propaganda campaign pushed onto every phone and screen that only served to make everyone more nervous around them - or perhaps that was the idea. Anyway, unlike other grenades it supposedly has this 'health-and-safety' feature whereby if you pull the pin but keep the lever down for longer than 15 seconds a light on the top flashes as bright as a camera and it has this pulsing, haunting siren, like some lonely night bird. It's like they knew it'd end up in the hands of suicide bombers and, well, thieves.

I didn't want to bother with the whole timer thing but I had to have that sound and light show.

The final solution was to cannibalise a gate alarm I cut down from the back of an old highschool near our place they're flipping over to barracks. It had the flash and a siren. I made a soldering iron from a masonry nail, a bit of wooden dowel, solid core copper wire and a 7.5V battery. With a couple of dumpster-dived 100k resistors and a 22uF cap I was able to get the BC557 transistor the thing runs pretty close to the sound of the DM53, tested under all the blankets and clothes I could find. The old onboard 12V battery backup only seemed to hold about 70 seconds charge for some reason, so that was my finish line right there, but the rest came together pretty nicely.

The lever was made from an old electric kettle handle and the hull from mould cast chocolate box lining I found in the trash. Some well placed cuts for the form and I gave the inside a layer of 2-part epoxy that the *Hausmeister* left lying in the stairwell, to make it nice and rigid.

Perhaps ended up a little bigger than the real deal but I thought using a chocolate box was poetry. Those wankers...

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It's true Mum sees it as it is but she doesn't always tell it. She always bullshitted us when she was sick, she was always "fine thanks babe". When her back finally yielded to 3 decades of coding we could see she was in pain but that's not what she has now. No matter what she says. Skin, tongue, appetite, eyes - it's not just her back and we both know it. I can't stand seeing her like this, I can't stand it. But no one cares about us. What my Mum needs now is morphine and a shadow-medic that will take favours. The morphine though, I'm going to sort out the morphine.

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Normally Matthias and I would eat together but the last couple of days I'd taken the excuse of airing the flour from my lungs. Some truth in it though. I'd put on some shades and take a stroll counting steps over the square, getting as close as I could to the store before cramping the hired-gun out front bouncing anyone not rich, gov or military. I got close enough on the second pass to know exactly where the meds are: behind a desk under a conveniently labeled 'Apotheke', hanging at the back.

Today I spun the same excuse, and it wasn't easy keeping it casual knowing I'd never see him again. Broken old Matthias - I knew he'd miss bantering about Flusser and Parikka, Haraway, Mehta and Bratton, letting me hold and admire his limited edition Martin Howse pieces. Some of them still even worked.

I waited in the entrance hall for Matthias to take a piss and snuck back down to the cellar to grab the sack, hidden under a pile of so many others, and put on the uniform. One last look at Mum's T before buttoning up. Matthias's shades were left sitting on his desk so I grabbed them too. Sure I felt kind of bad about it, but well, this was it.

Half way across the square I reached into my pocket and lay my thumb on the switch. Damn it was good to make art again.

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Julian Oliver, 2018.  
<https://julianoliver.com>

Research dump (15 files)

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