Sehnsucht

by TheAstronomyMod

Summary

1981. You've been kicked out of your school, your home, your country, for being queer; and your family have banished you to live with a distant relation in West Berlin in disgrace. But in the shelter of The Wall: rent is cheap and squatting is free; drugs are plentiful; sex of every kind is readily available; and everyone you know is forming absolutely amazing experimental bands, making Super-8 films and creating fantastic art.

This story is basically fan fiction of 'B-Movie: Lust and Sound in Berlin' universe. Featuring appearances from: Einstürzende Neubauten, Mania D / Malaria!, Die Tödliche Doris, Les Liaisons Dangereuses, Die Haut, The Birthday Party and many more.

Relationship notes: This story is not intended as Slash and if you're just looking for Nixa, you will be sorely disappointed. The primary relationship involves two complex genderqueer artists, and I am deliberately centring the women and the historically queer people in the West Berlin scene.

Content notes: story contains no AO3 warning content, but does contain heavy drug abuse, sex work, homophobic violence, violence against women, and other content I will CN for on relevant chapters.

Updated every Friday evening GMT
This story is intended as historical FICTION. I have done my best to be accurate with regards to real gigs, records, line-ups of actual bands, but all of the scenes depicted are constructed entirely from my imagination, and the relationships between the characters are based on pure speculation. This is in no way intended as a canonical reconstruction of this music scene; it is a work of fiction inspired by the work, the interviews, and the lives of a group of real artists, musicians and writers.

That said, some timelines have been deliberately altered, in order to compress events into a three-year period from 1981-1983. I hope it does not spoil readers' enjoyment of the story. Before you leave me any angry notes demanding "Why did you get X, Y, or Z RONG?!??!” please sit back, examine my artistic license, and consider that the change may have been deliberate. (I'm not saying I have made no accidental mistakes - I certainly have discovered inaccuracies which only turned up with further research. For example, I did not know when I wrote the earliest chapters, that Christine was the bass player in Malaria!, not Susanne. That was an accident. I did, however, know that Malaria! formed much earlier in 1981, but I deliberately moved their genesis to coincide with the timeline of the story.)

It is always a challenge to write a story, in English, involving what are supposed to be a group of native German-speakers. As in my other fiction, >>dialogue written like this is intended to be read as if it spoken were in German<< and "dialogue written like this is intended to be read as if spoken in English." Names of German bands, records, venues, etc. will usually be translated into English; that's a long-running stylistic choice, specifically designed to duplicate the effect of being a non-native speaker approaching terms in their second language.

Blixa voice in English is always rendered phonetically, because even his English-speaking bandmates cannot repeat the words of Blixa without doing the Blixa voice, ja? No insult is intended; Blixa's accent is, frankly, adorable.
The Schöneberg Angel

When I first moved to West Berlin, that dirty little bar at the bad end of Yorckstrasse had scared me a little bit. On my way to work, I would pass it in the early hours of the morning, while taking the shortcut from my Great-Aunt’s house, through the cemetery with its old, bomb-damaged tombs, and up a bit of a spooky alley that cut under the railway arches to the main road. So, emerging from the gloom, blinking as the sun came up, to find revellers rolling out onto the pavement in their black clothes and their odd haircuts, well, they looked just like a flock of bats returning to their roost.

But as the weeks passed, and I grew more familiar with the decidedly funky character of Schöneberg, fear turned to curiosity. I started to slow down as I walked past, trying to figure out what was so inviting that kids would crowd into it, spilling out onto the street if they couldn’t get in, at hours of the morning that sensible people like me were getting up to go to work. It was an ordinary store-front bar, though with a bit of a forbidding iron grate over the front window, so you couldn’t see in. Over this grate, the word >>Risk<< had been stencilled in the angular sort of typeface that had looked futuristic only a few years previously. It looked filthy, to be honest, the floor thick with cigarette butts and stale beer, but in 1981, not much of West Berlin was particularly clean.

In the end – or the beginning, depending on how you look at it – I only went in by accident. I had just been trying to get past, to scurry home as quickly as possible before I got completely soaked. It had started raining as I got on the S-Bahn, and the drops got heavier and heavier as the journey progressed, until it became that torrential late-summer downpour that obliterated everything in its path. Thinking that the downpour couldn’t last too long at that intensity, I hung back under the railway arches, waiting for the storm to clear.

I had got too used to the fine German summer, and my English habit of always carrying an umbrella with me at all times had fallen by the wayside. I wasn’t even wearing a coat, let alone a hood, so I stood in the shelter of the railway with the collar of my work overalls up, and watched great sheets of dirty grey rain fall across the avenue. When, at last, I thought it might be starting to lighten, I ventured out. Foolish me. I was not even 20 paces from the shelter of the bridge when a great stroke of lightning rent the heavens, and the rain let loose even more fiercely, as an electrical storm started to rage above, the raindrops pelting down so hard they almost felt like hail. I should have turned and run back to the bridge, but I stubbornly put my head down and pushed on, breaking into a trot, eyes glued to the pavement as a wall of water sloughed onto me from a passing car.

“Damn and blast!” I shouted uselessly in English at the retreating taillights, and resolved to get to shelter. Slipping and sliding on the pavement, greasy from a humid summer, as I tried to get away from the road and its traffic, I abruptly collided with another body in my heedless rush towards the nearest building. Luckily, to prevent us both falling into a puddle, the quick-witted stranger seized me around the waist, and pulled both of us into the shelter of a door.

>>Diabolical weather<< shrieked a banshee voice over the roar of the storm as this newly-emerged creature somehow produced a set of keys. There was a short wrestling match with the heavy, metal door. My companion was very thin, almost frail, and seemed to be having trouble moving it, so I put my shoulder to the frame and forced it open. The door shuddered ajar and we both fell through out of the rain, almost on top of one another. Scrabbling in the dark, my rescuer tripped a lightswitch that bathed the place in a sickly yellow light, then turned to look at me, and burst out laughing. >>You look like a drowned rat<< announced a deep, rich, rolling voice, as its owner dug behind a bar and produced a stack of dishtowels.

>>You don’t look much better<< I retorted, trying to work out if my companion was a man or a
woman. All I could see of them was a mass of hair, dark with rain, plastered to a pair of high cheekbones that were already streaked with running mascara, above an expanse of sopping wet black leather. The mascara was what made me think woman, as did the frailness, and the high, hollow cheekbones with an almost V-shaped cavity below. They found a small electric fan, set it out on the bar and turned it on, blowing dryer air in our direction to try to lift some of the dankness of the heavy afternoon. The stranger was very tall, taller than I was, which was a rarity in a woman. But they had such long, slender graceful limbs, and the way they moved was decidedly feminine.

I should have stopped gawking and shown more gratitude, but I was getting a bit chilled, and my thick canvas work overalls were soaked. They tossed over a towel, with which I did my best to dry my hair – it wasn’t hard, as it still had only grown back in tufts from being shaved at the start of the summer – then tried to figure out what to do about the jumpsuit, which was hopelessly sodden.

My rescuer pulled off their jacket, which turned out to be not leather at all, but the kind of heavy vinyl used on car seats. Underneath, their T-shirt was wet right through in a yoke all around the exposed neck, so the androgynous figure pulled that straight off, revealing a narrow, flat physique, his ribs showing through his pale skin. It was a young man.

I caught only glimpses of him as we towelled our faces dry. He moved with a strange insect grace, like the room was too small for his long limbs, imbuing even the gesture of bending over to run a towel down his trouser legs with the weird elegance of a praying mantis. There was something queer, and slightly disorienting about him, how he had a young man’s lithe body, but a feminine fluidity to his movements. But as he straightened up, looking me in the eye, and I pushed back the sopping towel from my hair, we locked eyes, as he seemed to take in my face for the first time. For a split second, I felt an electric shock as if of recognition, but no, he was a stranger.

>>Oh<< he said, slightly surprised, as if echoing my thoughts. >>I thought you were someone else. Out in the rain... well, sorry, I thought I knew you.<<

I said nothing; I just stared in response, because he was beautiful. I don’t mean handsome; his face was far too feminine for that, so feminine that I would have taken him for a woman had I not seen his skinny boy’s chest. And it wasn’t even the sort of prettiness that young men sometimes have before they are fully grown. He was beautiful, like a painting of a medieval saint, even as he smiled crookedly and ran his fingers under his eyes to fix his smeared mascara. His hands, with their long, pale, narrow fingers, seemed never to rest, wandering about with a highly expressive agitation.

When I did not speak, he went to the door and peered out. >>This rain is not letting up. Are you in a hurry? We don’t open for another half hour, but you’re welcome to stay here for a bit, dry off...<< He ran the towel up and down his legs again. From the shine, I thought they were still sopping wet, but I realised as he mopped beaded rainwater off them, that they, too, were some kind of rubberised material that looked not entirely unlike leather. But he, unlike me, was at least wearing some kind of rubber wellington boots >>Do you want a drink?<<

I couldn’t just stare at him all night; I knew I had to find my tongue. >>Thank you. I’d like a coffee, please.<<

>>A coffee?<< he turned to me with a slightly quizzical expression, gesturing back towards the bottles of liquor, as if to imply, you know, ‘my friend, this is a bar’. I simply nodded. >>Are you English?<< he finally enquired, upon getting no other response. “Ikke can schpick a leedle Englisch,” he tried, in an almost impenetrable accent, pointing at his chest.

I nodded again. >>There’s no need. I can understand German.<<

He started to speak very slowly, and very clearly, choosing simple words and enunciating everything
carefully, as if speaking to a child. >>OK, I understand. Your German is not so good. We have a machine... somewhere. I shall make a coffee, for us both yes? Perhaps it warms us after that cold shower. Take off the clothes and put them before the fan. They dry quicker there, yes.<< He gestured extravagantly towards the fan as he headed for the back room, his endlessly twitching hands far more eloquent than his short, easy, tourist-friendly words.

I ventured a slightly terrified smile as I declined the invitation to disrobe with a shake of my head. My German was just fine. I was simply struck dumb by the presence of this beautiful boy with the face of an angel, and a body like an Old Master might have painted a dying Christ. I wasn’t even into boys. Not like that, you know. I just looked at him, and wanted to paint him, could already see a hundred versions of his face, his body, all angular like one of Egon Schiele’s Vienna Secession era sketches, or maybe tall and haunted and gothic, like an El Greco. He had eyes a bit like an El Greco, but startlingly blue. But then he nodded purposefully, and vanished.

As he went into the back room, I looked around me, taking in the bar and its strange, deliberately tatty décor. Graffiti covered every available surface. Though the main window had a large metal grill over the front of it, it only half obscured the view, so that it was possibly to vaguely see out, though impossible to see in. And even during the daytime, without the crowds of bat-like waifs, the floor was still sticky with the ghostly aftermath of stale beer and the walls stained by cigarette smoke. The humidity made the sense of dirtiness worse, and my damp clothes weighed on my heavily, so I unbuttoned, feeling a little self-conscious about the baggy uniform overalls, and tried to air them in front of the tiny fan, then applied the damp towel to my hair and shoulders again.

My bag, at least, was waterproof, so I dried off the outside with some serviettes before checking that the inside had indeed remained safe. A paperback of German history to read on the S-Bahn to and from work. A pocket camera, always loaded with black and white film. A bulging vinyl zip-bag stuffed with pencils and pens. An A5 sized sketchbook. I wondered for a moment, if I dared take it out and do a quick surreptitious sketch of this Schöneberg angel. I could hear him sort of singing to himself in the back room, and he had a beautiful voice, deep, with a slight edge to it. The fan was doing nothing for the jumpsuit, so I moved over towards a table in the corner, from which I had a good view of the bar. There was no chair, so I had to haul a barstool over, and soon settled down, pulling out my paperback as some kind of cover, if he asked what I was doing.

It was some time before he returned, bearing two cups of steaming coffee, a cigarette clenched between his teeth. In the meantime, he seemed to have done something to his hair, which now, instead of being plastered to his head with rain, was sticking up all about his head in a pale brown halo, though it looked like chunks had been hacked out of it with a razor. >>Milk and sugar?<< he offered as he placed the cup before me.

>>No thank you.<<

>>Good, because I don’t think we have any.<< A short sarcastic laugh and an extravagant eyeroll.
>>There’s some Baileys, though, I think... That might be nice...<<

>>Thank you, I don’t drink.<<

At this, he turned around, surprised, and looked me up and down, as if trying to make sense of this inconceivable position. I was almost tempted to try to offer some explanation, when the door banged, and a third person blew into the room on a giant gust of wind, struggling with an enormous black brolly. This new arrival was small and dark-haired, with the very androgynous clothing so typical of Berlin that it seemed difficult to determine her gender either, until she spoke.

>>Where the devil have you been?<< the angel demanded of the newcomer. >>I had to open up by myself.<<
Can’t you see it’s raining puppies from buckets out there? said the girl. She was decidedly handsome, with a large, greased-up quiff that seemed miraculously to have survived the rainstorm, but she had a decided accent to her German that I couldn’t quite place, but recognised as very different from Blixa’s plain High-German, or even the distinctive Berlinerisch twang. Oh, you haven’t even started to set up. Nice. You spend a week in a recording studio, and you’re too much of a rock star to fill the ice bins. Couldn’t you at least have loaded in the tins of beer?

The angel shrugged and scratched at the back of his head, pulling his hair into little wisps that stood out perpendicular from his scalp. Sorry, I’ll go and get them now.

And for god’s sake, put on some clothes, man. Do you think I want to see all that hanging out? she said in a voice that indicated even to me that she was teasing him.

He shrugged, an elegant expressive gesture with his slight shoulders, touched his shirt to find it still damp, then reached for his vinyl jacket, throwing me a slightly conspiratorial grin. I grinned back, pleased to be included in his intrigue. But as he draped the jacket around his bare shoulders, the girl followed his glance.

Oh. Hi. She barely acknowledged my presence with a nod, which made me feel slightly relieved before going behind the bar and starting to set up, uncorking various bottles and exchanging their tops for pouring snouts. God, the pilot fish are getting here earlier and earlier, to seems.

Nah said Blixa. I don’t think he’s a pilot fish. English. Barely a word of German. Not a tourist, though. I think he might be a student? On his way out, he picked up his cup of coffee and swallowed the last of it. I sipped at mine, considering enlightening them, then decided not to. To be a student in Berlin was to be almost invisible. It was convenient, when sketching, to be invisible. But he smiled at me as he passed. More coffee?

Yes please I said, and reached for my wallet, but he brushed away my attempts at payment, and refilled the mug, before returning with a crate of beer on each shoulder. Although he was slight, he was stronger than he looked.

As the two of them set up the bar, insulting one another with a playfulness that indicated friendship rather than rivalry, I clandestinely took out my sketchbook and started to work. I began with a few gestural drawings: the way he stood, his shoulders at an angle as if apologising for his height; the pointed thrust of his nose; those thin hips and long legs, clad in that strange shiny black rubbery fabric that seemed to invite the touch, or at least invite the attempts of my ink to trace its contours and reflective surfaces.

The door banged again. Two young men, one short and blond, the other tall and Asian, both dressed in the kind of outlandishly customised army surplus clothes that marked them as squatters, came loudly in, demanding beer and filling the small room with their noisy chatter. The angelic bartender brightened at their appearance, and greeted them both warmly, exclaiming over them with hugs and those European double-kisses, nattering back at them excitedly with a manic energy that seemed to fill the room.

I withdrew further into my corner and did my best to disappear into the graffitied walls as the room quickly filled up. I drew the early evening drinkers, hurriedly sucking down the first few drinks until the shakes disappeared. Then I drew the girls that appeared a little later, catching my attention with their bright eyes, androgynous clothes and bold make-up, breasts and combat boots bristling. I had been in Berlin for three months, and this was my first night in a bar, checking out actual young, available Berlin girls. My heart was still too bruised from the girlfriend I had lost in London to do anything more than look, but the evening was an education in itself. Their mating dances were all so forward to my repressed English eyes, and yet oddly refreshing. I set myself little wagers on who
was paring off with whom, and as I caught little snippets of their conversation, I wove those snatches through the drawings.

And I drew the beautiful bartender taking a break, smoking a cigarette and sipping a glass of water, sitting up on the back shelf of the bar, his feet casually resting on the sink, knees splayed, elbows akimbo, his angelic face very intent and serious. I didn’t just sketch in vague details for his face; I made a dedicated study. His full, slightly pursed lips, those prominent, cheekbones, his large, slightly protruding eyes with the dark quizzical commas of his eyebrows above. He caught me watching him, and stared back, curious, so I buried my gaze in my sketchbook, pretending I hadn’t been staring. But when I turned my gaze back, he was still looking at me, not angry, not an aggressive stare, just curious. As he seemed to work out what I was doing, a smile spread slowly across his lips. He smirked, but did not break the pose until I was finished, and sat back, to take in the finished work. I fixed a line here, erased a mistake there, until I was fairly satisfied with it. But when I turned back to the bar, he was gone.

Oh well. I flipped the page over and glanced at my watch. It was well past the time when I should have been home. I had missed dinner entirely, missed my great-aunt’s nightly audience with the ancient television, and lord knows what punishment would await me upon my eventual return. But the place intrigued me. The dirty, urgent, beautiful people who inhabited it intrigued me. I started another surreptitious sketch, this one of a group of men who had attracted my attention, holding court at the front of the room.

One of them was very swishy, almost effeminate, with a shaved head, but wearing so much make-up I wondered if he was an off-duty drag queen. Two of the others, passing an old-fashioned super-8 camera back and forth between the pair of them as if it were a sacrament, were dressed in that ever so slightly exaggeratedly masculine way that I had come to associate with gay men on Old Compton Street. The fourth man was ambiguous, unreadable, wearing deliberately understated and almost anonymous clothes that, perversely, made him stand out even more in the midst of all the leather and ragged denim of a punk club. But it wasn’t until one of the two butch guys put his hand gently on the hip of the other, and leaned in for a completely un-platonic kiss, that I knew for certain. The frisson of recognition electrified me. Openly gay men, in an ordinary bar? I had never felt quite so far away from London.

Obsessed with their fearlessness, I did my best to capture them on paper. They were beautiful, and ridiculous, and somehow aware of their own ridiculousness, which made them both more beautiful and more absurd. Their fearlessness seemed deliberate, and self-conscious, and yet so much more fierce for that awareness. Not to mention, their extravagant gestures and exaggerated, theatrical facial expressions were too much fun to draw. As I drew one of them, the so-normal-he-looked-slightly-weird one, his slightly swishy eyebrows raised so high as to leave his face and give whiplash to half the room, I heard a low cackle beside me.

>>That’s brilliant. You’ve really caught Wolfgang there. His eyebrows, in particular. That definitely looks completely like him.<<

I jumped slightly, realising I was not alone, and removed my pen from the paper so as not to leave a mark, quickly hiding the drawing with the sheet of blotting paper I used to avoid smearing the fresh ink with my own hand. By my elbow stood the beautiful bartender.

>>May I see?>> he asked, and though I tried to close the book, I was not quick enough to prevent him from picking it up. My face flushed, and I lowered my face to hide my shame, as he paged through the drawings, his cigarette dangling from his lip, alternately smiling and chuckling and turning the book to the side to read the words where they wrapped around and through the images. >>These are not bad at all<< he finally said to me, though he still did not hand the book back.
Thank you I replied carefully, feeling more exposed than if I had been lying naked in front of him. Can I have my book back, please. I must go soon.

Hmmm he said, but still did not return my possession, flicking through it until he had reached almost the beginning. I had bought it when I arrived in Berlin, and the earliest pages were filled with sketches of tumbledown buildings and rubble. But he stopped when he reached a page where I had scribbled out the Wheel for Ohm’s Law, his fingers tracing the symbols of the equations. Is this Alchemy?

No I laughed nervously. It’s to calculate Resistance from Voltage and Current.

Interesting he mused, then started to flip back and forth through the pages as if looking for something. But I thought you were drawing me, earlier.

I was. As he paused at another page where I’d scrawled measurements and equations for my job, in amongst more technical drawings of Berlin architectural styles, I seized my chance and tried to take my book back, almost by force, tugging it from his hands, though he seemed reluctant to let it go. I made a gesture as if I might show him, and he released it. But instead I started to tuck it into my bag.

Can’t I see it? Your drawing of me?

I let out a deep sigh.

No need to be shy. I know I’m hardly a movie star. His full lips turned up in an aloof, half mocking smile.

Reluctantly, I pulled the sketchbook back out, and showed him the page. The way I had drawn him, he did look like a movie star, his wide-splayed legs, the smoke from his cigarette caressing his medieval martyr face, somewhere between James Dean and a Botticelli angel. He stared at the drawing, his lips slowly curling up into a full smile. I couldn’t tell if he was embarrassed or charmed, so I closed the book and folded it away into the depths of my bag.

OK, I really need to go now.

As I removed my bag from the table, he seemed to wake from some reverie. I do some art, too, you know. Well, I do all the posters and album art for my band he admitted, half bashful, half boastful. Young men always wanted you to know that they were in a band, like this information was supposed to impress you, when half of London had ‘been in a band’.

You’re a musician I said dryly, knowing my sarcasm wouldn’t translate.

Well he said, blinking, his eyes a little wider open than seemed possible. I am an anti-musician.

I laughed. From anyone else, it would have sounded so pretentious, but from this beautiful creature, it just seemed a statement of fact. Well, I am an anti-artist I retorted as I climbed down from my chair.

He grinned at that. Next time, I’d like to show you some of my anti-art. I’ll bring it with me. I’d like you to see it. But only if you like... And then he turned and half-shrugged as if to indicate he didn’t give a rat’s arse if I looked at his art or not. He was such a strange mixture of cocky and aloof that I didn’t entirely know how to respond.

OK I said, and nodded sharply. I had to have a little fight with myself to get myself to walk out of the bar, as there was a big part of myself that simply wanted to stay in that dirty, damp bar and stare at the beautiful angel boy all night, but I had to beat it into submission and frog-march it out the
door. At the door, it made me pause and look back. He was still watching me, a cigarette held to his lips, clasped between two bony fingers. I stared back, just trying to impress his face into my memory, drinking him in, blinking as if I could capture him like a camera’s image in the wink of an eye.

Outside the rain had let up, and it was turning into a beautiful, clear but windy night, the last rays of the late summer sun still turning the western edge of the sky a kind of burnished pinky-mauve. It was the kind of endless half-dark summer night when West Berlin’s creatures worked up a terrible thirst, and there were more people, urgently trying to work their way in through the door I was half-blocking. I took one last look, then pushed out into the dusk, hurrying along my shortcut through the cemetery almost holding my breath, because if there was one thing I was more afraid of than ghosts or ghouls or grazing alcoholics, it was my family’s wrath, and I was now very, very late.
Risk

Chapter Summary

The narrator is drawn back to the Risk bar, in search of the intriguingly androgynous model. But the bar is overrun with beautiful women, as Mania D come to visit their friend Blixa, in search of free drinks.

I crept to the house silently, and managed to make my way into the central courtyard and climbed the back stairs in the dark, slipping into my great-aunt’s apartment and up to bed without rousing anyone. And in the morning, where I expected fearsome rows and threats of disinheritance or homelessness or worse, there was only icy silence.

Icy silence, and a complete lack of the nice, big breakfast I had come to expect on Sunday mornings. My Great-Aunt sat at the dinner table, reading the newspapers over a lavish meal of cheese and fruit and cold meat she cut the fatty bits off and fed to her lapdog, but my place was bare. When I coughed politely and enquired as to whether I might have a boiled egg, she stopped reading and looked at me over the top of her reading glasses for some time.

>>Now I understand, that young people may wish to go out, of an evening, or even all night, to dinner, or a show, or dancing, or whatever delights metropolitan Berlin may offer you. But...<<

Icicles danced in the air between us. >>You will be so kind as to inform Grete or myself if you do not expect to attend dinner. For food is dear, and must not go to waste. If we do not hear from you, we will assume you are out, until further notice.<<

So chastened, I apologised profusely, and sloped off to the kitchen to find my own breakfast. It still surprised me, those things my German relation found completely blasé, and those she found completely inexcusable; and how often they seemed totally reversed from the trifling peccadillos and mortal sins that my upbringing by the English half of my family had inculcated in me.

I made a mug of tea – almost the last of the English tea that I had brought over with me – and retreated to my bedroom. Dark rings were showing under my eyes, but not, contrary to my Great-Aunt’s expectations, due to my activities in Berlin’s nightlife. I’d dodged out so early that I’d been safe back in my own bed before midnight. And yet, I had barely slept.

All night long, I had tossed and turned, replaying each scant exchange of conversation over and over, trying to recall the exact intonation and expression with which he had said what. But the words were unimportant. It was the intensity of his eyes, and the way that the dark commas of his eyebrows seemed to underline or undermine whatever he was saying. Settling down at my desk, I pulled out another, larger sketchbook, and started to try to draw him from memory, those high cheekbones, ever so slightly cavernous, the blunt tip of his chin... no, his lips were different. Fuller, more pouting. I erased the mouth and started again. The bottom protruded slightly below the top, giving the impression that he was always slightly annoyed about something. And his eyes, there was something about his eyelids, or the dark circles under them, that made them seem unnaturally huge. Why could I not remember him better? I needed a photo... well, I needed him.

No, I thought to myself. It is someone else that I need. Flipping back through the pages, I found the earlier sketches I had done in London, of my former girlfriend lying crumpled sleepily in our bed. She, too, had had the eyes of an El Greco, though hers were dark where his were bright blue. And
she, too, had had those high, slightly gaunt Greta Garbo cheekbones that seemed to go on for miles. It would be absurd to suggest that they looked alike, English girl and German boy. And yet they both had something distinctive of each other. It took me a moment to work out what it was. Both of them just somehow *looked*, like my drawings.

But it was pointless moping over old drawings of Maud. Maud was gone. Her parents had disapproved of me, and snatched her away from our shared bedsit, sending her off to Canada to work as an au pair. And my family had banished me to Berlin, and my dusty Great-Aunt, as punishment for absconding from the university course I had been failing, with this totally unsuitable girl. And here I was in Berlin, no girlfriend, no money, and no prospects except my shitty, badly paid apprenticeship. Of course I needed to escape into the fantasy world of my drawings.

I turned back to the previous last page, tried another drawing of him in the margin of the first, and though I seemed to get his hair right this time, the sketch still failed to capture that wide-eyed, staring rebelliousness that he wore about him like a cloak. Despite the fact that he had, actually, been perfectly polite, even friendly over the sketchbook, there was a distance to him. A distance that he wore in those deep-set, knowing eyes, an old man’s eyes in a young man’s face. Something about those eyes seemed to hold you at a distance, eyeing the world as if from behind the heavy steel gate of that dirty bar where he worked.

I closed my eyes and memories came flooding back, from the night before. The deep, rich tone of his voice, the way he held his cigarette, the unruly birdnest of his hair, the traces of moles across his bare shoulders after he removed his wet shirt. It was too much, I felt tied in knots and turned inside-out.

Pushing the large sketchbook away, I dug the smaller portable one from my bag, and flipped through the images I’d drawn the previous night. The drawing I’d shown him, oh god, that just embarrassed me now. I hadn’t caught him, not at all. It was an odd mish-mash of clichés, wide cowboy legs, an unknown saint’s long, solemn face and an unruly mass of ridiculous hair. No wonder he had laughed. (He had laughed, hadn’t he? I was left with the distinct impression that he had been laughing at me the entire evening.) I felt so ashamed I never wanted to see him again, and yet I knew I would be back. He had invited me, after all, hadn’t he? It would be rude not to.

The bar was closed on Monday and Tuesday, or I’d have been there immediately after work, face pressed against the rattling metal grid they had in place of a window. By Wednesday, my fear and my curiosity were wrestling with one another. Half of me was convinced I had dreamed the whole encounter, or foolishly exaggerated the beauty of the boy. With the sober light of day, he would be revealed to be just another street punk, as boring and shallow as men usually revealed themselves to be, upon closer examination. Berlin was full of pretty, androgynous people who seemed fashionable and frivolous, without any real depth. How could he possibly be any different? The other half of me was giddy with anticipation and almost sick with nerves as I slouched my way under the railway bridge and approached the bar, praying that I had judged the time right, to arrive after it had opened, but before it grew busy.

There was no handle on the heavy metal door, as I remembered from our wrestling match, but I could see that there were people inside through a long narrow slot like a peephole. So I knocked on the metal. When I saw eyes appear at the slot, squint, then nod and grant me admittance, my heart was beating in my throat. The girl with the rockabilly quiff was there at the bar, but... no, wait, there behind her, slouched a tall, slim man in a leather jacket, his face turned away as he served another customer. He was not quite as elegant as I remembered, his gestures less graceful, but I was determined to stay and speak to him. The tables were both occupied, and I was about to settle in the recessed corner where the window should be, when the tall man in the leather jacket turned around.
It was not an angel. It was just an ordinary, tall, good-looking, square-faced Prussian with a spikey mane of tousled brown hair. For a moment, I felt relief – well, that’s it. Alarm over. He is not what you thought he was at all. But as he smiled expectantly towards me, wondering if I was the next customer, I saw that it was the wrong man entirely. Panicked, I looked between the man and the girl, before deciding the girl was safer.

>>Excuse me. Your colleague, that was here the other night. I need to speak with him.<<

She looked at me blankly. >>The other night? I’m sorry. I don’t remember you.<<

>>The night of the rainstorm<< I blurted out. >>Your colleague allowed me to shelter. You were late, and so he opened up.<<

She frowned as if concentrating, then shook her head. >>The nights here all kinda blur into one after a while.<<

>>Very tall, very thin... moves like a ballet dancer, unusual eyes.<< I described, gesturing wildly.

Her male colleague overheard, and looked at me. >>Tall skinny guy with big, popping eyes? That’s got to be Blixa. Everyone’s always looking for Blixa. No wonder he thinks he’s such a rock star...<< He rolled his eyes as I dug in my bag, and produced my sketchbook. At this point, it fell automatically open to the drawing I had done. I showed it to the girl, and she smiled, then nodded, her eyes softening as they moved from the paper back up to my face.

>>Yeah, that’s Blixa alright. He seen this? You should show it to him, he’d get a kick out of it.<< I nodded very slowly, turning over this new knowledge of his name in my mind. Blixa. I wondered if it was Latin, as it was like no German name I’d yet heard. It was a feminine name, to suit such a feminine man. The root – Blick – it meant look or view, in German, as if acknowledging the striking quality of his appearance, and how it demanded attention. >>He only works on Saturdays, love. Come back Saturday, maybe eight or nine o’clock? Then you might catch him.<<

As the other man peered over, trying to get a glance at my sketchbook, I slammed it shut. >>Thank you for your time<< I said, solemnly, and stashed it away, wondering how I was going to waste my time until Saturday rolled round again.

And so I became a regular at the Risk bar.

On Saturday evening, I went home straight from work and changed from my grotty overalls into the uniform of narrow black jeans and a dark button-down shirt loose enough to hide under. At least this time I remembered to dig out my shapeless, knee-length raincoat, but at least it was black, and so, would have to pass muster.

I informed my great-aunt that I would not be at home for dinner, and arrived, at 8pm on the dot, to find the place almost empty. Berliners never ventured out until well past midnight. But as soon as I walked in the door, my head turned towards the angel behind the bar, as if drawn by a magnet. How could I ever have mistaken any boring, solid-jawed Prussian for this unearthly creature? Perched at a corner of the bar, he stood like a silent film star portraying a bartender, his slender shoulders slouched at an insouciant angle as he sipped water from a large glass. I almost rushed to approach him, but then saw he was busy with a customer, so I hung back shyly, and cast about for a place to settle to watch him. The tables were all occupied, so I dragged a barstool over towards the shelf by the grid-iron-window. I slung my rain coat over the stool, and put my bag on the windowsill as if daring anyone to take my spot, then got into place for the bar.

The girl turned to serve me. She looked at me blankly, as if she still didn’t remember who I was.
>>Please may I have a coffee?<< I asked politely.

She looked at me as if I were an absolute time-waster. >>We don’t serve coffee.<<

>>I had a coffee the last time I came. Blixa made it for me.<< It was the first time I’d said his name aloud, and it sounded like a benediction – a benediction or a curse.

For a moment, she just stared at me, defiantly, then rolled her eyes, turning to her colleague. >>Blixa, don’t do special orders for your groupies. Then they come here, wanting fancy coffee and shit.<<

Blixa, who had previously been flirting his way through his customer’s conversation with an expression of vaguely aloof coquettishness, turned, a cigarette still caught between his teeth, and as he caught sight of me, his lips peeled back in a grin, sending the cigarette drooping at an alarming angle. >>English!<< he said, his eyes brightening, picking up his glass of water and toasting me with it. His mascara, unrained-upon tonight, was perfect, and one of his eyes was ringed all round with a thick layer of black eyeliner. >>I brought some of my stuff tonight. I’ll get it when I’m on a break, and show it to you, if you like.<<

I stared back at him, willing my face to smile as brightly as he was, but finding myself unable to, all of my muscles frozen with fear and adoration, the way angels are supposed to freeze when they see the face of God. >>While I am waiting, do you think I might have a coffee?<<

>>We don’t serve coffee<< the girl with the quiff reminded him.

>>If he wants a coffee, make him a coffee, Maria<< Blixa retorted, twirling one finger in the air as he swallowed at least half of his glass of water in one gulp.

Maria rolled her eyes at him. >>I don’t have time to make her, or anyone else a coffee.<<

The pronoun was a tiny change of grammar, but a deliberate challenge, though whether to Blixa or myself, I couldn’t tell. It was a query I faced often enough, though not usually as subtly as from this pair. Both of them turned to look at me, as if expecting me to settle the argument for them, but I refused to confirm which of them was correct. I simply stared back blankly, as if I didn’t even comprehend that this was a question, challenging them to either ask outright, or leave the subject alone.

>>He wants a coffee, he can have a coffee<< Blixa asserted. >>In fact, I’ll take a break now, to make it.<<

But as he moved out from behind the bar, the girl moved to the cash register and rang up the order. >>That’ll be 5 DM<< she told me, an extortionate amount for a coffee, but, to be fair, the first two, I had had for free, so I paid grudgingly and returned to my seat by the window.

He emerged a short time later, carrying a large mug of coffee and a battered box. I knew it took only five minutes to make the coffee, but it took him another ten minutes to cross the bar. Every step he took, someone accosted him, said hello, slapped him on the back, greeted him as an old friend. It was strange, because in appearance, he seemed so forbidding, those penetrating eyes that seemed to always know something that you didn’t know. And yet, as he moved through these people, presumably his friends, his goofy smile came easily, dancing around lightly on his feet as he greeted people with an absurdly good-natured grace. My angel, it seemed, was a social butterfly, gifted with some natural charisma, though my coffee was no longer steaming as he placed it on the shelf beside me. The battered box, though, he placed carefully into my hands.

>>Careful<< he intoned solemnly, reaching up and scratching the back of his neck with the hand
that wasn’t somehow still holding a cigarette. >>That’s some of the art for my band. Posters, flyers, cassette covers, that sort of thing. I’ve even been working on an album cover, as our first album will be coming out soon.<< He smiled proudly at this, before adding, modestly. >>Well, there might be some song lyrics and sort of word art and poems and such.<< I had never heard anyone pronounce the word *poems* with such disdain. >>But I imagine, as an anti-artist, you’re most interested in the sketches.<< And he smiled, to show that he didn’t just remember me, he remembered the whole conversation.

The other bartender called his name, as a crowd was starting to form around the bar, and he scurried off, leaving me holding this box, battered and held together with rubber bands, in my hands, wondering if I should open it or not. Did I really want to break the spell of this beautiful creature, by finding out he had banal thoughts or childish poems, and instead of discovering some ethereal angel from beyond, he was revealed to be only some boring, plodding *musician*?

I stared at the cover of the box for a long minute, my eyes tracing the spidery handwriting that proclaimed its contents and the year. The handwriting was as distinctive as the boy, as spikey as a thorn bush, somewhere between a mental patient’s scrawl and heavy German black letter type. Deciding that, on the whole, I liked the handwriting if nothing else, I opened the box. It was as he said, flyers in the typical punk style that had already passed out of popularity in London. “Manic Depression!” said one, showing a housewife clutching a carving knife. “Collapsing New Buildings” declared another covered in dinosaurs. “The Deadly Doris” proclaimed another, made from photos of transvestites cut from some vintage magazine. I smiled, as though the flyers were clearly intended to offend or shock with their crude type and their provocative images, these gestures reminded me so intimately of London, the squatters, and their supposedly anarchic and nihilistic, yet oddly idealistic and naive political screeds, that I felt a warmth of familiarity. These Berlin punks with their Prussian cheekbones were perhaps more physically beautiful than their London counterparts, and their clothes were somehow more original, less colourful but more elegant, but as I flipped through those flyers and those posters, they stopped seeming so foreign. The London squatters had accepted Maud and me in a way that my parents and teachers never had; perhaps I would be alright here.

And then I picked up a smaller, lined sheet of notebook paper, drizzled all over with that spidery handwriting. For a moment, I paused, wondering if I really wanted to know what was inside this pixie-boy’s head. But maybe it would be good to nip this obsession in the bud, lance it like a blister through discovering that he was completely ordinary. I started to translate, and my breath caught, almost immediately in the back of my throat.

The words danced on the page. That is the only way I can describe it. I had never known that German could do that! German was, to me, the language of the nursery, the tongue of my mother or grandmother snapping at me what I was or was not allowed to do. The few times I had picked up their books, since my grandmother insisted I should keep the language up, it had seemed almost impossibly ponderous and heavy, these massive cavalcades of words and letters in their slow and stately procession across endless pages. Blixa’s poetry – though poetry was not even the word, for it seemed both to be not quite poetry, as it followed none of the rules or conventions of poetry, and yet something astonishingly *more* than poetry – danced upon the page with a lightness and playfulness that seemed to perform acrobatics, both with the meanings of words, and their sounds. The English word “pun” didn’t even do justice to what Blixa did with the German language. He rammed words together and pulled them apart and tossed them up in the air with a casualness and yet a strength that resembled seafoam dancing upon ocean waves.

I dug swiftly through the files, looking for another, to see if this was just a fluke, some accidental aberration, until I found another sheet of that blue-lined notebook paper. The second was as good as the first, maybe even better. I could see the scratching of the pen, how hard he pressed down upon the paper, a misspelling scratched out, a correction which revealed he had been naturally writing on
the spot, rather than transcribing or copying. Digging further into the box, I found cut and pasted cassette covers, images cut from magazines combined with names — of songs, presumably — a couple of which shared titles with the poems. These were song lyrics? I could not even imagine what music would go with these storms of sound and meaning.

Raising my head, I looked across the bar, to where the poet-bartender stood dishing out cans of beer, laughing and joking with another handsome Berlin boy, that same swishy man who had been holding court on my first night. Blixa’s gestures were feminine, but they were not swishy in quite the same way. He simply seemed to be genderless, while at the same time, his beauty, and those skin-tight rubberised trousers seemed to heighten the sexuality of his body. Everything about him seemed charged, somehow. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to throw the box back at him, and run, run far away from this city, and my great-aunt, run all the way back to London if I could. And at the same time, I wanted to pin him down, confront him with this poetry, demand ‘what is this, how can you even do this, what is the magic trick, how does it work?’ Images danced in my head already, to accompany these strange texts, his writhing body clad only in his words so that the words seemed to be eating him.

And then the door banged and the room was suddenly overwhelmingly full of very attractive young women, all talking and laughing and singing and shouting at the top of their lungs. I withdrew further into my corner, as the group bunched up by the bar, then spread out, all the while talking at speed. The girl at the front, a short but very pretty young woman with a large round face and huge, sparkling eyes, her pouted lips painted the colour of a nectarine, the leader presumably, marched straight up to Blixa and threw her arms around his neck, kissing him on both cheeks in the typical Berliner greeting, insisting the whole time ‘Blixa, darling! How marvellous you’re back. How was Hamburg. Isn’t this good. We can’t stay, darling, we’re off to the SO36. I’m surprised you’re not there already Wolfgang. Look, darling, we’ve locked up the Iron-Grey but Bettina has the keys if you need to crash for the night, oh god, yes, Beate, calm down, we’ll go in a minute, you won’t die if you miss 30 seconds of him, I’m just saying hello to Blixa, yes, we might come back here later after the show, we might go on to the Jungle, how is everything, is everything good here?‘ like I did not know a human being could talk that fast, and she had a slight roundedness to her consonants, a Western lilt that was distinct from the sharp Berlin accent, that made it sometimes hard to decipher what she was saying.

Blixa smiled affectionately and kissed her back, as I felt my heart sinking in my chest, shifting his weight from foot to foot and catching her by the wrist and holding her so she couldn’t run away.

‘No, stay for one drink, I insist, keep me company‘ he was saying, not quite as fast as her, but with his other hand, he was digging under the counter and producing a bottle of wine which he was surreptitiously handing to the impatient young woman next to her.

The very pretty woman looked around, shrugging off her coat to reveal an eye-catching outfit, but encountered the same problem that I had. All of the tables remained taken, as the bar was filling up. As I wrestled with my disappointment — how foolish I had been to presume anything about the pixie-boy — and stuffed it back down inside me, I cleared my throat, and put the lid back on the box I had been holding.

‘You’re welcome to leave your coat on the little shelf here. I will keep an eye on it, for you ‘ I offered, pitching my voice very low, and using the formal Sie, though Blixa seemed to address everyone and anyone as the informal du, as a matter of course.

She turned and looked at me, and honestly, her smile was like having a laser beam focused upon me. All the hairs went up on the back of my neck, as I became suddenly very aware of her beauty and its effects on me. ‘Good! That is very kind of you ‘ she said with a short, satisfied little nod, switching immediately to the informal, as the rest of her merry band of beautiful women started to
shed their coats and pile them next to me. One of her friends had got a bottle of wine open and was pouring drinks, so she turned to me. >>Glass of wine?<<

>>No thanks, I don’t drink<< I started to say, but she looked as shocked as if I had announced I ate babies.

)>>Nonsense!<< she declared, seized the bottle, and filled my empty coffee cup. >>What on earth are you doing here, if not to take advantage of the free drinks. No one comes here for the ambience, because there isn’t any! And they hardly come here for the service...<<

Blixa laughed, leaning his elbows on the edge of the bar nearest us and resting his pointed chin on his hands as he watched us. Surrounded by these swishy men and beautiful women in their exotic plumage, I felt as drab as a starling. Everyone laughed as they proposed a cheer with their wineglasses, which Blixa joined in with his water glass, though I sat the toast out. >>English<< he announced by way of explanation, as if this explained everything odd or awkward about me. >>He is an anti-artist.<<

>>Good!<< pronounced the pirate ringleader, darkening her lips with the cheap red wine. >>I’m Gudrun. I run an anti-fashion shop.<<

>>I’m not really an artist<< I mumbled apologetically, handing the box back to Blixa. I simply hadn’t known what to say, how to respond, whether to comment on his extraordinary poetry or not, so in a way, the appearance of this sudden crowd was a slight relief. We exchanged smiles, and from the expression on my face, I got the impression that he understood that I had liked what I had seen. I tried to shape my mouth, to produce some acknowledgement, blurting out some >>your poems are really rather good<< but Gudrun cut me off.

>>No one is really anything in Berlin. That’s the appeal. You can play at being absolutely anyone here.<< Her smile warmed me, allowed me a little hope, so that I risked a flirtation.

>>Well, to be quite honest, I’m playing at being an apprentice electrician at the moment.<<

Conversation ground to a halt, as Gudrun stared at me, her eyes huge and round, and I wondered if I had made another gaffe on the scale of confessing to the fact that I did not drink. The way Blixa spoke, I presumed all these girls were art students, his obvious insistence that anyone not behind a bar must be a student. It was the other girl, the impatient girl with bleached blonde hair, and a long narrow face with beautifully arched eyebrows, who finally spoke up.

>>Did you say an electrician?<<

I swallowed nervously, wondering exactly how badly I had blown it, by revealing my trade. >>Well, a trainee. An intern, to be correct.<< The precise grade was Praktikant, the lowest form of apprenticeship, but this detail didn’t seem to bother them in their eagerness.

A third woman poked at Gudrun, barely daring to address me herself. >>An electrician? They are like gold dust in this city. You must get him to come round, Gudrun. Immediately!<<

>>Well<< I said a little apologetically, feeling I had overstepped a little. >>I’m not qualified at all yet. Well, I had some training in England, but it doesn’t count for German certification. My Great-Aunt has an electrician she says is a great rarity, in that he will come on call. He was so desperate for help that he was willing to take on even me as an intern.<<

>>Can you fix a blown fusebox?<< demanded Gudrun.

>>Of course I can<< I shrugged.
Could you come round the shop? asked Beate, the impatient blonde one, cocking her head to one side like she was casually inviting me round for tea, not asking for the world’s trickiest favour – an out of hours house call.

Oh god, we have been without electricity in the back room now for a week! Months! An age! Gudrun took off again in her rapid-fire voice. That wretched teenager of yours Alexander von Steelworks, or whatever you’re calling him this week. He tried to install a new games machine, and did something to the fusebox and now nothing works, either in the back room, or down in the whole cellar. He said he’d fix it but he just made it worse. Now even the kettle doesn’t work. Do you know what it’s like to live without a kettle? You can’t even properly do the dishes... not that you’d know anything about doing the dishes, Blixa...

I have to haul gallon drums of water up to the roof, to heat up in the sunlight just to take a bath Blixa drawled in a casual feat of one-upmanship, picking up his glass of water and sinking the last gulp, then shivering slightly. A water heater sounds quite bourgeois and decadent to me.

Well, Blixa, you’re always saying you like the Decadence. When can you come round, baby electrician? Gudrun turned her eyes back on me and I felt like caught like an insect in the sun’s glare.

I stopped and chewed my lip, trying to think through this one. My employer had a strict client list he allowed to bother us with emergencies, and I knew he was backed up for months with routine work. Although I was a lot more knowledgeable and experienced than my low grade implied, I was not certified in any way, and so it was technically illegal for me to even attend a job on my own... But. Gudrun, with her round face, her arched eyebrows, and her long, slightly pointed nose, was seriously beautiful, and the way that she was looking at me, a mixture of girlish hope and slightly predatory intent in her eyes, it was making my heart beat a little faster in ways that overruled my brain. My heart? Who am I kidding. It was my genitals that made the decision. Gudrun, with her half-shaved head, and long dark tendrils of hair dripping into intense, heavily mascaraed eyes, she made my body tingle all over.

So I ventured. I would have to see if I can borrow the van after work, as I need my tools, but... perhaps... I might be able to swing by about 5?

Good! Then it is decided! Gudrun insisted with her customary nod. I didn’t stand a chance against her. She found a slip of paper, borrowed my pen, and wrote down her name, her phone number and a street address nearby. Blixa, I’m still at class at 5 on Monday. Can you be at the shop to let her in?

No barked Blixa in deep, authoritative voice, shaking his head to flick his hair out of his one eyeliner-smeared eye. As he spoke, he reached down for his large glass of what I had taken for water, realised it was empty, then turned to refill it to the brim, not from the tap, but from a bottle of straight Russian vodka. You’ll have to let him in yourself. I’m meeting with the new bassist from Hamburg tomorrow, and I will be rehearsing with him at that timepoint. We have a gig in only a few weeks – and so do you, if you are not too busy going to all the clubs to remember your musical engagements!

I looked down at the piece of paper I was still clutching, astonished that after living the life of a monk for the past three months, it had taken me only one evening to obtain the phone number of the most beautiful girl in Berlin. So she was in a band, too? Now that was interesting. Boys in bands were dull as toast. Girls with bands, on the other hand, that sounded like it could bring excitement into one’s life. I can come by at 7. It is no problem.
Iron-Grey

Chapter Summary

Carter reports to Gudrun's shop, Iron-Grey, to fix their electrical problems. And in gratitude, Gudrun and the girls take Carter out dancing, to see the sights of West Berlin's nightlife for the very first time.

Iron-Grey was the name of the shop. I parked the van outside by the curb on Goltzstrasse and peered in, wondering if I was too early, as it had taken me far less time than I had expected to drive over from the yard in Tempelhof.

On Monday morning, when I had asked my employer to borrow the van, he had looked at me appraisingly for a very long time, before giving me a short lecture about how I was not insured when I was off the clock, and how he did not want to be the one to break it to my esteemed Great-Aunt if I blew myself into bits, so I had damned well better be careful. I hemmed and hawed a bit and said that the pretty girl who owned the shop would be very disappointed, as she had been trying for weeks to get her fusebox fixed, and old Schumacher laughed and twiddled the ends of his moustache, saying >>Oh there’s a girl involved. I was young, too, once. I would tell you to take care, but you won’t be getting anyone pregnant, will you, my young buck. Off you go, but make sure the van is back in the yard by 8am tomorrow morning<< and to my astonishment, he tossed me the keys, and made a gesture like he was turning a blind eye to my nocturnal activities. I felt my face burn with shame as I walked to collect the van, wondering what my Great-Aunt had told him, but I was just keen to be off before he could change his mind.

The shop was dark and deserted, so I retreated to a nearby coffeeshop with a large front window, from which I could watch the street, and my van, as the neighbourhood was not too great. There I sat, drinking coffee and eating plumcake and trying to draw the assembled company of young women I’d met at the Risk, as if they were a ship full of pirates.

A tap on the window startled me. >>Oh there you are. I was so afraid I’d missed you.<< Gudrun blew into the shop like a ship on fire, though her speech was not quite as fast as it had been on Saturday night.

I stood up to greet her, a kiss on each cheek that felt like tiny beestings of excitement, before she drew back and looked me up and down, taking in the drab, battleship grey overalls I had to wear to work. I had been about to apologise for my work clothes, when she reached out to touch my rolled-up sleeves.

>>This is so hot. Really fabulous. Is it the real thing? How old is this? The cut looks like it is from the late 40s or early 50s, you can tell by the shoulders. Oh, is that logo for real? Schumacher Electrics – Light and Power? Completely hot. Wait till Bettina sees this, she loves the styles of that era.<<

I blinked in amazement as she made me turn round to show her the back. >>It’s just the logo of the company I work for, the electric light and its concentric rays. It’s the same one they’ve had since the 20s. I believe old Schumacher wants to modernise it, but the firm that designed them was bombed in the war, and he hasn’t a clue how to commission a designer.<<
Gudrun laughed, and her laugh was like a little stream of cold water running down my back, setting all of my hairs on end again. >>Come to the Hochschule für Kunst, we have graphic designers coming out of our arses. But why would you want to update this? It’s beautiful. Do you mind if I take a photo?<<

>>Not at all.<< She took a small art student type camera out of her bag and fiddled with the settings. Although I desperately wanted to ask if I could take a photo of her, I didn’t dare, as I was afraid it would be obvious to anyone that my photo would be for less noble uses than clothing design.

I posed for her picture, then quickly finished my coffee, and the pair of us walked down the street, with her chatting gaily and me desperately trying not to be struck dumb. Her energy excited me, as did her easy confidence, like, here was a woman so sure of herself that she seemed almost brazen to my repressed English sensibilities, but her very boldness completely charmed me and knocked me out. I had always been attracted to particularly outspoken, forward young women, as their competence seemed to ignite my own. When we reached my van, I busied myself pulling out my toolbox and various implements I hoped made me look like a real electrician. If only I had half her self-assurance, I could do a far better job of it.

Gudrun opened up the shop, and offered me a drink she would not bear to hear of being refused, though I found it comical how she would fill a cup with wine for me, only to have me leave it untouched at my elbow. As she ventured through into the back room, and dug through the accumulated mess for a torch, I cast my eyes about the place. Everything was grey, which I found quite amusing, as Gudrun herself was such colourful character, slouching about in a green knitted dress that showed off her figure marvellously. The walls were grey, the shelves were grey, the clothes were grey, even the jewellery was grey. And there was a cabinet containing boxes and boxes of cassette tapes, and a few Xeroxed magazines, and all of those were grey, too. It looked like my impression of Berlin, when I’d first arrived on the train: a completely grey city, with even greyer skies than the city I’d just left.

>>My god, sorry this is such a mess<< said Gudrun, kicking at a pile of books and magazines and empty cereal boxes as I made my through to the back room. >>Ugh, the smell... let me open the window in the back and air it out.<<

The dim back room, lit only by a window onto a dark central courtyard, was also painted grey, but this grey had been decorated in various spray-painted slogans, in white, black and red. Emma Goldman made me laugh, in that context: it’s not a revolution if I can’t dance! Against one wall was erected a sort of a loft bed on a platform, and over the bed was painted a quote I didn’t recognise the author of: he who sleeps misses out!

>>I do apologise, let me just get rid of this...<< Picking up a mug full of some unidentified liquid, she carried it through into a small kitchenette and dumped it out. >>I think it’s rotting ricemilk. How foul!<<

>>I can’t actually smell a thing<< I confessed. >>I... don’t have much of a sense of smell<<

>>In this case, you are lucky. It’s Blixa, not us, who leaves the place in such a state. Bettina told him he could crash here when he needed to, but you know what Blixa is like, he simply destroys things without even meaning to, like he just can’t help it.<<

I did not know what Blixa was like, but I still felt the urge to defend him, as I picked up some of the books and piled them on another set of grey shelves. >>He doesn’t strike me as particularly destructive, more just incredibly enthusiastic, like an oversized puppy who does not realise his strength.<<
Gudrun laughed aloud, a laugh I did not yet understand the irony of. >>Oh yes, he is the most enthusiastic person I have ever met. His energy could light the city. Enthusiastic for destroying things. And you can destroy with love as easily as you can destroy with hate. Oh, there’s our torch. He’s been reading in bed again, I knew it.<< She climbed up the ladder and dug in the blankets to produce a battery operated flashlight.

I looked at the books in my hands – Antonin Artaud. Walter Benjamin. Emma Goldman, with the quotes on the wall underlined multiple times, the pages so dog-eared that they fell open to the exact place – wondering what she meant. But she had already pulled up a trapdoor in the corner of the floor, and was leading me down steep steps into a rough unfinished cellar of the sort that Berlin shops all seemed to store their goods. I picked up my toolbox and followed.

She flashed the torch onto the smoke-stained fusebox, and it became immediately apparent what the problem was. >>This I can fix, but I need to know what caused it, or it might just happen again.<<

>>Oh, that’s easy<< she snorted, leading me back up the stairs. >>It was Blixa’s wretched teenager, who was in such a rush to get this going...<< She gestured towards a pinball machine I hadn’t noticed in the corner of the darkened room. >>He’s too wild, that one, and instead of taking him in hand, Blixa encourages him because he thinks it’s funny that such a young kid is already such a punk.<<

Poking at the back of the pinball machine, I discovered that someone had simply chopped off an English style plug, as if with a pair of scissors, from the discarded parts lying nearby, and tried to wire it directly into the mains. Even I, on my first day as an apprentice, would not have been foolish enough to attempt to do something as dangerously stupid as that. No wonder the circuit had blown. I took out a pair of heavy insulated gloves from my pockets, and pulled the wire out of the wall. Thankfully it wasn’t soldered in, it was just rammed in and stuck with a bit of electrical tape – whoever had done this hack job was lucky he hadn’t been killed! – and it came away without a fuss. The mains didn’t look like they’d been damaged, but there was a small smoke burn on the wall.

>>Well<< I said, scratching behind my ears with a pencil, and trying very hard to sound like Schumacher reassuring a customer. >>It doesn’t look too bad. But I’ll have to get some supplies from the van.<<

>>Oh, what a relief<< said Gudrun. >>I mean, I’m pretty handy with tools. I can change a fuse alright, and wire up a stereo. But I know better than to mess with the mains – which is why I didn’t try to install the pinball machine in the first place. But I figure, Baby Electrician, you’ve got to know what you’re doing.<< As we climbed the stairs again, and I exited the door, someone else – I vaguely recognised her as one of the pirate lasses from Saturday night – was coming in. >>Sorry, we’re not really open right now...<< Gudrun started to say, but the visitor cut her off.

>>Have you seen Beate anywhere?<< the newcomer demanded. >>No one’s seen her since Saturday night, after the Friendship show. She’s not been to class, she’s not in the flat... has she turned up at the shop since then?<<

Gudrun started to laugh, getting out the abandoned bottle of wine and pouring an extra glass. >>Good for her! You saw how Chrislo and her were eyeing each other. I think it might do her some good, make her a little less uptight if she got a really good seeing to and some action up the...<< The friend glanced at me, and coughed politely, and Gudrun laughed. >>And the best thing about affairs with boys in touring bands is... he will fuck off back to Düsseldorf, and she won’t have to deal with seeing him around town! Ha!<<

I pushed past them to the van, and unlocked it, before extracting the right supplies. I had been worried that they might have some really complicated problem I could do nothing about, but the
bungling teenager had fucked up so badly, he had managed only to short out one loop before the whole system had tripped and cut out. I would fix the fuse, and then reinstall the pinball machine properly, rewiring it with the correct plug to prevent more damage.

As I returned to the shop, I found that Gudrun’s audience had increased from 1 to 3, as another pair of women had turned up, pretending to browse and trying on things from the racks, but really they were also engaged in discussing this curious disappearance of Beate. I asked for someone to hold the torch for me as I worked, and Gudrun adjourned to the back room, though she perched at the top of the stairs, continuing her chats with her mates. I worked as slowly as I could, just enjoying the sensation of being bathed in her light, quite literally in this case. To my annoyance, but also my hope, she kept shining the light on me, rather than on my work, and I would have to remind her to focus the beam on the fusebox. >>Just admiring your jumpsuit<< she would call back, moving the torch. >>Are you ready for a top-up of wine?>>

The cracked cup of wine remained untouched in the corner, but I called back >>I could do with a coffee.<<

>>For goodness sake, could someone please run down the street and fetch our workwoman a cup of coffee to go? Manon, can you go?<< called out Gudrun. Someone corrected Arbeiterin to Arbeiter with a giggle. I smirked to myself, as I flicked the replacement fuse, and the cavernous cellar was flooded with light. >>Good!<< called back Gudrun. >>Sweet blessed relief! Bettina, run in the kitchenette and check if the kettle will heat up again?>>

I could hear someone overhead walk back across the floor, then there was a yelp of joy. >>Yes! The electric light has come back on... oh thank goddess!<< I smiled, as this Bettina had changed the word in the common phrase, from Gott to Göttin, as if these women deliberately changed everything from masculine to feminine, by principle. >>Yes, Gudrun. we have boiling water again.<< I recognised the voice; so Bettina was the name of the taller, distinctive looking woman with the long square face, and the deep, throaty, appealing voice.

When I returned upstairs, I found the shop full of intense, chattering, arty young women. And yes, there was a cup of coffee waiting for me on the counter, though Gudrun now seemed reluctant to let me leave, pointing out various handyman jobs she suggested I do. None of them were difficult, or even taxing, and I did wonder if they were just making excuses to keep me around. But then I realised, as Gudrun stood on her tip-toes to point out a spotlight she wanted moved, that it was my height. I stood 5’10” in my socks, even taller in workboots, which was usually a problem in other situations, but somehow worked to my advantage as a tradesman.

I did a few more jobs of things that the small German girls couldn’t reach, then Gudrun made another attempt at flirting with me, and suggested in a low, pleasing tone, that they were ever so grateful for my help. But Bettina stepped in and told her to stop batting her eyelashes, as I was due a payment. She disappeared into the storeroom and came back with a large plastic bag, and handed it to me.

>>We can’t pay you in cash, because it’s not exactly a profitable operation here. But we hope this will be sufficient to repay your effort.<<

It wasn’t heavy, but it felt substantial, though I didn’t look in it until I was loading up the van. Inside, were stacked a few cartons of a very expensive American brand of cigarettes. I had been about to protest that I didn’t smoke, and could not eat cigarettes, but remembered a discussion, months ago, between my Great Aunt and Old Schumacher, when he had first taken me on, about how cigarettes, during the dark days after the war, had served as some kind of black market currency when the city was first occupied by rival armies of different nationalities. Clearly, old traditions in Berlin died hard.

I hung about on the pavement, wondering how to say goodbye, as it seemed from their discussions.
that most of the young women planned to go on to a club or a bar. But Gudrun came to the door, blowing her smoke out into the street as she sucked at her cigarette. >>We’re going clubbing. If you like, you could come with us.<<

Laughing, I gestured down to my work clothes. >>In this? I wouldn’t get in the door.<<

Bettina joined her at the door, and looked me up and down. >>Are you kidding? That is the most chic outfit the Jungle will have seen in years. In fact... can we borrow it some time to make a pattern from?>>

I eyed Gudrun carefully, trying to measure her reaction to this idea. >>Well, you’ll have to wait until I’m not wearing it.<<

Gudrun laughed and flicked her hair out of her eyes, smiling as if she was well aware of the effect she had on me. >>What kind of girls do you think we are, that we would strip you off on the first date. You will have to come back later in the week.<<

Chloe joined them at the door. She had done her hair and make-up, and looked absolutely amazing. She gestured towards the van. >>Can you give us a ride at least as far as Nürnbergerstrasse?<< she asked hopefully. >>We’ll do something with your hair, make sure you get in.<<

I rolled my eyes as I realised it was not me they wanted, but my transport. >>The van has to be back at the yard in Tempelhof by 8am<< I insisted, even as I knew that I was being tugged into this world in Gudrun’s slipstream.

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I ended up sleeping in the van, catching only a few precious hours before I would have to get up and go out with Schumacher again. I had left the girls, buoyed up on excitement and other, more mysterious chemical enhancements, at the corner of Yorckstrasse, skipping their way towards the Risk bar at 5am.

But it was worth the missing sleep, for Gudrun and her girl-gang gave me an entrance to a world I had never even dreamed of, lurking just below the surface of dusty, grey, bomb-damaged West Berlin. That first night, it’s true, was magical, because it was all so new. How a dirty, smoke-blackened exterior, lit only by shuddering, blinking neon, would suddenly open up, and we would move down some dark passage, to emerge into some dazzling underworld, shining spotlights and outlandish clothes and floor-pounding music, whirling with raucous, dancing young people.

David Bowie’s Fashion came on, and Chloe shrieked. >>It’s my theme song! Everyone come on the floor and dance.<<

>>I... I don’t dance<< I tried to stutter, even as the rush of beautiful women seemed to sweep me towards the floor.

>>Nonsense!<< cried Gudrun, seizing me by the wrist and physically pulling me into the pullulating crowd of dancing bodes. >>Everybody dances in West Berlin! Even uptight baby electricians.<<

>>I’m not so uptight as all that, am I?<< I muttered, feeling a little like I had been challenged. Gudrun’s body, whirling so close to me in the midst of the crush, seemed to spur me on to try to make some showing of myself, awkwardly shuffling and slipping my feet back and forth, though my
hips didn’t want to make any sudden moves.

Bowie gave way to a throbbing electronic drumbeat, my confidence growing as I recognised the distinctive double heart-beat synth stabs of a popular tune that seemed to have been following me around West Berlin for the past few weeks. “Sometimes I feel I’ve got to... run away...” echoed the lyrics, in English, around the glossy dark of the club. The urgency of the beat moved me, as I pressed closer to Gudrun, bending down to whisper in her ear.

>>Do you know who this is?<<

Gudrun laughed, standing on her tip-toes to reply. >>Of course. This is the biggest song in England at the moment. Your compatriots. It’s called Tainted Love and it’s by a new group called Soft Cell.<<

>>You seem to know a lot about music<< I murmured, feeling very smitten, enjoying the closeness of our conversation on the crowded dance floor.

She smiled at the compliment; it was the right thing to have said. >>I sometimes help out at a record shop. It’s my job to know a lot about music.<<

We danced together for a bit, my pulse speeding to match the pulse of the music, feeling almost intoxicated. But just as I tried to pull together the confidence to make some kind of move, the heartbeat pulse of Tainted Love gave way to the unmistakable bassline of Chic.

>>I love this song!<< Bettina appeared abruptly out of nowhere, dancing back towards us. Gudrun pulled away from me, our intimate little dance broken up as Bettina threw her arms around her friends’ shoulders. >>Do you think we can get Beate to play bass like this?<<

>>Well, it’s better than bloody Joy Division basslines, isn’t it<< laughed Gudrun sarcastically.

>>Do you think you can manage the drumbeat?<<

>>Hang on, let me see if I can work it out<< As we danced, Gudrun concentrated, moving her arms as if she were playing air drums along with the beat. So she was not just any musician, but a drummer? That was even more impressive.

Trying to hear what she was hearing, I closed my eyes and let the rhythm take me. Relaxing my body, I allowed my hips to start to swing, swivelling them back and forth with the insistent beat of Le Freak. It was the steady bounce of the handclaps that drove the song along, as the jazzy rhythm seemed to circle around them, and I found myself unable to stop myself from moving to the bobbing bassline.

Very close beside me, Gudrun started to giggle, then Bettina let out a rich, throaty roar of amusement. >>We have got to get some of this going, if it makes even uptight Englishers dance like that.<<

I opened my eyes to see both of them grinning at me as I shimmied away, surprising them with a couple of more fancy moves, a spin and then a little soft-shoe. >>See? I knew you could dance<< shouted Gudrun in my ear.

>>I could learn to like this...<< I admitted, as we were swept up in the crowd. The lights flashed, the music changed again, to something darker and more urgent, and I felt the world start to spin.

We didn’t stay in any one place for long. Driven by the shifting music, we rushed headlong from one room to another, one bar to another, dropping off some girls, but picking others up as I drove them
about in the van, everyone’s face shining, our veins pumping with the beat of the overloud music, everyone beautiful, everyone dangerous and shiny and hot, a word I was learning had nothing to do with the weather. The city at night was a different world, how those filthy, poor, grey streets would transform into another West Berlin, as if we’d slipped through a portal into some other dimension where everyone was gorgeous and wild and the air seemed charged with sex and liquor and an acrid chemical tang I had not yet learned to recognise as cocaine.

As I watched Gudrun, Manon and the stragglers rush off towards the Risk, I silently begged whatever god or goddess watched over the night, for one of them to make some sign. And, as if giving my wish a divine blessing, it was Gudrun that turned around. >>Hey, Baby Electrician!<< she called back over the roar of my van’s engine. >>I don’t even know. What’s your name?<<

I smiled, and told her, with what I hoped was a mysterious smile >>Carter.<< At a miserable boarding school where Surrey natives could not wrap their posh mouths around the clutch of consonants my German mother had seen fit to gift me with, I had become simply synonymous with my father’s surname, to the point where even my Great-Aunt called me Carter.

Manon turned around, frowned, then laughed aloud. >>How can you be called Kah-turr when you don’t even drink.<<

>>What?<< I asked, puzzled, but Gudrun shrugged her elfin shoulders beneath her light summer coat.

>>No, that’s Kater, Berlin slang for the headache you get after a heavy night’s drinking. How do you say in English? This is Carter. Like the American president, yes?<<

>>The American president is not Kater<< insisted Manon stubbornly. >>He is Ray-gun, like shoot you dead, bang bang, because he wants to blow up the world with a nuclear bomb.<<

I left them discussing it on the pavement, as I drove away, racing the clock to get the van back to the yard.

I rode the high for days, though I slept the next evening, exhausted by a long day on the job, and flummoxed by Schumacher’s almost grandfatherly teasing about my hot date. He had noticed the haircut, where Chloe had taken a razor to the back of my head, and shaped the three-months’ worth of chicken-fluff into a stylish fade, and made some jokes about my sharp new look. Honestly, I think sometimes Schumacher forgot who I was sometimes, as he called me by the names of long-dead apprentices, but what he didn’t know about electrical wiring couldn’t be worth knowing, and he was a very good teacher, patient and encouraging, though I seemed to suck up his knowledge without even trying.

At lunchtime, I finally worked up the nerve to ask about the cigarettes. I told him I had received an odd payment for my off-the-clock work, and wondered what to do about it. He took one look at the cigarettes, and started to cackle. >>These are the real thing, not that counterfeit Soviet muck<< he whistled appreciatively, leading me through to a small, locked closet behind the storeroom where we kept our supplies. And back there, were shelves and shelves of Things That Shouldn’t Be There. Boxes of American Army material that looked like they had fell off the back of a truck. Weird East German products with mysterious instructions stamped in Russian letters. And stacks of various brands of cigarettes from around the world, lined up like gold bricks. >>You don’t want to get mixed up with that black market stuff, especially if your girl has another lover on an army base. Just bring it to me, and I’ll sort you out.<< He went to a safe, extracted a cashbox, in which I saw all kinds of currency – both sorts of German, American, even French – and peeled off a small wad of Deutsch
Marks for me.

I stared at the money, glanced at the cigarettes, then tried to look back at Schumacher, but he was already at the door gesturing for me to get out so he could lock up. I had only been in West Berlin less than 6 months, but I was already learning that there were certain things one should just accept, and not ask too many questions about.
Chapter Summary

Carter is back at the Iron-Grey with hopes of taking off the uniform for Gudrun, and
reveals more than they had intended. Also, Beate reappears after her mysterious liaison
with Chrislo, with some unwelcome news for her band.

Only a few days later, I was back at Iron-Grey, as if drawn by a magnet. It was the oddest shop, as
often when I drove past during the daytime, normal opening hours for a clothing shop, it was closed
and shut up dead. It seemed to open up about 5 or 6 in the evening, as all the other shops were
closing down, and stay open until everyone had dispersed to bars around midnight. Though the lights
were on, the door was locked, so I peered through, saw there were people moving around inside, and
tapped on the window. But to my surprise, this time, it was not Gudrun that opened up the door, but
Blixa.

>>English!<< he said, sounding quite delighted to see me.

>>She has a name; she is called Carter<< corrected Gudrun, from behind the counter, sounding ever
so slightly irritated.

It took me some time to work out the source of her irritation, but it seemed that Blixa was not alone.
He was accompanied by a short, rather elfin-looking round-faced young man with a shock of
thinning hair emanating from his head at odd angles. And this young man was playing with the
shop’s tape recorder, causing distorted music to speed up and slow down, trying even to make it play
backwards, Patti Smith’s boy looking away from Johnny, then suddenly backing up and walking
away in ponderous slow-motion. I recognised the song, even in its mangled form; it had been one of
Maud’s favourites.

But abruptly the tape snapped, and the music stopped, everything disappearing in a squall of noise as
the tape recorder spewed out tape. >>Andrew!<< snapped Gudrun. >>That’s not even my tape!<<

>>Sorry<< said the short man innocently, as he unplugged the tape player and held it upside down to
try to pry the broken tape out of it. >>Don’t worry, I can fix it. Tape splicing is a hobby of mine.
Have you got a pencil and some sticky tape?<<

I dug in my bag, and produced a hexagonal drawing pencil of the exact right size for rewinding
cassette tapes, while Gudrun found him some tape. There seemed to be some tension in the room,
though I could not be sure of the source, but the small man was true to his word, and was quickly
repairing the broken tape. Blixa was hanging about by the cabinet, rearranging the tapes on the
inside, noting enthusiastically which ones had sold, and replacing them from a sort of leather
briefcase at his feet. Gudrun seemed impatient with him, replying only monosyllabically as he raved
about names I was slowly learning to attach to local West Berlin bands.

I pretended to look at earrings on a display, though my ears were not even pierced. Although I had
come with the idea of flirting with Gudrun, offering to take off the work overalls I had carefully
cleaned and pressed in anticipation of being removed, Blixa’s presence, as much as I had looked
forward to seeing him again, rather threw a spanner in my carefully prepared works. The idea of
undressing in front of Gudrun, as much as it terrified me, also excited me more than I liked to admit.
(Perhaps my heart was finally unbreaking!) But Blixa just confused me. I knew with certainty, that I was simply not into boys. I had experimented, once or twice as a teenager, as everyone did, and found the results extremely not to my taste. And yet Blixa, in the same way that his texts were somehow both less than, and more than mere poetry, was somehow not quite, and yet more than, a man.

I observed him carefully, out of the corner of my eye, taking care not to be seen staring, but I simply couldn’t stop my eye from tracing the outlines of his face like a pencil-tip flicking across really good quality drawing paper. His face invited drawing, that was the only way I could think to express the odd desires his presence aroused in me. I wanted to hold a piece of gauze over his features and trace every line, capturing those delicate features, in pen, or better yet in some kind of feathery charcoal.

>>Come on, Blixa, you know the meeting starts at 8<< muttered Gudrun, though I had to admit, when she was peeved, with her exquisite eyebrows angled sharply down, her face took on a fierce beauty that would leave me tempted to provoke her.

>>It’s only 7<< said Blixa cheerfully, plumping up his little pile of fanzines in the display cabinet.

>>We need time to set up, pour drinks and the like.<<

>>I am a professional bartender! I can help you serve the drinks<< Blixa shot back with such playfulness that it was obvious even to me he was goading her.

>>It is a band meeting, you are not in the band<< insisted Gudrun, refusing to be drawn.

>>I’m in a band. And anyway. Chloe and Claudia are not in your band, and I know for a fact, because Jana told me, that they are coming<< flipped back Blixa, calmly and very reasonably in that deep voice of his.

>>The meeting is not for men<< Gudrun finally, grudgingly had to admit. >>We need our space to be free of masculine energy, so we can all speak freely.<<

Blixa turned and deliberately caught my eye, and I felt exposed, caught out, for at that moment, I had taken my sketchbook out and was doing a quick study of his sharply pointed nose, trying my best to work out if it had been broken, since there was a definite crook at the top of the bridge. >>Well<< he said, with a conspiratorial air. >>In that case, Unruh and I will have to go, and we’ll have to take Carter with us.<<

>>Don’t be absurd. Whatever Carter is, it is not a man<< said Gudrun with a plain-speaking tone, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. But as I paused, my pen frozen in mid-air, waiting for Gudrun to reveal what she thought I was, Blixa moved, as quick as a snake’s strike, and snatched my sketchbook from me. I cringed, but when he saw what I had been drawing, he smiled widely, moving over to Gudrun, and putting the sketchbook down in front of her.

>>They’re really good, don’t you think?<< he asked, and unless I was mistaken, the tone of his voice has changed from playful to genuinely impressed. Moving around behind her, he put his hand on her shoulder as he peered down at the drawings, but Gudrun didn’t even flinch, let alone flick it away, as if there were some long familiarity between the pair of them. For a moment, I wasn’t sure which of them I was more jealous of, until what Blixa said next caught me by surprise. >>Maybe we should have Carter do some drawings and sell them here. I think it would do really well; feed your ill replenished coffers.<<

Gudrun looked at the drawings, and even she smiled. >>The only thing these drawings feed is your ego, Blixa. Now get out.<<
Blixa sighed, theatrically donning a leather cap of the sort that chauffeurs and motorcyclists wore, and wrapping his voluminous black vinyl coat around his slender frame, then he called to his friend. >>Come, Unruh. Let us take our masculine energy elsewhere. We know when we are not wanted.<<

>>Masculine energy<< hooted Andrew as he climbed off the bench where he had been dismantling the tape recorder. >>Blixa couldn’t generate masculine energy with a dynamo made of testicles.<<

>>Out!<< roared Gudrun, and the boys ran off. Picking up my sketchbook, she carried it over to the bench where Andrew had been sitting, and fussed with the cassette deck to play some music, only to realise that the tape was gone. Andrew must have palmed it. She rushed to the door, and howled >>Andrew! Come back you little thief...<< but they were gone. I took the chance to retrieve my sketchbook.

>>You don’t have to squirrel that away<< she said, in a much more friendly tone, as she settled back on the bench. >>Your drawings are as good as anything I see at art school.<< She extracted a cigarette and lit it. >>I can see why Blixa would make an intriguing subject, but...<< Her voice trailed off into cigarette smoke as she exhaled.

I stared at her, wondering what warning tone lurked behind that ‘but’. Finally, I decided to just come out with it. >>Are you and he... are you... erm... are you a couple?<<

>>With Blixa? Fuck no!<< she almost exploded, though the hoot was of laughter, not of anger. >>Oh my god, that Dussel...<< I didn’t know what the exact meaning of word she used, but I got the impression of derision well enough from her expression.

>>I’m sorry. I did not mean to offend. You are very... familiar. That is all<< I stuttered, trying quickly to recover.

She waved my apology away. >>We know each other very well. We’ve been in bands together on and off since we were teenagers. I suppose in many ways, being in a band is a bit like being in a marriage. It creates a definite intimacy, that can be closer than sex. But that experience what convinced me that we... Blixa and I... we had no business being in a band together at all. Let alone a relationship! He would drive me crazy. But we are the best of friends. I love him to bits! But to preserve that friendship, we have to... well. Avoid working together.<<

>>They are too alike<< said a voice behind me, and I jumped, realising that we were no longer alone. Gudrun gasped, and I turned to see Beate standing in the door, looking bright-eyed with the sort of dreamy expression of someone who has just woken up from a deep, refreshing sleep, though she seemed somehow a little the worse for wear. I could not help but notice the bruises on her arms, and the virulent lovebite blazing on her neck. >>She and Blixa? They are both too single-minded, too determined, too intent on getting their own way. Being in a band with those two was like a permanent shouting match. I swear, they would come to blows, and although the crowd found it amusing to watch her giving him hell onstage, it was no fun to be around. It is much better they have their own projects now. Much more peaceful.<<

>>I am nothing like him. You, too, have tasted the lash of his tongue, you know what he’s like. He is an ideologue, you know. Everything has to be done Blixa’s way, or no way at all. It’s impossible! And he always wants the impossible!<< protested Gudrun. >>A true ideologue!<<

>>And you are...?<< teased Beate.

>>An idealist.<< insisted Gudrun. >>But let us not get into this, what about you, where on earth have you been? We were on the verge of sending out search parties.<<
Where do you think I’ve been? her friend replied dreamily, flopping down on a little loveseat in the corner.

With Chrislo. You know his band have been looking for him. Wolfgang took Gabi out to the edges of town, to try to look for you two.

Beate let out a little laugh. Yes, I’m sure that’s what Wolfgang took Gabi out looking for – for me, and not those dodgy gay sex clubs, oh ho ho.

This is not a laughing matter! Where have you been?

In a little studio somewhere up in the British Sector... friends of Chrislo let us borrow it. And it was just... it was just heaven. Three whole days of just making love and making music, bodies and minds just completely attuned, like two instruments in perfect harmony... It’s unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.

Making music? With Chrislo? retorted Gudrun, who seemed to have changed her tune now that the subject of music-making had come up. But you already have a band. Our band.

You don’t even understand. It’s so completely different to make music with a lover, rather than with friends. It’s like you make music, not just with your thoughts and your mind, but with your whole body. Your music is so cerebral, Gudrun. Which is good! For you. But with Chrislo, it is total body music we make. Electronic body music.

Gudrun appeared shocked, even alarmed, at this new development. Beate getting a good shag off Chrislo, that she had been in favour of. But for the pair of them to start a band together, that was a step too far. Are you sure about this, Beate? You know, I’ve been talking to Gabi and Robert. They say that though he’s a good musician, he is completely insane. Even Wolfgang is nervous of him. And Wolfgang is a good judge of character. If he says someone is bad news, then he is definitely bad news.

Wolfgang is just jealous Chrislo doesn’t swing his way. I think he’s very good news. For me, at least. Beate lay back, leaning her head against the wall as she splayed across the loveseat. And the more outraged and worried Gudrun seemed to become, the more dreamy and relaxed Beate sank into the fantasies of lovemaking that showed so clearly all over her face. He wants me to go to Düsseldorf with him. He knows a producer there – someone who can get us in the studio. He has connections, Gudrun. He knows Conny Plank – you know, the great Conny Plank who discovered Kraftwerk and NEU! – even you’ve got to admit you’re impressed by that, Gudrun, Miss Too Cool For Düsseldorf.

The Great Conny Plank – listen to yourself, Beate! What about our band? What about female solidarity, and girls gotta stick together? You get with this great Chrislo fucking Haas from the great German-American Friendship, and all of your ideals just go out the window because you got some good bit of dick?

An amazing bit of dick corrected Beate, taking out a pocket comb and starting to sort out her hair. And you would know what an amazing bit of dick could do, if all your boyfriends weren’t gay.

Only half-gay retorted Gudrun, with a little laugh. After all, there was me. They were both smiling now, as if over some private joke, so I could not work out if they were fighting in earnest, or if this was some teasing friendship they had developed through their band. After all, she had been much rougher with Blixa than she was with Beate, and it was obvious that she and Blixa still adored each other.
>>All the boys in West Berlin are half gay<< sighed Beate. >>Chrislo is not half anything. He is one hundred percent... total...<< her voice trailed off as we could hear another group of guests entering from the street.

>>A dynamo made of testicles<< I said, almost under my breath.

>>Exactly<< said Beate, even as Gudrun started to laugh, with her hand over her mouth, just as we heard chattering voices from outside.

>>So Wolfgang, and Gabi, and these two rent boys they have picked up by the American barracks, they say they are going off to a show...<<

>>But it wasn’t a show of the kind Gabi was expecting, on no, Claudia, you should have seen the flyer, it was a... well, let’s just say if Wolfgang was expecting to shock the stuck-up Düsseldorfers with a bit of Berlin nightlife, well, it was Wolfgang who got a little more than he bargained for as Gabi was well into... oh my god Beate! Where have you been?<<

And there was another round of greetings and hugs and those Berlin double-kisses as Gudrun and Beate moved up and made room on their seats for the newcomers to sit and have a glass of wine. I was introduced to Claudia, though Chloe and Bettina I already knew, and everyone just accepted me as Carter, because obviously it was Beate who was the focus of all the curiosity and gossip, after her adventures with the keyboard player of this hot new Düsseldorf band. Two more girls arrived, Manon, who was in the band, and Susanne, who wasn’t, at least not yet, but seemed to be quite intrigued with the idea of an all-girl group.

And although Gudrun had described it to Blixa as a meeting, it was like no meeting I had ever attended, even as the space filled up with more women. Drinks flowed freely. Gudrun put on a tape, the Slits album, which I knew and loved, again from Maud’s record collection, and people started to wiggle in their seats. Women sat and talked in little groups, sometimes gossiping about their lives and loves, but mostly about their bands, and their art projects, and the films they were shooting, and the clothing they were working on designing. I don’t know if it was because the scene was so small, or on account of some hearty German cordiality, but everyone seemed keen to get involved with everyone else’s projects. Designers offered to let the musicians to wear their clothes onstage. The musicians were keen to provide soundtracks for the filmmakers’ videos. Artists talked about doing group shows together, and bands talked about jamming together and who could do what guest spots at each other’s performances.

Gudrun especially, I noticed, was a truly congenial host. She was particularly good at getting people to talk, letting her friends know if they shared the same discipline, because Chloe is a designer, but did she know that Bettina has a proper industrial knitting machine, yes, maybe they could bring it into the shop and set it up so they could all learn. And Maria plays the piano, but she also DJs, and she wants to start a band, hey, did you know that Christine can play drums, and of course Beate is the best bassist in West Berlin, but no, Beate wants to go to Düsseldorf and work with this hot shot record producer, but everyone who wasn’t Gudrun was really happy for her, and excited at her prospects, and the change of working with this world-famous producer, Conny Plank, and really supportive of her developing her career in this way, and with all of this wave of excitement and support, even Gudrun calmed down and conceded, hey, just remember all your friends back at Risk when you are a big star on the television...

I wasn’t entirely sure what I was doing there, but I started to really enjoy myself, even just sitting, listening to the energy flowing through the room. Gudrun had been right. Without the boys to dominate the atmosphere, the women set about knitting themselves into a tight, supportive community. It was the kind of thing that Maud’s feminist friends used to pay lip service to – female
solidarity — but in action, this gang of tough West Berlin girls in their dark lipstick and their big boots, they seemed like they could move mountains.

>>So you are the famous electrician<< Claudia was saying to me as I held a glass of wine I was only pretending to drink. >>Do you think you could have a go at my loft? I want to put in dramatic spotlighting, oh, and one of those Hollywood makeup mirrors with the dimmer-switch so that you can emulate the effects of sunset, or office lighting, or mid-day high noon...<<

>>Carter is also an artist, you know. An illustrator<< Gudrun always used the feminine versions of words with me – Kunstlerin – but for some reason, from her, it didn’t bother me. >>A very good eye for portraiture, you know.<<

>>Portraiture?<< exclaimed Claudia. >>Who have you done?>>

Gudrun raised one of her exquisite eyebrows at me, as if she were challenging or teasing, I could never quite be sure. >>Well, she’s mostly been drawing pictures of Blixa Bargeld, of all people. She makes him look positively angelic. You wouldn’t believe our Blixa could look that good and pure and innocent.<<

>>Blixa? Our Blixa?>> hooted Bettina from across the room. >>Oh my god, we have got to find you another model before you ruin your eyesight on that goblin.<<

>>You should draw Gudrun<< Claudia suggested, smiling at her attractive friend.

>>Oh my god, yes, Draw Gudrun<< insisted Beate, sitting up and joining the conversation. >>I will buy it, if it’s a good portrait. I’d like a picture of my dear friend Gudrun, to remind me of her when I go to Düsseldorf.<<

Gudrun stood up, and adjusted the lights, lit some more candles and poured out another bottle of wine, distributing it among the guests. >>Why would she want to draw ugly old me<< she said, with what sounded like very false modesty indeed, though if there was something beneath that, I couldn’t tell. With the room so full of people, and so many candles burning, it was starting to get rather warm, and I tugged at the collar of the work jumpsuit I had forgotten I was wearing.

>>What you should do, though<< interrupted Bettina >>Is take off that jumpsuit and let me measure it. I want to sell a line of overalls in the shop, and that one has such a nice cut.<<

>>Bettina!<< laughed Manon. >>So direct and forward, and to the point.<<

>>What?>> shrugged Bettina, then started to laugh. >>If Carter is shy, there’s a dressing gown in the back room.<<

I looked around for Gudrun, but she had retreated to the back of the shop; I could only see her eyes glittering in the light of her cigarette’s tip as she drew on it. >>I suppose I could let you borrow it for a few hours. But I need it for work tomorrow.<< Standing up, I climbed unsteadily to my feet, as my hands went to the top button and started to unfasten it.

>>So this is the entertainment for the evening? A stripping electrician? Hurrah! This is much better than rehearsals with The Skin<< giggled Susanne.

The girls, who had been drinking for a few hours now, were starting to grow a little rowdy. Someone whooped, as someone else started to clap, slowly, rhythmically to the drumbeat of The Slits’ Liebe und Romanze. The atmosphere intoxicated me, the way that sometimes, when I was around people who were very drunk, I almost started to feel my own head spin. >>Come on, give us a show, Carter. Take it off, take it off<< chanted a voice I was sure I recognised but bashfully
I closed my eyes, feeling very self-conscious, but to my surprise, as the chant took hold, I felt myself bourne up on a wave of camaraderie and acceptance. I started to unbutton further, trying not to focus on those glittering eyes in the back of the shop, just letting my hips swing back and forth to the low, familiar music that was playing in the background. The fabric of the jumpsuit was old, as it had been hanging around the back of Schumacher’s shop for at least 20 years, and stiff with age, but still, I teased with it, pulling it coyly down in back like a striptease act, before revealing that I was actually wearing a vest and long johns beneath. The fabric of the jumpsuit was old, as it had been hanging around the back of Schumacher’s shop for at least 20 years, and stiff with age, but still, I teased with it, pulling it coyly down in back like a striptease act, before revealing that I was actually wearing a vest and long johns beneath. As the girlish whooping intensified to a crescendo, I felt myself blushing, yet pleased, oddly encouraged by the unfamiliar attention, as I peeled off the rest of the suit, and stepped out of it, handing it to Bettina before curtsying to the assembled girls, acknowledging that yes, despite my height and my broad shoulders and the short tufts of my previously shaven head, yes, it was apparent from my tightly-bound but budding chest, and the smooth lines of my groin, that my body was like theirs.

Then I sat quickly down, quite embarrassed by the spectacle I had just made of myself. >>So you see<< I sputtered, trying to cover my blush. >>I’m not what you think. I mean, you’re not wrong, but... you’re not right, either. I don’t know what I am.<<

But Bettina looked back at me evenly, her long square face smiling with encouragement as she handed me the dressing gown. >>It doesn’t matter, here, what you are.<< That German expression – es ist egal, literally it is equal – had never sounded so sweet. >>You are always welcome with us.<<

There were friendly pats on the back, a few quick hugs, but to my eternal gratitude, no one even made a big deal of it. The pirate gang opened their hearts, and I felt like I became one of them, that night.

As I put on the spare dressing gown, Bettina quickly picked up the sloughed-off uniform and started to dig into its seams with the practiced hands of a designer, investigating its dimensions with a measuring tape as the rest of the room fell back into their easy chatter. >>It is as I thought. The material is very old, but it’s good quality stuff.<< she pronounced, turning it inside out, and showing me how it was made.

>>It’s older than I am.. It’s been hanging around the back of the workshop for 20 years maybe.<<

>>It’s probably older than you think. You know, in the 40s, when all the men were at the Fronts, fighting the Americans on one side, and the Russians on the other, it was the women who kept the city going. There were female electricians, female builders, female plumbers, even female firefighters<< she explained.

I shuddered. >>So I’ve been wearing some... Nazi’s cast off uniform?<<

She shook her head. >>It’s not that simple in war. It was the same in England, you know. The same in occupied France and the Netherlands. All these jobs that us women took over, just because we had to. We weren’t fighting, we were just trying to keep everyone alive. Then the men came back from the front and they tried to chuck us out and take our jobs back. But they can’t erase what we have done, what we have contributed.<< She smiled as she looked up at me. >>You always look like you are so alone, Carter, you always carry yourself with a sadness, like you are the only one of your kind who has ever been. You aren’t alone, Carter, they just wrote the women like us out of the histories.<<

I felt tears forming in my eyes as I looked down at her. I wanted to protest, wanted to tell her ‘if only you knew; I have completely failed at being a woman, in every way’, but I stopped myself, and just smiled as I looked around at the faces of these incredible young women, all bursting with energy and
plans and enthusiasm for one another, all around me.
Solidarity

Chapter Summary

Carter finally works up the courage to make some kind of approach towards Gudrun; Blixa gives an original kind of performance in the shop, which is cut short by a surprise visitor.

Most of Iron-Grey’s girl gang went out drinking afterwards, or on to clubs, but I went home to sleep, as I had work in the morning. On our rounds through Tempelhof, I asked Schumacher, who was old enough to remember The War, if what Bettina had said was true. Had there been female electricians and plumbers and firefighters, in the last days of the dying Reich? Oh yes, Schumacher had assured me. Fearsome women, you didn’t want to get mixed up with them. There wouldn’t be a Berlin left standing for anyone to occupy if it hadn’t been for the women, they were the ones who had put out the fires and saved the city. They had cleared the rubble away afterwards, as well, brick by brick, sometimes with their bare hands. I should ask my Great-Aunt, or better yet, my Great-Aunt’s personal assistant, Grete, if I wanted to know about that. Grete, I gathered, from Schumacher’s respectful tone, had been a formidable force in her youth, though now I knew her only as a formidable force around the breakfast table if I forgot to tell my Great-Aunt that I was dining out.

I stayed in the next few nights, locking myself in my room after dinner, and setting down to draw. Taking out the large block of drawing paper, I looked at the drawings of Blixa I had attempted only a few weeks ago (though it felt like months, since that first night at the Risk bar) and almost laughed at how ridiculous they seemed to me now. For a moment, I was tempted to rip the page from the sketchbook and crumple it into the nearest bin, but instead I turned the page and started again. This time, I was going to draw Gudrun.

Gudrun, with her distinctive asymmetrical hair, and her slash of dark lipstick, was much easier to draw. Those high rounded cheekbones, and that elfin chin, they flowed from my pencils. Her eyes, with the catlike uptick of thick black eyeliner, they were almost too fun to shape with my pencil. I inked her in, wove a banner declaring ‘female solidarity’ in three different languages – English, German and Russian – around her head, and found I was very pleased with the result.

I took it to Iron-Grey the next evening, intending to ask her to pass it on to Beate, who had commissioned the thing, though really with the ulterior motive of showing it to her myself. As I walked up, I could see a small crowd of children gathered round the front window. As I got closer, I saw that some of them were dancing, stomping about joyously, while the older ones were pointing and laughing at someone inside. As I pushed open the front door, I was greeted by a strange caterwauling sound. It took me a few minutes to work out what was going on, but it appeared to be Blixa.

He had removed all of the displays from the front window, and instead was standing there, bashing tunelessly with the side of his fist at a guitar that had been plugged into a cheap radio, with a jaunty, slightly martial rhythm. This atonal beat served mostly to accompany himself as he made the most bizarre sounds with his mouth; half animal yowl, half hiss, more like the sounds of nature, of tectonic plates scraping against one another, an inhuman, iceberg sort of sound, rather than anything that sounded like it came from a human being. As I watched, intrigued, he had clearly polarised the small crowd that had gathered outside to watch and listen. The younger, less inhibited kids were
responding with sheer animal joy, throwing themselves about with anarchic glee at this banging song of primal id. But the older kids, ones who had started to pick up a sense of what was acceptable or not, and what was cool or not, they seemed embarrassed, startled, even outraged by Blixa’s unfettered performance.

Myself, I couldn’t decide how I felt about it, and though I found myself strongly moved by it, I couldn’t tell if the emotion was delight or disgust. It was like no music I had ever heard before, even from the tuneless squat-punk bands I’d heard in London. It was, as he had proclaimed, anti-music. There was no tune; there were barely any words, apart from his bizarre dancing word-salad poetry. But there were torrents of emotion seeming to extrude from every pore of his body, as if he were secreting the sound like sweat, as much as making it with his mouth.

But as I walked through into the shop, I caught sight of Bettina and Gudrun, working, undeterred by the noise, at a large sewing machine that had been set up in the middle of the floor. Bettina had, true to her word, obtained some battleship grey canvas, and the pair of them were cutting out patterns to make iron-grey jumpsuits, not for female electricians, but for female warriors.

>>This is... different<< I observed, gesturing with my head towards the performance in the front window.

>>Oh yes. He’s very much improved<< said Bettina, making me wonder what Blixa’s singing had been like before.

>>You can tell he’s really been working at it<< agreed Gudrun. >>He’s really coming together now.<< So it wasn’t just me. The odd yowling noise, it wasn’t torturous or unbearable, it was actually strangely expressive, and in its own way, beautiful, in the way that remote, treeless mountains, or sheets of glacial ice were actually very beautiful.

>>I, too, have been working<< I said, by way of introduction. >>I wanted to give this to Beate before she left, since she was the one who suggested it.<< And then I produced, from inside a cardboard folder where I had preserved it, the drawing of Gudrun.

For a few moments, there was silence, as my pride in my work slowly gave way to a growing embarrassed fear that I had done something wrong.

But finally, it was Bettina that spoke.. >>That’s really quite good. You have absolutely caught her, that is her smile, one hundred percent. Anyone who knows her, would know: that is Gudrun.<<

But Gudrun was looking at the drawing slightly suspiciously, though I could not understand the reason for her mistrust. >>Oh god, does my nose really look as formidable as that<< she finally said, though I could sense that again, this modesty was false. It was not self-consciousness that fed her negative reaction to the drawing.

>>Well<< I said sheepishly. >>I can fix the nose, if you like.<<

>>No, don’t change a thing<< insisted Bettina. >>We’ll have to post it to Beate.<< Holding it up, she called out >>Look, Blixa, Carter has drawn Gudrun. Isn’t it good?<<

>>Where’s Beate?<< I asked, and Gudrun started to respond that she had just packed up and gone, without so much as a goodbye, to Düsseldorf and Chrislo, of course...

...but like a shot, Blixa had discarded his guitar, and leapt over the sofa in one bound, and was loping purposely towards the sewing table, grinning like a maniac. He took the drawing, and stared at it, tracing the Russian letters, saying aloud, ‘Zhenska Solidarnist’ just to prove that he could read
It looks just like you, Gud. A split second pause. Well, a good-looking, sexier version of you, at least.

For a moment, Gudrun’s eyes flashed with outrage, then sharpened to something like sibling rivalry, her voice taking on a snide, sing-song tone. Oh, you’ve just got your nose out of joint that an artist would rather draw me, than draw you!

But his smile widened as he turned back to me, and I could see that he had had a haircut, or at least, someone had been hacking at his head, probably with an electric razor, for there were great chunks missing from the front and sides in oddly rectangular patterns, though it still hung down in clumps over the back of his head, above a crudely shaved bit. But even with this strange mutilated haircut, his face still somehow had a nobility and intelligence that made me feel all churned up inside.

Well, when are you going to draw me, Carter? he asked, like it was a challenge as much as an invitation.

Gudrun’s face changed in an instant, as her smile turned wicked. Oh yes, Blixa, you should totally pose for Carter. Like you posed up at the Hochschule, and like you posed for Wolfgang...

But Blixa’s grin expanded, as if he didn’t see the darkness behind Gudrun’s goading. Oh, ja! I can disrobe if you like. No problem. Wolfgang said I had a very intriguing physique. Have you seen the photos he made of me? They’re very good, very artistic. Even anti-artistic, if you like. You’ll never get Gudrun to pose for art-photos like that, oh no.

I couldn’t help myself, I felt my face flushing from my forehead down to my chest. But Gudrun, and I don’t know what devil had got into her, seemed to sense my discomfort and only tried to make it worse. Have you seen those photos, Carter? Blixa has a very high opinion of them, he tells everyone about them. Maybe he can demonstrate for you... go in the back room, nobody wants to see your pimply buttocks again, least of all those little kids in the street, eh? she teased, her eyes flashing.

But Blixa missed the subtext completely. Those kids in the street know more than you think. Little kids always make the best audience for rehearsing new concepts, because they absolutely will not lie to you. They haven’t been infected by the Culture-germ yet. They haven’t been infected by ‘Cool’.

He said the word in English, but with a real Prussian disdain. If they like something, they love it with their whole hearts, and they let you know. And if they hate you, they will not hesitate to tell you that, either. There is no pretence with children. All musicians should be forced to rehearse in front of children. They would learn a lot.

As he spoke, Blixa moved towards the back room, unbuttoning his trousers, and showed every intention of actually doing it, taking his clothes off and posing for me, when Bettina, bless her heart, finally seemed to notice the abject panic on my face, and stepped in. No, don’t go back there, Blix, my patterns are all over the floor. Keep your clothes on and sit down, Carter can draw you on the sofa. Or better yet, as you’re performing. Isn’t that the most Blixa-ish Blixa?

This is true Blixa enunciated with his finger, then rushed back to his impromptu stage like an oversized puppy, his long, skinny legs easily clearing the sofa, as he leapt over it to retake the space in the window. With the guitar, or without? What do you think?

As I turned horrorstruck, to see Gudrun silently laughing at me, I narrowed my eyes at her. This is hardly Solidarity I managed to spit. Her face fell as if she’d been stung.

Oh come on she said, defensively, as if she realised she was acting shabbily towards me.

Everyone can see you like him. All those drawings? I’m just helping things along.
I just stared at her, unsure of how to reply. Did people think that I... well, that I was attracted to Blixa? As if anyone could think that I could like a... a male? But then I stopped myself. No one knew me here. No one knew that about me. No one knew anything about me. I wondered if that lovely warm acceptance I had felt the other night would extend to this. For a long second, I dared to dream that it might.

It might have come to a head, there and then, I might have broken down and confessed, might have told Gudrun how I felt about her. But the door banged, and there was a customer. At least, I thought it was a customer. Gudrun looked over and rolled her eyes, while Bettina took on a slightly panicked expression and moved towards the cash register. I turned around and saw a little girl, standing in the entrance to the shop.

>>Is Christian here? I need some money from him.<<

When she spoke, it was obvious she was not a little girl, she was a full-grown woman, though a tiny, diminutive one, with a fey, pixie-like look to her, as if she were made of gossamer and might blow away at any moment. She stood no more than about five foot tall, with a round, fairy-like face, with beautiful high cheekbones. Her skin was darker than most Germans I’d met, but with an odd ashen quality that made it look almost translucent, highlighting huge, sleepy eyes a shade of grey so light they looked colourless.

But it was her clothes that arrested my attention. Even amidst the unconventional fashions of West Berlin, her clothes stood out. She was wearing an old-fashioned, close-fitting black lace dress, the sort of thing my Great-Aunt would refer to as mourning clothes, with a long hem that might have been a tea dress on anyone else, but hung almost to her ankles. Around her neck were draped a selection of glass and crystal beaded rosaries, though all of the crucifixes on them had been turned upside-down. Her dark hair streamed down her back in long, ratted waves, with streaks of colour so closely matted together that it was hard to tell what hue it was meant to be dyed, though the roots near her head showed at least an inch of deep black. She was wearing shiny crepe ballet slippers, with a line of water damage seeping above the soles into the silk, over laddered black tights, and over the top of the whole ensemble, was draped an oversized man’s formal dinner jacket, complete with tails.

She blinked, slowly, with a faint reptilian air, taking in first me, then Gudrun, then Bettina, before turning about, her eyes lighting on Blixa, fiddling about with the headstock of his guitar.

>>Christian<< she repeated. >>I need some money. About 20 DM should do it, but I need it now.<<

Blixa looked up, as if only just realising he was being addressed, spied the girl, and suddenly frowned, his face growing steadily more panic-struck. >>Jana<< he said, his voice slowly rising, struggling to stay calm as he removed his guitar from around his neck. >>If you’re here, and Unruh is at work, then who is watching the squat?<<

>>It’s OK<< said the girl, her voice becoming more childlike as Blixa grew more visibly alarmed. >>I left the door on the latch, and the key under the mat... I really do need that 20 DM, though.<<

>>Scheisse!<< exploded Blixa, and I had never seen him move so fast, leaping over the sofa and collecting his huge vinyl jacket in one fluid motion before dashing out the door and down the street, still pulling his coat about him as he broke into a run. That was always the problem, with squatting. Once you occupied a house, you couldn’t leave it unoccupied. At best, you might come home and find some other squatters had taken over your space and changed your locks. At worst, you could come home to the landlord – or the police – tossing your stuff into the street.

The girl seemed unperturbed by his sudden absconding, turning her eyes to us. >>Bettina, do you
have 20 DM. I really do need it, quite urgently.<<

>>Sorry, Jana, love. We just took the day’s float back to the bank, about an hour ago. We don’t even have change for a fiver right now<< said Bettina, and even I could see she was lying, as she and Gudrun had clearly been at the shop all afternoon, working on the jumpsuits.

The strange pixie-waif turned her colourless eyes towards me. Her eyes widened, as her thin eyebrows seemed to float up her forehead. >>And who is this? I don’t think we’ve met.<<

Gudrun’s mischievous grin lit back up, as I could feel the tension in the shop start to rise. >>This is Carter. Carter is an artist. She’s going to draw Blixa. This is a picture she drew of me. Don’t you think it’s good?<<

Jana squinted at the drawing, and smiled. >>It looks just like you, Gudrun.<< But then she turned to me. >>I don’t suppose you have 20 DM?<<

>>And you are?<< I blurted out, wondering when someone was going to let me in on the secret.

>>Oh! Where are my manners?>> she said, with the delicacy of a Victorian heroine, then moved towards me and extended a hand. Her fingernails were so long they looked almost like talons, the fingernails of someone who had never soldered a fusebox in her life, and painted the colour of dried blood. >>I’m Jana. I’m Christian’s girlfriend. He lives with me at my squat over on... over on... oh, you know the Strasse over there, just before the railway bridge.<< She waved her hand gently, breezily, the same sort of expressive gesture that Blixa liked to make.

>>Christian?>> I stuttered, wondering if I should know this person.

>>Oh, sorry, I forgot. He doesn’t like to be called that any more. I mean, of course, Blixa.<<

I gave her the 20 DM I had in my wallet just to make her go away. Honestly, I had no designs on Blixa, but something about her just completely unnerved me. That strange, fey, dreamy smile; her otherworldly manner, folding the money into her bra before pressing my hand in thanks, and flitting from the shop as suddenly as she had arrived.

Bettina and Gudrun exchanged glances. >>She’s getting worse. Someone should do something.<< muttered Bettina.

>>What is to be done? You know Blixa won’t see sense about her<< Gudrun replied. As I looked back and forth between the pair of them, Gudrun turned on me. >>You shouldn’t have given her that money. You know it’s going straight to her drug dealer.<<

>>You and Blixa are a fine pair to get sanctimonious about drugs<< I stuttered, feeling rather defensive.

>>We indulge<< Gudrun retorted back. >>A line of coke here, a bit of hash there, it’s hurting no one. But Jana dabbles in smack, and she is in the fast lane from dabbling to dependent, so giving her money helps no one.<<

>>Heroin<< I said limply, feeling very stupid that it had taken me so long to understand. I had little experience with junkies. Even the squat where Maud and I had taken shelter in London had a strict no heroin policy. Junkies were unreliable, they stole things, and even in an anarchist squat that believed in sharing common property, it was not OK for common property to have to be fetched out of the local pawn shop because someone had needed a fix. Suddenly, I understood why Bettina had moved so defensively to the cash register. >>And Blixa knows? Why doesn’t he do something?<<
Blixa’s a man<< said Gudrun, rolling her eyes and lighting another cigarette. >>And like lots of stupid men, he wants to be a knight in shining armour. He likes to think he can rescue the helpless little naive waif, and that he can somehow just... love her out of being an heroin addict.<<

>>What do you expect him to do?<< said Bettina. >>I mean, she’s our friend, too. I’ve had serious talks with her, telling her we’re all concerned about her health. But you know how she gets, how she just goes all vague, and waves her hands, and says she’s sure all will be well in the end. She’s like Blixa, a hopeless optimist.<<

>>You’re right. There’s nothing you can say to Blixa, either, to make him see that she’s not getting any better.<<

I stood there, musing through my own thoughts, my petty annoyance at Gudrun’s earlier mischievous cruelty seeming very, very small by comparison. I couldn’t get that strange, fey child-woman’s face out of my mind, that slow reptilian blink that must have been the effect of heroin withdrawal. There had been times when the break from Maud had felt so sharp and so painful I thought I would die of it, and maybe, then I would have been tempted by the hope of oblivion. I wondered what on earth this strange, fey girl was running from. Very slowly, I found my voice.

>>Sometimes people have to really hit bottom, in order to climb back out<< I said, and turned to go.

>>Yeah, well, you don’t have to help them on the way down<< said Gudrun quickly. >>Just don’t give her any more money, OK?>>
Off-Putting

Chapter Summary

Carter's crush on Gudrun has not gone unobserved, and a third party steps in to warn her off. At the Risk bar, Carter finally starts to give in to Blixa's repeated demands to be drawn.

Work was so busy for the next week that I didn’t get the chance to pop round Iron-Grey again. Once he was confident that I wouldn’t wreck his van, Schumacher started to let me drive everywhere, fiddling with bits of kit on his lap on the way to the next job. But my grasp of West Berlin geography was still not very good. I knew approximately where the main avenues were, but as soon as I got onto the side streets, I would find myself all twisted around, somehow invariably head east, and then suddenly bam! the van would be up against the graffitied slab of the ominous grey Wall. The native West Berliners never even mentioned it, this massive thing so huge and omnipresent they had stopped even seeing it. But the rare tourists were fascinated by it. I would have been fascinated by it, but every time we started to drive alongside it, Schumacher would cross himself and tell me to get us the hell away. It did no good to spend too much time in the presence of the thing, he said, as if the wall itself had a malign influence, quite separate from the soviet soldiers on the other side.

We drove from one inner city neighbourhood to another, from our yard in Tempelhof up to Kreuzberg, through Schöneberg and sometimes as far afield as Moabit, crossing little canals and rivers and tributaries of the Spree on the way. Although I’d heard rumours that there were posh suburbs to the far west, full of parks and lakes and ‘villa areas’, the bit of West Berlin we serviced didn’t seem to have much in the way of beauty. Every few blocks, there still lay large scars of abandoned land that looked almost unchanged since the tanks had rolled out. Apart from brief glimpses of the Tiergarten, the rare trees I saw were more likely to be growing out of bombsites or ruined houses than the fabled Linden Avenues I had read of in books from the 1920s. Sometimes we drove past the huge, hulking bulk of the great curved arc of the fascists’ monumental airport to far-flung industrial areas on the other side of Tempelhof Airfield. But then I’d take a wrong turn getting back on the Autobahn, turning East instead of West because I wasn’t used to driving on the right hand side, and bam! there was the grey no-mans-land of the Wall again like the punchline of an unfunny joke a belligerent child wouldn’t stop telling.

Schumacher liked to lecture me in the van, on our drives to the next job. It wasn’t the electrical knowledge he wanted to tell me about – he said I was smart, and I could pick that up quickly enough – it was the customer handling. What to do with an unsatisfied customer. How to extract more money someone who didn’t want to pay you what you were worth. How to deal with the back-seat driver who thought they knew more about your own job than you did. I groaned internally, as I had already dealt with some of them, usually men, who wanted to insist to me ridiculous things that violated the basic laws of physics, when discussing the electricity running in their own walls.

The muggy closeness of August was starting to give way to the clear, crisp chill of September. Posters had gone up around the huge circus tent that had sprung up on the bomb-damaged area around Potsdamer Platz like some unearthly mushroom, advertising a “Great Downfall Show”, some kind of anti-musical festival that Wolfgang, one of the regulars at the Risk bar, had assembled, featuring all of our friends.
For over the past few weeks, the mysterious names that I had known only from Blixa’s cassettes started to be attached to the people I met at the shop, at the Risk bar, and around the city. Blixa and Andrew and the awful teenager, together with the pair of Hamburg punks called Mufti (the short but very muscular man with a forelock of curly gingery-blond hair) and Mark (the tall, handsome, Asian bassist who had accompanied him that first night at the Risk bar) – that lot had a band called the Collapsing New Buildings. Swishy Wolfgang, who was always so quick with his cutting wit, he and another handsome boy, and a girl who played drums, they were the Deadly Doris. And the gang of tough pirate girls with big boots and dark lipstick, who had adopted me, they had been first Manic Depression, then Mania D, and now, since Beate had decamped to Düsseldorf with Chrislo, Bettina and Gudrun had been in secret discussions to regroup under the name Malaria! Slowly, the tangle of West Berlin nightlife was starting to make sense to me, as I attached names to the few dozen faces I saw every week.

And all of these friends were now putting on a giant variety show together. Gudrun and Blixa had even decided to bury their musical differences to perform a set together. That, I would like to see! I had already decided to tease Gudrun about how her opinions changed, depending on what options were available.

But the next time I went back to Iron-Grey, Gudrun wasn’t there, though Bettina was. I liked Bettina, I liked her serious, quiet manner, in comparison with the boisterous but sometimes rather too obstreperous drummer. And she was pleased to see me, too, wanting to unveil the prototype of the new jumpsuit, and have me try it on. Honoured, I went in the back room to change. When I emerged, I felt a little unsure of myself. She had changed the design, and I felt quite self-conscious, noticing how she had brought in the waist to fit my form a little more closely, and moved the fastening so it zipped up diagonally, futuristically, across the chest to the shoulder.

>>You look fantastic<< assessed Bettina with a sharp nod. >>Here, Gudrun made these belts to go with them, so give it a go.<<

She handed me what appeared to be the seatbelt from an aeroplane seat, a long strip of black ribbon and the metal lump of the release, and I belted it around my waist, cinching it in tight, surprised by how it pulled the whole look together.

>>I’m just going to sew the Iron-Grey logo on the arm, and then you can wear that to Risk tonight<< Bettina said, pulling out a patch.

>>I can’t wear this out.<<

>>Why not? You are a walking advertisement for the shop.<< Bettina threaded a needle and eyed up my sleeve, as if she were planning on just sewing it directly to my skin. >>We need someone who isn’t Blixas to go around in our clothes – I mean, he is a good advert for the shop, in that the clothes do look good on him, but with his tall, slender figure, he just looks good in anything.<<

>>But this... well, that’s the exact problem... it makes me look like I have a... figure.<< I tried to keep the disdain out of my voice as I pronounced the word, but still, it dripped from my tongue.

>>That is the point.<<

>>I liked my baggy, androgynous, unisex overalls.<< I sulked.

>>This, too, is unisex<< insisted Bettina. >>But it puts the sex in Unisex. Unisexy. You need to get out there and get laid. Stop mooning over Gudrun. She’s straight, you know, though she doesn’t look it.<<
What?! I sputtered, feeling myself flush again. I do not... moon.

Bettina clucked her tongue at me. You are very obvious. Gudrun finds it a little... off-putting.

She told you this? I gasped, burning with shame.

She didn’t need to. With an iron grip, she held my arm as she sewed on the patch with the name of the shop. This is West Berlin. There is something for everyone here. You need to find the one that is for you.

I felt like a puppy that had been whacked on the nose, but still, I was smart enough to realise that I was being warned off. A couple of the other girls arrived, Claudia and Chloe wanting to see the finished designs, sparing me the indignity of further conversation, but internally, I was mentally turning over Bettina’s words over and over again. Really, I wanted to go home and mope—moon, even—but the girls refused to allow this, threading their arms through mine and pulling me down the street towards the Risk bar. Even as we approached, eyes appeared at the peephole, and the door swung inwards, granting us admission. Bettina walked in with a proud, quiet air of possession, with the rest of us following in her wake. It really paid to have one of the local rock stars in your party, if you wanted to get served. Maria whistled when she spotted us, and Blixa’s tufted head appeared above the counter. He was kneeling down to rewind a tape, but stood when he saw us.

Wine for the ladies, and coffee for the gentleman? he offered with a wide grin. You are going to draw me tonight, yes, English?

Maybe I said, and felt his eyes pass over me as he looked me up and down, before coming to rest on my waist with a curious expression. I felt so self-conscious about the cinched waist that I tugged at it a little.

I like your belt he observed, and I felt a tiny twitch of relief that it was my clothes he was coveting, not the newly feminised form.

Gudrun made it I shrugged, as he emerged from behind the bar and drifted off to make the coffee for me.

Maria took over his job at the tape machine, and loud music soon echoed about the room. In the weeks I had been going there, I had started to recognise some of the music. Maria liked to play old American country music, primitive rock’n’roll, and loud, fast-moving punk. Blixa liked to play dub with heavy, heavy basslines, and of course all of the local music that he sold on his cassettes. He had no shame about playing his own music, and I had come to recognise his banshee wail when it appeared on the bar stereo, but he also had no reservations about playing his friends’ music, loud, and often, so that every now and then, a song would come on, and a little cheer would go up around the musicians responsible. Although there were, of course, little rivalries and local jealousies, the West Berlin musicians did not waste time tearing each other down like the London punks did. And I found the genuineness with which they saluted one another’s efforts truly heartening. It wasn’t just the girls who treated their music-arts-film-fashion scene with that hearty German cordiality; they all genuinely seemed to enjoy swapping their talents about.

By the time I had finished greeting all my new friends, Blixa had emerged with my coffee, carrying it on a little tray in one hand, as he brushed at his nose with the other. But as he spent his usual time crossing the room, Bettina looked back and forth between me and him, and the special order.

Why don’t you drink alcohol? she asked, but in a far kinder tone than the Germans usually demanded. Bettina, at least, sounded curious, rather than judgemental.
I just don’t like the taste<< I shrugged. >>It’s disgusting.<<

I don’t think anyone drinks alcohol for the taste<< she laughed, in her deep, throating voice. >>More for the effects.<<

I don’t know, I think people do. They always talk about the bouquet of the wine or whatever... but you see, I lost my sense of smell when I was young. So it doesn’t have that kind of bouquet, or aroma, or anything. Without a sense of smell, alcohol just tastes vile; it’s like drinking a glass of petrol. There’s no effects that could possibly be worth that.<<

Bettina sipped at her wine thoughtfully, before conceding, >>Hmm, maybe you do have a point there.<< But then her mouth widened into a smirk. >>But that would explain why you get on with Blixa so well, though. If you never have to experience his... ripeness!<<

I was about to ask what she meant when Blixa finally reached me with my drink. >>Your usual, my dear. Coffee for the English gentleman.<<

I grinned and thanked him, for the coffee was one of those small rituals that reaffirmed our friendship, though I usually switched to coca-cola over the course of the night. Or maybe it was his way of getting a little break, as he always emerged slightly re-energised from the backroom, blinking excitedly in a way that had little to do with caffeine. I was learning not examine any of my new friends’ habits too closely, from mysterious Soviet contraband to itchy, dripping noses. But tonight – disaster! – a large, beefy skinhead was sitting in my customary bar stool over by the window.

>>Never mind<< said Blixa. He handed me my coffee, and strode across the floor. As we stood, biting our nails over whether Blixa was going to finally push it too far, and get the shit kicked out of him, Blixa walked over, tapped the skinhead on the shoulder, and started to talk to him at lightning speed. The skinhead just looked surprised as Blixa babbled blue streaks at him, his eyes huge, his eyebrows dancing like two dark question marks above his face, his expressive hands acting out some story that we couldn’t quite hear. The skinhead’s eyes widened larger, and for an awful moment, we thought Blixa was done for, but to our great surprise, the skinhead shifted his bulk, then climbed out of the chair, collected his things and walked towards us.

He shook Blixa’s hand, then very politely addressed us >>Excuse me, my ladies. Please, do take your table, and accept my humblest apologies.<< He moved through into the back room, leaving me to take my seat, while the girls all started unloading their coats onto the little shelf.

>>What did you say to him?<< demanded Bettina.

Blixa just smirked and put his finger to his lips, nodding jerkily. But then he seemed to change his mind and pointed the expressive finger at me, his long narrow face breaking into a glorious grin. >>You are, of course, now committed to drawing me tonight.<< And with that, he loped back behind the bar, took down a large water glass from the shelf and filled it up from a bottle of Russian vodka, then started serving thirsty customers again.

I pulled out my sketchbook, and opened up a fresh page, slowly inking out boxes, as I wanted to document the comical scene I had just witnessed. Under my pen, the skinhead became even more enormous, and Blixa even more skinny and weedy, little more than a pair of enormous cheekbones and a wild bush of hair. Manon and Christine, who had arrived a little later, and had not seen the altercation, looked over the comic as I drew it, and roared with laughter. When Blixa came by, emptying ashtrays and picking up empties, and saw it, he immediately loved it, and insisted that he needed to Xerox it and sell it at the shop with the fanzines.

But as he walked away, he stopped, turned back and looked at me carefully. >>Draw me properly
now<< he insisted, with a strange expression. >>Draw me like you drew Gudrun.<< Although he had drunk nearly half a pint of vodka by that point, he did not appear drunk, just animated, his eyes particularly piercing as he gazed at me, before loping back to the bar.

I stared after him as he retook his position behind the bar, feeling very odd, with Bettina’s words about being too obvious echoing in my brain. And he must have been aware that I was staring, because he stood up a little straighter, then grabbed a chunk of his hair and started to, well, preen, back-combing it so that it stood up perpendicular from his head, these two or three long tufts among all the uneven shaved bits. It shocked me a little, this man who was somehow both oblivious to, and deeply aware of his own beauty. And I stared at him, trying to figure him out, if he was aware of the effects of his unusual looks, or if he was trying to destroy them, with that weird haircut and his odd clothes. The black ballet top, with the scoop neck that showed off the extreme thinness of his shoulders, did he know how that invited eyes to caress his throat? Or did he just find it cool and comfortable, during a long shift where he was wearing skin-tight rubber trousers?

His eyes flickered back towards me, while I pondered the trousers, as if checking I was still looking at him. And as I pondered, I realised I was already drawing, even while hating myself a little for giving in to the urge to trace his lines with my pen. Obvious, try-too-hard, and off-putting. I tried to shield what I was doing from Bettina, but soon Gudrun appeared at the door, and gestured for her friend to join her, then pointed towards the bathroom at the back of the club. I couldn’t shake the feeling that they were going to talk about me, and my face burned with shame at the thought of Bettina delivering to Gudrun the outcome of our little talk. Obvious. Off-putting.

>>She’s smiling<< observed Chloe, shaking me out of my self-pity. >>That means it went well with the negotiations for the new bassist.<<

>>What?<< I stuttered. >>New bassist?<<

>>That’s where she was tonight. She went to talk to Susanne from The Skin about filling in for Beate at the upcoming concerts.<<

Fuck. Stupid me. Always being overly self-conscious about things that other people were oblivious to, and oblivious about the things I should have been more self-conscious about.

When Gudrun and Bettina returned, they both seemed in better spirits, smiling and laughing and discussing their plans for the upcoming concerts, what songs they would play, what they would wear, what films they would show during the performance. Although it shocked me a little, how quickly they had replaced Beate, still, I was a little in awe of how dedicated Gudrun was, and how quickly she was pulling a new band together from the ashes of the old. But still, she glanced at my sketchbook when I went to take a sip of my coffee, and I wasn’t quick enough covering the ink with the blotter, and I swear, the look that passed over her face when she saw Blixa’s spiky hair and protruding cheekbones, it looked like relief.

The evening quickly filled up with fun and conversation, both Gudrun and Bettina bubbling with excitement at the new line-up of their band, and talking about gigs they would start booking in the near future, once Susanne had learned the songs. And, as so often was the case, talking about their own gigs turned to talking about other band’s gigs, friends who were playing at the Excess, or more famous bands who would be appearing at the SO36. Then someone mentioned that Martin, who ran the SO36, would be doing a showing of art-films at a gallery space near the Hochschule, and at that point, Bettina turned to me and nodded.

>>You’re coming to that, aren’t you, Carter? I think you’d really like it. My friend Tabea will be
I shrugged vaguely and stuttered >>I didn’t know I was invited?>> Growing up forever the odd one out, I was always afraid of imposing on other people, and obviously, I did not want to appear too keen towards Gudrun now.

>>Of course you’re invited<< laughed Gudrun, blowing smoke sideways out of her mouth. >>Don’t be so uptight and English. If it’s a public show, they want people to go, so just turn up and say hello. You don’t have to wait to be invited.<<

Manon smiled and gently nudged my arm. >>I think Carter is shy. You can come with us if you like. <<

>>Come with you where? Invited to what?>> Blixa’s low, deep voice abruptly appeared in the middle of our conversation as he plucked their empty wine bottle from the little shelf at my elbow. Although he looked as though he were technically supposed to be collecting the empties again, he was clearly enjoying the opportunity to stick his long, pointed nose into everyone’s business.

>>Martin’s film-showing up by the Hochschule<< supplied Bettina.

>>Oh yes, we are all going to that.<< It was all Blixa needed as an invitation to join the conversation, tucking the empty bottle under his elbow as he leaned back against the wall beside me, crossing his long legs and digging in his pockets for a pack of cigarettes. He offered me one, then when I declined, lit one himself. >>Are you coming to our Great Downfall Show on Friday?>>

>>Yes, I think so...<< Blixa’s presence, standing so close I could feel the warmth coming off his rubber trousers, unnerved me slightly.

>>Will you have your van?>> interrupted Gudrun.

>>I will see if I can borrow it, if you like?>> I immediately offered, my hopes leaping into my throat for a moment, before another internal voice kicked in to say: Oh god, just stop it. Obvious and off-putting.

But Gudrun smiled, pleased. >>I need to get my drum-kit from Kreuzberg to the Potsdamer Platz for the performance with this one. I’ll put you on the guest list if you can help out.<<

>>I’d be delighted to<< I replied, with considerable relief.

Blixa laughed, throwing back his head and letting out an animal snort. >>Careful, Carter, of being conscripted into other people’s Downfalls.<<

I knew he was making a joke, but something about the way he said it rubbed me the wrong way. >>Why are you lot all so obsessed with such negativity and destruction, Downfall and Collapse and all that?>>

Pulling his lips back from his teeth, Blixa gave a great bray of laughter. >>Because it’s the End of the World. At this point in time, we are living through the end of days. You know this, right? I don’t think this society has more than... perhaps three years left, at the most.<<

I looked at him, a little confused. >>Do you mean politically, or metaphorically, or are you talking about The Bomb, or what?>>

>>I mean it quite literally<< said Blixa with a sharp nod.
>>And in you’re in favour of this?<<

>>I am neither for, nor against. It’s simply a matter of fact. There’s no point in fighting what is inevitable; one might as well do one’s best simply to experience it most fully.<<

>>But people have been foretelling the End of the World since the time of the Ancient Greeks<< I mused. >>Do you really think it’s going to happen this time?<<

Blixa’s eyes suddenly lit up at the mention of the Ancient Greeks. >>Have you heard of the famous German archaeologist, Heinrich Schliemann?<<

>>I have, as a matter of fact.<< I blinked at him a little, as I was surprised that he had heard of such an obscure figure. But then again, maybe the man was more famous in Germany. >>He was the one who interpreted Homer literally, and discovered the long lost city of Troy, yes?<<

Now Blixa seemed really animated, as if he were genuinely excited. >>Yes, this is the one. Do you know, when he dug up the lost city of Troy, which the Ancient Greeks supposedly destroyed, he found seven cities, all piled one on top of another. It was destroyed again and again, and restored again and again. After each downfall, people pick up and go on. Civilisations rise, civilisations fall, except they don’t really fall. Humanity just goes on living, in its own way, in the ruins, until the next thing comes along. So the end of the world is... you know, it is just making way for the next thing.<<

>>But the Ancient Greeks did not have the Nuclear Bomb, OK?<< I countered. >>I think our capacity for Apocalypse is qualitatively different from anything that has ever gone before.<<

Blixa merely shrugged. >>So the Russians – or the Americans, I don’t really care who starts it – wipe out civilisation on earth, in the blink of an eye...<< Spreading his hands, he made a gesture like an explosion, the tip of his cigarette letting off a dramatic burst of glowing embers. >>Something will come after it, that is more interesting than what there is now, I have no doubt of it.<<

>>You seem awfully confident that something will come afterwards – like the human race is going to survive a nuclear bomb?<<

>>The Medieval Church thought that the invention of the Longbow would signify the end of the human race, because it could pierce armour. Somehow, we got over it<< he snorted.

>>Somehow I don’t think we will get over total immolation by nuclear bombardment. Have you seen film footage of Hiroshima, of Nagasaki? Shadows, on the walls of buildings. That is all that was left. Where people were immolated, in the blink of an eye, and all that remained of them was the shadow of where they had been standing. Not to mention radioactive fall-out, nuclear winter... this is different from the Longbow, Blixa, and qualitatively different from the invention of Gunpowder or projectile weapons, because this is not an invention which kills just individual men or ruins buildings, like a sword or even a V-2 rocket. This is an invention which destroys planets. Not just human life, but all life. First the blast furnace of the explosion, then the nuclear winter afterwards kills everything left alive over the coming months. The Earth itself may never recover from a nuclear winter.<<

>>First fire, and then ice? That sounds very interesting to me, indeed, I would like to provide the soundtrack for our impending doom, first the fire, and then the ice. I think that would be a very interesting proposition indeed, to make art during the end of the world.<<

A line of half-remembered poetry popped into my head, which I struggled to translate into German. >>Some say the world will end in fire. From what I’ve tasted of desire, I vote with those who are for fire. But if I had to die twice, I’ve known hate enough to vote for ice...<<
Blixa’s face lit up, both physically and metaphorically, as he sucked at his cigarette, his lips curling into a smile as the tip flared. >>That sounds like poetry.<<

>>It is poetry, from what I can remember. I think it’s Robert Frost? It’s better in English, though, as it rhymes properly. ‘Desire’ and ‘Fire’ rhyme so well it’s a bit of a cliché in English, but obviously, ‘Sehnsucht’ and ‘Feuer’ don’t rhyme at all.<< I muttered by way of explanation, suddenly embarrassed by the quote.

But Blixa exhaled his cigarette smoke in a long, low hiss, his voice giving rise to the word “Seeehhhhhsssssssssscht” like a sigh. >>See, I don’t just write songs about Downfall and Collapse. I write songs about desire and yearning and energy, too. But people never notice the songs about love; they only notice the songs about Collapse.<<

>>Well<< I said quietly. >>I haven’t seen your band.<<

>>Maybe you should<< he insisted. >>You might understand me better.<<

For a long moment, we stared at each other, eyes locked together, as I felt a prickle of electricity shimmer across my skin. But abruptly, over the low roar of conversation, we both heard Maria call out from the end of the bar.

>>Blixa!!! What, is this your fourth cigarette break of the evening, or your fifth? Can you get your skinny rubber-clad arse back behind the bar, please? People are lined up three deep, for fucks sake.<<

>>It’s only my second break<< Blixa sighed deeply and rolled his eyes. But as he peeled himself off the wall and strode back towards the bar, he turned and half-smiled towards me. >>I shall see you at our Downfall, then, yes?<<
Für den Untergang

Chapter Summary

All the West-Berliner musicians and artists come together for a "Great Downfall Show" on the Potsdamer Platz.

There, Carter has their first experience with drugs; and in the midst of it a somewhat alarming epiphany.

A carnival atmosphere prevailed at the festival at the Circus Big Tent on the Potsdamer Platz, which had come together under the moniker, Brilliant Dilletantes. (The spelling mistake, Wolfgang insisted, was *deliberate*, an oh-so-punk gesture of randomness and defiance.) Of course I had been conscripted, first for my van, by Gudrun, to transport gear from various squats and spaces about the city, and then again, by Blixa, for my toolbag of tricks, to make sure that all of the various multitude of instruments, both professional and home-made, had appropriate electrical supplies. It was a Friday, but Schumacher seemed happy, or at least accepting enough of the situation, to let me have the afternoon off. And to be honest, I *liked* being conscripted. My new friends were exciting and extremely glamorous, and it made me feel, well, important, and in the thick-of-things to be considered useful to them.

The New Buildings, who I still had yet to see live, presented a particular challenge. Andrew had turned up with an odd assortment of barrel drums, springs, bits of sheet metal and just plain rusting junk, which had sent the venue’s soundman into a bit of a tailspin. It was suggested, politely, that he might want to share a more conventional drumkit with one of the other bands, perhaps Gudrun’s, but Andrew was having none of it. He had sold his drumkit, he insisted, in order to pay the rent on the sprawling garbage-heap where he lived. And it was a point of principle, he insisted, that its replacement had been built from scraps salvaged from building sites where his labour was exploited for miserable wages. Andrew was very sharp, and really quite political, and could be savage when he chose to. He and Mufti ganged up into a little wall of defiance over their unconventional instruments. Mark, the handsome bassist, was doing his best to be diplomatic, explaining that the unconventional instruments were their Unique Selling Point, trying to smooth things over with the venue’s soundman, with the help of another of the performers, also, confusingly, called Mark.

This new Mark, however, to my great astonishment, was somehow speaking rapid-fire German with a pronounced Mancunian accent. I had never heard the like, but it wasn’t until Gudrun did the introductions (Gudrun had a knack of stepping in and doing introductions at precisely the right time) that I discovered the other Englisher on the scene. Mark was a tall, scrawny, slightly overenthusiastic music geek with an odd penchant for dressing like a policeman, but after four or five months without hearing a single other English voice (American voices, sure, on the radio, but on the street they usually belonged to soldiers, and were best avoided) I was a little overcome with emotion. Rather than standing back a little and circling each other slowly, as I normally did with new men, I threw myself into conversation with gusto. When he realised I was associated in some way with Malaria! he became as friendly as could be, chatting with great enthusiasm about our friends’ music, name-dropping half a dozen bands I had never heard of, that he considered them the equals of. The Fall. The Dead Trousers. The New Order. Who even were these people?

But it was over this friendly chat at the soundboard, that I became aware of Gudrun’s effect on
people, for Mark was clearly smitten, and kept going out of his way to do whatever she asked. I’m not even sure she was consciously aware of it, and I don’t think that it was a deliberate strategy on Gudrun’s part. It was more like she just had such infectious energy and such charisma, that other people’s plans quickly became aligned with hers. But what was even more interesting to me, was the way that Blixa seemed to observe the way that she worked, and he emulated her in his own fashion. Gudrun worked her charms very subtly, by a gentle kind of persuasion underlying her energetic conversation; but Blixa just flirted outright, with anyone and everyone, not even verbal flirtation, but really playing on his physical allure, rolling his beautiful eyes and flexing that long, sinuous body, so graceful in those form-fitting ballet tops, in a way that demanded attention even while resisting touch. Blixa knew he was beautiful, I realised with a shudder, and seemed to use that beauty as a tool to get what he wanted. And suddenly, I felt oddly embarrassed about the amount of time I had spent drawing him. Honestly, there wasn’t anything of sexuality in the way that I drew him; I just admired his face and his body the way I would admire a well-designed piece of architecture, or a pretty view.

There was nothing underhanded in the way that either of them operated; it wasn’t like either of them ever seduced people into doing things they didn’t want to do. It was more like they were both aware that sexual charisma was a kind of currency, a social capital they were both willing to use in their single-minded pursuits of their musical aims. Neither of them ever begged; they never even had to ask most of the time. People of all genders, impressed by Gudrun’s cool beauty, and Blixa’s beautiful coolness, would find themselves offering them things, not even with the aim of impressing, but just with the aim of getting to be part of their exciting and cool worlds. And suddenly, I saw how I had blundered in, in exactly the same fashion, and felt slightly ashamed. Obvious and off-putting. Bettina had been right; her comment had been a kindness.

So I hung back slightly, by the sound desk with the men, watching Gudrun work her magic, and watching Blixa watch and emulate Gudrun, as a form of education. It was such a change from the repressed sexual politics of London, which you had to pretend was on the level, but seemed to explode into violence the moment anyone got drunk. Instead, it was like a tacit but implicit understanding of the subtext of sexual commerce in the music scene. It was shocking to my perhaps repressed British sensibilities, but at the same time so fascinating that I felt compelled to watch. So I was so absorbed that I almost missed it, when Manc Mark tapped me on my shoulder.

“If you’re an English lad, you might have an interest in my thermos here!”

It genuinely took me a moment to remember how to speak English. “Oh ja?” But as he opened it, I caught a glance of a warm, milky-beige liquid. “Oh my goodness, is that tea?”

“Earl Grey, stewed fresh this morning.” He held out a Styrofoam cup, and poured one for me.

“Oh blimey, I have not had a cup of Earl Grey since... oh, you don’t even want to know how long it’s been.” I sipped, enjoying the slightly floral aftertaste. “Are those biscuits?”

“Go on, help yourself,” he offered, opening up the metal biscuit tin I had seen in his bag.

I dipped one in the tea, and savoured the sensation of crumbly biscuit dissolving in sweet tea, one of those childhood delights that never got old. Of course, it was some weird German biscuit that didn’t taste quite right, but the herbal tang was alright with the flowery aftertaste of the Earl Grey. “Oh, this is so nice. Germans don’t know what they’re missing.” I finished the first biscuit and started on a second.

As I reached for a third, Manc Mark moved to intercept, covering the tin with its lid. “Yeah, you might wanna slow down with those. Save some for later.”

I washed down the rest of my tea over the next few minutes. “Is there more tea, though.”
“Yeah, right, no worries.” He poured another cup and we mockingly toasted one another.

“Where do you get this from?” I asked, savouring the flavour. It was the most delicious tea I had ever tasted in my life, the taste of Bergamot so vivid in my mouth I caught the ghost smell of an English meadow.

“Ah, the tea, my Mum posts to me. The Dutch Cookies, though, those are special recipe from Amsterdam.”

No, I was definitely smelling cut grass, which struck me as distinctly odd. There was no grass underfoot, just trampled ground, and anyway, I couldn’t smell. I sat up and tried to concentrate, but the music from the stage seemed to be pulsating, shimmering, elongating, until the notes were like a long, thin ribbon, reaching out from the stage towards the mixing desk, the notation all cramped together like Blixa’s handwriting on a shiny strip of tape entering the mix through the flickering VU meters. “Dutch cookies,” I heard my voice say, echoing through my skull as if from a million miles away, thinking it was an odd phrase for an Englishman to use, and suddenly Gudrun was at my side.

>>Oh my god, Mark, what have you given her? Carter, you didn’t eat any of his cookies, did you? Carter, look at me, oh my god, her eyes are like two black pools... Carter, can you hear me? Come away...<<

>>Her?<< asked Manc Mark, a little surprised, then started to laugh, his high-pitched nervous giggle stampeding like horses across my field of vision. >>Oh my god, she’s completely wrecked.<<

>>She doesn’t take drugs! She doesn’t even drink, you limpwit<< hissed Gudrun, as she quickly grabbed me by the arm and started half pulling me, half carrying me through mile-high forests of trampled grass and waving multi-coloured circus flags to a slightly quieter area. This place seemed as palatial as a Bedouin encampment, all swirling tapestries on the wall, and hanging tassels and bells and coloured lights refracting off every surface. >>Carter!<< she cried, slapping my cheeks gently, and I tried to focus my eyes.

The fog cleared a little, as I saw Gudrun’s concerned face leaning over me. There was no Bedouin camp, it was a plain beige canvas space somewhere in the depths of the Big Tent. >>Gudrun! What’s happening? Aren’t you supposed to be on stage?<<

Blixa appeared behind her, his face wreathed in smoke that seemed to waft about his face, mixing with his hair until it was yards long, swirling and sinuous, coiled like snakes which slithered down towards me, caressing my skin and hissing charmingly in my ears. >>What has she taken?<< he asked in his deep, low, slow voice, the snakes catching his words and repeating them on and on until they turned to glittering silver air.

>>Space cakes. Mark reckons two or three.<<

>>I’ll get Jana. She’s good with overdoses.<<

But I clutched at him as the smoke curling around his head transformed into an ominous mushroom cloud. The mushroom cloud filled with the word, Hiroshima, which someone seemed to be chanting somewhere off in the smoke. The reference seemed to tug at me urgently, remembering that embarrassing conversation, back at the Risk. Suddenly, I was deeply ashamed of the way I had stared at him, drawing him and leering at him, in a way I found it difficult to explain. >>Blixa<< I said, his name clicking on my tongue. >>Blixa, I’m so sorry.<<

>>What for?<< he asked, shaking his head, sending little mushroom clouds cascading down the shoulders of his coat like a miniature apocalypse. I couldn’t possibly tell him I was ashamed he might
think I desired him from the way I stared at him, so instead I concentrated on the mushroom clouds, and oh god, had I really quoted Robert fucking Frost while talking about Hiroshima.

>>The last time we spoke, you tried to talk to me of the apocalypse, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I stupidly just quoted poetry at you. You must think me such a fool, such a... such a...<< I wanted to say ‘flippant’, but when I reached for the German word, it seemed to slither out of my mind. >>Un-serious person.<<

>>Un-serious?<< echoed Blixa. >>Why?<< I hadn’t realised I had taken his hand, but he squeezed it reassuringly.

>>It is barbaric, to write poetry, after Auschwitz<< I quoted, feeling my face flushing.

But Blixa’s eyes lit up, as he recognised the quote. >>Adorno was an old fool. It’s not about culture and barbarism. It’s about emotion. Poetry is the only possible response to the horror of Auschwitz, of Hiroshima – Hey! Can someone tell Borsig to knock it off with the soundchecking already?!?! – an expression of the inexpressible. In the face of destruction, poetry says what philosophy cannot. So to your point... well, I think you are a more serious person, because you respond to Hiroshima with poetry.<<

Finally, the chant about Hiroshima ceased echoing, as another person joined the small crowd gathering around me.

>>What’s going on?<< Wolfgang’s face appeared between Blixa and Gudrun’s, his voice lovely and calm, but it was hard not to stare, as his face was completely gold and shining like the sun, and he seemed to have sprouted a pair of feathery horns. Oh, bloody hell. I was definitely hallucinating now.

Four and a half months in Berlin, and that was my first encounter with drugs. The whole evening turned into a kind of intense hallucinatory wonderland, a cavalcade of delights one after the other, though I am not sure I could tell you what any of the bands actually sounded like. They sounded amazing, like nothing I’d ever heard before, like audio fireworks strung out across the stage, in a steady progression of ever more amazing tableaus, but I’m still not sure that any of them were real.

People I knew from Iron-Grey and the Risk bar seemed to come and go across the stage, as a tall blond man in a suit announced the acts: Andrew did something, as did the Awful Teenager. But it took me some time to realise that any of it was actually music. The Deadly Doris droned and buzzed somewhere in the background as I lay there, hallucinating giant iridescent insects hovering over the city. They seemed to be wearing exotic animal costumes, their faces shimmering with bright colours and gold sparkles, and Wolfgang seemed to be flickering back and forth between being the Great God Pan one minute, and then the Devil the next. I had never seen such an incredible, lively performance, but then again, considering the Bedouin tapestries that turned out to be plain canvas, I was learning not to trust my senses.

At one point, I became aware that Gudrun and Blixa had gone onstage and done some kind of improvisation, with Gudrun hammering out a tribal beat and Blixa chanting and intoning something about Chutney over the top, but none of it really registered. The order of the bands seemed all jumbled up, as hours, years, centuries later, as tendrils of green vines grew over my ears, a woman I would have sworn was the legendary film-star, Christiane F did her best to hold the stage with the awful teenager. Blixa, tall and impossibly beautiful in his rubber suit, came on and did something to her amp, and I couldn’t take my eyes of him, I was so high. I lay on a little carpet on the floor, hearing anti-music echoing through the crowd as I watched the insane movies my brain projected on the back of my eyelids, or on every available surface if I kept my eyes open.

The huge tent was so full, I barely recognised the place. There were hundreds, maybe even a
thousand young people crammed into the space, watching the performers, listening to their strange music, their faces coming and going and overlapping into one another like a surging sea. Punks, art students, squatters, everyone seemed to have come together for the concert.

At some point, Jana had appeared like a serene vision of a virgin saint, wearing a white lace dress that seemed to shimmer like icicles caught in the sun, her long, ratted hair taking on streaks of pearlescent peacock colours that I couldn’t tell if they were real or just the drug, for her locks seemed to twist and writhe like snakes. She sat beside me on a large pillow which seemed to grow or shrink with the light, until she was like Alice’s caterpillar sitting up on a huge mushroom, chain-smoking fags she lit one from the butt of another.

She was, as Blixa had promised, remarkably good and remarkably calm, her little-girl voice dragging me back down when I got too high, holding my hand when the music got so intense it started intruding on my other senses like damp creeping up a rotten wall. So this was what people were chasing with those highs they pursued in nightclubs and in squats? Sounds became visions, colours had tactile textures and beautiful music became so intense I could taste it on the back of my tongue. And most disorienting of all, my brain somehow seemed to fill in the detail of smells I hadn’t experienced in years. How could people stand to live like this? And yet, at the same time, even as my head suddenly writhed with unexpected bursts of bleach or rosebushes or toasting cinnamon rolls, I could understand how this kind of thing could be appealing. Time disappeared. West Berlin disappeared. My sense of my self, as a body in the world that other people had expectations of, completely disappeared. My mind felt like an iridescent bubble, floating free of the meat-cage in which I lived.

I didn’t know how long the experience lasted. It might have been hours. It might have been days. Jana got up at some point, and fetched water, which she made me drink. And suddenly, I was roaringly hungry. When we wobbled outside to find a refreshment cart, the sky was very dark. Jana ordered two of these awful sausage things that I normally disdained, and I paid, though she had to select the coins for me, for German money had lost all meaning, these shiny trinkets that people placed so much value in it had become only scraps of waste metal in my hand. The wurst, however, was the most delicious thing I had even eaten, and I devoured both of them, as Jana nibbled on candy floss that stained our hands and our mouths pink. She really was astonishingly pretty, this tiny child-woman, with innocent eyes and a knowing mouth, laughing as we tore off wisps of cloud and ate them.

>>These clouds do taste strawberry, yes?<< I wondered aloud.

>>I think so, yes. They just taste pink to me. But you must be coming down, as you remember German now.<< She smiled at me proudly.

>>I’ve been speaking German the whole night<< I insisted.

>>If you say so!<< she laughed, and her laugh was like tinkling bells and running water. >>I think Blixa’s band are about to go on now, if you’d like to go and see them? They can be a bit scary, though...<<

>>Are they very loud?<< My sense of hearing was still distorted, though the strange echoey thing had finally stopped, and loud sounds no longer sent plumes of colour and bursts of disorienting smells across my vision.

>>They can be. If it gets very frightening, you can hold my hand, if you like<< she offered. Without thinking, I took the proffered hand, and we walked through together, back into the tent. It was even darker inside, with very dramatic light up on the stage, where Andrew’s pile of junk had been assembled into some kind of apocalyptic landscape. The crowd was pushing closer towards them,
but Jana picked a careful path around the outside. >>You don’t want to get too close. You might get hit by something.<<

>>Hit by what?<< I asked warily.

>>You’ll see. Blixa says he goes into a kind of trance when he performs, like he doesn’t always know what he’s doing. Oh, look. It’s starting. What do you think of the new trousers?<<

>>New trousers?<< I asked, and followed her gaze. Blixa stood in the centre of the stage, his chauffeur’s cap draped mysteriously across one eye, the other carefully lined with kohl. His rubber coat was clasped tightly around his skinny waist with the same type of airplane seatbelt that I had only, the previous week, been wearing with Gudrun’s Iron-grey jumpsuit. And on his legs were not the old, worn trousers where the fabric backing showed through the rubber worn away at the knees, but a new pair of far more realistic leather-looking things that actually clung to his skinny frame, their shiny folds highlighting his extreme thinness. Drugs or no, they were the most fascinating trousers I had ever seen in my life. >>Those are very nice trousers<< I agreed, watching them wrinkle and bend as he unfurled and then removed his coat. Underneath the coat, he was wearing a shiny black tunic, also made of some rubberised material, that puckered and caught the light. His hips jerked back and forth, and I watched, entranced, seeing his form not even as human limbs, but just shapes of highlight and shadow, perfect geometric forms.

>>I’m glad you like them. You paid for them after all<< she laughed, squeezing the hand I had forgotten she was holding.

>>You bought Blixa’s trousers with that money?<< I gasped, no longer sure what to believe.

>>Of course. They turned up on a market stall, his exact size, and I knew if I didn’t buy them straightaway, they would be gone. They look good, don’t they. I knew they would fit him beautifully.<<

I turned to look down at her, studying her carefully. >>They said you’d spend the money on drugs.<<

>>They would<< she chirped, and I was about to ask her what she meant by that, when we were cut off by a plume of noise from the stage, so loud it seemed to burn everything in its path. The effects of the drugs still lingered, transforming overspill from one sense into another, and yet the noise didn’t scare me or hurt me. It was just like being buffeted with sound, like standing in the bow of a ship as it crested a wave, and letting the wind and ocean spray almost push you backwards, a sound so strong it could knock you down, or hold you up if you fell. It was exhilarating, breathless and urgent. It took me a moment to realise it was Andrew’s drumming. Mufti leapt up, shirtless, from where he had been crouching, tense with nervous energy, and started dancing about, pounding with a mallet on his heap of scrap metal. The beat started, slow and hypnotic at first, and then speeding up as the bass joined in, until it was pounding along with my heartbeat, so overpoweringly loud that all of us were caught by it, hundreds of heads swaying along, powerless under its spell. And then Blixa ripped off his hat, showing hair that had been scraped back with a razor, almost to the scalp in places, and started to wail.

I couldn’t even do justice to the change that came over Blixa when he performed onstage. Naturally, I knew with the part of my conscious mind that was making its way out from under the influence of the drugs, that this was our Blixa. Slightly goofy, enthusiastically grinning Blixa, high on coke, his motor-mouth running at speed, making jokes at Gudrun’s or Maria’s expense; capricious, charismatic Blixa serving up free drinks as the pied piper of the Risk bar, leading everyone to keep drinking until the sun came up; cool and standoffish Blixa wrapping his cloak of aloofness about him like his rubber coat, even in the midst of a crowded Kreuzberg gig. Yet the Blixa that appeared onstage was
none of these Blixas, and yet somehow all of them. He came alive, his whole body twitching with that animal nervousness, his limbs imbued with a superhuman grace as he stalked the front of the stage like an alien insect from outer space. His fallen angel face, his long, lanky limbs, those expressive hands alternately hammering at his guitar or communicating in their own individual language. And then there was that instrument like nothing else on earth, his voice.

His voice, which I had heard before, in the window of Iron-Grey. A voice which had whipped up the excitement of children, the derision of older people, and incited my curiosity, but had sounded mostly just alien. And yet, surrounded by this beautiful, storm-like cacophony of steel and feedback and noise and shards of sound like flying glass, here, his voice made complete and total sense.

Blixa chanted, he screamed, he shrieked, and then sometimes, he would pull back slightly from the microphone, open his mouth wide, and let loose with a howl that seemed to capture and express all of the rage and pain and anger in that fucked-up poor, desperate, beautiful city of West Berlin, and yet at the same time seemed to liberate us. He didn’t sing, so much as he channelled something deep and primal that surged into him from the city around him. When Blixa opened his mouth, there was not one shred of repression or social nicety in the way that he just let loose and poured all of his emotion into this concentrated moment of pain. It was terrifying, and yet it felt like a benediction: I understand your pain, and I accept it, and it flows through me, out into the world.

At that point, my nerves still jangling from the drugs, my whole system thrown into disarray, any other kind of more conventional music would have been too much, would have irritated and overpowered my disarranged senses. And yet, the New Buildings’ anti-music, in that state, was somehow less than, and yet also more than music, in a way that perfectly suited my state of mind. Even as I clung onto Jana’s hand, watching the anti-spectacle unfolding onstage, the thought penetrated my mind... Blixa up there is just so far ahead of the rest of us that we don’t even understand what we have in that man.

And the next thought was even less welcome: *I am falling in love with that man.*

My mind recoiled. I gasped a little, and dropped Jana’s hand as if I had been burned. No. Don’t be absurd. This isn’t real, this is the drugs talking. I will believe anything when I’m this high, even that Deutsch Marks are just shiny pebbles with no value. I can’t be in love with Blixa. He’s a man. This isn’t real, it’s another hallucination.
Malaria!

Chapter Summary

Unsure of what else to do with their unruly emotions, Carter starts publishing their art. Malaria! have conflicted emotions over Beate's new band. But at their next gig, Carter learns how close violence lurks to their sheltered little enclave.

Content note for homophobic abuse and threats of violence.

But the feeling stayed with me, would not leave me alone, and was still the first thing in my head, on waking the next morning, crumpled in the back of the van. (I discovered later that Manc Mark, perhaps feeling a little guilty over unintentionally drugging me, had found me curled asleep backstage, picked me up and placed me in the van, then driven me to the address painted on its side.) I stretched the kinks out of my back, washed my face and mouth out in the work bathroom, and somehow made my way home on an early morning bus, but my feelings for my friend had not changed.

It was impossible, I told myself. There was nothing to be done with this love. He had a girlfriend, who was now also one of my friends. And even if he had not, what on earth would I do, loving a man? I didn’t have a clue, how this creature would even fit in my life. I’d screwed a man once, just to see what it was like. Sweaty, uncomfortable and not much fun, to be honest. And let another feel me up awkwardly in the dark, forcing my hand down onto his cock until it spurted in my hand. I hadn’t felt anything either time, except that it was a lot of hard work, for very little reward. Men did not excite me. I wouldn’t have a clue what to do with Blixa, even if I got him, and the idea of getting him, that was absurd. And yet still, I loved.

I did the only thing I knew how to do, with a love like that. I drew. I finished off the silly Blixa and the Skinhead comic that I had started at the Risk bar. I drew another comic, inspired by the strange visions that had marched across my eyelids as I lay under the influence of the drugs, at the Great Downfall Show. In the comic strip, Berlin was melting and reshaping itself in the fire and heat of the Collapsing New Buildings’ music until the earth buckled. The ancient cemetery across the road from my Great-Aunt’s house disgorged its inhabitants, as one by one the bomb-damaged tombstones uprooted themselves and marched down the road, towards the Circus Tent on the Potsdamer Platz. The audience parted, as the New-Buildings played, to admit the new revellers, the musicians pounding their instruments, Blixa with his hands raised in benediction as all of the tombstones danced about in front of him. Then I drew an eye-catching black and white cover, had fifty copies made at a local instant print shop, and put them together as a little cartoon booklet, named “Kollaps Komiks” after one of Blixa’s poem-songs.

I sold some of them at the Iron-Grey shop. The rest I handed out to friends, at the gig that the Collapsing New Buildings played with Malaria! the next week.

Blixa absolutely loved Kollaps Komiks to literal bits. He read it over and over, and kept a copy of it in his back pocket for weeks, showing it to friends and fans alike, until the paper physically wore out. And I drank up his praise like an alcoholic gulping down cheap Russian vodka. I told him that if the comics were good, it was only because his music had inspired me so, and it was only half a lie. The stories were good because his music had inspired me; but I only wrote them down so feverishly
because my insane, impossible love for him was like a fuel I had to burn, or it would burn me up.

That next gig, which was at the SO36 supporting Malaria!, was maybe not as exciting, since I now knew what to expect from the New Buildings. But it was far more nerve-wracking, now that I felt like I had an emotional stake in the outcome. I got out of work at 5 on the dot, and rushed over in the van, as I had agreed to transport Gudrun’s drum kit from the space where they rehearsed to the club. I always agreed when Gudrun asked me to do something with the band. I loved feeling part of that band, this group of serious young women in our pirate gang. Although we all laughed and had a wonderful time, hanging out at the shop or in bars, onstage was an entirely different matter with them. They had a very severe dress code – dark suits, black shirts, dangerous looking pointed black shoes – and styled themselves with that very stark white and dark red make-up. And they took themselves, and their music incredibly seriously.

But Gudrun, although she was clearly nervous about the gig, was bursting with other news. >>This came, from Beate<< she explained as she climbed into the front seat of the van, and pulled out a padded brown envelope with a Düsseldorf postmark. Bettina’s head appeared in the gap between the seats as she opened it, and out slid four cassette tapes, with very plain covers in red, blue, black and silver, simply declaring “CHBB”.

>>Ach, men! Always wanting to go first. It should be BBCH<< snorted Bettina.

>>But that spells a very rude word in English<< said Gudrun.

>>Not quite, but close enough<< I laughed, then gestured to the van’s stereo. >>Are you going to put in on?<<

>>I’m a little scared to listen to it<< Bettina confessed. >>What if we don’t like it.<<

>>It’s Beate. Of course it’s going to be excellent<< snapped Gudrun. Only she was allowed to criticise Beate and her life choices; if anyone else said anything less than charitable about her friend, she was as enraged as a mother lioness.

>>What if it’s better than us<< Bettina countered.

>>Just put it on<< I snapped, and as I stopped at a red light, I took the tape from Gudrun’s hand, and put it into the tape player.

There were a few moments of tape hiss, and then the music started. It was very, very different from anything that anyone in Berlin was doing. There was no guitar, nothing the slightest bit rock, or even anti-rock. Instead, there was a pulsating electronic tone in the bass register, and a harsh electronic drumbeat, accelerated to a fast, danceable rhythm. Tape loops and atmospheric sounds whirled about the ear, as a woman’s voice drifted in and out, saying garbled, almost unintelligible things.

>>Well<< said Bettina, from the back seat. >>It’s very Düsseldorf, isn’t it. She’s gone all electronic, like a Kraftwerk record or something.<<

>>It’s nothing like Kraftwerk<< snorted Gudrun, who was still staring, astonished at the tape deck, as if expecting her friend to appear inside it. >>This has a heart, and a soul, unlike those stuck-up Düsseldorf boys.<< She paused, continuing to listen with rapt attention as the music took a definite swing towards the danceable, the bassline exploding into a sort of synthesised metallic throbbing that had us all nodding our heads along. >>I actually think that Düsseldorf has done her good.<< Another pause as the music kicked up a gear and I found myself swivelling my shoulders in time as the electronic bass synth seemed to warp and bubble like a pot boiling over. >>And it pains me to admit it, but I think that psycho Chrislo has done her good. This is extraordinary.<<
Are we going to write to her and ask her if we can stock this in Blixa’s tape cabinet? asked Bettina.

We can do better than that. I’m going to go to Zensor and tell him to get it in stock to distribute to all of West Berlin. The tape seemed to have invigorated Gudrun, and she was in a fine mood as we got to the venue. As I parked out front of the loading bay, she took the tape inside, and asked the soundman to play it over their sound system as we loaded in the gear.

What is this? asked Mark, the first of the New Buildings to arrive, punctual to a fault, as he trudged out to give us a hand loading in. It’s... wild. Fantastic bassline.

It’s Beate’s new band. Isn’t it absolutely amazing? gushed Gudrun. It was one of her greatest strengths, that she never seemed to bear a grudge, and was always willing to rep for friends she believed in, as loyal as she was hot-headed.

Your little bassist? She made this. Mark looked impressed.

Uh-huh. Maybe your little label should hurry up and sign them, before some hot-shot Düsseldorf label snaps them up shot back Gudrun, always on the lookout for some networking opportunity.

As we wrestled the equipment onto the stage, the other Malaria! girls arrived, one by one. Manc Mark, who was doing sound, arrived and set up behind the sound desk, nodding at me rather sheepishly. “Alright?”

“Much better, thanks.”

“I’ll be offering you tea, but maybe not the biscuits today,” he teased, relieved that I did not seem to hold the events of the previous week against him.

“Maybe later,” I laughed, and settled down to watch the band as Gudrun sat down at her drum kit.

Can we just run through the new one, quickly? she suggested, as Manc Mark walked around her, positioning the mics around her kit. She had given me a tape of the songs they had been working on, which I played in the van when Schumacher allowed me, so I was already a bit familiar with how their songs went, but I had no idea how intricate they could be to play live. The track she wanted to work on had an odd, disjointed stop-start rhythm that was really catchy, and stuck in my head like toffee, but apparently it was the devil to get right. She and the new bassist went over it again and again, making sure that it flowed from one bit to the next. A quick riff, stop dead, then Bettina would sing a line a cappella, and then they would count to three and pick up on the off-beat. Gudrun said it was influenced by Free Jazz, where you played not exactly on the beat, but around the beat. Either way, it sounded great to me, though Manc Mark had to stop them.

Sorry, ladies, but I’m going to need you to do a proper soundcheck now. Gudrun, can you give me the kick drum?

Gudrun made a face, and started to pound her foot on the kick drum’s pedal, as Manc Mark twiddled various knobs, and the sound started to spring to life in the club sound system. But Gudrun soon got bored with just playing the kick, and started to throw in the occasional snare hit. I could tell she was trying to emulate that very mechanical, machine disco of Beate’s band, and after about a minute, she totally had it, making me swing my hips to dance, but Manc Mark put a stop to that, reminding her to concentrate on the task at hand. Back to the plodding BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! and no more machine beat, but I could tell that the tape had really impressed her.

And yet, even in that wonderful, close-knit, pirate-gang of the West Berlin scene, there were still
sexist assholes who wanted to ruin it for everyone. I was standing with Jana, and Blixa, who was in a weird, high-spirited, confrontational mood after the energy of his band’s set. We were watching Malaria! play, and I was dancing around a little in my spot, because I was enjoying them so much. I loved hearing my friends make such a brilliant sound onstage, the way their odd, seemingly disjointed lines would weave together, all these disparate pieces of music joining together and interlocking like the pieces of a machine. The bass held it all together with its rhythmic repetition, as the drums thundered out a beat that was then picked up by the guitar and repeated, before being passed to the squiggle of the synth, and then somehow it would all come together like clockwork gears as Bettina sang over the top. Susanne, the new girl, fit in perfectly, as if she had been born to play with them. I did not know her other band, The Skin, but apparently they had a thing for wearing nice suits onstage, in tribute to old-fashioned jazz bands. Susanne had brought her very formal dress sense into the band with her, and the rest of Malaria! had decided to follow suit, wearing these mannish tailored clothes that looked stunning with their very stylised vampish make-up.

It was so arty, so quirky and angular, and yet at the same time so catchy, those almost nursery rhyme chants of Bettina’s that you couldn’t help but go home singing, at the end of the night. The little riff, and then the stop, and then Bettina strode up to the mic and chanted “Geh duschen, geh duschen, ab in die Fabrik...” and the drums kicked in absolutely perfectly in that weird stop-start Free Jazz rhythm, just how they had rehearsed it over and over at soundcheck.

But there were these two jerks behind us, who kept making snotty comments, mostly about the way that they girls looked, and how they must all have been lesbians, in those severe black suits, and how they both knew a sure-fire cure for lesbianism, hur hur hurrrr. I shifted uncomfortably, and threw a sideways glance at Blixa, but he was doing his aloof thing, sunglasses over his eyes, wrapped in his aura of cool the way he wrapped his rubber coat and his fetish cap around him, so no one would come and accost him, standing where he was in the audience, watching his friends’ band.

And then the lads behind us moved on to the subject of the music. Gudrun’s drumming, in particular, they strongly objected to, as one of them started up again. >>God, what is with this shitty drummer. Like, just... pick one beat and stick to it. She can’t even play, she’s just all over the place. I could do a better job of drumming than this...<<

At that, I turned around and threw a very evil glare at them. They were off-duty soldiers, from the look of their haircuts, though I couldn’t quite place the accent. But the glare just seemed to enrage them.

>>What the fuck is that in front of us<< one of them started up, deliberately catching my eye. >>Is that a boy or a girl?<<

>>And its girlfriend? Boyfriend? The long, stringy, mangy, fleabitten thing standing next to it... I don’t know. Is that thing with the shit-for-hair even human?<<

I could feel Blixa bristle beside me, as he realised they were talking about us.

>>I know one way to find out<< laughed the really ugly, bull-necked one, the same one who had complained about Gudrun’s careful, precise beats. >>Stick our dicks down their throats and see which one hollers soprano or bass.<<

Slowly, Blixa turned gracefully around, languidly letting his rubber jacket fall open at the waist. Posed with his hands on his hips, his pelvis tilted slightly forward, he looked the two soldiers up and down, licking his pink lips in a gesture that was at once slightly obscene, and yet somehow highlighted his intense androgynous beauty. >>Alright<< he drawled, tilting his eyebrows to a mocking angle as he curled his lip into a sneer. >>Which one of you two is actually man enough to slip me your dick.<<
The two toughs exchanged odd glances, and seemed slightly taken aback, like they had expected to be unchallenged bullies, to be predators, and were alarmed to find themselves suddenly the prey.

Myself, I would have taken advantage of the sudden silence to quietly walk away, but Blixa, as if drawn by some strange masochistic urge, actually stepped closer towards them, rolling his wide shoulders so that the fabric of his shirt caught against his slender chest in a way that was uncannily alluring. He didn’t stop until he was only an inch or two away from the larger soldier, the air between them seeming to pulse with the electricity of danger or sexuality or both. >>Well, come on, Muscle Mary, let’s see your limp dick, then. Or are you just... all mouth and no trouser?<<

The soldier stepped back, unnerved, but Blixa, who did have a couple of inches of height on him, though he was only half his width, moved even closer, looking down into the man’s face with a devastatingly contemptuous angle to his expressive eyebrows.

>>A hard man is so good to find...<< he whispered huskily.

>>Get away from me, faggot!<< In an instant, the soldier uncoiled and struck with the swiftness of an adder. Raising his hands to physically shove Blixa away, he seemed to forget that he was still holding a plastic cup full of beer, and lost hold of it, the alcohol sloshing out everywhere. In his haste to retreat from Blixa’s unnerving sexual display, he slipped, and toppled over, collapsing in an ungainly heap. Clutching at his comrade for balance, he pulled the other soldier off his feet, too, sliding on the wet floor, so that Blixa, in his rubber wellies, was the only one left standing, laughing at the chaos in front of him.

>>Well, while you’re down there, ladies, if you wouldn’t mind blowing my pipe<< cackled Blixa, as the soldiers’ faces turned red with rage.

“Scheisse!” yelped Jana, as she realised what was happening, and with lightning-quick reflexes I would never have credited from that dreamy, ethereal waif of a girl, she grasped Blixa by the elbow and pulled him backwards, away from the soldiers and towards the backstage door. My sense of victory over the assholes was short-lived, as I realised what would happen once they got to their feet. Seizing Blixa’s other elbow, I lifted and physically dragged him in the direction Jana was trying to pull him, before his sarcastic mouth could get us in any more trouble.

Even as the bull-necked one was climbing up from the floor, his smaller mate had launched himself after us, bellowing at us in a language I didn’t understand.

>>Andrew! Mufti!<< I shouted as we reached the backstage door, and pulled it open, shoving Blixa and Jana inside. >>Fuck! Where is a bouncer?<< Mufti appeared, holding a large metal crowbar he used in the finale of their performance, with Mark and the awful teenager in tow. >>We’ve got trouble<< I shouted, and looked around for some kind of weapon.

Mufti rolled his eyes, hefted the crowbar in his hand and stepped outside. He was short, compact, but with his shirt off, he looked powerfully strong. Mark, who was tall and muscular, seized a power drill which had been plugged in by the size of the stage, and the teenager grabbed a length of heavy iron chain that they used as percussion on another song. As the soldiers arrived at the door, the three of them took up position just outside it.

Expecting to confront two skinny fags and a small, goth pixie-girl, the soldiers looked very shocked indeed to find the rest of the New Buildings, lined up with heavy demolition equipment. For a few moments, they faced off in tense silence, before the bull-necked soldier spoke.

>>That fag spilled my beer<< he asserted.
>>You can buy another beer<< suggested Mufti, with far more politeness than I’d have given him credit for, as he tested the crowbar’s weight against his hand.

>>Your fag friend needs to pay for the beer<< the smaller one retorted.

Blixa, who never did know when to leave a situation alone, stood up on his tip-toes, to gaze out over the top of Mufti’s head. Catching the bull-necked soldier’s eye, he winked and gave a mincing wave before calling out >>Coo-ee! If you fancy a drink with me, darling, just ask!<<

The bull-necked soldier advanced, his nostrils blazing, but Mark also stepped forward, and gave a blast on the power-drill, waving it menacingly in the soldiers’ direction. Mufti smiled politely, and said >>Now, my friend Mister Chung here is schooled in the ancient Chinese art of trepanation, so unless you’d like some extra holes in your skull, I suggest you look for your drinks elsewhere.<<

Mark, who I knew to be a rather scholarly young man, with a good head for business figures and no experience whatsoever in the dark arts, buzzed the power drill a few more times, and the soldiers stepped back.

The lanky, babyfaced Teenager, who was clearly itching for a fight, stepped forward, swinging his chain rather casually, as if it were a lasso. He looked the heavier soldier in the mouth and squinted, as he needed glasses he was rather too vain to wear, since he had discovered girls. >>When you die<< he asked >>Can I have your teeth? I really want some teeth to, like, decorate my amplifier with, so it looks like an open mouth? I tried cat teeth, but they’re just... you know, they’re just not the right size. I’m not being funny, but... you’ve got really big teeth, so I reckon your teeth would do nicely. Can you open your mouth a little wider, so I can see them properly?<<

The soldiers blinked, taken aback, then exchanged looks. Mark buzzed the drill again, and suddenly they seemed to rather deflate, shaking their heads with alarmed expressions, as they started to back slowly away. >>These fags are completely fucking verruckt!<< >>You don’t want to get in a ruck with these mental cases, they don’t behave right.<< Another moment, and they slunk away into the crowd.

>>Jesus fucking Christ<< swore Mark, dropping the drill, before turning to glare sideways at Mufti. >>Ancient Chinese art of trepanation? What the fuck was that?<<

>>You know, you’re always doing that uncanny Chinese meditation thing before gigs and shit, to get you in the mood<< shrugged Mufti.

>>That is Qigong, the spiritual practice of exercises and meditation, to clear the mind and focus the energy before performance. Not some ‘weird Chinese shit’ thank you very much<< sighed Mark long-sufferingly.

>>No it’s cool, old boy, and I have seen you focus your energy with total precision against violent audiences in Hamburg, it’s cool, that’s all I was trying to say<< replied Mufti with his hands palm-up in an appeasing smile.

>>Oh man, I really wanted some teeth<< sighed the Teenager, shifting his chains with a slightly dejected expression as Mark and Mufti slapped each other on the back and hugged it out like brothers. >>I asked my dad if I could have his, when he had some root canal work done, but his were too rotten to use. Where do you think I can get some teeth, for my amp?<<

>>You do realise<< sighed Mufti. >>That they are probably going to come back in an hour with the rest of their squad, and beat the living shit out of us.<<

>>They were Russian<< shrugged Blixa. >>Couldn’t you hear their accents? They’re not even
supposed to be this side of the wall. They won’t wanna be caught over here. Anyway, if they come
back, Carter has a van. She can get us away.<<

>>I will?<< I gasped, letting out a breath I hadn’t realised I had been holding.

>>Guys, I’m serious<< the Teenager continued to whine as the band retreated to the dressing room.
>>Where can I get some human teeth? Do you think they sell them on the Black Market in East
Berlin?<<
Chapter Summary

When Malaria! learn of the opinions behind the argy-bargy at their last show, Gudrun and Bettina make a pact to take control of their band's own destiny, and go to New York in search of it.

And Carter, to whom Blixa hands off charge of the shop while the girls are away, has a very strange visit from Jana.

The next day, at Iron-Grey, as the girls picked over the details of their performance, specially recorded on the portable tape recorder they used in the shop, Gudrun heard bits and pieces of the argument on the recording, and frowned.

>>I had almost forgotten that interruption. What the fuck was Blixa playing at? Why was he picking fights during our performance? Was he trying to upstage us, again?<< she grumbled.

>>No, it wasn’t anything like that, I swear. I was there, he had a good reason for why he reacted the way he did.<<

>>What, did someone insult his haircut? Honestly, if he makes such a spectacle of himself, what does he expect?<< laughed Susanne, who was new, and didn’t know Blixa as well as the rest of us.

I frowned darkly and shook my head. >>He would laugh in someone's face if they insulted him. But insulting or threatening his friends is a different manner. I don’t agree with what he did, but I know he had his reasons for doing it.<<

>>What happened? Tell me the truth, Carter<< said Gudrun, very low.

And slowly, like pulling teeth, she extracted the whole story from me. I didn’t want to tell her, wanted to shield her from that kind of shit. The awful, sexual comments about their stage presence. The way he had insulted the drumming technique she had worked so hard to achieve. And, to top it off, that final bit of extra added sexual menace, that awful threat to rape myself and Blixa, I still wasn’t sure which of us he objected to more, though I did my best to tone down the way that Blixa himself had escalated the situation.

Gudrun went very quiet, which was unusual for her. I had expected her to roll her eyes and come back with some sharp, spikey comment, so typical of Gudrun, who had the capacity to reduce the snottiest scenester to rubble with a lash of her tongue, though generally she preferred to work through charm. But her silence shocked me a little. Everyone seemed very tense, Manon examining her fingernails intently as Susanne and Christine exchanged glances. Bettina nudged her gently, as if to say, you know, are you OK, and finally she spoke.

>>Well, at least those soldiers were honest in their opinions of us, unlike the rest of the backstabbing West German music scene<< she announced, very darkly.

>>Oh come on, that’s ridiculous. West Berlin loves you. You’re local heroes. You were the first band I even heard of, when I arrived in the city<< I protested.
In West Berlin, yes, it’s like a comfortable little nest made of all our friends. In West Berlin, they get us; they love and accept us. But when we go and we play these shows out of town and deal with the rest of Germany, the same thing always happens. We play with the Deadly Doris, and they get signed to a record deal, and we don’t. We play with the New Buildings, and they get signed to a record deal, and we don’t. We play with Jump Out Of The Clouds, and even they get signed to a record deal, and we don’t. It’s starting to get a little old. We play in England, we go on the John-Peel show, and he loves us. But it’s the conservative German record companies. They’re all run by men. They’ll throw their money, and their time, and their resources at all these other bands, but not us. Like they don’t trust us. They want to look at us, sure, take pictures of us and use them to sell their magazines, but invest in us?

That’s not entirely true<< I pointed out. >>I mean, you have tapes out. Blixa says your tapes sell really well.<<

We make our tapes ourselves<< pointed out Gudrun icily. >>We record them ourselves, in Blixa’s basement, then we release them ourselves, promote them ourselves, and then sell them ourselves, in our shop.<<

Well, that way we get to maintain complete control<< insisted Bettina. >>It’s better this way, no one tries to sand off our rough edges, and make us into something we’re not. I mean, can you imagine if we signed to a label that tried to give us beauty treatments and turn us into the Go-Go’s or something.<<

I like the Go-Go’s<< protested Christine.

I like the Go-Go’s too<< conceded Bettina. >>But we are not like them, not at all. We are very divisive, and I like that we are so divisive. We polarise audiences. People really absolutely love us, or they want to throw things at us and drive us out of the room. We inspire passionate responses, and I’d much rather inspire passionate responses, than people just shrug and go ‘they were alright’. We are dedicated, confrontational, strong women. We make dedicated, confrontational, strong music.<<

The New Buildings are also dedicated, confrontational and divisive<< Gudrun countered. >>And yet a record label from Hamburg is quite happy to give them a lot of money, so they can go into a proper recording studio, not just Blixa’s basement, and make a proper record, on vinyl, which will be properly promoted and properly distributed about Germany.<<

Bettina fell silent for a moment, then piped up again. >>But Beate always said that we were far more brutal than the boys. I liked that about us.<<

Gudrun arched one of her exquisite eyebrows in a disbelieving expression. >>The problem is not that we are more brutal than the boys. The problem is that boys are allowed to be brutal, and strong, and yet if we are the same... it scares people.<<

Berlin boys, brutal and strong?>> I chuckled, trying to break the tension in the room, which I felt oddly responsible for causing, through describing the squaddies’ banter. >>I mean, Blixa, that great, long, skinny spaghetti noodle of a man? He couldn’t be brutal and strong, even with a... with a dynamo made of testicles!<< Everyone laughed, even Gudrun, as I stood up and minced about dramatically, pretending to be Blixa, even going over to the window and standing there pretending I was performing, stamping my feet like a petulant toddler, the way that Blixa did when he sang. The tense mood lightened as Manon rolled a joint, and Bettina reached for the wine bottle, and started to refill everyone’s glasses.

I’m sorry, I’m banging on like a broken record again<< sighed Gudrun, holding out her glass for more wine, as if this were an argument they had been having for years, before I had arrived on the
scene. I’m just tired of asking these questions. I go to the cinema, and it’s all boys’ stories. I open a book, and it’s all boys’ stories. I turn on the radio, or go to a gig, and it’s just all boys’ stories, and boys’ voices, all over again. I’m not asking for the moon on a stick. I’m just asking to hear women’s stories, and women’s voices, you know, once in a while. Women are 50% of the human race, so we should have 50% of the stories. And yet we seem to get about 5% of the stories. So if I go to a gig, and I don’t hear women’s voices, why is it so wrong if I decide to stand up, and shout with my own voice, so that there is at least one woman there?<<

We all exchanged glances, feeling Gudrun’s fierce gaze upon us, and I realised I didn’t have any answers. What she had spoken of was something I had noticed, constantly, but never knew to put a name to, until Gudrun had spoken up, and almost crystallised it into being, by giving it a name. The whole topic confused me. What about my own strange predicament, definitely not a man, and yet not a woman either? I had always emulated the stories I read growing up, adventure stories about pirate gangs or running away to sea or what have you, but they had always been stories about boys. And the few stories about girls that I read, the girls were all stupid and ineffectual and cared only about ponies and dresses and foolish, inconsequential things, while the boys got to stow away on ships and have adventures. Would I be me, this weird inbetween thing I was, if I had ever got to read stories about girls that smuggled on board pirate ships and had adventures? I had no way of knowing.

When Susanne spoke up, she was laughing, almost like she was teasing Gudrun. >>Why don’t you start your own record label, Gudrun? Do it real DIY style. Take a leaf from the Anarchist squatters.<<

>>Anarchist squatters...<< muttered Gudrun darkly, and looked about the room carefully as if making sure we were alone. I knew we were all supposed to support the squatters, and Blixa and Andrew were both very keen that we attended demonstrations and showed solidarity because they both lived in squats (though really, I suspected they secretly just liked watching the argy-bargy that often erupted at these demonstrations) so what she was about to say would probably be considered disloyal, even counterrevolutionary by the boys in our scene. >>They talk a good talk, but have you noticed, who it is that does all the speaking at their demonstrations, and at their meetings about communal housing, and who it is that makes the coffee, and cleans up afterwards? Have any of you ever been in a communal squat where a man did his fair share of cleaning up the shared spaces – the kitchen or the bathroom? Have you ever seen a squat, where a man did the dishes? I mean, have you?<<

Christine laughed openly at that, then covered her mouth as if she knew what she was saying was totally unsayable. >>I mean, we all know, being an anarchist means never having to do the dishes.<< Our eyes all drifted over to the small kitchenette space, where dirty dishes – mostly from Blixa’s breakfasts – crowded the sink.

>>But if you try to raise these issues at the meetings, if you try to say to them, well, what about women’s issues. What about the division of labour, what about women’s needs...<< hissed Gudrun.

Manon snorted, and imitated the high-minded speech of the revolutionaries. >>Now, now, Comrade-inna. We will attend to these things after The Revolution. When we have thrown off the bourgeois Capitalist chains, then we will have gender equality.<<

>>I am tired of waiting until after The Revolution. I want equality for women now<< insisted Gudrun.

>>I want equality for lesbians and gays now.<< Bettina caught my eye as she said this, and a shiver passed through me, wondering if she knew.

>>If they can’t even institute these basic things at their meetings, where they are in complete control
of everything, do you even trust them to keep their promises about what will come after the revolution?<< added Gudrun, and we all knew this was heresy, but we all nodded.

There was a creak at the door, and we all jumped, as if worried about being overheard voicing our disloyal opinions, but it was only the wind. Bettina got up and pushed it closed again, her eyes falling on Blixa’s cabinet of cassette tapes. >>I mean, how hard can it be to start a record label. If Blixa can do it, surely anyone can.<<

Manon picked up the topic as she finished rolling the joint, lit it, and passed it round. >>I mean, you’ve worked at enough record shops, Gudrun. Surely you should know how the process works. You’d probably do it better than the boys. You have more sense in your head than Blixa, Andi and Alex put together.<<

Gudrun’s eyes flashed as she smiled wickedly. >>Maybe I will! And I will sign only women. Well... no. I won’t directly say that I will sign only women. I’ll do it the way that the boys do it. I’ll sign one man, who is extremely pretty and very useless, and keep him around, just so that when... when Alex, or Wolfgang, or whoever else asks, ‘Oh, Gudrun, will you release my band on your label’, I can turn around and say... ‘Well, sorry, Alex, I’d love to release your experimental noise tape, but you see, I’ve already got a man-band on my label’. And then sign his girlfriend.<<

Everyone collapsed with laughter as the joint reached her, and she took a very deep draw with a very silly, pompous expression, because we could all picture exactly how the boys in the scene would react to such a situation.

>>... actually, that’s not such a bad idea. Christiane is one of the first people I would sign!<<

It was a pipe dream to us, but it was no pipe dream to Gudrun. The idea took hold in her, that evening, and she started to make enquiries, to put out feelers, to expand her network of filaments and connections into a genuine plan to make something happen. If West Germany wasn’t interested in her pirate gang of strong, determined women, then she would take them abroad, to America, to New York City, where she had some friends from art school. That was the power of Gudrun’s will. She barely spoke English, but she got in touch with her friends in New York, and she had Manc Mark pull in some of his contacts from Manchester (apparently those mysterious names I hadn’t recognised – The Fall and The New Order – pulled quite a lot of weight in New York!) and she materialised an American tour, and even an American record label that were interested in maybe putting out a 12” for them.

And so Malaria! decamped en masse to the States. They had got in contact with Nina Hagen, a Berliner girl who was enjoying some success over there, about playing some shows in support of her. And Manc Mark’s contacts with some other promoters and some friendly bands in New York and Philadelphia and Washington DC came through with some dates, and off they went for a short tour. I had to admire the immense nerve of it, how Gudrun, with charm and charisma and sheer determination, managed to open doors, and then propelled her band through. People who had not really been prepared to like them, because they were a gang of fierce-looking, self-determined women, found themselves taken aback by how good the music was once they heard it, music that was just too urgent and important to ignore. America, I was quite sure, would not know what hit them once Malaria! touched down in New York.

While the girls were away, I somehow got roped into helping look after the shop, at least on the evenings that Blixa went off to rehearse with his band. It wasn’t difficult, as almost no one ever bought anything, except the occasional tape or fanzine. Mostly, it was about keeping the door open and the lights on, and talking to whoever turned up. For the shop served in some ways as a hub for messages. Almost no one in West Berlin had a telephone, and answering machines were unheard-of.
So people would drop by and ask for Gudrun, and I’d tell them that she was on tour of the States. Then people would drop in and ask if I had seen Blixa or Nicholas or Christoph or any number of people from the scene. I didn’t have a clue who some of these other people were, so I told them to write down a message and pin it to a cork board over the counter.

People loved that message board! For the most part, the notes were simple, like >>Max! Meet us at the Excess club on Thursday<< or >>Blixa – we need more copies of the Stahlwerk cassette at Zensor<<. And of course, there soon developed the usual announcements of >>drummer needed, kreuzberg<< and >>spare ticket to Friday’s concert at Metropol for sale<<. But Blixa liked to leave more arcane messages that made sense to no one but himself. >>Make way! Make way! There is no creation without destruction<< and >>if we all concentrate our thoughts in the same direction we ourselves can become the phoenix of the new rising from the collapse of the old<<. But Blixa liked to leave more arcane messages that made sense to no one but himself. >>We are living not in the last days of the old but the first days of the new!<<

When I was really bored, I used to like to pencil in little rebuttals and comments at the bottom of his notes. >>who cleans up after the destruction is what I want to know for cleaners are the truly creative ones, bringing order from chaos<< and >>someone’s first days are not always someone else’s last days have you never seen how a baby gets born<<. At first I thought Blixa might be annoyed by these little interruptions, but it turned out that he loved the to-and-fro, and often asked for sticky tape to add on another reply underneath the last, until the little dialogues expanded and grew in length into little streamers of conversation, mostly in quotes, I have no idea if he recognised my handwriting, or even realised it was me, but I delighted in those long, surreal quote-battles, and I think that he did, too.

>>You are born on your own, and you die on your own, everything else is up to you!<<

>>No one on this damned earth is EVER born on their own, unless you do not consider mothers to be people?<< Clearly, Gudrun had been rubbing off on me.

One day, Jana came wandering in, looking a little lost and spaced-out, reading the messages on the board as if looking for some kind of sign. She didn’t even notice me until I spoke.

>>Hey, Jana. Why aren’t you at the squat?<<

She shrugged sort of vaguely and continued to read the board. >>They’re rehearsing. It’s awfully loud. Would it be OK if I put a message up?<<

>>Of course, anything you like.<< I tore out a page from my sketchbook and handed it to her, along with a marker for writing out a message.

>>TAROT READINGS<< she printed, in a rounded, slightly girlish hand. >>Past, present and future, all will be told, starting from 5DM. Ask for Jana<< and then there was the address of the squat where she lived with Blixa, only a few streets away from my house.

I was bored, so I bit. >>You do tarot readings, huh. Can you do one for me?<<

She turned and fixed me with a very intense gaze for quite some time. >>Are you sure you want to know your future?<<

>>Come on, what harm can it do<< I tossed back, playing around a little.

The look she gave me seemed genuinely meant to spook me. >>You have no idea.<< But I shrugged, not willing to be scared off by some child’s game. It was like kids who tried to scare you by telling you the Ouija Board was moving by itself when you knew it was them doing it all along.
She turned, pulling a small cardboard box out of her voluminous black bag, then sat down on the sofa, taking the cards out of the box and shuffling them gently, touching them as if they were delicate flowers. >>Come here and sit down.<<

I did as I was told. >>Do I have to cross your palm with silver?<<

>>You’re my friend, I’ll do yours for free. Now, I just want to hold your hand for a minute, over the cards. No, don’t touch them directly. Take my hand, while I hold the cards.<<

I laughed a little, raising my eyebrows the way that Blixa had mock-flirted with the soldiers at SO36. >>If you want me to hold your hand, Jana, just ask.<<

But she rolled her head backwards, and started to breathe in a very laboured way, and for a moment, I wondered if she was playing around, or if she was genuinely about to have some kind of fit. But no, she shook her head like a dog shaking water off its fur, and started placing the cards on the coffee table in front of us. Then she peered at the cards, and frowned.

>>Well<< I said, casting my eyes over their muted colours. The deck was old, and very well-worn. >>At least I don’t see Death, or a skeleton riding a horse, or anything super creepy.<<

>>Death is not the worst card in the deck<< she said, in a slightly world-weary tone.

>>Which one is? Do I have any of the bad ones?<<

She frowned more deeply. >>The Nine of Swords is pretty bad.<< She moved her hand over a picture of a man sitting up in bed, weeping, surrounded by daggers. >>But I don’t think this is for you. This is someone around you. Someone who has not entered the picture yet, I don’t think.<< She moved her hand lower, touching a card with a dark drawing of a medieval tower being struck by lightning and bursting into flames, as the whole thing seemed to be collapsing into a ruin.

>>Collapsing old buildings<< I joked, but she gave me such a look, I immediately regretted the quip.

>>This is the worst card in the pack. The Tower<< she insisted. >>But it’s odd, where it is. See, these are the two forces at tension in your life, here and here.<< She gestured towards a picture of a magician and a picture of a buxom woman in a floral robe, with a crown of stars. >>But this card here, the harbinger of doom, this is the card that you need to concentrate on, and bring more of into your life, in order to resolve the tension between the two opposing forces, and reach this, the final outcome unless you change course.<< Her hand moved to the last card, which had a picture of two people proposing a toast under a winged lion head. >>The Two of Cups. This is a very good card.<<

I shrugged. >>Well, it all works out alright in the end, I guess. That’s good.<<

But Jana was looking at me very, very strangely. >>It is as I thought<< she said softly. I waited for clarification, looking over the cards, but they were just painted pictures on worn paper. Leaning forwards, she took me by the wrist, and forced me to look back at her. >>Carter, you see, I have the Second Sight.<<

I stared at her, my eyebrows raised, waiting for her to laugh, to make a joke out of it, to tell me she was kidding, and haha, gotcha, what a fool I was for falling for it. But none of those things happened. The waiflike girl just continued to gaze at me with a slightly apprehensive, slightly dazed expression, as I wondered if she really believed this stuff, or if she was just really high.

>>If you say so, Jana<< I finally shrugged, pulling my hand away from hers.
My Dad used to be an American serviceman, before he met my Mama and settled here. His family is Creole, from New Orleans. These things are common in that side of the family. I’ve heard stories from my Grandma.

I stared at her, suddenly realising that she actually believed it. Jana, you know that stuff is just superstition. It’s not real I said, very slowly and carefully, trying to back my way out of the conversation.

You don’t believe me. No one believes me she sighed, and started to pack away the cards. But then she threw me a glance. Blixa believes me.

Does he I said, resolving to have a conversation with him about not pandering to people’s delusions when they insisted irrational things.

I have predicted enough things for him, that he learned not to doubt me. I told him, I had a dream he went to Hamburg, and he would find the other half of his identity there. The bottom half. Sure enough, when he went to play in Hamburg for the first time, he met Mufti and Mark. And he told me they were going to and come and play with his band. They become the other half of the New Buildings. And their band was called Downwards. Hence the bottom half, don’t you see?

That’s kind of vague, don’t you think?

How about this, then? I saw a photo of a man in a fanzine, and I put my finger on his photo and said ‘that man will sign you’. I had no idea who he was. He wasn’t even onstage, he was just standing in the audience. When they go to Hamburg, Blixa met that exact man, and he owned a record label, and he signed the New Buildings. Is that vague?

Are you sure it was even the same man?

Quite sure. Her conviction really was unnerving.

Alright, you have the second sight. Tell me what’s in my stars, from your tarot reading I teased, not meaning to sound quite so much like I was taking the piss, but she was clearly offended.

Never mind she said, a little huffily, folding up the deck and putting them away. You will find out for yourself in the end.
Sex Work

Chapter Summary

Wolfgang and Blixa, trying to loosen Carter up a little bit, take them to a gay bar. Someone gets some extremely hot gay sex out of it. And Blixa gets his nose extremely out of joint.

Content note: contains depictions of sex work. Does what it says on the tin, yeah.

That October, both of Malaria!’s offshoot bands beat the mother band’s new line-up to releasing vinyl, which we all knew was the only format that really counted, as this meant they could be reviewed in the newspapers, and actually played on the radio, as opposed to just in shops and bars.

Beate’s and Chrislo’s band, who had started calling themselves Les Liaisons Dangereuses, released a very strange record indeed, with lyrics in Spanish, sung by a teenage oddball who went by the name of Krishna. It was a genuinely odd-sounding record, with a huge electronic bassline, of the sort we had come to expect from Beate and Chrislo, heightened by Beate’s chattering sound sculpture textures, while that loopy singer recited these kind of singsong little stories over the top in snatches of Spanish, French and broken German.

No one understood what it was about, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was that that insistent mechanical, stomping beat had an absolutely irresistible hypnotic appeal that could instantly fill any dancefloor with a pulsating, joyous mass of revellers. That beat was a monster, somehow more brutal in its minimalist electronics than Kraftwerk, and yet more playful than the German-American Friendship’s hammering industrial blasts. The Spanish lyrics, especially, triggered the happiest associations, of sunshine and holidays on the Mediterranean, and people could not pile onto the dancefloor fast enough whenever it came on. Blixa put it on at the Risk bar early on a messy Sunday morning, and was astonished to see even the crowded front bar turn into a mass of people jumping up and down and shouting along “Los Niños, si, los Niños!”

And of course the Collapsing New Buildings released their own dirty, nasty, roiling cauldron of hymns to chaos and collapse. Old Schumacher had got used the Malaria! tapes I used to play in the van, and even came to like some of the songs. But he stared, aghast, at the tape deck, the first and only time I tried to play Collapse in the van. >>What have you done to the car stereo? Is it broken? Have you and your friends blown the speakers?<< he demanded, until I had to take the tape out and play some of his favourite nostalgic Schlager tunes to prove that the stereo was fine, and he did not have to take any recuperative damages out of my paycheque.

One song in particular caused him particular annoyance, picking up the cassette cover, with Blixa’s scrawled handwriting, to establish that he was hearing what he thought he was hearing. >>Listen With Pain?<< he scoffed. >>Kids of your generation, you’re too coddled. No one who had grown up during the war, with American bombers screaming overhead, and the sound of hand to hand fighting in the streets, would need to make a song called Listen With Pain.<<

>>You know, our generation do have a lot to be angry about, with unemployment, and the state of housing in Berlin, and what with the Americans and the Russians about to blow us to bits with a nuclear bomb at any moment...<< I tried to protest, with the sort of political bent that heard Blixa complain about, but Schumacher was having none of it.
Nonsense! he snorted, and that was the end of it. I soon learned not to talk politics with Schumacher, for no matter how much rioting there was in the streets, or how bad the police violence against the squatters got, it was never as bad as the events of ’45. And I soon learned not to play the New Buildings in the van when he was there.

But that clanging cacophony, and that rage, and that pain in the New Buildings record, it really caught something, a sickening bile that was spewing out of West Berlin, all chaos and decay, as if in direct active squat-punk resistance to the calm and pristine electronic soundscapes of shiny, futuristic records like Kraftwerk’s Computer World. West Berlin, and the New Buildings in particular, seemed determined to be a rotten, festering boil on the face of the modern, streamlined West Germany, reminding them of the past rotting away inside their present. And the disaffected youth of West Germany needed to hear it. The New Buildings were about to leave on their own tour of West Germany, and as if to rub in the joke, they called it “The Berliner Sickness” after a nasty comment one of the local politicians had made about the West Berlin squatter scene.

For weeks before they left, Blixa made a point of coming round the shop I was helping to look after in Gudrun’s and Bettina’s absences, and seeking me out to tell me each bit of news personally, and to generally boast about his band’s good fortune. He was obsessed with the reviews of his band’s record, and would bring them to the shop, to pick over and discuss, trying to establish, not so much if the review was good or bad, because he didn’t seem to care about whether people liked it or not, (in fact he seemed to revel in the reviews where the critic had absolutely loathed the record) but to establish if they had properly understood, what it was that the band were trying to do. They were deliberately trying to be abrasive and irritating and un-musical. And of course, each visit and each review and each bit of gossip was usually accompanied by some request towards me.

See, Blixa had discovered that I was good at fixing guitars. Before Malaria! had left for the States, someone had given Gudrun an old broken electric guitar, which she just wanted to keep round the shop, and practice her fingering on, without making too much of a noise. One evening, while I was bored, waiting for the girls to get ready to go out, putting their lipstick on or whatever, I picked up the guitar, shook it, and heard something rattling around inside it. After carefully taking the strings off, I got a screwdriver and opened it up, only to discover that one of its electrical bits had come loose inside it. I soon worked out the problem, rewired the connection, found a replacement for the missing part, which turned out to be a volume knob, and soon had it plugged in to their little transistor radio amp, just to check that it worked. Of course I couldn’t play the guitar at all, but as soon as Blixa heard a noise coming out of that guitar that had been broken for years, his eyes went all big and round and he stared at me in a way that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

He came back the next day, with his own guitar, which he wanted me to take to pieces and fix the wiring, which had developed a bad habit of cutting out if he hit it too hard, which, of course, being Blixa, was almost every time he hit it. This guitar, I viewed as a challenge, for the problem was that it was completely filthy inside. I did the best I could to clean out the muck, the dust, the bits of cigarette ash, and general grime, then replaced as much of the badly corroded wire as I could reach.

As I worked, sitting on the sofa with the bits of guitar spread out in front of me on the low coffee table, Blixa sat himself down at the shop counter. He rested his sharp chin on the back of his hands, and started to study me very carefully, his eyes absolutely glued to my fingers, as I worked with the screwdriver, bits of wire, and the soldering iron.

Can I ask you a question, Carter? he finally said, his voice very low and deep.

Of course I shrugged, thinking it was just going to be something about electrical wiring.

Are you a lesbian? Again, he kept his voice low and deep, like it was the most natural question
in the world, but I was so shocked that I started and had to react quickly not to drop my soldering iron.

>>That’s kind of a personal question<< I hedged, squirming under his gaze, wondering what on earth had brought this up.

>>I did ask if it was alright to ask you<< he protested.

>>I suppose you did, though to be fair you didn’t tell me what kind of question it would be.<<

He started to twist his body back and forth on the rotating clerk’s stool by the counter, though he kept his head lying on his folded arms, and his eyes carefully on my hands. >>You’re not going to answer then.<<

>>I just want to know what on earth made you ask<< I retorted defensively.

He shrugged lightly, the fabric of his ballet top puckering over his exposed collarbones. >>Well, it’s what Bettina reckons. And Bettina’s got a good radar for girls who are for the girls, if you catch my meaning.<<

I stared back at him, wondering awkwardly for the first time, if Bettina had had an underhanded reason for warning me off Gudrun, that had nothing to do with Gudrun’s discomfort. >>Well, I am for the girls, but I’m not sure I’d call myself a lesbian.<<

>>You also go with men, sometimes, then?<< asked Blixa with the casual nonchalance of someone asking if I took milk and sugar in my tea.

Looking away from him, I stared down at my hands, feeling the colour start to rise in my cheeks. I was trying very hard not to think about going with men that way, with Blixa’s distracting blue eyes on me. >>No, I’m not really into men. Not like that...<<

>>So you go with girls, and you don’t go with men. Is that not a lesbian?<<

>>You go with girls too<< I shot back, a little more sharply than I intended. >>Does that make you a lesbian?<<

A grin spread across his face as his eyebrows nudged sharply up and then down. >>There are some who might say so.<<

>>Don’t be ridiculous<< I snapped. >>It’s obvious you’re not a lesbian because you’re not a woman.<<

>>You sound very sure of that<< retorted Blixa and this time his eyebrows were starting to raise more slowly, with the distinct warning of a dog whose hackles were going up.

>>It takes more than a bit of eyeliner and a ballet top to make you a woman<< I shot back.

>>And you’re the expert<< sniped Blixa.

At that moment, I pulled back, mindful of Blixa’s sharp tongue. >>No. That’s exactly it. I’m no expert on being a woman at all. I don’t feel like I meet Bettina’s definition of a lesbian, because I don’t feel like a woman myself.<<

Blixa nodded as his face returned to calm. If I thought he’d be taken aback by this confession, he was rather sanguine about it. >>Yes, I can see that. Slowly, he smiled and lowered his eyebrows
It seemed like he was trying to put me at ease, but I felt my personality starting to fray at the edges a little bit, the way it always did when I tried to explain. >>Well, I don’t feel entirely like a man, either. I feel like a... I don’t know what I am. Not being one thing doesn’t automatically make you the other, does it? This is, I think, why I really don’t like going with men. They always try to make me into The Girl in the relationship, and you know, I am not A Girl. I don’t know how to be a girl, not for anyone. But with women... I don’t feel like I’m put into that box quite so much. Which men always try to put me in.<<

>>But there are ways in which men can be with other men that don’t involve either of them being ‘The Girl’...<< Blixa started to venture, but I cut him off.

>>I wouldn’t know anything about that<< I replied quickly, curtly, trying to make it clear this time of questions was over. I did not want to think about men who were anything, especially the way he was now, very carefully and deliberately rubbing his finger back and forth across his lips, without even taking his eyes from my hands.

>>Look, your guitar is nearly finished<< I blurted out. >>Do you want to fetch your little amp and try it out?<<

The conversation was successfully diverted, as Blixa stood up and climbed over the sofa to retrieve the radio receiver he used as his amp. When he plugged it in, he was delighted with the results, as the guitar’s rewired pickups were about twice as loud as they had been before. And every time he came round for the next few weeks, he had another bit of kit that he wanted me to open up and take a look at. And every visit was accompanied with another exciting piece of news about another exciting gig they had booked, until it seemed like they were going to be visiting every city with a music venue in the whole of West Germany.

I tried to be happy for him, but when I heard the news, I found it hard to share in his band’s excitement. Having Gudrun and Bettina being so far away was hard enough. But he was going to be away for over three weeks – nearly a month! – and I was finding it hard to imagine descending into Berlin nightlife without Blixa as our pied piper. I had got used to him being at Iron-Grey all the time, sitting on the counter, or in the window, enthusing about the latest thing, putting on a cassette of ‘this amazing track’ or hooking up his film projector to play some Super-8 film he insisted was art and we all needed to pay attention to, now. And of course, the band he had just discovered would be playing somewhere in the city, or the artist would have some impromptu show in a gallery or a shop, and he would make us all pile into the van to go off and see. Blixa’s relentless energy and enthusiasm was so infectious it carried us all along, long after the time I should have been asleep.

I complained, once, about the hours we kept, when I had been conscripted with the van, after a long day of work, at the end of a long week of work, to drive him and Wolfgang out to some obscure location up in the French Sector, for some strange art show cum performance art party that Wolfgang had some pieces in. But when I complained about my exhaustion, Blixa had looked at me, quite seriously, then dug in the pockets of his voluminous vinyl coat, and produced a small plastic bag containing a variety of pills of dubious origins. With his long, bony fingers, he extracted one, and held it out as an offering to me.

>>I don’t take drugs<< I reminded him, though I had to admit, my resolve was wavering, after discovering that I had experienced no lasting ill effects after the overdose on space cakes at the Great Downfall Show.

>>It’s not really a drug<< he insisted. >>It’s not like hash or coke or smack or anything. It’s only Dexedrine. Perfectly safe, perfectly harmless. They give them out to American servicemen so that
they can stay awake through their overnight watches. Even *housewives* take them, to keep their figures trim.<< He patted his absurdly skinny belly, and I realised that he had dressed up for the party as if for a gig, wearing his best rubber trousers with the buckles just below the knees, and a clean leotard top, his eyes carefully mascaraed, the left particularly painted round with a ring of eyeliner.

I looked at the pill, feeling exhaustion creeping through every bone in my body. I knew I had several choices. I could drop the lads off, and drive home to bed, knowing that I had severely disappointed and let down my friends, who were expecting a ride home, to avoid the long trek through unfamiliar neighbourhoods full of foreign soldiers, where they were likely to face being beaten up for looking, well, more than a little bit queer. Or else, I could try to catch a few hours’ kip in the van, but that meant I would miss out on whatever exciting goings-on were going to be happening in that warehouse, where both Wolfgang and Blixa had assured me, things were going to get really, truly decadent. Or I could take Blixa’s special American pill.

I took the pill.

Blixa grinned at me, his wide lips pulling back from his sharp, pointed teeth, raising his eyebrows as if to say, you’re really one of us now. I didn’t feel anything, I still just felt tired and slightly annoyed as I locked up the van and followed him and Wolfgang through the night to the glowing lip of the warehouse door beyond. Inside, the light was dim, and mostly red, giving the place the aspect of the inside of a volcano, or maybe some Dantean Hell, as we pushed inside. It was crowded with bodies, almost entirely men. Wolfgang had claimed that there was going to be an art exhibition, but I could see little art, and a whole lot of decadence, as bodies slipped against bodies in the dim light.

>>I’m going to find the bar. Do you want anything?<< I shouted in Blixa’s ear, and he nodded, making a gesture that indicated that he wanted a beer.

With some difficulty, I located a couple of drag queens selling their wares from huge barrels full of ice and bottles, and managed to exchange a few DM for two bottles of beer and a can of coke. But then I had to push my way back through the throbbing mass of hairy flesh and bits of leather, to try to find my vanished friends. I asked a passing construction worker in a leather harness of some sort that looked totally unfit for any construction site I had ever been on, if there was any actual art in the place, and he pointed back towards a doorway further inside. I persevered, and pushed through into a lighter, less crowded room, where, true to Wolfgang’s word, there was some kind of exhibition, and the two lads I had come with were standing round looking at the pieces. I handed out the drinks, and as I sucked at the can of coke, I started to feel the exhaustion start to lift from my limbs. I wasn’t tired any more, in fact, I could probably stand to go on looking at weird art for a few more hours. It took me a few minutes, mostly from Blixa’s sniggering, to work out that the weird photos on the wall, all of these dark gaping voids surrounded by abstract patterns of swirling lines, were actually close-up photography of gaping anuses.

>>I was supposed to have a piece in this show<< Blixa told me proudly.

>>Where is it?<<

>>The beastly philistines took it down. I was too outré for them<< Blixa sighed, rolling his eyes extraordinarily.

Wolfgang curled his handsome face into a smile, cupping his hand for an exaggerated stage whisper. >>He submitted a set of artfully semen-stained sheets. It wasn’t too outré, darling, it was just a health hazard. It stank!<<

I glared at Blixa, who was now snorting with laughter, then pushed past him, out through a door into what I thought was the bar again, but turned out to be a crowded dancefloor, almost slick from the
sweat pouring off the dancers. There was a weird grinding synth music in the background, over
which a bored-sounding English girl recited something about being hot on the heels of love, and the
bodies on the floor seemed to grind and throb in time with it. There was no band, only a DJ, and
over where the impromptu stage was, a pair of naked muscular men with soldiers’ haircuts and large,
fake, simulated weapons painted with flags, were pretending to assault one another with the
cardboard rifles and machine guns, then rubbing up against one another in a strange performance,
wrestling, as sinuous as snakes. I smirked, thinking of the toughs that had chased Blixa and me at the
SO36, then looked to the side, for on either side of the stage, as someone’s idea of a camp joke, a
pair of topless girls were gyrating in time to the music. I stared, sucking at my coke like I had been in
the desert for so long I had forgotten that I was even thirsty.

The girl on the left was a typical androgynous Berlin girl, short dark flapper haircut, gash of red
lipstick, and slim, boyish hips. But the girl on the right, she was a goddess. She was curvy, ever so
slightly plump, with large breasts that swung hypnotically back and forth to the thrust and cut of her
wide, voluptuous hips. Wavy red hair tumbled over her freckled shoulders in a loose up-do like
something out of a 1950s pin-up magazine. She looked like something from another age, as if
Brigitte Bardot had been yanked out of a dazzling Technicolor 1950s film and thrust into the gritty
grey world of West Berlin. Slowly, I became aware of a thudding noise that was not the music, and a
high-pitched whine cycling in my ears, as I felt the whole world simultaneously shift gears both up
and down, so that I seemed to be standing at the edge of some tunnel vision that was perfectly
centred around the beautiful woman, tipping me inexorably towards her. Swallowing the last of my
soda, I flipped the can away, completely heedless of where it landed, and found myself pushing
towards the stage, intent on the girl.

Twenty minutes, half an hour, an hour, I don’t even know how long it took me to attract her
attention, because either my racing brain had slowed down to the rate of the thudding beat pulsing
through my eardrums, or the world had finally sped up to the relentless pace of the high-pitched
whine coursing through my veins, but I eventually – abruptly – found myself up on the podium,
dancing with the red-headed goddess. Every one of my senses was on fire, my energy surging,
completely rejuvenated by the heady promise of sex that seemed to emanate from every pore of her
luscious body. I didn’t even know what it was that had come over me, I just knew that I had to be near her, all
of my inhibitions peeling away like a bad sunburn to reveal some raw, red creature beneath, boiling
with lust. I flirted, and I teased. I brushed up against her, then pulled away, letting her follow me.
Christ, I had forgotten what it was like to dance with a beautiful girl who responded to my flirtations,
pressing up against me, letting her nipples drag against the rough canvas of my jumpsuit. Putting my
hand out, I held it for a moment only a few inches from her nipple, waiting for a reaction, as her eyes
closed to slits, and a raspberry coloured tongue appeared to lick her painted lips. And I swear, it was
she who thrust her breast into my hand, as my thumb and forefinger found themselves closing about
her nipple. Not ten minutes later, I was kneeling down before her, dancers whooping as I licked at
her breasts, her knee-high boots pressing me into submission. I felt drugged, stupefied, by the
intoxicating sensation of her sweat, as she bent down to whisper in my ear.

>>You’re not a queer, then?<< There was no maliciousness in her tone, just a steady appraisal of the
situation.

>>I am for the girls<< I assured her, burying my nose against her fishnet tights.

>>Coz I’m working tonight, but I could give you a private dance, with a happy finish, if you have
money?<< She named a price, as I stared up at her, gobsmacked.

Lust made me insensate, disbelieving of what she was offering. >>You mean, you would have sex
with me... for that?<<
She laughed, and caressed my hair. >>Of course, sweetie. You really are such an innocent, aren’t you?<<

The sum was high, but seemed inconsequential compared to the beauty of her body. What were Deutschmarks after all, but shiny pebbles? I wanted to shower her with them. Shapely thighs, wide hips, that gently little curve of her belly that seemed to press itself into my face as if demanding to be kissed. >>Where can we go?<< I asked desperately. >>I have a van...<<

>>I’m not getting in a car with you, lad, innocent or not. There’s an office, in the back. Let’s go there.<< I followed her meekly, just clutching her hand, feeling like my knees were shaking and my whole body was just quivering with lust. How long had it been? I felt myself all churned up inside, waiting for the trick, wondering what was going to happen to stop this, or if I really was, finally, about to get laid. As we reached the office, I closed the door behind me, but she pulled it open, ajar just an inch. >>Look, my colleagues are just down the hall<< she warned. >>If you pull any funny stuff, I just want you to know, I will shout for them.<<

>>No funny stuff<< I assured her, going over to her and pressing my mouth against her just at the nape of the neck, kissing and sucking and nibbling, as I felt my blood roaring in my veins. She was several inches shorter than me, just the right height, even with the stiletto heels of her go-go boots, so I pulled her body against me, feeling for the soft flesh of her rounded ass. She clung to me, parting her legs, so I went to kiss her mouth, but she turned away.

>>No, that’s not on offer, don’t you know anything, little boy?<<

>>I’m so sorry<< I gasped, pushing my fingers inside her fishnets as I nibbled hungrily at the soft parts of her neck.

>>Oh, what the hell, you’re seriously handsome<< she shrugged, and brought her mouth up towards mine. Our lips met, and I pushed my tongue inside her mouth, exploring her like a forgotten continent. Her tongue was a revelation, her mouth as soft as the flesh of some ripe fruit, her teeth like a pearly staircase to further delights as she raked them across my tongue. My hands went to the back of her head, feeling the texture of her hair as I pulled her towards me, locking her lips against mine. It had been so long since I had kissed a girl, and all of those months of frustration and lust went into that kiss, until both of us were breathless. As I pulled away, she smirked at me, and tried to straighten her now-lopsided up-do. >>Wow. You’re a good kisser, cutie.<<

>>Only an appetiser<< I assured her. >>I want to kiss you down there.<< I gestured with my chin towards the dark cleft between her fishnet tights.

>>That’s extra<< she warned me.

>>I got money<< I assured her, and sank to my knees. I pushed her short, leather skirt up out of the way, only to find the fishnets attached to suspenders, and she wasn’t even wearing knickers. Oh Christ, the texture of her skin made my head spin as I lifted her and pushed her up onto the desk, parting her legs and thrusting my face into her cleft. She moaned a little, and started to writhe, and I had no idea if the writhing was another thing I would have to pay extra for, or if the way she thrust her fingers into my hair and clutched me against her was genuine, but good god, I had forgotten the way that a girl could move underneath me, and how much that excited me and turned me on. I was lost in my own lust, sucking, licking, grabbing great handfuls of her freckled flesh, every iota of my energy focused on my mouth, wanting to push myself up inside her where everything was warm and wet and wonderful. I found myself showing off, all those little tricks that Maud had taught me, making her gasp and lose her breath. The little pants grew sharper and shallower, and she let out a long, low, animal moan as she came, her face crumpling up as if in agony as I pulled back to watch, finishing off the job with my fingers.
Oh my god she muttered, lying back against the desk. I’m not used to coming, for real, when I’m at work.

I laughed a little, feeling proud of my handiwork, even as my better reason told me she probably said that to all the guys. I’m not like the other guys.

She sat up and kissed me again, and I tried to warn her that my face was sticky with her juices, but she didn’t seem to care, licking it off me as she showered my face with her attentions. But then she seemed to compose herself again, taking a more professional tone as she tried to exchange places with me. Now, about your happy finish.

No, that’s OK I tried to protest as she reached into my lap and unfastened the flies of my boiler suit, but her hand slipped inside my clothes before I could stop her.

Her hand touched the absence where she had clearly expected my equipment to be, and she abruptly stopped and just stared at me. I froze, and for a long minute, we just stared at one another, as I wondered what she would do, if she would scream for her colleagues, if there would be an abrupt explosion of violence, and I would be expelled from the club, or worse... But she seemed to recover from her surprise in a moment, and covered it up with professional ease. Oh she said aloud, then smiled. You are really not like the other guys, then. Lie down, I can handle this.

I lay back on the desk, not even really caring what I was lying on, as all of my nerve endings were concentrated on that one spot between my legs, where she was pushing her plump fingers inside me. Her thumb found the head of my clitoris, and started to massage, very gently and very professionally, as if she knew what she was doing. Granted, I was already very turned on, from the taste of her pussy, from the whole experience of dancing with her, maybe even from that awful drug that Blixa had given me, which had indeed made me alert and randy, but it seemed only a matter of moments until my whole cunt quivered and then exploded around her, in a huge mass discharge of relief. The events of the past few months seemed to leave me, as I felt a deep sense of peace and wellbeing just flow across me, leaving me quietly energised.

She lay with me for a few moments only, then she got up, and retrieved her bag, wiping herself off with some tissues, before telling me what my bill was. I sat up, feeling a bit awkward as I reached into my jumpsuit for my wallet, only to grow alarmed as I heard a deep, low voice tell me Better check your wallet to make sure she hasn’t already taken it.

I jumped, for the inch’s gap between door and frame had widened to about six inches, and Blixa’s face hovered inbetween. For an awful moment, I felt myself flood with shame, wondering how long he had been there, and cast my eyes downward towards my wallet. But it was fine; my money was all there. I counted off the bills for the beautiful go-go dancer, now trying to fix her clothes and her make-up in a pocket mirror, then glared at Blixa. He was staring, with a mixture of curiosity and surprise and interest, not at the girl, but at me, in a way that made me feel distinctly uncomfortable.

Do you want a go she asked Blixa in a most straightforward tone, as if asking him if he wanted another bottle of beer. You’ll have to wait a minute while I fix my hair, but I won’t re-apply lipstick if you just want a blowjob.

I haven’t got any money said Blixa simply, and her interest in him evaporated as she went back to her toilet, though he continued to stare at me.

Were you watching me the whole time? I demanded, feeling weirdly compromised. I hadn’t been ashamed of going with the beautiful girl until this moment, but Blixa’s gaze made me feel suddenly like I had done something quite wrong.
Blixa’s lips parted in a wicked grin. >>She will probably charge you extra if I did.<< I continued to glare at him. >>Look, you are a newborn innocent baby when it comes to West Berlin nightlife. I just wanted to make sure you were not ripped off.<<

I said nothing, but put my wallet away and did up the snaps of my jumpsuit. The warm glow of the sex had not left me, but the other roaring sensation in my ears, was finally dimming, and I was starting to feel tired. >>How much longer is Wolfgang going to want to stay?<<

>>Wolfgang has gone home on the back of a motorbike with a beautiful young man of his acquaintance. We won’t see him again tonight. We are free to go back to Schöneberg any time you like.<<

At that, the beautiful girl looked up again. >>Schöneberg?<< she asked hopefully. >>You said you have a van, yes? Can you drop me in Friedenau, if that’s not too far out of your way.<< It was actually quite a bit of a detour, but the way she was looking at me, nibbling slightly on her protruding lower lip, I knew I would say yes, even had she lived in Zehlendorf.

>>You’re from Friedenau?<< demanded Blixa, his eyes widening.

>>Well, I live there now, what of it<< she shrugged defiantly.

>>I was born in Friedenau<< said Blixa very slowly, and as she turned to look at him, something passed between them that I didn’t understand.

She smiled when she saw the van, even though Blixa cut her off and leapt for the passenger seat in the front. I cast him a dirty look, then opened the sliding back door for her. >>You’re an electrician?<<

>>Yes<< I said, and went round to the driver’s seat. >>I’m called Carter.<<

>>You must earn good money, working as an electrician in this city<< she said appreciatively, fingering the various tools strewn over the back of the van before finding the small jump seat and sitting down.

>>I do alright<< I told her, as Blixa cackled with laughter.

>>You got any cigarettes?<< she asked.

>>I don’t smoke... but Blixa does<< I told her, expecting him to offer her a cigarette, the way he would casually supply them for Gudrun or Beate or Bettina, but he stayed silent, his arms crossed across his chest, not even reaching for his pack. >>Blixa<< I said, a little too sharply. >>A cigarette, please?<<

Finally, he extracted his cigarettes from his jacket, pulled two out, lit them both, then handed one to me, just to be an arsehole. I rolled my eyes at him, and handed it back to the girl. “Danke.” “Gern Geschehen.”

Blixa clammed up completely, sucking at his cigarette, as he lapsed into unusual silence, forcing the girl to fill up the space as we drove, giving me directions to her home. Friedenau turned out to be a pretty but densely-packed warren of lovely old-fashioned apartment buildings arranged on avenues in sweeping quadrants around attractive squares. Here, there were trees and lush green spaces like I had never seen in my neighbourhood.

>>You live here?<< I asked, surprised at how posh it looked, though I guessed appearances could be deceiving.
The girl squirmed in the rear-view mirror. >>Well... no. Take the next turn, we’ve got to go over that bridge across the railway tracks. I live on the other side of Friedenau.<<

Blixa laughed, a short, mean-sounding snort. >>Yeah, I thought you might.<<

>>You think I’m trash because I live on the wrong side of the tracks?<< said the girl defensively.

>>That is my side of the tracks. Where I grew up<< he almost growled.

Almost as soon as we’d got to the other side, the buildings changed, from pretty Art Nouveau terraces to large, ugly, monolithic blocks that looked a lot like council estates. As we grew closer, Blixa grew more silent and withdrawn, though the girl did not seem to notice, directing us down a side-street.

>>Can I see you again?<< I asked, as she gestured for me to pull up to the kerb outside one of a whole flock of almost indistinguishable apartment blocks.

She seemed to think this over for a moment, then nodded, and pulled out a scrap of paper from her bag. >>If you have money, of course.<< She handed me the piece of paper, on which she had written her name – Ilsa – and the name and address of a coffeeshop in the red light district, then disappeared without so much as a backwards glance, let alone a kiss goodbye.

Blixa seemed to stew, as we drove away. Finally, he spoke, in a moralistic tone that rendered his beautiful voice rather ugly. >>Well. So you are visiting prostitutes now. What will your fine feminist friends make of this, I wonder.<<

I turned to look at him, unable to understand why he was acting this way. Clearly, it was not about the practice of visiting sex workers, as Wolfgang chatting up rent boys had aroused his mirth, not his condemnation. Was it something to do with the fact that it had not really previously registered with him, that I liked women, despite that awkward conversation in Iron-Grey? It was one thing, to have a friend who was queer, in the abstract, but quite another to confront it in the soft and juicy and throbbing flesh. But if that were the case, why did he take me to that party, full of men who were ‘for the boys’, where I was surrounded by drag queens and groping men in muscle shirts? Blixa clearly had no problem with homosexuality in the flesh, if it were male flesh. And yet Blixa definitely seemed to be sore at me about something.

Again, I felt a wave of shame. I could not understand West Berlin at all, how one minute it seemed so absolutely free, and the next it seemed so moralistic and condemning. As I pulled up outside the squat where Blixa lived with his girlfriend, I looked up at the window, and saw the cover of Kollaps Komics hanging up in a place of honour as a display, next to an advert for the New Buildings’ album. How much love had gone into making those drawings, and yet here he was angry with me, because I had done this shameful thing of going to bed with a prostitute. I grasped for straws, trying to think of a way to justify what I had done, and maybe even get him to like me again.

>>You promised me the party would be decadent<< I pointed out. >>So I indulged in a little of that decadence. Don’t you think it’s important for artists to understand decadence? Wasn’t that what you were discussing with Gudrun the night we met?<<

>>You think something as tawdry and banal as going to bed with a prostitute entails real decadence?<< sneered Blixa, putting his wellies up on the dashboard and kind of curling up in a ball, rather than making any move to get out of the van. >>Do you genuinely have that little imagination?<<

I straightened up, feeling the need to defend myself, my face growing hot as I spoke. >>So it’s OK for male artists to go with prostitutes to find their inspiration – Egon Schiele, or Munch or Manet

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does so, and it’s a foundational experience of their artistic, worldly education, but for me...

>>Artistic, worldly education?<< quoted Blixa in a taunting tone, and I suddenly saw myself through his eyes, a complete novice, little better than an idiot. >>How old are you?<<

>>Age has nothing to do with it<< I sputtered. >>Rimbaud ran away to Paris and experienced all the decadence of the disarrangement of the senses when he was what – 16? 17?<<

Blixa laughed aloud at that, not even his taunting cackle, but a genuine snort of hilarity. >>So that’s it, you try a little hash and take one pep pill, and suddenly you’re Arthur Rimbaud, are you?<<

I stared down at my knuckles, gripping at the steering wheel, feeling all of the confidence and exhilaration of the evening draining away, utterly humiliated by the easy way he demolished my most intellectual arguments. Why was he even still sitting in my van, why didn’t he just piss off and snark away somewhere else? As my ego dropped into the gaping chasm of self-loathing I had not yet learned to recognise as a speed come-down, Blixa continued to loll in the passenger seat, picking at the buckles on the calves of his rubber trousers.

>>Alright, I’m twenty<< I confessed at last, when the silence grew too much to bear. >>How old are you?<<

>>I’ll be twenty-three in January<< he supplied, with an almost adolescent petulance to his voice that made me smirk. January was months away; he was like a little boy claiming to be nine and three quarters.

>>You’re barely older than me.<< For some reason, I’d thought Blixa was far older, maybe 25 or 26, from the amount of things he already seemed to have accomplished in his life. >>And I don’t see how you have any right to judge me. I take my inspiration where I find it. And I think it’s important to have... experiences. Emotional experiences, even tawdry and banal ones. If one is to create art that has any real meaning, real understanding of emotional impact beyond empty, button-pushing attention-seeking and cool and transgression just for the sake of transgression.<< My words, slow to start, picked up momentum until they were like an avalanche, but Blixa’s head snapped to attention.

>>Wait, is that what you think I’m doing?<< he suddenly demanded, as if I had finally landed a blow to pique his own ego.

>>Semen stained sheets, I mean really<< I reminded him, and suddenly he squirmed, his mouth breaking into a helpless crocodile smile as he glanced sideways across the van at me. Our eyes locked, the hostility abruptly gone. And in that moment, he looked so beautiful I would have forgiven him anything, if only I could capture that funny half-smile, get it down in pen on paper.

>>You know, you keep saying you’re going to pose for me, properly, and then you don’t<< I suddenly blurted out.

He looked up, startled, studying me with that one mascaraed eye from under his cap, as his smile turned suddenly genuine. It shocked me, how pleased he looked to have been asked. >>Of course I will, naturally, any time. You just don’t ask.<<

>>Well, you’re going off on tour next week<< I pointed out. >>When is there time?<<

>>Sunday morning, after work. I will make time<< he offered, looking really quite insistent about the whole thing. >>Will you photograph me? I’ll go home and change after work, if you want to take photos.<<

>>I can take photos, yes. It would be good to draw from photos, while you’re away. Where shall we
meet?<< I sputtered, wondering what I was getting myself into, my head spinning as I thought through the possibilities.

>>Where do you live?<<

Oh no. With the atmosphere as weird and as spikey as it had been on the drive home, I wasn’t sure I wanted him in my apartment. And oh god, what would my great-aunt make of this creature? >>I live across the road from that old cemetery. You know, the one on Monumentstrasse?<<

>>Old Saint Matthews Churchyard?<< Blixa’s eyes lit up as he uncurled and put his feet back on the floor. >>Did you know that the Brothers Grimm are buried there? They wrote my very favourite story ever. Do you know it, the Town Musicians of Bremen?<<

I shook my head, thinking only of a way to keep Blixa out of my great-aunt’s apartment. >>Shall we do the shoot in the cemetery, then? I’ll meet you at the gate.<<

>>Perfect.<< He opened the door and leapt out of the van, then smiled at me as he held the door open, his customary good mood completely restored. >>I will see you soon, yeah?<<
Blixa and Carter wander round a cemetery, taking photos of each other for an art project, and discussing philosophy like a pair of goths in their early 20s, what do you think they get up to.

On Saturday night, I dropped in at the Risk bar only long enough to make sure that Blixa had remembered his promise, then took off for what passed for West Berlin’s red light district, dressed in my best clothes, with a crisp new shirt, and polished shoes. I had never in my life deliberately gone out with the intention of commissioning a prostitute, in fact, I had never, until a few short days ago, even considered going to a prostitute. But Ilsa’s cheeky pin-up smile and plump limbs consumed my thoughts. I knew I was not in love; I was not deluded enough to think that. But lust was a powerful motivator, and I was carrying around so much frustration inside me that I wanted to slake my thirst in her body.

And anyway, wasn’t it true, what I had told Blixa? If I wanted to be an artist – a real artist, not just a cheap dauber of doodles – didn’t I have to throw myself into every kind of emotional experience with gusto? And wasn’t lust, even a dizzying, morality-warping lust that could be slaked with a few shiny pebbles, an emotional experience worth exploring? That was what I told myself, as my van inched west down the busy Kurfürstendamm.

I had a bit of trouble locating the café, in the triangle between Olivaer Platz and Uhlandstrasse, just off the bright lights of the Ku’damm. Driving through that area at night at a slow speed was pretty much an invitation for every working girl in the city to come strolling up to your window. But as I looked over the assembled crowd, trying to spot that flaming ginger hair, I saw only henna and rouge. Finally, I parked the van and made my way into the café she had given me the name of. As I strolled inside, trying to act casual, a couple of girls called out to me, the traditional greeting >>Hey, sweetie<< but I could see no trace of Ilsa.

>>Are ya looking for someone, my lad?<< asked one of the older women in a thick Berlin accent, looking me up and down.

>>Yes<< I stuttered, slightly relieved to have an actual question I could answer, rather than one of the intimidating come-ons. >>I’m looking for a girl called Ilsa. Short, buxom, long red hair?<<

>>Ah yeah, we know Ilsa. She’s one of our gals, usually works this patch. But I’ve not seen her tonight, dearie.<< she said in an almost motherly tone.

>>Well, if you see her, can you tell her Carter is looking for her?<< I couldn’t remember if I had even told her my name, so I added. >>The electrician.<<

>>Can’t tell one workman from another in the dark<< cackled the woman. She eyed me expectantly, and I wasn’t sure what was required of me, until one of the other biddies started to laugh.

>>Ya tips a messenger, dontcha, sweetie?<< she suggested.

>>Oh, of course<< I muttered, hoping I wasn’t getting completely taken for a ride, as I produced a
few DM from my pocket.

>>Ah, now that jogs me ole’ memory<< said the oldest woman, the one in the leopard print coat who had first addressed me. >>Carter the Electrician, lookin’ for Ilsa. We’ll tell ‘er if we see ‘er, won’t we, girls. We’ll get you fixed up, my lad, don’t worry.<<

>>We got lots of redheads, if you’re looking for a redhead<< the other woman added, crowding in closer.

I rolled my eyes as I realised which way the wind was blowing. >>Have yourselves some drinks on me, ladies<< I told them, pushing over some more DM. >>But I’m looking for Ilsa.<<

When I got home, I didn’t fancy going back to the Risk bar and facing Blixa’s teasing, so I opted for a few hours’ sleep. He would come over in the morning anyway, an eventuality I wasn’t sure how I felt about now. He had been charm itself when I dropped by at Risk, but then again, he had been surrounded by all his friends, in an expansive mood, being treated like a rock star about to go off on tour, as one of his filmmaker buddies even chopped him out a line of cocaine on the end of the bar, as a goodbye present. I had already started to hate how people acted when they were on cocaine, all empty and hollow-headed, full of air like windbags, talking at speed but saying nothing. I wondered how long it took to wear off, and hoped that Blixa would at least be acting like a human being by the time he got to the cemetery.

I slept a little, at least until the sun came out, then bathed and dressed and headed out. It was a beautiful morning, crisp and cold, with a faint mist rising from the ground as the sun hit it. I grabbed both my cheap, tourist camera, and my good SLR, stuffed them in my bag with my sketchbook, and headed downstairs, only to find Blixa already outside my apartment building, staring up at it.

>>How did you know I lived here?<< I asked suspiciously, quite sure that I had told him to meet me at the cemetery gates.

>>I didn’t. I’ve just always been curious about this building<< he confessed, squinting up at the large, heavy, iron-bound front door. A faded sign, in an old-fashioned looking typeface from before the war, declared >>females only<< above the entrance. I realised, as Blixa stood on the pavement staring up, that although I had never seen fit to test this rule, I had never seen a man in the building, apart from that one morning that Schumacher had been summonsed to fix the electrics.

>>It belongs to my great-aunt<< I explained.

Blixa tilted his head back, craning his neck to take in the façade, which had clearly once boasted beautiful pieces of plasterwork, before being marred by bullet holes and shrapnel scars from the war.

>>Well, she lives on the first floor, in those grand rooms with the arched windows, and rents the rest out.<<

Blixa’s face abruptly changed, as he wrenched his gaze from the building’s façade to my face. >>I had no idea you came from money. Are you only playing at being an electrician, then? Slumming it, down here in the gutter with us lot<<

That must have been the cocaine talking. For a moment, I bristled, but refused to rise to his needling.

>>I pay rent, the same as everyone else does. Being a landlord these days, in this part of West Berlin, it hardly pays for the coal to heat the place.<<

>>Huh<< snorted Blixa, a little dismissively, and I wondered if the whole day would be spoiled by
this weird sparring between us, but then he looked back up and resumed his study of the building, as a slightly dreamy, nostalgic expression came over his face. >>When I was young, we used to call it the old witch’s tooth building<< he said, in a faraway voice, as if lost in memories. >>My grandparents said that before the war, there was a whole row of these grand houses, facing the cemetery. But bombs fell on either side, knocked out a few houses first on one side, and then the other. So it stood up like a senior’s single tooth, in the midst of a rotten jaw where the other teeth had worn away. No one knew how it had survived, but it did. Some said the owner was a witch, who had done a deal with the devil to keep her brothel safe. Others said that it was the power of the Blessed Virgin Mary, protecting all the virgin ladies sheltering under this roof.<<

I laughed aloud at the thought of my stately old great-aunt resorting to either. >>I doubt both of those stories very much. But old Schumacher told me that my Aunt’s personal assistant, Grete, was a fire warden, so she always made sure there was a barrage balloon tethered to the roof.<<

>>Well, either way, for many years, it was the only house standing on this block. When I was a child, it used to be quite spooky to walk by, this one lonely house with only the cemetery for company. And then, about ten years ago, they threw up these horrible new-buildings next door.<<

I laughed, again, at the way he shoehorned in a reference to his band, like men always had to remind you that they were in a band. >>Well, for me it is a very convenient place to live, for not a lot of money. My rent is cheap; and I get free food and local phone calls. So I cannot complain.<<

Again, Blixa moved his gaze from the tall, slightly forbidding house to my face, but this time he smiled in camaraderie. >>Come, let’s go to the cemetery. I will show you the tombs of the Brothers Grimm.<< Threading his arm through mine, he lead the way. >>Did you know, my very first job, out of school, was working in a cemetery? Not this one, but a State cemetery out on the other side of Schöneberg?<<

>>You’re such a liar<< I laughed. >>You’re just making that up to make yourself sound cool, but you don’t. You just sound like a big old Grufti.<<

>>I’m not a liar, it’s true<< he protested playfully, thrusting his other hand into the pocket of his coat to make it billow out around him. >>What do you think of my outfit, by the way? Will it pass muster for your aesthetic? I borrowed this coat to look stylish for your pictures. Or do you think it just makes me look like a ‘big old Grufti’?<<

Looking him up and down, I realised he must have gone home and bathed and made some kind of effort with his appearance. He was wearing his new rubbery trousers again, which clung to his slender calves, with his wellingtons buckled over the top. Over his usual ballet top, he had thrown one of Gudrun’s asymmetrical knitted sweaters, adjusted to leave one shoulder exposed, and over the top of all of this, he had artfully arranged a long, black trenchcoat with such a military appearance that I wondered if he had borrowed it from Manc Mark. And then, of course, there was the cap, and one of his eyes ringed as usual with very precise eyeliner, his eyelashes darkened with mascara and his lips tinted with what might have been lipgloss. He looked, to be fair, startlingly beautiful, like the androgynous angel I had first encountered at the Risk bar, and I felt my irritation at him falling away.

He held the iron gate for me as I passed through underneath the arches into the cool calm respite of the graves, the old-fashioned headstones and mossy paths feeling a million years away from the frenetic pace of West Berlin. As we wandered about, Blixa and I started to relax, and show one another stones and funerary statues we particularly admired.

>>I love this skinny old man<< he laughed, pointing up at a long, emaciated bronze figure like a Giacometti. >>Don’t you think he looks a bit like me?<< His attitude seemed different in the morning light, more like the energetic, fun, playful Blixa I had met all those months ago, and less like
the irritating rock star wannabe who had been annoying me recently.

>>I can see the resemblance...<< I agreed, but trudged onward. >>This one is my favourite<< I sighed, as we reached a huge grotto like a half-shell, with a marble statue of a woman standing, arms spread, in front of a black and gold frieze of a setting sun, filled with masonic symbols.

Blixa grinned, and climbed up into it with the enthusiasm of a child. Kneeling in the lap of the statue, his head raised and arms outstretched, he stopped and turned to smile at me, until I realised he was posing for me, and wanted me to photograph him. I took out my cameras, and started to frame the shot carefully, before snapping him. Although I had gone out the previous day and bought a few more rolls of film, I was still painfully aware of how expensive it was to get film developed, and used the shots sparingly.

Then he climbed down, and sat beside what looked like a strange dragon-griffin creature, and I saw that there were two seats to either side of the memorial, like an opulent art nouveau bus shelter. >>Family Jockel<< he read, settling into one seat and pulling out a cigarette as I took the other seat. >>Well, they seem like they were really something when they were alive.<<

>>It doesn’t matter who you are when you’re alive, and how grand your tomb is. You’re still dead. You’re all dust by the time you get to a cemetery<< I intoned in a faintly grandiose manner.

>>Oh, but not if you believe in the grand resurrection of the dead, in the final days before the Last Judgement<< intoned Blixa, blowing out his cigarette smoke with such a rakish tilt to his eyebrows that I couldn’t work out if he was joking, or if he really meant it. “Dem bones, dem bones, gonna rise again...” he sang, in imitation of gospel blues.

>>That’s not how the song goes. Come on<< I said, as it was too chilly to sit in the shade, on the cold marble bench. We walked further into the cemetery, stopping to read the stones or admire statues. I tried to remind myself that film was expensive, and I should use it sparingly, but Blixa was being so charming, and posing so alluringly that I found myself taking more and more shots. In front of the camera, it was the same as when he was onstage; he started to come alive. I framed him through the viewfinder, caressing him with my lens, watching how he would smile or glare, or do that strange, wide-eyed innocent gaze back at my camera, his whole face transformed by his pout, or the angle of his expressive eyebrows. I didn’t kid myself that he was flirting with me, as he smouldered at the lens, his lips pouted, his cheeks sucked in to make them look more hollow; I knew he was flirting with the camera itself. But Christ, he was beautiful, standing, leaning against one of the monuments in his long coat, which made him look taller and slimmer and somehow more ghostly, his face wreathed in smoke from his cigarette.

>>Oh, let’s photograph this one...<< he cried, crushing the cigarette underfoot before skipping to the next memorial, sloughing off his coat as he climbed onto a ledge, holding his chiselled-looking cheekbones against the chiselled marble of a graveside angel. The way his asymmetrical jumper hung off his exposed shoulder echoed the classical gown of the statue, the living flesh angel and the dead stone angel nearly as pale as each other, despite the blackened streaks of smoke damage. He looked up into the eyes of the angel and frowned, puzzled. >>Do you believe in angels<< he asked.

>>Well, that depends on what you mean by angels. Do I believe in winged ladies flying about plucking the souls of children? Of course not. Don’t be absurd<< I scoffed.

Blixa turned and laughed his braying laugh, rather spoiling the image of the beautiful boy. >>I must admit, when I was a child, I found it slightly creepy, the idea of a Guardian Angel. I asked my Mama: what, does she watch me even when I take a piss<<

The disparity between the beautiful pose and the vulgar language made me laugh aloud. >>I can’t
imagine that went down well.>>

>>But then, in the Bible, angels aren’t guardians at all. Even the word – it means messenger in Greek. That God is far too important or grand to speak to mortals, so he sends this winged telegram delivery service instead<< mused Blixa, nose to nose with the angel.

>>I thought it was more the idea that God was so far beyond our mortal ken or comprehension that he needed emissaries, or our minds would burn up like toast at the mere Presence<< I teased, deciding to just go along with the strange conversation. Maybe it should have surprised me more that he had actually read the Bible, but his taste in reading seemed quite omnivorous.

Blixa climbed down off the angel and strolled along a path, kicking at leaves as we passed a row of more modern memorials. >>Fear and trembling and the sickness unto death<< he murmured, almost to himself, then suddenly turned and fixed me with a piercing stare. >>Do you believe in God?<<

>>No, of course not<< I said, almost reflexively, laughing nervously at the oddness of even being asked.

>>The English are all natural atheists, I suppose. You’re all natural cynics. Rebels. For the Germans, I think it is harder. Especially Prussians. A desire for order, cosmological and theological, is baked into our souls.<<

>>Do you...<< I paused, before saying the almost absurd thing. Obviously, I had occasionally known religious people. There had been a couple of girls at school who had been swept with great religious passions, though it had commonly been held to be a bit odd to care that passionately about anything. But I did, generally, just assume that most people were sort of gentle, ignorant atheists, more out of lack of being bothered with all that schoolgirl passion, than any true religious or irreligious sentiment. >>...believe in God?<<

>>I don’t know<< he said in a quite determined tone of voice, and he looked almost as surprised by the answer as I did.

Then he turned, and with a great dramatic sweep of his long coat, he stormed off until he reached another monument, a sculpture of a mourning woman, with a carefully chiselled veil over her face and one of her arms lifted gently over her head. And there he paused, gazing down thoughtfully at the names of long-dead Berlin bourgeoisie. I was filled with a sudden tenderness for the boy, so I tried to probe further. >>So you’re an agnostic, then.<<

>>No.<< Again, the very determined note to his denial. >>An agnostic – from the Greek, a- gnosis – believes that such knowledge, of whether there is or isn’t a god, is not even possible. I don’t even have that strength of conviction. I simply don’t know.<<

Leaning back against the statue of the mourning woman in an echo of her pose, he pulled off his holey jumper and arched his back exactly like a topless dancer, and though his chest beneath the ballet top was smooth and flat, I felt a small bolt of electricity surge through me at how strikingly similar the gesture was to the way that Ilsa had danced. He turned his head towards me – or rather, the camera – and licked his lips, and gave me such a look that my knees almost shook. For an awful moment, the idea crossed my mind that he was doing it deliberately, like he wanted me to desire him, though to what ends was a complete mystery to me. Blixa just seemed to like to be looked at, like a small child who couldn’t stand not to be the centre of attention.

I snapped the photograph, then, dragging my eyes away from his body, I looked about me, all the crosses, the angels, the families resting in the Lord. >>I suppose, in a place like this, it’s easy to see the need for that belief, the desire for certainty. To know that your loved ones are safe in the bosom...
of a god that cares. In the face of all this piety, it feels almost churlish to refuse it, and arrogant to insist that all these thousands of Marks spent on tonnes of marble are in vain, and yet...<<

>>I don’t know. In the face of all this simpering piety is where I feel the most blasphemous. I want to tell them their platitudes are empty, there is no god, and nothing awaits, only a tumultuous chaos, in an eternal night filled with pain.<< His sharp eyebrows were definitely mocking as he pulled his jumper back on, then wrapped the coat around him, as protective as his cynicism.

>>So you don’t believe, really. You’re an atheist at heart<< I suggested, with more than a hint of relief.

But Blixa whirled on me, his eyebrows knitted together in a flash of something that looked almost like anger. >>I told you I don’t know.<<

I tried to tug him back to good humour, with a bit of his normal sparring banter. >>But you seem to be perfectly sure of everything else, Blixa. You’re absolutely certain that the government is corrupt and should be brought down. You’re totally convinced that the Russians or the Americans are going to plunge us all into nuclear Armageddon. You have one hundred percent conviction when it comes to telling us all, vociferously, what music is shit and what music is good...<<

But his face didn’t resume its usual mischievous smirk. Instead, he seemed to look more confused, and slightly bereft. >>Yes, and this is the problem. I don’t like not knowing what I believe. Especially something so important. It bothers me, not to know, what I think on the subject. I mean, religion – organised religion, Christianity and so forth – I think it’s a scam. I think it was invented, as a tool of repression and control. I can’t believe in Heaven or Hell, it all seems like a myth designed to frighten a child, to my ears. You better behave, or Nanny will banish you to a burning underworld. << He waved a finger about dramatically, like an angry nursemaid. >>Yet still, I maintain this persistent and insistent belief, which I know is irrational, and yet it is unshakable, that I have a soul. That there is more to me than bone and flesh and that which withers into dust.<< He kicked at the dust again with his tall wellies, as if he were kicking at the remains of his god-fearing ancestors.

>>It seems to me<< I said, as reasonably as I could. >>That one does not have to believe in religion, or even in gods, to believe in the soul. Some electrical spark of mind, of brain... some pulse of consciousness that separates us from the inanimate.<<

>>Electricity<< he laughed, and the mocking tone was back. >>You always want to bring it back to something physical, something a scientist can measure with a meter, but I suppose that’s what I get for trying to talk about God with an electrician.<<

There was a part of me that felt slightly piqued, because if an Englishman had said this, I would have taken it for a subtle dig at class, and I wanted to assert that I was an electrician by accident, not by birth. But I had gathered, from his comments about my great-aunt’s house, that Blixa was far more working class than I was, and even viewed this with a hint of pride. But anyway, that clearly wasn’t what he intended, as he said ‘electrician’ in the same manner he had said ‘scientist’ or might have said ‘accountant’.

>>I don’t see why you shouldn’t talk about God with an electrician<< I lobbed back. >>After all, wasn’t Jesus supposed to have been the son of a carpenter?<<

>>My father was a carpenter. That doesn’t make me the Son of God<< he shot right back, his face growing animated, as if he were enjoying the verbal sparring.

>>Well, it would be rather inconvenient if you were, as I can’t imagine how difficult it would be, to be unable to decide if you believed in yourself or not.<<
Blixa threw back his head and laughed his unrestrained braying-donkey laugh again. It really was quite astonishing, the disparity between his spiky, sarcastic Berlin cool, and that absolutely uninhibited snort of joy and amusement.

>>Of course I believe in myself<< he asserted, and at that moment, I could see that that was precisely what was so irresistibly attractive about Blixa. He really did have one hundred percent confidence in himself, that seemed to blaze out through his eyes as a kind of charisma. And to people like me, who were constantly fretting and doubting and questioning themselves, it was like an irresistible beacon, a signalling light demanding approach, and yet some kind of drug one could burn oneself on.

>>This is, I think, perhaps why the English take to agnosticism more easily.<< I said softly.

>>Because if, like me, you are riddled with self-doubt and ambivalence, then you learn to live with ambiguity and contradiction and you learn to accept the condition of simply not knowing, and never being able to know.<<

His face, slowly, completely changed. As he continued to gaze at me, the confidence slipped, and I found him looking a little bit lost, his eyes huge and staring, with the unfocused slightly glazed look of someone who had been up all night. And yet this little-boy-lost expression, the genuine hunger for knowledge in his eyes, it seemed only to heighten his otherworldly beauty. Confident, arrogant Blixa was beautiful and sexually irresistible and yet totally unassailable, but this Blixa, a little vulnerable, his beauty scared me, unmoored me, made me want to run away from that outthrust lower lip.

I took a few more photos of him standing there against the grimy marble, then wandered off to scout out a new location, refusing to give him the satisfaction of staring as he stretched his elegant limbs to the sky like a ballerina, as if saluting the deity he couldn’t work out if he believed in or not. And as I came round the corner, I was confronted with a row of four solemn, black marble pillars, all with the name “Grimm” chiselled into them.

>>Are these your brothers?<< I called out, and he came leaping over a tombstone to join me.

>>Oh yes<< he said, marching up to Jakob, and climbing over a mound of ivy to pose by the stone. >>Please take a picture of me with them, my long-dead brothers.<< I snapped away with the camera, wondering whether to frame the picture dead square with the four pillars, so that Blixa’s insouciant pose became the focus, or whether try to capture the tall, gothic redbrick tomb a little way behind them on the diagonal. As I stumbled about, trying to frame the shot, he posed, then pulled out his pack of cigarettes and lit another up. >>Do you know the story of the Bremen Town Musicians?<<

>>I can’t say I do.<<

He extricated himself from the grave plot, and plonked himself down on a cold iron bench that seemed to have been set up to sit and admire the Brothers Grimm. >>Come here and I will tell you.<<

I sat, but found the iron far too cold. >>It’s too cold to sit down. I need to be moving around, or I’ll freeze.<<

>>Come here<< he repeated, and put out an arm to catch me, folding me into the warmth of his embrace, trying to wrap his huge, flapping back coat around my shoulders as well. The heat of his body surprised me; he was so skinny and so pale he looked like he should be as cold as marble. And yet he seemed to give off an energy that heated me, as he sat there, smoking, his arm around me.

>>There was, once, a donkey, a dog, a cat, and a rooster, all of whom had been abandoned by their owners, because they were no longer of any use.<<

>>What, were they too old, or, what...<<
Hush, let me tell the story. They had been cast out. Because they were too strange, or too unusual, or because they simply did not meet their owners needs any more. The world is cruel to outcasts, as you know. So anyway, they found each other, and they all made a pact, that they would go to Bremen to become musicians, because Bremen was known as a Free Town at that point.

What does that mean?

Well, it meant that you could set up as a tradesman when you were an apprentice, and not have to have a master. But the animals took this to mean, that they could live there, in freedom, rather than have to have masters. So they all agreed, it is better to go to Bremen, and become musicians – something better than the death which they could find anywhere.

Animal musicians? I protested.

Look, do you want to know the story, or don’t you? He demanded, and I fell quiet. So the four animals, they come along to a cottage, which is all lit up as if for supper, and when they look inside, they see these four robbers settling down to dinner, to enjoy their ill-gotten gains.

How did they know they were robbers?

Because they were all wearing masks, and holding great bags marked Swag, of course. Stop interrupting. Anyway, the animals decided to sing, and make music, and there was this very great caterwauling of donkey braying, and dog howling, and cat yowling, and rooster crowing, and the robbers were frightened, and they ran off screaming and afraid. So the animals went in the house, and settled down to a very nice dinner, after all.

What made it think that it was their dinner, and that they had any right to it? If they’ve just driven four innocent farmers away from their dinner, how are they any better than robbers? I was only teasing, because it seemed to annoy Blixa so much to have holes picked in his stories.

It’s not stealing, if you steal from thieves he insisted, gesturing insistently with his long, bony fingers.. It is the redistribution of goods, which is a socialist aim, is it not?

You’re a Socialist now? I teased. I thought you were an Anarchist.

Anyway, be quiet. Taking me by the shoulder, he shook me gently, good-naturedly, but I took the hint, and fell silent. The animals knew that they were robbers, because they recognised some of the goods, which had been pilfered from farms that they had once lived on. So they settle down for the night, after a nice meal. And at some point, one of the robbers comes back. But the cat wakes up when she hears a noise, and the robber sees her eyes, and thinks they are the coals of the fire, and tries to light a candle from them, and the cat freaks the fuck out, and wakes the others, and the cat scratches the robbers, and the dog bites the robber on the legs, and the donkey, she kicks the robber with her hooves, and finally the rooster flies up and drives the robbers from the house with a great cry. And the robber runs away, screaming to his companions that he has been scratched by a witch, which is the cat, and knifed by an ogre, which is the dog, and cudgelled by a giant – the wily donkey – and finally driven from the cottage by the screams of a judge, calling down vengeance on them from the rooftop. So the robbers decide this is too much for them to bear, and leave the neighbourhood permanently. And the happy villagers, all of whom have been suffering under the robbers for years, are so grateful that they let the outcast animals have the cottage for their home, and they live there, happily, making their music, for the rest of their lives.

I burst out laughing, elbowing Blixa affectionately in the ribs. I can see why this story appeals to you, yes. Mufti is as stubborn as the donkey, and Andrew as faithful as the dog, and Mark as clever as the cat, and you, I imagine you, with your shrill Judge’s voice, you have got to be the rooster.
He sucked at his cigarette, and smiled at me sideways, out of the corner of his eye. >>You know me and my friends all too well<< he said, leaning towards me and nudging me gently. And at that moment, in that gentle nudge, I suddenly saw all of us, Blixa and his motley friends, Gudrun and her pirate girl gang, and Wolfgang and the filmmakers, and yes, even me, as the outcast animals living for free in the magical cottage of West Berlin. With that image in mind, I was filled all of a sudden with a wave of the most powerful affection for Blixa, and so I leaned over, put my arm around his skinny waist and rested my head against his shoulder, squeezing him tight and wishing I could capture this moment, capture this whole beautiful, burned-out city, and all its beautiful burned-out people, and just hold it in my heart forever.

Blixa returned the hug, wrapping his arm tighter about my shoulder, and resting his head gently against the top of my head. He took one last drag of his cigarette and then flicked it away. Then he moved forwards slightly, and looked down at me, and I swear, I don’t know what came over him, but he got a look in his eye like he was going to kiss me, and started to move his face closer and closer to me, like if I didn’t pull away, our mouths were going to collide.

I pulled back sharply, and abruptly leapt up from the seat, moving away from him quickly, and going to retrieve my bag of cameras from the step where I had left them. >>Are we going to take more pictures?<< I blurted out, trying very hard not to meet his eye, trying to process what had just happened, both why he had tried to kiss me – had he really tried to kiss me, or had that been my imagination? – and why I had leapt away so sharply, as if I had been burned. >>Because I don’t want to let these out of my sight, you know? They’re not valuable, but... well, they might look like they are to a thief or a junkie.<<

Blixa stared at me from the bench, his beautiful face registering first surprise, then a wave of hurt, and then finally just confusion. Maybe he didn’t really understand what he had just tried to do, either. He stood up awkwardly, casting about him, as if he had lost something, and then he found the belt of the borrowed coat and fastened it tight about him, as if he could keep something in, or someone out, by buckling his belt so tight he looked as if he almost couldn’t breathe.

>>I...<< The long issccccchhh sound of his German dissipated in a plume of icy breath, as the temperature was dropping. >>I need to go<< he blurted out. >>I have... things I need to attend to. Before we go on tour. I guess I shall... I shall just see you when I get back from tour.<< And he turned, and in a flash of that long black coat, he was gone, not running but striding, his skinny legs pounding down the street outside the barred walls of the cemetery as fast as his feet would take him.

I sat down on that step for some time, just staring after him. No, this was absurd. Blixa had a girlfriend, a very beautiful and kind girlfriend, who was one of my friends. And I was gay, for fuck’s sake. Well, no, technically, I meant, if I felt like a boy most of the time, and I was into girls, did that make me gay or straight? I had no clue. And Blixa was... well, I had been about to say that Blixa was a man, but that wasn’t the whole truth, either, was it? Blixa was powerfully feminine, with his adopted girl’s name, and his make-up smeared face, and his camp, theatrical manners; but he was at the same time, both very feminine and somehow still very masculine – domineering, bossy, arrogant – as well, all wrapped up into one perplexing body. Whatever he was, he confused me. It was impossible. And for the first time, I actually found myself glad that he was going away for several weeks.
Carter starts hooking up with Ilsa again and again, moving from 'customer' to 'regular fellow'. Gudrun is the only one of the Risk Bar gang to try to find where they've gone, though she has unwelcome information of her own.

It was three days before I was back in the red light district, slowing down every time I passed an intersection, scanning the girls for the glimpse of red hair. I parked up, and went to the café, but almost immediately, a bleached-blond girl in a too-tight dress told me >>Are you the English lad with the thing for red-heads? Herzogin is looking for you.<<

>>Herzogin?<< I stuttered. It meant something like Duchess.

The bleached-blond nodded over her shoulder, and my gaze fell on the older woman in the leopard-skin coat, who I’d met the first night.

>>Hangover<< she called, snapping her fingers at me, rolling her words in her strong Berlin accent.

>>Electrical feller, buy us a drink.<<

>>Have you seen Ilsa, Herzogin?>> I sighed.

>>Gi’ us a drink and I’ll tell yer.<<

I dug out a few DM, and she smiled triumphantly, and told me the name of the intersection where Ilsa could be found. It was quite far out along the avenue, almost out by the City Autobahn, so I took my van, slowing down when I saw the flaming curls of her hair, and the swell of her arse in that tight leather miniskirt. My heart leapt as I pulled over and rolled down the window, and saw that it was, indeed, my Goddess.

>>Ilsa!<< I called out.

She turned and looked at me like she had no idea who I was, as she started her negotiation process almost mechanically, going down a laundry list of acts, and what they might cost.

>>And what would it cost for you to clock off for the night, and come home with me?>> I asked, feeling my heart pounding in my chest. The first time I’d done this, it had been drugs spurring my courage, but now it was sheer adrenaline.

She laughed, and named a sum that was close to a week’s wages.

>>Fine<< I said. >>Get in the van.<<

It was only when she climbed in the van, that she seemed to register that she had seen me before.

>>Hang on<< she said, blinking slowly as if surfacing from a long, deep ocean dive. >>I know you.<<

>>Yes.<< I nodded.
You’re that fag who turned out to be a dyke. For a long moment, we looked at one another, as I tried to work out which part of that I was supposed to be insulted by. But she didn’t say it in a sneering or cruel manner; in her world she was simply stating a fact. Finally, she smiled, and nodded.

I know a hotel we can go to, where they won’t ask questions. Go down that alley there, you can turn around and come out on the main Strasse.

I took her to that no-questions hotel, and fucked her senseless, stripping her to the skin before climbing into bed. She was so beautiful I just wanted to stare at her without letting her see me, but she tugged at the fastenings of my boiler suit until I removed it. But when she tried to pull my vest off, I stayed her hand.

No I said slowly, kissing her shoulder.

Let me see you. I know you’ve got to have tits. I want to see them.

Absolutely not I insisted, and fortunately that time she let it go.

I spent hours, kissing every centimetre of her freckled skin, pouring all of my lust and my frustration and my confusion into her soft, plump, yielding body. I ate her up greedily, wanting to make her come again and again, even as she kept telling me that it was bad for business for her to come, for real. Her clients wanted fake orgasms, all sighing and cooing and swinging her hair about, not this dirty, sweaty, gurning-face and shuddering rictus grin of almost-agony. And after she came, she insisted on getting me off, pulling my pants off my hips and trying to get her face between my thighs, but again I stopped her.

You’re funny about that, too, huh.

Please, just don’t.

I don’t care that you’re not a man. Can I just... with my fingers? It seems unfair that you don’t get off, too.

Lying back against the pillows, I folded my arms behind my head and let her push two of her fingers inside me, playing with the tip of her thumb against my clitoris until I felt my body spasm into orgasm. I felt so peaceful, just lying there, with my arms around her that I didn’t want to speak, didn’t want to do anything, but just feel her heartbeat against mine.

But afterwards, she asked for a cigarette, and I had none, so I took my wallet and wrapped myself in my jumpsuit, and went downstairs to buy a pack from a machine. I recognised the brand that Blixa smoked, and bought them, then returned and tossed them onto the bed. She lit one, and the haze of smoke reminded me of Blixa, who I had been trying so hard to forget. When she had finished it, I took her hand to kiss it, but the slight stain of nicotine on her flesh reminded me of Blixa. And so I took her fingers and pressed them between my thighs, staring into her huge blue eyes as I used her like a toy to get me off again.

And I woke to the sight of her bent over the night-stand, gently lifting my wallet. Hey I cried, disgruntled, and hating Blixa for being right.

I was just taking my fee, and then enough to pay for the hotel, OK? she protested, blinking her not-at-all innocent blue eyes at me as she tossed my wallet back into my lap. I counted what was left, and was surprised to discover that it was true, in fact, she hadn’t even taken all that she had said she would charge me the previous night.

Don’t I owe you more than this?
>>Discount for regulars<< she shrugged, and kissed my shoulder before slipping out of the room.

Of course I became a regular. Berlin was starting to build habits in me. I was hooked, just as much as I realised she was, the first time I saw her pulling a syringe, a lighter and a small spoon surreptitiously from her purse, as she disappeared into the bathroom. How could I have been so dumb? But I was in over my head.

It was Ilsa who took me to my first genuine lesbian bar of Berlin, laughing and bouncing up and down on my knee as I stared about me, genuinely flabbergasted that such a place existed, even though the inside seemed like a time warp back to the early 70s, with ads for women-only communes and lessons in how to knit your own menstrual supplies. We had drawn a few odd looks, slightly hostile glares as we walked in, but it wasn’t until I went up to the bar that someone said to me >>are you sure you’re in the right place, my lad?>> and I realised they had genuinely taken us for a heterosexual couple.

My voice went thin with nerves, and shot up about an octave, as I stuttered something like >>We don’t want any trouble, my girl and I are just looking for a place we can have a quiet drink together.<< Only then, did the woman at the bar choose to see my smooth skin, and recognise my lack of an adam’s apple, before allowing me to buy a soda pop and a glass of sparkling wine for Ilsa.

But with Ilsa perched on my lap, her arm draped around my shoulders with the casual air of possession I didn’t care. It was somewhere we could kiss freely, and caress one another without a care in the world, and we didn’t have to worry about being bothered by Ilsa’s customers.

And it was Ilsa who took me to a sex shop, and showed me the things that one could purchase, if one had money, in the demi-monde of Berlin. Lifelike dildos, that one could attach to a harness that went about the waist and upper thighs. She told me to buy one, and wear it under my clothes when I came for her in the van, so that I could take her standing against the wall in the alley behind the café, then leave to go back to work, and she could go on to another customer. That, she wouldn’t charge me for, she teased. In fact, it was good to be seen with a regular fellow, especially a tall, smart-looking fellow like me, so that her clients wouldn’t try anything funny with her if they thought they’d face my wrath. Her ‘regular fellow’? Oh, the sweetness of that phrase. I became Ilsa’s acknowledged lover, even among the other working girls.

Ilsa pulled me into the other side of West Berlin, a world of whores and seedy hotels and sex that seemed to live in a dark parallel to the music and art scene that I had started to inhabit through my acquaintance with Gudrun and Blixa. And Ilsa’s world was a world where I existed as a body, a body with desires and secretions and needs, not just a mind.

I was happy, truly happy, for perhaps the first time since I had arrived in West Berlin. For those early weeks, as Ilsa and I got to know one another’s bodies, I was dazzled, just dizzily in love. Even the sight of her, wobbling down the street in her knee-high go-go boots towards my van, she made me grin like a fool, feeling my heart pounding in my chest. Her smile of relief, when she saw it was me, it made me feel about ten metres high. I would laugh, and kiss her, and then tease her by pulling the pins out of her hair, so that tousled up-do would come tumbling down, her flame-coloured curls falling all about her shoulders. I started to dream ridiculous thoughts – that if I could just earn enough money, I could tempt her off the streets, and get her to kick, and then she would be mine, mine alone, and I wouldn’t have to share her with all those dirty men.

Malaria! came back from their tour of the States, but I had started neglecting my friends at Iron-Grey. Instead, I was working double shifts at Schumacher’s to earn the overtime, going out in the morning and afternoon with the old man, then again in the evening with his younger deputy, a cousin who was on call for the emergencies. I, who had never lacked for money, needed the money desperately,
to cover all those extra visits to the red light district, because even when I wasn’t paying for her, my money seemed to evaporate in the presence of Ilsa. Schumacher was delighted with my renewed interest in work, as he confessed he had been afraid he was on the verge of losing me to those no-good rock’n’rollers. If I studied hard, I could take the certification exam soon. And if I passed, he said he would give me his rusting old van, and he would buy a new one, and that way, the firm could have two full-time vans for call-outs, neatly doubling their income.

But it was Gudrun, who was the only one of the music scene to seek me out, and find out where I had disappeared to. She actually turned up at Schumacher’s one afternoon, all decked out in a stylish Iron-Grey jumpsuit, knocking confidently at the door to the yard and striding in without even waiting for a confirmation. Both the Schumachers, the old man and the younger cousin, stared at this apparition in her heavy boots, her short haircut and her bright red lipstick, then turned to me with something of a newfound respect, as they looked her up and down and found her beautiful.

>>So this is where all Carter’s money goes<< whistled old Schumacher, as Gudrun rounded on me.

>>Carter, where have you been? We haven’t even seen you since we got back from New York.<< she half-pleaded, half admonished.

>>I’ve been really busy. With work. I’m taking a certification exam just before Christmas<< I hedged.

>>You can’t drop in, even on a Saturday night? Or do you just not come around, now that Blixa isn’t in town?<< The insinuation she intoned into Blixa’s name carried one meaning to me, but clearly quite a different one to Schumacher, as he made the same assumption about Blixa’s gender that everyone else did, upon hearing the name without seeing the boy.

>>Tee hee hee<< wheezed Schumacher, turning to Gudrun with a conspiratorial wink, though he was clearly trying to make trouble. >>I’ve heard this Blixa name before, so much so that even an old man like me notices. Are you telling me, Carter, that you are two-timing on this beautiful young lady with this Blixa character?<<

Gudrun looked at Schumacher with a gentle smile that acknowledged the compliment, then turned back to me, with a perplexed expression. >>Wait. You and Blixa? Is that a thing, and not just gossip?<<

>>Don’t be absurd!<< I protested. >>Blixa has a girlfriend.<<

>>Doesn’t mean anything. They have an arrangement<< shrugged Gudrun, looking even more perplexed.

Old Schumacher’s eyebrows shot up across his forehead. Me, he had long since come to consider a harmless oddity, but this potential lesbian love triangle turning to a love quadrilateral before his eyes, this was almost too much excitement for him to contemplate. At that moment, I knew I had to get this conversation away from prying eyes as fast as possible, so I seized Gudrun by the elbow, and hurried her out of the courtyard, and into the bowels of the building, marching her through the supply storeroom, and into the tiny vault at the back, mostly because it was the only room in the building that I was absolutely sure was soundproofed. (A copy of the key, I had discovered, was on the keyring for the van, which I now carried with me whenever I was on the job.)

But Gudrun’s eyes grew huge as she looked about her, taking in the Russian goods, the US Army gear, and the heaps and heaps of cigarettes. >>Oh my god<< she gasped. >>Schumacher is in on the Black Market, isn’t he. That’s why he turns such a blind eye to your extracurricular activities with the van.<<
"Quiet," I insisted. "We don’t talk about that here, OK."

She picked up a carton of cigarettes and examined it. "He totally is. There’s no German customs sticker on this."

I sized the carton from her and placed it back on the shelf. "There was no customs sticker on the cigarettes you paid me with, that first night, either."

Gudrun smirked at me. "The band has a, erm... very keen admirer in the American army. But I don’t imagine Schumacher gets all this kit from starstruck young officers."

I didn’t particularly want to go back to the conversation we were having before, but it seemed less complicated than addressing Schumacher’s connections to the Black Market. "Look... hang on, but what did you mean by Blixa has an arrangement?" My curiosity won out over my desperation not to talk about Blixa.

A wicked smile spread over Gudrun’s face. "Jana and Blixa? They have a kind of open relationship. It’s very modern. See, Jana thinks it doesn’t count, if a boy goes with a boy, or a girl goes with a girl. They don’t consider that cheating."

"I’m... not... a boy?" I stuttered hesitantly.

"Well, you keep insisting to us you’re not a girl" Gudrun shrugged, her eyes flashing with mischief.

"And anyway..." I cast about blindly. "They might not consider it cheating, but I would. See, it’s nothing to do with Blixa, why I haven’t been around. I’m... you see, I’m... well, I have been seeing someone."

Gudrun’s face lit up, as if she were both surprised and genuinely delighted at this news. "Really? Anyone I know?"

I shook my head briskly, trying to imagine the feisty feminist art student and the almost criminally undereducated street urchin that was Ilsa ever coming into contact. "No one you know."

"Look, I am genuinely happy for you, Carter. But you don’t have to hide it. You can bring... him? her?" She settled for ‘sie’ after a brief questioning gaze, and a confirming nod from me. "You can bring her round the shop if you like. Pretty much everyone I know is gay or bisexual. You dating a girl, it’s not a big deal, at all. I’m just happy if she makes you happy."

"I don’t know that it would be her scene, to be honest."

Gudrun frowned. "What makes you say that? Is she very proper or something? You English, you’re into that kind of thing, aren’t you."

"Quite the reverse" I almost laughed. "No, I mean, just... She met Blixa, and she and he really didn’t like one another." And then I shut up, because even the memory of that first night was very strange.

"So Blixa has met your girlfriend, but I haven’t?" She sounded genuinely piqued.

"It was only by accident. It wasn’t intentional." I remembered, suddenly, the way that Blixa had walked in on me having sex with Ilsa that first time, and felt even more uncomfortable, twisting around awkwardly.
But Gudrun misinterpreted my discomfort. >>Well, it’s no wonder that Blixa had his nose put out of joint by you getting a girlfriend.<<

>>What do you mean?<< I growled defensively.

>>Oh, come off it, Carter. Honestly, I think that you and Blixa should just go off somewhere, and just screw. Get it out of your systems, and then I don’t have to hear about you from each other any more.<<

>>What.<< It was news to me, that Blixa discussed me with Gudrun. But then again, Gudrun was Blixa’s best friend. Who else would he discuss such things with? Certainly not his girlfriend. His girlfriend, with whom he had an arrangement. No, wait. This was absurd. My head felt like it was spinning.

>>And don’t give me this, ‘oh he has a girlfriend’ nonsense. We are beyond that sort of thing, in this scene. It’s one of the central tenets of our feminism. We reject this kind of cattiness. We don’t compete with other women, and especially not over men. We support each other. And that means not indulging in this misogynist, catty personal jealousy over other women. Just have a word with Jana, and say, you know, you and Blixa have this thing that you need to work through, and you need to just sleep with one another. I’m sure she will be fine with it.<<

I stared at Gudrun, horror-struck. It wasn’t even the idea that I should go to Jana and negotiate, in an un-catty, un-competitive fashion, for the rights to screw her boyfriend. That sounded so sensible and so German that I could completely imagine Jana blinking her slow junkie gaze, and suggesting what trousers I should have Blixa wear when I took him off to bed him. It was the idea that even Gudrun could see my stupid, unrealistic, impossible, passion for Blixa, as if it were shining all over my face. >>You cannot be serious<< I managed to stutter.

>>I am completely serious. It’s not healthy, the way that you and Blixa fixate on one another. You should just screw, and get over it.<<

I stared at her, trying to work out how on earth to respond to that, to remind her, that I didn’t even like boys. My mind tried to process this idea, but it slid straight off the detail that Blixa and I seemed fixed on one another, because that was just too impossible to contemplate, and pounced on the word fixation. >>Wait. So. If you say now, oh, everyone’s bisexual in this scene, and you say, now, oh, that it’s not healthy to fixate, and the correct response is to just screw, and get it out of your systems... Why on earth didn’t you just screw me, when I was fixated on you, all those months ago, instead of getting Bettina to warn me off?<<

>>Oh.<< Gudrun sighed deeply, and seemed to suddenly deflate like a balloon. >>Oh, Carter, I’m sorry you were hurt by that. But it had to be done.<<

It astonished me, but I was also slightly relieved that she didn’t even try to deny it. >>So I was good enough to flirt with, when you wanted free electrical work for the shop, or free rides to gigs, but not good enough to screw, even for the sake of my mental health, and to prevent fixations?<<

Gudrun bit her lip, and I felt suddenly awful for my outburst, like I had wounded a small child. >>Oh, Carter, stop it. Don’t take it so personally. I do like you. And I do actually think that you’re very attractive, you’re a very handsome... person. But you...<< She paused and sighed again. >>Carter, you’re hungry for something I can’t give you.<<

>>What?<< I stuttered. >>What’s that supposed to mean? What is it that you think I want?<<

Gudrun’s jaunty confidence seemed to drain out of her face. >>I don’t know what you want. And I
don’t actually think that you even know. Which makes it a bit scary, your hunger. Because that’s the problem, like you’re not looking for sex; you’re looking to an answer to all your puzzles. And I can’t solve your puzzles. Because honestly, Carter, you just confuse me.<<

>>Confuse you?<< I echoed, wishing I could end the conversation, back out of it the way I came, without causing any more hurt, but at the same time, I had to know.

>>You confuse me, and not in a good way. I mean, sure, I mostly like boys. But yes, I have experimented and gone with girls a couple of times, and that was nice, too. I enjoyed it. There’s nothing wrong with it. But with you, Carter, I don’t know what you’re about. You’re not a girl looking for an exciting fling with another girl; but it’s not like you’re a man I can have a relationship with... uuhhh... you...<<

The long, dissipating end of her ‘disssssccccchhhhh’ reminded me so painfully of Blixa’s awkwardness, that morning in the cemetery before he left for his tour, that I physically winced.

>>I’m not a boy, or a girl, and not even the cool, sexy West Berlin kind of androgyny, but the hungry, scary, confusing kind, and so I don’t fit anywhere in your cosmology.<<

>>Oh, Carter, it’s not like that. We all like you, whatever you are. You’re just Carter, and you know we all have a very great affinity for you. You’re my friend.<< But she stumbled over adding the –in to Freund. >>But this too confuses me. What do I even call you?<<

>>You wouldn’t screw me, because you didn’t know what grammatical ending to use with me?<<

>>It’s not about all that, it’s not about anything as silly as German grammar, you make me sound so absurd. It’s not your pronouns, it’s...<< And here she suddenly swerved just as the truth came out.

>>It’s your intensity. Your hunger. Like I said, it can be a bit scary... But, look, anyway, what does it matter. You have a girlfriend now, don’t you?<< she asked hopefully, as if hoping this could restore the great gash that she had ripped through the core of my being.

>>I do have a girlfriend now<< I echoed, a little defiantly, wondering at what point Ilse would start to find my awful scary intensity so off-putting.
Chapter Summary

Just as suddenly as Ilsa arrived in Carter's life, she departs, leaving Carter absolutely gutted. And yet, Jana has a indecent proposal of her own. While Gudrun has made friends with an Australian band, while on tour of the States.

Content note for implied violence against sex workers.

When Gudrun had gone, finally, leaving me to nurse my bruised ego in peace, I suffered through the torments of Old Schumacher’s comments for a few more hours. Then I borrowed the van, and drove straight to the corner, out by the far section of the Ku’damm, where I knew that Ilsa usually worked. I didn’t care what it would cost me. I just knew I needed to go, and work through my problems, rubbing up against the skin of a woman who didn’t care what my body was or what pronouns she should use with me.

But Ilsa wasn’t on her usual corner. She wasn’t at the café either, and neither was she at the coffee stand out near the City Autobahn, where the girls huddled in cold weather. Thinking she might have been with a customer, I drove to the cheap no-questions hotel, and waited for an hour outside, knowing she was nothing if not punctual, and would not allow a session to go on over the allotted time limit. But she wasn’t there either, and the clerk, true to his word, pretended not to know a thing about Ilsa, even though he had seen me enter and leave with her many times over the past six weeks.

Dejected, I drove back to the café, and tried to buy Herzogin a drink, but she shook her head darkly and refused my money. >>No one’s seen Ilsa in a couple of days<< she hissed, bending her head so close to me that her hair brushed my skin.

>>Where could she have gone? Has no one heard from her?<< I pushed.

Herzogin looked around, checking to hear that no one else would overhear us, before pushing her lips so close to my ear I could feel her leaving traces of lipstick on my skin. >>I know Ilsa likes you a lot, and you’re her regular fellow, so I’m only telling you as a favour to her. Word is, there was a raid up in the French Sector the night before last. A couple of girls haven’t checked back in, since then. Ilsa is one of them. ‘Trude is another. And French Zusie is still missing, too.<<

The information shocked me. I had always thought that prostitution in West Berlin was, if not entirely legal, well, certainly not considered anything worth bothering too much about, from a legal point of view. I considered it to be mildly immoral, what Ilsa did, and something I felt sometimes ashamed about having resorted to, but no more bothersome to my sense of legal obligation than Schumacher’s little tangles with the Black Market. Legality was, well, flexible, in West Berlin. But perhaps in the French Sector, different rules applied.

>>They always take the foreign girls first<< said one of the other old-timers at my table. >>Less people notice, if they go missing.<<

>>Ilsa is foreign?<< I felt stupid for not even noticing.

>>She’s Danish, sweetie. Did you not hear the accent? Like many girls, she came down for a
weekend visit, and just never went back. It’s easy to get stranded here on the Island.>>

Something dull thudded in the back of my head. >>But she can’t just disappear. She has.. well, she has...<< This time, I bent in so close to Herzogin’s head that the bristles of her ears brushed my lips. >>She has a habit. She never carries more than a day’s supplies on her, and she always comes back home to score.<<

Herzogin widened her eyes as she looked at me, as if barely believing any human being could be so freshly hatched. >>The French police know that, sweetie.<< I had never heard my own innocence turned into such a liability, as the way she pronounced that word. >>They count on it. It makes the girls real desperate.<<

I simply stared at Herzogin, trying not to freak out at what was finally registering on my brain. If I had been more of a man, I would have done something. Would have even known what to do. Vague plans formed in my head, the idea of going to the French Military Police with money, and trying to get her out. But I had absolutely no idea how to suggest a bribe, and knowing my luck, I would have landed myself arrested for corruption, in a cell somewhere far away from Ilsa. My own impotence stung me, and I’m ashamed to say that I thanked Herzogin for her time, left her some kind of tip, and slunk out of the café like the ignorant child I was. A real man would have known what to do. But it was rubbed in my face, yet again, that I was not a real man.

I drove around West Berlin for the rest of the night, scanning every girl on every corner for red hair, just desperately praying that Herzogin and her friend were wrong. I drove all the way up to the French Sector, hopelessly looking for the police station, but even if I had found it, what would I have done? So instead, I turned around and drove home, but of course I couldn’t sleep.

It was two weeks before I found out for certain what had happened to Ilsa, and by that time, my anxieties had caved in on themselves, and my heart just felt hollow and dead. I had been out on the Eastern stretch of the Ku’damm, on an emergency job with old Schumacher; or rather, he sat in the passenger’s seat of the van, and directed me as I climbed up a ladder and repaired the power supply for a display of neon lighting that advertised a shop beneath.

But as I climbed down, bathed in the blueish glow of the now-working neon, a tiny ball of leopard skin coat and tinted silver-blonde hair came rolling up to me. >>You’re Ilsa’s feller, ain’t ya!<< It wasn’t until she spoke, with that broad Berlin accent, that I realised it was Herzogin. I had never seen her outside of the café, off the barstool on which she was customarily propped up.

>>Yes, I am. Is there any word of Ilsa?<< I gasped.

Herzogin nodded slowly. >>Buy me a drink?<<

>>Of course.<< I dug in my pocket for the DM, but had to hit Schumacher up for some money. >>Is she back? How is she? Where can I find her?<<

Herzogin squirrelled the cash away somewhere inside the leopard skin coat. >>French Zusie came back from the French Sector. Fucking froggy bastards knocked out one of her teeth. That’s going to cost a pretty penny to fix.<< It strained the limits of my German vocabulary to understand her slang, but Herzogin was at least an educational experience, every time I talked to her.

>>What about Ilsa?<< I pressed on.

>>Deported!<< yelped Herzogin. >>They can’t touch French Zusie coz she got a German feller by way a’ marryin’. But turns out Little Miss Ilsa is underage. Only seventeen.<<
She told me she was nineteen. I stuttered.

She told us all so, but ‘er Danish papers told a different tale. So they packed ‘er on a train and sent ‘er back to Copenhagen. No return to West Germany for five years, or least until ‘er Majority.

I stared at Herzogin, feeling my hopes shuddering and sinking below the waves. Ilsa was underage? But working at a party like that, I had never thought to ask.

Well, thanks for the information. Well, I thought yer might wanna know, since you were her regular feller. And with that, she nodded sharply, and shuffled off down the street. “Tschuss!”

Loping back to the van, I felt like my heart had been hollowed out with some kind of rusted implement. But old Schumacher was leering at me. First that beautiful Gudrun with the shop, then that Blixa girl that caused all the trouble with her, and now this Ilsa? Some teenage Danish beauty? My god, I thought the young men were bad. Get a female apprentice, your aunt told me, that way there will be no trouble with girls stealing them away. But my god, Carter, you have more girlfriends than the rest of my apprentices put together.

So Ilsa was gone, just as quickly as she had arrived in my life. My weekly pay packets were my own again, and just sat, slowly burning holes in my pockets, without Ilsa’s habit to race through them. But my sexual frustration was once again the thing that consumed my every waking moment that I was not at work. I tried going back to the lesbian bar where she had taken me on one of our brief, sweet dates, but without a girlfriend, it just felt cold and cliquey. I didn’t drink, so I sat nursing a tonic water, and no one so much as approached me. In my jumpsuit and cropped hair, the untrimmed top of which was slowly expanding into an unruly quiff, I didn’t seem to fit the tone. The 70s did not seem to have ended in there, and the earth mother long stringy hair and hand-knit tampons thing really did not do it for me. I quietly paid for my drink, and did not go back.

The next evening, I sheepishly went back to Iron-Grey, though I hadn’t spoken to Gudrun since that weird afternoon at my workplace, and tried to slink quietly through the front door, praying no one would notice I had been away.

But it was Bettina at the counter, who almost shrieked with joy when she saw me. Carter! Your new girlfriend has given you the evening off, to come and talk to your old friends? Oh, let me make a pot of coffee just for you.

It took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to burst out crying. But I knew that Bettina was the kind of radical feminist who likely went on marches against the exploitative evils of prostitution, so I pulled myself together, and tried to piece together some cover story. I... I don’t have a girlfriend any more.

Oh no, sweetie, what happened?

That casual word, sweetie, that all the working girls used with me, it just opened the floodgates, and let the tears rip. She got deported... back to Denmark.

As I collapsed onto the sofa, Bettina abandoned making the coffee, and just came and sat down next to me, putting her arms around me, and softly smoothing my hair. Oh, sweetie, it’s OK. If you need to cry it out, just cry it out. Don’t be ashamed to cry, it’s only natural. Your heart has been broken.

But again, that devilish word ‘sweetie’ only reminded me further of the café, and how Ilsa had addressed me, bringing it all back. I just whimpered against her, just feeling like everything was falling down around me.
Is there anything you can do? Were there conditions to the deportation? she asked, sensibly, when my racking sobs abated a little.

No return for five years. I will never see her again.

You can go to Denmark. It’s not that far. You can take the train to the coast, and then there is a ferry to Copenhagen. Listen, I fell in love with a girl, while on tour, and she lives in New York City! Copenhagen’s a lot closer than New York, let me tell you.

I don’t know where she went... I have no address. I don’t even know... I realised with a start that I had never even known her last name. How could you be in love with someone whose full name you didn’t even know.

I wish you were a drinker, because I would take you out and get you really, totally blitzed right now sighed Bettina, in a somewhat less than motherly tone. It would make it feel better.

I am starting to understand that impulse. Because right now, I could really go for one of Manc Mark’s Space Cakes, and the sweet oblivion they bring I sobbed into the damp patch I had cried on Bettina’s shirt.

Well, it’s funny that you should say that. Because Manc Mark just sold me a nice, big block of hash, earlier this afternoon.

And that was when I realised that West Berlin really, truly was warping my sense of morality and right and wrong, because I said yes. She locked up the shop, and put me in a cab, and took me home with her. Bettina, to my surprise, clearly had quite a bit more money than the rest of us, because she didn’t live in some grim squat. She lived in a rather grand loft on the top two floors of another huge, pre-war apartment block, though this one was in considerably better nick than my great-aunt’s bomb-scarred building. The whole duplex apartment was done out in very chic, minimalist Berlin style, with massive paintings hanging on the walls, underneath the very traditional high-ceilings with lovely ornate plaster still decorating the fireplaces and the light fixtures. Bettina’s housemate, she explained, was a film maker, and was amassing a quite a good collection of the most modern of art.

But we retreated upstairs, to a beautiful open studio space which was clearly Bettina’s, from the bits and bobs of half-finished clothing designs hanging about. As I browsed nosily through her bookshelves, admiring her collection of fine art books and feminist tracts, she dug out an ornate Turkish style water pipe, and started to pack it with dense, crumbly greenish compost that had the same vegetable tang as those Dutch cookies that Manc Mark had fed me.

Within half an hour, the room was full of herbally scented smoke, and I felt as if I were floating on a cloud of incense, somewhere very high up in the heavens above Berlin, which I could see splayed below me from a sloping skylight. Ilsa was melting, seeming very far away from me now, the heartbreak only barely a dull ache in the cavity of my chest. Bettina had vaguely suggested at one point that we ring Gudrun and get her to come round, but fortunately this idea seemed to be dropped quickly when I showed no enthusiasm for it. Gudrun and Blixa, and the weird things that Gudrun had told me about Blixa, and his fixations and his ‘arrangements’ with Jana seemed to be very far away indeed.

The vines of the writhing art nouveau fireplaces seemed to writhe and twist, swirling about my head. The telephone rang, and Bettina went to answer it, talking for a while, as I lay on the sofa and sucked at the water pipe, and stared into space. A short time – or maybe a couple of hours, I lost track of time completely – later, people I did not know arrived. Bettina introduced them, but their names flowed through my head like sand, and I mostly ignored them. One was the housemate, Tabea, a rather butch looking young woman with close-cropped and carefully styled white-blonde
hair, who I knew of vaguely as a friend and some-time collaborator of Wolfgang’s. And there were two other women, a couple it seemed, who I had also seen out before with Wolfgang. All three of them were film-makers of some kind. Everyone started to chat, about films at first, then Bettina started talking about this really hot actress she’d met in New York, and I felt myself detaching from the conversation and then from reality itself. People spoke to me, but I barely answered. I just lay on the sofa and watched the silent movies playing behind my eyelids.

The best ideas for comics always came to me when I was stoned, so I asked Bettina for a pad of paper and a pencil. I drew for hours, but nothing I wrote down made any sense. But still, the images rushed along inside my eyes, as I struggled to get them on paper. A Dantesque vision of a volcano’s chamber, all red lit, and writhing with muscle men. Go-go dancers with bellies made of water pipes, and you sucked on their nipples to draw generous draughts of hash-smoke. French policemen bashing down gravestones, that turned to teeth in a giant’s mouth, and the giant rolled his enormous tongue, and simply swallowed them, along with a donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster. A strange creature who was half boy and half girl, half angel and half demon, who opened up her long black cloak and arched her flat chest at me, saying >>You confuse me, but in a bad way...<<

I came to, back at home, lying crumpled on the floor, in the front hallway of my great-aunt’s house, with no idea how I got there. Trying to climb to my feet, I stumbled over a package left casually on the stairs, and saw my own name. Confused, I ripped it open, and saw piles of photos. The photos I had posted off for developing. Dozens and dozens of photos of Blixa, with his heavily mascaraed eyes, smouldering at me in a cemetery. He looked as good as I remembered, his skin oddly fresh in the cold air. And then, I had forgotten, but before sending them off for developing, I must have fired off the last shots of the roll when I was with Ilsa, for there she was, her flaming hair reduced to black and white, lying naked on a hotel bed, her legs pulled up and her breasts bared in the perfect pin-up pose. And as I started climbing the stairs to my bedroom, I knew I had to write my visions down before they dissipated.

I drew for days, calling in sick to work and telling Schumacher that I had the flu. I certainly felt wretched enough, though whether that was the heartbreak or the aftermath of the drugs, I wasn’t sure. But as I stayed in my room, barely leaving to make more coffee or trudge down to the bathroom, my pens scribbled black and white lines across the paper, as Kaos Komics followed Kollaps Komics.

When they were done, I did a larger run than of the first batch. They sold them in Iron-Grey, and then Gudrun, declaring that issue two was even better than the first issue, persuaded other local shops, like Zensor and the Shit-shop to carry them. Gudrun was feeling much more pleased with life, as the trip to America had been very fruitful. Though she, unlike Bettina, had not acquired an attractive American girlfriend, one of the bands they had met in New York, some Australian chancers with a silly name like the Birthday Cake or something like that, had invited them to be the support act at a big show in London, about which Gudrun was very pleased indeed. They did invite me to go with them – and in a van that Manc Mark was hiring, so they weren’t even after my vehicle – but I declined, as I was still feeling very guilty about making up the time I had skived from work.

Three days after Gudrun and the Malaria! girl-gang left on tour again, Blixa and the New Buildings came home, a little dazed and shell-shocked, but relieved to be back home in West Berlin. The tour, it seemed, had been quite hard work, polarising audiences across Germany. People either hated them, spewing violent abuse that only spurred them on to more abrasive noise, or else they ignored them. And if there was one thing Blixa hated, it was to be ignored. Very few Germans outside West Berlin really seemed to know what to make of this band of outsiders, too awkward, too defiant, too noisy to fit into either the conventional German pop structure, or the typical Hamburg-style idea of what Punks should be, all leather jackets and knucklehead testosterone antics. Everywhere they went, they seemed to start fights, because they were far too intellectual for the belligerent German punks, and
yet too scruffy and punk and confrontational for the intellectuals. Wherever they played, they were better at generating controversy than they were at generating ticket sales, it seemed.

But the controversy had generated notoriety, and the notoriety had inspired a huge buzz, that soon reached beyond the borders of Germany. Other cultures seemed curious about these Germans, in a way that Germany did not seem curious about itself. Or, perhaps it was just West Berlin, which the prosperous block of West Germany was starting to see as a little bit of an embarrassment, a poor relation to be swept under the carpet and not examined too closely. But, in the New Year, there was to be a European tour. Even if West Germany wasn’t keen, France, the Netherlands, and even Austria wanted a taste of this bizarre and divisive band that were becoming known for playing home-made instruments with extreme violence, and even taking drills and jack-hammers to the venue in pursuit of their art.

On their return to West Berlin, the New Buildings played not one but two sold-out shows, one at the SO36, the home-coming gig, and the other a few weeks later, at the Metropol, a larger and more upscale venue than they had played before. It was technically a benefit concert that they were contributing to, in support of one of the bigger squats, where Andrew and at that time Alex were living, but the larger venue was definitely a step up. Punk bands played at the SO; proper touring rock bands played at Metropol.

After nearly a month on the road, the band had pulled together into a tight unit, the songs flowing into one another in a well-constructed symphony of noise. And Blixa, who had always had a compelling stage presence, seemed to be evolving into a magnificent frontman, half carnival-barker, half ringmaster of some bizarre circus. At times, it looked bloody dangerous up there, with sheet metal and heavy equipment flying around, but the way that Blixa stalked back and forth, this striking, black-clad angel of death, tall and thin amidst all the chaos, he was riveting.

He had this trick that he performed, where he would stand up at the microphone in the front and centre of the stage, and place a huge black sleeping mask completely over his eyes, so that he stood there blinded before us, an incredible act of faith, given the chaos raging around him, heavy axes flying and plumes of sparks exploding without warning. With his eyes closed, he sang from the bottom of his heart, as if feeling blindly for words. It was an oddly powerful gesture, that sent a shiver down my spine.

The Malaria! girls, fresh back from London and full of praise for the show they had been part of, kept me company at the SO36 gig, but it was Bettina I sought out now, rather than Gudrun. Bettina and Tabea, and their tough little knot of ‘women-loving women’ had completely accepted and absorbed me, as if that six-week affair with a girl none of them had even met had been some kind of initiation ritual to make me one of them. But I was grateful for the comradeship, of course, and clung to them.

Wolfgang and his band, the Deadly Doris were supporting, and there was a great deal of friendly back and forth between the various groups, and much good humour. The Deadly Doris didn’t play songs, so much as they constructed musical moods, and filled their between-song spaces not with banter, but with strange performance art pieces, such as Wolfgang casually setting a mic to a brewing electrical kettle and amplifying the act of making a cup of coffee. They were very funny, very camp and very arch, pushing the boundaries of what was music and what was non-music in a completely different way from the New Buildings, but they worked well together, and the evening was a great success.

The Metropol gig, though, became very odd in atmosphere over the course of the night. Somewhere between the bit of the evening where Blixa was swanning around the venue, telling war stories of their beleaguered tour to enraptured scenesters, and the bit where he disappeared to go onstage, Jana
appeared, and clung to my arm, guiding me off into a booth. I was already a little stoned, so I didn’t think about this, and just followed her weekly. Pushing me into the inside of the booth, she took the outside seat, so that I had the better view of the stage, but she had the exit. At first, I was pleased of her company, as some of the more political members of the squatters’ movement intimidated me a little, really pressuring you into supporting their cause, whether you were a squatter or not. So Jana seemed like a much better companion than some aggressive anarchist who wanted to lecture me on the joys of communal living until I coughed up some money. At first, our conversation was light and cheery. But after exchanging pleasantries, she seemed a little more animated than her normal, ethereal calm, looking about her twitchily before pulling me closer into her confidence and staring at me quite intently.

>>So I hear you have been through a break-up<< she said urgently, looking at me so intently with her unnerving colourless eyes. >>Was it absolutely awful?<<

I closed my eyes for a moment, and let the blindsided shock of the question roll off me. Really, I was getting a little better at handling the fact, if not the idea, of the breakup, but it was still disconcerting to be asked about it so directly. Blixa, to my relief, hadn’t actually mentioned it, though I was certain he had to know, as Gudrun seemed to have told everyone, spinning it as part of the yarn of why Kaos Komics were so good.

>>I’m not going to lie<< I confessed, when I had pulled my unravelling mind back together. >>I was gutted.<<

>>Gutted<< repeated Jana slowly, a little unsure, and I wondered if German used the same idiom, for I, unthinkingly, had just used the verb that one used to describe preparing fish or game to be cooked.

>>Sorry, that’s a metaphor. I don’t mean it literally<< I clarified. >>But it hurt, it really did. It felt like someone put a hook in my heart, and pulled it out through my throat.<<

>>How awful<< agreed Jana, looking slightly less alarmed, though still worried. >>The Nine of Swords. I told you so. It was in your reading.<<

I just glared at her, as if to say, you are completely bollocking me, trying to get a look into the pupils of her eyes to work out how high she was. Not that I had much right to criticise her on that front, as I had sucked down half a joint before the show, with Bettina, but clearly I wasn’t high enough for this tarot nonsense.

>>But you mustn’t brood, Carter. People tell me that you have taken it badly, that you have been brooding.<<

>>Gudrun<< I sighed, rolling my eyes. >>You know how Gudrun exaggerates everything.<<

>>Bettina<< she countered. >>And Bettina is not given to exaggeration in the same way. Besides... being gutted like a fish, that does not sound like a pleasant experience or a healthy attitude.<<

I looked down, biting my lip, and wishing I had some more hash to make this conversation bearable, as Jana’s careful positioning of herself so that I was on the inside of the booth meant that I could not escape. Glancing over towards the soundboard, I checked to see if Manc Mark was doing sound, as I knew he was always good for a spliff, but it was actually the Awful Teenager, Alex, bent over the desk. No comfort there, and no escape from this conversation I really didn’t want to be part of.

>>No, I’m serious, Carter. You mustn’t get all upset and become depressive over it. It does you no good. It’s quite unhealthy. A good-looking person like you, you should get out there and play the
field. Have a good screw, that is the best way to get over it.<<

>>Jana!<< I protested. >>I appreciate the concern, but I am fine as I am.<< Turning towards the stage, I tried to concentrate on the New Buildings, watching Blixa stalk back and forth across the stage like an insect overlord in his tight rubber trousers and his black ballet top.

Jana followed my eyes for a minute, then looked back at me, watching me watching her partner, examining my face carefully as if searching for something. >>Perhaps you should have a screw with Blixa. He likes you. And I swear to you, I would not mind at all.<<

>>Jana!<< I almost yelped, having almost entirely managed to forget their little arrangement since Blixa’s return. >>I have no interest in Blixa, in that way, no matter what Gudrun has been telling you.<<

>>Gudrun?<< asked Jana, widening her eyes in surprise, scratching lazily at the lace around her arms. >>What has Gudrun to do with it? I say so only because I see the way you look at him. And I’ve read your comics. They’re very good. Look, I understand. He’s a good man, to have a screw with. He’s very affectionate, and yet very energetic. You two would do one another good. And he could use it just as much as you.<<

>>I don’t like men<< I almost spat, desperately wishing myself out of the booth, anywhere but in that club, watching the New Buildings, having Blixa’s girlfriend tell me exactly what he was like in bed. But Jana would not let up, her words tumbling out of her mouth in a sing-song rush that the laid-back girl never normally hurried over anything.

>>Going to bed with Blixa is not like going to bed with a man at all. He’s very feminine, ninnerine, femininnerinerinnerin. He’s acrobatic, acquiescent, almost passive, passes-service, service-servant<< she started to almost sing, in a girlish voice, then suddenly seemed to snap to, with an odd expression, as if she wasn’t entirely sure what she had just said. But then her eyes lit up, and she added >>He likes the girl to go on top.<< A heartbeat’s pause. >>Or the boy. He’s not too fussy about the gender of his lovers<< She peered at me closely again, as if she either couldn’t see, or didn’t care about the blush spreading quickly across my face and neck. >>What is your star sign?<<

>>Aries<< I almost sputtered, relieved to change the subject, even to something as absurd as astrology.

>>Oh, perfect. Blixa is a Capricorn. Capricorn, Airy-corn. The ram and the goat, you go well together.<<

>>Look, I’m sorry, but please could you let me out<< I suddenly snapped, no longer caring if she thought I was rude. >>I need the toilet...<<

Finally, she shifted, and stood up to let me pass, though I headed, not for the toilet, but the door out of the venue, pushing anarchists out of the way before they could accost me for cash. >>I honestly don’t mind at all<< she called after me as I fled.
Liquid Gender

Chapter Summary

Just as suddenly, Blixa is single. But Carter has been taken under the wing of the butch posse, as Bettina and her new American Girlfriend, Anne "Liquid Sky" Carlisle, teach her all about Gender and what a construct it all is. Blixa, on the other hand, has decided he is For The Boys.

Of course, I was the last to know the gossip that all of West Berlin had been buzzing with for days. And I didn’t even hear it from Blixa, as I was desperately avoiding him, and whatever weird arrangements he had worked out with that strange, eerie sing-song child. I heard it at Bettina’s, when I went round, desperately trying to make a connection through Manc Mark, because I found I needed my own supply of hash, to keep my mind from falling apart every time I thought of how I’d lost Ilsa. Bettina phoned Manc Mark, who agreed to stop by her flat on his way to a Deadly Doris gig that evening. He invited us along, so we decided to have a smoke first, then go to the concert. Manc Mark had just packed Bettina’s lovely Turkish water pipe, when Tabea, Bettina’s beautiful butch housemate appeared, having smelled the sticky-sweet herbal scent of the smoke. So she sat on the sofa and smoked with us, plying us with the latest news before we headed out.

>>Blixa and Jana have definitely split up<< she announced salaciously, and I felt all the air go out of my lungs as if I’d been punched in the gut. >>That’s why he’s moved into your shop, which Gudrun is not entirely pleased about.<<

>>It’s not that Gudrun is displeased... no, let me tell you. It’s my name on the bills, and Gudrun didn’t even ask me if he could move in<< grumbled Bettina, in complete contradiction to what Gudrun had earlier told me. For a moment, I wondered if he had in fact ever asked either of them if he could stay there. >>She says it’s not her fault, he just appeared, moving in bit by bit so that she didn’t realise it was happening. But Blixa and Gudrun are as thick as thieves, you know they are.<<

>>I can’t say I’m surprised. It’s been a long time coming, I’m only surprised Jana didn’t kick him out sooner<< said Manc Mark, a little superciliously.

>>Why?<< I stuttered, still reeling from the news. >>What have you got against Blixa.<<

Manc Mark switched quickly to rapid-fire Mancunian English. “Look, love, nothing against your mate. But honestly... I know everyone in West Berlin has a bit of a screw loose; you have to, to live in a bonkers city like this. But Blixa, mate, Blixa’s got the entire fookin’ clockwork upstairs coming out his ears, if you know wharrah mean.”

>>I don’t think she threw him out<< said Bettina, speaking over the top of Manc Mark, to show that she knew that the slangy, rapid-fire English was meant to exclude the others, and she disapproved. >>I thought it was by fairly mutual agreement. He was the one who moved out, after all. If she’d left him, she would have been the one to go.<<

>>He shouldn’t have gone on tour for so long<< Tabea whistled in a tittle-tattle voice. >>Leaving a pretty girl like that alone, bound to come to trouble.<<

>>So she dumped him? Did she start seeing someone else?<< I asked, barely believing it of her.
Jana, beautiful though she was, struck me as some fruity ethereal batcake, with her tarot cards and her ‘second sight’; not some erotic temptress. But then again, if she had been playing the field, that would explain the urgency with which she pressed me to sleep with her cuckolded partner, if she wanted to assuage her own guilt. God, these Germans did my head in. How they acted in public like everything was so straightforward and on the level, but subterfuge seemed to lurk everywhere.

Well! Tabea took a deep draw from the water pipe, then looked about the room, as smoke wafted from her nostrils, smiling as if she were holding in more than the drug. The theatrical trick worked; none of us said a word while we waited for her to complete her gossip. Finally, she exhaled and passed the pipe to me, laying her arms along the back of the sofa as she reclined, smoke billowing from her mouth. Did you notice that she stopped touching everyone up for money, when he went off on tour?

I opened my mouth to protest that she didn’t spend the money on drugs; she spent the money on Blixa last time, but my mouth was now full of hash smoke, and Bettina cut her off. Maybe she kicked. She did say she was going to try to.

Tabea didn’t wait to allow another interruption this time, pulling her cigarettes out of her leather jacket. She didn’t kick. She’s been higher than Skylab for weeks, and you know why? Without missing a beat, she extracted a lighter and lit one. She’s screwing her dealer.

No way ejected Manc Mark, taking the mouth of the hose from me, unwinding it from around the table corner, where it had caught. No dealer on earth would support a habit like that for a little pussy, no matter how good looking Jana is. It’s just not good business practice.

All three of the lesbians burst out laughing at him at once.

What? What did I say? he protested, looking as innocent as someone could plausibly look, with a policeman’s hat draped over one eye and the pipe of a hookah sticking out of his mouth.

“You are such a Manc,” I teased him.

“You say that like it’s an insult, ya soft bloody Southerner.”

I mean, you think with your wallet, and not with your heart I clarified.

Tabea opened her cat-like eyes all big and round and faux-innocent. I think her dealer is thinking with an organ a little lower than his heart, to be honest. Jana can be very... original in bed. Men are so stupid, they can get hooked on that kind of thing.

I wanted to pump her for more information, but I didn’t get the chance, as Manc Mark checked his watch and said we better hurry up and finish the pipe. I floated on a cloud of hashish down the street and into the club, where Wolfgang appeared in fancy dress and kissed everyone on the cheeks, thanking us all for coming down. Wolfgang and Nicholas had their own take on the Blixa-Jana triangle, and we ended up going through the gossip all over again.

No, it was definitely Jana that ended things Nicholas insisted, all wide-eyed and breathless, like this was the story of the season. All that touring, he’s been away so much, and you know musicians are never faithful on the road.

Speak for yourself, just because you can’t keep it in your pants said Wolfgang, rolling his eyes. I’m sure Blixa had his reasons, and he’ll thank us to keep us to keep our noses out of their business during this difficult time for them.

Oh, darling, like you don’t have a dog in this fight retorted Nicholas before breaking into
Wolfgang fixed him with a distinct gaze, and walked off in the direction of the stage, and then there was a burst of noise and the concert was beginning, so we took our seats. And all my thoughts were washed away by a wave of noise and music and the desultory chatter of incredibly high people in the wee hours of the morning.

Blixa was at Iron-Grey the next time I went round, one afternoon after work. Of course he was there, he lived there now. His things were all over the back room, his dirty dishes in the sink, his music on the stereo. He acted happy to see me, and raved about the comic, and asked if I had managed to get the film of his modelling developed, wanting to know how it had come out. I didn’t mention my break-up; he didn’t mention his. It seemed simply easier that way, dancing around the questions that that would have to open up. I told him the photos were good, that they had come out really well. He asked if I could get enlargements made for him, as the record company wanted such things. I laughed and told him I wasn’t made of money, and he nodded his head decisively and said he would ask around, as with so many friends who were film-makers and photographers and artists, it was not a hard thing to find a darkroom.

I agreed, but the atmosphere in the shop had changed since Blixa had moved in. Andrew seemed to have taken up permanent residence in the cellar, designing and making odd home-made instruments down there, so that there was always the sound of banging going on. It was busy, like it was always busy on a Friday evening, full of people who wanted not necessarily to buy the clothes or the cassettes, but who wanted to hang out, to enjoy the social scene, to make connections. But Blixa’s scene was slightly different from Gudrun’s. It wasn’t as if the shop suddenly filled up one day with awful men, as Blixa’s friends were, for the most part, artists and gay men, and those soft, slightly effeminate West Berlin dandies where you just couldn’t tell. But the pirate-girl-gang meetings moved, from the shop to Gudrun’s squat, when it was warm, or Bettina’s and Tabea’s grand apartment, when it was cold enough to need their luxurious heating.

For the soft, mild Autumn had ended, and little had prepared me for the sharp, biting cold of Berlin winters. The question, constantly, at home and at work, became one of heating. The very air changed, as everything grew acrid with the tang of coal. For the principle source of heating in Berlin was old, Victorian era coal stoves. Ugly burlap bags thick with black soot or coal dust appeared everywhere, for sale in shops, on the street corners, and the obtaining and burning of the stuff became a constant concern. Even without a sense of smell, it wasn’t the stench for me, but the constant fumes, and we all walked round constantly with eyes rubbed red from the smoke.

My Great-Aunt had a strict regimen for the provision of heating for the women who lived in the boarding house upstairs. It was a waste to provide heat while people were asleep or out at work, so the great furnace in the basement was stoked to provide heat and hot water only from 6 until 9 in the morning, and then again, from 5 until 10 at night. And, of course, it was my job to make sure that the great coal bins that fed the thing were always stocked, a task for which Schumacher’s van proved very helpful in procuring those vast quantities of coal sacks to make up the stocks if we ran out between the weekly deliveries.

Tabea had an aversion to the cold, and the money to make sure that their coal stove was always well-stocked, even if Bettina had to struggle up the stairs with the bags. Other friends, such as Gudrun and Manc Mark, simply didn’t bother. Why heat a house if you just weren’t going to be there? Hence, they would go out every evening, to Iron-Grey, to Café Mitropa just round the corner, or to the Risk bar, just to enjoy the warmth which could be obtained with the purchase of a cup of coffee or a bottle of beer, which worked out cheaper than lugging those awful sacks of coal up the stairs. Wolfgang,
the lucky sod, had somehow managed to sublet a modern apartment in a post-war building, which had the magic of electric heating – and a power shower! Unheard-of in Berlin! – though this was very expensive and had to be carefully regulated or Blixa would come round and spend two hours steaming up the bathroom just to get warm.

Suzanne’s other band, The Skin, shared a ramshackle rehearsal space cum band house with a couple of the other scene bands in an industrial area near the Wall in Kreuzberg, suspicious burns and bullet holes in the walls, oddly new wood around the brand new lock on the front door, that sort of thing. That didn’t even have running water above the ground floor, with its primitive kitchen and outside loo, so they didn’t bother heating anywhere the water couldn’t freeze. However, their cavalier attitude towards electricity, running illicit wires like vines from the mains, it terrified me. Suzanne had me come round and do a few rudimentary checks since Malaria! were rehearsing there now, fixing some really dangerous home-made wire-jobs, and trying to impress upon her bandmates the importance of grounding and insulation, but need always won over caution.

But at least it kept me in employment. Schumacher’s business picked up as the weather turned cold. If we were lucky, it would be a big installation job of putting electrical heaters into clean, but usually rather shoddily constructed new-builds. (Though I could no longer hear the term “new-builds”, even in a work setting, without thinking of Blixa’s mob.) Not so lucky were the hack-jobs, of trying to navigate ancient and unreliable wiring, to install new electric heaters into old buildings without turning them into fire hazards. And the very worst of all, was trying to clear up the emergencies of shorts and tripped circuits and electrical fires in habitations that made The Skin’s band house look like a palace of modern safety. Schumacher wouldn’t touch the squats; he said they never had any money and it wasn’t worth the trouble, even if the squatters could persuade the electricity company to turn on the power legally. But these were the places where my friends lived, and I simply wanted to see them alive after the next big freeze.

I studied for, and passed the basic electrical certification exam, both the written portion of the test, and the practical. So I was now qualified to take on my own simple, basic jobs. But Schumacher, with a wink and a nod, urged me instead to take on the more lucrative emergency calls, in which we were almost licensed to print money, as people were so desperate. But I spent a lot of time, on the clock and on my own time, going into squats and illegal band rehearsal spaces and studios, just making them safe.

Christoph from The Skin, who it turned out, didn’t actually live at the decrepit band-house, but in a much nicer (and better heated) loft around the corner, contacted me privately about installing the same kind of lovely power shower that Blixa had boasted to him that Wolfgang had. I got one cheaply for him wholesale, and he paid me cash under the table, but then begged me not to tell Blixa that he’d got one. But of course Blixa found out, as he had a bit of a radar for other people’s luxuries and added Christoph to the round of friends he just coincidentally dropped in to visit when he got a bit ripe, since there were no washing facilities at Iron-Grey. Maybe it was a little annoying to Christoph, but it was good for me to pick up a reputation as a person who could install electrical heating and power showers.

So I became not just known in the West Berlin music and arts scenes, but considered a useful person to know. It was an odd position for me, to be considered a friendship worth cultivating, but I enjoyed it. Especially the first time that some musician I didn’t really know came into Iron-Grey and started asking intently, not for Blixa or Gudrun, those social butterflies around whom the music scene spun, but for me.

An elaborately made up and slightly swishy man appeared one day, and demanded that I, and only I, would do, to do something about the absolutely appalling state of his band’s rehearsal room, and could I please come now. I drove him back in my van, and was shown into what looked like a
squalid squat from the outside. But the inside was like another world, all velvet flocked wallpaper and gold curtains, and two very beautiful women were lounging in formal ballgowns in the shadows of a romantic, candle-lit lounge that just happened to be draped with the usual accoutrements of amplifiers and drum kits, amidst piles of phoney Louis XIV kitsch.

One of the beautiful girls leapt to her feet as she saw me struggling in with my toolbox. >>Is this the luscious lesbian ‘lectrician?<< she asked, and I felt myself bristling.

>>I’m Carter<< I said guardedly. >>I’m here to do something about the lights?<<

>>Don’t worry<< said the other beautiful girl, walking up to me and doffing her wig to revealed a shaved head, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She dropped her voice about an octave, to finish in a man’s tone >>I’m Salomé. We’re all family here, darling.<<

The first girl, who I realised was also a drag queen, started to circle me slowly. >>Look at these muscles. Ooh, and this toolbelt.. Is this real?<< She squealed as she wrapped her fingers lightly around my arm to cop a little feel, just below where I’d rolled up my sleeves.. >>Oof! Why don’t you have a cock? Are you sure you are no twink, because if this is what the lesbians look like these days, honey, I might be tempted to start eating at the fish bar!<<

>>Down, girl! Behave!<< tutted Salomé and gestured with a torch towards the hall closet, where, presumably, the misbehaving fusebox was located. >>There is work to be done?<<

I smiled saucily and shouldered my tools, feeling a little more at home now I realised why it had been me they had called. >>Don’t worry, ladies. I’ll have your fusebox sparking in no time.<<

The pair of them tittered and swooped round me like a pair of bats as I sorted out the wiring. It was a ten-minute job to change a fuse, but they made such a fuss as if I’d rewired the entire house from top to bottom, when the power surged and the lights came back on. Salomé found my fee, plus a nice bonus for the late-night call-out, then handed me a business card that said >>Horny Beasts<< on it in a very fancy typeface. >>If you ever need anything<< she intoned very seriously. >>You give me a call. I know everyone in this town, darling. Everyone.<<

The only downside of my new professional status was that the Kraftfahrt-Bundesamt did a cursory check of my physical faculties when I applied for a transfer of registration of Schumacher’s old van, which he had given to me when he’d bought a brand spanking new one for the company. The KBA accepted my English driving documents without fuss, but found my eyesight wanting. Now, I knew I didn’t have the greatest eyes, and I wasn’t always great at recognising faces from a distance. But the news that I would have to wear glasses, in order to drive the rusty old van I was now spending every weekend afternoon tinkering with, that did not please me.

I turned to Bettina for help. And Bettina referred me to her glamourous and fashion-conscious American girlfriend, who was visiting West Berlin ostensibly on a modelling job, but mostly spending all of her time lounging about and driving Bettina wild. I had never, in all my life before, encountered anyone quite like Anne.

The first time I met her, I had just dropped by Bettina’s to complain about the glasses situation, and as Bettina went through into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee, this exquisite creature came slouching out of the bedroom, wearing a flame red merry widow bustier, with a white feathery marabou cloak, like something out of a Marlene Dietrich film, draped over the top. She was easily as tall as me, but she was wearing stilettos that put her at about six foot, and the way she looked me up and down made me feel quite peculiar.
“Bettina,” she drawled in a rather patrician New York accent. “There’s a beautiful youth here in your living room. Let me... slip into something more comfortable.”

I sputtered a little and fell silent, as ‘beautiful’ was not an epithet that anyone ever tended to apply to me. When Bettina reappeared with the cafetiere, I turned and gaped at her in astonishment, but Bettina smirked somewhat proudly, as the blonde creature reappeared, wearing a boxy, masculine-cut suit over the top of that flame-coloured push-up bustier. “Have you met my girlfriend, Anne?”

Bettina had always been one of the most stylish women I knew, mixing chic black clothes and butch leather trousers with dark lipstick in the Weimar art student kind of vein. But Anne, she took androgyny to a whole different level. She had a long, thin, slightly ambiguous face with high cheekbones and a sharp jaw, but she kept her hair cropped very short in a very masculine style, albeit dyed platinum blond. Her gender-fuck fashion sense mixed very chic, very elegant, but slightly butch menswear with the most exotic and slightly erotic of undergarments. Whenever we left the house with her, people on the street would actually turn to do a double take, to see some stripper’s bustier peeking out from under a pinstriped banker’s suit, like they could not tell if she was a man wearing kinky undergarments, or a daring woman with a particularly androgynous style. And Anne, though she was not, yet, famous, had a blue-blood air of celebrity about her, so that we were always shown to the very best table at the Jungle whenever she was in town.

Between the pair of them, Bettina and Anne really seemed determined to get me to try to make something of my look. To be honest, I had never really thought about having a look before. Mostly, I just thought about making sure I passed for ‘generic bloke’ in a way that wouldn’t attract too much notice on building sites.

“Carter,” Anne said to me as she sat me down, and dug her long, elegant fingers into the mass of my unruly black hair. “You have such good bone structure, if you’d just do something with it... and this hair... is it real?”

“What do you mean, is it real? It just grows from my head like that.” I hunched my shoulders, as instead of inheriting my mother’s soft, silky, honey-coloured German hair, I had ended up with my Anglo-Irish father’s thick, black, horse-like mane, which had always been considered incredibly ugly by my family.

“The colour is to die for – I have too many ex-lovers back home who had to turn to Miss Clairol to get it this deep a shade.” She dug around in her handbag until she produced a comb, and started to back-comb my quiff until it stood up perpendicular on the front of my head. “Oh, look at that, Betts, I haven’t even put any styling product in it. Hang on, let me do your eyes.” I suffered in the chair, as she pulled out some kohl, sharpened the pencil, then started to menace it threateningly towards one of my eyes.

“I don’t ever wear make-up,” I protested, trying to bat her away.

“Why not?”

“Make-up is for girls,” I snorted. “I’m not a girl.”

“Carter,” said Anne very carefully, taking my blocky chin in her long, elegant fingers and turning it towards her. “Listen to me, because this is important. Gender isn’t something you wear. Your gender isn’t in your clothes, your make-up, your hair, though those are all very good places to start. Just remember, even though those things are important, they are only a paint-box. Just costumes. It’s all drag. Because gender is how you feel, deep down in your heart. Any man wearing a dress is still just a man wearing a dress if he doesn’t do it with the right attitude. It’s how someone carries themselves that makes them a man, or a woman, or something inbetween. True masculinity is not about refusing...
to wear eyeliner, it’s about how you project yourself while wearing that eyeliner. Now look up, no, right up at the ceiling, and let me show you.”

Settling down, I pondered what she had just said as she poked and prodded at my eyes. And I thought, of course, about Blixa. Blixa wore eyeliner all the time. I could very easily imagine him turning up in a dress without a moment’s thought, and yet it wasn’t at all the way that he dressed that made his gender so hard to read. It was, as Anne had suggested, the way that he carried himself, the way he moved, his fluid, expressive hands, his dancer’s way of weaving his shoulders so that a simple shrug could convey a thousand words, the graceful way he stood, and bent, and flexed, and the devastating precision he deployed his eyebrows, or his sneer. Blixa would still be neither a man nor woman, but simply a Blixa, in a dress, in a three-piece suit, or completely nude.

Finally, Anne was done torturing me with that kohl pencil, and my chin was released. “Now. Look at yourself.”

I was genuinely surprised by the defiant Victorian street-urchin who stared back from the mirror over Tabea’s fireplace. “I look like Joan fucking Jett.”

“Yes,” pronounced Bettina, with a Teutonic hint of ferocity that scared me a little. “You do.”

“Nah, I’d say more Johnny Thunders,” observed Anne, producing a paisley-print scarf from somewhere in her voluminous carry-all bag, and wrapping it around my neck in a loose bow. “Lord, now that man was a proper heartbreaker...”

“If you are trying to make me jealous with your heterosexual crushes, it is not going to work,” teased Bettina, stretching herself out on the sofa behind us.

“Heterosexual, heteroschmosexual,” laughed Anne. “He thought I was a boy when I first met him. Not that it matters much; he still gave me the eye. It just doesn’t matter, does it. If you find someone attractive, the genitals are pretty much the least important aspect of it.”

“Well, what is important, then, if genitals are not?” I stuttered, feeling my whole head starting to spin under her heady influence. It wasn’t that I desired Anne – after all, she was Bettina’s lover, and despite West Berlin social mores, I didn’t really fancy sharing – but this worldview seemed intoxicating, exhilarating, seductive. The things she said just rearranged my mind.

Anne left me, and walked over to Bettina, who was sat, smoking and pouting on the sofa. “Noses,” she drawled, gently tapping her lover’s very pointed Prussian nose with her blood-red fingernails. “I have a definite thing for good noses. And hair, of course. Hair is the single most important thing to me,” she insisted, digging her fingers into Bettina’s thick, brown schoolboy crop. “If the hair, and the nose, and the style is good, what’s down below doesn’t really matter to me.” As she thrust her tongue into Bettina’s ear, Bettina looked like she was about to protest at something, but as their kiss started to turn passionate, she seemed to forget whatever she was going to say.

I didn’t like to stare, but Anne fascinated me. She would dress as a boy one day, a girl the next, but more often than not, some strange and flamboyant mixture of the two. And as she tried to dress me up, lending me clothes or styling my thick black hair into outrageous peaks, she both encouraged me, and inspired me. She dragged me in her wake, on her and Bettina’s shopping trips, and pushed me to try on clothes that I admired, but never thought I had the confidence to pull off. And slowly, maybe not at work, but definitely going to gigs, and going out on the town, I started to push my dirtbag butch thing into the realm of ‘old-fashioned dandy’. Fitted shirts started appearing in my wardrobe, as did a couple of old-time waistcoats with lapels. Proper Levi’s were almost impossible to get in West Berlin, but when she left, Anne took my measurements back to New York, and gifted me with a pair she’d found in a second hand shop on Broadway down near Houston, making a special note
of the address, imparting this mysterious location with a near mystic appeal. I dressed myself more carefully, and found that I started to enjoy the lingering glances from both sexes. As a girl, or in the guise of a shapeless teenage boy, I’d never attracted much attention. But as an androgynous dandy, people were suddenly intrigued when I walked through a room in what Anne called my ‘soft butch chic’.

And it was Anne who sorted out my vision problems for the KBA, so that I could be issued with a German drivers’ license and the registration for my beloved van. She had an extremely good eye for what would suit my facial shape, and combed through vintage spectacles until she found me, not some modern metal and tinted glass 80s monstrosities that the fashionable shops were selling, but a pair of very old, round, horn-rimmed glasses that looked like something a professor at the Bauhaus would have worn. I got my prescription filled into those, though the optometrist complained about grinding the lens to the right shape. And when I put them on, combined with my man’s haircut, and my old-fashioned clothes, I was astonished at the Weimar intellectual who stared back at me.

Gudrun’s jaw actually dropped. the first time she saw me, in my new glasses, wearing a stiff Victorian gentleman’s waistcoat and shirtsleeves. >>God in heaven, Carter, you’re handsome in those.<<

The compliment was a welcome one, not just because it pleased me to be considered attractive by Gudrun, but because it made me feel that we were, finally, back on completely friendly and non-awkward terms after the weirdness of the autumn. I had accepted that she didn’t fancy me, but still, it felt nice to be admired.

And Blixa? Blixa’s eyes flickered over me with an expression that made me shiver. Blixa was going through a very weird period, since he and Jana had split up. First he scraped his hair back, almost to the skin, which was very ugly, really highlighting the bony longness of his pale Prussian face. He had always been lanky, but without a girlfriend, he seemed to simply forget to eat, and started becoming almost painfully thin. And he was starting to act... well, there was no other way to put it, really. He started to act really faggy, like he was no longer just slightly camp, in the way that so many West Berlin men were all camp. He actually started to act like heterosexuality and even masculinity itself was something he no longer had any use for, and was just casting away from him like abandoned luggage now he no longer had to hold on to a girlfriend.

I caught sight of him sometimes in gay bars, where I went with Bettina and Anne and Tabea and the little butch clique. They were all trying to make me get out there, on the scene, to meet someone new, a nice girl to help me get over Ilsa. So it wasn’t like I was actually looking out for Blixa, but his strange, ethereal beauty just seemed to shine out over a crowded room, whether he wanted it to or not. All the things he did to make himself look more ugly only served to make him look more unusual, and therefore more beautiful. The way he was carrying himself had changed, since he got back from that first tour, like he had discovered something new about himself out there on the road, as the focus of hatred and adoration from people who had not grown up in West Berlin, and knew nothing about him.

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His odd aloofness intensified, and I would catch sight of him, standing against the back wall of a club, wrapped up in that rubber gear, the leather-boy cap tilted down over his mascaraed eyes, just projecting an air of fuck off, don’t talk to me, like no one would dare approach him, and I don’t know if he actually pulled, or if he just went there to pose. And yet, still, I just couldn’t take my eyes off him, the intensity of his eyes, and how they seemed to reach out across a crowded room, that judgemental glare that seemed to look down into your very soul, and I thought of the rooster on the rooftop in his favourite story, and thought, yes, that’s you. I had never known anyone with that kind of intensity and charisma, who could just stand in the background, and somehow suck up all the attention in the room.
Those clubs that Bettina and Anne took me to, they were an education in themselves, so different from that earnest earth-mother lesbian bar that Ilza and I had visited. Men dressed like women, women dressed like men, and I saw same-sex couples snogging openly, in booths or against the wall, in ways that made my head spin. In the shadow of the Wall, all morality seemed to have gone out the window, and absolutely anything would go. And yet, of all the strange creatures, horny beasts, drag queens, male impersonators, fags, queers, lesbians, dykes, twinks and butches, the strangest creature of all was still Blixa.

Bettina gave him shit, sometimes, in an over-friendly, slightly familial tone. >>So you’re gay again now?>> she teased him as she gave him a bottle of beer he was too poor to buy himself. >>I knew that whole Jana thing was just a phase.<<

>>It’s not a phase, Betts<< retorted Blixa, in the most sulky, petulant tone, though he and I were almost studiously avoiding one another’s eyes.

>>I’ve seen all of your phases, since you were fifteen, darling<< countered Bettina. >>Straight, bi, gay, bi, straight again, like a yo-yo. Will you ever make up your mind?<<

>>I don’t see why I should ever make up my mind<< shot back Blixa, his eyebrows reaching a dangerous level of sarcasm that I would immediately have backed off from. >>If someone wants to suck my cock, what matters to me is if they’re hot, not what kind of hole they have for me to put it in.<<

Bettina just laughed, and reached up to ruffle his hair, which only infuriated him. >>You boys and your cocks. I’m so glad I never have to deal with this shit... My lover is all boy, no cock, and I’m proud of it<< She roared with laughter and stuck her arm through Anne’s, as we plunged on deeper into the club.

But just for a moment, as we passed, Blixa’s eyes and mine met, with a tiny but unmistakable blast of electricity as his eyes widened and his pupils dilated. He licked his cracked lips nervously, but seemed unable to speak. I didn’t nod, I didn’t smile, I just froze, like a startled deer, until I could hear Tabea up ahead. >>Bettina! Anne! And my goodness, Carter... why it’s the full triumvirate of tuxedo babes tonight. Love the pencil moustache, Anne, suits you! Everybody’s here! DJ, put on Bette Davis Eyes for us Harlow blondes, we want to dance!<<

Those clubs made all the difference to me, in many ways. They were the first place in my life, where I had ever felt normal. The bartender at my favourite was Salomé, the drag artist and musician whose rehearsal space I had made habitable, so she always greeted me with warmth, smearing me with lipstick, introducing me to her drag queen friends as >>the luscious lesbian ‘lectrician<< and refusing to let me pay for drinks. The fact of knowing that there were other women like me there, not even butches, but something more elegant, more refined, more decadent, wearing carefully clipped hair and tuxedos, with monocles as outlandish as my 1920s architect glasses, and the way they nodded at me, with a deep familiarity, made me feel whole in a way I had never felt before. It was for them, that I had started dressing up really, to win their approval and maybe even their acceptance. And yet Blixa, in that place, no matter how he tried to dress up like a little leather twink in his rubber cap, the way he held himself aloof, as if there were an invisible Berlin Wall around him, he just seemed to grow stranger and stranger in that environment.

We avoided one another, even though we were both aware that the other was there, because we often caught each other staring. Even though we greeted one another at Iron-Grey or at the Risk bar with the same warmth and friendliness as ever, we rarely spoke, in those meat-market gay clubs. Because if Blixa turned up in a club, I would know with absolute certainty, that I wasn’t going home with anyone that night.
It wasn’t like I was a massive seducer or player of the field. I didn’t have Anne’s poise and air of celebrity, and I didn’t even have Bettina’s air of mystery and elegance. I was just tall, and rather shy, and a little bit awkward, and all too painfully English, but thank goodness, there were some women who occasionally found an appeal in my bumbling approach. Or, more likely, they approached me, because something in me seemed to appeal to mothering types. I tried to be up front and honest about my situation, and explain that I was just getting over another badly broken heart, that I had rotten luck with girlfriends being torn away from me due to circumstances beyond our control, and that I really wasn’t looking for a relationship, but my friends just insisted I should not spend my convalescence brooding at home. And miraculously, sometimes that line even worked, and some lovely girl took me home for a shag and a warm breakfast afterwards. (Oh god, if only I had known how easy it was for a butch to get a shag in certain places in West Berlin, I might never have gone with Ilfa in the first place.)

But if Blixa was there, my wits seemed to desert me. I wasn’t able to navigate that delicate space of the pick-up, orienting myself to desire lines and subtle clues as to possibility. Blixa’s mere presence created a gravitational well that seemed to divert all those sticky trails of attraction and potential away from the available women swirling around me.

We didn’t talk about it. We met up at Iron-Grey and talked about music and clothes and books and art just like we always did. We took pills and stayed up all night, arguing about the non-existence of god. I went to the Risk bar on a Saturday night with Gudrun and the gang, and he greeted us with hugs and free drinks (wine for the girls, cans of coke for me) and we even went in the back room for an illicit draw of hash when he was on break before returning, giggling, to our usual stations, him at the bar, and me sitting in the window drawing the nightlife of West Berlin. And we never ever talked about what we were doing, staring at one another so intently, in those spaces where we were supposed to be meeting the demands of our flesh.
Darkroom

Chapter Summary

Blixa, housesitting Wolfgang's flat while he is away for the holidays, invites Carter round to use his darkroom. But as we already know, Blixa's favourite thing to do in Wolfgang's flat is use up all the hot water. Do things heat up between Blixa and Carter?

Christmas was approaching. Our walled enclave was emptying out, as the art students went home to their families, and those who could leave, did. Gudrun, who surprised me with the joy she took in such a kitsch, uncool holiday, took me round a large, jolly Christmas Market, buying little trinkets for her friends and her family. She gave me a small, painted wooden ornament of a drum, >>from the little drummer girl<< to remember her by, before disappearing back to Lüneberg Heath to spend the holidays with her mother and sister.

Schumacher had given me the week off, in those dead days between Christmas and New Year, and I had absolutely no idea what to do with it. At the end of November, I had written a half-pleading, half-recalcitrant letter to my parents, suggesting that maybe I could come home over the holidays? But I received a less than enthusiastic response saying that they were going away, and anyway it wouldn’t be nice to be in Britain when the weather was so miserable, so I should save my visit for the Spring.

On Christmas itself, my Great-Aunt and Grete threw a slightly maudlin ‘waifs and strays’ party for those sad ladies who were staying in the boarding house. I put in a brief appearance, accepted a slice of some impossibly heavy Stollen (half of which I fed to the lapdog, Fritz), drank my yearly thimbleful of lukewarm sekt just to remind myself that I hated the taste of alcohol, and left them to their old lady revels, retreating to my bedroom to read.

The days slid into one another. I went out to the shops to buy dog-food for Fritz, and ran into Beate, who was home visiting her parents for the holidays, so we went for a coffee and a catch-up chat, as I filled her in on the Berlin gossip she had missed. She told me that she was, still, deeply in love with Chrislo, but she was starting to understand why people had tried to warn her off him. He was a genius, it was true, but he was also erratic and unpredictable, and had started to become, well, unreliable. He scared her a little, with his drinking, and his drug-taking was becoming a little reckless. And yet the pull of amazing sex and even more amazing music won out over her common sense. It seemed the course of love never did run true, but I told her, from the depths of my experiences with heartbreak, to hang in there. Difficult love was better than no love at all.

But as I was walking home afterwards, I glanced at my van, parked fortuitously in front of the house, and was annoyed to see someone had left a large, black plastic rubbish sack resting on its front bonnet. Oh, what a nuisance to have to clean that up, can’t people get rid of their own coal-sacks, I thought to myself... but as I grew closer, the black plastic sack moved, and unfolded legs, and resolved itself into the long, narrow form of Blixa, who had been perched on the front of my van as if waiting for me.

>>Carter<< he greeted me, with boyish enthusiasm, his face cracking open in a grin. >>I’ve just made the most fortuitous discovery.<<

>>Is it soap?<< I teased, for Blixa’s lax attitude towards cleanliness was a source of unending
dismay among the Iron-Grey staff.

>>Do you know, I am house-sitting for Wolfgang, over the holidays, since that lucky thing has been invited to spend Christmas with a highly attractive antiquarian bookseller in Rome. And do you know what I have discovered that he has, in his apartment?>>He was clearly in an expansive mood, bouncy and full of energy.

>>If it’s another collection of disgusting gay pornography, I don’t want to know.<<

>>Better than that<< he insisted, gesticulating wildly and waggling his pointed finger towards me in his glee. For a minute, he looked at me expectantly, but I refused to play his game, and would not guess. >>Carter, he has a darkroom. You must come, immediately. And then we can do the enlargements of your photos.<<

>>Oh.<< I had almost forgotten that he had said he would look for a darkroom for me. That was actually a pleasant surprise, as I hadn’t had access to a proper darkroom since school. >>Are you sure he won’t mind us using it, though?>>

Blixa gave a self-satisfied little nod. >>Wolfgang specifically told me: I may use anything in his house, except the aged whisky. Darkroom chemicals are not whisky, so therefore, clearly I may use them. Come round now, won’t you? You’re not busy, are you?>>

I blinked at him for a moment, then realised that I was on holiday. I didn’t have anything better to do, so I might as well take him up on the kind offer. >>Alright. Let me go and fetch the negatives.<<

>>I’ll come with you<< said Blixa, following me up the steps like a puppy.

>>Erm, that’s not a good idea<< I said, pointing to the sign above the door, saying >>Females only.<< But Blixa looked at me with such huge, round, disappointed puppydog eyes that I found myself craning my neck, trying to spot if my Great-Aunt was at home.

When Blixa realised what I was doing, he supplied. >>No one answered the door, when I rang. I do not think your relatives are at home.<<

None of the lights were on, on the ground floor. It was risky, but... oh, what the hell. >>Alright, but let’s go up the back.<<

I let him in through the service entrance, leading back through a narrow driveway to the central courtyard. We slipped in through the gate where I normally loaded in the coal, then went up the back stairs. Blixa looked around, completely curious, as if he had never seen an ornate, middle-class townhouse before, and showed every intention of just wandering through into the formal rooms at the front, until I physically grabbed him by the sleeve of his rubber coat and shoved him into my room.

Without even waiting for an invitation, he flopped himself down on my bed, then started looking around, taking in the wall to wall bookshelves, and the various sketches and posters tacked up around the room.

>>What city is that a map of?>> he asked, pointing to the huge colour map of London over my desk.

>>That’s my city. It’s London<< I sighed, tempted to reach out and trace the path of the Thames with my finger.

>>Why do you have a map of London over your desk, when you live in West Berlin<< Blixa demanded, sounding a little annoyed.
I don’t know. It keeps me from getting homesick, I suppose. And sometimes, I guess it’s a way to try to make sense of West Berlin. That I try to translate, to map Schöneberg to Shoreditch, and Kreuzberg to Hackney.

Blixa looked almost outraged. Why would you do such a thing? That doesn’t even make sense. What has Schöneberg to do with... Shardeetch? He said the English name rudely, like a piece of gristle he had stuck in his teeth.

Well, you know, they’re kind of similar. The central neighbourhood where all the cool kids and artists hang out; the working class neighbourhood that is still a bit rough, next door...

West Berlin isn’t London, it’s West Berlin. You can’t translate. You have to learn the new meanings of this place, not compare it to your English world. This seemed to have really got his goat for some reason.

Do you speak English at all, Blixa? I probed, feeling a little defensive.

“A leettle,” he replied, and smiled as if he were showing off.

“When you speak English, do you think in English,” I asked slowly and deliberately. “Or do you think in German, and translate each word, each phrase into English?”

He had to stop and pause to contemplate that. “Zhat is how it vas vhen I started to learn, ja. But as you learn, it comes more quick. Vhen you can zhink in English, vizzout zhe German, zhat is ven you haff really learnt English.”

Maybe you have to learn a city, the same way you learn a language. And you do have to translate, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, until you learn to think in your new city.

Hmmmm he said, as if thinking it through, but as I turned and dug through my desk, trying to find the negatives, his eyes started to wander again. Are these books all yours? he demanded.

Well, most of them I barely glanced at them before returning to the hunt. The English ones are all mine, but most of the German art books are my aunt’s.

Blixa picked up the book nearest to my bed and read the title aloud in halting English, “Zer Univerze Vrom Virst Principles; Basic Physics For Zer Vorking Man.” before adding Are you reading this for work or pleasure?

Fearing he would lose my place, or worse, I took the book away from him and laid it on the desk. For curiosity.

Tell me about physics, then he urged. I am very interested in this subject. I read a little while ago, a very interesting book on physics, called The Tao of Physics, which enumerates the ways in which science, as it becomes more abstract, approaches the principles of ancient Chinese philosophy, and even mysticism.

Did it answer your questions about god I wondered aloud.

No. But it’s really quite extraordinary. Do you know this book?

I know it’s likely to be rubbish. If you want a good book on science, just ask me, Blixa, I’ll find you something good. Richard Feynman is a good place to start. But don’t go messing around with that Quantum Mysticism bullshit, Blixa. It’s bollocks. It will absolutely rot your brain. The parcel from the developers was not in the top draw, so I moved to the middle.
“Bollocks” said Blixa, repeating the English word that had slipped in without my noticing. >>But wasn’t Oppenheimer also a physicist, one who worked with the atom bomb? When the test succeeded, when the Bomb went off, he did not quote physics or science or atomic theory, he quoted the Bhagavad-Gita: Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds. It was he who invoked Shiva dancing, destruction in one hand, creation in the other. This is the basis of mysticism itself.<<

>>It’s a metaphor, Blixa<< I sighed. >>An allegory. I doubt very much whether Oppenheimer was really a mystic. He was a pragmatist, who faced an impossible choice. Feynman, on the other hand, Feynman’s a really interesting character. As much a poet and a beatnik as a physicist. You’d like him.<<

>>What do you think of alchemy, then? I suppose you think that’s all bullshit, too.<< The way that Blixa said Scheisse made all the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, putting some real Prussian disdain into it. >>I am right now reading a very interesting text on alchemy, that posits it was a metaphor, an allegory of the political situation in Europe during the Renaissance. Just the same way we now describe metaphors of our current political situation using the Bomb, describing the state of collapse in a nuclear implosion, the H-Bomb, as a way of describing the state of collapse in our own society. What do you make of that? What do you think of Alchemy?<<

>>I think alchemy is interesting as the basis of Western science, but beyond that...<< I shook my head, trying to ignore the rustling noises coming from my bed as I stopped searching the middle draw and moved to the bottom. >>It’s like astrology is interesting because it forced ancient cultures to keep very accurate star charts which formed the basis of proper astronomy, but I wouldn’t put any faith in it, or plan my life around my star sign.<<

>>I love astronomy, I have loved it since I was a child<< piped up Blixa, his eyes lighting up and suddenly looking as if I had piqued his interest. >>But I also find astrology very interesting, as a method of how people conceptualise the various personalities<< he insisted, in his contrarian voice. >>It is the basis of psychology, too.<<

Finally, I located the packet of photos, though I didn’t know why I had hidden them away at the back of the bottom drawer, like I was afraid of someone finding them. I opened up the packet to check, and oh yes, that was why I had hidden them. The topless photos of Ilsa. I took those out of the pack and stashed them back where I had found them, making sure I took only the Blixa negatives and prints, but I could hear giggling from the direction of the bed.

I turned to see, with slowly creeping horror, that Blixa had got the drawer of my bedside table open, and what was worse, he had extracted the leather harness for my strap-on, and was holding it up, eyeing it with intense curiosity.

>>Give me that!<< I snapped, lunging to close the drawer before he could discover the dildo, but he rolled away from me, holding the harness out of reach. >>What are you doing, digging around in my things anyway. How dare you!<<

But he was snorting with laughter, examining it closely. >>What on earth could it be. Could it be something... lesbian?<<

>>You know perfectly well what it is. Now give it back to me.<<

>>It is a sex thing, yes?<< Wriggling on the mattress, he held the contraption over his slender hips and started to thrust suggestively.

>>Knock it off, Blixa<< I snapped. There was a brief tussle between us, and I wrested it from his grip, but he continued to stare at me with a really odd expression, like half-challenging and half-
curious. >>Come on<< I said, just wanting to get him out of my bedroom before my Great-Aunt could come home. >>If we’re going to go to this darkroom, then let’s go. I’ll just leave a note for Grete saying I won’t be home for dinner, and then we’ll head off.<<

>>Alright, alright<< he grumbled, as I swept him out of my room, and almost frog-marched him down the stairs back to the courtyard before he could start picking up the photos of my family on display in the long, passage-like Berliner-Zimmer, to peer at my relations.

It wasn’t that long a drive to Wolfgang’s modern apartment block, but Blixa commandeered the stereo and put on one of his tapes. >>Have you got any hash?<< he asked hopefully.

That, too, I had grabbed from the hidden place at the back of the desk, but I didn’t want to give him ideas. >>Not when I’m driving. Maybe later.<<

We climbed the stairs to Wolfgang’s – so it seemed that even swish modern flats didn’t get you a lift – and Blixa let us in with a spare key hidden up above the lintel. Wolfgang’s flat was almost exactly what I had expected: very modern, rather sparse except for a vast quantity of books, bits of his art in progress everywhere, erotic prints of young men on the walls. Curious, I took off my shoes, made myself comfortable, and nosed about in his shelves, admiring the eclectic mix of philosophy, esoterica and fairy tales. Clearly this was where Blixa had been doing his reading on alchemy and the Tao of Physics.

But Blixa was poking around in the boxes at the foot of Wolfgang’s desk. >>Do you like the posters?<< he asked in a teasing voice, gesturing with his eyebrows towards the naked men.

>>Mapplethorpe, yes? They’re very tasteful<< I replied, refusing to let him get to me.

>>Tasteful?<< Again, he let out a little grunt of laughter, but then he seemed to find what he was looking for. >>Go on, roll a spliff.<<

I looked around for rolling papers, then found a pipe on the desk, its bowl already sticky with resin, so I loaded that, took a few puffs and passed it to Blixa.

>>Do you want to see the photos that Wolfgang took of me, earlier this year?<< he offered, though I should have known from his grin, that he was up to no good.

>>If Wolfgang took photos of you, why are you after mine?<<

Blixa’s grin became positively wolfish as he handed me the box. >>I can hardly send these to the record company.<<

As I lifted the lid to look at the photos, I saw a small, feral boy curled in a ball, his teeth bared at the photographer. The spiky hair looked very familiar, as did the long, thin limbs, as it permeated my somewhat stoned brain that these were art photos, and that Blixa was completely nude. I looked through them, marvelling at the marble paleness of his almost hairless skin, and the photos were so beautiful, and so lovely to look at in my hash-enhanced condition that it didn’t really dawn on me, that this was an odd thing to be doing, to be admiring nude photos of the friend sitting only about twelve inches away from me on the sofa. Blixa was absurdly beautiful, and intensely photogenic, with a charisma that seemed to leap off the glossy photographic paper, and his angular body looked more like some kind of sculpture, or some exotic tropical seashell, than it did a young man.

>>Do you like them?<< he asked, passing the pipe back to me, tapping me on the elbow as if surprised that I was responding to them so positively. If he had intended to shock, which, knowing Blixa, he probably had, he had not succeeded.
They're beautiful photos. Wolfgang is extremely talented, he really does have a particularly good eye.

He has more than a good eye Blixa giggled, a little coquettishly, and I wondered what that tone was supposed to signify, if I was supposed to be shocked by the nudes, but I had been hanging around West Berlin art students for so long that nudes no longer phased me in the slightest. I dug a little deeper, and found a few snapshots of Wolfgang and Blixa, hanging out in what looked like the Café Mitropa, Wolfgang’s arm draped around Blixa’s shoulders with an intimacy that looked more than just friendly. As I studied the angle at which the two boys’ heads echoed one another as they leaned into each other’s bodies, I thought again of how Blixa and Wolfgang flirted at the Risk, and felt the ground beneath us, that I thought was so solid, shift ever so slightly.

And at that moment, it suddenly dawned on me that he might have had an ulterior motive in showing me the photos, that had nothing to do with shock at all. I knew, in theory at least, that Blixa went with men sometimes. I’d seen him on the pull in gay clubs, and both Jana and Bettina had said as much. It was no big deal, as Gudrun had once told me. But to see photos of him with a man, especially a man I knew well, it threw me a little, though I couldn’t say why.

He and Wolfgang were old friends, I knew that. And anyway, why was he showing me nude photos that his friend had taken of him? And photos of him and Wolfgang that seemed to indicate that they... Oh god. I lifted up the next layer of photos and suddenly caught a glimpse of a clutch of Polaroids of Blixa and Wolfgang just full-on snogging in a corner of the Risk bar, tongues and all. I swallowed nervously, put the clutch of nude photos that I had been holding in my hand back on top of the Polaroids, refusing to dig any further. It was none of my business. And what’s more, I just didn’t want to know. I felt, very strongly, that whatever had happened between Blixa and Wolfgang was their business, not mine. And whatever reaction it was that Blixa thought he was going to get from me, with these photos, I made a deliberate choice not to give it to him.

Whatever weirdness he had in mind, I decided I better nip that thought in the bud. Right I said, closing the box and standing up. Where’s the darkroom, then?

Oh, we have to set it up in the bathroom. Blixa stretched languorously, like he didn’t really want to move from the comfortable sofa.

Well, give me a hand. I insisted briskly, and walked through into the next room. Oh, shit. I had walked into the bedroom, and it was decorated in predictably Wolfgang style, with large Tom of Finland prints hanging above the bed. The covers of the bed had been left in disarray, as if someone had only just got out of it recently, and the pillows still bore the imprint of Blixa’s head. Best to get out of there quickly. Muttering to myself, I went back to the living room and selected another door, which was, luckily, the right one.

Although it had been nearly two years since I had set foot in a darkroom, it came back very quickly as I stepped into the large, tiled bathroom. There was an enlarger folded away on a sideboard, with a couple of rubber trays for developing fluid, which fit perfectly over the large double sink. The chemicals were all stacked neatly in one side of the linen cupboard, and there was even a second lightswitch, which turned on a red darkroom bulb. As Blixa flicked through the pack of photos, indicating which ones he liked best, I set up the enlarger and filled the tubs. Then I turned on the red light, turned off the overhead light and set down to work.

It was actually a joy to remember how much I liked the printing aspect of photography. Setting up the negative, doing test strips, framing and composing the area of the shot I wanted to use; it all felt very soothing. I soon got into a rhythm, doing the whole thing like an assembly line. Turn on the enlarger’s light, time the seconds of exposure, then flip the print into the developing bath. If I timed it
right, I could go back and set up another print for exposure, and flip the print through into the fixer as the timer ticked down. Developer, fixer, soak in a bath of water to get the chemicals off, then hang it up on the line to dry.

I’d made about half a dozen enlargements, when I heard the water in the bathtub start to gurgle. >>What are you doing? I’ve got enough water to...<< But as I turned, I saw Blixa standing, completely stark bollock naked on the bathmat, bending over to test the temperature of the water.

>>I’m just going to take a bath<< he informed me, as if this were the most natural thing in the world. Under the red light, his slightly pimply skin looked so perfect and so smooth he didn’t even look human. That hairless, boyish skin, dusted with freckles, smudged with dirt, his skinny chest, so thin the ribs showed through, those long, coltish legs, and in the centre, like a fat white worm... no, don’t look there. >>You don’t seem to need my help?<<

>>No.<< I yanked my eyes away, and turned back to the counter, trying to concentrate on putting the last few prints through the process, and doing my best to ignore the splashing sounds as Blixa stepped into the tub.

My body was going through the motions of printing out photos, but my mind could not stop dragging itself back to the sounds of joyful bathing behind me. Blixa was loud, as always, splashing about, singing to himself a bathing song that he seemed to be making up on the spot, chasing the soap when he lost it underwater.

I finished the last of the sheet of photographic paper in the open box, and looked around for another, but I didn’t dare open a fresh pack. Although Blixa seemed unconcerned about Wolfgang’s resources, I made a note to myself to buy him some supplies to replace the ones we’d used. But as I started to clear up, Blixa demanded my attention again.

>>Carter can you give me a hand?<< I moved towards him, trying very hard not to look at him, though fortunately, the water lent him a modesty he completely lacked. >>Can you just make sure, and scrub the bit in the middle of my back that I can’t reach? Jana always used to tell me to use a bath brush on it, so I didn’t get blackheads, but Wolfgang hasn’t got one long enough to reach.<<

For a moment, the thought shot through my hash-addled brain that he had got to be joking, but I found myself taking the brush, soaping it up, then rubbing it up and down the length of his back, almost counting the knobs of his bony spine. Leaning forwards so I could reach all the way down, Blixa started to make an odd noise, almost like a cat purring, that definitely spoke of pleasure.

>>That hit the spot! Many thanks.<< He grinned up at me as I handed the brush back to him.

>>Shall I shampoo my hair? I have friends who swear to me that you should never wash your hair. It destroys the natural oils, they say. But it’s kind of fun to lather it up, don’t you think? Hand me that bottle?<< He gestured to a tube of shampoo that was just out of his reach up in the shower caddy, and I found myself having to lean across the bath to fetch it for him. >>What scent is it? Wolfgang has some weird taste in perfumed soap. Does it smell bad or good?<< But instead of raising the bottle to his own nose, he held it out to me.

>>I am the last person you should be asking that. I have no sense of smell at all.<<

>>Really?<< Blixa’s eyes widened as he turned to observe me. >>How did you lose it, or did you never have it to start with?<<

It was something I hadn’t thought about in so long, I had almost forgotten that there had been a time when I could smell. >>When I was in my early adolescence, I used to get terrible, terrible nosebleeds all the time. The doctors said they would do a procedure to cauterise my nose, to stop the bleeding.
When it was done, sure enough, I had no more nosebleeds. But my sense of smell was pretty much gone.

Blixa grinned at me. \textit{I’m not so good with smell, either. I broke my nose when I was younger. If you look at it carefully, you can see it’s not straight.} He turned to me and laid his finger along the ridge, so that I could see there was a slight crook to it. \textit{And ever since then, I’ve had terrible problems with my sinuses, like I caught a cold one day, and the damned thing has never left, for three years. It’s always dripping, always itching. And I can’t smell much, either. The girls at Iron-Grey are always teasing me, telling me I stink. I just can’t tell.}

\textit{I... wouldn’t know...} I said as he started to splash about in the tub again, dipping his head underwater to wet his hair, so that the lower half of his body popped up again, his organ flopping against his thighs.

\textit{Do you want to lather it for me?} he offered, holding out the bottle, but I started to back away, feeling the complete absurdity of the situation. Blixa merely shrugged and set about lathering up his hair, whistling as he scrubbed it first one way, then the other.

But my brain didn’t seem to be working, and it wasn’t just the drugs. Maybe it was normal for healthy young Germans to bathe in one another’s presence, lather each other up in the tub, but my repressed English mind was screaming. I retreated to the other side of the room, and stood against the counter, just staring at him, drinking in his beautiful features and long angular body. I thought I had finally got to the point where I was OK with Blixa’s presence, and found his beauty an inspiration, rather than a torment, but I just felt helpless in the presence of this young man bathing. He seemed to be completely aware that I was staring, but didn’t seem bothered by it, smiling back at me as he shaped his soapy hair into different styles.

\textit{Now for the fun part} he said, and dipped his shoulders, slipping elegantly below the water line. But as his head disappeared, the other half of his body rose, as I could see his organ lying inert against his thighs.

But finally he emerged, his hair plastered to his head like a seal, his eyes looking almost unnaturally large when he pushed the water out of them with his thumbs and opened them, blinking.

\textit{Can you grab me a towel?} It was hard to move, but I did as I was asked. I needed desperately to sober up or smoke some more hash, enough to make this situation somehow less surreal, as Blixa climbed out of the tub and started drying himself off. I couldn’t quite tell if he was simply oblivious to my flabbergasted amazement, or actively enjoying it, rubbing the towel back and forth across flesh that almost glowed under the red light.

\textit{Is it OK if I turn the light on, or will it damage the photos?} he asked, almost innocently.

\textit{They’re fine; they’re just drying} I stuttered, and suddenly the room was flooded with light. And there stood Blixa, almost marble pale, though I could see, now, the occasional bruise and patch of bad skin. He was just a man, not the marble angel that posed in the cemetery photos.

Finally, he finished towelling off his hair and hung the wet towel over a rail. And for a very long minute, the two of us just stood there, gazing at one another, Blixa standing very erect, his head up, his shoulders thrown back, his thin chest puffed out, while I tried to physically shrink away from him, collapsing into the sink counter, afraid of how much I wanted to touch him.

\textit{Are you just going to stare at me all night, or do you want to do something more?} he asked, his
voice low and even, and at that moment, I realised that we had both come here with a very specific purpose. Both? Wait, no. I meant, that he had come here with a specific purpose he had not chosen to share with me. No, really? Don’t be a naïve little coquette, I thought to myself. Even before I had seen the nude photos, I had seen him lying on my bed, playing with the harness of my strap-on. I had deliberately chosen to pick up the hash and bring it with me. I had known, even if only subconsciously, exactly his purpose in bringing me here, though I had chosen to actively ignore it. Ignore it? Maybe I had even actively embraced it. I just couldn’t think with his body so naked and beautiful in front of me, like my skin was going to start to physically hurt if it didn’t meet his.

>>What else do you expect me to do? Get out my sketchbook and draw you?<< I panted, just buying for time, trying to put off the eventual decision.

But Blixa’s head suddenly snapped to attention, as his face lit up with excitement at the idea.

>>Yes<< he said, turning to the mirror to push his shaggy wet hair out of his face, then quickly reapplying his eyeliner with an expert hand. >>Good idea. I would like that.<<

He opened the door, strode out into the living room, still completely naked, and located the pipe and my bag of hash, loading up another bowl full, striking a match and puffing to get it lit before taking a long draw, then handing it to me. And as I stood, trying desperately to suck more of the drug into my system, he dug about, and found a few sheets of drawing paper, an artist’s clipboard, and a coffee can full of pencils.

>>Come<< he said, and walked through into the bedroom with an almost absurd amount of self-confidence. It didn’t seem to bother him at all that he was naked, in fact he seemed to revel in the complete freedom of his long, graceful limbs. I followed as if in a dream, taking the pencils and paper from him, as he lay down on the bed with the unselfconsciousness of a young animal. He posed, lying back and arranging his limbs into a pleasing arrangement, then lay his head against the mattress, gazing up at me with a hungry expression, the darkness of the kohl around one eye highlighting the paleness of the other.

I put the pencil to paper, and started to draw, mechanically, almost automatically, as if there were no conscious thought between the eye and the pencil. And I knew, as I drew, that this was an erotic act, that tracing his outlines with the drawing was as close as I would ever get to tracing his skin with my fingers or my lips. And he watched me drawing him, his full lips twitching up in a half-smile, as if he was enjoying being watched, being drawn, being captured.

Finishing the sketch, I pulled out another piece of paper, than gestured for him to move. He obliged me by changing position, and I started another drawing. I caught the tilt of his head, the sharp angle of his hip, the long slope of his thigh, but left his organ a vague suggestion before going back to fill in the details of his face. His huge eyes, his prominent cheekbones, those lips like a ripe fruit begging to be tasted. And then I thought, the hell with it, and made a dedicated study of his cock, with his neat balls hanging behind.

I gestured for him to change position again, and took out another sheet, filling this one with the tangled sprawl of his long limbs across the mattress. I did another, and then another, until I had a pile of half a dozen nude drawings of Blixa. And then I found I had run out of paper, so I picked up a sheet that was only half covered, and started to draw a second Blixa curled up sleepily against the first. But it was only as I started to draw the second set of genitals, in comparison to the first, that I realised it was starting to grow, lengthening and filling out, rising sharply away from his thighs as he became erect. He was enjoying this.

>>This is turning you on?<< I asked quietly, barely trusting my voice to put a name to this weird thing that was happening between us.
Of course it is. You don’t find it erotic to be watched, to be admired?

Not at all<< I almost spat. I prefer to be the one who watches.

Yes, I can tell.<< And with that, he shifted, changed position, and spread himself openly across the mattress. The gothic arch of his thin chest looked like an icon of St Sebastian, his face a solemn Burne-Jones with haunted eyes, and his straining cock giving some competition to the Tom of Finland posters above his head. His legs parted, his thighs splayed so that I could see not just his genitals, but the dark cleft between his buttocks and the hint of an entrance. For an awful moment, I imagined what it would be like to enter him, and then shuddered. You’re cold<< he observed.

I’m not at all cold.<<

Come here<< he almost growled, and I knew better than to deny him. Carefully, tentatively, I put down the drawing block, and shuffled towards the bed on my knees. As he rolled over onto his side and made room for me, I stretched myself gently onto the bed. Only a few inches apart, we stared at one another, my gaze conflicted, as if I couldn’t decide whether I was afraid of him, or wanted to eat him up. He reached out and took off my glasses, and everything became slightly unfocused, the crook of his nose, the intense blue of his eyes, the faint dusting of boyish freckles across his taut cheeks. He was so passive, lying there, just letting me look at him, not even making a move to touch me, his body so tender and vulnerable as he splayed himself out before me. That passivity attracted me, reminded me oddly of the way that Maud used to lie, naked in bed, letting me watch her. I looked at his lips, and bit my own, barely daring to breathe. Finally, he spoke aloud. Kiss me?<<

I bent forward, closed my eyes and kissed him. Although I had been expecting his face to be rough, sandpapery like a man, his skin was very smooth. My lips touched his, and found them plump, yielding, so I pushed inside with my tongue. Sourness, the taste of smoke and something unpleasant, something slightly rank and rotten, like two-day-old coffee. No, this was all wrong. My mind was aflame, intrigued, aroused, whirling like a child’s toy, but my body absolutely refused to go through with it. I pulled away, opening my eyes.

After a moment, he noticed something was wrong, and opened his own eyes. What is it?<< I just shook my head, unable to articulate what was going wrong inside me. He was beautiful, and the way that he was lying splayed beside me twisted and churned me up inside with the desire to... something. But that kiss had felt wrong in a way that had little to do with his bad breath. Have I got this wrong? I know you are attracted to me. I can see it in your eyes, in the way you look at me, like you want to eat me up.<<

Blixa, I’m in love with you.<< I hated the unambiguous, undeniable word the moment it was out of my mouth, but I realised with a start that I had said it not to bind him closer to me, but to push him away.

I know<< he said, and smiled. Me, too.<<
Chapter Summary

Carter sleeps with Blixa. (That said, does "sleep with" have to mean sex, or can it mean staying up all night making art, talking, sharing secrets that neither of them have ever shared with another, until they confront the very nature of desire?)

The words he said, ich auch, meant ‘me, too’, but the way he said it left some ambiguity as to whether he meant he loved me, or if he loved himself, too, because it was obvious, from the way he lay there, his naked limbs splayed out in joyous abandon, that he enjoyed his own beautiful body.

>>We should... Carter, we should do something about this. This electricity between us. Because I feel it, too, you know. You see, I am always aware, when you walk in. Your... intensity is so erotic that I can feel your energy, from across a room. If I walk into a bar, or a club, and you are there, I can almost taste, it, a certain charge on the wire. A magnetism. A tension. And it’s not healthy to let all this erotic tension come between us like this. We should resolve this in the simplest, and most expedient manner. We should just screw, and get over it.<<

I just stared at him for quite some time, alarmed to hear my own tension for him described so perfectly in plain German. It surprised me, to discover that he noticed me, when Blixa’s whole shtick was to pretend that he never noticed anybody.

But finally, painfully slowly, I found the words to speak. >>What if I don’t want to get over it?>>

He looked back at me, his face completely puzzled. >>How so?>>

>>What if I don’t want to be healthy? What if I’m... what if I’m just... an invert?>> It was a queer, old-fashioned word that I had read in one of my great-aunt’s books on psychology: Abweichung. No one in West Berlin used that word any more, they just said ‘schwul’ or ‘anders’, unless it was maybe Salomé, making some ironic comment on his own perversions. >>I mean, we’re already aware that what I am is not psychologically healthy. Not a boy, not a girl either, and not happy and proud with it, like Anne or like Salomé, but just some mixed-up in-between creature no one knows what it is.<<

Blixa just looked at me, his eyes very serious, but his mouth twisted into a grim smile. >>Whatever you are, I am the same. This is, I think the magnetism that draws us together.<<

>>Magnets that are the same repel each other, they don’t attract. You’d know that if you read a proper book on physics, and not this Tao of Quantum Mechanics rubbish. Two magnets need to have the polarity reversed to stick together.<<

He actually laughed aloud, that funny boyish snort-laugh that meant he was unselfconsciously overcome with glee. >>A girl so masculine that everyone takes her for a boy, and a boy with a girl’s name and a face full of make-up and manners so feminine everyone simply takes him for a fag. We are neither of us, the opposite sex, not really. We are both of us, something somewhere in-between. But, as you say... with the polarities reversed, me pointing from the masculine towards the feminine, you pointing from the feminine towards the masculine. Somewhere in-between, the same, but reversed.<<
We both continued to just stare at each other, as I realised that what he said was true, lying so close together there was barely an inch between us, though our knees touched. It had been so long since I’d actually lain like this, staring into someone’s eyes, that I had forgotten how intense it could be. Ilsa would not allow it; she had grown very quickly bored and rolled away from me. Even with Maud, it had taken months of furtive glances and accidentally-on-purpose hands brushed against one another’s skin, before we had worked up the courage to lie like this, gazing into one another’s eyes, trying to understand, let alone articulate, what longing we were experiencing for each other. And yet, with Blixa, here we were, and he was just lying there, staring at me, looking into my eyes like he could see into the very bottom of my soul, and he did not even blink.

It was an age before I spoke. >>Maybe you’re right. And I do desire you. But I don’t want to have sex.<<

>>Why not?<< He wasn’t angry, just genuinely curious. >>Is it because I’m a man?<< He glanced down, towards the swollen organ bouncing tightly against his belly. >>You can take me like a woman, if you would rather. In fact, that idea rather excites me. Isn’t that what the harness is for?>>

He said it without the slightest hint of guile, as if he were offering me a piece of Christmas cake, rather than offering to indulge a fetish he knew excited me. His eyes were open and honest, and a little desperate, as if this idea didn’t just excite him, but consumed him.

>>You know I prefer women, so you’re just offering to be a woman for me<< I said, with the hint of an ironic smile.

>>I know it’s more complicated than that.<<

>>You have no idea how complicated it is<< I snapped, suddenly angry, with a rage that had little to do with the boy lying in bed with me. >>For you Berliners, it’s so easy. Gay, bisexual, queer, it doesn’t matter to any of you. It’s all normal here. You have no idea how hard it’s been for me.<<

>>So tell me.<< Reaching out a hand, he laid it against the side of my face, touching me for the first time, in a surprisingly tender gesture.

>>I’m not spilling my guts for you, when you keep everything about you so tightly tied up under that rubber suit.<<

He took a deep breath, then let it out in a giant sigh. >>I was in love with a girl, who is a junkie. I did everything I could for her. I wanted to save her from her demons. And then one day, she chucked me, because she had a vision, a premonition that I was going to betray her for a man. A tall, skinny, English-speaking man with intense blue eyes and a messy black quiff.>> He looked at me, but he didn’t even need to add that that sounded the very description of me.

>>That’s absurd. You know she only has those visions because she takes too many drugs. It’s the same when I smoke hash, but I’m smart enough to know that the hash is the cause of the visions, even if they are inspiring for my art.<<

But Blixa ignored the sneering tone to my voice, continuing on completely calmly. >>She wasn’t on drugs when she had this vision. It was first thing in the morning. She’s not like you or me, you know, taking drugs to heighten the creativity. She takes so many drugs to stop the visions. If she doesn’t take drugs, she says that they crowd round her, like so many dead souls battering at the windows, begging to be let in, and she can’t sleep on account of their voices.<<

I stared at Blixa, suddenly realising that Jana’s problem was worse than we had all thought. Hearing voices. Strange bursts of agitation. The echolalia of sing-song word-salad when she was wound up.
Believing she could read people’s minds and predict the future. >>Blixa. *Geliebte.* You know those are not the symptoms of clairvoyance. Those are the symptoms of the onset of paranoid schizophrenia.<<

>>I don’t think so.<< Blixa’s eyes flashed, then he gave me a long, appraising look. >>You have no idea what Jana has been through in her life. The only little black girl in our class... for a couple of years, she was the only black girl in our entire Gymnasium. I feel for Jana, for what she went through, because I saw it. I can’t stand bullying. I can’t stand bigotry. Not against anyone, but even less for a girl I loved. When they bullied her, I felt it, right here, in my own ribcage, what they did to her.<< He thumped his chest, just over his heart.

Biting my lip, I found it hard to meet his gaze, feeling like such an arsehole for the way I’d doubted Jana, treated her like a borderline idiot at times. He was right; I had no idea what she’d been through.

>>But Jana’s life is not up for debate. I told you my heartbreak. Now you tell me yours.<<

I screwed up my eyes very tight, trying not to let the tears come. >>Can I trust you? No one in West Berlin knows anything about me. I don’t want to go round Iron-Grey and hear it third hand from one of Gudrun’s friends.<<

He made a gesture over his chest. >>Cross my heart. The only place it might end up, is in a song. But songs are like your stories, your comics. They are art, they are made up, so they are not the truth, but they are also the truth. The true truth.<<

And so I told him about Maud. I told him how we had met at boarding school, two horny teenagers with no other outlet for our feelings. How feelings had led to passions, how fumblings had led to carnality, how a simple sexual outlet had led to the blossoming of overwhelming first love. The boarding school soon realised that this was not a normal teenage crush, that would burn itself out, and be abandoned for natural, ‘normal’ love, when we graduated and met the men we would be fated to marry. Our families were alerted. We were expelled, and then separated. And yet the separation enflamed our passions. We both wrote, feverishly, sometimes several times a day. And finally, we decided to run away together.

We had walked out of our respective colleges, met each other on the platform at King’s Cross, walked off into the crowd, and vanished. For over a year, we had lived a kind of hand to mouth existence in the squats of East London, Hackney and Dalston and London Fields. Maud had made friends, quickly, in the music scene. Myself, shyer, I had shaved my head to pass for a boy, and threw myself into manual work, and tried to avoid gossip with the lads on the building site where I trained to be an electrician.

And one day, her family had found her. A photo, published in the NME, of Maud and I at a gig in a squat belonging to some musicians we knew, had attracted the attention of the private investigator her family had paid to find her. Enquiries had been made. The musicians, not wanting to bring the police down on their squat, told the investigators where we were living. (I never trusted squatters again, after that.) And one morning, the police had swooped down in a raid, hauled us out of the single bed where we lay, and dragged us off in the back of a squad car to the police station, where we were forcibly separated, and handed back to our families, because we were both under 21.

We never saw each other again. When I wrote to her at her family’s home, my letter, intercepted, opened and thoroughly read, was returned to me with a note telling me that Maud had been sent to Canada to work as an au pair, and that I was never to contact them again. And my parents, shamed first by my expulsion from school, then by my disappearance, had decided to punish me by sending me to Germany, to the mouldering house of this ancient distant relative, to be bored to tears by dust and decay, until I saw the error of my ways and abandoned lesbianism and returned to academia.
And I said this, with a very snide English sarcasm that didn’t quite translate into German, Blixa started to laugh. Yes, I was trying to be funny, in that very English hide-your-true-feelings-with-sarcasm sort of way, but he wasn’t tittering as if at a snide aside, he had rolled over onto his back and was almost shaking, with great, animal brays of laughter.

>>What?<< I demanded. >>It’s not that funny. I mean, this is my life, Blixa. They have ruined it.<<

>>How is it ruined. Explain this to me.<< He poked me very gently on the edge of the shoulder.

>>My parents kicked me out of my home, just for a start.<<

>>My parents kicked me out of our home, when I was 17<< he replied knowingly, waving his finger towards me. >>It didn’t ruin my life. It saved it.<<

>>Your parents kicked you out? What for?<< I blinked at him, struck by our sudden similarity.

He shrugged a little peevishly, like it was still a sore spot. >>For being expelled from school.<<

>>You, too? For what?<< I almost willed him to say, for being queer, but his face grew genuinely sour, as if this still irked, years later.

>>Damage against school property. I set the student council room on fire. I mean, I said I was going to do it. It was the platform I was elected to the student council on – vote for me and I will set the whole bloody farce on fire.<< I started to laugh at the defiant way he described it, because it was hard to believe that Blixa had ever been a student, let alone a member of the student council.

>>Expelled not just from that Gymnasium, but the whole Berlin school system, before I even had a chance to sit the Abitur. And for that, I was thrown out of my family home. Does it look like my life is in ruins?<<

I bit my lip as I looked back at him. By whose criteria, I wanted to ask? Because I saw two young men before me. One was a staggeringly ambitious artist whose passion and dedication burned through his life and the lives of everyone around him like a beacon, pulling us on to greater heights of music and culture and art. The other was a worryingly thin young man, who worked part time in a dirty little bar, sang in a punk band so divisive their gigs erupted into violence, and who slept in the back room of a friend’s shop.

Instead, I sighed deeply. >>I lost my girlfriend<< I said quietly. >>I’ve lost two girlfriends now, and I’ve lost my family, who did not even want me to visit at Christmas, because they know I’m queer. My life is in ruins. And although I am trying to make the best of it, living in the ruins, as all good Berliners do... you know, this is the laughter of black humour, of a person has had everything taken from them. Not because it’s funny.<<

But that only made Blixa start to giggle again. >>Carter, it is funny. Your family sent you to West Berlin, to cure you of lesbianism? This is the funniest thing I have heard, since... since... I heard the rumour that David Bowie and Iggy Pop moved to West Berlin to kick drugs, not even realising that West Berlin was the heroin capital of Europe.<<

I stared at him, feeling something very strange stirring inside me. >>I had not heard that rumour.<<

>>Oh come on, it was the funniest joke in West Berlin through the 70s. So for your parents to send you here, of all places, to a Ladies Boarding House, to cure you of lesbianism... no, it is too, too delicious. I am dying of the irony.<< He pretended to fan himself, his gestures growing even more effeminate as he rolled his huge, expressive eyes.

>>Why do you say Ladies Boarding House, in that tone? What are you implying<< I demanded,
irate at this smear on my Great-Aunt’s reputation. >>Is this like when you were insinuating it had been a brothel, because it survived the bombardment?<<

He stopped laughing and looked at me, as if realising that there was a part of the joke I wasn’t getting. >>Your German is so good I sometimes forget you weren’t born here, and you don’t know things we take for granted.<<

>>But I was born here. My mother is German<< I explained patiently. >>She married a British officer, and settled in the British Sector, where I was born.<< And I was struck again, as I told it, by similarity. My story sounded so oddly akin to Jana’s. Well, Blixa certainly had his type. That both Jana and I were both deeply, intimately of Berlin, the city of his birth, the only home he’d ever known, and yet somehow still marked as alien.

>>You were born in Berlin?<< asked Blixa, more than a little surprised. >>I didn’t know that. And yet, somehow... it makes sense. And not just how you speak German so fluently.<<

>>It’s complicated. Since my father was British, and the army base was British territory, I was born a British citizen. But my mother’s family were from the other side of Berlin. You know, when the Wall went up, it went up overnight.<<

>>I know, I remember it well<< he snorted, as if vaguely insulted that this Brit was explaining his own city’s history to him.

>>How could you? You must have been a baby.<<

>>I was two and a half<< he protested. >>And my parents used to speak of it. Though not often.<< He was genuinely excited now, his attention piqued by the idea that my life and his city had somehow intersected.

>>My grandparents spoke of it often. It was their favourite story; how they escaped the Wall. It was the day after my mother’s birthday, so my grandparents had been visiting our side of the city for a little party at my Great-Aunt’s house. My grandmother had drunk too much wine with dinner and fell asleep, so she and my grandfather stayed over. And when they tried to return home the next afternoon, they found they couldn’t. Without the proper papers, they were trapped, and my father was afraid of what was going to happen in the newly divided city, so he resigned his post, then left for home and took me, my mother, and her parents all with him back to England.<<

He shook his head. >>You missed some pretty bad years. They talk about the economic miracle, the Kennedy visit and all that, but in our side of Friedenau, it took a while for the benefits to trickle down. But my Mum has told me some stories of the blockade, the airlift, before I was born. They were hungry all the time, when she was a little girl.<< His face darkened, and something seemed to close behind his eyes. >>My father doesn’t really like to talk about it at all, though.<<

I nodded to indicate I understood. >>My Great-Aunt doesn’t like to talk about those days much, either. Grete, on the other hand, Grete loves to tell stories. I get the sense that she was a little bit of a rebel, and not adverse to striking a few deals on the Black Market. My Great-Aunt has said many times, that they wouldn’t have got through the War, or through the early days of the Peace that followed, without Grete.<< At her name, Blixa’s head suddenly perked up.

>>Grete<< he said slowly, with very great importance. >>Is that the other grand old lady in the photographs in your hall.<<

>>Yes<< I said. >>That’s her. I’m not sure she’s such a grand old lady, though she is formidable. She’s my Great-Aunt’s personal assistant, they came through the war together, and have been
Blixa started to giggle again, clearly trying to hold it in, but his eyebrows spoke of his deep amusement on his account. >>Personal assistant, eh? And where does Grete sleep?<<

I stared at Blixa, as this was something I had simply never thought about. >>She has... offices... of some kind, upstairs. I’ve never been in there, but...<< Wait, no. As I thought of all the mornings that I had encountered the two old ladies on my way to work, or coming home from partying at the Risk bar, I realised I had never once encountered Grete coming down the stairs in her ornate, old-fashioned dressing gown. She only ever came from the front rooms, my Great-Aunt’s apartment. There were not two bedrooms there. I knew the arrangement of that house very well. The kitchen, then the long open Berliner-Zimmer where we ate and socialised and generally lived, leading through to the front of the house, with its formal sitting-room, and the boudoir beyond, where my Great-Aunt slept, with her lapdog in a basket at the foot of the massive double bed. The household offices were at the back, above my room, for I had the smaller, less grand bedroom at the back where a housemaid would have slept in the Kaiser’s time. I heard footsteps up there during the day, while the house went about its business. I had never once heard footsteps up there at night. My face must have told Blixa everything, about what I had seen every day for months and months, and yet consciously refused to recognise.

>>I think, your family did not send you to West Berlin as a punishment for being a lesbian, or to try to change you. I think that they sent you here, because they know exactly who – and what – you are, because they already have one in the family.<<

I thought again, of the speed with which my Great-Aunt had accepted my mother’s request, how she had insisted that I come immediately. >>I have thought of it all this time as punishment, but in all earnestness it was a kindness?<<

As I sat with this new knowledge, feeling it somehow seeping into my bones with its truth and its rightness, I felt my eyes overflowing with tears. Blixa reached out and wiped away the trail with his long, elegant thumb. >>I think so.<<

I lay for a very long time, just trying to think this through, as he reached up and found the hashpipe. My Great-Aunt had been trying to give me a home. Even in finding me employment, she had been trying not to get rid of me, but to encourage me to stay. Schumacher had known what I was, from the very first day of the job. He must have known Grete and my Great-Aunt since... since... I wondered how on earth the pair of them had survived the Nazis and their purges of ‘inverts and degenerates’. By lying, and pretending for decades that Grete was only a personal assistant, that was clearly how.

Blixa relit the pipe, took a few draws then handed it to me. >>I don’t think you are going to have a fuck with me tonight, are you?<<

I shook my head sadly, as I inhaled the acrid smoke into my lungs and held it there. He seemed to accept this information, but as I exhaled, I felt the need to explain. >>Honestly. It’s not because you are a man... I don’t even think of you as a man. I think of you as something like me, half and half. It’s because I am in love with you.<<

He eyed me warily. >>You know, like I said, I don’t think your German is as perfect as it sounds. What do you mean, when you say love?<<

>>You must know what I mean, because you seem so certain that having a fuck will end it.<<

>>The only thing I know about love, is that it doesn’t last<< he shrugged. >>I don’t think this is lasting love, with us. I think for you and me, it’s the sensation of wanting what we can’t have, the
feeling of yearning, that fuels this passion. Yearning does not survive having.<<

>>But what if I’m actually enjoying the sensation of being in love, of wanting, of... obsessing? What if it’s not you that I want, but the feeling of wanting? What if this yearning is an energy, an engine that drives me, drives my drawing, drives my little stories, drives those stupid little comics everyone likes so much?<<

And Blixa suddenly opened his eyes very wide, and just stared at me, not with the blank incomprehension I had been afraid of, but something even worse. He stared at me like he understood exactly what I was talking about, and it scared him to death. But then he took another draw of the pipe, and blew smoke away from me, over his shoulder, shaking his head a little wildly. >>I think you are in love with love itself.<<

I shook my head slowly. >>I am not. I hate love. It ruined my life. I am against love. I am anti-love.<<

>>You are not anti-sex.<< This with a very camp and slightly mocking raised eyebrow.

>>I hate having a body<< I confessed, feeling suddenly very exposed in front of him. >>I hate that it has urges, and desires, and needs.<<

>>You have a very beautiful body<< said Blixa, and I stared at him. It was only the second time ever, after Anne, that anyone had ever used that word with me. Even Maud, who I knew, had loved me completely, unconditionally, had treated my long, spare, wiry body as an obstacle to be overcome. >>You have a body like an athletic young man. It excites me.<<

I just looked at him, feeling something twisting about inside me. >>if you think saying things like that will make me have sex with you... No. The reason I cannot have sex with you is because you say things like that to me. I can’t be your girlfriend. I can’t even be your boyfriend. But I need to be in love with you. My obsession is an energy that drives me. I need that energy, more than I need a fuck.<<

>>I understand<< he said, nodding slowly. >>I understand more than you can possibly imagine.<<

>>How<< I said, maybe a little too dismissively, looking at his beautiful face and thinking, how on earth has this man ever not got exactly what or who he wanted? >>How can you possibly understand, what it is to want, and not have?<<

>>It’s how I feel about you at the moment<< he quipped, poking me again. >>So this is why you feel you have to have me<< I shot back. >>Why you demand from me something I can’t give you. You want some reaction from me that I cannot possibly fulfill. Like you want me to be someone I cannot be, some bisexual West Berlin lad who has a nice fuck with you tonight, as casual as having a cup of tea, then goes back tomorrow as if it meant nothing at all.<<

But slowly, the sarcasm fell away, and very strange expression came over his face, not quite fear, but something very like it. >>This feeling. I know completely. I know what it is to be wanted, in a way that I can never fulfill. I...<< The expression shifted, to something like annoyance, and for a moment I was afraid I had offended him. >>You know, when I say things like this, everyone laughs and tells me, oh, Blixa, you are so arrogant. I do not think that I am arrogant.>>

I didn’t mean to laugh quite so loud, but I did. >>Now why would anyone think that?<<

He gave a little shrug and a half-smile, but then his face grew serious. >>Listen. Is it arrogance to believe in oneself? To like oneself. Is that arrogance or confidence? I think that I am confident, and
that I know who I am, and what I believe, and I say it convincingly, and people find this... well, they find it intriguing. I am not merely flattering myself if I say people find this attractive. I know I’m not the most handsome man in West Berlin. I’m no movie star, but I make the most of how I am. I have a good look. I make myself interesting. Reinvent myself. I know I’m charismatic, and energetic, and I know how to make things happen. And so people become weirdly...<< He grasped for words in a way that seemed very uncharacteristic for the normally extremely articulate young man.

>>Infatuated.<<

>>I’m not the only person who is obsessed by you, is what you are trying to tell me<< I said quietly, trying to understand the message he seemed to be trying to get across. Don’t think you’re that special to me. I get this all the time. Suddenly, I saw his decision to show me Wolfgang’s photos in a different light.

>>Carter, I think you have a particularly clear kind of vision. I can tell from your art, from your comics. You are a true artist; you know how to look at a thing and really see that thing, not the social conventions around it. You look at the Risk bar, and you already have everyone’s number, whether it’s Wolfgang being so normal he’s actually weird, or some decent, polite Bavarian farmboy pretending to be a violent skinhead because he’s afraid of the big city. But you look at me, and you see something I like. I aspire to be the creature who appears in your comics, this quixotic Pied Piper of Berlin. You flatter me, like you can see who I want to be. But some people... well, they look at me, and they build a kind of fantasy in their head of who they want me to be. Maybe I’m responsible for this fantasy because it is my words, and my music which has caused them to construct it. It’s made up of bits and pieces and thoughts and images that I put in their heads in the first place. I don’t know.<<

>>How can you be responsible for what other people project onto you, though. That’s in their head, not in yours.<< With a twinge of guilt, I wondered if this was what I was doing, if I just looked at this creature who was not entirely a boy but not a girl either, and only saw myself. Maybe creative people only ever could see themselves in the people that they loved.

>>Well, this is the thing. They become obsessed with me – or this idea of me – and then they start holding me responsible for the things that they say I make them do. Me? My words? Do I make them do these things? Do my words? I don’t know!<< He looked genuinely worried that he might. It was that tiny moment of worry, of concern, that made me think he wasn’t arrogant. >>Do I drive people mad? Am I some kind of vampire that feeds off people’s adoration, that I eat up all of that love, and I grow stronger, and they grow weaker, from this one-sided love that I can’t return, because what they love isn’t actually me?<<

I fixed him with a steady gaze, choosing my words carefully. >>It’s flattering to think that one might have this kind of power, isn’t it? It’s very gratifying to the ego, to think that you have the ability – the charisma or charm or whatever – to inspire so much love as to drive someone mad. That you could affect someone that deeply. But, as you say, it’s not about you. It’s about what’s going on their head. It’s not about the depths of your charisma, it’s about the depths of their capacity for love, or madness, or whatever it is.<<

He looked at me, his eyes troubled. >>But that’s the question, Carter. How deep is your capacity for love? You don’t strike me as a shallow person. I mean, me... honestly, I am very shallow when it comes to love.<<

>>You don’t strike me as shallow. If anything, you sometimes strike me as too intense, too serious.<<

>>About my music, yes, I am very serious, about my writing and my art, certainly. But love?<< He
made a dismissive gesture with his hand as if batting an insect away. >>You shouldn’t be in love with me. I am very shallow. I like these things casual. Very casual, with none of the encumbering strings. And yet every time I go out looking for casual, in the clubs, there is you, standing there, with all of your strings, so pretty, so bright, and yet so easy to become entrapped with.<<

I burst out laughing, wondering what on earth had put that image of me in his head. Strings? Me? Who did my best to keep women at a distance by telling them my heart had been broken? >>Now who’s projecting? What makes you think I come with strings?<<

He snorted a little. >>Carter, you come with so many strings and traps and hidden doors, and you don’t even know.<<

>>And even if I did, what makes you think these strings and traps are for you?<<

He opened his mouth with that slightly arrogant expression that meant he was about to contradict me, but before he could get any words out, his expression changed, and his face fell. >>Alright. That’s fair. Maybe it’s not you that has all the strings. Maybe it’s me, that sees, that you are not a shallow person, and thinks... knows that I would not be able to be shallow with you. I feel your intensity; it’s what draws me to you, like an energy, because I would want you to be that hungry for me. And I would need to love you completely.<<

>>I don’t know if I’m a shallow person masquerading as a deeper person, or an extremely deep person masquerading as a slightly shallow one. I have no idea. It’s never really been tested<< I confessed, with a slight shiver. >>I don’t know how deep my capacity for love, for obsession, for madness really is, because I’ve never had the chance to really love.<<

He looked back at me, his deep blue eyes searching, as if he wanted to know something I could never really tell him. I stared back at him, and all I could think was that he was beautiful, this strange, intriguing, clever man, who was both alarmingly insightful, and yet somehow completely naïve. If he wanted me to sleep with him, as he clearly did, why was he telling me that he was so shallow? Was he trying to put me off, or just warning me what to expect? But then again, why was I telling him these awful truths I felt urged to confess? Were we trying to put each other off? But finally he smiled, and touched the side of my face tenderly.

>>You’re always so calm and unflappable. I used to think you were just shy, but then I slowly realised that you are actually very self-assured beneath that British reserve. You just sit back and observe everything with the calm measure of a scientist, like you’re just studying us. I wonder sometimes what it would take to shake that composure... but then again, maybe it’s better not to find out.<<

I almost laughed. >>Calm and composed? Only on the surface. I feel like I’m a great roiling ocean of emotions on the inside.<<

>>Still waters run deep, eh<< he laughed, touching my hair tenderly. >>While I wear my heart on my sleeve all the time, but in reality I’m as shallow as a bath.<<

>>I don’t think so<< I responded carefully, and finally extended one careful, tentative finger towards the centre of his bare chest. >>I know you are a massive drama queen, but in many ways, I think that’s a carefully contrived defence. I think there are uncharted depths to you, that you keep very hidden from most people.<<

>>You think<< he said, with a defiant tilt to his eyebrows.

>>I know<< I insisted, with deep conviction. >>Or I would be able to just have that shallow gone-
tomorrow fuck with you. And I can’t.<<

>>Well<< he said. >>If I can’t talk you out of it, then... If you want to be in love with me, then be in
love with me. I will eat up all of your love, and all of your adoration, and feed off it, and I will grow
stronger and you will grow weaker from this one-sided love. You have no idea what you ask. You
want me to be a vampire off your love?<<

I shook my head slowly. >>I don’t think you’re even remotely a vampire. I think this whole scene
feeds off your energy, your charisma, your beauty. And maybe I get stronger off you wanting me
and not having me, too.<<

>>So this is your way of telling me you are really not going to have a fuck with me tonight no matter
how hard I try to convince you.<< he sighed, and looked down the narrow crack between our
bodies, indicating the erection that had not gone anywhere, in fact only seemed to have become more
insistent. >>Then I have to do something about this. Do you mind if I take care of it myself?<<

>>Do as you wish<< I shrugged, rather curious as to what he would do.

He flopped over onto his back, and took his cock firmly in his hand, though his head remained tilted
towards me. >>Will you take your clothes off, so I can look at you?<<

>>No<< I said firmly, and glanced up towards the Tom of Finland posters that had clearly been put
right in the line of sight of the bed.

Shaking his head, he smiled wolfishly. >>This pornography does not excite me. Please? Disrobe. I
swear to you I will not touch you. I just want to see you.<<

I sat up, and unbuttoned my shirt before slipping it off my shoulders, then raised my hips and slid out
of my heavy jeans, then slipped back into bed in my knickers and my vest.

>>And this<< he insisted, looking at the vest, his breaths growing shallow as he continued to stroke
at his cock. >>Please let me see your breasts.<<

>>Absolutely not.<<

>>Why not? Did you let your little Danish girl see them?<<

I shook my head. >>Not even Ilsa.<<

>>All the more reason to show me. I know you, like Ilsa never did. She was very pretty, but she was
not very bright. You need someone clever, who understands you.<< At least now I knew the reason
for that slightly catty, jealous tone to his voice when he spoke of her. I hated that Gudrun had been
right, all along. >>Show me. I want to see.<<

Sitting up again, I turned my back on him as I pulled together the courage to slide my vest up over
my head. And then I fiddled with the straps of the back brace that I wore, not down over the bottom
of my spine, where the other labourers I’d worked with in London got their lumbagos, but strapped
down tightly over the embarrassing buds of my breasts. Slowly, I undid the fastenings and slipped it
off me, allowing those two embarrassing half-orbs of repulsive flesh to hang free of their bindings.
And then I lay back down, next to Blixa, feeling my face flushing as he stared at them, his breaths
growing shorter as his strokes grew faster. But to my relief, he made no move to touch them, as I lay
there, watching his beautiful, long fingers tighten, until the muscles of his stomach grew tense, and
his organ convulsed, sending little plumes of white pearly liquid shooting up across his chest like wet
little jewels.
His breaths slowed, his hands grew still, and his eyes half-closed, though I could still see blue half-flickering beneath his absurdly long lashes.

>>Do you still love me?<< he asked.

>>Completely<< I said.

>>Me, too<< he sighed, and this time I knew without question that he meant he loved me. >>Stay the night?<<

I shrugged and looked about me, knowing that I was going to give in, no matter what he said.

>>I promise I won’t molest you. You are safe with me. I just want you to stay.<<

>>You don’t like sleeping alone<< I teased.

>>I don’t like sleeping, at all.<< When I looked at him oddly, he added, with a slightly vulnerable expression that made me realise he was telling the truth >>I am afraid to go to sleep. I do not know why. Gudrun and Bettina have always teased me about it, saying that I am afraid of missing out, if I sleep for a minute, that I will miss some exciting party, some amazing new band, some exhilarating moment of performance in an art gallery or a squat... but no. I am afraid to sleep, and I don’t know why.<<

I looked at him very carefully. >>That’s my fear<< I insisted, feeling more than slightly strange. >>For a long time, after Maud, I was afraid to go to sleep, because I was terrified that I would dream of her, and wake up to find the police snatching her from me again.<<

He looked back at me and smiled. >>Maybe our dreams and fears have got all mixed up, like your magnets with their reversed polarity. Hold me tight, while you sleep. Hold me as hard as you love me. I promise I will be here, when you wake.<<
Carter and Blixa play footsie as they get used to the new parameters of their friendship. Blixa has a birthday, and Carter gives him an unusual gift. Then both the New Buildings and Malaria! tour Europe, and Carter experiences life on the road - and the annoyances of the music industry - for the first time.

Blixa and I spent the night in each other’s arms. At first, I dropped off quickly to sleep, while he stayed awake smoking. At some point, he dropped off, one arm still curled around my shoulders like a child hugging a teddy-bear, for when I woke, he was asleep, softly snoring, his head thrown back across the pillows. He looked so young when he slept, almost like a little boy, his skin oddly fresh, the tensions of West Berlin fallen from his features, giving him a relaxed, almost tender expression I seldom saw when he was conscious. I lay, propped up on one elbow, just watching him, the rise and fall of his skinny chest, the way his eyes flickered under his eyelids as if he were dreaming. And when I could stand it no more, I reached for the sketchpad and drew him, sprawled across the mattress sleeping in boyish abandon.

I slept again, and finally woke around noon, just in time to see Blixa twitching and blinking like he was fighting his way back to consciousness. But he beamed when he opened his eyes and caught sight of me, rolling over towards me and wriggling like an enthusiastic puppy under the bedclothes, placing his hands either side of my face. >>Carter! You’re still here. I was afraid I dreamed the whole thing. I’m so happy.<<

>>Me, too<< I laughed, and moved forwards to gently kiss his forehead.

>>Did you dream about me?<< he asked, his voice very deep, and still thick with sleep.

>>I don’t think I dreamed at all.<< Looking into the intense blue of his eyes in the morning light, I felt awake and yet somehow still dreaming.

But he snorted with laughter, and let go of my face to reach down towards the eiderdown. >>But that’s no good. Let’s go back to sleep until you find me in your dreams, too.<< Grabbing the edge of the bed covers, he yanked them up over our heads, plunging us into sudden darkness.

For a moment, I was disoriented, struggling against fabric, trying to push my way out into the light, especially since he seemed to have dislodged the blankets, so that my feet were suddenly uncovered and quite cold. After a few minutes, I finally found my way out and sat up, though all I could see of Blixa was a long bundle of bedclothes, with a pair of slender ankles sticking out at the end. Desperate to warm up my feet again, I raised my knees and pressed the soles of my feet against the top of his own.

>>Aaiiyee<< the bundle shrieked, and tried to roll away. >>Your feet are freezing.<<

>>Well, whose fault is that, then. Warm me up, please.<<

Grumbling, his head emerged from the bedroll, as he pulled me towards him, wrapping me in his arms and plying his feet against my own, rubbing briskly until our legs were hopelessly tangled.
together. But at least I was warm now, looking down at his surprisingly lithe and graceful feet.

>>Your feet are so very small and delicate<< I observed, surprised because the rest of him was so immensely long and skinny. But his feet, by comparison, appeared trim and quite neat.

>>What?!<< exploded Blixa, sounding almost insulted. >>They’re nothing of the sort. They’re bigger than yours.<< Together, we wrestled for a bit, as he tried to gain the upper hand – or foot, as the case may be.

>>Lie still<< I urged, until we managed to lie perfectly aligned, my foot up against his. >>Look, your foot is only a centimetre longer than mine. And how tall are you?<<

>>One hundred and ninety centimetres<< he said, with a curt nod and the distinct edge of pride. >>And I wear a size 44 in the shoe, I’ll have you know, so my feet are hardly small.<<

I performed a few quick mental calculations. >>That’s what, six foot... three?<< I glanced over at the bony longness of him, the width of his gaunt shoulders where they escaped the blankets, suddenly realising exactly how enormous he was. >>I’m only five foot ten, and I wear size 43, so your feet are definitely small for your height. Almost dainty, compared to the rest of you.<<

>>They are nothing of the sort!<< he protested very loudly, rolling on top of me and attacking the tender parts of my waist with an attempt at tickling. >>How dare you malign the size of my feet. And anyway, how would you know. You’re a lesbian.<<

As I clawed at his hands, trying to keep them away from my tender areas, I shrieked as I suddenly grasped why he was so irate about my observation of his body parts, and abruptly started to giggle. >>I’m only talking about your feet, Blixa. Which are, to be fair, delicate and dainty and really quite graceful. You have a dancer’s feet. I have no idea about...<< And here I started to laugh openly. >>The rest of you.<<

>>I have been told, in that matter, too, that I am really quite generously endowed indeed<< he protested, sounding genuinely quite irate, to the point where halfway through saying it, I think even he realised how absurd he was being, and stopped tickling me and started to smile. For a moment, we just lay there, him on top, and me underneath, skin against skin, and for that very long moment, we just looked into one another’s faces, as the rise and fall of our breathing started to synchronise, growing ever so slightly faster. It would have been so easy, for him to just move ever so slightly, and slip inside me, as I could suddenly feel his length, hard against my thigh. But I don’t know if he saw something in my face, ambivalence or even fear, because instead he sighed, and smiled, and bent down to kiss me gently on the tip of my nose. >>I think I better go to the toilet, and have a piss, and maybe a wank. It’s up to you if you want to join me.<<

I grinned as he rolled off me. Really, we were going to be alright, if we could already joke like this. >>That, I think, you can really manage by yourself, but thanks for the offer<< I shouted after him.

He came back some time later, with coffee, and a grin that stretched from ear to ear. We decided to stay in bed for the rest of the day, smoking hash, taking pep pills, and eating the remains of the food that Wolfgang had left in the kitchen. He scratched away at writing his spidery poetry. I sketched. Neither of us had a change of clothes, so we just stayed naked. It no longer seemed in any way odd, but it didn’t feel erotic, either. We were just like two children in the Garden of Eden, too happy and high to realise we should be ashamed of our nakedness.

And at the end of those two, three days – I completely lost track of time – something had shifted between us. The tension was gone. I still loved, with an energy that fuelled my drawings, but I was actually completely confident that I was loved in return. Something in him had changed, had
softened. He still dazzled and dizzied me, but he no longer disoriented me. I felt like our affection for one another was something deeper, longer lasting than the fizzle of just sexual attraction. It would survive not having sex with each other.

We stayed in bed until the hash ran out, and then we put our clothes back on, and wandered out into the brittle cold air, and parted with a hug, saying we would see each other at some New Year’s party, or at some bar, or at a gig somewhere. And would I come celebrate his birthday at the Risk bar, the week after? Of course I would. Wild horses couldn’t keep me away. For a moment, he just held my face between his hands, and looked at me, like he was trying to decide whether to say something, but finally he just planted a kiss on my forehead, and I walked home with a light heart, feeling at ease with the world.

Drawing Blixa like that seemed to unleash something in me. When I got home, I took out my sketches of him, and did new draughts in ink, taking care to render the light and shadow of his body in bold, three-dimensional forms. Something I hadn’t taken much notice of, at the time, but came out as I worked on the drawings, was that Blixa had been eyeing me the whole time I had been sketching him. Going back to the enlargements of the photos I had taken of him in the cemetery, I studied his face. It was the same in the photos, that playful, teasing, bright expression that gazed coquettishly at the camera, perfectly aware that he was being watched, acknowledging his awareness both of his own beauty and the desire it inspired, even as he challenged his viewer – me presumably! – to admit that desire. There was something intensely erotic about that gaze. It wasn’t at all like the way that nude women gazed out from girlie magazines, cheeky but demure with their chins dipped and their lips puckered. Blixa’s stare made it seem obvious that he was in control of the whole sketching situation, something I was oddly envious of as I strove to capture it in the drawings.

It took me completing a self-portrait to understand why I felt so envious. Peering into the mirror I had propped up on my desk, to try and establish if I gazed out with the same expression when I was drawn, I was disappointed to discover that I did not. I hated my body. I hated the way it betrayed me, hunching my wide shoulders to hide the shadows of my lumpy chest. And that mistrust of my own form showed in the way my semblance peered suspiciously out of my own portrait. But Blixa, even splayed naked across Wolfgang’s bed, he looked comfortable in his own body. He looked at ease. Damn, how I envied that ease, how he genuinely looked as if he enjoyed his arched chest and his long limbs. It was true, he often moved slightly awkwardly, especially onstage, with that alien insect grace of a creature accustomed to a completely different gravity. Yet as he lay there, staring back at me out of the drawing with that calm, cool confidence, it was obvious that he did not hate inhabiting his body the way that I hated mine.

As I traced the outlines of his lanky limbs with my pen, then drew back to admire my handiwork, I felt myself racked with a sudden pang of desire, so sharp it was almost a physical sensation. And that felt odd, because it was precisely the kind of unmistakably carnal urge I had not felt while lying in that bed kissing him. What on earth was this, some Pygmalion trip? To love a work of art I had created, more than I loved the boy who had inspired it? No, it was more complicated than that, and yet more basic.

Everything had got somehow all snarled up. The envy I felt for that abandon with which he inhabited those long limbs and that smooth, arched chest had got all tangled up with my desire. But was it desire to copulate with that body, or desire to inhabit a body like that, myself? The pang flared again, as I finally managed to articulate the thought, even as an unspoken idea in my mind. Yet I could not prise apart the twin shoots of desire that seemed to have grown, intertwined around each other, until I could not tell one from the other. Did I want to fuck Blixa’s long, lean, androgynous and yet unequivocally male body, or did I want to have that body, to walk around in that smooth
male chest, those narrow male hips with the confidence and self-assurance projecting out from Blixa’s intense blue eyes? Both. Neither. It was impossible to tell. The desire seemed like such an impossible, unruly, forbidden thing. To want sex with a man was unthinkable. But to want a man’s body for myself...?

No, it was absurd. Impossible. There was nothing on earth that would give me a body like that, no amount of binding or stretching or punishing my muscles with manual labour to make them strong and lean. But to look at Blixa’s body, in my drawings, or my photos, was to invite that impossible longing, as much as it was to invite sexual desire for him.

Picking up a fresh sheet of paper, I sketched out another long, narrow body like Blixa’s, resting on his elbows so that his chest was angled up slightly. But instead of Blixa’s long, narrow face, I drew my own. And instead of his coquettish smirk, I drew the suspicious glare of trepidation on my own. For a long time, I stared at the drawing as if it were some magical sigil, this odd chimera, half me and half Blixa, until its malevolent gaze grew too much to bear. No! It was an impossible thing. The drawing inspired not lust, but the same sense of wrongness that I had felt, trying to snog Blixa. Snatching up the paper, I crumpled it into a ball, but I didn’t even dare throw it in the ordinary rubbish for fear of... I don’t know what I was afraid of. Afraid my aunt, or one of our neighbours would find it and laugh at it? Or afraid the thing itself would come to life and stalk around my house like a demon, looking for the creator that had brought its bizarre form into being? Looking around, I found a matchbook. Not taking any chances, I lit the hideous, impossible thing on fire, then tossed it into the grate of the fireplace and watched it burn until there was nothing but ash left.

Then I sat down again, picked up my pencil, and started drawing like a feverish thing. I wasn’t going to question this desire again; I was just going to burn it like fuel and follow where my pencil led me. The wildness left me as my drawings submitted to my own hand and eye again.

I propped the mirror up lengthwise over the desk, then disrobed and lay down on the bed opposite. I tried to draw myself as I was, my wide, mannish shoulders, the two weird blobs of flesh hovering on my chest, the slight swell of my belly, my deceptive hips, then my long legs with calves made muscular from walking. My face, I realised, as I drew, did not look either suspicious or coquettish. I looked ferociously curious, focused, intense. So was that the off-putting intensity that Gudrun had found so scary? Or was that the magnetic, erotic intensity that Blixa found so irresistible? How could two people look at that expression, and see such different things?

But at last, I pulled back and looked at the drawing. It was a good drawing, both technically proficient and actually recognisable as myself, and yet also aesthetically pleasing, mixing the bold lines and flat planes of a Mucha with the angular eroticism of an Egon Schiele, if I might be allowed to flatter myself a bit. I liked this drawing of myself, in a way I did not like my own body. It was like Blixa had said, I had somehow managed to draw around the social convention that surrounded my body, to draw something I actually liked. And I realised, as I looked at it, that I had not actually drawn the self-portrait for me.

The next few months were one of the happiest periods of my life. I was young, and free, and happy; in love but enjoying not being tied down. I had a good job, and money in my pocket, and an exciting group of friends to share my good fortune with.

1982 started off on a high note, with a weekend long squat party, at which rotating members of various bands – the New Buildings, Malaria!, The Skin, the Deadly Doris – all took turns swapping out their instruments and playing in various new and exciting combinations, one drummer playing with another band’s bassist, and lead singers of two bands at once singing unusual duets. Even I had
a go; although I couldn’t play a note, I ended up whacking on some sheet metal in a glorious racket with Mufti and Andrew while Beate thundered away on the bass and Salomé chanted a fake Latin mass into a microphone. It was a wonderful mess! And Blixa’s birthday at the Risk bar was even messier and sloppier and filled with friends and laughter and illicit substances.

I caught him before the messy drinking really began, as he was stowing away the large black leather briefcase-bag in which he carried his precious cassettes, his fanzines, his band documents, and all his really important things.

>>Look, this is a gift for you<< I said, pressing a plain brown envelope into his hands. >>I’d prefer if you didn’t make a big deal out of it, and I’d really like it if you didn’t show anyone. But I wanted you to have it.<<

Blixa looked perplex and intrigued, smiling with little-boy curiosity as he broke the seal and slowly slid my odd self-portrait out of the envelope. For a long time, he just stared at it, his face slowly taking on a dreamy, slightly lascivious expression, but then he smiled and slid it back into its wrapper. Extending his impossibly long arms, he wrapped them around me like a great black rubber spider, pulling me so close I almost couldn’t breathe, crushing his face against my hair until I could feel his breath warming the top of my ear.

>>Was that a strange thing to have given you?<< I asked awkwardly, feeling a bit overcome by his reaction as I finally extricated myself from his embrace.

>>Maybe it is; I don’t care<< he insisted, tucking it away into the depths of his briefcase. >>The drawing is beautiful. I will treasure it always. But what truly moves me, is the fact that you trust me enough to give this to me.<<

>>Are you two done canoodling back ‘ere?<< called out Maria’s voice, as we shot apart like guilty schoolchildren. >>Honestly, disappearing to some exclusive backstage at your own birthday party, how Blixa bloody Bargeld. Come out you rock star, everyone’s asking for the birthday boy. Bettina’s even managed to find you a vegan birthday cake.<<

Typically, Blixa celebrated his own birthday by giving the music scene a present: he and his buddies had turned their hands to what they thought of as ‘dub’ and released a cassette of remixes and tape loops and weird echoey sound experiments. Since I no longer had Old Schumacher telling me I couldn’t listen to the New Buildings in the van, I nearly wore the tape out, listening to it on the way to work. When I told Blixa my favourite was Sado-masodub, but it wasn’t quite long enough for the drive to work, he obligingly mixed a 30-minute version that covered one entire side of a cassette, with a special custom mix-tape on the other side. Oh, how I treasured that tape, with his distinctive handwriting marching across the front cover, with not just the names, but little comments on the tracks he had selected for me, like he wanted me to know why they were special to him. When the gift proved well-received, he made me another and then another, his own little tributes of love.

At the end of January, the New Buildings went on tour again, out into Europe for the first time. Blixa sent me strange postcards with foreign stamps, his spidery handwriting making hilarious jokes of dangerous concerts and near-misses with their unconventional equipment. He had a little joke with me, that he always tried to send me the most boring postcards, so I never got photos of mountains or grand canals or castles. I got postcards of shopping centres and ugly brick town halls and train stations, which seemed somehow much more fitting. He seemed good-spirited and playful, perhaps even optimistic in the messages.

Compared to their tour of Germany, which I think Blixa had found quite hard work, playing underappreciated gigs to people who were not willing to hear them, places like the Netherlands and France were a lot more exciting. These audiences could get a little confrontational, but at least they
reacted. Blixa didn’t mind being hated or screamed at; what he couldn’t stand was to be ignored. After they played Paris, I received a postcard with a weird scrawled message saying >>I don’t ever want to play in West Germany again. Playing gigs in West Germany is shit compared to this! (Well... maybe still in Berlin.)<<

They played in Amsterdam for the first time, and Blixa absolutely fell in love with the city. Well, not so much the city itself as its lively drugs scene. He came home telling me he had tried “the real deal” there, >>not those rubbish little housewives diet pills we’ve been messing with<< but genuine, white-hot amphetamine sulphate, so powerful it was like opening up your skull and pouring the universe straight in, so that he felt focused and sharp as a knife, staying up for days at a time without fatigue.

It all seemed fun at the time; Blixa seemed to be having a marvellous time. He became a different character on speed, sharp and witty and cutting. In an odd way, pure amphetamine seemed to calm him down, so that he became tightly focused and intense, instead of boisterous and manic and exploding in a hundred directions all at once. He wrapped his success around him like a cloak, and sharpened himself on it. We were a tight, loyal, close-knit little scene, and if you were in it – and for the first time in my life, I was in – you were part of something that felt truly magical and amazing.

Malaria! released their first proper record, on their cool New York label, and started to tour pretty intensively in the spring. Manc Mark, who had somehow found himself roped into the gang as their ‘manager’, always tried to drag me along to their out of town gigs, as he knew that I would stay sober enough to drive home. OK, sure, I would sometimes overindulge in a little hash. But I’d inherited an affinity for the peppy little housewife pills that Blixa now considered himself to be so far above, and I’d be alright to drive after one or two of them.

And after a couple of nervous crossings at the Staaken border control, I learned that the issue of passports was a delicate one, that I was uniquely placed to handle. Manc Mark had a British passport, so they would let him out of West Berlin with only a cursory check of the German passengers’ papers. (If you didn’t have a passport, the official papers were such a hassle, as you actually had to apply in advance and pay a fee to cross the border, that everyone in the bands – even Blixa, who objected strenuously to all official documents – sprung for the expensive full West German passport.) Since I, on the other hand, had dual citizenship, and a birthplace listed as West Berlin, I could drive out on my British passport without hassle, then drive the van back into the city on my West German one, and be greeted routinely in both directions, as if I were merely returning home.

It was deeply, deeply weird, driving the hundreds of kilometres through East Germany along tightly controlled and forbidding autobahns, until we reached the border. But the concerts were well worth it, and the trips were always a brilliant time. In my opinion, Malaria! were the best live band in Germany, those five incredibly beautiful women in their coordinated black outfits with a gash of red lipstick, making this drop-dead cool and angular music in clubs from Hamburg to Düsseldorf.

We always liked playing Düsseldorf best, as Beate would appear after a gig at the Ratinger Hof, sometimes with Chrislo in tow, and take us out on the town. And at a strange, darkened club in the Central Business District, we actually caught a glimpse, through a crowd, of those four weird guys from Kraftwerk, sitting there in their perfectly tailored suits and pencil ties, though I didn’t have the nerve to approach them. Gudrun loved them, as she was starting to get properly into electronic music, playing some of the set on the synth before switching back to the drums. But the one time she went anywhere near the cold, robotic Rheinlanders, their creepy drummer tried to chat her up, and she beat a swift retreat.

But then Chrislo, usually hopped up on machismo and drink, and god knows what else, would end
up getting aggro with a bouncer, and we’d be out on the beer-spattered pavement of the Altstadt, Beate trying to drag him off before he got really out of control. Their band was doing well, Los Niños Del Parque was a huge international hit, selling by the bucketload across Europe and even in America. But Chrislo was the first of the gang who was obviously not handling the pressure of success at all. Seeing his handsome face, mashed by a bouncer, was distressing. But seeing him taking it out on Beate, as the two of them would start to scrap, that really worried me.

Malaria!’s hard work was paying off, too. Their 12” vinyl, New York Passage, had gone Top 10 in the independent charts in the UK, mainly thanks to John Peel’s incessant championing of them as “Queens of Noise”, and it also got a huge amount of college radio airplay in the US. For Gudrun, it was a real affirmation, and I think there was a tiny part of her that really got off on telling scenester boys that this ‘girlband’ they had dismissed or downplayed had achieved something special. The taste of success lit a fire under her. They discussed the next step constantly, at Iron-Grey, at the women-only meetings they still held in their flats, and at the rehearsal studio they shared with Susanne’s other band, The Skin.

The band were split on how to proceed. The more cautious side of the group, led by Bettina, were willing to shop around and make a deal with one of the German labels who had ignored them before their success. Now that they had proven their merit, surely even the most sexist of the music industry men would change their minds and offer them the same kind of deal that the New Buildings had been negotiating. Gudrun, and the more independent side of the band, on the other hand, wanted none of it.

>>We already know that they are completely sexist<< Gudrun protested. >>They’re not going to work any harder for us than we work for ourselves. Why reward them for their misogynist attitudes, and give them the fruits of all of our hard work?<<

>>Look, they have good contacts<< Bettina insisted. >>They know all the right people, they have the links already in place. It’s not about who they are, it’s about who they know, and who they can put us in touch with, that we can’t, ourselves.<<

>>But we have contacts<< Gudrun snorted. >>It was me who went to Zensor and asked him, hey, which distribution companies should be carrying our records. And may I remind you, it was John-Peel who called us, not some record company who went begging to him. He called us.<<

Bettina roared with laughter. >>Yes, and you and Beate squawked down the phone at him then hung up, because neither of you could understand a word of English. At least a German branch of an international record company will have someone who can talk English on the phone!<<

“I can schpik englische perfekly vell now, carn’t I, Karteh,” enunciated Gudrun, to prove her point.

>>Look, where are we going to get the money to start a record label?<< asked Christine, who was good at breaking up her bandmates’ squabbling and bringing them back to the bottom line. >>It’s not like copying home-made tapes in Blixa’s basement, putting out an actual album on vinyl. It costs a lot of money up front. Where do we get that kind of money? We barely make a profit on touring.<<

>>So we apply for arts grants, we go to the government for a business loan – they are practically throwing money at anyone who will start a business in West Berlin! We talk to patrons – you know that Wolfgang talked a wealthy gallery owner into giving the Deadly Doris two thousand Marks for them to make a record! You should know these things yourself, Bettina, from starting Iron-Grey...<<

Bettina shifted uncomfortably on the sofa, because it was unspoken but common knowledge around the group, that substantial amounts of the funding for the opening of the shop had come from
Bettina’s wealthy family. She didn’t like to talk about it, not only because she felt it created a rift between herself and the less wealthy members of the group (who, coincidentally, were the ones arguing most strongly for self-sufficiency and starting their own label) but because she was always slightly wary of her bandmates asking her to tap into those funds again and again.

>>Well, as you know, Iron-Grey has never managed to turn a profit. We wouldn’t be able to run it at all if we actually had to pay any kind of real rent<< she finally sighed.

>>We should at least talk to some record labels, see what they’re offering<< suggested Christine diplomatically. >>What can it hurt?<<

And so Gudrun and Bettina dressed up in their best suits and their big boots and their art school haircuts, and went off to talk to the first Big Business Record Label who had come sniffing round the scent of their success. Almost from the start, it was a complete disaster, as we found out when Bettina, sheepishly, and Gudrun, triumphantly, picked through the post-mortem at the Risk bar the following Saturday.

>>They were the most offensive male chauvinist pigs I have ever had the displeasure of meeting!<< raged Gudrun as we gathered round the bar, waiting for Blixa to serve us.

>>They were quite patronising<< conceded Bettina, waving her finger towards the bottle of red wine they wanted to share. Blixa grabbed it for her, but waved away her money, as the local punk stars always drank for free when Blixa was working the till.

>>I went in, with all of my research, and all of our touring plans, and all of our sales figures from the last E.P., and all prepared to talk through what we expected to accomplish with our debut album...<< continued Gudrun as the weedy Blixa wrestled with the corkscrew.

>>I really was quite impressed with the plan, it was really good, very thorough<< agreed Bettina. When they argued, Bettina and Gudrun could be fearsome, but when they agreed, they spoke with one voice.

>>And what do you think this prick said? He said, ‘don’t you worry your pretty little heads about that, we have people to handle all of that for you’<<

>>Absolute prick<< echoed Bettina. As if to demonstrate her frustration with the entire male sex, she seized the bottle of wine from Blixa and removed the cork he was still struggling with, using a ferocity that indicated she would rather be removing the record company representative’s head.

>>We have the same problem<< said Blixa with a jaunty nod of his head. >>Record company people are the emissaries of the Devil, and the Devil is commercialism.<<

>>Yes, but this is something you do not have to deal with<< raged Gudrun. >>Because do you know what they did want to speak to us about?<<

Blixa put his elbows on the bar and rested his sharp chin on his skinny wrists to indicate that he was all attention. >>Tell me. The Devil is always in the details.<<

>>Our image!<< snapped Gudrun.

>>Our haircuts!<< roared Bettina.

>>Our clothes!<< rejoined Gudrun.

>>Can you imagine!<< cried Bettina, who was by far the more outraged of the two, though it had
originally been her idea to go to a major label. >>We, who have studied design and couture at the school for Kunst!<<

>>We who have been running a clothing boutique for three years<< added Gudrun.

>>Well, I’ve helped<< pointed out Blixa, but the girls just talked right over the top of him.

>>And they think they are going to have image consultants to come in and tell us what to wear and how to cut our hair and what make-up to wear? The arrogance of men!<< Bettina almost shouted, with the tone of voice that could carry all the way to the back of the SO36 even over the roar of the liveliest of punk crowds.

>>We are incorporating our own record label on Monday<< announced Gudrun, and held up her glass to propose a toast. >>We will release our own album.<<

>>I am in complete agreement<< said Bettina, and clicked her glass against Gudrun’s.
Employment

Chapter Summary

As the first half of 1982 rushes by in a blur of gigs and excitement, Carter finds they slowly have to choose between life in the music scene, and their job.

Employment in West Berlin turned out to be like shifting sand. As Gudrun and Bettina went into business founding a record label for Malaria!, they officially bequeathed Iron-Grey to Blixa, so Gudrun could concentrate on trying to learn the ropes of the record industry. But I, too, was having trouble trying to balance my job, with my expanding life in the fast-growing music scene. Old Schumacher was generally pretty cool about whatever hours I liked to keep, so long as the jobs got done, and I did decent work. He was always fairly relaxed about my odd hours, and about my extracurricular work. Finally, he had got the business set up just the way he wanted it, with me in the old van, and his cousin in the new one, leaving him in the office just handling the bookings and the... other, less licit stuff. With two vans on the go, business started doing so well, that the cousin got a Praktikant of his own, a sullen, spotty lad who was really terrified of me, and alternated between leering outlandishly, and being stunned into silence every time I spoke. But, with my own van and my own hours, it was easy enough to ignore both leering lad and stuffy cousin.

On the whole, I tended to prefer the smaller, domestic jobs to the big, building-site jobs that the cousin favoured. I found it really satisfying to turn up on call for some hausfrau in an absolute panic, and calmly restore order and light and power to her stricken household. It didn’t pay as well as the big construction jobs paid, sure. (And old Schumacher had taught me well how to astutely assess a customer’s economic situation, and instilled in me the soft-heartedness of when to offer special discounts to people who looked like they needed them.) But the sense of fulfilment that I got from repairing a second-hand fridge in a house full of skinny kids, and the gratitude that women, in particular, showed me, when I spoke to them in simple, un-patronising German, explaining the problems and being honest about what it would take to fix them... that was worth more than money. People, especially women, came to trust me, and asked for me repeatedly, passing my number from friend to friend as a reliable and respectful tradesperson.

It was a weird line of work, to walk constantly into the most chaotic moments of people’s domestic lives. But I got to see how West Berliners really lived, the stunning contrasts between wealthy American functionaries (who liked the idea of an English-speaking electrician) and the grinding poverty of ruinous tenement blocks that had changed little since the tanks rolled in in 1945. And I seemed to operate constantly in a strange sphere was I was simply taken without question as a man, again and again, simply because I turned up to do a ‘man’s job’ wearing a man’s clothes.

It was funny, because Gudrun often asked me if I experienced a lot of sexism in the electrical repair trade. Gudrun, after her terrible experiences in the record industry, was clearly very concerned about such issues, and asked her friends about them frequently. But to ask me if I experienced sexism on my own job, well, that was an odd one. Because in many ways, yes, it was appalling. There were constant sexist comments on building sites, and jibes about how useless and awful and incompetent women were, from other tradesmen I encountered on the job, or buying supplies at a wholesale warehouse. (Not from old Schumacher, luckily enough – had he done so, I would never have lasted a week on the job.)
But the thing about these comments was, that as awful as they were, they somewhat rolled off my back, because everyone simply took me for a man. I looked like a man. I was as tall and as strong as a man. And in their eyes, I was extremely competent at my job, which made me a man, because women were by definition incompetent. ‘Carter, the English lad’ read to them as a male name. Perhaps it might have been different had I been named Mary or Sue. But because they were expecting to see a man, they saw only a man. And treated me accordingly, with gruff respect. I never got the whistles or the comments that girls, beautiful or not, received if they ventured into these work spaces. But I never would have dared to walk into those spaces wearing a jaunty blouse or a face full of make-up. (Not indeed, that I even owned such things.)

Me, for my own self, never knew how to respond to these kinds of comments. Because, on one hand, it was pretty obvious they didn’t apply to me. I wasn’t useless or incompetent or a sexy piece of arse or a gossipping shrew. Maybe I would have been more concerned had these comments even been directed to me personally. But as it was, it was actually part of my coat of armour that I did not, could not respond to them. Because to respond to them would be to acknowledge that maybe they could be applied to me, and give away that chink in the armour that I wasn’t who they thought I was. And then I thought I really would be in trouble, and the casual ease with which I passed through my working world would be compromised. It would have been real trouble, in my occupation, to be viewed as a girl.

But on the other hand, I did not agree with these comments. I thought of the smart, strong, capable German women I knew – Gudrun, Bettina, Tabea, Grete and my Aunt – and thought that the comments were ridiculous to the point of insulting. And the men I respected did not agree with them either. Old Schumacher, despite his occasional, very affectionate and grandfatherly jokes towards me, if he heard young men on work sites he frequented talking in that way, he would round on them and tell them to wash out their mouths. >>You’re paid to work, not to run your mouths off. A woman gave birth to you, and on my clock you will respect women<< he would bark, in a short, sharp tone that demanded respect, and always got it.

However, just as I was starting to get used to my job, and even like it, settling into a comfortable enjoyment of it, old Schumacher announced his retirement. The company was doing well, the new apprentice had settled in nicely, and the cousin’s wife, Sigrid, had just started working in the office, taking on the bulk of the administrative work. And so the older man decided it was time for him to cash out and sell the business to the cousin. I was sad, as I liked old Schumacher, and looked up to him a lot, as he had taught me so much on a professional level, and he had really looked after me on a personal level. But I was not prepared for how much the company would change, under the cousin, who really was of a completely different mindset to the easy-going old man.

For a start, all the Black Market stuff, and the off-the-books stuff was out. Young Schumacher was aiming to do a lot more of the lucrative government work – big projects, lots of money – but that meant keeping your nose and your books clean. But then he told me that that meant I had to put a stop to my off-the-clock squat and music scene work, or find a way to make it legit. I told him that what I did outside of company hours was none of his business. So Young Schumacher decided to make it his business, by cancelling my long-standing agreement with my mentor that I could work as flexible hours as I wanted, so long as I made up the time at some point. He tried to force me to commit to a regular work schedule.

The thing was, the little, domestic jobs that I tended to favour, they didn’t conform to a regular schedule. Families with shorted-out washing machines didn’t want me turning up at 8am, when they were trying to get their kids dressed and out the door for school. They actually preferred me turning up at 10 or 11, when they were ready for me – or better yet, at 8pm at night, when the fuse had blown in the first place. Evenings were the most popular time to book in calls, when the husband would be home. And the fact that I was occasionally willing to work on a Saturday afternoon, that
was far more popular than the ability to turn up at 8am on a Monday morning.

But the younger Schumacher didn’t want me to carry on doing the small, poorly paid, piecemeal domestic jobs. He kept cancelling my little repair jobs and booking me in for large-scale building jobs he knew I hated.

For most of the spring, we battled. Every time Malaria! or the New Buildings or the Deadly Doris played a gig that was advertised in the local paper, or in adverts on walls around Kreuzberg, Young Schumacher – or more likely, his busybody little wife, who wrote out the schedules – would make a deliberate point of scheduling me for an early start the next day. I burned the candle at both ends, though I did not risk going into open rebellion. I pulled a lot of all-nighters, revving through on what Blixa now disdainfully called ‘housewives’ pills’ then rolling into work at 8am having stayed out all night, or caught a few bleary hours of sleep in the back of the van.

Those gigs, especially the wild bacchanalias at SO36, where punk bands from out of town would play, and the local heroes would support, were my passport to this other West Berlin that I had fallen in love with. The music was incredibly intense and extreme, especially the American bands who were starting to come through on tour. British punk had completely splintered, into odd, angular art-rock on the one hand, bands like Bauhaus and Wire who wore their art school references like a mask; and dumbed-down troglodyte Oi. But American punks took the whole thing to another level, becoming more and more hard core in their pursuit of faster, louder, and more extreme music.

And it was the dancing, more than anything, that caught me. I had seen both pogoing, where people jumped up and down excitedly, and slamming, where people careened about, smashing into one another with anarchic glee, before, in London. But the Berlin style of dancing turned pogoing and slamming into a far more communal thing, where a crowd of young people would somehow seize one another around the shoulders and leap about, surging first one way, and then another, a mass of people moving like a sea. I watched, but I did not participate, held back by shyness. Until one day, the Teenager, Alex, arriving late, saw me standing at the edge of the audience watching a band, thrashing my head back and forth to the music, and simply grasped me around the shoulders, howled >>moron dance!<< (which was the title of one of Blixa’s songs) and pulled me straight into the midst of the pullulating crowd.

For an awful moment, I panicked, feeling completely assaulted by noise and sound and strange bodies jostling me from every direction. Another body collided with me from the other side, and knocked me off balance, and for an awful moment, I thought this was how I would die, knocked down and tramped at a punk gig. But to my surprise, I did not fall over. The dense mass of bodies caught me, and held me upright, so that I twisted and lurched, but did not go down. A third person grabbed Alex around the neck, and pulled us in another direction, and the crowd shifted, allowing us through. Someone in the mass of people caught us, and shoved us back in the other direction, and as I looked up, I realised the third dancer was tiny, elfin Andrew, his face twisted into ecstatic joy as the crowd buffeted us, pushing us first one way, then another, in time to the surging, energetic music coming off the stage.

And at that moment, I realised that the dancing was like waves, it was like swimming in a strong ocean current, and that the exhilaration and terror were the same, to be knocked about, and carried, and yet have complete confidence that these people all around you – and I kept catching glimpses of kids I knew, from Iron-Grey, or from other concerts – would ultimately catch you if you fell, support your body and keep you floating. The crush and push of humanity of all sexes was, in an odd way, intensely sexual, and yet, despite the violence of the music and the movements, it was not particularly aggressive. It felt like an intense, participatory communion, more like an orgy than a gang-bang. And from that day, I was hooked. I started going to every gig, with Blixa or Gudrun, if they were around, or with Andrew and even Alex if they weren’t, taking advantage of every opportunity to experience
those strange, wild dances.

I grew tighter with the other New Buildings, through dancing and going to gigs. Mufti and Mark were spending more and more time in Berlin, and less and less time at home in Hamburg, though the pair of them seemed to be in half a dozen bands spread between both cities. Mufti was even more of a social butterfly than Blixa, it seemed, though to be fair he was far more of an accomplished musician than Blixa ever was. He was a truly gifted drummer, who could tease a beat out of absolutely anything, from plastic containers, to shopping trolleys, to assorted bottles and glasses left strewn across the bar of the Risk when Blixa had forgotten to collect the empties in a while. But he could also play the piano a bit, and had a natural kind of ear for music, so that when he picked up anything – a guitar or a keyboard or even a banjo – without a single lesson, he could produce some interesting noises out of it, though not necessarily the noises its maker intended. He was just obsessed with sound, with teasing out the timbre of anything – musical or non-musical – that could be plucked or struck or blown or bowed to make a noise. It was that native, inborn sense of musicality that really lifted the New Buildings’ odd music from pure cacophony, to those passages of intense, almost spiritual beauty.

And Mufti, unlike Blixa, actually knew his way around a recording studio. All of the musicians in those days used to carry little portable cassette recorders about with them, not just to play music, but to tape band rehearsals or gigs. Mufti, on the other hand, turned taping everyday things into a kind of art form. He had half a dozen different microphones, from tiny, unnoticeable spy mics you could wear on your lapel without anyone noticing, to large, flat contact mics he would fix to the side of a car to record engine noise. He had a way of joining bands through agreeing to play drums, and then ending up producing the whole record, simply taking over in the studio, by way of his uncanny ability to always make things sound interesting.

First, he had been working with the band that the awful teenager had started with his improbably beautiful and famous girlfriend, Christiane F, already the author of a best-selling book and then film about her life as a teenage drug addict in West Berlin. The German pop music industry were very keen to capitalise on her international fame and her legendary beauty, but the records they wanted her to make, and the records that she and her noisenik boyfriend were interested in making were two very different beasts. After the record company strong-armed her into recording a dreary disco track for the American market, Mufti and Alex liberated the masters and created their own version, which was much less radio-friendly, but much more fun.

Since that had proved such a lark, Mufti and Alex recruited Mark into their studio-based ‘wrecking crew’ and went on to produce yet another prefabricated punk record backing a hot girl singer, this time enlisting a shockingly beautiful Polish woman with a penchant for slight S&M theatrics in her lyrics. The whole thing was manufactured over the course of a month, recorded and released as a kind of experiment in machine-line music assembly, and then disbanded just as quickly. It was fairly astonishing to me, that Mufti and Alex were both quite ordinary looking blokes, and yet they were constantly surrounded by these absolutely stunning girls. Privately, I wondered what their secret was, that these grungy boys routinely turned up these with gorgeous women like Christiane and Mona, and how I could share in it.

Honestly, if I had had the slightest modicum of musical talent, I would have given it a go, as Mufti insisted that frankly, anyone could be a musician, given the right environment. But I declined to participate, preferring instead to study intensely how Mufti and Alex interacted with their fascinating music-capturing machines. The machines, I found interesting, and I enjoyed poking at them, and fixing them occasionally when Alex managed to mangle them.

I really enjoyed that heady atmosphere of West Berlin’s music scene, where bands would form, swap members, percolate through the entire underground economy of clubs and record shops and fanzines,
and break up again maybe a month or two later, to be absorbed back into the primordial soup of the city’s musical DNA. Even though West Berlin was a fairly large, presumably cosmopolitan city, the music scene was absolutely nothing like London’s, where people passively consumed gigs and clubs that other people would lay on for their entertainment. People didn’t just watch; they joined in and made things happen. Or maybe it was just that peculiarity implicit in the German language – that fun was something that had to be *made*, not had. But every time Mufti or Alex turned up with a new band, I would obediently trot along to check them out, knowing that there was fun to be made there.

Blixa, of course, still had the best radar for music, which he shared with me constantly, through those incredible mixtapes he made me like little love letters. I never knew anyone who could make mixtapes like Blixa, though there was an implicit understanding in listening to the things, that they would swerve wildly from the hottest new alternative record on import from the States, to weird machine noises he had recorded because he found them interesting, to home-made recordings either of his own band, or friends’ bands he had gone to see play live. They were wildly adventurous, and for me, who had known little about music before falling in with this crew, they were a musical education in and of themselves.

Either through his music-world contacts or through his obsessive keeping up with zines to stock at Iron-Grey, Blixa always seemed to have his ear to the ground, and a nose for rooting out every cool foreign band that would be passing through West Berlin. He always seemed to know which concerts to go to, which clubs to be seen at, and which bands not just to listen to, but to seek the acquaintance of. At SO36, Blixa, who was incredibly good at networking, with an uncanny ability to instantly befriend almost anyone with the laser beam of his charisma, held court like a rubber-clad aristocrat, swanning backstage and inviting British or American luminaries of alternative music out for a night of free drinks at the Risk bar.

With his new American rock star friends, as well as his own successful band, his social capital was definitely on the rise. Now that he was known to be single, he was a bit of a hot property on the scene, and he certainly played the field. Girls, boys, it didn’t really seem to matter to Blixa, so long as they were *hot*, and they didn’t have any hang-ups about permanence, or expectations that it might lead to a regular thing. He wanted it known, that everything he got up to, was to be kept strictly casual. He wanted sex, and he certainly got it, without much trouble. Now that he was definitely a local celebrity, he didn’t seem to even have to go looking for liaisons. Blixa just made himself available in that passive, receptive sort of way of his, and sexual partners seemed to almost throw themselves at him.

It didn’t bother me, all that easy no-strings sex. Good for him, I thought, to be honest. We were friends and I felt very secure in the odd kind of totally platonic love we shared. (And he never wavered in letting me know that he did care for me. He was one of the most effortlessly affectionate men I had ever known.) But to see the easy way he shared his beautiful body with anyone on the scene who was willing to keep it casual, that actually made me very glad that I had not joined the ranks of his conquests, that night in Wolfgang’s flat.

Gudrun laughed at me, and teased me that she definitely knew that there was something between us, as I was the one person in West Berlin that Blixa wasn’t fucking. I rolled my eyes at her and told her that not everything was about sex. But secretly? The fact that I had turned him down, and no one knew made me feel, well... oddly special.

I still saw Jana around the neighbourhood, in fact, I probably saw more of her than when she and Blixa had been together. To my relief, but also my slight confusion, she continued to act as if we were bosom buddies, waving at me, even from across the street, if she saw me out and about, and making a point of coming over to say hello. If she was alone, it was fine, and the whole thing was perfectly amicable. We’d just chat for a little bit about clothes or music or the weather, make
promises to get together at some point, then go our separate ways. But if she was with her new boyfriend, Johann, well, something about him rubbed me the wrong way.

Johann was good-looking, in a tall, square, cheekboned sort of way – in fact, in many ways he was like a Hollywood handsome version of Blixa – but my god, he knew it. He had long, thick, shining hair where Blixa’s had been hacked away in chunks. And he had a good, square, jutting jaw where Blixa had a thin, slightly recessed chin. His nose was perfectly straight and aerodynamic where Blixa’s was crooked, and he had two rows of perfectly even, perfectly white teeth where Blixa had splayed, gappy tombstones he seldom bothered to brush. And yet his face lacked the bright intelligence of Blixa’s face, that animation that transformed Blixa from merely handsome to utterly beautiful. And he wasn’t just dumb, he was full of himself, too, in a really grotesque way.

Jana would often invite me round, telling me to drop by the squat whenever, and I would make vague promises to visit, that I had no real intention of keeping. It wasn’t that I disliked her at all; it was just that heroin still made me really uncomfortable. But I ran into Johann by himself one night at Risk, flush with money and a little drunk, having just unloaded a large batch of coke. He looked me up and down, and tried to buy me a drink, and when that failed, he just started to ask flat out. He laughed aloud, joking that he’d heard I was a hermaphrodite. My face grew hot, and I told him it was a beastly lie. But then he moved closer and said he’d heard I liked girls; was that true? I told him it was none of his business. He laughed again in a really ugly tone, then moved in even closer and whispered to me that Jana swung both ways, and he really wanted to watch her with another girl some time, and come on, she kept inviting me round the squat, so how come I never dropped by. I extricated myself from the conversation swiftly, and made a note to never, ever go to Jana’s place.

But life was becoming complicated enough in other ways. Berlin’s wild music scene had caught me, and seemed intent to keep me, but my fucking arsehole of a new boss just wanted to ride me hard. Young Schumacher was always refusing me days off for concerts, and his wife was always insisting on booking 8am starts on mornings after nights they knew I was going out. They tried to schedule work on my birthday, for which Blixa had told me he was booking out the entire Risk bar for a private party, since one’s 21st birthday was obviously a big deal. But I told that stupid man and his hatchet-faced wife that I had worked out long ago, with their older relation, that we all got birthdays off, and there it was, written into my contract.

I won that round, and had a ball at my birthday party, at which Salomé and Tabea both dressed up in drag and sung Happy Birthday To You in true Marilyn Monroe style. Afterwards, I got a brief snog from each of them, and honestly, Salomé copped such a feel of my muscles that her boyfriend started to look really quite put out. Manc Mark, who I never knew had such culinary talents, either baked or obtained a large tray of hash-laced cake so potent that half of West Berlin was knocked out for two days. And one of Salomé’s femme friends took me home afterwards, and introduced me to the decadent practice of using the little canisters that came with soda-water refills to almost infinitely prolong orgasm while I screwed her senseless. Life was good. I had the best friends in the world.

But work no longer had the relaxed, open atmosphere I had enjoyed under my former boss. It wasn’t just the younger Schumacher who resented me, it was his wife. Sigrid had originally come on board just to answer the phones and run the accounts, and soon ended up trying to run the place. And Sigrid, for whatever reason, though I had initially tried to be polite and well-mannered towards her, took against me, and did everything she could to make my life hell. First, she objected to my uniform, and said that really, to give a good impression, I should wear a skirt to work every day, as she did. I laughed outright at that, and told her if she thought I was going up ladders and down manholes and crawling through basements in a skirt and high heels, then she was off her rocker. And yet still, she stared at me with a whiff of strong Prussian disapproval every time I was about. My
habit of unbuttoning my jumpsuit to the waist, and washing my hands and torso at the outside tap when I came in from a particularly dirty job, the same way as all the male workmen did, that infuriated her. It wasn’t seemly, she hissed at me. I would give the men wicked thoughts if I stood around in my dirty grey tank top, washing myself with my broad shoulders and hairy armpits exposed. I should come inside and use the tiny little bathroom with a sink the size of a soup bowl.

Absolute nonsense, I told her, and carried on as I was. She responded by making my hours even worse, scheduling me for early starts every day of the week. But it wasn’t until she made some very direct suggestions that I should come out with them on Sunday morning, to their local church, where I might meet a ‘god-fearing young man who would set me straight’ that I cottoned on to the true source of her dislike of me.

I didn’t know for certain, until the day I offered Tabea and her new, very attractive film director girlfriend, Isabel, a ride out to a photographic supply warehouse on the outskirts of Berlin, and just asked them to meet me at the yard after work. They arrived a bit early, and I had something to check on in the storeroom, so I left them for ten minutes sitting on the front of my van. They weren’t even doing anything when I got back, though I knew Tabea was not shy about public displays of affection. They were just sitting together, holding hands, and chatting, their heads bent together, like lovers do. But Sigrid hit the roof, and called me into her office, her face almost purple as she told me to get those depraved sinners out of her sight. I was completely blindsided by it. I had been in West Berlin for just over a year, and had grown so used to the relaxed and tolerant attitude of my friends, that I had forgotten how to react to attitudes like hers.

After that, it became open warfare between myself and the two Schumachers. The young apprentice stopped even speaking to me, scurrying out of my sight as if afraid that whatever perversion I had was catchy. And a few weeks later, Young Schumacher tried to get his revenge for my birthday holiday. I simply asked for another morning off, as Wolfgang and Andrew were throwing a “Christmas Party in May” featuring all the Risk Bar All-Stars comprised of various New Buildings and Dorises, and, they promised, naked boys in bathtubs and mermaids in various states of undress. Schumacher denied the request. I went to the party anyway, and had a whale of a time, throwing scraps of fish-heads with the best of them, and getting felt up by an androgynous young mer-creature dressed only in a false fish tail and gold paint, while Blixa goaded us on through a megaphone, cackling at the chaos around him.

I just about managed to stumble back to the yard by 8am (which meant missing the tail end of the party) but then collapsed asleep in the driver’s seat of my van with the doors all locked, and could only be woken by fifteen minutes of furious pounding on the windscreen when Sigrid arrived at 10. Young Schumacher was furious. Technically, I was on the property, and so had fulfilled the terms of my contract. But, obviously, while unconscious, I had done no work.

And finally came the ultimatum. In early June, the New Buildings, Malaria! and a gang of other West Berlin band were booked to play a special “Berlijn Festival” in Amsterdam. Given how many of my friends were playing (and how many people wanted a ride there in the back of my van) there was no way I was not joining the convoy of band vans headed West. Young Schumacher, of course, wanted me working, and denied my request for time off. I told him that I was going, whether he approved the time off or not. He responded by telling me that if I went, I was sacked, and what’s more, he was going to confiscate my van. It was a damned lucky thing that Old Schumacher had transferred the van to my name, and I had gone through that whole annoying process of registering the thing (and failing the eyesight test) because I told him to get stuffed. Van and electrician were both going to Amsterdam. I walked off my job, got in my van and drove away, backing it down the alley into our courtyard and parking it carefully off the street overnight in case they got any ideas.

Over drinks at the Jungle, Blixa and Gudrun both told me that I had made the right decision. Blixa
even suggested firebombing the yard, but thankfully I talked him out of that. But in the cold, sober light of morning, getting money out of my bank account to pay for petrol for the long drive halfway across Europe, I looked at my bank balance and realised that pitiful amount had to last me until I found another job.

Manc Mark told me not to worry. He had a friend who ran a recording studio, who was looking for a sound engineer with good electrical skills. I told him I knew very little about sound, except from what I’d picked up watching Mufti and Alex at work. He offered to teach me what he knew about mixing, and insisted that anyway, it didn’t matter at all; as what they really wanted was someone who could take apart the ancient recording equipment and keep all the old gear running. We’d be a great fit, he assured me, the owner was as mad as a box of frogs, workdays never started before noon, and we’d get on like a house on fire. When we got back from Amsterdam, he would make the necessary introductions, and the job was all but mine.

And so I tossed my fate to the gentle, early summer wind, loaded up my van with bits of Malaria!’s gear, and headed to Amsterdam to see what life on the road could offer me.
Amsterdam

Chapter Summary

The Schöneberg gang decamp en masse to Amsterdam, where Gudrun introduces Blixa to a certain Australian for the first time.

It was a full day’s drive from Berlin to Amsterdam, so the whole gang had made various arrangements to stay over for a few days, and sample the local delights. The Skin, Suzanne’s old band, were playing at a converted church in the centre of town – oddly enough, supporting that weird Australian birthday-themed band that Gudrun had played with in New York and London – so we dispersed to the various places where we were staying, with the agreement that we would all meet up that night at the gig.

Malaria!, who demanded their beauty sleep, had booked a large room in a tourist hotel for the duration, and I had been invited to stay there. Six girls spread across two king-size beds was a bit of a squeeze, but it was palatial in comparison with what the New Buildings discovered across town. Blixa, pulling in all of his zine-scene contacts, had arranged for the band to stay at a squat for the extra days. (The promoter had booked them a hotel near the venue, but only for the one night after the gig.) But he had walked in to the room he was offered, taken one look at the bed, which he found to be crawling with bedbugs, and decided instead that he simply wasn’t going to bed for the entirely of the 72 hours we would be staying in Amsterdam.

Fortunately, with the resources instantly available to curious young tourists of a chemical disposition, it did not seem like that would be too much of a problem. While the Malaria! girls showered and got ready to go out, I drove Blixa across town to a place where Manc Mark insisted we would be able to score anything we liked. Sure enough, Blixa bought enough amphetamine to keep him awake for a week, while I bought a lump of hash the size of a bar of soap. It looked like we were both going to enjoy Amsterdam. Parking the van in the hotel garage, resolving not to be in a fit state to touch it again for the rest of the trip, we climbed in the back to indulge a wee bit in our chosen substances, then, suitably refreshed and giggling slightly, made our way to the venue to meet the rest of the gang.

Although I had intended to pay for the gig, we got to the door and discovered that Blixa was on the guest list, with a plus one, which he immediately offered to me, plus backstage passes. Well, that was nice of The Skin. Feeling a little blasphemous, we made our way through the main body of the church, through what was once the sacristy to the warren-like backstage area.

Backstage was crawling with Australians. It was deeply weird for me, as though it wasn’t entirely rare to hear people speaking English in the American zone of Berlin, Australian accents took some getting used to. The Skin’s dressing room was full of Malaria!, but still, Blixa and I forced our way in. We showed Christoph and his mates the results of our haul, and they showed us their backstage rider, and there was a fairly amicable swap of food and drink and substances as they got in a good state to go onstage, and we got in a proper state to appreciate them. I don’t know if the hash in Amsterdam was much stronger than I was used to, or I was just exhausted from the eight-hour drive, but I was flagging. But then Blixa offered me a small line of his magic white powder, and suddenly the whole world was sparkling and fresh and exciting and I was wired to the gills, both Blixa and I almost slithering off the walls with the amount of chemicals we had mixed.
We went out into the balcony to watch The Skin. As they played, we all danced, and rowdily shouted our approval of our Berlin compatriots. Although we meant to troop backstage again to offer our congratulations, another band had come out onto the stage, who immediately captured our attention. We all watched, entranced, as a tiny American woman with enormous black hair, an orange streak at the front, recited poetry that was by turns spooky and vulgar, to the accompaniment of a spine-tingling backing tape. Gudrun and Bettina, who always loved to see other women onstage, rushed to the front of the balcony and nodded along approvingly. I looked around me, entranced by the architecture of the church, while Blixa stared, his eyes popping out of his skull and his arms tightly crossed across his chest.

>>This music sounds an awful lot like yours<< I ventured, though Blixa was clearly already retreating into silent, intensely focused amphetamine mode.

>>Oh. Yeah. That’s coz it is. Her record company wrote to our record company a few months ago, asked if we wanted to collaborate. So me, Andrew and Alex knocked this up in the basement of the shop. It’s good, yeah?<<

I nodded my agreement, but then had to sit down, as I was overcome by a sudden fit of the giggles, as I had a sudden image of this goth chick as the priest of this weird deconsecrated church, celebrating some bizarre industrial Eucharist for the crowd of black-clad congregants. Wow, that Amsterdam hash was strong.

When she had finished, we poured backstage again to offer our congratulations to The Skin, and consume a little more of each other’s substances. Blixa cut another line of speed, and I rolled another spliff full of hash, and passed it around. The party in the dressing room was over-spilling into the corridor as more of their friends piled in, and Blixa, Gudrun, the Teenager and I found ourselves outside in the corridor, which was just as well, as the various drugs were hitting us quite hard, and it was nicer to be outside in the relative cool, than inside the rammed and sweaty dressing room.

Gudrun kept insisting loudly that we should go and see this headlining band, the Birthday Cake, or whatever they were called, but I was not convinced.

>>I don’t want any birthday cake<< I announced to no one in particular. >>I’m feeling a little bit sick, to be honest.<<

>>Not the Birthday Cake, the Birthday Party<< repeated Gudrun. >>You know, like the Pinter Play?<< As Blixa and I started to giggle uncontrollably, she rolled her eyes at us and strode off back to the balcony to stake out a good spot.

>>The Birthday Cake<< repeated Blixa, jamming his elbow into my side, and my giggling intensified to the point where I felt almost ill. >>How about a birthday hashcake. Can we smoke another spliff?<<

>>Your birthday was back in January. Now don’t make me laugh so much, or I’ll throw up<< I warned, as Blixa and I tried to get a handle on our giggling.

>>That would be very, very punk<< insisted Alex. >>Can you vomit while the band are onstage tomorrow? I’ll mic up your stomach and use the sounds of your stomach acids and intestinal juices and things while you puke.<<

That only made Blixa and I laugh harder, until we were both practically snivelling. But abruptly, the door to the other, larger dressing room opened, and a young woman stepped through. She was pretty, but rather androgynous, thin and delicate, with fine features, prominent eyes, and a birdsnest of spiky black hair tangled on the top of her head. Initially, it looked like she was just going to push past us towards the balcony, but then she stopped, and did an almost comical double-take upon
seeing Blixa and I. After looking at us for an almost rude amount of time, she turned and walked back into the room from which she had come.

>>Was it something I said?>> asked Alex, and we all collapsed back into the laughter we had been suppressing. My stomach had settled down a bit, but I was very, very high, much higher than I had intended to be.

The door opened again and the woman came out again. Except, somehow, in the two minutes she had been gone, she had changed, and must have put on shoes with high heels to give her quite a few extra inches in height. And to make the game even more Alice in Wonderland, she had changed into almost the exact outfit that I was wearing – the drainpipe vintage Levis that Anne had bought me in New York, a checked cowboy shirt, a buff coloured waistcoat in an old-fashioned style with lapels, and those very pointed Cuban-heeled boots that everyone in West Berlin had started wearing, after Gudrun and Bettina came back from Italy with a car boot full of them on consignment. I looked her up and down, puzzled, as she looked back at me, staring at me with a perplexity as if she hadn’t just come out and stared at me for several minutes already. It was all very odd.

Blixa started to rustle vaguely inside his rubber coat, like he was gearing himself up to shout >>Fuck off, what are you staring at, take a picture, it’ll last longer<< and other such things that the West Berlin punks shouted at tourists. But Blixa, I could already tell, was really, really hyped on speed, to the point where he was starting to have trouble speaking.

But then the door opened again, and there was a whole crowd of Australians, jostling and laughing and shouting in that harsh accent of theirs. The girl in my outfit was joined by her twin, in the outfit she had worn before, as I realised there were a pair of them, one tall, one short. The crowd spilled out into the hallway, discussing loudly which direction was the way to the stage.

“That way, and down the stairs,” I pointed, as I had seen the sign earlier, but it had taken me a moment to remember that I actually spoke English.

One of the Australians, a particularly ugly one, with a very blunt snub nose and a porcupine’s quill of black hair nodded at us, and said “Cheers” but then he stopped as he caught sight of Blixa. The pair of them stared at each other, and time seemed to slow down and collapse in on itself, everything becoming like slow motion, like the mixture of drugs was totally fucking with our perception of time and space. “I’m sorry, but have we met before?” said the Australian.

Blixa blinked, very slowly, and I could tell, that he was on the same drugs as me, and was probably experiencing the same weird sensory distortions that I was. He just stared back at the Australian with a mixture of puzzlement and defiance.

“Look, I know this is gonna sound really weird,” insisted the Australian in his deep voice, blinking back at Blixa in an oddly reptilian way. “But I cannot shake the feeling that we have met before... Like, don’t laugh, but, perhaps... maybe in, uuuhhhh, a dream or something?” He looked back and forth between Blixa and myself and Alex, as Alex muttered >>Nutjob<< under his breath. “I’m sorry, do any of you speak English?”

At that, I laughed, as I had spoken English to him not two minutes earlier. From the state of his face, and the slow reptilian blink of his dilated eyes, it was clear he was on heavier drugs than either Blixa or I. “I speak English, thank you,” I told him. “I just don’t speak Australian.”

The tall one in the cowboy hat laughed uproariously at that, but the ugly, snub-nosed one turned to stare at me, as if he were working out whether to be insulted or not. To be honest, he did look incredibly familiar, but maybe he just had one of those faces. But thankfully, just at that moment, Gudrun reappeared down the corridor from the balcony. When she saw the snub-nosed Australian,
she burst into a wide grin, and trotted up to him, throwing her arms around his neck and greeting him with the warm Berlin double-kiss.

“Niiiick!” she said, in deep, rolling, throaty English, drawing back and smiling her most enchanting smile at him. “I was just coming to see where you are. Your public are chanting for you...” But then she followed his eyes, to see where he was staring. “Oh, have you met one another already? These are the Neubauten boys – well, Blixa and Alex are in Neubauten. Carter is one of our crew. Blixa, this is Nick. Nick Cave.”

“Kick Knave,” I muttered to myself and started to giggle. The Australian shot me a quick glare, but Gudrun carried on, ignoring my interruption.

“Blixa, this is my friend you have heard me speak so much about, from the Birthday Party. Nick, you and Blixa are so alike, I am sure you will be friends. Well... friends or bitter enemies perhaps. Let us hope it will be friends.”

“Blixa,” said Nick, turning the syllables over in his mouth like he was tasting some unfamiliar wine. “Look, can someone translate, because... uuuhhhh. I swear to god I have seen you before. I feel... very strongly... I have the funniest feeling that you and I, have met, in a dream, or a vision, or a... uuuhh, I, erm, maybe in another lifetime? Yeah, I know how crazy that sounds. But I can’t shake the feeling I have known you, for a very long time. Can you understand me at all?”

Blixa just stared fixedly at Nick, and said nothing. Now, I could have sworn that Blixa had at least the rudiments of English. He had dished it out to me on occasion to prove a point, and I had heard him, in the Risk bar, talking to visiting American musicians who had no German at all, so he had at least enough English to take a drinks order, or to wrangle himself on the guest list for a gig. But he remained silent, studying Nick very intently, as if memorising his face.

I sighed deeply and turned to Blixa, translating quickly. >>This guy is totally verruckt, but he swears, he has met you before, in a dream, or a vision, or most likely a drug-induced haze.<<

>>Yes, I know. I have no doubt of it<< said Blixa very quickly. So he could understand, and he was physically able to talk, he was just choosing not to.

“Blixa is the singer of Einstürzende Neubauten,” supplied Gudrun, rushing into the gap, like she just had a gift for smoothing over difficulties between people she was determined to network together. “He has had his photo in many of the music newspapers. Perhaps you have seen him in one of these? He has a very distinctive face; people tend to remember him.”

It’s entirely possible that Nick and Blixa would have continued to stare at one another all night, but the taller of the two androgynous twins piped up, and to my surprise, had a fairly deep and entirely masculine voice. “Come on, Nick. We were due onstage twenty minutes ago. We’re not going to get an encore if we hang about much longer.”

Nick rolled his eyes long-sufferingly. It was Blixa’s gesture, camp and slightly theatrical. “Stop being such an old mother hen, Rowland, we’ll go on when we’re good and ready to go on.”

But the tall one with the cowboy hat stood up straight, adjusted its brim, then walked determinedly down the hall, and the rest of the band followed him like he was clearly the leader, though Nick was last, continuing to throw puzzled glances back over his shoulder at Blixa.

>>What an absolute fruitcake<< I sighed, as soon as they were out of sight.

>>An interesting man<< contradicted Blixa, as Alex got up, and started to walk down the hallway to
the balcony. >>We should go and watch.<<

>>You can’t seriously believe all that crap about meeting you in his dreams. That’s a load of druggie nonsense<< I persisted.

But Blixa turned and faced me, his eyes suddenly very wide and very blue in the dim light. >>The last person who told me, upon our first meeting, that we had already met in a dream, was Jana. We ended up being lovers for over three years. So, when someone tells me they have met me before, in a dream, I tend to pay attention.<< With that, he stood up, pulled his cigarette pack out of his coat, lit one, then headed down the hall.

Grumbling, I climbed to my feet and followed him. >>Well, if you and Nick get married in three years, be sure and send me an invitation.<<

Blixa smiled and put his arm around my shoulders. >>Why, Carter, I do believe you are jealous.<<

>>Fuck off, and get your arm off me, you disgusting boy creep<< I teased, though I didn’t struggle too much as Blixa bent over to deposit a soft kiss on my cheek before releasing me.

As the Australians took the stage, Blixa pushed his way through the crowd to the front of the balcony, resting his elbows on the rail, and his sharp chin on his elbows as he gazed down at them.

I’ll be honest. I absolutely hated the Birthday Cake, the first time I saw them. To the point where I started to doubt my friends’ taste in music, as Blixa was clearly entranced, and Gudrun was excitedly dancing with Manon and Christine.

The band played a sort of stripped-down minimal take on punk, with a similar rockabilly feel to The Cramps, but with the Australian cowboy shtick dialled up to 11, and a weird American Gothic vibe that left me, as a Brit, completely perplexed. But they had stage presence, that I would grant them. The tall bassist in the cowboy hat came alive onstage, as lithe as a gymnast, going down on his knees, before rolling over on his back, air-humping his instrument before leaping to his feet again. The spooky-twin guitarist, with the hollow cheeks and the huge, haunted eyes, he abused his instrument and himself, while the singer, who had struck me as a slightly timid, stuttering fruitcake, turned into a completely different beast under the spotlights.

He stalked back and forth like a panther, wailing with a deep voice and an intensity I’d never have guessed from his skinny frame and his narrow shoulders. He stripped off his shirt and got down on his knees, he prayed, he rolled about as if in spasms, then he threw back his head and he howled as if demons from hell were after him. It was all very standard punk-singer theatrics, very Iggy Pop, in fact many of the moves, and the animal shrieks reminded me oddly of the way that Blixa performed. Though Blixa would never strip like that onstage. To him, it was a very deliberate act to keep himself bound up as tightly as possible, and allow no one a glimpse of his skin. But maybe that was it, maybe that was what Blixa saw in Nick, that first night, and wanted to devour, he was staring at him so intensely. Blixa was possibly the most uninhibited and unorthodox man I had ever met, and yet Nick got up onstage, and started rolling around, writhing in a pool of his own sweat and tears, and showed Blixa up as the uptight little Prussian schoolboy he maybe still was somewhere inside.

Blixa, as Gudrun frequently complained, was forever propounding about What Was Truth and What Was False, and what the New Buildings did and didn’t stand for, and what they were and weren’t prepared to accept. Blixa lived his entire life bound up very tightly with these very strict protestant ideas of what was Right and what was Wrong.

And here was Nick, onstage, howling that he did not give a flying fuck about Right and Wrong, in fact, if he could tell the difference at all, he was going to hurl himself as hard as he could into the
gaping mouth of Wrong, and not just dance with the Devil, but back the Devil into a corner until he could either fuck or be fucked by him. All that bilious, noxious, toxic masculinity on display down there, the strutting and the chest-baring and the offering-the-universe-out-for-a-fight, it revolted me, to the point where I recoiled from it. It was true, I craved masculinity, and there were days when I would have given anything in the world to have woken up one morning, and just been a real man, instead of this weird, neither-nor half-girl, half-boy thing. And yet watching that man down there, acting out all the most depraved and grotesque parodies of the worst aspects of masculinity, it was like a gruesome reminder of why I never, ever, could embrace fully wanting to become a man. What if I turned out like that?

But Blixa, skinny, androgynous Blixa, with his girlish face and elegant hands, his camp manners and his odd prissiness? He looked down at Nick on that stage, burning with this vision of the most toxic colonial manliness, and maybe he craved that release like he craved amphetamine to ‘help him focus’.
Mentionitis

Chapter Summary

Blixa develops a bad case of Mentionitis about his new Australian friend. And Carter develops a slight case of the Green-Eyed Monster.

After the gig was over, I wanted to go back to the hotel, and finally just crash out, as the hash in my system was winning the war with the pinch of speed, and I was flagging. But I was hopelessly outvoted by my friends, all of whom wanted to hang around and go to the Birthday Party’s aftershow. Christoph and Manc Mark had a brief discussion, and it was decided that we would stay, and the whole gang of Germans filed through into the sort of chapel-bar that had been set aside for the bands and their guests. I kept trying to catch Gudrun’s eye, as she had the key to the hotel room, but she was having too good a time, having a very involved conversation with the American Goth chick. The Goth was going on at length about the state of the NYC scene, and how it was completely over and burned out, and was buttonholing Gudrun for information as to what West Berlin was like, was there a good scene and what were the venues and the galleries and poetry slams like. Poetry slams? Gudrun had never heard of a Poetry Slam, and was pumping the Goth for what that might be, was it like a poetry reading, or was it something else?

One by one the Australians came through: first the spooky lesbian twins; then the jazzy type who looked as if he would be more at home in The Skin; then the redhead, then the cowboy with the moustache and the hat, and then finally, after a considerable delay, Nick appeared. He had redressed, in a button-down shirt, and tight leather trousers that looked real, unlike Blixa’s rubber get-up. He looked more than a little dazed, as if he wasn’t entirely sure who he was when he wasn’t up on that stage throwing himself about. Manc Mark went over and said hello, as they seemed to have some previous acquaintance, asked Nick if he wanted to come and smoke some hash with us, then brought him into our group. The odd creature looked at us warily from under the impossible tangle of his black hair, and seemed so uncomfortable in his own skin as he took the spliff from me, holding it daintily between thumb and forefinger as he took a very small draw.

“Gotta be careful, the stuff makes me paranoid as hell” he said by way of explanation, as if rolling around shirtless on a stage filled with electrical gear and glass bottles weren’t the sort of thing to make most people paranoid. The difference between the wild man he became onstage, and the mild-mannered, nervous, almost twitching boy he was offstage was quite disorienting. He accepted a beer, and clutched it between whitened knuckles, and addressed himself mainly to Manc Mark, as he seemed to be the lone native English speaker in the group of Germans, but his eyes kept flickering back across the group to Blixa. Blixa, in a very uncharacteristic quiet mood, stayed completely silent, just staring back with huge, slightly predatory eyes.

And what Nick wanted to know from Manc Mark was more or less the same subject that the American Goth – Lydia was her name – had been interrogating Malaria! on. “So, uuuuhhh, what’s the Berlin scene like? Gudrun tells me it’s, erm, really hot right now. I mean, uuuuhhh, yeah, we moved to London because, well, uuuuh, because we heard it was, y’know, uh, the happening place if you wanted to get anywhere in music. But I gotta tell you. London is... erm, well, you see, uuuuhhh... no offense, but London’s a complete morgue as far as music is concerned. It’s dead.”

“None taken. I’m from Manchester,” said Mark with a self-satisfied smile, holding out his hand for
my joint again.

“Well, in that case, I can be, uuhhh, well, y’know, I gotta be honest with you. It’s the people in London. I mean, erm, yeah... even in a small scene like Melbourne, people are kinda like... well, obviously there’s stuff that goes on, on a personal level. But on the whole, you know, you get the... uuhhh... the sense, the feeling, the spirit that you are all in this thing together, right? In London, it’s like everyone’s so busy, erm, just fighting with one another. They’d all stab their grandmothers in the back for a recording contract. There’s no sense of, uuhhh... you know what I’m trying to say?” The way he spoke was so awkward and halting, constantly stuttering and um-ing and ah-ing and falling over his own words, that it took him an age to come out with anything at all.

“No sense of community,” supplied Manc Mark. “Yeah, mate, that’s my impression of London, too. I mean, Manchester has a bit more of sense of regional pride, or identity, yeah, of community. Everybody helps each other out. But West Berlin... West Berlin is like nowhere else I’ve ever seen in the world, on that front. It’s a little bit magic.”

“Magic,” repeated Nick, sucking at his beer. “We could do with some fucking magic right about now.”

“I mean, look at this lot. Neubauten and Malaria!? They drove halfway across Europe, two days early, so they could come out to Amsterdam and support their friends’ band.”

“No kidding,” mused Nick, turning his eyes towards Blixa again. “You guys know Die Haut, then?”


“What’s he saying?” asked Nick, a little helplessly, turning back to Mark.

I glanced across at Blixa, raising one eyebrow. >>Are you alright, Blix?<<

>>Everything is fine, Car<< replied Blixa, with the flash of a wicked smile and a flirtatious raise of his own eyebrows in reply.

“He and Die Haut are old friends,” said Mark. “And even Carter – she quit her job to come and support the West Berlin bands here.”

I wanted to punch Mark for saying that, as Nick turned and looked at me really strangely, and I could see his face changing as he looked at me closely, and realised the person he had taken for a boy was actually a girl. “I, erm, I... uuhhhh... I see.” So he was one of those blokes who started to act really weird the moment he realised you were a woman. I hated him even more, at that moment, as I glared at Mark, then rolled my eyes, a real dramatic Blixa-style roll.

Conversation fell silent, as a yawning hole opened in the atmosphere, and I felt my credibility fall into it. I was exhausted, and to be honest, I did not have time for this boys’ club bullshit from British or Colonial men. I cast a meaningful glance over at Blixa, who just smirked back at me, then I announced, “I’m exhausted. I’m going to hit Gudrun up for the key to the hotel. Don’t go to bed too late.”

>>I have no intention of going to bed at all<< retorted Blixa playfully, draping his arm around my neck and depositing a sloppy good-night kiss on the side of my mouth.

I kissed him back swiftly, just to shut him up, but, as I walked away, I heard Nick ask Mark. “So, uh, those two – her and...” he gestured his head towards Blixa as if afraid to mention his name, pronouncing it strangely, like an unfamiliar flavour between his teeth. “Is that ‘Blixa’s’ girlfriend?”
Blixa said, very quietly, almost under his breath >>She belongs to nobody, and that’s the way we both like it.<<

But Mark laughed. “Those two? Who even knows. They got some weird situation going on. But no one even asks those kinds of questions in Berlin.”

>>Ask your friend<< said Blixa, in dangerously playful and slightly mocking tone of voice>>If he wants to try to find a gay bar in Amsterdam.<<

“Fuck off,” said Mark.

“What did he say?” asked Nick.

“He asked if you wanted to go to a gay bar.”

“Uh, erm, well, uuhhh...” So it turned out that Nick could get even more tongue-tied than he did around a woman. “Look, uuhh, I’ve got nothing against the gays, right, but I’m straight. I like women, you know?”

>>Ask him if he wants to go to a brothel, then<< snarked Blixa, in an even more provocative voice.

“What does he want?” Nick seemed terrified, and yet oddly fascinated by Blixa, like he couldn’t stop staring at this man he couldn’t understand.

“He wants to know if you want to go to a brothel.”

“No! I mean... No! Absolutely not. Anyway, I’ve got a girlfriend...” And I could tell Blixa was settling in to be this obnoxious for the rest of the night, so I walked more purposely out of earshot, to the other side of Gudrun.

Luckily, when I finally got a word in edgewise between Gudrun and Lydia, it turned out that Bettina was also exhausted and wanted to go back to the hotel. So we would take the key, and leave it down at reception after we’d let ourselves in. We got back to the hotel, made the necessary arrangements, and then I lay down in the centre of one bed, and Bettina lay down in the centre of the other, and I was soon fast asleep.

When I awoke, Gudrun was on one side of me, her face mashed up against my armpit and her arm wrapped tightly around my waist, deep in the sleep of the very drunk, while Manon was fast asleep, rolled in a ball on my other side, her spine curved against my hip. I just lay there for a few minutes, feeling the desperate need to urinate, but thinking that at that moment, in bed with half of Malaria!, I was probably the envy of every straight boy in Germany, and every lesbian in West Berlin. I might not have a job, and my prospects looked dim, but in every other way my life was absolutely amazing.

For the next two days, this gang of young Germans raced around Amsterdam, sucking up drugs, and culture and the latest fashions, as if with a thirst for life itself. And Blixa developed the most amazing case of mentionitis I had ever witnessed in another human being. Everything was Nick this, and the Birthday Party that, until I wondered if he was even seeing Amsterdam before him, or some reflection of what he imagined Australian outback life to be.

Nick wasn’t from the Outback; of that I was certain. There was something not only in the way he dressed – slightly too fastidious in his skinny-ribbed nylon shirts and his tight pegged trousers – but in the way he spoke, and the way he carried himself, for him to be anything other than a pampered
child of suburbia. Even the way he held his cigarettes – not tight, close to the filter, like Blixa was going to suck his right down to the marrow, to squeeze out the last drop of nicotine; but loosely, elegantly, between splayed fingers, like it didn’t really matter if he dropped it, he could always afford another – seemed to me more like an English boarding school toff than the outback punk he represented himself as being. There was something ultimately very phony about this Nick, to me. But Blixa didn’t care. If anything, the falseness was part of the appeal. Blixa didn’t care that the outback punk routine was an artifice, a pose; he just wanted to drink down the artifice like consuming a work of art.

But I was not the only person who had noticed this new fascination. >>Someone’s got a cruuuuussssshhhh<< drawled Bettina when Blixa brought up the Australian singer for about the twelfth time over dinner.

Yet instead of rolling his eyes and throwing back some bitchy rejoinder, as the Blixa I knew and loved would have been certain to do with Betts, he seemed to withdraw into himself, staring at Bettina as if this were an eventuality he had not actually considered. >>I do not<< he finally said, quietly, almost tentatively, as if he could not even convince himself.

>>He wants to come to Berlin<< said Gudrun with a wicked smile, and I suddenly understood why the two of them were such good friends. They didn’t just have the same taste in music; they had the same sharp, slightly mocking sense of humour. >>You should invite him to the Risk bar, get him so drunk he can’t stand up, and then give him a good shove up the arse. He’s so uptight, it will probably do you both the world of good.<<

But Blixa, instead of joining in the fun, gazed back at her with a wounded expression. >>I don’t want to... it’s not like that!<< But then, finally, he turned to me, looking at me with the sort of helpless and scared look of someone who hadn’t been to bed in about 48 hours. >>You understand, don’t you?<<

And as I looked back at him, I realised that he had been bitten by that same bug that had got me, the very first night I walked into that dirty bar on Yorckstrasse. He was in love with the idea of a person.

We sought each other out, after dinner. Gudrun and Manc Mark went off to try to coordinate some plans with the other Berlin bands that were rolling into town, while other members of the New Buildings and Malaria! made plans to go to various gigs around the city. But Blixa came up behind me and seized me around the waist and asked if we could go for a long walk around the city. >>We could consume some substances<< he suggested, but I didn’t want any of his speed. Instead, we smoked some more of the hash, sitting on the lip of a canal, then followed the flickering lights reflected in the water, into the touristy centre of the town.

>>It’s not that I don’t fancy him. He’s a very sexy man<< insisted Blixa, with an honesty that shocked me. >>But I don’t want to have sex with him. I want to... to...<<

>>You want to what?<< I asked, realising I already knew the answer.

He threaded his arm through mine, as we reached the end of our canal, and crossed a small bridge to get to the next spit of land. >>Don’t laugh at me.<<

>>I won’t laugh, I promise<< I said, then added, grinning, in a bad facsimile of Antipodean English, “I’ll even hold your hand and fake an Aussie accent if that would make it better.”

>>Fuck off<< he laughed, then clutched my arm closer, lowering his voice as if imparting an almost unsayable secret. >>I want to write songs for him. I want to make music that is worthy of him, that impresses him. I want him... to be this impressed by me.<<
I laughed aloud; I couldn’t help myself. These were words I could never, in a million years, have ever imagined coming from the mouth of the normally confident and totally self-assured young German, and yet something about Nick seemed to have unmoored Blixa.

>>You promised you wouldn’t laugh.<< he moaned. >>I will never trust you again.<<

>>I’m not laughing at you, I’m laughing at me. That’s how I felt about you, when I first met you.<<

>>How so?>> His face was desperate.

>>You want to be special to that man, the way I wanted to be special to you, when I first encountered you.<<

Blixa looked at me with surprise, but then his face relaxed, and he smiled and squeezed my arm.

>>Then in that case, what do you think I should do? Because you and I are good friends, now, aren’t we. You are special to me. I want to be as special to him, as you are to me.<<

I smiled, feeling my affection surging towards him, not even thinking about Nick, but just wanting Blixa to be happy, wanting him to feel energised by this crush, not unmoored. >>I think you should get to know him. Actually talk to him, on a person to person level, not play those weird mind games you like to play. Because that’s what you and I did. Talk. And look at us now, six months later. We are good friends.<<

Leaning over, he kissed the top of my head. >>I do love you, you know<< he said. >Completely.<<

>>No, you don’t. But thanks for saying so.<<

>>I do<< he persisted, and I could tell that he was very stoned, because he kept repeated the words, as if entranced by them. >>I love you, I love you, I do. You, I love you. Not Nick. You, you, you, I do, I do, I do.<< It sounded much funnier in German: Ich, ich, ich, liebe dich, dich, dich. Nicht Nick, Nick, Nicht.

>>Shut up<< I giggled, punching him gently and putting my hand over his mouth, but he was very stoned, and continued to murmur it to my fingers.

When he realised I wasn’t listening, he stopped muttering, opened his lips and licked my fingers, so that I dropped my hand from his face and had to wipe his spittle on my jeans. He wanted to sing, so he was going to sing.

But I stopped walking, as we had come to another bridge, and gazed over at the other side. >>Is that the red light district?>> I asked.

His eyes lit up. >>Do you want to go to a brothel?>>

>>Why are you so keen on this brothel business?>>

>>It’s Amsterdam<< he shrugged. >>It’s famous for its brothels.<<

>>There are brothels in West Berlin<< I pointed out. >>And it was you who gave me shit about that kind of thing there.<<

Blixa shifted uncomfortably, and an expression came over his face that appeared almost apologetic.

>>I know. And perhaps I feel now that some of the things I said to you then were a little... harsh.<<

I stared at him, wondering if this were the closest thing to an apology I had ever heard escape his
For a moment, we paused in our strides, and just looked at one another, him chastened and me slightly indignant. But then I relented, and bent towards him, planting a soft kiss on the side of his face, just below where his cheekbone met his ear. Of course he was forgiven; I would always forgive him.

He smiled with relief as we started to walk on, his arm entwined with mine. >>Do you miss her? Ilsa?<<

>>Not really. I barely remember her.<< To my surprise, it was not even a lie.

>>Alright. Let’s just walk through and have a look<< he sighed, and we crossed the bridge, still arm in arm. If he had expected it to be exciting, he would have been disappointed. It was the same as in Berlin, slightly tawdry, slightly sad, less about desire and excitement, and more about cold hard cash. Hawkers would walk towards us, but then catch sight of our linked arms, and, taking us for a gay couple, would walk away again, spitting at the ground and muttering something about queers. It was strange the way that how I was read changed with whom I was with. With Gudrun or Bettina, the men of Amsterdam took me for a lesbian and made grotesque noises as we passed. But walking with Blixa, they took me as a gay man. Could a person really be two different genders on the same day, depending on who they were with?

We walked on and on, for another hour or two. Sometimes he talked about Nick, and I could see already, that he was building this huge, elaborate fantasy of a man who probably didn’t even exist. Hadn’t we talked about the dangers of that? Blixa seemed blind, where his fantasy of Nick was concerned. But sometimes we just walked in silence, arms linked, or holding hands, and that was the best. Thoughtful Blixa was the least annoying Blixa.

After a couple of hours, we found we had walked round in a big circle, for Amsterdam’s canals seemed to be in the shape of a giant wheel, always bringing you back to where you started. We were near the hotel, and Blixa turned to me with very dark circles under his eyes in the harsh tourist-light of the city centre.

>>Can I come to bed with you tonight?<< he blurted out, then quickly corrected himself. >>Not for a fuck. Just to sleep.<<

>>You can’t<< I said, feeling something almost like regret. Had we been alone, I might well have taken him to bed and just held him tight, to try and soothe that yearning, that shone all over his face as sharp as pain. >>I’m already sharing a bed with Gudrun and Manon.<<

>>Can I sleep on the floor?<< he shot back. >>I can’t face those bedbugs. The mattress was crawling.<<

After two straight days of heavy drug use and no sleep, I wasn’t entirely sure that the bedbugs were real or hallucinated, but he looked so pitiful, I decided to kick the decision down the road. >>That’s up to Gudrun and Bettina, really. They paid for the room.<<

>>Gudrun will be fine with it. She is my best friend, after all<< he assured me, and breezed towards the hotel, pulling me in his path.

Gudrun rolled her eyes, and said well, alright. Bettina tried to overrule her with a no. Blixa said he was going to sleep in the bathtub, then, at which point Manon suggested we vote on it. In the end, it was 4 to 2 to let him stay, and Blixa curled up in a loveseat, pulling his rubber coat up over his chin. Of course, with all the speed still coursing through his system, he didn’t sleep a wink. But at least he
was safe from bedbugs, and imaginary Australians, and other terrors.

The show the next day was an absolutely roaring success. Malaria! played an outright barn-stormer of a set, as Manc Mark did his best to show me how to operate the mixing board. Much of the festival, including the New Buildings’ set, was filmed and broadcast on live television. Now, if Blixa came alive in front of an audience, in front of a television camera, he became almost electric. That was something he had learned, from his friends with the Super-8 cameras: how to project his personality into a motion camera. Even burned out and sleep deprived, his eyes looking hollowed out and sunken in, his skin wrecked from the amphetamine abuse, without so much as a piece of fruit passing between his lips for days, he was still the most photogenic human being that ever turned their cheekbones to a camera. Even I, who had seen him perform dozens of times and grown used to his beauty and his charisma, gasped when I saw how he translated to the small screen. He didn’t just look angelic as the industrial howl of the music raged around him; he genuinely resembled an Orthodox icon of a Christ.

And none of us knew it at the time, but in a hotel room on the other side of the Netherlands, someone else was watching Blixa on television, and developing his own intense case of mentionitis about the austere ly beautiful German.

But on that night, none of us cared. Malaria!, who had left half the Netherlands in love with them, and the other half wanting to join their pirate-girl-gang, wanted to burn off their nervous energy by dancing. And dance we did, down on the floor of a huge warehouse club, Blixa throwing one arm around my shoulder and the other around Gudrun’s, and screaming that we should dance like morons. Amsterdam didn’t quite know what to make of our moron-dance, and we were quickly thrown out. Not one to be phased by a little wrinkle like that, Blixa suggested that we all adjourn back to the New Buildings’ hotel for a proper party. We stopped along the way, bought a couple of bottles of vodka, and some orange juice for mixer, then six girls, plus Blixa, walked into the New Buildings’ hotel room to find the entire band stark bollock naked.

Andrew and Mufti were both jamming, Mufti on a tiny toy Casio keyboard and Andrew on an assortment of metal lids of the type that typically covered room service dishes, the pair of them bashing out an assortment of German punk classics like Paul ist Tot and Wir Sind Bereit.

On the other side of the room, Alex, who had been up for perhaps even longer than Blixa, was sitting in a corner, rocking back and forth, and engaging in a deep and meaningful dialogue with a small electric metronome. >>Tick tock<< went the metronome, then Alex would repeat >>Tick tock, tock tick<< and collapse into strangled teenage laughter.

Neither Gudrun nor Bettina so much as blinked, as they were long used to the boys’ unpredictability, and set about finding glasses in which to mix their drinks, chummily calling out to the lads to see who wanted to do shots. But Susanne, who was still rather new, and perhaps finding it all a bit much, went to lock herself in the toilet, only to find Mark, also completely naked, jumping up and down in a bathtub full of their clothes, as if he were treading grapes for wine.

>>What on earth are you doing?>> she demanded, and Mark continued stamping as he enlightened her.

>>Bedbugs<< he explained, ever so reasonably. >>The squat where we were staying was absolutely riddled with bedbugs. We didn’t want to bring our little friends into this nice, clean hotel here, so we’ve all stripped off and I’m soaking our clothes in disinfectant, just to make sure.<<

"Wir sind bereit! Wir sind bereit!!!” shouted Mufti, and Andrew echoed “Bereit, bereit, bereit” in a
completely different key.

>>Tick tock tick tock<< chanted Alex.

Susanne started to slowly back away, with a slightly... concerned look on her face. >>Don’t worry<< Mark assured her, jumping up and down in the tub, his genitals flapping. >>They’re all dead! Man has triumphed over insect. There are no more of the buggers left alive – I mean, it took a while to catch the ones hiding in Andi’s chest hair, but they’re all dead now! Dead, dead, dead!<<

>>Death is a scandal!<< echoed Andrew, and he and Mufti swung into a joyful cover of one of the Deadly Doris’s most catchy songs. “Der Tod ist ein Scandal! Der Tod ist ein Scandal!”

>>Carter, do you want to go back to our room and crash, maybe?<< Susanne asked a little nervously, as I dug in my jumpsuit for the keys, but found instead the remainder of my block of hash, which would need to be smoked before we attempted to cross the border.

>>No way<< I laughed, looking over at Blixa, who was similarly stripping off and joining in the impromptu chorus, dismantling a metal lamp-stand for his instrument of choice. >>I wouldn’t miss this for the world.<<

Mark emerged from the bathroom, and, upon seeing the half-dozen assembled women sitting on the edge of the bed drinking, suddenly had an attack of modesty, and stripped a sheet from one of the beds, tying it around himself like a toga. >>How do I look?<< he asked, tugging it into place.

>>Beautiful<< said Bettina, fashioning a sort of crown out of a plastic flower arrangement and handing it to him. >>Hail, Caesar, king of the Dandies!<<

As Mark leapt onto the bed like a general surveying his troops and throwing vague supermodel poses, Blixa bashed away on the metal lamp-stand and changed the words to Wolfgang’s song slightly, chanting “Der Tod ist ein Dandy, der Tod ist ein Dandy” then started to extemporise about a tall, skinny black-haired Dandy Death, riding through the Australian outback on a horse.

I rolled my eyes and did my best to shut him up by stuffing a fat spliff into his mouth.
Mufti becomes a film star. And at the documenta 7 art festival, Blixa finds the understanding that had been lacking in the West German punk scene.

I paid for all that partying the next morning, when we had to get up early and check out of the hotel for the long drive back to Berlin. All very well for Malaria! and the New Buildings, who had finished their work, and could just sleep in the various vehicles headed back. But that was when my job as a roadie really began, as I needed to load up my van, then drive the eight hours back to West Berlin, only to be interrogated and have my van taken almost to pieces by the border guards, once they heard we were coming back from a three-day trip to Amsterdam. By the time I got back to West Berlin, I was so tired I was hallucinating bedbugs the size of VW camper vans, scuttling up the autobahn off-ramps, but we did eventually get home.

Upon our return, we discovered that the New Buildings’ and Malaria!’s performances on the telly had so impressed a Dutch video artist that he invited them to come and perform at the opening of his show at the documenta 7 exhibition in Kassel. There was no money in it, and the bands would have to find their own way there, but I volunteered my van, and it was such a prestigious event that everyone in West Berlin threw in petrol money to get them there. Salomé was showing some of his paintings at the same exhibition, so we decided to make a Berliner convoy out of it, and all go down together. Salomé, who had actually received some money from the organisation responsible for the exhibition, had decided to hire a house for the duration, and invited the whole West Berlin contingent to stay, so it was too good an opportunity to pass up.

The New Buildings’ links with the video art world seemed to be strengthening on all sides. Mufti had been introduced to a collective of experimental filmmakers working in Hamburg, by his mate Klaus, who ran the coolest record shop in Germany, and occasionally attempted to help out managing the band’s somewhat chaotic business affairs. The loose group of artists, writers and musicians wanted to create a science fiction film based on the work of William S. Burroughs, on the subject of sound as a form of mind-control, exploring such concepts as Muzak as pacifier, sonic torture, even strategically-deployed noise as incitement to riot – all the kind of ideas that seriously appealed to Mufti and the other New Buildings. But although the film-makers reportedly had a pretty decent script, and they had already conscripted Mufti and his famous friend, Christiane F to star in the film, they were still very short of funding, and looking for ways to film on the cheap.

For the exciting climax of the film, they wanted to have the protagonist of the film, conveniently called ‘FM Einheit’ (Mufti’s full stage name, though no one ever called him so), deliberately trigger a riot with the subversive power of his home-made anti-music. Now they knew that they could not provide a Hollywood style riot for the film, complete with stunt-men to simulate the violent bits, as they could not pay a cast of thousands to play malcontents or police. So someone had the bright idea of waiting for the political agitators of West Berlin to stage an actual riot, then go out and film Mufti (with the rest of the New Buildings as free extras) pretending to be the instigators of the rather more real violence.

Sure enough, in June, there was a planned state visit by the American president, Ronald Ray-gun (Manon’s ‘shoot you dead, bang, bang’ always echoed in my head, whenever I heard his name).
Massive protests were planned among the activist and anarchist communities. So Mufti got all dressed up in the costume he would wear for the film, and the various New Buildings accompanied him with portable cassette players, and they went out into the thick of the demonstration, to wait for the argy-bargy to kick off.

After a year of living in Berlin, I had learned enough about demonstrations to generally have the good sense to stay away from them. There were always a lot of hot-headed young men with big political ideas, and not a lot to lose, just itching for a ruck. But the real problem was the police, who could turn from well-mannered and orderly Germans into raging bully-boys attacking with clubs and boots, at the drop of a harmless firecracker. I didn’t really have that kind of urban sixth sense to understand the subtle changes that let others know that police were moving from just standard hassle to frothing state violence, so the whole thing terrified me.

The anarchists, on the other hand, treated the whole thing like an elaborately staged game. It was a show of force, that they could always provoke either the police or the crowd into turning the protests into combat situations. But Mufti and the film crew were counting on this, to provide a dramatic backdrop for the scenes they were shooting. Crowds gathered. The police gathered. Mufti and the other New Buildings wandered about with their cassette players, while the film crew followed them with handheld videocameras and their omnipresent super-8s.

At first, it was fairly relaxed, as far as West Berlin protests went, a lot of chanting of slogans and banging on improvised drums, a bit of stone-throwing, a bit of back and forth with the cops. And then things went absolutely mental. Abruptly, the sound of gunfire exploded across the streets. People panicked, and ran. Then there was the sound of helicopters, and people stampeded in the opposite direction, back towards the line of the police, who were still at panic stations, looking for the source of the gunshots. The sounds seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere, as the terrified protesters broke through the line of the police and chaos erupted all around.

And Mufti, like a complete muppet, ran towards the sound of the gunshots.

>>Are you totally fucking verruckt<< shouted one of the film crew, as we all tried to head for shelter.

But Mufti turned around, grinning with glee, and pointed to the tape recorder he was carrying as a prop. >>It’s not real<< he shouted back. >>Can’t you hear the slick production reverb on it? They’re sound effects! Someone is playing a tape of gunfire!<< And into the crowd he charged, the musician playing a fake movie-star sound-terrorist, off in search of real sound-terrorists.

It took the police nearly twenty minutes to realise what was going on, and start running around, confiscating tape recorders, and arresting anyone suspicious who was carrying one. But by that point, the crowd had slipped the designated protest area, and become a howling mob, overturning cars and setting things on fire. The fire department was called, but the cops turned the water cannons on the protesters, rather than on the burning cars, which only escalated the violence. Mufti’s film-maker friends got far better footage out of it than they had been expecting, and Mufti himself was pleased as punch that he managed to get a really good tape recording of the riot, all police sirens and chanting mobs and the sickening whoosh of petrol catching fire. (Alex, on the other hand, who always took things just that bit too far, had looked just a bit too convincing as a fake anarchist, and had managed to get his beloved tape recorder confiscated by the police. It took him weeks, and a small fine for disorderly conduct, to get it back.)

But the film-making gang, including Mufti, all seemed both slightly shaken, but also intensely excited, that these things that they had been writing as science fiction, were abruptly becoming real on the streets of Berlin.
The streets eventually cleared of rioters, President Ray-gun went home, and the New Buildings, puffed up on the idea that their abstract art-ideas were becoming reality, went off to documenta 7 to play for the art world where they felt they belonged.

I had no idea what this documenta festival actually was when they first started talking about it, but I had certainly heard of the artists who would be exhibiting there – everyone from Gilbert and George to Marina Abramovic, Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman, and even a special ‘action’ by Joseph Beuys. Blixa, in particular, was excited at the idea of witnessing Germany’s most exciting modern artist, who had electrified Düsseldorf with his unorthodox ideas about both his teaching methods and his praxis. I didn’t know Beuys’ art well, but I had heard his philosophy of ‘everyone is an artist’ which was quoted often by the art students in West Berlin, and I wanted to know more about this charismatic shaman of the German conceptual art world. So Blixa borrowed a book about him from the library, and sat in the passenger seat of my van, reading it to me as we drove down to Kassel, until I was soon as excited about seeing the great man as he was.

When we arrived in Kassel for the grand opening, the whole city seemed to have been transformed into a giant art exhibition. The first thing that greeted us was a monumentally sized, bright blue icepick thrust into the land by the side of the river. It completely distracted Blixa as he fussed with the map, so we drove around aimlessly for a bit, trying to find our accommodation. But once we located Salomé’s place, and dumped our bags and claimed the available beds and floor space, the groups started to squabble. Some of the more equipment-minded musicians wanted to go straight to the venue where they would be playing the following night, to see what the situation there would be regarding amplification and a PA and the like. But Gudrun, Bettina, Blixa and myself were all far more interested in the opening night of the art festival. So we split up, most of them off to this art bunker where the band would play, and the more art-minded off to the main building of the festival, where Salomé said he would do his best to get all of us in, on the explanation that we were close, personal friends of one of the star exhibiting artists.

To my surprise, the trick worked, and we were admitted (though I assuaged my guilt at not paying to get in, by purchasing a wonderful full-colour glossy catalogue, complete with little biographies of the artists). Immediately, Salomé took us proudly to see his contributions.

>>But they’re breathtaking<< I gasped, genuinely surprised that our friend, who was known as much for the pursuit of decadence and debauchery, as for his drag act and his decadent glam-punk band, Horny Beasts, had produced such unexpectedly pretty paintings, colourful canvases depicting lush water teeming with water lilies. >>You’ve caught the humid atmosphere of Monet’s garden, but with the lush sensuality of Georgia O’Keefe’s erotic flower portraits.<< It was a bit of a teasing joke, as ‘humid’ had an overtone meaning gay in West Berlin slang, but Salomé seemed delighted with the comparison, letting out a chime of laughter.

>>Oh, I do love how you flatter me, my luscious ‘lectrician<< he giggled, pretending to swoon and flutter his eyelids. >>You are invited back to all my shows.<<

But Blixa was impatient. >>Carter’s catalogue says that Beuys is giving a talk in twenty minutes. Can we go over, to make sure we get in?<<

>>Don’t worry<< sighed Salomé, with breezy assurances, but as it turned out, it was quite lucky that Blixa had made us go over so early. For the hall was already rammed to the gills, and if we’d come any later, we wouldn’t even have got in, as it was already standing room only. (I found out later that there were nearly 500 people crammed into a room that was only supposed to seat 300, and many more waiting outside, and craning to hear.) Salomé and Gudrun and Bettina, since they were short, pushed towards the front, but Blixa and I hung back, trying to find some breathing room.
Beuys was *electrifying*. He didn’t particularly look like much when he shuffled up to the front of the room. Small and kind of gnarled looking, with a weathered face, he was dressed quite simply in a fisherman’s leather vest and a very working class felt hat jammed down tight over his ears. But his eyes seemed to twinkle in his face, with a bright intelligence, and when he spoke, he was spellbinding.

Words poured out of him in great torrents of meaning, as he accompanied his lecture by scrawling phrases and arrows and strange diagrams all over the chalkboards that surrounded him. None of it was difficult or arcane, but the connections he drew were often so surprising and thought-provoking as to be revelatory. And as he leapt from subject to subject, he seemed to fire everyone with that electric enthusiasm. Art was no game to him, no parlour trick or intellectual pastime; it was something real and raw and urgent and important. >>Everyone’s an artist<< he kept insisting, as I slowly realised the true meaning of what he was saying. He didn’t mean that just anyone could draw or paint or sculpt. Because Capital-A Art wasn’t a daub, or a sculpture, or an object at all, it was a way of looking at, and conceiving the world, and he insisted, most strenuously, that every human being on the planet had the right to participate in that collective world-building project. Society itself, he said, was a ‘social sculpture’, and everyone had a role in sculpting it.

Blixa was mesmerised. I could feel him by my side, not fidgeting or twisting about or causing trouble, as he did when he was bored, but completely rigid with attention, his whole body straining to catch more of the work being enacted before us. There was no room to sit down, so he rested his sharp chin on my shoulder, and breathed into my ear. >>This is incredible. He has the same attitude towards art, that we have towards music. This is what I keep trying to say – everything is music. Music is not a note or a melody or a beat. It is a way of organising sound. I’m so excited his ideas are so similar... oh, I should have been a painter.<<

I laughed and put my arm around his waist, leaning into his side. >>There’s still time<< I whispered back. >>You can be a painter if you like.<<

>>Nah<< he shrugged and squeezed me back gently. >>I’ll leave that to you. I want to use these ideas to transform music.<<

When Beuys finished speaking, after having announced his grand new project, a long-running action involving planting 7,000 oak trees across Germany, I expected him to open the floor up to questions, but he did something much more odd and much more intimate. Instead of taking questions and answering them publicly, he invited everyone in the audience to come up to him and address him individually, have a proper dialogue, rather than the shouting matches that Q&As tended to become. I would desperately have loved to go and get in the queue of people waiting to speak with the great man, and in fact Bettina and Gudrun wandered off to try to find the end of the queue. But after ten, fifteen minutes, it became quickly apparent that there was no way that he could possibly speak to everyone who wished to speak with him.

Salomé had already found some other art-world friends, and was having a good gossip about whose paintings had sold for *how much*, so Blixa and I exchanged glances, then admitted our defeat. >>Shall we go and look at these paintings?<< he suggested.

I nodded, and we wandered off into the halls. Some of the artists I recognised instantly; others were complete unknowns. Some of the images moved me immediately; others of them seemed more arcane and impenetrable, but I found myself challenged and intrigued by them all. Blixa, on the other hand, was as highly opinionated about the paintings as he was about everything else in his life.

>>95% of contemporary art is complete shit<< he asserted, with a curt little nod.

>>Isn’t that exactly the same thing you say about music?<< I retorted, gearing up for a good
argument with him, of the sort that could keep us entertained for hours, because, to be fair, I knew a lot more about painting than I knew about the kind of music he listened to, and I thought I actually stood a chance of winning this argument.

>>Well, it’s true about music. But the absolute crap-ness of most music makes us sound good by comparison. You must make it the same for you, with art. To be the 5% of good art that is made to look good in comparison with this.<<

I couldn’t help but laugh at the sheer nerve of him. His self-confidence could come blisteringly close to arrogance at times, but it was charming the way he was always so unrelentingly supportive of his friends. >>Is that a vote of confidence, Herr Bargeld? Do you think I have what it takes to be showing at documenta 8, in five years’ time?<<

>>Well, I know you’re not crap, and you know you’re not crap, so...<< proclaimed Blixa, but abruptly our progress was blocked, as we came to an opening through to another gallery, hung with a heavy curtain that obscured what was in the space beyond it. >>Hello, what’s in here?<<

>>Orgiastic Mystery Theatre<< I read, from the large placard on the wall.

>>Orgies, eh? I am for orgies.<< Blixa’s eyes flashed as he shot me a grin. >>Warning: please be advised that this exhibit contains art of a graphic nature which might offend those of a more sensitive disposition. Visitors must enter only at their own risk.<< Blixa’s grin widened. >>Ah! This sounds far more my case. Shall we go in?<< He held back the curtain with a little mock bow, and we both stepped through.

Inside, there was a long, narrow gallery, which was lined on one set of walls with large, paint-splattered canvases covered in splotches of a kind of rusty dark brown-red. >>Looks like a used maxi-pad; no wonder the men can’t handle it<< I quipped, but Blixa had been drawn to the displays of photos and video which dotted the other side of the room.

>>Relics<< he read aloud. >>These items on display are but relics, a reminder of the intensity which occurs during the theatre, but are no substitute for it.<<

>>Holy relics<< I mused, going over and looking closely at the bloodied canvases. Whatever the stuff was that was clotted and clumped on the fabric, it looked terribly real, bits of flesh and hair stuck in repeating patterns, as if it had been wrapped a number of times around a corpse. >>It reminds me oddly of photos of the Shroud of Turin.<<

But Blixa was mesmerised by the longer texts, and the video playing on a loop on a small television. >>Carter<< he announced breathlessly. >>These are relics – they are residues, artefacts of the Actions – the rituals themselves – that this artist undertakes in performance. Listen to this, what the newspapers had to say... The concept of intensity is key to understanding the Actions themselves. The Actions push performers towards the extremes of feeling – horror, ecstasy, joy – by embracing the extremes of experience: birth, orgasm, death. The Actions are striking for their use of animal carcasses, entrails, and a large volume of blood as materials, calling to mind pagan rituals, cult sacrifice and crucifixion. The point is to push the participants – and there is little boundary between performers and audience in Nitsch’s work – to intense experiences of total abandon, transcending the senses to attain the rush of being wholly alive. Wow, does that sound like anything to you?<<

I moved over towards him, peering over his shoulder at a video of a group of performers dragging an animal corpse around the courtyard of a castle. >>It sounds like a New Buildings gig where something has gone horribly wrong. Like that gig where Andi nearly chopped his leg off, and was dripping blood all over the place, and the audience thought it was all part of the act.<<
Well, yes, perhaps a little bit. He smiled slyly. But I was thinking more of Antonin Artaud. This is like the Theatre of Cruelty pushed to its most logical extreme. Taken out of the theatre, and out into life, as an intensely alive pagan ritual.

I peered at the photos that had entranced Blixa so much, depicting extreme scenes of bloodletting and animal sacrifice. It’s quite gory. It seems a bit of a rotten deal for the animals.

Blixa rounded on me, his eyes flashing. You eat meat, do you not? What on earth do you imagine happens in an abattoir?

Looking at the photos again, I blinked, wondering if I should become a vegetarian. I never really thought about it.

That’s the point! declared Blixa, really quite animated. You are so alienated from where your food even comes from, to the point where you are completely alienated from your senses. To eat meat, without understanding it comes from an animal, with guts and blood, is to eat food without really tasting it. These images are so... But oh! It is not enough, just to see the relics. I would love to experience the real thing.

But you don’t even eat meat I pointed out.

It’s not about the meat persisted Blixa. It’s about the rush, the experience, to live in that state of total awareness, even for a few moments. This man – Nitsch – he compares it to a form of drunkenness. To be so deep into the ecstasy of the moment that the performance becomes more heightened than reality itself. Oh! How can we attain that kind of intensity in a musical performance? Attain that state of heightened truly-aliiveness, both performer and audience. This is what I want to be doing, Carter, with my music. How to incorporate this?

I suddenly understood what he was talking about, why the fire had suddenly lit up in his eyes. To make your audience not mere witnesses, but part of the orgiastic rush of the performance. I mean, isn’t that what you do, when you make your performances so dangerous? The sparks that leap out into the audience, the uncontrollable sheet metal that goes cascading off the stage?

Blixa already seemed in a kind of ecstatic trance, moving from photograph to photograph, peering into them as if willing himself into the action they portrayed. We must find a way to make it more dangerous, then. More intense, more immersive. No more of playing these stupid punk clubs for egotistical idiots who just stare at you, expecting to be entertained. I do not want to merely entertain. I want to make musical performances that are as total as this. He stopped before an image of a blood-spattered, half-naked man tied to a cross made of the cross-section of a butchered cow. I want the audience to feel like this. If we have to set the stage on fire to get the audience to catch alight, then we set the stage on fire. I will speak to Mufti about how to do this. He has to see this. Tomorrow, I will bring him here and show him. Mufti will understand, he is theatrical, he has the showman’s gift.

We rushed from image to image, bourn up on Blixa’s enthusiasm. To see art with him was to experience a whole new kind of looking, the way he carried me along with his zeal like a river in flood. To see even familiar art through his eyes was to see things afresh; to see new art through his eyes was exhilarating. He seemed to be changing, mutating, twisting the way that I looked at art in exactly the same way that Beuys had. To see pictures not just for whether they were pretty or not, but for the worlds they created or rendered possible.

As we strolled the rest of the galleries, drinking in the art with our senses, it seemed as if just the thought of this Orgiastic Mystery Theatre had widened up our eyes and our ears to an almost orgiastic openness. Blixa’s thoughts and comments and comparisons kept returning to the Nitsch...
work again and again, even more than the Beuys lecture which had fired him up so, as if he could not get this thing he had witnessed out of his mind.

We carried on exploring, and somehow found a party where dinner-jacketed staff were serving finger sandwiches and wine to assembled artists and collectors, and made ourselves at home, gorging on the food and slurping up the wine. Although Blixa was wearing his threadbare button-down black shirt, and I was in a short-sleeved black turtleneck, both of which skirted the limits of acceptability for what artists could get away with wearing to such a formal party, Blixa just looked too charismatic and interesting to be anything other than an artist, so no one even challenged him, and I sailed through the event on his arm. He drank too much, and talked a lot of bollocks to serious curators of the art world, spitting back out the kinds of jargon we had only just read on the placards in the exhibition. But Blixa was just so beautiful and so energetic and so alive that he charmed everyone in the room. I’m quite sure that half a dozen collectors went home thinking they must get a ‘Blixa’ piece for their gallery.

By the time we crept back to Salomé’s rented townhouse, it was quite late indeed. Blixa was now quite drunk, and my head was still spinning from the heady atmosphere of the art party, but we were both ready for bed. Unfortunately, there was already a body in the bed that I had claimed as my own, which was always the problem with these shared accommodations. Considering how long a drive I’d put in, I pouted and refused to sleep on the floor.

>>Never mind<< said Blixa. >>Come and sleep with me. You can talk to me about that Nitsch exhibition, I’m still just burning up with curiosity about the whole thing.<<

>>You mean, you can talk, and I can listen while I fall asleep<< I muttered, grumbling as I located the rucksack that I had left on the bed as a mark of ownership, but which had been unhelpfully removed to the top of a dresser.

>>Yes, something like that<< he laughed and led me upstairs to a little cot in a garret room, which, fortunately, was still unoccupied, as Blixa had spread his smelly rubber coat over the top of it, and no one ever wanted to touch that.

Both of us stripped off our clothes without thinking, and climbed into bed, wrestling and nudging and elbowing one another to get comfortable, until Blixa just suggested we lie spoon style on the narrow mattress, and he wrapped his enormously long arms around me to keep me from falling out. It was strange how, with any other man, I would never have allowed it, fearing the sexual overtones, but I trusted Blixa so implicitly I felt completely safe with him. We must have whispered back and forth urgently to one another for nearly an hour, about all the paintings and exhibits and photos we had seen, before both of us wore each other out with our chatter, and fell into a deep sleep.

When I woke, it was already late, as the sun seemed quite high in the sky, but Blixa was still fast asleep, his arms wrapped tightly around me, and one of his legs thrown across mine for good measure. It was nice, actually, warm and reassuring, like a fleshy duvet, and I thought back to the dream I’d just been having, the pair of us wandering through the entrails of some enormous animal, observing such features as the spleen, and the ribcage, and the tiny areolae of the lungs with the same excited interest as we’d examined the paintings the night before. I laughed, and made a mental note to tell Blixa, knowing how delighted he was at his occasional guest appearances in other people’s dreams. Picking up his wrist, I peered at his watch. It had just gone eleven, and I did need to wake him, as in point of fact, I needed the loo, so I nudged him carefully until he woke.

>>No<< he muttered sleepily into my shoulderblade, wrapping his arms even tighter about me.

>>I’m not ready to wake up now, you are cruel to wake me<<

>>I need the loo<< I whispered to him gently but insistently, and finally, he grumbled and released
It took me some time to find the loo, which turned out to be downstairs, and I was slightly embarrassed, padding through the kitchen in my underpants and vest, to find Salomé and his boyfriend Rainer eating breakfast and lingering over the newspapers.

>>My god, Carter, you have breasts<< exclaimed Salomé by way of greeting.

>>Of course I have breasts<< I muttered as I headed into the toilet.

>>I hate to say it, but they’re better than yours<< I could hear Rainer laugh through the thin wood of the toilet door.

>>Don’t be beastly<< admonished Salomé.

>>Well, they definitely slept together<< observed Rainer, lowering his voice, though he was still loud enough to be heard next door. >>Do you think they did it?<<

>>Don’t be perverse. Their whole thing is that they don’t do it.<<

>>I bet they did<< giggled Rainer. >>Which one do you think was the top, and which was the bottom, or did they...<< There was a brief pause. >>How do lesbians fuck, anyway?<<

>>I bet they didn’t. And knowing Blixa, always six months ahead of the fashion, you just know, next year it’ll be all the rage, people not having sex as the most up-to-the-minute form of being debauched<< countered Salomé.

>>Do you really think everything is all about being debauched, though<< asked Rainer.

>>Of course! And it’s the only thing left that one can do, in West Berlin, to be really degenerate and deviant, is to have a great love affair, but not have sex. I think it’s quite romantic, really<< sighed Salomé.

>>It is quite sweet, I suppose<< agreed Rainer as I washed my hands and face, then hung back behind the bathroom door, waiting to see what else they would say. To be honest, I was curious, more than offended. >>Did you see them whispering and canoodling, all through the Beuys lecture? Those two are so obviously in love, even if it’s only in a platonic way.<<

>>But that’s the thing about being like us<< sighed Salomé, turning philosophical. >>When you’re queer, literally everything you do is seen as being somehow debauched and degenerate, no matter what you do. So to fall in love – even that becomes somehow politicised, whether you fuck or not.<<

>>Is it queer, though, that’s the interesting question<< countered Rainer.

>>Of course they are.<<

>>Well, they are. So no, I’m not disputing she’s a dyke, and Blixa’s... whatever Blixa is, really. Blixa’s just... everything-o-sexual, isn’t he. But aren’t they, after all, just a woman and a man, no?<<

>>Are they, though?<< mused Salomé.

>>Well, you and I don’t stop being gay, when you’re in drag, do we<<

>>And I don’t think they stop being gay when they’re together.<<
When? I thought you said their whole thing was that they didn’t. Both of them laughed. But it all comes down to Foucault, doesn’t it. Are people homosexual, or are there just homosexual acts?

Oh, please, darling, it is too early in the morning for Foucault said Salomé and I could almost hear his eyeroll.

I finally opened the door, and coughed loudly, wondering if I should let them know that I had heard every word they had said, but Salomé was suddenly all smiles and sunshine, beaming at me as if the pair of them hadn’t just been gossiping themselves rotten about me.

There’s coffee in the pot, if you want it, darling he called out to me.

Is there rice milk?

Of course there’s rice milk. We wouldn’t dare have Blixa round if there wasn’t. Salomé and Rainer exchanged knowing glances.

Better get an extra-large mug for Blixa. Got to keep his strength up for the whole fashionable not-having-sex technique I couldn’t help but tease, bumping him gently with my hip as I passed.

Ooh, you bitch!! howled Salomé, but then started to cackle, reaching out and putting his arm around my hips as he pulled me back towards him and looked up at me with a quite loveable mother-hen expression. You know we’re only teasing, because we love you, dear, and Blixa can be such a little slut. Just watching out for you, my darling, one drag artiste looking out for another.

Rainer pretended to look shocked as I draped my arm around Salomé’s shoulders and gave him a little hug. You can’t call actual women bitches, Salomé, dear. It’s misogynist.

Carter’s no more an ‘actual woman’ than I am guffawed Salomé, fanning himself with the colour supplement like a dowager empress.

Ooh! That’s not what you said last night I tittered, leaving a kiss on the top of Salomé’s bald head as I went to pick up the coffee mugs. He pretended to slap me on the arse as I passed, and I yelped, but it was all so playful I didn’t feel angry at all about the gossip. It was strange, but with Salomé and Rainer, I never got the feeling that it was actually malicious, the way they so casually gossiped about Blixa and I, but rather the kind of bond-building chit-chat that knit social groups closer together. In their strange way, I knew they only gossiped about us because they considered us family. Just like when Salomé implied I wasn’t an ‘actual’ woman, it felt nice, like some kind of validation that he knew and understood what I really was, rather than an insult. I felt comfortable with them, like I could relax into who I really was around them, the same way I trusted Blixa to sleep in a bed with me.

I was smiling as I made my way back up to the attic, bearing two cups of coffee. Move over I told Blixa, as I handed one cup to him, and placed the other on the floor by the mattress.

Come back to bed he moaned, stretching himself out along the wall to make a place for me.

It’s cold without you.

You do know Salomé and Rainer set us up last night. They were taking bets this morning, on whether we’d screwed or not I said as I squished in beside him.

Blixa paused to swallow some coffee as he considered that. Do you want to screw? he offered, in all apparent earnestness, sitting up, with a thoughtful, slightly hopeful expression on his face, as if he were offering me the last slice of pizza out of consideration.
I thought about that, and for a moment, there was a curl of the old lust somewhere around my groin. Blixa looked so boyishly beautiful in the morning light, and as I remembered his energy, his excitement the previous night, I found myself wondering just how enthusiastic he might be when he fucked. But as the silence grew heavy between us, and his lips peeled back from his teeth in a wolfish grin as he realised I was genuinely thinking it over, I caught a glimpse of his teeth, covered in plaque, and stained yellowish-brown from the coffee. The idea of kissing those teeth turned my stomach and brought me back to earth with a jolt.

>>Nah<< I said quickly. >>Not really.<<

Shrugging gently, he lay back on his elbows and seemed to accept the answer. But then his face changed, grew abruptly serious. >>I sleep through the night when you’re here, you know<< he said quietly. >>I never sleep through the night. I’m a chronic insomniac.<<

>>I can hardly bottle myself, for you to use as a sleep aid<< I quipped, sipping my coffee.

>>Be serious. I’m trying to tell you something important<< said Blixa, with a slightly wounded tone.

>>You know what’s important<< I told him, turning around and laying my head against the pale expanse of his skin, feeling the warmth of his chest, and hearing the reassuring steady thud of his heart behind his ribcage. >>Waking up Mufti and Andi, and taking them to see that Nitsch exhibition. If you show them that, they will figure out a way to make it happen with your music.<<

>>Yes!<< exclaimed Blixa, and suddenly he was leaping out of bed, sending the bedclothes flying and nearly spilling my coffee, as he cast about the room for his clothes. Unable to find his own shirt, he picked up the black turtleneck I had been wearing the night before, even though it was almost absurdly too small for him, and put that on. >>The ecstatic ritual. The orgiastic mystery play! Mufti and Andi need to see that! They will understand. You are completely right. Where is my other boot?<<

I drove the whole band over in the van, and this time I hung back watching, as the pack of them raced from photo to photo, laughing and giggling as Blixa explained the radical ideas behind the pictures, and how he wanted to incorporate them into the band’s performance. By soundcheck, they were already quite seriously discussing it all. By the time of the concert, it was clear that they were attempting to put the theory into practice, sharpening the immersive experience of their performance into a transcendent ritual.

The art crowd loved the New Buildings’ daring. And they loved Malaria!, too, these five elegant, serious young women making their elegant, serious noise. Manc Mark sat me down at the soundboard and showed me how to do the live mixing, until I understood the way that guitar, bass, synth and vocals all wove together into their beguiling music. It was amazing to me that something which sounded so simple, could be so complicated to put together from a technical standpoint, but I was really starting to enjoy the whole process of mixing, like I was playing the whole band, using the soundboard.

The whole gig was a smashing success, and Blixa was in a superb mood at the audience response. The art world seemed, especially in the light of some of the more conceptual performance art pieces we had witnessed at the main exhibition, prepared to grasp what they were trying to do as a total performance, in the way that the small-minded punk scenes of West Germany did not. And to my surprise, people who had been at the art party the night before, and recognised him, actually came up to Blixa and shook his hand – not, as I worried, to castigate him for crashing the party – but to congratulate him on the daring conceptual purity of the ‘performance art’ they had just witnessed.

In the van home, the next afternoon, the whole band as a group made a pact that they were not going
to tour West Germany as a rock group again. There was no point, declared Blixa. Those stupid, trendy, narrow-minded West German punks simply didn’t understand – or didn’t want to understand – what they were trying to do, in a way that the more intellectual, arty, internationally minded crowds in Berlin and Amsterdam instinctively did. This performance in the unusual and alternative space of a modern art festival seemed to prove to them that there was an audience for what they did, but they would only find it at unconventional gigs, or in an international setting. So after one single tour of West Germany, the band decided that they were never going to tour their home country ever again. If West Germany could not be bothered with them, then they would not be bothered with West Germany.
Lydia

Chapter Summary

Carter switches careers, from electrical engineer to sound engineer, as Manc Mark gets them a new job in a recording studio. But as luck would have it, the first client is the American Goth, and guess who she has brought with her as her backing group? West Berlin is suddenly overrun with Australians.

Almost immediately, the New Buildings went back to Amsterdam to play another gig with Malaria!, as it was one of the places where both bands were completely accepted and widely beloved. I did not go to this one, as unfortunately, I had a job interview to get through. Manc Mark’s friend with the recording studio, Thomas, was intrigued by the CV I had hastily knocked-together on Bettina’s typewriter, and asked me to stop by for a chat. The more I investigated the situation, the more I realised how incestuous West Berlin was. Manc Mark, it turned out, used to be a freelance sound engineer there, working the odd session to pick up a bit of cash. But he had quit to look after Malaria! full-time, and in fact was going with them to London that summer, where they would begin work on their debut album. So Manc Mark was trying to stay in Thomas’ good books, by helping him out of a squeeze he had created, while helping me into his old role.

It was one of the weirdest interviews I ever had in my life.

The owner, Thomas, who also doubled as the producer and chief engineer on most of the sessions, was a bit of a 70s stereotype, big sideburns, amber-tinted glasses, tall and skinny with a bit of a belly and a truck driver’s belt buckle. >>So what kind of music are you into?>> he started out with.

>>Mostly, I just listen to my friends’ bands. I have to be honest with you, I’m not really much a music... fanatic?>> I confessed, feeling my chances of getting the job going down the drain.

>>So you don’t have a specific taste in music, or ideas about how good bands should sound?>>

I thought about Blixa, and those conversations we had recently had, where he expounded for hours on his very specific ideas about Good Music and Bad Music and how 95% of the music in the world fit into the latter category, though I could never tell what he was hearing that divided them. >>Not really, no. I try to stay open-minded. Is that a problem?>>

>>Not at all! It’s good!<< Thomas cracked a smile for the first time. >>Great, in fact. Open-minded is the foremost quality I need in an engineer. The moment you think you can do the musicians’ job better than they can... you’re done.<< I shifted uncomfortably in the chair, and tried to smile. >>So you’ve got qualifications as an electrician.<<

>>Yes, sir. And I’ve got a couple of years’ experience in the field, too. I’m not fresh out of school or anything.<<

>>We use a lot of fairly vintage kit around here; it requires a lot of attention to keep it going. Are you OK with getting your hands dirty, and using unorthodox methods, fixing things we can’t get a replacement of?>>

I risked a wry smile. >>I’ve done a lot of work around the squat scene in West Berlin. There’s not a
lot of money, and not a lot of parts. Make do and mend is a philosophy I’ve really come to admire.

Alright. Technical test. Change the plug on this he said, pushing a small electric light, and a spare plug across the desk.

Excuse me? I stuttered.

If you’ve got qualifications, this should not be hard.

I need my equipment... a screwdriver to start with, maybe a soldering iron...

Thomas gestured off behind me, and I saw some gear scattered across a workbench. I picked up the lamp and the plug, and went over. But as I unscrewed the old plug and put in the new one, I saw that the fuse was completely inappropriate for the wattage of the lamp. Oh, you do not want to put that in here. Let me see if you’ve got anything else... I dug through the box of equipment until I found the right type. That should work better. I replaced the fuse, changed the plug, then peered at the lightbulb. Is this burned out? I asked. Is it OK if I try it?

He made an expansive gesture as he lit a cigarette.

I plugged it in. The bulb was blown. I replaced the bulb, but it still wouldn’t turn on. So I turned it upside down, and realised that one of the wires had come loose, and soldered it back into place.

Again, I plugged in the lamp, flicked the switch, and the light came on. Fixed I said, and sat down.

I like your thoroughness. You’re hired. You can start next week. But I gotta warn you. It’s piecework around here. When I got a band in, you’ll be paid by the day. We start around noon, a little earlier if there’s a load-in, and go through until they stop. But if I don’t have a booking, there’s no work. I do my best to keep us in bookings, as it’s no good for me to have the studio sitting empty. But there is always unavoidable down time. Understand?

I stared at him, thinking how amazing it would be, to have a job I would never expect to have to turn up to, before noon. Completely. So long as I’m allowed to pick up other jobs in the down time, do repair work, that kind of thing.

You’re a contractor, you do what you like. he shrugged, then added. And, if you’re any good at music instrument repair work, which Herr Reeder said you were, we can shoot a lot of work your way. For a small referral fee, of course. But you can set up your toolbench in the cellar downstairs, if you like. Like your own office.

That sounds great! I grinned, and stood up to offer him my handshake, but then he seemed to remember something.

Wait, Carter. Can you speak English?

“Yes, I can speak English fluently,” I told him.

No idea what you just said, I don’t speak a word. But we got a really famous and important American artist coming in, in a few weeks. Huge on the New York scene, so this is kind of a big deal that she’s coming here, and not to Hansa. Apparently, it’s all the rage to record in West Berlin now that Bowie made it cool. But I just want to make sure that someone around here can understand what the fuck she’s saying when she gets here.

That’s not a problem. I was expecting to sign some papers, but it was all very casual. There was a chart on the wall that indicated when the studio was in use, block-booked for days or for
weeks. Thomas had another, more experienced assistant sound engineer, named Jürgen, who came in on some days, but he wanted to make sure there was always a staff member on site every time there was a band in. I gave him the phone number of my Great-Aunt’s apartment, and told him if I wasn’t there, they could always leave a message for me at Iron-Grey.

It was, in many ways, the perfect job. The hours were amazing, as I could roll out of bed at my own convenience, and slouch in just before noon, while sessions never went much past 10, or midnight at the very latest, leaving me free to go out on the town afterwards. Days off were my own business, as the studio was booked in slots. Each block-booking could be grabbed or turned down depending on my schedule, though if I turned down too many, Thomas warned me that I would start being passed over for the good bookings.

I was already vaguely familiar with a soundboard from Manc Mark showing me what was going on during Malaria!’s live sets, though Thomas’s had 16 channels, instead of the 8 they used at most clubs. I laid cables, I checked mics, I fixed broken electrics – and I never had any idea how much electrical gear there was in a studio that could go wrong, before I started working there. Thomas warned me never to use channel 8 on the mixing desk unless I could possibly avoid it as the fader stuck, and channel 7 should never be used for vocals, as there was a buzz. So I stayed late one night, and took the board to pieces, only to discover that a huge lump of very sticky resin and ash had fallen down and lodged among the wires, as if someone had accidentally tipped out a bowl of hash while recording. I laughed and laughed and laughed, but in the morning, I had cleaned it out and the buzz was gone, and channel 8’s fader went up and down perfectly. (Of course I smoked the lump of hash with Blixa. What do you think, I was going to waste perfectly good hash?)

And working in a studio was great for my local reputation, as many of the day-booking clients were local bands who wanted to bash out a demo, or record a single. It helped immensely, that many of them already knew me, at least by sight, and they tended to trust me. And after two or three weeks of learning the ropes, under Thomas or Jürgen’s patient tutelage, I could not believe that I had spent so much time digging around in attics and climbing down into basements, when working in a studio was such a cushy job. To start up the repair business, I set up my own little office in the cellar, and spent my mornings and lunchtimes relaxing and poking at broken synthesisers or amplifiers with my soldering iron. It turned out I had a real knack for electronics; there wasn’t much I couldn’t fix. And sound engineering wasn’t hard, not compared to electrical engineering. Some of the artists came in with egos, and I slowly came to understand why Thomas had questioned me so carefully on whether I had musical taste to get in the way. But I always figured, if you were straight with people, they would be straight with you.

A few weeks into my new job, the renowned American performance artist from New York City who had block-booked the studio turned up. To my surprise, it was Lydia, the Goth Chick we had met in Amsterdam. She told me she had rented out an entire house in Kreuzberg, and had the walls covered in cheap black velvet, then decked it out in horror movie posters and weird, gory Catholic tat, with votive candles and rosaries and Virgin Marys everywhere.

And she had almost all of the Australians we’d met in Amsterdam in tow as her support band. Just as half of West Berlin had decamped to London with Malaria! as they recorded their album, West Berlin was overflowing with Australians, as if we had done some en masse cultural exchange. Australians hanging about the studio. Australians living at The Skin’s house and ‘house-sitting’ Manc Mark’s apartment in his absence. Australians turning up at the Risk bar, asking for Blixa, who had stupidly told them that they could drink for free when he was working. Because Jesus Christ, were this lot determined to live up to the stereotype, and they drank like a horde of thirsty camels, gorging down the cheap Russian vodka that Blixa habitually served in half-pint glasses. And soon, all of the drug dealers around Berlin were hanging about outside our studio, as their thirst for drink seemed to be matched only by their thirst for illegal substances.
In an effort to keep his studio from getting wrecked, Thomas tried to confine them to hash and a bit of beer, while they were supposed to be working. But it soon became quite obvious that Nick, who would usually appear last, late in the day, as the shadows were lengthening into early evening, was in point of fact a high-functioning junkie. One of his bandmates made a joke about his heroin use, which turned out not to be a joke at all, and once it was pointed out, I couldn’t stop noticing how his habit ruled his working life. He had a rhythm whereby he would squirrel himself away to consume his smack in private, and disappear from the world for up to an hour or so. Then he would suddenly snap to, and reappear all smiles and charm, and there would be a fairly long stretch where he could maintain an ordinary working attitude for a limited period of time, before eventually starting to fray at the edges, and finally deteriorating to the point where he needed to fix again. And then the cycle would start over again. It was maddening, and did not always conform to the standard 10 hour cycle of the studio.

But it was a massive eye-opener to me, the amount of drugs that this lot went through, not necessarily at the sessions themselves, but definitely around the studio, and at the long, all-night party-salon-discussions that Lydia liked to host at her place after work, to which I soon found myself invited, along with the band. To be honest, I had not had that much experience around hard drugs before I had come to West Berlin, and even for the first year, my opinions of addicts and what they were and weren’t capable had been formed mostly by Jana, and Jana, to be honest, with her tarot cards and her kooky premonitions, had hardly struck me as an intellectual. My impression of druggies was the one formed by what I read in the press: not very bright at all. So this was the first time I had come up against a different stereotype, that of the opium-inspired poet, who aspired to be Baudelaire or William S. Burroughs or Coleridge conjuring up visions of Kubla Khan. People who used heroin not to get out of it, but to stay up all night getting into it, winding through long, philosophical and artistic discussions about the nature of Good and Evil.

For Nick, confirming my suspicions of him as a boarding school toff, fancied himself a bit of an intellectual. He didn’t actually go wild when he was on smack. (Though alcohol, that was another story. Alcohol had... unpredictable effects on Nick.) Smack seemed to actually blunt the wildness in him, so that he calmed down and became thoughtful, even reasonable, during that shadowy window of time when he got the balance of chemicals right.

We sat around in a dreamy, poetic half-daze, in the incense and smoke-filled bordello that Lydia turned the front room of her house into. I stuck to hash, which seemed safest, but I tried not to be judgemental that the others didn’t. I had never actually seen people taking smack before, but to my surprise they didn’t inject it, they heated it on a little contraption of tin foil and inhaled the fumes, a process that Nick, somewhat pretentiously, referred to as ‘chasing the dragon’.

But I shook my head when it was offered to me (being non-judgemental only went so far) and instead found myself concentrating on a strange Catholic icon that Lydia had pinned to the wall, and seemed to have customised with little cut-out bits of pornography so that the Virgin Mary seemed to be floating on a nimbus of pale pink pussy.

“Are you Catholic?” I blurted out, then abruptly realised that might have been a bit of an insensitive question.

But Lydia merely laughed, to show she wasn’t offended, and replied “Well, I did go to Catholic school. But I don’t think you ever really get to attain the status of ex-Catholic. You kind of spend the rest of your life being a recovering Catholic.”

“Ah, I see,” I stuttered. “I’m just an atheist, so I find the whole thing a bit mystifying. Blixa’s always interrogating me, to find out if I believe in god or not, but I never really understood the question.”
“Well, it’s kind of a straightforward question, but it’s not really the interesting question,” insisted the straight-talking poet in a brassy New York tone. Reaching over the coffee table, she poured a large glass of a dark, almost blood-red drink.

“What is that, Laudanum?” teased Nick.

“Definitely,” laughed Lydia. “Do you want some?”

“Go on, then.”

“Well, what is the interesting question?” I demanded, looking around to see if anyone else knew, but Rowland and his girlfriend Genevieve had reclined back on a pile of cushions, lapsing into their own private world of whispers and giggles. Rowland didn’t strike me as shy when he in the studio, but he seemed quite slow to warm up to people in more social situations.

“The Problem of Evil,” said Lydia, as if this were the most self-evident answer in the world.

“Which is?” I wondered aloud, really wishing that Blixa were there, as he was much better equipped for these moralistic arguments on the nature of True and False and Good and Evil than I was.

“So you’re an Atheist,” said Lydia. “There’s no God. OK, sure. So where does Evil come from, then?”

Nick propped himself gently up on his elbows, then coughed creakily to shoehorn his way into the conversation now that it had started to interest him. “Well, even if there is a God. A good, loving, all-powerful God, like the Christian God. Why, if God – or whoever it was that created the world – is supposed to be good, is there so much evil in the world?

Lydia’s thoughts on the matter were straightforward. “It’s psychological. Right from Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung onwards. There are two drives in the world: Eros, and Thanatos. The drive for sex, and the drive for death. Procreation, destruction. Both of these things are behind all good, and all evil. You can’t separate them. They are the same thing, ultimately. And both of these things are fundamentally part of being human.”

Nick was more philosophical, even bordering on the religious, smoothing out his put-on outback drawl for a more polished, urbane accent as his eyes got that faraway reptilian look. “But are humans fundamentally good, or fundamentally bad? I struggle a lot, to accept either of these positions, which all of the world’s great religions seem to take a different stand on. Are humans, at heart, basically good, and need to be tempted into sin by the Devil, or are they fundamentally bad – Original Sin and all that – and need to be saved, redeemed, by Jesus Christ, or Buddha, or... Jim Jones, or whoever.” He dug in his pockets and took out a pack of cigarettes, smirking at the bad taste of his own joke.

“That’s not what I said,” countered Lydia, as Nick dug around for his lighter. “I said that humans are not inherently good or inherently bad. They’re fundamentally all mixed up. Good and Evil, light and dark all jumbled up together. Jung had the right idea with his idea of the Shadow Archetype. That every soul casts, and thus creates its own shadow. And the Shadow is what we call evil; all the bits of one’s own psyche that each of us is most afraid of. You have to learn to embrace your Shadow self. Accept that Evil is a part of the human condition and always will be. Evil loses its terror when you accept and even learn to embrace the dark sides of one’s own animal instincts. If you accept that Evil exists, and is a part of you, and your own urges, and not something just out there in the world waiting to snare you…” But Nick interrupted before she could finish her thought.

“Well, that’s the question that I’m interested in. Is Evil a tangible force, out there in the world? Or, is Good for that matter?” He gestured wildly with his lighter, waving the flame about dangerously
before finally lighting his cigarette and snapping it shut. “All these stories I heard as a boy, where the Devil was a real person, waiting out there in the Bush to trap you into Sin and drag you off to Hell. They used to terrify me! But, uuhhh... when you look at it as an adult, it’s a totally absurd notion. A man in red tights with a pitchfork, leaping out from behind a rock to tempt you to kick your little sister? Ludicrous! But if you don’t believe in the Devil, then where does Evil come from?”

“I told you, if you’d let me finish a sentence for once,” insisted Lydia, who at least had the guts to drag her own topic back from the interrupting man. “Carl Jung says that Evil is the dark side of your own self. Like a shadow that your own mind casts. And like a shadow, you don’t see it as part of you, you see it as a projection. So when you project this Shadow side out into the world, and see it as an external force, it’s only because you cannot accept the dark aspects of your own self.”

“Huh,” said Nick, as if her words had finally managed to penetrate his drug-addled head. “That’s interesting. Because that’s kinda what I’ve started to think. That both Good and Evil have to be something that are inside us. No one’s thoroughly good, or thoroughly bad, not as individuals, and certainly not as a whole species, like the idea of Original Sin proposes. But to accept that Evil is something that has its origin inside us... wow, that’s wild. But at the same time, it’s incredibly freeing.”

“That’s exactly what I thought, when I realised that I was a total freak. It was incredibly liberating, to embrace the dark, horror-show side of myself,” agreed Lydia. “To become the predator that I was supposed to be afraid of. And truly own my own desires, and dark impulses.”

“To own your own desires,” Nick echoed, sucking at his cigarette ferociously, as if he really desired to be sucking something else. “Even when your desires are the most socially unacceptable, in terms of human respectability. Rape, murder, mayhem. Maybe people had to invent the Devil, rather than accept that these things came from inside them.”

“I think you’re so hung up on the Devil, because secretly, you’d really like to be the Devil,” Rowland suddenly interjected in a sarcastic drawl, rolling his prominent eyes.

“Wouldn’t that be something,” laughed Nick, his pompousness somewhat punctured for a moment as he rolled over on his back, his eyes suddenly lighting on me, minding my own business in the corner by Lydia’s oversized hookah. “If I were the Devil, I’d tempt that silent, studious little engineer girlfriend of Blixa’s to take a fucking drink already.”

It took me a moment to work out he was addressing me, as I was a little stoned, and very tired from a long day at work. “I don’t drink.” I insisted.

“Is there some story there?” probed Lydia, licking her lips as if spotting something insalubrious.

I merely shrugged, wondering if I should perhaps make something up to satisfy their appetites, but in the end, I told them merely the mundane truth. “I don’t like the taste.”

“Not even Port Wine?” offered Lydia. “Or Sherry? Here, try this,” she offered, pausing to pour a thimble-sized glass from a crystal-cut decanter. “This is Spanish Amontillado, like in the Poe story.”

With her lazing there in her little lace top and her velvet dressing gown like a 50s pin-up model, I actually leaned forward and accepted a sip, then made a face. “Ugh, that is way too sweet. I don’t know how you can stand that. Tastes like raisins. Sickly.”

Lydia let out an adorable little cackle then licked her lips at me. “Have you ever tasted blood? Like, real human blood? Blood is also surprisingly sweet.”
I widened my eyes, feeling the tingle of eroticism, wondering if this was some kind of sex thing, but Nick immediately changed the subject, as if annoyed that the attention of the most attractive woman in the room had been diverted by someone else.

“Have you ever heard of Manichaeism?” Nick blurted out.

“The name sounds familiar. Was that some kind of Chinese Philosophy?” asked Lydia.

“An early Christian heresy, originating in Central Asia,” supplied Nick, looking pleased to be the centre of attention again. “They believed that every human being was a miniature representation of their cosmology, where the forces of light and dark fought it out, inside each human being. Because, you see, in Manichaeism, God was not omnipotent, and in fact, God was not even the creator of the physical world. The Devil was. The creator of this world was Satan, and as a result, each human being had a mixture of both Good and Evil woven through them. And it’s actually the world, and everything in it, that is Evil, and humans are forever trying to work their way back to God.”

“Sounds like my kind of Heresy,” laughed Lydia. “Satan’s my kind of guy. But it reminds me a bit of why the early Christians considered sex to be so dirty. Because the world itself was evil, while souls were considered perfect and pure before they were born. So to have sex and to procreate, to make more children, and thus incarnate more perfect souls of light into this slough of despond and pit of despair, was a terrible act of evil and abuse. Isn’t that absurd? And so generations of Christians learned to hate sex, and think it was dirty, even long after the heresy died out.”

“But sex is dirty,” insisted Nick doggedly. “I mean, it’s fundamentally, inherently dirty. Lust is a sin. Carnality is evil. So to despoil a woman, and her pure, beautiful feminine form, with the carnality of lust, that is inherently dirty.”

Lydia burst out laughing, great racking spasms of laughter that caused her rather substantial bosom to quiver and threaten to pop out of her lace lingerie in a way that made Nick more than slightly uncomfortable. “Oh my god, Nick, where did you learn that? Sex despoils a woman’s pure, beautiful feminine form? You can’t tell me you actually believe that crap?”

“I... don’t know,” confessed Nick, looking suddenly very unsure of himself, unable to face Lydia’s jiggling flesh, and yet at the same time unable to force himself to look away.

“Christ, Nick. You know nothing about sex, and you know even less about women,” roared Lydia, knocking back the rest of her Port Wine, then sinking my unfinished thimbleful of amontillado to boot. “Now really. This has been very entertaining, but you guys really need to go home, and I really need to get myself to bed. We regroup at the studio at noon, sharp, tomorrow, OK? And I need my beauty sleep, to preserve my beautiful, pure, unspoiled feminine form, a ha ha, oh god, Nick, you make me laugh so hard sometimes I swear wine is going to come out my nose.”
**Chapter Summary**

Lydia, the New Buildings and the Australians join forces to work on a collaboration. Blixa and Nick's interrelations become more codependent, as Blixa's behaviour in the studio, driven in equal parts by amphetamines and admiration of the Vienna Actionists, becomes more extreme.

Content note for mild S&M themes.

**Chapter Notes**

A reminder: this story is historical fiction, though it is based on the reported oral history and band mythology. I have done my best to be faithful to historical facts, but some timelines have been compressed, and deliberately altered in order to fit the narrative of my story.

Lydia, to my surprise, had an extremely dedicated work ethic, and did indeed arrive at the studio at noon on the dot the next day. No matter how wasted she got at the end of the night, she was dedicated enough that she always turned up in the morning, usually somewhere close to on time, focused and ready to get down to work. She was a bit of a nut, and used to scare the shit out of the other engineers that worked at the studio, especially if she would do something like... casually produce a jack knife and use it to nonchalantly clean her elegant, black-painted fingernails.

But I had been amused by the way she handled Nick the previous night. And I was really quite impressed by the way she seemed aware of her own tendency to both terrify and fascinate men, and how she turned that to her own advantage. She actually seemed to enjoy the disparity between men’s reactions to her diminutive baby-doll appearance, all huge eyes and soft, puckered lips; and her hellion wildcat persona of sex and death and extreme pornography mixed with splatter movie gore. For the Birthday Party, though, her darkness, and her obsession with evil – whether the kind of B-movie horror film schlocky kind, or the more unsettling forms of cruelty, and true life darkness that lurked in the hearts of men – that was what they loved most about her. Lydia didn’t shy away from the oversized, cartoon-vision of evil that the Birthday Party played with; she positively embraced it, turning it on its head and mixing it with an unsettling eroticism. Despite the way she gently mocked Nick’s odd prudery, they still bonded over their mutual fascination with sex and death, and formed a tight little creative nucleus based on the mixture of Eros and Thanatos. Oh, and heavy drug abuse, whatever the technical Freudian term for that drive was.

I grew to have a healthy respect for Lydia, for these were very obviously her sessions. She constantly walked a tightrope between maintaining a rigorous artist’s control over her project, and yet managing to keep satisfied all the egos of these somewhat overinflated artistic men around her. Well, managing them well enough for them to do her bidding, more or less, while they worked on her project. She and the guitarist, Rowland, worked really well together. They seemed to have an unspoken understanding of where each other’s boundaries were, and treated one another with both affection...
and respect. Nick, on the other hand, required constant supervision, and I was fairly in awe of how she managed to subtly keep him in line, without his really noticing. Nick, I think, was a little in awe of her, because she was so completely and thoroughly both sexy and sexual, though in a weird way that didn’t so much pander to the Male Gaze, as completely unsettled it and turned it inside out, leaving all its entrails showing. But he was also afraid of her. Still, she enjoyed being completely terrifying, and yet still managing to somehow make men lust after her, not in spite of, but because she was terrifying.

Blixa, on the other hand, positively adored her, deliberately courting her attention in a way he seldom extended himself for anyone. Not that he chased her; Blixa didn’t chase anyone. But I saw him do many of the same things he did when he first met me, just making himself constantly available. He soon started coming round the studio all the time, as he and Lydia bonded into a tight little knot. I don’t know if he actually slept with her – maybe he did, maybe he didn’t – it wasn’t any of my business. But he certainly fancied her, as she had that exact tiny, bonkers witch-doll look that I knew he really went for, and he definitely enjoyed the aesthetic appreciation that she expressed for him in return. But Lydia was, at that point, in the process of hooking up with one of the Australians, a tall, slightly emaciated man with fair hair and a perpetual slightly child-like expression, who answered to the name Jim (though Rowland and Nick, constantly, sarcastically, referred to him as The Foetus, I think for his boyish appearance). So I think Blixa realised quite quickly that there wasn't much chance of a proper thing with the lovely Lydia; and quickly slid instead into the role of confidante or best-girlfriend. And Blixa, as I already intimately knew, was so intimate and catty and willing to dish the dirt in gossip, that he made for a wonderful girlfriend, saucily teaching Lydia all the dirtiest German words he knew.

And he definitely recognised in Lydia something of himself, that steely-eyed artistic determination, to push back the boundaries and make art as extreme as one possibly could. They both knew they were birds of a dark and raven-winged feather, and they respected one another for it. But Blixa was canny at inspiring curiosity by keeping his distance. He didn’t participate in her recording sessions like the Australians did, hanging about, trying to impress her; he invited her to participate in his. Blixa was always like that, with powerful women. It was the same as it had been with Gudrun and Beate. He admired them, but he wanted them working on his terms, rather than him working on theirs.

But Lydia didn’t work that way. If she wanted to collaborate, she wanted to collaborate in a truly two-way exchange. And her sessions, if they were musically masterminded by anyone other than herself, were in the hands of the spooky lesbian twins, Rowland and his beautiful double, his girlfriend Genevieve. Lydia was vaguely obsessed with Rowland, though in a weird, slightly incestuous way, because although they flirted and cuddled the way that Lydia flirted with everyone, she kept insisting that he was in some way her brother. Occasionally she would even go so far as to joke that Rowland was the ‘ghost of her dead twin’, which honestly creeped me out a bit when she’d do something provocative like pull him onto her tiny, delicate lap and pretend to spank him.

Rowland was someone I could never quite figure out, for his looks were very effeminate, and his manner was very soft, his voice quiet, reinforced by the curious sensation evinced by those huge liquid eyes of his, that always added a slight air of plaintiveness to any of his requests. And yet, like Blixa, he was capable of producing the most abrasive, extreme sounds and somehow shaping them into music.

He was very particular, he needed his guitar set up just so, and would only have certain microphones on his amps, and my god, I had to win his trust before I was allowed to so much as touch a wire on the head of his guitar, even to tune it. He was not a man that ever seemed to enforce himself on anyone, certainly not in the way that Blixa enforced himself on a session, either with Lydia, or the New Buildings. And not even in the way that Nick drove the whole thing to his own obscure but demanding beat with his junkie needs. And yet, in many ways, Rowland seemed to be the one
quietly, and yet insistently, driving forward those ramshackle sessions where half the band was on smack, the other half on speed, and everyone drinking, incessantly, from noon until dawn.

It was a baptism by fire, into the delicate art of engineering, as I realised the most important skills in a studio were not knowing where to place a microphone, or how to tweak the tone settings on an amp, but how to balance the delicate constellation of egos, so that recording could even proceed.

For it was obvious, even at that point, that Nick and Rowland, though they put up a chummy show of camaraderie, were such completely different characters that at times I wasn’t sure how they had ended up in a band together. Nick was, at the heart of it all, constantly insecure, like he desperately wanted to be someone else, and the reason he went onstage, the reason he was a songwriter at all, was to create alternate characters, bigger than himself, in order to disappear into. When he was asked, as he was at Lydia’s sessions, simply to be Nick Cave, he didn’t seem to have a clue as to who that was. He seemed to act up and act out, almost in compensation for not really having a distinct personality offstage. Rowland, on the other hand, seemed to be a complete, and perfect, and utterly unique individual, as if he sprung into the world fully-formed, and had never been – could never have been – anyone else. If Rowland was playing some kind of character, as it was obvious that Nick did when he performed, I never, ever saw him take it off, not once in the long stretches of those 12-hour workdays.

And Rowland, rather than participating in the chummy schoolboy camaraderie of Nick and his gang of hard-drinking mates, far preferred to relax into the company of his girlfriend, Gen. Gen, a real tough but fragile-looking beauty, was the first and foremost of an archetype I would meet many times over the years: the Girlfriend who should have been The Star. She was the one who subtly shaped and moulded the boys’ musical tastes, keeping an eye out, not for what was hip, but for what was interesting. Blixa told me she had turned up at Iron-Grey, and carefully listened to many of the cassettes on sale there, before selecting a few to buy and take home. And again, it seemed she put in regular appearances at Zensor, the cool record shop in Schöneberg, on the day that new releases came out, keeping her finger on the pulse of what was going on, and making sure to pick up copies of the latest English music press. And to my surprise, when I asked for some help with mic-ing and soundchecking the piano on a morning that Nick did not deign to grace us with his presence, I discovered that she was actually a far more accomplished musician than Nick, playing the piano with a grace and a sensitivity that Nick never showed, stroking it and really making it sing, where Nick only ever bashed away at the keys like a cockney in a music hall.

Both Gen and Rowland seemed to genuinely love, and obsess over music, playing it constantly, even when they weren’t working, and talking about it even when they weren’t playing it. And what the pair of them loved best of all, was kitschy old girl-group songs, like the Shangri-Las and the Crystals, real tough girls who would stab your heart out with a mascara wand. It was Rowland, in fact, and not Nick, who had recognised that tough-girl gang aspect to Malaria!, and purposefully cultivated their acquaintance at the shows in New York and London. And that, I think, was the appeal for Rowland, of working with Lydia, who, with her tough mouth and her huge eyes, seemed the archetype of dirty innocence embodied by those hard-talking New York dames. The track they were working on was, in fact, a Nancy Sinatra duet that really captured that kind of off-kilter 60s femininity. Because Rowland, unlike most of the straight men I had ever met, was seriously interested in exploring femininity, in all its forms.

And yet, Rowland was stuck with Nick, who tagged doggedly along, trying to enforce his masculine persona on this girl-group. There were scraps, which on the surface seemed to be about Lydia, or over Lydia, or what Lydia should or shouldn’t be doing, and why Nick insisted on dragging her onstage to duet with him, when Lydia was supposed to be doing solo shows with Rowland. But even I could tell, the fights weren’t about Lydia at all. There was a struggle between the two men, and Nick seemed determined not to play fair.
“Look, uuuhhhh, let me play some piano on this, erm particular passage,” Nick would interject, arriving just as we were about to move onto the next track. “I’ve been listening, and I’ve got a really good idea for, uuuhh, a piano riff would go nicely here.”

“I don’t think it needs a piano,” Rowland would counter quietly. “We’ve been working on the guitar arrangements all afternoon, and Lydia is happy with the way it sounds.”

“Yeah, but, you seeeee... Lydia’s voice doesn’t really suit a, uh, guitar right here.”

“Lydia’s voice is just fine without a piano. She’s playing her thing, and I’m weaving my guitar parts around it.”

“Look, I’m just saying, I don’t think it’s right for what Lydia needs. You want a bit of, erm, rolling piano. Or maybe an organ sound. Something smooth to, uuuhhh, bring out the roughness of Lydia’s voice. Don’t you think, Lydia.”

“You’re going to have to show me what you mean,” Lydia would counter, in that slightly nasal New York accent. “You can’t just describe it, you gotta play it, so’s I can hear it.”

“OK, Carter, roll the tape. Just drop me in, uuuhh, don’t record anything. I’ll just, erm, fool about, on the piano for a bit, until I hit on something Lydia likes, huh? How about that.” And this would go on for another hour as Nick worked out what he wanted to play, because Lydia believed in free expression and hearing people’s ideas out, no matter how they extreme they were, and then another hour to get it down on tape, maybe more if Nick was in the wrong part of the cop-shoot-cop cycle. And the sessions would get bogged down and eaten up, and Nick would try to worm in on whatever it was that Rowland and Lydia had already agreed.

In the end, Nick didn’t even play piano on the finished version of the track. Rowland altered the guitar part slightly to fit Lydia’s off-kilter vocals better, and when we needed to change the piano to match the new rhythm, Nick was off trying to score. And so, to try to save time on the overrunning sessions, I just said, why doesn’t Gen just do it, and Gen started insisting, oh no she couldn’t, it was years since she’d played piano properly, but Rowland really encouraged her, and buttered her up, and I enthusiastically got out the mics and adjusted the piano bench to Gen’s size, and away we went. She practised it a couple of times, then her first take was absolutely perfect, exactly what the track had needed. And that was that.

Nick, as one would imagine, was not pleased. He acted, in some weird way, both awkwardly deferential towards Gen, but at the same time, weirdly resentful and slightly spiky towards her and Rowland when they were together, like there was something going on between Nick and that couple that I did not understand. But Rowland, rather than risk an outright confrontation, retreated tighter and tighter into his relationship with Gen, while Nick looked around for an outside ally to align with against their dyad.

What he found, instead, was Blixa.

Blixa had been hanging around Lydia’s sessions like a black-clad bat, always observing, seldom speaking, and yet silently passing judgement on everyone, with that very strict Prussian disdain of his. At first, he claimed he was just coming to visit me, affectionately popping by to check how I was settling into my new job, though it was soon apparent that the studio held another magnetism for him. Gen asked, several times, slightly provocatively in that sassy Australian way, first if I was Blixa’s boyfriend, and then, more teasingly, if I was jealous of the weird, wordless flirtation that seemed to be going on between Blixa and Nick, and the whole group would laugh. Even me, to be fair, because Gen was so spunky and warm-hearted it was hard to read her jokes as cruelty, though obviously I did not get the same sense of family from this lot that I had got from Salomé and Rainer’s
jokes. It was obvious that they found both Blixa and me very odd, and quite alien, albeit in a fascinating and intriguing way. But everyone had noticed, that Blixa and Nick had become involved in a long and convoluted mating dance.

The first was a step purely of convenience. Nick, who had come originally to West Berlin with the vague hope of kicking, realised that was never going to happen, but found himself ill equipped to navigate the complexities of scoring in a foreign language. Blixa, on the other hand, knew a fairly reliable and reputable (well, as far as such people could be called so) dealer, who happened to owe him a favour: Jana’s new boyfriend, Johann. Introductions were made. Regular deliveries started coming to the studio, which made our recording schedule a bit more predictable, but this was not exactly the best for Nick’s state of mind. Blixa said he just wanted the best for Nick, to help him in any way he could, but from the outside, it was hard not to see him taking on the same ‘protector’ role he had taken with Jana, with a strong whiff of simply wanting Nick dependent on him. Blixa was, after all, still pretending to Nick that he didn’t speak a word of English, while maintaining to everyone else that he was trying to persuade Nick to hurry up and learn German. The two of them were quickly developing a deeply, deeply co-dependent relationship, as Blixa would disappear for days at a time, leaving Nick to learn how to pine for something that wasn’t drugs.

But Nick absolutely loved Berlin. He found there, the freedom and the supportive community that had been lacking in London, as people from the scene dropped by to check out what they had going on, and he was invited, first to The Skin’s studio, (initially for a jam session, and then to move in and stay) and then to the New Buildings’ recording sessions for a planned split single with Lydia.

The whole group, Lydia, the Australians and all, decamped to the New Buildings’ recording studio for a day, to work on a collaboration between the two sets of musicians. And I simply went with them, as there was fuck-all for me to do at my own studio when they weren’t there, and anyway, they were paying me to be an engineer, so I might as well engineer at the other studio. So we all went over to see the New Buildings, and work on this track together.

Blixa, on that day, had been up all night, consuming an almost inhuman amount of speed, until he seemed to become almost impervious to pain or heat or cold or anything. He wanted to become one with his animal nature, as the track they were working on was called Thirsty Animal. Though I knew for a fact he was a vegetarian, he had become obsessed with the sound of meat – human meat, animal meat, it didn’t really matter to him. That extreme Austrian artist he’d encountered at documenta 7, who used meat and animal carcasses in strange, bloody, ritual performances, had left Blixa profoundly influenced by his strange images of ritualistic abandon. He wanted blood and guts in his work, so he didn’t just want to use his inhuman voice as an instrument, he wanted to use his entire body, slapping and pounding his own chest to produce weird, hollow sounds. Mufti, not to be outdone, had ordered half a pig’s carcass from a butcher, and bought it into the studio, pounding on its dead ribcage with mallets to make strange, wet, squelching sounds.

It never made much sense to me how Blixa and Mufti, although they usually went about together in a tight little unit, and swore they were best of friends, somehow seemed to become locked at loggerheads the moment they stepped into the studio. In some way, both of them really wanted to be the leader of the group, and dictate its direction. Onstage, it worked really well to essentially have two frontmen, as they constantly played off one another, and looked fantastic together, the tall, spindly androgynous creature wailing into the microphone, and the short, muscular blond metalsmith hammering away at sheet metal like two very different kinds of Greek gods. But in the studio, they tangled constantly, as, although they both headed towards the same destination, the pair of them had radically different ideas of how to get there. And in front of the assembled group of Lydia, plus assorted members of the Birthday Party, both of them started to act up, as if in front of an audience.
You’re getting too abstract again, too much intellect without heart; too arty-farty complained Mufti, facing up to Blixa, his powerful arms locked defensively over his chest.

There’s nothing wrong with being arty-farty retorted Blixa. And I will never apologise for being an intellectual.

But you’re over-embellishing it with all this abstract, heavy-handed metaphor. You want something simple and direct. Something even a child can understand Mufti explained.

You stick to being heavy-handed with the metal, the wood, the rotting flesh, and all the other percussive instruments, and I will stick to the intellect, OK? sneered Blixa, who had clearly felt piqued to resort to such bitchiness. It’s supposed to be abstract. Is it my fault if it takes intellect to understand? It takes intellect to understand the Theory of Relativity, but that doesn’t stop it being important or true.

Listen. What takes more intellect? countered Mufti. To explain Relativity to another fucking physicist, or to explain Relativity to a child? That is the kind of directness we need in our work.

Blixa whirled around and stormed away from his bandmate, and I knew the comment had hit its mark, as it was the exactly the kind of pithy comment that Blixa would really have liked to have made. Hmm he said, refusing to concede that Mufti might be right, which in turn just infuriated Mufti, who hated to be ignored nearly as much as Blixa did. Let’s get back to work, we need to finish this percussion track. Alex, can you cue up the tape?

OK, fine, you show me how you want me to play it, if you think you can play it better than me shrugged Mufti, sitting himself down and defiantly rolling up a joint.

As the tape started rolling, Blixa put on the headphones and kicked aside Mufti’s mallets, then started beating on the animal’s corpse with his own fists, getting into a strange, trance-like rhythm where he seemed to lose all consciousness of what was going on around him.

Mufti sat smoking for a few minutes, then got up and went over to join him, picking up the rhythm on his mallets and embellishing it slightly with his drummer’s flair for showmanship. After a couple of run-throughs, it started to sound really good, so Blixa moved back to pounding his own chest and torso in time with what Mufti was doing.

Alex got up to reposition the mic to pick up Blixa’s ribcage xylophone, and cued up the track to record again, but Blixa swore loudly, then stopped halfway through the track. I can’t hit myself hard enough to get the right sound. It’s like some self-preservation instinct keeps kicking in that I can never quite override. I need someone else to do it. Raising his head, he looked through the control room window and his eyes lit on Lydia. Lydia? You always say you want to beat the shit out of men, well, here’s your chance?

“What did he say?” asked Lydia, suddenly rousing herself from some deep, intimate pillow-talk with Rowland to realise she was required.

“He wants you to flog him,” I translated. “He says he can’t hit himself hard enough to sound right. Why don’t you go out there and give us a mic-check, see if you’re loud enough.”

Lydia rolled her eyes, but pulled herself to her feet and padded out to the recording room, pretending to lick her lips and doing a pretty good impression of some cartoon dominatrix. She picked up a strip of heavy leather and tried it against her palm a few times to test its weight, but as she got closer to Blixa, who was testing out the various parts of his chest for their resonant qualities, she wrinkled her nose and made her face. What is that smell? she sputtered, gagging a little.
“It might be the pig,” suggested Mufti, but as she stepped away from it and got close enough to Blixa to hit him, she made a retching noise.

“It is not the pig. It is more... ugh. It smells like rotting vegetables or something. Jesus, Blixa, take a fucking bath. There’s no way I’m getting into anything with you.” As she dropped the leather strap and made her way swiftly back across the floor, holding her hand over her nose and mouth, the entire studio broke into mocking laughter.

Blixa looked confused, and picked up the edge of his T-shirt, which had once been white, but was now a slightly yellowish-grey colour, sniffing at it gently before just shrugging. >>Am I going to have to do this myself...?<<

But as Mufti walked towards him, I saw his eyes suddenly light up. >>No worries, Blixa. I will gladly hit you. Repeatedly<< he offered, with a tone of voice that indicated there was something more than eroticism to his offer.

>>Oh good<< said Blixa as he lay down and Mufti took his position over him. >>Cue up the tape and do a line-check?<< Mufti put his back into it, and thumped his bandmate, hard. >>Oof<< winced Blixa.

>>Don’t cry out<< commanded Mufti, with a decidedly sadistic tone to his voice, adjusting his position so that he was standing over Blixa, straddling his chest as he flexed the muscles of his arms and tightened and released the fingers of his fist. >>You’ll spoil the take.<<

Blixa whimpered slightly, but did as he was told, biting down on a drumstick to keep himself from crying aloud, as Mufti started jubilantly pounding away on his skinny ribcage as if it were a punching bag, just as the tape started to roll. The beating started out with sickening thuds, and escalated slowly, until I could barely believe that Blixa was able to stand it, dragging on for ten minutes that seemed almost like an eternity. Blixa kept curling and uncurling his toes, flexing his wiry muscles then relaxing, but several minutes in, I saw that he was no longer biting down on the drumstick, in fact, he was lying there with a slightly beatific expression on his face, as if he had pushed past the pain and endorphin barrier into actually enjoying his own degradation and pain. There was a part of me that thought, you know, I really shouldn’t watch this. It’s a bit weird to just sit here viewing this oddly kinky, drug-fuelled scene as if it were just another recording session. And yet, at the same time, watching Blixa’s long body bend and flex and roll with the blows, there was a part of me that filed away the information with the sole thought, huh, now that’s interesting.

Mufti was straight; I was certain of that. I had in fact, recently discovered through the crew of his science fiction film, that not only was Mufti heterosexual, but that he had a cute little wife back in Hamburg, which was the real reason he hadn’t moved to full time to West Berlin. But the weird scene going on between Mufti and Blixa in the recording room was so overwhelmingly erotic that I started to worry that the control room windows would start steaming up.

Lydia was cackling with laughter over the whole thing, even while Rowland was pulling away squeamishly, wincing a little with the reverbed slap of each punch. The rest of the New Buildings were so used to Blixa’s antics that they pretty much ignored the weirdness of the situation. But Nick was sitting up, a look of intense interest on his face. Leaving aside the book of William Faulkner’s poetry he had been absent-mindedly perusing, he stood up and walked over to the studio window, staring through as if both fascinated and repulsed by the orgy of violence being rained down upon Blixa’s willing body.

Finally, the ordeal was over. Mufti, laughing and sweating, the anger and resentment seeming to have drained out of his face, climbed off Blixa and sat back on his heels, calling out cheerfully
>>Can we hear that back in the monitors?<<

Rolling into a sitting position, his face kind of glazed with relief, and yet an obvious mound rising in the vicinity of his rubber trousers, Blixa let out a cackle like a sick duck, then sneered >>Is that all you got, Mufti? Can we do another take?<<

Alex shrugged and fiddled with the mixing desk, as he rolled back the tape, then played the results of the orgy of pig-based violence over both headphones and studio monitors. >>It sounds good, yeah? << he observed. >>It really works, you can’t even tell what’s Blixa and what’s the pig.<<

But I frowned as I joined him at the mixing desk, trying to pull back his settings from all over the map. Doing my best to get a decent, clear sound, I soloed the track so I could EQ it properly, bringing up the bass. However the microphone, which had ended up at the wrong end of Blixa’s long torso behind one of Mufti’s legs, sounded so muffled it didn’t actually sound as wet as meat should sound.

>>Let me just re-position the mic for you, if you’re going to do another take<< said the engineer in me, as I walked back out, and looked Blixa’s battered and reddening chest up and down. Forgetting for a moment that Blixa was even a human being, let alone a boy who still occasionally acted like he wanted to fuck me, I moved the mic closer to his chest, and gave him a few good solid slaps, carefully testing where to place the mic to get the best sound. >>What you really want, though, is a contact mic. Have you got one of those lying around? Better yet a pair, record it in stereo.<<

>>Yeah, I think we do...<< chirped Alex. He loped off into the storeroom, then returned a few minutes later with the kit.

I fixed them to either side of Blixa’s ribcage, like a pair of extraneous nipples, then sat back and thumped him in various places, moving the mics to get the best combination of the sound of skin hitting skin, and also the sound of the blow reverberating through his chest cavity. >>I think that’s going to sound really good<< I pronounced, standing up and leaving Blixa back to Mufti, who was readying himself with relish at the thought of another chance to even the score with his annoying bandmate.

>>You enjoyed that<< said Blixa, licking his cracked lips, as he glanced at me wolfishly.

>>Dream on, pervert<< I laughed, and walked back, to slap Alex away from mucking up the mixing board settings for the new mics. Oh, yes, it sounded much better now.

But Blixa turned to Nick, still staring at him through the control room window, and raised his eyebrows at him suggestively, gesturing down towards his frighteningly thin and pale chest, covered in red welts, though the bruises had not yet started to come up. >>Do you want to have a go?<<

Even in German, the meaning was unmistakable. Nick quailed slightly, took a drag on his cigarette, but did not turn away. “Thanks, but... no. That’s OK.”

>>Ready? Rolling!<< I called out, and diverted the music to their headphones, as the orgy of violence started anew, with Mufti really brutally and single-mindedly whacking away at Blixa’s chest, in rhythm to the glorious cacophony of the track.

When it was done, Rowland looked on horrified, his face pale, as Blixa had to be helped to his feet, limping slightly as he made his way back to the control room and flopped down in a chair. Lydia moved aside sharpish, wrinkling her nose as Blixa looked about with a sated and self-satisfied expression on his face. >>Does anyone have a cigarette?<<
As Nick found one and lit if for him, I turned to Rowland. “Right. You’re the next victim, it seems. Do you want to go out there and do your bit?”

“Erm... excuse me?” stuttered Rowland, almost physically recoiling.

“You’re doing your guitar overdubs next, right? Or would you rather wait until Lydia’s done her vocals? We can set you up to run through Blixa’s amp, or you can go direct. What do you reckon, Alex?”

“Amp,” said Alex, in his schoolboy English. “Definitely be so kind to use the Fender in schtudio. It is miked all ready and set up to record on track ten.”

Relief flooded Rowland’s face. “Oh. You mean record my guitar parts. Yes, yes, of course. Let me get my guitar...”

Rowland laid down his own guitar parts as quickly as humanly possible, then fled the studio in an awful hurry, as if he had decided that West Berlin was in all probability, not really his thing. But Nick was oddly fascinated, hugging his own skinny chest and sucking on a cigarette as he stared across the studio at Blixa. For Blixa, smoking a joint to dull the pain to the point where he was now laughing and pinching his flesh to show where the bruises were coming in, had just beaten him in his own game of self-destructive exhibitionist one-upmanship. The thoughts Nick seemed to be having were written clear as day all over the astonished expression on his face: *I may play these wild, extreme characters onstage, but Blixa here, he fucking lives them.*
Blixa and Wolfgang both encourage Carter to have a show of their art. And when the Birthday Party return from tour, Blixa is caught out in a long-running fib, only leading to more admiration from a helplessly smitten Nick.

The sessions broke for ten days, as Lydia, The Birthday Party and the Skin all went off to do another ten-day tour of Germany. And as much as their presence had felt like an invasion of Australians taking over West Berlin, I actually kind of missed them when they went. Blixa, on the other hand, actually pined.

Falling back into my old bad habits, I found myself sloping round Iron-Grey, just looking for something to do, as much as a place to hang out. And at Iron-Grey, I found Blixa curled up on the sofa in front of a fan in the humid summer heat, his nose buried in a book.

>>What are you reading?<< I asked, nudging him to move over so I could sit down. He unfolded his long legs and put them back on the floor, but was still monopolising the place where I’d intended to sit, so I took out the ice lolly I’d brought him as a treat, and held it for a moment against the tiny sliver of flesh between the bottom of his slashed-up black T-shirt and the top of his jeans, until he yelped and jumped aside.

>>I’m reading one of Wolfgang’s books about early Christian heresies. Have you ever heard of Manichaeism?<< he asked, marking his place with a scrap of card and placing it on the floor as he took the ice lolly and started to unwrap it greedily.

>>I have, as a matter of fact<< I laughed. >>I’ve brought a sandwich, as well. Do you want half?>>

>>Is it vegan?<< he asked suspiciously, though I noticed he hadn’t bothered asking if the ice lolly was vegan, even as he wrapped it back up and put it down.

>>It’s hummus and sweet pepper. From the Turkish shop round the corner.<< I held out the package so he could scrutinise it before deciding whether to eat it.

>>Alright<< he agreed, as if he were doing me a favour by eating half my lunch, though he was so painfully thin he looked like he needed it more than I. >>So do you know what’s really interesting about the Manichaeans?>>

>>They believed that the Christian God wasn’t omnipotent, and that Satan was actually the true creator of the physical world.<<

Blixa looked ever so slightly put out that I had somehow jumped ahead to his punchline. >>Where did you hear that? I thought you were an atheist.<<

>>I expect exactly the same place you learned about it.<<

>>Wolfgang Müller?<< asked Blixa innocently as he wolfed down his half of my sandwich.

>>Someone ever so slightly more Australian than that.<<
Well conceded Blixa rather archly. Nick is a very interesting person. He has some very interesting ideas, about Good and Evil, that go beyond Christianity and this simplistic conception of the problems of Right and Wrong.

But to believe that Satan made the earth... honestly, Blixa, you can’t decide if you believe in God or not, but you’re willing to go the whole sausage and swallow the idea of Satan? I teased, elbowing him gently as I finished my half of the sandwich and pulled my own ice cream out of my lunch bag.

But the problem of Good and Evil goes back far longer than the Devil. Satan himself, had to be invented. His whole attitude became very excited as he abruptly remembered his ice lolly, took it out of its packet and started to suck at it.

Wasn’t he supposed to be a serpent in the Garden of Eden, or something like that?

That’s one idea said Blixa quickly, gesturing towards me with the tip of his melting ice lolly. Have you heard of the Ophites? I shook my head, trying to concentrate on finishing my ice cream before it melted. They were another set of early Christian heretics. Very, very interesting. You see, they believed that the serpent from the Garden of Eden, and Jesus Christ himself, were exactly the same person.

So you’ve gone from... the world was created by Satan, to Satan and Jesus are the same. OK!

No! Not Satan he insisted. The serpent. Do you know what the serpent was the symbol for, in ancient Greek mythology, and then again, in Alchemy?

It was the symbol of... wisdom. Of knowledge, wasn’t it? That’s why doctors use the symbol of serpents wrapped round a Caduceus. I had to dig around in the deep recesses of my school education, but it was in there somewhere. But then again, that was why I enjoyed arguing with Blixa. I never knew where our conversations would end up.

Of Knowledge repeated Blixa, not sucking at his ice lolly like a normal person, but now chomping it up with his teeth and gulping it down in bites. And what did the serpent ask Eve to do?

Oh Christ I groaned. I can’t remember these old fables from nursery school. He wanted her to... to eat the apple, from the Tree of Knowledge, I think? Knowledge being some kind of old-fashioned word for sex, and so they realised they were naked, and had to dress up in fig leaves or whatever?

No! insisted Blixa, thumping the sofa with the denuded stick of his ice lolly. It was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Humans had to learn, had to be taught what Evil was. Animals do not know what Evil is. Nor do children. You have to be taught the difference between Right and Wrong. This is why the Ophites thought that the Snake was Christ, because he was humanity’s teacher.

I’m not sure I follow I stuttered, wondering what part I had missed, though Blixa was clearly captivated by the book.

Think about it! insisted Blixa, thumping the book. It’s all in here. Animals. Small children. People who have gone mad. None of them have a concept of what Evil is. That’s why a child can’t be convicted of a crime. And that’s why people can be judged not guilty by reason of insanity.
I’m not sure that’s how it works. People are judged not guilty by reason of insanity because they are considered not fit for trial. Because they don’t understand the process of a trial, let alone what it is they did.

Precisely! cried Blixa. They have no knowledge of even doing Evil. Humans have to be taught what Evil is. By Christ, or the Snake, or by the dictators of what is Morality. A child has no sense of morality. Nor do truly primitive people, untouched by Christianity. They are closer to an animal state.

That’s a bit racist, isn’t it? I protested, unable to follow this strange convoluted logic that Nick seemed to have inspired in him.

No! he protested. Only if you see Animal as worse than Human. But not if you see an animal state as being better, as being purer than a Christian, Capitalist, Civilised state. Animals do not murder one another. They kill, only for food or for self-defence. Animals do not make profits at the expense of one another’s lives, or health, or children. They take what is sufficient for themselves, and that is enough. Animals do not pollute the environment, or amass nuclear weapons capable of wiping out every living thing on earth, several times over. Humans do that, with their Knowledge. So this idea that Christ – the Serpent of Knowledge – taught humans the Knowledge of what Evil was? Do you not understand what I’m trying to say?

I’m going to have to think about that one I conceded, but then spread my hands in defeat before he jumped back into the topic. I’m not disagreeing with you, Blixa. But maybe I can read the book after you’re done with it.

Then you will see insisted Blixa with a curt nod, picking the book off the floor and sticking his long nose back into it.

And so Blixa, in the Australian’s absence, became like a man possessed, feverishly trying to work on new material for the New Buildings, all based around the themes of animals, and how humans displayed or denied their animal natures. He told me he wanted the band to record an album called Hunters and Collectors, depicting Man in his primal state, still fascinated with this Outback mythology, as filtered through his obsession with the intense rituals of these Austrian ‘Actionists’ he had discovered at Documenta. Without much work in the studio, with the Australians gone, I hung about the New Buildings as they wrote and rehearsed Blixa’s complex song ideas. Watching Blixa try to explain his complicated concepts to his gang of Town Musicians with the help of charts and maps and diagrams (clearly, someone had learned something from that Beuys lecture!) I found myself drawing mad comics about the band turning into animals. Blixa and the pig they had used as percussion exchanged personalities, Blixa’s bones lying rotting in the studio as re-animated Pig-Blixa roamed the streets of West Berlin, looking for drugs to consume or lovers to rut with, howling with the intensity of his need.

Blixa thought it was absolutely hilarious. He begged me to show the comic to Wolfgang, one afternoon when we met up with him to return the book on early Christian heresy, and ended up staying for a late breakfast at the Other Shore Café. (The perpetually underfed Blixa never turned down an offer of food if someone else was picking up the cheque.)

The three of us had a nice breakfast, and a good gossip, as Wolfgang was telling us, with a complicated mixture of affection, pride, and typical Berlin sarcasm, that Salomé had been experiencing a spectacular success from his appearance at Documenta. Not only had he sold the pieces from the show, but no less an entity than Deutsche Bank had commissioned a new painting from him. Now Wolfgang, despite his affectation of studied Berliner irony, did seem genuinely
impressed by and supportive of our friend’s good fortune. Blixa, on the other hand, seemed a little more suspicious, reacting initially with punk outrage at ‘selling out’, even though this was clearly shot through with a heavy dose of envy.

It was the same as when he and Gudrun had sniped at one another like squabbling siblings. Although it was obvious that he wanted to be supportive, and believed that he should be supportive, his natural sense of competitiveness always seemed piqued, if he didn’t believe his own projects were doing as well as they deserved, in comparison with his peers.

Luckily, Wolfgang seemed to notice Blixa’s sense of pique, and swiftly changed the subject, enquiring instead how Blixa’s and my various projects were going. This was the point where Blixa remembered my comics. >>We, too, have been very inspired by our Documenta experience<< he announced. >>And you should see the drawings that Carter has been doing, helped, of course, by her exposure to my own band’s recent projects.<<

Of course Wolfgang wanted to see them, so, blushing, I pulled them from my rucksack and showed him. Wolfgang chortled himself silly, and immediately suggested I show them to the manager of the café, who, he said, sometimes put on informal shows of local artists, especially gay artists, given their clientèle. It took me a moment to work out what he was suggesting.

>>A show? Me?<<

>>Why not?<< Wolfgang shrugged.

>>I’m not... you know, a proper artist. Not like all those amazing people we saw at Documenta. I just draw comic books.<<

>>What did Beuys say there? Everyone’s an artist. You’re an artist. After all, you did those sketches of me<< Blixa reminded me, though honestly, that night we had drawn one another as a weird form of making love was something I chose not to dwell on much, in order to enjoy our status as happy, affectionate, flirtatious friends.

>>The great thing about Berlin is<< said Wolfgang. >>We don’t bother with those divisions here, proper artist, improper artist. We’re all dilettantes. Everyone turns their hand to everything. You know Blixa was going to be a painter, before deciding to be a rock star.<<

I turned to Blixa, realising how little he delved into this part of his life. I’d only ever seen that one box, once, of artwork he’d done for his band stuff. >>Why do you never show me any more of your stuff?<<

Blixa shrugged vaguely, looking a little annoyed. >>I told you. They wouldn’t let me do a show of my work. It was too extreme for them.<<

I frowned, and bit my lip, thinking maybe I wouldn’t try for a show then, as Blixa was far more charismatic than I was, and if he couldn’t pull off a show, what hope had I.

But Wolfgang rolled his eyes. >>Semen stained sheets<< he reminded me, then extended his hand. >>Look. Do you have any extra copies? Leave some with me, and I’ll show them to Gerhard, have a little chat, see what he thinks.<<

Blixa was reinventing more than his band; he seemed to be in the process of reinventing himself. He started letting his scalped hair grow back, longer than he had worn it before. He switched from ragged, yellowing T-shirts and ballet tops to more formal button-down shirts, always in black,
always form-fitting, or just sheer enough to show off his extreme thinness. Nick’s dress sense, more
than anything else, had started to rub off on him, as he started to back-comb his hair into a large,
light-brown porcupine’s quill.

But Blixa had other problems, ghosts from his personal life starting to resurface, The Drug Dealer,
who now believed that he and Blixa were friends thanks to turning him on to new business from the
Australians, came round to Iron-Grey for a little heart to heart chat, about Jana.

>>She’s getting worse<< said Johann, quietly, after exchanging something like pleasantries.

>>Well, maybe you shouldn’t feed her so much smack<< snorted Blixa slowly, with a contemptuous
expression that seemed to say \textit{what concern is it of mine, what the girl you stole from me does now I
am gone.}

>>It’s not the drugs<< he confessed. >>She takes way less than she used to, mostly because I started
hassling her about eating into my profits.<<

>>Charming<< I said, as I had never liked him, and though he did serve a useful purpose in the
community, that didn’t mean I had to be friends with him.

>>She’s... well, she’s weird.<< continued poor Johann, who I soon realised seemed more than a little
out of his depth. >>She knows things she couldn’t possibly know.<<

>>Like what<< I scoffed, even as Blixa started to sit up and pay attention.

>>I got offered a bad batch the other week. We were out near the border to collect it, and Jana
picked up the package to stow it away, when suddenly she drops it like her hand has been burned.
Jana, who has never met a drug she didn’t like, she won’t even pick it up, she just said ‘don’t sell that
shit. Get rid of it!’ I asked her why, and she just looked at me, real spooked, like, and said ‘people
will die’. Now, it was too good an offer to pass up, but something about her spooked me. She
wouldn’t shut up about it. And so I did a swap with Emir, I took his cheap Turkish tar, and he took
that refined shit.<<

>>Noble of you<< I muttered, but Blixa shushed me.

>>The next week, I read a story in the papers, about how a contaminated batch of heroin put a whole
squat of people in the hospital. Three of them died, just like Jana said. How could she possibly have
known that? She didn’t try it. She didn’t even taste it. It was all sealed up in plastic.<<

>>I don’t know, man, but it’s lucky you got out. Did the police come after Emir?<<

>>Dude got on the first coach to Anatolia. He didn’t stick around.<<

>>Well, count yourself lucky<< shrugged Blixa. But after Johann left, he turned to me. >>You still
think Jana is just a latent schizophrenic?<< he said, in a very dark, sarcastic tone of voice.

>>Lucky guess. You use enough smack, you’ve got to pick up a feel for when it’s not right. I refuse
to believe in such a nonsense as psychic powers.<<

Lydia returned, but without the Australians, who had gone on to tour the UK again, so that she could
get to work on cutting the final vocals for the record. To my considerable relief, we got a lot more
done when her entourage were not around. Work progressed far more quickly without Nick battling
Rowland over every tiny musical decision. She was an absolute pro when it came to putting down
vocals, none of the faffing about and multiple takes that I had seen from the Australians. I would do my best to make the room special for her: burn incense – she liked patchouli best – about an hour before she got in, so that it would smell nice for her, but it wasn’t too smoky; dim the lights, except for a little spot for where she held the journal with the lyrics; maybe put out a nice red rose in a vase so the sleazy, decaying space looked a little classy. And she rewarded me by not pulling any prima donna antics, just getting down to work, and giving me good, clear, but intensely emotive takes every time. She liked me, because I never hassled her about staying in tune or wandering off the beat; but to me, all that bullshit technique was never as important as the emotion. If the emotion was true, the rest didn’t matter. And Lydia had buckets of emotion in her performance.

I thought she must have put in some kind of good word for me, to Thomas, because he told me that the studio had been booked out again, in August, this time for the Australians, and they had specifically asked for me to engineer. I was suspicious, thinking it had to be Nick, still trying to worm his way into intimacy with Blixa, through his link to me.

But, to my surprise, when they returned to Berlin, I found out it was Rowland who had asked for me by name. “I trust you.” he told me later in his quiet little voice, looking at me with those huge, slightly protruding little-boy-blue eyes of his, when they arrived back at the studio. Which was news to me, given how territorial he had got when I tried to touch his amp. “Or rather, Gen trusts you, and I don’t know a better recommendation than that.”

I tried to think of when I’d ever particularly sat down and talked to Gen. Maybe I’d set up some keyboards for her to play on the sessions, and obviously, I always asked her specially to soundcheck the piano for me when I needed a level on the line. I just showed her the same respect and consideration that I showed any musician that walked in the door of our studio. (It wasn’t until later in the month, when Malaria! returned from London, and told me witheringly of their experiences with engineers that weren’t Manc Mark, that I realised that this was not always the case with male engineers!)

But the later months of that summer brought many changes, for the Birthday Party had decided, not just to visit to Berlin to record, but to move here, permanently. Blixa was absolutely delighted with the news. The mentionitis accelerated as the date of the beloved’s return grew closer. People, by whom I mean mostly Salomé and Rainer, teased the both of us about Blixa’s obvious fascination.

>>Ooh, Carter, are you just going to sit there and listen to that little slut talk about other men in front of you like that<< the pair of them would tease back and forth at the Jungle, knowing that it would make both Blixa glare at them, and me sputter incoherently that we weren’t lovers, and anyway, my masculinity wasn’t fragile enough to be threatened by the likes of Nick.

And yet, the return of the Australians coincided with Blixa being caught out in a long-running fib. Early one afternoon, he had been standing behind the bar of the Risk, talking on the phone to a British music journalist, as Gudrun had banned him from using her phone, after a very expensive long-distance phone call to arrange a gig in Paris. Although the New Buildings’ records were only available on import in the UK, there was a huge amount of interest in this band who were rumoured to take heavy construction equipment to the venues they played. So a music journalist was trying to get some provocative quotes out of Blixa, while Blixa was trying to pump him for his contacts, and advice on cool UK labels.

Blixa had asked me to listen in, in case he needed help with translation, because he was often frustrated by doing interviews in English, claiming >>It’s very difficult, having these complicated thoughts I cannot express in this simple language.<<

I tried to tell him that English wasn’t a simple language, it was actually a highly nuanced and
complex one, and the problem was actually his limited Gymnasium English, but Blixa never would
listen to criticism.

I had previously made the mistake of trying to correct his pronunciation once or twice, but he had
simply glared at me and said >>Well, you understood what I said, yes?<<

>>Yes, but that’s not how you say that...<< I tried to instruct him. “It’s ‘I do not think so’. ‘Think’
with a th, and ‘so’, with a ssss sound, like a German ß, not ‘I do not zhink zo’.”

But his glare turned stony, and he stuck his protruding lower lip out at me, and insisted, “If you can
unterschtandt vhat I saidt I do not zee vhat zhe problem iz.”

After a few rounds of this, I simply gave up and left him to his extraordinary rendition of the English
language. I offered to help if there were any technical terms he didn’t understand, but he was so
independent-minded (or more likely so stubborn) that he refused to call on me for assistance, so
instead I sat in the window of the bar and sketched as he barked at the journalist in heavily accented
but rapid-fire, semi-mangled English.

And of course, while this surreal conversation was going on, who should come sloping up to the
door, but Nick, come looking for his drugs buddy. I didn’t hesitate. Blixa’s childish sense of mischief
was clearly starting to wear off on me, so I padded quietly to the door, slid back the bolt to admit
Nick, then stood back, curious to watch the feathers fly as Nick discovered that he had been the
victim of an extended practical joke.

At first, Nick just looked astonished, as if confronted with a talking dog, an English-speaking Blixa.
Then his eyebrows knitted together and annoyance twitched across his face, as he realised he’d been
had. But then he started to smile, and coughed gently to catch Blixa’s attention. Blixa, thinking it was
me, didn’t even turn around, waving his hand behind him as if to quiet me over some correction of
his appalling pronunciation, then threw back over his shoulder “Help yourself to a trink, I vill be
chust a minute,” thinking, of course, that I would take only a can of coke.

Nick, however, took that as an invitation to grab a bottle of whisky and pour himself almost half a
tumbler. He sat drinking it, as Blixa, still engrossed in the telephone call, really started to fly at
amphetamine-speed, revealing his true proficiency with the English language.

Finally, Blixa ended the conversation and hung up, then turned around, expecting to find only me,
but instead confronted Nick, and his now-empty glass of whisky. “So,” drawled Nick. “What’s a
man got to do to get a drink around here?”

Blixa slowly grinned, his lips pulling back from his teeth in a sheepish expression, but he took out
another tumbler and poured both of them generous drinks. >>Just ask nicely.<<

“In English!” roared Nick. “Or do I need to get your fucking girlfriend here to translate again?”

I bristled, and prepared to give him another lecture on how Blixa and I were not an item, and even if
we had been, I had a name of my own, and it was Carter, but Blixa let out his braying laugh.

“You really do need to learn how to schpeak German,” he said quite reasonably, but Nick had
calmed down, and was staring at his friend with an expression that indicated he wasn’t actually angry
at him for essentially lying to him for a couple of months, but actually quite impressed at his
deviousness.

“Sooroooo. How’s tricks. What’s going on, with...uuuuhhh... how are the, erm, Neubauten sessions
going?” Nick could barely manage Neubauten. He clearly wasn’t even going to attempt
Blixa smiled. “Zhey are going... interesting.”

“Does interesting mean good, or does interesting mean bad?”

Blixa’s smile widened to that of a wolf, for he dearly loved playing with Nick and turning his own words back on him. “But, Nick, you always say zhat man is a complex mixture of botze good and evil, and it’s important to embrace zee evil side of vonself as well as zee good. So why do you vant me to say if zee sessions are going vell, or zhey are going badly. Why kent zhey just be going... eeeenteresting?”

For a moment, Nick just stared as it penetrated his befuddled brain that he had been outmanoeuvred. But then he roared with laughter that shook his great spiky black cloud of hair, and pointed a cigarette-stained finger at Blixa. “I like you,” he proclaimed. “You are as clever and as slippery as some... uuuhhh... some trickster character out of a, erm, aboriginal folk tale.”

Blixa really liked that comparison, throwing his shoulders back and sort of preening himself a bit. Blixa tended to slouch so much, and he was so spindly I often forgot how incredibly tall he was, but he made Nick, who was easily over six foot, look like a child beside him. “Do you know, zee Trickster God is a recurring figure in Germanic myths and folk-tales, also? I haff a very great affinity for zhis being, who pops up in our myttology as Loki, and again and again in African folk tales, in Native American mytts, and also zhe Australian figure of Crow...”

I smirked as he showed off, as I knew that he had been reading a copy of the New Larousse Encyclopaedia of World Mythology at Wolfgang’s after finishing the book on Early Christian Heresies, but Nick looked quite impressed, before resolutely adding, “And Bugs Bunny.”

“How so?” demanded Blixa, looking more than a little outraged, as he was, at that point in time, having not yet been to America, still very opposed on some kneejerk level, to American pop culture references.

“He’s... uuuhh, the trickster rabbit, always outwitting his opponents, erm, y’know, outsmarting Elmer Fudd or Daffy Duck, or, uuuhh, whoever goes up against him and tries to hunt him. And the tricks that the, uuhhh, the cartoonists used for him to escape, were, uuhh, on many levels, pure surrealist earth magic. Bending the reality of the canvas in order to help him escape.”

“Is zhis true?” demanded Blixa, turning to me for back-up. “Carter is an underground comic book artist,” he added by way of explanation, as an aside to Nick.

“Well,” I hedged, thinking about it, a little loathe to take Nick’s side over Blixa, as for many reasons, I could never quite bring myself to trust Nick. “He does have a lot of the fluidity of the Trickster God. Especially the way he seemed to change gender at will, how he would put on women’s clothes to flummox and seduce Elmer Fudd in particular.”

“Haha,” cried Blixa, his eyes flashing. Clearly, he liked that idea. “Yes, Loki vas also able to change gender at vill, to seduce anyvon, god or mortal.”

Nick blinked, completely taken aback, though I noticed that he did not address his rebuttal to me, who had raised the idea, but to Blixa, almost completely blanking me out of the conversation. “Are you implying that Bugs Bunny is a queer?” He didn’t use that word the way that Wolfgang or Tabea or Salomé and Rainer tossed around its German equivalent, as a badge of defiance and pride. He used it like he was... concerned that these degenerate Europeans had just smeared an icon.
“Vell, vhat has your knickers in a twist,” retorted Blixa. (I laughed, because Blixa had so clearly picked up one of my English expressions, which I used privately to describe when a musician got too heated in the studio.) “Vouldn’t you say it was ferry queer indeed to change von’s sex at vill, to be a male rabbit von moment, and a female rabbit zee next? Zhat is zhe fundamental of zee Trickster’s ... zee Qualität... vhat is zee vord I vant, Carter?” He flicked his fingers back and forth in my direction, though I wasn’t entirely sure what word he was grasping for. Blixa, I guessed, seemed to use the term “queer” the same way that Wolfgang and Tabea did, and I was coming to do, as a declaration of some integral aspect of who we were.

“Sorry, I need German for this,” I apologised to Nick, then quickly asked >>Well, what are you trying to say, Blix? Are you trying to say that the ability to switch between genders is an inherent aspect of the Trickster God? Or are you saying that The Trickster’s ability to switch genders makes him fundamentally gay?<< I knew how Blixa liked to play around with language, and always had to pin him down before I even attempted to translate.

>>Both<< said Blixa defiantly, then tried to say it in English, but that was one of those words he really struggled with, and it ended up something like “Botze.”

“Boats?” said Nick, a little confused.

“I don’t know that the latter is true,” I hedged.

“Look at yourself, look at me,” said Blixa by way of defence.

“Look at Gudrun,” I countered. “She’s very androgynous, but she’s not gay.”

“Gudrun is complicated,” laughed Blixa. “She goes to bed vit boys, but you notice she only likes to dance vit zhe girls...”

“Look at Rowland,” I countered, with a wince at being reminded of Gudrun’s rejection. “I thought he was a girl the first night I met all the Aussies. But he’s not one of us, he’s got a girlfriend.”

Blixa stiffened as I mentioned Rowland. “I don’t know anyzhing about Rowland...” he retorted a little dismissively.

“Rowland... uuuhhhhh... yeah, uh, Rowland is complicated,” said Nick, looking down into his tumbler of whisky. “Too complicated.”

“How so?” I asked.

He ignored me, and turned again to Blixa. “So you think Bugs Bunny is some fag trickster god? Are you gonna leave me any, uuhhh... icons of my youth?”

As Blixa’s smile grew wolfish again, something started to niggle at me. “I tought you vere iconoclast, Nick. But vait until you hear about John Vayne and Monty Clift, ja?”

As the two of them resumed their odd argument-flirtation, I realised exactly what was bothering me about Nick. It wasn’t just that he ignored me, or treated me like a simple interpreter, rather than a participant in the conversation. Lots of English-speaking people visiting Berlin leaned on me or on Manc Mark for help communicating with the local celebrities – Manc Mark in particular ended up standing by, communicating vague compliments while English fanboys drooled over Christiane F. But what bothered me about Nick was the way that he blatantly ignored ideas that I brought up, until Blixa repeated them. Then, he seemed to find them interesting, and to make matters, worse, subsequently carried on as if they had been Blixa’s ideas in the first place.
But the irritation stayed with me, and I found myself venting about it at Iron-Grey, now that Gudrun had finally returned from the recording sessions in London and was holding court at the shop again.

>>Honestly, Gudrun, he just sat there, carrying on as if I didn’t even exist. When I suggested that Bugs Bunny might be gay, it was just like... ooh, what is that noise, is it the wind? I hear nothing... But as soon as Blixa says, y’know...<< I found myself deepening my voice and Berlinising my consonants to imitate Blixa’s unique way of speaking, as everyone did when they quoted him.

>>'Yes, Bugs Bunny is a gay trickster god’, all of sudden, Nick perks up his ears and says ‘oh my god, Blixa, I never knew that Bugs Bunny was gay'.<<

>>Of course Bugs Bunny is gay, it’s a rolling joke in queer culture<< laughed Tabea, who had been hanging out and brainstorming over female filmmakers to make Malaria!’s first proper music video.

>>People have even made little films about it in the Super-8 scene, you don’t even have to splice the original cartoons that much. So it’s not as if either of you came up with this idea.<<

>>It’s not even that I came up with the idea...<< I moaned. >>It’s just that he never acknowledges one of my contributions to a conversation until Blixa repeats it.<<

>>Oh god, I know. There was one engineer in the studio in London who was like that. I would ask, can we get some more reverb on the vocals, please, it’s sounding too dry. And he would completely ignore me, until thirty seconds later, Mark would say, ‘can Gudrun get some reverb on her vocals, please?’ And then, of course, he would agree, ‘oh yes, more reverb on the vocals. Of course.’ At least Mark was nice about it, and would listen to me, and sort of pass the messages on, like it’s a submarine: more snare, less tom... MORE SNARE, LESS TOM!!! But it’s absurd to have to go through this charade.<<

>>Well, at least Mark tries to compensate for it. Blixa does nothing to correct it!<<

Gudrun just laughed. >>Blixa is just as susceptible to a handsome face as the rest of us. Of course he wants to impress Nick, with your clever ideas.<<


>>Nick<< she said, as if I were a dummy that needed everything spelled out for me. >>I’m sorry that you have competition now for Blixa’s attention, but it’s quite clear he’s as smitten with that dishy Aussie as the rest of the girls in Berlin are.<< Everyone laughed, in a kind of joyous giggle of girlhood.

>>What?!<< I almost exploded, as I had had more than enough of this from Rainer and Salomé already. >>For a start, I am not jealous of Blixa, because we are not an item, so don’t even make a joke of it. And second... Nick? Handsome? He’s as ugly as the devil.<<

Chloe laughed from the back of the shop. >>The Devil is the most handsome man to ever walk the earth, that’s why sin is so seductive.<<

>>Oh, he’s a bit of boor, but he is very handsome, come on, Carter<< protested Gudrun.

I turned to Manon for backup, but she nodded enthusiastically. >>He is very pretty. You just don’t see it coz you’re a lesbian.<<

>>Wait, wait, no<< I sputtered. >>I am certainly capable of recognising that a man is attractive, even if I’m not attracted to them. I mean, I can see, plainly, that, for example, Wolfgang is a good-looking fellow. And even among the Aussies... that bassist of theirs, how’s he called... Tracy. He is dead
handsome, like a punk rock John Wayne. And Rowland, Rowland is so pretty, he could make even a dyke like me change her mind. But Nick? Have you lot lost your minds? He’s ugly as sin.<<

>>Mmmm, sin<< mused Gudrun. >>Delicious, delicious sin.<<

>>Nah, he’s totally hot<< agreed Suzanne. >>I would willingly go to hell for that hot babe.<<

There were various murmurs and purrs and growls of agreement from the various corners of Iron-Grey as the girls present fell to discussing exactly what nature of sin they would like to commit with the snub-nosed Australian.

>>Look, I am sorry, but you have all collectively lost your minds. He’s hideous.<<

Gudrun started to giggle. >>Hands up here, who thinks that Carter will be bedding Nick in less than three months.<< Several hands shot up.

>>Fuck off Gudrun, you still think I’m screwing Blixa.<<

>>Wherever would people get that idea<< Gudrun chortled wickedly, and picked up the latest issue of Karnal Komics, opening to a page where a monstrous re-animated pig-Blixa was falling with some gusto upon a young man with glasses, that I realised, she had taken for a self-portrait.

>>Hands up who thinks Blixa will bed Nick before any of us do<< giggled Chloe, and every hand in the room bar mine went straight up.
Chapter Summary

Carter falls in love at first sight, with a beautiful red-headed girl - again! - only to discover her heart already belongs to the person they hate most in West Berlin.

It astonished me, just how quickly the normally standoffish and sardonic West Berlin scene accepted and absorbed Nick Cave. After all, it had taken me six months of living in the city to even get inside the Risk bar. And once inside, it wasn’t until Blixa had decided he liked me, and Gudrun decided I was a useful person to know, that I had actually been accepted, and treated as one of the gang, though it still took me ages after that before Maria stopped calling me a ‘pilot fish’. But the famous punk-rock-star, with his face in the music papers and his records on the coolest label in England, it was like the whole scarred, split city of Berlin just rolled over on her back for him, like the old whore she was. Nick was abruptly everywhere, not just in all the coolest bars and the hippest clubs, but at parties and rehearsal studios, as everyone seemed to fall over themselves, tugging at their forelocks in an effort to impress him with their hospitality. The city that eschewed not just stars, but the whole concept of stardom itself, had decided as if on a whim, to completely deify him.

And I had no back-up in my single-sided crusade against the deification of Nick Cave, as the only other person in the city who hadn’t fallen hook, line and sinker for the annoying Aussie seemed to be Bettina. And Bettina was flying off to Canada with her girlfriend, whose newest film was debuting at some film festival in Montreal. Anne had not been in Germany much over the previous six months, because she had been working flat-out on this film, which she had not just starred in – well, starred in a double billing, in both male and female drag – but helped write the screenplay for, as well. Bettina had been raving about it, based on the various clips and edits she’d witnessed on previous visits to New York, saying it was like a New Wave lesbian sci-fi thriller, with groundbreaking ideas about both gender and the nature of sexuality itself. She told me it was a dark commentary on the hideous primacy of male pleasure, with a political message buried underneath the sex and drugs and exotic fashions. Obviously, Bettina thought Anne was a genius, positively bursting with pride for her talented girlfriend. But I was withholding judgement until I saw for myself what Hollywood had done with Anne’s powerful sexuality.

The way that Bettina talked about Anne was adorable; she was just so clearly smitten with her glamorous ‘film star’ girlfriend that it made my heart ache. I guess it awakened something in me that I had almost forgotten about: the desire to have a girlfriend. Sure, I had friends in West Berlin. Really good friends: close emotional friends like Blixa and Bettina; good supportive friends like Wolfgang and Gudrun; happy, fun party friends like Tabea and Salomé. And it wasn’t like I couldn’t go out and pull, in the queer clubs of West Berlin, if I really fancied a shag. But when I saw Bettina getting so excited about Anne, there was a part of me that just ached for the physicality of having a girlfriend.

What I really wanted was someone lovely and soft and feminine to slouch around with; someone not just for a shag, but for that affectionate couple-bond of intimacy and understanding, and all those shared little moments. I wanted a girlfriend. But instead, I was spending a week cooped up in the studio with Melbourne’s most toxic cartoons of masculinity. As the Birthday Party sessions approached, I found myself feeling more and more apprehensive about what I had signed myself up for.
The morning the Aussies’ recording sessions were due to start was a sweltering August day when
the air hung heavy and close with the humidity of the buried swampland around the Spree. Before
work began, I packed up my van and drove across town to pick up the special guitar amps that
Rowland had requested for the sessions. But as I was driving back down the main drag of Kreuzberg
towards the studio, my heart suddenly stopped.

Because there, on the sidewalk ahead of me, walking with that slow, meandering but purposeful gait,
er her red-gold hair pouring down across her shoulders, and over her vintage sundress, was Ilsa. I was
going too fast to stop, but as my van sailed by, I gazed back over my shoulder, and caught only a
glimpse of her round face and huge, almost childlike eyes in the mirror. My session forgotten, I did a
terribly illegal U-turn at the next interchange, then drove back down the other side of the street, my
heart pounding as I saw that yes, the woman with the mass of gingery tresses was still there, she was
not a phantom, she was a real human being strolling down the Strasse, swinging her handbag and
gaping up at the shop signs with the exact same tilted angle of her little pixie chin that I remembered
of Ilsa.

Finally, I got back on the right side of the road, and pulled up alongside her. “Ilsa!” I called, but she
didn’t turn around, engrossed in a shop window. “Ilsa!” Still no response.

Oh, sod it, I thought, and parked the van in an illegal zone, then came flying out of it towards her,
rushing up to her, and then at the last minute, the girl turned around, and I stopped dead. For it was
not Ilsa. On closer examination, she was much more slender and willowy than the plump, dimpled
Ilsa had ever been. This girl had amber-brown eyes where Ilsa’s had been blue, her hair was lighter
than Ilsa’s had been, more a coppery strawberry blonde than a fiery auburn, and the curve of her jaw
made her face seem less determined and cheeky, more dreamy and waif-like. And I suddenly realised
exactly how embarrassing this looked, flying out of van to greet a complete stranger.

But this strange girl just laughed, and did not make a scene out of it, as if it were a common
occurrence in her life. For a girl that beautiful, it surely must have been. “Why, hello there,” she said,
in a faintly sleepy voice, then corrected herself. “Oh, sorry. I mean, Guten Tag.”

“No, it’s OK, I speak English,” I assured her. The sun was in my eyes, and the heat was quiet
intense, and I felt my head spinning as she smiled up at me expectantly, as if gently but insistently
wanting to know the reason for the interruption. I reached for some explanation. “I’m sorry. I thought
you were someone else. You reminded me of someone I used to know.”

“Really? Is it a very sad story? You looked so excited and happy as you came rushing up, as excited
as a little boy, that I wanted to share in your joy. But now you look so sad. Who was she?”

“My ex-girlfriend.” My brain was dizzy, spinning out a line of poetry I sometimes used to greet Ilsa
with, though she understood not a word of the English. “Red hair she had, and golden skin, her
sulky lips were shaped for sin... Oh love! For love, I could not speak, she left me winded, wilting,
weak, and held in brown arms strong and bare, and wound with flaming ropes of hair...”

The girl smiled disarmingly and rolled her eyes a little. “Well, I always thought Betjeman was a bit of
an old pervert, but it’s a charming sentiment.”

“You’re not one for poetry, then,” I stuttered, feeling myself a little winded, wilting and weak.

“Oh, on the contrary... I love poetry... I am... well, I like to think of myself as a bit of a poet.” She
had a very slow and careful way of speaking, her voice very soft and a little high, kind of baby-girl.
“Though I like to think I could do a bit better than ‘red-haired robber queen’. ”

I simply stared at her with a kind of fluttery sensation coursing through my veins. “I’d like to hear
She smiled in a way that was at once quite dreamy, and yet a little dangerous. “Splitting up the concrete, the earth quakes. Splitting up the concrete, the earth quakes and waits. I lifted up God’s dress, punched him and got in. I lifted up God’s tiny dress, and punched him again.” The words, especially coming from that pert, sulky little-girl mouth, seemed genuinely shocking, and I stepped back a little. “Not a fan, huh,” she laughed, her eyes flashing mischievously.

“No, I like it,” I assured her.

“I’m Anita,” she said, and extended her hand, as if to shake. Not knowing what else to do, I took it, but then bent over to deposit a kiss on her knuckles. She laughed, but quickly withdrew it. “And you are...?”

“Carter,” I told her, trying to remember my manners. I was just so knocked out, the resemblance to Ilsa, the fact that she was a poet, much like Maud, much like Blixa...

“Carter was a painter’s cat,” she said, in that slow, little-girl voice of hers.

“Well, actually, this Carter is an electrician.”

She turned around and leaned against the shop window, digging in her handbag for a pack of cigarettes. For a moment, she extended it to me, but I shook my head, so she lit one for herself and carefully smoked as she told her tale. “No, that was a book I really loved, when I was a child. It was, like... a history of art, but told through the story of this cat, Carter, who was both the... the Muse, and yet somehow the creation of this eccentric artist. And every morning, the artist – Mr Blob, for that was his name – would wake up and paint Carter in whatever style he was interested in painting that day. One day he was blue and fuzzy and speckled, like an impressionist, the next day he had two tails and an orange head with the eyes on both sides, like a Picasso. The day after that, he was skinny and emaciated, like a Giacometti sculpture, and then on another day, Mr Blob just did a line drawing, and didn’t bother colouring him in, so Carter was invisible, and he got to chase all the dogs around and drive them mad. It was hilarious.”

“That sounds amazing.” I said, genuinely intrigued by this strange book, and the strange girl that loved it. “I’m actually an amateur artist – well, I draw comic books – and I’ve often wondered about the characters I draw. Like, after I Xerox the stories and send them off into the world, do these characters go on to live lives without me?” I thought for a moment, about Pig-Blixa and the unlucky boy with glasses, and how Gudrun had read so much into those ink sketches.

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“Of course they do!” insisted Anita, blinking very slowly at me. “But, y’know, when I was a kid, I loved that story. And I always thought... what fun it would be, to be a painter’s cat, and be created anew every day, for a new adventure. But as I got older, I realised... the book is also actually an extended metaphor for the problems of living your life as a Muse, and what it means for a creator to... to tell your story without your input or your consent.” A sudden sad expression came across her face, and I wanted to put my arm around her shoulders to comfort her, and ask her why she looked so sad, but of course at that moment, the ugly green van of the Polizei appeared on the other side of the street, and I started to worry about my illegally parked vehicle.

>>Hold on, hold on, I’m just going to move the van... just finishing up a job<< I shouted as I got up and walked quickly to my vehicle. But to my surprise, Anita had crushed her cigarette with her heel, and followed me to the kerb.

“You have a van?” she asked.
“This white van is mine, yes.” I said, and suddenly saw a way to prolong the conversation, all thoughts of the recording session I was supposed to be engineering in 20 minutes time flying completely out of my head. “May I offer you a ride somewhere?”

“That’d be grand. See, I’m supposed to be looking for a recording studio...”

“That’s a wonderful coincidence,” I told her as I unlocked the door, and she climbed into the passenger’s seat. “I work in a recording studio.”

“I thought you said you were an electrician.”

“There’s electricity in recording studios, isn’t there?”

She gave a little laugh that was like the tinkling of bells, and it warmed my heart. Get a girl to laugh, and you were halfway there. But as I pulled away from the kerb, she glanced into the back of the van. “Oh, I know those kind of amps. They’re very nice. My boyfriend’s guitarist has always wanted a pair, but they’re so expensive.”

I sucked in my cheeks, feeling my heart sinking, as I knew that I was being told about this boyfriend as a sort of warning that this ride did not mean what I hoped it meant. “So where am I driving you to?”

She dug in her handbag, and produced a crumpled sheet of paper, with the Iron-Grey logo on the back of it, on which someone had written, in an all-too-familiar spidery hand, the address of the recording studio where I worked. Oh god, let this not be happening. This beautiful woman, with whom I had struck up such an instant rapport, please, dear god, let this not be happening. “That is, by an enormous coincidence, the studio where I work,” I told her slowly, feeling the pit of my stomach dropping away with the fear of what she was going to say next.

“No way.” And suddenly she was looking me up and down, with that slow disbelief giving way to shock that I had come to dread and yet expect, every time someone realised they had read my lying body incorrectly. “Oh, wow. Nick and Rowland were saying that it was so amazing, that they had found a studio with a female sound engineer. That must be... you? You’re a girl, aren’t you? I’m so sorry; I took you for a boy.”

I nodded slowly and fell into silence as I reached the block of the studio where I worked, and started to perform the delicate operation whereby I pulled across the road, and then backed the van slowly through the road entrance into the courtyard behind. When I was parked, I went around to the back and lifted the two amps out, then locked up the van. After unlocking the door, I asked Anita to hold it open, then picked up one amp in each arm, and trudged through.

When I put them down to unlock the internal door, Anita tugged at the handle of one as if wanting to help, then gasped, as she found she could barely get it off the floor. “You must be incredibly strong” she whistled, and I felt my heart struggling in my chest as hope fought against despair.

As I got the two amps through into the studio, I saw that the band had already started to gather there, plus a couple of girlfriends and the increasingly omnipresent Blixa. Since even Nick was there, I realised I must be incredibly late. Spotting my heavy load, Nick rushed over, and tried to take one of the amps from me, not even in some chivalrous gesture of helping me out, but more in some typical display of masculine one-upmanship. For a moment, I struggled, but then thought, fuck it, this is not worth the ego. But as my hand left the amp’s handle and its full weight fell on him, he staggered back, as if not expecting it to be quite so heavy. Feeling my ego somewhat gratified, I snorted and shifted the other over to the corner of the floor where Rowland was already spreading out his guitar paraphernalia.
And then, my heart crumbled, as I knew it must, for of course, the goddess with the cascade of coppery hair and the sleepy bedroom eyes turned and threw her arms around Nick and greeted him with a kiss that left no doubt as to their passion. And if I had instinctively disliked Nick before, for his brusque manners, his boorish ways and his irritating way of ignoring me for Blixa, at that moment, I could feel the vague sense of dislike actively curdling into hatred. That girl, that weird, dreamy, poetry-writing pearl of a girl with the face of my lost lover, and the intoxicating little-girl voice that seemed to hide some mysterious intelligence, she had chosen this burning rubbish-tip of a human being to love? I felt so angry I had to turn away, and busy myself in sorting out power supplies for Rowland’s hired amps, setting them on standby for the tubes to warm up.

Fortunately, there was a pile of work for me to lose myself in. Thomas had already selected the mics he wanted to use for the various instruments, and left them out for me to set up. Neumanns for the new guitar amps – wow, they must really be special – and the Shures for the drum kit, while the bass would go direct. Desperately, I tried to blot out the conversation on the other side of the room, while Rowland fussed with the amps, turning them on and starting to play with adjusting their settings.

“Oh, listen to this... the spring reverb...” Knocking the cabinet a glancing blow, he was rewarded with a strange, rattling echo that sounded like Andrew knocking one of his metal springs down a flight of stairs. “Vintage Fender Twins... oh, these have the tremolo, too, I think I’m love...”

I stopped to watch what he was doing, intrigued by the weird noises the amp was making, even before he had plugged in his guitar. “OK. At Lydia’s sessions, you kept talking about the tremolo on your guitar. Is it correct that there is a tremolo on your guitar, and a tremolo on your amplifier, as well?”

Rowland’s face lit up with a girlish enthusiasm, as he picked up his guitar to show me. “Well, a tremolo is rather like... erm, I suppose it’s just a technical musical term for... well... it makes the music swoop, or slide, or shiver and shake...”

“It is an Italian term,” boomed Blixa from the other side of the room, slightly territorially, as if he felt it was his right alone to instruct me on music. “It means to tremble, to quiver.”

“Yes, that’s right,” agreed Rowland in his soft voice, his long delicate fingers going to the metal fixtures of his guitar. “Do you see this, erm, plate here? With the rod attached? This is a guitar tremolo. Fender Jaguars have a very special kind, called a floating tremolo. That means that you can either press down on it, releasing the tension, and deepening the note...” Plucking a note on the guitar, he demonstrated, and the sound swooped down. “Or you can pull up on it, increasing the tension and raising the note.” He repeated the process, and this time the sound bent up.

“It’s got kind of spaghetti western sound to it,” I observed, glancing across the room at Blixa.

“Precisely,” said Rowland, with an excited smile. “Very Ennio Morricone. He is one of my favourites.”

“He is one of my favourites,” countered Blixa, in the strangest of tones. “Carter and I looked at his film, Zhe Good, Zhe Bad and Zhe Ugly, last veek on zhe television.”

Rowland ignored Blixa, and moved over to his amp, plugging in the guitar. “Now this is Fender amp tremolo...” He plucked a note on his guitar, then as it echoed through the amp, he twiddled a knob, and suddenly the guitar started to go all choppy, the sound dropping out in bits, then as he adjusted the knob, the chopiness seemed to speed up, until the guitar sounded like it was almost purring.

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“Wow,” I said, intrigued by the effect. “That sounds... awfully like the 60s. Like all those odd psychedelic records they would play on pirate radio when I was a very little girl.”
Rowland seemed to grow more animated than I had ever seen him before. “Yeah, loads of 60s garage bands used to use it. The Electric Prunes, the Seeds, the Count Five. Shadow Morton even used to use it on Shangri-Las tracks for dramatic tension, do you know his work? He is one of my favourite producers of all time.”

“I know the Shangri-Las. Gudrun likes them a lot, she played them for me. But I’m not familiar with Shadow... what was his name?” I confessed.

“Shadow Morton. He was the producer, and kind of mastermind of the Shangri-Las. Gen turned me on to his work... He’s incredible. Well, I can tape it for you, if you’re interested.” But abruptly he fell silent, as the shadow of one of his bandmates fell over us.

“Are you going to start mic-ing the drum kit any time soon?” It was Mick demanding this, who I didn’t know at all, and had never much interacted with. He stood with his hands on his hips, glaring at me with a quite insistent expression.

“Well, I didn’t see your drummer about. I was going to wait for him to get here, so he could tell me what he wanted from the kit...”

Mick abruptly cut me off. “Phil isn’t with us any more. I’m playing drums for the band now. Can you maybe start mic-ing the drumkit now? We have been waiting...”

“No problem.” I straightened up, disliking the tone he was using, but I knew better than to be anything other than perfectly helpful in the studio. Tensions could run high in any session, and it was always better not to add to them. But before I went to the kit, I turned to Rowland and touched him gently on the sleeve. “I would love if you would make me that tape. Feel free to put things on it, that you really like the guitar tone on. I could learn a lot from something like that. It would help me record you better.”

Rowland’s smile was really something, especially in the face of Mick’s gruff demandingness, as he retreated to the drum stool, and started criticising every mic choice that Thomas had made, as I tried my best to set them up. But Blixa, well, Blixa glared at Rowland with veiled animosity, like I had no idea that Blixa could get so weird about the idea that I might be allowed to receive a mixtape from a boy that wasn’t him. But then he put his nose in the air, and stalked off, ignoring us both, to focus on the object of his affections.

As I worked, I could hear occasional waves of stifled laughter from across the room. Every time I looked up, it seemed that Blixa and Nick and that red-headed goddess Anita were wrapped in a little knot of conversation, bending their heads over something, each in turn, followed by a wave of giggles. It took me about twenty minutes to spot the small bag that Blixa kept dipping into, and realise that they were consuming some illicit substance, probably speed, or more likely coke, due to the high-octane giggling. Sudden annoyance coursed through me. Not about the drugs, as obviously I had got high with Blixa dozens, maybe even hundreds of times now. But I was annoyed that I was at work, with my boss keeping an eye on me from the other side of the control room glass, and therefore utterly unable to participate, and they were making absolutely no effort to hide what they were doing. I mean, they hadn’t even asked me. I would, of course, have had to say no, but still, I felt irritated at being left out of the intimate little knot that their drug use created.

Once the drums were fully mic-ed, I tapped on the control room window to let Thomas know that Mick was ready to start line-checking, then deliberately walked over to the Blixa-Nick-Anita knot, wanting very much to disrupt it, to pry my friend, and the girl I was crushing on, away from that awful man.

With my hands on my hips, I faced Nick. “So, do you want to cut a guide vocal, while the band
record? Because it would be better if you went in the iso-booth to do so. I know you sing pretty loud, and we don’t want it to bleed through.”

But Nick just blinked his slow, reptilian junkie-blink at me, as if he were afraid to speak to me. Christ, this band! Each of them, with their own special brand of weirdness: Rowland, who treated me like some kind of visiting dignitary; Mick who ordered me around like a roadie; and Nick, who did his best to ignore everything I said, unless Blixa repeated it. For a moment, I was considering slipping into German to ask Blixa to re-pose the question, when finally Nick seemed to jolt to attention.

“Oh, you mean me. I’m not singing on this track. Anita is.”

I turned to look at the small, delicate girl, and tried not to let the shock show on my face. “I think you should probably go in the iso-booth, then,” I heard my voice say, hoping it didn’t look too obvious that I was trying to get her away from the men. “Through here...”

I just wished I’d had advance warning of her presence. But then again, how would I have prepared? Well, I’d at least have shown her the same touches of kindness and respect that I had shown Lydia. I’d have aired out the iso-booth, maybe burned some incense or lit a scented candle to mask the scent of sweating male bodies. I might even have got flowers. Hell, for Anita, I would have sourced an entire bouquet of roses, chrysanthemums and lilies. But instead, I just took her through into the booth, found her a pair of headphones, adjusted them to be closer to her size, then plugged them into the small control panel.

“They’re only line-checking the drums, so it’s going to be kinda boring for you, but you can adjust the volume with this knob here, and get it so that the headphones are comfortable.”

She nodded and looked at the control panel like she was afraid of it.

“You’ve done this before, of course, right?”

“Oh yeah, a million times.”

“OK, if you want anything, like a jug of iced water, or tea with lemon, or... anything. Just let me know.”

She nodded and stood on her tip-toes trying to reach the mic, which was set up for approximately Nick’s height. I laughed and brought it down for her. Smiling sheepishly, she whispered, “It looks so easy when Nick does it.”

“OK, I’ll give you some tips,” I laughed. “Whatever you’ve seen Nick doing in the studio.. please do the exact opposite of that.”

She laughed aloud, then held her hand over the microphone, a charmingly naïve little-girl gesture, as if afraid of being overheard, even though the booth was completely sound isolated. “You know, Nick’s really not that bad once you get to know him. He’s actually really quite shy, and sensitive, and a little bit awkward underneath. He just makes up this big act of being a troglodyte punk wildman to cover up the fact that he doesn’t really like being himself very much. You can’t let it get to you, the stuff he says and does, while he’s in performance mode.”

We looked at each other, and for a moment, so much seemed to pass unsaid between us, but then I just shrugged. “I’m just here to do a job. The band asked for me, and I’m going to do the best job I can. But that’s what this is. A job.”

“He’d really like to be friends with you guys. Especially your Blixa. You know, he really struggled
with that in London. He found it impossible to make friends, and it’s not easy for a shy, sensitive guy like Nick, to be without friends.”

“Nick. Shy and sensitive?” I said, unable to stop my voice dripping with sarcasm, but Anita stopped me and touched me gently on the arm.

“He is, you know, though he uses his charm and his acting skills to try to hide it. And I know he doesn’t seem like it, but he craves approval deep down. He wants to be liked. And I can see that Mark and Christoph and especially Blixa are the first new people he’s clicked with, in a really long time. Well, since we left Australia, basically.”

Her understanding of him and her love for him were so palpable that I almost wanted to run out of the room. How was it that such a kind, beautiful, sensitive, intelligent girl, could end up saddled to a boor like him? But I did my best to nod and smile. “I don’t know what people have told you, but I am not the boss of Blixa. Blixa is his own man, and there’s no one alive or dead that can make that man do a damned thing he doesn’t want to do.”

Anita smiled mysteriously, as if she knew something I didn’t. “Maybe so, but everyone tells me you’re one of the few people Blixa actually respects and listens to.”

“Everyone?” I asked, confused. “Who says that? Honestly, don’t listen to gossip, and whatever it is people think about... Me and Blixa.”

But Anita nodded smugly. “Blixa told me so himself.”

I stared at her, completely flabbergasted. It still flummoxed me, this idea that Blixa not only thought about me when I wasn’t there, but talked about me to other people. Looking out through the window into the main studio, I caught sight of him standing by Nick, the pair of them chatting with quite a bit of animation. “Well,” I managed to say. “I do have to say, Blixa has had the most enormous case of mentionitis about Nick since we got back from Amsterdam.”

“Mentionitis. That’s a good word for it.” She giggled wickedly. “Nick, too. He talked about him so much, at first I thought he was some girl. So I started asking him, should I be a little jealous of this weird Blixa character you met in the Netherlands?”

“Blixa’s a good person,” I said, a little too defensively.

“I’m not digging for gossip, but you’re clearly close. You and him are...?”

“No, absolutely not,” I snapped, a little sick of the way that conversations kept trying to go down that road, then relented, hating myself for making this beautiful girl draw back slightly at my heated tone. “Yes, we are close, but he is...” I had been about to say that he was not my lover, but that would mean denying that I loved him. Instead, I said bluntly, “Look, he’s not my boyfriend. I’m not into guys.”

“Oh.” Realisation dawned in her eyes, and I expected her to recoil, to pull away from me. But instead, she smiled knowingly, leaned forward, and put her hand gently on my arm. The unexpected gesture of acceptance made my heart thud in my chest. “I understand. He just speaks really highly of you, is all.” But then her eyes flashed with mischief. “But Blixa’s not exactly the most guy-ish guy, is he? Though, to be honest, neither is Nick. I think they’re very alike in that respect, those two.”

I nodded vaguely and had to leave the booth before I said something I might come to regret.
Vices

Chapter Summary

As Carter continues to pine for Anita, Blixa and Nick start to corrupt each other with their chosen vices - drugs, gambling, weapons, and arguments over the non-existence of god.

To watch Blixa and Nick circling one another coyly around the studio, in that odd sort of mating dance that pretended it wasn’t a mating dance, that made me feel very strange in a way I couldn’t quite pin down. Nick was already clearly smitten, his eyes following Blixa around the room, trying to wind him into conversations with little titbits, like he was trying to intellectually impress the object of his affections. Blixa was a little more reserved, playing it cool like he always played it cool in unfamiliar situations, wrapping his reserve around him like a cloak, which, of course, only made him seem more alluring. It didn’t seem quite fair, as Blixa had both beauty and cool on his side, and was well aware of how to use both to their best effect; while Nick, as a straight boy who didn’t even seem able to acknowledge his own attraction, seemed unaware of the effects of Blixa’s beauty on him, even as he responded to it in the way that everyone responded to Blixa’s intense, almost eerie sexual charisma.

Nick, on the other hand, wooed Blixa with an aspect I don’t think he even realised that Blixa lacked: his high-quality Middle-Class formal education. For Nick, at his posh boarding school, had been taught properly about music, about art, about literature, in a way that Blixa, at his state comprehensive, had had to school himself. And Blixa drank up Nick’s erudite literary namedropping with the thirst of an autodidact, allowing himself to be wooed with references to obscure American novelists, iambic pentameter and formal rhyme schemes, and the actual art of songwriting, with middle-eights and key-changes for emotional impact. To be sure, Blixa was educating Nick, and expanding his mind, teaching him about Berlin and its alternate ways of living and approaching morality, but also about German culture, and opening up Nick’s mind to the entire concept that there were ways of living that were outside his narrow, parochial Australian experience, in fact were outside the entire Anglosphere. But Nick, too, was leaving an impression upon the unimpressible Blixa, educating him with the example of what it was, to have a formal liberal-arts education. Because Blixa, for all his ferocious intelligence, and for all the books he had read and the ideologies he had studied with his autodidact intensity, was still a working class boy who had been expelled from Gymnasium. And Blixa was all too obviously impressed and intrigued by Nick’s perpetual air of Being Educated, some formal quality that could not be distilled or absorbed from any book.

But in the end, it was another book entirely that kindled the flirtation into a romance.

Rowland and Mick were in the main recording room, squabbling over guitar overdubs, as I sat at the tape console next to the mixing desk, rewinding and playing the tape for them, over and over. I had re-set the counter to the start of the track, so I didn’t really have to give it my full attention. Since the band were ostensibly ‘producing’ themselves, Nick was sat at the mixing desk and Anita was sprawled on the sofa behind it, while Blixa slouched about, doing his best to get in the way, draping himself across the back of the chair behind Nick, as if eavesdropping on his creative process.

Nick had been scribbling down lyrics in a battered notebook, when Blixa’s head suddenly shot forward, craning his neck to read over Nick’s shoulders. “I recognise this. This is from the Bible,”
he observed, in that thick German accent he never bothered to disguise.

“It sure is,” agreed Nick. “Uuuuh, the King James Version, to be exact. The most poetic and yet violent book in the English language.”

Blixa looked at the passage from the Bible, then looked at his friend, his brow furrowing for a moment, before asking the fateful question. “You are a Christian?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I commit to any particular sect of Christianity, but...” His voice trailed off awkwardly.

“Do you believe in Gott?” demanded Blixa.

A very strange expression came over Nick’s face, as if he considered lying for a moment, to preserve his cool in front of the judgemental and opinionated German, but then he shrugged and risked everything with the truth. “I do, as a matter of fact. I, uh, believe in God very strongly. Not devoutly, obviously, as I am a terrible sinner. But I do definitely believe in God.” And then he turned to Blixa with an odd smile, half defiant, half apologetic, like he was expecting Blixa to react very badly to this.

But Blixa stared back at him, astonished. “You have certainty?”

“Not certainty. Just Faith. Look, I can’t explain it,” stuttered Nick, clearly confused, as if Blixa’s reaction was not the one he had been expecting. “And I can’t defend it. I’ve had arguments with Atheists, and I always lose.”

“Carter is an atheist, and she seems ferry sure of it.” Blixa turned and smiled at me a little triumphantly.

“Well,” I said, a little defensively, though of course I turned it into a joke. “The Christian God doesn’t like queer folk. And since your God denies my existence, I think it’s par for the course to deny His.”

“Oh, I know that atheists are sure there is no God, and they have all the proof of it,” sighed Nick, as if I hadn’t even spoken. “Yet that does not stop my belief, my Faith. I know it’s not a rational thing. It’s more like a... a feeling. An intense emotion. I know there is a God, as sure as I know which way is up, and I know if a girl is pretty.”

“A feeling,” repeated Blixa as if he’d never even considered this option, staring at Nick as if he could bore a tunnel straight through his eyes and into his brain. “How does zhat vork?”

“I don’t know! If I could explain it, I’d be a... well, I’d be a very wealthy man or a very holy man. I just... know, by faith alone – sola fide, as the priests say – that there is a God.”

“But how can you know vizhout proof?” Blixa demanded.

“Well, I mean... how do you know you have a spine?” Nick sputtered, twisting himself first one way then the other. “You can’t turn your head all the way around, and see your own back yourself. You can try to catch a glimpse in a mirror, but you know... mirrors lie. Photos can be doctored, X-rays fixed. And yet, I know I have a spine, because I can feel it. Every time I move or bend, I can feel it there, supporting me. Holding me up. And if I bend the wrong way... ouch, yup, I have a spine there. I can feel God the same way I can feel I have a spine. I just know He’s there. Because my life wouldn’t work without Him. And I can feel the pain when I go the wrong way; when I sin.”

Blixa seemed to subconsciously echo Nick’s movements as he twisted his shoulders first one way,
then the other, as if trying to feel his own spine. “But I know I haff a spine, because ozher people haff seen it,” Blixa countered, then raised his eyebrows lasciviously, his eyes glittering in my direction. “Some girls haff even vashed it for me. In zhe bath, vit a sponge. I can certainly feel my spine when a lover touches it, because it excites me erotically when someone touches zhat place on zhe small of my back.”

Nick smiled the wolfish smile he always smiled when anyone talked about girls to him, and I felt my skin crawl to think that I was one of the girls Blixa was evoking in his weird eroticism, even as I remembered, with a shudder, the low purring sound he had made as I scrubbed his lower back. I didn’t like this veiled boast to Nick, and it embarrassed me to think what conclusions Anita might draw, if she thought I went about sponging Blixa’s erogenous zones regularly. It had only ever been once. And I thought the agreement was, we didn’t talk about that night.

But Nick leaned forward and asked, in a low voice, “That’s exactly the kind of feeling I’m talking about. Like, how do you know you’re turned on? And how do you know when you’re in love?”

That stopped Blixa in his tracks, as for a moment, he simply stopped and stared at Nick. Across the room, Anita giggled, and for an awful moment, I felt some bone twist in me that I didn’t know I had. But Blixa’s body betrayed us, as he turned slightly, and I saw his eyes flicker towards me. “I haff tried to prove zhat von using logic and rationality, and you chust can’t<< he said in my direction.

>>If you’re in love, you chust know.”

“That’s the kind of feeling it is, to believe in God, because to believe in God is to love God,” said Nick very quietly, like I could hardly believe that something that profound could come out of that awful man’s mouth. “You just know.”

Yet Blixa was staring intently at him, as his face creased into a smile, with something resembling relief. “So if I believed in Gott, I vould chust know, vit zhe same kind of certainty, as when you know you’re in love.”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to say,” propounded Nick, with an expression of pleasure and slight triumph crossing his face. “It’s not a rational, logical thing. Faith is an emotion. Simple as that.”

But across the room, Anita yawned and stretched, and shifted on the control room couch. “I wouldn’t say emotion was a simple thing.”

Nick ignored her, returning to his notebook, but Blixa cocked his head towards her. “How so?”

“Do you always just know, when you love someone? Love is complicated. And it’s not... just one thing. Sometimes it’s hard to tell complicated emotions apart. Like... love and hate have only a hair’s breadth between them. Have you never loved someone so much you come to hate them a little, or hated someone so hard you actually kinda wanted to fuck them?” The vulgar word, in the beautiful woman’s little-girl voice, seemed to pack an extra punch.

Blixa stared at her, astonished at first, then started to smile. He liked her, I could tell, and I was somehow glad of it. “Yes, yes, of course, I absolutely haff.”

I was so busy studying Blixa’s reaction that I almost missed the long, meaningful stare between Nick and Anita. Because Nick sighed deeply, and said, in a slightly didactic schoolteacher tone, “That’s why I said like being in love, Anita. It’s a simile. An analogy, not a direct comparison. Love for a woman is like love for God, but not exactly the same. Because every time you love a woman, it always contains the element of desire. A man can’t love a woman without wanting to possess her, to have her. And desire always contains that element of dirtiness, that element of hate. While love for God is perfect, because it does not contain the desire to have, but rather the longing to be had.”
A shiver went down my spine, an actual electric tingle like the prickle of skin signifying danger, though it would take me a long time to understand why what he said bothered me so much. But Anita’s frown deepened, her beautiful lips twitching into a fox-like pout.

“Well, I don’t actually think Faith is a simple thing either,” she continued. “And I don’t think Faith and Doubt are the opposite of one another. They’re parts of the same thing, only a hair’s breadth apart, just like love and hate are. It’s not possible to have doubt, unless you actually have some inkling of Faith in the first place. And Faith is impossible, without the possibility of doubt. Otherwise it’s not Faith at all, just certainty.”

Nick looked annoyed to have holes poked in his argument, but he stopped scratching at his lyrics sheet and put the pen down, looking back and forth between his girlfriend and his new best friend. “I don’t think you’ve contradicted anything I’ve said,” he countered, a little defensive. “Doubt is not the opposite of Faith, it’s a tool to strengthen one’s faith. Like, being truly good, truly holy, does not mean one has no concept of what sin is. In fact, I would argue that it takes knowing what sin is, to truly be good. Otherwise, that’s not goodness, that’s just innocence.”

Anita smiled. “So I guess... only once you’ve eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, are you truly able to sin. If you have no knowledge of God, and no knowledge of what sin even is, sure, you can do bad things. But can you sin? No.”

But Blixa, whose ears had pricked up at the mention of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, simply looked perplexed. “You keep talking about sin. What the fuck is sin? This I do not understand. I understand Right and Wrong. I can even understand Good and Evil, because Evil comes from human Knowledge. But Sin? No, no, no! No!” he propounded, getting more irate with each repetition, waving his hand back and forth as if to physically push the objectionable idea away from him. “This is where I start to think... no, not to think. To know, it is bullshit. My instincts tell me, it’s the same... conviction as when I know I am in love... that there is no such thing as Sin. This is the bullshit that the Christian priests made up to control people.”

Nick smiled lazily, and scratched at his arms. “See, that’s it, Blixa. You need to believe in God, to truly understand what it is, to sin.”

Anita laughed, and the tension in the room dissipated. “I’m sorry, Blixa. But I think, deep down, you are an atheist.”

For a moment, Blixa just looked surprised, with the candid unselfconsciousness of a young animal, but then surprise gave way to relief as he turned to me. “Carter,” he called out with a wide grin. “I’m so glad. It seems I am an atheist too, after all.”

Those sessions turned into two days of the most uncomfortable atmosphere I’d yet encountered in any studio. At first, I thought it was just me, that I was feeling awkward about the crush on Anita that was steadily growing, the more she went into the iso booth and sang her strange and twisted poetry in her wispy, little-girl voice. And it wasn’t even Nick’s escalating drug use, though to be fair, that didn’t help. The squabbling between Rowland, who was now the only guitar player, and Mick, who wanted to be the guitar player, but was now the drummer, was like a low-level rumble that permeated the sessions, though I stopped hearing it after a while, the way you stop hearing the traffic when you work by the Autobahn.

But as we broke for dinner, halfway through the first day, I realised that even on their down-time, the band used the kitchenette in shifts. Rowland and Genevieve would come in first, take what little they needed, and then when they had cleared out, Nick and Anita and Mick and his girlfriend, Katy,
would come in afterwards. Blixa did whatever Nick did; Tracy and his girlfriend Kate just kind of floated. (Kate and Katy? Oh boy, did that get confusing.) But once I’d seen how Nick was forming a little gang with Blixa and Mick, and excluding Rowland from it, I couldn’t help but see it more and more. They arrived separately. They left separately. They ate separately. They were staying in different houses, with different groups of people. Mick and Tracy and the Kates were staying at The Skin’s ramshackle band house; Nick and Anita had taken up lodgings with Christoph and his magic power shower; while Rowland and Gen were staying with another Aussie who already lived in Berlin.

And the more Nick cosied up to Blixa to the exclusion of his bandmates, the more I found myself compensating by going over to talk to Rowland about tremolo arms, amp reverb, distortion stomp-boxes, guitar compression, whatever work-related topic we could use to keep the personal tensions in the studio at bay. Trying to make friends with Genevieve, I suggested that if she was really into vintage records, maybe at the weekend, I could take her and Rowland in my van, out to one of the larger flea markets near the borders of the city, where you sometimes caught British and American servicemen trying to supplement their incomes by selling imported records it was hard to get in Germany. The twins jumped at that chance, though I saw Anita’s eyes suddenly light up at the idea. For a moment, I considered asking her along, as well, but then realised that would involve having to ask Nick. And though I knew with the rational part of my brain, that it would have been the diplomatic thing to do, there was a part of me that just didn’t want him there. And anyway, it was up to her and Nick if they wanted to tag along, I thought to myself.

But it was always the girls that pulled the band back together, I soon discovered. The girls, huddled together in the tiny studio kitchen, in an urgent conference discussing something they didn’t care to share with me, looked, oddly, more like a tough, cohesive gang, all vintage clothes and dark lipstick, than the boys ever did. The girls, together, looked like a band the way Malaria! looked like a band. The boys, though they were marked as obviously belonging together by their harsh Australian accents, dressed as if they were in four different bands, one a cowboy, one an Edwardian dandy, one a 1940s jazz dude, and well... whatever the hell pale-skinned, black-haired creature of the night Nick was supposed to be.

Unlike Nick and Rowland, whose silences spoke more eloquently of their estrangement from each other than their gentle piss-taking ever did, Gen and Anita really did their best to get along. I don’t know that they had any natural affinity for one another; but it was more like they had found themselves thrown together on this strange adventure, penniless together in a foreign land, and they were determined to make the best of each other’s company. To my delight, Gen extended the peace-making overtures and invited Anita on that record-combing expedition out to the flea markets, even though Nick stayed home and slept in after a long night of drinking with Blixa, who was pretty much inexhaustible. And I jealously savoured my precious moments with Anita, when Nick was not there, as my crush on her grew and grew to almost mythical proportions.

Falling in love with a straight woman. What a fool’s game. Hadn’t I learned from Gudrun, at all? And yet, still, I pined. Even though the band had only booked a few days, I made sure that Anita got extra time to for vocal sessions to finish up the recordings, just for the pleasure of having her in the studio without her human rubbish-tip of a partner. And yet, somehow, despite all of the care that I put into those recordings, they got shelved. The band never used them.

Because where was Nick? Nick was staying up all night, off his nut on drugs, and learning that the way to stop himself from going on the nod was to mix his smack with Blixa’s speed. Blixa swore to me that he drew the line at heroin, he didn’t even smoke the fumes off tin foil, which Nick somehow pretended wasn’t as bad as shooting up. He had witnessed enough, with Jana, to know it was something he should never mess with. And I chose to believe Blixa, though I know many didn’t. Blixa was a habitual, almost compulsive liar, when it came to having fun, playing games with
people, and he was flowering in the games he was learning to play with the press. But Blixa did not seem to lie to people that he loved, about things he knew were important to them. Lying was a game, for Blixa, a fun thing to pass the time; it was not a defence mechanism, like it was for Nick.

Nick and Blixa, Nixa and Blick. It’s true, I conspired to throw them together as much as possible, to buy me time with the flame-haired poetess of my dreams. But they threw themselves into their vices with systematic enthusiasm, as if daring one another on to corrupt each other.

The first of these, obviously, was drugs.

The second, almost predictably, was gambling. Now I admit, I never saw the point of gambling. I had a scientist’s brains, and a good head for maths, and I knew that statistically, it was always a losing proposition. I would play a hand occasionally, if they needed someone to make up the numbers for a card game, but it held no fascination for me, beyond learning the rules and figuring out the probabilities and treating the whole thing as an interesting game of chance. The Birthday Party were phenomenal gamblers; they claimed that card games were the best way of beating the boredom of touring, during those insane distances they travelled to Australia and back.

At first, Blixa was aligned with me. “Gambling is part of an oppressive system of economic exploitation designed at parting the working classes from their hard-earned cash,” he insisted strictly, with an air of complete political outrage. The Australians laughed at this, and Nick called him an uptight and moralistic Prussian. What an old maid, said Tracy. Hark, do I hear the Salvation Army band play, said Mick, as they cut the deck and started to deal. And Blixa knitted his arched Prussian eyebrows and thrust out his Prussian lower lip, and sulked, for if there was one thing his Prussian soul hated, it was being reminded of its uptight and moralistic legacy. Because at heart, Blixa was actually a complete moralist, though he was possessed of a very strange and unorthodox set of morals that he seemed to have worked out for himself. Violations of these morals did actually wind him up and violate his quite considerable sense of justice in a way that made him very sharp and cutting. And yet he hated to have this pointed out to him, for Blixa was an Individualist Anarchist and a newly-hatched Atheist, and therefore beyond mere morals and morality. He joked about the Prussian habit of law-abiding Prussian morality, as if it didn’t apply to him.

>>Do you know why the Russian Revolution never happened in Berlin?<< he would quip, then start to laugh. >>Because all the Kaiser’s men had to do was put up a sign saying, ‘Do not trample the grass’ and the people would not get near the Palace.<<

And so, slowly, to prove he wasn’t the orderly Prussian moralist he secretly was, he was seduced by gambling. He started out just watching the games, trying to work out the rules, and ended up getting caught up in the excitement of the game, until he said he wanted to learn, just to understand the narrative better. And they enjoyed teaching Blixa the arcane rules of card games, and goading him to join in, watching as his façade of jaded indifference crumbled in the face of the excitement of games of chance. For Blixa was always naturally a risk-taker. He loved the drama and the tension of card games even more than he loved the rush of winning, and the adrenaline intensity of making wagers, pushing the stakes higher, the trickster’s love of bluffing and lying and yanking people’s chains, trying to push them beyond their comfort zones. Blixa got a chemical rush from unnecessary risks at cards, that seemed to rival Nick’s heroin rush. He started to carry a pack of playing cards with him everywhere, the way Jana carried her Tarot Deck.

Then Tracy taught him how to play Dice, and the mania for games of chance seemed to take over his brain for hours, Blixa hyper-focusing on roll after roll after roll, trying to predict and tabulate and tame the outcome. He became a magnificent die-roller, casting the dice with an extravagant, slightly dramatic flick of his wrist, as if acting the showman was part of the fun of the game. It fed his compulsiveness, and ‘one last roll, double or nothing’ was never the end of it.
I found it so frustrating, because Blixa and Nick were, obviously, both sharply intelligent young men. They were both incredibly well-read, though Nick was the product of a rigorous and systematic English-style boarding school syllabus, while Blixa was a terrifyingly smart autodidact who had left school at 17, and sharpened himself first on the West Berlin public library system, and then on films he had watched at the art-house cinema where he had worked as a teenager. When Nick and Blixa fenced their rapier wits in conversation, it could be like a roller-coaster ride to follow them, from Dostoyevsky to Heinrich Heine to Apocryphal Gnostic Heresies to Antonin Artaud’s opinions on Balinese theatre. But when the wits fell to gambling with cards or dice instead, the words fell quiet and it became uncharacteristically boring to be around them, even with the temptation of the beautiful Anita to distract me. Because while they played cards, Anita tended to disappear into a book, because Nick couldn’t stand ‘feminine chatter’ putting him off their game.

Blixa defended his new habit vociferously, if I dared to criticise it. >>Is this not one of the fundamental laws of the Universe? The one principle, on which Einstein himself, was wrong? ‘God Does Not Play Dice,’ he declared, and the quantum physicists proved him wrong, wrong, wrong. God does play dice. And so playing dice is a way of growing closer to the only God I recognise, for what is god, but the eternal toss of the dice in quantum physics?<<

>>That’s absolute nonsense, Blixa, and you would know it, if you ever picked up one of the real physics textbooks I try to get you to read, and not this fucking Feng Shui of Fractal Chaos muck that you choose to pollute your mind with<< I sputtered back at him.

>>My life is an uncontrolled experiment in Chaos Theory, and the Die is my Laboratory<< retorted Blixa, raising his provocative eyebrows in a challenge, as if knowing exactly how much this type of talk irritated me.

>>Where is the line between the pseudo-intellectual and intellectual? Where is the line between physics, metaphysics and ‘pataphysics? The problem is not that I don’t read these papers of Roger Penrose and Richard Feynman that you love so much; it’s that you won’t read Alfred Jarry and Antonin Artaud<< he insisted, touching me lightly and playfully on the chest, because this was another hilarious game for him, winding up Carter. And as he touched me, I realised that unlike his dice, this was a game I actually quite enjoyed. I wanted to seize his hand, and hold it, crush it in my grip, against my chest, as if this would make him come around to my way of thinking.

But then Nick shuffled back from the men’s room, and dealt another round of cards, and the playful, conversational Blixa that I loved so much disappeared into that silent, intense staring at the drama of the deck, the kings and queens and jacks and aces marching between their fingers like some story in a language I couldn’t read.

And then the third major vice that Nick introduced Blixa to, was the fascination with weapons. I had grown up with an ex-army officer for a father, and though he had been forced to resign his post to bring my mother’s family out of Berlin, he had impressed upon me from an early age that weapons were not toys. I had been given a penknife when I attained double digits, to teach me respect for blades, and I had hung onto that respect as I’d become first a manual worker, then an electrician. These things were tools, and tools deserved one’s careful attention, not one’s fascination. Firearms, on the other hand, scared the living daylights out of me, as my father had intended that they should, for he wished me to avoid the family business of bearing arms.

The first time that Nick produced his gun, as casually as if he were taking out a pack of fags, I nearly
jumped out of my skin. “What the blazes are you doing with that? Put that bloody thing away,” I hissed.

But Nick merely started to cavort with it around the room, pretending to point it at Anita, before miming taking aim and pretending to pull the trigger. Although I could see that the safety was on, even the play-acting of such a scene outraged me. My father had drilled into my head: never, ever draw a weapon on a person, unless you are fully prepared to use it.

“What the devil do you think you’re playing at? Knock it off!” I gasped, feeling all of my protectiveness come rushing to the fore, as my heart thudded with love and terror for Anita. It was the same deep, primitive urge-to-protect that had seized me when johns had bothered Ilsa, and I had found myself placed in the role of her pimp, feeling my masculinity surge to defend her. The same stupid, pointless masculinity that had failed to find any way to protect her from the French military police.

But Anita merely shrugged, and pushed him away casually as if this were a game. “Don’t encourage him, Carter, he only feeds off your outrage. He gets a rise out of it. The only way to make him stop is simply to ignore it.”

As if in defiance of her words, Nick sat down and turned the gun towards me. I stood up, and advanced darkly towards him, all the hairs rising on the back of my neck. As I towered over him, I felt a kind of calm fury descend across my mind, as I realised I would take a bullet for Anita. “You had better be prepared to use that. Because if you pull that on me, or her, again, even in jest, so help me god, I will make you regret it.”

For a moment I saw genuine fear flicker across his face, and I’m not sure which he was more afraid of; if he was afraid of me, or if he was afraid of the genuine possibility that he might have to use the gun on a living person. But in another moment, Blixa reached out and laid his hand gently on his friend’s arm, and said in a low, quiet voice, “Put it avay, Nick. You don’t vant to make an enemy of Carter.”

Nick’s eyes flickered towards Blixa, then he shrugged, and smiled cautiously, and lowered the gun, twirling it around his finger like a gunslinger before stowing it back in the holster underneath his jacket. It irritated me so much that he only did it, not out of respect for me, but for Blixa, that I actually felt like ripping the gun out of his hands and cracking it down across the side of his skull, like my father had taught me was actually the most effective use of a firearm. But somehow I got the better of my temper and sat down. I was not a rash person, or an angry one, but something about Nick seemed to trigger a primal hatred in me.

A few days later, Blixa turned up with a large flick-knife, of the sort generally used for gutting deer while hunting. He developed a game, much like Nick’s habit of twirling the gun on his finger, whereby he would take out the knife, flick it open, twirl it around his knuckles, then flick it closed again, then repeat the process, over and over and over again like a nervous tick. It drove me insane; every time I thought he would slip up and repeat the process in the wrong order, and catch his knuckles on the blade, or slam it shut on the last finger, but he never did. It was just the awful, tantalising, stomach-churning risk that he might. But Blixa was addicted to risk, and the adrenaline rush for him, clearly, was the possibility that he might slip up.

I started getting up and leaving the room if he took out the knife, until he would laugh and promise to put it away, and call for me to come back. Blixa, at least, still listened to me, even if Nick did not.
Wolfgang makes good on his promise to arrange an art show for Carter at the Other Shore. But Carter is finding it harder and harder to manage their crush on Anita and their jealousy over Nick.

For the long, clear, warm month of September, neither the New Buildings, nor the Birthday Party toured, and having such a long run of Blixa, at home, in his own city, had become a rare luxury. We formed a strange knot, Nick and Anita, Blixa and me, that everyone was coming to take for a unit. We went to gigs and films and art shows together. We went to bars and clubs and parties together. We even went to Malaria!’s triumphant album launch as a foursome, setting off gossip right across our tiny scene.

We had been to one of Martin’s film exhibitions in the early evening, then went back to someone or other’s flat to do to a few lines, so we were all quite high already. Unable to stand still, tense and unruly with nervous energy, we kept milling back and forth between the packed and overly warm gig inside, and the knot of people gathered outside. Blixa and Nick were more interested in caning the drinks, but Anita and I stayed inside to watch the girls perform, before joining the boys out on the street, enjoying the cool of the evening air after the sweaty heat of the overcrowded club. In high spirits, the four of us started horsing around on the pavement outside Malaria’s party, passing a joint back and forth between us to try and take the edge of the amphetamine jitters.

Anita had been asking me to translate what the band had been saying, nudging me and saying, “Everyone keeps saying ‘starker frown, what does that mean, ‘starker frown?’”

“Starke Frauen,” corrected Blixa as he passed her the joint. “It means Strong Vomen. It is in tribute to zhe Berliner Vomen. Zhis city is notorious for her ferry strong vomen.” Turning, he danced sideways and grinned at me, reaching out his fingers and pinching me around the top of my arm where I had rolled up the hem of my shirt. “I mean, look at zhis von.”

“Carter is unbelievably strong,” agreed Anita with an edge of flirtation as she exhaled hash smoke and passed the joint to Nick. “You should have seen her lift those heavy amps at the studio, like they were nothing.”

Nick bristled, as if his manhood was piqued, and as he popped the joint into his mouth, he rolled up the sleeve of his own shirt and tried to show the nub of his tiny muscles. I merely laughed, and flexed my arm to show that I was, visibly, better endowed than him.

“Carter is stronger zhan you are,” laughed Blixa, as he placed his own weedy, almost dangerously thin arm beside us, which honestly looked like two rubber bands stretched over a toothpick. “She is stronger zhan me, also.”

Curling his lip into a sneer as he exhaled the hash smoke, Nick passed the spliff back to Blixa, even though it was technically my turn, and spat disparagingly, out of the side of his mouth. “Yeah, I bet she lifts weights. She looks like she lifts weights.”

I knew he meant it as an insult, but I chose not to take it as one, stepping forward and relieving Blixa
of the joint before he could finish the whole thing. “I do, as a matter of fact, lift weights,” I informed him. “I started going to a women’s sporting club, up near the Spree. Need to keep my strength up somehow, since I stopped doing manual labour.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re into heavy manual training with the East German women’s athletic team,” snarked Nick as I sucked in a lungful of hash. “All that lifting and bench-pressing.” I had never heard anyone make lifting sound so sordid.

“I bet I could bench press you,” I shot right back as I deliberately exhaled my mouthful of smoke towards his face, and stepped in his direction with an air of menace.

“I’d like to see you try...” retorted Nick, moving towards me and squaring off with his shoulders. He was taller than me, but whippet-thin, like it would probably be an even fight between us, but Anita stepped in quickly.

“What I’d really like to see, is you lift Blixa,” she suggested saucily, in such a light, flirty, teasing tone that the heavy atmosphere between Nick and I immediately dissipated, as we all started to laugh. “He’s so thin, I bet you could pick him right up, and toss him over one shoulder.”

“Yes!” cackled Blixa, bursting out into his braying hyena laugh of genuine mirth. “I am sure she could. And I, too, would like to see her try.” His eyebrows were dancing flirtatiously as he moved between Nick and me.

“Yeah, go on, then,” goaded Nick, in a tone that made it clear he didn’t believe I could, and suddenly my pride was at stake.

Swallowing nervously, I looked at Blixa, who had divested himself of his leather-boy cap, and his bag, and had handed both to Anita. "Are you sure about this?" I asked quickly in German, as I looked him up and down. He was so skinny, he probably didn’t weigh much at all, but he was still very, very tall, and an awkward size and shape to lift.

"Quite sure," he agreed, with a bright, exited smile. "Look, put your hands around my waist. We will do it like they do in ballet. On the count of three, I will leap, and you lift. All you have to do is catch me, and hold me. OK? Come on, it will be fun. One... two... three!"

I wasn’t sure how we managed it, but Blixa stepped back, to take a bit of a running jump, and then did indeed leap into the air, as I seized him just above his slender hips, and hefted him aloft, as his momentum carried him upwards. And abruptly, I was just standing there, on the street outside the SO36, staggering slightly, as I held Blixa in the air, suspended up above my head like an odd, spidery, black rubber ballerina.

Anita started to giggle aloud, clapping her hands and jumping up and down with sheer delight, as I hefted Blixa to judge his weight, his black rubber wellies kicking impotently at thin air. He was actually slightly heavier than he looked, as if his body was very dense, but I realised I could actually support him quite comfortably, at least for a short time. Nick looked absolutely astonished, and maybe even a little afraid as I turned slowly around, taking care not to drop my precious cargo.

“I’m an aeroplane!” cried Blixa, his voice ringing with childlike delight as he looked about, this way and that, flapping his arms like a bird. “I am a zuper jet fighter! Full speed ahead! Voll Kraft Voraus!”

“Don’t wiggle so much, or I might well drop you.”

“Take me inside,” demanded Blixa, pretending to pound at my back. “Release zhe bats! Carry me to
I started to laugh, realising that he was completely at my mercy, and turned around to make my way back into the SO36. >>Make way<< I warned loudly, as I lurched towards the entrance. Both doors were open, so I could just about carry Blixa through. >>Make way, coming through!<<

Both of us were nearly shrieking with laughter as I somehow conveyed him, backwards, down the long, dark hall into the venue. Anita and Nick were in hot pursuit, both completely gobsmacked, and yet shaking with mirth at Blixa’s and my antics. As I burst through into the venue, battering the door open with his boots, my arms were getting quite tired, but I had no idea how to put him down safely without dropping him. With increasing difficulty, I managed to stagger towards the bar, and it was lucky that a couple of punks saw us coming, and clattered out of the way, as I swiftly, somewhat inelegantly, dumped Blixa backwards, and deposited him on top of the bar.

Blixa, as agile as a cat, kicked a couple of empties out of the way, and somehow righted himself, leaning over the astonished bartender and demanding. >>Three bottles of beer, and a coke, please<< as he helped himself. When he had the drinks, he somehow vaulted down into the crowd, and made his way back towards us, distributing his ill-gotten gains, then throwing one arm around my shoulders as he deposited a sloppy kiss on my cheek and proposed a toast. “To the strongest woman... women in Berlin!” he insisted, then turned and somewhat diplomatically included Bettina in the toast, as she had come to see what unearthly commotion was upstaging their party now.

But Bettina, long my ally, sighed and rolled her eyes to see us all standing together in such a close knot, Blixa’s arm draped so territorially around my neck and scoffed >>Well, we’ve lost this one to heterosexuality, now, haven’t we?<<

Shrugging Blixa’s arm off my shoulder, I chased after her, ostensibly to congratulate her on the album, but really to protest my innocence that this horseplay was not evidence of any kind of thing with Blixa. I had actually just been showing off for the benefit of Anita. Bettina accepted the compliments, but just looked at me with that knowing expression, like she could see straight through my objections, and nothing I could protest could convince her that I had been trying to impress Anita, on whom I had the raging crush, and was still very much the rampant Dyke that had gone clubbing with her.

But it was useless. Both Blixa and I seemed to have changed in some way, in our sexual habits.

For quite some time after Blixa had broken up with Jana, and especially while his band were touring, he had very much played the field and slept around, his omnivorous sexual appetites taking delight in liaisons with every available gender. But now I noticed that he seemed far more chaste in his proclivities, and didn’t go sloping off at the end of the night, when some attractive young thing beckoned. When I had teased him about it, and suggested that he was now concentrating his energy on trying to sleep with Nick, instead of his little circle of admirers at the Risk bar, he shook his tufted head decisively and said >>I’m done with all that. It is dissipating of one’s energy, to expend it on sexuality, giving so much of your energy first to one person and then another. I am conserving my sexual energy for my creativity. This, I feel, makes me much happier.<<

Blixa was happy. Everyone at the Malaria! party commented on how joyous and bubbly he seemed, effusive and optimistic as he kissed the whole band repeatedly and congratulated them with genuine warmth and pride, even before the cocaine started flowing again. It was obvious to me how pleased his growing friendship with Nick made him, and it cheered me to see Blixa so happy, and so generous in love, sharing his time and his thoughts and his boundless enthusiasm with the man. In many ways, Blixa was so good for Nick, as Anita kept telling me, during moments of girly bonding that I treasured. What made Anita happy made me happy. And what made Anita happy was Nick’s.
new lease on life. Blixa was opening Nick’s eyes to the wonders of West Berlin, expanding his horizons and truly challenging him, intellectually, artistically, aesthetically, and yes, even with the drugs and the gambling and the stupid boyish fascination with weapons.

Because through Anita, I discovered that Nick had been blocked, horrifically, catastrophically blocked, before he had come to West Berlin. And since he had reached the walled city, he had started writing again: writing Birthday Party songs with Mick; extemporising improvisational poetry in long jam-sessions with The Skin; and even starting work on his long-term dream of writing a novel. It was absolutely undeniable that Blixa, and West Berlin, was good for Nick. Nick blossomed under Blixa’s love.

But I seemed to be the only person even vaguely concerned that Nick might not be so good for Blixa, whose risk-taking was accelerating, whose impulse-control was slipping and whose drug consumption seemed to be spinning out of control. And yet every person I tried to raise my concerns with, saying that I did not think that Nick was as good for Blixa as Blixa clearly was for Nick, only told me that I was jealous, because Blixa was so clearly falling in some kind of love with Nick.

>>Learn not to be so uptight and English about love; there are many kinds of love<< Bettina told me as I helped her hump gear to a Malaria! gig.

>>Why would you be jealous over a man? This is sheer cattiness<< Gudrun told me, as she rode in the passenger seat on the way back from the gig to their rehearsal space.

>>If Blixa loves you, and you love Blixa, and Blixa loves Nick, too, doesn’t this simply mean that there is more love in the world, and love is such a brilliant, wonderful thing, isn’t it, why shouldn’t there be more and more of it?>> Salomé told me with the most wonderful smile and the most poetic intonations, as he dished up the drinks at their aftershow party.

But it was Wolfgang who drove me absolutely over the edge, with an offhand comment, one morning he had got me out of bed early, to get up and go bird-watching amidst the falling leaves in the wild windswept wasteland where Potsdamer Platz used to be. I thought surely it had to be some euphemism, for drugs or illicit sex, probably both, knowing Wolfgang. Alas, no, he genuinely meant birds of the feathered kind, turning up with a pair of binoculars and a small pocket guide to the birds of Europe. Now that it was autumn, he informed me with a bright, excited tone, arctic species would be passing through on their way South to warmer climates. And so we sat for an hour as the sun came up and the dawn chorus started chirping, as he scanned the scrubby trees and scratched away in a notebook to indicate what we’d seen. The birds in Berlin were odd, unfamiliar. Even the crows were the wrong colour, a drab, dark grey to match the city, but it was fascinating to watch them strut about, all stiff-legged and bold, the only creatures that could hop The Wall with impunity.

I found it quite enjoyable in an odd way, the silence and stillness of the great, ruined empty space, the awkward broken tooth of the Weinhaus, and then the almost-wilderness running up almost to The Wall. >>It’s so peaceful here<< I murmured. >>It feels a million miles away from the frenetic rush, rush, rush of the nightlife. Honestly, I don’t think Blixa has seen a minute of sunlight since that awful Australian got here. It can’t be healthy for them, staying up all night like that. They don’t ever seem to go to bed<<

>>Your boyfriend is a big boy, and he can take care of himself...<< was all Wolfgang got out, before I lost my temper.

>>Blixa Bargeld is not my fucking boyfriend<< I almost screamed, so loud that I startled the flock of small birds that Wolfgang had been watching, so that they all rose into the air in a smoke-like mass. >>I am only concerned about his fucking well-being!<<
Wolfgang sighed deeply, realising our bird-watching opportunity was over, then put his hand on my arm, and told me quietly and thoughtfully, >>If you are that concerned about Blixa’s well-being, then it’s obvious you love Blixa. I, too, have been fond of that young man, and I can tell you from experience. If you try to hold him back or constrain him, even for his own good, he will hate you for it. He will shy away and take flight, like that flock of birds you just startled off. But if you love him, let him find his own limits.<<

>>But Nick is poison<< I insisted, my thoughts whirling around Anita.

>>Jealousy is poison<< Wolfgang told me gently, gathering up his things.

I stared at him. I wanted so badly, to break down and tell him, ‘I am not in love with Blixa. I recognise that the problem here is jealousy, but I am not jealous over Blixa. It’s Anita. I’m in love with Anita. How can that goddess, that absolute pearl of a woman, be attached to that thundering oaf of a man.’ The words formed on my lips, but then I looked into his eyes, and realised what he was telling me. He had tried to love Blixa, and couldn’t. He wanted so badly, for me to love Blixa, because he still loved Blixa so much he wanted Blixa to be with someone who could give him what he needed. I knew that person couldn’t be me. I was too much in love with Anita. But it would break Wolfgang’s heart to tell him that.

Instead, he turned to me, embraced me tightly, left a quick kiss on each of my cheeks, then dragged me off to get in his car. For Wolfgang had an ulterior motive, in taking me birdwatching. Afterwards, he insisted that I go off with him to have breakfast at the Other Shore Café, and introduced me to the manager, Gerhard. It turned out that Wolfgang had, as promised, shown him my comics, and indeed, photos of some of my slightly risqué drawings of Blixa, and Gerhard was keen to put on an exhibition. His last great art discovery, our very own Salomé, whom he had talent spotted while still tending bar, had gone on find great renown after having a show of his paintings at the Documenta festival, so he was keen to start discovering and showcasing new local queer artists.

He had liked the comics, but he had loved the drawings of Blixa best of all. Those, insisted Gerhard, were the most homoerotic drawings he had ever seen, and he had to have them on the café’s walls. To my great astonishment, I found that it was all practically organised for me, and I had only to agree, and it would then happen. The whole thing gave me quite a surprise, to be honest. It was one thing to be a comic book artist, and sell cheaply Xeroxed pamphlets around West Berlin. But to be given a show, at a café where the great and good of Berlin’s gay scene gathered, where everyone from Iggy and Bowie, to Michel Foucault had drunk? It made my head spin. Of course I said yes. (And Blixa was as envious as could be, because Gerhard was the ‘art critic’ who had removed his semen-encrusted ‘art’ from another show.)

So despite my excitement, I had to ban Blixa, and by extension Nick, from the preparations for the show. Because Blixa, of course, wanted to make himself the star, the stunner in the frames, and tell everyone how he had inspired these works, to the point where Wolfgang had to remind him quite insistently that the star of the show should be the artist, not the model.

Wolfgang and Salomé and also Tabea helped me with the physical aspects of the exhibition, as they had all done this kind of thing many times. They helped me select which drawings to display, and solved the problems of getting them mounted and framed, both the small, finicky comics which needed to be handled delicately, and the more large-scale sketches and life drawings of Blixa splayed out across Wolfgang’s bed.

In one of the drawings, the setting was distinctly recognisable as the corner of Wolfgang’s bedroom, with the ribbed radiator that echoed the boniness of Blixa’s chest, and the hint of the Tom of Finland poster above the bed. Wolfgang turned to me, and gave me a long, appraising look, though I couldn’t
work out what, exactly, he was appraising, but he said nothing about it. That drawing was definitely the best, from both a technical point of view, and also from a conceptual point of view, as the detail of Blixa’s half-erect cock echoed the gay pornography on the wall, yet belied the intense feminine beauty with which I had rendered his delicate painted face. Even with the slightly cartoonish Tom of Finland cock, it was almost impossible to tell if Blixa, so fey and yet so elegant, was male or female or even human at all. Looking at the drawing, I almost started to fall in love with Blixa all over again, then reminded myself of the decision that we had made that night. He was my model, my muse, and not my lover.

But my friends soon picked another favourite, that everyone loved despite it not being technically as good. This was an odd double drawing, where I’d initially drawn Blixa lying on his back, staring sleepily out of the frame, and then about twenty minutes later, I’d picked up the same sheet of paper and drawn him again with his eyes closed and his cock hardening, the two drawings so close together that he looked as if he’d fallen asleep curled up against his own shoulder, though if you squinted, it simply looked like two pretty, skinny boys in bed with each other. I’d written “the artist and his muse; the muse and his artist” across the bottom in a kind of in-joke with Blixa, but it seemed this was the one that had sealed the deal, in terms of getting the show. So that was, jokingly, what we started to call the exhibit, until I found that it had stuck.

Anne’s film, Liquid Sky, which had recently started to be shown in cinemas, had really caught a mood, and made that exaggeratedly angular androgyny incredibly fashionable. Blixa and I had gone to see it, and though he had scoffed at what he called its preposterous alien subplot, we had both been knocked out by how convincing Anne had been, as a boy as well as a girl. The scene of Anne, having aggressive, exhibitionist, even lethal sex with her own self in male drag, had cause a huge stir and left quite an impression, not just on us, but on the whole Berlin scene. My drawings of Blixa, it seemed, with his bony angular body, and his pretty, feminine face, had exactly the same gender-bending appeal. To my surprise, people loved them.

While the artists planned the exhibition, and how it would be hung, Gudrun and Anita decided that they would handle the opening night party, and the invitation list. Gudrun, of course, knew everyone who was anyone in West Berlin, yet it was another of her endless cases of putting people into the right situations, for this was to be Anita’s first chance to host an event in her new home city, and she was excited about the possibilities of making a bit of a social splash. Anita, with her airy, ethereal manner, struck upon the allegory that the Blixa of the drawings might be Puck, and wanted to give the Other Shore a Midsummer Night’s Dream theme for the evening. Nick was a bit sceptical, as hmmm, fairies in a gay bar, wasn’t that a bit... offensive. (As if Nick ever cared about being offensive; he, I think, was more concerned that he might be taken for a fairy.) The Gays, on the other hand, loved the idea, as Salomé and Tabea squabbled over who had to be Oberon and who got to be Titania. (Salomé, of course, won that round.)

Gudrun laughed and said, “My god, are you going to make us all wear costumes, Anita?”

Anita smiled dreamily, and replied “What a simply marvellous idea” and it was decided that after the opening, at the café, there would be an afterparty at The Skin’s band house.

Wolfgang, to my eternal gratitude, helped me with the more... intellectual aspects of the show, buttonholing me outside Iron-Grey one morning. >>We need an Artist’s Statement<< he told me. >>So if you could just write one out, I’ll give it to Gerhard, so he can send it out.<<


>>You just write out a statement, saying a little bit about yourself, and a little bit about the art, and
what you’re trying to accomplish with the art, who your influences were, what your motivations are, you know, explain the meaning of the pieces a little bit?<<

>>They’re drawings<< I said. >>Nudes. You just look at them. Maybe they turn you on.<<

Wolfgang gave me a long, level stare, then shook his head. >>Darling, there’s a little more to this art game than that.<<

>>Well, can’t you do it?<< I protested. >>You’re good with words and writing and things. Can’t you just whack out some art-wank and send it out for me.<<

For a long moment, he looked at me, as if trying to assess how hopeless I was, but then he rolled his eyes. Taking me by the arm, he steered me towards the Café Mitropa, and sat me down at a table, ordering two coffees and pulling out a notepad. >>What do you think the pictures say, in your own words, to you? You tell me, I’ll translate into art-speak.<<

>>Well, they’re just drawings of Blixa. I mean... you know how beautiful he is. You’ve photographed him. He already looks like a painting.<< Wolfgang wasn’t even writing, he was just staring at me impatiently, tapping the eraser of his pencil against the table, so I wracked my brains and tried to think of something more intelligent to say. >>Drawing is what we do, instead of fucking. Because we’re... you know, not the right... sex for each other. I like women, and although Blixa is really pretty, and really quite extraordinarily feminine in many ways, well... he’s not a woman.<<

Now Wolfgang started to scribble. >>Yes, that’s good. The drawings are about sublimated desire, in order to render visible a queer response to the pressures of heteronormativity.<<

I laughed aloud, as the waitress brought our coffees. >>Wow, I don’t understand a word you just said<< I said, and took a sip. >>But, I mean, they’re about beauty. Because Blixa isn’t handsome, like you’re handsome<< I figured flattery was worth a shot, and Wolfgang smiled appreciatively, fluttering his eyebrows as he spooned sugar into his coffee. >>He’s beautiful. I really wanted to bring out the femininity, the vulnerability in his looks.<<

The pencil scratched away, I could tell he was liking this. >>A female perspective... no, a female Gaze, transgressing gender to render a masculine nude as a surveyed object of eroticism and...<<

>>Nah, don’t say that.<< I cringed, as he stopped scribbling and looked up at me expectantly. >>I didn’t feel like a woman as I was drawing him. I can’t be a woman for him. That’s why we’re not lovers. Why I draw him instead of screwing him. I can look at him, and draw him... without having to feel like a woman. How do you even express that in art terms?<<

>>Experimenting with a male gaze, to explore the potentialities of queer desire, then... You’ve got to tart it up a little, cater it to the audience.<<

>>Noooo<< I whined, almost tying myself in a knot. >>I don’t feel like a man, either. I don’t feel like a woman, or a man.<<

Raising his eyebrows, Wolfgang bent over in a comical exaggeration of pretending to check me out. >>Darling, there are ways of establishing this...<<

>>But that’s the whole point of the drawings<< I protested. >>You can see that Blixa has a cock, in the drawings. I’m not even pretending he doesn’t. There’s no guessing game. But... There’s something... beyond masculine or feminine, to him, that transcends having a cock. It’s not the make-up, or how he dresses. Even nude, the way he lies, the way he holds himself like he knows he’s being watched and drawn, even the angle of his wrists, his splayed limbs, the way he gazes at you
with his flirtatious doe eyes as he lies there, inviting you to look at him... All of these things transcend the ordinary masculinity of his body. And I kind of feel like...<< I paused, thinking of those powerful, arresting images of Anne as a totally convincing young man in that film. >>I don’t know. Everyone thinks I just want to be a man. But I don’t. Even if I woke up tomorrow, with a cock and a flat chest like Blixa, I wouldn’t... feel any different inside. Because there’s something to being a man that goes beyond having a cock and two balls, and I don’t have it. Like there’s something to being a woman that goes beyond having tits and a vagina, and I don’t have that either. And that’s what those drawings of Blixa are trying to express. Something about me, not about him. That I am neither one thing, nor the other. And yet somehow both. And through drawing Blixa... as both. I’m able to express my true self.<<

Wolfgang stared at me, as if understanding something about me for the first time, then he placed the pencil on top of the notebook and pushed it across the table. >>Write that down<< he urged. >>That’s exactly what the Other Shore needs to know. That’s not just your Artist’s Statement, that’s your Life Statement.<<
Gudrun and Anita arrange a special art opening pre-party for Carter. The group of artists discuss the problems of muses, and muse-hood, and then Carter finds their heat broken not just once, but in two different places.

The night before the opening, to calm my nerves, Gudrun suggested that we have one of her women-only meetings at her flat, to eat supper and make the final last-minute arrangements. Manc Mark, having got wind of this, dropped off a large hash-cake, intended for the proper party, and a smaller hash-cupcake intended to calm us down at the pre-party girl-party. That was very sweet, said Gudrun, but no, it did not make him an honorary girl, and no, he could not come to the pre-party party. Mark protested and said that he had heard Salomé had been invited, and Gudrun put her foot down and said it wasn’t anything like the same thing, because Salomé was coming in Titania drag, and that was just different.

We had a wonderful time, girls, Salomé, me, and all. So wonderful that we forgot to eat the cake before dinner, as we were all gossiping away. And it wasn’t until the bulk of the guests had departed, and it was just me, Gudrun and Anita left, that Anita went into the kitchen to clear away the plates, and found the hash cup-cake sitting on the sideboard.

“Oh my lord, never tell Nick this happened, as this will destroy my reputation forever,” she quipped, as she came back into the living room, carrying the cup-cake on a plate. “But we forgot to take the drugs.”

She looked so scandalised that Gudrun and I burst into laughter, as Anita promptly cut the cake into three pieces and set each on a napkin before us.

“How many people is this cake made to serve?” wondered Gudrun. “Mark makes these things very strong...”

“Who cares, more drugs for us,” giggled Anita, and gobbled her piece up. Gudrun picked up a bread knife, and cut her piece in half before eating one piece, but Anita simply picked up the discarded portion and ate that as well, her huge eyes looking so innocent as her mouth looked so naughty that I almost had to physically refrain myself from leaning over and trying to kiss those icing-dusted lips.

Instead, I looked over at her, not wanting to be outdone by my crush, and picked up my piece, not taking my eyes from hers as I popped it into my mouth, remembering for a moment, that strange afternoon of the Great Downfall Show. I chewed slowly, as she watched me, a smile spreading over her face, then swallowed. “There, I needed that.”

Anita grinned back at me. “You’re such a show-off, Carter. Gudrun, darling, do you have a cigarette?”

“Oh of course. Shall we go in the other room? I can’t bear to think of all those dirty dishes in the kitchen.” Gudrun stretched, then lead us through into her bedroom. As she fiddled with her tape deck, and put on the latest Siouxsie and the Banshees album, I thought to myself, wow, a year ago, I would have given my two front teeth to be in Gudrun’s bedroom, and yet here I was, oddly
unbothered.

Anita immediately threw herself down on Gudrun’s bed and sprawled out, her gingery red hair curling everywhere. “I have the sudden desire to paint you as a Pre-Raphaelite muse,” I blurted out. “One last-minute addition to the show.”

“Oh, please,” groaned Anita, throwing her head back in despair as Gudrun sat down at the other end of the bed, placing an ashray between them to stop Anita flicking ashes onto the floor. “I have had enough of this muse business forever.”

“But don’t you know, you’re Nick’s muse,” laughed Gudrun, poking her playfully with her foot. “That’s your job, as a woman. Not to be a musician in your own self, not to be a songwriter or an artist or a poet, but just to be a muuuuuuuse.”

Anita absolutely cackled, as I looked about, wondering where I should sit, before finally deciding on the floor. “You know, Nick really does have a muse,” she finally said. “He totally believes in all that bosh. He really has this imaginary muse who inspires him, and feeds him song ideas, that he totally believes in, and is as real to him, as I am to you or Carter. But it is not me. No, thank you.”

“I just don’t understand it, this muse business,” drawled Gudrun. “It always just seemed such horse-shit to me. The way men want to claim you as a ‘muse’. Like a way of taking away your own personality, and your own life and experiences, and turning you into a flattened thing. Not even a thing. Like your entire existence is just reduced to an idea within his head.”

Anita laughed aloud. “I know, right? But you, Gudrun, you’re so creative, so... imaginative yourself, I can’t imagine any man daring to make a mere muse of you.”

“Do you know, I was not even 16 years old, the first time a man tried to claim me as his muse?” said Gudrun. “One of the first musicians I had ever met, the guitarist in a local dance band. You know, I was obsessed with music when I was a teenager, and I wanted to learn to play the guitar, so I asked him to teach me, because I was besotted with live music. And this man was so egotistical as to believe that I was obsessed with him, not with the idea of music itself. So, when I go round to his house, instead of giving me guitar lessons, he sat me down and told me he had written a song about me.”

“He didn’t!” giggled Anita. “Did he make you listen to it?”

“Oh yes. He sat me down in front of him and started playing it, thinking I would be flattered.”

“Was it any good?”

“Anita, my dear, it was terrible! I was mortified. And as I listened to this song – ‘Too Young’ it was called – I simply could not hear myself in it. It was a ridiculous thing, about this fantasy he had of what he thought I was like, some stereotypical nubile teenage girl in love with, and throwing herself at an older man, who was both terrified of, and yet of course egotistically flattered by her attentions. As if! The whole thing was all in his head, and nothing at all to do with me. ‘You are my muse, Gudrun’ he kept telling me, because he was so proud of this song, and I was just so puzzled by the whole thing. So I always think, whenever a man tells you ‘oh, you are my muse’ it’s never about you. It’s always about him and the ideas in his head. His music, his paintings, his novels or whatever it is he does. So I resist this muse-making impulse, with every fibre of my being. I have no interest in being a muse. I am the musician.”

As Anita laughed mockingly and nodded, long-sufferingly, I stared at Gudrun as if finally figuring something out. Back when we had first met – it was maybe a little over a year, but it felt like another
lifetime ago – she had rejected me romantically, and though I had long since got over it, I had never understood why. And yet, as she and Anita lolled over her bed, smoking cigarettes and laughing at men, I suddenly remembered that unfortunate drawing I had done of her, to give to Beate, and winced. Was that how she’d seen me? Just another man who had wanted to make a muse of her?

“They certainly believe it’s about you, though,” sighed Anita. “As if they are afraid of their own emotions. The same way that they look at a pretty girl, and they can’t believe that their lust originates in their own heads. They have to place lust in the body of the young girl they’re looking at, as a repository for emotions they can’t bear to believe come from their own heads.”

“Sounds like Nick,” I sneered. “His whole thing about believing sex is inherently dirty, and women are just...”

“Oh, please, Carter, don’t start,” sighed Anita, with a completely world-weary tone.

“Do you think there even is such a thing as a muse?” interrupted Gudrun, successfully derailing that topic. “Is it completely made up, or is there something behind the idea?”

“Do I believe in muses?” Anita made a vague gesture. “That’s like asking do you believe in love. Or do you believe in God.” She turned and winked at me, with that quip, to show she wasn’t angry with me, and I was reminded of the long flirtation-argument argument between Nick and Blixa on that very subject. “You have to explain, what you even mean by the question. Because obviously some people believe in them, though they may mean vastly different things.”

“Well,” said Gudrun, lowering her chin to her hand as if she were thinking this through deeply. “I mean, is a muse an abstract idea of inspiration, some archetype in your own psyche; or is a muse really another person, who inspires you to make art, to write songs, by their presence... you know. Like a beautiful girl that some perverted old painter paints, because he is too old to fuck her.”

“Or, to be fair, a beautiful boy that a handsome young... girl... woman... Carter, what is it that you want us to refer to you as,” giggled Anita, and it took me a moment for me to realise that she was joking about me.


“Look, Carter is a good example,” agreed Gudrun. “Because Carter almost always draws Blixa. And let’s be honest, Blixa is not a beautiful man.”

“Yes he is,” I protested.

“No, he is not,” persisted Gudrun. “Look, it’s nothing against Blixa. I have known him for years, he is one of my best friends. But he is not a classically handsome man. He is very charismatic, and he has pretty eyes, and good cheekbones, sure, but he has a weak chin, and he is all nose... that huge, ugly, blocky nose just completely dominates his face. And he is too... way too thin, his face too gaunt, like a scarecrow crossed with a skeleton. But the way Carter draws him, he looks beautiful. So... is Blixa Carter’s muse, in the sense that men talk about women being their muse. Or is the Muse the thing that inspires Carter to draw Blixa in the way she does, to make him look... beautiful?”

Anita shook her head and lay back, sucking at her cigarette. “It’s love that makes Carter draw Blixa the way she does. Love makes the beloved seem beautiful. That’s how desire works.”

“Is it?” I asked. I was starting to be so stoned that I didn’t even bother denying that I loved Blixa. “I mean, what Gudrun said makes a strange kind of sense to me, though I don’t agree that Blixa isn’t pretty. But I have always drawn Blixa because he looks like one of my drawings, all spindly and
elongated, with his arched cheekbones and his huge eyes. But what you’re saying is that I draw him the way I do, because I love him. No, I don’t think so. I think I love him because he looks like one of my drawings.”

“You sound like Nick,” giggled Anita, as if forgetting she had just asked me not to talk about him. “Nick is always getting these crushes on these girls he thinks looks like his muse. They’re always the same. Very small, uuhhhh, very thin, with raven-black hair and porcelain white skin, and, erm, eyes as pale a blue as a Velvets song, uuhhhhh…” The way she perfectly imitated Nick’s halting, stuttering manner of speaking was so exact that I wanted to laugh, until I heard what she said next. “I mean, why he goes out with a brown-eyed strawberry blonde, when this is his type is beyond me, but this is Nick’s muse. Like I said. Not me.”

And in that instant, I hated Nick like I did not think it was possible to hate a man. Because Anita did not sound upset or embittered about the disparity between Nick’s taste and her own person, but she definitely sounded mocking.

“Because of what you said earlier,” pointed out Gudrun. “Because love makes the beloved beautiful, and he is in love with you.”

“You are such a doll,” said Anita. “You are such a perfect doll, Gudrun. Why don’t you have a boyfriend who loves you as much as Nick says he loves me.”

Gudrun made a dismissive shrug, wafting away her cigarette smoke with her hand. “I don’t have the time for a boyfriend. I have a record company, a fashion shop, two bands, and an art degree to finish. Who has the time for a personal relationship, with all that.”

“You should fall in love,” said Anita. “Sex gives you almost as much energy as Blixa’s magic Russian pixie dust.” All three of us laughed, for different reasons.

“Hey, I have sex,” laughed Gudrun. “You know that. I have no problem getting sex, if I want it. But who has the time for love. It’s just too much work, love.”

“Sex, love, is there a difference?” I asked, and suddenly I was no longer sure I knew the difference.

“I think so.” Anita seemed to have to stop and think about that one. “Sex is just with the body; love is attraction with the mind, and the heart.”

“There are many different kinds of attraction,” said Gudrun, her German accent making her sound very wise. “Many kinds of love. Think of the Lou Reed song... Some Kinda Love. That’s how many different kinds of love there are. I mean, think about West Berlin, and one of the things that I love about this city, is that it recognises many different kinds of love, and accepts all of them. If I’d stayed in Luneberg, I’d be married by now. All of my girlfriends from school are married now. Who was I to marry? My boyfriend was half-gay. But he gave me Berlin, instead of a ring.”

“Bisexual,” corrected Anita. “Not half-gay, bisexual.”

“Bisexual,” mused Gudrun. “What a funny word. What a funny language, the English language is. Does that mean you have sex twice a year, or you have sex once every two years?”

“That’s biennial versus biannual,” I laughed. We were all starting to get very giggly now, and I realised we were all three of us very high, though Gudrun perhaps not so high as Anita or I.

“It’s so hard to figure out, sometimes, when you love a man, what it is that you are attracted to,” sighed Anita, and my ears perked up, because I wanted, on some fundamental level, to hear that she understood what an awful man Nick was, and to hear that she did not love him. “When I met Nick, I
just thought he was the most beautiful man I had ever seen in my life. He was so tall, and so striking-looking, and his eyes were such a deep blue that I just looked at him, and thought... ugh. I just wanna root the bejesus out of that man. Like, do you know what it’s like to just look at a man, and just want him naked and sweating on top of you, inside of you, like that physical, animal reaction of just wanting?"

“Uh-huh,” agreed Gudrun with gusto, but I stared at Anita with horror. On one level, it was so strange to hear these vulgar terms from her poet’s mouth, and yet on a very animal level, I raged, because how could she feel these things, about him? But Gudrun’s eyes had gone all misty as she leaned her chin on her arms and gazed at her friend. “How did you two meet, anyway?”

Anita got a slightly soppy expression on her face, as if lost in memories. “Oh, it was at some teenage party or other. I saw him, and I just knew. I spent all evening trying to get him on his own, then finally I dragged him off to my friend’s bedroom, on the pretext of getting him to listen to some record or other. And so I finally dragged him off alone, and we sat and listened to music, and... and... just talked. I told him everything about me, that first evening. I mean, it was girlish stuff, my hopes and dreams, and how I wanted to be a poet. But he sat and he listened, so patiently, so thoughtfully. He didn’t interrupt me and start yammering on about his band, and his life, and all that kind of shit that, you know, how boys are always trying to impress you. He just sat, quietly, looking at me so intently, and he listened to me. Like, I thought it was so rare that a guy would actually listen to me. So I knew from the start, that Nick was special.”

Gudrun smiled dreamily. “That is amazing. Most guys that age, they just can’t wait for you to stop talking, so they can get in your pants.”

“Well.” Anita’s eyes flashed mischievously. “I also, to be honest, just wanted to get in his pants. Because I’d seen him around, you know. I’d seen his band play, already, at a party, and I thought he was lush. At first, I just thought he was so wild, and so uninhibited and crazy. And I totally craved that, because at that point, I was so shy and reserved, and I really wanted to be totally wild, and uninhibited, and crazy. I craved that, I wanted to eat that up, like I wanted him. Like, sometimes having a crush on someone is so intense and crazy like that, it’s about wanting to be who you think they are. I mean, I look at Nick and the way he looks at Blixa, and I can see, that that is the kind of crush he has on Blixa. He wants to be as assured, and as self-confident, and so absolutely ferociously pure, at his art, as Blixa is. You know, I’m pretty secure in my relationship, and I wouldn’t be threatened if I thought Nick wanted to fuck Blixa. But I don’t think Nick does want to fuck Blixa. I think on some level, he wants to be Blixa. You know?”

I stared at her, wanting her to rewind her words, and take back what she had said she felt about Nick, but my tongue seemed to move of its own volition. “Wow,” I said. “Because I’m pretty sure that Blixa would fuck Nick in a heartbeat.”


But Anita just rolled her beautiful amber eyes. “I am pretty sure that if he tried, that Nick would run about a million miles in a split second. Because after I got together with Nick, and after I fucked him a couple of times, I realised... that whole crazy, unrestrained Wildman thing? That was all in my head. That was what I wanted Nick to be. Because underneath it all, Nick is really rather sentimental, and he’s actually quite shy, and he is actually quite terrified of everything, including women, including sex, and if your Blixa ever whipped his dick out...” She let her voice trail off, but her wide eyes, and the expression on her face made it clear what Nick’s reaction would be. “Nick plays at this stuff. He is drawn to guys who are a little bit gay – I mean, look at Rowland – but at the same time, he hates them a little bit, because he doesn’t know how to cope with how they make him feel.”
“Like I sometimes think he hates women,” my tongue said, without my volition, like what the hell was in these cakes that Mark had made us, were they some kind of truth serum?

“That’s what Lydia thinks,” sighed Anita. “Lydia thinks he secretly hates women. She says he’s secretly a prude who plays at being a Wildman, but underneath it all, he hates women.”

“Do you think he hates women?” asked Gudrun, really quite seriously.

“How could I be with a man who hates women?” asked Anita, which was the question I really wanted to know, but she didn’t seem to mean it in the way I meant it.

“Because you’re drawn to the danger,” said Gudrun, and in her deep,throaty voice, she made danger sound incredibly sexy.

“I don’t think he hates women. But I think he’s afraid of women,” explained Anita slowly, like her voice was coming up from a very deep part of her. “He’s afraid of femininity, because he’s been beaten up his whole life, in Australia, for looking like a poof, for wearing make-up and writing poetry and caring about art. And yet he craves it, this feminine side.”

“And yet,” I countered, feeling a very deep anger spilling out of my mouth. “Because he doesn’t actually respect women, or think women are human beings, deep down, the only way he can engage with femininity and still keep his respect intact, is to explore femininity with these very androgynous, very effeminate men, like Rowland, like our Blixa. He can only engage with the femininity in men, because he fundamentally does not respect women. He thinks of women as possessions, things to have, not human beings.”

“I think you’re a little bit right, and a whole lot wrong. Because he is drawn to femininity in men. In his creative partners. But Nick doesn’t hate women,” insisted Anita.

“I think you look with eyes of love, that make Nick seem beautiful to you,” I countered, feeling my heart burning inside my chest.

“Well, what about you, Carter, is what I want to know?” asked Anita abruptly, sitting up as if she didn’t want to make it obvious she was totally changing the subject.

“What about me?”

“You’re gay, right?”

I burst out laughing.

“I mean, you’re a lesbian.” As she said it, she seemed to lose confidence in it. “You like women. Isn’t that what you meant when you told me you weren’t into guys? At least... that’s what Nick reckons. You’re... homosexual.”

“Well, I don’t hate women like Nick does.” I said pointedly. “I feel a deep love, and attraction, and respect, and appreciation for women. I just don’t think I am one.”

“But then, I think, what about you and Blixa?” Anita looked genuinely perplexed.

“What about Blixa?” I said, though I knew perfectly well what she meant. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“I don’t even think that Blixa’s a boy,” countered Anita. “That’s what Genevieve said, when she met him that first time. She burst into the dressing room all breathless, and just said ‘I have just seen the most amazing looking person.’ She said she had seen this incredible creature posing in the corridor
like a ‘beauty queen from another planet’. He didn’t even register on her radar as a man. And I... I know what she means. I look at Blixa, and my senses are confused. I don’t know what he is. Then I go to hug him, and when I smell him, and, you know, Blixa has a pretty strong musk, my nose tells me, that’s a man. He smells like a man. But as I touch him, and hug him, he’s so frail, and so delicate, my body tells me... that’s a woman. You know him better than I do. What even is Blixa?”

I had to close my eyes and think about that. With anyone else, I would have hidden the truth, would have kept to the same old, ‘he’s not my boyfriend’, but I couldn’t lie to the woman I loved. “Whatever Blixa is, I think he and I are the same,” I confessed.

“So when you’re with him, are you gay, or straight, or bi... or... what?” Clearly Anita had not got the memo that Blixa and I were not lovers. What on earth had Blixa told her and Nick, when I was not around? And yet, I realised she had seen all those drawings, that we had been preparing for the show. No one who had seen those drawings doubted that Blixa and I were lovers. They weren’t like Wolfgang’s abstract nudes of Blixa, where he looked more like a shell or a flower or a beautiful object than a naked young man. The drawings themselves were so clearly erotic acts.

“I don’t understand how that works,” I confessed. “I honestly don’t. Like, when I’m out on the prowl with Bettina and Tabea, and I pick up a girl, people say... oh, Carter’s a lesbian. When I was going out with Ilsa, people would look at me, with her, and say, oh, that’s a straight man with a girl. When I’m in the Other Shore with Blixa, people look at us, and say, oh, that’s two gay boys on a date. And I guess Nick clearly thinks Blixa is feminine, and I’m feminine, so we’re two dykes. Which of these things am I? What makes my sexuality? The person I’m with, or the person who is looking at me? Because I don’t understand.”

“It’s not about what other people think,” insisted Anita. “What do you feel?”

“I don’t know what I feel. What does anyone feel, when they’re attracted to someone? Are we attracted to bodies? Like, you talk about wanting Nick sweating and inside you. When I think about fucking, do I think about bodies, do I think about a cunt, and just want to get inside a cunt? Do I think about gender, and about how someone reads to me, like, I touch Blixa, and you’re right. He’s so thin and so frail, and hugging him feels like holding a girl. The very first night I met him, and felt that electric shock that I thought was love at first sight, I thought he was a girl. I look at him, and I see cheekbones, eyelashes, painted lips, and my eyes tell me: that is a girl? But the one time we actually tried to have sex, my body just... stopped, and went: ugh, no. That is a man. I would have to be a girl with him. I don’t want to be a girl with Blixa, I want...” Thankfully I stopped myself before my tongue betrayed me. “I don’t want to be a girl with anyone. It’s not that I think there’s anything wrong with being a girl. I love girls. I just have no interest in being one.”

But the way Gudrun was looking at me – like this wasn’t even news to her, that Blixa and I had tried, and failed, to have sex – she was looking at me like she was wondering what had been at the other end of that sentence I had cut off. But Anita was so stoned, I had successfully diverted the conversation away from the dangerous thing, the idea of what I wanted from Blixa. “Do you want to be a boy, is that it?”

“No, I just want to be a human being.”

“Don’t we all,” sighed Gudrun, thankfully changing the subject. “Why is that so hard for men to understand?”

“Can I have another ciggie, Gud?”

“Yes, of course.” Gudrun bent down, found her packet and extracted two. She lit both of them before handing one to Anita, with a casual intimacy that made my stomach flip.
Anita sucked at her cigarette and started to think aloud. “I’m still thinking about that question. Are we attracted to bodies, or are we attracted to genders, or are we attracted to... something else. Minds. Muses. The thing that love makes us see when we’re blind. Because when I think about it, when I think about... just fucking? I think about cocks. I am one hundred percent about cocks. Getting a good root.”

Gudrun and I both laughed at the vulgar Australian slang. It seemed doubly shocking that this tiny, beautiful pixie-girl could swear like a sailor.

“But then again, when I first met you, Carter, I swear to god, when you came running up to me on the street, I totally thought you were a hunk. I turned around, and I saw a tall skinny dude, wide shoulders, black hair in a kinda shaggy quiff, really striking looking, good jaw, cheekbones for miles, and honestly, I thought, if this guy has blue eyes and a turned-up nose under those intellectual glasses, this is 100% my type.”

I flushed bright red, and put my hand to my face, because I did not have a turned-up nose, I had a great beaky prow of a nose, which was why I thought the glasses made me look so good; they obscured the great honking nose that dominated my face. But my heart was pounding at the thought that I hadn’t been completely mad. Anita had turned around and looked at me with the flush of desire. She had been flirting with me.

“But when we got in the van, and we were close-up, in close quarters like that, I got the smell of you. Not in a bad way; I’m not saying like, you stink or anything. But I have a really sensitive nose.”

“Despite all the cocaine you put up it,” laughed Gudrun.

“Oh shut up, I have a really good sense of smell.”

“I have no sense of smell,” I confessed. “I wouldn’t know how... a man or a woman smelled.”

“Really?” asked Anita, looking quite surprised and a little sad for me. “A sense of smell is so important to sexual attraction. I can’t imagine having no sense of smell, because I can’t imagine being attracted to someone who didn’t smell right. It’s like a chemical, animal response, pheromones or whatever.”

“So what do I smell like?” I asked quietly, a little afraid of what the answer might be.

The smile left Anita’s face. “Well, my sense of smell told me, even before you did... this is a woman, and something in me, at an animal level, just went... I’m sorry, but... no. Not for me. It’s not like it was a choice I made, or a decision that I felt on any intellectual level. It was just something that happened on a physical, pheromone level.”

For a moment, my heart seemed to stop beating, as I felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. Anita had just rejected me. She had done it in a really thoughtful, and even kind way, and explained, completely, her reasoning in a way that left me no doubt, gave me nothing to push back on and say, well, hey, if you weren’t dating such a jerk, then maybe... But no. I recognised a rejection when I heard one. Anita had just rejected me.

“I mean, it’s for the best, isn’t it. I’m with Nick, obviously. And we both adore Blixa,” she continued. I wanted to scream, for once and for all, that I was not with Blixa. “But I don’t think I’m wired that way. It’s very boring, but I’m just heterosexual.”

I looked over at Gudrun, desperately wanting her to meet my eye, to share some acknowledgement that my heart had just been broken, but Gudrun wasn’t looking at me. She was looking at Anita, and
she was laughing. “So what was that with me, then? Are you just going to tell me, oh, we were drunk?”

“Well, we were very drunk,” giggled Anita. “And we had both, by that point, had two of those pills, what did they call them – those groovy love pills.”

“I had had one pill. You had had three,” pointed out Gudrun, then lapsed into another fit of giggles.

“Well, as I was saying, there were extenuating circumstances. We had had a lot of drugs.” Anita’s round face looked the picture of innocence as she described this indulgence as if it were just an extra helping of ice cream after dinner, as the realisation of what they were talking about hung stubbornly about the corners of my mind, refusing to either penetrate my consciousness or go away. “To be fair, Nick and I were on a break. You have to take a break, sometimes, when they tour. It’s too much temptation, being away for so long.”

“This is the part where you tell me it meant nothing to you, and I clutch my bosom and weep and tear my hair out,” said Gudrun, though she was clearly having trouble keeping a straight face, as she was almost shaking with laughter.

“Oh, it meant a lot to me, sweetie,” laughed Anita, reaching out and patting her hand. “I couldn’t have picked a nicer Fräulein to do the Weimar Lesbian thing with in a squalid squat in West London, but as Rowland would say, well, it’s not really my thing.” She could imitate Rowland’s soft lilt almost perfectly.

“So what you’re telling me, is, it meant nothing, and it’s never happening again, well in that case, get out of my bed, you strumpet, and give me my cigarettes back, and...” Gudrun couldn’t even finish her sentence, she and Anita were both laughing so hard they were almost crying, and the information finally penetrated my brain. Gudrun and Anita, had had a fling, while they were in London, and they were crying with laughter over the ridiculousness of it now.

“Oh god, this woman!” squeaked Anita, in her adorable little-girl voice. “She makes me laugh until I think I’m going to wee. You are the best thing about West Berlin, Gudrun, and you don’t even know it.”
Still reeling from their heartbreak, Carter finds out that Blixa has been lying to them, too, for way, way longer, than he ever lied to Nick about not speaking English.

As the pair of them fell about laughing, and trying not to lose their lit cigarettes in the bedclothes, I did my best to stumble to my feet. Blindly, I tried to find my way out of the bedroom, because they continued to giggle and gossip and make disparaging comments about boys and carry on roaring with laughter as if the world hadn’t changed, and I hadn’t had my heart ripped out of my chest not once, but twice.

Anita had just told me that she would never, ever have sex with me, because I just smelled wrong. Gudrun, a year ago, had told me that she would never, ever have sex with me, the reason at the time being, because I confused her, in all the wrong ways. And yet somehow, despite boyfriends, despite sexual orientation, despite confusion and smell and everything, the pair of them had managed to have a fling with each other.

I wanted to die. I wanted to crawl off in a hole and just disappear. Or run off and join a monastery and take a vow of silence and never speak to a woman again. But instead, I found my boots, and pulled them on my feet, and made my way out to the stairwell before I burst into tears.

With tears streaming down my face, I stumbled about Berlin in the dark. I couldn’t tell how late it was, and I didn’t know where my van was, but at least I realised I was too stoned to drive. But that somehow made it worse, the huge amount of hash I had consumed jangling my nerves and making every wretched twinge of my broken heart feel like a jagged wound had been torn in my chest and was oozing out blood and lung fluid like that awful rotting pig that Blixa and Andrew had had in the studio, every time they hit its chest with a mallet. I was the pig, and the pig was me, and now it was me, wandering about Berlin in the cold, bellowing out my broken heart and looking for somewhere to slake my stupid, pointless, useless lusts.

I thought about Blixa, and just ached. I was in love with Anita, and I couldn’t have her. I knew he was in love with Nick, and just thought, with what Anita had told me, he would never have Nick, either. What a fucking pathetic pair we were. Or, rather, a pathetic, non-fucking pair we were. Blixa hadn’t even been screwing around recently, I knew that because all of his energy was going into his creativity; he had told me that was where his sexual energy was going, and he was pleased with it. Or rather, he had implied that he wasn’t screwing Nick because he was conserving his sexual energy, but from what Anita had said... oh Blixa wasn’t telling the whole truth either. He was as hung up as I was, and as in denial about it as I was. I ached for Blixa, as well as myself as I stumbled through the dark, trying to get out of the dark residential area and back out to a main commercial drag. Two mixed up boy-girl, girl-boy creatures, and neither of us got to fuck who we wanted.

And then a voice spoke, as if in my head, and I don’t know if it was the insane amount of hash I’d consumed, but it seemed to make perfect sense. Why don’t you just fuck Blixa? It seemed like a shining beacon of sense and rationality, cutting through my confusion like a light was shining out
through the misty darkness of the city. Up ahead, there was a streetlight, and the light was shining out, *Why don’t you just fuck Blixa?* The light resolved into a busy Berlin street, with streetlamps and kebab shops and night cafes and signs of life, all crying out, *Why don’t you just fuck Blixa?* At the end of the street was a bright shining glass temple whose glowing warmth seemed to beckon to me as I stumbled towards it, drawn by the happy shining red letter A above its door. A scarlet A. Adultery. *Why don’t you just fuck Blixa?* The door opened with a soft shoop, and I floated inside, to find myself surrounded by piles and piles of gleaming boxes of headache tablets and bandages and toothbrushes and toothpaste. “Sonderangebot: Zahnpasta” declared a cheery bright sign, and I started to laugh at the idea of tooth-noodles, before remembering that I did actually speak German. I was in a chemist, and the reason I had never fucked Blixa was because he had such awful bad breath.

But toothbrushes and toothpaste were things that I could buy, and twist his arm into using, and yes. I could just fuck Blixa. I grabbed about four tubes of toothpaste and two double-packs of toothbrushes, before going to the counter and smiling at the pleasant young man watching me with an expression of mild alarm and curiosity.

>>I need...<< Oh, fuck. I did not know the word. Scrambling around in the back of my mind, I strung together compound components to come out with something like. >>I need preventatives.<<

>>Preventatives?<< said the chemist, with a perplexed expression. >>For the teeth? Do you mean... dental floss? Mouthwash?<<

>>No, no...<< I racked my brain, but the hash was making everything go very funny. >>Plastic. Rubber. Bucket.<<

>>I’m sorry. Come again?<< He started to draw the toothpaste and toothbrushes across the counter towards him, as if considering refusing to sell me dental hygiene products on account of my extreme intoxication.

>>I’m sorry. My German is so bad. I’m English...<< I said by way of explanation, and lowered my voice as deep as it would go. >>Little rubber hats you wear on the schwanz so a girl makes no family.<<

>>Ah. Prophylactics<< supplied the chemist, with a look of extreme relief, and produced a box from somewhere under the counter.

“Genau,” I almost shouted, pulling Deutschmarks out of my wallet and pushing them at him in an effort to get out without any further embarrassment.

The chemist made change as quickly as he could. Stuffing both condoms and dental equipment into a plastic bag, then double-bagging it, he nudged it towards me over the counter as if afraid it would contaminate him with my madness or foreignness or both to come into contact with me.

>>Don’t worry<< I muttered to no one in particular. >>I’m just going to fuck Blixa.<<

I walked all the way back to Schöneberg, hoping my head would clear, but it didn’t do much good. The night air seemed to swirl around me, accelerating the blood rushing through my veins until everything seemed dizzy. Little fishes swum in and out of my vision, darting from the light-cone of one streetlamp to the next. Why, did I never learn about the strength of Manc Mark’s hash cakes. And more importantly, where would I even find Blixa? It wasn’t his night to work at the Risk, which meant he could be anywhere. Blindly, I headed towards Goltzstrasse, hoping against hope that even if he wasn’t there, that he might have left some note on the message board.

But of course it was closed. It had been late when I left Gudrun’s, and it had taken me nearly an hour
to walk across town in my stumbling, stoned state. Of course he had locked up and gone out on the
town somewhere. The lights were out and the door was barred, though the window was half-covered
with posters advertising my show at the Other Shore. That, clearly had been Blixa’s doing, as I
recognised the scrawl of his handwriting declaring >>opening night: tomorrow!<< He really was
sweet to encourage and promote me like that, but that was Blixa, wasn’t it, so fiercely loyal and
supportive to his friends. I felt suddenly proud to know him, and ached to be with him, to be caught
up in his slightly manic self-confidence.

But as I leaned my forehead against the cool of the glass, wondering what to do with myself, I
caught sight of a tiny flicker of light against the wall, deep inside the shop. And then it was gone. I
perked up. If a light had gone on, then off, it meant someone had to be inside. The light appeared
again, moved from one side to another, then appeared to flick off again as if someone had pulled a
shade down over it.

And it was then, I remembered that first afternoon at Iron-Grey, Gudrun digging about on the floor,
and complaining about Blixa reading in bed with the torch. I tapped on the door, but of course he
didn’t hear me, so I tapped louder. The light appeared, swished about the room, but then retreated
again. Oh, fucking lazy Blixa, didn’t want to get out of bed. Retreating round to the side of the
building, I located the gate through into the internal courtyard and walked down it into the hollow,
dark space at the back. Craning my neck, and counting windows, I worked out which was the back
room of Iron-Grey. Then I found a bin, wheeled it over, and climbed up to peer into the shop.

And yes, there was the familiar back room of the Iron-Grey, even more of a mess now that Blixa
lived here, the floor a tangled rubble of dirty clothes and magazines and cereal boxes and empty
cartons of rice-milk. And there, up on the loft bed, almost even with my head, sprawled out with his
arm curved over his head, the light of a torch directed down into the page of a book displaying a full
colour diagram of a spiral galaxy, lay Blixa.

I tapped on the glass, and he jumped. For a moment, he dropped the torch, then recovered it, and
shone the beam out the window, almost blinding me for a moment. >>Carter? What the devil are you
doing out there?<< he called, before finally, he crawled down the ladder out of bed, his long thin
legs pale and bare in the torchlight, then walked over and opened the window.

I climbed inside, and sat on the ledge, just looking at him. His hair, which was growing back in long
clumps, stuck out about his head like a brownish-blond halo. His eyes, so bright, so intelligent,
twinkled above the gothic arches of his solemn cheekbones, his lips, his helplessly sensual wide lips,
twitching up in a smile that indicated that he really was pleased to see me. Gudrun was wrong. It
wasn’t love that made Blixa beautiful; he simply was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at him.

>>I’m sorry<< I stuttered, not sure how to broach what I wanted. >>I didn’t mean to wake you.<<

>>I wasn’t asleep<< he shrugged. >>I was reading – a very good book, in fact. It’s by Carl Sagan,
and it’s explaining physics, hopefully in terms even a stupid anti-musician like me can understand.<<
Foolishly, I didn’t notice the slightly mocking tone of his voice.

>>That hardly sounds like your kind of thing at all<< I replied, trying to fall back into our usual
teasing arguments. >>No mysticism, no alchemy, just good hard, science facts.<<

He smiled slyly. >>Oh, but it is very interesting. Did you know that the masses, of very large objects,
such as stars and planets, have gravity wells so large, they actually bend the fabric of spacetime, and
they are so powerful, they can warp even light? Isn’t that amazing?<<

My chest felt tight, and I ached for him. >>Yes, I think that very beautiful bodies can also have this
effect. They seem to bend space, and light, and time towards them.<<
Blixa laughed. >>Yes, I, too, have experienced this.<< He grinned, and I saw his awful, discoloured teeth, and remembered why I had come. >>Beautiful bodies, beautiful minds. And I just roll into their beds, due to the gravitational pull. Gravity is my enemy, and must be resisted with every molecule of one’s body, but... sometimes it is irresistible.<<

Bending down, I opened the bag, and did my best to pull out the toothpaste and the toothbrushes. >>Look. Blixa, darling. I’ve brought something for you.<<

He looked down, and took the gifts, but he frowned defensively as he examined them. >>My teeth are bad. Yes, I know. Living in squats... sofa-surfing... sleeping here... I never get round to taking care of the teeth. And well... the amphetamine doesn’t help, it’s true. But the decay of the body, it echoes the decay of society. It is symbolic<< he insisted defiantly.

>>Blixa<< I suggested. >>Just... for me? Please brush your teeth?<<

>>Now?<< he asked, surprised. I nodded, and he put his hand to his mouth. >>Is my breath really terrible?<<

I nodded slowly, even while smiling. >>I know you don’t give a sausage, but can you, just maybe, take care of yourself a little more, for my sake if not for yours?<<

Smiling sheepishly, he dropped his hand and closed his lips. >>For you... OK. It is very kind of you, actually, to bring me this<< he conceded, and padded through into the little kitchen area. >>Come and talk to me while I brush. Tell me about the gravity wells. Explain to me how that works, in your calm, precise world of electrical meters and measurements.<<

And so I stood, and in my happy, drugged daze, I started holding forth, and told him about black holes, and event horizons, and entropy and chaos theory and all the kinds of ooh wow physics that sounded really amazing when one was very stoned, while he bent over the kitchen sink, and brushed his teeth until his gums bled, and I tried not to be horrified at the blood in the sink.

>>You know<< he said, between gulps of water, as he rinsed his mouth clean. >>I always loved the metaphor of gravity as a curved rubber sheet. With all the planets and moons and suns bending and stretching it under their gravitational mass. It truly symbolises the warping and distorting effect of Mr. Newton’s devious and unamicable gravity.<<

I paused, as that was not exactly how I’d just described the effect. >>Wait. Was that in the Carl Sagan book you were just reading?<<

Blixa smiled slowly, turning sideways to glance at me. >>No, I remember it from Gymnasium.<< He paused, as if waiting for that to sink in, before whispering. >>Science was always my favourite subject at school. Astronomy. Especially Astrophysics.<< As my expression grew more puzzled, his grin grew wider. >>You do know, that if I’d done well at the Abitur, that I wanted to study Physics at Uni. I had every intention of becoming a researcher.<<

>>What?<< I stammered, blinking with disbelief. Was he having me on?

But he laughed, and reached for the tube of toothpaste. Squirt a bit onto his finger, he used it like paint, to slowly spell out an equation against the metal of the sink: \[ \Delta S = \Delta H / T \]

I looked at the equation and rubbed my befuddled eyes. Although I knew that somewhere in the back of my brain, I recognised it, I was so stoned it took an unduly long time to comprehend what it meant. But Blixa’s face changed from mischievous to triumphant as he started to chuckle at my apparent ignorance. >>I can’t believe you do not recognise that?<< he teased.
But as he started to crow, the information finally reached the conscious part of my brain. >>The Second Law of Thermodynamics?<< I sputtered, staring at him as he briskly nodded, then straightened up and wiped his face with a grubby towel. >>But that’s Physics. Proper Physics. Are you lying for fun again, or... or...<< Another realisation dawned like a bright red sun slowly flushing a darkened sky. >>Or have you actually been having me on, for even longer than that time you pretended to Nick that you didn’t speak English?<<

He raised and lowered his eyebrows quickly, mischievously, then a wicked grin spread across his face. >>Maybe I enjoy playing with you?<< But as my face grew suddenly furious, his grew more tender. >>It’s teasing. It’s fun. It’s flirtation. I thought you knew.<< The arrogance fell from his eyes, as he cocked his head playfully. >>And maybe I do just genuinely enjoy the clever way that you always explain these things. It’s really kind of adorable. I do like talking to you about science, because you know so much about the practical elements, while I’m more into the Theoretical. But I do also just enjoy winding you up a little bit, too, because you know, you never do stop being the Sensible Electrician at heart, and you’re very confident about your science and your physics. I mean, your confidence is very sexy. Like your intelligence is very sexy. But... it makes you blind, sometimes, with regards to me. Maybe you are not as observant about me, as you think.<<

>>Not very observant about what?<< I demanded, very confused, but feeling that my confusion was on the edge of giving way to an explosive fury. The revelations of the evening were really more than I could emotionally bear.

“Sehnsucht,” he sang very softly, and I recognised the song as one which was often the climax of their set. “Kommt aus dem Chaos.”

>>I don’t understand<< I mumbled, feeling simultaneously both angry and stupid, because I hated feeling stupid. >>That equation of yours is about working out the change of entropy in a system... Anyway you’ve missed out a minus sign. The Delta of Entropy is equal to the negative of the Delta of Heat divided by Time. Change in Entropy is the opposite of the change in Heat over Time.<< I rambled on, trying to remember my basic physics, but Blixa had started laughing overtly now.

>>Yearning<< he sang again, pointing at $\Delta H$. >>It comes from the chaos.<< And then he pointed at $\Delta S$. >>Yearning is the only energy. It comes from the Chaos.<<

As his finger hovered over the $\Delta S$, something went off in my head. >>Chaos... you mean the entropy in a system. Disorder.<<

>>I am very interested in Disorder. And...<< Blixa nodded enthusiastically as he pointed to the $\Delta H$, singing again. “Seeeeeehhhhn-sucht.”

Sehnsucht was one of those weird German words that meant half a dozen different things depending on context. Yearning, longing, nostalgia, unrequited desire... “Geil.” I said abruptly, as something clicked in my head. It was the word all of us used to mean cool, sexy, horny... but it literally meant hot. Heat, as another word for desire. $\Delta S = \Delta H / T$. Entropy was equal to Heat divided by time. Chaos gave rise to Desire, to yearning, to erotic energy over time.

>>You absolute fucker<< I said softly, with more than a little awe, looking back and forth between the equation and his smirking face. >>This whole song is an elaborate mathematical pun based on physics?<<

>>When you told me<< he replied. >>That you derived energy from yearning, from desire, I understood completely. I thought of Physics. Where energy comes from. It comes from Entropy. From an increase in Disorder. From Chaos. My creative energy comes from the same place.<<
As I gazed at him, my fury ebbed, and was replaced with a sneaking admiration, my heart throbbing and bouncing about my chest like a drum as I realised, yet again, how playful, how clever, how bright he really was. I felt like a moth fluttering helplessly around a candle. **You studied Astronomy at Gymnasium. You write songs based on Physics. At heart, you’re really just as big a nerd as I am.**

>>Maybe.<< He stepped towards me, opening his mouth and showing a crooked row of teeth. >>My teeth are clean now. Are you happy?>> he asked, looking down into my face. His teeth, though still yellowish from tobacco, looked a lot more sanitary and free of that weird build-up of dirt. I looked at him, at his great prow of a pointed nose, at the skin stretched tight over his freckled cheekbones, I looked at his deep blue eyes and his expressive eyebrows, at the hollows of his cheeks, and the tiny mole just below his mouth. I thought about his inquisitive mind, his ferocious curiosity and his playful, mischievous intelligence, and I thought about what Anita had said about love, and about attraction.

And I put my hand up, around his neck, and I pulled him down towards me, and I kissed him. Remembering what he had told Nick about desire, my other hand snaked around his waist, found the small of his back, and slowly moved up his spine until I found those knobbled vertebrae that had made him purr like a cat.

At first, he stiffened slightly, a little too shocked to respond, but as he realised what I was doing, his whole body seemed to melt. As he leaned into me, he wrapped his arms around my waist, then put one hand on the back of my neck, pulling me towards him, his mouth merging against mine as I parted his lips and pushed my tongue inside. He tasted good. He tasted right, herbal flavoured toothpaste and cigarettes and sweet boy sweat and the faint tang of rubber, and his tongue yearning against mine like he wanted to devour me completely.

When I finally pulled away, he was trembling slightly. >>Why are you doing this?>> he asked, not angry, but very definitely confused.

>>Do you love me?>> I asked.

>>Completely.<<

>>Maybe we should just have sex.<<

He blinked at me. >>What’s changed? I mean, I’m not disagreeing. I like this idea very much. But why now? It’s not the physics, is it? If only I’d known...<<

>>You’re attracted to Nick, aren’t you<< I said, as calmly as I could.

>>No! ...well, yes.<< Blixa pulled away from me, and put his hand up into his hair. >>It’s complicated.<<

>>He’s never going to sleep with you, you know<< I informed him.

>>I know that. I’m not stupid... and anyway, I don’t even... Why are you even telling me this? Anita isn’t going to sleep with you, either, you know. Don’t think I’m an idiot, I can see the way your eyes follow her around a room, and I know how much she reminds you of Ilsa, but Ilsa with a brain, who actually laughs at your jokes and appreciates your drawings, and I know how intoxicating that is for you. Well, no, she isn’t going to sleep with you, and Nick isn’t going to sleep with me. Thanks for hailing on my parsley. So what of it.<< Pulling away from me, he went to light a cigarette, and I could see from the slight tenting in his pants as he moved, that the kiss had definitely turned him on.
We could... I took a deep breath and said the unsayable. Maybe we should go ahead and fuck. Everyone always thinks we’re fucking already. I think... My voice grew stronger, as I remembered the conviction I’d felt, drifting through the mist towards the light. I think we should just fuck each other.

He frowned, and seemed to see straight to the core of me as he studied me, slouching against the frame of the bathroom door. Did Anita reject you, is that it? Are you only here because I’m just your sloppy seconds?

I looked at Blixa, really looked at him, the hash still in my bloodstream heightening my vision and making him seem almost unreally beautiful, his long, thin body, his coltish, almost comically long grasshopper legs, bare under the harsh fluorescent light, his skin so pale it looked like marble. His face, so familiar, that I had drawn a hundred times, and yet I never got bored of looking at. His deep blue eyes, that I had never noticed before, were not perfectly blue. Right around the centre of his irises, only visible in the bright light of the kitchenette, was a narrow band of gold, that gave them a faintly aqua tint. Blixa was never exactly what he seemed on the surface. There was always something golden at his core.

I’m not scared of rejection I said thickly, fumbling my way towards the truth, as I stared into the centre of his eyes. I’m used to rejection, it’s second nature to me. That’s why I always fall in love with the straight girls. What I’m really afraid of, is actually falling for someone who loves me back. I don’t know how to do that. And that’s why I’m so afraid of you. Not because I’m afraid that the obsession, and the creative energy that it brings will go away, if I sleep with you. But because I’m afraid that it won’t. I’m afraid I’ll fall in love for real. Because I know that you love me back.

Blixa looked at me with utter disbelief in his eyes, like for a moment, he genuinely thought I was having him on, and that I would yank the ball away and say, haha, no, just kidding, of course we shouldn’t fuck. But I was looking at him, and although I was trying to smile, inside I was experiencing what Anita had described, that I was looking at him, and just wanted him naked and sweating on top of me.

We looked at each other for so long, and so hard that my confidence almost started to waver. You do love me I repeated, as if challenging him to deny it.

Completely he insisted, but I worried it had just become a reflex, a habit, to say so.

But, what, you’ve changed your mind. You’re not as into me, physically, as you were, eight, nine months ago? Has that worn off, or something?

A flicker of tension across his face, a curl of his lip that was almost certainly desire. Carter, I am even more into you now, physically, than I was, eight, nine months ago. He sounded almost surprised by this. But are you sure you want to do this? he almost gasped.

I thought about that for a moment. Yes. I have never been more sure of anything in my life. We should definitely fuck.

Blixa’s face changed slowly to an expression of unfettered joy. I had finally caught him by surprise.

OK.

Chapter End Notes
Is this a very good idea? Is this a very bad idea? Was this inevitable, or will it be catastrophic? Are Blixa and Carter making a terrible mistake, sleeping with each other only because neither of them gets to sleep with the person they really want? Or is this actually both of them, finally coming to their senses about their true feelings for one another, and what they actually want from one another? Answers on a postcard, OR IN THE COMMENTS, PLEASE!!!
Anti-Climax

Chapter Summary

After over a year of sexual tension, Blixa and Carter finally have a fuck. Then go star-gazing and argue about Walter Benjamin, as you do.

If Blixa thought that having a fuck would change anything between us, would somehow exorcise the desire, the yearning, the obsession, he was wrong. Fucking diminished nothing.

Reaching out across the tiny kitchenette, he deftly plucked my glasses from my face, and laid them beside the sink. This time, he grasped for me, and pulled me towards him for a kiss of such passion and depth that it became obvious, even to me, exactly how excited he was at the prospect of having a fuck together.

We pulled apart, painting slightly, and grinned at each other, as nervous and excited as schoolchildren on the first day of holidays, almost drunk on the giddy freedom of what was to come. Without words, we moved through into the back room, climbed up into the loft bed and lay down together, then we started to gingerly touch one another, kissing and exploring with fingers and tongues. He was surprisingly affectionate, even playful, with a childlike appetite for teasing and naughtiness. I pulled off his shirt, and kissed his nipples, laughing at how thin he was, how different a boy’s chest was from a girl’s. Then he asked, quietly, solemnly, if he could take my shirt off. I pulled at my vest, then turned around and showed him the buckles of the brace that held my breasts flat.

>>If you don’t want me to remove it, I won’t<< he said, very considerate, as his long, elegant fingers paused on my back.

>>I want you to do it<< I assured him, and let him unbuckle me, and peel the brace away, so that we both were naked. It felt so strangely natural, the warmth of his flesh on mine. His hands, and then his mouth found my breasts, and for a moment, I stiffened, terrified, but as his tongue touched my nipple, I gasped at the sudden rush of pleasure. I had never remembered it as being pleasurable, being touched on the chest like this, and yet his mouth made me feel electrified with sensation.

>>Come here<< he whispered, tugging at my hips. >>I want you to go on top.<<

I lay on top of him, skin against skin, almost holding my breath as I bent down to kiss him. I had forgotten what to do with a man, and I found myself pushing my knee between his legs, surprised that he let me prise him open.

>>Hold me down<< he whispered, as he arched his back and held out his arms. For a moment, I paused, but then I grabbed him by the wrists and held him down, pressing his arms into the mattress as I started to move against him, feeling his cock slip between my legs. >>Hold me fast<< he urged.

I ran my mouth down the side of his neck and nibbled at his protruding collarbones, surprised by how little flesh he had on his bones. His hips were so slight and yet his cock was definitely straining against me, I could feel it against my thighs. And abruptly, I stopped, not sure how to proceed. >>I don’t really know what to do with a man<< I confessed, worrying that I was going to ruin the mood completely as I let go of his wrists.
But Blixa laughed, and put his arms around my shoulders, pulling me down closer to him. >>I don’t
know either. Whenever I imagine this, I always dream of you climbing on top of me, just pushing me
down and overpowering me completely.<<

I looked at him, a little concerned. >>You’ve imagined this?<<

>>Of course I have.<< He paused for a moment, then looked suddenly worried, as it dawned on me,
under what circumstances, exactly, he might have imagined it. >>Haven’t you?<<

I rolled off him and lay staring at him with a flabbergasted expression, as he rolled over onto his side,
his arms still around me, his face nose to nose with mine as he looked very deeply into my eyes. The
idea that Blixa thought about me at all, when I wasn’t there, was still vaguely astonishing to me, let
alone that he might think of me in... intimate moments. To my surprise, I decided I actually liked it,
and smiled at him cautiously.

>>Whatever gave you the idea that I would be like that?<<

He shrugged lightly. >>I’ve seen you with girls.<<

>>When have you seen me.<<

He swallowed nervously, then closed his eyes and raised his eyebrows. >>I watched you, that night
with Ilsa.<<

>>Why did you do that?<< I asked, just glad to have the confirmation that it wasn’t my imagination,
had it done so. I wasn’t angry, just surprised that he would want to.

Opening his eyes again, he set his mouth in a disgruntled line. >>Because it was supposed to be me,
right? You were supposed to have a fuck with me that night. I planned it. We arranged it, so that
Wolfgang would take off with his boy, leaving me stranded. Then you were supposed to go home
with me.<<

I stared at him for a moment, and then started to laugh. >>Why?<<

>>It was your hands, OK? I love your androgynous face, I’m so hot for your ambiguous body, how
strong you are, how you can just pick me up and sling me about like a toy. But it is your hands that
make me go weak in the knees. I love to watch your hands when you work. Whether you’re
drawing, or whether you’re manipulating your tools, especially when you are working with your
electrician’s tools. You have the most beautiful, strong, supple hands. I just wanted your hands on
me. Have you not noticed, how I keep trying to get your hands on my shoulders, my back, my
waist? Christ how I want your hands. Your fingers. In my hair, in my mouth, around my neck,
around my wrists, holding me down, on my skin, on my cock, even inside me. Especially inside me.
Oh god, how I want your fingers inside me. To hold me fast and overpower me, leave me quivering
and laid open, like a girl.<<

I did as he asked. I ran my fingers over every centimetre of his skin, tracing him as if I were drawing
him. He was oddly passive, receptive, arching his back towards me, this strange feminine man who
seemed to want me as intensely as I wanted him. I climbed on top of him, and held him down, and
somehow remembered how to get a condom on him, and get his cock inside me, as I ran my fingers
over his mouth, and he opened his lips as he sucked them in, desperately, urgently, his mouth warm
and moist and oddly like a cunt, until we both laughed at the joy of it.

It wasn’t that big a deal, fucking a man. We were both giggling and screwing one another, wrestling
slightly in the enclosed space high up under the ceiling. He made me laugh, and then he made me
gasp, as he angled his hips and started to bounce me up and down on top of him roughly. I fought back a little, grasping his bony shoulders and grappling him down into the mattress. His upper arms were so thin I could almost get my thumb and forefinger around them, but his cock was suddenly doing amazing things to the inside of me as he thrust away at me.

>>How do I make you come?<< he panted as he strained against me.

I just stared at him, as it was not a question I had ever heard a man ask. >>I make myself come<< I said gruffly.

He grinned wickedly. >>Use me as a toy<< he urged. >>Do whatever you want with me.<<

Seizing his hands, I pushed them between my thighs, then held my own hands on top, and ground his fingers against me until I could feel the orgasm building. It only took a few minutes, and then there was the small explosion of climax. I gasped for breath, feeling my body fluttering with pleasure, then slumped back against him, breathing hard. An orgasm from a man. First time for everything. Releasing his hands, I touched his face, pulled his mouth towards me and kissed him. It was nice. Orgasm with a man. Not mind-blowing or spiritual or life-changing, but nice. I sucked his tongue into my mouth, raked my teeth across it, then released it, smiling down at him with a dazed expression.

>>My turn now?<< he asked, and I nodded. >>I might get a bit rough<< he warned.

>>Do you want me to hold you down?<<

>>Oh god yes.<< His eyes closed as I seized his wrists and pinned him against the mattress, then he started to thrust quickly, intensely, panting and gasping for breath, until he, too, stilled.

For a minute or two, we just lay there against one another, catching our breaths, me listening to his heartbeat slowing to a normal rate again. >>You came, yes?<< I asked, a little worried, as his organ slipped out of me.

>>Climax, yes<< he said softly.

>>Anti-climax<< I said, and we both laughed as I rolled off him and lay beside him on the bed, still looking into his intensely ultramarine blue eyes. He remained just as beautiful as he had been before I fucked him.

>>It gets better with practice, I assure you<< he said softly, a little apologetically. >>It’ll be even nicer next time.<< But I just stared at him, a little perplexed.

>>This is something you want to do again?<< I was confused, because he had spent the past year telling lovers not to get attached to him, and yet he wanted me to stick around?

>>Of course<< he blurted out, but then paused. >>Don’t you?<<

I didn’t know how to answer that. I hadn’t really thought about what happened beyond that initial fuck, that I had felt such urgency to just do, and get over with.

>>I’m not saying...<< But suddenly he seemed to stutter over his words, and his jaunty confidence deserted him for a moment. >>I mean, if you don’t want to do it again, that’s OK, too. But let me know, so I don’t... so I don’t make a fool of myself. So I know what to expect?<<

Lying back against the mattress, I thought it over, twisting my fingers in the tangled clumps of his sandy brown hair. >>Blixa, I’m not sure I understand what you are asking.<<
What is there to understand? he asked, rolling over to face me. Desire exists he declared, kissing my cheek. Or it doesn’t.

Oh, it does I assured him, with a helpless grin. It definitely does. He smirked proudly, and pressed his lips against the other cheek. I mean, yes. Of course. It would be OK to have another fuck. Or a few, even. Later tonight, or... some other time? Yeah. I desire that, most definitely. He looked slightly relieved, curling his lips into an impish moue. I just don’t want to... I tried to think how to put it delicately. I don’t want to cramp your style. I don’t want to fetter you, or tie you down.

His eyes flashed wickedly as he deflected the conversation away from where I was trying to lead it. To be honest, I would like nothing more than if you did tie me down and fetter me to the posts of your bed. But suddenly he got a very intense expression in his face. If you would tie me down, then put on that harness, and penetrate me, like one of your girlfriends, I would like that more than anything.

The idea excited me more than I liked to admit. OK, sure, yes, we could definitely get together and do that some time I told him, as he reached for the blankets and pulled them up over our naked and now cooling bodies. But Blixa... I just don’t want to... I just don’t want to create unreal expectations. I can’t... Ugh. I know, now is not the best time to talk about this, but...

Now is what we have. Now is all the time we have. Not tomorrow, not next week, now. Best to make the most of it insisted Blixa with a doggedness that made me realise he wasn’t just talking about this specific conversation.

But you... I mean, that’s exactly it. One of the things I love most about you is... You exist, so completely, only in this moment. Not tomorrow, not next week, not even half an hour in the future. Just now. You pull me out of my head and all my worrying and obsessing and cogitating about the Future, and you pull me into this body, in this moment, with you, here, present, exactly now. When I’m with you, there is only now.

Good! His face lit up with delight, his whole body rocking forwards as he nodded. You understand perfectly. My love burned with the perfect intensity of that understanding. I want to be with you now. But also... Here, the corner of his lips turned sheepishly up. I want all of our nows.

And abruptly the sensation slipped away, as I remembered tomorrow, and next week, and the rest of my life, and suddenly blurted out But you know that I can’t be your girlfriend.

He nodded solemnly. I didn’t expect you to be. To be honest, I think that’s part of the appeal, that you reject convention as strongly as I do. But then his lips twisted up in a smile. How about you be my boyfriend? Alright, then. My feckless boyfriend. You forget to call me, you drop by only when you want sex, you deny we have a relationship in front of your mates, I obsess over you and wait by the telephone for you to ring, and yet forgive it all when you bring me flowers, looking for a fuck? You could be my boyfriend. I think you’d make a good boyfriend.

I burst into laughter and cuffed him gently on the chest. So much laughter was another thing I had not expected from sex with a man. Be serious I told him, though I didn’t feel very serious. I felt kind of giggly and snuggly. This was not the conversation I had expected to have, at all. But in a way, it was a relief that we were raising all these things, and not just assuming. I wanted this to go well, fucking Blixa, not end up in a tangle of hurt feelings and recriminations.

I kind of am serious? He smiled and kissed my nose gently. I don’t want to play the boy-part in a relationship right now. Maybe never again. Can you just come to me, when you want me? I’ll
always be up for it when you want me. Whenever. So I don’t have to worry about pursuing you? Just come and go, like a cat.<<

>>I...<< I was about to tell him that I really didn’t want a relationship, but as I thought about it, actually what he proposed sounded quite good right now. >>We just have sex, whenever I want? And otherwise, things stay as they are? We stay friends, yes?<<

Relief flooded his face. >>We are friends. We are the best of friends. That doesn’t change, not ever. We just add... all the fucks we’ve been avoiding..<<

I looked at him sternly. >>But you brush your teeth first.<<

For a moment, he pouted, like a petulant little boy disliking being reprimanded, but then burst out laughing. >>Alright. I’ll brush my teeth if it will make you have more fucks with me.<<

>>Alright. We’ll carry on as we were, with fucks.<<

And it was fine. I had sex with Blixa, once at night, and once again in the small hours of the morning, and the world didn’t end. Our friendship didn’t implode, we didn’t get weird and stop talking to one another. Neither of us got uptight. I didn’t wake up and hate the sight of him, mostly because we didn’t really go to sleep. We had sort of intended to at some point, but instead we kept kissing and snuggling and giggling and having strange, distracted, late-night conversations about ever more increasingly arcane subjects, as I drilled him, trying to work out the full dimensions of his complete knowledge of physics and astronomy.

He laughed, and pulled me out of bed, and we half-dressed, then he dragged me up the back stairs to the roof. As we sat there, in the dark, one of his arms around my shoulders, the other pointing out the stars, he showed me how to find Sirius, then the Winter Hexagon, from Rigel to Aldebaran, then Capella, Pollux and Procyon, right round in a great loop. We snuggled together, staring at the stars as the night wore on, until the sky pinkened at the edges and started to turn to day. Then we crept back downstairs as the sun came up, we rolled into bed, and we both dozed, my head against his chest and my arms around his waist. Then we did the fucking thing again, and it was definitely nicer that time, as we learned to anticipate what each other liked, then we decided to get on with our lives.

The morning brought new challenges. A place to bathe, for a start. Iron-Grey had a toilet with a tiny sink behind the kitchenette, but there was nowhere to clean up. I was terrified that we might stink of sex, and anyone we met would know what we had been up to. I was still getting used to the idea of being with him, the idea that I could walk by, and see an exposed bony shoulder, and it was alright, in fact it was highly appreciated if I bent down to kiss it tenderly. Blixa was a kissy man, I already knew that. He kissed everyone, girls, boys, friends, lovers. He was as open and demonstrative with his affections as I was repressed and British, and that affection didn’t change now that we were lovers.

So I had no idea how to handle the fact of being with Blixa in public. Whether kissing, hugging, gently squeezing, touching his exposed skin was appreciated, or forbidden.

And yet, I didn’t want to leave him, and slope off home to bathe by myself, especially given that I had missed the morning window for the furnace, and would have to heat water on the stove. He suggested dropping in on Wolfgang, who, after all, had that power shower. I was really not prepared to handle being with Blixa in front of the man I very much suspected of being some kind of former lover, though I found myself oddly shy of just coming out and asking if they had been intimate.
So then, he suggested we go to Christoph’s house, as he, too, had a power shower now, and I tensed up, remembering that Anita was staying there. Unless she had stayed over at Gudrun’s. I didn’t have a clue, and was astonished to find that it was still tender, for if I’d expected screwing Blixa to erase those feelings, it seemed that I was out of luck. Why couldn’t I just fall so completely in love with Blixa, that the overwhelming love just erased all of my other tense, conflicted emotions? Hell, screwing Blixa didn’t even seem to have done much to assuage my yearning for Blixa. I still looked at him and found myself shivering with lust, wondering what other fantasies he harboured, if he wanted anything else from me, as well as my tying him down and penetrating him by force. No, better not think that way if I wanted to get out of Iron-Grey at all.

We went to Wolfgang’s. He took one look at us, and seemed to know instantly what had happened, drawing back from the door, holding his hands wide to welcome us in. >> The artist and his muse<< he said, with a knowing smirk. >>or, the muse and his artist<<

I murmured something apologetic about the hot water being off at my great-aunt’s house, and he laughed.

>>You’re welcome to the shower. I’ll put on a pot of coffee and make some breakfast. Will you be going one at a time, or do you want to save my hot water bill by hopping in together?<< He smiled and winked, almost as if to make sure I knew that there were no hard feelings.

>>I’ll go first<< I said, my face flushing, though Blixa was grinning wolfishly, as if he were pleased as punch to have his conquest recognised. I showered quickly, and put on the same clothes, wondering if I could nip back home to change before the opening. And when I emerged, I found Wolfgang and Blixa roaring with laughter in the kitchen. I flinched and drew back, until I realised they weren’t discussing me at all, but some art scene in-joke.

>>Are you excited for tonight?<< Wolfgang ventured, as Blixa sloped off to the shower, and I took his place at the kitchen table.

>>I’m a little dazed<< I confessed, not sure if I was talking about the art show or my lover.

>>Everything’s happened all at once.<<

He handed me a cup of coffee, then put his hand over mine, and squeezed it gently. >>Wait until you see the paper – I saved this to give to you.<< He produced a copy of the local paper, which covered the West Berlin art school and gallery scene almost exhaustively. And there, on the first page of the arts section, was a large photo of one of my drawings of Blixa, albeit with his family jewels covered by a small inset box which showed a portrait of the artist – and the muse.

I had no idea when the photo had been taken, but there was Blixa front and centre, animated, holding court at the Risk bar, clearly pontificating about something with his dancing hands caught mid-gesture and his bright, intelligent eyes gazing out of the photo at the photographer, though he was leaned towards me as if drawn by a magnet. In the foreground, to the right of him, was me, looking not at the photographer, but at Blixa, with an expression that actually shocked me to see. Because I had had no idea how it was that I looked at Blixa, and indeed why it was that people constantly thought we were together, but the expression on my face could only be described as adoration. I had been looking at him as if he belonged to me, and he was leaning in towards me as if he agreed, two good-looking young men appearing very much in love, even though the photo had to have been taken weeks earlier.

And then I realised how recently the photo must have been taken, for in the background of the photo, on the other side of Blixa, standing leaning with his elbows bent back against the bar as if he needed to be propped up, was Nick. And he, too, was gazing through his messy black hair at Blixa with something resembling adoration, a dark, eerie mirror of the expression I had on my own face.
But then I wrenched my eyes away from the photos, and started to read the text. >>Last decade, a book called ‘Ways of Seeing’ by the English academic, John Berger, took the art world by storm. This book discusses the qualities of the Male Gaze, which turns the image of a naked woman into a Nude: ‘Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relationship between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object.’ Carter, an English artist, has come to West Berlin, not merely to live as a man, but with the desire to live without gender at all, an extraordinarily ambitious project. And in this audacious set of drawings, Carter has turned Berger’s diktats of art on their head. The tall, thin, androgynous yet undeniably male youth who serves as Carter’s muse is a man watching himself being looked at, and yet his internal surveyor is both ungendered, on account of Carter’s determination to live without gender; and yet also oddly feminine on account of the overt passive homosexuality of the setting; and also of course masculine, because neither artist nor muse can ever entirely escape the conventions of society. The erotic pictures – and there is no doubt that these images are highly sexually charged – manage to be both completely homoerotic, and yet completely degendered, because what is a nude, when the context of the erotic impulse of the painter has been so completely stripped? Context changes the gender of both the sitter, and the perceived viewer, in an extraordinary series of works. The latest exhibition at the Other Shore Café is both beautiful, and challenging, and not to be missed...<<

I felt my whole body bending and shifting and melting away, as I read, both annoyed at how the author – no name was given – seemed to have both completely missed the point, and yet somehow revealed things in my art that I had never managed to see. >>Wow<< I said, and finally remembered to take a breath.

>>It’s wonderful, isn’t it<< said Wolfgang, and I realised I had almost forgotten where we were.

>>Yes, yes<< I agreed. >>May I keep this?<<

>>Of course. I saved it for you.<<

>>Saved what?<< asked Blixa jauntily, reappearing redressed in his rubber jeans and his threadbare leotard top with the hole in the armpit that seemed to invite my tongue.

>>Wolfgang found a piece about my show in the paper<< I explained, handing it over. >>It’s really something<< Blixa smiled when he saw the huge photo, a smile that widened into a grin as he quickly read the piece. But of course, Blixa skimmed over all the guff about art theory, until he found his own name mentioned.

>>...and when he is not playing Muse for Schöneberg’s scintillating gay arts scene, Blixa Bargeld is, of course, the mesmerising leader, singer and multi-instrumentalist of West Berlin’s premier experimental performance troupe, Collapsing New Buildings<< he read aloud. >>Oh, I’m so pleased with that description. That will annoy Mufti so much<<

But I looked at him carefully, as he gloated over the review, pointing out the bits he liked to Wolfgang. >>It doesn’t bother you, to be called my Muse?<<

>>Why on earth would it bother me? It’s a very good title. Which of us is the muse, and which of us is the artist? I love that it leaves this ambiguous.<<

I shrugged, thinking over Gudrun’s protestations of the previous night. >>You don’t think that it... maybe diminishes you, to be reduced to just an idea, or a concept, an inspiration in my head?<<

Blixa laughed aloud. >>But Blixa Bargeld doesn’t exist just in your head, or in your ungendered gaze, or however this art theorist wants to put it. Blixa Bargeld is a product, that I invented, distilled
and improved and commodified. But ultimately, I am the artist. I have created the original, an object with cult value. The Blixa cult. The ritual object displayed in performance. All you have done is created is another art object, a reproduction. Which only enhances my exhibition value.<<

He nodded sharply, clearly very pleased with himself.

Following his lead, I also laughed, though to be honest, I sometimes couldn’t tell when Blixa was making an extremely convoluted philosophical joke, and when he really was being as arrogant as he sounded. >>So you think you’re not a muse at all, you’re the actual artist, and I’m just the camera reproducing your work of art.<<

>>Oh no<< insisted Blixa, thumping the newspaper lightly. >>I am a muse. Most assuredly. It pleases me, to be your muse. I love being a muse. I would be the whole world’s muse if I could! Not just to work, to make my own life a work of art. But to become a muse... to inspire the whole world to reproduce Blixa Bargeld, and, like I said, enhance the exhibition value of this unique Blixa Bargeld original...<<

>>So all along, you tricked me into enhancing your cult legend. And all my drawings, and my comics are just adverts for your Blixa Bargeld product<< I teased right back.

>>No! No! Have you ever read Walter Benjamin’s Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction?<< he asked, his eyes flashing. >>This will explain everything. I’m quite sure Wolfgang has a copy, if you have not yet read it, but anyway, it doesn’t really matter, because in point of fact, it’s wrong.<<

Wolfgang had got up and started to walk over to his bookshelves in search of it, but abruptly turned, and sputtered slightly. >>Wrong? Walter Benjamin? How dare you!<<

>>Well, of course he’s wrong on this<< cried Blixa. >>Because you know, you go to the Louvre and you queue up for hours to see the Mona Lisa. Or you go to Amsterdam and you go to the Van Gogh Museum and you see Starry Night. This cult item you see in this fanatic’s ritual, for thirty seconds amidst a crowd, maybe once in your life, like a devout Muslim travelling to Mecca. And on your way in, and on your way out, you see the gift shop, where they have thousands... hundreds of thousands of reproductions of this artwork for sale. Tell me, is the original painting diminished by those hundreds of thousands of reproductions, or is its value enhanced, by how much people are willing to reproduce it?<<

>>I’m not sure. Because it depends what kind of value you are talking about.<< I said slowly, deciding to try to meet him on his own strange logic. >>The auction value, of whether it can sell for a million pounds at Christie’s? The cultural value? Or the individual, personal impact of the image? Because I do have to say, that once you’ve seen Starry Night reproduced on a hundred thousand tote bags and keychains and umbrellas, a certain something about its emotional impact truly is actually cheapened. And I don’t think that’s something that ever comes back once it’s lost, even through seeing the original.<<

>>Hmmm<< said Blixa, and started to chew his lower lip thoughtfully, his face taking on a self-important and slightly challenging expression, as if he were merely gearing up for the next round. >>I do not think...<<

>>Here’s the actual essay, Carter, if you care to read it<< said Wolfgang, returning to the table and dropping a small paperback into my lap. >>Of course, he’s completely twisted the meaning of Benjamin’s original arguments, but that’s Blixa for you.<<

>>On the contrary. I love Walter Benjamin. He is my spiritual father<< Blixa smiled, and his haughty, argumentative expression melted away. >>I’m just trying to distract Carter from being nervous about the show. And look, it worked. When she argues with me, she becomes fierce and
passionate and forgets to be a shy, reserved, nervous little Britisher at all.<<

I turned and looked at him, wondering whether to be annoyed at him for winding me up again, or whether to be grateful that the distraction had worked. But his little boy smile was so appealing as he tented his eyebrows at me, that I just couldn’t stay angry with him.

>>But I’m not teasing about the muse thing, though<< he suddenly interjected, with a tone of great importance. >>I am genuinely pleased, if I inspire you to make your own art. This idea excites me. It excites me more than anything.<<
Breaking Glass

Chapter Summary

Carter and Blixa make their first public appearance as a ~couple~ at Carter's art-opening. But a ghost from Blixa's past makes an ugly interruption.

Content note for episode of psychosis, and police intervention.

We sat around drinking coffee and talking about art shows, and various performances Wolfgang had given, as he assured me that feeling this nervous vomitty-feeling was completely normal before a show. Then Blixa and I dropped back in at Iron-Grey for a few hours because it was almost as if Blixa liked keeping afternoon office hours, so that people could drop by and visit. Of course he had to be available so that people could share their gossip with him, and he could keep his ear to the ground of what was going on in his city. I took the opportunity to nip back to my own house, and changed into a nice suit I'd bought for special occasions, then carefully styled my hair for the evening’s party.

By the time I got back, Salomé had appeared and took us off to dinner at some fancy restaurant now that he was flush with Deutsche Bank’s money, but I was too nervous to eat, and Blixa kept reaching under the table to squeeze my leg as if he were concerned that that I was too tense. His tenderness towards me surprised me, but I wasn’t sure why I had expected that to change. We debated getting high, but I had had enough of hash, and I didn’t fancy Blixa’s speed, so he and Salomé went off and did a line of coke while I nursed another coffee, because really, the lack of sleep was starting to catch up with me and I was starting to get into that very familiar sort of West Berlin daze of no sleep and too many stimulants and slightly horny but totally fucked. In more ways than one. My nether parts ached slightly, every time I shifted my hips or crossed my legs, but in a good way, a pleasant way, like the happy tiredness after a good, long country walk, and every time I looked at Blixa’s slender hips I felt a little stab of pleasure-pain near my own.

And then it was time to go. We held hands in the taxi, him looking very intently at my fingers, lying clasped in his lap, and I remembered what he had said about how he had fallen in love with my hands. I wanted to just put them on him, and say, yes, yes, yes, god you amazing man, yes, but Salomé was having an argument with the taxi driver about the local council’s politics and the mayor of West Berlin and the corrupt Chief of Police and his hated policy on trying to break up the squats, and so instead Blixa and I just smiled at each other, and he mouthed something I didn’t quite catch.

The cab pulled up outside the café, and even though it was early, the place was very, very crowded already, with people spilling out onto the sidewalk outside, smoking and drinking and talk, talk, talking. The music was so loud I could hear it from outside – the new Malaria! album. Bettina’s expansive, theatrical cabaret voice totally suited the atmosphere of the bar and its art, and I felt a wave of solidarity at having my friends’ band there in spirit. Blixa climbed out, and actually held out his hand to me, like he expected me to walk into the place arm in arm, oh good god I wasn’t sure I was ready for that. People might think that we were.. well, we were. There was no denying that now. We were lovers.

I took his hand and walked up to the door, and there was Gudrun sitting at a table with a long list of names, looking all glamorous, like a visiting rock star, and I was terrified she was going to say
something about my abrupt disappearance the night before, but she acted like nothing had happened at all, just smiling at us, her eyes all huge and round as she told us who had come, and what amazing people had turned up, and wasn’t it all so wonderful.

>>Wonderful, wonderful<< agreed Blixa, kissing Gudrun on both cheeks in greeting. He squeezed my hand and tugged me inside, propelling me towards the centre of the crowd like he was not going to allow me to just stand by the wall and observe. Then he whispered something again, and I didn’t catch it because there were so many people and the place was so crowded and it was so noisy.

>>What?<<

He grinned and leaned closer and whispered in my ear. >>I said I’m so proud.<<

Blixa? Proud of me? I just gawped at him until he squeezed my hand and tugged me onwards into the crowded room.

And there was Anita, standing in the thickest part of the crowd, shining like a goddess with her red-gold hair pouring down her back, acting the perfect hostess and taking me by the arm and saying “Good god, Carter, you clean up nicely, you look gorgeous in that suit,” and my face felt like it was on fire as she kissed my cheek. “Come and meet your fans, everyone loves the show...” and I was being dragged off to meet people as Blixa winked and disappeared in the opposite direction.

Just being around Anita seemed to exacerbate my nerves, until I felt almost like I was going to throw up, but she didn’t even seem to notice. She took me by the arm and guided me first towards one person, and then before I could even catch what they were trying to say to me, she shoved me on towards the next. I shook hands, I said hello to people, I did my best to greet people politely and accept compliments graciously, but it just seemed to go on and on and on. I felt so churned up by Anita’s presence that I wanted to crawl away and hide, but then again, I couldn’t stand the thought of being away from her. God, where was Blixa? I didn’t feel like this when Blixa was around any more, I felt confident and self-contained and beloved. But without his presence to steady me, Anita’s small, soft body at my side felt like a spotlight I couldn’t ignore. It was overly warm in the café, and the lights were too bright and the music was too loud and my special suit felt awkward and unnatural, and even though it fit perfectly well, I didn’t feel like myself in it.

People kept talking to me about what they thought my art meant, which felt completely absurd, but at least it kept me from having to say anything. I smiled and blushed and accepted compliments, but found myself falling more and more silent. People enjoyed this sort of thing? Really? Listening to some man droning on and on about Aubrey Beardsley and his cock drawings from Lysistrata, I glanced around the room, searching for Blixa. Finally, I caught sight of him at the bar, posing next to Nick with an imperious posture, his head erect, his hands on his hips and his pelvis thrust forwards, like he wanted to announce to everyone in the room that he had got laid last night. Nick looked out of it, really fucked up, and he wasn’t even looking at Blixa, he was glaring across the room, and I followed his gaze quickly to see Rowland and Gen talking and laughing with the drummer from The Skin, who had just arrived with Manc Mark. Lydia turned up, and the dynamics in the room seemed to change again, as she made a bee-line for Rowland, working like a sheepdog to cut him off from the flock and nudge him away from his girlfriend, and Gen looked slightly put out at that, but rolled her eyes and made a snarky comment to the drummer, who smiled, very politely, with tight lips. But if Nick glared at Rowland, he positively scowled at Lydia.

The music had changed, the new Malaria! album had gone, and now David Bowie’s Low was winding its sinuous funk around the room, pulling away my ability to concentrate with its odd, tortured guitar lines. Lysistrata man started telling me about how Bowie used to live just next door, as he was recording this very album, and frequently took his meals at the café, but the Bowie echoing
over the loudspeakers seemed to be trying to tell me something urgently. “Don’t look, at the carpet... I drew something awful on it. See!”

>>Look, I’m sorry<< I found myself saying to the Lysistrata man, as I gently excused myself from the conversation. >>But I’m feeling a bit warm. I really need to go and get a drink of water.<<

I could see Anita trying to catch my attention, moving towards me with another cock-drawing-collector she wanted to introduce to me, but I shook my head and dodged the other way. I couldn’t face her, or another conversation about cocks in art. I needed a drink of water, or better yet, some air. The bar was too crowded; it would just be better to head straight outside into the cool night air. But as I was making my way towards the door, the crowd seemed to part, and I became aware that someone was walking towards me. At first I took it for a small boy, with dark, close-cropped hair, wondering if someone’s child had come looking for his parents in the crush. But no child had a face like that, thin and cadaverous, dark circles under its eyes, the cheeks sunken in. And as this creature locked eyes with me, I suddenly realised that I knew it, that this was Jana, though she seemed to have hacked all of her hair off, leaving only bare-scraped curly tufts that reminded me uncomfortably of the hacked-off hairstyle that Blixa had only recently abandoned after he started hanging out with Nick.

And when she spoke, I knew for certain that it was Jana, her little-girl voice rising slowly from a whisper to a hysterical whine. >>Vultures<< she cried. >>Vultures, all of you, circling the pyres.<<

As her voice rose in volume, people turned to look, curiously at first, conversation dying away as if they thought this was maybe another part of the art.

>>Hyenas! Like a pack of hyenas, the lot of you! Scavengers! Carrion beasts!<< For such a small woman, she had a piercingly loud wail. >>Yes, you, you fuckers. All of you. Vultures.<<

People were starting to stare, drawing away from her, laughing nervously as if they were starting to think maybe this wasn’t part of the art show, but things were spinning a little out of control. A couple of people turned to look at me, as if expecting to take their reaction from mine, but my face registered only shock. >>Jana?<< I said, my voice shaking.

She walked straight up to me, and stared at me. She tried to hand me something, but I didn’t want to take it, so instead she pushed it – some slip of paper – into the sketchbook I was holding because I’d been showing my drawings to some cock-collector. And then she moved even closer, putting her face really right up close to mine, then whispering >>Oh my god, I am so sorry. All I see is breaking glass. Stop him.<<

>>I...<< In the background, Bowie’s disembodied voice had been singing about breaking glass, and I wasn’t sure what it was that she was apologising for, making a scene at my show, or... But she moved past me and towards the bar, drawn like a magnet towards Blixa, and for a horrified moment, I saw that she had the local paper in her other hand, and that it was open to the photo of Blixa and I. Oh god. Had she realised, from this photo, that Blixa and I had, well, only as she had bloody well asked us to, ten months previously... got together?

>>Vulture!<< she cried again, but she didn’t stop by Blixa. She walked on and stopped in front of Nick, then pointed a single accusatory finger at him. >>Vulture!<< she shrieked. >>Carrion beast! You fucking scavenger coming to pick over the bones of West Berlin! You’re not wanted! Fuck off!<<

Nick drew back, his face suddenly very pale, like he clearly couldn’t understand what she was saying, but understood that it was bad. “Look, sweetheart, I’ve, uuuhhh... I’ve never met you before in my life.”
Pack of hyenas, and you are the hyena king! she screeched, undeterred. The vultures, the vultures, all of the vultures. Circling! Can't you see them circling the city?

Darling said Blixa, moving to try to come between his ex-girlfriend and his new best friend. Maybe this is not a good time to...

Vulture! screamed Jana, and this time, she picked up a drink that was lying unattended on the bar, and she hurled it, glass and all, with all her might, at Nick.

"Whoa!" yelped Nick, and leaped out of the way, his reflexes just a little too slow to avoid getting hit, as Blixa rushed forward to restrain her, now just screaming inarticulately about scavengers and wild beasts and corpses in the street.

Darling repeated Blixa. Anita appeared, and lead away Nick, who was now bleeding from the face and muttering something about being a magnet for bonkers sheilas.

But Jana turned to me, her eyes huge, her pupils pinpricks, and hissed I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry. I thought it was you... it was not. I am so sorry.

Thought what was me? I asked, but a large burly man had appeared, and was detaching her from Blixa's restraining embrace, and dragging her away, kicking and struggling.

He's poison she howled, even as the large man was joined by another, and she was ejected from the building. Can't you see it? Can't you smell it on him? The smell of decay. Don't let him hurt her. You understand me, don't you. Keep your lovers from his clutches. All of them. He's poison.

A shiver went down my spine as I realised she wasn't talking about Blixa; she was talking about Nick. I turned to Blixa, moved towards him and tried to reach for him, but I could see that his face registered surprise and fear and deep, deep worry. He looked truly shaken, as my hand found his.

The silence that had formed in the wake of the interruption seemed to deepen for a minute, but then, slowly, the normal chatter of conversation started to slowly pulse back to life, everyone saying what was that? or who was that crazy girl? but with nothing like the same volume.

And then abruptly, the tense and overheated air of the café was abruptly shattered by the smash! of breaking glass as some projectile came in the front window. Oh, Jesus Christ, she had been going on about breaking glass, hadn't she? Blixa and I exchanged looks, then both of us ran at once, knowing that we had to get to Jana before the staff did.

There she stood, outside in the half-light, in front of the now-shattered window. Clearly some flying glass had hit her, for blood was starting to seep down her gaunt face, as she just stood there, as if she were as surprised by her own violence as we had been. She looked at me full in the face, and simply repeated the words The Tower she said. I thought it was you, that he would betray me for. The Tower. I got it so wrong. He's going to betray you, for him. The Tower, don't you see.

Blixa walked around to the other side of her, so that she was hemmed in, and could not run, before taking her gently by the shoulders and suggesting Jana, we need to go. You have to get out of here. They're going to call the...

A police siren suddenly started to wail, a lot closer than either of us had been expecting. Shit I swore, looking to see if there was an alleyway that we could bundle her down, but she was not moving, just standing there staring at me like a forlorn child.

And abruptly, Gerhard appeared outside, with two large staff members, advancing on Jana, and we
were trapped. >>That’s her, that’s the girl<< insisted the burly man who had ejected her, adding a racial epithet I didn’t know, but certainly got the gist of.

>>My window<< moaned Gerhard. >>They warned me, my insurance company said, don’t have open windows on a gay bar, put up some shutters for protection. Oh god, my insurance premiums are going to go through the roof.<<

Jana just looked at him blankly, as Blixa stuttered. >>I am very sorry about your window...<<

Everything seemed to become jumbled together, the crunch of glass underfoot as the police arrived. The officer shined a light into Jana’s face, but she didn’t even flinch. >>Is this the perpetrator? What happened, were there drugs involved?<<

Turning to face down the policeman, Jana just stared calmly, carrying on in the same fashion, but a new, completely ordinary tone that was somehow much more frightening than the shrieking and shouting she had been doing earlier. >>Flying vultures, circling the pyres of the city. Poison. Death and destruction. The angels will destroy the city, you know, the avenging angel of history, just like Walter Benjamin said. And hyenas roaming the streets in packs. Corpses, corpses everywhere. Piles and piles of bodies, and the scavengers pick at them night and day, pick, pick, pick. Vultures and snakes and things that crawl. Death, death, death, death, death.<<

>>Oh, Christ Jesus<< said the policeman, and spoke into his walkie-talkie. >>Call an ambulance, this one’s a full-on fucking nutter.<<

All three of us went off in the ambulance together, me holding Jana’s hand as she kept talking, her phrases becoming more and more disconnected, degenerating into a kind of word salad, and Blixa at the other end of the stretcher, trying to fill in some basic history for the paramedic. Drugs, yes, she was known to be dependent on heroin. No, neither he nor myself used heroin, neither of us were on anything, which was almost the truth. Relationship to the patient? Ex-lover, said Blixa, his eyes flickering nervously towards me. They used to live together, for a number of years. What an awkward lot we were. Where were her parents or closest relatives? Blixa sighed deeply and tried to remember where they lived. Friedenau, he muttered, but the better part of Friedenau. There was clearly a lot of history there.

When we reached the hospital, some other medical types arrived with a straitjacket, but Jana was so calm and unconcerned it scared me more than if she had been crying and wailing. >>No need for that<< muttered Blixa, as Jana started to chatter away at the new medics in a weird, sing-song tone, loopy words that signified nothing.

We were there most of the night. I took turns comforting Blixa while the medics examined his ex-girlfriend, and then comforting Jana while Blixa tried to argue with them that there was nothing wrong with her mentally, she had clearly just had a bad batch of smack. She started to go into withdrawal as we sat there, shaking and shivering as Blixa begged them to do something. It took hours of her clinging to each of our hands in turn, her ragged fingernails biting into my skin, before they agreed to give her a dose of methadone.

I could hear the doctors arguing outside in the hall, when I went to refill her jug of water. >>The state of some of these kids, when they come in.<< >>One never knows what dosage they’re up to, if one should try to maintain them at the same level, or bring them down.<< >>First of all, do no harm.<< >>Well, it’s not us doing the harm, is it? It’s the Russians.<< >>Come on, that’s just a rumour.<< >>It’s no rumour. You want to come and work in the clinic in Kreuzberg some time. Someone brings their mate in with an overdose, and if you’re lucky, you get them to show you what they’ve taken. Sometimes it’s still in the original packaging. Medical grade, Russian supplies.<< >>But why would the Russians do that? Not to mention, why would the East Germans allow medical supplies
out of the country when they’re so poor? War of attrition. They want to degrade the moral fibre of West Berlin youth. They just don’t care who gets hurt in the process. That girl in there. She’s what? 22? 23? And she has the heart and veins of a 50 year old. What can you do. Drugs are the least of that girl’s problems. We won’t be able to tell until we stabilise the opiates, but it seems like self-medication for the onset of psychosis. You heard her. She hears voices, she believes she can foretell the future, read people’s minds. Classic case.

It was not be the first time I had heard the rumour, but it was the first time I had heard it from the mouth of someone who was a professional, and not just an overly paranoid speed freak. The New Buildings, jokingly, often called their speed ‘Russian vitamins’ but I had thought it was in jest. Soon, a nurse finally appeared with a cup of orange juice, and some noxious mixture that she watched carefully while Jana swallowed. And finally, the girl lay her head back, and seemed to find some peace.

The police reappeared after filling out their paperwork, and argued with the medics over whose jurisdiction she was. Clearly, she was under arrest for the damage to the Other Shore, but the medics kept using ugly words: delusional, echolalia, schizophrenia. Blixa and I sat on either side of her, each holding one hand as she lay there, sleeves of her shirt hiked up to show the track marks on her arms, her limbs so thin she looked like a child, her skin ashy and discoloured and blotched, spread so tight over her bones.

In the morning, her parents arrived. As her mother flew to her bedside and started to stroke her bony face, her father, a tall man who was clearly every inch an ex-Serviceman, turned on Blixa and attacked him, first with words, and then with blows. You! This is your fault, you feckless waster! You ruined our daughter. She was a straight-A student, my little girl, she was going to be a ballet dancer, before you appeared on the scene, messing her up with your fancy words and your ugly talk and all the fucking drugs...

Blixa didn’t even try to defend himself, he just let the old man hit him, until I had to pull him off, and dragged Blixa away, sheltering him with my body.

And after all this, you’re a fucking queer? the old man bellowed as I hugged Blixa and tried to calm him with a kiss.

Let’s just fucking go I said to Blixa, who just seemed lost, disoriented, but somehow not broken, finally waking up enough to bluster back at the older man, standing up straight and pulling himself up to his full height, glaring down into his face.

Carter! called out Jana. She sat up and looked straight up me as her father did his best to push Blixa and I out of the room. He’s a bad man. she said, quite clearly, lucid for the first time in hours. He’s hurt someone before, and he will hurt someone again. You’ve got to stop it! The flaming little girl, oh how he hurts her! Glass! Smashing glass! He pushes her through the glass! Watch out! And then she repeated it to make sure I had heard her. Smashing glass, Carter. Smashing glass!

I shook my head, confused. She seemed to have lost her wits, as if she now believed someone else had broken the window, and not herself, with her own cut-up hands?

When we found ourselves out on the street, the day had dawned. Blixa didn’t even have change for the bus, so I sighed and said I’d pay for a taxi. After two days without sleep, I was ready for bed. We didn’t speak much in the taxi, we just held hands and stared moodily out the windows. But as we moved towards the city centre, he suddenly stirred and looked at me solemnly, asking if I minded if the cab dropped him in Friedenau.
"Whatever you like" I said a little too quickly, then worried he might feel abandoned. "Do you want me to go with you?"

He shook his head grimly. "Not unless you want to meet my mother."

For a moment, I considered it, then thought, after Jana’s father, really, I’d had enough of other people’s parents. "Not at this time, no. And I imagine you want space."

"What?" Blixa turned to me sharply, looking utterly perplexed.

"Space" I repeated, then realised it was an English idiom that didn’t really translate. "Sorry, what I mean is... I imagine you want some time to yourself to sit and think, and just... work things out by yourself."

He smiled for the first time what felt like days, and even ventured a laugh. "I thought you meant, space, as in, like... outer space."

"No. It just means time by yourself. Though I know you like outer space so much, you can have that, too."

He closed his eyes and smiled, squeezing my hand. "Thank you for understanding."

I leaned towards him, wanting dearly to lay my head on his shoulder, but I wasn’t sure how he’d take it. But as he felt me shift, he turned and leaned his head against mine. Bending down, I rested my cheek against the top of his head, nuzzling slightly against the unexpectedly velvety stubble of the gashes shaved into his soft brown hair. And we spent the rest of the drive in silence, each with our own thoughts.

"I do love you. And I will see you soon, yes?" he said as the car pulled up outside a huge, working class housing estate. Then he turned to me, and kissed me on the lips, a deep, lingering kiss, just in case I’d forgotten what he was like as a lover, then turned and fled from the car.
Carter starts to have doubts and second thoughts about their new relationship with Blixa, turning to Wolfgang for advice. But Blixa surprises them, as they learn exactly how powerful sex with each other can be.

Content note: this chapter is extremely explicit.

I didn’t see Blixa again for nearly a week. There was work, of course, some dreadful schlager-style band with a fussy female singer who kept me running around fetching her water, adjusting her microphone, making her hot mint tea with lemon, until I longed for the straightforwardness of Lydia or Anita. Although I had found the Australians noisy, obnoxious and chaotic, I missed their charisma and I missed their fractious energy. It was a bit of a surprise to me, to find out that working in a studio could also be boring and tedious when the band were not as intelligent and exciting as my friends. But granted, it was still not as bad as standing in an icy basement, wrestling with tangled old copper wires, praying I didn’t get electrocuted.

After giving it a couple of days, I dropped by Iron-Grey after work, deciding to take Blixa at his word, and go find him when I wanted him. But to my surprise, he was not there, and Bettina was watching the shop. As a couple of teenagers I didn’t recognise took turns on Alex’s pinball machine, she bemoaned the state of the place. As a couple of teenagers I didn’t recognise took turns on Alex’s pinball machine, she bemoaned the state of the place.

>>Nah, Blixa’s not here. Gone to rehearsal, him and Andrew. But I mean, seriously, look at this. I don’t mind him staying here, but this is ridiculous, the absolute state of this mess. It’s one thing if he just sleeps here and minds the register for us. But honestly... he’s been bringing girls round. He must have chucked his used condoms under the bed, and just left them there. All weekend! Until I came in on Monday, and found them starting to stink.<<

I mumbled something apologetic, though I decided not to inform her about my role in the creation of the mess. Honestly, I didn’t know what men did with condoms after they used them. It wasn’t something I had any experience in.

>>So I missed the big hoo-hah at your show, apparently<< she rattled on. >>I got there quite late, and found police tape all round, and one of the windows smashed in. The police kept trying to clear the place out because all that broken glass wasn’t safe, but the staff kept selling more drinks so long as people kept drinking, until Gerhard had to beg them to stop, in case the police took away their license. We all went round The Skin’s house and had a fantastic time, playing music, and banging on until the sun came up. Wonderful shindig. It’s such a shame you had to miss your own party. But Jana really cracked up, huh... Well, honestly, I always thought that girl was a bit touched in the head.<<

I feel bad for her. I don’t really think she had much control over what she did. I just hope she can get the help she needs.<< I didn’t really want to talk about Jana, or the party I’d had to leave so early, so I started looking through the messages posted all over the board. >>Have you got a piece of paper I can... Oh never mind, I’ll rip a bit out of my sketchbook.<<

Digging for a pen, I sat down and tried to think of what to say. I love you. I miss you. I can’t stop
thinking about your body, and what it feels like when you’re inside me. Christ, no. What if someone intercepted it. Instead, I wrote simply the words ‘die Weltraum’ – outer space – and drew a wonky picture of a galaxy. Then I folded the piece of paper in half, wrote ‘BLIXA’ on the outside, and pinned it to the messageboard.

The next day, I went round to return Wolfgang’s book on Walter Benjamin. I’d read the collection of essays over the course of a few evenings, and found I suddenly understood a whole constellation of Blixa’s favourite in-jokes. ‘Exhibition value versus Cult value’ was only one of them, but so was ‘The Angel of History’, and to my surprise, so was that ‘Make way, make way!’ cry he used to shout – the ‘cheerful destructive type’ in Benjamin’s universe. I smiled and hugged myself as I felt whole chunks of Blixa’s references slotting into place like the missing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. So when I finally finished it, I drove over to Wolfgang’s building, and rang the doorbell.

>>Carter!<< He looked genuinely pleased to see me. >>How are you. Come in and have a coffee, I’ve just put a pot on.<< I handed him the book, and thanked him profusely, but he waved my gratitude away, thanking me for returning it, as I gathered that when he lent Blixa interesting books, he often never saw them again. >>Have you heard any word about Jana?<<

I shook my head as I sat down at his kitchen table, playing distractedly with his strange, kitschy Soviet salt and pepper shakers. >>Her parents threw us out of the hospital, so we’ve heard nothing since then.<< I filled him in on the details, then sighed deeply. >>Mostly, I’m worried about... well, Blixa.<<

>>The thing to remember about Blixa is, he is remarkably resilient. He’s lived through a lot, already, that young man. He was kicked out of school, his parents threw him out of their house. He’s tough, he knows how to take care of himself.<< But then he paused. >>Are you alright, though? It was certainly an... eventful opening.<< He poured out two cups of strong coffee and sat opposite me. >>People will talk about it for years to come – the Other Shore will never forget your show, at least.<<

I hid my face in my hands. >>Oh god, I’m almost ashamed to show my face there again. Will Gerhard ever even speak to me after all that?<<

Wolfgang just looked perplexed. >>How is it your fault, what Blixa’s crazy ex-girlfriend does?<< I remained silent, not wanting to tell him how I was quite sure that Jana had actually been trying to warn me, about whatever she thought she had seen in a vision. For days, I had been trying not to think about her, or her bizarre behaviour.

>>Wolfgang, do you believe in the supernatural?<< I blurted out.

He blinked slowly. >>Well, that’s a very interesting question. In general, I find the whole thing intensely intriguing. You know, the idea that humans, with our puny bodies and our timid little minds, that all we can see and know and comprehend with our puny minds is all there is to this world... well, it’s preposterous. Of course we can’t, and so, the things that we can’t account for, that’s where we put that label, supernatural. So of course, some of those things are real, we just can’t understand them.<<

>>Do you believe that people can... foretell the future?<<

He laughed aloud. >>Carter, people foretell the future every day. I turn on my radio and someone foretells what the future of the weather will be for the rest of the week. I can foretell that you and Blixa, either tonight, or some night this week, will get together and he will enthuse at you about some new book he’s read or perhaps some film he’s seen, and then you will smoke some hash or snort some speed, and go to bed together. And on Saturday night, you, and I, and Blixa, together
with about half of West Berlin, will all be at the Risk bar at some point, and will wake on Sunday with absolutely roaring wretched hangovers. There, am I psychic? Is that supernatural? People are predictable, so the future is predictable.<<

>>I don’t mean like that. I mean like... what Jana said about Nick. You heard her, right?<<

>>Darling, all of West Berlin heard her, and probably half the East<< he laughed.

>>But do you think it’s true?<< I persisted. >>Do you think he’s some kind of vulture, picking at our scene?<<

>>You don’t like Nick, do you.<< It wasn’t even a question, it was just an assertion of fact.

>>No.<< It felt like a relief to get it out in the open. >>And before you say again, oh, you’re jealous over Blixa, no, it’s not that. I don’t trust him.<<

>>And so, because you don’t trust him and you don’t like him, what Jana said is niggling away in the back of your head. The ravings of a drug addict who is, in all likelihood, in the early stages of Schizophrenia, if what the cops said is true.<<

>>She’s been right about other things.<<

>>Such as... what?<<

I gulped at my coffee nervously. >>She knew Blixa and I were going to end up together.<<

>>A woman who’s been a man’s lover on and off since he was a teenager, and has worked out exactly the kinds of pretty boys he likes to have affairs with, spots the latest lad her boyfriend has his eye on, and ends a relationship that’s been wobbling on its last legs for ages. Then nine or ten months later, ta-dah, he finally beds said pretty boy. Ooh. Psychic!<< Wolfgang, too, had a disarming way with his eyebrows that put me at ease, and I laughed aloud with relief. The way he always called me boy or lad, like he understood something deep down about me, it pleased me. Made me feel like he was on my side, in some way.

>>Yes, of course. You’re right.<< He merely nodded as he sipped at his coffee. >>Do you like Nick, though? Be honest.<<

He shrugged. >>I think he’s phenomenally talented, and phenomenally ambitious. He is going to attract a lot of attention to our little scene, and he is going to light a fire under a lot of people. I think West Berlin will be good for him, and I think in many ways, he might be good for West Berlin.<<

I stared at him evenly. >>You didn’t answer the question.<<

>>No, I didn’t<< he said, and changed the subject. >>You know, you should drop by round the Other Shore. There’s been some interest in your work. People want to buy it.<<

>>Well, they can’t<< I said, slightly alarmed. It had been hard enough to show those intensely intimate portraits of my lover; I didn’t want to have to think about parting with them.

>>Don’t be absurd. You should go round and have a chat with Gerhard about offering prices. I can help you negotiate if you like. Or you can ask Salomé – now she drives a hard bargain.<<

I thanked Wolfgang for the coffee, and headed off, but I didn’t go directly to the Other Shore. Instead I found myself dragged back to Iron-Grey, looking for Blixa. Was this going to be my life now, chasing round after someone who kept disappearing? Of course he wasn’t there, but Gudrun
was on the till, laughing and gossiping with a couple of girls from the art school.

She smiled when she saw me. >>You just missed him, but he left a message for you.<<

When I turned to the board, I saw my name written in that familiar spiky handwriting, and my heart leapt. >>What made you think I was looking for him anyway<< I said, taking down the slip of paper.

Gudrun rolled her eyes. >>He asked me to tell you. That’s all.<<

I opened the message greedily, and was confounded to find he had written a single word, “coupling” and a strange symbol comprised of six lines, some broken and some unbroken. Coupling? Well, that was obvious. I smiled to myself, but was still confused by the odd drawing.

>>What did he say?<< she asked.

>>Tell me<< I said, showing her the drawing.

>>That’s a hexagram<< one of the art school girls recognised. >>It’s from the I-Ching.<<

>>Wait, he’s got a book on that around here somewhere<< Gudrun went in the back room and dug around in his pile of rubbish, then returned with a well-thumbed paperback on the I-Ching. >>Look it up.<<

>>Where’s he gone, anyway?<< I asked, settling down on the sofa to flip through a number of broken-line drawings that all looked approximately the same as the one Blixa had drawn for me.

>>Off somewhere with Nick. The two of them are cooking up some hare-brained scheme or other. I’m almost certain it’s a scam, but they’re going to try to take advantage of it.<<

I felt bile suddenly rise in my throat, with a surge of anger that surprised me. So Blixa needed space from me, but he was perfectly prepared to go dashing off around town with Nick? It twisted almost like a knife, until I managed to remind myself. No. I had been the one telling Blixa we needed space. The book insisted, on the other hand, that Blixa was telling me that he wanted “coupling”.

“Conjoining”, according to his book, also known as “influence (wooing)” or “feelings”. Calm down, he’s sending you a perfectly clear message here.

>>I’m sure I’ll hear about it soon<< I sighed, trying to get a handle on my own feelings.

>>You coming to our gig this weekend?<<

>>Of course I am. Always. When? Where? Do you have a flyer?<<

She handed me a slip of paper. >>Well, you can ask Nick about this scheme at the gig. We are supporting his band.<<

Again, there it was, that twisty bile-making feeling, not even of jealousy this time, but more the sense of annoyance that fucking Nick was just fucking everywhere, and I would never get any time alone with my friends ever again.

>>If you want to roadie for us, we can get you in for free<< she suggested in a hopeful voice.

I laughed aloud, relieved that my friends still counted on me for something. >>If you want my help, just ask<<

>>There’s free drinks for all the bands all week, too, but, well... you don’t drink<< she shrugged,
and I was reminded once again how West Berlin was the city were literally anything went, where you could be a fully functioning junky, where you could walk around in drag with a man on a dog leash, where you could pretend to shoot your girlfriend in front of a whole studio and no one, no one would care. But refuse to touch a drop of alcohol, and then you were the world’s strangest oddity.

>>I don’t think I’m working that day, so I’ll swing by in the afternoon, with the van<< I assured her, then looked at the hexagram, still crumpled in my hand. Although I knew it required an answer, I struggled to think in Blixa’s intensely symbolic, mystical language. >>What’s a good card in the Tarot deck?<< I asked. >>I only ever seem to get the bad ones<<

>>The Sun<< suggested Gudrun. I nodded, then tore off a big of the flyer, scribbled a big childlike sun, with wavy lines coming off it, wrote “Die Sonne” underneath, and tacked it to the board with Blixa’s name.

I walked over to the Other Shore a little sheepishly, thinking how different it looked in the clear light of day. The broken glass had all been swept away, and there was a workman outside, painting the frame of the window that had just been replaced. Business was brisk, but Gerhard made time to talk to me, and brought me a cup of coffee, explaining that people had been asking to buy the pictures. Not the cartoons, which we both agreed were not appropriate to sell, but the lovely nudes of Blixa. People had been asking to buy those, and the offers were quite good. The whole conversation was so straightforward, none of the beating around the bush and pretend-you-weren’t-talking-about-business of English people. He proposed a price he thought was fair, and suggested a percentage cut for himself. I told him I’d have to talk it over with Wolfgang, and he immediately raised the price of the drawings by 10% and lowered his cut. I agreed, a little relieved, as work at the studio was not as regular as I had hoped it would be.

And that reminded me to swing by the studio and check if there had been any new bookings, and make sure that I was still free to roadie for Malaria! at the weekend. There had been a last minute commercial job slotted in for the next day, recording some radio jingles, so I put my name down for that, and went home to spend the evening working.

But when I sat down in front of my drawing desk, there was nothing. The blank page stared back at me like a reproval. No comics, no sketches, no doodles, nothing. I picked up my pencil and tried to form something, anything, even just the sharp angle of Blixa’s hip connecting with his torso, but the pencil would not cooperate. As it skirted over the page, I found it tracing an ugly jawline, a piggy nose, two eyes with dark, maliciously angled brows, and then a crest of black hair like a porcupine. Oh, fuck no. For a moment, I stared in horror at what I had drawn, then made a desperate but purposeful effort to scratch the thing out, obliterate it from the page, reduce it to a shiny black tangle of thick graphite. There was no way I was having that man in my sketchbook. And yet his eyes still seemed to stare out at me, even from behind the dark scribbles.

I slammed the book shut and went to bed.

I had no idea what time it was when I awoke. The sky was still dark, and the house was quiet, except for an insistent tap, tap, tapping noise like a dripping pipe. For a moment, I snapped to, startled, thinking I’d left the tap flowing, or maybe something had gone wrong with the morning load for the furnace, but no. I had made sure it was filled, the previous evening when I’d come in.

I was just about to lapse back into sleep when the tap came again. >>Carter!<<

Turning to the window, which I’d closed and locked the previous night due to the chill, but somehow forgotten to close the curtains, I saw the glowing tip of a cigarette illuminating a tall, dark figure lurking on the balcony, peering into my room. I almost screamed aloud, then realised it was only Blixa.
Shooting out of bed, I got up and went to the balcony’s door, wondering how he’d climbed up the drop of about twelve feet down to the courtyard below. As he hung about, coughing as he stamped out a cigarette, I unlocked the door and let him in. He almost fell into the room, his elbows and knees and angular limbs flailing everywhere, then collapsed into my arms. All at once, his hands reached around to the back of my head, then his mouth found mine and he swept me up in the most passionate kiss. Groggy, half-asleep, my body started to respond to him, kissing him back urgently, curling my limbs about him, but my mind was still fighting its way to full consciousness, and not entirely engaged. Stumbling backwards, we collapsed onto my bed in a tangle of bodies, but after a few minutes of kissing, our mouths parted.

I wiped his saliva from my chin with the back of my hand, then looked at him, trying to appraise the situation. >>What are you doing here?<< I asked, pushing his patchy brown hair, the unshaven bits of which were starting to grow a bit shaggy, back from his forehead.

>>I am so, so horny<< he insisted, sounding more than a little bit drunk, his hips gently humping mine, his fingers already at the buttons of my pyjama top, pushing it off my shoulders to expose my breasts. >>And I want you to fuck me.<<

>>Are you drunk?<< I asked, then gasped as his mouth touched my shoulder, nibbling insistently at the hollow where my neck met my collarbone as his fingers found my nipple.

>>Yeah, a little<< he admitted, bending his mouth to my breasts, setting my skin on fire everywhere he touched it, as his hands moved down to push my pyjama bottoms off my hips. >>OK, a lot.<<

I couldn’t help myself, I found myself kicking my pyjamas off, then reaching for the flies of his rubber trousers, tugging at them to find that he was already very hard. Clearly the drinking hadn’t yet interfered with his facilities. >>Where were you drinking?<<

Blixa just laughed his braying laugh, pulling back to kick off his wellies, then slipped out of his clothes. >>Went to some new club in Hasenheide with Nick<< he told me, in between kisses and embraces that were more like wrestling than gestures of affection, each of us pawing at the other’s body hungrily. >>Owned by a couple of Turkish dudes. My friend Chris is working as a bartender there, and gave them my name as a good contact in the music scene.<< > His hands were on my buttocks, my mouth was on the staircase of his ribs, gnawing and biting. >>They want to start a new music venue – money laundering, Chris reckons. Something totally shady. Drugs, weapons, something like that, just don’t ask where the cash comes from.<< Rolling onto his back, he pulled me on top of him, sucking each of my breasts into his mouth in turn. >>They offered us unlimited free drinks if we’d do some shows – all the hip kids; us, the Birthday Party, Malaria! – because they see how crowded the Risk and SO36 are, and they think we can bring in the crowds.<<

>>So you and Nick have been drinking all night?<< I laughed, amazed that he could even stand up, let alone that he was so hard between my thighs as I grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him on top of me, dragging his lips back up to mine and sucking his tongue into my mouth as he angled his hips to get himself between my legs.

>>All afternoon, too. We started, I dunno... 4 o’clock? 5?<< he answered as he got his mouth free, then suddenly he gasped as he got his cock inside me and raised himself up on his elbows looking down at me, twisting his hips to get better traction as I found myself suddenly squirming with pleasure. Sex with a man; who knew?

>>So you’ve been sitting with Nick for the better part of a day, getting steadily more drunk and more horny...<< I teased him, reaching up to touch his face, tracing the outline of those cheekbones I knew so well. The shaggy hair suited him, really brought out the feminine prettiness of his face.
He laughed more softly as he slumped back against me, bringing his mouth down on mine, then tried
to get his arms hooked under my knees, pulling them up and out to get better access to my body as
he thrust into me. >>Yeah, alright, it’s true. But you’ve nothing to be jealous of. He’s not into me.
Not like this.<<

I was finding it hard to breathe, as he was really being a bit brutal, but I clung to him, my nails
digging into his back. >>I’m not jealous<< I insisted, but somewhere inside, I knew deep down that
Blixa wouldn’t be here, with me, if he wasn’t so deeply enamoured with Nick.

>>Do you love me?<<< he asked, his eyes widening as he started to get that slightly slack-jawed look
that meant orgasm was very close.

>>Completely<< I assured him. >>But if you’re going to come, for god’s sake, pull out, as you
haven’t got those condoms with you, have you?<<

>>I do, actually, but...<< he protested, but I felt him slip out of me, then felt his wet cock sliding
against my belly. >>Ah, shit<< His breath caught in his throat as he shuddered, and I felt wet
warmth spurt across my stomach. >>I’m sorry<< he gasped, slumping back against me. >>I wanted
to be a better lover, but...<< He tried to kiss me and missed, catching the edge of my eye. >>Oh,
fuck, I’m still so drunk.<<

As he raised his hands to his face to rub his eyes, I lay back, wondering what to feel. Obviously, I
was disappointed, as just as it was starting to get good, he had stopped. But was this what we were
going to become to one another? Always the person one or the other of us went to, when we’d been
driven to distraction by lust for another person?

>>Wait<< he insisted. >>I’m not done...<< Lowering his hands from his face, he went back to biting
my neck, kissing my shoulders, sucking at my breasts, before moving lower, parting my legs and
kissing me gently between my thighs. But then he seemed to remember something. >>Wait a
minute<< he insisted, sounding suddenly very drunkenly determined. >>You’ve got that thing.<<

>>What thing?<< I laughed. He looked so cute with his wide eyes and his intent expression that I
didn’t get angry at the interruption, I just sat up and showered his face with kisses.

>>That harness thing<< he insisted. >>You’ve got a cock, I’ve seen it. Let me fuck you with your
own cock.<<

Both of us burst out laughing at the absurdity of what he’d just said, but then we froze, staring at one
another both of us realising that the perversion of what he’d just suggested was actually seriously
turning us both on. >>Alright<< I agreed, and pushed him off me, rolling over to the bedside table,
extracting first the harness, and then the strap-on. >>Let me just wash this first...<< I suggested,
trying to buy a little time as I walked over to the washstand on the far side of the room, and ran the
dildo under the tap.

In the meanwhile, Blixa had untangled the harness, and was doing his best to put it on himself – legs
through the loops, and then a belt that went around the waist – but he was a little bit too wasted to do
it up properly. It looked so strange, the dark leather bands against his worm-white skin, adjusting his
actual cock to make room for the strap and hoop that held the fake cock. Seeing him sitting there on
the edge of the bed, his eyes still smeared with mascara, his hair hanging in his face, the harness
around his skinny waist, it was such an odd mishmash of masculine and feminine that I found myself
becoming really, really aroused.

>>This is crazy<< I said, pulling him to his feet, tightening bits of the harness that needed to be
tightened, adjusting the straps, and then slipping the cock – as he had said, my cock – into the loop.
I lay back on the bed, pulling him down next to me, kissing him, a little more tenderly now, as he pressed up against me. It didn’t feel like his cock, it had a completely different texture, though it was about the same size and shape. (Ilsa had longingly lingered over an almost comically large one, but I had wanted something more... proportionate with my frame, a decision I was very glad of now.) But as he rubbed it back and forth between my outer lips, it didn’t bend or shy away from the opening the way his did.

>>It’s a little hard to control<< he admitted. >>I can’t feel it, so I can’t tell if it’s inside you yet.<<

I shifted, and reached down to guide it inside, feeling all of my nerves singing as it slid home. >>There<< I said, and together, we started to rock back and forth.

>>Wow<< he said, putting his arms around me and looking deep into my eyes. His pupils were so huge, all I could see was the rim of azure around the very edge. >>I feel like such a lesbian.<<

>>I wish<< I laughed, though it was hard to laugh with all of my energy and my pleasure and my focus concentrated down between my legs, where he was rubbing back and forth at an angle that sending serious amounts of sensation tingling up my belly and down across my thighs.

>>In some ways, I kind of wish, too.<< he said, and I thought he was being a playful kidder again, until he pushed a little further inside me and started to really grind his body against mine. >>I wish I could be a girl with you, and really understand what it’s like, to be two women together, that special bond that girls seem to get. But then, I also wish you could be a man, so that I could know what it’s like to be a girl being screwed with your actual cock. It’s different, isn’t it, fucking a man or a woman?<<

I tried to murmur my agreement, but the whole situation had heated up to the point where I no longer knew where my limbs ended and his cock – my cock – even began. My whole body seemed to be pulsing, convulsing with wanting more and more of him, even as he was feeding me these crazy, perverted fantasies which were, admittedly, curling up inside my brain and making me even more and more aroused than what the dildo was doing to my cunt.

>>But what I love best of all<< he whispered directly into my ear, his lips brushing the tiny hairs of my earlobe so that I kept shivering with delight. >>Is the idea of you and me, as two boys. My cock inside you; your cock inside me. And yet... and yet...<<

I was moaning aloud, twisting beneath him, my whole body and my whole brain just opened up to whatever he wanted to tell me, like he wasn’t just fucking me with the dildo, he was fucking my brain with his words and his voice, his deep, low, slightly evil voice purring in my ear; and these fantasies he was weaving, it was like he was taking my own darkest desires and feeding them back to me. >>And yet what?<< I demanded, writhing towards him and kissing him, sucking his tongue into my mouth almost violently.

>>And yet I love your pussy. I love that you walk around like a man, with your wide shoulders and your big boots and Christ, you know how I feel about your strong, capable hands. You make such an insanely good-looking man that every fag in Berlin is half in lust with you. And yet, I strip you open, and there’s this inside. This secret mouth down below that just sucks and sucks and takes all of me in, and you have no idea how tight and how warm and how wet it is, and how much I love being inside you.<<

I let out a kind of a strangled cry as I seized his hands and pushed them between my thighs. His
forefinger seemed to find my clit blindly, and pressed down, rubbing against it rhythmically until I
felt all of the tension and longing and pleasure that had been building up beneath explode across my
body in a long, pulsating meteor shower of pleasure that seemed to go on and on, rolling back
through me in fizzling little waves. I felt obliterated. I felt wrecked. I felt completely annihilated by
an orgasm so strong I hadn’t felt since... well, I was going to say since Maud. But it was so different
from those furtive, quiet orgasms I had snatched from Maud that it seemed to belong to another body
entirely. Like, Blixa, with my own cock, and his perverted, seductive, impossible words, had
managed to reach a part of me that I had been afraid to even admit existed.

As I lay back panting, just trying to catch my breath, he bent down and kissed my face, gently
wiping away tiny tracks of tears I hadn’t even notice come running down my cheeks. >>When you
catch your breath, I want you to put this on, and go as hard as you can with me<< he whispered.
>>I’m starting to get hard again, but it’s going to take a lot to get me off a second time.<<

He pulled out of me, and I sat up, feeling more than a little light-headed, then unbuckled the harness
from around his waist, and fastened it in the familiar way around my own. >>Wait, I should wash
it...<< I suggested, seeing how slick it was with my own juices. How had I been so wet, with a man?

>>No!<< he almost barked. >>I want it wet. I want your cum inside me... In fact...<< He looked
about wildly. >>Have you got any oil? Body oil? Skin lotion?<<

I looked about, and found a small bottle of baby oil I sometimes used to get tough mechanical grease
off my hands. As I dribbled a bit onto my already-slick cock, he turned over, showing his pale white
arse to me as he parted his thighs, and lay the way he’d once lay for me to draw him, showing the
tangle of hair around his balls and the and dark cleft between his legs.

>>I’m not sure I know how to...<< I stuttered, climbing up behind him, confused a little by the
unfamiliar arrangement.

>>Same as a girl. You slide inside, and then you ride<< he insisted. >>Just fuck me like you fucked
your Danish girl.<<

I parted the lobes of his arse, and rubbed a little bit of oil onto the tight little star of his arsehole. It
seemed absurd that I was going to get this huge thing inside there, but he was already rubbing
himself against the bed in anticipation. Gingerly, I pressed the tip of my cock up against his
sphincter, and as he exhaled and relaxed, I managed to get the head of it inside. He let out a long,
great, quivering sigh that ended in a hiss.

>>I’m not hurting you am I?<<

>>On the contrary. Deeper, please.<<

I pushed until I felt a slight pop, and then suddenly I sank in all the way. He softly yowled beneath
me, his fingers and toes flexing and relaxing and clutching at the sheets. >>Are you sure I’m not
hurting you?<<

>>Fuck me<< he almost hissed, the consonants of his misssssccch dissipating in a sigh as I started to
move, working back and forth with my hips, sliding in and out as he writhed beneath me.

It was completely different to fucking a girl, and yet somehow the same. The anatomy, the
topography was all wrong, as I had to guess from gasps and yelps which angle was most pleasurable
for him, which was, of course, completely different from female anatomy in direction and depth,
towards the back, rather than towards the front. And yet the way he moved against me, the way he
bucked his hips to greet me, rising and falling, pushing against me and pulling away, moaning and
writhing and hissing at me to go deeper, harder, faster... well, christ. There was such a weird frisson, knowing that I was fucking a boy, and yet feeling like I was fucking a girl, that I started to feel myself getting turned on all over again.

He seemed to have no pain limit. I was worried that was the drink, and he would regret it in the morning, but he begged me to be rougher with him, though I wanted to be gentle the first time. When I moved my hand round to check that he was OK, I found that his own cock was as stiff as a board, but he moaned so appealingly as I closed my fingers around it, that I started to work at him from both directions. He seemed to lose all sense or cognisance of where he even was, his eyes closed tightly, his mouth hanging open, biting at his own sensual lips, muttering little inarticulate guttural phrases that might have been my name. I kept steeling myself for ‘Nick’, but fortunately, it didn’t come. His breaths got sharper and sharper, then he cried aloud, and then his cock convulsed slightly and spurted in my hand.

I slowed my thrusts, and then stopped, kissing his shoulders, even as he caught his breath.

>>Stay in me<< he begged. >>It feels really nice, and I just want you to stay in me a few minutes... << But then he laughed. >>At least you won’t lose your erection after you come.<<

>>I can stay in you all night<< I laughed, and he twisted his head around and bent back, surprising me with the force of his kiss.

>>I...<< His eyes were huge dark pools as he pulled away, looking at me with fear and desire and love all mixed together. He looked as shellshocked as I had felt, twenty minutes earlier, when he had extracted that powerful orgasm from my own body. But then he sighed, and slowly pulled his body off my cock.

As I glanced down, I made a face. >>Oh. I better, uh... this is messy. I need to rinse this off and clean it up.<<

>>Just rinse it off and come back to bed. I want you to hold me<< he urged, as I climbed out of bed and gingerly detached the mucky thing from the harness without smearing it on anything. Contrary to what he had asked, I smothered it with soap and gave it a good scrub, resolving to put boiling water on it in the morning. >>Come back to bed!<<

When I was satisfied it was clean, I obliged, folding myself into bed beside him, wrapping my arms around his waist and resting my head against his shoulder, holding his curled body against me like a folded pillow.

>>There’s only one way it wasn’t perfect<< he murmured into the pillows as I pulled the covers over the both of us.

>>What<< I muttered, thinking to myself what a picky, impossible thing a man was.

>>Next time I really want you to tie me. Strap me down good and tight.<<

>>Not when you’re drunk<< I said, a little bit afraid of how much I was turned on by what he asked.

>>Alright, then next time, I can be sober and you can be stoned out of your mind again. Then we’ll see, just how far we can go<< he insisted with dogged, drink-fuelled determination, then fell asleep.
I woke to the alarm and remembered that I had signed up for a day’s work in the studio, then turned to get out of bed, and found an arm wrapped loosely around my waist. Oh god. A man in my room. I had to get him out!

>>Blixa<< I hissed, but he did his best to ignore me, shifting his head and trying to burrow it under my shoulder. >>Blixa, you have to get up.<<

>>Fuck off, I’ve got a hangover.<< The similarity between my name and the German word for hangover would have been funny, were I not so worried about getting him out of my room.

>>Do you even remember last night?<< I muttered as he tried to pull me closer to him.

>>Every depraved minute of it, and I want to do it again... once I get rid of this wretched headache.<< He blinked at me, then pulled a pillow over his head in protest at the early hour.

>>Blixa, I’ve got to go to work, and you’ve got to get out of this house before anyone sees you.<< It took some doing, but I did finally get him dressed and sneaked him down the back stairs and through the coal cellar door, back out into the yard. >>Come round this new club, the Sector, after work. I’ll be drinking there with Nick<< he urged, and told me the address. We kissed quickly, but with desperate passion, then I shoved him out the door, and went back to wash and dress for work.

I was useless all day, walking around in a kind of daze. My body may have been at the studio, setting out mics and doing line-checks and operating the tape machine, but my mind was back in that bed. Glimpses of Blixa’s pale white arse, that dark hole gaping at me, waiting for my cock, seemed to hang about just behind my eyelids. My lips seemed to tingle still with the force of his kisses, the edge of his teeth on my skin. And my cunt... my cunt felt a bit sore and slightly chaffed, and yet still, I just wanted him back inside me.

We were recording ads for radio, which wasn’t difficult, but it was fiddly. There were very strict time-limits for ads, and they always wrote too many words, so we had to slow the tape down slightly to fit in the whole spiel, and then gently speed it up, but not too much, so that it didn’t sound like chipmunks advertising the department stores or groceries. And then there was the trouble of mixing in sound effects, or else backing music that had to be piped in from a record, but not so loud that it would drown out the announcements. But it was very lucrative work, far more lucrative than the punk bands, who sometimes couldn’t even afford an engineer at all.

And since the vocal announcers were generally paid by the hour, the sessions almost never overran, so that I was finished by a reasonable hour, and drove over to this new venue to meet my lover. This place, Sector, was a two-story hall was on the edge of a park that had a really rough reputation, so I
was a little worried about my van, and made sure to park it off the street, a few blocks over.

But I paused as I walked into the entrance, and stared at the posters. There was a huge poster for the Malaria! show the next night tacked up on the door, but it was one on the side, for the New Buildings that had caught my eye. For the image they had chosen was one of Wolfgang’s photos of Blixa, completely nude and curled in a ball. I don’t know why it gave me pause. It certainly wasn’t Blixa’s nakedness, for I was well aware that he was a beautiful man and his image could move others as much as it could move me. It wasn’t even that they’d used one of Wolfgang’s images, and not mine – but then maybe that was it. Posters for my show had been up all over West Berlin for weeks, that Wolfgang had put together in his little graphic design studio. So of course the posters looked alike. They’d all been made by the same people: me, Blixa and Wolfgang. And yet it still felt strange.

I walked inside, and immediately found the bar, just off the street to attract passing trade. From the looks of things, it was already getting very messy. There was only a sparse crowd as apparently there was no band playing tonight, but both the Birthday Party and the New Buildings figured very heavily in the attendance. If the management had been counting on the bands attracting new customers, well, there did not seem to be any more paying punters than there were band members, once all the girlfriends and general hangers on had been taken into account. (Technically, the Teenager had been kicked out of the New Buildings months ago, and yet he was always somehow still around, currently drinking beer and playing pool with Tracy. Alex, despite his bluffing, was very clearly out of his depth and getting his arse handed to him by the burly Australian.)

I walked up to the bar, taking the bartender’s unusually quick attention as a sign that it was a slow night, and ordered a coffee.

>>I can do you a Turkish coffee?<< he asked hopefully. I nodded. >>I’ll bring it out to you. Where will you be sitting?<<

>>Wherever Blixa is<< I sighed, looking around, until I caught sight of him, huddled in a booth with Nick and Anita.

The bartender’s face fell. >>Oh. I’ll put it on their account, then.<<

>>No, no<< I insisted, feeling really quite bad for him. >>I’ll pay for it separately.<< It was only 2DM, but I made sure to leave a generous tip, as it didn’t seem like he was having much custom. Then I made my way over to Blixa’s booth and slid in beside the lopsided group.

The table was almost covered in empty glasses and bottles of various shapes and sizes, so that it was clear that they had already been drinking for a long time. Nick and Blixa were slumped at the back of the booth, so deep in conversation, and so enraptured with each other’s company that neither noticed me for an almost embarrassing amount of time. I smiled wanly at Anita, feeling my confidence dropping as she rolled her eyes back at me and made a ‘kill me now’ gesture by pretending to wrap her hands around her own neck and sticking out her tongue. Truth be told, I was never sure how to greet Blixa in public, if I should just go for the typical Berlin double cheek-kiss, or if I should greet him more tenderly, as a lover. But it made me feel wretched, not even being even noticed, let alone greeted at all.

“Heisenberg?” Nick was slurring, in that slow, thick voice of his. “Are you talking about the, uhhh... the bloke with the blimp? Remember the Heisenberg and all that?”

“No, zhat is zhe Hindenberg, who had zhe airship,” Blixa countered, with his rapid-fire German accent. “Heisenberg is zhe Uncertainty Principle. Now I am not talking about Uncertainty. I am talking, at zhe present moment, about the be-find-ly-ness of time...”
“Same thing, ultimately, Uncertainty, Time.... Uhhhh... Isn’t that what you’re saying, though, Blixa, that we can never be truly certain of... uuuhhh... even the reality of time itself?”

“No, no, no, you are not listening to what Heidegger was saying,” Blixa persisted doggedly, thumping his hand on the table. “Zeit... und Da-zeit...”

“Da-seit?” stuttered Nick. “I don’t speak... German. You know that.”


I turned to Anita, and caught her eye, trying to smile. “How long have they been at this?”

“That’s exactly what they’re trying to establish,” Anita sighed, picking up her glass and peering into the dregs of it. “Days... weeks... centuries, except Blixa keeps insisting that Time doesn’t actually exist, because physics, or maybe because philosophy, so it doesn’t matter how long they carry on drinking.”

I stared at Blixa, feeling such a curious mix of emotions, both an irritation at how drunk and how oblivious and obnoxious he was being, and yet also a deep, helpless glow of adoration that this intoxicated idiot I loved was, with deep conviction, trying to enlist Heidegger, the most impenetrable philosopher in German history, in his drunken barroom drawl.

“How long have they been at this?” asked Anita with a slightly bored, pleading tone, and I turned to look at her, the perfect pucker of her lips turned down in a pout that still moved me, and made me feel slightly odd that I had been so distracted by Blixa.

“Erm, no. Sorry.” As her expression fell and she lost interest in me, I found myself wishing that I’d thought to stop and pick up something, anything, on the way over. But as the session at the studio hadn’t involved musicians, I hadn’t even thought to obtain the usual supplies for creative enhancement.

At that moment, the bartender reappeared, and deposited my coffee in front of me, then tried helplessly to clear away some of the mess, before being shooed off by Blixa, all territorial about his empties.

“Meine Flasche. Meine Fleisch. Meins,” he hissed. But finally he noticed me, and perked to attention. “Carter!” he exclaimed. “How long have ve been here?” I wasn’t sure if he meant how long they had been there, or how long I had been there without him noticing, but I decided to poke fun at him, either way.

“It depends what you mean by ‘we’ and it depends what you mean by ‘here’,.” I teased. “It’s been about 13 billion years since the Big Bang, so... something shorter than that?”

Blixa grinned with amusement. “I should know better zhan to ask an electrician. He vill of course just quote science at me.” I felt my heart lurch, as this was, clearly, the prelude to the familiar argument between us, that had come to feel like a sort of erotic foreplay.

But Nick turned and glared at me, with a cool, almost calculated dislike that almost shocked me. Normally, he bothered to hide his feelings towards me a little more carefully, but it seemed obvious now, that if I disliked him, the feeling had come to be completely mutual. “Go and get us some more drinks,” he ordered petulantly, as if we were back in the studio, and I was still the junior engineer paid to cater to his every whim.
“Fuck off, get ‘em yourself,” I tossed back, turning my attentions to my coffee, which was dark, black and exceedingly strong, just the way I liked it. There were two lumps of brown sugar on the side of the dish, so I dropped one into the thick, almost soup-like coffee, and stirred it. I sipped gently and felt all the hairs rise on the back of my neck as the caffeine hit my bloodstream. It was, quite possibly, the nicest coffee I had tasted since arriving in Berlin.

“Get me a fucking drink, wench,” roared Nick, almost at the top of his lungs, and as a professional punk singer, his voice really was quite loud indeed, so loud that Tracy and Andrew, who had taken Alex’s place at the pool table, turned around to glare.

“I vill go and get zhe drinks,” grumbled Blixa, stumbling to his feet, though I was blocking his exit from the table. I glared at Nick with an expression I hoped would put the fear of my wrath into him, then stood up to let Blixa out, and followed him to the bar, rather than spend any time at the table alone with Nick. By the time we had got to the bar, Blixa had forgotten the drinks order, so he just waved his hands rather camply at the bartender, and said >>More of... well, more of the same again, please.<<

I was still furious with Nick, so I scratched at the itch, even though I knew I shouldn’t, that the irritation would become infected into something nasty if I picked at it with Blixa. >>That man’s an arsehole<< I insisted. >>I don’t see why you hang about with him so much.<<

>>Maybe I’m an arsehole, too<< Blixa retorted defiantly, then turned to me, grinning a slightly supercilious smile that both frightened me with how much I could potentially hate him, and yet only seemed to make me want him more. The tilt of arrogance to his eyebrows only seemed to make him more beautiful. For a moment we faced off, but then he shrugged and turned to the bartender.

>>Send the drinks to the table. I’m going for a piss.<<

But he took my hand as he stomped off, and I found myself carried off in his wake, trailing him to the men’s room. The venue had been refurbished recently, and the toilets were actually quite clean, which was a rarity in West Berlin, and still relatively free of graffiti. Blixa walked up to a urinal and unzipped, standing there for a few minutes. I waited for the tinkle, but he seemed agitated, shifting his hips and twisting around.

>>Fuck<< he swore. >>I can’t even piss. I’m too hard to piss.<< Without even zipping back up, he stalked off into one of the empty stalls. For a few moments, I stared at the door where he had disappeared, wondering what on earth he meant, then suddenly his head appeared around the edge of the stall. >>Come on.<<

>>What??? I asked, shocked, and wondering what his erection had to do with me.

He emerged, seized me by the wrist, then pulled me into the cubicle with him, pushing me up against the wall and bringing his mouth down on mine with an urgency that caught me off guard. For a moment, I just stood there, shocked, his tongue in my mouth, his hands on the back of my head, then all of a sudden, I felt my body responding, almost against my will. I reached down and put my hands on his glossy, rubbery arse, and squeezed, remembering exactly what it had felt like to penetrate it the night before. And suddenly I was kissing him back with the same urgency and singularity of purpose, as it dawned on me what we’d both come to the bathrooms for.

His mouth was on my neck, his fingers on the buttons of my shirt as I found myself wrapping my legs around his waist. Another few moments and he had my brace unbuckled, though he did not remove it, just yanking it down and pulling my breasts out of the top, sucking at my nipples until they were hard. I scrambled with the flies of my jeans, then pulled them down, stepping out of one leg and wrapping it around him, while I tried to balance with the other leg, digging between his thighs to find that yes, despite the amount of vodka, beer and schnapps they had put away between
them, Blixa was in fact absolutely rock hard.

>>Condom<< I snapped.

>>Left hand side pocket<< he barked back at me, and I fished around in his pockets until I found it. I somehow managed to get the packet open with one hand, while I palmed his cock with the other and raked my teeth across his neck, then unrolled it down over him. He collapsed backwards onto the seat of the toilet, and I climbed onto his lap, impaling myself upon him as he sucked at my breast. And suddenly we were a sweating, thrusting heap of flesh and rubber and hairspray, each of us straining at the other, just desperate to fuck one another deeper and harder.

With a sudden burst of strength, Blixa climbed to his feet, holding me up around his waist as he pushed me backwards against the wall of the stall, and just started to buck with his hips, thrusting inside me as energetically as if he wanted to cleave me in two. I clung to him, seized his hand and pushed it to my breasts, wanting him to do with his fingers what he had been doing earlier with his tongue. Everything was heat and sweat and the thud-thud-thud of my body against the metal of the stall’s wall, until suddenly I felt a weird tingle on the back of my neck that was not actually Blixa’s tongue, but the distinct feeling that we were not alone.

Pulling my head away from Blixa’s insistent mouth, I turned, and looked out towards the urinals, through the door that he had forgotten to lock, and saw, standing there, staring at us with a shell-shocked look upon his face, my worst nightmare, Nick.

>>Shit<< I swore, tugging at Blixa to get his attention, but he was really truly lost, in pursuit of his orgasm, or mine, it didn’t really seem to matter to him. >>Blixa!<< I hissed, but I called his name so frequently during sex he barely seemed to register it as anything beyond approval of whatever he was doing with his cock or his tongue or his fingers.

Nick coughed, and that seemed to break his concentration. “Am I, uuuhhh... interrupting, or, uuuhhh...”

Blixa turned, and as he saw Nick, he actually slowed his stroke, though he did not stop. A weird expression came over his face, but not a shred of it seemed to be embarrassment. Part of it was pride, like he was actually pleased to have someone witness whatever it was that he was doing to me, and how completely I had surrendered myself, body and soul, to him. And part of it was an air almost of... showing off. He slowed his thrusts, but did not stop, though he pulled away from my body slightly, partly so that Nick could see the breasts that he was squeezing, but more, it seemed, so that Nick could see the cock that he was now sliding, almost entirely out of my cunt before sliding it gently back in again. And Nick wasn’t even staring at my breasts; he was staring at the length and girth of Blixa’s cock, where it slid in and out of me, hard and glistening with my juices.

“Vell,” said Blixa quite calmly, as Nick clearly stuttered for words. “Eizher join in, or shut zhe door, OK?”

For the longest moment there was silence, as Nick seemed to struggle with whatever he had that passed for a conscience, and I found myself realising with horror what my lover had just said. And it wasn’t just the horror of imagining Nick’s disgusting junky body anywhere near me; it was the horror of the realisation that maybe that was what Blixa had been expecting me to offer, the night that he had caught me with Ilsa.

But before Nick could even answer one way or the other, the outside door banged again, and I heard Tracy’s distinctive jovial voice ring out. “Jesus Christ, do you two poofs even have to piss together?”

Nick started to stutter something, but Blixa seemed unconcerned, continuing to just slide in and out
of me with just enough friction to keep his cock hard, as if this were the most normal situation in the world.

Tracy walked over to the urinals without even glancing at us, and I could hear the sound of him relieving himself. Thirty seconds of tinkling, then, like a well-brought up lad, he zipped up and walked over to the sinks to wash his hands. But as he walked back, he glanced towards the inside of the stalls, as if trying to work out what held Nick’s attention so rapt. Had it not been for the awkwardness of my predicament, impaled, helpless, immobile, on the end of Blixa’s cock, it might almost have been comical, the double-take with which Tracy regarded us, as he realised what was actually happening.

He took a slow, very business-like look at my body, his eyes lingering on my breasts, then tipped his hat. “Ma’am,” he said politely, by way of greeting, then shifted his gaze to Blixa. “Now you make sure the young lady comes first, you understand me?” he admonished, then stepped in front of the still-gawking Nick, and pulled the door to the stall closed. “Some privacy for the courting couple, Nicholas,” I heard his muffled voice say, and then the sound of both their footsteps echoed away.

Blixa turned his attentions back to me, and he was actually giggling, and leering at me like he expected me to join in with his amusement, but I was neither drunk nor fucked up, and the absurdity of the situation was giving way to a sort of numbed horror. As if realising I was not as into it as I had been, he kissed me, trying to get me back into the mood. And I had the oddest sense of dissociation, as if, although my body were still there, and I could feel his cock sliding in and out of me, leaving tingling sensations in its wake, my mind had disconnected, and could no longer process those swirls of nerve-endings as pleasure. But he was lost again, his enjoyment deepening until I could see from his face that he was about to come. And come he did, panting and shuddering and kissing my face as if he hadn’t even heard Tracy’s instructions.

As I just stood there, feeling totally disconnected from everything around me, Blixa sighed deeply, then pulled out of me. He bent down to grab a handful of toilet paper, pulled the condom off with it and tossed it into the toilet bowl, then leaned forward, shaking his rapidly deflating cock until piss finally streamed from it down into the bowl.

I watched with a curious mix of emotions as he finished, shook himself dry, then flushed. But when he turned to me, he must have noticed the angst all over my face. >>What’s wrong?<< he asked, in a voice that was almost returning to tender.

Although I wanted to cry, I knew that I absolutely could not, in front of him, not like this. But my voice was shaking as something I hadn’t entirely intended to say leaked from my lips like the last beads of urine from his cock. >>I think I hate you a little bit, right now.<<

He looked at me with sadness, and yet more than a little bit of resignation in his eyes as he bent forwards and kissed me, very gently, on the lips. And I hated myself even more for responding to that kiss, to the way that my mouth still surged up to greet his. But then he shrugged, and dug in his jacket for his cigarettes, lighting one almost automatically. >>Yes. All of my lovers, eventually, come to hate me a little bit<< he confessed, blowing the smoke away from me.

I just stared back at him, completely flummoxed by how such an ugly twist of hate, and yet complete slavish adoration could somehow coexist in my heart, for the same person. >>Do you even love me?<< I asked.

>>Completely<< he replied, without missing a beat, and from the look in his eyes, I knew it was the truth.

Clamping the cigarette between his teeth, he bent down and extracted a wad of toilet paper, which he
handed to me, to clean myself up with. As I scrabbled for my jeans and pulled them back up, he managed to disentangle my brace, then helped me to compress my breasts back under it, and did up the buckles at the back. I rebuttoned my shirt, then we just stared at one another in silence as he finished his cigarette, then tossed the butt into the toilet.

He looked at me, his eyes questioning, but I shook my head. "I think I might be a little bit afraid to go back out there."

"You?" he said, with an arched eyebrow and a disbelieving tone. "I don’t believe you’re afraid of anything."

Bridging the gap between us, I collapsed forward onto him, and clung to him, embracing him around the waist as he put his arms around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head.

"You can hold my hand if you like" he offered, in a tone I couldn’t tell was serious or slightly mocking.

"That won’t be necessary" I mumbled into his chest, but he took me by the chin and raised my head to face him.

"I’m not ashamed of you, you know. I’m proud that you are my lover" he insisted. "But I sometimes think that you are ashamed of me."

I looked up at him, and I desperately wanted to say, ‘I’m not ashamed of you, but I’m ashamed of the way you act when you’re around Nick’ but I knew better than to say it aloud. Instead I shook my head, and pressed my lips gently against that soft, tender part just where the angle of his jaw met the hollow part of his neck, which I knew drove him absolutely wild.

Then I straightened my clothes, and we went out to the sink to wash ourselves up. With my head held high, I walked back out with him, hand in hand through the gauntlet of weird stares from Australians and Turks, to settle back at the table with Nick and Anita.

“What time is it?” asked Blixa, scratching his crotch idly as he settled back into the booth, and picked up his next drink as if he had never left.

“Blixa, you have already established zhat time, uuuhhh... as a philosophical concept that Martin Heidegger problematised, bears little or no meaning to zhe perceptual impressions zhat, uuuhhh, human animals experience as elapsed space between series of events,” said Nick, in a weird parody of Blixa’s thick German accent, and Anita started to laugh a hollow, slightly despairing laugh that was almost entirely devoid of humour.

“Can we get some more coke,” she sighed. “Because I swear to god, you said you were going to try ringing your dealer again at the end of another hour, which is how we got on this whole discussion about time in the first place.”
Carter agrees to roadie for Malaria! when they support the Birthday Party, and finds themself conscripted into being a guitar tech for Rowland - not just at the gig, but for their upcoming recording session at Hansa.

I slept in the next morning, in anticipation of a long night, then drove my van over to Malaria!’s rehearsal space to pick up their gear. The girls were all excited, and buzzing with news, talking breathlessly about the sales and chart positions their album had been achieving in countries around Europe, and even in the States. Soon, I felt myself bourn up in the enthusiasm of the old pirate girl gang once again and rejoiced at their success. I parked outside the now familiar venue, and the girls took turns keeping an eye on the van while the rest of us unloaded all of the gear. The Birthday Party hadn’t even started soundchecking yet; they were just standing about the stage, milling around, so I said I was just going to go off and park the van somewhere safe.

When I came back about 20 minutes later, there had been absolutely no change, though Malaria! were now equipped with drinks, and sitting about on their pile of amps, smoking furiously.

>>What’s the problem?<< I asked, glancing at my watch and worrying if Malaria! would get a soundcheck at all.

>>Rowland has vanished<< Gudrun sighed. >>He went out into the park to try to score, and he’s not come back.<<

I took a deep breath, then sighed. Only the hapless Rowland could get lost and fail to score in Hasenheide, one of the most famous open-air drug markets in Berlin. But instead of getting caught up in that nonsense, I approached the stage and caught Mick’s eye. “Can’t we start checking the drums without him?”

Mick suddenly perked up, and looked over at Tracy. Tracy glanced over at a dark smear by the side of the stage that I had taken for a pile of rags, but on closer examination turned out to be a slightly the worse for wear Nick. “Well, ma’am. I don’t see why not?” said Tracy.

I looked about for the soundman, but all of the sound equipment appeared to be piled in a heap by the front of the stage. It was good quality gear, stencilled with the name of one of the better equipment suppliers in West Berlin, but no one seemed to be in charge of it. “Where’s the sound engineer?” I asked.

Mick shrugged. “Beats me. They delivered that about an hour ago, but no one’s turned up to do anything with it. None of the staff here speak a word of English, and I have only high school German, so we can’t figure out what’s going on.”

I turned around and looked at Malaria!, who weren’t the sort to get annoyed, but were clearly starting to get a little impatient. “Oh, sod it. I’ll start setting it up.”

By the time Rowland finally reappeared, I had the kit miked and had run a line out from the bass amp into the mixing desk. Rowland walked over to the bag of rags at the side of the stage, kicked it a
couple of times, muttering “Get up, you cunt,” until the porcupine quill head roused itself, then he and Nick sloped off to the bathroom – a place I’d really have preferred not to think about, given the events of the previous night.

While they were gone, a large Turk appeared and started shouting at me in broken German. It took me a few moments to realise he was cheesed off about the mixing desk. So this, it turned out, was the sound man. Well, good luck, I told him. He went up onstage, and fussed about the mics, but as he realised that I had actually done quite a good job with the drumkit, he seemed to calm down a little. He tried addressing the band next, wanting to know what was going on with the guitar amplifier, but if his German was not so great, the Aussies’ German was hopeless. The only one who had even a few words of German was Mick, and as he had warned me, it was less than rudimentary. So I had to translate, for the most part, but what this soundman really wanted now, since the kit and bass has been sorted, was the guitarist.

Steeling myself for whatever it was that I might find, I trooped off to the bathroom to locate Rowland and Nick. The room was the same as it had been the night before; the row of urinals on one wall, the three stalls on the other. I cringed to think of what had possessed me and Blixa to act like that the previous night, then advanced upon the stalls, pushing open each door in turn.

Nick and Rowland were in the last, of course, the site of our assignation. Nick, looking slightly less ghastly than he had 20 minutes previously, had already fixed, and was slumped up against the wall, while Rowland was crouched on the toilet. It took me a moment to realise why his trousers were down around his ankles, but then I caught sight of the small needle sliding into the large vein in his skinny leg. It wasn’t a surprise, but it was still a shock. I mean, I knew, obviously, that this lot all used heroin, as casually as I had come to smoke spliffs. But it was one thing to see someone chasing the dragon with a bit of tinfoil, and quite another to watch that semi-erotic act of penetration that was shooting up. Especially since this was Rowland, who had somehow struck me as more gentle, more thoughtful, and less of a... flaming wanker than the other Aussies.

I coughed to announce my presence, then managed to stutter. “Guys, when you’re ready? The sound man’s here.”

“Don’t you ever knock?” muttered Nick, as if it had been me that had walked in on him the previous night, and not the other way around. I glared at him, and he laughed, as if it had been intended as a joke.

“Rowland, if you’re busy, do you mind if I just give the sound man a line-check on your guitar?” I persisted.

Rowland smiled brightly, the light returning to his eyes as he slid the needle out of his thigh. “No, it’s fine. I’ll be there in two ticks.”

I just continued to stare, as it was the first time I had ever actually seen anyone fixing before. It looked so oddly sexual, the metal implement sliding into flesh, the flush of excitement in Rowland’s cheeks as he came back to life. “Why...” I started to blurt out, but stopped myself just in time.

“Rowland’s vain,” laughed Nick, hugging himself around his skinny waist. “He doesn’t like the track marks to show.”

“Fuck off, ya beastly cunt,” shot Rowland back, the frequent obscenities still seeming strangely out of place from that sweet, girlish mouth, then he smiled at me, his face taking on a slightly beatific expression. “I’m ready. Shall we go?”

Nick extended a hand and heaved his fragile bandmate to his feet, and the two of them, unsteadily,
with stiff limbs, like a pair of land-bound crows, picked their way back to the stage to finish soundcheck.

I hovered about, helping out, as I seemed to have been drafted as both translator and junior sound engineer. Rowland had some problem with his distortion pedal, which kept cutting in and out with an alarming sputtering sound, but I told him to soundcheck without it for now, and I’d give it the once over, when I got a got a chance to run to the van and fetch my tools. By all appearances, the soundcheck was going well, and the band seemed actually to be getting on a lot better than those last sessions in the studio. They ran through a couple of songs, and then it was Malaria!’s turn to set up.

With the steady hands of a professional, I shifted Malaria’s gear onto the stage, then rearranged the mics and sound equipment around it. The Turk at the sound desk seemed to come around to this arrangement, as if he realised that he could relax and get paid for twiddling a few knobs, while I did all the hard labour. We did some linechecks, then it was Malaria!’s turn to run through some songs.

“We were going to do a song together, weren’t we,” suggested Nick, and I felt my back go up, but Bettina brightened, as she and Gudrun exchanged glances.

“Ja, if you are still up for it.”

“Do you want to teach me how it goes?” he asked, and Bettina reached for a notebook to scribble down a few lines of lyrics.

But at that point, Rowland approached me, cradling a small yellow guitar pedal in his hands. “Carter, would you mind taking a look at this for me now?”

I glanced up at the stage, seeing the grotesque way that Nick seemed to be flirting with Gudrun and Bettina, playing with their hair and batting his eyes at them, and felt my heart wrench. Really, I did not want to leave the room, as I was terrified that that moment I took my eyes off Nick, he would somehow abscond with all my friends, but Rowland’s face was plaintive. And I had promised.

“Alright,” I sighed, and reached for my coat, feeling for my car keys. “Are you coming with me, or are you staying here?”

Rowland’s eyes glanced towards the stage, and lighted upon Nick with mild distrust. “Alright, I might as well come with you.”

It was so strange, the difference between the mild, thoughtful, good-natured young man who chatted to me lightly as he accompanied me to the van, and the fey, wild-eyed oddball that came out when he was onstage. I could never quite figure Rowland out, because he was, in many ways, so familiar and yet so alien. To be honest, there were many ways in which he reminded me of Blixa: his long, bony face with the skin stretched tight over pronounced cheekbones, his slightly camp and effete manner, his long thin limbs, for he was nearly as tall as Blixa, and almost as skinny. To walk with him, his determinedly fast, slightly bopping gait as he strode along, reminded me of my lover. And yet, he was in so many other ways, completely unlike. That harsh Australian accent, where I expected German. His gentle quietness, in contrast to Blixa’s concentrated manic energy. And the clear, fascinated adoration with which he constantly brought up his beloved girlfriend, though I suppose, really, I would never have known if Blixa ever talked that way about me. I didn’t really want to like Rowland; I was so thoroughly disgusted with Nick that I didn’t want to like any of the Australians. And yet I found myself oddly charmed by his amiably bumbling and eccentric demeanour offstage, coming off more like the peculiar Oxford professor of some arcane eccentricity, than a punk rock guitarist.

We got to the van, and he sat in the back door smoking a cigarette as I dug through my equipment
looking for a screwdriver. When I got the distortion unit open, I could immediately see what was wrong, in that the wire attaching the battery to the circuit board had unravelled and was on the verge of coming loose. That, I was coming to learn, was always the problem with those little MXR pedals, but I knew that it really needed soldering, and for that, I needed the electricity back at the Sector. And so I picked out my soldering iron and a knot of solder from my tool box, and back we went, Rowland obligingly offering to carry my things for me like a Victorian gentleman.

But when we returned to the venue, the atmosphere backstage seemed to have changed, become slightly charged, though it took me a moment to work out why. Mick and Tracy were sitting, quietly drinking with the Kates, while Nick was sitting with Gudrun and Bettina, the pair of them still intent upon teaching him the song he was to guest on. And yet Nick was no longer paying much attention to them, because perched on a stool, wrapped up in his rubber coat, attracting attention with his mascaraed eyes and his wild, gaunt face, although he wasn’t even saying anything, sat Blixa, who soaked up all the attention in any room like a wad of cotton soaked up the liquidised heroin in a junkie’s spoon.

Almost immediately, Rowland seemed to tense up, the mild-mannered ease dissolving in a new kind of skittishness. “Well,” he snorted. “That’s Nick gone for the evening, now the Beauty Queen From Another Planet is here.”

“The what?” I asked, laughing, as it seemed a particularly apt description. Across the room, Blixa noticed me arrive, and turned to gaze down his long nose at me, with that very regal expression that meant he wanted me to come over, though of course he would never do anything as obviously needy as actually beckon to me. I waved, but shook my head, gesturing to the piece of equipment I was holding in my hand, and Blixa rolled his eyes, then conceded to blow me a kiss. Rowland was right; he really was a complete queen, but I kind of loved him for it.

Rowland noticed the blown kiss, and glanced at me nervously. “Sorry, nothing, that’s just what Gen calls him.” He seemed suddenly embarrassed to have let it slip.

“It’s cute; he is quite the beauty queen” I agreed with a smile, to indicate that I didn’t bear either of them any ill will over the nickname, but from Rowland’s sheepish expression I wasn’t sure if it was necessarily meant to be complimentary. Gesturing for him to follow me out into a small storage area I intended to use as my impromptu workshop, I noted that he seemed to relax again slightly. “Don’t you like Blixa?” I probed as I plugged in the soldering iron, well aware that it was a slightly loaded question, coming from someone they all now knew to be his lover.

“It’s not that I dislike him, or anything so dramatic as all that,” protested Rowland. “He seems a perfectly affable fellow, as far as Germans go. It’s just... well, he’s always around, isn’t he.”

I buried my nose in the circuitry of the guitar pedal, trying to hold the misbehaving wire in place with a pair of tweezers as I manipulated the solder onto the iron. Although I was tempted to retort ‘Funny, I could say the same thing about Nick...’ I decided that would not be diplomatic. Keeping quiet, I concentrated on the repair job, then put the soldering iron aside to allow it to cool down, and blew on the newly soldered repair to help it set.

“Shall we give this a go? See if it’s working?” I suggested. Rowland followed me back out to the stage, where he plugged it into the amp, then plugged the cable from the guitar into it, with a satisfying pop that indicated something was now working.

“That sounds hopeful,” said Rowland and picked up the guitar. He stomped on the pedal, and the red light came on, and then a nasty, metallic, caterwauling tone went shuddering through his amp. “Oh yes, that sounds perfect. Hasn’t sounded this good in ages.” He tried another few spaghetti western chords, manipulating the tremolo arm to bend the tone, so that it sounded like a cavalcade of dancing
Hearing the noise, Tracy emerged from backstage, and came out to watch. “Well, that’s sorted it out,” he observed. “Did Mizz Carter do that?” The way he added the title to my name sounded so funny and formal, like a French governess, that I forgot to be cross with him about the intensely disliked prefix.

Rowland nodded, and tried another riff, the guitar sound juddering like a derailing freight train, then exchanged an odd expression with Tracy. Tracy simply nodded and leaned back against the wall, crossing his legs at the ankle. Rowland coughed and fiddled with the knobs of his guitar, which crackled slightly, causing both of us to wince.

“I could try to fix that if you’d let me. Well... not now, but if you brought it round the studio?” I suggested.

Again, Rowland and Tracy exchanged surreptitious glances, before Rowland finally spoke, so breezily I didn’t initially think he was serious. “Don’t suppose you’d consider a job as a... well, combination guitar tech and sound engineer.”

At first, I took it for a joke, and simply laughed, but Tracy stepped in. “You know, we’re going in the studio in two weeks. We could really do with a sound tech who knows us, knows our sound, and what we’re trying to achieve.”

“You’re not booked into our studio,” I said, a little confused, wondering if I’d missed something on the scheduling board.

“No,” said Rowland. “We’d want you to work directly for us. Don’t worry. The record company will pay for it.” He named a figure that was quite a bit higher than my day rate at my own job, high enough for me to realise that I was actually getting a little tiny bit screwed over by my jovial employers.

“Um, I’m not sure,” I stuttered, climbing to my feet and scratching my head. “I mean, technically, I’m not exactly bound to an exclusive contract at my studio, but... I’d have to check it’s alright.” I shifted my weight from foot to foot, considering it. “Where are you recording?”

“Hansa,” supplied Rowland, with more than a hint of pride to his voice. That stopped me in my tracks. Even in the few months I’d been working as a sound engineer, I had grown to learn that Hansa-by-the-Wall was spoken of with a kind of reverence among anyone who knew anything about music or recording. It was where Bowie had recorded his Berlin trilogy, and his aura of untouchable genius had long continued to hang around the place.

“Blimey,” I said quietly. “What’s the catch?”

“There is none,” said Rowland, and smiled a little too jauntily. “We just... trust you?”

Tracy laughed. “And we also know, from hearing you manage that bloke on the mixing desk, that you speak perfect German, as well as English. Honestly, we need a translator!”

I told them a conditional yes, but that I’d have to check my schedule to make sure I wasn’t double booked. To be fair, with my rational side, I knew it should have been a dream job. To work at Hansa Tonstudio? Most sound engineers could go their entire careers and only dream of working at the place, and I was being hired in as a guitar tech? Surely there had to be someone else in West Berlin who was just as good at fixing up old vintage guitars and sound equipment. But something about the offer niggled at me, even as I dodged outside for a breath of fresh air away from all the cigarette smoke.
smoke backstage, to get a gauge on the mood of the crowd.

Out in the hall, wandering about, nodding hello at people I knew from the scene, I thought that Malaria! had been an astute choice for a support act. The Berlin scene loved them, and people would turn up early to see them, and spend the rest of evening propping up the bar. But then I saw the drinks order disappearing towards the backstage area, and laughed at how extravagant my friends were being with their riders. There was never any such thing as a free lunch, and I thought these new promoters would come to regret their decision to offer two of the hardest-drinking bands in West Berlin an open bar.

The actual, real sound man for the evening signalled to me, and waved me over, so I went over to talk to him for a bit. After a few misunderstandings, we hammered out the running order and the set times, and I wrote them down, and went backstage to tell the bands to disregard the official times posted on the wall, and stick to these hours. And again, as I walked backstage, I was struck by the heavy atmosphere. Mick had joined Nick and Blixa at the one table, and he and Nick were scribbling at something in a note book as Blixa kept Anita and Gudrun entertained, rolling them long thin joints. And on the other side of the room, at a different table, as if they weren’t even in the same band, sat Rowland, newly joined by Gen, and Tracy with his girlfriend. For a moment, I paused, wondering which table to go to, as I felt a certain loyalty to Rowland, now that I’d agreed to be his guitar tech, and yet obviously, I wanted to go and sit with my lover, who had now noticed me, and was gesturing with one of the joints, as if he wanted to share it with me.

And then it hit me, the suspicion that Rowland and Tracy might have had a completely underhanded motivation for hiring me for the Hansa session: if Blixa had become Team Nick, they wanted the other half of the couple as Team Rowland. And at that moment, I realised that the eccentric, bumbling Rowland was nowhere near as airy or fey or hapless as he acted. He could play band politics just as shrewdly as anyone else in the music business.

I went and sat with Blixa. He lit the joint and inhaled deeply before passing it to Anita, then bent over and kissed me, exhaling the smoke in a long plume into my lungs. Oh Christ. If Blixa was going to be very stoned, it looked like I was, too.

Time passed, awfully slowly, and then finally, it was time for Malaria! to go out and play. I patted Blixa gently on the knee, and told him I was going out to watch them from the wings, keeping an eye out for flying drumsticks and stray guitar cables. With a headful of hash, their music excited me so, that I spent more time dancing than actually roadie-ing. Ack! There went the mic on the kick drum – I flew out quickly and up-righted it, narrowing dodging Manon’s whirling guitar headstock. Manon laughed as I shot back towards the wings, and danced at me as she played, caressing her guitar in time with the beat. God, I loved this band. Why couldn’t they the ones tempting me away from my day job to a sideline as a guitar tech? Oh right, because that was Manc Mark’s territory. He had finally turned up, and was on the other side of the stage, tuning Manon’s spare guitar for the next song. Gudrun grinnned as she walloped her drums, really raising a sweat, but then Bettina whirled about and accidentally kicked over Gudrun’s water bottle. Shit! I darted backstage and found a replacement, and slotted it in next to her hi-hat, just as they finished the song, and she reached for the cold water to refresh herself. I knew that it all looked so effortless from the audience, one song giving way to the next, but it never failed to surprise me, how frenetic and chaotic and disorganised it actually was onstage.

Nick appeared in the wings opposite me and started chatting nervously with Manc Mark. Christ, was the set already over? How was that anything like 40 minutes? Time seemed to collapse under the bright lights. And yet behind them, like a dark shadow, like a devil crouched over one of Nick’s shoulders, stood Blixa, and I suddenly started to see things from Rowland’s point of view.
Gudrun thudded at the drums, which was Nick’s cue to come forward. The crowd, already eating out of the girls’ hands, erupted into applause. Nick announced the song in English, and Bettina in German, and they were off. He and Bettina played off one another, as he stalked the stage, but she didn’t flirt with him the way that Lydia had; she just eyed him with all of the arrogant Berlin disdain she could muster. But as Nick stepped forward, baiting the audience by leaning out over them, I looked through to the other side of the stage, and caught sight of Blixa. Blixa was completely and utterly enraptured, his eyes following Nick with an expression of hunger. It wasn’t even lust. Since becoming his lover, I had learned to recognise the intent, slightly haughty and piercing gaze that came over Blixa’s face when he experienced physical desire. What Blixa looked at Nick with was the desire to be him, pure and simple. And I shuddered, because I didn’t want Blixa to be Nick. I just wanted Blixa to be Blixa.

Finally, Malaria! finished, to rapturous applause, and more preposterous antics from Nick, offering the audience out for a fight, screaming at them as he whipped himself into a frenzy. But I knew the changeover was tight – only 15, maybe 20 minutes – and immediately dashed forward to start to clear Malaria!’s equipment out of the way. I coiled cables, and pushed them into the back of amps, then thrust the amps at Manc Mark, who wheeled them off, out of the way, and into the small storage area where I’d been soldering before. The pair of us worked fast, going back for the next load of equipment, and then the next, until the stage was bare except for the Birthday Party’s gear. Finally, I breathed a sigh of relief when it was all stowed away, and the boys started to gather by the stage door. My job was over for the night, at least until it came time to load the stuff back into the van and drive it home. So I patted Mark on the back at a job well-done, and set off in search of one of those gorgeous Turkish coffees.

The front bar cleared out as The Birthday Party went on, so I got my coffee fairly quickly, then ran into a Super-8 filmmaker I knew through Tabea, and we chatted for a bit as I drank it. His lover was already perched on the side of the stage, documenting the proceedings, and they had arranged to switch halfway through, but he was happy to chat until then. Wolfgang appeared, and I bought him a beer, topping up my coffee high with some coca-cola, and together, we wandered back through into the hall, standing near the back and observing from a safe distance.

Wolfgang’s witty asides really were the best, as he made an offhand comment about the precarity of heterosexual manhood with a side-glance and an eyeroll towards the stage. I almost hugged him on the spot, and we slid into an easy conversation about some of his ideas for one of his upcoming shows. The Deadly Doris weren’t exactly a rock band, but they weren’t exactly performance art, either, but I generally found their peculiar performances a great deal more witty and engaging than the brutal onslaught of the Aussie punks onstage. And with Wolfgang, at least, I felt secure that we could hang back and snark and snipe and be sarcastically ironic in peace.

But I had only been talking to Wolfgang for about ten, fifteen minutes, when I felt someone come up behind me. Hands touched my hips, and for a moment, I jumped, preparing my flight or fight response for an arse-kicking, but then I recognised the familiar sensation of rubber. It was Blixa, wrapping his arms around me from behind, and resting his sharply pointed chin on my shoulder. I wasn’t really sure how to react. A part of me wanted to flinch, wanted to shrug him off me. I had never really been a fan of public displays of affection; they embarrassed me. But there was a part of me, as he pressed himself against my back, and started to move his hips as if he wanted to dance, that actually, secretly, really quite enjoyed it. This was a thing, the gesture seemed to say. Blixa and I were a real, genuine, publicly acknowledged couple. I couldn’t even remember the last time I had been part of a couple that people knew about, and acknowledged with nods and gentle greetings as they walked by. Ilsa had never wanted to meet my art scene mates. And Maud? Christ, I realised with a start. That had been years ago.

Blixa exchanged a few droll one-liners with Wolfgang, but it was obvious from the way he tightened...
his embrace around my waist that it was not his company he was after. Wolfgang finished his beer, offered to buy the pair of us a drink, but Blixa shook his head and said >>no, that's OK<< for both of us.

Wolfgang walked off in the direction of the bar, and as Blixa’s hands crept downwards, towards the waistband of my jeans, I knew what he was after. To be honest, I had been thinking the same thing as I had felt him pressing his erection into the bottom of my back. His mouth reached my ear, and he licked gently, making all the hairs on the back of my neck stand up as my insides twisted up into something shaped like desire.

>>Do you want to take a little trip to the gentlemen’s toilets?>> he suggested, in a low breathy whisper that seemed designed to excite the sensitive parts of my inner ear.

I craned my neck and shook my head. >>Too busy, this time of night.<<

>>How about backstage, we’ve both got passes.<< I didn’t really want to think about why Blixa was suddenly so randy.

>>Bad idea, you know Bettina’s holding court back there<< I sighed.

Blixa was still moving against me, his cock grinding against my buttocks. >>I am a human animal with needs<< he whispered. >>And I need sex with you now.<< I could feel his need so much through his trousers, that it was actually turning me on.

>>There’s always the van<< I suggested.

Eleven minutes later, Blixa was perched on the little jump seat in the back of the van, his rubber trousers around his ankles, and I was bouncing up and down on his lap, both of us sweating and straining, our hands in each other’s hair, locked together at the mouths and the genitals. It had become like a roaring hunger, this habit of fucking Blixa, and once he suggested it, I couldn’t get it out of my head until it happened. We slid into one another and started to grind, neither of us letting up until we’d both got off. Sex with a man; who knew it could be so compulsive, so addictive. And yet he didn’t feel like a man when he was underneath me, his pretty face smeared with makeup, totally surrendering himself to me and letting me push him about like a ragdoll. These bony wrists, these long, slender fingers, they didn’t feel like a man as I grabbed them and held him pinned beneath me. The more forceful I was with him, the more he seemed to love it, his mouth open, panting for breath, his eyes lit up with that spark of need, so different from the way he watched Nick onstage.

And half an hour later, both of us reeling and completely shagged out, we rolled back into the venue hand in hand, to encounter the aftermath of the Birthday Party’s set. Feeling suddenly very guilty about ditching Malaria!’s equipment, I rushed backstage, only to find them drinking with Manc Mark, and showing no inclination to move. Blixa slid in beside Nick at the band’s table, lolling back and smirking at his friend with a slack, totally sexually sated smile. It was obvious from his disarrayed hair, the bruises coming in on his wrists, and the general stench of sex, what he had been up to, and it seemed almost like he wanted Nick to know.

Nick looked over at him, wrinkled his nose as if sniffing, then made a face. “You’re like an animal. You know that, right, Blixa.”

Blixa smiled wolfishly, digging in his jacket for his packet of cigarettes and offering one to Nick before shaking one out for himself. As he found a lighter and lit both cigarettes, he looked directly at Nick as he spoke, not at me. “I’m in love.” A split second pause that felt electric. “Haven’t you ever been in love, Nick?”
“Love makes animals of men,” said Nick slowly. “And angels of their beloved.”

Anita turned and looked at Nick with an expression that could only really be described as pure poison. I had no idea what had happened in our absence, but it had clearly taken its toll on Anita. She caught my eye and made a face like a petulant child. There was a time when I would have jumped through hoops for her, but I realised as I looked at her, that I was no longer in love. I tried, for an awful moment, to imagine kissing her, to imagine penetrating her, but it was no good. I saw only Blixa’s face now when I thought of sex.

“I’m kind of tired” she said, stretching, and trying to bring composure back to her face. “Are you sure that no one has any coke?”

“No coke,” said Blixa, with an air of mild annoyance, as if he were a sommelier being asked for a wine that had gone out of stock. “Contacts have all dried up. I can probably find some amphetamine if I ask around, but it might take some time.”

“Never mind,” she sighed and looked down the table towards Nick. “I should probably go to bed.”

I stood up and announced, “Anita, do you want a ride home? I’m going to go and get the van and start loading up. Gudrun, can you just lend me the keys to your space, and I’ll put everything away and drop your keys off at Iron-Grey tomorrow.”

Nick grinned wolfishly and raised his eyebrows at Blixa. “The women are leaving,” he intoned gleefully. “This means freedom for us.”

Anita turned, addressing Nick with a cutting tone to her voice. “Your idea of freedom is the freedom of the little boy in the nursery, who wants to be free only to shit the bed,” she snapped, then stormed from the room.

She walked with me to the van in silence, brooding in the passenger seat on the short drive back to the venue. She watched the van as Manc Mark and I made short work of loading the gear, then I kissed Blixa goodnight. (Blixa, at least, seemed happy to be kissed, pointing to his cheek and then his neck and then his lips and insisting >>kissing here, here, here!<< as if he wanted to be petted and fussed over a little, like a cat demanding affection.) And finally Anita and I set off.

“Blixa’s really in love with you,” she observed, staring out the window as the van slid through the night, up across the canal, back towards Kreuzberg.

I laughed a little dryly. “Blixa said he’s in love. He didn’t say he was in love with me.”

Anita snorted with laughter, picking up on my insinuation. “Men!” she cried. “Those two really are just having a blatant little love affair without us, aren’t they?”

I was going to protest that I didn’t care what Blixa got up to without me, but the truth was, I did. I would not have cared one jot if I’d caught Blixa balls-deep, shagging Wolfgang. I loved and trusted Wolfgang, and would have just been happy that they were getting on so well. Or even one of the tough, androgynous West Berlin girls that loved to make eyes at Blixa at the Risk bar, or at his band’s gigs. I might even have cheered him on if she was particularly cute and I got to see her naked; might even be tempted to join in if she had nice tits. But Nick? Nick hurt.

“I thought you said Nick would never in a million years have sex with another man,” I pointed out a little cautiously.

“Do two people have to be having sex, for it to be an affair?”
I thought of the long time, almost a year, that Blixa and I had been in love, without ever having sex. Had we been having an affair, then? Or had our affair started with that desperate screw in the back room at Eisengrau? It had, and it hadn’t. “I don’t know... look, we’re here. Can you get out and open the gate, so I can drive into the yard?”

She did as I asked, then helped as much as she could, as I unloaded the van. It didn’t take long, and I was itching to be off, but she stopped me, and put her hand on my arm. “Do you want to come up for a cup of coffee?” she offered, in a plaintive little girl voice.

I considered telling her I was too tired, but as I looked up at the house, I realised it was dark. Even The Skin were at the gig, and as she stared up at me, I understood that Anita really didn’t want to be alone. “Yeah, alright. Just the one, though.”

She lead me upstairs, and made me a single cup of boiled instant coffee, then opened a bottle of wine for herself. “It’s freezing down here. Come up to my room, at least it’s a bit warmer up there.”

I did as I was told, thinking how, only a few months earlier, I would have been completely beside myself at the thought of going to Anita’s bedroom. Well, Nick’s bedroom, too, I had to remind myself, which dulled my excitement somewhat. It was a strange, cramped place, a single room divided with a make-shift platform into a working space with a desk, a reading space with a chair and a lamp, and then a smaller space above for a bed. Anita chose the bed, turning on a bedside lamp, then pulled the curtains round to seal off the space after I kicked off my boots and climbed in. As she settled in, and pulled the duvet around her shoulders, I looked about me. Above the bed were dozens of haunted-looking gothic icons, on glossy colour paper, as if clipped from art books. It wasn’t to my taste at all, but then neither was Nick.

Anita sipped at her wine, then looked for a place to leave the bottle. But shifting papers about on a small shelf at the top of the bed, she suddenly seemed to happen upon a cardboard box that looked terribly familiar. “Oh, that’s where my tarot cards got to,” she mused, then her face lit up. “Let me read your fortune, Carter, that should be fun.”

I pulled back as if I had been burned. “Um, no thanks,” I said sharply.

Anita looked up, her expression teasing. “What’s the matter? You scared of the occult? Scared to learn your future?”

I shook my head, frowning darkly. “The last person to read my tarot was Jana.”

She had to furrow her brow and think for some time before conjuring the person for that name. “Blixa’s crazy ex? That creepy girl who tried to glass Nick? All the more reason to get yourself a new fortune,” she insisted, as she stared to shuffle the deck.

“She used to be a friend of mine,” I protested, feeling very disloyal, but Anita was already laying out the cards in a strange pattern.

When she was done, she stopped and frowned at them. Some I recognised; many I didn’t. “Wow,” she said, then studied them for some time. “These are some pretty powerful cards.”

I shifted uncomfortably on the bed, and sipped at my coffee, but it was pretty undrinkable. “I bet you say that to all the punters,” I said, trying to laugh it off. At least I didn’t see that awful card with all the swords on it. But there, of course, was the collapsing building being hit by lightning. “Oh, look, It’s Blixa again,” I said, trying to make a joke as I pointed to it.

Anita looked at me in shock, more than a little taken aback. “What makes you say that card is Blixa?
I would say this is Blixa.” She pointed at a card marked The Magician.


“Don’t even joke that this is Blixa,” she insisted doggedly, again tapping the card. “This is the worst card in the deck. But it’s where it is that is weird. It’s the quality you need to concentrate on, to reconcile the opposing forces, and bring about the final outcome.”

I just stared at her. “That’s not funny, Anita.”

“What?” she blinked at me.

“I’ve heard that before. That’s what Jana said. That’s why I thought it was Blixa – she was seriously trying to push me and Blixa together, before they even broke up.” I thought about the other cards that she had pulled – there had been a beautiful, buxom woman with flowing red-gold hair, holding a heart. Ilsa. It seemed obvious to me now. And the Nine of Swords lurking for ‘someone that wasn’t me’ – was that Ilsa getting deported, or was that Jana’s own breakdown? No, stop it, I told myself. It’s absurd. It’s only a children’s game, these stupid cards.

“The two opposing forces,” she said, “Are pretty full-on. The Devil – that’s exactly what it looks like. Bondage, degradation, being enslaved to your desires. And the Magician – that’s a pretty powerful trickster character, full of arcane secrets and occult knowledge. This is definitely Blixa, this card had Blixa all over it.”

“Bugs Bunny,” I suddenly remembered, thinking of that day in the Risk bar, sitting with Nick.

Anita gave me an odd look, then carried on. “This is you, the primary energy manifest in your life. The High Priestess. Again, this is an incredibly powerful card, especially for a woman. This is the... the highest and holiest of the Major Arcana. The influence of reason, the influence of passion... Passion is a good card. That’s Strength.” She pointed to a picture of a woman prying a lion’s jaws apart. “But the influence of love... The Fool?” There was a colourful drawing of a happy young man traipsing directly off a cliff.

“That’s me alright,” I conceded. “Fools stumble in where angels fear to tread.”

“That’s not what it means,” she persisted. “It’s more like... fearlessness. Adventurousness. Approaching things with a completely open mind. The Fool is about newness, about rushing in and experiencing all the joy that life has to offer, drinking it in.”

“That is... so not me.” Again, it sounded more like Blixa than like me. “And what’s the final outcome?” I asked, trying to remember what Jana had told me.

Anita looked at me with her eyes round with curiosity. “That’s what’s so weird. With all these really powerful cards, I would expect some intensely important result.” She tapped a card showing a solitary figure wrapped in a dark cloak. “But there’s only this. Disappointment.”

I roared with laughter, though I really didn’t mean to hurt her feelings. After all the wafting high-mystical chat, I had expected some giant punchline. But no. Disappointment. How typical.

“Disappointment,” I finally chuckled. “Well, that’s just life, isn’t it. Thank you for the confirmation.”

“I don’t understand,” said Anita, flipping through the cards left in the deck, showing them to me one at a time. “With all these powerful forces, I would expect... The Lovers. The Marriage. Maybe The World or something. But Disappointment?”
“I would be disappointed with anything else,” I told her, then leaned forward and kissed her demurely on the forehead. “Now, thank you for the coffee, but I really have to be going. Thanks for the reading. I’ll keep it in mind. That’s my lot – Disappointment.”

I drove home slowly, thinking over that weird night that Jana had flipped out. It had been only a few weeks, but already seemed like another lifetime ago. But as I turned over the events of that evening, I remembered abruptly that she had given me something, and I had never thought to look at it, too caught up in the drama, the smash of the broken window and the arrival of the police, to pay it much attention. But now I was curious.

Digging through my things, I found the sketchbook that I had been carrying that night – a small, pocket-sized one, rather than the full-sized one I normally drew my comics in. There it was, stuffed into the back like an afterthought. I pulled it out, realised it was indeed a tarot card, and stared at the brightly coloured picture on the front. The Tower. The Collapsing Building. Had I really expected it to be any other card? And yet, as I peered at it more closely, I realised that she had written into the white spaces of the billowing clouds of smoke, in little tiny cramped letters, the words ‘stop don’t push her through the glass’ over and over and over again. I mean, Jesus Christ. Jana, what was that? As I stared at the tarot card, I started to feel weirder and weirder about that night, and more cross and annoyed, thinking that that whole stunt with the smashing window might have been... premeditated?
Jealousy

Chapter Summary

Blixa and Carter find themselves having to set some limits around expectations of fidelity, as Blixa has an encounter with a very persistent groupie. But as their relationship deepens, will Carter ever work up the courage to address who, exactly, they are really jealous of?

The New Buildings were playing two shows the next night at the Sector, one at the fairly early time of about 10pm, and another one much later, starting after midnight. I think perhaps the club owners were starting to realise what a bad deal they had struck, in allowing the bands to drink for free, and were trying to sell two lots of tickets to recoup their losses.

Somehow I had found myself conscripted into driving half of Andrew’s junkyard over in the van, and then, since it was the same soundman again, I found myself mic-ing up the assembled gear. Blixa was in a bit of a weird mood, full of tense, nervous energy, before he even started to snort speed in preparation for the evening’s gig. Rather than crowd him, I decided the best thing was to give him space, which he seemed to appreciate. Gudrun soon arrived with her girl-gang in tow, and instead I hung out with them in a little knot by the front bar, moving into the main hall as the band went on.

Watching him performing onstage was so strange, the gulf that opened up between the hyper, affectionate, slightly goofy Blixa I knew as a lover, and this charismatic, highly concentrated, pop-eyed shaman who seemed to take over his body as he performed. He had grown so much as a performer over the previous year, and that wasn’t just me looking at him with eyes of love. He and Andrew, in the van over, had been endlessly discussing and dissecting this Antonin Artaud book, The Theatre and its Double, with which they were all obsessed. For months now, they had been trying to work out how to transform Artaud’s strange ideas about breathing magic and terror and wonder back into the theatre, into their musical performances. So Blixa’s gestures had grown more theatrical, more expansive, acting out the songs with his whole body as well as just his inimitable voice. The audiences, who had previously hung back, either in shyness or in fear, now seemed constantly on the verge of overrunning the stage, pressing in with their enthusiasm. Blixa ignored them for the most part, but Mufti, buoyed up in some weird onstage ego trip, would come right down to the front of the stage and try to bluff them off, throwing around bits of sheet metal, aiming right at their bodies, seeing how close he could get to physically assaulting the front row before they backed off. It could get very tense at time, but it was always exhilarating. Maybe I was biased, but the New Buildings seemed to be doing something genuinely innovative and original in their music, in a way that the Birthday Party were only ever reanimating the corpse of old-fashioned rock’n’roll.

Nick and Anita arrived about 20 minutes late, catching only the latter half of the earlier show. Anita almost immediately made a beeline for the girlgang, hugging Gudrun and Manon and me in turn. But Nick hung back, glancing nervously at the group of women, as if we were lionesses who could strike at any time. He preferred to go over and hang out with The Skin instead, though he barely spoke to them, as if really, all he wanted was to stand with the men and simply gawp at Blixa. What fragile masculinity! It was obvious that he thought Blixa was beautiful. We all (with the exception of maybe Gudrun, who mostly thought he was just full of himself) thought Blixa was beautiful. But Nick seemed unable to bring himself to actually voice the opinion of Blixa as good-looking, except
through these weird negs, like he always had to qualify Blixa’s extraordinary looks to exempt their effect on him, even as he lavished words on trying to describe him. He would never say ‘extraordinary looks’ for a start; he would say ‘unusual’. He would never say ‘attractive’, he would say ‘arresting’. And he would constantly describe Blixa as looking ‘destroyed’ or ‘diseased’ or ‘decayed’, though obviously, in the weird, topsy-turvy, anti-beauty of the Birthday Party’s dedication to Punk, disease and decay and destruction were all so obviously considered positive and attractive and interesting and even. \textit{beautiful} qualities. Nick was clearly fascinated by Blixa’s appearance, but simply couldn’t seem to admit it, like he had to have Blixa standing up there on a stage above him, in order to have license to just \textit{gaze} at him, drinking in his strange alien beauty like a drug.

The set ended, and as the hall cleared out, we debated going backstage. And I, of course, ended up being appointed to go back and see if Blixa was in the mood for company. Blixa, instead, as Nick and Anita had guessed, didn’t want company; he just wanted to screw, as he was often really wild and wound up and horny when he got offstage, wanting not so much affection as complete annihilation in another body. So we sloped off to that dark storeroom backstage where I’d fixed Rowland’s pedal the night of the previous gig, and it was amazing to me, how fast we got down to business, like there was no longer the slightest pretence we weren’t there to slake one another. But my orgasm, and then his, calmed him down and reduced the wildness a little bit, and I could see him coming back down to his own body through our post-coital haze, even if he would just have to psych himself up again for the later show. I wanted to sit and catch my breath for a moment, but then I stupidly said something about how I wondered if Nick and Anita would just take off without us, and suddenly his head snapped to attention, and he wanted to go back out, like he hadn’t even realised that Nick was there.

And so we straightened ourselves up and returned to the main hall almost immediately, as he and Nick set down to drinking, the pair of them making goggle-eyes at one another as Nick tried to outdo himself in purple prose to describe how good he’d thought the set was. The two of them seriously set about systematically demolishing the venue’s liquor supply, knocking back tumbler after tumbler of neat vodka, and Blixa was almost insensate with drink by the time of the later set, though he snorted yet another line of speed to keep him from passing out. Instead, he careened about the stage, always seeming on the edge of falling over, but his body somehow just carried along, buoyed up by his own momentum. He was electrifying, no matter what state he was in. And in fact, sometimes when he was completely fucked up, he was even more electrifying, because he seemed to genuinely lose control of himself, stalking about the stage like a frantic insect overlord, screaming his head off as chaos raged around him. At times, Mark seemed to be the only one holding things together, propelling the motion forward with the beat of his bassline as Andrew and Mufti moved from a creative and theatrical display of destroying things, to actually genuinely destroying things.

It was an odd night, and Blixa came off the stage very high, more from the mayhem than just the drugs. As the bar stayed open, since the owners were trying to recuperate their losses from the receipts, he and Nick hovered around, right out front like they wanted to be noticed. People kept coming up to Blixa and congratulating him on the performance, or buttonholing him with strange, intense conversations, where fans bombarded him with questions that seemed to be more accusation than genuine inquiry, as if this tall, slightly fey man could explain to them the baptism by fire and noise that they had just witnessed onstage.

I had to admit, I had rather grown used to that sort of thing over the year and a bit I had been attending New Buildings’ gigs. But for Nick, it seemed to be the first time that he had seen Blixa on his own turf, on his home ground, being the focus of so much simultaneous adoration and demandngness from his fans, and he seemed both unsurprised, and yet slightly fazed by the intensity of the attention Blixa attracted. I had known from that first day at the Risk, just how much Blixa was adored in West Berlin, but for Nick it was as if it were a shock to discover that other people also shared his obsession with the lanky musician.
Blixa, to be fair, could sometimes be peculiar about encountering his audience. If he had felt odd or awkward about the show in any way, he couldn’t stand to interact with anyone, and would bolt off immediately after the set, and lock himself away with only the band or his friends for company. But if he had had a good show, he seemed to want to drink it up, the adoration, the bizarre explanations, as if perhaps, it was really the strange, obsessive fans who could explain it to him, the catharsis that he had just been through onstage.

But that night, Blixa was into it. Making himself available, up by the corner of the bar, he held court like a boy king, drinking in whatever weirdness the public choose to offer him. Most common were bizarre conversations with intense young men who insisted that they had some unique insight into what the New Buildings were about. Blixa took a weird kind of delight in listening to these, shrugging and insisting that he didn’t see why he might inherently have any greater understanding into his own music than some super-fan who had listened to the record a hundred times. And then there was the weird castles-in-Spain kinds of boasting from older men who kept insisting they had some kind of industry connections, or insight into the music business that only they could offer him. Blixa had a keen internal radar for bullshittery, and usually laughed at their attempts to ingratiate themselves, telling them exactly his very sharp opinions of the entire corrupt music business, but regardless, he seemed oddly flattered by their attempts.

And of course, there were the girls. Blixa was a beautiful man, doing a very public job, and naturally, girls were drawn to him. I wasn’t exactly jealous; it was something more like envy. Because Blixa didn’t even really have to do anything to attract their attention. He just stood there, and girls, some of them seriously beautiful, just flocked to him like hummingbirds to a particularly lovely orchid. Blixa enjoyed the company of women. And I wouldn’t pretend that some of that wasn’t sexual. Blixa had a strong ego. He liked to be admired, and it didn’t really matter to him – woman, man, gay, straight – who was doing the admiring. But when he was around women, even women who were fans, he seemed to relax into an easy, fluid femininity of companionship, whereas he always remained slightly spikey and alert around men.

Watching them together, he was the complete opposite of Nick. Nick relaxed in the company of other men, he allowed himself to be witty and charming, with that homosocial bond that had dragged him off to stand with The Skin, rather than allow himself be absorbed into the Pirate Girl Gang with Anita. But when women appeared, especially beautiful women, like the young women who were trying to chat up Blixa that evening, he seemed to stiffen and tense into alertness, as if he felt the need to put on some display of machismo, gawping openly at very attractive women in a way that even I could see made Anita uncomfortable, rolling her eyes at him with open disdain.

Blixa, on the other hand, relaxed into titters and giggles and delightful little moments of shared cattiness that disarmed women. He flirted, not through trying to impress or overwhelm or charm women, the way that Nick did; but through establishing the same kind of bitchy little gossip and girlish camaraderie that a woman might share with her hairdresser. And that kind of disarming intimacy, that drove girls wild. Women slipped into an easy, unpressured kind of flirtation, then suddenly found themselves lost. And Nick, I could see, was studying this unusual flirtation technique, because it quite ostensibly seemed to work.

One after another, I watched girls try it on with Blixa. Like, I could not believe that some weird experimental industrial band from West Berlin could attract anything like groupies, and yet there they were, making eyes at Blixa after the show. Perhaps I should have been more jealous, but I simply didn’t feel threatened enough to get territorial. If Blixa wanted to shag them, he was welcome to go off and shag them. I certainly understood the impulse of why they wanted to. If anything, the idea was completely fascinating to me. Once or twice, he was approached by a girl so beautiful, I was tempted to fantasise about stepping in and suggesting, well, why don’t you come home with us and smoke some hash, and see what happens. They would flirt, ask for an autograph, and maybe even a
kiss, and then Blixa would somehow dismiss them, turning to Nick, or to the next fan if someone else was waiting, in a way that made it clear the audience was over, and he had extracted all the adoration he required from them. I was entranced by the unnaturalness of the situation, far more than I felt put out.

One girl, though, was persistent enough to keep hanging around that evening, stepping back just long enough for other fans to talk to him, but always reappearing when their conversations ended. She was English-speaking, American from the accent, with the perfect teeth and beautiful glossy mounds of hair that that normally entailed. There was a part of me that wondered what might have happened had I not been there, because Blixa really was quite drunk, and was continually slipping back into that easy, hairdresser-chat camaraderie with her, to the point where I think that she believed him to be quite serious in his flirtation.

And that was when she made her move, slipping her arm around his neck and leaving it there for a minute, then two minutes, and finally, when he seemed to have forgotten it was even there, she turned towards him, her mouth open, and practically swallowed his entire ear.

At that moment, Blixa sobered up a bit, as if finally realising what was going on, and did his best to try to extricate himself from her, sliding her arm from around his neck as if wrestling off an octopus, and doing his best to resist the sucker-like mouth when she detached it from his ear and attempted to apply it to his lips. In a way, it was actually quite comical to watch, and I probably should have stepped in and helped him, but I certainly understood her helpless desire. She was only doing what I had fantasised about, those first nights at the Risk bar. Pulling away from her, he threw me a strangled look, but I couldn’t help but collapse into laughter. After a slight wrestling match, he finally got her hands pinned and held her away from him, at arm’s length.

“Listen,” he said, quite loudly, loud enough to hear him over the dull roar of the gathered crowd, and the hapless DJ trying to play Turkish pop records to the assembled mass of people. “Listen, you’re very nice, but I’m sorry. I’m not interested in taking zhis furzher.”

“Well, why aren’t you interested?” whined the American girl. “What, are you some kind of queer?”

At that, Blixa’s face seemed to pass through some substantial confusion, as knowing him, he was probably very tempted to quite simply tell her, that yes, he was indeed a queer, that everyone in West Berlin was totally bisexual as a matter of principle. But perhaps it was for the best that he chose another tack. “Vell, if you must know, I already have a lover. And she is standing right zhere.”

The girl dropped her hands at that, and turned to look straight at me, her face darkening like the Spree in bad weather. As Blixa’s eyes followed hers, meeting mine and helplessly imploring me to somehow step in, I felt awkwardly put on the spot, and shrugged. Counting on the fact that she probably didn’t speak very good German, if at all, I looked him full in the face and spoke very fast, throwing in a lot of Berlin slang. >>Don’t use me as your excuse. If you want to go with the girl, then go with the girl.<<

>>I do not want to go with this girl<< he insisted, growing suddenly irate.

For a moment, I contemplated saying something like, ‘she’s your groupie, so you get rid of her’ but instead, I sighed deeply and stepped towards her, trying to arrange my face into a patient smile as I turned to her. “Look, love,” I said in my most gentle, mothering tone, even though I resented having to be the one to do it. “I’m not angry. I do get it – he’s a very attractive young man. I understand how he can make you lose control of yourself a little bit. But I really think it would be best if you went home quietly now, so there’s not any kind of fuss.”

She tried to approach Blixa one more time, making as if to only hug him, but he raised his arms,
seizing her by the shoulders, and holding her at some distance from him. But rather than understanding that it was he who didn’t want it, she turned and vented her frustration at me. Looking me up and down, she sneered, and then spat at my feet. “Dyke.”

“Oh indeed,” I muttered under my breath, but fortunately, her fury spent, she slung her coat round her shoulders and stomped off.

Blixa and I looked at one another, shocked, and his expression was so irate, and so put out and so offended, that I couldn’t help but laugh.

>>Don’t laugh, it’s not funny<< he insisted, straightening his back and tugging at his hair where her affections had displaced it.

>>Actually, it is quite funny,<< snickered Anita, whose German comprehension seemed to be improving a little faster than her boyfriend’s.

Blixa, scowling, looked back and forth between us, before turning to Nick, who was doing his best not to burst out laughing. And when Nick’s giggles started to erupt, I think Blixa realised that the situation was quite absurd, and cracked a smile. “Get some drinks in, eh, Herr Cave?” he demanded of Nick, then when his attention was distracted, he turned to me. >>Did you mean that?<<

>>What?<< I shrugged.

>>Telling me to go with strange girls.<<

I turned and looked at him, trying to work out what he was asking me, if he was actually asking me for permission, or if he just wanted reassurance that I cared about him enough to be jealous. >>What, would you prefer I lied, and pretended to be jealous, to make you feel more secure?<< I offered.

>>Jealousy doesn’t make me feel secure. It makes me feel... Well, it makes me feel like a possession. I don’t like being a possession. I don’t like the way German girls go at this, treating you like a package to be passed back and forth between you all.<<

Remembering the way that Jana had tried to do exactly that, I dropped the smile from my face, and looked into his eyes. >>I don’t consider you my possession, or anyone else’s. You are your own creature, and that is, actually, one of the things I very much like about you. And I am not jealous. If that’s what’s going to make you happy, going with a pretty girl, then you should do what makes you happy.<<

He stared back at me, his face challenging. >>But this doesn’t make me happy, with you standing there, just laughing at me, while I am being practically raped.<<

And suddenly, I found myself oddly angry, annoyed at being forced to give him an emotional reaction I didn’t feel. >>Well, how am I supposed to react? If I get jealous, I’m a possessive bitch. But if I don’t get jealous, I’m somehow responsible for what happens to you?<<

For a moment, he seemed to stare at me disbelievingly, as if challenging me with his eyes, but then he seemed to notice the genuine hint of anger behind my words, shrugged and then dropped it. >>I don’t want to go with some random girl. For some stupid reason, only you seem to make me happy enough right now.<<

He put his hand on my waist and squeezed me gently, though I wasn’t sure if he was trying to reassure himself or me, for he seemed somehow out of sorts now, not even relaxing when Nick reappeared with three tumblers full of vodka and a can of coke. Gesturing with his head, Nick pointed towards a booth, indicating that perhaps the audiences should be over for the night, and
Blixa followed him over, quietly fuming over something, though I couldn’t work out what.

I sat and sipped at my coke, but Blixa’s mood had changed from the expansive thrill-seeking of earlier in the night to a kind of drunken sullenness where he was acting quite put out, even affronted. So when Mufti appeared, and asked if I was still willing to take their gear back to the rehearsal space in my van, I agreed and swiftly finished my drink.

“Are you going to The Skin’s space? Can you give me a ride?” asked Anita.

“Sure, I’ll come back for you when we’re done loading,” I shrugged, and loped off backstage.

There wasn’t much left to take home after that gig: a guitar amp, a bass amp and one of Andrew’s home-made percussive... things, consisting of a long metal spring suspended from a frame. Everything else had been reduced to rubble which I thought they’d be better off throwing in a skip than loading in a van, even as the few remaining obsessive fans picked off the occasional splinter of twisted metal to take home for a memento. But, with Andrew and Mufti’s help, I loaded what was still usable into the back of my van. Blixa, however, showed no sign of wanting to leave, as he was now definitely in a contrary, slightly ornery mood, and looking for a scrap. I didn’t want to give it to him, as I had no idea what I’d done wrong in the whole interaction, so I left him in the back of that dark booth with Nick, to just carry on drinking and arguing until the sun came up, as Nick was always up for a scrap. Andrew extracted the keys to their rehearsal studio from him, tossed them to me and climbed in the back of the van, leaving Anita to take the passenger seat, and I drove off and just left Nixa and Blick to it.

Anita rolled herself in a little ball, her feet up on the dashboard of my van as we drove through the darkened city. It seemed to be becoming a ritual, leaving the lads to drink, as us two wives sloped home with the gear.

“You handled that very well,” she observed, after I finally dropped off Andrew and his pile of scrap metal.

“Well, what was I supposed to do?” I shrugged.

“I never know what I’m supposed to do,” she sighed. “I know I’m not supposed to get jealous. And yet, I can’t help but feel... I don’t know. Angry at how unbalanced it is.”

“In what way?” I asked, confused by what she meant.

“I guess I’m a little envious. At how you and Blixa, you both very much have your own thing going on. Blixa loves you, and I know you love him, but you don’t seem to need Blixa.”

I was about to protest, when I realised what she said was true. I might love Blixa, and maybe even be a little obsessed with Blixa. But I never made the mistake of assuming that he was mine to keep. “We were friends for a very long time before we became lovers. So I think we have a good balance. I know when to walk away and give him space. And he... does the same for me.”

“Nick and I have no balance at all. He’s here with his band, so he’s got his job, and he’s got his friends all laid on for him, through the music scene. And me? I don’t have a visa so I can’t even work in West Germany. So I’ve just got Nick. That’s my job. Nick.”

“But you’re a poet,” I protested. “You don’t need a work visa to write your poetry.”

Anita turned to me, her lovely golden eyes huge with unhappiness. “No one likes my poetry. They nixed the songs that I wrote for them.”
“I liked your songs,” I insisted, and gestured towards the glove compartment of the van. Anita opened it, and saw the tapes that I had collected there, to listen to while I drove. There were, of course, a couple of Malaria! tapes, and a couple of mixtapes that Blixa had made me as love-offerings when he was courting me, and yet there, near the top of the pile, was a copy of the rough mixes of her songs that I had worked on.

“I guess you’re right,” sighed Anita, with a little sentimental smile. “I should be more like you, and more like Gudrun, and make sure I have my own stuff to work on. Then I’ll stop being all worried over girls. Because there are always girls around Nick, and there are always going to be girls around Nick. I just have to learn how not to let it bother me. And that means having my own thing to walk off to.”

The thing was, it wasn’t girls that was the problem, between my lover and I. Over the next few weeks, I started specifically having to carve out time with Blixa, away from Nick. But there was at least one thing I still had as an edge over Nick, and that was sex. And Blixa for those first weeks we were together, was completely rampant, as if he was trying to make up for the previous year we’d spent not screwing, by screwing me every chance he could get. It took me a while to work out why he had been upset after that night at the Sector, for I could hardly believe it myself, until it happened again another night, Blixa having to rather forcefully turn down a casual blow-job from an admirer at another gig, and being shocked by how little he found he wanted it. I suddenly realised that that incident at Sector was perhaps the first night that Blixa realised how deep he was in with me, for him to be offered consequences-free sex with a completely willing girl, and to suddenly realise he just didn’t want it. He wanted me, more and more often, like he was trying to prove something, though I often got the feeling when we were together, that he was actually searching for something, the way he gazed, deep into my eyes, as if he were wordlessly trying to interrogate something from our pleasure.

If I went round Iron-Grey and there was a lull in visitors, he would lock the door and pull me off in the back room to tumble me on the loft bed. When I dropped in at Risk at the weekend, he whistled to Maria that he was going to take his customary break to make me a cup of coffee, but instead of heading towards the kettle, he dragged me into one of the storerooms, pushed a keg against a door with no lock, then took me standing against a rusted sink. Romantic, it was not, but the two of us just couldn’t seem to get enough of each other’s bodies. It was almost like we dared one another, egged one another on, taking ridiculous risks and pushing the boundaries of when and where was an appropriate time to screw. I started to like this game myself, pushing him into the back of the van, while we were waiting for one of his bandmates; even clamping his wrists down with a bit of wood-working gear, to take him against the workbench in my little workshop at the studio, when he swung by to borrow some gear.

For me, I fear it was only half horniness, and half the desire to prove that ultimately, there was still something I could give him that Nick could not. For him, well, he finally confessed that he was afraid that one day, I would simply change my mind, that I would go back to girls and wouldn’t want him any more. But I still wasn’t sure if he was trying to prove to me that sex with a man could be really exciting, or if he just wanted, for his own benefit, to get in all of the screwing that he could, before that day arrived. And I realised at that moment, that he hadn’t yet discovered my secret weakness for him. He hadn’t realised that somewhere between then and now, I had stopped looking at Anita, had stopped looking at other girls, had stopped looking at pretty much anyone that wasn’t Blixa. He consumed my thoughts, in a way that might have scared me, had I ever sat down and seriously thought about it, the way that he had confronted it that night at Sector. And maybe I, too,
was endlessly searching for something, and I didn’t even know what I was looking for, but I knew I only ever found it at the bottom of Blixa’s deep ultramarine eyes.

It wasn’t as if I thought we had some glorious future. Most of the time, none of us thought we had a future at all. At any moment, Reagan or Brezhnev was going to push the button and set off the Armageddon to annihilate us all. Even if I had thought of heterosexual couplehood and, god forbid, family-making at all, it was not as if we believed there would be time for it before the apocalypse hit. Time genuinely felt short, as if each and every never-ending night would be the last before the bomb went off. And yet it somehow made the immediate moment, and the prolonging of it, ever more intense and sweet. Who cared if we had forever. We had each other right now, and the intensity of that now was intoxicating.

When it was just the two of us, when there was no Risk bar, no Birthday Party and no Nick, it was just so amazing it made the awkward tension of the time with Nick bearable. Blixa was so bright, and so funny that he made every moment, in bed or out of it, feel like an adventure, and so affectionate and so genuine that I opened up to him in a way that made me feel safe and whole. As days turned into weeks, then weeks turned into a month, and then another, finding ourselves still together, still happy, and still in love, I started to actually relax and be more fully myself with him, even as he was playing with artifice and trying out new roles and new games in bed with me.

Sex with Blixa was just unlike sex with anyone I had ever had with anyone, before or after, man, woman or anything inbetween. For Blixa, in his erotic play, though he did very much like to be tied down, and he did like to be penetrated, sometimes even aggressively, sex was never about power for him. That was what I found so unusual about him, especially for a man. Blixa didn’t need to exert power to obtain sex, I realised, looking back on his early, clumsy attempts to ‘seduce’ me, because Blixa’s idea of seduction, as I well remembered, was simply to get naked, lie back, and wait for the other person to jump on him. The idea of the beautiful, charismatic, but intensely lazy Blixa ever pressuring anyone into sex, or exerting power or dominance through trying to obtain it, was simply absurd. He’d never had to.

Maybe it was his half-gayness (as Gudrun put it, which seemed a better description of him than “bisexual”), or maybe it was his half-femininity, that made him empathise with, and deeply relate to women and gay men, instead of wanting to use them or dominate them in some way. Blixa wasn’t particularly un-masculine in other ways, it was just that he was both strongly masculine, and also strongly feminine, all at the same time.

But more likely, it was the same thing that he aspired to, onstage: that what the exacting, highly-strung, tightly wound-up musical control freak, Blixa craved more than anything else, was the sensation of losing control. Blixa wasn’t the slightest bit submissive in word or deed or servile in any way – quite the reverse in fact, playfully spiky and combative – but he gave himself completely over to the practice of losing control in the throes of sexual abandon. That, I realised, had been behind Blixa’s fantasies of me as a domineering butch, climbing on top of him, pushing him down and overpowering him completely. He wanted not just to lose control, but to surrender control, to experience sex as a kind of swoon into the erotic, released from the tyranny of conscious thought with the same oceanic bliss as when his trance-like music took him out of himself, or the abuse of drugs and the sleeplessness they brought deconstructed his mind into an ecstatic state beyond logic.

It was strange, because I had always thought of myself as quite timid, quite restrained and very definitely English and repressed. Those were the qualities I had lacked that had attracted me, first to Gudrun, and then to Blixa – their very boldness and seeming fearlessness. But Blixa recognised something in me, and something in the sex he knew I preferred. He saw exactly what it was that I was restraining and repressing, that I was somehow terrified of my own masculinity. I was afraid of my own desires to dominate and control and exercise power. But Blixa had seen the way that I
walked into chaotic situations – buildings without electrical power, recording sessions with musicians in disarray, soundchecks where half the required performers were missing – and simply took control of the situation to sort it all out.

I slowly realised that it wasn’t actually my hands he had been so in awe of; it was the things they did. He saw me take control of a malfunctioning guitar, or the soundboard in the studio, and make them sing, and he fantasised about me taking control of his body in the same way, and making him sing out loud. Secretly, I liked taking control, I liked exercising my power; but it scared the shit out of me. So for Blixa to actively surrender control to me... that gave me a kind of license to be everything in bed, and out of it, that terrified me. Not just to pine and to want, but to have and enjoy.

And oddly, taking control of Blixa’s body like that, using my power not to hurt or dominate, but to bring him such intense sexual ecstasy, it somehow broke through my own weird assumptions about what sex should or even could be like for me. For sex had always been something that I had wanted to do to other people, something that I believed should happen in my lover’s body, not mine. I’d thought it was just the way I was wired, that I’d always been such a stone butch with Ilsa, wanting to give but never to receive pleasure, never wanting to let anyone into my body. I hadn’t noticed, until I started to have sex with Blixa, stone cold sober in the middle of the day, that until then, I’d always had to be completely fucked up – stoned, wired, on speed – to actually follow through on my conquests in the gay bars of West Berlin. Blixa rearranged me, as much by example as by the incredible things he did to my body, and to my brain, when we fucked. It was strange, given how some of the lesbian scene would come to accuse the pair of us of ‘going straight’ and ‘becoming breeders’, but Blixa taught me how to queer sex into something I could actually allow to take place inside me.

He gave me the freedom to take off a mask I had worn too long, while I gave him the freedom to experiment with new and different masks. I became more of a man around him, as he became more camp and effeminate. I started to gain self-assurance and express myself with more confidence, not just my sexual desires, but thoughts and opinions I’d previously kept to myself. To my surprise, he seemed to enjoy this, and even encouraged it, his eyes lighting up when I said aloud things I’d only thought before. For a man who later picked up a reputation for being arrogant, even egotistical, I discovered that he did not mind being challenged a little, so long as the challenges were interesting. And the freedom to truly be myself, around Blixa, to my surprise, started, slowly, to translate into living more authentically, around others.
Let's Do It A Dada

Chapter Summary

By complete accident, a very naughty cross-dressing Blixa accidentally meets Carter's family. And there are some surprises all round.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Blixa and I got careless. I don’t know, maybe we wanted to get caught, as I was tired of sneaking around and lying to my aunt, like I had grown tired of telling my friends I didn’t love this strange creature I spent so much time with. Privacy was impossible at Iron-Grey so we seldom slept there, but when he slept over at mine, I worried constantly about being turfed out of bed after late nights and early mornings of him sneaking in through my bedroom window. I had carefully memorised what mornings of the week my relatives would be out of the house on their usual rounds and social calls, and tried to make sure that Blixa did not fall asleep after sex, on the days when I knew they would be at home. But of course we got lazy. We screwed up, and we got caught.

We’d been up all night, taking speed and screwing. I didn’t use the drug all the time like he did, but I had certainly learned to use the filthy powder as a kind of accelerant for sex. Amphetamine made me bold enough to be willing to be as rough with him as he liked, and it gave him the endurance to keep going for hours and hours. The intensity of the drug got a kind of synergy going with the intensity of our feelings, and sex and love and fucking and being high and being in love all seemed to blend together in a marvellous blur, bodies and art and life all smeared together. We argued about politics and love and the lines between science and philosophy, passionately, almost maniacally, for hours, setting the world to rights, and the best way to settle arguments was with sex. I wasn’t drawing him, because I didn’t want to admit to myself that I had stopped drawing almost completely, but we took polaroids of each other half-shagged and wasted and even dressed in costumes or made-up. And then looking and taking photos led to touching and touching led to screwing all over again. Being with Blixa was intoxicating; the best drug I had ever tried.

The sun had come up, and we were starting to come down, but we smoked a bit of hash to delay the inevitable horrors, so we were still very giggly and silly. Blixa, looking around for something to throw on before he ventured out to the bathroom to wash and dress properly, discovered a chest of drawers at the back of my closet.

>>Are these your clothes, Carter?<< he asked playfully, digging through the chest and pulling out a pair of very fancy lace knickers, and a sort of vest-like lace-up top.

I roared with laughter. >>They never were. I think they belonged to whoever rented the room before I moved in.<<

Undaunted, he put them on and pranced round the room, striking supermodel poses against the desk, and draped over one of the chairs, before diving back into the wardrobe and digging for more. >>Oh, there’s make-up, too. What a find! Do you want to put lipstick on me?<<

>>, I giggled, rolling over to watch him as he dragged a small make-up case over to the sink in the corner of my room.
The mascara was caked absolutely solid, so he threw that away, but he managed to sharpen the kohl and put two huge black rings around his eyes, like a sleepy panda. There was a stick of concealer, which he dabbed at his cheeks to make them even more hollow and arched-looking. Then he took out a tube of lipstick, which was an odd coral colour, but he puckered his lips and applied it anyway. He looked absolutely extraordinary, because he was such a beautiful person that the exaggerated make-up only served to make him look more gorgeous, even as he had very clearly applied a parody of a girl’s face. But he also looked ridiculous, as he had used the make-up to exaggerate, rather than ameliorate his long, thin, elfin face. My libido twisted about for a bit before deciding that actually, yes, it was oddly hot.

But Blixa went back into the cupboard, and dug further. He extracted first a pair of high-heeled shoes, but these were far too small for him, and were kicked back into the cupboard. But then he dug a little deeper and found a pair of sling-back slippers with bits of fake marabou fluff glued onto the front. Although these were also slightly too small for him, he did manage to get his feet into them, so long as he didn’t do up the straps at the back. Pleased with the result, he shuffled around the room for a bit, but then muttered his irritation that the mirror over the sink did not adequately reflect the shoes, as well as the whole outfit.

>>There’s a full length mirror in the bathroom<< I giggled, though I knew I shouldn’t encourage him. >>But I wouldn’t go about dressed like that<<

>>I don’t care; I want to see my beautiful self<< he insisted, and, sticking his arms out to balance, tottering on the kitten heels of the slingbacks, he unlocked the door to my room, and minced across the kitchen towards the bathroom. Even across the house, I could hear his horse-like bray of amusement. >>Oh my god, I look like a hooker<< A brief pause for a snicker of giggling. >>But that’s your type isn’t it?<<

>>Fuck off Blixa<< I laughed, and I was about to reach for the block of hash in my bedside table, when I heard his footsteps out in the kitchen joined by a second set.

>>Oh<< I heard Blixa say, surprised, before recovering his jaunty confidence. >>Hello there.<<

And then my heart froze, as I heard Grete say, quite calmly and politely, but with an immense amount of gravitas, >>Oh darling. That is not your colour.<< I quickly pulled it off, and stuffed it away, then dashed around, donning first my pyjamas, and then my dressing gown, before bolting out to the kitchen to face my imminent doom.

But to my surprise, when I got out to the kitchen, neither Blixa nor Grete were there. I followed the noise of laughter down the hall, and found the pair of them in the bathroom. Blixa sat patiently on the toilet lid while Grete dug in her cabinet. >>With your fair skin and light-coloured hair, you don’t want an orangey tone like that. It will wash you right out<< she was saying, as Blixa was wiping off the lipstick with a tissue. >>You want a more raspberry tone – or even a wine coloured tone, if you want a bit of a vampish look.<<

>>Oh yes, vampish was what I was going for<< Blixa agreed.

>>Ooh, yes, this one will do for you, then. This is a Chanel vamp red<< cooed Grete, pulling out a small black and gold stick, then bending down to apply it to Blixa’s face. >>No, don’t pucker up, just open your mouth slightly, please? Oh, yes, that’s much more like it. You have such lovely, full lips, my dear. You’re lucky. I never had such a pout as that<<
I coughed lightly to announce my presence, as the two of them were so caught up in their lipstick application. >>Erm... good morning<< I stuttered. >>I see you’ve met, erm... well... this is Blixa.<<

>>Oh yes, we’ve made ourselves acquainted<< chirped Grete. >>Do you want to try some blusher? You almost don’t need it, with those cheekbones, but... Hmm.<<

>>Blixa is my, erm...<< I stumbled over the word, for what we were to each other, but Blixa quickly supplied it.

>>Girlfriend.<< Raising one eyebrow, he smirked at me mischievously, as if daring me to contradict him.

>>Of course you are, darling<< insisted Grete, gently brushing the line of Blixa’s cheeks with a hint of rouge. >>Waldtraut, there’s no need to be so shy. I know your aunt will be delighted you have a girlfriend. We’ve been so worried about you – it’s not right for a young person your age to be without lovers. We didn’t want to push you, but I’m delighted to meet your Blixa, and we want you both to know that she is welcome.<<

Blixa turned to me, his eyes huge, not even bothering to correct the pronouns. >>Waldtraut?<<

>>Don’t you dare<< I warned, then turned to Grete. >>Look, Grete, you’ve got it wrong<< I insisted. >>It’s not what you think. Blixa’s not... He’s just... playing.<<

But Grete was barely listening to me, dusting powder over Blixa’s chin, where his stubble was starting to come in. >>We all play our roles<< she asserted.

>>He just likes to push boundaries. He only does it to be shocking<< I insisted.

>>This concealer you’ve used is shocking<< Grete tutted quietly. >>Really, darling, you should have been clean shaven when we started, but a little bit of powder will work wonders. They haven’t started you on the hormones yet, have they?<<

I shook my head briskly. >>Don’t fib, Blixa. You’re not even... This was just an experiment.<<

>>What is life, but a grand experiment<< said Grete wisely. >>We are all allowed to experiment. How do you ever learn, or grow if you don’t?<<

But Blixa looked up and fixed me with a steely gaze. >>Whatever you are, I am the same. You said that yourself, remember? We are the same.<<

>>It’s OK<< insisted Grete, smiling at Blixa, and then turning to me. >>There’s no shame in it. We’ve had people like Blixa here, before.. Before the war, they used to come for treatment at Dr. Hirschfield’s clinic. It doesn’t matter to us.<< The German phrase, es ist egal – it is the same – sounded so sweet to me as she turned back to Blixa. >>You are what you are, and you’re Waldtraut’s lover. Which means you are welcome here.<<

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. After all the lengths I’d had to go to hide Blixa from them, they were just prepared to welcome him, as my lover, boy, girl, something inbetween, whatever he was? I’d grown so used to being secretive about my sexuality that I never thought I might find acceptance in my own home.

Blixa, however, turned to me, raising his eyebrows. >>You are really Waldtraut? You never told me you had such a beautiful German name.<<

>>I hate it. I’m Carter.<<
Waldtraut. Valdi<< he repeated, rolling the tangle of German consonants on his tongue like English people could never manage. In his mouth, my ugly name sounded beautiful. >>My cosy forest lover<< he teased, playing with the syllables of my name the way he always played with German words.

>>Blixa, darling, will you stay and have breakfast with us?<< asked Grete, seizing the moment.

Blixa grinned, smearing wine-coloured lipstick across his teeth. >>I’d be delighted to.<<

Grete and Blixa had clearly already bonded, and were thick as thieves. She must have really liked him, as she rose to the challenge of cooking him a vegan breakfast. But over the breakfast table, in his rubber trousers, the lace vest and a full face of make-up, Blixa managed to charm even my Great-Aunt, pumping her for stories of the Weimar Germany of her youth. She had never chosen to share these stories with me; or maybe I had never dared to ask. But Blixa gobbled them up, like Fritz the lapdog gobbled up my Great-Aunt’s scraps, as he loved stories of Old Berlin, the city’s deep past in the days before the Nazis and the war laid ruin to his beloved city. Blixa was a true Stadtkind, I realised, and so was my aunt. No matter what had been done to it, and what atrocities it had visited and what degradations it had suffered, both of them adored Berlin, needing it the way a salmon needs the mountain stream where it was born.

Their shared love of their city bonded them, as much as their love of me, and she warmed to him. >>So what’s your passion, Blixa<< she enquired, rolling her lovely Berlin vowels on Leidenschaft.

Blixa’s face cracked open in an absolutely astonishing grin. >>Noise<< he confessed. >>I love sound.<<

>>You’re a musician?<< asked my aunt, with an excitement to her voice I rarely heard.

>>Well, it doesn’t have to be music, in fact, in many ways it’s better if it’s not music. I love the sound of traffic. I love the sound of the S-Bahn, the ‘guh-dung guh-dung’ as the double-axels pass over a bridge. I love the sound of construction, the crash and whallop and err-err err-err of... you know the sound of an old-fashioned manual saw? To me, this is like a lullaby. My father was a carpenter when I was young, so the sounds of woodwork, of metalwork... oh, I find it wonderful, the sounds of the building site. But even better, I love the sound of destruction. You know the sound of fire? The sound a match makes when it is lit? It is such a beautiful, complex sound. I never tire of it.<<

As he spoke, I saw Blixa become truly animated. If he had been trying initially to shock my aunt, he would have been disappointed, for she was not horrified, but delighted, her face lighting up with a kind of mischief, and I saw, all of a sudden, that she must have been quite something when she was young. How strange, that it took my lover to make me suddenly notice things in my own family.

My great-aunt laughed aloud. >>This reminds me of the mechanical ballet... all those kinds of sounds of construction and destruction, turned into music. Do you remember that, when we were girls, Grete?<<

>>Oh, yes. What fun that was! The Dadaists, they would run around and turn absolutely anything into a musical instrument. Singing saws, tubas made of drainpipes, wild mechanical symphonies... They would bring it into the little Lokale on the corner of my parents’ road. They audiences liked them better there, than your snooty uptown people. Sometimes folks would throw horse dung – god, the city was so poor you wouldn’t waste even rotting fruit – but when the destruction really got going, oh, we used to love that.<<

Blixa’s eyes grew wide. >>You remember Berlin in the 20s? You went to Dadaist performances. I was obsessed with Dada when I was a teenager.<<
I wouldn’t call them performances<< Grete laughed. >>They were more like... parties, with the people on the stage and the people on the audience all mixed up. Like acts in a variety show. People wanted it wild; the stranger the better.<<

>>You cannot possibly be that old<< Blixa blurted out, with an honest surprise that was actually completely charming, and my aunt smiled, flattered.

>>Well, darling<< she said, and I had never really noticed before how my aunt always said ‘darling’ in English, lengthening the vowel and rolling the r to make it sound decadent and Weimar. >>We were teenagers ourselves.<< she said with a girlish grin.

>>Were we?<< scoffed Grete, in slightly scolding contradiction. >>We were younger than that.<<

My aunt laughed aloud. >>We were both of us, born before the Great War. Don’t fib, my love. I was 16 in 1923, and you were 15. Remember, we used to lie and swear we were older to get into the Lokale.<<

>>Oh, I had forgotten so much<< sighed Grete. >>It was so awful, and yet it some ways, it was a wonderful time to be alive. All the communists, all the art students, all the anarchists and Dadaists and strange, half-starved musicians singing such savage songs about the government, they were such fun. Before the fighting really started, at least it was still fun. Then the money went completely insane, and there was never enough to eat, but there was always fun to be had for free if you were young and you liked a lot of noise.<<

>>Berlin hasn’t changed at all<< mused Blixa. >>My group are the same. You could be describing my band. Anarchists, art students and half-starved musicians.<<

>>The more things change, the more they stay the same.<< mused Grete. >>But at least the money these days is slightly more reliable. I can remember the first time I held a note for five million Marks in my own two hands, my god, I said to Willie, look, darling, we are millionaires. And the next week, we spent it on a single pack of cigarettes, hee hee.<<

>>Well, one must have cigarettes<< insisted Blixa, taking out his pack and offering it to Grete.

>>Ooh, I haven’t had one in years<< Grete looked at them longingly, then glanced at my aunt before sneaking one anyway. Blixa grinned, and produced a lighter, lighting one for her and one for himself.

>>Are your band new Dadaists, then?<< My Great-Aunt frowned at the cigarettes and fetched an elaborate glass ashtray, then looked back to Blixa as if wanting him to join her in her reverie.

>>I... maybe?<< Blixa seemed genuinely entranced by the idea, blowing smoke out of his nostrils so that his face was wreathed in it.

>>I hope your lot are better than those dreary students back in 1968<< snorted my Aunt, coughing a little over the unfamiliar smoke. >>They were such a boring lot. So earnest, so bogged down in tedious politics. No sense of fun, darling, like we used to have fun, dancing in the cafes, because the world was ending.<<

>>If I can’t dance...<< Grete started, and first my aunt, and then my lover all joined in. >>...I don’t want to be in your revolution!<<

>>I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody’s right to beautiful, radiant things<< quoted my aunt, with a grand wave of her hand.
The world is still ending. It never seems to stop ending. Though our dances are a little different from yours. Pushing back his chair, Blixa got up to demonstrate the jerky, twitchy moron-dance we all loved to do at the SO36.

I’ve seen this dance before! cried Grete, puffing away at her cigarette like a forbidden treat. Oh my goodness, I had forgotten how tobacco makes you light-headed. Valeska Gert! She would dance like this. She would dance a traffic accident or a boxing match – or an orgasm, hee hee – as easy as dancing a jig. You would have loved to see her, Blixi.

Come! barked my aunt, rising and pushing Fritz off her lap, gesturing for Blixa to follow her through into the front rooms of the house. Grete and I also stood, and prepared to clear away the breakfast dishes, but my aunt waved her hands magnanimously. Don’t you dare. Dishes can wait.

Blixa grinned, as that was clearly a sentiment he deeply believed in, and followed her. I heard Fritz’s claws clattering along the wooden flaw, and Blixa’s marabou-slippered feet a split second behind, as both dog and boy pitter-pattered after the old woman, as she walked through into the heavily curtained formal sitting room, lined with books and paintings I had never peered through the gloom to examine.

There’s the piano, darling. Play! ordered my aunt, gesturing towards what I had always taken for an ornately carved wooden sideboard, walking over and switching on a lamp on either side of it to reveal that it was indeed a musical instrument.

She pulled out the bench and Blixa sat down, but as he raised the lid and stared at the keys, he confessed. I can’t. I don’t know how.

Nonsense! bellowed my aunt, with the same tone as when I told Gudrun that I did not drink. What do they teach children in the schools these days.

I was not given music lessons at school Blixa insisted with a sort of defensive defiance. It was not considered important for working class children to learn music. I was taught athletics, sprinting and swimming, instead.

An absolute scandal muttered my Aunt as she combed through her shelves for old paperbacks and yellowing pamphlets. We must get you lessons.

I think I’m a better composer for not having had lessons Blixa countered, starting to tap away at one note, and for a moment, I thought he was going to break into song, as I recognised the rhythm as that of one of his band’s more intense songs, a piece called ‘Yearning’.

Nonsense. You have to learn what the rules are, to really properly break them.

Blixa stopped playing and stared at my Aunt as if she had revealed a very great truth to him, but she continued to dig through her shelves.

Here suggested Grete, settling down beside him on the bench and opening up the cabinet of the piano to reveal a strange spindle with a roll of paper inside. I wasn’t taught music, either. But there are other ways to make a nice noise. To Blixa’s astonished and delighted gaze, she removed the paper roll, and replaced it with another, then grappled at the bottom of the piano, so that a pair of foot pedals appeared. You take one, and I’ll do the other. I’ll show you how it’s done.

And slowly the old piano wheezed to life, out of tune and missing a few notes, but the keys and hammers dancing out a recognisable version of an old Brecht tune – I think it might have been Mack.
the Knife – which Grete and Blixa sung in harmony. Breakfast turned into a wonderful party, as my aunt dug out things to amuse ‘Blixi’, as they had both started to call him. Yellowing magazines full of nonsense collages that looked almost eerily similar to his band’s flyers and fanzines. Pamphlets composed in such heavy black-letter type I thought they surely must be some kind of government legalise, but instead they were filled with nonsense words, recognisably German, but simply meaningless phrases that didn’t even fit together. Blixa was entranced. I had never passed such an enjoyable morning with my own family, in the year and a half I had been living there. My aunt even offered to lend him some of her books, which I removed from her library only on pain of punishment. And yet, she leaned in close to Blixa, as she offered.

>>But you must promise us one thing, darling.<<

>>Anything<< agreed Blixa, clearly in an expansive mood and prepared to be charitable.

>>You must come in the door and up the stairs from now on. No more climbing on the bins and shimmying up the drainpipe up at all hours of the night<< supplied my aunt in an imperious voice.

Blixa blushed slightly, which was adorable, as I rarely saw him embarrassed, while I stuttered >>But how did you know...?>>

>>Who do you think picks up the bins when you knock them over on your way up?<< Grete sighed.

He looked mortified, and agreed very quickly, taking my hand and squeezing it. But it wasn’t until the clock struck two that he made any move to go, before finally seeming to remember that he, at least ostensibly had a social life, as well as a job.

>>Is that the time<< he blurted out. >>I have to go and open Iron-Grey!<< Then he turned to my aunt slightly apologetically. >>The shop where I... work, and well... live.<<

>>What kind of a shop?<<

>>We sell... clothes. Cassette tapes. Home-made magazines. DIY art. That sort of thing.<<

>>How wonderful!<< my aunt declared. >>I am glad to hear the youth of Berlin still know how to entertain themselves. Now. You must come back and visit. Often. You are family to us, Blixi, and you are welcome.<<

Blixa grinned like a lovestruck fool as we headed back to my room to collect his things. >>Why did you never tell me your family were so amazing?<<

>>But they aren’t<< I wanted to stutter. >>The rest of my family are nothing like my Aunt and Grete. They’re narrow and English and small-minded and... I had no idea. I’m just... used to hiding everything I am from my family.<<

He stared at me with an odd, hungry expression. >>I was never able to hide who I was from my family. I’ve never been able to pretend to be anything other than who I am. Maybe I would have lived an easier life if I had. But your Auntie Willie and Grete...<< His words trailed off, as I could see he was besotted with the decadent world of Weimar lesbians they had provided him with a tiny glimpse of. But finally, he shrugged, and his expression changed. >>Well. Who knows. With such a family as yours, would I have actually learned how to hold my own opinion and defend it so well? Would I have learned to value conflict and dissent? I don’t think so.<<

I took his hand as we walked off down the street together. My thoughts raced. Would it really be possible for Blixa to find another, happier childhood, with the family I was only just discovering? I tried desperately to think of ways we could somehow take him in and make him ours, but without
making the leap to the obvious one.

By the time we got to Iron-Grey, it was about 3 in the afternoon. Fortunately, Gudrun had already stopped by to open up, and she and Chloe were going through a consignment of fashionable new clothes that Bettina had brought back from Italy. Blixa, of course, seized them and looked them over with a practiced eye, commenting on which ones he thought were ‘hot’ and which he thought were rubbish. Some of the biker jackets had extra little leather straps and buckles sewn into them, which he thought were great, though he wasn’t sold on the rest of the clothing, which he proclaimed ‘bourgeois’, as if he hadn’t just enjoyed a morning of the most bourgeois entertainment possible.

>>Where do the buckles come from?<< he wondered. >>I don’t like the coat, it’s ugly and the sleeves are all wrong. But the buckles are fantastic.<<

>>I don’t know<< mused Gudrun, teasing at the fabric to work out that the buckles and straps were not, in point of fact, functional for anything, and had just been sewn on. >>I can ask around and find out. There’s got to be some kind of haberdashery a catalogue, like there is for zippers and buttons and other fastenings. They look like some kind of accessories or fittings that have been added on. Maybe shoe designers might know where to order such things.<<

>>Just get me the buckles<< insisted Blixa as he detached a studded belt from the pile and wrapped it around his waist. He was so thin it went round him twice. >>That’s all I want. Forget the ugly clothes, I’ll just wear the buckles. I used to have these wonderful rubber trousers with buckles just below the knees. Do you remember them? I wore them in Kassel.<<

>>Oh, those ones? Yeah, they were great. Why don’t you wear those any more?<<

>>Well! They got a tear in the arse, remember? I tried my best to fix it with duct tape, but then one day I crouched down onstage, and the entire seat ripped out.<<

>>God, yes, that looked obscene. I remember you wanted to just carry on wearing them, like that, with your pants poking through, like everyone could see your entire arse. Who wants to see your arse? Well, apart from maybe Carter<< teased Gudrun.

>> I was so sad when they finally collapsed; I loved them so much.<< And then he turned to me, suddenly distraught, wild-eyed and staring, looking like a man who had been awake too long.

>>Wait, Carter. I have a pair of boots with buckles on? What happened to them? Did I leave them at yours?<<

>>You’ve got them on your feet<< I pointed out. Blixa looked down as if noticing them for the first time, and started to laugh. Rolling my eyes at his antics, I picked up a pair of leather trousers, which I really quite liked. They were made of soft, Italian leather, supple to the touch. The weather was turning cold enough to make them seem appealing, and with the extra money that Rowland had promised me for the Hansa sessions, I might actually be able to afford them.

Gudrun laughed aloud as Blixa tried on the jacket with all the buckles, and found that it was almost comically too short for him, barely reaching past his elbows. >>I have this image of you now, Blixa. Wearing nothing but buckles, like a giant boot that buckles all the way from your ankles up to your chin, no clothes, just this giant boot made of straps and buckles.<<

>>Yes!<< said Blixa, his eyes huge with the dogged determination of a man who had been up for 48 hours straight. >>Exactly.<<
As Blixa continued to wrap more and more belts around his skinny waist, trying to decide which one he wanted, one of the lads from The Skin arrived, calling out his hellos and asking if he could put up some posters in the window, and leave some flyers on the message board. Gudrun said sure, but Blixa immediately grabbed one and started to pour over it.

>>Oh, this one is for our show<< he said brightly, and handed it to me. >>Isn’t it a brilliant flyer? Don’t you think, Valdi?<<

And there, in the centre of the flyer, was my drawing of the two Blixas. Except I blinked, trying to chase away the vague writhing hallucinations from being up all night, and realised it was not my drawing at all. It was a photo of Nick and Rowland, clearly in imitation of my drawing, as they both appeared naked, Nick sprawled out on a bed, looking totally out of it, while Rowland curled coquettishly at his shoulder, his scrawny chest declaring his maleness while his painted face made him look as feminine as my drawings of Blixa had.

The flyer irritated me. I couldn’t deny it and pretend that it didn’t. And it wasn’t just how consciously they had echoed my drawings from the art show they had all been at. People in West Berlin constantly bounced ideas off each other, borrowed looks, sounds, catchphrases, because it was intimately understood that all art was inherently done in collaboration. What irritated me was how Nick and Rowland, two straight men, who, as Anita had put it, would have run a million miles from an actual cock, were playing with these images of homosexuality and queerness as a kind of aesthetic pose, borrowing this cachet of cool off the backs of those of us who actually lived it, bearing the insults and the gobs of spit and the constant threat of violence from the police, from off-duty soldiers, from drunk Russians in beer halls who just didn’t like the look of us.

It was so hard to express my discontent. See, if Blixa and Mufti had made that poster, I would not have been outraged. Sure, Mufti was straight, he had a cute little dark-haired wifey in Hamburg. But Blixa wasn’t and he didn’t even try to hide it. Mufti knew and accepted that, and even allowed his musical and relationship with Blixa to be tempered with a sort of sadomasochistic flirtation, and even romance. And ultimately, I knew, from hard experience, that if trouble kicked off, Mufti had our backs. If anyone gave Blixa any hassle for being queer, they would get Mufti’s American trainers or bare-knuckle fists squarely in their face.

But Nick? Nick was just as likely to be instigating the kicking. Sure, I had not actually seen him kicking any queers. But he kicked people for calling him a queer, as if the word itself were an insult. As if being gay were a terrible, degrading thing to be. While if someone called Mufti queer, he would simply retort >>that is no insult. I’m proud of my gay friends.<< If someone called Blixa queer, Blixa would flex his beautiful, fluid body, and suggest >>Yes, and what of it, do you want some of this?>> turning their own hatred and fear back on them, highlighting the fact that being gay was nothing to be ashamed of; but being homophobic (and yet, paradoxically, still desiring the beautiful boy) was a very shameful thing indeed, and the shame was theirs, not his.

But to see Nick and Rowland playing at being a gay couple as some kind of artsy... transgression? Yes it irritated me, in ways I could not explain to Blixa. Because Blixa of course, thought the poster was the best thing since sliced Dada, insisting that West Berlin, and by extension of course, him, was having the most salutary effect on Nick, and he started hanging that blasted poster up everywhere.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter obviously inspired by this picture....
Chapter Summary

Carter goes into the studio with the Birthday Party, as Rowland's guitar tech. When Nick arrives, with Blixa in tow, it becomes clear that the band are rapidly dividing into two comps, with Carter caught in the middle.

TW: there's a scene right at the end that definitely crosses the line from sniping into harassment or possibly assault. This may be triggering for some people.

I bought the leather trousers, naturally. I knew I was going to as soon as I went in the back room to try them on, and found they fit me like a black leather glove. Maybe there was a part of me that was inspired by Blixa and his decidedly kinky fashion sense; maybe I just wanted to look cool enough to be Blixa’s partner in public. But I told Gudrun to hold them for me, then went to the bank to check that yes, I did have the money to afford them, then withdrew the cash and went back to claim them. Retreating to the back room again, I put them on, realising how sensual it felt to actually wear such soft, supple leather against my skin, then emerged to Blixa’s distinct approval.

>>>Those are hot<< he pronounced, with a pleased little nod of the head. >>>Can I borrow them some time?<<<

>>>You can’t wear these, my love<< I reminded him in my most annoyingly pedantic tone. >>>You’re a vegan.<<<

Of course the Birthday Party’s semi-nude poster backfired. Blixa went to hang a large, A2 sized version of it up at the venue, and the owners, who had already been shocked by the single, naked Blixa on the previous poster, absolutely hit the roof at the overt homoeroticism of two naked men. I think, perhaps they were already furious over the enormous bar bill the two bands had managed to run up in the previous weeks – legend had it that this ran over a thousand DM, and I didn’t exactly doubt it. But that poster was the final straw for them, and they both cancelled the concert, and took away the open bar with which they had been entertaining these fairies.

Obviously, I felt bad for Blixa, who had been immensely looking forward to the gig, as the two bands had planned some kind of collaboration and maybe a duet, perhaps even with Blixa singing the female part on one of those Lee and Nancy covers that Rowland liked so much, while Nick roared out the male. But secretly, there was a part of me that rejoiced. Neither Nick nor Rowland was the slightest bit gay. They just wanted to wrap themselves in the cloak of queer West Berlin cool. So it was with great schadenfreude that I saw their little stunt backfire, with the realisation that homophobia, even in tolerant, decadent West Berlin, was still a thing that could have powerful consequences, even for scared little straight boys playing at being gay.

But what were Blixa and I playing at? Were we two queer kids playing at being straight, or something else? I didn’t even know any more, and didn’t even care. To Blixa, I genuinely felt like it added a layer of frisson, that people could not tell the gender of his partner. He enjoyed people’s confusion, when he introduced me, not with an easy label that came with a helpful German gender-ending, but simply as Carter. But it was an odd feeling, for me. Because on one level, I knew, through the long and various phases of our courtship, that Blixa loved me, as me, and he would not have cared if I was a man, woman or some evil god-serpent from mythology. But on another level, it
both worried me and yet excited me that Blixa was genuinely into my androgyny, the same way he was into and excited by rubber clothes and weird chunky silver buckles and extreme clanking industrial noises. It had become a joke in the scene, that everyone called me Blixa’s boyfriend and Blixa my girlfriend, and Blixa loved the joke, playing along with it. It made sense to everyone else, so it made sense to us. Grete’s words echoed in my mind and gave me strength. >>You are what you are.<<

I eventually stopped fighting other people’s presumptions. I just let them believe what they liked; it didn’t change who we were. Blixa, on the other hand, really enjoyed challenging people’s preconceptions. Because although he insisted that what he had told Grete was not a lie, I did not think it was the whole truth. Blixa, unlike some of the drag queens that hung about with Salomé, did not actually want to be a woman. He was quite happy being a Blixa, whatever a Blixa was. But Blixa definitely enjoyed transgressing the boundaries of what was supposed to be masculine and what was supposed to be feminine, because it was confrontational, and it wound people up.

That was, ultimately, the greatest difference between my lover and I. Because when, as I walked down the street, someone shouted out something like >>what the hell was that, was that a man or a woman<< I would throw my shoulders back and pretend I didn’t care, but deep down, actually I did care. And although I was so used to it that it no longer hurt me, on some level, it did in fact bother me. I wasn’t trying to cause a scandal. I simply wanted to pass through the streets, unmolested, in ways that made me feel like myself. The leather trousers, that I started to wear every day, I did not wear them because they looked ‘hot’. I wore them because they felt like armour against those stares and those kinds of comments.

Blixa, on the other hand, lived for those moments. Although he was so pretty, he could easily have passed for a girl, he had no interest in doing so. He wanted to make people uncomfortable. He wanted to occupy a space that confused and confounded people, and made them genuinely question their conceptions of reality. He wore all that rubber as a deliberate confrontation, that he wanted people to look at it and feel that it was not clothing. And when someone said to him, >>What the hell was that, was that a man or a woman<< then he rejoiced, because he felt like he had succeeded in his quest to genuinely bend people’s heads.

Blixa grew more and more interested in pushing boundaries, with his presentation both onstage and off. Egged on by myself – and Grete as well, to be honest – he grew more and more daring. My bedroom was where he played, and tried out ideas to see if they would work, but half of the looks he tried out in my room ended up onstage. He adored Grete and my aunt, and they, too, were charmed by him and nurtured his eccentricities in a way I don’t think he had ever got at home. To my surprise, he started to pick up some of their Weimar lesbian affectations, their grande dame gestures, perfectly imitating that rolling English Daaaarling, with which my aunt peppered her speech. The Australians, the only native English speakers we really knew, found it hilarious and slightly endearing that Blixa would dish out this grand Daaaaaarling like a 70 year old dowager, when greeting Nick or Mick, but the Berliners all just took it in their stride as another of Blixa’s many foibles.

The next time I got paid, I took my lover to the strange sex shop where Ilsa had once taken me, with the idea of buying him his own strap-on harness, and his own false cock. Blixa wandered around, as wide-eyed as a child in a candy shop, touching and caressing objects that excited him, visually as well as erotically. For this shop sold not the self-conscious shock tactics of fashionable punk ‘bondage’ clothes like Iron-Grey did, but genuine ‘fuckswings’ and ‘cock restraints’ and odd rubber hoods with buckles and zippers over the mouths. He gazed at all of it with a cupidity resembling greed, which worried me a little, until I realised he didn’t actually want these things for the bedroom. He genuinely seemed to want to wear these kinds of things onstage, to show the fashionable types who had started coming to his band’s shows because they had started to make a name for themselves as being hip, what real transgression looked like. But of course most of these things had to be
specially ordered and made to measure, and neither of us could afford anything on that level.

We pooled our money and bought Blixa a kinky-looking black leather harness with large steel rings and D-clips, that attached to a belt, buckled around his waist, then went between his legs and fastened to another ring at the back. It looked amazing, especially over Blixa’s close-clinging black rubber trousers. Those huge stainless steel rings that drew the gaze, one triangle focused over his cock, and the other over his arsehole, seemed to invite the eye and the touch. They were intensely erotic, this feminine yoni-symbol of a gaping hole, positioned over the blatant forms of male sexuality, the bulge of his crotch and the cleft of his buttocks. It drove me wild, and I got to take him home and unbuckle him and partake of the delights that lay beneath. But to his audience, it was sheer provocation. The day Blixa buckled them on, he stopped being an overly tall, awkward, over-excitable boy in a weird rubber suit, and started being a genuine sex symbol, in every meaning of the term. His body itself was no longer merely the site of desired sex, but became a symbol of sex itself. When Blixa strutted into the Risk bar wearing that harness over his rubber jeans, conversation stopped, and the temperature seemed to rise five degrees, the sharp tang of sexual arousal cutting through even the atmosphere of stale beer and cigarette smoke. And I knew that day, even as he wore these silver rings that I had given him, as he strutted behind the bar, inviting every eye in the shop, that Blixa was no longer mine, in fact he never really had been.

Despite the money, I had started to somewhat regret the decision to agree to engineer on the Birthday Party’s sessions at Hansa, which were coming up fast. At least partly, because the New Buildings had booked a gig in Copenhagen for the Sunday of that weekend. Blixa was fully intending to work his usual shift at Risk on the Saturday night, then sleep in the van for the long drive and ferry ride to the city.

But he looked at me very carefully, for a long time, as if waiting for something, before finally sighing deeply and asking me if I wanted to come along. >>I mean, I understand, this is kind of a big deal, Copenhagen, after all.<<

>>I don’t understand<< I shrugged. >>I’ve been with you to Amsterdam before, so it’s not like I don’t know what goes on when you lot tour.<<

Blixa screwed up his eyes, then shifted his weight from leg to leg, rolling his shoulders as if trying to get rid of a knot in them. >>But it’s Copenhagen. Denmark.<< He paused and stared at me intently, as if trying to beam whatever it was he was implying, directly into my skull. >>What I mean is, if you wanted to try to find Ilsa, we could... you know. Ask around for you. Someone in the squat scene might know her.<<

It had been a year since I had even seen Ilsa, and yet even the sound of her name went through me like a shudder. >>Oh<< I said limply, as I realised what he was offering. I didn’t even know what to say. Ilsa had become more than just a memory, but something more like an ideal in my head, against which other girls had been measured. The idea that she was a real person, that could be looked for and found, in a squat in Copenhagen, that had long since stopped even seeming to be a potential. But Blixa was looking at me like he expected an answer. >>Is that really a good idea?<<

>>I don’t mind<< he insisted. >>I won’t be jealous. I just wanted to let you know that... well, it was an option.<<

>>Can I let you know, after the session is over? So I’ll know, well... how tired I am? If I’m... even up to it.<< I hedged, feeling a weird hesitancy not about going with them to a gig, but about this weird Ilsa business.
Well... if you don’t want the seat in the van, then Mark’s girl does.

Then she should have it<< I shrugged, not wanting to be pressured like this.

I don’t want her in the van, she’s a fucking yuppie. I want you there<< Blixa insisted, and I suddenly got the idea that there was more going on here than he was letting on. Why did he want me in the van so badly? Or was it more that he wanted me to confront the Ilsa thing head-on? I couldn’t read what Blixa really wanted, and I was too stubborn to ask.

I’ll let you know after the session<< I insisted defiantly.

Preparations had begun a couple of days in advance. Rowland had brought his favourite guitar round to me at my regular studio, and patted it longingly, as if taking leave of a lover, before asking me to fix the wiring. I took it down to my workshop and took it to pieces and checked the wiring and blew all of the dust out of it and checked the intonation and the string tension. Jürgen, who was very impressed with the fact that I was going to do a session at Hansa, no less, had really taken me under his wing and taught me a phenomenal amount about electric guitars and the proper care of them, under the understanding that I would bring back any secrets I might learn at the Bowie-Palace. So together, the pair of us got Rowland’s guitar into the best possible shape it could be. And Rowland almost cried with happiness when he saw how we’d fixed her up, tugging at the dark tangle of his hair and chirping “oh my goodness gracious” and sighing as if he were a little girl.

The next day, Tracy appeared with his bass, and we had a nice, long look at that, too. That instrument had clearly seen a lot of abuse, but we did the best we could with it, and its owner was delighted, tipping his cowboy hat and graciously thanking me with a beautifully drawled “ma’am”. I organised a pair of vintage Fender Twins for Rowland again, and looked into a decent bass cabinet, and humped them over to Kreuzberg, where I found myself almost too impressed by the grand façade of Hansa to even ring the bell for the Tonstudio.

To my surprise, the staff answered the bell in English. I told the disembodied voice who I was, and that I was there to be guitar tech for the day’s band, and they seemed quite surprised that I had arrived so early. But still, they buzzed open the door for me, and I rolled the amps inside, then an efficient young Englishman with a rather posh accent appeared and helped me get them upstairs to the rather grand salon, better known as the Meistersaal, where the band would be recording. I looked around as if in a dream, rather impressed by my surroundings, all that carefully polished wood and lush drapery. The Birthday Party’s record label must have some kind of money, to get them even three days here. As soon as the smooth young man left me alone to set up, I took out my pocket camera and snapped a few photos, marvelling at the incredibly painted high ceilings, wondering if some traces of David Bowie’s presence would somehow appear on the film.

The next person to turn up was a rather jet-lagged but still energetic young Australian who introduced himself as Tony. He was the senior sound engineer on the project, but he had already been briefed by Rowland as to why I would be there, and in what capacity.

“I’m so glad you speak English,” he insisted, pumping my hand. “I’ve been in Berlin less than 24 hours, and it’s a bit... weird.”

“Really,” I almost purred, trying very hard not to laugh. “You don’t say.”

“I do say,” he said, shaking his head in wonder as he started to unpack microphones and cables. “Nick took me to a bar last night, you know, to get me over my jet lag. And I swear to god, we’re just sitting there yapping away, catching up, getting the tinnies in, and in walks this... this... six foot... I don’t even know what you would call it. A transvestite? Is that the word? Anyway, there’s this bloke, six foot three if he’s an inch, in a full face of make-up, and hair teased out to here, and he
walks in, wearing a rubber suit... a shiny black rubber like some kind of fetish thing... with a fucking codpiece on his crotch! I have never seen the like! And this creature... this black rubber transvestite creature just comes over and walks up to Nick, as nice as you like, says “Hallo daaaaaahrling” and bends down and puts his hands on either side of Nick’s head, and I thought he was actually literally going to snog Nick, but Nick, at the last minute, turns his cheek, and gets a full-on kiss on each side of his face, like... whooooaaa, mate. What’s that about!"

It took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to burst out laughing, as I instantly recognised the description, and knew how it would delight Blixa.

“So I tell ya, I drank up, and I got out of there as quickly as I could. They warned me before I left, Berlin’s a weird city. I had no idea how weird! So I gotta tell you, it’s a relief to be working with a nice, normal English lad.”

“Oh,” I said, non-committaly, though inside, all I could think was, if only you knew.

Mick arrived first, only nodded at me, but greeted Tony like an old friend, before starting to set up his drumkit. About half an hour later, Rowland and Genevieve arrived, with Tracy in tow, and they immediately set up their camp on the opposite side of the Meistersaal. I mean, Hansa was obviously known for the magnificent natural reverb of the cavernous space, but it was very clear, right from the start, that the band were dividing, almost literally, into two opposing camps at each end of the massive hall. And I knew, right from the start, that I had been hired to be Team Rowland.

Rowland, fortunately, was in a good mood, bright-eyed and sociable, ready to work and grinning with good cheer as he asked me about the amps and the microphones, and joking about where to stand to most efficiently capture the decadent Berlin Bowie-vibe of the studio. “Gen’s even got her platform boots on, to help us channel the general Bowie thing, haven’t you, Chucklebuster?”

Gen laughed and showed me that she was, indeed, wearing the most amazing pair of red velvet high-heeled boots. “Genuine glam-ambiance, bought for a fiver on the Portabello Road.”

“There’s a grand piano, if you’d like to have a go,” I suggested, gesturing towards the massive beast, still wrapped in its quilted cover.

But Mick coughed and started making noises about the drum-kit being ready for mic-ing, and Gen smiled awkwardly and cast Rowland a meaningful look. “Best not get in the lads’ way.”

Nearly two hours after we’d started line-checking, Nick finally arrived, almost dragged in the front door by a rather bedraggled-looking Blixa. I tried not to react, and only nodded hello, noting that both of them were already acting in that weird, stiff, slightly twitching manner that meant that they had already started in on the stimulants. Oh, Christ, it was going to be a long session.

Nick and Blixa went immediately to the other side of the long salon, and started chatting with Mick. Tony, who, up until that point, had been chatting with the band as if they were old friends from Melbourne, suddenly saw Blixa and started to look a little queasy. I shook my head and simply carried on laying out cable between the amps and the bussing ports. Blixa, however, hated to be ignored. He came over and stood by me, but I told him quietly >>Knock it off, I’m working. I haven’t got time to horse around with you.<<

>>Horse around?<< he said, with a vicious grin, and waited until I bent over to plug in a loose cable end to reach down and very deliberately slap the leather of my arse as if I were a horse he wished to go faster.

I shrieked and immediately stood up straight, and without thinking, purely in self-defence mode,
grabbed him by the crotch. But Blixa didn’t shriek in reply, he simply laughed his braying donkey-
laugh, for instead of a handful of delicate testicles, I had come up with a handful of leather straps.
>>This is why I love you<< he chortled, then put his hands on the back of my head and bent down
for a kiss.

For just a moment, as Blixa’s lips touched mine, I let myself go, and relaxed, remembering that line
from the Bowie song, two lovers kissing in the shadow of the Wall. And here we were, in that same
studio, in the shadow of that same Wall, kissing. It was too romantic, and he knew it. And we kissed
as though nothing could fall. My love for Blixa was both a chink in the armour, and yet this hideous
strength, which seemed both to embolden me, and somehow also to weaken me. Yet slowly, I
clawed my way back to real life, or whatever passed for it.

>>I love you too, but I am here to do a job. Can you please just let me get on with it?<<

Across the room, Tony’s eyes were on stalks, almost popping out of his head as he stared at the nice
English ‘lad’ having a quick grope with the six foot transvestite in a rubber codpiece. “Jesus Christ in
a pick-up truck, mate, I am going to need a fucking beer just to get through this...”

After a few hours, we had the drumkit and both sets of amps miked up, line-checked and ready to
roll. But just as I was getting ready to settle down to work, there was another interruption. The
doorbell rang, and after a few minutes, reception sent up a ragged-looking Welsh photographer, who
said he was there to document the band’s sessions for the NME. He swore he was into the gritty
vérité of it all, and wanted to capture the band as they were, in their ragged punk glory, but of course
the musicians had other ideas. They wanted to play up for the camera, showing off and acting out,
and I knew while the lens was snapping, and they were pretending to play their instruments for the
NME, we would get no real recording done.

This strange and co-dependent relationship this lot quickly revealed to have with the press, it faintly
amused me. Because of course they all made out like they weren’t at all interested in the accolades of
journalists, and they held the writers in contempt, claiming that they didn’t care about the trappings of
fame and blah blah blah. But the minute that this journalist appeared, they all sort of snapped to, and
stopped squabbling over trivialities like whose guitar was too loud and who had scarfed the last grain
of heroin, and started boasting about punch-ups they had gotten into at gigs, while Nick was name-
checking the various writers and authors whose gritty, dark work had inspired the gritty, dark,
Southern Gothic blues of this latest record.

It wasn’t so much that it was pretentious or inauthentic or anything. Honestly, the band – and Nick in
particular – were bright, well-educated young men. Nick and Blixa could and did flip jokes about
obscure German philosophers all night long, even when they were in their cups. But the pose, the
aspects of themselves that they chose to show to this journalist, the heroic struggle of this Byronic
figure, versus the rather more petty and mundane squabbling of their lives, well, it deeply amused
me.

But the press intrusion was definitely disruptive, and it took an hour for us to get them back down to
work, and the business of actually recording. And then the problems really became apparent.
Rowland had come prepared, with several ideas of songs that he wanted to work on, that had guitar
parts and basslines pretty much sketched in. But the problem was, that since Rowland and Nick
hadn’t really been talking, except on the rare occasion they both needed to score, there were no lyrics
prepared at all for these new songs. And Nick, clearly looking more and more the worse for wear as
the day dragged on, was in no shape to even contemplate writing lyrics. He barely remembered the
words to songs he had already been playing for a couple of months now.

Over the past few months, Nick had been writing, and he did have about 4 or 5 songs that they had
worked out at gigs well enough to start recording. But those songs had been written not with Rowland, but with Mick. And Mick was very particular and ever so slightly territorial about how Rowland played guitar on what he thought of as ‘his’ songs.

Recording proceeded at a glacial pace. Rowland, Tracy and Mick squared off against one another at opposite ends of the Meistersaal like gunfighters at the OK Corral. Nick retreated to a vocal iso booth to put down a guide vocal, which would be overdubbed with a better vocal take at the very end, when we could take advantage of the hall’s beautiful natural reverb. And Blixa, Tony, Genevieve and I sat at the mixing desk in the control room, and honestly, I don’t know how Tony kept his sanity through the endless squabbling and back-chatting and general high school teengirl levels of hate-filled silences and freezing one another out.

Because these lads, for all their intellect and verbal posturing, they never sat down and talked about what was going on between them. Not like Malaria!, with their consciousness-raising feminist encounters, or the New Buildings, with their anarchist squat politics, sat down and talked to one another about what they were going to do. I mean, the New Buildings took it to ridiculous lengths sometimes, that they had sat down and had a long, convoluted discussion and then a vote over whether to kick Alex out for being an undisciplined, uncontrollable teenager, and then another even longer and more convoluted discussion over how to bring Alex back into the organisation when he had grown up and calmed down a bit. But the Birthday Party? I never saw them sit actually sit down and talk over what was going on with that growing rift within the band. They just ripped the piss out of one another and sniped and dug their heels in over various aspects of the recording process. And it actually made me wince a little, to see that chatty, charming and sociable good mood that Rowland had walked in with, be worn away into bruised silence by Nick’s petulant intractability.

Tony barely kept the peace in that studio. Honestly, in the face of all this recalcitrance, Tony didn’t even keep his own sanity. By early evening, when the jet lag was hitting hard, he started opening up tinnie after tinnie of strong Australian lager. By the end of three days, I would realise that he was just as crazy as the rest of them. I swung back and forth between thinking that Blixa’s presence was not fucking helping at all, as he distracted Nick and antagonised Rowland simply with his mere presence; and thinking that Blixa’s sheer manic energy, insisting that they knuckle down and do one more take before they take a break, was literally the only thing keeping those four men in the studio together.

For Blixa had ways of motivating Nick. Mostly they involved chopping out another line of that judderingly pure Soviet speed. And that would give us another couple of hours of Nick focused enough to actually get back to work again. Painfully, I watched Tony start to get down the bare bones of the songs, as I filled out the take sheets and kept the long strip of masking tape on the mixing desk up to date with the information of what instrument was on what channel.

But eventually, Tony cottoned on to what was going on, as the intervals between Blixa calling for a break and going off in the back part of the hall started getting shorter and shorter.

“Alright,” he finally demanded through the talkback monitor, his voice echoing through the hall. “What are you two smoking back there?”

Blixa turned around and shrugged, then made his way over to one of the ambient overhead mics on the drumkit. Balancing on his tip-toes, he intoned “Ve are not smoking anyzhing.”

Which was, technically, the truth. Blixa had been briefed as well as I had, that smoking was absolutely verboten in the Meistersaal.

Tony glared at Blixa, but Blixa just stared him back down, until finally Tony sighed. “Alright, if you’re not smoking something yet, maybe you should be. Let’s take a smoking break.” And so they
all trooped through into the shabbier back rooms, where smoking was permitted. But as they gathered again, lighting one another’s cigarettes and generating a great puffing cloud of nicotine around them, Tony suddenly caught sight of a splat of white powder on the cuff of Blixa’s shirt. “A-ha!” he cried in triumph, licking his finger and seizing it like a police sample. “You lot are at the cocaine. I knew it.”

“It is not cocaine,” Blixa insisted, again, completely truthfully.

“Pull the other one, it’s got bells on it,” said Tony and put it to his tongue. “Lads, this does not taste of dandruff.”

Nick pulled back his thick lips and smiled with an evil expression I did not think that any human being could be capable of rendering so malevolent. “If Tony wants to try the special West Berlin Cocaine, then let him try the special West Berlin Cocaine.” He and Blixa exchanged conspiratorial glances, then Blixa finally dug in his pocket and produced his small wrapper of Russian Vitamins, chopping out a line for Tony on the studio’s kitchen table.

Predictably, the sessions went downhill from there.

Tony made them record the same song over, and over, and over, obsessing over tiny microtonal sounds from the drumkit with complete hyperfocus. He became absolutely paranoid about sound leakage, chasing down little rattles and squeaks that only he could hear. At the end of fourteen hours, they had burned through half a mile of tape, and produced maybe three and a half usable songs. At that point, Tony, half-wrecked from jet lag and amphetamine, crawled under the mixing desk, gibbering to himself about some tiny rattle, and promptly disappeared.

The band, their focus gone, decided that I should drive them back to The Skin’s house in my van. Blixa told me on the way over that I should just stay there with him, as it was closer, and we’d all be returning anyway in the morning, and I didn’t have the energy to fight him. I parked in the courtyard and followed the musicians into the house. Upstairs, as Nick didn’t want to wake Anita, we trooped up to a spare room. Rowland and Gen disappeared, and I was not surprised, as Nick had been riding him particularly hard that evening, but the rest of us climbed one by one up a ladder to one of those sub-divided loft platforms that everyone in Berlin used to create small, warm bedroom spaces out of huge, high-ceilinged rooms. A few of us ended up piled on the loft bed’s mattress as we smoked hash – or the Birthday boys smoked something considerably stronger – desperately trying to come down from the jittering speed high. But I was so exhausted from my long day that I couldn’t be bothered to join them for more than one toke before I curled up in a ball, my head in Blixa’s lap, and went to sleep as he gently petted my hair.

I woke with a start, in the middle of the night. Someone on the bed had sidled up to me in the night, and was very deliberately and very firmly pressing their crotch against my rear, their semi-erect cock rubbing back and forth between my buttocks. Half asleep, thinking it was just Blixa, I reached back and tried to push him away. But as my hands touched the man’s hip, I realised his trousers were made of completely the wrong fabric. Where I would have expected that rubbery fake leather, instead my hands touched some kind of silky material of the sort formal suits were made from. And then I shot completely awake, and realised that my face was still lying against Blixa’s thighs, the rubber puckering the skin of my cheek. It was pitch black, but I shoved the interloper away, hard. A hand appeared and tried to grasp hold of my hip to pull me back towards him, but I sank my fingernails into it, and it vanished sharpish. Grabbing Blixa’s legs, I shook him sharply to wake him up.

>>Blix, let me go on the other side of you.<<

>>Can’t<< he mumbled sleepily. >>I’m in the corner, up against the wall.<<
"Then we switch positions" I almost barked, and something in my voice must have warned him I meant business, for he soon wiggled free and let me slide over the top of him, until we’d changed places.

I did not sleep well for the rest of the night, but in the morning, we were alone on the mattress. Blixa immediately decided that the best way to work off the grumpiness of his hangover would be a little game of hide-the-wurst, but as soon as he started spooning me from behind, the memory of the unpleasant encounter the previous night sent a shudder through my body.

"Knock it off" I said. "I’m not in the mood."

"Well. We just have to work out how I get you in the mood, then" he teased, nibbling gently at my neck and nuzzling my earlobe like he knew I couldn’t resist.

"No, I mean it. Stop it. I’m freaked out, because someone on the bed groped me last night."

"Lucky you" chortled Blixa. "No one groped me, more’s the pity." But when he saw the furious expression on my face, he stopped teasing, and folded me carefully in his long arms. "Valdi? Are you alright?"

"I’m fine" I assured him. "I’m just a little shaken. The thought that..." I stopped what I had been planning on saying about one of those Aussie bastards, and replaced it with "...one of our friends could jump on me like that while I was sleeping, well... it’s not a nice thought."

Blixa thought about that for a minute, playing gently with my hair, though his face darkened. Blixa had never had a jealous bone in his body... well, that wasn’t strictly true. Since we’d got together, I’d given Blixa nothing to be jealous about. But finally he seemed to snap out of his mood, and kissed my forehead gently. "We were all pretty fucked up when we drifted off to sleep. It’s entirely possibly someone got confused, and just didn’t think where they were."

I decided to take that at face value. "I hope you’re right."

And we snuggled for a bit more, then worked out some deal where we had a swift quickie, in exchange for a promise that he would behave himself at the studio, and not try to molest me when I was working. He pouted and sighed and pretended like this was the worst imposition that could be asked of him, so I jokingly fish-lipped him, and then suddenly we were kissing in earnest. I could never say no to Blixa. But somehow the brief screw and the relief of orgasm washed the tension from my body and the unease from my mind. Blixa’s cock really was some kind of magic, but my god, I wished he didn’t know it.
Hansa, Day Two

Chapter Summary

Day Two of the Birthday Party's sessions at Hansa, and the band are in severe disarray. And Blixa is Not Helping. And as relations between Nick and Anita become strained, Carter hears the other side of their supposed meet-cute story.

Chapter contains extremely blatant and obvious fan service for the lovely Rowland fans who are continuing to read. ;-)
It was dim, and the floor was covered in a threadbare Persian carpet, and the bed was covered with thick blankets of a dark, vaguely Victorian pattern, so I almost didn’t see the boy sprawled out underneath them until it was too late.

“Ouch!” yelped Rowland as I stumbled over him.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you there,” I apologised, trying to untangle my ankles from the bedclothes as Rowland pushed back the blankets and sleepily rubbed his face. His normally immaculate hair was tufted into great asymmetrical crests by the pillows, lending him an adorably boyish appearance. I noticed his chest was bare, somehow soft-looking and completely hairless, and again, I was struck by how oddly feminine he looked, so that even though I could see his flat torso and his tiny nipples, that revulsion of “ugh, a bloke” didn’t kick in. In fact, a part of my mind registered that he was, in fact, beautiful, and seemed surprised by this information.

“I suppose I’m awake now. I might as well get up,” grumbled Rowland, as if this were a very great imposition. “Would you mind passing me my smalls...”

As he pointed across to a pair of men’s underwear folded neatly on the dresser, I suddenly realised that he was naked beneath the covers, and started to stutter and cough. “Err... um... these ones...” Picking them up, I did my very best to hand them over without looking at them, or indeed him.

After about a minute, and some rustling noises, he piped up, “It’s alright, I’m decent now.” But then, as if noticing my discomfort, he coughed slightly, and hemmed a little himself. “And, well... I know you’re... well. I’m very aware you’re... spoken for. As am I. So I would never want you to, erm, feel uncomfortable with me.” It was so sweet of him to want to reassure me, that I turned to smile at him, and oh god... there he was, he had climbed out of bed and was picking his way across the room wearing nothing but a pair of Y-fronts.

It came as a bit of a surprise to see Rowland, gawky, eccentric, girlish Rowland as an attractive man, because men, as a class (well, with the exception of Blixa, and he wasn’t exactly a man, was he?) didn’t interest me. But as Rowland’s long bare legs stalked the room as elegantly as a sandpiper, I found myself suddenly looking at his body in a different way. Rowland’s pale, spindly legs, not that different from Blixa’s long, sinewy swimmer’s legs, suddenly seemed, well, for want of a better word... desirable. Not that I wanted to do anything even remotely sexual with Rowland – oh god no – but the idea that these legs were lovely to look at... Nick’s horrible insidious voice echoed through my head: Rowland’s vain. Well, no, that wasn’t the kind of desirable I meant. I didn’t want to sleep with him. But I meant that, if I could choose a body from a catalogue, as easily as selecting a pair of trousers from a rack at Iron-Grey, god, wouldn’t Rowland’s tall, elegant, birdlike frame be a lovely one to pick?

Quickly, he found a pair of jeans and thrust his legs into them, then pulled on a blouse from the cupboard, and the moment passed. He was just affable, charming, slightly goofy Rowland again, with his beaky nose and his large, inquisitive eyes. I sighed with relief and asked him “Your missus is cooking up an elaborate fry-up downstairs. Can you help me wake up Tracy and Mick?”

His grin split his face from ear to ear as he informed me “Oh, Chucklebuster’s fry-ups were the stuff of legend, back in St Kilda. We’d best not miss it!” and together we roused the troops and made our noisy way downstairs.

So, properly fed and adequately caffeinated, I managed to get all of the Aussies down into the van, and delivered to Hansa at about quarter to noon. And Mick, who had never much liked me, much to my surprise, was so impressed at my cat-herding abilities that he asked if I wanted to continue my guitar tech and roadie-ing duties on their upcoming mini-tour of the Netherlands.
Thinking he was merely taking the piss, I just laughed “No way in hell.”

But Rowland spoke up, and repeated the offer in earnest, adding that it was definitely a paying gig.

I turned around and stared at Rowland, his slightly vitamin-deprived skin sketched tight over his pretty girlish cheekbones, and thought that after only 24 hours with this band in the studio, I could think of many occupations I would prefer to ever working for them again, and some of them involved wading knee-deep through the open sewer of the Spree, while East German guards shot over my head. I smiled wanly at Rowland, but politely declined. It would not be the last time someone in that band asked me to tour with them, and it would not be the last time I declined.

We finally managed to locate our missing producer, looking very much the worse for wear as he half-dozed on a sofa in the bowels of the building, trying to replenish his much-depleted brain chemistry with strong coffee. “Jesus Christ in a flat-bed truck, is West Berlin cocaine always that hard on the system, or is that just jet lag.”

Although I didn’t really have the heart to tell him, I decided it was for the best, as I glanced around to make sure Blixa was out of earshot before bending over to whisper. “Blixa’s ‘cocaine’? It’s actually pure amphetamine sulphate. The Russian secret service ship it into West Berlin in bulk, to corrupt the moral fibre of the capitalist youth. You might want to keep that in mind before you indulge so hard again, OK?”

“For real?” Tony’s eyes went all wide. “Thanks for letting me know. You’re a pal.”

Five hours later, as Tony switched from tar-like coffee to tinnies of Aussie lager, he hit the studio talkback button and his voice echoed through the Meistersaal where Nick and Blixa were hunched over an amp at the rear of hall. “Blixa? Get your rubber bum in the control room now, mate. I need some of your Russian Marching Vitamins, double-quick.”

We took a break for ‘dinner’, which was really an excuse for Blixa to ring round and try to set up some drugs deals. Eventually, it was decided that Anita would be roused from The Skin’s house to go and pick up the supply from Jana’s now ex-boyfriend, and bring it to the lads in the studio. Not that we were getting much work done that couldn’t be interrupted. Rowland was trying to do guitar overdubs in the main hall, but Nick didn’t like a thing he was playing, and Mick was just sitting on the sofa behind the mixing desk with his arms crossed and his face stony. Tony had disappeared to go and find something to eat to get the metallic taste of Russian Vitamins out of his mouth, and so I was trying to coax Rowland to carry on recording, translating Nick’s sharp-tongued insults into gnomic instructions like “OK, Rowland, let’s try another take. Can you make this one, well... looser, but also, you know, tighter with the snare?”

At the sound of my voice, Rowland looked up from his strings with a mournful, hangdog expression, then did his best to re-arrange his long, solemn face into some semblance of chipper, to tell me “Right-i-o, Carter, I’ll do me best.”

Nick was really struggling to keep civil, sitting cross-legged on the sofa in the corner, sniping at Rowland while he was going through scraps of paper full of lyrics and just endlessly crossing stuff out, and erasing it, and then copying it out again into a new notebook. Blixa sat at his side, lighting cigarettes off the butts of other cigarettes and watching Nick’s progress like a hawk. This was not the way that Blixa worked at all, and I could see that he was intrigued by Nick’s romantic tortured-poet routine, endlessly writing and re-writing his words. See, Blixa improvised when he sang. He extemporised, and spat lyrics and odd rhymes and bits of puns, the whole thing cascading out of him like a torrent of speech. The magic happened somewhere between his mouth and his brain, finally coalescing into a poem when it reached tape. Only at that point did he write the thing down. Hence why his lyrics sheets looked like works of art: they were dictations, from poems worked out in
speech. But I could tell that the way that Nick worked, crafting his lyrics on paper, searching for the right word with the right set of evocations to fit the meter, like a sixth former writing an essay, it left an impression on him.

The doorbell went, and no one moved, so I muttered something about having to do everything around here, and went downstairs to answer it. Of course it was Anita, who had had the presence of mind to bring both drugs and dinner. We regrouped in the little kitchenette, where we were soon joined by Tony, and replenished our various needs. And to my surprise, the bills for both drugs and dinner was added onto an expense account for the record company to reimburse.

When we returned to work, Tony took over the mixing desk, and Mick went into the recording room to have words with Rowland about how the guitar parts should go. But having Anita in the studio seemed to distract Nick. It wasn’t at all like the way that having Genevieve around seemed to calm Rowland down, and keep him focused and happy, withdrawing into her company when Nick got too fractious. And it wasn’t even that Anita was doing anything distracting. Honestly, she was just curled up in a ball in a big leather chair away from the mixing desk, a notebook open on her lap that she, too, kept scribbling away at. I was pleased to see her writing, especially after the weird chat we’d had after the last New Buildings show, like she was finally trying to find her own thing in West Berlin.

But it was like Nick and his goddamned ego could not stand not being the centre of attention if there was a woman in the room. (Well, clearly I didn’t count as a woman, and Genevieve was already earmarked as Rowland’s property, so Nick didn’t see her as a potential audience.) Rather than sitting quietly with Blixa and working on polishing his lyrics, he got up and he started to pick at Anita.

“What are you working on?”

“Nothing.”

He craned his head to try to see the notebook, but she angled it away from him. “Whole lot of nothing on that page.”

“Poems, alright.”

“Let me see.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’re just going to laugh at them.”

“Would I laugh at you?”

“Yes.”

“Come on, I swear to God I won’t laugh. Let me see.” Reaching over, he started to chuck her about the chin and tickle her and otherwise pester her, until finally he took hold of the notebook with his other hand and tried to jerk it away from her. To be fair, Anita put up quite a fair resistance, but Nick was easily twice the size of her, and soon he had prised it from her, partly by his wheedling and partly by sheer force.

As Nick sprang to his feet, stalking off with his prize, Anita looked up at him ruefully, her expression somewhere between hopefulness and dread. Nick paced back and forth across the control room, one hand holding the book, the other twisted around the back of his neck, fingers tangled in his hair as if
massaging himself. His silence was somehow more awful than if he’d spoken, disparaged the poetry, or even laughed, but as his silence deepened and his face darkened, as he read more and still refused to comment, the hope dropped from Anita’s face. I had never seen a man use silence with such cruelty. His nostrils twitched in a kind of sneer, but true to his word, he didn’t laugh. He didn’t have to. I could see him, visibly crushing Anita’s spirit with that unusual taciturnity, so in contrast to his customary piss-taking jocularity, where she was expecting something – praise, acknowledgement, mockery, anything – and watched her shrinking into a smaller and smaller ball in the chair. Finally, he just sort of snorted, then closed the notebook, and tossed it back onto the floor beside her chair.

Just as we were expecting him to speak to her, instead he turned to Blixa. “Do you want to go and smoke a fag?”

“Ja, alright,” replied Blixa, unfolding his long limbs as he climbed to his feet, and together the pair of them disappeared.

Anita seemed crumpled, deflated somehow, her whole face screwed up simultaneously with hurt, and a kind of helpless anger, as if she recognised what he was doing to her, but was somehow powerless to stop herself from being hurt by it. As the tension in the room seemed to grow thicker and thicker, not exactly helped by the argument still flaring up in the Meistersaal between Rowland and Mick, I stared at Anita, feeling my heart breaking for her, as she stared at the notebook with a poisonous expression.

Finally, she seized it, and opened it up very carefully, then turned to the page she had been working on, and without a word, ripped out the sheet, crumpling it into a ball then tossing it over into the wastepaper basket. Then she, too, got up and stormed from the room.

Tony reappeared just as Anita was storming out, and somehow managing to ignore the argument between Rowland and Mick now echoing through the studio monitors from the main room, turned to me and rolled his eyes. “Women, huh,” he said, then sat down at the desk, hitting the talkback button and trying to catch the musicians’ attention. “Boys, boys... I know emotions are running high, fellers, but can we just take a minute, and try to get one last take.”

As his attention was diverted, I walked over to the wastepaper basket, and fished out the ball of notebook paper, uncurling it and trying to flatten out the crinkles and render it legible. And as I started to read, a shudder went down my spine. Anita’s handwriting, round and girlish, was very exact, the words marching down the page with an urgency. And the words, though I would hear them in a slightly different version maybe hundreds of times in the years to come, on radios, on the stage, and even in a film, never hit me quite like that first time I read them in the control room of Hansa, with the image of Anita’s crushed face still dancing in my mind. “Ah wanna tell ya ‘bout a girl...”

Carefully, I folded the paper in half, then folded it again, then tucked the slip of paper carefully into the breast pocket of my shirt, but as I turned, I caught sight of Anita, standing in the doorway as if she had forgotten something.

The moment I caught sight of her, I knew that she had seen me take her poem, but she didn’t mention it, she just kind of stuttered, “I left my purse in here...”

I wanted to say something, wanted to compliment her writing, wanted to restore the confidence that her awful boyfriend seemed to be leeching out of her, but instead I just put my hand to my chest, and gently patted the pocket where I had stowed the stolen poem. But I was never any good at keeping my emotion off my face. The pleasure and the awe and my regard for her must have shone all over my face, because she raised her lips in a crooked kitten smile. I started to stutter an apology, maybe even offer to return it to her, but she shook her head.
“Keep it,” she shrugged. “At least you liked it.”

“I thought it was beautiful,” I confessed, my face flushing.

“Carter, you’re a sweetheart. This band doesn’t even deserve you,” she said, then walked over to me, and strained up on her tip-toes to deposit a kiss on my burning cheek.

She went home shortly afterwards, leaving the boys to cobble together guitar takes the best they could from the tangled recordings of Rowland and Mick. We finished a little earlier than I had expected, and Tony suggested to Nick that he start on the vocal overdubs. But after a couple of run-throughs, it was obvious that Nick’s voice was shot, from the smoking, or the Russian Vitamins, or who knew what. So Tony stopped the sessions at that point, and told Nick to go home and look after his voice and come back bright and early in the morning.

Any sensible musician would have gone home and had a few cups of tea and honey, maybe sucked on some cough drops and rested their voice. What Nick and Blixa did instead, was go out drinking, because The Skin were playing at a wretched little dive bar back in Schöneberg, and it would be rude not to go out and support their mates, wouldn’t it. I don’t know that Nick or Blixa heard much of the set, as they settled in at the bar and started pouring out pint glasses of vodka and chain-smoking one cigarette off the butt of the other’s last, and trying to bellow at one another over the roar of the music. A few songs in, and someone recognised Nick, and this earnest young man in metal-rimmed aviator glasses and an Iggy Pop shirt came over, enthusing loudly about the Birthday Party while Blixa glared at them, growing more and more disdainful and remote, until the newcomer mentioned that he had a wrap of cocaine, and asked the local rock stars if they’d like a line. Of course they did, and off to the bathroom we all trooped.

I wasn’t a big fan of coke, it always left me feeling brittle and fragile, like my ego was a giant balloon puffed up too big to sustain all the frenetic talking, so I asked Blixa if he had any hash.

>>Left hand pocket<< he told me, and left me to rummage around in his rubber jeans, because he was too busy chopping out the fan’s cocaine into lines for him and Nick.

One line, and Nick’s whole demeanour changed, becoming witty and energised and completely sarcastic, his voice cracking as he talked louder and louder, and faster and faster as he and Blixa seemed to compete to out-sarcasm one another, one-liners flying back and forth between the pair of them like a blizzard of words. The fan stared, mutely, as he was certainly getting his money’s worth, though Nick and Blixa made short work of his coke. But they’d already decided they’d had enough of this bar, and Blixa muttered something about “Ve vill go somevhere else, somevhere I know Carter at least vill like a little better” with a vague wink at me and so off we went, with the slightly shellshocked fan in tow, doing his best to keep up as the lads strode off through the night to find another, smaller, seedier bar, without the live music and the rowdy crowd, where they could indulge their penchant for nasty bon mots without being interrupted by Thomas’s pounding drums.

When we walked up to the door, the tall, statuesque blonde woman guarding it looked at Blixa for a moment, then nodded and allowed him through, but she stopped when she saw Nick and the fan.

>>No, no, this place is not for you<< she said, sweetly but firmly.

“Wait, wait, what did she say?” asked Nick, but as he tried to push past her, firm hands gripped and held him. “No, I’m with Blixa... you just let my friend in...” he enunciated quite clearly, as if he could make up in volume for what he lacked in the German language.

>>This is not your kind of place<< she repeated, lowering her beautiful alto voice until it was almost a growl, but as I moved forward to bargain with her, I got a better look at her, and realised I had definitely seen her before.
But as she got a look at me, the tight line of her mouth broadened into a grin. "I know you!" she cackled. "Hangover! You were Ilsa’s feller, or at least that’s what she called you."

My memories shifted, back to that noisy café off the Ku-damm and the name suddenly fell into place. "Trude!" I gasped, and greeted her with a soft kiss on each cheek. "How are you? How’s tricks?"

"Off the game!" Trude said proudly. "Made enough money to afford the operation, then I got out. Making good money as a hostess here, now."

"Glad to hear it. You look great!" I told her, trying to remember if Trude was the one who had had her teeth knocked out by the French police? The replacements twinkled a little as she smiled at me, so I smiled back and nodded. "Seems like a nice place..."

But Trude beat me to it. "You are welcome here, of course. But are these your friends, then?"

"Unfortunately, yes. See, Blixa went in ahead of us..."

"Oh, the pretty one?" said Trude, perking up with a suggestive little wiggle. "Is that your new girlfriend?"

"Something like that!" I laughed.

Trude sighed and rolled her eyes, then looked Nick up and down. "Tell them to give me a pack of cigarettes, and you can go in."

The fan didn’t smoke, so Nick had to provide the honours. But, the deal completed, with some grumbling from Nick about the unusual cover charge, as those were his last cigarettes, and we were admitted, finding Blixa already ensconced at a table, chatting animatedly with one of the most extraordinary looking women I had ever seen. To be fair, most of the women in the room were... unconventional looking. Square jaws, wide shoulders, inexpertly applied make-up, a little too thick, and the hairstyles all looked a little too dated not to be wigs, and the hint of five o’clock shadows on a couple of chins and... oh. Suddenly the penny dropped through my somewhat stoned mind. That operation of Trude’s; it hadn’t been on her teeth. Turning around, I caught her eye and smiled inquisitively, gesturing slightly with my head. She smiled and nodded, and I beamed back at her, suddenly feeling that very intense pang of something like homesickness I sometimes got in Berlin, an odd homesickness for Berlin, the sensation that this city had somehow always been my home, always been where I belonged, even before I’d come home to it. The girls here were girls, like I was a boy.

Blixa, from the way he was chatting with the girl he was sitting next to, letting himself go just as completely camp and effeminate as her, his wrists sticking out at an absurd angle as he rolled his beautiful eyes and flirted and called her Daaaaahrling, it was clear he knew, and was enjoying every minute of it. Nick, on the other hand, seemed oblivious, barely glancing around him before making a bee-line for Blixa. I decided not to enlighten him, figuring Nick would almost certainly either cause a scene, or insist we go somewhere else, if not both. And I had decided I liked the place, even felt oddly at home in the place. Someone behind the bar put on an Amanda Lear record, and the high-pitched laughter in the bar seemed suddenly to step up another gear, as a group of girls shuffled off to go dancing together in the back room, and the noise and general hilarity overwhelmed us.

The fan was sent up to the bar to obtain more vodka, as Nick and Blixa settled into their seats and started to cackle at one another like a pair of witches under their wilting hair. "Did you catch his
“No idea,” said Blixa, as the girl he’d been chatting with stood up, and blew him a kiss as she tottered off, staggering slightly in her high heels. >>Bye, darling! Good luck with everything...<<

When she reached the bar, her blonde friend came over, and tried to drape herself around Nick’s shoulders. >>Would your handsome friend care to dance?<< she enquired in a low, deep purr of a voice.

“I don’t... speak... German,” repeated Nick for about the fiftieth time of the evening. The girl just looked at him blankly. “Ish schpreck-chure... keiner... Doit-ish,” he just about managed to get out, trying to wave her away.

I leaned forward and caught her eye. >>Sorry, love, I don’t think he’s up for it<< I told her with a commiserating smile, and she sighed and clattered off.

“Trying to have a quiet conversation in this city is a little impossible,” complained Nick, rolling his eyes and going to light a cigarette, only to realise he had given his pack to Trude to get us in. “I didn’t hear a word that guy said in the other bar. Did you?”

“I don’t zhink that it was really necessary to hear anything much before or after zhe question, ‘do you vant to do a line?’” laughed Blixa, leaning forward to offer Nick one of his own cigarettes.

“I feel like I’ve started a million conversations I’ve never finished, in this city,” sighed Nick, pushing his bedraggled fringe out of his face to let Blixa light his cigarette.

“But zhat is the great charm of Vest Berlin, never to have to finish a conversation,” countered Blixa, distracted by a stream of noisy women who had pushed through from the back room and started clogging up the bar. The hapless fan in the Iggy shirt got stuck behind them, and it didn’t seem like he was ever going to get served. So for several minutes, Nick and Blixa furiously sucked down their cigarettes without speaking, as it was simply too loud to talk, before someone put on a Sylvester record, and most of the girls rushed through back to the dance floor.

“Well, sometimes it’s best not to have to have the conversation to start with,” chortled Nick, leaning forward and warming to the topic, as he glanced sideways at the ladies. “I mean, with a beautiful woman, sometimes it’s better if you don’t hear what they say.”

I felt my back suddenly go up, as the giggly warmth of the camaraderie I’d felt as I entered the bar suddenly melted away. “Well, I can imagine why it’s better for you if women don’t hear what you say,” I started to shoot back, even as Blixa gently placed his hand on my thigh and started to pet me. I couldn’t tell if he was trying to charm me and calm me down, or egg me on.

But Nick was oblivious, lost in some memory that was clearly intensely amusing to him, as he finished his cigarette and stubbed it out. “That kind of reminds me of my first date with Anita. Did I ever tell you that story?”

“I don’t zhink so,” drawled Blixa, digging through his pockets as if looking for something.

“It’s actually kind of funny,” snickered Nick, shoving his hand into his hair to try to push the blackened mass out of his face. “We were just kids, you know. I’d seen her around, but I’d never talked to her. I thought she was... well, she was one of the hottest girls on the scene. Way out of my league. And yet, we ended up at this party, and I couldn’t believe my luck when she asks me to go off into her friend’s bedroom, and you know... ‘listen to records.’” He made air quotes and leered a little as Blixa located his lighter, produced his pack of cigarettes again and lit another two before...
passing one to Nick.

I glared at Nick, feeling all the hairs going up on the back of my neck, as I’d already heard a slightly different version of this tale.

“Anyway, we go up to the bedroom, and to my surprise, Anita actually wants to... you know, listen to records. And she plays record after record, I don’t even remember what, some teenage shit she used to like. You know the crap that girls like.”

Blixa looked slightly confused, as all the girls that he knew – Gudrun and Bettina and Beate – all loved the same abrasive, minimal punk records that he did, but he shrugged eloquently and spread his arms along the back of the booth, one curling across my shoulders, the other skirting the back of Nick’s seat.

Nick leaned into him slightly as the volume of music in the bar increased again, accompanied by a wave of feminine tittering from the back room. “So she plays record after record, really loud, because she wants me to hear them over the party that’s raging downstairs, and she’s talking the whole time, and I can’t hear a bloody word she’s saying. But I don’t care, because as she’s just rambling on about... whatever the hell it is girls like to talk about, I’m sitting there, nodding along, polite as anything, because I’m just staring at her, looking at her sitting on that bed, with her knee-socks rolled down and her skirt riding up, you remember those short-short skirts girls used to wear in the early 70s? Phew! So I’m just sitting there looking up at her, thinking how beautiful she is, and how amazingly attractive she is, and how lucky I am just sitting in this bedroom with her, waiting to make a move, just nodding along at whatever it is that she’s saying that I can’t even hear.” As he gestured with the tip of his cigarette, he started to laugh. “And finally, the record ends, and she stops talking, and then, just as she comes over closer to me, to turn the record over, she just looks at me, and she puts her hand on my knee, and she says, ‘Oh, Nick’ and she suddenly tells me she loves me, and all I can think is... holy fucking shit, I am the luckiest man in the whole State of Victoria, because this amazingly beautiful girl is in love with me, and we are about to make it.”

As I stared daggers at him, Blixa started to shake with laughter beside me. “Zo you did not hear anyzhing she said, et oll?”

“Not one word!” laughed Nick, raising his eyebrows as he took a drag of his cigarette. “But who fucking cared, because the most beautiful girl in Melbourne loved me, and wanted to make it with me.”

“So did you... make it? Vhat is zhis ‘it’ zhat you made?”

“You know,” shrugged Nick awkwardly. For a man who sung about the dark side of humanity as much as he did, he certainly was such a terrible prude. It wasn’t even that he avoided swear words; he swore like a sailor when he was onstage. It was like he genuinely did not want to use any of those swear words for their actual purpose of describing intercourse. “It.”

“You mean you had a fuck,” retorted Blixa, with his typical Berlin bluntness. He never minced his words.

“You could say that,” agreed Nick, relieved that Blixa had supplied the term, and as he kind of leered at us, I felt my hatred growing so thick as to be almost palpable, as if I wanted to reach through the smoke and haze of that dark bar and smash the leer right off his ugly, lying face.

But Blixa noticed nothing, as finally the fan had returned, bearing four double-vodkas, no ice, and there was a moment’s shuffle as the glasses were handed round. >>Thanks, but I don’t drink<< I said quietly.
I’ll have yours<< piped up Blixa immediately, reaching over to take mine.

“She doesn’t want it? Can we split it?” asked Nick hopefully, but I immediately grabbed my glass and tipped the entire contents into Blixa’s glass.

I dropped my voice to talk to Blixa, leaning over and pushing my lips through the thicket of his hair to his ears. Can we just finish this drink quickly, and go home? We’ve got a lot of work to do tomorrow.<<

He turned and looked at me, and I think he saw the weariness in my eyes, because he seemed about to say something, but then Nick tapped him on the shoulder and asked him a cigarette, then Blixa bent over to light it for him and the two of them were off in their own little world again.

“Blixa, I can’t stop thinking that you and me, that we should maybe do something together,” Nick was insisting. “Your aesthetic and mine, I just think it would… uuhhh, you know, it would work really well together.”

“Vhat, like zhe split single ve did, vitt your band and Lydia?” suggested Blixa.

“Yeah, you know, but without the bands. Like, just you and me. It doesn’t have to be a whole… Birthday Buildings performance,” Nick persisted.

“Birt’day Buildings? Collapsing New Paahties?” laughed Blixa, who enjoyed tossing words around like they were bits of confetti.

“Collapsing New Parties” mused Nick. “That sounds like a Velvets song, doesn’t it. Und vhaaaaaat coooooostume shaaall zer poor girl veeeeeeeaaar... to all collapsing new paaahtrties...” he crooned.

Blixa creased up into snorts of giddy laughter. “Is zhat supposed to be a German accent?”

“Well, yes, I’m doing Nico, and she is, I am aware, German...” Nick protested.

“Zhat does not sound even remotely German. You sound... I do not even know, Svedish or somezhing to me.”

“OK, we won’t do any Nico covers, then. But let’s you and me definitely do something together. Maybe not even music, you know? I’ve been writing a lot recently, I’ve been thinking more in a kind of narrative sense, more like drama or film?”

“Film?” Now Blixa’s ears perked up. “I am ferry interested in film. Tell me about zhis film idea.”

“You know, that back in London, me and Lydia, we wrote, like 50 one-act plays, as a kind of exercise. And I really enjoyed the experience. I was thinking of maybe expanding one of them. Turning it into a play... or, better yet, a screenplay...”

Now Blixa’s attention was really engaged. “A screenplay, ja, zhis I would be very interested in seeing. You know, I worked for a long time, as a teenager, in a cinema, vitt friends who vere involved in film-making. I haff always been very interested in soundtracks, you know, not just zhe music but zhe... how do you say, zhe auditory world of a film. Zhe sound design. Sound effects, atmosphere, and so on.”

“I tell you what, Blixa,” Nick joined in, not so much interrupting Blixa as simply joining in the flow of his imagination. “Because I really want to write a film. I want to write a screenplay. People I’ve spoken to, back in London, they were really keen on the idea. I think I’ve got some contacts who could make it happen. But I would love if you and I could collaborate – I write the film, and you do
the soundtrack. What do you think about that?”

At that, the fan perked up, finally managing to get a word in edgewise. “Do you know, but I am a film student. If I could assemble a crew…”

I stared at the lot of them, feeling so left out by the direction that the conversation had taken. I kept willing Blixa to notice how tired I was, remember that we all had to work in the morning, waiting for him to snap out of this castles-in-Spain world of fantasising with Nick, but he had stopped noticing me a long time ago.

Finally, I patted him gently on the leg to catch his attention. >>Look, I’m going to take off. I don’t want to crash with The Skin again, as I didn’t get a proper night’s rest there. I want to sleep in my own bed. And we have a long day tomorrow. All of us do.<<

>>Fine<< he shrugged, and turned back to Nick. Foolishly, I had stupidly thought that maybe he loved me enough to just accept my urging, and stop this nonsense and come home with me, but of course not. Resisting the urge to tug at his sleeve, I carried on staring at him, until he noticed, and turned around to face me. >>What? It’s no business of mine, where you sleep. I don’t own you. Do what you like.<<

I stared at him helplessly for a moment, but I knew it was useless. He was staying to hang out with Nick. Perhaps he misunderstood me, and thought I genuinely needed to rest and be alone, but honestly, I don’t actually think he gave it that much thought. He knew where the party was, and where the drugs were, and where Nick would be, he was sure to follow. I went home by myself, and I slept alone for what felt like the first time in weeks.
By day three of recording, Carter is actually ready to murder Nick... and Blixa, too, for good measure.

TW: contains several episodes of transphobia, some frankly grotesque rape-apologist BS, and resultingly, a fairly graphic account of gender dysphoria

The third and final day of those sessions was one of the most painful working days of my life. I arrived early, having had a good night’s rest physically, even if my mind was still in turmoil, and started to set up. Clearing the amplifiers and baffles out of the way, I set up the vocal mic in the Meistersaal and tried to prepare the room to record Nick’s vocals. Time was tight, as we only had a couple of hours to get the vocals down, and then we needed to mix the four tracks before the end of the session. Tony showed up at a reasonable hour, and we loaded up the tape machine and set the board in preparation, then he went into the hall to check on my mic placement before conceding that yes, yet again, I did seem to know what I was doing.

Rowland and Mick arrived almost at the same time, which was a little awkward, but both had their girlfriends in tow. The girls, at least, were determined to get the boys back on track, and greeted one another warmly. Genevieve started raving to Kate about the rough mixes she had heard the previous night, and of course Kate wanted to hear them, so I cued them up and blasted them over the studio’s beautiful monitors, explaining that the vocals were only guide vocals, but they could get an idea of the guitars and the rhythm section. Between the two of them, they pointed out the bits they really liked, and oohed and aahed in appropriate places until the two guitarists’ moods started to brighten, and they began to act more confident about each other’s work. With the girls onboard, they actually settled down into a friendly discussion of what had worked, instead of sniping at one another about what hadn’t. And with the distance of a good night’s sleep, and the magic pixie dust of Tony starting to fire up compressors and EQ and various production tricks, the songs were actually starting to sound a lot less rough, and a lot more like a cohesive E.P. than the mess of feuding guitars they had sounded like the previous evening.

Nick, however, was absurdly late, and given Blixa was nowhere to be seen, I could guess the reason why. To be fair, Mick and Rowland – and Tracy, when he arrived a couple of hours later, expecting the vocals to be finished and mixing to be underway – did actually put aside their differences, to collaborate on the production. Mick, in particular, was a consummate musician, with an ear for a good hook, though he was as wildly arrogant as Rowland was gentle and unassuming. We did as much as we could, but without vocals to balance the other instruments, there was only so much we could get done.

It was late afternoon by the time that Blick and Nixa finally sloped in, both of them looking very much the worse for wear.

“Oh sweet lord,” Nick was drawling. “I cannot believe you did not see fit to tell me, that we had gone to a... to a... tranny bar. I mean, at the very least, you could have warned me...”

“‘We don’t use that word here,’” I snapped at him sharply, feeling it like a slap across my own face. “It’s considered an insult. We just call them girls.”
“Those weren’t girls, Carter,” Nick continued to insist in a tone somewhere between pedantic and panic. “Those were men. Men in dresses and wigs, and honestly, I try to keep an open mind, about what you lot have going on here in West Berlin, but... seriously. You could have warned me. That... guy I was dancing with...”

“Girl,” I corrected.

“That... person I was dancing with... I could have... I could have... I was so high, I could have touched cock and not even realised,” protested Nick, with sickening alarm.

It seemed the pair of them had stayed up all night, snorting the unfortunate fan’s cocaine and drinking his vodka until the sun had come up. I glared at Blixa, resolving to wait until Nick was safely in the studio to give him a dressing down, and warn him that I would have him banned from any further recording session I was ever involved with, if he didn’t knock this on the head. But he immediately protested his innocence and declared that Anita had turned up shortly after I left, and it was she who had insisted, in full knowledge of the situation, that Nick have a dance with one of the girls, and what’s more, it was she who had started off the real monster cocaine binge, and they had only been trying to keep up, and prevent her from bolting down the whole lot herself.

>>Bullshit<< I snorted. >>You two were well on the way to oblivion before she got involved. What really happened? Did you and Nick ring Anita and ask her to bring the rest of the drugs? The drugs that were supposed to last the band all weekend?<< How the blazes had this become my job, trying to ration out the band’s pharmaceutical consumption, like I was parcelling out recording tape?

Blixa shifted his weight from foot to foot like a nervous horse and admitted that perhaps the true events of the previous night had been a little more like what I was describing, but still, what was done was done, and then added, with a supercilious little sneer, that it was no use getting my knickers into a twist. It was that final phrase that did it, an English phrase that I had taught him. Feeling my blood boiling into a rage, I came as close as I had ever come to actually lashing out and hitting Blixa in genuine anger, but then a burst of music let loose from the control room as Nick emerged, and I suddenly remembered another studio, another, less tense session, and Blixa exhorting us both to flog his bare chest with mallets. It was pointless to hit Blixa I realised, and stepped away, trying to calm myself down. The fucker actually liked it.

Nick nodded conspiratorially at Blixa, then sloped through into the Meistersaal to start his soundcheck. He gave a spine-curdling scream into the mic, and his voice was clearly shot to hell, with tobacco and cheap vodka and cocaine and god knows what else. But as I walked back into the control room and heard the music swell up around his creaking voice, somehow the fucked, up-all-night raggedness of his voice actually suited the dark, bluesy tone of the four nasty little songs they had recorded. He did his best to warm up, and gave Tony some decent line-checks, then asked for a cup of tea, with extra milk and sugar. I pressed the talkback button and told him to never drink milk at a vocal session, and suggested that plain tea with honey and lemon would be better for his voice. Although I honestly expected him to tell me to fuck off, he seemed somewhat cowed by his hangover, and nodded his agreement.

“Right, I’ll have some of that then, please,” he said, and the tiny gesture of that ‘please’ surprised me so much I shuffled off to make the pot myself.

Blixa came sloping after me as I boiled the kettle and dug in the cupboard for teabags. >>Have you got any headache tablets?<< he asked rather wearily, and as I turned to scold him, I realised he really was not in good shape. He kept sniffing alarmingly, not his usual perpetual post-nasal drip, but something nastier-sounding. His eyes were all sunken in, and the dark circles under them were not smeared mascara.
Whatever comedown or hangover you’re in the grips of, you probably deserve it<< I muttered as I
dug through the supply cabinet and found a multi-pack of paracetamol, breaking off two and handing
them to him.

Valdi, don’t. I feel absolutely grim.<< Breaking the foil seal, he swallowed both tablets dry.

I couldn’t help myself, the words just seemed to spill out of me, as I hissed >>You know, Blixa, it’s
one thing if you want to get fucked up and fuck up your own band’s sessions. That is your business.
But fucking up someone else’s sessions by dragging the singer in four hours late, after a cocaine
binge at a trans bar, his voice too raw to...<< The kettle boiled, so I turned to fill the teapot and
dumped in a couple of teabags, digging a shrivelled lemon out of the fridge and squeezing half of it
into the tea, then locating a pot of honey and stirring some of that in for good measure.

Oh<< retorted Blixa, with that dangerous tone of voice, like he was somewhere between mocking
and genuinely starting to get brassed off. >>Since when are you the Birthday Party’s biggest fan, and
since when are you so concerned about Nick.<<

I’m on a job here, unlike you<< I snapped, then realised from the furious expression on his face
that I had gone too far. >>Look, my love, please be reasonable. It’s obvious there is a fissure in this
band, and I am sorry, but you are making it worse.<<

His face was grim, and it was obvious this time that it was not the hangover, that he really was angry
with me for pulling rank. >>Their personal relationships are not my concern<< he told me briskly,
then took the teapot, turned on his rubber-booted heel, and stormed off back to the studio.

Sinking down to a chair, I put my face into my hands, and just wanted to curl in a ball. What had I
been thinking, when I’d accepted this job? Oh, a chance to work at the great and amazing Hansa
Tonstudio. How great that would look on my CV. Why had I let Rowland talk me into it? I had
known when I signed up for it that there was an underhanded motive of interpersonal politics. But
I’d thought it was the Birthday Party that would crack under the strain, not my own relationship.

I was interrupted in my pity party by the crack of a footstep at the door, and then a low, courteous
“Good day, ma’am.” I looked up to see Tracy standing, hands on his hips, looking down at me with
his John Wayne smile.

Immediately, I shot back into work mode. “I’m sorry, Trace, what can I get you?”

“Nothing. I was just coming down to check that you were OK.” He continued to gaze at me placidly
as I nodded to indicate I was fine, though really, I didn’t want to have to deny it with my voice,
because my voice would have let him know that everything was not actually fine. “Listen, Mizz
Carter, I just wanted you to know, we do appreciate everything you’ve done for us on these sessions.
They wouldn’t have gone so smoothly without you.”

That raised a laugh, at least. “You call this smooth.”

Tracy grinned. “You should have seen our last sessions in London. They came to blows.”

Somehow it all fell into place by the end. Nick, with or without the aid of chemical stimulants or
strong tea, somehow pulled himself together and delivered some spine-tingling performances, the
utterly fucked raggedness of his voice actually complimenting the swampy, bluesy atmosphere of the
tracks. Mick, more than anyone else, was invaluable on the mix-downs, as he was still relatively
sharp, or at least, not suffering from the aftermath of the world’s worst hangover, and had a really
good ear for where everything needed to sit in the mix. Rowland and Nick seemed to headed in
opposite directions with what they wanted to do with the final mix, in that Rowland really wanted to
be in a raw, reverb-laden 60s garage band, while Nick and Mick were pushing towards something earlier, more minimal, and yet more theatrical. Berlin was leaving its impression on the pair of them, and not just in the huge, hollow reverb of Hansa’s Meistersaal.

It was all hands on deck for the final mix-downs, as we needed to bounce between multiple guitar takes and vocal takes, with me operating the tape machines as Tony directed everyone to their faders. I hit record on the smaller reel-to-reel mix-down tape, then hit play on the huge multi-track tape machine. As the music surged around us, Tony barked at what faders needed to go up or down, Nick and Mick and Rowland each taking over one of the channels, while Tracy sat in the back with his feet up and his hands folded behind his head, just marvelling over the glorious racket.

But in the mix of hands and faders, I caught sight of something. One of the boys’ hands had a small, semi-circular cut at the base of his thumb, just where it joined his hand, that looked like it had only recently scabbed over. The hands were too tangled as the mix-down was happening for me to work out who it belonged to, and I had to rush back to stop the master tape. When I came back to check out what I thought I had seen, hands were back in pockets or fiddling with cigarettes they weren’t yet allowed to light.

As I suddenly remembered the awkward groping incident at The Skin’s house, I glanced down, and looked across the men’s knees. Rowland was in Levi’s, and Tracy had on his customary leather trousers, but both Mick and Nick were in more formal slacks. Mick’s hands, on closer examination, were cracked and callused from his drumsticks, and there was a nasty bruise on one of his index fingers as if he’d caught himself with a stray drumstick, but his thumbs were unhurt. Nick, on the other hand, was scratching lazily at the side of his hand.

“What happened to your thumb?” I tried to ask nonchalantly, but my voice came out in a kind of a hiss.

Nick froze for a moment, looked down at the semi-circular mark, exactly the same size and shape as the nail on my index finger, then quickly thrust his hand away into the pockets of his nylon slacks. “I, uuhh, don’t really know to be honest. I think maybe a cat scratched me or something? It’s nothing. No big deal.”

I just stared at him in horror, feeling my skin crawling, as he refused to meet my eye, looking away from me and glancing back towards Blixa with an unreadable expression. My whole body just reacted with a kind of panicky, vomity feeling, remembering the violation of that cock pressed between my buttocks, not even accidentally, but quite deliberately, rubbing back and forth even before the hand snaked onto my hip. Nick? I thought to myself, trying not to let my emotions show on my face. I was pretty sure that I revolted Nick almost as much as he revolted me, and anyway, he was scared to death of me. But the haunted, guilty expression with which his eyes kept dancing back to Blixa churned my stomach. What did Blixa have to do with it? But then again, Nick was such a troglodyte, I knew he thought of me as Blixa’s property. The guilt on his face might not be due to his drunken violation of me, but his worry that he had somehow transgressed Blixa’s property rights by groping his girlfriend.

And yet, as Blixa turned, and, catching Nick glancing at him, smiled back at him with his typical mischievous, slightly haughty eyebrow-raise, another possibility, another suspicion, despite or maybe even because of Nick’s panicked reaction at the thought of accidentally touching cock at the trans bar, crawled across my mind with a sickening lurch. Blixa had been wearing his leather-look rubber trousers that night, while I’d been wearing my soft Italian leather ones. What if, in the dark, Nick’s cock had mistaken leather, for pleather? I wasn’t sure which idea revolted me more, and I suddenly felt a little faint, my head spinning in a way that had little to do with the meals I’d skipped, trying to get the session finished on time. The thought of Nick groping me made me want to vomit. But the
thought of Nick groping Blixa made me want to burn down all of West Berlin.

But abruptly, Tony called out, and disturbed the tense atmosphere of horror. “You guys want me to burn you a couple of cassette tapes, so you can listen to the mix-downs at home?”

Nick suddenly snapped to, and yanked his gaze away from Blixa. “Yeah, yeah, sure, Tony. Can you do us four copies?”

“Fife,” corrected Blixa. “Ve vant von to play at zhe Risiko.”

“Sure thing. They've got a high-speed tape duplicator in here, so I can do you half a dozen, in a jiffy.”

Nick and Mick took possession of the masters as Tony burned off a cassette copy for everyone. Blixa palmed his with a grin and insisted that was going on the stereo at Risk as soon as he got to work. (By this point, he was three or four hours late for work, but he swore that Maria would understand when she heard the tape.)

I was trying to avoid Nick the best I could, busying myself in work, taking down the microphones and coiling up the cables in the Meistersaal, when abruptly he slouched in. He looked about and collected his suit jacket off the back of a chair, but then blanched when he turned and caught sight of me. But as I glared at him, my lip curled up in disgust, he started to quail a bit, glancing around as if to make sure we were alone.

“Look here, Carter,” he broached, in what he probably thought was his most reasonable voice. “It was not what you think.”

I just fixed him with a steely gaze, my mouth a thin line. “What, was not what I think?”

“Erm... back at Die Haut’s house. When I may have gotten a little, erm... fresh. It’s not what you think. I was just... Honestly, I woke up, and I was so fucked up I didn’t know where I was, like, for a second there, I thought maybe I was back in my own bed, with Anita. So I... uuuhhh... I just don’t think it was a big deal, OK?”

Narrowing my eyes, I just stared at him, waiting for the punchline, or the apology, or whatever was to follow. But something about his ‘confession’ bothered me. If that was the honest to god truth, then why was his voice shaking, and why did he keep trying to assuage me with that weird used-care-salesman expression of fake sincerity, raising his eyebrows and bobbing his head? As he tried his very corniest like-me grin on me, I did my best to puzzle through what was bothering me about this fake non-apology.

“You know...” I mused, thinking out loud. “On nights when I’ve gone to bed before Blixa, and he’s rolled in really fucked-up and a bit frisky... we still have ways of working out, if both of us are into it or not. If he starts rubbing up against me, and I shove him away, no matter how fucked up we both are, he... he stays shoved.” I thought back to the morning after, when Blixa had done exactly that. Blixa was really good with no. Blixa was also really good with persuasively exploring around the reasons for the no, and trying to work out if there was a way we could turn that no to a yes. But if he didn’t hear that yes, he always went off and just had a wank. “Or else he asks me about it, and we talk.”

But Nick was looking at me with genuine annoyance in his eyes. “Jesus, you’re a hard bitch,” he muttered, his voice slowly rising to a defensive whine. “I mean, I am trying to explain to you, how things were that night, so you don’t get all upset about it, but nooo... you’ve just got to give me some little feminist lecture and rub it in, about how I’m scum, compared with Blixa?”
“Wait... what...” I sputtered, feeling my face flushing as I grew almost incandescent with rage. “You sidle up to me in the night, and you... grope me... and then after attacking me like that, you think you’re just gonna explain it away, like...”

“Whoa, whoa,” snarled Nick, taking his injured thumb out of his pocket and thrusting it towards me. “You attacked me. I’m the one who ended up wounded and bleeding here. I mean, what do you call this? I made an honest mistake, and you... you just about knifed me for it.”

“Knifed you? I scratched you in self-defence. You rubbed your disgusting organ against my body while I was unconscious... and when I woke up and tried to push you away, you fucking grabbed me? What the fuck did you even think you were doing, rubbing up against someone you couldn’t see, in a darkened room? What the fuck would make someone behave like that... or think that’s even remotely OK?”

“Now look here, Carter, look here,” ranted Nick, waving his finger at me, and shaking his head back and forth as he advanced on me. “You walk around dressed up in men’s clothes, and pretend you’re a boy because you think it’s geil or whatever it is you cross-dressing Berlin freaks believe you’re getting out of fooling people, pretending to be the opposite sex. But you have no idea, Carter, no idea at all, what it’s like to really be a man. You have no idea what it’s like to walk around with a cock between your legs. A cock that has needs. A cock that has urges. A cock that wants what it wants, when it wants it. If you had any idea what it was to actually be a man, instead of just play-act at one, you would run away like the frightened little girl you really are, Carter.”

Feeling my chest tightening, my blood surging in my veins and my heartbeat throbbing in my temples, I walked up close to Nick, right up in his face like I had once seen Blixa walk up to Russian soldiers and throw their ugly insinuations right back in their faces.

“And you have no idea what it’s like to wake up every day in a body that physically revolts you,” I said really quietly, forcing him to lower his voice to pay attention, even as his face moved from angry to confused to scared. “You have no idea what it’s like to walk around with this... this disgusting, secret second mouth between your legs. This gaping wound, this unquenchable hole that wants things. This hairy gash that oozes goo and bleeds and tells you that you want things that revolt you. This grotesque abomination of a body, that other people constantly think they have an unquestionable right to, with or without your consent – so that you’re to blame for whatever they do to it – because of what disgusting filth they think you have between your legs.”

Nick started to back away, shaking his head, with a slightly disgusted look on his face, muttering “You’re not right, Carter. You’re not right in the head,” but I followed him, words just pouring out of me like a torrent I could not stop. I had never said this shit to anyone, barely even dared to even think it, and yet I couldn’t stop myself spewing up this tide of bile I wanted to drown Nick’s ugly hateful words in.

“You’re not wrong. But, you know, it’s not my head. It’s this... this body is not-right. Imagine being trapped in a body that is just... not-right. And the whole fucking world is telling you constantly in one ear, that this hairy monster between your legs is disgusting and revolting and inherently degrading to have, and you hate yourself because you secretly agree with them; even as the world is constantly whispering in your other ear, rubbing up against you, trying to get its hands on your disgusting hole, trying to control it, turn it into an object, a disembodied commodity, plaster its grotesque image all over walls as pornography to remind you how horrific your own body is, until every time you even see a picture of one, you’re almost screaming, ‘get it off, get it off me’. You have no idea what it’s like to live with this hole inside you, Nick. No idea what it’s like to live in a body like mine. You wouldn’t last ten seconds with a vagina, Nick.”
“I wouldn’t want to,” sputtered Nick. “I’m not... like you. You’re sick Carter. I know Blixa’s into some weird shit, sexually, but... you are sick.”

“I’m glad I’m not like you,” I almost vomited up. “Because you know what’s sick? How much you hate what you want so much, and how much you want what you hate. I at least have a reason to hate my body, because it lies about who I am. But you just hate it because you think it’s female, and you think being female is revolting. Even as you want it! Even as you spend all of your time with these camp, feminine men like Blixa and Rowland because you’re so afraid of the thing you want so much. And you grope me in the night, when I’m asleep and helpless, because you need to remind me, that no matter how much I scare you or intimidate you... that I’m just a hole to you.”

“You’re fucking mental you are,” sneered Nick, though he looked genuinely terrified as he started to raise his hand as if to slap me. “Do you imagine that I would even... touch you? You’re too ugly and mannish to rape, Carter, so you make up these wild fantasies?”

“You lay a fucking finger on me ever again, and I swear to god, Nick, I will disembowel you,” I snarled right back, right up in his face so close I was sputtering sputum into his hideous mouth.

And of course that was the moment that Blixa came stumbling in, looking for us, and he saw Nick backed up pale and gibbering and looking genuinely shaken, and me with my first curled and ready to lay that bastard flat if he moved a muscle towards me.

In an instant, as fast as an uncoiling serpent, Blixa had leapt across the space that separated us, and snaked his arms around my chest like he was going to hug me, but instead he pulled me backwards, sharply, and away out of reach of Nick.

“What the fuck?!” howled Blixa. “Would you two stop this fucking fighting all the time. It does my head in! I don’t understand why you two have to be like this, the two persons I care most about in this city, why you always have to be at von anoher’s throats like a pair of bickering children! Worse than children! Like animals!”

“Blixa, you have no idea... what he just... but he... you didn’t even hear what he... what he said... what he did...” My voice just sputtered out helplessly as I struggled against his grip, my hands flapping wildly. I was so furious and angry and disgusted and riled up, my face flushed with emotion, almost terrified by the things that had just come flowing out of my mouth in a flood of black bile.

Blixa looked at me, realised I was too insensate with fury to even explain what I was angry about, then turned back to Nick. “What did you do?” he demanded.

But Nick had somehow managed to pull himself back together, shaking his hair out of his face and pulling himself up to his full height like an actor getting into character. “I was only trying to explain to her about that little misunderstanding at Die Haut’s house the other night. The little misunderstanding that she attacked me over.” Holding out his thumb, he displayed the small wound to Blixa. “And she started screaming at me, and accusing me with these wild fantasies that I somehow... ‘attacked’ her.” And I swear to god, he actually did air quotes.

Looking back and forth between Nick and me, Blixa’s eyebrows knitted together, perplexed and troubled. I could see it in his face, that he knew something had happened between us, but he couldn’t work out what. Blixa knew me, he knew I didn’t just freak out on people for no reason. But his obsession with Nick just seemed to wilfully blind him.

But finally, he spoke, his voice tight. “Nick, you had better go. Go now.”
Nick took one last look at me, and I swear his eyes flickered like he wanted to land one more bon mot like a punch designed to infuriate me or knock me off balance. But fortunately, his eyes slipped off me to Blixa, and he closed his mouth and held his tongue. He turned, and fled.

Blixa didn’t let me go. He stood there, his arms around me from behind, as the restraint loosened into an embrace, and he bent his head against the side of mine, nuzzling his cheek against my hair.

>>Carter...<< he sighed. >>My love. What is wrong?<<

>>He groped me<< I insisted, gasping for air like all the oxygen had been drained out of the room. >>I know what happened that night, and I know it was him that groped me.<<

>>I believe you<< said Blixa, and I felt my breath exhale in a great gush of relief. >>But I also know that you hate Nick so much, that even if it was a misunderstanding, and he had come to explain or apologise, that you would not let it lie. You would go on the attack.<<

Pushing his arms off me, I turned to face him. >>You don’t believe me.<<

Reaching out, he put his hands on my face, trying to pull me back towards him. >>I do believe you. I believe that what you said happened, happened. But your hatred of Nick distorts the meaning of what happened.<<

I just looked at him with such sadness in my eyes, feeling him somehow slipping away from me. My love for Blixa just twisted the facts around until I didn’t know what to believe. Maybe it was true, that I did hate Nick so much it twisted every conversation into an argument. But at the same time, I thought that maybe Blixa’s love for Nick twisted him in the same way, into being incapable of believing ill of his friend. And that started to twist my love for Blixa into something else.

Blixa smiled at me, and thumbed away a tear I had not noticed form in the corner of my eye, as if he thought that meant the incident was now resolved, though really, it was a tear of anger, not of sadness. >>I wish you would stop fighting with Nick. It doesn’t make any of us happy.<<

>>I have to go and load the amps out<< I said quietly, and turned and walked away.

I went back to work, and did my best to calm down. It reassured me to coil cables and put equipment away. I counted microphones and headphones and stands, marked them down on a checklist, then signed a form to say it was all in order. But as I loaded the hired amps out of the studio and back into my van, to be returned to the music hire shop on Monday, Blixa came and stood by me. He had recovered his jaunty attitude, though he was pacing back and forth nervously, shifting his weight from foot to foot as if he were gearing up to pester me about something.

>>Don’t you need to go to work?<< I snorted, feeling mixed up and horrified, and, at the bottom of it all, still very sore over the whole business of him refusing to condemn Nick.

>>Yeah, in a minute. But I need to know first... are you coming with us tomorrow?<<

I turned and stared at him blankly, as it took me several minutes to remember. Copenhagen. He still wanted me to go to Copenhagen with him and his band. But I sighed deeply, still feeling the anger and the annoyance and the hurt simmering around in my head, and begged exhaustion. >>I am sorry, Blixa. I am too tired.<<

>>I have had less sleep than you have, and I’m going to sleep in the van<< he protested.

>>I have to work on Monday. You don’t.<< It was a lie, but he didn’t need to know that.

But still, he gazed at me with his penetrating blue eyes. >>That’s all. Too tired. Just work.<<
>>What do you want me to say? That we’ve seen rather too much of each other this past weekend, and I really need a break from you, and your new best friend, and how you choose to act when you’re around him?<< I hadn’t meant it to come out like that, but there it was, and as I said it, I realised it was true. My discomfort wasn’t even about how much I disliked Nick; it was becoming clear to me that I just plain disliked who Blixa was, when he was around Nick.

I had expected Blixa to just roll his beautiful eyes, and gesture with his extravagant eyebrows to let me know just how ridiculous he thought my complaints were, but for the first time, I saw Blixa Bargeld’s insane unshakeable confidence actually drop for a moment, and a scared, confused little boy stared back at me. A Blixa I had never seen before; a Blixa very unlike the Blixa I was starting to resent a little too often.

But it was only a moment. Then a wall seemed to go up around his face, and there was the extravagant eyeroll that I had been expecting. >>Well<< he said, shrugging his shoulders as if to say, *what is that to me.* >>What do you want me to say to Ilsa if I see her.<<

It was definitely a challenge, but I wasn’t sure how he expected me to respond. For a minute, there was silence between us, as I tried to work out what his game was, but then I merely shrugged. Ilsa was a ghost. Not even a ghost, but just the memory of a haunting. The real, physical girl in Denmark, I could not raise an emotion for her, not even to make Blixa jealous. >>Tell her I hope she’s doing well.<<

Blixa continued to stare at me, chewing on his lower lip, and at that moment, I suddenly saw what he had just done. He had given me a moment to hurt him, to let him down, to tell him that I still loved some ghost of a girl, and not him. And I hadn’t taken that out. I wondered what on earth was going on, if he was trying to get rid of me – or if it was something else. That at the moment he realised he might be capable of losing me, not because I was in love with someone else, but because of something he might have done or failed to do for me, he suddenly realised he wanted me after all?

But the moment passed, and neither of us said anything. >>I am very late for work<< he finally said.

>>Yeah, you better go<< I sighed. >>I’d offer you a ride, but I’m headed in the opposite direction. I’ve got to put these amps into storage at The Skin’s space.<<

He smiled tightly and nodded, then sloped off towards the bus stop. We didn’t even kiss one another goodbye. For a few moments, I just stood there, watching the rubber of his trousers bend and warp over his shapely buttocks as he bent down to examine the schedule, my mind dragging back to that awful night at The Skin’s house, wondering if that had been what Nick had been seeing when he groped at me. But it was too much for me to bear thinking about. Wrenching my eyes away, I climbed into my van and drove away.
The Problem of Evil

Chapter Summary

With Blixa gone on tour, Carter turns to Wolfgang moral advice. And for the first time since Carter and Blixa got together, Carter starts drawing again.

And in the meantime, Carter runs into a familiar face from the past, and hits on an idea to get Anita working again.

It would be another week before I saw Blixa again. On Sunday, I slept in, not even realising how exhausted I had been by the whole session with the Birthday Party, and not even physically, but emotionally and mentally. On Monday, I wasn’t actually working at my old studio, and didn’t want to get caught out in the fib, but I decided to risk going round to Iron-Grey, assuming that the New Buildings would not be able to drive back from Copenhagen overnight. Really, I was feeling unsettled at heart, and desperately wanted to talk to Gudrun, to try to restore some sense of normality.

But when I got to Iron-Grey, I found a strange girl I didn’t recognise sitting at the till, reading a rather forbidding-looking magazine on modern design.

>>Oh, hello. Is Gudrun about?>> I asked, a little hesitantly.

The girl shook her head, eyeing me intently with a curious expression that made me feel really rather examined, though not in an entirely unpleasant way.

>>Will she be in later? Is it worth leaving a message on the board for her?>>

Again, the girl shook her head, causing the thick blonde braids she had wrapped around the crown of her head, Swiss Goatherd style, to shake slightly. >>Nay<< she finally supplied, just as I was beginning to wonder if she could speak at all. >>Gudrun and band make tour at present time, so I agree to watch shop, as favour to Bettina.<< She had the edge of a decidedly foreign accent to her German, though I couldn’t quite place it.

>>On tour<< I repeated, wondering how I’d become so distant from the Pirate Girl Gang that I hadn’t even been in the loop that they were touring.

>>Italy and France and Swiss<< said the mysterious young woman.

>>Any idea of when they’ll be back?>> I probed.

>>Pair of weeks. I agree to watch shop for all Half Term.<<

>>Half Term<< I sighed. >>Is it Half Term already? I never can get the hang of German holidays.<<

The ice maiden smiled, her face transforming from her formerly forbidding expression to a rather appealingly fierce smirk. >>And me, as well. Very different from Russian holidays.<<

>>I’ll try again later in a few weeks<< I told her.
I shrugged and stayed for a few minutes’ conversation. She was a designer, it turned out, in her third year studying at the Hochschule für Kunst, and she particularly liked the leather jeans I was wearing, still fastened with Gudrun’s seat-belt buckle. I asked her what her particular medium was, and she told me that she was very interested in repurposing found industrial materials for clothing. For her first year project, back in 1980, she had made jeans out of the fake leather that VW used to cover the interior of their cars, and Gudrun had been kind enough to sell them at the shop. (And I suddenly realised that I had actually seen such a garment, on Blixa’s legs, back in the very early days of our friendship.) After making a series of corsets out of the treads for armoured cars, she was getting very into tyre rubber, especially inner tubes.

I laughed and told her I knew a young man who would probably be interested in that sort of thing, especially if she could somehow work in some straps or buckles. She sniffed a little, and said with the jaunty self-confidence of such a beautiful woman, that she did not do custom orders, as this brought an element of too much commercialism into her work, which she considered Art. OK, fine, be that way, I thought to myself, then wished her a good day and headed off.

As I strolled back to my house, I tried to think of other friends I could call in on, since both Malaria! and the New Buildings were out of town. Well, if the art school was on half term holidays, that meant Wolfgang might be free. I went home and rang him, and we chatted for a few minutes, before he broached the subject of the Other Shore. Had Gerhard got in touch about the sales, and made arrangements for me to come round and collect my payment, and take down the remains of the exhibition? No, he hadn’t, I told him, wondering if I should have been more pro-active about the whole thing. Well, never mind, said Wolfgang, and asked if I was free that afternoon, and so we made plans to meet at the café, and do the business side of it together, if I wanted some moral support.

I was glad for the company, but I didn’t really need the help, as Gerhard was pleased to see me, and pleased with the results of the exhibition, letting me know that as soon as I had another portfolio of work together, he would be first in line to host another show. I shook his hand and said I’d let him know. The drawings had sold well; it was quite a bit more money than I had expected. And although I did feel weird about losing those wonderful drawings of my lover, Wolfgang reminded me that he still had all the professional quality photographs of the artwork and was more than happy to make me prints. I thanked him again, and this time I offered to treat him to lunch, since I was so flush.

We chatted about our projects, and I did my best to be vague, as I didn’t want to tell him that to be honest, I had stopped drawing when I had started fucking Blixa. Maybe I was still in denial about it; that I didn’t want to see it as a kind of block. Or maybe I just didn’t want to admit that the block, and my relationship with Blixa were somehow related. But I shrugged off his questions, and started asking about his work, and Wolfgang was so excited, like a little boy, really, about the projects he was working on, that he couldn’t help but share his joy about his creative obsessions while I sipped at my coffee. He was getting very into children’s toys, especially the modern electronic ones which had little circuits to make them talk. What if he could get into that circuitry, and rewire the toys to say different things, to make GI Joes talk about poetry instead of warfare, wouldn’t that be a wonderful statement to make using art?

I liked talking to Wolfgang about capital-A Art. Unlike those sometimes snooty young women from Gudrun’s school, Wolfgang never looked down on me for my lack of formal training. He always took the time to make sure I understood things thoroughly, explaining his technical terms thoughtfully and carefully, but never in a way that made me feel patronised. It was more that Wolfgang was just so in love with Art, and with Creativity, that he just wanted to share his love and his excitement and his boundless enthusiasm with everyone. I told him his fervent passion reminded
me oddly of the lecture I’d once seen Beuys deliver, a comparison he blushed at, and said was extraordinarily flattering. He was only about four years older than me, but in many ways, he seemed to take on the role of tutor, or mentor, encouraging me to pop in for a lecture at the art school, or visit a life-drawing class when term started up again.

>>Though I can understand<< he chuckled >>If you only wish to draw nudes of our handsome mutual friend.<<

I closed my eyes and bit my lip, trying not to let my emotions show all over my face, but my silence, it seemed, spoke for me.

Wolfgang sighed deeply and turned around to call out for another round of coffee, before leaning forward and patting me gently on the hand. >>I don’t want to intrude, but... are things alright?<<

>>No, things are not alright, really<< I finally confessed, the words erupting out of me as if belching a horrible burst of gas into the air between us. >>We have problems... well, we have only one very big problem, really. I am sick to death of Nicolas bloody Cave.<<

>>These things are sent to try us<< said Wolfgang calmly and quietly, sounding for all the world like the well-meaning but useless parish vicar who had tried to console me after I’d been expelled from my boarding school.

>>Stop it, you sound like a fucking Christian, and I have had all of the Southern Gospel Christianity I can stomach for one lifetime, in this past recording session<< I almost snarled.

>>I’m so sorry<< said Wolfgang, with rather too agreeable a smile. >>I did used to be one.<<

My head snapped up, as that was something I’d never really cottoned onto about Wolfgang, though as soon as he said it, the philosophical and spiritual bent of his bookshelves suddenly started to make sense. >>Used to?<< I asked, suddenly very interested.

>>Well, ironically, it was left-wing politics that got me involved in the first place<< he explained, pausing for a moment as the waiter brought another carafe of coffee, before pouring each of us another cup. >>Jesus was the first Marxist, you know. The first political hippie.<<

>>You were a hippie? I can’t imagine it!<< I scoffed, as Wolfgang, in my eyes, seemed to have been born a slightly tweedy 30-something art professor, though he was only two years older than Blixa.

>>A Jesus-Freak, no less.<< He sat back in his chair and laughed. >>I completely was, as a teenager. I’ll show you photos one of these days, if I can find them. Long hair, and hennaed, as well. Berlin was all hippies in those days. Have you never seen photos of your lover, with long hair down to his arse? He was a pretty hippie.<<

I pulled a face, as I had been trying to avoid thinking about my lover. >>Well, if Jesus was so amazing, why did you ever stop being a teenage Jesus-Freak?<<

It was Wolfgang’s turn to make a slightly sour face. >>Well, that’s the thing. Jesus, when you read the actual words of the New Testament, was completely radical, politically, spiritually, in every way. The Christian Democratic Union, well... not so much. I got quite disillusioned, quite fast. The homophobia was a little off-putting, to say the least.<<

>>Well, that’s Christianity, isn’t it<< I muttered, thinking how recently I had had this exact argument with that awful man. >>I don’t really know if that awful Kick Knave actually believes any of it, or just uses it as a shield to justify his grotesque straight-boy homophobia.<<
>>Kick Knave, oh that is witty in English, isn’t it, darling<< Wolfgang eyed me carefully over the top of his coffee cup as he drank, then took a deep breath. >>Back on him again, though, are we.<<

>>Well, he’s the Christian I’ve been tangling with the most, recently.<< I muttered.

>>And not Christian Emmerich?<< he quipped, raising his eyebrows.

It took me a moment to remember that that was actually my lover’s birth name, and groaned aloud. I had no idea who this Emmerich person was; I knew only Blixa Bargeld.

>>The thing about being a former teenage Jesus-Freak preacher is, I have actually read the New Testament, a lot more deeply and a lot more recently than most Christians I have encountered. Did you know there was a queer apostle?<<

>>What?<< I sputtered as I nearly spat out my coffee. >>There never was. Who?<<

>>The Apostle John, the Beloved Disciple of Jesus<< said Wolfgang, grinning like a cat playing with a bird, as he saw my expression change, growing more alert as my eyes widened. >>There’s a lot of quite queer stuff going on between Jesus and young John, and a very long tradition of people reading them as gay, right back to your compatriot, the playwright Christopher Marlowe. I have a book about it somewhere, I’ll loan it to you if you like.<<

>>Jesus was gay<< I repeated, unable to believe what I was hearing.

>>Well, quite probably bisexual. It was not frowned-upon in that culture, at that time.<<

My initial instinct was to disbelieve it, but I was aware that I was quite out of my depth, and Wolfgang was the expert in spiritual and mythological matters, not I. >>Can you get that through that thick Australian’s head, perhaps?<<

>>That I can’t do<< sighed Wolfgang. >>But I can assure you, that homophobic readings of Christianity are not supported by the New Testament. As a queer, teenage Jesus Freak, my ministry was much closer in spirit to the original radical, Marxist Jesus of the Gospels, than these hypocrites, Kick Knave included.<<

I found myself smiling as I examined Wolfgang’s face, waiting for him to crack up and tell me that he was joking, with that typical arch, ironic Berlin sense of humour, but found him completely serious. >>Well, that’s not enough to convert me, but it certainly puts a different spin on things.<<

>>Doesn’t it, indeed.<< He nodded and refilled my coffee cup.

But suddenly, something niggled at me, and I found myself wondering. >>Did Blixa used to interrogate you about religion? Ask you if you believed in God, and all that<<

Wolfgang laughed aloud. >>He really hasn’t changed much, has he.<<

>>And do you?<< I looked up. >>Still believe?<<

At that, Wolfgang stopped laughing and folded his lips into a serious expression. >>Is this like that time, where you asked me if I believed in Magic?<<

>>I didn’t ask you if you believed in Magic, I asked if you believed in the Supernatural. Precognition and reading the future and all that. But while we’re on the subject of the Supernatural, well, yes. Do you believe in the Supernatural, do you believe in God?<< I couldn’t help the sneer from appearing in my voice, though I tried very hard to keep it out. But Wolfgang didn’t even blink.
Well, in order to explain to you how I do believe in... well, although not that vengeful, homophobic God of modern Christians, I do definitely believe in something, I would have to explain to you that my idea of God, of the numinous, what you’d call the Divine... well, there’s nothing supernatural about it. In fact, to me, God is the very opposite of what you’d think of as the Supernatural, or Magic or whathaveyou. What is God, is everything that is natural, that is Good, that is Right.

And what about Evil? I said, thinking again of Nick and his devilish arguments.

Again, there is nothing the slightest bit supernatural about Evil, either. No devil, no red gentleman with horns and a tail – and no, not a pale-faced man with blue eyes and a spikey black pompadour, either, before you ask. Evil isn’t the opposite of Good, it is the absence of Good. Think of the qualities in life, that are really, truly Good. What do you think they are?

It took me a moment to realise he was asking me a question, I was so focused on trying to work out what he meant, since I, too, had a very pale face, blue eyes and a spikey mass of a pompadour that looked almost black when I hadn’t washed it in a week. Me? What do I think of as good? Wolfgang nodded as he took another sip of coffee. Well, Courage for a start. Courage is Good.

And Generosity, that is a great good. Kindness. Truthfulness, and more than merely telling the Truth, but always being straight with people, always treating them right, with respect.

Well, if you think of these qualities as Good, then what would be the absence of them? A lack of Courage? That’s Cowardice, and that’s a kind of evil. To lack Generosity is to be Selfish, and that’s a form of evil, too. To lack kindness is to be callous, to be cruel. Wouldn’t you say cruelty was a principal type of evil? And to lack truthfulness? That’s why being dishonest is a form of evil. And the opposite of treating people with respect? That’s treating people as objects, as merely means to an end. That is one of the greatest evils there is, and also the fundamental basis of Capitalism.

I never thought of it like that! I blurted out, suddenly seeing the whole thing mapped out before me, in Wolfgang’s cool, clear tones. Blixa and his obsession with Right and Wrong; and Nick with his obsession with Sin and Redemption. Both of them had it all wrong. Evil wasn’t a quality in itself. It was, as Wolfgang described, the absence of a quality.

You see, don’t you? I can see it in your eyes. I always thought you were a particularly clever lad! said Wolfgang, in his lovely, patient, slightly paternal tone.

But what about me? I said, feeling my heart sinking. My great failing right now... it’s like Gudrun said. It’s jealousy. What she calls wretched cattiness. And not even sexual jealousy, because I do not think that Nick... homophobic, closeted Nick... is ever, in a million billion years, going to sleep with Blixa. But that bond they have... that fascination, that obsession that Blixa has with him. I guess maybe it’s some music thing, and that is something I can never ever share with Blixa, because I am just not a musician.

How do you know you’re not a musician? asked Wolfgang, in that same patient Art Professor tone. Your friend, Joseph Beuys – and I must admit, he was the man who inspired me to become an artist – he always says... everyone’s an artist.

Everyone’s an artist, yes. That was the topic of the talk we saw, in Kassel.

I believe, quite passionately, the same thing about music. Everyone is a musician. How do you know you’re not a musician?

I shook my head sadly. Because I work in a studio. That’s how I know. I see that thing my friends...
do, Blixa and Gudrun, Mufti and Christoph, Rowland and Nick – and even you, Wolfgang – conjure music out of absolute thin air, and I can never do that. I just can’t. I can’t work that magic trick. But...

Suddenly, I saw things from a different angle. You know, here’s the thing about Blixa. Despite the generous, cooperative nature of his whole West Berlin scene, I know, deep down, how competitive Blixa really is. That’s why he’s such a stickler for insisting, oh, 95% of German music is shit. He’s always comparing it to himself, and trying to compete. That is his great flaw...

I took a deep breath and sighed deeply. Like jealousy is turning out to be mine, competitiveness is his. I suddenly remember what Gudrun said, what she told me ages ago, about why they couldn’t be in bands, or in a relationship together, even though they were best of friends. Because he always has to compete. Maybe that’s why he’s able to be with me. Because I’m not a musician, he never feels the need to compete with me.

What’s the opposite of competing? asked Wolfgang. If excessive competition is the evil, what is the good?

I thought for a moment. Collaboration I supplied, and then something clicked. Oh my god, Blixa and Nick are always going on about how they want to collaborate on something. They want to write a single together, or produce a play, or maybe make a film... They know they want to do something together! The only argument is what, specifically, they are going to do.

Can you maybe see Blixa’s little... obsession with Nick in a different light, with that knowledge?

I guess that makes some kind of sense I conceded, acknowledging the truth of what Wolfgang was saying, though the tight knot of anguish in my stomach did not diminish. But why can’t I stop feeling so jealous about him?

Wolfgang spread the fingers of his hands like a parish vicar offering absolution. What’s the opposite of jealousy?

I have no idea I almost sobbed.

Cocking his head to one side, Wolfgang almost whispered Trust.

Trust? I wanted to wail, but I tried to keep my voice controlled. How can I trust, when I see the way Blixa looks at Nick, the way he acts around him, the way he ignores and disbelieves me, in favour of him, the way he... constantly talks about him when he’s not there. The fucking mentionitis. Even when Nick is not there, it’s like he is. Blixa never ever acts like that about me...

Wolfgang laughed sharply, but then scoffed, a bit more gently. I know that boy of yours keeps his emotions close to his chest. But do you honestly think that Blixa never sat opposite me here, moaning about this handsome young electrician with amazingly sexy hands and an adorable English accent, who drew, and sketched, and wrote comics about him, and yet would never ever let him get in his pants, because this handsome young thing liked girls, and Blixa, as queer as he was, could never quite be enough of a woman for this magnificent creature to deign to shag. Do you honestly think, Carter, that I never sat through days, and months, of that?

It was so unexpected that for a long minute, I stared back at Wolfgang, feeling a flush spreading slowly across my face. Blixa? I stuttered. Blixa said that... about me?

As Wolfgang re-composed himself into the semblance of a sympathetic young vicar, as if slightly embarrassed by what he’d just said, my words just hung in the air. In the silence, I tried to make sense of what he was telling me. Trust? Would I ever trust Blixa? But what was I afraid of? Blixa screwing around? I’d watched Blixa screw around for nearly a year, and it never bothered me. What
really scared me, was that Blixa would go off, and be a Muse, for someone that wasn’t me. But Nick already had a muse, hadn’t he. And no, I was not talking about Anita; she had made that clear to me.

>>Trust<< I said aloud, and tried to ignore the little voice inside me, that kept insisting, what good was a Muse, if you hadn’t so much as put pen to paper for months?

>>OK, confession time is over<< said Wolfgang, folding up his napkin and dropping it gently onto his plate to indicate that he was finished. >>Father Wolfgang absolves you in the name of Warhol, and Beuys, and Valeska Gert. Now. Do you want some help with packing up the drawings you don’t want to sell, and carrying them back to your van?<<

I took the comics home, still in their nice frames, and hung them up about the walls of my room. And then I sat down at my desk for the first time in what felt like months, and opened my sketchbooks and took out my pencils and sharpened them and arranged all of my tools about the desk. Then I made a whole pot of my great-aunt’s fiendishly strong Austrian style coffee, and sat down to work. I put my pencil down on the paper, and made my first line. It felt right in a way it hadn’t felt right in a long time, and I followed the curve around, watching the magic happen as the curve turned into a circle, the circle turned into a face, the face developed features, familiar, twisted into evil, and dialogue started to wend its way through its long, spiky black hair.

Scribbling furiously, I heard voices bubbling up in my mind – Lydia’s, Nick’s, Blixa’s, Anita’s, Wolfgang’s – and tried to form the babble of thoughts about Evil into a conversation, and from a conversation into a story, and from a story into a set of frames. And suddenly, I felt possessed, seeing the whole comic book just unwinding in front of me like I was watching a film. I didn’t even bother to ink the first page before I moved on to the next, blocking out the frames with a ruler and sketching in the images to go with the words that were crowding my head. They were all in there, my friends, though I did my best to obscure their identities, turning them into animals – Blixa as the crowing rooster judge, Nick as a stubborn donkey, Lydia as a fierce mother lioness, Wolfgang as a proud noble wolf, and Anita as a lovely wide-eyed fawn. To my eyes, they were still subtly recognisable, but I wasn’t sure they would be to anyone else. And then the last character was a dark, formless void at first, who slowly resolved into a being that was neither man nor woman, neither good nor evil, in fact barely a being at all, who was forged into shape only by the others’ observations of it. The last character was clearly me.

And so, the story unfolded, a six-way conversation between the animals about the nature of Evil and where it came from, that built and developed from Blixa’s fierce Prussian moralism to Nick’s weird Christian fantasies to Anita’s fatalism, before resolving into Wolfgang’s simple and elegant explanation. It took me two days just to block out the rough pencil sketches.

And then I panicked, as I found myself ringing Wolfgang and begging for permission to use his words in my own art.

But Wolfgang just laughed. >>No one owns ideas, my lad. Please... draw your story. I trust you to do a good job. Just... let me be the first to see it when it’s done.<<

I thanked him and hung up, putting on another pot of coffee to give me the energy to start inking it in. I worked through the night, and woke up the next morning to find that my favourite felt-tip had run out of ink. Disaster! Somehow dragging myself through the bath, I pulled on my clothes and ventured out to buy a replacement. Fortunately, as I walked through Schöneberg, I remembered there was an art supply shop just up the road from Iron-Grey, and this time, when I located a pen I liked, I bought four of them, just in case, folding the little paper bag into my raincoat for safekeeping.
Walking back home, I had just crossed the Hauptstrasse and was about to trudge up the steep side road where Jana used to squat, towards the bridge that was a short-cut over the train tracks back to my house, when I suddenly caught sight of a familiar face. I had to stop to make sure I was not mistaken, hallucinating some ghost beneath a cloud of bleached-blonde hair.

>>Beate?<<

>>Oh, hallo, Carter<< To my relief, she grinned and walked towards me, embracing me quickly.

>>What are you doing back in town?<< I stuttered, wondering if I’d missed something. >>Are you guys playing a gig? I haven’t seen any posters...<<

>>Oh no<< she shrugged airily. >>We’d just decided we’d had enough of the Rhineland. All that Carnival joviality, it wasn’t really my kind of place. I missed the smell and the cynicism of Berlin.<<

>>Berlin has a way of wending itself into your soul, doesn’t it. Let’s just say Berlin missed you, too<< I laughed.

>>Did it?<< she said, looking around, a slightly sad expression coming over her face for the first time. >>It seems like so much has changed since we’ve been away. And yet it’s exactly the same. Maybe it is I who have changed. But never mind... where is everyone? I went round Iron-Grey and it was deserted. I was just popping in to see Jana, but she’s completely cleared out. Where are Malaria!, where are the New Buildings?<<

>>Malaria! are on tour of France, Italy and Switzerland. And the New Buildings are on tour in Denmark, as far as I know...<<

Beate grinned. >>As far as you know? You know, I’ve heard rumours, even in sleepy old Düsseldorf. Aren’t you and our Blixa an item now? I can’t say I’m surprised. From when you first arrived in town, he definitely had the eye for you.<<

>>Ah, let’s not talk about Blixa<< I sighed. >>How are you and Chrislo?<<

>>Ah, let’s not talk about Chrislo<< she sighed, with a dramatic eyeroll.

For a moment, the pair of us eyed each other warily, as if wondering how much to push, but then we both burst out laughing. >>Do you want to go get a coffee and talk about it?<< I finally offered.

>>Yes, yes I would love to<< she replied, with what looked like considerable relief.

Ten minutes later, we were ensconced in a booth at a café and having a bit of a moan at one another. It astonished me, the way that heterosexual women actually seemed to bond over the faults and failings of their men, but since I had started actually sleeping with Blixa, I seemed to have been admitted to this previously unknown private club. To have a man was to know emotional pain; and heterosexual women seemed to enjoy bonding over that pain. I made only a few passing comments about Blixa hanging out with an undesirable crowd, and told her a little about the Australians who seemed to have descended on West Berlin like a cloud of locusts.

But Beate seemed genuinely torn, as she alternated between insisting that she was worried about Chrislo, and his increasingly bizarre and unpredictable behaviour; and downright venting about how unhappy their volatile relationship was swiftly becoming. He suffered from terrible moodswings, which could take a turn for the violent at any moment, especially when he was pried away from his beloved machines. Basically, anything that wasn’t making music or programming synthesisers, Chrislo could not handle, and did not want to be interested in. Which, if they were famous, wealthy musicians, with a whole staff on retainer, would not be a problem, but it really left a huge and terrible
burden on Beate, that she was increasingly unsure if she wanted to shoulder.

They had come back to West Berlin with the idea that Beate would reenroll to complete her course on Sound Design and Audio Engineering that Autumn, but while she was wrestling with the band and school and the duties of a relationship, Chrislo could not even be bothered to leave their squat to take care of basic needs such as shopping for food. Alcohol, on the other hand, he seemed always able to procure an endless supply of, and ditto chemical enhancements. But she was getting rapidly fed up.

>>But how’s the music going?<< I probed. >>You always said that the music made everything worthwhile.<<

>>He works like a demon at the music, it’s true. Some of the things he records are absolutely amazing. But we haven’t finished writing or recording anything, and we definitely haven’t done any gigs we planned to do in West Berlin, because do you know why?<<

>>I’m guessing this is another thing Chrislo is unreliable about organising?<< I shrugged.

>>Noooo... this one is on Krishna. He can’t stand Berlin. He came once, barely stepped off the train, when he said he hated it, it smelled bad and it was too cold, and he was going back to Belgium<< she moaned. >>But that’s another thing Chrislo is supposed to be looking into, and just hasn’t. This is West Berlin, there are hundreds of musicians here. You’d think it would not be a big deal to find a new singer for an established band, with a recording contract, and yet... I swear, he honestly hasn’t even asked about.<<

Remembering the way that Gudrun used to connect people in the feminist meetings at the Iron-Grey, I was suddenly struck with an idea. >>I think I know someone who doesn’t have anything else going on, and is looking to get involved with this kind of project.<<

>>Really? Do they write lyrics? That’s what we really want. Not someone who’s an amazing technical singer, though that would be nice. But what we really want is someone with a very distinct personality and stage presence, who can write their own lyrics, and front the band. Because neither Chrislo nor I are the slightest bit good at writing the damned words, and people always want words.<<

>>Yes, she writes lyrics<< I assured her, trying to think how I could get the two to meet.

>>She?<< Beate brightened. >>Oh, I like the idea of working with another woman again. I really miss that, from the Mania D days, the sense of being in a girl-gang.<<

>>Come back to my house, I’ll play you some of her material.<<

We paid for our coffees, then walked back to my great-aunt’s house. Remembering that the cassette was still in the van, where I normally listened to music, I made Beate get in the passenger seat and dug through the glove compartment, though the tape was still fairly near the top. I put it on, and Beate and I listened in silence, Beate staring at the car stereo as if it might hold the answers to all her problems.

>>I’m not keen about the band<< she observed, a little hesitant. >>The drummer’s awful.<<

>>It’s not her band, it’s her boyfriend’s band. Wait until she comes in.<<

As Anita started to sing, Beate’s face slowly started to light up. >>Oh, I like her a lot. She’s got a wonderful tough-little-girl quality to her voice.<< As the song went on, she smiled more and more.

>>Oh yes, she’s wonderful. The lyrics are so unexpected, so strange, and yet really powerful coming from this knowing little-girl voice. I like it a lot. So she’s not with this band any more? She’s
available? Because with a better band, I think she could be really something.<<

I grinned, as my plan was working out better than expected. >>Let me give her a call and see if I can introduce you guys.<<

We went inside, and I dialled Christoph’s number, hoping that I would get him or Anita, rather than Nick, but to my relief, Anita answered after it rang a few times. “Hey, babe, what are you up to?” I asked. “Are you busy this afternoon?”

“Not doing much of anything. In fact, I’m so bored I’m actually kind of glad you rang.”

“Well, be bored no more. I’ve got a project for you. Can you come out and meet us at a café? I’ve got a musician friend who has heard your demo tape, and would love to meet you.”

“Oh, god,” sighed Anita. “I would love to... but I can’t. Not this afternoon.”

“Well, when would be a good time for you? This evening maybe? Tomorrow? I’d love to get you guys together. My friend is looking for a singer for her band, and I think you would be perfect for them.”

“I, uh... don’t know,” sighed Anita, sounding more than a little worried. “See, Nick has gone out, and I have no idea when he’ll be back.”

“Well, come out and meet us,” I urged, feeling a little irritated at the man. “You don’t need his permission to meet up with a band, do you?”

“Well... no, obviously not...” hedged Anita. “But you see, he’s gone out and taken the only set of keys. Christoph is away for the week, and so... if I go out, I have no way of getting back in the building. And I have no idea when Nick is going to be back. He never tells me these things when he goes...”

Sighing deeply, I put my hand to my forehead and tried not to get angry at that asshole. “So you’re telling me that Nick has gone out... possibly for days. And taken the keys with him, so that you can’t actually leave the house until Christoph comes back?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Anita’s voice sounded so pathetic and so resigned that I wanted to drive around West Berlin and hunt Nick down until I found him, and then punch his lights out.

But Beate touched my arm gently. Her English had clearly improved greatly while she had been touring. “The friend. She stays with Christoph?” I nodded. “Christoph has a piano, ja?”

“Does Christoph have a piano, babe?” I asked Anita.

“Sure he does. Nick uses it to write songs on sometimes.”

“Tell her, we come to her,” Beate said with a determined little nod.

Beate asked if we could pick up some dinner, and maybe a bottle of wine on the way, as I drove her over to Kreuzberg. And it was actually a very good thing that she did, because it turned out that not only had Nick left Anita without keys, he had left her without any food, either, as there was not a thing to eat in the tiny kitchen. But Beate had been generous, and brought more than enough to share, and Anita wolfed down her dinner, as if she hadn’t eaten in days.

To my delight, Anita and Beate hit it off almost immediately. Beate played her a copy of the Liaisons Dangereuses record, and Anita sprang to her feet and started to dance around the room, spinning as
if captivated by the wild, juddering beats. When I left them, Beate had sat down at the piano, and was playing a few tunes, while Anita had got out her notebook of poetry, and was extemporising some melodies to try to match music and words together. It seemed like a musical match made in heaven!
I Love You (Forget It)

Chapter Summary

As Anita and Beate grow closer, it emerges that the two women unfortunately have more in common than their taste in music. Blixa returns from Copenhagen with a guilty conscience, and the realisation that he could actually lose Carter leads to a proposition that surprises them both.

TW: depictions of and discussion of Domestic Violence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I went back to my home, and immediately threw myself into my work again, though I found myself changing some of the images, turning the soft, beautiful fawn that was supposed to be Anita into a small but exquisite bird who was being kept in a cage by the donkey, who had long-ago lost the key.

Again, I stayed up all night inking it in, but in the morning I was rudely jolted out of bed by a phone call from Thomas at the studio, who wanted to know if I could come in last-minute as a replacement for Jürgen, who was down with the flu. Frankly, the money was too good to turn down, so I agreed, and somehow managed to drag myself to work, and did a reasonable impression of a competent sound engineer for the next two days. But even as I was mic-ing drum kits and operating the tape machine, my head still kept coming back to the comic book, turning it over and over, thinking of slight adjustments to the words and little additional backgrounds and details that I could add without too much difficulty.

On Friday, I got a triumphant telephone call from Beate. The Birthday Party were heading out for the weekend to do a short tour of the Netherlands, but Anita had decided to stay behind to work on the new material with Liaisons Dangereuses, and Beate wanted to know if I could arrange a proper studio for the weekend. They wanted to put together a little demo with the new line-up so they could start booking gigs. I rang Thomas and asked if he had anyone in for the weekend, and he told me that they’d had a cancellation, and was so delighted to find a replacement at short notice that he offered them a real bargain. As happy as I was to be working with Beate and Anita, I was still annoyed that I would not be able to finish my comic book by the weekend, but still I had to put it aside, and go in to work.

But as soon as we settled down to work, it became apparent that when Beate had been moaning about the precarious state of Chrislo, rather than exaggerating, she had actually been downplaying his problems. He was well fucked up, and I didn’t even think it was alcohol. I suspected something harder, from the way he lurched between being sullen and uncooperative, and being aggressive and defiant, insisting that they didn’t need a fucking tape op or a sound engineer on their sessions.

Anita, to her credit, acted like a complete professional about it all, or, to be honest, perhaps she was so used to being around junkies that the whole situation seemed completely normal to her. Chrislo became more and more truculent, to the point where started unplugging all of his machines and insisting that I call him a taxi to go home.

Beate took me aside and apologised profusely, even as she begged me for some way to rescue the
sessions. Chrislo had pissed off enough people in Berlin that they needed this demo to prove that they were reliable enough to book for a gig. I thought for a moment, then asked how they had been doing gigs with Chrislo in this state.

Pulling a slightly guilty face, Beate explained >>I have back-up tapes of everything. At live performances, I use a portable mixing board to mix then in and out, to make sure that the music always keeps going, no matter what Chrislo gets up to.<<

I glanced over at Anita, still sitting down and going through her notebooks. >>Can you get the tapes, and have Anita sing over them? We can mix them together in the studio as easily as you can, live.<<

>>I don’t know that Anita knows the old songs?<<

Anita looked up at the sound of her own name. >>The old songs? From record you giving me have? Yes. That, now knows me<< she offered, in her halting German. It amazed me, honestly, how much Anita had picked up in only a few months, where Nick still struggled with even the basics, struggling to enunciate ‘Es geht mir gut’ as opposed to ‘I go good it’ or ‘going I good it’ or some strangled greeting that had nothing to do with German.

“But can you sing it? Krishna sings sometimes French, sometimes Spanish...”

Standing up, Anita took a deep breath, then launched into a pretty a-Capella version of Mystere dans le Brouillard.

“You speak French,” I gasped, when she had finished.

Anita beamed. “Of course I do. I did years and years of it at school.”

Beate and I exchanged glances, as I said quietly >>Take Chrislo home in a cab, then come back with your master tapes, OK? We can still do this.<<

As she disappeared, I set Anita up with a microphone in the isolation booth. “I’m an old hand at this, now,” she laughed, picking up her headphones and adjusting the volume levels.

But when Beate returned, I could not help but notice that she was sporting an ugly bruise starting to come in on the side of her face.

>>What the...<< I blurted out, getting ready to rage, but she held up her hand, and the expression on her face warned me off.

>>Don’t<< she snapped. >>We have to get on with this recording, and I do not have time for this conversation right now.<<

>>Yeah, but...<<

>>Please, let me get on with my work<< she insisted. Anita came up beside us, stared at the bruise on the side of Beate’s face, then quietly, without even saying a word, put her arm around the other woman’s shoulders and pulled her in for a tiny hug for just a moment, before letting her go.

Beate’s focus was admirable, her fingers flying over the controls of her synchronised tape-decks, and the small, portable mixing desk she used to control them. We laid each of the tapes down to a different track on the master, then got to work recording Anita’s vocals over the existing music.

Anita was a real pro, doing two, maybe occasionally three takes for each track, and then she had nailed it, moving swiftly onto the next. Within a couple of hours, we had enough for a three-track
dem, so we settled down to mix the thing. Beate controlling the faders and adding tiny bits of effects to make the whole thing sound like it had been done live. Really, I was a little bit in awe of her, because, although I had become pretty handy with a mixing desk over the summer, I was still a little baby Praktikant in comparison to her skills at the soundboard.

>>Where did you learn all these tricks?<< I asked, astonished.

>>I told you, I’m doing the sound design course at the Hochschule. If you want to learn these tricks, you should sign up. I’m sure they’d take you, with your experience. They love training people from a technical background, teaching them about Art as well as Technik.<<

We mixed down the songs quickly, then spent the rest of our allotted time making duplicates that she could send out to promoters and bookers, hoping to put together some shows in Berlin, and then maybe a tour with the new line-up. Anita brightened when Beate started talking about gigs, laughing at the idea that she could do a European tour of her own.

“Imagine that,” she laughed. “Nick getting home from tour to find out that I’ve gone on tour of Europe without him.”

>>Burn an extra copy for the Risk<< I told Beate. >>I’m sure they’ll play it there, and you know everyone who’s anyone drinks there. It’s really good publicity.<<

>>Is your boyfriend still tending bar there?<< Beate laughed.

I stopped and blinked, and it was only at that point that I realised it was now Saturday, and it had been a whole week since I had parted company from Blixa. I assumed that he would be working, as he seldom missed a shift, as it was his only regular source of income. But it suddenly struck me as odd that it had been a week since I’d seen or heard any sign of him, and I had not even seemed to notice. Feeling a little guilty, I nodded slowly, then suggested. >>Shall we go over and pay him a visit...<< before calling out to Anita. “Do you fancy a swift drink at Risiko?”

“You betcha!”

I loaded up the van, then locked up the studio and drove over to Schöneberg. >>Do you want to drop your equipment at your place, before we head over?<<

But Beate made a strange face. >>Do you have anywhere secure to leave your van? It might be better not to take it home if Chrislo’s still in a mood.<<

>>I can leave the van in the Hof at my house. That’s as secure as anywhere<< I offered. >>But do you want to talk about this?<<

>>Vodka first, talk after<< insisted Beate, and I had to do as she asked, backing the van through the narrow passage into the back courtyard before locking the gate as we headed up to the Risk bar, taking a shortcut through the old graveyard.

“Oh my god, you live by a cemetery, this is so cool,” gasped Anita as we made our way through the spooky, broken tombstones. “If we do a photo shoot for the band, can we do it here?”

Beate laughed, her own spirits being lifted by Anita’s enthusiasm. “What a good idea.” They hooked their arms together as they strolled forward, and I felt pleased that both of them seemed to have been reinvigorated and revived by the nascent collaboration.

All three of us were in good spirits by the time we reached the Risk bar, laughing and joking as we tapped on the door for admittance. Maria shrieked when she saw Beate. >>You’re back! So you’ve
not been eaten by Düsseldorf after all. Vodkas all round! Well, two vodkas for the ladies, and a coffee for Carter. Blixa! Can you make a coffee?<<

>>It’s fine<< I giggled. >>I’ll have a coke, and you should put this tape on, it is fresh off the mixing desk, and you guys are gonna love it.<<

And then I looked over at Blixa, wondering why he hadn’t spoken to me, and as I caught his eye, the expression on his face almost stopped me cold, my heartbeat catching in my throat as I suddenly felt as if all the air had been drained out of the room. For although he rearranged his face into studied blankness when he realised that I was looking at him, the expression on his face had been unmistakable: guilt.

Anita and Beate collected the drinks, and having glanced around the front room and decided it was too busy, had decided to go through into the back, gesturing for me to follow them. But my eyes remained locked with Blixa’s, my brow furrowing as I tried to work out what was going on with him. The guilty look in his eyes wouldn’t go away, even as his gaze followed me across the tiny room, a slightly panicked expression coming over his face as I smiled and shrugged, and gestured that I was going to accompany my friends into the back.

“OK, when I say go, you start chugging the vodka, and you don’t stop until I say so,” insisted Anita, gesturing towards Beate’s generous half-pint of vodka.

“Chug?” asked Beate, a little confused.

“Swallow fast. Like this... Go!” shouted Anita, and held the glass up to her face, trying to gulp down the vodka, though her eyes were starting to water and her throat muscles were twitching with revulsion. Beate laughed and lifted her glass to her mouth, getting down three or four mouthfuls before giving up. “Stop!” cried Anita, and both of them shivered and shook themselves and gasped for air. “OK, you’ve had your vodka. Now tell me about that bruise.”

“Oh mein gott, it is not how it looks,” Beate protested. “I hit him first, to be honest. He is standing by the tape deck. He does not want me to take it, he is... how do you say... he blocks with his body. I want the tape. Also. I grab him on Schultern... what do you call...” She gestured lightly towards her upper arms.

“Shoulders,” supplied Anita.

“I grab him on the shoulders. I give him a little push. He give me a little push right back. I give him a more... bigger push. OK, I hit him. So he hit me back. I grab tapes and run,” explained Beate. “It is my fault. I should not start pushing. But I get angry. I do not like when men tell me what to do.”

“That’s not OK, sweetie,” insisted Anita. “I don’t care if you pushed him first. He is twice the size of you. Him pushing you is not the same as you pushing him. And him hitting you...?”

“I know, I know,” moaned Beate. “But I have hit him before. I lose my temper. I am passionate person, and he... he... well, he has a temper also.”

“Look, honey, but no. You and me are going to have a talk about men...” Anita persisted, but as the pair of them lowered their voices, I felt a vague prickle on the back of my neck, like I felt I was being stared at, and turned around to see that Blixa had come out on his break, and was standing on the opposite side of the room by the door, gazing at me with an expression that could only be described as hang-dog. There was still guilt all over his face, but mixed with a little fear and something that looked like self-loathing or maybe even remorse.
My mind went blank. Except for one word, that is, that floated to the top of my head and seemed to trickle through and percolate through my whole brain like a leaky drainpipe soaking an inadequately insulated wall. Nick. It had to be Nick. Something about Nick. What has Blixa done with Nick. Oh god, why is this man in our lives, why did we ever set eyes upon Nick.

Blixa saw me watching him, and raised his eyebrows in my direction, like he wanted me to come to him, because he did not want to say whatever it was he had to say about Nick in the company of my little girl-gang, currently both fuming with anger against their individual men that neither of them could adequately express, except at the other. There was no way Blixa was walking into that trap, with whatever was going on his head, about whatever he had just done with Nick.

I took a deep breath, and walked over to him. >>OK, so what have you been up to, what are you looking so guilty about?<< I said in the most even and calm voice I could muster, even though inside, my heart was absolutely shaking and quivering with fear of whatever it was that Blixa had done with Nick.

>>I am... I am...<< He shifted his weight from foot to foot like a nervous horse, before finally his face cracked into open pain. >>I am so, so sorry<< he managed to sigh, with the mournful solemnity of a pallbearer at a funeral. >>I fucked up, OK?<<

>>Fucked up how?>< I asked, my voice very quiet, as I had to literally force the words out over the pounding of my intense drumbeat heart. Oh god, it’s Nick. His hideous grinning face filled my thoughts, the dancing image of that repulsive junkie body, naked, sprawled out across my mind, oh god, no. Just spit it out Blixa, it’s fucking Nick, isn’t it. What have you done with Nick.

He lowered his voice, glancing around him to make sure no one was listening, before finally just grabbing me by the hand and dragging me into the little storeroom, pulling the door shut behind us and kicking an empty beer crate in front of it to keep it closed. >>I fucked a girl in Copenhagen, OK? It was a total mistake. I was very drunk. She had coke. It just happened, OK? And I realised I’d made a mistake as soon as I sobered up. But it happened and there it is.<<

For a moment I simply stared at him, flabbergasted, and then I started to laugh, feeling great waves of relief washing over me like a hot shower after a long day at work. It wasn’t Nick, was my only thought, as the image of that hideous naked scarecrow body jerked away like a phantom dispersed by daylight. It was nothing to do with Nick, and I was grateful.

Blixa looked confused. >>Why are you laughing?>< he asked, a little panicked, as if he were afraid I was laughing at him.

>>Blixa, I don’t care. Some girl? This is sausage to me. I thought something really awful had happened.<<

>>You don’t think this is awful?>< He seemed genuinely surprised at my reaction.

>>Did you have a good time?>< I shrugged, poking at my emotions to see if they felt at all tender, but to be honest, I was so overcome with relief that it was nothing to do with Nick, that I could barely raise a whisper of ill feeling.

Blixa frowned. >>Uhm, I couldn’t really say. I was really fucked up, I don’t remember much of it at all. I think she had a good time, as she asked us all to stay. We ended up staying at her squat for three days.<<

His voice was so matter-of-fact about it that I burst out laughing again. >>You had such a terrible time fucking her that you stayed for three days.<<
His mouth twisted into a wry smirk. "Copenhagen is nice? he offered. "They have a really good squat scene there. They have squatted an entire military installation, turned it into an anarchist paradise. It’s quite something. It was the anarchist squat I was staying for, not the girl."

"Was the girl nice? Good-looking, at least?" I teased, finding myself smirking back at him. His conscience clearly bothered him so much that I felt I should give him something of a reaction.

"She was alright" he shrugged. "Yes. Small, pretty, dark hair. But unfortunately she didn’t seem to be that bright. I’m not really into girls that aren’t clever. I like to be able to have a conversation before and afterwards, you know? To me, this is flirtation, to match your intellects. It takes the fun, the frisson out of it, if there is not intellect to spar with. It was OK, but... there’s not the depth. So that’s why I don’t feel so good about the whole thing."

"Then why did you fuck her?" I shrugged.

He echoed my shrug back to me, though of course, his was far more expressive, the great wings of his shoulder-blades sloughing off guilt like a pitched German roof sloughed off snow. "It’s expected, you know? You stay with a girl for a few days, you’re expected to fuck her, as a matter of courtesy."

I was fascinated by this arrangement, wanting to ask how this was so different from those transactions of Ilsa’s that he had so disapproved of. "What, like paying for a hotel?"

"Stop it, stop being so mercantile about it" he muttered, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "I... I feel bad about it enough already. I suppose I feel disappointed in myself, like, at the time, it was just animal lust, but afterwards, I thought... you know, this is not worth fucking up what I’ve got going on with Carter for. His eyes, though still tinged with guilt, looked completely honest, as if he was surprised by his own admission.

I frowned. "Look, Blixa, if you don’t enjoy the sex, or you feel guilty about it afterwards, then don’t do it. But don’t blame me for these feelings. You are your own person, you do what you like."

He stared at me, astonished. "You’re not angry with me?"

"Should I be?" I asked with a shrug, searching for emotions that just weren’t there. It wasn’t Nick, was all I could keep thinking, with sweet blessed relief. Oh thank god it wasn’t Nick. "I tell you, it’s sausage to me."

He suddenly reached out and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me to him and squeezing me so tight I almost couldn’t breathe, holding me against him and burying his face in my hair, moving his lips back and forth against the edge of my ear. "Oh god, I thought you have been avoiding me. I’ve been so scared you were going to chuck me. And the longer I went without seeing you, the more convinced I was that you had found out, and you were ignoring me as a way of ending things with me. And it hurt. It felt like death, the thought that I might lose you."

"I’ve not been avoiding you, I’ve just been... working."

"Don’t go away again... ever" he murmured to my hair. "And I don’t ever want to go away again, without you. Never again. I’m your moon. I need to orbit around you."

I stood, shocked, in his arms, slowly raising my hands and tangling them in his hair, uncharacteristically flat, soft and silky with grease, thinking how strange it was that Blixa had these feelings, and then thinking how it was even stranger that he seemed so surprised by the intensity of
them. But I, too, was surprised. I don’t know why I found it so hard to believe that Blixa actually did
love me and miss me and value me as a presence in his life, even after a year of telling me so, but the
strength of his declaration stunned me a little.

>>Blixa<< I insisted carefully, thinking through what Wolfgang had told me. >>This is West Berlin.
And if I have learned anything from West Berlin, it is that we do not compete. We collaborate, we
share. Like punk musicians in West Berlin don’t compete over gigs, they share them and invite their
friends’ bands onstage to join them, and if there’s not enough keyboard players to go round, people
play in more than one band, like Susanne sometimes plays with Malaria! and sometimes she plays
with The Skin? And it’s all cool. My friends, these brilliant feminists I know, they’ve taught me that
women should think in the same way. We should not compete with each other, and we should not
see other women as threats. We should see other women as friends, as collaborators. So it’s pointless
to get angry about this woman. Men are not worth getting angry about. We should just share.<<

Blixa stared at me in surprise, his mouth moving like he wanted to talk, but no sound coming out.
But finally, he managed to form words, though what he said astonished me. >>Perhaps you are more
West Berlin than I, at this point. Because I don’t care about what’s cool, or punk, or ‘West Berlin’<<
I’d never heard anyone say those words with such derision. >>I just want to be yours, and yours
only, so I don’t have to worry about losing you.<<

>>People are not possessions<< I said quietly. >>You can’t own someone else.<<

>>But what if I want to give myself? What if I want to belong, to only you?>>

For a long moment, there was silence, as I thought about that, as I thought about Blixa belonging to
me, not as a possession, but as a man who chose to be with me. But what he said next surprised me
more.

>>I think we should get a place together. I want to move in with you. I want to live with you.<<

I laughed a little to try to defuse the shock of it. >>Really? Is squatting at Iron-Grey getting a little too
primitive even for you?>>

But he raised his head and looked at me with real hurt in his eyes. >>Why do you always have to
make a joke of everything? I’m serious. My feelings are serious. I’m in love with you, and I want to
be with you. Full time. I want to see your face first thing in the morning, every morning. I want you
and me to belong together.<<

I blinked. >>I’m sorry. I didn’t realise you were serious. I mean, after what you’ve just told me about
fucking random girls on tour, I believe I’d be excused for thinking that I wasn’t that big a deal to
you.<<

>>Not a big deal to me?>> gasped Blixa with the full force of his wounded pride. >>I’ve been in
agony these past days since we got back. Agony. My soul burns. Thinking that you would leave me
over it. Alright, I was an arsehole. I went to Copenhagen thinking, well, if she doesn’t want me, I’ll
show her. I can find someone else who does. But I didn’t actually want the someone else. And it
shocked me, Carter, how much it upset me, when I realised that my stupid ‘I’ll show her’ mistake
might cost me your love. I hate how it felt. It wasn’t fun; it was agony.<<

>>Well, don’t screw around if it upsets you so much?>> I told him quietly, trying not to show
disbelief at this sudden discovery of depth of feeling. Blixa could be such a drama queen about such
ridiculous things, that I was genuinely flabbergasted by this sudden burst of apparent sincerity.
Perhaps I would never truly come around to the idea that Blixa was actually mine. Not that I thought
he was some shy, wild creature that would dart off at any moment if I startled him with a sudden
movement towards exclusivity, but that I thought of Blixa as so completely his own, headstrong, independent person that I couldn’t imagine one person ever satisfying his intensity enough for him to settle down. Hell, I still thought of my own intensity as something too much to inflict upon one person. But was that the real crux of the issue? Did I secretly think Blixa was too much for me, or that I was too much for Blixa? What did I really want from him? Did I want to live with him? Or did I want specifically not to live with him, not to have him as my personal responsibility? I suppose that was the problem; I didn’t really know. My mind felt all churned up, like I didn’t even know what I wanted.

>>If you say you don’t want me to screw other girls, then I won’t. Anything for you. I want to keep this... this you and me thing. It’s... important to me.<< His eyes were both serious and contrite, as if this was something he had wanted to hear from me, to make it be me enforcing his chastity, rather than him understanding that maybe he couldn’t handle the conflicting emotions that arose from infidelity.

For a moment, it almost danced on my tongue, wanting to say to him, ‘if you love me, then you need to leave Nick alone. Tell me you’ll never have anything to do with him again.’ And yet I was a coward. I couldn’t force myself to say the words, couldn’t even begin to trust that if I asked him this, he would actually give up Nick, and not me.

Instead, I dithered. I didn’t want it; his guilt laid at my doorstep. That I was certain of, in a way I was certain of nothing else. >>Why do you need me to say it? I mean, what do you want from me, in telling me this? Absolution? Forgiveness? I can’t stop you from doing it again. Only you can stop yourself from acting like this. Or is that what you’re asking, that you and me need to come to some... arrangement, like you had with Jana, so you don’t feel bad about what you get up to on tour?<<

Blixa pulled back, and suddenly looked at me with a different light in his eyes, a little curious, a little wary. >>Arrangement?<< he asked, as if this were the first he had heard of such a thing.

I stuttered over my words, suddenly wondering if this were recent history I shouldn’t have poked so hard. >>Didn’t you and Jana have an arrangement with each other, whereby she didn’t consider it infidelity if you went with men?<<

Now his expression had genuinely changed, half mystified, half horrified. >>Where did you hear such a thing? I never told you any such thing.<<

>>I...<< I opened my mouth to tell him that I had heard it from Jana herself. Except I hadn’t, had I. She had only told me that Blixa wasn’t all that choosy about the gender of his lovers. Although she had, to be fair, tried to push me into taking him as a lover, I realised it must have taken place only after they had already made the decision to part. Who had told me that they had an open relationship? I must have heard it somewhere. >>I just heard it. Around.<<

>>Do you think I used to just screw around on Jana? Is that what this is about?<<

>>Come off it, Blixa. You had an open relationship. You even tried it on with me a couple of times, remember? Taking me to that party of Wolfgang’s. Trying to kiss me in Saint Matthew’s Cemetery.<<

Blixa turned away from me and put his face into his hands, squeezing the top of his nose and rubbing his eyes. >>We had an open relationship, yes. It was her idea. She wanted it that way. Strong West Berlin women and their ideas about sexual freedom. Thank you, yes, I have heard so much of this in my life already. Is it such a crime that I want to have an exclusive, just two people relationship with you?<<
It’s not a crime<< I stuttered. >>It’s just... it’s just... I mean, we talked about this, didn’t we, that night at Wolfgang’s? I think we both have our doubts that either of us are the kind of person that can even do an exclusive relationship. And I don’t want a relationship that’s going to feel like a constraint or a burden to... either of us. I don’t want to turn into...<< I had been about to say turn into Anita or Beate, unable to leave boyfriends who treated them so cruelly, but I stopped myself just in time.

But Blixa turned around, hurt shining in his eyes. >>You don’t want to turn into Jana? Is that what you were going to say?<<

>>No! No...<< I could see in his eyes that he thought I was lying, but I didn’t want to betray what my friends had told me in confidence.

>>Do you think I didn’t love her? Do you think I didn’t love her enough, is that what you’re saying? Is that what you mean, when you tell me that you think that I screwed around on her indiscriminately?<<

>>No, no, no<< I insisted, then paused. >>But I just don’t think you can love someone out of being schizophrenic.<< I paused for a moment, my thoughts tugged insistently back to Nick. >>Or a junkie.<<

Blixa suddenly withdrew from me, pulling himself upright to his full height in the tiny space, looking down his long nose at me with anger that would have been magnificent, had it not struck something cold through me. >>You don’t actually take me seriously, as a lover, do you?<< he accused, his voice taut. >>Like, you don’t even take me seriously as a person. So you don’t think I’m capable of being serious, as a lover?<<

>>What?<< I sputtered, wondering how this conversation had started with him confessing infidelity, but somehow ending with me accused. >>You’re the one who wanted to keep things casual. You’re the one who told me... ‘be my distant boyfriend, just come and go like a cat.’<<

>>I said I didn’t want to have to be the one to pursue you<< he snapped. >>But this feels so unbalanced now. Like I love you so much more than you love... oh, forget it.<< Kicking the box away from the door angrily, he yanked it open and stormed off into the now quite crowded bar.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, this chapter (and the next) was a hard one to write, striking a balance with the conflict between Blixa's vulnerability / need, and his typical standoffish, slightly arrogant aloofness. This episode was the one that triggered the final argument between my beta reader and I. That she simply could not imagine Blixa (not even a young, less jaded, more emotionally available Blixa) ever pursuing anyone.

And yet, I don’t think it’s that simple. Here’s me trying to write a love scene that flips all of the heteronormative assumptions about the shapes that relationships are supposed to take, and who does what roles in them. Blixa insisted at the start that he didn’t want to be ~the boy~ in the relationship, that he didn’t want to have to be the pursuer. And Carter took him at his word. Except Blixa discovers that actually, being ~the girl~ in a relationship is kind of shit. It makes him vulnerable to wanting more than he is getting; and suddenly he realises that he doesn’t have all the power in this relationship any more.
There’s a part of me that thinks that Carter’s cynical assessment of the situation is correct: Blixa is tired of the primitive conditions at Iron-Grey. He wants a home, perhaps he even wants a sugar-mummy to take care of him, since he really likes staying with the Weimar Lesbian Aunts. But there’s also the bruised romantic in me that thinks Blixa actually believes what he is saying: the thought of losing Carter makes Blixa understand exactly how deep in love he is. But Carter just doesn’t believe that he really loves them as much as he says he does, he’s a drama queen and he’s in love with the whole idea of yearning and desire. The pair of them have really flipped roles. That at the start, Carter was obsessed, and Blixa was intrigued and attracted by the sheer force of Carter's desire. But now Blixa can't stand the idea of not being the focus of Carter's intense desire, even as he's started to treat it as if he can take it for granted. (He can't!) It's not that Carter is playing hard to get; it's that Carter turning into such a cat-boy has shifted the balance of power, because Blixa wants to be able to take that desire for granted.

I don't know! I don't know! I've rewritten this scene (and the next) half a dozen times, that fight with my former beta reader really knocked my confidence in this part of the plot. It's not even that I think Blixa is ~being the pursuer~ here. It's more that he got used to a certain level of adoration from Carter. And when he does things to fuck that up, he realises he actually misses it and needs it when it's not there.

I don't know! I just really hope it works, and seems believable, what's going on with these two.
Blixa and Carter agree to move in together, and join one of West Berlin's many squatter communities.

I stayed in the storeroom at the back of Risk for a few minutes, trying to compose myself, but I simply couldn’t understand what had gone wrong. The sense of relief I’d felt, over the fact that the Awful Thing had had nothing to do with Nick... that seemed to have evaporated now, under the intense heat of wondering what on earth I had said or done to make Blixa feel I didn’t take him seriously. But somehow the conversation seemed to have started with him holding all the cards, and ended up with me holding none.

Taking a deep breath to clear my head, I went out to look for Beate and Anita, wondering if maybe one of them could explain my incomprehensible lover to me. Unfortunately, both girls seemed to have disappeared. I tried to think where they might have gone, wondering if they’d gone back to Christoph’s or gone on to try to remonstrate with Chrislo. But as I walked through into the front room, I caught sight of Blixa, now back behind the bar and serving drinks as fast as humanly possible, chatting with bright, slightly forced animation, with everyone in sight, like the same social butterfly he’d always been.

My heart ached to see him so light and easy, when I felt so rearranged by his confession and unexpected request. We’d always been a bit of an odd couple that way, him the charismatic ringleader, and me more quiet, thoughtful and reserved. I’d thought we balanced each other out, but clearly he thought we were unbalanced? The relationship did feel unbalanced to me, but not in the way he thought. So he believed that he loved me more than I loved him? I always felt like I was far more in love with him than he was with me, but that I had to be the cautious one, knowing that I would be the one to get hurt if the whole thing blew apart. Blixa, on the other hand, just threw himself wholeheartedly into situations, without looking before he leapt. If anything, Blixa was always too much of an optimist! But then again... I loved his optimism. Blixa’s optimism tugged and tossed me into the deep water of situations I never would have attempted on my own – but found I loved, once I was afloat with him beside me.

In the end, I decided that the best thing to do was just stoically bear it, and wait for him to blow through this mood like he blew through all the others. So I had been about to wrap my British reserve around me like a cloak, put my nose in the air and walk out the front door, when suddenly the loudmouthed painter who’d been sitting at the end of the bar peeled himself off his stool and announced his intention to >>fuck off to the Excess Club for a real night’s entertainment.<< Habit took over, and thinking I couldn’t pass up a rare empty bar stool, I found myself leaping for it, and, to my surprise, no one else got there first. That cosy habitual spot, between the bar and window, was mine. I glanced over at Blixa, but he was studiously ignoring me, so I dug in my canvas bag and pulled out my sketchbook, settling down to draw.

For about ten minutes, we had a running battle of the wills, as I knew Blixa was aware of my presence, but he kept only half-approaching me, coming over to clear away empties. I didn’t raise my head, not even glancing at him, and he didn’t speak to me, either. It wasn’t that busy a night, as there was something going on at the Excess – and I realised much later, that he was only flying solo.
because the Birthday Party were still on tour – and so he was actually standing around, drinking and gossiping with the punters, far more than he was serving drinks. I could see he was trying not to look at me, but his eyes seemed to keep tugging back in my direction, and as always, he simply could not resist the urge to pose, to stand and preen and back-comb his hair and arch his slender chest. I tried not to pay him too much mind. I just sat and drew, a strange drawing of a creature with two snake-like heads, each straining to try to get on top of the other. >>I want you to be the first to admit you are joined to me<< >>No I want you to be the first to admit you are joined to me<<

There was a fairly long lull in trade and Blixa leaned back on his haunches against the bar, lighting himself a cigarette, fussing with his hair to make sure the long, ragged bits were still standing up perpendicular in the back. I turned over the page, and drew a pair of creatures that were completely intertwined together, tangled in knots, both of them biting off little pieces of each other while insisting >>I love you more<< and >>No I love you more<< while they were both eating up equal parts of each other and growing more and more tangled until you could no longer tell where one ended and the other began.

A napkin suddenly appeared at my elbow, and then a moment after it, an open can of coke. I looked up to see Blixa nervously backing away, as if trying to pretend he hadn’t put them there. I smiled at him and took a sip. He smiled back nervously, biting his lip, before being called off to serve another customer.

When he was done, I caught his eye and beckoned him over. He came, hesitantly, and stood in front of me, looking down at me expectantly, his expression half trepidation, half bruised pride. I just stared up at him, knowing I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t think what. Only when I looked into his eyes, I just knew that I loved him. It wasn’t a rational thought, it wasn’t something I could pin down and say, it’s because he’s beautiful, or it’s because he’s clever. It was just a feeling of wellbeing, of completeness, when he and I looked into one another’s eyes. So I reached up and put my hand on the back of his neck and pulled his face down for the briefest of kisses before releasing him. Emotions passed over his face, surprise, annoyance, embarrassment, then pleasure.

>>Don’t do that. I’m working?<< he muttered shyly, though I noticed he did not move away, his body still bent towards me, nervous legs kicking at the dirty floor. I showed him first one drawing, then the other. He smiled and rolled his shoulders back and forth sheepishly. >>Yeah. This is true, this is us<< he conceded, pointing at the first drawing, then stopped to peer intently at the second. >>Is this true? Is this really true?<<

>>Do you think I don’t love you?<<

>>But you’re always so calm, so stoic, poking holes in my passion. You’re so reserved, it’s hard to know what you think sometimes.<<

>>I thought you liked my composure. One of us has to be composed.<<

He smiled a sheepish grin. >>I do like the way you look after me. I feel like I am always spinning, spinning out of control, and maybe you are my... well, my centre of gravity. Pulling me back to you like the sun tugs at her planets. Back to sense, and to order. To science.<<

I smiled, charmed by the little in-joke, his reference to my love of physics, as I felt my heart melting. >>I love you so much, you big dumb spaghetti-noodle...<<

He grinned at me, but abruptly there was another small pile-up of customers, and he had to stop talking to me, and go over and serve some drinks, opening up another bottle of wine and pouring it out for a gaggle of art school girls.
As he worked, I turned over the next page, and I wanted to draw something, but my mind seemed to have gone blank. Instead, I took the lid off my pen and wrote, in stark black pen, in English, at the top of the page. “What do you really want?” Then I put the pen down and stared at the blank page.

After about ten minutes, the crowd dispersed, and Blixa came back to stand by me. Seeing me staring at the open book, he took it and turned it around. But then he did something strange, in that he picked up the pen himself, and held it for a moment over the page. I knew, that both of us were somehow both intensely verbal, intensely wordy people. Words had a kind of magic, for both of us. And yet, he had never previously made a mark in my sketchbook.

But he took my pen boldly in his left hand, and he wrote, underneath, in his spidery scrawl, >>I want to live with you.<< And then he looked at me very meaningfully, as if the act of writing it down were like a magic spell that somehow made it real.

My thoughts whirled about my head. On one level, I did want it. To be with Blixa all the time, to never worry about him, to know that we always had a place to come back to together, it was a seductive idea. If we lived together, maybe I could finally believe that he was really mine. And relax, be that calm centre of gravity that he somehow believed me to be.

But I always needed precision. I always needed the right word, needed to somehow understand what I was getting myself into. Picking up the pen, I wrote, again, in English, “Do you mean, be a proper couple?” And I turned the book back around to face him.

Blixa stared down at the paper, and his face abruptly darkened, biting on his lip as he frowned at the line of text. >>What does this word mean?<< he asked defensively, tapping the word ‘proper’. >>I don’t know that I understand this. I don’t know that I can do this... correct style of relationship. Is that really what you want?<<

But the word he used was all wrong. He said ‘richtig’, which meant proper in the sense of correct or orderly or respectable. Which was completely not the sense in which I’d used the word at all. >>No, no, no<< I protested. >>That’s not the word I meant at all...<< I grasped for German words that wouldn’t come, as he gazed at me, slightly apprehensive, from under his hair. All along, I’d thought that German was supposed to be the language with the mysterious untranslatable words, and yet we seemed to have been derailed by the common British usage of ‘proper’.

“In ordnung,” he sneered. “Anständig.” Respectable, upstanding, polite... >>This is not me, and I did not think it was you, either.<<

>>No!<< I protested. >>That’s not what I meant at all. I meant, more like...<< I pulled out my pen and scratched out the word ‘proper’ and wrote first ‘wirklich’, then scratched that out and put instead ‘echt’. Real. True. Genuine. Then I scratched all of it out, and stared down at my sketchbook.

Another customer came over, and Blixa left me, to tend bar, leaving me all confused and discombobulated, like I hated to be misunderstood, especially over a point of translation about something that was so important to me. Abandoning pretty drawings, or nice texts, I just scratched away with my pen, because sometimes logic failed, and the only way to puzzle through what I was feeling, was just to write it down.

>>I don’t want to do anything just because it’s correct, or expected of me, or just because it’s simply what our parents did, or the same thing as what all our friends are doing. I only want to do, what I feel in my deep heart. What is sincere, what is authentic to how I feel. But I want to be certain, that what we feel, is real, and true. Not a thing for display, for the eyes of others. And not a thing that is only ‘necessary’, because of financial need or animal lust or momentary insecurities. I want to be certain, that the decisions we make are on account of true feeling. And I want you to be certain, too.
If we live together, it needs to mean something. It needs to be real.<< And this time, I used echt.

He was gone a long time, this time, laughing and joking with a large group of young people who seemed to have an endless drinks order. When he came back, he was in quite a jolly mood, because they had given him a cigarette, and even lit it for him, and he sucked at it like a contented baby, as he walked back towards me, and looked down at what I had written.

And as he read, his face slowly changed, from relaxed jocularity to an expression of longing, almost painful yearning, as he reached the end, then moved his eyes up from the paper, to gaze down at me with his eyes full of something I couldn’t read. Taking his cigarette from his mouth, he exhaled a long grey plume of smoke, then shook his head. >>You scare me sometimes.<<

>>>I’m sorry. Forget it<< I said, and started to close the book, climbing down off the stool, but Blixa reached out and caught my hand.

>>>Don’t you dare go<< he insisted, his eyes boring into mine with a startling intensity. >>You scare me, because I could have written this. About every single thing in my life. I often wondered what it would be like to meet someone as... as uncompromising, as intense, as idealistic as people have accused me of being.<< But then he smiled. >>And here you are.<<

>>>Me?<<< I blinked.


I stared back at him, slowly smiling as I understood what he was saying. >>Do you really want to live with someone as crazy and mixed-up as me.<<<

Now he was grinning outright. >>I do. Because call me an optimist – and everyone does, don’t they? – but I’m just as crazy and mixed up as you are.<<<

I took a deep breath and tried to think about it. This beautiful man, he really had just looked down into the strangeness of my interior all delineated in lines of black and white, and he had not blinked. >>Really?<<< I asked, blinking. >>Really, truly?<<<

He smiled, and said, in English, as he pressed gently with his finger at the tip of my nose, “Properly.”

>>>OK, but how?<<< I stuttered, my thoughts flying out ahead of me into possibilities and eventualities and maybe even concrete plans. This was the way we worked together, Blixa impulsive and quick, and me careful and thorough. >>There’s no way I’m going to live in Iron-Grey, there’s no privacy. And I’m sorry... I know Grete and my Aunt love you, but I don’t think you can live in our house. They can’t give a lease to someone who isn’t a woman, so I guess we have to find our own place together...<< I had no idea if that was true or not, but it just seemed very important to me that Blixa not just move in with my family, that if we were going to do this, we needed to establish some space of our own. >>And I don’t suppose you have the money to make rent, so that means we’re looking for a squat, right?<<<

His face moved from fear to nervousness to joy as he realised that I was actually agreeing to what he was asking. >>Yes<< he asserted. >>We are looking for a squat. I can ask people. I can ask around. Just the other day, Andi said, he knows friends who are looking to occupy a house...<<

>>>I’m not so sure I’m into occupying<< I hedged. >>Can we move in somewhere that’s already a bit settled, a bit organised?<<<

>>>Organised? You mean, like the communal houses they have in Copenhagen. I’d like that a lot.
OK. I’ll ask Andi and Alex if they know anywhere that’s going. I’ll ask around, ask my friends. I’ll put the word out. Carter and I are looking for a place together in a squat. As I watched his face, I suddenly realised what, exactly he was trying to do. He didn’t just want to live with me. He wanted all of our friends to know that he was living with me. Like this wasn’t just a gesture of convenience, this was a gesture of commitment, an announcement to the world that we were a proper couple.

We are moving in together. Me and Carter.

My confidence rising a little, I played nervously with the binding of my sketchbook, and felt my way towards what I knew I had to ask, for my own peace of mind, as well as my safety.

Blixa smiled and pulled out a fresh cigarette, the same way he often did, after particularly intense sex, lighting it off the butt of the last, with an expansive gesture.

I took a deep breath, and finally said the unsayable.

For a moment, I thought I had blown it, as Blixa’s face twisted with exasperation and annoyance as he exhaled smoke in a great dark cloud.

I’m not telling him you can’t see him<< I stuttered, trying to hold my ground, even as I bargained.

Blixa sighed deeply, wreathing himself in smoke as he took a few more drags of his cigarette then crushed it under his heel.

Blixa sighed deeply, wreathing himself in smoke as he took a few more drags of his cigarette then crushed it under his heel.

Three days later, Blixa and I were sat in front of a committee meeting at one of the older, better organised squats, situated in that strange hinterland between the railway lines that separated Schöneberg from Tempelhof, known locally as “The Red Island”. The old pre-war tenement block had been damaged in the war, but the squatters had half-restored the building into a decent sort of shape, fixed it up a bit, and painted a colourful mural depicting worthy political subjects on the firewall. This seemed a really convenient location for both of us, within walking distance of both the Risk bar, and my Aunt’s house. It had been squatted for long enough that the police had given up trying to turf them out, so it had become quite settled, with a residents’ association and a large room on the main floor set aside for a kind of free cultural space, and even rotas of house wardens who looked after the place. The Cultural Committee were impressed by Blixa’s status as the singer of an internationally famous punk band, and were keen to get him signed up to represent the squatting scene in the press, a role he was not particularly keen to take on. But the Residents’ Board had heard bad things about the New Buildings, since they had a reputation for destroying things, not so much
on account of their actual live performances, but due to the odd and awkward behaviour of Andrew and particularly Alex in another squat.

Now I was not used to communal living on that scale, that we had to be approved to join a squat. This very idea struck me as nonsensical; I thought the whole point of a squat was that you didn’t have to ask, you just squatted. And where I came from, only extremely wealthy blocks of flats had residents’ associations, let alone cultural committees. But it seemed that Germans were so well-organised that even communes did. And so we were hauled up in front of them, to present our case for being allowed to join them.

>> So would you be willing to partake in cultural activities<< asked one of the Cultural Committee.
>> A performance by such a well-known group could potentially pay for a new façade for the building.<<

>> I don’t know<< hedged Blixa, and I could feel his thighs tensing on the bench beside me, which meant that he was growing annoyed. >> I am only one person, in an organisation of five people, and I cannot make decisions for everyone. I’m sure you, as a committee, understand my difficulties.<<

>> But what about you, Carter?<< asked one of the women on the Residents Board. >> We have a strong community among the women here. Tell us about yourself, what do you have to offer the cooperative?<<

I found myself tensing up almost as hard as Blixa had, wondering how to gently break it to them that I did not consider myself a woman, and resolved to get a shorter haircut again, even though Blixa claimed that he liked my quiff when it grew long and shaggy. >> Well<< I offered limply. >> I am a sound engineer, I work at a local studio a few days a week. Oh, and I’m also a comic book artist, and I’ve had a show of erotic art at the Other Shore.<<

There were a few awkward mutters and the sound of shifting bodies, as if no one knew quite what to make of that. But then Blixa spoke up. >> Carter is being unduly modest. You should probably also know that my lover has a certification as an electrician.<<

The room sprung alive with jostling and soft discussion, even as I sighed and elbowed Blixa, realising that I would now end up with a second full-time job at home, on top of my work. But this idea of a certified electrician on the premises proved very popular.

>> There’s the fifth floor<< someone suggested. >> There’s no electricity up there, but if you could wire it up, that would be a nice home. Big, roomy.<<

>> That’s far too big for them<< moaned another woman, who looked heavily pregnant. >> There’s only two of them. And there’s three of us – about to be four. We’ve been asking for a second room for months. Why should they get that big space up in the attics, when they’ve only just arrived. Is it because he’s famous? Because that goes against our principles of equality...<<

>> Where do you live at the moment?<< I asked diplomatically.

>> We have one room in the sub-basement. At the back, giving out onto the garden. I mean, it was a nice, comfortable space when we were still a couple. But Klaus is nearly two, and it’s far from ideal for such a young child...<<

>> This attic space is big enough for a family, but there’s no electricity? Is that correct<< I asked. The woman concurred. >> So how about I take a look at this attic, see how big a job it would be to run in a fuse box and wire up some electrics for you, put in a couple of lights, and so forth.<<
>>Sounds good to me<< said the woman, folding her hands placidly over her swollen belly. >>I change my vote to yes. They’re in.<<

>>Hang on<< sputtered the head of the Cultural Committee, who was still sore about this business of bands needing to consult all their members before playing benefit gigs. >>We have not given our decision yet...<<

But the pregnant woman’s partner stood up. >>I think you are outvoted. Come, you two, let’s go upstairs, and I’ll show you the attic.<<

The attic was huge, and lovely, and I found myself almost coveting the space, but then I looked down at those flights of stairs and thought how little fun it would be to drag Blixa’s equipment up and down them when his band had a gig. I looked at the big, curved dormer windows, and tapped the walls, and asked where the electricity came into the house. Of course it was the standard West Berlin firetrap of wires jumped off other wires and all snarled up. I told them I’d have to turn off power to the whole building if I was going to have to work on that, but they agreed that they would discuss it in committee and come up with a time that was convenient to all.

Then we went down into the sub-basement, which was a bit of a misnomer, because the actual ‘basement’ was almost at street level, with steps to go up into the main floor of the house proper, and since the whole building was built into one of those few slopes that put the ‘berg’ in Schöneberg, the level below the front street level actually opened out onto a large garden at the back. And it was actually something like a garden, rather than the deep, lightless central Hof so typical of old Berlin blocks, because the ‘back house’ at the rear of the property had been bombed away, and the ‘cross-wings on the side had been bombed away, so that there was a great empty wilderness stretching all the way to the street behind.

>>A true Berlin Garden House<< laughed Blixa, folding his arms around my waist as we looked out into the surprisingly lush greenery.

Half of this space had been left to just grow wild, as a playground for the squat’s children, and the other half had been turned into what looked almost like proper English allotments, with cabbages and Brussels sprouts and potatoes growing in tidy rows right through the winter.

It was that garden that convinced me to abandon all notions of reason and sense, and make the very poor decision to move into that squat with Blixa. After years of living on the first floor, looking out onto a lightless Hof with only a coal shaft, oh, how I wanted a garden!

First of all, I had to tell Grete and my Aunt that I was moving out. Blixa went round with me, and sat, very demure and nervous on a stiff-backed chair, as scared as if he were asking for my hand in marriage. My Aunt was very sad, and Grete dabbed at her eyes, but they both observed that Blixa and I were grown adults, and we clearly knew our own minds and what we wanted to do, and obviously they both adored Blixa, so we had their blessing. But then, my aunt carefully added that she was not going to rent out my room at the back of the house, and that ‘you’ (singular you, informal, very plainly meaning me and me alone) were welcome to come back and stay any time one felt the need.

I sniffed a lot, and told them that I loved them, and that I was very grateful for everything they had done for me. And yes, I would love it if they kept the room the way it was for me. In fact, would it be alright if I used it as a kind of office or studio to do my artwork in? They agreed and said that would be lovely, and then they could pretend that their adopted grandchild still lived there, and I sniffed even more, and had to excuse myself and go to my room before I started crying properly. Over the past two years, they had been more like parents than my own parents had been, and as excited as I was to move out and start on my own, with my lover, I knew I would miss them terribly.
As I sat down on my bed and started looking about my room, wondering what to pack up first, Blixa wandered about, picking at things. But after a few minutes, he reached my desk, picked up a sheet of comics I had been working on, and paused. He stopped moving, stopped even fidgeting and fussing about, and read it, thoroughly, entranced, then dug through the rubble on the top of my desk, looking for more of them. Without even asking, he sat down at my desk and read the whole thing, straight through, without stopping, but abruptly ceased as he reached the last few pages, still in pencil, with bits of jumbled-up words and images missing or displaced or needing to be edited or amended.

>>This is amazing<< he finally pronounced. >>Absolutely incredible. By far, the best thing you’ve ever done. But why is it unfinished?<<

I stood up and walked over to join him, though to be honest, I felt a little guilty, as I hadn’t even realised I’d abandoned it halfway through. >>It’s just a little thing I started working on while you were in Copenhagen. And then... well, you came back and life started up again. I haven’t had time to finish it.<<

>>Well, you should make time<< insisted Blixa, shoving the unfinished papers into my chest. >>This is good. And I have a feeling these ideas are important.<<

“Jawohl,” I said, more than a little sarcastically, for I didn’t like his tone of voice. Because if there was one thing I didn’t have over the next few weeks, it was time, and if there was a reason, it was indirectly Blixa, and his insistence that we should live together, and his volunteering me as live-in electrician for this squat.

First, there was the question of the electrical work that had to be done on the squat, before we could even move in. I was round there constantly, even when I wasn’t technically working on it, trying to set things up and coordinate deliveries of supplies. Blixa, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen. He was far too busy doing music things. His band had booked a gig, with the Deadly Doris, in Paris, at the end of the month, which was, coincidentally our deadline to move into the new space, giving me less than three weeks to get everything sorted. So I was constantly at the squat, trying to make habitable a space that we weren’t even going to move into, and Blixa was... at rehearsals. It didn’t seem exactly balanced. Especially if I found out that rehearsal had only lasted a couple of hours, and then he had gone out drinking afterwards with Kick Knave again without telling me. (OK, I had agreed that I wouldn’t complain about that, in exchange for a Nick-free home. But we hadn’t even moved in yet, and Blixa was already out all night drinking with Nick.)

Luckily, the family for whom I was doing the work were far more helpful, and both parents got involved in hammering up partition walls and finishing things off, after I’d got the electricity sorted. The was a certain enjoyment to the act of physically making things with my hands, that I had lost while I had been working at the studio. Not that studio work wasn’t creative, of course, but putting in wires and fixing up walls, it provided a satisfaction that was completely different from finishing a mix-down and making a tape. Even little two-year old Klaus helped out by hammering at the floorboards with a noisy joy that reminded me a little bit of my partner onstage.

But that was another concern of mine. Watching Hilde puff up and down the stairs carrying that enormous stuffed-turkey of a belly in front of her, I resolved that this was one aspect of the squatter lifestyle that Blixa and I would not get involved with. I dropped in on Beate and Anita at rehearsal, and asked them about the very specific problems of avoiding pregnancy while cohabiting with a very sexually active and frisky partner. Beate, modern woman that she was, proved extremely helpful in obtaining this information – she took me to a clinic where I was given a full check-up and presented with a list of options. A small piece of equipment was obtained, fitted, and I was given instructions on how to use it, and told to come back in six months’ time for a check-up. Little baby Klaus was amusing, the way he followed me around with something like hero-worship, insisting that he wanted
to become a 'lectrician. But there was no way that I would be contributing to the gene pool of small tow-headed German toddlers running around that bombsite at the back of the garden.
Anita makes her debut as the new singer of Les Liaisons Dangereuses, while Beate, rather dangerously, becomes smitten with one of The Skin.

And Carter and Blixa discover the joys of cosy domesticity in the basement of a freezing cold squat.

Beate and Anita invited me to go along to Anita’s debut as their vocalist, as Liaisons Dangereuses were supporting The Skin at an intimate little jazz club. Me? Well, us. It was strange to me how invitations automatically seemed to encompass my partner as well as myself, as if we were now one person. But Blixa said he would be more than happy to attend, insisting he had known Beate since they were both in single digits, and was always keen to support her projects.

But when we got to the club, he greeted Beate warmly with the typical Berlin double-kiss, embraced Anita, then disappeared to spend most of the evening drinking with Nick. Nick was in a weird mood, as if he didn’t like the fact that he was there only in a supporting role to his partner’s project, drawing Blixa and The Skin around him in a tight little knot. He avoided me like the plague, which suited me just fine, though the few times he even glanced in my direction, it was with the terrified expression of a man who thought I was a bomb that might explode if he looked too hard. But Chrislo, too, seemed oddly withdrawn, barely acknowledging any of the gang before retreating to his machines to check and recheck their tuning.

Gudrun turned up, with Manon and Manon’s boyfriend in tow, and Beate brightened to see them, embracing them all warmly. But Beate was in a strange, brittle, excited mood, which I thought might have been pre-gig nerves, though it took me most of the evening to work out its true source.

Liaisons Dangereuses went on first, though really, it was more like Anita and Beate were in a band together, on one side of the stage, while Chrislo was off in a little world of his own, on the other. The atmosphere was electric. Anita was marvellous as a frontwoman, her breathy voice drawling through three different languages as she alternately wooed and threatened the audience. Despite the wide-eyed little-girl innocence of her looks, her words and gestures seemed to be filled with a thrilling, almost sexual sort of danger, which was very enticing. Within thirty seconds of her opening her mouth, all conversation in the room had stopped, as people simply stared at her, as if no one in our little scene had bothered noticing her before, outside the context of being Nick’s girlfriend.

The Skin, in particular, seemed very taken by the band. Christoph and Rainer were both very complimentary about the performance, which I supposed was to be expected, as Anita was their friend, and houseguest. But their drummer, a small, very neat-looking Swiss named Thomas, he was staring absolutely rapt at the stage, as if completely entranced by the proceedings, barely moving a muscle except to sip at his whisky.

About two or three songs in, Rowland and Gen turned up, and though they nodded distantly at Nick, they seemed to deliberately make their way to the other side of the small room to watch Anita perform, and they left shortly after the band finished. Chrislo, too, disappeared, almost immediately after they had cleared their instruments off the stage. Beate, on the other hand, after graciously accepting compliments and congratulations on their performance, hung around expectantly, her eyes
constantly twitching towards the stage.

As The Skin started to play, Anita returned to Nick’s side, while Beate settled down at a table with Gudrun and Manon, but even I could tell that she was not paying attention to what either of them were saying, she was so enraptured by the band.

>>Are we boring you?<< teased Manon, upon realising for about the fifth time that Beate had not heard a word that she had said.

>>No, no, not at all. Just... this band. Well, they’re very good. Are they new? I don’t think I remember them<< stuttered Beate.

Gudrun looked at her friend, then looked up at the stage, then turned her gaze back to her friend, her lips turning up at the corners in that old, familiar mischievous smirk. >>Alright, Bea, which one do you fancy?<<

>>Hush! No, absolutely not. It’s nothing at all like that<< sputtered Beate, blushing slightly, though I noticed that she did not stop continuing to glance longingly back towards the stage. >>I just think he’s really very talented, that’s all.<<

When the set ended, Gudrun dragged a protesting Beate off to be introduced to the unfamiliar musicians. Christoph, obviously, she had met before, and the others did not appear to concern her much, but when Gudrun introduced her to the little Swiss drummer, the normally confident and self-contained Beate immediately started to stutter and giggle like a teenage girl.

>>I thought your set was wonderful<< said Thomas, in his funny Swiss accent, smiling at her with the same rapt expression he had been watching the set with.

>>Oh no, you were much better than us. I thought you were really marvellous<< protested Beate, blushing bright red and staring concertedly down at her shoes.

>>No, I thought you were brilliant<< persisted Thomas, with a ridiculous grin. >>But have you ever considered playing with a live drummer?<<

>>No, never. We far prefer machines<< stuttered Beate. >>Well, at least Chrislo prefers working with machines. I quite like... a bit of both? I used to enjoy playing with Gudrun, when we were in Mania D. She’s a very good drummer. That was always a fun challenge, to play with her.<<

>>Did you play keyboards, or...<< Thomas’s face was changing from rapt to hopeful, hanging on Beate’s every word.

>>Oh no, I played bass in that band.<<

>>Bass!<< ejected Thomas, growing suddenly even more effusive in his praise. >>Oh, I love the bass. The bass is the most important instrument in any band. Not just saying that as a drummer, though, obviously, it’s really important for a drummer to have a good bass player to bounce off. It’s a really lovely... back and forth thing, when you get a good rhythm going with a bass player. It’s a really special relationship, between bass and drums. Almost magical, at times. I love a good bass player. Truly.<<

>>Oh yes?<< Beate cast a helpless expression in the direction of Gudrun, almost as if to say ‘help, get me away’.

Thomas’s face fell as he saw that look go between the two women, but then he seemed to shrug and take it in his stride. >>I have to go and clear up my kit now, but...<< Dejected, he put his hands in
back pockets and started to walk away, but then seemed to find something back there. Pulling out his wallet, he walked back towards us, and produced a small white rectangle of card. >>It was lovely to meet you, Beate. And if you ever change your mind about needing a live drummer... or anything else... just give me a call<< He gave her his business card, and then he walked off to clear up his drum kit.

>>Bea...<< ventured Gudrun, almost licking her chops with mischief as she prodded her friend.

>>Shut up, Gud<< warned Beate.

>>He’s dishy, that one<< persisted Gudrun, her eyes flashing. >>He’s got that square, solid jawline you really love, doesn’t he.<<

>>He’s gorgeous<< Beate almost squeaked, her voice a high-pitched titter that was totally unlike her normal clear, calm speaking voice. >>And I have a boyfriend<< she added, then ran away.

The New Buildings gig in Paris was a lot of fun, as I went along, giving in to Blixa’s insistence this time, though it amused me far too much to tease him about whether he was going to be a coke-whore with any groupies that offered him drugs. I loved watching Blixa onstage, of course, and the New Buildings seemed to be changing and growing, every time I saw them perform live. I genuinely loved them, especially the way that Mark’s bass seemed to hit a groove, and carry the momentum through the glorious chaos klanging and banging and raging all around them. Mufti and Andrew would often try to play against one another, like a raging war pulling the beat apart in their little kingdoms of scrap metal and power tools, but the bass would pull everyone back together. Blixa didn’t really play guitar like a guitar-player, it was more like a tool that he used to generate little rhythmic figures that he could sing over the top of. So if there was a melody at all, it was usually Mark carrying it, and I always listened out for it.

Mark noticed my attention, and teased me after the gig, saying, >>You know Blixa doesn’t allow us to make dance music, but whenever I see your head start going, I figure the harder you’re nodding along, the better we’re doing.<<

Wolfgang, though, embarrassed me a little by asking how the comic was coming, as he said he had been impressed by the subject and was keen to see it. Blixa, of course, had to boast that he had already seen the rough draft, and insisted that it was really good, and told Wolfgang how much he would enjoy it, which was a little impolitic of him. But Wolfgang was good-natured about it, and simply asked to see it, though I was a little ashamed to admit that I had simply not had the time to finish it. For I had spent the past two and a half weeks sweating like a beast to make sure that Blixa and I had a place to live when we came home from Paris. Blixa rolled his eyes, and implied that I was lazy, which annoyed me even more. Because, honestly, how much had he done on the new house? Absolutely nothing, since the Birthday Party had got back from their tour of the Netherlands, that was how much. Because the moment that Nick reappeared in Berlin, Blixa seemed to have a radar for finding him out at a bar, and turning one or two drinks into an evening’s carousing. But at least these days, I knew better than to agree to join them. Blixa would turn up when Blixa felt like turning up, like a tomcat finding its way home.

On the 1st of November, when we were due to move in, it was absolutely freezing. Those lovely French Doors out to the garden, that I had found so enticing when we’d viewed it in good weather, turned out to be inadequately weatherproofed, and not only was there an awful draft, but when it rained, there was a leak. It took another two days of me working to get it watertight, though Blixa had already started to move his things in. Two huge shelves of vinyl records and a stereo appeared, as did a television – with a videotape recorder, which was still quite a bit of a luxury in the early 80s.
I don’t know why it surprised me, the appearance of these possessions, which had not been present at Iron-Grey, but something about them rubbed me the wrong way.

Perhaps it had been the casual way, that when I had insisted that we needed to buy a new mattress, as I was not prepared to deal with the bedbugs that had been the scourge of the squats in Amsterdam, that Blixa had protested that he didn’t have the money, and if I wanted such a thing, that I should buy it myself. Too proud to ask my aunt where to get a good deal on household goods, I had gone out and bought one, ridiculously overpriced at KaDeWe, and transported it back to the squat in the van. (And oh, how my new upstairs neighbours had laughed at the KaDeWe stickers on a brand new mattress, going into the basement of a squat!) And yet, there was that expensive record collection, just sitting there, and many of the records were imports from the Americas. Because what Blixa loved more than just about anything else were weird, booming dub reggae records, full of juddering bass noises and wibbly echo effects. I had never known that there were so many dub records from Jamaica in all of Germany! Not to mention the punk records, and the American hardcore records, and the weird arty records from England. I suppose I should have known how many records he owned, because where else would the music on those wonderful mix-tapes, with which he wooed me in the early days, have come from? But god only knows where he got the money from.

Blixa, however, laughed, because I owned exactly 4 records, the sum total of the vinyl that I had collected since moving to Germany, mostly because I generally listened to cassettes in the van. But then he went through my four records, and though he wanted to sneer at them, he found that he couldn’t.

For there was Horses, by Patti Smith, which reminded me of Maud, though now in a pleasant and nostalgic sort of way. Then there was Cut by The Slits, which now had strong associations with the early days of that wild camaraderie of Gudrun’s pirate girl gang. I also owned New Order’s Factus 8, which had been given to me as a present by Manc Mark. And then I owned The Litanies by Satan by Diamanda Galas.

>>How on earth did you end up with a copy of this?<< demanded Blixa, taking it out of its sleeve and flipping it on to his newly installed record player.

>>Same way I ended up with my other records? Went to Zensor and bought it<< I shrugged, as the unearthly sound of her voice filled our room, bouncing off walls we had not yet decorated.

>>Yes, but how did you even hear about it? This is pretty obscure. I mean, it’s one of my favourite records this year. But I have not played it for you.<< Blixa seldom pulled rank on me, but he seemed outraged by the fact that someone who wasn’t him, had introduced me to the record.

>>I think maybe Gudrun played it for me?<< I tried to rack my brain over how the intense, emotionally cathartic, and yet otherworldly beautiful album had come into my possession. >>No, I remember. Gudrun had a copy of a magazine, with an interview, and a picture of her. I thought she was the most stunningly beautiful woman I had ever seen. And not just stunning, but striking. She was saying really interesting things. So I wanted to hear her voice. So Gudrun got it for me.<<

>>You fancied her<< Blixa accused, sounding for the first time in his life like a jealous lover.

>>Well... yes<< I finally confessed. >>She’s incredible. Her voice, her looks, her art... She’s incredible.<<

>>I agree completely<< said Blixa quietly, though he still sounded a little put out. But then he lowered his voice. >>Is it weird, if you and I have the same taste?<<

>>In music, or in women?<< I laughed.
It was the first time I had ever seen Blixa actually flustered.

But we listened to that record over and over, in our basement. And sometimes he even tried to sing along, wrapping his strange animal-whine-shriek around the classically trained singer’s inchoate moans and howls. Sometimes he even succeeded, though he didn’t quite have her range, at creating the strange wailing sounds that excited us both so much, and then he would grin at me through his hair, and ask >>Do you think I’m sexy like her now?<< I hugged him as much to steal some of his warmth as to let him know that yes, I did think he was sexy.

His voice, to be fair, was one of the sexiest things about him, how it could change from intensely masculine to slightly feminine to completely androgynous, in fact not even human, within a single phrase. His deep, resonant speaking voice was incredibly beautiful, and yet he could soar up into an unearthly banshee wail. He had a breathy whisper that could send a shiver down my spine, as if his lips had touched the soft parts of my earlobe, just by speaking a single word. And yet, he could produce this strange, eerie hiss, sounding not like a man or a woman at all, but like some kind of force of nature. I realised, the more and more time we spent together, that he was growing far beyond being an angry punk screamer. He really was trying to genuinely push the limits of what a human voice could do. And living with him, I don’t know why it surprised me to discover that this arch, ironic, bitchy, sarcastic Berlin queen, although he was often killingly funny and cuttingly sharp in our everyday life, could actually be intensely serious, and totally committed when it came to studying and exploring his art.

Living together turned out to be highly enjoyable, when we did finally get settled. That I did have to admit, though I also wondered how much of our peacefulness was due to the fact that The Birthday Party had gone on tour for much of November, and I had no rival for my lover’s attention. Being together full-time was fun and exciting and really quite sexually charged. Blixa and I were delighted to find ourselves very much in love, and even deeper in lust, as we would nestle together on that new mattress, alternately talking urgently, staring into one another’s eyes as if we could see into one another’s souls; then screwing energetically, whenever we wanted to, at any hour of the day or night. It felt reassuring to have his weight and his warmth in the bed, even when his long awkward limbs erupted from the blankets, freezing us in the middle of the night. His manic energy was inspiring, as he rearranged the furniture to make us little cocoons or pillow-forts with my expensive KaDeWe bedlinen, or sat up all night banging at his guitar, making up little songs on the fly to make us laugh. The first few weeks, during that honeymoon period, living together felt like an adventure we were both excited to be on with each other.

Not that there weren’t problems, but we somehow managed to solve them together. That basement room was miserably cold, and the damp was a constant problem. I wanted to put in a small electric heater, to just leave on the whole time, to dry out the walls and stop the condensation from forming on the French doors, but we were told we were already using up more than our allotted share of the electricity with Blixa’s stereo and television. If we wanted to have heat going all the time, we would have to rely on the sooty black pot-bellied coal stove that I had taken for some kind of funky antique, rather than the sole source of our heating.

I didn’t know much about stoves, but I went to the local library and got a book about testing chimneys, as fear of asphyxiation was something that terrified me, even if I was fairly confident that I could sort out malfunctioning electrics. I tested the flue, and made sure the chimney was in working order, and indeed, when I held various smoking substances to the top of the stove’s cavity as a test, and adjusted the controls, it did seem like the thing was functional. So if we wanted to stay warm, we would have to burn things.

Almost immediately, Blixa declared himself lord and master of the fire. I laughed and told him that surely this was proof that he was the girl in the relationship. In every culture dating back to Greek
mythology and the goddess Hestia, it was women that looked after the hearth. Blixa said that was fine with him, he would be lady and mistress of the fire, and dedicate himself to Vesta.

>>A Vestal Virgin you have never been<< I teased him.

>>Yes, staying chaste might prove a problem, but whose fault is that with you in the room, eh<< he flirted, grinning like a devil as he cupped my arse with his hand affectionately.

But Blixa loved to burn things. Honestly, I had never realised before, that the reason he smoked so many cigarettes was because he was obsessed with fire, and loved to handle open flames. I did my best to keep us supplied with coal, which was not cheap, but at least a banked bed of coal would usually last through the night. Blixa, on the other hand, just loved to burn anything he could get his hands on. Old pallets, sticks of broken furniture he pulled out of skips, logs purloined from public parks... his thing for scouting out bits of wood was becoming nearly as all-consuming as Andrew’s fetish for bits of scrap metal. (To the point where I wondered if the fire-starting that had got him thrown out of school had been not a political statement, but some kind of pyromania that had got out of hand!)

The fire was warm, and it did a lot to dry out the damp, but Blixa could spend hours building it, and then setting it, and then poking at it, and playing with it, feeding it to make the flames dance until the coal caught.

>>Why are you so fascinated by fire?<< I asked him, one night when he spent at least three hours testing the combustible properties of wood, paper, cardboard and fabric.

>>Because it seems so alive<< he replied, dousing a bit of old denim in lighter fluid to try to set it aflame.

>>You treat it like having a pet<< I teased. >>A particularly energetic and dangerous pet.<<

>>Fire is one of those things, that really makes me wonder, where is the dividing line between alive, and not alive. Because it behaves so much as if it is alive. The trigger point, the flash point, of what starts a fire going... It’s fascinating. One moment, you have inert wood. The next, you have this living, growing, glowing entity.<<

>>Reminds me of your old conundrum about souls. What is the flash-point between being alive, and being dead.<< Had that walk in the cemetery really been only a year ago? It felt like several lifetimes ago. And here we were, living together.

>>Precisely<< agreed Blixa. >>You cannot tell me that fire is not alive.<<

>>Well, it’s funny you should say that<< I mused, pulling out a library book on life sciences that I had been reading, inspired by the idea of a garden. >>Because, you see, fire is one of the things that confounded scientists, when they were drawing up the boundaries of life...<<

>>Oh no, here come the Scientists<< he laughed. >>I am not just living with you, Valdi, I am living with 3000 years of Western Scientists.<<

>>Alright, I won’t read it to you, then.<<

But as I fell silent, busying myself in my book and ignoring him, he turned around and grinned at me, to show he was only joking, tugging at my toes affectionately to get my attention. I had already captured his interest. >>And I love it. Bring on the Scientists. What do they say.<<

>>It’s quite interesting, the boundaries of what is alive, and what isn’t. Is fungi spore buried in ice for
twenty years alive, is a virus alive, is a computer alive?<<

>>Is Germany alive? Is the planet alive?<<

>>Those are good questions. Is a planet alive? There are some scientists who think that it is entire ecosystems that are actually lifeforms, not the individual plants or animals.<<

>>Is a band a lifeform?<< shot back Blixa. >>Is a communal squat a lifeform?<<

>>Well, life isn’t a thing, really. It’s a process. Life is a vortex, through which matter and energy pass. Is a band a lifeform? Well, what kind of energy passes through a band? Music, obviously... is music a form of energy?>>

>>Or is energy a form of music?<< Blixa tossed back as lightly as if we were juggling.

>>Blixa, you think everything is a form of music.<<

>>Well, it is!<< he crowed triumphantly. >>Do you know, I had a dream, last year, where I was listening to my own DNA, as a form of music. Read to me about the rules for life. Are they like the three laws of thermodynamics? Chaos equals desire over time<< he teased, reminding me of his song, and that strange talk in the kitchen of Iron-Grey, the night we got together.

>>The three laws of thermodynamics are really quite sad, when you apply them to life. You can’t win; you can’t even break even; you can only lose. This is how energy flows through a system, it all starts at sunlight, from photosynthesis in a plant, which gets eaten by an insect, which gets eaten by an animal, which gets eaten by a bigger animal, which eventually gets eaten by one of us...<<

>>Not if you’re a vegan<< pointed out Blixa. >>You are closer to the sun, then, so your energy is closer to the source.<<

>>I suppose that’s fair<< I conceded.

>>You should become vegetarian. It’s cleaner<< he insisted, which seemed to be a common refrain around the squat, as almost all of the food prepared in the shared kitchen for communal consumption was vegan.

>>Mate, like your farts don’t stink to high heaven<< I teased back, prodding him with my foot, and he started to cackle, pretending to raise his arse in my direction. >>It’s still sad, though. Energy flows in one end of a system, and out the other, and there’s no way to preserve it or stop it ebbing away. Take that formula – entropy equals the negative of heat over time – or chaos equals the decline of desire over time. It means that desire, like heat and energy, can only ever decrease over time.<<

>>No<< snapped Blixa, suddenly growing a little bit irate, as he grabbed another stack of newspaper, and started to roll it up into little balls, tossing them onto the fire to watch them explode in shimmering sparks of heat and light as the flames caught the paper. >>I don’t think this is true. You feed the fire, and it grows and grows. Like longing increases over time.<<

>>But it can’t. That violates the laws of physics. Unless you think of desire as some kind of perpetual motion machine<< I scoffed.

He turned back to me, his face fierce, as I realised we weren’t talking about physics. >>Maybe it is!<<

>>That’s impossible.<<
"You're a cynic."

"I'm not a cynic, I'm a scientist" I said calmly. "Everything dies. All life dies, that's part of the deal. All fires die out. Plants die. Animals die. Even stars die."

"Stars go supernova, and then they collapse in upon themselves. But if they're really big, they don't stop collapsing. They collapse and collapse, and their gravitational field grows stronger and stronger, until they turn themselves inside out, and become a black hole, eh? Can a black hole die?"

There he had me. "That, science does not yet know."

Blixa nodded sharply, with a smug little smirk. "I don't think so."

"You think a black hole is a perpetual motion machine?"

As he turned to me, the smirk widened into a lascivious grin, as he raised his eyebrows knowingly. "I can think of a hole of yours, that is like a perpetual motion machine for me. The event horizon, the gravity well of this very beautiful body pulls me in, every time..."

I howled with mingled outrage and delight as I realised how he filthily was flirting, and grabbed a magazine by the side of the bed, and hurled it at him. But he caught it before it hit him, and started slowly, nonchalantly, to rip out pages and feed them into the fire, too.

And as Blixa fed the fire, I read aloud to him from the book on Life On Earth, and started going through the various scientific definitions of life: it undergoes growth, it reproduces itself, it responds to stimuli. Between the pair of us, we wrangled out how many of those definitions both fire and love did and did not meet, until he finished burning the magazine, and slithered into bed beside me, and threatened to throw my book on the fire if I didn’t stop reading and surrender my hole to him, and in retaliation, I threatened to throw his previous Video Cassette Recorder on the fire.

Now that was a threat to Blixa! Because one of the biggest surprises, to me, was how much of a film buff my lover was. Film was not a medium that had ever interested me much, but Blixa watched films constantly, obsessively, even taping them off the television to watch them later. And so watching films with him was an education in itself, as he took care to explain, afterwards, what had been good or bad, what had worked or not, about the movie we had just watched. When he found I was a willing student, he went back to his parents’ house and collected a cardboard box full of his favourite films on tape, that he wanted to show me. And so, in the deep, dark cold of November and December, when the stove burned low, the pair of us curled up under the blankets like a pair of earwigs and lay entwined together, keeping each other warm as we watched Fassbinder or Herzog epics.

Myself, I preferred science or nature documentaries, and once Blixa learned that I enjoyed them, he started to tape them for me, too. Blixa, I discovered, could be really thoughtful like that, if he knew I was interested in a thing, collecting little bits and pieces to offer me like a bower bird wooing his beloved with shiny things. To my delight, it turned out that Blixa liked almost anything about science, and we watched documentaries about earthquakes and volcanoes, about forests and about glaciers. He was happy enough to watch the nature films about plants and animals, but his absolute favourite were the astronomy documentaries, reruns of Carl Sagan’s Cosmos and Space Shuttle footage were particular favourites, and more than anything, he loved theoretical footage about Black Holes.

"Talk to me about gravity wells" became a long-running inside joke between the pair of us, because both of us liked to refer to the dark holes that were our centres of pleasure, as some kind of gravity well that the other could not hope to escape.
And it may sound trite, but Blixa read to me. He devoured books constantly, hungrily, picking up paperbacks at the library or at second hand bookshops and bringing them home to chew through. When a passage particularly delighted him – or pissed him off – he would let out that little snort-laugh, and announce >>Here, Valdi, listen to this...<< and start to read aloud, in his deep, sonorous, emotive voice, alternately mocking or inspired. And I would cock an ear, smiling, thinking to myself, how beautiful his voice was, getting ready for agreement or argument, the inevitable discussion this tit-bit would provoke as we mulled these idea over. How I loved to listen to his restless brain at work, picking over Barthes or Benjamin; A Lover’s Discourse or Theses on the Philosophy of History.

Blixa was, at that point, going through a real thing for theatre. Having devoured the complete works of Antonin Artaud as inspiration for his band, he had bugged some of his more literary friends to recommend him modern playwrights whose work embodied the anarchic spirit he so loved in Artaud. And his friends recommended him an experimental playwright by the name of Heiner Müller, working just on the other side the Wall in East Berlin. From the very first script, Blixa was in love. He was so impressed, entranced by the vibrant, fluid vernacular German, all run together in blocks, with characters intended to speak or chant right over the top of one another, that he actually felt moved to get up and start acting out the stories. Leaping from one side of the room to the other, he would read first one part, and then the next, until he was performing all of the parts at once, in half a dozen different voices.

It was so much fun. I genuinely adored it when my lover read to me, his brain ticking like clockwork behind those deep blue eyes. We talked at length, exploring one another’s minds, with a freedom and ease that rivalled our enjoyment of one another’s bodies. And those moments of sweet bliss made the rest of it, the cold, the damp, the noise, the eternal interpersonal problems of living in insecure shared accommodation, all seem somehow worthwhile.
Frau Bargeld

Chapter Summary

Blixa loves the new squat even more, when he meets the new neighbours. On the other hand, Carter slowly discovers, that although they enjoy the intimacy of living with Blixa, neither squat politics nor 'heterosexual' domesticity are not particularly for them. And when Wolfgang tries to persuade them to do something with their latest comic, Carter runs up against some unexpected friction.

Content note: contains misgendering and biphobia.

I discovered new things about my lover by living together, not least a carefully guarded but fundamental streak of good-heartedness and loyalty, in ways that sometimes surprised me. I had never been able to keep up with him on his long Saturday shifts at the Risk bar, so I usually left him about 4 or 5 am, and went home to sleep, assuming that he would do the same once his shift finally finished. But to my surprise, on Sunday mornings, he came home, and instead of peeling off his clothes and getting straight into bed to collapse, he cleaned himself up, washed and shaved his face (which was quite a rarity, as Blixa could go nearly a week before the lightest of shadows appeared dusted across his upper lip and chin) put on an unexpectedly nice pair of jeans, without the usual holes in the knees or tears in the bum, and a clean button-down shirt. And then he disappeared again. The first time it happened, I was so tired it barely registered, and caught up with him in the afternoon, when I awoke and he came home. The next time, I was a bit more awake, and teased him a little, saying, >>Where are you going, dressed up like that, are you off to church?<<

But a strange, slightly sheepish look came over his face. >>No, no, don’t worry, nothing like that.<< >>Well, what is it, then?<< I sat up, feeling suddenly a little odd. >>Are you going to see your parents? Sunday lunch?<< My voice grew a little sulky, as I still considered it odd that he had met Grete and my Great Aunt a number of times, but I had still never met his parents.

But Blixa shook his head slowly, slightly forlornly, as he finger-combed the knots and spikes out of his hair and brushed it back, out of his face, covering over the shaved patches around his ears. >>No, it’s visiting hours.<<

>>Visiting hours?<< I echoed, wondering what on earth he could mean.

>>I have to get in and out before noon. Jana’s parents arrive just after noon, after they leave church. So I have to get in, and visit, and leave before they see me.<<

I stared at him, as the meaning of what he’d just told me penetrated my sleep brain. >>You go to see Jana on Sunday mornings?<<

He nodded sheepishly, his eyes slightly haunted. >>Every week. Except when the band is on tour. She hates when I miss a week, because no one else from the scene ever comes to see her. I try to take her tapes of the latest music... and zines, so she can keep up with her friends. Though she says the meds make her too sleepy to read, she likes looking at the pictures. Especially pictures of gigs. She likes to see people dancing. You know she used to be a dancer.<<
Guilt went through me like a shudder. I honestly hadn’t much thought about Jana since Blixa and I had got together, and yet somehow, he had been going to see her at the hospital every week, even against her parents’ wishes? >>How is she doing?<<

He shrugged vaguely. >>It’s two steps forwards, two steps back. She’s off heroin, which is really good, naturally. But the medication they give her instead, the anti-psychotic medication... well, she says it stops the voices – the angels, she calls them – but it also makes her tremble, and slur her speech. And she says it’s lonely without the angels. She misses them.<<

>>Angels<< I repeated thickly, suddenly seeing Blixa’s bizarre interrogation of my angelic beliefs in that cemetery in a completely different light. It had struck me as a bizarre conversation, because, clearly, sane people didn’t really believe in angels, except as some kind of spiritual metaphor or something. But maybe Blixa hadn’t been asking metaphorically, because the person he had been dealing with... wasn’t sane?

>>Angels<< Blixa agreed with a nod. >>Berlin has quite a thing for angels – you know, Goldelse, and Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History. So I’m not surprised Jana fixated on angels. She tries to do drawings of them – you know, in mental hospitals these days, it’s all the rage to do what they call art therapy. They let the patients draw, make music, write poetry – it’s kind of nice, to be honest. You would approve of the art lessons there. But she keeps drawing the angels, and says that she misses the voices, so the doctors insist she’s still crazy, and they won’t let her out.<<

I stared at Blixa, absolutely gobsmacked, trying to think what to say. >>Well... erm... say... say hello to her, from me. And tell her... tell her I’m glad she’s drawing. Drawing is good.<< But then I choked with worry. >>If, well... if you think she’d like to hear from me, that is.<<

But he grinned his crooked little-boy grin. >>Yeah, I will. She’d like that.<< But then his face resumed its worried expression as he dug about for a couple of cassettes and a zine that he put into a paper bag. >>I have to go, I’ll miss the bus.<<

I held my arms out for a hug, and kissed him fiercely as he said his goodbyes. >>You are the sweetest man alive<< I whispered in his ear.

>>I’m really not; really, I’m an asshole<< he sighed as he walked to the door. >>But I feel guilty about Jana, I do feel responsible for what happened to her.<<

Lying back down in bed, I tried to sleep, but the thought of Jana, locked in a mental hospital, obsessively drawing pictures of angels, well it seemed to run round and round inside my head. And upstairs, the squat seemed to be waking up, as I could hear children crying, pots banging and the gurgle of the ancient water pipes. I thought I had got used to apartment living, and the noise of West Berlin, but apparently it was quite a different prospect, living in a boarding house full of spinsters and domestic workers, from living in a squat full of musicians, punks and young families.

Squatting had always suited Blixa, and he took to it like a natural. He, unlike me, had many years’ experience of this kind of communal living, and he knew how to navigate the little political currents around having so many people sharing a space. With his intense charisma and easy charm, he soon knew everyone in the place, even the children – and little children in particular were fascinated by Blixa, his long, oversized limbs, his weird rubbery black clothes with their shiny bondage belts, and his habit of wearing wellies everywhere, even indoors. I, on the other hand, found the interpersonal politics – and the partisan form of politics – hard to negotiate. I never grasped the weird rules about wash-room rotas and kitchen use, and I could never remember if we were supposed to support or oppose the SPD or the CDU. It irritated me the way that the communal aspects were supposed to be
run on gender-neutral terms, but as Gudrun had once so disloyally pointed out long ago, I only ever saw women working in the large, shared kitchen at the back of the main floor.

And noise, for me, was a constant problem – dogs barking, children crying, weird footsteps in the middle of the night – but Blixa did not even notice it. In the late hours of one evening, we were sitting together at opposite ends of the bed and I was trying to sketch Blixa as he strummed away at his guitar, when the tikka-tikka-tikka of his unamplified guitar was abruptly joined by the distant twang of an amplified guitar, immediately upstairs from us. At first I thought it was someone’s stereo. But then it abruptly hit a bum note, and the unmistakable sound of tuning echoed through our space.

I froze, my mind spiralling out into worst-case scenarios, wondering if this was going to become a daily occurrence, if we had moved into a building where no one ever had any consideration for the sonic space of others. So I turned to Blixa with an apprehensive expression. >>Are we going to have to bring this up at one of those endless fucking community meetings, and file a motion about amplified music at anti-social hours?<<

But Blixa cocked his head, listening very intently to the guitar from upstairs. Then he nodded decisively and stood up, still clutching his own guitar. >>Leave this to me. I will have a word.<<

I heard Blixa’s footsteps disappearing up the stairs, as the guitar-playing carried on. And then, abruptly it stopped. Oh, thank goodness, I thought, Blixa has made them see sense, this is such a relief. For five minutes, ten minutes, there was blissful silence, but still, my partner did not return. And then the guitar-playing started up again, but this time, there were two guitars echoing through the amplification.

I wanted to scream, wanted to beat on the ceiling with my fists and make them stop. But although I tried stuffing my fingers in my ears, and tried lying down in the bed with the pillow over my head, it was useless. Tossing the sketchbook aside, I pulled on my trousers and put on a pair of shoes, and made my way upstairs to knock on the door of the room immediately above ours. There was no response, as the guitar-playing was really quite loud now, and I didn’t want to knock hard enough to wake the neighbours on the other side of the landing.

But as I was standing there knocking, and trying to work up the courage to try the door and just barge in there, a young woman bounced down the stairs and walked up to the door beside me. >>Oh, hello.<<

I jumped a bit, as I had been about to bend down and look through the keyhole, but I stuttered a greeting and managed to say hello. >>I, erm... I think my partner is in there<< I offered by way of explanation. >>He disappeared up here with his guitar about twenty minutes ago.<<

The young woman laughed, and shifted something off her back, which turned out to be a gig bag for a very large guitar. >>Well, come in. Berni never leaves the door locked when he’s expecting me.<<

Suddenly I stood up a little straighter, eyeing the guitar with open interest. Boys who played guitar were a pfennig a dozen in West Berlin, but girls who played the guitar? They definitely made life more interesting, and my curiosity about our new neighbours was now piqued. As I stood back, the girl reached out and tried the door handle, found it unlocked, then picked up her guitar and trudged through.

I followed her into the room to find Blixa lounging on a decrepit sofa, opposite another long skinny squat punk sprawled on a bed. Beer bottles were already open at their feet, a spliff was smouldering in an ashtray between them, and both of them were laughing uproariously as they bounced music off one another.

>>Gila!<< shouted the unfamiliar young man over the roar of the guitars, when he noticed the girl
striding across the room to dump her guitar by the amplifier. >>Look who’s moved in downstairs from us. It’s Blixa from the New Buildings.<<

At the interruption, Blixa stopped playing and looked up. >>Carter, my love!<< he cried, grinning. >>Isn’t this a wonderful coincidence? It’s my old friend Berni living upstairs from us! We met at a gig in Amsterdam on our first tour. Oh, hello, Gila, you’re here as well?<<

>>Yeah, we moved<< shrugged the young woman, apparently named Gila. She had a Dutch accent, but she had the short, close-cropped dark hair and androgynous style of a typical West Berlin girl. >>The Amsterdam music scene is so small, so stagnant. We heard good things about West Berlin, so... we decided to come check it out.<<

>>The West Berlin scene is the best<< insisted Blixa, raising his beer bottle as if he were proposing a toast. >>You’re going to love it here. Remind me again the name of your new band?<<

>>Sleepless Nights<< supplied Berni, picking up the spliff and taking a draw from it before offering it to me. The irony of the name did not escape me, even as I stepped towards him to accept the hospitality of the joint.

>>Thank you<< I said, and had a deep draw, waiting to take a deep breath before I passed it on to Gila. Then I smiled as sweetly as I knew how, and suggested, >>Now, speaking of sleepless nights, do you think perhaps you and Blixa could keep it below about 60dB from around midnight to 8am?<<

Berni exchanged a sheepish look with Blixa as he got up to turn the amp down slightly. >>Oh! I am so sorry, I got carried away demonstrating my new amplifier.<<

>>It is a very good amplifier<< agreed Blixa, swigging from his beer bottle, still showing no sign of wanting to go back downstairs and get back into bed with me, and every sign of wanting to turn the jam session into a party. >>Do you know, my beloved Carter here is an excellent sound engineer, and she works in a recording studio nearby.<<

>>Really?<< said Gila, turning to me. Now her attention was piqued. >>It’s so nice to meet a sound engineer who’s a woman. I’ve become very interested in sound recently. I mean, I’m the bass player in the band. But I bought a portable tape recorder recently, and I’ve become so interested in found sounds, musique concrete and sound sculptures.<<

>>You have really come to the right place, then<< insisted Blixa with the enthusiasm of a young puppy. >>Everyone in West Berlin is so interested in this kind of music at the moment! Mufti and I have been swapping tapes with other artists, it’s so exciting.<<

Gila and Berni exchanged looks. >>Yeah, we’re very into working in this way at the moment. We’ve done a couple of singles in the new direction, less conventional funk-punk, more experimental but we’d really like to start work on an album of this kind of music.<<

>>If your band really wanted to start work on an album, talk to Carter<< urged Blixa. As I gave up on the idea that I might get him to come home, and just settled down on the sofa beside him, he threw his arm around my shoulders and shook me gently. >>I told you she works in a studio. And I’m sure she could get you a very reasonable rate. She really does excellent work. And, if you wanted... well, the New Buildings and I would be delighted to produce your record.<<

Gila and Berni exchanged glances, then Gila nodded. >>That would be amazing. Please give us the phone number and the address or something?<<
On one hand, it was nice to be acknowledged, and Blixa’s pride in my work really did swell my heart. But on the other hand, it was starting to become symptomatic of the way that he had started to see my time as an extension of his own time, and thus open for him to volunteer or give away. I know that he was just trying to make friends, and get me involved in the social life of the squat, as he thought it wasn’t for me to keep to my basement lair, wrapped up against the cold. But he kept telling people that I could do things without bothering to ask or consult if I was even interested in doing them. Which left me in the awkward position of either doing a thing I was ill-prepared to do, or withdrawing the offer and making it look like I was the uncooperative, ungenerous one with my time and my electrical skills. It didn’t take a lot of time to swing by someone’s room after work and fix their alarm clock or tea kettle or portable tape recorder. But still, it was my time that was taken up, and Blixa who got the credit for being so helpful and generous, and me who got the blame if I couldn’t.

And yet despite these little impositions on my time and skills, it was still somehow suggested anonymously at one of the community meetings, that perhaps I was a little less than generous, since I never volunteered my time cooking or washing up in the communal kitchen. I nearly exploded at this, and wanted to give them a mouthful about how it was hard to find the time to wash dishes when I was constantly fixing the stupid bloody wiring problems that invariably developed in a house where people constantly piled extension cables onto overloaded and badly wired power outlets. Instead, I tried to keep my temper, as I explained that the reason I never did shifts at the kitchen sink was because I tended to eat all of my meals at work. The most I ever used in the house was a single cup for my tea in the morning, and I made sure to wash that out in the basement sink where we bathed.

A woman across the room coughed, shifted uncomfortably, then put her hand up. I recognised her vaguely as the female half of the couple that lived opposite Berni at the front of the house. >>Well, if it’s not you, Frau Bargeld<< I winced at how my name had been collapsed into Blixa’s. >>Then where are they coming from, the little piles of dessert bowls and glasses that accumulate at the top of the stairs on our landing.<<

I felt Blixa shift beside me on the sofa, scratching lazily at a small tear that was forming in the seam of his favourite rubber trousers. Blixa was not a big fan of food, I knew. He seemed to subsist entirely on ricemilk and puffed children’s cereals. Exactly the sort of things that were consumed in dessert bowls and glasses. >>I will have a word with my partner, and try to establish where the problem is coming from<< I replied, with ice in my voice. But before the meeting was even over, Blixa had sloped off to talk to Berni about his new amp and to see if they could have a jam session that afternoon, in fact, how about right now, because he did not fancy the incipient bollocking from his missus.

I was back at Iron-Grey the next day, looking for Gudrun and finding her measuring out patterns in a strange black fabric, with the Russian girl who had been tending the shop for her over half term.

>>How<< I almost screamed. >>Do you get that impossibly destructive creature, Blixa, to wash his own damned dishes?<<

Gudrun laughed aloud, then took a drag of her cigarette. >>You don’t. Or, if there is a way to force Blixa into it, it’s something you have to find out and tell me. Because, with my long years of experience, I have found you either do the dishes yourself, or you learn to live with endless piles of dirty dishes. That Blixa lives in perpetual filth and I’m frankly astonished that it’s taken you so long to discover it.<<

>>Blixa is impossible<< I yowled. >>Blixa is just... am I supposed to be a housemaid and spend my
life clearing up after all this crap? Or am I supposed to just live in filth, in my own house? I can’t stand living like this, I like things to be clean, tidy, and ordered. Not just... ptthht oh I’ve just stepped in last week’s underpants growing mould on the floor.<<

>>Clean and tidy and ordered?<< laughed the Russian. >>Your accent may not sound German, but your attitude certainly does.<<

>>I don’t understand this reputation the Germans have for being orderly. This German I live with is a filth-monger!<<

>>Perhaps she needs some discipline<< the Russian suggested, with a lift of her eyebrow and decidedly smutty tone to her voice.

It took me a split second to realise that the Russian had used the feminine pronoun for my lover, which tickled me for a moment, before I stopped and wondered why. This Russian mangled the German language worse than I did. I still sometimes added random e’s to the ends of words and said Deutscherin when I meant Deutscher, and I occasionally got Der, Die and Das all tangled up. But the Russian seemed to dispense with definite or indefinite articles and sometimes even pronouns entirely, so perhaps it was a simple grammatical mistake. Anyway, Blixa’s name had a feminine ending, so it would make more sense for ‘Blixa’ to be a sie.

But Gudrun ignored the mistake laughed a little and said >>Well, you can’t say you weren’t warned. I distinctly remember having this conversation with you... oh my goodness, the first time you came into this shop, all those years ago.<<

I sighed and looked towards the back room, which looked oddly bare and forlorn now that Blixa had moved all of his rubbish out of it and into our basement. >>I suppose you’re right.<<

>>Here, can you hold inner-tube straight? I do rivets now<< said the Russian girl, and Gudrun bent down to her task again. As she held the odd black fabric, the Russian manipulated what looked like some large, metallic industrial fastener and moved it slowly, noisily, down the table, leaving a row of shiny silver bars connecting two black rubber strips together.

>>What on earth are you making?>> I wondered, coming back to the table and craning my head to get a better look at the delicate operation, as the Russian managed to reach the end of the row, then turned and went back the other way, adding on another layer.

>>I buy job-lot of used motorcycle inner-tubes on market. So I cut into strips, fix together with hundreds of little metal fasteners. Like punk safety pins, yes? But more utility look. Factory. Industry. Rubber is little bit fetish, rivets are cool, don’t you think?>>

>>You’re making a rubber coat out of inner tubes? You better not let Blixa know about that, or Blixa will have it.<< I started to giggle.

>>Same Blixa? Dirty creature who lived in back room? She does not deserve my clothes.<<

I laughed aloud. >>Yes, that would be him. My lover.<<

My correction of the pronoun had been subtle, but the Russian stopped and looked at me with a penetrating expression. >>Apology<< she finally said, then added with very Russian directness. >>I am thinking you are for girls.<<

I burst out laughing with something that felt like relief. I did not realise how cloying I had been finding it, how repressive and constraining, the way that everyone at the squat assumed that I was heterosexual, and even called me Frau Bargeld, until a stranger somehow confirmed my very
existence, with the other, more correct supposition. >>Well, normally, yes, I am for the girls<< I conceded. >>Blixa’s a bit... different.<<

For a long minute, there was silence, as even though the terrifying Russian girl was still continuing her work with the industrial fastener, I could not shake the feeling that she was studying me out of the corner of her eye. But finally, Gudrun broken the silence.

>>Speaking of Blixa<< she broached. >>You know I found a shoe-maker’s catalogue that sells all sorts of leather shoe buckles.<< Digging around in the piles of merchandise around the counter, she located a padded brown envelope, and slid out the contents: a catalogue and a small bundle of metal brick-a-brac wrapped up in some black stuff. >>They sent me these as samples. So tell your other half, if he wants me to sew buckles on his trousers, to bring them in for me.<<

But the Russian picked up the samples of merchandise, and laid them out on the table. Against the background of the slick, shiny inner tube material, the large silver and black leather buckles looked particularly bright and metallic. >>Ooh, these are nice. Do not give to smelly back-room man. I want to use these. Make corset. See? Holding them against the inner-tube material, she wrapped it around her slender waist. >>Oh no, rubber will buckle. Never mind, I put straps over shoulders to hold it straight. Deep V at the back, maybe, very sexy, very chic. What do you think?<<

>>I did promise the buckles to Blixa, Val<< sighed Gudrun. >>He does have first dibs.<<

>>You know what<< I suggested, suddenly thinking of how Blixa would look in all that shiny black fabric. >>If you make a rubber corset out of motorcycle inner tubes, and stick buckles and straps and metal rivets all over it, I absolutely guarantee you that Blixa will find a way to wear it. In fact, given how he’s been wearing that... strap-on harness for the past 2 months straight, you probably won’t even be able to get him out of it ever again.<<

>>Man in corset<< mused Val thoughtfully, still moving the makeshift fabric around as if trying to work out how to cut it. But then she nodded decisively and smiled a positively evil grin. >>I like it. Strap him up, he make no more trouble. Do you know measurements?<<

>>That sucker has a 28” waist<< I sighed. >>But he is long, and narrow. I think he wears at least a 34” inseam, so you better make the straps quite long.<<

>>I have more than enough tyre rubber to strap this man down<< said Val jauntily, and took out her tape measure. As she snipped at the fabric, and cut it out into rough segments, I watched, entranced.

The bell of the shop’s door went, and Gudrun’s head jerked up, but it was only Wolfgang. >>Hello, my ladies<< he called out to Gudrun’s greeting. >>I’m bringing some more zines for you to sell. Shall I put them out in the rack, or do you want me to leave them on the counter for you?<<

>>Do they have prices on? I’ll need to put stickers on them if you haven’t priced them<< replied Gudrun, but as she moved to take the magazines from Wolfgang, he noticed me lurking behind her.

>>Carter!<< he called out. >>I have been looking for you, you have been making yourself awfully scarce. When I telephone your Aunt’s house, you are never at home.<<

>>I’ve... uh... moved out<< I explained cautiously. >>I’m squatting now. Blixa and I have got a place together.<<

>>Marvellous<< he said. >>I’m so happy for you two. But, look, Carter, I’ve got an idea for you. A friend of mine, a publisher, has been in touch. He’s asked me to help him with putting together a journal, of essays, and artworks, on the theme of the Queer Experience of God and Religion.<<
>>Yes, I can see why that would appeal to you<< I agreed, thinking warmly of our conversations.

>>Well, yes, I shall be contributing an essay, of course. It will be published through the university press, so it’s quite prestigious. But then I remembered, that you said that you were working on a comic, on the theme of God and Good and Evil, inspired by our conversations. I mentioned it to my friend, and he was intrigued. Would definitely consider it for inclusion. Would you be interested in contributing your work to such a publication?<<

>>Oh, that would be wonderful<< urged Gudrun. >>It’s been ages since you did one of your comics – they used to sell so well here.<<

>>Well, erm...<< I hedged. The truth was that I had been so busy, first with the conversion work, and then with the move, and then simply with Blixa, that I had got no further with it. >>You see it’s not finished.<<

>>Can you let me see what you’ve got?<< suggested Wolfgang amicably. >>He might be happy to go with a portion of the whole piece... or...<< And here he dropped his voice and moved closer with an understanding smile. >>You know, for me, sometimes when I have difficulty finishing a piece of work, I find that the promise if publication is an excellent incentive to pick it up again and actually finish the thing off.<<

>>It’s not a question of not wanting to<< I protested. >>It’s a question of finding the time.<<

>>One has a habit, I find<< confided Wolfgang. >>Of making time, for the things one really wants to do.<<

I glared at him. >>The one who first said that<< I snorted, a little dismissively. >>Was clearly not a woman, working one shift at work, and another at home.<<

Gudrun and Val both laughed at this, even as Wolfgang backed off a little. >>Well. Show me what you’ve got so far. Meet me at the Other Shore in half an hour with it? I’ll buy you lunch. You’re looking almost as thin as Blixa, squatting is clearly not agreeing with you.<<

>>Ooh, he never buys us lunch<< teased Gudrun.

>>Come round next Thursday. Bring Betts. I’ll make you supper<< offered Wolfgang. >>My little brother is in town, and he wants to meet more local musicians.<<

I found myself walking swiftly home, locating the pile of unfinished comics, sweeping them into a protective envelope, then running back to the Other Shore. It was true; I wasn’t eating properly since I’d left home. And it wasn’t even that I couldn’t cook or care for myself. It was more that I hated venturing into the huge kitchen of that squat, and facing the recriminating stares of the women, for failing to deal with Blixa’s untidiness.

But Wolfgang was waiting patiently for me at the café, and Gerhard came over when he saw what we were doing, insisting on coffee and desert on the house, for two of his star artists. Wolfgang loved the comics, both the finished sections, and the unfinished bits I sketched out and explained to him. He urged me to complete them, insisting that his friend would be very interested in publishing them, and Gerhard joined in, saying he loved the new philosophical themes to my work, and suggesting I make a book out of it. He knew the editors of a publishing house, he said, who often liked to drop in for coffee. Then Wolfgang asked if he could borrow the finished bits for ten minutes, to go round the corner to the print shop, and take a copy of them, and I agreed to wait and have another coffee at the Other Shore.
While I was waiting for my coffee, the door banged and Bettina strode in with Isabela. I waved at them, and on seeing me, they smiled and came over to my table. >>Mind if we join you?<< asked Bettina.

>>No, no, not at all. Well, Wolfgang will be back in a few minutes, but I’m sure he won’t mind if you pile in. The more, the merrier<< I waved, gesturing to his empty chair.

>>Ah! What’s Wolfgang up to at the moment? Always up to no good, that one<< Isabela chortled, catching a waiter’s eye and gesturing for coffee.

>>He’s busy putting together a journal of... Queer Responses to the Religious Experience or something like that<< I explained.

>>I can see how that would appeal to him<< Bettina hooted. >>Shall I give him one of my lesbian goddess poems, or do you think he’ll find that blasphemous and inappropriate?<<

>>You totally should<< encouraged Isabela.

>>Well, who knows, he might be up for it, as he’s currently trying to strong-arm me into contributing, and as an atheist, I don’t know how appropriate that is...<< I sighed.

>>Sure, Atheism is as valid a viewpoint on the religious experience as any other<< Bettina quipped.

Isabela, on the other hand, cocked an eyebrow at me meaningfully, and added >>However, on the other hand, I’m not sure how appropriate it is for you to contribute, given how you’re straight now, but...<<

>>What?<< I had to put down my coffee cup, as my hands started to shake.

>>Well, everyone knows you’ve shackled up with Blixa<< pointed out Bettina. >>This is how it always happens.. How we lose girls from The Team.<< sighed Isabela. >>You get a bit of dick, find out you like it, and then next thing you’re living together and getting sucked into heterosexuality full time... Look, you’ve even started growing your hair out<< she said so casually that it felt as if I’d been kicked in the gut.

>>What?<< I sputtered, raising my hand to my hair. The truth was, my quiff hadn’t been trimmed in months, let alone razored at the back, and it was becoming very shaggy indeed. But this wasn’t anything at all down to aesthetics or sexuality, it was down to the fact that I’d lost three weeks of paid work over the squat refurbishment, and I hadn’t had the money for trivialities like haircuts. But neither had Blixa, whose hair was longer than mine, and had now reached his collar, forming a shaggy sort of a mullet. >>I’m the same as I ever was<<.

But as my voice grew confused, Isabela grew more strident. >>No you’re not, Carter. We don’t see you at the dyke bars any more. You don’t come to the gay clubs. I only ever see you at the Other Shore when you’re working, and trying to get your art in spaces that are reserved for the queer girls. And you’re not queer any more. You’re at home, playing house with a man, and you know what, I’ve seen this too many times before, with the bisexual girls. You start playing at being married, and then one day you are married. Next thing, you turn up pregnant, then you’ve got a baby, then you’re gone, to the other side. You’re a breeder, and that’s that. Which is fine, if that’s the life you want to lead. But don’t take space away from the real queer girls, the ones who live here, all the time.<<

I stared at Isabela, then turned to Bettina, waiting for her to defend me, to point out that it was possible to be bisexual. After all, Bettina’s girlfriend Anne was bisexual. But Bettina said nothing, and would not meet my eyes, and I wanted to believe that she didn’t actually agree with Isabela, but
didn’t quite want to start an argument, but her silence troubled me. I just sat there, at the table, feeling shellshocked, feeling like all the air had suddenly been drained out of the room. This hurt, way, way worse, coming from Isabela – or from Bettina, someone I knew and loved and trusted – than it would have hurt from a stranger.

And yet, what could I say, in response to them? Could I protest to the pair of them that our sex, between me and Blixa, still was really bloody queer? That when I tied on my strap-on and penetrated him from behind, I felt more gay than ever, and when he told me he was my girlfriend, and together, in bed, alone in the night, he and I were girl and girl together, or boy and boy, or more likely, two strange queer, mixed boy-girl creatures who were able to strip one another bare, and by the golden glow of the wood fire, penetrate those inner sanctums, and really be who we were, what we were, together, in a way we had never been with anyone else?

Could I tell either of them that, in a way that they could understand? Of course not.

And what she said hurt me all the more, because I knew there was truth in what Isabela said, I could see it happening, even as I fought against it. Every time someone at the squat called me Frau Bargeld, in jest or in earnest, every time someone took me to task and told me I should do the cleaning or the house-keeping for my partner, I could feel myself chaffing against it, even as their words became a kind of truth. Blixa wasn’t trying to make me The Girl in our relationship, but the rest of the world was. People at that squat saw Blixa as the man, and me as his wife, and there was nothing we could do, in bed or out of it, to stop that horrible cage that appeared in people’s eyes when they looked at us that way.

Wolfgang reappeared, and I seized my drawings back from him, but I barely saw him. I stuttered some excuse, and left quickly, even as he called after me >>Carter finish those drawings! I mean it!<<
Carter is having second thoughts about squat politics, about cohabitation, and about their relationship in general. And Blixa has to work some of his legendary charm if they are both to avoid being thrown out of their home.

I went to my aunt’s house to drop off my drawings, then found myself digging through my bookshelf for emergency money that I had hid, even from Blixa. I grabbed the last of that precious cash, and I immediately went out, heading for Penny Lane, the barbershop-cum-art-gallery where all of West Berlin’s coolest kids got their barnets brushed up.

>>Take it off<< I insisted, sitting down in the chair. >>Take it all off. Short back and sides. In fact, just shave it. All of it. I want it gone.<<

>>Carter<< sighed Chloe, who had been cutting my hair since the first night I’d gone out on the town with the Iron-Grey gang. >>Are you sure? Your quiff is your thing. I can’t imagine you without this big black cockscomb of hair. You wouldn’t be the same. What is it, what’s brought this on? You’re not going through a breakup, are you? You and Blixa seem so happy now, so good for one another.<<

>>No, not a breakup<< I wailed. >>But I feel like a part of me is breaking up. I feel like I don’t know who I am any more. So just give me the biggest... gayest.. Dyke-iest haircut so everyone will know, what and who I am, and stop trying to tell me that I am not.<<

>>Ah<< said Chloe thoughtfully as she shook out the protective nylon cape and tied it round my shoulders. >>Carter, your sexuality is not located in your hair.<<

>>I know<< I sighed, thinking of something Anne had told me a year previously. >>But it’s a damn good place to start.<<

I felt my mind soothed as the buzz of the electric razor hit the back of my neck, and she stripped my hair away. She removed the back and the sides, and left the top longer, shaping my quiff into a huge prow, backcombing it to make it stand up like an angry hedgehog, then shaking it loose a little bit with her fingers. I put my glasses on, and a handsome young man stared back. Finally, I looked like myself again, even if I didn’t feel like myself.

After paying for my haircut, I went home and strode into the squat feeling like I was wearing armour. But of course, as I was making my way down the entrance hall to the backstairs to the basement, my most hated Hausfrau came out of the kitchen. For a moment, she did a double-take, confused by the changed hair. But before I could abscond, she cut in front of me, barring my progress down the stairs.

>>Ah<< she said, in that annoying, slightly supercilious voice. >>Frau Bargeld, we’ve been meaning to have a word.<< She was one of those communist squatter types who always used the word we when she meant I, and I knew she meant it to summon the spirit of the whole commune behind her outrage, but it always just sounded like the meant the royal we. >>We keep running out of spoons in the kitchen. And though we have asked all around the squat, and collected the various
missing cutlery, well. You and your partner were out, so we had a little poke around your room, and what do you think we found, Frau Bargeld? But we found seventeen spoons. Seventeen, Frau Bargeld. Seventeen! What could anyone possibly want with seventeen spoons...<<

I had simply had it. >>For a start<< I roared. >>My name is not Frau Bargeld. It is Carter. C-A-R-T-E-R. Carter. And for a second, I am not responsible for your fucking spoons. It is Blixa who takes your spoons and your bowls, not me. And if you have a fucking problem with Blixa, then you need to ask Blixa. Not me. Do I make myself clear?<<

The annoying woman pulled back as if I’d hit her, instead of just shouted at her. >>Mark my words<< she flustered back at me, puffing herself up like a robin. >>The Central Committee will be hearing about this. Yes, you can be sure the Central Committee will be hearing about this.<<

>>You can tell them about the seventeen spoons, too, bitch. In fact, you can shove your seventeen fucking spoons up your fucking arse!<< Shaking my head, I pushed past her and went down the stairs. But of course Blixa wasn’t in our room, as I could hear music from upstairs. Gathering up my things, I stuffed them into a bag, and went up to Berni’s room, banging loudly on the door to announce my presence before entering.

Of course, there were Berni and Blixa, surrounded by swathes of hash smoke, banging away at their guitars, accompanied by Gila on the bass, and Mufti playing improvised percussion against the rhythms of a small portable tape recorder that was blasting out loops of strange, repeated found sounds.

>>Valdi!<< cried Blixa, looking very stoned, and rather pleased to see me. >>Come and join the party.<<

>>Beloved<< I said quietly, bending down to kiss him tenderly on the side of his floppy hair. >>I need to go back to my Great-Aunt’s flat for a while. I have got to get this comic book finished, as Wolfgang’s friend wants to publish it. It might be overnight, it might be a couple of days.<<

>>You don’t have to do that at your Aunt’s house. You can do that here<< Blixa insisted, looking a little put out that I was abandoning him. >>I like it when you draw. I like watching you. And I thought you liked drawing while I played guitar to you?<<

>>I have also<< I confessed. >>Just shouted and sworn at the wife of the Central Committee Fuhrer and her seventeen stolen spoons. So it may be... politic for me to be... out of this house for a little while.<<

>>Central Committee Fuhrer<< repeated Mufti, nearly exploding with laughter. >>Oh god, does your squat have one of those, too? They really are unbearable, aren’t they? Death by Central Committee. It’s fucking bullshit, isn’t it. You should talk to Alex about how to get one over on these kinds of petty fascists.<<

>>I may also have called her a bitch.<<

>>That’s my girl<< said Blixa, his eyes shining with pride.

>>And told her to shove her seventeen spoons up her arse<< I added, wincing at that particular detail.

But Blixa threw his arms around me and squeezed me. >>West Berlin has had the most salutary effect on you, my dear. I am so glad you are learning to be properly punk, and to stand up for yourself.<<
As I paused for breath, trying to recollect my sense of calm. I listened to the strange, disjointed metallic rhythm of the tape recorder loop. >>Blixa, what on earth were you doing with seventeen spoons anyway?<<

Blixa merely shrugged innocently. >>We recorded them. What else would one do with spoons? We needed a metallic sound for the tape loop. So we got all the spoons out of the draw, and Mufti threw them on the floor in time with the music. It sounds great, no, yes?<<

>>Oh shit<< sighed Berni. >>I sympathise, because that cow from the Central Committee... oh my god. Gila is terrified of that woman, though she’s always been sweetness and light to me.<<

>>God, no, she is a total tyrant<< interjected Gila. >>She never criticises the men. Only the women.<<

>>Well. Carter, if I were you, I would go out the back<< warned Berni. >>You know you can go around the garden, back through the bombsite, and then on the other side, at the back of the alley, there’s a loose panel that slides up and down. The one with the painting of a rat on it. You can follow the alley out to the street.<<

>>Really?<< I asked, suddenly very grateful to the pair of them. >>I had no idea that alley went through.<<

>>Yeah, we don’t like to advertise that<< he shrugged. >>Because although it’s convenient to get out that way, should the police come, we don’t want strangers coming in that way.<<

I kissed Blixa quickly, leaving him to sort out the mess with that awful woman and her commandant partner, then took my stuff and left.

When I got back to my Aunt’s house, I found Grete shuffling around the kitchen. >>Carter<< she cried. >>Have you come back for a proper visit? I saw that you had been in and out of your room, and was starting to be a little offended that you hadn’t even popped in to say hello.<<

>>I’m sorry, Grete. I needed to get some artwork in a hurry<< I apologised. >>But... do you mind if I stay here for a couple of days?<<

>>Not at all! We’re happy to have you.<< But then she craned her neck to look past me. >>Is Blixa with you, or...<< When she saw my face fall, she put her arm around me and made soothing noises. >>There, there, darling. Relationships are difficult. Are you having trouble? You can talk to me, you know.<<

I sighed deeply, wondering if I even knew how to explain it. >>Not with Blixa. I’m more in love with Blixa than ever. It keeps surprising me, how much you can you love someone, how you can discover more and more about them, and still love every little bit more you find. But living together is... it’s hard work. And living in a bloody commune, with committees and sub-committees and quotas and quorums and you have to consult a bloody social council before you can even take a bath...<<

Grete started to laugh. >>You needn’t tell me, dearie. We’ve been through all of this before. There was a point in the 60s, where your aunt was very taken with communal living, and she wanted to start running the boarding house on more egalitarian terms. Thinking that it would be fairer, and that it would be somehow easier, if the boarders took on more responsibilities. My goodness, it lasted about three months. It took about ten times as much work to get everyone to even turn up to the
meetings, let alone come to any decisions at them. So we gave that up very fast, and honestly, I think most of the residents were happier about that, than we were.<<

I was soon laughing aloud, even as she poured me out a cup of coffee. >>I can’t imagine. But yeah, it’s...<< I stopped, wondering if I could even explain why it bothered me so much, the way the other squatters simply assumed that I would take care of the problems that Blixa generated. >>It’s difficult. And though I love living with Blixa... well. I never get the chance to work on my art. I thought I would come here for a little peace and quiet so I could finish my work.<<

>>You go right ahead. I’ll make sure you’re not disturbed. Are you in for dinner?<<

I found myself suddenly flushing with gratitude, thinking of the way that Grete carefully, painstakingly, always made sure there was food for everyone to eat. Until I’d started living in that squat, where other people systematically hoovered up any spare food I was foolish enough to leave lying around, I had never given it a second’s thought, how food always appeared, like clockwork, around mealtimes in our home.

>>I would love to have dinner with you, Auntie Grete. Let me know if you need any help peeling, or preparing, or anything.<<

Grete just stopped, and looked over at me, surprised, and I swear I thought I saw tears standing in her eyes.

>>What is it? Are you alright?<<

She put her hand to her eye, and wiped the moisture away. >>That’s the first time you’ve ever called me auntie. You know, you are more like a daughter to us than...<< But then she turned away, her lip quivering, waving her hand as if to keep me at a distance.

I just walked up to Grete and put my arms around her, squeezing her close. >>I know<< I said softly. >>And I love you, auntie.<<

It felt so luxurious to be back at my old house, with hot water that ran in a bath, with food that appeared magically on the table at dinner time, with proper heating and clean, dry bedclothes, that I thought I would never take any of these things for granted again. And I sat down, after dinner, with a pot of coffee at my elbow, and drew for six hours uninterrupted. And the next day, I did double the amount of drawing, and around midnight, I completed this comic that had been hanging around unfinished for months. As I piled it in a stack on my desk, and admired my handiwork, I thought about maybe going home and crawling into bed with Blixa for the reward of some snuggling, and maybe a quick screw. But then I thought about the long, cold walk, the freezing basement, the lack of a hot bath the next morning, the annoyance of having to sort out the food situation and the dirty dishes situation, and I thought ‘fuck it’ and stayed put.

I loved waking up in my own bed, in a clean and tidy bedroom. And although I’d once found the limited hours of hot water draconian, I now found it such a marvel to have running hot water at all that I delighted in the experience. Hot water in the squat had to be boiled in the kitchen, or warmed up on top of the coal heater. Grete made breakfast for my aunt and I, and I was so grateful that I did the washing up for all three of us, without even being asked.

I rang Wolfgang and told him the drawings were done, so he asked me to bring them over. Then I rang the studio, and it was a good thing I did, because Berni had got in touch and booked some recording time for his band, and had deliberately asked for me by name, to engineer the sessions. My
life seemed like it was returning to a more recognisable shape, and so I had better get on with it, no matter where I was sleeping.

So I hugged and kissed both Grete and my Aunt, and went out to go about my business. Downstairs, I noted that my van was still parked in the Hof. Although I had originally planned to keep it by the squat, once I’d brought over a few loads of supplies for the attic conversion in the back of it, I found that rather too many people kept asking for special favours of deliveries by it. I didn’t like to be precious about my van, as I always felt that it was sheer blind luck that had brought the gift of it to me, and I should share that luck with others. But the older members of the squat, well, I didn’t like the attitude with which they assumed that my van was theirs to utilise, whenever they liked, and the way they insisted that it was selfish, or worse, bourgeois for me to curtail their use of it. Especially considering how they never, ever seemed to want to fill the tank back up after they’d borrowed it, even though I was expected to contribute my petrol and my mileage. That, to me, was hypocrisy. Even the New Buildings contributed petrol money, even when they barely had money to feed themselves after a gig.

But until I did the sessions with Sleepless Nights, I didn’t have the money for petrol, so I left the van in the Hof and went to get the bus to Wolfgang’s apartment. Wolfgang was delighted with the finished drawings, enthusing that the finished results were even better than the pencilled drafts had indicated. As he set up his camera to take print-quality photos of them, he gave me his essay to read, to show how well our subjects had aligned. I told him that his essay was amazing, and pointed out several wonderful arguments in it, bemoaning the fact that I hadn’t had this new information when I’d been designing my comic. But Wolfgang smiled and said that was what was good about the two pieces, that they developed their own theses, building on another, but not mirroring one another perfectly.

It was one of those perfect comments that made me feel really good about myself, and really good about my art, and really good about Wolfgang, and how kind he had been, how supportive. And I was about to open my mouth, and ask him what he thought about Isabela’s weird comments the other day, to ask him if he thought I was ‘no longer queer’ now that I was living with Blixa, and what he thought about the idea that I was taking space away from ‘real’ queer girls, by publishing my work in queer spaces like this journal.

But before I got a chance, he picked up a copy of the local arts magazine, and tossed it down in front of me, so that I could see a giant, half-page advert for the ‘Berlin Atonal’ Festival, at which his band, and the New Buildings, and Malaria! and The Skin and almost all of the other local hip kids would be playing that coming weekend. It had to be pretty special, as Blixa had even given up one of his lucrative Saturday shifts at the Risk bar in order to play. But then Wolfgang made one of his wonderfully catty, yet killingly funny comments about one of the other bands playing, delivered with such a perfectly sarcastic angle of his eyebrows that you couldn’t possibly hold the comment against him. And I realised at that moment, that Wolfgang, as sweet and as kind and as charming as he was to my face, was perfectly capable of being incredibly cutting. And so I closed my mouth, and I kept my questions about Bettina’s less than charitable comments to myself.

Then I got the bus back, not to the squat, or to my Aunt’s house, but to the New Buildings’ rehearsal studios, looking for Blixa to find out how the squat’s kangaroo court had gone about that cow’s complaints about me. The band were taking a break, huddled around a tiny electric heater as they smoked their cigarettes, so I asked them if they minded if I borrowed Blixa and took him off to get a warm drink in a Turkish café down the road.

He looked at me sulkily as he put his hands around the glass of steaming mint tea, just to warm them up. >>Our bed is freezing cold without you in it, Valdi<< he moaned.
My bed also felt very empty, but I had a lovely hot bath to warm me up this morning. Blixa’s expression turned from sulky to plaintive as he realised I had had the better deal of it. But tell me. What has happened with Frau Fuhrerin and her complaints to the Social Kommissar?

Well, said Blixa, lighting a cigarette and taking a long draw from it, a slightly bitchy expression coming to rest on his pretty pursed lips. She made her complaint, and demanded that a meeting be held that night, to throw us both out. I told them that you had gone, that you had been so upset by her actions that you had left. Who knew for how long.

Not exactly the truth, I tutted.

Not exactly a lie, either. And there was of course, on that afternoon, a power cut in the kitchen. One of the fuses blown – you know, the kind of thing you would have fixed in a jiffy – but it took them an inordinate amount of time to sort it out, and everyone except Frau Fuhrerin kept commenting on how they wished you were there. Blixa smiled and bent his head to his tea, raising his eyebrows at the same time. With his hair getting so long in front, it was an oddly feminine and seductive gesture, and I felt a fierce stab of sudden lust and affection and possession, all wrapped together. Anyway, when the lights were back on, she made the committee have the meeting anyway, as I was to stand trial in your place, which worked very much against her, as when the whole house turned out to attend the committee meeting, everyone thought it was very unfair to have the meeting there and then, without you to defend yourself.

A whole house meeting? Not just the bloody committee?

I think it was supposed to be just the committee, the Social Kommissars. As he playfully echoed my sarcastic term, I felt us knitting together in a tight knot of defiance. Blixa, at least, I knew was on my side, and I felt so close and conspiratorial with him at that moment, like the two of us could take on the world. But as soon as it got about what was going on – and Berni made sure people knew what was going on – everyone turned out. The front hall was packed.

Everyone? At least 20 adults live in our building. Oh god, that must really have been bad. I felt almost many of my misgivings about Berni and his noisy guitar amp start to melt away, as I realised we might have made a powerful ally in our upstairs neighbour.

But Blixa shook his head, leaning back in his chair as he studied me. Not exactly, he drawled, and sucked at his cigarette again, shaking his forelock out of his eyes. I always forgot, when I was away from him, exactly how beautiful he was, and how it wasn’t even just his delicate features that made him so lovely, but the animation and energy in his eyes. See, she and her cronies definitely had it in for you, documenting how they thought you were lazy, and uncooperative, and you did not participate in the washing-up rotas. But then, one by one, people started standing up and started saying ‘well, Carter fixed my clock’ and ‘Carter got my lights working again’ and ‘Carter re-caulked my window so it stopped rattling’ and one after another, about half a dozen different commune members stood up and pointed out ways in which you’d been helpful, or useful, or kind, and said how nice it was to have an electrician on the site.

I stared at him, completely taken aback. I had been hurt by the ferocity of Frau Fuhrerin’s attack against me, but not really surprised. I had grown very used to a certain type of person taking against me. But it caught me utterly off guard, when other people appreciated or even defended me.

So what did they decide? Trying to think it through, I realised that I would not be devastated if we were thrown out of the house. I would be annoyed, sure, after all the work I’d put in, but the romance of communal living had definitely worn off. But for Blixa, on the other hand, it would be decidedly more of a problem. He didn’t really have anywhere else to go.
aren’t we.

Blixa smiled. >>Deadlock. Frau Fuhrerin is not allowed to vote, as she raised the complaint. Which leaves the committee tied, 2 to 2. It’s supposed to go to an open vote in the house tonight. If you come and put in an appearance, it’s very likely to go our way.<<

>>OK<< I said, hating all this politicking. Blixa, on the other hand, though he seemed annoyed by it, was definitely enjoying the machinations of getting one over on any kind of authority. But for me, I just didn’t want to live somewhere I felt so unwelcome. >>But Blixa, I don’t know how to tell you this, but...<< I paused as he sipped his tea.

>>I know what you’re going to ask.<<

>>Blixa, it’s not about you, it’s about them.<<

He smiled wryly. >>Come off it. All of my lovers start to hate me a little while. And almost no one wants to live with me at the end of a month.<< And suddenly the hard exterior cracked and he had that strange, vulnerable, bereft expression that made him look almost unbearably beautiful. >>Are you leaving me??

>>Of course not<< I said quickly, panicked, feeling my heart start to pound with anxiety at even the thought of leaving him. >>But the living together thing, can we maybe do that, only part time? Maybe every other day? So I can I spend maybe four days a week at yours, but three days a week at my aunt’s house, so I can get some art done.<<

>>And your hot water heater<< said Blixa wryly, the sarcasm masking the look of intense relief that we were not breaking up.

>>Think of me going to my Aunt’s house the same way you think of going to the New Buildings’ rehearsal studio.<<

He shrugged his effortless shrug, and smiled wryly in agreement.

We went together back to the squat that evening, after rehearsal broke up. It was, as he had described, a complete kangaroo court. I hung back with Berni and Gila, and tried to be friendly to people I knew, but stayed quiet the rest of the time, letting Blixa do the talking when he needed to.

But Blixa was a persuasive speaker, and an extraordinarily good ringleader, subtly stirring up sympathy for us and against the ‘Social Kommissars’. The vote went overwhelmingly in our favour, and several people started to complain loudly that it was absurd that it had been called in the first place. And even though I wanted to go downstairs and crawl into bed with my lover, I had to smile and shake people’s hands and thank them for not throwing me out for having done nothing wrong. But then Berni said he was going to have a little party in his room with the rest of his band, their drummer arrived with a bottle of vodka, and we all trooped down there and smoked hash until I couldn’t see straight.

Berni was so sweet, especially when he was very stoned, and he flopped down between us on the sofa, and kept hugging us and saying over and over again, how he was so glad that we were staying, and telling us what a hassle the previous downstairs neighbours had been about his guitar playing, what with the baby and all, and how cool it was to have other musicians down there now, and crying a little bit with happiness, and then hugging both of us again, because he was so stoned he couldn’t actually stand up.

Blixa just laughed, and hugged Berni back, kissing the top of his head affectionately, then put on one
of Gila’s crazy tapes, singing along with the weird looping sounds as he tried to roll another joint. >>This is so good, you guys<< he was insisting to his friends. >>You have to go and record this, it is my new favourite music. You’re the best band in Berlin and you’re not even from Berlin, a ha ha!<<

>>If you would sing with us, Blixa, we will record it, and it will be our honour<< Berni cried, almost glowing with happiness, and hugged us all again.

And suddenly, I felt overcome with a sense of wellbeing that didn’t actually have much to do with the hash we had smoked. It was more to do with the realisation that Berni really was actually a truly lovely, friendly bloke, gentle and thoughtful and kind. And that Blixa, for all his failures to do the dishes or return spoons to the kitchen, when he was around gentle, thoughtful Berlin squat-punks like Berni, became enthusiastic and kind and affectionate himself. It felt almost disloyal, but I loved who Blixa was, in this environment, with Berni and Gila and their crazy Dutch drummer, Peter – or with the Bremen Town Musicians of the New Buildings – in a way I did not love the Blixa who sat and drank all night and talked absolute fucking bullshit with Kick fucking Knave.
Atonal

Chapter Summary

The entire West Berlin music scene turns out for the Atonal Festival at the SO36, but Carter's evening is somewhat ruined by a bad trip.

But when it's Malaria's turn to play, Beate has a strange and secret request for Carter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Berlin Atonal Festival turned out to be a weekend-long party, as much as it was a gig. A carnival atmosphere prevailed, as people floated in and out of the SO36, much like the Great Downfall Show the previous year, but spread out over a whole weekend, instead of compressed into one evening.

As if in confirmation of the West Berlin music scene’s growing importance, the NME, the most important music magazine in Britain, had assigned a journalist to cover the festival, and the city’s vibrant music scene. Blixa, of course, immediately made it his business to meet with this journalist, and obviously made such a big impression upon the writer, that the review of the festival soon seemed to be expanding into a huge feature all based around the New Buildings. Blixa sorted the fellow out with a guest list spot for the festival, and the journalist rang his editor, telling him he was going to come back the next month, and schedule interviews and a proper photo shoot. It looked like Blixa and his mob might get their first cover feature!

Blixa and I went down early on Friday night, and met up with Mufti, as we went to check out Manc Mark’s band. Mufti arrived with the alluring Mona in tow, and another of Mona’s musician friends, this long, skinny, incredibly pretty creature who introduced himself as Raymond, though the gang seemed to have nicknamed him Pig, due to his odd obsession with German pork products. When I discovered he was also a sound engineer, and apparently actually English, despite the leather trousers and the ambiguous Berlin haircut, I told him that Kreuzberg, which was heavily Turkish and mostly Halal, probably wasn’t the best place to experience the finest of German pork. But if he wanted a good sausage, I knew of a rather adorable ‘swinery-dinery’ restaurant down in Tempelhof, which Old Schumacher had sworn served the absolute best in German Wurst. This tall, skinny pig-obsessed fellow was so pleased with this information, that he sort of attached himself to us for the rest of the weekend. It was odd, how, in West Berlin, I found myself sparking up quick friendships with other English people in a way I never had, back at home, but he and Blixa really hit it off, as Pig started regaling him with stories about the nascent experimental music scene in London. According to him, this weird, extreme music was starting to be called ‘Industrial’, a term that intrigued Blixa, and so with Blixa’s approval, the lanky Londoner was absorbed into our gang.

We ended up staying all night, doing lines of amphetamine to keep us going through the long weekend, then smoking hash to mellow out the edgy, nervous buzz of the speed. The evening’s music rushed by in a wonderful, jagged, multicolour haze, as we all found ourselves on our feet, jumping up and down and surging back and forth in our glorious moron-dance. Feeling bourn up on the music and the crowd’s excitement (and, well obviously, the steady stream of Blixa’s speed) I barely slept, as Mufti and Mona and Pig came back to the squat with us, to carry on partying after the...
music had stopped.

The couple opposite Berni had recently moved out, possibly driven away by the noise of the late-night tape-looping sessions, and their drummer Peter had moved in, so that the entire basement of the house was almost totally inhabited by musicians. With the huge kitchens between the cellars and the older families upstairs, no one minded too much if there were the occasional jam session, so long as it was all kept to a dull roar. When Pig saw some of Neubauten’s home-made instruments, the bizarre bits of twisted scrap metal and springs that Mufti and Andrew used as percussion, he was absolutely entranced by them, testing them to discover their intriguing sonic capabilities, and enquiring as to how the hell a soundman would go about mic-ing them. Very carefully, from a safe distance if Mufti was hammering at them, I informed him, and everyone laughed. The rag-tag group of musicians soon started a serious jam session that began at about 3 or 4 in the morning, and went through until the next afternoon. And by the time that we were ready to load the instruments into my van to take them over to the SO36, Pig was so enamoured of the home-made trash-percussion that he had wrangled an invitation to come up and jam with the band onstage.

On Saturday night, our gang was playing: first Alex, who was starting to grow out of his awful teenagerness, then the New Buildings, and finally the Deadly Doris. Blixa got all dressed up for the occasion, in his shiniest rubber jeans, with the silver-studded harness belted over the top, and a slightly dandyish black button-down shirt that flattered his slender build. Emaciated and elegantly wasted, with his fluffy longer hair back-combed on top, and hanging into his mascara-darkened eyes, he looked somehow both slightly haggard, and yet almost unbelievably pretty.

The band were in fine form, bourn up on the camaraderie of a hometown gig. (Not to mention the chemical enhancements, as I noticed that Berni had positioned himself sitting on the edge of the stage, and kept rolling joints which he handed up to Mufti to pass to the rest of the band.) The SO36 was absolutely packed to the rafters by the time they went on, crowded with people howling for them. Although it was freezing outside, the space inside was almost overheated, with sweat dripping off the walls. I made my way to the sound desk, knowing that both the sound and the view would be best there, and found Alex at the mixing board, who nodded in greeting and pulled the barrier back to let me stand by him, up on the slight riser, as the set began. Blixa pressed play on a large boombox onstage, and Alex brought the tape up in the mix, the strange looped sounds run through his effects units and echoing about the hall in a glorious, almost hymn-like cacophony.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a joint, then pointed towards Alex, so I nodded and took a couple of draws myself before passing it on. Alex was busy with the mixing board, so he just opened his mouth like a baby bird wanting to be fed, and I held the joint to his lips as he inhaled. I wanted the hash to calm my nerves, but instead it seemed to excite my senses, and as the sounds from the stage seemed to cascade about the room, I realised I better slow down, or I’d be as messed up as I’d been at the Great Downfall Show. Then I had to stop and think how long ago that had been, as it felt like another lifetime. No, it had been a little over a year previous. And yet somehow in the intervening 15 months, this band and my life had woven together to the point where their songs and my memories seemed utterly intertwined.

The music captured me, seized hold of my entire mind so that conscious thought was impossible, but as the New Buildings played, time seemed to both accelerate and slow down, the whirlwind of sound coming off the stage completely distorting my senses. Song followed song, so familiar from other gigs, from rehearsals and jam sessions, even from the tunes that Blixa improvised while lying in our bed, that I started to get a little confused, as to where Neubauten songs ended and our own personal lives began. I took another few draws of Alex’s joint, but I don’t know if it was much stronger hash than I was used to, or if there was something in it, but that spliff didn’t calm my odd mood, it just seemed to inflame it, as sleep deprivation and the drug combined to make me feel really, really ill at ease.
Alex nudged me with his hip, and I bent over and held the joint to his lips, but this time I left it there, as I could already tell that something about this drug was really hitting me the wrong way. Onstage, Blixa had managed to strap on his guitar, and was hammering away at a one-note guitar line that seemed to reach down into the depths of my being.

>>Desire<< he whispered into the microphone, his voice slowly rising from a plea to a scream. >>Desire. It comes from the chaos, desire.<< I shivered, remembering how many conversations we had had on this subject, before I really even knew his band, before I understood the lyrics to the song. >>Desire<< he repeated, his voice so urgent it felt like it could tear down the walls of the SO36. >>Desire is the only energy, is the only energy. Come out from the chaos! My yearning, my addiction, my longing, my obsession... Desire. It is my only energy.<<

Onstage, the chaos raged as Andrew produced what looked like an angle-grinder and started shooting off streams of flying sparks that danced about the stage, threatening to set Blixa on fire. It was a mesmerising performance, urgent and dangerous, the sounds and images and bright sparks of fire assailing me in a way I could not ignore. But standing up in the sound booth, with my head rearranged by that powerful hash and nearly 24 hours without sleep, the song hit me with a force it had never really hit me with before. The Fear seeped through me like damp. Tendrils of paranoia wafted through my brain like smoke, started to creep through my mind, like vines of strangling weeds invaded a safe domestic garden. Had he... no, it was my mind playing tricks on me as I’d smoked too much of Alex’s weird hash. They’d recorded the song the week before we met; they had been playing it for years. It was nothing to do with me, and yet, as he sang, I could not shake the feeling that this music had somehow already known me, before we had even met.

For I’d told Blixa, the previous winter, that I couldn’t sleep with him, because it was my desire, my obsession with him that drove my creativity. And he had looked at me, not like I was bonkers, like everyone else did when I’d said I didn’t want to fuck this person I was so clearly crazy about, but like I had glimpsed down into the bottom of his soul. Something in him, and something in me, had understood one another, over that idea. We had bonded over that understanding, and we’d slept together the night he finally explained that song and its depths of meaning. Because, honestly, when Blixa had explained it, that first night we had first made love, it had felt like fate. We were the same, the way our unrequited yearning and our creative passions seemed to be all tangled together. I had thought that hadn’t changed, after we started sleeping together. But it had changed. Somehow, too slowly for me to notice, as I’d moved from being crazily obsessed with Blixa, to being in a genuine, requited, committed relationship with him, my creativity had ebbed away.

I didn’t sketch or do comics, while I was living with Blixa. I hung about, mooning over him and screwing him and gazing into his eyes, and discussing life and the cosmos and the Theatre of Cruelty with him, but I stopped drawing when I was with him. It was only when I was away from him, craving him, thinking about the idea of him, that my creative energies turned the chaos of my passion for him into my art. And the bastard knew it, even though he sulked and pouted and kept trying to make up excuses and urgent reasons why I should stay at the squat, in bed with him, and not go back to my Aunts’ house to draw and work on my own stuff.

And then I suddenly started to shiver, because I thought for a moment: what if he experienced the same thing? They’d been extemporising on essentially the same set for months now, it was how I knew the songs so well. Shouldn’t Blixa be writing, shouldn’t he be collecting his own experiences and turning them into his word salad poetry, forging them into songs? But he didn’t. He sat in our basement and fiddled with his guitar, singing nonsense to amuse me. Or he went upstairs to play around, taking drugs and jamming with Berni and Gila, not even playing guitar but mucking about with those tape-loop recordings. Sensations of fear and paranoia were no longer seeping through me like damp, they were suddenly flooding my brain, as I experienced the almost debilitating negative effects of a paranoid, gut-wrenching high gone wrong, spinning out of control like a bad trip. Why
wasn’t I drawing? Because I was living too much with Blixa. Why wasn’t Blixa writing songs? Was it the fault of his now entirely requited relationship with me?

Alex turned and offered me the joint again, but I shook my head, as I realised that it smelled all wrong. Clearly, it had been laced with something, but I hadn’t a clue what. My brain writhed and twisted in the winds of my paranoia, trying to claw its way back to some safe, dry land, but my emotions were completely swamped.

The next song, too, started to twist my head about into ugly shapes, as Blixa started to sing, with a desperate tone that sounded like he was crying, >>Black, black, black, don’t go away, never again. Hold me tight, I’ll hold you tight. I don’t know, who cut you out of my ribcage... But don’t go away, black, black, black...<< I had heard the song a dozen times before, as they played it regularly, but as that tainted hashsmoke continued to wend its way deeper and deeper into my bloodstream, my paranoia kicked up a gear. Was this song about Jana? Or was she just on my mind because I knew Blixa had been visiting her, and I felt guilty about it? No, it couldn’t be. It seemed far too obvious. Anyway, said the rational part of my brain, fighting back to ascendance, they had been playing the song since before they’d even broken up. But, still, I could hear the urgency, the guilt in his voice as he sang, and suddenly found myself crying. It was like he said, a long time ago; all of our stories ended up in the songs, a way of lying, to tell the truth.

Finally, a respite from my awful, paranoid bad trip, as the music finally seemed to lighten and turned to something new and unfamiliar. The New Buildings, in the spirit of creative exchange and collaboration, had decided to improvise around some of the sound collage tapes they had made with Sleepless Nights. One of the tracks, Blixa’s favourite, was based around a tribal sort of drumming loop, adding a distinctive polyrhythmic swing to their simmering cacophony of sounds. Pig, who had been lurking by the side of the stage, had picked up a pair of drumsticks, and crouched at the front of the stage, hammering away at a sort of metal framework to produce a weird percussive beat. And as the burbling, energetic, exciting new music surged up around me, my brain started to relax a little. Blixa was fine; Blixa’s creativity was fine. Our relationship had done nothing bad to him, or his musical talents. He was making new music with all the new people that he had met, and this bubbling, percolating track was the proof. For Blixa, having abandoned his guitar, was trying, slightly awkwardly, to actually dance.

The crowd abruptly went wild for the insistent new beat, erupting into a frenzy as they surged towards the stage, and lifting my mood with them. Mufti was up front, positively swaggering, shirt off, his curly blond hair bouncing up and down to the beat as he played a skittering rhythm of his own, dancing in and out of Pig’s clattering tribal thump. Andrew, on the other hand, wasn’t really into the tribal thing, and he was expressing his disagreement with this musical direction on a large oil barrel in the centre of the stage. He and Mark started to percolate an aggressive mechanical counter-rhythm between the pair of them, as Mark, grinning like a fool, kept slamming the headstock of his bass into the oil drum, so that the resulting boom shuddered down the neck of his bass and came out distorted through the pickups, as well as the microphone inside the drum. It made a glorious noise, and Blixa came over and started lazily dancing with him, bobbing his head back and forth to the beat as Mark tried to fake him out, twisting the tuning pegs of his bass to bend and warp his notes as he played them.

Blixa, I could now see, was absolutely stoned out of his gourd, trying to sway back and forth to the infectious, almost danceable rhythm his band were bashing out, but he was pretty much too high to stand up, semi-paralyzed by Berni’s powerful Dutch hashish, so that he had to prop himself up with one hand against his amp while the lower half of his body tried to shimmy and jerk to the beat. Still shaking his head back and forth, he raised the microphone to his mouth, shouted some nonsense words, something like “voice devours fire!” and immediately started trying to toast, streams of half-German nonsense words like those reggae singers he listened to down in our basement, word salad
flowing from his mouth like hypnotic poetry as his limbs flailed. And as the music pounded, my heart thudded with love for this ridiculous, crazy, astonishingly talented man I lived with.

Alex was busy at the sound desk, adding electronic accoutrements and embellishments of his own, concentrating hard on trying to meld the rhythmic assemblage of noises into a sound sculpture, as Blixa staggered to the back of the stage, picked up his guitar, tried to fasten it around his neck, only to find the strap broken. So he shook his head and advanced on the microphone, his broad shoulders tilted at a non-Euclidean angle to his stick-like arms as he thrust one hip out and moved his weight onto one leg, curling the other against the microphone so that he looked a bit like an oversized black stork. Alex faded the backing tapes out, then the three drummers picked up another rhythm. For quite some time, Pig stayed up onstage, weaving in and out of the other two drummers, and the tape loops in the background. Mark was getting really into it, bashing away at his bass like it was a kind of cudgel, while Andrew danced about like a fairytale creature, stamping his feet and hammering at things. Then Blixa stood up straight and moved to the centre of the stage.

>>Thirsty animal<< he howled, which was the signal to his bandmates that it was time to start the next song. This one I recognised, as the track they had recorded with Lydia and Rowland during the summer, as Alex skilfully mixed in passages from a cassette of the mix-downs of those intense, eventful sessions. It was almost too intense a reminder. Had Blixa and I been screwing yet, then? No, of course we hadn’t. It had all been desire and yearning and unrequited longing fuelling that crazy music and my crazy drawings during the summer. It felt like a million years ago, but it was only six months. How had we got so tangled together, that my memories had got all tangled up with his music? It seemed like every song was just full of our lives together in a way that was suddenly painful and raw. The bad-trip paranoia rose in the back of my mouth again, threatening to choke me. Blixa was as creative and dynamic as ever. It was only me, that wasn’t. Everything of our lives was going into these songs; there was nothing left for me.

The audience was getting louder, shouting and screaming as the concert crescendoed to its completion. Andrew, now stripped to the waist, had climbed over one of the speaker stacks and was taking a power drill to one of the walls behind the stage. It wasn’t even the little electric power drill that Mark had once used to chase off those angry Russian soldiers who wanted to beat up Blixa for throwing their own homophobia back in their faces; it was a huge, powerful, nasty-looking piece of industrial equipment, with a drill-bit quite long enough to go right through a wall and out the other side. The music surged, as Alex carefully rode the faders, highlighting the rough-housing rhythm of their interplay: a swell of Mufti’s overloaded Casio keyboard here; a surge of amplified drill in response; a sudden burst of oil-can drums there; then another surge of amplified drill in response. Andrew was really going at the wall now, just sinking the power drill through the plaster into the concrete behind it to get a nasty grinding tone. Then he pulled it out, and drilled another hole through. The crowd were going absolutely mental, like they wanted to smash holes in the walls, or maybe each other. Andrew climbed up on an amp, held up the power drill for everyone to see, then sank it into the wall again, sending a shower of sparks and broken plaster everywhere. But this time, the drill stuck, and though he tugged at it a couple of times, he couldn’t get it free. So he just left it there, half-hanging out of the wall, raised his arms as if in surrender or benediction, I couldn’t tell what, then walked off the stage.

The music faded as the other musicians burned themselves out, and Alex very skilfully switched to another tape, as Blixa collapsed to his knees, exhausted, looking up into the roof as if completely dazed. He looked absolutely shattered, dark rings under his eyes, as I realised that he had not been faking it onstage. When he lost himself onstage, when he freaked out and lost control and went into a kind of frenetic trance, he was giving everything he had. But he picked himself up, and somehow walked off, acknowledging the audience, both exhausted and proud, this beautiful and elegantly wasted man that was my lover.
Moving quickly, dragging myself out of my bad-trip paranoid I thought, quickly, what he needed. I fetched a pint glass of water, but also a bottle of that really sickly schnapps he liked, thinking it might bring his blood sugar back up, and went in search of him. Backstage was crawling with people, but I found Blixa slumped in a seat, sulky but bright-eyed, demanding that someone fetch >>his Valdi.<<

>>I’m here<< I told him, and kissed him, and he immediately brightened. >>Drink this, my love, quick as you can<< I insisted, then thrust the pint of water into his face.

>>Is it vodka?>> he demanded. I nodded, and he held it up to his mouth, gulping thirstily, and I was relieved to think he would rehydrate, until suddenly, about halfway down, he seemed to notice the trick and wrenched it away, protesting angrily >>It’s only water.<<

>>Oh, sorry, that’s mine, darling<< I said, and kissed him again, before handing him the schnapps. The sugar, I knew, would revive him, if the water hadn’t done its trick. >>This is yours. Drink this, it’s your favourite.<<

>>That’s more like it<< he bellowed, throwing his arm around Andrew’s neck and whooping. Andrew took a good few gulps of the schnapps before Blixa managed to wrestle it back, then the pair of them collapsed, laughing and wrestling and hugging one another like a pair of puppies, with the euphoria of a gig well-played.

By the third night, we were all completely wrecked. Had my friends not been playing, I might have been tempted to crawl back to our cellar and sleep, as I was still not recovered from the ‘bad trip’ of the night before, but Malaria! and The Skin were finishing out the final night of the weekend. Unfortunately, seeing The Skin meant dealing with Nick, who had tagged along with his housemates. And I realised with a start, as we nodded almost cordially, but studiously avoided one another for the rest of the evening, that it was the first time I had seen him since moving in with Blixa. Maybe, on that level, moving in together had been good for all of us, since Blixa did actually respect me by not bringing that man into our actual home. Not only was our relationship able to grow more rooted, but I found myself better able to tolerate short bursts of Nick when I didn’t have to see him all the time. A sudden wave of appreciation for Blixa swept through me, as my chest tightened and my heart felt warm.

Anita, at least, was pleased to see me, and threw her arms around me, thanking me again for putting me in touch with Beate. Although Liaisons Dangereuses had not actually done much more together in terms of music, mainly because Chrislo was being so difficult, the two women had definitely formed a little knot of solidarity. Beate was spending a great deal more time round The Skin’s band house with Anita, since the atmosphere was so poisonous at home. And it was from the pair of them that I heard the new gossip that Nick had been writing songs with Christoph, and that he was going to Amsterdam in December, to record with The Skin. I smiled and said I thought that was great, and commented on how this showed how thoroughly Nick was integrating into the collaborative atmosphere of West Berlin. But internally, I sighed with relief at the idea that Nick would be away for another month, and so my happy little liaison with my lover could continue uninterrupted.

Our little gossip session was cut short by half the girls disappearing to go onstage, for Malaria! were up next. The rest of us who were left pulled together, myself, Anita, Chloe, Claudia, and a new woman it took me a moment to recognise as Val, the Russian girl who helped out at Iron-Grey. With her long, milk-blonde hair loose around her shoulders and flowing almost down to her arse, she looked completely different than she had at the shop, especially as she was not wearing the typical West Berlin art student uniform of all-black, but a very daring bright-red dress that clung alluringly to her hour-glass figure. And when she turned around, she revealed that it had actually been re-
fashioned from a Soviet flag, for there was a bright yellow hammer and sickle slapped cheekily across half of her well-shaped arse.

>>Wow<< said Claudia, admiringly. >>That is daring.<<

>>I know<< laughed Val, proposing a toast with the usual half-pint tumbler of vodka. >>I could be sent to Gulag, for wearing this back home.<<

>>I don’t know<< I stuttered, gently refusing the vodka she was trying to press upon me. >>I mean... you don’t think it’s a little disrespectful to wear someone’s flag on your... posterior like that? I mean... you don’t think it’s a little disrespectful to wear someone’s flag on your... posterior like that? To be honest, the extreme shapeliness of her posterior terrified me, and I didn’t like the way that the insignia kept drawing my eyes back towards it.

>>Disrespectful?<< laughed Val fearlessly, chucking back another slug of vodka as she brushed a wave of pale hair out of her face. >>My parents defected, not me. I have no choice where I am born; I have no choice where I live now. Flag means nothing to me.<<

I drew back from her, more than a little alarmed, but Claudia and Chloe were both laughing, as if this were a fabulous joke. Fortunately, we were all interrupted by a wave of drumming from the stage, as Gudrun roused her band to life, and I was saved from having to talk to the intimidating Russian any further.

The band were in fine form. Beate was doing their live mixing, and they sounded absolutely brilliant, tight and taut and whip-smart. But I saw Thomas the Swiss drummer hanging about in the crowd, and he wasn’t watching Malaria! at all, he was watching Beate. I had no idea where Chrislo was, and to be honest, I was glad he stayed away, for Beate and Thomas kept kind of circling one another, smiling and blushing and risking only glances at each other’s faces. They kept seeming to find excuses to have to bump into one another, a little chat here, a little hint of flirtation there. But Thomas, unlike Chrislo, who had been dashing and dazzling and more than a little dangerous, was simply kind to Beate, bringing her drinks, fetching her things from backstage, lending her his jacket and draping it round her shoulders when she said she felt a chill from the open door.

When he had to disappear to do something with his own band, Beate eyed me carefully and asked me if I wanted to get a drink. Looking around for my lover, I spotted him deep in conversation with Nick, who was crowing annoyingly about his upcoming adventures with The Skin, so I rolled my eyes and agreed.

We got a glass of wine for her and a coke for me, and found a quieter spot near the back to chat, then, after the usual exchange of pleasantries, she got straight to the point. >>I need your help, with the van. It’s OK, I can give you money for petrol. But what I need is for you to keep this strictly confidential. We both know how West Berlin gossips.<<

>>It’s OK, I can be discreet<< I assured her. >>What’s the job.<<

>>I need you to help me transport my gear, my musical equipment and so forth, out of our flat, and to a secret location.<<

>>Secret location<< I laughed. >>You mean, the space where Malaria! and The Skin and half of West Berlin rehearse.<<

>>No<< hissed Beate, glancing around her. >>It’s the first place anyone would look. The gear has to go somewhere else. To a friend’s house. No one can know where it’s gone.<<

>>OK...<< I agreed, feeling the urgency of her request penetrating my sleepy brain. >>Let me know
when, and I’ll be there with the van.<<

>>That’s the other thing. I don’t know when.<< Beate’s eyes were intense but downcast, as I shook my head with a lack of comprehension. >>It will be maybe Tuesday, maybe Wednesday.<<

>>I can’t just wait around...<< I started to protest, but the desperation of her expression stopped me.

>>Chrislo leaves the house and his machines only once a week, to meet his dealer. He’ll be gone 45 minutes, maybe an hour. That is all the time we have to get my instruments, my equipment, my things out of that apartment. If I leave, and leave my things there, there will be consequences. Terrible consequences. Do you understand?<<

Suddenly the information fully penetrated my sleep-deprived brain. >>You’re leaving him... you’re leaving the band? Does Anita know? She was so excited about joining the group...<<

She suddenly looked up and met my eyes for the first time, and I saw the mingled fear and sorrow and hurt hiding behind the desperation. >>It was Anita’s idea. If it were not for her, I would not have the courage to leave. If I thought I could somehow leave Chrislo, and still continue the band, honestly, I would do it. But I’ve come to realise that won’t be the case. Chrislo won’t allow it.<<

I looked at her in silence for a long time, but then I nodded grimly. >>Alright<< I agreed. >>I’ll make sure I’m at my Great-Aunt’s house on Tuesday and Wednesday. I’ll give you the phone number there, and you go down to the phonebox on the corner, and you ring me the moment he leaves. I’ll be there with the van. We’ll get you out of there.<<

Beate smiled, her face flooded with relief. >>Thank you. Now let’s go back to the gig and try to have some fun.<<

As the pair of us walked in, we ran into Blixa, who was loping out to find us. Grinning, he immediately wrapped his arms around my waist, and smirked at Beate with an air of pure possession. Beate smiled back at us, pleased to see her childhood friend so happy, though even I could see her smile was shot through with the edge of pain. Prying his arms from around me, I conceded to hold his hand as we walked back into the main venue together, though I immediately tried to veer off in the opposite direction as I saw Val up at the bar, unmistakable in her Soviet red dress. But as she turned, showing the flag on her behind, Blixa burst into laughter.

>>Who is that girl? I love her dress. Do you think I could get away with wearing a German Eagle insignia on my behind?<< he laughed aloud, delighted with the idea as he slapped his own lean buttocks.

>>She’s no one<< I muttered. >>Never mind.<<

>>She’s not no one<< Beate explained patiently. >>She’s Valentina. A friend of Bettina’s. You know...<< And here she lowered her voice conspiratorially. >>One of the Lesbian Mafia<<

>>I love the Lesbian Mafia, they are my good friends<< exclaimed Blixa, even as I glanced askew at Beate. It was almost as if she had forgotten that I, too, was one of the ‘Lesbian Mafia’ of West Berlin. It was so strange, the way that being absorbed into this presumed heterosexual sisterhood opened up some intimacies, and yet seemed to shut down certain others. >>Let us go and say hello to her!<<

>>Let’s not<< I said quietly, and tugged him off towards the backstage. >>Let’s go and say hello to The Skin.<< Blixa gave me an odd look as I pulled him off in the opposite direction, as he knew it to be very strange that I might willingly spend time in a place where Nick was known to be, but he
merely threw another glance over his shoulder at the girl in the red dress, then tramped obligingly after me to find our friends.

Chapter End Notes

Supporting evidence of just how stoned Blixa was at this performance can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nXBityg5cQ
Chapter Summary

Beate makes her escape. Carter discovers as Sleepless Nights enter their studio, that recording with Blixa can actually be fun. Blixa plays games with the English press, and the Iron-Grey gang present Blixa with a Christmas gift, as the last pieces of his iconic ~look~ fall into place.

At the end of the night, no one wanted to stop playing. The Skin and Malaria and Sleepless Nights and the New Buildings all somehow rolled back to our squat and carried on drinking and singing and making music down in the basement. I must have slept at some point, because I woke up curled in a corner of the mattress, my face mashed up against the side of Blixa’s thigh. He and Mufti and Berni and Gila had two portable cassette recorders and one guitar between them, which they were using to bounce down more and more layers of sound back and forth between them until the tapes contained so many layers of guitar and thumping sounds and laughter that it was hard to tell what was what. At that point, rolling over and lodging my face in the pillows between Blixa’s back and the wall, I realised that I had finally grown used to squatting, to the point where I could actually sleep through absolutely anything.

On Tuesday morning, I left the gang still jamming and making crazy music, and walked to my Great-Aunt’s house to await the phone call from Beate. She rang, her voice tight with emotion, at about three o’clock in the afternoon. I got in the van and drove straight over to find her and Anita waiting outside with a small pile of boxes. Between the three of us, we got the van loaded as quickly as we could, then Beate and I drove away. She directed me across the neighbourhood to a large apartment building at the other end of Yorckstrasse. To absolutely nobody’s surprise, she rang the bell, and Thomas came down and helped us carry the gear up the stairs.

>>Are you sure you won’t stay here?<< he asked, his face almost beaming with kindness and regard for her. >>You are welcome to, if you like.<<

>>I don’t want to get you involved<< she insisted, smiling at him through the tears she was definitely doing her best to hold in her eyes. >>I’m going back to my parents’ house. When Chrislo comes for the inevitable argument, we might as well have it there, because my father will throw him out if he lifts a finger against me.<<

I gave her a lift home, after stopping at a petrol station where she kindly paid to fill my tank. At her family’s apartment block, I hugged her and told her if there were anything else she needed, she could always call on me.

She just shook her head bravely and smiled at me. >>Thank you. I appreciate the offer. But you just go back to Blixa and take care of that great, long, pig-headed noodle. He may be a pain in the arse, but he’s one of my oldest friends. I really do hope you two are very happy together.<<

>>We are<< I assured her, and went home to find that the party was somehow still going, down in the basement of our squat, and Blixa had not been to bed at all, to the point where he was hallucinating orchestras in the sewers beneath Berlin, and insisted that the whole street was gently humming with music. So I threw out Mufti and Berni, coaxed my lover into lying down with the promise of sex, and after relaxing him with an orgasm then holding him gently, playing with his
long, floppy hair until his heavy eyes drifted closed, I finally got him to sleep. For about thirty hours, straight.

The never-ending weekend party of the Atonal Festival somehow managed to bleed seamlessly into the recording sessions for Sleepless Nights. There was a good vibe in the studio, completely unlike the poisonous tension of the last session I’d worked, where Blixa had been present. It felt more like a loose group of friends, hanging out, bouncing ideas off one another and having fun than a proper recording session.

Mufti parked himself at the mixing desk, and pronounced himself ‘Producer’ (a role which Blixa also claimed for himself, but Blixa didn’t know anywhere near as much about sound engineering as Mufti did) and then set about using the whole of Sleepless Nights as his instrument, much in the way he and Andrew played with the assembled set of junk they carted onstage. It turned out Gila and Berni had some recordings of live tracks that they wanted to mix and beef up into proper masters for the album, and then they had the tape loop projects which they wanted to record into new songs. So the group experimented with different techniques, seemingly enjoying the experience of moving away from a traditional four-piece punk band to this wildly creative sound laboratory where any kind of sound was fair game. And aside from the core group, musicians came and went, dropping in to add a trumpet or a keyboard riff as required. The whole thing was informal and relaxed – well, as relaxed as a session could be where people kept chopping out lines of speed on top of their amps to stay awake through the marathon 16-hour sessions, but you know, I had come to see that sort of thing as perfectly normal for West Berlin. The amphetamine vibe would never get too much, as out would come blocks of powerful Dutch hash, and everyone would be both completely wired and yet completely mellow.

To my surprise, after those awful Birthday Party sessions where I had found him so disruptive, I actually enjoyed having Blixa about in the studio. His boundless determined optimism, among a group of people who actually wanted to be working together, turned out to be inspiring and uplifting. Then again, maybe it was Berni and Gila who made the difference. Unlike Nick and Rowland, they actually seemed to enjoy being in a band together, and were determined to work in concert with each other, rather than against each other. Gila seemed excited by Berni’s songs, and couldn’t wait to start working on them, fleshing them out with her own ideas and arrangements. And Berni, unlike Nick, was constantly praising Gila’s musicianship – to be fair, she was a phenomenal bass player, fast and fluid – and treated her like an equal in the songwriting process, rather than freezing her out, the way Nick had done to both Rowland and Anita in turn. Praise, it seemed, was a far better lubricant to a productive work environment than that relentless Australian piss-taking. And in this positive, supportive, creative environment, Blixa’s boyish Tiggerishness was charming, rather than an irritant.

It was true that he was almost comically lazy – he never wanted to actually get up and play guitar or sing or get in front of a microphone – but he had an incredibly good instinct for the actual form of a song. When he was at the controls, he could become intensely focused, pulling out sheets of paper and getting people to diagram out how the songs were supposed to flow. Between the two of them, I got a first-hand view on how Blixa and Mufti (with Alex occasionally dropping in to contribute weird electronic effects) were actually a remarkably powerful team. Blixa was the abstract ideas man, the architect, teasing out the shape, the idea, the meaning of a song like a blueprint or a groundplan; while Mufti sat down with the tape and the microphones and actually turned the ideas into an organised structure of sounds, like a building engineer.

Blixa, I soon realised, approached songwriting more like a playwright than a musician. He started, not with melodies or with rhythm, but with whole tableaus of what he wished to express in a song. Collecting words, concepts, snatches of sounds he was particularly attracted to, he worked a bit like a
director to map out a kind of performance that would be enacted, on tape, or in front of an audience. While Mufti cranked away like a stage manager, making sure each of these tableaus flowed, one into the other, to build up the flesh and bones of this chart that Blixa would block out on endless sheets of paper.

The sessions finally finished, and the album was completed, but even then Mufti didn’t rest, as he was taking the train straight back to Hamburg, to finish filming on the Science Fiction film he had started over the summer. The film collective had somehow squeezed some arts funding money out of the various regional German Councils, and put together enough money to hire proper equipment, and a film crew, and pay a couple of professional actors. They had even managed to persuade William S Burroughs himself to play a cameo role, since the script had been based on one of his ideas, and an English musician that Mufti was friendly with, a Mr Porridge somebody-or-other, who was apparently really well known in Britain, was also going to contribute his talents and his name to the project.

But as I was giving Mufti a ride back to the train station in the van, he turned to Blixa and said >>You know, when this film is wrapped, we should start work on our next album.<<

Blixa stopped horsing around in the passenger seat, and chewed thoughtfully on his hangnails for a few minutes, then nodded, and said in his deep, serious voice >>Yes, we should. We should start writing the new record.<<

And inside, my heart gave a little kick, that those awful fears that had nearly swamped me, the night of my paranoid ‘bad trip’ at the SO36, were completely unfounded. Blixa was as creative as he had ever been. Our relationship hadn’t been bad for his musical inspiration at all. (It was only me that hadn’t drawn a single comic since I’d submitted ‘queer thoughts on god’ to Wolfgang’s friend.)

But first there was Christmas to get through. Blixa had already agreed that we would spend Christmas Day going to keep Grete and my Aunt company at their ‘waifs and strays’ party. He proudly told me that he had even learned a few old songs from the 20s and 30s, to play on the piano for them, which was news to me, as we had no piano at the squat for him to learn on.

>>Oh, it was easy<< shrugged Blixa casually. >>Nick taught me a few chords on Christoph’s piano, when I was visiting the other day. It wasn’t hard to work out the rest.<<

I fell silent, because Nick was something we really didn’t talk about. Blixa wasn’t a fool; he knew damned well how much I disliked his new best friend. But still, Nick was a subject that we danced around. I had promised not to voice my dislike; but he did his best never to tell me how much time they still spent together, albeit without me. We eyed each other warily for a few minutes, neither of us daring to ask what the other was thinking, but when he finally spoke, what he said surprised me yet again.

>>My parents are having a traditional family meal, on Christmas Eve, before church. We don’t have to go to the service, they know I object to churching. But they’d like us to come for the family dinner.<<

>>Us?<< I stuttered, hardly believing what I was hearing. To be honest, I had forgotten that Blixa even had parents.

>>Yes, you and me. Us. First person plural. My parents have heard about you, they know I am living with... a lover. A lover I am serious about. So they would like to meet you.<<
"Your parents" I repeated, struck dumb by the idea.

"Yes, my parents. My mother and my father. The people who raised me. The father who contributed DNA to me, the mother who gestated me in her body. Would like to meet you. The romantic partner with whom I cohabitate." He said it so matter of factly that I had to burst out laughing. Blixa always had the ability to make me laugh, even as he was asking me to do something I considered absolutely terrifying.

"Alright" I agreed, wondering what on earth I was letting myself in for.

Shortly before Christmas, the NME writer came back. In those days before answering machines and emails, before most of us even had telephones in our unreliable squats, scheduling an interview with the New Buildings was quite a tricky thing to do. He booked an interview and a photo shoot through the record company, who left messages for Blixa all over Schöneberg, at Iron-Grey and the Risk Bar and even the Café Mitropa.

Blixa was very pleased with himself over this honour, and dressed and prepared carefully. In addition to his usual rubber jeans and voluminous vinyl greatcoat, he had somehow got hold of an old fashioned priest’s shirt, complete with a white clerical dog collar. I didn’t know where that thing came from, if it was a fancy dress costume, or if it were the real thing from a second hand shop, but Blixa absolutely loved that black shirt with the priest’s collar and started to wear it incessantly. Since he was getting more and more into winding people up with his newfound atheism, he thought this was a hilarious thing to wear, to meet with the British press for the first time. Most British people I knew might be gently irreligious, but I just prayed that this reporter was not devout.

My lover back-combed his thatch of light brown hair into a voluminous spiders’ nest, ringed his eyes with his typical asymmetrical make-up, then took great care in selecting a paperback to have peeking from the pocket of his great coat. Should he reference Walter Benjamin or Antonin Artaud, was a question he pondered quite consciously, just as deliberately as he selected his clothes. Benjamin was more intellectual, obviously, but also more political, and Blixa was becoming wary of making political statements in the press, after the West Berlin Green Party had had a go at him for appearing to support all-out nuclear war. ("Well, at least it would be interesting" Blixa had protested in his defence.) Artaud, on the other hand, was definitely cooler, and more transgressive, so in the end, he plumped for Artaud, and very carefully made quite sure that the title could be seen peeking obviously from his pocket when he was sitting, as well as when he was standing.

Already very manic with excitement over the feature, he did a line of speed before meeting the journalist for his interview at the Café Mitropa, and cheerfully babbled on at the man for over an hour in his extraordinary rendition of English. Of course I hadn’t been there – hadn’t been allowed to be there – but Blixa spent the next few days describing the conversation: philosophising at length on his glorious new anti-music; expounding on his plans to turn the New Buildings into an experimental theatre group; taking surreal side-swipes at the advertising world; then finally pulling the whole thing together with a long digression into Physics.

Oh, how Blixa loved to talk bullshit about physics, full of half-remembered facts from his Gymnasium studies and my books, leaping from collapsing buildings to collapsing stars, imploding in on themselves to form black holes, quoting Oppenheimer again, just as a wind-up. I put my hand over my mouth and laughed helplessly as he described the conversation, because his puppy-like enthusiasm was just so irresistible. The journalist had been gobsmacked by Blixa’s relentless driving energy, and his sheer flair for verbal facility, the way he punned and wordplayed and twisted even his second language like a painter deftly wielding his brush.
And yet, the English didn’t like it, that steely determination and self-assurance and total self-confidence with which Blixa spoke of himself and his art. I don’t know if it was the amphetamine ego, or the failure to understand Blixa’s cutting wit, but the writer found him egotistical, even arrogant. That was not an accusation I really agreed with, though I understood why people made it. My lover was certainly willing to laugh at himself, in fact he frequently did. But Blixa’s unshakeable self-belief was one of the most attractive things about him, the source of that charisma that pulled other people in towards him like the event horizon of a black hole. However, in Britain, you were not supposed to like yourself as much as Blixa clearly did.

The photo shoot, on the other hand, yielded very interesting results. Anton Corbijn was a name that even I had heard of – a Dutch photographer known for his very strong black and white style. However, Corbijn’s camera didn’t love Blixa the way mine had. He took some endearing photos of him in the priest’s collar, holding a pitchfork and looking very bright-eyed and devilish. But Mufti and Mark were very clearly the stars of the shoot, wielding axes and drills and heavy industrial equipment. And Mufti was already regarded as quite an indie darling in Britain, due to that string of punk records he’d produced or collaborated on. While in Blixa, they found clearly just another pretty boy with a big mouth, which Britain already had in spades. Heavy demolition equipment, on the other hand, that was what was getting them on the cover.

It took some doing to arrange Blixa’s Christmas present. Well, it wasn’t just a present from me, to be honest. It was partly from me, and partly from Gudrun and Bettina, put together by Val, and basically intended as a gift from everyone at Iron-Grey. I went and talked to Gudrun, and then Gudrun talked to Val, because honestly, Val still scared me a little, but the whole thing was worked out and organised and arranged. So first, I had to go down by myself to make sure that it was ready, and then I had to somehow convince Blixa to drop in on the right day, at the right time, so that we could all be there to give it to him.

I think he knew something was up, as it was really not that big of a deal for him to go and spend an afternoon at Iron-Grey, and yet I was quite insistent that it be this particular day, at that particular time. So he walked in, and smiled expectantly to see everyone sitting there waiting for him, and when Val caught sight of him, she jumped up and swore in Russian, then said >>Your shoulders are wider than expected. I got height right, and waist, but you are so skinny I did not think you have such wide shoulders.<<

We followed her into the back room, and there on a dressmaker’s dummy was this elaborate corset made of shiny black rubber, fastened at the front with these four huge chunky silver buckles, the whole thing attached to these two straps of stapled-together inner tube over the shoulders. Blixa’s eyes widened as he saw the garment, gazing at it with genuine cupidity. Walking towards it, he bent forward and touched the fabric, seemed pleased to find that it was rubber, then massaged the bright metal of the buckles ever so gently with his fingertips.

>>Wow<< he breathed, really rolling out the vowels. >>This garment is so beautiful. Are these zippers... no, wait, they are... are they industrial staples? How extraordinary!<<

>>Well, go on, try it on<< ordered Val, a little brusque.

Blixa turned around, and I knew he was a good actor, but he did a very convincing display of surprise. >>Is this for me?<<

>>Who else, you big dummy<< sighed Bettina.

>>Go on, put it on<< urged Gudrun. >>You said you wanted a rubber boot that would buckle all the
way to your chin, so, well, we did our very best.<<

Blixa unbuckled the straps greedily, like a little boy anxious for a new toy. Then he slid his coat off his shoulders, standing there for a moment in his leotard top before he slung the corset around him, sliding the straps up over his shoulders like a vest, before starting to do up the buckles. Yanking them tight, he fastened them up, then smoothed down the puckered rubber fabric to fit his elegant narrow waist. Val had really done an amazing job; it fit him like a glove.

>>Wow<< he repeated, rubbing his hands up and down the rubber. >>Wait, do you think I should fasten the harness over it, or under it.<<

>>Over it<< directed Val.

>>Do you still have that studded belt that I admired so much?<< he asked, pushing his luck with a smirk. Gudrun gave in, and went and fetched it for him. As he rearranged his harness, and buckled the extra belt over the top, Val went round the back and fussied with the deep, exaggerated V at the back.

>>Your shoulders are too wide. I’m afraid it’s going to flop open if you move like you move onstage. Can you just hold on a minute? I want to put some kind of... chain or flap, to hold it.<<

>>Not a chain<< warned Blixa, turning around to admire himself in the shop mirror. He was so slim and the rubber was so taut that he really did look like one continuous surface of shiny blackness. >>That’s exactly where my guitar strap has to go over, and I don’t want to catch it.<<

>>OK, I’ll do an extra cross-beam of electrical tape<< said Val, picking up an extra flap, and a handful of safety pins. >>Stand still, I’m going to staple it in place, but I don’t want to catch you with the riveter.<<

>>I’m riveted by the process<< laughed Blixa, playing to his audience. >>Shall I sit down for you?<<

He liked the rubber corset so much, he didn’t take it off once for the next three days. To be fair, he barely took it off for the next 4 years.

People absolutely loved it, when he turned up to the Risk Bar that Saturday, wrapped into the rubber corset and tightly buckled down with straps and belts and glittering silver bits. Girls, boys, everyone just stared at him openly, the shiny, rubber-clad angles of his beautiful body, and Blixa strutted about like a peacock, to know that he had everyone’s attention riveted, his unusual looks heightened by his unusual clothes. It didn’t bother me; in fact it filled me with the faint stirrings of pride, to see exactly how longingly people’s eyes lingered on my pretty lover’s attractive form.

The Australians all turned up in a little knot, around midnight. I was prepared to be charitable, as I hadn’t seen Nick in nearly a month, since he’d been away recording with The Skin. After the break from each other, even Nick and Rowland even seemed to be on fairly companionable terms, as if absence had made those hearts grow fonder, too. But, of course, everyone, even Rowland, noticed how Nick stared at Blixa, taking in the new clothes with an admiration that did not dare speak its name, though of course he was far too scared and uptight to actually say anything to Blixa about how good he thought it looked.

Anita and Gen, on the other hand, discussed this new article of clothing with thorough interest that soon turned prurient.

“It’s strapped up so tight,” observed Gen, craning her neck to get a better view of it over the bar. “I
mean, it’s not just that he’s thin, though. He is thin. He’s thinner than I am, and I’m like a foot shorter than him.”

“He doesn’t just have a flat stomach,” sighed Anita, in a tone of voice so deadpan I couldn’t tell whether it was admiring or despairing. “He has a positively concave stomach.”

“All those buckles” whistled Gen. “You’ve got to wonder if he sets off metal detectors when he goes to the airport.”

“I wonder how long it takes to unbuckle them all,” whispered Anita, in a slightly hushed tone of awe, and abruptly they exchanged glances, then both let out tiny shrieks of laughter.

Almost in unison, they both looked over at Blixa slyly from under their fringes, as he served another drink, then their heads bobbed closer together. “Imagine unbuckling Blixa,” suggested Gen, with a positively mischievous glint to her eye.

Anita put her hand over her mouth, like she was physically trying to restrain herself, though it was unclear if she were afraid of laughing out loud, or exploding with lust. “Unzipping Blixa.” she suggested, then degenerated in a fit of giggles.

“Unpeeling Blixa like a great black rubber banana,” responded Gen, her strong Australian accent making this scenario sound even more saucy and suggestive.

“Unchaining Blixa,” countered Anita, really rolling the syllables on her tongue as she glanced over at him again, bending over so that the metal links gleamed against his rubber backside.

“He’s always such a perfect gentleman offstage, and such a strange, alien... presence onstage, that you’ve just got to wonder what he’d be like, if he were ever really unchained...” agreed Gen, as the pair of them filled their eyes some more, and then broke into lascivious little titters of licentiousness as they forced themselves to look away.

“You’ve got to watch out for those men who are always zipped up so tight...” countered Anita, with a meaningful tilt to her eyebrows. “You never know what they’re hiding underneath.”

“I wouldn’t mind...” Gen started, and Anita joined in as they finished the thought together. “I wouldn’t mind finding out!”

“Do you mind?” exploded Nick abruptly, and I wasn’t sure which he was more annoyed by – the fact that his girlfriend was making vaguely sexual innuendo about his best friend, or the fact that the pair of them dared to voice urges they were clearly all feeling, with the way Nick kept staring at Blixa out of the corner of his eye, but only the girls were bold enough to give voice to.

“You don’t mind, do you, Carter?” ribbed Gen, nudging me gently with her elbow as she leered at Nick, as if to remind him, presumably, to whom Blixa’s unbuckled flesh was supposed to belong.

“I don’t mind at all,” I giggled, sipping at my coke through a straw to keep myself from spilling exactly how many times in the past week I had done precisely what they were fantasising about.

“It’s disrespectful,” insisted Nick defiantly, though I knew he couldn’t be outraged on my account. “But it’s nothing of the sort. He’d be completely flattered if he heard.” I just turned and fixed Nick with a slightly pitying gaze, thinking how Blixa might be his very best friend, but on some levels, he didn’t seem to know him at all. “Blixa wouldn’t wear that clobber, if he wasn’t aware of its effects on people,” I told him patiently. “He wears those clothes because he wants people to look at him, and think about unbuckling, and unzipping, and unchaining. Not just his body, but the whole of society,
Nick looked slightly put out, scowling into his drink, as Gen grinned her tight-lipped smile at me, a question dancing on her lips before it finally escaped. “Oh come on, Carter. You must have given it a go, unbuckling Blixa.”

“Damn right,” I tittered into my drink, then raised my eyes and smirked at her over the rim of my glass. “And it’s every bit as amazing as you might imagine.” Gen’s and Anita’s eyes grew huge as I allowed myself to slip into a rare moment of admitting open physical pleasure in my beautiful partner. “As you unfasten all those buckles, slowly there emerges... First, the ribs. Perfect for gnawing on. Then, the pale, pale, ghost white skin on his soft belly. A little tuft of hair... And then, best of all... the spots. Blixa has freckles... moles... that lead all the way down... in a tempting game of join-the-dots... towards his perfect...”

I didn’t even get to finish my thought, because Gen and Anita both exploded into shrieks of giddy laughter again, stamping their feet and hugging each other with excitement, and I joined in their mirth, because honestly, it made my heart warm, how annoyed our collective lust seemed to make Nick. Rowland, on the other hand, just looked faintly perplexed.

“Are you into that sort of thing, then Carter?” he asked, seeming genuinely more curious than disapproving.

“What sort of thing?” I asked, suddenly feeling a bit guilty about talking such smut, as our dear sweet Rowland sometimes didn’t really even seem to inhabit the same world as the rest of us.

“Freckles,” he intoned, quite seriously. “I mean... I’ve got moles. When I’m somewhere that’s warm enough that I can take off my shirt – because, let’s face it, Germany is too bloody cold to do that too often – you can see that I’ve got moles all over me. I always thought spots and speckles were supposed to be unattractive. But are you telling me, Carter, that girls are into that sort of thing?”

I paused, and stared at Rowland in silence for a moment, trying to work out what on earth he was playing at, asking me what girls liked, until Gen started to giggle her infectious little laugh. “Go on, Rowland, get your kit off and show her. I’m sure that Carter would like the chance to compare.”

“Yes, yes,” agreed Anita. “Our Carter doesn’t have much experience with the naked male form. I think the only man she’s ever even seen naked is Blixa, so I’m certain she would be interested to experience your intimate moles for comparison’s sake...”

“Nooooooooo!” I abruptly shrieked, as it dawned through my stoned brain, what the girls, at least, were playing at. One encounter with a nude Rowland was more than enough for one lifetime, thank you. Yet as Anita and Gen both started to whoop with laughter all over again at my embarrassment, and even Rowland joined in, cackling softly as he smirked at me, I realised I had walked straight into that mocking Australian humour yet again.

Had Rowland actually been taking the piss out of me? He looked so sweet it was too easy to forget he was never genuinely as innocent as he came across. I felt suddenly wrong-footed, in a way that unnerved me, as if I’d let my guard down when I should have known better. I’d got so used to hanging out with Germans, and it’s true, Berliners could be sarcastic, and Berliners could be rude, but I never felt, with the New Buildings or Sleepless Nights, that they took any kind of joy in humiliating me. The Birthday Party, on the other hand? I needed to never let myself forget about their relentless mockery and piss-taking. Even Rowland.

But as Anita and Gen and Rowland drew closer into a little knot of laughter and smutty comments about freckles in rude places, Nick’s anger simmered over. “You girls are disgusting, with the way
that you talk,” he almost snarled. “I mean, Carter, you’re always giving me those little feminist lectures, about how women are superior to men, but deep down... you girls are just disgusting.” And with that, he stalked off to go and get another drink from the almost superhumanly sensual Blixa, still preening himself behind the bar.
Chapter Summary

On Christmas Even, Carter accompanies Blixa down to Friedenau for the dreaded ritual of meeting his parents.

Content Note: although the characters in this chapter may share superficial similarities with Herr Bargeld's real family, I must repeat that this is a work of fiction, the depictions are the product of my imagination and are in no way intended as in any way representative of his relations, living or dead, and absolutely no offence is intended.

Christmas arrived in West Berlin with a blast of freezing air, blown down from Russia, as Blixa and I huddled in our basement, then made plans to retreat to somewhere warmer. Blixa didn’t even bother trying to clean himself up or make himself presentable for his parents. If anything, he put on his punk rock finery, his rubber trousers and his new bondage corset, and he did his best to tease and backcomb his hair into huge hedgehog spikes that stood several inches into the air.

>>Do you think I should shave it a bit?<< he asked, standing in front of the mirror and admiring the wild brown mess.

>>Oh no, don’t cut it<< I blurted out before I could think not to. >>I love how long and feminine and soft it’s getting<<

He laughed at my obvious joy in his beautiful hair, and picked up a stub of kohl to darken the black rings around his eyes. Since I’d started living with him, I had realised just how aware he was of his own extraordinary looks, and just how much he enjoyed provoking people’s reactions to his beauty. Although he carried himself with a studied air of punk disarray, as if he had only just rolled out of bed, I now knew that he could spend nearly an hour getting ready to leave the house, even more if he thought he might be photographed.

And people did photograph Blixa often, at Risk, at Iron-Grey, and out and about at gigs. Local filmmakers were forever documenting every nearly every performance his band made around town. To Blixa’s great pride, the local experimental director, Albrecht Metzger, who was known throughout Germany for presenting the music television programme, Rockpalast, (something like the WDR’s own homegrown version of the Old Grey Whistle Test) had even found Blixa so photogenic that he had asked his band to appear in one of his films, which was due to start shooting in January. So it was not entirely vanity that made Blixa so careful in his appearance, but more an awareness that his own personal image was an artform to be perpetually curated and even exploited.

If I thought about it that way, perhaps it was a bit of an honour for Blixa to consult me in the construction of his hair. But his vanity still amused me as he examined his great tufted crest in the mirror. >>Don’t worry. I don’t want to shave it nearly bare again. But I thought of shaving maybe the sides? A bit like a Mohican? But I don’t want to lose my sideburns.<< Turning his head this way then that, he picked at the tufts that underlined his cheekbones. >>Here, you help me. Shave this bit off, here and here.<<

Nervously, I picked up the electric razor. I’d never cut anyone’s hair except my own in my life, and I was nervous about having a go, but then I thought of meeting his parents, and thought I couldn’t
possibly do a worse job than he regularly did to himself. >>Alright, turn your head to the side. I’ll try
to shave around your ears.<<

>>No, don’t make it even<< he protested. >>Make it go in, like... strips.<<

>>What, like go-faster stripes<< I teased.

>>Yeah exactly. For speed.<< He laughed as he slipped into the English word, that always meant
drugs, for a stupid pun. Groaning, I gave him a little affectionate shove as a rebuke, then set to work
with the razor. He almost purred as I sliced into his thick hair with a comb, then set about running the
razor carefully over the bits he wanted to shave. >>It feels so nice, the vibrations. I think I might
shave my head bald if you didn’t like me to look like a girl.<<

>>Don’t blame me for your bad fashion choices<< I tossed back, teasing, but at the same time, not
really joking. It was true, I did prefer Blixa with his hair long and hanging in his face. And if he was
going to go onstage and be the focal point of his band, honestly, I thought that he should look as
interesting and sexy as possible. But at the same time, it was like the thing with the screwing around.
If Blixa didn’t want to chop off his hair, because he was afraid it would negatively impact his
onstage image, then that was his thing, but I kind of resented having the whole thing pinned on me.

>>Now do the back<< he insisted as he rubbed his fingertips back and forth across the soft suede of
the newly shaved bits I’d revealed around his ears.

>>I don’t want to take too much off<< I said, gingerly cleaning up the shaggy area around the nape
of his neck.

>>Don’t be so timid<< directed Blixa. >>You’ve got to grab hold of a whole lock of hair, and just
take chunks out.<< Seizing the razor back from me, he tried to demonstrate, but he couldn’t quite
reach the back of his head. >>Like this.<< Grabbing a huge lock of hair at the front of his head, he
rammed the razor about halfway down the roots. As he took his hand away, some of the hair came
with it, leaving jagged strands of longer hair standing up against uneven stubble as ragged as a
harvested cornfield.

I tried to do a little bit of hacking at the back, but Blixa soon grew impatient with my attempts to tidy
it up. >>I don’t want it to look tidy. I want it to look the opposite of tidy. Like a bush warrior.<<

>>A wild bush warrior from the outback of Schöneberg<< I teased.

>>Hush wife, we are going to be late.<< The word he used – Frau – was ambiguous, as it could
mean woman or wife, but although it still made me cringe internally, at least I knew he meant it
affectionately.

>>It’s not my fault we’re late. I was ready half an hour ago, but you had to powder your face and do
your hair.<< I tossed back.

>>Hair is important<< he insisted, slinging his huge vinyl coat round his shoulders and taking my
hand. And together, we walked up into the cold December air, to go and be judged by his parents.

We drove down to Friedenau in my van. In a mirror of a journey we had done a year and a half
before, I found myself driving through beautiful, grand avenues of ornate Art Nouveau apartment
blocks, before taking that sharp turn over the railway bridge and ending up in the flock of social
housing estates sandwiched in a long, narrow strip between the Autobahn and a long expanse of
allotments.
Which one is yours? I asked, peering up at the huge, monolithic slabs of the apartment buildings. They were only 6 stories tall, like most of Berlin, but since each of them took up an entire city block, they seemed so large as to block out the sun, looming over us with their bright red tile roofs.

Come on, you have been here before. Twice. Blixa reminded me, slightly sarcastically.

They all look alike. I can’t tell them apart I confessed, and Blixa looked at me, annoyed, for a moment, before snorting with laughter.

That’s the point he grumbled, with a slightly malevolent tone that surprised me. You must never think of yourself as an individual, if you come from these places. The design is a constant reminder. They are factories, for churning out the cogs for machines that are the German working classes. But abruptly the pontificating mood gave way to a cry of protest. Eh, you have just gone past it. That one back there. Turn around!

I turned around when I reached a large, bare square with a squat, ugly church, then parked the van in the next available spot I could find on the street. Climbing out, I stared up at the mountainous blocks, more than a little intimidated. But Blixa was already loping down the street ahead of me, and I had to break into a trot to keep up, after stopping to lock the van. Finally, there was a break in the pinkish-white cliff face, and he lead me through a low, tunnel-like entrance into the interior of the building. Inside, to my surprise, was a small park, complete with lush trees, and well-kept lawns, and even a small children’s playing area. The windows on the inside were a bit larger, and there were even a few balconies, so that the shelter of the large, enclosed cloister seemed almost pleasant, compared with the iceberg exterior.

But Blixa scowled up at the windows, and made a rude gesture towards one of the balconies. For a moment, I was about to protest, but then I saw the twitch of curtains on that side of the building, and understood. It wasn’t just the rigid, regimented, building that enforced conformity in the youth of the community; the entire cloister functioned as a kind of panopticon, and from the thousand lidless windows, there seemed to be no privacy at all.

I don’t know how he located the correct entrance, given they were all so facelessly alike, but like a salmon swimming upstream to the river where it was spawned, Blixa located one of the half a dozen stairwells, and lead me reluctantly up a flight of stairs to an apartment.

As he had warned, we were now very late, but I think that was planned quite deliberately, as he was the last of his siblings to arrive, and his parents were already too busy to hassle him much.

Although my lover tried to slide into the house unnoticed, greeting the cats before he greeted his family, his mother waylaid him and dragged us out into the living room to meet the family.

And you must be... she ventured, looking me up and down with an expectant smile.

Blixa remembered his manners, and muttered This is my Valdi.

Waldtraut I corrected a little stiffly, then wanted to kick myself for not insisting on my real name, before stuttering Everyone just calls me Carter.

Valdi! Delighted exclaimed Frau Emmerich, and as Blixa retreated into a sullen, defiant teenage species of silence, I found myself almost completely overwhelmed by her double-kiss greeting. Frau Emmerich (and I wouldn’t dare to call her by her first name, though she introduced herself as Jutta) was a small, slim, very neat, perfectly dressed grande dame of a matriarch with a large halo of light-brown hair sticking out in a bouffant around her head to try to gain some height.
Then Blixa removed his coat, and for almost a full minute, his mother stared, open-mouthed, at Blixa’s tyre-rubber and buckles outfit, and although I could see it took almost all of her self-control not to make a comment out loud, her eloquent eyebrows made her disapproval quite plain. The huge shock of teased hair, too, she took in, and I could see her extend a tentative hand to touch the really uneven rats-tail stubble-field bit at the back, but Blixa petulantly slapped her hand away before it could come too close, and replied to the silent criticism of her judgemental eyebrows with the most poisonous of defiant looks.

But Frau Emmerich was not to be put off so easily, as she sat down amidst her family, as imperious as a queen, maintaining control over her unruly brood not through physical intimidation, but through cutting wit and extravagant eyerolls, and I recognised those same intensely dramatic eyebrows of hers as completely the double of those that expressed their dissatisfaction with me every time I tried to persuade Blixa to drink some water or do some dishes or go to bed. They were so like, this tiny woman, and this towering youth, and it was obvious to me that this was the source of much of their friction, though I do not think that either of them would have thanked me for the comparison.

Herr Emmerich Sr, on the other hand, was a huge, hulking presence at the opposite end of the room, as reserved and thoughtful as his wife was chatty and outgoing. But when he opened his mouth, my god, he was loud. It wasn’t even that he seemed to be yelling, or raising his voice in anger, it was simply as if the natural volume of his voice was as loud as a bullhorn, shaking furniture and scattering his progeny. And in a way, it seemed he had to be, to cut through the endless chatter of his family. This patriarch of the family was enormous, easily six foot, and it was obvious that this was where Blixa had inherited his height, though Emmerich Sr was thick and muscular and rather pot-bellied where Blixa was just gaunt and weedy. He had the same huge prow of a nose as his son, the same slightly weak chin, and the same intensely blue eyes. But in character and attitude, it was quite clear my lover took after his mother, for Herr Emmerich Sr was as unflappable as his son was nervous and excitable. Frau Emmerich, like Blixa, was eternally restless and fidgety. She, too, was a hand talker, her long, elegant fingers constantly in motion, emphasising and decorating her conversation, though even on the rare occasions she was silent, they still danced in her lap, weaving and interweaving her fingers in incessant graceful gestures.

Not that there was much silence in the Emmerich household, for Blixa had a brother and two sisters, two of whom had brought along a boyfriend or girlfriend of their own, and all of them seemed to be just as chatty as Frau Emmerich. To my surprise, Blixa was, by comparison, actually the quiet, intense, thoughtful one among his siblings, and was relentlessly teased for being intellectual and bookish, especially by his thunderingly down-to-earth father, who seemed slightly judgemental about any and all of those highfalutin’ cultural things like books and art and avant-garde art. Blixa, the ring-leading pied piper of the Risk bar, the serious and quiet one? It was quite an eye-opening experience, even as I found myself shrinking back into the sofa, a little overwhelmed by the volume at which four or five Emmerichs would all start expounding at once in that sharp, rapid-fire Berliner German.

>>She’s very quiet, this new girlfriend of yours, Christian<< Frau Emmerich was announcing, at the top of her lungs. >>Does this suit you? To have someone as silent as you? And you always have to go for the slim, boyish ones, don’t you. No figure at all. When you used to dress up as a girl with all that lipstick and hairdye, we were always worried you would come home with an actual boy one day, weren’t we... though I suppose that’s alright for some, so long as you’re happy.<< she added quickly, beaming at me.

Across the room, Herr Emmerich Sr made a very strange, strangled noise, combined with a deeply judgemental expression, then shifted in his seat, as if he were about to start booming away on this topic, but a swift and poisonous expression from Blixa seemed to quiet him.

>>Mama<< warned Blixa, and if he had had hackles, they would have been rising. The eyebrows
were already knitted into a permanent state of consternation, and I wondered if it was possible his parents had no idea about their son’s ambiguous sexual orientation.

>>Do you know he used to grow his hair right down to his backside, this tall one of mine, and it was dyed bright lilac<< Frau Emmerich continued, trying to draw me into the conversation. >>We shall have to dig out the photos and show you.<<

>>No we shall not<< protested Blixa, growing steadily more outraged.

>>I’d like to see them actually<< I ventured, grinning sideways at my lover.

>>She talks, after all!<< said Frau Emmerich, bending forwards towards me and petting me gently on the hand. She was so lively and charismatic that none of it came across as rude, more like gentle, affectionate teasing and friendly inquisitiveness. >>Do I detect the hint of an accent? Where are you from? Our Christian, he loves exotic girls. There was that American girl, with the wonderful wild hair, oh, what was her name.<<

>>Mama!<< yelped Blixa.

>>Jana?<< I supplied helpfully.

>>Such a lovely accent<< Frau Emmerich sighed.

>>Carter is German<< Blixa insisted defiantly. >>She was born in West Berlin.<<

>>Were you really? Not with that accent, surely!<< Frau Emmerich enquired, as quizzy as a cat.

>>I grew up in London<< I explained.

>>London, oooh<< said Frau Emmerich. >>We’ve never been to England. Blixa’s always wanted to go, he’s always wanted to travel, haven’t you, darling. I think this is why he likes the foreign girls so much.<< She leaned in closer, winking at me to try to pull me into her companionship, and I found myself oddly charmed by her, despite the outrageousness of what she was saying, and how much it was winding up my lover. >>I don’t mind at all – though I know some might say it was unusual – I think it’s exciting. We’re all Berlin born and bred, generations back, not very exciting, but ooh, London, have you ever met the Queen?<<

>>Alright, thank you, Mama, dinner has been lovely, but Valdi and I have to go now...<< insisted Blixa, standing up.

>>But we haven’t even started dinner<< protested Frau Emmerich. >>We’ve barely served the appetisers.<<

>>Alright, who wants some Glühwein<< boomed Herr Emmerich the Elder, rising to his feet as he spoke, with a voice that rattled the windowpanes.

>>Icke!<< said everyone, almost in unison.

I wasn’t sure how I ended up with a mug of Glühwein in my hands, but Herr Emmerich simply seemed to distribute them out at random to members of the family, regardless of age or interest. But the mug provided me with a slight dilemma. Frau Emmerich had moved her sharp teasing off her oldest son and onto the next in line, giving my lover a slight respite, but I could feel that he was not exactly uncoiling beside me on the sofa. Now, normally, I would refuse a drink, or find some way to abandon the glass. But in the pin-neat and well-organised Emmerich home, there was nowhere to hide the damned thing. Blixa had swallowed the lot of his own mug, almost in one go, then started
looking possessively at mine, as often when we were at parties, he would happily hoover up drinks that had accidentally been given to me. But for some reason, the assumption annoyed me that day, perhaps because I did not like the idea that he was just going to drink himself into a stupor, leaving me to handle his family completely sober.

Besides, it was Christmas. The one day of the year that I always had a glass, usually of sekt or brandy, or something nasty, to remind myself that I didn’t like alcohol. Ignoring Blixa’s imploring looks, I raised the mug to my lips and took a tentative sip. To my surprise, it was actually delicious. It was sweet and thick, and heavily spiced, and tasted more like fruit punch than wine. I took another sip, bigger this time, and found it went down surprisingly easy.

>>You like that, do you, my dear?<< roared Herr Emmerich, and immediately topped up the half inch dent I’d made in my mug.

>>It’s very nice<< I agreed, feeling my head start to spin slightly.

Blixa coughed gently and pushed his mug forwards for a top-up, but Herr Emmerich tutted at him, if tuts could be ramped up as loud as jet engines. >>Don’t be so greedy, young Christian. Save some for your mother. Jutta, can I tempt you?<<

>>Don’t mind if I do!<< boomed Frau Emmerich in response, and Blixa got neither a word in edgewise, nor a drop in his empty cup.

I floated through dinner, feeling my cheeks flush and my head slowly fill with the most enormous sense of jovial, pleasant well-being. When I finished the first glass, Herr Emmerich attentively topped me up, and I found myself growing quite merry. I barely heard the arguments raging round the table as Blixa started to scrap, first minor sorties with his younger brother, then more serious explosions with his father. It seemed fairly minor stuff to me, the usual grumbles of taxi drivers and newspaper columnists. Blixa’s father and brother took the standard ‘sensible’ view, while Blixa, backed up only occasionally by his littlest sister, who looked up at him with something approaching hero worship, took the most radical.

It started, almost imperceptibly enough, with an argument about veganism. Frau Emmerich, to be fair, had done her best to provide plain versions of vegetables, not slathered in butter or mayonnaise, and had even managed to produce something like a small chestnut and apple stuffing for her son to pick at. (Frau Emmerich was delighted with me, since I heartily ate and warmly complimented her roast goose, though I think Blixa viewed this as slightly disloyal.) But Herr Emmerich Sr voiced the opinion, first of all, that it was a terrible strain for his wife to have to cook two separate meals, then moved on to asserting that vegans were all freaks and hippies and squatters and worse. And lord only knew how any son of his had got mixed up with such a terrible practice, among such a terrible crowd of people.

See, Emmerich Sr thought the squatters’ movement was all lazy bums and drug addicts who really should get proper jobs, and stop holding up the march of progress, because all those tatty old tenements in Kreuzberg really should be knocked down and replaced with good, modern dwellings, so decent tradesmen like him could get work on the rebuilding projects. Emmerich Jr countered, with increasing waspishness, that the landlords were the real villains, didn’t they know there was a housing shortage in the city? They were only sitting on the properties, letting the houses fall into disrepair in the hopes of selling the land and getting rich, and in point of fact, the squatters were doing the city a favour, by keeping the beautiful, old-fashioned tenements from collapsing into rubble.

It wasn’t until Emmerich Sr started griping that the youth of West Berlin were all lazy shirkers, just hanging about looking for free money and trying to avoid military service, and honestly, artists –
who in their right mind wasted good money on that rubbish art? – ought to be rounded up and put to
real, honest, good labour – compulsory labour – doing the dirty work of reconstructing Germany,
that I realised this semi-ritualistic argument of theirs was actually personal. It wasn’t about the dirty
squatters in general, it was about this squatter, sitting at the family table, even though honestly, most
of the time that we weren’t at those interminable committee meetings, I usually forgot that we even
were squatters. And it wasn’t about feckless, lazy Berlin youth in general, it was about this youth, at
this table, who preferred the unpredictable and financially perilous, but interesting career of being an
anti-musician, to the absolutely dire and grim, but predictable career of being a gravedigger, a
rubbish-collector, or worst of all, a carpenter on a building site.

And as Blixa started to really raise his voice, I realised that that banshee-shriek punk cry of his was
nothing extreme to him, it was just the normal volume of conversation in his family home. With
devastating ferocity, he launched a personal attack, recriminating viciously on the evils of conformist
old former Nazis who bloody well needed to be shocked, with art, and with music, because they had
got their tongues so far up the occupying Americans’ arses that they had forgotten how to fucking
think for themselves. And at that point, finally, his mother got involved, trying to broker peace
between among the increasingly irate men of her family.

>>Please, you two, it is Christmas. Could we have peace on earth, and goodwill to all mankind, and
be spared the annual argument on politics? I don’t care if the CDU or the SPD or little green men
from outer space reign in the Rathaus, so long as there is peace between my boys.<<

>>Don’t patronise me, Mama, you know he’s a bloody fascist at heart<< Blixa snapped with all the
sharp anger of a seventeen year old, and pushed his chair back, storming from the room.

For a moment, I just looked around the table, shocked, as Herr Emmerich started to rumble that he
wasn’t sure how he was supposed to be a fascist, given he was barely even born when That Man has
been elected (no one in his family would even say the word, Hitler, which struck me as quite odd in
itself, but then again, many older Germans seemed to act as though they could simply pretend that
the events themselves had never happened, if they simply never mentioned the name of their
architect). But no sooner had that grumble died away, than Blixa’s younger brother started rabbiting
on about how anti-social that Christian was, and how inconsiderate it was that he couldn’t even keep
his opinions to himself for one family gathering, and not even on Christmas, could he abstain from
being so bloody argumentative, and look what he had done, he had spoiled Christmas dinner, again,
for the 23rd year running.

For several minutes, I was tempted to simply ignore my lover’s abrupt disappearance, and carry on
swallowing down the lovely Glühwein, but then realised that really was disloyal. So I coughed
apologetically, and said >>I better go and see that he’s OK.<<

>>Second door on the left<< said his mother long-sufferingly.

I excused myself from the table, and found the door, wondering if it were a bathroom, a bedroom or
what, before tapping quietly. >>Go away<< snapped Blixa, sounding more petulant and teenage
than I thought capable of his deep voice.

>>It’s only Carter<< I said. A few moments later, there was the sound of a latch drawing back. I
opened the door to find Blixa pacing up and down a tiny bedroom, smoking furiously.

>>How dare they treat me like that<< he ranted. >>They treat me like I’m an ignorant child, when I
know more than they do, these days.<<

I stood, swaying silently on the carpet, wondering if I should tell him that he was, in point of fact,
acting exactly like a child, as if he had regressed back to being about 15 the moment he had stepped
through the building’s gates, but thought better of it.

>>And my brother... did you hear him asking me when I’m going to stop this music nonsense and get a proper job, even offering with that smug, patronising tone, to set me up with an apprenticeship at his firm? Who does he think he is, my father? Honestly! Doesn’t he realise, that I am now considered one of the foremost experimental artists in all of Germany? Doesn’t he realise that the NME – the biggest music paper in Britain – sent a journalist to interview me, before we have released so much as a note in the UK? To everyone else, I am a big deal, I am a serious artist. But to my own family – they treat me still like a petulant child.<<

Moving forward, I went to him and put my arms around him, burying my face in his neck to try and still the great fits of giggles that were threatening to erupt from the bottom of my stomach like a flock of unruly butterflies. But even so, I found my belly shaking, and I started slowly to laugh.

Blixa found this irritating, even as my mirth was slightly infectious. >>What are you laughing at? You’re completely drunk, aren’t you?<<

>>Pissed<< I chuckled, feeling my head swirling and realising that I was really quite enjoying being very drunk. >>But you do realise, Herr Blixa Bargeld, well-known leader of the West Berlin Avant-Garde, that tonight you are not acting like a serious artist who will turn 24 in a few weeks’ time; you are actually acting exactly like a petulant teenager?<<

For a moment, I felt him tense, but then he relaxed, as I felt him start to laugh, too. >>I am not Avant-Garde. I want nothing to do with the Avant-Garde. That is a military term, and I will have nothing to do with the military. I’m a deserter!<< he insisted, even as laughter slowly overtook his voice.
Blixa and Carter escape his family for a furtive tumble in a secret location that was very special to his youth. Then the pair of them return to Schöneberg, for a far less tense celebration with Carter's aunts.

 Alone in his teenage bedroom, Blixa and I hugged for a few minutes, then started to sway slowly together on the carpet, as if dancing to music only we heard, both of us giggling to ourselves, until there was another small tap on the door.

 >>It’s your mother.<< 

 >>Ugh<< said Blixa, his body tensing up again. >>Go away.<<

 >>Don’t be rude, my tall one<< admonished Frau Emmerich, opening the door, and just checking that we weren’t up to anything that required privacy. Guiltily, we slouched apart as she entered clutching two photo albums. >>I wanted to show this to your girlfriend.... And this to you.<<

 Sitting down on the narrow bed, she patted the spaces on either side of her. With no real reason not to, I sat first, but Blixa hung back. His mother put one of the photo albums down on the bed nearest to him, then opened the other.

 >>Here you go<< she said, opening up the photo album and flipping through it until she found a photo of an elaborately made-up Blixa with heavy eyeliner and long, chest-length light-brown hair dyed with streaks of lilac. I gasped, because he didn’t just look beautiful. He looked, physically, like the young woman I’d taken him for the first night we’d met.

 >>Oh, Mama, don’t show Carter that<< he grumbled, snatching the other photo album from the bed before she could show me whatever lurked in that one, too.

 >>But I want to see them<< I protested. >>You were so pretty...<<

 >>He always was an extraordinarily pretty lad. You should have seen him as a baby! People were always saying he should go into pictures. The bluest of eyes, he had... Just look at him. Did you ever see such eyes, in a child? So intelligent, so knowing, even then. He always looked so serious, so deep in thought. You always knew he was a clever one, just to look at him.<<

 But on the other side of the room, Blixa had suddenly snapped to attention, because he was leafing his way through the other photo album, and what he found there, instead of antagonising him, seemed to have captivated him.

 >>Valdi, look<< he said, finally sitting down on the other side of me from his mother. >>These are reviews... all of the reviews of my band... from our album, from our singles, from our live show... even reviews of the tour. And look, beloved, here’s even the review of your show, with the photos of your drawings of me.<< He was growing animated, excited even. >>Mama, may I have this? You have clippings that even I don’t have.<<

 >>No, you may not. I’m keeping it to show the grandchildren.<<
Blixa wriggled uncomfortably, throwing me an awkward glance. >>We’re never having children.<<

>>Never say never, my dear.<<

>>I’m not bringing kids into this shithole<< he insisted.

>>Language<< said his mother, and patted him gently on the knee. But the crisis was past, and we settled down to spend a less controversial half hour looking at old photos.

By the time the rest of his family left for church, I felt I had sobered up enough to drive the van back up to Monumentstrasse. There was a brief argument about church, but I managed to head that one off, by explaining we had already made plans to meet my own family.

Frau Emmerich made a painful expression, then kissed her son quickly on both cheeks. >>I hope her family love you as much as I do, my tall one<< she said briskly, and he was released. But then she turned to me, and pulled me in closer than I was expecting for her double-kiss. Between kisses, she spoke to me, her voice very low so as not to be overheard. >>Please, take good care of him. He is still my son.<< But as she pulled away, she smiled brightly, as if she had said nothing at all. >>Valdi, don’t be a stranger. I would love to see you both again.<<

Blixa was oddly quiet as we walked to the van, though I felt my skin prickling with more than the unexpected cold, as the temperature had dropped once the sun had gone down. That whispered admonition to look after her son still bothered me. It was different from the way Beate had told me to ‘look after that great, long, pig-headed noodle’, as Frau Emmerich clearly had so much more at stake, with regards to her son’s well-being, but it was still somehow the same, some strange presumption I couldn’t quite grasp that this man’s emotional well-being had now become my responsibility. I couldn’t help but wonder, when my friends saw Blixa alone, if they told him to ‘look after that stubborn English butch’ in quite the same way.

When I found the van, I unlocked it, and we climbed in. I started the engine and turned the vehicle around to head home, realising a little too late, as I mounted a small grassy strip in the centre of the road, that the wide avenue was not intended to allow U-turns. Driving slowly, I had to concentrate very closely on the road, and the burning headlamps that seemed to appear out of nowhere and blaze across my screen. >>Oh, shit. I seem to have gone the wrong direction<< I swore as I passed that ugly church again, realising maybe I’d had a little more Glühwein than was wise.

But Blixa had been very definitely lost in thought, for he suddenly looked up at my curse, a little startled, and said >>No, no, can you just keep going in this direction for a moment? I want to show you something.<< I drove on, past another 3 or 4 of those huge, long, cliff-like blocks, then as we crossed a big main road, he gestured off to the opposite side of the road. >>Pull over just here. You can park on the side of the road.<<

I climbed a little unsteadily out of the van, and stared up at an unexpected mountain, right in the middle of suburban Berlin. >>Where are we?<<

>>No, no, you’ll like this. I promise<< he insisted, taking my hand and pulling me towards a building that loomed out of the dark of a midwinter early evening.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, as I realised what it was. >>The Zeiss Planetarium? You’re taking me to a planetarium?<<

>>Damn<< muttered Blixa, leaping up the steps and peering through the large, darkened windows of the pretty modernist building. >>I don’t think it’s open today. No, closed for Christmas. I would have loved to have taken you to one of the shows...<<
A planetarium I repeated, a little dumbfounded. Who puts a planetarium in the middle of a working class housing estate?

This place saved my life when I was a child sighed Blixa. There was absolutely fuck-all to do around here, when I was young. No cinema, no shops, not even a youth club. But there was this. I used to come up here, every chance I got. And wait until you see what’s at the top of the Island... Taking me by the hand, he tugged me up an unexpectedly steep slope to the side of the building.

The Island? What kind of island is this? Berlin’s completely flat. Why is there a mountain in the middle of Friedenau?

It’s not a real mountain laughed Blixa, towing me upwards in his wake. It’s a rubble-mountain. We are walking on the bones of the old Berlin that was bombed away in the war. All of the rubble, all of the debris from the bombed-out buildings, they dumped it all here in a great pile. And now we have this little mountain. Our island.

A little out of breath, I followed him as we climbed the path, then abruptly ducked through a shortcut up a steep slope and into the bushes. When we emerged, blinking in the moonlight on the top of the small mountain, I saw before me three small domes. Was it a mosque, or some kind of strange chapel? But as I looked over the tilework and window-grills, with their decorations of planets and astronomical symbols, I realised that it was a tiny observatory.

Oh my god I repeated dumbly. What on earth is this doing up here?

I used to come up here all the time when I was a kid he insisted, trying to peer in through the windows, though this place, too, was shuttered and dark. It was my idea of perfect freedom, when my family got too much, to run away to the Island. I’d come up here, and hang out, by myself for hours, with the stars and the planets for company. Completely free! This is where I picked up my love of astronomy, of physics. Like I said, this place saved my life.

As I stared up at the domes, I tried to imagine the small, solemn blond boy of Frau Emmerich’s photos climbing up this steep hill to peer into the wonders of the night sky. My own adult Blixa, roaming about in the dark, was such a puzzle, and yet here was yet another missing piece. My heart thumped with love for him, at this new, unexpected facet, this stargazing child seeking freedom in the night skies over West Berlin.

Come over here he called, from a clearing on the other side of the rubble-mountain, and I followed him round. You can see all of Berlin from here.

Peering off through the bare trees, I saw, glittering in the streetlights, first the red roofs of the massive housing estate, marching across the landscape like giants. And then beyond that, church towers and steeples, dark against the faint orange glow of the city sky, and even a huge, bulbous watertower. Then turning a little to the right, I saw the huge spiked-onion spire of the Communist Fernsehturm, and other unfamiliar buildings, and realised that from this hill, you could see right over the Wall, and into East Berlin.

It’s beautiful, isn’t it he asked, coming up behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist, resting his sharp chin against my shoulder. Coming up here always makes everything OK again. It’s a pity we can’t see any stars tonight. On a clear night, from here, you can see right across the universe.

Tilting my head back against his, I gazed up into the cold, dark, night sky, but scudding clouds had already covered the moon. We were completely alone, and for a moment, I shivered, feeling the drop in the temperature. But there was a glimmer in the night sky, and then another. For a moment, I
thought they might be the stars, appearing on Blixa’s command, but as a tiny icy splash landed on my face, my lover started to laugh, the tension and anger draining out of him as he burrowed his body against mine.

>>Look, it’s started snowing.<<

For a few minutes, we stood there, out in the open, laughing and trying to catch the snowflakes on our tongues, but as the clumps grew thicker, we retreated back under the shelter of the observatory’s upper observation deck. Standing there together, his arms wrapped around me, his face crushed against my hair, I could feel the heat of his body against mine, as his cold hands started to creep under my coat for warmth. The sensation of his hands against my skin was intoxicating, as his fingers sought the heat of my body beneath my clothes. And then slowly, we started to move, me nuzzling up against him, pushing myself against his body with an insistent rhythm, and him rubbing himself against my back, as his hands, now warming up, dipped under my jeans to find a different sort of heat. Down, his chilly fingers wandered, restless, working their way into my pants, sliding between my thighs as I shifted, opening my legs to him, willing him to go deeper still.

He murmured something in my ear, and I murmured back my assent, nestling against him, leaning back into his embrace, and as his fingers touched wet warmth, I felt my whole body light up like shooting stars. As he pushed a fingertip inside me, the whole of my being felt concentrated on that single soft spot, even as I could feel the chill of the air, the warmth of his body, the tiny biting cold of windblown snowflakes hitting my face. He was rubbing back and forth now, massaging me, spreading out the wetness, pulling up, circling my clitoris with his fingertip to raise little shudders of pleasure before plunging back inside the event horizon of my dark hole. My whole skin felt like it was singing out with desire for him, twisting and writhing as I moaned slightly, my mouth reaching back to find his as the wetness of our mouths joined, echoing that other wetness he was urgently exploring. His fingers were right up inside me now, pushing, pulling me towards excitement, as he vibrated, twitched, playing me like his guitar. I lolled backwards, swooning into his arms, utterly powerless to do anything except let pleasure wash over me as he manipulated my body, until I was almost at the point of coming all over his hands.

But he pulled away slightly, breaking off the kiss, and I opened my eyes (I hadn’t realised I had closed them?) and was almost frightened by the intensity of the desire on his face. >>I want you<< was all he said, all he had to say.

>>Yes<< I whimpered.

We moved as if with one will. There was a bench just in front of us, set as if to admire the view, so we lurched over to it, still wrapped together. Ignoring the cold, burning too hard with lust, I pushed my trousers down around my knees, stepped out of one leg, then leaned over the back of the bench, raising one knee to give my lover easier access to my black hole. But he was right behind me, breathing hard as he leaned into me, and I suddenly felt the cold of metal against my intimate skin. Oh god. I suddenly remembered all those buckles, and turned to see him fussing with the fastenings of his buckles. After a few moments of wrestling with the rings of his belt, he finally shrugged and said >>Oh, fuck it...<<

Without bothering to untangle the knot of his belts, he urgently unzipped his rubber jeans, and extracted his cock. He seemed flummoxed by harness for a moment, but then he seemed to remember its original inspiration, and gingerly threaded his semi-erect cock through the largest silver ring. It fit almost perfectly, as he stroked it a few times, to bring it to full hardness, and then it stuck fast. So he adjusted the belt, grinning wolfishly as he leered at me.

>>It feels kind of good, actually. Tight. The friction will be interesting, if I can...<< His cock was in
his hand, then he was leaning into me, pushing it back and forth between my thighs, the chilly metal warming up. As he grabbed hold of my hips and tugged me sharply back towards him, I felt him slip inside me.

We become like one animal, moving together in the dark, snow swirling about our heads. Back and forth, we slammed up against one another, my arse in the air as he pushed my head forward, groping between my legs with his free hand to try to find my clitoris again. It seemed forever that we pumped back and forth, the icy plumes of our breaths streaming out into the night like clouds from some great locomotive, though it could have been ten minutes, or it could have been an hour. I was so close to climax that every thrust seemed to almost push me over the edge, but as he grew rougher and rougher I could feel his own blind need as he accelerated towards orgasm.

>>I’m about to come<< he cried out.

>>Not without me<< I muttered, and jammed my hand down on top of his, trying to pull myself towards the elusive orgasm. Behind me, I felt him tense, and his whole body shuddered as he spurted inside me. But as he slowed his stroke, he clutched tighter with his hand, his fingers grasping, and I held my breath and pitched over the edge into a blindingly powerful orgasm that seemed to rip the breath from my lungs and the blood from my brain as my whole body erupted, seeming almost to pulsate and throb and almost hum with excitement. It took forever for the sensations to ebb away into the cool, dark night, my head spinning, as the universe slowly returned to normal. And without the heat and excitement of sex to keep us warm, I was now very cold, and both of us were dusted all over with snow.

Blixa laughed and pulled out of me gently, extracting his now limp and shrinking cock from the ring and wiping the belt off with a bit of tissue before tucking himself back into his rubber jeans. >>Your trousers are covered in snow. Here, let me...<< As I stepped out of the other leg, he picked them up and shook off the flakes.

I straightened up, trying to rebutton my coat where he’d worked it loose, but as I righted myself, I felt a long drip of his semen run down the inside of my leg, and started to giggle, embarrassed. There were aspects of sex with men that I would never entirely get used to. >>Where’d you get that tissue?<<

>>Stole it from my Mum’s, where else? Here, let me clean you up.<< Bending down, he ran his finger up the inside of my leg to catch the drip, then, not sure what else to do, he thrust his finger into his mouth and licked it clean.

>>That’s disgusting<< I laughed, recovering the merry jollity of my earlier drunk, though I was now fairly sober, just light-headed from the intensity of that orgasm.

>>Why?<< he shrugged. >>It came from me, didn’t it?<< Then, as if to prove his point, he squatted down, thrust his pointed nose between my thighs and, lapping like a cat with his tongue, licked my thighs and vulva clear. >>You always taste so good. Perfect desert for Christmas Dinner.<<

>>Not exactly vegan, is it? Shall I tell your Dad that your morals are sometimes... a little flexible, when it comes to what you will put in your mouth?<<

He shot me a dirty look, and for a moment, I worried about re-igniting the earlier argument, but then he seemed to relax and laugh it off. >>If eating a little pussy and swallowing a little sperm makes one not vegan, then I am the world’s worst vegan. Come on, let’s go back to yours, I am freezing my arse off out here.<<

>>Well, whose fault is it you got your not-entirely-vegan arse out in the snow<< I teased, pulling my
trousers back on as he readjusted his harness and belts.

>>It’s your fault for being so fucking horny, isn’t it<< he shot back, taking my hand as we started back down the path, slipping a little in the snow. >>Rubbing up against me under the observation deck.<<

>>And whose fault is that for being so bloody sexy, eh? How am I supposed to resist you?<< I retorted, grinning at him as I pulled him closer, wrapping his arm about my shoulders as I nuzzled up against him, and he laughed and pretended to bite me.

We found the car, now dusted with snow, and I had to run the engine for a few minutes to warm it up, as the pair of us rushed round, trying to clear off the windows with a brush I found somewhere near the toolkit in the back. As I drove back into Central Berlin, he lapsed into silence again, fiddling with the controls of the heater, but this seemed a more happy, sated silence, then the teenage sulk of earlier.

>>You alright, my love?<< I asked, as I finally reached Monumentstrasse safely, and pulled off the road into the courtyard to park. He nodded and kissed the side of my face gently, then put his arm around my shoulders again as we climbed the back stairs. The house was dark, so I turned on the lights in the kitchen, and lit the stove to make a pot of tea before bed. And just as the kettle was boiling, the front door banged, and abruptly there was light and laughter and two sets of footsteps clattering up the stairs, and Fritz barking, and suddenly the two elderly women burst into the kitchen, both of them singing at the top of their lungs, dressed up in a pair of very old, very elegant tuxedoes.

>>Happy Christmas, Happy Christmas<< they both called out, buzzing around, their faces shining. Grete drew back when she saw Blixa, pulling open his coat to exclaim over his unusual outfit. >>Look, look, how beautiful this corset is<< she cried. >>The buckles, the shiny rubber, the rivets, it reminds me of the costumes for the Mechanical Ballet. Do you remember when Valeska Gert danced a motorcycle race? It is just like that! Take off your coat, my love, and let us see it! How wonderful! Did you make this yourself?<<

Blixa visibly relaxed in a way he had seemed unable to, back in Friedenau, and smiled, then look off his coat to show my aunts his new clothes. >>Oh no, some friends of mine who are fashion students made it for me. The style is called Industrial. Do you like it?<<

>>What a fine thing it is to have friends who are fashion students. It is a wonderful garment. It suits you well, your beautiful slim figure<< laughed Auntie Willie.

>>Is that tea you’re making? We’ll all have some, with the Stollen cake<< suggested Auntie Greta.

>>Don’t worry, Blixi, you can have some, too, as it’s vegan cake<< insisted Auntie Willie. >>Greta made it herself with pure vegetable shortening. You would never know!<<

And the old women fussled over Blixa, and Grete admired his new haircut, and somehow Blixa uncoiled, all the tension falling out of him as he stopped being so wild and teenage and resentful, and became again the handsome, charming, witty young poet I knew and loved. My aunts adored him, and they accepted him in a way that I now saw he never got at home. In my home, it was considered perfectly normal to be a poet or an artist or a musician, a matter just taken in stride as part of the natural order of things. My aunts didn’t just accept him, they encouraged him, even painstakingly educated him. It used to shock me sometimes, the sudden gaps and complete absences in Blixa’s knowledge of the cultural world. That he had these wells of deep obsessive knowledge that he had acquired about Antonin Artaud or Berthold Brecht, but step at little bit to one side, and he couldn’t
tell an Impressionist from a Pre-Raphaelite. My aunts never judged him or mocked him for that, they just got the book and showed him, Modigliani or Michelangelo or Malevich.

But I realised, as I sat in that formal room in the front of my aunts’ house, lined with bookshelves they kept consulting and pulling down bits and pieces to delight Blixa with, that I hadn’t seen a bookshelf in his parents’ house, nor a bit of proper artwork on the walls. (He told me later that his houseproud Mama considered the sight of bookshelves to be untidy, and used to make him hide his schoolbooks away in a storage caddy.) He had been taken to an art museum exactly once in his life, as a small boy, when he had whined and wheedled and cajoled his parents into taking him to see real Egyptian hieroglyphs at the Pergamon. So when Blixa curled up on the sofa and inhaled Jacob Bronowski or John Berger, George Bataille or Tristan Tzara, devouring books in the course of an afternoon, I suddenly understood that this was, more or less, terra incognita to him, a new and barely-known continent to him, rather than the background hum of Culture I’d known my entire life.

Later, as we lay in my bed in the dark (and Blixa told me we would never have been allowed to share a bed as an unmarried couple in his mother’s house) he sighed and said I didn’t know how lucky I was. That gave me pause, as I wondered where on earth Blixa had come from, this wild seed, so completely unlike that safe, solid, proletariat German household from which he had sprung. And I thought I would never, ever figure Blixa out completely; I would only ever receive more and more bits of tiny puzzle pieces to fit together like a mosaic and try to glimpse the truth.
Rough Trade

Chapter Summary

Carter takes Blixa to London for a brief holiday, to meet their parents. Blixa charms the entire London post-punk scene, and Carter finally smashes through their writer's block.

For a very special early birthday gift, I took Blixa to London for the week leading up to New Year’s. Wolfgang’s friend’s journal had been collated, and published as a book, and I received what seemed to my eyes an impossibly large cheque for my contribution. The two of us wanted to have a little holiday together, and he wanted to see London, as both Pig and the journalist from the NME had stimulated his interest, and he was curious about some of the offers that his band were starting to attract from the UK. Anyway, it seemed the right time, since I had finally met his family, for him to be introduced to my parents.

Since it had been nearly two years since I had last seen my parents, I decided not to stay at the family house out in Surrey, and instead booked the cheapest hotel I could find, which turned out to be in Bayswater. I couldn’t imagine that the suburbs could hold much interest for my lover, as it was London he was interested to see. So we got an endless train across the continent, and took the ferry across the channel, then caught another train up into London. How strange and disorienting it was for me, to step off the ferry and be suddenly surrounded by English accents again! They sounded sharp and strange to me, but Blixa was deeply amused by the whole thing, face pressed up against the glass of the train window, mesmerised by how different my city was from his own, and constantly comparing London to Berlin, usually to London’s detriment. He insisted on practicing his English on me, though his intense Berlin accent made him sound somehow more German than when speaking German, as he demanded explanations for all the ways our cities were so different.

“Zhe buildings!” he demanded as the train raced through the suburbs of South London, observing the long, jagged terraces of Victorian houses packed in back to back. “Zhey are all so narrow... Why are zhere susch narrow houses? How does von even breeze in a house so narrow?”

I watched the rows upon rows of brick teeth marching across the hills as the train slid by, and thought how huge and monolithic Berlin’s massive double-fronted buildings had seemed when I had first seen them. “They’re all single family homes. That’s why they’re small. Those huge double-wide buildings in Berlin – they’re designed to be apartment blocks, so everyone gets a slice of the block. Here, each family insists on having their own individual home. So they divide them lengthwise.”

“But eet is only haff a house!” Blixa carried on doggedly, pointing to where gables were split by two neighbours deciding to paint the brickwork a different colour. “How can von liff in haff a house?” I merely shrugged, as it seemed normal to me. “Eet is ferry ferry odd.”

When we arrived in Central London, we clambered off the train, and I was immediately struck by the pollution. It wasn’t as if West Berlin was a particularly clean city, with the omnipresent pall of coal smoke hanging over it, especially in the winter. But it was a cold day in England, and though not particularly wet, the pollution from traffic seemed to hang in the air over London like a grey-brown haze.

I went to a ticket machine, fiddling with English money that seemed to have become somehow completely unfamiliar, and bought two weekly travelcards, handing one to Blixa with the strict
instructions not to lose it. Blixa examined it suspiciously, as if trying to decipher the strange hieroglyphics that depicted the zones it permitted travel to, then pocketed it. For a moment, I wavered, half wanting to drag him on a bus so he could experience the impressive size and breadth of London, but even though we’d gained an hour on crossing the border, I didn’t trust London traffic to deliver us all the way across town in time to meet my parents. So I turned instead to the Circle Line.

“Ah,” said Blixa with a self-satisfied little nod as he looked at the route map. “You haff von of zese, as vell.” I cast him a mystified glance before examining the board for the next Bayswater train. “Ringbahn!” he pronounced proudly.

“It’s not a Ringbahn, it’s the Circle Line, and anyway, we had ours first, and yours doesn’t even go all the way around Berlin.”

>>Yes it does<< contradicted Blixa, irate and defensive enough to lapse straight back into German. >>It goes all the way around Berlin, but it has to stop and turn around when it gets to the Wall... but do you know, that the U6 and U8 actually go through into East Berlin on their circuit, and you can see the ghost stations where you are not allowed to get off, if you press your nose up to the glass to peer into the gloom. But no one is allowed to get off or on, so the ghost stations just sit there, empty. I do wonder sometimes if their trains come through to our side to turn around...<<

The train finally heaved into sight, with a great roar that drowned him out, and I was quite convinced he would have carried on going on about how West Berlin’s U-Bahn was eminently superior to the Tube if I hadn’t interrupted him to push him onto it.

Blixa looked around, his tall narrow frame hunching slightly to get through the doors. “It’s bigger than a U-Vier but not as big as an S-Bahn...”

“They come in different sizes – if we go on the Central Line, that’s about as narrow as the Schöneberg Line. The Metropolitan Line... that’s bigger than an S-Bahn,” I protested, feeling the odd urge to defend the city of my youth as we found two seats and Blixa folded himself into one of them.

“Humph. Vee shall zee,” dismissed Blixa with a little nod as he folded his arms across his chest and glared fixedly at the tube map.

When we climbed to the surface again at Bayswater, I was a little disoriented by the noise and the flashes of colour and the roar of traffic. The tumult of London was a shock as I realised what a sleepy backwater West Berlin was in our decaying districts near the Wall. I stopped to look at the map, and realised that our hotel had fibbed slightly about its central location, and we would have been better getting off at Notting Hill, so I picked up our suitcase and prepared for a long slog back down Bayswater Road towards Notting Hill Gate. But Blixa was absolutely mesmerised as I tried to drag him off down the street, towards our hotel.

“Zhe cars!” he exclaimed, constantly turning to look out into the traffic. “Zhey really are on zhe wrong side of zer road! Look at zhem! Everyzhing is reversed. Left-hand cars, left-hand steering wheels, left-hand traffic lights... are zhe Ampelmännchen all left-handed, too?” A genuine sense of delight danced on his beautiful features.

“I thought you’d like it,” I shrugged. “London is a whole left-hand city.”

His face erupted into the broadest grin as he let out a bray of laughter. We stopped at a traffic light, as a crowd of people gathered around us, and he stared at the left-hand traffic as it surged by. As soon as the cars had passed, I tugged at the handle of our suitcase and prepared to cross the road, but Blixa
let out a cry of alarm. “Valdi!” he shrieked, grabbing my elbow and physically dragging me back onto the kerb. “What are you doing? Do you want to get yourself run down by a left-hand car?”

All around us, people were getting impatient that we were not moving out of the way, blocking the pedestrian intersection with our suitcase, but Blixa looked genuinely alarmed as they started to push their way past us and across the street. “Come on, let’s go. There’s no cars for miles,” I told him as I shook his hand off me, and set out across the street, as we were now way behind the other pedestrians.

But Blixa stood, stubbornly, on the traffic island, glaring at me with that intensely disapproving Prussian stare, waiting until the little walk signal turned green. And I had to stop on the other side of the street, and actually wait for his stubborn little Prussian arse to decide it was OK to cross the road.

“You don’t have to wait for the light,” I tried to explain, in the very slow, careful voice Londoners used to explain things to foreigners. “It really is OK to walk if there are no cars.”

“It’s dangerous,” insisted Blixa, who seemed far more bothered by the idea of jaywalking than I would ever have given him credit for. “Vee could be kilt.”

I looked at him with a slightly pitying expression as we walked off down the pavement. “Blixa, I thought you were an anarchist?”

That made him really irate, as he exploded with all the outrage his tired, travel-weary orderly little Prussian soul could muster. “Zhis is not anarchy. Zhis walking into traffic, eet is... eet is... chust a deaf-vish!”

As the scene repeated itself at the next three crossings, he got crankier and crankier, as I strode across the road with the rest of the pedestrians, and he waited, growing steadily more petulant, for the lights. The first couple of times, I stood on the opposite side of the road, waiting for him, then to be honest, I got tired of waiting, and simply trudged on towards our hotel, forcing him to break into a trot and dash across the road against the light, or risk being left behind.

By the time we got to the hotel, my amusement at his antics was wearing off, and he was downright cranky, tired from the journey, and I soon realised he was more than a little shaky, since he had a bit of a bad speed come-down, as we hadn’t dared to carry anything with us. And we had less than half an hour to get to the family reunion, as for some stupid, overly ambitious reason, I had agreed to meet my parents for an awkward supper on our first night in London, at the new Pizza Express restaurant in Notting Hill. If I had had any sense at all, I really should have begged off, or at least left Blixa at the hotel to sleep off his grumpiness with the excuse of jet lag, but the details had all been arranged in advance, and by the time we got to our room, it was really too late to call my parents out in Surrey and cancel. Of course Blixa carped and moaned so much that we ended up being nearly twenty minutes late, which did not make for a good first impression.

As I walked into the restaurant, I was surprised by the change in my parents. They seemed much older than I had expected, and somehow smaller and a bit faded, though of course it was me that had changed. They were more than a little thrown by Blixa, who clearly wasn’t at all what they had expected, though I had warned them in advance, to their audible relief, that despite the name, Blixa was ostensibly a man. I had simply got used to him, rubber trousers, mascara, black clothes, enormous hair (at least he had had the sense to leave the priest’s collar at the hotel!) but my parents looked quite taken aback.

Blixa did his best to be amiable as he picked at his garlic bread and olives (the only vegan options) but he was very clearly not in the mood. After a couple of attempts, he gave up on English, and started talking almost exclusively in German, mostly to my mother, since my father had pretty much
forgotten the little German he had ever had. My mother was initially charmed by his sharp intelligence, though she claimed later that he was a little hard to understand, as she found his German quite rough and heavily Berlin accented. (Which was a lie. Blixa spoke perfectly respectable Hochdeutsch; it was more likely to be my mother’s German that had deteriorated over 20 years in the Home Counties.) My father, on the other hand, much like another patriarch we had recently left in Friedenau, objected to Blixa’s veganism, objected to his occupation as a musician, objected to his politics – and I didn’t even bother translating the bit about the anarchism – and most strenuously objected to the shaggy hair and the make-up.

Rather than being rude outright, Blixa resorted to cutting sarcasm, fixing my father with a cruel sneer and remarking in an exaggerated accent as his eyebrows veered towards the most dangerous angle, “You vould like my parents, I zhink. Ja, you und my parents vould certainly find yourselfs most definitely philosophically and politically aligned.”

Moving my hand to my lover’s thigh, I squeezed sharply, as though my father looked perplexed, trying to work out if he had just been insulted or not, I knew for a fact that Blixa had essentially just called my Dad a Nazi. And given how hard my father had worked, when he was in the military, to rebuild and preserve West Berlin in the face of the communist blockades, that would not have gone down well.

We cut the evening short after one drink in a local pub, as my mother tactfully suggested that perhaps I would like to catch up with the family later in the week, without the need to bore my partner further. The stony look on my father’s face made it clear that this suggestion was not for Blixa’s benefit, but still, I was relieved, as Blixa by this point was in a filthy mood, and I was afraid there would be a terrible argument if he became too drunk to hold his tongue. Leaving my lover to drink in the hotel bar by himself, I walked my parents back to the Tube and said goodbye, trying to be bright and jaunty against the heavy silence of my father’s obvious disapproval of my partner. Even my mother had skipped straight over the “Well, if this is really what you want...” stage to the “You do insist on making your bed, Waldtraut, so you are the one who will have to lie in it” stage, which honestly only made me more determined to go and get back into bed with my beloved German.

When I got back to the hotel, expecting an argument, I found Blixa had gone to bed, of his own volition, though I knew he was angry with me by the way he curled into a tight little hedgehog ball, over by the wall, when I climbed into the bed, refusing so much as a cuddle, let alone a placatory fuck, which, quite frankly, I could really rather have done with after the heavy damp cloud of my parents’ disappointment with my life choices.

By the time we emerged, blinking, into the early afternoon of the next day, I think he had forgiven me a little. I took him up Portobello Road, and he started to like London a little. By the time we got up to Rough Trade, Blixa had decided that London was, in point of fact, a highly agreeable place, and he actually approved of it.

It certainly helped his opinion that we walked in, and there, hanging on the wall, was a large poster-sized music magazine cover depicting, of all people, the Birthday Party, back when they had been a five-piece, lounging in an abandoned church. Blixa decided that this was an exceptionally good omen, and turned to me, grinning as he extended a long finger towards Rowland, who was dressed in that soft-butch style that looked almost uncomfortably like what I was wearing.

“Look, eet is your girlfriend,” he said with a salacious grin that made it clear he had heard every one of those smutty conversations back at the Risk Bar. “...und his moles.”

For a moment, I tensed, ready to tell Blixa to fuck right off, but some reckless holiday mood took
over, as it was easier to joke with the annoying Aussies hundreds of miles away. So I pointed right back at Nick, resplendent in that ridiculous pair of too-tight leather trousers, and retorted, “And look, there is your girlfriend. And his fragile masculinity.”

As Blixa brayed with laughter, one of the shop clerks walked by, and barely glanced at us before deciding to helpfully inform us in a slightly patronising tone, “Actually, that’s the Birthday Party. Really good Aussie death-punk band. They’ve got a new EP coming out on 4AD next month called the Bad Seed?“

Blixa and I exchanged knowing glances, as he raised his eyebrows at me, and I was struck by a sudden odd swell of pride, at walking into a record shop a thousand miles from my home, and finding a record that I had worked on. Just as the clerk seemed about to walk off, Blixa smirked, and gently informed him, “Ja, vee know zhem vell. Zhey live vit friends of ours in Vest-Berlin. Vee are drinking companions vor a long time now.”

It was as if Blixa had said some secret codeword, as the clerk suddenly turned around and looked us up and down, not dismissively as he had done before, but with a distinctly evaluating gaze. “Oh.” I could see it in his expression, that sudden curiosity as to who we were, two German punks in a London record shop, as he wrestled with his too-cool indie attitude of not wanting to act in any way like he might know or even care about celebrities. “Wait, and you are...?”

As I turned, my eyes fell on the large display of badges for sale on a bit of felt-backed board by the cash register. For there, among the logos of PiL and Wire and Crass, was a small black badge depicting the dancing petroglyph man that Blixa carefully stencilled on all of his band’s equipment. It was one of those signs that was so familiar to me in the environs of West Berlin, that I had stopped seeing it long ago. And yet, in this record shop in London, it appeared so strange, ripped out of context, that I almost gasped. Nudging Blixa with my elbow, I pointed to it, and his eyes lit up.

“Ja, zhis is us,” he said, with genuine little-boy excitement. “Die Einstürzende Neubauten. I am called Blixa, I am an anti-musician. I write the texts for the band.”

And that was it; we were committed to staying in that record shop for the rest of the afternoon being feted as visiting celebrities. Blixa spent hours in there, digging through the racks of music, telling people about the West-Berlin scene, grilling the staff, and making all kinds of enquiries about what was good that was going on in London. It astonished me, how Blixa had the knack of making friends, just like that, as he charmed the record shop clerks, and he soon had people telling us about gigs, and parties, and sound systems, and all sorts of various events that were on that week, with friendly invitations that we should definitely come along and check it out.

I hung back, a little shy, letting Blixa work his magic, as we found ourselves invited first to the office of an independent record label just to hang out and listen to local music, then to a pub, then to a gig, then to an after-hours club that played bone-judderingly loud reggae and lovers rock. Blixa was absolutely in his element, chatting away, networking and making connections. He was already familiar with the names, at least, of quite a lot of movers and shakers in the London music scene, from zines and the endless postal correspondence the band kept up. And to my surprise – though not at all to his – his reputation had preceded him, as although his band were not yet signed to a British label, German imports had made their way over to Rough Trade. And everywhere we went, as soon as he said his name, we encountered people who had heard of Blixa Bargeld, or his group, this extreme German punk band with the unpronounceable name and the penchant for playing scrap metal and heavy demolition equipment onstage. And even if they hadn’t, he was just so distinctive in that buckled rubber get-up and that heavy German accent that people simply assumed he was some kind of punk star and treated him accordingly.
It wasn’t that I was uninterested in this chatter, but it was clear that I simply wasn’t as enthralling to these people as my celebrated partner. To be honest, I’m not sure many people even realised I was his partner, as ‘Valdi’ became anglicised into ‘Walt’ and they mistook me sometimes for a bandmate, as I realised in conversation with native Londoners that I had picked up a faint German accent to my English, and sometimes just for some English friend Blixa was staying with. Occasionally, I might need to translate, but Blixa had a mind like a sponge, doing his best to suck up the English language, and all its London slang, as if he were picking up the tune of a new song. So to stave off boredom, I found myself digging in my bag for my long-neglected sketchbook, picking it out and sitting at a table, while Blixa schmoozed and was schmoozed, making satirical sketches of all the ridiculous London musicians and scenesters we met.

Soon, my parents completely forgotten, we had plans to go to a gig, or an exhibition, or someone’s squat party, every day for the rest of our visit. So the next morning, Blixa rang the music journalist he knew at the NME, and wrangled an invitation to come and visit the NME offices by Blackfriar’s Bridge. I was a little bored by all the music scene talk by that point, so I told Blixa to go and do his interview, and I’d go out to Surrey to meet my parents for lunch, then come back and meet him in the pub before supper.

Without Blixa and his cutting wit, meeting up with my parents was slightly less painful, but it was still an ordeal, equal parts ‘well, you seem happy and we’re happy that you’re happy’ and ‘are you sure this is what you want to be doing with the rest of your life’. Honestly, I wasn’t thinking about the rest of my life. I was blissfully happy with Blixa, and enjoying what I was doing, and enjoying who I was doing it with, and that was enough for me. As my father gave inspirational speeches with military urgency, and my mother fussed and made caring noises, I found myself pulling out my sketchbook and drawing surreptitious little comics as I ostensibly nodded along, and said ‘yes, Mama, no, Mama, three bags full Mama’. Although these people had given birth to me, I realised sadly that they were not my family. My real family was the lesbian couple living in that tall boarding house, back in West Berlin.

By the time I was on the train back to London, the pages of satirical sketches had developed into three and a half storyboards of quick cartoons around the comical figures of these two hopeless musicians, their slavish obsession with ‘The Scene, man, The Scene!’ and their endless plans and machinations to make themselves famous in the heady and exciting world of the ‘London Music Biz’. They weren’t entirely based on anyone I actually knew (though I supposed they looked a bit like Nick and Rowland in a certain light, with their skinny jeans and their towering black hairdos; albeit mixed with the more comical aspects of Blixa and Alex and Mufti’s punk idealism rolled in). But mostly they were fleshe from scraps of conversation I’d heard in Rough Trade, and at the pub, and at gigs, not just the previous night, but over the past two years. It was quick, and easy, and after the weird, awful writers’ block of the previous months, it was a relief how smoothly and easily they flowed from my pen. Even on the train, I continued to sketch away in pencil, and didn’t really want to get off at Blackfriars station to meet Blixa and his music journalist friend.

There was a stiff wind, blowing the polluted haze off the city as it tugged at my hair and ruffled waves into the sluggish Thames. Even as I walked across the bridge, my head was still spinning away with comics, the plot simmering and bubbling up into absurd scenes and wonderful story arches that seemed to coalesce and take flight before my eyes like foam off the turbulent river. I found the pub, and inside, wrapped up in a cocoon of stale cigarette smoke and beer, was Blixa, holding forth with a gaggle of his new English music journalist friends, who were all trying to ingratiate themselves with him, by offering him advice on what the best record company was for the New Buildings to sign with.

Blixa had always carried himself with a concerted air of intensity, but since coming to England, he had started to mask his natural boyish tiggerishness with a slightly cultivated aloofness that seemed to
translate as almost unspeakably cool. Perhaps initially, he was merely covering for his poor English, as he still frequently complained to me about the difficulty of expressing complicated thoughts in such simple language. But there was also a part of me that suspected he had observed how my external facade of stoic composure unnerved and intimidated Nick, and had decided to try it on himself. Oddly, although these English music journalists all liked to play up the impression that they were hip young gunslingers, and talked themselves up as godlike arbiters of cool, but behind the bluster, most of them seemed riven by deep seams of insecurity that Blixa’s icy attitude exacerbated. So Blixa’s beautiful aloof coolness seemed to trigger this weird urge to try and impress him, and the assembled writers had given up all pretence that they weren’t fascinated by this mysterious creature in their midst, and kept offering him titbits of information in an attempt to win his interest.

It was a very odd scene, but I bought a round, just to be polite, then sat and quietly sketched as their conversation drifted vaguely in and out of my attention. No, don’t sign with Beggars, that was completely the wrong sort of crowd for them. Mute would be the obvious choice, but it was clear that they already had a lot of high profile acts, and Blixa thought that he really wanted his band to be the number one priority, not one of a stable. Rough Trade, no, that was totally inappropriate, don’t even think about going to them. But hey, did Blixa know about this unorthodox new label called Some Bizzare (the spelling mistake, like Geniale Dilletanten, was apparently deliberate) who had had quite a lot of success with Soft Cell. Blixa, I knew, liked that Soft Cell record quite a bit, it had been a regular spin on the tiny dancefloor at the Jungle, so he took notes on the back of a menu, carefully noting down what his new friends had said, so he could look them up and send them a tape when he got back to Berlin.

The conversation drifted as the assembled company contemplated getting another round in, or going to dinner, as they asked what our plans were for the evening, and Blixa debated swapping out the gig we had planned to go to, for a guest list of something one of the music journalists recommended. I didn’t really want to move just yet, as I was now five pages into my new comic, and really enjoying ripping the piss out of the two hapless musicians I was drawing as they endlessly fussed about their standing within ‘The Scene, man, The Scene!” with the same puffed-up insecurity as the assembled music journalists displayed.

>>What are you drawing, beloved?<< said Blixa, nuzzling his long nose against my neck and snaking one arm around my waist, and I guessed he was trying to sweeten me up for some abrupt change of plans. A strange shudder and a sharp intake of breath seemed to go round the table, as if the indiscernibility of my gender had been some kind of shield, preventing them from only just noticing that Blixa and I were actually lovers. Would it be a problem? I mean, Soft Cell were so obviously gay, perhaps they had actually been implying something with that suggestion.

But as Blixa tugged at my sketchbook with the hand not caressing my bum, I had to come up with some explanation for the drawings. >>Just comics. Do you want to change our plans? It doesn’t matter to me, I’m happy to go wherever you want to go tonight.<<

>>Let me see...<< I was reluctant to pass them over, in case he actually recognised some of the anecdotes, pulled directly from incidents that had happened to the Birthday Party. But he took them and started to read, puzzling a bit over the words, as I’d chosen for whatever reason, to write them in English. I needn’t have worried, as Blixa soon started braying with laughter, turning to show them to his friends. “Zhis is zo funny, zhis is based on an actual story of what happened to some friends of ours in Vest Berlin...”

Soon, my sketchbook was making its way around the table, as one by one, the journalists read it, and either winced, or sniggered to themselves, or burst into sarcastic laughter. “These are fantastic,” broached one of the journalists. “You should submit these to our editor. They’d go down a treat in the office.”
“The NME doesn’t publish comics,” sneered one of the others. “But I’m sure you could find a publisher somewhere in the underground comics scene…”

“Melody Maker does,” corrected the first journalist, whose pride had been piqued, as I suddenly realised that the table was actually split into two parties, competing for Blixa’s attention, as it contained journalists from two of the different rival music papers that covered the British music scene. “If you wouldn’t mind making a copy, I’ll take it to the editor myself.”

Blixa suddenly grinned with pride. “Ja! Vhat a brilliant idea. Valdi is an artist, she has already published a number of ferry amusing comics, back in Berlin, under her English name of Carter…” I cringed, as there it was, that pernicious ‘she’ that not only confirmed that we were lovers, but would suddenly reduce me from co-conspirator to ignorable girlfriend. Expressions around the table changed, from curiosity to relief, as I saw recognition dawn, and ‘Walt’ became not a boy or a bandmate, but an androgynous girlfriend. But to my surprise, Blixa dug in the black leather valise he used to transport his demo tapes and papers and notes and things about in, and from somewhere in the depths of it, he produced a much-dogeared copy of Kollaps Komics “You won’t understand, because zhis is all in German, but you can see her style… I can explain a bit of zhe plot… It is ferry good, ferry vitty.” And I looked at him, feeling my heart almost bursting as he wrenched me back, from ignorable girlfriend, to artist of interest, as he started enthusing about my silly little artwork to his new friends, like I could not believe that he actually seemed to be as genuinely proud of my strange scribbles as he appeared to be.

I think the knot of music journalists were surprised, because Blixa was such a passionate man, and yet the bulk of his passion was expended in hatred – several times, I had heard him holding forth on some controversial opinion such as, “I hate music! I vish to destroy all music!” (Though, to be fair, he usually followed up that attention-grabbing statement with something like, “I vish to destroy music, to burn it down and remake it again from zhe ashes… better.”) So to hear Blixa being passionate about something he thought was good – that actually made them stop and pay attention. Blixa’s opinion became their opinion. The comics were considered cutting, and funny, and dead sharp.

Everything was falling into place by the time we toasted in the New Year, a few days later, at a big experimental music-scene party we had been invited to by friends of friends. The thing turned out to be a huge gig in a warehouse in Hackney that had been put together by the same English musician who had done a guest appearance in Mufﬁ’s film. It was a wild party, and we walked in through a blackened, half-abandoned tunnel into a cavernous ruined space, to find bombardments of sound and multimedia imagery as a kind of deliberate sensory overload, with televisions piled about the stage, playing four or five different crazy films at once. Half-naked dancers writhed under black lights, the whole thing underpinned by this slow, thudding, trancelike dance music as the small, gargoyle-like musician recited strange propaganda over the top in an oddly dispassionate monotone that seemed to wind its way inside your very skull.

Blixa had finally managed to score some speed, and so my lover and I were completely wired with that brilliant, jittering high I didn’t even realise I had missed, but it suited the mood of the party perfectly as we danced together under the strobe lights. Both of us were starry-eyed and full of hope and full of excitement for the coming year. Blixa had obtained not just the address, but the phone number of this up-and-coming record company, and had already managed to speak on the phone to its owner, finding him deeply unconventional and unorthodox in all the right ways that appealed to his deeply iconoclast nature.

“Yes, I’ve heard good things about you. Send us a demo,” urged this strange Stevo character. “Send photos, press clippings, naked pictures, whatever you’ve got, just pop them in the confessional box and I promise I’ll give them the once-over.”
And to my amazement, the art director of Melody Maker had not just liked my ridiculous comics, but had commissioned me, for a regular fee, to write at least 12 episodes, once a week for the next three months, starting in February, with an option to be extended out to 24 weeks if the response was good. So both of us were just extraordinarily happy and filled with this unexpected wave of hope and optimism and anticipation for what the future held for us as we rang in the New Year of 1983.
The New Buildings start work on their second album, *Hunters and Collectors* choosing unorthodox recording settings such as an abandoned strip of the Autobahn, and a disused water tower in a ruined train station.

We returned to West Berlin in high spirits, and both of us threw ourselves into our respective work with renewed passion. For the first time in ages, the drawings flowed easily for me, and I completed the remaining episodes within a week or two, got them copied professionally, and posted them off to England.

Blixa’s projects, on the other hand, were much grander. The Australians were away on tour of Britain, so Blixa had time on his hands, and decided to get busy. First, the New Buildings were set to appear in yet another film. The famous presenter from the WDR appeared, a wild-haired young man, a bit smaller, but somehow much more energetic than he appeared on the television, with a complete film crew in tow. I was somewhat cowed by him, as I was still not quite used to meeting people off the telly, but Blixa and Mufti greeted him as an old friend, as they were all old hands at this filming business by now.

The set Albrecht had picked for the New Buildings was magnificent – an abandoned sector of the City Autobahn I had passed many times with Old Schumacher in the van, and never given a second thought to. The divided city was filled with such oddities, bits of city architecture just cut off and left to rot, either by the War or the Wall. It was deeply symbolic on many levels: the New Buildings attacking the infrastructure of Berlin itself; the New Buildings dismantling the mythos of Germany with its Autobahns and its modern, industrial car culture; the New Buildings laying waste to the image of German music as this calm, pristine, synthesised soundscape of *Fahren, Fahren, Fahren auf der Autobahn*, literally setting fire to the Kraftwerk oeuvre I knew they still loved, the way every youth had to destroy their own father to create themselves. There could not have been a better setting for the New Buildings’ assault on normality, than that cold, grey segment of the Autobahn in mid-January.

And Albrecht had somehow arranged to set up his film crew there, and decorated the set with smashed-up junkyard cars dotted about the highway for the boys to vent their musical anger upon. Driving my trusty van, my good clothes covered once again with my old boiler suit, I was somehow tasked with the job of transporting all of the New Buildings’ odd bits of kit from their rehearsal space to this location. Guitars, amplifiers, a PA, went in the back of the van, but also, of course, assorted oil drums, plastic canisters, heavy work equipment like power drills and chainsaws, and the ubiquitous bits of scrap metal that Andrew surrounded himself with, and somehow forged into home-made musical instruments.

Andrew was absolutely in his element, dressed up in the neon yellow safety gear of a highway official, twirling his new, provocative baby moustache with glee. Only the eternally wily trickster character of Andrew could have been puckish and bolshy enough to turn this deeply uncool symbol of German conservatism, the Hitler moustache, into something truly subversive and punk. Once the official gear was assembled, he made me do a couple more reconnaissance runs around the neighbourhood, as he hung out the sliding door of the van, requisitioning various bits of road
furniture, a couple of traffic cones, an oil barrel, even the road traffic sign that declared “AUTOBAHN ENDE”. All of this gear was commandeered and brought back to the film set, arranged into an apocalyptic wasteland on which to perform. A couple of the barrels were filled with rubbish, and gleefully set on fire by Mufti, as much for warmth as for the effect of shooting flames and smudges of thick black smoke, as they were all shivering in their stage clothes.

Finally Albrecht warned the assembled crew to get back out of both band and cameramen’s way, and the band set to work, performing tableau after tableau of orchestrated, semi-choreographed destruction for the cameras. Whether the music worked or not was not the issue, as the film crew assured them that they could easily overdub the performance with recorded music in the editing suite. But capturing the manic, destructive energy of this gang of anti-musicians was Albrecht’s goal, as they gleefully set about reducing their carefully constructed film set to rubble with the ecstatic intensity of a religious ritual.

It really was dangerous in those early days; there was absolutely no concession to health and safety as the boys hefted their demolition equipment. All of it was done on trust and choreography and that strange rhythmic sense of timing that the musicians all seemed to share. Andrew would attack with his drill, then Mufti would send a plume of sparks across the set with what looked like an angle-grinder, and then Mark would somehow charge in with the chainsaw, and his colleagues would leap back just at the right moment, split seconds from death. Although I knew them as boisterous young men, as loud and friendly as oversized puppies, as soon as the cameras started rolling, they behaved as they did when they were onstage, with deadly seriousness. The beat was insistent. It had to be, or a single instance of bad timing, one of them neglecting to duck in time as an axe went whistling past his ear, could have been the end of someone’s life, let alone the band. And yet the danger only contributed to the excitement, the cameramen darting back and forth, trying to avoid getting hit themselves as they documented the carnage.

Blixa, in his customary ecstatic trance state, disgorging a steady stream of shrieks and yowls and animal noises into his microphone, was completely riveting, tall and almost inhumanly slender, the clinging rubber of his trousers and that beautiful corset making him seem even more spindly, as shiny and black an insect in a carapace. The inclement weather, overcast with occasional squalls of wind, had made short work of his towering hairdo, but his gaunt, heavily made-up face was mesmerising as he performed. In any other band, he would have completely dominated the camera’s attention as an overwhelmingly charismatic frontman. But the mob of squabbling, metal-munching, car-destroying anti-musicians in the background almost totally upstaged him. There was no question that the group was a collective when they performed live, for Blixa, no matter how handsome and charismatic, was simply no match for a circular saw shooting off a three-metre arc of flaming sparks.

But it was such chaos on the set, that it wasn’t until we saw the rushes a few weeks later, that I started to understand the theme of these new, slowly coalescing song-texts. With a shock, I realised I had heard many of these phrases before: vultures circling the city, corpses dancing in the street, scavengers picking over the bones of Berlin. Beloved, Beloved, he kept chanting, before descending back into madness and chaos, metaphors of infection and addiction. I pulled back and stared at him, both my lover sat beside me, and the image of my lover’s oversized stage presence projected onto the screen before us, realising that the whole song was shot through with Jana, her schizophrenic word-salad woven through the noise and the destruction. It was brilliant, of course, the way he caught her mad rambling, and turned it into tortured poetry, spiralling out the syllables into a metaphor of the fractures at the heart of the whole, sick society. And yet there was a part of me that went into emotional freefall, as I started to understand what he was doing.

Jana’s collapse, her addiction, her breakdown and her madness, he was spinning it all out, turning it into poetry like some terrible fairytale creature spinning straw into gold. Our lives, our loves, our passions and our downfalls, what were they but just grist for the mill of Blixa’s poetry, personal and
political all tossed into this spinning maelstrom from which he hewed his art? For a moment, I was really angry at him, absolutely spitting furious, terrified what of mine he was going to steal, and weave into a song to impress the film-makers and intellectuals of Berlin café society. And then, just as quickly, my anger passed. Hadn’t Jana ended up in Kollaps Komics at some point, a strange child-creature with decks of tarot cards spilling from her hands? And hadn’t I, myself, eaten Blixa up and vomited him out upon my pages again and again? It was what we did. We chewed each other up, and spat each other out in our mutual texts. It was what artists always did to one another. It wasn’t theft; it was love. True love.

But really, at the heart of it, was I angry because Blixa was turning his friends and lovers into political metaphors for the state of his city? Or was I angry because the ghost of the girlfriend he couldn’t save seemed to haunt his creative consciousness more than the living lover who sat by his side? I hated myself a little, as I realised that this was a pang, not of indignant anger, but of jealousy, of pure cattiness. I always prided myself on my lack of jealousy. I didn’t give a shit who Blixa screwed, and congratulated myself on turning a blind eye to whatever he got up to on tour. His cock was his own business. But the idea of Blixa fuelling his creatively with the yearning for someone else... that made me feel sick at heart in a way that was hard to explain.

To my surprise, when I returned to my aunts’ house, I discovered that I had received a long-distance phone call from London, and a message from the art director of Melody Maker to call him as soon as I could. Fearing for the phone bill, I rang, and immediately asked if they could ring back. Convinced that they had found some problem with the comic, that they hated it, and had changed their mind about publishing, I thought that if they were going to sack me, they could do it on their own money. No, insisted the art director when he finally got through, they still loved the comics and they definitely wanted to publish them. However, there was a slight problem with a couple of the panels. Although the comic frequently skirted the very boundaries of decency, there were a couple of panels they very definitely could not publish. One page depicted one of the musicians injecting himself with an almost comically large hypodermic needle filled with dissolved bits of number one records, and the resulting bad trip took up the rest of the page. References to drug abuse, the art director explained, were fine, but I could not depict the act itself, especially not so graphically, in images that indicated I was quite so familiar with the process.

And then later on, there was a sequence where a gang of lesbian separatists had stripped themselves naked in order to pass as groupies and kidnap the lead singer of the band. But once they had him, I depicted, again in comical oversize, the scene whereby they stripped him naked and prepared to cut off his cock. Naked girls were perfectly OK, and lesbians apparently were all good fun. But the oversized naked cock – not to mention the New Buildings-inspired circular saw with which they planned to cut it off – that had to go, in order to be published in the magazine.

I wasn’t pleased at the idea of having to draw it all over again, and was almost prepared to dig in my heels and refuse, but the art director informed me that if I didn’t edit the images, that they would, and publish the results anyways, whether I liked them or not. I muttered to myself, thought about the money, which had already been spent on food and a shockingly high electricity bill at our squat, and finally agreed.

When I got off the phone with the editor, I immediately rang Wolfgang, who I knew had access to much better quality graphic editing equipment, and asked him if he could help me edit the two offending panels, so that I didn’t have to redraw the whole thing. He agreed immediately, and told me to come round his studio at the Hochschule für Kunst in a few hours.
But although he was extremely helpful with the technical advice, showing me how to use an X-acto knife to cut out a small piece of white card to fit perfectly over the cell to be changed, he frowned when he saw the subject matter. I knew his English wasn’t the greatest, so I doubted that he got most of the puns and bad jokes, but as he sifted through the panels, his face darkened.

>>Carter, are you sure this is the direction you want to go in? Because I feel this is rather beneath you<< he finally pronounced, not in a cruel way, but in a slightly concerned, parental kind of way.

>>It’s just some nonsense for the English music papers<< I explained, a little defensively. >>It’s not supposed to be great art or anything<<

>>Are they paying you an awful lot of money?<< he asked, and something his tone annoyed me.

>>Enough<< I replied sharply. >>Look, it’s just some surreal, stream of consciousness nonsense. It’s annoying to have to change the two panels that I thought were the funniest, but... I guess kids – young teenagers – do read music papers<<

Wolfgang’s face did not brighten. >>The publisher of Queer Responses to God were asking and asking for you to do a follow-up for them, on more enlightened themes, better suited to your extraordinary talents, and you just ignored them. But instead, you do this, which is crass, and obvious, and not satirical in a light or playful or ironic tone, but just nasty and mocking and nihilistic.<<

>>I think it is ironic, and light, and playful. Mocking... sure, OK, maybe it is a bit mocking, but...<<

I was about to protest that it hadn’t been intended as cruel, but lots of it had indeed been intended as cruel and cutting, because so many of the musicians I’d met in London had indeed been completely up their own arses.

Wolfgang held up a page depicting a trio of performance artists applying make-up, then recording the sounds of their own wanks, and broadcasting it endlessly on cheap video to try to brainwash people into buying their music. And as he tapped at the image, I suddenly realised that he thought it was about his own band.

>>Oh no<< I protested, my face suddenly flushing. >>Oh, please don’t think this is anything to do with you. This was based on some friends of the New Buildings, these absurdly pretentious artists we met up with at a New Year’s Eve party in London... This guy, the leader – honestly, he called himself Porridge, to give you some idea of what a twat he was – he made out like he was starting some pseudo-religious cult based around ‘Industrial Music’ and trying to sucker kids into sharing their most pornographic fantasies as a kind of mind control. So this is him, wanking over the fantasies kids have sent him, and then recording it, in order to... to literally sell their own... wank fantasies back to them. It’s these... Temple of Psychotic Youth cunts in London, or whatever they’re calling themselves. It’s not in any way supposed to be anything to do with you...<<

>>Carter, I would only warn you about biting the hand that feeds you<< replied Wolfgang, in a tone far more cold than I had ever heard that warm, generous man ever use with me.

I sent the edited versions of the comics special delivery back to London, and the art director was happy to proceed with them. And that first week of February, the New Buildings appeared on the cover of the cover of the NME, and the first episode of my comics appeared in Melody Maker. Although Blixa’s joy was somewhat tempered by the fact that the NME had chosen to make Mark, hefting an axe, the cover star, both of us were delighted, and celebrated in style with a two-day party and jam session at the squat. The New Buildings were already planning their first attack on the UK,
supporting the Birthday Party at a huge gig at the Lyceum, a legendary 2000-seat venue in the heart of the theatre district. Half of the West Berlin scene seemed to be going, as Malaria! were booked on the bill as well.

The New Buildings themselves were deep in preparations to start recording their second album. Still completely obsessed with the idea of Hunting and Collecting, Blixa struck upon the idea of going out into the bush (well, as much bush as could be found in West Berlin) and collecting sounds with the dedicated pursuit of a group of primitive hunters. The first order of the day was obtaining some portable recording equipment, as the tiny tape recorders so beloved by Andrew and Mufti would not do for this. These sounds had to be obtained in studio quality fidelity.

I knew that Jürgen, the chief engineer at the studio where I occasionally put in an appearance two or three days a week (though more to keep up the lucrative sideline of repairing equipment, than to engineer at any sessions) did actually own one of these devices. It took some doing to persuade him to rent it to Andrew, as Andrew had to prove his credentials – producing a certification in piano-tuning and repair from a school in Amsterdam that I had never even known of before – then demonstrate he knew his way around a soundboard, and provide a substantial deposit (underwritten by their German record company) before he was allowed to take the thing out into the field. (And still, Jürgen begged me to keep an eye on him, as he knew the New Buildings mostly by their reputation for destroying things live on stage.)

The portable recording device was expensive as hell, even to operate. It took half inch studio tape, which cost a lot of money, and ate up batteries at a clip. But Blixa carefully documented all the expenses, and saved them up to charge back to the record company. We – the Berliner core of the band, at least, Blixa, Andrew and Alex – met at Nollendorfplatz, the centre of town, and solemnly recorded a few minutes of the S-Bahn, before setting off in search of sounds to be hunted and collected. With befitting studiousness, we taped the traffic, we taped pedestrians, we taped arguments in the streets. As it started to snow, we followed the crowds into the KaDeWe and taped the conversations of shop assistants and customers, then rode up and down in the lifts, taping the hydraulics and the automated announcements of >>second floor, ladies undergarments and nightwear<< until we were thrown out.

Fortunately, it had stopped snowing by that point, so our little knot of intrepid hunters and collectors wandered along the Ku'damm as it got dark, recording the bells of the Kaiser Wilhelm Church, before fortifying ourselves on endless cups of coffee at a café that did free refills. And, of course, as if we weren’t already wired enough on that strong Berlin coffee, Alex produced some pills and we all popped a couple of Bennies to get in the mood. As we slithered out into the grey afternoon, the sky glowered, and specks of snow started to appear on the pavement again, so we decided to get on a bus, and recorded the sounds of the bus engine as it slowly made its way east. We got off at the top of Yorckstrasse, as I think Blixa really had the idea of sacking off recording, and just going to the Risk for a drink.

But as we stood in a little clump around the U-Bahn station, arguing about whether we were done recording or not, Andrew kept turning around to stare at the huge black hulk of a water tower that seemed to keep a watchful eye over the whole neighbourhood.

>>Why don’t we go up there?<< he suggested, pointing up towards the structure, this huge ball-shaped metal water-tank propped up on stilts.

Blixa and Alex stopped squabbling as they turned to look at it, their faces suddenly lighting up.

>>Yeah, we said we wanted the wilds of West Berlin – you can’t get more wild than the Gleisdreieck...<< agreed Blixa.
The station? I asked stupidly, as we followed Andrew, single-mindedly climbing up a steep embankment to one side of a decaying railway bridge that spanned Yorckstrasse.

The station? The station? parroted Andrew, his eyes glinting in the streetlights like some mad creature from a German fairy tale.

Are we going to Gleisdreieck Station? I repeated, knowing from experience that you had to be very specific with Andrew, or he would completely twist the meaning of whatever you said, like an overly literal genie granting unwanted wishes.

No! he barked as we reached the top of the incline, and were greeted by the sight of a dark, wild-looking forest, its twisted branches all denuded of leaves and for winter. As I caught my breath, Andrew plunged into the woods along a track, and the rest of us trooped after him. We're going to the station that is no longer here.

I followed blindly, looking about as my eyes tried to adjust to the almost pitch blackness, as although the trees were bare, we had tramped a long way from the road and its dim streetlights, into the shadow of the dense, scrubby woodlands. But luckily, Andrew and Alex, inveterate squatters that they were, soon produced torches from their rucksacks. As the beams of light picked out pale, silvery flashes of white birchbark on either side of us, I realised that this was a strange, neat and tidy Prussian forest where the trees seemed to stretch out in front of us in straight, orderly lines.


He means the Anhalter Bahnhof supplied Alex helpfully, a few steps behind me in the gloom.

You mean that strange, single-toothed shard of a ruin on the way to Hansa? I shrugged.

Strange, single-toothed shard of a ruin repeated Andrew with an amused snort-giggle.

You've been hanging out with Blixa for too long, you only speak in poetry now.

I'll take that as a compliment I tossed back, and heard braying, Blixa-like laughter from somewhere behind me as we picked through the woods in single file, our group stringing out as various of the lads dropped behind to piss out the coffee we were all completely wired on.

Back in the old times, before the war, you know Anhalter Bahnhof was Berlin's largest, grandest train station Andrew started to explain in the slightly pedantic tone of an overenthusiastic train nerd. So behind the station, stretching back down this way, were the stock yards for all of Berlin's trains.

Berlin was famous for its trains Alex interrupted from off in the woods. Borsig steam locomotives – the best in the world. You can't do better than a Borsig.

Huge stock yards continued Andrew, ignoring the teenager. Big enough to hold trains from all across Europe. It was the international hub of its day, the gateway to the South. Trains from Prague and Vienna arrived every twenty minutes... trains from Italy... even trains from Greece! And not just passenger trains, but goods trains.

All trains are good! blurted out Alex, a little bit too excited, as he tramped up close behind us. There was something oddly charming about the way these boys, underneath their dirty patina of cool Berlin punk, somehow were still huge nerds underneath.

There was a huge goods yard repeated Andrew. For the loading and unloading of merchandise. So when the station was blown up in the war, all these miles and miles of track were no longer needed for anything... so it was just left to go to ruin. Left to the trees... for decades. Now
turned to miles and miles of wasteland, overgrown and just rotting back into nature. We think we are the masters of Berlin, the humans? No. Nature will always reclaim.

There was the sudden rush of wings and feathers, as something or someone, whose nest Andrew had clearly disturbed by loping up ahead of us, abruptly swooped past us in the gloom. I tried to dodge out of the way as it flew by, and my foot caught something metal.

Luckily, Alex caught me from behind, and steadied me as I stumbled in the dark. >>Careful<< he warned. >>The rails are all still underfoot, though the trestles are rotting away.<<

And as he said it, I suddenly saw it. The long lines of birches, marching in orderly rows off into the night, they were growing up between the beds of railway tracks that were no longer there. It was oddly beautiful, this strange little triangle of wildness right in the heart of Berlin, like an old scar that had turned to a beauty mark. And like much of West Berlin, I’d driven past it a hundred times without ever really wondering what was behind it, while my friends, these strange street urchins of the city, seemed to pour over places like this, looking for a way to turn their scared, beautiful city into art. Up ahead of me, Andrew wordlessly turned around, and gestured for me to get the recording device ready, as off in the distance, on the other side of a poorly constructed dividing fence, I could see the friendly yellow headlights of an U-Bahn oozing out of the brightly lit Gleisdreieck Station like a hungry worm.

“Untergrundbahn,” recited Alex in a kind of sing-song voice, as he started listing all the kinds of trains there were in Berlin. “Stadtbahn, Ringbahn, Vorortbahn, Strassebahn…”

“Strassebahn?” repeated Blixa. >>No, don’t be stupid. There are no trams in West Berlin. Not since I was a very little boy. My father took me to see the very last tram run – I couldn’t have been more than eight.<<

>>They still have trams in East Berlin<< insisted Alex doggedly. >>Why don’t we have trams if the Communists can have them?<<

>>Everything’s better in East Berlin<< retorted Andrew in that facetious know-it-all voice where I could never work out if he was joking or not. >>The air is cleaner, the sun is brighter...<<

>>The coffee is stronger, and the drugs are more powerful<< tossed back Blixa, who loved to egg on Andrew when he was in this kind of a mood.

>>And they still get to have trams<< repeated Alex, sounding a little forlorn, and we all started to laugh.

Filing slowly through the abandoned railway yard, we recorded the trains speeding by. Our imaginations caught by the strange winged creature that had dive-bombed us, we recorded the few sounds of nature there were left in the woods in the dark days of winter. Then we moved swiftly on, spooked by the unexpected aural appearance of something wild and strange, yowling its way onto the tape, like a cat in heat or a dying baby, though we would argue for days if it had been human, animal or bird that had cried out as if in anguish.

>>It’s Blixa, practicing his singing<< laughed Andrew, with false brightness, though we were all so spooked that our loose scouting party had bunched up close together again.

>>It’s not me<< insisted Blixa, his voice behind us, where the screams had come from up ahead.

>>It sounds like a fox.<<

And it was at that point, that we decided to get out of the woods, and veered off to the right, away
from the cries, to make our way to that hulking metal “Kugel” that seemed to float over the whole wasteland like a baleful god.

One after another, we hopped a small fence, pushing our way through overgrown weeds and undersized saplings. In the dark, there were strange lurking shapes, curved walls and odd pits. Alex tried to claim that somewhere off in the gloom, there was a badly damaged locomotive engine, which had exploded upon the direct impact of a bomb, festooning the nearby buildings with yards of steampipes, like rusting ribbons. I scoffed, as he was prone to exaggeration, but Andrew protested that no, it was true. They’d ransacked it for interesting bits of metal to use as instruments.

The weird animal call came again, still off to our left somewhere, and we pushed on away from it, trying to pick our way past the huge hulking structures that surrounded us. The light of Andrew’s torch bounced off a dark cliff face, revealing it to be a slab of ivy-covered brick work, with broken windows like long, mournful eyes. As we scrambled carefully along the curve of its broken wall, I realised it was the remains of a huge, semi-circular engine shed. And there, on the other side, up on its long slender stalks like an unearthly bird, was the water tower. Feeling a surge of relief, we rushed over to it, and gathered in a little group at its base. To my surprise, there was a large metal door at the base of the large trunk that looked like its main support, and tiny windows leading all the way up.

>>We have to get up inside it<< said Alex dreamily, tilting his head back to gaze up at it, like a huge black void hollowed out against the moonlit sky. >>Imagine what the reverb would be like, up in that enclosed space.<<

>>It’s locked<< observed Blixa, rattling the door, but there was a large, rusting padlock bolting the thing shut.

>>Not for long, if I can help it<< retorted Andrew, dropping to his knees and digging through his rucksack.

>>Don’t tell me you have a boltcutter in there?<< Alex perked up at the thought of any incipient destruction.

>>Better than that<< said Andrew, and extracted a small, cordless drill of the sort he sometimes used onstage. For a moment, I wondered what on earth he would do with that, but then he exchanged the drill bit for a jerry-rigged screwdriver head, and applied the thing not to the padlock, but to the screws holding the bolt to the frame of the door itself. One after another, the screws came away, and Andrew simply lifted the whole apparatus, bolt and padlock, to one side, and pulled the door open, as it protested with a shuddering groan I wished we’d had the foresight to record. >>After you, Herr von Borsig<< he intoned, bowing stiffly towards Alex.

Alex, with his long legs and his teenage fearlessness, barely even shone the torch inside to reveal a narrow, tightly twisted metal staircase leading up, and he was away, bounding up the spiral stairs like a young gazelle.

>>You guys should come up<< his voice echoed down the tight space. >>It’s clear. You can get all the way up.<<

Andrew gestured to let me go first, but I shook my head, and let him go ahead of me. Feeling a little nervous about the height, I offered to let Blixa to go up next, but he leered at me and made a slightly salacious comment about wanting to admire the view. I rolled my eyes at him, shouldered the tape machine and followed Andrew.

There was a long, spiralling climb, and finally we emerged onto a tiny platform. It was too narrow for all four of us to stand, so Andrew immediately located a metal ladder, popped his torch between
his teeth, and started to climb.

>>Come up, come up, you guys! There’s a whole platform up here<< he called down from the heights, as we heard clanking metal footsteps stomping around above our heads.

Andrew and I exchanged glances, but I gestured towards the large, unwieldly recording device. It was alright to carry it over my shoulder on a level surface, but going up a ladder with it would make anyone dangerously unbalanced. So we worked out a strange procession up the ladder, as Andrew went first, hauling the top of half of the reel to reel by its strap, while I went just behind him, holding it from the bottom so it didn’t dangle and bash itself against anything. And at the end of our strange vertical convoy climbed Blixa, keeping just a little bit too close a hand on my calves and ankles, to make sure I didn’t fall off the ladder.

I looked around for Alex, trying to get my bearings as I edged my way around this high narrow platform, that wound a tight circle around the base of the huge ball of the water tank, its bulk hanging just above us, blocking my view. But another shout revealed that Alex was already above us.

>>Come up!<< he called down, as we found another ladder. >>It looks like it’s open – we can definitely get inside!<<

Again, in the same order, we climbed another perilous ladder to a higher, but slightly wider platform that completely encircled the tank at its widest point. A little less nervous, since the bannister seemed in much better repair, I walked all the way around, admiring the view. As the boys debated how to climb the last few metres into the top of the ball, I stood there for a moment, catching my breath, and looking out over both the Berlins, West and East, from the unexpected height. The spot-lit and search-lighted wall was easy enough to spot from that height, winding through the city like a scar. But the biggest surprise to me was that the two Berlins were actually slightly different colours: the East was yellower, and dimmer, while the West was slightly brighter, a dazzling blue-white.

But the boys were not so interested in the visual panorama spread out before them; they were interested in sounds. As Andrew took the recording device from me and did his best to tape the sound of the whistling wind, Alex had located the last ladder up to the very pinnacle of the tower. Pulling on a pair of gloves and again, clenching his torch between his teeth, he made his way up rather slowly, as one of the rails seemed to have rusted away halfway up. But finally, he reached the top, and popped open a hatch.

>>It’s just a weird... round... room...<< he observed, and then abruptly his tall, spindly figure disappeared from the top of the tower, followed by a sharp, resounding BOOM. For a moment, we all held our breaths, wondering what we would actually do if we had just recorded the accidental death of one of our companions. But two minutes later, a very loud >>Wow... (wow... wow... wow...)<< echoed down from the heights of the tower. >>The acoustics in here are amazing. (amazing... amazing... amazing...) You’ve got to come up! (up... up... up...)<<

I wasn’t entirely sure how we made it to the top. Again, Andrew and I manhandled the tape machine between us, as Blixa did his best to hold the ladder still, until finally he hauled himself up beside us. For a moment, the three of us crouched there, up on that exposed platform, then as they dropped down into the dimly lit ball, each of them in turn let out a shout, and then broke into delighted laughter to hear the juddering reverberation of the echoey round iron room. But I paused, taking a deep breath and looking back over my shoulder at the magnificent view, as I tried to get up the courage to venture down into that dark, murky, enclosed space.

>>Stop gawking at the Communists and their trams, and bring the recording equipment down<< urged Andrew, and I finally turned and gently lowered the machine into the gloom, before following down the steep, but somewhat less rusted metal ladder leading into the interior.
>>Oh!<< shouted Blixa, (Oh... oh... oh...) and was rewarded with a slightly delayed chorus of ghostly Blixas echoing about the space. There was a small, flat shelf just below the entrance hatch, so I set the recording machine there, as the boys spread out, down in the hollow, round space of the water tank. >>Oh!<< Blixa repeated (Oh... oh... oh...) as I checked how much tape we had left before putting on the headphones and recalibrating the sensitive microphone for the noisy yet muffled close quarters of the ball, intensely disorienting after the space of the wasteland.

Andrew had got out a pair of drumsticks, and was peering at his watch in the gloom, as he started to tap out a gentle beat on the floor of the metal room. >>Wow, six second delay<< he observed, and I suddenly realised what he was trying to do. Soon, with his keen rhythmic ear, he had picked up the exact delay time of the echo, and was starting to steadily drum along, so that each of his beats fell on an echo of his previous beat, amplifying and reinforcing the rhythm until it was almost dizzy-making.

When Alex understood what he was doing, he joined in with the flat of his gloved hand against the wall and the thud of his boot against the floor, decorating the steady beat with little flourishes and counter-beats. But lost in the rhythm, he managed to drop the torch, and the room was plunged into complete blackness. >>Sorry<< he muttered, and started to scramble to retrieve it, but Andrew did not miss a beat.

>>Sssshhh!!! Keep going, keep going<< urged Blixa, then let out a mighty cry, as he found something metal, and started to add to the steady thrum and echo of the juddering hypnotic beat. In the darkness, my eyes were useless, but the echoes were so disorienting I found myself losing track of time and space entirely. I knew there were three young men down in the darkness below me, and at some points, I could tell exactly where they were from the direction of their thuds and thumps. But at other points, their noise and their echoes seemed to join in the dark, as if there were only one giant man pounding the iron below me. And then, at other times, there seemed to be an army of thumping, beating drummers crouched somewhere below me in the dark. I lost track of time completely, my heart the only measure of time, and yet even that seemed to speed up to the insistent echoey dub of the odd room’s intense reverb. We could have been in there an hour; or we might only have been there ten minutes. (Later, the next morning, when we checked what we had caught on tape, it turned out that the tape had given out after at least seventeen minutes, but I knew from the sound of the finished tape fluttering round and round on the reel, that the boys carried on drumming for quite some time afterwards.)

I couldn’t take the noise. The echo was doing my head in, it threatened to overwhelm my heartbeat and stop my lungs, so I found myself climbing up the ladder and back out onto the roof of the tower. The temperature had dropped, and the night was sharply cold, but the fresh air was like a powerful drug after the close dankness of the watertower. And I sat up there for a long time, feeling the deep elemental music shuddering beneath my feet, as much as I heard it. The clouds of the afternoon’s snow flurries were clearing, and the stars were starting to come out. Orion was headed downwards, so it must have been late, but I followed the belt to find Sirius. I tried to remember the points of the Winter Hexagon – was it Rigel, Aldebaran, Capella? Ah, Blixa was always better at remembering this stuff than I was. I could hear him wailing wordlessly somewhere below me, and felt my heart clench with love for him. How was it possible to love, and just go on loving? Surely there had to be an end to it. I could feel it out there, lurking in the dark, but I couldn’t bear to think about how it would come, the end of love. I knew it must come, the day I would look at his beautiful face, hear the tug of his soaring voice, gaze into the messy chaos of his quixotic brain, and feel nothing. But at that moment, I couldn’t even imagine it. It truly seemed like our love would go on reverberating forever, like the endless beat juddering around that echoey space.
Shots Fired

Chapter Summary

As the New Buildings start work on their second album, Carter's cartoons attract the attention of the UK's coolest comic book imprint. But when the New Buildings reconnect with the Birthday Party for a gig in London, Nick rumbles how his life is being satirised for inspiration.

To start work on their fabled second album, the boys went off to Hamburg to meet with some hot-shot English producer about going into a proper studio, but I stayed in Berlin. I suppose I’d been hearing about this album for so long, that a part of me had stopped believing they were ever going to stop arsing about and knuckle down to actually record the thing. But this sound engineer, Jon, came with some seriously good references, and what’s more, he had worked with the unholy Sex Pistols, so clearly he knew how to surf the chaos of punk and drugs and anarchy and the unruly lifestyles that came with all those things.

I stayed in Berlin to work, as the Art Director of Melody Maker had come back to me, and confirmed that they wanted another dozen episodes of my stupid little comics. Just thinking about the ridiculous antics of all my musician friends, I knocked off another six pages in a week and a half, and sent them to England. By now, I was used to the little dance of the censor’s bar, and being told which panels I would have to change to keep the conservative British press happy.

To be honest, I needed the money. Again. I didn’t really know what happened to our money. It wasn’t as if we were spending a penny on rent, and we barely ate. Blixa was generally kept alive by the kindness of the staff at the Café Mitropa, who knew that their local celebrity was part of the draw of the place; myself, I relied on the kindness of my aunts, who fed me at their apartment, and often sent me home with large string bags full of winter tangerines, to make sure my lover and I didn’t catch our deaths of scurvy. Travel was an expense, getting to gigs and recording sessions and film shoots, as was postage. Blixa was always too skint to send out his demo tapes, and since I was going to the post office to send off my latest edits of the comic strips to England, did I mind just posting this off, too? He claimed he would always reimburse me with money claimed back from the record company, but if this money was claimed back, it never made its way into my pockets.

And, of course, our largest expense was drugs. I needed hash to draw; it was as simple as that. I used it as a creative tool, to spark my creativity, to lubricate the wheels of my wit and dream up those wacky and steadily more implausible plots of the comics that paid my way. I wasn’t like Blixa, who kept using more and more ‘substances’ to get into it, to get out of it, to keep him up all night, to get him to sleep when the morning came, to spur his creativity, to get him into the studio and keep him working those insane hours they worked. I didn’t do drugs like Blixa did drugs, though honestly, every time we had a fuck, I ended up doing more drugs with him, because it was easier to just join him than to get into an argument about exactly how much either of us was consuming. I knew I had no right to criticise him. He knew he had no right to criticise me. So instead of criticising, we just joined in with one another’s vices. But if I was honest, and god, I hated being honest about that subject, purchasing drugs consumed well over half our combined income, though, to be fair, our income really never was that much to begin with.

At the beginning of March, I received a very strange letter, forwarded to me by the Melody Maker
offices. It was from an independent comic book publisher – not one of the ones I’d ever heard of, though they listed a string of series they claimed had been successful – who said that they had been impressed by the weekly strip in Melody Maker, but that they had heard a rumour that the comic had appeared in a highly censored and bowdlerised version, and that they wanted to print the original. I wrote back and said that yes, the original had been much dirtier – and much funnier – and included a quick Xerox of the lesbian separatist cock-chopping scene. I told them if they wanted to meet, I’d be in London with my partner’s band on the 7th, so just pop along to the gig, and we could meet up.

So much was going on at that point, that some comic book publisher was the least of my concerns. Things were moving very quickly for the New Buildings. This new producer they had been working with had the bright idea to move them out of the familiar environment of West Germany. The sessions in Hamburg had been slow, and frequently blocked by a lack of progress. Members of the band kept disappearing. Blixa and Mufti in particular had a habit of going off for long walks when they were supposed to be at the studio, and turning up hours later, with reels and reels of tape recordings of, for example, the fish market down by the harbour. But Jon was smart enough to suss out that the long walks were, in point of fact, a cover for slipping out to make other connections. And I think, perhaps, certain segments of the band were actually far too distracted by the easily available drugs scene in Hamburg to get much work done, as they all slipped into bad habits too easily.

Jon finally abandoned the sessions, and sent them all home, with the idea of resuming the recording in London the following month, block-booking a studio in Soho to keep them out of trouble. This studio had come highly recommended by a friend of a friend (some mates of the Birthday Party, to my annoyance) since it had recently been bought out by new owners who had made a lot of money on the London club scene, and were looking to freshen up the reputation of the place. Blixa recognised the name of the studio instantly, as the site where much of David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust era recording had been done, and decided that this was too fortuitous a coincidence to pass up. Bowie had come to West Berlin to overcome his creative block, so this gang of West Berliners would go to Bowie’s former studio for a bit of the same magic.

As if in confirmation that this was the right decision, the owners of the Risk Bar announced that they planned to completely gut, renovate and refurbish the venue. Not a moment too soon, as during a night of particularly heavy rainfall, the toilet, which had never been especially structurally sound, with its leaking pipes and its sagging floor, had collapsed through into the cellar. Blixa hadn’t been at work that night, but apparently the drinkers barely even noticed, and carried on carousing until the next shift came to open it up in the afternoon, and found the gaping hole where the bathroom used to be. (It was even rumoured that several patrons had been so insensate with drink that they simply continued to relieve themselves into the hole, making the damage worse.) With his sole source of steady income cancelled for at least a month, Blixa knew his best chances lay in London, where at least he would be fed at the studio. He wrote to friends, he pulled in contacts, and thanks, surprisingly enough, to that annoying Porridge fellow, the band managed to locate two rooms in a semi-illegally occupied ‘artists’ community’ in East London, where they would be able to stay rent-free for the duration.

I debated for some time, whether to go with him. Mufti’s wife emphatically said she was not coming; she had a life and a career in Hamburg and had even less interest in London than she had in Berlin. (Unfortunately, I later heard rumours that she had met another man on the set of the film he had made with Christiane, and she secretly just wanted rid of him.) Mark’s girlfriend, just as emphatically, said she was definitely coming, because who else would look after these muppets if she didn’t. (She was the one who had got saddled with the job of babysitting and feeding the troops, while the band were recording in Hamburg.) Alex, who had only recently been reinstated to full membership of the band, after being banished to the soundboard for nearly a year, had just recently broken up with his girlfriend, so he was flying solo. Andrew, well... no one was quite sure which gender Andrew even preferred, to the point where everyone had just kind of assumed he was asexual. But Andrew
surprised everyone, by almost immediately acquiring a very pretty and street-smart Cockney girlfriend in London, without whom the entire band would almost certainly have frozen to death, for lack of being able to understand the complicated and costly system of token-operated electricity metres in our accommodation.

Back and forth my opinion seemed to go on whether I wanted to come along, not at all helped by the fact that Blixa didn’t even seem to know whether he wanted me there or not. Well, obviously, on a very basic level, he wanted me there, a warm body in his bed, constantly available for sex and to banish the night terrors as Blixa was still, perversely, incredibly resistant to the idea of ever actually going to sleep, and could only be persuaded into bed if a lover were already there. Oh yes, and there were the more sentimental reasons, such as he trusted me and valued my opinion, and said he would actually miss me if I wasn’t there to spar with and regale with his latest fascinations and discoveries. But on the other hand, they were going to London to work, he planned on spending long hours in the studio, and he was worried (perhaps mindful of how unhappy Anita had become, in the same situation) that I would be bored and fretful by myself, and therefore distract him from the work he needed to do.

I laughed outright at that idea, and I think perhaps that was what perversely persuaded me to go. London was the city of my birth, and I was perfectly capable of entertaining myself there. Blixa grinned with relief and immediately asked if I could bring my van, so the band would have some form of transport for their gear.

Not wanting the squat to sit empty while we were away, we asked around, and found someone we trusted to occupy the space. It turned out that Val, the designer from Iron-Grey, had been scrapping with her college roommate, and was as a result looking for a place where she could work on her degree project uninterrupted. So she moved in for the duration, promising to make Blixa a new tyre-rubber waistcoat as repayment, and we packed up to spend a month in London.

I was excited about the move. I thought the change of scenery would do us both good, and since my comics were well-received, it might be advantageous to be within striking distance of the Melody Maker offices, to see if more work might become available. And this strange letter from this strange publisher in London – and I had had a response, saying he was definitely interested in meeting up – well, that was just one more thing I could entertain myself with in London.

In the end, I almost forgot to put the publisher on the guest list for the gig where we’d agreed to meet. The New Buildings had played a couple of warm-up gigs in Belgium, both for the practice, as they wanted to perform several of the new songs they wished to record; and to pick up some spare cash for the weeks ahead in London, as arts festivals in Benelux were well subsidised. Things got predictably messy, we had a rough channel crossing, and all of us were terribly sick on the drive up to London. I had to dart out to the nearest Boots to find Dramamine for Blixa – everyone thought it was drugs, but it really was travel sickness (this time, at least) – and almost forgot about the meeting until the last minute, when I had to scribble in the name at the bottom of Andrew’s list.

The gig was intense. Everyone was very wound up, for completely different reasons. I went to say hello to Malaria!, who I hadn’t seen in ages, but they seemed to be scrapping. Bettina had been spending a lot of time in the States, quite simply because she wanted to be with her girlfriend. Anne, who had been receiving a great deal more attention as an actress since the cult success of her weird lesbian sci-fi thriller, Liquid Sky, needed to be either in New York or Hollywood, to be accessible for auditions and screen tests and the like. So that meant that with Bettina away, the bulk of the songwriting, not to mention the tedious band and label admin work, was falling on Gudrun. Gudrun had been hard at work, preparing material for a new album with Manon (and also with Beate, who was somehow now back in the fold, though mostly as a kind of sound engineer) but Bettina seemed more interested in Anne, than in her own band. Anne had tried to be diplomatic, and had even
directed a video for the band as a kind of placatory gesture, hoping that her celebrity – for Liquid Sky had caused quite a sensation – would help them to attract more attention on American music television.

Gudrun, on the other hand, had hated the video. She said the whole thing looked like cheesy lesbian soft porn, full of semi-naked shots and exotic undergarments and billowing curtains as a metaphor for erotic ecstasy or something. Gudrun had no problem whatsoever with invoking lesbian chic – their entire image for most of their career had been heavily based on that dark, dangerous, androgynous Weimar image. And she had no problem at all with the invocation of feminine sexuality, which was the theme of much of the new album. But she had a problem with cheesiness, and the video, certainly in comparison with the dark, mysterious German Expressionist Silent Film images of their earlier clips, well, I have to admit it did look a little bit cheesy.

Also, and I think this was a slightly bigger part of the problem, Gudrun was tired of being just the drummer. She had worked hard on her guitar playing, and wanted to move up front, taking a more active role onstage, instead of being trapped, sitting down behind the drum kit. And this desire to be more of a frontwoman, it was obvious to me, was causing as much tension as Bettina’s relationship with Anne.

The Birthday Party, on the other hand, were having problems of their own, though I would not hear the exact details for another few days. After trying out various drummers on their last tour, none of whom had really clicked, Mick was also back behind the drum kit. Now Mick, although he was a really good drummer, had no intention whatsoever of remaining a drummer. He wanted to write songs, and he was, steadily, writing songs with Nick, but for that he needed to play the guitar, though, obviously Rowland had claimed that job, and wouldn’t be moved off guitar onto the drums because Rowland couldn’t play drums to save his life. Tracy, on the other hand, really admired Rowland as a musician. Tracy was a good bass-player, with a phenomenal stage presence, but he wasn’t in any way a writer. He relied on Rowland’s infallible ear to write his distinctive bass parts and teach them to him. So although Tracy said his loyalties were primarily to the band, to him, that meant Rowland. And so the gulf between Mick and Nick, on one hand, and Tracy and Rowland on the other, seemed to widen with every gig.

They were having record company problems, as well, as 4AD had not exactly proved a good fit for them. Dependent as they were on Beggars Banquet to approve their studio budget, the situation had all of the problems of a major label; but given the strangeness of its figurehead, the impenetrably monk-like and mercurial Ivo Watts-Russell, it also had all the worst and most peculiar disadvantages of a tiny independent. Watts-Russell balked at the sheer amount of drug abuse and criminality the band seemed to attract, as various members kept getting arrested for drug offenses every time they set foot in London. The distinctive-looking Tracy, in particular, seemed to have a knack for getting hauled up before the bench, and sent down for a spell. The press might have loved the outlaw romance of Tracy’s criminal career, but it wreaked havoc with their recording schedule. And Beggars Banquet did not want to keep funding endless expensive sessions at Hansa Ton Studios, only to end up with nothing to show for it except a handful of songs for an EP.

The band’s manager had received a preliminary offer of interest from Mute, with a substantial amount of money that would enable them to tour the States and Australia in the coming year, but accepting that offer meant perpetuating the increasingly untenable fiction that the two halves of the band were not at unresolvable loggerheads with one another. Their dressing room was so unbearably tight with tension, that Nick ended up in the New Buildings’ dressing room for most of the evening, where he and Blixa fell to gossiping as if it had been two years since they had last seen each other, instead of only a two-week British tour.

The New Buildings, alone of all the bands at that gig, were on top of the world, and they knew it.
With the upcoming studio sessions, this gig was the beginning of an adventure, rather than the end of a ragged tour. And Blixa’s carefully planned barrage of demo tapes had paid off; no less than five of the cream of British indie labels were in the running to sign them, swelling out their guest list. After their recent NME cover, the British press was paying attention, in fawning admiration mode. Blixa was in an expansive, easily excitabile mood, buoyed up by gifts of ‘substances’ from admirers, which, to be fair, he did share with the rest of us. He held court like a queen backstage, witty and quotable and daring anyone within his vicinity not to fall in love with him.

I had to go out and get some air, because even my love had its limits. And ran straight into a strange chubby man with long, frizzy hair, thick glasses and a demeanour that could not have been more awkward at the hippest gig London had seen all year.

“Excuse me,” he stammered, looking very much out of his depth, and vaguely terrified that I might actually bite him. “I’m looking for someone named Carter – I was told he was most likely to be with the German contingent? Are there Germans in this dressing room? The last one was just full of extremely drunk Australians.”

“I’m Carter,” I shrugged, somewhat stoned and completely mystified as to why anyone might be looking for me, and not my more illustrious partner. “Can I help you?”

He looked me up and down, completely taken aback. Whatever I was, in my spiky hedgehog quiff, my leather jeans, and a ruffled black silk shirt with a stand-up collar, which Blixa and I had been stealing back and forth from one another for the past three months, I was clearly not at all what he was expecting. “I’m sorry, you don’t look much like a comic book artist,” he blurted out, and I laughed aloud.

“I’m not sure what a comic book artist is supposed to look like. Why don’t you come inside, have a drink – do you drink – and you can tell me what you want?” I offered.

The strange man, Warren, seemed even more terrified inside the dressing room than outside it, surrounded by extremely boisterous Germans on heavy chemicals. But I sat him down, and gave him a beer, and tried to extract whatever it was that he had come to find. Digging in his deeply uncool neon orange messenger bag, he extracted a series of very poor photocopies of what were clearly the original, uncensored versions of my recent comics. “I got these from a friend, who works at IPC, though obviously, he wishes to remain nameless. When I found out the name of the author of these strips, I also managed to obtain these...” Digging through his bag, he managed to produce a very expensive import copy of >>Queer Responses To God<<. “I don’t read a word of German, but the art is.... well, it’s light-years ahead of what anyone in the UK or even the US is doing. This art is up there with what the Japanese are doing at the moment – and I’ve been told by a friend who can read a little German that the text is very good, too.”

“Wow, OK, yeah, this is all my stuff...” I mumbled, a little nervous, wondering if I’d just invited my A-number-one stalker backstage at a New Buildings gig. Well, never mind if I had. I knew I had only to shriek, and five very strong Germans – well, four strong Germans, and one very weedy and slightly femme German – would be on him like a shot. “The only thing you’re missing is the Kaos Komics stuff I did in Berlin...”

“Oh! Again, I don’t read the German, but my friend from Hamburg explained the general gist...” Digging further into the messenger bag, to my surprise, Warren the comic book geek was an exceptional completist, and had a copy of Kaos Komics, though he did not seem to have found Kollaps or Karnal. “Now, obviously, your English is excellent, if I may say so, as I can tell from the Melody Maker stuff... So if you would be interested in translating these for an English language version...” As he brandished the sheaf of papers, with the uncensored originals of the Melody Maker
comics on top, he suddenly caught the attention of Nick. Nick was just one of those guys with an unfailing internal radar, for when anyone that wasn’t him was getting some attention from someone he considered useful to his career.

“Why, hello. I don’t believe we’ve been introduced,” he drawled in his most exaggerated Aussie accent, his eyes wildly friendly as he rotated in his chair to greet the stranger. “I’m Nick...”

“This is Warren,” I mumbled, then stuttered over whatever it was he wanted from me that I had not managed to catch. “He’s a... well, he’s a...?” I turned to him for confirmation.

“I’m a publisher, as a matter of fact,” Warren finally supplied.

“A publisher?” repeated Nick, his ears now twitching to attention as he attempted to turn up the charm. “Did you know, that I am currently in the process of writing a book?”

Now, Nick had been telling people that he was considering, or in the process of, or maybe starting work on this book – which was sometimes a novel and sometimes a play and sometimes a screenplay for a film – since he had arrived in West Berlin, to the point where none of us even remotely believed in the actual physical existence of this book for even a minute. But this publisher was a stranger, and Nick clearly expected him to be impressed. But instead of looking suitably attentive, Warren burst into peels of uncontrollable laughter, as I cringed.

It was one of the repeated motifs of the latter part of my comic’s story, that the more idiotic and pretentious and drug-addled of the pair of hapless musicians fancied upon the preposterous conceit that he was an experimental drugs novelist after reading William S Burroughs. So he went about telling everyone that he was ‘in the process of writing a book’, insisting to anyone with ears that it would be ‘the most transgressive book The Scene will ever have seen’.

But Nick looked mystified at the laughter, then slightly annoyed, as clearly this was not the impression he had hoped to make, but he laughed a little awkwardly himself, and shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“My goodness,” blurted out Warren, as soon as he had recovered from his laughing fit enough to speak. “I had no idea, when I came here tonight, that I would meet the original of Dirk McJerk. This is him, is it not? You’re a fantastic artist, Carter. The resemblance is uncanny.”

Nick looked confused, as I realised that he had been on tour pretty much continually since the comic had started its run. But stupidly, in his foolish, misplaced pride, Blixa decided to enlighten him.

“Did you know, that while you haff been away, my Valdi has been righting a comic strip. For Melody Maker. Carter’s comic strip appears every veek, in a newspaper all across Britain. It is keellingly funny. You really should read it, it is most hilarious.” And with that, Blixa quickly lifted the sheaf of the original, uncensored, filthy, outrageous comics from the publisher, and placed them gently into Nick’s hands.

At first Nick was merely amused, as everyone was, titillated by the sex and drugs, and charmed by the exaggeratedly self-important uselessness of the two titular characters, Dirk and Kirk McJerk. But then, slowly, as he flicked through the pages, and started to recognise situations his band had been in, and saw his own misadventures depicted with that sarcastic, mocking tone that had so bothered Wolfgang, the truth started to dawn on him. Of the two musicians, the frontman with literary pretensions was an amalgamation of Nick and Blixa; the other, the guitarist who thought he was a musical genius, was a weird melange of Rowland and Mufti, though obviously with bits of Wolfgang and Salomé and Porridge and every other musician I knew in Berlin and London woven through them. But the symmetry was too much to ignore. Nick and Mick. Dirk and Kirk. Nick’s lips
tightened and his eyebrows narrowed. Because that was the absolute worst thing about Nick: although he was constantly on the ready to take the piss out of everyone in his band, and everyone else around him, he never handled criticism of himself very well.

I froze in my seat, feeling a sick, vomitty feeling rising in my stomach that I did not think had anything to do with Blixa’s travel bug. During the number of times I had fantasised, while I was writing the thing, about Nick finding it, and reading it, and seeing himself pilloried in it, it had never felt quite like this. I had always thought it would feel triumphant, glorious, and filled with righteous fury as Nick got his final comeuppance. And yet, as Nick stiffly handed the papers back to Warren, glaring at me with a look that was at once both awfully, horribly, pathetically wounded, and yet completely poisonous, I realised that I had just unwittingly fired the first shot in what was about to become open war between us.

“Come, Blixa,” he said, tapping my lover on the shoulder, and of course Blixa, arrogant and haughty, and yet faithfully besotted where Nick was concerned, pricked up his ears to hear his own name. “There’s substances in our dressing room. Let’s go and see what we can find.”

I didn’t see Blixa again for the rest of the night, except as that whirling dervish down on the stage. And when he was onstage, Blixa didn’t belong to me, he belonged to the whole audience, straining towards him undeterred by flying sparks and scrap metal. Well, fuck it. I didn’t belong to Blixa either, and I had a comic to sell.

As we stood watching Malaria! from the balcony, Warren got slowly drunk, and as his nervousness faded, a foul mouth, a wicked sense of humour, and a driving sense of ambition all revealed themselves in my new companion. While the New Buildings performed, he gave me a potted history of his comics publishing company, which had grown from hand-mimeographed political cartoons in the 60s, to a Xerox in a back room pumping out illicit underground art in the 70s, to the largest independent comic book publisher in the UK. Fuck that superhero shit, he insisted, and I was very relieved to hear him swear. He wanted gritty, real comics, that reflected the everyday existence of Britain under Thatcher.

But I wasn’t British, and I didn’t live under Thatcher, I tried to tell him. He didn’t care. He loved how mercilessly I had pilloried the pompousness of the current wave of Gothic British rock, and he wanted me to turn that discerning eye on everything around me. And he didn’t just want the popular stuff that I’d done for Melody Maker, though obviously that was the hook to get people to buy the books. He wanted the weird shit. He wanted translations of Kaos Komics and Kollaps Komics. He wanted more philosophical stuff, like the Queer Search For God. He wanted whatever nuttiness came floating up out of my brain.

Although my memory of English men was that they were completely repressed and weird about sex, once he started drinking, Warren didn’t beat about the bush at all. He wanted to say right up front that he was absolutely fine with my being gay and all – in fact, Post-Bowie, being kind of gay was actually rather a fashionable and daring thing to be – and the ‘fucked-up queer sex in the comics’ was ‘frankly fucking refreshing’. For a moment, I considered enlightening him, as it slowly dawned on me that he genuinely thought I was a boy, and had mistaken Blixa and I for a gay couple, a misapprehension that would happen many, many times over our stay in London. But instead, I decided to float the even more daring idea that I really ‘didn’t do gender, at all’. He didn’t even blink, in fact, his eyes widened, as he said “Brilliant. What an absolutely amazing promotional hook. That’ll really piss off the Mary Whitehouses of the world – you’re queer, you’re transgressive, you’re from West Berlin, and you don’t do gender. I love it. It’s like something out of Sci-Fi. You ever read any Ursula LeGuin? I am a big fan. Big fan.”

I had to confess that I hadn’t.
But his eyes genuinely lit up. “Left Hand of Darkness. I’ll lend you a copy. Classic sci-fi story, absolutely classic. The hook is... it’s a whole planet, without gender. We can market you as a kind of... androgynous sci-fi rock’n’roll space alien thing, from West Berlin, a planet without gender. The marketing releases practically write themselves. Fantastic.”

Warren was really into marketing hooks and promotional ideas. It seemed his publishing company had some money now, as alternative was in, in every aspect of British life. And I would get paid – maybe not enough to be like the big guys, turning up at comic book conventions in a limo or whatever – but enough to quit my dayjob and focus on drawing. I didn’t even have the heart to tell him I didn’t have much of a dayjob. Although I still turned up at least once a week to pick up some spare cash doing repairs at Thomas’s studio, I had quit even that lark to accompany Blixa to London.

By three songs into the Birthday Party’s set, the crush, even at the front of the balcony, was so annoying we withdrew to the front bar to talk through the details. Publishing deals, when not done for a weekly fee like at the NME, were immensely complicated. There was usually an advance of some kind, then a percentage of sales, and I suddenly longed to have Wolfgang sitting by my side, explaining it all to me in very clear German. I didn’t understand what any of it meant, and didn’t even know who to ask. I had to tell him I would take a copy of the contract, and try to get someone at the arts collective where we were staying look it over, and get back to him. Again, I hadn’t meant to haggle, but he responded by leaning over and adjusting some of the percentages. He made sure I took two phone numbers, and his address, to write them down in the back of my sketchbook, as well as taking a business card, and urged me to get in touch if I had any questions at all. Then he stumbled off unsteadily into the night to catch a night bus back to Camberwell, and left me sitting in a rapidly emptying bar, as I hadn’t even realised that the band had finished and the venue was clearing out.

After narrowly avoiding being thrown out by finding my backstage pass stuck in the back pocket of my trousers, I made my way back to the dressing room to try to find Blixa, but he and Nick were long gone, off to some fancy party or some drugs connection, no one was really quite sure what. It didn’t matter. I knew the point Nick was trying to make, and he had made it quite plainly.

But now, I was left with a dilemma. The New Buildings’ equipment had somehow become my responsibility, as they had counted on my van to get it to England, and now they were still counting on my van to get it from the venue to the recording studio. The only problem was, that load-in at the recording studio wasn’t until noon, while we had to clear out of the hotel where the promoter had booked us by 10am. And in the meantime, what on earth were we going to do with all that gear in the intervening hours? I consulted with Andrew and Mark, then they appointed me to go and discuss matters with the house stage manager, as I had the best English of us all. Yes, we could leave the gear backstage overnight, and there was a huge sigh of relief at that, but we had to tell them exactly what time we would collect it the following morning. I split the difference and told them 11am, then hissed at the lads that they damned well better turn up to help me load it out. Ignoring me, they all went on to another party, while Mark and his girlfriend and I drove back to the hotel.

Of course there was no sign of Blixa at the hotel. To atone for my cheek, Nick made damn sure I went to bed alone, and woke up alone, staring at Blixa’s luggage where he’d left it on the floor, as if it could answer me. I took a shower and dressed, and prepared for a very long day of what would probably be a lot of very heavy work. At 10am, I was fully expecting to be by myself at the front desk, but fortunately, sensible Mark and his perfectly turned out girlfriend were already there. Over the coming weeks, this would turn out to be a very familiar pattern. Mufti and Andrew turned up about ten minutes late, and Alex five minutes behind them, looking so rough and green around the gills, we told him to just skip the load-in and find a sofa somewhere to sleep it off. I looked around, checking alcoves and sofas to make sure I had not missed my own partner, then silently fumed as I loaded his suitcase, yet again, into my van for him.
He wasn’t at the venue, either, though fortunately the stage manager did appear, and unlocked the
doors so that we could load out the band’s assortment of unwieldy home-made instruments. After
some faffing about, and hovering with the van outside coffee shops as the various Germans got
themselves caffeinated, we managed to burn an hour, and turned up in Soho just in time to load in.
That was a bloody nuisance in itself, as the studio was down a tiny pedestrianised alley, so I had to
park around the corner, and we all had to somehow carry the gear down this medieval street. At least
Mark’s girlfriend, Monika, proved useful, in that she offered to watch the van while we loaded the
stuff, taking the keys so that she could move it if she had to, and circle the block in the event any
parking wardens came round.

We had finally got all of the gear into the studio, and were discussing whether I should wait around
for a bit, or whether I should just go with Monika up to Hackney to try and find the place where we
due to stay from the half-remembered street address, when who should come sauntering into the
studio but his royal highness, Blixa Bargeld, his hair a wilting lopsided disaster and his eyes shielded
by mirrored aviator sunglasses, smiling a lopsided smirk that reminded me almost uncomfortably of
Nick’s smile of triumph.
Vanadium I-Ching

Chapter Summary

As the New Buildings return to London to continue recording, they start to be heavily wooed by the mercurial Stevo, head of Some Bizzare Records, who provides Blixa and Carter with an entry into London's heady gay scene. (Featuring blink and you'll miss 'em special guest appearances by Marc Almond and Coil.)

>>Look what the cat dragged in<< laughed Andrew. >>Did you specifically wait outside until you saw we were done humping the gear?<<

I stared at my lover, feeling fury building behind my eyes. After all the terrible things I'd imagined during the night I'd spent tossing and turning, here he was, absolutely fine. >>Nice of you to finally turn up<< I sighed, but it was hard to keep the edge of disgruntlement out of my voice.

>>Oh, don’t start with me Valdi, I have a hangover to beat the devil himself<< protested Blixa, the same refrain I always got when Nick was around, as he removed his sunglasses to reveal bloodshot eyes and dark circles stretching all the way to his cheekbones.

>>You bloody well deserve one<< I muttered under my breath, but as Blixa raised his hand to rub at his dripping nose, I caught sight of a fresh, bright red weal on the inside of his arm. With a sudden flush of panic, I caught at his arm, and pulled it straight to reveal that yes, there was a long red mark down the inside of his elbow. >>What is this?<< I demanded. >>What have you and Nick got up to?<<

His face wrinkled into open disgust as he seized his arm back from me. >>For fucks sake, what do you think?<< he spat, his voice genuinely furious. >>After everything I went through with Jana?<< I just continued to stare at him, aghast, not knowing what to believe, until he turned his arm over, and showed me another three scratches, more obviously claw marks, down the back of his wrist.

>>There was a big ginger tom cat at the squat we ended up at last night. I tried to say hello, but it played a little rougher than I was expecting.<<

Relief flooded me, but I still had to check, had to turn his arm back over to make sure that the mark on his elbow was indeed just a scratch, and not a puncture wound. >>I’m sorry<< I said, but the words tasted like dust in my mouth. How like Blixa, to turn his unexplained disappearance into me begging his forgiveness.

But Mark intruded, before the spat could go any further. >>Blixa, do you have the address of the place we’re staying? It would be best if Monika and Carter went up there in the van and got situated, while we set up in the studio. Maybe afterwards, you girls can come down, say about 9 o’clock, and meet us for dinner, yes?<<

Blixa dug in his bag, and eventually produced the letter with the requisite details. I was still too annoyed to kiss him goodbye, so he just shrugged and walked through into the studio to find Jon the engineer, and I took off without a word.

When we finally located the block where we were staying, a huge brick edifice that looked like it might have been a factory or a brewery or something, and managed to persuade someone from the
‘collective’ to give us the keys, and show us where we were supposed to sleep, we were a little disappointed. Our rooms, far from the huge, cheap and cheerful accommodation we’d grown used to in West Berlin, turned out to be absolutely frightful, dank, dark and musty. There were, as promised, six beds scattered through the two connected rooms and there was even a tiny kitchenette just off the entrance passage, with a sink and a kettle and a single electric coil, though the bathroom was shared, and down the hall. But it was clear, from Monika’s wrinkled nose, let alone the grime covering the floors, that the previous occupants had clearly not done a lick of cleaning before they’d left.

Fortunately, we saw no signs of bedbugs, just bed linen in an absolutely disgusting state. Monika and I walked through the flat, prodding at mysterious stains, then turned and looked at each other, with horrified expressions that indicated we were both having second, third, and fourth thoughts about this whole adventure.

I didn’t know Monika at all; I only heard about her culinary skills every time the boys came back from Hamburg. But Monika, with her exquisitely coiffed hair, and her perfect nails, and her beautiful clothes, as immaculately tailored as a flight attendant’s uniform, did not look like the sort of woman who was prepared to spend four weeks in a dank squat with dirty sheets. From the irritation on her face, I honestly thought she was about to ask me to drive her to the nearest airport, to hop on a flight back to Germany, but instead, she sighed heavily, then turned to me and briskly suggested >>Are there launderettes in London?<<

Be a musician’s lover, go on tour, see the world. What a load of rot. Blixa got to see the world. I got to bundle all the filthy sheets up in plastic rubbish sacks, then Monika and I took them to a launderette to boil-wash them. The pair of us rolled up our sleeves and cleaned for about five hours straight, until we were able to sit down without wanting to immediately wash our hands. Then we did our best to impose order on the dark, but admittedly quite cosy rooms, hanging up sheets over ropes to try to create some privacy for the various parties who would be sharing the house. The three solo lads, we stacked into bunkbeds in the larger of the two rooms, then pushed two double mattresses into opposite ends of the smaller room, and divided it in half, for the two couples. And with all this work completed, we collapsed, and then groaned, realising that there was no food in the house, and we were not meeting the lads for supper for another three hours. Welcome to London.

And then the electricity meter ran out, and the room was plunged into pitch darkness. I dug through Andrew’s luggage until I found his torch, but none of the money we tried in the meter seemed to work, and I had no idea where to get a token. We cleaned ourselves up quickly in the dark, then headed out to find a café or a pub where we might be able to nurse a cup of tea for a few hours.

Once we got talking, I found I liked Monika. Despite her overly polished, totally yuppie appearance, she was bright and intelligent, with that eternal upbeat cheerfulness that some Germans just seemed to have naturally. In any other situation, it might have grated on me, but sitting in that grim working men’s café in Hackney, I found I was actually immensely grateful for Monika’s steadfast optimism. And when I mentioned the weird comic book publisher, and the even weirder contract that I would have to find someone to take a look at, she surprised me by telling me that she used to work in publishing, managing the royalties for the Hamburg office of Europe’s largest supplier of travel and guide books. (That explained her taste in clothes – she had, in fact, started her career in travel as a flight attendant!) But she said she would be happy to look the contract over, and talk me through any of the technical terms. In fact, she often did the same thing for Mark, combing through the New Buildings’ contracts and explaining the difference between Points and Mechanicals, trying to teach him how music publishing worked. The hours flew by, as she put on a pair of cats-eyed librarian glasses, and combed through the contract, occasionally muttering >>mnnmm-hmmm<< or >>nnuh-uh<< or >>right, this whole paragraph needs to come out. You’re much better off negotiating your own international deals with each foreign market, rather than letting them do it and take an extra cut. <<

To my weary, uneducated eyes, she seemed to relish the challenge, and even offered to go with me
the next afternoon, and meet with this publisher herself. I almost hugged her on the spot. I’m sure we made an odd pair, my grungy leather-clad self and Mark’s polished yuppie girlfriend, but those few weeks together were an intense bonding experience, and we became first allies, then fast friends.

Those weeks in London were oddly charmed ones, despite the poverty, despite the cramped quarters of all of us living on top of one another. Once he recovered from his hangover, Blixa resumed his typical cheerful and good-tempered mood, convinced that they had managed to smash through the strange creative block that had afflicted them in Hamburg. Travel energised him, and the change of scenery seemed to open up new creative horizons for him.

I’ll be honest, though, a lot of the sudden burst of productivity was down to the complete unavailability of hard drugs in London. Well, not that there were no drugs in London; it was just that none of us had even the faintest clue where to score. Blixa was cranky for a few days, but slowly he seemed to return to a normal shape (regular meals at the studio rendered his gaunt face quite sleek and handsome again), and something like a normal sleeping pattern. Even Alex returned to health after a week or two, the weird puffiness falling away from his features and his energy levels rising with his improved mood. Monika played den mother, and after a few days, Andrew’s new Cockney girlfriend showed us where to obtain the tokens to get the electricity meter running again. Early into the mornings, I worked on my comics, while Blixa scribbled away at his lyrics sheets on abandoned bits of reclaimed paper. We became a happy, close-knit little bunch of an improvised family.

With the new producer onboard, the New Buildings’ songwriting seemed to have undergone a quantum leap in its complexity and ambition. Gone, were the short, angry, punk blasts of extreme noise. And in their place, the scrappy group of Bremen Town Musicians were learning to create intense and sweeping soundscapes for Blixa to drape his spooky poetry across. It was still noisy, to be sure. And they still utilised a vast range of unusual and abrasive sounds, making use of scrap metal, construction noise, cut-up bits of their field recordings from Hamburg and Berlin, even attempting audacious experiments like trying to record the sound of a controlled conflagration in the studio. When they despaired of using conventional instruments, such as the studio’s piano, they opened the thing up, and hammered at the strings with their drum mallets, rather than doing anything so mundane as simply sitting at the keys and pressing them. (When the owner of the studio protested at this apparent mistreatment, Jon had to take him aside and explain that the work was artistic, very important, and the technique already had an established history in John Cage’s compositions for prepared pianos, exhorting the man not to be alarmed at the sight of two or three scruffy-haired Germans taking the instrument to pieces.)

Some of the experiments were wonderfully successful – Blixa happened upon the idea of recording his own heartbeat, and threading it through the background of the songs, sped up or slowed down, to create an intimate, human feel. And some of the experiments were an absolute disaster – Andrew ruined an entire reel of very expensive two-inch tape by attempting to generate a counter-rhythm by chopping out little triangular holes through the band’s taped performance. It didn’t sound good at all, it just sounded like the machine was broken, and what was worse, the jagged edges got stuck on the playback mechanism until the tape backed up and spooled out in great untidy loops.

But when it worked, it felt like they were genuinely exploring entirely new musical territory. Blixa used these huge lengths of paper to map out charts and diagrams of how he felt the songs should proceed, and yet he was enthralled with the idea of allowing chaos, chance and randomness to dictate the progress of the work. Ironically, my electrician’s toolkit, which had been in the back of my van, and so just got absorbed into their musical equipment when we unloaded their gear into the studio, ended up a part of their aesthetic process. For Blixa, as long as I’d known him, still loved to throw the I-Ching every time he faced a conundrum, and apparently my 6-piece set of expensive
vanadium-steel spanners were perfect for this exercise. The clatter and clash of the falling metal harmonised beautifully with the odd tuned-metal bell-like objects, like Buddhist song-bowls fashioned out of scrap metal, which Mufti and Andrew used to bash out the melody. And over the top of a humming, throbbing, machine-like tape-loop, Blixa obsessively chanted those lyrics he had written after Jana’s breakdown, full of vultures and dancing corpses burning in the pyres of West Berlin.

Mark seemed to be developing an entirely new method of bass-playing for the recordings, in which his strings weren’t so much plucked, or even slapped and popped like in funk, but aggressively attacked and assaulted so that the sound developed a sharp, percussive tone that perfectly underpinned the drummers’ unconventional sounds. He and Mufti frequently developed a rough and tumble back-and-forth between the driving bass, and the smash and crash of Mufti’s percussive assaults that sounded like nothing so much as a conventional punk band’s rhythm section being gleefully but methodically kicked down a flight of stairs. The overall effect was breathtakingly audacious and novel, but their highly intellectual approach didn’t come across as abstract or inaccessible, it came across as messily enjoyable and engaging as a mass singalong in one of West Berlin’s punk dive bars. Honestly, the New Buildings were to other experimental music, what an urgent, early-hours, vodka-fuelled debate on the meaning of art at the bar of the Risiko was to a dry lecture on aesthetic philosophy in a dusty museum.

But it was not all banging and noise. There were moments of bleak startling beauty in the eye of the storm. As recording went on, my favourite song to emerge from the sessions was one of Mufti’s softer, almost delicate tape-loop experiments. Mufti, who had a weakness for world music, and collected recordings of folk songs and drumming circles from around the world, had fallen in love with an Armenian folk song he used to listen to over and over in the back of the van on the drive to the studio. At first, the band had the vague idea of attempting a cover of it, but New Buildings covers never seemed to proceed in any standard kind of way. Rather than try to recreate the haunting microtonal strings by merely playing them, Mufti and Alex set to cutting them into strange, spinning loops of tape whose texture recalled an animal circling its cage. Over the top of this gently throbbing drone, they played bowed steel and tuned engine-hum like an odd mechanical lullaby.

As the cradle of drone whirred to life, Blixa’s beautiful voice whispered into the microphone at very close range, as intimate as a lover, curiously sexy, both soft and yet strangled, before exploding into an unearthly cry that seemed to erupt from the very core of his soul. Looped and echoed through a delay unit, his treated voice had the same eerie, un-sexed quality as that Diamanda Galas record he admired so much, extracting the beauty of a human scream the way that the anti-musicians extracted beauty from the metallic clang of scrap metal and rubbish. And as the epic soundscape build to its conclusion, like an eagle spiralling ever-higher in its gyre, the puckish Andrew fastened on the idea of weaving the squealing, grinding whine of his angle-grinder around Blixa’s voice like an uncanny duet between man and machine.

It was completely unlike anything they had ever recorded before. To the point where I think all of them were a little shell-shocked that such a beautiful and otherworldly thing could have come from their rough hands. And yet everyone who heard the track became so mesmerised by it, that the band became convinced that this was the direction their future lay in.

Blixa was excited and energised by the music they were making – to be honest, they all were – and that energy pulsed through their work with an urgency that rendered even the ugliness intensely beautiful. Everyone knew that they were onto something very unique, and wholly original, and buckled down to work, focusing and pushing themselves to creative breakthroughs and greater heights. And the rough mix tapes that Blixa brought back from the studio filled him with confidence and me with pride. My lover had astonished me, and for once, I was not shy about letting him know. Listening to the tapes, one earphone each from a tiny Walkman, as we drifted off to sleep, we
murmured to one another that the New Buildings weren’t just the best band in West Berlin; they might well be the best band in the world.

It was only towards the end of our stay that the band started to run into trouble. They were being courted quite heavily by this new record company, Some Bizzare, who, not coincidentally, had offices in the same block as their studio, and in particular by the boss, Stevo. Blixa, as a bit of a challenge, had indeed sent over a demo, and also included some of my nude photos of his mascara-smeared self, as his typical, slightly aggro way of testing exactly where the boundaries lay. Stevo, who was gay and had a bit of an eye for the boys himself, was very in touch with the club scene in Soho, and immediately recognised the potential of Blixa’s androgynous beauty, launching a fairly concerted effort to get the band on his roster.

Stevo was an incredibly eccentric character, but gifted with the same kind of charisma and charm that drew people to Blixa, albeit with a far more garrulous streak than Blixa, who was still somewhat hamstrung by his lack of fluidity with the English language. After a month in London, Blixa’s conversational English had very much improved to the point where he was fluent enough to get by in social situations, but it was that scalpel-like, incisive, punning wit of his that his English simply wasn’t fast enough to manoeuvre, the way that he could in German. Stevo, on the other hand, had the Gift of the Gab, a bizarre fusion of English and hipsterese and that peculiar gay Soho slang, Polari. The New Buildings weren’t fazed at all by his eccentricities. Coming from West Berlin, they had an incredibly high tolerance both for weirdness and for gayness, and they were all just charmed by Stevo’s unconventional approach, happy to meet someone on their own uncompromising wavelength.

But Stevo, unfortunately, punctured the little protective bubble that Jon had so carefully engineered around the band. Fixing on Blixa and Mufti as the ones to be convinced, he started to take them out after recording sessions, introducing them to the late-night club scene in Soho. Like everyone else in London, he took me for a Twink, and assumed that Blixa was gay.

Even back in Berlin, Blixa had always loved to play games with German grammatical gender, and my lack of gender. Even though he usually referred to me as sie, he deliberately flipped the endings of the verbs around to really play with the ambiguity of the word, “Sie”, which could mean she, or they, or even you, depending on the context. And when he described me, he almost always used male endings instead of female, creating these grammatical impossibilities, such as “sie sind ein Kunstler” – they are a (male) artist, rather than “sie ist eine Kunstlerin” – she is a (female) artist. But in London, as a kind of winking in-joke on the genderlessness of the English language that he found so difficult and hard to learn, he enjoyed the way the he could simply remove every revealing gender ending that German forced into his descriptions of me, and referred to me only as “my lover”, leaving other people to draw their own conclusions. And in London, people usually guessed male. I wasn’t insulted. To be honest, after the refreshing bluntness of West Berlin’s typically strong, androgynous girls, I found English girls a little shallow and difficult to communicate with. And the London scene was far, far more gender segregated than West Berlin ever was, so that I was ever so slightly relieved to be accepted so swiftly as a boy, albeit a gay one.

Blixa being half of an ostensibly male couple was no big deal to Stevo. In fact, I think it was rather a selling point, as most of the artists he worked with were also gay. But he courted Blixa by taking him to... interesting nightclubs, and introducing him to the cream of London’s gay scene, many of whom were already on his label.

We always seemed to end up at this dark little hole around the corner from the studio, known with a slightly ironic touch, as the Batcave. This dive bar was filled with flocks of black-clad freaks who
made Blixa and the Germans look fairly normal by comparison. I found the zombie-fancying fashion victims vaguely hilarious. As far as I was concerned, it was all fodder for my comics, as I sent my hapless fictional musicians down into the ‘Bathole’ to tangle with the regulars, some of whom were maniacs pretending to be vampires, but others genuinely were vampires just pretending to be maniacs. But unfortunately, that particular nightclub was awash with drugs, and Blixa had an infallible nose for sniffing out who had speed or other stimulants. The sessions started to suffer, though our nightlives bloomed.

Mufti and Andrew, though they weren’t hostile to the gay scene, were still not really prepared to be part of it. The more muso members of the band, however, hooked up with an eccentric English musician who was also, a little confusingly, called Frank. (No one ever called Mufti ‘Frank’ to his face – they wouldn’t dare – but both of them were deeply amused by the symmetry.) English Frank soon started visiting the band in the studio, which everyone enjoyed as he was another totally eccentric character, a true like-minded soul, but it was still a little bit of an interruption. But the New Buildings were intent on turning every session into a squat party. It was strange, how I’d heard, constantly, second-hand, from other musicians, most notably The Birthday Party, that the London music scene was insular and cliquey and impossible to break into, and yet the ebullient New Buildings were constantly making friends that they swiftly turned to collaborators.

A few days later, in the velvety dark of a basement in Soho, we finally met the star of Stevo’s stable, that Marc Almond lad who was a permanent fixture in the tabloid press’s gossip columns. I laughed as we were introduced, and said something to the effect of, “The first night I went clubbing in Berlin, I ended up dancing all night to your big hit, with the most beautiful girls in Germany. So I have very fond associations with your music.”

Marc smiled at me slyly from under his towering waves of enormous black hair, and dropped his astonishingly long eyelashes to his sharp, sphynx-like cheekbones. He was one of the most extraordinarily pretty men I had ever set eyes on, and looked so much like a girl that I almost accidentally fancied him. But he smirked at me saucily, and moved in closer. “You’re so kind…” he said in his soft Yorkshire burr. “Though I must admit, I have heard word of you two before, and that you, in particular are a very queer fish indeed.”

“Me?” I laughed, wondering why it was me he was singling out for conversation, as it was very clearly that it was Blixa he was interested in, from the lascivious glances he had been tossing in his direction all evening. “I’m a nobody. A null entity. No one here knows anything about me.”

“I’ve heard rumours you’re family…” he confided, bending in close. “From a little red-headed girl I met at a Birthday Party?”

“Anita?” I blurted out, suddenly overcome with a wave of homesickness for my friends back in Berlin. I had not seen Anita in months, but just the mention of her pulled me suddenly closer to him, for if they were friends, I thought he had to be alright. “Anita Lane?”

“The very same. Marvellous girl! We were the very best of friends when she and that dreadful boyfriend of hers were living here in London. I used to take her sandwiches from Marks and Sparks when Nick left her alone in that tatty flat in Kilburn. The last time I saw her, she told me all about you two delightful creatures, girl-boy and boy-girl, if you catch my drift.” Again, even though he was leaning close to me in a flirtatious manner, I could see that his eye flickered to Blixa, and I started to laugh aloud. I wasn’t threatened at all; I was quite flattered to be honest. “So I know your secret, though don’t worry, duck, I won’t spill it to a soul. Anita trusts me, so you can, too.”

“Anita nearly broke my heart in three different places, but she’s still one of my best friends,” I agreed.
Marc smiled at me knowingly, not a leer, but a deep, understanding smile that seemed to invite intimacy. “I had to admit, I thought the story was so wonderfully deviant. A butch dyke and a little leather-boy twink falling in love and deciding to live together. So decadent, and yet... so romantic.” From anyone else, this description of our love affair would have put my back up, but Marc sounded not so much curious as simply in awe of the possibilities of this situation, like he genuinely found the story both perverted and oddly appealing, in the same way that Rainer and Salomé once had. “So she told me you were rather... bendable,” he quipped, then his eyes flickered back to my partner, currently having his ear chewed off by Foetal Jim, one of the Australians we had met in Berlin. The Foetus, now working as a PR and publicist in the London music scene, always seemed to turn up, like a bad penny, wherever we went, gifted with this weird ubiquity, the ability to somehow exist simultaneously in three or four cities at once. “Your other half is well lush. Is he also... bendable?”

I laughed aloud as the conversation took the predictable turn. I knew it wasn’t me that was drawing Marc’s attention. “You will find that Blixa is the most flexible man who has ever lived...”

“No!” I suddenly insisted, and Marc’s face fell, though he seemed to miss my meaning. “Look, Blixa is his own person. You don’t have to clear things with me. If you want to make a play for him, then go ahead and try. You never know, he’s into all sorts of situations. He just likes to be fancied; he’s not choosy about the gender of who does the fancying. You’re a very attractive man, he might well be up for it. But I am not the owner of Blixa’s cock, and I am not the manager of his social life. You will have to sort out your own affairs yourselves.” As I found my words oddly echoing Jana’s, I wondered if this was what she had felt like, once, when dealing with me and my obvious crush.

“You Germans are so modern,” laughed Marc, gently fanning himself. “It’s so refreshing.”

Yet, as Marc joined our tight-knit little social circle, it was still me he seemed to attach himself. While the band were in the studio, he would often come up to the rooms in Hackney for ‘a cup of tea and a natter’. Perhaps he was one of those soft, warm-hearted gay men who just preferred the company of women – especially since he had apparently been so tight with Anita, and spoke of her with genuine affection. Or perhaps he found my English less impenetrable than the rest of the Germans. He made eyes, coquettishly, at Blixa, and Blixa, intrigued but coy, soaked up the admiration the way he soaked up all sexual flattery, but never lowered himself to actually making a move. I had learned that about Blixa – perhaps it was a power thing, but he never seemed to like to be the one to put himself on the line and make an overture. Had I had a lick of sense, I might have taken the beast by the horns, and proposed a threesome, but without the license – and cheap amphetamine – of West Berlin’s club scene, I didn’t quite have the balls. After all, if Jana had proposed a threesome, I would have run a million miles, and Marc was so strangely Anglo-Saxon in his attitudes, totally open and forthright about his perverse desires one minute, and then completely shy and standoffish the next.

The band’s sessions had ended as another band were moving into the studio, but the New Buildings were booked to come back again in August, to finish recording vocals, and mix the album. So on the last full day that we were in London, Marc turned up unannounced at the rooms in Hackney we were doing our best to pack up, and announced that he and his friends were kidnapping Blixa and I and taking us ‘to the seaside’ for my birthday. I felt guilty about abandoning Monika to the task of packing up, but she laughed and told us to go; she’d put the boys to work scrubbing, for a change. If they could handle sheet metal, they could handle a brillo pad, she laughed, and lobbed a box at Andrew, who picked one out gingerly, and held it up to his ear as if investigating its musical qualities.

And so Marc, Blixa and I piled in the back of a huge, four-door Morris Minor, with another gay couple. Peter was at the wheel, and Geoff was pouring over OS maps and getting us hopelessly lost
because he was too busy sniggering at names like Snargate and Appledore and trying to guess at their etymology. Peter said he was a filmmaker, and had a large, professional videocamera in the back of the car – it was so like Berlin I wanted to cry for joy. Even as we were about to leave, it suddenly felt like coming home. We all chatted about the usual topics, folk magic and the hidden power of the occult, and Blixa filled them in with bits and bobs of German and Scandinavian fairy tales he’d read at Wolfgang’s, and of course, any excuse to trot out the tale of the Town Musicians of Bremen.

Peter listened with interest, and started extemporising on the figure of the rooster in various mythologies, symbol of the sun, whose entrails were read by the ancient Greeks, or the mysterious traveller between worlds in voodoo mythologies. As we drove into the blustery wind of an April day on the English seaside, it felt like a proper adventure.

We drove out to the far end of Kent, to a small, low wooden shack crouched down low against the hulking presence of the sea, but it seemed to be deserted, the windows dark and the chimney devoid of smoke.

“What a nuisance, I don’t think Derek’s about,” sighed Geoff, folding the map and putting it back in the glove compartment, now that we had apparently reached our destination.

“Well, don’t just sit there with your mouth full of teeth, boy. Go and knock on the door,” directed Peter. Geoff muttered to himself about the cold as he pulled his coat about his shoulders and shambled off to the small hobbit-hole that passed for a door.

After a few minutes, he came back shaking his head. “He’s definitely not in. No one’s even collected the post. Shall we go back to the village and get something to eat?”

We stopped briefly at a small village shop to stock up on crisps and sweets that were to pass for lunch, then we all clambered out onto a bare shingle beach, desolate and deserted in the unrelenting wind.

Blixa, Peter and Marc laughed in the teeth of the wind, hurling rocks into the water, trying to skip stones against the tide. Geoff and I huddled a little further up the beach, trying to keep warm in the shelter of a vast block of concrete that seemed to have just washed up there. As he sucked at some nasty bottle of schnapps I hadn’t even seen him pick up at the village shop, I took out my sketchbook and started to draw. I did my best to capture the three lads hurling stones into the grey expanse, then turned to my companion and asked if he minded if I drew him. Geoff laughed, and said he was flattered, he got it all the time.

For if I was frequently taken for a Twink, my goodness, Geoff was the real thing. He was pale and fey, with hair bleached buttery blond, as dreamily pretty as a minor character from Brideshead Revisited, with the same sort of slightly melancholic doomed beauty. As I drew him, he reminded me oddly of Anne, that same patrician world-weariness to their good looks. Indeed, with his deep-set eyes and his pointed nose, he was exactly what Anne would have looked like as a boy. I noted the resemblance, and asked if he knew of her, and he laughed and said they’d enjoyed the film, and laid bets as to her real gender, until the film credits rolled. He, of course, had lost, while Peter, older and wiser, had seen the truth.

The other lads came back from the edge of the beach, Blixa having waded out a little bit too far in his rubber wellies, and got a nasty shock, sitting down and turning them upside-down to empty out sea water, and so he wanted to move to keep warm. Peter said he’d get the camera from the car and do some filming while we walked. So we set out with the wind blowing into us, as Peter said it would be easier to walk back with the wind behind us, when we were tired out. Marc just laughed and said that this was a mere breeze to a Yorkshireman.
“Let’s go to the sound mirrors,” suggested Geoff, and off we trooped. It was a long walk, but as the curious concrete structures came into view the magic of the landscape revealed itself to us, and I understood why they’d brought us.

“The acoustics are incredible,” explained Peter as Blixa climbed up onto the concrete expanse and posed, staring out to sea. “You have to get right into the exact parabolic centre, but when you do, you don’t even need a microphone. You really can just pick up focused sounds from 30, 40 miles out at sea.”

“What were they for?” I wondered aloud, sitting down to sketch the strange arcs of concrete and metal.

“Early warning system for attack from the bloody Gerries,” explained Geoff, quickly turning to Blixa. “Sorry – no offense.”

“None taken,” laughed Blixa, posing against the concrete, tapping against it with the metal of his belt to see if it had resonant qualities. “Shall I attack und demonstrate, to see if it vorks?” The wind and salt water had destroyed his hairstyle, but he still looked as beautiful and strange as the almost alien landscape.

“Before the invention of radar, early detection had to be done with sound,” explained Peter, and I could see Blixa’s eyes widening, as he contemplated this idea.

We went down to the lip of a small inland lake, and shouted up into the concrete, trying to make ourselves heard. Then, as Peter and Geoff, with Marc’s help, climbed up into the largest structure and fussed with the video camera, trying to record anything but the relentless howl of the wind, Blixa and I wandered off exploring. On one of the smaller mirrors, we climbed up onto a strange ledge, before descending a narrow, brick staircase to shelter in a small concrete bunker underneath the massive structure. In the dim half-light, I spotted a pile of distinctive rubber prophylactics coiled on the floor, nudged Blixa and started to giggle.

Of course it only gave us ideas. Cuddling together for warmth, we soon grew amorous. Cramped together in that tiny flat with six other people, opportunities for sex had to be seized carefully, often on the fly. So to have this cosy, concrete bunker to ourselves, with the dazzling view of greyish blue sand and greenish blue sea in the background, it was too good a prospect to pass up, and the cuddle soon turned to an erotic clinch as I tugged his buckles open. We coupled in silence, trying to stifle our cries to make sure our grunts and groans didn’t turn up on anyone’s videotape, but met with the frenzied pleasure of two lovers who simply hadn’t had enough time and space to themselves for far too long. Two cold, but blessedly invigorating orgasms later, and Blixa laughed and contributed our own votive offering to the pile of prophylactics.

Finally, we emerged from the gloom, trying to re-order and re-buckle our clothes, and discovered that everyone had known exactly what we had been up to. We hadn’t even stopped to think that we might stink to high heaven. But the atmosphere that greeted us was jovial, light with schoolboy smut and friendly ribbing. Peter made a vague joke that he could have put his videocamera to better use, had he known in advance that there would be al fresco German mating rituals to film, and everyone collapsed with laughter.

We trudged back, fighting the oncoming gloom, as the wind raged so hard as to nearly blow us off our feet, and the party split into two groups, Marc and Blixa and Geoff lagging behind as they passed a bottle of schnapps between them. Blixa seemed to relax among these young gay men, becoming a softer, more effeminate and fluid version of himself, not as uptight and twitchy as when he was around more masculine men. Then again, maybe that was down to his chemical composition, drunk on schnapps rather than high on stimulants, but I liked this sensitive and slightly femme Blixa that he
became around Marc and his friends far more than I liked who he was around, say... the Birthday Party.

Peter and I, with some kind of blustering masculine bravado, pushed ahead, talking about travel. If the deal with Some Bizzare went ahead, Blixa was keen to travel and tour the world, to see Japan and Australia, and Peter was enthusiastically telling me what cities had the very best gay scenes – comparing Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur and Madras. Of course, in his opinion, nothing was as good as Bangkok, which was like another world as far as sexual practices went.

But he smiled, with a knowing, slightly paternal air, and lowered his voice as he said to me, “You could get the Operation in Bangkok, you know.”

I blithely asked, without thinking, “What operation?”

“You know, the Operation. To make you a real boy?”

All the hairs suddenly went up on the back of my neck as I found myself in quicksand up to my neck before I’d even realised I’d got out of my depth. I’d been accepted so easily into the group of gay men that it hadn’t even dawned on me that I wasn’t really one of them, in their eyes. “Wait... what?” I sputtered, then blanched. “How did you know?”

Peter laughed, and shot me a wink. “Marc told us.” So much for being discrete! “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t have guessed otherwise. Your secret is safe with me. But if you wanted it – the reverse Casablanca – Bangkok’s the place to go for that.”

“They can do that? I mean, I know... they say there are methods to... operations to... to do it the other way around, male to female... But... female to male...” My mind reeled. “How?”

“Thailand’s not like Europe, you know. Nothing like it at all. Asians have a completely different concept of gender than we do. They don’t just have two genders out there, they have about seven. It’s all considered perfectly normal, sometimes even sacred. Boys living as girls. Girls living as boys. And everything inbetween. You’d love it there.” This, he delivered with a slightly goading grin.

“But how do you turn a girl’s body... into a boy’s?” My voice was ragged with both terror and desire, as if this was something I’d never even dared to consider before. “How do you turn an absence, into a presence?” I lowered my voice before saying the unsayable. “How would I... get a cock?”

“Surgery... hormones... I’ve heard they can inject testosterone directly into the clitoris, and it just puffs up like a mushroom. Of course...” and here his voice became so tinged with laughter I wondered if he were serious, or just making it up. “It means you’d have to walk around with a perpetual hard-on all the time. But seeing how you and Blixa behave around each other, it seems you both do, anyway.” Then he let out a huge, hearty laugh, and clapped me on the back.

As the twinks caught up with us, we fell silent, but my mind was in complete disarray. It was not a thing I’d ever even thought possible, until Peter had dangled it in front of me. But Geoff unlocked the car, and we piled back into the rear of it, Blixa in the middle, sleepy and pliable, while Marc and I curled up on either side of him. As our heads rested on his shoulders, Blixa nuzzled first one pile of black hair, then the other, and then he passed out, tired from the long walk and relaxed by the schnapps. As the car pulled off into the deepening night, we lay together in a little heap of limbs. I couldn’t sleep, my mind racing with this idea of becoming A Real Boy, but Marc cuddled up against Blixa just like a teddy bear, his hand snaking cautiously onto one rubber thigh. Blixa grunted and shifted, his eyes glittering under his long lashes like he was not entirely asleep, and seized the hand and moved it gently onto his crotch, patting it contentedly, and to this day, I don’t know if he thought
the hand was mine, or, as I suspected, he definitely knew it was not. But Blixa had won Marc’s adoration for the rest of time, with that gesture, as all three of us drifted off to sleep.
Mutiny In Hansa

Chapter Summary

Back in Berlin, Blixa talks Carter into engineering for the Birthday Party again, but being around Nick only ramps up their obsession with becoming a real boy. The Birthday Party, on the other hand, are in severe disarray, as tensions between Nick and Rowland simmer over a new song that Nick is writing with Blixa.

Content note for descriptions of gender dysphoria.

The idea of becoming A Real Boy would not leave me alone. It still had not left me the next morning, as we loaded up the van, and made our way back to Germany. The ferry crossing was awful, as it always was, then the border crossings were even worse. It was easy enough to get into East Germany with Berlin ID, but to get out again, into West Berlin, it was always a faff, full of delays and weird waits and annoying searches of your car and equipment. Why would anyone bother smuggling drugs into West Berlin? The place, as Blixa had long pointed out, was the drugs capital of Europe.

I didn’t dare bring it up with the rest of the band rammed in the back of the van, sitting on top of their equipment, but I couldn’t get Peter’s suggestion out of my head. The morning after we got home, I went like a supplicant to the big central Staabi, ascended the stairs to the reference section and looked it up, hauling heavy books off the shelves and sequestering myself at an isolated desk to examine them. In the encyclopaedia, there was a brief note to the effect that Asian cultures recognised the existence of genders other than those known to Westerners, and provided a Hindi word, Hijra. Looking up that word in the archives produced a slim, battered medical treatise of indeterminate age, in highly technical and slightly archaic German. There was even a stark, scientific, black and white photo of a beautiful youth with breasts, a made-up face, and a cock, as an illustration of this extra gender, but there was no explanation as to whether the cock or the breasts had been artificially enhanced. The image haunted me as I took careful notes, then made my way back home on the bus.

But I was too busy hustling my various jobs to do more dedicated research into the subject. Buckling down to work, I finished the comics I had been so carefully drawing in London, and managed to do a pretty good English translation of the first issue of Kollaps Komics. I posted the whole lot off to Warren, with a mock-up of a full-colour image to use as a cover, in preparation for my first proper ‘graphic novel’. My sense of relief and pride was immense. But almost immediately, I needed to find some money to tide us over until it was actually published, as Blixa and I had raced through my advance from Warren in London, feeding my hard work into that electricity meter.

So I went back to Thomas’s studio, to see if there was any repair work I could pick up to earn some spare cash.

>>Oh yes<< said Thomas. >>I’ve got two guitar amplifiers, a synthesiser and a portable mixing desk that want work. Oh, and someone was asking, so do you know anything about record players? This scratching thing is all the rage with the kids these days, but it ruins the drive belts. I said I’d ask about, if you could do something about that.<<

>>I’ll have a go. I’ll have to charge for a replacement belt if the rubber is worn out.. but really, it’s a question of changing the drive mechanism so that it can go both ways without damage.<<
The idea of going both ways raised a smile and a snigger from Thomas, as I wondered how much he knew about me. >>Oh, and someone from Hansa Toooooonstudio was phoning up, looking for you<< he drawled sarcastically, really stretching the vowel to imitate an English speaker’s accent. >>But I told them you don’t do engineering work any more. Oh no, moved on to bigger and better things, our Carter has...<<

I stared at him, astonished. >>Who was asking for me?<< I couldn’t think at all who it might be.

>>Some Australian, I think? Name was... Timmy? Tommy? No... Tony. That was it. Wanted you to do sound for a birthday party... though who would have their birthday party at Hansa is beyond me. It wasn’t until the end of April. You can probably ring them back, if you’re still interested. I’ve got the number here somewhere.<<

Tony Cohen? The Birthday Party’s producer had rung up, asking for me? Now that was a shock to me. I thought nothing in hell would tempt me back into the studio with the Birthday Party, but to be honest, we really were desperate for the money. Refurbishment work was dragging on a little longer than expected at the Risk bar, and so Blixa still didn’t have a steady source of income. And yet, despite our extreme impecunity, my instinct told me, do not take that job.

But Blixa was sanguine about it. >>You should do it<< he shrugged, as if he couldn’t see what the problem was. >>It’s good money. And we do need that money. Don’t be stubborn. After all, we’re all friends, aren’t we?<<

>>I don’t know about that<< I stuttered. >>Tracy, yes, I’m sure it was probably Tracy that asked for me again. Or maybe Rowland... I think Rowland trusts me, though lord knows why. But Mick thinks I’m useless, and Nick... honestly, you know he can’t stand me. Nick absolutely despises me.<<

>>You are overly paranoid, where Nick is concerned<< pronounced Blixa with a mocking sneer that made me so angry I almost wanted to punch a wall. >>Jealous.<<

>>Saying I was jealous of Nick would imply that I had something to be jealous of. Which I don’t. I just don’t like him. I think he’s a pseud, and a poseur, and what’s more, he’s shockingly awful to Anita, which all of you just handwave away...<<

>>And we all know how you felt about Anita<< pronounced Blixa with a mocking sneer that made me so angry I almost wanted to punch a wall. >>Jealous.<<

>>What do I have to do to you, to prove that I’m not jealous of Nick?<< I almost shouted, still astonished by Blixa’s ability to wind me up.

>>Engineer the session<< shrugged Blixa, with his impossibly smug face.
Alright I will! I snapped, and went out to a phone booth to ring Tony.

But even just talking to the Aussies somehow put my back up. Tony was alright, if a little naïve about West Berlin, but I never quite lost the sense, when I talked to him, that he still viewed me as a complete fucking freak. And I don’t know if this was just me being paranoid, or if the edge of nervousness in his voice when he talked to me, as he were vaguely afraid that I was a bomb that might go off at any moment was just down to his unfamiliarity with... queers, or if Nick had been filling his head with deliberately malicious gossip about me.

As I hung up the phone, memories of the previous session, that I had been wilfully blotting out of my mind, came seeping back. That terrible last argument, where Nick had told me, in no uncertain terms, that I ‘had no idea, what it was like to be a real man’. I flinched at the phrase, hearing Peter’s words echoing about my head. ‘You could get the Operation in Bangkok. Become a Real Boy.’ And something twisted inside me, something ugly and painful, a wordless desire I didn’t even have a name for.

I got back to the squat, and trudged down the stairs in an edgy, disjointed mood, only to open the door to our room, and find Blixa sprawled across our bed, lying there as if waiting for me, half naked, shirt off, jeans unbuckled and sliding off his hips, grinning up at me with a coquettish smirk. Beside him on the mattress like a peace offering, lay my dildo, and the strap-on harness, which he kept fingering lovingly, twirling it around his little finger.

You know he said in a deep throaty voice, rolling his R’s and his eyes alluringly as he gazed at me from under his hair I know we didn’t use this in London because we never had any privacy in that shared accommodation. But there are certain things that I have definitely... missed.

I looked down at the rubber cock, and felt a tingle of heat rising behind my eyes. A Real Boy, repeated half a dozen voices echoing inside my head. I stepped closer to pick up the harness, and Blixa reached out and playfully ran his hand up and down my thigh.

I am so relieved to be back in the privacy of our own squat that I would suggest we take advantage of this intimate seclusion to catch up on lost opportunities for screwing in the fashion I know we both prefer...

He did not need to ask me twice. A recklessness took over me as I stripped off my clothes, belted on the strap-on and pushed my lover back against the mattress. Feeling him acquiescent and almost submissive beneath me, I felt a masculinity surge within me. A real boy, I thought to myself. I’ll show you a real boy.

The thought tormented me as we fell upon one another’s bodies. All I could think, as I raked my teeth across his pale throat, was, imagine if I were a man doing this. As I shoved my knee roughly between his thighs and prised him open, I fantasised, imagine being a man and doing this. And as I had him tied to the bedframe by his slender wrists, face down in the centre of bed, with the shaft of my dildo sunk several inches deep inside him, I finally gathered the courage to broach the topic. Would you like it if I had a real cock?

Your cock is more than real enough for me he moaned, arching his back to meet me, impaling himself on my implement, trying to take in more and more.

Yes, but don’t you ever wish I was a real boy?

I like exactly what you are he insisted, mewling and grinding his hips against the sheets. Half man, half woman, and I never have to choose which I like better, because you’re both things and more.
I grabbed the bony handles of his hips and hauled him backwards towards me, balancing him half-on, half-off my lap as I grabbed his cock, manipulating it roughly, squeezing the veiny surface of his foreskin, wondering what on earth it would be like to be doing this to my own cock. But Blixa was too deep in his pleasure, thrashing beneath me, to have any kind of conversation except how much more of my shaft he wanted inside him. He cried out like a wild animal, a long, high-pitched yowl of ecstasy as he came, quivering in my hand, and there were no more words.

But I tried again, after I unfastened his shackles and my dildo, and we lay together, panting as our heartrates returned to normal, and his pointed nose started to nudge towards the cleft of my legs. And I was pulled back into my own body with a shock, my own female body with its awkward darkened mysterious hole. The mingled juices of our sex didn’t seem to bother him, he just wanted to bury his face in my cunt, murmuring that he could feel my heartbeat most strongly there, and he would get me off in another minute, when he had caught his breath.

I can’t stop wondering what it would be like to have a cock of my own. To penetrate you for real, to feel your heartbeat against me the way that you can feel mine<< I sighed. Blixa’s tongue was already working against the hood of my clitoris, and if I closed my eyes, I could imagining it mushrooming up into a cock the way that Peter had described, Blixa taking its whole length into his mouth and sucking on it, not just lapping at this tiny nub. >>I hate feeling like just a half-man. I wish my body was just more... What if I could be not just a half-man but a whole man?<<

I love your body just how it is. Your cunt is amazing. You know how much I like it, yes? The taste of it. The texture of it. The colour and the feel and the way it holds me so close, just like a wet, sucking mouth.<<

Peter said there was an operation you can get in Thailand. They can remove my breasts, give me a boy’s chest, and then administer shots of hormones directly into my clitoris, to make it grow. I looked it up in the medical journals<< I added, though that part was only a half-truth.

But Blixa suddenly pulled away, glaring at me with genuine anger in his eyes, and my cunt suddenly felt very cold without his mouth on it. >>What would you want to do a thing like that for?<< he demanded, as he cast about him, looking for his cigarettes.

So I could be a real boy<< I replied, feeling awkwardly bereft now this thing was out in the air between us.

Blixa extracted a cigarette and lit it roughly. >>If I wanted a real boy, I’d be with a real boy. There were enough of them throwing themselves at me, back in London. I want to be with you, Valdi. What you are. All of it. Cunt, breasts, wide shoulders, rubber cock. I like what it is that you are.<<

I don’t know. I just thought...<< I stuttered, trying to explain what about the idea appealed so much to me. >>The idea won’t leave me alone, since Peter told me about it. I can’t stop thinking about it.<<

His eyebrows knitted together at a dangerous angle, as he frowned, and exhaled his cigarette smoke in a furious plume. >>I shouldn’t have taken you with us to London. I thought it would expand your horizons, expand your mind. But those people... Peter, Geoff, Genesis, even Stevo... they fuck with your head and make you think you want things you don’t want. You don’t want to be a half-man or a whole man. You want to be a Valdi. An in-between thing, just like me. I love what you are, as Valdi. I want a Valdi. I don’t want some... artificial man. No, no, no, no!<<

Hold me?<< I begged, feeling absolutely bereft at the thought that there might be ways he would not love me.
He sighed deeply, and transferred his cigarette to his mouth, and rolled over to hug me, but he put only one of his long arms around my shoulders. The other he placed very carefully but very firmly between my legs, and across the mouth of my vulva. >>This is mine<< he said quietly, breathing it into my ear as he picked my body almost off the bed and pulled it towards him. >>Mine.<<

I somehow picked myself up and went on. It was one of the worst decisions of my life to go back into the studio with the Birthday Party, but I had already committed to it, and good god we needed the money. Blixa kept reminding me of the money, but to be honest, I think he only wanted yet another excuse to hang about, as if he didn’t have a permanent, open invitation from Nick to turn up whenever he wanted.

The Birthday Party were my first experience with a band that really, truly, had just had it with each other, and were intent on imploding as dramatically as possible, and taking as many people with them as possible. There was open psychological warfare between Nick and Rowland, a level of psychological cruelty I didn’t think possible from two people who claimed to still be friends. Both of them were perpetually wrecked on smack, and Johann came once a day with a fresh supply, just to get them in a state for working, so it wasn’t as if they had to go very far to score. But still, the pair of them seemed to be engaged in some kind of battle to prove which one of them was more valuable to the band by failing to turn up when needed. Rowland started coming in an hour late, keeping everyone waiting as if to prove that he was still an important member of the band, without whom nothing could proceed. To which, Nick responded by starting to come in two hours late, as if to beat Rowland at his own game.

Mick had already checked out a long time ago. With the dead-eyed professionalism of a session player, he turned up, knuckled down to work laying down drum parts with Tracy, dropped in a few rhythm guitar parts as a general guide to how the songs went, then told the assembled junkies that he did not wish to be bothered again until they were ready to mix their mess. Whatever problems it was that Nick and Rowland had developed between them, it was none of his business. He was O-U-T out. And he went.

Rowland did his best to muddle through. He was a sweet soul, though completely out of his depths, both in his addiction, and the level of cruelty that Nick was prepared to stoop to, to get his way. Nick was back to his old trick, that he used to use to torture Anita, of begging his partner to work with him, begging them to show him what they had, wheedling and cajoling and building up the sense that he really, really wanted to play ball, really wanted to hear it... and then at the last minute, when the item was finally displayed, just lapsing into stony, sullen silence that cut much deeper than any criticism possibly could, shrugging and turning away without a word. Rowland didn’t have the kind of toughness that Anita had, the shell that she had built up around her to protect her from Nick’s endless careless cruelty. He fell for it every time. And every time, it seemed to cut him to the quick.

He would sit in the studio with his Fender amps, listening to the backing tracks over and over on his headphones, carefully working out a guitar arrangement to drape round the song like a barbed-wire cage. Rowland was such a perfectionist, it took him hours to work out a single arrangement, but when he hit on something that worked, he chased it down like a terrier until he got it right. But then Nick would come back, and listen to this careful composition, and within 30 seconds, his face would turn sour, and he would shake his head, and mutter “Nah, mate, I’m just not feeling it. Can’t you do something else? Something more like... you know... Something different.”

And Rowland would be back at the beginning again, having to completely re-write the entire song from scratch, without so much as a word of guidance from Nick as to what he actually expected. The thing was, Rowland, for all of his musical confidence, and his personal flair for his carefully
constructed personality, simply did not have the force of will that Blixa had regarding music, and now Nick was coming to share. It frustrated me, because even I, who was generally very laid back and conciliatory in the studio, would eventually have reached a point where I’d have just told Nick, “That’s the guitar part you’re getting, you’re stuck with it, now move on.” But Rowland seemed to have a confidence in his endless musical creativity that he didn’t seem to have in his own ability to assert himself, and just went back to the drawing board and tried to work out another guitar line.

The sessions were painful, and yet they went nowhere. And amidst all of this, Blixa insisted on hanging around like a black-clad fruitfly, constantly buzzing around Nick, lighting him cigarettes, chopping out lines, telling him jokes and making obscure references to crack him up, so that Nick’s buzz never had to get too heavy. To make matters worse, they didn’t have just a photographer from the NME hanging about, taking pictures this time. They had a full film crew, as one of the director types who was always hanging about the Berlin scene had had the bright idea of documenting the band’s creative process by following them through their recording. It must have been the most boring band film ever made, because nothing happened. The band didn’t even fight; they were too fucked up and too out of it to even argue properly. They just endlessly stalled, and glared, and took their turns in the recording hall one by one, each of them trying to undo whatever it was their rival had previously laid down.

And through all this chaos, Blixa stalked, like a beautiful young lion, dragging the camera’s attention as the only working musician not too fucked up to stand straight. (Though Blixa, since returning to Berlin, had dived face-first, straight back into an endless line of ‘substances’. I knew he didn’t touch smack, in fact, he got angry if I even suspected him of it, but Blixa had never met any variant of amphetamine that he would not cram into his face until it was gone.)

There was one song in particular that they just got stuck on. Admittedly, it was an usually catchy tune for them, based around an obsessive, stalking, repetitive three-note bassline that I used to get stuck in my head for hours after we’d left the studio. The lyrics were darkly funny, describing an overdosing junkie waking up in a heaven that was just as full of rats and trash and junk as the ghetto he’d died in. Honestly, I wished I’d thought of it myself, as it would have been the perfect ending for Dirk or Kirk, but I did not want to admit that in front of Nick.

Blixa caught me singing it to myself in the morning, muttering “A punishment? Reward! A punishment? Reward!” to myself as I made the coffee and plunged the bell of the cafetiere like I was deploying a hypodermic needle.

He smirked, and needled me with his elbow. >>You like that one, huh?<< he announced proudly. >>I helped him write that one, you know.<<

>>No wonder I like it then<< I shot back. >>You’ve got more talent in your little finger than Nick’s got in his whole body. And it shows, if that’s your song. I don’t know why you waste yourself on them<< I added, hoping flattery might work with Blixa when consternation didn’t. But he just took it as encouragement.

For Blixa was soon pulling a Mufti in the studio, declaring himself ‘musical director’ and trying to take over. Insisting that the track needed a more clanging metal percussion element to it, he had me drag the drum mics out into the stairwell, and started hammering on the ornate cast-iron balustrade of the staircase. Even I had to admit it sounded good; the famous Meistersaal had nothing on the cavernous reverb of that tall, narrow metal box of the back stairs.

But Rowland hated the way it sounded. He hated the way that Blixa suggested he play guitar on the track, brutal and blocky, no more than one note. Rowland wanted to embellish the track with his spaghetti-western twang, which sounded completely out of place. Rowland hated the maniacal
nursery rhyme chanting that Blixa suggested the band do as backing vocals, echoing “rolling, rolling, rolling” in the background like a Greek Chorus of demented junkies. And Rowland hated the weird, metallic clanging noises.

I was genuinely torn, because on the one hand, the suggestions that Blixa made really were good, and they had the ability to lift the song from the Birthday Party’s knuckledragging dumb punk to something genuinely original and frightening and as otherworldly and dark as the lyrics implied. But on the other hand, Blixa wasn’t in the band. Rowland was. And I hated the position that those men pushed me into, because of course it fell on me to gently go and tell Blixa that there weren’t his sessions, and he really had to back off, and let Rowland get on with his job. The look Blixa gave me as he collected up his rubber coat and slung it round his shoulders was utterly poisonous. And I felt impotent and furious that this look fell upon me, instead of upon Nick or Rowland or any of the people whose decision it was that I had to enforce. Yet again, it was our relationship that suffered and picked up the slack, as he went back to the squat to fume, and I went back to my Aunts’ house to sleep without him because I just didn’t want to be pulled by his beauty and his fury and his refusal to sleep with me when we were angry at one another into making an apology I had no fucking need to make.

Almost as if to punish me, Blixa retreated more and more into his intimacy with Nick, and Nick seemed to lord it over me that my lover preferred his company to mine. The pair of them ploughed through drugs. I don’t think Blixa went to bed at all during the week long sessions, while Nick or Rowland, at least, would conk out on the nod for a bit, dead to the world while Blixa scratched away at diagrams for songs on endless sheets of Hansa-headed notepaper.

For Blixa had a new idea of romance in his life. The Blixa who had first met Nick was a little West Berliner boy, who had grown up so sheltered by the Wall, he had barely been to France and the Netherlands. But now Blixa had crossed the water to England, and discovered that London was somehow even more London than films about the city suggested, and he was becoming steadily more and more enamoured with the idea of travel. The Mitteleuropa that had been his stomping ground had grown too small for Blixa’s new dreams. He wanted to see the world: Australia, the States, maybe even Japan. And Nick, on his return from the USA, was full of wild stories and tall tales about how much more America the real American South was, than anything that could be captured in a film. (Of course, having played one gig in Georgia, and another gig in Texas, Nick was now an expert on the subject of the American South.) But Blixa drank up these travel stories like the teenage girls at my boarding school had drunk up semi-pornographic bodice-rippers they had to smuggle in and hide from the teachers.

The more Nick talked about touring, and about travel, and about adventure, the more starry-eyed Blixa became. But the way the pair of them talked about future adventures, the more it seemed that Nick had already half-decided that he wanted Blixa as his sidekick, rather than his actual sideman, Rowland. Rowland was not stupid, he could see what was happening, right under his nose. He fought back the only way he could, by writing more baroque and heartbreakingly beautiful guitar riffs, since Rowland always was, and even Blixa would readily admit it, ten times the musician that Blixa was, from a technical standpoint. But as the drugs started to take their toll, and Nick’s constant undermining worked as a kind of psychological warfare, even Rowland’s consummate musicianship could not keep up, as the sessions slowly started to fall apart.

We didn’t finish the sessions so much as just abandon them, even though the band had not even completed the mere six tracks they had attempted. Everything was in a state of incompletion, guitar tracks missing here, finished vocal takes missing there, but the band was contractually obliged to undertake this tour of Australia that they had signed up for. And so off they went, leaving this mess behind them for others to clear up.
I walked out with a reasonable cheque for my efforts, not as much as I’d hoped for, since Mute had clamped down on the budgets, but enough to keep me going for a couple of months if I wasn’t paying rent. But that was the problem. I wasn’t currently living at the squat, for free. I was staying with my Aunts again, and I felt guilty if I stayed in their house, and ate their food, and used up their hot water without paying my fair share. I knew I was losing Blixa, and yet to concede defeat, to Nick of all people, was just beyond me. I hung on, tenaciously, for a few days, though to what hope I was clinging I didn’t really know, then finally just abandoned myself to the idea that Blixa and I were going to have to end our affair. Could we do that and still maintain our friendship, that complex bond of yearning and obsession that mutually fuelled our creativities? Fuck, I had stopped fulfilling that role for Blixa a long time ago, and I knew it. It was all about Nick now.
Blixa and Carter return to London, but find their relationship unravelling more and more as they each discover the price of success in their chosen fields. Because as much as Carter hates Nick, they discover how dependent their newfound creative endeavour is on him.

Finally, the Australians went off on that blasted tour, back to Australia and New Zealand, for two whole months. While they were gone, the news broke that Mick had officially left the band; they’d engaged a session player for the Antipodean dates. Mick stayed in West Berlin, and started looking around for people to collaborate with. The usual suspects all lined up, especially since Mick, by now, had pretty passable German. Beate told me he had been jamming with Swiss Thomas, who was now her official boyfriend, since Chrislo had finally, to their great relief, left her alone to crawl back to the succour of his machines.

And once the Australians were gone, surely enough my lover came slinking recalcitrantly back, with an air that was at once both defiant, and yet oddly like an animal with its tail between its legs. I came back home one afternoon after going to the post office with another package for Warren, and found Grete emerging out into the hall as I climbed the stairs.

>>Your confessor is in the front parlour<< she told me, with a slight giggle.

>>My confessor?>> I looked at her in confusion for a moment, but then walked through to find Blixa sitting amidst a pile of books, as if he’d been waiting for me for some time, dressed up in his priest’s collar and his tight-buckled corset. It annoyed me how beautiful he looked, how sharp his cheekbones were, how impossibly blue his eyes seemed under the perfect arches of his exquisite eyebrows. But as I got closer, I could see that he was wrecked, that there were dark shadows under his eyes that were nothing to do with his mascara, and his skin had broken out in spots across his chin.

For a long minute, we just looked at each other, but then he finally said >>Hi<< in a rather small voice.

>>Why are you here?>> I asked, trying to sound unbothered, but I just couldn’t keep the defensiveness out of my voice.

>>Do I need an excuse to visit you now?>> he asked, again in that small, tightly restrained voice. I shrugged, and struggled with the urge to reach out and touch the skin of his cheek, to brush away a clump of backcombed hair that had rested against the side of his face. There was another, longer silence between us, but finally he opened the black leather attaché case at his feet, and extracted a large colour brochure. >>Well, if you require an explanation from me, I came to bring you this.<<

I took the brochure from him, and started to flip through it idly, before realising what it was. >>Clinique du Parc, Casablanca: World Leaders in Gender Reassignment Surgery and the Treatment of Transsexuality.<< As I flipped through it, astonished, I saw slightly more euphemistic and medicalised descriptions of the process that Peter had described. But then my heart shuddered in my chest. Blixa had told me he didn’t want to me to go through with The Operation because he loved
me the way I was. Was the fact that he was, now, offering me this, the sign that he had, somehow, stopped loving me?

>>Is that it, is your love for me finally at an end?<< I asked, trying unsuccessfully to keep my voice from breaking.

>>What?<< he almost spat. >>How can you think that? I searched for this, I went out and found it for you, because I love you so completely. Because I want you to be completely you, and I want you to be happy. If this is what makes you happy... Being half-man, being whole man... I want you to be happy with you, more than I want myself to be happy with your body. So how can you think that I don’t love you? My soul is still on fire with love for you. It burns. How can you think I don’t love you completely?<< he demanded, the hurt in his eyes almost unbearable.

>>You only love me when Nick’s not around<< I said, in a very small voice.

>>That’s not tr...<< But Blixa’s voice abruptly gave out, as if uncompromising, moralistic, Prussian little Blixa simply could not physically force himself to lie. >>What do you want from me<< he said instead, turning the Wahr into a Was at the last second. >>You know how I am made. You know what inspires me. Longing. Not having, but wanting.<<

>>It’s never going to be me, is it?<< I found myself almost howling. >>Your new songs, they are all about Jana. Schizophrenic drawings... vultures circling the city. I heard the lyrics on the demos you played for Nick. And Nick... Nick is your inspiration now. You want to impress Nick so much. But what about me? You are just too sure of my devotion now. What is there left of you, for me?>>

>>Carter<< he sighed. >>You’re my lover, my teacher, my sparring partner, my conscience, my barometer for what is right, and true, and real. This is what I love most about you, that you are not a musician, you are not tied up with this part of my life. So that you can truly be objective, and I trust you. What do I have to do, to make you trust me, and come back home with me?>>

>>Come back home with you? What do you need me for?>> I shrugged.

>>I need you<< he insisted, a word I had never heard Blixa say before, and might probably never hear him say again. Blixa didn’t need anyone. Blixa had constructed a whole morality out of never needing anyone. >>The bed is too cold without you. It’s too silent.<<

>>Silent<< I laughed. >>With Gila and Berni upstairs.<<

>>There’s no one to talk to. No one to read to. No one to scratch my rough ideas up against, to polish them until they shine. No one to contradict me and say, ‘No, Blixa, don’t be ridiculous, that Bohr Model of the atom is completely outdated and oversimplified, here, read this article on Quantum Theory, and how the atom is really fizzing and bubbling and spitting like an unseasoned log on a fire...’<<

I almost laughed aloud, to hear him suddenly change his voice into an exaggeration of my faint English accent. He knew how to flatter me, and I found that flattery working.

>>I miss you<< he said, and the plaintiveness of his voice shocked us both. >>And I don’t just miss your cock, and your soft breasts to lay my head between. I miss your mind. I miss the way that you and I, our conversations, the things we think, just fit together, like two halves of a complete being. You are not a half-person. You are half of a Carter-Bargeld whole. And I can’t sleep, when you’re not there. I can sleep through the night, when you are in my arms. And I can only sleep when I’m with you, because being with you feels like safety. Do you not understand how much this means to me?>>
Of course I went back with him. Blixa played me like an instrument, he knew exactly when to be tough, and when to be tender, leaving me craving him like a drug. I packed up my things, and followed him meekly, and we made up our emotional wounds in each other’s bodies, not brutal and perverted this time, not subversive and queer, just two people who needed to hold one another, and make each other come to paper over the cracks that kept threatening to shatter this strange life we shared.

For the rest of April, and the whole of May, we slowly knitted ourselves back together. The weather turned clear, and Berlin abruptly decided to become lovely. The garden that lay just beyond the doors to our room, which we’d spent all winter keeping at bay with heavy curtains and draft excluders and endless caulking to keep out the rain, suddenly exploded into bloom. I started to help the other squatters with their vegetable plots, as seedlings that had been cultivated and nurtured in a dozen windows found their way to neat rows in the earth, and the bombsite turned first that bright, intense yellow-green of early Spring, and then suddenly exploded in a profusion of flowers. Throwing open the doors of our deep, sub-basement hole, I joyfully let the Spring in. I dug out weeds, hacking at the fat thickets of roots, to work out my frustrations, then I sat under the shade of a straw hat on a folding deck chair, with Blixa bringing me coffee as a reward for my labours. I fed him tender greens, fresh from the ground, and his skin started to lose that awful, acne-scarred greyish tone, and look almost healthy. We ate well, from that garden, after the privations of winter, and it showed in Blixa’s boyish face.

That spring was, I think, the most beautiful Blixa ever looked. He was slim and graceful, elegantly wasted, but drug abuse had not yet turned his face cadaverously gaunt. His eyes were bright and inquisitive, burning with a curiosity and passion that captivated everyone who met him. And his hair had reached a perfect length, cut to the nape of his long, elegant neck, shaved back to show his cute, oddly elf-like ears, and yet teased and back-combed into a huge, light brown coxcomb, that seemed to exaggerate his tall, slender length until he seemed about seven feet tall. Various West Berlin artists and film-makers took photos of him, which appeared in the local music press. I had to cut them out and save them, pressed in a book, because he genuinely looked like a rock star, resplendent in his rubber trousers and that slim-fit priest’s shirt, with the new inner-tube waistcoat that Val had made him, the long lines of industrial staples hugging his slender figure and exaggerating his broad shoulders, the lines of his metal-ringed harness inviting the eye to caress his groin. Sometimes it almost hurt to look at him he was so pretty, his thick eyelashes darkened with mascara, his eyes so deep a blue they looked bottomless, his lips a bruised pink just begging to be kissed. I looked at him, and he took my breath away, but he teased me, when I wanted to sit down and draw him, as if I didn’t already have enough sketches of him.

>>>Never<<< I said. >>>You are my muse.<<<

But Blixa laughed, as he picked up the drafts of my comic book that I had abandoned in order to trace his beautiful features. >>>I don’t even think this is true any more. I think Nick has become your muse, too.<<<

And as he showed me a picture of Dirk McJerk attempting to garrotte Kirk with his own guitar strings, in a scene that strongly mirrored the events of the previous month in Hansa, I started to shudder. I didn’t want Kick Knave for a muse; I hated that wanker! And yet the artist in me, like I was keeping some horrid insect wriggling on a pin, still couldn’t manage to look away in horror.

I kept the brochure from the Clinique du Parc for a long time. I read it over and over, searching for clues, whether this was the right thing to do, or not. I wrote to the address at the bottom, and more literature, heavy medical literature, arrived in a plain brown envelope as if it were pornography. I read that over and over, with an electrician’s attention to detail, skipping through the diagnostic process to linger obsessively on every description of every medical procedure, and every caveat and
rare side effect and percentage of risk.

In the end, it wasn’t what they did say, but what they didn’t say, that swayed me. Breast tissue can be removed, but there may be a small chance of scarring, and many patients experience a loss of sensation. How much loss of sensation? It had taken me years of hating my lumpy feminine breasts, to grow to love the way that Blixa’s mouth felt on them now. I didn’t want to give that up. They talked about the average growth of clitoral tissue, with hormonal therapy and pumping to elongate it, but it wasn’t enough. Possibly centimetres of growth? How many centimetres of growth? It barely seemed worth it. I wanted a cock, not a tiny stub of a thing. But did I really honestly want a cock? Did I really want to be a boy? Or did I just want desperately to not be a girl? When I had been in London, with all those wonderful, exciting gay men, and the shallow, superficial goth girls with their overly powdered cheeks and silly chatter, I had wanted, desperately, to be taken for a boy. But back in Berlin again, surrounded by strong, fierce, androgynous women with short hair, big boots and outspoken opinions about politics and art? I didn’t feel the pressure, not so much, to avoid being seen as a girl.

Firing up the coal stove to take the chill of the evening, I took off my clothes and I peered at my long, square body in the cracked full-length mirror that Blixa had rescued from a skip. My lover looked at my body, too, and made growling noises, and tried his best to tempt me into bed, but I shooed him away, as I stood there, holding my arms across my chest and trying to imagine myself without my breasts and with a stubby little mushroom between my legs. But Blixa came up behind me, and put his arms around my waist and pretended to sink his teeth into my shoulder, and I laughed, pushing him off, and reminding him that I could pick him up and toss him over one shoulder if he misbehaved.

And he smirked, and said >>I’d like to see you try<< and suddenly we were wrestling and laughing, and tugging at one another. And I suddenly realised, I liked my body when I was with him. I liked the way it felt, I liked the things it did, the way it could wrestle him down and pin his wiry arms behind his back and make him cry for mercy, saying he’d do anything, anything I asked, his eyes both pleading and mischievous. My body wasn’t the problem. It was the stupid things that people assumed about me, when they looked at my lying body and thought it said anything about me, or what I was. I didn’t want a different body; I wanted to live in a different world where my body didn’t matter.

After we fucked, I got up, and I picked up the literature from the clinic. I stared at it, as Blixa dozed, sated, then I walked to our coal stove, pried the door open with a pair of tongs, and tossed the whole bundle onto the fire. Blixa was right. I didn’t want to be a half-man or a whole man. I wanted to be a Valdi.

By June, business with the band started kicking off again. A deal had been reached by the mercurial Stevo Pearce, and the New Buildings officially signed to Some Bizzare. A ‘road manager’ had been acquired, on the recommendation of ‘a friend’ (of course I groaned internally when I discovered the mutual friend was Nick), an English woman whose job it was to get the band out and playing gigs, and they started to make plans to tour England. A big gig in London had already been booked for the band, in mid-June, but already Blixa was arguing with Stevo, because when he saw the ad for the concert, he exploded with annoyance, as apparently he hated the support acts, who he derided as wanna-be industrial groups trying to muscle in on the New Buildings’ sound. In fact, one of the groups, according to Blixa, wasn’t just trying to steal their sounds, but had gone so far as to try to rip off Blixa’s inimitable crows’ nest of a haircut.

The negotiations went on for a week, via very expensive long distance phone calls, until Blixa finally
suggested that it might actually be easier to just go to England, and handle press and promotion and tour-booking in person, especially since we, still living in a squat, definitely struggled with the business of arranging those expensive long-distance phone calls. (Truth be told, there was no one left in Berlin who was willing to let Blixa borrow their phone to ring London, as he never repaid any money when the bills turned up.) But this idea of going to London actually worked out well for me, as the first issue of ‘Kaos Komics’ (Warren had decided to keep the German spelling of the name, as German was viewed as subversive and cool) was to be released in England, and the publisher wanted me to go over to do some promotion, photos, interviews with the press and so forth. Fortunately, Stevo agreed, and sent two plane tickets, so instead of driving to London this time, we would actually fly in comfort, though Blixa severely hated flying, since it aggravated his tricky sinuses so.

So I rang Val and asked her if she wanted to housesit our room in the squat again, and luckily she jumped at the chance. She moved in, carting boxes down the stairs, the day that we were due to fly out. But of course Blixa, lazy as ever, hadn’t bothered packing anything in advance, so I was throwing clothes into suitcases as he lolled on the bed, reading an American newspaper to practice his English.

>>Listen to this, Valdi<< he whistled, smoothing out the newspaper across the mattress. >>The first woman to go into Space – Sally Ride – will be launched with the American Space Shuttle this coming week...<<

>>Not first woman in Space<< corrected Val, dumping a large cardboard box at the foot of the bed. >>Only first American woman in Space.<<

I turned to say something, but as she leaned over the box, I noticed, almost against my will, that she was wearing an extremely low cut peasant blouse, and as she straightened up, I caught a glimpse of her rather buxom breasts, nestled together amidst the stitching. Spring had definitely sprung, as I felt an involuntary shudder of lust go through me like a knife.

But as I shook my head to try to clear my brain, Blixa leapt into the gap. >>That’s not what it says here, in the American papers. It says Sally Ride, the first female Astronaut from NASA...<<

>>Well, of course Americans would say that. Soviet space pilots are not Astronauts, they are Cosmonauts. First female Cosmonaut went into Space, June 1963<< announced Val cheerfully.

>>Are you sure?<< I asked, distracted by the glisten of her sweat rising from the back of her neck as she turned to go back out to fetch another box.

>>Quite sure<< said Val with a self-satisfied little nod. >>I was named after first female Cosmonaut – Valentina Tereshkova. She went up into Space on my birthday, 16th of June, so I am named for her.<<

>>Happy Birthday<< offered Blixa, though it was still a few days off.

>>Thank you<< acknowledged Val briskly, then turned again, to open up the box she had just deposited at the foot of the bed. The room was full of boxes and suitcases, so there wasn’t much room, but as she bent over, this time with her back to me, I noticed that due to the exceptionally warm weather, she was wearing very cute and very tiny cut-off jeans shorts that rode up to reveal large crescents of her very pert and rounded bum. And as I caught the sweet glimpse of her flesh, this time, the shudder of lust was so strong I could not deny it. Valentina frankly terrified me. Mostly because she wasn’t another of those skinny, angular West Berlin girls, she was a plump and well-endowed cornflower doll of a girl, with an hourglass figure and an arse like a ripe peach that seemed to hover in the air before me like a fever dream. The force of my lust caught me totally by surprise,
like a thief in the night. It had been so long since I’d experienced that visceral, hormonal surge of desire for anyone that wasn’t Blixa, that I had forgotten what it felt like. And just as it registered across my befuddled brain that this really truly was a physical, pit-of-my-stomach *lust*, a second behind that realisation was a stab of remorse, followed swiftly by stinging guilt, as I wrenched my eyes swiftly away from her.

But I had not been quick enough. Across the room, Blixa had noticed my visceral reaction, and his face curled up in a wolfish smile as he considered this new discovery. But Val, oblivious, found what she had been digging for, and straightened up as she turned back towards me.

>>Here<< she insisted, thrusting a small, framed piece of newsprint towards me. >>I know you cannot read Russian, but here is photo of me, with other famous Valentina. We are from same, small district of Yaroslavl Oblast, you see. Very small village.<<

>>What do these letters on the wall say?<< I asked, trying to concentrate on the faded photo of the small, tightly swaddled baby instead of on the bountiful body of the beautiful, now adult woman before me, hoping my face wasn’t flushed bright red, though it felt like it surely must be.

>>Is hard to translate exact honorific... something like... Russian Space... diminutive form of term for beloved-female-leader... Like a.. queen, or a princess, I suppose. Though, obviously, Soviets do not have royalty.<<

>>Russian Space Princesses? Can I see?<< piped up Blixa, his wolfish smile turning positively devilish at my obvious discomfort. And suddenly, I was annoyed with him.

>>Well, don’t just lounge there like some pasha while we’re slaving away<< I suddenly found myself nagging at him. >>Get up and help Val carry her boxes.<<

But Val suddenly dropped her sweet and somewhat sentimental Russian space princess smile, and resumed her customary scowl of disdain. >>No, no, I do not want dirty back-room man touching my clean things. Is bad enough I have to disinfect bed where his dirty boots have been lying.<< And with this, she turned and swept back upstairs.

Blixa positively leered at me from across the room as he surreptitiously swung his dirty wellies back down to the floor. >>Well, it’s obviously not *me* she’s wearing that sexy outfit for.<<

>>Shut up<< I sputtered, placing the framed photo back in her box and turning my frustrations to trying to get our suitcase zipped up.

But Blixa continued to cackle away, climbing off the bed and getting up to examine the newspaper clipping. >>I’m not jealous, honest. I just think it’s adorable how flustered you are. I think... yes, you are. You are actually blushing.<<

>>I’m not flustered over... her.<< I was so flustered I couldn’t even bring myself to say her name. >>I’m flustered over this flight, which you know we are going to miss if we don’t get packed up and on our way.<<

He smirked as he moved closer to me, and removed one of his more ragged black leotard tops from the suitcase and replaced it with his priest’s shirt. >>I remember when you used to get that flustered over me.<<

That started me blushing all over again, because, honestly, I wasn’t sure that Blixa had ever really stopped flustering me. >>I never did<< I blatantly lied.

>>Coming into the Risk bar every Saturday and asking for coffee... honestly. And I was so
fascinated by you, I used to actually go in the back and make it for you. 

>>You used to go in the back because you wanted to go and do a line without having to share it with Maria<< I teased right back.

>>No, it was definitely you. I was captivated. I always wanted any excuse to talk to you...<< insisted Blixa, moving closer to me and prodding me gently in the waist. And abruptly the door slammed open.

>>Hey, it becomes awfully near flight time. Do you two want ride to airport?<< I shot guiltily apart from Blixa as Val returned, bearing another box.

>>I... erm... are you ready?<< I turned to Blixa.

>>I am always ready<< he replied with a wink, in a tone so lascivious that Val actually turned and glowered at him.

>>You disgust me<< spat Val, adding a Russian word I was sure wasn’t an honorific.

>>Well... OK, erm...<< It was hard getting my brain in gear, as I tried hard to think through what Val was actually asking. But the more I stuttered, the more Blixa made that face at me, raising his eyebrows knowingly at my awkwardness. >>But, erm, my van is still parked back at my Aunts’ house, so, erm... I think we have to get the S-Bahn.<<

>>No, is no problem. I borrowed car to move boxes. I can take you<< chirped Val, and I was stuck. But as I shouldered my bag, and picked up the suitcase, Blixa simply grabbed his rubber vest and sloped after me. But when we reached the stairs, Val rounded on him. >>She is too good for you! Pick up heavy suitcase, lazy back-room man.<<

Blixa merely laughed as he did as he was told, as his natural optimism could never be submerged for long.

Of course Blixa teased me about it the entire way to London. But when we got to London, all was not well. I had thought Stevo was coming to collect us, or would at least send a car, but we arrived to find nothing arranged, and had to catch the Tube in to Soho by ourselves. But at least we did have accommodation, though it turned out we weren’t staying out in Hackney this time. Stevo had found us a room in Soho, which seemed really convenient at first, until night fell. Because I swear this bedsit was next door to a brothel, from all the coming and going, all night long. The tiny room, which shuddered with every door slam next door, was far too noisy for me to work, and the central location proved far too much of a distraction for Blixa, who moved quickly from the lively Soho club scene to the lively Soho drugs scene. I was happy to see Marc again, but Marc had a lot of very disreputable friends who were happy to ply Blixa with ‘substances’ which might make him more pliable.

I didn’t notice how bad Blixa’s amphetamine abuse was getting, because I was working so hard, trying to negotiate a new creative labyrinth, navigating the publishing industry without Wolfgang or Salomé or Monika to explain the terms to me. But Blixa was becoming unpredictable, even to the point that I started to notice. I knew he could handle his liquor, as it was nothing to him to suckle an entire bottle of vodka over the course of an evening. But the speed in London was not the pure, medical grade Russian Vitamins he was used to in West Berlin. It was cut with all kinds of crap, and had often alarming effects on his physical health, not to mention his mood. Gigs were scheduled, the promoters were messed about with escalating and often conflicting demands, and then cancelled at
short notice. It wasn’t my job to keep track of this stuff; they had this road manager who was supposed to be handling concerns such as their live engagements – or their failure to deliver thereupon. But Blixa was so erratic and unreliable that though the manager did her best to handle the band’s bookings and un-bookings, she often turned to me, to try to track down and essentially manage my capricious lover when he failed to appear.

I didn’t like being forced into that role. I tried to keep my creative career and my press separate from Blixa. We had both agreed, under prodding from Stevo, that Blixa was to be presented as available. If Stevo had his way, Blixa would be the new heartthrob of the fast-exploding ‘industrial’ scene, but this required that Blixa be presented as being free of any encumbrances of gender-confused German girl-boyfriends. The British music press laughed at the notion of any thin, spotty heartthrobs emerging from such a serious music scene, but they still obligingly printed nude photos of Blixa, splayed, naked and almost luminously pale, for the readers’ admiration. It worked; interest was piqued. Stevo, it turned out, had a much better eye for what would appeal to girls and gay men, than the misogynist, homophobic British music press. But sustaining that interest required maintaining the illusion of availability.

Warren wanted me to take much the same approach. It was, apparently, intensely unusual for comic book artists, even underground ones, to be well-dressed and attractive, especially in the kind of androgynous rock’n’roll way that I was. So he made sure that photos were sent out with the promotional material, and included a biography, lifted straight from Wolfgang’s old ‘life statement’ for me, saying that I was a fashionable Berliner of no fixed sexuality, intent on living without gender, as inspired by Ursula LeGuin’s The Left Hand of Darkness. (I had still never read this book, but Warren insisted that comic book collectors were really big into sci-fi, so it was a cool reference to drop.) It turned out to be a highly effective hook, even beyond the Nerd World of sci-fi comic book geekdom. Press that didn’t normally cover comic books, or graphic novels, as Warren liked to call them – and not just my alma mater, Melody Maker, but proper papers like the Guardian – were suddenly interested in the brooding, ambiguous androgyne that pouted from my promo photos in a leather jacket and my now towering black quiff. But again, this gender-tease relied on the idea of my own availability, and that didn’t involve entanglements with long, skinny, rubber-clad West Berlin dandies.

It was such a strange time. In many ways, London culture was obsessed with gay subcultures and gay icons. Boy George, in his full Irish ragamuffin drag, was a regular in both teengirl magazines and tabloid gossip columns. And yet there was a kind of lurking hatred and fear just under the surface of that fascination (especially as gay men in New York and Hollywood suddenly started getting sick in strange and frightening, mysterious new ways) that prevented all of these gay characters from ever being named as actually gay. The idea of a Queer Power Couple, such as Blixa and I might have been, had we ever come out about who and what we really were, was unthinkable. Had we been an ambiguous but straight couple, we might have got away with it, as the Eurythmics were an androgynous heterosexual couple, him with long hair, her in the male drag of power suits, and they were enjoying a huge amount of chart success with their icy, German-flavoured electro-pop.

But taking that pose would have meant lying, which Blixa, with his absolute, uncompromising commitment to radical authenticity, would never have sanctioned. Neither of us were straight, and our relationship was anything but. To lie by omission, to simply fail to mention our relationship, was a minor breach of honesty to his moral compass, but to actively pretend that we were a heterosexual man and a woman, that would have required a level of personal mendacity that neither of us were prepared to countenance. Myself, I thought they were both lies, but we were damned either way. I chose the convenient dishonesty. So instead, we never, ever mentioned each other in our interviews, and I lived in constant fear that someone might connect the dots that linked us together, praying that my original source at Melody Maker never ratted us out. I just had to hope that our mild level of
indie-magazine fame was not lucrative enough to tempt an outing.

But it shocked me, the invasion of privacy that dealing with the British press seemed to involve. No one wanted to accept the notion that I was living without gender. Everyone wanted to know What I Was. The whole thing was viewed as a giant tease. Female writers often tried to claim me as a Feminist icon, but they found themselves revolted by the transgressive themes of my comics, sex and drugs and violence in comically oversized parodies. The radical lesbian separatists, who had become recurring characters in the comics, rampaging across the page until they destroyed even the ‘patriarchal order of the page’s grid system’ had, to my relief, inspired mirth and delight in my deeply feminist friends. Gudrun and Bettina and Beate had got the joke, understanding that the target of the satire was the exaggerated fear that men held about feminism and the masculine horror of feminists. The Society for Terror by Radical Angry Wimmin, or the S.T.R.A.W. Feminist Front, as they called themselves, was a warped mirror reflecting the kind of stereotypes they found thrown at themselves all the time: angry feminazis, screaming harpies who hated men.

But British feminists, it seemed, did not catch the layers of irony involved. Especially after someone uncovered my connection, not to the spiky radicalism of the New Buildings, but the toxic stew of the Birthday Party’s cartoony pseudo-transgressive take on evil. My name, after all, was on the engineering credits for their latest E.P., a dirty little cauldron of nasty sounds whose cover was graced with a cleverly obscured but still cringeworthy fucking swastika.

“This isn’t feminist” accused a particularly persistent interviewer, a committed feminist named Julie something-or-other. “I don’t think you’re living some brave life, free of gender. I think you’re a woman who is afraid to be a woman. You’re using this ‘No-Gender’ identity as a kind of trick, a ploy, a ‘get out of sexism free’ card. And I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that, honey.”

“You have no idea what I face,” I tossed back, trying very hard not to lose my temper. “The enemy, to me, is people’s assumptions about what I face, as much as the various oppressions that I do face. Just as people’s assumptions about what my body means are the problem. Not the body itself.”

“But you have a body,” persisted Julie. “That means you have a sex. Why are you so dishonest about what your sex is? What is your sex?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” I snapped, narrowing my eyes at her.

“Sex, and the oppressions that certain people face, on account of the Class they are put into on account of their Sex, is the single most relevant factor in this discussion. In fact, in any political discussion. You don’t get to change that, or evade that, at will. Just answer the question. What is your sex?”

“I am the Anti-Sex,” I snarled, in the defiant tone of the Risiko punks, as I remembered that very first conversation with Blixa: I am an anti-musician; I am an anti-artist.

The next week, it was on the cover of London’s largest ‘radical’ newspaper: My huge, blown-up promo photo with the eyes scratched out, and the slogan “I am the Anti-Sex” substituted into their gouged-out place, like the cover of that iconic Sex Pistols record.

Blixa’s eyes grew huge with admiration and cupidity when he saw it. >>I am the anti-sex<< he echoed, tracing the letters with his fingertips. >>I wish we got coverage like this. They just ask us if we’re Nazis, because we are German.<<

I guess the controversy worked, as Warren was delighted with the initial sales figures when they started coming in. But my reputation was shredded. With the association with the Birthday Party uncovered, people suddenly connected Dirk and Kirk with Nick and Rowland, not as parody, but as
loving homage. The next few interviews were with grotesque young men who covered their
revulsion towards women with this thin veneer of transgressive radicalism. I wanted nothing to do
with it. I did not hate women the way they did; I just did not think I was one.
Chapter Summary

The Birthday Party return to London in disarray, and Nick’s reliance on Blixa drives Rowland from the studio, and the band. But as Nick and Carter are thrown more together, their disagreements turn poisonous as Carter discovers his dark secret.

TW for rape apology, and description of sexual assault of a minor

A reminder that this is fiction, and the characters are entirely my own invention - but this event in particular is based on documented evidence and self-confession.

By July, the rest of the New Buildings appeared in London, to restart work on recording, and then mixing the album. In preparation for their arrival, Blixa and I moved from the room in Soho to a squat in a dilapidated ‘Flock of Bats’ on Brixton Hill. To be honest, I had been expecting a nice, well-ordered Berlin style squat with a fairly regular, albeit anarcho-syndicalist, lifestyle, run by committee and fixed up by DIY-minded residents. That shithole on Brixton Hell was nothing like a Berliner squat. It had a burned-out space usually used as a shooting gallery on the ground floor, a goth band and their mates sprawled across the first and second floors as it slumped into what the council euphemistically called “managed decline” (actually an almost Victorian slum-like level of decay), and then the New Buildings just trying to make the top floor habitable. Half our money went on plugging holes in the roof, and pulling up sodden linoleum to make the bathroom usable, though of course there was no shower and no hot water. Making the most of my skillset, I went round Brixton Market, bought a power shower that had ‘fallen off the back of a truck’ and sent the bill for its installation to Stevo Pearce. It was almost like being back in Berlin.

The Goths were amusing, not very bright, but mostly harmless. If they were ever irritating, I just wove their foibles into the Dirk and Kirk stories in Kaos Komics. But the shooting gallery, that was a whole different story. I did my best to try to keep it under some kind of check. There wasn’t much I could do about the junkies who came there to fix, but I resented the dealers who would hang out in the shelter of the shared doorstep. This was a little enclosed vestibule, just out of sight of the road, and therefore an ideal site for avoiding the police, but their little camps as they set up shop made it difficult for me to get in and out of the flat. I tried to be straight with them, and say, look, I was not looking to disrupt their trade, and I wanted no trouble, but I needed to be able to get in and out of my house, without stepping over them every time. But Blixa, of course, worked out his own deals with them, saying it was fine if they camped out on the doorstep, so long as they were prepared to get him a better class of amphetamine than he could get in the clubs. So I would spend the afternoon trying to get those fuckers off of my doorstep, only to come back in the evening and have them tell me “But Blixa said we could sit here...”

As Blixa started consuming more and more ‘substances’, and work on finishing their album slowed to a crawl, their British tour was rescheduled, then rescheduled again. I didn’t want to be a nagging partner, but the amount he was using was starting to frighten me. He became careless; he just lost track of time. He was forever missing the last tube from Oxford Circus, yet the idea of getting on the N159 to Brixton at Oxford Circus while wearing make-up and an incredibly gay-looking rubber suit, was in those days, still a dangerous proposition. He always wanted to take a taxi instead, but we didn’t have the money. Though he would blithely call a cab and charge it to Stevo’s account, I kept
trying to remind him that money from the record company wasn’t free. Now that they had signed a deal, all their carefully receipted expenses had to be recouped from their sales before they saw any money on the other side of the album release. Mark kept trying to impress upon Blixa the importance of Royalties and Sales Statements and Recoupable Expenses, and all those things that Stevo handwaved away with promises that Blixa would be flaunting his cheekbones from the cover of the NME soon, but Blixa was unconcerned, borne up on his eternal amphetamine optimism. Every time we got a taxi back from Soho to Brixton, the anxiety would eat away at the pit of my stomach, but Blixa was usually so fucked up, he didn’t care.

The nights blurred into one another after a while. But one early morning cab ride stood out in my memory. Blixa had been having sinus pain all day, as the pollen count of the hay fever season climbed, to the point where I had to go out and get him a saline spray to ease his nasal distress. I warned him not to put any more things up his nose when he was already having trouble with his sinuses, but of course he didn’t listen to me and carried on chopping up speed with a razor blade and sucking it up his nose. I was exhausted, almost dropping with fatigue by the time we climbed into the cab, but he was wired and antsy.

Some roadwork was going on around the South Bank, so we ended up on a long diversion through Vauxhall, leaving Blixa irritated and cranky, stuck in traffic. He kept sniffing and scratching at the inside of his nose, holding one nostril closed as he tried to blow some blockage out the other. I tried to ignore the disgusting noises that were emanating from his side of the cab, but as we passed under the shadow of the railway bridges, and out into the sodium-yellow light of the main road, I looked over and saw a sticky, dark trail of blood running from his nose, across his upper lip and down around the edge of his chin.

>>Blixa<< I stuttered, digging for a tissue. >>What the hell is that?<<

Blixa looked up, startled, then put his hand to his nose. When he pulled it away, he saw the blood, but he touched his wettened finger to his tongue, just to make sure. >>If I carry on consuming like this, I’ll be dead in two years<< he sighed, with a resigned fatalism that broke my heart.

I, who never cried if I could possibly help it, burst into tears, and was inconsolable, the entire taxi ride back to Brixton.

If I thought things were bad enough through July, in the first week of August, the Birthday Party – or what was left of them, as it was now down to just Nick, Tracy and Rowland – turned up in London to start mixing the EP they’d recorded for Mute. The three of them were barely speaking, a state of affairs which was made all the more painfully obvious by the way they dispersed across London. Rowland and Gen were staying with friends up in Camden. Tracy and Kate weren’t far away from them, in Kilburn. But to make my living situation even more grim, Nick and Anita moved into the flat below us, taking over from one of the Goths while their band went on tour. The two biggest junkies in West Berlin, moving into a flat above a shooting gallery, and below a nest of speed freaks. It would have been funny if it had been an episode in my comics, and not my actual life.

Anita was in dreadful shape, a pale shadow of the vivacious, creative woman I’d known in West Berlin. She was anxious and paranoid, convinced that Nick had been screwing around on her while he was back in Australia. One night, she even confessed to me that she had made a pretty concerted attempt to leave him, trying to kick the habit of him like she was trying to kick heroin, only to have him ring her, night after night, insisting to her that she was the only person he could trust, and begging her to come back. Of course it had only been crocodile tears. He had no intention of giving up his almost compulsive screwing around; it was simply that his masculine ego could not handle the idea of being the one who was left. And Anita was trapped, knowing that it was utterly crushing her spirit to stay, but finding that she was unable to leave him, as he would do everything in his power to
drag her back. So trapped, she sank deeper and deeper into drugs.

And Blixa, in London, with Nick, was almost unbearable. Unpredictable gave way to downright untrustworthy. Sometimes, he didn’t actually turn up to his own band’s sessions, leaving Mufti and Andrew in charge of the mixing process. But to my surprise, the other New Buildings didn’t blame Nick for Blixa’s increasing capriciousness; they blamed me. Tensions increased, to the point where I stopped going in to meet Blixa at their studio, and certain band members moved out of the flat on Brixton Hill to stay with girls and/or friends.

The Birthday Party had been booked into Pink Floyd’s mammoth barn of a recording studio, up on the border of Islington and Cannonbury. And with the typical haphazard carelessness that plagued the band, somewhere between Hansa and Britannia Row, the channel-maps, the long strips of tape that were fixed along the bottom of the mixing desk so you knew what instrument was on what track, had gone missing. Tony, who had spent much of the previous recording sessions almost as fucked up as the musicians on Russian Vitamins and cheap vodka, could barely remember which song was which, let alone what channel all the instruments had been recorded on. I, on the other hand, had spent the sessions reasonably sober, and had a fairly good memory for that kind of thing. And so, despite never wanting to see those men again in my life, I found myself bundled in the back of a taxi by Blixa, and whisked back to the studio to clean up their messes.

I didn’t think it was possible, but in the months since I had last seen them, the band had deteriorated even further. Tracy was a mess, bloated and bleary from some medication he was on, still not entirely recovered from a stretch of jail time he had served for various petty criminal acts. Rowland, too, was clearly not well. I knew the look of junk withdrawal sickness, and this was something deeper than that. That gentle, fastidious man, always so careful in his appearance, was clearly ill, his skin taking on an odd jaundiced tone, and he obviously needed to get to a doctor, but he was reluctant to, because he didn’t want to cop to how dependent he was on heroin. Nick, thinner, meaner, was too out of it to be much of an asshole. He didn’t even protest when Mick, who had been summoned back from Germany, in case I hadn’t been able to sort out the mess of the tapes, walked through the door. Mick and I looked at each other and sighed. Neither of us liked the other much, but it looked like we were the only ones in much of a physical or mental state to get the job done. And so we sat down at the controls with Tony, and tried to put the jigsaw puzzle of which instrument was on which channel back together again.

The first track we lined up was Mutiny In Heaven. I swear to god, that track was cursed in some way. We managed to get most of it sorted out and cued up, which was a bit of a nightmare, given the sometimes double and triple tracked vocals. But the guitar had gone missing. I had sworn that Rowland was doubled in stereo on tracks 13 and 14, but track 13 had just weird, muted sounds, like someone tinkering on an unamplified guitar caught through an overhead mic, and track 14 had half of one rejected guitar take, and half of another, which had been written to accompany a much earlier vocal line, from before Blixa had convinced Nick to go with the haunted, spooky, double-tracks and backing chants. Whatever was there no longer bore the slightest resemblance to anything Nick was doing on the vocals.

Mick put his head into his hands and looked like he was going to either weep or start pulling his hair out, but Tracy dragged himself off the sofa, and went out to tell Rowland that he would have to record the whole thing all over again.

It was like extracting rotten teeth, getting usable takes out of that band. Nothing Rowland played was good enough for Nick, who was really struggling to stay conscious through most of the session, let alone even-tempered. Again and again, we went through take after take. I was at the point, where I was ready to yell “it’s a wrap!” on any goddamn thing that was even vaguely in tune and on time,
but I swear to god, Nick was winding the whole thing out and prolonging it because he was lording it over me, him having me and Blixa in the studio, and me being powerless to leave. After about two hours, Mick had simply had enough and went back to his hotel, saying to call him when it came time to cue up the next track. And on we went, with those interminable sessions on that hellish song.

After about six hours, even the endlessly polite and agreeable Rowland finally snapped, and hissed "Well, I can't just sit here thinking of completely different things to play within six hours, there's only so many things I can come up with in that time" into the studio microphone.

Tony rubbed his eyes, kneaded his temples, then told Rowland to go and take a break. Practically throwing his cans down onto the floor, Rowland unplugged his guitar and climbed to his feet, stalking out through the control room with the guitar still slung round his back, throwing only a single evil glance at Nick, before he went out to the lounge to make a cup of tea.

“How hard is it to write a fucking guitar line,” snarled Nick, when he was gone.

“Guitar lines are easy. Even a childt could right von. In fact, a childt vould probably right zhe best von for zhis song,” drawled Blixa in his deep, sinus-plagued voice.

“Do you just want to get in there and have a go?” suggested Nick, throwing up his hands.

Tracy froze, hovering by the mixing desk, and the tension in the room seemed to abruptly escalate, as Nick looked at Blixa, and Blixa looked back and forth between Nick and Tony and Tracy.

“Nick, is that really such a good idea. I mean... guitar is Rowland’s thing...” ventured Tracy, but Nick cut him off.

“We have tried just about everything else at this point,” Nick countered with a derisive shrug.

“You know he won’t take that well,” pointed out Tracy.

“You know what? I don’t give a fuck. I am dog-damned fucking tired of constantly tip-toeing around that old maid’s feelings. We’ve got six days to get this record finished, and if Rowland can’t do it in that time, let’s get someone who can. Blixa, just have a go, see what you can come up with.”

Blixa looked back and forth between the others with mild hesitation, but finally shrugged. At least he had a musician’s sense of decency about using other people’s equipment, and loped out to the lounge to ask, “Rowland, vould it be alight if I used your guitar?”

I had never heard Rowland so much as raise his voice before, so the explosion that followed took me utterly by surprise, as I could hear that gentle man’s raised voice reverberate through the entire barn-like studio. “Well, fuck you!”

There was the slam of a guitar case being closed, then the echo of footsteps, and the slam of the front door of the studio. About thirty seconds later, Blixa returned to the control room, looking unfazed. “I vill take zhat as a no. Is zhere anozher guitar I might use?”

Somehow, someone located Blixa one of Pink Floyd’s million and one guitars from a storeroom, and carefully tuned it up in preparation for use. Blixa, ignoring the weight of history in this instrument, simply walked into the recording room, plugged it into the amp, then started fiddling with the knobs, actively de-tuning the pitch, and fucking with the tone controls to make it weedy and trebly.

“How do you want a run-through?” asked Tony through the talk-back monitors.

“I do not need a run-zhrough,” shrugged Blixa. “I haff heart zhis track a tousandt and von times
already. I could play it in my sleep.”

With one ear of the headphones on, and the other dangling, as much to spare his towering hairdo as to hear the sound in the room, Blixa shouldered the guitar, turned the reverb on the amp all the way up, and clanged his way through the sparse, jittery soundscape, accentuating rather than downplaying the spooked, atonal racket of the performance. One more track of overdubs on Channel 14, and that was it. The song was done. Blixa’s spare, minimal playing, textural rather than melodic, had been exactly what the track needed to bring it to life.

Rowland never came back.

Not that afternoon, and not the next day, either. Although the tall, gentle guitarist had always been quite spare in speech compared to the more garrulous Nick and Tracy, the studio seemed almost deathly quiet without him. I think everyone knew, by the third day he failed to turn up at all, that the record we were trying so hard to save on the mixing desk was essentially a corpse. The band, as it was, was over. And without anyone’s even noticing, Blixa somehow slipped into Rowland’s place at the board. In an odd way, I was happy to have him at my elbow, the gentle friendly nudge at my hand as I adjusted a control he didn’t want altered, the occasional affectionate caress on the back of my neck as I hunched over the EQ pots, trying to trim off some unwanted harmonic. Blixa’s physical presence made those sessions bearable for me, as well as for Nick, in a way that he had been disruptive at Hansa, and I could not have said what the difference was. Maybe there was a loosening of the atmosphere, as they all knew that without Blixa’s total, rock-steady confidence, the record wouldn’t have got mixed at all.

But Nick really was latching onto Blixa in some new and co-dependent way. Even on the days that Blixa didn’t come in to Britannia Row, Nick would ring him at Trident when we were done, and suggest he meet up for a drink in a bar with a late-night licence near the Angel. (London, unlike West Berlin, had much stricter licensing laws, and finding late-night bars or restaurants that served drinks into the early hours of the morning was a constant battle.)

Nick, it seemed, did not want to go home. “It’s Anita,” he finally confessed, as we stumbled from the Blue Angel to a grubby Chinese restaurant where Blixa and I picked at fried rice in order for Nick to obtain another bottle of wine. “She’s become such a drag. Always rabbiting on at me, accusing me of sleeping with women if I so much as mention a girl’s name. I hate to go home, because I know I’m going to face another round of it.”

“But if you don’t go home, surely that just makes the problem worse, as you give her more to be paranoid about,” I tried to point out helpfully.

“Is her paranoia my fault? Honestly, being treated like a criminal makes me want to go out and start an affair if I’m constantly going to be accused of one. I mean, the waitress here is cute. What was her name? Mae Ling? Hey, Mae Ling, darling, can we get a bottle of wine over here, maybe you can be my future wife.” Catching her eye, he picked up the now empty bottle of wine and shook it.

Mae Ling blushed, and giggled in that nervous way that young women do when they don’t know how an extremely drunken man is going to take a rejection, and brought another bottle of wine, and a fresh basket of prawn crackers for me. Blixa, despite his protestations that he was a strict vegan, immediately started in on the prawn crackers, which he had a decided weakness for.

“Vimmen,” he ventured. “Can’t live vizh ‘em…”

“Can’t shoot ‘em!” guffawed Nick, and both of them collapsed into drunken laughter.

I immediately sank an angry prod into Blixa’s thigh, but he wriggled away from it, and put his arm
around my shoulders. “But Carter,” he laughed. “You are always telling me... you are not a woman.”

“It’s not fair,” I protested. “When men have so much structural power, and women do not, to make a joke about killing them. After all, how many women die by the hand of jealous partners, while you complain and act oppressed if your girlfriends give you the evil-eye after staying out drinking all night.” Even as I heard my voice taking on the strident tone of that annoying interviewer, Julie Something-Or-Other, I started to hate myself a little for being forced into the position of defending a sex I was not part of.

“Women die by the hand of jealous partners...” echoed Nick, who seemed to have heard me for perhaps the first time in his life. “God, that’s good. I didn’t know you were a poet, Carter. I’m going to write that down, ‘When woman die by the hand of jealous partners...’ What rhymes with partner?”

“Artner, barter... Carter!” laughed Blixa, as if the whole conversation were hilarious.

“I’m going to change it to lover, I think. More poetic, and a better rhyme,” mused Nick. “Women die by the hands of jealous lovers / a fate more poetic than any of the others... Nah, the meter still isn’t working, but I’m just going to make a note of it. Where’s my notebook? Have you seen my notebook, Blixa?”

“Why do so many of your songs have to be about killing women?” I snorted at Nick.

Nick shrugged and looked vague for a moment, but his face hardened as he scratched away with a pen to record the line on a napkin, then sipped at his wine. “It’s the most poetical subject there is, the death of a beautiful woman.” As I glared at him stonily, he laughed and added, “That’s an Edgar Allen Poe quote, in case you don’t recognise it.”

“I don’t see what’s beautiful about violence, when you’re the one on the receiving end of it.”

“I’m interested in violence. I’m interested in anger. Honestly, you have no idea, Carter. You think you can just go and get some operation to become a ‘real boy’...” I cringed as he said it, air quotes and everything, realising that Blixa must have discussed my private dilemma with him. “You have no idea, what it’s like to be a man. How much anger men carry around with us, day after day.”

“Ooh, it’s so angry-making, all that business of running the world,” I retorted, feeling my hackles rising as we slipped into the familiar argument.

“It’s women who run the fucking world, Carter,” Nick insisted, and it took me a moment to realise he wasn’t actually joking. “I mean, you’re always telling me you’re a feminist and you want power for women. But really, women already run the world. You control everything. Everything that matters.”

“Like what. Name me one thing that women control in this society.”

“Margaret Zhatcher,” suggested Blixa helpfully, who still somehow seemed to think that Nick and I were having an actual political debate, and not a desperate death-struggle at one another’s jugulars.

“Sex,” responded Nick, leaning back and lighting a cigarette, even though the rest of us were not done eating.

“Sex vizh Margaret Zhatcher? No, zhank you. No, no, no, no. No!”

“Women control sex,” persisted Nick. “Women control procreation, and therefore you control the whole world. You have no idea what it’s like to really walk around as a man, perpetually horny, perpetually turned on, and have women telling you what you can and can’t do with your body.
Women wanna control our bodies. You want to control our cocks. Put a fence around our sexuality, no you can’t have that. You have no idea, little girl, how much men hold back. How much anger we walk around with. No idea.”

I stared at him, shocked, because as drunk and slurring his words as he was, a shiver went up the back of my neck as I realised he genuinely meant it. “You talk like you’re oppressed, because you think rape is a natural right?”

“Rape,” laughed Nick. “What a fucking joke. Rape is a chain, that women invented, to hang around sexuality, to control and curtail the freedom of men. You have no idea, girl, what it would be like if women weren’t in control. You could be raped right here.”

I looked from Nick’s face, twisted in drunken malevolence, to Blixa’s, not even for him to back me up or defend me – it wasn’t like I expected my lover to jump in and protect my honour – but just to say, no, you’re crazy. This is not how men want to behave. The idea of Blixa, passive, submissive Blixa, who simply lay back and seduced people into losing their hearts and their bodies to him with his intense beauty, as a natural rapist? I wanted Blixa to come in, and protest that this idea was absurd. That it was only Nick who felt this way, and not all men. But Blixa just looked back and forth between me and Nick with a strange, half curious, half nervous look on his face, like he was trying to puzzle this one through. And it was at that moment, that I realised no help was coming.

Because Blixa never thought of himself as a man or a woman, either, just a Blixa. But Blixa, all six foot three of him, growing up in sexually liberated, gay West Berlin, had only really been verbally hassled, but never actually physically attacked for wearing make-up. My mind flashed back to that night at the SO36, when we’d got some stick from the Soviet soldiers. I had been terrified for our lives, but Blixa had treated the whole thing like a joke. That was why he had laughed and goaded the soldiers, even as his band got out the heavy weaponry. That sudden, liquid cold fear of violent men simply wasn’t part of his experience. And never having lived in the actual body of a woman, he had no idea what bullshit Nick was spouting.

It was at that moment, that a man appeared at our table, an older, more masculine version of Mae Ling, who I rather suspected was her father. “We close now,” the man said, barely keeping the fear and anger out of his polite, shopkeeper tone as he placed the bill in the centre of the table. “You go home.”

I looked around. We had been the only patrons for some time. “OK, OK,” I assured him, digging in my wallet for money to cover the food I had eaten. “Blixa, will you pay for the wine?”

“I haff no money,” protested Blixa.

“Wait, what time is it. We’ve missed the last Victoria Line again,” protested Nick, though I didn’t see him digging in his wallet for money for the drink.

“You go now,” insisted the man, a little louder. “You go now or we call police.”

“Call a cab instead,” grumbled Blixa. “You can put zhis von on Mute’s tab for a change.”

“Not enough money,” added the man, gathering up my coins. “Ten more pound for wine.”

Nick looked at Blixa. Blixa looked at me. I avoided both their eyes. “I don’t drink,” I said pointedly.

Groaning like I had just made the hugest imposition on him, to make him pick up his own drinks tab, Nick dug in his pockets and produced a couple of crumpled fivers. “That’s extortionate,” he muttered. “You could buy a whole vineyard for that in Melbourne.”
Fortunately, the minicab arrived quite quickly and we clambered across the back seat, though I made Blixa sit in the middle, not wanting to risk a close encounter with Nick in this state of mind.

“Fucking women,” Nick persisted, the whole way down Rosebury Avenue. “You know it was that bitch who set her husband on us, because I dared to flirt with her. That’s women, they have the power and they wield it, in every circumstance, just to fuck you over.”

“The idea that they were tired, and just wanted to close up shop to get some sleep, that didn’t occur to you,” I muttered into the purple-orange night outside the taxi window.

“No, it’s women,” persisted Nick. “You know, I have suffered enough in this life already, because of the actions of angry, vindictive women.”

“Like what?” I snapped.

“I was thrown out of high school, on account of a woman.” Nick supplied.

Blixa’s ears pricked up at that, happy to have something in common with his drinking buddy. “In earnest?” he said, his face lighting up in a smile. “You were expelled from school? So was I, my friend – and so was Carter! All three of us. What were you done for?”

Encouraged by Blixa’s interest, which he rightly read as solidarity, Nick grew bolder. “I grabbed some girl’s arse.”

“What?” Blixa blinked, as clearly he had been expecting some political transgression, akin to his attempt at arson, or my defiant queer stance. “How would that get you expelled.”

“Me and my mates used to get drunk on cheap sherry in the student lounge. It was just kid stuff, you know, we were only about 13. First time away from home.” Nick’s voice grew lighter, the anger dropping out of it, as if he were just recounting some boarding school japes. “There was this girl in the lower sixth form who was considered, like... you know the sun would shine out of her arse. Pretty, popular – though in reality, she just had the wealthiest parents, you know. They’d throw pool parties for her at Christmas, that was the real source of her popularity. Well, you know, she annoyed me. She was just such an uptight little bitch, always walking around in, you know those real short-skirts they used to wear in the late 60s. Total tease. You know the type.”

I grew deathly silent, staring across the car in horror, though honestly, it was like Anita had once told me. It was like my disapproval just drove him on to greater heights.

“So one day, I decided to show this stuck-up bitch. She walked a little too close to me and my mates – I mean, you know 13 year old boys are little better than animals, they can’t help what they do – and I saw her arse hanging in my face, so what do you think I did? I just reached up under that little teeny-tiny skirt, and I grabbed her knickers as quick as I could, and I pulled them down around her ankles. Flipped up her skirt to show everyone what was underneath, and you know, I copped a feel, because here’s a real, live girl, naked in front of me, you know, why wouldn’t you?”

He let out a guffaw at his own daring, then looked about to wait for a round of laughter or applause or ‘oh Nick you kidder, you’, like I don’t know what he was expecting. But obviously, my face was completely horror-struck. And Blixa just looked perplexed, as if he couldn’t comprehend the political motivation behind such an act. West German boys were quite accustomed to adult nudity, and would not have seen a naked girl as a provocation in quite the same way that Nick had. “I don’t understand. Why would you be expelled for this?”

“Because, like I said, her parents were wealthy. Olympic size swimming pool in the backyard of
their house, wealthy. While my dad, he was a schoolteacher.” As Nick explained this, Blixa’s face adjusted itself, as suddenly he saw this reconfigured as some kind of class struggle. “Her parents wanted to have me charged with attempted rape. I mean, can you imagine? Just for pulling down her knickers and copping a little feel of her arse. Attempted rape. As if! I was only 13, though I was already quite tall for my age. As if a 13 year old knows what he’s doing.”

“How old was she?” I asked, my voice thick with disgust.

“I dunno... at the start of the Lower Sixth Form... she must have been 16? So, you know, almost an adult,” Nick shrugged.

I tried to remember myself at 16, pale, shrinking, barely daring to press my sweaty palm into Maud’s as if holding hands was an almost impossible act of intimacy. The idea of some young man... forcing down my knickers, grabbing a handful of my flesh, then showing my bared genitals to an entire room full of teenage boys? I felt gripped by a wave of vomit, and would have asked the driver to stop the car, had we not been climbing up the tangle of ramps to get onto Blackfriars Bridge.

Blixa’s face was stony, impassive as he looked back and forth between Nick and me. Clearly, he could see that I was upset, as I stared out the window, and refused to meet anyone’s eye. But I don’t think he understood why I was so furious, as Nick looked so defiant, maybe even flippant.

“Ve haff all zhree of us, been zhrown out of school,” he finally concluded, reaching for my hand and squeezing it gently.

I jerked my hand away, suddenly remembering that awful man who had grabbed at my thighs in the cinema, when I was perhaps 15 or 16, sliding his hand up under my school skirt until it touched the cleft between my thighs. When I had frozen stiff, too shocked or too polite to scream or ask him to stop, but clenching my thighs in a tight knot to keep him out, he had instead seized my hand, and forced it down onto his worm and made me jiggle up and down until it spurted, warm and sticky over my unwilling fingers. Even now, over 6 years later, I could still feel the bile rising in the back of my throat, the white-hot humiliation and disgust, curdling with the searing blast of shame. The way Nick laughed at it, treating it like a joke, the way he had grabbed this girl, not in the dark of a cinema, but in the bright, exposed lights of a student lounge, it made all of those old memories come flooding back into places in my body I wished simply to forget.

I had never thought about this memory in relation to my own predicament; to tell the truth, I did my best not to think about this memory at all. But at that moment, I suddenly wondered. Who would I be, what would I be, if that experience had not burned the sensations of humiliation and shame, into my thoughts about the deep cleft in my body that this man in the cinema had grabbed at? No, it was absurd. I had been a tomboy all my youth, charging through life in boys’ clothes as I climbed trees and dismantled bits of machinery I found in the garage. My gender was not the fault of that lad who had groped at me in the dark. I’d always known I was Butch, even before I found the word.

And I’d worked out pretty early on, years before that damp hand in the dank cinema, that I liked girls, loved their soft bodies, their tinkling laughter and their affectionate minds. But it had not been until that moment in the cinema, that I’d turned Stone, that I’d wanted sex to be something that happened somewhere outside of my body, away from me, a traumatised reaction it had taken Blixa a year to coax me out of and actually allow sex to be something that could take place inside my skin. And as those memories flooded back, triggered by Nick’s careless words, his casual description of his casual violence, I couldn’t help but think... who would I be, if that had never been done to me?

I could not get out of the cab fast enough, as it arrived in Brixton Hill. Taking my bag, I charged upstairs, leaving Blixa and Nick to haggle with the cab driver over whose record company would pick up the tab. Safe in my room, I ripped off my leather jeans, and changed into an old pair of
pyjama bottoms, and wrapped myself in a huge, shapeless cardigan, shivering despite the lingering heat of the August afternoon. And then I climbed into bed, curling into the smallest possible ball as I squished up on the far side by the wall. As my head touched peeling plaster, I suddenly remembered that night in The Skin’s band house. It had definitely been Nick who had grabbed me in the night. I had always known it was. My stomach retched, and I was very nearly sick into my hand.

As much as I wanted to curl in a ball away from the world, I knew that if I threw up in the bed, it would be me who had to clean it up, so I dragged myself out of it, and nearly walked into Blixa, who was trudging through into the bedroom as I was dashing out.

>>Where are you going?<< he demanded drunkenly. >>What, are you so angry with Nick that you can’t even stand to be in the room with me? Are we going through this again?>>

Ignoring him, I dashed through into the tiny single lavatory, and managed to get the bowl open before heaving the Chinese dinner up into the toilet.

The sound of retching must have carried down the hall, because Blixa’s bitching and moaning abruptly stopped. >>Carter...?<< he called out after me. >>Valdi, are you alright?>>

I rested my head against the cool of the porcelain, trying to catch my breath as he staggered after me. Since I’d been in too much of a hurry to even lock the door, he pushed his way in, when I did not answer, and stopped, sliding down to a sitting position as my body was racked with nausea again, disgorgeing prawn crackers and fried rice and finally just green bile into the bowl.

>>Valdi, you’re not pregnant, are you?>> he said, with a note of genuine alarm creeping into his voice. >>You know we can’t afford an abortion.<<

I just sat back on my haunches, feeling the world spinning around me. >>I hope to god I’m not<< I muttered, watching the ugly chintz pattern on the wallpaper swell and then retreat as if the walls were breathing.

Blixa let out a humourless snort as he pulled out a cigarette and lit it. >>You don’t believe in god.<<

But the smell of the cigarette only made my stomach turn over in an alarming way. >>Blix, please can you take that cigarette elsewhere. I feel genuinely grim.<<

This time, his laugh had humour in it, though he did not get up. He took one last deep drag of the cigarette, then merely reached up to stub it out in the tiny handbasin. >>This is payback, it seems, for all the times you were horrible to me when I had a hangover.<<

When I didn’t answer, didn’t even laugh, he leaned forward and touched his hand against the skin of my face. His hand was as cold as ice.

>>You’re burning up<< he observed, then, clenching the extinguished cigarette between his teeth, he climbed unsteadily to his feet, and with a strength that surprised me from that thin, almost frail body, actually lifted me bodily and carried me back through into our bedroom. >>Get into bed<< he said, laying me down softly. >>And stay there. I’ll get a bucket if you need to be sick again.<<

>>It’s freezing<< I muttered, trying to pull the blankets up over my head. >>Can’t you turn the heat on.<<

>>It’s August<< he said, with genuine alarm creeping into his voice as he sat down on the mattress beside me and laid his hand against my forehead. >>It’s almost unpleasantly hot up here.<<

Somewhere downstairs, I heard the echo of raised voices coming closer, then a door slammed once,
and then slammed again, and all of a sudden, the raised voices were in the room below us. There was always noise in that flat below us, the goth band playing their stereos or yelling or the interminable parties of their drugged-up friends, but this was particularly irritating as the shouting seemed to drill straight into my head.

>>Let me fetch you some water<< suggested Blixa, and vanished. I closed my eyes, and the spinning stopped for a little bit, but the voices were just loud enough that I could not quite slip into unconsciousness, just hovering on the verge of the words being audible, but too loud to let me sleep. It was a man and a woman, I could hear that much. She was angry; he defensive. I just wanted to tell them to give it a rest, when Blixa reappeared, holding a plastic mop bucket in one hand, and a glass of water in the other, bending down to his knees and trying to raise my head to drink from it. >>Just sip, don’t gulp<< he instructed. >>Take it easy. Not all at once, or you’ll just be sick again.<<

>>Thank you<< I murmured, grateful for Blixa’s calm tenderness. There was a reason I was supposed to be angry at him, but I couldn’t quite remember what it was.

The voices downstairs reached a fever pitch, as the woman exploded in anger, then abruptly, there was a crash. >>That sounds bad<< observed Blixa. >>I wonder if I should go and check on them.<<

I wanted to close my eyes and sink back into semi-consciousness, but Blixa nudged the water closer to me again. I took a sip, and realised with relief that the voices had stopped. But abruptly, there was a tapping sound at the front door of the flat. I willed it to go away, but it hammered on for a few minutes, then finally stopped. And then, just as abruptly, there was tapping at our bedroom door.

>>Blixa, I don’t want to bother you guys, but...<< Alex’s voice. He usually slept in the front lounge, and often got stuck with answering the door and admitting guests. >>It’s Nick.<<
In an eerie fulfilment of Jana's premonition, Nick and Anita split amidst a violent confrontation. But Blixa makes a choice which ultimately destroys his relationship with Carter forever.

TW: contains domestic abuse, and violence against women

As I stated at the beginning of this story, I have played fast and loose with timelines for plot purposes. The events described in this chapter took place in 1987, in West Berlin, rather than in Brixton in 1983, but they are well-documented as having happened.

Blixa moved to get up, but I suddenly remembered why I was angry, just as the realisation dawned that the fighting couple downstairs had been Nick and Anita. >>Don’t let him in here, beloved. Please. I don’t want him in our flat.<<

>>Blixa, it’s me,” moaned Nick from outside. “Anita threw me out.”

>>What am I supposed to do with him, then?<< whined Blixa, thrusting his hand up into his unruly hair as he twisted this way and that.

>>I don’t care. I don’t want him in our house. I’ll vomit on him if he comes in here.<<

>>Alright, I’ll take Nick downstairs, and I’ll send Anita back up here. I’ll tell her you’re too sick to be disturbed.<<

I closed my eyes and merciful blackness descended for a welcome stretch of time.

And then suddenly someone else was trying to lift my head, and there was the cold metal of a spoon at my lips. “Come on, Carter, take your medicine.”

I tasted it tentatively, but it made me want to gag. “What the fuck is it.”

“It’s Imodium AD,” supplied a soft, gentle Australian voice. “If you’ve got a stomach bug or whatever, it will sort you right out. Come on, nice big gulp... there you go.”

It tasted absolutely disgusting, but whatever it was, it worked. My stomach seemed to calm down, the spinning receded, and I slipped back into the blackness.

I have no idea how long I slept for. The sun had come up. When I rolled over, to try to get away from it, my eyes fell on a small, red-haired woman curled up in the easy chair I used to store our laundry. Anita. When she realised I was awake, she shifted and tried to smile at me. “Good day.”

Licking my lips, I tried to form words, but if I had felt terrible, Anita looked like hell. There were dark circles under her eyes, her lips were oddly puffy, and there were bruises coming in on her bare
upper arms, in the shape of two gripping sets of fingers. “You look like I feel,” I said.

She laughed. “You’ve had food poisoning or the norovirus or something,” she supplied. “It should pass quickly. You’re lucky you don’t drink, or you’d have a roaring hangover, to boot.”

“Blixa thinks I’m pregnant,” I sighed, wondering if our situation could possibly get any worse.

“Is that a possibility? When was your last period?”

I had to stop and think back. “It was ending just before the sessions started. Maybe five or six days ago?”

She snorted with laughter. “As beautiful as yours and Blixa’s babies would be, Carter, you’re not pregnant.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, I flopped back on the pillows, and tried to remember how the hell she got here. The fight. The slamming doors and raised voices. Slowly it came back. “What were you and Nick fighting about last night?”

Her face tightened in a knot of anger, pain and helplessness. It had been a mistake to ask. Looking after my health, Anita seemed to have reached a level of calm, but now a flood of anguish seemed to wash across her face. “Carter, he’s got another girlfriend. I mean, I know he’s never faithful, but this is just... this is disrespectful to me.”

“Anita, he really was out drinking with me and Blixa last night. No one else was with us... I would tell you if there had been, you know that. But it was just Blixa and Nick fighting about last night?”

Anita’s expression turned somehow both betrayed and suspicious. “She calls the house. I mean, she does it on purpose when he’s not here. This girl he was screwing, back in Melbourne. She calls the fucking house, when Nick isn’t in, and she tells me I better pack my bags because she’s screwing Nick and she’s going to take him away from me.”

“And you believe her?” I said, a little too evenly.

“Carter, they’re not faithful to us,” she almost spat. “You know that, right? I mean, I know you pretend it doesn’t bother you, but they screw around, when we’re not there. They get each other’s backs, they lie for each other, they egg each other on, and then they even cover it up for each other. I don’t believe either of them any more.”

I shrugged vaguely, testing that spot in my psyche to see if it was sore, but I still felt nothing. “I don’t care.”

“You should care, Carter. You don’t even know how Blixa puts it about. You make yourself blind, but everyone else can see. You know he screwed Marc... well, Marc told me Blixa let him suck his dick.”

I laughed aloud. “Good. I’m pleased for him. Marc was gagging for it.”

“And all those women, back in West Berlin. He screwed that Russian chick, Valentina, you know. At the Eisengrau, no less. He screwed Gila, too, that’s how he knew there was a room going in that squat where you live. And Lydia, you know he banged Lydia, right? Before she and Jim got together. And that road manager of theirs. Nick’s had a go at her, too. First Nick, and then Blixa, like some kind of buddy thing. And Gudrun, too, you know he’s had an on and off thing, fucking Gudrun for ages...”

That was the point at which I actually burst out laughing. “Gudrun wouldn’t shag Blixa if he was the
last bloke in Berlin. She thinks of him as her brother – and they squabble like siblings, too. Gudrun
told me, back when we first met, that she would never mess around with Blixa. They were too
similar.”

Anita’s eyes flashed. “Not Gudrun and Blixa, for fucks sake. Gudrun and Nick. Gudrun’s just
another of Nick’s fucking conquests. My best friend in that awful fucking city, and he’s been fucking
her, too.”

For a second, that actually threw me. The sucker punch knocked the air out of my chest, and for a
moment, I was afraid that the sick vomity feeling was coming back. Gudrun would never deign to
fuck me, but she would fuck Nick? But the dizziness and the pain passed, just as quickly. Trying to
fight down my emotions along with the nausea, I said very slowly, and carefully, “I don’t care. What
Blixa does with his cock, is his business. Even if he fucked Gila and Lydia – and god, that was all
before my time, so what does it even matter – and everyone else in West Berlin. It’s his business.
You just wanna infect me with your paranoia, because you think Nick is screwing around. And I just
won’t take it, Anita. I refuse to take on that responsibility. What Nick does with his cock may be
your business, but I refuse to make what Blixa does with his, mine.”

Chewing on her lip, Anita’s face really started to glaze over with that junk-sick greyish desperation.
“Nick tells me, what Blixa gets up to, to try and punish me for my jealousy. Why can’t you be more
like Carter, he says. That chick’s so cool she never gives a damn, even if some girl was sucking
Blixa off in front of her. Like I’m supposed to be more like you. Well, I refuse. I don’t want to be
like you, Carter. Your heart is dead.”

I stared at her, as the realisation hit me. It wasn’t just her paranoid junkie-senses that made her think
Blixa was screwing around on me. It was Nick, who had fed all this information to her, in an attempt
to turn her against me. Oh Christ, that man was devious, and he did not play fair. He knew I was
Anita’s ally, and he wanted to make sure that the pair of us started to scrap and fight and be
suspicious of one another. “Oh bollocks, Anita. Nick fed you this, and you just believe him?”

“You are so stupid sometimes,” spat Anita. “Blixa tells Nick everything. Don’t you understand?
Everything.”

If she wanted to choose a sliver of ice to slide straight into my heart, she could not have picked a
better one. My head started spinning again, but it was not food poisoning this time, it was the
realisation that what she said was true, even if Nick’s lies were not. Blixa shared everything with
Nick. Even the private details of his emotional life with me. And though I did not care what Blixa
did with his beautiful body, the thought of him telling Nick everything about our inner secrets, that
made me want to lie down and die.

As I lay back, my eyes closed, wishing I could just will myself into the sweet oblivion of sleep, I
heard Anita get up, and shuffle out of the room. Her footsteps echoed down the stairs, then, after I
dozed and wallowed in the half-light between waking and sleeping, sick in both body and heart, she
finally reappeared, her face a little brighter and her skin a little less grey, as if she had fixed. And she
was carrying a small cardboard box in her hands.

“I’m going to do your tarot reading,” she said.

“Fuck off with your tarot,” I muttered, but she ignored me, and started to shuffle the deck, then
slowly laid the cards out of the bed.

“The Nine of Swords,” she said. “This is going to hurt, though I don’t know if it’s going to hurt you.
Or me.” Another card, a young man sitting under a tree, refusing golden goblets being offered to him
one after another. “The Four of Cups. Luxury But this isn’t a good card at all. It symbolises apathy
and boredom, disillusionment and growing uninterested in everything that formerly excited you.” I stared at the brightly coloured folly, thinking how much I fucking hated the fucking tarot, but of course the next card was no surprise at all. “The Tower. Always the Tower, with you. Disaster always seems to hover around you, whenever I do your reading.”

“I have heard all this crap before,” I snapped, my illness making me very cranky indeed. “Is there some witchy-handbook where you spooky goth girls learn to spout this shit from? Because this is the same old shit that Jana used to say.” Climbing out of the bed, I managed to make my bleary way to my desk, and dug in my sketchbook, until I found the Tower card from Jana’s deck. It had become a kind of talisman for luck, and I always transferred it to every new sketchbook, a reminder of why it was so important to draw. “Here,” I spat, tossing it down into her lap, then climbing back into bed before my head started spinning. “Jana gave me that, the day she lost her fucking mind.”

Anita stared at the card, entranced, tracing the little tiny writing that wound its way all around the clouds. “But what does it say?” she murmured. “My German is not so good... Halt. Over and over again. Halt? Oh, that’s stop. Right. Through the... through the... is that grass or glass? Through the glass... it looks like... Push or shove? No, it’s shove her not. That doesn’t make any sense. Is this like Alice Through The Looking Glass or something? Stop, don’t shove her through the glass. What does it mean?”

“That was the night she threw a brick through the window of the Anderes Ufer,” I told her. I was exhausted, and my stomach was grumbling, and I just wanted her to go away. So Blixa discussed his entire emotional life with Nick now, did he. I didn’t want to think about it, but Anita’s morbidly curious face, bent over the card, just made me think about nothing else.

“I wonder what on earth made her do it. She was really angry at Nick that night, wasn’t she. You don’t think Nick tried it on with Jana?” her voice was slightly incredulous, but her face was desperate.

“I don’t care any more,” I said, my eyes fluttering closed. “I’m exhausted, and I need to sleep.”

“I’ll let you rest.” To my surprise, but my slight dismay, she walked over to the bed, and pressed her lips gently against my forehead, like a mother kissing a child, and then she walked from the room, not with her usual skipping, slightly dancing gait, but with the defeated air of a woman who knew she was losing everything. At that moment, I felt like we both were.

Blixa and Nick didn’t come home for another three days. I got over my illness, which almost certainly was the Norovirus, for Anita came down with it next. I went downstairs, and nursed her through her illness, as she had nursed me through mine, feeding her spoonfuls of Imodium and making sure she sipped at fluids instead of gulping. A day and a half in, she ran out of smack, and started to shake with withdrawal, which only made the virus worse. I offered to go downstairs and negotiate with those awful dealers who were always hanging about on our doorstep, but she said she wanted to kick. It couldn’t possibly be worse than the Norovirus, she insisted, though the sight of her curled in a ball, crying and shaking, her hair greasy and knotted, it broke my heart.

I sat, restless, in that stupid Goth bedroom, watching her for signs of improvement as I read a copy of Anne Rice’s Interview With The Vampire, which seemed to be the only non-comic book in the house. I know, I know, for an underground comic book artist who was having some considerable success with their first graphic novel, I knew it was pure snobbery, but I just didn’t want to read the horror comic trash the Goths had lying about. If it were anything like their taste in books, it would have just bored me, for the Anne Rice novel was turgid, overly melodramatic trash that reminded me of those awful, badly made up girls at the Batcave who somehow managed to be both pretentious
and shallow at the same time. Everything I read in the English language just seemed to be stupid and inconsequential, compared to what the Germans were doing in West Berlin, and I found myself truly starting to hate London.

The Goths had no fucking taste. The bedroom wasn’t even stylish, like Lydia’s bordello chic had at least been oddly elegant, or at least well put together, with an eye for the macabrely beautiful. Here, everything was badly painted black, there were ceramic and wax and plastic skulls everywhere, and bats and fake spiderwebs, like someone had put up really bad Halloween decorations and never bothered taking them down. Hanging on the walls were schlocky B-movie posters of vampires and zombies, and in the centre of the room was a weird glass coffee table, done out to look like some kind of crystal altar. In the centre of this ‘altar’, covered as it was with druggie paraphernalia (and honestly, only half of this stuff seemed to belong to Nick and Anita) was a replica ceremonial dagger, with a schlocky fake-jewel-encrusted skull on the handle, winking at me with its fake ruby eyes. It had clearly started life as a letter-opener, and didn’t even look sharp, the tip blunted by ripping through phone bills and fan mail.

But Anita was in bad shape, and not much fun as company. Without the drugs, she was listless and sullen and completely paranoid, insisting that every creak on the stairs was Nick and his new mistress returning home to toss her into the street. I tried not to engage the paranoia, because I was still sulking myself, my head spun around by the weird mixture of lies and half-truths that she had either been fed, or made up. Were they true? They couldn’t all be. Had she completely made them up? It seemed unlikely, as she barely knew some of the people she claimed Blixa had screwed. Had Nick made it all up? Had Nick constructed this strange, oddly sexual fantasy about how Blixa secretly fucked every attractive person he encountered? That seemed more likely than Valentina and Blixa ever sharing more than shots of vodka and witheringly catty repartee about how disgusting she found him, and yet that idea confused me most of all. Had Blixa’s fluid West Berlin sexuality just become a repository for Nick’s wildest sexual fantasies, the way that Nick’s Southern Gothic outback mythology had captured Blixa’s travel-hungry imagination?

I found I was hungry for the first time in days, ravenously so, so I went to the phone to dial out for takeaway. It was only when I picked it up, that I realised there was no dial tone. The line had been disconnected. Someone, it seemed, had had the presence of mind to cancel the phone account before leaving their flat in the care of two Australian drug addicts. And then it struck me. Anita had told me, urgently, that Nick’s other girlfriend rang the house, when he wasn’t there. How could anyone call, when there was no phone line? Putting the receiver back down, I walked through into the bedroom and stared down at her, wondering if she, like Jana, was losing her fucking mind.

I left Anita sleeping, as she seemed to have passed out cold, then went upstairs, first to eat what little food was left in the fridge, then take a shower, and have a little rest. When I opened my eyes, the room was dark. The door was open, light bleeding in around the edges of a tall, impossibly thin figure with hair like a satanic pincushion and cheekbones that seemed to stand several inches clear of his long, narrow face. Death himself, come to collect a lost soul? I thought, suddenly of Anita’s tarot cards, but Death stumbled forwards into the room and revealed that it was only Blixa. Closing the door behind him, he shrugged off his clothes and half crawled, half slithered into bed.

>>How are you, my love?>> he asked casually, as if he hadn’t been missing for nearly four days.

>>Physically, I’m alright...<< I muttered sleepily.

>>I could do with having you physically. I am so, so horny<< he insisted, and started to nuzzle his nose against my ear, my shoulder my neck.

>>If you’re so horny, why don’t you just fuck Nick, since you spend so much time with him<< I
muttered back.

>>Don’t be stupid. Shut up and kiss me.<< His mouth only skirted mine, the briefest of kisses, but I could tell his breath was absolutely awful, vodka and cigarettes and the metallic tang of amphetamine, the bristly tickle of a beard that was starting to come in after about five days. And yet I found myself opening to him, even as I knew this might well be the last time I did so. He knew me too well. After a year of urgent screwing, he knew all of my secret erogenous zones, knew every button to press, to take me from half-asleep to half dizzy with desire for him, curling myself around him, clutching at his skin and trying to get him inside me. We didn’t even bother with a condom, as we’d run out. That was such a stupid false economy, as he had pointed out, if we couldn’t afford condoms, how on earth could we afford an abortion, but that was the depth of my stupid, heedless lust for him. Every risk I knew, every problem I could see welling up in advance, and I just fell for him anyway, again and again.

Just as he entered me, I could hear the argument kick off downstairs, but I did my best to blot it out, just concentrating on the physical pleasure of holding Blixa, sucking him inside me, feeling his slight weight against my belly, his sharp bones between my thighs. Me, who had never thought I could get physically pleasure from a man, and now I could no longer imagine an orgasm except from Blixa’s long, narrow cock, or his obscene pink tongue.

I sat up, just as he swung his legs around to a kind of crouching position, and we knotted ourselves into a strange tangle of arms and legs, a ball of flesh, joined at the mouths and genitals, wrapping ourselves around one another as if we could somehow merge together at every inch of skin we could bring into contact, his bony knees and my elbows slipping into the crook of each other. When we were clinched together like this, nothing mattered except the pleasure of it, those short, desperate rutting motions as our groins slammed up against one another, his cock pounding me inside, my breasts slapping against his chest, his fingers finding my flesh to coax deeper and more exquisite sensations from my body.

We fucked one another almost senseless, losing our breaths just as we came, then collapsed back against the mattress in a sweaty tangle, sated and spent. He hadn’t even bothered to pull out when he came, but I didn’t want to let him go. Downstairs, the argument started to rage, first her screaming, demented, ragged, then him, drunken, brutish. Finally, Blixa pulled out of me, then rolled off me and lay on his back, rubbing his face with his hands.

>>They could really lay off for a little while.<< he grumbled. >>After three days, I really do need to sleep.<<

>>Four days<< I corrected. >>Where the fuck have you been?<< I hated the question, even as I found myself asking it, though I tried to keep my voice light.

>>The studio, of course.<<

>>Which band<< I pressed.

>>My band, mostly. Then Nick’s band. I finish one day shift with Neubauten, and then I go and do a night shift with the Birthday Party. A mammoth session, to end all sessions, but both records are mixed.<<

>>If you were only with Nick’s band half the time, then why didn’t Nick come home to sleep?<< I tried to keep my voice nonchalant, but after three days of nursing Anita, I really had started to take on some of the paranoia that I could hear raging at top volume below us.

Blixa squirmed uncomfortably and said something to the effect that Nick’s affairs were Nick’s
>>Does he have another girl?<< I asked, as casual as I dared.

Screwing up his face, Blixa finally spat out >>Yes.<< So Anita wasn’t completely unhinged in her paranoia.

>>Do you?<<

>>No, no, no, no!<< insisted Blixa, but then the denials gave way to another squirm. >>Well not a girl. I let Marc blow my pipe. More than once. It was convenient, what can I say.<<

I laughed aloud, with something resembling relief. >>Good, I’m glad. He wanted you so badly, I’m glad he got to have you.<<

Blixa’s face twisted, from worried defensiveness into a slightly self-satisfied little grin. >>Well I did try once... with a girl. You would have known well enough had it worked out. But... alas, no, it was not meant to be.<<

>>Who? What?<< I asked, perplexed. >>Why would I need to know?<<

Blixa’s grin turned saucy. >>Well. Did you ever wonder why I disgust Valentina so much? She let it slip when I went to collect my second rubber vest, that she thought you were the most handsome person in all of West Berlin, and the East as well. I tried to dig a little deeper, because I knew you were nursing a crush on her.<<

>>What makes you think I have a crush? I do not have a crush!<<

Blixa just laughed. >>Because you act so terrified of her. No one is terrified of a girl that beautiful without good reason. I know your type. Her hair is yellow, not red, but she is it. You like those girls with big round bosoms. So I suggested at that time, perhaps we could indulge in a little ménage a trois, as I was not the jealous type. So she told me in no uncertain terms that although yes, her heart did beat faster at even the thought of you, that she found me ‘smelly and objectionable’ and she would never get into a bed that had me in it, not even if the reward was sex with the hottest butch in West Berlin. And that was me told! Dirty disgusting back-room man.<< He imitated her Russian accent perfectly.

I stared at him in astonishment for several minutes, trying to work out if he was serious, but when his face remained the same, I started to laugh. I should have stopped there. I should have wrapped my arms around him, and pulled his face between my breasts, and held him through the night, letting us knit ourselves back together through physicality the way we somehow always did. But I didn’t stop, as the argument downstairs was reaching a pitch it was quite hard to ignore, and this time it was Nick’s voice really going for it.

>>Do you think they’re going to break up?<< I said very quietly, knowing that it was a loaded question, that I wasn’t really talking about Nick and Anita’s chances, but about his and mine.

But Blixa seemed to misunderstand the question, perhaps deliberately. >>I don’t even know that there’s enough of a band left to break up. Mick has quit, Rowland has quit... you know, Nick has asked if I want to step in and take over guitar-playing. But honestly, we can’t go on with that name, because it was Rowland’s name that he chose for the band, but... Nick is trying to think of a new name for us.<<

>>Us<< I stuttered. >>You want to play guitar for Nick? You really want to...be in a band... with
him?<<

Blixa shrugged effortlessly. >>Of course I would. I’m not much of a guitar player, but if Nick wants me to play guitar, I shall play guitar. If he asked me to play... I don’t know, clarinet, I would play that for him, as well. I will play anything he wants.<< And he grinned, his face wide open with hopeless adoration which chilled me to the core. This wasn’t happening. This could not be happening.

>>Blixa<< I said, barely trusting my voice. >>I know you don’t want to hear it, but I have to know. If I asked you to choose, between Nick and me, you wouldn’t choose me, would you?<<

Blixa exploded, like I had never seen him lose his temper for real, off the stage and not in a performance. >>God damn it, Carter, I am tired. I am deeply tired, of your stupid, petty, impossible jealousy of Nick. Nick does not ask me these questions. He would never ask me to choose between you and him. Why do you do this? Why do you ask questions, and tell me you already know the answers, like you are afraid of what is in my heart?<<

At that moment, I felt my hopes die. If the answer had been me, he would have just kissed me and smoothed away my frown and said >>don’t be stupid, my love, of course I would choose you<< and then I would never, ever have had to even ask the question.

As we stared at each other, both of us angry, both of us infinitely hurt, the voices downstairs went suddenly silent for nearly half a minute. Blixa rolled his eyes, and I could tell, he was about to say something snide, while I held my breath, afraid of what would come next. Was this it? Were we finished?

And suddenly the air was rent by an awful, inhuman, banshee shrieking, more anguished and pained than anything I had ever heard come out of Blixa’s mouth. It took me until a second voice joined it, more obviously a woman’s voice screaming in anger, that I realised it was Nick. And then there was an almighty loud crash, like the sound the Other Shore’s window had made when it had shattered. And then there was a silence which was more frightening than anything that had gone before.

Blixa and I stared at one another, our argument forgotten, for half a heartbeat, then we both leapt out of bed. I pulled my dressing gown around me, as he pulled on his filthy trousers, hopping, one leg in one leg out, down the hall as we raced to get downstairs. The door was locked, rattling on its hinges as Blixa banged at it, but all I could hear was a weird, half-animal keening sound from inside. Blixa started to pound on the door, but I gestured for him to get back. I put my shoulder to it, smashed my hip against the lock, and the thing gave way in a shower of splinters of rotten wood.

“Nick!” called out Blixa, racing down the corridor to their room at the back.

“Anita?” I gasped as I scudded to a halt, just inside the door. Neither Blixa nor I had shoes on our feet, and the entire floor was a mosaic of tiny, glinting pieces of broken glass. And in the centre of the oddly spiral-like arrangement of glass shards was what was left of the glass table, even the metal support beams twisted and broken. And in the centre of the wreckage, like a small, battered, bloodied doll, lay Anita, her eyes closed as if she were just asleep.

“I didn’t mean to do it,” wailed Nick, an ugly, keening cry. I looked up and saw him standing, immobile, with ribbons of blood pouring down his cheek from a fresh wound on his forehead.

“Fuck you, you didn’t mean to do it. You’ve spent the past three years writing pop songs about killing women, and you say you didn’t mean to do this?” I exploded.

“She came at me with the knife. What was I supposed to do?” In his hand, Nick still held that absurd, ridiculous child’s toy of a skull-handle letter opener, the fake-ruby eyes now smeared with his own
blood.

“Just stop her! You didn’t have to... push her through the glass...” As it came out of my mouth, I shivered at how it had mirrored Jana’s weird scrawl, all over the tarot card. Had she written it on a tarot card deliberately, knowing that that fascination would make it find its way from me to Anita? And yet, how could she have known? And after all that, in my stupid, oblivious scepticism, I had somehow failed to pass on the warning.

I looked about for shoes, saw a pair of Nick’s old brogues sitting on a shelf, and grabbed them to put them on my feet. But Blixa, impervious to the pain through drugs or alcohol or lack of sleep, had already pushed his way towards the wreck of the glass table. Bending over Anita, he picked up her wrist, though it was slick with blood, and started trying to feel for a pulse. She was so still, so pale, I thought she couldn’t possibly have survived that.

But after an impossible space of nearly a minute, Blixa finally nodded. “She is alive. She has a pulse.” Then he turned his head to me and almost screamed. >>Call a doctor, call an ambulance!<<

I ran, as if released from a spell. There was no phone in our flat, so I picked up the Goths’ phone, and tried to dial 999, fretting at how long the rotary took to click back round each time. But I had forgotten; there was no dial tone, no operator, no nothing. Cursing myself for wasting precious time as Anita was probably bleeding to death, I grabbed some cash from the kitchen drawer, pulled the dressing gown closer around me, belted it, and prayed Nick’s shoes stayed on my feet as I stumbled down the stairs.

The shooting gallery was deserted. Even the dealers were gone. There was a phone booth on the corner, but of course the receiver had been smashed. (The dealers didn’t like people calling the police on them from the box.) For a moment, I squinted at the darkened façade of the building next door, but I’d never so much as said hello to our neighbours. They probably all thought we were junkies, too, and wisely avoided us. And then I saw the sweep of headlamps and a faintly glowing yellow box coming over the hill. A taxi!

Abandoning all sense, I ran out into the road and flagged it down. “Where’s the nearest hospital?” I almost screamed at the terrified driver, who was badly shaken by a flapping dressing-gown wearing ghost leaping out at him in the middle of night.

“Denmark Hill, but if you want an emergency room, love, leaping out in front of cars at this time of night is the right way to go about it,” the driver admonished me.

“Not for me. Our neighbour. He’s just pushed his girlfriend through a plate glass table... She’s bleeding everywhere...”

“Allah be merciful,” swore the cab driver, but he had more sense than me. “You don’t want to move her in case she’s injured the spine. Let me get on the radio, and have the despatcher call an ambulance. What’s the full post code?”

It took only seven minutes for the ambulance to come, but it felt like an eternity. The police were only a minute and a half behind. The paramedics went up the stairs with the police on their heels, and came down about ten minutes later, with Anita, looking almost impossibly tiny, wrapped up in a foil blanket and strapped down to a stretcher. The ambulance roared off, and the cab driver asked if I wanted to follow it. I said wait a minute, wondering if Blixa would go with me, but then the police emerged, with Nick between them, not in handcuffs but looking about as hangdog and shellshocked as he could be.

“I didn’t mean to do it,” he insisted, yet again, vaguely in my direction, as the police shoved him
roughly into the back of their car. “She came at me with a knife.”

“It was a fucking letter opener,” I roared at him, but two steps behind them was Blixa, now fully dressed, and pausing to lock the door to the house. “Are you coming with me? Anita’s gone to Denmark Hill Hospital.”

“I’m going with Nick,” he said darkly, moving over towards the police car, and gesturing to them to indicate he wanted to ride in the back.

>>Anita could die<< I insisted, dropping into German so the police wouldn’t hear. >>That fucker pushed her through a glass table, he might well have killed her, and you’re going to the police station with him?>> I searched his eyes desperately for any sigh of understanding, but he had grit his teeth and his eyes were dark with determination.

>>She tried to stab him.<<

>>With a letter opener<< I repeated, feeling myself going numb. >>Look at the size of her, and look at the size and strength of him, and tell me that she was a threat to him.<<

>>The paramedics have stopped the bleeding. She’s not going to die, she has only concussion<< Blixa shrugged. >>But Nick needs my help. He is in a bad way, he’s blaming himself for this, and in his fragile state... I don’t trust these policemen. I’m going with Nick. He’s my friend.<<

>>And Anita is not your friend?>>

The look Blixa gave me chilled me to the bone. >>Carter, you will never understand men as long as you live. He did what he had to do.<<

I pulled back, as shocked as if he had slapped me, and just stared at him, as he climbed into the police car beside Nick, and let the officer slam the door closed behind him. What he said stung me, right to the core, an insult made even worse by the fact that Blixa knew how badly it would hurt me. And yet, still, I feared for him, and tried to warn him.

>>Blixa, he’s dangerous. It’s not just the attack on Anita, he is a violent man<< I shouted through the window of the police car.

Blixa shook his head and shouted back. >>How is he violent?>>

>>All those songs he writes, about killing women...<<

>>They’re just songs<< Blixa shrugged. >>I write songs about vultures devouring Berlin. You write comic books about radical lesbians slicing off men’s cocks. It’s all just art. They are only songs.<<

>>But it’s not just the songs, with him<< I persisted, following the police car as it started to reverse, in preparation for turning around. >>He sexually assaulted that teenage girl in Australia.<<

>>He was a child<< Blixa shouted back through the window.

>>He groped me, that night at The Skin’s place, and you just ignored it...<<

The fury in his eyes actually frightened me. I had never seen my lover look at me with such disdain, and I knew at that moment, that it was all over. >>I am starting to think that you dreamed that incident, that you made it all up, to justify your dislike of my best friend.<<

>>And now he has pushed Anita through a glass table? Come on... Jana tried to warn me about this.
Honestly, she tried to warn us...<<

>>You’re insane<< spat Blixa. >>Honestly, you are insane with jealousy. Why do I always attract the insane women, first Jana and now you?>> Waving his hand, he made a dismissive gesture, as I felt my life slipping away from me, like he was trying to drive me insane.

I tried one last-ditch effort as the police car pulled away from me, out into the road, and I followed it. >>If you go with him, Blixa, that’s the end. It’s really the end, for you and me.<<

>>Oh, you’re leaving me are you? Again?<< I had never before born the full brunt of Blixa’s insolent sarcasm as he rolled his eyes and tented his eyebrows, and it felt like a punch to the gut as the police car pulled away. >>Your little threats don’t work so good when you use them all the time. How many times have you left me now? Three times? Four times? Half a dozen times? You leave me, and I have to play the game and dance the dance, and I just go to your aunts’ house and sing the little song you like to hear, and drag you back. I’m bored of this game, Carter. Bored. Nick needs me. Get over it...<<

>>Blixaaaaaaaaar!<< I wailed after the car’s taillights.

As the car drove off, back down Brixton Hill, I could see Blixa still rolling his eyes, and shouting something back at me, but even his piercingly loud voice was lost to the wind.

And as the car disappeared over the crest of the hill, I saw Nick turn around, his pale face framed in the back window, his hair standing up about his head in a massive black porcupine quiff. Nick didn’t have enough German to know what we’d been arguing about, to understand that he’d finally won. But the look on his face wasn’t triumphant, it was completely terror-struck.

Jana’s words echoed in my head. He’s poison, Carter. Poison. The world seemed to be collapsing in on itself, as the cab driver climbed out of his vehicle and tried to get my attention. “Alright, love! Do you still want that ride to Denmark Hill?”

“Yes, yes, thank you, you are very kind to wait,” I said, and climbed in the back. As he did a three-point turn, and drove off up the other side of the hill, towards the South Circular, Jana’s voice was still circling round my head like a sleep-deprived hallucination. She had indeed tried to warn me, I realised, as the massive tower of the church at the top of Streatham Hill heaved into view. >>The Tower<< she had said. >>I thought it was you, that he would betray me for. The Tower. I got it so wrong. He’s going to betray you, for him. The Tower, don’t you see? Nick is poison. Keep your lover from him. Nick is poison.<<

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Anita survived. Two week in the hospital being weaned off painkillers, and she even kicked, clean for the first time since she’d met Nick. The bloom came back to her skin and the shine returned to her pretty ginger hair, but her heart was broken. She left Nick. How could your love survive something like that? Even she knew it was at an end.

My relationship with Blixa did not survive. How could a relationship survive something like that? I moved out of that flat on Brixton Hill and went to stay in a Bed and Breakfast while Anita recuperated. But kicking the habit of loving Blixa was something that took far, far longer than two weeks.
I flew back to West Berlin as soon as I could, staying with Val at first, but that basement room held too many memories. After a few nights of crashing in the same bed, the obvious occurred, but she sensibly packed me up, got me out of that hole full of memories, and moved me in with her in Kreuzberg. It took a very long for my heart to heal, to be able to love again. But at least that lust I experienced for her was powerful enough to keep us together while sex blossomed into true love.

I would not have survived that break, without Val, without her devotion, and her sensible Russian toughness. When Blixa returned to West Berlin a month later, of course he turned up and made a stupid, foolish, doomed play for my affections again, as much, I think, to prove that he could, as out of any desire to rekindle the romance. The knowledge that Val truly loved me gave me the courage to send Blixa packing, which I do not know I would have had the strength to do, otherwise. I think it hardened Blixa, to be jilted like that, when he believed he could always get me back. I think he resolved, at that point, never to give his heart so completely ever again. And yet my love for Val was finally truly solidified by that act of deliberately choosing her. She didn’t just paper over the cracks of that break-up; we evolved a new, mature, lasting, stable love, built from those solid foundations. We thrived. During the 80s, underground comics suddenly went very overground, and in the huge market of the States, Fantagraphics snapped up Kaos Komics. It had a print run well into the 90s, when I retired it to concentrate on more serious graphic novels on, erm, themes of what we were only just learning to call Genderqueer and Trans issues. I never did get The Operation, as in Berlin, I felt I never needed to, but people wrote to me, for years, and told me my comics had helped make their journey easier for them. For Berlin was truly my home, even as the Wall fell and Germany turned. West and East Berlin were reunited, and even the Soviet Union crumbled, but both Val and I stayed put, as our home had become with each other. When my aunts grew too frail to run a boarding house, Val and I took over from them, and turned the place into a space to nurture and support female and gender diverse artists. We are still together. I am still a little bit in awe of her.

For a long time, I could not listen to the New Buildings, even as their music became more complex and more beautiful than I could have dreamed of. And that feeling got worse, as I finally got my misjudged wish, and in my absence, I became Blixa’s muse, in a way I had never been for him when I was present. >>I am the subversive love; the anti-sex.<< Our midnight taxi ride enshrined forever. But honestly, Blix, how many times do you have to tell me your soul is burning before I stop believing you? But instead of healing his heart, he locked it away. I heard dark rumours of how he spent the next two decades flitting from one affair to the next, never able to settle down, and I was haunted by the reproachful self-accusation that he might never be able to replace that one great love who walked out on him. But Blixa had his own dark roads of addiction and dependence to walk down, before he found peace. He played guitar with Nick for 20 years. As far as I know, they never consummated their romance. The perfect love. A mirror for them both, love returned and yet eternally unrequited.

And then one day, he really did meet someone who was worth leaving Nick, and all that darkness behind for. And he left, without so much as a glance back. Which was ironic, because the woman he married didn’t actually mind Nick. It was Blixa’s decision to leave Nick, a gift he gave her freely, because she had never asked. He and I had long ago settled our scores and buried our differences, and we had done our best to learn to be friends again, for the sake of our mutual friends, so I really did rejoice for him, when he told me that he had met a beautiful woman he wanted to marry, not even because she was beautiful, but because she was actually cleverer than him. And it filled me with peace, to know that he was as happy and content with his lovely mathematician wife, as I was with my beautiful Russian space princess. They have a daughter now, who he loves very much, so I guess his mother was right to keep that scrapbook.

And this is a secret, so no one outside our own little family must ever know, but in the mid-90s, when Val and I decided we wished to become parents, it was Blixa we asked to contribute the DNA.
Oh, you should have seen his face when I suggested it! I think he honestly believed that he might finally get that long-anticipated ménage à trois, but no, Valentina and I made him work the trick with a turkey baster. And so with my former lover’s help, my wife bore me two sweet little tow-headed Prussians of our own. And so, despite all the history between us, for that, both Valentina and I are eternally grateful, and I know we will be in each other’s lives one way or another, for ever.

See, it can happen, even for tortured artists, for Blixa and for me; to meet the person for whom Sehnsucht, for whom longing for was not as good as simply being with.

Chapter End Notes

I would really love some comments, questions, observations on the story, now it's finished? Even if you have any nagging "whatever happened to so-and-so?" questions, I would love to answer them.

Thank you for reading. I hope you have enjoyed having your heart ripped out. ;)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!