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Blackfish Tattoo

“Don’t get the map, every girl has that,” said the skinny man with black, wavy hair behind the counter. “Just don’t do it,” he said again as he shook his head in disgrace. I looked from wall to wall, each covered in colorful, framed art, most of it looked hand-drawn. The room wasn’t big. My eyes quickly scanned all four walls. I nervously turned around to see two women sitting on the couch behind me. I didn’t know what to do. This was my fourth time being shut down for a tattoo that I was desperately trying to get in Berlin. I stood there in awkward silence as I thought of what my next move would be. Was it really that hard to get ink embedded on my personal canvas? But wait, let me rewind, the story started two days prior.

“I think we passed it up,” I anxiously told Myers and Connor as we walk down a street with tall buildings coated in graffiti. Most of the graffiti consisted of black letters with a variety of colors in the background. “Nie wieder Krieg,” or “never again war” was a common phrase I saw as I walked down the street, still searching for the room that would change my body forever. “Yeah, I think I saw a building that might have been the place back by the construction,” Myers told us as we all stood around looking like lost puppies searching for their owner. In this case, Blackfish Tattoo was the owner. I was definitely the lost puppy. *We will find it; we will find it*, I repeatedly thought to myself. I had to get this tattoo. There was no way I was leaving Germany without it.

We finally stumbled across the building that could potentially change my body forever, I was excited. I stepped through the small door and immediately was surrounded by intense, detailed art work hung on the walls. The walls were painted black, maybe to make the framed-art

stand out more. The room was small, almost cramped. Behind the counter and to the right was a step with a mostly-open door. I could hear the buzz of electricity pulsating needles through delicate human flesh. I couldn't see far back into the room but I knew that was where the magic happened. Tattoos are cool, well, the tattoos covering the two men behind the counter were cool. There was hardly an inch of skin that wasn't covered in black letters of various fonts, or colorful images that told a story. I wanted to get a small quote in German on my finger. "We don't do that," said one of the men after I explained to them what I wanted. I thought to myself, *what do you mean 'you don't do that?' aren't you a tattoo shop?* I said nothing, just stared at his intimidating brown eyes. He could tell I was lost. "You're not from Berlin are you?" said the same man, "we don't do tattoos on hands, feet, face, or neck because the skin is different there than the rest of your body and after five years, tattoos look really bad in those places." I didn't know whether to be sad or happy. Sad that I couldn't get the tattoo I wanted in the place I wanted; or happy that he at least had the courtesy to tell me this information before I permanently messed up my finger.

I quickly decided that I appreciated his honesty and that this tattoo shop held themselves to a higher standard than what I was used to. They wouldn't allow me to get ink that would eventually look like crap. Maybe this was for the better. I left, disappointed. On the walk home, I kept thinking about how most tattoo shops in the U.S. don't mention how skin stretches out and sheds differently on certain parts of your body. If I was in the states I would have blindly, and mistakenly, gotten that tattoo without knowing the long term effects.

Germans are more blunt, honest, and efficient than what I'm used to back home in Louisiana. Efficient like their Deutscherbahn (DB – train system). Three different brake systems: first manual, then a backup air brake system, and third, a magnetic brake system. The Germans

built their DB trains in a way that makes it close to impossible for the train not to stop. The conductor has to press one of three buttons at least once every 30 seconds. Once every 30 seconds. If they don't, the train system is automatically overridden, two back up breaks kick in, and the train is safely brought to a stop. What if the conductor has to use the restroom? I guess they can't, or if they do the whole train comes to a stop.

Not only did I find this efficiency in the safety mechanisms of the DB, but also in the operations of the stations where they work on the trains. In the basement, 2.4 meters underneath the train tracks, they meticulously check the maintenance under the train. As one could guess, many machines and tools are needed for repairs. One way the Germans have made this process faster and smoother is by installing magnetic lines underneath the floor that they walk on. They have done this so the machines needed for the maintenance repairs magnetically follow the lines and do not need drivers. A simple idea, but makes a huge difference.

Okay sorry, back to more interesting things, my tattoo situation. I was bummed. I needed to get a tattoo in Germany, I *had* to. I mean after all; I was 90 something percent German. Once I was back at Pegasus Hostel and in a peaceful state of mind I thought... and thought... and finally it came to me.

The sun set and five hours later dawn was approaching. We were back on the same street. The same graffiti covered the buildings, street signs, and construction areas as I saw before. This time we knew where we were going. I stepped inside, same man with black, wavy hair behind the counter. He was staring at me with a blank face. His slim arms and boney shoulders didn't move as I walked a few steps up to glass counter. Once I arrived at the counter, he looked at me and smiled. I explained to him what I wanted and asked for a price. *€300 for an outline of a map and a German quote on my back?!*, I thought to myself. Wow, maybe this tattoo thing wouldn't

work out for me after all. “It’s more expensive on your back because the skin stretches out so we have to tattoo it when your skin is stretched out – it takes double the amount of ink,” said the same man with black hair and a slender nose. Here we go again with the German efficiency, and logic, and honesty. I was having some really bad luck in this situation. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to drop €300 plus on a tattoo the size of my hand.

I said, “Okay, thank you,” and sadly walked out the door. My dreams and hopes were crushed, again. I was feeling a love-hate relationship with the tall man behind the counter who had black, wavy hair. I wanted to grab his long, skinny neck and demand that he engrave a tattoo on my skin. I also wanted to kiss his razor-sharp cheek bone and thank him for his honesty. At the same time, at least I knew I could trust this particular tattoo parlor; ya know, for the next time I’m in Berlin and want a tattoo.

As we walked back to the hostel, I tried to absorb the situation and mentally adjust for the defeat I just experienced. Why was this happening to me? Why was it so hard to get a tattoo in Berlin? Maybe it wasn’t *so* hard to get a tattoo in Berlin, it was just more efficient and expensive than what I was used to.

I couldn’t process this defeat alone, I had to talk about it. My German professor, Myers, told me how the man’s reaction to my tattoo ideas was very much how German people act normally: blunt. The tattoo guy literally told me that having an outline of a map on my back would be cliché and too many girls had it, all saying this as he shook his head in disappointment. He also told me that the quote “mach liebe nitch krieg” doesn’t make sense in German and that I should put it in English, “make love not war.” That defeated the whole purpose of getting a tattoo involved a German quote in Germany.

“German people don’t hold back. If you ask a German whether something looks good on you or not, they will tell you it looks awful if it looks awful on you.” Myers said as he and Connor tried to comfort me on the walk back. It was bittersweet, like biting into chocolate expecting sweet, rich, goodness and finding out it’s 100 percent dark chocolate. I appreciated his opinion and his better knowledge of the German language, but I was still bummed. The walk back to our hostel seemed like it took eternity. It felt like a dark cloud was hovering over me, closing in with every step I forced myself to take. Graffiti on the buildings didn’t seem as colorful and playful to me anymore. The sun wasn’t shining as bright as when I left the hostel that morning. The whole world seemed to be morning for me and my tattoo, as they should be. I dreadfully kept moving on, dragging my feet one behind the other. I had succumbed to defeat twice by the intelligent, blunt, brutal tattoo man behind the innocent, glass counter. At this point, all I wanted to do was get in bed, cuddle with my sheets, and watch Netflix. But I was in Germany and there was no Netflix-streaming on the hostel Wi-Fi.

I walked, and I watched. I watched children play on the sidewalk with their friends. I watched them run around screaming as they tried to tag each other. Laughter burst out of their lungs and from that moment on I forced myself to forget about the tattoo. After all, I *was* 90 something percent German. And I *was* in the great, powerful, industrial country that my ancestors came from. No tattoo man would ruin that experience for me.