

Joe Lavelle

shaun-how-sir-alley

toms a smiler. mostly i like that but sometimes its fucking annoying like when youre coming down off whatever it is that youre coming down off and its 6 in the fucking morning after sisypthos or sissyfucks or whatever its fucking called and youre on hauptstraße and youre freezing your tits off because your t-shirt is sweat-stuck to your skin and theres a fucking hard fucking freezing fucking wind coming down georg-lowenstein-straße and toms in your fucking face fucking smiling.

- alright ben he says. alright
- fuck off you say
- bens on one he says

tom says it to the kraut who latched on to yous and whos taken his tank top off and whose skin is all goosebumps and looks like sandpaper only without the shiny bits.

- hey man. you okay man the kraut says

he has an american-kraut accent which just kinda makes you feel worse. and toms beaming in your fucking face and the worlds turning too fucking fast and everything

feels heavy like the atmosphere is pressing down on your chest and theres an acidic chemically metally taste in your spit and your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth and your stomach feels small and theres something - some vein or some fucking organ that you never knew that you had - throbbing somewhere inside your skull and all you wanna do is be alone. be on your own. crash. sleep. and you start crying. and even though hes trying to be serious and hes holding you and though you cant see his fucking face you knowing hes still fucking smiling.

but mostly i like that toms a smiler.

i love tom. in a way.

i think tom loves me.

i think he loves everyone. thats why he smiles.

once i had a dog like tom. when i was a kid. a labrador called sam. he loved everyone. he got run over. what i really wanted was a dachshund. a sausage dog. i wanted a short-haired brown one like the one thats on a lead being walked by the bint in very yellow hot pants as me and tom stand in the sun outside the hostel on schönehauser allee smoking weed in our boxer shorts.

- *sind sie amerikaner*

high sweet voice. red hair. no tits. wide hips. pale skin. hazel-brown eyes that lock on to toms. he sucks on the spliff and hes smiling his smile. and she smiles and does this thing with her tongue and her lips and her eyes and a finger and a lock of her hair at the side of her face. i override the urge to puke and stoop down to stroke the dog. tom shrugs his shoulders at her.

- *engländer* i say

and i stand up and she pulls a face as if her dreams turned to shit and she walks off but she looks back and i look at tom and he looks at me and we laugh. and the dog barks. and she turns away and the dog turns away and then theyre gone.

- what did she want
- thought we were americans
- why
- our boxers

he draws on the spliff and passes it to me.

- how do you know these things

i say that i just do and he says that i understand the language and i say that i dont but he says that i kinda do and at least i can say the street names. and hes right. i can. and he says he cant even remember the name of the street were standing on.

- schönhauser allee

and he tries to say it but hes fucking hopeless and i laugh but he doesnt and i think that for someone who smiles a lot tom hardly laughs at all which is kind of odd really dont you think. and i draw on the spliff and i think a mo.

- remember shaun from school
- tall shaun
- yeah
- what about him
- what did he always used to say

tom just stares at me.

- to old man todd. in maths
- how sir. he always used to ask how sir

it takes a few seconds for the penny to drop.

- shaun how sir

he laughs.

- shaun-how-sir-alley

and i draw on the spliff.

- sissyfucks. now this. youre fucking genius

but im not. not really. sissyfucks was not genius cause the place wasnt cruisy and not very queer. if berghain was sisyphos then sissyfucks wouldve worked but berghain is berghain.

- what you reckon about tonight he says. underwear party or what

- see how we feel i say

and i take another draw on the spliff and tom takes it back and then the guy from the hostel comes out and so tom takes a long draw then drops the spliff to the floor and stubs in out with his bare foot which shouldve hurt him but it doesnt. he carries on smiling his smile and the guy from the hostel tells us to come inside because we shouldnt be standing on the street in our underwear. and so we go back inside like good boys and i think that the guy from the hostel hates us. not sure why he hates us. could be because were english or better-looking and younger than him. could just be that someone complained. could be that he just hates his job. could be hes gay or bi or something and not out and were too much. too in your face. too queer. could be hes constipated from all the junk food he eats while hes sat behind reception. hes always there. could be that he hates us because of something else. could be that he doesnt hate us at all. could be im still paranoid from last night.

we go back to bed. sleep until eight at night. tom gets horny but im not having any. i get up first.

- not seen any sights at all he says. not even the brandenburg gate
- you can see the tv tower from the window i say
- big fucking deal

i dont wanna argue so say fuck all else and tom just smiles his smile.

its still light when we go out. we go to mcdonalds on shaun-how-sir-alley.

- you ok he says
- yeah i say
- you got a gob like a smacked arse

and i think a mo.

- ever loved somebody
- dont know. maybe

he takes the lettuce out of his bun. wipes the sauce off his fingers with a napkin and stuffs his big mac into his mouth.

after mcdonalds we buy new pants at brunos. i go for calvin kleins. black briefs with a red waistband. the words calvin klein in black letters against the red. tom goes for the unknown. barcode berlin. and not pants but a jock.

- youll show your bare arse i say

we spend 50 euros. cant afford it. not really. none of it. not the pants. not easyjet. not the hostel. not the clubs. not the booze. not the drugs. i think about it. i think about it a lot. not sure tom does but howd you know behind that smile.

we walk back to the hostel. its getting dark. there are cyclists and pedestrians and cars, trams, buses and a funny yellow train and we pass cafes that double as restaurants and cocktail bars. no place is ever just one thing in berlin. depends what

time of day of course. cafe for breakfast and then restaurant for lunch and evening meal and then cocktail bar for the late night drinkers. theyre all at it. the vietnamese. the italian. the thai.

tom wants a drink. we go into a bar. tom asks for ginger ale. the assistant looks at tom like he laid a turd on the floor.

- dont understand man the assistant says

he says it in a crappy american-kraut accent. tom points at the ginger ale in the fridge.

- ach, ghin-ger allah

i laugh. tom smiles. the assistant frowns.

i cant decide between fritz cola or bionade. i take my time. make a thing of it. get the assistant to make a suggestion. he suggests bionade. comes in four flavours. its *bio*. organic. a now thing. a german thing.

- what flavours

and the assistant has to look at the bottles one by one to tell me, but after all that i go for the cola. he gives me daggers. serves the fritz cola. i wink at him. when we leave i pay but dont tip.

at the hostel we shower together. there are three showers to a floor all next to each other in the bathroom. we dont lock the door. we laugh and shout and play around. i grab at toms arse and he screams and squeals and laughs for once.

in our room i pull skinny jeans over the new calvins. tom reckons skinny jeans are a berlin thing like the thing for leather and the thing for full beards are berlin things.

- do you keep your shoes on

he means at an underwear party.

- dunno i say

we get ready too early to go to the party. so we go to the sex place on shaun-how-sir-alley. more money. its a cinema. lots of screens. lots of booths. a screen in every booth. dozens maybe hundreds of movies to choose from. you just press the button under the screen to change them. the movies are the same old same old. seen one seen a hundred. the booths are clean. leatherette seating. wood-effect melamine surfaces. easy to wipe down. reminds me of mums kitchen in the old house. there are holes in the walls of the booths. big holes. the edges of the holes are smooth and rounded. no chance of splinters.

i buy a beer from the assistant. its cold. bitter.

only us and a few older guys. bores me but tom likes the attention. they like his youth. his sex appeal. his smile. some follow him along the corridor. i sit on a sofa and wait and watch. tom stands in front of an open booth. leans against the wall. exchanges stares. one old kraut enters the booth and beckons tom in. is that the right word. beckons. sounds like fucking shakespeare or something doesn't it. tom watches him. goes to join him but doesn't. he returns to me. toms a tease.

tom receives an sms.

- someones asking if we are still meeting up he says

- who

- t

- the kraut from sissyfucks i say

i remember the krauts name. thom. tom with an aitch. thom like in thom barron. but tom with an aitch is better looking than thom barron. younger. thinner. less pumped. natural.

- yeah i remember now. wanted to meet at some place on a street named after a tree
- a street named after a tree
- yeah. you up for it
- yeah. i suppose

tom texts thom. thom texts tom back. the place is on kastanien allee. we leave the cinema. its not far. near eberswalderstraße station. we walk. takes 5 minutes. some shirtless old leather queen says something as we enter. reads toms face. laughs.

- welcome to our queer household honey the old queen says another american-kraut accent. toms none the fucking wiser. tom with an aitch appears.

- tom he says they peck each other on the cheek.

- ben he kisses me on the cheek too.

i ask what *kastanien* means. it means chestnut.

the place is a cross between a bar and someones living room. scruffy and comfy but too public. you can hear german and british and american and italian or spanish accents. tom says hes gonna score some gear. i stay with thom. thom buys the beers but then he goes to chat with a guy he knows. he comes back.

- a fuck buddy he says tom returns too. we don't stay long.

on shaun-how-sir-alley we walk to the station and catch the funny yellow train. its the u-bahn. the underground. even though its above the street.

we change at alexanderplatz.

tom scored 4 tabs. 2 x ecstasy. 2 x something else. he thinks the something else is acid. he wants to take 1 tab of each.

- lets call it fantasy he says

says it like hes some fucking chemist and hes invented some new fucking high. i say it sounds very fucking eighties. fantasy. like something mum used to do.

on the way to the next platform he puts 1 of each tab on his tongue swallows and screws up his face.

on the next train we pass graffiti on a wall. tom reads it out loud.

- sex and drugs and rock and roll

but it says sex and drugs and techno. i look at thom and thom looks at me. i smile. he smiles. nods. and really hes not half bad looking in a geeky kind of way. doable. before we arrive at the underwear party i take 1 tab. thom says that he doesnt like doing drugs and reminds me about sissyfucks.

- you were very upset

but he takes the other tab anyway. not sure which was the ecstasy and which was the acid. not sure it matters.

you do wear your shoes at an underwear party. if you want to. and we want to. we wear trainers. some guys wear boots. boots and pants with or without socks looks really odd. there are lockers for your clothes. 10 euros entry. you get a numbered white plastic disc for the locker. an assistant has the key to all the lockers. the disc is on a rubber band. you use the disc to order drinks too. you pay when you leave.

theres three rooms. a quiet room with a bar. a dance floor. a darkroom. red walls around the dance floor. matt black everywhere else. tom looks for the dj. his bare arse disappears into the crowd.

thom orders beers.

tom returns.

- sounds like theyre playing wax dont it but theres no fucking dj he says

goes on about it.

- theres no fucking dj. there should be a fucking dj but theres no fucking dj

it doesnt matter. we dance anyway. its hot. men in pants. bare skin. smell of fresh sweat. nearness. tom and thom and me. intense. we hop and turn and bounce and swivel. we lose tom and then thom takes my hand and leads me away from the music. away from the dance floor. away from the other men in their pants. i let him.

we go along a corridor and then in to darkness. im in the darkness. im in the darkness with thom. im in the darkroom with thom. and we can still hear the music and feel the bass through the floor and the walls. some minor diva sings that true love lasts forever. and we hold each other. and thoms skin isnt like sandpaper at all. its soft and warm and he has bands of muscles. biceps and pecs and abs. and we hold each other and i think that ive never loved anyone but thats wrong. i love tom. maybe i love thom too.

- you should not call me kraut he says. i heard you last night

- im sorry i say. okay

- okay

and he smiles and i smile and we kiss and grope up against the wall.

- whats this *auf deutsch*

my hand is on his arse. his pants are es briefs. blue.

- *mein arsch* he says

and i move my hand.

- and this

- *eier* he says

and i laugh. we say balls. they say eggs.

- and this

we say cock they say *schwanz*. we say belly they say *bauch*. we say tits they say *brust*. we say nipples they say *nippeln*. we say ears they say *ohren*. we say eyes they say *augen*. they say *mund* and we say mouth. and sex is *sex* but we are wasted and sex isnt going to happen.

- you want that i get v he says

- v

- *viagra*

- no

and we hold each other and kiss each other and i think. i think that we say love and they say *liebe*. and time crumples. and then its the end of the night and we are back at the bar with tom who is smiling. sweat-wet wasted and wearing a t-shirt.

- look at this he says. some guy gave it me

- oh aye i say. and what did you give him

he just smiles.

- look he says

and he pulls the front of the t-shirt up over his head and on the back is a gargoyle or something. and it looks weird but at the same time horny cause the pants and pulled-up t-shirt frame his abs.

- *heraus heraus* the man from the hostel shouts

he bangs at the door. tries to open it but we locked it with the bolt. i become aware of other things slowly. one thing at a time. i am hot. sweating. i am dehydrated. i am fully clothed. i am in the middle. toms in front. thoms behind. it is light. bright. red numbers on the clock. 15:06. the man from the hostel shouts that check-out was at noon.

- for this you must pay an extra day. hear me. hear me

i hear him. tom and thom dont. the man from the hostel goes and they eventually wake. we get up. we pack. the flight from schönefeld is at 18:35 we think but cant find the boarding passes. thom checks on his iphone. we have just two hours. we sneak past reception. on schaum-how-sir-alley tom can't keep up. thom looks at me.

- you could stay with me he says

- tom and me

- just you

tom catches up and i look at tom and tom looks at me. thom looks at both of us. tom smiles his smile but i dont smile. thom walks ahead.

- what's up tom says

i tell him and the smiler stops smiling.

Author Bio

Joe Lavelle lives in Liverpool, England. He is on the Creative Writing Masters at Lancaster University. He has returned to writing after having fiction published in the nineties in anthologies including *Queer View Mirror* (Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver) and *The Gay Times Book of Short Stories: New Century New Writing* (Gay Times Books, London). He is working on a collection of short stories about encounters between British and German men tentatively entitled *Alone with the Germans*.

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