

OPENING CINEMATIC

Until my first night in Germany, I had never set foot inside a bar. I'd also never been in a fight before, and certainly not over a girl. Neither would have happened—I merely would have unpacked my bags in my new host family's home and gone to bed early—except that my hands were hurting again.

It had started several hours ago, after our flight landed in Cologne. Initially I'd been able to bury the pain under the excitement of arriving at last in Germany, but the humid ferry ride from Cologne downriver to St. Goar had only made the situation worse.

Autumn, the girl for whom I never could have guessed I'd soon be fighting, had absolutely reveled in the balmy heat on the upper deck of the ferry, throwing back her long neck and letting the sun play across her face. I probably should have asked her to help me, maybe to dig my support gloves out of my backpack, but she still didn't know the extent of my arthritis. We hadn't exactly traveled in the same circles at school and I had no intention of starting off our summer together by forcing her to be my nurse.

Hours later, after supper with Autumn and our new host parents I had reasoned that a long exploratory walk through my new hometown might at least tire me out so I could sleep all night and start fresh tomorrow.

It didn't work. Even so, the evening began calmly enough and the scenery was distracting. Out on the water an ancient tanker lumbered southward on the current, engines grumbling peaceably. The night was so still I could hear the tanker's wake lapping at the opposite shore. Lighted windows and streetlamps spread like glowing tree roots up the walls of the valley. Completing the picture, a huge old castle stood on a cliff overlooking the town, stern and brilliant in the glare of yellow ghost lights.

There, I thought, staring up at the first European castle I'd ever seen in person. There was the silver lining. I'd made it to Germany. No more troubled frowns from Dr. Elmore whenever the subject of traveling abroad came up. No more anxious suggestions from my mother that the money I'd saved for this summer could just as easily go into my college fund.

"*Guten Abend*," said an elderly gentleman pleasantly as I passed. He was sitting on a bench in the circular glow of a streetlamp, clutching the bend of his cane in an enviably firm grip.

I opened my mouth to return the greeting, but before I could do so, a sharp cry, brassy and angry and clearly female, echoed through the still air and died out over the river.

The man and I both turned toward the sound. I told myself I didn't—*couldn't*—recognize the voice that had made that sound. Then again, at supper Autumn had mentioned that she might take a walk too...

The old man resettled himself on his bench and grimaced distastefully. He rattled off some haughty sounding German that I might have understood in different circumstances, but with the cry still fading in my ears I heard mostly gibberish.

OPENING CINEMATIC

I did pick out a single term which I repeated as a question. “*Die Kneipe?*”

Alcohol related vocabulary certainly hadn't been part of the curriculum at New Canaan Mennonite High School, but our teacher, Mrs. Miller, had admitted, “Beer is an important part of German culture. Many Germans of all ages visit a *Biergarten* or *Kneipe*, which we might call a bar or pub, in the evenings for a social drink with their friends.”

“*Ja, natürlich die Kneipe,*” the old man repeated in a deep, pursed tone of disapproval.

Another shout rang down the street. Yes, that voice sounded familiar, no denying it. This time the sound was followed by a rush of loud, harsh laughter.

“Thanks,” I said over my shoulder to the old man, starting to run toward the sounds. “*Danke*, I mean. Sorry.”

He called after me. I didn't bother to translate. Every footfall on the uneven cobbled street brought a quick, ringing jolt like a hammer blow through my knuckles up to my elbows. I skidded around a corner and heard music, a tuba-heavy polka faint beneath the rasp of my own breath in my ears. More laughter. Wouldn't I feel silly if I burst into the *Kneipe* gasping like a hooked perch only to find a bunch of strangers playing some drinking game, clapping, laughing, and hollering along to the music?

The street narrowed into a little alley. A metal sign bolted to the side of the nearest building read *Flussgasse*. River Street, or something like that. I remembered Mrs. Miller telling us the word *Gasse* didn't translate very well into English and referred to a narrow pathway of some kind. Now that I was pelting down the center of one at full speed, however, I thought it just looked like a regular old alley. Why did teachers always act like the stuff they taught was so darned complica—

A tinkle of breaking glass rippled through the alley. The polka music stopped suddenly, as did the laughter. Uneasy voices drifted

from a lighted doorway thirty feet ahead. Several Germans sitting at the round tables outside the *Kneipe's* front windows stopped their conversations and peered inside with obvious concern.

I skidded into the door and pushed through with my right shoulder, sending a new river of fire down that arm. In the dim haze of the *Kneipe* I could make out heavy wooden tables running the room's full length. Along the back wall enormous barrels were stacked like a medieval king's supply of mead. To my right stood a high, mirrored bar packed with an impossible amount of exotic bottles.

But these things were mere periphery. All eyes in the *Kneipe* were on two people in the middle of the room, one of whom was Autumn. Sometime between now and the supper we'd eaten with our host parents she had changed out of her travel clothes into a tight blue halter top and khaki shorts that showed more leg than my mother's bathing suit.

She stood red-faced before an absolutely hulking German man who might have been in his twenties. It was hard to tell. He was well over six feet tall, shaved bald and covered in bulging, trembling muscles. He wore a gold ring in his nose and looked like nothing so much as a bull that had learned to stand on its hind legs.

Autumn brandished the top half of a brown beer bottle that ended in a spiky cylinder just below the neck. Judging from the yellow spatters on the guy's white t-shirt, the bottle had been full when Autumn had broken it and started taking swings at him.

"*Nochmal ein Flittchen aus dem Internet,*" the bull sneered to his friend. "*Dieses hat grössere Titten, oder?*"

He made a suggestive squeezing motion. His thick hands and forearms were covered in angry little red dots that might have been bug bites or healing injuries from previous bar fights. Or needle tracks, I supposed. Lord knew the guy was big enough to be using steroids, and the thickest cluster of marks was visible near his elbow, where drug addicts in movies usually juiced up.

OPENING CINEMATIC

“If you *touch* me again,” Autumn raged up into his face, which was even redder than hers, “we’ll see how many of those big squirmy veins I have to cut open before you pass out.” She puckered her mouth and gobbled a lace of spit onto his cheek.

One of the veins Autumn had mentioned pulsed in his forehead. “*Schlampe*,” he spat softly.

Although I didn’t know that particular word, its many possible meanings were evident. I stepped fully into the *Kneipe* without any idea of what I meant to do.

“*Guten Abend!*” I shouted, trying to sound as cheerful as possible. Everyone’s attention shifted to me. So far so good. “*Bitte, dieses Mädchen ist meine Schwester*,” I adlibbed.

It was a bad lie. Autumn and I couldn’t have looked less like brother and sister. She was short and powerful with legs like a field hockey player, whereas ever since my growth spurt last summer my body had the general shape and muscle definition of a wooden spoon. But I also didn’t think anyone would be paying close attention at the moment.

I searched my memory for the German word for “crazy” and after a moment I found it. “*Sie ist verrückt*,” I explained. When that didn’t seem to connect with my audience I pointed dramatically to the side of my head. “*Im Kopf!*”

Some of the tension began to ebb from the room. Muted chuckles erupted at a table to my left. Even if these were at the expense of my German, hearing them lightened my heart.

“Leon, what are you doing here?” Autumn asked. She sounded nonchalant, annoyed even, that I had busted up her evening.

“We’re going home. Our host parents will be wor—”

With Autumn’s attention fixed on me, the body builder took the opportunity to clamp a beefy hand around her fingers and the neck of the beer bottle. He jerked up on her arm and she staggered toward him, off balance. A second more powerful jerk lifted her off her feet, arm extended awkwardly over her head.

Before I even knew I had moved, I was standing between them, shoving at the bald giant and sending splintery, aching heat through my unprotected knuckles and wrists. I may as well have been shoving at a redwood tree. Unperturbed, he yanked again on the bottle, this time pulling down instead of up. It slipped out of Autumn's grip at last, and suddenly jagged glass was slicing through the air toward my face, glistening beads of beer still clinging to the sharp edges like saliva on pointed teeth.

I had time to register surprise on the guy's face. His arm shifted strangely as if he might be trying to stop his downward stroke but it was too late. New, stinging pain lanced down the center of my forehead and I went to my knees with the force of it.

A hot wet stripe ran from my forehead down the bridge of my nose and dripped between my lips. It tickled. I thought about wiping it away, but my hands hurt for some reason.

Autumn might have screamed my name. I was quite occupied with the shiny red drops appearing on the toes of the big German guy's dress shoes. The shoes looked expensive. Why was he letting beer drip all over them?

Wait, was German beer red?

It was all terribly confusing and truth be told I didn't want to think about it anymore. I thought I might feel better if I went to sleep for a while. So that's what I did.