

Lion Christ

*Sly Dog*

Excerpt translated from the German by Lucy Jones

p. 17

*Civilian serviceman in Munich area (21 y/o, 5'9", cherrywood eyes, dark hair, slim but with some muscle) seeks man, late 20s max, preferably financially stable. You like dancing (not country or waltzes!) You're into culture or just want to go out for a nice meal? My BFF Theresa will take and pass on your details if you call 089 58742 on workdays after 6.30 pm. Please give details of age and your exact appearance. Letters also accepted of course (P.O. Box, codeword: lasting friendship) only with a photo please (full-length photo in return!) Discretion assured.*

*P.S. Sorry, because I live in the countryside I can only meet in the city centre at weekends. Looking forward to hearing from you and hopefully meeting you in person soon!*

p.78

They corner me at the exit – my boss, her face like stone, with Sabine in tow, who's been acting strangely uptight all evening. The floor is suddenly crawling with killer ants, but when I take a closer look, it's just the speckled linoleum. Maybe I'm just having one of my dizzy turns.

'Open your bags for us, Florian,' commands my boss, calmly but firmly. How I hate being called by my full name. Thank God I'm already halfway out of the door and so I act like I just don't hear her.

'Have to hurry, bus won't wait,' I mumble before getting ready to bolt.

But that's when she grabs me by the wrist and pulls me roughly back inside Loisch Department Store.

I cling to my bag as if my life depends on it, only letting go when my boss whacks my fingers several times, each time slightly harder. As if in a trance, I stare at the "30 per cent off!" sign for

knitted and woollen goods behind her immaculate, blonde quiff, trying to ignore my burning hand and the scores of invisible ants now crawling up my legs.

‘I nevva thought you’d do a fing like that, Flori,’ Sabine says, looking with a stunned expression at the grey polka-dot blouse that my boss is now waving in the air as if the supreme court were in session behind the muslin dresses.

‘And what do you need this for, hm, young man? Come on, spit it out!’ my boss hisses when she’s finished parading the blouse. She comes so menacingly close that I catch a whiff of sour coffee on her breath, mixed with the heavy cedarwood perfume of a real grande dame. Don’t back off now whatever you do, I think, even if your feet want to. Just ignore those ants eating you alive until there’s not a shred of skin left.

‘Wot? No idea how it found its way into my bag! I didn’t put it there! Must be some kind of mistake.’

‘Oh, come on Florian, do you *really* think we’re daft? The cheek of it! Don’t you dare lie to our faces!’

‘The name’s Flori and I’m not. What would I do with summink like that? Me, steal women’s clothes? That’s slander, that is, plain bonkers!’

Looking out of her depth, Sabine puffs a strand of hair out of her face and touches my shoulder kindly, as if she might believe me after all – please, please, please – as if every desperate syllable falling from my mouth makes sense to her all of a sudden, and I’m relieved, I can tell you.

But then I look back at my boss and in her cold eyes, I see the stare of a frustrated small-town cop whose golden teenage boy is never going to be the next David Beckham, even if she bends over backwards.

‘Items have been disappearing all month. Pure coincidence, is it, that something’s missing the next day whenever I drive Klaus to training?’ she barks.

My heart hammers in my throat and I fight to keep looking her straight in the eye because if I don’t, I’m done for, it’s curtains. I focus hard on the hum of the air conditioning overhead and wish that the dear Lord himself would suck me up through the metal grating and into the shaft, even if it would hack me to pieces.

‘You know what, you good-for-nothing?’ says my boss, throwing the stolen blouse on the floor – or rather, tossing it away like an old cleaning rag before she steps carelessly right over it. ‘Clear off this minute! I never want to see your face in here again! Not a shred of decency in you! I can’t believe it! First, you clean out half the store and then you have the nerve to ask for a fat pay rise! Without even batting an eyelid! Mind-boggling, it is!’

Sabine hastily picks up the blouse as if the cheap fake silk might get dirty or trampled on. But you can eat your dinner off the floor in Loisach Department Store and we've been closed for twenty minutes so there's not a customer in sight. She hurries after our boss, giving me a glance of pity mixed with incomprehension.

'You know what, Frau Moser, why wud Flori need somefink like this? He's right. Please give 'im a last chance and have a heart, won't you? Deep down, he's a good sort, thoughtful. Like when he brung cake the other day for Gerlinde's birthday, yeah?'

My boss stays where she is, grabs Sabine by the shoulders, and looks at her like she's a small kid who needs the bleeding obvious explained. No playing with sharp objects or fire, no fiddling with the light switch, and no picking up lollies from the ground where ciggie butts have been lying, otherwise you'll get tummy ache. Thank God I can't hear what she or anyone else in this world is saying about me, a skill I picked up as early as year three or four at school. All that stupid gossip about what kind of boy I was – in one ear and out the other. Everything goes quiet around me, even the air conditioning seems to have broken down for once. I stand rooted to the spot like a showroom dummy next to the discount racks at the entrance of Loisach Department Store, while just over there, my life is being raked over.

When my boss has said her piece and disappears through the steel door without a glance in my direction, Sabine turns to me, bewildered.

'Is it true, Flori? Did you really. . . for yourself. . .? So you're—'

She dries up and I clear my throat, trying to find my voice for a glib retort.

'Well. . . Bine,' I end up stammering. And that's all I can come up with. 'Can you please say hi to Mrs Eichinger for me, and if possible, tell her I won't be back? And say I'm going to see our plan through like we said, she'll know what you mean. . . Yeah? Promise? Tell her my life's really taking off now, and it's gonna be fantastic!'

Sabine doesn't seem to understand what I mean but gives a kind of nod. Then she slowly pitter-patters over to me and tweaks my side.

'Honest to God, Flori,' she smiles sheepishly, 'you're lucky the old battle-axe can't order you around anymore!'

I try to smile casually, waving her comment away, but it feels like I'm wearing a carnival mask, the ones you see in Venice, which I've been hiding behind since I was seven.

I gather my scattered belongings from the floor where they've landed during the body search and stuff them back into my bag – my sandwich box, my thermos flask of cold rosehip tea, my tote

bag, a creased “original autographed” postcard of Eurovision Nicole that I couldn't send Ma for her birthday in the end because I was afraid she'd notice the fake signature.

I stumble out onto the pavement, still wet from the cloudburst in the late afternoon, and stare at the big ice-cream cone opposite with its three weather-beaten plastic scoops like I'm seeing it for the first time.

‘Don't let her order you around either, yeah? You shouldn't put up with any old thing!’ I shout angrily back, turning around one last time to face Sabine and giving her a three-foot grin as if I'm back to my old self. ‘She don't deserve you – not in a hundred years! Best thing would be if you and Gerlinde handed your notices, like, then the old bag would look really stupid. When we all make it big, she'll be stuck here alone!’

I hope my voice doesn't sound as strange as I feel.

Sabine keeps smiling and waving after me with the fake silk blouse like it's a hanky in a film as the cruise liner is setting off. ‘Oh, Flori, you *are* a one. . . well, then, have a great time in California, yeah?’

On the bus home, I'm cold through and through. A random rattling sound comes from deep inside the engine, and the scratchy seat under my thighs won't prop me up. When I ask the bus driver nicely to turn off the air conditioning, he doesn't even take the stubby cigar out of his mouth to answer. ‘It's not on,’ he says, ‘at least not in the cheap back seats where you're sitting.’ He gives a throaty laugh.

I sit back down and rub my legs together to stop myself from shivering. Dead flies are stuck to the outside of the smeared window and gawp at me. We drive over the bridge at Puppling across the Isar, which is still whipped up from the thunderstorm a few hours ago. As I gaze down, mesmerised by the fast-flowing current, I think about how our neighbour's son drowned in this very river. How does it feel when your lungs fill with water, past the point of no return? Do you turn into a little trout at the last moment and swim away? Please, God, let it be that way.

That evening, I lie under my bed among the dust balls and lost woollen socks. Downstairs in the living room, the *Tageschau* music blares from the TV. It's calming how some things never change. Hopefully just before the world ends, the same upbeat news jingle will tinkle through our timber ceiling and a Waldemar Hartmann robot with a fashionably stripy tie, flat intonation and a plastic moustache will talk about how, at the ten millionth CSU Party conference, Franz Josef III was elected for life – no, forever. ‘And the weather in Bavaria is of course sunny and warm as you'd expect in purgatory. Those were tonight's headlines and I wish you a pleasant evening, dear viewers.’ These kinds of things matter, I realise that.

I absently carry on stroking a particularly fluffy woollen sock, squeezing it to my chest like the flea-ridden toy bunny I took everywhere as a child, until one day when I was playing in the naughty gravel pit, I lost him and couldn't stop crying. 'Where are you, Wabbit? Are you buried in the sand? Jeezus, just come back, please!'

I crawl out of my hidey-hole under the bed and pack what's necessary, while picturing myself standing in front of Ma and Pa, bawling my eyes out. In the end, they helped me look for Wabbit in the gravel pit after Pa quite rightly smacked me round the head because I could've been the buried one, 'not just that dumb, lousy toy.'

We never found Wabbit.

The same hands that churned up all that sand back then now stuff my trousers, vests and denim jacket, my toothbrush, razor and Gillette shaving cream into a holdall. Also my ID card with the terrible photo where I look like the pasty, moonfaced son of a priest's housekeeper, who's been hidden since birth from the local congregation. And of course, my Bogner Man cologne, my confirmation penknife, my secret boy mag with Adonises lusciously oiled from head to toe, my platform shoes and, finally, my red dress made of the finest fake satin in the universe.

Soon, though, I chuck it all back out on the sisal carpet in a fit because I've changed my mind. Then I crawl back into my dusty, safe hidey-hole and cuddle up even closer to my woollen sock in that muggy, cramped space. 'I'll never let you go, ok, because you an' me, we've got it good under here.'

Sometime later – ten minutes max – I break my promise and pack my holdall for a second time, feeling wobblier than before. Except that now I do it neatly, one thing at a time, the way you're supposed to. My hands flap about indecisively but actually, they know exactly what they have to do.

Because I can't haul any more stuff and my holdall barely zips up, I fill a grey bin liner with the rest of my loot and get Gregor to drive me to the brand-new clothing container that's been proudly announced in the local rag more than once. Our village has recently become a shining example of philanthropy, almost on par with a big city when it comes to charity.

Every time car headlights appear behind us on the tar-patched road, I give a start and turn around. Some dark birds, I don't recognise which kind, take off like jet planes through the drizzle into the jagged blanket of clouds. From up there, the last daylight shines onto the perfectly even furrows of the fields.

'You're quiet today,' Gregor says, his cute jug ears pricking up just noticeably.

'Pft, rubbish.'

But to be honest, I haven't said a word since we set off. Because on the huge screen in front of me, in razor-sharp detail and Technicolor, I'm seeing us being waved over to the side of the road and me getting arrested while he watches with his great big St Bernard eyes. I hear the click of the handcuffs and from head to toe, I feel my parents' disappointment at having raised a lad like me, only to have him wind up in Borstal. It's like the little needle pricks when Mrs Schindler the tailor pinned me into my Holy Communion suit, the one that had belonged to my cousin, Martl, who was two and a half heads taller than me. Even after she'd altered the suit, I still looked like a pre-schooler playing a banker at a fancy dress party.

When I'm finally standing in the freshly paved car park of the town hall and go to slip my bin liner into the creaking hole of the container, my fingers resist. Oh, come on, I try to coax myself, at least some poor person in Africa will soon be wearing these cool clothes and feel like a pinup model. Over there, I bet they've never seen such fancy department store goods. I bet people usually donate the worst rubbish they wouldn't be seen dead in. And then they call it charity – a taupe cardigan from a 1971 Jaeger catalogue. I realise that Gregor is watching me from inside his Kadett, getting more suspicious every minute, and so I count down from ten, feelings all churning inside. Come on, do it, just let go, it can't be that hard!

'What was really inside those bin liners?' Gregor asks when I climb back into his Kadett in a daze. 'And no porky pies.'

'Oh, just some of my Mum's old sports clothes.'

His expression shows that he doesn't believe a word. He shrugs in a strop and starts up the engine again.

Half an hour later, in a very overgrown patch of the woods near Erlach, we're both sitting on the back seat covered in sweat, having nearly got stuck in the mud with the back tyres – just what I needed today – as we drove deeper into the dusky undergrowth.

I rest my damp forehead on Gregor's shoulder, my briefs hanging pathetically around the backs of my knees as I start to shiver again. Even his sperm tasted weird today. Not of pure, shiny excitement, but more like rancid cooking oil that's been standing around in the cellar for years. As for me, I couldn't even come, didn't get anywhere close.

'Hey, what's up?' Gregor asks again, thankfully holding tightly onto my arm. 'Coming down with something, little buddy?'

'Maybe. Might be a cold.'

I can't get another word out, my throat suddenly feels corded up. He tries tickling me but that doesn't work either, nor do his silly faces.

In the end, he stops and just sits there awkwardly, looking like he's been through a hot wash and has shrunk.

'Hey Flori,' he says, 'I don't do anyfink with birds no more, you know that, right? I only like you. But at discos, yeah, there's no way round it, right? I have to ask a couple of 'em to dance in case it looks suspect.'

He gives me a guilty glance and then puts on his Michael Caine voice. 'I don't want no bird's respect. I wouldn't know what to do wiv it!'

His half-baked Alfie impression doesn't make me laugh for one second. I just sigh glumly and stare out of the window into the misty night. He'll never come to anything, it flashes through my mind, he'll never make it as an actor, a doctor, not even a cushy geography teacher with a decent pension. It makes me ache all over to have such a low opinion of my own boyfriend. He is and always will be Georg Förg Junior, nothing more. Is that really enough for me?

'As if I care,' I snap at him, shocked at myself. 'Ask as many birds as you like for a dance at the next lousy village disco. No skin off my nose.'

'Sounds like the opposite.'

'For Christ's sake, I don't feel good today, ok? Is that illegal now, or wot? Do I have to win a pissing contest every day?'

My flare of temper startles him and he clumsily brushes the back of my head with his rough fingers – the roughness of which never bothered me until now. Then he gives me a peck on the tip of my nose.

'It's all gonna work out fine, little buddy. Maybe we can drive up to Tölz tomorrow, hm, would you like that? Go to a nice pub, my treat, what d'you think?'

'I dunno, could do.'

We drive back to the car park outside the off-licence with its neon sign that's been there since time began: *Alois Krautenbacher and Sons – beer, spirits and soft drinks*, the only source of light in Sonnkirchen, if not the whole drab world. For hours, the sky has been shrouded in the cheapest fake tulle, the kind that billows out from your hips but just won't fall nicely.

Horribly weak at the knees, I scramble out of the Kadett and just in time, the gravel underfoot stops me from slipping onto the road wet from the downpour. And anyway, at the last minute, a strong hand shoots out of the car window to grab onto for support. Gregor pulls me towards him for the last time and tenderly pinches my cheek like he always does. Then he does his parting riff. 'Is he gonna be a good little boy?' He pauses, swallows and bravely carries on. 'Ah, you still like me, don't you?'

I hesitate before nodding like one of those plastic dogs in the back of a dentist's estate car. With gruesome formality, we smile at each other like two distant cousins, and then Gregor pulls back his hand, only slightly reassured. I'm so happy that it's getting dark because hopefully, he won't see my expression in the dim light of the neon sign. It would be a dead giveaway.

The next morning, after a night that dragged on forever, during which nothing helped – not Ma's warm milk with honey, or Pa's apricot schnapps – I haul my holdall downstairs, not looking left or right, I just can't. There are no photos of a tiny banker in his Holy Communion suit on the walls, standing in front of a spindly bush, grasping a hymn book and a gleaming candle. And there's definitely no world-famous portrait of a little rascal called Flori, splashing about with yellow water wings in a tub filled with rainwater, scowling and naked. 'He-ey, you, no press photos and definitely not for free!'

The oak timber stairs creak much too familiarly, no matter how carefully I tread.

When I finally open the door to the lobby and peer into the dimness, I not only see Ma's and Pa's waterproofed comfy shoes all in a row but also a pair of sandals whose worn-out leather straps encase snow-white toes. My gaze travels up Ma's familiar body concealed in a cleaning apron and a faded blouse, her hands in rubber gloves, and her golden fish chain around her neck. With her large, tired eyes, she looks at me.

'Where are you off to?'

'Oh,' I say, 'to see an old friend from polytechnic for her birthday, I'll be back tomorrow.'

'Don't you have to work today?'

'Nah, took the day off.'

She looks at me blankly for a bit before she spots the holdall hanging from my shoulder. Then her expression shifts to unease. My forehead, cheeks and armpits all start sweating.

'And what's your friend doing for her birthday?'

'Oh, nothing big, we'll probably just go to the cinema and then to the Italian afterwards. Well, Ma, I really have to go now before I miss my bus.'

I try to sneak past her but feel something grabbing my sleeve. Without warning, she squeezes me hard against her chest, and for the first time in ages, I feel her small hand, still encased in a rubber glove, gently stroking my back. My body feels strangely peaceful as if it wants to stay this way forever.

'Well, then,' I say, as casually as possible, after she's let go of me, which sadly had to be.



'Hm, well, then,' Ma whispers, almost inaudibly.

I avoid her gaze and don't dare turn back as I take big, brave strides down the driveway, the gravel crunching underfoot. Over in the shrubbery, the blackbirds scuffle, stuffing themselves with blackcurrants like there was no tomorrow. 'Like the old Romans, those damned birds,' Pa would say now with an indulgent smile. 'Well, if they find them tasty, what can you do?'

In front of the pub, I wait for the bus to Wolfratshausen, embarrassingly sweaty for this time of day. From there, a train will leave for Munich later on. One last whiff of chip fat and sauerkraut blasting from the extractor vent, one last spit of my gum into the privet hedge in front of the beer garden, then with a hiss, the doors of my good old thirty-metre-long private limo open.

'Did you just spit your chewing gum into the hedge, you little sod?' says the driver gruffly in greeting.

'Pft, definitely not,' I snarl back, then off I zoom to my dear old, scuffed seat at the rear, where I hope a chilled glass of bubbly will be waiting to calm my nerves and, please, my heart.