Münster Beggars

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I have started going to church a few times since I’ve been here, enjoying the hour as ever more time to meditate and think of my own squalid smallness. I attend a church with such sky-piercing spires and frighteningly solemn decor within, it’s the sort of classic Ernst that our Kumbaya-singing hand-holding happiness has lost. It’s across from the mall in the plaza and has an attached bookstore, but I can forget that on a Sunday morning, even if I have to stumble across the cobblestones in a hangover and uncomfortable shoes to do so.

By the time Sunday rolls around I have amassed enough guilty thoughts and confusing paradoxes to merit waiting in the short line outside the southeast entrance of the Münster. The first time a beggar held the door for me, I jumped. The joking lack of outgoing, friendly service in Germany did not prepare me. Half-lit by the late morning sun, he seemed to emerge from the woodwork like a caricatured gargoyle, with a mountainous nose and pinched, watery blue eyes, flyaway blond hair breaking off at the ends. The German beggars always wear cast-off Americanized clothing. Anything emblazoned with a proud capitalistic insignia makes the shabbiest of worn linen army jackets sing with pride. Sometimes they have crutches and a limp for added sympathy points, sometimes worn and holey sweatsuits from head to toe.

When it’s my turn the beggar leaps forward and dramatically pulls the door open with a politely deep “Guten Morgen” and a wide smile. His row of nicotine-stained but surprisingly well-organized teeth distract me from the dog food bowl at his feet, already graced with a few one and two Euro coins, glittering in the Sunday noonlight like from the bottom of a fountain. No request for change, no pity-inducing story about being born with AIDS and deadbeat parents, like what the smackheads under
the bridge on *Poppelsdorfer Allee* sometimes serve up to richly-dressed tourists and liberal-leaning students. Just a gracious smile and I’m inside the church, ready to dip my fingers in holy water and meditate on my life for just under an hour.

The eternal beauty of the Catholic Sunday mass is the reliability of its length. I have never attended service longer than an hour. I sit in an empty pew and breathe in all the gilded absurdity around me. I wonder if the beggars asked the church for help and this was the idea of a forward-thinking yet practical priest to feed these beggars for lifetimes instead of merely for a day. Perhaps the beggars had the idea themselves, being greatly interested in the internal mechanics of the service industry. Or maybe, like anything that seems as much a part of this city as the leaking stink of rain between cobblestones, this partnership erupted organically. The beggars show up and the church tolerates their presence so long as they do not openly harass the patrons.

They never do ask for money. The dog food bowl serves as enough of a prompt for some, the empty scuffed metal soothing guilt with each chink of change in the bottom. I sometimes donate to the street musicians who set up shop over on *Mauspfadstrasse*, but only when they play a particularly heart-rending tune to soundtrack my wobbly and triumphant walk home to my cavernous one-bedroom. Once a lone saxophonist played “The Long and Winding Road” lit by a single poetic streetlight, and it was just perfect enough for my loose change. They don’t openly ask for money either, but it seems unfair that the plush velvet lining of a violin case entices me more to charity than a metal dog food bowl.

Before the mysterious foothills of Europe I hadn’t been to church to pray in years. As I approach adulthood I understand why my parents pray, as I gather more and more things in my life that I could not bear to lose, and more mistakes that I need impossible forgiveness for. All I can do sometimes is pray for a more-than-human-spirit to give me absolution. It’s the most daring thing I can think of to preserve the life I want. It
has become a relief to offer up my unholy heart and deceiving mind and innate fears. I’m not asked but I give it up freely. The beggars don’t ask, maybe because of dignity or law, but only smile. I would give all my weight of emotion to the beggars too, if they wanted it.

Inside the dark herbal echoes of the church is no room for beggars. I assume, although I cannot follow the priest’s guttural German recitation, that he speaks of forgiveness, of loving one’s neighbor and oneself, love for all creatures, and virtuous fake tales of history. How much do I receive daily that I do not openly ask for? The tolerance of my life here by my lover back home, who is reminded daily, though I promised coming here wouldn’t change me or us, that I fall in love with a new person, building, idea, blade of grass every five minutes, even though I promised to be forever loyal and let him fill my every thought and desire. My parents forgive me for being the daughter who needed them least, who fought with them less but guarded her secrets all the more fiercely. I have received men who let me wink at them and rest my head on their shoulders, I have received good weather, long conversations on even longer bus rides, riverside access, the Hofgarten after midnight with friends and cheap wine, cobblestones and ever later sunsets.

After about forty minutes I obediently follow the line to take communion, and when the priest offers der Körper Christi in rolled Rs and a solemn tone I take it without question. Afterward I kneel in my pew, asking for forgiveness and tolerance of my faults to whoever is listening, perhaps just the paper-thin, eavesdropping Frau on my left. Even this late into mass, yet more patrons enter with heads bowed, embarrassed yet still desperate to receive even a little bit of the priest’s baritone words.

The beggars remain outside during service, offering the same courtesy to these late stragglers that they did the pushy, desperate punctuals. Those in a hurry have no idea these are beggars. They see the open door, the cool dark
safety of murmuring prayer within, without letting their eyes drift down to the empty metal dog food bowl at their feet. I believe there are some meaningful Bible passages about beggars. Forgive me that I have not read them. Forgive me that I have stopped going to church again, and just walk by to watch the beggars lean against the chipped stone wall and wait for visitors before they jump to politeness, hoping for something they cannot ask for.

— Laura Citino