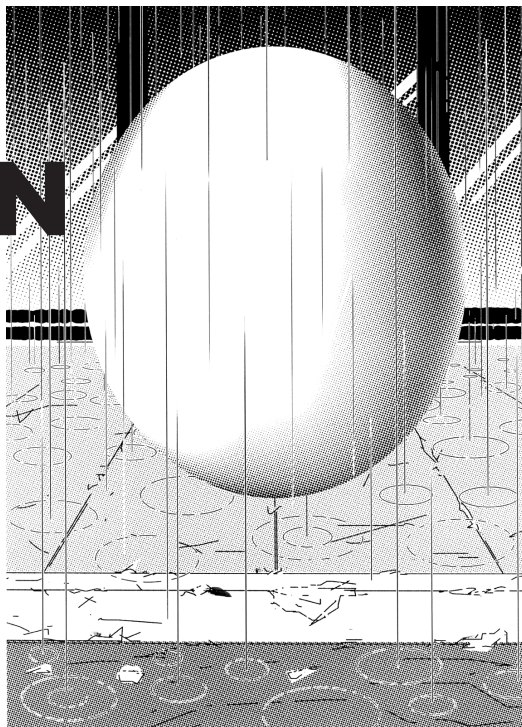


ESSAY BY JOHANNES MUSIAL

YOU ARE THE ONLY WHITE PERSON HERE.



It was a night in late October, light rain falling and a cold breeze coming in from the north, when things changed. Not just the seasons, leaves shifting color and the sun growing colder. Something else, more serious, too.

It happened six years ago in New York. I had moved to the city for journalism school. When I arrived in the summer, the city was boiling. Heat simmering, sweat flowing, Latino music blasting. Life creeping out of open windows into the street.

This, they said, was the land of the free. A long way from the dying country in which I was born. East Germany caged its citizens' bodies behind a wall and had a secret police force do the same with their souls, afraid of what unenslaved thoughts might do.

I was born too late to care. No memories of the state, only a faded birth certificate. And so I moved on, undisturbed and oblivious, able to journey wherever and whenever.

The plane slid into New York during the last daylight. It was the Obama years then and looking back everything seemed simpler. The noise subdued. Emotions less fragile. Isn't it pretty to think so?

From the airport I took the subway to the apartment, where I would live with three classmates I had only spoken to over the phone. The train rattled along rusty tracks towards the distant skyscrapers, which stood like lazy giants. It passed through poor neighborhoods with dimly lit streets. Buildings were rotting away there, the rent rising nonetheless.

I was the only white person in the subway car. I held my suitcase ever so slightly tighter.

The train passed under the East River into Manhattan. Underground the change was just as noticeable. Every stop flushed more white passengers into the car, some in suits, some red-faced from the summer sun.

I got off at 125th Street in Harlem, after the makeup of the car had changed once again. Outside it was night now. The air still warm and thick with exhaust fumes and a vague smell of decay so often found in congested ci-

ties. A blend of urine stench, the sweet odor of trash and who knows what else. I felt uneasy. Glancing nervously up and down the street. Surely because of the long flight, I told myself. And because I was overwhelmed by the vast city. Really, it was because I had surfaced in a neighborhood, where I found myself the only white person in sight.

Until I sat down to write this, I had forgotten about these moments, considered them too small and, yes, too shameful to remember. But problems always start small.

Living in New York I learned that pretending to understand, no matter how convincingly, doesn't equal true understanding. I had pretended to understand the struggle of people with a skin color different from mine. After all, I had marched in demonstrations and traveled the world.

Then I met undocumented immigrants who would never get to attend the Ivy League university I did. Then I met Black mothers who raised children by themselves, while working two, sometimes three jobs to afford a tiny apartment at the edge of the city. Then I heard the unemployment rate of Black Americans was twice the one of white Americans and their chances of ending in prison fivefold.

When I was breaking the law with white friends, jaywalking or smoking a joint or drinking in the street, we knew the police wouldn't do a thing about it. We also knew it would be different were our skin another shade.

Like that of Eric Garner. A black father of six, who suffocated in a chokehold on a dirty Manhattan sidewalk after police suspected him of illegally selling cigarettes. „I can't breathe," he gasped before his death. "We can't breathe," people at protests chanted after his death. Panting for air because the lives of black Americans are worth less than those of white Americans.

At the time when all this unfolded, I was following Diandra Forrest for a magazine story. I had contacted the African-American model after coming across a photo of her online. In it she looks pale, her skin not black, but a sickly white draped around a delicate frame. She has albinism.

I was interested in exploring race in the United States through the lens of someone caught in the racial divide. Someone who's black and white and, actually, neither. In the fashion industry her looks are even more of a liability. "It's like black, white and Diandra," she once told me during a photoshoot at a Manhattan loft. "They want what's more marketable and for some reason, what's more marketable is either a Black girl with white features or a very Black girl with African features. There's no in-between."

In late October, six years ago, she turned 26. For her birthday she invited friends and me to a skate club. "It's adult night," she messaged me. "So don't worry, you won't be tripping over any little ones. So let's eat, dance, and celebrate my ass getting old lol."

It was a Wednesday. The place called Crazy Legs was located in Brooklyn, on a scarred street punctured with potholes, its asphalt pulling and tearing and cracking. Inside, past a hallway with a Martin Luther King mural on one side, there was a gym. Speakers blasted 80s music and people roller-skated in circles around the outlines of the basketball court.

I spotted Diandra the very moment I entered. A tall, slender figure effortlessly drifting across the slick wooden floor. "Have fun," said the woman handing out the skates and gave me a pair. "Sure will," I said smiling, thinking it can't be that hard.

After some hours of futile attempts at mimicking Diandra's grace, I counted three embarrassing falls. Quite fitting,

it seems to me now, for it wasn't the last time I would be proven wrong that day.

Well before midnight, our group moved to a bar some blocks away. The rain that had started earlier let up long enough for us to get there dry. I believe it was the Nostrand Avenue Pub. It could have been any other dive, but it doesn't matter anyway, since all bars around there were alike, a dark interior and large windows facing the street, the same beers on tap – Brooklyn Lager, Blue Moon, Lagunitas.

We ordered drinks instead. Fancy ones with fruits and plain gin tonics. We talked faster and sang louder and drank more and rushed the clocks forward and it must have been after a Rihanna song or "Shake It Off" by Taylor Swift, whose music I actually don't like, but alcohol, it must have been sometime after that, when a guy from the group leaned over to me.

"I know this is awkward, but you're the only white person here," he said. "Would you mind talking to the police officer outside? A friend is in trouble."

I was suddenly jerked sober, looking around, realizing he was right, no other white person in the bar, not a single one. What are the odds, I asked myself. And surprise turned into something unpleasant, my stomach ten times larger, my eyes racing between the drink in my hand and him and the door and Diandra to my left and him. There was a worry on his face. He was convinced I would be able to help, because of my skin. Only because of my skin.

"Sure," I said eventually and put down my glass. Walking towards the door, flashing by, I remember Diandra telling me that her black friends occasionally ask her to sit upfront when they're in a car, assuming the police won't pull them over with a white-skinned person in the passenger seat.

"What's the problem, officer?" I asked, a line I may have lifted from some movie, but felt appropriate. The policeman turned around and looked at me from below thick brows. He was also white. Also he was overweight and at least in his forties. Maybe not the first choice to pursue a criminal, I thought.

A girl from our group stood next to him, a drink in her hand. The officer said he intended to fine her since she was illegally drinking in the street. Casual talk followed, promises to not ever do it again. Someone behind me mentioned that I'm a journalist. Until, finally, he was willing to let her go.

We ordered another round and danced some more, to a Beyoncé song or "Happy" by Pharrell. And nothing would be what it was. Somehow the ground had shifted. As if a rug had been pulled away from under my feet and a gaping hole opened up in its place, making me lose my footing in a seemingly steady world. And cracks appeared in the walls and the ceiling and all around me, the facade crumbling.

From then on, when the police would show up at a party, a white person would do the talking. Always a white person.

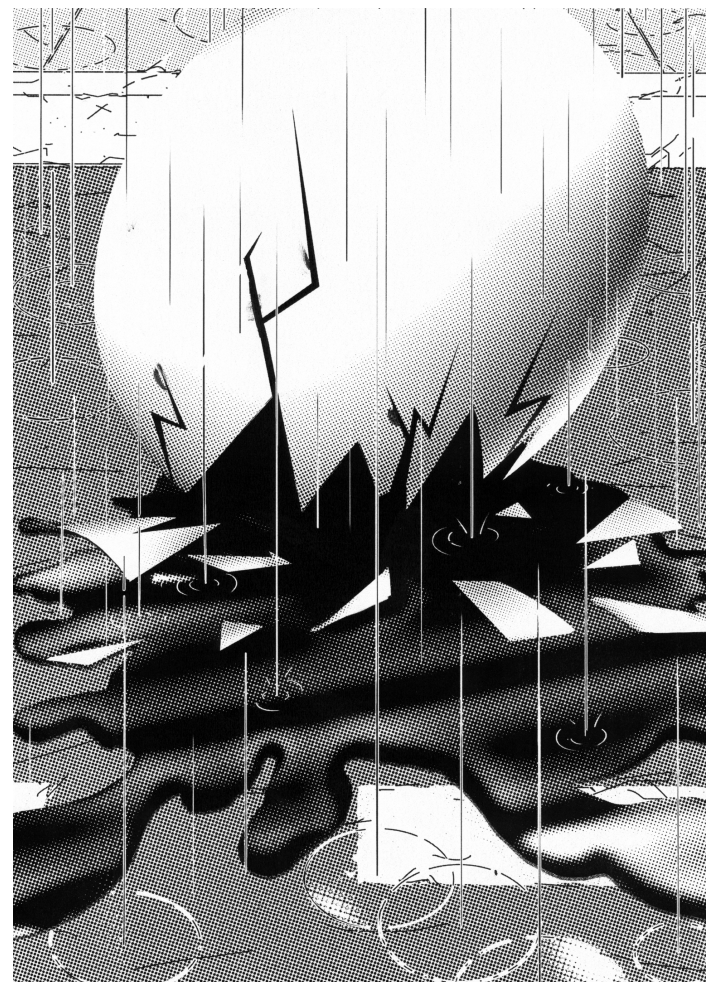
For all the successes and failures, love and death that followed, I still remember that night once in late October. Remember that when I left the bar, the rain had picked up, pounding the city. That I walked home nonetheless and took water like a boat with a leaky hull.

You're the only white person here.

I was trying to keep my eyes on the stumbling drunken feet. Step after step after step after step.

Would you mind?

"What's the problem, officer?"



Illustrations by:
OMSCIC COMICS

Johannes Musial

Born in East Berlin just before the Iron Curtain came down, Johannes Musial often examines the cracks in society through his work as a magazine writer and documentary filmmaker. Failing to finish any of the novels he attempted to write as a teenager, he took a more conventional career path: After studying journalism and political science in Germany and Spain, he moved to New York, where he attended the Columbia Journalism School. His stories focus on people around the globe facing unique challenges. Among them a mother in Minneapolis who befriended her son's murderer, girls in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro who find hope through learning to dance ballet, participants of a private tour in California who volunteer to be tortured and men in Guyana who catch wild birds and have them compete in singing competitions. He works for ARD, Die Zeit, Vice, Reportagen, Al Jazeera and is a host of the documentary channel Y-Kollektiv. Based in Berlin again, he is finishing what he left off as a teenager and is currently writing a book about longing for and finding true adventure.