

July 14: ♪ 2. Ain't It Funny ♪

She made me dress up for this cheap tourist??!!

Peter shook his leg to relieve the pressure on his foot. Portly Mrs. Hamilton strolled down the Berlin sidewalk in an elegant navy blue suit and high-heeled pumps next to a smaller woman in simple clothes.

Massive and lightweight. Fancy and plain. It struck him how the unequal pair mirrored the contrast in the surroundings. Sixty-five years after the end of World War II, the capital city of Germany showed the checkered marks of the brutal shelling. Modern high-rises adorned with steel and glass stood amid hundred-year-old Art Nouveau buildings heavy with wood trim.

The young real estate agent stood at the agreed upon meeting point in front of the door of the freshly renovated building. Each wave of traffic shoved a burnt odor through the air. His iPod Nano, playing Madonna's "Angel", fought valiantly, though hopelessly, to drown out the noise.

Peter brushed back a stray lock of dark hair and shifted his weight from one foot to another. He had only worn the black Rockports twice before, so they felt stiff and tight. The discomfort sent his mood into the gutter. He could have come in his trusted white adidas sneakers. The ones Mrs. Hamilton despised. So what if they were scuffed and frayed from overuse. At least they were comfortable.

Memories of the embarrassing moment last week brought an uncomfortable rush of blood to his face again. The older woman had inspected the recently built penthouse apartment and given unsolicited advice on his casual attire. Considering her maternalistic tone, the image of the diminutive wallflower at her side looked like an embarrassing joke, if not an insult, to Peter.

The plain, high-necked, white blouse could have escaped

straight from a Dress For Less store. An ill-fitting, iridescent skirt in an ambiguous brownish-green color reached down to her knees, followed by unremarkable flat slippers. The hat topped it all, though. A white mosquito net, molded over her tied-up hair, flared out into a useless huge brim unable to shade her face.

The vibrations of the mobile phone in his pants pocket caught his attention. His hand scrambled to retrieve the old Nokia model. The display showed "Office."

"Oh, damn, worst timing possible," he cursed. Peter inserted the earplug's jack into the phone, hit the green button, and bellowed into the microphone, "Ja, was?"

"Bad day, Peter?" The office manager's sweet German accent coping with the traffic noise calmed his brain.

"Sabine, what a nice surprise. I'm still standing in the loud street waiting for the customer and these damn dress shoes are killing me. They're not broken in yet."

"What? You are not wearing your adidas? Unbelievable."

"Yeah, this agent looked at the apartment last week." He mocked Mrs. Hamilton's heavy Southern German accent. "Said: 'My American customer cares about appearances. You look better in dress shoes.' You should see the impending fashion disaster. All this dressing up...for nothing. Did enough of that auditioning as an actor in L.A."

"Well, maybe you can go back to that soon. Herr Schmidt said you *must* meet with him today or he will hang you up the next tree. He needs the certificate of... well, the *Abgeschlossenheitsbescheinigung* for the five apartments he bought."

"What does that old fart want?" Peter cursed. "I'm *not* Gandalf, the great wizard. No magic to get the building department to move faster!" He sighed as he looked at his Swatch Flick Flak watch with cartoon characters on the band. "Alright, I'll squeeze him in after this. Won't take long. We're talking the absolutely biggest and absolutely most beautiful condo in the building. The trashy buyer can't afford it."

Why did he even bother? So many other things he could do instead. Peter sighed as he pictured the pretty office manager's 34 B bust. "Please, Sabine, deliver the message in person and save me from this drudgery. Then you and I can lie naked at the river bank and play with each other."

"You think of one thing. You know the boss's old-fashioned dating rules."

"Forget him. You're already practicing your English with me. I can tutor you in anatomy, too."

Sabine let out a dismissive chuckle. "*You* may not care about your job, but *I* do care about mine."

Peter focused on the smaller woman a few houses away and noticed her dark brown sunglasses with pink plastic rims and her curvy figure. "Nice legs! At least the customer's eye candy. Younger than I thought. Hang on, something's happening."

The two women stopped to talk to a ragged man standing with his German shepherd in the carriageway of the neighboring nineteenth century house.

Peter looked at his Swatch again. 11:58. "C'mon, c'mon, I wanna get out of these lousy shoes."

A gust of wind made the loose fitting blouse hug the pronounced profile of the smaller woman.

"What, 36 double-Ds? Natasha!" Even five years later the thought of his lost love sent a sting through his heart. His hand reached out for the stranger in the distance.

Sabine interrupted his fantasy. "What?"

"I thought I saw my old girlfriend, but that's impossible." His arm fell limp to his side.

The young lady rummaged through her small handbag. She placed a folded bill on the beggar's outstretched scrawny hand. The older woman's eyes widened in surprise.

Peter screamed into the phone. "No!"

"What now?"

"She's a bleeding heart do-gooder. Appearances, sure. Need the appearance of a homeless person to score with her! Damn,

I look like a rich guy." He pointed his hand at the group. "Could have worn my scruffiest garb. Thanks, Mrs. Hamilton! They're almost here. Gotta go, Sabine. Bye."

He put away his phone and inserted the earplugs into the iPod in his shirt pocket,

The two women approached Peter. Whereas Mrs. Hamilton towered over both of them, her petite customer could just about look him in the eyes. The sense of familiarity would not let go of him. He knew her-- the way she walked, the curves of her body, Natasha's height—but it could not be. At best, she looked down from a cloud while brushing her wings incessantly, in the meticulous art she used to groom her hair.

He shook the two women's hands in turn. His grip clung to the young American's warm, soft skin while he struggled against the bright light to discern her eyes in the shadows behind the dark glasses. *I know you. Who are you?*

"Would you prefer the tour in English?" Peter asked. "Makes no difference to me."

The lady said, "Sure." A beautiful smile flashed across her lips as she withdrew her hand. "Nice shoes."

"Thanks," Peter replied surprised. "Your voice sounds familiar."

She smiled again.

They rode up in the typical small retrofitted elevator. Although the plate on the wall indicated a capacity of four people, three already made for a tight squeeze, and Mrs. Hamilton occupied space for two.

"I call them *Kuschelaufzug*," Peter told them while pushing up against the young woman's heaving bosom. "A 'cuddle elevator.' You really get to know your neighbors."

The pleasant scent of a flowery perfume filled the cabin. *Getting weird. Smells like Natasha's favorite.* He pinched himself. *Ouch.*

To kill the time on the ride up, he gave his usual spiel about the building. On the top floor, he led the way into the empty apartment.

In the living room, Peter walked up to the southern glass front. The noon sun hung just right for his show. He *loved* to act out Kate Winslet's iconic moment at the bow of the ship in *Titanic*. With outstretched arms, he would look out over the rooftops of Kreuzberg, the trendy bohemian district of the sprawling metropolis.

"The south side—practically all glass, hence sunny, sunny, sunny," went his line. He would then swing around and face the customers with the perfect backdrop of sunlight flooding the area behind him. A fitting intonation and broad, dramatic gestures turned every sales pitch into an exciting movie production in his mind, even though he felt like he had done a million already. Maybe two million.

I could have been an actor. I should have been an actor.

Fate had intervened to deny him his Hollywood dream. Instead, Peter wasted his time giving presentations to customers and their brokers. The young American looked penniless to boot. Nevertheless, he had to give it a shot. If nothing else, the tightness he felt in his pants demanded a stunning, impressive performance.

Titanic time. He spread his arms and turned around to face the women. "Sunny, sunny, sun..." Peter froze. The bright light now fell directly on the young lady's glasses, penetrating the dark tint to reveal her beautiful eyes.

RoRo!

He knew those eyes! He knew those eyes! And that smile of hers! Natasha had them. So did her on-screen lookalike.

No way, absolutely no way! Get real! Rose looking for an apartment in Berlin?

He remembered last week's subway TV news. She had left the rehab clinic earlier than scheduled. Her doctors said she had already fulfilled all the requirements of that portion of her sentence.

The display showed an older picture, not the horrible mug shot used during her incarceration. Beautiful, big, vivacious eyes framed by long, thick eyelashes dominated her girlish

face. Her full, fair hair fell down to her shoulders. And her smile radiated warmth, friendliness, and charm.

The acting talent she had shown as a teenager had made many of her movies blockbusters, hence quickly establishing Rose Sinéad O'Rourc as one of the hottest young actresses among the Hollywood in-crowd. Not that Peter cared. He worshipped her resemblance to the best friend he lost so tragically. Pined for a moment, a minute, an eternity with her.

Mrs. Hamilton had not introduced her customer by name. The hideous outfit confused him. A fashionable young star in *that*? But those eyes and that smile. He would recognize them anywhere. If she wanted to hide from paparazzi while going to rehab, the camouflage worked. Did the city even have a clinic? Could it be? Though his heart raced, his well-rehearsed script allowed him to continue.

"So, Natasha, um, I mean, Miss O'Rourc, you can, um, have an American-style open kitchen here." He had outed her! "IKEA starts around 4,000 euro. Sky's the limit, of course."

He pronounced the name the German way, a habit by now. Peter looked at the pretty woman with hopeful anticipation, but she just stared through the sunglasses at the empty wall of the imaginary kitchen. No reaction at all.

His infatuated hopes crushed, he lowered his eyes and his voice, pointed to the concrete below, and gave his usual spiel.

"The builder can install wood flooring everywhere. Starts around 8,000."

Europeans *love* wood floors. Maybe the lady would too. The three strolled past bare walls and windows to the terrace, where he mentioned green technologies like air heat exchangers, solar panels, and the government subsidies available for them.

In the last room, the young woman turned to her agent.

"Could you measure out the kitchen, please?"

"Of course, my dear." Mrs. Hamilton whipped out her laser measurer and left.

What an odd request. I e-mailed the architectural drawings. She

only has to read them.

From halfway across the room, the brown lenses in pink frames seemed to size him up. Quiet words, almost whispered, drifted across the empty space.

“So, you recognized me?”

Behold, the goddess had spoken! Made herself known to a mere mortal. His heartbeat quickened, followed by sweat staining his blue dress shirt.

Peter had seen all her movies. They made the long, cold, lonely winter nights more bearable. After all, Berlin, Germany lay as far north as Hudson Bay, Canada. Around Christmas what little sunlight made it through clouds and snow vanished by four in the afternoon. Her radiant smile helped him through those depressing times without Natasha. Now, he faced her reincarnation in the flesh.

He desperately sought a witty answer to impress Rose, but his brain failed. *Don't say something stupid now.* Peter looked out the window at the blue sky to calm down and stuttered, “I...I recognized your eyes, um, that beautiful smile of yours. You're the prettiest actress around.”

His mouth felt dry. “I own all your DVDs and albums. I mean, I even have your picture on my iPod.”

Sudden silence...followed by a choking sound. *I didn't just say that, did I?*

“Don't say?” Rose replied.

No way out. Have to go down that “long and winding road,” as the Beatles would say. After some fiddling Peter retrieved the iPod from his shirt pocket, earplugs and all. He clicked through the menu.

Cooked by the hot sun or his boiling blood, sweat flooded from his every pore. His shirt clung in spots to his arms and back. Although his wet fingers slipped on the iPod wheel, he managed to pull up the picture of a juvenile Rose during her brunette phase with straight shoulder-length hair held together in a ponytail, the same style as his beloved Natasha. Peter only managed a half-broken “here,” as he pointed the

display at her.

Rose took two cautious steps toward him, pushed her sunglasses onto her forehead, and gazed at the picture. Her smile appeared again.

“Barely legal back then, you know. Longtime fan, I see. Why so bashful? No autograph wishes?”

Peter felt like dying. Two steps and he could reach out and touch his goddess, but he could not move. Despite his gaping mouth, he could not breathe. The lightness in his head added to the feeling of fainting. He closed his eyes for a moment and gasped for air, while trying not to hyperventilate. Her flowery perfume teased his nose.

“This is my *Notting Hill* moment,” he mumbled. “You know, I dream about this, but it's not real. I mean, I know, I'll wake up any moment and you'll be gone, and, and, you are my customer, and I want to keep my job, and —”

“Notting Hill moment?” Rose interrupted, amused.

Blood shot into Peter's face. His head wanted to explode. No rocks to hide behind. Not even furniture. Nor could he flee to the safety of another room. The Rockports stuck to the floor. A morass of embarrassment sucked him in deeper and deeper. His mind had lost all sense of coherence; except for some movie quotes; floating around; as in *Play It Again, Sam*.

Whatever. She must think I'm a jerk. Typical, starstruck fan. Natasha, please, help me. Don't you recognize your best friend?

“Um, *Notting Hill*, you know, the movie. Julia Roberts, Hugh Grant. Big screen actress meets small bookseller. ‘I'm just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her.’”

Over. Finished. Done. She'll think “stalker” now for sure and run out screaming. Or call the cops.

Peter stood looking straight at her, and Rose looked straight back. Suspended animation.

She opened her mouth to say something, but Mrs. Hamilton came into the room and asked, “Watching videos of some other apartment?”

Only then did Peter notice that he still held the iPod in

Rose's face and dropped his arm.

The older woman gestured toward the door. "*Tja*, my dear, I don't want to rush, but we have to head to the next appointment. We have to find a parking place on Kochstraße. That will take a while."

Peter was relieved, literally and figuratively, until Rose talked to him again.

"You said you can do the interior, right? Do you have an estimate? Can we discuss this further? Like, five o'clock at my hotel?"

"Can we do it at four?" Mrs. Hamilton said with a frown on her face. "I have to pick up my children from soccer at five."

Four eyes stared at him. Peter saw through Rose.

She knows me, she knows me not. Should I, should I not?

Rose shrugged and said, "Well?"

He whispered, "Sure. I have no kids to pick up."

"Anna will give you directions," Rose said.

"Anna?" Peter asked.

"Oh, right, Mrs. Hamilton. Americans are on a first-name basis, you know. It's, like, mostly, more formal here," Rose said.

Mrs. Hamilton scribbled on her pad and handed him the paper. He waved goodbye, as the women left. Peter did not want to ride the elevator with them. His body yearned to be at close quarters with his goddess, but his mind trembled at the thought. For a while, he stared longingly at the door frame through which she exited.

This is not happening. This can't be happening!

Since he downloaded the picture on his iPod years ago, Peter dreamt about Rose; imagined meeting *the* woman for him: a safe, unreachable mirage of Natasha; a controlled dream that forgave his past transgressions; ignored the horrible pain he had caused his best friend.

Now, his certain fantasy transfigured into unpredictable reality. The sun had stripped away the fictitious veneer. Revealed what lay behind pink sunglasses.

Jennifer Lopez sang "Ain't It Funny" in his head—about a moment changing his life and not wanting to face the truth: the same big eyes, the same warm smile, and the same addiction that had led him on a disastrous path before.

He searched in vain in the bright light outside for the perfect world his mind inhabited mere moments ago. A creepy cold evaporated the heat from his skin.

Peter closed his eyes and inhaled the lingering scent of Rose's sweet-smelling perfume. Chivalrous dreams of rescuing her wrestled with brutal memories of his prior deadly failure demanding satisfaction. If he destroyed the life of another woman, he surely must forfeit his own.

For how shall unworthy me slay thy demons, where knights of greater valor failed thee, my goddess.

He was no psychiatrist or psychologist, but sold apartments in a city with its name-giving bear adorning its crest and flag, far, far away from Hollywood. Two places that the universe had suddenly folded together.

Right there. He opened his eyes and pointed to the spot where she had stood. Like Arsenio Hall in his talk show pointed out the spot that superstar Michael Jackson stood on.

No way. Peter made excuses. Out of his league. Only fantasy. Just a dream. Stars never fall for nobodies like him. Deep down he knew this must end in tragedy. Like the last time this perfume seduced him. He slowly walked away in his soaking wet shirt. When he passed the door frame, he muttered, "Natasha, Natasha."