The Burger in Neukölln

A Reminiscence

by Daniel Brockman

February 2026

"I wasn't anyone in particular, just a vague figure in the anonymous depths of an anonymity that was not entirely my own, as if it had been mislaid by someone else whose name I couldn't remember. Nothing of what I had been or had pretended to be remained in me. I was simply a conscious sleep. While falling asleep, I'd been the one who was still awake; now that I was awake, I was the one who was still asleep."

—*Fernando Pessoa,* The Book of Disquiet

I lost my laptop on the first night.

I was staying in one of the only hotels on Oranienstraße, which is to say I was staying in the heart of Kreuzberg, which is to say I was staying in one of the hearts of Berlin, because Berlin has many hearts and they all beat at different tempos. I didn't know any of this yet. I knew nothing. I was just a person in a city, walking down a street, going into bars, drinking beer, talking to strangers. This was back when I still got drunk, when my tolerance hadn't yet flattened into a horizontal EKG of psychotropic non-response to blood alcohol level. That night I achieved something like obliteration.

The next morning I woke up and didn't know where I was. This is the classic architecture of a hangover: first the naive, idiotic bliss of consciousness without context, and then the slow reassembly of identity. You remember where you are. Then you remember who you are. Then you remember what you're like. And then you just go: ugh.

But before I could complete that process, I noticed my laptop was missing. I searched the room with increasing panic. It was not under the bed. It was not in the bathroom. It was not anywhere. I sat on the edge of the mattress and tried to reconstruct the previous

night from the fragments floating in my skull. I remembered walking. I remembered bars. I remembered, specifically and for some reason vividly, a gay bar—the tables, the lighting, the conversations I couldn't quite hear anymore. I remembered drinking beer there for a long time.

So I put on my clothes and went out into the noon light of Kreuzberg, squinting, looking for something that matched the image in my head. Nothing did. The street was full of bars but none of them looked right, or maybe all of them looked right, or maybe the bar in my memory was a composite of several bars or a bar that didn't exist at all. Eventually I gave up on pattern-matching and decided to ask someone.

I found a man who looked like he might work in the neighborhood—maybe a server on a smoke break, maybe a bartender starting his shift. I approached him with what I thought was a reasonable question: "Excuse me, is there a gay bar around here?"

He looked at me with an expression I will never forget. It contained weariness, contempt, pity, and a kind of exhausted amusement, all compressed into a single German face. He said, in a thick accent: "My friend... every bar here is a gay bar."

I stood there for a moment, processing. He wasn't being inclusive. He wasn't making a political statement. He was simply describing the factual situation. I was on a street, in a part of town, in a city, where every bar was a gay bar, every club was a gay club, everything was a gay everything, and my question had revealed how absolutely lost I was—not just geographically but ontologically, a tourist in a city that had no patience for tourism, asking for directions to a place that was everywhere and therefore nowhere.

I never found my laptop. I gave up. I decided to treat it as a sacrifice to the city, a toll paid at the gate, the price of admission to whatever was going to happen next.

※

What happened next was Denis.

I had come to Berlin to work on something that didn't exist yet. This was 2015 or 2016, I can't remember exactly, and Ethereum had just been released, and a small number of people around the world were trying to figure out what you could actually do with it. I was one of them. Denis was another. We had found each other online, through the forums and chat rooms where people were sharing bytecode and arguing about opcodes,

and I had flown to Berlin to meet him in person and see if we could build something together.

Denis lived in Neukölln, which is adjacent to Kreuzberg but has its own character—more residential, more Turkish, more of that particular Berlin quality of being permanently under construction without ever quite being finished. His neighborhood sat in what used to be the liminal zone between East and West, the no-man's-land that became a party when the Wall fell and never stopped being a party. The name Berghain—the most famous club in the world—is a portmanteau of Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, the two neighborhoods it straddles, and the name itself is a monument to the fall of the Wall, to everyone rushing to embrace, to the celebration that started on that day in 1989 and has continued, uninterrupted, ever since.

Denis knew all the clubs. He had grown up in these streets, had come of age in the permanent autonomous zones that emerged in the vacuum left by history. But he always seemed slightly out of place, even in the places he knew best. There was a somberness to him that didn't quite fit the ecstatic context. He went to the techno parties but he watched them as much as he participated. He knew the door policies, the secret

entrances, the DJs' schedules, but he reported on these things like an anthropologist rather than a celebrant.

I didn't understand this at first. I thought it was just his personality, a kind of German reserve, an intellectual distance. It took years before I learned the word for what he had.

※

We spent the first day in his apartment, coding.

Denis had implemented his own linear logic framework, a way of reasoning about smart contracts that was more rigorous than anything else anyone was doing at the time. We were trying to make it work with actual bytecode, trying to compile our abstract ideas into something that would run on the Ethereum Virtual Machine. It was difficult. We kept hitting walls. The JavaScript wouldn't cooperate. The bytecode wouldn't verify. We would get close to something and then it would collapse.

By midnight we were exhausted. By two in the morning we were frustrated. By four in the morning I had given up and was just sitting there, drinking a beer, watching Denis hunch over his keyboard with increasing tension. I could see the frustration building in his

shoulders, in the way he was stabbing at the keys. And then, at some point, something shifted. He deflated. His posture changed. He turned around in his chair, looked at me, and said: "Want to go to the club?"

I thought he was joking.

He was not joking.

※

Sisyphos is on the outskirts of Berlin, on the east side, in a former factory complex that has been converted into a permanent rave. I say "permanent" advisedly. The party starts on Friday night and ends on Monday morning. Sometimes it doesn't end on Monday morning. Sometimes it just keeps going. The club is more outside than inside, a sprawling compound of dance floors and chill-out areas and secret gardens, all of it suffused with a hippie energy that distinguishes it from the gritty minimalism of Berghain. If Berghain is high-tech anti-elitist German gay fetish noir maximalism, Sisyphos is its pastoral twin: softer, greener, more forgiving, a small paradise in an industrial wasteland.

We arrived at five in the morning on a Sunday. Denis knew the door people, so we walked straight in. The sun was coming up. People were dancing, or sit-

ting in clusters on the grass, or wandering through the labyrinthine structures with expressions of beatific confusion. There was an open drug market. There was a sex club. There was a hair salon, or something that functioned as a hair salon, staffed by people who were clearly not professional hairdressers but who had scissors and enthusiasm.

I did MDMA. I let a girl cut my hair. I had long hair at the time, and I sat in a chair while she snipped at it with an expression of intense concentration, and when she was done I looked in a mirror and I looked like the most insane person who had ever lived. My hair was asymmetrical, hacked, deranged. Later that day, after we finally left the club, I went to a barber and shaved my head. It was the first time I had ever had a shaved head. I walked out into the Berlin afternoon, bald and blinking, feeling like I had been initiated into something I didn't yet understand.

※

That was how I met Denis. We finished our project eventually—or abandoned it, I can't remember which, the two blur together in my memory—and I went back to Sweden, and then I went other places, and the years

passed. But we stayed friends. We would meet up whenever I was in Berlin, which was often, or whenever he was somewhere else, which was rare. He didn't travel much. He stayed in his neighborhood, in his routines, in his familiar streets.

And throughout all those years, there was always something slightly off about Denis. Not wrong, exactly. Just muted. Like a radio playing at low volume, or a photograph slightly out of focus. He went to the parties but he didn't quite enjoy them. He ate at restaurants but he didn't quite taste the food. He had opinions about things but they were always qualified, hedged, as if he didn't trust his own perceptions. Everything was fine, but nothing was good. Everything was acceptable, but nothing was great.

I learned, eventually, that this has a name. Dysthymia. A chronic, low-grade depression that doesn't disable you but doesn't let you fully live either. It's not the dramatic depression of breakdowns and hospitalizations. It's the quiet depression of getting through the day, every day, for years, without ever quite being present for any of it.

Denis had had this his whole life. He didn't know it had a name until he went to a doctor—a real doctor, not just a therapist—and the doctor told him what it

was and prescribed medication. This was years into our friendship. He called me to tell me about it, and I could hear something different in his voice, a kind of cautious hope that I had never heard from him before.

I remember where I was when he told me. I was in Thailand, sitting on a balcony, watching geckos climb the wall. He was in Berlin, in his apartment, probably at his desk. The connection was bad. His voice kept cutting out. But I heard the word—dysthymia—and I wrote it down on a napkin so I could look it up later.

※

The medication took a few weeks to work. These things always do. The brain has to adjust, the chemistry has to rebalance, the neurons have to learn new patterns. Denis reported on the process with his usual analytical detachment: he was sleeping better, he thought, or maybe he was just imagining it. He was less irritable, possibly. He might be feeling something, but he wasn't sure what.

And then, a few weeks in, I visited Berlin again. We went to dinner in Neukölln, at one of his favorite places. It wasn't really a restaurant—more of a counter with stools, a grill, a guy making burgers. The kind of place

that exists in every city but that you only find if you live there, if you walk the streets every day and notice which doors the locals go through. Denis had been eating here for years. He had never told me about it. This was the first time he brought me.

We ordered burgers. We ordered beers. We sat at the counter and ate in silence, the way old friends can, without needing to fill the space with words. The burger was good. The beer was cold. The evening light was coming through the window in that particular Berlin way, golden and slow.

And then Denis looked up from his burger, and he had a faint smile on his face—a smile I had never seen before, not in all the years I had known him—and he said:

"Daniel, this burger is very okay."

※

I started laughing. I couldn't stop. I pulled out my phone and started texting people—my brother, my friends—because I knew immediately that something important had just happened, something I needed to document before it slipped away.

Denis started laughing too. This was notable. Denis did not usually laugh at his own observations. He made them and then moved on, as if humor was something that happened to other people. But this time he laughed, because he could hear it too, how funny it sounded, how absolutely quintessentially Denis the phrase was.

"Very okay."

Two words that nobody had ever put together in quite that way. A superlative applied to the merely acceptable. The highest praise that a person with dysthymia—a person who had spent his entire life in the gray zone between bad and fine—could possibly muster. The light was reaching through, faintly, for the first time. And this is what it sounded like.

※

I had been thinking about rating scales for years before that night.

It started with an observation so simple it felt like a discovery: "not great" is worse than "good." This seems obvious when you say it out loud, but it isn't how rating systems work. On a five-star scale, three stars looks like the middle, the neutral point, but nobody

experiences three stars as neutral. Three stars is already a failure. "Not great" is a polite way of saying "pretty bad." The scale lies about its own topology.

This observation sat in my brain for years, marinating, occasionally surfacing when I was talking to friends about restaurants or movies or whatever. I would explain my theory: that the honest scale is asymmetrical, that the negative side compresses and the positive side expands, that the words we use reveal the structure we actually experience even when the numbers pretend otherwise.

Eventually I formalized it into what I called the minimal honest scale:

bad / not great / good / great

Four levels. No middle to hide in. The asymmetry visible in the language itself: "bad" and "great" are anchors, but "not great" defines itself by what it failed to reach, while "good" is allowed to simply be what it is. The lopsided symmetry between "good" and "great"—one syllable, almost rhyming, but one is merely adequate and the other is exceptional. Something about this felt true. Something about this felt like it was capturing a structure that existed independent of my notation.

※

Over the years I kept expanding the scale. Four levels weren't enough. I needed decimals. I needed room at the top for things that exceeded the category. I needed room at the bottom for things that were worse than bad.

Eventually the scale grew to encompass negative numbers and numbers past ten. Negative ten was the floor: total destruction, the end of all possible consciousness, the paperclip desert. Twenty was the ceiling: unreachable, asymptotic, the infinite flourishing that you could approach but never touch. The scale became $[-10, 20)$, a half-open interval, closed at the bottom and open at the top, because destruction completes but creation never does.

And then I added the beer categories.

This was partly a joke and partly not. Swedish alcohol regulations create a taxonomy of beers by alcohol percentage: lättöl (light beer, under 2.25%), folköl (people's beer, 2.25–3.5%), öl (regular beer, 3.5–5.6%), and so on up through starköl (strong beer) and the various import categories. I started mapping these onto my rating scale, not because the percentages lined up exactly but because they lined up approximately, and the approximation was funny and also somehow true.

A 7.5 is dubbelöl territory: double-strength, something you approach with respect, something you don't have six of. An 8 is "Very Okay"—the scale's best joke, a deflation disguised as a promotion, the place where most actually good things live. A 9 is trippelöl: you have one and you're done for the night. A 10 is perfect, Platonic, achieved. An 11 is "one louder," the Spinal Tap dial, the category breaking under the pressure of something that exceeds it.

The beer metaphor carried information that pure numbers couldn't. It made the scale about sustainability, about how often you could encounter something at a given level, about the relationship between intensity and livability. A 7.5 pizza is great; you'd eat it twice a week. A 7.5 beer is something you approach carefully; you have one and you think about it.

※

When Denis said "this burger is very okay," I heard it immediately as a coordinate on my scale.

Not just any coordinate. The coordinate. The center of the working range, the place where ordinary life happens when it's working, the baseline hum of existence that most people take for granted but that Denis had

never been able to access. "Very Okay" is an 8 on my scale. It's dubbelöl. It's the thing that works, reliably, without fireworks, without disappointment.

For Denis, reaching "very okay" was like reaching the summit of a mountain he hadn't known he was climbing. His whole life had been spent at 3 and 4, in the zone of "not entirely bad" and "not great," never able to break through into the territory where good is actually good. The medication didn't make him happy. It didn't give him ecstasy or revelation. It just lifted him, finally, into the zone where a burger could be very okay.

That phrase became a touchstone between us. We would use it to describe things that were working: "How's the project going?" "Very okay." "How are you feeling?" "Very okay." It was a code, a shorthand, a way of acknowledging that the ordinary is an achievement for some people, that reaching the baseline is its own kind of triumph.

※

Years later, I wrote an essay.

It started as a shitpost, a glorified shitpost, an attempt to explain my rating scale by way of Dave Portnoy's pizza reviews and Spinal Tap's amplifier that goes to

eleven. I wanted to capture the topology of quality, the way real rating systems compress all the meaningful differentiation into a narrow band while pretending to offer ten or five or a hundred options. I wanted to explain why a 7.4 pizza is actually good, even though the pizzeria owner hears it as an insult.

But the essay kept growing. It absorbed the beer categories. It absorbed the negative numbers. It absorbed a meditation on the difference between the achievable and the transcendent, between perfection and what lies beyond perfection. And then, somehow, it absorbed Lacan.

I don't know how this happened. I wasn't trying to write psychoanalytic theory. But the structure of the scale—bounded at the negative end, unbounded at the positive—mapped onto something Lacan had said about jouissance, about the difference between the phallic satisfaction of counting and completing and the feminine jouissance that exceeds the count, that overflows any totalization, that is "not-all" and cannot be captured by the signifier.

The essay kept growing. It became a meditation on good and evil, on creation and destruction, on why the paperclip maximizer is what happens when you collapse value to a single metric, on why the galactic

sinthome—the flourishing of consciousness across the universe—requires preserving the not-all, the space for forms of life we cannot yet imagine.

And then it ended with hope. Dangerous hope, the kind that knows failure is more likely than success, that knows the negative singularity is closer and easier to reach than the positive asymptote. But hope anyway, because the trying is the thing, because the conversation itself is practice, because refusing to collapse is its own form of participation in the not-all.

I called it "Hope Is a Very Okay Thing."

※

That essay existed for a while as a finished object, or what I thought was a finished object. But objects have a way of revealing their incompleteness.

A few days ago I realized there was more geometry to the scale than I had articulated. The Numogram—the CCRU's qabbalistic diagram of the decimal system, the occult machine that Nick Land and his collaborators built in the 1990s—kept appearing in my peripheral vision. The 4/5 gate, the Spine, the central hinge of the decimal labyrinth: it corresponded to my 10/11 dyad, the place where the achievable meets the transcendent.

The nested asymmetries, the gravitational dynamics, the way certain numbers have mass and warp the space around them: all of this was implicit in my scale but I hadn't made it explicit.

So I wrote another essay. "Geometric Numerology: Preliminary Materials Toward a Theory of the Gravitational Integer." I called it preliminary materials because I knew it wasn't finished, because the topology was still being mapped, because the strange attractors were still being discovered. But it captured something: the binary star system of 10 and 11, the orbital dynamics of 9.5 and 11.5, the chiasmic gender flip where the same territory looks masculine or feminine depending on your reference frame.

And then, almost immediately, another problem emerged. The original essay rated itself—"this is probably a 7.5," it said, a self-assessment from back when the essay was still a shitpost, before it became what it became. The rating was now outdated. But updating it would create a paradox.

※

The paradox is simple to state and impossible to escape.

If the work is genuinely good—if it operates at 11, transcending its category—then any self-rating will collapse the quality. Claiming 11 is arrogant; it makes the work seem worse. Claiming less is false modesty; it also makes the work seem worse. Both paths lead to 7. The only way to actually be 11 is to not rate yourself at all.

But the original essay had rated itself. The fossil was embedded in the text. And I suddenly realized that this created a specific coordinate, a strange attractor in the topology of value: the place where self-reference becomes impossible to execute cleanly, where claiming transcendence and denying transcendence collapse to the same point.

I called this coordinate 7-Eleven.

It's a convenience store. It's a pun on Spinal Tap. It's also a genuine topological feature: the superposition of 7 and 11, the paradox where the true rating and the collapsed rating coexist, unresolvable from inside the system but measurable from outside. The scale goes to 7-Eleven because 7-Eleven is where you end up when you try to rate yourself going to 11.

I wrote a third essay about this. "This One Goes to 7-Eleven: On Self-Reference and Strange Attractors in Numerological Topology." It diagnosed the paradox, mapped its structure, and proposed that the 7-

Eleven is not a failure but an authentication—proof that you've crossed into territory where self-reference becomes load-bearing and therefore destabilizing.

※

So now there are three essays. A triptych.

The first builds the scale, takes it from pizza reviews to cosmic speculation, ends with hope.

The second reveals the geometry underneath, the Numogram correspondence, the gravitational integers, the nested asymmetries.

The third discovers what happens when the system becomes self-aware, when it tries to rate itself, when reflexivity activates a strange attractor that was always latent in the topology.

And sitting between the first and second essays, like a hinge or a key, is the Numogram itself—not my diagram, but the CCRU's, the occult machine that I didn't know I was building toward until I saw it in the corner of my vision and recognized it as the secret blueprint for everything I had been doing.

The triptych is complete. Or at least it coheres. It stands as a structure, enterable from multiple points, readable in any order. You can start with the pizza

reviews and end with the strange attractors. You can start with the strange attractors and work backward to the burger in Neukölln. The architecture holds from any angle.

※

But underneath all of it—underneath the topology and the Lacan and the CCRU and the gravitational integers—there is still Denis, looking up from his burger with a faint smile.

"This burger is very okay."

That's the human ground. That's what the galactic sinthome is for, what the scale is trying to protect, what hope is dangerous for. Not the transcendent. Not the 11. Just the ordinary, the baseline, the thing that works. The morning light. The face of someone you love across the table. The simple pleasure of food and company and the day beginning.

Denis reached "very okay" after a lifetime in the gray zone, and it was enough. It was more than enough. It was the light finally reaching through, the crack opening, the first sign that something other than chronic low-grade suffering was possible.

The scale goes to 7-Eleven, but it also goes to 8. It goes to "Very Okay." It goes to the burger in Neukölln, the beer at the counter, the silence between old friends who don't need to fill the space with words.

That's the coordinate I keep returning to. Not the transcendent, not the paradox, not the strange attractor. Just the place where life works, finally, for someone who thought it never would.

—Daniel Brockman
February 2026