

Zurich, 1989

by Savannah Schroll Guz

A group of adults, mostly men, are sitting around a table covered in heavy cotton cloth, the corners pressed to sharp pleats. I am among them, although I am not an adult. I am fourteen, the only teenager there. The group is drinking. They've already emptied three bottles at one end of the long table. I cannot account for what the other side has polished off because I have not been watching, although I can tell by their laughter, by their raucous exclamations, that they are drunk. Because we are in Europe, I drink with them, although I have twice tipped sparkling water into my glass because I have learned the wait staff will replenish my drink without asking, and I, in turn, will drink it because, among these adults, the wine is my mark of equality. Still, I am trying not to drink so much. I want to keep up with what the men around me are saying, even as my head throbs slightly from the effort.

I am not sitting with my parents, who are down the table, talking animatedly to the Austrian nationals who have congregated on that side. I do not want to be close to my mother and father right now because I do not want to be shaken by the alarm bells that resonate so shrilly in my world, bells that cause atmospheric disruptions in the hazy daydreams I prefer to dwell in: *why are you wearing that dress when I brought you nice clothes? Honestly, you can't pack your own suitcase. See, you've wrinkled this. How could you?* And so I sit down the table with a Swiss salesman, two Germans, and an Austrian, all of whom work for the same firm. They are speaking English, although slurred now by the wine. They have lived in America for so long, they have begun to forget certain words of the language their mothers spoke, the language they grew up speaking. Even the alcohol does not bring it back, but instead intensifies their accents, making their voices sound aggravated and pronounced like blisters. I sit quietly and listen, concentrating, maybe even frowning.

The man across from me is red haired, a salesman. His features are smooth and unfreckled. Perhaps he is going on forty, although I

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cannot tell for sure. He is handsome in a way that my mother would call "European," an eccentric form of male beauty I mistakenly associate with woven leather loafers and white socks or jackets without traditional lapels. This man is joking about his wife and begins to belt out an expression from America's Excedrin commercials, "I haven't got time for the pain!" The other men laugh too loudly, with spittle flying from one man's mouth as he responds to the spectacle. People at other tables turn to look. The redhead, who is named Peter, covers his face with his hand, his fingers splayed wide in a melodramatic expression of either apology or anguished resignation. I watch his display and eventually realize that the eyes behind the fingers are staring at me. I see the dark ring of his iris against the bloodshot white. The men beside us continue talking, and eventually, the hand comes away from his face. I see, as I had not noticed before, Peter's trim auburn beard and above it, the manicured arc of his mustache.

The conversation has moved on, and the men next to me begin laughing, snorting and slapping knees. Occasionally, they include me in their teasing. They are not condescending, but ask what I think and nod enthusiastically when I agree, even when my assent is reluctant. The red haired man named Peter has withdrawn from the conversation entirely. Distracted, he plays with his fish knife, which is the only utensil that remains at his place setting. Then he signals the waiter and touches his glass.

I feel his eyes again, and I look back at him with impulsive boldness, a daring I do not recognize as my own. I have not received this kind of attention before. It chases away my headache and causes me to sit up straighter, to feel slightly more alive. His gaze appears level, earnest, if somewhat cloudy and unfocused. He looks down in the direction of my parents. My mother has her chin on her hand, listening to something said by someone at the end of the table. My father is equally absorbed in the conversation and notices none of what is happening where I sit, none of the intent gazing, which brings the blood rushing up to my face. The men beside me continue talking and have turned towards the subject of work, while the man

named Peter leans forward and asks in a low voice, "What room are you in? Or are you with them?" He nods sideways in the direction of my parents. I smell the alcohol on him, which wafts towards me in a volatile billow as he speaks.

I shake my head. I tell him I have my own room. He nods, smiling. "What's the number?" he asks, his left hand still resting against his face.

I don't answer immediately.

"Tell me the number," he whispers again. "Please."

I glance at my parents again. "215," I answer, looking down at the table cloth as I say it.

He nods. Fear is rising in me, but excitement, too. I do not yet really understand the power I seem to have at this moment, or even that it is a kind of power. And I am certainly too young to recognize that it will end up being weakness, too.

I reach for my glass and empty it, tasting more mineral water than wine. I glance at his glass. It is a flick of my eyes, almost unconscious. I know if I alert the waiter myself, it will attract my mother's attention, which I don't want at this moment. The man named Peter smiles and empties his glass into mine. The man beside me notices and shakes a finger at Peter mirthfully, "What do they call it in America?" the man asks, smiling. "Contributing to the delinquency of a minor?"

"Tush," Peter says and waves away the man's jibe.

I drink what he has poured. He signals the waiter and touches his glass.

