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((pp. 71-81))

“So, you wanted to know why Heinrich Weil didn’t dare show his face at Buchfinkenschlag anymore?” Johann Gersweiler briefly licked the cigarette paper. Catching sight of the tip of his tongue, Lina knew that her body had made a different decision than her head.

“When he first came here, Madame Rose was married to Monsieur Bruant. Marion was their daughter. But she was away at boarding school in Geneva most of the time because there weren’t any high schools around here. It was our forester who brought your Uncle Heinrich here. Your uncle wasn’t bad-looking and was quite a few years younger than Madame.” Gerswiller picked a bit of tobacco off his tongue, all the while gazing into Lina’s eyes.

“You can imagine where things went from there! Bruant didn’t stay around long to watch the carrying on between his wife and Weil. He’d always had an unpleasant violent streak, and one evening during an argument he went after them with the fireplace shovel. There were no witnesses. Then, when Madame Rose asked for a divorce, Bruant refused to let her simply kick him out.” Gerswiller got up at that point, came over with the kettle, and poured the tea.

“So Bruant bought a house here in the village, right next to the church. He refused to give up. He kept coming here and trying to make up with Madame Rose, but she wanted only to be with Heinrich Weil.”

That’s what I would have wanted too, Lina thought. She tried to catch her mother’s eye, but Berta was sitting in front of her full cup with her eyes lowered as if before an oracle.

“Madame Rose even took his name. Oh my, if anyone dared to address her as Madame Bruant after that, they’d have been in for it!” He laughed. “Maybe she did it just to show Bruant that trying for a reconciliation was useless and he might as well save his breath. And then at some point Bruant got the idea. In the village they said that he’d moved to Geneva to be near Marion. The year after that, Marion came back from boarding school to live at home.”

He blew on his hot tea and unabashedly slurped some. Lina didn’t care for mint tea, but to show she appreciated his hospitality she sipped at her tea, noiselessly.

“When a boy falls in love for the first time he thinks his girl is the most wonderful person in the world.”

Lina exchanged looks with her mother. Neither of them wanted to hear Johann Gerswiller’s story about his first love, and thankfully he made it short. “She was,” this time he was considerate of the elderly lady’s ears, “she was very mature for her age and refused to let anyone tell her anything; she was both sweet and malicious. She took delight in setting people against each other, and I’m afraid she couldn’t keep her hands off other people’s things. You might think that a girl like Marion Bruant could buy her own underwear. But she used to simply take the staff’s things off the clothesline. Once Marie the maid saw her wearing a shirt of hers, and she got upset and accused Marion of having stolen it. Marion called her a liar to her face.”

“How unpleasant!” Berta Weil said, finally drinking some of her tea. “The things these young ladies learn in Switzerland – tsk, tsk. Yet they apparently don’t learn to swim,” she added with her usual lack of sensitivity.

Gerswiller gave her such a look that she quickly turned her attention back to her tea.

“But she was only seventeen,” Lina tried to placate him. “Young girls are sometimes a bit clueless at that age.”

“Fifteen,” Gerswiller corrected her; “she was fifteen. Back then, when it happened, Madame Bruant adjusted her age upward for the press. Marion had fled from the school in Geneva because she’d been caught smoking grass with the other girls in the changing room at the athletic field.”

“You can smoke grass?” Berta Weil asked, confused, but got no answer.

“Oh, but we’ve all tried that once,” Lina interjected.

“Yes, we tried it. That and other things.” Gerswiller took a deep drag on his crooked cigarette, holding it between his thumb and the tip of his forefinger. He squeezed his eyes shut in the smoke; then stubbed it out. “In any case, I think that Madame Bruant soon regretted having her rebellious daughter in the house. She wasn’t exactly the motherly type, especially once Henri began dancing attendance on the girl.... When he’d stand close behind her holding the binoculars so she could see the birds in the trees... or when he’d be supporting her here and there during swimming lessons in the pool.... The old fool! Marion only laughed at him behind his back. What the old people didn’t know was that we met nights at the tennis court, and back then it wasn’t just to smoke in secret. Or to play badminton.”

His lips moved, but not to laugh. Lina pushed her cup away. She wouldn't make any further gestures of politeness.

"Would you like to know what happened the night of June 21st?" He didn't wait for an answer. "While everyone was partying on the terrace, Heinrich Weil went up to the tower with Marion. This time it was because he wanted to show her the stars, and this time it wasn't just a bit of forbidden groping of her soft places. He tried to rape her up there. It was only because she was such a savvy girl and knew how to defend herself that she got safely out the door and down the stairs. And there at the bottom of the stairs was her mother, and so that was that.

"And I'm supposed to believe this?" Lina said angrily. "My uncle was a harmless, kind man. He didn't get a kick out of schoolgirls. I know he was happy with his wife."

"As you wish," he replied coldly. "In any case, not so happy that Madame would put up with his company any longer after Marion's death."

Berta Weil realizing this might be the start of a row, quickly entered the discussion.

"Please go on with the story. What happened at the party?"

"Nothing," he said. "It just went on; no one there wanted to risk a scandal."

"And you didn't notice anything either? After all, you were on the terrace."

"I hadn't even realized Marion had left. There were more than forty guests, and they were all drinking a lot. When the search started, I walked over to the tennis court, but she wasn't there. I never even thought of the swimming pool. Not until it got light. I found her there the next morning."

Lina was silent, but her mother continued in her role as detective.

"So you didn't notice whether any of the other guests left the group?"

"Oh yes. Our dear Henri was gone for quite a while. Madame got very anxious and asked me if I'd seen him. The driveway and the garden were illuminated, but the park was dark and the guests took along lanterns when they went looking for her. Weil, the great hunter and trapper, was the only one carrying a flashlight when he set out. He was the last one to come back, but of course he didn't find her either."

The two women exchanged glances.

"And then all of you just stopped searching and went to bed?" For the first time Lina thought that she could detect a subtle break in his surface self-assurance. He turned formal.

“Most of the guests agreed with Madame Bruant that Marion wanted to play a trick on all of them, and that the less attention they paid her the sooner she would turn up again.” Then he continued in his customary casual style. “Weil was the only one who couldn’t let it go, and he ran off again. The devil knows where he went and just when he came back.”

“What are you hinting at?”

He raised his eyebrows, hands, and shoulders in an ironic gesture to demonstrate his cluelessness.

“Do you think he followed her? Why would she have gone to the swimming pool in the first place? Was she desperate or ashamed because of the attempted rape? Or maybe it wasn’t rape? I saw in the police report that Marion had sex with... a man before her death.” She was unable to speak her uncle’s name.

“But Lina!” her mother cried in shock. Gersweiler’s face had turned red. He’d understood.

“No,” he said, “absolutely not. She would never voluntarily have done it...with that...with Heinrich Weil... done it voluntarily...she would never...would never have done that.” He fell silent, furious.

Then you’re actually the only other possible person to consider, Lina thought. She might as well have said it out loud.

“She was a bit wild,” he continued, somewhat more calmly, “but she and I, we stuck together. She was my friend. I don’t know what made her jump into that damned pool. No, I don’t know. For the last thirty years I’ve wondered what made her do it.”

No one spoke. There was no reason to sit at the table any longer. But there was one question to which Lina hadn’t yet received an answer.

“Why is the house such a wreck? That can’t be just because no one lives in it. It looks to me as though the destruction was intentional.”

“It was,” Gerswiller said. “Madame Rose didn’t want to stay in the place. Six months after it happened she went to live with relatives somewhere in France and tried to sell Buchfinkenschlag. But look at this place. Even thirty years ago there were no buyers for it, and Madame definitely did not want to have a commune here. I acted as a sort of caretaker, and for a while I was able keep it up, more or less. But I wasn’t able to prevent Bruant from coming here with his thugs in the dark of night. He took what he could, and then his guys tore the place apart and set it on fire.”

“Why?” Lina asked, horrified.

“Maybe in revenge because Madame Rose didn’t pay enough attention to Marion and went to bed with Henri instead of with him. He was a pretty nasty customer. Back then we didn’t have cell phones. Somebody in the village called the fire department, but by the time they arrived Bruant’s thugs had cleared out, and I’d put out the fire in the hall with a pail. Madame didn’t want to lodge a complaint; I think she wanted to forget Buchfinkenschlag completely, just erase it from her mind. She couldn’t even talk about Marion as her daughter anymore. She spoke of her as a house guest.”

“Incredible!” Berta murmured.

“Naturally, after that my job as caretaker was over.”

“But you’re still here.”

“That’s right,” he said. “I’m not as easy to pull up as an undesirable weed, and somebody has to keep an eye on things a bit, after all.”

“So you’re a squatter?”

“Looks as if I am,” he replied.

What does he do here, Lina wondered. How does he support himself? There was neither a phone nor a computer on the desk. No papers that might point to some sort of business; there wasn’t even a newspaper lying around. But now Gerswiller had said everything he wanted to say, and he got up. The women got up too. Suddenly Berta Weil seemed to be in a hurry to be off.

“We really have to say goodbye now,” she warbled as if she’d been pushing to leave for a while already. “Thank you for the tea.”

This was Lina’s opportunity.

“Could you give me Madame Bruant’s address?”

“You never give up, do you?” Gerswiller said. “No, I can’t.”

“Please,” begged Lina. “I have to talk to her. Don’t you understand that I care about the house too and that I haven’t come here just out of curiosity to sniff around? I loved coming to Buchfinkenschlag when I was little.” And because she was still annoyed at his sarcasm, she added, “And I also loved my Uncle Heinrich very much. If he says that he was innocent, then I believe him.”

“Your car is probably parked down on the street,” he said as if he hadn’t heard what she’d said. “I’ll take you there. Then you won’t have to walk all the way through the park.” He took a bunch of keys off the desk and led the way. There was the same

mysterious tidiness outside behind the house as inside. The yard between two low additions was empty except for a rain barrel with green fern fronds sprouting around it. She heard a motor running behind the open window of the building on the right and smelled diesel fumes. Must be his generator, Lina thought. Here he could get up to all sorts of mischief. A kind of self-sufficiency; like the firewood that was piled up neatly under the projecting roof of the building on the left. There was a Land Rover parked in the middle of the yard; it had no doors and no license plate. Gerswiller helped Berta into the passenger seat.

“Hold on tight here.” By the time he turned to her, Lina had made up her mind. She lightly touched his arm.

“Johann Gerswiller. Do you still remember when you pulled down the branches of the cherry tree for me with a hoe? And one branch broke off and we hid it so that no one would yell at us, but then the gardener found it and...”

“...and I got an awful beating.” Both of them laughed. That dimple! Lina thought.

“Let me have your cell phone number,” he said. “I have no idea where Madame is; I’ll have to phone around a little.”

Lina made use of the opportunity.

“You can reach me by landline at the Hotel Augusta’s phone number.” She found an old bus ticket and a pencil in her pocket and wrote out the number.

“You live in a hotel?”

“It’s mine,” Lina said and handed him the number. He grinned, climbed into the Rover and started the engine. Then he drove onto a gravel road and continued briskly through the high yellow grass. Stalks of grass scraped against the metal of the car, the warm air vibrated with the sound of the crickets. In the back seat, Lina laughed.

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