

THE  
ZURICH HOUSE

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Wolf remembered everything about Marta. Nevertheless, he was startled when she called him one day and said that someone finally wanted to buy his father's house. He'd never spoken to her on the phone; he hadn't seen her in ten years.

"The buyer wants to sign on Monday," Marta said. "I know it's very short notice, but can you make it?" Her voice was clear, her English perfect. The news was expected. Wolf's father had died the year before, leaving him the house he had moved to after divorcing Wolf's mother. Marta, his father's girlfriend, had managed most of the sale. All he had to do was sign the papers.

"Of course. Yes. I'll be there," Wolf said. He was standing in the new apartment he was moving into with his fiancée, Sarah. He had just swept the roaches out of the tub and scrubbed the bathroom with lemon Lysol and Comet, the ammonia chapping his hands. It was late afternoon; the sounds and smells of the apartment were as yet unfamiliar to him, and the sun was shining on the faces of the brownstones across the street. Sarah was unpacking their record collection, piling the vinyl on the table and occasionally looking over at him. When Wolf got off the phone he had to sit down. He didn't know what Marta looked like now, and he wished he'd been given some warning that would prime him for the shock of her voice. He was so unaware of its capacity to unnerve, to pull him back to one of the greatest humiliations of his life: loving her. When Wolf looked up, Sarah went to the kitchen, brewed a pot of coffee, and waited for him to talk. He gazed at the sharp curve of her jaw, then the dark hair firmly clasped in a braid that went halfway down her back.

"What is it?" she asked after pouring the coffee.

"We finally got a buyer for the house. Marta called."

She looked at him quizzically. "Are you going to be okay?"

He picked up a record resting on the kitchen table: Green Day's first album, *Dookie*. Absurdly, it was the only gift his father ever gave him that he could remember liking, the house included.

"It's fine," he said. "It was only a matter of time."

Wolf knew he sounded harsh, but he felt no attachment to the property. When his father died, he'd felt a generalized relief for Marta: no more bed pans, no more morphine, no more doctor's visits. It was the same now, as if the news was related to some unknown person at the other end of a great echoing room.

"How is Marta taking it?" Sarah asked.

"I don't know. They'd been renting it out for so long that I doubt it meant much to her. Except as an income generator."

Wolf wondered whether he ought to tell his mother about the house. The place wasn't hers, either, and she was happy for him when he inherited it. By the same token, she didn't mind when he put it up for sale six months ago. *Do as you will*, she'd said, and he was relieved that she was impartial and didn't expect him to move back to Europe. His mother had always tended towards brevity. *Don't shoot the messenger*, she'd said when Wolf was ten years old and his parents were divorcing. His father had announced that he was leaving Germany and moving to Switzerland to take up a professorship. Wolf had known even then how minimal his father's involvement would be, and so he'd agreed to live his life between two countries.

Both of his parents had lived bitterly deprived Communist childhoods in East Germany. They didn't expect the kind of success they found after the Wall fell, and Wolf had often wondered whether this surpassing of expectations was what drove them apart, made them realize that there was more to life than what each could supply the other. All that capitalist goodwill: his father with a lecture series in West Berlin that eventually turned into tenure at a university in Zurich—his mother, for her part, refused to move. His father was ambitious, optimistic, careless and brilliant. His mother was a skeptic with migraines and occasional depressive periods. She was fiercely loyal to her colleagues at the newspaper, especially the Eastern ones who, like her, refused to talk about the past but alluded to it with their dislike

of authority (little gray men, his mother would say, whenever they passed by a government building). Eighteen years ago, Wolf's parents decided that he would visit his father in Switzerland only on school holidays. His father's house there, in contrast to their Charlottenburg apartment, had huge glass windows, uncomfortable furniture in shades of dark blue and green. Its strangely luxurious austerity suggested that physical unease was character building.

When he called his mother about the sale of the house that day, her voice was grave, measured. "It's strange," she said. "I still feel as if your father was a distant relative. Not somebody I actually was acquainted with."

Wolf was not hurt by her frankness. Both of them felt they had survived some obscure disaster—what, they never knew—and so, even when he was a child, they'd spoken to each other in the honest and even way of adults. It was Sarah who pointed this phenomenon out to him, and he'd been astonished that others viewed the relationship as unusual. But then so much nurturing, so much hovering, was expected of American parents: they viewed their children as magical extensions of themselves, and there, in Wolf's opinion, the trouble began.

"I never understood why he left me the place," Wolf said. "It should've been Marta. But I guess only the apartment mattered to her."

"Her family has sufficient funds, I think," his mother said, absent of bitterness. Still, because his father had contributed so little when he was growing up, she believed that Wolf was entitled to what had been left to him.

When she asked about Sarah, though, Wolf felt himself fading. They were fine; New York was fine. And this was true. He had lived there, by choice, for nine years. Berlin wasn't his home anymore, and Zurich never had been—was never real life. The only person capable of making that part of his existence *seem* real had been Marta. Marta who was twenty years his father's junior, Marta who became a professor, Marta who wanted children but gave up having them, for his father's sake. Their relationship was one of the great mysteries of Wolf's life. Granted, his father had been good-looking in a glancing, professorial way: he kept his silver hair too long and he wore high-end, moth-eaten jackets with coffee stains on them. Maybe it was this appearance of studied neglect that drew Marta to him, but Wolf doubted it. She was too smart to fall for the impression of neediness, disarray.

He felt Sarah's arms around him, her hands in the middle of his chest, and he smiled and placed his fingers over hers.

"I wish you didn't have to go," she said.

With her body arched against his, he could feel her worry. He turned towards her. "It'll only be a few days."

"I wish I could go with you."

"Switzerland isn't all it's cracked up to be."

She shrugged. "Europe is Europe to me."

Wolf thought of the first time they went to Berlin together, the summer after they graduated college and realized they were in love. He thought of how much that terrified him, because it meant he might lose her. He didn't think very far ahead in those days, of course, but at some point he realized that there was no one else with whom he wanted to be. The enormity of this knowledge meant that Berlin was no longer an option—for there, like any other good German, he lived with a heaviness and guilt that he could not reasonably ask Sarah to shoulder. It required a wherewithal, equal parts patience and aggression, that she did not have. Besides, her Long Island childhood had an ease to it that he could never quite fathom: her parents liked each other. Her father was Jewish, her mother Protestant, and they were decent to Wolf about what Sarah's brother called *the whole German thing*. They seemed to him a delightfully unburdened couple, though he knew he had a tendency to idealize other people's families.

When Wolf stepped off the plane in Zurich a few days later, he took his time making his way to baggage claim, accommodating the old people and the slow walkers as he would never do in New York. He was surprised that Marta found him first. Wolf was startled by her warm hug, by the new angularity to her features and the faint streak of gray in her hair. Apart from that slight shift in her appearance she had not changed. And he was relieved to find that, while

she struggled to meet his eyes, he could easily meet hers, and no trace of embarrassment clung to him.

On the drive to the apartment she shared with his father, Marta asked about his life in New York, about the graphic design firm he worked at, even about Sarah.

"I wouldn't have had the courage to sell the house," Marta said as she opened the door to the apartment. "You'll see when we go there tomorrow that it's the same as it ever was. I'm glad you didn't have it staged after you put it on the market. Your father always did hate moving the furniture around."

Wolf forced a smile and tried to take in his surroundings discreetly. He was surprised by the close quarters she and his father had been living in. Even for two people the space would have presented a challenge. Wolf was temporarily wracked with guilt over leaving her to manage his father's illness, a three-month battle with lung cancer that his father refused to fight even though he was only fifty-seven.

"You can rest wherever is most comfortable," Marta said vaguely, with a quick and embarrassed gesture towards the second bedroom. "I'll be out here reading. Unless you'd rather I make coffee? To help you beat the jetlag?"

He shook his head.

The bedroom was clinical in its simplicity, and the mattress was so firm he doubted he would be able to relax, even with the blinds drawn and the sheets cool against his cheeks. He wondered what room his father had died in, and he wanted to text Sarah. But it was too early in New York, and he didn't want to alarm her: since they became engaged, every action the other took seemed freighted with meaning and importance. Even when they made love there was a new urgency. In the early hours of the morning before his flight, in fact, she had straddled him with such ease he was surprised, and as she moved, he had seen something bright at the edge of her eyes that was also unexpected: fear. A few months before his father died, Wolf had announced his intentions, over the phone, to marry Sarah. Wolf had expected a comment that would leave him smarting, confused. But instead his father had made a strange noise—an *ab* or *nab* sound, half-wheezing, half-gulping, as he fought the fluid in his lungs. Wolf decided to interpret this as assent and was cheered by the fact that his life in the United States wasn't just a fluke or an escape. His existence in New York had a reason—love, rather than pure aspiration—that probably wouldn't make any sense to his father were he well. Wolf pitied his overwhelming selfishness, his inability to be transformed even by Marta.

It was Wolf's mother, the summer he was eighteen, who told him about Marta's presence in his father's life. She told him with a tightness at the edge of her voice, as if she felt compelled to prepare him for whatever discomfort might ensue. But Wolf, however much he'd joked about such a prospect with his friends, didn't think he minded. As soon as he met Marta, though, that lazy summer after he finished his Abitur and before he went to university, his flippancy surrounding this seemed grotesque. And for whatever reason—probably his lack of imagination—he'd expected Marta to be dark and cheekboned, the way the women in Berlin were, the way his mother was. But she had a flat, pale face framed by flat, pale hair, and barely broke five feet. Had Wolf seen her on the street he wouldn't have given her a second glance, and he wondered whether she was used to being ignored. He himself was not terribly good-looking: he had a huge nose that skewed to one side of his face and looked as if it had been dislocated. Later, during his first year in America, he would overhear a girl describing him as ugly-cute. It was impossible to be devastated by this, because it was true.

When Marta spoke, though, any chance of his underestimating her evaporated. She had a low, ringing voice, and an encyclopedic knowledge of history that surpassed even his father's. Her dissertation was on East German economic recovery post-Reunification (or lack thereof, she said, revealing her small round teeth). She spoke both High and Swiss German and had a decent grasp of French; her English was impeccable. In fact, Wolf was surprised that his father had chosen someone so intelligent. Being around her made Wolf feel slightly off-kilter, as if he had become an observer of his own life. This self-consciousness intensified when Marta, washing the dishes his father left out the night before, thanked him.

“For what?” Wolf said.

“For welcoming me here. It must have been hard, moving back and forth like this your whole life.”

“Not really,” he said. His existence had been split into orderly halves since he was ten years old, and he didn’t want anyone pitying him for it—least of all a woman close to his father. But he knew he sounded brusque and pompous, so he took his breakfast plate to the sink and washed it carefully. Aware, as he did so, of Marta’s surprise, and of the fine, fair hairs coating her arms and wrists.

“Yes, we appreciate your being so flexible,” his father said, standing in the doorway.

“Dad, I’m eighteen, not eight.”

His father laughed. “Of course. It’s just that you hear horror stories. Evil stepparents, angry children.”

Marta’s shoulder twitched and she turned back towards the sink. The fact that Wolf was required to think of her as his stepmother alarmed him, and he wondered how long she and his father had been together. She could not have been his student—they were in different departments at the university, he in history, she in economics—which Wolf supposed was a relief, but he still felt uneasy.

“Wolf had top grades on his Abitur,” his father said, clapping him, hard, on the back. “He studied a lot. His mother always kept an eye on him. A little too much for my taste, actually. A bit nanny-ish.” This—his father’s belief that his mother had somehow spoiled him by actually caring for him—was an old routine, and so Wolf smiled and tried to think of a polite way to leave the kitchen.

“Where will you go to university, then?” Marta asked awkwardly. She had filled the sink with water so hot there was steam rising, but this did not seem to make a difference to her: one by one she plunged the dinner plates in, her hands growing redder each time.

“Freie Universität.”

“I see. You’re humanities-oriented.”

“Exactly,” he said. His father went to the office adjacent to the kitchen and shut the door. Marta looked briefly in his direction, then resumed her work at the sink.

“You’ll take your skin off like that,” Wolf said, jerking his chin toward the water.

“It’s cooled,” Marta said, wiping her hands on her jeans. “And the heat kills bacteria.”

“Well, I can dry, at least.”

Marta shook her head but moved away from the sink.

“Marta, come look at these flights for springtime,” his father called, opening the door to the office. “I was thinking we could fly into Casablanca first. Or maybe Rabat.”

Wolf, catching the green of the front lawn stretching down to the road and feeling a wave of irritation at the house’s pretensions, wanted to say that he’d heard Casablanca was a pit, nothing like the movie. But he told himself that he should appreciate the slightly different image that his father projected with Marta that summer. After all, his dad made fewer jokes at his expense. Wolf’s dad listened more carefully and was clearly proud of Marta’s devotion to him. And he seemed amazed, too, that she cared for him. In other words, he behaved like a man in love.

A few days later, Wolf and Marta and his father took a cabin in the Alps for the weekend, but on the way up, Wolf had a nosebleed requiring them to cut the journey short. It ruined the front of his shirt and his pants, and the blood came so fast that Marta, pulling tissue after tissue from the box of Kleenex she’d found in the trunk, suggested they go to the emergency room. And so they’d trundled back down the mountain, the Volvo screeching at every turn because Wolf’s father refused to get the brakes replaced and still drove like a Berliner who’d never seen a hill before. The dazzling blue of the sky, the whiteness of the air, made Wolf’s eyes hurt, and he wondered if his prodigious nose, that uneasy conduit for the blood still gushing out of him, would be the purveyor of his premature death. Marta kept looking at him anxiously from the passenger’s seat, and he was reminded of drives to the doctor when he was a child,

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and would press his fevered cheeks against the car window to alleviate the throbbing in his head.

At the emergency room, the doctor looked closely at him, shrugged, and said he had been swiped with altitude sickness. The other possibility the doctor suggested was that his nosebleed was an anxiety symptom—“Someone your age has many changes happening in his life, does he not?”—and Wolf hated him for his knowing look.

“There was no reason for him to pathologize that,” his father said as they left. “You aren’t one of these people with mental problems, are you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“When I was growing up in Chemnitz, the air was so polluted I had nosebleeds all the time. Nobody batted an eye. Both of your grandparents died in their forties. Cancer. I’m convinced it was the factories.”

“I know, Dad.”

His father sighed. “Well, you can wipe the car seats off when you get home. At least we won’t have to get them re-upholstered.”

“Right,” Wolf said. Though later that afternoon he used the last of Marta’s Kleenex to scrape the blood from the leather, he wondered what would happen if he left the stains to dry and turn rust colored. He wondered whether his father, however much he’d opposed the doctor, might take this as a sign of psychological disturbance, rather than the overwhelming laziness Wolf had been seized with since finishing high school. The thought made him smile, and he was startled when Marta came out of the house as he placed the dirty tissues on the hood of the car.

“You should go lie down,” she said.

“What? Because I had a nosebleed?” Wolf replied, though in truth he did feel a little faint.

“We’ll finish the seats later. I don’t know why your dad made you—” She trailed off, shielding her eyes from the sun as she peered into the back seat. “Especially since the doctor said it might be anxiety related.”

“It wasn’t. I’m fine,” Wolf said, willing her to go back inside. But instead they stood there, staring at each other, and he wondered whether there was still blood in his nostrils.

Marta cocked her head and smiled. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

As she trudged up the length of the lawn, Wolf noticed that her pants were too short, her ankles strikingly narrow, and for the first time he wondered whether, beneath her clothes, she was as orderly and practical as she appeared.

That night, deciding that he had humiliated himself too much to eat dinner, Wolf went to bed early. He woke around midnight and was unable to go back to sleep. From his room, he could hear the television going, and he thought of how companionable his father’s relationship with Marta seemed. He could picture them together on the sofa in the living room, arms draped over each other, blue flooding their faces every few seconds. When he went downstairs, he was surprised to find her sitting alone on the carpeted floor, her knees pulled up to her chin and her hands wrapped around her ankles like a child. She did not hear him walk in; the carpet muffled everything.

“What are you watching?” he asked.

“Christ, you scared me,” she said. “It’s a documentary about Reunification.”

*Today, despite the financial crisis, Germany is a place of youthful opportunity. For example, take the success of twenty-two-year-old Ludwig—*What was this, Deutschland lite?

Wolf sat down next to Marta, leaning his head against the front of his father’s chair. She was wearing an old t-shirt and a pair of leggings. Through the tired gray garment, he could see the outline of her small breasts, and he observed how neatly she’d perched her head on her knees, the indentation in her chin making her look younger.

“What is it?” she asked sharply. “You’re staring at me.”

“I was just really, really wondering what your thoughts were on East German economic recovery.”

Marta laughed and muted the television. On screen, crowds of people were climbing over the Wall, footage that, in

spite of its ubiquity, had always moved him. The black night, the chipped structure, colors overexposed, wine bottles passed around. Schnapps, dancing, bewildered guards now wrested out of employment.

“This documentary is bullshit. Your poor father, growing up in the East. No wonder they’re all running to the far right out there.”

“Any excuse,” Wolf said mildly.

“What do you mean?”

“For Germans to go right-wing,” he said.

“Oh. I thought you meant your father using his background—”

“That too,” Wolf said, barking a laugh.

“He’s not so bad, you know,” she said. The friendliness was gone from her voice.

“You only say that because you’re in love with him.”

“A relationship is less complicated with a man his age,” she said stiffly. “Less artifice. They want something or they don’t.”

Wolf said nothing, knowing he’d offended her but unable to retract his words. She, after all, had brought the topic up.

“Anyway,” Marta said. “I’m going to bed.” Her tone reminded him of a professor trying, and failing, to take a democratic approach with an unruly student.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what? You’re entitled to your opinion.” She touched his wrist, then withdrew just as suddenly. “Your dad has been good to me. I’ve lost both of my parents, you know. My father when I was young and my mother last year. Nobody else gave a damn or even knew what to say.” She shook her head and padded back upstairs.

After that, Wolf was more careful. Marta, for her part, continued to watch him closely. It saddened him that she did not trust him, but then he did not really trust himself, either. Seeing her now, ten years on, was less fraught, but it still felt laborious. For a long time after waking up from his jet-lagged sleep, he lay spread-eagled on the bed. When he finally did get up, he found Marta on the patio, her eyes shut against the sun, a tray with coffee and biscuits in front of her. She jumped a little as he slid the door open, but then smiled.

“So tell me what the buyers are like,” Wolf said.

“An older couple. Children at university. They only want it for weekends, I think,” she said.

“What a shame.” He paused. “I never understood why he left the place to me.”

She stared at her hands. “I had no use for it. And he gave you so little otherwise, Wolf.”

He shrugged. “It’s not something I think a lot about now.”

“Well,” Marta said shortly, “I can tell you that right after the diagnosis your father decided the place would go to you. My family has a lot already, and—”

“I haven’t done badly myself.”

“That’s not how I meant it,” she said, pouring the coffee.

“I know.” He picked at a loose thread on his jeans.

“We would have welcomed you back,” she said quietly. “We would have liked to hear from you more often.” Wolf was too irritated by the feigned innocence of her admonition to say anything reasonable.

“Water under the bridge,” he managed, after a few beats.

Wolf’s father had come to visit him twice in the last decade: after his graduation from university in the States, and then after his master’s. He called his son on Christmas, Easter, and birthdays, and though their connection was undoubtedly loose and artificial, he had kept in touch. And how could Marta accuse Wolf of silence when it was what she wanted, what—and he still believed this—had been the best thing for both of them? Her selective memory,

unsurprising, perhaps even arising from courtesy, angered him more than he liked to admit.

"I had my reasons, you know," he said suddenly. "For not coming here."

Marta looked up at him with what she probably thought was a caring expression. "I'm aware. And I'm sorry you felt that way." You felt. She probably did not mean to agitate him so much that he thought of knocking the cups and saucers across the flagstone. Or doing some other performatively angry gesture that would no doubt appall both of them. When she did the dishes later, resisting his help as usual, Wolf watched to see whether she was still insensitive to the hot water. But she pulled on a pair of gloves, the rubber snapping against her wrists with menacing efficiency. He excused himself and decided to go out for a walk, breathing in the clear air with a sentimentality that surprised him. He could not have missed Zurich. He'd never liked it there.

Indeed, when he left Switzerland the summer he was eighteen, he had been sure that it was sheer boredom spawning his feelings of dissatisfaction and emptiness upon his return home. His memories of Marta felt extraneous and foolish, since they were invariably linked to his father and all that belonged to him. Immediately after he began university in Berlin, though, Wolf had discovered that he was not interested in studying history. As he was writing papers about Bismarck and Hindenburg and Stresemann and Hitler with an angry ahistoricism that earned him poor grades, he also lost his virginity to a beautiful Turkish girl, who told him that he had father issues and lacked direction in life. *What else is new*, he said, and their relationship didn't last much longer. Then, examining the deep purple shadows under his eyes at the end of that semester, Wolf's mother uncharacteristically suggested that he see a therapist. But he planned to visit his father after Christmas, he said. When would there be time? His mother looked at him curiously, and he remembered to keep his newfound eagerness in check.

When Wolf arrived in Switzerland that winter, though, he found that something was terribly wrong. Marta was jumpy; she and his father were hardly ever in the same room together; her cleaning seemed frantic. One night, his father made reservations for the three of them at a restaurant quite far from the house, but he canceled at the last minute, having a departmental party to go to, a prospect at which Marta rolled her eyes. "You two can go," he said indifferently. "You'll like the food there, Wolf."

The restaurant was the sort of place that a rich, elderly tourist might have appreciated. Despite its hideous wallpaper, the glowing sconces on the walls, Wolf liked it, and was disappointed when Marta—looking around at the polished wooden booths, the white-haired Americans and pouting French couples in their Canada Goose jackets and Adidas shoes—said, "Well, at least nobody's wearing a dirndl." They ended up being surprised by how good the food was, though: bratwurst with Dijon mustard, currywurst, cubed potatoes, shredded cabbage that had clearly been sitting on an ice block for hours. All comforting peasant fare. Outside, it began to snow, small dry flakes, and Wolf could feel his spirits rising, his chest expanding. The waiter brought candles for the table, and, watching the wick shorten in the amber glass, Wolf asked Marta how old she was when her father died. Then hated himself for his forthrightness.

"Sixteen," she replied steadily.

"Any siblings?"

"Brothers. They're twelve and ten years older than me. I was the only kid in the house at the time."

"That must have been difficult," Wolf said.

"I didn't have time to fall apart. It was my mother who was a wreck afterwards. My dad was a suicide."

Wolf froze. "I'm sorry. We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"No. Better this than pretend nothing happened." She cleared her throat.

"I was never really alone after that. Even when I went to university, I lived at home with my mother. And when I went to work in Paris afterwards I ended up living with a French guy. Then I came home to Zurich to get my doctorate and lived with my mother again up until last year." She paused thoughtfully.

“And my father? Is he—”

“Much better than anybody else I’ve lived with,” she said, biting back a smile.

Wolf grinned. “He’s a little old for you.”

“Are you this opinionated with all women, or just me?” she said, but Wolf was happy to see her laughing.

“I only meant that you don’t have to be a caretaker.”

“Wolf, your father is forty-eight, not seventy-eight.”

He laughed. “Right. Should we get the check?” They agreed to split it, and he was relieved that she neither expected him to pay nor made a show of paying for him. She touched his cheek briefly as they left the restaurant. Her knuckles were icy, and the sensation made his molars ache.

Afterwards, Marta said she needed to go to the market inside the train station. Wolf followed her up and down the short narrow aisles, making jokes, pretending he knew the words to the terrible German country songs coming over the radio, and teasing Marta for knowing them. She tried to keep a straight face, but as soon as she caught his eye would collapse into laughter. The cold followed them as they left for the platform, a bag in each hand. There was no one around. It was half past ten.

For twenty minutes they waited like that, murmuring about the weather and their plans for the following day, though they had none. Finally, a maintenance worker told them that the trains had been canceled for the night. Malfunctioning. Or maybe somebody on the tracks, he added thoughtfully. “Your father can come pick us up,” Marta said quickly. “The party should be over by now. I’m sure he won’t mind since—” She held her Blackberry closer to her ear. Twice, three times she called, and there was no answer. *Don’t bother*, Wolf wanted to tell her, but didn’t. She put the phone back in her pocket.

“Well, maybe we can get a cab,” Wolf said. The maintenance worker thumped his bucket down near them, the smell of soap and bleach cutting through the previously scentless air.

Marta put her hands over her face and let out a small yelp. For a second he did not realize that she was crying.

“Marta. Jesus. I’ll call one right now. We’ll get out of here.”

“Fuck,” she said, wiping her nose on her jacket sleeve. “It’s not that.”

The maintenance worker stared at them, and Wolf gave him a dirty look. Tentatively, he guided Marta up the stairs and back into the freezing air. “What is it, then?”

“Your father,” she said. “You know, don’t you? How difficult he can be?”

“Well, he’s not always the most thoughtful person,” Wolf said. “But he loves you.”

“Oh, don’t give me that shit,” she said. Snot kept pouring out of her nose, and he split open the package of tissues he’d gotten, handing her one. She pressed it to her face, then ran her thumbs fiercely under her eyes.

For a long time, he told himself that he did it to shut her up. It was true that he couldn’t bear to hear anymore. He had known for most of his life that his father was not a good man, but that he was bad wasn’t something he could contemplate, not then. But the truth was that Wolf kissed Marta because he wanted to, and because it was unbearable seeing her in such distress. At some point, though, his good sense kicked in and he drew away.

“What is it?” she asked. “Am I so disgusting to you?”

“No, but, Marta—”

“I get it.”

How cold she could be.

They could have found somewhere to stay. Could have come up with some excuse. Bad weather, a blocked road. Wolf’s father might not believe them, but on the other hand it might not occur to him to be suspicious. Instead, Marta had hailed a cab. They put the groceries in silently, and she sat up front. He could see the sharp outline of her face, the ash-blond hairs crowning her forehead, and through her silent fury and the terrible feeling in his chest he

knew he'd fucked up. But better now than later, when it would be harder to part with her, to deny himself what he had wanted since the summer. When they finally reached the house, they went in silently. His father was still not home. Wolf got into his pajamas, his teeth chattering; he turned the heat on, he went to bed.

He woke sometime in the wee hours of the morning, his tongue stuck to the top of his mouth, almost rabid with thirst. The sky was still black, but it had stopped snowing, and he went downstairs to the kitchen, silent save the hum of the lights. After he'd filled his glass, though, he heard something from the patio. When he looked up, he saw his father, silhouetted by the high beam of the back-door lights. He meant to creep back upstairs, but his dad turned quickly and smiled, stepping back into the kitchen and locking the door behind him.

"Still up? Did you drink coffee or something?" Wolf shook his head. "How about whiskey, then? It's Laphroaig. I'll put an ice cube in so it's not too strong for you."

"Actually, I'd be fine with it neat," Wolf said, but his father banged the icetray against the granite countertops and dropped two large cubes in with an expression of satisfaction. Wolf drank tentatively, trying not to show how much his lips were burning.

"You and Marta have a good time? Have stuff to talk about?"

"Yes," Wolf said. His tongue tingled, his heart beat in his throat. It took considerable effort not to choke. "And the departmental party?"

His father looked at him blankly for a second, then recovered. "Oh, that. The usual schmoozing. Sorry I couldn't pick you up." He gazed steadily at Wolf. "She's good, isn't she? Marta?"

"She's great. You're lucky."

"I think I am," his father said. "Well, I'm going to turn in. Make sure you rinse the sink."

That night, Wolf lay clinging to his mattress, sweating. He hovered at the edge of sleep until the middle of the morning. For the remaining two days of his visit, he was not able to get Marta alone. When they were with his father, she refused to look directly at him, and whenever they bumped into each other going from room to room he felt like some kind of predator.

"Marta—," he even began once, and she said, loud enough for only him to hear, "Don't fucking talk to me."

*Don't fucking talk to me.*

It was impossible not to think of that exchange, ten years later, when Marta drove them out to see the house. She straightened her shoulders as they got out of the car, staring up at the hill as though she had never been on the property before. She had always preferred to park at the foot of the lawn rather than inch up the driveway. He tried not to stare at her ass as they trudged up the hill, but he found it funny how jerkily her hips moved, how ill-disguised her irritation was.

The rooms were the same as they had been the decade before. Each space still had an absolute and disturbing scentlessness, an airlessness that Wolf knew could not be alleviated by opening a window. When he passed the bedrooms, he saw how uninhabited the place really was. An unfamiliar pinstriped Ikea comforter stretched across the bed Marta and his father once shared. His scalp prickled, and he walked downstairs.

"Everything to your satisfaction here?" Marta said. They both stood in front of the flat-screen TV in the living room, as if expecting it to turn on and explain what the hell they were doing.

"Yes. Why wouldn't it be?"

She shrugged.

"Because it's your place, not mine." She ran her forefinger along the white TV console, a gray smudge appearing. "Somebody will have to dust in here."

"It looks perfect to me. Ready for the buyers."

She nodded. "Want a drink?"

"I didn't know there was anything in the fridge."

“Champagne. I left it in there for when the couple moves in, but I can buy another bottle later.”

There was still a haphazard assortment of glasses in the kitchen cabinets. As she filled two flutes, Wolf gazed through the sliding doors opening onto the terrace, from which, on a clear day, you could see the Alps. He didn't see Marta putting the glass in front of him, and when he moved his hand it shattered all over the white tile. “Shit. I'm sorry.”

“Not to worry. Can you get the broom and dustpan?”

She stepped aside as he cleaned the mess up. “Is there another glass?” he asked.

“Just a jar. The renters left them,” Marta laughed. She grabbed his hands suddenly. Up close, he noticed, she had freckles, and tiny crow's feet at the edge of her eyes. All of her features had lengthened, sharpened.

“You have cheekbones now,” he said.

She reddened and turned his hands over to look at his palms. “You didn't cut yourself?”

“Nope.”

“Good.” She dropped his hands and looked at the clock. They both stood staring out at the backyard, and in the high summer light, Wolf felt a terrible wave of sadness.

“Marta, why don't you buy it from me?”

“What?”

“The house. You have the money, don't you?”

She laughed.

“What would be the point? It's so far away from the university. And I have no children.”

“But just to rent out,” he said. “For income.”

“I don't need it. My parents left me more than enough.” She cleared her throat. They were both silent for a moment. “There's no point, Wolf,” she added, gentler this time. “It's too troublesome.”

“But you could be happy here.”

“How do you know where my happiness is?” Marta said, smiling.

“It's not in that apartment.”

She took his face in her hands for a second. “Stop telling me what to do.”

She had never known, Wolf thought. She had never understood her effect on him. He stared at the countertop, as if to divine some pattern that would tell him how to behave.

“You look pale,” Marta said.

Wolf flattened his palms on the counter. “Do you remember that night we went to the restaurant?” he asked. She nodded. “Afterwards I was terrified my father would find out.”

She laughed. “Oh, he knew. I told him.”

“What? How did he—”

“He was a little perturbed, but I convinced him it was nothing. In the end he found it funny.” She paused. “He never addressed it with you?”

“No. Not explicitly.” Wolf stared at the ceiling. “I guess he didn't think it was important.”

“It was. For me,” she said, clearing her throat. “I didn't realize it at the time because I was so pissed off with—well, with both of you. Your father was extremely demanding. And you would just .... acquiesce. He could have asked you to do anything.”

Wolf finished the champagne. He thought it unwise to deny his lack of wherewithal at the time, but the revelation irritated him in more ways than he was willing to analyze. He'd neglected that part of himself—the boy who'd dutifully shuttled between two countries for nearly a decade—for so long that he forgot that was how Marta remembered him. A half-erotic anger, mixed with shame, pressed against him.

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When he had returned to Berlin that winter ten years ago, the idea of going back to the Freie Universität made him feel sick. His mother knew something was wrong and, in the coming weeks, pried the story out of him piece by piece. When it was over she pressed her hand over his and asked him what he wanted to do. Burn his life to the ground and salt the earth, he said, his teenage capacity for hyperbole at its peak, and she said perhaps a few months in the States might be beneficial. Of course, it would not be just a few months. Wolf's first summer in New York, waiting for college to begin, would be the worst of his life, and he had almost wanted to give up the student visa, the place at NYU, the expansive future where no one—*no one*—would tell him what to do. He could have called Marta, found another course of study, made things right. But soon he met Sarah, and though it would take another four years to realize that he was in love with her, he could not leave her.

Still, even with his father gone, the memory of him—the kitchen and the whiskey and the wise gray glance that had always been able to strip his son clean of pretense—was unbearably clear, and so Wolf was silent as he and Marta drove to the real estate office. At the office, expounding on the virtues of the Zurich house he felt frozen, idiotic. He was sure that he could feel Marta looking at him from across the table. Though she had chosen to stay with his father, Wolf understood now the urgency with which she got rid of the house, its deceptions, its memories. As usual, she wouldn't let him drive on the way back, and they both kept quiet.

"So, you knew how I felt," he said when they got back to the apartment, putting his hand on the sofa to steady himself.

She nodded. "I didn't know that meant anything to you till today."

Oh, she was embarrassed by her behavior, she explained. How much weakness, how much neediness, it revealed. And he was much younger than her. But she had never been embarrassed by Wolf. It was just that being together would have been impossible. He could understand that, couldn't he?

"Has anything changed?" he asked.

Marta stood very still, and Wolf half-expected that to be it, the end of his pathetic infatuation and all that it entailed. The acknowledgement was nice, he told himself. He didn't need anything more. And there was too much risk involved in making a move: perhaps even retaliation if he, accosted by his own guilt (Sarah), or some other normal inhibition, stopped himself. At the same time, it did not surprise Wolf when he let Marta put her hand gently against his crotch, when he followed her into his room. They undressed quickly, and he thought with amusement that there was still something incredibly technical and fastidious about her: as if she'd expected this, perhaps even orchestrated the encounter to create the illusion that he was in control. For a second he paused, kneeling, his stomach arched above her and his palms on either side of her face, and then she pressed up into him, as if to assess his solidity. First, he let himself in hesitantly, and then, judging by how deeply she dug her nails into his skin, reached an easier rhythm. Though her urgency surprised him, he was not overwhelmed or put off, and he thought of all the times he had wanted to be with her, how alarming her power over him had seemed then. How different they were now.

In the morning, Marta did not move even as he loosened his arms around her, sat up, got dressed, and for a second he wondered whether he should just leave her like that, undisturbed and disencumbered of him. But he could not, and at last she woke, passing her hand across her forehead, stripes of sunlight doubling over her face. She smiled and reached for him, and they lay like that for a few minutes, his left arm arched above her head and his right hand resting on the gently cushioned blade of her hip bone. "Marta," he said. "I can stay. I can forget about New York."

"Wolf, you've never liked Switzerland. You've never really wanted to be here. This is just because of—"

"It's not just because of sex," he said.

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Sorry."

"It's because you're nostalgic. But you'd lose your mind in Zurich. You know that."

She rolled over to face him. He groaned quietly, both annoyed by and relieved at her pragmatism.

"It's not your real life," Marta said gently.

"No," Wolf agreed. He had always liked her straightforwardness, but now he wished that, just once, she would acquiesce to the fantasy he'd created, consider the impossible possible. But Marta would not do this, and how could he expect her to? She had always been practical, and he wondered whether, even in that moment, there was some part of her, some indefinable core, that he couldn't get at. At the same time, he had never felt so close to her. He began to wonder whether the events of that night, already acquiring finality, had aged him in some way, brought him closer to maturity, or at least an understanding of the last ten years. But he feared that making them symbolic would be deflating, adolescent. And he knew that now was the time to leave, to let go.

Still, as Wolf packed his bags, Marta suddenly unable to make eye contact with him as she folded his shirts and laid them in his suitcase, he was overwhelmed with a kind of tender sympathy for his younger self. His belief in the inscrutability of love. And afterwards, as the Lyft pulled away from the apartment, the blue-and-gray feeling of her was still on him. Yet he knew, with absolute certainty, that he would never see her again. He could envision this: Marta, only thirty-eight, living without the disaster of his father to contend with. Free of him, of Wolf, she might get a second chance.

When he saw Sarah waiting for him at JFK, he felt a wave of love for her, magnified by the guilt that—though absent of regret—intensified on the drive back from the airport. They said little, Wolf amazed, as usual, at New York, its famous pulse, and at the demands already pressing on him, *fiancée, apartment, job*.

"It's done, then? The house?" Sarah cleared her throat. "And this whole thing with Marta?"

He looked over and saw that her features had grown painfully tense. She was blinking fiercely, and it took him a second to realize she was crying. "Sarah, I'm—"

"Don't," she said, thrusting her palm out. "Don't fucking talk to me." Wolf bit the insides of his mouth and looked out the window, too shocked and jet-lagged to experience real panic, but fear and guilt tugged at him nevertheless, and he stared at his palms, knowing that whatever excuse he managed would be thoroughly inadequate. When they pulled up in front of the apartment, he half-expected Sarah to confiscate his keys, banish him for good. He paused at the foot of the brownstone steps. He placed his hand firmly on the peeling banister and stared upwards as she swung open the wrought-iron gate, angrily wrangling the lock until the front door opened with a soft punching sound.

"What are you waiting for?" Sarah asked, turning around sharply. "Aren't you going to come in?"

"Yes," Wolf said, with a certainty that he believed, would always believe, was entirely absent of doubt.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** **Rebecca Bihn-Wallace** is a graduate of the University of California, Davis, and is currently an MFA in Fiction candidate at Brooklyn College. Her debut short story was published in this *Miracle Monocle* in 2019. She has since been published in *The Marathon Literary Review*, *Underwood Press*, *Running Wild Press Anthology Vol. 2*, *Sink Hollow*, *The Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *The William & Mary Review*, and *Dismantle Magazine*. She lives in Brooklyn.