

A Stranger From Geneva

by Samantha Hunt

My mother lowers her voice to a whisper even though we are speaking across a telephone line from her empty house to my empty apartment, barring the slimmest chance that anyone might hear our conversation. Still, she quiets herself as if to say, "This story you are about to hear is too dangerous for broadcast on the regular frequencies."

My mother has never been good with secrets. She used to think keeping them was **akin** to lying, so the secrets she did keep were special, only for her and my father, kept as a hedge against their children, as a private world for just the two of them, as a reminder of their lives before six kids invaded. This story was once one of those secrets. She decided to tell me out of the blue recently and she behaved as though it was no big deal. "Haven't I told you this before?" she asked. She had not. But things have changed since my father died three years ago. Now it seems the doors to mystery have blown wide open in my mother's life as if proximity to the greatest secret of all, namely, where my father went, diluted the power of the secrets she once kept. Now she'll tell anybody anything.

In 1964 my mother was a 26-year-old divorced woman living in the town of Pleasantville, New York. In the months leading up to my mother's divorce, her first husband had ploughed through dates with a humiliating tally of local women, enough to populate a unit of the ladies auxiliary. My mother's first remedy – smashing her car into his when she found him engaged in a passionate, Lover's Lane moment with a woman from the Episcopal Church – failed to produce helpful results. So she left, joining the world of single women again. Single, but in 1964, not unstained.

The divorce was painful. Her ex became abusive, and so she needed a distraction. My mother convinced her friend Cappy, a lady with a large and fierce laugh, that they had to travel. They had to escape. Europe would be a good start. Switzerland seemed safe. Both women were itching to flee. However, Cappy's father, a Catholic, stood in the way. He would not allow Cappy to be in the company of a divorced woman until he had first interviewed my mother. This unbearable interview included repeated uses of the verb "to know" employed in the biblical sense. Despite the odds, my mother passed his test.

That's how they found themselves in the spring of '64 in Geneva, where waves of relief and sudden joy swept over them at each sighting of non-American packs of chewing gum, each pair of funny Swiss shoes, every syllable from a foreign tongue, all the small things that proved the world was not at all small, in 1964.

"We ate fondue every night. We'd never even heard of fondue before," she says. It was at the end of one such dinner when a waiter interrupted their hilarity. "Excuse me, Mesdemoiselles. The gentlemen seated by the window there," and he pointed to two young Swiss men, "have insisted on paying for your meal."

"We tried to protest," my mother says through the telephone, "but the men had already paid and the waiter refused to return the money to them. So we kind of shrugged and invited the men to join us." There's a twist in my mother's voice that is audible through the phone line.

"They were extremely polite, manners that American women could only dream of finding back home then. Maybe a Midwesterner could have been this polite but there were no men like these men on the East Coast," she says. "These men held the doors, pulled out chairs, listened intently, paid for everything and stood each time Cappy or I even considered visiting the ladies room. These were very different times," my mother clarifies.

"After coffee at the restaurant the four of us decided to go out dancing. They took us to a magnificent nightclub and by this time we had coupled up, Cappy and I having decided that she preferred one man and I preferred the other. I got the handsome one. His name was Hans. He knew how to tango beautifully," my mother recalls across the long distance line.

"The men were engineers working for an American company in Switzerland," she says. "Their relationship was that of business colleagues only, not friends. Still we were all enjoying the night and so continued drinking and dancing until two in the morning when it was decided that what we needed was some fresh air. We thought a walk near Lake Geneva could provide that."

The four set off on an early morning stroll. Cappy and her date had a seat on a bench beside the lake while my mother and Hans kept walking down to the end of a pier that **jutted** out across the surface of the

water. "This was back before you just rushed back to a hotel room and slept together," my mother clarifies again.

Out on the pier Hans stood directly behind my mother. The thousand lights of the city reflected off the lake. Romance was nigh, my mother felt, and again a moment of relief passed through her, thinking of her ex and then thinking of the exotic Swiss engineer who was just then, no doubt, preparing to kiss her. She exhaled and at that moment Hans placed his hands around my mother's throat. He squeezed. He tightened once. He crushed the cavity of her trachea.

Hans wrung her neck thoroughly and effortlessly as though he were a soldier trained in the exact art of compressing an enemy's jugular. No air could pass in or out of my mother's body.

She could not move. She could not yell. She could not breathe. She stood staring out across the lake. Her arms dangling by her sides. Her feet nearly lifted off the ground by the vice about her throat. She thought, 'This is unbelievable. A Swiss stranger is about to kill me.' And then she thought of her life up to that point, as if to see how it could have led her here. She wondered, 'are these the **wages** of my divorce? Do I deserve this?' By the shore of Lake Geneva my mother noted the moments that passed. Hans said nothing, only continued to squeeze, as if in answer to her question: Yes, this is exactly what you deserve.

"The strangest part," my mother whispers, "is that I remember the superb mental clarity I achieved as I was choked. In that clarity I thought, I am going to die now and the lights on Lake Geneva are beautiful. How sad, I was thinking, that beauty ends here. You really study these things when you think you're going," she says.

Time, that all night had been a **torrent**, slowed to a drip. After a minute or two of strangulation she was losing consciousness. She was staring down into the water when finally silent Hans spoke. He asked my mother, "What would you do if I didn't let go?" His breath was on her neck and she thought, "He is breathing." He held the choke a moment longer. He let go.

That part of the story is awful, being choked by a stranger in Switzerland, but both my mother and I believe that what came next is far more **sinister**.

Rather than screaming bloody murder once she caught her breath, my mother, perhaps out of fear or, ever scarier, perhaps out of fear of impropriety, simply turned and walked back to the bench where Cappy and

her date sat talking. My mother said nothing. The four of them regrouped, walked back to their hotels and politely said goodnight.

Forty years later my mother still has Hans's business card. She keeps the card in a bureau drawer, filed beside a buffalo nickel her grandfather gave her, a clutch of two-dollar bills she'd saved, and a tiny red bean filled with miniature carved ivory animals. When I asked her why she kept his card, a reminder of how she almost died, she sounded surprised. "To get revenge?" I asked.

"Oh no, not at all," she said. "I keep it, because it's part of my life."