

TSCHAGGUNS

by Anna Polonyi

“In fiction we want to have characters create scenes that in life we would, in all likelihood, avoid. This contrasting attraction-and-avoidance turns out to be a terrible spiritual problem for young writers. In daily life, a writer may practice conflict-avoidance, but in fiction a writer must welcome conflict and walk straight into it.” Charles Baxter.

I.

Halfway down the stairs, after I had told Eve I wasn't in love with her and didn't know if I ever would be, I was already thinking about how best to pack for the trip to the mountains. On the street, I thought I saw Sarah Delwaters, a British-Nigerian woman from work. But because it was dark and Sarah Delwaters is black, I couldn't be sure it was her. If it was, it would be rude of me to walk past her without saying hello. But if it wasn't, I didn't want to startle a stranger walking alone at night on an empty street.

I veered abruptly to cross to the opposite sidewalk but then began to worry Sarah would think I was racist because I hadn't recognized her, or think I was rude, because I *had* recognized her but instead of saying hello, had crossed the street. I wondered which was worse. If she were to mention it later in the office, I would tell her I had just broken up with

Halfway down the stairs, after I had told Eve I wasn't in love with her and didn't know if I ever would be, I was already thinking about how my trip to the mountains with my father. On the street, I ran into Sarah Delwaters, a British-Nigerian woman from work. She was looking at a shop window, swaying slightly on the balls of her feet. I asked her if she fancied a sample of my grandmother's schnapps; I lived right around the corner. To my surprise, she said yes. She missed her last bus home so we slept, head to toe, in my bed. In the middle of the night, I woke up to her putting on her zipping up her jacket.

“What's going on?”

“You're a real piece of work, you know that?”

“What?”

“I'm going to call a taxi.”

I reached out to touch her shoulder as she looked

my long term partner, and didn't trust myself to speak to anyone. Even though I had never called Eve my "long term partner" before, and we hadn't really broken up: we were just not sure how to continue. So that would make me a liar on top of everything else.

Our landlady picks us up at the train station and after a quarter-hour drive, we arrive along a narrow road to a modern white house with light wooden terraces. The landlady shows us into the flat my father and I have chosen to live in for a week, then we all trudge down to the basement so she can show us where we are on a map on the wall. We stare at the dot she points to and nod.

I suspect we know something our landlady does not: that this village is the only place in all of Austria to begin with TS. We have come to this conclusion from our day of traveling. Each time we changed trains, my father typed our final destination into the ticket machine to double-check the next connection. Each time, after punching in the T, the auto-fill would recommend T as in Tamsweg, Ternitz, Turnau. As soon as we added the S, the

up the cab's number. She dodged my hand. "Don't touch me," she said. I could see her face, streaked with tears, lit blue from the screen of her phone. "Is everything okay?" I asked, but she didn't answer, and headed straight out the door.

II.

Our landlady picks us up at the train station and after a quarter-hour drive, we park in front of a modern white house with geraniums hanging over the terrace. The landlady shows us into the flat my father and I will be staying in for a week. We look at a map, and wonder where we are. The landlady looks at us for a moment before getting back into her car, as if she were sorry to leave us like this, or as if she were still waiting for an explanation of some kind.

What had at first been a warm, soft-edged thought—to spend a week alone together in the mountains, something my father and I had never done before—had cooled and hardened into this: us standing on a balcony in Tschagguns, neither of us quite sure why we were here, nor what we should do next.