



Revolutions

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I went to school in the Space Age, when in science class we still made models of the solar system out of pipe cleaners and colored Styrofoam balls. The nuns would hover over us to make sure we got the universe right—Earth in its proper, Copernican place; nobody making jokes about Uranus. As for me, I would personify the planets. I thought they were like a celestial family, like *my* family, who were at that time the universe to me.

My father was Jupiter: remote, cool, uninhabitable, making his long slow circle to work and back each day. My mother was a moon: revolving nervously around us all, reflecting. My sister had to be one of those luminous planets—Venus, maybe, or Mercury—one of the spinning hot ones filled with mystery and potential. I didn't know yet where I fit in this galaxy. The self-contained sphere that was me was still looking for its place, moving from the orbit of a little girl into the wider revolutions of womanhood.

It was 1966, and we spent that summer in my mother's girlhood town of Eppelheim, in those days still a typical German village of scrubbed stucco houses, chicken coops and subsistence gardens, flanking a main road that ribboned quickly into vineyards and heartbreakingly green pastureland. In the distance hung the dark tapestry of the Odenwald, a few ruined castles like fallen meteors along the verdant line of its hills.

I was ten, my sister twelve and already beautiful. It strikes me looking at photographs that we were a girlish

version of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis—my sister tanned, slim and worldly like the Dean, suave in that way that suggests at once confidence and vice; I was the bucktoothed sidekick with the rubber face and banana-peel gracelessness. Because of it, my sister refused to speak to me in public; the very fact that I longed to be with her, and spent my days trailing after her dressed in her own hand-me-downs, branded me as unfit. Perhaps I reminded her of a shabby younger version of herself, some sort of phantom, dogged and unsatisfied.

It was her luck that our neighbors in Eppelheim also had two girls; Petra and Kati were our same ages, except that Petra was small as a six-year-old and Kati already mature. We introduced ourselves and, with the efficiency of children whose career is play, divided up into our respective amusements. My sister and Kati disappeared into the parlor to trade secrets, and I stayed in the front yard and sized up Petra.

Scrawny and runtish, she looked even more of a victim than me. Her arms were about as thick as pogo

sticks, and even the way she stood—gazing patiently into the middle distance with her pencil neck bent slightly forward—made me think she was someone used to being appraised and found wanting. Most damningly, I recognized the faded, lumpen look of her outfit: a shorts-and-top set printed with watermelon slices that had been laundered to pale pink and that still fell into the shape of her older sister's more lissome curves.

Still, we were in it for the duration, and I soon learned that whatever Petra lacked in appearance and initiative she made up for with a kind of subservient moxie. We spent our afternoons playing Search and Reconnoiter, a game I had devised that took us into and out of every basement in Eppelheim. No one in the village locked the slanted wooden doors leading down to their cellars, and when the sun got hot and most housewives retired upstairs for their afternoon nap, Petra and I conducted our clandestine house-to-house searches.

I remember the deep cool smell rising each time we opened another door to begin our trespass. It was like

stepping into a grave—moist and forbidden, delicious and frightening all at once. From the heat and sunlight that had been gathering all morning over the meadows, summer dust powdering the splay-leafed vines and rising on the air like talc, we'd step down into the chilly strangeness of someone else's house, our bare feet gripping cold stone steps, palms pushing at cobwebs looped like bayou moss and recoiling from the stained green tears the walls had wept.

We had nothing like this at home in America. Our basement was paneled and carpeted in orange shag, and my father had put a vinyl-padded bar in one corner with four barstools, although no one we knew ever came over for a drink. The only bottles he had behind the counter were one each of gin and vermouth, along with a small jar of gimlet onions and a canister of tiny cocktail swords in green and white, like the arsenals of two shrunken armies. I and the three remaining barstools would keep him company as he mixed his one nightly martini, and while I spun on the stool's fat, sticky

upholstery, sometimes we would talk about what was on my mind. Lately that had been the recurring arguments that rose and fell like opera from my parents' bedroom and that sounded different from the usual sparring of two stubborn, voluble people.

“Dad, are you and Mama angry?”

“What do you mean?”

“I hear you fighting. At night.” There was a pause, during which he looked down into his drink. “A lot,” I added. I wanted him to speak.

He let out his breath. “Well, there’s fighting and there’s fighting.”

I waited for more, but he went quiet again. I put my chin on the counter and looked through the bottles—the gin bluish like watered-down window cleaner, the vermouth the color of old floor wax. I knew my Dad could make me all the promises parents do, in that raised, unguent voice where deceit and reassurance swirl around like two impossible flavors of ice cream—*Mommies and Daddies sometimes disagree*—that

double whammy voice whose words bleed the truth while its tone implies the childishness of your concern—*but that doesn’t mean*—and yet you know, you know.

But he didn’t. Instead, he kept watching the little onion speared in his glass, moon-white and refracted like something at the bottom of a pool. I don’t think I had ever seen my father look so perplexed, as if he were amazed at how his life had brought him to a basement wet bar in New Jersey staring into a troubled vortex of gin. My chest began to ache, and all I knew to do was reach out and trace, over and over, the green and gold label on the vermouth bottle.

But that had been the spring. The season had revolved, and I was older now.

While Petra and I snuck through the underground spaces of other people’s lives, sometimes I’d envy my sister and Kati’s intimacies. What they talked about for hours in that closed-up parlor I couldn’t begin to imagine, although one afternoon on my way to the toilet I walked in on them unexpectedly. Kati was standing

in front of my sister in the dim, shade-lowered light, holding open her blouse for my sister's gaze. She looked like a saint in a holy card displaying her wounds, but in this case it was the precocious swell of her breasts, their nipples small and hard as tacks in the unfamiliar air.

They both stared at me without moving, and when I could pull my eyes away from Kati, I caught my sister's look—narrowed, venomous. In that darkened space between us her irises seemed to have turned the color of arsenic. It occurred to me that my sister was one of those wicked girls, spawn of some stray gene of malice or mischief, from whom nice girls are warned to stay away. I backed out of the room and closed the door behind me.

On Sundays that parlor was thrown open to the light, the cushions plumped and the nubby upholstery collared with fresh Belgian lace. My Tante Hilde brought out unlabelled bottles of the fizzy young wine from last year's harvest, while the men gathered in the parlor like frogs in a pond, including my father, prodigally tan and

fit from his passionate tennis playing. They drank the fresh Sylvaner wine and talked about soccer, while the women occupied the kitchen to cook.

Watching my mother in that big, white-enameled space, laughing and throwing out some joke or smart response that was caught up by the other women and sent around the room—watching her there, her vibrant ease made me stare as if she had just opened a garment to reveal her radiance. I think I had never seen her so beautiful, so much her own pure self. Certainly not in our modern, avocado-colored kitchen at home, where she spent her days alone sitting at the table learning English from back issues of *Good Housekeeping*, or simply staring out the window at the blank fence dividing our house from the next, frowning with preoccupation or anxiety.

I wanted this new woman as a mother, this brown-haired girl with the shining smile and the mysterious, sexy knowledge who stood leaning her hip against the countertop and laughing, flicking a pinch of dough at us

Little Pitchers, Petra and me, as if just by being girls we too were conspirators in this marvelous game of gender. I wanted them all, this whole buzzing, joking nest of women—stern Hilde, spinsterish Ilsa, my pink-cheeked blonde aunts and second cousins with their muscular arms and big rural laughter.

Outside of Sundays, when the women had dispersed to their own kitchens and gardens and to the task of keeping the men out of the parlor for the rest of the week, we children lived in the radius of my cousin Magda. She was a good-natured, moon-faced girl of twenty with a tonsure of dark curls that didn't suit her, and thick black Buddy Holly glasses that looked like scaffolding on her pale, plump face. What we liked most about her was her fascinated, unselfconscious preoccupation with her own body, as if it was a recently acquired appliance with complicated instructions for assembly and operation—rituals of plucking, powdering, pinching, evaluating, turning in front of her bedroom mirror until it became an object all of us regarded with wonder.

It was a slightly unruly body, a widening gyre, her hips spanned by the stretchy jersey of her miniskirts like a tight bolt of fabric over the two discernible dromedary mounds of her cheeks. From behind, her thighs looked curdled, and there were threadlike veins along the soft backs of her knees—but when she shaved, which was often, each of us girls got to touch her handiwork, the skin over her shins the color of skim milk, smooth as stretched nylon. She also let us smell her perfumes, tiny bottles shaped like glass teardrops with the gooey scents of jasmine and rose, or our favorite, the pentagonal 4711 bottle from Cologne that made our noses pucker with its pop of citrus and lavender.

Magda had bought a black maillot bathing suit on a trip to France one year, largely because the saleswoman, a deft Parisienne, had made a point of calling it a “slimming” color. The suit was revived every year for outings to the beach, and although the garment managed mainly to encase and push, it gave Magda substantial cleavage, which even we knew must be a

plus. It was only childish envy that caused us to make bets on when her titties might pop from their black Spandex casing like paste from a tube.

On hot Saturday afternoons, we would all be picked up by Magda's boyfriend, a dull boy named Eric with eyes the color of weak tea, who was a mathematics student at the university. We would drive the twenty minutes to a park-like lake that served as the local swimming hole, with an incongruous white sand beach some town official must have carted in from the Frisian Islands in a moment of civic creativity. Madga and Eric would walk ahead and plant their blanket and umbrella a distance away from the rest of the family, then peel down to their bathing suits without looking at each other before hunkering down on the blanket with the grim determination of public romance.

They would lie close to each other, murmuring or dozing, or occasionally rubbing suntan oil with exaggerated slowness into each others' halibut-pale skin. In some tribute to sun worship or machismo, Eric

sported a pair of those tiny European bathing trunks that were becoming scandalously fashionable in the sixties. As he stretched out on his back we could see a thin arrowshaft of black hairs disappearing beneath the waistband, like a line of ants marching from below his navel into a tiny, collapsed blue tent. Madga, on the other hand, was almost pretty without her glasses, though we knew she was blind as a mole, and if she were to run in to swim she'd have to guess where the water was.

But we were cheering for her in our hearts, even though we were not allowed near them on those afternoons. Accessible as Magda had been all week, at the beach she would draw an invisible circle around her and her man, beyond which we knew it was death to go. This, after all, was what all the mornings of cold cream and lacquer, of lotion and talc had been leading to. Like a chrysalis in her black envelope, the Magda we knew would transform in imagined radiance, become a new creature there by the water's edge. The rest of

us—nieces and nephews eating the sticky sandwiches from the hamper, cousins splashing in the shallows, old Omas and menopausal aunts and uncles hairy as silverback gorillas—we were all only satellites to this change. Even Eric, for whom it all seemed to have been done, was only a vehicle, a vassal in service to emergent beauty.

When I was eighteen I went back to that beach, on vacation from a study-abroad summer in Berlin. Half the beach had become a nude bathing area, controversial enough that rafts of suited bathers formed flotillas that bobbed offshore so they could heckle the topless. They shouted epithets about morality, but most had binoculars and spent much of their time staring at the naked girls and boys playing volleyball on the sand.

I was on my way to a reunion in Essen, where I would also join up with my parents. They had separated more than once over the intervening years, always to come back together in a tense new attempt at harmony.

It was as if they couldn't break free of each others' force fields, although whenever they got near they threatened to burst into flame in the suicidal way of foreign matter traveling through another body's atmosphere.

The pull and twist of their difficult love had long since stopped occupying me. Ours was a family growing away, pulling free of each other's gravities, traveling apart at what feels to me now like the heedless, self-immolating speed of light. I had left home for Europe, two years after my sister had chosen a college in Alaska to make sure none of us would ever follow her, long for her, or come upon her secrecies again.