

FLASH FICTION

(1)

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Intoxication

Things have been at a standstill here for weeks. I'm lying on my sofa with nowhere to go and no obligations to fulfill. Because the note on the table by the window hasn't changed: "Please be patient a little longer. We will review your request and make a decision as soon as possible."

After submitting my documents right after I arrived in Heidelberg, I thought it would only be a matter of a few days before my studies began. At the university, I figured, I'd be able to quickly make up for lost time. But the only thing that shows I'm really here are these few lines from the university registrar's office.

On the weekends, first-year students march past my window, shouting and bellowing—the orientation week has turned into orientation months. Everyone has a beer in hand. I'm familiar with that from Denmark, too. Unfortunately, I don't like beer at all; I'm not Danish either—I'm not even from the EU, even though I lived in Aarhus, Denmark, for years. Sure, it would have been easier to get into college there, but I was determined to go to Heidelberg to study "German Romanticism." Why, actually? Yes, why, actually. I'm annoyed with myself. Once again, I had to stand my ground, break down walls. Instead, I bounced right back. And my head feels like mush from all the

cigarettes I smoke. Meanwhile, the money I've been carefully watching since I arrived is dwindling. Going out wasn't an option. On hold. On hold.

But this room here isn't exactly cozy in December. On a good day, the heater manages to get it up to about 17 degrees. That's why I usually lie on the sofa under a blanket. Just like right now.

My phone says 8:32 p.m. Friday. I get up and walk over to the window. Down below, a whole crowd of people is streaming through the pedestrian zone, apparently in really good spirits. Maybe some of them are on their way to the underground pub with the good music. Sometimes I'd stop when I passed by there and see students rushing down the stairs or stumbling back up. Most of the time, they were in groups, holding hands or hugging each other, which is why I never dared to approach the stairs on my own.

In the distance, some of the students are indeed turning the corner that leads straight to the pub. I turn around and walk, as if on autopilot, into the bathroom; I bend down and reach behind the small shelf, pulling out a neck pouch. I open it and take out 50 euros. Then I stand in front of the mirror, and the person looking back at me seems to nod. So I put the money in my wallet, go back to my room, take my favorite sweater out of the closet, and a new T-shirt. I slip on my shoes, throw on my jacket, and

suddenly I'm part of the stream of fun-seeking first-year students in Heidelberg.

Soon I'm approaching the pub and, for a few moments, I slow down, become more cautious, more pensive—but then I'm standing at the stairs. And I take the first few steps.

When I open the door, a wave of exuberant energy washes over me. Music is playing; people are dancing, moving from left to right and back again. I'm not sure right away where to go, but I spot some open space at the bar. When I get there, I'm immediately greeted warmly.

- A beer?

- What kinds do you have?

- Hundreds!

- Then I'll have... one from the region.

- We've got the Weihnachtsbräu. It's stronger than a regular beer, though.

- Yeah, okay!

A little while later, I have a bottle from the Badische Brauerei, founded in 1889, and a large glass in front of me. I pour myself a drink, take a sip of a brownish, thick, yet sweet liquid. It tastes almost like dessert, so I let another sip slide down my throat. Before long, I, too, start moving my body to the music, turning toward the crowd with the glass in my hand. A beautiful girl walks past me and toasts

me. I take another sip—wow, she was pretty. And I notice that my body temperature has risen and I’m getting hot. I set the glass down on the counter and drape my jacket over the barstool. The college girl is standing just a few meters away now—and I feel great! Except I’m even hotter. I down my glass in one gulp and refill it until the bottle is empty.

- “Well, you sure can hold your liquor!”

I hear a voice behind me. I turn around again, and a head of curly hair with a glass to its lips is moving in time to the music.

- Actually, I don’t drink beer at all.

- Yeah, right...

- No, really. But this tastes surprisingly good.

- Then you’ve got to try what I’m having right now.

And she holds the straw from her cocktail right under my nose. So I take a big sip. Wow, that’s strong. I shudder.

- That only happens on the first sip. After that, it goes down sooo smoothly.

- And what’s it called?

- “Until the Next Morning”

What a cool name, I think.

- Come on, take another sip.
- But then your cocktail will be empty in a second...
- Don't worry, I'll order some more for you and me anyway. You know, you have a cute accent. And she pushes past me toward the bar.

I also think she has a very pleasant voice, but I'd never say that so directly. And a funny, cheerful face to boot. I quickly finish my beer and set it down a little ways away. I feel like I urgently need to take off my sweater so I don't overheat. Her curls are so thick that her face is completely hidden behind them. And for a moment I wonder where I am, what's going on here. But then she turns toward me with two glasses in her hand:

- "Are you coming with me?"

Sure, I think and say. She leads the way through the crowd, and I follow her to a table with at least ten young people.

- Who's that you've got in tow?
- That's... a heavyweight!
- No...!
- Yes! And he has a great accent!

- Cheers, then!

- Cheers!

Once again, I take a sip of this cocktail. I can't really hold my liquor and don't drink much—actually, almost never. Still, I call out, "Cheers!" to the group. And everyone raises their glasses and smiles at me. No one puts their glass down right away—no, everyone takes a big gulp first.

- "Cheers, accent!" someone suddenly calls out.

And I toast back, now grinning from ear to ear:

- I love this "Until the Next Morning"!

- "By the way, my name is Ivette," says the curly-haired girl. "And we're all studying pharmacy. Come on, I'm sitting right here."

And she points to her empty chair, pulling me along with her. Ivette snatches another chair from the neighboring table, grabs me by the shoulders, and gently pushes me into my seat.

- Ivette – a lovely threat!

I manage to say. And she grins at me as if she understands this silly joke:

- And you—do you have a better name?
- Ronaldo. Like that dumb soccer player.
- Ronaldo-Soonaldo!

And she laughs, revealing her snow-white, perfectly aligned teeth. And suddenly I'm intimidated by her beauty.

- Wow... teeth... right? The way you're staring at them.
- You really don't miss a thing. Cheers, Ivette!
- Cheers, Soonaldo!

Then someone from the other side slips an arm under mine, hooks it around me, and before I know it, the whole table is swaying to the music. Ivette keeps gently tossing her hair against my neck, so that I'm completely enveloped in her scent.

Someone comes over with a tray of schnapps and sets it on the table. Everyone grabs a glass; Ivette hands me mine and beams at me:

- Cheers, everyone!

So I down the glass just like everyone else.

- "Ronaldo, do you have any plans for tonight?"

- No, no one's waiting for me.
- Then I suggest we go somewhere else soonaldo.

What reason could I possibly have to object...

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