

THE PILOT'S WATCH

There's a stale, unearthed smell in her bedroom. I want to open the window, but it's sealed shut. On the nightstand sits the silver-framed black-and-white photo of my grandfather. He died before I was born. I smile at him, like I always do, wishing there was some way to break through the invisible barrier that blocks me from knowing him. I've never been in love, but I can tell Mamie's still in love with Grandfather because even after all this time, her voice rises like a musical note when she says his name. I bend down and open the drawer. There's a small faded green leather box inside. It's heavy and old, the leather on the corners ragged and torn. I've never seen it before, which is odd since I packed all Mamie's things to move her here after Mom died. Did she slip it into her handbag so I wouldn't see it?

I bring the box to the kitchen and place it on the table.

Mamie says, "I was your age when I left Switzerland. Just after the war in Europe ended." A shadow from the window above the sink crosses her face. "Open it."

I lift the lid. Inside is a watch. Mamie indicates that I should take it out. Scratches scar the glass cover. The dial is black with big phosphorous numerals, and the patina is glossy like a gorgeous night sky. Beyond the hour markers, numerical scales rim the dial's edge, which only the long second hand can reach.

"It was your grandfather's."

My eyes are drawn to the black leather strap. At the last adjustment hole, the leather is ashen and cracked. I run my finger over it and feel a faint spark on my skin. Could Grandfather have left some charge behind, waiting all these decades to come to life? I turn the watch over. On the leather underside are black burgundy stains near the lug that secures it to the case. My fingers twitch with a tremor from long ago.

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“How come you never showed it to me before?” Mamie doesn’t answer. “Did you show Mom?”

She shakes her head. “On the dial,” she whispers, “Rolex Oyster Chronograph and Fab Suisse.”

“Where’s the Fab—”

“Below the six.”

I find the tiny letters poking up like coral along the watch’s bottom rim. “What does it mean?”

“Fab is short for *fabriquer*: made in Switzerland.”

I place the watch in the box. All I know about the two decades Mamie lived in Switzerland before coming to America was that she met my grandfather, an American Army pilot there, fell in love with him, and followed him to the United States. Growing up, I never considered why she wasn’t interested in returning. I figured it was because Mom and I were all that mattered. Now that it’s only Mamie and me—is that why she wants to go back?

“Why now?” I ask.

“There’s someone...” She sits very still. “The watch belongs to her. I need your help to go back and find her.”