



Swiss Deluxe Hotels

When Time Slips Through Your Fingers

Rolf Dobelli, Beau-Rivage Hotel Neuchâtel

For years I have conducted job interviews in the bar of the Beau-Rivage Hotel in Neuchâtel. I sit at a little table by the window, dip my lips into the froth of a cappuccino and try to avoid the all too frequent desire to let my eyes wander, slightly bored, over the lake while the young people before me tell me their life story. There is nowhere more conducive to an informal discussion than this bar. And nowhere is the melancholy more beautiful. For years, the view over the lake from this hotel has offered me a kind of solace. When I'm no longer here, this landscape will remain unchanged, I tell myself. A rather futile thought, I know.

The penultimate applicant was a man in his mid-thirties, tieless but sporting a waistcoat. From his jacket peeped a creased pocket handkerchief which matched the colour of his enamelled cufflinks. The first two sleeve buttons were undone. So hand-tailored! How he sat there: casual, sophisticated, a construction as if he had already absorbed the zeitgeist of tomorrow. A dandy. That's the problem when you're looking for someone in marketing, I sighed to myself: you get clowns. I had written him off in an instant but was loath to deprive myself of the theatricality of his presentation. On top of that I had time to kill – a whole afternoon.

The young man opened a kind of pouch from which he took his CV. The synthetic bag looked as though it were designed for a trek across Siberia. It was emblazoned with a logo that meant nothing to me – except that I was no longer an initiate of this youth culture. Which annoyed me. The young man regurgitated a torrent of words which I didn't understand. At least every second word was English. He talked about "visits" and "social media", "Twitter" and "cost per click". I was grateful for Lake Neuchâtel which stretched out before me that afternoon like silver paper. Now and then, the sun broke through the clouds, lighting up the green

backdrop of hills. Behind them – as if hastily painted in – stood the Alps. The view over the lake made up for the hollowness of his blathering.

I am resolutely against idylls and any form of nostalgia. That's also true in my private life. The past is something that is best left undisturbed, especially when the old pictures come welling up. And yet there they were now. Perhaps that was why I felt so drawn to this lake. As a student in mechanical engineering, I was once invited to visit a watch works in the Jura around Neuchâtel. The purpose of my visit? To assess to what extent it is possible to automate production in a watch works. A degree dissertation.

I stayed the night in Neuchâtel at a friend's house. That's where I met her. At a semi-public wine-tasting in the Beau-Rivage. She was ten years older than me. A tall, slim woman with a head full of muddled thoughts. She listened more than she spoke, holding her head slightly to one side. Her eyes were green as Brazilian slate and she had slightly protruding teeth, giving her lips a somewhat wicked look. I had no idea to whom she belonged. I didn't want to know.

The next day, I hired a sailing boat for two hours – I couldn't afford any more – and invited her to join me. It was a sultry day. To cool off, we dived into the lake. We slept together. It wasn't the first time I had slept with a woman, but it was the first time without lust. We might both have been in high spirits with the local Chasselas, and we forgot the time.

When we woke up the next morning, our boat was caught in the reeds in Chevroux. The keel had grounded and the mast was askew. During the night, a storm must have driven us towards the shore. Franziska stayed in the boat while I swam ashore and informed the police, who pulled the boat from the reeds and towed it back across the lake to the harbour in Neuchâtel. Then came the apologies, a bill from the rental agency for a new keel and an extra day's rent. I had no income so Franziska paid for the damage. I never heard from her again. I learned from my friend that she had left for California shortly afterwards and at some point had a child. That was during the seventies and it seemed as if all women were having children in those days. When I finished my studies, I joined the very same watch works I had visited in the role of technical manager. I now manage the firm.

I dragged my gaze away from the lake, licked the froth from the cup and dismissed the young man. The more I thought about that summer's day, the less I was in the mood for job interviews.

The final candidate arrived at five. I had already noticed her outside on the promenade. She sat almost motionless on the bench in the shade of the trees in front of the Beau-Rivage. I could only see her back. Now she was standing in front of me. I was immediately struck by her green eyes. As green as absinth. But maybe it was simply because I had been staring at the ever-changing greens and greys of the lake for hours on end. She was in her late thirties, slim with dark hair which formed a stubborn parting above her right eye and fell in energetic waves over her cheekbones down to below her shoulder – and like me she had a birthmark on the back of her right hand. I found it amusing to know that I wasn't the only person in the world with a black mark on my hand.

She took me through her CV, which I had already read, explained why she had moved from one job to another, her time in Silicon Valley. Her love of California. She talked while my mind was elsewhere.

“Why Berkeley?”

“Stanford”, she corrected me, “Silicon Valley, as I said.”

“Sorry. So why Stanford?”

“Because my mother lived there, in Los Altos Hills, and I was born there.”

“Is your mother American?”

“Swiss. From Zurich.” She held her head to one side as Franziska would have done, a superior smile on her face.

Only then did it dawn on me that she had the same surname: Glanzmann.

Suddenly I needed to cough. I almost choked.

“Excuse me,” I said and coughed into my handkerchief before dabbing the sweat from my brow.

“Tell me, is your mother called Franziska?”

“Do you know her?” She sat bolt upright.

“Vaguely. We met once, many years ago.”

Suddenly I felt hot. I beckoned to a waiter and ordered a Pernod, although I am not really in the habit of drinking alcohol in the afternoon. I was pleased every time a guest came through the door creating a little draught in the bar.

She stared at my hands. They were trembling. I pushed them under my thighs. But there was still her gaze.

“So where does your mother live now?”

“Do you want to know anything else – concerning my professional experience?” Her face was a closed book.

“You’ll be hearing from me,” I said and stood up. We took our leave without shaking hands. I think we both wanted to avoid that.

I watched her leave: her gait, her dark hair. I followed her with my eyes until I could no longer make her out – until she was on the promenade and dis-appeared behind an industrial building. Something kept me from going home.

That evening in the bar. “This is no longer my time,” I whispered in the barman’s ear, “it’s as if it is slipping through my fingers.” I kept his forearm pressed to the bar until he gave to understand that he took my problem seriously.

I tried one absinth after another until, well past mid-night, the night manager accompanied me to a door. The following morning I woke up. I was lying in a hotel bed-room. A magnificent view. The sun behind the clouds, the lake, two or three sailing ships gliding across it, a suspicion of the mountains behind. At reception, my car keys were returned to me. The bar bill was astronomical. The room bill was waived. I felt very embarrassed.

I wonder today if it was a mistake not to employ her. She was the best-qualified candidate beyond a shadow of a doubt. Naturally, I didn’t take on the dandy, preferring another woman. She did a good job. But she didn’t shake my world.