

The First Two Pages of “Patterns” by Edwin Hill

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An Essay by Edwin Hill

This story came out of a happy mistake. When Josh Pachter approached me about submitting a story based on Paul Simon’s work, I immediately jumped to “April, Come She Will,” a beautiful song about the passage of time and the evolution of relationships. I started writing right away about a New York comedian—April—traveling through Europe after learning that her friend and performance partner, Maeve, had landed a role in an independent film and would be moving to Los Angeles. At the beginning of the story, April feels as though she’s being left behind after years of trying to make it as a performer, but she winds up meeting a stranger on a ferry who helps her appreciate Maeve’s absence and that she doesn’t have to live in the shadow of her more talented friend anymore.

I was about two-thirds of the way through the story when I remembered to check in with Josh to see if another author had chosen “April, Come She Will.” Guess what? Someone had. (It’s a really good song!) Josh suggested a handful of other songs to choose from, one of them being “Patterns.”

I didn’t know the song well, but I liked its bleak themes of inevitability and the patterns we’re forced to repeat in our lives. It has great lines and images like

“shivering shadows” and gloom impaled on a wall. Like a good short story, it uses strong verbs. What more can you ask for in inspiration? So I set out to retrofit my original story.

The first thing I had to do was adjust the tone. My original story was melancholy but, like the source song, was light and hopeful, too. I had set it on a fall day in a German village on the Rhine during a wine festival, and it ended with April and the stranger standing in the turret of a ruined castle while April flashes forward through her life. That tone wouldn't fit the themes of “Patterns,” which is an angrier and more pessimistic song. I switched the season from autumn to winter but kept the setting of the German village on the Rhine. Instead of a wine festival, I used a *Christkindlmarkt*, one of the Christmas markets that take over German towns in the month of December, when the sun sets at about three-o'clock in the afternoon.

From there, I wanted to infuse the story with the sense of paranoia that emanates from the song “Patterns,” so I made the meeting between the protagonist—now named Henry Darling—and the stranger be one where the reader doesn't quite know at first who's pursuing whom, or why. The original story had been set in the early '90s when technology was just beginning to creep into our lives. I changed the timeline to the late '80s because I wanted these characters to inhabit a world where they could lose themselves completely. I also wanted to

capture an era of stolen glances and innuendo, one where gay men found each other and silently communicated their desires while the world swirled around them. There's no Grindr on this ferry!

Finally, I wanted to create a sense of inevitability that would do justice to the song, especially the lines, "There are patterns I must follow / Just as I must breathe every breath." In *Henry Darling*, my hope was to create a character who teetered on the edge of desire, one who fought those patterns but ultimately found that they could scarcely be controlled, even upon meeting a handsome stranger in the dead of winter.

The First Two Pages of "Patterns"

December 1987

I was on the run again when I felt the stranger watching me from across the ferry's crowded deck. I should have been on guard. But anyone who mattered would be searching for me in Burgundy, not here on the Rhine. No one knew that I'd crossed the border from France into West Germany earlier that morning, that I'd had a croissant aux amands for breakfast but planned to eat schnitzel for dinner.

My last correspondence had been a postcard to Julian, mailed outside the Dijon train station after I'd fled Clotilde's manor house. What I'd written to him was a string of lies: I was enjoying Burgundy, Clotilde was a generous host, I wished he had been able to make the trip with me. I signed my name—Henry Darling—with a flourish and a series of XOs. In a PS, for anyone to read, I added Thank you for arranging everything!

I was a master at beginnings and a failure at endings. Running away when things got tough was a pattern I'd followed with Julian and Clotilde and others before them, a pattern I could scarcely control.

I'd expected to follow it again last night, with Sandrine in Strasbourg, but she'd been luckier than most. She'd surprised me by filling my ceramic cup with cider moments before disappearing into the night. She hadn't even said adieu.

It was easier to disappear in those days. There were almost no cell phones. No Facebook or Grindr. No data trails. No internet cafés. It was a world where we handwrote addresses and phone numbers in little black books and promised to stay in touch, where we were permitted to smoked indoors, where we didn't know what it meant to "disconnect."

Still, I wondered what I'd done wrong. Had I made Sandrine uneasy, or had she simply known that she'd be better off if she never saw me again?

I wondered if she'd sensed the darkness where I'd dwelled for so long.

As the ferry chugged up the choppy Rhine, I lifted my brand-new Ray-Bans and turned for a full view of the stranger, who was still watching me. He was in his mid-thirties, ten years older than I was, and rakishly handsome. He had a thatch of thick hair, a hook of a nose, and the kind of body that was made to show off fine clothes. A patterned scarf was draped around his neck, its ends tossed over his shoulders. A gray tweed coat hugged his waist and hung to just above his knees. At the beach, in the summer, I suspected he wore a Speedo.

I caught his eye. He met my gaze, exuding danger like a hunter tailing his quarry. I slid the Ray-Bans down again to ward off the December sun and waited for him to make the first move. The sunglasses had cost me two hundred dollars. Buying them and going on this trip had nearly depleted my savings, but it felt good to be frivolous, to spend money for the sake of spending. That, to put it simply, was what this trip was about: indulgence.

The ferry turned a bend in the river, and a village appeared, spilling down a steep embankment lined with grape vines and topped by a ruined castle. It was the fifth castle we'd seen today, and a voice on the loudspeaker told us about it as the ferry prepared to dock. Half the people on the boat laughed—the ones who spoke German. I laughed, too. I'd studied German for seven years and spent a semester getting drunk in Freiburg, and I wanted to appear as if I was in on the joke, though the only word I'd managed to isolate and understand was

Burg, which meant castle—and I wondered if I'd have managed even that without the context clues.

Across the deck, the stranger didn't laugh at all.

But he continued to watch me.

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