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In the Green Meadow

On our 20th wedding anniversary my husband had invited me to an elegant dinner. Although that was over two years ago, I still remember it as if it were yesterday. We sat in the casino-restaurant by candlelight and had already ordered our meal: I had asked for filets of milk-fed lamb, he a wiener schnitzel. What an affront to order a wiener schnitzel on our 20th wedding anniversary, by far the most vulgar dish in the Austrian cuisine. In my kitchen I have never fried one of these revoltingly common, and for every stomach-sensitive person, murderous pieces of meat, and so on our wedding anniversary he ordered this proletarian dish, with potato salad no less, offensive to my taste buds and my sense of style. Then my husband raised his glass and instead of saying: “To our future happiness” or “Thank you for all the years you’ve allowed me to spend with you” or, at the very least, “Cheers” or any appropriate saying a man with manners normally should have at his ready command on such occasions, he looked at me intently and said: “I’m taking this opportunity today to tell you that I’m planning to leave you. And so I’d like to drink

with you to the years still lying ahead of us, and which we'll be spending apart." His words hadn't registered at all at first and I stared for a few seconds at his golden-yellow schnitzel and the little oily bubbles on the breadcrumb coating, at the slice of lemon and the little parsley twig, and I kept repeating his sentence to myself and felt that this could only be one of his—mind you, bad—jokes, and I gave a somewhat forced laugh. Then he smiled too and said he was glad I was receiving his suggestion so cheerfully and agreeably. I thought, well, that's great, if you intend to play such a tasteless game with me, then I'll simply play along too, although in the meantime I had lost my appetite for the delicious milk-fed lamb. "Ah," I said blithely, "something new at least. Do we want to get a divorce or simply have separate tables and beds?" Separate beds, though, had been a matter of course for years already, our sheets long since cut in two. After careful consideration he said he had decided to move out of our joint apartment for the time being; I was permitted to continue living there with our son, he would not yet seek a divorce at present, if I'd agree to an amicable and reasonable settlement. The most important thing for him was to be able to live alone and not have to see me on a daily basis. I looked at myself in the large mirror on the opposite wall, judged myself perfectly worthy of being seen, and asked myself

why he no longer wanted to see me. Did I have leprosy? Did I exude a bad odor? Was I afflicted with deficiencies I had been unaware of until now? At any rate, it slowly dawned on me that he was serious. Close to tears I asked him what it was he so disliked about me. “Nothing,” he said, “nothing, but I’ve had enough.” I’ve had enough, he said, and I immediately remembered the Bach cantata one likes to play at funerals. On our 20th wedding anniversary our marriage was thus to be buried, to receive a first-class burial. So this was the funeral feast, with schnitzel and milk-fed lamb. You think something must have happened in our marriage? This decision of his must have had a pre-history? I should have noticed symptoms? But nothing had happened, nothing at all had happened, for years there had been no unpleasantness between us whatsoever. Except for my having passed, finally, after twenty semesters, my last law exam and I was just in the process of preparing for the bar exam while he had finally been promoted from Chief of Veterinary Medicine to Councilor. With the new title he had received a substantial pay raise and we wanted to send our son to boarding school in Bad Aussee, where he was to study for his university entrance exam. Supposedly I hadn’t been able to pay sufficient attention to him, since every night I was sitting over my law books until four in the morning. I’d had to work through

thousands of pages and store ten thousand paragraphs in my long-term memory. The law exams had been a snap compared to these challenges. The date for the bar exam was already scheduled for two months from now, and now of all times my husband had to decide on a separation, had to choose our anniversary to disclose his intention. Why then of all times still puzzles me today. You think it was pure cynicism, typical of men? No, he's not a cynic. In any case, I'd never been aware of such a trait in him until now. It's much worse, it was thoughtlessness, it was emotional brutality, and it was the perfect opportunity. Who knows, he probably thought, who knows when I'll have another chance like this where she's at my mercy—by candlelight, in public, where she can't make a scene, no tearful spectacle, she won't throw plates here in this elegant restaurant where we are known, the wine and exquisite food will soothe her, he probably thought, and by the time we're home she will have calmed down and tomorrow we can discuss the matter rationally. But don't forget that ever since my childhood I've suffered from a trauma, the trauma of abandonment. You say that psychotherapy or psychoanalysis might be helpful? Don't make me laugh. I tried that, years ago. Years ago I went to a psychoanalyst for that very reason, I sought out a shrink when my father the councilor-asshole abandoned us. He asked

me immediately to lie down on his couch, and I was amazed because I assumed only the Sigmund Freud Museum still had a couch, but there it stood, it really still did exist, the psychoanalytic couch. However, it was a totally different model, without a carpet covering it, in blue and very simple, probably a Bauhaus design; the couch, you have to realize, is not a metaphor, but reality, and when I had reclined on the Knoll couch and taken off my shoes, a man's gentle voice told me to relax, to loosen up, close my eyes, breathe deeply in and out, ten times, and at the same time imagine that I was a tiny little girl standing in a meadow, all alone in a green meadow, and the meadow was carpeted with flowers and it stretched endlessly, and I was to tell him what associations I had, very quickly, that is, after I had counted to ten, and without thinking too much. And I tried to count to ten and to visualize at the same time a meadow and myself as a tiny little child in the meadow, and was proud that I succeeded with both right away, and so I stood in the green meadow and was all alone, as the soul-doctor had demanded, and I saw yellow dandelions, daisies, pink carnations, and bluebells at my little feet and with big eyes I looked up at the sky, which was so blue and the meadow so green and immeasurably big and deserted and I infinitely small; and then I began to cry. I think it's easier to cry when you're lying down

than sitting or standing because it simply flows out of you while you are lying down, and the tears were indeed pouring down my cheeks and running into my ears and down my chin into my neckline and I briefly thought of my make-up which my tears were now ruining, and I couldn't stop blubbing, and mucus was coming out of my nose and I couldn't breathe anymore and I sat up and gasped and doubled over and howled like a watchdog. When I finally had calmed down somewhat, I saw my therapist sitting there indifferent in his chair, nodding and observing me. This stranger had been staring at me the entire time, and had seen how I lost all my bearings in his green meadow. First he sent me to the green meadow and then he let me despair there. I came to my senses at last, jumped up, wiped the tears from my face, blew my nose, gathered my belongings together and shouted at him: You perverse voyeur, you devious sadist! Or something like it, and with my shoes in my hand and slamming the door, naturally, I left his office. And for days afterwards I was ashamed of having let myself go like that in front of a complete stranger. It took me a long time to recapture, figuratively speaking, my tears, that is, to compose myself, and to cram all the painful images that had been lured to the surface and had been able to be lured forth so easily, deep back down. No, stop mentioning these soul-destroyers to me!

None of these tormentors will ever see me again, I swear. By putting you on the couch they take you for a ride, with their sleazy-soft therapist voices they buzz into your ear, and right away you stand in the meadow and are delivered up to despair. Like Hansel and Gretel you are being led into the woods by these charlatans and then left alone. But in a fairy tale there is a happy ending; in psychoanalysis there is none. In short, with my schnitzel-eating partner who had bidden me farewell at my side, I felt as if I had been sent alone into the meadow. But I did not cry, I did not rage, I kept my cool this time—that is, not quite, because I began to laugh, rather loudly and rather long. I couldn't stop at all. The staff began to take notice. A waiter approached our table and I was still laughing. I was screaming with laughter and Walter hissed: "Stop it!" but I couldn't stop, and then Walter also began to laugh so that it wouldn't be so conspicuous, because a laughing man is something natural, but there's something disreputable about screeching women, and these elegant restaurants don't like to hear it. Women at most may giggle but to laugh so raucously and continuously, no, that was more than embarrassing. Therefore Walter saved the situation by joining me in my laughter. Yes, he even drowned out mine. It filled the space and room and my laughter finally faded into his. Then I could stop at last. I became

silent, wiped the tears I had laughed from my face, and he gave me a stern look and I could feel his wounded pride because I regarded his intention to leave me as such a joke that I almost suffocated with laughter. Eventually, after I had renewed my make-up in the ladies' room, I asked him very soberly how he imagined a separation in practical terms, who would wash and iron his shirts and clean his shoes and cook his meals, and listen to him when he wanted to vent his anger from the office. And as I was formulating my question, I was already hoping again, no, I was actually convinced that the whole thing could only be one of his tactless jokes. But, lo and behold, he had already imagined a few things: he would rent his own, modest apartment. He longed for silence and seclusion. The laundry, he said, he'd drop off, of course, at my place. After all, he would still continue to pay for my apartment and my food. Could another woman have been in the picture? I'd have understood that. I'd have had something tangible to fight against. But unfortunately there was no evidence for that at all, at the time, I have to add in this case. He always came home punctually from the office and sat in the apartment. That is, of late he sat only in front of the computer and played solitaire, day after day, until bedtime. You know the game? Solitaire—every day. Before dinner and after, Mr. Chief Veterinarian sat at

his desk and played the game of patience on his monitor. I've been afraid for some time that this behavior of his would lead directly and inevitably into stupidity or insanity. Either he played solitaire or he was with his fraternity brothers somewhere. Women are strictly excluded from these male-bonding experiences so that the men can let it all hang out, or whatever. Right now, for example, he is sailing with them in the Mediterranean. My mother, who has hated him ever since he voiced his intention of leaving me (which he indeed did virtually overnight) was hoping he'd be washed overboard and drown in the Adriatic or be dismembered by sharks. One week before my bar exam, two months after his announcement of his decision to leave, he moved to the Mühlviertel, to a ridiculous hole of a village with the name of Engerwitzdorf. He had taken along his desk, his bed, his books, and of course his computer with the monitor and left me sitting alone in the city apartment. He had dropped off his dirty shirts, naturally also his underwear and socks, because the washing machine as well as the iron remained with me. He stops by once a week to bring me his dirty laundry and exchange it for clean and ironed clothes. I had been stupid enough not only to agree to all this but also to cry my eyes out over him. The crying started at breakfast already which I suddenly had to eat all alone; I no longer had a

conversation partner, no longer heard a human voice, and our son Mandi was at his boarding school in Bad Aussee meanwhile from where he was writing me desperate letters. You ask whether I had loved Walter so much? That's irrelevant now. I married him. He is still my husband. One doesn't question love or non-love. It's simply a private-legal contract that we drew up together. *Pacta sunt servanda*: An implicit duty to stand by each other *for better or for worse*. Of course I no longer loved him, he had long since gotten on my nerves, and I was stupid on the whole to miss him at all because I can't even tell you exactly what it was I missed about him. I didn't miss him personally, he had mainly been a stand-in for my fear of being alone and abandoned, which had solidified into a complex ever since my visit to the analyst and which had been implanted in me since childhood; well, you know the story of my father, the veritable councilor, he too...and the green meadow, you understand! Sex, no, he hadn't slept with me for years, I told you already—for years no sex at all. What, you think he might have become impotent? Yes, you are right, once he did have a bilateral inflammation of both testicles. First he had mumps, then inflammation of the testicles. His balls were as big as a bull's at the time. So swollen, and painful. You think there could have been an after-effect—erectile dysfunction as a late

development? Men would rather take flight and retire to remote retreats as semi-recluses and play solitaire or, to ward off oppression, play Minesweeper on their PCs to avoid admitting a weakness? You think it might be a matter of male sense of shame? I couldn't have cared less had he been impotent. I was busy enough with my studies. But now I'm worried I may not be getting any more money. He's beginning to calculate every penny he's depositing into my account so that I now have little freedom of movement. He said he now had two households to support and my housekeeping money would therefore have to be less generous than before. And if you're without a husband your social status plunges immediately, then you're no longer Frau Councilor here and Frau Councilor there. The mailbox usually stays empty and invitations to private parties are rare, too, as soon as the news leaks out that you are available, so to speak, again and therefore a threat to the hostess-wives. You think that's provincial? Well, believe me, that's how it still is in this small town. Of course I'm still in touch with him, amicably, by telephone, and dealing with his dirty laundry, as he demanded. Sometimes he even takes me out to dinner to some kind of a pub in the Mühlviertel where you get smoked pork with sauerkraut or noodles with cabbage, or wiener schnitzel of poor quality and wine that gives you a

headache the next day. He says he has discovered the simple life. Recently he called me again because he wanted to know whether Mandi had finally passed his high school exams. Of course he passed, I had brought him home again so that I wouldn't be so alone. The child was so happy. I'm still reproaching myself for even having sent him away to boarding school because I thought I'd have too little time for him. But one always finds time for what's important. In the fall, Mandi has to do his military duty and afterwards he wants to study. And then he'll be a full-fledged member of the Danubia Fraternity and will get drunk regularly with his fraternity brothers and his father and thus establish his professional career. Gay? What makes you think that? Latently gay? Who are you talking about? The father? Oh no. Why would he turn gay all of a sudden? A councilor can't take such chances. Yes, depressed. Definitely depressed. Threatened by inner chaos. Therefore the non-stop solitaire and never Minesweeper, at least not while we were still together. He arranged his world on the monitor. Maybe I shouldn't have undertaken my third course of studies. The more progress I made in my studies, the more our marital ways parted. I wasn't even aware of our estrangement. In fact, I do remember now, he began to play solitaire after I had passed my first diploma exam and was furiously aiming for the final law exams. At the

beginning of my studies he had always made light of my endeavors and let me have my way. He, the tenured veterinarian, had observed my housewifely studies—that’s how he referred to it—good-naturedly but from a distance, as long as everything functioned well at home. And things did function. When I think of all I accomplished—I sewed my own dresses, even my suits, and still make them today. Night after night I studied and sewed and cooked and mended and washed and ironed, night after night. And barely slept a wink. What was I supposed to do alone in bed, the husband on his PC playing solitaire? Maybe I shouldn’t have undertaken a course of studies so late? He might have handled social studies or German studies, but not law. I should not have penetrated his male domain. Perhaps my incursion into his male world threatened him in his sovereignty, just imagine, a wife, a housewife and mother, hierarchically on society’s lowest rung, undertakes to climb the ladder, to approach the head of the household at eye level—to a certain degree I can even understand his sentiments—or wouldn’t you be annoyed if your cleaning woman, whom you could order around and even torment for years, suddenly wanted to be addressed as “Frau Doktor” because she stealthily completed her university studies? It’s easy to lose one’s orientation then, particularly if you are a man. I called his natural

superiority into question, robbed him of his identity. I'm not afraid to move on and up. With my master's degree I castrated him, metaphorically speaking. Most likely he has been searching for a new identity ever since I passed my final law exams. What am I supposed to do? I fear I've paid all too high a price for my university degree. You think I have gained a lot, approval, satisfaction, from my studies? You think it was fun for me? No, it wasn't fun at all, not for a single moment did I have fun. But I couldn't break it off, my mother had already informed our entire circle of acquaintances and friends that her daughter was studying law, and now I was constantly being asked about the progress of my studies by both well-meaning and ill-disposed people. Some smiled condescendingly at my efforts. My mother-in-law likewise felt that a wife and mother should know her place and not deprive her husband of his domestic comforts with her intellectual ambition since he was the one bringing home the money which enabled her to lead a comfortable housewifely existence. These and similar comments had spurred my ambition immensely; soon I studied only out of resistance to my surroundings because, in fact, the entire legal rubbish didn't interest me in the least, it still doesn't interest me today, and yet I suddenly faced the bar exam and there was no turning back. I was so afraid of failing and embarrassing myself

should I fail. I'll definitely fail, I kept on thinking; I had no idea how I was to master the entire material, during the day in the law office of Zappatotti who was exploiting me as his legal assistant, and at night, alone, with my lecture notes. I don't even know why I'm telling you all this, because it's over now. I did in fact pass the bar exam; I have my lawyer's certification in my pocket, but instead of rejoicing after the exam I descended the wide staircase of the courthouse and burst into tears. What now, I thought, what now, I have to become a lawyer now and open an office and woo clients and defend them and win trials, and I can't even afford a secretary, nor can I afford an office, and I felt I was ready now for the psychiatric ward or for suicide. And that's how things stand at present. Tell me I'm stupid, or tell me what I should do, and Walter also congratulated me and invited me to the Auhof Restaurant for pork roast with dumplings, and I wanted him so much to come home with me, just as he used to, but he returned to the Mühlviertel and I to the city. And Mandi is in the army, with the pioneers, and Walter said I had now reached my goal, and my mother said that she'd be my secretary in my office, which I can't even afford. And as I was sitting alone at my kitchen table I felt that Walter's words that I had now reached my goal were nonsense, I haven't reached my goal at all, I don't even want to reach my

goal, but rather I was just at the beginning, but the beginning of what I didn't know.