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Madonna in the Meadow

The winter had been endless and dark; it had snowed several times in April, and May brought nighttime frost and storms. Even June had been cool and rainy, but then, within a few days, summer finally arrived. July was suddenly hot and glaringly bright, the sun turning each day into a celebration. Thunderstorms broke during the night, but in the morning the sky glowed a fresh, pale blue; birds chirped and hopped about among the damp twigs; and the meadows on the other side of their district glittered wet with dew.

The last street in the east was called Am Kuhlgraben and was still part of the city. It consisted of a long row of one-family houses. In the third one, the white house with the newly planted front-yard garden, the shutters went up at exactly seven o'clock in the morning, even though it was Sunday. Luisa was making her rounds, and she always started with the living room windows that faced the garden. Benno, her mixed-breed dog running expectantly along behind her. He was a year old, yellowish-brown except for a few black spots, and practically full-grown. That's how long Luisa and Christopher had been living here.

"In front of the house it's city, and behind it begins the country; we'll have both," Luisa had said, delighted, when they went for the first time to look at the house Christopher had inherited from his grandmother – which he would have liked above all to sell immediately. It hadn't taken her long to convince him that it was just the right house for them. It wasn't far from downtown and the more lively parts of Frankfurt, like Bornheim or Nordend where they used to live in much-too-tight rented apartments in old houses.

Opening the terrace door, Luisa breathed in the fresh air, the smell of grass and damp, musty soil. There were sounds coming from the house next door. Life on Kuhlgraben began early. It wasn't so much because of young children – there weren't many here – it was the dogs who determined the day's rhythm. They guarded the properties and filled up the empty spaces in a home after the family's children moved out. For the younger couples who weren't sure they wanted a baby, they

served as test animals, as guinea pigs. They compelled stressed-out, mid-forties types to go jogging regularly or at least to go out for walks – Luisa had been told this and a lot of other things by people who had dogs.

But what she noticed right away was the many purebred dogs living on Kuhlmühlgraben. There were two Dalmatians, one greyhound, one St. Bernard, one Royal Poodle, two Chows, and one eighteen-year-old, half-blind-and-deaf Pekingese who ate only calves liverwurst now. Out in front the residents showed off with their cars, in the back with their dogs – that was the nature of this street. And Luisa and Christopher liked this ambitiousness – after all they wanted to get up in the world too.

After a long time in front of the mirror, Luisa went to make coffee. She'd always been somewhat vain, and her vanity had been prodded recently when a workman told her she was a look-alike for Lauren Bacall. She'd given the man a tip that made him blush, and after that he voluntarily repaired the rails in the conservatory. Luisa plaited her hair into a long braid and made it into a bun at the nape of her neck. She had ash-blonde hair and a longish face with curved, nearly invisible eyebrows. Benno, who was gradually losing patience, brought her a sneaker. It made her laugh, and she finally stopped fiddling with her hair.

But still she took her time, didn't rush. It was so peaceful in the mornings while Christopher was still asleep and ahead of them lay a free day together. She went into the kitchen, searched through the refrigerator, but then decided it was still too early to eat. She got the newspaper and sat down, but couldn't really concentrate on it.

Sundays here were languid and lazy, but this Sunday promised to be different. In the course of the morning her sister Ines, together with her friend Raymond, and her young daughter Anne, would come for a visit. Anne was supposed to spend part of her summer vacation with them. Luisa was more excited than she cared to admit.

She had begun to get ready for the child a week earlier, putting the terrace in order and collecting crayons, pine cones and paper in a box – all the things an eight-year-old girl might like to play with. She especially hoped that the little girl would make friends with Benno. On the phone she had told Ines that it wouldn't be easy for Anne to find other playmates here. But Ines said that didn't matter. They had taken Anne with them to Vienna for a few days, and now she wanted to go away for a week

alone with her friend. Ines' psychotherapist had strongly suggested it. A mother's healthy self-interest could only have a positive effect on her child, Ines had explained to her sister. She and Raymond really needed some time with each other, just the two of them.

Ines rarely asked for favors for herself – to be frank, the sisters weren't close – and so Luisa had said yes immediately instead of asking herself if the mother's healthy self-interest would also have a positive effect on Christopher and her.

“They just want to unload her,” Luisa had told Christopher. “She's very good. And when she wants something or needs something, she'll tell us. Quite uncomplicated.”

Luisa tried to remember the last time she'd seen Anne. She had visited her sister in Heidelberg, but at that time the little girl was at a school function. An athletic event? A hike? Luisa couldn't recall.

“Why don't they take Anne with them?” Christopher asked. As usual when Luisa came into his room in the morning, interrupting his work, he was slightly irritated and refused to take his eyes off his laptop, as if his carefully set up charts might suddenly vanish just because of her unwanted presence.

“I have no idea. You know Ines. But you don't have to do much for her. Ines said she draws and plays by herself. And we have a lot of cartoons she can watch.”

At that point Christopher had looked down at his desk and mumbled something that she'd taken for assent.

That had been a little more than a week ago. Now Luisa walked through all the rooms once more wondering what else there was to do. She had put the house in order the day before. There were vases with meadow flowers in all the rooms. The colorful tablecloth from Bali that Ines had given her brightened the kitchen. And clean towels lay invitingly on the bed in the guest room. In addition she'd placed a bowl with two apples and several cookies there for Anne to make her feel welcome. She'd taken the large plastic container that used to hold Benno's dry dog food, rinsed it out with the garden hose, and put it under the desk. In it the child could keep things she found in the meadow or at the edge of the forest. Luisa actually knew very few children, but she had a good idea of what they liked to do.

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It occurred to her just then that it might be fun to get to know Anne in an uncomplicated way, by giving the dog a bath, the two of them together, laughing as they bent over the tub, wet from his splashing. An interior scene, intimate, a little corny, as if painted by Degas.

She heard quick, light footsteps, and then her niece was there.

“Hello, Aunt Luisa.”

Anne was thin and fairly colorless, the way blonde children so often are. She wore braces, had a brown plastic barrette in her hair, and earrings with little stars dangling from them. Suspenders held up her jeans. The impression all this made on Luisa was that of a helpless child who had to be held together and fastened on all sides. She motioned her to come closer, but Anne remained standing timidly in the doorway, watching the dog.

“This is Benno,” Luisa said superfluously. “I’m just giving him a bath. Will you come over? You can help me shampoo him.”

Luisa felt secure; she was after all here, in her bathroom, in her life. She had everything under control.

“I’d rather not,” Anne said. “It smells funny in here. And I don’t think he’s nice looking.” She pointed at Benno.

Luise was flabbergasted. She followed Anna’s gaze and looked at her dog. Of course she was right. Benno really wasn’t a particularly beautiful dog. He’d always been the exception among all the fine specimens along the Kuhlmühlgraben. Luisa had realized that from the very first moment, when she got the puppy from a friend of a friend. At the time she’d complained that although the little puppy was sweet, he certainly wasn’t good-looking and that he wouldn’t grow into the dog she’d always wanted. But in the meantime all that had been forgotten. These days she saw only the big, black, loyal eyes and the perfect black nose at the tip of his broad yellow muzzle. Now, for the first time in a long while, she looked at him with a stranger’s eyes.

Seen from that perspective he looked like the product of a children’s game in which one child draws the head and folds the paper; then the next child blindly adds the body, and the third one, the legs, etc.

No, he wasn't particularly good-looking, but he was lovable. Something you couldn't say for that brat.

Luisa looked at the girl standing in the doorway with such obvious anger that the child took a step back. But Luisa managed to control herself, to choke back the cutting remark she was about to make. Anne looked uncertain. She seemed to be waiting until she'd be allowed to walk away, to leave this wet bathroom that smelled of dog. She looked as if she'd landed in the wrong film, Luisa thought, and I'm not going to free you. Wordlessly she continued to rub the dog and then turned on the shower.

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"Sit down," she said pleasantly, but was crushed when Christopher, looking at Anne, gruffly rephrased it, "You may sit down." At that Anne lowered her head again in such a way that it would have made Luisa furious all over again if she hadn't felt so relaxed and at peace with herself – actually she had to remind herself that she was.

"Anne is a servant, you see; that's what she told me," Christopher said as he reached for a chicken drumstick. "It's a game she's playing."

"Anne is what? What game are you talking about?"

"She's been left with evil step-parents, strangers, because her real mother can't take care of her anymore. And she has to work her butt off for these rich people who live in a big house. Has to do menial work like picking berries and cleaning up dirt."

Anne, who'd been following his every word the entire time, nodded happily and looked hungrily at the picnic basket. Christopher made a lordly gesture indicating the servant girl could help herself.

Luisa was dumbfounded. She felt betrayed. How could it be that she was suddenly just one of the players in a game? All the effort she'd put into preparing this picnic! She felt degraded at the thought that she was now supposed to take part in someone else's show. And on top of that one that was the idea of a little girl. The

whole thing hit her quite unexpectedly. After all, she'd done so many things in the course of the day to make sure that everything would turn out as she'd planned.

She recapitulated the books she'd seen among Anne's belongings. OK, *Heidi*— there probably were servants in the house of the rich Clara; *Suddenly a Princess*, or something like that; and an award-winning children's book about slavery by Paula Fox, whom Luisa herself loved as a writer for adults. Yes, all that taken together fit. Anne had enough models, and now here, with Luisa and Christopher, she had the chance to put something together from it all. She herself would never have realized that this was what was going on in the girl's head because she interpreted Anne's standoffish attitude completely differently. In the end it turned out that Christopher was the one who understood it, not Luisa.

"I've been given a day off tomorrow," Anne said.

"That's nice," Luisa remarked, exhausted.

"Then on Tuesday, when I'm working again, I can carry things for you at the market."

"That's – wonderful."

Luisa nodded. She was very tired and not at all hungry anymore. She felt like lying down and going to sleep with her face to the sky. At least, Luisa thought, my first impression wasn't wrong. Something was really fishy about the girl's behavior. But now that she knew, what was she to do? It was one thing to lie here on her back, resting. It was quite something else to be condemned to powerlessness. Oh, how nice it would be to turn the clock back. And when she woke up she didn't want to have to explain anything. She just wanted to play a game – like Anne – a game she herself had chosen, and have the others support her. To be loved – that's what it was, nothing else. That's what mattered.

"Don't you want to eat something?" Christopher asked with his mouth full.

"Sure!" She spoke decisively, but reached out only hesitantly.

"Put your head down again, Aunt Luisa," Anne said suddenly.

"What? How do you mean? Like this?" She looked down again. What the devil was the girl thinking now!

You look like the Madonna in the Meadow."

“Like a Madonna?” Christopher, the philistine, interrupted, his mouth full of food. “Really?”

“I saw the picture in Vienna,” Anne said. Now that she was officially a servant, she refused to be diverted. “The Madonna in the Meadow. It has a woman in a red dress with her hair pinned up at a picnic, and she’s looking down. Exactly the way you were just now. And you’re wearing a red top too, only the jeans don’t match.” She nodded with satisfaction.

Luisa remembered the painting vaguely. It was a Raphael and really did show a woman, her ash-blonde hair pinned up, wearing a red dress and a blue cape. She was holding a naked child. Did she, Luisa, also have such a pale face and that slightly otherworldly Madonna look? In any case, it was an extraordinary observation for a child to make.

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The Hideout

I’m sitting on the couch; I didn’t turn on the light when I woke from my afternoon nap, even though in the meantime it had gotten dark outside. The light from street lamp was bright enough for me to find the refrigerator. I smoke a cigarette. Having finished two beers, I get up to fetch a third.

“At some point they’ll turn the power off anyway. So I’ll just get used to it,” I told Benno.

“Let’s drink to it not being too soon. Oh, I’ll think of something. This little woman isn’t stupid.”

I drink. Ash falls to the floor. The dog looks at me reproachfully. I’d like to let him out into the street where he could run around and pee on everything, but that’s out of the question. He’d go running to Luisa’s house and alert the neighbors. Benno isn’t my dog. I get paid for what they call “his care.”

Whenever I take him for a walk I’m always careful that people see me in the best light. I play nicely with him and his little stick in the meadow right behind

Luisa's house. And then when she and her husband come back from their trip and make their discreet inquiries, they'll hear only good things about me.

I crush the empty beer can and get another; it's the last one. I have to go out soon. I decide to drink this one very slowly. First, though, I turn on the TV. The dog whines. He's clever. TV on means: Nothing's going to happen very soon here. I explain to him that I'm not planning to watch a film, just something to pass the time while I'm drinking my beer. I tell him that I need my minimum dose. I also mention that it's his own canine highness's fault that I don't have anything stronger in the house. If I did, it would happen more quickly. But duty, etc. What would happen if I fell asleep and only woke up the next day; what would happen to him then? So you see.

“Look at that nice animal program, sweetie. Monkeys – there in the box.”

For about five minutes Benno is impressed by my speech. He even stops whining. After a while, though, he begins to scratch at the door. Maybe he has to poop, I figure, and I really couldn't stand it if he did that in the apartment. It's been looking pretty awful in here for a while now. But there's a limit.

The scientist is just saying: “Gorillas, like all apes, aren't housebroken; they have to rebuild their sleeping places every day.” As if he could see into my living room here, where I seem to be having the same problems with Benno as the guerillas. Oh well, almost the same. Benno, after all, is housebroken. I turn it off, even though I would have liked to know what the scientist meant by “rebuild.” Do they keep moving around all the time? More than once a day? Maybe they'll repeat the program tomorrow morning. Then I'll listen more carefully.

I put on Frank's old, heavy parka, a piece of clothing you can live in, which, unfortunately, doesn't smell like him anymore. With Benno on the leash, I take the shortcut to the meadows. It goes past two kiosks that sell booze, but not my favorite one. It's better that way. The cold air will soon sober me up. I walk rapidly past the black house façades. Even in the darkness that swallows everything you can still tell whether the people living behind them are well off or not.

There's the arrogant, cold blackness of happy, emotionally dulled, middle-class residents and the hopeless, contagious blackness of the apartment houses with the small, bare windows. The area where I live is one with apartment houses.

Glätzenviertel sounds like a mixture of “Glatze (bald)” and “ätzend (disgusting)”; Gallus is a real estate paradise by comparison. The windows here resemble black holes. Now and then somebody comes out unexpectedly. You never know whether it’s because he’s depressed or on a drug high, and in the end nobody cares.

Fifteen minutes away from the path it all looks different. The entire Kuhlmühlgraben Street, including the house we used to live in, belongs to people with the arrogant blackness. Was it different before, when we lived there? I can’t really tell what has changed. Was I a different person? I drop the thought. I don’t know the tenants, but they’re probably like all the rest of the people here. Ambitious people who’ve made it, not really young anymore. It was the building society savings plans that made it possible. Or the people inherited.

After Frank’s accident his mother took back our house. He only had the right of lifetime residence, but he never told me that. Nor did he tell me about the financial difficulties of the studios since the crisis, and that quite a few members were no longer paying. He didn’t want to upset me. I used to go to pieces over every idiotic thing. And he was protecting me. And naturally, being only forty-two, he hadn’t made a Will. He was so generous – we rarely talked about money.

His mother, on the other hand, is cold as ice. She never did like me, and for her the only good thing that came from the death of her son was that after the three months she granted me as a period of mourning, she could kick me out of the house.

Let’s face it,” she said to the man in court, “she’s just going to drink it all up.”

As if I weren’t even present. And then, totally serious, she had shown him the wedding picture of Frank and me, to prove to him how far downhill I’d gone in those few years.

“I’ll put in an application for a course of treatment for her,” she said, the hypocrite, and the official at the court nodded sympathetically – the poor mother who’s lost her son and has to deal with the fortune-hunting alcoholic daughter-in-law.

Weeks later, a bundle of application forms arrived for me from the pension fund, no message enclosed. The devil only knows how she found out about my pension fund. Presumably I left something behind when I moved out of the house. I didn’t take a lot with me. And I’d never have gone back to the Kuhlmühlgraben

neighborhood, if it hadn't been that I was still casually in touch with Luisa, who gets me jobs now and then. But on the whole, we were never really close friends.

She came for the first time after Frank's death on some pretext to check up on me because she likes tragic stories and loves to play Mother Theresa. I'm afraid that her sympathy wore out over the years. By now she sees me only as a burden. But I can't let go of her. Not merely because she's the only one who knows that I ever had an earlier, a different life. No one else would believe it. But I've also grown to like her. She's so flawless. Like a beautiful little machine, that all by itself solves self-imposed tasks with perfection.

I light a cigarette, pushing away the thought that Luisa would prefer it if I never went to her place anymore. It was my idea to volunteer to take care of Benno for the six weeks they would be away, and to take care of her flowers and the mail. Yes, I'd suggested it, and no one mentioned that money was involved, a few small bills. She had hesitated a long time before she had reluctantly said yes.

"Life goes on," I told Benno, who was pulling like crazy on the leash. "You know that's what they say. But sometimes I think it's not true. Life doesn't go on, it only pretends to. Everything around us is a façade, a pretense, and worthless."

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