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“Let me be your farmer.” He whispers. “Your Tyrolean bacon.”

They’re in his living room with its wall of glass, on the 14th floor, with half of the city at their feet. From this mountain, the view is really good. Reinhard bought the straw at the pet store, he prepared the room before Kristine rang the bell. She put her handbag on a chair and asked, “What’s the straw doing here?” They had to laugh. He bought the pitchfork at the hardware store and the costumes on the internet, he finds purchasing things easier there, fulfilling his wishes is never more than three or four mouse clicks away. A blond wig, only the lederhosen were expensive.

They agreed there should be a cow -- a pillow with black-and-white spots is perched on a stool. The CD player is programmed. They agreed on the mountain, an alpine peak with a good view, a rocky crest topped with snow, but half-way down, their barn is surrounded by lush green grass. They’ve agreed on the stall in which the cow stands in the straw, they’ve agreed on the milkmaid. Her breasts are pushed up, she’s wearing wooden clogs and an unusually short dirndl with an apron. And they agreed as well on the dairy farmer, with his lederhosen with their button fly and suspenders with a cross strap. For later they’ve arranged: a thunder storm. The rest is a given -- sun, sky, edelweiss.

That he could inhabit a life so different from his own was something Reinhard, at an earlier point, never would have believed. “Our new pet word,” he whispers in Kristine’s ear, “is *liable*.” That’s the lawyer in him: the fact that one is *able* to live such a *lie* and not be held responsible for it.

The cow swats flies away with her tail. She's a splendid animal, very clean, her udder looks like someone has just washed it. The view from the mountain down into the valley is dizzying. The milkmaid has blond curls, her cheeks are flushed, she has walked all the way up to the barn from the village in order to milk the cow. She carries a milk pail in her hand. But up here she not only finds the cow, up here the farmer is waiting as well.

He's working in the barn, growls a brief greeting as she enters, the pitchfork in his hands, he bends, stands, pitches the old straw across the room, he barely breaks a sweat. The maid sits on her stool in her short dirndl, shoves the pail under the cow and begins to milk it. In doing so she watches the farmer, who acts as if straw is the only thing on his mind. When the maid gathers her courage and says something about how her fingers feel as the milk streams into the pail, he snarls that she shouldn't be wasting time and confounding the cow.

The milking is done, the farmer gives the maid a quick look over his shoulder as she carefully picks up the pail by its handle. They exchange a glance. From one second to the next the weather turns, a first rumble of thunder but no rain, no rain yet, the maid gasps for air. It's so close that she can barely breathe. Fear of the storm wells up in her, what will she do up here if lightning strikes, up here on the mountain? The cow stretches out its neck and moos, the maid trembles.

Suddenly the farmer is standing beside her. He doesn't do anything to calm her, but she can feel safe at his side, can't she? But then he says to her: "The milk, take the milk down to the village, fast." Frightened, the maid shakes her head. She tries to hold the pail steady, the milk mustn't splash over the side, the maid takes a

step back. A creaking, a moaning, the storm is above them, the maid on the verge of tears. The farmer looms in front of her like a giant.

When it thunders again the maid cannot suppress a scream. Dizzy with fear, she quickly sets down the pail. The farmer has told her often enough what will happen if she spills the milk. She raises her arms in defense, but suddenly he grabs her, presses his strong hands against her shoulder blades and pulls her to him. She can't get away from him, he pushes her head down against his chest, like he does when a cow is giving birth to her calf. "Shh. Quiet."

They stand like that for a moment, outside the wind holds its breath. Then the farmer shifts his weight, grunts, and reaches down with his right hand. He pushes up the maid's apron, the skirt of her dirndl under which she wears alluringly threadbare cotton panties.

They sink to their knees, with a forceful motion the farmer turns the maid, keeping his hand under her skirt. "But...", the maid whispers. "But I'm afraid of thunder, and the cow..."

"What's the cow got to do with it?" the farmer snarls. He gropes her, the maid slips in the straw. She shudders and her face, when she throws her head back, is lit by a bolt of lightning. The farmer tugs at his lederhosen, nature is going wild, the cow bawls, the farmer dips his hand into the pail, into the milk, still warm, scoops up a handful and gives it to the maid to drink. It drips down her neck. The farmer licks his fingers, the maid licks the farmer's fingers, the farmer again dips his hand into the pail and rubs the milk between her legs. He scoops milk into her lap, using both hands now, the milk soaks through her skirt, the fabric clings to her thighs. After one last clap of thunder it begins to rain and the maid shudders and moans...

He slams the book closed. He expected a loud clap, but there's only a dull thud because it's a paperback, a worn paperback with a rustic scene on the cover. A cow, a barn, grass, and in the background, at the top of the mountain, snow.

Only a dull thud. The young woman jumps nevertheless, he apologizes with a smile, surprised that she could hear him with the huge headphones over her ears. Once in a while he hears a tuneless jangling, he can hardly believe that it's music.

The young woman sits across from him on the train, otherwise the compartment is empty. Just as he takes a breath, perhaps to say something to the young woman, she bends forward and begins to pull up her stockings. With routine movements and outstretched fingers she pulls them tighter, first the right ankle, then the calf, the knee, the thigh, and finally she's forced to lift her buttock for a moment, her skirt is quite short. Then the young woman does the same with her left leg, until her stockings are without wrinkles and lustrous and hug her legs. The young woman is wearing red heels that buckle on the side. Her skirt is of an imitation kilt design that no Scotsman would be caught dead in.

He feels himself turning red. He quickly puts his hand to his throat. His collar is still in place, stiff, a black-and-white barrier between him and the world. He'd be damned if he was going to loosen it. But damnation was waiting.

He asks himself how long it has been since the young woman has seen a priest. Maybe she's not even baptized? He's sweating, the young woman crosses her right leg over her left. The compartment door could open at any moment. The young woman puts both feet on the floor, straightens up, scoots back in her seat until her

entire back is pressed against the backrest. Then she slumps down again, this time crossing her left leg over her right.

He clears his throat, but the young woman ignores him. The second time, he does this so loudly that it hurts his throat. Only as he loosens his collar after all, shoving two fingers between the cloth and his neck, only as he feels his own sweaty skin does she suddenly ask, “Are you hot?”

He doesn’t know what to say.

“It’s practical, a cassock. You can’t see sweat spots on black.”

“What....” He gestures vaguely with his hand. “What....”

“What am I listening to and what is my name? Valerie.” The young woman puts the stress on the last syllable, she smiles innocently, her lips are thin and painted red, exactly the same color of red as her buckled shoes, her kilt, as if the lipstick were part of a uniform. Now the young woman – Valerie, her name is Valerie – removes her headphones and places them in her lap, flicking from her knee an invisible piece of lint. “Do you know the Song of Songs?”

He’s confused. “Which group is that?”

The young woman laughs. “*With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste...Your navel is like a round goblet, which lacks not blended drink.*”

The priest groans softly, smoothes the wrinkles of his cassock under which his legs are shaking, the young woman’s eyes are on him. “You don’t,” she says, “want to talk about the Bible?”

When the young woman stretches out her legs toward him, the priest removes her red shoes. “Nice,” he says, “leather.” His hands are shaking. In return, the young woman wants to help him off with his cassock.

“You’re sweating so.”

When the priest is no longer wearing his cassock, but only long underwear and black socks, he stands up on the cushion of his seat and holds a cross out in front of her. She falls out of her role: “I’m not a vampire.” But then she looks at the cross again, this time with a frightened expression.

As the young woman lies on the floor of compartment, confessing without end: “Father, I have sinned,” the priest can’t bear the sight of it, the young woman sobs, and he lifts her up.

As she sits on the priest’s lap, her skirt gone, reciting the rosary in the voice of a six-year-old, they pray together until it is Valerie’s nipples and not the wooden beads that he runs his fingers over, pinching them for a moment. “Great are the works of the Lord,” says Valerie, “oho.”

“Our new pet word,” Reinhard whispers in Kristine’s ear,” is *confession*.” Each time she comes, her face is as lustrous as if covered in a clear lacquer. He imagines her orgasms as being longer than his and more intense, he studies her enviously, her orgasm is perplexing to him. Sometimes she opens her eyes, but he doesn’t think she sees anything when she does, at least not him.

He’s still wearing his priest socks and kisses Kristine on the neck, she laughs, his goatee probably tickles or scratches, it’s rougher than her pubic hair. She thinks it doesn’t suit him, Reinhard knows that. Neither his, as she puts it, advanced age nor

his quite respectable profession. But he likes being thought of as rough. Sometimes women cross to the other side of the street, evenings, when they see him coming; he likes feeling that he's a threat without actually being one.

Maybe the beard is meant to cover the fact that he's losing his hair.

He gives a grunt and stretches his arms. Kristine gets up from the couch – from the train seat, Reinhard thinks—a little come running down her leg. She pushes the room screen to one side and goes over to the chair where, a long time ago now it seems, she placed her things, her blouse is hanging over the backrest. Before disappearing into the hall, Kristine gives Reinhard another smile. When he hears the door to the bathroom he jumps to his feet and takes his glasses from the desk, clothes are scattered all over the floor, the kilt and the red shoes with the buckles in their midst. The stockings are torn, he'll have to buy a new pair tomorrow.

He briefly considers putting his cassock back on, but then he goes into the bathroom completely naked. Kristine has just put her foot on the edge of the tub and is washing between her legs, she's shivering, her arms are covered in goosebumps.

“Oh no, don't look at me while I'm doing this!”

He leans against the doorframe. “Why not?” But she doesn't lock the door on him as she did in the beginning, when he would stand outside it, puzzled, pressing the handle down again and again until she would call out that she would only be a minute.

“It's so...banal. I'm just washing myself.”

“You have no idea what men find erotic.”

Kristine is ten years younger than he, she's forty, he has often asked himself whether she dyes her hair, which is shoulder-length and soft, and the brown color is soft as well, an unusual shade. Actually, everything about Kristine, though she is

slender, looks pliable and soft. When she bends over, her breasts briefly sway back and forth.

She gets dressed, first her panties, he's never seen her wear a thong, he should buy her one. She hooks her bra in the front, then twists it around into position and slips her breasts into it, her face still shiny. When she reaches for her blouse Reinhard pushes off from the doorframe and goes back to the living room.

He was lucky with this apartment, at least that's what the agent told him. Everything is new and still smells like fresh paint. The first time Reinhard invited Kristine here, it's been two months now, she gave a sharp gasp as she walked into the living room. For a moment he didn't know what it meant. Then she slowly walked over to the glass wall, which faced east, and stretched out her arms. "The entire city," she said. "Well, he answered, "half of it."

"This view," the agent had said, "makes up for the fact that there's no balcony. I know you wanted an apartment with a balcony...Nevertheless, if you'd sign here, please?"

Reinhard, still naked, sits down at his computer and randomly presses a key. He can feel the leather of the seat on his crotch. Living so high up has its advantages, no one can see him.

Though there's no reason to have a bad conscience about working half a day at home, he nevertheless always packs more into it than he would at the office. He'll be going through his stack of files all evening. When Kristine had rung the bell, he stopped typing in mid-sentence. He fleetingly thinks of having a key made for her; then, should the opportunity arise, she could arrive at the apartment before him and get things ready, even surprise him for a change.

She comes into the room with her coat on, puts her hand on the back of his neck, he swivels around in the chair and grins as her eyes move down his body. “Do you really have to leave already?”

She nods. “I’m already too late to pick up Emma.”

He’s only known Kristine’s daughter for two weeks now. Emma is six, he had imagined six-year-olds as being bigger and less childlike, she had started school recently, after all. Her hair is much lighter and softer than Kristine’s, her face is smooth and round, she still has her baby fat. The skin of her hand, when she shook Reinhard’s, was sweaty and hot, and later he had the feeling that her body was always giving off heat.

“Then I’ll think of you,” Reinhard says, “as I’m tidying up.”

Kristine bends down and kisses him, his glasses are in the way. She gives his collarbone a light rap with the back of her hand, but now, her hand says, let me leave, I have to go. He holds her fingers tightly. “Then say hello to her.”

“Emma?”

“Who else?”

She seems happy at this, picks up her handbag. “School is still so new to her. Yesterday she fell asleep on me at the table. And she doesn’t like getting up early. She counts everything now, her pencils, the checks in the tablecloth, though she’s known her numbers for a while already...Do you want to come for dinner sometime?”

When Kristine is gone he goes into the bathroom, sniffs her washcloth, which is drying above the radiator, then gets dressed. The heat is on. They didn’t really even have a summer and now they’re being cheated out of October, the wind is already

ripping the leaves from the trees even though they're still green, and the sun isn't shining.

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