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The Couple of the Century

It's really quite simple: I'm leaving you.

Three words. Everyone understands them. Everything over with, in just three words. You only have to say them. The simplicity of it shocks me. Another thing shocks me: the sentence is just as short as the one I said at the beginning of our story.

At the beginning I said: I love you.

Three words at the start, three words at the end. It would seem that the most important things in life can be expressed in very few words.

But in this case, the latter, you can't put them off. You have to say them as soon as the other person walks in the door. Ideally, no other words get in the way. Start chatting, and the plan goes off the rails.

I admit, I don't find it easy to say this sentence, to say it *casually*. What's going to happen next? I'm under no illusions. Once it's out, a boundary has been crossed. There's no going back.

I've always wondered how the things we've said can be taken back. *I didn't mean it like that* or *forget what I said* – these phrases don't make sense to me. You can't take things back, you can only wake up. Words change things. Once an arrow's been shot, you can't get it back.

I'm leaving you. I'm not sure when these words first crossed my mind. Or how many times since. I've been practicing them for a while. There comes a point when certain ideas start to feel as familiar as the face you glance at every morning in the mirror.

The thought of all our years together unsettles me. So many years! So many years, compressed into a few hours of recollection.

I don't like it.

Though it's not like anyone wants it to take thirty years to recall thirty years. I certainly don't.

The most distant memories take shape most clearly.

I was living in a small apartment, in prefab housing on the outskirts of the city. My apartment was on the sixth floor. I'd lived there with my parents in my late adolescence, but they were gone by then, each in their own direction, family no more. They had separated around when I started university, and I lived there alone.

My bedroom contained a bed and a table. I had some books heaped up on the table, and next to them lay a game of Halma.

Summer break had just begun. One evening, the heavy black telephone rang in the hall. Phones had cords back then, so I stood in the hall on the call. This rhyme wasn't intentional (these things happen).

It was you.

Do you like vanilla tea?, you asked.

I would have said any drink was my favorite, so long as it came from you.

Ten minutes later, you appeared at my door with the vanilla tea. I let you in. We sat on the floor for tea. That's what everyone did back then, it was in vogue. At parties, everyone sat on the floor. I think it made it easier to embrace and sink into the carpet together. That's what we did. You embraced me, and we sunk together into the carpet.

We even skipped the tea.

When I woke up the next morning, you were lying beside me. I was stunned. Then it was noon, and you were still there. You seemed to be the first person in a while who didn't want to immediately disappear from my life. I was so accustomed to a lack of ties.

We spent the day on my balcony under the awning. It was so hot we could see the laundry drying. Beneath us, the tram drove sluggishly by. We read a book together. It was called "What a Small Moped with Chrome Handlebars, Standing There in the Courtyard." The cumbersome title appealed to us both. I read it first, then you. It wasn't particularly thick, and we both finished it that day.

I gave you a key to the apartment. Now you could come and go as you pleased. You did in fact come back, always at night.

After a week I said: I don't want to give myself up for someone else.

You looked at me, eyes wide: So what do you think is the point of love?

I was glad you saw it that way – I'd long been on the verge of giving myself up.

I went to the hairdresser. He cut off my hair.

Because of the heat, I explained, the next time I saw you. The truth was, I wanted to look like you.

Suddenly, you stopped coming. I was worried, but not so much about you. I was worried about our story. After all, it was a love story. These stories demand a special kind of care, I told myself, especially at the beginning.

I set off to your house with a bottle of cherry liqueur and homemade cookies, crumbs of hash sprinkled into the batter. You lived outside the city, a half-hour away by bus. I rang, but nobody came to the door. I spent a few minutes skulking around outside the brightly lit house. Then I left. I had to run to catch the last bus back, it was just after midnight.

I mailed you the cookies.

I saw you again in the university cafeteria. Classes hadn't yet resumed, and the cafeteria was deserted. I thought you would act like we'd never met. But you hadn't forgotten me.

I said: Why are you sitting inside? The weather today is beautiful. It's summer break!

You squinted and replied: I go on break when I want to.

Your tranquility put me at ease. At the same time, I was excited.

You often drove us around in your car. A brown VW Jetta. We'd leave the city. Once, at twilight, a pheasant flew out in front of us. Another time, an eagle-owl grazed the windshield with its wing. When I was rolling down the window, the crank broke off. You laughed. All summer long, we drove with the window half-down.

At the end of the summer, I asked: What are we?

Instead of answering, you suggested a picnic in the park.

We made a three-year pact. You said: If we make it three years, we'll see.

Suddenly, a dog we didn't know bounded up to us and lunged for the cheese in our basket. The dog immediately fell to the ground, gasping and choking. You watched, unmoved – almost gloating. As though anyone who meddled in our affairs promptly got what they had coming.

Then the dog ran away.

And you kissed me.

(This story feels like the summary of a film I saw a very long time ago, on a very old television set. I can recall only individual scenes, while the structure as a whole escapes me.)

It wasn't over after three summers.

We lived through thirty-one summers together. Six of them were declared the summer of the century in the news.

In this time we took 42 trips together, 27 of them international.

We bought four kitchens.

We had new IDs issued five times.

Once, we witnessed a fire and had to be evacuated.

We ended up in the emergency room a total of seven times – four because of our children and three because of ourselves.

We got robbed six times.

We had six different cars. We didn't buy any of them new.

We spent nine and a half days waiting in government offices.

We played 912 games of Halma.

We prepared 8,667 school lunches and bought 41 birthday cakes.

We took 173,500 photos in those years.

We had a total of 76 infections. (I suffered through most of them.)

We had four surgeries, one of them serious.

We took 1,405 baths.

We got 281 haircuts.

We each tore a pillow (different days, different causes).

We bought new laptops eight times.

We attended funerals and weddings. But I didn't count those.

I'm not sure whether counting up the years adds anything meaningful to our story. Whether our story *depends* on it. Isn't it better to describe love without assigning it to a point in time? Or does it require a starting year? Would it make a difference if I said we met in 1991, 1994, or 2000?

That would feel as though we were the product of a specific era, of a given set of historical circumstances. As though everything had to happen just as it did. I would feel trapped in time.

On the other hand, it *did* all happen as it did. There are no alternative versions of our story.

This much is certain: we were young. There had been a revolution. The Berlin Wall and all the other borders had fallen a few years prior. Freedom reigned, as they said in those days. The whole world stood open to us. (They said that, too.) And yet, it seemed that all of my friends, myself included, wanted to die, to bite the dust with a grand gesture – or at least leave the country. That's how we saw it. (Most people our age rejected the big, new, reunited Germany.) This attitude probably had nothing to do with politics. We were convinced that existence was a bleak place which longed for silent, poetic insurrection. No historical event, even one full of joy and hope, could change that. Clutching our packs of Gauloises, we'd sit together in the university cafeteria, sipping coffee and quoting poems by Georg Trakl in melancholy tones. One was called "De Profundis." It began:

A field of stubble, onto which a black rain falls.
A brown tree, which stands alone.

You watched our comedy with impatience.

I don't have time for unhappiness, you shrugged. It's a waste of energy.

After that, I paid attention to your comings and goings. All the reasons I'd craved to die eluded me.

I found you stately. A word nobody used at the time and which flew to me as if from a distant century. As if it had been waiting to regain currency until it could finally modify its only proper referent: you.

Unlike most students, who wore ripped jeans and sweatshirts, you dressed like a dandy. Your elegance put us all to shame, even the lecturers. Your suits and button-downs weren't fashionably cut, but seemed to come from a Cary Grant or James Stewart film. Sometimes you walked around like a librarian in horn-rimmed glasses, bell-bottoms, and mustard-colored platforms that made you even taller than you already were.

You were so beautiful that you could be absolutely hideous.

You always waited until everyone was seated to enter the seminar room. The door flew open and there you were, cloak billowing – all eyes on you.

Later, I would recall again and again how you stood there, every time, in that wonderful, billowing cloak. But as the years went by, I couldn't stop thinking about something else: the cloak wasn't billowing. It *couldn't* have been. That green, PVC cloak was too stiff to billow. But it did. You stood there, cloak billowing, drawing all of our eyes. You never had to come up with an excuse for your lateness. Your entrance commanded that much awe.

I loved you immediately. When we would stand and talk, I had to lean my head all the way back to look at your face. I'd stand before you and gaze upwards. That posture! I suppose from the very start I was fated to put you on a pedestal.

In those days, I worked weekends at a cinema. An old cinema, in a courtyard in the city center. (The big multiplex theaters out in shopping centers and train stations were only just starting to appear.) In the afternoon I'd unlock the gate, arrange the candy on the counter, start up the popcorn machine, and clean the auditorium. I heated the building with coal in the winter, shoveling it with a pitchfork as though I were on a ship. Before the first moviegoers arrived, I'd help myself to an ice-cream from the freezer. Then I would strike the gong. I usually stood in the back of the auditorium, half hidden by the curtain, and watched the film for a while.

I told you about my job.

You knew the cinema.

Ah, I said.

I didn't tell you that I'd seen you there once, a few weeks before you appeared at my door with the vanilla tea. You were with a red-haired girl. The sight of her stung me. Not because she was exceptionally pretty. She wasn't pretty, not at all. But even so, you held her hand and put your arm around her shoulder. For a second I thought you might be a saint. Someone capable of discovering a miracle in another person.

Perhaps it could also happen to me.

Later, after the vanilla tea, I gave you the number for the cinema. The telephone, which hung on the wall next to the counter, rang quite often. Every time, I hoped it was you. But it was just people asking about the screening schedule and start times.

You preferred to appear unannounced. Usually just before midnight, after the last screening, when I was locking up the building. You would stand a few paces away, at the corner of a house. As though afraid of encountering someone other than me, you waited in the dark. It imbued our meetings with a certain exclusivity. The secret you made out of our togetherness excited me. I'd get in the car and we'd drive off (the eagle-owl, the pheasant, the Brandenburg landscape by night).

The tension every time, before we fell into each other.

I didn't feel the need to tell anyone about us during that first year. I didn't write anything down. I was cautious. It's not yet time to tell our story, I said to myself. In my eyes, narrative was something that came at the end. Far, far away, I thought, in a distant time that was fully abstract to me. A false start could destroy everything.

I didn't even say anything to my mother, whom I saw rarely. When she expressed surprise that I was so happy (an unusual state for me), I simply said: *I've met someone.*

I came over to your apartment for the first time. Before I entered, you said:

I have to warn you, it's no castle.

I went in, and it was no castle.

I didn't mind at first. Then I suggested trading out the mattress for a bed, the trestle table for a desk. While I spoke, you sat on a sun-bleached folding cushion and listened, smiling, arm tucked behind your head.

I bought you a stereo, a chest of drawers, a runner, and a walnut-colored chair with curved legs. You were pleased, but I noticed that if it all disappeared one day, you wouldn't miss a single thing.

The only thing you seemed attached to was a little serving trolley, with a white Napoleon bust made out of plaster standing on top of it.

It was part of your persona to live like a hermit, apparently without needs. Your whole lifestyle – the cloak, the old-fashioned suits, the limited number of possessions – could be interpreted as a series of citations. But sometimes, something else shimmered through, and I would suspect that maybe you didn't care about things because you *couldn't*. (Perhaps, when someone is poor, they intuitively regard wealth with suspicion.) But classifications like those were irrelevant. We didn't come from a world in which people cared who was affluent. We spent our time thinking about other things – freedom and anarchy, the irrationality of the bourgeoisie, the futility of utopias, the lethargy of the masses.

I used the money I earned at the cinema to take you to restaurants. I took you to Pagode, a two-story Chinese restaurant that was popular at the time. Another time we ate Italian, Greek.

In turn you sometimes brought me flowers, long-stemmed sunflowers or Canadian goldenrods. You laid them casually over your shoulder on the way to the parking lot, like a cowboy with his rifle. You played me music by Chet Baker and taught me Officers' Skat. (It amused you that I, the daughter of a former officer, didn't know the game.) We played Halma and Scrabble, and sometimes dice. I taught you to hit the center of a target with an air rifle and gave you books by Peter Handke and Wolfgang Hilbig. Most of the books on *your* shelf had something to do with eroticism. Modernist eroticism – François Villon, Henry Miller, Charles Bukowsky, Georges Bataille, Brecht (the love poems). A particular kind of frivolity. Those books came from another time, a time before me. I didn't know who had given them to you. I didn't even know if you'd read them. Had you immersed yourself in those books? I knelt in front of the shelf and commented on each of the titles, making fun of them. You didn't care.

I read "The Silent Don" by Scholochow when I was a teenager, was all you said. Imagine, four volumes of Scholochow!

You sounded lost in thought, irritated, as though you couldn't comprehend it yourself. Only eight or nine years had passed since then, but we lived in an entirely different world.