

THE WEDDING

A FINE COLOGNE first, then his face in the doorway. "I'm getting married," he said drily. Then regretting his attitude, he tried to smile.

I always left the door unlocked for the mailman to leave my checks from home and for Anneliese who, finishing work around three in the morning, would enter the room on tip-toes. "You don't have to leave the door unlocked. All my things are here—my clothes, my jewelry, even the dog. . . . What if my stuff were stolen? Have you thought what'd happen then?" She'd wake me up to bitch if she were in a bad mood, otherwise I'd get it with my coffee in the morning. "You only have a toothbrush and a pair of glasses here—that's why you don't give a damn. When did you ever think of anyone else—me, for example,—when did you ever think of me and get used to locking the door. All you know how to do is waste your father's money. Big deal . . . a degree—what am I saying?—you can't even get through a semester. But you know how to leave my door unlocked. And sit around while I work. You don't think I'm a whore, do you?—I work while you throw away money."

"Please, baby, take it easy. It's not daylight yet." Under the down quilt, her body tightened. It burned.

"Don't *babe* me. *Verdammt scheisse!*" Then, she grabbed me high between my legs and began to turn me on, expressing in this way her desperate love. "Don't, love, and if you're good, I'll take you to Tunis for a week with my next check. Do you remember . . . the little white train through the orange groves, Carthage, Sidi-Bou-Said?" She then clawed my breast with her nails, wrapped around me like a vine as she tried to close my mouth with her lips. "I want you to lock the door, love, lock it."

Stathis looked into the mirror, as he straightened the collar of his shirt. Suddenly, he grabbed the quilt and repeated, "I'm getting married." He left me naked. Pacing nervously, he entered the kitchen,

bumped into a chair and the noise of cups was heard. Closing the cupboard, he turned on the faucet. "Where is she?" He entered the room, wiping his lips, and pulled open the curtains. The light blinded me. "Haven't you got any coffee?" I covered up again, smelling a rat. "Come on, get up!"

Anneliese came in with her baggy pants, carrying a rose and an armful of bags upon her lovely breast. "My God, what beautiful weather!" She set out milk, coffee, rolls, and jam on the table. "Breakfast and afterwards the forest. I'll make some eggs." She put the flower in a tall glass. "Stathis, will you have coffee with us?"

Stathis looked at her with bloodshot eyes, said, "Sure," and, without taking a breath, added, "Today, I'm getting married."

Anneliese was drinking milk from the carton. "With whom?" she asked, wiping off a few drops of milk from the corner of her mouth. She was beautiful.

"To Sigrid—she's in her third month," and he added, "Get up. I want you to be best man."

"She should have an abortion, if she's pregnant," yelled Anneliese from the kitchen. After that, she laughed. Putting her head in the door, she said, "I didn't mean it."

Stathis looked at her seriously and said, "*Ach was*, you can't always get away with an abortion."

"Dear, haven't I told you to get cups with handles?" I don't like to drink burning coffee served in a bowl. "These bowls are for people without arms. And look at these half-assed lamps!"

Anneliese lived for design. "Speak correctly, love, cups don't have arms, they have handles." Turning to Stathis, she said, "Morning hysteria. What time is the wedding?"

Stathis got his diploma yesterday morning and from noon on he celebrated with Hans at different bars. I ran into them in the back room of Annita's late in the afternoon. Only the best was on the table: schnapps and liqueurs, whiskey and vodka and lime, two empty and one half-empty bottles of champagne, cheese, biscuits, chocolate, and black cigars. An atmosphere of siege. In the middle of the table was a carafe and from time to time Hans poured into it what was left from the glasses. In the midst of swearing and cursing he would invite the few

customers to drink from this weird cocktail. Even though the yellow and blue lamps accentuated the paleness of the faces, Hans' was red, his eyes ran, and he looked as if he were going to crash. He didn't notice me and said every so often, "It's meaningless." They drank on credit. For Hans this was no problem since he could have bought half the bar with all the money he had spent there. Stathis could also buy on credit since he had become a *Doktor* that morning. He was high, laughed, drank, danced alone, and threatened to screw the two waitresses together. He held a roll of thick paper and claimed that it was his diploma and from now on he could do whatever he wanted with it. He threw the roll into the air, used it to spit out peanuts, put it to his eye as if it were a spyglass.

In the middle of the room, there was an aquarium with pebbles, seaweed, hidden lights, and terrified fish. The water was filtered through special holes because in the afternoons a metal cover was placed on top. It was locked up like this ever since a desperate truck driver had emptied a bottle of Bols into the tank and shrieked while the fish gasped for breath. In this room rowdies gathered and whoever didn't like it could sit out in front. You could even bring your wife there. Whenever anybody wanted to help out one of these derailed drunks, he'd use the emergency exits next to the restrooms, thus sparing the drunk the humiliation of parading through the front room. Most of them, though, demanded exit by the front door. With an air of unsteady dignity, they'd follow a straight path through the room and go out into the street. Whoever succeeded in reaching the street would get into a taxi.

From the next table the notary, Mr. Berghaus, smiled at Stathis and the small veins around his nose spread across his face. He sparkled all over as if every day he scrubbed himself with his suit on. He washed down the schnapps with big gulps of beer. "Well, tell me, young man—first of all, congratulations—tell me, what will you do now?"

Hans overturned a bottle and grabbed it in the air with excellent sobriety. "The Americans," he said nostalgically, "we don't know who the Americans are," without giving a damn if he made himself clear.

Mr. Berghaus caressed his shaven cheek and said, "Well now, we'll see." He liked what he said, took a breath, and repeated, "Now, we'll see." Holding his empty glass, he leaned toward Stathis. "That is—what do I mean?—what I want to say is, do doctors have prestige in your country? Do people appreciate . . . I mean . . . the fact that a sadist can become a surgeon instead of a butcher?"

Shaken by laughter and a strong cough, Mr. Klaus, the porter from the nearby hotel whose nickname was Fixit, tried to speak in the midst of laughter and strong coughing. "So that's the way it is." He gestured with the same finesse as when he opened the doors of cars. "I'll cut off your hands, you dirty old man. Excuse me, honey. I didn't mean anything, dear . . . so that's the way you want it," and he raised his voice hysterically.

"At two-thirty." I sipped the coffee with a little spoon, so Anneliese brought me a decent cup. She couldn't stand slurping. Stathis' face still showed the effects of last night's bacchanal. He was uneasy. "Finish up, will you," he said.

"Did you show up at the clinic?"

"I quit," he said and added after a little, "I hadn't noticed that you drink it black." He stared at me while I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, thinking of his widowed mother in Lagada. Anneliese asked if he'd already regretted becoming a doctor. She spoke of how serious such a decision was, and that he was already mature enough to do something. *Verdammt*. I coughed the same way I had done when I was young and used to hide behind a hairdresser hoping that I'd be found. I looked around for my silk shirt as I was getting dressed.

Anneliese shouted, "You can go to hell, you and your shirt." She slammed the door of the bathroom and locked herself inside. "And your degree, you idiot, why did you get it? To end up as a clerk in a bank? And what are these stories about getting married?"

Stathis licked his finger and cleaned the dusty corner of his shoe. He looked at me as if he wanted to know what was so strange. Instead, he said, "Sigrid's old man has left us his gas station, and we're going to manage it, the two of us."

Ten years of work and study, most of the time odd jobs, so that he could become a doctor. Stathis, a shop-owner, with a widowed mother at Lagada. I kicked the locked door to cover the noise of the the shower. "We're off. Meet us at church."

"Love, get a couple of bottles of champagne for afterwards. Great. We'll have a party." With the rose in my lapel, I felt like the best man. "Take money from my bag."

"I have some," I yelled back, and then softly, "You little bitch."

At the consulate, complete boredom. Even the chairs seemed to be yawning. Gone were the good old days. The officials gave Stathis the papers he needed, wished him the best, and we left. At the supermarket, as I reached for the German champagne, Stathis said, "No, the occasion calls for French." Moving towards the cashier, he lifted a cheap pen and I pocketed a box of colored thumb-tacks. It was one o'clock. The bride was to go straight to the church so we decided to drink a beer at Joop's. We sat outside so we could contemplate the women who passed by, the boys on their bicycles, and the wide cars rolling lazily under the sun. Stathis pointed at Hans' parked car and said he had to be around somewhere. "Do you know that for every day he doesn't work, he loses up to 500 marks in commissions." Hans sold electronics. Stathis was calm. He looked at the babies in strollers, the flower-seller, and at the beauties crossing their bare legs. He felt tender. Looking at the waitress, he said, "The broad is busy. We'll be late. Let's go inside to have a drink." Coolness with a taste of alcohol enveloped us as we walked inside. In the back, the pool players appeared and disappeared under the lights, while the balls knocked around amidst the scattered exclamations. Peace. Hans came close with a cue in his hand. "Magic," whispered Stathis.

Hans laughed and the bones stretched the reddish skin of his face. "That creep," he pointed at Stathis, "That drunk. Finally, he pissed on it, and even wanted to burn it." He took a drag on his cigarette and looked behind him at the players. "No good." He got up to leave but came back. Before Stathis could interrupt, he said, "Today, for the first time, I paid attention to the balls; I watched them well. I'm sure that whatever they do, wherever they go, they always return. Do you hear? They always come back." The players called him from the back to take his turn. He added, "You know, of course, what I mean by that."

Stathis stopped him and said, "You know, today—"

Hans cut him off by saying, "Today, I don't want to be bothered; I'm doing some thinking."

Father Porphirios had just turned on the lights and was preparing the wedding table with the tray, the almonds, the rice, and the wedding crowns when Sigrid arrived with her emotional father, who hadn't stopped grumbling, "Why do we need to spend so much, child. A civil wedding would've been O.K." Anneliese entered in a hurry after the ceremony had begun. The presence of the street life outside was intense in the church, yet Father Porphirios chanted calmly, making his words

audible. Trapped. The eternal question floated in the air again and I felt I couldn't help inhaling it; it happened every time I made one of my rare appearances in church. I exchanged the bridal crowns and, like a sleep-walker, followed the dance of Isaiah. At the end, after having kissed both of them on the cheeks in a kind of dizziness, I tried to do the same with the priest. In the churchyard, Anneliese had unleashed her tongue and was speaking to Sigrid ". . . and how wonderful, and ask Stathis to take you to Greece, and how lucky you are, God, the sun, the retsina." Without taking a breath, she asked me if I felt well. Stathis didn't know what to do with his hands. He affectionately hugged Sigrid, and then undid his tie. Sigrid's father invited us to dinner that night and said his sister, her husband, and two friends would be there.

Anneliese said, "Thanks, but as for me, some other time because I have to work at eight."

Anneliese's car cut through the city and we reached the suburbs. "How great it would've been if we'd put a 'just married' sign on the car," said Sigrid, "and tied tin cans on the car and honked the horn." We paused on a shoulder at the turn of the road and walked downhill. We found the small opening, hidden from the road, with the valley and a part of the city spread out below us. Stathis had regained his self-confidence. He put both of the crowns on his head and contemplated the mountains way beyond the river. I opened the champagne as Anneliese brought out the tall crystal glasses. Above us came the din of city life dissolving in the silence of the woods. We emptied the bottle wordlessly. Anneliese reminisced about her father's farm, when she had helped with the harvest, and she mumbled a song. Stathis sprawled on the grass as Sigrid lay her blond head on his chest. She turned gently to look at him, her hair playing with her silver earrings. Anneliese, with her face towards the setting sun, emptied the last drops from the bottle onto her palm and licked them up. Stathis had risen to his elbows and looked hungrily at the river, at the train passing through the trees, at the barges, the blond hair of Sigrid, the chimneys, the autobahn; he could distinguish the sound of each thing and I thought he whispered—why not.

translated by Anna Lillios