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Filbert's Fate

Translated from the German by
Alex Gabriel

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This is my final police report – the culmination of a lifetime spent documenting the shadowy side of mankind. My paperwork ultimately filled a dozen binders. I suppose that not very much of it remains. Nevertheless, I will be submitting this one last report. The years are catching up to me; I have now reached an age at which death's arrow might strike at any moment, and my internal memories of the past have thus begun to dominate my perceptions of the external world. I suppose that's why things left undone have now started to afflict me, to compel me to sit at my desk once more within my secluded existence and draft this communication to the outside world.

My typewriter is an ancient Hermes with an unusually large typeface, a machine that was common in police stations back in my day. It was an instrument of torture for detectives like me, who were happy only when working out on the streets. But I'm sticking to my plan, forcing my fat fingers to strike the keys, which really need to be cleaned, but never mind that. No sooner have I started to type than I am overcome once again by the emotions of the past, thinking of all the time I spent sifting through the baffling fragments, finding absolutely nothing, until the pieces just came together one evening and the truth lay there before me, crystal clear. This will inevitably be a report not only of the facts, but of old feelings as well – as you will soon see.

The case that I will unravel for you was never officially solved. At the time, I was unable to make it official – or rather, it would not have made any sense for me to do so. To be honest – as I have resolved to be – I was never quite prepared to duly share the results of

my probing with the investigating judge. I broke the rules, but do not blame me for this. There is not the slightest trace of guilt in my conscience. My writing of this report, dragging these events out from the depths of the past and wiping away the sands of time that had buried them like an ancient mosaic, is solely for the files – believe me, gentlemen of the prosecution, it is exclusively for your files.

The story began on a bright June morning in 1966. I woke up drenched in an intense light that flooded every room of my cramped apartment, as well as my entire neighborhood of apartment blocks, and apparently our whole rather small-scale city. For a short time, it burned all the shadows away. The world seemed to be in a pleasant state of excitement. Life pulsated, and summery scents floated through the air. I reported to headquarters, as I always did when I wasn't out working some particular case, and I immediately felt the tension in the room. The squad captain was waiting for me. “Hit the road, Wiederkehr,” he said, without returning my greeting. “Some guy named Filbert was found shot dead. You're taking the case.”

I felt a small bomb explode in my gut. “Filbert?” I choked. “What's his full name?”

“Franz Filbert. Journalist and politician. Wrote some nasty things about us in some of his articles too. Why – did you know him?”

Oh yes, I knew him. I had even gone to school with him, and then for years we were part of a group that would regularly play cards together in the neighborhood pub. “Why Filbert, of all people?” I thought uneasily, anxious that his violent death could end up putting a spotlight on the police, and particularly me.

“Suicide?” I asked hopefully, though I knew better.

“That would've made things easier for us, but

unfortunately it doesn't look that way. Shot through the heart, no murder weapon found. You know him?”

I can still remember the mixed feelings that initially stirred up inside me, before a general sense of compassion for him, as a victim, finally set in. The paths of our lives had run together throughout the years, even if more out of lazy habit than out of any sort of real affection – though everyone assumed we were friends, of course. Filbert's life was full of intrigue. Where things flowed smoothly, he brought turmoil. He managed to turn calm, clear waters into sticky mud that he would toss at others while he himself remained clean behind a protective shield woven of self-righteousness.

I told the squad captain offhandedly that I had known Filbert, then headed out to the scene of the crime. The body had been discovered by a couple out for a stroll along a quiet sunlight-dappled forest road, on one of the hillsides that blocked the city's urban sea of houses from sprawling out in all directions. A few steps further along, a magnificent view opened up on the city. The forensics team was busy collecting evidence. Filbert had already been taken away to the coroner. I followed him there, unable to believe he was dead until I finally saw him lying on the autopsy table in that cool, white-tiled room. He had been shot through the heart – at close range. Rigor mortis had set in, and his lower jaw had dropped in such a way that his dead face was frozen in the same indignant expression that he would assume when he used to accuse me (and others) of having a flawed political consciousness.

Things were quiet in those days in our civilized city, and all throughout our proper little country of Switzerland, in fact. Murder cases were simply not on our regular agenda. When they happened, the entire elaborately structured police organization seemed to

collapse in upon itself. Every senior official felt himself personally responsible, demanding to know the results of the forensic department's analyses and tying up the coroner's telephone lines. Meanwhile, the detectives just stood around in the aisles chatting about the case, hankering for the latest developments. The situation was only straightened out when someone finally managed to fetch the commissioner from the tennis court, or from one of the many receptions whose invitations he simply could not resist. And after a spokesman had updated the press, the police machinery was finally set in motion and started working towards making the murderer pay for his actions – actions that contributed to bringing the crime statistics of our proper little country just that little bit closer to the crime statistics of the less proper countries of the world.

I was then taken off the case for the time being. After checking out my personal connection to Filbert, the squad captain had assigned it to my colleague Schoch instead. I raised a ruckus at headquarters when I found out. I then saw, through the veil of my anger, that the squad captain was unimpressed by it all, and eventually I just left the building (without clocking out) to go drown away my indignation in a nearby bar that was frequented by tormented police officers. Schoch was the oldest detective on the squad, but he wasn't the most proficient – he was actually the most incompetent.

Schoch has been dead for a long time, and since you obviously did not know him, gentlemen of the prosecution, I feel I must clarify a bit. When Schoch handled a case, he had hardly any interest in the painstakingly laborious process of actual fact-finding. Instead, he maintained an interconnected contact network of government agency staff, city politicians, and

reporters, and would simply tune in to his contacts to collect rumors, grudges, and hostile character sketches. Together with his cronies, he conjured up some image of the perpetrator based on corresponding hunches, and then he tracked down some person who matched this image. I consider it a great credit to our judiciary system that no prosecution attorney ever actually relied upon Schoch's work.

While I explained to the sympathetically listening bartender, with my voice increasingly slurring, that the squad captain would never get the case solved like this, I suddenly saw the logic. Schoch had contacts in those very same circles in which Filbert had kept company. By simply keeping an ear to the ground, he might actually just happen to come across something useful. Besides, we were dealing with a case in which the victim had been a journalist and a politician – it was all too easy for the police to get their fingers burned. By sending Schoch, the squad captain would manage to stay in the loop more effectively under such circumstances. I found it all rather shrewd, and thus suddenly fell silent, leaving the bartender quite annoyed.

If it seems like I am expressing a sort of esteem for the captain, I should point out that I myself have never mastered this ability to manipulate people, to systematically use them as puppets to achieve some desired end of mine. This may just be due to the way I was brought up. Or it may be a result of my own innate disposition, which happens to be rather passive and observant. I've just always lacked the drive to deliberately interfere with the course of events; in the rare instances when I've actually done so, it has been motivated by some sort of pressure to expedite one stalled investigation or another. But it simply has never been my style to try to impress my ideas upon other people,

to rope them in for my own ends. In this sense, I am quite different from Filbert, who would constantly use moral pressure to try to convince us all to improve the world together with him. I am rather inclined, though, to take the facts as they are, without any compulsion to act upon them – to let things run their course. I prefer to take in the world as it really is. I just have always wanted to know what was actually going on.

Whether I was born this way or brought up this way, the fact remains that I was not cut out for a leadership role – but was rather well-suited for a position as a detective, tasked with patiently putting together the pieces of each puzzle, one by one, until the full picture would appear. That, gentlemen of the prosecution, is how I have always seen my investigative work. And this mindset has brought me some success – including ultimately my solving of the Filbert murder case, in which it turned out to be significant that the case was closely intertwined with my own life story. It is only thanks to this circumstance that the necessary information actually reached me, albeit slowly over the course of many, many years.

In this sense, Schoch was actually on the right track when he decided to come interrogate me. He triumphantly informed me that, as I belonged to the victim's close circle of acquaintances, there was simply no way around it. He then began a full-on, by-the-book interrogation, shining a bright light at my face and pressing play on a tape recorder, with a stenographer by his side to transcribe, and a harsh tone in his voice. It was quite presumptuous of him; I was truly beyond any suspicion at all, having been at the police club's annual convocation at the time of the crime. About a hundred and sixty witnesses there could testify to the fact that their fellow officer Wiederkehr

was taking full advantage of the club's open bar at the hour in question.

I paid him back accordingly. I answered each of his questions with another question, dragging every minor point out into a long, pointless discussion. And although I was often recognized for my great memory, I found myself unable to remember any facts relating to my links with Filbert. Schoch got extremely annoyed; the insidious grin was wiped off his face, he began to sweat, and eventually he had to force his words out through his tightly clenched jaw. Finally, he just had nothing more to say. I left the interrogation room without a word, and he sent the commissioner an official complaint that was summarily ignored – it's not that the commissioner particularly liked me, but rather that he shared my own dislike of Schoch.

I now intend to place on the record everything that I withheld from Schoch at that time – and more, much more. The complete history of the case, which is absolutely necessary in order to make sense of it. Because, as you will soon understand, it all actually began much earlier. It began back when Brauer, Filbert, Stöckli, and I traveled to Paris together. Or rather, even earlier, during the investigation of the murder of the proprietors of the Bürgli Restaurant. Or perhaps even much earlier, back when the four of us were in school together. In any case, I think it would be best if I start off by telling you a bit of my own background.

I, Arnold Wiederkehr, was born on April 2, 1928. The fact that I'm stuck with the surname Wiederkehr, which means “recurrence” in German, is something that I've managed to come to terms with. My grandfather, prone to a certain naïve sort of pride, had once commissioned a heraldist to create a coat of arms for the family; according to the heraldist, our surname was

actually derived from Widder, the German name for the zodiac sign Aries. But I've actually found my life to be full of all sorts of recurrences. In fact, in a way my life has almost been defined by them, as you will soon see.

On the other hand, I still have not come to terms with the name Arnold. I find it meaningless, boring, and ordinary. At school, there were always two or three Arnolds in the class. Why couldn't my parents have given me a biblical name, or maybe some other sort of classical name? Samuel Wiederkehr, or perhaps David, Adrian, or Alexander Wiederkehr – names that have substance. Such a name definitely would have eased my development while growing up, and maybe even have allowed me to carve out a better career for myself. But no – my father was named Arnold, and his father before him, and so on, throughout generations of Wiederkehrs. You'd have to go quite far back to finally find a Friedrich, which (I think you'll agree) is not really any better than Arnold.

You might not be surprised to hear, at this point, that my father was a police officer as well. Despite the passing of many years since his death, I still don't harbor quite the best memories of him. He was a man of stubborn integrity, so incredibly staunch in his adherence to regulations that he was eventually put in charge of a district police station. His favorite word was "directives" – and he knew how to torment his inferior officers, as well as his own family, with them. He didn't just follow existing rules, he also created new ones continuously – and where the scope of the police code ended, he said that life itself had certain rules. He often relied upon the abstract but ubiquitous rules of common practice and the common good: "That's just that way it's done" or "That's simply not proper" would be his final words on the matter.

He also prided himself on his strict punctuality. He would return home every day at exactly a quarter past noon, remove his uniform jacket, trade his formal shoes for slippers, go to the bathroom, and wash his hands. He would then proceed to the kitchen, where he would wait for the family to be seated and for the food to be served. I would have already turned on the radio in the living room – this was a man's task – loud enough so that we could all listen to the news from the kitchen. There was no discussion at the table until the news report ended.

As the absolute ruler over his domain, he had many ways of showing his utter lack of regard for the rest of us, such as tapping out and leaving the ashes from his acrid-smelling stogie in the sparkling white bathroom sink that my mother had just polished. He would toss the cigar itself into the toilet, and every single day it would disgust me when I would see the brownish trail along the inside of the white porcelain bowl, leading into the water where the stub itself was floating like an unflushed bowel movement. Yet, at the same time, I was fascinated by the realization that the much-vaunted system of rules and regulations did not actually apply to the one who wielded the power.

I am painting a picture of the milieu in which not just I, but also Filbert and Stöckli, grew up. Not Brauer, though; he was the son of a doctor who was always so busy that he may as well have been invisible and an excitingly beautiful mother who took all the boys' breath away. We secretly worshiped her, and would present her with the first daffodils we found each season, invariably snatching them from some park.

My mother, on the other hand – well, it's strange, but I can hardly remember her. It's not that she has been dead for so long; rather, she was simply just that

bland. You cannot imagine a less colorful person. She was bony and skinny, with grey-blond hair, faded blue eyes, lips that were thin and pale, and a sallow complexion. And even into her old age, she had a tendency to always giggle. It was her reaction to anything that happened, good or bad. I never saw my mother burst out uncontrollably, neither in laughter nor in tears. The older I got, the more this weak façade just disgusted me.

I suppose that's probably the root of my ongoing attraction to sumptuous, expressive women, though this really only manifested itself later on, after my failed marriage. Even today, for example, if I walk into a store and am greeted enthusiastically by a pretty young woman – the type that these mountains tend to produce – I immediately feel a sort of magnetic attraction to her. In fact, so much so that the otherwise motionless serpent in my pants, so to speak, begins to twitch eagerly – a damned irritation at my age, I can assure you.

I can see that I have already digressed from the focus of my report, gentlemen of the prosecution, but you will just have to get used to this. Remember that I have lots of time for winding trails of thoughts, spurred on by my memories, to unfold before me here in my solitude. It is a mild autumn day, and I am sitting here on my patio, with its intricate design of old granite slabs, surrounded by young chestnut trees that are spaced far enough apart to afford me a view down the valley. I can see wooded slopes above a stone village and, at the end of the valley, rolling bluish hills beneath a bright blue sky. I am sitting at a sturdy, weather-beaten table, and beside my typewriter is a bottle of Merlot that is quite steadily being consumed. The entire atmosphere manifests an absolute lucidity, facilitating my task of

bringing the details of the Filbert case to light. Anyway, allow me to continue.

Filbert, Stöckli, and I lived in the same residential complex full of municipal employees. We were together since kindergarten. Brauer only joined us in primary school, bringing us into contact with a new, fundamentally different world. We would tiptoe into his parents' spacious, elegantly furnished home, through its library boasting two thousand volumes (as Filbert once reverently counted), to the garage, where we would marvel at one of the few privately owned automobiles in our neighborhood, our wide-eyed young faces reflected back in its shiny black finish as its chrome parts gleamed like a king's silver treasure. Dr. Brauer himself emerged as a sort of godlike entity, one who made the final decision on whether we children were truly sick and could thus stay home from school.

From those days onwards, the four of us were inseparable. We roamed adventurously through the neighborhood and the nearby woods, played soccer in the open spaces between the apartment blocks (much to the annoyance of the local retirees, who wanted nothing more than their well-earned rest and relaxation), and terrorized the rest of our classmates. Wilhelm Brauer was the undisputed leader of our group, the one who concocted all of our plans. But our real clout actually came from Arthur Stöckli, the dumbest and strongest boy in the class. Stöckli unconditionally went along with whatever Brauer said, while sporadically following me and Filbert as well. If Brauer decided that Stöckli needed to punish one of our classmates, Stöckli, with a grin on his face, would just go ahead and start “swinging his fists like sledgehammers.” That was one of Brauer's expressions; he had his own library of children's literature, and thus

had a much richer command of language than the rest of us.

Our group only started to grow apart when Brauer enrolled in a college preparatory school, while Filbert and I attended a vocational high school. Around this time, Stöckli ran off with a small circus that passed through our town. He was soon tracked down and brought back home. After two more unsuccessful school years, he was hired as a trainee animal keeper at the local zoo.

Years later, I found out that my homeroom teacher had tried to have me sent to a college preparatory school as well. He was met with a complete lack of comprehension on the part of my father. Perhaps one reason for this was that the Second World War had broken out, and people were so busy struggling through the present that they could no longer be bothered to believe in the future. But I think that the main reason was that my father simply could not imagine such a break from the established order of our social circles. The pursuit of knowledge was ridiculed; acceptable activities included crafts, stamp collecting, hiking, and perhaps competitive sports. There was exactly one single manifestation of intellectual activity that I witnessed in my parents' house: my father regularly filling in the crossword puzzle from the local newspaper's weekend supplement, with the help of an old dog-eared pocket dictionary.

I can't say whether knowledge actually is power, but in any case it is undoubtedly a useful tool to have when dealing with life's turmoil. For a long time I cursed the fact that I had been left behind educationally due to my background, until I was finally able to make up for it. My opportunity came thanks to my transfer to the Special Investigations Department. The department

was founded in the spring of 1967, about a year after Filbert's death. At the initiative of the commissioner, the highest levels of our corps had met with representatives of the municipal council and the Federal Police at a well-equipped, private Alpine cabin, in a secret powwow that was disguised as a mountain hiking retreat. The men all knew each other from their military service days. Concerned about the revolutionary wave that was spreading across the globe at the time, they decided to create a unit dedicated to sensitive political investigations, reporting directly to the commissioner himself.

Then came the unrest of 1968. I was given the task of monitoring elements of the academic community that were suspected of subversive activities. It was inevitable that I would be required to spend many hours in the university library's reading rooms, a few tables from the subjects I was observing, behind them whenever possible. Of course, I could not simply spend hours there peering out from behind a carefully folded newspaper, without attracting attention. So I approached an old, disillusioned librarian, who happened to detest the unwashed, long-haired youth; I explained my situation to him and inquired about how the library worked. I even got my superiors to pay for the necessary library cards, which was quite remarkable given the fact that the Special Investigations Department initially had rather limited funding. The youth riots, though, made them decide to grant my request.

I began to read. At first randomly, and I admit that they were mostly books full of magnificent pictures of boldly glistening icy peaks or shiny historic brass trains or sleek supersonic fighter jets. But later, I started getting more systematic. And rather than hanging around the doors of the classrooms, I even

ventured to follow our subjects into their lectures and seminars, in the guise of an older, but all the more eager, learner. I learned whatever they had me learn, sitting in on courses in history, literature, foreign languages, sciences, and lots and lots of sociology. I even procured the relevant reading materials along with the people I was trailing. The commissioner was the kind of guy who was always up for some good-natured jest – a common trait of great men – and jokingly took to calling me “professor” in those days. I didn't always understand the lectures at the start, as my educational background was obviously lacking. But fortunately I was able to attend many basic courses, as it was mostly the younger students who were seeking out political activities during their first few semesters.

It all sometimes makes me feel like there has been a sort of balancing principle operating in the background – that somehow the very same forces that earlier denied me a higher education, later helped me get one. The scope of my education was subject to the whims of chance, but it turned out to be surprisingly broad. At the time, I was thrilled to finally be able to sip the sweet nectar of knowledge, and I soaked it up like parched soil soaks up the year's first rainfall. Nowadays, after most aspects of my life have been straightened out, much of it seems insipid, as stale as the dusty old books left behind by the man who had occupied this house before me.

A few words about him: he was a single, long-retired chemistry professor who, after having put up with so much nonsensical babbling during his academic career, decided to retreat into the peace and quiet of nature. He was apparently doing quite well here (as I infer from the letters he left behind), until he collapsed one day on the way into the village, dying

instantly. His heirs were distant relatives who had long ago forgotten that he even existed, and they sold me the house, with everything in it, at a very cheap price.

His library contains, for example, three editions of Scheffel's Ekkehard, two of Madame Bovary (one as part of Flaubert's collected works), five of De Amicis' Heart, among many other volumes from the 1800s. The collection is obviously the result of the professor having inherited various smaller collections at various points in time, and makes it clear that, as far as literature was concerned, he must have been a conventional bore – with no works at all from the twentieth century.

But I can't complain, as I made some great finds amongst his books; for example, an 1875 edition of Georges' Latin-German dictionary. I leaf through it to refresh my two semesters of (admittedly untested) Latin knowledge or to try to find etymological links for words emerging from my subconscious late at night. And in a dusty corner of the study I was delighted to discover a shelf of forensics-related books, whose entertainment value is at least equivalent to that of most crime novels. The books could serve as valuable source material for many authors, and they manifest a sort of sentimental value to a veteran detective like myself. Nearby the desk is a shelf of books on metallurgy, which I suppose must have been the old gentleman's specialty. When I revisit the subject of metalworking, it picks up a thread from a period of my youth during which I completed an apprenticeship with a locksmith, as per my father's wishes.

Josef Unteracker, the locksmith, used to manufacture bicycle racks. Despite the war, his business was booming. Maybe the army was setting up rows of bicycle racks in their facilities. Perhaps the racks could be used as backup gun mounts. Unteracker put his money

into apartment buildings that were built on a former swampland on the outskirts of the city. On Saturday mornings he would collect the rents and “look after things”. I would accompany him, while his employees cleaned up the workshop. We would drive there in an old, rattling Ford pick-up. The caretaker would be waiting for us in front of the property, with a workman if there was something that needed to be repaired. We would walk around the property, with Unteracker himself up front discussing the war with the workman, the caretaker walking in silence behind them, and finally the young apprentice Noldi bringing up the rear, doing nothing more than simply following the others around through Unteracker's empire.

But I was embarrassed to serve an emperor like Unteracker, and I would keep my distance as he castigated tenants who couldn't (or didn't want to) pay interest on late rent payments or who had the gall to complain about the complex's inadequate heating systems. He would tell them bluntly that too much heat turns people into lazy slackers, and that he had therefore instructed for the property to be heated only to the minimal extent required. Seventeen degrees Celsius should be enough, he would say, especially in these difficult times when everyone needed to stand together for the good of the country. The corners of the walls in the apartments were starting to get moldy, and even the caretaker would grumble that the cheap construction and poor heating were to blame. Unteracker would deny this, saying it was the fault of the tenants, who did not air out their apartments properly. He would then demonstrate to us all what he deemed to be the proper way to air out an apartment, using a method so complicated that it alone would keep a housewife busy for the entire day. And to conclude each visit, being a

devout churchgoer himself, he would attempt to exhort his tenants to lead more pious lifestyles.

After the end of the apprenticeship, Unteracker kept me on at his locksmith shop until my army conscription. However, he refused my bashful request for an increase in wages, a subject that I broached only on the instruction of my father, who had proclaimed one day at the dinner table that his son finally needed "to dig his heels in and learn how things work in this world."

Then came my military service, which consisted mostly of cold night marches, lonely fear, and insatiable hunger. When my service time was concluded, I applied to join the police force, following in my father's well-trodden footsteps.

My youth may have been nothing other than average. But the aftertaste that it left in my mouth, in retrospect, was bland, joyless, and utterly lacking in development. The possibilities that the world had to offer were simply not open to me. Of course, this was also partly due to my own lack of ambition. As a locksmith, I would have been very welcome on the ships of the Swiss merchant marine. If I was really desperate, I could have enlisted in the French Foreign Legion, as so many do, or even ended up pursuing a criminal career, on the other side of the fence that I ended up so zealously guarding – assuming one considers these sorts of cop-outs to involve "development" of a certain kind. And, incidentally, there is no reason to assume that Stöckli's or Filbert's prospects were any better. We would all only experience our development in later years, if at all, proportionate to the extent that our civilized city and our proper little country could continue to develop themselves on the whole. We owe most of the progress that we made to the economic boom of the sixties.

Perhaps it is only my current perspective that has given me the impression that opportunities were lacking, or were missed. However, I can clearly recall the gloomy mood in which I persisted from the time my apprenticeship began, and how it only abated when I began to stand on my own two feet professionally. As a young policeman on patrol, I would help elderly people cross the street and make sure that cyclists obeyed traffic signals at hazardous intersections in our hilly neighborhood; the uniform afforded me some prestige and a small, but not to be underestimated, amount of power.

At twenty-three, I seemed ready to start a family; unfortunately, though, I was incredibly shy around women. I could not grasp how Brauer was able to conduct himself with such ease when dealing with the opposite sex. I now understand that the advantage of his social class was really all he needed. A visit to his parents' mansion or a drive in his father's Bentley was enough to win over any young woman. But for young men like myself, the situation was quite a bit more difficult. The daughters of doctors and lawyers and businessmen were like unattainable little fairies. Even the daughters of tradesmen seemed almost as unattainable. The class barriers were rather impermeable until the fifties, despite the fact that the movies we watched would always show us that true love could win out. In practice, though, we were limited to the girls of our own social class, who were perfectly willing to be convinced to make out in a dark movie theater or an empty apartment – when the parents happened to be away and the siblings could be bribed to stay away as well. But that was as far as these girls would go. Their shrewd mothers had drilled into them the notion that they should never give up their one big trump card,

as girls of this class could lose their charms all too quickly, and those who blindly placed their trust in men were all too often left bitterly disappointed. Thus, any man who was truly interested was first required to be bound at the marriage altar.

In the case of myself and Annemarie, it can be said that her refusal to allow me to possess her propelled things forward quite fast, and that the question of whether we were actually a good match for each other was essentially ignored during our period of mindless courtship. It was undoubtedly she who married me, rather than the other way around. In a way, it was sort of inevitable that I would end up with Annemarie, as she was Stöckli's sister. Even today, though, it is not quite clear to me why I specifically pursued her, rather than any of the other girls around. Like the rest of the Stöckli family, she was not exactly bright, sort of moody, and often grumpy, but she was also pretty, resourceful, and quite bold. I would marvel at how she, herself a salesgirl, would arrogantly lash out at the staff of some other shop when she felt they deserved it. I liked her style of dress, as well as the slightly obscene manner in which she would sink her catlike body into the upholstery of an armchair, softly snuggling herself against it. But you will admit, gentlemen, that this all sounds rather ordinary – it does, in fact, seem to be the case that I married her purely for the sake of the conquest.

Our initial intimate liaisons, which never went “all the way to the end” (as Annemarie used to put it), began in the basement of our apartment block. The Stöcklis lived in the same building as us, two floors below, corresponding to Mr. Stöckli's lower ranking job – he worked for the municipal sanitation department. Everyone agreed on the fact that this corresponded to

an inferior status – it's shocking how even the lower classes choose to sub-classify themselves. By the way, even the Stöcklis did not consider themselves to be on the lowest rung of the ladder; Mrs. Stöckli was in the habit of pointing out that she would never head into the city on her free Wednesday afternoons, as the local riffraff would be out on the roads then. As for the Filberts, they had an apartment in the next building, in a better location off of the main road, and just a bit more upscale. The first automatic washing machine in our complex was located in the basement of their building. Filbert's father, as you must know, was in charge of the municipal indoor swimming pool.

Annemarie went to school with my sister Mathilde. The two of them were close friends, until the time my marriage fell apart. Mathilde was three years younger than me and grew up in my shadow. I regret the fact that, while she always looked up to me, I hardly even registered the fact that she existed. In our family, the women just didn't seem to matter. Mathilde was a quiet, good-natured child. She was pretty, if perhaps a bit too chubby. At the age of seventeen, while apprenticing as a pharmacist's assistant, she went through some sort of crisis. She was slouchy and uncommunicative for six entire months, her eyes constantly puffy from crying, and I never heard a word from her about what was going on. Afterwards, she went back to being almost exactly the same person she had been before. She married an architect at the age of twenty-two and raised two children. And she finally discovered her own body after fifteen years of quiet marriage. This happened during the same period of time in which my promotion to the Special Investigations Department was rescuing me from the tedium of the daily grind. One day, upon stopping by Mathilde's place for a

visit and discreetly observing the family as usual, my trained detective eyes suddenly noted that she had become slim and elegant, and was putting more effort into her appearance than she ever had before. Was this related to her husband's professional success? Well, I can't really say.

As we have now reached advanced ages, with our peers passing on at ever-increasing rates, she is the person who is closest to me these days. Even if we only see each other once every couple of months, I feed off this familial relationship. She worries about me, and she helped me purchase this house in which I am spending my retirement. When I was hospitalized with jaundice, she visited me as often as she could; she even wanted to set up a television by the bed, an offer that I declined, preferring to lie there in silence. My affluent brother-in-law surely would have wanted the television if he were in my place. He is buying up every last green patch of land available these days and building identical single-family homes on all of them. He looks down patronizingly at me, the policeman. He's a real backslapper, and, whenever I visit my sister, my back takes quite a beating as he lectures me about this and that. But we get along quite well. Yes, we get along quite well.

But back to my marriage. The wedding went off as per the standard script – white wedding dress, black tuxedo, a serenade by the police band, and finally a bus trip to the flowery landscapes of Thurgau with the entire Stöckli and Wiederkehr families. Brauer drove there in his own car, a Morris Ten, accompanied by his beautiful fiancée, daughter of the powerful owner of a local factory. Filbert was invited to ride in Brauer's car, which led to a bit of an argument. Filbert expressed his irritation at the contrast between the frightfully

conventional vacationing petite bourgeoisie in the tour bus and the urbane Brauer in his personal automobile. Brauer replied that it made no sense for him to climb into the bus with the others when he would be more comfortable in his own car. I agreed with him, as the Stöcklis and the Wiederkehrs would have felt uncomfortable with his presence anyway.

But Filbert remained resentful, and we had barely sat down at the garden restaurant on Lake Constance, with its fancy white tablecloths, before he started with his accusations of class-based arrogance. This made Brauer's fiancée burst out laughing, which only infuriated Filbert even more. His rage increased to the point that he almost acted upon it. He ended up leaving the festive group without saying goodbye, taking the train back home. The whole incident was hardly noticed by anyone. Except by me – I felt responsible for everything, worriedly watching over my friends, and I was glad that things didn't escalate. Two weeks later, when our weekly get-togethers at the bar recommenced, Filbert apologized – first to Brauer, then to me.

The rest of the festive day went as expected, featuring clumsy verses full of naughty innuendo, dance numbers during which everyone claimed the right to kiss the bride one last time, and the inevitable tears of the bridesmaids whose so-called gentleman escorts were more interested in indulging in liquor than in taking care of their ladies – I wish someone could explain to me why, exactly, our culture considers this the most beautiful day of one's life.

Our wedding night at a hotel on Lake Constance, after everyone else had returned home, was a disaster. I was still a virgin at the time of our marriage, but Annemarie was not. Discovering this fact immediately shot down my masculine potency, even as Annemarie

tearfully told me that she had been raped in a community garden shack, at thirteen years old, by a brutal neighbor boy (whose name, incidentally, she never divulged.)

After that unfortunate start, we were eventually shackled together by the habitualness of everyday life. It was a passionless and unexciting marriage. The housing cooperative had awarded us an apartment in the same complex in which our parents lived, with the result that our mothers assumed control over everything in our lives. A new era suddenly dawned, in which the men no longer had a say in anything that happened at home. When our parents came over to visit, our fathers would lamely retreat into a corner while our mothers explained to us how we should be living our lives. I suspect that they even influenced our sex life through Annemarie, who participated in it somewhat reluctantly for the entire duration of our marriage.

Our mothers also cooked for us regularly. Affordable food choices started to fill the market shelves in the fifties – and the shared family meals then turned into full-fledged assaults on my stomach. It was particularly the sons and sons-in-law who were stuffed full of all sorts of fare. Our fathers' excuses were the diets that had been prescribed by their doctors; the women just nibbled away.

I would sit down expectantly at the table with the family, with a good appetite, looking forward to fulfilling my basic sustenance needs. Either my mother or Mrs. Stöckli would start by serving a generous salad, along with homemade meat patties – theoretically three per person. But the women would only take one each, and our fathers no more than two; the remainder was then pushed in front of me, Noldi – apparently the only one young enough and strong enough to handle

it – without a word of explanation. And since I was not yet trained, at the time, to put up my defenses in such situations, I was unable to offer any resistance to the automatism dictated by collective reason. Afterwards, I felt full, ready to leave the table – but that had only been the appetizer. Next came the roast, accompanied by a rich potato gratin. And finally the compote, pie, and coffee. Unfortunately, I just put up with all of this.

We quickly slipped into an existence in which each and every day was exactly the same. Annemarie continued to work as a salesgirl in the department store. Maybe she had some sort of vision regarding where she was headed. I did not. I simply went and did my police work each day. I also started to undertake climbing trips with the police club on my days off. I still have photos from that time in a drawer of the huge desk left behind by the chemistry professor. They show a young Noldi – jaunty, tanned, and slim – triumphantly laughing on snowy mountain peaks and abseiling down their cliffs with his comrades.