

A Husband Stands in a Room

by Clara Henssen, transl. by Binesh Hass

She had never wished her husband away, not like many other women, thought Renate Kohldammer, when one day she found out that he had turned into a potted plant. More about this later.

Yes, Renate knew women who wished their husbands away, not exactly to hell, but maybe away for a weekend for a golf tournament in Sicily, for a week in the Caribbean, something like that. Such wishful thinking was whispered amongst wives in the intimate atmosphere of a dressing room or under the buzz of the dryer in a hair salon—very rare, but it did happen. And if it did, it was an articulation and an apology in one breath, you apologized for what you just said while you were saying it. It was a therapeutic manner of speaking, primarily intended to relieve oneself, accompanied by the vague wish that what was spoken should not leave the room, but should remain in it as in a secret box.

And even if Renate kept what she heard to herself like a good friend, it was a mistake to think that it did not leave the room, because she carried it away inside her, not only as a secret, but as a thought. And as a thought, it planted all sorts of unwanted side thoughts in her which could be described as weeds—in her and her life.

Recently, for example, she had dreamed of vacuuming and accidentally sucking up her husband, Dieter—he had disappeared into the nozzle like a dust mouse, just as light and fluffy. It had happened very quickly, quite remarkable actually considering his real weight.

This dream had certainly been a nightmare, not a dream, a nightmare, and even the psychiatrist, Professor Rothans, said so. Professor Rothans had described her dream as a nightmare and, if Professor Rothans said so, then it

was true. She had also explained in detail to Professor Rothans how she had woken up from her nightmare with a feeling of profound guilt, and how relieved she had been, very relieved, happy even, to see Dieter asleep next to her like every night and to realize that everything was the same, that Dieter was still there, that she had only dreamed, and that it was just a nightmare. A nightmare into which she had not initiated her husband, of course.

"What a horrible idea to suck up one's own husband, isn't it?" Renate had said to Professor Rothans, plucking a tissue from the tissue box provided for patients, expecting some tears she had intended to shed for poor Dieter at this point.

It was a bit frustrating that Professor Rothans was unimpressed by the imminent tears and had continued undeterred:

"Let's go back to your nightmare for a moment, Mrs. Kohldammer. Can you tell me exactly what happened after your husband disappeared into the vacuum cleaner?"

"What do you mean?" Renate asked.

"Well, what did you do with the vacuum cleaner?"

"Oh, well," replied Renate, with a newfound lump in her throat, "I pulled the cord out of the socket, pressed the button that automatically pulls the cord into the vacuum cleaner, and put the vacuum cleaner back in the closet."

"Did you do anything else with the vacuum cleaner bag and your husband inside it? Dispose of the bag, or open it ... or replace it?" asked Professor Rothans.

"Well, I left my husband in the vacuum bag even though he called for me," Renate answered and laid her hands in her lap, kneading them excitedly like a schoolchild who had been summoned to the headmaster's room and was now awaiting her punishment.

But the punishment did not come, for Professor Rothans only remained silent, and so did she—his silence was the room-creating silence of a psychiatrist, hers the anxious silence of a wife who had briefly looked into her inner life as if peeping through the window of a stranger's house. And soon the therapy session was over and Renate went home with a queasy feeling in her stomach and still the dry tissue from Professor Rothan's therapy room in her clammy hand.

So, when Renate found out that her husband had turned into a potted plant, it was terribly absurd, but not a surprise, because she had guessed that something was coming.

A moment ago Dieter had been sitting in his beloved wingback chair, dozing in and out of sleep with Haydn's Piano Concerto in D Major in the background while reading the book, *A Culinary Journey of Discovery through Southern and Eastern Styria*. His mouth was ajar and his right nostril twitched to the rhythm of the music, or perhaps to the rhythm of his pulse, Renate thought as she bent over and took off his false gold glasses, placing them on the table in front of him. Normally his spectacles remained safely on the hump of his nose, but this time they had slipped passed the hump and onwards to the tip of his nose because he was perspiring more than usual these days. Or so Renate thought, for Dieter had stopped his diet and was eating red meat again, sweating like the old days.