

#Leavetheshitbehind

Do not get involved; you are already involved. You are whatever happens to you - and it serves you right.

*Misch dich nicht ein, du bist eingemischt. Was geschieht, bist du. Es geschieht dir recht.
Friedrich Dürrenmatt (famous Swiss author and philosopher of the 20th century)*

Though written from a single man's point of view, the present text is not meant to be a contribution to the gender debate or the #MeToo movement, for that matter. Nevertheless, I am fully conscious of the fact that this story may be interpreted and read in this way.

Introduction

Since last year, I have been living under the same roof as a cat, a very big tomcat, to be exact, a cousin of Garfield, yet not quite as greedy as him. Admittedly, it was not my personal choice to let the cat into the house. I share the place with a housemate, whose cat it is, which is why I could not simply say no.

Naguro is the name of the creature, which has now gained my affection, after several months of inner resistance to this unusually large and long-haired tom, who occasionally sheds tufts of fur and also pulls it out himself, which I still find repellent. Once or twice, for instance, when preparing a salad, wisps of Naguro's white-reddish hair could be seen floating silently airborne toward the kitchen sink and falling into the salad spinner. This and the like did not make it any easier for me to accept this living arrangement, this ménage à trois in a small house.

Hello my friend, leave the shit behind! xoxo kitty

So, let's start. I emptied the letter-box. The usual mail, bills, flyers, etc. But in among them was the very first of a series of dozens of postcards, which would keep coming for weeks, and all of which somehow miraculously found their way into my letter-box. Only after three months did the flood finally die out. At the beginning of October, well over a hundred cards adorned a whole wall in the study. The theme was always the same with nuanced variations. In vain I searched for a sender. The cards were sent from all over Switzerland, some even posted from neighbouring countries. Sometimes three or four cards were waiting for me in the mailbox the same morning. When I held the very first postcard in my hands, I was rooted to the spot. At first I was astonished, disbelieving, then almost trembling – and finally simply grateful. Thank heavens! I studied the skillfully made sketch: the garden bench – our garden bench, Francesca's and mine – and a cat were depicted. In the background the small bench, a stylized cat turd on it. In the foreground the innocently behaving cat trotting away nonchalantly, head and tail alike erect, as if it did not care about the whole thing and as if this excrement was the last thing it would leave behind and with which it should have anything to do. The sketch was titled "Chin up – leave the shit behind". Others were titled "Hit that shit and leave it behind" and "Leave the shit behind"; and "Laugh and leave the shit behind"; again others with "Leave the shit behind – karma is a bitch" or "Garden bench with shit for sale".

Before the arrival of the redeeming first card I had woken up for days with morning thoughts which were as gloomy as those the previous day, as those the day before that, and like those on the day before that. I was feeling as much trapped as the cynical TV weather man Connors (Bill Murray) from the movie "Groundhog Day", who is condemned to live the nightmare of the same day repeated over and over again, and who consequently tries to kill himself. It was not that bad for me but, like him, I did not know what else to do either. A festering, paralyzing despair, nourished by a lack of determination, had spread throughout me. And I simply could not come up with a suitable remedy to escape my ever spinning thoughts.

Your karma loves you. And you will love your karma – karma is a bitch

Fight or flight? Should I start a fight with that headmistress? Should I send her the letter I had written and put in an envelope, in order to let her know of the legal situation of the matter in question? *Threaten legal action against her, the way it seems to be commonplace these days?*

Or else, just let that matter rest? Try to forget it as quickly as possible; try to repress it as best I can? Anyway, I would be having no further dealings with either the principal or that young primary school teacher in the future. Nevertheless, I was really feeling worried. I was not out for any kind of confrontation whatsoever. Was my apprehension not justified, and not in the least neurotic? How many

times over the past years had one heard or read about men who found themselves constrained to fight tenaciously for their good reputation? Which often meant that there was some damage done to it already; and, bruised and battered, those men had no other choice but to work hard at damage control.

Being a person who is quite indecisive when it comes to major conflicts, I walked to the letter-box a zillion times and, stopping there, I would manage to open the slot but not to post the letter. I feared too much the consequence of what would then follow. I feared my writing could indeed have a self-defeating effect with the result that I would not find my peace of mind. So, back in the house, I would put that letter in a certain place with the office supplies – only to suffer then from *decido-phobia* all over again.

It was thanks to that amazing first postcard – being the merciful antidote which had worked like magic – that I could finally breathe easily again; that I managed to banish the perpetual inner cinema from my mind effectively. Art, reduced to the size of a postcard, had brought me back to daylight successfully, after a painful period of a fortnight in which I had hit rock bottom.

In the course of the following days and weeks the cat postcards, which arrived reliably in the letter-box a couple of times each week, served as an effective therapeutic agent for me to restore my psychic balance – and my confidence in the opposite sex. A kind of messenger of the Gods seemed to have taken pity on me, the poor devil, to show me the way: Leave the shit behind. Let it be. *Lahs eifach sii.* (meaning “just let it be” in Swiss-German)

Sh, I just came and left the shit behind

I was lying in bed snoozing, with the window open. My peace was disturbed by the sound of a cat right below in the garden. Deep, long, grumbling sounds were in the air. As I thought, the neighbour's male cat was again harassing the female cat of another neighbour.

Territorial fights, with me and Francesca right in the middle. Although the annoying meowing came from the cat Lia, my sympathy was clearly on her side. I dressed and went down to the backyard. Wild Lia was lying belly down on our garden bench, looking through the planks where the big tomcat was staring confidently back at her, very close, just one paw's blow away. I went straight downstairs to shoo away the pesky beast. The calm was restored and the danger averted. And still, Lia continued making a deep growling sound, not as loudly as before, but still clearly audible. I wanted to soothe her and stretched my hand out to stroke her back. That turned out to be a mistake. Unfortunately, I had not taken into account Lia's lingering stress and with this, the slightest of touches, she sprang away as if bitten by an adder and, at the same time, she pooped and pissed at one go onto the garden bench. She then bolted to a neighboring garden to hide.

What a gift! Not only had I taken sides with Lia for weeks and had accepted her in my garden, but quite a few times I had chased the neighbour's tomcat away so he would stay in his own territory – well, thank you very much!

I went straight back to the kitchen to get something to scrub the

furniture clean. It stank far less than I had expected. Anyway, I may have been hyperventilating at that very moment causing me to notice the stench less.

I wanted any trace of this mishap to disappear fast; as if I aimed at erasing the whole intermezzo from my memory as quickly as it had occurred just some minutes before. It was a wasted effort, as one might imagine.

Francesca and her cute Mexican friend, who would stay as a guest at our home for a week, came round the corner to the backyard where I was still busily wiping away the last bits of crap. What happened, Cesca wanted to know.

I got up from my crouching position and started to tell them in English, confusedly, what I had experienced shortly before. Most of the annoyance had faded, so I was able to entertain them with this still fresh story. Hearty laughter was their answer. More questions. Guffaws of laughter, after some more explanations.

Really, that story was just hilarious. Really. Yes, surely it was – as long as you were not personally involved in that mess. You see, in a certain sense the real crap on the bench had a symbolic significance for me. The poop on the bench could be got rid of without further ado. What was yet to come in mid 2016 on the other hand, what fate had in store for me then, within one fortnight, was what I sometimes felt to be one big load of real stinking, steaming bullshit, something only mankind is able to produce and something in which I feared drowning at the beginning of a hot, sticky summer. *Mud sticks.*

Better be clever and leave the shit behind

Rarely had I been so nervous in my role as an intercultural interpreter. The group, larger than normal, included four members of the local school council, plus a teacher, plus the problem parents. Prior to the meeting, the head of the school council had warned me that the mother was someone who could not be negotiated with. Hence the round-table discussion and the reason they had decided to bring me in to mediate.

The husband, in a suit, sitting on my left, was an expat banker. He reeked, and the longer the discussion went on, the more he stank. It was the kind of stress-induced perspiration of a person who feels extremely uncomfortable and who therefore would have preferred to be elsewhere. This conflict between the Swiss authorities on the one hand, and his wife's unrealistic and presumptuous demands on the other was clearly not something he was used to dealing with. I immediately associated the corpulent wife who was sitting to my right with Niki de Saint Phalle's *ange protecteur*. She seemed fully relaxed, self-composed, poised to attack or repel equally, akin to a female sumo wrestler. Nice prospects!

During the long discussion and in its pauses, the teacher (who was undoubtedly the person to blame, in the eyes of the girl's mother), the secretary, and the Head of school council in particular, looked to me for help and advice. I understood those looks as an invitation to drop my role as an impartial intermediary and to side with the school authorities instead. That would have meant violating the counselors' charter which requires remaining strictly impartial. For once, it was

not difficult for me to break that professional commitment, once faced with this self-centered angel. After dispensing with impartiality, quasi officially, my jitters were overcome and I seemed to be given wings in this present case. Eventually the sumo-angel was wrestled down.

Ultimately, not only the interests of the school authorities were safeguarded, but the case was also settled in favour of the child who could be transferred to another class the following term.

After an hour and a half I left the meeting giving the excuse that I had another appointment.

I wanted to get away as fast as possible and leave this room still charged with tension and filled with stale air.

An evening in the world of shit

Back home I shoved a pizza in the oven, poured a glass of wine and smoked a cigarette. Later a small joint maybe, to celebrate the united forces' victory over the sumo-angel .

My home is my castle. That moment I couldn't have cared less about what was going on in the world. I had made it through the day. I was about to pat myself on the back. My command of English, huh, I shouldn't have worried about it.

After I scoffed half the pizza, I get a text-message:

“Hey, leave my girl-friend Johanna alone! I know what kind of game you're playing“.

Pardon me? What was that now? Wasn't it possible for a man to have his peace, once in a while? I had accepted I would never hear from

her again. Until not so long before, say a couple of weeks, we were sharing a job at a primary school. Obviously, Johanna's boyfriend had got wind of the fact that, from time to time, Johanna had given me a blowjob over lunchtime, to relax my mind from the exhausting school routine! He must have heard that we had given each other shoulder massages now and then. As a matter of fact, nothing whatsoever happened, in the sense that the upset boyfriend – behind whom, however, I intuitively suspected Johanna herself from the very first moment – should have good reasons to be seriously concerned. My nerves being quite frayed and, on top of that, half the pizza practically cold, I answered outright undiplomatically:

“Eh, what are you saying, pal? Nothing is going on with Johanna and me. Nothing is... and nothing has... You don't have to worry at all. And now just leave me alone, will you... you prick?”

And, since I had had to pull myself together that afternoon quite a bit anyway, I sent him or her a second message:

“PS: Let me tell you another thing, Johanna, in case it's you pretending to be your boyfriend texting me here... I want you to know that when there's a problem, there are better ways to communicate than by texting”.

Did I see through her?

I was left in peace finally and ate another quarter of the pizza but the tranquility did not last for long.

Johanna was at least fifteen years my junior. We got on well together. Towards the end of my employment I had asked her to lunch with me in the garden at my place. I would have liked to stay in touch with her. Her reaction was evasive. I did not persist. On the

very last workday I placed a gift-wrapped educational book in her bookcase, along with a farewell card.

Hit that shit – and leave it behind

In a formal and very short email, I was informed by the principal that I would not be part of the teachers' soccer team on the upcoming sports day.

Sincere regards. Wishing me well, once again.

A friendly dis-invitation without any further explanation. A cheek and a provocation.

After all, I had been working at that school for almost one semester and had been very involved with second graders who were not that easy to cope with. I was aware from the outset that the principal didn't find me likeable. At the job interview, for whatever reason, she could hardly look me in the eyes. While speaking she stared at her notes or at the table rather than looking at me. Quite unforgettable.

I had been looking forward to returning to the school and playing football in the teachers team against the pupils.

I wanted to get to the bottom of it all; I needed a clear justification from the headmistress. I e-mailed her and also phoned her one or two days later. She was probably expecting to get a telephone call from me, as well as the e-mail.

Since I had been disinvited from that sports-day event so suddenly due to that serious, yet unfounded allegation of harassment against me, I wanted to talk to the person responsible on the phone for a

couple of minutes, at least.

If necessary, I could still submit a statement in writing.

What the heck is going on here, I asked, audibly agitated. I cut through the shit without further ado. Impossible to keep cool and collected – no need to, either.

What is this? This dis-invitation? How dare she do that?

Johanna had contacted her to say that I had been pestering her. That is why she had met Johanna's request. The young teacher would feel ill at ease if I showed up on the school grounds again for the sports day. The headmistress could confirm, though, that no one knew about these allegations, except for Johanna and herself.

Plus, my employment at the school had come to an end weeks ago, hadn't it? So...?

Aha, I see, we are talking about harassment, but please, don't be afraid pal, it will stay between us.

This is none of her business, I told her. In fact, the whole story between Johanna and me doesn't concern her at all. It is strictly a private matter and has nothing to do with school affairs. She should keep out of this since this is just not within the range of her duties. And, if she had wanted to take action, it would have been fair and correct to point out to Johanna that someone accused should have an opportunity to present his side.

However, I am conscious that Johanna is permanently employed, while my employment was only temporary.

The school sports day did not take place. The weather happened to be so bad on that day, as well as on the following spare dates, that the event was finally cancelled.

They all just leave the shit behind! Who left the shit behind?

A persistent high-pressure area meant for perfect summer weather. Francesca was out already and I was at home, alone with our holiday guest Catalina. As is often the case, when I am free in the late morning, I was sitting at the kitchen table over coffee and bread and jam, a book in my hands.

Catalina came into the kitchen, wished me a good morning and stepped into the adjacent bathroom, after some pleasant small talk. A few moments, I interrupted my read. It was not what I was reading, though, that made me sit up and put the book on the table, no, my attention was captured rather by unexpected sounds from inside the bathroom.

Catalina was obviously trying to lock herself in, which, however, was a hopeless undertaking since the key in the lock doesn't turn. Our bathroom can't be locked. My book still on the table, I was waiting to see what would happen next. Believe it or not, at first it did not occur to me to simply shout to Catalina that she could not lock that door, that its key would not work. I was gazing at the bathroom door and, spellbound, was listening to her futile attempts to lock that fucking door. No luck! Several minutes must have passed since the moment Catalina had closed the door. Or, maybe time had stretched to an unbelievable extent as the tension made minutes out of seconds? I pictured the feelings of exasperation and stress Catalina was getting into. She did not utter one single sound; and, she did not open the

bathroom door either to ask me about that non-working lock. The final scene from *Shining* crossed my mind where Jack, gone completely mad, is smashing the toilet door with a big axe, miming the evil wolf at his wife:

Let me i-in, little pigs – let me i-in! – Or I'll huff, and then I'll puff and I'll blow your house in!

Well, I have known the big bad wolf merely from tales, whereas the poor little pigs are emotionally still much more familiar to me.

Eventually, I called out to Catalina in English that there was no use in trying to lock the bathroom door, since its key doesn't work. Today, I cannot remember if Catalina responded to my words. Anyway, just a few moments later, she had stepped into the shower cabin because I could hear the shower water, distinctly. Or had she? Or had she merely turned on the tap and let the water run in order to tell me that everything was fine with her? Had she instead not even undressed and taken a shower, from sheer fear?

F*... s*..., f*...! Why on earth did Cesca have to tell her friend about Johanna and me? Why could she not have kept quiet and told Catalina about that conflict later? What about loyalty among house mates? Could she not see what she was bringing about by telling her mate?

Couldn't she see how she was creating distrust of me in Catalina? Not merely empty rhetorical questions, meant in a plaintive and accusatory way, no. These are questions which are still unanswered and will likely remain unanswered.

How could Francesca do that to me?

One or two days after the, um, *Shower-Gate*, as it were, I confronted

Cesca with my suspicions, while Catalina was out. Although her reaction did not show many signs of regret, she openly admitted that I was right with my guess. Betrayal. Breach of trust. I turned away from her, swearing. We did not talk about that scene either during the days that followed, nor much later.

Whenever Cesca was out during the remaining days of Catalina's stay, when she and I were alone in the house, we were treating each other with extra care, like: Imagine Catalina and me having fatefully ended up along with my small terraced house on a deserted island, and now she had to make sure not to awaken the wild animal in me. I played my part. Alas, I was playing my part well, as mild as a dove.

#Leave the shit behind

I owe Francesca a lot. I bear her no ill will. The #Leavetheshitbehind postcard-scheme was her idea. It was not until late fall, though, at the #Leavetheshitbehind party, that I heard first-hand from her who the initiator of that campaign was. It was she herself, she said to me offhandedly. I wiped away her claim, slightly drunk. Anyone could say that. I preferred to believe that one or several persons with whom I had no dealings whatsoever were responsible for that postcard campaign. Needless to say, more than once I had asked around among friends and acquaintances, those who could have been involved: Now tell me! Admit it! Was it you?

True, the only one who was up to starting and pulling off that kind of

project was Francesca. The high quality, the diversity of design techniques, and the sheer number of cards: all this carried her fingerprint. She was the one in my circle of acquaintances who knew many others who could readily take part in this plot. Also, she may have seen fit to start that remarkable postcard campaign out of sympathy for me, so as to set things right again. On the other hand, one year later, the whole campaign turned out to be somewhat of a double bind. Cesca had posted, to my taste, rather unflattering party photos on Facebook claiming that I was too soft to burn the #Leavetheshitbehind cards for real, as I had announced I would. Which is not true.

I guess the making of the postcards must have been terrific fun. Furthermore, thinking of the way she and her team were providing me with those anonymous cards over months and were witnessing my reactions in real time; the way Cesca and I spoke at length about postcards, she, the handicraft teacher, speaking expertly about them sometimes, without batting an eyelid, or revealing anything at all: doesn't all of this speak volumes about my former housemate Francesca?

One year ago, after three and a half years of living together under the same roof (a long time after that party), I fell in love with Francesca. Shortly before, she had disclosed to me she was going to move out by early summer. Almost at the same time, I had got the impression that the end of her then, relationship was close. Just the night before, when Cesca indeed informed me about the break-up with Martin, I dreamt I was on a lonesome hiking tour on a glacier and, when

ascending, I got caught in an avalanche but would finally land, after a very, very long slide, safe and sound in a warm bed, beside my Francesca.

I invited her to weigh in with her opinion on this present text. Though I meant business, she did not respond to my offer. I would have liked to give her a say in it.

I am still fond of her – a bit less than before, maybe – in spite of her incidental *Katzenfreundlichkeit*. Whenever we see each other in the backyard, Francesca and I say hello, sometimes. For she did not move away far from my home, you see, merely a stone's throw away.*

Then sometimes we do not greet, and ignore each other instead. Kind of like cats are used to doing.

* In German the proverb goes (someone is) „just one cat's jump away“.

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A shortened version of this text – the politically correct version so to say – was published in the Swiss magazine ERNST in September 2019:

<https://www.ernstmagazin.com/archiv.html>

#11 ERNST Das Gesellschaftsmagazin für den Mann / Das Tier und wir

#11 ERNST Men's Alternative Magazine / Pets and Us

This text and all the #Leave-the-shit-behind pictures are protected by copyright. I would especially like to thank Francesca for the terrifically noble idea of her

postcard campaign. All the names of the persons that occur in the text are changed. The names of the cats Lia and Naguro were retained unchanged. The italicized titles correspond with some of the slogans on the postcards.