

## Die Ordnung in Intercourse

Leaning close enough to lick the mirror, Esther tucks a wisp of hair under the organdy prayer cap. She clutches the Penny Saver to her bosom and considers heading to the health screening clinic early. Going there before they open will only lead to frustration. Esther tugs at the waist of her blue dress and matching apron pinned just below the collar. Her practical shoes are silent as she drifts into a stall of the Walmart bathroom.

She and Amos are expecting their second baby. The first died a few weeks prior to delivery after an uneventful pregnancy. This time, rather than going to the hospital, she will have a midwife. She wishes the bishop could convince English doctors to make house calls.

Once seated on the toilet, Esther opens the Penny Saver and studies the clinic ad. She cannot squander any more time before it opens. She and Amos agreed to have lunch at McDonald's. He loves their fries, which Esther finds too salty. Amos hates to wait for meals and if she's late, he'll surely let loose on her, which will only result in her feeling miserable the rest of the day. In a flurry she crushes the paper between her large palms and tosses it in the used pad dispenser.

Esther leans from her perch on the toilet seat over the folded material of her dress between her knees and inspects her swollen ankles. Her feet are achy, especially her baby toes. She recalls how her mother would immerse stale bread in milk to make a foot bath, an Amish alternative to fancy store-bought treatments.

When I get home, she thinks, I'll crumble up some bread and drench it in milk. Bathing my feet will do wonders for my mood.

Esther figures she'll feel better after lunch and blames her mood on a dip in blood sugar. Earlier that morning she hadn't bothered to finish her cup of St. John's wort. She scrubs her

hands in water so hot it scalds her scaly fingers. She delights in the soap's almond smell before rummaging in her purse for a handful of walnuts.

She checks her watch. "Time for Amos," she tells the mirror.

Like a snowy owl scouting prey, Amos sits on a window ledge in front of McDonald's. "You didn't buy anything."

"Nothing caught my interest." Esther feels barren but forces a smile. Inside the restaurant she gestures at the wall menu behind the cashier. "I'm hungry enough to devour an entire meal myself. Do you mind, Amos?"

He leans in to rub her hard belly. "My lovely Mrs. Kuepfer, it would please me greatly."

Esther twists from his stalking hands. "Amos." She forks out of reach. "What if people see?"

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Amos adjusts the bridle bit in his horse's mouth and finger-measures the depth of the throat latch before climbing onto the bench of the *dach wagnle*. Esther sits on the extreme far right of the buggy bench. An indigo cloud crouches on her shoulders. The salty fries regurgitate into her mouth. The trip-trot of Belle's hooves, the sway of the buggy, and a red fox offer no pleasure. She fondles a pilfered toy soldier and a drink umbrella concealed in her dress pocket. The clutch of self-loathing is putty lumped in her throat. When Amos attempts small talk, Esther sulks, her lips sutured with catgut.

Once home, Amos stows the *dach wagnle* in the shed and leads Belle to pasture. Esther sits under the quaking aspen, the garden hoeing postponed until after she soaks her feet.

Amos tugs a blue hanker-chief from his pants' pocket and mops his brow. "You need a rest after our busy day in town?" he asks.

Esther pays him no mind.

Amos sprawls on the grass and studies his wife of two years. Living with Esther has been a trial most days and not something he can bring up with just anyone. His parents live in Millerstown, too far away for a quick visit. He is aware everyone has their troubles and Esther's demons are theirs and theirs alone. Amos wonders privately if all Amish wives descend into darkness. He recalls how angry and unpredictable Esther's own mother could be, that is until last summer when her husband died. His death seems to have freed her up. When Amos was courting Esther, he recalled Esther's mother spending many weeks cooped up at Philhaven Home. Amos stops looking at Esther and peers down the lane-way past her into a distance of his own.

"Not talking now, Esther?" Amos says, guarding his eyes by holding a hand along the ridge of his forehead.

Esther's chin flattens to her chest. What she has resembles a virus. Some days she feels as if she's returned from sabbatical charged with the promise to do what is expected in the kitchen, garden, and in bed. Other times a cinder block crushes her chest threatening to explode her lungs and shove her organs to unnatural places. She draws a tentative breath. Esther studies the mush caressing her feet, its odour much like rising dough. She leans toward the pan and scrapes the pulp between her toes.

"The foot soak helping?" Amos asks. He removes his going-to-town hat and finger-combs his auburn bangs.

Esther clutches the arms of the lawn chair with white knuckles. "Amos, quick. There, above your lip. There's a woolly bear."

Esther shrieks until Amos swats away the imagined bug before cradling a hand over hers.

"It's just my mole," Amos says. "Another episode?"

Esther stands, steps from the pan of mush, and turns toward the house, leaving a trail of goop on the freshly cut grass. “The hoeing will have to wait,” she says, waving at Amos. Esther heads for the bedroom. It is four o’clock. Another night he’ll have to scrounge supper.

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A few weeks later, Esther erupts into spontaneous labour. Amos paces the bedroom while her knees remain bent and her lips pursed. They follow the *Ordnung* tutored by the Amish bishop and don’t subscribe to a telephone. Amos, while reluctant to leave, must go and fetch the midwife. He hitches Belle to the *dach waglie*. By the time Amos gets back, it is too late and the support of the midwife is past due. They find Esther clinging to the naked body of a baby boy, the umbilical cord wrapped tight around the rigid baby’s neck. Esther tries to coax the infant to suckle by rubbing a nipple against his limp cheek.

Amos begs, “Esther, please.” He nods for the midwife to take their son away.

After a simple funeral, Esther heals physically as anticipated of a strong Amish wife. Late one night, Amos awakens to a rasping sound coming from downstairs. His socked feet pat the wooden steps to the cellar where he spots Esther. He speaks so gently he sighs. “Esther, what are you doing?”

His voice, despite its softness, startles her. She jumps off her seat knocking the stool over. It clunks when it collides with the concrete floor. Her face blossoms red and sweaty. She thrusts her fists on her hips and spits. “What does it look like? I’m papering.”

A bucket of homemade glue sits to her left. A paint brush sticks to the floor. Shiny magazine cut-outs with crimson lips and garish purple glasses fret from the concrete wall across from Esther.

“Won’t you come to bed now?” Amos says.

With jagged eyebrows and sharpness never before uttered by Esther, she says, “Amos Kuefer, don’t you ever tell me what to do again.”

In Esther’s eyes he detects a flash of crimson. She is so enraged she is snarling and snapping at him. He watches her lips move. The words tumble out so fast he cannot always make sense of what she says. The pitch reminds him of a rabid dog his family had when he was a boy and Amos can still recall the sound of the gun his father used to put the dog down. When Amos bends forward to console Esther, she whips around and squirts out of his reach. In her hand, she brandishes the scissors she’d just been using to cut pictures from the magazines. With great speed, she stabs the damp air between them.

“Esther, really, that’s enough.”

“Why? What are you going to do about it?” She thrusts the blade at his midsection.

She’s worse, he thinks, than his boyhood dog. He is faced with deciding what is best: run to the shop to get the horsewhip or just give her space.

When Amos turns to mount the cellar stairs, Esther mutters over and over, “Coward. Nothing but a weak ole coward.”

From the top of the cellar stairs, he whispers, “It’s for the best, Esther.” He pivots and heads back up to bed.

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Later in the month, an Amish healer offers Amos powwow charms, tinctures, and teas to help quash the demons within Esther. Amos also decides to hire a teenaged girl to help out.

“Susannah, make Esther her special tea,” Amos orders.

*More tea?* Susannah thinks. Her face takes on a disturbed, arrested look.

Within days Susannah records the peculiarities in the home. She jots in a red Moleskine, a gift from her grade eight teacher. Susannah conceals her notes under a mattress in the bedroom

next to where Esther rests. The floorboards outside her room creak as Amos goes to check on Esther once more before heading out to the shop.

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Every day Esther is the same, switching between pacing in front of the kitchen cook stove and arguing with Amos about such small, insignificant issues, like whether it'll rain soon or if the onions need hoeing. Amos offers her a liquorice root tonic. He massages her heels and Achilles tendons. He rubs a pearl-sized amount of mentholated liniment on her temples. She responds by shrieking at him or falling face-down onto the kitchen table in a fit of tears. One day, Amos plucks a strand of hair from her pillow and takes it for metal poisoning analysis, but skips the results. He steers the *dach waglie*, instead, to the bishop, who nods and advises him to get himself home and procreate. "Your wife needs to fill your home with sons."

A few mornings later, Esther vanishes from the bedroom. Gloomy smudges linger under Amos' bloodshot eyes. "You're with her a lot, Susannah. What have you noticed?" he asks.

Susannah considers. "Last week when she finally got up mid-afternoon, she wandered the yard for hours before heading for the road. She stood so close to traffic it was a miracle she wasn't hit."

Amos settles a finger on his lips. "Keep this quiet. Best not upset our community."

Susannah doesn't tell Amos that, after the road incident, Esther turned up in the summer kitchen half-naked and in a state of heightened arousal. Later that night, Susannah's pencil turned red hot and threatened to spark a flame she wrote so feverishly in her Moleskine.

Amos pines for someone with whom to confide. His family is too far away. He has no brothers. His cousins all have their own families and farms to worry about. Amos can't be confiding in the hired help, yet that's what he finds himself doing. He figures no one else would understand anyhow. Besides, this whole Esther business is embarrassing.

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The next morning Susannah checks on Esther, who is lumped under a mound of covers despite the early heat of the day. From deep under the blankets, Esther says, “Somebody, get me a bedpan.”

Susannah stands quietly watching and waiting in the doorway of the bedroom. Nothing physical prevents Esther from getting up to use the outhouse. Susannah stomps to the shop where Amos is slicing leather.

Amos pours coffee from a thermos. He looks up to find Susannah’s burning gaze.

Susannah sits on a stool opposite Amos. “Forgive me, but I never signed up for this. I’ve been offered work at the Swartzendruber’s,” she explains.

“But, I, we need you. Won’t you reconsider?” he asks. “It’ll be tight, but I might be able to pay a bit more money.” Her silence is his answer.

Susannah pivots back to the house to pack.

Amos keeps records of his observations in a scribbler he keeps in a drawer with his bookkeeping journal. His face shows strain from balancing business with household needs. Esther just has to smarten up and pull her weight, he thinks. He hems and haws all morning and decides later that afternoon to slip by his mother-in-law’s to seek her help.

His mother-in-law’s hair is fastened in a tight knot at the base of her head. She has a humpback. She studies him from behind round, steel-rimmed glasses. His mother-in-law leans forward and pours him a cup of tea.

Amos doesn’t know quite how to bring up his problems with her daughter and is relieved when his mother-in-law puts a calming hand on his.

“She’s begging for help, Amos. Don’t miss this opportunity to do something.”

Amos is tempted to ask his mother-in-law to have Esther live with her, but as the man of the house Esther is now his problem.

He chews a callous along his thumb before saying, “Truth be told, all this feels way beyond me.”

“And you know I’ve done my part,” she says. She captures a rogue strand of hair and slides it under her prayer cap. “Go home and try harder. Be the good man I know my daughter married.”

She goes to a drawer and retrieves a cell phone for Amos. “You need this more than I.”

His immediate hunch is to wave off the offer of the cell phone, but he reconsiders and pockets the device. After, seated on the bench of the *dach waglie*, Amos lifts his face to the rise and fall of a gentle wind. Birdsong faintly sounds from the meadows along the gravel road. He considers with mixed emotions if he ought to keep going down the road, past his farm and business, leaving Esther to fend and figure things out on her own. But he knows what the others in the community would say about him if he abandoned his responsibilities.

The last few nights Amos has been bedding on the sofa; uncomfortable but it beats the floor. Every night before retiring he checks Esther. And this night is no different. As soon as he enters the hall, sweat rivers his spine. In the dim bedroom light he detects a head slumping from the quilt-covered mattress. He grasps an empty orange pill bottle from the mat beside the bed and throws it at the wall. A pungent smell of vomit knocks him into action. He punches 9-1-1 into the cell phone. He feels humiliated as he is forced to reveal to the dispatcher that his Amish wife has tried to kill herself.

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The bishop excuses Amos from worship so a neighbour can drive him to Philhaven on Sundays. The smell of sulphur from a nearby steel mill mugs Amos when he steps from the black Oldsmobile.

Children of Philhaven patients kill time on a wooden bench in a murky foyer. Amos spots a youngster plucking paper, a knitting kit, and a box of crayons from a plastic bag. From her pocket she pulls a wax paper packet. Amos detects the scent of summer sausage. A man with a mocha complexion wearing a blue uniform stands guard at a locked door to the unit. He is there every Sunday, too. The girl creates stick people with a black crayon.

She looks up at Amos. She opens her mouth to speak, then thinks better of it.

“You waiting for someone?” Amos asks. Her eyes flicker. He steps closer until he is beside her.

She empties the tiny box. Two crayons spill to the floor. The girl stands on the bench and shoves the wax paper at Amos. “Want some?” she asks.

Amos opens his palm. He points at the crayons. “Where are the others?”

“Mommy ate them.”

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At times like this, Amos regrets moving so far from his parents. Fifty miles is an impractical distance to travel by buggy. He is positive by now that the community thinks he’s a bad husband, a man who hasn’t successfully kept his wife in order. Maybe the bishop is right. Maybe they need to try to make another baby.

Amos sets a wide-brimmed black felt hat over his auburn locks before again seeking counsel from the bishop. When he is honest with himself, Amos pines for a flat crowned hat, the kind worn only by Amish fathers. Amos glances into a hand mirror and wonders if Esther will be home from Philhaven in time to trim his bangs.

Amos stares into the bishop's canvas green eyes. "Am I the only one?"

The bishop snorts into a hanky. "This congregation just doesn't comprehend the troubles you face. Through prayer you'll find the way, Amos."

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In the common room at Philhaven Esther licks sugar from the heel of her hand and rocks on the orange chair. A foursome nearby plays cribbage. An unlit cigarette perches on one of the player's lips, his hand swiping at imaginary ashes. A female player slurps from a mug, the sound bouncing off the metal screening that separates patients from the kitchen.

Esther sips coffee. It tastes burnt. Her mouth is as dry as pocket lint. Dr. Bradshaw said Amos saved her life. How it's now up to Esther to grow up and face her illness. The pills he prescribes devour Esther's memory so sometimes she checks the pills and spits them into the toilet. Something as simple as choosing between white or whole wheat buns at dinner confuses her.

Esther checks the time. She watches patients from another unit exercise in the fenced yard. Three more minutes until Amos comes. Her chair looks crooked. She stands and repositions it. Again and one more time. The chair's feet rasp like a dog kicking a foot to dust its ear.

One of the other residents yells, "Shut up, will you? We're trying to play cards."

Soft foot steps indicate Amos is coming for her. With exaggerated effort, Esther lifts her head. Patients here drag their feet when they walk. Amos slides the chair along the polished tile floor and sits.

She sticks a finger in the cup and stirs. "I made you coffee."

"Thanks." He sets the summer sausage next to her hand.

She unleashes the meat from the wrapper and takes a bite. "Too much garlic."

“What have you been doing?” His face remains blank like a chalkboard on the first day of school.

*Oh, no*, she thinks. *I'm supposed to remember*. Sweat pools under the purple sack that is her hospital uniform. Amos disagrees with the clothing policy but it's an English-run centre.

Esther begins to rock. Sticky spittle gathers in the corners of her lips, white as bark peeling from a birch. She tries to unhinge her tongue from the roof of her mouth.

“The pills. They make it so hard,” she says. A cloud dims her efforts to convey thoughts to comprehensible words so all that emerges are cavernous sighs. Esther squeezes her eyes to rid herself of images of head-less chickens running in a yard.

A buzzer sounds. “Look at that,” Amos says. The visit is reduced to a blur.