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Ellen Has Seven Men

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Being totally honest with oneself is a good exercise.

– Sigmund Freud, *Letter to Wilhelm Fliess*, Oct. 15, 1897

1. But You Don't Understand

“*Different* is not the right word. There is no category for what she is, or thinks she is, or might be turning into.”

“What do you mean, might be turning into?”

“What she will be next month may not be what she was last month. Or maybe it is, but it's a new version of the old self that she had, or thinks she had. You might witness her reaching a dead end, muddled and despairing, or think she is starting a new adventure, frenetic and obsessive about her inventions. For some people a dream come true, for others heaven turned nightmare. Her words and deeds dressing up familiar territory or transgressing against every conceivable decorum. Who knows how she will be when you meet her next time. No one, not even her doctors have been able to figure her out yet.”

“Maybe they are not telling you what they know.”

“Could be, but I think the problem is that they have only hypotheses to work with, and that they cannot test them very well, because what she is giving them, all those words, stories, and exclamations, all that is fabrication. And that changes too, depending on what day of the week it is and who she's with.”

“What do you mean by fabrication? Fabrication of what?”

“Of herself, her virtue, that golden ring of purity, all that moral goodness that makes your eyes water when she talks to you. You listen to her on a good day and you think that *is* her: knowledgeable, courteous, good-humored, committed to good causes, concerned about the environment, healthy food, clean air, saving energy, protecting wildlife and all that, a woman solidly entrenched in the world of religion, helping where she is needed, and stepping in even where she is not needed. But I tell you, that's all show, all of it. Ellen *is* the show. What she puts on stage is such a miraculous show, you'd never know she's acting, and she may not know it either.”

“So she *is* different. That’s what I said.”

“Different, yes, but this is not the kind of difference you normally find in a group of people. Ellen is her own invention, an artifact of imaginations that don’t add up to anything of real substance other than the ordeal she is putting me through. And that is *substantial*, believe me.”

“I still don’t understand, Mr. Köhnlechner.”

“Nobody does. I don’t quite either, even though I have lived with her for fifteen years. And if *you* had lived with her for that long, I bet you wouldn’t be sitting here in this diner talking to me. You’d be on your knees praying all day, or you would have skipped town. I don’t know what exactly she told you about me, Mr. Himmelmann, but I’m sure it wasn’t to recommend me for canonization. You might want to keep away from me.”

“Why? You are a highly respected person in the university community. I thought it would be nice to get to know you, I mean, to get to know you *better*. I also thought you could tell me something about Ellen. After all, you are her husband.”

“Wrong, I *was* her husband. Well, in a way I still *am*, but only on paper, and that is fading quickly.”

“But that is not what I hear from your wife.”

“Former wife, please, soon-to-be-divorced wife, over-the-hill wife, soon-to-be-ex wife.”

“I’m not sure what to say to this, Mr. Köhnlechner.”

“Well, it all depends. What is Lolita saying to you?”

“She says she loves you.”

“Right! That and that I have a personality disorder.”

“I think she cares about you, Mr. Köhnlechner.”

“Sure, but not as much as she cares about herself. In fact, she *adores* herself.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Self-adulation is her trademark, that’s what makes her so special. You say she is different, *I* say she is unique, uniquely interesting or uniquely deranged, depending on the angle from

which one looks at her. What is your particular angle, Mr. Himmelmann? Are you impressed by her?"

"Impressed about what?"

"Oh, there could be many things, but mostly the splendor, the grandiosity, all that pathos with which she gets everybody's attention. Haven't you noticed how she walks down the aisle in your church? Have you seen the way she swings her hips and throws her head to the side, the superbly orchestrated glance she throws at people when she knows she's being watched? And the superiority in her voice when she wants to let people know that she has something very important to say. And then, of course, there is her endless suffering, the pain in her eyes that beats even Saint Mary's look of agony when she stares at Jesus on the cross, those facial contortions and that nervous twitching around the mouth. She suffers as if that were the price she has to pay for all that goodness in her."

"Yes, I have seen the twitching in her face and I always wondered about that. What is that, this twitching, what exactly is she suffering from?"

"She hasn't told you? She's suffering from me, she says I'm cold-hearted. She calls it passive aggressiveness, though at times she also charges me with callousness or recklessness, or she calls me menacing or blasphemous, depending on who is listening. There is no limit to her ingenuity when it comes to describing my character. She says that I have victimized her, belittled her, and humiliated her, and I have done all that despite her goodness, which I regularly make fun of. Hasn't she told you *any* of this?"

"Well, she cares about you. I think she wants to have more of you, not less."

"And *I* think she is fooling you. She has been fooling everybody, and I have been the greatest fool of all."

"Professor Köhnlechner, may I call you Bernd? You sound very angry."

“I *am* angry. Ellen would tell you that my anger is part of my personality disorder.”

“I think you are just very disappointed, Bernd. I see so many people go through periods of misery in their lives. But isn’t grief a natural part of life? There are ups and downs all the time, but people often ignore the ups and they dwell on the downs, thinking they have reached the end of everything. They don’t realize that these are just feelings, and feelings can be very deceptive. Have you ever considered that you ...”

“Mr. Himmelmann, I know what I am feeling and I know what I am thinking. Thinking is my job, it is what I do for a living. I’m not just thinking about property rights, incentive structures, and institutional rigidities, although Ellen figures in these things as well. There are times when all I do is think about feelings, because I want to understand what is happening. I fight my way through tons of studies on mental disorders, different kinds of therapies, cognitive, behavioral, drug-based, and whatever, and I think about the doctor-patient relationship, hoping to find something that would explain Ellen’s condition. I think about the methodological problems in these studies and about the potential biases in the interpretation of the data that are available to researchers. Years of intensive study of all this research to get it right, and I still don’t understand everything. I talked to all her psychiatrists over the years and I thought about what they said, and then I went to see her counselors to get *their* opinion on what I had been thinking. Now that we are separated, I show up in my lawyer’s office twice a week, and there I am not only talking about legal rights and obligations. I am also talking about feelings, all that anger and disgust. And when I meet with some of my colleagues, I am thinking about their feelings too. Mr. Himmelmann, I think about feelings all the time, my own and those of others. And do you want to know the outcome of all that thinking? It has brought me to one

single, irrevocable conclusion, and that is that I am finished with her. It's over, fini, finito, Schluss! Do you understand?"

"Nothing is ever final, Bernd. There is God, and He will help you, as He helps all of us when we are lost. If you would just put yourself in God's hands, you would see that He has *good* plans for you and Ellen. He will not be silent when you turn to Him. He is ingenious, He will help you see that divorce is not the way out when we carry a heavy cross on our back."

"Sorry, but I prefer to work on *my* plans, and I guarantee you, Ellen is not in them. Look, I haven't been myself for so long. There have been moments when I thought *I* was losing my mind, when I thought, if this doesn't stop soon, I'll turn into a kind of person I don't want to be. And then I'll hate everybody for it, most of all myself."

"I'm so sorry to hear this, Professor. I'm terribly sorry about what you are going through. This must be hard for you."

"What, that I'm losing my mind, or that I'm talking to you about this?"

"Well, I can imagine that it's difficult for you to speak about this, but your wife has told me that ..."

"Please don't call her wife? Wife is a social category we use to denote things she definitely is not. She is neither loving nor supportive, and there is no tender wifely touch either. Besides, it's not categories that matter. It's not whether we are talking about a wife or a girlfriend, or about being married, separated, or divorced. To me, it's character that counts, and I have come to detest hers."

"But she still loves you, she says."

"And *I* say she has a bad character. She's a moron and she's vicious and demonic, and that is putting it mildly."

"I'm so sorry you feel this way."

"Thank you, but there is no reason for you to feel sorry. I have lived with this emotional terrorist for half an eternity, and I am not sorry for feeling what I am feeling now."

“But I do feel bad for you, Mr. Köhnlechner, I mean, Bernd. I want to help. I want to offer you, both of you, some comfort. That is what I’m here for. Your wife came to me because she wanted ...”

“Again, please call her Ellen, my ex, my past, my departed, my on-the-way-out, or whatever, but please don’t call her my wife.”

“Okay, it’s Ellen then. What I want to say is that in difficult times we all need someone we can trust. You know that God is always here for us. He is around us and He is in us. We are all children of God.”

“Excuse me, I am not a child, and she’s not a child either.”

“Of course, but she needs God like everyone else. Don’t we all have a craving for someone much greater than ourselves to guide us when we feel lost?”

“Oh, she has cravings alright, cravings of the animalistic kind, I’d say.”

“I think she is hurting, and I see that you are hurting too. You need someone to care for you as well.”

“If you mean pastoral care, I don’t need that. I think you are a very kind man, Mr. Himmelmann, and you mean well, but what I need right now is money and a good lawyer to help me hold on to what I have left of it. Living with Ellen has been very expensive, and getting rid of her, finally, is turning out to be catastrophically expensive.”

“I know, there are always issues with money, but shouldn’t we also look at the other side of Ellen, her human side? There is a whole realm of existential questions that one should take to heart. What I see in that realm is a person in need.”

“Yes, in need of an audience, and she probably picked you to be one of those lucky people who get to sit right in the first row so that you can absorb easily everything she’s saying.”

“Ellen is looking to me for spiritual comfort.”

“Okay, then give her that comfort. It’s fine with me.”

“Yes, that’s what I want to do, but I’m not always sure how to say things. She gets upset so easily.”

“Perhaps you should speak with her father about this.”

“You are right, I probably *should* meet with her father, but I thought I talk to you first, as her husband.”

“*Former* husband, remember?”

“Well, as far as Ellen is concerned, you *are* her husband. She can’t just wipe out everything that made you a couple over a stretch of fifteen years. Nor can you, Bernd. It’s very kind of you to meet with me. I have seen you in church a few times, but there has never been the opportunity to really talk to you. You never came to our Saturday gatherings, unfortunately. You can still attend, you know. I would love you to come.”

“Thank you, but I think it is *Ellen* who wants me to go to those events. Did she also ask you to get me to go to mass?”

“I’m not talking about attending our church services. The Saturday gatherings in our congregation are purely social events. One or two of our members may present a particular topic for discussion, or they may give an interesting slide show on something, or we just have a potluck dinner. Many people bring their friends along, from all walks of life, so it’s also a great way to meet new people. You might even bump into a few professors there.”

“Good, but if I want to meet colleagues, I go to our Faculty Club, not to a church, and if I *have* to see Ellen, I want it to be in court, and not at your slide show. I’m not sure if you know, but Ellen and I have a separation agreement. It is a rather lengthy, formal agreement and it specifically says that we are separate and apart. I take contracts very seriously, especially written ones, and this one I take particularly seriously. I must be serious about this, Mr. Himmelmann, or all hell will break loose.”

“But I’m sure Ellen wouldn’t mind having you there.”

“Believe me, she *would* mind if I gave a slide show on my Last Supper with her or if I organized for your congregation a discussion on the postmodern transference relationship she had with one, possible two of her psychiatrists.”

“May I suggest that, rather than worry about Ellen, you could just have a good time with the other people there, just socializing with us. I know there are people who would like to meet you. We are a close-knit community where everybody looks out for each other, also for Ellen, of course.”

“Oh I think she is already well taken care of. For example, there is an attorney she is very close to, and she has a whole team of doctors looking after her. Even some of my colleagues are there for her when she calls in the middle of the night.”

“But they cannot give her the answers she is seeking.”

“Maybe that’s because they don’t understand her questions. Isn’t this where you come in, Mr. Himmelmann?”

“Only God can give her the answers. I am just someone she can lean on when she thinks her world is falling apart.”

“My advice to you: stay clear of her, don’t let her smother you. People get uprooted all the time. There are earthquakes that can make entire towns vanish, strange diseases that knock you up, and campfires that get out of control, but people survive. I suggest you leave her alone and let her get on with life.”

“She says she doesn’t have a life.”

“Wrong, she *has* a life and *she* is shaping it, and you better not interfere in that.”

“Okay, then let me just say that your wife has been ...”

“Excuse me, as I said before, she is not my *wife*. We have been living in legal separation for almost half a year and I hope I am divorced before this year is over. I enjoy living by myself, and I would enjoy it even more if she would comply with the terms of the contract and leave me in peace. If you want to do something for me, Mr. Himmelmann, you could tell her to read the contract. It says in *four* places, ‘Separate and apart.’ Three

simple words, printed in bold and underlined. I insisted on this when the contract was drawn up, to avoid misunderstanding. ‘Separate and apart,’ it says very clearly. She can read, so how difficult can this be?”

“I know about the separation, Mr. Köhnlechner, but, if I may say this, she thinks that deep down you don’t really want a divorce.”

“After what I just told you? There is nothing left to repair, recover, or restore in any shape or form. She knows this, or she wouldn’t concoct these wild accusations against me. There have been days when her denunciations were coming in by the hour. She is still doing it, sending me letters, some of them over ten pages long, and all of them are utter nonsense. Her writing style is pathetic too, redundancies and logical contradictions all over the place, and stuff that reads like an introduction she puts at the end. Even my first-year students write better than that.”

“Is style really important? She may see writing as the best way to communicate with you, even if it’s a bit clumsy.”

“I don’t call it clumsy when she sends me long letters, via registered mail and with a copy to her lawyer, in which guilt and restitution are the central themes. In one letter she claims that I took her painted enamel sugar bowl with me when I moved out. In another letter she wants me to return the artificial flowers she gave me once for Valentine’s. This is absolutely stupid, and it’s my support money with which she is paying her lawyer to endorse this idiocy.”

“She doesn’t have a job to earn her own money.”

“But she has enough money to give to your church. It makes her feel good, she says. But *I* don’t feel good, it’s *my* money, you see, and we are talking about a sizeable sum. I don’t mean to offend you, Mr. Himmelmann, but I’d rather give my money to Amnesty International.”

“Our church has programs for people in need as well.”

“For people who are tortured by their spouse day in and day out? She has blackmailed me emotionally for years. She has bombarded me with incriminations and denunciations non-stop, and now she has her lawyer steal my money and hang me from the ceiling, head down. I’m not joking, that’s exactly what she instructed him to do. You call that ‘clumsy communication’?”

“Oh my, you sound so angry.”

“Well, you could just say that’s life, short and brutish, disillusionment wherever you look. I spent a good part of that life under Ellen’s command, and even now that I’m finally getting out, she is still all over me. And she runs to you to get your blessing for all this.”

“She believes in God and she comes to me because she wants to support the House of the Lord.”

“With *my* money!”

“She means well.”

“Not with me she does.”

“If it helps, Bernd, I do think you are a good man.”

“Are you sure about that? I have a personality disorder. That’s pretty nasty stuff, and you never get rid of it. Ask Ellen, she’ll give you details.”

“It’s enough for me to know that you care about her. I can sense that. Trust me, the financial side of your separation may feel difficult for you right now, but God will thank you for it.”

“I would prefer to get my thanks now, while I am still alive. My time in this life is running out, and I’m afraid what comes afterwards will be a major disappointment too. All signs point in that direction.”

“You need to be patient, Bernd. Would you be willing to explore new paths? Who knows, they may even lead you back to Ellen, a happier Ellen, and a happier you.”

“I am not against exploring things, Mr. Himmelmann. I am an explorer by training. I scout new roads all the time, but my

preference is for roads that lead *away* from her. I am really tired of fighting her every day.”

“All couples have arguments.”

“Yes, but I’m not talking about arguments that couples normally have. I’m talking about *battles*, over things that are beyond grotesque. Can you imagine fighting over who gets to push the shopping cart in the supermarket? I really don’t care who pushes the cart around, but she *insists* that I care, because it’s an important decision in a family, she says, because it has to do with sharing burdens and responsibilities.”

“Making decisions about who does what in a family sounds pretty reasonable to me, Dr. Köhnlechner.”

“In theory, certainly, but do you want to hear what those family decisions sounded like with us, on a Saturday morning at Kruger Shoppers? She wants me to tell her where in the store I would like to push the cart, so I say to her, okay, let me push the cart in the deli section and then we can switch when we get to the produce section. Sounds reasonable, but no, she takes my suggestion as an attempt to live out my supposedly snobbish bias for European foods, because in her mind *delicatessen* means expensive imported cheeses and fancy-schmancy salads, presented in elegantly decorated displays with little bottles of French wine placed around the plates. So she insists that, if I’m so selfish to want to take over the cart in the deli section, *she* will pick out the cheese, and, of course, it has to be cheddar because her grandfather came from England. If I go to the deli section to celebrate my European roots, she should have the right to live out her English connection. I say, fine, make the most of your connection, take the shopping cart and load it up with all the cheeses from Merrie Olde England you want. Take your time, you can reminisce about your grandfather and his family as long as you want. In the meantime, I will get a couple of sponges, because we need a special sponge or something else to get our kitchen sink clean. I say all this in a friendly way,

and very calmly, but she takes my proposal as an assault on her competence in the kitchen, which, she claims, is the place where I really want her to be. So I say, okay, if *you* want to pick out cleaning utensils, go ahead, get whatever you think will do the job. I will retire to the magazine section to look at *The Economist*, while you decide if you want a sponge, or a toothbrush, or something else to scrub the sink. Now she shouts at me and says that I spend all day in my office reading, so I don't need to read stupid magazines in the supermarket too, while she plays my slave doing the *real* work, like making tough household decisions and pushing a fully loaded shopping cart through crowded aisles, which, by the way, really doesn't help her neck. She says that it's my fault that her neck can't get better, and by forcing her to do all the grocery shopping, I am making it worse, and this only a day after she has been told by her doctor to rest. Now, if you think *that's* absurd, wait, she's not finished. I tell her that I want to check out the latest issue of *The Economist* because I am looking for current material for my course on markets and institutions. So now she claims that I am abandoning her in the store because the great professor doesn't want to be seen in public with a simple housewife. These are all *her* words, Mr. Himmelmann, I am not inventing any of this. Sorry, I say to her, as gently as possible because the two ladies standing next to us are giving me this really nasty look, of course I don't mind being seen with you in a store. I'll stay with you and I'll push the shopping cart wherever you want me to. I ask her nicely which part of the store *she* wants to go to next. What I then get is not an answer to a perfectly reasonable question, but the charge that I want to pick a fight with her and that I am again, as always, unloading all responsibility for decision-making onto her, which is really not fair, since her analyst has confirmed that a husband has responsibilities too. Mr. Himmelmann, this is not an argument, this is warfare. The aisles at Kruger's are like the trenches in World War I, and the

accusations spewing out of her mouth are like the fire coming out of the flamethrowers they used in Vietnam. All this is going on for half an hour, and when we finally manage our way out of the trenches and get to the checkout, she wants to stand at the exit end of the counter because only *she* knows how to pack the bags properly. I might as well have disappeared to the magazine section to get out of her way, she says. Better yet, if I'd care about her, I'd stay home. I'm only a hindrance to her. Now, Mr. Himmelmann, you say, God has plans for us, but if He thinks I'll go back to this nonsense, He is mistaken."

"I can see this isn't easy for you, but you have to remember, it isn't easy for Ellen either. I think she just wants to do things right, she wants to become more perfect."

"Then let me ask you, what exactly is she perfecting, what she thinks she is, or what she wants to be? Or is she neither here nor there, determined to perfect ambiguity? Or what if she is perfect already and just doesn't know it?"

"What do *you* think, Mr. Köhnlechner, I mean, Bernd?"

"Hard to say. I'm not an intelligent agent, but I do know that there are people who think she is so perfect that they just want to get out of her way because there is nothing they can put up to match her grandiosity. Everybody loves our pretty little town, and if there ever was a reason for someone to seek asylum in Uzbekistan, it is to put five thousand miles between Ellen and themselves."

"She mentioned to me something about therapy. What is she being treated for?"

"Everything and nothing. All that her doctors have given me are standard labels for diseases and discomforts, for aches and pains out of a textbook, but nothing that I could use to survive in her orbit. What would *you* do, if a doctor tells you that your wife suffers from an anxiety disorder? Would you sit on a beach with her and wait for coconuts to drop on her head? What if they tell you she has an obsessional neurosis? Would

you hide all those therapy books she keeps buying every week? Or if your loved one is diagnosed with depression? Does that mean you should get her the complete collection of Laurel and Hardy movies to cheer up? Or if the diagnosis is something like abnormality of character, how would you handle that? Take her to the zoo to watch monkeys throw feces at each other?"

"Abnormality of character, what is that?"

"That's what the despairing analyst said when he called off the treatment. He told me that after the sixth session *he* ended up on the couch. He was joking, of course, but in the end he was as useless as all the others who have treated her. In my opinion, for most of these analysts she is a person they use to confirm the validity of their label for an illness they specialize in. And categorically calling her obsessed, hysteric, narcissistic, or whatever isn't really helpful when she comes home from a three-hour session with an analyst, saying that she should have married *him* instead of me."

"Is this what she said, really?"

"Yes, but this is harmless. There are other things she has said to me or done to me that are so perverse I wouldn't even tell you if you invited me to your confessional booth. Most of her therapists have given up after just a few sessions. Hopeless, untreatable, they said, like Mother Theresa wanting to become an astronaut."

"Aren't you a bit too harsh? Ellen isn't Mother Theresa, but she also wants to do good."

"Not to me. She's a fanatic, a hypomanic, and compulsive with a lot of things, including everything having to do with faith and religion, but that's not surprising. Religious hotheads often struggle with psychological issues."

"Where did you hear that?"

"From the research. There is plenty of research suggesting that religiosity is correlated with a range of mental disorders, even if, given the available data, one cannot always say, *why*