



Julia Schoch

The Couple of the Century

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When people fall out of love, where does that love go?

A woman wants to leave her husband. After many, many years of marriage and many, many years of living together, she is determined – but also devastated. How did it come to this? While considering her next move, she takes a trip down memory lane. There were indeed many highs: the early, ecstatic days of love at university, the times they spent abroad, and later their years with their young children. But there were also lows, moments that changed the course of their lives. Moments that foreshadowed failure. But can something that went on for so long really be said to have failed?

- A tale of love and marriage in today's world
- »Julia Schoch, archaeologist of her life, digs up what is so often hidden in the everyday life of couples:
the waves of love, the beauty that remains even in disillusionment. « (Die Zeit, 17.03.22)
- For readers of Alex Schulman, Antje Strubel, and Anne Tyler



Julia Schoch born in 1974, works as a freelance author and translator of French in Potsdam. She received countless nominations and awards for both her writing and her translation. Her novel 'Das Vorkommnis' ('The Incident') was awarded with the Schubart-Literaturpreis in 2023. She received the 2022 German Schiller Foundation Award for her literary works.

Sample Translation
By Lucy Jones

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It's actually very simple. I'm leaving you.

Four words that everyone understands. Four words are all it takes. You just have to say them. I'm amazed by how simple it is. And I'm amazed by something else too. This sentence is just as short as the one I said when our story was just beginning.

In the beginning, I said, 'I love you.'

Three words at the beginning, four at the end. It seems that the most important things in life can be said in very few words.

But when it comes to the latter scenario, there's no waiting around. You have to say the words as soon as the other person walks through the door. It's best not to let other words get in the way. You can't get caught up in chit-chat or the whole plan will go down the drain.

Saying this sentence is hard, I admit. Just *casually* coming out with it. Because what happens after that? I'm not kidding myself. Once it's out, you've crossed a line. There's no taking it back.

I've always wondered how people take things back. Phrases like *I didn't mean it like that* or *Forget what I said* make no sense to me. Instead of taking something back, the only option is a rude awakening. Words change something. Once the arrow's shot, you can't retrieve it.

I'm leaving you. I'm not sure when I first thought this sentence. Or how often since. I've practised it for a very long time. Eventually certain ideas become as familiar as your own face every morning in the mirror.

When I think of how long we've been together, I'm shocked. So many years! So many years can be squeezed into a few hours of memories.

That bothers me.

On the other hand, you don't want to take thirty years to remember thirty years. *I* don't want to.

Things from the distant past usually stick in my mind most clearly.

Back then I was living in an East German high-rise on the edge of town. My flat was on the sixth floor. It was the flat in which I'd spent my last years as a teenager together with my parents. But by then, they'd already left, each in a different direction, and I had no family anymore. They'd divorced almost as soon as I'd started studying and I was living alone there.

In my bedroom was a bed and a table. On the table was a huge pile of books. And next to the books was a Chinese chequers board.

It was summer and the holidays had just started. One day the heavy black phone on the sideboard in the hallway rang. Back then, there were only phones with cords. I stood by the sideboard at the end of the cord. This rhyme is unintentional (things like this happen).

You were on the other end.

'Do you like vanilla tea?' you asked.

I would have said any drink was my favourite. All you had to do was suggest it.

Ten minutes later, you were standing at the door to my flat. I let you in. We sat down on the floor to drink tea. Everyone was doing it back then; it was in fashion. When people arrived at a party, everyone sat down on the floor. I think it's easier that way to put your arms around the other person and sink back into the rug. That's exactly what we did. You put your arms around me and together we sank back into the rug.

We even skipped the tea.

The next morning when I woke up, you were lying next to me. That surprised me. Midday came around and you were still with me. You were the first person in my life in a long time who didn't want to leave straight away. That's how much non-commitment I was used to.

We spent the day on my balcony under the sun canopy. It was so hot that we could watch the laundry drying. Below, a tram rolled idly past. We read a book together. It was called *Which Moped with Chrome-plated Handlebars at the Back of the Yard?* A convoluted title that we liked. First I read the book, then you. It wasn't very thick and we both managed to finish it in a day.

I gave you a key to my flat. That way you could come and go as you pleased. You came back, always at night.

After a week I said, 'I don't want to lose myself in someone.'

You looked at me, wide-eyed, and asked, ‘What else do you think love is about?’

I was happy you saw it that way. Because I’d long since begun to lose myself in you.

I went to the hairdresser. I had my hair cut short.

The next time we saw each other, I told you I’d cut my hair short because the weather was so hot. But really, I wanted to look like you.

Then all of a sudden, you stopped coming. I was worried. Not so much about you. I was worried about our story. It was a love story, after all. You have to take special care of stories like these, I told myself, especially when they’re just beginning.

With a bottle of cherry schnapps and homemade biscuits, to which I’d added crumbs of hash, I set off to your place. Your flat was outside town. The bus ride took half an hour. I rang the bell but no one answered. For a few moments, I slunk around the building, where the lights inside were on. Then I went home again. I had to run to catch the last bus because it was already past midnight.

I sent you the biscuits by post.

In the university canteen, I bumped into you again. It was still the holidays and so the canteen was nearly deserted. I thought you’d pretend we’d never met. But you hadn’t forgotten me.

I said, ‘Why are you sitting in here? Outside the weather’s so nice. It’s the holidays!’

You narrowed your eyes and said, ‘I take holidays when I want to.’

You radiated such calm that I felt calm too. At the same time, I was excited.

Often you took me for rides in your car. It was a brown VW Jetta. We went on trips to the countryside. Once a pheasant flew up in front of us at nightfall. Another time, a large owl brushed the windscreen with its wings. As I was rolling down the window, the handle broke off. You laughed. All summer, we drove around like that, with the window half-down.

When summer was over, I asked, ‘What is this between us?’

Instead of answering, you invited me to a picnic in the park.

We agreed on a three-year pact. You said, ‘If we manage three years, then we’ll take it from there.’

Suddenly an unknown dog came racing towards us and swooped on the cheese in our picnic basket. The dog immediately fell to the ground, yapping and choking. Unmoved, almost

gloating, you watched it. As if those who interfered in our business would get their comeuppance straight away.

Then the dog ran off.

And you kissed me.

(This story feels like a summary of a film I watched long, long ago on an old TV set. I can only replay single scenes while the overall arc of the story has slipped out of my reach.)

We didn't split up three summers later.

We've spent thirty-one summers together. Six of them were reported by the newspapers as 'the summer of the century'.

During that time, we've been on forty-two trips, twenty-seven of them abroad.

We've bought three kitchens.

We've had five new ID cards issued.

We once had a fire and had to be evacuated.

We've been to the hospital emergency room seven times, four times for one of our children and three times for us.

We've been robbed six times.

We've had six different cars. None of them were bought new.

We've spent a total of nine and a half days in the corridors of local authorities.

We've played 912 rounds of Chinese chequers.

We've made 8,667 sandwiches for school and have bought 41 birthday cakes.

Over the years, we've taken 173,500 photos.

We've been through 76 illnesses. (Most of them I went through.)

We've had four operations, one of them serious.

We've taken 1,405 baths.

We've been to the hairdresser 281 times.

We've both ripped apart a pillow (on different days for different reasons).

We've bought eight laptops.

We've been to funerals and weddings. But I haven't counted them.

I'm not sure whether the years in which things happened would add anything important to our story. Whether our story *hinges* on dates. Surely it's better to describe love without relating it to a particular time. Or does it need a starting year? I mean, would it change anything if I said we got to know each other in 1991, 1994 or 2000? This information would make me feel we were just the product of a certain era, the result of historical circumstances. As if everything was bound to turn out the way it turned out. It would make me feel like a prisoner of time.

On the other hand, everything *did* happen the way it happened. There's no variation of our story.

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Unlike you, our luck made me feel uneasy. I think that's how it was, how I saw it.

With a Latin textbook balanced on my knee, I was studying for my advanced exam as the university required. Neither of us had had Latin at school and I had to cram several years of material into two semesters. But I didn't mind. I learned the vocab like crazy and immersed myself in the texts. The fact they were set so far back in the past appealed to me. I didn't want to read literature about the times we were living in. The present was you and me. I didn't want to share it with writers who had different opinions about it.

You watched me calmly while I studied.

'Is life always going to be this simple?' I asked you.

'Of course,' you said.

I laughed. 'Oh, really?'

You gave me a serious look. Then you said, 'No idea, but that's how I want it to be.'

When two people fall in love, it feels like a miracle at first. Or you think of biology, a chemical process. Later, when I thought about us and what brought us together, I took other things into account too. We'd both grown up in a dictatorship. We knew the same films, the same music, and we had the same longings. (It's difficult to describe the sweet feeling of entrapment throughout our childhoods. Like a gentle grindstone.) We were both ashamed at the sight of people filling their shopping bags in a frenzy when they were allowed to go West for the first time. And when we were abroad, even years later, we always felt as if we'd got away.

We'd been lucky. In our corner of the world, the course of history clearly had our best interests at heart.

For a long time, I even saw similarities where there were none. I thought, for example, that our fathers' jobs were only different on the surface. That they'd essentially followed the same goals in life despite how different they were. Because even though your father was an artist who criticised the state, and mine *served* the state, they'd both needed it, just in different ways. That's how I saw it. The proof was that when the state abruptly collapsed and its ideology with it, both of them, your father and mine, had the rug pulled out from under their feet.

(This kind of thing doesn't happen from one day to the next. Even if the history books declare the year when a political system ends, down to the very day, it often takes longer to sink in with people. Suddenly thirty years have passed and you realise: of course it pulled the rug out from under his feet. Like watching someone falling over in slow motion.)

In truth, there were no parallels whatsoever. Even though I wanted there to be an analogy, a similarity, connecting us.

In truth, it was like this: By siding with you and your family, I was able to shame my own. Yes, in a way, I wiped out my own background by loving you.

People only realise how things are when it's too late. But even if I *had* understood at the time how they were, I wouldn't have thought much about it. I wouldn't have wanted to trace the connection between us back to things our mothers and fathers did or didn't do, whether they were similar or not, or what they'd become over time.

I still don't want to do this. I don't want our love to be based on anything as ordinary as *background*.

Psychoanalytical or sociological interpretations don't help me. None of them change the enormity I feel about our relationship. The enormity of leaving it behind. (But how do you leave your past behind?)

An equally valid explanation is that I've always been interested in how our story continues. I've always wondered: what will happen next, with us? And so it has continued.

What do we turn into when the other person stops loving us? Do we change back into ourselves? When we leave a relationship, are we still the person they once fell in love with? Or, *in the throes of love*, had I changed into someone else over the years, unnoticed by the outside world, or even by me?

I told myself that perhaps you were right. Love prevents bad things (pain, suffering) but strangely enough, good things too (which may also amount to pain and suffering – I always see things too bleakly.) Be that as it may. I saw something that looked like my real, un-lived life. Very clearly, there were other possibilities for how I could have lived. Possibilities without you.

On a residency, I met a translator. He was Argentinian and translated from Italian and English into Spanish. He was industrious and so was I, and after we'd slept together, we'd both often return to our desks. Sometimes he flicked absently through one of the books on my bedside table and read out the names of the writers or a title. *Sarah Kirsch*, he'd say, or *Mein – Jahr – in – der – Nie-mans-bucht*. And I understood that he had no associations with any of it. I felt the same. When I thought of the enormous list of things I'd have to learn to get to know him properly (his country, its history, the geography of his native land, the branches of his family tree), I lost heart. It unsettled me that I couldn't guess which aspects to him were typically Argentinian and which were a result of his personal story, a small boy from a village near Resistencia.

I realised I didn't expect anything from the affair. This lack of expectation seemed even more meaningless than feeling bored in a relationship.

Unlike you and me, he and I had no shared past. You had the edge over him in that respect. But then I wondered how long two people can rely on a shared past. And anyway, isn't it sad if two people are kept together by their joint historical trajectory, by the same *system of references*? But then a different thought comforted me. Neither a *shared* background nor social *differences* matter when a relationship comes to an end. Neither can save love.

We were afraid of saying it aloud. We didn't want to, so we didn't try. After all, we'd never sworn ourselves to honesty. We thought *telling each other the truth* was ridiculous. We were members of a different world, one in which the point of a secret was to keep it, not reveal it. Nothing has any weight without secrecy. Silence, hesitation, reservation – we liked those sorts

of things. People with nothing to hide repelled us. We distrusted transparency.

I have to be careful – I’m saying *we*, not *I*. Still.

But that’s how I felt. When it came down to *what mattered*, we’d always agreed.

Perhaps it was an understanding born from habit. These things are easily mixed up.

To really know who and how you are without other people, you’d have to be on your own for a very long time – years, decades even. No one is capable of trying this out.

For many years, I liked coming home after a trip. If something had happened during my time away, I’d already work out how to tell you about it while I was on the train or plane home – actually, I’d tell you right when it happened. It was nice to know you were there. You’d always pick me up on my return.

Then, at some point, you didn’t like picking me up from the station or airport or any other place. Once you were wearing a new pair of glasses but I didn’t notice on the long drive home from the airport because my thoughts were still where I’d just come from. And shaking your head, all you could say was: Christ, really?

Things like that – misunderstandings, oversights or strategies – piled up. Some weeks later, I insisted on you wearing a certain coat when you picked me up from the main station, the dark-green raincoat from the time when we’d met. I just *had* to see you in that awful, wonderful coat when I stepped off the train. But over the years, something had happened and when I got out, I saw from afar that you weren’t wearing that coat. Perhaps you wanted to demonstrate your independence. To show you weren’t going to be walked all over – not by anyone, not even me.

I said: our story will be over when we go our separate ways. It will be lost. And this is why I’m afraid of breaking up.

But perhaps it’s the other way around. Perhaps it needs to end in real life so that I can start telling our story. I mention this because it reminds me how often I’ve failed when I’ve tried to write about us.

In the past, when our story was beginning, I thought that if I ever wrote a proper book, it could only be about you. What on earth was I supposed to write about otherwise? All the

books I'd write would be about you, that much was certain.

I wanted to write about how easy it is to be happy.

'You just have to decide,' you said back then. (It was when we made our pact: the park, the cheese, the choking dog.) I decided to love you. You decided to love me. *Finito*.

That's what you said.

For many years, I loved the simplicity of this.

I really tried to write that book. I wanted to do it because of you. You didn't like books with blundering fools. All those idiots! You begrudged stories for beginning when it was already over. For turning up when disaster struck. I always quoted a truism about literature when you said that: Writing about what makes you happy usually fails. But secretly, I believed the opposite. Secretly, I thought you, not the truism, were right.

It would have to be a novel in very simple language. A simple novel. It would have to be very short and unfussy, I thought, nothing contrived or artificial.

Now and then I made notes. I jotted them down in secret. I didn't want you to notice. I probably thought that even a minor criticism of yours would put me off.

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I'd long since stopped being furious that I'd followed you for years, blindly in love. I didn't feel bad about being dependent on you. (I probably still am.) I didn't wake up one day and decide to go my own way. Those expressions are ridiculous.

If I felt angry, it was because my blind love for you had disappeared. I miss it. I miss it even more than I've missed you.

But can love return? And if so, where does it go in the meantime?

I don't know.

I can see it in myself. Not so long ago, I told myself: I'm leaving you. This very day. I urged myself to say it before any other words got in the way. I made arrangements, even packed. Or rather, I'd meant to pack. I'd thought about all the things I'd take. I thought of the large black leather bag on top of the wardrobe. Thought about what it'd be like to walk out of the door for the last time. Just after you'd walked in and I'd said

the sentence.

But while I was thinking about how to do it, I was making dinner for us. I was standing in the kitchen in a bright red kimono, stirring a pot. I mixed in squash and minced beef and cooked it all in tomato sauce. To finish I added dill, vinegar and sugar. I turned down the temperature. (It has to simmer so that the aromas can infuse.)

I stared into the bubbling sauce. But instead of thinking some more about leaving you, I started to think about which hotel in Paris I'd like to spend the night with you in. Which quarter was better suited to us, Montmartre or Montparnasse? People say you should never travel back to places you were once happy in. All the same, I'd like to. I can't stop before I've experienced something to the very end. There's always a strange residue of hope in me. The hope that life has an unexpected twist in store.

Thirty years ago, we imagined we'd take a room in Hotel Lutetia. I only read later that the Lutetia was used to accommodate war survivors, the ones who had come back from the camps. Emaciated and irrevocably changed, those former prisoners lay in the hotel beds. And all the people who were waiting for someone to come back – a son, brother, mother, sister or husband – went to the Lutetia and asked after them, day after day. I guess that, for all their hope, people were also *afraid* of finding their loved ones among those gruesome figures.

And this is how I felt that evening. Instead of getting the bag down from the top of the wardrobe, I stirred and thought about the Lutetia. Eventually, I heard the door go, first in the hallway, then the one to the kitchen opened. I looked up and gazed at you.

I stirred the food and said, 'I've made us braised squash.'

Why do we always say the wrong thing? Why do we get our words mixed up? I'd meant to say: I'm leaving you. Instead, I carried on talking.

'I love you,' I said.

You hung your coat over the chair, very slowly. And then you looked at me and asked, 'Sorry, what did you say?'

That's what happened. That's the way I remember it.

What I understood that evening was that we can't trust ourselves. I wasn't sure whether I should correct what I'd said. Had you even heard me?

Later I went out onto the balcony because it had begun to snow. I stood there and watched the snow slowly covering the dead plants.

I thought: We’ve dreamed for thirty years, each one of us separately. And I thought that I’d never wanted anything else.

The most important things always occur to us last.

We never got married.

At first, I was proud that we didn’t need the state to witness some oath we took. Later and for a long time, I was happy that we weren’t married. I told myself it made things easy. That way we didn’t need to involve a lawyer or decide on payments if it came to that. It was our business, no one else’s, I told myself.

It wasn’t until years, decades later, when an officer at the American Consulate asked during an interview for a work visa why I wasn’t married (I’d told him you were coming to Ohio to visit). I said we’d missed the right moment and now it was too late. (At the same time, I was afraid because I thought the embassy clerk might think I was being ironic, and irony was surely inappropriate during a visa interview.) Our pact made three decades ago in a park seemed very distant and foolish. A private myth, completely meaningless. It wasn’t something I could talk about, especially not in front of a clerk.

You’d driven me to the embassy that day. It was New Year’s Eve and you’d spent the time I was in the interview buying rockets and a few crackers for the evening. On the way home, I thought: What evidence, aside from a couple of anecdotes, is there for our love? What trace of us would remain? I thought about whether we should get married. I’d possibly thought about it before too, and perhaps I’d even wanted it from the very beginning. Who knows exactly what they thought when and what remains of a memory?

This is how things stand: I have to pull myself together to write about us. I mustn’t wait any longer. We will only exist when it’s all written down – and I mean everything: our love and its transformation, our passion, stagnation, joy, loneliness and togetherness.

So roughly what’s called, I suppose, a life lived to the full.

Press Reviews

»I’m familiar with all of this. As I read, it felt as if I’d written it myself. It’s the most truthful book that I’ve read in a long time about love, failure and unbearable expectations. It’s about living in this century, in which the agonies of love are supposed to replace some lost sense. « (Elke Heidenreich, **Süddeutsche Zeitung**)

»Julia Schoch once again succeeds in tracing, cleverly and wilfully, the tiniest tremors – in what we dream of becoming, who we want to be, and what gives us stability –.” (...) I’ve rarely read a novel that so insistently explores the alienation of two lovers, right down to the smallest shades of feeling. « (Sandra Kegel, **Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung**)

»This story about love and separation is very unique and, at the same time, absolutely typical. In a way, *The Couple of the Century* is already a classic about the way we love in these times. « (Sigrid Löffler, **Radio Bremen**)

»A breathtakingly insightful long-term study of the shifts in a relationship — and an exhilarating *sentimental education*. « (Denis Scheck, **Druckfrisch/ARD**)

»You might think that Julia Schoch’s new book is about the failure of a relationship. But in fact, she’s written one of the most beautiful love stories in recent times. (...) one long declaration of love, a eulogy of great yearning. « (Stefan Kister, **Stuttgarter Zeitung**)

»It isn’t about an ideal world or disillusionment; it’s a precise reflection of what it means to love and to write a story about it. And this makes it particularly special given the worn paths trodden by this old, popular topic far too often. « (Sabine Rohlf, **Berliner Zeitung**)

»Julia Schoch writes with great ease, wit and irony. (...) she takes a savvy look at the culturally conditioned concepts of love, using a few concise brushstrokes to paint a portrait of a society, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the present day. « (Christel Wester, **WDR 3 Lesestoff**)

»By describing the most personal things with scalpel-like precision, this novel describes painfully universal things. « (Lena Schneider, **Der Tagesspiegel**)