

A footman enters with the afternoon tea. Neither Franzi nor Sophie regard the man as he sets down the tray on the Biedermeier table before them and precisely lays out the service, spouts pointing in directional unison like good, little soldiers. The man scarcely exits before Franzi begins rearranging the pieces, as is his habit.

Perhaps he's claiming this, their private hour, for them, Sophie contemplates. An attempt to loosen etiquette. Ward off the taxing rules that govern them, or such. Franzi hums the aria their daughter's been rehearsing as he works. Watching him absentmindedly move the creamer back and forth and back again, Sophie considers that, perhaps, she's overthinking his motives. Maybe he just likes the busyness of it. Like chess without the competition.

Regardless, it's what he does, part of their daily ritual. Franzi moves the service about and then pours his own coffee. Then she pours her tea. Franzi adds cream to both. Then Sophie plops a single cube of sugar in her brew. She says, "This is my favorite hour." He strokes her hand and agrees, "Heaven on Earth." Every afternoon, the same.

The tea set is a gift from Franzi celebrating their second married month. How the gift thrilled her then! Brought her to tears, in fact. She'd only mentioned once in passing, ages before, a childhood memory of her mother's tea set. Ivory earthenware decorated with dramatic plum and salmon-colored flowers which spring from fantastical stems which sprout three different types of leaves. Sophie always enjoyed the impossibility of the botany. Then one afternoon — Had two months really passed? — Franzi placed a nearly identical set before her. How did he remember the description, let alone find such a true copy? A set for their private use, he said. Suitable for two.

That was before she became accustomed to Franzi marking all events, however monumental or mundane, with mementos. So many mementos, and each so suspiciously considerate that

Sophie wouldn't be surprised to learn that Franzi logs her remarks and keeps a stash of oh-so-meaningful trinkets at the ready.

How uncharitable, Sophie chides herself. What kind of wife belittles her husband's attentiveness so?

As Franzi pours cream, Sophie eyes about for the sugar, which lies just beyond the far side of his cup. Her waistline is thicker than it should be, but she struggles to forgo sweets. Besides, it's just one cube. She can skip the biscuits. Somewhere in the middle of these thoughts, Sophie realizes how odd it is that Franzi placed the sugar so far away from her. He always does that, too, she stews. Even though he doesn't even take sugar. Why? To make her rely on him? Or, perhaps, to make a present of it? A bizarre re-gifting of the sugar bowl, day after day. And isn't all of this rather at odds with the purpose of the hour — their time to be just Franzi and Sophie, not the archduke and his lesser, morganatic wife? Questions swirl a moment before Sophie commands herself to stop. She's manufacturing intent. Franzi's just a creature of annoying, but innocent habit. His devotion to her is unquestionable. Impeachable.

But when he asks "One lump?", Sophie is undone. "Yes, of course," she snaps in a tone that makes his eyes flinch. She nearly says that it's simply not sporting to make a dance of the sugar, but decides against it. She'll sound petty or even shrewish for taking him to task about something so trivial. But the more she ruminates, the more Sophie finds that she is that petty. Petty and quite cross, actually.

"Are you well?" Franzi asks with genuine concern, which grates Sophie's nerves all the more. Why can't she have a mood without being asked after her health? Is there no snit without illness? She cannot always be serene, his sweet lamb, as he calls her. Sophie takes a long breath. What has gotten into her? Such venom in her blood today. She takes another breath and

adds a perfunctory smile to the exhale.

“Heavens, I think it’s clear I need an extra lump today,” she offers with a playful headshake. They both laugh. The concern recedes from his eyes, and Franzi resumes humming — as if nothing’s happened, she notes. He puts one cube in her cup and one on her saucer.

They drink in silence a moment before Sophie says suddenly, “Wherever did we get this service? I simply cannot remember.” His nose wrinkles as if her words actually sting. She is as shocked as he, can scarcely believe what she’s said.

Franzi responds in his formal tone, the one reserved for outsiders: “I’m not sure. From the Modena estate, perhaps?” A lie. His mouth fixes itself like he’s sucking on it.

Sophie is all repentance, and corrects, “Wait — heavens! — this is the set you gave me all those years ago, isn’t it?” Her voice lilts too gaily, and she looks toward the door as if doing so might conjure the footman or some other welcome diversion.

“Ah, yes, you’re quite right,” he says flatly. “I’d forgotten.” Another lie.

They contemplate each other in silence. Moment after moment after silent moment passes between them. Sophie’s chest pounds with regret. Franzi’s expression is stone. She’s gone too far, but her lips don’t issue an apology. An explanation would be even more awkward. And whatever reason could she give? She’ll sound daft trying to explain it to him. Simply daft. Or worse, discontent. Worse still, ungrateful.

With an inward sigh, Sophie tops off her tea and adds the second cube. The tea consumes the sugar, devours every last crystal as Sophie stirs. She takes a deep breath; smiles on the exhale. Franzi’s eyes soften a touch. What a mess she’s made of their favorite hour. And over what — sugar? How childish. It’s just — she frets — Franzi seems rather like the tea in all of this. And she — the sugar. Such a happy union, but only after she dissolves.