



Query

My wife and I talked of separation last week. After an incendiary argument, one in a string of many days and nights that have long indicated a deep marital malaise, she finally said, in response to my last vicious dig, and with an ominously even tone: “Maybe we should try separation, then.”

Such an unalterably final statement, looking back. And to think it began with a dispute over the sink’s dirty dishes and the next day’s child-care arrangements. But I tell myself now it didn’t really begin there, for these minor contentions were mere symptoms of a more far-reaching problem: this marriage has long been moribund.

The odd part is that I grasped none of this; I was passionately arguing about the dishes and about who should take care of our daughter, oblivious to the fact that, to my wife, these matters were now trivial. That for her there had been too much arguing, that separation was on her mind.

If I had known this, I would have done the dishes. Frantically. I would have traded shifts at the clinic and freed up time to take care of my daughter. I would have done what I could to stave off those shocking words. But now they have been said and I have felt the rupture. Though it must have been imaginary, I did feel close to my wife beforehand; now I affect a high diplomacy, treating her like an elegant stranger.

If she had said “separation” in an angry, a vindictive, even a hurt tone, I might not feel so utterly resigned. But her words

were dull, lapidary, the product of deliberation. She was resolute. It is now a matter of time.

What remains is how and when her words will be put into practice, who will go to the lawyer first, who will have custody of the child, who will keep the house. In all three of these matters, I fear I’m beaten: I don’t really want things to dissolve, I know that it would be harder on my daughter to be separated from her mother than from me, and that it would be logical for them to keep living together in our family home.

Logical. I never thought I’d have to contemplate the dissolution of my life; I’ve wanted a family for so long that to witness and in some respects be responsible for its breakup seems desperately illogical. And to be unable to do anything about it, about those words, so calculated and certain, intensifies the sense of illogic. I fantasize — I’ll do every dish, I’ll mop the floor every week, I’ll clean the bathroom more often — despite my feeling that nothing can be done.

I walk about the house like a stranger myself, one who sleeps in the guest room and wonders when he will eventually be told to leave. But to think about leaving and losing is much, much harder than concocting pathetic, desperate ways — maybe flowers every day? — to salvage this sad relationship.

— *Dr. Ursus*