

## DESIRE

Waking one morning from her frenzied dreams, Marie-Claire Sturm gazed at her long leg sticking out from under the duvet, her large feet with their brick-red painted toenails, her breasts that tumbled to the side as she lay naked on her back, her forearms which she didn't wax – unlike her legs – although for years she had wondered whether she should, and her long, slender hand reaching for her phone, and for the first time in her life as a woman she was happy with her body. More than happy. Her body was perfect just the way it was. And she was grateful that it moved without pain, that everything worked as it should, sending signals and releasing hormones as it should, and that it performed this miracle day after day without any external help. Even though she had put it through things that had definitely not helped. And even though she wasn't young, at least not in a medical sense. Not that lifestyle or age were any guarantee of anything anyway. She had simply been lucky with this body, and she had heard a thousand times how grateful we should be, which she had taken on board and tried to do out of a sense of duty, but it was only now, this morning, that she genuinely felt that gratitude for the first time.

The sun shone on her face, making the walls and the bedsheets glow like fresh snow, enhancing the contrast with her tanned legs, bent as though she were lying on the beach. The only imperfect detail was the window panes, which desperately needed cleaning. She reached for her phone, consciously observing the mundane movements of her fingers, feeling pleased with them. Was this that mindfulness everyone was constantly going on about? The display showed 11:27. She switched the phone to flight mode. It was Saturday, after all.

Marie-Claire dropped onto her back. That feeling was still there. She could feel her heartbeat, perhaps slightly accelerated. Her solar plexus seemed to be pulsating. Like when you're afraid. It had never occurred to her before that the physical symptoms of fear and euphoria were the same. Perhaps this was a panic attack, misread as elation?

She closed her eyes and immersed herself in the orange behind her eyelids. She felt like she was floating, and wondered if something had happened that she had just forgotten about. Yes, a few things had happened. But nothing that would prompt this. This baseless happiness. Utter contentment. Profound gratitude. It was almost frightening. So overwhelming that it felt like an epiphany. An awakening. Not Marie-Claire's sort of thing, really. Especially not in the morning.

Most days she woke up with a shock like someone had struck a gong right by her head. *I'm childless*. That was her first thought: clear, distinct, true, and it always hit her so hard, it made her heart race. She had read about bereaved people who dreaded waking up in the morning because it felt like every day started with discovering again that their loved one was no longer there. It was the same with her. What was more of a background noise

during the day, varying from a murmur to a rumble, was handed to her every morning as a slap in the face. Then she'd get up. And get on with life.

The desire was slow to emerge. Marie-Claire, the late bloomer.

*Look at it this way: you had twenty-five years to become a mother. That's a quarter of a century.*

That's what Dr Nonnenmacher, her gynaecologist, had said to her yesterday afternoon, her eyes wide with excitement, as if she was presenting her with a solution. She wasn't. All she had given Marie-Claire was a new mantra with which to torture herself, along with: I've failed. Messed up. Frittered my time away. Fucked up. There was one thing I was put on this earth to do and I've missed my chance. Pissed my life away. Why didn't I realise earlier that I had an expiry date? That I should have focused on the only important deadline in my life? What have I been doing all this time? Am I dimmer than everyone else? And is this my punishment? And now a new one, with heartfelt thanks to Dr Nonnenmacher: I had a quarter of a century. Even more, in fact, because I got my period when I was twelve.

Then there were the metaphors. She was in her mid-thirties when she started to see the world differently. When she started speaking in metaphors to herself and to a select few others, who didn't even seem to notice, perhaps suggesting that her metaphors weren't particularly original. Or that they weren't really listening.

The train is pulling out of the station, MC would say. I can see the tail lights. And I hate running. I see the door slowly closing; I'm alone in a dark room. I see an hourglass, the time I have left trickling away. I see myself playing musical chairs. Trip to Jerusalem as we used to call it. Anyway, I'm running around trying to find a free chair. I see myself in the bargain bin. Is that where I belong? Am I in the clearance sales now? And I'm also rummaging around in the bargain bin, looking for whatever's left over. The best is all gone. I'm too late.

*How long do I have left?*

That's what she asked her gynaecologist yesterday, and it sounded like she was asking how much time she had left to live. And Dr Nonnenmacher – Nunmaker, not a name that boded well if you wanted a child, as Marie-Claire only now realised – looked away from the screen and smiled at her.

I'm afraid I can't give you a precise date, but as I said, you're not too old. Your results are fine. And there are various options.

She then went on to list them: IVF, ICSI, IUI and GIFT, though that one was much rarer now. Marie-Claire had researched them all to death, and pictured petri dishes and syringes, along with broodmares being inseminated with a cannula as long as your forearm – that's

what all those methods and acronyms reminded her of. She pictured various couples: despondent husbands and wives, where things weren't working with one of them; determined same-sex couples where perhaps things worked fine with both of them, but they weren't going to resort to hetero sex as a means to procreate. Marie-Claire had friends who had gone down this route – couples who had made the decision after carefully weighing up every option. She envied them for their pragmatism, and for not falling for the nonsense about finding the right man to be the father of your children, someone who had to magically appear in your life at just the right moment and then stay.

Wonderful that all these people could now be helped. But all the same: thanks, but no thanks.

That's the way it is, said Marie-Claire. I'm not infertile and neither do I want a child without a partner.

Great. That's fine, if you want to wait for the right partner, said the doctor, glancing at her screen again, as if spotting something important, perhaps another method, or maybe a private message, something funny. Bad style, thought Marie-Claire.

The good news from this appointment, scheduled to update her on her reproductive capability after years of ignoring it, was the reassurance that she was still in good shape. All the same, the words *wait* and *right partner* was enough to make Marie-Claire want to get out of there, fast. She nodded furiously at Dr Nonnenmacher's invitation to join her counselling group for women unfulfilled in their desire to have a baby, grabbing her handbag and jacket.

It's not decided once and for all for you, of course, but it might be helpful to hear from women in a similar situation. I also offer individual sessions. As you might know, I'm also a qualified psychotherapist.

No, Marie-Claire hadn't known that. However, she wasn't surprised that Dr N. had another qualification up her sleeve. She presumably also had several children, a house, a car and a horse – and an ideal husband, no doubt also a doctor, possibly also a management consultant. In any case, you could hardly fail to notice that things were going swimmingly. She had the aura and look of a woman who needed all her powers of abstraction to empathise with a deadbeat life story like Marie-Claire's, and it had probably occurred to her, why not make a side hustle out of this capacity to empathise with losers?

Thank you, I'll think about it, mumbled Marie-Claire, enfeebled, unintentionally humiliated by the gynaecologist, whose last sentences she barely took in, hearing only key words: therapy, prerequisite, participate, university clinic, new method. She didn't want a new method. She didn't want anything frozen, removed or injected. She wanted to wake up one morning, realise she'd missed her period, pee on a pregnancy test, see two stripes appear, and whoop for joy.

It was a familiar scene. There had been two occasions when she hadn't whooped for joy. The first time she wept and howled, then confessed to her mum, who was – astonishingly – neither shocked nor angry, but immediately set everything in motion, as she put it. There seemed to be no thought of any other option, which had surprised Marie-Claire. There was apparently no question of waiting to see what happened, letting it progress and live. She'd been giving it a lot of thought lately. Those two times, successfully repressed for years, were now floating to the surface like corpses. Returning to haunt her, whispering that this was her punishment for not letting them live.

She was seventeen the first time. Year five by Dr Nonnenmacher's reckoning, and far too young. For once, she, her family and the society she lived in were all in agreement.

You don't want to screw up your life before it's even begun, said Vroni, her mother, and then, more gently (always an afterthought with Vroni): You still have all the time in the world. Leave all that for later, but right now you need to stop crying and get a move on, because time's against you.

Elfriede, her grandmother, was also in favour, or against the pregnancy, Catholicism notwithstanding; it didn't fit in every situation in life; that didn't mean you were a bad person, it just meant that you had to compensate elsewhere; there were always ways to make up for things – going to confession was definitely a start. Elfriede had seen a lot in her life, including backstreet abortions, so it was a blessing that nowadays all you had to do was meet the woman from Pro Familia, who in this case could sign off a decision *anti familia*, and then you were in professional medical hands. God knows it's not pretty, but being a woman meant being in constant danger and being left to face the music on your own, no matter which route you decided to go down. And fat chance of finding a man when you've got a baby, Elfriede added. That *fat chance* generally summed up what she thought of Marie-Claire's prospects on the marriage market. Which Elfriede made no bones about when her granddaughter hit puberty and it became clear that she was going to be over five foot ten. Oh come on, mum, enough of that, Vroni had said, while Marie-Claire carried on sobbing, agonizing over whether or not she should tell the assistant coach at the basketball club – the *father*, wow, what a word.

Veronika and Elfriede didn't even ask about him. He didn't matter. Marie-Claire came from a long maternal line of widowed, abandoned and disappointed women. Women who managed perfectly well on their own, who expected the worst and then settled for the worst. That wasn't where she wanted to end up. But even at seventeen, it looked as if her hardest task was going to be to steer her little boat against this strong current and find another course. Perhaps that was another reason not to have the baby, Marie-Claire thought later: it would have meant being stuck living with her mother indefinitely. Just as Vroni had always ended up back with her mother, overwhelmed and exhausted and alone, first with one child, then with two.

Marie-Claire was also going to have two. Two healthy babies. That much she was sure of. [...]

## SHAME

Passing by on her road bike, Anahita glanced up to see her picture. It was hard not to see it when the entire city was plastered with her face. Alternating with the other faces that were up for election. The impact of these posters was surprisingly small. Hardly anyone had approached her in the past few weeks after seeing one; no one had glanced at her for longer than usual. There seemed to be no connection between the real her and the one on the poster. Despite having made a point of not only looking good, but also looking like herself. She had chosen a particular smile from her repertoire of facial expressions, making it her official smile. If you had good teeth, you should show them, even if she had seen herself twice today with a blacked-out incisor. Here and there, she had acquired glasses or devil horns. No Hitler moustache, yet – still the number one choice of election poster doodlers – but an anatomically very convincing penis aiming diagonally for her half-open mouth like an arrow. She had always wondered how people felt having to put up with being defaced like that. Now she knew: not great. The blowjob poster was very high up, high enough, and behind her a takeaway delivery rider on an e-bike rang his bell. She sped up. It would be gone in a few days anyway. The election was history.

It was months ago that she was invited onto this radio show. Because she was considered a good media person. Because she belonged to a group of people that people liked listening to at the moment. It was almost a wellness trend: focussing on people like her seemed to promote a sense of well-being. This is my time and I'm making the most of it, she thought when the requests came in.

The preliminary call with the editor couldn't be delegated to someone else. The show was going to be a portrait, as they put it. It wasn't about political issues, it was about her. That's why Anahita was surprised that her interviewer, Marie-Claire Sturm aka MC Storm, didn't call her personally, but had someone else call her. It had the air of a demonstration of power, but then she decided perhaps it was standard procedure. The young editor was both obsequious and impudent at the same time, a combination that straight away burst Anahita's otherwise tightly inflated airbag of professional friendliness and fairness. Disdain and coldness seeped out, which made her uncomfortable, not so much because of the editor, but rather because it felt like a loss of control. This situation was definitely too small for so many emotions.

I haven't been able to find out much about your family online, squeaked the girl who was supposed to sound like a woman.

I thought it was about me, not my family.

But as it's a portrait, we'd need some basic info. And then you pad it out with your anecdotes, so to speak. Um. So, yeah?

That made Anahita freeze up, so to speak. What's more, the woman had unsuspectingly touched on one of her shortcomings: she didn't do anecdotes. Even her mother could tell a story with a punchline, and it was decades since she had anything new to talk about. The same with her father. Master of the dinner table conversation, although he was terrible at telling jokes and always messed up the chronology and spoiled the punchline, explaining it to his audience again afterwards. Her brother Cyrus had declared Dad's approach a unique comic style in a category of its own. Her other brother, Reza, was a walking collection of new stories from his star-studded professional life. And that left just Anahita, who had inherited nothing of her family's storytelling talent.

She heard the squeaky voice ask whether she spoke German at home with her family, for example? Or were there any experiences from her school days that she hoped to bring into her work. Keyword: integration. Hello, are you still here?

Yes, said Anahita.

Apart from the fact that the young woman didn't seem to know what an anecdote was, it was obvious what they wanted from her. The same story they'd heard a thousand times. That reassurance of hearing what they expected to hear. It felt like being intelligent. It felt like the world was predictable and therefore a safe place. In Anahita's case, they wanted to hear the story of the well-meaning, simple immigrants whose only desire was for their children to be better off. Her father was a doctor, but of course whatever doesn't fit the story can be made to fit. Plus a bit of folklore around the big family celebrations, yeah, that's what we're good at, throwing a good party and all that. And finally the happy ending in the form of the successful daughter, who – and here a few details please about the long, hard climb – now sits here before you. Tadaaaa! Keyword: integration.

If they were going to have their schmalzy immigrant story, thought Anahita, she would need to find something to give them, so she could keep to herself the stuff she had no intention of talking about. Her parents had other challenges at the moment besides their non-German surname, and she had almost pulled out of the election campaign because of it all – something she didn't want to even think about right now, let alone air in public. No, she would lull listeners with some predictable fluff from her childhood that makes her parents out to be completely normal people, which they were on the outside. Everything's fine, nothing to see here – that was one thing her family always agreed on.

And I see here that your brother has a film production company. Um. So. Yeah?

Which presumably meant that she wasn't the only one in the family who had *made* it.

I have two brothers. One's a filmmaker, the other owns a restaurant. I'm the youngest, she added.

Mm-hmm. Great, said the girl, perhaps because she was finally able to provide her boss with a snippet of new, albeit irrelevant, information, or perhaps because she felt she ought to praise Anahita for her willingness to co-operate. Note to self: only daughter, older brothers. Great, because there's nothing there anyone could be offended by.

Hello, are you still there?

You can find my parents' names online. Where they're from, their professions. Anything else I can run by Marie-Claire Sturm, as you said.

Um. So. Yeah. And if there's anything you don't want to talk about at all, can we run by that in advance?

I don't want to talk about my current marital status.

Okay?

Just not at all.

Okay.

She sounded so defensive, like she had something to hide. From the faceless phone voice of an intern. But there wasn't anything. That was the problem. Her private life was a big nothing.

A yawning emptiness where most people could offer a one-sentence explanation. Married. Mother. Better still: both. No more questions. Or ones that were met with an enthusiastic response.

So then my husband and I decided ...

My daughter always says ...

I was pregnant with our son at the time ...

In Japan, they had agencies where you could hire family members. Parents, partners, children. To keep up appearances. To come across as a well-rounded individual. You could specify what kind of people you wanted, she had read. Your partner's profession and background, the age of the children, even how your rent-a-family should behave. A small, nuclear family would be good, Anahita thought after the unhelpful phone call with the radio assistant. A husband and daughter who are only there when I need them. Then I'd just have to explain what became of them if I really wanted to start a family.

The fear that she might be caught out never seemed to go away. And she always thought that the next hurdle she overcame would free her from it. Graduation certificate, degree, teacher training, job, postgraduate degree, working for the party, climbing up the ladder. But the fear never went away. The fear that people might realise she was unsuitable, the wrong choice. That, for strategic reasons, she had been installed in a role she wasn't right for. That she was nothing but an opportunist, an imposter, a token woman.

And then there was the one thing that at least no one could accuse her of having obtained by devious means: being alone.

The cycling tired her out. She had convinced herself that she desperately needed more exercise. The truth was that this was the second time she'd taken the bike out since she'd bought it from her sister-in-law, who now got around Berlin on a cargo bike full of children. Anahita had to wear her bag across her chest, which creased her blouse, and roll up her trousers, which looked stupid and didn't stay put, and she only vaguely knew the way. All this just to give off a casually sporty impression. Ridiculous. Yes, sometimes she was an imposter. To put it in a nicer way: a woman who cared about how she came across. Even the small details. Seeming as informal as possible fit well with this show, where she was keen to cultivate her 'behind-the-scenes-she's-totally-cool' image. No work car, no entourage, dressed casually, arriving on her leisure mode of transport. It was all an act but at least it looked good, even if she almost fell off because she couldn't grip the pedals with her smooth leather soles. The advantage was that she had a bit of time to herself. She still hadn't yet got used to spending car journeys working and ignoring the driver. Instead, she frittered her time away with small talk, which the driver probably didn't need any more than she did and which only came from her urge to please everyone. At least now she had some time on her own to think. About how she was going to stay relaxed chatting for two hours, without resorting to platitudes, not giving away anything private, while still coming across as likeable and approachable. Anahita cursed the hard saddle, and herself for underestimating this appointment.

She had been alone and had worked hard. A good combination. But then the work had paid off and she was still alone. For almost seven years now. In that time there had only been one relationship – also one of the things not intended for a public audience. It was a relationship that belonged to the night, where he himself worked, the son of a pub landlord who followed in his father's footsteps, running his restaurants and bars like an impresario. He knew every bigshot, every heavyweight in town, and he loved to throw his own weight around, sticking his nose in every gala event, every art deal, property deal, and a good deal of cocaine, too. His driving matched his lifestyle: he was always on the verge of a crash. He always had cash on him, but who knew where it came from. Or maybe it was obvious, because at the bar, cash was still king. Too regal to stop by the tax office, Anahita assumed, aware she had no place in this scenario at all, with her constant fear of the morning after. Anahita who was constantly tiptoeing around in her expensive pumps on a minefield of possible fuck-ups. She was used to being the enfant terrible amidst the stuffy apparatchiks she was normally surrounded by. With this man, she met genuine enfants terribles for the first time, people who could be relied on to go large, every night. It seemed to be the only thing you could rely on in this city, she sometimes thought, sitting in one of his bars, being



waited on by the staff as the boss's girlfriend, surrounded by people who also enjoyed success or coveted it, but in industries where they didn't have to split themselves into a daytime and a nighttime self.

This relationship – which was never defined as such – felt like a beginner's surfing course. Sometimes Anahita and this eternal party host managed to stand on the board for one euphoric moment and everything was perfect before they fell off again. He called her his political princess and predicted a bright future for her. She called him her host animal and at some point she started calling him, just to herself, her Last Call.

By then she was thirty-seven and it struck her that the topic of having children only ever concerned what compromises a woman had to make for the sake of it. Men were only mentioned when things didn't work out. The restaurateur she was seeing would have had to give up his entire way of life to become a dad and raise a healthy child. And what if he had? Then, at a critical stage of her career, Anahita would have had a baby with a man who was always surrounded by a whiff of scandal. At least she would have been a step closer to her role model, the French minister who preferred to tell the press that her private life was complicated rather than name her child's father. But anything this man did could have been associated with her. Other politicians had already tripped up over paying their cleaning ladies off the books, while this guy was probably employing a whole army of workers who walked out after their shift, cash in hand. There was also the question of what else he got up to, which Anahita didn't want to know, and with whom, which Anahita also didn't want to know; she could hardly claim any exclusivity to their relationship when she would barely even admitted that she knew him. Not even in front of her brother Reza, through whom she had met him. He was seated at their table after a film premiere because he always sat at the top table – he was a born party host, after all. With such a zest for life that he got the entire table drunk. And with that sardonic gift for banter that comes with being Viennese. He was a ladies' man, they couldn't get enough of his punk, and Anahita was no exception. The zest for life and the banter flagged a little during the day compared to how he was by night, and his mood swings were one of the reasons why Anahita was ready to miss her Last Call. She didn't proceed to the boarding gate, destination Maternité; instead, she chose the exit. If they had genuinely been a couple, she would have had to say, it can't go on like this. Instead, she woke up several times a week with the nagging question of what she'd said the night before, what she'd done, who she'd sat next to, who'd taken photos and where they might end up. Perhaps she was being paranoid, after all there was no law against going out for dinner with friends, but Anahita couldn't shake the feeling that it was time to make a decision. The words *blackmail target* throbbed in her head. Often accompanied by a pounding hammer, because this was a lifestyle Anahita couldn't keep up with, not with her daily workload.

It turned out stepping back wasn't hard. She just stopped going anywhere he would be. It reminded her of school, when she'd had to choose between having fun and exam revision, and she also started avoiding certain people and places. A period of sombre relief set in. Their messages petered out until they were barely in touch. When they eventually met again, surrounded by other people, they shared an amicable, knowing look: no hard feelings.

Anahita Martini MP was single when she stood for election in Berlin, officially and unofficially. She was thirty-nine years old and alone.

No one had said anything about it yet. Yet.

Ms Martini, you're a single woman with no children, and you're Senator for Education, Family and All That Shebang – ha ha, sorry, that sounds a bit Schröder – but seriously: don't you sometimes have the sense that this position requires not only professional competence, but also, how to put it, personal experience?

Her imaginary interlocutor was there again: the voice that always piped up to throw tricky questions Anahita's way before anyone else did.

The question was the proverbial elephant in the room. It was everywhere you looked, even now as she cycled past the other candidates' election posters. Women her age, equally well qualified for her role. But with presentable partners and children. Her fiercest rival, whom she referred to as her colleague, had five. She was neither rich nor poor, she had married her university boyfriend in her early twenties and brought one child after another into the world at the same time as doing everything Anahita had done. Women like her were a constant humiliation for women like Anahita.

So, you think a mother would be closer to the issues I'm working on? she asked her imaginary sparring partner.

You could say. And it's not as if there aren't other candidates in your party that tick all the boxes ...

Let me ask you a question back: does a doctor have to be ill? Does the Minister of Health have to be a doctor? Can a doctor become Minister of Defence if she's never served in the Bundeswehr?

No, no, not like that. She needed to work on her tone. She needed to sound more confident, less harrassed. Ideally tickled by the naive notions entertained by her interviewer. Who was, after all, herself.

Sometimes Anahita wondered whether there was something pathological about these grillings she put herself through. In any case, the fact that she regularly heard a voice that she also replied to was something she kept to herself.

One solution, she realised, would be to go on the offensive. Look, this is me, this is who I am, and it's as it should be. Boldness and transparency – that's what voters value. Not that Anahita was an activist for independent living, she just happened to be unattached.

Her supporters would resent her if that changed. If she admitted that she wasn't single by choice, she'd be declaring herself fair game. Textbook Catch 22.

It wouldn't even be a problem if she had a wife to present to the world. That was no big thing any more, the groundwork had been done, thank goodness. And bravo! If she had a wife and, even better, children with this wife, it would all be hunky dory. She wasn't sure whether it would be better to say she *had* the children with her, or that she was *raising* the children with her, but unfortunately all this was neither here nor there. Because it wasn't a relationship with a woman that was Anahita's problem, it was the lack of a relationship with a man.

We're constantly expanding the conception of what we define as normal, she had recently heard in a lecture. A liberation and opening up to ways of living that were previously not invited to the party by the Normal elite. But somehow it looked as if these ways of living still had to involve living as a couple. The world was made for couples, even here, where a half of all adults lived in single households. Who were these people, Anahita often asked herself. Did they fall under her mandate: family? Politically, they had no lobby because they weren't raising the next generation of taxpayers. What protection did you need if you lived alone? Protection from loneliness. Protection from shame for living the way they do.

She was therefore predestined to go on the offensive when it came to her relationship status. To be a poster girl against single-shaming. A positive side effect: the migration background might finally be left in the background. Negative side effects: too many to count. From all sides. She was already vulnerable. Having no clear relationship status opened up the field of speculation immeasurably. People who live alone are suspicious. Or to be pitied. They always were. No end in sight there. Pro footballers and Formula 1 drivers go further if they're not gay, politicians do better if they're not single. Unless they have children. Or they're widowed. After all, Anahita wasn't single, she was divorced. That meant there had to be a backstory. And indeed there was.

One day, the moment she'd woken up, Anahita Farahani was asked by Daniel Martini if she could imagine looking at this face every morning for the rest of her life.

It was his own face he was pointing at. It was crumpled and red, and thanks to his enormous self-confidence, Daniel Martini had no issue with addressing her close up with his breathtakingly bad morning breath. She laughed, in a mixture of panic, hysteria and also joy. With him, everything felt too funny to hurt. Why not, she said. Daniel wasn't likely to ask again. It was a Daniel-style ADHD flash of inspiration: a lightning-fast idea followed by a lightning-fast wedding.

Let's fly to Las Vegas and get married by Elvis.

Since when have you had the hots for Elvis?

Okay, Copenhagen then – nice and quick there, too. Nice town hall, nice people, good restaurants.

He was surprised when she took his name and gave up her maiden name completely. Not even double-barrel? No. Anahita didn't want to sound like a female politician of the short, grey hair generation. She wanted to sound like rattling ice cubes, rosso, bianco and dry, as cheerful as a *Cheers*, internationally recognisable and easy to spell. Farahani, her maiden name, would have watered down the dry Martini. She had always been fond of it, but it would live on thanks to her brothers. She had already perfected her new signature – a bold, confident M and the dots of the two i's dashed off together – before they had even flown to Copenhagen. And she was looking forward to trying out either a brisk, snappy *Martini!* or a breathy, seductive *Martini?* when she answered the phone. In this respect, at least, Anahita had really thought this marriage thing through.

They both called their parents at the same time, straight after the wedding. His mother felt betrayed, burst into tears and passed the phone to his father, while Anahita's mother didn't seem to have any problem with being uninformed and uninvited, but came straight out and asked if she was pregnant.

No, for God's sake, why would you think that?

It wasn't such a strange question – she realised only years later. From her mother's point of view, she was old enough; from her own point of view, she still had plenty of time and lots she wanted to do first. Besides, getting married hadn't felt like a biographical highlight, but like a performance dolled up in Dolce & Gabbana that probably wouldn't have happened if either of them had caught a cold or they'd missed their flight. She enjoyed having to be as spontaneous as Daniel pretended to be. She enjoyed his infatuation, which even at the time she could see for what it was. She was only his second girlfriend and the first who actually wanted to sleep with him. Anahita had met a sex-starved twenty-five-year-old man, which gave her a position of power she hadn't reckoned on and didn't take advantage of. Her body gave him so much pleasure that it gave her pleasure too. The pesky questions generally summarised as, am I beautiful enough?, fell silent during this time. Sex was Daniel's chief need, while for her it became a recreational drug that she deserved given how hard she worked. Sex was the foundation of their relationship. As the older woman, even if just by four years – which seemed like decades to her, not least because her husband constantly owed her money and had only vague, half-baked career plans, something she would later come to regret – she envisaged that this foundation wouldn't hold up in the long run. While they focused on maximum spontaneity and minimum daily grind, Anahita was confident that the father of her children would be whoever came *after* Daniel. Which she never told him. The divorce was almost as mutually consensual as the wedding, as Daniel had already been living in the USA for two years and had told her that he was going to be a father. The new woman, now his second wife, posted photos of

holidays with two little girls and a nanny who looked like Anahita back when she'd been with Daniel. Anahita needed to stop following her, but then there were also more important things she needed to stop doing, like smoking for example.

*Smoking reduces your fertility.* Who read these warnings? She did.

Her goal was Brussels. She was going to get elected to the EU Parliament and get these kinds of warnings put on alcoholic drinks, too. *Drinking puts you in danger of beating up your fellow human beings. Don't even start.* You either spoil the fun for everyone or for no one. [...]

## REGRET

Later, Marie-Claire couldn't even remember what she'd actually wanted to ask Senator Martini. The words came out of nowhere. After the recording, Anahita went straight back to using the formal *Sie*, nodding frenetically at MC's apology before calling a driver for herself and her road bike.

MC had asked a childless woman the child question. She, of all people – she who had banned this question, who had banned it before she herself could be beset by it. The question that was hardly ever asked of men, and was used, consciously or not, as a weapon against successful women to highlight a deficit. For dramatic effect. To hit where it hurts. The tabloids could do that, and indeed they did, but not here under her watch.

After Anahita Martini had said goodbye, with curt professionalism and naturally with the request that the recording be sent to her office from editorial, MC stomped down the long, curved corridor of the broadcasting centre and grabbed Lotta for a debrief, or what, when she was starting out, they had called the third degree.

Did she tell you she didn't want to talk about it or not?

I think so. Um. Yeah? But isn't that what everyone says?

No, not everyone says that, there are a lot of people who would love to fritter away my airtime entirely on the adventures and talents of their children. But every guest has the right to tell us in advance what they do or don't want to talk about. It can't be that difficult.

Um. I think she said that she didn't want to talk about her family. And I told her that it was supposed to be a portrait. She could have cancelled at that point. Besides, there aren't any children on her homepage or the Senate website. Um. So? Yeah.

What kind of logic is that? There's no mention of illnesses or sexual preferences on her website, so do we have to ask her about them?

No, but not having children isn't an illness that's got nothing to do with anyone else. Are we supposed to assume she has children? To be honest, I don't really get it.

Yes, I see that you don't get it. But that doesn't mean you don't have to do your job properly.

Pardon? Excuse me?

Right, Lotta, you need to apologise to me because you didn't give me the most important information about this conversation.

MC had long suppressed her dislike of the young woman who had been assigned to her in place of the very competent woman her own age who was – of course – on maternity leave. Lotta shed her permanent smile, which had annoyed MC from the start, and looked horrified. Artfully horrified, too horrified for this brief conversation in which nothing had happened. MC had barely raised her voice, tempering her sarcasm. She had attempted to break through Lotta's arrogant grin and told her she had made a mistake. That was all there was to it.

Have a nice evening, she muttered, leaving Lotta sitting at her desk with her shocked face and her Hawaiian poke bowl.

Lotta needed to be told, MC told herself, feeling a little less guilty than she did at first. But she also realised that it wasn't because she hadn't been warned that the question had slipped out. It was because it was what she was most interested in.

She would call Anahita Martini later when she was sure exactly what she wanted to say. It was too late to fix it now. The child – the taboo – had well and truly fallen down the well. It soured the mood from then on, which MC hoped wouldn't be obvious to listeners. Anahita was professional enough to return to her friendly, chatty tone after glaring at MC and hitting the palm of her hand against the fingertips of her other: Time out. No one would ever see it, just as no one would ever hear the electric crackle of silence that followed, but MC would never forget that moment. She had until then only been aware of that pain within herself. It hadn't occurred to her it would be shared by the education policy spokeswoman, now a senator, whose entire adult life since she was eighteen looked like everything had gone exactly to plan.

She would call her. Tell her that although it didn't look like it, unfortunately, she did understand. Not in that instinctive way that was demanded of women, that sticking-together that was yet another task always there to trip women up. No. She did genuinely understand her. Which, unfortunately, hadn't occurred to her in time. She should have spoken to Anahita herself before the interview, she should have prepared better, then she would have realised that this woman clearly had the same problem as she did. MC, who right now regretted everything she had been proud of in the past, every decision she had made that could be seen as unconventional, intuitive and spontaneous. She had almost a sense of relief to have met someone else who had lived differently, who had had clear plans for the future and had nevertheless arrived at this point. It was quite possible that Anahita Martini had declared her her eternal enemy, it was even more possible that she was trying

to erase this conversation and this radio presenter from her memory, but MC suddenly felt close to her. Suddenly she didn't feel quite so alone.

Heading back to the conference room for the remains of the wine and nibbles, which she would now consume on her own, MC remembered that she had probably already alienated Martini when she mentioned her age. Not her best move, but on the other hand it was understandable – it's our main problem, after all, thought MC.

I was in my prime in my late thirties, her mother had always said; I was still beautiful then and I knew my mind. That was the point at which Veronika Sturm finally knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to be a healer, or more precisely, a complementary health practitioner. Her first real career aspiration at just under forty, which was perhaps twenty years later than the average, but better than coming up with the idea of wanting a baby at that age.

MC poured herself a glass of wine and put her feet up on the conference table.

They're most beautiful in their late thirties, said a former lover not so long ago; he always talked about women as *them*. But he also said *I like them young*, which sounded like he preferred his steak bloody, his trousers tight and his coffee black. She should have replied: And I like them young and beautiful, darling, because he was neither, which he made up for in other ways, but instead it left her speechless. He had been lying in bed, she had just done her bra up, he had made some well-meaning comment about her body, which was in such good shape, but sadly, sadly, even though they were so beautiful in their late thirties, he still preferred them young. This man had two children whose gap-toothed giggles looked out from his screensaver, but he was no longer with their mother. That's what MC had firmly assumed, anyway. They had met at a wedding, and why else would a man turn up at a wedding without his wife? And then say nothing about her? For months on end, while she told herself: he's the one. I can't believe it, too good to be true. Because apart from the fact that the man was a complete dick who never said a word about his wife, yet loved showing off his children, and his projects and his heavyweight acquaintances, whom he always referred to by both first and last names so that no one could be fooled by the notion that they were just ordinary people, apart from all that he was a one hundred percent match in Marie-Claire's eyes. It had been such a good match, she still thought occasionally, disregarding everything that didn't fit. He was creative, funny, an attentive lover with good taste in hotels and restaurants, he challenged her intellectually and physically, expressed himself superbly and was busy enough with himself and his fabulous life to always give off the necessary remoteness that made him even more desirable.

MC topped up her wine glass. Fuck, she thought.

It had been a matter of dignity not to stand in a queue waiting. You did good, Marie-Claire, she told herself when she called the affair off, beating him to the let's be friends move. She had him in checkmate, but also herself. From then on, she was ready to be told

that the man had separated from his wife, only to start his next family with the next woman (very young, not MC). In the end, to avoid having to congratulate him on this grandiose plot twist, MC broke off contact completely.

It ought to be forbidden for men like him to take time away from women like me, she thought, but ah, sod it. There were enough painful things that weren't forbidden, and rightly so, because when two adults came into contact with each other, they had to look out for themselves. He hadn't asked for his body to be the perfect machine that never had to take time off because it was riddled with PMS or menstruating, or pregnant, or having a baby, or breastfeeding and looking after the baby. He hadn't asked to be able to procreate until he died, every day if he had to, 365 days a year, without interruption. Was that even true? It could be one of the reasons why so many men felt more comfortable with their bodies than women did. That superiority.

It was a scandal that we weren't the centre of the universe, humiliating that we were descended from animals, and even more insulting that we weren't in command of our own consciousness. This affected all humans, but these wounds ought to have healed by now, as old as they were, especially those inflicted by Copernicus and Darwin. The question of consciousness that Freud had raised was making itself known more often at the moment, now that she had to seriously ask herself where this urgency had come from and this distorted vision that only allowed her to perceive what she didn't have. Those other grievances were a joke compared to hers. They are old and human, in the male sense, which is different from suddenly being unable to fulfil what is essentially your sole purpose in life, a grievance that also only affected one half of humanity while leaving the other entirely unaffected.

When MC looked at men like her ex, she understood the phrase penis envy. But without a sense of being physically incomplete – she had never actually longed for a penis, or if she had, then only briefly, on hikes or at festivals with portaloos. No, what she wanted was not another organ, what she wanted was time. What she wanted was the choice. Which she had had: the female choice. A term that made her think of nature documentaries and courtship displays, with the males strutting about all puffed up with dazzling colours, some vicious, some cute, some completely off their rockers – it's all or nothing, after all.

As a little girl, MC hadn't felt incomplete because she didn't look like her father when she was naked, possibly because this father had never been present in her life, anyway. But as a big girl, she should have chosen the father of her offspring. Right from the start, she had misunderstood something. She had been the one to do all the crazy courtship things, putting on all the dazzling colours and puffed up displays, who tried to be all cute and lovable, failing to see how brutal it could all be. She had overlooked the fact that she was part of nature, which didn't give you several decades to choose a partner. *You've had a*



*quarter of a century. I like them young.* And it wasn't as though she hadn't had any opportunities.

Marie-Claire?

Elena poked her head around the door – the recording manager. In other times, they would have gone for a drink together. They'd have gone over the programme, rehashing every detail, the guests, their conceits, the mishaps, MC's faux pas. They'd have had a good chuckle and accidentally drunk one glass too many.

What are you doing here in the dark?

Having my after-work glass of wine.

Ah. I thought you were going somewhere.

MC had become the one who had to join in everyone else's celebrations. And now for Elena, too, whose bump was still barely showing, not even showing a bit of belly as the tabloids put it when a high-profile woman dared to walk around in a baggy T-shirt.

Nope, I'm going home after this.

Me too, of course. Should be a nice programme.

I hope so. It wasn't that easy. Ciao, and say hi to Tom, yeah?

MC had adopted a fake grin, which she flashed to Elena and kept, needlessly, long after she had left the room. It was the only facial expression that prevented her face from freezing or dropping when she heard how other people's lives were progressing. No one seemed to notice that MC's smile was no longer a genuine one from deep inside her, a Duchenne smile. That only the lower part of her face smiled, and that it gave her cramp. She didn't hate herself for it, but every time she did it she wondered how it had got to the point that she bared her teeth like a wolf at other people's good news instead of being genuinely happy for them, which she had always been able to do. She was wiser as a child than she was now: little Marie-Claire had instinctively known that comparing herself to others brought nothing but envy and misery. You are you, and they are them. It was that simple back then. She had friends who had more, who had nicer houses, came from tidier family circumstances, and with her child's perspective she already sensed that there was no point in wanting to be someone else. She had gone through life with a sense of compensatory justice. She saw that some people had money but no ideas; others had ideas but didn't know how to act on them; others were beautiful and talented but unhappy. She had taught herself to be content with what she had and what she was.

With time, this gift seemed to have gone astray. Slipped away stealthily. It felt like an illness with episodes and lapses. And the relapses were coming at shorter and shorter intervals and lasting longer every time. [...]

**END OF SAMPLE**