

Anika Decker: Two Reasonable Adults Who Have Seen Each Other Naked

The new novel by the acclaimed screenwriter and director: Anika Decker's debut spent weeks in the Top 20 of the SPIEGEL Bestseller List

Younger man, older woman – a thoroughly normal relationship?

Bridget Jones meets Good Luck to You, Leo Grande

**‘Get out there, sweetheart, and live a little.
Today is the day for smooching.’**

Nina: approaching fifty, divorced, and mother of two children. She doesn't begrudge her ex's new marriage to a young influencer and mother of twins, but she can't deny that there are a few irksome details. Her tiny flat compared to the imposing mansion of her supposedly bankrupt ex, for example. But then something happens that Nina almost refuses to believe: She falls in love with David, twenty years her junior, throwing the established order of her life into disarray. Suddenly, everybody seems to have an opinion on her life, including herself, and if she wants to be happy, she'll have to take a fresh approach to it.



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Anika Decker, born in Marburg in 1975, lives and works as a screenwriter and director in Berlin. In 2007 she achieved her breakthrough with her sensational screenplay debut, 'Keinohrhasen' (*Rabbit Without Ears*), which is one of the most successful German films of all time. Anika Decker worked as a director as well, her productions were highly successful. Her first novel 'Wir von der anderen Seite' (*We from the Other Side*) was on the Spiegel bestseller list for weeks.



Anika Decker
Two Reasonable Adults Who Have Seen Each Other Naked

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Sample Translation: Two Reasonable Adults Who Have Seen Each Other Naked (by Anika Decker)

Sample Translation
By Leanne Lockwood Cvetan

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Nina

The first time I saw him was at the twins' birthday party. My ex-husband Phil had actually let himself be talked into multiple in-vitro attempts by his second wife. What I am amazed about, with regards to this undertaking is, first of all, that he had a desire to have children especially after I've had to remind him of our two children's birthdays for about twenty years. I can't recall for the life of me ever seeing him on a swing, a teeter-totter, or crawling through a play tunnel. Secondly, it is a mystery to me how the doctors could have managed to motivate his sperm to this sort of superhuman feat. Phil thinks of himself as a wine expert when in reality he's been binge drinking for years. The only thing separating him from some poor devil sitting outside the department store is essentially the price of a single bottle and that our pal at department store has the decency to keep his mouth shut about the vintage, how it was aged, or the exclusive vineyard in the fucking south of France where he bought the stuff. People like my ex-husband will go so far as to take a wine tour just to prove they aren't alcoholics. Anyone who enjoys, and who is even capable of blathering on for an entire evening about grapes certainly can't be an alcoholic. When in fact, any dinner you go to with a group of business consultants somewhere around fifty will all have pink teeth and breath that'll knock your socks off by the time the main course is barely finished. I know because I spent twenty years cooking dinners for Phil's long-time business partners at our house. But that was back then, when I was still a wife. When I still had a separate dressing room, and even a utility room. Today, I live in a one-and-a-half-bedroom apartment in the city. I have to hang my wet clothes up over the bathtub to dry. I'm just glad to have a bathtub at all. I was so dumb when I signed that prenup. I was even dumber when I agreed to put the little bit of money my parents left me towards the down payment for the house – the house that never even belonged to me if the registry office is telling the truth. My main characteristic is anger with disappointment following at a very close second. It's all my own fault. I should have checked sooner about how German divorce laws work; I should have known that the job of housewife "for the sake of the kids" is an incredibly crappy deal. When I look at our old wedding photos today, see myself in my stylishly minimalist-looking slip dress in champagne and my beach waves in the middle of Berlin, where there's absolutely zero beaches in sight, all I see is an idiot in a white dress. I married someone without the slightest clue of what I was signing away. If you can believe the authorities, my self-employed ex-husband is a very poor man. He owns nothing but the mountain of debt he incurred as he started his new law firm, which is why we also never had any gains while we were married. He wasn't much of a gain himself during our marriage either, emotionally speaking, but that's another story. I spent weeks leading up to our wedding searching for the perfect dress. It was the only topic of

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conversation between me and my girlfriends. I should've been meeting with divorce lawyers instead. They ought to put up stands next to playgrounds, although, yeah, it's too late by then anyway. They ought to hand out flyers outside dive bars so that people, I mean women, can learn what the equalization of accrued gains is. And no, you don't automatically get half of everything you have accumulated together since day 1 of the marriage. It absolutely isn't. It's much, much less than that. And then some ridiculously tiny percent of that. And if you were also dumb enough to then "stay at home" for a few years, well, then good luck. Try finding a decent job, fail to (of course), and be glad that you don't land in some pitifully low paid media job like I did.

So, I went to visit my on-paper-so-impooverished ex-husband in his spacious villa that he shares with his young Influencer wife ("Hey Ladies, it's time again for mindfulness with Lulu") and their three-year-old twins. Lulu has two thousand followers and all of one brain cell. I wish I could at least follow that up with a "but she's a really sweet girl," except she isn't. She's arrogant and despises all fat people across the board. Let me rephrase that, by "fat" she means any woman bigger than a size 8. This doesn't apply to men, provided they have a job at the managerial level.

Did I mention already that Lulu is only a couple of years older than my and Phil's daughter Marie and almost the same age as our son Ben who's currently living in England? Perhaps I should also mention that Marie records TikTok videos of Lulu and the twins doing choreographed dance moves to topics like "Water is for everyone" and "Environmental protection"? But you won't see Phil's Mercedes G-Class appear anywhere in them. My daughter is actually smarter than that, but she sold out when to Phil's bribery when he offered her a student apartment with a roof-top terrace. I promised my now adult children that I would always maintain a good relationship with their father – and now here I am with a silly animal mask, finger paints, and the world's fakest smile!

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Lena and I stand apprehensively facing one another next to the large table in Living Room 2. Feigning enthusiasm, I say: "Here, I brought some kids' make-up. It's all organic." That too was a lie. I just scraped a couple of unwearable shades of eyeshadow into some little eco-looking pots. The circle of life.

"They're all out in the yard already, waiting for you to get started," says Lena, still in that whiney voice.

Why is she always so unhappy? I suppress the urge inside of me to ask her. I already have experience doing that and am also too stoned to stand hearing whatever she's angry about.

"Great, I'm looking forward to it," I say stoically. "And now, you come here." We stiffly hug each other.

"I guess I'll go give those little monsters some sexy smokey eyes." My joke doesn't go over well and Lena looks just as annoyed as ever. I'm heartened by my sister's relentless anxiety of not being accepted in her stuffy, new upper-class neighborhood, or worse: that the other mothers might find her too "prole."

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I can still remember her being so embarrassed when our mother would pick us up from grade school in her trashy see-through blouses and no bra.

Lena used to love watching all those family TV shows, like the one with that famous actor where the fathers wore collared shirts and sweater vests and the mothers feathered their hair like Lady Di. They had real lunches in those shows, not like at our house where we had only the crate of potatoes in the cellar to eat from, or my mother tossing us an apple with two goofy holes carved-out for eyes.

I see Lena standing before me as a little girl with thick, cartoon character glasses, wearing her brightly colored overalls and thin, always straight and perfectly symmetrical braids.

Lena has always wanted nothing more than to be part of a pack, it made no difference what this pack looked like. I tried to warn her of the pecking order in Grunewald, but I only ever sounded exactly like our mother: "It's so boring when everybody looks the same."

Lena doesn't believe me when I say I don't want to go back to that. Presumably because, in her eyes, I failed and am now living her nightmare today. Anything I say contrary to her lifestyle she hears as jealousy.

[...]

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"Hey, Nina, I can't imagine how you managed it all back then..." Lulu's looking to flatter me.

Every time she gives me a compliment, it's always attached to some annoying favor she wants me to do for her. I scrunch up my eyes for a moment and wait. It doesn't take long before she asks: "Could you please run over to that French bakery and pick up the cake for me? Sophia only got the éclairs, and now here we are with no cake."

"Sure, I would love to, but I don't have a car."

"Oh, yeah, right," Lulu says thoughtfully.

"I can drive, it's no problem at all," I hear a deep voice say. I turn around and am stunned.

Standing next to me is a very tall, very young guy who looks like a French film star or someone who saves kittens from burning buildings. I suddenly catch myself laughing foolishly, though no one has said anything funny. Lulu looks at me strangely. Stop it, Nina, quit laughing, I tell myself in my thoughts but keep on laughing. Then I say, "Sorry, sorry," which doesn't help any either.

"So, it's okay then?" Lulu asks.

The very young man and I nod. "Hi, I'm David," he says, while I inconspicuously stare at his exposed collarbone from his T-shirt having slipped a bit.

[...]

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Lena

Lena winces as she sees her mother, just about three sheets to the wind, coming toward her from across the way with an entire bottle of wine in her hand, and her sister, a little further on, gawking at some young guy in this completely inappropriate, skimpy sundress. The afternoon could have been so enjoyable without the family.

Even the children have been behaving themselves for the most part so far. Her husband Flori

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was standing next to Phil, smoking and chit-chatting about the enormous American-style grill, or the meat, or whatever other stuff successful men are interested in.

But the victory of the day is that she was allowed to wave hello in a video recording for Lulu's TikTok. She even introduced Lena as "a very lovely fellow daycare mom." The permanent smile on her face along with all her compliments standing outside the preschool every morning before she has to rush off to the grade school are finally paying off. It won't be long now before they're sitting together over lunch bowls at "Happy Bowl" around the corner where Lulu and her friends like to sit around in their yoga outfits, barely eat anything, and bathe themselves in the adoring glances of people passing by. Soon, Lena will be sitting there too, if everything goes according to plan and no one gets in her way.

Once again, her mother and her sister stand out like two absolutely alien appendages. All the young women here are wearing the most gorgeous frilly floral dresses from Zimmermann, that even secondhand, still cost over four hundred euros. All the outdoor decorations are in muted shades of cream and beige; colors that the children can't quite decipher, but which the mothers immediately find very stylish.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lena again notices a second wine bottle waving in the distance. Why can't her mother just simply radiate a soothing calmness and wear beige like other women her age? Instead, Lena has to look at this green kimono that used to be a bathrobe. She silently prays that no one will have seen her mother helping herself to a drink straight from the bottle. Her sister looks slightly high, as usual, walking across the large lawn, headed for the driveway. Probably to smoke a joint. Ever since their divorce, Nina's really gotten out of control.

"When will they ever finally let me in?" Lena asks herself, as she does so often. She had invested so much in these past months of moving here. She's dreamt for a long time of having a villa with a G-class and a business executive husband to go with it. Unfortunately, she's had to make do with a VW Passat and a tiny row house, which was in the right school district, but at the very outer edge of the wealthy neighborhood. The row house just next door already starts the catchment area for the school district of much lesser attractive stratum of society.

[...]

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Nina

"Come here," he whispers. He wraps his arms around me, I push up against him. I hear him softly moan.

We fall backwards onto my bed and what happens afterwards exceeds everything I could have ever hoped for.

How could I have abstained from sex for so long? From sex and passion and from that wonderful feeling of falling asleep next to someone else content and exhausted?

For this one night, my worries and insecurities have all disappeared. For this one night, I am the most desirable woman in the world who is sleeping with the most attractive man in the world.

And although I have come to rely on a bedtime ritual that includes a million little steps over the course of the years, this time it happens all on its own, with no transition; I fall asleep next to this man as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

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For as magical as the night was, waking up the next day is anything but.
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"Were you watching me sleep?" he asks into the tense silence.

Damn it!

I explain that I was just trying to put my water back on the table and was only staring at him to make sure that he hadn't woken up. I subtly lower my hand holding my cell phone just as it starts to ring.

We both look at the display. "Marie."

"That's my daughter, I'll call her later, it's fine," I say, hoping to restore a little bit of normality.

"You have a daughter who already knows how to call you?" David asks, astonished.

"Yeah, and a son. Ben. He's studying abroad. He's an absolute overachiever. He doesn't get it from me," I rattle away and try my hand at a charming laugh.

What's wrong with the vibe here? David stares at me and it doesn't feel very pleasant. I stoically continue trying to lighten the mood.

"It might come as a surprise to you, but my name is not Vodka Soda, it's Whiskey Sour," I say and laugh at my own joke. David politely laughs along and simply says: "What? Ah, yeah, okay."

"No, that was a joke. My name is Nina."

Marie calls again. I expect to see who of us is supposed to stop at the bakery quickly today before we go over for our weekly cake and coffee with my mother, who, I'm sure, will take it as an occasion to open her first bottle of wine.

"Kids," I say pretending to be annoyed as I send Marie's call to voicemail once again.

The mood is still awkward. I follow David's eyes to that damn menopause book that's still laying around.

"Say... I know you're not supposed to ask, but..." He starts and then doesn't seem to know exactly how best to formulate the rest of the sentence.

Why do I have the feeling that my answer is going to be a big surprise? Well, fine. The best way to peel off a bandage is to rip it off, it's the least painful that way.

"You want to know how old I am? Almost fifty. Did I not mention that? Do you prefer tea or coffee?" I chatter on like some outgoing morning talk show host.

It's suddenly very still. Then I hear him clear his throat.

"Thanks, I don't need anything," he says with a changed voice and then adds: "wow" and "wow."

I can't take it anymore. I jump out of bed, throw on my robe, and say: "I need to get to the office anyway today."

He looks at me questioningly: "On Sunday?"

Oh, right. Whatever, I keep going. "Yeah, that's just how it is with television. Always on air!

There's no business like show business!" I laugh at my own joke again. I can't help it. I have no idea why I keep cracking one corny joke after the other.

Now sitting upright, David looks at me from the bed.

"Wow," he repeats himself as if it's the only word he knows. "I would've said you were thirty-

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eight.”

That genuinely surprises me because I am not one of those women who gets that all the time, though I have to admit that over the last few years, my life has more or less resembled that of an asexual amoeba and there was no one else really who could have misjudged my age.

This morning, this one to so callously follow the phenomenal evening we had last night, is too much for me. Without another word, I storm into the kitchen and busy myself there simply because I don’t know what else to do. All of a sudden, David comes up behind me, fully dressed.

“Well, then,” he says. I nod. We tensely kiss. As he’s leaving, he turns around in the doorway and asks: “Are you still coming to my birthday?”

“Of course,” I lie and hear the door fall into the lock.

Tears immediately shoot to my eyes; I can’t decide if they’re tears of embarrassment or anger. I am so dumb, so unbelievably dumb and ridiculous. What the hell was I thinking?

My mother, of all people, comes to mind, who tells the same joke to every young and attractive waiter she meets: “I’ve been noticing the entire evening that you’re only looking to get me drunk.” Marie and I always look at each other in complete embarrassment. Am I not theoretically just like her?

Aren’t the only possible relationship scenarios between an older and a younger person the ones where the older person is a millionaire and a man?

And isn’t the question always the same: “Will the love still be there when the money’s gone?” We all know the answer to that.

Thank God David doesn’t know how much preparation Zeynep and I put into yesterday evening, how many different outfits I changed in and out of, and how terribly my hands shook as I put on my eyeshadow. It’s bad enough that I know.

Not to mention that it will forever remain my secret that as we were sitting yesterday at Grill Royal, I imagined just for a moment that we could be a sort of couple. I am seized by a completely over-exaggerated level of lovesickness that’s almost worse than the humiliation. I had completely forgotten how that feels.

[...]

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David

I don’t know what surprises me more: that I can feel that way again since my ordeal back then, or that I’m having the best sex of my life with a woman who immediately throws me out of her apartment the next day. Okay, she didn’t exactly throw me out, but it wasn’t hard to see how uncomfortable she felt around me. And the fact that I had also said that I would have taken her for younger might have been meant as a compliment, in the context it must have come across as a real letdown on my part. But would it have made any difference if I had kept it to myself? Probably not. If the mood the next morning has somehow shifted, it’s best to get out of there as fast as you can and just hope the next time will be better.

I have no idea if there will even be a next time, but what I do know is that I definitely should not

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be the one to try and force something like that given my mental state. Because I know that I certainly don't have much to offer on an emotional level, especially not to an absolute grown woman.

And yet, all morning long I keep catching myself going back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room to see if she might have come after all. It's idiotic, I know.

I'm so glad that Jasper took over most of the lunch prep, because I don't know where my head is right now. My thoughts are still circling around last night as I try to get through plate after plate of all the lunch orders.

How soft her skin is, how it turns me on the way that slightly derisive smile of hers plays at the corner of her mouth, how close we were. I think of the moment when I thought I was going to burst with ecstasy watching her and whispered, "Wait, don't move." We just lay there, skin on skin, connected with one another. Never have I experienced someone so intensely that at some point we simply can't bear it any longer.

Think about how she closed her eyes when she came. How, afterwards, we lay there in bed, entwined in one another, telling each other how it feels sometimes to be in the world, searching for a home and having no idea of what it could look like.

She lay facing me, propped up on one arm, gently running her other hand up and down my body, looked at me and said: "Maybe it's also perfectly okay to not really fit in anywhere, or if you don't have a home. Because who says you absolutely have to have one?"

"But the question is, would you like to have one?" I countered, still completely awed by the fact that we had just done it. Maybe it was a sore topic for her, because after that, her face turned sad. She softly whispered: "Yeah, of course." She looked at me and looked so lost at that moment that I immediately chastised myself for my nosiness.

Why did I even ask? What business is it of mine?

I push more lunch plates to the waitstaff and am numb with fear. What if we never see each other again? What if I am the only one who wants this? I can't believe how much it has affected me, and I don't know whether I should be happy about it or run away screaming.

[...]

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Nina

As we sit in front of the TV together, I have a hard time concentrating on the program. The questions swirl in my mind: what's the point of life? What does it mean to have a real life? A marriage you're happy in? The lonely existence of a divorced woman living in a one-bedroom apartment with prospects of a meager pension?

What was there to be happy about?

Is it living when each of us sits inside his or her little box and longs for something else? With the box being a little smaller or a little bigger depending on how much you make. And if we've really got a lot, we buy ourselves some nice scraps of fabric that have been sewn together to cover our shivering and defenseless hides. That may make a woman like Lulu happy.

What might make me happy?

Or was that already it with me being happy?

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I observe my mother wearing Zeynep's wool socks and acting as though she's part of this political talk show. She enthusiastically makes comments, loudly expresses her irritation, and is so involved that I can only laugh.

Maybe that'll be enough for me later, a little apartment and a good program to watch at night? It's actually quite nice being the one who decides what to watch and there's plenty of old men on TV. Maybe that's all one needs to not feel lonely?

I have a good deal of sympathy for my mother at the moment; for falling in love, for naively underestimating the consequences, and for ostensibly being ethically punished for her mistake by her colleagues.

No one understood back then that my mother was probably only trying not to go under. I still remember how wounded we had all felt after my father's death, how all of us were desperately searching for the love that we had now lost forever.

For so many years, I was never able to look at my parents' old photos; I couldn't stand the way they beamed when they smiled. How proud my father was of our mother: "Now take a good look, your mother is the best driver in the world!" or "Did you know that we were named the nation's funniest family today? It's probably because of you and your mother. We'll all need to practice our dancing before the award ceremony!"

We all laughed about that, because we knew that my father was just being funny.

I recall how my father used to love to turn up the music after Sunday breakfast and we would all dance together. He would first spin my mother around in a circle, then Lena, and then me. These were moments of perfect happiness, with no worries, no fears.

To this day, I still get misty eyed when I listen to Marvin Gaye, Al Green, or an old Quincy Jones record.

To this day, I still love to dance, though I hardly ever do it!

Instead, I've always carried it around with me, this loneliness I've felt since my father's death. Even those times when I don't acutely feel it, I know that it's there lurking in the very back of my soul, waiting to make itself noticed again, sometimes more gently, sometimes more like right now.

Those times when I'm not feeling the best, the grief sneaks up on me from behind. Then I miss my father with whom I would otherwise be going over to our favorite ice cream parlor for a scoop of "comfort" ice cream, my father who I'd love to give one last hug to.

I have often read that grief comes in waves, but it never occurred to me that these waves would also be there as my constant companion. Anytime a storm occurs in my life, the cold water hits me from all sides and whirls me around until at some point it spits me out and I land on the shore, weak and gasping for air. All I can do after that is to hope that the terrible pain will soon subside. Maybe this time, it'll be quicker than I think, and that this here is just a sort of transition phase to help me close the door on another chapter in my life?

Whenever the topic of menopause ever used to come up when I was around, it was never clear to me how vivacious and hungry you feel once you've officially been written off.

Why is it that people's life dreams all end at around thirty-five?

I wish I had a plan for this next half, something that doesn't include preparing for the inevitable.
[...]

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Nina

The fact that my sister always manages to completely ruin every enjoyable moment with her constant complaining simply drives me up the wall. I don't want to be angry, but I am already this close to losing my temper as we enter the living room. Everything looks so damn homey here without me. There is a pot of steaming coffee sitting on the coffee table in front of the sofa. The table is laid out with those beautiful dishes with the wild roses on them, a nicely scented candle is burning, and Lena seems to have found time to bake her famous bundt cake with hazelnut streusel in between leaving her husband. My mother, still a bit black and blue in the face, is happily munching on a mouthful of cake as she goes in to cut herself another piece. Apart from the slowly fading bruises, she looks like she's just been on vacation to the Riviera, definitely not like someone whose deathbed I was just sitting on. Marie and Ben are playing a lively game of hide and seek with Lena's girls. Can't things just please be normal between us for once? I suddenly have the urge to pound my fist into that stupid bundt cake. Aren't we all furious with each other? We just spewed all kinds of insults and accusations at one another and now, we're all sitting around here like a scene out of some family TV series from the eighties? I guess I have no other choice than to play my part in this idyllic deception. Just as I am still trying to absorb this new situation, my daughter falls on my neck. "Mama, let's not fight anymore. It doesn't matter who's right or what it was about. I've already forgotten everything, okay?" I nod, but a voice inside me screams: "No, it's not okay! Nothing's okay!" Ben now also comes over, puts his arms around me, and says over and over: "It's all just a bunch of nonsense. It's okay if you mess up once in a while, as long as we have each other."

I have no idea of what's going on inside me. Something's churning in my stomach like it wants to turn me inside out.

I stand in the middle of the room and swallow hard.

"What's wrong, Sweetheart, won't you come and say hello now that I've practically risen from the dead? Lena and I have already discussed everything. She's going to move in here with the girls for a while and then you can come now and then to help. I have to go to physical therapy three times a week, but for the most part, I'm already back in top form, as you can see." My mother smiles at me smugly.

And in one fell swoop, that cramp that had taken over my stomach makes its way to the top and now I know what it is: it's rage.

Diplomatic as I am, I hustle my two young nieces into my mother's bedroom where I tell them they can snoop in whatever drawer they choose so long as they put everything the way it was. Then I return to the living room, take a deep breath, and it all just comes pouring out of me, with no holding back. All the things that have been pent up inside me for decades and which I had always assumed was just a sensitive stomach: "How in the hell is it in this family that we can only be honest with one another for no more than one evening max, only for it all to immediately get swept back under the rug? We have been lying to ourselves for years trying to protect one another and even go so far as to use our own life choices as a leverage against everyone else's, but why I ask you!

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"I lie whether I'm coming or going. Because at fifty years old, I still feel ashamed! I'm ashamed for having fallen in love with this man, ashamed that I have no money, and that I hurt everyone when I divorced Phil! With the two of you, Ben, Marie, I have asked myself every day of my life if you are happy, if you're eating enough, if you're eating too much, if you're eating all at, if you have enough money, if someone loves you, if you love them, if you're pursuing your talents as much as you should be, but if you also give yourself a break sometimes. Whether you have friends, and if they're nice to you. If you're managing okay being so far from home, if you know how to transfer money when you have to pay a bill, if you also remember to put away some money for taxes, if you sometimes miss me. I am scared for you every time you get into a car, take a trip, or eat something that doesn't agree with you, when you have sex, and when you risk having your dreams shattered by reality. Yeah, I am so consumed by you and with my love for you that I haven't, in the slightest, thought of myself for a very long time. Has it even occurred to you how I have been invisible all these years? We live in a goddamn metropolis for chrissakes, and I have found all of ONE gynecologist who knows anything about menopause! And why is that? Because we are not even important enough to conduct medical research on! If men were overcome with uncontrollable sobbing and hormone fluctuations as bad as mine, we'd already have found a cure for it. And I am me – a very intensely intuitive person, in case that interests you! I am that way again and I won't ever let go of that! I am creative and loving and plan to enjoy my life as a woman with every fiber of my being starting right here and now! I won't hide away any longer!

"And you know what, Mama, things between you and me are also going to change. You have certainly made mistakes, but at least I can say now that I now understand you better. I love you and will always be there for you till you're back on your feet again and also thereafter. This is my new start with honesty in this family!"

My mother, Lena, and my kids look at me somewhat bewildered, but I am only just getting started.

"I don't want us to keep sweeping things under the rug anymore, like for example that we never talked about the summer Lena and I were left alone, or our grief, or that idiotic Frank Voltz!"

My mother flinches and starts choking on her coffee.

"You don't need to look at me that way. That asshole broke your heart after papa died and before you could even see straight yet. Yes, I read his letters and that wasn't right of me and I'm sorry. But I also never would have done it if you had just told us the story. Let's talk about it! I thought for so long you'd left us alone just so you could have a good time. But now I know: You were at your wits' end!" My mother, who had been listening with her head bowed the entire time, now looks me in the eye. She nods. Then whispers: "Yeah, you're probably right."

I shrug. "I am right! It's important that we talk about things. It's the only way we can comfort one another and learn from it! We pass on everything else. I am so scared to love, because in this family, love has always ended in disaster. First, dad up and died on us, then you lost yourself due to that idiot, then I got divorced, and now it's Lena's turn next or what?"

My sister looks at me shame-faced.

"I tell you what, I'm putting an end to this miserable silence!

And in the future, I will have sex when I want and with whom I want. I will fall in love and I will

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enjoy it, whether it suits you people or not. From now on, you'd better be ready for anything because I am not holding back!"

So, that's that.

I wearily fall to the couch, next to my mother. Only now do I see that she's got tears in her eyes and is looking at me like a little abandoned puppy dog. "I'm sorry," she says mournfully. "I'm really sorry."

"Oh, Mama," I say as I feel a tear rolling down my cheek.

I lay my head on her shoulder as she, too, cries and strokes my hair.

My children come over to the sofa now as well and hug me. First, Ben says sheepishly: "I promise we'll let you sleep with whoever you want to from now on."

Marie nods: "We will, honest. We are all excited to see what's in store for you."

"Actually, it's really cool that you want to change the way you live," Ben adds, and I can see from his eyes that he has no idea what this change means, he just wants to be supportive. Now, that's love.

We spend the evening sitting together for a long time and make great strides in our first attempts at honesty. For the first time, we talk with one another about my father's death, about that summer when Lena and I were made to grow up much too soon, and how hard it was coming to terms with the fear of potentially being left on our own forever. My mother is shocked: "Did you really think I wasn't going to come back?" Lena shrugs and says: "It was really awful; I still dream about it sometimes."

"I also think about it a lot. Plus, I think I probably have attachment disorder."

"What do you mean 'probably'? Of course you do!" my sister replies. Well, that's what I get for demanding honesty.

My mother, I mean Mama, as I will call her more often from now on, tells us how she didn't think she'd make it through back then. How she'd felt so drained and that she wasn't able to be a good role model for us. And for the first time in front of my children, I admit that I have always continued supporting this absurd idea of being a patchwork family for their sake, and that the situation between me and my ex and Lulu has often really frustrated me.

After she puts the kids to bed, Lena and I get cozy in our old bedroom and she tells me how this alienation slowly became part of her marriage. I ask if she still has feelings for Florian. Lena just shrugs: "I think maybe I need to first learn how to look at myself more honestly."

This evening for the first time, it's clear to me that my little sister was actually jealous of me. For that, only today for the first time, my life seems really promising, all of our lives, really...

Perhaps we can finally start over as a family.

And eventually, after really everything is said, we start digging up a few nice memories. Just before midnight, Mama asks me a question that had been in my thoughts for a long time already: "When a person dies, their brain is still active for a full seven minutes more. They say that the dying person relives what they've experienced; their most important memories. Do you suppose papa saw us? And do you think that it was nice? I don't know."

"Of course, it was," I immediately exclaim, as if it were some strange reflex. "He absolutely saw us and I'm certain that it allowed him to let go very happy. I promise you that."

And at this moment, maybe I'm just imagining it, or maybe not, a star shines brightly right

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through my mother's window.

Later, while it's still night and the rest of my family has gone to bed, I head out for the train to Berlin Wedding, to my apartment. As I board the tram, I'm alone in the carriage. I look out the window next to my seat at the streets, still full of cars. I see a young couple laughing as they stumble out of a bar, I see an elderly lady walking her poodle, the two of them probably couldn't sleep, and I see the sun starting to come up on the distant horizon.

I write a message and then start at my phone until, surprisingly, it beeps at me. As I read the reply, I feel a wave of happiness flow throughout my entire body.

I have never been more sure of anything in my entire life. Taking long strides, I walk down the street I've only ever been on once before, and my heart races as I ring the bell and say my name into the intercom. Then I run up the stairs as though my life depended on it.

"You don't need to go so fast, we've got the rest of our lives ahead of us!" David says and grins at me from under a mess of bedhead hair. I look at him and know that it will probably be exactly the way he just predicted it. We have so much time and I plan to enjoy every second of it. I exhale slowly: "Well, aren't you going to invite me in?"

He looks at me seriously: "No more back and forth, just love this time?"

I nod and say: "Just love, I promise."

Before I can say anything else, David pulls me into his arms, leans forward, and kisses me. We take a brief moment to look at one another as though neither one of us can believe this beautiful thing is actually happening to us. Then I remember something I ought to say just for the sake of it: "Well, there might still be a little more back and forth here and there, you know how I am. But I won't be going anywhere without you. Guaranteed." David looks at me. He looks like he's thinking about how a life with me will likely never be a peaceful one. Maybe he's just now starting to grasp what he's gotten himself into? He sweeps a strand of hair out of my face and looks at me: "You are so naïve, Vodka Soda, did you think I didn't know that?" And before I could give a reply, he pulls me into his apartment and I imagine that my father would be very happy for me at this moment.

At Home

David

Nina and I are lying together in my bed, am I dreaming?

How grim my thoughts were just a week ago, even two days ago. I could feel how Jasper was tiptoeing around me, enveloping me with his protective instinct. It doesn't matter how many times I said that it wasn't like it was back then, but that it was just plain old normal, intense, crushing, burning heartbreak instead, the concerned expression never left Jasper's face. He wouldn't believe me and I could also understand that. It was an extremely intense time back then when I simply slipped and fell into the void.

But I won't be falling anymore. I know that I have solid ground under my feet, that I am more aware of any potential internal shifts and that I would seek help immediately.

How was Jasper supposed to know that it was nothing more than the pain of a breakup? I was overwhelmed myself by its intensity. On the one hand, the pain was unbearable, and on the

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other, it's been a damn long time that I've felt anything from myself. Two days spent at the Baltic Sea wasn't going to change anything. None of my desperate attempts to suppress my feelings were going to help to ease this painful heartache. That's what I've been hoping for all these years: to finally feel something so deeply inside myself. The intensity of it was unbelievable, and for as awful as it was, in a very strange way, I relished it.

I relished in the pain, because it meant that I was alive again, was taking part in everything, and that I had come to terms with that worst time of my life. I came to realize that my miserable state was so much better than not feeling anything at all, as was previously the case for a long time.

And of course, I missed her every second of it, painfully and incessantly. I saw her smile, I recalled her lying naked in my bed, how she had softly whispered my name in the middle of the night.

And now, she's lying in my arms again with no intention of ever leaving again. I can sense it very clearly. There's a peace now between us and it's more exciting than anything I've ever experienced before.

When I got her message late in the night, I knew what I would answer. As she told me later, she was scared of how I would respond, or whether I'd respond at all.

Except that it was all so easy. How else should I have responded to her message of "I love you"? The only thing to say to that is "Come home."

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