

Tjaša Mislej

MAMA IS THE FIRST WORD

Translated by Tina Mahkota

CHARACTERS

LIZA

MARKO

JADRANKA

SANJA

ANTON

EMA

LUNA

KATJA

ALEKS

BARBARA

RONJA

SAŠO

KSENIJA

TINA

IGOR

BARBARA

RONJA

SAŠO

RONJA'S MUM

RONJA'S DAD

ALEN

ALEN'S DAD

PSYCHOLOGIST

MAŠA

MILAN

LAURA

Prologue: The Miracle of Life

This is an anthropomorphic depiction of the miracle of conception.

There are biological processes and there are interpretations. Biology and ideology.

This is how it starts. Accelerated breathing, skin-to-skin contact. And then, ejaculation! Hundreds of millions of sperm cells are setting out on a long journey. A gentle violin sound is heard, slowly at first, growing faster and faster. A double bass joins in, giving rhythm. Thrum thrum thrum thrum.

The violins start playing louder and louder, resonating deeply. The beat is inspiring. And then suddenly, a moment of pause. The breathing stops. One main, dominant follicle is released from the cluster of follicles; it ruptures, a mature egg cell is released and embarks on its way to the fallopian tube. Ovulation!

Resembling a rising force, the sound of strings resumes. A female choir joins in. A divine harmony of the string orchestra, sopranos and altos spills over the room. Every single cell in a human body contains 46 chromosomes. It is sex cells only that contain 23 chromosomes. When they combine with the opposite sex cell, a new, singular and inimitable combination of 46 chromosomes is created. It is only a few hundred sperm cells that reach the egg cell and only one of them succeeds in penetrating its core to fertilise it. This creates a new cell, a zygote, the term meaning "joining of two things". Conception!

We hear violins, double basses, vocals, a trombone, a clarinet. Now the drums join in. They underpin the rising rhythm. Tu-dum-tu-dum-tu-dum.

After fertilisation, the zygote begins to divide. First, it divides into two cells, then four, and so on. When the fertilised egg reaches the uterus, it implants there and becomes an embryo. In the week 6 of pregnancy, an ultrasound scan detects the pulsation of the tissue that will later form the heart. The pulsation is very rapid: tum tum tum tum tum tum tum tum tum tum.

In week 7, buds of limbs and internal organs appear. In week 9, the embryo weighs three grams. In week 10, female foetuses have ovaries while male foetuses have testicles. The foetal stage begins!

In week 12, the foetus is about 6 cm long and it can move. In week 20, the foetus can hear and respond to sounds. In week 24, the foetus opens its eyes; eyebrows and eyelashes appear. In week 33, the foetus is positioned head-down. The rhythm of the music increases, the angelic harmony of female voices is heard again.

In week 40, the foetus is about 50 centimetres long. The labour is triggered by secreting oestrogen. The cervix relaxes and opens, the uterus squeezes and contracts harder and harder and harder, until an enormous expulsion of a 3 to 4 kg heavy mass of bone and flesh through the mother's pelvis and vagina occurs. This often causes severe haemorrhaging, tearing of the perineum and prolapse of the mother's colon.

Silence. The music suddenly stops. The cries of labour pain stop.

And then... The first vocal sound of a new human being. A baby's cry!

LIZA

LIZA (23), MARKO (29), SANJA (26), JADRANKA (60), ANTON (64)

LIZA: When I found out, it was a shock at first. And fear. And wondering what I was going to do. I felt I was losing control. As if this was no longer my life. When I told Marko, he was ... confused. He said nothing. He waited, trying to figure out what I was thinking. And I told him. That I had to fix this. And go back to my life. He said he understood. No reproaches, no unnecessary questions. I went for a check-up, got a referral, made an appointment. On Saturday night, I said to Marko, let's go out, let's party and just forget about it for a few hours.

Nightclub. Loud electronic music. Liza and Marko are dancing on the dance floor, hugging, kissing. The club is packed. Everyone is dancing, enjoying themselves. Liza lights a cigarette.

MARKO: You sure it's okay?

LIZA: 100 percent. The owner doesn't mind us smoking inside.

MARKO: I don't mean that. You know what I...

LIZA: What?

MARKO: Well... *(He strokes Liza's tummy.)*

LIZA: What? I don't get it.

MARKO: Maybe you shouldn't be smoking.

LIZA: I've got the appointment for abortion on Wednesday. What are you on about?

MARKO: Well, I don't know... Are you sure?

LIZA: Shit, Marko. We've discussed it thoroughly. Why are you bugging me now...?

MARKO: I'm not. It's just... It was a quick decision we made.

LIZA: No point in delaying it. And I really don't want to think about it now, okay?!

Liza walks away from Marko.

LIZA: I'll probably have a baby one day, I guess. But not now. I haven't finished my studies yet. No steady job on the horizon. Marko works in a bar, shift work. I can't rely on my parents. My Dad's getting on and... he's not in the best of health. And Mum works all the time. I just can't ...

We can't... I've made my decision, and I don't want to wallow in guilt. I know that there is a small lump of new cells growing in my body... But they are just cells, dividing. And the cells will stop dividing. At some other point in time, a new being could come out of this. Every month, when an egg cell is released from my ovary, a new human being could potentially emerge. But not yet. I can't. Not now.

Next day. Marko and Liza in their flat, still in their pyjamas. They are having a late breakfast.

MARKO: Sorry about last night. What I said... You know.

LIZA: No bother. I just want to move on.

MARKO: Sure. If that's your decision.

LIZA: We took it together, you and I. You said it yourself, 'it's not the right time'.

MARKO: Yeah, sure.

LIZA: Especially now, if you're thinking of opening up your own bar.

MARKO: Yeah. Sure, I agree.

LIZA: Okay.

MARKO: Okay.

Silence.

MARKO: Shall we go out? For a walk, have some coffee?

LIZA: I actually wanted to do some course work.

MARKO: Come on, babe, it's Sunday. I'm off work.

LIZA: I have to hand in lots of stuff next week. Maybe we can go out after lunch?

MARKO: Okay

LIZA: Can you whip up something quick for lunch?

MARKO: Sure

LIZA: Cool.

The doorbell rings.

LIZA: Are you expecting someone? Aco?

MARKO: No. No clue who it is.

LIZA: Will you get the door, please? I have to get dressed.

Liza goes to the bathroom. Marko pulls up his tracksuit and goes to open the door. It is Marko's parents Jadranka and Anton, and his sister Sanja.¹

SANJA: Sur-pri-se!

JADRANKA: Bravo, sonny! Sonny mine.

ANTON: Congrats. Never mind what it will be, as long as it's male!

SANJA: Dad!

ANTON: What? Hey, joke is joke. Well done, sonny Marko.

JADRANKA: Where's my Lizika, love?

MARKO: Ehm ... In the bathroom. What have you got here?

Jadranka enters the flat past Marko. She places a pan of štrukle on the table. Anton follows her, carrying a massive pot of chicken soup. Sanja has a bunch of balloons with images of smiling storks and babies in one hand, and tiny yellow woollen baby slippers in the other.

MARKO: Whadafuck, Sanja? What's going on?

SANJA: Surprise!

MARKO: I told you to keep schtum. I can't believe you blurted it out to Mum.

SANJA: You never told me not to.

MARKA: Yes, I did! Twice!

SANJA: No, you didn't.

MARKO: You just don't get it, do you? Liza's not having a baby.

SANJA: What?

MARKO: She's having an abortion.

SANJA: For fuck's sake. Why didn't you tell me?

MARKO: Yeah, fuck off, Sanja. Why didn't you call me?

SANJA: I called you, but you never answered.

¹ Translator's Note: Jadranka belongs to the first generation of immigrant guest workers. As the play is set in Slovenia, this means her background is one of the republics of former Yugoslavia; her mother tongue is Serbo-Croatian, not Slovenian. The food she and Anton bring along reflects her cultural background and traditions. The way they speak reflects her background, they use a lot of words and expressions that are markers of immigrant identity and cultural differences, and these are printed here in italics. Marko and Sanja are second generation immigrants, therefore their language is less marked by their national and cultural background. Jadranka and Anton's departures from standard language use is represented by several grammatical features (e.g. double negation, lack of articles, non-grammatical word order, etc.)

MARKO: Can you please tell Mum that you were wrong... On second thoughts, you'd better just leave, all of you, as soon as possible, before Liza...

SANJA: You tell Mum. She thinks she's getting a grandchild.

MARKO: Fuck off, Sanja! Just fuck off!

Marko's Mum and Dad are putting up a big banner in the kitchen with the inscription: 'Baby Coming Soon.'

MARKO: Mum, what the...? What are you doing?

JADRANKA: Just small banner.

MARKO: A small banner? It's all over the kitchen.

JADRANKA: Well, is small kitchen you have.

ANTON: The flat is small. All of it. Miniature.

MARKO: Yeah, well. It's a bedsit. That's the point of a *bedsit* – it's small.

JADRANKA: Where will baby sleep, huh?

MARKO: Ehm ... Mum ...

JADRANKA: Yes, sonny?

Liza comes from the bathroom.

LIZA: When I came out of the bathroom, I was clueless. Marko's entire family was gathered in the kitchen, all smiling, but Marko, visibly panicked, there was a huge pot on the table, Sanja with balloons. And then I saw a sign saying 'Baby Coming Soon'! I was totally knackered and hungover from the previous night before, anxious about the abortion. I had no clue what the fuck was going on.

LIZA: Hi. What's this?

JADRANKA: Lizika! Congratulations! Great news.

ANTON: Bravo! Jadranka and me, we are ... We all are happy...

JADRANKA: Go on, give it to her.

Sanja hands Liza a pair of yellow woollen slippers.

SANJA: Yellow ... because we didn't know the sex.

LIZA: Marko?

MARKO: Can we talk?

LIZA: Yes, sure.

MARKO: Just give us five minutes, okay? Sanja, you know where the coffee is. Can you ... ? Can you make some for Mum. Please.

SANJA: Okay.

JADRANKA: I'll do it. Sanjice, just sit down.

SANJA: Let me, Mum...

Marko and Liza go to the bathroom.

MARKO: Fucking hell. What a mess.

LIZA: What is going on? What exactly did you tell them?

MARKO: Fuck all.

LIZA: Oh, did you now? Fuck all? We've got twenty balloons in the kitchen and a huge banner saying *Baby Coming Soon!* Jadranka's here with her pots and pans. What's the matter with you, mate?! Don't tell me you didn't tell them!

MARKO: Shit.

LIZA: Shitstorm. What now?

MARKO: I don't know.

LIZA: You go there and tell them that there's not going to be any baby.

MARKO: Fucking hell. Mum will... I don't know... she's going to have a heart attack.

LIZA: Your folks will hate me.

MARKO: No, they won't.

LIZA: I don't get it. Why the fuck did you tell them?

MARKO: I only... kind of ... mentioned it to Sanja. I told her to keep schtum. But there you go. The fucking gob on her... Makes me want to hit her real hard.

LIZA: You told your little sis? For fuck's sake. You know her. You know she's not reliable.

MARKO: She obviously got it all wrong.

LIZA: Obviously!

MARKO: Listen, let me sort it out. I'll tell them. Okay?

LIZA: Okay.

MARKO: Let's go.

Marko goes to the kitchen.

LIZA: Marko went to the kitchen, whereas I... I wanted to stay in the bathroom forever. Bloody hell. Why was that necessary? I always had the feeling that Jadranka didn't like me anyway. I didn't know her well, but I knew she went to mass every now and then. I feared she'd blame me. I'd be the monster, the selfish bitch and what not. I had a headache and I didn't feel like eating, especially not her greasy soup.

Jadranka is reheating chicken soup on the stove.

JADRANKA: The soup is ready in a sec now. Marko sonny, you want some?

MARKO: Yes, please. Mum...

JADRANKA: Give me plates, love.

ANTON: We all have soup. It's almost lunchtime.

JADRANKA: Enough soup for everyone.

Jadranka brings the pot to the table and starts serving.

LIZA: Thank you. Just a smidgen for me. I don't really feel like eating.

JADRANKA: But is chicken soup. The best when you're pregnant. Now must watch what you eat. Marko, listen to me now. Pregnant wife must never be hungry. If she say ice cream, you run to the shops for ice cream. If she say meat balls, you go and grill meat balls. You get it, Marko sonny?

MARKO: Ehm... Yes.

LIZA: Yeah... Uhm.

MARKO: Ehm... Liza actually... she... doesn't like meatballs.

JADRANKA: So what. She can have steak or sausage. As long as it's meat. For proteins.

ANTON: Yummy, soup is good. Super. Bravo.

JADRANKA: There's *štrukle* for afters. Lizika, more soup?

LIZA: No, thank you, I can't.

JADRANKA: You feel sick? Oh, you poor thing.

LIZA: Not really. Well, a little ... Marko?

MARKO: Yeah, well... Liza and I were talking... You're not going to like this, Mum.

JADRANKA: What?

MARKO: Ehm ...

SANJA: Go on, speak up. Tell her.

MARKO: Just stop it, sis. Liza and I discussed it and ... we agreed that... we're not going to Vodice this summer for our summer holiday.

LIZA: What?

MARKO: So sorry, Mum. We'd like to go somewhere else for a change.

JADRANKA: Where?

MARKO: Ehm... Morrocco or Sri Lanka, we don't know yet.

JADRANKA: Grannie will be upset. You crazy to even think of Morrocco?

SANJA: You sure? Morocco

JADRANKA: Oh my... pregnant woman travelling the world with big belly? The heat and the mosquitos... Why?

LIZA: I'm sorry. Marko, can we go the bathroom?

MARKO: Well, yeah. Ehm... Just a minute. You carry on eating. We'll be right back.

Marko and Liza go to the bathroom.

LIZA: What's wrong with you? Why won't you tell them?

MARKO: I will. Just give me time...

LIZA: Seaside holidays, Morocco? You're talking rubbish, man.

MARKO: I need to find the right moment.

LIZA: I'm afraid it's too late for that.

MARKO: Shit.

LIZA: Stop putting it off. Tell them before she starts feeding me *burek*.

MARKO: That's not *burek*. It's *štrukle* filled with cheese.

LIZA: Just tell them.

MARKO: Okay, okay. I will.

LIZA: *Štrukle, burek, zeljanica*. Whatever. I was hungover, I wanted them to leave and take those stupid balloons with them. And yellow baby slippers. For who? Who for?! There isn't going to be a baby. There is no baby. No baby! I didn't want to think, what if... if if if . Why did they come waving balloons and slippers in front of my nose?!

Liza and Marko go back to the kitchen table.

ANTON: Ehm, sonny. Your mother and I was thinking...

MARKO: I must tell you something.

ANTON: Wait, me first. Your mother and I decided we change cars with you.

SANJA: Really?

MARKO: What cars?

ANTON: You get ours and we take your Clio.

SANJA: Oh, for crying out loud!

ANTON: Your mother and I, we don't use the car a lot of time. We need no station wagon. Sanja, sorry, baby will need room. They can't put a pram in a Clio. You'll have to adapt.

SANJA: For real?

MARKO: No, I mean it. No need. We don't need a bigger car. Okay?

LIZA: Shit, I think I'm gonna be sick.

JADRANKA: Sick! My sweet girl. Want anything, love? More soup?

LIZA: No, no, no! Water. Just water, please.

JADRANKA: Marko, get water.

LIZA: And a basin. Just in case.

Marko fetches a glass of water and a plastic basin. Liza takes a sip of water. Then she leans back.

MARKO: Are you OK?

LIZA: I feel sick.

JADRANKA: You, poor thing.

SANJA: She does look pale.

JADRANKA: Would you like a bite to eat? You want *štrukle*?

LIZA: Marko, the basin!

Liza takes the basin and pukes.

MARKO: Oh, shit.

SANJA: Hold her hair.

MARKO: It's okay. She'll be fine.

LIZA: Fuck. Sorry. I'm so sorry.

ANTON: Hope it's not the soup?

JADRANKA: The soup?!

ANTON: You know, Ranka. I've got a bit of a queasy feeling in my stomach too.

JADRANKA: It's not the soup, you idiot! The woman's pregnant, for Christ's sake.

LIZA: It's definitely not the soup. I had too much to drink last night. I shouldn't have mixed gin and vodka. It was brutal.

JADRANKA: What?

MARKO: Liza is... Liza isn't... She's...

LIZA: Sanja, can I have a smoke?

SANJA: Yes, sure.

LIZA: I smoked a whole packet last night; so I've no fags left at home. Listen, Jadranka... I'm really sorry. Makes no difference, if I smoke or not. Isn't that right, Marko?

MARKO: Ehm... Yes. Liza... you see, she's *actually not* pregnant. I mean... she is pregnant. But she won't be for much longer. Sanja got it all wrong.

SANJA: Hey, don't blame me now.

JADRANKA: I don't understand.

MARKO: Liza isn't having a baby.

LIZA: I have an appointment for abortion on Wednesday at 8 a.m.

JADRANKA: Abortion?

MARKO: Yes, Mum. Abortion. Termination of pregnancy. You know what it is, don't you?

JADRANKA: Abortion? I see...

Silence.

JADRANKA: All right.

Jadranka tears down the banner.

MARKO: Mum?

JADRANKA: I don't care. No, for real. It's okay, sonny.

MARKO: I'm sorry you brought balloons and soup and everything... Basically, it was Sanja who caused this fucking mess.

SANJA: No, I didn't! You never mentioned abortion.

MARKO: I told you we hadn't made up our mind yet. And to keep fucking quiet.

SANJA: I didn't know, I didn't mean it, you asshole.

MARKO: Okay. At least admit you fucked up!

JADRANKA: Not on purpose!

Silence.

JADRANKA: One question. Why abortion?

ANTON: Come on, Ranka! You don't need to ask that.

JADRANKA: Yes, no no no... Sorry.

SANJA: Leave the man alone. It's hard enough for Liza as it is.

JADRANKA: Yes, yes. I understand. I understand. I won't say a word.

Silence.

ANTON: Shall we go now?

JADRANKA: I'll just say this ... Marko, you'll be 30 years old. When I gave birth to you, it was war. War, Marko. Women were giving birth during the war.

MARKO: So what? What are you saying, Mum?

JADRANKA: Nothing. Nothing.

Silence.

JADRANKA: It's all right. Liza... I'm sorry. I'm sorry if... If I said something wrong. I just... I... No, I'm sorry. I hope everything's gonna be okay. Yeah, it will be. You're gonna be fine. Don't you worry, okay?

LIZA: Okay. Thank you.

Silence.

JADRANKA: Ah, well.

Jadranka is on the verge of tears.

ANTON: Let's make a move now. Go, go.

JADRANKA: I'll leave the soup and *štrukle* for you. You won't need to cook.

MARKO: Great. Thank you.

ANTON: Come on, Ranka. Let's go... Don't you worry. Liza, you're young.

LIZA: Yeah.

ANTON: Bye.

SANJA: Shit, yeah. Sorry, Marko. Take good care, Liza.

LIZA: Thanks. Bye.

LIZA: I was holding back tears as they were leaving. I didn't want to cry in front of them. Shit, why did it all have to be so complicated? Marko walked them to the door and I just sat on the sofa and tried to take in what had happened. And I was violently sick.

LIZA: Shit. Marko! Marko, the basin, the basin! Quick!

Marko comes running and gives her the basin. Liza pukes again.

MARKO: Are you okay?

LIZA: Yeah. I just need a quiet moment. Thank god, they're gone.

MARKO: Fuck, Sanja totally pissed me off.

LIZA: She felt bad too. As for Jadranka, I don't know what to think. She didn't like me before ...

MARKO: Not true.

LIZA: Now I'm going to be the murderer of her first grandson.

MARKO: No, of course not. She said she...

LIZA: Yes, she understands. Well, I don't know... Bloody hell, my head. Can I have a glass of water?

MARKO: Sure. Would you like to lie down? Rest.

Marko strokes Liza's hair.

MARKO: It's going to be okay.

LIZA: I'm so scared, it's going to hurt.

MARKO: Shit. I'll go with you. If you're okay.

LIZA: Yeah, sure. Thank you.

MARKO: Fuck, I'm so sorry... I shouldn't have said anything to Sanja.

LIZA: It's okay, you didn't know it was going to be like this.

LIZA: On Wednesday I went to the clinic. They gave me some pills and a bed in the day ward. I was there for five or six hours until it was over. The procedure was long, hard and painful. But ... it was the only option for me. I never had any regrets.

Myths about motherhood

– I'm a nervous wreck sometimes ... Guilty! I couldn't give birth, they had to cut the baby out ... Guilty! I couldn't breastfeed, there was no milk ... Guilty! I breastfed until the baby was three ... Guilty! My lap is not always a soft and safe shelter ... Guilty! I don't know how to set boundaries ... Guilty! I raise my voice, and I shout ... Guilty! I don't want to have children. Guilty! I can't have children. Guilty! I have a child and I often get freak out. Guilty! I worry too much and I am a helicopter mom. Guilty! My mother was a drunk and I feel no gratitude towards her. Guilty! I hate cooking and cleaning the house. Guilty! My child is the centre of my world. Guilty! My mother never stood up for herself or for me, so I resent her. Guilty! I refuse to take days off and go to work even though my kid has a cold. Guilty! I will never be as good as my mother. Guilty! I work on Sundays instead of spending time with my kids. Guilty! I can't shake off the guilt. Guilty, guilty, guilty!

Some myths about motherhood:

– Myth No. 1: It is in every woman's nature that she wants to be a mother!

Maternal instinct as such does not exist. Although it is very popular and some people think it should be guarded.

– Myth No. 2: Mum's care is the best care!

Anyone can be a mum or a good parent. An adult who creates a secure emotional bond with a child and cares for him or her lovingly.

– Myth 3: A child has needs that only a mother can meet!

The myth of the necessity of motherhood diminishes the role of the father and other caregivers. And it ties women to the home and children.

– Medea killed her children. Fedra tried to seduce her stepson. Emma Bovary left her child for a lover. Anna Karenina neglected a child for a lover. Nora left her family because she wanted to be alone for a little while ... But all those debased women ... those bitches got punished!

EMA

EMA (32), ALEKS (36), KATJA (30), LUNA (5) LIAM (20 months)

EMA: It all went wrong, that weekend. On Friday I was run off my feet trying to cook a meal for Liam on time, to go to the kindergarten early to pick up Luna, to put Liam to bed quickly so I'd have some peace and quiet to entertain my guest. Of course, the kitchen was a total mess. A massive pile of laundry on the sofa because nobody had time to fold it. For the first time since we moved, a classmate from college came to see me.

The doorbell rings.

EMA: She's here already? I told her not to ring the doorbell. If Liam wakes up...

Ema goes to answer the door. It's Katja.

EMA: Well, hi!

EMA: Hey! You've finally made it ...

EMA: We used to hang out every day in college. But now ... I don't know ... We haven't seen each other for more than a year. I kept telling her on the phone about all the problems with the building, so that I thought she finally wanted to see it. The house! And I wanted to show her all the rooms. I finally have space for a separate bedroom and a children's room. And a study, where so I can work undisturbed ... When I looked at Katja, though, she didn't seem genuinely interested. She was somehow absent. It got kind of uneasy, me and her together... it was definitely different. Then I made us coffee.

Half an hour later.

Ema and Katja are sitting at the kitchen table. Ema pours the coffee.

EMA: Will you take milk?

KATJA: Yes, please. Have you got any soya milk?

EMA: No, sorry. Just plain.

KATJA: No problem. I won't take any.

EMA: Unless I squirt you some of mine? It's 100% bio.

KATJA: Ehm ... I don't think so.

EMA: Only kidding, mate. A joke.

KATJA: Yeah, sure. Ha ha.

EMA: Would you like some biscuits maybe?

KATJA: No, thanks. No sweets for me. I'm on a diet.

EMA: You? Why? You look great. Whereas I ... just can't get back in a fucking shape.

KATJA: Don't worry.

EMA: What about fags? You stopped?

KATJA: Yeah, kind of.

EMA: That's great. I didn't smoke when I was pregnant. But I do have an odd fag every now and then. Well, every day.

KATJA: You just go ahead, I don't mind...

EMA:... The terrace isn't quite finished yet. It's such a mess. Aleks is putting up the stone fence himself. Fussing about every single stone ... which way it should be set. It never ends, I'm telling you.

KATJA: Sounds tricky.

EMA: I spent five years of my life worrying about this bloody house. Had I known it, we would've never opted to self-build.

KATJA: Ah, come on. It's a finished house. You've got a fucking house, Ema. You own a house!

EMA: Well, actually, the bank owns it.

KATJA: These days, many people are unable to get a mortgage.

EMA: I know. But sometimes it feels scary... It's such a terrifying feeling that you owe so much money. Are you two still renting?

KATJA: Yes. It's crazy, prices in Ljubljana are brutal.

EMA: Why don't you move out of the city?

KATJA: Where? Here?

EMA: Why not?

KATJA: It is nice, don't get me wrong. The unspoilt nature, it's so green. Clean air!

EMA: It smells like manure!

KATJA: No noise, no busy roads.

EMA: Our closest neighbours are 300 metres away. And they're old, all of them.

KATJA: Well, Ema ... I don't know... don't you get bored?

EMA: Bored? No way. It's only a 30-minute drive to Ljubljana.

KATJA: It took me 45.

EMA: When it's rush hour.

KATJA: It is always rush hour. Well, I definitely wouldn't cope having to commute every day. No way.

EMA: I know. We've lived here for a year, and you've only just managed to get here now.

KATJA: Sorry. I would've come sooner ... It's just ... you know. Time's an issue. It's a long way out. If you were closer ...

EMA: Well, I've not moved to a different country.

KATJA: You could come to the city more often too. I've asked you so many times...

EMA: I know ... Hey, are you hungry? Would you like something to eat?

KATJA: No, I'm okay.

EMA: Some cheese and bread and veggies?

Ema slices bread, cheese and vegetables.

EMA: Hey, tell me, how are things at the faculty? Madam assistant professor!

KATJA: It's great. But also exhausting. My seminars, projects, papers. And consultations with the students. This term I was assigned to teach an extra tutorial and then...

EMA: And then... She went on for ten minutes, elaborating on her promising career as a young assistant professor, a future full professor at the faculty, telling me which article of hers was published in which journal, and how well she got along with her colleagues and also with the students, and how her nasty fucking supervisor encouraged her ... I know, I should be happy for her. I wanted to be. I tried to listen with some enthusiasm, disguising that I was actually getting demoralized with every word she said... And then, she dropped the final bombshell.

KATJA: And so, I'm just waiting for that peer review now, for Juhant to finally send it off, and ... well, it should go to print in May. My first monograph!

EMA: Vow! Tops! Congratulations.

KATJA: Thank you.

EMA: A monograph, just like that!

KATJA: Well, yeah.

EMA: Whereas I... stuck at home, looking for misplaced picture books and dummies...

KATJA: I'll send you a copy.

EMA: Signed!

KATJA: Definitely.

EMA: Ehm... did I mention it? I'm working on an article as well. On cancer cells.

KATJA: Are you?

EMA: For *Cell Biology*.

KATJA: Great.

EMA: I'm not sure though, if I'm going to make it. The deadline's in two weeks. I'd need to fetch samples from the lab. Aleks's working on a major project at work right now and he's totally stressed out. He's working overtime every day.

KATJA: Oh, that sucks. You might finish it and publish in some other journal.

EMA: I've been telling myself that for five years.

KATJA: Well, you've got kids now. I've only got my dog and Rok, and I don't seem to cope with the pair of them sometimes. I can't imagine how I'd manage with all the commitments...

EMA: So, how's Rok these days?

KATJA: Ah, the usual. Too much energy. So he goes riding his bike uphill every weekend.

EMA: Would you two like to borrow my kids for a day or two?

KATJA: No, thanks! We'd sooner take another dog.

EMA: Oh, come on. You're not tempted in the least?

KATJA: Not at all. Your kids are totally cute, both of them. It's just... I don't know, I feel like I'd have to give up so many things. And anyway... It's hardly the best time to have children now. To bring new human parasites into the world.

EMA: I never thought of Luna and Liam as parasites. Well, maybe Liam, as he's after my boobs 24/7.

KATJA: Oh, sorry ... you know what I meant ... looking at the big picture ... There are too many people in this world, exhaust fumes are destroying the climate, natural resources are limited, soil fertility is fucked, we're losing huge areas of forests every year to intensive agriculture and massive fires. And it's just going

to get hotter, and there's going to be less and less food. And more people.

Given human nature and selfishness, I cannot delude myself that we'll ever be able to coexist. Inevitably, there will be a third world war and indiscriminate slaughter for raw materials, for food. It's only a matter of time – 15, 20, 30 years from now?

LUNA: Will there be war, Mummy?

EMA: No. No, of course not. There won't be any war. Stop worrying, love.

KATJA: Shit. Oops. Sorry.

LUNA: Mummy?

EMA: You just carry on playing and stop eavesdropping. *To Katja*. They hear everything.

KATJA: I've completely forgotten she's here. She's such a good girl. And so big! I can't believe it. It's like... you were pregnant only yesterday. At your master's thesis defence.

EMA: No idea how I managed it all then. And now, my PhD thesis is dragging on forever. I don't seem to be making any progress.

KATJA: We were all so sure then, you'd be the first to get a PhD degree.

LUNA (*to Katja*): You know what happened in kindergarten?

KATJA: What?

LUNA: A stork made a nest on the roof. There were four tiny storks in the nest. Baby storks. The teacher showed us on the webcam.

KATJA: Really? Were they cute?

LUNA: Yes. But then they all died.

KATJA: Oh, no. Oh, dear.

LUNA: The teacher said it had rained for five days and ... they got covered in mud.

EMA: They froze to death.

KATJA: Oh no, poor things.

EMA: Luna, why don't you draw something for Katja?

LUNA: I'm going to draw storks.

KATJA: Live ones, okay?

LUNA: Okay.

KATJA: Well... I must be off soon, I've got to... I've got loads of stuff to finish for work.

EMA: Come on, no rush. Aleks won't be back until late.

KATJA: Really?

EMA: Well, he's totally overworked this month, they've got issues with foreign investors, blah blah blah.

KATJA: Bless him, he's paying your mortgage.

EMA: So he should be, he's been working on his career for more than ten years.

Because of my maternity leaves, I'm employed only 33% of the workload. If I'd stayed at the institute, I'd have already got a full-time job contract. But as it is, I have to listen to Aleks's nagging every month about how we depended on his salary and he had to work extra time.

KATJA : I know. It's just... It's almost impossible to buy a flat, let alone a house. Maybe you should try to look at it more optimistically.

EMA: Yeah... I should be fucking grateful. To have a full fridge, a stack of dishes and a pile laundry to wash. And that my husband pays my mortgage. Hooray!

KATJA: That's not what I meant... When are you going back to work?

EMA: Kindergarten's no option before September. If we get a place at all. Still waiting for the decision. Ah well... Aleks is being totally exploited at work. Plus, he goes regularly to the gym and does swimming, otherwise he's all sore and can't function properly. And he has to go for a drink with the guys from the office, so they don't think he's an arsehole. Plus the commute.

KATJA: He seems to have his life sorted out fine. When was the last time *you* went out for a drink, eh?

EMA: I do go out for coffee, every now and then.

KATJA: On your own, without the kids?

EMA: Well, no...

KATJA: Come on, let's do it tonight. You and me. It's Friday. Just wait for Aleks to come home, hand over the kids, drive over and we'll paint the town red. Okay?

EMA: I'd love to, it's just... And I don't know exactly what time he'll be back. He has some teambuilding stuff after work as well.

KATJA: Okay. Next weekend then?

EMA: I'm still nursing Liam ... in the evening and two or three more times at night.

KATJA: Well, why don't you ask Aleks to give him a bottle?

EMA: Liam hates the bottle. He throws it away, screaming.

KATJA: Wait, what? Are you telling me you haven't had a night out in two years?

EMA: Ehm... Actually, yeah. And if I count Luna, it's been almost five years.

KATJA: No shit! Five fucking years?! We're going out next weekend, you and me. Let Aleks deal with the screaming.

EMA: Well... I don't know...

KATJA: Ema!

EMA: I'll try to arrange it... Okay?

KATJA: Okay. Just give me a call, and we'll go.

EMA: Yeah, sure. I'd love to.

KATJA: Come on. You can't be stuck here all the time, on your own, in the middle of the forest, surrounded by deer and bears.

EMA: Bears! Ah, stop it...

KATJA: Well, it was lovely to see you. I really need to dash off. I've got some work to finish. And it's Friday, busy roads ... btw, your house is totally super.

EMA: Yeah, sure, I get it.

KATJA: Take good care, all right? Speak soon! Promise? Give me a call, when you come to Ljubljana.

EMA: Okay.

KATJA: It was lovely to see you after such a long time. Goodness me, you're a real housewife now.

EMA: Fuck off!

KATJA: It's cool! I don't mind. Anyway, I'm just kidding. Thanks for having me and everything.

EMA: No soy milk, though.

KATJA: Have a nice day. And call me for a drink. Urgently! Ciao, Luna!

EMA: Yes, absolutely. Ciao!

Katja leaves.

EMA: It was the first time she'd come to see us and she barely managed to stay for one hour. Of course, I'd love to go out and get legless, but how?! I had no one to babysit for me. My mother lives at the other end of the country... My hypochondriac mother-in-law Renata is too unwell to look after the kids. 'Fucking housewife', I can't believe it.

LUNA: Mummy, Can I watch a cartoon?

EMA: No! Go and play ...

LUNA: Let's play Uno!

EMA: Luna, I can't. I'm going to get some writing done while Liam's asleep.

LUNA: Please... Can we play together? Come on! Mummy! Please!

EMA: Ssh! You'll up wake Liam! What's wrong with you?!

LUNA: I'm sorry.

EMA: Okay. Let's play Uno. Just one game. Fetch the cards.

LUNA: Yesss!

EMA: By the time I'd fed them both that Friday night, combed their hair, showered, brushed their teeth, put their pyjamas on and got them in bed, I was totally knackered. I would've loved to watch a series and fall asleep on the couch... But what with my paper, cell biology, the regulatory mechanisms of cell division... I should, I really should be working... I sat down at the kitchen table, turned on my laptop, looked for all the books. I was barely fifteen minutes into my article ... when I heard Liam crying. For fuck's sake! Why can't he sleep uninterrupted for an hour?! He keeps crying and screaming. I haven't slept normally for five years. Sometimes at night I start imagining... when I'm carrying him, pacing up and down the room... what it'd feel like if I knocked his head against the wall gently. Just like that... by accident. I want to whack him in the wall, the screaming head of his. It'd give him a reason to cry, the little fucker. Why can't he just fall asleep for a change? I pinched him several times. Bloody hell. What's wrong with me? He bit me while I was breastfeeding. It bloody hurt. He was screaming blue murder out one night and then he bit my nipples... So, I pinched him. Hard. Fucking hard. So, he'd remember. I nipped him in the back of his neck. It showed. There was a bruise. It changed colour every day. I prayed all week Aleks wouldn't notice. And he didn't. Of course not. He doesn't give a shit about him... The asshole wouldn't notice if the kid was missing two fingers. Shit... Fucking hell...

Ema sits down at the computer. She is struggling to get on with her writing. She opens the book, searches for a relevant page...

EMA: The moment I found the right page and got focused, started typing something that made sense... Aleks came home. I immediately heard him talking on the phone. Work stuff.

ALEKS (*on the phone*). Okay. All right. Yeah? Didn't we say by the 20th? Oh. Did we? Yeah. Mm–hm. Yeah? Shit. Okay, the 18th. Right so. yeah, I'll let Anita know. Okay. Okay. Bye.

Aleks hangs up the phone, looks at Emma.

ALEKS: Hi.

EMA: Hi. Who was it?

ALEKS: Gregor.

EMA: At 10 p.m.?

ALEKS: Yeah, I know. It's mental. He suddenly remembered he had to let me know about some deadlines... What about you? Are you working?

EMA: Trying. I'm too tired.

ALEKS: Better go to bed then.

EMA: I don't know when I'll be able get some work done. You've been gone all day.

ALEKS: Why do you have to say it like that...

EMA: Like what?

ALEKS: Yeah, like... like a reproach. I told you I had to join some teambuilding.

EMA: Yes, I know. So, how was it?

ALEKS: Well, you know... Gregor was desperately trying to be funny, and we laughed at his jokes. It was meant to be mainly socialising, but we ended up talking shop. A complete waste of time. How were the kids?

EMA: It took me ages to get them down. Luna was messing all the time.

Aleks goes to the sink, inspecting the messy kitchen. He wants to get a glass of water, but he's unable to reach the tap because the sink is full of dirty dishes.

ALEKS: Oh, Ema. Look at the state of your kitchen!

EMA: Whose kitchen? Mine?! My kitchen? I didn't realise it was *my* kitchen. You sound like some stupid male chauvinist.

ALEKS: Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. It just kind of came out. You're the stay-at-home-parent. It'd be easier, if you put the dishes in the washer straight after using them. That's all.

EMA: Yay, you're brilliant, Aleks. I can't, if there's still clean dishes in there!

ALEKS: No need to shout! I don't have a problem putting the dishes away. Just, I can't even pour myself water, because the sink's full And crumbs all over the counter, on the floor, at the bin. Come on... no big deal. I just can't believe it, you're not bothered by the mess.

EMA: The last thing I need is your stupid sermon about cleaning the house.

ALEKS: Ema, well... For fuck's sake. I've been at work all day. I'm fucking knackered. I really don't feel like arguing with you.

EMA: You'll get a good night sleep yourself though. I have to submit my article in two weeks. I have no time to write it or I'm too knackered anyway.

ALEKS: Yes, the article...

KATJA: I've told you ten times I have to write it. And next week I'll have to go to the lab to fetch samples for my thesis.

ALEKS: We have crazy schedule at work next week.

EMA: As always.

ALEKS: I think... When Liam's in kindergarten, it'll be a lot easier. You're still on maternity leave.

EMA: Maternity leave? What are you on about, Aleks? Officially, it's long over. If I want to get new projects at the institute, I got to finish my thesis as soon as possible. Or else, I'll be left with no other option but go into teaching. Imagine, having to teach biology or home economics at some crappy elementary school with a grumpy headmistress.

ALEKS: So what? It doesn't sound too bad...

EMA: I'd rather work in Hofer!

ALEKS: You'll be all right, you just need more time.

EMA: You already have a career. It's easy for you to talk.

ALEKS: I can understand you, of course I can, it's just... I don't know. Sometimes I think you're way too annoyed. I mean, I don't know... For no reason. Why do you insist on going back to work? We're doing fine, as far as money is concerned. We've got enough to repay the mortgage. Plus a disposable income.

EMA: It's not about the money.

ALEKS: The new car can wait. We'll go on holiday somewhere not too far, for a short time. I don't know... You should be glad you don't have to beat the crowds every day getting to work. What with the bad weather... I don't know, really... are you bored?

EMA: Do you listen to me at all? I've been stuck at the same point for five years. I'm so busy all the time, but I'm not achieving anything. You've never been in this position. You've never had to put your ambitions aside.

ALEKS: I'm not sure, if can see the whole picture. Right now, it's my salary that is ...

EMA: I know, your salary is very important now. I know. But I don't want it to be like this forever...

ALEKS: Look, everybody in my office stays at work till the evening. Including my boss. Do you really think I'm the last one to go home?

EMA: That's why I have to finish my PhD thesis as soon as possible, otherwise it'll never change. Your job will always be more valuable. You'll be more valuable.

ALEKS: Wait, I never said that. Ema, come one...

EMA: For fuck's sake. Sorry. I'm just... I'm worried it's gonna be like this for ever.

ALEKS: Of course not. Listen, I'll spend more time with them this weekend, so you'll be able to write. Okay?

EMA: Okay.

Aleks hugs Emma.

ALEKS: We're dealing with a real crisis in the office at the moment. Everybody's working overtime.

EMA: Tell them you've got kids, for fuck's sake.

ALEKS: It's not the public sector. Our main partners are from Switzerland and America. There, the working hours are until 7.00 p.m. Rich kids have nannies, poor kids are in the streets.

EMA: That's why they're all fucked up.

ALEKS: We can go somewhere tomorrow, what do you reckon?

EMA: Where?

ALEKS: I don't know, wherever. A day out. To Bled maybe.

EMA: Isn't it too crowded?

ALEKS: It's low season. It'll be nice.

EMA: The weather will be okay, I guess.

ALEKS: We can walk around the lake and have cream cakes.

EMA: Okay. Super.

EMA: Then he hugged me. I let him. He started kissing my neck. He held me tight and I felt a bulge between his legs. We hadn't had sex for ages. I wasn't sure if I missed it or not. Somehow... no time... never the right moment... He put his hands inside my panties...

EMA: Shit, I'm sorry ... I haven't had a shower... and my hair is greasy.

ALEKS: So what... You're beautiful.

EMA: Wait a minute. I'm going to take a quick shower and shave.

ALEKS: No, no. No need... I'm not letting you go.

Liam starts to cry.

EMA: Shit. Liam. Not again. Can you check on him?

ALEKS: Sure, I can, but... He won't calm down with me. And Luna's going to wake up too. I just don't have the tits –

EMA: Yeah yeah yeah! I'm fucking coming. Shit...

ALEKS: Don't be mad at him.

Saturday, 8.30.

EMA: And then... Saturday! At last! The coveted Saturday. I got up in a good mood, even though the night was hellish again. At least I wouldn't be on my own all day. I put on some music and started making breakfast. Aleks was in the bathroom. I switched the TV on, kids programme for Luna and Liam, so I could have a breather. I was frying eggs and making fruit salad and sandwiches for our day out. And then Aleks came out of the bathroom. With his phone.

ALEKS: Hey... You're making breakfast?

EMA: Eggs and melted cheese, I'll slice some fruit as well. Want some coffee?

ALEKS: Ema...

EMA: Yeah?

ALEKS: My Mum's just called.

EMA: Has she? Is everything okay?

ALEKS: Not really. Well, no big deal. I guess. Her stove's not working. She asked me to come and have a look.

EMA: Sure, you can go later, in the evening. Or tomorrow.

ALEKS: Oh, shit. Ema. Fuck. I completely forgot... I kind of promised Mum I'd drop by today. Oh, shit.

EMA: Wait, what? You're not fucking serious, are you?

ALEKS: I know, I fucked up. I promised her last weekend, but I had to go to work. So I told her I'd drop by this weekend and... She's already got everything ready for Sunday soup. And now she's run out of gas. But you know, she can't do without a stove all day.

EMA: What Sunday soup, Aleks? It's not even Sunday today!

ALEKS: That's what she calls her soup. Listen, I'll be right back. We can go out together later. In the afternoon. After lunch.

EMA: After lunch. So, I've got to cook again?

ALEKS: No no no, I'll cook.

EMA: When? If you're not here.

ALEKS: We can have macaroni again. I'll be right back, okay?

EMA: You'll be right back my arse. It's an hour's drive!

ALEKS: She can't do without gas.

EMA: Great! Really great. You were not here last weekend, remember? You were in the office.

ALEKS: Yeah, I know. I should have gone to see her last weekend. You know what she's like. Especially since Daddy's gone... I couldn't say no to her.

EMA: But you can say no to me?! Why is it me? Why do I always have to put up with fucking everything!

ALEKS: We can go together, the four of us! Come on, let's do it, I'll fix her gas, and you can have coffee ...

EMA: I can't wait! To listen to her going on about her ill health for an hour? You promised me a trip, not drinking coffee with my mother-in-law. And anyway, I'd have to look after the kids again, because she doesn't know how to play with them!

ALEKS: She's unwell, Ema!

EMA: I'm fed up with this, it's always the same. Your work, your mother, the car, the house – everything is more important to you!

ALEKS: Ema ...

EMA: You just go to your Mummy. We'll be alone again, so what!

ALEKS: Don't be upset now.

EMA: It's all right. Go.

ALEKS: We can drive to Bled in the afternoon. Or tomorrow. (*Aleks approaches Ema, she backs away.*)

EMA: Go. Bye. Bye!

EMA: So, another monotonous day was ahead of me, chock-a-block with housework and looking after the kids. The usual: cooking lunch, washing the dishes, cleaning, doing the laundry, changing nappies, tidying up, arguing with the kids, intervening in their squabbling for toys, stopping them from shouting, arguing, and so on and on and on...

Saturday afternoon.

After lunch. Ema is tidying up. Luna is drawing. Liam is asleep.

LUNA: When's Daddy coming back?

EMA: I don't know, Luna. You've asked me three times already.

LUNA: Can I watch a cartoon?

EMA: No, you've watched enough.

LUNA: Please. Can I? Please? Can I?

EMA: I said no. Pay attention, when I'm talking to you.

LUNA: When's Daddy coming back?

EMA: I don't know.

LUNA: Why are you always at home? I want Daddy. When's Daddy coming home?

EMA: I told you. I don't know. He's not answering his phone. Hang on, I'll call Grandma.

Ema calls Aleks' mother.

EMA: Hi, Renata! How's everything? Oh, I see. Really?... Did you see the doctor? Oh dear, more medication? Well, I'm ringing to ask you... is Aleks still there? He's not answering... I see. Okay. Really? You shouldn't have bothered. I've got lunch cooked for him. Okay. I'm going to throw it out... What do you mean, 'sleeping'? Can you wake him up, please? Yeah... I know he's tired. We're all

tired. Can you wake him up anyway? We've made plans, you see... Fucking hell ... Why is it so hard to wake him up, if I ask you?! Eh?

EMA: She's hung up on me. The bitch hung up on me. She refused to wake up her darling little boy.

LUNA: Mummy?

EMA: Sorry, Luna. I'm so sorry. Mummy's using bad language.

LUNA: I don't like it when you talk like this.

EMA: Sorry, Luna. I won't do it again.

LUNA: Look, I've drawn a little butterfly for you. Isn't it cute?

EMA: It's very beautiful. Thank you.

LUNA: Mummy?

EMA: Don't you worry, pumpkin. It's all right.

LUNA: Are you angry?

EMA: Hey, I have a brilliant idea. Why don't we make pancakes?

LUNA: Yessss!

EMA: After Liam woke up and I nursed him, we started making pancakes together at about four in the afternoon. Liam and Luna kept arguing about who was going to hold the bowl, who was going to pour the milk, who was going to stir the mix. Luna wouldn't stop talking. I wasn't listening to her. In my mind, I was scolding Aleks, telling him it wouldn't go on like this, I didn't see the point any longer, I was going to move in with my Mum. And then Luna poured way too much milk in the bowl. The mixture was too thin. So, we added another egg. And extra flour. And then we ran out of flour. At exactly 16.20, we ran out of flour.

EMA: Luna, watch your little brother. I'll just fetch flour from the pantry.

LUNA: Okay.

EMA: So, I went to the pantry to fetch flour. As quickly as possible. And before I got back to the kitchen, I could hear loud arguing and shouting.

LUNA: No, no, no! Let go, Liam! Mummy!!!!

EMA: I ran into the kitchen. The bowl, containing a litre and a half of batter a few minutes ago, was knocked over. Its content on the floor. Luna was on the verge of tears, clenching her tiny fists. Liam was on the kitchen top, screaming, covered in pancake batter, running down all over his tummy, his legs; his tiny hands punching the sticky liquid and his hair. The batter was oozing off the top, into the drawers, dripping over the clean pots and pans, soaking my neatly folded tablecloths. My head started spinning. I was shaking with anger.

EMA: What have you two done?! Who's going to clean this mess, eh?!

LUNA: It was Liam! He did it, Mummy! You stupid moron. You stupid fool! I hate you!

EMA: And then, something happened that should never happened. In her rage, Luna pushes Liam very hard, he falls backwards and hits the wall with his tiny head. He's screaming, I jump in and smack Luna hard. Real hard, right in the mouth. Luna falls backwards, collapses on the floor. I check out on Liam, he's howling, with just a small bump on his head. Then I turn over to Luna. She's holding her hand over her mouth. Blood's dripping between her fingers. Drip drip drip. Over her shirt, her pants, to the floor. Our eyes meet for a second. In a flash, she gets up and runs out. In her slippers, no jacket. She's running away across the meadow, into the woods.

EMA: Luna! Luna! I'm sorry! Come back! Luna! Come here, now! No no no no. Fuck. What have I done...

EMA: I grabbed Liam and ran after her. She was nowhere to be found. I checked around the house. Nothing. I went into the woods, walking over the branches with Liam in my arms. I call Luna, scream, cry, shout that I'm sorry. Nothing. She was nowhere to be found. I went to my next door neighbour to ask, and no, she hadn't seen her. Then I ran back into the house, put Liam in front of the TV and started tidying up the kitchen. I picked up bits of broken crockery. I wiped on the counter, on the floor. Pancake batter all over the place. And drops of Luna's blood. Some of it was already smeared. As I wiped

the blood away with the cloth, my stomach twisted with pain and my head rumbled with fear. Luna was not back, I had to take action.

EMA (*on the phone, on the verge of tears*): I'd like to report a child missing... My daughter's disappeared. She ran into the woods. I saw her running into the woods. Yes. Luna Uranek. Almost five. She's all alone! She's alone in the woods. I'm telling you, she's alone. Without her jacket! In a T-shirt ... it's so cold outside ... She's been gone for an hour and a half... Yes. The address is Pod Bregom 46. Thank you.

EMA: Then I went into the hall and grabbed Luna's purple and blue jacket with a strawberry pattern. I sniffed it hard, and tears poured down my cheeks. I parked Liam in front of the TV and ran around the house like a madwoman again.

EMA: Luna! Luna, where are you? Please come back! Luna!

EMA: When I got back to the house, Liam was sitting at the front door tearful, calling me. I squeezed him close and buried my face in his tummy. Then I heard Aleks's car pull into the driveway.

EMA: Aleks! Where have you been?! I called you a dozen times!

ALEKS: Sorry, it took a while. I had to get a new gas canister, they didn't have it at the first petrol station, and then she insisted I have something to eat... you know what she's like...

EMA: Luna's gone. She went out. She's gone.

ALEKS: What do you mean? Where did she go? Where is she?

EMA: I don't know... She's disappeared. I can't find her, Aleks. She's gone. Nowhere to be found...

ALEKS: Are you fucking kidding me? What do you mean, 'gone'? You can't lose a child.

EMA: I don't know... She ran out, into the woods.

ALEKS: How long ago? How long?

EMA: I don't know, an hour and a half.

ALEKS: Fucking hell, Ema! Call the police. We need to find her before dark!

EMA: I've already called them. They're on their way. Where are you going?

ALEKS: Where?! To look for her.

EMA: Take her jacket!

ALEKS: Fucking hell, Ema. Do you realize how cold it gets at night?

EMA: It would've never happened if you'd been home! Fuck!

Aleks leaves.

EMA: Aleks went into the woods, while I waited for the police. They came and filed a report. I didn't tell them about the slap. I was shaking. I didn't realize this was happening for real. When the fire brigade and the volunteer search party arrived, I was devastated. The lump in my throat got so big it hurt. Should something happen to her... In the greatest need, even non-believers turn to God. I prayed like mad. I promised Him everything, if He brings it back to me. Cold sweat was pouring down my back. My heart was pounding. The minutes dragged on forever. I called Aleks every five minutes. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. I was going crazy. I went into the woods as well. I put Liam in his overalls, took the carrier and the torch. And then the phone rang. At last.

EMA: Yes? What? Oh, thank God. Thank God! Put her on the phone. (*Ema speaks to Luna.*) Luna! Pumpkin, are you okay? Fine, fine. No no no, you won't get punished. Of course not. Just come home. Oh, I see Okay. Really? You poor thing. Can I speak to Daddy now? Okay, okay. Aleks? What's wrong with her leg? I see. Oh, shit. Oh, okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Let me know how it goes.

Ema hangs up.

Saturday night.

EMA: It was in the middle of the night when they finally got home. I was still awake. I couldn't sleep. Aleks carried Luna to bed, she was fast asleep. Her ankle was bandaged. My heart broke when I saw the blood clotted

on her face... And then Aleks and I just stood in the kitchen, I had no idea what to say.

EMA: Would you like a bite to eat? Are you hungry?

ALEKS: No. I had a sandwich from a vending machine.

EMA: At least, you didn't have to wait that long.

ALEKS: They examined her promptly. Checked her head, gave her something against dehydration. And hypothermia. And x-rayed her leg.

EMA: Thank God, it's not broken.

ALEKS: It's a pretty nasty sprain though. And she was hypothermic at that stage. Shit, we were so lucky she ...

EMA: Poor thing.

ALEKS: She fell into a hollow. And then she couldn't climb out. Because of the leg.

EMA: I keep telling her never to go into the woods alone. If she'd only listened to me, this wouldn't have happened.

ALEKS: Don't blame her.

EMA: I'm not, I'm only saying...

ALEKS: It's *your* fault. Nobody else's but yours, don't you get it? What possessed you? To hit her like that?!

EMA: I never... Just one... a light slap on the cheek.

ALEKS: You hit her. She told me.

EMA: No, I didn't... I didn't hit her hard.

ALEKS: Stop it, Ema. Her lip was split. Hallo?!

EMA: I didn't... I never meant to... I didn't...

ALEKS: When we found her, she was scared shitless. She's scared of you.

EMA: What do you mean 'scared'? No way is she scared of me.

ALEKS: Listen, I really don't know what to do anymore. This isn't working and won't go on like this. I don't see the point anymore.

EMA: What? I don't get it.

ALEKS: You have serious problems, aggression issues. I'm not sure I can trust you again... to leave you alone with them.

EMA: For real?! Are you crazy? You haven't had any qualms leaving us alone all day long! I've raised Luna practically on my own for five years, and now Liam as

well! Where were you, eh?! Where were you before?! And now you're the smartest person in the world. Check yourself in the mirror, you, asshole!

ALEKS: See? That's exactly what I'm talking about, Ema. These outbursts of yours.

You're unable to talk like an adult.

EMA: I make one mistake and I'm... what? A pile of shit for you!?

ALEKS: You need professional treatment.

EMA: I know I made a huge mistake. And I'm terribly sorry. But I'm on my own all the time. I need help. Dealing with everything.

ALEKS: Come on, you're gonna take responsibility for your actions.

EMA: Really?! What are you talking about? Tell me straight!

ALEKS: I can't stand your nagging, your complaining... You're always all grumpy...

I'm just sick of it... I'm sick of you!

EMA: Fuck off, you bloody egomaniac!

ALEKS: Well done, Ema. Well done.

A cry from Luna's room is heard.

LUNA: Mum! Mummy!

EMA: Yes, sweetie. I'm coming. Mummy's coming.

Ema runs away to check on Luna. Aleks goes after her. Ema turns to Aleks at Luna's door.

EMA: Sorry, I just want to be alone with her for a while. Please?

ALEKS: No, I'm coming in with you.

EMA: She called *me*.

ALEKS: Luna, sweetie?

LUNA: Yes, Daddy?

ALEKS: Would you like Daddy to come in as well?

LUNA: Yes.

ALEKS (*to Ema*): See?

EMA: Fuck off. I don't believe it. You won't let me talk to her.

ALEKS: I just want to be there.

EMA: It's about time you remembered to be there, asshole.

ALEKS (*resentfully*): You're really not normal, Ema.

Ema is hurt by his words. She does not know what to say.

LUNA: Daddy!

Aleks goes to Luna's room.

EMA: Am I really not normal? Am I a bad person... a bad mother... It wasn't on purpose. I didn't mean to. I'm just ... I can't do everything. I can't be alone anymore. I'm just suffocating! Hell no. There's nothing wrong with me. I just need some peace and quiet, some space to myself. But maybe that's not normal? Is it?!

Hasn't the stork brought you anything yet?!?!

A middle-aged woman approaches the clerk.

– Good afternoon.

– Yes?

– Is this the demographic office?

– Yes. Can I help you?

– I have an appointment.

– Can I see your ID? Okay.

– Age?

– Forty.

– Are you employed?

– Yes.

– Do you suffer from any chronic disease, serious health problems?

– No. Nothing special.

– Do you have a major housing problem?

– What do you mean?

– Are you homeless?

– No, I'm not.

– Addicted to drugs? Alcohol?

– No!

– That's great. So, ma'am. For now, I'll just issue you a warning.

– A warning?

– A warning before the sentencing. It has been established that you are perfectly capable and competent to deliver children, yet you have contributed nothing to the increase in the birth rate. On behalf of the State, I am giving you a warning. We will meet again in a year's time. If the situation is the same, you'll be burnt at the stake.

– Stake? What do you mean?

– Oh, I get it! Not the real stake, ma'am. Haha! An insider clerical joke. This is not the year 1600. You'll just have to pay a fine if you continue to be childless. That's it.

– I see. A fine?

– Well, yes. Penalty for neglecting your civic duties. For contributing nothing to the birth rate, although you could, by all official criteria. Currently, the fine is 1.200 euros. If there's inflation next year, it might get higher. .

– I see.

– Goodbye, ma'am. And good luck. Next!

– I always imagined I'd get baby fever eventually. And then I was in my late twenties and in my late thirties. But nothing. No desire whatsoever. Only other people's expectations. I don't want to be pregnant, I don't want to give birth, I don't want to change soiled nappies, I don't want to listen to screaming, I don't want to be somebody's chauffeur for twenty years.

– I'd rather have no children, because I wouldn't be able to look after them financially. No point in raising a child in poverty. My partner and I, we barely make the ends meet as it is. We're both self-employed. We can't afford to have children. And why would I bring a child into this world when I see it's all going to hell.

– I'm 35 years old and have been happily married for 7 years. I don't like children, as simple as that, I find them annoying. I'm not prepared to give up my freedom for their sake. Egotism? Maybe. My husband and I organise our free time as we please. And we truly enjoy it. Women who don't choose to be mothers always have to justify ourselves to someone. I don't give a fuck, just don't feel like having kids!

KSENIJA

KSENIJA (58), IGOR (62), TINA (37)

KSENIJA: Celebrations, feasts, anniversaries, weddings, Christmases, you name it, often they don't go the way we want them to. I tried to make everything... I don't know... perfect. I made a booking at an expensive restaurant in Ljubljana a month before. I'd taken up going to the gym regularly, I was eating healthy food. I went to a beautician. I had no proper outfit, so I ordered a two-piece suit online. For my 58th birthday I surely deserve it. I invited only two people to dinner. My partner and my daughter... And even that proved too much in the end.

A posh restaurant. Ksenija and Igor are sitting at the table. The third chair is empty.

KSENIJA: She's late again.

IGOR: She'll be here.

KSENIJA: It's fifteen past.

IGOR: Gorgeous crystal glasses. Lovely tablecloths. Very posh.

KSENIJA: It's not the first time we're here. Can you tone down your enthusiasm?

IGOR: Okay, okay. Would you like another aperitif?

KSENIJA: No. Are you trying to get me drunk?

IGOR: Just asking. I'll have another one, while we're waiting.

KSENIJA: She's late again, for my birthday, of all days. I raised her to be punctual.

To show respect. But no.

IGOR: Maybe she got held up by something.

KSENIJA: Not a word from her. What could be so important on Friday night? She's finished work. No kids. Not even a dog! Or at least a goldfish to change water in the tank.

IGOR: No. Chill out, it'll be cool.

KSENIJA: 'Chill out. It'll be cool'. Why are you talking like your son?

Tina storms in.

TINA: Sorry, Mum. I got lost... My satnav wasn't working. And this place is not signposted at all. Hi, Igor. You weren't waiting long, were you?

IGOR: No big deal.

KSENIJA: Twenty minutes! Imagine how late you'd be it wasn't my birthday.

TINA: Sorry, Mum. Happy birthday! (*She hands over her birthday present.*) I hope you like it.

KSENIJA: Some box.

TINA: You've got everything anyway, so I decided to get you... Well, you'll see. It's not an object. But an *experience*.

KSENIJA: Hm?

IGOR: Sounds interesting.

The waiter approaches the table.

WAITER: Aperitif?

TINA: Could I have a martini?

KSENIJA: You're having a martini?

TINA: What?

KSENIJA: Well, one doesn't start with a martini.

IGOR: If she fancies it.

TINA: Sorry, may I order what I like?

KSENIJA: Sure. Do as you please.

TINA: Go on, open it.

Ksenija opens the box. There is a lot of paper inside the box. She is removing it.

KSENIJA: Is this paper never going to end?

Finally, she finds an envelope in the box.

KSENIJA: Couldn't you simply give it to me?

TINA: Come on. It's for a laugh.

KSENIJA: A tree died over this paper, just in case you didn't know.

TINA: It's brown paper, see? Recycled.

IGOR: We'll take it home and upcycle it.

Ksenija opens the envelope. She reads it.

KSENIJA: 'Body flying. One flight in the Aerofly Postojna wind tunnel'. What the hell?

TINA: You're going to fly! Wind tunnel! Don't you know it?

KSENIJA: Well, I'm not sure I want to find out.

TINA: It's awesome. You step into a big chamber, it's blowing really hard, so the air current lifts you up and keeps you afloat. You're actually flying. Flying in the air!

KSENIJA: Mhm.

IGOR: Wow! I guess that's exactly what your Mum needs. An adrenaline boost.

KSENIJA: Adrenaline? Me?! I've been working as an anaesthetist for 30 years, doing night shifts in emergency rooms, anaesthetising the injured, the burned, the maimed... And now you expect me to let myself be tossed up and down in the air?

TINA: Come on. It'll be fun.

IGOR: Thank you for the present, Tina.

KSENIJA: Thank you.

TINA: I was looking for something special for you ... had no idea what to get you.

KSENIJA: You should've made it easier for you. A nice book would do.

TINA: By the way, it's a voucher for two persons. I've been there already, so... Igor, go for it.

IGOR: It's for two persons?

KSENIJA: Great. Igor's looking forward to it. Aren't you, Igor?

IGOR: Ehm, yeah, of course.

KSENIJA: Well, do you know what you're having? We've already decided.

TINA: Not yet.

KSENIJA: I recommend the lamb, if you ask me. Don't say I'm forcing you.

TINA: It's fine. I'll see for myself, okay?

KSENIJA: Sure.

Tina reads the menu and the wine list. Ksenija and Igor sit in silence.

KSENIJA: First, she was 20 minutes late, then she studied the menu for another 10 minutes. If I gave her any advice, she got annoyed immediately... I mean, I just wanted to help. Because I know the restaurant and I know what is good. Sometimes I feel like I'm not supposed to say anything to her. She feels provoked right away. Well, she finally made her choice, so we could order. 20 minutes later the starter arrived.

IGOR: Yummy, the lobster soup's delicious.

KSENIJA: Watch out.

IGOR: What?

KSENIJA: You've dipped your napkin in the soup.

IGOR: What? Oh. (*He fixes his napkin.*)

KSENIJA: And? How's your pâté?

TINA: Delicious.

KSENIJA: It's homemade. Here, they have almost everything from local farms.

TINA: Great. At least they're not transporting animals all over Europe from some dodgy slaughterhouses.

Silence.

KSENIJA: And? How's work? Any news?

TINA: Not really. Well yeah, Valdes will be away on a long sick leave.

KSENIJA: Really? What's wrong with her?

TINA: No one knows exactly. Fatigue, maybe. *Burnout.*

KSENIJA: Some novelty, this. We didn't even know what burnout was, in my day.

TINA: So, the director's appointed me as the new deputy. Jovič agreed, so... It looks like I'm deputy head now. I won't have to do so many night and weekend shifts.

IGOR: Well done, you, congrats!

TINA: It's no big deal.

KSENIJA: I was *head* of department when I was your age though.

TINA: I know. You've told me many times, Mummy.

KSENIJA: Ah well, let's not talk shop. How's your... let me put it this way... private sphere?

TINA: Oh, Mum.

KSENIJA: What happened with that bloke Andrej? You never said anything.

TINA: Oh dear. I think I need another glass of wine now.

Tina waves to the waiter. He comes over and tops up her glass.

KSENIJA: His father was none the wiser either. Did you two ever get together at all?

TINA: Just leave the bottle here, will you? Thanks. Nobody tells you anything because there's nothing to tell. We went out together once. Just because you spent the whole month bugging me what a great bloke this Andrej is. But you know, the guy hardly opens his mouth.

KSENIJA: That can be a plus.

TINA: He was so boring, I lied I didn't like having dessert, so I could leave early.

KSENIJA: Now, that's a shame.

TINA: From now on, I'd really appreciate it, if you could refrain from setting me up on dates. I've had it with the 'amazing' sons of your 'amazing' coworkers.

KSENIJA: Maybe you're just being too fussy.

IGOR: Give her a break, will you? She's got plenty of time. Mr. Right is sure to come along at some point.

KSENIJA: Will you stop telling these fairy tales? She's 38!

TINA: Not yet. I'm 37.

Tina empties a glass of wine and pours herself another.

KSENIJA: She's thirty-seven. My little girl is 37. I had her in my second year of studying medicine. Four more years until my graduation, and then internship, consultancy, being constantly on-call ... Ah well ... She was such a funny little baby. Round and plain bald. She had no hair when she was one year old. And those tiny hands and round fingers... She was such a calm baby. Curious about everything. When I was studying for my exams, I used to read aloud to her. And she listened with her big eyes. About the anatomy of the respiratory tract and about all possible infections ...

Tina drinks some more wine.

TINA: Well, if you really want to know... I'm seeing someone this Sunday.

KSENIJA: Oh? Vow, who? A boy?

TINA: A boy.

IGOR: See? Young people will... suss it out themselves.

KSENIJA: *Suss it out?* Are you for real? So, who's the lucky guy?

TINA: I haven't met him yet.

KSENIJA: Oh? Another blind date from the internet. Don't expect too much.

TINA: I mean, I know who he is, we just haven't met yet.

KSENIJA: Okay. Are you going to tell us more?

TINA: What do you want to know?

KSENIJA: How old is he? What does he do? Does he own a flat, a house?

TINA: I see, *the basics*. Okay, one step at the time. He's 22. He's a student of sports science in Koper. And he lives in Izola. With his parents.

IGOR: Bravo.

KSENIJA: You're bloody joking me.

TINA: No, why?

KSENIJA: I was 20 when I gave birth. I had a clear goal, a single focus. To get my degree and take care of this child, this little girl who was totally dependent on me. It was hard, but in a way, it was also easy. It was crystal clear to me what I needed to do. I pushed on like a bulldozer. I knew what I wanted. And I achieved it.

Twenty minutes later. Main course. Tina has had her wine glass topped up several times.

KSENIJA: You've nearly emptied the bottle, my darling daughter.

TINA: Have I? I haven't noticed.

KSENIJA: So, this guy of yours... this student bloke ... I'm amazed, really... I mean, how do you imagine a 40-year-old...

TINA: I'm 37!

KSENIJA: ... serious-minded and well-off...

TINA: Oh, yeah. Well-off! That's paramount.

KSENIJA: ...well-off doctor, deputy head of department, would get along with a 22-year-old student from Koper?

TINA: I don't know, Mummy. Love can be a riddle.

KSENIJA: Can it?

TINA: Let's take ... you, for example

KSENIJA: Well, let's.

TINA: You are cold, cynical, over-ambitious and judgemental. You show your love by wanting to keep people under control.

KSENIJA: What? Not true at all.

IGOR: Actually...

TINA: Listen, Igor. If she criticises you often, it only means she loves you. Relax.

IGOR: All well then. She's corrected me at least ten times today.

KSENIJA: Could you two stop, please?

TINA: We're not to blame, if you want to dominate, always.

KSENIJA: Dominate? I?

TINA: When I was little, you wouldn't let me go anywhere. I wasn't allowed to go to the woods, I wasn't allowed to go to a summer camp, even though everybody else could go. I wasn't allowed to go to the cinema with my classmates.

KSENIJA: You were just a kid.

TINA: I was 12!

KSENIJA: Exactly. Way too young to go to the cinema on your own. I need to go to the ladies.

Ksenija goes to the toilet. She looks in the mirror and fixes her make-up.

KSENIJA: They both were attacking me. On my birthday. For being possessive, for wanting to be in charge. Tina's father was a ticket inspector on an international train. A fun-loving guy, he liked his drink and good time. He was from Prezid, a place on the border with Croatia. He was hitting on me, promised me heaven, and I was so naive. It was only I got pregnant, he kind of remembered to mention told me he had a wife and three kids in Croatia. I broke up with him, the bloody arsehole. I had to take control over my life to make sure we survived, me and the little one. I fought like a lioness to finish my studies. Luckily, I was allocated a flat and free kindergarten in the halls of residence. But for the first five years we lived so frugally, I can't even imagine how we made it. I was penny pinching for every single apple.

Ksenija returns to the table.

KSENIJA: Okay, I apologise, if I was too domineering. I simply worry about you.

TINA: Maybe you worry too much.

KSENIJA: Because you haven't got a clue how to sort out your private life. You're 37 and you just... you don't... your private life's a mess.

TINA: I don't have a husband and kids? Is that what you're saying?

KSENIJA: Oh, come on, stop calling me conservative. You could have a wife, for all I care. Or cohabit. I've never been married either. As long as you don't end up living on your own.

TINA: Do you know what my therapist told me recently? Apparently, my core problem is that I'm still in symbiosis with you. I can't start my own family because of... because you've tied me to you too much!

KSENIJA: Typical. It's my fault again. I've told you many times I suspected that woman's professional competence. Maybe you should find a different one. I can check with my colleagues in psychiatry.

TINA: See? You want to have it your way again. You don't like her opinion, so let's get rid of her.

IGOR: More wine?

KSENIJA: Yes, please.

TINA: Keep pouring it. Thanks.

KSENIJA: You've had too much to drink.

TINA: *He* found me, you know.

KSENIJA: Who?

TINA: With the help of a private detective. He called me, just like that.

KSENIJA: Who?! Who found you?

TINA: Adrijan.

KSENIJA: Adrijan?

TINA: I mean, the detective found me. Adrijan hired him.

KSENIJA: Wait a moment. Tina... Maybe this is not a good time.

TINA: I see... Igor doesn't know?

IGOR: Know what?

TINA: You haven't told him?

KSENIJA: No, I haven't. Not yet. The right moment never occurred.

IGOR: Ehm... You haven't told me what?

KSENIJA: I'd rather not go into this now.

TINA: Why not? I want to talk about it now!

KSENIJA: You're drunk. You don't even know his real name.

TINA: Yes, I do. His parents named him David.

IGOR: What are you two talking about?

TINA: Will you tell him? Or shall I?

KSENIJA: You really won't let go, will you? Okay. Tina got pregnant when she was 15.

TINA: I got pregnant and gave birth. It was a boy. I named him Adrijan. Mum virtually forced me to have him adopted.

IGOR: Bloody hell. I had no idea. I'm sorry, Tina.

TINA: Ssh! It's *her* call what we're allowed to discuss and what is off limits. Ssh!

KSENIJA: You're hopeless.

TINA: I'm meeting him this Sunday. My 22-year-old guy is Adrijan. Well, he's called David now.

Silence.

TINA: You're not going to say anything? He's your grandson. Even if he doesn't fit in with your image of a perfect bourgeois, well-to-do family!

KSENIJA: Bourgeois? My parents were farmers.

TINA: If we go back long enough, we were all farmers once.

KSENIJA: What's that got to do with it? You're drunk.

TINA: Am I? Not drunk enough. Waiter! Waiter! Another bottle here.

IGOR: I'm clueless.

KSENIJA: Me too. I apologize. I need a fag.

Ksenija leaves to have a cigarette in the smoking room.

KSENIJA: On my birthday, of all days, she just goes bang and opens this topic. I was going to tell Igor myself. I was definitely going to. But not today. Not on my birthday. Not in a restaurant... In a public place. She never had any sense of timing. When to do something and when not! To have a baby at 15 and still being single at 40... definitely no sense of timing!

Igor and Tina at the table.

IGOR: So, you were still in high school?

TINA: Yeah, we went on a school trip abroad. It was the first time I was allowed to go away for several days. The guy worked in a hotel, a young French lad. It took me real long to realize I was pregnant. When I couldn't hide it anymore, it was too late for an abortion. So, I gave birth.

IGOR: Bloody hell. I can't imagine how you feel.

TINA: Let me tell you something... I have no idea how I feel. Well, I guess I'm scared. More than anything. I suppressed it, after it happened. My Mum and I never talked about it. It never occurred to me to look for him. I erased it. As if he had never existed. But he does. Living his life. For 22 years.

Ksenija returns to the table.

IGOR: Congratulations! didn't know you were a granny!

KSENIJA: Stop it. The boy was adopted and has other parents and grandparents. I really don't get it, why on earth did you bother looking for him?

TINA: It wasn't me! I told you *he* found me. Why aren't you listening?

KSENIJA: Right. Just go ahead and meet him, if you think it's a good idea.

TINA: And why not?

KSENIJA: Do as you please. Just don't get me involved.

Silence.

KSENIJA: Not exactly medium, this steak.

TINA: You're amazing. You only think of yourself, don't you? Always.

KSENIJA: I've always put you first! Do you think you'd be a successful doctor now, if you'd kept the baby? At 15?

TINA: We'll never know now, will we? Because you made the choice.

KSENIJA: No, my dear. It was you. I only gave you advice.

TINA: You brainwashed me.

KSENIJA: Because I know what it was like. It's the most horrible feeling in the world when you can't take care of your own child. I wanted to spare you that.

TINA: Yeah, but you didn't. Don't you get it? I had a baby, and they took him away. I didn't even have a chance to look at him. I don't have a single picture, not a single image in my head, nothing.

KSENIJA: I know what it's like when you don't have money for nappies, when you don't know how to pay the bills, when you don't have anyone to babysit. I wanted to save you all that so you wouldn't have your youth ruined!

TINA: Oh... I was a ruined youth for you?

KENYA: No!

TINA: I see ... You were deprived. I'm sorry.

KSENIJA: No no no no. You don't need to apologise. You were the best thing that ever happened to me.

TINA: Yeah. I... I can't do this anymore. I've lost my appetite. I'm going home. Happy birthday, Mum.

KSENIJA: Come on, wait! It was better that way, believe me. For everybody. Just go and take care of yourself. I'm not saying I never want to be a grandmother. Now would be a suitable time. But a grandmother of a baby, not a grown man who already has other parents and another grandmother.

TINA: That's it, Mum. I hope all your wishes come true!

KSENIJA: You're in no state to drive! I'll take you home.

IGOR: No, no way, it's your birthday. I'll take her.

TINA: No! I'm taking a taxi. I want a taxi. Waiter! A taxi, please. A taxi!

KSENIJA: You're not leaving just like that. Don't be offended. You could at least have a dessert with me, right? A chocolate soufflé with fucking ionised raspberries.

TINA: For fuck's sake. You can really be ...

KSENIJA: What?

TINA: A nagging witch!

KSENIJA: Oh, sorry. I'm really sorry for totally fucking you up with my crap parenting! Okay? Call a taxi, I don't give a damn. Bye!

IGOR: Ksenija...

KSENIJA: What?!

TINA: Bye.

Tina leaves.

Twenty minutes later. The dessert.

IGOR: Mmm, this chocolate soufflé is yummy.

KSENIJA: I've had better. The custard is lumpy. It's not silky. They didn't get it right.

IGOR: I didn't notice it.

KSENIJA: Of course not. I should've taken pear tarte tatin with lavender.

IGOR: Interesting combination. Cool and edgy.

KSENIJA: Stop talking like your son.

IGOR: I'll speak as I please, for fuck's sake!

KSENIJA: Okay, okay. I'm sorry... Oh, shit. Cheers, fucking cheers. And thanks for putting up with me.

IGOR: Happy birthday.

A perfect mother and a proper family

– Here's a phantasm about an ideal mother: a perfect mother gets up early in the morning to make breakfast and coffee or tea. She conceals the bags under her eyes with powder and doesn't bother anyone because she's tired and has a backache. She is always gentle, comforting and reassuring. She can cook the best lunch. A perfect mother takes care of the home, the garden, shopping, making sure the children are healthy, fed, happy, dressed in clean clothes, have their homework done, arrive to sports training sessions and music school on time. A perfect mother is grateful for the miracle that emerged from her womb. Who invented this fantasy creature?

– Here is the phantasm of an ideal family: father, mother and children. In the family, one is the father and the other is the mother. This is the way it has always been. And may it continue so. God created Adam in his own image. From his rib He created Eve, his helper and companion, so that he would not be bored. And God said: Multiply and make new believers for the kingdom of God! A true Christian family is a couple that multiplies. In a proper family, there is a father and a mother, not parent 1 and parent 2.

– I am a proper father. I have a good job. I have a good car. I have a good road bike. I have a good mortgage.

– I am a proper mother. I have a nice job. I have well-tended beds in my garden. I have manicured nails. I have lovely pills for my nerves.

– And these are our two perfect children. He is our brave, clever and strong son. She is out beautiful, obedient and hard-working daughter.

– I am a daughter. I have no self-confidence and no real friends. I have bulimia.

– I am a son. I have a crush on my classmate. One day he kicked me out of school. I am baptized and my love is sin. But the Gospel says: Judge not, and ye shall not be

judged. A proper family is love.

BARBARA

BARBARA (45), SAŠO (42), RONJA (15), RONJA'S DAD (42), RONJA'S MUM (40), PSYCHOLOGIST (35), ALEN (16), ALEN'S DAD (50)

Ronja's mum and dad are packing their suitcases.

RONJA: But do you really have to go?!

RONJA'S DAD: We can't put it off any longer. We don't know how it's... You know.

RONJA: But why, I don't get it why I can't go with you.

RONJA'S MUM: Come on, Ronja... we've talked about this a hundred times. It's term time. You'd miss too much.

RONJA'S DAD: And they don't take children in the convent.

RONJA: I'm not a child.

RONJA'S DAD: You'll have a blast at Barbara's. She's so cool.

RONJA: I don't know her at all. I want to be with you.

RONJA'S MUM: You will. In less than three months.

RONJA: Three months!? That's a lot... And what will happen to you... what will you be like in three months?

RONJA'S MUM: I'll be the same as I am now.

RONJA: Promise?

RONJA'S MUM: I promise. I've got great medicine. Everything will be fine.

Barbara's kitchen/living room. On the table, an open bottle of champagne and two glasses. Barbara is making popcorn and topping up snack bowls.

BARBARA: You won't believe it! I've been baking.

SAŠO: Baking? You? Good job you didn't set the building on fire.

BARBARA: Give me a break it. I've made coconut muffins!

SAŠO: Goran adores coconut.

BARBARA: You can take home a few. Too bad he got ill...

SAŠO: He had a bad headache already yesterday. And then he started coughing during the night. In the morning, I told him to call in sick, but he wouldn't listen to me. And then he got fever at work.

BARBARA: And now you left him on his own?

SAŠO: Sweetie, he's 43! He'll be fine. I made two litres of tea for him. And put Paracetamol on the table. It's just a bad cold, I think he'll survive.

BARBARA: I've sent him a photo of muffins and champagne. He hasn't replied yet.

SAŠO: He's asleep. Snoring, with his nose stuffed! Glad I'm not there. He'd call, if he needed anything.

BARBARA: Yeah, sure.

BARBARA: Once a month, I organize a movie night with my two best mates, Sašo and Goran. We eat popcorn, drink hugo and watch movies. On Saturday, usually. This time we decided we'd do it on Friday, because Ronja, my 15-year-old niece, is coming to stay with me tomorrow.

BARBARA: So? What are we watching? Fancy a horror movie?

SAŠO: I don't think I'm in the mood for horror. I have lots of it in real life. Hey, have you seen *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*?

BARBARA: No.

SAŠO: You haven't? Really?

BARBARA: I haven't. What's it about?

SAŠO: I can't believe you haven't seen it. You must see it, mate.

BARBARA: Okay.

SAŠO: It's about transvestites, it was made in 1994, but the story is real good and the actors are legends. Well, Goran actually doesn't like it – I don't know what's wrong with him. There, I have it on my USB stick.

BARBARA: USB stick? Do these still exist?

SAŠO: Awesome! *'Finally it has happened to me right in front of my face and I just cannot hide it!'* A song from the film.

BARBARA: Amazing. Would you like some more bubbly?

SAŠO: Absolutely. Thanks. So, when are you picking up Ronja?

BARBARA: I'm not picking her up. My brother's bringing her. Tomorrow, fucking tomorrow! I can't believe I said yes.

SAŠO: It's only two months.

BARBARA: *Only* two? More like three! I'll be sharing my flat with a spoiled teenager for eleven weeks.

SAŠO: Is she spoiled?

BARBARA: I don't know, to be honest. I guess so. Aren't all children spoilt these days?

SAŠO: I think, every generation thinks the young ones are spoilt. You know what I mean: 'We had to earn our bread and butter when we were 12!'

BARBARA: How am I going to manage? I have zero experience raising anyone. I've never been interested.

SAŠO: It might not be too bad.

BARBARA: Well, we're not all cut out to be parents. I always knew I wouldn't have kids.

SAŠO: Relax, you'll hang out together, you can bring her shopping. Or go to a concert. This is your chance to be a cool aunt. You can get the same piercings done. Of the tongue!

BARBARA: Don't be daft. My brother will kill me.

SAŠO: Or at least a matching tattoo! I know a very good tattoo artist.

BARBARA: Stop it.

SAŠO: Cheers, mate! You'll be fine.

BARBARA: Cheers.

SAŠO: If you ever need help, uncle Goran and uncle Saša will always be there for you.

BARBARA: The pair of you! You'd teach her all kinds of shenanigans.

SAŠO: Definitely.

A brief pause.

SAŠO: Did I tell you... Goran and I... We're actually... Well, we've been contemplating of having one.

BARBARA: One what?

SAŠO: What do you think? What? A hamster?

BARBARA: What?

SAŠO: We'd like to have a baby, Barbara.

BARBARA: A baby?

Barbara goes to the fridge and pours herself another glass of champagne.

BARBARA: I nearly choked. A baby? Sašo and Goran? Never heard this before. Well, okay, they've been a couple for a long time, cohabiting and what

not, but their lifestyle isn't exactly... Travelling, concerts, they're never at home, they're both self-employed. I couldn't be more surprised.

BARBARA: Dude, you two are thinking of having a baby?

SAŠO: Yes, we are. Goran and me. Why?

BARBARA: Haha?! Okay, sorry, sorry. It's not funny. Not in the least... You just took me by surprise here. I'm sorry... Are you for real? Well... How long have you been – I mean, you and Goran... How long have you been discussing it?

SAŠO: For a while now. Six months or more. One year, maybe.

BARBARA: Really? How come I know nothing of it?

SAŠO: Well, it's not that we're keeping it a secret. We just wanted to make sure first, if we really wanted it.

BARBARA: And?

SAŠO: Yes. We do, sort of.

BARBARA: Wow. What can I say? Great. Have you made any enquiries, checked out any information... I mean, how does one...

SAŠO: It's hard ... I mean, it's either adoption or surrogacy.

BARBARA: You want to adopt?

SAŠO: At least in theory, we can be put on a waiting list to adopt. But we'd never be selected, of course not. The fact is, one can only adopt one's partner's biological child.

BARBARA: Yeah, I now.

SAŠO: It's much easier for you lesbians.

BARBARA: No, it isn't. And I'm not a lesbian!

SAŠO: Oh, sorry. I forgot you're going through a phallus phase again.

BARBARA: Give me a break. I've mostly always had boyfriends.

SAŠO: What about Monica?!

BARBARA: Okay. I can fall in love with a female person too. I don't discriminate, ha ha. Unlike you.

SAŠO: Stop it. But, yeah, it's shitty ... Women can get artificially inseminated abroad. I know two lesbians, they went abroad, got a son, and now they're having a divorcing and fighting for custody.

BARBARA: With artificial insemination, you don't get a guarantee that you'll stay together. It can happen to any couple.

SAŠO: It wouldn't happen to us.

BARABRA: Oh, come on. Did you see it on the news? The Constitutional Court's decision – they have to change the law now too, so that single women can apply for artificial insemination.

SAŠO (*sarcastically*): Great.

BARBARA: But that's very important! I hope it passes the administrative procedure.

SAŠO: Super. It just that it's no use to us, because we don't have a womb.

BARBARA: Right... What about surrogacy?

SAŠO: We've considered it. They don't do it in Slovenia. Actually we couldn't find anything sure about it in the law. We wondered, maybe we could make some sort of an arrangement with a woman ... I don't know.

BARBARA: As long as you count me out!

SAŠO: Yes, dear! Don't worry. You're getting on in years! I'm sorry, but, uh –

BARBARA: I know, I know. I'll be more than happy to pass on this.

SAŠO: If any female friend or relative of ours would be willing to... Goran has a young cousin. Of course, in such a case the egg is donated, it wouldn't be hers. Genetically, it would not be her child.

BARBARA: Gee, sounds complicated...

SAŠO: It *is* complicated, trust me. So, at this stage we just want to know if it can be done at all, legally. What happens with our rights to the child and so on? We read the act of law on... artificial insemination a hundred times, but it's not very clear. So, I was thinking, could you perhaps... as a lawyer... could you have a look?

BARBARA: Yes, sure. No problem. It's not my area of expertise though. But I'll look into it.

SAŠO: Super. Thanks.

BARBARA: So, you two are serious about it?

SAŠO: No, just for a laugh. Of course, we're serious.

BARBARA: Oh, I see. Sorry... I just... I can't imagine you two... Not because you're guys. I can't imagine myself either.

SAŠO: I know. I guess it's hard for everyone to imagine what it's like to have a child. You only find out after you've had one.

BARBARA: So very true. But look at me, I, who never wanted a baby... I'm getting one tomorrow. Tomorrow, Sašo! Not a baby, but a 15-year-old teenage girl, in the thrall of puberty.

SAŠO: Well, good luck to you! Cheers.

BARBARA: Cheers.

BARBARA: My brother asked me if Ronja could stay with me. Well... I wanted to say no at first, make up some excuse, whatever. But I couldn't. My brother's wife, Ronja's mum, was recently diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. At the age of 35! She was given a bunch of drugs and somehow it worked. But she had a couple of relapses. She'd been wanting to go to Tibet for a long time. They decided to go as soon as possible, before...well, before her condition gets worse. Ronja's just started her first year of high school. She failed to convince her parents she wouldn't miss anything major at school. So tomorrow, instead of Tibet, she's coming to live with me. For eleven weeks! I feared it was going to be a disaster!

The next day. Barbara's flat. Barbara is showing Ronja the rooms.

BARBARA: Hey, it'll be great! We're going to have so much fun. You'll see.

RONJA: Mhm. Hooray!

BARBARA: Don't be too disappointed. Tibet's hardly a place for teenage girls.

RONJA: Yeah, right? Why not?

BARBARA: I don't know... Let's say... there's no McDonald's there.

RONJA: So what? McDonald's sucks.

BARBARA: You haven't been to my new flat yet, have you?

RONJA: Ehm, no. I don't know when I was last at any of your places.

BARBARA: This is the kitchen. I'll show you how to turn on the stove. Easy-peasy. Are you watching?

RONJA: Ehm, yeah.

BARBARA: Here's the fridge. Feel free to take anything you want. Really, you don't need to ask me anything. Make yourself feel at home. Okay?

RONJA: Okay.

BARBARA: Just one thing, please don't touch my protein shakes. I'm following a strict plan when to drink them.

RONJA: Yeah, no problem.

BARBARA: And here's the bathroom. With a separate toilet over there, so no panic, we don't have to wait for each other. In case of emergency, ha ha.

RONJA: Mhm.

BARBARA: This'll be your room.

RONJA: Where can I put my stuff?

BARBARA: Wherever. The closet's empty. And on the shelves, on the table. Do as you like.

RONJA: Okay. Thanks.

BARBARA: You're welcome.

RONJA: See you later.

Ronja goes into her room and closes the door.

BARBARA: Ronja?

RONJA: Yes?

BARBARA: If you need anything, just give me a shout, okay?

RONJA: Okay.

Ronja puts on her headphones with loud music.

BARBARA: I hope you're not too upset about your mum!

RONJA: What did you say? My headphones...

BARBARA: Nothing. Just saying it's going to be a blast!

Barbara goes to the kitchen.

BARBARA: I never wanted to have kids. They make me nervous. I knew I'd have to deal with a narcissistic, self-absorbed, resentful teenage girl who saw herself abandoned by her parents for ten weeks. I haven't a clue what 15-year-old girls think. Do they still play with toys? Do they have boyfriends? Do they have sex? I don't remember what I was like when I was 15.

Monday morning. In the kitchen.

BARBARA: Good morning.

RONJA: Hi.

BARBARA: So? How did you sleep?

RONJA: Alright.

BARBARA: Is the bed okay?

RONJA: Mhm.

BARBARA: What will you have for breakfast?

RONJA: Nothing. I never eat in the morning.

BARBARA: Oh? How does your mum find this?

RONJA: She doesn't mind. She doesn't eat in the morning either.

BARBARA: Well, neither do I. But you're still growing. I think it'd be better, if you had something.

RONJA: Okay. A yoghurt.

BARBARA: Great. There you go. Ehm... Shall I take you to school or...

RONJA: No need. I'm taking the bus.

BARBARA: Okay.

Silence.

BARBARA: I won't be back until late. I have another court proceedings this afternoon.

RONJA: Is it cool to be a lawyer?

BARBARA: Depends. I guess yes, if you're interested... in law.

RONJA: Yeah.

BARBARA: Are you?

RONJA: No, not really.

BARBARA: What are you interested in?

Ronja shrugs.

BARBARA: What do you like about school?

RONJA: Ehm, nothing, I guess.

BARBARA: What are you good at?

RONJA: I don't know. Nothing.

BARBARA: What are your strong points?

RONJA: I don't know! Why are you asking me...

BARBARA: Okay, fine, I'll stop. Just keep in mind, you can always talk to me. If there's anything... if you... well, if you need anything.

RONJA: Yes, Barbara. You've told me ten times since I arrived here.

BARBARA: Okay.

RONJA: Okay.

BARBARA: You can have a frozen pizza for lunch. Or you can have pasta or salad or whatever. Just be careful, you don't want to cut yourself. Or you can wait for me ...

RONJA: Oh, stop it! I know how to cut vegetables, you know.

BARBARA: Don't forget to lock up when you leave.

RONJA: Duh? I'm not a baby.

BARBARA: I know you're not. I'm sorry.

RONJA: It's cool. I'm going to the bathroom.

BARBARA: And so, literally overnight, I became a sort of a surrogate mom.

Okay, I used to babysit Ronja a few times when she was very little, but always just for an evening or an afternoon. I was shocked that she was such a big girl now. In my memory she was still a 10-year-old girl. She had changed so much in five years that I hardly recognised her. After the initial shock, we were just getting used to each other. And after two weeks, there was another surprise. Sašo and I were having coffee.

BARBARA: So, how's Goran ?

SAŠO: Ah well, healthy as a horse.

BARBARA: Great.

SAŠO: He's so full of energy again. Yesterday he dragged me to Rožnik. On

Saturday he wants to go hiking in the mountains. He's got some kind of sports thing going on, which is weird. And how's Ronja?

BARBARA: Well, I missed my morning yoga class because Little Missy spent half an hour in the bathroom. Locked inside. I couldn't get my stuff. And when she finally appeared, her hair was straight. Ironed!

SAŠO: Don't you know it's trendy to have straight hair?

BARBARA: You should have seen her outfit.

SAŠO: Tell me all.

BARBARA: Baggy tracksuit bottoms. But her top was... real short, a boob tube more like it.

SAŠO: So what. It's warm. Remember what you used to wear in high school.

BARBARA: Shit, yeah. I mean, really. Black thong and white tight pants.

SAŠO: Oh blimey, Barbara – no!

BARBARA: Stop it. Also, I found out she smoked. She smells of fags.

SAŠO: Are you sure? It wasn't you?

BARBARA: I never smoke at home. I went sniffing at her jacket. It reeked like an ashtray.

SAŠO: Look, I smoked too when I was fifteen. And then I stopped. You started in college and still smoke now. So?

BARBARA: I don't know, should I mention it to my brother?

SAŠO: Definitely not. You're a cool aunt, remember?

BARBARA: Yeah, I know... it must be difficult for Ronja... her mum has multiple sclerosis.

SAŠO: Fuck, yeah. That's tough.

BARBARA: Ronja refuses to talk about it. Or anything else for that matter. She stays in her room all the time. And on the phone. Well, at least she goes to do sports twice a week. I don't know how I'm going to cope.

SAŠO: Stop worrying. Just listen to your instinct.

BARBARA: My instinct tells me to put her on the first plane to Tibet. Ah well, I'll manage, I guess. Two more months. My brother and sister-in-law are on a retreat at a monastery at the moment. No internet. They're not allowed to talk. Can you imagine? They just meditate, eat and sleep.

SAŠO: Sheer bliss! I'd go there right now. To disconnect for a while.

BARBARA: Well, I guess... Do you know who added me on Tinder? The fitness trainer I was telling you about. Seba. I hear he's single now.

SAŠO: Show me.

Barbara shows him a photo on her phone.

SAŠO: Mhm, not bad. A bit too musclebound though.

BARBARA: Yeah, exactly. We'll see if he texts me.

SAŠO: Does he have kids?

BARBARA: No, he doesn't. An extra plus for him. By the way... The thing about surrogacy. I read what I could find.

SAŠO: I'm all ears.

BARBARA: Well, this is how it goes... surrogacy itself is not explicitly against the law.

SAŠO: Really? It's not?

BARBARA: No. But... In practice, it's... it's basically not feasible. The law on assisted reproduction prohibits the artificial insemination of a woman who would leave the child to a third party after birth.

SAŠO: I see.

BARBARA: No clinic will do it for you, even if you both agree the details with the woman. For now they only treat couples.

SAŠO: Which means... If one of us applied to a fertility clinic as a couple, I mean with a woman? As if, by arrangement with a female friend?

BARBARA: Yes, you could do it. You'd need a referral and undergo all the procedures.

SAŠO: Mhm.

BARBARA: And then ... I mean, she would be officially the mother. Even if she handed the child over to you, she would officially retain her parental rights and duties.

SAŠO: You mean she could change her mind in the meantime.

BARBARA: Exactly.

SAŠO: Yeah... I know. Shit, it's all pointless. I mean... this desire ... irrational and pointless. How would we even do it, for real? A woman carries a child, gives birth and then we take it from her, buy it from her? Fuck.

BARBARA: There are countries where surrogacy is allowed by law. A contract is signed. In such a case, you two are legally the parents, and she's not.

SAŠO: There are agencies. They do everything, all the paperwork, the arrangements. In California, Georgia, India ... in Ukraine, but we wouldn't go there of course. And in India clinics are not really ... And in America it costs a fortune. We've checked it all. Ah, it's all weird ... I don't know.

BARBARA: Well, a woman gets a lot of money. She can support her family, her social status improves...

SAŠO: Yeah ... Goran thinks the same. But me ... I don't know. I have my doubts. I've read stories that didn't end well.

BARBARA: Mhm, I understand.

SAŠO: I feel bad for Goran. He really wants it.

BARBARA: And you?

SAŠO: I don't know anymore. I feel... like there's no chance. Just because I'm in love with a man... I don't stand a chance.

BARBARA: Look... I'm not a mother either and I'm perfectly happy.

SAŠO: Yeah, but it was your call.

Silence.

Barbara's phone rings.

BARBARA: Sorry, I have to take this. Yes? Oh, I see. Yes, speaking. Today? Okay. I can, sure. I'll be there. Bye. (*To Sašo*). It was the school. The class teacher wants me to come for an emergency parent–teacher meeting.

SAŠO: Why?

BARBARA: I don't know, something to do with Ronja, she didn't say. Got to go now.

Barbara leaves.

BARBARA: The class teacher called me, because I'm a legal guardian ...while my brother and sister–in–law are happily meditating in Tibet. That's why I had to go to school to be given a sermon. I had to leave work early, reschedule all my afternoon meetings. 'There's been a serious incident. An incident that we all regret.' But really, Miss Class Teacher, I regret it deeply too that I had to rush to school after only two weeks.

Evening. Barbara's flat, Barbara and Ronja.

BARBARA: Promise you won't do it again!

RONJA: What?

BARBARA: You know exactly. You won't smoke in the school toilet again.

RONJA: Everybody does it.

BARBARA: Or anywhere on the school premises.

RONJA: Oh, shitstorm, mate.

BARBARA: Presumably you got caught twice. In one month. Your class teacher will reprimand you. And I had to sign a statement of some sort. An education plan, an action plan, or something.

RONJA: Whatever. I don't give a toss.

BARBARA: Does your dad know you smoke?

RONJA: Of course not.

BARBARA: You've been here barely two weeks, and I've already been summoned to the school. You're damn lucky your dad and mum are in a monastery. And that they don't have a phone.

RONJA: What? You'd rat me out?

BARBARA: What?

RONJA: Are you a treacherous rat?

BARBARA: What?

RONJA: Just forget it.

BARBARA: No more fags at school. Or outside the school. Okay? I don't know why you smoke in the first place. You know you can get cancer?

RONJA: Why do you smoke then?

BARBARA: Ehm...

RONJA: Fucking hypocrite.

BARBARA: Look, you don't need to make the same mistakes I did. While you're staying with me, I'm responsible for you. And I'm the person to be called to your school, and I'm going to have to leave the office early because of you. Just don't do it again! Okay?!

RONJA: Well, yeah, I guess. I'm sorry if I'm... a burden to you!

BARBARA: I never said you were a burden.

RONJA: Whatever. I can't wait to go back home!

Ronja goes to her room and slams the door.

BARBARA: Ronja! Shit...

BARBARA: It was clear to me that my 'cool aunt' status was seriously jeopardized. The sermons I had to listen to at the school about her behaviour. ... Several teachers have reportedly noted that "your child doesn't follow instructions. Maybe she is distressed and therefore behaving in a risky way." Of course she's distressed, she's just found out her mother has a terminal disease! And she's not my child, for the record. Her parents are sitting cross-legged all day long, chanting mantras in a monastery on the other side of the globe. In the meantime, I'm left to clean up their mess here. Aunt Barbara will sort it out. Don't panic. Do you have shit to vacuum? Call aunt Barbara... And then, it turned out this was just the lightning before the storm. The real hurricane landed about ten days later.

Ten days later.

Barbara's flat. Evening. Barbara is tidying up the kitchen. Ronja is in her room.

BARBARA: Ronja! Aren't you going to eat something? Shall I make you some toast?

BARBARA: Ronja?!

RONJA (*from the room*): No!

BARBARA: On Wednesday, Ronja was locked in her room all afternoon. When I asked her if she wanted dinner, she said she wasn't hungry. After dinner I watched a series. Ronja made no appearance from her room. She didn't even go to the toilet. I was worried. I asked her to come out of the room. I immediately noticed her red eyes and a puffy, tearful face.

BARBARA: Are you okay? What happened? Ronja?

RONJA: Nothing.

BARBARA: Come here, I'll make some tea. Will you have some?

RONJA: Okay.

BARBARA: You haven't eaten anything. Are you okay?

RONJA: Yeah, well.

BARBARA: Is it because of Mum?

RONJA: No... It's not that.

BARBARA: What is it then? You can tell me. Ronja... Your eyes are all teary.

RONJA: It doesn't matter.

BARBARA: No, it does. It matters to me, Ronja. Did something happen at school?

RONJA: Yes

BARBARA: What? Did someone hit you?

RONJA: No.

BARBARA: Did someone say something to you?

RONJA: No.

BARBARA: What was it? Ronja?

RONJA: One of my classmates posted a photo in the group chat of our entire year.

I'm on the photo. A disgusting photo...

BARBARA: Can I see it? Show me.

BARBARA: She produced her phone and showed me the photo. The nasty, rude, degrading photo. Her classmates shared it in messages, Tik Tok chats, private groups, everywhere. A photo of Ronja with her eyes closed and her mouth wide open. In her mouth... there was a massive, erected penis. With the inscription: *luvs to suck*.

BARBARA: Oh, my God. What is this?

RONJA: Isn't it fucking obvious? Apparently, I'm a slut, right?

BARBARA: What?!

RONJA: It's not real. It's photoshopped!

BARBARA: Who did this?

RONJA: It doesn't matter.

BARBARA: Who was it, Ronja?!

RONJA: One of my classmates.

BARBARA: When?

RONJA: I don't know. I fell asleep on the bus ... With my mouth open.

BARBARA: Is this a school bus?

RONJA: Yes. On Tuesday we went on a school trip, a cultural excursion, and I fell asleep on the way back. I had no idea Alen took my picture.

BARBARA: So, it was Alen?

RONJA: Yeah, I think so. I don't know! Everybody's sharing it. Fucking hell...

BARBARA: Alen? What's his surname?

RONJA: Why do you want to know?

BARBARA: Last name?!

RONJA: Završnik.

BARBARA: Ronja, everything will be fine. Look, I'll sort it out. Don't you worry.

RONJA: How? You can't delete this ...

BARBARA: It's against the law, the photo. Everyone will have to delete it.

RONJA: Everyone's seen it by now ... And they've been taking the piss with me all day!

BARBARA: Shit ...

RONJA: Could I ... call my Mum please?

BARBARA: Oh, I don't know.

RONJA: Their numbers are unavailable all the time.

BARBARA: They're on a retreat, no internet. And their phones are taken away. In seven days, you'll be able to talk to them.

RONJA: I don't want you to go to school or anything. I don't want a major drama.

BARBARA: I understand. But it's not a solution that you back off. He needs to be made accountable. And shamed. And publicly, so that others learn something.

RONJA: Well, he didn't rape me, did he! Don't you know what ghastly things are happening to women around the world? Do you know how many women get murdered, beaten, raped every day? It's just a stupid photo.

BARBARA: It's not just a picture. That's how it starts. It must be suppressed immediately.

RONJA: For fuck's sake...

BARBARA: It's a criminal offence, Ronja. Publishing sexual content without consent. Plus, you're underage.

RONJA: Why the hell did I fall asleep on the bus!

BARBARA: You're not guilty of anything, okay? And we're going to sort this out. Right?

RONJA: Yeah.

BARBARA: The very next day, I called the class teacher and reported the abuse. I demanded they act and threatened to report it to the police. Soon I got a call from the headmistress. She assured me they were doing everything to protect Ronja. The whole class had a meeting with the class teacher and the headmistress. They were given clear instructions on what they had to do. The next day everyone had to sign an official statement that they had deleted the picture from the internet and from all electronic devices. And they each apologised publicly to Ronja. The school psychologist invited Ronja and me to a mediation. Ronja agreed, so I agreed. I was determined to tell off the spoiled little brat.

At the school psychologist's office. Mediation. The psychologist, Ronja, Barbara, Alen, Alen's father.

PSYCHOLOGIST: On behalf of the school, I would like to say that we are very sorry that this happened. We will organise several workshops on peer violence and the dangers of the internet.

BARBARA: Commendable, but in this case, this is too late.

PSYCHOLOGIST: I realise that certain things cannot be deleted retrospectively. Ronja, I'm really sorry for what happened to you.

RONJA: Thank you.

PSYCHOLOGIST: It's your turn, Alen. I think you wanted to say something to Ronja.

ALEN: Em... Yeah. Well... I'm sorry.

PSYCHOLOGIST: Can you speak up, Alen?

ALEN: I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry, Ronja.

PSYCHOLOGIST: Okay. It's all right that you apologised. But you have to realise that your action was despicable and an act of violence against your classmate.

ALEN'S FATHER: Wait a minute ... Violence? Isn't that a bit ... I don't know ... A bit exaggerated.

BARBARA: What?! Of course this is an act of violence. You obviously don't get it, sir. Let me explain: publishing sexual content involving a minor without consent is a criminal offence and can be punishable by up to one year in prison! I work as a lawyer in court!

BARBARA: It definitely shut up Alen's father immediately. He got really scared for his sweet little angel. The boy almost peed in his pants. Served him right. It was about time he learned that harmful actions have consequences. Obviously, his parents hadn't taught him that. I wasn't really going to sue him. Ronja and I had talked about it before, and she believed him he was sorry. She didn't want him to get kicked out of school. He may have been genuinely sorry. But it was necessary to set an example for others. A clear signal that this was not the way to do things. So, I insisted that he be given adequate disciplinary measure. He was given a written warning before expulsion.

Ronja and Barbara have just come back to the flat.

BARBARA: Bloody hell, if that was my kid ... I'd punish him ever so severely... he'd be grounded for a year, allowed to go only to school.

RONJA: I know. Fuck, he got so scared. And for the rest of the meeting, his dad just kept quiet and nodded. Awesome.

BARBARA: Yep. It's been a long day... Are you hungry?

RONJA: Yeah, I am.

BARBARA: I'm starving! Shall we order a pizza?

RONJA: Yes, why not.

BARBARA: Check the menu online.

RONJA: In two days, I'll be able to call my Mum.

BARBARA: That's right! Isn't that great? Do you miss her a lot?

RONJA: Yeah. And my Dad too.

BARBARA: You know they love you very much, don't you?

RONJA: Mhm.

BARBARA: They'll be back in six weeks. And you'll finally get rid of Aunt Barbara.

RONJA: It's not that bad.

BARBARA: I'm not too grumpy, am I?

RONJA: No, you're not. Not at all.

BARBARA: Shall we watch something together on Netflix? Are you up for it?

RONJA: Yeah, why not.

BARBARA: Great!

Five weeks later. Barbara and Sašo are having a drink in a café.

BARBARA: You know, in the end, nothing happened with that Seba guy.

SAŠO: All the better. He wasn't right for you. You need someone much more...

BARBARA: More...? What?

SAŠO: I don't know, more sophisticated.

BARBARA: Oh, stop it. Well, would you approve of an architect with silver hair?

SAŠO: I might. Show me his profile. Mhm, mhm. Doesn't look too bad. For a 50-year-old.

BARBARA: He's already texted me. We're meeting for a drink on Saturday.

SAŠO: This Saturday?

BARBARA: Yeah, sorry. I was going to tell you... I'm cancelling our movie night this weekend. Unless... you two and Ronja would like to watch something together.

SAŠO: Sure, why not. The girl's a character.

BARBARA: True, she is... Just one more week and she'll be home again. It's gone by so fast.

SAŠO: You see, you've survived.

BARBARA: Yeah, barely.

SAŠO: You'll miss her, I told you.

BARBARA: Ah, no way, mate! Blissful peace is about to return.

SAŠO: Must rush back to the office. Good luck with the architect.

BARBARA: Thanks.

Sašo leaves.

BARBARA: I might miss her? ... Well, maybe. I got used to Ronja. I got used to waiting for her outside the bathroom every morning. Thinking about her when I'm shopping for food, if she needs anything, an XLbox of cereal maybe. Asking her every afternoon how was school and getting one word only from her: *okay*. I'll miss doing the laundry more often and hanging up her weird teenage outfits. Watching a series together in the evening and making popcorn. I never make popcorn just for me. I got used to having someone around when I come home from work; the lights are on, I can hear the TV or radio when I open the front door. I don't know, I might miss her after all...

On labour

– When I gave birth for the first time, it was horrible. I was in labour for 36 hours; four medical teams changed their shifts. My placenta had to be removed manually because it wouldn't come out. I nearly bled to death; they had to resuscitate me. Suddenly, there were all those white coats around me. Jesus Christ!

– If my mother had given birth 100 years ago, she would have died for sure. This is what she told me many times when I was a child and still likes to repeat it.

– My labour was induced so violently that my pelvis almost split into two. And in the end, I had a caesarean section anyway, because the baby got stuck. They had to urgently pull him out of my stomach.

– And when they finally pulled the baby out of my wife, I saw the umbilical cord wrapped around him three times. No, ten times, to be precise. It took them five minutes just to unwrap the bloody thing!

– My labour was beautiful though.

– What?! How come?!

– I embraced the pain and allowed it to travel through my body. I knew that the pain was helping me to bring a new human being into the world. It was hard, but it was also beautiful.

– Okay, I have never given birth. And I never will. Obviously, speaking as a man. But I do know something. A woman must suffer in childbirth. That's the way nature has it. To prove that she's made of the right stuff and will know how to make sacrifice for her children.

– Me too, I'd like to say it was wonderful. But I can't. Because I'd tell a lie. Because it all went wrong. Because I thought the baby and I were going to die.

– Why is it always about the birth? Okay, childbirth is an event. Yes, it is an event. But what about after the birth?! What about the torn vaginas and crotches, the

stitched wounds that leave scar tissue? What about a prolapsed uterus that has to be surgically removed? What about a prolapsed bowel, which permanently handicaps a woman's normal bowel movements? What about the pain of sexual intercourse, which can last for months, even years, after childbirth because of the tears?

– Ah, who cares about that. It is labour that is so interesting! Childbirth, suffering and new life!

– In the beginning there's longing. And there's an idea and there are emotions. But it's a long way before one gives birth. Words are linked into sentences. Sentences into repartees. The organism grows and develops. Moods of contented creation and total stress alternate. I always say to myself, why do I need this? This is the last time. That I could do something easier, something more normal, more mundane. The agony of giving birth, the unbearable cramps when you don't know if it's ever going to end. When your body locks up and the whole thing won't move. When you just want it to be over. And then there are the others who take part and help while you're giving birth. And it's easier together. And that's how you end up giving birth. A new drama. And maybe a brief relief. And back to square one.

– If I were a pregnant woman in occupied Gaza, I would be terrified of giving birth. Most hospitals have been reduced to rubble by Israeli bombs. If I were pregnant in occupied Gaza, I would fear that my malnutrition and the absence of medicine might harm my baby. If I gave birth in Gaza and I had no milk because of malnutrition, I would feel guilty and powerless. And if the Israeli blockade made formula or milk impossible to find, I would pour unsterilized water mixed with sesame paste into a bottle. Or anise and cumin tea. If I had to watch my newborn waste away before my eyes, unable to feed him or her because of the occupation, my heart would splinter with rage, despair, helplessness. At night, I would lie awake listening to drones circling above the neighbourhoods. I would lie awake listening to explosions rumbling in the distance, and the relentless pounding of my own heart.

MAŠA

MAŠA (39), MILAN (55), LAURA (36)

MAŠA: I went out to get a pregnancy test. The drive home was longer than usual because I went to a pharmacy at the other end of town. I didn't want to go to the one near home. The pharmacist already knows me. 'There she goes again... she's come for a new test... she's not pregnant again...' God damn it. I bought four tests to stock up. If they weren't so expensive, I would have bought more. I'm 39 and I want to have a baby. 'Want' is not the right word. I long for a baby, I desire it to the point of pain. Yes, I'm one of those women. Every time I see a new mum with a pram, I get cramps in my stomach. What exactly does someone who wants a baby want? I don't know. And yet, with every cell of my body, I feel that this is what I want. I want a child. Someone who will always be mine and I theirs, no matter what may come in life. It's day 14 since the embryo was planted in my womb. Only one was viable. I ran to the bathroom and peed on that horrible stick. And then I waited... Let it be plus, plus, plus... I was afraid to look... And it was minus again. I dragged myself out of the bathroom and onto the sofa, put the covers over my head and fell asleep. Then he came home.

Maša's partner Milan comes home. He is making noise in the kitchen.

MAŠA: Hey!

MILAN: Hi, did I wake you up...

Maša looks around and spots a negative pregnancy test on the coffee table. She picks it up and goes to Milan.

MAŠA: Milan, nothing. Again, nothing.

MILAN: What?

MAŠA: I took the test.

MILAN: Oh? Isn't it a bit early?

MAŠA: No. It's 14 days after IVF.

MILAN: It's never 14 days. You miscalculated it. Tomorrow will be 14 days. And it doesn't necessarily show anyway.

MAŠA: That's true.

MILAN: Retake it in a couple of days.

MAŠA: Yeah, you're right. I'll do it again tomorrow. First thing in the morning. That's when the hormones are at the highest level in the urine.

MILAN: Just throw this one in the bin. You pissed on it.

MAŠA: Mr Squeamish! If we have a baby, you'll see far worse things than pee.

Maša is waving the pregnancy test in front of Milan's nose.

MILAN: Yuck! Bin it!

MAŠA: Haha! Okay. I'll retake it tomorrow.

MAŠA: Well, I didn't ... take the test. No need. When I pulled down my pyjamas bottoms and sat on the toilet this morning, I saw it there. Staring in my face. A bloodstain. I got my period. No need to take another test. After another humiliating minus. The diagnosis of unexplained infertility hit me in the face again.

Maša comes into the kitchen.

MAŠA: I got my period.

MILAN: Did you? You sure?

MAŠA: Yeah. Positive.

MILAN: Mhm.

MAŠA: Mhm? That's it then? You're not going to say anything?

MILAN: Maša, love... Look, I know this is really harsh on you. I don't know what to say. We'll try again.

MAŠA: I don't know how many more times I can go through this.

MILAN: Every time they prod you with the needles, I feel terrible, it makes me snatch the needle out of their hands and take you away from the hospital.

MAŠA: This was our fourth attempt. It's only going to get worse as the years go by. Your spermogram isn't the greatest either. You're not getting any younger either... What if... I don't know... Maybe we should try something else?

MILAN: Maša... We've been through that.

MAŠA: Could you give it another thought? Please! It was doctor Dolinar who mentioned a donor. Surely, he knows what he's talking about.

MILAN: You know all too well what I think about that. The sperm would be who— knows—whose!

MAŠA: But it'd still be your child, *our* child.

MILAN: It's not an option. I'm sorry, Maša.

MAŠA: Hopefully, one of them might be viable. Last time they harvested 10 eggs and only one developed. We didn't get any frozen babies at all. I read on one of the forums that some couples get five or six frozen babies from one puncture.

MILAN: Well, write to those people and ask them to give you one, and we'll have a 100 percent *other people's* baby.

MAŠA: Stop it, please.

MILAN: You want to get pregnant with someone else's sperm? Bloody hell, Maša. It wouldn't be my baby. How come you don't get it?

MAŠA: You know, people adopt children. And they're theirs, just like so.

MILAN: It may not be my sperm's fault at all, you know? Have you thought about it? You're not the youngest either.

MAŠA: That's exactly my point! I fear it might soon be... well ... too late.

MILAN: Come on. If we're meant to, we'll have a baby. You need to have some trust.

MAŠA: It's easy for you to say. You already have a daughter!

MILAN: Hey... It's okay, Mašika. It's all right. We'll give it another try. Okay?

MAŠA: Okay.

Maša goes into the bathroom and throws the unused tests in a drawer

MAŠA: It wasn't okay. Nothing was okay. It seemed to me that Milan didn't care whether I got pregnant or not. He already has a grown-up daughter from a previous marriage. He's a father. What about me? A barren woman. He's 55. The doctor put it nicely: your sperm cells are slow. And there's not many of them. I'm not saying you're infertile, but your spermogram isn't that great. He said it clearly. And given his age... To be honest, we don't know if the genetic material is still OK. I may undergo ten more IVF procedures, the insurance will only cover two more anyway, and it'll still be fuck all. The next day I felt like shit. I called my friend and neighbour Laura. She had moved into our block after her divorce.

Maša's friend Laura comes to see her. They are having coffee. Laura hugs and comforts Maša.

LAURA: Maši... You'll be okay, Maši. I know you're in pain. But I have one of those feelings, everything will turn out right. I can feel it in my guts.

MAŠA: I don't know... It's been going for so long, we've been having unprotected sex for almost seven years, working on a baby seriously for the last three years, and going to the clinic for two years. Don't mention it to him that I told you... Milan's sperm cells are slow.

LAURA: So, he's the problem?

MAŠA: No, no. They don't know the exact cause. It's just... If I was younger and he had better sperm... I'm sure there'd be more chance. I read online about women who had long-term partners, and it didn't work out. When they broke up with them and found a new partner, they got pregnant straight away.

LAURA: You're thinking of breaking up with him?

MAŠA: Well, no, not really. I couldn't live without Milan. I want to be with him. It's just... this damn pride of his. He won't accept donor sperm..

LAURA: Well, yeah. I guess it must be quite a blow for a bloke.

MAŠA: So, what if there's no other option?

LAURA: There are always other options... Have a think. How would a sexy woman like yourself get hold of young, fresh sperm, eh?

MAŠA: Laura!

LAURA: What? You said it yourself there's no other option.

MAŠA: Okay then. You're suggesting I go to some students night club and hope to get laid?

LAURA: I don't know... That'd be the easiest thing to do, I guess. Could also ask a friend for a favour.

MAŠA: Stop it.

LAURA: But do you want me to find someone? My ex would be all for it. It'd be a massive boost for his ego: a big ass impregnator!

MAŠA: Give me a break... You don't have kids this week?

LAURA: Yeah. They're at his place this week.

MAŠA: So, you have a shared custody?

LAURA: Yeah. Fifty-fifty.

MAŠA: A lot of couples have it like that now.

LAURA: I find it great. The week I'm on my own, I can really get a lot of stuff done. And when they're with me, I can give them my undivided attention. And we

have a great time. But there are certain constraints. I had to find for a flat close to school and kindergarten. Or at least a bus, some kind of public transport. I was lucky to find this flat.

MAŠA: I'm so happy you came here.

LAURA: I'm not being facetious. Listen, if Milan doesn't want to consider a sperm donor option, it's his problem. You're the one who must act.

MAŠA: Hm... Well, I couldn't just have it off with someone.

LAURA: You can get impregnated as a single woman.

MAŠA: What do you mean? I can't. Milan and I are registered as a couple. We've been to practically all the clinics...

LAURA: No, you fool! You can go abroad!

MAŠA: Mhm. What about Milan?

LAURA: What about him? You'll just tell him that you got pregnant by miracle! These things can happen, you know. And he'll be a proud daddy!

MAŠA: Well, I guess ... But I would have to pay for everything ... It's expensive. I don't know...

LAURA: If you only need the sperm, it's not that expensive. And maybe there's an option for installment payments. I can lend you the money. Think about it.

MAŠA: Sounds a bit crazy, Laura!

MAŠA: And it was crazy full stop. But then again... The more I thought about it, the more it seemed doable. I searched online for clinics and sperm banks abroad. I didn't know you could choose a donor online, it's as simple as that, just order your sperm, pay for it and have it sent to you in a specially refrigerated container. Within 24 hours. It comes with a syringe that you use to inject the sperm into your vagina. I almost ordered the sperm at one point. Then I got worried: what if I get infected? What if something goes wrong with the baby? What if the sperm isn't properly checked? I decided to go to a foreign clinic and register for artificial insemination. Laura volunteered to come with me. And off we went. They ran the necessary tests, and I signed a statement to accept donor sperm. Since all my results were fine, the clinic suggested we try insemination first, that is, by catheter. Even

better, it's not painful and cheaper than IVF. I only had to choose a donor, and that was it.

Maša and Laura are sitting in front of a computer, browsing the sperm bank website.

LAURA: They're all Danish.

MAŠA: Well... it's a Danish sperm bank.

LAURA: Look at these names... Zaho, Cupid, Gimli, Cookie? Wow, look at this one!

Florian! Caucasian, Scandinavian background, tall, educated...

MAŠA: Oh no... Light blond? No way.

LAURA: Why not? Don't you want a cute blonde baby boy, blue-eyed?

MAŠA: He must look like Milan. Get it?

LAURA: What about this one? Dark-haired, medium height, a slightly large nose, brown eyes?

MAŠA: This one has no ID. That's why he's cheaper. If he doesn't have an ID, the child can never find out the identity of the donor and contact him.

LAURA: Yeah, well... Wouldn't that be ideal for you?

MAŠA: Definitely. Milan will be the father. But I'm thinking long-term... Should something happen to him... maybe it's good to have at least a hypothetical chance that the child can find out who the biological father is at some future point. The clinic will only provide information at the written request of a child of legal age. I don't know... I somehow feel it's my duty to ensure it.

LAURA: I don't know, to be honest. You'll pay 800 euros more for the hypothetical chance.

MAŠA: Right.

LAURA: Shit, I didn't realise sperm was so fucking expensive. How much do you think the donor actually gets? Not a lot, I guess.

MAŠA: It's in the region of 50 euros per ejaculation.

LAURA: Is that it?

MAŠA: Apparently, it's very expensive to process and store the sperm.

LAURA: And the clinic has to make some money, right?

MAŠA: I can say goodbye to my savings, I guess.

LAURA: Well, yes. Children cost money.

MAŠA: This one is costing me before it was even created.

MAŠA: I chose a donor, paid for the sperm which was sent straight away to the clinic for storage. I got another course of hormone pills. I've taken so many pills over the years that Milan didn't even notice that there was a different box on my shelf. I kept telling Milan my visits to the clinic were business trips, work-related commitments. I told him that my company was considering opening a branch abroad. He never asked me the details. We weren't in the habit of talking about work at home. And then, D-day finally arrived. Laura kept saying that I was a pedigree cow being taken for insemination. Everything went smoothly at the clinic. I lay down on the medical bed and spread my legs. A tube was inserted into my vagina and the semen was injected. I lay down for a while, received instructions and went home. It took barely two hours max. Then it was another 14 days of waiting. I had to bite my tongue several times to make sure I didn't say a word to Milan. And 14 days later it happened. For the first time in my life, I saw a plus sign on the test!

Maša takes Milan by surprise with a positive pregnancy test.

MILAN: What have you got there? What's that?

MAŠA: What do you mean?! It's a plus, *our* plus!

MILAN: This is... your test?

MAŠA: Yeah, who else's you think! Silly billy. Haha!

MILAN: How come?

MAŠA: Haha, I wish you could see your face now.

MILAN: I didn't know you'd taken the test...

MAŠA: My period was late, but I didn't say anything, so I wouldn't be... you know what.

MILAN: A plus? It's a plus, just like that?! Is it really a plus?

MAŠA: Yes! We've done it! Maybe because I stopped hoping... I stopped thinking about it, and lo and behold! We've done it.

MILAN: Maša! Mašika!

Milan lifts Maša and spins her.

MILAN: Well done, darling, congrats.

MAŠA: We did it.

He releases her on the floor.

MAŠA: Well, I did it. At last, I got pregnant. Milan was totally shocked at first, but eventually he got happier than I. He never asked questions or counted the days – when, where, how. We waited until the first ultrasound, the first heartbeat, and then we broke the happy news! We told everyone that we had got pregnant naturally, and they were so surprised. And happy for us. They were really happy. I felt like a queen!

Maša is in the living room with her huge pregnant belly. She is reading a brochure about water birth. Milan is making her a smoothie.

MILAN: Do you want me to add some cottage cheese? For protein intake.

MAŠA: Yes, please, if it's from the shop. As long it's not homemade. Because of the bacteria.

MILAN: Okay.

MAŠA: I was thinking of maybe changing gynaecologists. For my final checkups. I guess it'd be best in Postojna, if I'm to give birth there.

MILAN: Postojna? Ljubljana is much closer.

MAŠA: But they don't have water birth option there. And in Ljubljana, it's so crowded and they don't pay proper attention to you. I'd prefer to give birth at home, by candlelight, smooth music...

MILAN: We agreed you'd go to a maternity hospital.

MAŠA: Yes, I know. I will. But then again... my doula says I could give birth at home just as well.

MILAN: Your who?

MAŠA: Doula, my birth attendant, I told you. She's called Kristina, she came to see me the other day. She's such a warm person.

MILAN: Isn't Laura going to be with you?

MAŠA: Yes, she is. Laura, the doula, the midwife from the maternity ward... and you, of course.

MILAN: It might get a bit crowded, eh?

MAŠA: Well, in the old days, all the women from a village were present at birth. It was only later that Western medicine turned it into a medical procedure.

MILAN: It's up to you. As long you don't give birth at home, in a bath.

MAŠA: I'd be up to it, I guess.

MILAN: I think you would. Here's your vitamins. Drink up.

MAŠA: Yes, doc.

Milan brings Maša a large glass of smoothie. Then he puts all the peelings in the bio-waste bin.

MILAN: I'll be right back. I'll just take this.

Milan takes the rubbish out and collects the mail from the letterbox. He returns with a letter.

MILAN: There's something for you. From some clinic?

MAŠA: What? Let me see. A clinic? Give it to me.

MILAN: I don't know... The envelope says it's from a clinic...

Maša takes the envelope.

MAŠA: Oh, I see... it's... nothing. I registered for some check-ups during my pregnancy.

MILAN: What check-ups?

MAŠA: It's nothing. Really. Never mind. Some extra check-ups for... some diseases, they don't run the test here.

MILAN: Oh?

MAŠA: I didn't go in the end! I figured there was no need.

MILAN: How come they sent you this now?

MAŠA: Oh, probably just some kind of publicity material. Never mind.

MILAN: Won't you look at it?

MAŠA: No, I couldn't be bothered with it.

Maša tears up the envelope.

MILAN: Right. Well, I must be off now. Have some rest.

MAŠA: Yes.

MILAN: Bye.

Milan exits.

MAŠA: Bloody hell Thank God Milan left, because I got really scared. I didn't understand why they sent it to my address. I specifically warned them to send all my documentation, invoices and everything related to the procedure to Laura's address. Just as well I was at home. The very next day, I wrote to the clinic and once again told them the forwarding address... Then another two months passed and finally the big day arrived.

Maša is sitting on the sofa, doing the breathing technique to alleviate her contractions pain. Laura and Milan are by her side.

MAŠA: Ouch, ouch, ouch.

LAURA: Check the timer.

MAŠA: Three minutes.

LAURA: I think that's it.

MAŠA: Milaaan! Let's go!

MAŠA: So, the three of us got in the car and drove off to Postojna. It took Filip 15 hours to be born. In the end, I couldn't give birth in the water. He came into the world by caesarean section. Nothing went according to plan. It was difficult for me after the birth as well. I had a big scar on my tummy and breastfeeding was not going well. I was mainly pumping milk all day and learning to breastfeed. But Filip... Filip was such a healthy gorgeous baby! Everyone said he was my spitting image. Occasionally people tried to find some Milan's features in him. Look, he's got your ears. Or the nose. Just to make him feel better. As a matter of fact, he didn't look like him at all. But Milan couldn't care less. He kept saying, we're so blessed the baby looks like me, because I'm the prettier one. It was exhausting at times, I won't deny it, but still... I can't possibly tell you how the baby changed everything! I was in heaven when I held him and nursed him. It was like being in love for the first time. I don't know, it is the hormones, maybe? When he smiled at me, when he stroked me with that tiny hand of his, when he sucked the milk and gazed into my eyes with gratitude – I was... I don't know... over the moon. For the first time in my life, I felt this was it. And just like that, it was Filip's first birthday and the first kids' birthday party. It was a disaster. I was nervous all day, tense and grumpy.

After Filip's first birthday party. Maša and Milan are tidying up the flat.

MAŠA: I'd been planning this party for a month.

MILAN: It was fine.

MAŠA: No, it wasn't. Half of the people didn't show up.

MILAN: They apologised. Something always comes up.

MAŠA: My muffins were awful. Laura nearly choked on them. Didn't you notice? She could barely swallow them. They were so damn dry. Disaster.

MILAN: So what. The cake was great though.

MAŠA: Yeah. Bought in a pastry shop! Nobody wanted to play the last game. Did you see it?

MILAN: There was too much of everything. They were fed up with your games.

MAŠA: Fed up?

MILAN: Well... They were bored... How should I put it... You *made* people play games.

MAŠA: Excuse me, I organised *the programme*. All by myself. I organised the entire party on my own. You didn't lift a bloody finger.

MILAN: You didn't let me!

MAŠA: And now you dare to criticise me.

MILAN: Not at all. It's just... You get rather intense sometimes. There's no spontaneity.

MAŠA: Are you joking me? Am I going on people's nerves? No wonder, as I'm in charge all the time, you don't do anything. I get it, of course I do. Filip isn't yours anyway, so why bother.

Awkward silence.

MAŠA: Shit. As soon as I said it, I got a tingling sensation down my back. The words just flew out of my mouth. I don't know what possessed me. I hoped he hadn't heard it. But he did. I could see it in his face immediately. I have no idea how come I said it. Just like that, while we were arguing about some trivial rubbish.

MAŠA: You know I'm joking, don't you? I didn't mean it. Forget it.

MILAN: Mhm.

MAŠA: I was joking, okay? A stupid joke, sorry.

MILAN: Okay.

MAŠA: Okay. I'm sorry.

MILAN: It's okay, Maša.

MAŠA: He said it was okay. But it wasn't. A tiny of doubt started drilling in his heart. And the little worm was gnawing away at him. And it got bigger and bigger and bigger. From then on, everything changed. Milan became suspicious. He was often distant and distracted. Until Laura finally fucked it up big time.

Sunday afternoon. Milan is making coffee. The doorbell rings. Milan opens the door.

MILAN: Oh, hi.

LAURA: I've arranged with Maša to call.

MILAN: She's not back from her walk yet.

LAURA: I see. No problem, I can come back later...

MILAN: No, no. Come in. You can wait here. I'm just making coffee. Would you like some?

LAURA: Great. I really fancy coffee. Thanks.

Laura comes through and sits down. Milan pours coffee.

LAURA: So, how's the little one? Settling well in kindergarten?

MILAN: Yes. He's fine. Great.

LAURA: Oh. Great.

MILAN: Laura... I know.

LAURA: Know what?

MILAN: Maša told me.

LAURA: She told you... what?

MILAN: You know. About Filip.

LAURA: Yes, but what?

MILAN: That I'm not his dad. *Silence*. No point in your denying it, because she's admitted everything.

LAURA: Oh, shit. She shouldn't have told you.

MILAN: She must have had a guilty conscience.

LAURA: Shit. She shouldn't have told you. Shit, Milan. I'm so sorry.

MILAN: You knew about this?

LAURA: I'm so sorry about everything. Just don't do anything stupid now. Use your brain. Drop your ego.

MILAN: How could she... have it off with that guy from work!?

LAURA: No, no... What? No. What guy from work?

MILAN: Who was it then? Who was it? Laura?

LAURA: We went to a clinic... abroad... to get donor sperm.

MILAN: Fucking hell! She did it?! She really did it?!

LAURA: She didn't tell you...?

Milan grabs his jacket and his car keys and storms out.

LAURA: Shit, I fucked up.

MAŠA: Yeah. She fucked up massively. He tricked her big time. A classic trick. Laura called me in panic and told me everything. My heart was pounding heavily, was as I pushed the pram home. Laura had left before I got home. I guess she couldn't bear to look me in the eye. Milan was nowhere to be seen either. I took Filip to my mum's, went back home and waited. Cold sweat was pouring down my back. In about an hour he came home.. He wasn't drunk, but I could smell alcohol.

MAŠA: Milan –

MILAN: Just leave it, okay? I've come to collect my stuff.

MAŠA: What stuff?

Milan goes to the bedroom room and starts taking his clothes out of the wardrobe.

MAŠA: What are you doing?

MILAN: Packing.

MAŠA: Can we at least talk? Talk to me. Milan? Please?

MILAN: So now you want to talk, eh? ... What about before?! You've been lying in my face for two years.

MAŠA: I did it for us.

MILAN: You did it for your own sake. For your own selfish reasons!

MAŠA: Right. And for yourself! As if it mattered now! I did it because I had no other choice. Do you want me to get down on my knees? I'll get on my knees.

MILAN: Stop it. So, who is he? Uh? Who's the father?

MAŠA: I don't know... Some donor.

MILAN: What do you mean, you don't know the baby's father?

MAŠA: You're his father.

MILAN: He has nothing of mine, he's not my blood. He doesn't look a tiny bit like me.

You've tricked me, you took advantage of me.

MAŠA: He loves you. He thinks of you as his dad.

MILAN. I can't, Maša.

MAŠA: Where are you going?

MILAN: I'm staying with Bojan for a couple of days. I'll be back.

Milan leaves.

MAŠA: And off he went. He took only a few things. He didn't come home all week. He wouldn't answer my calls. He just texted me not to worry.

That he needed time. How much time? A week, two weeks? How much time?! And then he finally came back. To collect the rest of his stuff.

MILAN: I'm going to Austria. For a while. I got a job there.

MAŠA: Wait, what? Austria?

MILAN: Work. I'm going to work. The pay is good. I've signed a lucrative contract. I'll send you some money.

MAŠA: We need you here. To be with us. At home.

MILAN: I need to go away for a while, Maša. Better for everyone. I can't act as if it were no big deal.

MAŠA: Act like a responsible adult.

MILAN: You did this behind my back. So don't talk to me about responsibility.

MAŠA: I don't want you to go!

MILAN: Just for a while. I've signed a contract for six months, and then I'll see how it goes.

MAŠA: Six months? You know how long this is? Your son won't see you for half a year?!

MILAN. He's not my son.

MAŠA: This surely shut me up. *He's not my son. He's not my son.* I just stood there, not knowing what to say. Milan started removing his stuff from the flat. He took his books, his clothes, his sports gear...

MAŠA: You don't want to wait? I can fetch him for you from the kindergarten? Won't you at least... say goodbye?

MILAN: I can't. You tell him that... That I lo—... That I'll call him. And I'll wire you money every month.

MAŠA: I don't need money...

MILAN: Yes, you do. Why don't you fucking stay with us then?!

MILAN: Well... maybe one day you'll understand.

MAŠA: I don't get it... What did we do to you?

MILAN: Stop it, Maša. You know what you've done to me. Not Filip. You!

MAŠA: And just like so, he was gone. None of his stuff was left in the flat. We were left alone for the night. I had no idea how I was going to cope. I couldn't have done it without my parents' help. And Laura's. I kind of managed the first month. Kindergarten, work, housework. Filip learnt to walk. Watching him proudly take his first steps, I forgot all about my tiredness. A few more months passed. Milan was transferring money to me. He called me several times, asking for pictures of Filip. I didn't know whether I should send them to him or not. I didn't know what to feel, whether I should be angry with him, hate him, or even understand him... I had one big confusion in my head. And I missed him. I missed him a lot. And then... Then one day, he suddenly appeared at the door.

Maša goes to answer the door. Milan is standing at the door.

MAŠA: What are you doing here?! I mean... You should've have called first.

MILAN: I wanted to see you. I wanted to see you right away.

MAŠA: Aren't you in Austria?

MILAN: Not anymore. I've given my notice.

MAŠA: Okay, come in.

MILAN: Where is Filip?

MAŠA: In his bed. Sit down.

MILAN: Shit, Maša...

MAŠA: What? What's about your job?

MILAN: Something happened at work. A colleague fell off the roof. On a building site.

MAŠA: Oh? Shit.

MILAN: It was terrible. He couldn't get up. Couldn't move his legs. He was lying there in pain, vomiting... Terrible. As we waited for the ambulance, he kept calling

for his wife and kids. Asking where they were. Over and over again. I couldn't sleep that night. I thought of you, of Filip. Everything that had happened. I thought about my old man, too. May he rest in peace, although he wasn't... You know, he wasn't exactly a model father. He worked as a lorry driver. International routes. He was absent most of my childhood, the cunt. And then I thought... Milan, what are you doing here? In Austria? What the fuck are you doing? Maša... damn it, I fucked up.

MAŠA: ... It's not just your fault. I should take some blame too ...

MILAN: I don't know ... I thought it'd be easier if I left. I wanted to run away, I guess.. Just to get away from everything.

MAŠA: Away from us.

MILAN: Not away from you. Just away from... from my anger. From feeling that you cheated on me... I don't know. I felt terrible. Do you understand?

MAŠA: I don't know... I don't know if I can fully understand you.

MILAN: I'm back now. Come on... I'd like to try. I missed you.

MAŠA: Bloody hell, Milan. You know how much I missed you! I don't know whether I want to hug or slap you, you cunt.

MILAN: Sorry.

MAŠA: What if you get these ideas again that you have to leave? Or will you run away again when the going gets tough?

MILAN: No fucking way. I won't. I want to be with you. With you and Filip.

MAŠA: Okay. We'll see how it goes. That's all I can say to you right now.

MILAN: Shit, Maša, if I could turn back the time...

MAŠA: Okay, okay, we'll give a go.

MILAN: Yeah?

MAŠA: Because of Filip.

MILAN: Okay, okay.

MAŠA: And then, we'll see how it goes.

MILAN: Can I... Can I give you a hug?

Inhale and exhale.

MAŠA: Yes.

About the meaning of everything

– *The Universe was born in the Big Bang, 14 billion years ago—when time, space, and energy burst into existence from nothing! For reasons we still don't understand, everything exploded out of a single, infinitesimally small point. In the first thousandth of a second, space expanded by a factor of 10^{78} . Big Bang, baby. The Universe was born!*

– *At first, there was only hydrogen and helium. Drawn together by gravity, these gases formed vast clouds. When enough mass gathered, and the atomic nuclei were pressed close enough, a thermonuclear fire ignited. Hydrogen fused into helium—and the first star lit up the darkness. The birth of a star!*

– *Four billion years ago, there was water on Earth. And somehow, lifeless molecules combined into structures that began to replicate themselves. One day, by some incredible coincidence, those structures crossed the line into life. The beginning of life!*

– *Why are we here? Why is there something, rather than nothing?*

– *Maybe the Big Bang never happened at all. Maybe our universe is just one among many, born again and again as dimensions collide—each impact sparking a new beginning, a new end.*

– *Or maybe someone created the universe. After all, can something really come from nothing?*

– *The DNA chain evolved over eons and eventually gave rise to Homo sapiens around 200,000 years ago. That's barely a blink in the planet's timeline. Today, we live in a geological epoch named after ourselves: the Anthropocene—defined by human impact on all life. But when did it truly begin? With the agricultural revolution? The conquest of the Americas? Or was it the detonation of the atomic bomb?*

– *We exist because of particle attraction, the coming together of atoms—because of love. We are here to be with one another. Our essence is always coexistence.*