

Nightparents

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p 33-35

NOTEBOOK

Whether Saskia wanted a child...

“What? A what?” she yells over the music.

She’s not great at giving answers. Her gaze clouds over, her mouth goes dry; she knows others are waiting to hear what she’ll say. A storm is brewing inside her. She starts to ramble.

Asking questions herself, making notes, standing chilled to the bone by the open window, waking up under a duvet and looking forward to all those unknown stories, locking herself away with only a big bottle of coke and a roll of loo paper to write the ultimate piece, avoiding the big issues, wiping the memory of intimate revelations... she can do all that.

What was the question?

Whether she wanted a child. Her. Yes, her. Because everyone wants kids.

“Me? A child?” she asks. She is standing in the living room of a couple who have just paid their first month’s rent together and have been given a pasta-making machine by the girl’s mother. “Nope. No way. Do you see me as a mum?”

She’s not the kind of person to have kids. She smiles encouragingly at her long-fingered acquaintance. Then the others agree, laughing. “Ha ha, you as a mum... Yeah, right – what a thought! Inconceivable... not the responsible thing to do.”

A white-shirted man’s guffaws are so uncontrolled that he knocks her with his elbow and spills red wine.

“Is there some reason why you don’t want children?” The acquaintance – long fingers and all – comes to sit next to her on the sofa. Saskia feels trapped. She considers coming up with an acceptable, invented tale about rape, infertility or fear of her own paedophile tendencies, but instead she keeps her mouth shut. If you don’t want to answer a question, the best approach is just to let the mystery smoulder.

*

She can usually ignore the voice perfectly well, but this evening – Saturday, 14 May 2013, according to her diary – the voice at her own party is that of a young woman with a shiny new psychology degree.

“Everyone wants kids,” says the psychologist. “Why don’t you want a child?”

“I do want a child,” says Saskia.

One of those sweet little marzipan dolls, or a battery-powered cuddly toy like a Tamagotchi, or a

child's guinea-pig that you can lock away in a cage with water and fodder; she'd consider having *that* kind of child in her house.

But a real baby? With no cage, and born without the nappies that it would need so many of? No thanks. That's just a bit too lifelike for her.

Saskia suspects that there must be a biological reason for not wanting children; there's no other way of explaining it. She doesn't feel that hormonal rush, that irresistible urge, that call of the body that is referred to in Biblical tales as if it were a fruit tree ("This body must bear fruit") or mentioned in real women's diaries ("This body wants to make a baby all by itself, with nothing more than a sperm cell and Google for any urgent questions during the pregnancy"). Real women, her friends, have bodies that bellow dictatorial demands for children that the women have no option but to obey.

She isn't in favour of kids and she isn't against them. Her feelings don't even go that far. Babies, those real ones with ten toes that you sometimes think are only eight of when you're counting them feverishly... real babies mean nothing to her. When she goes on a baby visit to a lesbian friend who's just had something called Emma and is threatening to force the said small bundle into her arms for a photo, Saskia is friendly but waves the offer away. Suppose she dropped the precious package? Okay, it wouldn't smash into smithereens, but she'd certainly lose a good friend. And knowing her, she'd be a bundle of nerves herself, shaking and forgetting to support the baby's head so that it'd get whiplash and have to wear one of those flesh-coloured neck braces for the rest of its days.

Extracts taken from her diary:

Why not?

- the dead houseplants, goldfish that I've been feeding cornflakes for three weeks and then chucked in the larch beneath the window (not capable of looking after things, etc.)
- what pregnancy actually means: an alien growing inside your body, a creature that stretches you out from the inside, making a room for itself and there's nothing you can do about it, a squatter in your home who you can't keep away with a restraining order, and then finally – after nine long and utterly exhausting months – you have to squeeze the life-sized monster out, with its claws and viciously stamping feet and head as big as a balloon. A physical impossibility that has been flouting all the laws of probability for millennia (official medical term: tokophobia, the pathological fear of pregnancy)
- no time, because I've got to write (I'm an author)
- real reason: me me me (me).

p 49-56

NOTEBOOK

There you were all of a sudden, dear Saul, on your mum's forty-first birthday. As if you were already with us at the breakfast table, eating muesli. Your Mummy Juli had decided. She had never cared much for presents, but said that the calendar and a friend had told her something: now I'm going to have a child.

Juli and Saskia would be the child's parents, but at the same time they wanted the biological father to be a known quantity. Suppose their kid was walking around town, seeing every man as a potential candidate for the biological father. What torment. A child has the right to know who the donor was, argued Saskia. In a dingy rear attic of her mind, an idea lit up: something like that could be very important if she ever did a disappearing act. There it was again: that me-me-me would be suffocated in the rhythm of life with a child. Things might go better with the light of that emergency exit in mind. The donor might be able to take on the dad's role. The best thing for the child. Win-win.

Juli didn't want to be pregnant with a stranger's child. Juli wanted a story, not just a number at the sperm bank that their child could ask about later, assuming there hadn't been any administrative cock-ups. A young child can put a towel over its head and crow triumphantly, "I'm gone!" Everyone knows the child's still there under the towel. Donors are like that too. Working with an anonymous donor would leave them shadow-boxing, hopeless. The absent begetter would always be right. Not being around would make sure he was missed, the silences filled with fantasies of a perfect father. They would be the parents and so they'd shoulder all the blame. Too right. You can't deprive the child of its opportunity at least to meet the biological father from whom it sprang forth – at some point, sooner or later, or never.

Saskia wouldn't be a biological parent, so Juli wanted her at least to choose the biological father.

How does a woman choose a father for her child? And how do two women choose a father together? How long can you take to think? As luck would have it, Nature was freeing them of their doubts, because the clock was ticking and the doctor had made it pretty clear that you become less fertile from thirty-five onwards. And over forty, you may as well forget it.

So the search for a non-anonymous donor could commence. In principle the kind of quest that fairy-tale heroines would embark upon, bribing magical animals along the way and making mincemeat of dragons.

In real life, finding sperm was actually a pretty awkward task to get a handle on.

*

The non-starters:

- Hetero men who had spontaneously offered their services in the past, before there were even any plans. "If you ever need a donor, I'm game" would suddenly be dropped into a conversation from left field. Though it would have to be done the way Nature intended, of course.
- A close friend who was entirely overcome by Saskia's inquiry. "There's nothing I'd like to do more," he said, "which is why I won't. I'd be outside your door every day. I'd move in with you. I'd want that kid to be with me, day and night. I want to be a dad."
- A well-off male duo, with blue velvet chairs and expensive careers, with everything that could be needed to give a kid a glitzy future. Plus an overweening need for a child, even if only part-time. They talked about it over large glasses of chilled white wine. The conversation soon progressed to the practical, necessary arrangements. Who would pay for what? What would they do about holidays? Their careers – the one a businessman, the other a politician – had taken off and their bank accounts had grown commensurately. A dream scenario, nicely padded out... but it didn't click for Saskia and she provided the embarrassing rejection on the marble front steps, as she and Juli were taking off the covers that they'd had to wear over their shoes. A guilty and cowardly 'sorry'. Followed by them slinking away, heads lowered and hunch-shouldered.
- An investor who wanted a son, for later, for when he was old. Someone to travel the world with him and order room service in the most expensive hotels and to tell the story of his life to.
- An artist who reckoned that her husband would be delighted to provide the sperm because he was such an advocate of equal rights. The woman herself wasn't in love with Juli, of course. No way.

*

The history of how Karl and Saskia got to know each other is an all-or-nothing tale, a history that has become snowed under even though they've only known each other for four years. It seems to be an eternity ago that Saskia was accused of drugs smuggling, as a form of welcome to Winnipeg – a small city in the icy, thirty-below-zero heart of Canada, a place nobody would go to in winter except to help shift Winnipeg's exceptionally pure cocaine through to the rest of North America. Or to write. At the invitation of an arts centre, Saskia travelled to the snowy-white molehill. She was going to stay at an artist's house there. Juli let her go, of course; Juli always lets her go when she's got to write. She's always had a holy awe

for that. Unlike the customs officers at the airport. They probed with rubber gloves for anal evidence of her alleged status as an author. Finally released at three in the morning, she hobbled into the arrivals hall and her old, over-full suitcase picked that moment to burst at the seams and scatter the contents over the cold tiles – knickers, tampons, ripped-open packets of instant sachets of tomato soup with cheesy croutons for emergencies. Crawling around like an insect, she collected her belongings together. She looked up and saw some dickhead grinning down at her. One of those lesbian-hating homos who are too pretty to lend a hand to help, a step worse than the machos who spontaneously offer instructions when you're parking. The kind of prideful jerk who thinks he's a cut above the rest of the world. Said dickhead made no move to help, just leaving her to fume. And what she hadn't even dared contemplate turned out to be true: the dickhead was the artist whose house she'd be staying in for a month.

Karl was a dickhead. Afterwards, he explained that her hackles were raised so aggressively and her body language was screaming "Leave me alone" so loudly that he didn't even dare to help.

All or nothing. He could do it. Her hard shell of ice broke immediately thanks to the man who without a word draped a woollen blanket over her shoulders and gave her a cup of ginger tea. Because she herself was numb but too tired to sleep, he gave her a tour of his strange Gothic house at four in the morning. He'd made a lot of changes to it himself. Twenty stuffed and mounted deer heads stared at her; preparation for an installation in the Whitney. He told her about the sect that had lived here, fundamentalists who believed they could exclude all negative external influences and kept their children imprisoned here. Under the wooden floor in the living room, Karl had found a drawing. Big painted letters on it said, "We will be a happy family forever". In the bright colours of this gaudy and cheerful slogan, he saw a cry for help from children who were locked up to keep them pure. He would use it in one of his works. In one room you could still see how children's fingers had scratched the wallpaper off and how they had filled in the patterns with stick drawings.

The blond, muscular man with a trimmed beard, toned body, blue eyes and not much of a chin was ever so hospitable, an artist without a mobile phone, a food snob without a food blog, an eager beaver who made his own filo pastry, who tried out all his best ingredients and recipes on her (all organic and local and wholesome), who offered her pricey shampoo made from melted fats mixed with lavender he had plucked himself, who didn't have a single plastic bag in his home (let alone that horror of horrors, aluminium foil) and who was able to keep her amused at all times with his inexhaustible knowledge, sarcasm and hugs. He took her to his studio, where installations rose up that were as lavish as Paul McCarthy's and that looked her straight in the eye with intense ferocity.

Karl had taken Saskia on board so quickly that it seemed as if they had known each other for years. He confided everything to her: his recent relationship breakup, lots of screwing around, his exaggerated suspicion of his friends at times, his love for his mother and his isolated youth on a hippie island. That childhood was a bit weird, he said; he could build wooden houses at the age of ten but had never seen candyfloss.

"I was a freak."

"I was the freak on the other side of the hedge."

Oh yes, they were both well crazy. Or conversely, maybe they were the only ones sane enough to see the madness.

Karl told her what a culture shock it had been when he arrived in the city. An islander who was totally maladjusted. In his perception, the big city was a cacophonous laboratory full of tubes and structures, where they were trying to bring a single monster to life with exhaust fumes and radio frequencies, a monster that was perhaps made up of thousands of swarming people. He could hear every penny drop at the cash registers and felt as if the noise coming at him from all sides of the metro would make him explode. He only knew the din of nature, which penetrates deep inside you through your pores rather than screeching into your ears.

They met at a moment when both their lives were totally overpowered by love. He had just broken up with his film-director boyfriend and was still wiping his nose on handkerchiefs that had the latter's name embroidered on them. She had just discovered the shining, euphoric depth of a rock-solid love that was

only improving the longer it lasted.

With endless cups of tea (with unsolicited whisky and a lump of butter in), Saskia talked about Juli and her boundless energy, about their friends and their radio careers and musical ambitions and training in psychology and their urban allotments, about the deal she had made with Juli seven years ago that had turned out so well. Saskia would like to spend her whole life writing and Juli wanted children sooner or later. They would respect each other's wishes. It had been one-way traffic so far. Juli let Saskia roam the world, collecting stories. Juli had no trouble with that.

For nights on end, Karl and Saskia told each other their multifaceted stories of love and loss. That was where they forged their bond, where they spoke scornfully about their families. Karl told hilarious anecdotes about his eldest brother, the hippie who still lived on the island of Portes and whose wife had had a vision of the place where all her chakras would achieve perfection. That transpired to be the most deserted and spookiest spot on the island, deep in the woods. So that's where they'd now built a nice, cosy house. Mad as hatters, those two. Karl also told her about the loneliness on the island. How he could tell that Saskia understood something of it. And about how they, with their new and delicate bond, should protect each other's loneliness. There are areas where everyone is alone, and you need to respect that in each other. Areas where you say, that's mine and mine alone, and you'll steer clear of it if you respect me. Saskia thought it was wonderful. She's got her own cellar full of dark secrets, with her shame keeping the lid on it tightly closed.

p 95-99

NOTEBOOK

The fertility lab smelled of cigars. The room was no bigger than a bedroom. White as toothpaste, a grey chair with stirrups. The doctor came in; the assistant coughed. Had he been smoking? His rubber gloves were pistachio green, his gestures firm. A syringe with a long snout, filled with a mixture of cells from her sweetheart and her best friend. The paths taken by genes, crossing and fusing in a crucible. The doctor asked Saskia if she wanted to push the plunger of the syringe in. No, thank you. This was a clinical procedure that had nothing to do with Saskia: sneaking any romanticism or involvement in would be fake.

*

The IVF specialist had confirmed it was alive and the cells were dividing. The fortnight-old embryo had first resided in a petri dish and had now been transferred to the natural incubator. We monitor everything, day after day.

She was an interesting medical experiment, that girl lying there. The girl with a child inside her.

That frail body, Juli's body. Whereas Saskia's body is so tough that she hardly ever gets sick and overtakes men when she's out running. How illogical.

Nine months, three seasons, forty weeks, two hundred and eighty-two days: that's how long Juli's body had for building a complete human. No longer.

Saskia promised Juli spontaneously that she'd never say, "We're pregnant."

*

That time she went to fetch Saul from the day care centre. The father of the girl with frizzy hair like a huge swarm of wasps around her head is waiting for her at the door. As always, he's talking nineteen to the

dozen. He says hi to everyone, explains, lifts baby buggies over the step, supplementing his broken Dutch with numerous gestures and a loud voice.

Fascinated by two women who fill both the male and female roles, he has fitted fragments of information together. Now he wants to put the last piece of the puzzle in place.

"God bless Shawl," he says once again. The fact that God has even given the women a boy is testimony to the unfathomability of His ways.

"Thank you."

"You made him?"

"Uh...?"

"Made by you? You made Shawl yourselves?" His articulation is exaggerated, the volume up three more notches.

"Yeah, sure. We made him," she replies.

"Or with squirt, in hospital?" He uses his thumb to press the plunger of an imaginary syringe.

"Well..."

"Or at home?" he asks, his eyes twinkling. "With a man?" Laughing, carried away as his own fantasy runs wild.

She is speechless. And then she can't get it out of her head again. He asked the questions that she sees some people stumbling over. She should have been quicker, she could have bounced it back at him and asked what position he and his wife used when making their own children.

*

In the sultry heat of the city of Antwerp, on a square where everyone gathers around a playground and a bar in the summer, they are sitting on the grass with Saul. Juli goes off to the bar and then two small girls do what smart little girls do: track down mistakes in the world and set out to investigate. They shuffle a bit closer and gather up their courage, until the younger of the two, an impish child with a headscarf, turns to Saskia and asks, "Are you sisters?"

"We don't look much like each other, do we?" "Hee-hee, no." "We're a couple."

(Giggles.) "You can't be. You're both girls."

"So are you."

(Letting the impossible sink in.) "But we're not a couple! We're sisters!"

"Well, we are."

"Sisters?"

"No, a couple."

"So who's the man?"

"We're both women."

"Whose is the baby?"

"He's ours."

"But who had the baby in their tummy?"

The older girl nudged her kid sister. "You can see that."

"Juli had the baby. That's her over there, in the queue by the bar. With the blond hair and blue eyes."

"Not you?"

"No, not me."

"So you're not a woman," conclude the girls. "You're the man!"

*

There will be a role for Saskia's body in this child's story, she thinks before the birth. Her body will be used for comforting, for rocking to sleep. Given that babies often don't want to fall asleep, she envisages herself on many nocturnal walks, child wrapped up in a bundle on her arm, wandering through the streets, out

beyond the ring road, onto the motorway, catatonic, glazed eyes fixed on the white stripes, taking the slip road while a night-time driver hoots at her, following the exit, greeting the dawn, checking her little cocoon (he's almost nodded off now), walking into the shop, wandering through Ikea, letting people look at the child, ending up in the sleeping area, crawling under the duvet, let the child sleep on, falling asleep herself and waking up after closing time.

But Saul, you always sleep like a log.

p 107-112

NOTEBOOK

Don't be afraid, my boy.

It's not all that serious, the game they call Life.

Take a look at where we'll start.

At the beginning, right.

Start at the beginning, my mother always said, because the rest is tricky enough.

*

In the waiting room of the fertility clinic, a sturdy woman in a carpet-like robe stood in front of them. She took them to her tiny little office. They had been practicing the roles in the kitchen. To play the role of a psychologist convincingly, Saskia had grabbed a writing pad and a pen. Juli put on a grumpy face and pretended to be Saskia. It was very important that they had a watertight alibi because they didn't want to be caught being insecure about parenthood. Someone could have told them about Saskia's doubts. Spies were everywhere – the communism of parenthood was making her bloody paranoid.

After the psychologist had regaled them for half an hour about her own exploits on fertility promotion in parliament, she did not ask them about the why. She asked Saskia how her family would respond.

That one question was enough: a needle pricked under your fingernail – anticipating the hurt doesn't help ward off the pain. A box of handkerchiefs was pushed under her nose, utterly professionally, as if it was part of the procedure. She didn't dare look around, at Juli. She knew she'd blown it. And somewhere down there in the darkness, a spark of hope flickered: who knows, maybe they'd missed their chance here and the whole procedure would be aborted, the fairy tale crunching into an insurmountable obstacle. Resulting in them just being two women again, an infertile couple.

A twosome. Just that. Normal. They were playing at being a normal couple.

Tactful but resolute, the psychologist skirted right past personal family issues.

She thought it was very good that Saskia had chosen the donor. "The two of you are eliminating the biological difference by letting the non-biological mother choose."

She also talked about the importance of not calling the donor the 'father'.

"Words are important. Don't think that you're doing anything exceptional or unnatural. When we started keeping nature under control a bit, medicine began," she said, gesticulating magnanimously in her dramatic robe, pointing to the three walls that enclosed her like an insect in a matchbox. "Can you see all those folders? They're all records of fertility treatments. Most of them are heterosexual couples, but the shame can still weigh very heavily. We get people here from all over the place."

In the waiting room, they had seen Hasidic Jews, veiled women, women with bare midriffs. The welcome DVD they had received had a menu of fifty languages to choose from.

The woman stood up. The carpet surrounding her cascaded into place. How many children might she

have borne? What could her personal link be to this tale of fertility? They shook her hand. She pointed to the open door, with a stuffy and airless corridor behind it. If you walked to the end of it, took the lift (the third floor was crossed out as if three was an unlucky number) and then walked past the smell of fried pork chops emanating from the cafeteria, you came to the payment machines in front of the car park. And beyond it, if the next sliding door was feeling cooperative, the big wide world awaits... where in the vast traffic jam of this country's rush hour, parents with children in the back seat are thinking of holidays and doctors' appointments. And childless couples are thinking of psychologists in home-woven carpets.

*

It's going to happen, Juli had said. We're going to be parents.
Saskia was looking for a child to practice on.
Saskia found an aubergine to practice on.
She rocked the aubergine in her arms.
Saskia would be called its mother, just like Juli.
They would be initiated into the cult of Maternity.

*

Karl's spermatozoa were still jetlagged when they drove him straight from the airport to a medical laboratory for the very first donation. They had been informed that the indicated day and hour was the time for a sperm sample. A haywire navigation system guided them to an industrial estate outside the city. They entered a gigantic room that most closely resembled a Nazi conference hall: the whole architecture was aimed at making the individual feel small. They ventured forth to the counter on the far side and stated their business politely.

"We have a donation appointment."

"You've come to hand over a sample, you mean?"

"Well, that's one way of putting it."

"Where is it?"

"Oh, er... in him." Saskia and Juli point to Karl.

"Excuse me? Sir, may I have the specimen? The sample?"

"I am the donor," says Karl.

"We thought the semen had to be... fresh," says Saskia, threatened.

"That's not the procedure. The semen has to be brought to us within twelve hours of donation."

"We're bringing it to you. Fresh. He's got it."

"I thought I'd seen everything," says one of them to the other. The holy trinity at the raised reception desk hold an intense consultation.

"I've come specially from Canada for this," Karl ventures, tense but courageous, unsure what the near future will bring and what he can contribute.

"Just flown over," says Juli. "Hardly even landed, ready to deliver the perfect sample."

The three Fates confer. With a deep sigh, one of the stern-looking ladies dives under the desk. After some rummaging, she reappears again with a plastic pot the size of a small breakfast buffet jam jar, it places high above their heads on the desk.

"And how do we get the sample into the jar now?" asks Karl, employing an unusual *pluralis majestatis*.

"Well, it's not customary, but I suppose it'll have to be done here."

"Where can we do that... I mean 'he', where can he...?"

The three heads go into conclave again.

One of them suggests the cleaners' toilet, waving vaguely in the direction of a corridor. They go to explore.

All the doors are locked, except for one broom cupboard. With a door that doesn't lock. Karl draws a deep

breath and, with courage born of despair, finds a spot between the buckets, stocks of surgical gloves and barf bags.

Juli and Saskia sit down on a bench and wait. They wait for a long time. Longer. They fear the worst. After a terrible, lengthy wait, the door opens again to reveal a deathly pale Karl with drooping shoulders, bandy-legged. The last drop squeezed out painfully, as he himself put it, yielding a dollop that is barely visible to the naked eye. Saskia and Juli can't stop laughing.

With one hand on the handle so that nobody could come in, he'd had to do the business with the other. Above his head, he could hear Nazi jackboots stomping around. It's a miracle he managed anything at all.

Even the laboratory staffer to whom they have to hand over the goods for testing, a lab tech through and through with a bouquet of pens in his ink-stained breast pocket, asks with the sober honesty of a scientist whether this is really the whole sample.

Karl endured that too, his masculinity humiliated to the core, that temporary castration with words, that totally unjustified ridicule when he had given everything he had in him. After a couple of hours waiting, the man with the pens told us that Karl's sperm was actually exceptionally good quality.