

BAS
TEI
LÜBBE

**Caroline Schmitt
A LOVING THING**

Sample Translation by Rachel Farmer



Novel

Hardcover | 221 pages | February 2023

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“Seeking generous female who can get me some cocaine. By the way, I’m not allowed to use my mum’s Fiat anymore so it would be good if you had a car,” Mariam read, splaying her freshly painted fingernails to keep them away from her phone.

We had spent all Sunday at the lake and were now lounging in the garden swing seat on our roof terrace, enjoying the breeze—the first time the temperature had dropped below thirty degrees.

‘Shame I don’t have a car. Otherwise, count me in,’ I said, my mouth full.

Mariam’s tabbouleh was usually better than this. But sadly, her attention was currently focused on my romantic needs rather than my culinary ones.

“Ladies,” she read on, “when you know what you want, get rid of your other contacts. Then we can actually text properly and not just stop after two messages. I did sport until I was 18. The rest is my genes.”

I felt sorry for people who were dredging through this intellectual cesspit because they were actually looking for love, not just passing the time while their nails dried.

‘Does that mean the guy hasn’t done any exercise for seventeen years?’ I asked.

Mariam made a face, scrunching her freckles together, and swiped left.

‘Speaking of exercise, “Have you ever been stand-up paddleboarding? I can show you how.”’

‘Is assistance included in that selfless offer?’

Mariam grinned.

Then, ‘Oh,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘There’s more. His cat is dying. He’s put a crowdfunding link.’

‘Are Tinder donations tax deductible?’

Mariam’s thumbs swiped left at lightning speed. If she’d been single, not just occasionally taking over my Tinder account, she would have given herself tendonitis in two days flat. Sometimes she would shake her head in boredom, then heave a deep sigh or laugh derisively. It was only when she came across a particular highlight or lowlight that her eyes would light up and she’d start reading aloud.

‘Oho, now we’re talking,’ said Mariam. “‘You should have: a passion for travel, yoga and coffee, white trainers, and an eco-lifestyle in the form of chestnut laundry detergent and a wooden toothbrush. I’m 2.10m, please be taller.’”

‘Haha, that’s not bad,’ I said. ‘Tell him: “I live in a treehouse and am 2.11m tall. My strong shoulders will be enough for both of us.’”

‘Why am I doing this for you when you’re coming up with the best lines yourself?’

‘Because I have no interest in people who put a carefully curated range of photos of their carefully curated lives onto an app where Netflix, basic empathy and “vino” count as hobbies.’

Mariam shook her head and typed away furiously on her phone. Probably sending topless photos to Elias.

She had pined away for her ex Marlene for over a year after they had attended a friend’s wedding and Mariam had told her—drunkenly, but in earnest—that she was ready to start a family. Marlene wanted a lot of things, preferably right now, but a family wasn’t one of them. To save herself and Mariam time, strife and disappointments disguised as compromises, she had made short work of it and broken up with her while still on the dance floor, as the bride and groom groped and stumbled into their happily ever after. ‘I’m doing this because I love you,’ Marlene had said, as Herbert Grönemeyer’s voice crooned through the speakers, asking whether feelings were worth it and whether time really healed all wounds.

During her year of heartbreak, Mariam had left as many doors open—or allowed them to be held open—as possible. Then, when she met Elias, she slammed all the other doors shut, confident and carefree, as if her heart had never been broken.

Elias was a doctor in his early thirties and was, despite Mariam’s

prejudices against the male of the species, completely unperturbed by her bisexuality and unafraid of the future, even a shared one. In any case, they had been dating for two months now and things seemed to be going well, at least judging from the fact that Mariam had stopped asking me constantly what this or that message or last-minute cancellation could possibly mean.

Now she was trying to win me over to the dark side too, because being in a relationship made 'everything so easy'. Yeah, right.

'You're going bathing with the toothbrush guy next week,' she said.

'Huh?'

Mariam snorted with laughter.

'You're meeting in his bathtub.'

'You've got to be kidding me?'

Clearly, she hadn't been texting Elias that whole time.

I flung myself at her, arms outstretched so my nail varnish wouldn't smudge. Mariam had painted our nails azure blue so we could at least imagine we were spending the summer at the beach. Now she was struggling in vain to escape my grasp.

'Give me the phone!' I yelled.

'Only if you don't undo all my good work!'

'Max! What are you doing this weekend?' she had written five minutes ago, pretending to be me.

'If it's not raining, I'll go to the lake, and if it is raining, I'll be in the bath. I'd even throw on a bathrobe just for you, Lio.'

'Bit hot for a bathrobe, don't you think?'

'Okay, scratch the bathrobe.'

'What's left of you without the bathrobe, Max?'

'You tell me, Lio. I hope it rains all day on Saturday. We could have a get-to-know-you beer in the bath? Or am I projecting again?'

'7 p.m.?'

For once, Mariam hadn't used a single emoji. Impressive.

'The guy knows his grammar and understands what projection means?' I said.

She nodded proudly.

'Max'll snap you out of your self-inflicted celibacy.'

'Are you sure you didn't get sunstroke while you were out swimming?' I asked.

There was no way I'd be getting in the bath with some random guy.

'Do you like the painting?'

'I haven't seen her this focused in a long time,' said Max, who'd seen me for the first time only ten minutes ago.

He put his arm round me. I peered at the picture, which I found artistically fascinating. Mostly, though, it was serving as a brief distraction from this date, which I didn't even want to be on. After much protesting on my part, Mariam had caved and changed the location of our date from Max's bathtub to a small, moderately well-attended exhibition preview and had shooed me out the door with the words, 'Don't be like that, it's just some bang-average, kind-of attractive guy you'll never see again'.

Max was wearing a blue shirt with white dots on it. Of course, he wasn't 2.10 metres tall, otherwise I would never have noticed that his hair was either dark blonde or reddish in colour depending on the light. 'Kind-of' attractive didn't quite do him justice. After our tense and awkward greeting, which we both tried to forget as quickly as possible because it cast our actually very non-awkward personalities in a bad light, Max had pulled a bottle of wine out of his leather jacket and had since been ensuring that my paper cup never ran dry. It was sweet, but unnecessary. The venue had a well-stocked bar full of free booze to loosen visitors' purse strings.

Max nudged me. My unprofessional input was required.

'What a great picture,' I declared. 'I really like it!'

The canvas was almost as big as my bed. A resplendent explosion of gold and yellow stood out against a background of cold blue hues. At the top, drips of paint in various thicknesses ran down from two bright circles onto some shapes resembling leaves. The top half of the picture was bold and bright, the bottom dark and muted. The artist had applied the paint using a glazing technique, a term I had learned from Mariam, so I could still make out the layers beneath. My gaze could barely keep up, drifting from one layer to the next.

'The creative process was so intense,' said the woman who had evidently painted the picture I was staring at.

'I can imagine,' said Max appreciatively.

'Why does your voice sound so familiar?' the artist asked him.

'I'm on the radio,' said Max. 'Planet Pop. Morning show. Every other week. I co-host it with Kat, who's much better at it than me.'

'How exciting!' the artist gushed.

'It's okay, I guess,' said Max.

I nodded knowingly. I hadn't seen him this bored in a long time.

'You should think about starting your own podcast,' I teased. 'Since your voice is so great.'

'Stop it now, babe.' Max patted my shoulder. 'Running gag,' he explained to the artist.

'Do you want to hear the story behind the painting?' she asked.

'That's why we're here,' said Max.

'My husband suddenly left me after fifteen years of marriage and two children together. He decided he was into men. Now he wears earrings and flowery shirts, and there I am...'

'I mean, he didn't exactly decide though,' Max said, interrupting her. 'Sorry,' he added.

'Everyone needs a few flowery shirts in their wardrobe,' I muttered. 'Including me.'

'Obviously I know that, but just between ourselves.' She winked conspiratorially. 'Anyway, I've been trawling through our attic like a madwoman, digging through old photo albums looking for answers. I didn't find any there, of course. Gay is gay. Then, when I was plastered one day, I booked a trip to the beach and spent the whole weekend not sleeping and pouring my heart and soul into this painting.'

'Leaving isn't easy either,' I lectured the woman, who must have been twenty years my senior. 'For your husband, I mean. Ex-husband.'

'He gave us both the chance to start again. I suppose that was a blessing in disguise,' she relented.

Max's gaze darkened.

'And did it work? Pouring your heart and soul into the painting?' I asked.

'Of course not.' She grinned. 'The painting is for sale by the way!'

'Really? How much?' Max asked.

'If you marry your girlfriend this year, I'll give you a €500 discount.'

Perhaps the artist hadn't moved on from her divorce after all.

'Do you have business cards?' Max was pretending he wanted to sleep on it and get back to her.

While the artist was hunting for her business cards, I whispered into Max's ear, 'You're good, babe.'

He topped up my paper cup with red wine, his lips brushing my cheek as he murmured, 'Flowery shirts, huh?'

'Aren't you sticking around?' the artist asked. 'Some of us have already started the afterparty out the back. I'm Martina by the way.'

Max and I exchanged glances, neither of us willing or able to leave this joke of an event and be forced to have a serious conversation. We both nodded enthusiastically.

The afterparty was actually a thinly veiled opportunity for the four artists who were exhibiting their work to talk shop, which they did with such gusto you would have thought they were at a panel discussion at documenta. Two men, a woman and Martina perched on rickety chairs around a wine crate sporting more filled paper cups. Max and I sat down too, nodding with great interest and pulling increasingly ambitious faces at one another while no one was looking. Their discussion was mainly focused on subversive processes, transmediality and metaphorical drawers. There should, in their view, be even more unravelling, questioning and arguing in future. By the time the word catharsis was mentioned for the third time and the artists were starting to slur their speech, which thankfully did nothing to impair the substance of their discussion, my ears had been bent to breaking point and the end of my rope was in sight.

'Oh, would you look at the time!' Max cried suddenly, looking at his phone. 'We're late for a birthday party!'

'What a shame! We could have chatted with you forever,' said Martina.

The others nodded in agreement.

'Time flies when you're having fun,' I said, standing up.

The others nodded again. They knew the feeling well.

'I'll be in touch about the painting!' Max called through the door as it snapped shut behind us.

We stumbled, giggling, down the stairs. I could feel the alcohol going to my head. Max too.

'Dance for me!' he said, undoing the top two buttons of his shirt.

He slumped down on a step and started playing *Blue Suede Shoes* by Elvis Presley on his phone.

I climbed onto the windowsill and shimmied as fast as the limited space allowed.

Well, it's one for the money

Two for the show

Three to get ready

Now go, cat, go

I shuffled my snow-white Reeboks across the smooth stone and gave it everything I had. Afterwards, I bowed so low that I almost fell off the window ledge. Max lifted me back to the ground and skipped through his playlist. I saw it had several thousand followers, and Max explained that he used to do regular gigs as a DJ. He only worked with records, of course. Kids today had no idea that music was something you could and should work for, and that nothing under two minutes could be considered art.

Finally, we swayed back and forth to Michelle Gurevich's *Party Girl* like two people who were smug about that one dance course they took at secondary school, but who thought getting the rumba steps in the right order was overrated.

I'm a party girl

Crazy girl

See my lips how they move

Can't you see I'm a natural?

Life of a party girl

Sexy girl

I used to be so fragile

But now I'm so wild

Then we heard the door open upstairs and noises entering the stairwell.

'Run!' I whispered in mock panic. We were late for a birthday party, after all.

We pelted down the stairs and only stopped running when we were two streets away.

'One more thing, Bonnie,' Max panted.

He took my hand, and all of a sudden I couldn't wait to go home.
Alone.

'What?' I asked.

'Will you go for a dip with me next weekend?'

When I unlocked the door to our flat half an hour later and quietly crept inside, I could hear giggling from Mariam's room.

'Lio?!'

I tried to sneak to my room on tiptoe so Mariam wouldn't give me the third degree.

'Get in here!'

Stupid tiptoes.

'Are you naked?' I asked.

'Yes,' shouted a man's voice.

'No!' Mariam was indignant.

She and Elias were lying fully clothed on their bed watching some American late-night talk show.

'On a scale of one to ten, how much do you love me for setting you up?' Mariam said, pausing the video.

'Five and a half,' I gave a rough estimate.

'Are you drunk?'

'No way.'

'Hey, Lio, we've still got some nachos left over. Do you want me to grab you a plate?' asked Elias, who either felt sorry for me or didn't want to witness the interrogation.

I nodded enthusiastically.

'Is he a good kisser?' Mariam raised her eyebrows.

'No idea,' I said.

'But you were supposed to make out with him. You had one job!'

'But he's not a bad dancer.'

Mariam yawned.

Luckily, at that moment Elias returned with a portion of nachos groaning beneath a mound of jalapeños, tomatoes, corn, coriander, sour cream and lashings of cheese. I suddenly realised how ravenous I was.

‘Do you want to go on a long bike ride this weekend? Mari will only come if you’re there too,’ he said, pointing to his girlfriend, who was once again busying herself with imagining the talk show host naked.

‘I’ve got plans, sorry,’ I muttered as quietly as possible in the hope that Mariam wouldn’t hear.

Unfortunately for me, she leapt up, throwing her laptop off the bed in the process, and rushed over to me. Mariam had spent five years trying to convince me to let someone into my heart—‘because some people are far too nice to let you end up an old spinster, people like me for instance’—and I had never once in those five years had ‘plans’ that didn’t involve her, studying or work, so she knew I hadn’t made such a pig’s ear of that stupid *one job* after all.

‘Lio is drunk and in love! Lio is drunk and in love! Lio is drunk and in love!’ she yelled, planting a kiss on my lips.

‘I’ll come with you next time,’ I told Elias, still clamped tightly in Mariam’s arms as she bounced up and down. ‘I can’t leave you alone with this one, can I?’

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[pp. 79 – 83]

My mother had always set a lot of store by her reputation in the village. Her daughter wore clean clothes and shoes. Her husband had been working in a steel mill since he was sixteen, the only business in the area with more than twenty employees. She did the accounts for various small shops in the village that would eventually close because people were driving to big places in their big cars to do their big shops nowadays. In winter she swept the snow from the pavement, and in summer she complained about the families with small children who spent weeks on holiday at the campsite by

the river, but hardly spent any money in the local restaurants and ice cream parlours.

Every year, in the autumn, the village streets were strewn with rotting grapes from the hillsides behind the houses, which were covered with miles upon miles of vineyards for wine growing: Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Dornfelder. There was almost as much wine as there were Catholics, whose main goal in life was not to please God or the priest, but their neighbours.

In front of the house where we rented the top floor were three large planters filled with seasonal flowers. The walls of the house were threaded with ivy and the snaking tendrils of vines. From some windows you could see the river, which was brown as lentil soup all year round. Sometimes, a river cruise ship would glide in slow motion from right to left. Between the river and the house lay a large road, a small lawn and several vegetable patches, in which my mother grew lettuce, courgettes, radishes, tomatoes, rhubarb, vineyard peaches, redcurrants and apples. A good harvest meant we wouldn't need to spend as much on food, and that put her in a better mood.

She had completed her nursing training at eighteen. Less than two months later, she was pregnant with me. So she packed in her job, which didn't stop her acting as the resident medical expert for the rest of her life, and convinced my father to marry her. At first, I was a thorn in my mother's side and a third wheel in her marriage, then a thorn that bit her nipples raw instead of sucking, and then a thorn draining money from her wallet.

In defiance of every Catholic ideal, my mother was head of the family. Apart from her hairstyle, which collapsed in wet weather, everything about her was rock hard. Her hips didn't have a single gram of fat on them. She had high, sharp cheekbones, and every morning she would spritz her neck with perfume. I didn't know whether she did it out of habit or because she liked the smell. I didn't know whether my mother liked anyone or anything.

Whenever I arrived home from school and rang the doorbell, I would, for a moment, be privy to the version of my mother she reserved for other people: the polite version.

'Who is it?' she would ask through the intercom in a friendly tone. And I would answer, 'Lio.'

I would hear her breathe heavily and press the button with the key on

it. Silently, I would enter the house. My friends' houses smelled of lavender, crumb cake or cheap scented candles. Ours smelled like vinegar cleaning solution. Now I would find out whether today was one of those days that, even at midday, my mother didn't know what to do with all her anger. If it was quiet in the house, I would be spared. But for years she would come and meet me on the stairs almost every day and drag me up to the attic by my sleeve. She wore a faded apron that she would use to wipe her hands, which had just been cutting onions or stirring soup, and got herself ready. Sometimes I would pull down my trousers myself to make her job easier. Then my mother would grab her wooden spoon and smack my naked behind. Her smacks were precise and uniform. Often, I would dig my fingernails into the palms of my hands and force myself to stay in the moment. I wanted to use each second to forget the previous one. If I managed that, I'd have forgotten everything by the time I moved out one day.

In my memory, each of these periods of exertion went on for hours, but they probably never lasted longer than two minutes.

When my father came home from his shift, he would open a bottle of red wine—his first of the evening—and sit in his old leather armchair staring at the river. The second bottle came after dinner, and the third with the news at eight. Depending on the day, he would either doze off in his chair or manage to drag himself to the marital bed. The wooden floorboards made it impossible to move quietly around our flat, which was both good, because the sound of footsteps gave me advance warning, and bad, because anyone who needed the toilet in the night was betrayed by the sound of the boards creaking.

So as not to incur my mother's anger, I trained myself to pee in my room at night. I would pull down my pyjama trousers, sit on the cold rim of the wastepaper bin and start peeing. If the rest of the flat was silent and I was afraid my mother would hear me, it would take me longer. If the TV was on or she was already in bed, I'd be done in ten seconds. I would wash out the bin in the shower the next morning.

For years, my mother was none the wiser. Until she came into the bathroom one Saturday morning and asked me, the picture of innocent curiosity, what had happened.

'I didn't dare go to the loo last night,' I said.

She sneered, then turned away again.

I wasn't ashamed of what I'd done. I was hoping she would show a bit of understanding.

Moments later, my mother returned with a wooden spoon in her hand. We usually took a break from our attic excursions at weekends because my father was at home. But not today.

Without a word, I climbed up the stairs behind her in my pyjamas. It was only when the spoon broke in half that she finally stopped. She thrust the two halves into my hand and said:

'Hang that above your bed and don't show your face again today!'

As if that were a punishment.

15

[pp. 122 – 126]

4 Weeks Pregnant

The blastocyst, a spherical cluster of cells, implants into the endometrium. It is half a millimetre in length and is about the size of a poppyseed. The pregnancy hormone HCG prevents the mother's body from shedding the uterine lining. This is a delicate phase because external influences can easily harm the embryo. But once this blastocyst has firmly implanted, the yolk sac, amnion and placenta form. The placenta provides the cluster of cells with nutrients and oxygen and removes metabolic waste products.

'We're late, let's go!' Mariam yelled after I had trudged up the four flights of stairs to our old flat.

She already had her tennis racket on her back and was raring to go. Once I had extracted myself from her hurried embrace, I held up a little white box in front of her nose.

‘What’s that?’ she said, although it said what it was right there on the packaging.

Mariam gaped, beamed, then saw my stony face and snapped her mouth shut again.

‘Surprise,’ I said tonelessly.

Mariam pulled me inside the flat and shut the door.

‘When did you last get your period?’

‘This can’t be happening.’

‘I’ll just let the tennis court know. Shall I roll us a joint?’

‘No, better not.’

While Mariam was on the phone, I took off my shoes, dropped my bag on the floor, and only then realised I’d forgotten to bring my tennis things with me. I’d taken Lotti for a quick walk after work, bought a test and cycled on autopilot straight over to Mariam’s.

I went to the bathroom, closed the door almost all the way, and peed on the test strip. Then I flushed the toilet and sat down on the light grey shag carpet in front of the bath. The bathroom was crammed full of expensive creams, oils and scented candles, just like mine and Max’s bathroom was filled with dirty coffee cups into which he had dropped cigarette butts thinking I wouldn’t notice. Since Elias had been living here, Mariam’s flat was much neater and less colourful than back when it had still been my home too.

‘Please say something,’ called Mariam from the kitchen.

‘Hello.’

‘Has it been three minutes yet?’

There was nothing so precious in life as those first few seconds when something life-changing had happened and you didn’t have to tell anyone else yet. The same was true of both good and bad news, in my experience: getting accepted to university, your aunt’s premature death, a 3+ next to a blue line.

Mariam appeared in the doorway.

‘Well?’

I held the stick out to her.

'That doesn't mean anything. Should I get more tests? The pharmacy round the corner is still open.'

I shook my head.

Mariam sat down on the floor next to me and started taking the piss out of the straight white couple on the packaging who were grinning at the test strip with borderline manic expressions on their faces. I looked at Mariam's face, then back to the display, then back at Mariam's face, then burst out laughing. I was shaking with laughter so hard that I almost fell over.

'This isn't good news, is it?' Mariam ascertained, after I'd calmed down.

I had always assumed I couldn't get pregnant. My body wasn't a real female body. At best, it was a rejected prototype. Besides, nature must have had some incentive to stop someone like me reproducing.

'Do you want to call Max?'

'This woman did the test with her guy there,' I said and ripped the package into tiny pieces.

'I don't think you should decide what to do based on their life choices. They'll end up breaking up after a year because she thinks he should be changing nappies more often and he can't help noticing she's put on a few pounds. "You're getting chubby, darling. I'm only telling you because I'm worried about your health." That's how he talks, I swear!'

'Hm,' I replied.

'Telling Max doesn't mean...' Mariam hesitated and made a weird little gesture in front of her stomach, '...that you need to see it through.'

'He might be happy about it,' I said. 'And overestimate himself and us, like he always does.'

'Wouldn't you be happy about that?'

'If I mess up my relationship with Max, the same will happen with everyone else too. Including children.'

'That's not what I asked.'

'I dunno. Probably not. No.'

'You think Max has stuck around out of pure charity? He needs you as much as you need him.'

'Why didn't I do the test on my own?' I groaned.

'So, what now? Vodka or weed?'

'I feel sick,' I said.

'It's not fair,' said Mariam.

'What isn't?'

'That you're the one lumbered with this, even though I'm the one who tempted fate so many times.'

But it was also true that Mariam wouldn't be *lumbered* with a pregnancy. Elias loved babies—the smaller, the better. Mariam would rather skip the first few years and start the whole motherhood thing when she could have discussions with the kid about Henry Moore sculptures. But the fact that they both saw a family in their future was obvious.

16

[pp. 129 – 133]

5 Weeks Pregnant

The embryonic stem cells now turn into specialised cells and form the trilaminar embryonic disc. The top layer of cells forms the neural canal, which will eventually become the brain and spinal cord. All the other organs are also formed from the embryonic layers. At this stage, an ultrasound will not show an embryo yet, just a small black dot. That is the amniotic sac, which is one centimetre in size.

I would rather have a root canal every week than go to an annual check-up with my gynaecologist.

Every time, Dr Yilmaz and I would exchange pleasantries across her huge desk—how are you, fine thanks, how was your holiday? She went Sweden in the summer and the Alps in the winter. I never went

anywhere, but as soon as I stepped foot in her surgery I always felt homesick. Then we'd go into the next room, the one with the table to lie on and all the instruments. I would get undressed, feeling very uncomfortable, and climb onto the chair, which not only looked like an instrument of torture, but also was one. I would put my feet in the stirrups to the right and left. Dr Yilmaz would raise me up—spread your legs a bit wider—and hold up a silver speculum—just to warn you, this may feel cold—but the temperature wouldn't even register because I would immediately feel a sharp pain shoot through me. The speculum would rip my guts wide open. It'll be easier if you just relax. Do they say that to animals at the slaughterhouse too? I never had any idea how long the contraption was inside me—could have been sixty seconds, ninety, or two minutes. Then Dr Yilmaz would take a swab, and I'd try my hardest not to be sick. After an eternity, she would take the speculum out. I would remain sitting there, stiff as a board, unable to move. Then she would rub some non-strawberry-flavoured lube onto a probe and give me a questioning look—ready?—I would nod, and the probe would slide in pretty easily. No wonder, since the speculum had done all the work. You see that? she would ask, pointing to the ultrasound monitor next to her, That's the cervix. It looks good.

Finally, Dr Yilmaz would slip a practised right hand into a glove and shove it into me. Amazing, I would think as I always did, there's an adult's hand inside me. She would feel around in there and press her other hand down on the outside—your abdominal wall is rather hard, but otherwise nothing to report. Almost done. She would lower the chair, and I would stand up and totter back to the little changing area, where I would put my trousers back on and take off my t-shirt. Next, she would feel my breasts for lumps, which sometimes appeared during my cycle, but which had always turned out to be harmless tissue. No news is good news, Dr Yilmaz would always say before I left. I would thank her and power walk as fast as I could past the receptionist. I would call them to arrange my next appointment. Bye. After the heavy surgery door had shut behind me and I couldn't hold on for one more second, my body would unclench and I would start to shake. I never waited for the lift, opting instead to run down the five flights of stairs. Outside, things were usually just as they always were: sometimes raining, the fruit seller shouting, apples and pears!, a cyclist zigzagging nimbly past

a bus, someone limping across the road, most people staring at their phones. And I would stand there, retching and bawling my eyes out as if I'd had my guts ripped out with no anaesthetic in exchange for a fat bonus from the health insurance company.

That's how my gynaecologist appointments normally went.

Today was different.

Today I couldn't help noticing the wall of baby photos in the waiting room. Several layers on top of one another, as if the doctor was trying to tell me she was responsible for bringing every baby in history into the world. Today I wondered for the first time what happened to the ones who ended up in the loo or the bin.

Dr Yilmaz's desk had a new picture frame on it. I couldn't see what or who was in the photo from my side. We went without the small talk because she hadn't been on holiday since my last visit.

I got undressed and sat down on the chair. Whatever was about to happen couldn't possibly be worse than the speculum.

I spread my legs. Dr Yilmaz squeezed some gel onto her probe and said, 'We'll just take a look, shall we?' as if anyone but her would be doing the looking.

She rummaged around in there, then looked at the screen and cleared her throat.

'You are pregnant in uterus.'

I could tell from her expression that most of her patients had a different reaction to this news than I did.

'So, what now?' I asked.

'May I offer my congratulations?'

'What if I don't want it?'

Dr Yilmaz sighed as if I'd offended her.

'Then you need to find another doctor.'

'Why?'

'Because that goes against my principles.'

'Do you have any recommendations?'

Dr Yilmaz sighed again. While I got my clothes back on, she went to the other room and fished a sheet of paper out of her desk with a list of addresses on it that had evidently been photocopied many times.

I don't know how up to date these are. You'll need to ring around. There are medicinal and surgical options available. Most places only offer the surgery. You'll need to get hold of a consultation certificate at least three days beforehand to show that you've thought things through.' Dr Yilmaz wasn't unfriendly or accusatory; she just didn't want to be having this conversation. 'Don't go to a religious clinic if...'

'If I've got no principles?'

She looked at me in silence.

'The receptionist will give you your medical certificate as proof of pregnancy,' she said finally.

We nodded at one another, unsure if our relationship would recover if the fertilised bundle of egg cells implanted in my cervix didn't end up pictured on a thank-you card on her wall in ten months' time.

'I need my medical certificate,' I said quietly to the receptionist, whose name badge just said 'Chrissy'.

'Of course!' said Chrissy, beaming at me. 'Congratulations! I'll get your pregnancy logbook ready too.'

'I don't need one, thanks.'

'Oh. That's a shame.' She looked sad.

I took the piece of paper and left.

In the lift on the way down, I looked at the diagnosis as if it were confirming I had a chronic illness, a malignant tumour or an irritating, untreatable STI.

[END OF SAMPLE]