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If That's How It Is

Translated by: Rachel McNicholl

It has to be done, that's clear, and today's the day. Anne has an appointment – today, not tomorrow – and she'll go there, and they'll suck the embryo out of her. She's going on her own. "Max," she said, "I have to do this on my own. I don't want you to come."

I said, "Are you sure? Do you not want me to collect you either? Think about it, please – you don't really want to be alone when you wake up, do you?" But Anne tilted her head slightly to one side and gave me a stern look, as if to say, This is my body, and you know where you can stick your leading question, so please just accept it, OK. And that was that. The worldly-wise Anne. When she's got that look, it means keep your mouth shut or soon we'll be having a screaming match. That much I know. Call it empirical evidence. We've been together for over two years.

Anne is dolling herself up big time. She's been in the bathroom for three quarters of an hour already. I could hear the hairdryer a while ago, and before that she took another shower. Whenever the two of us are going out she doesn't take half as long, and she goes round the apartment at least twice, shouting that she has nothing to wear. Then she comes into my room and stands in front of me, always a little lopsided, one leg bent slightly, all stressed out and panting with effort, and asks if she looks OK like that. Each time I fall a little in love with that stance, and with the panting, and I say, "You look great. You look fantastic." I say the same about every outfit. It's a ritual.

She emerges from the bathroom in her underwear, heads straight for her room, and closes the door without saying a word. I have no idea what to do with myself. I sit on the kitchen couch and study my fingernails; every now and then I bite off a bit of cuticle. I'm waiting, waiting for it to be over. I'm listening for sounds in the apartment, so that I can hear what Anne is doing. I'd rather be drinking, to be honest, preferably since this morning. Anne is getting dressed.

Three months ago, none of this would even have been possible. Anne hardly ever felt like sex any more. It was frustrating, for her and for me, and getting a little worse week by week. At first the problem only arose when we tried to make love and it didn't work. More and more, we ended up lying back to back until one of us would touch the other gently on the arm. Later, she rejected me before it even got to that stage. I assume she did that because she wanted to avoid my obvious disappointment and her anger at her own body. But it didn't make things any better.

At some point our relationship began to suffer as a result. Our behaviour towards each other became more distant; Anne was less and less inclined to spontaneously sit on my lap after Sunday breakfast. We no longer gave each other a kiss when we arrived home. And we got annoyed with each other way more often, blaming one another for silly little things. It crept up on us; we didn't realise it until it was almost too late and we found ourselves wondering, after a vicious row, if we still loved each other at all.

The gynaecologist said that the pill can be a contributing factor to a lower libido. So Anne stopped taking it. This did help, in fact; we slept with each other more often. Our love-making changed around then; the sex got better. Anne especially seemed to be getting more out of it. But we didn't like condoms. And we didn't use any other form of contraception. We ignored the risk of pregnancy; we didn't talk about it either – it was more a case of letting things happen than actually doing

anything. Ten days ago, I came home and Anne said, "I'm pregnant." That was the first and last time she uttered the word.

It's 4pm. The appointment is in half an hour. That was the earliest available slot; they squeezed Anne in. She has been fasting since breakfast.

She still has to get to the other side of town, but she's taking her time getting dressed. I knock on the door of her room. "What is it?" she says.

"Can I come in?" I ask.

"If you must."

She's wearing a white blouse, a black trouser suit, and high heels. She's got lots of make-up on. Red lipstick, foundation, powder, eye shadow, mascara, kohl, rouge, the works – too much of everything. You can see little skin blemishes beneath the make-up, and a line on her neck where the make-up ends. Her hair is tied back tight in a ponytail. Anne doesn't look at all like Anne. She looks like a version of herself about to try and trade in a clocked car for more than it's worth.

"Well, say something," she says, "Tell me how I look at least."

"You look great. You look fantastic," I say. "The whole waiting room will fall in love with you."

"It's a gynaecologist's, Max. The only people there will be women waiting for an appointment during which a stranger will peer into their vagina." She's looking in the mirror. She tugs at her ponytail, at her cleavage, and wrinkles her forehead. "No one is going to be falling in love with anyone there."

"What's the matter?" I say. "All I was trying to say is you look great."

"OK, Max. OK."

Up to this point the day had been pretty normal. The usual morning routines. Anne was first into the bathroom; I stayed in bed and told her how beautiful she was when she came back to the bedroom wearing just underwear and a towel around her head and stood in front of the wardrobe as usual. We used the time in the morning to spring-clean the apartment. Cleaning out cupboards, descaling the kettle, clearing drains. We hardly spoke. If we did say anything, it was to remark on how surprising it is that closed cupboards can get so dirty on the inside.

One of our big pasta plates got broken, the last of them. We'd had four, all kaput now. I dropped it as Anne was handing it to me. It hit the floor, shards scattering in all directions. Anne cursed in a loud voice and accused me of being awfully clumsy. Later I cooked some pasta for myself and ate it off a flat plate. Silently, Anne watched me eat, then she headed for the bathroom.

She turns to face me. "I have to get rid of it. Have you any idea what this is doing to me?" She turns back to the mirror and runs a hand over her hair. She presses a tissue to her lips to remove the excess lipstick. Then she picks up her handbag and walks past me out of the room. I follow her into the hallway and as far as the front door. "By the way, Marie is coming to meet me afterwards, assuming everything goes to plan," she says. "We'll probably go for dinner or something. I'll give you a ring when it's over. Don't wait for me in any case – I don't know what time I'll be back."

"What do you mean," I say, "Is that how it is now?"

"Max, it's me they're going to be sucking an embryo out of – me! But don't you worry, I'll be fine."

I knew straight away that I didn't want it. My response was clear, right from the start. "I can't imagine having a kid, not right now," I said. Anne was crying. I said, "I mean, I can imagine it in

principle, and with you, just not yet.” We’d only been living together for six months. Anne had just been put in charge of her own group at the kindergarten. I had a thesis to write and final exams to prepare for. We’d been planning a long summer holiday travelling in the USA. That’s how things were. We sat on the bed, held each other, and could not believe how stupid we had been. We thumped the mattress with our fists and flung the pillows across the room. We both agreed that being pregnant should be good news. We didn’t spell out what that meant; we just decided not to say anything to our parents. Anne said the smell of coffee and cigarettes already made her feel sick.

She’s leaving, heading down the stairs without giving me a kiss or a hug. I stay in the apartment doorway. “Have you got the certificate?” I call out after her. Anne pauses on the landing. She grips the banister, looks up over her shoulder. There’s a ceiling light immediately above her, and it casts shadows on Anne’s face, under her eyes, on her cheeks. She looks hard. My sweet little Anne, the girl who stood in front of the wardrobe after our first night and couldn’t decide which socks to wear; this same Anne is now standing half a storey below me, stiff, in heels and an ironed blouse; and her eyes are hard too. She says, “Yes, I have the certificate.”

“Are you sure?” I say. “No harm checking again. You need that piece of paper.”

But Anne doesn’t answer, just continues down the stairs. The clack of her heels echoes dully in the stairwell. I remain at the apartment door, picking at a spot on my neck. Then the front door clicks shut downstairs. Throughout the last ten days, I was never able to imagine what a heavily pregnant Anne would look like.

The last time we were at the gynaecologist’s, Anne cried on the way home. She’s been going to the same practice since she got her first period. The bus was driving through the neighbourhood where she grew up, and Anne spent the whole time staring out the window, crying silent tears. We’d got confirmation; the doctor had pointed at the ultrasound monitor and said, “Yes, look here, see that – you’re pregnant.” With a great deal of imagination, you could just make out a worm-like shape the size of your fingertip. She gave us a leaflet with addresses of places where you can get crisis pregnancy counselling, and we set off home, and Anne cried.

I go back into the apartment and look down at the street from the window. Anne is already out of sight. In the kitchen, I get a beer out of the fridge. I see that my hand is shaking. I put the opener down beside the bottle, lean against the worktop and take a deep breath. Then I stretch both hands out in front of me. I’m shaking. I look at my trembling hands and remember my father once telling me how, ever since the moment I was born, he had lost control of his life: all he could do from then on was react, not act; it was like navigating through a permanent fog. There was no accusation in his voice, more surprise at this realisation. We were sitting in my grandparents’ garden, drinking cool beer under a blossoming cherry tree. He stood up and went back to the patio, where three generations were sitting together. My father was twenty-six when I was born, the same age I am now.

We didn’t tell anyone our news. We went to the countryside for the weekend, to get away from it all. To a small guesthouse that had oak furniture in the breakfast room. We explored the village, barbecued on the terrace at the guesthouse and walked the country lanes.

In the evenings we tried to imagine how it would be if we kept the baby. We only discussed practical things. Money, parental leave, the apartment. We each identified a close friend we would confide in. We didn’t once, the two of us together, picture the baby on a nappy-changing table, how it would grin at us and fart at the same time, or nestle at Anne’s breast to feed, or crawl around the apartment, or say its first words.

Nor did we speak about the stressful aspects of the first few years of parenting, the sleepless nights, the general restrictions. None of that. "We'd have to move house" – that's the way we talked.

It was only during our walks, or at night when I couldn't sleep, that I wondered what it would be like to push a buggy or to hear someone else's breathing in the bedroom besides Anne's. But I didn't speak these thoughts out loud. On the last evening, Anne was smoking and drinking again. The word abortion had not been mentioned.

I'm sitting at the kitchen table, three empty beer bottles in front of me at this stage. My forehead is propped on my hand, and I'm still waiting. It occurs to me that we ought to oil the table top again; the wood is all dry and bleached. In one place you can see a deep circular indent. The legacy of one of our rows. I was so worked up that I slammed the base of a tumbler down hard on the table.

I take a fresh beer out of the fridge and sit down again. The shaking is a bit better now. It is quiet, unbelievably quiet. All I hear is the ticking of the clock. It's making me nervous, so I take it off the wall and remove the battery. The hands stop at twelve minutes past six. I put the clock face down on the table, beside the empty bottles. I think of my Anne lying there with her legs open and various doctors and nurses coming and going around her. A breathing tube in her mouth; the anaesthetist seated by her head, watching the cardiac monitor, keeping an eye on Anne's heartbeat, while down at the other end people are shoving sterile instruments into her. I start sweating, on the back of my neck, on my forehead, under my arms. I wonder whether everything went OK, whether she has come round yet. Whether it's over. I finish my fourth beer.

I reckon we were a straightforward case for the Pro Familia counsellor. We had already reached a decision. We needed the counselling certificate and we knew that anyone who went for a counselling session always got the cert. On a form, we were supposed to give reasons why the pregnancy presented a conflict. Items one and two on the list were "family or relationship problems" and "father of the child does not support the pregnancy/mother". I ticked number thirteen, "financial/economic circumstances", and number sixteen, "educational/professional circumstances", and pushed the form across the desk. Anne could see what I'd selected. Then she turned her page face down and slid it across to the counsellor.

The counsellor looked at our forms, then asked: "On a scale of 0 to 100 per cent, how much would you say you do not want to have this child?"

"90 per cent", I said.

Anne looked sideways at me, and then she said: "90 per cent."

Thirty minutes later we had a stamped certificate confirming that we had been for counselling. Anne took several leaflets from an information stand as well and stuffed them in her bag. The allocated time for the counselling session was one hour.

It's after nine o'clock. Still no word from Anne. I'm still drinking beer, downing it faster. By now I'm drunk, pacing up and down in the kitchen, in the hallway. I'm pacing round and round the apartment like a man possessed. I'm no longer worried, I'm furious – with Anne, with us, with everything. I wobble a bit and bang into a doorframe. Calm down, damn it, I say to myself. I turn on the TV but I can't watch a single programme for more than five minutes. Something on every station triggers an unpleasant association. I can't even watch a cookery programme. I switch channels when I see a honeydew melon being de-seeded. I turn the TV off again and close my eyes. Then my mobile rings.

"I meant to ring you," says Anne.

I can hear music in the background, voices. "How are you?" I say. "Is it over? Where are you?"

"Haven't a clue," she says. "Somewhere or other. Marie is here. We're going to have something to eat now." She sounds exhausted; she's speaking slowly, with a heavy tongue.

"Come home," I say. "Please, come home."

"I told you, we're going to have something to eat here. Don't wait up for me. I have to go now."

"Wait," I say. "Just wait a minute, damn it. Is everything OK?"

"Yeah, yeah. I need to go to the toilet," she says.

Then the line goes dead.

I ring straight back, once, twice, and the third time she rejects the call. The fourth time, the call goes straight to voicemail. I fling my mobile on the floor and the battery falls out. I am struggling to breathe and have to sit down on the floor. I start crying, for the first time since Anne told me that she was pregnant. I weep hysterically and let out one loud scream. Then I get up again, wipe my hand across my face and piece my mobile back together again. I start searching the apartment for clues as to where Anne might have gone with Marie.

I read the notes on her desk. I turn her computer on and check her internet search history. I am determined to find out where she is, to go there and bring her home. She didn't search for any restaurants or bars in the last three days. Instead, Anne seems to have trawled her way through every German-language discussion forum about abortion. Threads with titles like "Eternal memory" or "Anniversary of due date". The pile of leaflets Anne picked up at Pro Familia catches my eye. The covers show happy-looking parents with toddlers: Child Benefits and Parental Leave, Studying and Parenting, Pregnant in Berlin. I delete the search history, grab the leaflets, take them straight down to the basement, and dump them in the paper bin. On the way back up, I hear my mobile ringing. I sprint up the stairs.

"Where are you?" I ask.

"It's Marie," says Marie, "Anne wanted me to let you know that everything's OK. We're in a restaurant. I'll take her home later."

"Which restaurant? I'll come and get you," I say.

"Max," says Marie, "Anne doesn't want you to come here. I'll make sure she gets home, don't worry. But please don't ring again."

She hangs up.

A few minutes later, I ring Anne again and get her voicemail. The recorded message is cheerful, she sounds good-humoured and happy, the kind of voice you'd like to leave a message for.

After the beep, I say in a faltering voice, "Anne, it's Max. If I've done something wrong, I'm really sorry. But please come home now. Come home – OK? I can't stand it any more... I love you."

I'm standing at the window keeping an eye out. Every time a car approaches I hope it's a taxi with its roof light off and Anne in it. Now I'm drinking the dregs of cheap schnapps on ice. My mobile is on the window seat beside me. In the building across the street, a couple is cuddled up on the sofa watching TV. Insects swarm around the glow of a streetlamp. Another car approaches slowly, but it doesn't stop. I ask myself where I lost Anne along the way. I try to think of a moment, any gesture or phrase that ought to have signalled that what was running through her head in the last ten days was

completely different to what was running through mine. I realise that I have no idea where we go from here.

I wake when I hear the key turning in the apartment door. The TV is flickering in silence, throwing faint light into the room in time with the scene changes. I get up and quickly head for the hallway. Anne bumps off the wall as she enters. Her make-up is smeared, her face oddly contorted; she has been crying. "Anne...", I say and go to her.

She takes half a step back, holds her hands chest high, palms out, and looks past me. She looks like a stop sign.

"Anne...", I say again, "it's over now, isn't it, you got through it."

She doesn't answer, just manoeuvres past me with her hands still raised, careful not to touch me. When she's right beside me, I reach gently for her chin, to try and get her to raise her head, to get her to look at me at least, to find out what's really going on. She catches my wrist, looks me in the eye and guides my hand down very slowly. It feels like a threat. The piercing disdain in her eyes brings goose bumps to the back of my neck. She goes into her room.

I hear her pulling something out from under the bed. I head for her room and stand on the threshold. Anne is packing a small suitcase. She says, "I'm staying at Marie's tonight."