

1 In the Shadow of the Rainbow Unicorn

Ingrid and Olga, two long-time acquaintances of mine, suddenly began inviting me for dinners more often than usual. Every time I showed up they would hug me in a meaningful way and soon I realized what question was to follow. They were looking for a donor.

I spent days and nights lost in thought. To experience the growth of a new being? From the very beginning? We gays generally don't give much thought to children. But the idea sounded attractive. One an artist, the other an engineer. A well-balanced couple, how ideal. One Swedish, the other Slovene. The former more feminine, the latter quite butch. Both environmental activists and hardcore vegans. At the time it sounded most virtuous to me.

We were debating it for hours. Ingrid was to give birth, Olga would adopt. Nothing easier here in the Netherlands. The child should know me, they proposed, and spend one weekend per month with me. Just right. However, I'm thinking, do I have anything to offer this baby? What if it's a boy? I'm really bad at football. But I am creative, excellent in painting and playing the piano. I also sing well and I know dozens of children's songs. Certainly I will find time for the kid. I will help it to grow into a healthy, honest person. The more I contemplated, the more I wanted the plan to work out.

What could possibly go wrong? We had known each other for years. We signed the contract, toasting the occasion with sparkling wine. I locked myself alone in a room. Will it really happen, this miracle, conception from a cup? Surprisingly, one did not have to wait long. Joyful, but also in deep awe, I was waiting for the arrival of a little loaf. Please let everything go smoothly, I begged the creating forces every evening. The couple did not want to find out the sex at the ultrasound. At least that's what they said. Mr. Trump had just entered office when a little boy was born. Luka. This year he turned four years old.

That is all I know about him.

It all started slowly, about one year after the birth. I used to babysit him once a week in the afternoon. The atmosphere was cheerful, I felt welcomed. We had dinners together, occasionally went for a walk. It seemed that my socializing with the child was something desirable. I was careful not to come unannounced, call repeatedly or impose myself in any way.

First I felt clumsy with a fragile small being in my hands. Showing him photos of butterflies on the wall I talked to him encouragingly, hoping not to set off any sirens. But he was of a content nature, and I was able to quickly make him laugh. You were a happy baby, Luka! You pulled on my beard when I was laying you into your stroller. Your blue eyes were staring at the swift Dutch clouds, you were excitedly kicking and babbling until my lullaby won you over. When your legs got stronger, you ran to my huge bicycle and studied every screw. Then you shouted "ta!" and pointed at the canal where I had taken you to watch the boats and water birds.

Occasionally I had the feeling that Olga was somewhat reserved. Or was I just imagining it? Perhaps she was just being protective, making sure that I didn't drop the baby? After all, I was used to her masculine posture. Her body language of a dominant male. With gestures of a grumpy bodyguard, ready to smack your face. As such, I found her interesting. She could easily stand guard at the door of some nightclub.

We knew each other from our student days, before she left for the Netherlands. When I moved there too, we started hanging out more often. The first year I accompanied her to kickboxing trainings in some squat. There just wasn't enough aggression in me for this sport. On Fridays Olga was a devoted volunteer in some public vegan kitchen. These were occupied old places, covered with graffiti and posters with slogans against capitalism. For tolerance, equality, inclusiveness! They rarely missed a march for human rights. Occasionally I asked if I could join them. "Everyone is welcome under the rainbow unicorn", said Ingrid.

Once I unintentionally brought a yogurt into Olga's vegan apartment and immediately her mood soured. But she could also be nice and entertaining. I saw no reason why she would have any resentment towards me regarding the child. I had no idea that something was boiling under the surface.

For a very long time she said nothing. On another occasion I sent an email with attached photos of me as a baby, which apparently enraged her. Only half a year later, when we finally sat down to talk, she revealed: "I don't know why I should be looking at those photos." There was a raging undertone to her voice.

Much later I started remembering her occasional remarks after Luka's arrival. "What an ugly baby he was when he was born." And another time: "How he used to stink." All this I let pass or simply took as a joke. The boy was mostly very cheerful. And so was I. They took excellent care of him, there was order with eating and sleeping. They hand-made him various wooden toys. I expressed praise, how well they were raising him. The response was somewhat cold, but I didn't give it much thought.

On the staircase the neighbors would ask me, "Is he yours?" Yes, I said, but he has two mothers. Long after this Olga revealed that my answer was something unheard of. How else was I supposed to answer. They themselves wrote in the contract "Jaka will be known to the child as the father". They had not given me any instructions. I was certain that I was not doing anything wrong.

A few times we had video calls with my parents, who live a thousand miles away. Once, as my mom was tenderly chatting with Luka, I heard a door in the apartment close with a bang. I thought it was Olga taking out the garbage and the wind had caught the door. She was slightly impatient that day. Only later did it occur to me that there had been no draft. She had left the apartment in anger, slamming the door. Ingrid was still reconcilable and kind at the time. She suggested fun things, such as me bathing with the kid in the tub.

Shortly after his first birthday, they all moved to Sweden. This was planned from the beginning and didn't bother me. Working online allows me unlimited travel, and I was able to visit them several times. At the same time, something was changing, almost imperceptibly. While strolling around the

city Ingrid innocently and casually remarked: "We don't know how to explain to people who you are." I didn't see a problem with that. They could say I was a friend from another country. The next day: "We don't want Luka to call us mother." I should have already heard the alarm, but I didn't.

"Are your parents pressuring you?" It was only at this question that I thought for a moment. Um, they were happy to receive photos, they were interested in Luka. I really didn't see this as pressure. After all, we signed that they could meet the child.

Unknowingly and unintentionally, I was becoming a burden. The more Luka was growing and recognizing people, the more unwelcome I became. I received a longer letter: "...We don't want Luka to be confused. So from now on we will tell everyone that he does not have a father... Because the word father is burdened with high expectations..." Um, I never said I wanted to be called so. They themselves stated in the contract that I would be known to the child as the father. That autumn it was the first time they didn't pick up the phone. I didn't keep trying. I rarely called them anyway. Much later I learned about Olga's comment while I was ringing in vain: "What does he want again?"

It became clear to me that there were heavy clouds on the horizon, only the source was not clear. We set a date for a thorough conversation. The atmosphere was no longer pleasant. During dinner, we pretended as though nothing was happening. Then we opened the wine and for the first time I heard worrying statements. Olga (who is not the biological mother), says that she is struggling with herself. After the birth, she didn't want to, she couldn't, go outside with Luka in his stroller. She couldn't even kiss the boy. She can't even speak Slovene to him. Only her immigrant English.

This caught me unprepared. I was always very careful to let them have their privacy. Next: "The two of us are trying to create a family here!" Did I hear this right? Have I done something wrong? Am I ruining this family? How strong is this family, if my basic kindness is threatening it?

In their opinion, I was showing too much interest in the child. Supposedly I misunderstood our agreement. "You're not the father!" I never said I wanted you to call me so. And it didn't matter to me. "But you still think you are!" It was getting hot. My thoughts were the problem? An indignant voice continued: "You don't have a son!"

After two long debates we did not resolve anything. I received a few more photos of Luka until even these ceased. Among the last was a smiling one-year-old little boy in a pink skirt. His blond locks had grown, a hairclip was holding them above his eyes. I didn't know anything about gender theory at the time.

They started rejecting everything. They ignored a birthday card that I sent. My parents' gift was returned unopened.

After months of no response, they finally suggested a meeting at an exhibition. The Schwankmeier. When I arrived, the little one smiled at me, I touched his cheeks: "Hello, Luka." Unpleasant silence. We buy tickets, then Olga disappears with the boy around the corner of a long hallway. I start looking at the artwork. An hour and a half later I see them on the terrace. She is teaching him to jump. As I get

closer, the teaching became even more engaging. With her back to me. So that is how our meetings will look from now on.

What have I got involved in? Who are these two, really? Who did I entrust this child to? Why such a rejection? Should I go to court? Is this an endless dispute? Lifelong pain? My first thought every morning? Helplessness.

Shortly after Luka's second birthday, I went to visit them in Sweden, for the last time. I made a colorful booklet with illustrations of Luka sitting in a hot-air balloon and different vehicles. The boy came to me immediately, he was not afraid. Olga promptly prepared paper and crayons for him. Pretty obviously she was deterring him from contact with me.

Somewhat later, I hear Luka say to Olga, "Mama". Which seemed nice to me. So he won't be the only child in the kindergarten who doesn't joyfully call out "Mom!" when she comes to pick him up in the afternoon. But weren't they against this word? Because, according to them, isn't too loaded? I ask carefully. How come Luka calls you mom now? Olga reluctantly: "Because of the fucking kindergarten!" Ah, so in kindergarten he picked up such undesired words. Ingrid provides a more elaborate explanation: "When you call a person by name, no one knows anything. But if you say mama, then everyone knows that she is the one who cooks, washes and does everything! Do you understand now?"

After dinner, when Luka falls asleep, we are supposed to start a conversation. I will try with a calm, genuine interest in their views. Maybe at least I will get clearer answers. Now I know I have to look for them between the lines. In a long evening debate, I learn the following: Olga and Ingrid are deeply saddened because they are not able to conceive a child on their own. Because Luka is not biologically from both of them. They want to forget this fact. Ingrid: "It's like living in a bubble." If someone reminds them of this, it hurts badly. They don't want anyone to remind them. But I remind them. Because I show interest in the child. They perceive this as hurtful. That's not right. Olga: "This is unacceptable!"

I repeatedly ask what exactly I did wrong. Silence. They have no answer. They both just feel something. That it is weird if I come and "expect" something. Based on my "genetic role". Ingrid: "Our family does not build on genetic roles, but on social roles." Olga: "There is no room for any genetic crap here. "Genes are taboo in this house!"

That is why I am welcome solely and exclusively as a friend. By no means as a donor or biological father. Olga advises me to behave the same as I would with any other acquaintances with children. So, what can I do then? What am I not allowed to do? Can I sit next to Luka? Can I look at him? All this I need to find out for myself. They don't want to talk about the details. I have to act in the same way as when I visit other friends with children. Olga: "If you can't do that, get help!"

I remind her of our agreement. It was clear to all of us from the very beginning that I was interested in contact with the child. Should I now pretend? Shall I forget how the baby came into existence? Olga: "Find a therapist." Ingrid: "Hide it!" Olga: "I don't want to listen to this shit anymore!"

Olga then reveals that at Luka's birth she experienced an "emotional blow" and "many issues" that she had to deal with. Therefore, I also have to resolve my burdens. I reply that I have no emotional issues. I was simply joyful that a healthy boy was born. And I still am. Ingrid: "Don't you see how much you hurt us when you want to see Luka?" This startled me. I had no idea I was hurting anyone.

After all, they themselves wrote in the agreement that the child would stay with me one weekend per month. Ingrid: "Because we were stupid! We would never write something like that again... It is completely irresponsible for a parent to promise something like that! Now, as a parent, I think, how the hell can anyone write that down!?" If I move to Malmo, I won't see the child, I can kiss him goodbye.

Olga: "You don't come as a friend! You're coming because you're interested in Luka! As a father! ... You are not a father! He is not your son!" Her lower lip is trembling with fury. I say it is clear to me that I am not raising this child. That I don't decide on anything. Of course I come as a friend, but I am also a donor. I can't pretend otherwise.

Olga: "I know that this burdens you. This genetic crap is built into us! So the adoptees then start looking for their true parents. But I don't want to hear that! Because it hurts! If that's the case, then I can just go! Because I am nobody in this case - genetically! Because I am nothing. I can leave, and you two just continue - like mom and dad!" Meanwhile, I start hearing sobbing from my left, Ingrid had burst into tears: "Yes ... this is it!", sob, "this is the e... essence!", sob.

Somehow I managed to keep calm. Apparently we had got to the essence. Olga feels threatened by my existence. For her to keep standing, I must fall. Otherwise she feels like nobody. "It is by no means my intention to hurt or erase anyone", I replied. But I felt an abyss. An insurmountable depth, an unbreakable Gordian knot. In their tumultuous responses I perceived labyrinths of uncertainty and fear. A furious performance that seeks to hide the fragility of a wounded female psyche. Unreasonable fear that manifests itself as aggression. An attack to cover her weakness and self-doubt. Trying to conceal the truth. To tailor reality in order to justify and suppress her inexplicable fear of disappearance, non-existence.

I went to the toilet, ran cold water over my forehead. Was I dreaming? But the nightmare was not over just yet. What followed was Olga's vision of her mother-in-law, Ingrid's mother: "You know, I have very little patience with her. She thinks she can come and act like ... grandma." She uttered the latter with cold contempt, through her teeth. "But she's nobody. She's just an egg!" What do you mean? "Yeah, just an egg. Like you, you're just a sperm!"

I'm already thinking there is enough bizarreness for one night when Olga comes out with one last question. Uttered with a mixture of outrage and unwavering certainty in her own rightness. Now she will expose it, me and my inappropriate behavior. This will be the proof which I will not be able to deny: "Now tell me, Jaka, where did you get the idea, how, how does it even occur to you that you can speak to Luka in Slovene? Do you also speak Slovene with the children of your Dutch friends?"

I collapse on the train. Chewed, spit out. Discarded in the ashtray. Did I really believe I could see the child? That the contract would be honored? What naivety! I deserve this.

I'm staring through the glass. How do I silence the screaming inside me? I put on my headphones, searching for something loud. Maybe Prokofiev No. 5, piano concerto. Once again. Five more times. A hundred more.

I'm standing in the shower. I don't notice the hot water is long gone. The cold is caressing my boiling thoughts.