

*Belle Nuit - A bittersweet
Affair 1-3*

1. How it all began

Me. Manuel.

I'd never been so ill-prepared for a date—and yet so damn ready at the same time. Clara stood next to me in the neon-lit nightmare of the outlet mall, where it always smelled like sales, polyester, and Mondays. She waited patiently while the upcoming night played out in my mind's eye, in choppy scenes that flickered faster than the discount signs on the walls.

She tugged at my sleeve, steering me toward the shoe department. The shelves full of clunky, neon-colored sneakers looked as if someone had painted the rows with highlighters.

"Look, they have your size!"

"I'm not looking for sneakers," I mumbled. "But for a suit that won't make me look like a accountant gone astray at a swinger event."

The fact that we were standing here was absurd.

Two years ago, we'd met on an adult dating site—a place where "Hy [sic]" was considered a cover letter and "How's it going? Great profile" already qualified as a literary masterpiece if it was written halfway without mistakes.

I have no idea what men expected from such messages. Couldn't they write better with one hand? They should have started a rumor: "As a man's message goes, so goes his Johnson!" That might have been the only form of quality assurance that would have worked. Although—speaking from personal experience: scientifically, this theory didn't hold up anyway; otherwise, I'd easily pass for John Holmes today. Because when I wrote to someone, I really went all out! And in most cases, I got replies.

It immediately set you apart from the rest, and that was definitely not a mistake, especially on platforms like that.

I'd sent Clara half a novel, and she liked it so much that she replied with an essay. We figured out pretty quickly that we were compatible not only linguistically but also—at least in theory—in bed.

What started as a sexual encounter with the potential for “friends with benefits” very soon turned into something else: a love neither of us had expected. It was so intense and sexually fulfilling that it surprised even us.

Maybe it was because neither of us was a blank slate anymore. At fifty-one for me and forty-four for Clara, we'd shed enough baggage to feel light again. We felt like a live album by a beloved artist from our youth: the cover has a few scratches and the voice is a shade rougher, but everything is damn well-rehearsed and gets by without a trace of playback.

It was precisely this desire that soon sparked our curiosity for even more. The fantasy wasn't new; it had accompanied both of us in earlier relationships, but had remained purely theoretical there. With us, it found a foothold. From the very beginning, we couldn't get it out of our heads. Sometimes loud, sometimes quiet, sometimes hot, sometimes uncomfortable. But always alluring.

It was about sharing. Not at the Italian restaurant around the corner, but in the bedroom. Or rather: at a swingers' club. Feeling strangers' bodies. Wild chaos. Hearing desire. Smelling ecstasy. And ideally: right in the middle of it all instead of just watching.

Yes, I wanted to see Clara give herself to another man. Or several. Not as an act of losing control, but as an expression of an old fantasy of mine that finally wanted to come to life.

The premiere was supposed to have taken place three weeks earlier. At a nudist event at a venue in Lower Austria—far enough away from my personal circle to remain anonymous. The website aggressively advertised with superlatives and the square footage of the grounds, but as we all know, when it comes to sex, size doesn't matter.

What ultimately convinced us was the “couples-only” policy. A filter that lulled us into a false sense of security. Still, the worry remained: Would it be a deluxe orgy, or more like a trainwreck in flip-flops and wifebeaters?

The website's graphic design—a wild mix of WordArt logos and poorly lit wellness areas—promised more neon lights than the kind of exoticism they were trying to sell there.

Still, we'd signed up. Determined. Open to anything. To other bodies, new experiences, unfamiliar sensations—and yes: even to the possibility that it might be too much. Too real. Too raw. Too close.

Because: fantasy is one thing. Reality is something completely different. But then: COVID-19 hit. Three days before the event. Positive tests, negative vibes. Instead of shameless nudity and loud moaning, there was quarantine, fever, and chicken soup.

No orgasm, but a deep sense of life's irony. Universe 1: Swinger God O. A bit of relief, admittedly, was part of it. But no sooner were we healthy again than the itch returned. Not between our legs, but between our ears. The thought of not having at least tried it became unbearable. Almost like a missed opportunity.

So: A fresh start. This time properly. This time with determination.

And above all: This time, for real.

The day: Friday, July 15th, 2022. The place: My home in Lower Austria. Around noon, Clara got into her car a few hundred kilometers further west and set off to see me. She brought with her: a small piece of luggage, immense anticipation, and no kids. A child-free weekend was as rare in the world of long-distance, blended families as a tax refund you didn't expect. And sometimes almost just as desirable.

So the conditions were ideal. At least in theory. After all, we wanted to embark on something that could turn everything upside down emotionally.

That evening, between a *Käsekrainer* and a cozy blanket, the conversation turned back to our visit to the club. We sat side by side on the sofa, half-full, half-sleepy, in that typically Austrian mix of coziness and latent dissatisfaction with life. This time, the plan almost sounded like “now or never.” We were healthy, we were free, we were... curious. And not just a little. Vienna was out of the question for professional reasons—too close, too risky. After all, you don't want to run into someone at a club whom you had a Teams

meeting with that morning. So we logged back into joyclub.de, where we'd already started making our first swinger plans. Joyclub is a massive adult platform for people who don't need three weeks of small talk to get started. You select your preferences and no-gos and, that way, find like-minded people. And for those who'd like to meet more than just a single partner or a single couple: The calendar spits out matching events at the relevant clubs. We clicked through the event listings—titles, pictures, keywords—and searched for that one spark: not just hot, but just right. Not just allure, but also style.

And then there it was: an evening in Graz.

Club Soho. Title: CMNF with mask.

It sounded like a code from a mediocre spy movie, but it was a concrete invitation to adventure.

CMNF stood for Clothed Male, Naked Female. Men in dark suits or tuxedos. Women naked, but wearing Venetian metal masks. Probably so they wouldn't get cold. Or to keep it stylish. James Bond meets **Eyes Wide Shut** meets please, no flip-flops.

We were instantly electrified.

The organizer—Eroluna—unveiled the evening's program on its homepage. Not in bullet points, but with an almost missionary passion usually reserved for food bloggers writing about homemade kimchi.

We were instantly smitten—the way a kid feels opening the perfect Christmas gift. With the details. With the language. With the dress code. With the idea of ending up in a club where style meant more than just not leaving your towel on the leather sofa.

Finally, we could live out our fantasy—but not in a setting with polyester bedding and the soundtrack of **Debbie Does Dallas, Part 7**. Sure, there'd probably still be a beer belly or two. But at least not in tank-tops. And no one would show up in bath slippers. That was contractually prohibited.

We had—at least on paper—arrived.

The ladies had to be naked, except for a few select accessories. A thong? Okay. Hold-up stockings? Sure. A bra? If she wanted. But always just one thing. No “and,” only “or.” It sounded pedantic, but it was exactly to our taste. Clear rules.

For the gentlemen: evening wear. **Black jeans are almost like a suit anyway.** Not a chance! A tailcoat, tuxedo, or at least a dark suit with a tie or bow tie. Anyone who showed up in sneakers, a short-sleeved shirt, or a baseball cap could turn right back around.

No entry for fashion faux pas.

A club that not only understood our vision but had codified it into rules.

Hallelujah!

The program read like the script for a libertine play—or better yet: an erotic cabaret with clear stage directions.

There would be a lottery drum from which every woman was allowed to draw two tickets. On each: a man's number. Her prize. Whether she redeemed it was up to her. At a poker table, men (or were women allowed, too?) would play for a woman.

Decadent? Absolutely.

But also: Binding. In more ways than one.

And then the blind date room: a darkened area, men wearing blindfolds, lined up as if for a courtship dance. The ladies? Free to choose. If I'm in the mood, I'll pick one. If I'm curious, maybe two. Or I'll just run my fingers through his hair briefly and walk away. Power play, desire, uncertainty, and dominance—all in five minutes.

It's quite possible that this was exactly what appealed to us most in our imagination: not sex with strangers. Not the act of showing off, not being seen. Not even participating. But rather experiencing a setting that felt like a game—precisely because it had such clear rules and a fixed structure. A game that played on power, aesthetics, and suspense.

And that's exactly what was so alluring.

Not for me as a participant. Really, not at all. I'd come to this club with my own personal agenda, and that

didn't include ending up in one of the beds as a trophy by the end of the evening. But watching? Understanding the flow, observing the dynamics, experiencing how strangers choreograph desire? That was something else entirely.

Almost anthropologically interesting. And when it went well: erotic.

Curiosity instead of control. Closeness despite boundaries.

The evening wasn't just a date with a third person—someone we'd only meet there—but also with a version of ourselves that had remained in the blind spot of our imagination until then. Enchanted? Maybe. Repressed? No, but carefully guarded. A side that knew what it wanted, yet was never sure if it was allowed to have it.

The tone was clear, friendly, open. All interactions were voluntary. Anyone who just wanted to watch was welcome to do so; anyone who wanted to join in was welcome to do that, too. At least, if *HE* could.

There was room for the curious and the experienced, for exhibitionists and the cautious. Even single men were allowed to join—up to ten percent.

That sounded manageable: not a pack of drooling lone wolves following your every move, but—so we hoped—men with style and good judgment. It was conceivable that one or two might have to step in—reloading takes time sometimes. A backup shooter didn't seem like a bad idea to us, preferably a Daniel Craig type, not a John Wayne. A bow tie beats a cowboy hat, hands down. In short: The description sounded like sophisticated eroticism. Not a cheap hookup, but a curated experience.

The price? Over 200 euros per couple. Steep. But based on what we'd read, probably worth every cent. We didn't want some half-baked sauna with erotic posters and plush vaginas. If it turned out to be a flop, we could always talk ourselves out of it afterward.

There was no time for second thoughts: the event was already the next day. So we clicked "Sign Up." A few minutes later, the confirmation arrived by email. In black and white. No turning back—just anticipation. And a little panic.

When we went to bed later, the sex was nothing but foreplay for what was to come. We were excited, our heads full of images, eager for the unknown.

My reservations? Blown away for the moment.

Afterward, we lay next to each other. Naked. Awake. Still. Our bodies warm against each other, our thoughts racing.

So much anticipation. So many questions. No more fear.

Clara had to sneeze. Twice.

2. *The Journey*

Me. Manuel.

On Saturday morning, with a level of determination that shopping rarely warrants, we headed to the nearby outlet mall, whose fluorescent-lit, bargain-hunting atmosphere didn't quite fit the erotic opulence we were aiming for that evening. It was a bit like kicking off a trip to the opera at a hot dog stand.

Our goal was to acquire some status symbols: a suit for me that didn't scream **accountant gone astray**, and a pair of shoes for Clara that were especially comfortable for lying down in—her words, not mine. I took note of that and thought: I must have done something right in a past life, otherwise I wouldn't be shopping for shoes to lie in with this woman right now.

In fact, I found what I was looking for quickly. A dark gray suit, as if designed just for me. That's how you do it: walk in, choose the right style right away, done. The glance in the mirror not only boosted my ego but also my hope that, at least visually, I wouldn't be exposed as a novice.

I'd also found a shirt—a white, slightly tailored style that the salesman handed to me saying: "You can Pull off a slim fit."

I nodded gratefully, but couldn't help wondering if he meant that seriously or was this something he said to all men over thirty who weren't pushing a belly across the room?

In any case, I wore that phrase with pride, just as people used to wear a badge on their chest: **I am a slim fit**. For a moment, I wasn't the responsible father with a job that no one would voluntarily describe as sexy—but a man. On his way to an adventure.

It proved more difficult, however, to satisfy Clara's craving for women's shoes, whose dopamine-releasing effect was directly proportional to the height of the heel.

When the heel reached Tesla-level heights—from the era before Elon went crazy, of course—it was almost like sex for her. But really, only almost.

The problem was: the shoe shopper's calculations didn't take the relevant stores into account.

Now, the outlet mall wasn't known for a lack of shoe stores, but what malicious Austrian tongues referred to as "fuck shoes" were out of stock everywhere that day. Good thing she'd already stashed a suitable pair or two at my place anyway. And a few more on top of that.

So I remained the only one who would be showing up that evening with a new outfit. Clara took it in stride.

We paid, packed up, took a deep breath, and headed home. We passed displays with "70% off" signs and faces showing a mix of consumer frenzy and a search for meaning. It was Saturday, shortly after noon, and everything was buzzing with frantic shopping panic. A woman was dragging a man with six shopping bags behind her, as if she wanted to single-handedly stabilize the local economy, while her overwhelmed husband trudged along behind her with a blank stare, his mind perhaps already on divorce.

On the way back to the car, as the sun dazzled my eyes and I held the garment bag in my hand—which seemed like a tender promise—I knew: We weren't just on a shopping trip.

We were preparing ourselves inwardly. And even though I wasn't always sure whether my courage was real or just curiosity in disguise, it felt right.

It was quiet in the car.

We barely spoke, just exchanged brief glances, our hands brushing against each other casually.

The air conditioner hummed softly; the suit bag lay on the back seat. And in my head: a whole movie. For years I'd had this fantasy. Read about it. Talked about it. But what would it really feel like to see Clara with someone else? I couldn't imagine it. Not yet. Some things you can only experience—you can't prepare for them.

The highway stretched on, fields to the left, fields to the right, occasionally a tractor, a roundabout, a town name you'd forget right away. And in between: that tingle. That feeling that we were doing something we'd never do otherwise.

Not forbidden—but exciting.

Not dangerous—but not without risk, either.

It was as if we'd put everyday life on pause for a weekend and slipped something electrifying into the gap that opened up. Like a quiet tension before a thunderstorm. Like the first tingle of champagne on the tongue.

The adventure could begin. Except that it was still seven hours and 200 kilometers away.

After we returned home—accompanied by the soothing creak of the hardwood floor, which always sounded like a mixture of approval and quiet skepticism—we lay down for an afternoon nap. My dozing was filled with images, expectations, and that kind of inner excitement that makes your brow furrow slightly even in sleep.

Around 7:30 p.m., the dressing ritual began. The double Windsor knot was in place, as was the suit—CM (Clothed Male) was all set.

Clara, on the other hand, stood in front of the closet looking tense, as if she had to give a TED Talk in a sold-out Wiener Stadthalle. Amid climate change, wars, and catastrophic global inequality, a new crisis had quietly joined the ranks of humanity's great unsolved problems: no idea what a woman should wear to a *strip* event.

In the end, she chose a delicate summer dress over sheer black suspender stockings and shoes that would put a Viennese coffeehouse chair to shame. She stepped into the doorway—elegant, but with an aura that revealed that tonight we weren't sitting in a wobbly chair, but in a box at the State Opera.

"What about 'Naked Female'?" I asked.

She sighed. “A breakdown on the A2 and I’ll be standing naked on the hard shoulder, directing traffic?”

A statement as absurd as it was plausible. So the dress could stay on until we reached Graz.

Our nervousness was understandable—they’d surely sensed it in other couples, too, when they first embarked on an evening like this. A glass of Prosecco might have helped, but that wasn’t an option since I was driving. Besides, I’d never handled sparkling wine well.

But wasn’t stage fright part of the deal anyway when you were presenting yourself in front of an audience? And that’s exactly what we were doing—in a slightly modified form. We were on our way to a swingers’ club. Complete with a setting, improvisation, and possibly standing ovations. This stage fright was the most pleasant of the three unpleasant feelings. The second was: nervousness. And the third... more on that later.

First things first: I’d always been open-and I’ll be standing naked on the hard shoulder, directing traffic minded when it came to sexuality. More of a chatterbox than a top dog. Confident on the outside, but without any real points of comparison. I was most familiar with the female perspective because: women told me everything—or at least a great deal. Not that I always asked for it. On the other hand, I had surprisingly little idea of how other men ticked, what they doubted, or what they desired. The reason was simple: I had no male friends. Never had. Not a single one. That made it all the easier for me to form friendships with women. I was the kind of guy women confide in. The one they turned to for intimate details, confessions, affairs—and sometimes even for a tearful outburst in the coffee kitchen. And I found that exciting. Thrilling. Sometimes even erotic. Although to this day I don’t know why two female colleagues, independently of each other, regularly told me when they were on their periods. One thing was clear, though: the friend zone? Completely my natural habitat.

Even without any male points of reference, however, I suspected that I was something of an exception when it came to certain things. Because sex was never completely stress-free for me. Sometimes more, sometimes less—but without my brain getting in the way? Never. From the very beginning, there was pressure. Not because I was prudish. But because, like so many things, I’d somehow learned it all at a slight angle.

My first girlfriend was hot-tempered; I was phlegmatic to a fault—a classic mismatch that lasted seven years. I’d been late to the party, sexually speaking; she hadn’t. And since she was my first, but I wasn’t her first, she was the boss in bed from the start. No BDSM—that hadn’t been invented for us back then. Still, the division of roles was clear: I had to deliver; she could devote herself entirely to quality control. Lying down. With her eyes closed.

The deal was unspoken but binding: I wasn’t allowed to come until she did. On the rare occasions when I didn’t stick to it, the mood immediately hit rock bottom. I learned early on that there was no bonus point system for male pleasure. Just debits and credits. And woe betide me if the timing wasn’t right.

The seven years of our relationship were mostly even happy. But for my sexual development, it wasn’t the ideal learning period. I wasn’t socialized to be a being of pleasure, but rather a service provider—with a well-cultivated sense of duty and a slight hint of self-doubt.

I wouldn’t say that sex and stress were one and the same for me, but the former was always tied to the latter. And I’d never quite shaken off that underlying feeling—that the body was supposed to deliver, while the mind constantly checked to make sure everything was in order.

And now we were on our way to Graz—for an evening where Clara might have sex with other men. Or, following one of her side fantasies, perhaps even with a woman. I would watch. At best, aroused. At worst, emotionally overwhelmed.

From the moment this scenario was first brought up—and I’m no longer sure if it was already in her ad or only came up when I first contacted her—it was clear: She could easily imagine sleeping with other men. I, on the other hand, had no desire to be with other women.

Not because I was particularly faithful or self-denying. But for me, there were too many reasons against it.

First: I had the best sex of my life with Clara. And I’m not saying that because I have to, but because it’s true.

Before her, I'd had a relatively large number of sexual partners—which had less to do with passion than with self-doubt. I wanted to be loved. Or at least: to be perceived as attractive enough.

And sometimes the difference between the two came down to exactly one night of wild sex.

Second: I wasn't a fan of condoms. To me, they ruined everything that was soft, warm, and immediate about sex. In the club, of course, they were mandatory—that goes without saying. I wasn't in the mood for sex with terms and conditions.

Third: Overthinking sex in that setting seemed like a surefire path to disaster.

Fourth: I knew which women turned me on—and which ones didn't. The range of my disinterests was surprisingly broad. For example, I wasn't a fan of large breasts. An A cup—or a B at most—was more than enough for me. I'd tried C cups and larger and realized I was more of a minimalist. Plus: everything had to be natural. To me, silicone was about as sexy as laminated newspaper.

Another thing that turned me off: lip fillers. That duck-face aesthetic that kept spreading. And one more thing: I preferred women who were older rather than younger. Not old—but more mature. I was never into college girls in crop tops. My kind of woman: editors in cashmere.

At the club, there was a risk that I'd have to politely yet firmly turn women down—ideally without coming across as sexist, superficial, or arrogant. What if a twenty-year-old Rubenesque woman with enhanced large breasts and lip fillers approached me, pointed to the raffle ticket pinned to my lapel, and wanted to take me upstairs as her prize?

One thing was clear: nothing would come of it anyway—in both the literal and figurative senses. Because sexual potency is also a matter of the mind. And mine would discreetly take its leave in such a scenario. But how do you gently explain that to a young, enterprising woman?

And then there was that third feeling: fear. Specifically, fear of how others would react to Clara. Clara was an exceptionally beautiful woman. Dressed, of course, but even more so naked. The kind that makes you wonder why clothes even exist. But she had a flaw. And it was my fault. It was about: pubic hair.

Not wildly overgrown like in a 1970s Russ Meyer film, but well-groomed, beautifully trimmed, the way it was worn in the mid-90s, when everything was still analog—including sex. It was clear from the profiles: for most men, that was a total no-go. And thousands of pictures on Joyclub made it clear: a clean-shaven standard that seemed to be the only acceptable option. That was all I needed to know.

I imagined how she'd stand there: naked, beautiful, confident in her posture—and how people's eyes would slide right past her, as if she'd misunderstood the dress code. I hoped that at least one person in the room wouldn't be fixated on an ideal image that had been shaped somewhere between the Pornhub homepage and a Venus ad. Someone who'd think: "Well, okay, she's old school, but my God—just look at her...!"

The paradox was: that was exactly what I loved about her. That little bit of extra naturalness. For me, it wasn't a no-go, but almost a must-have. And yet here I was, sitting next to her in the car, mentally bracing myself for rejection as if I were at a job interview.

If she'd gone unnoticed later on, I would never have forgiven myself. Not because I needed validation, but because she'd given me hers—visibly, below the waist.

Toward the end of the ride, I calmed down. Maybe because I'd already thought through the worst-case scenarios. Maybe also because it occurred to me that we were riding together. In the end, that was what mattered: not what you see, but with whom.

Finally, the exit for Graz lay ahead of us.

3. *The Entrance*

Me. Clara.

“May I ask your names?”

The man, in his mid-fifties, wearing an impeccable tailcoat, speaking with a German accent, and sporting a charming smile—presumably the event organizer or master of ceremonies—asked the question with a courteous composure. The evening here had long since begun, while part of me was still wondering whether I would be a spectator or a member of the ensemble.

His tailcoat fit so perfectly that I wondered if he’d been born wearing it. He’d probably spent more time in a tuxedo than I had in all my favorite jeans combined. He exuded style, like everyone who worked here. I would have liked to say something particularly witty. Or at least something that suggested I belonged here. Instead, I said nothing. Manuel took over, with a tone of voice that spoke for me without overshadowing me.

“Clara and Manuel,” he said, a hint of pride in his voice, just as a naked woman floated past, her silicone breasts so voluminous that I couldn’t help but think of statics. She glided into our field of vision with the natural poise of a flight attendant in an old Pan Am commercial... only without a uniform and with significantly more implants. She was blonde, tanned, her body so flawless that this lack of imperfection seemed like a void. Self-assured and apparently content, yet I saw no eroticism in her, but rather a caricature of femininity. I knew Manuel saw it similarly. He wasn’t drawn to perfect symmetry, but to the unplanned. The real thing. The moment a dress slipped out of place, not the one in which it was strategically removed. And I also knew: He found me more attractive than her. Not despite my small breasts—but because of them.

The day before, we’d talked about what we expected. Of course, we had our ideas—and our prejudices, too. Could it be that plastic surgery played a disproportionately significant role at an event like this? After

all, you were inevitably exposed to the gaze of others. So it was conceivable that many there were inclined toward self-improvement. To a normal extent, that wouldn't be a problem, but we couldn't have imagined feeling sexually aroused if I were the only one who hadn't had an appointment with a plastic surgeon. The fact that Ms. Silicone was our very first visual encounter with the scene couldn't have come at a worse time, but—as would soon become clear—it couldn't have been more atypical.

The man in the tailcoat asked discreetly, but with a hint of mischief in his eyes: “Which mask would you like to wear?”

The selection was elegant—fine metal ornaments, baroque lines, a touch of a Venetian opera ball with a Bond-like flair. The table with the masks looked like a curated selection from a museum of seduction. Each one was a promise of anonymity, yet not invisibility. I chose a black one with a silver pattern—stylish, but not too dramatic. The mirror revealed a stranger. Then they wrote our coat check number on the backs of our hands with a black-light pen. Q from James Bond would have turned green with envy.

It was clear: There was no turning back now.

The eye contact between Manuel and me was brief but clear. A micro-nod, a hint of a smile. We were here. We were ready.

In the coat check, we ran into Ms. Silicone again. This time she was moving, bent over. So low that you couldn't help but catch a glimpse of areas you'd file away in a biology Text book as “not relevant to the exam.” A pose tailor-made for Instagram, only without filters and with an unshakable self-confidence—perhaps fueled by plastic surgery—that both fascinated and irritated me. Still, when we left the dressing room and joined the crowd, it was immediately apparent: The majority of the women didn't look like they'd stepped out of a magazine, but rather like women you might run into at the bakery. Real bodies. Real poise. Some were nervous, some self-assured, and some in a state I'd best describe as pleasantly overwhelmed. And that reassured me more than I'd expected, since I felt much the same way.

These were our first moments in a club; I soaked up the atmosphere like a sponge. The event description had raised expectations—not just about the guests, but also about the ambiance. An evening like this called for class. And yet: even our wildest imaginings were surpassed.

The foyer was smaller than I'd expected—no grand reception hall, more like an elegant entranceway. To the right were small lockers for coats and bags; sturdy, pretty, nothing like a public locker room, nothing like Ikea. Standing by the door were the two people in charge of admission (I later learned their names: Gunnar and Birgit), with that calm friendliness that immediately signaled: You were in the right place here, as long as you allowed yourself to be here. A thick, heavy curtain separated the foyer from the bar area. Behind it lay a room of about 150 square meters. In the center was the bar: solid wood, rectangular with rounded corners, the staff inside, bar stools outside as if on standby. To the right, two elegant Chesterfield sofas facing each other, a matching armchair; next to them, a staircase leading up to a small gallery. Further to the right were two separate rooms: one housed the buffet; the door beside it, closed, led to the smoking area. To the left of the bar, a door led to the game rooms and the restrooms; further back on the left was a nook—again inviting, with beautiful sofas. The lighting was warm and subdued; it made the skin feel soft and soothed the nerves. Gentle music, voices as if filtered, ice cubes clinking against each other in glasses. “Crowd” here meant: about a hundred people, chic, engrossed in conversation, listening rather than making noise. No basement, no attic—a lounge with rules and atmosphere. I exhaled. That helped.

Nudity I could handle—Austrian saunas had cured me of any shyness there. But being looked at like this, in a place like this—that was different. I knew my figure was good. Not flawless, but still good. Hard-earned, three times a week at the gym—ladies only—because I didn't want to fight over weight benches with testosterone-fueled gym bros while working out. I wasn't one of those women who identified with protein bars as a way of life—but I was disciplined. Not always enthusiastic, but reliable. And people could tell. Or

so I hoped.

But what woman ever finds herself completely okay? Too tall, too short, too curvy, too skinny. The inventory of flaws is universal, multicultural, and independent of body fat percentage. It's an inner sport in which we're all secret Olympic competitors with a shot at a medal. Manuel had taught me something I hadn't thought possible for a long time: to like myself.

Not to put up with myself. Not to tolerate myself. But to truly like myself. He loved my small breasts. He caressed them with a tenderness that left nothing to be desired. And when he looked at me, I saw tender longing.

That was new to me. And healing. I was enough. Not as a version of some other, better woman, but as myself. Being a woman without a battle plan, without the pressure to optimize, without the need to work against myself. No one had taught me that before. And now here I was. In this club. With him. Suddenly, there was that voice in my head. Quiet, but persistent. Like a memory I'd long believed I'd sorted out, until it resurfaced—at the wrong moment, with the right question.

What if we were getting carried away? What if this evening—meant to be the culmination of a fantasy—became a stumbling block for everything we'd built together? Maybe it wasn't a good idea at all, but a house of cards made of tests of courage and projections. And if it collapsed, it wouldn't be with a loud bang, but with a quiet “If only I had...”

It was our plan together, yes. But carrying it out was on me. My idea. My impulse. A year ago, at Lake Garda, amid the sunbathing lawn, the heat, and gin and tonics, I'd asked, “Wouldn't that be... exciting?” And him? He'd hesitated. Just briefly, but noticeably. Because he was weighing things that might have been better left to intuition. We put it off.

About three months ago, it was he who brought up the subject again. He was sure, he said. No jealousy. No doubts. Absolute clarity.

But could you really know something like that? Was the absence of jealousy a stable foundation, or just a charming phrase that sounded good as long as you didn't put it to the test? Was his certainty real, or just a bravely worded hope that his heart would stay steady when things got serious?

I didn't know. And yet: I was there. No safety net, no turning back. The moment had come.

And I jumped.

Without a rope or a safety net.

And Manuel held my hand.

He looked stunning—over 1.90 meters tall, slim-fit ready (as we'd officially known since this morning), in that very same dark gray suit that looked classic without being old-fashioned. White shirt, red tie, the knot perfect, his posture relaxed. A man who knew he looked good.

Me, on the other hand: a black garter belt, 8 denier nylon stockings, twelve-centimeter-high heels in black patent leather that promised more than I ever seriously intended to deliver. Seductive, uncompromising, slightly overambitious. The comfort level: just barely above “Help!” But how does the saying go? Look beats comfort. At least in theory. In practice, I was already thinking as I walked up the stairs: Please, no emergency exit without a handrail.

It wasn't just the bar area that made an immediate impression. The gentlemen in attendance did, too. Most of them in dark suits, some even in tuxedos, all looking more distinguished than wild. And the women?

Naked.

Or almost. Gloves—not actually called for in the event description—thongs, garters. The rules seemed to be taken more as a friendly suggestion here: People mostly stuck to them, but with their own interpretation. Sounds erotic?

On paper, maybe. In glossy brochures, definitely.

In reality: more like a wellness weekend with a glossy finish. Bodies everywhere, but surprisingly little

tension. Skin as far as the eye could see, but hardly any sizzle. The nudity felt more like a uniform than a promise. Being naked as a dress code. A party theme that sounded better on the invitation than it did in reality.

I looked around. It was as if someone had called for eroticism—but no one had shown up. Nudity alone isn't a spark. When all the women are nearly naked, a sort of "nudist-beach numbness" sets in: an overload of skin that the eye quickly gets used to; the spark has to ignite somewhere else.

The hundred guests who had RSVP'd had apparently all shown up—according to the invitation, that meant about 47 couples and a handful of single men. Of course, it wasn't possible to tell exactly, but it was obvious that there was roughly an equal number of men and women.

Leaning against the bar table on the left were three men, their glasses just above their chests, their jackets open; their laughter was brief and restrained. To the right, a woman in suspenders pulled her stockings up a centimeter—a small, elegant gesture, more a matter of style than an invitation, yet without any erotic connotation. Seated on the Chesterfield sofas, with small towels placed beneath them, were two women sitting sideways with their legs crossed; they spoke softly. Not posing, but more in the spirit of: We're fully dressed, even though we're not wearing anything. It did nothing to add to the erotic atmosphere.

Manuel wasn't thrilled either. Not out of prudishness—his attitude toward nudity was neither uptight nor voyeuristic—but because nudity alone didn't electrify him. I sipped my cocktail in small sips to keep my hands busy. No one spoke to us. No charming "You're not from around here, are you?", no gallant question about our first impression. Yet I had long since set my sights on someone. Mr. 222—that was the number on the lapel of his jacket, which every gentleman had pinned on for the later raffle. A man, I estimated, slightly older than Manuel, with a Daniel Craig look and a Casanova aura—a sophisticated temptation. My inner "maybe" spontaneously chose him. Manuel was on board. No jealousy, no suspicion, just curiosity with boundaries. He even offered to approach Mr. 222 for me, like a discreet wingman in a suit. I politely declined. I wanted it to be more subtle, more elegant. My plan: to stroll over to him "by chance" with a plate of buffet appetizers. Something between a spring roll and fig mustard would surely lead the way.

Success? Zero. Mr. 222 didn't see me. Or maybe he saw me and decided to ignore me. Maybe I was too subtle. Maybe too direct—by not giving him a seductive glance, but instead staring right at him? Or maybe he was just busy with a woman who smelled more like a California villa with an ocean view than the Salzburg mountain region.

At least Manuel had spotted someone, too. A couple. The woman, perhaps in her early fifties, slim, small breasts, fantastic legs, elegant black gloves—a throwback to Audrey Hepburn as Holly Golightly.

I nudged him. "Audrey Hepburn," I said.

He smiled. "She's got something."

I knew what he meant. And I knew what I meant, too.

It wasn't an expression of desire, but a tribute. Even though it was clear to him: sex with other women was out of the question. Not because he wasn't allowed to. But because he didn't want to. For him, my desire was the source of his pleasure. My courage. My embrace of the new.

And that moved me more than any touch on the inside of my thigh ever could have. But before we even came close to taking a risk, the man in the tailcoat appeared again. This time he had the grandeur of a variety show host who knew full well that something was about to begin that people would whisper about later. His voice was velvety. His posture upright, but not stiff.

He explained the program—and suddenly all the doors took on a different meaning. The possibilities opened up.

"Ladies' choice," he announced.

But not like at the opera ball, where young gentlemen with sweaty palms vied for their chance with Miss Rottenmeier. Rather, it was men with blindfolds in dimly lit rooms. The ladies were allowed to enter, choose, touch, and lead. A sort of erotic wheel of fortune. It sounded exciting. For others.

The first time, I wanted to be close to Manuel. His hand. His quiet nod, which conveyed the golden rule of swinging to me: Anything goes, nothing is expected. I wasn't ready yet. Not there. As an object in the play-room, there was no room for emotional connection during *Ladies' Choice.*

So no participation.

Instead, we waited. We watched. We sipped from our glasses, counted invisible minutes, listened to the clinking of ice cubes, the whispers of those who also didn't want to take part in the ladies' choice.

Between the sofas: bare skin, half-covered by satin or leather. A man adjusted his already perfectly fitted tie, while a woman with silver nipple piercings clung to a glass as if to a railing. On the Chesterfields to the right, two women were flirting heavily and enjoying each other's company; the tension on a garter clip slipped briefly—a small click, then a soft laugh—and her friend helped her, planting a kiss on her temple.

The air was heavy with perfume, cocktails, and anticipation. A couple kissed, slowly, almost pointedly, while another man sat beside them and simply watched—motionless, but with a look that said it all. As for us? Our desire waned. Our fatigue grew. Our thoughts began to take on the shape of question marks. Was this the beginning—or already the end? Had we expected too much? Or simply not let ourselves go enough yet?

The trip home was creeping closer. But before we left, we wanted to at least take one more look around the play rooms. Maybe out of curiosity. Maybe out of defiance. Maybe because we sensed that we hadn't ended up here by chance. And maybe because giving up just wasn't our style.

It was around half past ten when we were told that admission was now open to everyone—not just the participants in the ladies' choice. The doors were no longer barriers, but invitations.

Hours later, we were still there. Happy. Content.

And Manuel... a little uncertain, too.