

Masculinity

Me. Manuel.

It was perhaps understandable. After an evening that had gone so spectacularly wrong, one tended to dig through old stories. You look for patterns, like an archaeologist searching for shards in the mud, to understand the present—or simply to remind yourself that you’ve survived other defeats before.

Before I can tell you what happened next with Clara, I have to take a step back. I have to address a question that has accompanied my entire adult life like tinnitus: What does it mean for me to be a man? How I interpret the answer to this question today is less the result of a conscious decision than a series of accidents: relationships that failed; career plans that imploded. What felt like major defeats at the time was, in retrospect, my greatest good fortune. For it was these ruptures that ultimately made me the person and the man I am today.

August’s version of masculinity was deeply repugnant to me. It was a relic, a dinosaur bone. Asserting oneself without consideration, dominating without empathy, parading one’s own needs like a monstrosity while relegating a woman’s needs to the fine print. That was the old school. But I also knew that my own definition—one based on listening, equality, and consensus, even in the most dominant scenarios—barely measured up to Champions League standards in the average men’s locker room at a soccer club. There, that made you seem soft. A softie who ‘gets it’.

For me, however, this path was the only viable one. Not because I had consciously chosen it—but because life chose it for me.

I have children. Two. And contrary to the traditional gender roles, for years I was the one who stayed home. That wasn’t a political decision or an attempt to stage a new kind of masculinity. It was simply our everyday life: She pursued her career; I took care of the household. I was often exhausted, smelled of baby oil instead of aftershave, but I didn’t feel diminished. I liked this division of roles because it suited us. And above all: it suited me. It wasn’t until a few years later, when I was standing in the outlet mall looking for a suit for an elegant evening at a swingers’ club, that it dawned on me: It had never been a role reversal. It had simply always been my role. And now, with Clara, it was time to try out another facet of that role. Less of a provocation, more of a clarification: Clara and I had found our dynamic and were now expanding our radius.

But first: Andrea.

Andrea was my girlfriend at the time, later my wife, now my ex-wife—the only constant in this equation was her name. We knew each other from school. Strictly speaking, she was my first time; at least, everything except the actual act. Back in the ’80s, Dr. Sommer, the sex advice columnist from the German teen magazine BRAVO still reverently called it “petting.” Today, a sixteen-year-old would hear that word and probably Google whether it’s a rare Pokémon or an app for petting pets. Back then, it was innocent, carefree, almost old-fashioned in its tenderness. That tendency toward intellectual mental gymnastics during sex—which would later sometimes define me and always plague me—didn’t emerge until much later, with someone else.

Maybe a real first time with Andrea would have done me good—who knows? But life doesn’t deal in “what-ifs.” We lost touch and didn’t cross paths again until twenty years of radio silence had passed. In Vienna, First District. Coincidence, fate, statistical probability—call it what you will.

The moment she laughed for the first time, my shoulders felt lighter. By the time I told my second joke, hers had relaxed. She was in the midst of picking up the pieces of her marriage and separating from her then-husband. Her appointment at the University of Vienna was the official trigger for her move, but not the real reason. Sometimes in life, you just need a little nudge from the outside—a professional necessity—to end something that was already long lost emotionally.

It was immediately crystal clear to me that Andrea appealed to me. She was familiar, she was smart, and we shared the same sense of humor. But my choice of her also revealed a lot about where I placed myself in the hierarchy of men. I wasn't chasing trophies; I was looking for what was achievable. Back then, I was guided by a theory I'd developed over the years—a holy trinity of attractiveness: intelligent, strong, feminine. My only dilemma was that I always ended up with women who met at most two of those criteria.

When I say “feminine,” I don't mean physical build. For me, impressive curves were not relevant. What I meant was a certain demeanor. I liked women who enjoyed being women—and, ideally, even celebrated it. Women who didn't just enter a room but owned it—not through loudness, but through a natural sensuality.

My long-term partners had always been intelligent and strong. Feminine? Never.

And that's exactly how you could describe Andrea: a professor with a postdoctoral qualification, assertive, with an extraordinary career ahead of her. She wasn't quite the “tool belt” type, but even less so the “cosmetics case” type. I'll admit it: the “cosmetics case” type isn't really my thing either; the bathroom cabinet doesn't have to look like the spare parts warehouse of a Sephora stockroom. But when you go out to eat, when you dress up—in a woman's case: a dress, lipstick, a touch of flair—that meant something to me. Emotionally, and erotically. That wasn't Andrea's thing. Nor, for that matter, was it her predecessors'.

At some point, I stopped believing that I'd ever find all three qualities in a single woman—and even if I did, that I'd be attractive enough for her. Women who are intelligent, strong, and unapologetically feminine tend to end up with the George Clooneys of this world. I convinced myself that this was realism. A man has to know his limits: I can cook well, but I'm not going to become a Michelin-starred chef. I'm probably not completely unattractive, but I'm certainly no Clooney or Pitt. It's worth a lot to know what league you're playing in.

That doesn't mean I haven't also won over women who enjoyed their femininity and flaunted it. But they often lacked that special strength that attracted me. Some had the desired confidence, but lacked the zest for femininity. Others had that very zest, but their intellectual sharpness stayed at home. So for me, there were always only two of the three qualities. Always—except once.

That was Iris. My great love in my mid-twenties—one of two in my life, alongside Clara.

In a way, Iris still is today, only I've placed her in a completely different compartment of my heart. At twenty-five, I fell in love with her. She was in a relationship; I was the affair. The cliché in its purest form. After two and a half years, she had to make a decision. And she did. Not in my favor.

I understood. And I didn't understand. Reason is a wonderful thing, as long as it isn't used against one's own heart.

Actually, I'm a very balanced person. At least, as long as everything is running smoothly. Back then, however, it turned out that when I suffered a deep emotional loss, I overreacted. And I should really write that “over” in all caps, bold, and underlined. I didn't recognize this pattern until years later, looking back; with Andrea, I'd repeat it—but on an even grander scale.

After Iris turned me down, I threw it all away. The trainee program at a major corporation, the secure management position within reach—I quit. I just wanted to get away. Travel, backpacking, escape.

Away from Iris, out of the box that suddenly felt too confining. But: Just traveling is one of those things. Someone like Richard Branson or Elon Musk can do that, but I can't. Which, of course, didn't stop me, and so at some point I came back broke and started working again at an international corporation—this time with far fewer ambitions. The trip had changed me, and so had my priorities. Less work, more life, to get the balance right.

After I returned, I ran into Iris again. And yes, we had sex a few more times. It was important to me to see if I was over her. I was. I still found her confident, attractive, impressive. We were emotionally connected, yes. But no longer romantically. That sounds contradictory, because we slept together two or three more times. But that's how it was. Sexual residual heat with no future prospects—nothing more. After that, what remained was something more sustainable than a hysterical "forever": trust without expectations. Iris became my constant, my best friend. She was the first person I called when, years later, I found out that Andrea was seeing someone else. And the one who visited me in the hospital almost every day after my subsequent second overreaction. During those hours, there was no calculation. What mattered was that someone was there who didn't keep score. Friendship can't be quantified—but you know when it holds up.

But before that, there was a whole life. In 2006, Andrea and I moved in together. In 2008, she got pregnant. It wasn't planned on the drawing board—more like: we accepted it. As her belly grew, so did our longing for greenery, and we traded our old Viennese apartment for a house in Lower Austria. The following March, our first child, Constanze, was born. There are moments when life doesn't need a punchline—it simply delivers a due date.

It was just a coincidence in timing, but right after the positive pregnancy test, I made the best mistake of my life. One of those setbacks you'd never give back for anything in the world: I failed spectacularly. At a job interview.

Ten years earlier, I'd deliberately derailed my career for Iris's sake and had actually never regretted it. I was content with my work-life balance and had no ambitions to change it. Until Andrea came back into my life. She didn't demand anything, but her ambition sparked mine. Headhunters were contacting me regularly anyway, mostly with offers at the same level. Boring. No reason to switch.

And then, with a baby newly on the way, one of those rare opportunities came along that made you sit up and take notice. The interview with the recruitment consultant, an assessment center—everything went as smoothly as clockwork. Suddenly, the future smelled of a career again, of a company car and a sensational salary. It wasn't a done deal, but I was standing on the sidelines and my shoes were tied tight.

In the end, I received an invitation to the final round with the relevant board member. I was one of three remaining candidates. The person across from me had a name that couldn't have been more British. Let's call him Archibald McDermott. Hard to imagine him without an umbrella and a bowler hat. A strategic advantage, I thought. I like the British, and so far the mutual liking seemed to be there. At this level, the technical questions had already been checked off the list; it was all about the chemistry. My penchant for understatement and a healthy dose of self-deprecating humor should, in theory, serve as a door opener with an islander. I felt confident—maybe a little too confident.

I prepared meticulously, picturing Earl Grey, refined understatement, and smiling questions that all owed for everything and demanded nothing. And I polished my business English, crafting answers that sounded smart but modest.

The day arrived. I was led into the corner office. Carpeted floors, the smell of power, and air conditioning. He was sitting behind the desk. Archie.

I put on my most charming smile, ready for small talk about the weather in London. And then he opened his mouth. Archibald McDermott was... actually Austrian. "Setzens eana," he said. Sit down, in broadest Austrian dialect.

He wasn't just Austrian. He was Viennese. And specifically the kind whose sense of humor was definitely not inherited from his British namesake. He was likable, as I later heard from others. But not to me. Not in that room. My British script had become worthless in a fraction of a second, and I didn't have a backup.

I'm not an alpha. At least not when I'm dressed up and sitting at a conference table. Worse still: I have a fatal aversion to people who feel the need to assert their presence simply by raising their voices. Anyone who looks down on me loses me—usually before they've even uttered their first sentence. Admittedly, I knew—even back then, and later with Clara even more precisely—that dominance can be a fascinating trait. But only there: in a safe space, in play, based on trust. In real life—and for me, that included my career—meeting people on equal footing was non-negotiable. If someone came at me with nothing but status, I shut them out. With Archie, the wall went up almost immediately. After just a few sentences, I sensed: This isn't going to work. He asked a question—precise, blunt, without the British "Would you mind..." I answered, tried to sound casual, made a joke to lighten the mood. The joke didn't land; it shattered against Archie's glasses like a bird against a windowpane. I got tangled up in subordinate clauses that sounded defiant. The more I tried to turn things around, the worse it got. I heard myself talking and wanted to cut myself off: "Shut up, Manuel. Just don't say anything else." But I didn't. I kept talking. And with every word, I dug myself deeper into a hole.

I single-handedly derailed the conversation. No drama, no ill will on his part. Just me, who couldn't get along with this type of person.

Sometimes the chemistry just isn't there. A job interview for a dream job, however, is about as bad a time as you can imagine to realize that. Every resume is a narrative, a story you tell about yourself. And that day, I'd chosen the wrong narrative voice.

As I left his office, there was no longer any doubt in my mind. I took it in stride, hopefully with dignity, but certainly with a touch of humor. There are moments when a shrug helps you more than any career advice book.

Someone else got the job, but I was surprisingly unfazed. Instead of a big career, I received something that would turn out to be more valuable: fatherhood and parental leave benefits. That job would have meant more than 50 hours a week. I would have been one of those fathers who only peripherally notice their children's most significant milestones—or who have to wait until the evening to hear that their child took their first steps that day.

My failure with Archie created the opportunity to completely reverse the roles at home. I became the "motherly" father, staying home with the children, while Andrea pursued her career—better and more consistently than I ever could have.

My greatest happiness in life lay in my fatherhood—I know that now. A career certainly doesn't make you unhappy. But the feeling you wouldn't trade for anything in the world comes with having children. Thank you, Archie. We didn't become friends. Instead, I became Dad, Version 2.0.

Many good things in life happen to you without you even consciously striving for them. Iris had taught me that love doesn't end where romance runs out. Andrea had shown me that a relationship could still be good even if it didn't shine in every aspect. And Archie had—unintentionally—done me a favor by letting me fail at the right time and in the right place. At the end of the day, some totals just added up, even if the individual items didn't look pretty. And when I made a list later on, the credit side included

many things that couldn't be measured in euros. Two children. A few people who stuck around. A sense of humor that was enough to get me through the gloomy days. And the realization that sometimes you win by losing—provided you're willing to embrace the defeat.

Fatherhood was my anchor. But not a harbor. Later, I would meet Clara, a woman who taught me that even romantic relationships didn't always have to follow the traditional path.

But first, I had to learn how to be a kangaroo.

Parental Leave

Me. Manuel.

Even before I received the expected rejection for the job over the phone, it was clear to me that I, too, I wanted to take *Karenz*—the Austrian term for parental leave. I liked that word. It sounded like a pause, like a conscious retreat. The German equivalent, *Elternzeit*—literally “parents’ time”—always seemed fundamentally wrong to me. As if you were only a parent during those months when you stayed away from the office. As if fatherhood were dissolved the moment you returned to your desk.

Among my circle of friends, my plan was still considered a bit of a wild idea. In truth, I didn’t know anyone personally who had ever taken advantage of the opportunity—but for me, it was still the logical next step. Perhaps as a counterpoint to the career that, once again, wasn’t happening? Maybe. But it didn’t matter: It wasn’t the “why” that was important, but the “when.”

Andrea would start—breastfeeding, obviously. “For how long?” I asked at the breakfast table amid crumbs and cheese scraps, right on the first weekend after the Archie disaster.

“Seven months,” Andrea said with such certainty that any doubt would have bordered on the absurd.

“Then it’s my turn,” I said, as if I’d always known it. “For eight months.”

I need to clear up a misunderstanding here. When I later told people that I’d stayed home for so long back then, they often expected a modern-day hero’s tale. To some, “new masculinity” might have sounded like a podcast with a boho vibe, like an oat milk latte and a cargo bike in the 7th district. As if it had been some hip lifestyle choice. But reality didn’t have an Instagram filter. It was less urban gardening and more baby food jar pragmatism. I wasn’t fighting for social change—I was simply living my life. Unhurried, unscripted—and as I would soon realize: wonderfully relaxed.

One sentence, because it’s important to me: Men on paternity leave aren’t heroes; they’re parents. Strength isn’t just about biceps; it’s about being present. When Austropop plays in my head, it’s sometimes Fendrich: “Macho Macho”—in the baby-wearing edition.

And yes: cherry-picking. Months eight through fifteen are the main stage of childhood: sitting, crawling on all fours, pulling oneself up on the coffee table, the first step, a word, then another; suddenly children’s books are exciting, love comes back tenfold, and the primary caregiver becomes a magnet. Jackpot—and I was prepared.

At the playground, I marveled at the daily maternal showcase unfolding before my eyes. One mom brought millet balls, the next sugar-free date balls, the third carved a hedgehog face out of an apple (toothpicks for the quills, of course, and organic, naturally). What an advantage I had as a man, not having to participate in this competition simply because of my gender! I showed up with my child, diapers, and wet wipes—and nothing more than that—and got looks as if I’d won the presidential election. “How lucky for Constanze to have such a dedicated dad!” one of them said.

“Actually, I’m the lucky one for getting to do this,” I said.

“Yeah, right,” she said, without much conviction.

It took a while for them to believe me that this wasn’t just a phase—but my version of masculinity.

For her second birthday, Constanze’s godmother gave her a kangaroo from IKEA—a big one, with a pouch in front and a little kangaroo inside it. To her, the big one was the daddy kangaroo—obviously—and the little one in the pouch was the baby. It never even occurred to her that the big one could be

a mommy kangaroo. In the illustrated storybooks., she'd point to the adult animal with its young and consistently say "Daddy." In her world, whoever was with the child was the dad. I'll admit it: I liked that. For the first time in my life, I stood out not because of some achievement, but simply by being there.

For me, being a man no longer meant filling the pouch, but carrying it.

Andrea let me do my thing. No competition, no jabs. Her standard was simple: Are the kids doing well? That wasn't—and isn't—a given; I still give her a lot of credit for that to this day.

I took my cue from Billy Joel's line from "Keeping the Faith": "I found you can dance and still look tough."

With Constanze and our second child, Wolfgang—yes, the Mozart reference was intentional, but at least we spared them **Tristan and Isolde**—I practiced the art of fatherhood: babywearing in the semi-darkness, advanced comforting, and the ultimate skill: bottle-feeding without waking anyone up. PEKiP—those parent-infant classes—and Emmi Pikler weren't my thing. I think when you're relaxed, it rubs off on the kids.

To be fair, it was hell for us at first: Constanze was a baby who cried constantly. Andrea found Dr. Karp's book **The Happiest Baby on the Block**, and the advice worked right away. They really do exist—those "Priceless" moments you can't pay for with a Mastercard. The moment you realize you can calm a hysterically screaming five-week-old baby within seconds is one of them.

One day at home—Constanze at the coffee table, one wrong step, tears. "Daddy!"—arms up in the air, situation clear. I comforted her, not Andrea. She brought the wet washcloth and the band-aid. We looked at each other: That's how it should be. No score-keeping, no comparisons. Just the team.

But in this daily routine of pushing the swing and changing diapers, a part of me remained unfulfilled. The longing for a different kind of intimacy, beyond evening rituals and comforting. Andrea and I had once discovered together the thrill of losing control, the sharp spice of dominance and submission. That thrill was lost in the daily grind. With kids in the house, that kind of play is hardly possible. Nothing is less romantic than the fear that one of them might walk in, just at the moment when you're losing yourself in a role that's incompatible with that of the caring dad. So those sides of us mostly remained unlive, a faint hum beneath the surface.

Nineteen months after Constanze, Wolfgang was born. I went on parental leave again. After that: six years of part-time work, twenty hours a week. Andrea worked full-time, and I did what is generally considered the "woman's role." It was our normal—and it worked. For both of us.

Out in public, when I showed up at the playground with two little ones, people's surprise turned to admiration. I didn't do much to earn it. Most of it was down to other people's expectations. When I wasn't there, someone probably asked, "So—where's their mom?"

But before I start painting myself in a golden light: I was a good father. But I wasn't a good partner. Andrea and I had discussed early on in our relationship that fidelity didn't have to be absolute. Not some "open relationship" workshop, but rather the old adage: "What I don't know won't hurt me." The catch: keep your heart out of it. A nice phrase that sounds reasonable as long as it isn't put to the test. I took advantage of my freedom to an excessive degree, which, in hindsight, I'm not proud of. A father who's just as present at the playground as the mothers themselves quickly becomes the standard—a contrast to one's own, often absent partner. That makes it easier. In the end, it was pure vanity—and certainly not meaningful.

Maybe it was only fair that I was the one left behind in the end. Andrea fell in love—for real. Heart involved, rules broken. But before that, I had ten years that felt like perfection. As a father, I was fully present; as a partner, I was a sham.

You can't sugarcoat your own record. I wasn't a saint. But at least I wasn't an August. His way—control, His way—control, boundary violations —remained for me the antithesis of everything I wanted to be.

Fatherhood shaped me. It radically recalibrated my inner compass, softening me up for life scenarios that didn't appear in any manual. Without that decade as a "kangaroo dad," I would have approached Clara differently later on. More uncertain. Or too certain. In any case, not ready for something that didn't require a set of rules.