

I  
*Beginnings*

My dear daughter,

I imagine you're a daughter, because then I'll have another chance at life.

I'll call you Nia, which was my grandmother's name.

I'm writing to tell you why I didn't have you, and why I decided not to be a mother.

I'm reaching out to confess my story to you, and, like mine, that of many other women—women who are unfortunate, or perhaps spared: women without offspring, with unfertilized wombs, but women all the same. We're many. Some of us suffer the silence that falls upon our interior expanse, on the sense of non-fulfilment. I'm writing to you for this reason, my sweet unfinished daughter, so that you may be my fondly remembered image of an unrealized birth, nurtured on a lost terrain, an ignored and isolated island of the heart. Such a heart forced to come to terms with its own pain, the anguish of a loss that has no place and that nobody wants to hear about.

I wanted you for the first time twelve years ago. It was after a day of success that my body required your presence, to unite and consecrate a marriage that was already ordained by the state. My wedding day, my baby, was the best day of my life. I never imagined it could be. I didn't know my capacity to love so much. It was a celebration of boundless glory, sealed by the ritual words of eternal vows, in front of family members, friends, and the officials of the state.

I'd met the man I went on to marry while I was juggling multiple careers, after my father had dissipated his assets in dubious investments. It had taken a few years to settle into steady work that I enjoyed: a career in journalism, income from investments born from the portion

of Mother's inheritance I'd managed to save from my father, and occasional opportunities from my lifelong vocation for the theater and acting. I was living in one of the busiest and most fascinating cities in the world: London. The personal wealth I was accruing had a positive effect on my mind: it staved off insecurity and fear of poverty. I could purchase all the things I wanted; I didn't have to ask my father, or any man, for permission.

Work gave me a sense of purpose and hope for individual freedom, but it also took a heavy toll on my body, and I couldn't detach from it, other than run away from it. Travel became a distraction, an adventure, part of an identity of conquest that I'd learned from my father. He'd grown up so poor. His first trip to the sea—a twenty-mile distance from the home his family shared with two other households after the post-war displacement—had been at the age of fifteen. After he'd built his "empire" (that's how he referred to his financial success from poverty to wealth), he'd always be interested in travel and the leisurely exploration of faraway lands.

In a similar way, during those years when I too was building my own little financial empire to sustain his loss, I'd been drawn to exotic destinations to cope with the anxiety of my hectic, urban life. I felt invincible, like the memory of my father had seemed to me from the eyes of his little girl.

So, the marriage began as a joke to disprove fate, and to say to hell with marriage. I married my partner because he needed it, to have the rights of a citizen, to find a job and earn hard cash to send home to distant relatives. When I offered marriage, I didn't love him, nor did he love me. I didn't want to be alone. I'd tried to end the relationship, but hadn't been capable of letting go, completely. The pain of solitude was just too much to bear. Being by myself was simply too frightening. I hoped the oblivion that had so overwhelmed me with pleasure and ecstasy during the initial phase of romance would return between us. When he expressed a need for

the same opportunities I was eligible for, I felt pity too. I let my guilt convince me to believe my illusions.

That's how the marriage began, like a game of manipulation, a challenge. Marriage, in my thoughts, had occupied the same circle as the death of freedom. I might never, otherwise, have married him, or anybody. Belonging to a marriage, a person, a child, or any group, felt life-threatening to me. But how much meaning in that piece of paper! How disproved was my cynical display of freedom and independence, how dependent I became, and how hungry for love I realized I was.

Shortly after the wedding, many things began to change. He grew more distant, often staying out until the early hours of the morning, reeking of alcohol on his return. I became more jealous, and possessive. Until then I hadn't wanted children; we hadn't spoken of having any. Although we cared for each other, the relationship lacked trust and honesty. Despite this reality, in the weeks that followed the civil ceremony, I witnessed with amazement a feeling of wanting birth, as if during that nuptial rite, in front of family and friends, my heart had opened, and new life was breathing through it. It was all very confusing, I'd not felt so warm before, so ready for motherhood. My body's independence, possessed by a life of its own, was dictating the rules of my own future.

It was truly an extraordinary experience. Whether I acted out a role I was powerless over because conditioned by my newly adopted status, I can't say. As the weeks went by—after the longing for connection had been “opened” on the marriage day—a voracious appetite for more love devoured my insides, and something was so stirred in my belly that it affected my mind. Wanting a child didn't come as a thoughtful decision—it stemmed from a physical yearning from a repressed appetite for connection that I had no idea existed. I had no relationship to my body other than the craving I felt to satisfy an implacable sexual desire that became all the more compulsive the further away our connection drifted.

When I received a resounding “No!” to my request to start trying to have a child, my yearning imploded. Like a tiny atomic nucleus, or like the eye of a hurricane that promises destruction and devastation, so rose the thunder and rage that also forms the being of a woman. From that dissonance, between the body that quivers for the seed of life, and the mind, witnessing a full-blown typhoon about to hit the abandoned island of love, comes the short-circuit. The void. The devastation. I’d chosen a man, an imperfect human being, made of flesh and blood and vague feelings. An adult child, much as I was too, wrapped in concern for the preservation of our own images as solid, proud, and strong individuals. These projections concealed the fragility of our unresolved and difficult childhoods, but no one dared speak of such heartfelt truths. When I’d met him, I’d never have talked about children—because I didn’t want them. To be a mother, until that moment, had constituted an outrage directed at my future, an obstacle to my destiny, an unnecessary burden on my presence in the world, a presence I envisaged to be very different from that of my mother.

As I’d repudiated motherhood with the rebellion and strength of a warrior worthy of the greatest heroic myths, I’d sworn not to want children. I’d dressed in armor and held out a shield to protect myself from the temptations of the heart and from the fate that had descended on that influential person who’d been my first example of a woman: the one I’d called Mother.

2

*Believing I Was a Monster*

Dear Nia,

do you know that nowadays, because we’re in modern times, women can have children even alone? We’ve always been able to “have” them, in the sense of raising them, sculpting them as our creation, as we think best,

because most of the time the man isn't there. But today we can also conceive them, by ourselves, with the help of technology. The marvels of medicine are now available for women who can no longer wait. Those who were not able to have a baby with a man—some out of misfortune, some out of fear, some out of impatience or exhaustion—can allow themselves the luxury of having one alone. And having a child by means of technology really *is* a luxury. The responsibility falls entirely on us women, and what an advantage this is! Or so—at least, at first—it seems.

Imagine, my daughter, having all the honor and burden of two parents in one, someone who is both mom and dad. This is the advantage of modern times.

I was determined not to miss this miraculous opportunity, so four years ago I injected my belly with hormones, and for three weeks, my ovaries swelled up like balloons, full of ripening eggs. I felt in my heart the fear I might have experienced if the swelling had been in my womb, a being increasing in size for nine months. I cried, I regretted, wondering why I'd undertaken the treatment, why I'd subjected myself to such discomfort.

On the first try, I generated fifteen eggs that contained the hope of one day turning into one or more future babies. You could have been one of them. You were stored, with the others, in the refrigerator of an assisted reproduction facility in Barcelona, because that's where I lived then. The city offers many amenities like that one, allowing women like me—emancipated, alone, hard-working—to secure a future motherhood at less than a fourth of the cost of other places like the United States.

My friend Esther accompanied me to the clinic on the day of the extraction and sat in the waiting room during the procedure. I was happy to see her when I opened my eyes after the induced sleep. Esther was one of my number-one advocates for single motherhood, "If it makes you happy," she said. She too had been dabbling with the idea of freezing her eggs, but never got around to it. She admired me: she said I had courage.

My brother Dario also promised he'd help if I decided to have you. He's a good brother and a good father to his own two children. Your uncle Dario had even set aside for you his own daughter's clothes, toys, and toddler gear. I didn't have to buy anything new, for everything was already in storage!

Your cousin Perla likes pink and violet and looks a lot like I did at her age. I didn't care who you'd look like or how you'd like to dress. In fact, I imagined you might not resemble me at all—you'd have wavy, dark brown hair and brown eyes. I imagined you'd prefer wearing overalls and solid white or green t-shirts. In Spain you'd look like me because the reproduction facilities would join my eggs with the sperm of an anonymous donor whose complexion matched mine. I didn't like that idea.

Before wanting you, I was full of commitments, curiosities, travels, loves, and passions. There was no goal I couldn't reach with my determination. This hunger for life might have come from my desire to escape from pain—I can't tell.

"I didn't want you. You ruined my life," my mother—your grandmother—said. I repeat the words here, but will cover your ears, because these are words a child should never hear, and they left a deep mark on me. The disappointment and self-hatred I felt, to know for certain that I was the cause of the downfall of the person I loved the most in the world—it made me feel despicable, guilty. I hated life—my life—for causing so much pain.

For so many years I was living with the desire to disappear, to crash out of life itself, rejecting my very reason for being. And, because of my mother's words to me, for so long I thought that my life too could be ruined if I had any children, knowing I too might be capable of inflicting such pain upon another living being.

So I've used my body as an instrument of pleasure, but never one of creation. I always took great care to protect it from the danger of a pregnancy, because there would have been a lot at stake if I'd found out that a

little life was growing inside it. If I created something, I was also afraid that it would be a monster, a fury that would turn on me to kill me and make me scream those same words that I'd heard coming from the mouth of my beloved mother—a monster herself, whom I'd never have been able to see as such. I could only believe that the beast was me: a repulsive and disgusting being, guilty of having been born. So, I pushed everyone away, especially those who saw something beautiful in me. Because I thought they were wrong, that they deluded themselves, and because I didn't want them to see who I really was, the monster I felt I was, inside.

Other brutish creatures I fell in love with because I felt they were on an equal footing with me, and so with them I felt safe. They wouldn't have tried to convince me that my mother's words were false, or that they weren't justified, and that I was something else—that there was some beauty in me.

I sought loneliness, and I wanted it more than anything else in the world, even more than you, Nia. This is also why I thought that having you would be an act of selfishness, after so much time wasted pushing everyone away. Because having you—an innocent and pure creature—alone, all to myself, would be like avoiding the adult world, the world of the beings with whom I must compromise, grow, get involved, be afraid, tremble, believe, cry, and mature. Having you alone would really be a way of avoiding looking at the beauty in me.

My value still seems so distant, I can't see anything but you, Nia, right now. You're the only beautiful vision in my life, and I need you, to feel joy, to feel alive, to feel that my life is worth living. If I don't have you, I should have to set aside the monster and say, "Thank you, monster. Thank you for what you did to protect me and help me survive. Thank you, but I don't need you anymore."

Of course, then, if I put you, and the fiend away, I might have to open myself to life, and I'd be all alone. That would be terrifying. I don't believe the world will

want me, as I am. All alone, a woman alone, in her mid-forties? I've never believed the world wants a woman to exist just for the sake of existing. If I'm a dutiful daughter, a caretaker, or potential mother, I have a right to exist. Yet, I don't believe I can survive alone, without a man, a child, a family to make me whole in the world.

3

*How to Choose the Father*

All was in place for your arrival. I'd even bought your father. That's how it's done today. There's a sperm bank, several actually, at different places in Europe, with many vigorous men willing to donate their seed so that women like me, who haven't found the right man of their own, can purchase a reproductive fluid to fertilize themselves.

The dad I'd chosen for you is called Lewis. He's Danish. Dear daughter, you'd have been half Danish. But not exactly, because he was also Anglo-Saxon. So, you'd have been Danish-Anglo-Saxon-Italian-American-Romanian. How confusing!

I'd spent hours reading all the profiles. The first selection had been their level of education. I wanted an intelligent man, maybe a professor, like the last man I'd loved. So, all the scientists, mathematicians, and economists appeared. There were some Italian economists too. One of them, R, had a girlfriend, grew his own vegetables, and liked to cook. I imagined him to be a good father, from a traditional family, and he'd written that he was in favor of future contact with you. You'd have had a lively, extended, Italian family, with plenty of pasta and sausage lunches!

The research became entertaining because, guess what, my baby? You can hear their voices too! Men's voices are beautiful to listen to. Tucked inside the voices of these great men I always conjured up a desire for

confirmation, self-regard, and a sense of assurance that made me smile. I envisioned them proud of their titles, their time devoted to their studies and social issues. Most of them didn't believe in God. They were rational men who believed in science, evidence, experience. For this reason, their voices were controlled, important-sounding, mindful of choosing the right words, and thoughtfully intellectual. I listened to them and visualized them sitting in the interview room at the donation facility, determined to do the right thing, for humanity.

"Since I was eighteen, I've always been a blood donor. But in Italy, to my knowledge, you can't donate sperm. So, when I moved here, I thought that it was the normal thing to do," R declared in the sample recording of his voice.

What really made me fall for him, though, was when he was asked to describe his personality and said, "I'm extremely confident, and way too rational—I analyze everything that I have in front of me. I'd like to be a lot more emotional, like a baby—able to be amazed by everything, and happy for everything." I thought his words were so endearing.

When I decided to buy R, he was no longer available, and I suspected he might never be again. I thought, *He changed his mind. Maybe he doesn't want to father so many little children scattered around the world, who'd claim his affection and his attention at lunches in the future.*

I directed my aspirations toward the seed of D, another Italian economist, who spoke English with a pleasant, slight Italian accent. D said he made excellent tiramisu, and coconut and lime chicken! He seemed refined, polite, intelligent, but not very affectionate, even cynical. Above all, he hesitated when asked the question "Would you be willing to be contacted in the future?"

"I spoke to one of the counselors about it," he revealed. "It's not something someone would expect to happen. I'd be fine with the idea now, but I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. I might be a completely

different person in eighteen years' time," D concluded apprehensively. He declared that he didn't want to have children. He explained that his parents had instilled in him a strong sense of duty but (my guess was) not a lot of affection.

I thought of the ancient Roman virtue of *pietas* (piety) and was seduced by a fantasy in which we shared that common trait. He, then, was a monster of faithful, filial piety too! If I'd had him in front of me, in flesh and blood, I'd have loved him. I really think so!

In addition to hearing the voices of these great men, you can also see their handwriting, because every man is asked to write a letter to the children of the future. How the handwriting in the letters reveals their authors! The messages are often short and incisive, so as not to leave too much room for emotions. Or maybe it's because of embarrassment, or a desire not to alter the course of your life too much—not to dictate too many rules in a few words, in a letter to the future. Because, as we know, the author is only a seed, not really a father. So, writing the minimum seems appropriate: stepping aside, but choosing a maxim, a phrase you can remember forever, maybe even get it tattooed on your arm one day, to say, "This is my father, this is the universal principle I inherited from him." And maybe that's exactly how you'll live your life, thinking about those words, crumbs of love that you'll raise in the paradise of the soul, worshipping them like the gospel of a saint, a holy donor who thought of you, and your mom.

Oh, my imagination! How much judgment on my part. How much fear! How many future thoughts that confuse the present and cloud my choices. How many worries, and you aren't even born! How much responsibility.