

What Peace Looks Like

A Novel

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This is a work of fiction.

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Chapter 1: Dubai 2060 — “Beginnings”

“Mom, it’s still dark out.”

“It’s seven thirty, Jonas.”

“Exactly.”

Somewhere in a briefing folder, I am the foreign minister of Switzerland. In this bedroom, at seven thirty on a dark February morning in Bern, I am a woman losing a negotiation to a person under a blanket. My son is eight years old and lying in his bed as stiff as a plank, having decided that the sunrise is a scheduling matter and that the schedule is wrong.

I try science. “Jonas, the sun rises later in winter. You know this.”

From under the blanket comes the closing argument. “Then wake me up in summer.”

Eight years old, and already arguing like a lawyer.

Down the hall, his twin sister is a different weather system entirely. Heidi is up, dressed, and stationed at the bathroom sink, brushing her teeth with the scowl of a child who suspects her toothpaste has been swapped for

mustard. Helping an eight-year-old brush her teeth means holding her steady, brushing, and pretending you are not being spat on. Heidi has the temperament of a thunderstorm and the attention span of a squirrel, and when she isn't digging in her heels she's the funniest person I know. The transitions between the two are fluid and impossible to forecast, like mountain weather.

And then there's Elsbeth. Ten years old. Dressed, shoes tied, lunchbox packed, cheerful. Elsbeth is the child who convinced me, right after her birth, that a second one would be a wonderful idea.

Nobody warns you about twins.

Nobody.

Not the books, not the midwife, not the well-meaning women who don't have twins themselves but know exactly how it's done.

While the three of them steal each other's cornflakes, I stand in the kitchen doorway and recite it to myself like a mantra: for almost ten years now, the world has been at peace.

Sit with that for a second. In all the millennia before, it never happened. Not once. Not one single year in which there was truly peace everywhere on earth, no exceptions: no gunshot, no bombardment, no shell coming down anywhere.

Ten years.

And I have spent this particular morning of it negotiating with a blanket.

My name is Anna Zaugg. I'm thirty, I'm Switzerland's foreign minister, and I am chronically underslept. Not because of world politics. World politics would almost be romantic. Because of Jonas, Heidi, and Elsbeth, my three personal disturbers of the peace.

I named Elsbeth minutes after she was born. Everything had gone so smoothly, and in that moment I wanted something classic. Something timeless. Conservative, people say. Fusty, say the less polite ones. My colleagues at the ministry all had suggestions: Mila, Lena, Nova. Names that sound like perfume ads. Elsbeth has never once complained. The other day she came home and announced, "Mom, I'm the only Elsbeth in the whole school. Probably in the whole city." She said it with the pride of a Nobel laureate. That's when I knew I'd gotten it right.

Jonas, naturally, is the family rebel. His school, like almost every school on earth now, runs on the new system: one core curriculum for every child regardless of sex (math, science, athletics, shop class), plus two required electives each semester (drama, dance, cooking, needlework, acting), switchable every semester so nobody spends a whole year stuck in the wrong box.

That's the entire idea, really. No more boxes. And if there have to be boxes, then boxes with the doors left open.

Jonas signed up voluntarily for soccer and cooking and flatly refuses to so much as try knitting or drama. Which upsets exactly no one. Free choice is the point of the system. Jonas just makes his choices louder than most.

He's one of the few boys in his class, and sometimes I wonder if that's lonely for him. When I ask, he says, "Nah, the girls are cool. Most of them, anyway." Then he grins, and I stop worrying.

For about an hour.

Gabi is waiting down in the car. Gabi is my assistant. She's thirty-five, has a daughter named Simone, and possesses the remarkable ability to hold three conversations at once, run a calendar, and look like she got eight hours of sleep. After eight hours of sleep, I look like I got three. After three, Gabi looks like she's coming back from a spa weekend. I don't know how she does it, and I've decided not to investigate, in case the answer is discipline.

By the time we're in the air, I can finally admit where I'm going. Dubai. Peace Conference number ten, and my first, because my predecessor, Barbara Müller, retired last year. Barbara was a remarkable woman, and one of the few ministers with a husband of her own. Her

Thomas was one of the survivors of the virus, and the two of them lived in a little house on Lake Thun that Barbara refused to trade for a city apartment in Bern. “I can govern from home,” she liked to say. “And Thomas can cook from home.”

At thirty, I’m the youngest foreign minister Switzerland has had since the founding of the Confederation. That sounds impressive. It feels like sitting on a plane hoping your assistant packed the right speech.

The flight takes six hours, and Gabi uses every one of them. She’s brought three binders: the résumés of all the foreign ministers, the protocol notes, and the restaurant recommendations for Dubai. The third binder is the thickest. “Priorities,” she says when she catches my look.

I read the résumés like a novel, mostly because they read like one.

Nia, Africa. Fifty-two, three children. Ran a refugee camp in Kenya during the war, helped build the African Union after it. Twenty years with her partner, Adjoa, a doctor she met in a field hospital.

Leila, United Arab Emirates. Forty, one daughter. An economist, known for her devotion to numbers and for bringing laminated statistics to every conference. Her partner, Farah, is an architect in Abu Dhabi.

Mei, China. Thirty-five, no children. A culture expert who reformed the Chinese film industry. Lives with the Japanese choreographer Sakura; in Beijing, the two count as the most dazzling couple on the culture scene.

Irina, Russia. Sixty-seven, the eldest of the group. Says little, listens a great deal. Her file contains a single word: widowed.

Emelie, Scandinavia. Thirty-eight, dry as a martini, digitized the Scandinavian welfare state. Married to Astrid, a biologist who studies parthenogenesis at Stockholm University.

Yuki, Japan. Mid-thirties, technology minister, speaks more softly than everyone else and gets heard anyway. Developed Japan's AI strategy. Not married, no children, one niece who wants to be an astronaut.

Hilda, Germany. Forty-five. Married to Sven, forty-seven.

A husband of her own.

I read the sentence three times. In a world where men are a dying species, where women are over ninety percent of the population and the global birth rate hovers somewhere between one and one point five, this woman has a husband of her own. Not a donor-catalog man. Not a weekend man shared with three other women. A real, living, everyday man. The story behind it isn't in the

file. I resolve not to ask her about it, and know in the same breath that I will.

Apart from Hilda and Barbara, I don't know a single foreign minister who lives with a man. It's not that women despise men. Most have simply never met one. In a world that's over ninety percent women, falling in love with a woman is the most natural thing there is. The few remaining men are coveted, but more as a biological resource than as a life partner.

That sounds harsh.

It's also the reality.

As for how children come into that world: for over ten years now, there's been an alternative to artificial insemination with donor sperm. Parthenogenesis. An egg cell is coaxed into dividing without any sperm at all, and the children are always girls, X chromosomes only, no Y. Thanks to government subsidies it's cheaper than the sperm bank in almost every country, in some nearly free, and still the uptake is surprisingly low. Women want a donor's genetic variety, maybe even the small chance of a boy. Irrational, if you go by the numbers. But the desire for children has never been a matter of reason.

Ask Gabi. Faced with the sheer number of donors, she couldn't make up her mind and put the whole insemination business off for nearly a decade. Those were fun

times. Every week she'd appear in the office kitchen with a fresh batch of donor profiles, and we'd rate them together like a dating app, minus the risk of the guy turning out ten centimeters shorter in person than advertised.

"This one has green eyes and plays the cello."

"Sure, but look at the ears."

"Gabi, you can't see ears on a profile."

"Exactly! That's what's suspicious."

For a while she had a favorite because he was listed as a "home cook and marathon runner." Three weeks later she dropped him, because she couldn't picture raising a child who might voluntarily run marathons. "Who does that to themselves, Anna? Forty-two kilometers. Voluntarily. That's not a hobby, that's a cry for help."

The daughter she eventually had, Simone, loves acting and wants to be an actress someday, in India or China, because that's where the best women directors banded together, built schools, and lifted film onto an entirely new level. In the United States and Europe it went the other way: no real actresses left, just computer-animated performers running on raw compute. Simone finds Hollywood boring. "Mom, those are all just computers," she tells Gabi, and Gabi sighs, because she secretly loves the old Marvel movies where men in tight suits saved the

world.

The irony of history.

The airport in Dubai impresses me, despite every picture I'd seen going in. The terminals are small cities: shops, restaurants, gardens kept so perfectly you have to wonder whether the plants are real. They are. Dubai treats itself to real plants in an airport. In the desert. Somehow that fits a place that has always made a business model out of the impossible.

At the waterfall by Gate A, I have to stop. The water drops four stories into an illuminated basin, and hundreds of tiny lights ride down inside the falling water, so that it looks like it's raining stars. I stand there like a kid in a museum and forget everything for five minutes. The speech. The conference. The stain on my blouse that is definitely Jonas's muesli and that I've been hiding since Zurich.

"Anna, the car's ready." Gabi, punctual as a Swiss train.

From the airport we proceed, as befits the occasion, by electric Bentley. My driver, a young woman of maybe twenty-five with a smile wider than the car, has her two small daughters along, because otherwise she'd have been late. They sit up front together in one oversized child seat, giggling at a frequency only kids under five can produce. The kind of giggling that's contagious even when you have no idea what's funny. Probably

nothing. Children that age laugh at nothing and at everything, which may be the healthiest trait we lose over the course of a life.

We detour past the daycare first so she can drop the girls off. It's a new building with greened walls and a playground like a miniature adventure park, and since it's already eleven o'clock, drop-off is thinning out; inside, kids are hollering for the lunch being set out in the dining hall. The whole building is glass. Parents can drive by anytime and see their children, and somehow it doesn't feel like surveillance. It feels like an open living room where every woman is welcome, even one who's only passing through.

"My girls don't nap anymore," the driver chats as she threads through traffic. "Better for bedtime anyway. Otherwise they're up till nine wanting one more song and one more glass of water and one more story."

Well. It's the same everywhere in the world. In Bern, in Dubai, probably on the moon, if children lived there. They'd eat moon dust and refuse to go to sleep.

The drive through the city is an event in itself. Dubai has changed since the thirties. The flashy gold facades of the 2020s have given way to something more elegant: lots of green, lots of glass, less look-how-rich-we-are and more we've-figured-out-that-sustainability-is-sexy. The tallest buildings in the world still stand here, but now

they wear vertical gardens and produce more energy than they consume. At least that's what the brochures claim. Gabi, of course, has read one.

The conference center sits on an artificial island shaped like an enormous lotus blossom. Naturally. In Dubai, everything has to be shaped like something. Our hotel next door is shaped like a wave. The restaurant across the way looks like a seashell. I wonder whether this city contains one single building that just looks like a building. Gabi photographs everything. For Simone, she says. Simone wants to know whether Dubai is "as insane" as the internet claims. Yes, Simone. Dubai is exactly as insane as the internet, only hotter.

The heat hits me like a wall the second I step out of the air-conditioned Bentley. Forty-five degrees Celsius in the shade, and shade is about as common here as men: barely. Gabi, who apparently doesn't sweat because she is a genetic anomaly, hands me a cloth. "Blot, don't wipe. Your makeup." I blot. My makeup is a lost cause, but it's the thought that counts.

The welcome is warm and overwhelming. Two hundred delegates from every continent, and it feels like every single one of them wants to hug me.

Nia leads the charge. She's tall and stately, with a voice that could fill the whole hall without a microphone and a hug that makes bones crack. "Anna! The new Swiss, at

last. You look younger than you do on screen.” I’m not sure whether that’s a compliment or a warning.

Leila greets me with a tray of dates and a sentence: “Eat before you speak. Empty words come from empty stomachs.” She’s shorter than I am, but her presence is enormous. A USB stick dangles from her belt. “My emergency statistics,” she explains gravely. “In case somebody talks nonsense and I need facts.” I like her immediately.

Mei nods politely and says, quietly, “I read your profile. Impressive, for your age.” Then she turns and is gone. Mei is like a cat: elegant, silent, and you never quite know whether she likes you or merely tolerates you.

Irina says nothing at all. She just looks at me as if she were X-raying me. Her eyes are a pale blue on the edge of gray, and she blinks so rarely you start to wonder whether she has forgotten how.

Emelie shakes my hand with a grip like a vise. “You’re the new one. Don’t worry, everyone cries their first time. By the second time, it’s only half of us.” She grins. I’m not sure she’s joking.

And then there’s Hilda. The German foreign minister shakes my hand and smiles, a warm smile with a layer underneath it that I can’t quite name. Wistfulness, maybe. Or fatigue. Or something else entirely. “Welcome, Anna. Don’t let them intimidate you. Most

of the women here don't bite." Then, quieter: "Most."

Nia leans toward my ear. "Hilda has a husband of her own. Did you know that?"

I nod. "What does Adjoa think of it?"

Nia laughs. "Adjoa says a man in the house would be like a goldfish in the bathtub. Nice to look at, but what for?" She winks at me. "We love Hilda. But the thing with Sven, for most of us, is a fairy tale from another era. Fascinating. Not for imitation."

The conference opens at two in the afternoon, in a hall so vast the back rows probably need binoculars. Glass and steel, a podium of pale wood, interpreters' booths along the sides (though the AI translates in real time now, faster and more precisely than any human), and on the ceiling a chandelier like a galaxy built of crystal. Two hundred chairs. Two hundred women. Two hundred life stories. The air-conditioning is set to a level I'd call Arctic overcompensation: forty-five degrees outside, what feels like fifteen inside. Gabi has brought a cardigan.

Of course she has.

And then the moment arrives. My speech.

I stand at the lectern with two hundred pairs of eyes on me, and my hands are sweating. Switzerland: land of neutrality, chocolate, and mountains. What am I sup-

posed to tell these women, who survived wars, rebuilt countries, wrote history? Some of them, at my age, were running refugee camps or drafting constitutions. At my age, I have three kids, a muesli stain on my blouse, and a speech I rewrote from scratch at one thirty last night.

I take a deep breath.

“Dear colleagues. Dear sisters in spirit. I stand here as the youngest in this circle, and I ask myself whether I have any right to speak about peace. I have never known war. I was a child when the world was burning. My earliest memory isn’t the sound of bombs. It’s the smell of cheese fondue at Christmas.”

Scattered laughter. Nia grins broadly.

“But maybe that’s exactly the point. I’m the first generation that didn’t fight for this peace. I was born into it. And I’ll tell you: that frightens me more than any war could. Because if you never fought for peace, it’s that much easier to take it for granted.”

Silence. The kind of silence that means people are listening.

“Ten years of peace. And if we’re honest, it didn’t come because we grew wiser. It came because the world changed. Because women took the lead. Not because women are better people. That would probably be too easy. Because the way we lead is different.”

I look out into the hall. Two hundred faces, listening.

“Thirty years ago, the women who got elected were the ones bristling with power and authority. Women who had to prove themselves in a world that didn’t belong to them. Today we elect women who know how to listen. Women who have children. Women who know what it’s like to be woken at six in the morning by an eight-year-old asking why the sky is blue, and actually wanting the answer.”

Soft laughter.

“Charisma is no longer a jutting chin and a fist pounding the table. Charisma is empathy. Understanding. Listening. The world is governed by mothers, grandmothers, sisters, partners. And maybe that’s why we’ve had no war in ten years. Not because we no longer have weapons. Because nobody sitting at the table wants to use them.”

I talk about transparency, about the responsibility of small countries, about how we hand peace on to the next generation. I talk about my kids: about Jonas, who’d rather play soccer than knit, and about Elsbeth, who wears her old-fashioned name like a crown. And I watch the faces in the hall change. I watch the protocol fall away and something human rise to the surface.

At the very end, I give them the only definition of peace I trust.

“Peace isn’t a state of being. Peace is a morning routine. You get up every day, you brush your teeth, you keep going.”

Thirty minutes, and when I finish, Nia is the first to applaud. Then the others. Hilda gives me a slow nod, with a look that says: well done.

It means more to me than the applause.

The coffee break afterward is like the first day at a new school, except everyone’s nicer and the coffee’s better. Within ten minutes, Gabi has made three new contacts and researched the best restaurants in Dubai Marina. I’m standing a little lost at the window with my cup, looking out at the sea, when Leila appears beside me.

“Good speech. For a beginner.”

“Thank you. I think.”

“The cheese fondue was clever. Humor disarms.” She sips her tea. “Do you know why I bring laminated statistics?”

“Because you’re a numbers nerd?”

She laughs. “That too. But mostly this.” She lowers her cup. “Numbers don’t lie. People do. Speeches are lovely, Anna, but at the end of the day, what counts is what’s in the tables.” She pulls a laminated sheet from her bag and holds it up. “World population: 4.7 billion. Women: 92 percent. Men between eighteen and forty:

3.1 percent of the total population.” She lets the numbers settle. “Three point one percent. That is not much, Anna.”

“No,” I say quietly. “It isn’t.”

Leila puts the sheet away and is quiet for a moment.

“My mother,” she says then, “was an economist. Like me. She taught me everything I know about numbers. Systems, structures, the logic underneath the chaos.” Her voice drops. “She died eight years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

Leila waves it off, but the gesture is too quick, too sharp. “She was stabbed. By a man. He was, how do you say it in Switzerland, out of his mind. He was stabbing women at random in the street, and my mother was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

I say nothing. What is there to say?

“It was one of the last acts of violence by a man in the Emirates,” Leila goes on. “They tightened the security laws afterward. Which does not bring my mother back.” She looks out the window. “You know the absurd part? The numbers are from her. The laminated sheets were her thing. I kept them up because when I use her method, it feels like she’s still in the room.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“It’s sad. But thank you.” She finishes her tea. “Enough of that. Tell me about your children. I need something alive after all these numbers.”

The afternoon is working groups. Economy, education, security. I’m in education, which means two hours of curricula with eighteen women from fourteen countries. Fascinating and exhausting in equal measure. The Scandinavian delegates have the best concepts, the African delegates the most inspiring stories, and the Chinese delegates the most PowerPoint slides. Mei alone has prepared eighty. Eighty slides. For a twenty-minute slot. Gabi whispers, “That woman doesn’t sleep. She PowerPoints.” I nearly choke on my water.

At dinner I sit next to Nia. The food is spectacular, a blend of Arabic and international cuisine arranged so artfully you almost hesitate to destroy it. Almost. Nia doesn’t hesitate. She eats with an enthusiasm that’s contagious and, between bites, talks about home.

“You know the biggest difference, Anna? Not the politics. Not the economy. The girls. Twenty years ago they didn’t go to school. Now they go, and they don’t come home, because after school they want sports club, then choir, then homework, and then they complain that the day is too short.” She laughs, and the laugh rolls over the whole table like a wave.

Three glasses of wine in, Nia simply stands up at her seat, no microphone, and delivers an unofficial speech that leaves everyone in tears. She tells the story of a girl in her country. Six years old, first grade. The girl came home from school and said to her grandmother, “Grandma, I learned to read today.” The grandmother wept, because she herself had never learned. For her, as a girl, it simply hadn’t been provided for.

“And then,” Nia says, “the girl came home the next day and said, ‘Grandma, today I wrote. And do you know what I wrote? Your name.’”

The whole table is crying and laughing at once, and I think: this is the moment the long trip was worth it. Nia’s voice is quieter now, but it still carries. “And do you know what that girl told me when I visited her school?” She pauses. “She said, ‘When I grow up, I want to be like you. But with longer hair.’”

Laughter. Tears. Nia runs a hand over her head; her hair is barely two centimeters long. “Well,” she says. “I’m still working on the hair.”

After dinner, when most of the others have drifted up to their rooms, Leila catches me by the arm. “Sauna?”

After a twelve-hour journey, a speech, working groups, and one emotional dinner, I have nothing left. My body says bed. My brain says bed. My feet, seven hours into a pair of new shoes, are screaming bed. But Leila doesn’t

take no for an answer. She has a way of looking at you that permits no contradiction. Not bossy. More like an aunt who knows exactly what's good for you.

The hotel's steam sauna is opulent. Golden tiles, eucalyptus, dimmed light, and in the corner a small fountain burbling to itself. The benches are a dark wood that feels warm before you even touch it. The towels are so plush you could sink into one and never be found.

Leila has brought laminated sheets.

Into the sauna.

Laminated. Sheets.

"What is that?" I ask, though I can guess.

"Current population figures. Broken down by continent, birth rate, and sex ratio." She spreads them across the bench like a map. "Also the economic projection for the next five years, and a special analysis of the sperm-bank market."

I stare at her. "You bring spreadsheets into a sauna?"

"They're laminated. The paper can take the humidity." She says it like it's the most normal thing in the world. "Besides, a sauna is the best place for an honest conversation. Nobody can hide behind anything when nobody's wearing anything." She grins. "Literally and figuratively."

So we sit there, wrapped in steam, and Leila walks me through the demographic trends of North Africa while sweat runs into my eyes. The numbers are impressive and depressing at once. In some formerly Muslim countries, the share of women stands at ninety-eight percent. The birth rate has sunk to one point two.

“What surprises me,” Leila says, tapping a chart, “is the parthenogenesis rate. Almost every country offers it. Subsidized. Cheaper than any sperm bank. And still only eight percent of the women who want children use it.”

“Why?”

“Because women hope. They hope for a boy, even knowing what that means. Or they want a donor’s genes: his eyes, his height, his story. Parthenogenesis gives you a copy of the mother. For a lot of women, that’s too little.” She shrugs. “The biology is ready. The people aren’t.”

At some point I steer the conversation somewhere less spreadsheet-shaped.

“Tell me. Did you have a good donor?”

Leila grins. “A Norwegian. Blond, a meter ninety, speaks four languages. On paper, the perfect man. Under hobbies, the catalog said: sailing and philosophy.” She rolls her eyes. “Sailing and philosophy.

Imagine sitting on a boat, getting seasick, while somebody explains Nietzsche to you.”

I burst out laughing.

“And my daughter? A meter fifty-five, and she speaks only Arabic and ‘profanity.’ Though she can swear in three languages, which I count as a talent.”

“That’s something.”

“That’s something.” She takes one of her laminated sheets and fans herself with it. “The absurd thing is that men are a luxury good now. Thirty years ago they ran the world. Now they’re catalog numbers.”

“That sounds cruel.”

“It is. But is it crueler than what came before?”

I have no answer to that. We sit in the steam for a while, saying nothing. Just the burbling of the fountain and, now and then, the rustle of Leila’s laminated sheets.

“Anna,” she says after a while, “may I ask you a personal question?”

“In a sauna? Sure. Where else?”

“How do you do it? Three children and the job? I don’t mean the logistics. Anyone with a decent calendar can beat the logistics. I mean the feeling. Are you enough? For them?”

End of this excerpt

To find out how the story of Anna, Amira,
and the kids continues, read the full edition:

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