

Now

I know everything will be OK, despite my existential fears linked to my visa status in the United States. Going home to Germany and traveling back gives me so much anxiety sometimes that I almost don't want to go home at all, even if that means not seeing my family.

Just now, my sister sent a picture with a ring on her finger to our family WhatsApp group. A couple of months ago, she and her now-fiancé Michael announced that they are having a baby. To all of our surprise, they had planned it. We just didn't know about those plans. And of course, we are happy. When Natalie FaceTimed me back then and surprised me with the news that I'd be an aunt, I couldn't hold back my tears. They just came out.

But since then, I'm also having this growing sense of *Biological-Clock-itis* (yes, I made that word up), which I've heard and read about so many times in movies, magazines, and novels. It just didn't seem like something I'd ever experience. Why would I not have a boyfriend and potential father of my children at 29? Yet here I am, single, struggling with my legal status in the country I chose to live in, far away from fame, riches, or the comforting prospect

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of my own family, which I always thought I'd have much earlier in my twenties.

I am not in a rush to have children. Even though my younger sister, by one and a half years, seems to be far ahead of me now, basically married and a mother. I do, however, feel the rush to meet the man who will make all of this possible for me. The one who makes me so happy I can't think of anything else. The one who is honest and has genuine intentions towards me. And on top of that, is a semi bodybuilder without posing on Instagram, has a great smile, shares my passion for saving and not eating animals, has a job, is healthy, and can be romantic. Those are just a few things on my list, and quite honestly, I'm having a hard time believing that such a man does exist for me at this point.

It's Christmas Eve. We're eating sausages and sauerkraut at my grandma's place, just like every year, except that this time it's just my mom, my dad, grandma, and me. And Bennie, the Yorkie, who at his age doesn't hear or see much of what's going on anymore. Natalie used to be here with us, but she has her own family now. And for the first time, I start to feel really old. What am I doing with my life? Will I be the crazy aunt in America? The one with no husband but a bunch of cats? The one with all the crazy ideas but no actual career? The one who is too weird to fit in anymore, in a small place like this?

"Please eat more sausages. We have so many left," my dad says. And then addressing me: "I also have some of yours left, I didn't make them all, but I can put more in the

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pan.” By “my sausages,” he means the vegan ones. We might still follow our Christmas Eve tradition, but I insist on only eating vegan, and my family is more than OK with that, even if they haven’t decided to switch to an exclusively plant-based diet themselves. I do pride myself in having made a positive impact in their lives as well, though.

“Thank you, Dad,” I say. “I am completely full. By the way,” I casually remark, “I don’t think I want to go to church tonight.”

Christmas Eve service, basically in the middle of the night, always used to be something I looked forward to. Even after I moved so far away from home, it was always nice seeing familiar faces from the old days and talking to my old friends, even if it was just for a couple of minutes. But today, I don’t even feel like I belong here enough to go there. And I’m tired.

“Are you sure?” my mom answers. “I mean, it’s OK if you don’t want to come. You can still think about it. But don’t you usually like seeing all your old friends after the service is over?”

“Yeah,” I agree, “It’s nice, but everybody fizzles out within five minutes, and it’s not really worth it.”

So many of my “old friends” also attend the Christmas Service at our church. I used to be in a youth group for a big chunk of my teenage years. I think some of them resent me and assume that I think I’m better because I moved to LA. The other ones who still greet me with the same enthusiasm year after year basically don’t know me anymore, and catching up in five minutes at midnight is

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simply not possible. So, it's never more than a "How are things going in LA? Do you have a green card already?"—"It's good, and no, not yet, still working on that. How are you?"—"Oh, you know, the same old."

"I'll stay up, but I'm gonna watch TV instead tonight. You guys said it's not the same anyway since Pastor D left, and Natalie said they aren't going either."

I had gathered enough reasons to skip Christmas Eve Service and not feel bad about it.

Back at home, as I'm sitting on our couch, cuddled in a blanket, watching *Three Wishes for Cinderella*, the Czech version of Cinderella, a Christmas classic in Germany, my phone in my hand, I start to feel very lonely. I know it was my choice not to go to church with my family. But I would have felt lonely there, too. I feel lonely because I don't have a man in my life. I feel behind. And even though I wouldn't want my sister's life, and my parents aren't one of those happy, stuck to each other couples, I can't help but feel like a third wheel. It's not how *they* make me feel. It's just what *I* feel like. I am alone; I don't have a boyfriend; I pity myself.

I can't even use my dating app here because it only shows you people who are within a certain radius. And as far as I know, all the men in any reasonable proximity are either married, in a relationship, complete dorks, or way too young for me. And apart from that, why would I even want to meet someone here if I'm going back to Los Angeles in a few days?

I google *dating apps that let you search anywhere in the world*. '*Coffee meets Bagel*' comes up. I've heard about this

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before but haven't used it. I push the download button. I mean, what else am I going to do anyway? I can just browse while I'm stuck in the German holiday stillness. And while I'm at it, I am also downloading *OkCupid*, which I have used before. I have a faint memory of it allowing me to set my location anywhere I want.

I feel pretty desperate, having downloaded two dating apps at once, while I should just be enjoying the holidays with my family, not longing for some imaginary boyfriend. But right now, I am alone, with Bennie and Bounty, the gigantic cat. And who is going to judge me? I set up my profiles on both apps and set my location to Pasadena, where I live when I'm in LA. After about half an hour, I have uploaded enough pictures and info about myself to where I feel confident to start swiping.

Coffee meets Bagel only allows me to swipe through six people per day, which I went through in no time. "What a waste," I'm thinking. I go on *OkCupid* and swipe through about 100 guys in LA before getting frustrated and putting my phone away. I try to pet Bounty, who in return runs away from me after he leaves a nice big scratch on my left arm. I sigh and further cuddle myself into the blanket. I don't know where I belong anymore. I have two homes, and yet I always long for the one where I'm currently not.

Fife minutes later, I hear the front door opening and my parents come in. I'm happy they're home. "How was it?" I ask.

"You didn't miss anything. Except, your friends did ask about you," mom says. "They all asked, 'Did Kathrin not

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come home this Christmas? 'and I had to catch them up on everything you've done recently."

I don't even know what she would've caught them up on. I don't think I've done many exciting or interesting things in my life recently, or accomplished anything significant enough to be worth telling. But my mom sees all of that a bit differently. She's my mom, after all.

"What are you watching, daughter?" My dad comes into the living room, looking at the TV screen and then at me. He never actually waits for an answer. "Anyone care for some mulled wine before we go to bed?"

"Bring it on," mom says, and I agree. I don't drink much alcohol anymore, but tonight I think I can do with a cup.

Then

I'm sitting on one of the two couches in the foyer of the music school where I just started working. It's been a few months since I graduated from music college, and I'm glad I found a job in a school that's close by and owned by another German immigrant, Fred. I feel good here, apart from my usual everyday insecurities, like the fact that I'm at my heaviest weight so far. That still doesn't make me fat, or even close to obese, but it does make me wear leggings with a skirt on top, all stretchy materials because I can't get myself to buy bigger-sized jeans, when I'm sure I'll have to lose the weight again. And buying something now would essentially be a waste of money.

My hair is long, and for the most part, bleached blonde. It doesn't stay nice and straight anymore, even if I make the effort to straighten it out with an iron. It's thin, and unless I take an hour to curl it, it makes me feel kind of sloppy, the way it hangs down my head and shoulders. So on most days, I just put it up in a bun or some sort of ponytail, which also makes me feel unattractive, but at least I feel like I look a bit more cleaned up.

As I'm sitting on the couch, waiting, gazing down at my converse sneakers, while casually chatting with our shy receptionist Sally, Eddie comes in through the door,

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immediately engaging everyone in the room in fun conversation, playing with the little kids and throwing them up and over his shoulder. Eddie teaches drums here, but I haven't seen him for the last month or so. He must have been gone for a while. But even so, I have noticed how popular he is with the kids and how much energy he brings into this place. It makes me smile.

"Hey Karin," he says, noticing me looking at him. "What's up with those shoes of yours?"

I correct him, "It's Kathrin. And what do you mean?"

"I'm sorry. My bad. Kathrin. I was just thinking, a woman like you should be wearing something more classy."

"Oh yeah?" I say, acting sassy and confident in this conversation, when in reality I am everything but, and I question every word that comes out of my mouth. "Like what?"

"Like a pair of Js." He wiggles his feet and does a quick funny dance in his Jordans. "I'm sure they would look cute on you." And then he disappears into the drum room.

"Whatever," I'm thinking. I just can't place him or put him in a box. He's different. And somehow, that's weirdly intriguing. On the other hand, I have a strange feeling of discomfort. Most people aren't that forward. I look at Sally, and we both shake our heads and chuckle. I lean back on the couch and wait for the next ten minutes to go by until my next piano student comes in.

I didn't plan on becoming a teacher of any sort. I was so brave to make the big move overseas and study music

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here, leaving everything I knew behind. My family has always supported me, and my friends have always been cheering for me, despite not wanting me to leave Germany. And now I'm giving piano and singing lessons because I don't believe I could actually make real money with my music. I'm too shy, not thin enough, not fit enough, and haven't practiced enough. 'Too 'too many things. It's not that I'm not grateful for this job and the fact that it allows me to still live in this expensive city. To be here while I build a career and make the connections that are going to get me where I want to be. Only, I am not building anything but more insecurities and more excuses to not do what I really came here to do.

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That night, I get home, and Baloo greets me with a loud and persistent "Meoooooww" as if he's trying to say, "Where have you been all day, Mom?" Baloo is basically my family here, especially since Alana moved out a few months ago to work at Disneyland. We were in the same program in music college and lived together in a two-bedroom apartment, with several roommates in our living room, over the span of three semesters. There was the girl who was supposed to move in with us but then ditched us. Then there was Xavier, a guy who found our ad on Craigslist, who was high at least half the time and made the grossest sounds in the shower. After that, my new short-term best friend Dora moved in. But she moved back to Norway after just a few months. I still miss her dearly. She was and still is a soulmate. So then, another school friend moved in who

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then started dating our neighbor. After that, we brought in one of the new girls from school who, at one point, had half of her family living in our living room for a month when they visited from overseas.

Alana and I adopted Baloo about four weeks into living here, and it felt like we were a little family. She now feels like a sister to me. I just don't see her much anymore. She now lives in Anaheim, which, with light traffic, is about an hour away from Pasadena. I already went through two other roommates since then. It's only been four months since Alana moved out, and finding a cool girl to live with was quite tricky and exhausting. Luckily, I seem to have found a good one at last: Liu. She not only loves Baloo, but also shares my plant-based eating habits. She usually works all day and then spends her evenings at the library, from where she easily brings back ten books at a time.

I pick up my furry, four-legged friend and hold him tightly against my chest. "What would I do without you? Do you even know how much I love you?" He starts purring and pushes his head sternly against the palm of my hand, using both of his cat hands to grab my arm and pull my hand in tighter. He is the cuddliest cat I've ever met. And as a Siamese, also one of the loudest cats I've ever met. He's the cat I always dreamed of having. The one that sleeps in your bed with you, spooning, and comes to you and likes to be picked up. The one you have a special bond with. That, I am sure, we have.

When Alana and I went to the shelter to look at cats, Baloo picked us. He stretched out his little arm towards me from the cage he was in. He said, "Please take me home."

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At least that's what I thought he was trying to say. And even though we weren't even planning on getting a cat that day, he stole our hearts, and we ended up bringing him home that same afternoon. If only my relationships with men were as simple and straightforward. Maybe I am too picky, but perhaps I just don't want to settle for something less than what I want. Maybe my standards are higher than what I can offer in return, and so I will always run after someone who's 'too good for me.'