

THE MASERATI TRICK

Girls already blessed in their mothers' bellies by Italian clergymen aren't impressed by U-turns in moving city traffic anymore.

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Our child was born and the dream in my head began to dissolve like a magnesium tablet in a glass of water. My wife Asha fell pregnant and I had this dream: women with a pointed belly and straight hips give birth to boys, said our midwife. And women with curved hips and a flat belly give birth to girls. Asha had appointed belly and so I dreamt of a boy. And like most fathers-to-be I already had my son's career mapped out. He was to become a professional football hero.

We were on our way to Andria, the home town of my parents in Italy. Andria is a town in Apulia. For anyone from there this town has nothing in common with the picturesque dreams German tourists have about Italy. When such people ask me where my forefathers come from most of them mistake Apulia with Andalucia. But Andalucia is in Spain. Andria is an average town with average people who pursue average professions like people do in most towns throughout the world. On hot days the thermometer shoots up to 42 degrees. That's when the streets start to smell of dust and the air starts tasting of carbon monoxide.

Andria only came to people's attention once in Italy over the last 100 years because after a football match in the 1980s a heated fan from the local club Fidelis Andria crossed the path of the referee on his way into the chan

ging rooms after the latter had blown the final whistle. The fan then cut off the referee's right ear with a tomato knife in desperation for allowing a decisive penalty kick against the home team. People there still laugh about the story. That's Andria

We asked Don Amadeo to bless my wife's belly and ask the creator to give our son football genes like those of Diego Armando Maradona. Don Amadeo looked at us through his bushy eyebrows. Asha held her proud belly out into the sun stroking it affectionately. It was midday. We were sitting on the terrace in front of the church. Below us three boys were kicking a plastic ball against the church wall. Don Amadeo drizzled oil on his artichoke salad and said: "Well, dear friends, what kind of genes would you like?" Asha looked at me questioningly with her Indian eyes. She comes from an Arawak tribe in Guyana. Her family came to Germany in the 1960s. Because cricket is the national sport in this Caribbean state but you don't get far in Germany with cricket she left the decision as to the sporting future of our son to me. I said: "Diego's." Don Amadeo smiled understandingly, squeezed the juice of a halved lemon over his artichokes, sprinkled them with pepper and silently slipped them one after the other into his mouth. Finishing he nodded. We went home, accepted the well wishes of the Italian side of our family, wiped the tears of joy from their faces and set off on our way back to Hamburg.

Asha cried, Asha sweated, Asha struggled. The child came forth from her fertile womb a few months later. Inwardly I bowed in gratitude before my weakened wife, linked arms with her and took her with our offspring in my arms out of the hospital back to our modest flat.

Our baby had not learnt to be modest and occupied two-thirds of our flat in one fell swoop, even though it only had a radius of movement of just under a square metre: little bed, little cover, little bottle, little socks and little vest – I no longer had control of any part of the flat. And soon I didn't even have control of my own language. At one point I had even thought of looking up Don Amadeo to exorcise the word "little" from my vocabulary once and for all. I dropped the idea though I actually should have followed it through: an editor-in-chief once called me up because he found it exaggerated that I had turned the national German football trainer's nickname Berti into "little Berti" in a plea for Vogts when the German team was eliminated from the World Cup in 1998. I argued with this heartless editor-in-chief. The text was never printed. Berti soon disappeared out of people's head in Germany. But "little" stayed in my vocabulary.

I was soon buying little tables, little chairs, little plates, little spoons and little forks. Then my little bike clapped out and I bought a little car.

The child turned a year old and discovered my Alfa Romeo 164. It vomited, fertilized and urinated into the velour seating of my car with such fervour I felt it must love the smell of cesspits. Later I disposed of my Alfa at a tip for hazardous waste.

The child turned two years old and discovered a collection of reggae records. Using skewers it traced along the grooves of the records and put the LPs up to its ear to listen to them - because I had once explained the needle of the record player produced the music.

The child turned three and discovered our library. It pulled apart the entire works of Pier Paolo Pasolini to practice making paper swallows and painted the illustrated volumes on Diego Armando Maradona in water colours because it thought the stadium pitches on the photos should be red and not green.

The child turned four and discovered Asha's cosmetic case. This was where she kept the nail polish she decorated her finger and toe nails with on Sundays before we went to our favourite patisserie in Hamburg's Schanzen district. The child used the polish to paint the white tiles of the bathroom because it thought glittery stars would look good on the walls. Since that time I have realised that evolution has failed. This planet would be a sad place and nothing would glisten if my child wasn't here.

Today it is five years old. I recently borrowed a car from a wealthy friend, a Maserati 5000 "Aga Khan" coupé built in 1965. In this car I showed my child a U-turn so it could be impressed by its father. A child will only grow up to be a winner if its father is one, so a rule of child-rearing says. We were driving at lunchtime at 160 km per hour down the Jungfernstieg, one of Hamburg's most popular streets. I then changed direction at full speed. Several pedestrians cheered and others applauded. My child yawned saying: "Dad, drive faster next time". Children need limits, says another law of educational theory. But who tells children that adults have limits by the way?

I have never been ill in my life. Since our child learnt how to fend off bullies at kindergarten it knows what it wants. Since then I have been suffering from exotic diseases like the "Dad-you're-bugging-me" epidemic, the "Dad-leave-me-alone" plague or the "Dad-if-you-don't-get-out-of-my-room-this-minute-I'll-get-Oskar" malaise. Oskar is a boy from kindergarten with the manners of a street urchin. I think my child has become a slave to street jargon.

I decide to wean our child away from this fascination with the street to protect it and to reduce my suffering. For three weeks now I have been giving my child boxing lessons. Boxing is said to keep children away from the dangers of the street. We practise double-handed defence, the left hand and the right uppercut and hook. On good days we sashay in front of the mirror in the hall to the soundtrack of Rocky I. I act out a few boxing combinations. But my child thrusts its pointed fists right into my flesh. At least the lessons are paying off.

Which is more than I can say for Don Amadeo's teachings. At some point in the evenings we decided to start reciting the children's bible. We pray together since our child copied this from last year's Christmas mass. Since then it has folded its hands every evening before going to bed and prayed Father Christmas, the Easter bunny and Santa Claus would please pass by our house and all leave their sacks there. Well if they must... Anyway I've given up.

I recently turned my back on the church and have converted to Buddhism. Buddhism promises nothing and expects nothing in return. It merely focuses your attention back on yourself. Asha and I are going to look up our midwife and Don Amadeo. We want them to account for themselves. The boy I had dreamt of turned into a girl. This girl has a dream: she wants to be a professional boxer. She has a lion's heart. She's hungry for life. Which is why I live a life of splendid destruction.

For her. Jamila.