

Don't make me
choose.

Don't make me
choose

Sylvia van der Meer

Author: Sylvia van der Meer
Coverdesign: Ronald van der Meer
ISBN: 9789463863407
© Sylvia van der Meer

This book is for everyone who has had to endure the grief of a divorce.

Chapter 1

His hand feels soft, warm and clammy with sweat. I give it a quick squeeze, but not too hard. I can't believe this is happening! This must be the happiest moment of my life. I give my best friend a radiant look. Claire also has a smile from ear to ear. Just ten minutes ago she also held Glenn's hand, our idol, our crush. He is a singer songwriter from Great Britain who had his big breakthrough thanks to Ed Sheeran. My entire body is shaking, I'm afraid my legs won't hold me. Other fans are trying to get closer, pushing me away. My hand slips out of Glenn's hand. The moment has passed.

The bright light coming from my mobile phone hurts my eyes. With thick black numbers my mobile phone shows me it's half past twelve at night. The pavement is packed. Everybody is leaving the concert hall and everyone is getting in each other's way. In my mind I am still at the front of the stage, his hand in mine and I still hear the voice of Glenn caressing my ears.

I can hear Claire talk to me, but a persistent soft ringing in my ears is blocking out the words. 'What did you say? I didn't get that.'

'Oh my God! That was the most amazing performance of Glenn we've ever witnessed, wasn't it? He's so sexy!' Claire's eyes are almost shaped in the form of hearts.

I look radiant at my best friend. 'Absolutely! And he was so close, there must be some pretty pictures between them all, I'm sure of it. I might get one printed as a poster, if it's a really good one.'

‘That is a great idea. I may do the same, but with a different picture, I don’t want to steal your idea completely.’ Claire says excited.

‘It’s fine by me. After all, we went to the same concert, we might as well get the same poster as a memory. We already purchased different T-shirts.’ I point my finger at the T-shirts we’ve put on over our tops. Claire takes my arm and wraps hers around it. ‘Yes, we did. Let’s hope that your father is not at the tail end of the queue. I’m tired of all the dancing, but when I get home I have to tell my mom all the cool moments before I can go to bed.’

I point at a car just down the street. ‘You’re in luck, I can see the car already.’

As we walk towards the car, arms still wrapped together, I pull my jacket a bit tighter around myself. The mild breeze from this afternoon has made way for an icy wind, one with the promise of cold days ahead.

‘Hey girls, did you have a great evening?’ my dad asks as soon as we open the doors.

‘It was amazing!’ we call in unison.

The car is filled with a comfortable silence on our way home. It gives me the time and space to enjoy my favorite moments from this evening. The silence during the song ‘My forever love’, which he played just on the piano, and the absolute highlight of the evening when I shook his hand. My heart skips a beat now that I’m reliving the moment.

When my father turns off the car and the gentle humming from the motor stops, the realization drops that we’ve already arrived at Claire’s house. Her mom is standing in the doorway, waiting for her. I get out of the car to switch places to the front seat next to my dad.

‘Thank you mister Wallow.’

‘You’re welcome Claire, it’s no problem.’ He says before she closes the door.

I walk over to Claire and give her a big hug. 'This was definitely one of my favorite evenings.' I tell her with a big smile.

'Mine too. I'm going to tell my mom all about it. Luckily we can sleep in tomorrow. See you on Monday.'

I watch as Claire happily runs towards her mother and I get back in the car afterwards. Claire's parents are divorced. They get along well, but picking up Claire from a concert is not something her dad does. Her mom doesn't own a car and has to stay at home with her little brother.

'It's nice of you to bring Claire home as well, dad.'

My father has his head in his hand and rubs his eyes. 'It's no problem.' He places his hand on my knee and gives it a little squeeze. I take a good look at my father. He looks tired lately and the bags under his eyes are getting darker. That's when I notice it. 'Dad?' I ask teasing.

'Yes dear?'

'Have you forgotten to change your clothes at home? You're still wearing your suit.'

As if he needs to verify what I'm talking about, he lets his eyes glide over his arms and legs and then looks at his tired face in the rear-view mirror. 'I came straight from work to pick you up at the concert, I had to work late.' he sighs. I barely understand the last words because dad lets out a big long yawn.

'Work late? Until half past eleven at night? It's an hour drive from your office to the concert hall.' I give him a look full of pity. I know he's the CEO, but he also deserves some leisure time. 'They're going crazy at work. You work late all the time and now you have to stay even longer?'

'Don't you worry about it. Everything is settled with that foreign client, we can finally enjoy the weekend.' To make it clear to me that this conversation is over, my father sits up straight in his seat and starts the car.

The curtains of our house are closed. I assume that my mother and sister are already asleep. I try to put the key in the lock as quietly as possible. Before I fully get the key in the lock, the door swings open. My mom is on the other side of the door. 'How was the concert? I want to hear all about it. There's a glass of lemonade on the kitchen table.'

'I thought you were in bed already.' I say in surprise.

'I've been waiting for you.' She steps to the side so I can get past.

The garage door next to our house closes and locks with a soft click. Shortly after I can hear my father's footsteps. In the silence of the night the gravel seems to make extra noise under his feet. My parents say hello to each other and kiss. Mom looks sad. It must be her fatigue, usually she is in bed by eleven. I take off my jacket, hang it at the coat rack behind her and start to walk along the hall passing the living room and towards the kitchen in the back. I take a seat on the other side of a big table for eight and make sure my parents can see my new T-shirt. The lemonade my mom made for me is still cooled. I sit and try to wait patiently for my parents to enter the kitchen.

The wait is taking too long and I've already finished my glass. When I walk back into the hall with a newly filled glass of lemonade, my parents are whispering intensely.

'Is everything okay?' I ask carefully.

Two startled faces turn my way. My mom is the first to change back to a smile.

'Cool T-shirt.' She nods in my direction. She gives my dad a glance before heading to the kitchen.

'Is everything okay?' I try again.

'Yes, don't worry.' says dad. 'Your mom is starting to miss me with all the long hours I've done the past few weeks.' He laughs weakly. He's very tired. 'Come on, we want to hear all about your evening.'

Dad takes a seat next to mom at the kitchen table and places his hand over hers. I watch carefully, the conversation in the hallway seemed very heated. My mother leaves her hand underneath that of my father and smiles at me. Relieved I sit opposite them and tell them about my evening. When I tell them we got a spot at the up front and we sang along to all his songs, their reactions are very enthusiastic. They gasp when I tell them that Glenn even gave us a hand!

Dad has his arm draped around my mom and kisses her cheek when I leave them to go to bed. I leave the kitchen with a happy feeling and walk along the hall, up the stairs. Mom's had it with dad's long hours indeed. I take a peek in into my sister's bedroom, but she's deeply asleep.

The smell of hot waffles and the clatter coming from the cutlery drawer in the kitchen are waking me up. A bright light, coming from a small gap between my curtains, falls upon my face. I let out a groan as I pull my blankets over my head and try to get back to sleep. The pressure on my bladder is getting worse as I try to find a new comfortable position and my stomach starts to grumble. I sigh deeply before getting out of bed, my long blonde hair sticks up all over the place and looks like a bird's nest full of tangles on my head.

I get flooded with questions from my sister Sara the minute I walk in to into the kitchen. 'How was Glenn? Was he any good? Did he sing 'My forever love'? Did you get a spot near the podium?' My sister keeps babbling on and on.

'Good morning!' I yell as I grab a plate for breakfast. My sister gives me no time to get organized and insists. 'Well? Do tell, I haven't heard anything about it yet. Dad won't tell me. He says you should tell me yourself.'

'He was amazing.' I tell her enthusiastically. 'He sang all of the songs from his new album. He even played 'My

forever love' on the piano. We even managed to get a spot right at the front, near the stage!

Sara seems delighted and disappointed at the same time. 'Did you touch him?' she asks carefully.

'Yes, Claire and I both held his hand!' I can feel my cheeks turning red from excitement.

'O my God! Which hand did he touch?' Sara looks at me with big eyes.

I raise my right hand. Sara runs towards me and firmly grabs that hand. 'Wow! I can feel his warmth! You can never, ever, ever, ever wash this hand, promise?'

'Unfortunately I'll have to, eventually.' I give my sister a disappointed look.

'When I'm old enough to go with you and he gives me a hand, I will never ever wash my hand again.'

'Eew, I'll stop giving you hugs if that's the case. That's going to smell so bad.' We both start to laugh.

Mom, dad, Sara and I all turn to face the kitchen counter when the fire alarm goes off. Smoke circles up from the waffle iron. Dad jumps from his chair, runs through the kitchen swearing and pulls the plug out of the socket. Sara opens the waffle iron. Black slurry sticks on both sides of the iron, creating sticky strings.

'Eew. I lost my appetite.' I tell her.

'Really? That's a pity! This waffle burns because of the love it was made with. Just so you know.' Theatrically hurt, Sara looks at me.

'Hm. No thanks. I'll just eat a sandwich.' We both start to laugh again.

As I put away the last plates, I notice that dad has left quietly. 'Where's dad?' I look at my sister questioningly.

'He left for his home office while we were cleaning up.' The worried look on Sara's face gives me a knot in my stomach. 'Mom left early this morning. The front door

closing woke me up. I saw her getting in the car with aunt Lia.'

'What? Mom went shopping with aunt Lia without us?' I can't hide my disappointment. 'When will we get our nails done?'

'I think that,' my sister starts carefully. 'Mom wanted to be alone with her sister.'

'Why do you think so? We always have a good time when the four of us go out together, don't we?'

'I saw mom crying last night. I asked her what was wrong, but she didn't answer. I think she didn't even hear me.'

The knot in my stomach is slowly pulling tighter. My thoughts go back to the heated conversation our parents had last night. 'Mom and dad did have a discussion last night, when dad and I got home from the concert. She said she was starting to miss dad due to all the long hours he has done during the past few weeks. It could be the reason.' I stare at my sister, hoping she'll give me confirmation of what I just said. She seems to think about it and has a very focused look. Since when am I able to have a grown up conversation with my little sister? She's starting to become a young lady.

'It could be, it's just that mom was holding a letter. I feel as though she was crying because of the letter, actually.'

'Do you know who it was from?' A curiosity ignites inside of me.

'No, I couldn't see. The letter has been put away also. I couldn't find it anywhere.' Sara sighs.

I put a smile on my face, despite my gut feeling. 'Little spy. Don't worry about it, after the discussion last night they were cuddling in the kitchen, like always.'

Sara walks towards me and gives me a hug. 'Maybe you're right. The letter could be about anything. An old friend for example, to whom something has happened.'

‘Exactly, come to think of it, maybe it’s an old friend of mom and aunt Lia. That would explain why they wanted a day out without us.’

‘Vanessa?’ Sara looks at me with big eyes. ‘I know you have a rule not to do any schoolwork on a Saturday, but I’ve got a geography test on Monday and I don’t understand anything about this windward and leeward stuff. Could you maybe help me?’

I don’t feel like helping Sara at all actually. I would love to ask my dad what is going on, but the distraction seems nice, it’s better than pondering and waiting for my mom to get home. Sara really is clueless when it comes down to geography.

We practice until dad yells that dinner is ready. It’s awfully quiet during dinner. Dad still has dark bags under his eyes and has spent the entire day in his home office. When either Sara or me ask something, we get either a snarl or a vague answer. He leaves for his home office again as soon as he finishes his pizza. Sara looks at me with a sad face. ‘Where is mom?’

‘I have no idea Sara. I find it all a bit peculiar.’ I grab my mobile and send a text to mom.

Hi mom.

Where are you?

X V

I keep staring at my mobile for a little while, but mom still hasn’t read my message after a few minutes. I place my mobile on the kitchen table, this way I can hear it go off when she replies.

After cleaning up the pizza boxes, I fetch a game out of the cabinet. ‘Shall we play?’

‘Yes, that sounds like fun!’ Enthusiastically Sara grabs the Monopoly I hand over to her. I leave the kitchen and walk towards dad’s home office, knocking softly on his door. No

answer. I knock again, a bit harder this time, and open the door. Dad looks at me startled and closes his laptop immediately. 'Don't you know how to knock?' He looks at me annoyed and with a red face.

Startled by his fierce response I take a step back. 'I did, twice even.'

Dad let his head fall into his hands and closes his eyes. 'Oh, if, I don't respond next time just leave me be.'

'Sorry.' My cheeks are glowing and I know they are at least as red as his. 'Sara and I are going to play some Monopoly, would you like to join us?'

'No, I'm busy. Go play with your sister.'

A bit disappointed I close the door to his home office. Voices coming from behind the front door are getting my attention. Lots of laughter is followed by a lot of noise coming from the lock. I take a step towards the door when it opens ever so slightly. Mom stumbles in roaring with laughter, followed by a somewhat quieter aunt Lia. My mom is over by the coat rack. She tries to hang her coat up but fails to do so. Aunt Lia takes the jacket out of her hands and hangs it on the coat rack. Meanwhile Sara entered the hallway, attracted by the sounds.

'Mom?' Suddenly Sara sounds like the little girl she is. Mom turns to face us, a sweet smell drops down on us. She has a glassy look in her eyes, unstable in her heels tries to walk towards us. 'Hey girls!' Apparently she's startled by the sound of her own voice and starts to giggle. Then she whispers on. 'I bought presents for the two of you. Shhh.' She takes a look at the door of dad's home office. 'Do not tell anyone. I haven't bought anything for your father. Hahahahaha.' She laughs so loudly that she stumbles forwards. Confused, I look at Sara who is hidden half behind me.

'Are you drunk?' I ask surprised. Mom never drinks more than just one glass of wine.

‘Your mother has had a glass of wine too many, yes.’ Aunt Lia grabs mom by the waist and gently steers her towards the stairs. ‘I’ll help her get into bed, why don’t you bring a glass of water dear.’ Aunt Lia winks at me.

‘Should I sent dad upstairs also, to help?’

‘No, we’ll manage with just the two of us.’ She then swings mom’s arm around her shoulder and both stumble up the stairs.

Aunt Lia doesn’t stay long. As soon as mom is in bed and has drank her glass of water, she says goodbye.

‘What’s going on aunt Lia?’ This question has been burning inside of me the entire day.

A deep sigh and a kiss on my cheek is the answer I get, before she closes the front door behind her. I’m furious! What sort of treatment is this? I want to scream that I’m no longer a little girl anymore and that I deserve an answer. I don’t however, it will not get me an answer and it will only anger my father.

While in bed I just stare at the ceiling. I have a thousand questions and loose fragments of information that I can’t tie together. Yet I make an effort. Dad is working a lot of long hours, making mom miss him. Dad has secrets, otherwise he wouldn’t close his laptop so quickly when I walked in. Mom wouldn’t drink as much as she did today just because she misses him. Then there’s the mysterious letter. All these thoughts are dazzling me and I end up in a restless sleep.

‘Vanessa! Wake up!’ Sara stands beside me. She’s crying.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Move over, I want to be with you.’

Surprised I move to the cold side of my double bed. ‘This has been a while. Are you okay?’

‘Mom and dad are fighting.’ she sobs.

I draw Sara close to me. Then I can hear the mumbling coming from the room right across from mine. The distorted sounds aren't loud enough to hear what they're saying. But the sound of it tells me it is not a fun conversation.

'Don't worry about it little sis. All people argue, including married people. Arguments are a normal part of a marriage.'

'But they never argue.'

'Not when we're around. I bet they fight sometimes.' I try to sound convincing, but yet something gnaws at me. Sara has a point, I've never seen or heard mom and dad fight.

My sister's body shakes with every sob, I stay awake until her breathing is calm and I'm absolutely sure she's asleep. Only then do I dare to let go of my own feelings. A lonely drop glides from the corner of my eye, past my ear then falls upon my pillow. I look at my alarm, it's five thirty am.

During the morning Sara and I are trying to stall time. We both take a long shower, take more time to style our hair and to brush our teeth in the bathroom. When we're done and back in my bedroom, we look at each other. There's nothing left to do. We sigh deeply and walk out of my bedroom.

As we walk down the stairs we can feel the tension in the air building up. It is deadly quiet in the house, yet we can feel the presence of others in the kitchen. Mom and dad are sitting opposite each other and are looking at us as we enter the kitchen. Mom starts to cry softly and dad lets out a deep sigh.

'Take a seat, we have something to discuss with you.'
Dad says.

Sara takes the seat next to mom and places her hand on mom's shoulder to comfort her. I take the seat to dad. Everything seems to happen in slow motion. With a slow, low voice I can hear dad talking to us.

‘It needs to be recognized for what it is and I can’t dress it up nicely, let’s stay honest to with each other. Mom and I want you to know that we love you both dearly and that our decision has nothing to do with either one of you. After a lot of talks, some long and some short, your mom and I have come to the conclusion that we can no longer stay together.’

There it is. The five words Sara feared last night are about to be said. Words which have caused Claire immense pain and endless crying. I hold my breath.

‘We are getting a divorce.’

A huge pain breaks loose deep within me, all air is beaten out of my lungs and my stomach’s contents, probably the pizza and snacks from yesterday, are fighting their way upwards.

Chapter 2

Sara falls into mom's arms. The sound she produces, doesn't compare to crying. It's a heart wrenching cry. My brain works at full speed. I want to say something, ask questions, but I can't. My body doesn't cooperate, I'm paralyzed. My eyes are stuck on the mug in front of my mom. It's her morning mug. I wonder if she uses this mug every day consciously or if it's just a fine mug. The words on it are slowly sinking in. The irony of it cuts right through my soul. In red ornate letters it says "Best wife in the whole world". You know them, those cheap valentine mugs you can buy on every street corner from the beginning of February.

My dad places his hand on my arm. 'Are you okay?' I pull my arm away from under his hand as if his touch burns me. I jump up from my seat. 'No. No, no, no, no! You can't be serious! How could you do this to us? What's the point of it all? Do you even have a reason?' I thump the table with every word in the last sentence.

Tears are streaming down my face. Sara lets go of mom and walks towards me with arms wide open. We give each other a big hug. As I bow down to lay my head on her shoulder I can feel a gulf of my stomach's contents coming up. Quickly I place my hand over my mouth. I'm not going to make it to the bathroom in time. I look around me in sheer panic. I run towards the kitchen counter where I start to throw up in the sink as I open the water tap. I haven't even had breakfast. A terrible acid, bile flows out of my mouth. My body keeps shaking and gagging until there's nothing left.

I close the water tap as soon as the gagging has stopped. In a drawer next to the sink are newly packed toothbrushes. We always keep spare toothbrushes in this drawer. I grab one and start to brush my teeth.

‘Get something to drink for you and your sister.’ My dad’s voice is calm as ice. ‘We have a lot to discuss with each other.’

I fill two glasses, one with apple juice for Sara and the other with water. Apple juice tastes disgusting when you’ve just brushed your teeth. As I sit down at the table an awful silence fills the room.

‘What is there to talk about?’ I ask carefully.

‘Your mother and I want to make it clear to you that we want everything to be as calm and as normal as possible. We know it will still cause you a lot of grief and pain. That is why we will promise you that we will not place you in any uncomfortable situations. We are going to keep this amicable and it won’t turn into a messy divorce.’

With a bang Sara puts her empty glass back on the table. ‘Well, isn’t that nice?’ She is furious. ‘What are we going to make of this then? A happy divorce?’ She starts to scream. ‘Gosh, that’s bad luck. Your parents are getting a divorce. Too bad!’ Her face changes color from fiery red to very pale.

‘Sara, let’s take some time to hear them out.’ I stretch my arm towards her. Sara gets up from her seat. I expect her to come towards me, but instead she runs past me and leaves the kitchen.

‘Sara! Sara?’ Dad chases her down the hallway. The only answer he gets is the slamming sound of her bedroom door upstairs.

Dad returns to the kitchen, with his shoulders slumped he returns to his seat next to me.

‘Have you tried everything within your power to avoid this?’ I ask. I was hoping my voice would sound strong and mature but instead my words come out soft and shaky.

‘Yes honey, we really tried everything.’ My mom grabs my hand from across the table and gives it a squeeze.

‘But I never heard you talk about therapy. Wouldn’t that be a great idea? To try therapy first?’

Dad puts his arms around me. This time I let it him do so, it comforts me.

‘We really did try everything already, darling.’ says dad.

‘Even therapy.’ whispers mom.

I fight against my tears, I want to remain strong. ‘But, when? Dad was always at work.’

‘On Thursday mornings, when you and Sara were at school, your dad and I saw a therapist.’

The last bubble filled with hope bursts within me. I really had hoped this therapy would be a solution. I’m losing the grip on my self-control again and start to scream. ‘You guys are so unfair! You lied to us all this time pretending to be a happy family!’

‘No darling, we tried to protect you. Your mother and I didn’t want to place you in the middle of this all.’ Dad is getting paler by the second, but my anger has become uncontrollable.

‘That has worked out just perfectly then, because we are right in the middle of it all!’

Carefully I move away from under my dad’s arm and pull my hand away from mom’s hand. I feel empty and weak. I would love to just sleep for a week. The stairs are difficult, I have to drag myself up with every step I take.

I stop at the only closed door in the hall. Softly I tap the door before I open it. Two empty eyes are staring at me from the bed. Sara holds on to her unicorn teddy tightly. It’s white with rainbow colored mane and a horn covered with glitter on its head.

‘How are you holding up?’ The door closes behind me as I take a step towards her. Slowly Sara shakes her head.

‘Can I come and join you?’ Sara nods and I crawl next to her on her small single bed. Sara crawls close to me, I