

NORA OSAGIOBARE

DAILY SOAP

Sample translated by Alexandra Roesch

1

In 1998, two lost souls crossed paths at a Zurich tram stop, only to divorce two decades later. Thirty-three-year-old Anneli Killer had left the city some time earlier to join the Order of the Solar Temple, hoping to get over her ex-boyfriend, who had cheated on her with her best friend. But when the Order's plans to relocate to the star Sirius through collective suicide reached her ears, she turned her back on them, caught a slow train to Switzerland's least small city, and – driven by feminist ideals but mostly by a lack of better options – made peace with her best friend.

A list of things Anneli had tried to fill her spiritual void with:

1. Men
2. Cults
3. LSD
4. Psilocybin
5. Hash

But Anneli's existential crisis persisted. Instead of searching for new meaning in life, she simply started over from the top of her list. On that fateful day, her mild drug-induced psychosis coincided with the arrival of Thor Obioye Osayoghohowemwen, ten years her junior.

A few years earlier, Thor had boarded a Swissair flight² and had since been living the Swiss Dream, despised by the far-right SVP and idealised by the PR agency Goal in glossy brochures for lazy foreigners³. When he wasn't trimming the bonsai trees⁴ in his spacious⁵ owner-occupied flat⁶ he took walks around Zurich, hoping to avoid stepping in dog poo⁷.

2 A rubber dinghy

3 He worked in a factory seven days a week

4 Staring into space

5 Ten square metres

6 A temporary asylum housing estate

7 Being stopped, arrested and deported by the police

Thor Obioye Osayoghohowemwen falls into the category *ripe coffee cherry, plucked from a field kissed by tepid drizzle in Brazil*. Classifying Swiss citizens whose skin colour falls outside the spectrum of the Confederation's norm is the job of the Federal Office for the Rationalisation of Coloured People, or FORC for short – a division of the Swiss Civil Service that uses cappuccino and other coffee hues as reference points.

If, in Switzerland:

- a) someone is born; or
- b) someone applies for asylum; or
- c) someone enters the country on a visa,

and their complexion doesn't fall somewhere between *corpse* and *Mediterranean*, a FORC official pulls out their trusty Caran d'Ache pen and notes down the individual's peculiarities. These notes are then passed on to a second official under the tried-and-tested four-eyes principle. The second official reviews the findings for accuracy, adding or removing details as needed. This covert procedure is repeated six more times, until FORC has met the necessary standards for validity and reliability and can therefore claim to have made an objective assessment. Only then are the findings – which are compiled into a file – entered into the Swiss Skin Colour Register, a database available in both analogue and digital formats.

Anneli spots him before he spots her: a medium-height man with almond-shaped eyes, a high top fade, a dark brown shearling coat, and Chelsea boots in black-and-red snakeskin. She announces her presence with a loud burp. Thor cautiously lifts his gaze from the ground to the medium-height woman with grey-blue doe eyes, dark blonde waves, a white denim jacket lined with sheepskin, and zebra-print Buffalo platform boots. Anneli grins. Thor sweats. She strides toward him purposefully and stops directly in front of him – their noses now just centimetres apart.

ANNELI: Let's go to the cinema.

THOR: Why the cinema?

ANNELI: Would you rather go to the zoo?

THOR: Why not?

ANNELI: What's your favourite animal?

THOR: The penguin.

ANNELI: Do you know the joke about the man who's stopped at the border because he's got baby penguins in his car boot? The border guard is horrified and says they should be in the zoo, and the man agrees. But the next day, the guard stops him again, and there they are – baby penguins in the boot. When the guard angrily asks why he hasn't taken them to the zoo, the man cheerfully replies, "Oh, I did. Yesterday we went to the zoo, and today we're going to the swimming pool!"

THOR: No, I've never heard that one. But the man must have been white.

ANNELI: Why's that?

THOR: Because otherwise he wouldn't dare joke with a border guard

ANNELI: So, are you coming to the cinema or not?

THOR: I don't know.

ANNELI: Come on!

THOR: I don't have time.

ANNELI: Here's an idea: let's meet in twelve hours, at...

Anneli looks around for a clock, but instead spots a blond man with a lost expression, a Gérard Depardieu type.

ANNELI: Hey, you!

HERR BANAL: Uh, yes?

ANNELI: What time is it?

HERR BANAL: One moment. It's... 08:11.

ANNELI: Right, we'll meet here at Bellevue tonight at 20:11 and then head to the Arthouse Le Paris cinema together.

HERR BANAL: I'm married.

ANNELI: Not you. Him.

THOR: Me?

HERR BANAL: Ah, of course.

That evening, Thor leaves his younger brother in front of the telly with a lukewarm bottle of Rivella Blue and, heart pounding, arrives at Zurich's Bellevue. It's 20:12 when Anneli shows up. The two stroll silently toward the cinema. Thor feels a creeping unease, a sense of being followed – which he blames on the trauma of his sea crossing. The foaming waves of the ocean flood his Swiss idyll whenever he least expects it, washing up hallucinations on the shores of his mind, stirring up his dreams, salting his perception, and carrying his youth far away into open waters.

When they reach the cinema, they settle on *The War of the Roses*. Thanks to the ads, the film hasn't started yet. Thor is relieved that he won't have to make conversation for a while, and Anneli is glad her life is better than that of the characters on screen. They laugh for one hour and fifty-seven minutes.⁸

Wordlessly, but relaxed by laughter, they wander along Stadelhoferstrasse, past the theatre, looking for a bar to end the evening. For a split second, Anneli thinks she spots her ex leaning against a tree⁹ – but when she blinks, his wiry silhouette has vanished. Still, she's tasted blood. Finally, she sees a chance to make it crystal clear to Louis Efe di Cabrio that she's not interested in him anymore – and to do so with the help of flesh-and-blood, more persuasive than simply not answering the phone to him. Conveniently, her ex works as a waiter at the

Kronenhalle, just around the corner – which means the mirage (she supposed it was a mirage) has made up her mind about the venue for the rest of the evening.

But Louis Efe di Cabrio hasn't been at the Kronenhalle in a long time, and, oddly enough, the place has undergone an abrupt stylistic transformation. Gone are the Picassos, Miròs, and Giacomettis; now the walls are adorned with nude portraits of young men whose skin tones range from *latte macchiato served in a South African country club circa 1992* to *dark roast mocha sold in an Equatorial Guinean market*.¹⁰

While Anneli marvels at the break from the venue's long-standing traditions, particularly its descent into what she considers tawdry, if not positively vulgar interior décor, Thor sips his Coke, observing the art with an open mind.

What he misses most in Switzerland is the kola nut. In Nigeria, he used to split the purplish seeds along their seams like a ritual, breaking them into pieces and popping a fresh one into his mouth every hour. As he chewed, the bitter flavour spread across his tongue, bringing him into a state of simultaneous calm and focus.

After what felt like an endless taste-testing journey through Switzerland's caffeinated offerings, he finally found a substitute that both pleased his palate and somewhat soothed his craving for kola nuts: Red Bull. Despite the worlds of difference between the gummi bear sweetness of the drink and the earthy bitterness of the nut, the former has transitioned from a poor stand-in to a pleasure in its own right – something Thor would now miss if he returned to Nigeria. With the same absorption with which he once peeled kola nuts, he now lifts the metal tab on a can of Red Bull, the hiss of equalising pressure¹¹ giving him the same small burst of joy as the crack of a nut.

Although his overall caffeine intake has dropped since replacing kola nuts with Red Bull, the side effects – due to the way the stimulant is processed – are far worse. Thor has been dealing with bouts of nervousness and a racing heart for some time now.

Since the Kronenhalle serves neither kola nuts nor Red Bull, he has to settle for a Coke on this occasion – but it still gets his conversational juices flowing. Anneli, meanwhile, has to substitute her chai latte with a verveine tea. Unlike Thor, however, her flow of words seems to have been swallowed by a black hole.

8 Spoiler alert: Their laughter doesn't last.

9 In the 1990s, there aren't many PoC in Zurich.

10 Source: FORC

11 A drinks manufacturer once unsuccessfully attempted to register the sound of opening one of its cans as a trademark with the European Union. By incorporating a nitrogen pod into the can, which releases when the tab is pressed and creates an especially prolonged hiss, and by engineering a slight delay between the can opening and the sound itself, the company argued that the technical effort warranted trademark protection. However, the court rejected the application, stating that the variation in sound quality, being purely technical and insufficiently distinctive, could not establish brand recognition.

THOR: Funny. One of the Black guys in those paintings looks like my little brother.

ANNELI: Hmm.

THOR: Wouldn't surprise me if he's a life model. That guy's a real character.

ANNELI: Uh-huh.

THOR: When Prince Okiti came to Switzerland, I took him in. I mean, he's my brother, even if he gets on my nerves.

ANNELI: Uh-huh.

THOR: First thing he did was build a fence around our house and bundle up my old newspapers. Can you imagine?

ANNELI: Uh-huh.

THOR: And then there are his eating habits. He refuses to touch anything I cook. Instead, he boils potatoes and melts cheese over them.

ANNELI: Uh-huh.

THOR: Don't even get me started on his fashion sense! All he wears are hiking boots, fleece jackets, and quilted gilets.

ANNELI: Uh-huh.

THOR: Do you have any siblings?

ANNELI: An older sister.

THOR: Does she live in Zurich too?

ANNELI: No, in the countryside.

THOR: What's she like?

ANNELI: Completely bonkers.

Thor lets his gaze wander across the other guests and, behind Anneli, he spots the same man who thought he'd been invited to the cinema in Thor's place. The man keeps running his hand through his thick, dark blond mane, his pale green eyes glittering with excitement. A moment later, Thor sees why: a slender blonde woman in a dark green silk dress – who, much to Thor's astonishment, bears a striking resemblance to Anneli – stops by the man's table. The man springs from his chair like a jack-in-the-box and plants an awkward kiss on her mouth.

Thor tries to draw Anneli's attention to the couple behind her without them noticing, but Anneli's gaze is fixed on something behind Thor. She pays no heed to his frantic winking. Thor, now irritated by her apparent lack of interest, confronts her directly.

THOR: Are you looking for someone?

ANNELI: No, why?

THOR: You keep looking around.

ANNELI: I'm just admiring the art. So, why did you come to Switzerland?

THOR: Because of the low corruption rate.

ANNELI: You do know that lobbying is a huge issue here, don't you?

THOR: Lobbying and corruption aren't the same thing.

ANNELI: Well, almost. Is that really the only reason you came?

THOR: That, and the chocolate.

ANNELI: You do know we have to import the cocoa from West Africa, right?

THOR: Of course, but I've still never seen a bar of Lindt Excellence in a Nigerian supermarket.

ANNELI: Yeah, but still.

When Thor finally manages to point out the man and the woman, Anneli just shrugs indifferently.

ANNELI: Looks like those two were made for each other.

THOR: Don't you see she how much she looks like you? You could be sisters!

ANNELI: You only think that because you can't tell white people apart.

THOR: Maybe. But why didn't you want to go to the cinema with him and why choose me instead?

ANNELI: Not my type. I'm not into blond men. Unless they're sad.

THOR: Sad?

Anneli nods.

THOR: Why sad?

ANNELI: Do you have a problem with my sexual preferences?

THOR: No, no. And what else is your type, besides sad blond men?

Anneli visibly struggles with the question. Her gaze drops to the marble table, where it remains fixed as she awkwardly begins to speak.

ANNELI: It's hard to say... I don't really have a type in the classic sense. I like dark-haired, muscular men. Mediterranean, you could say.¹²

At that moment, the blond man lets out a loud cough, as if her words had caught in his throat. The coughing escalates into desperate choking, and Anneli and Thor watch as his companion, clearly embarrassed, slaps him on the back and offers him a glass of water. She avoids any eye contact with the neighbouring tables. Those tables, however, seem so bored by their own lives that the misfortune of an otherwise unremarkable stranger holds the same appeal as the climax of a Quentin Tarantino film.

FRAU BODECA: Armin, just take a sip.

HERR BANAL: *(Cough)* But we're *(cough)* making good *(cough)* progress in *(cough)* couples therapy *(cough)*.

FRAU BODECA: It's only for a few weeks.

HERR BANAL: Do you have someone else?

¹² Anneli and the Kardashians would definitely clash when it comes to dating.

FRAU BODECA: For heaven's sake.

HERR BANAL: You never wanted to take my name...

FRAU BODECA: Oh, not this again. I've told you a thousand times – it's just because of the company.

Thor, just as Anneli had been in the cinema, feels oddly comforted by seeing people whose lives are currently worse than his. He notices the man place his hand on the woman's, only for her to pull hers away immediately, causing tiny tears to well up in the corners of his eyes. Thor feels a pang of sympathy for him. The woman, meanwhile, redirects her attention to the artwork.

FRAU BODECA: Ghastly paintings. (*to the passing waiter*) Could we get the bill, please?

ANNELI: (*also to the waiter*) Us too.

THOR: Poor bastard.

ANNELI: He deserves better.

Thor insists on paying, and Anneli feels guilty for having been rude. She doesn't apologise, though, because she believes apologies are a man's job. Thor feels guilty for being infertile, imagining that Anneli might want children with him. He doesn't apologise either, because it's rather unusual to apologise for infertility on a first date. He swallows hard and pays for the overpriced drinks. Anneli links her arm through his as they glance one last time at the neighbouring table.

HERR BANAL: I love you, Zita.

The man now has his face buried in his hands while the woman mechanically pats his shoulder with one hand and punches her PIN into the card reader with the other.

Hoping Anneli might come back to his place after the date, Thor had declared his brother persona non grata from 11:00 p.m. on 2 December 1998. As a result, the two of them arrive at an empty one-room apartment, though the olfactory ghost of raclette cheese lingers in defiance of Thor's explicit ban. After opening the window, he sits beside Anneli on the sofa bed that Prince Okiti had folded up before his exile. Thor's gaze meets Anneli's, plunging into it like a heavy stone into a crystal-clear mountain lake, before slowly sinking to the bottom of her soul.

Anneli makes no secret of her lust. Her gaze drills into him with the precision of a professional craftsman working his material, eventually landing, so Thor assumes, in his digestive tract. He explains his bodily reaction,¹³ his stomach emitting growls and snarls, with deep embarrassment. Anneli's predatory instincts, however, remain undeterred by a bit of acid

reflux. She throws herself at him with fervent desire, to which Thor responds with a sheepish burp.

After a few hours of sleep devoid of cuddling or REM phases, Anneli, accompanied by Thor's rhythmic snoring, slips into her clothes. As she slams the door behind her, Thor flinches before resuming his dreams of emerald waves, gaping shark jaws, and screaming children.

Bleary-eyed, Anneli steps off the tram at Bürkliplatz early in the morning, intending to stroll by the lake until she reaches her penthouse apartment. Behind her, the tram doors close with the sound of mechanical wings. On the road running parallel to the tram tracks, she hears a phone conversation through the open window of a sky-blue BMW Z3 Coupé. As Anneli often finds with men, she cannot decide whether his loud voice indicates anger or sadness. When she tries to study the driver's expression, she realises it is the same man she had encountered the day before – first at the tram stop and then in the Kronenhalle. She freezes, scrutinising his swollen, tear-filled eyes and slightly open mouth, through which words escape in broken sobs.

HERR BANAL: She's kicked me out, Thomas. ... At the Baur au Lac. ... She booked it for me. ... Four weeks. ... And she can extend it. ... I have a bad feeling. I know you mean well, but it's been a while...

The traffic light turns green, and the BMW drives off. Anneli decides to follow the man. She's seen him three times in 24 hours – that must mean something. Besides, she doesn't know what else to do. She'd only lie in bed, meditate, masturbate, and browse the cult directory for new membership opportunities.

She runs the remaining 300 metres to the Baur au Lac and arrives at the five-star hotel, sweaty and out of breath, just in time to see an employee valet-parking the BMW. Through the open entrance door, she spots the man leaning on the reception desk with his elbow, his face resting in his hand, staring into space. As she steps into the lobby and stands behind him, the receptionist hands him a key. The man turns to go, sees Anneli, and freezes. A mix of surprise and joy spreads across his round face. Holding the hotel key, he looks like a toddler playing with a rattle.

In the early days, Anneli and Herr Banal only talk – or rather, he talks, and she listens. When she wraps the sobbing man in her arms and soothes him with gentle sounds like *shhhhh* or *bsssst*, her heart feels warm, her mind quiet, and she senses, at last, that she has a purpose in life.¹⁴

¹³ These are also side effects of his excessive coffee consumption.

¹⁴ Anneli's career as a kindergarten teacher ended abruptly due to her dubious teaching methods. She categorically refused to intervene in children's fights, claiming it would disrupt their Qi flow and cause serious developmental issues. Not even the black eyes and broken bones among her charges changed her mind.

Herr Banal, in turn, is glad to have found someone he can confide in unreservedly, as Anneli has no ties to his social circle. What's more, she bears an uncanny resemblance to Frau Bodeca, allowing him, in particularly weak moments, to imagine that he and his wife have spontaneously booked a romantic weekend at the hotel.

Anneli does not tell Herr Banal about Thor, even though she now sees him several times a week. Their ritual of a cinema visit followed by drinks at the Kronenhalle has become a routine, though they struggle to find much to say to each other once they leave the cosy cinema seats and face each other in the brightly lit bar. That is, until they end up on Thor's sofa bed, engaging in activities that require no conversation. Her meetings with Herr Banal, on the other hand, are a refreshing counterpoint to the wordless dates with Thor.

One evening, when Anneli enters his hotel room, Herr Banal has already polished off a bottle of Moët & Chandon. She becomes witness to an unprecedented crying fit, one so intense that not even her comforting sounds and hearty hugs can calm him down. After several failed attempts to express his despair in words rather than sobs, Herr Banal gives up. As if being lost for words weren't bad enough, he is then overcome by a *globus hystericus* – a choking sensation – that renders him breathless. His face shifts from a signal red to a tender purple and finally to a concerning shade of deep blue. Unfamiliar with first aid – believing such interventions to be unnatural – Anneli watches helplessly as he collapses. She finally sits astride him and saves his life with improvised mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

When Herr Banal regains consciousness and looks into Anneli's grey-blue eyes, the growing impulse to approach her physically blossoms into confident determination. With his eyes wide open, he presses a kiss to her lips, which at first recoil in shock but soon, convinced by the taste, return to meet his.

[...]

Although she took over the company eleven years ago and committed herself to its gradual modernisation, Frau Bodeca still follows the same quota system for her employees that her grandfather preached and her father inherited, and that he once shared with her during one of their rare moments of intimacy, loosened by a touch of grappa, as if it were some cherished family recipe:

1. An underdog with imposter syndrome, who tries to compensate for their insecurity through sheer diligence. The first clue you're dealing with such a person is their glaring overqualification; the second, their bland appearance. A job application from a thirty-year-old woman with mousy hair, glasses, bitten fingernails, and a first-class honours degree fit this profile perfectly. Meret has since become an indispensable part of the team – though Frau Bodeca, of course, would never tell her that.

2. A narcissist who believes they can single-handedly run the show and sees the rest of the team as more of a burden than a help. The first clue to such an individual is their glaring underqualification; the second, their eccentric appearance. Twenty-eight-year-old Ennio had little more to his name than a series of meaningless internships, for which he'd either received mediocre references or which he had abandoned before the contract ended. If you give people like this too much responsibility, the rest of the team will constantly have to clean up their messes – which not only boosts morale but also strengthens team spirit. Nothing fosters unity like shared hatred. Moreover, the dynamic between the narcissist and the underdog creates a kind of greenhouse effect: the underdog, desperate to prove their worth, works even harder to impress the boss, while the narcissist responds with oppressive measures⁷³, which only reinforces their own self-image as a far superior employee compared to the useless underdog.

3. A moralist with a penchant for hypocrisy, recognisable by their sharp, watchful gaze, a bitter line around their mouth, and a CV littered with countless volunteering gigs. Nina worked her way up from street fundraiser to overseas project coordinator and finally to director of the Swiss branch of one of the world's largest aid organisations. Though Frau Bodeca doesn't hold aid organisations in high regard – on liberal grounds, she believes people should help themselves – and has only ever donated to an animal charity once in her life, she is impressed by Nina's career record for several reasons. Firstly, working as a street fundraiser requires an extraordinary degree of resilience in the face of public hostility and unpredictable weather. Secondly, running a major charity demands an even higher degree of hypocrisy – both of which Frau Bodeca finds quite useful.

⁷³ Also known as bullying.

4. A "normalo" with no discernible personality, which has the advantage of making their performance immune to fluctuations. A normalo speaks exclusively in facts and expertise – as reflected in their choice of clothing. Lukas always wears the same black cotton Benetton T-shirt with the same black Levi's jeans and has worked for several international fashion houses. The forty-eight-year-old accepted Frau Bodeca's job offer because it came with a level of creative freedom he hadn't experienced in the big firms. He only speaks when absolutely necessary, and his contributions carry a unique significance in any given discussion. He has no need to show off, knowing full well he's the most capable member of the team. A normalo is neither lazy nor prone to burnout.

5. An heir who joined the company not because of his abilities but because of his family connections. He doesn't see his colleagues as competition but as representatives of the proletariat – though he would never let that slip. Paul's down-to-earth façade, which he shares with many other people from so-called "good families," serves him well – and ultimately, despite his respectable academic record, this is his primary function: to be the face of the company. Who could be better suited for that than a well-dressed member of Zurich's High Society in his early forties, who gives a wide berth to the bad boys of the scene and has never been involved in any scandal the tabloids could sink their teeth into. Paul Banal is also one of the few only-famous-in-Switzerland celebrities who has consistently turned down offers to appear on embarrassing TV reality shows.

When Frau Bodeca enters, the conference room is silent, even though everyone is already present. She strides to the head of the USM table, where the lowered projection screen gleams white, and, thanks to an ancient instinct, senses the weight of everyone's gaze without needing to raise her head. When she finally does, her hunch is confirmed – with one exception: Paul is staring at his phone, looking as though he's just lost his entire fortune in online poker and is dreading having to tell his family. Confronted with the collective attention of her employees, Frau Bodeca is suddenly convinced she has overdramatised the whole situation in her mind. The company would survive this incident, just as it had survived years of economic mismanagement under her husband. She starts the PowerPoint presentation and, behind her, a sensational tabloid headline and the hashtag expressing millennial outrage on social media light up the screen: *#banalandbloodyawful: The Fall of a Swiss Empire*.

She summarises the contents of the campaign and the criticisms it has provoked before expressing her regret with platitudes like "hurt feelings," "sensitive territory," and "a shared learning experience." Once the obligatory formalities are out of the way, she switches into her preferred mode of pragmatism.

FRAU BODECA: "My grandfather laid the foundation for this company while enduring gruelling shift work and relentless discrimination. Giuseppe Bodeca didn't turn his back on Italy only to be spat on in Switzerland – literally – so that seventy years later, people as young

as he was when he left his homeland, people who don't even know how to use a tin opener, could accuse him of racism and drag his legacy through the mud. We need to make that clear. At the same time, expanding our target audience to Millennials and Gen Z is vital for the company's survival. A press release alone won't clean up our image. We need a campaign that gives the face of the company a fresh coat of paint. Something that says: Banal & Bodeca is young, urban, and multicultural. A cross-channel rebranding campaign, aimed particularly at teenagers and young adults. Banal & Bodeca must take a strong stand against racism and homophobia. But we can't forget who makes up the majority of our customers – people aged forty-five to sixty. And our shareholders are even older. We can't come on too strong with them. We're not political actors; we're about aesthetics."

Frau Bodeca takes a moment to catch her breath. Her head is buzzing, her heart is pounding – she feels satisfied.

FRAU BODECA: "Right. That's it from me. Now I'm curious to hear your ideas."

She beams at the five people seated around the table, one by one, but then a crack forms in her euphoria, and the mediocrity of human existence flashes at her like the bared teeth of a snarling pit bull. The effect of her medication is beginning to wear off.

ENNIO: "We just reach out to Black influencers as brand ambassadors."

Nina (*irritated*): "And then?"

ENNIO: "Well, we dress them up, take photos, and post them with the hashtag #notoracism. Mission accomplished."

Ennio leans back in his chair, linking his hands behind his head, and grins around the room.

PAUL BANAL: "I suggest we don't limit the campaign to racism but also show that we condemn other forms of discrimination, like homophobia."

NINA: "We could launch a collection and donate a portion of the proceeds to anti-racism initiatives and LGBTQIA+ rights."

ENNIO: "LGT-what? I don't think donating to some private bank is going to solve our problem, Nina."

Ennio laughs, reclining even further in his chair, searching for approval in the eyes of the group – especially Frau Bodeca.

PAUL BANAL: "We could hire Black and gay designers for a capsule collection. Get some names that are trending right now."

LUKAS: "We also need to connect with the public on a personal level."

FRAU BODECA: "What do you suggest?"

LUKAS: "You should acquire a large, impressive painting by a Black artist for your office. Ideally, someone from Switzerland. That way, you support the Swiss art scene, which will also leave a good impression on customers who weren't offended by our campaign."

NINA: "The artist has to be Black, though."

LUKAS: "Yeah?"

NINA: "How could they be... I mean, they can't be one hundred percent Swiss if they're Black, can they?"

Lukas stares at her in disbelief and shakes his head silently.

ENNIO: "Louis Efe di Cabrio is really popular right now. My girlfriend studies art, and she can't stop talking about him."

When Ennio tosses the name of the artist into the room, Paul Banal flinches, as if he's got the hiccups. Noticing the attention this draws, he quickly nods in emphatic agreement.

PAUL BANAL: "Great idea."

LUKAS: "You invite your favourite tabloid for an exclusive interview, and sooner or later, they'll definitely ask you about the painting. That's when you gush about this talented artist whose career you've, of course, been following for years. Then you casually mention your commitment to supporting Black people."

NINA: "What commitment?"

Frau Bodeca shoots Nina a withering look. Then, to everyone's surprise, Meret breaks the awkward silence.

MERET: "That alone won't be convincing. We need to show that we genuinely care about the wellbeing of Black people."

ENNIO: "Thanks for the groundbreaking insight, Captain Obvious."

Ennio smirks mockingly, crossing his left leg over his right so his tapping left foot now points away from Meret.

MERET: "As long as the Banal & Bodeca family hasn't personally experienced discrimination, no one will believe it's serious when we say we're not racist."

NINA: "You don't have to be a victim of racism to take a stand against it."

ENNIO: "Frau Bodeca could just say she's one percent Black!"

Ennio bursts into laughter, looking around once again for approval, but finds none. Frau Bodeca begins pacing slowly around the table, pausing occasionally behind each of her

employees. This subtle threat immediately activates their amygdalas – a technique she always uses when she senses a lapse in focus.

NINA (*to Frau Bodeca*): "You could tell the press about your grandfather and the obstacles he had to overcome to start this company. That makes you relatable and shows that your family has faced racism too. People love those kinds of success stories."

LUKAS: "That's ancient history. Millennials can't relate to it – and Gen Z even less."

MERET: "Italians are seen as too well-integrated now for anyone to still 'other' them..."

ENNIO: "'Order'?"

LUKAS: "They've even made it into the SVP."

FRAU BODECA (*proudly*): "My father was in the SVP too – and even served in the National Council until his death."

LUKAS: "And what about gay people?"

MERET: "If the Banal & Bodeca family doesn't have any actual experiences of discrimination, then we should come up with a story that shuts down all the accusations at once."

ENNIO: "Let's say Paul's gay!"

Ennio claps his hands and bursts into uncontrollable laughter, crossing his right leg over his left this time.

PAUL BANAL: "Have you completely lost your mind?"

ENNIO: "Come on, it's funny."

PAUL BANAL: "I could sue you for that – it's slander."

FRAU BODECA: "Paul!"

ENNIO: "It was just a joke."

PAUL BANAL: "Do you see anyone else laughing?"

FRAU BODECA: "That's enough! We have far more important things to do than watch you two argue. Pull yourselves together."

After a long pause, it's Meret who breaks the silence again.

MERET: "We really could say Paul's gay. We could even say he's in a relationship with a Black man."

All eyes are now fixed on Meret, even Frau Bodeca. Only Paul Banal shakes his increasingly red face and folds his arms.

PAUL BANAL: "You've all gone completely mad. Zita, say something!"

But Frau Bodeca is already hanging on Meret's every word, not sparing her son so much as a glance.

NINA: "We're supposed to lie?"

MERET: "No, we're telling a story. That way, people can only speculate whether Paul is really in a relationship with a Black man or not."

ENNIO: "What kind of story?"

MERET: "A miniseries. A reality show. A behind-the-scenes look at the private lives of the Banal-Bodeca family and their successful fashion empire."

ENNIO: "Keeping Up with the Banal-Bodecas."

MERET: "A kind of soap opera. Always the same cast, all dressed in Banal & Bodeca."

LUKAS: "We stream it online – that's how we reach the target audience."

MERET: "It's a marketing, branding, rebranding, product, and online campaign all in one!"

ENNIO: "Smart."

NINA: "But reality shows aren't fictional. People would actually believe Paul is gay."

ENNIO: "Everyone knows those shows are scripted nowadays."

MERET: "And yet everyone pretends they're not. The voluntary suspension of disbelief."

LUKAS: "So we film Paul meeting his Black boyfriend, and we show how chill his parents are about it."

MERET: "No. We show him meeting his boyfriend in secret, and his mother completely losing it when she finds out."

NINA: "That makes no sense at all, Meret."

MERET: "If we cast Frau Bodeca as the villain in the reality show, we fictionalise her villainy. This subconsciously makes viewers assume that, in real life, she's not actually that bad. The point is, speakers in crisis communication are often perceived as insincere. This lets us leave it ambiguous whether what's happening in the show is real or not, while still responding to the accusations."

ENNIO: "Huh?"

MERET: "On the one hand, the family wouldn't admit publicly to having a problem with their son being gay and dating a Black man. On the other hand, this way they don't have to claim they don't have a problem either. We leave it up in the air whether the events in the show are real or fictional, but it still answers the criticism."

ENNIO: "Louis Efe di Cabrio loves being in front of the camera. I think he even gives interviews to *Weltwoche*. I could ask him."

PAUL BANAL: "Why him of all people?"

LUKAS: "Why not?"

FRAU BODECA (*quietly, to herself*): "Brilliant."

PAUL BANAL (*shocked*): "Excuse me?"

FRAU BODECA: "Good. I like the idea. Meret, you'll handle the soap opera with Lukas. Ennio, you're in charge of the capsule collection. And start looking for organisations we could donate to." (*noticing Nina's excited expression*) "Actually, no, forget that. But arrange a meeting with this artist, Louis Efe di Cabrio. I'd like to meet him personally. Right, back to work. Good luck."

Frau Bodeca rises from her swivel chair and casts one final look around the room. Only then does she notice how pale her son has become.