

Sabine Schoder: Liebe ist was für Idioten. Wie mich

Love is for Idiots. Like Me

Translation: Deborah Langton

© S.Fischer Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt am Main, 2015



Prologue

The day I decided I'd never cry again.

My black dress has got marks on it where my knees pressed it into the soft earth. One of my shoelaces has come undone and trails behind me. I want to do it up again but the stream of grown-ups sweeps me onward. Past coats hung up while wet, still dripping on the floor.

The air's grey with a persistent fog. Nothing to do with tears, more to do with the cigarette smoke hovering over the tables. My uncle, crashed out on a chair, undoes his sports jacket. He nods at the waitress who comes hurrying, pad and pencil poised.

My father sits at the end of the table. All alone. Only a half-empty beer glass to keep him company. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand which he then runs through his hair, depositing flecks of froth here and there. But he doesn't notice. His fingers feel for the contents of his bulging shirt pocket.

I run over to him. Pushing my way past adult hips and elbows as they knock against the sides of my head. Stepping on the loose shoelace, I trip up, fall on my knees, and pick myself up straight away. But it's too late.

His lighter's already flamed and gone out. The burning tip glows, eating deep into the cigarette my father's just lit. He tucks the pack away again out of sight in his shirt pocket and sinks down further into his chair, as if the smoke were melting him from the inside.

I pluck at his sleeve. 'Dad, please, do give it up!'

His gaze wanders blankly over my face, not finding anywhere to come to rest. 'Not today, Victoria. Not now. Leave me in peace.'

I'm on the edge of tears. It's easy to hold them back. I press my legs together until they shake with the effort and press my fingernails into the palms of my grubby hands. My sobbing makes voices falter, heads turn, words dry up. Everyone can see me, everyone can hear me. My father's the only one to take no notice. He lifts the cigarette to his lips again.

After this everything happens really fast. My little fist grabs hold of the white object. At first I feel nothing, then the burning tip bites into my skin. I'm too surprised to cry out and stare at the tobacco crumbling into my hand.

Then all of a sudden the image is destroyed. A rushing sound fills my left ear, I fall against the table, send glasses flying, something smashes. And then there's silence. Deathly silence all around us.

Beer's soaking into a table napkin.

Dad's hand is still raised.

The clout has left the side of my face throbbing.

That's when it really dawns on me.

Tears don't help.

Tears make you blind.

Chapter 1

How much of this stuff do I have to smoke to want you?

My mother's staring at me. From the small picture frame on my bedside table. She's got the Jennifer Aniston blow-dry. Very nineties. Very modern back then. A black, decaying tooth seems to feature in her smile.

Carefully, I scratch the dust off with my nail.

I throw myself on my bed, knackered, and close my eyes just as my mobile rings from somewhere on the floor.

'Please be a wrong number. Just let me lie here and die in peace.' I'm deadly serious. I have, after all, just done the shift of hell.

I fumble around on the floor for the phone to reject the incoming call. But in my attempts, I activate the loudspeaker by mistake and the phone slips further out of reach. There's my best friend Melanie's voice blaring out across the room. 'MANY HAPPY RETURNS ON YOUR SEVENTEENTH BIRTHDAY!'

I give a groan in reply.

'Viki, is that you?'

'No, sex hotline, here,' I snarl. 'For 6 euro a minute I'll make you crazy. Select one for a friendly flirt or two for filthy lesbian sex.'

'Since when have you gone in for a friendly flirt? Are you OK there?'

I heave myself up off the pillows and reach over the edge of the bed. The mobile's somewhere in a heap of clothes on the rug. At least there was a rug there the last time I did any clearing up. Instead of hoovering I just change the bedding. Mel's picture lits up the screen, right by my tatty socks. 'I'm just back from the restaurant. A five year-old threatened to wee on his plate if I didn't get him a lollipop. The parents described this as 'creative'.

Mel laughs. 'Forget about your rotten weekend job. Today's your great big day!'

I close my eyes. 'You're right. I'm allowed to give myself something on my birthday. How about a huge cream cake with an armed man jumping out of it to shoot me?'

'You'd let yourself be killed by someone you didn't know? What on earth are your friends for, then?'

I suppress a broad smile to stop Mel realising that this was a good one. 'Cos I know what she's got in mind.

A whole month ago I'd told my friends I had to work on my birthday and would rather be alone afterwards. They'd all responded with looks of surprised concern as if I'd announced my intention of becoming an axe-murderer. Soon after that the secret chit-chat started.

I pick my mobile up off the floor, turn off the speakerphone and lay on my back. My bedroom walls couldn't be any blacker and there's only one window for the light of the city to seep through. I switch on a string of purple fairy lights and, lost in thought, count the number of little bulbs. 'Real friends would forget about my birthday if I ask them to.'

'Real friends spend six weeks planning you a surprise party which you definitely know about because your cousin has blabbed.'

'A party? Really?'

'Hey, Viki!' Mel starts sounding a bit uptight. 'We're all meeting at ten at Black Zone. That way you'll have some fun and we'll celebrate your birthday!

I give a sigh of defeat. 'Who's playing, then?'

She hesitates. 'Major Malfunction?'

My sharp intake of breath makes it quite clear what I think of this band but Mel continues, 'I know! I know! But Black Zone's your favourite place and they're only playing 'til midnight. The atmosphere'll be brilliant.'

'The only atmosphere those guys are bothered about is the one in their pants,' I snarl with disdain.

'Ten at Black Zone,' begs Mel. 'Tell me you're going to turn up. Please.'

I tug at my hair which feels as though it's got about half a litre of cooking oil in it from the restaurant kitchen. 'I need a shower. And I want to colour my hair, too. I'll probably get there pretty late.'

'Cool! It'll be a birthday you'll never forget.'

I bring the call to an end and get myself up off the bed.

Mel couldn't be more wrong. I'll be guaranteed to forget this evening. I'll make sure of that.

Out of habit, I look across at my bedside table. But my mother only smiles in understanding.

If I look at the picture long enough, her lips begin to move. She whispers to me, tells me secret things about myself that I never tell anyone else. Sometimes she tries to persuade me not be so hard on the world.

What does she know? She's been dead for ten years.

I pick up the picture and put it away in a drawer. Face down.

Black Zone is a dark, featureless building in the city centre. Only the thud-thud of the bass and a red neon sign give any indication of what's inside. When I get there, Major Malfunction are already on. The sounds of rock music shake the darkened windows.

Waiting in the queue, I check my look in the glass-door: black lace-up boots (no heels), black fishnets, a black pleated skirt and my black leather jacket. My shining hair's freshly washed and dyed, in my favourite colour, of course. Normally I don't get myself so done up but, hey, I'm the birthday girl today. I hand the doorman a fiver and launch myself into the crush.

It's a real pit there today. I dig my way between sweating bodies, narrowly escaping getting a fag-burn on my jacket. The band's really flogging it on the stage. For a school-band, they don't sound that bad. There's just one snag. These guys are enough to turn anyone into a meddling do-gooder given that they're only interested in dragging a few females outside afterwards.

The vocalist is the worst of the lot. He always dresses in bloody pricey jeans, a T-shirt with the name of some veteran band on it, smears a bit of dirt on his Converse and sings about social inequalities. All he does afterwards is neck beer for hours and then lay the first good-looking girl who happens to trip over him.

Someone really should be straight with him about this stuff. But if the cheering audience is anything to go by, I'm the only one who seems bothered by these contradictions.

I push my way through to my friends who've got the corner table, a fitting distance away from the cheap imitation rock-stars. Mel flings her arms round me and her red curls catch my mouth. She's got on a pretty perfume, a smile to match and glittery nail varnish to mark the event. Her body feels full of fun in my arms; so far this is the first reason I've had to feel pleased about tonight.

Then my cousin, Phil, turns up and gives me an exaggerated bear hug. 'How you've grown!' he shouts, even though we saw each other three days ago. 'I remember you when you were soooo sweet and soooo high!' He indicates what he means by placing his flat hand somewhere at knee-height. 'Little Viki liked wearing pink ribbons in her plaits and princess frocks.'

'That was all a disguise,' I mutter. 'I was hiding a set of knives under the frock so I could kill off the wicked prince.'

Phil ruffles my hair in a good-natured way. I duck clear of his hand and let the rest of the gang wish me happy birthday. Lisa, Tom and Chris give me hug, one after the other.

'The guys and I clubbed together. Enjoy!' Lisa flutters her thickly mascaraed lashes and presents me with a folded envelope. First I take out what has to be the kitschiest birthday card ever invented in the whole world. It's got a rainbow over a nest of chirping baby birds, with Happy Birthday written in glitter across the impossibly blue sky. The mother bird flies in with a real mini-envelope in her beak, the words 'Birdy post just for you' emblazoned across its front.

I'm roaring with laughter. 'Oh my God, does that card have its own firearms certificate?'

They snigger. 'Open it up!'

Inside the envelope is a little plastic bag of dope.

I don't smoke cigarettes. And no, it's not because of the cancer pictures printed on the packet, and not out of consideration for the quality of my sperm (if I had any, that is). Cigarettes are just far too expensive. At least, that's the excuse I always feed to the others. The truth would be too depressing.

As for alcohol, I don't drink on a regular basis and that's out of preference. This is no surprise to anyone who knows my father. But I do still sometimes yearn for those moments you can just sink into and disappear. That's why I'm not averse to a spliff.

That shows how well my friends know me. I get another round of drinks in to thank them and let myself be pulled in to the group.

Now it's Mel's turn. She spirits out of her handbag a soft toy and sits him on the table in front of me. 'May I introduce you? This is Bear. He is the perfect lover. You can cuddle him, kiss him and get into bed with him.'

'Will Bear buy me stuff, too?' 'No. So you can kick him up the backside when you're pissed off. He'll never mind. D'you like him?'

'He's just brilliant. Thank you.' Bear tips to one side and I grab hold of him before he can knock over my glass of Coke. 'Should I be asking why he's wearing a pink G-string?'

Phil leans across in my direction. 'The G-string is a present from me. In case you still want to have a go with a real, warm-blooded man. On account of the thing with Adrian...'

Mel gives him a warning look. He falls silent and looks hard at his drink.

It looks like my ex-boyfriend, Adrian, still has the knack of spoiling a conversation. Even though he hasn't been on the scene for months. I should have stopped thinking about it all ages ago. For the sake of my friends who've really gone to loads of trouble for this evening.

My decision is firm – I'm not going to let myself be dragged down by either Adrian or other guys like him. Guys who talk about love and mean something quite different.

Talking of which. My eyes stray towards the stage.

Girls scream out above the frantic applause as the band has just finished its first set. The singer waves at a couple of girls at the front and the silly bitches almost fall over one another in their attempts to climb up on the stage.

Can't they see he's just stringing them along?

I strip the bear's trousers off over his bottom and catapult them across the room with an elastic band. Unfortunately, I miss.

'Thanks,' I reply to Phil's earlier remark. 'But I'll stick with stuffed toys.'

Over the next hour the joint we're passing round helps me shut out all background noise. Until, that is, screeching feedback from the speakers hits my ears and I cover them with my hands.

All the bodies in front of the stage have morphed into one single creature, its arms stand proud of its back, it pulses, breaths, spews out a drinks can overhead and sprays fluid over all the ripped jeans. The lead singer casually kicks the can away. Maybe he's used to being showered with litter.

He picks up the mike. I'm expecting the same old crap from him. How great the audience has been, the dates of their next gigs, where their CDs are on sale, what colour the coating on his tongue is after a heavy night, but I am instead taken by surprise.

'Hey, guys, before we finish tonight's show I need to tell you all something.'" The singer pushes the damp hair back off his sweaty forehead. 'The time with Major Malfunction has been really something. One long party, no holds barred, life in the raw with the occasional interruption for school stuff and waiting at various police stations.'

Whistling from the crowd. 'Bastard cops,' someone shouts. Witty chanting.

'These crazy guys up here have packed my brain with garbage, madness and, more than anything, happiness. We've had so many laughs, you know when your mouth goes numb and you're holding your stomach?' He shifts his gaze to the guitar he's holding, looking at it as if he didn't know where it's sprung from. Then he sets his mouth in a hard line, making it look completely white from where they were sitting, then bursts out with these final words: 'This is my last song. I'm giving up being vocalist with Major Malfunction.'

There's deafening shouting and yelling from the mob, only a couple of boys at the side clap properly. The singer takes hold of his guitar, ready to play, nods to his bandmates behind and lets the riff belt out for the crowd. The drummer misses his cue and thrashes at his kit in punishment. Their farewell number rips through the speakers.

Major Malfunction is over. A DJ's now up on the stage, his talentless scratching at discs only making a racket. Tom and Chris are stuck in the queue for drinks, Phil had to go for a pee and the girls have failed in their attempts to persuade me to dance. They did everything they could but it was eventually my point that someone had to look after the table that made them give up. Mel throws a worried look back over her shoulder at me and promises to be back very soon.

It does me good to sit there for a while on my own and to have time for my own thoughts. Then my stoned imagination takes my mind back into the past and reminds me why my birthday is so depressing. My friends mean absolutely everything to me. But sometimes they're just not enough. Sometimes I find myself longing for something more. I'm suddenly overcome by the urgent desire to find Mel. Unsteadily I get up from my seat and end up on the dance-floor. Bodies everywhere, hands everywhere. Elbows dig into my sides, flailing arms hit me across the chest, fingers clutch at my skirt. I'm stumbling and reeling about.

Everything's going too fast. I grab hold of a fixed table and close my eyes. The darkness is interspersed with burning red and glaring blue, my stomach heaves and tries to quell the thoughts making my head spin.

Damn it, I really haven't realised how stoned I am. I need air. Fresh air!

The railings outside the main door stop me falling headlong on the foot path and making an arse of myself in front of the bouncers. I take huge breaths to fill my lungs. But where's Mel? Normally she stays close. As I lift my head I find myself looking straight at the blonde vocalist, leaning up against the wall close by, having a smoke.

'I don't believe my luck,' I say, mockingly. 'May I stand here or do I need permission from the fan club to do so?'

The guy takes no notice of me. The strong smell of dope fills the night air. His dulled brain must have been trying to fathom out what I meant.

I take hold of his shoulder. 'Hey, is that just cigarette smoke or are you burning the straw in your little brain?'

He glances at me obliquely. His eyes are blue as the summer sky. Imperceptibly I lean nearer to find out whether this cocky bastard is wearing contact lenses but the light isn't good enough for me to see.

It niggles at my ego that he simply remains silent.

'Where are all the girls normally hanging round you the whole time?' I probe further. 'Have you broken their hearts?'

He takes a peaceful drag on the joint before he eventually answers. 'Maybe it's actually my heart that's been broken?'

'Oh, have you got one?'

'Hey, have you got something against me?'

I shake my head, laughing. 'I'm not stoned enough for confessions like that.'

His facial features betray no emotion. This guy is so cool he's almost deep-frozen. He says nothing, not a word, but then reaches over and holds the joint out to me.

I struggle for a moment but then accept it. The end of the cigarette-paper is squished up and a bit wet from his saliva. I ought to say no. But a different feeling is fighting its way up to the surface. Curiosity. What is it that makes all the girls like him so much?

I try it.

No roach. The smoke clogs my lungs, creates a pressure against my insides too hard for me to throw off. I have to cough and tears fill my eyes. 'Shit, is there any *tobacco* in there at all?'

There's a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. 'Not a lot.'

I don't want to chicken out. Not in front of him. I take another pull. This time I inhale deeply and hold it all in. Long enough to feel my head start to spin and my thoughts dissolve.

The joint's taken from between my fingers. It's burning through the paper fast, his pale skin glows like a distant star in the bitterly cold night. His face broadens, filling all my senses until the world is him and him alone. Grey smoke drifts from his nostrils and his sea-blue eyes hold me spellbound.

'Have you had enough dope now to talk to me?' he asks, all sugar and spice. 'Or would you rather drape yourself round my neck right away?'

'You self-opinionated idiot.' I let my head loll against his shoulder and muffle my giggles in his sleeve. Something about him smells really good. I'm starting to get turned on here.

Drugs, Viki, drugs rob you of any reason.

Something's rustling in my hand. I push a tiny plastic bag against his chest until he takes it.

'How much of this stuff do I have to smoke to want you?' I whisper in his ear. It's meant to sound sarky. But then I can feel my lips on his skin as it tingles with goose-bumps and now there's something different between us.

All of a sudden, the whole evening's funny. The two of us, here outside, it's a joke.

I kill myself laughing.

Chapter 2

Let's discuss your drug problem. With your mother.

I'm not so good. Really not good. My head's hammering. It's too hot under the bedclothes. I kick them off but slide over the edge of the bed where there shouldn't be one. My bare backside hits the wooden floor. My bedroom has no wooden floor.

OK, *not so good* is the understatement of the year. I feel crap. It's like my head's been put in a vice and my stomach's doing endless loops on a roller-coaster.

The light hurts my eyes. The room's too bright, its brilliant white walls are hung with framed posters of various bands and books fill the floor to ceiling shelving. My feet get caught up in various items of clothing, most of them black, familiar.

But none of that's important right now. My bladder's bursting. I need a toilet. And fast.

There's an open door leading to a small bathroom. I manage to get to the loo and groan with relief as I pee. Things are going round and round so I take deep breaths to stop myself feeling sick.

I go to the washbasin, my legs weak and wobbly, and splash my face with water so cold it stings. On the rail there's a towel I don't recognise and don't want to touch. Without thinking I wipe my hands on the T-shirt I'm wearing. A white T-shirt. A Pearl Jam band T-shirt, to be precise. The most awful thought starts to creep into my head.

I stumble back into the room and gather up all the bits of black clothing. My fishnets are ripped in the crotch but I don't really want to go there at the moment. Pearl Jam ends up on the floor. I get dressed and stuff the tights in my jacket pocket. Going over to the bed I nearly slip over on a used condom and quickly shake it off my boot. At least we used protection. *Christ, thank God we used protection.*

The Male Blondie is flat out on his stomach beneath the bedclothes, only his hair and naked arm sticking out. Doubtless he told me his name last night but I don't remember. To be precise, I don't remember anything of what happened after our second joint at Black Zone.

But I had a plan, didn't I? To flirt around a bit and then walk away, ice-cold? Like he does with all the girls? I can only guess as to the role played by the bed in this superlative drama. Somehow my strategy had seemed much more logical when I was stoned.

Maybe I should just go off without a word. He'd definitely be indifferent. No, let's be honest, now, he'd actually prefer that. What's more annoying for a bloke than a woman who can't see when she's supposed to clear off?

I dig my nails into his shoulder.

He gives a loud groan, puts his arm under the covers and turns over. Even though the words are muffled by the pillow, it's quite clear what he's saying. Crystal clear. Like splinters of glass.

'Don't make a noise when you go.'

Am I by any chance being thrown out?! I'd like more than anything to boot him out of the bed but all I do is thump the mattress and hurry out of the room.

What did I expect? However much stuff I'd smoked, I must have known what I was letting myself in for. I'm not offended. Just furious. Absolutely furious.

Why? What's all this with the shaking hands? And my whole body? It wasn't the first time I'd had sex. It wasn't even my first rebuff *after* sex. There's nothing here to feel disappointed about, nothing. Adrian did all that before this one came along.

The second time's not important.

Especially if you can't remember anything about it.

I bash into a chest of drawers and hit my knee, gag on the pain and hobble out. The hallway is decorated in a restrained yellow ochre with abstract paintings in earthy colours displayed throughout. On the swaying wooden staircase I realise I'm in a house and not a flat. He can't possibly earn enough from his music for this, quite apart from the fact he's still at school. This must be his parents' place. Are they still asleep? Is that why I have to keep quiet?

I clump down the stairs. It's pretty obvious what his two creators are going to take me for if I'm spotted. But then I also hope they'll see *him* for what he really is.

The front door, with its immaculate frosted glass, comes into view and now there's only one thing I want to do – get out of here as fast as I can. Away from this night, away from what I've probably done. I'm so focused on getting out that I don't see her until she's right there.

'Jay, couldn't you just be a bit quieter...' A blonde woman is staring at me. She looks so bloody like him. The same pale complexion, the same hair, sky blue eyes. It must be his mother. She's attractive for her age, slim and elegantly clothed in a cream knitted dress. Only the dark circles under her eyes look out of place. There's no make-up in the world that can fully conceal a sleepless night. She looks at me from head to toe and her jaw really does drop.

Did I mention that to celebrate my seventeenth I'd piled on two thick layers of black mascara? It must have distributed itself all over my face in the meantime. Quite apart from the fact my stomach's still on that never-ending fairground ride.

'I'm very sorry, I'll take myself off without any noise.'

I rush past her and grab the door-handle. Before I make my escape, I call back over my shoulder, 'By the way, your son has a bit of a drug problem. You should talk to him about it.'

Was that *quiet* enough? Laughter wells up inside at my black humour. OK, yes, that was naughty and maybe not fair but I feel pretty good about it. That is until I walk down the steps outside and throw up into a rose-bush just before reaching the garden gate. After that, I really do leave without any noise.

My father wasn't home when I got to our flat. Doubtless he's sitting in some sports bar placing bets and squandering the money that normal parents save to fund their kids' studies. And it's fine with me. That he doesn't, I mean. We have difficulty getting along, to put it politely.

'I hate myself and want to die.' When Mel calls this is how I greet her. In smart English.

'VIKI! I've been so worried about you! WHERE WERE YOU THE WHOLE TIME?' Mel can never control her voice when she's worried.

I shift the mobile to my other hand and stare at the places on the ceiling where condensation collects and drips back down into the bath-tub. The water's up to my chin and smells of lavender. The oil's supposed to be calming, so I'd tipped in the whole bottle by way of precaution. It's a pain to wash my hair again just the day after colouring it but it reeks of smoke, sweat and a night I'd like to forget. The water lapping round my shoulders is already turning grey. 'Sorry, I thought I'd made it pretty clear.'

There's a brief silence on the line. 'And I thought you didn't like this guy.'

'How ...'

'... do I know, Viki?' Mel sighs. 'Don't you remember? I asked you if things were OK. Not so easy, after all, as he had his tongue down your ear. What on earth came over you?'

'I've been possessed by a demon. Maybe several. Is one allowed to talk about this in a foreign language? Maybe English will help me through it.'

'Come on, Viki, be serious for once.' She sounds furious. 'Did you go to bed with him?'

I groan.

'Please tell me you used a condom.'

I sit up so fast that water splashes over the floor. 'Of course! What do you think I am?'

'The chemist has that 'morning after pill' you have to take straight away. You know that, don't you?'

'Melanie, I'm not pregnant and I'm not going to get pregnant, alright?'

'Okay. I just worry about you.' A door bangs shut in the background at Mel's. 'Was it any good, at least?'

Is rolling your eyes just another sign of being possessed by demons?

'I can't remember anything,' I admit resignedly.

Silence.

'Mel?'

No reply.

'Mel, I can hear you breathing.'

'So how do you know you used a condom *when you can't remember anything?*'

Can you really drown yourself in the bath? Or is that one of those impossible ways of committing suicide, like holding your breath? It would worth a try for the sake of research.

'I do know. I saw it. On the floor.'

'The condom?'

'Yes.'

'Only one?'

'Yes?!'

'So you only had sex once?'

'I've no idea.'

Silence. Then Mel's voice plays again like a speeded up recording. 'Have you forgotten those hideous abortion pix they showed us at school? Mush covered in blood and girls in tears? This pill I'm talking about only works in the couple of hours after sex. You're going to the chemist right now to get one.'

'Are you mad?' I suppress the desire to drown my mobile phone. I can't afford a new one. 'They're pure hormone! We absolutely did take precautions. Anyway, you can only get it on prescription.'

'At least get yourself a pregnancy test kit.'

'It's far too soon to do that,' I snarl.

'Aren't there quickie tests, or something like that? You can ask at the chemist, can't you?'

'It's Sunday.'

'Ever heard of the out-of-hours service? Viki, really. What have you got to lose?'

'My dignity?'

Her voice sounds warm and bright like it always does when she wins an argument.

'Just do it for me, okay?'

As I get to the chemist, an elderly man with a walking-stick is leaving and lets the door shut in my face. Angrily, I open it again and march up to the counter.

The woman pharmacist stands stiffly behind it and looks me up and down with a frown. 'Let me guess. Pregnancy test?'

I spin round, expecting to see Mel pop up from behind one of the stands, the testing kit in one hand and a brochure of ghastly abortion images in the other. She's not there, of course. I'm getting paranoid.

The pharmacist vanishes behind shelves that go floor to ceiling. When she reappears, she sets out the full range of products before me. 'I could explain about each and every product if you like but girls of your age always go for the cheapest one. It does the same job, to be honest.'

She hands me a box the size of a toothpaste tube, printed in baby pink and carrying a photo of woman looking extremely relieved. I feel so incredibly stupid.

'When did the intercourse take place?' she asks me.

'Isn't that a bit, well, personal?'

The pharmacist rolls her eyes. 'Used too early, it can distort...'

'It's for a friend. Just wrap it up, would you.'

'Ten days after possible fertilisation is the earliest you can reckon on a reliable result. In addition to that you ought to do another test one week after missing your period to be on the safe side. Shall I give you two, dear?'

I nod feebly. I feel sick again. I want to be at home in bed to throw up. No, first throw up, then bed. 'So how does it work with this pill, this pill for afterwards?'

'Provided the intercourse took place no more than seventy two hours ago, the morning after pill can be used as a means of contraception. You'd need to talk to your doctor about that as quickly as possible. Do you need anything else?'

I let out a sigh. 'A box of sleeping pills and a bottle of pure alcohol, please.'

The woman pharmacist leans towards me and puts her hand on my arm. Her face remains without emotion but her voice softens. 'It's not the end of the world, kid.'

No, it isn't. Pity.

I'm sitting on the toilet-lid, staring at the pregnancy test. Regrettably the enclosed leaflet confirms what the pharmacist said – it can't determine any pregnancy so soon after sex. But the way worry works, it lends an air of possibility to those things which would otherwise be ruled out by any sane and healthy human mind.

Even if the test is going to show me a lie, I want to see the result right now. I *must* see it. Otherwise I shan't sleep a wink.

It's like a felt-pen that you wee on and then put back together. According to the back of the packet it'll be *only five minutes until I can be certain*. For three minutes the pen trembles in my hands.

My mobile vibrates in my trouser pocket. I glance at the screen and answer. It's Mel. Who else would call me on the loo on a Sunday afternoon?

'Hey, Viki!' She sounds a bit guilty. 'Please don't bite my head off but –'

'Mel. Not now. I'll call you back.' I switch her off and put my phone on top of the washing-machine. One more minute. My phone vibrates again. I catch it just before it slips off. 'Bloody hell, I'm on the loo.'

'So why did you pick up?'

With horror I realise this is not Mel's voice. It's a guy on the line.

'Who's that?'

'Jay.'

'Who?'

'Does *'your son has a drug problem'* mean anything to you?'

I drop the pregnancy tester and it rolls under the toilet.

'Shit'.

'Exactly.'

'How d'you get my number?' I lean over and feel around on the floor. It hadn't been cleaned for ages and my fingers come up against things best left there. I nearly get the pen and it just rolls further away.

'From Melanie. Whose number I got from her ex, Daniel, if you really want to know the detail. Who, in turn, plays basketball with Dave, my mate from the band.'

The test is momentarily forgotten. 'You call up three people just to quote me on something?'

'I call up three people so I can say to you that the way you left this morning was really shit.'

I laugh in disbelief.

He lowers his voice as if not to be overheard. 'My mother's been crying her eyes out for hours. Thank you so very much.'

So that's what this is about! I'm lost for words. My fingers close round the pen and lift it out from under the toilet. It's got bits of fluff on it. Impatiently, I blow them away.

'What're you doing?' asks Jay, with some irritation.

'I'm checking the results on the pregnancy tester.'

Ha! That shuts him up. At least the test's good as a nasty surprise.

'What for? You can't be pregnant.' He sounds puzzled. 'Not by me, in any case. I got rid of the rubbers myself.'

'Did we definitely use protection? Are you absolutely sure about that?' Then I paused on a detail. 'Hang on. 'Rubbers' did you say? With an 's'?

'Yes, all three. I'm quite sure about that.'

Why did I ask that, as well? So that was my second, third and fourth time. That will really have sorted out my virginity. *Happy Birthday, Viki.*

I pull myself together. 'It's not your mother who should be so bothered. But you.'

'Why?'

Can he actually be asking the reason? 'You have sex with me and then throw me out afterwards!' Adrian's face comes to mind. Straight away I banish it. 'You could at least have said something like, *'Good Morning. We've had a one-night stand. It was really nice. Is it OK with you if we leave it at that?'*

'Nobody threw you out. You just went.'

My hand's already so sweaty that I switch my phone to the other one. 'But you said not to make a noise! You said 'when you go'. How else am I supposed to interpret it?'

His voice drops. 'I'm sorry. I had a headache...'

There's a silence.

I turn the pregnancy tester pen round and compare it with the picture on the back of the box. 'Anyway, I'm not pregnant.'

He sighs. 'OK... d'you feel like a coffee?'

My chest goes tight.

That's exactly how it started before. A hot guy with a confident smile, the one who ordered my *latte macchiato* to be topped with a chocolate heart.

Hey, I'm Adrian. And you're the cutest girl in this café...

My reflexes kick in faster than my mouth. I hang up and, my heart pounding, I stare at the screen. It stays blank.

Foreign Rights please contact:

Ulrike Blank (ulrike.blank@fischerverlage.de)

Esther Mallm (esther.mallm@fischerverlage.de)

Ilka Wesche (ilka.wesche@fischerverlage.de)