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„No, you just don't get it, Sushi. My mother didn't arrive *too late*, she *forgot* me. I had to wait for her at the bus stop for half an hour. In the pouring rain.”

I stared at the monitor, depressed. We always skyped on Saturday mornings, somehow that had become our routine. Only yesterday we had come back from our class trip to London – and already the daily routine had caught up with us again.

Sushi sat at his tidy desk. In the background was his collection of *How & Why* books. He owned almost all books of the series and had ordered them alphabetically. An edition of *Famous Speeches of Famous Germans* stood next to them. Sushi was a walking encyclopaedia.

Michael's sleepy face showed up in a new window. “Good morning, girls!” you could hear a yawn coming from the monitor. “What's up?” Behind him, his little sister Arielle was skipping about in his room.

„Jojo wants a different mother. She forgot to pick him up at the bus stop yesterday,” Sushi summarized our conversation.

“Makes sense...,” Michael answered. “She had sublet his room in the meantime and had to cover up her tracks first. Hey, Arielle. Show Jojo what you’ve made for him. And then get lost!”

“I don’t want a different mother,” I defended myself. “But what mother would forget to pick up her son after he had been away from home for a week?”

Arielle pushed herself into view next to her brother.

“This is for you, Jojo!” she announced breathlessly and let a woollen rope, which was ten metres long, dangle in and out of my sight.

“Oh...,” I doubtfully leant forward. “Really... useful!”

„You can hang things with the cord.” Arielle’s cheeks were glowing.

“Yourself, for example!” Michael murmured directed at me. “If things continue like this and only five-year-old girls will fall for you. You owe me a bag of M&M’s by the way.”

We had bet that I would hit it off with one of the girls from the drama group during the class trip. I would be turning 16 in only eight weeks. It was time to gain experience and all four of them were single like me.

Now, the class trip of grade 10 was past and the four girls of the drama group had all fallen in love during the journey – with four clones of Justin Bieber who were considerably older than me and whom they had met in the queue at Madame Tussauds.

Michael pushed Arielle roughly aside and she longingly waved goodbye with the cord she had crocheted herself. In my room, there were already a ceramic paperweight she had made, although I never received letters, a dreamcatcher that looked like a feather duster with behavioural problems, and a pot-holder in the shape of a deadly bacillus. The woollen rope with its sickly green colour perfected the collection.

“Will you come visit me tomorrow, Jojo?” Arielle called off-screen. Michael turned to his sister, annoyed. “If he does at all, Jojo will come visit *me!*” I heard him say. “He’ll visit *you* once you’ve turned 16 and when all your beautiful female friends will gather for a slumber party. By the way...” He turned towards the webcam again.

“I have something for you, boys!”

He stood up, threw the protesting Arielle out of his room and we could hear him lock his door. Two seconds later, he was back in his seat. “I’ll send you the link. It’s really off the wall. The chick slides in an entire *cucumber.*”

“Was that before or after EHEC?” Sushi asked earnestly.

I had to laugh.

“What’s EHEC?” Michael asked, confused.

„Verotoxin-producing Escherichia coli. Intestinal bacteria. Named after their inventor,” Sushi said. “For a short time, they thought it was transmitted by cucumbers.”

Michael sighed. “Sushi, you are worrying me. You are 16 and you stuff up your nutty head with all this unnecessary bullshit. Okay I admit, nowadays you adopted Asians are under pressure to perform. In the past, it was enough for you to look cute and to populate the world with Pokémon. But since this Asian-looking politician became minister you are all under pressure to become ministers as well.”

“Michael!” I couldn’t believe what kind of stuff he sometimes said.

Sushi apparently didn’t care at all. “I’m not Asian!” he protested lamely. “I’m more German than you two idiots taken together. There is a lot of proof of that.”

„Of course you are Asian!” Michael replied, unmoved.

My email inbox made a sound. While having this nonsensical discussion, he had sent me the link to the porn website.

“Maybe Sushi has other roots as well!” I stood by our friend’s side. The entire topic of adoption annoyed him. He himself had said that to me several times. He wasn’t interested in Japan, but of course you could see that he was from Japan. His parents had adopted him as a baby and since then had been working to shape him into a model Bavarian. Two years ago, when the bakery at the train station shut down and a small sushi restaurant opened up instead, Sushi had complained that more and more foreigners were destroying our traditional cityscape. Since then, we’ve only called him Sushi and his mother got upset about that at every occasion.

Michael made a derogatory noise. “What do you mean by *other roots*, Jojo? Sorry. But does Sushi look like a Turkish person to you? Or an Indian? There’s nothing wrong with being Japanese. I even like that better as Turkish. Otherwise we would have to call him Doner instead of Sushi. And please, what would that sound like?!” “End of conversation!” Sushi said, annoyed.

„Did you get the link?” Michael put a cola-flavoured lollipop in his mouth. “Watch the clip. Right now. I want to see your faces while you’re watching it!”

I looked around bashfully. It was nine o’clock on a Saturday morning. Any moment Mom or Ralf would call me for breakfast. I could hear my brothers screaming downstairs. It wasn’t really a pleasant picture - my mother catching me in the act of watching porn. There was also a lot on the line. Ralf had allowed me the internet connection only after I had signed a list of ten rules. One rule rather unmistakably stated something about using internet pornography. We had never really talked about the reasons why. He was simply against it and that’s that. “I can’t watch this until I’m home alone,” I admitted sheepishly.

“Loser!” Michael smirked. „Watch it sometime later. You’ll see, it’s the birth of vegetarian porn! A decisive step in the history of mankind. That huge cucumber could be the beginning of...”

“Breakfast!”

Startled, I had clicked and thrown my two buddies out of the system. It was ridiculous. Just talking about this topic made me feel pangs of conscience. I was sick of it that Michael pestered me with it all the time. As if he would need to do that! After all, he was going out with Lilli. Several times, I had watched clips that Michael had recommended me. The stuff was kind of sick. But it was addictive nevertheless. I couldn’t imagine that the women around me would do such things. Crawling around with a dog collar on all fours, peeing at some groaning guys and inserting vegetables.

What did this have to do with the things we learned in sex education at school? There had to be totally normal sex. One man, one woman. One multiple orgasm.

I thought of my mother and Ralf. We never talked about sex. When, where and how the twins had come into being was still a riddle to me.

My mother stuck her head around the door. “Are you working at the computer that early in the morning already?” she asked worriedly. She carried one of the wailing babies in her arm. “Take him, will you? Can you look after the two little ones tonight? The babysitter is ill and Ralf is at the meeting of branch managers until ten.”

I took my crying brother off her arm. A miniature version of Ralf stared at me. My brothers didn’t look at all like me. We could have just as well been total strangers.

“What will you be doing tonight anyway?” my mother asked and tried to keep her hand away from the bubble of snot welling up from my brother’s nose. I didn’t like babysitting at all. But nobody in this house seemed to notice that I was almost 16 and had a life too. I seemed to slowly but surely blend with the furniture.

“I have yoga class in the city. Why don’t you invite your friends over? You could watch DVD here and at the same time watch the little ones. They’ll be sleeping safe and sound after eight.”

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Michael and Lilli sat leaning against each other in one corner of our sofa. Sushi in the other one. I had made myself comfortable on the floor – my two brothers were lying in front of me in their cradle. They didn’t even close one eye but were screaming their heads off as soon as you paid no attention to them.

“On the channel ARTE they are showing a documentary about the German Democratic Republic!” Sushi said. Michael snatched the remote control from him. “Forget it. We’ll watch a DVD.”

Sushi admitted defeat. “Okay. But Lilli will pick one.”

“Alright, Lilli-fairy, would you rather watch *Bridesmaids* or *Black Swan*?”

Lilli gave him a kiss. “*Black Swan*, of course. Jojo, is there any cola left?”

I got up and Lilli accompanied me to the kitchen.

“That’s really beautiful!” she said. She stood at the glass door leading out to the patio. The garden looked like a jungle. Ralf and Mom had renovated quite a lot behind the old red brick house but they had been rather neglecting the garden since we had moved in. The entire property was surrounded by a wild, overgrowing hedge which had become as high and thick as a wall. A few ancient knotty fruit trees towered above the knee-high grass. Weeds were growing everywhere. The two-hundred-year-old house and the overgrown garden were like an island. Every time I stood here and looked outside, I felt positively forlorn.

“Hey, the apple tree!” Lilli said and took a step closer to the window. I stood next to her. She smelt of sun lotion, her brown curls were tied back with a sparkling hair tie. I thought of the time a few months back when we had kissed at the school’s fancy-dress party and for five wonderful days had been the probably most secret pair of lovers of all time. We had been totally hyper on the evening of the party, had been dancing with each other for the entire time and had eaten countless doughnuts. At one point we had been sent to get the keys from the janitor. On our way there, we had been kissing in the bicycle storage. It had been great, amazing. Lilli had tasted of icing sugar. Of strawberry jam and vanilla cream. I had had a little crush on her since kindergarten, but hadn’t had a clue that she felt the same.

In order to avoid making Sushi and Michael jealous, we hadn’t told them anything about it. I thought of the barn at the edge of the forest in which we had lain in the straw and had caressed each other during one surreal afternoon. It had felt so good to touch Lilli’s skin. The next day, she had called me and had bashfully said that it all had been a mistake. We would know each other for too long; somehow it didn’t feel right to her.

She had been going out with Michael for one month now.

I was surprised why that didn’t bother me that much. Lilli and I probably had really known each other for too long. Nevertheless I had been feeling strangely lonely since that one afternoon. I longed for someone. For someone to whom I meant something. Who meant something to me. Lilli wouldn’t have been the worst choice.

“The branch simply broke off during the storm yesterday,” I explained with a dry voice. Then I got a hold of myself again. “My mother has already called the garden centre,” I continued in a more relaxed tone. “They want to send someone to take care of it. The trees have to be pruned, the hedge has to be trimmed.”

“Lilli-fairy, come and cuddle!” Michael called from the living room. One of the babies started to scream. Lilli looked at me gratefully. “Thanks for not telling him!” she murmured. “You’re a really good friend, Jojo!” She kissed me on the cheek. Then we went back to the others together.

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At half past ten, Sushi's mother picked up my three friends with her car. The babies still hadn't fallen asleep yet and neither Ralf nor my mother had come back home. Sushi's mom stood in our kitchen. She was wearing a traditional blouse and a circle skirt which made her look wider than she already was anyway. "Your parents prefer it stylish!" she raved and scanned our things. "Can I take a look at your garden?" She marched onto the patio and looked around curiously. Sushi followed her and the two of them stood outside and looked up to the stars.

"A pity..." Michael watched the two of them through the window. "It could have been Angelina Jolie. Probably she was just about to sign the adoption papers for Sushi when ten fat stubby fingers snatched the documents from under her nose..."

The comment was mean but nevertheless Lilli and I had to laugh.

Sushi and his mother came back in. "You'll be able to really enjoy the garden during summer break, Jojo!" Sushi's mom said enthusiastically. "Or will you be on vacation?"

"I'll be visiting my father," I told her. I always visited him during summer break. Mom and Ralf would be travelling to the Black Forest with the twins. I would be alone here in the house for about 24 hours. My train was only leaving the following morning. I had long since made a deal with the boys that we would organise a party during the first night of my life I was home alone. I thought of the cucumber porn which I could watch in peace then. I would be all by myself. Half a day and one night. It seemed endlessly long to me.

I would step under the shower and nobody would rattle at the door and asked how much longer I would take. No babies screaming. Only me and an empty house. Warm water on my skin.

Dreamily, I stared at the empty bag of crisps on the table. I imagined...

The front door burst open and my mother entered together with Ralf.

"Is there a party going on in here?" Ralf asked and shook hands with Sushi's mother while he was laughing.

"You know the young people nowadays!" she answered sympathetically.

"As if!" Ralf replied and switched off the TV. "We were a lot wilder than they are. We didn't spend our Saturday evenings in front of the telly like these couch potatoes do."

"Well, you didn't have to look after two babies," I couldn't stop myself from saying.

A hint of panic ran across my mother's face. Reproachfully, she looked at me. "Could it be the two of them didn't want to sleep?" she then asked a bit too loudly. She put her gym bag on the floor and picked up one of the babies.

"So cute!" Sushi's mother said and looked longingly at the baby. "Well, come on children!" Suddenly, she sounded sad. „I'm taking you home!"

Michael and Lilli got up from the sofa.

I said goodbye to my visitors and waved when the car of Sushi's mother disappeared. Back in the house, I joined Ralf in the kitchen. My stepfather had opened himself a beer and read in the *Businessweek*. When I sat down across him, he raised his head. "Hey, you'll be 16 soon. Then you'll be allowed to drink beer too!" he said and pushed a bottle of cola across the table towards me. We drank silently.

„It's good your Japanese friend has such nice adoptive parents," Ralf said into the silence. "It's great when adults take care of children. I mean, of children who are not their own. To take care of your own children... to love them, to raise them... that's a piece of cake."

"But Sushi is their child." Again a discussion about Sushi.

"Indeed. Before the law. But not really. In any case, I simply wanted to tell you that you can always come to me when you're in trouble. With girls or at school. Or because of alcohol. You are not taking drugs, right?"

I stared at my cola. My mother came shuffling into the kitchen. The babies were finally in bed and were sleeping. "The husband of one woman in my yoga class walked out on her." Mom said sadly and threw an aspirin into a glass of water.

"Who?" Ralf looked at her with friendly disinterest. My mother continued with the story. I was glad that the conversation with me was over and I stopped listening. Stories of divorce from yoga class were luckily none of my business. A different planet, a different station. I got up without attracting attention.

The two kept on talking. When I came back into the kitchen to say goodnight, they were caught up in a lively discussion. I heard something about the room next to mine. It was supposed to become the guest room at one point. At the moment, it was stuffed with my old things, discarded furniture and clothes to be donated to charity.

"She is really nice!" my mother almost pleadingly asserted and looked at Ralf as if she were a little puppy.

"We'll see. I'll sleep on it," Ralf said.

I remembered the sex clip with the woman and the dog collar. It sucked but I couldn't get the image out of my head again.

And since that morning, I had been constantly thinking of this stupid cucumber.