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Bad Karma

Written by David Safier

Translated by John Brownjohn

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David Safier

BAD KARMA

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1

The day I died really wasn't much fun, and not only because of my death. That only just scraped home sixth in the day's series of lousy moments. The fifth-louisiest was the moment when Lilly looked up at me sleepily and said: 'Why aren't you staying home today, mummy? It's my birthday, after all!'

The following response to that question flashed through my mind: 'If I'd known five years ago that your birthday and the presentation of the German Television Awards would fall on the same day, I'd have made sure you were born sooner – by Caesarean!'

Instead, I just said quietly: 'I'm sorry, darling.' Lilly was disconsolately chewing the sleeve of her Winnie the Pooh pyjamas. Unable to bear that sight any longer, I swiftly added the magic words that always bring a smile to any child's crestfallen face: 'Would you like to see your birthday present?'

I hadn't seen it myself. I'd had to leave it to Alex because sheer pressure of work had precluded me from doing any shopping for months. Few things bugged me more than having to waste precious time queueing up in a supermarket. In any case, I never had to go shopping for all the good things in life, like clothes and shoes and make-up. Being Kim Karlsen, presenter of Germany's foremost political talk show, I was thankfully provided with such goodies by all the most prestigious firms. *Gala* magazine duly numbered me among 'the ten best-dressed thirty-somethings', although a major tabloid had described me, less flatteringly, as 'a rather stocky brunette with overly well-upholstered thighs'. I was at daggers drawn with the rag because I'd forbidden the editor to print pictures of my family.

'I know a beautiful little princess who wants her birthday present,' I sang out. And back from the garden came an answering

voice: ‘Then ask the beautiful little princess to step outside!’ I took my excited daughter’s hand and told her: ‘But put your slippers on first.’

‘Don’t want to,’ Lilly protested.

‘You’ll catch cold,’ I warned. All she said was: ‘I went outside without my slippers on yesterday, and I didn’t catch cold then.’

Before I could come up with some rational response to this obscure but cogent piece of childish logic, Lilly was running barefoot across the glistening, dew-drenched lawn.

Defeated, I followed her outside and drew in deep breaths of early springtime air, delighting for the thousandth time, with a mixture of amazement and pride, in the fact that I’d been able to offer my daughter such a wonderful home and huge garden in Potsdam, whereas I myself had grown up in a Berlin council flat. Our garden there had consisted of three window boxes filled with geraniums, pansies and cigarette butts.

Alex was waiting for Lilly beside a guinea pig cage of his own manufacture. At thirty-three he was still damned good-looking – like a younger version of Brad Pitt, but without the latter’s boringly come-to-bed eyes. I would probably have been swept off my feet by his looks if everything had still been okay between us. Sadly, our relationship at that stage was as rocky as the Soviet Union in 1989. And as devoid of a future.

The trouble was, Alex couldn’t come to terms with being married to a successful woman, just as I couldn’t cope with a frustrated house husband who grew daily more depressed by the remarks he attracted from mothers at the playground. ‘It’s *so* wonderful when a man looks after the children instead of joining the rat race ...’

As a result, conversations between us often began with ‘Your job is more important to you than our marriage!’ and ended, even more often, with ‘Don’t you dare throw that plate, Kim!’

Once upon a time we at least used to follow this up with some reconciliatory sex, but we hadn’t had any of that for three months.

This was a shame, because our sex life had varied between good and great, depending on form. And that was saying something, because sex with all the men I'd had before Alex hadn't exactly prompted me to perform an internal Mexican Wave.

'Here's your present, princess,' Alex said with a smile, pointing to the guinea pig munching away in its cage. 'A guinea pig!' Lilly cried in high delight. 'A goddamned pregnant guinea pig,' I amplified in my head, dismayed by the sight.

While Lilly was gazing in rapture at her new pet, I took Alex by the elbow and drew him aside.

'That creature's on the verge of multiplying,' I told him.

'No, Kim,' he said soothingly, 'it's just a bit on the plump side.'

'Where did you get it from?'

'An animal rescue centre.' His tone was defiant.

'Why didn't you buy it from a pet shop?'

'Because the animals in those places spend their lives on a treadmill. Like you and your TV types.'

Bingo! That was a dig at me, and it hit the spot. I drew a deep breath, glanced at my watch and said, in a tense voice: 'Less than thirty seconds.'

He looked puzzled. 'Meaning what?'

'Meaning you couldn't talk to me for thirty seconds without reproaching me for going to the awards today.'

'I'm not reproaching you, Kim,' he replied. 'I'm simply questioning your priorities.'

I was awfully upset by the whole situation, because I'd really have liked Alex to come to the awards ceremony too. It promised to be the highlight of my professional career, after all, and my husband should damn well have been there with me! Still, I could hardly question his own priorities, given that they consisted in organizing Lilly's birthday.

'Anyway,' I grumbled, 'that stupid guinea pig *is* pregnant!'

'So give it a pregnancy test,' he retorted drily, going over to the cage. I glowered at him as he picked up the guinea pig and placed it

in radiant Lilly's arms. The pair of them proceeded to feed the animal with dandelion leaves while I hovered in the background – which was increasingly becoming my habitual place in our little family circle. Not the nicest of locations.

While standing there I was involuntarily reminded of my own pregnancy test. When my period failed to materialize I managed, by an almost superhuman feat of willpower, to suppress the thought for six whole days. On the morning of the seventh, muttering 'Shit, shit, shit!', I sprinted to the chemist, bought a pregnancy-testing kit, sprinted home, dropped it down the loo in my nervousness, hurried back to the chemist, bought a new kit, peed on the stick, and waited for the obligatory minute.

It was the longest minute of my life.

A minute at the dentist is long enough. A minute at a folk music concert is longer still. But the minute a stupid test stick takes to decide whether or not to display a second line is the toughest trial of patience in the world.

However, I found the sight of that second line even tougher.

I considered an abortion but couldn't stomach the thought. My best friend Nina had had to have one at the age of nineteen, after our Italian holiday, and I knew what it had cost her emotionally. Despite the thick skin I'd developed as a talk-show presenter, I fully realized that my ability to cope with those pangs of conscience would be far inferior to Nina's.

I was thoroughly unsettled by the nine months that followed. I panicked, whereas Alex took the greatest care of me and was overjoyed at the prospect of becoming a father. That infuriated me somehow, because it made me feel more unmaternal than ever.

In general, though, I found the whole process of pregnancy a curiously abstract business. Although I saw ultrasound pictures and felt little feet drumming against my abdominal wall, the blissful moments when I grasped that there was a miniature human growing inside me were only rare and of brief duration.

Most of the time I was busy coping with morning sickness and hormonal fluctuations. And with mother-to-be courses in which you were supposed to ‘feel out’ your uterus.

Six weeks before the birth I gave up work and, stretched out on our sofa, gained some idea of how a stranded whale must feel. The days crawled by, and I might even have felt relieved that the time had finally come when my waters broke – except that they did so while I was standing in the checkout queue at a supermarket.

I promptly lay down on the cold floor as my GP had prescribed in the event of such an occurrence. The customers around me passed comments such as ‘Isn’t that Kim Karlsen, the TV presenter?’ or ‘Who cares, as long as they open up another checkout?’ or ‘Thank God I don’t have to mop up that mess!’

The ambulance didn’t come for forty-three minutes. I spent the interval signing a few autographs and explaining to the checkout girl that she’d got the wrong idea about male newsreaders (‘No, they aren’t all gay’).

My arrival in the delivery room was the prelude to twenty-five hours in labour. The midwife interspersed my labour pains, which were excruciating, with exhortations to ‘Think positive! Welcome every contraction!’ As for me, all I thought in my pain-racked stupor was: ‘If I survive this I’ll kill you, you stupid bitch!’

I thought I would die, and I might well have done so but for Alex and his soothing bedside manner. ‘I’m here for you,’ he kept repeating in a steadfast voice. ‘Always!’ I squeezed his hand so hard, it was weeks before he could flex his fingers properly. (The nurses confided to me afterwards that they always awarded husbands marks out of ten for how nice they were to their wives during the stressful hours of labour. Alex scored a sensational 9.7. The average mark was 2.73.)

But all my tribulations were forgotten once a nurse had placed little Lilly in my arms. I couldn’t see her because the obstetrician was still working on me, but I could feel her soft, wrinkled skin. It was the happiest moment in my entire life.

Now, five years later, Lilly was standing in the garden in front of me, and I couldn't help her celebrate her birthday because I had to go to Cologne for the television awards.

With a heavy heart, I swallowed hard and went over to my little girl, who was busy thinking of a name for her guinea pig. ('I'm going to call her either Kanga or Tigger.') I gave her a kiss and promised to spend all next day with her.

'Except,' Alex said scathingly, 'that if you win the award you'll spend the whole of tomorrow giving interviews.'

That hurt. 'In that case,' I said, 'I'll spend Monday with Lilly.'

'You've got an editorial meeting on Monday,' he countered.

'Then I'll skip it.'

'I'll believe that when it happens,' he said with a sarcastic grin that filled me with a burning desire to stuff a stick of dynamite in his mouth. To crown everything, he added: 'You never have any time for her.'

Lilly's response to that remark was a woebegone look that said 'Daddy's right.' It cut me to the quick – so much so that I started trembling.

Thoroughly rattled, I stroked Lilly's head. 'We'll soon spend a really brilliant day together,' I told her. 'Cross my heart and hope to die.'

She smiled feebly. Alex started to say something, but I gave him such a gorgon glare that he wisely thought better of it – very probably because he could read the dynamite fantasy in my expression. I gave Lilly another hug and strode across the patio* into the house, where I drew several deep breaths and ordered a taxi to the airport.

I never guessed, not at that stage, how hard it would be to keep my promise to Lilly.

* From Casanova's memoirs: 'During my 113th life as an ant I betook myself to the surface with a company of fellow ants, having been commanded by the Queen to reconnoitre the terrain around her realm. We were marching in searing heat across hot, sun-baked stone when, within seconds, the sky darkened in an almost apocalyptic manner. Looking up, I saw the sole of a woman's sandal inexorably descending on us. It was as if the sky were falling on our heads. "Alas," I thought, "I'm doomed to die yet again because some human being is paying insufficient attention to where she puts her feet."'

2

The fourth-louisiest moment of the day came when I looked in the mirror in the ladies' at the airport. It wasn't a lousy moment because I noticed, not for the first time, that I had a helluva lot of crow's-feet for a thirty-two-year-old, nor because my dull and lifeless hair steadfastly refused to lie down properly (all those defects would be rectified by Lorelei, my personal stylist, two hours before the awards ceremony). No, it was a lousy moment because I caught myself wondering whether Daniel Kohn would find me attractive.

A fellow nominee in the 'Best Current Affairs Presenter' category, Daniel was a positively obscenely good-looking, dark-haired man who, unlike most presenters, was genuinely charming. He was well aware of his effect on women and exploited it with gusto. Whenever we ran into each other at some media party, he would gaze deep into my eyes and say: 'I'd dump all these women if only you'd be mine.'

That remark was, of course, as accurate as the statement: 'There are pink elephants at the South Pole.'

But a part of me wished it were true. And another part of me dreamed of winning the television award, then sauntering grandly past Daniel's table with a faintly triumphant smile and having sex with him at the hotel that night. Ferocious sex for hours on end, until the hotel manager hammered on my bedroom door because the heavy metal band next door had complained of the noise.

However, the biggest part of me hated myself for the thoughts entertained by the other two parts. If I wound up in bed with Daniel the press would be bound to get wind of the affair, Alex would divorce me, and I would finally have broken my little Lilly's heart. So my itch to have sex with Daniel pricked my conscience so badly that I never wanted to see my face in the mirror again for the next twenty years.

Having quickly washed my hands, I left the ladies' and made for the departure gate. There Benedikt Carstens greeted me with an effusive 'This is our day, darling!' and pinched me hard on the cheek.

Always expensively dressed, Benedikt was my senior editor and my mentor – my personal Master Yoda, so to speak, though his sentence structure was appreciably better than Yoda’s. He had discovered me at the Berlin radio station where I was working after leaving university. I was just a humble assistant news editor to begin with, but the newsreader failed to turn up one Sunday morning. In the course of a disco crawl the previous night he had expressed the theory, to a Turkish bouncer, that his mother was a mangy bitch.

I had to stand in for the man, who was permanently indisposed, at a moment’s notice. I went on air and announced, for the first time in my life: ‘It’s six a.m. precisely. Good morning.’ From that moment on I was hooked. I loved the adrenalin rush when the red light came on. I had found my vocation!

Having followed my progress for a few months, Benedikt eventually sought me out. ‘You’ve got the best broadcasting voice I’ve ever heard,’ he said, and gave me a job with Germany’s most exciting television channel. He taught me the art of self-presentation in front of the camera. He also taught me the most important aspect of the job: how to do your colleagues down. Under his guidance I matured into a grand master in the latter discipline. My nickname in the trade was ‘Elbows’, meaning a woman who would push past anyone to get where she wanted – and kick them as she went by. Still, if that was the price of professional success, I paid it gladly.

‘Yes,’ I said to Benedikt with a wry smile, ‘it’s our day all right.’ He looked at me. ‘Anything wrong, darling?’ I could hardly tell him: ‘Yes, I want to sleep with Daniel Kohn of the competition,’ so I merely said: ‘No, everything’s fine.’

Panic gripped me. Did he know about me and Daniel Kohn? Had he seen Daniel flirting with me at that media party last month? Had he seen me blushing like a teenage fan hauled up on the stage by Robbie Williams?

Benedikt smiled. ‘In your place I’d be excited too,’ he said. ‘It isn’t every day one’s nominated for a premier television award.’ I felt

relieved – he hadn't been alluding to Kohn – but a moment later I gave an involuntary gulp. I really was intensely nervous, but I'd completely suppressed my trepidation all morning because of my bad conscience in relation to Lilly. It had now returned with a vengeance. Would I win the award tonight? Would the cameras capture my radiant, victorious smile? Or would tomorrow's Sunday papers refer to me merely as 'the rather stocky loser with the overly well-upholstered thighs'?

My fingers strayed nervously towards my mouth, but I just, in the nick of time, managed to dissuade my teeth from chewing my nails.

On arrival in Cologne we checked into the Hyatt, the luxury hotel where all the television awards nominees were being housed. I flopped down on the soft, yielding bed in my room, zapped through the TV programmes at ten-second intervals, landed on the Pay-TV channel, and wondered who the hell would fork out twenty-two euros for a porn film titled *The Sperm and I*?

I decided not to sacrifice too many grey cells on the altar of that question, and went down to the hotel foyer to drink one of those tranquillizing Chinese teas that taste faintly of fish soup.

The pianist in the foyer was playing such soul-destroying ballads *à la* Richard Clayderman that I imagined the two of us in a Wild West saloon: him tickling the ivories and me organizing a lynch mob.

While I was picturing me and my boys preparing to tar and feather the pianist and ride him out of Dodge City on a rail, I suddenly caught sight of ... Daniel Kohn.

He was checking in at reception, and my pulse began to race. A part of me hoped he would see me and another part implored him to join me. But the vast majority of me wondered what he could do to reduce the other two silly, edgy, life-unsettling parts of me to silence at last.

Daniel did, in fact, catch sight of me, and flashed a smile in my direction. The part of me that had hoped he would do so danced an uninhibited fandango of delight, yelling 'yabba-dabba-doo' like the late Fred Flintstone.

Daniel came over and sat down at my table with a cordial 'Hi,

Kim.’ The part of me that had prayed for this linked arms with Part One, and joined it in a rendering of *Oh Happy Day*.

When Part Three tried to protest, Parts One and Two grabbed hold of it, gagged it, and hissed: ‘Shut up, you wet blanket!’

‘Antsy about tonight?’ asked Daniel. I strove to disguise my nervousness and think of a suitably snappy reply. Seconds dragged by. Then I said: ‘No.’ I couldn’t help feeling that this response left something to be desired in the way of snappiness.

‘No need to be, either,’ Daniel said smoothly. ‘You’ve got it made.’ He said it so charmingly I almost believed he meant it. He was, of course, firmly convinced that he himself would win.

‘And after you’ve won,’ he went on, ‘we must raise a glass to your success.’

‘Yes, we must,’ I replied. Although this response was equally uninspired, I had at least strung three meaningful words together – a minor improvement.

‘Shall we also raise a glass if I win?’ he enquired.

‘Of course,’ I replied with a faint tremor in my voice.

‘Then we’re in for a enjoyable night either way.’

Daniel got to his feet, looking satisfied. He’d got what he wanted. ‘Sorry, must rush. Got to freshen up.’

I watched him go. The sight of his splendidly lithe haunches conjured up visions of him under the shower. And that really did make me nibble my nails.

‘What happened to your nails?’ Lorelei, my stylist, asked while she was titivating me in the hotel’s hairdressing salon. ‘Looks as if the rats have been at them.’ I was surrounded by the massed femininity of the trade: actresses, presenters, big shots’ trophy wives and girlfriends. None of them had been nominated for any prize. Their sole concern was to outdo the competition in the see-and-be-seen stakes. They all wished me lots of luck. Not meaning it, of course, any more than I meant it when I said: ‘You look gorgeous,’ or ‘Your figure is to

die for,' or 'You're exaggerating, your nose doesn't have the makings of a helipad.'

We continued to swap insincerities until Sandra Kölling walked into the salon.

Sandra, who looked as if she might come fourth in a Barbie Doll lookalike competition, was my predecessor as presenter of *The Late Show*. I'd usurped her job because I was better than her. And because I worked harder. And because I'd discreetly drawn the management's attention to her little nose candy problem.

It was common knowledge that Sandra and I had since been embroiled in a feud worthy of *Dynasty*, so every woman in the salon stopped chattering and looked at us. They were looking forward to a venomous verbal joust between two rabid she-cats.

'You're the bitter end,' Sandra snarled at me.

I didn't say a word. Instead, I subjected her to a long, hard, sub-zero stare. The room temperature dropped at least fifteen degrees.

Sandra started shivering. I went on staring at her until she couldn't take any more and left the salon.

The other women started chattering again, Lorelei continued to style my hair, and my reflection smiled at me in the mirror. Contentedly.

By the time Lorelei was through with me, my hair looked perfect and only an archaeologist could have found the crow's-feet under my make-up. Even my nibbled fingernails had been hidden beneath a set of the artificial variety. All I needed now was the outfit that would soon be delivered to my hotel room. A Versace! I was mad about the dress, which cost more than a Mini Cooper and had naturally been made for me free of charge, especially for the occasion. I'd already had a fitting in a Berlin boutique and was firmly convinced that I would be the best-dressed woman at the ceremony. It was a wonderful shade of red, caressed the skin like a lover, made my boobs look bigger, and minimized my thighs. What more could a woman have asked?

I sat in my hotel room, filled with anticipation and proudly reflecting on how far I had come: from the child in the high-rise whose residents would probably have assumed that Versace was an Italian footballer, to the successful political talk-show presenter who was probably destined to win a premier award in two hours' time, swathed in a fabulous Versace dress which Daniel Kohn would, later that night, rip from her body prior to having ferocious sex with her ...

At that moment my mobile phone rang. It was Lilly. A tsunami of remorse swept over me. My daughter was missing me and I was contemplating cheating on my husband – her father!

The birthday party was in full swing. 'First we had a sack race,' Lilly prattled away gaily, 'and then an egg-and-spoon race, and then a bun fight without buns.'

'A bun fight without buns?' I asked, puzzled.

'We squirted ketchup at each other ... and mayonnaise ... and we threw spaghetti bolognese over each other,' Lilly explained. With a smile, I pictured the other mothers' less than delighted faces when they came to collect their children.

'Dear Granny called to wish me a happy birthday,' Lilly went on, and the smile froze on my face. I'd spent years trying to keep my dysfunctional parents out of our family life.

My good-for-nothing father had deserted us for one of his numerous conquests when I was as old as Lilly was now. Since then my mother had boosted the local minimarket's hard liquor sales by around twelve per cent annually. I already made her a monthly allowance. As a rule, her only motive in doing a 'dear Granny' act was to extract some more cash from me.

'How was Granny?' I asked gingerly, scared that my mother had already been sozzled when she phoned.

'She talked in that funny way,' Lilly replied in the relaxed tones of a child who had never known her grandmother articulate any differently. I racked my brains for the right words to explain this linguistic

phenomenon but, before I'd found even one, Lilly suddenly screamed: 'Oh no!'

I flinched. 'What is it?' I asked feverishly, my mind's eye picturing a thousand disaster scenarios at once.

'That stupid Benny is burning ants to death with a magnifying glass!'

She hung up in a hurry and I heaved a sigh of relief. Nothing bad had happened.

Thinking of my little daughter, I ruefully came to a firm decision: Daniel Kohn would not, under any circumstances, get to rip off my Versace dress tonight.

I debated whether to call Alex and thank him for giving Lilly such a nice birthday, but the more I considered the matter the more convinced I became that we would be bound to bicker again.

It was almost impossible to believe that we had once been happy together.

I had got to know Alex while travelling around Europe during my gap year. He was a backpacker and so was I. He liked roaming around; I was doing it only to keep my friend Nina company. He adored Venice in the summer; I found the sweltering heat, the stench of the canals and the swarms of mosquitoes, which constituted a plague of positively biblical proportions, absolutely intolerable.

On our first evening in Venice we went to the Lido. Nina did what she was best at: turning male Italians' heads with her blue eyes and angelic blonde ringlets. Meantime, I swatted mosquitoes by the score and wondered how anyone could have been stupid enough to build a half-submerged city. I also fended off the hormone-sodden Italian

* From Casanova's memoirs: 'Ants have many natural enemies: spiders, cockroaches, and young devils armed with magnifying glasses. I burned like the Christians in ancient Rome and died for the second time that day – a day when the Goddess Fortuna truly failed to smile upon me. The last thought that took shape in my expiring brain was: "If ever I accumulate enough good karma to enable me to walk the earth as a human being once more, I shall leave my boot up the fundamental orifice of every magnifying-glass-wielding young scamp I encounter."'

boys whom Nina picked up for me as a matter of course. One of them was called Salvatore. He wore his white shirt with only the bottom two buttons done up, stank of the cheapest aftershave, and interpreted my ‘No, no!’ as an invitation to grope me. I defended myself with a slap in the face and a ‘*Stronzo!*’ Although I didn’t know what it meant – I’d merely overheard it on the lips of an irate *gondoliere* – it made Salvatore incredibly angry. He threatened to hit me if I didn’t shut up.

I shut up.

He put his hand inside my blouse. I was panic-stricken and nauseated, but I couldn’t do a thing. I was paralysed with fear.

Just as his paw was about to close over my breast, Alex gripped his wrist. He had appeared out of nowhere like a white knight in one of the fairy tales in which, thanks to my father, I no longer believed. Salvatore drew a knife and confronted him, jabbering something in Italian. I didn’t understand a word, but his meaning was clear: if Alex didn’t beat it at once, he would find himself starring in his very own version of *Don’t Look Now*. Alex, who had practised ju-jitsu for years, kicked the knife out of his hand. So hard that Salvatore decided to withdraw with his tail – among other things – between his legs.

While Nina was busy devoting the night to losing her virginity, Alex and I sat beside the lagoon and talked and talked. We both liked the same films (*Some Like It Hot*, *The Naked Gun*, *Star Wars*), we both liked the same books (*Lord of the Rings*, *Catch 22*, *Calvin and Hobbes*), and we both hated the same things (teachers).

When the sun reappeared over Venice I said to him: ‘I think we’re soulmates,’ and Alex replied: ‘I don’t just think so, I know so.’

Man, were we wrong!

I put the mobile phone back in my handbag. I was suddenly feeling all alone on my soft bed in the luxury hotel. Terribly alone. This was meant to be my big night, but Alex wasn’t sharing it with me and I didn’t even feel like calling him.

I had finally grasped something: We didn’t love each other any

more. Not in the least.

And that was the third-louisiest moment of the day.

3

After five minutes, during which I sat there in a daze, there was a knock on the door and a messenger delivered my Versace dress. The great moment had come. I carefully extracted it from the tissue paper, expecting to jump for joy. But my feet remained rooted to the ground, I was so shocked. Not only was the dress blue, which it damned well shouldn't have been, but it wasn't strapless! The idiots had sent me the wrong dress!

I called the messenger service at once. 'Kim Karlsen here. I've got the wrong dress.'

'How come?' asked the voice at the other end of the line.

'That's what *I'm* asking *you!*' I retorted, my voice vaulting an octave.

'Hm ...' I heard. I waited for that monosyllable to be followed by a word or two. It wasn't.

'Perhaps you could check your records,' I suggested in a voice that would have cut glass.

'Okay, I will,' came the listless reply. The man evidently had more important things on his plate. Like watching TV or picking his nose.

'I have to be at the German Television Awards in one hour's time,' I insisted.

'Never heard of them,' he responded.

'Listen,' I said, 'your cultural shortcomings don't interest me. Either find out where my dress has gone or I'll make sure your firm never gets any more business from the television industry.'

'No need to get worked up, I'll call you back right away,' he said, and hung up.

'Right away' turned out to be twenty-five minutes later.

‘Very sorry, your dress is in Monte Carlo.’

‘Monte Carlo?!’ I squeaked hysterically.

‘Monte Carlo,’ he replied in a wholly dispassionate tone.

He went on to explain that the dress in my possession was really meant for the female companion (aka call girl) of a software tycoon. My own dress was now in *her* possession. In Monte Carlo, so there was no possibility of getting it back in time. The man offered me a credit note in compensation, which wasn’t much help. I slammed the receiver down on the cradle and laid a curse – lifelong diarrhoea – on him and all his descendants.

In sheer desperation I tried on the blue dress and was mortified to discover that the software tycoon’s young ‘companion’ had a considerably slimmer figure than my own.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I saw that the tight dress greatly emphasized my boobs, likewise my bottom. To be honest, it had something. I looked sexier than I’d ever looked in my life, and it concealed my plump thighs even more effectively than the one I’d originally chosen. Since the only other outfit I possessed was my jeans and a rollneck sweater whose collar, thanks to Lorelei’s hairstyling, was a mass of tickly little offcuts, I decided to wear the dress anyway. If I also wore the black stole that had come with it, it would pass muster. I couldn’t afford to indulge in any violent contortions, but that was all.

Thus attired, I rode the lift down to the hotel foyer. The effect wasn’t bad. All the men stared at me, and none of them wasted an instant on looking at my face.

Benedikt Carstens, who had been waiting for me at the entrance, was profoundly impressed. ‘Darling, that dress ... It’s absolutely breathtaking,’ he said. ‘I know what you mean,’ I gasped, half asphyxiated by the pressure of the bodice on my rib cage.

A black BMW limo drove up. The chauffeur opened the door for me and held it open for the full two-and-a-half minutes it took me to stow myself and the dress in the back of the car without ripping the

material by making some injudicious movement.

We drove through the rainswept twilight and across the industrial district in which the Coloneum, the venue for the awards ceremony, was situated. Its deserted factories and broken windows invested it with all the charm of a post-atomic, post-apocalyptic cityscape. Loneliness overcame me once more.

To combat it I took out my mobile and called home, but no one answered. Lilly's horde of birthday guests were very probably rampaging through our house one last time with Alex good-naturedly egging them on. They would all be having fun and I wasn't there. I felt sick. Sick as a dog.

It wasn't until our limo had been waved through three checkpoints and pulled up beside the red carpet that my dark thoughts were banished by a surge of adrenalin. Over two hundred press photographers were stationed outside.

The chauffeur opened the door for me. As fast as I could in my tight dress – that's to say, awkwardly and in slow motion – I struggled out of the limo and into the most blinding, flashgun-generated electric storm I'd ever experienced. 'Here, Kim!' the photographers shouted. 'Look this way! That's right! Look sexy!' It was crazy. It was exciting. It was ecstasy!

Until the next limo drove up behind me. As if in response to a word of command, the two hundred lenses abandoned me in favour of some starlet with legs that ended beneath her armpits. 'Here, Verona!' I heard. 'Look this way! That's right! Look sexy!'

Benedikt and I took our places and the proceedings got under way. I had to listen to any number of insincere thank-you speeches before the master of ceremonies came to the award for 'Best Current Affairs Presenter'. At last! This was it! My heart began to pound like that of jet pilot who breaks the sound barrier, is catapulted into space by his ejector seat – and finds he's forgotten his parachute.

After a brief preamble of which I caught not a word, I was so excited, the compère read out the nominees' names: 'Daniel Kohn,

Sandra Maischberger, and Kim Karlsen.’ The three of us appeared in close-up on the screens around the hall, each at pains to smile serenely. Daniel was the only convincing performer.

‘And the winner in the “Best Current Affairs Presenter” category is ...’ The compère opened the envelope and paused for effect. My heart raced even faster. At record speed. Cardiac arrest threatened. The suspense was unbearable.

Having milked the pause for effect for all it was worth, the compère announced: ‘Kim Karlsen!’

It was like being hit by a giant hammer, except that it didn’t hurt. Overcome with euphoria, I stood up and hugged Benedikt, who gave my cheek another pinch.

I bathed in the applause.

I shouldn’t have done so.

If I hadn’t, I might have heard the ‘krrritshhh.’

Or I might have wondered why Sandra Kölling, my bosom enemy, was smiling, when foam should really have been oozing from between her rabid lips.

I didn’t smell a rat until, on my way to the stage, I heard a chuckle. Then another. And another. More and more people were chuckling. By degrees, the chuckles swelled to a thoroughgoing roar of laughter.

On the first of the steps leading up to the stage I paused, suddenly aware that I felt different in some way – ‘airier’ and less constricted. Gingerly, I felt my bottom. The dress had ripped!

And that wasn’t all. In order to get into it, I’d dispensed with my panties.

Ergo, I was exhibiting my bare backside to fifteen hundred assembled celebs and VIPs!

Likewise to thirty-three television cameras!

And, thus, to six million viewers!

4

At this, the second-louisiest moment of the day, I ought really to have mounted the stage with aplomb, made some quip about my mishap – for instance: ‘How else is a girl to make page one these days?’ – and then gone on to enjoy my success.

Sadly, this didn’t occur to me until I’d fled to my hotel room and locked the door.

In tears, I hurled my incessantly beeping mobile into the loo and removed the receiver of my continuously ringing hotel phone from its cradle. I simply couldn’t face talking to any journalists. Nor to Alex. I didn’t even want to speak to Lilly, who was bound to be abysmally ashamed of her mother. The thought of her shame made me feel more ashamed still.

And things would undoubtedly get worse in the next few days. I could already see the headlines: ‘Kim Karlsen’s Bottom Comes Top!’, ‘Are Panties Out?’, or ‘Even Stars Have Orange-Peel Skin!’

Then came a knock at the door. I froze. If it was some journalist I would stick his head down the loo as well. Or my own.

‘It’s me, Daniel.’

I gulped.

‘Kim? I know you’re in there.’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘That’s not very convincing.’

‘It’s true, though,’ I said.

‘Come on, open up.’

I hesitated. ‘Are you alone?’

‘Of course.’

I thought for a moment, then went to the door and opened it. Daniel was standing there with a bottle of champagne and two glasses. He smiled at me as if my public humiliation had never happened. It did me good.

‘We were going to drink a toast,’ he said, gazing into my bloodshot eyes. I couldn’t get a word out. He brushed a teardrop from my cheek.

I smiled. He came in. And we never even got to open the champagne.

5

It was the best sex I’d had in years. It was wonderful, fantastic, supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!

It felt good afterwards, lying in Daniel’s arms. It felt wonderful but awful. How could it feel so good? I had just cheated on my husband. And, indirectly, on my daughter.

I couldn’t go on lying there any longer. I got up and put my clothes on. Not the ripped dress, of course. That I intended to chuck down the refuse shoot in the morning. I pulled on my jeans and the itchy rollneck.

‘Where are you off to?’ Daniel asked.

‘Just going to grab some fresh air.’

He looked worried. ‘The lobby’s swarming with reporters.’

‘I’ll go up on the roof.’

‘Like me to come with you?’ he asked sympathetically. Looking into his eyes, I was surprised. He seemed to be sincere. Did he really feel something for me, or was he just afraid I might jump?

‘I won’t be long,’ I said.

‘Promise?’

‘Promise.’

He looked at me. I couldn’t quite tell what he was thinking. ‘I don’t want to ask,’ I said, ‘so I won’t, but ... will you ... ?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I’ll wait here for you.’

I felt glad. Although I wasn’t entirely sure I could believe him, I felt glad.

I put my shoes on and left the room. It was my last excursion as Kim Karlsen.

6

Space Station Foton-M3 had been conducting medical, material and biological experiments on behalf of Russian scientists since 1993. On the day of the television awards, ground control at the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan commanded the obsolete space station to re-enter the earth's atmosphere and burn up. However, the engineers at ground control discovered that the angle of entry had diverged from their original calculations. Instead of burning up completely in the atmosphere, only ninety-eight per cent of the station was destroyed. The remaining two per cent were strewn across Northern Europe.

Why do I trouble to mention this? Because the effing space station's effing urinal landed on my head!

I was standing on the hotel's roof terrace, gazing out over the lights of Cologne in solitary communion with my chaotic thoughts. Was Daniel in earnest? Should I get a divorce from Alex? How would Lilly react? Would *You've Been Framed* still be exhibiting my naked backside on TV in forty years' time – worldwide?

Then I saw a light in the sky. It looked lovely, like a shooting star. I shut my eyes and made a wish: 'Please let everything be all right again.'

I could see through my closed eyelids that the thing was getting brighter and brighter, like a signal flare. Louder, too – positively ear-splitting. I opened my eyes and saw a glowing fireball heading straight for me.

I knew at once that I hadn't a hope of dodging it. My one thought was: 'What a crazy way to die!'

There followed the obligatory 'résumé of your life' phase. The only pity of it is, the episodes you see aren't exclusively pleasant. My own mind's eye saw the following:

- Myself as an infant being dandled on my father's knee. I have an innate faith in human nature.
- I'm on a swing in a playground. Daddy is pushing me. I'm still very trusting.
- Daddy starts smelling of fresh bread.
- Daddy deserts us for the baker's wife. So much for my faith in human nature.
- I make mummy's breakfast. I'm seven now.
- At school I'm an outsider.
- I get to know Nina. She's like me. Now we're a pair of outsiders.
- Nina and I bet on who'll be the first to lose her virginity.
- One year later. I won the bet. I wish I'd lost.
- My father moves away, no idea where to.
- Nina and I run wild. Binge drinking, the odd Ecstasy tablet, lots of hangovers.
- Nina and I get our final exam results. We hug each other.
- Alex and I meet in Venice. I fall in love with him.
- Alex, Nina and I go on holiday together. I realize she loves him too.
- He also has feelings for her.
- He plumps for me. Phew!
- I shout at Nina that I never want to see her again.
- Alex and I get married in the church of San Vincenzo, Venice. I almost burst with happiness.
- Lilly is born. I feel her skin against my tummy. The best moment in my life. Why can't it last for ever?
- I forget our wedding anniversary.
- Alex and I quarrel. He buys Lilly a pregnant guinea pig.
- I promise Lilly we'll soon have a wonderful day together.
- The master of ceremonies calls out: 'Kim Karlsen.'
- I display my naked bottom to six million people.
- Daniel and I have sex.
- I wish for everything to be all right again.
- A Russian space station's incandescent urinal hurtles towards me.

After this brief biopic I suddenly saw the Great Light. It was just like what you always hear on television programmes from people who have been resuscitated after their hearts have stopped beating for a few minutes.

I saw the Light.
It grew brighter and brighter.
It was wonderful.
It enveloped me.
Gently.
Warmly.
Lovingly.
I embraced the Light and was absorbed by it.
I felt so good.
So secure.
So happy.
I had regained my faith in human nature.

But then the Light expelled me.
I lost consciousness.

When I came to I found that I had an enormous head.
And an immense abdomen.
And six legs.
And two extremely long antennae.

And that was the very lousiest moment of the day!