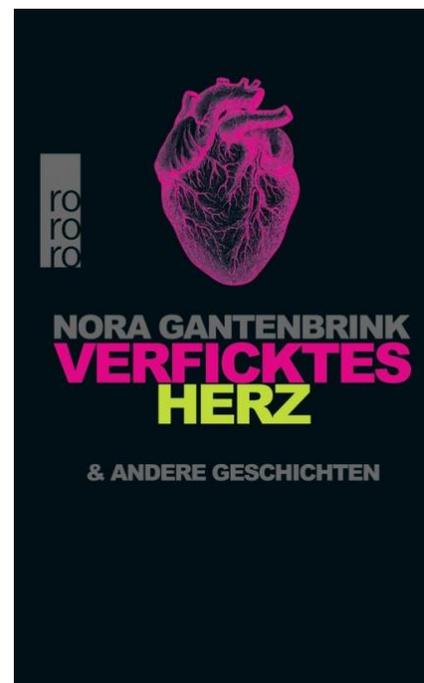


Nora Gantenbrink
My F*ing Heart**
rororo
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“Having your heart broken is the biggest load of shit there is. And the problem is that it’s a problem with no solution. There’s nothing you can do about it. Except wait. So the solution is that the waiting bit has to be good for you. Really good. You need yoga, you need to get wasted, you need a few good experiences, and even better short-lasting ones.” And it’s these that Nora Gantenbrink writes about in her debut book. Because that’s what all the characters in this exhilarating and powerful book want: to be loved. Until the very end.

Nora Gantenbrink, born in 1986, studied in Münster and attended the Henri-Nannen School of Journalism in Hamburg. She then worked as an editor at SPIEGEL ONLINE and wrote articles for Stern, ZEIT, SPIEGEL and a sausage magazine. Since the beginning of 2013, she has been a journalist for the German magazine Stern.



Röderinger

I was standing at my hometown Aral gas station, feeding my Mini Cooper Super-Plus fuel, when I caught sight of him slinking through the streets like a mangy dog. He walked with a stooped back, eyes downcast. Long, greasy wisps of hair stuck to his face.

Röderinger shuffled past the fuel pumps in a mink fur coat that was far too small for his tall frame. His naked arms poked out of the mink sleeves, and his wrists, thin and pale like two white bones, made for an eerie sight in the fluorescent light of the forecourt.

He had been in my grade at high school, where we called him Rö. Rö, the Great. Standing well over six feet tall, Röderinger had always been a little odd. That's what happens when you walk around with your head in the stars, he would say. The air is thinner up there so you're bound to go a little crazy.

Rö was the son of the town's chief resident Dr. Röderinger, which didn't make it any easier. Even his father can't help him, the people whispered to one another, as they always do in those one-horse towns where everybody knows everybody else.

"Rö," I shouted. "Elisa, you noble dame," said Rö and stopped dead. His eyes flickered.

"What's that fur coat you're wearing?"

"Humans need a thick skin," said Rö. "And if they don't have it, then they have to borrow one from the animals." He held a spray can in his hand and carried a shoulder bag that peeked out from under his coat.

Well, yes, he had a lot to do, he said cagily, not wishing to give away too much. All he could say was that he was involved in an artistic project and that he had become a performance artist. "Pink Explosion Glitter Happening" was the name of his mission, and he now called himself Monsieur Regniredör.

At night, Monsieur Regniredör would take his spray can and everything that was gray and ugly would be painted pink. The trash cans at the bus stops, for example. But also junction boxes, road signs and driveway pillars. Rö said the point was to make the world a more colorful place and to make people happier. I argued that spelling his surname backwards was not a good synonym for an illegal act, but he ignored it.

"Rö," I asked, "is it true what people say, that you're back up at the Havelkamp clinic for therapy?" "Every

now and then,” Röderinger replied. Yes, yes, he went there from time to time. “A little cooking therapy and therapeutic exercise and art therapy.”

“Are you still taking anything?”

“A little bit of happiness now and again, yes.”

“For heaven’s sake, don’t do that shit, Rö,” I said. “You should leave and go to university. Get as far away as possible from those East Westphalian drug dealers. They’ll just squeal on you, and you’ll be back doing community service.”

“I’m exempt from that,” Rö replied. “If you’ve got a screw loose, then they don’t make you do community service anymore.”

“I know, but doesn’t all the gossip bother you?”

“Hey, Elisa?”

“Erm, yes?”

“You know the stuff I put on the trash cans after I’ve sprayed them pink? Well, it’s not actually glitter.”

“No? What is it?”

Röderinger leaned in so close that I could smell the schnapps on his putrid breath, and then he whispered: “Stardust.”

I didn’t know what to say. Something went “click” beside me and Röderinger bellowed: “All fuelled up!” Behind me, a driver honked his horn.

“Listen, Rö,” I said. “I’ve been planning to go and visit Sarah in London. You’re still in touch with her, aren’t you? You both used to be so close, why not just come along? Sarah’s always asking after you, and you really need to get away from here for a bit. Please, Rö, come with me.”

Sarah and Rö had always liked one another; probably because they were both mad in a similar way. Only Sarah was better at channelling her madness. Also, apart from the odd joint, she generally stayed off drugs. Unlike Rö, who even on my 14th birthday had to be picked up by the paramedics because he’d mixed LSD into his Blue Curaçao.

Rö said he’d have to wait and see. He was working on a mirror made of soapstone in occupational therapy, and he wanted to get it sanded down first. Also, he didn’t have any money. Not one cent. It was all going on

dope and spray cans.

Rö's head rocked from side to side as he mulled it over, and then he said: "We'll see, I'll be in touch. I have to go now cos I'm busy. Nice talking to you." I shouted out to him asking whether he wanted to be dropped off somewhere, but he was already striding away.

The next morning, I got a call on my cellphone.

"Hello Elisa, this is Joachim Röderinger. I'm Sebastian's father. Sebastian just asked me for money because he said he wanted to fly to London with you for a long weekend."

„Yes, I asked him whether he wanted to come along and visit Sarah Liebermann. You still remember her, don't you?"

"Well, listen Elisa, you probably know about the massive problems we've been having with our son. If the director of the Havelkamp clinic weren't an old tennis buddy of mine, they would have kicked Sebastian out long ago. His urine samples keep testing positive for drugs."

"Oh."

"I'd give Sebastian the money for your trip to London, but I have to be sure that you would both keep an eye on Sebastian."

"We will. You know, I think it would do him good to get away from it all for a while. I could go for walks along the Thames with him and make sure that he doesn't take anything."

"Oh, Elisa," Dr. Röderinger sighed. I thought my plan had failed, but then he said:

"If you do your best to bring him home safely, I'll agree to your trip."

"Ok."

"Good. I'll give him the money. Send my regards to your mother!"

"I will, thanks."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Very soon, we booked two flights for the last weekend in April. Rö spoke to his physicians and continued working on his soapstone mirror. The local newspaper ran the headline “Vandalism - unknown perpetrators deface the village.” I wrote a seminar paper on the deployment of German soldiers in Afghanistan.

On the morning of our flight, I picked Rö up outside his parents’ house. He was wearing his undersized fur coat, held a large package in his arms and carried a backpack that was far too small. His mother stood at the kitchen window and waved to us.

In the car, Rö put on his leopard-print sunglasses and said: “Let’s go party!” I popped a CD in the car stereo and we listened to the Babyshambles to get us in the mood for our trip to London. Rö belched along to the melody and, all in all, it looked like a great start.

I parked my car at the Münster/Osnabrück airport and we headed to the terminal. “Rö,” I asked, “you’re not carrying any dope, are you?” “Nah! Only a few pills, but I’m allowed those.” “Ok.”

We picked up our boarding passes and checked in our luggage. During the security check, Rö refused to take off his shoes, arguing that his feet stank. Ultimately, though, he relented.

Before boarding, I bought a bottle of Moët champagne in the Duty Free store and we drank a Coke in one of those overpriced airport cafés where Rö told me about life in the nuthouse and that his art therapy with Mister Michalsky was really bad. Recently, he said, he painted a picture of the Aasee because the lake was so pretty and because everyone was allowed to sketch whatever they wanted.

So he had drawn the Aasee and the footpath surrounding it and also the long jetty where the boats from the sailing club berthed. And he’d made the picture look really pretty and put a lot of time and effort into it, around an hour, and then Mister Michalsky had held his painting up and said: “Mister Röderinger, Mister Röderinger, that frightens me!”

“What frightens you?” Rö asked him.

Mister Michalsky replied that what he had painted wasn’t actually the Aasee, not really. And he had run his finger along the contours of the lake and said that what he saw was a head. It was quite clearly the shape of a human head. And then he traced the contours of the footpath and said that it was a noose. And right at the end he tapped the jetty and whispered to him: “Mister Röderinger, the noose is pulling tight. There’s still a little wiggle room, but not much.”

Relating the story, Rö became really upset. “Elisa, it wasn’t a noose. And it wasn’t my head. It was the fucking Aasee. Jeez!” he shouted through the airport café. I threw my arms around him and pressed my head against his chest. “It’s alright, Rö, it’s alright.”

As we walked to the gate, I noticed again that people were giving Rö nasty looks. Was it because he was so incredibly tall? Or was it because of his fur coat? Was Rö's appearance really so creepy as to warrant those glares? Or were the people staring at him themselves just creepy?

After landing at Heathrow Airport, we caught the Express train to Paddington, where Sarah stood waiting for us. She wore colorful leggings and brown boots and shrieked with joy when she saw us. Rö laughed as he handed her the heavy bundle he had been carrying. When he laughed, you could see that his teeth had rotted away.

We took the Tube to Sarah's place. She shared an apartment near King's Cross with four other students, and although the apartment was neither very spacious nor very clean, to us it seemed just right.

In the kitchen, Sarah began unpicking the brown wrapping paper from her gift and let out another shriek when she saw the soapstone mirror. Even though it really hadn't turned out that well. Rö lit a cigarette and one of Sarah's roommates, wearing only a bra, joined us at the table, which prompted Rö to let out a weird chortle. I opened the bottle of Moët.

Later, we wandered through the city in a state of euphoria. Rö yelled out: "All these colors and people. There are so many. God must have had an art therapy class here. But without Mister Michalsky." And then Rö spread his arms and hollered even louder that Mister Michalsky was an asshole. Sarah said: "Escalation looming!"

We ate dinner at an Indian restaurant in Brixton. Rö drank five beers and knocked back his medication with a mixture of poppadoms and curry. As everyone apart from Rö was tired, we headed home at just before one in the morning.

Back in Sarah's kitchen, we sat together for a while reminiscing about old times. Rö told Sarah about Monsieur Regniredör and the clinic and all the lunatics there, and about a woman who was schizophrenic with whom he once made out. Sarah told us about life at the university and about a guy she hooked up with last weekend and I said I was still very happy with my boyfriend, Hans.

Then Rö and I lay down on the fold-out sofa bed in Sarah's tiny room. Rö took a sleeping pill and his thin, white feet jutted out from the end of the couch. I told him to go and brush his teeth, but he said, he never did that. Just before I nodded off, Rö leant his head on my shoulder and asked me, whether I was in love with Hans. Yes, I replied. "That's nice," said Rö.

We got up early the next morning and took the Tube to Camden Market. There was a whole mob of people

surging towards the daylight. The sun shone and the smell of greasy food filled the air. Rö wore a green T-shirt and kept stopping, fascinated by the punk and goth stores along the high street.

While Sarah bought us pink glazed doughnuts, I fetched some coffee. Hippies were busy stir-frying vegetables at the market stands. Camden is London's hotspot for all the crazy kooks. There are punks and musicians everywhere, and the stalls at the market sell everything from tie-dye shirts to suspenders. Although he towered over all the other people and despite his motley garb, Rö attracted far less attention than he usually did elsewhere. He bought a red velvet stovepipe hat from one of the street musicians, which made him look a little like Johnny Depp in "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." Sometimes people would stop and bow down before him.

At some point, Rö ducked into one of the thousands of tattoo studios dotted about the place. I was briefly distracted because I was on the phone with Hans. Once I had hung up, I went to find Rö. He was just having "Monsieur Regniredör" tattooed on his forearm. Sarah stood next to him. I screamed: "Are you crazy?" And Sarah asked: "Why?"

Later, Rö bought a mug for his mother with a picture of a bulldog dressed like the Queen Mum. He admitted that although he'd almost run out of money, he still wanted to get a piercing. I told him, enough was enough.

We each had a cocktail as we stood by the bridge, and the alcohol put us in a conciliatory mood. The spring sun shone and we danced to alternative electronic music before we took the Tube back home in the afternoon. Rö wearing his stovepipe hat on his head and a bandage on his right arm.

Sarah's roommate cooked us a meal of beef and veg and Sarah suggested we go to a pub before heading out to the "Old Blue Last," a club belonging to Vice magazine in London's East End.

Everyone took turns in the shower, except for Rö. He just pulled on a crumpled yellow shirt and a pair of black suspenders and donned his new top hat. Sarah and I told Rö that we were really pleased he had come along to London and that we were certain he could beat his drug addiction. It was just a little awkward that, during our conversation, Sarah's roommate snorted a line from the top of the induction cooker in the kitchen.

At the pub, we drank quite a few pints of fairly expensive Guinness. Sarah met the guy she had made out with last week. This week he was making out with someone else. Although he was a self-professed pacifist, Rö offered to punch him. I said "No," Sarah shouted something at the guy about his face and hemorrhoids, and then we all left for the club.

The "Old Blue Last" was full and the air reeked of cigarette fumes, dry heated air and sweat. Sarah ordered

three shots and three beers. We knocked them back and then went upstairs because someone mentioned a live band was playing. On the stairs, we met a man pulling a carton of milk along behind him on a leash who then proceeded to introduce us to his “pet.”

I’d noticed an interesting change in Rö since that morning: although people still stared at Rö in his fur coat and his colorful clothes and his top hat, the gazes he attracted weren’t disparaging. Instead, they were almost appreciative and admiring.

We hadn’t been in the “Old Blue Last” for more than ten minutes when a very beautiful woman approached Rö and began dancing around him. Walking to the restroom, I heard another woman say: “Check out the huge guy with the yellow shirt, he’s fucking hot.”

When I returned, Sarah was standing at the edge of the dance floor. She laughed as she handed me a beer. The DJ was throwing confetti. Sarah said: “I think Rö easily passes for a German Pete Doherty.” Indeed, a strange courting ritual was taking place in the epicenter of the club. There stood Rö in his yellow shirt and velvet top hat, dancing in a kind of epileptic fit.

And like orbiting planets, several skinny, good-looking women cavorted suggestively around our Rö. They toyed with his suspenders and rubbed their butts against his thighs like bees collecting pollen. Rö twitched and laughed and spun around in circles. I was never quite sure how to read his mood as I had no idea what kind of tablets he was taking.

“Sarah,” I said, “what’s happening here?” “I don’t know,” Sarah shouted above the music, “but I like it.” And then we both started dancing. A tattooed trumpet player began hitting on Sarah, and I met a guy from New Hampshire who wouldn’t stop asking me what I thought of his gold-colored suit. The problem was, he wasn’t wearing a gold-colored suit.

When I turned around at some point, I saw Rö kissing a dark-blond model-type girl who looked a bit like Kate Moss but with a bust. “Just look at her boobs,” Sarah shouted. “Just look at Rö,” I shouted back. We both stood there in disbelief.

At around four in the morning, Rö came up to us with the girl in tow, his dangly arms casually fondling her butt. Rö said he wanted to go back to the girl’s place. Sarah wrote down her address, gave him a few condoms and handed him some pound notes for a cab the next morning.

From the sparse information we were able to glean from Rö the next day, we pieced together what had transpired next. The events of the night must have unfolded as follows: when Rö and the beautiful girl tumbled into her small model-apartment, they ripped off all their clothes, kicking the stinking fur coat out of

the way. In his frenzied passion, Rö ripped her black pantyhose and bumped his head on her racing bike.

He kneaded her warm buttocks in his pale palms like human dough. And the girl, whose name he didn't even know, panted her whisky-soaked breath in his face.

The world had never before appeared as beautiful and colorful as it did to Rö on this night – even without Ecstasy, LSD or cocaine. He was screwing a woman so beautiful, he could never have imagined anyone as attractive existing anywhere in the world. She touched his body, the body he himself had hated for so long; but she did so as if it were something very precious and desirable. She seemed to take a liking to his long hair and his untrained, gaunt torso. She moaned in ecstasy and oozed with sweat. She was the porno of his life.

When he knocked on the door of Sarah's apartment at around 4 in the afternoon on Sunday, we greeted him with applause. Rö stank of sweat and sex. He ripped the top hat from his head and took a bow. Sarah shoved him directly from the corridor into the shower.

On Monday, I returned Rö to his parents. He had come to no harm, apart from a little ink on his right forearm and a tiny bruise on his temple. His mother wept with joy. Rö handed her the mug with the face of the Queen Mum and kissed my forehead as we parted.

Sebastian Röderinger, son of the chief resident Dr. Röderinger, born in Warendorf near Münster in early summer of 1985, never again experienced such a happy day as the night he partied in London's Vice club in April 2011. All the things he had sorely missed throughout his life came together that evening: love, appreciation, uninhibited sex, freedom.

Rö was the worm that turned. He had gone from downtrodden to being desired. As much as his look had been mocked by people in his provincial hometown, that evening, in the club, it was just right. Perhaps life grants each of us one great, warm and possibly perfect moment. I think Rö's moment came that evening.

Even years later, Sarah asked me why Rö hadn't moved to London after that night, but I didn't know the answer. Many a question remained a mystery to us until the end.

Rö died shortly before his 30th birthday of an overdose of something. There were so many different substances coursing through his veins that the coroner found it impossible to say which one had ultimately killed him. In any case, Rö's heart stopped beating at around seven in the morning in the toilet of a Goa-club in Dortmund. A Bulgarian cleaning lady found him late Sunday afternoon.

Rö's parents asked us whether we'd like to have a keepsake from his old bedroom. Sarah took his bong. I chose the red velvet stovepipe hat and the stardust.

Only a few mourners attended Rö's funeral. Rö's mother, sedated with Valium, leaned heavily on Rö's sister. The face of Rö's father was the same color as the gravestone. One of his aunts explained that the coffin was custom-built because Rö was so tall and called it a real disgrace that even in death someone could cause his family such problems.

The priest said that God was sometimes unable to save everyone in his flock, no matter how much he loved them. Then they played "Think Twice" by Celine Dion, claiming it had been Rö's favorite song.

Instead of flowers, Sarah and I threw the shining red velvet top hat into his open grave.

In my memories, Rö always wears this hat.