

Translated excerpt

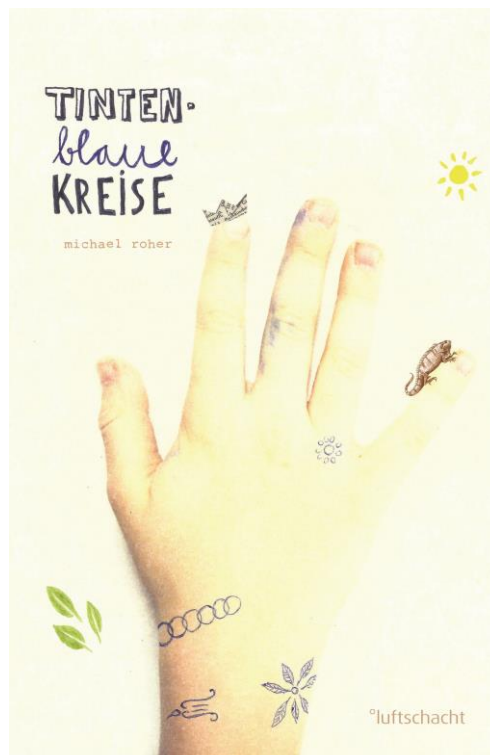
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Ink Blue Circles

Translated by John Reddick



Whenever I think of Phillip my thoughts end up more and more often with a question mark.

I've heard nothing from him for three weeks now.

Three weeks, since all that stuff happened with Tenka.

The sun's blazing down and burning the nape of my neck while I sit here with my iced tea chewing on the straw and wondering whether Phillip ever actually listens to his voicemail.

'Did you get my messages?' I want to ask him. 'Did you find the one in elvish in the tree?'

Or: 'Do you remember that paper boat you made out of a serviette? I named it *Malakoff* and put it on my windowsill upstairs. Some days it can even catch the smell of the river.'

But Phillip isn't there.

Doesn't answer his phone. Doesn't ring back. He's disappeared - simple as that.

And I'm sitting here in the sun outside Café Leguan watching the ice cubes melt in my glass and trying to understand what it's all supposed to mean.

But perhaps I'd better start at the beginning...

Part 1

Bee.

That's me.

Bee Sabina Mütz.

Star sign: scorpio.

Favourite food: radishes.

Second-best thrower of paper-plate frisbees.

Passionate doodler.

And the most wonderful child in the world. That's what my Mum says anyway.
And my Dad.

And old Jockel says it too: 'Sabina Bee, you are the most wonderful child in the world!'

And then he gives an impish grin and sprinkles a load of sugar over the milky froth on the top of his coffee.

Old Jockel is a regular here at our place, Café Leguan.

He comes first thing every morning, sits down at his table by the window, slurps hot coffee, and gazes out at the street. He reads the paper or plays board games - with Frau Almut when she's around. Or with Bee Sabina - in other words with me. Or on his own if Bee Sabina's short of time. When Bee Sabina has to do homework, for instance, or when she's trying out Mum's new drumkit, or wandering off to the harbour to feed the seagulls.

Or when Berry Boy comes.

Berry Boy comes on Wednesdays.

It's band practice on Wednesdays.

Berry Boy gives Dad a wave and places his order: 'One peppermint with milk, if you please!'

Dad nods and pours green syrup into a glass.

'Coming up: one toothpaste juice for the gentleman', he says, stirring milk into the brew and handing it to me on a little silver tray so that I can take it across to him.

'Mmm. Thanks, Bee!'

Berry Boy takes a sip, then wipes his lips with the back of his hand.

‘Wow! This stuff really is dangerously delicious. I think I’m already addicted.’
Then he pulls up a chair and asks me ‘D’you have time?’
I nod happily in the knowledge of what’s coming.
It’s our ritual.
I sit down next to him and fish a biro out of my pocket.
‘D’you fancy anything in particular?’
‘Hmm...’ He has a think. ‘Something with sea creatures, perhaps?’

Sometimes we sit there for more than hour, and Berry Boy watches me while I cover his forearm with figures, patterns and decorations until there’s not a single patch of skin left unmarked.

‘Dead cool!’

Berry Boy coos with delight, and gives his verdict on my Study in Blue.

Says something along the lines of never ever washing again until I’m all grown up and a proper tatooiist.

And then I tell him that in fact he *should* wash himself as otherwise he’ll start to stink, and in any case I’ve got to do a lot more practising before I get really good at it.

‘And for that I need your forearm all fresh and unadorned every Wednesday!’

‘It’s a deal, Bee’, promises Berry Boy, tousling my hair.

Mum reckons I’m a bit keen on Berry Boy, but that’s rubbish.

Well, okay, perhaps just a tiny, tiny little bit; but I certainly don’t want to kiss him the way Mum kisses Dad, sticking her tongue in his mouth and shutting her eyes - ugh, yuck!

Perhaps it more like Shirin in my class and her thing with Justin Bieber.

Shirin’s got posters all over her wall and above her bed. They’re all pictures of Justin Bieber. She sits there spellbound and drools over him because she thinks he’s just so sweet and cool.

And I drool over Berry Boy because I think he’s sweet and cool and because he plays guitar in Mum’s band and because he lets me share his jelly babies. He smells really great of lavender oil and already has a few real tatoos. But Berry Boy says he’s keeping one of his forearms reserved specially for me and that I’ve got the makings of a world-class artist. And sometimes he might run his fingers through my hair, like just now, and I go all red because it feels so-o-o good.

Berry Boy only lives two streets away from us, with his girl friend Linda and his son Yan.

I call on them sometimes and we cook spaghetti with red sauce, or play with Yan's Punch and Judy puppets. Or we go down to the river, light a camp fire, and bake apples.

And every Wednesday I look forward to him coming, getting me to bring him his peppermint syrup, and holding out his arm for me to draw on.

Like today. Like right now.

'Can you see what it is?' I ask him. 'It's a deep-sea fish.'

I trace out the shape on his skin with my finger.

'There's the tail and the fins. And there's the head.'

'Ah, yes', says Berry Boy.

But I can tell he hasn't had a proper look.

Lost in thought, he takes little sips of his toothpaste juice, and keeps his eyes fixed on the door.

There's a ringing noise from his jacket pocket.

He reaches for his phone.

'Can you give me a second?' he says, and goes out.

I can see him wandering up and down in the street holding his phone to his ear.

It's a phone call from the hospital. But of course I don't know that.

There's something wrong with Yan's heart. I'm not going to see any more of Berry Boy for a good long while.

But I don't have a clue about any of this right now.

But I have to mention it all the same.

Because of the Phillip thing, that's why.

Because the business with Yan's heart was the start of it all.

That's when it all began.

Dad says he first met Mum at sea.

Dad was a cook on a ship, but the story about how they first came across one another is different every time.

Today is a Sunday, and today the story goes like this:

Once upon a time there was a handsome young cook called Jonas Mütz (that's my Dad) who sailed the seven seas on an ancient cutter.

One night in the middle of the ocean the ship was hit by a severe storm. Waves as high as skyscrapers crashed down on it and buried it in the watery depths. And Jonas almost drowned.

'But all of a sudden there she was - a bewitching mermaid called Svenja Olavson, with long blonde hair and a great big pair of knockers.'

'Jonas!' protests Mum, rolling her eyes.

'What's the problem?' says Dad, feigning innocence. Mum grins.

Dad continues his story: 'So anyway, this fabulously beautiful and well-built mermaid came swimming up to the handsome youth and saved his life.'

And this mermaid was Mum.

And so the pair of them, Jonas and Svenja Olavson, fell in love with each other for ever and a day.

And later, once they were ashore, Svenja cast off her scales and decided to be a human being from that moment on.

'Easy as pie', says Dad. 'Mermaids can do that. They peel their fishy tail off and, hey presto, they've got legs. And what legs! Long and beautiful they were.'

Dad positively purrs, gives Mum a special look, then says that Svenja and Jonas really did have the hots for one another.

'And that's why they had lots and lots of steamy, wild, fiery...'

'Dad!' I squeeze my eyes tight shut and block my ears. 'Do you *have* to do this every time?!'

Mum gives Dad a pinch in the ribs. Dad grins and pours himself another cup of coffee.

'My turn to tell the story now!' declares Mum.

'Thank goodness!' I sigh.

Dad simply isn't capable of making his stories suitable for the ears of kids.

So Mum takes over instead: 'Then via Denmark and Poland we went all the way down to the Black Sea. I fell pregnant down there. Auntie Ilvi died soon after. I inherited her house and we moved up here. And then you arrived, Bee, on a rainy night in November.'

And hey presto, there's that misty-eyed look Mum always gets when she starts recalling stuff like that.

'You're my sweet little Eleventh Heaven', she says, and strokes my face. Biting a chunk off her breakfast roll she sits there chomping away and looking all sappy.

'Eleventh Heaven', she says - not '*Seventh* Heaven'! But whenever Mum calls me that, she's thinking of the day I was born. I'm a bit blessed, that's why, cos I popped out of the womb on the 11th of the 11th - not at eleven minutes past eleven, it's true, but it did take me exactly eleven hours to come out. That's Mum's story, anyway.

'The rain was hammering down on the roof like crazy', she says. 'I remember it so well. The window was open because I felt so hot. And our neighbour came round at four in the morning and brought me a salami roll - d'you remember, Jonas?'

Dad laughed, and nearly choked on a bread crumb.

'There she was all of a sudden outside the door, holding a plate in her hand. And that was the very moment you popped out into the world, Bee.'

'Yes', I say. That was the very moment I popped out into the world.

Bee Sabina Mütz, daughter of a mermaid and offspring of a prince of liars.

3

The name of our house is Leguan.

If you come from Brunnenplatz then turn into Mühlgasse, it's the second house on the left. Painted green; in front of it a few tables with parasols. And on the sign above the entrance door it says 'Leguan'. In large multi-coloured letters.

Downstairs is the café, and upstairs on the first floor, where the little window is - that's where I live.

In Bee Sabina's extremely private cave of a room bursting with art and anarchy.

This is the abode of Ulla the purple-and-blue-checked Cheshire cat, my pet spider Nepomuk and his merry band of creepy-crawly relatives, and, of course, me - Bee Sabina.

We live there in a clutter of lovingly arranged felt-tip-pen installations, torn-out sketch-book pages, scribbled-on paper serviettes, Barbie dolls embellished with biro, all scattered randomly across the floor, coloured marbles, books, magazines about tattooing, stuff for school, and sundry other essential necessities of life.

'Have you gone completely crazy?! What *does* this place look like?!'

Okay - perhaps I *am* a touch chaotic. That could be true.
But is that any reason for people to get so het up about it?
After all, I *am* an artist.
But no chance.

Mum and Dad are completely merciless in this regard.

‘Tomorrow’s clean-up day, you can bet your life on it!’

I give a loud snort and put on my most evil-looking face. Makes no difference, I know. But I enjoy cursing and muttering and moaning and mouthing off and inventing outlandish insults while clearing up my room. ‘Death and damnation! Snotty-nosed slobber lips!’ I shout while I slam the drawers shut, fling books onto the shelves and crash around in a great show of rage.

Then when everything’s all clean and sad and boring once again, Dad brings me a banana milk with cinnamon and almond slivers from downstairs as my reward. Dad enjoys using his culinary skills to spoil people. That’s why he hit on the idea of turning the downstairs living room into a small café.

Café Leguan.

Mum chose the name.

Cos that’s what the ship was called where Dad was the cook and where he and Mum first met each other. And that makes it a lucky name, says Mum.

Anyway, I couldn’t imagine a nicer home in the whole wide world.

I just love it all: sitting downstairs of an afternoon, either with Dad in the kitchen or with Jockel at his table by the window, in my hand a hot cocoa, in my stomach a warm chocolate-y feeling, in my nose the smell of freshly brewed coffee; the toings and froings of the guests; the gentle clink of the little silver spoons when people stir their drinks; Dad’s tiramisu and the murmuring of the conversations going on all around me.

Or when everyone sits down for a natter after Mum’s band practice on Wednesdays.

Then Dad conjures up a great big supper.

Frau Almut helps with the cooking.

And Jockel helps with the shopping.

You could say that Jockel’s pretty much part of the family now.

We’re usually still having breakfast when he turns up.

With a knock on the door he’ll say ‘It isn’t a crime and I’ve got the time.’

Jockel’s fond of rhymes.

Dad writes him a list of what he needs and gives him some money.

‘Hang on!’ I say, slipping into my shoes and my pullover and grabbing my school bag.

And Jockel and I go part of the way together.

Because my school isn’t far from the market, or the market isn’t far from the school: whatever.

‘Courgettes, carrots, sweetcorn, millet, whipping cream’, says Jockel, studying Dad’s shopping list.

‘Looks like we’re having Jonas’s famous millet bake again.’

He rubs his stomach and drapes my school bag over his shoulder.

‘Well, Bee? Tell me: how are things going, my sweet little pal? How is school, my dear little gal?’

School -

I kick at a couple of pebbles.

School’s not exactly my favourite topic.

School’s ok, but if I had the choice I’d spend my days quite differently. I’d draw a madcap mediaeval castle, for instance, or make a mighty din on Mum’s drumkit. Or try to be even lazier than Ulla the Cheshire cat. I’d ring Berry Boy’s doorbell and ask if he’d let me come up and then play me some songs on his guitar. I’d read important books - world-class literature such as Donald Duck. Or sit in Café Leguan drinking Russian tea with Frau Almut and getting her to read the cards and tell me my fortune.

‘Sabina’, she would say, in a voice as wrinkly as her wizened fingers, ‘Sabina, there’s trouble ahead.’

Frau Almut has big black eyes and bright purple lips.

Frau Almut smells of cigarettes and mint-flavoured chewing gum, and her ears are studded with shiny little silver rings.

Frau Almut is old.

Frau Almut doesn’t have much to do.

‘Once upon a time’, she says, ‘I used to be a witch.’

And that - so she says - is why she has magic powers.

By ‘once upon a time’ she means ‘in a previous life’.

Frau Almut has already had seven lives. She knows that from the cards.

‘Cards tell you your past as well as your future’, she explains; ‘ - you just have to know how to read them.’

According to Dad, Frau Almut is ‘a bit - well, *special*’.

But I like listening to her.

Such as recently, when she told me ‘Sabina, Sabina, there’s trouble ahead. Lady Luck’s off her rocker - do you see?’

Frau Almut was pointing at a card.

‘Some people are on the way up, others are on the way down - ah, just look at that hermit! There’s a journey ahead. But it won’t be a normal journey. It’s a search. A search for something. For somebody. For the world beyond. And...’

She stared at me as if I knew what she was on about.

‘I see a boyfriend too.’

‘Berry Boy, perhaps?’

‘Perhaps’, she murmured, crooking her head to one side.

‘But perhaps not. Perhaps yes and no both.’

Frau Almut would read the cards for me. She’d giggle and sip her tea.

And then Jockel would return from his shopping trip and sit down with us. Something funny might have happened to him on the way, and he’d tell us all about it while slurping his coffee topped with steamed milk, then play a board game with Frau Almut.

Yes, I think to myself as I push the heavy glass door open - that would be a thousand times better than school, hundred percent, no question.