

Kirsten Fuchs

... that I love you

Snow is lying in Berlin. It has simply lain itself down everywhere and never got up again. It lolls around like a lazy child and is of absolutely no use at all. Nobody asks it to get up again, to learn something, to achieve something. The snow lies in every street like a marking left by a megalomaniac dog. It owns the city. Its supposedly beautiful whiteness does nothing for me, nor does the crunching sound under my shoes or the breaking of the thin upper layer.

I am walking to take the bus to the airport. I leave my traces in the snow but because it continues to snow I don't actually leave any traces. My footprints get covered over and disappear. No reason to be sad or to cry. I never used to cry. I cried while watching Casablanca, but only the second time. Long story, but the way to the airport is long – long enough for a long story.

The first time I saw Casablanca was with my girl-friend at the time, Ina. She desperately wanted us to see the film together, although she herself had seen it numerous times before, but of course without me, perhaps with the guy she used to go out with. But I didn't really mind. There are things I've done with all my girlfriends, too: kissing, talking about my school days, smoking.

Ina and I watched the film snuggled up together, and guess what – it was boring. Ina cried at the end, because she cries every time she sees that film. It's like the knee-jerk reflex that makes your leg shoot up when somebody taps your knee: tap on Ina's heart with a little Casablanca

hammer, and the tears start to flow. I held her in my arms and it felt nice. Then Ina looked at me with her drop-shaped eyes and, just to ease the atmosphere, I said: "Well, if ever I need a visa, I'll know to look inside the piano first!" That wasn't the reason for our separation, but that's where it started. Ina was appalled when I said that I would never cry – or blubber, as men say – and certainly never weep, as women say. I told her I had cried on my first day at school because the patent leather shoe on my right foot had been too tight, and then also when my first car had been scrapped. Ina saw this as a complete inability to experience feelings: I was emotionless, unromantic, cerebral, and someone like that was incapable of love. I assured her that I loved her. I said: "I assure you that I love you!" and she found this assertion dreadful.

"But I told you that I love you and now I've done it again. I can even tell you again that I love you, no problem."

Ina got upset because "that I love you" and "I love you" are not the same thing.

"But the main thing is that I love you", I said.

"That I love you ...", she repeated. "You simply can't say it, can you?"

Then she gave me a challenging look. I didn't really feel like saying it any more, but I did anyway. A man's got to do what's a man's got to do.

"I love you. I love you. I love you!", I reeled off. Even that didn't satisfy her. I felt like I was taking an exam where the task was absolutely unclear: solve any problem, make any point, calculate something.

"I love you. There, it's out", I said. Ina was annoyed and stayed annoyed.

She took every opportunity to needle me about my lack of romanticism.

I was affectively handicapped, emotionally crippled and blind to romanticism. She brought the subject up with friends and slammed it

down visibly on the table when we were making raclette: “Yeah, the man who cries on account of a scrapped car...” As if I’d cried – I’d howled like a real guy.

I should really have argued with her but I wanted rather to be happy with her. I could have said: “Yeah, yeah, the woman who blubbers at the slightest shit...”, but I let it be. Instead I thought about how I could convince Ina that I really was romantic, extremely sensitive – hey, a total softie. Since I was none of these, this would amount to telling my girlfriend lies, but in any case I wanted to keep her. Ina was witty, clever, forgetful in an incredibly touching way and somehow totally cute. She plaited her hair and wore Pink-Panther hair clips. I ask you, who can say anything romantic to a woman like that? So I wrote a letter, with my rusty handwriting, which is good enough for scrawling shopping-lists on scraps of paper. I wrote the most beautiful love letter in the world, several pages long. I made a lot of assertions and meant them all seriously; I just embellished them in a pompous way. My feelings for Ina were like a beautiful fir tree which specially for her I transformed into a Christmas tree hung with stars, balls, tinsel, candles and figurines.

I can’t remember now everything I wrote. The salutation ran: My splendid girl!

In addition I had enclosed a voucher for a trip to Casablanca. I had borrowed the money from various people so that, if she wanted, we could fly off straightaway. It was the middle of winter, Berlin was snowed under. I placed the letter in a piano in a restaurant. It took me some time to find a restaurant with a piano. Then I took her out for a meal there. I looked at her happily. It was going to be my treat, of course, so straight off I generously ordered a bottle of wine and played with her fingers in my

hand. At some point she again put on her examination look, which was meant to get me to say “I love you.” I said: “Look inside the piano!”

“Ah, cut the crap”, she burst out. She probably thought I was taking the piss. “You and your jokes!” She slammed some money down on the table.

“All you have to do is to say I love you!” She put her coat on, much too hectically, and got caught in the sleeves. This gave her more time to stare at me like an enraged bull, as if I had a red rag on my face.

“I love you!” I said quickly. I’ve played lots of those computer games where you’re given three options: for example, how to persuade a doorman to let you in, or to get a teacher to hand over some papers, something like that. I was good at it. At the moment Ina was close to boiling point and about to storm off, I quickly turned over in my mind whether I should say “Stay here!” or “Calm down!” or “I love you!” I opted for answer c. I love you. “Forget it!”

Off she went. Outside it was cold, inside it was cold. I drank up the wine – which didn’t make me any warmer. By the time I left the restaurant Ina’s footprints had already been covered over by the snow. That’s why I can’t stand snow.

The bus has arrived at the airport – the terminus. I am the only person without any luggage. I stick my hands in my pockets and go through the automatic door, which shovels people into the airport like a paddle-wheel. A woman is in such a hurry that she starts trying to push the slow-moving door. Right in front of her nose, if she had happened to look, is a sticker telling you not to push the door by hand, but she doesn’t look in that direction. The automatic revolving door gets stuck and stops moving. The woman and I stand in our plexiglass cells and wait for it to start off

again. The woman looks at me, and if I had been in a hurry too, then I might have been pissed off. I smile. The door starts revolving again. The person who is in a hurry is held up by being in too much of a hurry. I like that. It seems just and nasty. Perhaps just is always nasty, but at any rate just. I don't think it's just that Ina has left me, only nasty. She fobbed me off on the phone and the only explanation she had to offer was that it wasn't right. That's what she's bequeathed to me: I'm like an heir who's now burdened with debts. A year has passed. During this time I have paid back the money I borrowed to buy the two tickets to Casablanca. I could fly there twice on my own or once with someone else – but I want to go with Ina.

I go to terminal eight. The trolley cases clatter, the announcements boom, the hurrying passengers' scarves flutter.

I go into the bistro, which gives you a view of the runway. There's a vacant seat at the window. I take off my coat from a sitting position: it's bound to be some time before Ina comes. After she left me I saw the film again and started to cry, or, if you like, weep. I still found the film boring, but I wept all the same. A stopper must have come out, because since then I've cried time and time again. But today that's over. Today Ina's coming. I've often sat here and watched the planes taking off and landing. The coffee is expensive and awful, the waiting staff very nice. Antje and Herr Tesch. Antje works here because she wanted to become a stewardess; Herr Tesch because he wanted to become a pilot. Antje's mother was a stewardess and Antje hardly ever saw her. When Antje told me this, I had to cry. Herr Tesch's father was not a pilot. Herr Tesch wanted to become a pilot because women took no notice of him and he was convinced that a man who can fly would get attention. He can fly. He's had the training. He

passed the examination but couldn't find a job. He hasn't got a woman, either. To tell the truth, he is not very attractive; in fact, his face is rather ill-proportioned. He has soft features around the mouth, but they're not smooth – just flabby. I think he would be better off with a beard. I even told him so, but he can't grow a beard, Herr Tesch explained. That made me cry.

“So, Dirk. How about one of our fine coffees”, asks Antje. I nod. “And an ashtray!” I shout after her. I light a cigarette already, trusting that Antje will bring an ashtray before the ash drops off of its own accord – even if I keep my hand steady. I like this place, because it isn't really a place. Most people who spend time here are either coming from somewhere else or are on their way to somewhere else. A restless assortment: some wanting to get away, some having to get away, some arriving and then wanting, or having, to get away again. I wait for Antje. First, Antje comes with the ashtray. Antje might in fact be pretty but it's easy to pretend that she isn't. She doesn't move very confidently, just casually, and she doesn't look inviting, just friendly.

Antje stands at my table for a short while and tells me that Hermann hasn't been around for a few days. “Well, perhaps he's made it”, I say. Antje doesn't think so. Then she has to go off and see to the other customers. Gabi is here, she always wants to talk a lot. And Jan is here, too; he needs another Coke every quarter of an hour. And then there are those customers who have actually flown or are about to fly, who are only here for a short time. But Hermann is not here. Hermann is afraid of flying. He sits around all the time and stares out of the window. He hasn't told me why he is afraid of flying. I've thought of various reasons and each one made me cry: his parents were in a plane crash, he himself

only just survived, the love of his life lives in Australia and he can't get there. Perhaps he is equally afraid of ships, and so he is trapped on this continent, which he sees as an island, something no normal person does because the continent is so big that even Asia is still the same island. I don't know what's wrong with Hermann. Everybody who comes here just to be here has a screw loose, has lost their marbles or is off their trolley in some way. I wait for Ina.

Jan wants to go to America, so much so that he always wears a cowboy hat, as if just wearing the hat were half the journey. He wants to become a star. He has recorded a CD, and is always offering to sell me a copy. Then I say, "Jan, I've already got one!", and Jan explains to me that he still has a thousand to sell. He is looking for a manager and a producer. "Then things'll start moving!", Jan smiles. He has a charming smile with dimples. I could easily imagine him as a star, but unfortunately he has an unremarkable voice, like a sparrow. Jan's stage name is Little Jimmy. I call him Jan. Antje is kind, she calls him Little Jimmy; she would even call me Rick if I wanted her to. When Jan excitedly told me that he's been given the chance to put on a concert in the art room at his nephew's school, I cried.

Today everybody's here, apart from Hermann: Jan, Antje, Herr Tesch, Gabi. I don't count myself; I'm just waiting for Ina.

Gabi used to be crazy about the idea of going through the metal detector and being searched. Gabi, unlike Hermann, tells everybody everything.

Gabi used to fly around Germany on low-cost flights. She deliberately put metal objects on her body, even in her knickers.

If she hadn't been reported for it by a young security official who felt sexually harassed, then she would probably have gone bust. She says

she's off it now, but she still comes to the airport, watches people being searched and then comes to the bistro to feel ashamed. I had to cry when Gabi told me that, but then I had to move away from her because she tried to tempt me to the toilet, so that at least she could have sex in an airport. Perhaps I would have had to beep.

I'll have to finish my coffee before Ina gets here. As usual it's awful. Sugar doesn't make it any better, if anything it's the sugar that gets worse. At the next table somebody is making a very loud phone call. Late arrival, pick up, taxi, connecting flight, luggage, passport. I could play a kind of word bingo. I would always put my money on precisely those six expressions. Then I would wait and listen in on phone conversations and when I got to six, I would jump up from my seat and shout "bingo!" People would probably think I was crazy, although in fact I am the only normal person among the slightly different customers. Antje isn't crazy, either, but the rest of them are hopelessly lost. I wait for Ina, and here she comes. She is wearing a black coat with grey fake-fur trimming, a black skirt, black shoes, and her grey hair is loose. Her hair is wet from the snow. She has run all the way here. She is freezing. I can see her legs shivering inside her tights. Some snowflakes have survived the walk through the airport to the bistro and are glistening on Ina's coat. She has put on some make-up, something she never used to do. There's some dark lipstick on her open lips. She looks around for me, her eyes wide open. The snowflakes have melted, drops of water are sitting on the fake fur of her coat and sparkling. Ina stands there with my letter in her hand. The sheets of paper are wet and crumpled and they are quivering because Ina is trembling so much. Ina is wearing black leather gloves, which she slowly takes off. She wipes strands of hair out of her wet grey face and

keeps on looking around for me, scared I might not be there and might not forgive her, hopeful I might be there and forgive her, trembling with the excitement of being about to kiss me, to storm over to me, to drop onto the floor and cry, to grasp my hand and stammer that she now realises that I love her, that she remembers what I said to her, and then she looked inside the piano in the restaurant and found the letter, she has always loved me, always thought of me, can never forget me, and of course she'll come with me to Casablanca. A puddle forms where she is kneeling because her hair is dripping and because she is crying and crying. Her eyes are as heavy as the sky before a storm, her grey eyes are looking at me, begging forgiveness.

"Ina, stand up!" I say and lift her up. Her face is completely white, under her nose there is a black shadow cast by the lights above. She has never looked so beautiful, "Ina, I love you!" I say. "I know", she says. Then I say: "Ina, I couldn't buy you a meal that night, do we want to eat something before we fly to Casablanca? It's on me."

"Kiss me!" she whispers and opens her grey lips.

I sigh. As always I've imagined everything in black and white. Who knows whether the letter is still inside the piano? Perhaps I should write a new one and put it in the piano. My coffee is finished, I order another.

"She won't be coming today, will she?" asks Antje. I shrug my shoulders.

"Why not?" I ask. "If she wasn't going to come, I wouldn't be here."

I light another cigarette and a plane lands.

"And it would be a shame if you didn't come here again", says Antje to the serviettes and then looks at me. For a moment she looks more than just friendly. She pushes her hair out of her face, and then Hermann walks in. He hasn't made it either. I wait for Ina.

