

Schöffling & Co.

foreign rights

English sample translation

Author Silke Scheuermann
Title RICH GIRLS
Original title REICHE MÄDCHEN
Copyright for
the translation Schöffling & Co.
Translated by Alessandra Bastagli

contact Kathrin Scheel
email Kathrin.Scheel@schoeffling.de
phone +49 69 92 07 87 16
fax +49 69 92 07 87 20
mail Schöffling & Co.
Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH
Foreign Rights
Kaiserstraße 79
60329 Frankfurt am Main
Germany
www www.schoeffling.de

((pp 65 - 82))

IN THE VICINITY OF LIGHTNING

Ever since he had retired, he had started to take an interest in his surroundings—in the unusual in daily life and in the frequent occurrence of truly exceptional things. Whenever he sat in his favorite chair and rustled through the pages of the August issue from three years ago of the magazine “Natural Phenomena and Hallucinations,” he delighted in the clear exposition on ball lightning by the New Zealanders Dinis and Abraham. The article was replete with charts and photographs and the fact that every single aspect of their theory concurred with his own observations made him happy. The observations were as follows: a yellow-orange or bluish light with a radius between five and thirty centimeters and with a lifespan of only a couple of seconds. And they actually did bounce around like volleyballs before extinguishing. The one thing he could not confirm was that at times they entered buildings—but he didn’t mind, after all, that could easily cause damage. They were a sort of by-product of normal lightning, forked lightning, which meant that they were likewise made of silicon.

Both specimen he had seen had hurtled past him at a certain distance: once as he was walking home from a class reunion and a storm surprised him in the middle of a field, another time as he had just picked up his new glasses from the optician and was cycling home over a small meadow. They had been beautiful. Today, as he ran his thick grey index finger down the chart on the glossy paper he saw them both again—round, glistening balls of fire; violent like inspired thoughts, unstoppable like emotions.

He practically knew the sentences and data off by heart and yet he went over them time and again. It bothered him that, in the kitchen next door, Sofie was making such a racket. She was using her favorite kitchen appliance; the mixer. The abrasive noise got on his nerves. Since he was in the process of getting mad at her anyway, he immediately recalled the previous evening when, for the umpteenth time, he had tried in vain to talk about his pioneering thesis—namely that in every storm at least one ball lightning shows up. And at the beginning of the storm too; usually as a part of the overture and not during the closing chords. Which was why they went unnoticed by the researchers who had dismissed the storm as an acoustic phenomenon and didn’t

understand why they should start over with established measurements without good cause. Even the American organization “Friends of Unexplained Phenomena” had responded to his proposition with a small, pre-printed brochure that clearly conveyed the fossilized mentality of the young researchers of the time. And that’s exactly why Carl was so annoyed—it would have been nice if at least his own wife would support him. But the previous evening, when he had tried to pick up this conversation anew, Sofie had preferred to turn to her thriller and had blown him off with the remark: “Ball lightning doesn’t exist.”

“Oh yes it does, it’s just that not anybody can see it,” he had replied, with despairing emphasis on the word “anybody.” He had acted proud, but was secretly disappointed, once again, in relation to this subject.

Apparently, as soon as he sat down, more than one of his limbs had used the opportunity to fall asleep instantly. Carl stood up, rolled his joints about and swung his left leg forward until the uncomfortable feeling of numbness gave way to an even more uncomfortable tingling and then every feeling faded away, which was what he would define as the normal feeling. The fact that individual body parts fell asleep did not depress him as much as the underlying implication that he didn’t have them under control anymore. Evidently his limbs were even more tired than he was, than his spirit, his intellect, than the synapses in his head; they had this urge to abandon him, un-cooperative, shy. But perhaps they couldn’t be any different; perhaps it was his own fault because, while he thought, he consumed so much energy for the nooks and crannies in his head that it did not suffice for his entire body. To distract himself—after all, the thought of sleep was not too distant from the thought of death—he walked over to the window. The view made him happy. It was so nice to live in a house that—though it was painted a yellowish color, was flat as a cheesecake and all in all was not very imposing—lay at the top of a hill and had an excellent view over the big, at times cream-colored, at times shimmering blue or, rarely (usually on Tuesdays) greenish sky over the town. Even if there was nothing going on up there today—no little cloud drifted by, no ray of sun arched in the sky and the giant expanse of cobalt blue remained empty—it only increased his excitement at the prospect of the storm that was predicted for the following evening.

Just as he was testing the comfort of his observation post—the angle of the chair in respect to the window, the focus on his binoculars, the height of the camera on the tripod he had built, the accessibility of the note pad and so on, the doorbell rang. He was almost glad of the interruption as it confirmed how wise he had been to start setting things up a day in advance, so that now he could perfectly well take a break and go up to the living room door to eavesdrop on what was going on in the hallway. He didn’t recognize the voice at first.

“You want what?” Sofie asked.

“I’m having a party at my place tomorrow night and would like to pay for a night at a hotel for the two of you, down at the Goldener Adler, a beautiful hotel, I’m sure you’ve heard of it.”

Aha, Carl thought, evidently it was the fun-loving young woman who lived in the converted loft above their apartment. In spite of the beautiful view from the windows, the house had the major disadvantage that it didn’t belong to them alone. People were constantly coming and going from their young neighbor’s place upstairs. He could even recognize the steps of her diverse but regular visitors, there was the one who galloped, the one who trampled, the one who waltzed . . . Carl had always meant to tell their fun-loving neighbor, who was presumably a student, to open a bar—preferably somewhere else.

“It’s likely to get pretty loud, and this way you could get some sleep . . . and it would also be a fun outing . . .”

“Hmm,” Sofie sounded far too interested. He pressed his ear against the cold wood door and was certain that his wife’s answer would not be to his liking.

“It’s rather short notice, but it sounds like a good idea. Ok then. But my husband, I need to ask my husband first.”

Though he should have expected it, he winced as she then called out a shrill “Caa-haa-harrl!” He counted to ten, then opened the door to listen, with the greatest possible composure, to the young woman’s idea that he already knew full well. In the meantime, thoughts churned in his head, but it didn’t help, he would simply have to decline firmly. It was hopeless to try to explain what exactly the appeal was of observing storms—how incredibly beautiful it was to see ball-lightning, something so special, a little like sex; both comforting and sinister because it makes you feel like you’re on the verge of something incomprehensible, but at the same time you are becoming aware of what exists. No, even if the following evening a herd of elephants were to charge overhead he would just pull the blanket over his head and be at peace. Anyway, he couldn’t yet think beyond that moment, beyond the storm. He put his hands in the pockets of his cardigan, made an impenetrable face, and only after a proper pause indicating captivated attention, he said: “Move out? Tomorrow night? Oh no, thanks. Noise doesn’t bother us. Party on, we’re staying here.”

Just as he registered, to his great satisfaction, that the visitor looked, yes, sad, but that the party animal didn’t dare contradict him, that she now looked to the floor at the tips of her shoes that, soon enough, would be pointing in the other direction as she turned around to leave—he noticed that his wife was giving him a stern, a very stern look.

The hotel was actually quite lovely. It was an old, half-timbered house with a gilded ornate sign out front, small bulls-eye windows below and above, thank goodness, large clear panes. It had a revolving door and a vast carpet surrounded by a border of green plants. As soon as they walked in, the concierge rushed over to hand them a heavy key with a gold number tag. It was the kind of place that, once you had settled in, was hard to leave.

A small bellboy carried Sofie's bag and a larger bellboy carried his suitcase with the observation gear to room number three hundred and eight. While the young man was still demonstrating how the lights work and how the door could be secured with a safety chain, Carl stood at the window looking out; the only thing that interested him was the view. In the negotiations with his wife, during which, step by step, he had abandoned his position, he had asked her to call the hotel and ask for the room with the best view. When it came to communicating she was better than he was, and in case of disaster he had all the right in the world to complain. Yet there was really no reason to complain. Besides, she had just started whistling happily as she unpacked, and he didn't want to put her in a bad mood, after all, this was a good premise for a pleasant evening together. The view was, yes, mediocre, considering the significance of the observations he intended to make, but nonetheless it was better than he had feared. There wasn't a window as large as the one at home, but one could see farther, all the way behind the church and over the little woods. At the moment however, it was Friday evening at about half past seven, he was distracted by the swarm of people in the pedestrian zone below. They pushed and shoved as they jostled and overtook each other and were so numerous that Carl had the impression they were multiplying themselves as he watched. They had this incredible rhythm that made him want to stop the image like a tired movie director, pull out single individuals and talk to them, ask them what they were looking for. Suddenly, in the midst of this philosophical train of thought, his wife blurted out: "Tell me Charlie, what are you doing staring out the window for so long? Do you want to throw yourself out?"

He was about to turn around to face her when he noticed his smile reflected in an impudent mirror on the closet. It was the grimace of a somehow comical, shriveled old man who wore dark gray corduroys that were baggy around the knees and a smoke gray sweater. Carl stared at him. Both the corduroys and the sweater were articles of clothing he had treasured for years, and he had expected that they would likewise show him respect, but now they showed him quite clearly that this was not the case. The fabric didn't fall from his chest and pelvis with discreet elegance, but oriented itself horizontally. Was there something wrong with his body shape? He felt himself, but no, he was as thin as always, no protuberances, nothing of the kind, everything was in order. What a stupid idea to hang a full-length mirror in a hotel

room. Without that thing on the door the closet would probably have been quite beautiful. Sighing, he came to the conclusion that he had been in his best shape in the years when this furniture was still in the form of young trees in the Scandinavian woods.

“Come away from the mirror,” Sofie said. He already knew she could read his mind.

“Coming.”

She lay stretched out on the bed. She had draped herself over it, which didn't surprise him in the least. She had always enjoyed competing with the things that preoccupied him—and she often won. Once again he was tempted by her, because she looked particularly beautiful that day. She wore a white blouse under a pink cardigan and the top two buttons were open. He could see her smooth white skin, a sight that reminded him that at the age of fifty-five an abnormal change had come over her. Dreamily, he contemplated her décolletage, the white stretch of skin, which was smooth in an unsettling, mysterious way; as if someone had ironed a sheet thoroughly, precisely, like bed linens are hardly ever ironed anymore—not even at a good hotel like this one. At first he had thought, she simply aged well, then he had noticed that she did not age at all. Her face was a smooth affair, the skin white like frosting; she had no wrinkles. She had a fairylike, moon-lady like aura, something charmingly untouchable, and this in spite of the fact that he had already touched her thousands of times. Carl watched her mouth move. It was pink now, not red anymore. All her body parts had become pastel colored, with purer, paler tones. Even her eyes seemed lighter, shinier. To give these new contents a new form, her face, that had previously been somewhat too round, had become thinner—as if a sculptor had finally freed the expressive oval that lay underneath. Carl had often asked himself if he should talk about Sofie's non-aging to his old friend, Professor Tuck. He could have her skin cream analyzed, for instance, and naturally she herself. That would probably be enough to begin with. If he and Tuck met for dinner and he brought her along—after all, she liked going out for dinner, always and anywhere—Tuck could come up with some excuse to examine her closely. But probably nothing more would come of this analysis than the psychosomatic explanation that was already clear to Carl—he had figured it out by himself. In his opinion, it was the almost perfect, calm, loving living conditions in which he lived with her, in which he had made her happy for years, that had preserved her so well. He had met her during the war. She had had no possessions except for some small, fancy hats, and he had made her the wife of the chief of police, the mother of an exceptional son, and now the grandmother of two splendid grandchildren with gaps between their teeth. He looked searchingly at Sofie.

“What are you looking at? And did you see this duvet? Isn't it pretty?” She waved a piece of fabric in front of his eyes.

This reminded him of how often she said highly uninteresting things. This had ceased to disturb him since he discovered that what content women say is not particularly fascinating—least of all to the man who made them content in the first place. He sat at the edge of the bed, caressed her neck, her breast, her stomach and listened to her. As usual, she found absurd inspiration in anything that in some form or other came from the outside. Whether it was a magazine or a phone call from one of her girlfriends, a made-for-TV movie or, as in this case, the furnishings of the hotel which inspired her, she loudly informed him, to rethink the layout of their apartment. Just like the overexcited theatre decorators his son used to have a preference for years ago, Sofie found endless pleasure in changing things constantly. The curtains would change color, get shortened—she would rearrange entire rooms so that at times he was afraid he'd get lost in his own home and was happy to have at least the toilet and bathtub as points of reference.

“We need a more stylish bedroom,” Sofie babbled, “the new bed linens we have at home are so beautiful but the furniture is almost fifteen years old.” Lost in thought, he contemplated the bed in front of him with Sofie on it. Her body created a wonderful hollow in the soft mass of blankets and bedspread, a hollow that must be soft and warm. “Isn't it fun to be here, isn't this overall a pleasant outing, and besides, it's free. The young folks should go ahead and enjoy themselves, I love it here, we have cable TV and can order in some food, it all goes on the bill, I don't need to cook.” He let her words breeze by—just like the storm with all its rage and commotion, Sofie was a primarily acoustic phenomenon.

“Stop looking out the window all the time, it'll be a while. Is it ok with you if we watch TV now and then order something to eat? Hey, I just asked you something!”

“I'm sorry,” he said, “I didn't quite catch that.”

“You're not thinking about those stupid lightning thingies again?”

“No, no.”

He pulled her to him and knew that soon they would be wrapped around each other in a knot. He loved the mixture of efficiency and playfulness that they exhibited, the combination of expertise and intuition that they had developed in the thirty-five years of their life together—that was definitely a good thing. Every time he felt that Sofie was getting distracted, she would suddenly become concentrated and effective, and as soon as she felt he was following a routine, she proved she could still surprise him with a pause, a flourish, a special flick of the tongue. Which on the other hand, in the next moment, allowed him to feel renewed joy in the trusted, beloved, movement. He forgot his obsession with ball lightning and swapped it for his obsession with Sofie.

“Always before a storm,” she said later, as they sat at the window with an aperitif and peanuts from the mini bar, “always before a storm you are at your best. That, for once, is something I discovered.” She played with the remote control—of course she had to start zapping around exactly in their coziest moments together, inviting at least four blonde presenters, a child with leukemia, a millionaire’s wife and a horde of shaggy protesters into the room. Luckily she got hooked on the third program fairly quickly. “Tatort,” she said with an enthusiasm that seemed peculiar to him considering that it was a regular series. “That is superintendent Brinkmann.” After three minutes, Carl was certain they had already seen this Tatort episode. The construction site in which they found the body was particularly familiar and he immediately suspected the red-haired widow, for no reason really, but he kept quiet, caressed Sofie’s back and said: “But when it starts you’ll turn it off, ok?”

Before the first roll of thunder, the program was over. They waited. Surprisingly, she had insisted that he push the couch against the window, not just the chair. Pleased by her courteous interest in his weather research, with much moaning and groaning, he had managed to move the couch. After a couple of minutes of uninterrupted silence during which his expectations grew, Carl said: “In the old days, people believed that lightning and thunder were the weapons of the gods and a sign of their wrath. Today we know that they are simply natural phenomena.” And Sofie, happily snuggled in his arm remarked: “Beautiful phenomena.”

Nothing moved, but he knew what was going on out there, though it was invisible. Warm, humid air was being wrenched very quickly into the high, cold regions of the mantle of air. After a number of excruciating minutes, finally, he saw gigantic towers of clouds building up, cumulonimbus clouds, storm clouds, often confused with cumulus clouds, which are good weather clouds, not unlike a gigantic, heavenly breed of cauliflower. He nudged Sofie and whispered: “Look.” She kept exceptionally quiet, didn’t utter a word, didn’t even sniff, but looked out with him, at the single rays of light that filtered through the clouds like thin tears. He found the light’s strength awe-inspiring. It reminded him once again that up there an authority sat enthroned: God—imperious, powerful, untiring. Carl repressed the impulse to wave, to wave at the clouds.

Then came the thunder. He saw branched lightning flash. The sky suddenly lit up with streaks. As splendid as it looked, there was nothing but fork lightning, nothing extraordinary, and he was a little disappointed. Besides, it occurred to him for the first time that they looked like varicose veins.

“Now” he said, strained.

But that was all. Water streamed down like an additional wall from the gray nothingness. He heard a car start and, farther away, he saw a red, round light that

presumably, no, fairly certainly, was a headlight. The world outside swam away from under his gaze. He was extremely disappointed. It must have been his lack of concentration; he couldn't explain it otherwise. Or had that round, red light not been a headlight after all but small, very small, ball lightning?

“Over already,” Sofie said carefully. On impulse he responded: “There was one, not very big,” but it didn't sound very credible, not even to himself. Yet exactly for this reason he took it even further and asked her, provokingly and a little resigned, “Did you see it?” and hoped she wouldn't notice that he was on the verge of tears.

But no, she seemed insecure, almost intimidated.

“I don't know, yes, actually, I think so,” Sofie said. He didn't understand her at first but then realized she was answering his question. Claiming nothing less than that this time she had seen something—she had, not he. Unbelievable, could it be that in this case she had had the quicker eyes, the more concentrated gaze? He looked at her. She smiled, agitated, friendly, a little ironic, as if taken by surprise by what had happened. Thoughts rattled in his head. . . what if she suddenly disposed of his skill . . . could it be that there had been an exchange, that the energy had transferred from one body to the other?

Yes, he thought that was quite possible.

“So you saw something,” he was confirming rather than asking, and she looked at him lovingly: “A round, orange-colored thing, right, exactly, that's what I saw.” Carl considered whether he should mention the possibility of headlights. But it was unlikely that a car would be back there in the woods and had it been a headlight, practical Sofie wouldn't have minced her words. “And?” he asked, “I mean, how did you find it?” And he hugged her so tight that he could hardly hear her answer, mumbled into his shoulder, “Very beautiful.” But he knew that it was more, much more than just very beautiful. It was a miracle. It meant that he was right, that together they were capable of advancing into the unknown, to move the borders of their experiences and perhaps, after a true search, to gain knowledge that was hard to attain. Yes, that's how it must be, what a gift! “And tomorrow you won't claim that you only said that to please me?” he wanted to know, to be sure. She replied “No, I wouldn't. I told you, I like storms.” But as Sofie validated what had happened in increasingly profuse terms and he hugged her close, a new theory took shape in his head. This one dealt with the fact that skill can transfer from one person to another. On condition that between the two people there is a love so enormous that the invisible becomes visible and the inaudible becomes audible, a love that now led Sofie to ask impatiently: “Can we order something to eat now?” and make a face as if she had won on all fronts. He ignored her, because he was happy.

The whole world was a lampshade, and he was the light.

For further information on international rights for this title please contact Kathrin Scheel at kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de

This excerpt is presented for informational purposes only – any use or copying for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited.