

# *Schöffling & Co.*

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### *Other People*

It was always the same. The express trains were drafty. They kept them too cold, and no matter how warm the jacket, it didn't help. Mareike knew this stretch, she could recite the stations in order. Yet once again she had forgotten to pack a scarf, an undershirt, thick socks. The landscape, arid and unremarkable, flew by, the weather report had forecast 86 degrees. And she was sitting here freezing.

It was her boss's fault. It was the new branch office in the north's fault. It was Mareike's fear of flying.

It was only just before eight. She sat with her back to the direction they were traveling in, had chosen a seat at one of the tables and put her bag on the chair next to her. Diagonally across from her sat a woman with huge headphones over her ears, a little older than she, maybe early thirties. The woman had her eyes closed and was leaning her head against the glass. In front of her was an open laptop, with a few books next to it and sheets of paper with notes, pens. A baguette sandwich in transparent wrap.

Mareike leaned over to rummage around in her bag and glanced under the table. The woman was wearing black cowboy boots, an eagle stitched into the bootleg. Welt-sewn leather soles, small, size six, six-and-a-half, tops. She bumped her head on the tabletop, the train lurched, the woman opened her eyes and looked outside. They slowed down, to each side there were ramshackle houses, the windows wide open, and underwear drying in the wind, sandboxes in the yards filled with grayish sand and bright plastic molds. The few renovated buildings appeared to be uninhabited. The train would stop soon, but Mareike still had two-and-a-half hours to go. She was bored. If they had at least reached the big railway bridge she could have begun to gather up her things. She could go to the bathroom one last time, comb her hair, reapply her lipstick as she was accustomed to doing.

There were 10 men, or 11. The train was totally booked. Car number seven was the only one on this stretch for which you couldn't make reservations. Ever since she discovered this, Mareike always got on at this car.

There were 10 men, or 11, who now were stashing away their suitcases and bags, setting up bottles and cans on the tables. A ghetto blaster was turned on. The men shouted, hello, hello! and slapped each other on the back. Let's stay here, they called, everything else is taken. Hey Fritz, Manfred, Udo, you wusses, can't you manage with the bags? Mareike leaned forward in order to see their shoes, she asked herself if the group of them were going on holiday. None of them was wearing hiking boots, but there was a pair of Budapesters, and gym shoes, Derbys, laced Ghillie brogues. The feet in the Budapesters pushed the ghetto blaster under the table. Mareike searched her bag for a magazine. The music was turned up louder, a man with an oily voice sang a refrain, in the background electric guitars, rattles and drums, loud cheers.

It was her boss's fault, her name was Balder. She had run the company for 20 years -- shoes in extra small and extra large sizes. They carried women's sizes 1 to 5 and 10 to 15 and men's sizes 4½ to 7 and 16 to 21. Her boss was always trying to get the manufacturers of famous brands to customize their sizes for her. Before Mareike started at Baldur she had worked in a normal shoe store. She herself wore an 8½ and had had to get used to the feet of her new customers. There really were women who wore a size 14. Many of them weren't even that big, and then it seemed as if their feet had simply been stuck onto them. Mareike quickly learned which styles worked well in the small sizes and which in the large. A shoe with lots of stitching and colorful seams appeared ridiculously ornate in a size 3, but looked good in the larger sizes and could even make the foot look smaller.

The conductor took her ticket. He wore his hair very short on the sides, a little longer on top, and had hands like a woman. Three studs in his right ear and gold rings on the middle finger of each hand. Mareike looked down, black patent-leather shoes. The conductor was small, a least half a head shorter than she, he had buttoned up his jacket all the way to the top. The men at the next table pocketed their tickets again,

one of them handed around fresh cans of beer. The music was turned up so loud that Mareike barely heard the hiss of the cans opening, only the toasts, the shouts. She read an article on decoding the brain, the woman across from her snapped her laptop shut.

She really did have to change the ring tone on her cell, it was still the same as it was when she bought it. Mareike punched the wrong key by mistake and the ringing stopped. A missed call -- Helma. Helma was her best friend, if one could call it that. They had been friends since grammar school, when such a thing as best friends still existed. Mareike called her back, the reception was terrible, everything sounded like it was coming through a wall of water. What, she said, what? Someone had told Helma that her feet smelled, someone at work, and now she needed advice, she didn't want to just let it go by. Mareike, she shouted, what should I do? Cotton socks, leather shoes, put the shoes out on the balcony for a whole day or stuff them with newspaper. Powder could help, Mareike said, and take a footbath every day for fifteen minutes in very warm water, and put a little tea tree oil in. What, Helma shouted, what? Then the connection failed.

When the woman in the cowboy boots stood up and put her headphones on the table, Mareike took her finger from the line she was reading. The woman didn't look at her, and using the back of the seat for support pushed her way up and out into the aisle. Then she leaned down to the man wearing the Budapesters, apologizing. Could you please, she asked, turn the music down? The men laughed, the one with the Budapesters turned a knob on the ghetto blaster. Is that alright, the woman asked. He said, Already taken care of. Unbelievable, one of them shouted, you can't even have any fun anymore. The woman bent down so low it looked as if she wanted to whisper something to the man in the Budapesters. No, she said, I just mean, could you turn it down a little? Then we won't hear anything at all, another man yelled. They all laughed again. I just don't like the music, the woman said, so thank you. The man in the Budapesters shrugged and the woman pushed her way back to her seat, opened her laptop and began to type. Mareike looked at her, she wore her part far to the right so

that her hair, long and tied in the back, covered half of her forehead. A small button nose, a small round chin. Their eyes still hadn't met.

The new branch office was barely making a profit, on top of which several customers had called the head office with complaints. The boss had flown out there to discover unpacked cartons piled up in the warehouse and the store almost empty. She had fired the head of the branch and had yet to find a replacement. Mareike, she had said, you're my best employee, the only one who can save us from this chaos. Since then Mareike traveled back and forth twice a week. All the way across country, at least that's how it seemed to her.

The magazine she was reading had an article on brain twisters for gifted students. A customer pays for a 50 Euro pair of shoes with a 100 Euro bill. The salesclerk can't make change, so she goes next door to the baker, who gives her two 50s for the 100. She gives the customer one of them and his shoes and puts the other 50 in the cash drawer. The customer has just disappeared when the baker rushes in. The 100 Euro bill is counterfeit, the baker demands another 100 Euro bill, which she gives him. What is the loss to the shoe store? Mareike found the answer so easy that she was sure she'd read something wrong. She looked in the back of the magazine for the answers, but didn't find them, not even when she checked the table of contents.

The men got louder, they drank one beer after the other. Hey, the one in gym shoes at the adjacent table called out to another man across the aisle, hey Fritz, Manfred, Udo, turn the music up. He actually pronounced it m-you-sic, like the English. Naah, said the bald-headed guy with the red neck sitting next to him, whom Mareike couldn't see very well. Naah, that will disturb the young lady! He looked over and grinned. Well, right, the other one called, she's disturbed already, what I'd like to know is what's wrong with a little music. Mareike turned the page of her magazine and had to begin the next paragraph three times. The woman with the laptop suddenly closed her eyes, the corners of her mouth twitched slightly. The man raised his voice and said in a falsetto: I don't like the music, I need my beauty rest! Mareike quickly put her index finger between the pages before turning to the men. This is a

public train, one can ask for a bit of quiet. If you want to listen to music, go find a compartment and anyway, she said quietly, the noise is bothering others as well. She felt herself turn red, she hadn't intended to get involved. She wanted to go back to her magazine, but the man in the gym shoes leaned over toward her. There you have it, he said, young people, they want to go around with their fingers up their noses, anything but have to deal with their neighbors, why don't you stuff some socks in your ears, hey, I'm talking to you! But it's clear what you are, sitting on the aisle and putting your bag on the seat by the window! So that no one can sit next to you, said the man with the gym shoes. Naah, the man with the red neck said, you with your socks, you.

Mareike stared at her magazine. Suddenly she felt hot, the heat made its way from her head down to her pumps. Should she take her bag from the seat in a half-empty car? How unfair that something like this should happen to her of all people. She who would rather stand than see someone else without a seat. And now? She could burst into tears, she wouldn't make herself any more laughable.

Tell that to your friend! she said, her voice cracking and so soft that she was barely audible. But looking over, she saw that she was wrong. The third man at the next table was sitting, like her, on the aisle with an empty seat next to him, but he didn't belong to the group. He wore a gray suit that was a shade lighter than his face, which looked Asian. One leg was crossed over the other and he was jiggling one foot. Braided leather, Mareike thought automatically, square-form caps. The man returned her look and smiled broadly.

You're not going to cause me any trouble now, are you, the conductor said. He slapped the backs of the seats with the palms of his hands and moved off. Mareike could smell his aftershave. At the door of the car he turned around. Do you know the film with the bridge of death, he asked, the one with Sophia Loren? The men fell silent, no one answered, the door opened with a hiss of air.

Her cell was ringing again. Good that I caught you, Helma said, haven't you gotten to the office yet? Not 'til around 10:30, Mareike answered softly. She turned her head to the window, saw a blurry green, some kind of forest – mixed, deciduous, coniferous, what did she know. Helma, she said, it's not a good time. But I need you, Helma yelled in her ear, I can't go back to the office. You can wrap your shoes in a

pouch and put them in the freezer overnight, Mareike said, that will kill the lactobacillus. But then you have to grease the leather really well! What, Helma said, can't you talk louder? Mareike was speaking as softly as possible and faster and faster: There are inserts that smell like cinnamon or coconut. Cedar fights the smell of sweat, and you can put gym shoes in the washing machine. She understood only a few scattered words of Helma's answer: why, what, how. The connection was simply not good enough, she hung up.

The Asian-looking man said that he was Persian. He was smiling as he spoke with his tablemates and Mareike was ashamed of her comment. It's not your fault and not hers, the Persian said with a light accent, it has to do with a basic societal problem! In Germany, he said, there is a culture of not interfering. A child born in his homeland – exactly, the man with the gym shoes interrupted, that's what I meant! The Persian shook his head gently and said: You haven't quite understood what I'm saying. He started from the beginning, his hands on the table, relaxed, one on top of the other. It has to do with the way you're brought up, he said, you Germans can't do otherwise. The bald man rubbed his red neck, the Persian took a deep breath and sounded more and more like he was holding a lecture. Culture of shame, culture of guilt. The letters in the magazine danced before Mareike's eyes, she again read the same paragraph three times. The man in the gym shoes was listening to the Persian and murmuring, yes, well, I can believe that. So, he finally said to the bald man, we're out of beer, let's go. He told the others they'd be in the dining car and added in a low voice: Just don't turn up the music, so that the young lady won't feel disturbed! The Persian smiled at the laughter. Mareike stood up and headed in the opposite direction, suddenly she really needed to go to the bathroom.

They were out of paper towels. There were no paper towels. She shook the water from her hands, drops spattered on the mirror and on her skirt. Then she heard an announcement and unlocked the door. The woman in the cowboy boots was standing in the corridor, she finally looked at Mareike as she leaned her suitcase against the wall. I get out here, she said. The train approached the station, slowing down. One set of tracks running next to another. Mareike swallowed, her mouth was

dry. She wanted to say good-bye to the woman, but remembered her wet hands and held them up in apology. The woman looked around. Suddenly she went over to Mareike and put her arms around her. They stood there cheek to cheek, the suitcase tipped over onto the carpet, Mareike was holding her arms in the air, right and left, the woman's arms were pressed against her ribs. The announcement stopped, the train gave a jolt and the back of Mareike's head brushed against the door to the toilet. Thank you for your help, the woman said and picked up her suitcase. The train door opened, a torrent of hot air rushed in, the woman didn't turn around. Her boots looked very expensive.

The conductor stopped Mareike. You neither, he said, you don't know the Sophia Loren film? There's a train, and in the train there's someone with the plague, an epidemic breaks out and only Sophia Loren and her ex-husband, a doctor, know what's going on! Mareike wanted to slip by him, but he grabbed her sleeve. I thought, she said softly, that it was about a bridge. Yes, he said, they're supposed to travel over a bridge that's in danger of collapsing. She leaned back, the conductor did the same, but the people getting onto the train could barely squeeze by them. The trolley wheel of a suitcase got hung up on the tip of Mareike's shoe, a man said, good thing you're not standing in the way. But why, Mareike asked, why should they travel over this bridge? The conductor pushed off from the wall and offered to help an elderly woman with her baggage. Why indeed, he called to Mareike over his shoulder. Think about it! In addition to her suitcase the woman was also carrying a basket with a handle.

Once she had sat down again and opened her magazine, she pulled her suit jacket closer around her hips, but there was a wide gap between her skirt and blouse in the back. Mareike was freezing and when she reached around and touched her skin there, it was damp and cold. On top of which she had the feeling she was getting a sore throat, but that was probably due to the dry air. The ghetto blaster had been turned off.

The conductor followed behind the woman so closely that he was practically touching her. He was carrying her suitcase, then lifted it up to the luggage rack and said, it can happen that a reservation falls through the cracks, so then you just choose



a seat here. The woman nodded and looked around her. The man with the gym shoes and the bald man were still in the dining car. Is this seat free, the woman asked the Persian. Mareike quickly removed her bag. Not over there, she said, but here. Both of the seats across the table unfortunately are taken, the Persian said, but if you'd like, you can sit here by me. As he stretched out his hand Mareike saw that his forearms were covered in hair. Perhaps she had spoken too softly, the woman shoved her basket across his table and said, That's nice of you. Mareike turned red, though no one was looking, and put her bag back on the seat.

The two immediately started talking. Are you from Turkey, the woman asked. She was maybe 70, short and too small for her voice; she was wearing a pair of beige Ballerinas. Marieke thought heels wouldn't suit her. The beige tone of her knit cardigan matched that of her shoes. The Persian was telling her where he was from. I've never traveled next to a Persian, the woman said. She asked, what do you do in Germany, where are you going, how often do you see your family, isn't it too cold for you here, are you a doctor? The Persian answered her. He missed his wife and children, but the work paid well and he went home twice a year, not everyone had this kind of opportunity. He said, why do you think I'm a doctor? The woman stroked his forearm, touched his cufflink. I don't know, she said, you seem so relaxed, and it would be reassuring to have a doctor on the train.

Mareike read an article that said animals enjoy a much richer emotional life than previously imagined. She shoved her hands under her thighs to warm them up.

Any new passengers?

The conductor touched her shoulder and she looked up at him. He had a scar on his left eyebrow where no hair grew. Have you figured it out, he asked. Yes, she said. He laughed and moved down the aisle a bit. It's just, he said, that I want you to see the film.

She read a paragraph about ravens in the Welsh Mountains who lie on their backs and slide down the snow-covered slopes over and over again, just for the pure joy of it. A mother elephant refused to abandon her calf, even though it was born with deformed legs. One hot afternoon she wore herself out getting it to a waterhole. In an experiment, rhesus monkeys refused to eat because pulling the chain for food caused

other monkeys to receive an electric shock. And in a zoo in Illinois, when a little boy fell into the gorilla enclosure one of the female gorillas protected the three-year-old and carried him carefully to a door, while her own baby clung to the hair on her back.

Mareike fell asleep, but soon awoke. Her head had dropped to her shoulder and her neck hurt.

Finally they were nearing the bridge – riveted steel, impressive construction. It was built high over the canal, with miles-long ramps on both sides. Mareike stood up. She'd go to the bathroom one last time, comb her hair, reapply her lipstick. She pushed the magazine into her bag and put the strap over her right shoulder. She traveled this stretch so often that she didn't even need to look out the window. The long curve of the tracks. She knew that one had the best view of the bridge from the other bank. But that was still a few minutes away.

But as she made her way from one car to the next she did look down, through the window in one of the doors, the ramp fell away sharply, houses and trees, like a model train landscape. They were still a long way from the water, but that section of the track was already invisible, as if they were moving straight through the air. As if the girders had collapsed, but no one had realized it.

She used the other toilet this time, but it didn't have paper towels either. When Mareike returned to the corridor the man in the gym shoes was blocking her way. So, he said, it's you, stand still for a minute! He was drunk. I know what you need, he said, coming closer, but you shouldn't take it out on other people. Mareike drew back, the man had large pores and an uncommonly thin nose. He said, it's been too long since she's had any, right? He grabbed for her and she turned away. At that moment the train lurched violently, brakes screeched on the rails. Mareike lost her balance, the man fell against her, they toppled over, another jolt, then the train came to a standstill. Her hip hurt and she had scraped her right elbow. She tried to disentangle herself, but the man lay on her with his full weight. An old piece of chewing gum had left a dark fleck on the floor next to her shoulder. Naah, she heard the bald man's voice say, what was that? She turned her head, the bald guy carefully put one foot in front of the other, reached down and helped his friend to his feet. The man with the gym shoes

staggered, then bent down to give Mareike his hand. Come on, then, he said, I didn't mean it that way. Now it was he who was turning red. Naah, the other one said again, what are you two up to?

The door to the car opened, the conductor called: Clear the aisle. Mareike stood up too quickly, she felt dizzy. She sank to her knees, steadied herself against the wall and picked up her bag, her change purse had fallen out and her cell phone. Behind the conductor, on the arm of the Persian, came the woman in the Ballerinas; blood was running down from a cut in her right temple. Don't make a fuss, the woman said, it doesn't hurt at all. The Persian smiled at Mareike. He said to the woman: You should know that I'm not a doctor, I work for Siemens. Mareike looked outside, they were still on the bridge, but no longer over the water. What happened, she asked. The conductor shrugged his shoulders. And she thought, films with Sophia Loren always have a happy ending.

The loudspeaker crackled: Due to an injury we are making an unscheduled stop, please do not leave the train! The woman in the Ballerinas and the Persian stopped where they were. Mareike saw the conductor push his jaw forward and raise his chin, as if he were swallowing something. It occurred to her that she couldn't locate his Adam's apple. What does that mean, she asked herself.

When her cell suddenly rang she looked at the display screen, stood there with the phone in her right hand until the woman in the Ballerinas said, answer it, would you. She nodded and pressed the button with the green receiver. Helma, she said, even as she was drawing in air, leave me alone, I can't take this shit. She hung up before Helma could answer and the woman in the Ballerinas said: That's all we need. Do we need that, the conductor asked softly.

The door opened with a hiss. Hey, the man in the gym shoes yelled, Fritz, Manfred, Udo, someone threw himself in front of the train! Their laughter sounded uncertain. The conductor took the woman in the Ballerinas by both shoulders and said, now we'll look after you. She shook her head slowly. Why, she asked Mareike, are you young people always in such a hurry to do away with yourselves? The Persian smiled and Mareike thought that she would like to lean up against him. She looked down at his shoes and thought, no brown after six, but six was a long way off. I don't know, she said finally. The cut was no longer bleeding, the trickle was almost dry.

Mareike wished she were in a situation where it was clear what it was she had to do. I don't know, she said aloud, we do away with ourselves, but the next day it's all been forgotten.

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