

Schöffling & Co.

foreign rights

author Svenja Leiber

title Schipino

original title Schipino

© 2010 by Schöffling & Co.

English sample translation

translated by Geoffrey Mulligan

copyright for
the translation Geoffrey Mulligan

contact Schöffling & Co.
Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH
Foreign Rights
Kaiserstraße 79
60329 Frankfurt am Main
Germany

www.schoeffling.de

Schipino is in the back of beyond. So far back it can scarcely be recognised. It lies on a hill encircled by swamps, streams and lakes. Four Dachas, mist rising to the black roofing felt at dawn and dusk, the windows decorated with colourful borders, the front doors protected by porches full of boots, firewood and empty bottles.

It's a place you might drift to, bring along someone or other, stay all of July or August, go fishing or picking berries and ponder the fate of Russia.

They have been coming here for years. Some have stayed for years. What is a year? Maybe an eightieth of the whole shooting match. Or round here maybe somewhat more than an eightieth, so what? They fell trees, cut their toe nails, milk cows, cut trails, chew on coriander and cling to the place. Life here is like a pause, without beginning or end. And what holds everything together is waiting: for visitors, for summer, for the post.

Chapter 14

(pp 104-119)

At the end of June it is Anna's birthday. Twenty-eight. Thanks to Pawel the day is wild. He roars round Schipino urging everyone to cook, to pluck, to make toasts and offer gifts.

He himself bakes a special cake of biscuit dough and condensed milk, which he cooks in the can. He strews the brown sludge with marigolds. In his shirt pocket is a small bottle of vodka and he drinks with everyone he meets: "Here's to Anna!" Tolik too hands out some fermented substance and stands at the piano singing: "It's a-a-a-all going to be just fine!"

And it is fine. A goodly day. A worldly goods day. One for drinking and toasting. In Schipino they outdo each other in the extravagance of their wishes for Anna, and in return she gives each of them a piece of her cake. A butterfly, barefoot, colourful and with birthday sorrow in her eyes.

So it goes, Riba thinks, and the cake, the good wishes and the vodka grow into July, then it's his turn.

I am afraid of that day, he thinks. I am always afraid of it. I know how I will wake up that morning, how I would rather lie in bed because no one is there to help me get up. I always opened the letters in such a panic, always hoping something really important...

Darja makes pear tarts for him. Sweet, heavy dried pears that she has soaked overnight.

In the morning he goes fishing with Viktor.

Viktor says nothing, but gives him every fish he pulls out of the lake. He could give him everything, he says, everything.

Riba does not respond. Not one wish has come his way, but he does have this pear tart and those fish. He looks out over the still water and observes wild geese plunging their heads in by turn, so that their bodies float on the surface like thick lumps of wood. A chill wind drives them from the lake.

And, that afternoon, when the time comes to wish him well, Riba can barely listen, even though they are yelling things at him that would be enough for anyone.

They are all seated round a table on the cookhouse veranda pondering the requisites for a happy life. Like colourful birds when their cage is uncovered, they twitter all at once. Riba feels they make him happy. They form a circle. And he works his way round it, with a large cake tin on which his cake is getting ever smaller.

Ivan, may you have! May you have ...a full pocket and an empty one, a falcon at your nape, a bicycle, a peaceful death, a woman with a gold tooth, one shady and one bright room, a wise friend, a good jacket, a trim arse, complete control over your own life, a leafy birch tree in front of your house...

And then Lilja is there.

On most birthdays she didn't turn up for the cake. Just brought along some small object, a picture, a book, never paused to accept thanks. Only once did he hear her express a birthday wish, for Tolik. She leaned in the doorway, looking askance, and as Tolik stood there smoking she looked out in to the garden and said simply: "Be Tolik" And then she left with no cake.

She must have just come on to the veranda. She stands before Riba in a faded pullover, the dog's lead tight around her stomach, her long hair woven into plaits, and says nothing. There is an awkward silence, the whole veranda an ear. Riba is about to hand her a piece of cake, never mind the birthday wish, when she fumes, nods towards Viktor, and snaps:

"Tell him he should stay till Mascha comes."

That's all. And she goes.

At the window, a fly caught in a spider's web buzzes itself to exhaustion. Riba watches Lilja leaving and forgets to offer her a piece of cake. He stares at the door for so long that his vision begins to blur. He wonders frantically if he should be asking a few questions. No one in Schipino has ever mentioned the name Mascha. Riba forces himself to look at each of them in turn. They seem put out. Darja, whose turn it is to convey her good wishes, puts a fist to her mouth and wanders off, and a pale Vasily follows. The others quickly eat their cake and vanish after mouthing overelaborate blandishments. Only Viktor remains. He takes another piece and shrugs. He chews for a while.

"You have ears to hear", he says finally.

Riba looks at him, baffled. For the first time he felt truly at ease here, and now they walk out on him.

"Who is that?"

“Who...? I can’t say. Mascha was Schipino’s beginning and then its end, at least that’s what they think round here. They are deadbeats, absolute deadbeats. And although there is no sadness in Viktor’s voice, it sounds as if he needs consoling. But Riba can’t do it. Perhaps because he too could use some consolation. He grabs Viktor by the back of the neck and looks right into his eyes... and his skin, his features... The horse runs through the fence, water through the leak. And the table and the bench and the sense of falling is barely noticeable among all these bodies. But the moan that Viktor utters as he stumbles from the veranda is engraved on Riba’s mind. A bray that settles over these fields like the howling of the wind.

Riba wanders aimlessly through the carrot bed. He is up to his hips in weeds. He is now thirty-nine years old, in a place without radio contact, and he has jeopardised the pact with his only friend here, and still he has burned the basil leaf. He sits down on the wooden steps to Lilja’s hut. In the cool evening air the wind chime that someone once hung in the rowan tree at the edge of the garden jangles. Riba stands up again, walks the few steps to the hen house. Rough planks, driven into the ground. At the entrance, the rooster sits blinking. Riba goes up to stroke the colourful feather dress. He approaches slowly, as if he were up to his knees in Schipino’s soil. And the creature too moves laboriously away and flaps clumsily to one side.

The evening, silence descends, then hammering, barking, a motor, then nothing.

Inside the hut Lilja turns on the light. Through the window Riba can see her as she sits down at the table and paints. He has watched her doing this once before. She is restless while she paints. She uses the remnants of old paint tins. Cars or comic strips that she tears out of magazines, copies and fills in. Just fragments, never a whole house, never a whole window. As she paints she bends low over the piece of wood or metal she is using. Riba doesn’t know whether she is merely short sighted or whether she is inhaling the paint.

Recently he came up to the table without saying a word. She lifted the picture, placed it facing inward against the wall with the others, and walked off. And Riba stood there saying sorry. Too late, she was gone. Walked past the window, clicking her tongue, and along the path to the forest.

Now she sits hunched over, her plaits jammed between her small breasts and the table. The radio plays a song about a fata morgana and a you. Riba can just about hear it, leans in to the door way and listens.

Without warning someone puts their hands over his eyes from behind.

“What are you doing here? Today is your day”, the skinny girl whispers, and she wraps a cloth around his head and takes him by the arm. “Today you are our guest of honour.” And with that she leads him away from the hen house and from Lilja’s hut and from Schipino, through the damp grass, over tree trunks and soft forest floor, until giggling, she stops him somewhere. Riba winces. He is not given to such games. He can hear some voices, there is a smell of fire and of the fresh green of his arrival almost three months ago. Anna takes the cloth from his eyes. Gradually he can make out the entrance to a broad wooden barn that sits in a clearing among the nettles. Above the barn is a pale moon and stars. Inside the barn is a yellow fire, and around the fire, all of them: Darja with little Nikolitschka, Tolik, Pawel, Vassily, Viktor, Natascha, a woman who is introduced to him as Anja, a few friends from Moscow, and at the back Lilja, who must have slipped past them or ridden, for she is somewhat apart in her riding boots and striped dress, leaning against one of the supporting beams and staring in to the void. They have prepared a place for him, bedecked with greenery, as if he were a hare. Around about it are gifts, plates full with pastries, pancakes, and among them are vodka and plums and pudding. And she seats Riba in the midst of it all, and he has no idea how and what, and whether this is wonderful or embarrassing. And he would like to ask each of them about Mascha, but Pawel is breaking up branches, Anna is handing out the food, Tolik is stirring a pot that hangs over the fire from a piece of rusty iron, at the window Vassily is singing of love, crocodiles and Moscow, and the heavy smell of the forest wafts through the doorway until the songs and the smells and the images topple. Vassily plays faster and faster, Viktor whistles along, high and shrill, until Anna gets up and starts to whirl round, stiff-legged, springing on to her heels. And Riba looks and looks, till she beckons him. No, please not that, please I ... he makes himself as heavy as a sack, leans back in his leafy chair, and the tall man dances in his place, like a propeller, with his arms bent. Vassily hits the strings, tra la la, and Nikolitschka leaps up and joins the two dancers, and it’s over. That’s it. The skinny girl comes to earth. For a moment her dress is filled with air all around her, and Pawel stands still, panting, laughing, leans forward and lays down on his stomach, and then Nikolitschka lies across his back.

Riba clears his throat, he wants to say something, make a speech perhaps, but no words come out and instead he opens the presents. He puts on a smock that Darja has knitted for him, dons a cap with a red wolf logo, and Vassily slips a couple of sweat bands over his wrists. Riba sits amidst all the greenery, dressed up like a sacrificial animal. He unwraps a tin of shaving foam from the tall man, a book of fairy tales from Viktor, who covers him with drunken kisses, a religious statuette from Natascha, who is briefly overcome with tears, and finally a little painting from Lilja. It

depicts a scarcely recognisable dog on a brightly-coloured seat next to an upright pole, maybe in the metro, an animal travelling through Moscow's depths.

Riba stares for some time at the dog's coat.

This is not an image of a dog, he thinks.

"Yes...", says Tolik softly.

"What is this meant to be?" Riba is not looking at him, but at the little painting.

Tolik glances briefly at Lilja. "She probably wouldn't be happy there."

"Where?"

"Moscow", says Tolik, so softly that Riba can barely understand.

"Vassily says you lose the most precious part of you when you take it to the city." Tolik shakes his head, picks up a wooden flute and plays.

Riba is still pondering Tolik's last comment as Lilja pushes herself away from the beam and departs. And Anja follows right away.

Riba catches Vassily's eye, then he leans forward again, feels for a chord, clutches the strings, and sings. He too has shaved his head, and it sways to the sounds like a monk praying, and the vault of his skull is beautiful.

"Maybe Anja can tell you something", says Tolik, before he launches in to a new song. He plays softly, Riba goes softly. His heart is pounding, he feels sorry, but he goes nevertheless.

Once outside he sees the saleswoman running along the edge of the clearing and he makes haste. She is not heading for Schipino, but for the gravel road beyond the trees. Riba catches up with her.

"No doubt you are looking for the same thing as I am", she says quietly.

From the darkness comes the clicking of her tongue. (Tza!) And a husky voice sings "Fa Fa Fata Morgana-a-a-a..." The song that was on the radio. The voice fades. Riba is alone on the path with Anja. In the moonlight he sees her pale smiling face. She is not surprised.

"I wanted to go for a walk with her, but she didn't feel like it. So I am off to the collective farm in Grischkova", she said. "Come with me. I heard what Lilja wished for you today." She is silent for a while, and then: "You will find out nothing in Schipino."

She smiles again and only now does Riba notice how different this face seems to those in Schipino. He nods at her, and they walk side by side for a while.

“Mascha was born in Grischkova.” Anja is speaking very quietly. “In the last wooden house. All that remains of it is a pile of charcoal that refuses to rot. The people of Grischkova don’t clear it away because they suspect that wouldn’t take them any further from hell.” Anja kicks away a stone. Mascha was threading mushrooms with stalks of grass, while her mother was bent over pulling up turnips in the garden, her firm broad back built for leaning forward and standing. And when Mascha picked the last mushroom her mother was already in the wooden house, making tea and cooking turnip soup. Mascha was lying under a tree, gazing upwards and swatting mosquitos, while out of a clear blue sky lightning struck the wooden house. “Anja looks up in to the night sky. “And, did they not run from the house? They tried to, of course, but when the mother, along with the sister and the father, threw themselves at the door, the door jammed, although it had only recently been open and you could have seen out in to the sunny garden. And the windows were locked. And when the mother looked at her hand something like mushrooms emerged from it, and when she looked at Mascha’s sister, she was already standing there in a dress of flames.” Anja falls silent and takes three large steps. “Gas-bot-tle was what they wrote in the papers afterwards. Yet they used to cook on the stove. Everyone knew that. And everyone knew too that Mascha’s father was familiar with the accounts for the collective farm.” She picks up a stick from the path and hits it against her bare leg as she walks. “Did Mascha see anything? Would she have said as much? She must have run back in to the forest. That’s why, at the collective, they only realised much later that the fire hadn’t got all of them. It wasn’t till winter. That’s when Mascha returned and knocked on her grandmother’s door on the fourth floor of the big house. And the grandmother wailed and sobbed for days, out of joy and anger. In fact she had no room for the girl so she crawled in to bed with her, partly out of fear, and her old man had to sleep on the sofa.” Anja throws the stick in to the bushes and they can hear an animal jump. “He didn’t like that, the old boy. And the foreman was also none too pleased with how badly things went, how inefficiently. In the end one had to be efficient. And he pulled on his boots, as he always did when setting off for work.”

In the darkness someone is clicking their tongue. Riba is startled. He thought Lilja was long gone. It seems she is now on a parallel path through the woods.

“It may be”, says Anja, “that the old boy was looking on as the manager caught the girl with the boots behind her back, in the machine shop or at the factory gates. From the fourth floor window he saw her fall on her pale face, saw the manager coming up to her, and her struggling to her feet and trying to run. And the old boy

groaned and downed a bottle, for the pain was unbearable, and he would have realised that, sooner or later, the word would go out that he had beaten his granddaughter to death, for it was well known in what state his wife sometimes crawled round to her neighbour. And then the bottle started to do the thinking for the old boy and everything became scrambled, and maybe the bottle suddenly thought, it would be a shame if the girl were to die such a useless death. And the old boy thought the bottle was right, and he used Mascha a bit too, after all she had such beautiful skin. And he blamed the whole thing on the bottle. May it burn in hell. And it was astonishing how much pain his lust had brought about. And it was astonishing that you sometimes couldn't tell any more whether Mascha was really alive, and then he simply shoved her aside and fell asleep. And Mascha thought of the mushrooms and her mother and the forest floor and her sister and snow. And the old boy's hair, the bottle beneath the sofa, his inflamed fingernail. And the red forest strawberries, and the red old boy, who didn't even wipe himself off. Did the grandmother know that she was playing in the forest when lightning struck? She looked out the window, as if there were something there. But there was nothing. And later on she stroked Mascha and wiped the salt water from the corners of her own eyes and Mascha's in to their hair, and they waited till spring, waited for little blooms to appear, but the edge of the forest was bare, although the seasons were passing. And then the grandmother just died, although she had promised to send Mascha to a school, to press a bag of sweets on her and tie a bow in her hair. She lay down on the bed and whispered something to the girl, and the girl nodded, although what the grandmother said couldn't be understood, and then Mascha was alone with the old boy and asked herself day and night what the grandmother could possibly have said."

Anja paused for a while.

"At that time I too lived in Grischkova", she continues.

"Mascha vanished in May. We all thought they had beaten her to death, but she surfaced in Schipino, just as people were always surfacing in Schipino."

Anja says no more. The way ahead is lit by street lamps screwed to the corners of three concrete blocks, which are overgrown with willow up to the first floor. Grischkova. In the middle lie the remains of a tumble down church. Riba can only distinguish the outline. He has no desire to come any closer. He stands still, until Anja turns round and looks him over. Some way off Riba thinks he can see a shadow on the middle concrete building. But Anja bursts out laughing and makes for the one on the right. The front door is ajar. The threshold is nothing more than the remnants of a grating. Reinforced concrete corroded by real winters. Inside is a dark staircase,

puddles, iron railings, heating pipes and a foul stench. Anja climbs up to the second floor, pushes open the door to a flat, surveys the rooms, comes back out to a fuse box on the staircase, fumbles round briefly in the dark and turns on a bare light bulb in the living room.

“I used to live here”, she says.

There are two rooms and a kitchen. In the back room the wallpaper shows a faded landscape, a pale French park. In the front room is a sofa with broken arm rests and curtains with sagging drawstrings. Against the window are a table and two torn camping chairs.

Anja turns the light bulb off again and lowers herself to the table, which is lit by the cold light from the street lamp outside.

Riba joins her. She offers him a cigarette and says nothing. He hasn't smoked since Moscow. He feels nauseous. Between them a dusty heat rises, the years of stench seeped in to this rotted shell.

Riba tries to unbutton the tight cuffs of his smock, while Anja leans back in her chair and waits.

“Mascha also stayed the winter in Schipino”, she says at last. But Schipino was a completely different place then. They still thought they could heal really wounds in Schipino.

In February a police van came, put Mascha in the back and took her to a home. And the word home is misleading.” Anja stubs out her cigarette. “Tolik got her out of there, but it took just under a year. She said not one word and just shook, as if she were in the back of the police van.

Darja took her in and washed her and put her to bed. He went mushroom picking with her and was astonished that Mascha didn't want to touch the mushrooms. He made clothes for Mascha, both small and large, for all ages. But Mascha refused to put them on. She said nothing and just stared at Darja until she burst out crying from so much misery. And when Darja started crying, Mascha laughed.” Anja nods. Riba can see her face gleaming. He is wreathed in sweat. The summer night is stewing. Outside a door or a window slams, geese honk, dogs bark, and there is silence again, not the calming silence of nature at peace, but a silence that comes after human beings. Riba tries to open the window. Only the upper one can be moved. The smell of giant hogweed wafts poisonously down from the opening. Riba stays leaning over the table, and as he scours the ruins outside he thinks he can hear someone's step on the stairs. Anja stands up, goes next door to the kitchen, returns quietly, and

suddenly he can feel her hand touching his side, passing over the skin on his hip where the smock has moved when he stretched. He gasps in shock.

“You are too afraid, Ivan”, she says softly, and then: “I must go. I can’t tell you any more today. You just have to follow the trail home. It passes above the lake. You can cross by the tree trunks at the river mouth down below. Then you are back in the fields of Schipino.”

And with that she goes. And Riba finds himself surrounded by the strangeness of Grischkova, the forest, the giant hogweed, the empty flat.

Another level, he thinks. Some other...

What happens to a glove that gets turned inside out? What an incomprehensible space, he thinks and stares in to the night. Why do you leave me to piece the whole thing together?

Riba feels his way down the dark, chilly staircase in to the open air. Once outside on the street he feels like running all the way to the lake.

(...)

Chapter 19

(pp 160-163)

November comes. Riba has been running round for twelve days. His movements are ponderous. There is an emptiness which accompanies him, sits with him at table, sleeps in his bed. A gap in which ideas have an aimless life of their own. Riba can picture Vassily’s face, a face that is compacted by soil, gnawed at by the world it is absorbing. The images are stubborn. As if they were trying to say: think on this.

Then Riba starts to put Vassily’s face from his mind. Or Vassily does so himself. Riba still remembers the eyes. But the mouth has already gone. Vassily is vanishing in a whirl. And the hole is closing over, with pink scar tissue like the clouds at the edge of the sky.

There is nothing more. There is nothing more to do, except feed the sad cow, the goats, the horses and the chickens. The potatoes have blight, there is no point in harvesting them. The weather is already too cold for mushrooms. And there are only

questions, but nobody dares to ask them. Viktor alone answers this or that question, handing Riba money and offering him his fur coat one evening.

“You need the fur coat yourself”, says Riba quietly and he goes to kiss Viktor on the cheek. But he cannot decide between right and left, and he lands on Viktor’s lips. And Viktor kisses him back.

And this once they seek tearful comfort in one another.

There is something in this, thinks Riba. There will always be something in this.

And they lie next to each other until it is light. Simply lie there, all skin and warmth, and Viktor decorates Riba’s chest with a biro.

“Some people”, he says, “are only interested in the light before darkness falls. Others see only the darkness beyond the light. Both are supping with the devil in their own way.” Viktor draws a flower. “I am looking for the moment between.”

Riba stares at the pen, which begins to blur, then at a green plastic beaker upon a plastic desk. In front of it is a bowl full of paperclips, a keyboard, a few files: his office. And suddenly he leaps to his feet, runs out of the hut and throws up. Once back inside, his vision is so blurred that he can barely find his bed. Convulsively swallowing, he tries to get rid of the bitter taste in his mouth and eventually he falls asleep in a shivering fit.

When he awakes it is cold and dark in the maple house. He feels himself all over. Something is different. Maybe it is evening. Through the window he can see Lilja’s light is on. He feels his way to the oven, feels his way to the light switch, has a good look around the maple house for the first time. Behind the drawn dividing curtain a wide cupboard is placed diagonally on Darja’s side. There must be a space in there, thinks Riba, or rather he only half thinks, or feels or remembers it.

As a child he loved to crawl in to hollow spaces, preferably when they were so narrow that his body was pressed in from all sides. He felt safe there, and it was a bad moment when he outgrew certain dens or sleeping bags. Just as it was bad not to fit in to certain clothes any more, and to know that he could *never* wear them again. That he would never again be so small, that it was over.

His recurring nightmare is that at some point he will be so enormous that there is barely room for him to stand on earth and he towers up with everything else in to an icy universe. Too big for this world. Too big for consolation.

Now he is in the maple house imagining the space behind the cupboard. He feels like moving it away from the wall and taking a look. But this is Darja's cupboard and Darja's half of the room, so he leaves everything as it is and goes outside.

He can hear the piano. It is out of tune. Riba goes to the cook house, sits for a while at the long table and listens to Tolik. His thoughts turn to Viktor, to his smell. The body and the images swell and fade. The intensity of that meeting cries out for more. Riba puts his hands up in front of his face. His skin is sore all over. The border, that border that craves a blow and then another blow, and another, just so as not to fall apart or explode. This spilling over, the steam hammer of the imagination, the excess of things once woken. And Tolik plays loud and sings along, but this sounds different than in the summer, full of uncertainty and full of rage.

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

For further information on international rights for this title please contact:

Schöffling & Co.
Foreign Rights
Kaiserstrasse 79
60329 Frankfurt am Main
GERMANY

phone: +49 69 92 07 87 16
fax: +49 69 92 07 87 20

www.schoeffling.de/content/foreignrights/news-start.html