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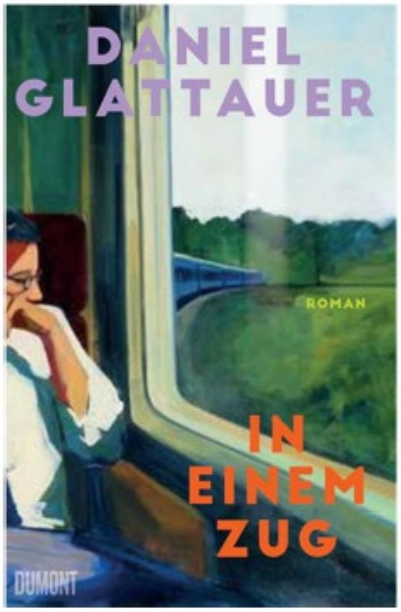

DANIEL GLATTAUER
IN EINEM ZUG / ON THE TRAIN

A Novel, 208 pages
January 2025

English sample translation by Jamie Bulloch
pp. 7-36

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Vienna Hütteldorf

Sitting diagonally opposite is a middle-aged woman. An early-middle-aged woman, in fact. For the time being I can't say anything else about her. I'm not the sort of man who sizes up women sitting diagonally opposite me, certainly not those in middle age, let alone early middle age.

Children, yes – you can stare at them for hours, whether on a train or elsewhere. They don't notice and, if they do, they don't mind because they're used to it. When they watch children, adults in late middle age, like me, often think back blissfully to their own childhood, or to the childhood of their children, if they have them. And if there are grandchildren they try to see themselves in them, especially if they're very proud of the young ones.

Or they're the other type, those adults who give evil looks and gripe at every opportunity. They check out and disapprove of every new, fashionable and degenerate childhood. Often they shake their head and look around for likeminded people who are shaking their head too and thinking exactly the same thing: What's going to become of these children? It never used to be like this in the past. In the past you would've… But of course you can't say such things out loud these days.

Whatever. At any rate, adults, whether they're the former or latter type, happily stare at children without any embarrassment.

Very old people too can be eyed up uninhibitedly during a train journey. Most of them like and appreciate it; finally, someone's taking notice of them again, is what they often feel. But you should give them the occasional nod of encouragement. As if to say: Bravo, well done, you've got really old and you're still putting up a brave fight, if a wobbly one, like here on the train.

A note of caution, however. If you stare for too long at the elderly you run the risk of encountering words. First they come in dribs and drabs, then they rain down upon you and you have to fend them off. And all of a sudden you're hopelessly entangled in a conversation you can never wriggle your way out of. For verbosity increases with age. In the back of your mind you should know where the journey's going. In my case it's Munich. But we're only somewhere between Vienna Hütteldorf and Sankt Pölten. Which means, if things went badly wrong, a good four hours of dealing with some old person's verbosity. With such a prospect in sight, it's advisable not to stare in the first place.

Whatever. Sitting diagonally opposite is an early-middle-aged woman. She's diagonally opposite because she's in a window seat in a group of four and pulled a face the moment I arrived and hinted at the possibility of taking the window seat opposite, within touching distance, eye to eye, kneecap to kneecap.

A brief digression: I hate it when someone sits down at my table. And I hate it when I'm made to sit down at somebody else's table. In a café, for example.

'Excuse me is there a seat free there?'

'Yes, in fact there are two seats free, because I'm going,' is what I'd love to answer in such a situation.

But I do it more elegantly. I reply, 'Yes, of course.'

And to the waiter: 'Could I pay, please?'

Once I was brave and said, 'No, I'm afraid not. Someone else is coming.'

The person I'd shooed away then found a seat at the neighbouring table and, together with me, waited patiently for my acquaintance to arrive. To begin with he sat there with baited breath too; later he couldn't decide whether to see me as a liar or a loser.

I tried my darndest to give a credible performance of the loser variant and kept glancing desperately at my watch and iPhone. The looks he gave me began to radiate the deep melancholy of when someone feels pity for another person. My only option was to get up and go.

'Been stood up, then?' he called out after me.

Back to the Vienna–Munich train. Able to empathise with the early-middle-aged woman's fear of being cornered, I voluntarily sat in the less attractive aisle seat diagonally opposite

her. I did it with such speed and determination that she could assume this was the seat I'd been looking for, had found and was delighted that I'd reserved. I didn't want her to feel that she'd spoiled my spot by the window by being there. I don't wish to shame anyone. And certainly not kick them. This way at least we can both stretch our legs out. Everything is fine.

I soon notice this from the semi-blind spot that is the corner of my left eye: the woman is doing the same thing as me – nothing. Indeed, she's doing three things at the same time: she's not reading, she's not listening and she's not sleeping. No mobile phone, no laptop, no earphones, no book, no women's magazine, no men's magazine, no trade magazine, no antitrade magazine, nothing at all. And her eyes are open and awake. (OK, I did steal one brief glance. She didn't notice, or she pretended not to.) People who do nothing immediately stand out. For we live in an era when, after ten seconds of doing nothing, i.e. without some multimedia entertainment, people normally fall into a hole. And on a train you fall into a hole and lose all train of thought, which is a serious precursor to depression.

The fact is, the woman and I have done absolutely nothing diagonally opposite each other for more than fifteen minutes. This is revolutionary. We're humiliating the entire streaming market with its billions of new images, texts, postings, videos and podcasts that have been put online just for us.

Spontaneously I surmise that she's engaged in the same dying activity as me: thinking. Maybe even contemplating. But then I notice something, yes I positively catch her in the act when my maximum-two-second glance sweeps her. She's doing almost nothing, but she is doing something. She's looking at me.

Early-middle-aged women who look at me definitely don't do it – I'm under no illusions about this – for the one reason that always comes to mind first. In fact I'd go so far as to say

that, ever since I've thought about women, I've never been looked at by one I don't know because she was unable to take her eyes off me, thinking: Wow, amazing, I can't believe what I'm seeing here! From cinema we're well familiar with these looks from women – greedy, I'll call them. But not only from cinema. There are men in real life who get these looks all the time. A few of them are even close friends of mine, although it would be more accurate to say that the looks are now directed at their grown-up sons.

Anyway, nobody's ever looked at me like that, and for about twenty years the chance of it happening has been decreasing by the day. Women's looks aimed at me are of a different character. In winetasters' lingo I'd be classified as 'insipid' and 'flat', although I might get called 'not unbalanced' too. But there's no refreshing, sparkling, exciting quality. There have been better vintages. Those are the looks I get.

Moreover, there are two types of women's looks I've encountered for a long time. The first says to me: 'You're just the right man.' These are women who are looking to foist something on me, a subscription, a lottery card, a rose for five euros or a questionnaire to capture the rest of my missing data.

And if they're not looking to foist something on me, they're trying to get something out of me. A signature to support the protection of animals that are as good as extinct. An agreement to save my soul through the religious back door. A small donation for something charitable, often for my own benefit. Those sorts of things. This is one type of women's looks.

The other is more specific. Here it is actually about me as a person. I'm being targeted, I'm under scrutiny. These are concentrated, focused, studied looks. Then it soon turns verbal and we find ourselves in the middle of 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire', at the 500-euro question.

This is the look I'm getting now. Which is why I know exactly what's going to come from diagonally opposite me in the railway carriage. I'm ready for it, I'm relaxed, indeed I'm even looking forward to it without thinking about the consequences.

'Excuse me, could I ask you a question?' the woman says.

There follows the brief phase where the woman's look assumes features of wonder, even subtle hints of fascination. Sometimes, I immediately reply, 'Yes, it's me,' thereby sparing the other person the tricky job of asking the question and possibly garbling it. For now that I'm able to look at her – indeed it would be a crime to look away – I can see at once that the woman is confident, she'll manage it at the first attempt, she'll do it with the minimum of words. Either she'll say, 'Are you the writer?'

Or she'll opt for the direct route and ask, 'Are you Eduard Brünhofer.'

Or, more forcefully, 'You're Eduard Brünhofer, aren't you?'

Or, combining it with the magic of exclusivity, 'Are you *the* Eduard Brünhofer?'

Let's take the scene a bit further. I'll reply, 'Yes, it's me.' Then I'll wink at her, nod, give a sheepish grin, well not really sheepish, only so that she knows I'm not smug about being Eduard Brünhofer. As if to say, 'I mean, someone has to be Eduard Brünhofer, *the* Eduard Brünhofer. In this instance it's me.'

But I'll feign a little surprise, as if she were the first person to have unveiled the secret of Eduard Brünhofer. I bet she'll love that. Because I'm virtually turning the thing on its head. The fact that I'm Eduard Brünhofer isn't special. What's special is that she has recognised me as Eduard Brünhofer. The achievement is all hers; I'm just an extra. Yes, and then it can proceed in a number of different ways. Her delight at the encounter could prove to be groundbreaking and she'll say, 'It really is you! I've read all of your books.' Followed by:

‘I’m your biggest fan.’ Or at least: ‘I’m a big fan.’ It’s not so rare for that to happen, even now. OK, it’s happened on a number of occasions.

Well, and then there are the different gradations. For example: ‘I find some of your books outstanding. Very good. Good. Really good. Quite good. Not bad at all. (I’d never ask which ones.) Or neutrally: ‘I’ve read quite a lot of your books.’ Quite a lot. Some. Few. Or: ‘I read one of your books only recently.’ (I’d never asked which one as I bet she wouldn’t recall the title.) Or less flatteringly: ‘I had one of your books in my hand only recently.’

Before it slipped from her fingers. Or the worst-case scenario: ‘I’ve always intended to read something of yours. Which book would you recommend?’ That would turn into a backbreaking task for me. No, I’d reply as nicely as possible, ‘You’d be better off asking a bookseller you trust.’

Let’s retreat from this speculation and go back to the early-middle-aged woman on the train who, now that I’m returning her gaze, I could of course describe in greater detail. But I’m not going to do that because this isn’t about appearances. The woman asks, ‘Excuse me, could I ask you a question?’ She asks it such in a way, with such an expression and with such a glint in her eye that I reckon she’s read quite a lot of my work, if not all of it, and that she’s liked it, if not liked it very much.

Feeling completely relaxed, I answer, ‘Yes, of course.’

Now comes the question: ‘Did you use to teach in Hegelgasse?’

Did I use to teach in Hegelgasse? I need a few moments to digest the shock. Did I use to teach in Hegelgasse? No, I didn’t. I’ve never taught. Not even in Hegelgasse. And I certainly didn’t ‘use’ to teach. It’s this that unsettles me the most. Because it means she doesn’t think I’m capable of still teaching, Hegelgasse or no Hegelgasse.

Yes, exactly, he used to teach. Now he's in his well-earned retirement. But because he's feeling stir crazy he jumps on a train and is going to Munich.

'No I didn't.' (Use to teach in Hegelgasse.)

'Oh, I'm sorry,' the woman says. 'I could have sworn you did.'

'I'm afraid not. You must have got me mixed up with someone else.'

'Yes, sorry.'

She turns away. She shakes her head. She's embarrassed. I'm the reason for her shame. I can't leave it at that.

'Who did you think I was?' I say.

'My English teacher. Back then.'

'English teacher?'

I pretend to think about this for a moment. I give her the feeling that it might be theoretically possible at least. That it might not be so far removed from the truth. This mitigates her mistake and lessens my humiliation.

But in the end I stick to my guns.

'No, I've never been an English teacher.'

'I do apologise, but the resemblance is uncanny.'

'I see.' So this is where we're at. I want to park this conversation. It's in a dead end. I'm just looking for the right parking space, but dead ends are generally congested.

'When did you last see him, your teacher?'

'Oh, a long while ago. When I left school.'

Obviously I could ask when that was to find out how old, or young, this woman is. But why?

‘I imagine he looks very different today.’

I’ve no idea why I said that. Perhaps I’m trying to put some distance between him and me. I’ve never wanted to look like an English teacher, certainly not umpteen years later.

‘He was my favourite teacher,’ she says.

I smile. Either that was a consolation prize in the wake of her mistake or a genuine compliment. Let’s say the latter. I remind her of her favourite teacher. Maybe only ten years older than her. A happy-go-lucky guy, a heartthrob, no doubt British by birth, with a dry sense of humour, freckles on his shoulders and red hair.

English teacher, with this soundbite: ‘I love Vienna, it’s so beautiful. And Hegelgasse is charming, it’s the best school in the world, with the loveliest pupils.’ He won everybody’s heart.

‘What’s his name?’

My last question. Totally irrelevant. But a good way to end the conversation.

‘Kowaricek. Heribert Kowaricek,’ she says.

Oh, very British. No, that’s not me.

Sankt Pölten

She hasn't got off. Unfortunately nobody's got on either, who she or I could have offered the seat next to us and who might have provided some welcome distraction. We're sitting diagonally opposite each other, unhindered and undisturbed, continuing to intentionally do nothing, like her, or pretending to be busy with things we don't want to do, like me. At least I don't want to deal with the paperwork for Munich. I have no desire to deal with paperwork in general. I hate paperwork. I hate preparing for meetings. And what I hate most is preparing for meetings involving paperwork.

I'm also unsettled by the woman diagonally opposite me. There's nothing more uncomfortable – yes, of course there are many more uncomfortable things, but they're hard to imagine in a situation like this – than silence after a conversation that has been constructed on the back of a mix-up before collapsing like a house of cards – with a former pupil of an English teacher by the name of Heribert Kowaricek, if you don't know this former pupil and see no point in changing that, but you can't escape from her either and you have no idea when she's getting off. I reckon it's going to be Linz or Salzburg. But both are still a way off.

I'm also surprised. I'm really surprised. I mean, in all honesty, I don't care one bit if my face means anything to anyone or not. Normally I like not being recognised. The chances of this happening are basically pretty good because I've always kept my presence in the media to a minimum. Although I love people, I really do, I love them in writing and adore them in their absence. In the flesh I'd rather they left me in peace, which is why I avoid the public wherever possible.

Here on the train it isn't possible and now this woman is sitting there, diagonally opposite me. I've looked her in the eye. And believe me, she's exactly the type of woman –

the prototype even – who reads my books, who inevitably knows my face from the portrait photographs on the inside covers. And thus it's bordering on the impossible that my face doesn't make her think of anything better, or let's say anything different, than an aged English teacher.

I also think she can read my mind. A few times she's taken a breath, only to restrict herself to a neutral sigh. Now the time has come. Turning to face me, she says, 'You look terribly familiar nonetheless. Sorry again that I'm…'

'No, you're not,' I reply. I hope she meant 'disturbing you'.

'Is it possible that…' Certainly, but I'm going to let her phrase it herself now. Her second chance, so to speak.

'Is it possible that we've met before?'

'Met?' I'm surprised, but I'm keeping an open mind.

'Yes, I've been thinking about it the whole time. The Vienna Opera Ball, perhaps?'

'Sorry, but I don't go to any balls.' I bet she's going to try the Oktoberfest now. People often get closer when they're vomiting than when dancing a waltz. 'Or the Berlin Marathon last spring?'

'I usually give the Berlin Marathon a miss. I prefer wrestling on the Heumarkt in Vienna.' I smirk. She gives a weak smile. I think she's got my point.

In any event I admire not only the way she's juggling between school, dancing and marathons, but also the huge effort she's making to have already met me. Now she launches into a new, almost desperate attempt.

'Please excuse me, I'm not usually like this, but I know you and simply can't work out where to place your face.'

Let's put an end to the drama.

‘In a bookshop, perhaps?’

‘Are you a bookseller?’

‘No.’

‘So?’

‘I write books.’

‘So you’re…’

‘Exactly.’

‘An author?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what, erm if you don’t mind me asking, is your…’

‘My name is Eduard Brünhofer.’ We’ve earned the pause that follows.

‘YOU’RE Eduard Brünhofer?’ I’m not going to describe the expression that’s now on her face. Too difficult, I’d have to analyse it first.

‘Yes, that’s me.’

‘That means I’m sitting next to someone famous.’ Not next to, strictly speaking, but diagonally opposite.

Besides: ‘I’m not famous. At best you might say I’m quite well known.’

‘Crazy,’ she says. Yes, that’s the expression on her face.

‘Of course, I’ve… heard so much…’

Heard? Audiobooks? I’m astonished but of course don’t let it show. Although I’m being pretty inflationary at not letting things show right now.

‘But, to my shame, I have to admit I’ve never read anything by you,’ she says.

I’m horrified, more at myself. I’d never have imagined I could be so off the mark.

‘You really don’t have to be embarrassed about it,’ I say, labouring over my humility and in an emotional state that plummets after the earlier pride.

‘I more or less only read non-fiction, you see, hardly ever fiction.’

‘Oh, I understand that. I’m exactly the same,’ I reply. Truthfully, by the way.

‘And when I do pick up a novel I tend to go for American and British fiction.’

That must have been down to the English teacher.

‘Wonderful, you’re well sorted, then,’ I say.

We give each other a nod, as you do when you want to finish a conversation, because everything that needed saying seems to have been said. No, her nod is a bit different. She nods as if waiting for something else to come from me. And I have to tread carefully here. I don’t want her saying to her friends later, ‘You’ll never guess who I met on the train. Eduard Brünhofer. He just wanted to talk about his books. I was nothing as far as he was concerned. He could’ve at least asked me…’

‘How about you? What’s your line of work, if you don’t mind me asking?’ I say.

‘Me?’ OK, clearly that wasn’t what she was expecting. She’s dismissive too.

‘Oh, it’s not that… I mean of course it’s nowhere near as interesting…’

‘I don’t believe that.’ I had to say. Wanted to say too.

‘I work… on the one hand as a physiotherapist.’

‘Oh,’ I reply.

The word goes right through me and instinctively I tense my pelvic floor to check that it’s still there. Till now physiotherapists haven’t occupied a fixed place in my life, although on my GP’s instructions they’ve been knocking loudly at my door and penetrating my consciousness for years now. I’ve given them a try. After a maximum of three ‘sessions’, as

they call their bouts of torture, I've always been able to free myself from their grip and discharge myself as having been cured early. I can't stand their exercises, nor the gruff manner of their advice or the peremptory tone in which they set about seizing control over my body. 'Until our next session you're going to do twenty of those for me every day,' were always their last words.

'But I'm a psychotherapist too,' she adds. Maybe she saw at once how much I struggle with the purely physical.

'Interesting. What's your specialist field?' I ask, to deepen the conversation.

'The human being,' she replies. I didn't want to know in that much detail. She laughs and only now do I realise at how high a tactical level our train skirmish is being played out. Neither of us wants to give away more or less of ourselves than good manners dictate. What makes things more difficult for me is that I'm gradually feeling the urge – you know. An early coffee. And once I gradually feel the urge I can't think of anything else, which means the urge rapidly becomes more intense. It always becomes especially intense when I have no leisure to squat in its honour, for example at four in the morning.

Right now I'm racking my brains as to how I'm going to tell a therapist I've just met, who's sitting (diagonally) opposite me, that I have to leave my seat immediately on account of this particular urge. To my wife, with whom I call a spade a spade, I'd say, 'Look, I've got to go to the bog.'

With friends and acquaintances I'd spare all comments; I'd just get up and go, and when I came back, relaxed, nobody would ask me where I'd been and why I hadn't asked to be excused. But what's the neatest way of interrupting this protracted exchange of pleasantries with a therapist who might look at me as an admirer, but has never actually read

one of my books? Do I say, ‘Please excuse me.’ For what? What have I done? Or do I say, ‘I’ll be right back.’ Far too brash. Or do I settle for an incomplete sentence: ‘Quick break.’ Or: ‘We’ll continue this in a mo.’ Or: ‘We won’t continue this afterwards.’ Or: ‘Well then.’ Goodbye. Have a good trip. A nice life. No idea. Then all of a sudden she gets up and says, ‘Please excuse me, I’ll be back in a moment.’

‘Good idea, I’ll join you,’ I reply, relieved. She gives me a confused smile. Yes, talking is really not my strength and if the exchange is quick I rarely find the right words. That’s why I became a slow writer.

‘And afterwards there’s something I have to ask you,’ she announced. I give a neutral nod.

We choose different directions to the loo: she heads towards Munich; I go back towards Vienna.

I’m the first to return to my seat, anxious about her question. For I’m expecting one of the ‘Awful Five’ that authors always get asked.

One: Where do you get the ideas for your books?

Two: When you’re writing, where do you write and why do you do it there?

Three: Do you write when something comes to mind or do you have fixed writing times like in an office?

Four (particularly awful): Are your novels autobiographical? How much of you is there in the characters?

Five: What do you like reading and who are your favourite authors? This is the question I loathe the most. I was asked it yet again only a few weeks ago as my trusted doctor, who unfortunately is also interested in literature, was slipping on a rubber glove to give me a prostate check-up. I politely reeled off a few names and titles that came to mind.

After his brief intervention – I need say no more – I'd have loved to have got my own back and demanded the following: 'Right then, now you're going to reveal to me your three favourite urologists.'

Back to Vienna–Munich. The therapist has sat back down and now she slides into an offensive questioning position.

'Herr Brünhofer, I'd be fascinated to know how someone becomes such a successful writer as you. What are the elements of your writing, what matters to you? I know the question must sound pretty silly, but…' At least she knows. I take the spontaneous decision to include the question in my hitlist of crimes against authors. 'There are no silly questions, only silly answers,' I lie formulaically to buy myself some time. In truth I'm already toying with the idea of unfortunately having to get off at the next station. (Amstetten. It would be the first time in my life.) I could get off and take the following train to Munich. Even better, I could get off and get on again in the carriage behind. But what if she caught me doing this? Besides, maybe she's getting off at Amstetten herself, that's not such an improbability. Maybe she's from Amstetten; that would explain her question. Not that I've got anything against people from Amstetten – I'd like to make that clear right now. It's just that, sadly, I'm stuck in a conversation with no apparent way out. Plumping for the close-your-eyes-and-hope-for-the-best approach, I say defiantly, 'The question is, of course, what you mean by successful.' With the emphasis on 'you'. I give her all the time in the world. But she doesn't want to explain this to me. Instead she stares into my eyes. Her pupils blur, drawing mine in. It's slightly hypnotic. She tells me just to keep talking. Maybe she thinks it'll do me good. I mean, she's the therapist here and I'm the client.

OK, then. I think you can distinguish between four types of successful writers. The first are successful simply because they write. They are the happiest; they don't need anything else. Their first goal is achieved through writing. And their next goal is to keep writing. I envy these people. Their texts are enough for them. They themselves are enough for them.

The other three types strive for public acknowledgement of their efforts. Some manage to create literary masterpieces. Their success is defined by critical appraisal in the media. In the past, when people used to read newspapers, this was in the review section; more recently it's to be found in high-quality literature blogs or podcasts on dgital channels. They also sweep the prestigious literary prizes, which always have money attached to them, but basically what counts is the recognition of the literary quality of their work.

Others define success by their celebrity status. Their books, often written with the help of a ghostwriter, are mere by-products of their time in the limelight and function as nebulae of their personal radiance. These individuals are often from careers unrelated to books; they can be doctors, lawyers, skiers, roofers, whatever. For example, they'll dump on the market the roofers' bible: *A Sure-Footed Life without Vertigo*. With the book in their hands they'll appear on every talk show until they're given their own programme. At the climax of their career they'll be recognised by everyone in the street. Afterwards everything goes quiet and it's not until years later that they're seen again on *Strictly Come Dancing*.

'You're in the last group, I suppose?' the early-middle-aged woman sitting opposite interrupts me. By now there's a certain familiarity to her.

'Why?' I say, unable to decide between 'Why do you think that?' and 'Why do you know that?'

'Because the best is always kept for last,' she says.

‘It’s not the best,’ I say, defensively. She smiles. I’m dealing here with a professional psychotherapist who also knows a thing or two about the dramatic development of a story. But now she forces me to assume an unfitting dramatic modesty.

‘How would you define your success, then?’ she says, delving.

‘Through the public. Through the people who read my books. Through the people I’m able to please with my books.’ There. Let that soak in. Let her feel it. That’s what happens to someone who’s never read one of my books.

‘So you’ll do anything for them?’

‘What do you mean by anything?’

‘Well, it means you’re not writing for yourself but for others. You’re not writing what you want to write, but what other people like to read. Because you want to please your readers.’

‘That’s almost correct. But not quite.’

‘What’s not correct?’

‘I write what I want to write, and fortunately this overlaps with what other people like to read.’ A quick pause for breath. I’ve come to the crux of my argument.

‘This is the thing. I’m damned lucky that there are enough people out there who like reading what I like writing. And I think that this is precisely what constitutes my success. Because you asked me how someone becomes a successful writer.’

And I’ve explained it in detail. Well done, me. Bring on Amstetten. I’m not going to get off. I’ll keep going. I’ll continue all the way to Munich whether I want to or not. I’m going to see it out. Nobody’s going to stop me. Nobody’s going to detain me.

Amstetten

‘So you like writing about love?’ she asks.

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We had a two-minute stop at the station, which is enough for Amstetten. There was barely a creak of a doors, barely anyone got off and barely anyone got on. A few people looking for seats scurried past us, without showing any real interest in bagging one of the ones next to us. These seats, by the way, have been secured by a black ladies’ shoulder bag and my ugly, writer’s rucksack that feigns student poverty. This is the one sharp diagonal line in our square. The other is formed by us in our respective seats, sitting at a respectable distance from each other, and it’s electrified. Basically this group of four seats is hermetically sealed and cut off from the outside world. In short, nobody dares get close to us, nobody wants to sit with us, and that’s a good thing.

A few words about the woman, maybe. Not that I’m interested in her; it’s not my place to be. All the same I find her somehow interesting. I can’t say why. Perhaps because I don’t know when she’s getting off, or where, or into which life. It’s got nothing to do with the way she looks or, let’s say, not very much, not excessively so. You’re certainly not going to hear me go into raptures about this woman – those times are over. Although…

At any rate, now I’d like her to stop asking questions, for us to sit opposite each other in silence, each of us absorbed in our own world, and to get the occasional smile, particularly one of respect. I’d like her to get up at some point and take her leave – in Linz, perhaps, that would be reasonable. Then we’ll whisper an almost cordially reserved ‘Delighted to meet you’ and ‘Me too’. She leaves her seat, moves a few metres away, I raise my hand again and

follow this with a curt nod. The whole thing is very unpretentious. Then she gets out, makes straight for the nearest bookshop on the station concourse, approaches one of the booksellers and says, 'I'd like a novel by Eduard Brünhofer.' Bookseller: 'Of course. Which one did you have in mind?' She: 'What would you recommend?' Bookseller (in astonishment): 'Haven't you read anything by Brünhofer?' She (ashamed): 'No, I… er, till now I've only ever read… British literature.' Bookseller: 'Then why not start with *The Second Encounter*? That was his first big bestseller.' She: 'Excellent. I'll have a copy of *The Second Encounter*, then. Thanks for the tip.'

But no. She stays. She doesn't fall silent. Instead she asks me, 'So you like writing about love?'

'Yes, that's right, I have done.'

'Not anymore?'

'I'm sorry?'

'You just said you HAVE liked writing about love. But not anymore?'

'Yes, of course. It's just… Look, I haven't written anything in quite a while, I mean not any books. Hence the HAVE. And so my HAVE has got nothing to do with love.'

'I see,' she says. Pause. Is she going to stop. No, she's not.

'Some of your romance novels were huge international successes.'

'Yes.'

'Love is international,' she comments.

'You could say that.' We both grin as if we'd just revealed a dirty secret.

This might be the time to gently let her know that I don't like talking about my books. Particularly not with someone who hasn't read them (yet). Because this means I have to do

double the work. First I write, then I have to explain myself. And yet I'm writing specifically so as not to have to explain myself.

Let's imagine the reverse scenario. Someone spends hours recounting a story in all its detail, putting his heart and soul into it, with all the empathy he can muster. When he's finished, hoarse, thirsty, exhausted, but happy; when he's got to the end, brought all the threads of the plot together, answered all the open questions, put in the final full stop; when he's properly finished with his story, just imagine the following happening. A listener diagonally opposite him in the first row, fixes his gaze with hers and says, 'Dear storyteller, I'm absolutely fascinated by the story you just told. But sadly I wasn't listening. Would you be so kind as to write the story down for me? I would really love to read it.' That's pretty much what's happening to me now. And I ought to tell her this. But she's quicker.

'What enables an author to write about love?' There are questions that sound shrewder than any possible answers to them.

'What enables an author to write about love?' she asks.

'Your question is smarter than any possible answer to it,' I reply.

'Thanks. But have a go anyway,' she says. Now the physiotherapist in her is coming to the fore.

'Well, first…' is how my answer begins. I like using first, second and so on. First because it doesn't put the full weight of responsibility on the first thing you say. Second, when you're saying 'first', you don't have to know what you're going to say 'second', but you can already be thinking about it and only finish 'first' when 'second' is fully formed in your head. Third, you leave it open as to whether there'll be a 'third' or a 'fourth', which gives you a certain flexibility with your answer. Fourth, by the time you get to 'fourth' you

can repeat ‘first’ again, because it’s been overshadowed by ‘second’ and ‘third’ and long forgotten by the person you’re talking to. Fifth, you can stop at any time and the question will always have been answered exhaustively.

‘What enables an author to write about love?’

‘Well, first, the desire to do so.’

‘You mean, it has to matter to you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Which means love matters to you?’

‘Yes, who doesn’t it matter to?’ She smiles.

‘And?’

‘What do you mean, “and”?’ I say.

‘Second?’

‘Second?’

‘Yes, you said “first”. I’m waiting for “second”.’

‘Second, you must have an idea about it.’

‘About love?’

‘Yes, that would be good.’

‘Do you mean experience?’

‘No, I mean an idea. An idea is enough for writing. You don’t have to have experienced everything you write about. You just need to have an idea about it.’

‘About love?’

‘Yes, for example. You must be able to conceive of it. The idea is more powerful than the experience. The idea feeds off the imagination. The experience destroys it.’

‘That’s good – who said that?’ This often happens to me. Whenever I come out with something clever, people immediately think I’m quoting someone else.

‘I did.’ Now she acknowledges it and repeats it back to me as a compliment.

‘The idea feeds off the imagination. The experience destroys it. I must remember that.’

Lovely. That would be a fitting end to our conversation. Would have been.

‘And what do you imagine when you imagine love?’

‘Do you always ask questions like this?’ I say.

‘Only when I’ve got a famous writer of romance novels sitting opposite me. So, what comes into your head when you imagine love?’

‘I imagine…’

‘Yes?’

‘I’ll have to think about it.’ This would be a good opportunity to casually ask her when she’s getting off so I can work out how much time I have to think about it. But in the end I’m often not cool enough to do this. So what do I imagine when I imagine love?

‘I imagine what’s happening to my characters, what they’re… feeling when they…’

‘Fall in love with each other?’ she says, coming to my aid. She emphasises the ‘L’ in ‘love’, slowly bringing her tongue from the back of her palate to the front of her mouth. I don’t think she’s going to get off at Linz. Salzburg is a better bet.

‘What do they feel, your characters, when they fall in love with each other?’ It’s pointless to think any longer about this. ‘The beginning of everything, the meaning of everything, the most profound things, the greatest things, the most beautiful, but also most frail things,’ I say. I’d have written this differently, of course, with more imagery, detail, at

greater length. Besides, frail isn't an adjective you usually put in the superlative, but we can make an exception when talking about falling in love.

'And you can recreate that in your characters?'

'I try.'

'You can imagine that?'

'I make every effort to.'

'Your own experience hasn't destroyed it yet?'

This woman can really listen, I have to give her that. But I'm certainly not going to tell her about my experiences of love. And it's no business of the conductor's, who's now standing right beside us at, I should say, a not inopportune moment. He's standing beside us, saying nothing. In my next life I'd like to be a conductor. You don't have to say a word, but everyone knows why you're there and what they've got to do.

Rummaging in her huge bag, she pulls out a few folded sheets of printed paper, hands them to the conductor and lets him decide which of these could be her ticket. From this I conclude that she seldom travels by train. Presumably she does most of her journeys by marathon running, only Salzburg would be a bit too far.

While I'm showing the conductor my KlimaTicket – maybe I should say a couple of words about him. Moustache, pilot glasses (he hasn't come out with more than a couple of words either) – before putting it away again, the question of our respective destinations is resolved in an unspectacular way.

'So where are you going to, Herr Brünhofer?' she asks.

'Munich.' I count one, two, three, four.

'And you?'

'Munich.' She smiles.

‘Munich too,’ I conclude.

‘Yes.’

‘Lovely,’ I say, an automatic response. She gives a vigorous nod of the head. I think she’s waiting for me to think of something more meaningful to say than ‘lovely’.

A brief digression: I generally consider it to be particularly awkward when two people who know each other only vaguely take the same trip without prior agreement. For example, if I meet a vague acquaintance on the underground because I didn’t manage to turn away in time, I reel off my emergency set of tried-and-tested clichés designed for short journeys. It goes like this: *Hello, long time, no see. Not since the pandemic. Yes, the pandemic, that was a bad time… Everything alright otherwise? And how’s your… that’s right, Brigitte. The children must be… Job still the same? No, no new book, but I’m working on it. Any holidays? Oh, Sicily, really lovely, we’ve been wanting to go there for ages… Yes, the Italian cuisine… Look, I’ve got to get off. Bye. See you soon.*

It can happen, of course, that your vague acquaintance has to get off too, rendering goodbye invalid and postponing it until you get to the station upstairs. I know vague acquaintances who would then stand with me for hours, advising me of the nicest places and best restaurants in Sicily and then wanting to send me the corresponding links via WhatsApp, for which of course they’d need my current mobile number. Oh, no, you’re not doing that with me! ‘Look, I’m afraid I’ve got to dash,’ I say before it can come to that. There is a residual risk that the vague acquaintance asks me which way I’m heading. Coincidentally, it then transpires that he or she is going in the same direction and, in the worst-case scenario, to the same destination. Which gives us the wonderous opportunity to deepen our two-minute underground conversation based on the worst sentence fragments. But it doesn’t get any

deeper; on the contrary, the conversation becomes ever shallower, step by step. I soon give up and fall silent. He's still on Sicily. I learn about both the passive and active Etna, roam around the catacombs of Siracusa and am made to hang around on the beach in Cefalù in forty-five-degree heat. By the end all I want is a godfather from Palermo who can silence the vague acquaintance in his own way. All this can happen if two people who hardly know each other anymore or who haven't really met, take the same trip without–

'Work or play?' she asks.

'I'm sorry?'

'Are you going to Munich for work or pleasure?'

'More like work.' I choose to put it this way because being a writer isn't work, at least it isn't for me. Being a writer is a condition that persists even when you're idle. A light swich that always remains in the ON position, even when the light occasionally flickers and threatens to go out, which is what you ought to be writing against.

'How about you?'

'Me? For pleasure.' She smiles. It's something she often does. There are a number of variants to her smile, which I'll describe in detail later, when there's finally a break in the conversation.

'Family?' I ask. I don't get time to wonder about my question.

'No, not family. A…' She thinks about it. 'A friend.'

'Oh,' I say. Friend is, of course, an elastic term, but the way she says it and looks makes me think it's something that stirs her up. In her expression I also see an invitation to me to ask about this friend. But I don't; it's none of my business. Although I would be interested.

‘So, are you staying in Munich for a while?’ I ask.

Strangely I’m already thinking of the train trip back.

‘That depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On how things develop.’ No doubt things with the friend. She’s already revealed quite a lot.

‘How about you?’

‘I’m coming back tomorrow afternoon.’

‘So soon?’

‘Yes, I’m only going to Munich for a meeting.’

‘It must be an important one,’ she says.

‘Oh, it’s alright,’ I reply. I don’t want to think about it.

‘But I think it’s nice,’ she says.’

‘What?’

‘That Eduard Brünhofer takes the train to Munich for the day rather than flying.’ If someone had paid me to fly I would have taken the plane. But I’m keeping this to myself.

‘For the sake of the environment,’ I say. She can believe me or not.

‘And for my sake too. Otherwise we wouldn’t be sitting opposite each other.’

WE WILL SOON BE ARRIVING IN LINZ.

Diagonally opposite, strictly speaking.