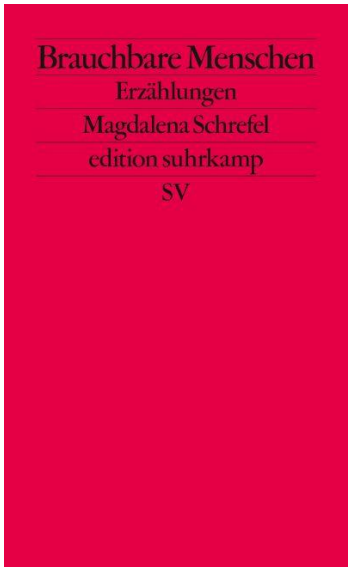

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Usable People

Stories

(Original German title: Brauchbare Menschen. Erzählungen)

183 pages, Paperback

Publication date: 06 March 2022

Sample translation by Ayça Türkoğlu

pp. 39 – 52

Cherry Picking

'Here's three euros,' says Ma, 'for dinner. Pop out to the shops.' She opens the door for us, pushes the handle down — a rush of air — and presses a shopping bag into our hands, a ten-cent plastic bag. Ten's the smallest bet. 'Will you be eating with us?' 'Of course.' 'You sure?' 'Well, I can't be sure.' Ma laughs, and the door snaps shut.

We stand outside the house, the light is still blinding. There are people and children sitting under the plane trees. We walk along the street, turn right at the next crossing — we smell petrol at the garage and chlorine at the entrance to the swimming pool — then it's past the playground and there's the supermarket. It's cold inside, the hair bristles on our calves and the backs of our arms. We pick up a packet of penne for 30 cents, a jar of green pesto for 1.19, a pack of cherry tomatoes for 59 cents and some white cheese for 89 cents. 'What does that come to?' '2.97.'

Ma won't miss the three cents because she's not as good at counting as we are. This is how we make a profit on every shop. We want to invest the money we make. We started at zero, now we're almost 200 cents in credit. One day, we want a big house, a villa with a pool, within reach of a lake, a motorboat moored at the jetty, a yacht — and a jet ski while we're at it. We want a kitchen with marble tiles, a fridge that's as high as the ceiling and always full. 'Two!' 'What?' 'Two fridges, we'll want two, one for you and one for me.' 'I think we'll want two fridges that go up to the ceiling and are never empty.' 'A TV!' 'A TV, a PlayStation, an Xbox and a Wii.' 'And a computer, and lots of clothes!' We'll want clothes made of silk, clothes with sequins on them, black, white, all that matters is that they sparkle, and we'll want

trousers too, brand name jeans and brand name sweaters, brand name shoes and brand name trainers, we'll want brand name everything, we want to be rich, one day.

We used to play in flower meadows, pickfield poppies and eat sour cherries with sugar, but only sometimes. More often than not, we ate berries we gathered near the Future, that was the name of the rubbish dump at the edge of the village. 'Why don't you pop down to the Future?' our grandparents would say. 'There's always something worth having there.' Twice a year, our grandparents would drive us to Bangladesh. It was in a nearby town, and this was before we learned that Bangladesh is also a country; for us it was just a covered market hall. Our grandparents bought us t-shirts and underpants and a pair of shoes made in India, China, or Turkey. 'Can we?' we'd ask then, once we'd posed like good little children, once Grandmother had held dresses up to our chests and Grandfather had tried shoes on our feet. 'Can we, please?' And we'd trot off to the end of the market where, next to the toilets, there was a stall full of toys. There were dolls and diggers, all sorts of balls and bats, there were building blocks, and buckets and spades and rakes, cuddly elephants and tigers and bears, there were skipping ropes and some things we didn't even know about yet. 'Get right up close.' We sniffed. Like vanilla sugar, the rubber smelt. The plastic felt soft and smooth in our hands and we could see the gloss and the lights. If the rubbish dump was the future, Bangladesh was paradise.

Then Grandmother got sick and all she did was lie in bed. Now it was Grandfather who sprinkled the sugar over our berries, and there was one day when he told us: 'Your grandmother died last night.' Then, the next morning, Ma arrived. Grandfather looked at her sternly and eventually nodded. 'Are you still not ready?' So we hurried. We packed our bits and pieces in a suitcase, put our shoes on and said: 'Byebye, Grandfather.' And said he should ring us.

'And how was the train ride?' he asked on the phone, shortly after we'd arrived. It took hours and hours, via Prague. And then we arrived at the central station by mid-morning. 'Here we are,' said Ma. Then we took the bus to the south of the city. 'Just keep going down, see? Here's the supermarket,' said Ma, pointing to it, 'and here's the döner man.' 'Döner?' Ma's eyes lit up. 'I expect you're hungry.' We nodded. Once Ma had ordered, she asked, 'Can you give me change for this note? These are my two little ones by the way,' she said, stroking our hair, because Ma didn't know we didn't like it. 'Twins.' The man behind the counter said something we didn't understand. 'Say hello then,' said Ma. And so we said, 'Hello.' 'Hey, look,' said Ma once we'd finished our last bites. 'What do you fancy playing? I'll show you.'

'Hey, Ma,' we finally said, at some point. 'Yes?' 'We're tired.' 'Just one more game, just one,' said Ma.

What we didn't tell Grandfather was that Ma overslept the next morning and we had to wake her up. That we shouted, 'Ma! Ma!!' 'What is it?' We had to go to school, we told her. We ought to go then, she said. 'We stayed up late again last night,' she said. And she was right, all three of us had fallen asleep in front of the TV. 'You still need to open the door for us,' we said. And Ma stood before us like Cinderella in her dressing gown, didn't quite get the key in the lock at first but then, yes, it turned. 'See you later, littluns,' she said and gave each of us a kiss on the cheek, and we turned away because she didn't smell like a princess in the mornings. Then, when we got back from school, Ma wasn't there. We waited by the door. 'Should we do our homework?' We had to do something, we couldn't just wait. So, we did some sums, and we did some more, we did one then another and another, until we'd solved five pages of problems. Until Ma finally came home. She had her best face on, lips and lashes. 'Where were you?' we asked. We'd already done all our homework, we said. 'And then some.' 'That's good,' she said, red mouth smiling. 'You're good kids,' she said. She'd been to the City, she said. 'When you're ready,' she said, 'you'll be able to come too.' She had something else to take care of, she said. We nodded.

On the outside, the City is big and colourful, its name lit up in red letters on a blue façade. On the inside, the City is huge, with machines on the walls, and empty and dark in the middle. While Ma played, we played at dancing. We swayed our hips in time to the songs, held hands and span each other around in circles, fast, until we fell over. Then at some point, we'd join Ma. 'Here,' she said. 'Sit down properly, that's it.' She pressed a euro into each of our palms. 'Let me do it,' said Ma. She had to concentrate, she said, it was work. 'Yes, it's hard work.' We cheered straight away, on the first go. 'Did you win? That never happens!' 'The cherries are in a line,' we said. We stood upright and proud. Her gaze was probing, her voice hard. 'You morons,' said Ma and that was when we learned that vertical was not the same as horizontal. Then we learned that there were other lines too: there are straight lines and lines with a kink, there are lines of three pictures, or four or five, that's the jackpot. 'The more you put in,' said Ma, 'the more you get out. It's like life, you have to give a lot if you want to win.'

When Grandfather calls, we say, 'We went past a playground on the way home. There was a roar and a screeching sound, it was incredible.' 'And what did you see?' 'We saw children wading in the water and children digging in the sand and children waiting their turn for the spades, the slides, the seesaw.' 'You wouldn't believe it,' we say, 'the playground is fenced in, like a cage with only one entrance, inside there are children catching balls, children throwing balls, barging into one another and falling over, children landing in the dirt and children on bikes, on scooters, with spades and diggers in their hands. Sometimes there's also a child on a

bench with a book in their hand.' 'And what do you do?' asks Grandfather. 'Nothing,' is our answer. 'Nothing that might get our clothes dirty, nothing where you have to run or throw yourself on the ground, and we don't play with other children, we don't want to wait, we don't want to stand in line, we want to get to decide when it's our turn.'

'That's my girls,' says Grandfather. 'And what about your mother?' We get cagey when Grandfather says "mother", because mother is a secret word that means Watch Out. 'Call me Ma,' Ma told us when she came to pick us up. 'It suits me better, leaves me room for another existence.' When she's not our Ma, her name's Natascha. But Grandfather only ever talks about *your mother,* he draws the words out when he asks, 'What's your mother up to?' 'She's fine,' we'll say. Because it's true. It's not for him to know that she's at her best when she's playing Candy Crush, much less that she's also happy when she's playing Mountain View, Bubble Craze, Balloonies and Fairy Queen, and sometimes Lucky Lady's Charm. That seven is her lucky number and her favourite fruits are sour cherries and lemons, that she doesn't like strawberries, or plums or melons. That she likes it more than anything when the machine lights flash. 'This'll be our little secret,' Ma had said. And we nodded.

Our favourite thing is going to Happy Day with Ma. Happy Day is bright and sits right on the street. There are also tables and chairs, and we sit down and do our homework. We do our sums – plus and plus, minus and minus and sometimes that one with the two dots. 'The main thing is that the answer's right. You always have to have more than you did at the beginning.' A woman with short hair works at the counter, she has a bird tattooed on her left upper arm. 'What's that?' we asked the first time we visited. 'A parrot,' she said. It was a pirate's bird, she said. 'Are you a pirate then?' we asked. 'Just call me Grandma,' she said. Grandma counts coins like Grandmother did biscuits, counting two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, so fast our eyes can hardly keep up. Grandma's bosom is enormous, it sits on the wooden countertop in front of her when she leans against the counter. We think that's what it was made for, the countertop, it was built there for precisely that reason.

Ma's breasts are small, little more that warts. We saw them once when she was getting changed. 'You drained me dry, you two,' Ma said, and then she cried, though we could have sworn we didn't do it. 'Yes, you did,' said Ma. 'You, it was you two, you can't even remember it.' But we can remember, we remember our grandmother.

There's a man at Happy Day we call Jack, after his favourite game. His real name's Joszef. 'Josef,' Joszef said when we asked what his name was. 'Because no one here can pronounce Joszef. But call me Jack.' Every time he sees us, he rolls up his sleeve. 'Look, here, it's the

city,' Jack says then, as if he's forgotten that we've seen the Fernsehturm on his shoulder many times before.

'I'm on a roll,' says Jack. 'This morning I burned through 350 big ones, I had 400 on me, put down the fifty and won 500. So what have I got, nine notes, nine!' We nod, even if Jack can't add up properly. 'Nine notes, I'm telling you, I'm never getting out of here, those nine notes, they're mine, I'm telling you.'

We drink hot chocolate made from powder and hot water. 'Put another spoonful in,' we say to Oma behind the counter; when she stirs it, the sound of the spoon against the edge of the glass blends with the clicking of the machines. 'Another one!' The hot chocolate's only lukewarm now, but the powder crunches between our teeth, the way we like it.

When we get home from the shops, we carry the bags into the kitchen. 'Ma, we're making dinner,' we shout. No answer. 'Ma?' Creep over, push the door open gently. 'Ma?' 'WHAT?' It's dark in the room. Ma's face is screen-blue. 'Are you hungry?' Ma is sitting on the only chair that's left, in front of her there's a laptop on a small table, the speakers are turned up high. A week ago, Ma sold the sofa, three chairs, the dinner table, a dresser. And the crystal glasses and a picture of home. 'The lace doilies, the doilies too,' Ma said. 'Come off it,' said the man who'd taken everything, 'who even uses them?' Ma didn't want to tell us what she got for them. And we don't know if she has any left over, either. It'd all be alright if she hadn't sold the telly. We love Disney, we watch the videos over and over again. They call us telly tots at school. 'It's because you talk like Disney princesses,' they say. At least there's still the laptop. Ma hasn't left the house for three days now, she hasn't been to Happy Day, or Vulkan, or the City. 'What is it, then?' asks Ma. 'Penne pasta,' we say. 'You two are the best,' she says, 'the best kinds anyone could ask for.'

We share the work, because there's two of us. We bring a pan of water to the boil and empty in the penne. There's no salt left so we use the last stock cube. We cut the tomatoes into halves and the cheese into pieces. We strain the pasta and let it slip back into the pan. We mix together the penne, the pesto, the tomatoes. Last of all, we add the cheese on top. Then, we call, 'Dinner's ready!' But Ma doesn't come. We know what that means. Her eyes are glued to the screen. Sometimes she curses, but always quietly, because she doesn't want us to hear her. Because she doesn't want us to know she's picking cherries again. 'Will you be hungry later?' we shout to her. 'Yeah, later!'

Ma's voice sounds far away, like she's on another planet. Still, we're relieved, because you can divide forty-five by three. That makes fifteen pieces of penne on each plate, two with seven tomato halves, one with eight. 'How much is three bells?' one of us asks, while the other slurps

up some penne with relish. ‘A hundred.’ ‘And how much is two cherries?’ ‘Less.’ ‘Three oranges?’ ‘More.’ ‘More than what?’ ‘Than the cherries, of course.’ Once we’ve eaten, we wash the plates, the pan, the sieve and the cutlery. ‘We’re off to bed,’ we call to Ma in the living room. ‘Is there dinner left?’ Ma looks like Snow White now. ‘It’s in the fridge,’ we say, ‘there’s a plate of penne left. It’s the plate with eight tomato halves but less cheese.’ You can’t always win. Ma says so herself.

We lie cramped on one mattress. The other one’s been sold. ‘That must be the widest bed in the world,’ Ma had laughed and tickled our feet a little, after we decided to lie on it crossways. At night, we turn this way and that in our sleep, we dream of hills and fields and hares. In our dreams we ask Ma if we can keep the hare. ‘Whatever,’ says Dream Ma. She looks pale. ‘Where did the hare come from?’ ‘From the meadow,’ we say, ‘it was under the cherry tree.’ We want to name the hare Zeko. ‘Why d’you want to call it that?’ Dream Ma says. The alarm clock rings before we can answer.

We get up, brush our teeth, and get dressed. ‘Do you want your hair platted?’ ‘Yes.’ So we plait our hair into two pigtails. ‘Have you got food money left over?’ Ma asks, suddenly standing at the door. ‘No.’ ‘You must still have something.’ ‘No,’ we say. ‘Do you always have to say everything at the same time?’ We shake our heads, so as not to speak. ‘What about your reserves?’ ‘What reserves?’ She knows exactly what we’ve got, she says, she knows we’ve still got one note stashed away, at least one. ‘I know you have it,’ Ma shouts. ‘We haven’t got anything,’ we say. ‘Not a cent.’ ‘Don’t make me laugh,’ says Ma, ‘every time I send you shopping, there’s three cents left over, you think I don’t know, don’t know what things cost? That I don’t know how often I send you to the shops? Do you think I don’t know you’ve been stashing money away?’ We look at each other. ‘It’s good that you’re saving, my little doves.’ Her voice sugary now. She just wants to borrow some, Ma says. ‘Just ‘til tomorrow night.’ She talks about interest and compound interest. ‘Now, give it to me,’ she says, then. And as she raises her hand. Better to have money slip through our fingers than a slap in the face, we think. So we rummage around in our rucksacks and say, ‘Here. All we’ve got is a pile of coins.’ ‘Is that all you’ve got?’ We look at each other again and say, ‘Yes, Ma, we’re sorry. That’s it.’

If Grandfather rang, we’d say, ‘Ma’s not hard to work out.’ ‘She’s like our times tables,’ we’d say, ‘you just have to break down what you don’t know into bits you do know’. Ma, we can see you. Sometimes, Ma gets low, falls apart, but only now and then. ‘But we’re good girls,’ we’d tell Grandfather, ‘We do our homework every day, and the shopping too. We cook, clean, do the laundry. And we save money, where we can, for the future, for our villa, for better times,

and for worse ones too. We save because we're thrifty.' That's exactly what we'd say to Grandfather, if he ever got around to calling.

A cyclist pedals past. There's a crate attached to his handlebars. On the edge of it, there are — we'd swear it —one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, eight brightly coloured parrots. They're being taken somewhere, like little passengers. 'We have to tell Grandma about this,' we say out loud, but think, even so, about our grandparents.

'What an ugly place,' we say, when we stop by the park. 'What an ugly place!' And, 'How could a parent imprison their children in a place like this?' We see a boy who's all alone. He's a little younger than us. He's crouching by the sandpit; he doesn't look up until we're standing in front of him. 'What are you up to?' 'Got to stop the worms from crawling away,' he says, reluctantly, without looking up, as if what's in front of him on the ground is the only thing in the world. 'Why?' 'It's a game.' 'How's that a game? This park's for babies,' we say, and before the boy can say anything else, we say, 'Get lost. Shoo! Go on. We're playing here now.' The boy looks at us, he stands up. '*You're* the babies,' he says. Then he goes. There are a couple of heavy rocks sitting by the upper outer edge of the sand pit. We pick them up, push the fattest one to one side. The sand underneath is packed hard, we scratch at it with our fingers. A metal screw cap pokes up out of the sand, we keep digging, until we've unearthed the whole bottle. The label is soggy, all we know is that there were cherries on it once. We say nothing, solemn, as we unscrew the cap.

We know brass, we know gold, and the money we have here has three colours. It's like Ma always says: 'Look after the pennies.' Because those pennies add up to make a pile of gold. 'She can have the pennies,' we whisper. Then we take the coins out of the bottle, and the notes too. Smooth each one out. We'll smell it on our fingers all evening, the scent of money clings to them. But now we fold the little notes into a ship and a boat, we stack the coins to make tower blocks and we fold one up, one big one, to make a house. We build a whole city out of money, one that's all our very own.