

Next stop: Olten

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Milena Moser

Next Stop: Olten

Passengers to Basle please change to the connecting train... He could change trains or just go on sitting. Nobody was expecting him in Basle, or in Berne or in Zurich for that matter. He was travelling without a destination, merely following the voice from the loudspeakers, the only one he had been able to bear lately.

Nobody was expecting him. No light was switched on in his flat. No meal was being kept warm. He could do as he pleased. He could come inside or stay away. He could go to Basle or to Berne. He could change at Olten or not. That was the good thing about being a widower. It was his own and nobody else's business whether or not he ate, slept or put on a clean shirt.

Not that he was really enjoying it. You don't get over twenty years of married life in a jiffy. Sometimes, when he was reclining on the couch in the living-room and reading the TV-magazine, he was certain that he could hear the sound of running water in the kitchen. «Make me some coffee, dear», he shouted, and only after a short instant, when there was no reply, no absent-minded «hm, yes, in a moment» coming from the kitchen, did he remember: She was dead. Isabelle was dead. She had always been so healthy. She had never eaten any meat, never smoked. Only now and then, while doing the cooking, she had secretly taken a swig from the bottle of kirsch which he had kept hidden behind the tins of food in the kitchen cabinet.

It was still there, that bottle.

«I've got a headache», she had said. She had grasped her forehead with her hand that was protected with a pink washing-up glove. Isabelle had had beautiful hands, soft, well-kept hands. Hands that had had their picture taken for advertisements: Just her hands, looming large in the foreground, while the body and face behind them belonged to someone else. «Too delicate for work», was the caption below one of the pictures, which showed her hand holding a slim cigarette. She had framed that photo and had hung it up in the kitchen right above the sink. «I've got a headache», she had said. She had been about to sit down, but had collapsed instead, had sunk down to the floor and had died. Stretched out just like that, with one hand still touching her forehead, wearing that pink washing-up glove.

He still imagined he could hear her steps in the hallway. Her smell still lingered in the air. No, it was unbearable in the flat.

Your next connections... He spent more and more time aboard the trains. Whole days ran away from him on the railway lines. But the hours he spent aboard the trains were not wasted. They followed a higher principle; they were subject to the timetable. The hours made sense.

Shortly after Isabelle's death he had sold the car and had treated himself to an unlimited railway ticket. They had given him a senior citizen's ticket without asking. Why not? He had no job, no wife. However, people who are sitting in a train, this he realized quickly – people who are sitting in a train are not accountable to anyone for anything. On a train he was a man with a mission. A man with an aim.

During the last months he had learnt some new things: He now knew which connections could be caught without too much unnecessary running along platforms; he knew at which stations the buffet trolleys were newly stocked with goods and where they had the freshest coffee in the thermos flasks. He knew above all on which sections of the railway system the longest announcements were made on the loudspeakers. For the voice on the loudspeakers was what mattered most to him. It was the only voice he could be bothered to listen to.

Additionally, he had acquired the habit of travelling in the silence compartment.

This train continues to Aarau... The way she pronounced the name Aarau with a dark A, spoken from the far back of the throat! «Aarau» was a foreign word to her. Just like it had been to Isabelle, too. That voice from the loudspeakers had attracted his attention at once, because it sounded just like Isabelle. Like a young Isabelle. Without the sharp overtones her voice had acquired in the course of their married life, and also without the supercilious, almost detached polish of the later years and the misty slur that came from the bottle of kirsch. It was a quiet voice, very clear and decisive, but solicitous as well. I know exactly what you have to do, the voice said. On the other hand, it was generous enough to allow him to believe he was the one who made the decisions: to change or not to change...

This train...

Sometimes he could observe other fellow travellers letting their newspapers drop while they listened to the announcement concentratedly, dreamily, leaning their heads back into the upholstery and smiling. In the seat opposite him there was an older man, older than he was, a rightful bearer of a senior citizen's ticket. He was unpacking a sandwich – ham and cheese – unwrapping it from its greaseproof paper. It was rustling far louder than should be permitted in a silence compartment. It was rustling right in the middle of an announcement.

Zurich Airport, Oerlikon, Main Station.

The man had raised the sandwich half the way to his lips. It was hanging in mid-air. His mouth was open while he listened to the voice: «Next stop, Zurich Airport.» He took a bite, chewed. Looked up, looked over, smiled. «That voice», the stranger said.

Weren't you supposed to be silent in a silence compartment?

«It reminds me of my wife. Deceased wife.»

Did he expect an answer to that? Those frowning businessmen from across the corridor were already giving them looks.

«Elizabeth», the other man said.

Elizabeth?

«Marianne», came a voice from the other side of the corridor.

«Verena.»

«Helen!»

«Ruth.»

✧

END