

Edgar Fuhrmann: Just a Normal Working Day



Unemployment can be quite stressful – especially if you continue to live your life as if you hadn't been dismissed at all.

Story from the book *Central Station* by Edgar Fuhrmann, with texts about people on the edge of society, stranded as human flotsam at the central station, this labyrinthine center of modern societies.

Picture credits:

Cover: Wolfgang Eckert: Brake buffer stop at the end of track; p. 4: Free-Photos: Commuters; p. 6: Peter H. (Tama66): Factory site; p. 9: Caro Sodar: Clock on the site of the former Leipzig cotton mill (modified); p. 10: Michael Gaida: Old industrial building; p. 12: Ulrike Leone: Briefcase with thermos flask; p. 14: StockSnap: Library; p. 16: Kalhh: Pea soup; p. 19: Richard Mcall: Market hall in Lisbon (modified); p. 21: Steve Buisinne: Shopping; p. 23: Acatana: Tunnel stairs at the station; p. 25: Faustmp-1832: People at the station

All pictures from Pixabay; images 1 to 7 and 9 to 11 coloured in the original

It was the same every morning. The bus just never came on time. Of course, it's not really that big a problem when a bus is five minutes late. But when you only have seven minutes to change at the station, five minutes is a lot.

Since he always planned for an earlier train, he had never been late for work so far, but it was a nerve-racking rush anyway. The only way out would have been to set the alarm clock earlier. But that was something he didn't want to do either. Even now, when he got up at half past five, he sometimes could hardly get out of bed.

There, at last: Central Station! The hand on the station clock had just jumped to 6.32 a.m. – so he still had three minutes to get on the train. As he hurried to the platform, he recognized here and there the hurried faces of colleagues who were walking in lockstep with him. Apparently, he was not the only one who reached the train in the nick of time. And yet the timetables had not changed for years!



On the train, he took his usual place on one of the folding seats once again. Of course, a more comfortable seat was out of the question when boarding so late. At least the train left on time today. There was nothing more annoying than having to wait on the train for connecting passengers after all the hurry.

As the wagons screeched through the many switches and curves, he watched the houses sink back into the shapeless mass of the city one by one. As soon as the first skyscrapers of the suburbs appeared next to him, he reached for the newspaper he had taken from home to skim the headlines. That way, he could at least to

some extent bring himself up to date with the latest news.

When the train stopped for the fifth time, he rose from his seat. Patiently, he joined the queue of those who had to get off at this station. The train emptied about halfway here. That's why those who were continuing their journey also stood up to look for better seats. Yet they could have done so a few minutes later!

Outside, the footsteps of the many people moving through the underpass towards the factory premises echoed in his ears. The stomping was so steady that he almost had the feeling he was still on the train.

At the other end of the tunnel, everyone trotted up the long staircase. They had to cross a small road, on which almost only employees' cars and trucks drove. The main road ran on the other side of the station so as not to interfere with the factory's own tracks.

Beyond the road, they all turned into a path that led through a small park directly towards the

factory gate. While the others walked on, he took the time to check out the green spaces. After all, they were also part of the factory and provided the first impression of the company to the foreign guests who frequently came here. Therefore, they had to be well maintained at all times.

From a distance, he saw the last colleague disappear into Plant A of the factory as he reached the large factory gate, wide open at this time of day. Diagonally behind it was the glass house of the gatekeeper and caretaker – a rather taciturn but altogether quite friendly employee. On his head, the man wore a cap in bright colours with the company logo. It always filled him with pride



when his eyes fell on it.

He tapped on the window and then raised his hand in greeting. "Good morning! Everything all right?"

"As usual," the porter grumbled without looking up from his newspaper.

"Mr. Lehman, I must compliment you today on the lawn. You really did an excellent job!"

"It was mown yesterday."

"Because of the delegation from Vietnam, right?"

The gatekeeper looked up from the paper for a moment. "Nope, the lawn is mown every Wednesday."

"Oh, really? I'd forgotten all about that."

The gatekeeper turned back to his newspaper.

"Did everything go well with the delegation?" he inquired.

"I think so," it mumbled from within the little glass house.

"You know, if we praise these people just a little bit for their products, they'll do anything for us! When I met one of them the other day, I said to

him: 'Made in Vietnam – a real seal of quality!' You should have seen how he was beaming with joy! I tell you, I could have asked for anything from him afterwards. You know, I think these people are much nicer than we generally assume. Basically, they are probably themselves ashamed of their cheap prices and wage dumping. But what else can they do? – Let's be honest: we wouldn't do it any differently if we were in their shoes."

"What an annoying penalty that was yesterday!"

"But all in all, things went well, didn't they?"

"Well, everything is still possible in the return match."

The doorman continued reading his newspaper.

"Mr. Lehman, there is something else I wanted to ask you. I have a brochure here about new products on the computer market. I think it might be of interest to the EDP department. Could you perhaps pass it on to Mrs. Gill-Ludemans?"

"I haven't seen her for ages."

"You can just put it in her mailbox."

"Okay, I'll do it on occasion."

He slid the brochure through the hatch of the gatehouse. "Well then – have a nice day, Mr. Lehman!"

Before turning to leave, he glanced at the big clock above the gate to Plant B. It was exactly 7.45 a.m.: time to go to the park. He now took a different route than before. This way he could examine the factory from different sides and detect any damage in time.

About 50 meters away from the gatehouse was his first observation post. From here he had already noticed a week ago that one of the windows on the second floor of Plant C had a crack at the edge. He had informed Mr Lehman about this six days ago. Since nothing had happened yet, he would probably have to point it out to him again tomorrow.

He took his memo book and a pencil out of his briefcase and noted: "Second floor window".





That would be enough to remind him of it tomorrow. From his third observation post – on the other side of

the factory – he spotted a soiled door. He made a note of that as well before moving on to his park bench.

A few rays of sunshine had dried the bench where he used to sit at this time of day. He only had to give it a cursory wipe with his handkerchief. Then he could make himself comfortable on it.

He opened the newspaper and turned to the page with the job advertisements. For at least half an hour, he marked the promising ads with a red pen. He took his time so as not to miss anything. Then he examined the ads that had met the criteria of the pre-selection in detail.

A young woman was looking for a job as a cleaner or kitchen help. He had let the ad get

past the pre-selection stage, because of course there was always a certain need for cleaning and kitchen help. On the other hand, the ad was a bit short. If the jobseeker had invested the money for another line, this would certainly have improved her chances considerably. The word "clean", for example, would have looked good in this context. Perhaps she could have added "available immediately" and addressed the previous professional background: "many years of experience", "best references" or something similar.

He took out his calculator to work out how much these additions would have cost. He came up with not even ten percent of the actual advertising price. If the young woman was really looking for work, she could probably have spent that amount. Since the telephone number was provided in the ad, he wrote it down in his notebook so that he could call the jobseeker on occasion and give her his suggestions for improvement.

In this way he examined a few more advertisements. Unfortunately, he could accept very few of them without reservation. It was always the same mistakes that people made. Perhaps he would have to call the newspaper after all, so that job seekers could get the necessary advice as soon as they placed their ads.

He had just examined the last advertisement when his colleagues from the early shift came to the park for their break. Relieved, he also took out his thermos and his breakfast sandwich. It was always a pleasant feeling to have a break after a first round of work.

The factory was so big that he didn't know the names of all his colleagues by far. However, there were many familiar faces among them. For example, the one back there, who sat down on a bench in the other corner of the park – that was Bernard, with whom he had already gone to school. He lifted his hand and waved at him, but



Bernard was deep in conversation and therefore probably couldn't wave back. And the one who was now walking towards him was Elmar. With him he had already gone on holiday once.

"Hi Elmar, how's it going?" he addressed him.

"Everything fine," said the other and continued walking.

Elmar had the habit of walking up and down a lot during every break because he had a sedentary job. This made it difficult to strike up a conversation with him.

Now all the benches in the park were occupied. Next to him, two apprentices to whom he had recently given some useful tips had taken their seats. At first he assumed that this was why they had sat down next to him. But this time they were just playing around with their mobile phones the whole time. Maybe they just didn't dare speak to him.

Gradually, the park became empty again. He got up with the others to catch the tram at a quarter past ten. After the breakfast break, he always went to the public library to work through the



scientific journals. This way he could always inform the company's development department about the most important innovations in good time.

"Good morning, Mrs. Wolter," he greeted the woman at the circulation desk, "are there any new magazines for me?"

"Yes, a new magazine has arrived," she replied, looking up briefly from her computer. "But the gentleman over there has just taken it."

"And you didn't tell him that I ..."

"I'm sorry, but I really can't always reserve all the new magazines for you."

Mrs. Wolter was basically a reliable employee. She had even blushed slightly when confessing her failure to him. In the end, she knew quite

well that there was a difference between this pensioner there leafing through the magazine and him studying it.

So he decided to let the matter rest for this time, especially since he still had some articles to study in yesterday's magazine anyway. He took it from the shelf and sat down at an empty table. Writing a few sentences in his memo book every now and then, he worked there until shortly before noon.

For lunch, as usual, he went to the department store's restaurant near the public library. As soon as he entered the high-ceilinged room, the familiar muggy mixture of kitchen smells, coffee steam and sweat hit him.

In the large hall, the voices echoed like in a warehouse. He hustled past the long tables, all occupied at this time of day, to join the queue at the food counter. It always took him about ten minutes to get to his turn, and then another five minutes to receive and pay for his food. All this was not very comfortable, but given the

reasonable prices, he put up with such inconveniences.

While he waited in front of the food counter, he took a look around the restaurant so as not to search too long for a free seat later, tray in hand. At some tables, wretched figures gazed into space, a cup of coffee in front of them, which they would hold on to until evening. At other tables he saw men gesticulating wildly, still others were occupied by pensioners playing cards or by chatty old ladies who probably wouldn't get up any sooner either.

He had already pointed out these abuses to those responsible in the restaurant several times, but they apparently did not consider it necessary to do anything about it. At least he had always found a free seat so far.

"Pea soup, as usual?" the woman at the food counter asked him.

"Today I'd rather have the spaghetti."

"I'm afraid they're sold out."



"So pea soup it is, then."

He took a mineral water from the refrigerated counter, paid and sat down at a table where, to all appearances, only single people were seated. A fly had followed him from the food counter to the table. Stubbornly, it tried to get some of his soup. He managed to chase the insect off his plate, whereupon it prepared to settle on his neighbour's steak. The latter shooed the fly to his counterpart's stew. When it was chased away from there too, it finally sat down on the stain-covered plastic tablecloth.

The insect was about to rub its legs together, as flies are wont to do, when the stew eater's fleshy paw whizzed down on it and crushed it. Immediately after, a massive index finger flicked the insect's mortal remains off the table.

"That's what they'd like to do to us, too," babbled someone he hadn't noticed at first. He was sitting at the head of the table, directly in front of the large window pane, against which two children were pressing their noses. For a

few seconds, everyone at the table looked towards him.

"I've been unemployed for almost two years now," the man added, spurred on by the attention he suddenly received. "And I tell you, they'd do the same to us if they could!"

When the other guests realised that the speaker was drunk, they turned back to their meals.

The pea soup was a bit watery today. It had probably just been re-poured into the food serving container, and he had only received the water that had settled on top due to the lack of stirring.

The drunk man raised his voice again. "Two years is a hell of a long time! That's something all these pen-pushers in the HR departments can't even imagine. They sit there and keep telling you the same. Just like parrots: 'You'll hear from us. You'll hear from us! You'll hear from us!' You're always too old, too young, too stupid, too smart, your jacket's too long, your hair's too brown, or whatever."



The chitterer looked around, but no one was paying attention to him anymore. "But it's true," he grumbled to himself, "they always find something that doesn't suit them."

He had definitely chosen the wrong table. But if he had just stood up now, it would probably have caused too much of a stir. So he decided to just finish his soup, then get a cup of coffee and head for another table with it.

"And all that haggling over money!" the drunkard continued to complain. "At the job center they offer you low-paid work at best, and at home your old lady is nagging you to bring some money home. And where from? Should I become a bank robber?"

The man paused for a moment, then thought aloud: "Actually, that wouldn't be a bad idea –

the money there has been stolen by someone else anyway!"

Now it was getting too much for him! Without further ado, he picked up his half-emptied plate and glass and took them to the dish rack. Then he got himself a cup of coffee, with which he sat down at a table in the far corner of the restaurant. Here he was squeezed between toilets and slot machines. However, he would rather endure the false violet scents of the toilet cleaner and the mendacious ringing of the slot machines than continue listening to the confused speeches of this lunatic.

The restaurant had become much emptier by now. Fortunately, though, the noise level was still enough to drown out the words of the drunk, whom he could still see gesticulating from a distance.

He now took the latest supermarket brochures out of his briefcase to conduct his market analysis on this basis. For the four supermarkets that came into question for his shopping tour, he prepared four lists and noted on each of them

the products that were available at particularly low prices in the respective store.

The differences in honey prices were particularly striking. But with coffee, too, he had to be careful. At first he thought he had discovered a very interesting offer, but then it turned out that it was less than the usual quantity. Candles were also on offer, but he had no use for them.

Once he had finished the lists, he transferred the products he absolutely had to buy to a new list. After each product, he wrote the abbreviation of the supermarket where it was available. On another list, he wrote down the things he only wanted to buy eventually, again with the corresponding supermarket abbreviations behind them. Here, the purchase decision depended on whether the cheap offers for the must-have products were not yet out of



stock – which, unfortunately, did not happen so rarely.

Finally, he noted on a third list the products that cost approximately the same in all markets. Where he would buy these products depended on factors such as distances between the stores and the clarity of the product arrangement. Lastly, he chose the most convenient route for his purchases. Then he finished his coffee and brought the cup to the dish rack.

The shopping proceeded to his complete satisfaction. Most of the special offers he had noted down were not yet out of stock, so he was even able to buy three products from the "can buy" list. This time there were even no major discussions with the staff. The only incident was when he had to explain to a saleswoman that it was not helpful to always put the products with an earlier expiry date at the front. When he pointed out to her that this trick would eventually fail because the customers could get used to such a strategy, she reacted somewhat irritably.

However, she didn't seem to be completely averse to the idea of rearranging the products.

Despite the fact that his shopping ran smoothly on the whole, time was still short in the end. The reason was probably that it had taken him longer than usual to compile the lists.

When he arrived at the station, the big station clock already showed 4.40 p.m. From a distance, he saw his colleagues waiting for the train. With the fully packed

shopping bag in one hand and the briefcase in the other, he hurried through the underpass, while he could

already hear the rattling of the arriving train above him. Taking two steps at a time, he rushed up the stairs to the platform and there joined the mass of commuters patiently advancing into the train.



When the train started, he sat on one of the folding seats again. Calmly, he reviewed the past day once again. Under no circumstances should he forget to draw Mr. Lehman's attention to the broken window tomorrow and to give him the list of novelties he had compiled in the library today. In addition, he wanted to enter the day's expenses in his budget book at home.

As soon as the train passed the high-rise buildings of the suburbs, the first passengers rose from their seats so as not to have to wait too long when disembarking. These were the ones who had little time to change trains. Fortunately, he was not one of them – his bus did not leave until 12 minutes after the train arrived. Nevertheless, the crush around him forced him to get up from his folding seat.

Along with the others, he drifted to the exit of the train and from there across the platform to the station forecourt. This was the most pleasant part of the day for him. Among all these tired people mechanically striving towards the buses and cars, a feeling of community

regularly flowed through him, strengthening him and making him light-heartedly face the strains of the coming day.

