

Edgar Fuhrmann: Passing Friendship



A man just released from prison tells a chance acquaintance about the reasons for his imprisonment. A story about drugs, companionship and betrayal.

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: Free-Photos: Meditative Drug smoking; p. 3: StockSnap: Coffee cup; p. 5: Willgard Krause: Scarecrow at sunset; p. 7: Thomas H. (McRonny): Lonely hut; p. 8: Eva Bergschneider: Pub in Dublin (modified); p. 11: Art-Tower: Amsterdam; p. 13: Ichigo 121212: Prison cell; p. 15: Goranmx: Smoke

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The train shook me rudely from my sleep.

It squeaked and jolted relentlessly until I finally wrenched my eyes open and squinted into the station's headlights. Sure enough – I had to get off. I slipped on my shoes, fumbled for my bag and staggered off the train. "Coffee," was my only thought as I tottered sleepily towards the station concourse.

To my great delight, a snack bar had already opened, where I got a cup of coffee for a small fortune. Inside, the air was far too stuffy for me to keep my tired eyes open. So I sat down in front of the bar on my bag, which slumped groaning beneath me.

My thoughts revolved around the exciting question of how long the coffee would warm my hands in this draught, when suddenly I felt someone approaching me. Looking up, I gazed into a haggard face, which, framed by long chestnut-brown hair, seemed even more tired



than mine. Maybe someone who has already slept in parks for several nights, I thought, instinctively reaching for my wallet so that I could respond as quickly as possible to the expected request for money.

"Want a beer?" the man with the gaunt face asked me spontaneously. At my astonished look he added: "I'll buy you one."

The question had caught me off guard. At first I didn't know how to react. "To be honest," I finally murmured, "I'd rather have a coffee."

"All right, I'll get you one," the man replied, disappearing into the snack bar.

While he fetched the coffee, I had the opportunity to get a closer look at him through the large windows of the bar. From a distance, what struck me most was his stooped posture. The leather clothes, which might have once been tight on his body but were now much too loose, made him look a little lost. A scarecrow on the move, that's how he stood in front of the counter and rummaged in his pockets to pay for the coffee.

His movements were careless and a little shaky. A good part of the coffee was already on the saucer when he handed it to me. After I had placed the old cup next to me and taken the new one, he pushed an abandoned luggage trolley over and sat down beside me.

For a while we sat next to each other in silence. Sipping my coffee, I stared drowsily into space. My chance acquaintance gazed impassively at the travellers, who were now gradually hurrying off to their morning trains.

I thought to myself that I would probably have to start a conversation now. While I was still thinking of a suitable topic, the man beside me suddenly asked me: "Do you know where I just come from?"

I uttered my obligatory "No" and looked at him expectantly.



"From prison," he told me.

I tried to look as indifferent as possible. "Did you visit someone, or ...?"

"No. I was in for one year. For weed."

"A whole year!" I exclaimed. "That long!"

He nodded. Around us it was now becoming increasingly busy. Trains were called out more and more frequently, commuters streamed towards the tracks or the exit. Some eyed us with undisguised annoyance when they had to go around us in the crush and thus lost precious seconds.

Without paying attention to the hustle and bustle, my new acquaintance began to tell me his story. "You know, before prison I had a really great time. We lived together in a house back then, me and a few friends, out in the sticks. It was almost rural. Once we even thought about getting some chickens. – Do you like chickens?" he asked me abruptly.

"I don't know. Rather the eggs than the chickens."



"Exactly," he laughed. "After all, chickens make a lot of dirt, and what's more, they cluck all the time. So we preferred to do without chickens. Anyway, we didn't need them to have an idyllic life. You know, no one just did their own thing – everyone took care of each other. We really shared everything. We had a common house, a common cash box, a common fridge. Of course, everyone had their own room, but if you had problems, you just had to go to the kitchen to talk. There was always someone there if you weren't in a good mood."

He gazed ahead of him, lost in thought. It almost seemed as if he had forgotten me. The first an-

nouncements of delays resounded from the loudspeakers.

"And then one day I met a guy called Wolf," he continued after a while. "I used to go to the 'Sahara' at that time – that was one of those junkie bars, you know? And there he was sitting at the counter. I noticed him right

away. He had such long blond curls – and fantastic blue eyes, I tell you ... I spontaneously invited him for a beer, and of course I offered him a joint. We immediately hit it off. He could listen to you for hours, but you could also do real shit with him – he was a real buddy!"

He gazed ahead of him again, engrossed in his memories. "From then on, I met him almost every time I went to the Sahara. We spent whole nights chatting. And finally he also told me about himself. That his father had died a few



months ago, that he had no real place to live, no money, no friends and so on. Man, that really touched me! We didn't have any rooms left in our house, but my room was very big, so I offered him to move in with me. – You would have done that, too, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, of course," I confirmed. Actually, I wasn't sure if I would have done the same. But the pleading look of my new acquaintance hardly permitted any other answer.

Relieved at my approving reaction, he continued: "The others didn't agree at first. Such a close-knit community, and then suddenly a newcomer arrives whom you don't really know – of course you're suspicious then, I could understand them. But I truly wanted to do something for Wolf, and at some point the others accepted that. So in the end he moved in with us."

He looked into space again for a while. Then he added, half speaking to himself: "In the beginning we all got along great. Wolf was just a nice young fellow, he had something ... Well, somehow you just had to like him. But after a while

there was some trouble, after all, because he was living at our expense all the time. So the others thought he could also contribute something. Moreover, he often disappeared overnight, just like that, without any explanation. That also went against the grain for some."

He fell into a short silence, then suddenly asked me: "Do you have a friend?"

"Excuse me?" I hadn't understood him right away, because by now the morning rush was in full swing. Trains were leaving and arriving, loudspeakers were blaring, people were stumbling and cursing.

"Well, a friend," he repeated, "a real one, I mean. Don't you have a friend?"

"I think I do ..."

"Can you imagine not trusting your friend?"

"No – then it wouldn't be a friend!"

"You see, that's exactly what I told the others back then. I even stood up for Wolf when we went to Amsterdam once again. You know, because of the coffee shops and all that. We always combined these trips with a little camping

tour: a bit of strolling, a bit of looking at the countryside, just hanging out together. Wolf was eager to join us, and I finally persuaded the others to let him come along. After all, we went on the trip with our old camping bus, so there was enough space anyway."

He smiled pensively. "It was really funny in Amsterdam. It was summer and we had great weather ... Once we got caught in a thunder-storm, so we took shelter under the canopy of a church in the middle of Amsterdam. You could have wrung out Wolf – he had such beautiful long hair ... I rubbed it dry with my pullover ... Just imagine, I sacrificed my pullover for him, and he ..."



For a moment it seemed as if his voice failed him. I looked over at him, startled: Tears were running down his cheeks.

"On our way home, we stopped at a motorway restaurant," he continued. "After the meal, Wolf suddenly disappeared. At first I thought he'd gone to the toilet. But when I went down there, he was standing in a corner talking on his mobile phone! Boy, was he scared when he saw me! He always told me he didn't know anyone, and now he had to call people from Holland. But I didn't say anything. I thought he'd surely explain it to me later."

He wiped his face with the sleeves of his leather jacket, then reached into his pocket for a handkerchief. Finding nothing, he asked me: "Got anything to blow the nose with?"

I pulled out a paper towel that I had taken from the train toilet. When I gave it to him, our eyes met for a split second. I looked into his dark rimmed eyes and thought of the prison, of the many days and nights those eyes had spent staring at the wall.



He blew his nose and then put the paper towel in his pocket. "I can keep it, no?"

"Sure. There's plenty of it on the train."

He reflected for a moment, then went on. "When we crossed the border again, there were suddenly cops everywhere. They dragged us right out of the car – you know how gentle they can be. They didn't have to spend much time searching for the weed. They knew exactly where it was hidden. After that we were all put into a mobile cage – all except Wolf! Just imagine, he was even on a first-name basis with the cops! I just couldn't believe it! He's on first-name terms with the cops, and I thought he was my friend! And the way he looked at me, how

cold he was! I can tell you, I was completely crushed!"

His eyes filled with tears again. He reached for the paper towel I had given him and snorted into it again. Only now did I notice that people had already stopped here and there and were staring at us.

"The hardest part was that damn insidiousness," he sighed. "They knew very well that I was into that kind of guy – they set him up on me quite deliberately!"

"What a mess!" I muttered while looking the gawking passers-by straight in the face to drive them away.

"By the way, what's your destination?" he asked me after a while, when he had calmed down a bit.

"I wanted to take the next train to B.," I replied.

"Gee, it's leaving in five minutes," he exclaimed and jumped up. "You'll have to hurry!"

A little dazed, I stood up. Immediately, the spines of an overtired face bored into my cheeks.

"Take care, my friend," he whispered as I looked once more into his weary eyes. A moment later, the currents of travellers had torn us apart.

