

# Edgar Fuhrmann: Station Fairytale

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In a land that is near and far at the same time, a king with a gold belly and a prince with a belly in the shape of a safe rule over a large railway station. One day, the king sends his son on a journey. On his return he will no longer be the same.

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.

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## The King with the Gold Belly

**O**nce upon a time there was a king who ruled over a large railway station. At the station, many trains arrived and departed, big ones and small ones, every day. And there were always many people at the station, and the people were all in a great hurry, because they all wanted to be punctual. But the more they hurried, the earlier the trains left, and so they were always in a bad mood.

But there was also another reason for the people's bad mood. They were all travelling on trains that they didn't really want to take. And they did so because the king bestowed sumptuous gifts on them every evening if they took the trains he wanted them to take.

The king was very rich. He had a big belly that was entirely of gold and so heavy that it always had to be supported by several servants.

Being a royal belly supporter was, of course, a very important court position. The most important one, however, was that of the royal

feeding master. You could only become a royal feeding master if the king had the greatest confidence in you. To achieve this, however, you had to pass through all the other positions beforehand.

Part of the duties of the royal feeding master was to distribute the gifts in the evening with which the king rewarded the behaviour of his subjects. These gifts included such indispensable things as nose-picking machines and talking toilet brushes, but also peepholes through which you could dive into foreign worlds. Most desired were the magnificent palaces in which you were allowed to live all by yourself. Since it was always far too crowded at the station, everyone strove to be on their own.

Anyone who wanted to become a royal belly



supporter had to say many wise words to the king – such as praising him for his appearance and the benefits he brought

to the people. In particular, you had to praise the freedom that, through the king's wise decisions, determined the lives of his subjects – whereby providing freedom was the same for him as providing gifts.

To rise in the royal hierarchy, you had to hold the position of a belly supporter for at least one year. Since it was inevitable to get a hump after having supported the king's heavy gold belly for a year, all those who held a higher position showed such a gold hump. Consequently, the latter was regarded as a valuable distinction, even as a self-acquired beauty, which the distinguished highlighted with jewellery and special clothing.

Those who showed particular skill in carrying the royal belly could be appointed royal precentor next. This office had the following significance: every evening, all court officials gathered for prayer. The precentor then stood in front of the king and sang to him: "O thou who art more beautiful than a million!" – whereupon the court officials repeated the praise in chorus. Then he

sang to him: "O thou who art more beautiful than a billion!" – which they all repeated in unison as well.

This way it went on until the king fell asleep. But woe to the precentor who stopped praying before the king was fast asleep! In such a case, the king let out his dreaded "Dismissed – without notice!" and looked grimly at the royal law-maker, who then, with a weighty countenance, listed a few paragraphs to justify the dismissal.

On the other hand, those who carried out the duties of the royal precentor to the king's satisfaction could hope to be appointed royal belly measurer. This office served to measure the circumference of the royal gold belly every morning – which was a very dangerous job. For when the king had lost weight, he called the royal wailing women to him, and the belly measurer was dismissed without notice. This explains why only very few managed to rise to the highest positions in the kingdom.



## Trainless People

Whoever had been dismissed without notice by the king had to join the trainless people. These were excluded from the evening gifts. Unlike the other subjects, they did not have a palace or at least a hole in the stone honeycombs of the royal castle to retreat at night. Instead, they slept on the benches in front of the station, where they scoured the rubbish bins for food scraps during the day.

Since the trainless people looked sick and old, they were not allowed to enter the station building. The king only tolerated young and healthy people in his vicinity. If he had not been

even more disgusted by death than by sickness and old age, he would probably have had the trainless people beaten to death like pesky insects.

Sleeping outside the station was not only unpleasant because it was as cold and draughty there as on the tracks when a train pulled in. It was also a very unsightly environment. While everything inside the station building glittered and gleamed, a black, sticky rain fell incessantly from the sky in front of the station, obscuring everything. Moreover, the building was surrounded by huge grey towers with giant propellers spinning on the tops.

As unpleasant as it was to be in the midst of this darkness circling around itself – the king still viewed the spectacle with great pleasure. His palace had a large picture window through which he could look directly at the propeller towers and the sooty rain. To cheer himself up when he was in a bad mood, he would look out into the steady rotating of the propellers and

listen to the royal electricity counters reading out the latest records of success.

In fact, this was one of the wonders for which the subjects revered their king: By plunging the world outside the station into darkness, he produced the light that filled the station inside.

### **The Prince with the Strongbox Belly**

The king also had a son. And this son had a belly in the shape of a safe, not inferior in size to his father's gold belly. The prince loved to teach other people about the sense of life. During the day, therefore, the young generation of the kingdom had to gather around him. Then the prince would ask the young people questions such as: "How many tables can you make from a 300-year-old oak tree?" or "Why are machines better than people?" or "How many storeys can be built on top of each other in one square kilometer?"

In order to give a satisfactory answer to the prince, you did not have to be good at arithme-

tic. The prince considered the most audacious answer to be the best, because he hoped that students who gave such answers would come up with new inventions that would fill his strongbox belly even faster. That is why he bestowed high honours on such students.

In the evening, before going to sleep, the royal reciter had to whisper long calculations and balance sheets into the prince's ear, containing many numbers and above all many plus signs. If, however, a minus sign appeared in the balance sheets, the reciter had to conceal this from the prince. Minus signs felt like a personal insult to him, almost like a physical pain.

The greatest delight for the prince was when the royal feeding master would come to him in the morning with whole stacks of neatly bundled banknotes and put them in his strongbox belly. Then a feeling of pure delight and bliss flowed through him, and millions



of plus signs seemed to sparkle in the station sky.

## **The Prince Goes on a Journey**

One day the king sent his son on a journey. The prince was always very pleased when his father sent him on such missions. After all, there were always people waiting for him at the destination of every journey, who, following the rules of etiquette, opened his vault belly and filled it with thick bundles of banknotes.

On the day of the journey, the prince was therefore in a good mood. He paid friendly compliments to all the court officials who accompanied him to the train – such as that they reminded him of a certain banknote or that their hump seemed particularly splendid to him that day.

The court officials returned his compliments as best as they could and waved after the prince for a long time as he left the station on the fastest train of the royal train fleet. Even when

the train was long out of sight, they still waved, because no one wanted to be the first to lower his hand.

Meanwhile, the prince sat in a wonderfully soft armchair on the whizzing train and looked out the window. Of course, he couldn't see anything outside, because the train was travelling far too fast for the fragments of the passing landscape to form a picture. So the prince did not succeed in distracting himself in this way.



The members of the royal entourage who were sitting with him on the train did not provide him with any diversion either. For it was customary in the kingdom to listen to uplifting business reports via headphones during train journeys in order to please oneself and not disturb the other travellers.

Even the latest balance sheets did not offer him any distraction – the royal reciter had already

read them to him in the morning. So the prince felt more and more uncomfortable. "+25", he thought and: "+43", but he simply did not manage to calm down. "+12 235", he thought and: "+239 567", but it was all in vain. He drummed his fingers on the back of his arm-chair, but the train just didn't move any faster. Would he ever arrive at his destination?

As a last resort, the prince finally ordered one of the royal feeding officers who accompanied him on the journey to give him a small snack in the form of two stacks of banknotes. But even that only brightened his mood for a short while. The journey simply did not come to an end. The train, fast as an arrow, seemed to creep along for the prince like a trainless person strolling across the station forecourt in search of alms.

## The Tunnel

After some time the train entered a tunnel. "What a calamity!" thought the prince, because he hated tunnels. But things were to get even worse. When the train reached the middle of the tunnel, it suddenly slowed down, it wobbled and jolted, and then came to a stop with a final, violent thud.



The banknotes somersaulted in the prince's stomach. "Minus!" he thought, since he immediately felt the losses that this delay would mean for him. Impatient, he instructed one of the court officials to go to the locomotive driver and order him to continue the journey at once. But the court official returned after a short time without having achieved anything. The locomotive driver had noticed a total failure of the elec-

tronics and was now waiting for the auxiliary locomotive ordered by radio.

"Minus-minus-minus! Super minus!" the prince shouted when he heard this, jumping up from his chair and furiously flailing his arms. In his rage, he ordered all passengers to go to their destinations on foot, on penalty of lifelong trainlessness. He even instructed his servants to leave the train so as to make sure that the other passengers would move fast enough.

Too late, the prince realised how pointless this order was: how were the passengers supposed to get to their destinations in the dark? How could they ever compensate for the loss of speed caused by the failure of the locomotive? And above all, who was going to feed him with banknotes when he needed some? "O dreadful, double and triple minus!" exclaimed the prince when he realised his mistake.

A feeling of uneasiness rose in him. It worried him because he sensed that it was not from a lack of banknotes. So the discomfort quickly turned into fear. But since a prince should not



be afraid, he tried to numb the fear by walking up and down the train.

He fought the maelstrom of minus signs that threatened to take hold of him by imagining the most beautiful plus signs he had come across in his life. But it was all in vain. After only a few minutes he was sure that everyone had forgotten him and no one would ever come to his rescue. So he finally opened one of the train doors and went out into the darkness of the tunnel.

At first he hoped to catch up with those he had expelled from the train. But he soon had to realise that this undertaking was futile. He himself

had instructed the passengers to hurry. With his heavy strongbox belly, he had no chance of even getting close to them.

Groaning, he paused and looked around. Even the lights of the train were no longer visible. It was completely dark and he was all alone. Suddenly a fear came over the prince that was not at all prince-like, a fear such as he had always seen in the eyes of those who had been dismissed without notice by his father.

In order not to lose his mind, he decided to go back to the train as quickly as possible and wait there calmly until help arrived. But no matter how hard he tried, the train was no longer to be found. Perhaps he had accidentally turned into another tunnel tube, or the train had pushed its way backwards out of the tunnel. In any case, the prince had to admit to himself, his situation did not give cause for an optimistic prognosis.

"Minus, super minus, hyper minus," thought the prince, but he thought it very quietly, for fear of his own thoughts, which suddenly seemed completely directionless to him. In a way, they were

the exact opposite of the tunnel shaft that led ever straight ahead, unwavering and incorruptible, into an ever deeper and ever more impenetrable darkness.

## The Girl with the Guitar

Finally, when his legs were already numb from all the exertion, it seemed to him as if a fresh scent was wafting around his nose. However, there was still no light to be seen. So he had to continue stumbling along the tracks, disoriented.

After he had walked a little further, he suddenly spotted a light in the distance, as if from a dimly lit window. Had he possibly left the tunnel without noticing it?

Although he walked straight towards the light, the glow did not become stronger. Only the scent increased in intensity.

"Plus!" thought the prince. Never before had he come across such a fine scent. He firmly resolved that when he returned to his homeland,

he would send a few court officials to this area to fill the scent into tins and then exchange it for banknotes.



Spurred on by such hopeful prospects, the prince reached a small, shabby cottage after some time. From the window, a flickering glow of light emanated. "Minus", thought the prince, because he hated things of no value. But he was still glad to finally meet a subject to whom he could do the honour of offering help to the highly valued prince.

Without further ado, the prince bumped against the wooden door of the cottage with his vault belly. It was meant as a knock, but the force of the blow made the door fly open with a loud bang.

Inside, a young woman sat at a rickety little table in front of a candle, knitting. She had tied

her long, red-blonde hair back in a pigtail to work, her shirt was casually folded back at the sleeves, and there were numerous colourful patches on her trousers. When the door flew open, she looked startled but unafraid at her unexpected guest.

"O minus upon minus! Triple minus!" thought the prince.

"I have an urgent phone call to make!" he announced after he had somewhat caught himself.

"I don't have a phone," the girl replied calmly.

The prince was stunned. Was it possible that this minus girl dared to make fun of him?

"Don't you see who I am?" he asked her. "I am your plus-sign prince, the protector of positive balances, and you must, no: you have the honour to help me!"

The young woman looked at the prince with amusement. "I would love to help you, whether you are a prince or not – but I still don't have a phone."

These words were too much for the prince. Speechless, he dropped onto the rickety sofa

that stood in a corner of the room. No sooner had he sunk into the cushions than it collapsed beneath him with a loud crash.

"O minus ..." thought the prince very quietly, for he feared he would have to compensate for the damage. But the girl only laughed. The prince, who was hanging helplessly in the wreckage of the sofa, glared at her from angry eyes. However, he refrained from reprimanding her. After all, it had been his fault that the sofa had fallen apart, and besides, he was dependent on the girl.

"Now give me something to eat!" he commanded. "The time for the royal evening feeding has long since come."

"I have nothing to eat in the house," the girl replied, still smirking at the awkward position the prince was in.

"I appoint you Extraordinary Feeding Lady to His Majesty the Prince!"

"I still have nothing to eat in the house," the girl repeated.

"Then knock down the tree outside your window and exchange it for banknotes!"

The girl shook her head disapprovingly. "You want me to cut down that beautiful oak tree? Who will give me shade in the summer then? Where will the blackbirds sing their songs for me in spring? – No, that is out of the question!"

Never before had the prince felt so minuscule. "I urgently need new banknotes," he explained to the girl. "Otherwise I'll die of hunger."

The girl laughed. "Why don't you get some berries or mushrooms from the forest if you are hungry?"

The prince did not answer her. Obviously he had come across the most trainless person one could imagine. From such a person, no help was to be expected. So he decided to just rest a bit and then set off again.



The girl felt sorry for the prince. It must be terrible, she thought, to walk around with such a vault belly all the time. So she tried to somehow respond to this oddball who thought he was a prince.



"Why does it have to be banknotes, of all things?" she asked him sympathetically. "I found a beautiful feather today – I'll offer it to you if you like."

"Is it valuable?" the prince wanted to know.

The girl nodded indulgently. "I have never found a more beautiful one."

"Is it worth more than ten banknotes?"

"Much more," the girl assured him. "I wouldn't give it away for all the banknotes in the world."

The girl is exaggerating wildly, of course, thought the prince. But it's better than nothing! And because he hoped to be able to exchange the feather for banknotes on his return, he de-

cided to make do with it for now. So he ordered the girl to put the feather in his belly safe.

"I appoint you Feather Collector to His Plussity the Prince!" he announced to give it an official air.

"What funny ideas you have!" Laughing, the girl placed the feather in the prince's strongbox belly.

"Now read me a balance sheet as a lullaby!" he instructed the girl after the feeding process was finished.

"I'm afraid I don't have one in the house right now," the girl replied with amusement.

"Then make one up."

"Can't you wish for something easier?" sighed the girl.

But the prince remained stubborn. "I have to hear a balance sheet, otherwise I can't fall asleep!"

The landlady thought for a while. "You know what, I'll play you something on the guitar!" she finally suggested. "Maybe that will help you."



"I want to hear a balance sheet!" the prince insisted in a whiny voice.

The girl looked at him compassionately. "You can imagine a balance sheet while I play the guitar."

With that, the girl took out her guitar and began to play. And because the prince was so tired and had no other choice anyway, he resigned himself to his fate and made himself as comfortable as possible on the pillows. After only a short time, the exertion of the day caused him to sink into a deep sleep.

## A New Life

When the prince woke up the next morning, he had a terrible stomachache. "Minus-minus-minus!" he whispered, but he didn't have much time to think. He felt so sick that he immediately had to get up from his uncomfortable sleeping place and rush outside to throw up. And as he did so, all the banknotes he had hoarded in his vault belly gushed out of his mouth. Unfortunately, there was a stormy wind that morning. So the notes flew off in all directions.

"Minus! O dreadful minus!" howled the prince, but there was nothing he could do about it. In the end, only the feather remained in his belly safe.

Dejected, the prince went back into the house to complain to the girl about the terrible misfortune that had befallen him. But as he walked towards the girl, who was lying on a mattress in a corner of the room, still fast asleep, he felt that he was more relieved than saddened by the loss of the banknotes.

"Minus!" he wanted to think, but he felt "Plus".  
For a while the prince stood silently beside the girl. Then she finally opened her eyes.

"Minus?" he stammered without thinking it.  
The girl smiled. "It's all right," she reassured him.  
"Just get some more sleep."

With that, she turned to the side to slumber a little more herself. The prince looked helplessly out of the window of the cottage, in front of



which a few horses were cavorting in a meadow. The morning sun made the dew-drops glisten. Like pearls they were strung on the thin spider threads.

"What magnificent pearls!" the prince said to himself, but to his own surprise he did not think for a second of turning the pearls into banknotes.

A joy rose in him that frightened him because it was much stronger than anything he had felt

before. He was dizzy from all the foreign smells, and the sparks of the morning seemed to dance before his eyes even as he turned back to the girl. Quite against his habit, he lay down once more and slept until noon. When he woke up again, he had lost all desire to return home quickly.

From then on, the prince lived with the girl in the shabby old house, which suddenly didn't seem shabby to him at all. With great zeal, he set about the tasks his new life entailed. First he repaired the sofa. Then he decorated the table with carvings, which the girl praised with considerate politeness, patched a hole in a corner of the roof and day after day fetched water from the well near the house.

In the evening he strolled with the girl across the meadows, learned to collect medicinal herbs with great skill and looked everywhere for feathers to please the girl. But nowhere did he find a feather that even came close to the one the girl had given him on his arrival.

## Homecoming

After a few weeks had passed, the prince said to the girl: "Let's go to my father's station! We'll get married there, and then we'll build a little house as beautiful as this one for every subject of the kingdom."

The young woman just laughed. It would never have occurred to her to leave her little house, the horses and the green meadows. Furthermore, she felt a great fear of the prince's father since he had told her about him. But even more than the king, she feared his kingdom, where everything that was precious to her seemed to be missing.

But the prince stuck to his plan. "When we pull into the station", he said to the girl, "you will pick up your guitar. Then you will play your most beautiful songs and sing them with your bright



voice. When people hear that, they will all stop and listen to you. And they will feel things they have never felt before. They will smile and they will cry, for they will regret all the days when they travelled on the wrong trains."

The prince's cheeks glowed with euphoria. "And then nothing will be the same as before. Everyone will only take the train that suits them, and even the trainless ones will be allowed to board the trains again. Everyone will walk completely upright, and a dignity never seen before will emanate from them. And since the royal belly supporters will also stand upright, the king will sink forward. With arms and legs wriggling like a beetle that has fallen on its back, he will grow thinner and thinner until he can finally stand up again – but then he will no longer be a king."

"How nasty you are!" laughed the girl. "Shame on you!" But secretly the prince's speech did appeal to her, and so she finally agreed to his proposal. One of the next days they set off on the journey to the faraway station.



Trepidation rose in them as they left the little house. At the same time, however, they were inspired by the adventurous spirit of those who feel the spark of a great change in their hearts. At first it seemed almost impossible to find the way to the king's station. The prince had never found out how he had come to the girl, and the girl had never heard of the station before the prince had told her about it. But in the end they did reach a track, where soon after a train with royal track workers came along. The track workers initially met the prince with great suspicion. They did not at all want to be-

lieve that he was the one he claimed to be. Not only had the prince's vault belly become much thinner and softer during the time he had lived with the girl. His face, which had once been wrinkled and grey like an old banknote, also looked much smoother and fresher now.

The prince's unusual friendliness was also something that the royal track workers did not know about him either. He therefore had to tell them a few things only he could know before they believed his words.

Once the men were finally convinced that they had the real prince in front of them, they could hardly believe their luck: A handsome reward and a high court office had been promised for the one who would find the missing prince.

But while the prince and the girl were travelling on the train of the



royal track workers towards the king's station, the girl was seized with a severe malaise. The prince took care of her untiringly, but all his efforts were in vain – he could not help her.

The closer they came to the station and the more trains rushed towards them, the worse the girl felt. And as they pulled into the station, even the guitar fell from her hands, and she fainted. The prince was dismayed and immediately wanted to call for help. However, the royal track workers convinced him that it would be better to go to his father first and then return with the king's personal physician.

The prince felt surprisingly alien in his old homeland. No one recognised him, everyone walked past him without a greeting, some even looked at him disdainfully as if he was one of the trainless people – he had changed too much. Even his own father stared at him in disbelief.

When the king finally recognised him as his own flesh and blood, he turned pale and red by turns. A fit of rage shook him like no one had ever experienced before. "Dismissed – without

notice – dismissed – without notice – without notice – without notice!" he cried in a confused, horrifying stammer, fixing his eyes expectantly on the royal legislator.

The latter, however, did not know what to say. The case of the king dismissing his son was unprecedented. So the king dismissed him too, and with a terrible roll of his eyes he shouted at his son: "Toilet cleaner! You shall be a toilet cleaner! Toi-let clea-ner!!!"

The king's entourage froze in fright. No one had expected such a terrible punishment! The prince still stammered something about getting married and living in a small cottage, but the king only addressed him as a toilet cleaner and ordered the royal guards to remove him immediately.

While the royal guards escorted the prince to the station toilets, he saw the train of the royal track workers being driven onto the siding. He wanted to run after it, but the guards refused to let him go. They felt sorry for the prince, but their concern for their advancement at court

was stronger than any compassion. So they remained firm and said to themselves: "Rules are rules!"

Since then, the prince has led a miserable toilet-cleaning existence. With his strongbox belly already half turned to flesh, he looks woefully disfigured. His face has turned ash-grey, and only the trainless people sometimes take pity on him and give him some of the alms they beg during the day.

If, however, you find the end of this story too sad, you can go to the siding and wake up the girl who is still lying there in a deep swoon. Who knows, maybe she was only afflicted by a temporary indisposition, or she is merely gathering her strength for the one song that will outshine everything and blow away all the plus and minus signs in a single sweep.

