

Translated extract from

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gewöhnen das muss gar nicht lange dauern.**

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**You can even get used to each other wordlessly, it doesn't
have to take long at all.**

Translated by Zaia Alexander

The Train Conductor

My name is Simone Saalfeld and I am your train conductor today. My name is Susanne Sieler. My Name: Today my name is Salomé Santrac and I will accompany you on your journey from Zurich to Hamburg. I know my name is unusual, nonetheless, if you have any questions I am always at your disposal. And otherwise, if you need anything at all, please feel free to contact me and my team any time. Perhaps you are thirsty or hungry, or you have other basic needs, if so, I might even be able to take care of your requests right at your seat, especially if you are thirsty or hungry in first class, first class thirst is quickly quenched; the same goes for hunger, that is, if we are dealing with the harmless kind of hunger that can be taken care of with the flick of a wrist, good morning, tickets please, I have to say that even though you know why I'm approaching you; despite the speed, I don't grab onto the seats; rather I rush towards you ready and smiling with my sentence, and while you search for your ticket, I stand next to you holding the seat firmly with one hand as we drive over the railroad switch behind Basel; even though I know it doesn't really matter, I take a quick look at myself in the smoothly curved window and hastily smooth down my hair which is a bit stringy and gnawed at the front. The circular lamps hanging diagonally over you are shining on your fingers as they nimbly search through your handbag, the walls of the Intercity Express curving around you almost imperceptibly. I know you will find your ticket, you have manicured soft fingers and you have applied cream all the way to the edges of your face, of course you have a ticket, and I'm glad you don't have it handy, that way I can stand next to you a moment longer, swaying gently side to side in motion with the train, watching as you gracefully search for it; there are passengers who search clumsily and frantic, seized with fear they will not be allowed to remain among us, but with you there is no question, you belong here and you know it, and there you go, there's the ticket, of course, it's not a ticket, rather it's the Bahn Card 100, you have purchased a membership, that makes us members of the same club, in other words, we are family. In the meantime, you probably have gotten used to my name, although we have not spoken; you can even get used to each other wordlessly, it doesn't have to take long at all. I'm reluctant to let go of you now that I've gotten used to you, slowly I continue onward, I turn around and look at you, you are bent over a newspaper that I hadn't noticed earlier, but you can't fool me, I know you are simply using the newspaper as a pretext for our separation, until you've forgotten about me, after I've walked past three, no five, or maybe

even eight rows on, and the darkened landscape has grown imperceptibly lighter. You are unable to see this because the windows are black from the reading light diagonally above you and it hides the landscape, which doesn't matter anyway, not for you, and certainly not for me.

Every seat is my seat because I've sat in each one of them, leaned my head on every window, folded down every armrest, I have touched every train everywhere, it's part of the job, I accompany the train, and touch it in areas intended for that purpose.

Somebody has made himself quite at home here, newspapers spread across both seats, shoes off, a sweetish smell announcing his presence, all the rows around him are free, he has put a cloth or a scarf over his eyes and has forgotten I am coming. He has cleverly spread himself across the gap between the seats, his head resting on a rolled-up jacket, the raised armrest pressing into his back isn't comfortable, but he doesn't care, he needs to sleep something off and have a good night's sleep, he can only sleep on the train, that's why he's here. His fatigue inundates me and heads straight into my eyes, I have to rub them carefully so my makeup doesn't smear, the eyeliner makes me look firm, possibly even severe, and this doesn't fit my name at all, I don't really need it anyway, I only need it if somebody doesn't belong and isn't prepared to purchase a membership, even if it is the most basic kind, a short trip, a commuter ride, one or two stations, not worth mentioning, nothing that counts in my eyes, but I will turn a blind eye if they want to be here.

But this one here does not want to be anywhere, and certainly not with us, he wants to sleep, his paralyzing sleepiness slumps against me, he doesn't care where he is, he could be lying around on any old floor, in any old dump, and he would just curl up like that, he could even be lying under a bridge, or with a woman, he could be lying there with me, he wouldn't care, he doesn't need a ticket, he doesn't belong. I stand right next to him, good morning, boarding in Freiburg, tickets please, he does not move at all, he might even be dead, his foot is sticking out from the seat and I bump into it harder than I had intended to because a motion of the train pushes me into him. He draws back his foot, but I refuse to give in, I push my knees against his foot until he rips the cloth from his eyes and stares at me.

My name is Salomé Santrac today, I say clearly, and I am your train conductor. May I see your ticket please.

Nobody's got a name like that, he mutters, and continues staring at me. I touch the white collar framing my neck, it lies flawlessly on my jacket lapel, I do not wear a necklace,

although white pearls would go perfectly with the collar, but we are not allowed to wear jewelry. Even unadorned, I am quite attractive; despite the gnawed hair, which has always lain rather thin and shaggy on my head, I don't need to wear jewelry.

I'll accompany you, I say to the passenger, and lean attractively against the back of the seat in front of him, and I see him sizing me up; he doesn't see I'm doing my job, he only sees the hair and perhaps the wrinkles around my eyes and the hair on my legs which has grown back again, even though I always shave and wear opaque pantyhose; I have to wear them, they go with the outfit, just like the opaque windows of our trains, no one can look in from outside; when the people on the platform try to wave good-bye to the departing passengers, they step very close to the windows, sometimes they frame their face with their hands and press it against the glass, wild and blind smiles, farewells that grow in intensity because they are gazing into the void, and that's how it is with the pantyhose.

But perhaps this passenger is able to see through the pantyhose, there are people who have that kind of gaze. Just recently, somebody between Ulm and Munich looked right through my jacket and blouse and saw my left breast was partially bulging out of the bra-cup, I had noticed it as well and unobtrusively tried to push it back into place through two layers of fabric, but there was too much else to do before I could reach the passenger; in just a single glance, he saw the bulging breast and his lips pursed in amusement, a look of relish came into his eyes, he rubbed his hands and sat up a little as if tying a napkin around his neck in preparation for a tasty meal. There was nothing left for me to do but to punish him. I asked him for his ticket, his Bahn Card, his credit card and his ID, and while he was digging everything out, he stopped pursing his lips, and I quickly thrust my finger under my jacket and blouse and pushed the breast back inside the cup, I did not care whether he watched me or not, he had caught me anyway.

But today I have a better name, it is a truly resonant, dreamy name; it spares me a thing or two, and I turn away from the sleepy, defiant passenger who again mutters, nobody's got a name like that, but he can't talk me out of my name, he's envious, that's all it is. He's hanging out on the seats as though he wanted to make himself at home for the night, but it has just gone by, fortunately, with the alarm clock for the early shift, it has gone by again, I always check-in as early as possible. He has his arms folded across his chest, he doesn't look as if he wants to trouble himself to look for his ticket, he eyes me stubbornly and disgustedly and a sweet smell of sleep emanates from him.

I stand my ground; I cannot possibly go away until he gives up. It's easy for me to stand, I

know the motion of the train, I'm not at its mercy, only on land do I move awkwardly, I have a slightly sway back, my neck is so tense I have to raise my shoulders, because they won't go down, my hands are clenched in my pockets around the house key, or the hotel key, or apartment key so I won't lose it, after all, I've got to sleep somewhere.

I have to sleep when I'm at home, I don't do anything else to do there, whenever I'm at home it's time to sleep, that's why I don't manage to do anything else at home, I go to bed immediately and take a light sleeping pill right away, something herbal so I can get to sleep. There's not much time for sleep, I have to get up early and leave early for the early shift. It doesn't matter whether I sleep at home or in the Intercity Hotel, I have furnished my apartment the same so I don't have to constantly get readjusted: a bed lamp, TV, a freshly made double bed, a bright carpet, the shelves empty and clean.

The need to sleep connects me to the sleepy, angry passenger, you may continue to sleep I say soothingly, I just quickly need to see your ticket, and he leers at me once more before he rolls halfway to the side, which is not easy on the narrow seat, he removes a ticket from his rear back pocket with a scornful shrug, and by its color I see it is, yet again, the black Bahn Card 100, it gleams in his hand as though varnished, and this triumph is hard to swallow. He belongs, he can sleep as long as he wants, he can sleep all the way to Hamburg or Berlin and he owes me nothing. I cannot say anything, but I also am not able to see the ticket, I have to check the date, perhaps it is no longer valid, perhaps he is trying to fool me, but I just stand there staring at his wool sock stretched before me on the seat, at the shoes carelessly lying across each other on the gray-striped floor, and I duck away from his gaze and walk to the next passenger.

My boss is at the front of the train, he expects a lot from me and I meet his demands, day in and day out. He welcomes the passengers on behalf of his team. His English, unlike most of the others, is flawless. He is able to make a juicy *th* sound and does a beautiful American *r*, and he says *Thank you for traveling with the Deutsche Bahn* in an upbeat and encouraging rhythm, he makes me feel like he is also thanking me, and it helps not to see him while he's saying it. But I can imagine him, I had seen him saying it earlier when the train departed, I did not take a close look at him. He did not look like a person who speaks English perfectly. I also do not speak perfectly, although I'm working on it, I often look for language courses in the continued education program; once I took a "body percussion course," a decision I learned to regret, and I'm planning to take a language holiday in southern England because they speak the most beautiful, cleanest English there, and I would like to speak English well because it is

useful to know a language perfectly.

The percussion course was taught by a wild, shaggy-looking guy in a copper-blue shirt, which bore no resemblance to the temperate blue of our jackets and ironed light blue blouses; it was a relentlessly garish blue, heightened to an explosive mix by his bright yellow pants. We stared at him like one of those exotic birds you see on TV, in travel shows and in reports about Australia, or the tropics, they seem reliable, but nobody in this country really believes in such colors, and so there we were, twenty-five railway employees in sportswear that didn't look a whole lot different from our uniforms, we simply don't have the time to change constantly, and we hardly approved of this guy's blue shirt, it made his face look pale. He had a loud, slightly hoarse voice, and he asked us what we expected from his class, everybody answered respectfully, new ideas, more zip, to find their own rhythm. I assumed everybody, except for me, had attended such courses before, otherwise they certainly could not say such things. I don't know, I muttered when it was my turn, and he really liked that, yes, he shouted, then you are totally open for everything, and it sounded like he was congratulating me, I caught his attention and he focused on me the whole day, just on me. We did exercises to feel our breath, we had to put our hands on our stomach and close our eyes, and when he saw my eyes kept opening against my will, he came up to me and put his hand over my eyes. It happened so quickly, I could not avoid it; I felt his warm hand on my face and looked at his palm. I sat up straight and did not move, and after a while, as I got used to this strange hand and the gift of twilight, he whispered, you're stiff as a concrete pillar, and I tore my eyes open again and wriggled away from him, defended myself, what do you mean, I'm totally relaxed. It continued in that vein, he had his eye on me, he picked me to demonstrate a dance step, he gave me the biggest drum, you've got to find your own language, he whispered, but I don't have anything to say. Imagine that drum you're hugging is a man. I stared at that clunky barrel spanned with skin and pushed it a little further away from me. If I hug it no sound will come out, I said rudely, you have to bang it.

Right?

I don't know a thing about love, even if I see it before my eyes from early morning to late at night. Though most of our customers travel alone, they take their lover with them, the adored one, a husband, a wife, they board the train right after getting screwed, hugged somebody, stood there with somebody in the corner groping under their shirt, kneading their breasts, pushing a hand between their legs, maybe they held a child, I can't look inside people's heads, but I can see when they've just been loved, they have it in their coats, in their cell phones that

they nervously type messages into to wean their fingers from the skin, out of breath, they hand me their tickets without giving me a look, instead they keep their eyes closed so they can relive their moment of love.

There are some who just cannot quit. They crowd into the disabled WCs two at a time, triumphantly they lock the door, the stench, the wet floor, the chemical fumes, none of it bothers them, on the contrary, it makes their love sparkle even more, or makes it dirty, whatever they feel like, people queue up at the WC, they knock, I knock, but they do not care, quite the contrary. Or they fold up the arm rest and squeeze together onto the seats, which is not easy because the pre-formed shell allows no fooling around with the seat, everybody is supposed to sit there properly, alone and upright, but they don't care, they squeeze together as if there was no tomorrow, and then comes the real show: They spread a coat over both laps, their hands disappear under it, they close their eyes and nibble at each other, their faces get hotter and they think in all seriousness, nobody knows what they are up to under the coat. I have nothing further to say here, whether I ask for the ticket, or not, they are not about to be bothered, they fool around under the coat, the other passengers look furtively to see if they can see something, and I don't stay close to them longer than necessary.

A little girl is sitting on the table for four, one of these thin long-haired creatures with earplugs and MP3 players, I think she's too young for that, but nobody cares what I think, and I'm not good at guessing children's age, they all look the same, and then suddenly they are adults. This one isn't grown up, some sweets lie in front of her on the table, jelly beans and blackberry candies with filling, as a child I liked them too and used to eat them, I wanted them, bought them and ate them, as simple as that. This child sticks the blackberry candies in her mouth, one after the other, too fast, if you ask me, you can't taste it if you just gobble them down like that, and I tell the child, slowly, slowly, and expect her to look up scared, like most kids who don't know how to say hello, or don't want to, because they can't unclench their teeth, except if you give them a blackberry candy, then their mouth opens every time, like a small reptile opening and shutting its mouth. The child looks up, but she doesn't look scared, she just nods and smiles at me as if she were used to being disciplined, and she doesn't have to look for her ticket, she has it ready next to the package of blackberry candy. Here you go, she says, and hands it to me. She is respectful and fearless, and I want to know why a good girl like her is traveling alone on the train, and I would like to know if she is really as well-behaved as she seems, or whether she is trying to fool me.

Children your age should not travel alone; I say strictly, it is a test to see what answer the child gives me, whether she acts like a brat, or her eyes fill with tears, that can happen quickly with children, they smile at you, and suddenly the smile cracks, and their lips tremble, and tears can suddenly spew from children's eyes, I have studied it, they just start to blubber like nothing. This child does not cry, but considers a moment and then nods.

I don't understand what she means by the nod, whether she thinks I'm right, or whether she wants to appease me and I probe further. Where are your parents. I was with my mom and now I'm going to my dad's, she says, and suddenly my eyes get teary even though the child doesn't seem to be upset about it; she looks at me quite amused, in general, she keeps looking at me and reading in my eyes what I want to hear, and what I will say next, and now that my eyes are wet, I quickly turn away and look out the opposite window, and while I am at it, I look into the window and see my scarf is a little crooked. I fix it, the knot is in the middle, the end has to lay on the blouse's button-facing, and while I am tugging at myself, the child says, do you want one, and holds the bag of blackberry candies towards me. I turn back to her, she has not stopped looking at me, she wants to make me happy, I've eaten lots of them already, these are all I've got left. Just as unexpectedly as my eyes filled with tears, I become filled with anger towards the child, the way the child was being so solicitous towards me suddenly seemed intolerable, the way she was trying to get on my good side. The way she kept paying careful attention to me, to what I say, how I look, she certainly must have seen my eyes filling with tears, she watched it happening, the way I moved my hanky back and forth, as if there was something to be saved. She had a good haircut and was properly dressed, the way people used to be, an old-fashioned dark blue ribbed sweater with a white collar, her cheeks are red, perhaps she's younger than I thought. She must have been to the hairdresser, or her mother had just cut it for the father, who doesn't love the mother anymore, the bangs lie perfectly straight above the eyebrows, it's truly maddening, nothing is wrong with this child, and on top of it all, she's polite. Are you good at school, I ask harshly, and move the bag of blackberries she is holding in front of me to the side as though they disgusted me, I do it so forcefully they nearly fall from her hand. Yes, she answers right away and beams a smile, yes, of course she is good at school, she is not ashamed of admitting it, a person that polite and attentive has to be good at school and in every subject, every subject, right, I ask impatiently. What are subjects, the child asks. Well, German, math, whatever kids do at school, I say. The child waits a moment to see if I am going to elaborate, she outdoes my impatience with patience by ten, what am I saying, a hundred times more, she waits, and when I don't say anything else,

and hold onto the back seat with both hands so I don't do anything to her, she nods again and says, I especially like German, and then she looks at my fingers which have turned completely white from clutching so tightly, and says, your ring is really great. I

look at the ring, a man had given it to me, it's a cheap brass ring, but I've gotten used to it and I never take it off, and I know the child doesn't like the ring, children don't like simple metal rings, they want diamonds, gold, whatever glitters and sparkles and this child only

complimented me on my ring to please me. She sits there playing innocent, trying to charm me, and she waits for me to smile and tell her about the ring, just showing me her ticket, that would not be nearly enough for this girl, she wants more, actually she wants everything.

She's used to that: to getting everything when she gives it her very best. She gives her mom her best, she does the same with her dad, she is practiced, and she doesn't want to get out of practice, so she tries the same with me. But you're barking up the wrong tree little one, people like you don't have a chance with me, I don't need you, I know how to get rid of you, your beggar eyes, your ever-so polite, sweet, little face with the charming hairstyle, if you don't cut it in time, they'll tease you for it later; you won't have it easy at all with your tail wagging, you want to be everybody's darling, the most clever and the most beautiful, the teachers love you, but the Students will hate you for it, maybe not yet, all of you are too small now and want to be petted, but later all the more so, you have to wean yourself from it, as difficult as it may be for you, you will keep trying, you'll have to work your butt off, with a keen eye you will pull through all the way to graduation, brilliantly, of course, because nothing but the best for you; you will bewitch your professors, and your men, and your therapists, you will put all your effort into reading other people's thoughts before they've even had a chance to formulate them, and whenever you succeed at it, it will warm you to the quick, which you will confuse with love, you're in for a surprise, you have to toughen up, you have to pat yourself on your own back, you will learn to do that, too, or find a man who will scratch you behind the ears, your dad is not enough, and I most certainly am not, you see, you can't get me, you poor little brownnoser, and if I were to say a single word about it out loud, you would agree with me, I know, because I know you.

She is still waiting, looks alternately at the ring and my face, the little witch with the round cut, as if she couldn't hurt a fly, I reach for her and graze her hair, I could grab and pull it so that her head bangs against the plastic casing of the wall, could tear her head back and wait for her to finally shut her eyes because it hurts so much, but my hand reaches past her for the bag and snatches a handful of blackberry candies, and I stuff them in my mouth and move

on, I don't turn around again, and I only say thank you when I'm in the next compartment. Meanwhile it's light out and my mouth burns, maybe from the sweet blackberries, the tiny beads of sugar get stuck between my teeth, they possibly have colored all my teeth purple, I should check this because it would be inadmissible to greet the customers with a purple smile, the guests embarking on a journey have put themselves into our hands, they would like to be welcomed by an appropriate and clean smile, not sticky and stained and certainly not puffy-eyed from crying. There might be a detective among them today, it could be anybody, except for the girl, it might be this old lady with the reading material, or it could be that guy over there in the suit, it will be a man, they usually use men because, according to my female colleagues, men are better snitches. The one in the suit is waiting for me, I don't have time to rinse my mouth or take a look in the mirror; you there, he shouts in a piercing, sonorous voice as if he had warmed up beforehand, and once he has gotten me over, though I would have come to him anyway, he continues shouting just as loud even though I am now standing right next to him, there is absolutely no room here. I look at him inquisitively, at least he has a nice window seat, and the seat next to him is free, too, and I know what he wants, but it makes no sense to anticipate what's coming; he simply wants to shoot his mouth off, that's what I am there for, and then he'll feel better. Where is the luggage supposed to go, he says, pointing dramatically to the aisle and the seats, how do you suppose that works. The train wasn't my idea, I could say, but instead I ask, may I help you with your luggage; and I hope he is a detective who gives me a bunch of points for dealing so well with customers. He laughs scornfully. You have no idea. Where is your luggage, I ask, but he is nowhere near done, you have no idea what is happening here, there is no room to move, cooped up, yes, cooped up like cattle, nobody has given any thought to it, nobody in this country thinks about it, and then they all are surprised when things go downhill. He speaks loudly over my bowed head, I do not need to say anything else, I can see all he has is a nifty, shiny, metallic suitcase on wheels which he has stowed under the seat next to him; it is a beautiful, expensive suitcase, with reinforced leather corners. When he falls silent, I look up briefly, am I fired, but he is leaning forward and staring at my name badge, p. Santrac, I'll take a note of this, you can be sure of that, and he begins to rummage for a pen in his folder while I quickly turn away; that's got to be enough, I need to drink something, my teeth, and what is the girl in the other compartment up to, and I have not even made it to car 7.