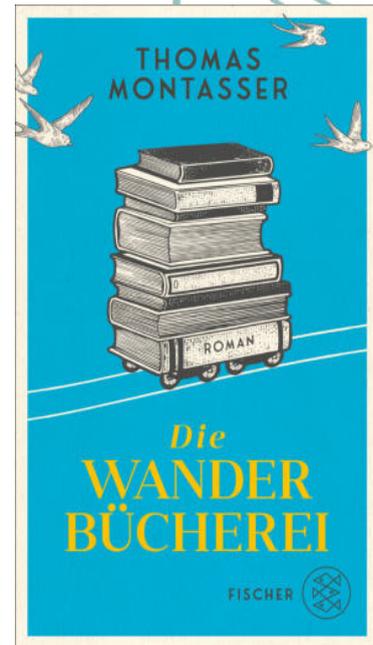


Thomas Montasser

The Travelling Library

April 2026 . 256 Pages

Books touch us, connect us, and sometimes they even save lives. Books are light in dark times.



Vera and Hans meet in the white and blue tram that journeys through Munich as a travelling library – and fall in love. But as a “half-Jew,” Vera must now, in 1937, do everything she can to avoid attracting attention. The same goes for Hans, a socialist. The two hide coded messages for each other in the books of ostracized authors. Thomas Mann, Kästner, Tucholsky: as library books, they become a secret means of survival for Vera and Hans. Until Hans stops coming to the travelling library...

Today: In an old tram car, restorer Sophie comes across faded library cards – and discovers the secret code of a great love.

In *The Travelling Library*, **Thomas Montasser** draws on motifs and events from his own family history. During the Third Reich, his grandmothers were a maid for a Jewish family and a waitress in one of Hitler’s favorite restaurants, respectively, while his grandfathers were a socialist and a communist – and both railroad workers. Thomas Montasser is an author, literary agent, and lecturer in book studies at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. His works have been translated into numerous languages and have appeared on bestseller lists in several countries.

Summary

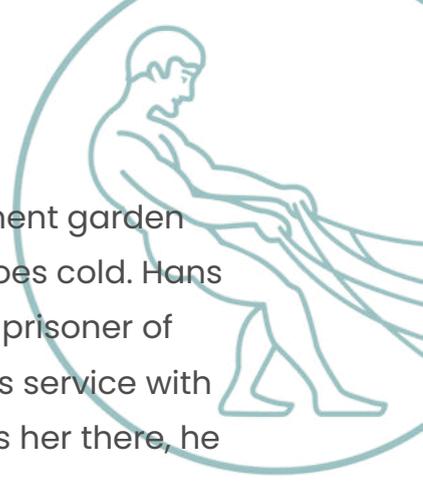


Munich, 2023: In the Transport Museum, an old tramcar sitting in the depot is slated for renovation. From 1927 to 1970, it served as a mobile library. For Sophie Fink, a young restorer, this is her first major commission. The carriage is in poor condition—no books remain, only the old "lending ledger." Sophie is tasked with collaborating with Fabian, a young filmmaker documenting the restoration. While working, she discovers mysterious symbols in the ledger and tracks down Charlotte Burger, the now eighty-year-old daughter of the last librarian. With Fabian's help, Sophie reconstructs a forgotten love story and deciphers the secret messages the couple once sent to each other. When the project is successfully completed, Sophie finds a message from Fabian inside the tram, written in the very code once used by the lovers.

Munich, 1937: Vera Friedrich is "half-Jewish," working without papers at Café Luitpold while caring for her Jewish mother alone. When a young man leaves his library book behind at the café, she returns it to the "Munich Mobile Library," housed in a tramcar. The librarian, Mrs. Schönfeld, is relieved, as the book is by the banned author Tucholsky. She secretly lends forbidden books to people she trusts. Vera meets the young man, Hans Blum, a railway worker and member of the banned SPD (Social Democratic Party). The two develop a numerical code to exchange messages within the pages of books by "ostracized" authors like Erich Kästner and Thomas Mann. This allows them to meet inconspicuously, keeping their love secret for years.

After the war breaks out, Vera's mother is "taken away," forcing Vera into hiding, while Hans drives trains to the front under heavy bombardment. The lovers continue to send each other messages of comfort until Hans stops responding. Word arrives that his train was bombed in Dresden. During the

final months of the war, a pregnant Vera survives in an allotment garden shack and gives birth to her child alone. Afterward, her trail goes cold. Hans is equally desperate when he returns to Munich after being a prisoner of war, assuming she is dead. In 1949, the mobile library resumes service with Mrs. Schönfeld once again at the helm. When Hans Blum visits her there, he finally reunites with Vera and their daughter.



Note: This is the story of a lending library that actually existed in Munich; the tramcar can still be seen today in the Transport Museum.



Sample Translation **by Alexandra Roesch**

'Hic habitat felicitas!' the young man says by way of greeting, as if he were some kind of Latinist. Which he isn't. Railwaymen aren't Latinists. Perhaps the people above them are, the ones up at Head Office. But they aren't railwaymen. Not if you ask the people who actually make sure the trains run.

'You're quite right, Mr Blum, Grüß Gott,' the librarian replies, making no attempt to hide how pleased she is to see this customer in her little realm. 'So you've read him then, Meier?'

'I have,' says the young man, and gives a solemn nod. 'Such a lovely little book. A scandal...'

'Sh, sh, sh,' the librarian goes, even though there's nobody in the carriage but them and Mr Rübsam, the driver. And the driver can be relied on. He hears nothing and sees nothing he isn't meant to hear or see. Or doesn't want to. When in doubt, he doesn't want what he isn't supposed to. Sensible, given the circumstances. 'But I agree.' Frau Schönfeld quickly pulls a borrowing card from her index drawer. On it is written 'Kärntner, Erwin', and the title Small Coincidences. She makes a note, slips the card into the book, then slides the book under the counter and, quite casually, piles a few more books on top of it, the ones lying beside her.

'Are you not going to put it back on the shelf?' Hans Blum asks.

'Better not. Perhaps one day, later.'

'But how are you meant to find it then? Isn't it hard enough when you have to look for Kästner under Kärntner, Tucholsky under Turacher, and Mann under Menne?'

'Not at all,' Frau Schönfeld says. 'It's better this way. Otherwise it might end up in the wrong hands.'

'But I can't face all that other rubbish, not for love nor money,' Hans Blum says, with feeling. 'Surely it must be possible to...'

Another customer steps into the carriage. Frau Schönfeld makes the gesture everyone knows: quiet now. He falls silent. She says hello. The customer says hello back. They chat. About the upcoming European football championship. About the outrageous prices Wöhrmüller has started charging for a pair of smoked sausages. About the weather, of course. And about the new novel by Anton Whoever-it-is. Hans Blum hardly listens, because he already knows he won't be able to stand the book. It's supposed to be 'uplifting' and 'so cultural'! He'd like to laugh. He can picture exactly what's uplifting about the thing, and what sort of 'culture' it's peddling. Not his. But his kind of culture isn't in fashion any more. Quite the opposite. His kind of culture has to hide under the counter. And if you're caught reading it, it sends you straight to Dachau.

'Well then, I hope you enjoy it,' Frau Schönfeld says, seeing the customer off and handing her a volume that could have swallowed 'Kärntner' five times over, ten times perhaps, and still was guaranteed to be a thousand times thinner. And a thousand times more stupid.

Hans Blum presses himself against the back shelf to let the well-upholstered woman and her hefty 'uplifting' masterpiece squeeze past. The carriage is cramped. Dangerously cramped. The librarian turns back to him. 'I still have everything,' she whispers. 'Just not out in the open on the shelf. I keep it all properly sorted.' She gestures under the counter, and behind her to the unsorted stack.

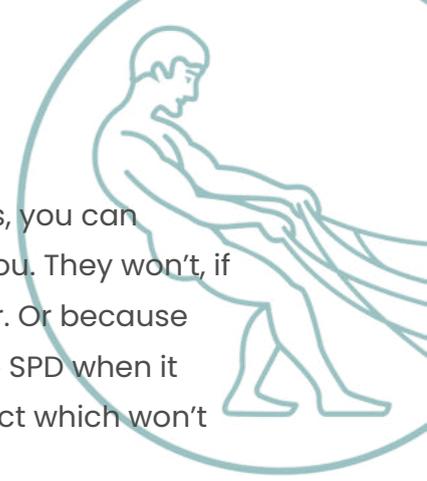
'And how am I meant to know what you've got?'

'Just ask me, Mr Blum. I'll help you. That's what I'm here for.'

He takes a deep breath. 'All right then. I'd like a new Meier novel.' Meier, that's what they call any author who's 'forbidden'. Kästner is Meier, just like Mann, Brecht, or Feuchtwanger. Not that there are many books by those writers, not even here in this tram carriage that has been converted into a library. But there are a handful. Just as there are a handful of people who still read them. At the risk of being



caught. Because everything is catalogued under the wrong names, you can always claim it was a misunderstanding. Perhaps. If they believe you. They won't, if you've already been noticed as being awkward. As a troublemaker. Or because your name is on a list as a Socialist. Like Hans Blum, who was in the SPD when it still existed, and who, like everyone else, buried his party card (a fact which won't help him).



The librarian gives him a conspiratorial wink and fishes out a book from somewhere right at the bottom, just as slim and just as inconspicuous, wrapped in plain paper. 'This one's good. A little daring. But I don't think it'll shock you.' For a moment he thinks he sees her cheeks redden. 'Turacher, Karl,' the borrowing card says. Castle Geistheim. He raises his eyebrows and flicks through it. It's Schloss Gripsholm really, by Kurt Tucholsky. He's heard of it, though he couldn't have said in what context. 'Daring?'

'Read it and tell me what you think,' Frau Schönfeld says. 'When we're alone again.' She flicks the card. 'Shall I?'

He nods. 'Thank you.'

'My pleasure. Now put it away, please.'

And so Tucholsky goes into his pocket. A little later Hans Blum is walking through the city, past the Künstlerhaus, behind which the handsome synagogue rises with quiet pride, past the imposing façades on Maximiliansplatz, and over to Briennerstraße, where his favourite café is, a place he treats himself to now and then, though he really can't afford it. Because even if the ruling party likes to call itself a workers' party, and claims to be not only national but socialist too, a railwayman on his wages can't splash out much, and even splashing out a little is often difficult.

The pretty waitress with the reddish-brown hair is there again. Since he realised she mostly serves in the back, probably because the tips are smaller there and the old hands keep the terrace for themselves, he likes to sit there. It means he can read a little without being watched, and now and then he can steal a look at

the young woman, who moves as lightly as a fairy and has an unmistakably sweet, slightly shy smile, one she doesn't give to everyone. He's noticed that.

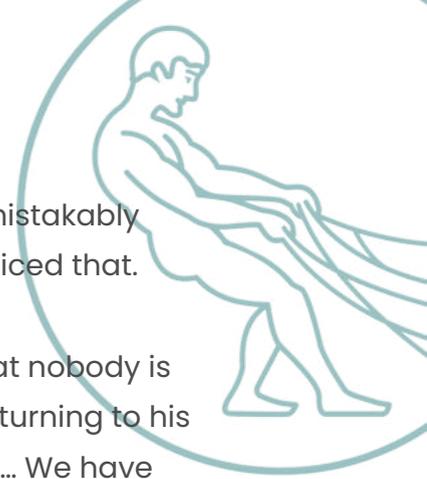
He orders his tea with milk and a little puff-pastry spiral, checks that nobody is sitting too close, and shifts his chair so he has a good view, before turning to his new book. Dear Mr Tucholsky, he reads, many thanks for your letter... We have noted your request. For today, something else... As you know, in recent times I have published all sorts of political books, which you have already dealt with at length. But now I would like, for once, to cultivate 'literature' again. Have you nothing at all? How about a little love story? He has to smile.

'Here you are, sir,' the girl says, shy and guileless, wasted here as a waitress. She ought to be on a stage with the way she carries herself, a thing one mustn't admire too openly, of course, but can't possibly fail to notice, with those doe eyes and that smile, that smile... 'Your tea. With milk, as you asked.'

'Thank you,' he murmurs, and looks down at the cup, or pretends to. Because in truth... My God, life could be so beautiful. And then he buries himself in the novel again. It begins rather well, yes, very well. Yes, a love story... My dear sir, Tucholsky replies, what do you mean, a love story? In times like these, love? Do you love? Who still loves nowadays?

Tucholsky, he thinks, the rascal. But everyone loves. Always. Times can't be that bad. If anything, when it gets too grey, a little love would be a fine thing. Is that why Frau Schönfeld recommended this one? Has she noticed he's hungry for... for what, exactly? He doesn't know himself. Or rather, of course he does. He simply doesn't want to admit it.

So he reads on quickly, because it's always easier to deal with affairs of the heart when they belong to other people. The heroines and heroes in novels, for instance. And only now and then does he glance up, from under his lashes, at the young lady, Vera (as he later catches her name), wasted here as a waitress when she really...But we've covered that. He reads and dreams and sighs, and dreams a bit more as he pays. And in the end he forgets the book, because when he stands up he has eyes only for Fräulein Vera.





1.

Coincidences

Late summer 1937

The buttercream tortes. The sponge rolls. And, of course, the Black Forest gâteau, which some guests even prefer to the Sachertorte from the Vierjahreszeiten, or Erbshäuser's Prinzregententorte. But no, this young man always orders nothing but tea and something made of puff pastry. Then he chooses a table a little off to one side and takes a book from a bag that's already looking well used. He is always impeccably dressed, Vera has noticed that too. White cuffs show at the ends of his jacket sleeves, and his shoes are polished to a shine, though they're not new. And he always wears a tie. The same one. It's obvious he hasn't much money, and yet he has some pride. He'd rather treat himself to some small delicacy at the Luitpold than stop somewhere cheap.

Vera likes men who pay attention to how they look. And she likes men who read. Like this one: while he waits for his tea, he first lets his gaze travel round the room, not too obviously, but obviously enough for Vera to notice, then he opens his book and begins to read. No, he loses himself in it. That, too, is striking. As soon as he starts reading, he seems to forget everything around him. He doesn't reach for his cup until the tea has long gone cold, and he eats his cherry turnover or his little rabbit-ear pastries absent-mindedly on the side. Then, at some point, it seems to dawn on him that he's lost track of time again. He waves the waitress over to pay, leaves a small tip, not much, but enough that neither he nor the waitress, nor indeed the head waiter Alfred, is embarrassed, though Alfred is usually at the front serving the better tables, and then he hurries off, stuffing the book back into his bag as he goes.

Only this time he doesn't. Vera has just tucked the twenty pfennigs he left her into her apron with a small smile, and is about to clear the crockery away, when she notices he's left the book on the table. The tower clock of the Theatinerkirche has struck, she remembers, four high, four low. The moment when the sun slips behind the Arco-Palais opposite and the terrace is abruptly thrown into shadow. A few weeks ago it was different. But now you can feel autumn coming. It may still be

gloriously warm out on Briennerstraße, where on fine days every table is taken, but soon the guests will move indoors, and the late-summer days will give way to a sharper, sterner autumn.



'Hello!' Vera is about to call, holding the book up. Hadn't she only just seen him hurrying off towards Maximiliansplatz? "Hel..." But he's gone. He left twenty pfennigs on the table on purpose, and the book by accident. Presumably, anyway. A little at a loss, Vera wonders whether she should run after him. She might still catch him. If only she knew where he'd gone. Left towards Stachus? Right towards Von-der-Thann-Straße? Or straight ahead to Königsplatz, where all the Nazi grand buildings stand, the Führerbau, the Temples of Honour, the Brown House...No, probably not there. Vera has a fine instinct for what sort of person someone is. She has to. The young man may not be one of those respectable bourgeois who still wrinkle their noses at the brownshirts, though by now they do it only very discreetly and only among their own, but nor is he one of the crude men who come from the very bottom and hope to claw their way up by bellowing 'Heil' and nearly dislocating their arms. No, he's far too sensitive for that, thinks Vera Friedrich, waitress at the legendary Café Luitpold, as she stands for a moment by table sixteen, undecided, and looks down at the book in her hands. It's wrapped in plain paper, presumably to keep it nice. Inside it says Schloss Gripsholm. By Kurt Tucholsky.

That surprises her. Isn't Tucholsky one of the banned ones? She looks more closely and finds a stamp on the inside of the front cover: Property of the travelling library, Munich. And a little pocket at the back, where the borrowing card should go.

'Everything all right, Fräulein Vera?' the head waiter asks in passing.

'The gentleman who was sitting here has forgotten his book, Herr Hartinger,' Vera says, and snaps it shut quickly; she doesn't quite know why.

'Put it by the till. If he misses it, he'll ask there.'

'Or I could just take it to him quickly?' she suggests. 'After my shift, of course,' she adds when she sees his eyebrows go up.

'Well, if you want to do that, it's up to you,' Alfred says, making no effort to hide his surprise. Then he's himself again. 'Vite, vite!' he says, as he always does, even though French isn't exactly popular with the clientele. 'Tidy up, so we can give the table to someone else.'



'Of course, Herr Hartinger,' Vera says. And then she clears the used crockery, wipes the table, and lays it again so swiftly and neatly that even Alfred Hartinger, now back at the counter, can't help an approving smile. He wouldn't like to lose her, Friedrich, popular with the guests and respected by the other women, even the less gifted ones. But times are difficult. Nothing and nobody is safe these days. People like Vera Friedrich least of all.

*

'For heaven's sake!' hisses the woman Vera hadn't even recognised as the librarian at first. The travelling library. Vera had heard there was a tram carriage that went round Munich as a mobile library, though she hadn't known where it stopped. So she ran to nearby Stachus and asked around. There's nowhere else in Munich with so many tram stops. And she's been lucky. The travelling library doesn't only stop there, it is actually there now. Vera climbs aboard at once, the book in her hand, and looks at the librarian in surprise. You always imagine someone rather pinched, with a bun and glasses. But this one is fairly young, looks as if she has a weakness for buttercream tortes, and is wearing a floral dress. She has such an open, direct look that Vera finds herself trusting her at once. The librarian takes the book from her and hurriedly hides it under the counter. 'Not so conspicuous!'

Of course. How stupid of her, when for years she's done everything she can not to stand out. Never to give anyone a reason to ask who she is, where she comes from, where she lives. Invisibility is her life insurance, which is not so easy when men find you attractive. Many of them, at least. She glances around. But there's nobody there except a gentleman in a hat at the back of the carriage. 'I'm sorry,' she whispers, with an apologetic smile. 'A gentleman left it behind at our café. At Café Luitpold.'



'Did anyone else see it?' The librarian studies Vera very closely, as if she's trying to see straight through her.

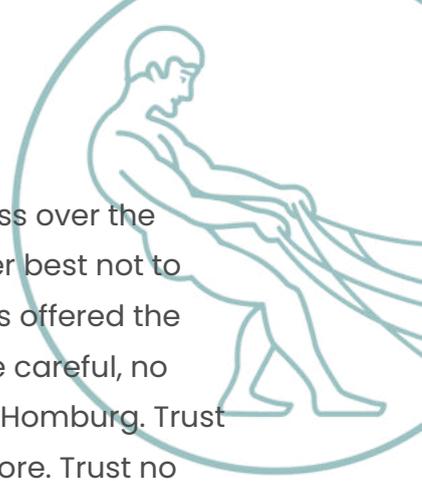
'No. Why? I just thought the gentleman who forgot it might have to replace it otherwise,' Vera says, wide-eyed. But she's already understood this isn't a harmless conversation, and they aren't talking about something harmless. 'It belongs to you, doesn't it?'

Vera knows the look the librarian gives her. It means: we don't speak of that. How often she's seen that look. In the past, especially, a few years ago. Lately it's becoming rarer. Faces are turning to stone. It's as if people have put on masks. No, as if the masks have grown into their faces. Vera swallows. 'If I... I mean...' She clears her throat. She drops her voice even lower and murmurs, 'I don't even know what the book is. I only saw the stamp.'

The next look the librarian gives her is one Vera knows as well. It says: very good. That's how we'll do it. There's something conspiratorial in it that frightens Vera a little, but also comforts her, because for a moment she has the feeling she isn't alone in the world. Not the only one with a dangerous secret. Perhaps that's why she dares. In any case, the next moment she hears herself whisper, 'Do you have more books I don't know?' And she even attempts a tiny wink, though it doesn't come off terribly well.

The gentleman at the back has made his choice and comes towards the lending desk, a stack of linen-bound volumes in his hands. 'Heil Hitler!' he says. Not particularly stiffly, more out of habit. 'I'd like to take these.' He even tips his hat with a little sideways glance at Vera, apparently pleased, perhaps because he's interrupting her conversation with the librarian.

'These, yes,' says the friendly woman in the floral dress, not returning his greeting. 'So ward das Reich, mm-hm.' She takes the borrowing card from the back pocket and reaches for the next book. 'Roosevelt-Amerika, right.' The same movement, practised and almost a little elegant. 'And Der König Geiserich, aha,' she says. 'Something uplifting.'



'One has to educate oneself!' the man declares, letting his gaze pass over the pretty young woman standing beside him again, while she does her best not to catch it. He must be at least twice her age. He's a stranger. And he's offered the 'German greeting'. However harmless he might look, Vera has to be careful, no matter how well kept his loden coat is, and how neatly brushed his Homburg. Trust no respectable-looking man, her mother used to say. That was before. Trust no man. That was yesterday. Trust nobody. That's today. And precisely because she remembers it, she smiles politely, without committing herself, and pretends to study the spines on the next shelf.

The man in the hat carries his Geiserich and his Roosevelt home, and for a moment they're alone in the tram carriage, Vera and the librarian. The librarian seizes the chance and says, 'Do take more care of yourself, Fräulein. You're too trusting.'

She can't know. But Vera can tell she means well, and that's more than you can expect from anyone these days. 'I do take care, madam. Truly,' Vera says. At that the librarian laughs and says, 'Don't call me madam! I'm Frau Schönfeld.'

'Frau Schönfeld. Pleased to meet you.' Never say your name. Not to anyone. 'Friedrich,' Vera says. 'Vera. I work at...'

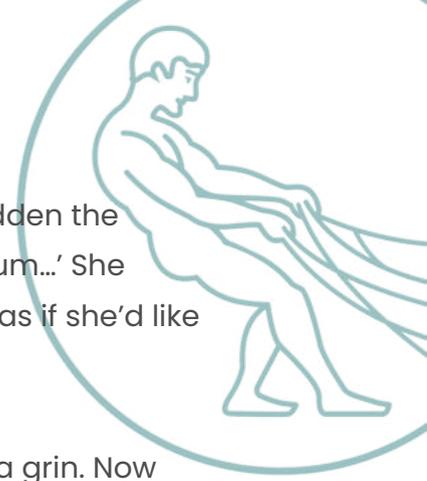
'Café Luitpold, yes, you said. Well then, thank you for bringing the little book back. That was very...' Kind? But she lowers her voice. 'Brave,' she says.

'Is it really that bad?' Vera has never truly thought about it. She hardly ever has time to read. And when she does, she takes what she can get. But you can't get a Tucholsky any more, can you.

'Worse,' the librarian whispers, though the carriage is still empty apart from the two of them.

'I'd like to read it myself, some time,' Vera ventures, and thinks she must be mad. As if living weren't dangerous enough already.

'The book?' Frau Schönfeld nods under the counter, where she's hidden the Tucholsky. Vera nods. 'But at the moment it's still on loan to Herr Blum...' She breaks off, realises her mistake, and makes a little flicking gesture, as if she'd like to clap her hand over her mouth.



'I'm sure Herr Blum wouldn't mind,' Vera says, and can't quite help a grin. Now they're allies. They share a secret. In fact, they now have two or three secrets, the book, Herr Blum, and the fact that they agree it's bad. Even if neither of them has said what, exactly, is so bad. They don't need to. Anyone who hasn't learned to understand without words has no future in times like these.

Frau Schönfeld hesitates, shifts a little on the spot, then decides on a proposal. 'Come again next week. Same time. By then I'll have seen him, the gentleman who's borrowed the book.'

Vera smiles. 'Is there something else you could recommend?'

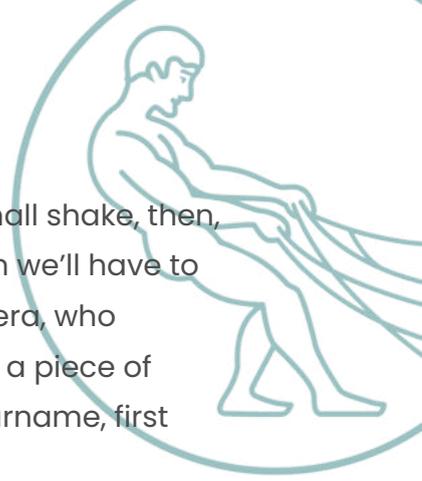
'There is,' the librarian says cautiously.

'Something as good as that?' Because it has to be good. Otherwise it wouldn't be forbidden.

'Hm.' Frau Schönfeld glances towards the back door, then out through the side window where the tram driver can be seen, in uniform, sitting on the bench at the shelter to smoke a cigarette. He doesn't seem interested in the travelling library. He certainly isn't leafing through a book – he's reading a newspaper, the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*. At least there's that. It could have been *Der Stürmer*. Or the *Völkischer Beobachter*. Though really they all say the same thing, only with different levels of rabble-rousing. The librarian leans far down and pulls out a slim volume from behind the counter, even thinner than *Schloss Gripsholm*. 'If you like,' she says. 'It's such a lovely book... But of course you'd need a borrowing card with us first.'

Of course. That's necessary. 'But I haven't got my work book with me. Or anything...' Vera says, crestfallen.

The round woman in the floral dress sighs and gives her head a small shake, then, to Vera's surprise, replies in an ironic tone, 'What a shame, eh? Then we'll have to manage without.' And she winks at her. She can do it better than Vera, who immediately feels her cheeks go hot. Already the librarian is sliding a piece of salmon-pink card across the counter and handing her a pencil. 'Surname, first name, and date of birth,' she says. 'And of course an address.'



She puts such a strange emphasis on an address that Vera is tempted, for a moment, to write down anything at all. After a brief hesitation she doesn't write a random one, but not her own either. She writes the café's address instead: 'Briener-Straße 11/München.' Then she draws a little stroke over the n in Briener. She pushes the card back. The librarian nods, satisfied. She knows the place, of course, everyone in Munich knows the Luitpold block, and she hands Vera the little book.

Vera is about to open it when a few customers step in at the back. Frau Schönfeld coughs pointedly, brings her hand to her mouth, and hisses, 'Put it away, Fräulein.'

Seconds later Vera is standing outside the tram, her heart hammering. It's painted in cheerful Bavarian white and blue, as if the sky over Bavaria weren't blood-red by now, with a round white disc in the middle, and through it two cruel black lightning-bolts. The driver looks up from his newspaper and nods at her, benevolently. Yes, yes, men. Perhaps he's harmless, one of the harmless ones. But he looks her over, secretly, like all the rest. She thinks. She can't know any better. She doesn't know Herr Kärntner yet.

Only when she's back at Café Luitpold and has locked herself into a cubicle in the ladies' lavatory does she dare to look at the book. And into it. Gregor and the Mishaps. By Erich Kästner.



2.

Patina

Present day

She loved the carriage at first sight. It was perfect. Perfect in its sad condition, perfect in its sad past, and perfect in its potential.

'Do you think we can bring it back to its former glory?' asked the head of Rolling Stock, peering at her with his small, tired eyes.

'I'm not sure that should be our aim,' Sophie said. 'Look, if we restore the carriage to a condition where it looks brand-new, then we're showing something that doesn't do it justice.' And, at his blank look, 'This object isn't only what it was built to be. It's also the sum of what it has lived through.'

'I don't understand...'

'If you had to draw a picture of your grandmother, would you draw her as a baby?'

'I see,' the museum man murmured, and something like understanding flickered across his face. Sophie had to smile. She'd once worked out that explanation for herself, because there was always someone complaining that, after restoration, an object didn't look new again. But new was something any object only looked for a very short time. For most of its life, you could see how long it had been there. Wear. Patina. Scratches, dents, chipped edges. How could it be otherwise, especially with an object that had spent over fifty years out on the streets, then another fifty standing around somewhere, mostly unprotected? Like this D 1.6 Rathgeber. The motor tramcar from 1912. A one-off. A wreck. And, above all, for decades, the travelling library.

This vehicle, though, really did look heartbreakingly derelict. Mummies and bog bodies were generally found in better condition than the D 1.6 as Sophie had found it, standing on rails above a workshop inspection pit so that you could walk the entire length beneath it and look up at it from below. Large sections of the side panelling were missing and even the strongest metal components were corroded,

sometimes rusted clean through. The floors were unsafe to walk on. The ceiling gaped with cracks and holes. For the work they would pull it into the neighbouring maintenance hall.

'But I can promise you this, we'll get it into a condition you'll be proud of,' Sophie said, and she meant it. Because however hard it was to imagine this ruin of a tram vehicle ever moving a centimetre again without falling apart, she knew she was standing in front of what would become her masterpiece. The work would be brutal, there would be setbacks, and she would curse herself a thousand times for taking it on. But in the end she would triumph, not least because it was a very special piece, this tram car in which literature had found its way to its readers.

Every single step would need to be documented in detail, and at the end she wanted to write an article about the D 1.6 that would be noticed well beyond the small circles of restorers and conservators. Because it had been a carriage with such a particular purpose.

'By the way,' the museum man said, 'we've been thinking we might assign someone from film to you.'

'Someone from film? What does that mean?'

'Well, we'd like to record the restoration work in image and sound,' he explained. 'For our visitors. To show them. We've got a new forum space opening here at the museum soon. There'll be a screen there with different films running. About the beginnings of public transport, for example. Or about the challenges of the transport transition, if you see what I mean.'

'And a film about the D 1.6?'

'About the D 1.6, and how we restored it.'

'How I restored it,' Sophie corrected him, and for a moment she feared it came out too sharp, too proud. She'd only been employed in the city restoration workshops for nine months, and this tram was the first major job she would be responsible for. It would be her task to instruct and supervise every trade involved, analyse



and source materials, coordinate and document the work. A lot of responsibility for a young employee who had never managed something on this scale before. But the museum man didn't seem offended. He conceded, 'How you restored it. Of course.' Even if there was, perhaps, the faintest hint of irony in his tone.



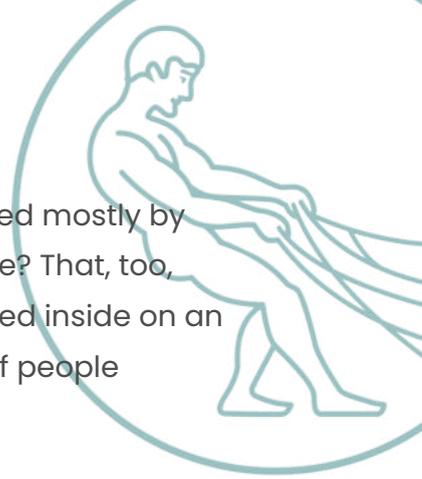
'May I?' Sophie asked, pointing to the open front door of the carriage.

'Please. Certainly. It's all yours. But be careful,' he added, unnecessarily. 'We've only put a few loose boards in there, just to make it walkable at all, provisionally.'

There were three steps up, with a handrail fixed to the side. Rust had eaten into it badly. One of the treads hung crooked. The front windows had no glass. In many places the paint had flaked away to reveal the rusting metal underneath, or it had blistered up in wide welts. This scab and this mange would keep eating into the carriage until it destroyed it entirely, unless something was done soon. The smell inside was sad and reassuring at the same time. Of course it was the damp of decaying material, of dust, and cold corroding metal, and old brittle rubber. But Sophie's sensitive nose told her there wasn't any major mould infestation. The old tram car hadn't become a breeding ground for spores, not on a significant scale. That, at least, would make the work easier.

The inside of the carriage was very plain. Shelves ran along the side walls, some with boards missing, some simply collapsed. The shelves were completely empty, not a single book left where there must once have been hundreds. At the front there was the driver's cab, and behind it a small counter, where the library stock had evidently been handed out. An empty wooden card index box still stood on it. Behind, a narrow register cabinet was screwed to the metal wall, its labels faded to nothing. The floorboards had only been lashed in place with cable ties over what remained of the original battens, making it dangerous unless you watched your step as you walked towards the rear entrance. Everything here was weathered, breathing transience. And yet, all at once, Sophie could see exactly how it must once have been. She could smell not only rust and old Bakelite, but the books on the shelves, the coats and jackets of the visitors, the dog someone had brought along, the vegetables in a customer's shopping bag, the aftershave of a guest, mingled with a hint of pipe tobacco clinging to him. Mothballs, eau de cologne, leather gloves, the scent of society in a city a hundred years ago. Had

children been among the visitors to the travelling library? Was it used mostly by educated bourgeois types, or was it meant more for working people? That, too, would have to be researched. How many people might have stepped inside on an ordinary day? How many books were borrowed? What sort of mix of people gathered here?



Once, they would have repainted the carriage, polished it up, repaired every tiny detail and lit it perfectly; they would have turned it into a showpiece, like the Ishtar Gate or the Pergamon Altar in Berlin. Thankfully the discipline had moved past that. 'Perfect' restorations still existed, really, only for classic cars, when specialist workshops brought them to a condition proudly described as 'better than new', which was exactly what it was. But an object like this old motor tram, the travelling library, was first and foremost a witness to its time. And as such, you should, and must, be able to see its time on it, even after an extensive restoration. Only, where to begin?

Sophie walked the few metres back towards the front and stood in the librarian's position. She let her fingertips glide over the scratched surface of the lending counter behind the driver's cab, drew a wavy pattern in the dust on the top, and thumbed through the empty index box. She moved it aside. Any loose parts inside the carriage would have to be stored elsewhere, to be brought back only after the restoration work was complete. That went for the shelf boards, and for the lectern standing beside the rear entrance as well. Sophie examined it. A hundred years ago it had been a utilitarian piece of furniture. Today, carefully restored, it would fetch a fair sum at an antiques fair. She carefully opened the drawers, bent down to the lower compartments, and then, in this enchanted place, discovered a book after all, a rather large, almost square volume with a wilted green cloth cover and a text block half torn out. She lifted it out gently and blew the dust from the cover. In dull gold letters it was stamped: Loans. 'Loans,' she whispered, and opened it carefully at a random page.