

Off Track

by Heidrun West

I love trains. I love Swiss trains. They are clean. The seats are well cushioned. The rattle has a sound that is both steady and comforting - a sonorous, well-oiled, well-serviced sound. Quiet comfort. Dependability. And punctuality. Watching the big hand click through the seconds of the scheduled minute of departure as the train starts to move leaves me with the satisfying sense the world is in order.

Yet even in Switzerland, trains occasionally run late. In winter, during a heavy snowfall, you'd expect it. But in summer, when the weather is perfect? It is the thousands of schoolchildren on their Schulausflug (the annual excursion) who cause the delay. Platforms are brimming with schoolchildren of all ages, two or three adults accompanying each class, as they set out to discover other parts of Switzerland. Kids from the Muothatal visit the big city Zurich, the kids from Zurich the cows in Muothatal. The French go to the Italian part, the Ticinese to the Bernese Alps. So summer sees an entire school population on the move.

Last June on my way to Zurich, a class of 8 or 9-year-old boys and girls boarded the train. Suddenly, our quiet dull compartment was invaded by a flock of chirping colourful birds. Laughing, shouting, elbows flying, they crammed onto the window seats. Across from me, long dark hair mingled with blond. Their heads together, giggling, a girl from Sri Lanka and her Swiss friend were sharing some secret, some story. Sisters over continents. The children were on their way to explore the airport. For half an hour we were a part of their adventure. For thirty minutes we had a break from the serious business of being adults. Zurich came far too early.

There is no country in the world, I am sure, where trains are not sometimes delayed. But has it ever happened to you that a train is early? I ran onto the platform a few months ago and found it strangely empty. Breathless and panting I looked up at the clock. Still three minutes to go before the scheduled departure, yet no other passengers, no train in sight. I ran up to the station-master coming along the track and asked him about the train.

"It just left," he said, rather flatly.

"But it can't," I stammered, "it's not yet time." "Don't YOU ever make mistakes?" he replied.

"But ... ," I wanted to continue, when the sudden memory of a recent incident stopped my tongue and made me decide not to argue the point ...

The previous Friday my older son, Anthony, had wanted to give a birthday party - without his parents around. His father was away on a business trip, and I was kind enough to take myself off to my sister near Olten. As Anthony also needed my car to ferry friends and bottles, I drove my husband's car to Pfaeffikon station, some 10 miles away, parked it there and took a leisurely train ride to Olten.

Next morning, however, both my sister and I felt we were coming down with the flu. I certainly had a temperature. But as I had promised Anthony not to show up at home before 6 pm, the time needed to clear up the aftermath of an all male party, I had no choice but to somehow get through the day. So we decided to do a bit of shopping to distract us from our sore throats and aching bodies. We ambled in and out of shops, filling bags and emptying purses. At three I'd had enough. "I'll take the 15:16 train to Zurich," I said to my sister. "That'll get me home at 5:30 and Anthony can't be too far

off having cleared the camp."

On the train, I realized how thirsty I was. Even food seemed a distinct possibility. After all, I hadn't had anything to eat or drink since breakfast at nine. But when the snacks cart came, I grandly waved it past. With more than half an hour between trains, I decided I would treat myself to cheesecake and coffee in the Hotel Gotthard in Zurich instead. And I didn't want to spoil my appetite for that. In Zurich, however, I found the train I had planned to take to Pfaeffikon did not run on Saturdays and that I had to take a local train leaving in 13 minutes. Not enough time to get to the Hotel Gotthard for coffee.

I installed myself on the train. I hung up my coat, parked the numerous shopping bags, searched my handbag for my keys, and together with my ticket, placed them all neatly on the windowsill, ready. Exhausted, dehydrated, I leant back. Still 11 minutes to go! Fed up I stared out of the window. Then - I could hardly believe my feverish eyes - a coffee cart on the train just across from mine!

Like a thirsty traveller in the desert who is drawn by the shimmering vision of a lake, I picked up my wallet - nothing else - left my train, walked across the platform and entered the other train. No. It was not a hallucination. The coffee cart was real. Grateful, my hand gripped the warm plastic cup. Slowly, not to spill the coffee, I headed for the door. Slowly, the train started to roll. The doors closed.

"But I need to get out! Let me jump off!" I shouted, suddenly very awake.

If the conductor had wanted to shield his young from a beast of the wild, he could not have done a better job protecting the door from me.

"But I have all my things on the other train, my coat, my handbag, my shopping bags, my keys."

Except for the click of the ever-faster moving wheels, an odd silence filled the compartment. The passengers had all found some spot on the wall to fix their eyes on.

Very small, I found myself an empty seat. The conductor sold me a ticket to Dietikon, the next stop.

The station - grey concrete - was as grey as the sky. And it was bitter cold. My skirt and silk blouse were neither right for the place, nor the climate. I ran to keep warm. Like many stations at the weekend, it was crowded with workers from Turkey or Albania who met there to pass the time of day. What they thought as I dashed past clutching my purse, I do not know; I certainly got some funny looks.

The station-master in Dietikon was extremely kind and helpful. He offered to call his colleague in Pfaeffikon for me. I was hoping that somebody would get my things out of the train there, in particular the keys, as I needed them to drive my husband's car home. We had just bought it, second hand, and it had come with one key only. "But no," the station master said, "I will not have time as the train is to be divided with half of it going on to Rapperswil, the other to Chur."

I bought a ticket back to Zurich.

In Zurich, more workmen filled the station, even more funny looks. Zigzagging, I ran to a telephone booth. Anthony answered. "Don't ask any questions, drive down to Pfaeffikon, meet the 17:14 train and get my things from the second car! And leave the keys with the station master!"

Then I tried the Lost Property office. There was a tiny chance that some bright passenger, who had

seen me exit and then ride off in another train, had handed my things to one of the train employees. Nothing. I bought myself another ticket to Pfaeffikon.

I had forgotten how slow a slow train was. The stations snailed by - Wiedikon, Enge, Wollishofen, Kilchberg, Rueschlikon . . . And nothing to do except think about my incredible stupidity and to worry. My main worry was my husband's keys. Not just because of the car key. What seemed far worse, the more I thought about it, was that the ring not only contained his office key, but worst of all, the key to the confidential filing cabinet. I knew my husband would loathe admitting to the personnel manager that his wife had left his keys on one train while she got herself coffee on another!

In Pfaeffikon I was out like a flash and up the stairs and in the station-master's office. "Has anybody handed in the things for Frau West?" I asked, holding my breath.

"No, I am sorry."

Devastated, I turned to leave. Without the keys, how would I get the car back home? The next moment they nearly hit me in the chest, as I bumped into a very impatient conductor at the door. Ignoring me, he shouted to the station-master, "Here are some keys for a Frau West! Tell her, her son has taken the other things home."

Saved, saved, saved at last!

The house was spotless and mercifully empty. Anthony was driving his friends home. Then I did what the film heroes always do when they don't know what to do - I poured myself a very large brandy. As it slowly trickled downward, I began to relax. Gratitude - to Anthony, to the passengers who did not steal my belongings, to the conductor of the train to Pfaeffikon, to the station-master at Dietikon, to the whole Swiss railway system - warmed my innards.

Remembering all this, I could hardly be angry with the stationmaster for sending the train off a little early. Anyway, was this not THE opportunity for that famous cup of coffee at the Hotel Gotthard? And it really was delicious!

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