

# *Schöffling & Co.*

## **foreign rights**

author Silke Scheuermann  
title Other People's Houses  
original title DIE HÄUSER DER ANDEREN  
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## **English sample translation**

translated by GEOFFREY MULLIGAN  
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contact Schöffling & Co.  
Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH  
Foreign Rights  
Kaiserstraße 79  
60329 Frankfurt am Main  
Germany

[www.schoeffling.de](http://www.schoeffling.de)

Shortly after they went on a trip together to celebrate their fourth wedding anniversary, Christopher began gradually to auction off Luisa's entire wardrobe on the internet. He had spent a long time looking for a suitable seller name and had finally decided on *Shopping Mouse 1*, a pseudonym that seemed inconspicuous amongst *Shopaholic 11*, *Stiletto Queen* and *Miri 22*. Besides, it was entirely free of innuendo. There was nothing to suggest that for years these articles had belonged to an ambitious scholar. Luisa would have hated this name.

Of course it would have been easier to give everything to the clothes bank or a second-hand shop. But he wanted it to last. He wanted it celebrated. He behaved as if he was taking revenge on Luisa, and he succeeded in hurting himself. He had paid for most of the items; he earned more and several budgets – restaurants, clothing, flights – had imperceptibly become his responsibility during the course of the marriage. He thought back to the times they had bought the clothes: in his home town of Hamburg, in Paris when they were visiting Luisa's brother, in Rome after her convention, in New York after his lecture; he said goodbye. Carefully he photographed pullovers, suits, trousers and dresses – she had vast numbers of dresses – from several angles, put the pictures up on the net, and then he began to make up short texts praising the quality of the respective items and briefly giving the reason *Shopping Mouse 1* was prepared to part with them. Christopher described cashmere pullovers, designer jeans and Missoni clothing in prose that was clumsy at first, but became increasingly fluent. He chose a font that was calculated to inspire trust. He drew suggestions for the story behind the garments from various sellers: he had almost gone for a slightly modified version of I'm- having-a-clear-out when he found something much more suitable: baby fat. Like *GabiHannover*, *Shopping Mouse 1* couldn't get rid of the baby fat and had therefore to part with sizes 34 and 36. He liked that a lot. He mentioned the weight gain with almost every item of clothing except for shoes and scarves. Luisa, who never put on weight because she never ate anything, would have gone pale at the thought that she could go up a size. He worked like a man possessed. He wanted to

have the whole thing over and done with by the time his wild enthusiasm had passed. In case he should feel regret, something he secretly expected, then it would be too late in any case, and *Knitting Jenny*, *Moira 19*, *Aerobicgirl* and several other women with Luisa's lean body mass would long since be the owners of this beautiful wardrobe.

There was something sensual about sitting with his camera on the big bed, surrounded by all those fabrics. It was like being in a warm nest. He draped the garments he wanted to put up on the net that day in a generous semi circle around himself. A pair of leggings still carried the price tag. He had never come across that yellow thingamajig. He hadn't seen her in that bathing costume for at least five years. He was personally offended by this excess. While he was at it he decided to give away some of his clothes too. He didn't want to be so decadent any more. Besides, he wanted to become vegan and support a child in an SOS children's village. Maybe he could go to a monastery as a novice. For a couple of years, or for one year at least. Something had to change.

But by lunch, which he ate in front of the television, he was no longer so sure about the veganism and the monastery. Still he had to get rid of a few things. Yes, he had put on a bit of weight – again, not much, but he could feel it and it disgusted him. He looked down at his stomach and grinned then he put half of his over-salted omelette in the fridge. Here was something he wished for devoutly: that after the separation with Luisa his whole environment, with him in it, would change, and quickly too. Another thing was that it shouldn't be any old change, but an improvement. A separation like this was a good opportunity to work on yourself.

He looked sadly at the omelette before shutting the fridge door, knowing perfectly well he might as well have thrown it straight in the bin – he wasn't in the habit of reheating food, certainly not if it was over salted. The only person in this house who could cook decent egg dishes was Luisa. Luisa, who after spending the return flight from the city on the lagoon in stony silence had pressed two laden sports bags in to his hands - you always brought back more than you imagined from a trip – and announced that she had already organised a connecting flight to Berlin while in Italy and would be flying straight on. She was going to visit an old girlfriend from her student days. She had said “an old girlfriend” in all seriousness, as if they were strangers, as if he didn't know that it would be either Michaela or Annika, probably

Annika, because there had recently been a row with Ela.

This turn of events had surprised him. He had reckoned with just about everything, with reconciliation or new fits of rage, with reproaches, sulks or tactical flattery, but not with this cowardly and highly effective retreat. But people were unpredictable – in the end living together always proved the same thing: you could depend on nothing. Anyone could scarp out of your life from one moment to the next. He fetched a coffee and went back to the bedroom where, lost in thought, he rearranged a silk dress.

And yet the trip to Venice had got off to a good start. No aggravating delays to the flight, and then that unbelievable first glimpse across the water to the city in the lagoon – the villas, palazzos, cathedrals and museums right on the sea, endangered, defiant, old, timeless, bewitchingly beautiful. The vaporetto had taken them directly from the airport to Madonna dell' Orto station, from where it was only a five minute walk to Fondamenta della Sensa and their four star hotel. No sooner was she on the boat than Luisa had made her enthusiasm excessively clear, even quite inappropriately for San Michele, the cemetery island, which she could supposedly see in the distance. And when they continued on foot she stood there shrieking several times, a church, someone's birthplace, a view to the sea, yes, yes, he could see that too. How childish it all was – and about as sexy as Heidi Klum moderating – he said that to her days later, when the whole thing had long since gone down the drain. They had been roughly an hour on Italian soil when the first disagreements began. It was getting on for seven in the evening and he had eaten nothing since breakfast, so he suggested dropping off the luggage quickly in the hotel and making straight for the nearest restaurant. Luisa agreed right away but took half an hour dressing up and combing her hair, then she emerged from the bathroom with a plea that they should stop at the Madonna dell' Orto on the way to have a look at one of Tintoretto's early works. He agreed, only so they could finally leave the hotel. He was really very hungry and was secretly hoping the Madonna dell' Orto would be closed – which it was. Nevertheless Luisa stood for a further half an hour in front of the building in order to contemplate the gothic facade, the loveliest in the whole city as she maintained. Meanwhile he felt sick with hunger. When she was finally through he suggested that rather than looking

around they go straight to the little local restaurant on the corner of that birthplace they saw earlier– it wouldn't be too far and he could definitely use a bite to eat.

“Oh you poor thing!” she said with supercilious sympathy. “And here I am tormenting you with culture!”

He bit his lip and walked faster.

The *Tre Mori* was a find: the atmosphere was pleasant, the music was turned down to a sensible volume, the chairs were plain and comfortable and the menu was clear and extremely interesting – the only thing that didn't belong here was Luisa's agitated face. But they had been given a pretty little table for two in the corner, and all the other tables seemed to be reserved. Wasn't this a splendid first evening? No?

No. Placing the order was as complicated as ever. It wasn't just that Luisa didn't drink any alcohol – she didn't eat either. Or rather, she didn't order anything.

“I'm really not hungry,” she announced, having studied the menu long enough to recite it by heart. And he, who was blissfully admiring the pretty waitress, replied peaceably, “Maybe that will change. Look, they've got sea bream. And squid risotto.”

She didn't react, but stared again at the heading *Secondi Piatti*.

“Do you know what you want?”

A tense nod. He didn't believe her. To give her some time he took advice from the English-speaking waiter on the choice of wine, tried one that was too fruity, and then chose a Montepulciano that went just as well with his black risotto as with his *Secondo*, steak with polenta.

Luisa didn't want a starter and nothing from the *Primi Piatti* either, but she did order the most expensive thing on the menu, the seafood antipasto, explaining first in long-winded Italian, and then just to be sure, once more in English, that she would like it to be served at the same time as Christopher's main course.

“Are you sure that's enough for you?” he asked.

“Of course,” she snapped back, and he let the matter rest. They each drank half a glass – she water, he wine – and they shared their irritation when an unashamedly cheery couple sat down right next to them.

“Germans, that's all we need,” Luisa moaned.

“There's no need to be so loud,” he agreed quietly, knowing perfectly well they were both secretly disturbed that the couple were holding hands and gazing in to each

others' eyes so adoringly.

The waiter brought some bread and Luisa relaxed visibly; she was even prepared to calm the storm she had created with her outburst. "That's how it is," Luisa explained in a whisper. "If you go to a first-class restaurant in Frankfurt there are also Americans and French people sitting next to you."

"Do you mean to say that it isn't a tourist trap here, it's just international?"

They gave each other an ironic nod, and he took a piece of bread. When his risotto arrived Luisa's face changed. This would make a good photo in an encyclopaedia under the heading gluttony, he thought. Dutifully he offered her a taste. She tried three bites from the left of the plate, and after a polite pause she fished out the plumpest bits of squid from the right. Then she tipped parmesan over a small corner she had also separated off for herself.

"Of course you'll have some of mine!" she promised generously.

But when he saw the morsels of cold fish and prawns on her plate, six in all, he didn't have the heart to eat any. She was finished in no time and watched him happily chewing his steak.

"How is it?"

"Fantastic."

She waited, he waited.

Then, silent and disgruntled, he shoved his plate across to her. She tasted some and, despite her accusing look, he dragged the plate back. The steak was medium, perfectly cooked, and the slightly sweet cassis sauce and the polenta complemented it beautifully. In fact, the portion would have been just right. Luisa ordered another plate from the waiter.

"Look, he really does understand my Italian!"

"Marvellous," he said. She just wanted a little of the polenta on her plate. Still he gave her a piece of meat, and in the end she accepted. She also accepted a refill when the plate was suddenly empty again. Meanwhile he felt hungrier and he drank another glass of wine.

"Pudding?"

"Absolutely not!" She made a face as if he had suggested they go straight for a swim in the canal.

“Okay,” he sighed meekly. He was fuming. He was capable of leaping up at any moment, chucking the wine in her face and leaving the restaurant. Any moment. Silently he implored her to say nothing for a little while, and his prayers were answered. She mumbled her excuses, stood up and went through the restaurant to the back. That was fine by him, although he actually couldn’t stand it when she disappeared to the toilet the minute the plates had been cleared away – it looked so bulimic. While she was gone, he tried to list in his head the advantages of not making a scene but letting her impossible, girlish behaviour go unremarked. Bravely, he said to himself this mustn’t be allowed to spoil my evening. But he was having trouble concentrating because the German couple next door were setting about their main courses with enthusiasm; they had two of each course, one apiece, as it should be. Luisa resurfaced, her lipstick refreshed, and got straight to choosing his pudding.

“I think you want the chocolate mousse!”

“Ahm, no. I’ll have the crème brûlée.”

“But look, over there, they’ve got the chocolate mousse, it looks great!”

“Then order one for yourself.”

She acted offended, ordered an espresso, which came with her own little spoon so that she could taste the crème brûlée. Because they were now so attuned to each other – he gave, she took – she didn’t ask for permission this time.

“Hm.” She licked the spoon carefully with the little pink tip of her tongue. Her eyes shone and her cheeks were red. He almost thought he could hear her purring.

“Too sweet for your taste?” he asked hopefully, although he knew better.

But she built up the tension, shook her head to give the impression she hadn’t quite decided, and produced her spoon again. This time he counted. The pudding contained ten spoonfuls. He had two, she had eight. He wondered if there was some trail mix he might be able to fall back on among the books in his hand luggage, finished off the wine and called the waiter.

Six more days, he thought. Six more lunches and dinners. I can handle that.

As they left the restaurant her mood was joyous.

“You see – I’m fine with just a little something to eat. I’m such a cheap date!” she warbled.

I’ve managed it so far, he congratulated himself. Now I must keep my mouth

shut for the two hours before we go to sleep. He was still hungry as well as a little drunk, a combination he found exceptionally unpleasant, and the blame for which he ascribed entirely to the monster who, believe it or not, had been his wife for four whole years. It also irritated him that drawing on the energy her body had taken from his risotto, his steak and his pudding, she was skipping along beside him, wondering out loud if they shouldn't go and do something, now that they didn't have to get up so early on account of the dog.

“What do you think, is Benno having a good time with Dorothee?”

He growled.

He knew that hunger would automatically drive him from his bed to the breakfast buffet, and again he found her inconsiderate. She had also seemingly forgotten how much he loved to roam through a foreign city at the crack of dawn, before all the other tourists – he wasn't much of a late sleeper, with or without a dog. Now, he thought grimly, I enjoy doing that on my own too.

And that's just how it went the next morning. When he awoke at six he thought briefly of slipping on a condom and taking the cosily sleepy Luisa with no great fuss, but at that moment she turned around sighing, and he smelled the garlic from yesterday's steak on her breath. He became quite sentimental when he thought of his steak lying on the plate, handsome and whole. Quietly he pushed the blanket back and stood up. At six thirty he was the first guest at the feast and, buoyed by this, he bounded along the fishy canals in the cool late-summer day towards the Jewish quarter. He didn't get back until just before eleven. Luisa was offended and irate and because, unlike him, she didn't have the self-control to ignore her emotional state, she naturally kicked up a fuss. He was barely through the door when she rushed at him, her face contorted and flooded with tears. He burst out laughing, suddenly and for no reason; he couldn't help it.

“You're laughing?” She was so astonished she stopped crying.

“It reminded me,” he snorted, “it reminded me of Punch and Judy!”

She turned on her heel, grabbed her bag and the map and was about to push past him and through the door when he said, “Where are you going?”

“Breakfast,” she said.

He followed, asked politely if he might join her, and while she was filleting her



grapefruit he allowed himself another pot of coffee and some scrambled egg, because he didn't know when he would get to eat again. And this was the pattern for the next few days: at around eleven in the morning and six in the evening when he was on his own for a moment while she took a quick look at Palazzo number eighty seven, he grabbed a morsel – Panini, a pasta dish, pizza, preferably something fatty and filling, then later, in a carefully chosen restaurant that lived up to Luisa's standards, that is an expensive one, he would look on with the patience of a saint while Luisa treated herself to the already shamelessly small portions on his plate. He would put on a good four pounds in the course of those ten days – but he wouldn't notice that till later. On the other hand, what he did realise after four or five days is that his sacrifices went entirely unnoticed. He started asking himself secretly if she was so used to his weak position in their relationship that she really had no idea of everything he did for her. For her and against himself; he was feeling increasingly unwell, which was of course due to bad meals shovelled down at the wrong time, and his getting none of the good ones. If she hadn't noticed then something had been very wrong between them for some time, for he had never seen himself as a weakling or a fool. If she really had noticed and was secretly pleased, she wasn't the person he had taken her for all these years. Either way, it wasn't good. In the evening he looked at himself in the mirror and asked when he had begun voluntarily to keep two thirds of his being under lock and key. He decided to put her to the test. One morning when it had looked like rain, something he had pointed out to her, she still took no jacket.

“The weather will get better,” she said optimistically. He refrained from packing a jeans jacket or a pullover in his rucksack, as he would usually have done, so as to surprise her with it when required. No, this time he let her walk alongside him with her teeth chattering – he enjoyed every minute. He had the feeling that he was following a path for the first time which had always been there, but to which he had paid no attention. She groaned softly every few paces and wound her scrawny arms around herself – a few passersby stopped and looked reproachfully at him, her companion, in his warm leather jacket with scarf and peaked cap. After a while Luisa stopped and asked, “Would you mind if we head back now and go there tomorrow? The weather is so foul.”

“You're just not dressed for it,” he replied. “Listen, it's the furthest part of town,

and we've finally made it! I don't want to walk all that way again tomorrow!"

He pointed out the white sign for the ticket booth.

"I know." There were tears in her eyes. "And you were so looking forward to it."

Then he rolled his eyes, peeled himself out of the jacket and handed it to her. At first he felt an inner sense of triumph, simply because he'd been right again. Only later did it occur to him that, firstly, he was still the one who was freezing and secondly, she had neither thanked him nor excused herself for her mistake. And that she had simply struck off the list one of the subjects that was most important to him on this trip. He was interested in architecture and interior design, and the exhibition was meant to highlight ideas on the theme of "vertical gardens" – a highly contemporary topic, in his opinion. But for Luisa there was no culture after 1920. Freezing and weary of the struggle, he enjoyed the exhibition a lot less than he would have otherwise. But he kept his mouth shut as usual – better to risk chronic bronchitis and months of the rest of his life chained to a bed than not to behave like a gentleman. That evening he was already feeling slightly feverish, and the next day he had pains in his neck and announced to Luisa that he would spend the morning in bed. Generously, she had raised no objection and had allowed him to draw the route to Scuola Grande di San Rocco on the map and hand her some cash, and then his lonely morning began. He looked out at the street and the canal and wondered what it would be like to walk just once through empty alleyways, but of course that would never happen, the streets weren't even empty at night. All those many, many occasions the city had been photographed and filmed and drawn – it might have looked a little shabby, but it was always both human and eccentric in its chaotic Grandezza, its jumble of streets and in the broad facades that bordered the canals. He thought about the sea as he continued to gaze out the window, observing the transport gondolas laden with boxes as they were steered skilfully past along the narrow canals, the mail and emergency doctor's boats and the many tourists who were being ferried about by sun-bronzed locals. He felt increasingly as if he'd fallen in to a trap. A less good-humoured and even-tempered man than him would have refused to put up with Luisa's behaviour long ago, he reasoned. How come it had gone so far with him? How had it simply become habit to spend the day swallowing the humiliations she so skilfully doled out to him in

small portions under the name of “marriage”.

When they first met, he had taken her bad manners for an endearing form of eccentricity, and later on, when there were many things he found not in the least endearing, he had reasoned that he was dealing with some form of protracted response to her complicated childhood. Besides, he had increasingly imagined his way in to the deceptive fantasy that she needed him in those tricky situations she got herself in to – otherwise she would have long since died of hunger or cold, gone missing, scared off all her friends and acquaintances and so forth. He had styled himself as her saviour, so that he didn't come across to himself as a complete idiot.

Now, lying there with a mild fever, he became aware of the absolute necessity of formulating a plan of attack to improve his situation in this so-called love affair. He felt new hope and heaved himself out of bed. He allowed himself a substantial warm breakfast, and equipped with his own sense of direction but no map, he set off on his own little tour of the city.

That evening they met up and spoke of their experiences on the way to dinner. He had discovered a hidden garden of rare beauty and looked at the mysterious photos by the young Stanley Kubrick, she raved about a biblical cycle by Tintoretto (*another one?* but he managed to bite back the question). He realised that he had enjoyed the day they had spent separately more than any of the others.

Those are signs, he thought to himself, clear signs that something had to change. What am I waiting for?

Less than three quarters of an hour later at dinner, he kidded her that he had in mind to eat up his plate of gnocchi himself – “alone” he spelled out when she looked at him in disbelief - and for the remaining two days till their flight home they argued incessantly. He said things to her he would scarcely have dared think before, but when spoken they felt just right. He called her a perfidious, controlling hussy with a massive eating disorder. “You'd be lost without me,” he bellowed. “You wouldn't find a single church. St Marks Square maybe, with some difficulty! And you'd have long since starved. All in all, I find that pretty much everything is more fun when you're not around.”

She found the truth about herself hard to take. For their remaining time in Venice they went their separate ways.

He had thought she would come to her senses back home and they could both begin to work on themselves, although of course she would have more work to do than him. But he was ready to support her in any way. He had invested a great deal of time, money and emotion in this marriage, and just like his habilitation he regarded her as an important project in his life - a project he wasn't about to simply abandon merely because it was clear to him that it hadn't turned out to be the success he had hoped for. Instead she vanished off to Berlin. Although the train would have been just as quick, he took a taxi home out of defiance. He had scarcely unlocked the front door when he saw her clothes hanging peaceably beside his in the wardrobe, and that was the point at which he decided yet again to do something, this time with his surroundings. Instead of always waiting for her latest unpredictable behaviour he wanted to be unpredictable himself. He could no longer stand the way that everything around him looked exactly as it did before. There was now to be a sharp line between his past and his present, and clearly visible to everyone, especially himself. It was time to redecorate. But – not any old how. He wanted to do something especially mean that would block off the way back for both of them once and for all. Only what? He cooked spaghetti and sat down with his plate in front of the television. That same evening the spark of an idea came to him, and the next morning he set about the execution. If any doubts arose, he conjured up the scene in the Doge's Palace when Luisa looked up the thousandth ceiling painting in the travel guide and compared the text with what was in front of her. He particularly despised her know-it-all attitude when they were contemplating art.

Christopher heaved himself up from the floor with a sigh. He had fulfilled his quota for the day, photographed ten garments, mainly blazers and winter dresses, and was about to transfer the data from camera to computer in his study. As he stood up he cast another glance at the shimmering grey-blue silk blouse which he had laid out with a gathered waist on the floor. There were two tiny flecks of blood on one sleeve. He had photographed these flecks separately, they were barely visible, but he knew they would keep the price down, even if he claimed it was ink. Nobody wanted to carry around traces of a stranger's life on themselves. Suddenly the blouse made him feel very sad. He remembered clearly how Luisa had given herself a nasty cut in the

palm of her hand while peeling an apple, blood flowed, formed a large puddle in the kitchen, and he had applied a pressure bandage as quickly as he could. She was silent and almost fainted when he drove her in to accident and emergency; there he held her good hand and distracted her with some improvised stories while the young doctor sewed up the wound in her right hand with four stitches. She had thanked him a thousand times for getting her so quickly to the hospital, and against all expectations they had spent an absolutely wonderful evening together – an evening the like of which they did not experience once in Venice. Christopher shuddered, looked once again at the blouse. Maybe as a souvenir...swiftly he called to mind the scene at the Doge's Palace. No.

“Education can be a terrible thing”, he said softly to the blouse, and less than half an hour later the “Superior-quality 100% silk blouse in midnight blue” was up for auction. He was particularly proud of “midnight blue”. Before turning off the computer he had a quick look at how the current auctions were going. Two cashmere polo neck pullovers and a twinset had been sold for acceptable prices – given that they had bought the clothes in Shanghai there was even a profit. Her kimono had remained on a lame 31.50 Euros, but that didn't matter; the auction still had quite a while to run. Initially, he had got nervous when absolutely nothing happened in the first few days, or the garment was stuck at a ridiculously low price after half the time was up, but then he realised that only the final half hour of the auction was decisive. The pros from *AngelBielefeld* to *Zazie 22* (was she really called Zazie? And was she really only 22 and on the lookout for designer gear?) were all online then and battle commenced. A couple of times he had even made an offer under an ancient email address to drive the price up, but he had long since given up on that. He was about to sign off when he noticed that someone was making an enquiry about the garment at the top, Luisa's Chanel suit that she had bought off a friend. He shook his head angrily. What on earth was there to enquire about a Chanel suit. Still he was curious. And the name *Amber Davis* didn't even seem like a special fun name for online shopping.

“I am somewhat superstitious, and I don't believe in the concept of second-hand clothing,” wrote Amber Davis. “But I asked for a second opinion, and my girlfriend said it would be fine.”

She is American, thought Christopher. Nobody would say “second opinion” round here.

“Nevertheless, I wanted to ask you if you had a good time while you were wearing the suit. I think there are objects that bring good luck and others that don’t. The fact that you had a baby presumably brought happiness, and so I assume the suit has good karma. I don’t want it to bring me bad luck when I’m wearing it in downtown Frankfurt.”

An American who believed in the karma of objects and lived in Frankfurt.

He burst out laughing; this was all too absurd. And somehow sexy.

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Schöffling & Co.  
Foreign Rights  
Kaiserstrasse 79  
60329 Frankfurt am Main  
Germany

phone: +49 69 92 07 87 16

fax: +49 69 92 07 87 20

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