

# *Schöffling & Co.*

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author Simon Urban  
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## **English sample translation**

translated by Katy Derbyshire  
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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)

The oval fasten-seatbelts sign lights up. The metallic gong sounds. The cabin's carbon panels tremble a little. *G.A.* Celebration begins its descent. It dips gently into the swirled pavlova of fog and exits it again after several minutes of jarred blindness, as if we'd just been invented in the clouds: me in my white trench coat, the suntanned captain with the confidence-inspiring beefiness of shirt-sleeved men who always know exactly what to do, and his spotlessly clean airship with its pungent scent of passion-fruit cleaning spray. The clouds tear, Celebration born again, and we plummet out of the cotton wool as if ejected from a vaporous virgin vagina.

'Welcome to mortality,' I say out loud, halfway serious. The captain turns around to me and smiles. For a moment I think I know him, have been twinkled at by his gold molar before, someplace and sometime. He turns away again and looks ahead, pulling gently on the thrust lever.

The blue-black Pacific comes into view.

I swallow my 3 p.m. pill with the last mouthful of Southern Comfort-flavoured tea and still don't fasten my seatbelt. We veer right, into a sharp curve. Approaching the landing strip. The archipelago appears below us, fallen from on high, splashed in all directions. Paradise spewed up into the sea. The Almighty, I think, must have had a pretty bad case of food poisoning one day.

Now the oval plastic Celebration window presents the first few details: the main island is the shape of a crippled crotchet. Grey hills alternate with dark woods, pale beaches with steep cliffs. It all looks more like a nature reserve than a crime scene. Here and there, red roofs stand out from the green, thin snakes of streets, with skulking dots for cars. At a crossroads, white letters are painted on the ground: STOP!

'Too late for that, I'm afraid,' I say towards the cockpit, but this time the man doesn't react. He prefers to press buttons, flick switches, stare into space.

The Celebration tilts to the left and a town slips into sight. It seems to be creeping out of the sea, growing up to the hills from the beach, mushrooming in all directions and fraying into the woods. I spot Holy Hill, enthroned above it all on its outcrop of rock. The four flashy sacred buildings, their towers first rising heavenwards separately only to then tangle together into one huge spire, into a single mind-bending church. A gigantic castle in the air for the global God-botherers. It really is reality. I realize I'd been expecting it to be a huge scam, right up to the last

moment. But down there, it flashes unmistakably, the holiest of all holy sanctuaries: the Global Prayground. The famous glass pyramid is glued between the four spires like an Egyptian UFO. It reflects the sunlight. It dazzles me. It makes me angry.

Far below the hill, the historical pleasure park is lit up, in its midst the enormous Eye of God, the largest big wheel in the southern hemisphere. The big party is set to start here in four days' time. If they don't find any more dead bodies by then.

I think: we're so far south they ought to have real Southern Comfort.

I think: so you really do exist, Gondwana.

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The arrivals terminal: a supersize greenhouse. Floor-to-ceiling transom windows, above them a curved glass never-ending roof. Magnificent palm trees that will never make it to the top of the space. Cameras everywhere. Gigantic posters of the Quadriga members on steel struts. Four white habits with no faces. The anonymous rulers over an archipelago of innocents. One Muslim, one Jew, one Catholic, one Protestant, all of them faceless functionaries whose identity no one knows, perhaps not even they themselves. Why they put up portraits that show nobody is a mystery to me. Like so many things when it comes to this case.

Even though I had a record-breakingly short time to prepare for my assignment, all the key information instantly pops up in my mind. I can flick through it like in a legibly written, well-structured notebook: for 47 years, the island was a vacation area for people with 'reductions or impairments of maximum achievable intelligence'. In its best days, up to 40,000 'mentally retarded' visitors came every year. A global financial success thanks to the pleasure park plus Polynesian feeling, funded by the UN, nickname: Cape Handycapped. There were four animal characters in top-to-toe furry costumes, designed by an American advertising agency to amuse the tourists and give a sense of security, feel-good diversity, confident outsider status. As they couldn't get a licence from Disney for mice, ducks or dogs, they decided on a 'particularly original' selection. It was no use to the island in the long run. Waning customer figures due to genetic technology led to debt, insolvency, and then finally the island was bought up by the World Church. The project: a symbol of monotheist reconciliation. The disabled guests stayed away and the elite believers moved in. The UNESCO-protected furry animals were reinterpreted as grotesque symbols of

unconditional love for God. The impairment of maximum achievable intelligence on the island went on undisturbed.

‘The core idea of this singular project,’ it said in one of the dossiers Gaarder had administered to me by force, ‘is the realization of the most primordial of all mankind’s dreams: nothing less than paradise on earth.’ These dreamers obviously weren’t aware that every paradise harbours its own fall of man.

I stroll step by step towards the sunny expanse of the Welcome Cathedral, built to make it unambiguously clear to all those who’ve just landed that they’re chosen ones, born under lucky stars, a marvellous improbability. ‘18 million people apply for permanent residence on Gondwana every single year,’ coos the dramatic voice in the TV ads, ‘and only 36 make it.’

Here comes number 37, and is guaranteed to leave again, I think as I pass the identification portal with my two suitcases. The monitors switch themselves on. My face, my name and my profession run across the display, then my flight data, my visa confirmation, my transport number. Two green squares flash and I confirm them with a synchronized press with both thumbs. Checking data, completing examination, please wait – data correct.

The lock opens soundlessly.

No weapons check, no alarm signal.

Ahead of me is a group of laughing Global Air hostesses in flawless silver uniform parras. Six silver tents wrapped around women, with suitcases dangling from their wrists and airline brooches at chest level. I feel the Southern Comfort-flavour tea feigning a slight high in me, swathing me in a gold-threaded bathrobe of cheery melancholy, beneath which I’m sporting nothing but my Smith & Wesson. I feel the desire rising within me to walk up to the herd of headscarved hostesses, open up my coat of sadness and offer the giggling girls two loaded guns at once: Can you handle something like this, little laughing ladies?

‘Detective Inspector Ahorn?’

The man asking the question was not next to me a moment ago but now he is, all of a sudden: fat, friendly Francis. The latter word is embroidered onto his white polo shirt in slanting letters, above his right tit.

‘Francis,’ I read aloud and look into two grey-green eyes in which fear, hope and joy are piled high into a feverish shine. I put down my cases and reach out a hairy hand. ‘Plato Ahorn. Call me Plato.’

Francis takes my hand and presses it quickly and firmly, then hesitates and lets go again. He obviously finds the question embarrassing but he asks it anyway: ‘And Mr Gaarder?’

‘Am I not enough for you?’

‘That’s not what I meant!’ Francis is in deep water. ‘Excuse me. Don’t get me wrong, Detective Ahorn.’

‘Plato.’

‘Plato. We’re glad you could come so quickly. But we absolutely have to speak to Mr Gaarder. Personally. As soon as possible.’

‘Are you one of the people who were there?’

‘There? Where?’

‘At the scene of the crime.’

‘Heavens, no!’ Francis stares at me. ‘I’m from the island visitors’ service! I’ve got nothing to do with...’

‘But you know about it.’

‘They told me some details. Yes.’ Fat Francis forces himself to speak calmly. ‘But only because of the crematorium. And then I was selected as your host. You’ll be staying at my home, Plato.’

‘Suits me. Looks like I won’t go hungry, anyway.’

Another stare.

‘Is Mr Gaarder coming soon?’

‘That’s the plan. He just wants to wait for my first report.’

Francis piles on the sugar. ‘Actually he told us he’d be here the day after tomorrow at the latest... So that means your first report...’

‘Is there any reason to doubt Mr Gaarder’s words?’

‘No. I’m sorry. Of course not.’

Some of the hostesses are now impersonating passengers. The tallest of them puts on a silly voice and moves to and fro like a zombie attempting a square-dance. Francis and I watch. These hostesses are the luckiest and happiest hostesses in the world. They take showers under the warm light of the sun, they wallow in it, perfectly aware of their perfect figures. We watch the elastic bodies doubled over with laughter like silvery worms; I sense the tears in their large eyes, the beautiful, powdered faces contorted into gargoyles by cramped grins.

‘He was slaughtered, Plato,’ Francis says quietly.

‘Trenk, you mean,’ I say.

Francis nods. Something unspeakable is squatting in his mouth, squinting out at me from between bleached teeth.

‘Tell me about it,’ I say.

‘Now?’

‘Time is a long-distance runner. And sometimes it even sprints.’

Francis looks over at the hostesses, as if they were about to hold up prompt cards for him to read his lines from.

‘He was stabbed to death like a – a sacrificial lamb to the slaughter. And before that they...’

An uninterested computer voice begins rattling off information on the island in the background. Several fully swathed civilians are chatting as they wait at the counter for sightseeing flights around Pinta/Cristobal. Bearded men are sitting in the Global Air Bistro, praying, reading the *Better Times* and drinking hot tea from small, pastel-coloured glasses. The computer voice has come to the end of its information and is followed by a Gregorian choir. *Dies irae dies illa, solvet saeculum in favilla: teste David cum Sibylla.*

I allow Francis a liturgical minute to give him a chance to fetch forbidden words from the depths of his brain. Francis chokes up one word at a time and chews on each one; he doesn’t like the taste. I notice he’d like nothing better than to spit them all out. A small, fat man wrestling with himself. At last he opens his mouth.

‘They cut off his... his scrotum and his member. They castrated him. And they forced him to eat it.’

The hostesses squeal.

Francis jumps with shock.

*Quantus tremor est futurus, quando iudex est venturus, cuncta stricte discussurus!*

‘Was Trenk the first one?’

‘I...’ His voice collapses at the knees. A tear creeps down Francis’ chubby right cheek. He nods and kills the tear on his jacket sleeve. ‘Who could do such a thing, Plato?! Here, of all places?! Why does a person turn into a murderer?!’

‘Every murderer loses faith in something before he kills,’ I say, staring at Francis, who is standing before me with his hands folded, eyes closed and lips trembling, as if praying to the Quadriga posters.

‘Can... can you help us, Plato?’

‘I can do everything that needs doing.’

‘Thank you.’

*Mors stupebit et natura, cum resurget creatura, iudicanti responsura.*

‘You should have called earlier,’ I say, trying to make it sound as tough as I mean it. ‘Really, Francis. You should have called earlier.’

\*

The cream-coloured Karmann Ghia convertible in which fat and friendly Francis drives me through the green hills towards the city transports us back to a consoling time around 1960, makes us into dashing heroes in a romantic drama, guaranteed no guaranteed happy ending. A Christmas-scented cardboard tree dangles from the bracket originally intended for the rear-view mirror. The radio warbles *Seasons in the Sun*. Colonial-style houses on either side of the road, spacious white wooden buildings with pillars, conservatories, bay windows, verandas and pools. Constructed in the era when this was still a secular paradise for children with learning deficiencies and not a sacred one for adults with deficient learning. I wouldn’t be surprised if the UNESCO-protected furry characters came round the corner at any moment: Randy the Wombat, Sandy the Manatee, Mandy the Draco Lizard and Wendy the Chequered Horse. All of them with brightly coloured bouquets of balloons pulling on their claws, paws and hooves, a singing school of retarded, mongoloid, limping boys and girls skipping behind them, leaving a trail of drool on the warm pavement. *We had joy, we had fun.*

‘What’s it like driving without a mirror?’

‘You get used to it.’ Francis forces himself to smile. ‘When everyone is considerate of each other a lot of things are possible, Plato. Not only on the roads. You’ll soon see that.’

‘Oh, will I?’

‘Mirror’s aren’t necessary in life.’

‘Really? And how do you shave?’

‘I go to the coiffeur. Our Muslim brothers have it easier, of course.’

‘The good old hobgoblin look.’

‘Please respect...’

‘And you really don’t care how you look when you get up in the morning?’

‘I look the way God made me.’

‘You look the way God made you.’

‘Yes, right.’

‘So why does God not want you to see how God made you? I thought he created you in his image?’

‘Well...’

‘Can’t he look himself in the eye any more? Or has he messed up somewhere and now he’s ashamed of himself?’

‘Plato...’

‘You all came out of God’s big punching press here. The cream of creation. But you wrap your women up from top to toe in silver tablecloths and you throw your rear-view mirrors away. What’s the point? The final proof that superstition makes you blind?’

‘You choose hard words.’ Fat Francis gathers his wits. ‘What you call tablecloths are the World Church’s ritual female full-veiling gowns; they’re called parras.’

‘As in parrallel universe?’

‘Grmpf.’

‘Or as in parra-noid?’

‘Perhaps you’ll understand us better when you’ve lived among us for a few days.’

‘Oh please, I hope not.’

‘You’re obviously one of the ever-decreasing group of people in this world who haven’t yet had the privilege of being enlightened, Plato.’

‘Some wait decades for enlightenment, and others switch their own lights on.’

Francis descends into morose silence. I realize he’s taking a scenic route especially for me – along the coastal road spread like a lasso around the island, then through the suburbs into the centre and up ruthlessly serpentine roads. All the



pedestrians are slim to athletic. The men wear shorts and show off muscular calves, well-trained biceps and flat stomachs. Their T-shirts are embossed with the face of Jesus, crosses, stars of David and sickle-moons. The women all look like G.A. hostesses, trundling after the half-naked gents like sporty silver sacks. Almost all the cars are convertibles. The drivers are all men, all sticking precisely to the speed limit. Everything seems to creep along. When women are visible they're banned to the back seat, their parras fluttering in the light breeze. Mummified transports that have become a perfectly normal sight on the continent too. Perfect conditions for a murderer, I think, with half the population permanently under wraps.

Francis, in an offended huff, drives through dazzling white residential areas towards Holy Hill. The road is blocked by iron bollards but he knows an endless combination of side streets that eventually lead us right onto Holy Hill. Francis makes a 180-degree turn and stops next to a bronze monument of a woman veiled from head to toe. Not even her shoes are visible.

'That can't be serious, Francis.'

'What do you mean?'

'The lump of metal next to you, of course!' I read out the inscription on the statue: '*Phyllis Schlafly Memorial*. Is it some kind of joke?'

'No, why?' He sounds insulted again. 'Phyllis Schlafly was a great pro-Protestant reformer who allowed the women of this world to find their true place in society. The monument commemorates her achievements.'

'Great. But it's not a very good likeness, is it?'

'Not a good likeness? But you can't see her.'

'Francis – oh, forget it.'

I get out of the car, turn to my right and realize I'm astounded. Faced with this view, this is the first time I can understand the holy rollers. It really is rather nice up here: the high plateau on which the self-proclaimed World Church knocked up its symbolic HQ juts into nothingness on an outcrop of rock. Only a glass barrier and then a sheer drop. The city is tacked onto the slope below us, a white hamlet of densely packed houses. Countless flags sporting the three religious symbols of the four local religions flutter above the roofs. Every World Church pensioner compulsively confesses which God he secretly considers the one true God. And they all have to look up at the headquarters. At all times.

Parts of the old fairground on the beach are already operating. Lights flash, the wind wafts scraps of music up to us and the big wheel circles at a leisurely pace. Behind it glitters the Pacific. Countless miniature islands float on the water like scattered remains after a monstrous plane crash.

I turn around.

I'm not a great fan of churches, but I have to admit I'm impressed again. The two cathedrals, the synagogue and the mosque in their semi-modern, semi-traditional Gaudí-Calatrava hybrid architecture, all built out of the white island stone, all exactly a hundred metres high and interlinked by countless curving bridges, form in their entirety a gigantic castle in the air, a phantasmagorical, multiple Neuschwanstein. Where the four uppermost bridges meet, between the tips of the minarets, domes and steeples, the pyramid floats a hundred metres above our heads. It looks larger than from the plane. Although it's made entirely out of glass there's no way to tell what's inside. That typical blatant secretiveness of all that's religious – there's always something for the keepers to define as unreachable. They always stage an empty spot that has to be filled with dreams. They always forbid you to look into something you'd really like to look into. If they'd let you, you'd soon see that it's empty.

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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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