

## **Brigitte Suerbaum-Renner**

### **When the lift lost its laughter**

“The average size of a lift in Germany is 2.03 square metres. [...] The minimum distance of 1.5 meters is theoretically possible, but it can get tight when getting in and out.” ...<sup>1</sup>

The lift in the underground car park, which takes people up or down 4 floors, is 2.35 square metres in size. According to the metal sign inside, its maximum load is 13 people or 1000 kg. When the two of us and our little dog are standing in the lift, it is full, especially since we usually have a shopping trolley with us for visiting the popular farmer’s market. As soon as the lift stops on its way up or down to pick up more people the following conversation develops:

He: *May we join you?*

You: *Of course, you are welcome. There is still room for many!*

He: *Really? Well.*

We move, two more people get in, you point to the metal sign. Everyone looks at it in disbelief and starts to talk about the gap between reality and theory, by now the lift has arrived at the next floor. The door opens automatically.

You: *Just come in. We’ll manage!*

She: *Are you sure? It seems quite crowded.*

You: *The sign up there says 13 people.*

He: *We are still calculating. But I’m confident that the lift will carry us all.*

She (entering with two more people): *We’ll make ourselves very thin. As thin as possible. You know, I really must go on a diet. And we’re truly grateful to you.*

In the meantime 7 people have squeezed together on 2.35 square metres, the lady is assured that a diet is not necessary for the lift community, shopping bags, handbags, bouquets of flowers and our trolley somehow find room in the gaps, our little dog has settled on 0.09 square metres at the exit door of the lift, it is praised by everyone for this; someone has only just discovered it and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.presseportal.de/pm/145854/4733309> [03.10.2024]

promises the little dog a treat when he gets out, children who happen to be travelling in the lift say “*cute!*” and compare it to their own dog, their parents chime in, dog owners get on with each other immediately. Everyone agrees that the little dog does not have to be counted towards the maximum load (“*How much does it weigh?*” – “*5 kilos*”). We debate whether and how we could possibly take more people with us – after all, 13 people are permitted. Remarks about the time of year and the weather crop up regularly. If someone expresses concern about too much frost or heat, you console them with one of your favourite sayings (although you are not from Cologne, just a lover and good imitator of its typical dialect): „*Et hätt noch immer jot jejange*“ (*Still, it has always gone well*)

The lift stops, the door opens, the little dog gets out purposefully: “*The little one is in a hurry*” – “*No wonder! Imagine its perspective!*”, “*It needs to find a tree!*”, “*Watch out, let nobody kick the little dog!*”, “*Where is its treat?*”, “*Oh!* (searching the pockets of his jacket, facing downwards) *Next time. Definitely.* “...”, some laugh and console the little dog while everyone somehow sorts themselves out when leaving the lift one after the other. It is crowded, people nod in a friendly manner, wish each other a nice morning, day, or evening. Sometimes the lift conversation takes you and some people a little further on the way out of the arcade to the market before strangers greet each other a last time and go their separate ways.

Nobody is bad-tempered on the trip in the lift, some limit themselves to a few words (“*Thank you.*” “*Good day.*” “*I’ll get out soon, don’t worry.*”) or make appreciative gestures (frowning, shaking their heads, laughing, huffing, sucking in their stomach, folding their arms, aligning bags in front of their own bodies, standing motionless with a pleading look at the others, all of that while registering the lift’s metal sign).

I have experienced this countless times, even your increasing dementia has not put a damper on your joy of life on those occasions. Using the lift remained entertaining.

That was then.

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Today there was a carefully laminated paper sign at the lift: *Masks required*

In the past weeks and months, we have stopped taking the lift at all, I have refrained from going to the farmer’s market out of concern about the necessary distance, which you would not want to or could not keep; the shops were closed.

Even on walks through the forest I tried to lead you quickly and at a great distance around other people so that you did not get involved in conversations that were now unwanted or even not allowed, due to the lack of 2 metres distance. Remarks about the little dog, the weather and the appropriate type of clothing, the visible and invisible animal population of the forest, the huge trees, the old and modern techniques of felling wood ..., they remained few. All the while I was moved by the thought that you, for many reasons, belong to the so-called vulnerable groups of people. You found this behaviour very strange and had no understanding at all for it.

Now we are vaccinated, there are fixed rules (about the obligation to wear masks, about minimum distances inside and outside, maximum numbers of people at gatherings, considering the location, the occasion, the family relationships of people while meticulously counting adults and children ...).

The two of us, accompanied by the little dog, return to the underground car park in our own car. That is allowed. Before getting out of the car you unwillingly and awkwardly put on the FFP2 mask at my request and a pointed look at the new sign. We only use the lift when it is empty and then I hope that no one wants to get in on its way up.

The lift appears, it stops, the door opens automatically, I stop you from getting in because there are already two people in the place, which has not grown bigger in the past weeks and months. The door closes. I prevent you from taking off your mask. You argue with me. We cannot use the stairs because of your heart condition, and, anyway, it's difficult with the little dog and the shopping trolley. The lift stops again, this time it is empty, we get in and I hope that we will stay alone. That doesn't always work out. Somebody gets in, after briefly hesitating and then following your inviting hand gesture. Fortunately, he is wearing a proper mask. You try to start the usual conversation through the masks, the person opposite looks irritated and seldom responds. I hold my breath, try to keep as much distance as possible between you and the other, the little dog stands on its 0.09 square metres at the exit, it is ignored, everyone is busy with themselves and their mask (pressing it tighter to their nose, tugging at the ear loops, trying to adjust their glasses over it, lifting it from their chin ...). People's faces have become narrow strips between the wire-enforced border of their masks and their hairline (or hat, depending on the season), their expressions cannot be read. The lift stops, the little dog gets out first, we all quickly leave the confined space, you sometimes wish the other person a nice day through your mask, rarely do you get an answer.

We get the market visit over as quickly as possible, the way back in the lift for just the two of us and the little dog is logistically easier to organise. I'll wait with you until we are the only ones standing in front of the opening door at the top. On our way down in the lift there is no one now who will join us even though they want to go up when the door opens automatically in front of them (*"Down, you say? That's fine. I like going by lift." "Goes down first? No problem!"*). Any remarks about the ridiculous metal sign with its 13 persons or 1000 kg are no longer relevant because there is no one else with you except me and the little dog. And I know the sign.

At some point the carefully laminated paper sign *"Masks required"* disappeared.

The doors of the lift open and close automatically, people get in and out, nobody misses the masks, everyone moves together, standing close (*"Oh, look! There is a little dog! What breed is it?"*, *"Can it actually bark?"*). But the old intimate contact is missing, most people (unconsciously?) try to keep a little distance. You no longer talk to the others in the lift, even though the metal sign has not changed: 13 people or 1000 kilos. You look at me and, after a while, you usually ask me: *"Where are we going?"* – *"To the market."* Then the lift arrives at the top and everyone gets out. Sometimes someone gives us a quick nod of greeting before walking away. You ask me with a frown: *"Where are we going now?"* I answer: *"To the market."*

My lift has not recovered its laughter.

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