

Translated excerpt

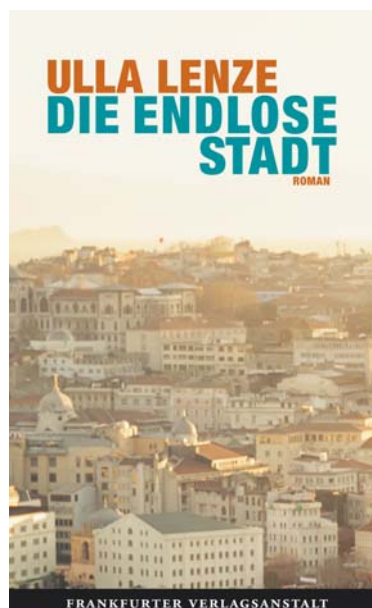
Ulla Lenze
Die endlose Stadt
Roman

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Ulla Lenze
The endless city
Novel

Translated by Isabel Fargo Cole



PROBABLY THERE ARE MANY PATHS

Someone is walking toward her through the low sun's light. He moves without haste, so that her stopping is reframed as waiting. She smiles reluctantly. Squints in the sun's rays. Until he's standing opposite, and his shadow falls on her.

This is the man she owes the past six months to. Yesterday they shook hands; today they barely took notice of each other, not on the ferry, not in Topkapi Palace, not in the Museum of Modern Art. He was part of an entourage clustered around the German foreign minister and surrounded by bodyguards, everyone wearing innocently bright polo shirts with dead earnest dark suit pants.

She feels her body tense up.

"Hello," she says casually.

"Hello," he says cheerily.

And then they both hesitate – they ought to know each other's names. It wouldn't do to ask again.

"Aren't you going to the Eyüp Sultan Mosque?" She points to the restive throng of thirty German and Turkish artists and creative types over by the ferry.

"No, I've had enough lectures for today," he says. "And you?"

"Me too."

"What are your plans?"

"Just to walk around." She doesn't dare say *by myself*. Instead she pushes her sunglasses up from her face. His smile loses its caution, closes more tightly around her.

What excuse can she use to get away from him?

"A suggestion," he says, putting his hand on her shoulder. She turns and gazes out at the town with him: pastel houses on a hill, a mosque's

minarets, her gaze following his outstretched hand. No wedding ring – something she’s just started to pay attention to, even in men who don’t interest her.

“You can see all the way to Istanbul from up there. Shall we tackle it?”

Tackle it. That makes her think of pension reform, or a soccer team trying to climb in the rankings. Not taking a stroll or *just walking around*.

His hand slips from her shoulder, he hasn’t noticed her hesitation, he’s already heading toward the town.

They walk through a park, deserted and rather dull. For these first few minutes they compare notes about Eyüp: the fourth most important place of pilgrimage in the Islamic world, oddly hidden away here at the end of the Golden Horn; except for the mosque and the view of Istanbul from the hill, the guide books they’ve read have no recommendations.

It’s more of a saunter, and she hadn’t expected that, this slow walk that practically requires a decision for each step (so that’s what he calls *tackling*). But each attempt to pick up the pace puts her a yard ahead of him, and he’s not at all willing to catch up.

Her hand at her nape, she turns around with a mocking smile. He raises his eyebrows questioningly, and she turns off the smile at once.

The evening’s images return. The big pools of light on the German consulate’s polished floorboards. The ballroom. The drifts of perfume like snow flurries hitting your face here and there. Tailored suits, form. The control of hairspray helmet coiffeurs. Forms and more forms. “None of it fits,” she moaned, trying to foment unrest in the people sitting left and right of her: “They have no clue about art or us, it’s not about us, it’s just...” – “Shut up, Holle, please.” – “... about public image.”

And then the man she’s having to saunter along with here was called up to the podium: how much the foundation owed to him, the board member of a major conglomerate, construction or banking, she can’t remember which. She snuck outside and phoned Celal. Celal, at Galata

Tower, said he got a hard-on the moment he heard her voice. "It is big like Galata Tower, baby!"

"Looks like snow," says the banking or construction guy, pointing at the slope.

"Yes," she says. They're old Ottoman tombs; she knows he knows that. Why has he joined her? Had she caught his eye back when the artists were being introduced, one at a time, the crucial stations of their lives read out? And on today's excursion was he just waiting for a chance to be alone with her? Hardly. Something must have caught his attention as she hurriedly jumped ashore. Something about it must have surprised, maybe even bothered him.

That's the most important thing about her. Not who she studied with, what galleries have showed her work, or the year of her birth. This tendency to take off. "I want to eat your loneliness," Celal had said. Because she'd said: "I am lonely most of the time."

A boy with a 20-liter water bottle on his shoulder overtakes them. They're walking as slowly as though in consideration for their halting conversation that might otherwise be left in the dust. He starts talking about the traffic in Berlin and Hanover, evidently casting about for universal, innocuous topics.

"I get around by bike," she says.

"Isn't that dangerous in Berlin?"

She nods.

She'd actually like to ask about his work. But what questions might reveal that she doesn't know people like him, and at the same time mistrusts them? They don't even have a subject in common, at most the strained search for one.

They pass a shop selling Muslim headscarves, a bakery window stuffed from bottom to top with flatbreads, shops with sponges, soaps, bulk herbs and teas. She puts her sunglasses in her purse.

"Do you have any favorite restaurants in Berlin?" he asks.

"Are you going to ask me out to dinner?"

He laughs quietly. But then he can't answer. He asks about a few places, all of them Michelin-starred, and though she knows several, she shakes her head each time.

"Don't forget I'm poor, technically speaking that's the basis of our acquaintance."

He smiles again, but now she sees retreat in this smile. Her directness is awkward for him. She can even understand that. As though he had to apologize for what he is. Well, he does.

The shops begin to repeat; they're still roaming the soap-sponge-herb district. A veiled woman holds a small child over a bush, its pants pulled down.

Holle looks at the shop displays, walks over – he's following her, she notes to her relief – feels the hard surface of a grey-green soap, smells it. "Olive-oil soap from Aleppo," she explains expertly, "I'm going to get two of those."

They step inside a shop with dark wood paneling, old, almost forgotten scents of hay and resin, dry summers, pharmacies. Spices and herbs spill from gunny sacks. "Merhaba." An old man greets them, bowing slightly. Behind him are glass carafes of rosebuds for making tea. Pensively her companion contemplates an old mahogany chest.

"Nice here, isn't it?" she asks.

"Yes," he agrees, "it's wonderful!"

"In downtown Istanbul these shops are disappearing, you know that, right?" she hears herself say. "Instead, you have the multinational corporate monsters casting their net of franchises over the globe. Douglas, Body Shop, Starbucks, H&M, Restaurant Nordsee. Yep, now there's a Restaurant Nordsee on Istiklal Caddesi. Everything's becoming the same, and the same thing is happening everywhere."

She's saying something everyone knows. She coughs; the cough is an attempt to keep him from answering. "Feeling better?" he asks once she finally ends the diversionary maneuver and drinks the glass of water the old man hands her. Celal is solicitous in the same way. That's how she met him, when she was wandering the streets on the evening of her arrival and showed up at his snack stand on the corner just as he was closing shop. She was hungry. He could tell by looking at her, though she was just standing around indecisively and covertly eyeing the handsomest Turk in the world. He made her spaghetti with oily homemade pesto; she'd explained, "I'm vegetarian, you know." He sat next to her at the little bistro table. All around the tiles were plastered with A4-format printouts, flash-lit photos of chicken döners, hot dogs, pizza and manti, Turkish ravioli. His English wasn't really good enough for a conversation, so they just looked at each other, and he kept bashfully smoothing back his long black hair. When he asked for her phone number, she had the truthful excuse that she didn't have a Turkish SIM card yet, and she purposely put a wrong letter in her e-mail address.

Somewhat enfeebled by her feigned coughing fit, she takes the soaps; the merchant has wrapped them in pretty tissue paper.

He bows again.

"So Oriental, isn't it?" she jibes, but her companion doesn't realize that she speaks of the Orient and Occident only in quotation marks – unlike him, for he instantly agrees, and enthuses about Istanbul as a bridge between the East and West. For months she and the other artists have been discussing this issue of enthusiasm and how to deal with it artistically. Do they have to address the clichés of this city in order to go beyond them, or do they have to rely on their own incorruptible gaze? Are we making compromises or art? is the crucial self-critical question.

And then she started the thing with Celal. Like a German pensioner with a Thai girl (the German pensioner, in this case, is her). She makes these jokes herself, if only to keep the others from making them.

Now her companion talks right past all these things that are so highly problematic. The fusion, he says, is so successful that often you don't know what continent you're on at the moment; after all, Eyüp is on the European side and yet it's so traditional, but on the Prince Islands, in Asia, it's like a summer resort in Mecklenburg a hundred years ago, with the pretty white wooden villas and the horse-drawn carriages.

"Oh, Orient and Occident," she sighs, "one day these words will be obsolete, just like Negro and Miss."

"Orient and Occident are geographical terms, there's nothing wrong with that," he says after a pause.

"And how can they fuse, then? Continents don't fuse. You're using these terms as cultural labels, and if you'll pardon me, that's a kind of cultural hegemony."

Another pause. She looks forward to a ping pong game she'll effortlessly win.

The bell at the door jangles; yes, he's holding the door for her. She looks at him speechlessly, wounded.

"We didn't want any more lectures today, remember?" he says.

Confused, she focuses on her surroundings – the sheets hung out to dry between the windows, the cat slipping around the corner – and he is silent too, though now and then he glances at her.

She doesn't recover until he loses sight of her, trudging up the Ottoman cemetery behind him; in a way he's playing the leader now, suddenly masculine and expeditious, turning around once to see where she is. Now it's getting dark, too. They walk over broken gravestones and through a forest of pale man-sized steles, tilted under the weight of the centuries, in a pattern of inclination and dismissal. Dates and names in Arabic. Woodbine and shrubbery rustles in the dusk like liquids spilled over gravestones and paths.

He climbs a flight of narrow, crumbling stone stairs, turns around and looks at her, says nothing, goes on, then says: "There must be some other path."

"Probably there are many paths. There's even a cable car."

"But you wanted to walk," he says.

"Yes, I did," she says.

And then, once more, silence. It's different from the silence at the beginning, which was more a searching, groping silence. She feels embarrassed now by her lecture in the soap and health shop, she'd like to explain herself, but in his present physical mode, devoted fully to the climb, he leaves no opportunity even to mention it.

Laboriously they climb over bushes. He turns and gives her his hand. Such soft skin.

He takes the next flight of stairs gamely, his feet in dark-blue moccasins, bare, tanned. She leaves the stairs and moves softly through the underbrush, feeling the sticky tickle of cobwebs on her face. Does she want him to miss her, and start searching? How silly. She turns back. He's still climbing, hasn't noticed a thing, she picks up her pace and moves behind him again, panting.

He's waiting for her up on a plateau, by a toppled gravestone that leans against a weathered wall, exhausted. He gazes into the distance. Istanbul lies in the day's last light. Stars emerge in the dark blue sky. He smiles at her, but it's a patient smile for board of directors' meetings gone awry, out-of-line negotiating partners.

"Ok?"

"Yes," she says breathlessly.

"Don't you do any sports?"

"Sure, do you?"

"None. Just sporting weapons."

He smiles as though she amuses him, as she obediently pulls a skeptical face.

She thinks of Celal, of Celal's guns. They're not sporting guns. Why has she entered this silent competition with a stranger? It ceases only once, for a moment. They're walking side by side along an almost pitch-black path which he lights with his cell phone, a path not quite wide enough for two. Their arms graze briefly. And then a little later they brush once again, like a booster shot.

The memory of the warm skin echoes for a while in her consciousness, all the way downhill – easier than the way uphill. They reach the harbor on time, and once he's given her his card, they sort themselves back into their groups. Dr. Christoph Wanka, that's his name.

At night Theresa lay in the light from the flats across the way. Just before dropping off, she opened her eyes, to see if the lights were still burning or if all the neighbors had suddenly decided to be considerate. The dream realm with its wonders was already too near.

The next day she searched Holle's things for a cloth to hang in front of the bedroom window. Holle had put all her personal belongings in three boxes. At first Theresa let herself dip into the top layer only, but then her hand delved deeper. Trash, mainly. Things Holle clearly couldn't part with, couldn't accept as finished: an almost-empty tube of mosquito repellent, broken incense sticks (more like crumbs), flabby scrunchies (one with a long dark hair in it), chewed pens, used transport tickets, paper napkins with restaurant logos, a package of nicotine gums chewed and stuck back in the blister pack. A shell. Tiger Balm for headaches.

Theresa told herself she might find a sari or a wide cotton scarf. For one thing, though, Holle owned hardly anything Indian, and she wore size 34/36, which elevated her to a plane of regal otherness. She seemed to value good, high-end materials and craftsmanship. Nothing off the shelf. Her underwear was miniscule, made of ivory or black lace. Some of the clothes hung on the drying rack, draped with surprising negligence, the sleeve ends of the delicate transparent blouses still balled-up. Theresa straightened them for her.

Theresa didn't go into the studio. When she walked past – it was on the way to the kitchen – she sometimes paused, as if next to a taciturn person who still couldn't just be ignored. Sometimes she pressed her forehead to the frosted glass and tried to make something out.

She found a photograph in a box and wondered what she was looking at. Was this a reflection of Holle? These strange people, but they couldn't be strangers, because Holle had kept the picture. Theresa

thought it helped her understand something about Holle, but she couldn't quite think it through. The photo showed a Mediterranean-looking family standing in an alpine pasture, arms linked, animated, fresh, as though taking a short break before dancing. That smile. They were all smiling the same smile. The father was a lean little man in a much-too-large suit, the mother wore a wide, ankle-length skirt, a vest embroidered with flowers and a headscarf tied rustically under her chin. The young woman was wearing fashionably distressed jeans and special-occasion make-up. The son was wearing a turquoise nylon jogging suit, but even it looked like a special occasion, he had a good face, a good body, he could wear anything. The family had a oneness about it, as though it always existed somewhere in the midst of nature; everything belonged together in a way that made Theresa understand why Holle kept the photo with her. Had she taken it? She didn't take pictures of people. The photos Theresa found at the bottom of the box showed only the desolate, empty urban landscapes that were already circulating on the Internet, of Teheran, Istanbul, Odessa. Only looking closely did she see people. Quarters of people. Body parts. An elbow. An arm. The back of a head in a departing taxi. Or so far away that they merged into the landscape. At the edge of a trash-infested waste, two figures trotted along a wall. Everything was singed, grey, black, silvery where the sky reflected in the puddles, but the sky was dark, thrown over the landscape like a blanket smothering a fire. A sense of apocalypse, last survivors. These photos from Mumbai were like the opposite pole to the family portrait in the green pasture.

Several photos were devoted to trash. This trash was not just documented, it was staged as a creative force. These were oppressive, inward-looking pictures. Streets and apartment blocks were photographed as though made of trash, as though trash determined the form. Trash snaked its way up the walls. Trash rotted in the pools of sewage.

And it was true. Trash, in this city, was an element like earth, air and water. It was not just accepted. It was propagated. It was

disseminated. It was beloved. It inspired a sense of triumph. It was a document of progress. Packaging material was proof of buying power and the pleasure of consumption.

Trash had emerged with the liberalization of the Indian market in the 1990s. New consumer goods entered the country, and new consumption habits. Things once used were dropped on the ground. It was an unfurling city, a waving, rustling city, full of whisperers and loci of unrest. Chip bags, dented Coca-Cola cans, cigarette boxes, paper wrappings. A texture emerged, an alphabet, an archive: refuse in all conceivable states, dusty, dirty, fuzzy, moldy, new. You saw the layerings of time, and you saw the others, their traces. With each step you entered the communion of all the strange selves that proclaimed their consumption habits in the shape of their refuse. You all showed the others what you ate, what you drank; it was anonymous, yet smotheringly intimate and close. The humid heat stuffed your nose with aromas of ferment, mold, all sorts of remains. The heat released sweat from your body. Osmosis. Unions. There was no escape. And once that had happened, once you had understood, this city came with you wherever you went. Into the last little corner of the world. Mumbai was no city now, Mumbai was an allegory.

Holle seemed to have left quite suddenly. There were packages in the refrigerator holding scant remains, one last swig of milk, a crumb of cheese, a Nutella jar scraped almost clean. Were these presents for Theresa? Or, and this was the explanation she leaned toward, was Holle one of those people who avoided getting rid of things, who always left a little bit behind in the package like an alibi? Who shied away from the definitive? From clean breaks. Decisions. Finalities.

Or was the accumulation on the streets unconsciously perpetuated in her refrigerator, a replica, an inability to behave differently than the outside world? Theresa tossed everything into a bin in the yard, to be rifled by the hungry people down on the streets. Things were as simple as

could be here, she reflected, and realizing her thoughts, she scratched her arm and went on snooping.

She leafed through a jumble of train tickets (Berlin – Hanover – Berlin), taxi receipts, sales slips, paper napkins, and finally realized that there was writing on the backs.

Upon entering the city, you become it. Your body changes, because this city stops at nothing. Able to breathe the air only on becoming the city. The fear of losing yourself, the desire to dissolve.

Suddenly you know, and you know differently than before. The body knows, it goes all the way into the belly, the breathing; that, I say, is knowledge.

The stillness in the slum is also the stillness of falling silent. Each thought knows it wants to think itself alone, so as not to think the place. Its impossibility.

In the end you don't know what's happened to you in this city. Not wanting to betray your Western parameters, yet mistrusting them as something too easily gained.

What is valid?

Survival in this city is a matter of chance.

She liked that. She wondered whether places like Mumbai, where survival was chance, also revealed the boundaries of art. If art was socially critical, it was no longer art, it was message. If it stood alone, it turned scornful.

She was familiar with that from her own work. Sometimes a thing was what it was only when it was alone and unknown. If you pointed a camera at it or cast it in the narrative conventions of reporting, you energized it with the meaning of the audience, its norms and judgements. Quite in passing you ruined what you wanted to show by showing it.

Maybe part of a discovery was that you couldn't share it? What had enabled the discovery was the absence of everything, and this absence had to be preserved. A contradiction. You want to show something, but you're thrown back on the misunderstandings, the necessary imprecisions of the available forms that corrupt what is shown.

She recalled moments as a reporter that no one had ever learned about. Light. Eyes. A train with the sun-hot wind roaring through it. There were three children, too. Five, six and nine. Brothers. They were traveling to Churchgate Station to shine shoes. They had no shoes on their feet. They picked up Theresa's scarf from the ground when it slid off the bench in the vibration of the train. The children knew everything. They knew what we'll never know (suddenly she was speaking to Holle), but for a few minutes they allowed me to be with them. Picked up the scarf for me, put it back on the bench and said goodbye, and I knew that from then on they'd always be with me. These children are always there. I can't forget these children. They'd go away only if I told about them.