

Translated excerpt

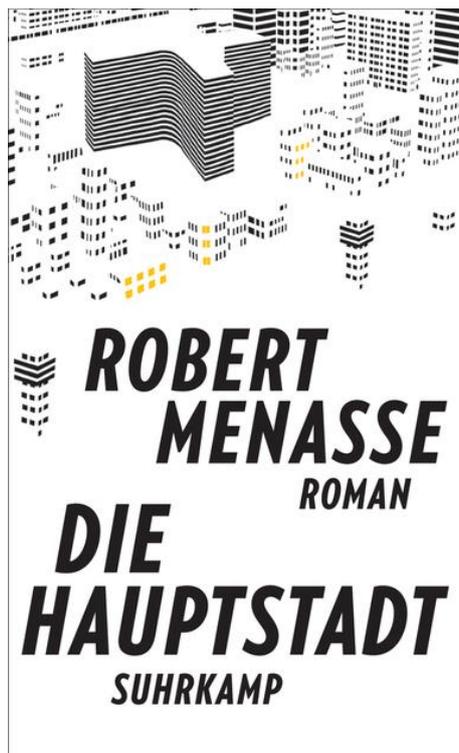
Robert Menasse
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Robert Menasse
The Capital

Translated by Laura Wagner (pp. 9-13) &
Craig Decker (pp. 16-37)



Prologue

There was a running pig! David de Vriend saw it when he opened a window in the living room in order to let his gaze drift across the square one last time before he left this apartment forever. He was not a sentimental person. He had lived here for sixty years, had looked out onto this square for sixty years, and now he was closing that chapter. That was all. This was his favourite sentence – whenever he had to tell, report, testify to something, he would say two or three sentences and then: »That was all.« This sentence had become the only legitimate summary of each moment or episode in his life to him. The moving company had come to fetch the few belongings that he would take with him to the new address. Belongings – a strange word, yet one that had no effect on him. Then the men from the decluttering service had come to take away everything that was left, not only everything that wasn't nailed down, but the nails as well, they ripped out, dismantled, carted away until the apartment was »clean-swept«, as they say. De Vriend had made himself a coffee, as long as the stove was still there and his espresso machine was still standing there, had watched the men, careful not to stand in their way, had held the empty coffee mug in his hand for a long time after, and had finally thrown it into a bin bag. Then the men were gone, the apartment empty. Clean-swept. That was all. One last look

out the window. There was nothing down there that he didn't know, and now he had to move out, because another time had arrived – and now he saw ... indeed: Down there was a pig! In the centre of Brussels, in Sainte-Catherine. It had to have come from the Rue de la Braie, was running along the construction site fence in front of the house, de Vriend leant out the window and saw the pig, swerving to avoid some tourists at the corner of Rue du Vieux Marché aux Grains, almost running in front of a taxi.

Kai-Uwe Frigge, thrown forwards by the emergency stop, fell back into his seat. He grimaced. He was late. He was annoyed. What was it now? He was not, in fact, late, it was just that when he had a meeting, he made a point of arriving about ten minutes before the agreed-upon time, especially on rainy days, so that he could compose his clothing, his hair, wet from the rain, his fogged glasses, before the person he was meeting arrived –

A pig! Did you see that, monsieur?, the taxi driver yelled. Almost jumped right in front of my car! He was leaning over the steering wheel, stretching: There! There! Do you see it?

Now Karl-Uwe Frigge saw it. He wiped the car window with the back of his hand, the pig was running away to the side, the animal's wet body shimmering in a dirty pink hue in the light from the streetlamps.

We're here, monsieur! Can't get any closer. What do you know?! A pig jumping almost right in front of my car. Stroke of luck, let me tell you!

Fenia Xenopoulou was sitting at the first table next to the big window overlooking the square in the Menelas restaurant. She was annoyed with herself for having come so early. It wouldn't seem confident if she were already sitting here waiting when he arrived. She was nervous. She had been worried that there would be a traffic jam due to the rain, had anticipated too long a journey. Now she was sitting in front of her second ouzo. The waiter was buzzing around her like a bothersome wasp. She stared at her glass and ordered herself not to touch it. The waiter brought a fresh jug of water. Then he brought a small plate of olives – and said: A pig!

Excuse me? Fenia looked up, saw the waiter staring out onto the square, mesmerised, and now she saw it: The pig was running towards the restaurant, in a ridiculous gallop, those short legs swinging back and forth underneath the round, heavy body. At first she thought it was a dog, one of those revolting beasts fattened by their widowed owners, but – no, it was indeed a pig! Looking almost like something out of a picture book, she saw the snout, the ears, as lines, as contours, that's how you draw a pig for a child, but this one appeared to come from a children's book of horrors. It wasn't a boar, it was a dirty, but unmistakably pink domestic pig that had an air of craziness about it, of threat. Raindrops were running down the window; blurrily, Fenia Xenopoulou saw the pig slowing down in front of some pedestrians suddenly, legs stretched, it

was slipping, threw itself to the side, buckled, gained traction, and galloped backwards, now towards the Atlas Hotel. At that moment, Ryszard Oswiecki was leaving the hotel. As soon as he had stepped out of the elevator, while crossing the hotel lounge, he had pulled the hood of his jacket over his head; now, he stepped out into the rain, hurriedly, but not too fast, he didn't want to be noticed. The rain was a fortunate coincidence: hood, hurried pace, that was completely normal and inconspicuous under these circumstances. Nobody was supposed to be able to testify later that they had seen a man fleeing, about this old, approximately this tall, and the colour of the jacket – of course they could recall that as well ... He quickly turned right, that's when he heard excited yells, a scream, and a strange squeaking pant. He stopped for a moment, looking back. Now he noticed the pig. He couldn't believe his eyes. A pig was standing between two of those wrought-iron pillars lining the hotel courtyard, it stood there with its head bowed, the stance of a bull about to attack, it had something ridiculous, but at the same time something threatening about it. It was a complete mystery: Where did this pig come from, and why was it standing there? Ryszard Oswiecki got the impression that all life on this square, at least as far as he could see now, had stiffened and frozen, the animal's small shimmering eyes reflecting the hotel's neon-lit façade – that's when Ryszard Oswiecki began to run! He ran to the right, looked back one more time; panting, the pig yanked up its head, took a few small steps backwards, turned around and ran right across the square, over to the tree line in front of the Flemish cultural centre De Markten. The pedestrians who had observed the scene were looking at the pig, not the hooded man – and now Martin Susman saw the animal. He lived in the house next to the Atlas Hotel, opened the window in just this instance in order to air out the room, and couldn't believe his eyes: That looked like a pig! He had just been thinking about his life, about the coincidences that had led to the fact that he, a child of Austrian farmers, was now living and working in Brussels; he was in a kind of mood in which everything seemed crazy and alien to him, but a freely running pig down on the square, that was just too crazy, it could only be his mind playing a trick on him, a projection of his memories! He looked, but he couldn't see the pig any longer.

The pig was running towards St. Catherine's Church, crossing Rue Sainte-Catherine, bearing left, dodging the tourists coming out of the church, ran past the church to the Quai aux Briques, the tourists laughed, they probably thought the stressed out, almost collapsing animal a piece of folklore, or some local phenomenon. Some would later search their guidebooks for an explanation. Weren't bulls chased through the streets of Pamplona, Spain, on some holiday or other? Maybe they did the same thing with pigs in Brussels? When you experience the

inconceivable in places where you don't expect to understand everything anyway – how jolly is life then.

At that moment, Gouda Mustafa was turning the corner and almost collided with the pig. Almost? Didn't it touch him, brushing against his leg? A pig? Gouda Mustafa jumped aside in panic, lost his balance and fell. Now he was lying in a puddle, tossing and turning, which only made matters worse, but it wasn't the dirt in the gutter, it was the touch, if there had been any at all, of the unclean animal by which he felt stained.

Then he saw a hand reaching down towards him, he saw the face of an elderly man, a sad, worried face, wet with rain, the old man appeared to be crying. This was Professor Alois Erhart. Gouda Mustafa didn't understand what he was saying, he only understood the word »okay«. Okay! Okay!, said Gouda Mustafa.

Professor Erhart kept talking, in English, he said that he had also fallen today, but he was so confused that he said »failed« instead of »fell«. Gouda Mustafa couldn't understand him, he repeated: Okay!

Then the sirens arrived. The rescue. Police. The whole square was bustling, flickering, fluttering in the blue lights. The emergency vehicles sped towards the Atlas Hotel, sirens wailing and blue lights flashing. The skies over Brussels did their part: It was raining. Now it seemed to be raining flashing blue drops. Now a strong gush of wind on top of that – yanking up a few pedestrians' umbrellas and turning them inside out. Gouda Mustafa took Professor Erhart's hand, let himself be helped up. His father had warned him about Europe.

Chapter One

Coherences Don't Really Have to Exist,

But Without Them, Everything Would Fall Apart

Who invented mustard? That's not a good way to start a novel. But then again, there can't even be a good way to start since, whether good or less good, there is no beginning at all. Every conceivable first sentence is already an ending, even if things continue on after that. It stands at the end of however many thousands of pages that will never be written: the prehistory.

Actually, you should, whenever you begin reading a novel, be able to turn back right after the first sentence. That was Martin Susman's dream. That's what he actually always wanted to become: a teller of prehistories. He had interrupted his study of archeology and then started—well, it doesn't matter, it's not really pertinent, it belongs to the prehistory that has to be edited out of every start of a novel since otherwise at the end it would never come to the beginning.

Martin Susman was sitting at his desk, having pushed his laptop aside, and squeezed two different tubes of mustard—one a spicy British one, the other a sweet German one—onto a plate wondering who had invented mustard. Who came up with the quirky idea of producing a paste that would completely cover over its own taste without tasting good itself? How was it possible it could establish itself as a mass-produced article? It is, he thought, a product like Coca Cola. A product nobody would miss if it all of a sudden weren't there. On his way home, Martin Susman had stopped in a Delhaize store located on the Boulevard Anspach and bought two bottles of wine, a bunch of yellow tulips, a bratwurst, and, to go along with it, mustard. Two tubes, in fact, because he couldn't decide between sweet and spicy.

The bratwurst was bubbling and sizzling in the pan, the burner was much too high, the pork was burning and the wurst was charred, but Martin paid no attention to that. He sat there and stared at the somewhat lighter yellowish and, next to them, darker brown mustard clumps on the white plate, miniature sculptures of doggie do. Staring at mustard on a plate while a wurst is burning in the pan has not yet been described in the professional literature as a clear and typical symptom of depression, but we can certainly interpret it as one.

The mustard on the plate. The open window, a sheet of rain. The musty air, the stench of charred meat, the crackle of the bursting intestine and burning fat, the fecal sculptures on the porcelain—that's when Martin Susman heard the shot.

He wasn't frightened. It sounded as if in the apartment next door a champagne bottle had been opened. Behind the peculiarly thin wall, however, there wasn't an apartment, but a hotel room. Next door was the Hotel Atlas. What a euphemistic name for that inconsiderable building in which, above all, hunched over lobbyists, pulling their trolley bags behind them, dismounted. Again and again, Martin Susman would hear through that wall things that, though he paid them no heed, he would rather not have heard. Reality TV or, who knows, just reality, snoring, or groaning.

The rain was falling harder. Martin had wanted to leave the house. He was well prepared for Brussels. At his going away party in Vienna, he had received thoughtful and apt gifts of equipment for Brussels including nine umbrellas, from a classical British "long" to a

German “Knirps” and all the way to the Italian “mini” in three Benetton colors, along with two rain ponchos for bicyclists.

He sat inertly in front of his plate, staring at the mustard. That he could subsequently tell the police the exact time at which the shot was fired was due to the fact that what he thought had been the opening of a champagne bottle caused him to open a bottle of wine. With each passing day, he kept pushing back the time he started drinking as far as possible. He never began before 7:00 p.m. He looked at the clock. It was 7:35 p.m. He went to the refrigerator, took out the wine, turned the burner on the stove off, tipped the wurst into the trash can, placed the pan into the kitchen sink, and turned on the faucet. The water hissed as it hit the hot pan. Stop staring into space, his mother used to hiss at him when he would sit in front of a book and stare with a blank look on his face instead of helping to feed the pigs or clear away their dung.

Dr. Martin Susman sat there with a plate of mustard before him, poured himself a glass of wine, and then another one. The window was open. Every now and then, he would get up, go to the window, look out of it for a bit, and then return to the table. By the time he was on his third glass, the blue light had swept across the window onto the walls of the room. The tulips twinkled rhythmically bluish in the vase on the mantle. Then the telephone rang. He didn't answer it. It should ring a few more times. Martin Susman looked at the display and saw who was calling. He didn't answer.

Prehistory. It is as momentous and, at the same time, unremarkably flickering as the eternal light in the Church of Saint Catherine at the other end of the Vieux Marché aux Grains Square where Martin Susman lived.

A few passersby escaped from the rain into the church. They stood around indecisively or walked through the nave. The tourists leafed through their guidebooks and followed the maps listing the places of interest: “Black Madonna, 14th Century,” “Portrait of St. Catherine,” “Typical Flemish Pulpit, most likely from Mechelen,” “Tombstones by Gilles-Lambert Godecharle” ...

And every now and then, a flashbulb.

The man sitting alone in one of the church pews appeared to be praying. His elbows were elevated, his chin was resting on his clasped hands, and his back was bowed. He was wearing a black jacket with a hood he had pulled over his head. If it didn't say “Guinness” on the back of his jacket, you could have mistakenly took him at first glance for a monk in a cowl.

The jacket with the hood was on account of the rain in Brussels, but the impression he made with it revealed something fundamental about the man. He was, in his way, indeed a monk.

He considered his monkishness and what he understood that to be—asceticism, meditation, and spiritual exercises—as his salvation for a life that was incessantly threatened by chaos and distraction. For him, that wasn't tied to an order or a cloister or to otherworldliness. Everyone could, indeed, must be, no matter what his occupation or function was, a monk in his own field, whose task consisted in being a devoted servant to a higher will.

He loved contemplating the tortured man on the cross and thinking about death. For him, that was an emotional purification, an intensification of thought, and a strengthening of energies every time.

That was Mateusz Oświecki. His given name, however, which also appeared in his passport, was Ryszard. Oświecki only got the name Mateusz as a student at the Lubrański-Academy seminary in Poznań, where every “enlightened pupil” received one of the surnames of the eleven Apostles. He was rechristened and anointed as “Matthew, the Tax Collector.” Although he withdrew from the seminary, he retained the name as his *nom de guerre*. The borders at which he had to show his passport, he crossed as Ryszard. As a secret serviceman, based on the testimonies of a few of his former contact people, he was known as “Matek,” the familiar form of Mateusz. As Mateusz he fulfilled his mission, as Matek he was being searched for, as Ryszard he slipped through the cracks.

Oświecki didn't pray. He didn't form silent sentences beginning with “Lord” that were always mere wishes, “Give me the power—” to do this or that, “Bless—” this or that ... One had nothing to wish for from an absolute spirit who remained silent. He contemplated the man nailed to the cross. The experience that person had exemplary done for humanity and, in the end, also had spoken out about, was that of being completely abandoned at the moment of confrontation with the absolute: when the shroud is slit open, lacerated, gashed, pierced, and torn open, when the screams of life's agonies pass over into a whimper and, ultimately, silence. Only in silence is life close to the omnipotent spirit, which, in an inconceivable quirk released the antithesis of its very being from within itself: time. A person can, from the moment he is born, go back and back and further back, eternally, eternally backwards. He won't come to any beginning and, given his foolish sense of time, will only comprehend one thing: He, before he was, had eternally not been anything. And he can think ahead, from the moment of his death until well into the future, he will not encounter any end, just this insight: He will eternally no longer be. And the interlude between eternity and eternity is time – the blustering, the babel of voices, the stamping of machines, the motors booming, the banging and cracking of weapons, a clamor of pain and the distraught shrieks of pleasure, the chorales of the angry and joyously deceived masses, rolling thunder and gasps of fear in the microscopic terrarium of the soil.

Mateusz Oświecki contemplated the tortured man.

He hadn't folded his hands. With clasped hands, he pressed his fingernails into the palms of his hands until his knuckles cracked and his skin burned. He felt a pain that was older than he himself. He could desperately retrieve that pain at any time. His grandfather Ryszard joined the underground at the beginning of 1940 to fight under General Stefan Rowecki in the Polish resistance against the Germans. In April of the same year, he was betrayed, arrested, and, ultimately, publicly shot in Lublin as a partisan. His grandmother was eight months pregnant at the time; the child was born in May 1940 in Kielce and was given the name of his father. To avoid any kind of kin liability, the child was brought to the family of his great uncle in Poznań, where he grew up and, at the age of sixteen, experienced the insurrection. The young high school student aligned himself with the group around Major Franczak to fight in the anticommunist resistance. He was deployed in sabotage acts, eventually in kidnappings by security police—and, in the year 1964, was betrayed by a comrade for 6,000 zloty. He was arrested in a conspiratorial apartment and, in a basement of the security police, tortured to death. Back then, his fiancée Maria was already pregnant; the child came into the world in February 1965 in the village of Kozice Gorne and was christened in the name of his grandfather and father. Another son who could never meet his father. His mother didn't tell many stories. Once: "We would meet in the fields or the forest. He would come to our rendezvous with a pistol or a grenade."

An eternally silent grandfather. An eternally silent father. The Poles, Matek learned, always fought for Europe's freedom. Everyone who entered the fight was raised in the fight and fought until they perished in it.

His mother traveled with him to the priests, searched for proponents, and purchased letters of recommendation. She trusted the protection the church could provide. Ultimately, she was able to accommodate him among the school brothers in Poznań. There he experienced the vulnerability of the human body. Blood is a lubricant to penetrate the closed hull, skin just dank parchment upon which a knife draws maps, a mouth, and a noisy baby a black hole that is filled until the last sound dies out silently, which is supposed to expend life. And there he also received a completely new concept of "Underground." When the pupils received their apostolic protective names, they were ushered into the phenomenal catacombs of the massive cathedral of Poznań, into the secret underground vaulted and burial chambers, over stone steps, which, in the torchlight, sparkled and shimmered down into the deepest underground passageway, a final last coarse chamber, which proved to be a sunken chapel of death and eternal life: a barrel vault in the tenth Christian century under the blood-soaked hundred feet of earth carved in stone. On

the front side of the room there was a monumental cross with a frightfully naturalistic Christ figure, behind which there were reliefs of angels coming out from underneath a rock or going back into it, terribly lively in flickering flames. And in front of that a Madonna—the sort of which young Ryszard had never seen before, in no church, in no portrayal in his books. She was completely mummified! The Madonna wore a cloak, which she had draped over her forehead, nose, and mouth such that a narrow slit of her eyes could be seen, her eye sockets so deep and so dead as they could only have been after a thousand years of tears. All of that, as well as the altar, chiseled and formed from the stone and clay marl of the geological stratum that's broken through here. Benches of cold stones on which, with their back to Ryszard and the other entering pupils, eleven monks were sitting in their black frocks, their sunken heads covered by their hoods.

The pupils were led through the middle aisle between the praying monks and forward to Christ, where they were crossed and then told to turn around. Ryszard looked back and then he saw: beneath the hoods, the skulls were shimmering. The rosaries in the monks' hands were hanging on phalanges—those monks were skeletons.

Man is closer to God under the earth than on top of a mountain.

Mateusz Oświecki tapped his fingertips against his forehead repeatedly. He felt very thin and moldy. And in his abdominal cavity, somewhat to the left beneath his navel, he felt a burning. He knew that death was burning there. It didn't cause him to be afraid, however. In fact, it reduced his fears.

Those skeletons in frocks were the mortal remains of the Mission Bishop Jordan and the founding members of the Diocese of Poznań. For almost a thousand years now, they have been persisting here in eternally silent prayer. In front of those eleven skeletons, each pupil received one of the eleven apostle names. Eleven? There was no Judas? Yes, there was. But to have given a student named Peter, God's first deputy on earth, would have been hubris. Whoever is chosen, can also get to Peter via John or Paul.

Mateusz Oświecki pressed the palms of his hands over his ears. So many voices in his head. He closed his eyes. Too many images. That wasn't a memory, wasn't a prehistory. That was there now, now, just as he sat there now in front of the crucified. And like the burning in his stomach. He wasn't afraid, just that clammy feeling, like you have before a big test or before a difficult task. An exam you can only take once is the hardest of all. He opened his eyes again, looked up, and saw the scar in the side of the redeemer.

Ultimately, Mateusz Oświecki envied his victims. They already had their punishments behind them.

He arose, exited the church, and looked briefly over to the blue light dancing in front of the Hotel Atlas. He proceeded slowly, his hood pulled over his forehead, through the rain to the metro station Saint Catherine.

When Alois Erhart returned to the Hotel Atlas, he was unable to enter the building. At least that's how he interpreted the hand the policeman was holding out in his direction. He didn't understand what the policeman was saying to him. He could not speak French well.

He had, for some time now, seen the rotating blue light of the police car and the emergency vehicle—and thought of a suicide. He slowly approached the hotel and that feeling immediately returned to him again, the one that had gripped him earlier that afternoon, as though nothing into which every person sooner or later heads suddenly spreads out like an announcement or a proclamation in the ribcage or the abdominal cavity. He felt it damply and breathlessly: that wonder that, in the limited shell of the body a growing emptiness can expand endlessly. The soul as a black hole, that all of the experiences it has made its whole life long, it has sucked up and disappeared, until only nothing is left, absolute emptiness, completely black, but without the mildness of a starless night.

Now he stood there, in front of the steps leading to the entrance to the hotel, with aching bones and muscles burning of fatigue, along with a few bystanders behind him, saying he's a guest of the hotel, he has a room there—which didn't change anything about the arm being held out in front of him. The situation seemed so surreal to him that he wouldn't have been surprised had he been arrested. But he wasn't just the old man whose body irrevocably stopped performing its tasks, he was also Professor Emeritus Dr. Erhart, who represented half of a life authority. Tourist, he said definitively. He's a tourist. Here! In this hotel. And he would like to go to his room. With that, the official accompanied him into the lobby and led him to a man in his mid-fifties, dressed in a much too tight grey suit, who asked him to identify himself.

Why was the Professor standing there with his head down? He saw the plump gas belly of that enormous man—and suddenly felt empathy. There are people who, in their massive physical presence, appear eternally strong, always fit, never sickly, until they suddenly lie there struck by lightning, dead at an age in which they say: that is no age at all. Always proud of their constitution, the consider themselves immortal as long as they can build their bodies in front of others, and squeeze others in between them. These people will never be confronted with the question of which decision they would have to make if they were old and chronically ill and, anytime soon, depending on care. That man was, at heart, festered and frail. He would soon fall, he just didn't know it.

Professor Erhart extended the pass to him.

When did he arrive? Parlez-vous français? No? English? When did he leave the hotel? If he was in the hotel between nineteen and twenty o'clock?

Why all these questions?

Homicide commission. A man has been shot in one of the rooms of this hotel.

His right underarm hurt. Professor Erhart thought that perhaps it was already apparent how much his arm hurt him.

He retrieved his digital camera from the side pocket of his raincoat and turned it on. He could see where he had been. Each photo said where it had been taken.

The man smiled. Looked through the photos. Afternoon in the European Quarter. Schuman-Place. The Berlaymont-, the Justus Lipsius-Building. The street sign "Rue Joseph II". Why that street sign?

I'm an Austrian!

That's right.

The sculpture "Europe's Dream" in the Rue de la Loi. The bronze figure of a blind (or sleepwalking?) man, who takes a step from a socket into nothing. What all the tourists photograph. There. Nineteen O'Clock Fifteen: Grand Place. Various photos there until nineteen o'clock twenty-eight. Then the last photo: twenty o'clock four, Saint Catherine, nave. The man kept clicking, that was the first photo again. He went back. Christ, the altar, in front of it, a man in a pew, on whose back it says "Guinness."

He grinned and gave him the camera back.

When Alois Erhart came into his room, he went over to the window, looked through the pane out onto the rain, ran his hand through his wet hair, and heard into himself. He heard nothing. When he returned around noon, he had just opened the window, leaned himself out wide to get a better overview of the square, had leaned out too wide and almost lost his balance. There was no more floor under his feet and he already saw the asphalt coming towards him. It happened so quickly he tumbled backwards, falling from the window to the floor, and landing with his right underarm on the heater, ending in a ridiculous pose and having the feeling as if he were in free fall, a feeling he could perhaps have in the second before his death. Then he pulled himself up, sat on the bed panting, and the euphoria was there: He was free. He could decide sovereignly. And he would reach a decision. But not yet. In due time. Suicide victim—stupid concept! He knew that he had to—and suddenly, he also knew that he could. Death, that was clear to him now, was as banal and futile and unavoidable as the point "possibly" at

the end of an agenda. That was the moment when nothing else came. He would have to overcome dying. Jumping.

He didn't want to die the way his wife did. So helpless at the end, that he her—

He took the remote control and turned the television set on. Took off his shirt and saw that he had a bruise on his right arm. He pressed the remote control: further! He took his pants off, keep going! His socks, keep going! His underwear, keep going! He landed at the channel Arte. A film had just started playing there, a classic one: "Damned for All Eternity." It had been decades since he last saw that film. He lay down on the bed. A voice said: "This film is being presented to you by parship.de, the leading partner agency."

It was no coincidence that, at that very moment, Fenia Xenopoulou thought about being rescued as the ambulance turned into the square and the siren could be heard. For days now, she had been thinking about nothing else. It had become her idea fix and so she thought about it now, too: Save me! He has to save me!

She was having dinner at Menelas Restaurant, located just across the street from the Hotel Atlas, together with Kai-Uwe Frigge, whom she, since she had an affair with him two years ago, privately called Fridsch, whereby it was coquettishly left open whether she was spoofing his name to "Fritz" because he was German or whether she was playing on "Fridge", the refrigerator, because he, in his sobering correct way, seemed so cold. Frigge, a gawky, nimble man in his mid-forties, originally from Hamburg and ten years already now in Brussels, had, with all the trench warfare, intrigues, and jockeying that accompanied constituting the new cabinet of the European Commission, been lucky (or else wasn't down on his luck) and had made an impressive career jump: he was now the Cabinet Chief in the General Direction for Trade, one of the most influential office directors of one of the most powerful Commissioners in the Union.

That both of them in this city full of first-class restaurants had decided to eat at a Greek place that proved to be rather mediocre was not due to Fenia Xenopoulou's wish to enjoy the aromas and tastes of her home cuisine. Kai-Uwe Frigge had suggested it. He wanted to show his Greek colleague a sign of solidarity, now that "the Greek's" near state-bankruptcy and the fourth ridiculously expensive Greek bailout package had left them almost without any money at all. He was sure to get some bonus points when he texted her "Menelas? On the Vieux Marché-aux-Grains, Sainte-Catherine, apparently very good Greek food!" as a meeting point, and she answered "Okay." That was fine with her. She had already been living and working too long in Brussels for patriotism to mean anything to her. What she wanted was: her rescue.

To call the funds that could spare Greece bankruptcy an aid package, Frigge said. Oh, well, metaphors in our house are the luck of the draw.

Fenia Xenopoulou couldn't care less. She didn't understand what he meant, but she laughed radiantly. It had a masked effect, and she couldn't be certain if one still noticed it, that artificial feeling, or whether it still functioned the way it always used to, a masterful blend of facial muscles, timing, blinding white teeth and an image of irresistible artlessness. One must also have a natural talent for the artificial, but Fenia was, on account of her career curtsies—at her age, she had just turned forty—so distracted, that she could no longer be certain of her natural talents to please. Her self-doubt, so she thought, outweighed her appearance like a psoriasis.

Kai-Uwe had just ordered a Greek Farmer's Salad. Fenia's first impulse was to say, I'll have that as well. But then she heard herself order a baked beef and orzo casserole. It was lukewarm and dripping of fat. Why didn't she have herself under control anymore? She had to pay attention. The waiter poured some more wine. She looked at the wine glass and thought: eighty more calories. She sipped her water glass, pulled her strength together, and looked at Kai-Uwe. She tried to press her water glass with both hands to her lower lip and look seductive. Inwardly, she cursed. What was the matter with her?

Bailout fund!, Kai-Uwe said. In German you can build such neologisms. They only have to appear in the Frankfurt Allgemeine three times, and then you can no longer get rid of them. The boss says it into the camera. The translators have already started to sweat. The English and the French know their life preserver and life saver. But what, may we ask, is a "bailout fund"? The French translate it as "parachute." Then protests emerged from the Elysee-Palast. That sends the wrong signal. The Germans need to please—

As he ate an olive and put the pit on his plate, then it seemed to Fenia he was consuming the taste of the olive but was returning the calories to the kitchen.

That's when the blaring of the sirens began, and then the blue light, the blue, blue, blue, blue ...
Fridsch?

Yes?

You must – You wanted to express it: save me. But that was impossible. She corrected herself: help me! No, she had to be competent, not appear in need of help.

Yes? He looked through the window of the restaurant over to the Hotel Atlas. He saw how a stretcher was pulled out of the vehicle and how men ran into the hotel with it. As close as Menelas was to the hotel, the distance was too great that he could have thought about death. For him, it was just choreography, people moving themselves to light and sound.

You have —, she already said, now she wanted to render the words unsaid, but that was no longer possible —... understand ... but that's exactly what you're doing! I know it, you know, that I —

Yes? He looked at her.

The sirens of the police cars.

Fenia Xenopoulou had at first worked in the General Direction for Competition. The Commissioner, a Spaniard, didn't have a clue. But every commissioner is as good as his or her office, and she attracted attention as an excellent part of a perfectly functional office. She got a divorce. She had neither the time nor the desire to spend every second or, later, third or fourth weekend seeing her husband in his Brussels apartment or visiting him in Athens where they would chat about some intimacies of Athenian society and puff on cigars like caricatures of nouveaux riches. She had married a celebrity attorney and thrown a provincial attorney out of her apartment! Then she climbed a notch higher and entered the cabinet of the Commissioner for Trade. You obtain merits in trade when you shatter trade restrictions. There was no more private life for her anymore, no more fetters, just free world trade. She really believed that the career she saw before her would be her reward for participating in the improvement of her part of that world. For her, fair trade was a tautology. Trade was the precondition for global fairness. The Commissioner, a Dutchman, had scruples. He was so unbelievably correct. Fenia worked hard to figure out how many gulden his scruples cost. The man still calculated in gulden. The laurel he received when Fenia convinced him was worth its weight in gold. Now, the next raise was supposed to come. She expected, following the European election and the new constitution of the Commission, to continue to advance. And, as a matter of fact, she was promoted. She received a department. Was that a problem? She experienced the promotion as a downgrading, a career setback. She was named Head of Direction C ("Communication") in the General Direction of Culture!

Culture!

She had studied economics at the London School of Economics, postgraduate at Stanford University, withstood the competition, and was now in charge of Culture! That wasn't even as sensible as playing Monopoly! Culture was a worthless department, without a budget, without any weight in the Commission, without power and influence. Colleagues called Culture an alibi-department—if only it were that! An alibi is important, every action needs an alibi. But Culture wasn't even a sham, because there wasn't even an eye that watched what Culture was doing. When the Commissioner for Trade or for Energy, yes, even when the Commissioner for Catching Fish had to leave and go to the bathroom, the discussion was interrupted and people

waited until he or she returned. But if the Culture Commissioner had to leave, people kept right on talking, no one even noticed whether she was sitting at the table or on the toilet.

Fenia Xenopoulou climbed into an elevator that continued going up, but then, undetectedly, got stuck between two floors.

I have to get out!, she said. When she returned from the bathroom, she saw that he was making a telephone call. He hadn't even waited.

Fridsch and Fenia looked through the big window across to the hotel, silent like an old married couple that was happy that something had just happened about which they could then say something.

What's going on over there?

I have no idea. Perhaps somebody in the hotel had a heart attack?, Fridsch said.

But if somebody has a heart attack, the police don't come right away!

That's right, he said. And, after a short pause—he almost said: A propos heart? What's new in your love life? But he passed on that question.

You've got something on your mind, he said.

Yes, I do!

You can tell me everything, you know.

He listened and nodded and nodded. Every now and then, he uttered a prolonged "okay," to show her he was still following her, and then, finally, he asked her: What can I do for you?

You need to make a request for me. Can you please—please make a request for me? I would like to return to Trade. Or can you talk with Queneau? You understand him so well. He listens to you. Perhaps he can do something. I have to get away from Culture. I'm suffocating there.

Yes, he said. All of a sudden, he was afraid. That, perhaps, was too great a word. He felt a trepidation he couldn't understand. He never contemplated his life. At some earlier point in time, he had thought about his life—much, much earlier, before he had much life experience. They were fantasies, dreams. He had mistaken dreams for thoughtfulness. One couldn't say that he had chased his dreams. It was as if he had gone to a certain track, to that part of the track where a certain goal simply begins. Ever since, he's been on the rails. He knew in his inner being that it was often pure luck he hadn't fallen off the track. But as long as he was still on the track, there was nothing he had to think about. It either functioned or it didn't. When it functioned, then "it" was replaced by "one." One functions. He didn't think about any of that. That was perfectly clear to him. He confused that clarity with a certain reason for doing what

he did, without having to think about every individual step he took. But now there was a slight falter in his gait. Why? He didn't ask himself that. He just felt that slight trepidation. Now I need to go to the bathroom for a minute.

He washed his hands and observed himself in the mirror. He was no stranger to himself. Not being a stranger is, at the same time, also not being intimate. He took a Viagra tablet from his wallet. He always carried one with him. He bit into it, swallowed some water, and then he washed his hands again.

He knew that Fenia, just like himself, would have to be out of the house tomorrow morning very early. They would both soon have to be in bed if they were going to be able to function tomorrow morning.

They took a taxi to Ixelles, to his apartment. He feigned desire; she feigned an orgasm. The chemistry worked. Through the window, the light of the illuminated advertisement was blinking blue from the bar at Le Cerf Bleu on the other side of the street. Kai-Uwe Frigge stood up again and closed the curtain.

Was there a man standing at the window? The black Avenger. The Phantom. The Shadowman. He looked like a comedy figure who had been painted on the abandoned wall of the house. All of the windows of the house across the way from the Hotel Atlas, on the corner of the Rue de la Braie, were dark. The display windows were nailed shut. On the house wall next to it, unreadable words written in a secret code were sprayed. In front of the house, there was a construction site fence from the demolition company De Meuter. Of course, Commissioner Brunfaut knew that that black figure nestled in by an in the first floor of the dead house was not a Graffito. But it made that impression. On every corner and end of this city there were house walls and fire walls all the way up to Dachfirsten with copies and variations and drawings by Hergé or Morris, animals by Bonom or works by the boys who considered themselves their disciples. If Brussels was an open book, then it was a comic book. Commissioner Brunfaut had come out of the Hotel Atlas.

The year certainly begins well, Commissioner! Every year certainly begins well, Brunfaut said. The rain had let up, the Commissioner stood with his legs apart and, as he talked with the men, let his eyes wander around the surrounding buildings. And then he saw it: the fenced-in shadow figure.

It stood right there: a man at the window. Of a house about to be demolished. The Commissioner looked up at it, fixated on it. The man didn't move. Was it really a human being? Or a doll? Why would a doll be standing there behind the window? Or was it a shadow,

whose contour was deceiving him? Or perhaps even the graffiti. The Commissioner grinned. Not really, of course. Just inwardly. No, a man was standing there. Did he see that the Commissioner looked up to him? What had he seen?

Let's go!, said Commissioner Brunfaut. Get to work! You take this house, you, this one! And you –

Die Bruchbude, too? But it's empty!

At that moment, the shadowman disappeared.

He moved away from the window. Where were his cigarettes? Perhaps in his coat. His coat was lying on the kitchen stool, the only piece of furniture that was still in the apartment. David de Vriend went into the kitchen and took his coat. What did he want? The coat. Why? He stood there indecisively, looking at the coat. It was time to go. Yes. There was nothing more here to do. The apartment was completely empty. He looked at a rectangular fleck on the wall. A picture had been hanging there. "Wald bei Boortmeerbeek," an idyllic landscape picture. He could remember how it used to hang there, until he didn't see it anymore. And now: an empty space. The only thing to be seen was that something used to be there, that wasn't there anymore. A life history. An empty contour on some wallpaper that used to be covering something. Underneath it was the contour of a cabinet that used to be there. What did he used to keep in it? What you amass in your lifetime. And the Dreck behind it. That's what comes to the fore.