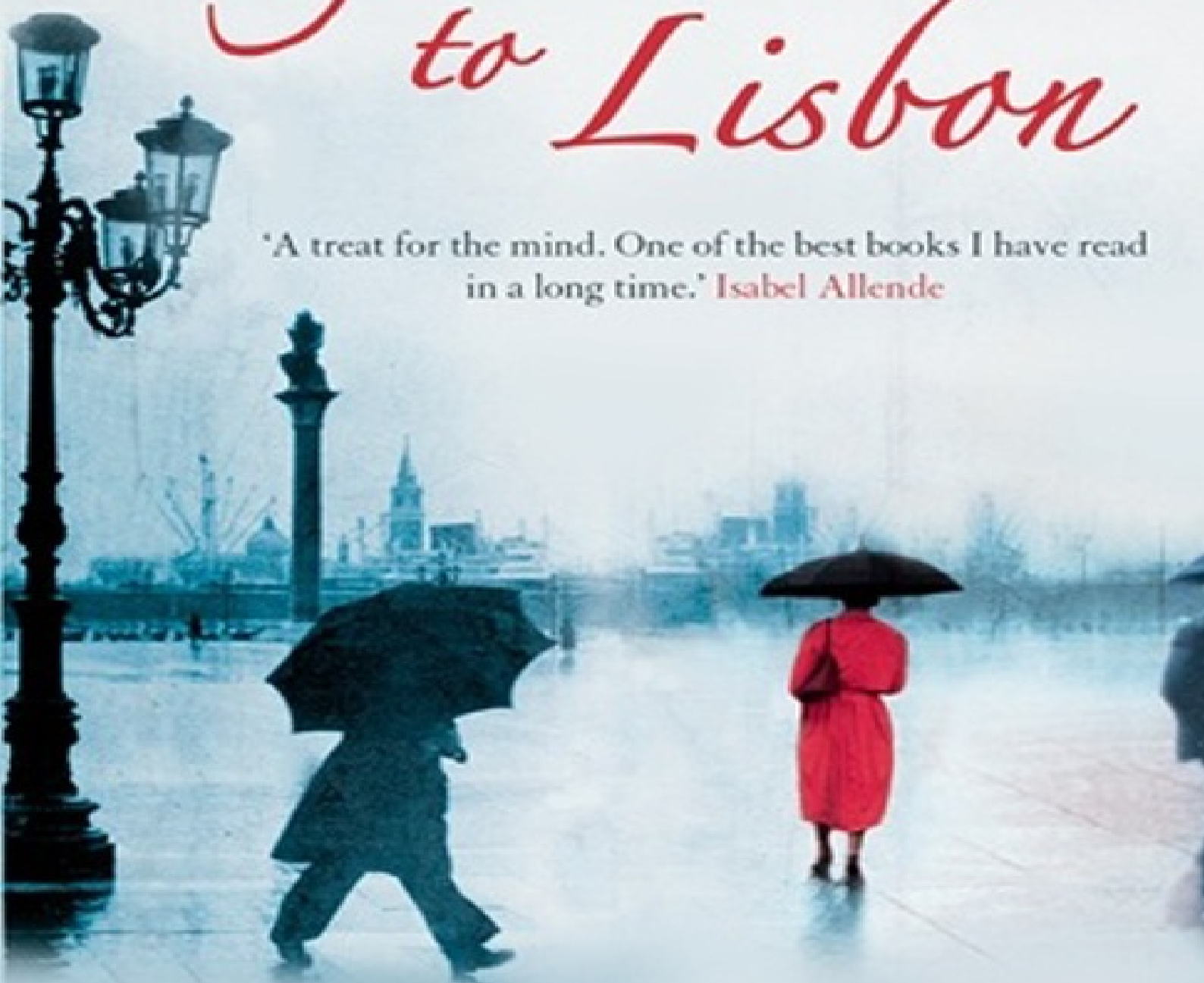


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Night Train to Lisbon

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in a long time.' *Isabel Allende*



PASCAL MERCIER

NIGHT TRAIN TO LISBON

PASCAL MERCIER was born in 1944 in Bern, Switzerland, and currently lives in Berlin where he is a professor of philosophy. *Night Train to Lisbon* is his third novel.

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Büch

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*Nuestras vidas son los ríos
que van a dar en la mar,
qu'es el morir*

Our lives are rivers, gliding free
to that unfathomed, boundless sea,
the silent grave!

Jorge Manrique

Nous sommes tous de lopins et d'une contexture si informe et diverse, que chaque piece, chaque momant, faict son jeu. Et se trouve autant de difference de nous à nous mesmes, que de nous à autrui.

We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others.

Michel de Montaigne, Essays, Second Book, 1

Cada um de nós é vários, é muitos, é uma prolixidade de si mesmos. Por isso aquele que despreza o ambiente não é o mesmo que dele se alegra ou padece. Na vasta colónia do nosso ser há gente de muitas espécies, pensando e sentindo diferentemente.

Each of us is several, is many, is a profusion of selves. So that the self who disdains his surroundings is not the same as the self who suffers or takes joy in them. In the vast colony of our being there are many species of people who think and feel in different ways.

Fernando Pessoa, O Livro do Desassossego

PART I

THE DEPARTURE

The day that ended with everything different in the life of Raimund Gregorius began like countless other days. At quarter to eight, he came from Bundesterrasse and stepped on to the Kirchenfeldbrücke leading from the heart of the city to the Gymnasium. He did that every day of the school term, always at quarter to eight. Once when the bridge was blocked, he made a mistake in the Greek class. That had never happened before nor did it ever happen again. For days, the whole school talked of nothing but this mistake. The longer the debate lasted, the more it was thought that he had been misheard. At last this conviction won out even among the students who had been there. It was simply inconceivable that Mundus, as everyone called him, could make a mistake in Greek, Latin or Hebrew.

Gregorius looked ahead at the pointed towers of the Historical Museum of the city of Bern, up to the Gurten and down to the Aare with its glacier-green water. A gusty wind drove low-lying clouds over him, turned his umbrella inside out and whipped the rain in his face. It was then that he noticed the woman standing in the middle of the bridge. She had leaned her elbows on the railing and was reading – in the pouring rain – what looked like a letter. She must have been holding the sheet with both hands. As Gregorius came closer, she suddenly crumpled the paper, kneaded it into a ball and threw the ball into space with a violent movement. Instinctively, Gregorius had walked faster and was now only a few steps away from her. He saw the rage in her pale, rain-wet face. It wasn't a rage that could be expressed in words and then blow over. It was a grim rage turned inward that must have been smouldering in her for a long time. Now the woman leaned on the railing with outstretched arms, and slipped her heels out of her shoes. *Now she jumps.* Gregorius abandoned the umbrella to a gust of wind that drove it over the railing, threw his briefcase full of school notebooks to the ground and uttered a string of curses that weren't part of his usual vocabulary. The briefcase opened and the notebooks slid on to the wet pavement. The woman turned around. For a few moments, she watched unmoving as the notebooks darkened with the water. Then she pulled a felt-tipped pen from her coat pocket, took two steps, leaned down to Gregorius and wrote a line of numbers on his forehead.

'Forgive me,' she said in French, breathless and with a foreign accent. 'But I mustn't forget this phone number and I don't have any paper with me.'

Now she looked at her hands as if she were seeing them for the first time.

'Naturally, I could have ...' And now, looking back and forth between Gregorius's forehead and her hand, she wrote the numbers on the back of the hand. 'I ... I didn't want to keep it, I wanted to forget everything, but when I saw the letter fall ... I had to hold on to it.'

The rain on his thick glasses muddied Gregorius's sight and he groped awkwardly for the wet notebooks. The tip of the felt pen seemed to slide over his forehead again. But then he realized it was the fingers of the woman, who was trying to wipe away the numbers with a handkerchief.

'It is out of line, I know ...' And now she started helping Gregorius gather up the notebooks. He touched her hand and brushed against her knee, and when the two of them reached for the last notebook, they bumped heads.

'Thank you very much,' he said when they stood facing each other. He pointed to her head. 'Does that hurt?'

Absently, looking down, she shook her head. The rain beat down on her hair and ran over her face. 'Can I walk a few steps with you?'

‘Ah ... yes, of course,’ Gregorius stammered.

Silently they walked together to the end of the bridge and on towards the school. His sense of time told Gregorius that it was after eight and the first class had already begun. How far was ‘a few steps’? The woman had adjusted to his pace and plodded along beside him as if she might follow him all day. She had pulled the wide collar of her coat so high that, from the side, Gregorius could only see her forehead.

‘I have to go in here, into the Gymnasium,’ he said, stopping. ‘I’m a teacher.’

‘Can I come along?’ she asked softly.

Gregorius hesitated and ran his sleeve over his wet glasses. ‘Well ... it’s dry there,’ he said at last.

She went up the stairs, Gregorius held the door open for her, and then they stood in the hall, which seemed especially empty and quiet now that classes had started. Her coat was dripping.

‘Wait here,’ said Gregorius and went to the cloakroom to get a towel.

At the mirror, he dried his glasses and wiped his face. The numbers could still be seen on his forehead. He held a corner of the towel under the warm water and was about to start rubbing them out when he suddenly stopped. *That was the moment that decided everything*, he thought when he recalled the event hours later. That is, he realized that he really didn’t *want* to wipe away the trace of his encounter with the enigmatic woman.

He imagined appearing before the class with a phone number on his face, he, Mundus, the most reliable and predictable person in this building and probably in the whole history of the school, having worked here for more than thirty years, impeccable in his profession, a pillar of the institution, a little dull perhaps, but respected and even feared in the university for his astounding knowledge of ancient languages. He was affectionately teased by his students who put him to the test every year by calling him in the middle of the night and asking about some remote passage in an ancient text, only to receive information that was both dry and exhaustive, including a critical commentary with other possible meanings, all of it presented without a trace of anger at the disturbance. Mundus, a man with an impossibly old-fashioned, even archaic first name that you simply *had to* shorten, and *couldn’t* shorten any other way. It was a name that perfectly suited the character of this man, for what he carried around in him as a philologist was in fact no less than a whole world, or rather several whole worlds, since along with those Latin and Greek passages, his head also held the Hebrew that had amazed several Old Testament scholars. *If you want to see a true scholar*, the Rector would say when he introduced him to a new class, *here he is*.

And this scholar, Gregorius thought now, this dry man who seemed to some to consist only of dead words, and who was spitefully called The Papyrus by some colleagues who envied him his popularity – this scholar would shortly enter the classroom with a telephone number written on his forehead by a desperate woman apparently torn between rage and love, a woman in a red leather coat with a soft, southern voice that sounded like an endless hesitant drawl that drew you in merely by hearing it.

When Gregorius had brought her the towel, the woman had used it to rub her long black hair, which she had then combed back so that it spread over her coat collar like a fan. The janitor entered the hall and, when he saw Gregorius, cast an amazed look at the clock over the exit and then at his watch. Gregorius nodded to him, as he always did. A student hurried past, looked back in surprise and went on his way.

‘I teach up there,’ Gregorius said to the woman and pointed up through a window to another part of the building. Seconds passed. He felt his heart beat. ‘Do you want to come along?’

Later, Gregorius couldn’t believe he had really said that; but he must have done, for he recalled the screech of his rubber soles on the linoleum and the clack of the woman’s boots as they walked

together to the classroom.

‘What’s your mother tongue?’ he had asked her.

‘*Português*,’ she had answered.

The *o* she pronounced surprisingly as a *u*; the rising, strangely constrained lightness of the *é* and the soft *sh* at the end came together in a melody that sounded much longer than it really was, and that he could have listened to all day long.

‘Wait,’ he said, took his notebook out of his jacket pocket and ripped out a page: ‘For the number

His hand was on the doorknob when he asked her to say *Português* once more. She repeated it, and for the first time he saw her smile.

The chatter broke off abruptly when they entered the classroom. Instead, an amazed silence filled the room. Later, Gregorius remembered the moment precisely: he had enjoyed this surprised silence, the look of incredulity on the faces of his students as they gazed at the bedraggled couple in the doorway. He had also enjoyed his delight at being able to feel in a way he would never have believed possible.

‘Perhaps there?’ said Gregorius to the woman and pointed to an empty seat at the back of the room. Then he advanced, greeted the class as usual, and sat down behind the desk. He had no idea how he could explain the woman’s presence and so he simply had them translate the text they were working on. The translations were halting, and he caught some bewildered looks among the students for he – he, Mundus, who recognized every mistake, even in his sleep – was now overlooking dozens of errors.

He tried not to look at the woman. Yet, every time he did so, he was struck by the damp strands of hair that framed her face, the white clenched hands, the absent, lost look as she gazed out of the window. Once she took out the pen and wrote the phone number on the page from his notebook. Then she leaned back in her seat and hardly seemed to know where she was.

It was an impossible situation and Gregorius glanced at the clock: ten more minutes until break. Then the woman got up and walked softly to the door. When she reached it, she turned round to him and put a finger to her lips. He nodded and she repeated the gesture with a smile. Then the door closed behind her with a soft click.

From this moment on, Gregorius no longer heard anything the students said. It was as if he was completely alone and enclosed in a numbing silence. He found himself standing at the window and watching the woman in the red coat until she had disappeared from view. He felt the effort not to run after her reverberate through him. He kept seeing the finger on her lips that could mean so many things: *I don’t want to disturb you*, and *It’s our secret*, but also, *Let me go now, this can’t go on*.

When the bell rang for the break, he was still standing at the window. Behind him, the students left more quietly than usual. Later he went out too, left the building through the back door and went across the street to the public library where nobody would look for him.

For the second part of the double class, he was on time as always. By then he had rubbed the numbers off his forehead, after writing them down in his notebook, and the narrow fringe of grey hair had dried. Only the damp patches on his jacket and trousers revealed that something unusual had happened. Now he took the stack of soaked notebooks out of his briefcase.

‘A mishap,’ he said tersely to the reassembled class. ‘I stumbled and they slipped out, in the rain. Nevertheless, the corrections should still be legible; otherwise, you will have to interpret them as best you can.’

An audible sigh of relief went through the room. Now and then, he still caught a curious look or heard the occasional whisper. Otherwise, everything was as before. He wrote the most frequent errors on the board, then he left the students to work on their own.

Could what happened to him in the next quarter of an hour be called a decision? Later, Gregorius was to keep asking himself this question and he could never be sure of the answer. But if it wasn't a decision – what was it?

It began when he suddenly looked at the students bending over their notebooks as if he were seeing them for the first time.

Lucien von Graffenried, who had secretly moved a piece in the annual chess tournament in the school auditorium where Gregorius had played simultaneous matches against a dozen students. Gregorius had noticed it immediately, and after the moves on the other boards, he looked at him calmly. 'That's beneath you,' he said as Lucien's face flamed red. And then made sure that the game ended in a draw.

Sarah Winter, who had stood outside the door of his flat at two in the morning because she didn't know what to do about her unwanted pregnancy. He had made her tea and listened, nothing more. 'I'm so glad I followed your advice,' she said a week later. 'It would have been much too early to have a baby.'

Beatrice Lüscher with the regular, precise handwriting who had grown old frighteningly fast under the burden of her always perfect achievements. René Zingg, always at the lowest end of the scale.

And naturally, Natalie Rubin. A girl who was grudging with her favours, a bit like a courtly maiden of the past, reserved, idolized and feared for her sharp tongue. Last week, after the bell rang for the break, she had stood up, stretched like someone at ease in her own body, and taken a colourful sweet out of her shirt pocket. On the way to the door, she had unwrapped it and, as she passed Gregorius, had put it to her mouth. It had just touched her lips when she broke off the movement, turned to him, held the sweet out and asked: 'Want it?' Amused at his astonishment, she had laughed her strange light laugh and made sure her hand touched his.

Gregorius went through each one. At first he seemed to be only drawing up an interim balance sheet of his feelings for them. Then, as he reached the middle of the rows of benches, he found himself thinking: *How much life they still have before them; how open their future still is; how much can still happen to them; how much they can still experience!*

Português. He heard the melody and saw the woman's face as, with closed eyes, it had emerged from the towel, white as alabaster. One last time, he slid his eyes over the heads of the students. Then he stood up slowly, went to the door, took the still damp coat off the hook and, without saying a word, walked out of the room.

His briefcase, together with the textbooks that had accompanied him for a lifetime, remained behind on the desk. At the top of the stairs, he paused as he remembered how he had taken them to be rebound every couple of years, always to the same shop, where they had laughed at the worn, dog-eared, pages that felt almost like blotting paper. As long as the briefcase lay on the desk, the students would assume that he was coming back. But that wasn't why he had left the books behind or why he now resisted the temptation to go back for them. If he left now, he also had to take his leave of those books. He felt that very strongly, even if at this moment, on the way out, he had no idea what it really signified.

In the entrance hall, his look fell on the little puddle that had formed when the woman in the dripping coat had waited for him to come out of the cloakroom. It was the trace of a visitor from another, faraway world, and Gregorius regarded it with a devotion usually reserved for archaeological finds. Only when he heard the janitor's shuffling step did he tear himself away and hurry out of the building.

Without turning round, he walked to the corner, where he could look back at the Gymnasium

unseen. With a sudden force he wouldn't have expected of himself, he felt how much he loved this building and everything it stood for and how much he would miss it. He checked the numbers again: forty-two years ago, as a fifteen-year-old student, Gregorius had entered it for the first time, wavering between anticipation and apprehension. Four years later, he had left the school with his diploma in hand, only to come back again four years later as a substitute for the Greek teacher who had been in an accident, the teacher who had once opened the ancient world to him. The student substitute turned into a permanent substitute, who was thirty-three by the time he finally took his university exams.

He had done that only because Florence, his wife, had urged him to. He had never thought of a doctorate; if anyone asked him about it, he had only laughed. Such things didn't matter. What did matter was something quite simple: to know the ancient texts down to the last detail, to recognize every grammatical and stylistic detail and to know the history of every one of those expressions. In other words: to be *good*. That wasn't modesty – his demands on himself were utterly immodest. Nor was it eccentricity or a warped kind of vanity. It had been, he sometimes thought later, a silent rage aimed at a pompous world, an unbending defiance against the world of show-offs who had made his father suffer all his life because he had been only a museum attendant. Others, who knew much less than he – ridiculously less, to tell the truth – had gained degrees and lucrative positions: they seemed to belong to another, unbearably superficial world with standards he despised. In the Gymnasium, no one would ever have come up with the idea of dismissing him and replacing him with somebody with a degree. The Rector, himself a philologist of ancient languages, knew how good Gregorius was – much better than he himself – and he knew that the students would have risen in revolt if their teacher had been replaced. When he finally did take the examination, it seemed absurdly simple to Gregorius and he handed in his paper in half the time. He had always held it against Florence a bit that she had made him abandon his defiance.

Gregorius turned around and walked slowly towards Kirchenfeldbrücke. When the bridge came into view, he had the amazing feeling, both upsetting and liberating, that, at the age of fifty-seven, he was about to take his life into his own hands for the first time.

At the spot where the woman had read the letter in the pouring rain, he stood still and looked down. It was only now that he realized how deep the drop was. Had she really wanted to jump? Or had that only been an unreasonable fear on his part, going back to Florence's brother who had also jumped off a bridge? Except that Portuguese was her mother tongue, he didn't know the slightest thing about the woman. Not even her name. Naturally, it was absurd to expect to see the scrunched-up letter from up here. Nevertheless he stared down, his eyes aching with the effort. Was that dark dot his umbrella? He felt in his jacket to make sure that the notebook with the number written on his forehead by the nameless Portuguese woman was still there. Then he walked to the end of the bridge, uncertain where to go next. He was in the course of running away from his previous life. Could somebody who intended to do that simply go home?

His eye fell on Hotel Bellevue, the oldest, most distinguished hotel in the city. Thousands of times he had passed by without ever going in. Now he realized that, in some vague way, it had been important to him to know that it was there; he would have been upset to learn that the building had been torn down or had stopped being a hotel, even though it had never entered his mind that he, Mundus, had any reason to go there. Timorously, he now approached the entrance. A Bentley stopped, the chauffeur got out and went inside. When Gregorius followed him, he had the feeling of doing something absolutely revolutionary, indeed forbidden.

The lobby with the coloured glass dome was empty and the carpet absorbed all sound. Gregorius was glad the rain had stopped and his coat was nearly dry. Treading lightly in his heavy, clumsy shoes he went on into the dining room. Only two of the tables were occupied. Light notes of a Mozart divertimento created the impression that one was far away from everything loud, ugly and oppressive. Gregorius took off his coat and sat down at a table near the window. No, he said to the waiter in the light beige jacket, he wasn't a guest at the hotel. He felt under scrutiny: the rough turtleneck sweater under the worn-out jacket with the leather patches on the elbows; the baggy corduroy trousers; the sparse fringe of hair around the powerful bald head; the grey beard with the white specks that always made him look a bit unkempt. When the waiter had gone off with his order, Gregorius nervously checked whether he had enough money on him. Then he leaned his elbows on the starched tablecloth and looked over towards the bridge.

It was absurd to hope that the woman would appear there once again. She must have gone back over the bridge and then vanished into an alleyway in the Old City. He pictured her sitting at the back of the classroom absently gazing out of the window. He saw her wringing her white hands. And again he saw her alabaster face surface from the towel, exhausted and vulnerable. *Português*. Hesitantly, he took out the notebook and looked at the phone number. The waiter brought his breakfast with coffee in a silver pot. Gregorius let the coffee grow cold. Once he stood up and went to the telephone. Halfway there, he turned round and went back to the table. Then he paid for the untouched breakfast and left the hotel.

It was years since he had been in the Spanish bookshop on Hirschengraben. Once, every now and then, he had bought a book for Florence that she had needed for her dissertation on San Juan de la Cruz. On the bus, he had sometimes leafed through it, but at home he had never touched her books. Spanish – that was her territory. It was like Latin and yet completely different from Latin, and that

bothered him. It went against the grain with him that words in which Latin was so evident came out of contemporary mouths – on the streets, in supermarkets, in cafés; that they were used to order Coke, to haggle and to curse. He found the idea hard to bear and brushed it quickly aside whenever it came to him. Naturally, the Romans had also haggled and cursed. But that was different. He loved the Latin sentences because they bore the calm of everything past. Because they didn't make you say something. Because they were speech beyond talk. And because they were beautiful in their immutability. Dead languages – people who talked about them like that had no idea, really no idea, and Gregorius could be harsh and unbending in his contempt for them. When Florence spoke Spanish on the phone, he had to close the door. That offended her and he couldn't explain why.

The bookshop smelt wonderfully of old leather and dust. The owner, an ageing man with a legendary knowledge of Romance languages, was busy in the back room. The front room was empty except for a young woman, a student apparently. She sat at a table in a corner reading a slim book with a yellowed binding. Gregorius would have preferred to be alone. The sense that he was standing here only because the melody of a Portuguese word wouldn't leave his mind, and maybe also because he hadn't known where else to go, that feeling would have been easier to bear without witnesses. Now and then, as he walked along the rows of books, he occasionally tilted his glasses to read a title on a high shelf: but as soon as he had read it, it had been forgotten. As so often, he was alone with his thoughts, and his mind was closed to the outside world.

When the door opened, he turned round quickly. He saw, to his disappointment, that it was the postman and realized that, contrary to his intention and against all reason, he was still waiting for the Portuguese woman. Now the student closed the book and got up. But instead of putting it on the table with the others, she stood still, let her eyes slide again over the yellowed binding, stroked it with her hand; only a few seconds later did she put the book down on the table, as softly and carefully as if it might crumble to dust with a nudge. Then, for a moment, she stood at the table and it looked as if she might reconsider and buy the book. But she went out, her hands deep in her coat pockets and her head down. Gregorius picked up the book and read: AMADEU INÁCIO DE ALMEIDA PRADO, UM OURIVES DAS PALAVRAS, LISBOA 1975.

The bookseller came in, glanced at the book and pronounced the title aloud. Gregorius heard only a flow of sibilants; the half-swallowed, hardly audible vowels seemed to be only a pretext to keep repeating the hissing *sh* at the end.

'Do you speak Portuguese?'

Gregorius shook his head.

'A *Goldsmith of Words*. Isn't that a lovely title?'

'Quiet and elegant. Like dull silver. Would you say it again in Portuguese?'

The bookseller repeated the words. Aside from the words themselves, you could hear how he enjoyed their velvety sound. Gregorius opened the book and leafed through it until he reached the first page of text. He handed it to the man, who looked at him with surprise and pleasure and started reading aloud. As he listened, Gregorius closed his eyes. After a few sentences, the man paused.

'Shall I translate?'

Gregorius nodded. And then he heard sentences that stunned him, for they sounded as if they had been written for him alone, and not only for him, but for him on this morning that had changed everything.

Of the thousand experiences we have, we find language for one at most and even this one merely by chance and without the care which it deserves. Among all these unexpressed experiences are those

that are hidden and which have given our life. Its shape, its colour and its melody. If we then, as archaeologists of the soul, turn to examine these treasures, we will discover how confusing they are. The object of our examination refuses to stand still, the words glance off the experience we are left with a lot of contradictions. For a long time, I thought this was a defect, something that had to be overcome. Now I think differently: that it is the recognition of the confusion that is the key to understanding these intimate yet enigmatic experiences. That sounds strange, even bizarre, I know. But ever since I have seen the issue in this light, I have the feeling of being really awake and alive for the first time.

‘That’s the introduction,’ said the bookseller and started leafing through it. ‘And now he seems to begin, passage after passage, to dig for all the buried experiences. To be the archaeologist of himself. Some passages are several pages long and others are quite short. Here, for example, is a fragment that consists of only one sentence.’ He translated:

Given that we can live only a small part of what there is in us – what happens to the rest?

‘I’d like to have the book,’ said Gregorius.

The bookseller closed it and ran his hand over the binding as affectionately as the student had.

‘I found it last year in the junk box of a second-hand bookshop in Lisbon. And now I remember: I bought it because I liked the introduction. Somehow I lost sight of it.’ He looked at Gregorius, who felt awkwardly for his briefcase. ‘I give it to you as a gift.’

‘That’s ...’ Gregorius began hoarsely and cleared his throat.

‘It cost pretty much nothing,’ said the bookseller and handed him the book. ‘Now I remember you San Juan de la Cruz. Right?’

‘That was my wife,’ said Gregorius.

‘Then you’re the classical philologist of Kirchenfeld, she talked about you. And later I heard somebody else talk about you. It sounded as if you were a walking encyclopaedia.’ He laughed. ‘Definitely a popular encyclopaedia.’

Gregorius put the book in his coat pocket and held out his hand. ‘Thank you very much.’

The bookseller accompanied him to the door. ‘I hope I haven’t ...’

‘Not at all,’ said Gregorius and touched his arm.

On Bubenbergplatz, he stood and looked around him. Here he had spent his whole life, here he knew his way around, here he was at home. For someone as nearsighted as he was, that was important. For someone like him, the city he lived in was like a shell, a cosy cave, a safe haven. Everything else meant danger. Only someone who had such thick glasses could understand that. Florence hadn’t understood it. And, maybe for the same reason, she hadn’t understood that he didn’t like flying. He didn’t like getting on an aeroplane and arriving a few hours later in a completely different world, with no time to take in individual images along the way. It bothered him. *It’s not right*, he had said to Florence. *What do you mean – not right?* she had asked, irritated. He couldn’t explain it and so she had often flown by herself or with others, usually to South America.

Gregorius stood at the display window of Bubenberg Cinema. The late show was a black-and-white film of a novel by Georges Simenon: *L’homme qui regardait passer les trains*. He liked the title and looked for a long time at the stills. In the late seventies, when everybody bought colour televisions, he had tried in vain for days to get another black-and-white set. Finally he had brought one home from the dump. Even after he got married, he had stubbornly held on to it, keeping it in his study; when he was by himself, he ignored the colour set in the living room and turned on the old rattle-trap that flickered, the images rolling occasionally. *Mundus, you’re impossible*, Florence had said one day

when she found him before the ugly, misshapen box. When she had started addressing him as the others did, and even at home he was treated like a factotum of the city of Bern – that had been the beginning of the end. When the colour television had vanished from the flat with his divorced wife, he had breathed a sigh of relief. Only years later, when the black-and-white picture was unwatchable, did he buy a new colour set.

The stills in the display window were big and crystal clear. One showed the pale alabaster face of Jeanne Moreau, stroking damp strands of hair off her forehead. Gregorius tore himself away and went into a nearby café to examine more closely the book by the Portuguese aristocrat who had tried to express himself and his mute experiences in words.

Only now, as he leafed slowly one by one through the pages, with a bibliophile's careful attention did he discover a portrait of the author, an old photo, yellowed at the time the book was printed, when the once black surfaces had faded to dark brown, the bright face on a background of coarse-grained shadowy darkness. Gregorius polished his glasses, put them back on and, within a few minutes, was completely engrossed in the author's face.

The man might have been in his early thirties and he radiated an intelligence, a self-confidence, and a boldness that literally dazzled Gregorius. The bright face with the high forehead was thatched with luxuriant dark hair that seemed to shine dully and was combed back like a helmet, with some strands falling next to the ears in soft waves. A narrow Roman nose gave the face great clarity, emphasized by strong eyebrows, as if painted with a broad brush and breaking off at the edges, thus concentrating attention on the centre of the forehead. The full curved lips that wouldn't have been surprising in the face of a woman, were framed by a thin moustache and a trimmed beard, and the black shadows it cast on the slim neck gave Gregorius the impression of a certain coarseness and toughness. Yet, what determined everything were the dark eyes. They were underscored by shadows, not shadows of weariness, exhaustion or illness, but shadows of seriousness and melancholy. In his dark look, gentleness was mixed with an air of intrepidity and inflexibility. The man was a dreamer and a poet, thought Gregorius, but at the same time, someone who could resolutely direct a weapon or a scalpel. You would be advised to get out of his way when his eyes flamed, eyes that could keep an army of powerful giants at bay, eyes that were no stranger to black looks. As for his clothing, only the white shirt collar with the knot of a tie could be seen, and a jacket Gregorius imagined as a frock coat.

It was almost one o'clock when Gregorius surfaced from his absorption with the portrait. Once again, the coffee had grown cold in front of him. He wished he could hear the voice of the Portuguese man and see how he moved. Nineteen seventy-five: if he was then in his early thirties, as it seemed, he was now slightly over sixty. *Português*. Gregorius recalled the voice of the nameless Portuguese woman and transposed it to a lower pitch in his mind, but without turning it into the voice of the bookseller. It was to be a voice of melancholy clarity, corresponding precisely with the visage of Amadeu de Prado, the author. He tried to make the sentences in the book resonate with this voice. But it didn't work; he didn't know how the individual words were pronounced.

Outside, his chess-playing student Lucien von Graffenried passed by the café. Gregorius was surprised and relieved to find that he didn't flinch. He watched the boy go by and thought of the book he had left on the desk. He had to wait until classes resumed at two o'clock. Only then could he go back to the bookshop to buy a Portuguese language textbook.

As soon as Gregorius put on the first record at home and listened to the first Portuguese sentences, the phone rang. The school. The ringing wouldn't stop. He stood next to the phone and tried out sentences he could say. *Ever since this morning I've been feeling that I'd like to make something different out of my life. That I don't want to be your Mundus any more. I have no idea what the new one will be. But I can't put it off any longer. That is, my time is running out and there may not be much more of it left.* Gregorius spoke the sentences aloud. They were right, he knew that; he had said few sentences in his life that were so precisely right as these. But they sounded empty and bombastic when they were spoken aloud, and it was impossible to say them into the phone.

The ringing had stopped. But it would start again. They were worried and wouldn't rest until they had found him; something could have happened to him. Sooner or later, the doorbell would ring. Now in February, it always got dark early. He wouldn't be able to turn on a light. In the centre of the city, the centre of his life, he was attempting to flee and had to hide in the flat where he had lived for fifteen years. It was bizarre, absurd, and sounded like some potboiler. Yet it was *serious*, more serious than most things he had ever experienced and done. But it was impossible to explain it to those who were searching for him. Gregorius imagined opening the door and inviting them in. Impossible. Utterly impossible.

Three times in a row, he listened to the first record of the course, and slowly got an idea of the difference between the written and the spoken language, and of all that was swallowed in spoken Portuguese. His unerring memory for word formation kicked in.

The phone kept ringing at ever shorter intervals. He had taken over an antiquated phone from the previous tenant with a permanent connection he couldn't pull out. The landlord had insisted that everything remain as it was. Now he found a blanket to muffle the ringing.

The voices guiding the language course wanted him to repeat words and short sentences. Lips and tongue felt heavy and clumsy when he tried it. The ancient languages seemed made for his Bernese mouth, and the thought that you had to hurry didn't appear in this timeless universe. The Portuguese, on the other hand, always seemed to be in a hurry, like the French, which made him feel inferior. Florence had loved it, this carefree elegance, and when he saw how easily it came to her, he had fallen silent.

But now everything was different. Gregorius *wanted* to imitate the impetuous pace of the man and the woman's dancing lightness like a piccolo, and repeated the same sentences again and again to narrow the distance between his stolid enunciation and the twinkling voice on the record. After a while, he understood that he was experiencing a great liberation; the liberation from his self-imposed limitation, from a slowness and heaviness expressed in his name and the slow, measured steps of his father walking ponderously from one room of the museum to another; liberation from an image of himself, even when he wasn't reading, as someone bending myopically over dusty books; an image he hadn't drawn systematically, but that had grown slowly and imperceptibly; the image of Mundus created not only by himself but also by many others who had found it convenient to be able to view him as this silent museum-like figure. It seemed to Gregorius that he was stepping out of this image if from a dusty oil painting on the wall of a forgotten wing in the museum. He walked back and forth in the dim illumination of the lightless flat, ordered coffee in Portuguese, asked for a street in Lisbon.

enquired about someone's profession and name, answered questions about his own profession, and conducted a brief conversation about the weather.

And all at once, he started talking with the Portuguese woman he had met on the bridge that morning. He asked her why she was furious with the letter-writer. *Você quis saltar? Did you want to jump?* Excitedly, he held the new dictionary and grammar book before his eyes and looked up expressions and verb forms he lacked. *Português*. How different the word sounded now! Before, it had possessed the magic of a jewel from a distant, inaccessible land and now it was like one of a thousand gems in a palace whose door he had just pushed open.

The doorbell rang. Gregorius tiptoed to the record player and turned it off. They were young voices, student voices, conferring outside. Twice more, the shrill ring cut through the dim silence where Gregorius waited, stock-still. Then he heard the footsteps receding on the stairs.

The kitchen was the only room that faced the back and had a Venetian blind. Gregorius pulled it down and turned on the light. He took out the book by the Portuguese aristocrat and the language books he had also bought, sat down at the table and started translating the first text after the introduction. It was like Latin but quite different from Latin, and now it didn't bother him in the slightest. It was a difficult text, and it took a long time. Methodically and with the stamina of a marathon runner, Gregorius selected the words and combed through the tables of verbs until he had deciphered the complex verb forms. After a few sentences, he was gripped by a feverish excitement and he got some paper to write down the translation. It was almost nine o'clock when he was finally satisfied:

PROFUNDEZAS INCERTAS. UNCERTAIN DEPTHS. *Is there a mystery underlying human actions? Or are human actions just what they seem?*

It is extraordinary, but the answer changes in me with the light that falls on the city and the Tagus. If it is the enchanting light of a shimmering August day that produces clear, sharp-edged shadows, the thought of a hidden human depth seems bizarre and like a curious, even slightly touching fantasy, like a mirage that arises when I look too long at the waves flashing in that light. On the other hand, if city and river are clouded over on a dreary January day by a dome of shadowless light and boring grey, I am certain that all human action is an extremely imperfect, utterly helpless expression of a hidden life of unimagined depths that presses to the surface without ever being able to reach it.

And to this upsetting unreliability of my judgement is added another experience that plunges my life continually in to distressing uncertainty: that, in this matter, the really most important one for us human beings, I waver even when it concerns myself. For when I sit outside my favourite café, basking in the sun, and overhear the tinkling laughter of the passing Senhoras, my whole inner world seems filled to the depths, and is revealed to me more fully because of these pleasant feelings. Yet, if a disenchanting, sobering layer of clouds pushes in before the sun, with one fell swoop, I am sure there are hidden depths and abysses in me, where unimagined things could break out and sweep me away. Then I quickly pay and hastily seek diversion in the hope that the sun might soon break out again and restore the reassuring superficiality.

Gregorius turned to the picture of Amadeu de Prado and leaned the book against the table lamp. Sentence after sentence, he read the translated text gazing into the bold, melancholy eyes. Only once before had he done something like that: when he had read Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* as a student. A plaster bust of the emperor had stood on the table, and when he worked on the text, he seemed to be

doing it under the aegis of his silent presence. But between then and now there was a difference, which Gregorius felt ever more clearly as the night progressed, without being able to put it into words. He knew only one thing as two o'clock approached: with the sharpness of his perception, the Portuguese aristocrat had awoken in him an alertness and precision of feeling even more keenly than the wise emperor, whose meditations he had devoured as if they were aimed directly at him. In the meantime, Gregorius had translated another note:

PALAVRAS NUM SILÊNCIO DE OURO. WORDS IN GOLDEN SILENCE. *When I read a newspaper, listen to the radio or overhear what people are saying in the café, I often feel an aversion, even disgust at the same words written and spoken over and over – at the same expressions, phrases, and metaphors repeated. And the worst is, when I listen to myself I have to admit that I too endlessly repeat the same things. They're so horribly frayed and threadbare, these words, worn out by constant overuse. Do they still have any meaning? Naturally, words have a function; people act on them, they laugh and cry, they go left or right, the waiter brings the coffee or tea. But that's not what I want to ask. The question is: are they still an expression of thoughts? Or only effective sounds that drive people in one direction or the other?*

Sometimes I go to the beach and stand facing the wind, which I wish were icy, colder than we know it in these parts. I wish it would blow all the hackneyed words, all the inspid habits of language out of me so that I could come back with a cleansed mind, cleansed of the banalities of the same talk. But the next time I have to say anything everything is as before. The cleansing I long for doesn't come automatically. I have to do something, and I have to do it with words. But what? It's not that I'd like to switch from my own language into another. No, it has nothing to do with that. And I also tell myself: You can't invent a new language. But do I really want to?

Maybe it's like this: I'd like to rearrange Portuguese words. The sentences that would emerge from this new order must not be odd or eccentric, not exalted, affected or artificial. They must be archetypal sentences in Portuguese so that you have the feeling that they originated directly and from the transparent, sparkling nature of this language. The words must be as unblemished as polished marble, and they must be pure as the notes in a Bach partita, which turn everything that is not themselves into a perfect silence. Sometimes, when I am feeling more tolerant about the linguistic morass, I think, it could be the easy silence of a living room or the relaxed silence between lovers. But when I am totally possessed by rage over the clichéd use of words, then it must be nothing less than the clear, cool silence of outer space, where I make my solitary way as the only person who speaks Portuguese. The waiter, the barber, the conductor – they would be startled if they heard the new use of words and amazed by the beauty and clarity of the sentences. They would be – I imagine – compelling sentences, incorruptible and firm like the words of a god. At the same time, they would be without exaggeration and without pomposity, precise and so succinct that you couldn't take away one single word, one single comma. Thus they would be like a poem, plaited by a goldsmith of words.

Hunger made Gregorius's stomach ache and he forced himself to eat something. Later he sat with a cup of tea in the dark living room. What now? Twice more the doorbell had rung, and the last time he had heard the stifled buzz of the phone was shortly before midnight. Tomorrow they would file a missing person's report and then the police would appear at the door some time. He could still go back. At a quarter to eight he could walk across the Kirchenfeldbrücke, enter the Gymnasium and explain his enigmatic absence with some story that would make him look ridiculous, but that was all.

and it suited him. They would never learn anything of the enormous distance he had covered internally in less than twenty-four hours.

But that was it: he *had* covered it. And he didn't want to let himself be forced by others to undo this silent journey. He took out a map of Europe and considered how you got to Lisbon by train. Train information, he learned on the phone, didn't open until six o'clock. He started packing.

It was almost four when he sat in the chair, ready to leave. Outside, it had started snowing. Suddenly all his courage deserted him. It was a crackpot idea. A nameless, confused Portuguese woman. Yellowed notes of a Portuguese aristocrat. A language course for beginners. The idea of time running out. You don't run away to Lisbon in the middle of winter because of that.

At five, Gregorius called Constantine Doxiades, his eye specialist. They had often called each other in the middle of the night to share their common suffering from insomnia. Sleepless people were bound by a wordless solidarity. Sometimes he played a blind game of speed chess with the Greek, and afterwards Gregorius could sleep a little before it was time to go to school.

'Doesn't make much sense, does it?' said Gregorius at the end of his faltering story. Doxiades was silent. Gregorius was familiar with that. Now he would shut his eyes and pinch the bridge of his nose with thumb and index finger.

'Yes, indeed, it does make sense,' said the Greek now. 'Indeed.'

'Will you help me if, on the way, I feel I can't go on?'

'Just call. Day or night. Don't forget the spare glasses.'

There it was again, the laconic certainty in his voice. A medical certainty, but also a certainty that went far beyond anything professional; the certainty of a man who took time to formulate his thoughts so they were later expressed in valid judgements. For twenty years, Gregorius had been going to this doctor, the only one who could remove his fear of going blind. Sometimes, he compared him with his father, who, after his wife's premature death, seemed – no matter where he was or what he did – to dwell constantly in the dusty safety of a museum. Gregorius had learned young that it was very fragile, this safety. He had liked his father and there had been moments when the feeling was even stronger and deeper than simple liking. But he had suffered from the fact that his father was not someone you could rely on, could not hold on to, unlike the Greek, whose solid judgement you could trust. Later, he had sometimes felt guilty about this. The safety and self-confidence his father didn't have weren't something a person could control or be accused of lacking. You had to be lucky with yourself to be a self-confident person. And his father hadn't had much luck, either with himself or with others.

Gregorius sat down at the kitchen table and drafted letters to the Rector. They were either too abrupt or too apologetic. At six, he called train information. From Geneva, the journey took twenty-six hours; it would take him through Paris and Irún in the Basque region, where he would connect with the night train to Lisbon, arriving at eleven in the morning. Gregorius booked a one-way ticket. The train to Geneva left at eight-thirty.

Finally he got the letter right.

Honoured Rector, Dear Colleague Kägi,

You will have learned by now that I left class yesterday without an explanation and didn't come back, and you will also know that I have remained incommunicado. I am well, nothing has happened to me. But, in the course of the day yesterday, I had an experience that has changed a great deal. It is too personal and still much too obscure for me to put it on paper yet. I must simply ask you to accept my abrupt and unexplained act. You know me well enough, I think, to know that it is not the result of

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