

THE PALACE MUST BURN

by Mercedes Spannagel

Sample Translation by Jen Calleja and Theodora Danek

© 2020, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG



(pp. 19-26 and pp. 77-82)

Literary Fiction / Novel

192 pages

Publication date: September 2020 (Hardcover)

Foreign rights with: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG

Contact information: <https://www.kiwi-verlag.de/verlag/rights>

I showed up at the café with Marx. I held him in my arms and he was completely still.

Jo looked up from his beer and asked: What is that supposed to be?

I sat down opposite him and said: An act of defiance.

I told him that Madam President had acquired a ninth greyhound yesterday, so I had immediately bought this pug because he was the opposite of a greyhound. And I had christened him Marx because Madam President hates communism.

Jo put his beer down and observed the baby in my arms sceptically.

I'd almost say that he looks philosophical, but because I know better: sad.

I lay my hand on Marx's forehead and softly stroked his velvety wrinkles. Marx was a black pug baby. I thought he suited the interior of the café nicely. I said: Marx complements the image of the coffee house.

Jo and I sat opposite each other in a booth on blue seats, as if we were on a train, and we ate savoury crepes.

Always with the provocative behaviour, Jo said and shook his head.

I looked at Jo and thought of that one time when I picked up a book from a book table, light pink cover, on it in black: (.)(.), and the title: *Breasts*. Back then I had wanted to talk to him about the minimalist and direct cover, but he was super uncomfortable with it.

The only things on the shelf behind the bar were the first four letters of the classic patisserie-font, *PATI*, white with a gold trim, and a surveillance camera.

I said to Jo: Do you remember how I took a picture of you once, when you were reading an article in that anarchist newspaper, *Revolt*, about voyeurism in the Vienna public transport system?

Oh yeah, said Jo.

You were reading it over breakfast, I said.

Jo nodded.

You have to confront the misery of the world right when you get up, I said.

Jo laughed and said: Are you staying over tonight?

When we were in his flat, Jo was still visibly overwhelmed with the baby that I had suddenly imposed on him. I said: this is definitely a wanted child.

Jo asked: Can a pug get high?

I had no idea. I did think it was ok to keep Marx in Jo's room while we smoked weed in the living room. First Jo put down a pillow for him, but then he got out a t-shirt from his drawers, he said: In case he shits on it.

I said: Please choose the t-shirt with Mao on the front.

But Jo pulled out a white one. I lowered Marx onto it and he lay there with his head on his paws and looked at us with gigantic eyes.

As if he just couldn't cope with this world, I said.

Understandable, said Jo.

In the living room we settled in on the sofa and while Jo rolled the joint, he asked what I thought of it here. If anything had changed in the meantime.

I looked around and said that nothing had changed. As if I had never left.

We sprawled around, the cold joint sat in the ashtray from Morocco that I found very pretty, I liked to point out how pretty it was. Then Jo asked if I had brought my pipe from Morocco, but I hadn't. We watched an Austrian TV series on his laptop that deeply bored me. Jo lit the joint again. I got up, crouched down between the coffee table and Jo, he exhaled smoke and looked at me, I grabbed his trousers.

Jo asked if he should pause the TV.

I said that I didn't care, that I wasn't paying attention anyway.

And after I had swallowed I asked what it was like to sleep with the child of Nazis.

And Jo breathed heavily and laughed and coughed and asked: What's it like to be the child of Nazis?

I got up to check on Marx, he was sleeping peacefully on his t-shirt. I smiled at Jo when I came back and closed the door. By chance I saw: a red chapbook lying on the yellow chair at the dinner table. I laughed. I read aloud: Stalin, *On Self-Criticism*.

Jo said that I should read it, judging by what I had told him about my depression and dissatisfaction last winter, as a quasi-preventative measure.

I said: It'll be a while before I think about the winter - even if I have been buying gingerbread since the end of August.

I sat back down on the sofa. I said: That chapbook is there for a reason. And this flat is basically an installation. That this flat was celebrating the

hippiesque, and it was only possible to set the stage to this extent if you were from a nice bourgeois family.

Sheesh, said Jo.

We hung out for hours, like we used to. For a long time I looked at the Nepalese rug and was happy after all that I hadn't moved in.

Lili had texted me: *Yeah, cute. But aren't we too old to use innocent creatures to compensate for unrequited love in every aspect of our lives?*

She texted: ...

She texted: *Can you even take responsibility for anything?*

I texted: *I can dress myself in the morning.*

I can dress myself in the mor

I can dre

I ca...

I wrote three-hundred replies to justify myself and sent none of them.

Jo explained that he had written elevenie poems with his first graders in today's art class, image to text.

Because I didn't want to engage with Lili's accusations and because the TV series hadn't got any more interesting, I took an old edition of the *Standard* newspaper that I had found in the loo, an empty loo roll and a pair of scissors. I cut 1-2-3-4-1 words out of the newspaper and glued them to the loo roll with sticky tape, the elevenie said:

Kisses

Criminal energy

But also condoms

Is against the Nazis

Dilemma

Because I was going to stay the night, I wanted to take a shower, Jo accompanied me to the bathroom.

I said that I had already had a finger up my vagina today, in the law faculty. I was speaking about inserting a tampon during menstruation.

Jo asked if that had turned me on.

No.

I had sat down in the bathtub, not drawn the shower curtains. Jo stood leaning against the radiator and looked at me. Jo asked if he should hand me a towel, but I said that I wasn't cold. Water dripped from my hair. Blood ran between my toes. I said that I had an idea for an art installation: to sit in a bathtub in public, bloody, for as long as I was on my period. Maybe count the millilitres of liquid.

Jo said that this made him think of Marina Abramović, who for days, weeks, months had just sat on a chair at the MOMA in New York and looked at visitors.

Jo said that he, if he turned artist, would also be doing performance art. Dada performance art, maybe.

I said that Walter Benjamin wrote in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that dada artwork mostly intended to invoke public disorder.

Is that what you want?

Jo said he could take pictures of me now. For Instagram.

I said that he had to consider the collective fear of nipples.

Jo suggested fetching Marx from the bedroom. I could hold him before my naked body. The title of the photos would then be *Pugs, Jugs & Periods*.

I climbed out of the bathtub, Jo handed me a towel, I wrapped it around myself, he helped to rub my body dry, he stood behind me and I told him that my mother wanted to set me up with a young man called Ferdinand.

Jo laid his chin on my shoulder and looked in the mirror and asked if I liked this man.

And I said, yes, so much so that I had pointed at the Schmiss scar, you know, from duelling in a fraternity, above his eyebrow and said: Organised bloodshed is menstruation envy.

I said: That's what you have to say to every frat boy.

In bed later I read Stalin's speech on self-criticism. Then I said: The main difference is probably that Stalin demands self-criticism because of prevailing hubris while I'm self-critical without any hubris whatsoever. What we can learn from this is the following: we need critique to strengthen Soviet power, but not to weaken it. I am Soviet power. Self-critique, therefore, only in well-administered doses.

Next to me, Jo put his phone aside and said: Yeah, self-criticism was an important element of communism, but that he hadn't read that pamphlet during his teenage communist phase and he definitely wasn't going to read it anytime soon. Bold move, reading the speeches of a mass murderer now.

And I said that I had to, after all, know what it was all about.

Jo asked, uhuh, what was it all about then, and I felt his hand in my knickers.

Jo said: The pug is not allowed in the bed!

The next morning, we slept with each other one more time, I lay on my back, and when we were finished I looked up and on the bottom of the shelf that hung above the bed there was a post-it note, which said: *Thank you, I love you*. And it wasn't anything that I had written. And I couldn't remember Jo ever putting up one of my post-its here, at this spot that he saw instantly when he opened his eyes in the morning. I got up and asked myself if that had an effect on me. Then I cut my favourite sentence out of the *Standard* and taped it to the cistern in the loo: *As individuals we cannot save the world*, took Marx and left. Outside the sun dazzled me and that was how it should be.

At the *Café Kino* they were showing gangster films that week, today it was *Reservoir Dogs*, they were putting up a projector, I ordered a rose spritzer, the rose spritzer came with a glass straw and I immediately sucked on the straw, Marx lapped up water from a dog bowl next to me.

Lily was late.

Well, he's still alive!, she said with a glance at Marx, then she pushed her phone in my face. A black-and-white photograph of women in miniskirts holding up placards saying *miniskirts forever* and *Dior unfair to miniskirts*. I continued sucking on my straw.

Lili said: In 1966 women in London protested against the absence of miniskirts in *Dior* collections. I watched a documentary on it today. I found a YouTube channel that publishes videos on the history of women's liberation.

I asked if she had interpreted today's gangster slogan that way: Life is short, the skirt is shorter.

I kept drinking and watched as Lili sat down in the leather chair opposite me, and I saw that her underwear said *AMORE* before she crossed her legs.

She was late, she said, because after the documentary she had watched a video of a YouTuber analysing the porno that had made Kim K famous, and that she just had to watch that too.

I stared at Lili and noisily sucked the last bit of liquid from my glass. Lili took my glass away.

I said: I don't believe a word you're saying, and isn't Kim a fascistic ruler of an Asian country?

I said: Your excuses for being late are getting worse and worse!

Lili said: And what were you doing when you didn't reply yesterday?

Had I been at Jo's, she asked.

I bent low under the table. Marx closed his eyes when I scratched his neck. He was so cute.

I said quietly: Yes.

Lili said loudly: No.

I said Yes more loudly and that I was going on a hunt that weekend and after that I was going to make a porno that would make me famous.

While the others were off hunting, I lay beside the pool. I lay there on a sun lounger, near the perversely blue water, my eyes closed behind my sunglasses, and felt the very warm September sun on my body, then it was suddenly cold. I persevered for a while in this state of inexplicable chilliness, goose bumps all over my body, until I opened my eyes and noticed a young man had cast a shadow over me. I took off my sunglasses, simply looked at him, and said nothing. He introduced himself as Theodor Thies.

He held his hand out towards me. He was wearing a pink shirt. I noticed that on the left-hand side, around where his kidney would be, his initials had been embroidered: *TT*.

I asked him why he wasn't off killing.

He replied that he'd just arrived.

I said: Pity, now everything's already dead.

And he said: Yes, what a shame.

He smiled. He asked if he may, he placed a lounge next to mine, he sat on the edge and looked at me, I had said: Please, please, do sit, only I had been thinking: Shit, he's going to stick around.

I explained to Theodor Thies that my mother had suspected before this trip to Styria that I would only come along to ruin the atmosphere for everyone else. She said: If you're only coming to ruin the atmosphere for everyone else, then don't bother.

I started kicking off in the car. Mother removed one hand from the steering wheel in order to take off her sunglasses, she looked at me for so long I started watching the autobahn for her, and so I could evade her gaze, and then she asked: Are you a *PETA* activist or something, why else would you be making a scene like this?

If I'd still been little, I'd have definitely had my ears boxed.

Theodor Thies said: OK, so you're lying here, your bikini's white, your hands are clean, you're refreshed, while the others roll around in blood. Is this alternative schedule of yours a silent protest?

And I was amazed that this Theodor wasn't so easily put off, I looked at his wild leather moccasins, the light material of his linen trousers, allowed my gaze to wander until they once more rested on the initials: Correct, TT, absolutely correct.

TT said he now had a great desire to paint my toenails red, which irritated me.

He said he would spray the rest of the nail polish here on the stone tiles. He spoke of Pollock.

I opened my mouth and said in an appalled voice: But Theodor!

Then I said: I in any case don't rate Jackson Pollock.

He smiled and said: I'm hungry. Come on, let's go get something to eat!

We were alone in the house. The gun cabinet was empty, the bar was full. I'd put on an oversized shirt, I sat on the kitchen table, swinging my legs.

TT told me, as he loaded up a piece of toast with smoked salmon, that he had also had a strict upbringing, including the odd *good clip round the ear*, and then he asked me about my aristocratic origins and I said: prefab high-rise.

I said: On the outskirts of Vienna.

Did you just say the outskirts?

Uh huh.

TT asked: And what was the view like?

I didn't know if TT thought I was joking, I said: First we had a view of a football pitch. Later we moved into another flat, clear view of the autobahn.

TT said, and once again I didn't know how serious he was being, that he found the notion of living closer to God pleasant.

I said: I think it's scary, you're standing on the eighth floor on the fitted carpet, close your eyes, and feel how the building sways in the wind. It's got nothing to do with God.

I thought about it while I chewed, eating up TT's toast, then added: Maybe you really are closer to God, because if you jump out of the window, you'll definitely be with him in an instant.

After we'd eaten we wanted to go out. We walked in the direction of the forest.

I laughed and said: Oh dear, how bored must I be telling you about the old days!

TT invited me to tell him something else.

So I began: Cats shat in the sandpit in the playground, the sand was replaced with gravel, we pelted each other with stones. The caretaker's son played with us, he had a mullet. It was the end of the mullet era. There was a war going on in Kosovo, that's why the boy was here. The sun shone, the high-rise was in the way, we were trapped in the perpetually long shadow of the high-rise.

TT said: I've never had a mullet. Do you think a mullet would suit me? No.

Because we didn't want to venture into the line of fire, we kept to the edge of the forest until we came to a deer stand, which we climbed. There, TT described his childhood as a mixture of sailing on Lake Atter and skiing in Switzerland.

And I said: Blahblahblah.

And TT grabbed and tickled me and said: You have to take mine seriously too.

I laughed and pushed him away.

All the kids at our school always got to go on skiing holidays, only my sister Yara and I didn't. Instead we lay in our beds during the holidays pretending we'd had a skiing accident and had broken our legs. We made a bet about who could wear their pyjamas without changing them for the longest. Yara usually won, I was older and a bedwetter.

Later on we saw the triumphant hunting party coming out of the forest. Most of them in traditional costume, feathers in their hats, guns over their shoulders, carrying their kill, which would be rediscovered later in an altered state on the dining table. We didn't make our presence felt so no one felt our presence. We sat there for so long the sky became even greyer.

Back in the house TT was greeted by everyone, a man with a walrus moustache and an accent said: And send your father my warmest regards.

Instead of having her hair in a severe bun, my mother wore her dyed blonde hair in a loose plait, but in spite of this she didn't seem able to completely give herself over to the laid-back mood of the weekend.

She asked me whether I was only able to stand around or whether it would be possible for me to make myself useful, I could lay the table or go pull up the lettuce from the garden, there was enough to do, had I been lazily lying around in the sun all day, so go on, quick march. And what was this absolutely outrageous thing I had on!

I wondered if my mouth looked as awfully small and taut as hers, I duly helped myself from the bar before dinner, TT allowed himself to be poured a little something too, he said that now he'd seen me next to my mother he was struck by the resemblance, and from then on our glasses were never empty.

The hunting party had hit the sack. TT and I were mixing ourselves another drink.

He said: Right, another shot of vodka.

I said: Enough, I pulled my glass away and TT shook vodka onto the wood of the bar counter, I put my hand over my mouth, doubled over, laughed.

TT said: Shhh.

I said: Uh huh.

We took the drinks outside. It was dark, there were stars. The pool lights were on, it made the water fluoresce turquoise. I stroked TT's arm and he stroked my cheek and he quietly asked whether we wanted to sleep together.

I said I would prefer not to have a right-wing body of thought inside me.

He laughed, shaking his head: He asked: What?

He asked where the assumption had come from that he was right-wing.

I said that I knew who his father was and that he was part of an extreme-right fraternity.

And TT said, but what about me, my mother was, after all, a senior politician for a far-right party.

So I kissed him. Then I took his hand and looked at him and said that as children of such parents we really had to do something. I was thirsty for action. I led him back into the house, to the gun cabinet. I pointed at all of the weapons that were just waiting to be used again. Then I pointed at the large

terrace door made of glass, left open, the light curtains gently moving, behind them, rough, white, stone tiles, then the pool, this pool glowed eerily at us. I quietly sniggered as I opened the cabinet with a theatrical flourish, TT stood behind me, TT put his hand over my mouth and his mouth on my throat, I passed him one weapon after another and we clutched the weapons under our arms and stumbled through the house out into the night. And then we stood on the edge of the pool, and I said: First touch the surface of the water with the tips of your toes.

The sun had warmed the water pleasantly. We dropped the weapons into the water and watched with excitement how they sank, we made bets about which one would touch the bottom first. We sat down and swung our legs in the water, it was so peaceful.

We were woken by a loud scream. My skull hurt. It hurt to turn it. I saw a woman from the hunting society standing in front of the terrace doors in her silk dressing gown, and she was screaming something like: Oh my God!

And I screamed back, what's the matter, haven't you ever seen a naked person before?

You know what TT? I had a nervous breakdown because I didn't know what I should wear, in the middle of this breakdown I heard the doorbell and I thought it was you, so I left my room in just a thong and I thought to myself it's so late, who else could it be, I went down the corridor under the scandalised gazes of the imaginary ancestral portrait gallery and stopped at the top of the big staircase and then watched your father walk by downstairs, and if he had looked up he would have seen me naked. After that I didn't make any further attempt to put something on.

You're telling me that my father is in this house right now?

Yes.

TT said: Put on this shirtdress.

TT was strict with me. He laid the dress over my naked body. I had stretched myself out on the bed and was touching the floor with the tips of my toes, covering my eyes with my hands.

I said: When I wore that Sef said to me: I guess you didn't want to take your nightie off today.

TT asked: Who's Sef?

I said: She's studying law too, maybe you'd know her if you saw her.

Quick march, TT said, grabbed me by my shoulders and pulled me up.

He traced his finger over the mirror that lay beside me, collected a few strewn specks of white powder and stuck his finger in his mouth.

That's not coke, he concluded.

What is it then?

Ketamine.

We crept downstairs and branched off down the corridors on the ground floor, all the doors were closed, we put our ears against the wood and listened, then we heard something behind one of the doors. We bent over to see through the keyhole. In the moonlight one of the greyhounds was circling on the parquet floor, looking like a consumptive sleepwalker. We continued walking until we could hear hushed voices. We kneeled in front of the keyhole; in the room with the turquoise walls sat two men in armchairs, with one of them we were only able to see a leg, grey trousers, coloured sock, leather shoe, smoke rose upwards behind the high armrest. The other, who was swirling his whiskey glass, I thought I recognised, but I didn't know where from. We didn't understand any of the conversation. We moved back from the door a bit.

TT whispered that he recognised his father from the sock. He said: classic lawyer tic, everything's monotone, but their socks are always perverse.

I whispered: Hey, look at my pink socks with yellow Andy Warhol bananas, I have a sense of humour, I laugh when you pay me my unjustifiably high hourly rate!

We jumped as the door opened and a shaft of light fell into the corridor. But then the door closed again.

Our hearts were fat children jumping on thin floors. Everything was thumping. We scurried back down the corridor and almost lost our way. It was only when we were back in my room that we were safe.

TT said that it had been plain childish, he shook his head. He paced up and down the room, I had thrown myself back onto the bed.

I could have just asked what he was doing here, he said.

I said: That would have been pretty uncomfortable for you.

Can you please not talk into the bedcovers so I can actually hear you?

I didn't know TT could be so serious.

I tried, for TT's sake, to articulate properly, my tongue lay a little heavily in its cave: Now and again my mother gets visits from people in the party, but I've never seen your father here before. I've never seen him in real life before, only in the press.

I hope nothing's going on between the two of them!

I shrugged.

This movement against the bedcover fabric felt funny, and, on top of that, the fabric was cool, I got goose bumps. And how funny it suddenly felt to stroke my goose bumps, *oh my*, how it tickled, how wet it made me. As a consequence, I didn't stop shrugging. It was all super pleasant.

My father once said that my mother had always faced hostility in the party because she didn't have a husband. You had to put up with a lot as a woman in a right-wing party.

Oh, TT cried out, and finally stopped pacing, I really want a whiskey now too!

He sat by me on the bed and looked at me and I handed him the mirror as a whiskey alternative.

TT took it and said something like: I'm really against drugs, but I'm also really shocked that my father is here in the middle of the night.

TT took the remaining ketamine and then sank back. He started monologising that his father considered him a disappointment, that he'd never said as much, but that he could sense it, first after he didn't join the mountain

infantry and then didn't join the army at all, then didn't join the fraternity like his younger brother. How his father sometimes didn't answer him, that he purposefully ignored him, that he would then just walk away and you'd find him in the library or his study for instance, a whiskey in his hand or holding a burning match to his pipe. That it had been on his account that he had begun his law studies and fencing.

Fencing? I asked, and gripped TT's hair, so soft, so fluffy, so down feathery. I thought about how I'd like to shave his hair off and stuff it in my pillow. My laugh resounded dully within me.

The sport, TT said. Was he slurring?

Take me with you sometime, I said.

He looked up at the canopy, he asked: Is there a lot of dust up there?

Then he closed his eyes.

TT?, I asked and opened the topmost button of his shirt. How pleasantly exhausting it was to use one's fine motor skills. I unbuttoned further.

Do we want to watch a film, TT?

OK.

I have one where you just fly for minutes on end through the universe.

OK.

Space flight objects fly through the black expanse while *The Blue Danube* plays in the background.

Like on *Austrian Airlines* flights?

Uh huh, it's like coming home.

That's awful.

It's iconic! It's so iconic!

[END OF SAMPLE]