

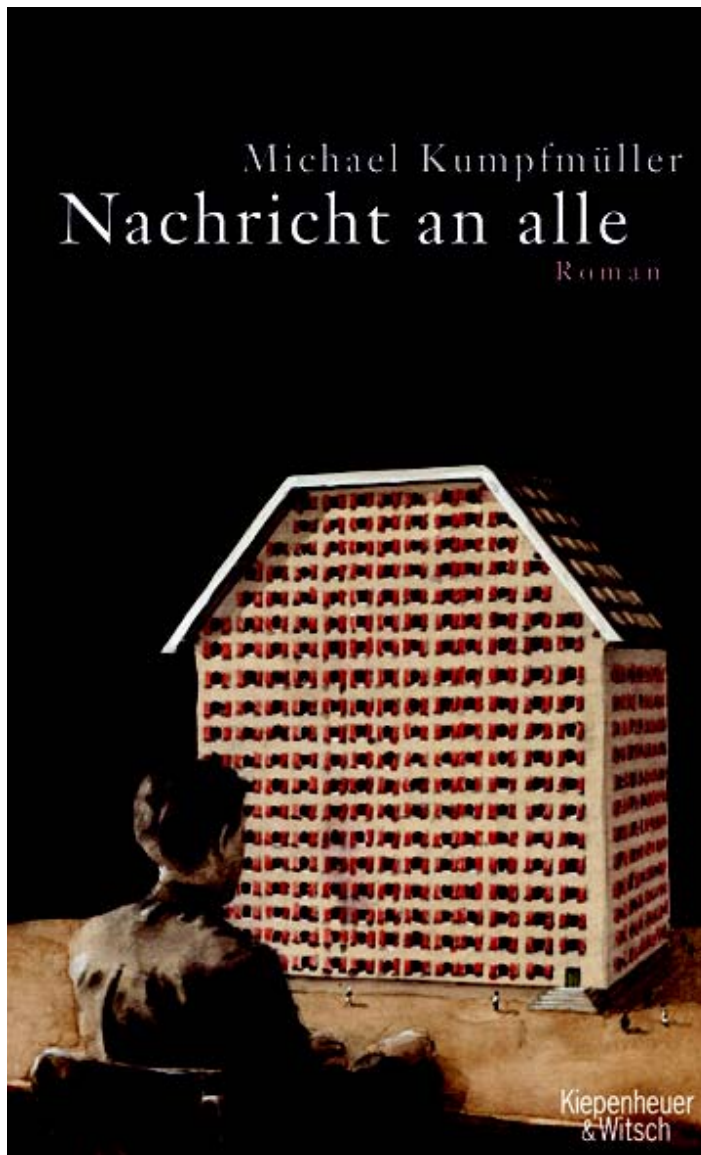
Sample translation

## Michael Kumpfmüller: Nachricht an alle

("Message to all")

Novel

Translated by Anthea Bell



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[pp. 9–19 of Michael Kumpfmüller's **Nachricht an alle** (Message to all)]

Selden was just mixing himself a drink when the message came in. Probably Per, he thought, some final idea for speeding up the sluggish negotiations they'd been grappling with for days, or maybe Britta, once again unable to sleep back in distant Europe, where it was early morning.

Not now, he thought. Give me a break.

He stood at the window for a while, looked out at the city, a few faintly illuminated windows, the milky glow of the traffic lights far below, a car now and then, hardly any pedestrians. The mist had thinned. Banks of it had been rising from the lake to the upper floors for days, wrapping the gigantic hotel complex in cotton wool, but now, at around one-thirty, it had almost cleared, you suddenly had a sense of space, everything seemed immeasurably large, yet densely compressed and full of detail. It was one of the rare moments when he was on his own, rather tired but alert.

He thought of the day ahead, the long hours before him, all the endless talk inside and outside the conference rooms, took off his shoes and jacket, sat down at the desk where his mobile was lying, now for the message. All very relaxed.

The message was from his daughter. He clicked on it and thought: that's odd, what does she want now, what does she want from her father at this time of night?

Hi, Pa, was the way she always began, but this time it was different: *Oh my God, she began. There's been an explosion. It's dreadful. We're crashing. Pray for me. I love you.*

That was all. Just a few sentences. He took them in, but he didn't feel as if he had grasped anything. He read them a second time, scrolled all the way down to the bottom, where at last he found her name. From: Anisha, the familiar number, sent 07:37:41, and tomorrow's date. His first reaction was: how can it be tomorrow? And then: this is some kind of joke. Come on, Anisha. What's it all about? Why are you doing this? What's going on? Repeating it in many different variations.

He sat there for a few seconds waiting for the pendulum to swing one way or the other. If you're frightening me it makes me angry, I believe what it says there, I think it's possible. OK, take it slowly, he thought. I don't know about any trip she's taking. She lives in Rome. She has children. She has to get up early. I can call her. I'll call her.

He tapped in her number, waited for the ring tone, heard a woman's voice explaining in Italian that the person he wanted to speak to could not be reached at the moment. She'd said something about Stockholm once. An appointment in Stockholm. Was that now? Was she on the way there? He tried the landline. He let it ring for a long time, up to fifteen times, saw her apartment in the noisy piazza, the phone in the entrance hall, Anisha in her dressing-gown

giving the children their breakfast in the kitchen, with the sleep-walking routine of a mother wondering why someone is calling so early, on a Tuesday morning in March. No one picked up the phone. The answering machine didn't switch in either, maybe they'd inadvertently left it off.

He began to feel annoyed. More angry than alarmed he sent her a text message back. *What's all this about, Anisha. Please call. At once. Your father.* For a short time he was satisfied with that. He'd done what he could, even if it was something of a joke, sitting up here with such a message, in this room on the thirty-fourth floor.

He switched on the TV set in front of the bed. He tried CNN, then the Canadian channels, but there was nothing. He simply didn't believe it. It wasn't possible. Something in him tried to deny it because it was clear that it was indeed possible, there were accidents with birds, there was engine damage, there were terrorist attacks. Not her, he thought. Why not her, he thought. What if, suppose. Games like that. Even though, for the moment, there wasn't the slightest proof of it.

A few pictures, an announcement, that would have been proof. An attack, a disaster with several hundred dead, they'd certainly be announcing that. But no. Just the usual TV programmes. A film, another film, a great many ads, a late-night show, CNN transmitting pictures of the latest series of violent incidents in the Hindu Kush.

There were more than forty channels. Deliberately, slowly, he went through them all in ascending order, then in descending order, while he fought with other pictures in his mind, pictures of burning planes, a smoking ball of fire in the sky, and then, as if in a film, the picture cut to his daughter in one of the back rows of seats as, terrified, she saw oxygen masks dropping from the roof.

He tried to talk to her. For a few seconds he saw exactly what was going on, what lay ahead of her. Then there was no more. He thought: why don't you get in touch, tell me what's happening, tell me how it goes on. He thought: Dear Lord, don't let it be true. She had written: *Pray for me. It's dreadful.* And now he really did begin to pray, angry with her for bringing him to this, for being, perhaps, in the process of destroying his life.

He had to talk to someone. He muted the sound and called Per, but Per had already switched his mobile off. He tried Britta, thinking she would still be asleep, but she answered at once. She sounded sleepy. Hello, hello? Who is it? Is that you? Sorry, I was asleep. What's the matter? What's the time where you are?

He told her what the matter was, just a few sentences, the images he was fighting.

Oh, come on, she said. You can't mean it seriously. She thought it was absurd. Don't upset yourself.

Her theory, plausible on first hearing, was: Anisha has lost her mobile, someone's stolen it, whoever has it now likes black jokes.

Forget it, she said.

He asked her to turn the television on all the same.

Now?

Yes, now.

All right. Hold the line, will you?

Yes, of course, I'll hold on.

He heard her getting out of bed, the rustle of the bedclothes. He imagined her standing up, slipping on her dressing-gown, going into the living-room a few steps ahead of him, incredulous as he was himself, slightly amused, or perhaps not. An Interior Minister's paranoid view of the world, she'd be thinking. She's *your* daughter, not mine, she'd be thinking, whether she meant to or not. Now he could hear voices. She was searching the channels. Once there was music, then words again, a woman's voice, a man's voice, the quacking babble of an animated cartoon. No trace of any news.

Come on, calm down, she said. Are you sure about this? Read it again.

He read it out again. *There's been an explosion. I love you.*

Britta said: my God, just like a film. And then, as if correcting herself: what kind of person could give us all such a fright?

Selden said: I'm going to try reaching someone in the Ministry. Keep the line clear and I'll ring back.

When he had rung off, he looked at the message again, its precise structure, the way it was composed. Perhaps he still hadn't understood what it meant, who had really sent it. He went through everything word by word, letter by letter, the technical data, sender, date, phone number. If you looked carefully, there was no name for the recipient or any specific name for the sender. It was a message to everyone from no one. *Pray for me*, she had written, so she ought to have added: *Love from Anisha*. But she hadn't. As if to say: what Anisha? There's no Anisha now, hasn't been for a long time, you can work out just how long.

Suddenly it seemed to him rather unlikely that this was a joke. What kind of sick mind would think it up? A young person who had just seen some film or other and got a mental kick out of terrifying total strangers?

He saw her in the plane again, just after the explosion or whatever had happened, the screaming passengers in free fall, nearer to the front a gaping hole, fire to the right, acrid smoke, and then suddenly the old Anisha, standing laughing in the middle of a landscape, in a wide field, looking up at the sky. She was watching something. He couldn't make out what, it

didn't come into the picture, but you clearly saw her laughing, as if at one and the same time she was down here, safe on the ground, and up there in the raging inferno.

He tried Per again. Suddenly he got Per. Per listened to the whole story, took it seriously but not too seriously, not while there were still no facts.

I'd just turned the thing off. Suddenly I'm thinking: turn it on again. What we need now are facts. What do we have the thing for?

He didn't say so, but it was still too damn early. All-clear or no all-clear, it was all a question of time. That affected first the crash itself. Then the fire-fighters. When do they arrive? The emergency services. How long does passing on bad news to the media take? Although we all know that bad news spreads faster than good.

Nothing on the news, you say?

Selden kept changing channels. Still nothing on the news.

Per asked: shall I come up? But Selden said: no, no, just find out what's going on. This is sending me out of my mind.

It was thirty minutes at most since the message had come in. He tried to pray again, like a child entering into negotiations with a higher power: give me that and I'll give you this, some kind of bargain, something that really mattered to him, although he couldn't think what. It was a matter of punishment, a settling of accounts, something you had to accept without protest. If the worst was true, it was what he deserved for his sins, his failure as a father, a man, a politician.

He began thinking of her as if she were dead, just trying it out, thinking of her as a dead woman. Poor Anisha. I'd have wanted so much more for you. I hope you loved just once without any reservations, I hope you had good sex. The children occurred to him, Anisha's postcards from Rome, her scrawled handwriting allowing him a glimpse of her life now and then, a lazy afternoon beside the river, on the banks of the Tiber in a bikini, while the twins slept peacefully in their pram.

He thought of whatever we wish for the dead beyond the grave. What they missed in this life. What we've all missed out on from the first.

Suddenly he thought of Ruth. He hadn't been in touch with her for years. Ruth outside the court building on the day of the divorce, congratulating him, Ruth in the churchyard, rather dark and very young, beside one of her lovers who was explaining to her, in a whisper, why there was no coffin, just an empty ceremony for a shadow, for a name.

For a moment he wanted to call her. But what would he say? She would laugh at him. Oh, stop that. Don't you have anything better to do? I don't hear from you for years on end, and now this?

He went on searching through the channels, up and down, but still nothing. Per had found nothing either. Calm down. The plane is in the air. It was just after two. Normally he'd have been in bed long before now, the last round of talks was to begin at nine, but he probably wouldn't have to be there. The thought came as something of a relief. If she was dead he didn't have to go. He'd pack, he'd fly home. He could think no further ahead than that. He saw himself with Per, in the car on the way to Britta, Britta in the open doorway, their first hours together, newly cautious, everything very gentle and careful, full of unexpected love.

Around three-thirty they transmitted the first pictures. They must have been available for quite a while, they were there and not there at the same time, it took an eternity for him to realize what they meant. Someone was in a helicopter flying over the scene of a crash. You saw scorched earth, smoking wreckage, fire engines and emergency vehicles in various places on the outskirts of a country village, and under them a red band running past with the headline: 180 dead in plane crash, no survivors.

Don't distress me, he thought.

You were so little when you were born, so wrinkled.

You must. Not. Distress me.

Any moment now, in the next take, he would see her, slightly dazed and with a few cuts on her face, emerging from a heap of ashes, very confused, perhaps injured, with third-degree or fourth-degree burns maybe, but his daughter. Where was she? He must surely see her, she couldn't have dissolved into thin air. But they just kept showing the pictures from the helicopter, far above, so that wasn't possible.

The plane looked as if it had been filleted, he thought, it looked like a fish skilfully taken apart, very small from this height, it seemed wholly improbable that human beings could ever have fitted inside it.

A little later they transmitted the first pictures from ground level. A smoking wreck appeared, a close-up of the remains of the cockpit, a burnt-out turbine, large parts of the fuselage, seven or eight windows in each, burn marks visible on them as well, further away scattered baggage, a child's toy, no dead bodies anywhere, no injured. You couldn't form a real idea of it. These were specific clips, horror carefully selected for first thing in the morning. Someone had been behind the camera, someone else had decided what could be shown. No burnt bodies, no mutilations, that seemed to be the rule.

They were vague about the scene of the crash: a place just outside Rome, about seventy miles north-east, an hour's drive by car. That was as far as the plane had got. Selden had driven that way himself, with Anisha and the children. Yes, he thought he remembered it. There, you see, he thought, you should have taken the car. Take the car next time, don't



forget to strap the children into their car seats at the back, and then off you go, it's a fine day, hardly any traffic at this hour, please drive carefully.

He realized that once again he was admonishing her. Very paternal. Wasn't it about time he stopped that? As long as she lived he'd go on secretly telling her what to do. As long as he was still telling her what to do she'd be alive.

Something began knocking, he thought it was inside him but it was a knocking on the door, and the man at the door was Per. He was very pale. For God's sake, I can't believe it. Selden said: come in, sit down. Look at that. As if he had just made a discovery. Isn't that what we've always preached? It can happen to us all, anywhere, at any time. And now this. Now it's my turn.

Per wasn't going to talk about such things, he told him what was now known. We're trying to get the passenger list. A plane to Stockholm, that much is certain. Why for heaven's sake was she going to Stockholm?

Selden sat on the edge of his bed and stared, motionless, at the TV set.

We must let her mother know. The children. I don't even know if she had the children with her.

Hello? he said, because Per wasn't reacting, and Per said: the children, my God, I hope not. Although it was barely imaginable.

A voice from the TV set said: *the fatal air crash happened next to a small village. Two houses have been completely destroyed. Imagine this happening in a city like Rome.*

A newsreader was on the screen, and beside him an expert speculating very cautiously about the possibility of terrorism. There was talk of someone on the Internet posting the first claim to be responsible; it was now being checked for authenticity. That was the present state of affairs. They gave a list of the latest terrorist attacks, those for which responsibility had been claimed, those that might be accidents, then just names of cities: London, Berlin, Tokyo, a short outline of the history of the early twenty-first century.

Per's mobile kept ringing every few minutes. There was more information coming in from the capital, news of difficulties with the Italian authorities who were still trying, in vain, to get hold of a passenger list.

She was on board that plane. No doubt about it.

She was never on board. She can't have been.

Per had already found out about flights. Seven in the morning, via Brussels to Detroit, and then on in an air force plane.

Yes, fine, said Selden. Fine. In a couple of hours' time. Then let's pack. I still have to pack, he said.

[pp. 35-44 of Michael Kumpfmüller's **Nachricht an alle** (Message to all)]

Josina had warned him. They'll mob you. They'll follow every step you take, they'll besiege you. This is going to be difficult, you'd better be prepared for that.

Even as they drove off the crowd was huge, camera teams waiting everywhere, hardly willing to let them through, scruffy figures in jeans and sweaters, filming as he got out of the car, which was surrounded on all sides, and as with the assistance of his bodyguard he fought to clear himself a narrow pathway leading to the entrance. He waved all questions aside, saw the microphones barring his way to left and right, waited patiently for them to let him pass again, moved forward amicably nodding his head, yes, it's me, here I am, I'm fine, thank you, until at last they reached the entrance. There were cameras inside too, if not in such serried ranks, at the foot of the broad staircase which, surprisingly, was clear, so that they reached the first floor almost unimpeded, running up them two steps at a time to the cabinet room, where the crowd increased dramatically once more.

He quickly pushed his way in and tried to reach his seat. They never took their eyes off him for a moment. They turned to watch him go to his chair and sit down, to see him unpack his things, the files with the papers that as always were neatly sorted in order of the day's agenda, they watched his expression, did it betray anything, was there a giveaway clue, something harder about him, a grief of which they could make something?

Selden assumed a businesslike expression and acted as if everything were normal. I'm OK, what do you want, said his face. I am only what you see. This is all you get.

He had always liked these first minutes. The brief skirmishes with the journalists, the rituals with colleagues as they all gradually arrived, the greetings, the small talk, who was speaking to whom, what the atmosphere was like. Usually they just nodded at each other or briefly shook hands, but today almost all everyone came up to him with an inquiring glance, as if he had been presumed dead or were someone very sick who, very surprisingly, had recovered, all in front of the cameras rolling, but without any sound, so that he would be seen on the evening news simply nodding, rather relaxed if the pictures were to be believed, no perceptible wounds on show.

There had been speculation in the media for days. Would he carry on? Could he, as a man and a politician? Was his behaviour still predictable? There was a long list of interview questions, at least a dozen every day, there were the photographs outside his house triggered by the least little thing.

The crash had been less than six weeks ago.

He had made a great effort to cope with the new state of affairs. He tried to accept it. That was easier at some times than others. He had flown to Rome and buried her, or what was left



of her. He had visited the scene of the crash, first when the wreckage was there and then when it was gone, both visits terrible in their different ways, because both times he had had to learn all over again that she had gone out of his life for ever.

The inquiry wasn't over yet. A number of experts in a hangar on the military part of the airfield were busy evaluating the evidence. It looked as if they had plenty of that. They had the wreck and the debris, thousands of broken pieces and particles that had been laboriously collected, the battered flight recorder with its data, which gave no precise information. They had played it to Selden. Strange sounds in the cockpit, a rushing noise, the voices of both pilots, what sounded like a routine exchange, then a bang, rather muted but clearly an explosion. Cause unknown.

In a temporary storeroom at the back of the hangar they had shown him what was left of the passengers' possessions. The remnants of luggage, toys, and there were mobiles too, all surprisingly intact, dirty in places, not just fragments, as he had expected. At the sight of the mobiles he had thought: ah, now I'll find you after all. Unfortunately, however, there were too many, almost all of them popular current brand names, but clearly just too many.

He had met Gianni too. Gianni looked terrible, he was obviously drinking, they didn't have much to say to each other. But Gianni, speaking in shaky English, was able to explain about Stockholm. *She had another man. She wanted to leave him. She not definitely know.* Selden didn't want to believe it, but Gianni showed him a sheaf of letters that had been among her things, all of them closely written in Swedish, signed with a name that meant nothing now, and there was also a crumpled photograph of a middle-aged man, a strange, reserved face with a moustache, small sparkling eyes.

The rest was a case of burrowing about, turning over the rubble and ashes in their marital apartment, which itself was in a bad way. As if she had never lived there, she and the children, who were with Gianni's parents for the time being, in a tiny mountain village that Selden didn't know.

He chose a few of her things, found the green suitcase with wheels that she had once brought when she came to see him, and packed all sorts of stuff in it: a box of photographs and letters, a diary she had begun in the early nineties, as well as all kinds of small items, travel souvenirs, her certified medical details from her pregnancies, the correspondence with officials that Gianni seemed to have dealt with already, an old doll, a red jogging suit because he suddenly thought he might need to smell her body aroma again, perhaps some scent of her still lingered under the armpits, although he refrained from trying. And that was it. Child's play. Rob a place of what belongs to it, and soon it was just a place like any other.

Back home he had tried not to do anything. He sat in his study and looked through her letters, and his own, the letters he had written her when she was sixteen, seventeen, and in

which he hardly recognized himself. That tone of restrained mockery and arrogance. What was he begging for the whole time, for heaven's sake? When she was angry with him and shut herself in her room he had sometimes begged like that. Are you listening? I'm talking to you. Come on, open that door, let's talk, and then he talked as did in these letters, in endless torrents of paternal remorse and admonishment, getting no answer, not just now that she was dead but back then, no answer from the figure of his daughter gradually evaporating far away beyond that door.

Every one had advised him: take your time, go away for a few days, Britta said so too because she herself would have liked to go away, and Per, with whom he was in touch all round the clock. As if he hadn't done his homework. Do your homework, then you can go out and play. Once he had talked to Nick for a long time, a good factual conversation about the state of the inquiry and his own plans. Just tell me when. It could be that you know when already. It could be you'll go crazy in the long run, out there in your house without us all.

They were herd animals, Selden had thought. They could move and defend themselves only as a herd.

He was glad to be back. Glad there were appointments again, questions from journalists, constant movement.

A woman reporter came up to his table and asked how, in the circumstances, he was sleeping. When can one sleep again, can one sleep again at all? He had to answer, of course, although he hated such questions.

Tell me your feelings and I'll tell you what sentence we pass on you.

Beck dropped in, so briefly did Reiners, asking how the inquiry was going. The day before he had already talked to Nick, who was surrounded by a gaggle of journalists.

He didn't by any means like them all. Some were political fellow-travellers, others covert opponents, competing for the place in the sun that was the circle around Nick. He valued Beck, with whom he had an almost friendly relationship, and from a distance he valued Thor as well, although he didn't have much to do with him. They had both phoned several times to ask how he was, Beck had even sent flowers, although Britta had nothing to do with it at all.

Hello there, Selden.

It's a long time since we talked on the phone. Let's do that.

Good to have you back on board.

The start of the meeting, as always, was formal. Nick rang the bell, which was the signal for the journalists to jostle for position. Someone closed the door, there was a brief greeting, a comment on Selden's return, and then the current situation.

There were a few strikes in smallish, recently privatized firms. Suppliers from the postal and railways sectors, in which the state still had some share. Redundancies were imminent or

had already been made, so naturally that meant unrest. One factory in the north had been occupied, there had been sporadic demonstrations, all on a regional level, which meant that they hardly featured in the news. No one was talking about a crisis. The country was changing, not everyone was happy with the changes. Cause and effect. The privatizations had political significance, so basically protests meant they were successful.

Selden had talked to Nick about that in his office, late yesterday evening, about the country, the reforms that must go ahead, the deceptive calm. Politics running hot and cold. Seizing the moment. Selden had made a plea for a hard line. No more bathtub politics, as he put it. Don't run any more hot water in, add cold instead, that's all. Then we'll see if there are any movements.

Let's tell it like it is, Selden had said, for he was in favour of the truth, or what politics knew of the truth, served up in digestible portions.

There seemed to be no more discussion pending of the new security package, number three on the day's agenda. As the minister responsible, he explained the measures envisaged: video surveillance of public places, the recording of phone calls, the stepping up of deportations. His colleague the Minister of Justice mentioned the familiar reservations about the gathering of new data. How did the profits relate to the expense, she asked. You record millions of conversations, and in the end you just have a few tapes on which the term Al Qaeda comes up. A terrorist doesn't talk, he acts. Or is there something, she asked, that I've failed to understand?

Because it was his role, Selden opposed her argument patiently, the way you explain something to children, and a little listlessly. He didn't seem to have the old fire back yet. The bite. The readiness to explain what the facts were for the one hundred and fiftieth time. You could obstruct terrorist attacks, you could disrupt plans. You had to wait, and then act when the right time came.

There are a hell of a lot of people with evil intentions out there, he said. Their plans are complex, the preparations take them months. During that time they talk to each other. They don't keep quiet. You can't see them, but they don't keep quiet.

No one said anything in reply to that. They were probably all expecting him to mention the crash. My daughter Anisha. If I may be allowed a personal comment here. But he never said a word about her.

The package was accepted, with one voting against and three abstentions. They'd see what happened in Parliament. Nick glanced briefly at Selden. Didn't I tell you so, he seemed to be saying. I waved it through on the nod, your turn next time.

Nick had asked him yesterday. He hadn't asked directly. He had said: I'm trying to understand. I don't understand. People board a plane, knowing they won't leave it alive. They

kill, but at the price of being killed themselves. I just don't understand it. Selden had said he didn't understand it either. They had no criterion for such things. These people were strange, almost like savages, mysterious creatures, and we were right to fear them. As in the past when there had still been savages. Young men between twenty and thirty, sometimes women too, who spent a few years training as engineers, and then the big bang. Evil, cowardly murderers, but they didn't come into the world that way. Someone had made them murderers, the question was who: fanatical preachers in the Koran schools, Islam in itself, Arab despotisms where there'd been no progress for centuries, feelings of inferiority by comparison with the West, which as everyone knew could justify anything, so that all these people, allegedly, were only victims. I feel victimized so I blow a hundred and fifty passengers sky high, and let's hope that will teach the survivors a lesson.

Selden would have liked to see their faces, a photo showing a pair of eyes, a nose, a mouth, features, wondered if they could tell you anything in retrospect. But he saw only figures swathed in robes, a landscape with tents, very bleak, and scenes from a video once shown on television, something featuring sheep and goats with belts of explosives strapped around them, to be blown up a little later. Just to find out how it worked. What explosive power you needed for what effect, what was the minimum required, what you could dispense with, the less the better.

Anisha would probably have said: oh, come on, Pa. Why bother about them? They just make you angry. Didn't you once say an angry man can't think straight? You need a cool head, that's what you said when I got angry with you, so now mind you keep a cool head too.

Had he said that? Maybe. He couldn't remember when. It must have been during her adolescence. Just before he'd moved out from Ruth and Anisha.

Obviously he was only half attending. He heard Beck speaking on an amendment to the anti-pollution directives, progress and problems in the field of industrial furnaces and gas turbines. Selden was not particularly interested. He listened to it all, but some of it passed him by.

Now, after a few weeks away, he was forcibly struck by the amount of petty detail discussed at these meetings. Amendments to laws passed years ago, the implementation of decisions on EU laws, additions to them, modifications. Most of these were repair jobs. Prevention and maintenance. They were adjusting tiny screws, polishing away an encrusted deposit here or there. The rest of it was risk prevention, internal as well as external, even if the enemy was unknown. Once the enemy had a name he was as good as defeated. Those who hadn't come out of cover yet were the problem. You had to be ready for them. You looked out of the window, you saw the outside world with its countless plants, animals, the endless complications of human society. It was all moving, filled with an infinite variety of colours and

odours, and to some extent it was organized, into couples, families, entire nations, but always provisionally, so there were also setbacks, separations, murder and assassination. There were laws whereby this order came into being. It was strong, it was vulnerable, someone had to uphold and defend it.

That was what he was here for, he thought.

So he carried on.

[pp. 106–111 of Michael Kumpfmüller's **Nachricht an alle** (Message to all)]

#### IV

There were a few eyewitnesses, unreliable passers by, who made off as quickly as they had surfaced: a group of young people in a nearby teahouse – their particulars sounded extremely contradictory – and also, of course, the officers who had stopped the car and were responsible for firing the shots. Two young Lebanese men in an old Benz, one of them dead and the other severely injured; the doctors were said to be fighting for his life. A press statement from the police listed their offences: driving without a licence; illegal possession of weapons; giving an insolent answer when told to get out of that car double-quick, stand over there, we'll show you. This last misdemeanour was described as resisting the authority of the state. No more was needed. Two over-zealous officers using their guns contrary to regulations, and two young men who lost their nerve at the crucial moment.

It started that very night.

Days later a short amateur video turned up, shot from the window of a multi-storey apartment house, all rather shaky and amateurish, blurred figures milling around a car, but otherwise there were only conjectures and reconstructions after the event.

Hannah too would have liked to see it with her own eyes: the precise course of events, how something like that could begin, the suddenly crowded streets, friends and acquaintances of the victims, people from the surrounding buildings, all discussing the incident, unsure how to react, their perplexity, their hesitation, and then action, the discovery of the answer. That virginal moment of decision was liberating.

A dustbin can burn, so can a car.

Fire is our language.

Now, in this hour, we are beginning to speak it.

Something breaks out and finds its target, she imagined. No trace of any plan. Someone wrenches off the wing mirror of a parked car, the next man smashes the car windows, and then suddenly, without previous agreement, three or four of them are acting as a group. The

car is heavy, but they rock it all the same, there's applause, voices urge them on, there's clapping, a kind of rhythm to keep them going, all of it energy, all of it speed. Who brings fire? Never mind. Suddenly the first car is burning, then the second, further away the first dustbins are set alight, two, three, four all in a tidy row, although warning voices are raised, but they don't want to listen to those voices, they can't, not now.

We're not through yet. What are you gaping at? Clear off or we'll take the fire to your houses.

Young vandals with shining eyes smashing up the whole bloody neighbourhood, marauding gangs, as a press release from the Interior Minister calls them, but they are also free radicals moving through the ghettos in loose formation, and then suddenly disappearing without trace.

Hannah couldn't get there until the afternoon. She had imagined God knows what, something out of a civil war if she had stopped to think about it in detail, old Beirut during a ceasefire, Baghdad or Mossul, but when she was on the scene at last she was disappointed. You could see wrecked cars, shop windows boarded up here and there, some of her colleagues around the place viewing the traces of the horror only just past for the evening news, and that was all. No one who was prepared to talk to her, no sound bite, just a bleak view of dilapidated facades, witless desolation.

She tried asking in a few shops with broken windows, spoke to passers by, veiled women with children, a group of men standing motionless in front of a burnt-out Honda Civic who made out that they didn't understand her questions. What are we supposed to tell you, they seemed to be saying, but usually she met with icy silence, now and then a hostile remark about the police just in case she could understand it, a curse in Arabic, Armenian, or whatever was spoken around here, before they turned away and with unmistakable gestures conveyed the message that she had better move off, for one thing because she was a woman, an unveiled white woman, and the Prophet had made speaking to such a woman a punishable offence.

Erik was mainly interested in the wrecks. He took pictures of the scene of the incident over on the corner, where a few men had organized a guard system. On the pavement lay several layers of flowers, notes asking WHY?, and also a handwritten list detailing other infringements of their rights: police officers who beat them up, employers who fired them without giving any reason, landlords who made them sign contracts for exorbitant sums.

When he had finished it was seven. They sat down in a snack bar and ordered falafel with strange sauces and salads on the side. It was a few streets away, where the atmosphere seemed less hostile.

She wished she were at home.



She told Erik about her impressions, and said she felt she wasn't really much further on. She sounded rather weary, she thought so herself, with a defiant undertone. This is my city too, she said. Here, in this district. I have a right to move about here, I don't need to ask permission, although in fact she didn't believe that. The place had belonged to these others for a long time now. They had occupied it. Anyone who was not one of them moved on shifting ground, as if on a quicksand.

Erik picked at his food and made little jokes.

I'm just imagining you in a headscarf, he said.

The new Al Jazeera girl reporter, live from the city suburbs. Maybe you ought to get yourself one of those headscarves.

He patted her arm and said it was only a job. A story like any other, although this one made him personally want to puke.

The poor Arabs, my God, he said. I hate Arabs.

He mentioned various countries in which he had travelled, he and his ex. He told her the name of his ex, and laughed as if at something that had happened long ago, part of a complex back-story.

When we were all still naive.

The dark, withdrawn face of the Arab. Why he was capable of anything. Years ago, on a trip to Tunisia, Erik had seen with his own eyes traders of some kind selling their tatty stuff at the roadside, full of contempt. In a camp, he said, we were on holiday in a sort of camp, and on the third day, when the roof fell on our heads, we went out and saw their faces. They despised us. They hated us. Not because we were gays, as you may be thinking, no, because we were whites or whatever they call us in those parts. They'll finish us off, I'm telling you, if only because they breed like rabbits. You just have to look around. If we don't finally defend ourselves they'll finish us off.

Half-heartedly, she shook her head.

The Arab, what do you mean, such nonsense, she said, I have good friends who are Arabs, but she didn't feel happy about saying that, for one reason because they were acquaintances at best, friends of friends whom she had met twice at the most. Her protest sounded like a cliché, and something inside her even agreed with him, she just didn't have the courage to look at it more closely.

Then they waited for dusk. Erik, as usual, made matters more complicated; he was having second thoughts about the car, in case they had to get out of the area in a hurry and had lost sight of it, so they parked a few streets further on outside a food shop, not really in the middle of the scene of the incident but close, always supposing something happened to make it worth while being close.

Erik was dozing off while she listened to soft, soupy music on a channel calling itself Radio Paradiso, which catapulted her into the seventies and eighties. Suddenly she felt sixteen, back when they weren't all so tough and cynical yet. She also saw clearly, and with a vague sense of shame, just what she was doing at this moment. What were those animals called? Hyenas, coyotes, carrion-eaters, exploiting misfortune, waiting patiently for prey that was still twitching.

They lived by other people's misfortune. They gloated over it, they fed on it.

Nothing at all happened until eight-thirty. Silence everywhere, hardly anyone in the streets, a bunch of youths here and there, groups of dark figures moving now this way, now that, and then nothing again, just silence, a light further off, but hidden behind the buildings, then a dull explosion, a howl, and she knew at once: here we go, then. Now. This time I'm on the spot.

She jumped out of the car, crying: shit, over there, round the corner, go on, get moving, and watched him picking up his gear, his camera and tripod, at a leisurely pace which in this situation almost sent her crazy. Oh, for God's sake, she said, leaving him there and running off towards the light, several hundred metres straight ahead and then left, where the second car was just going up in flames not twenty metres away, opposite her on the other side of the street. Suddenly she was perfectly calm. She took the little Ixus out of her coat pocket and thought: how strange, I'm wearing my coat, I have my little Ixus. She went closer and then back again, to the outer limits of the heat. Then she took the picture, checked briefly to make sure she had everything in it, the burning car, half-left a youth dancing about, only a swift impression like a silhouette, but moving, full of action, her very personal photo of the evening.

- End of Sample translation -