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**A Man Who Falls**

Novel

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pp. 9 – 16; 23 – 30; 59 – 61

His old bicycle is still leaning against the wall of the house. I climb up the stairs. It's only now that I notice that the elevator isn't working. The badge with the date of the latest pest control still stuck to the apartment door. Next to it, a notice from the police station. Broken-out wood from the door. I walk through the front hallway into the big walk-through room. My striped overalls are still lying where I took them off two days ago. In the hallway further back, I'm unable to keep myself on my feet any longer. I sit on the floor for a long time. Then I pull myself together, pick up the syringes, tubes, and plastic wrappers left behind by the paramedics. Off the wall in the chamber, off the door frame, off the door I wipe the dark red imprint of his hands. The hands wander on the wall as though they were searching for something. Something to hold on to. I scrub the dried blood off the floor, stand the fallen ladder up against the wall, roll up the two pieces of his cut-up leather belt. His overalls, cut open at the back, I can neither throw away nor keep. I cannot put them in the washing machine and sew them back together. In the evening, I place the bundle underneath a tree and cover it with twigs.

**1** The apartment is a deserted construction site. The walls sliced open, electrical wires lying around. Mortar everywhere. Carpet tiles, glued to the hardwood floor. Various layers of wallpaper. Empty bathroom with a concrete floor. All the way in the back, the kitchen, without a stove, without a radiator. When the chef in the Spanish restaurant two floors down turns on his stove, the smell of garlic and seafood drifts in through the open window. One of the six rooms is painted red, even the ceiling. A slide door with art nouveau glass panelling – nailed shut. The handles on the connecting doors have been dismantled. Broken padlocks on other

doors. Sinks in the rooms. A dilapidated dormitory, an abandoned shelter for people looking for a place to sleep and for work that doesn't require documentation. A cockroach has survived pest control. It comes out of the red room, hurries across the hallway, crosses the walk-through room, turns left to the open balcony door, and disappears.

The house is located at a road junction. A corner house. Traffic rolls over a broad street past both the front rooms facing North. The other rooms continue onwards into the side street, facing East. Across the street, a gigantic oak tree towers over everything, even the tops of the two younger maple trees. The apartment is actually too big for the two of us. But it's the first we found in three years for which the landlord didn't demand compensation for fixtures and fittings. The last one asked for thirty thousand German Marks for a circular oaken staircase built into the middle of a walk-through room. Pewter jugs had been placed onto the steps. The staircase ended at the ceiling, and the jug on the last step touched the stucco rosette.

The landlady, an elderly Greek woman who has been living in Berlin for more than half a century, carries an outdated handbag in the crook of her left arm, a bag like the ones carried by the Queen of England. During the Second World War, she had made a vow. If God saved her house from the bombings, she would set up an Orthodox chapel on the ground floor. At mass times, she now strides through a narrow door at the end of the corner house together with other Greeks. Then we hear voices, melodies, foreign and humble. Every now and then, an S-Bahn train runs over the nearby bridge and through the singing. Her son, slight, small, and sickly, has been burdened with supervising the house. He shares a bathroom and kitchen with five other tenants on the third floor. On Sundays, he visits, clad in a short, black coat and leaning on a walking stick, his mother for lunch and receives complaints, which he then yells after the tenants during the week when he catches them on the stairs or on the street.

We take a portable radio to the apartment with us. Since we don't know where to start, we pull at the carpet tiles. Underneath, torn panel parquet. So as not to lose confidence, we begin with the smallest rooms. I paint the pantry, and he renders a wall in the chamber facing the backyard. Then we tear off wallpaper. Underneath the wallpaper are newspapers with pictures and names from our childhood. Adenauer, currency reform, introduction of the new German Mark, Eisenhower, American soldiers, airlift, and the Candy Bombers. We only have one ladder. I remove the wallpaper on the lower part of the wall, while he takes care of the upper part. I hold the ladder when it wobbles, an old wooden ladder on which he stands astride. It's tall enough for him to reach the ceiling. If he pins it between his legs, he can move it back and forth by hopping slightly. We sit next to each other, leaning against a bare wall, and imagine the freshly painted white rooms. The room that is now red is going to be his study. The semi-

circular room at the corner could be my sewing workshop. It's big enough for me to spread out the fabrics I'm working with on the floor. Then a small guest room would connect to the workshop. The huge walk-through room could host a long dining table. The room next to it could be my study. In the room connecting to that, we would sleep. We take off our dusty overalls and make love in the empty suites.

**2** On the morning of July 27, 1986, he takes me to the airport and then parks the car in front of the door to his house. He walks up to his room and changes his clothes. He puts on the washed-out overalls, over them the slim leather belt that he coils up tightly when he comes to join me in bed at night. Then he gets on his bicycle and lets himself drift through the Sunday silence in Lietzenburger Straße. Later, he'll remember the warm wind. It was so quiet in the city, he says, as though time was standing still. While he is hopping up the stairs to our new apartment, taking two steps at a time as always, I wait for my flight in the departure lounge. The plane is delayed. Technical problems. As always, I'm nervous, looking for reasons to turn around. But I don't, and I move forward in line, just like everyone else, towards my seat.

In the early evening, he has an appointment with the tiler, who doesn't show up, because he was reading Wittgenstein. Reading the first sentence of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, »The world is everything that is the case«, he had, the tiler will say, fallen out of time. He couldn't fathom that his not showing up would give the word »fall« back its original meaning. Fall, drop, crash.

While waiting for the tiler, he renders conduit slits. When his back begins to hurt, he lies down on the floor, turns on the portable radio, and listens to music. Then he carries the ladder into the small chamber with the window facing the backyard. He puts down one bucket with mortar and a second bucket with water on the highest step. He wants to patch up a rounded corner on the ceiling and works, hands over his head, with two trowels. One to apply the mortar, the other to smoothen it out. He is standing on the top step of the ladder. There is something in this the smallest room of the apartment that he wants to cast out using special caution. Later, he is going to call it the eerie, or the evil spirits. All day long, he hasn't eaten anything, and drank only very little. He wants to finish in order to have time for his daughter who is going to spend a few days in Berlin.

He works on the small corner for a long time. During the hottest days in August, we are planning to move to this chamber facing the backyard when the blazing sun hits the windows facing East over the tops of the maple trees already in the mornings. It's not the big things that

challenge him, but the small. A minuscule corner that nobody would notice, yet whose curve puts his technical skills and his aesthetic sensitivity to the test. He tries to smoothen and spread out the mortar in that particular spot in such a way that the wall merges with the ceiling in a delicately drawn line. Every now and again, when he turns towards the door, two or three of the stickers with green skulls and the words »The End«, left behind by the previous tenants, come into his field of vision, stickers he had wanted to remove long since.

It happens in the early evening, in the hours between six and seven. It has long since happened when I, in Frankfurt, dial his telephone number in vain and then watch an old movie on television. I see Gérard Philipe, torn between three lovers, jump out of a window. In the end, the three women push him in his wheelchair peacefully and pull a blanket over his knees into place.

The call comes in the early morning. It had seemed to him, the doctor later says, as though I had already known what he would have to tell me. I'm sitting on a plane again. Images from the past week, the past three years that we have been going out, tumble atop each other. They already belong to a life I can't get back to anymore. When I close my eyes, I see him walking. He walks with his jacket flapping behind him, in long strides, hands in his pockets. He is walking towards me. Later, I will be trying to suppress the thought of how things would have continued from the middle of our life if I had given in to my fear of flying, or if the tiler had come.

[...]

**5** Before it happened, I used to get up late, not until it was already light in my room and life made itself felt with noises. Now I wake up at dawn, flee into half-sleep. I open my eyes so as not to be at the mercy of memory when it creeps up behind closed eyelids. I want to take control of life, get it in order, tackle it, do what needs to be done. Sometimes I can talk to him on the phone in those morning hours, just hear his voice, its sound covering up what happened, confer with him, on the wall colour, the varnish, shiny or matt, and about the places where electric sockets should be installed. I imagine him in the big room into which the sun shines already. From my bed, I can look out onto a tree. He can see the meadow over which I am going to come in a few hours.

The beginning of our life together lies underneath rubble, dirt, and torn-off wallpaper. I put on the striped overalls, make an appointment with the tiler, who is going to take a look at the bathroom. On the street, I run into a friend who has fled from doing his military service in

Syria. He takes over construction management and is going to install electrical wires. He gets hold of an unemployed Russian cameraman who is going to paint the windows and doors. A former building restorer, who came across the border from East-Berlin, is going to continue with the walls where we stopped. From the taxi driver who lives across from us together with constantly changing lodgers, I get the address of an artist who knows how to sand down hardwood floors. I put in a request for two telephone connections, one for him and one for me.

The aristocratic elderly lady living on the third floor on the right-hand side has died. Because the elevator hadn't been working, she hadn't been able to leave the house during the last days of her life. Now, the six rooms in which she had stayed back on her own years ago, are being emptied, the oval brass plaque with her name is taken off the wall. The furniture is standing on the side of the road. She had been leaning on the tables and chairs in her world that became less and less unstable. I could hear her when she walked from the kitchen through the dining room above me, past the lounge, the salon and her husband's former study up to the front door in order to open it; I carry a small mahogany cabinet that was the last to land on the pile back into the house and take it upstairs with me.

We now have an aluminium ladder with a wide step on the top level that can be fixed in position in the apartment. The tiler has measured the bathroom and replaced the broken Dutch tiles in the kitchen, the ceiling in the red room has been washed. I drive to hardware stores to buy white paint. The artist has numbered the ripped-out pieces of the panel parquet in the semi-circular room, traced them, and drawn up paper stencils. In second-hand shops in Kreuzberg, I look for a thin rear panel of an old wardrobe which he is going to trim and use to replace the broken pieces. The Russian cameraman unhinges windows and sets them down on pedestals in order to burn off the old varnish paint. The first windowpane broke in the process. I take it to the glazier, I buy metres of electrical wires, distribution boxes, and electrical outlets which the Syrian friend then installs, choose tiles for the bathroom and take a sample with me to the hospital.

They have changed the position of his upper body, from a horizontal into a slightly slanted posture. The gradual raising is so excruciating that he can no longer speak. The nausea is overwhelming. He is pulled into a vortex. What gave him support only moments ago is now disintegrating. He falls into a bottomless pit, falls from the world he is used to. Even my presence demands too much of him, too much movement, too much life. Silently, I lie down on the edge of his bed without touching him and disappear into sleep. When I wake up, I walk away quietly. Like every evening, I drive the same way via Clayallee back into Fuggerstraße. I

have rented two rooms there, one for bed and desk, the other for sewing. I sit in the café on the ground floor of the house for a while after. It's warm and lovely. We would have been strolling through the city on this evening, we would have walked along the Spree, would have walked on and on. Every so often, he would have pulled me close to him. Then we would have moved apart again, only touching each other with our hands from time to time. Now I follow the men walking by on the broad pavement with my eyes. I observe them from the waist down, only see their walk, how lithely and naturally they move their thighs.

When it gets dark, I climb up to my sewing workshop and cut up fabrics that I have collected. Brocade, velvet, silk. I cut them into tiny pieces and sew them together into panels. A piece of velvet is followed by one with a smooth surface, then follows another with a surface structure. Then I sew the panels together, piping between them, like a gap in brickwork. In the end, I have created a blanket which I back-stitch onto lining. I sew deep into the night, appease the anxiety, the fear. I look neither forwards nor backwards, only see what I'm holding in my hands. My brother is going to buy this blanket. Until today, I do not know whether he bought it for his or for my sake. He is going to keep it stored away for a house that he is going to build for years and which he might never finish. Maybe he takes it out from time to time, and spreads it out on his bed, only to fold it back together afterwards and take it back into a drawer to be used eventually.

**6** The Greek lady has had the elevator fixed. In the stairwell, her son is moaning about the cost. Carefully, I load the mended windowpane wrapped in a blanket into the mirrored cage. The artist is restoring the ripped-out floor panels in the semi-circular room. The building restorer is waiting for the first coat of paint to dry in the red room. In the meantime, he is working on the next room. The Russian cameraman breaks three more windowpanes when he sets them down on the pedestals in order to paint them. The vapours of the varnish cover the smell of garlic wafting in through the open windows from the Spanish restaurant. The Syrian friend gets here in the early hours of the morning, before the others arrive.

Each day, he is raised up a tiny bit more in his bed. Vertigo overcomes him frequently. Every now and again, he takes the strength of his ancestors from the depth of the images overwhelming him. He calls to them, he says, from their far-away worlds into his room and asks them for help. When he is able to see clearly again, he is lifted onto a bed on wheels. Lying on his stomach and fastened in with straps, he waits on the terrace in front of the ward for me to come walking across the meadow. When he notices my footsteps, he lifts his head, laughs, reaches for the

front wheels and comes towards me. I sit down on the grass so that I am on eyelevel with him. The meadow outside the ward is full of wheelchairs. The newcomers, the beginners, drive on the pathways, the intermediate drivers roll onto the grass, the highly skilled ones perform tricks. Two young women, almost girls still, one Turkish and one a punk with a mohawk, try to raise their wheelchairs onto the back wheels and turn in a circle. Both of them have thrown themselves out of a window. One because of a forced marriage, the other while high on drugs. An elderly woman laid herself down on some train tracks when her husband wanted to leave her. She survived, paraplegic. Now her husband sits by her bed or pushes her across the meadow in a wheelchair. With men, it's usually accidents, mostly with motorcycles. Like talking about a dream, they describe the heavy, fast machines they used to own. They compare top speeds, the thickness of the tyres, the frame, the sound of the engines. The women are silent. Suicide attempts are defeats. They don't make good conversational material. Only one heavysset man makes everyone laugh. When he talks about his fall, it sounds more like a mishap rather than a disaster that has him tied to a wheelchair forever. It happened at dawn, in the arcade outside his apartment on the sixth floor, when he came home from his job as a bouncer in a brothel and a cat jumped onto the roof of the neighbouring house. The bouncer's dachshund jumps after it. The dog tag gets caught in the gutter. The dog is hanging on the brink. The heavysset bouncer climbs onto the roof. The roof caves in. The bouncer falls. During the fall, he loses his dentures and his toupee. His dog is dead and his wife leaves him.

A young Lebanese man, who had stepped onto a landmine back home, has given up any hopes of ever being able to walk again. With splints on his legs, he has dragged himself forwards a few steps and then sat back down in his wheelchair. He now secretly leaves the hospital grounds to train. He doesn't drive on the pavement. He drives on the road, in front of the cars. The Lebanese man dreams of speed and of being caught speeding in his wheelchair one day.

When the sun sets, the meadow empties. Everyone meets at the tables on which teapots and bottles of water are waiting. They each drink one litre of fluids. After drinking, they wait for an hour. Then they tap. Gentle tapping on the stomach with the flat of the hand. If it works, this triggers a reflex which opens the bladder. Nothing must remain. Germs collect in the remains. The remains cause kidney failure, the ward physician says. The most common cause of death for paraplegics. If it doesn't work and the bladder doesn't open, students come later in the evening and drain it with a catheter. They come from the city, on bicycles. They bring the fresh night air, the outside world, and longing with them.

**15** Later, the doctors are going to call it a miracle. Until the end, he has refused to have a wheelchair fitted for him, suitable for his size and his weight. Again and again, they have pushed him, and again and again, he has said no. Now he is walking the path through the hospital grounds on two crutches. A scarf wrapped around his neck, the belt of his trench coat tied together, he is walking towards me the way he used to before. When he takes me into his arms, he leans against the gatepost so as not to fall. We spend the first night in our apartment on a mattress. I feel his body next to mine, intertwine my legs with his, which lie heavy, cold, and trembling between mine. He feels my touch in some places, other times he isn't aware of what my feet are doing when they trace his lower leg. I fall into a deep, exhausted sleep. He is kept awake by anxiety and the tension in his legs. In the dark, he braces one crutch against the skirting board, and gripping a chair with the other hand, he pulls himself up, props himself up, sways until he can support himself on his legs. Then he walks across the room, accompanied by the sound the crutches make, right, left, on the wooden floor.

The next morning, he decides to go on his own to the apartment he used to live in, where a few things have been left behind. For the first time in months, I follow him with my eyes as he walks away, walks back into life. I watch from the balcony as he stands by the edge of the pavement and waits until there are no more cars in sight. Finally, he sets out to make a step and crosses the road. Not looking right or left, only forwards, straight ahead. He disappears behind some scaffolding and I lose sight of him. He calculated that the distance was about seven or eight times longer than the journey from the paraplegics' ward over the branched pathways of the hospital grounds to the main entrance, which he has managed to walk in one stretch. If he rested along the way, on a wall or in a café, he thinks that he could make it. He gets as far as the arches of the S-Bahn bridge and turns onto Knesebeckstraße. Then he is too exhausted and stops a taxi.

In the time we have left until he leaves for a hospital by the Baltic Sea, the temperatures drop. Among boxes and scattered furniture, we sit wrapped in blankets. The radiator can't manage more than eighteen degrees. Eastern winds and smog get in through the gaps in the windows. When the smell of something burning mixes in towards the evening, I walk through the house anxiously, into the backyard and into the cellar. Then I follow the acrid smell into a side street. On Kurfürstendamm, I happen upon a hotel from whose broken windows thick smoke of a fire already extinguished still rises. While we keep each other warm during the night, we both dream



a horrible dream. He dreams that he is standing on a field, paralysed, and a row of tanks is rolling towards him. I dream that I am saving myself from people hunting me, because I'm able to run. But he is not. I see men carrying weapons come closer and closer. In the village of my childhood, I bang on all the doors in order to get help. But no one opens.

The next day, the heating engineer drains the water from the radiator again, turns the valves, re-fills the water, and vents the pipes. There's nothing I can do, he says, when it still stays too cold. We go to see the Old Masters in the Gemäldegalerie in order to get warm. He rented a wheelchair in a museum only once. Maybe it was the light incidence on the images behind the glass that created a glare. It spread out across the paintings like an opaque foil so that he, in his line of sight, could barely make out any of them.