

**Stephan Thome, *Fliehkräfte***

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**Sample translation by Helen MacCormac**

The stairs coil upwards like a snail's shell tiled in white. Happy people beam down from the billboards and warm air rises up out of the Metro tunnel. Hartmut walks slowly, so as not to sweat and lets a group of teenagers pass whose steps echo back down to him the next moment. He doesn't notice that Lamark-Caulaincourt has a lift, until he's climbed the last steps and leaves the station.

The exit leads out of the hill like a horizontal mine shaft. Down-and-outs are sitting on the steps drinking wine and canned beer, and talking loudly in argot. *Montmartre Fleurs* is still there, and so is the little bistro with the sheltered terrace. Rue Lamarck slopes gently uphill between rows of splendid houses, and though he recognizes it, it doesn't feel familiar, after all these years. Opposite the Metro station the view opens out across the sea of houses. A cool grey-blue sky has been hanging over the city, all day, but now the clouds are starting to disperse. It's going to be a nice Wednesday evening. Hartmut goes into the flower shop, gives the florist 20 Euros and sweeps his hand across all the different bunches of flowers in the vases. Then he simply nods and says 'Oui' as the man reaches for each flower with a questioning look. And then 'Non' three times when he is offered a choice of cellophane to wrap the bouquet. It's only a few more metres up the road. Lack of sleep has sharpened his senses, making every single impression seem significant. It was already like this, yesterday, on the motorway. He's on the verge of losing his sense of anticipation, because of it. He thinks about having a glass of wine in the bistro across the road, but decides against it. Doesn't want to smell of alcohol or sweat and so he suppresses his impatience, follows the Rue Lamarck to the next crossing and can already see the house entrance up ahead. Beyond it, there's the restaurant where they ate together the last time, in autumn '99. Nothing seems to

have changed and yet, it's not the same. Hartmut stops in front of the wide entrance and searches through his pockets for the scrap of paper with the door code on it. He left his hotel this morning straight after breakfast. He had needed to be outside. But after a few hundred metres he found himself in front of the massive opera house and didn't know where to go. A busty woman jogged along the pavement, not bothered by the pedestrians staring at her. Paris is a beautiful memory he doesn't want to bring up. A keen wind chased clouds across the rooftops. Shoppers swarmed into the Lafayette department store. Half an hour later, he was back at the hotel and passed the time with Charles Lin's awkward German. When the text started to dance in front of his eyes, he put it down and headed off to Montmartre.

The intercom makes a crackling sound. "Too early, of course," Sandrine's voice sounds amused.

He pushes the door open with his shoulder. The light of the ceiling lamp is reflected on a row of letterboxes, and on the freshly polished floor. There's a handwritten notice stuck on the concierge's door. Now as then, he ignores the hundred-year-old lift, walks up five floors and hears a door being opened above him as he reaches the final flight of stairs. He has imagined this first moment many times, in many ways, but when it comes, more than anything else, it's fast. Years become seconds, time in between gone without trace. The light from the flat shines into the darker hall and so he can only see her silhouette, at first. She seems slightly smaller to him, but her shoulders have always been slender, she's never used perfume and always did put a hand on the back of his neck when they embraced. There's a sudden cool draft of air on the stairs, then they take hold of each other's arms, the flowers are squashed, and Hartmut doesn't know what to say. Does a smile have its own way of ageing?

Sandrine shrugs, as he looks at her without saying a word.

"What did you expect? It's been some time." Her English sounds hesitant, and the French accent is stronger than he remembers. With her wide-cut linen dresses, she could be teaching herbal medicine or tantric meditation, but according to her mail of yesterday, she is still

working freelance and holds lectures on ethnology. He can't remember the name of the university – one of the ones with numbers.

It's strange to be touched and hardly feel it. As if he wasn't there yet, and was still waiting eagerly to arrive.

“You are not going to say anything?” she asks. Her long hair is pulled back into a ponytail with a trace of silver here and there.

“It's good to see you.”

They hug each other again, then Sandrine steps aside and lets him into the flat. The hallway is bright and narrow, and her shoes are lined up on the floor. She takes the flowers and shakes her head in an irritated way. They have done nothing but exchange mails, for so many years, are flowers not enough? Are they too conventional?

He takes off his jacket and Sandrine says: “You obviously haven't come to see me.”

“Why else?”

“You're asking me.” She sniffs the flowers and makes a face. “I don't know if I've got the right vase. How long have you been in town?”

“Since yesterday evening, as I wrote.”

The kitchen is as small as a pantry and just as full. There are piles of books in front of the radiator with brightly coloured CD covers, magazines and files poking out of them.

Sandrine's father used to meet his mistresses in the narrow rooms of this attic flat. The wood-panelled alcoves are charming and at this height, the windows look out across gabled roofs, brick walls and tall chimneys into the open space above the city.

“What do you usually drink at this time of day?” Sandrine asks, as she opens and closes a few cupboard doors. “Coffee or alcohol?”

“Have you got any wine?”

“Guess,” is all she says.

The triumphant face of the President stares at him from the cover of Paris Match. Sandrine never did think much of functional divides in rooms, and certainly hasn't banned her work to a single space. Yellow post-its with literature references are stuck to the dresser and the frame of the door. For a moment there is nothing to say. He's been meaning to visit her, on and off, for years. Now, he's standing in her kitchen doorway with his jacket over his arm. The interior of the flat has hardly changed, neither has the smell of coffee and old paper. Only the height surprises him; it's like floating and looking down at houses, parks and boulevards. "Where are you staying?" Sandrine has found a vase, puts the flowers into it and her eyes search for a free space.

"Rue de Helder. Near the Opera. Hotel Haussmann."

"Never heard of it. Why there?"

"I just booked the first hotel I could find. I've never stayed in one here before."

"You could have got in touch earlier... Why did it have to be so soon, all of a sudden? Are you on the run or something? Years of silence and then: Hello, I'll be there tomorrow. I could have been on holiday."

He waves towards the fridge.

"There's room up there."

"It's like you've forgotten how I live. Couldn't you have bought a smaller bunch of flowers, at least?"

They look at each other for a second, amused by the awkwardness of the moment. All those years, in which they have been doing what Sandrine called 'the right thing' at the time, lie between now and next thing. She moves to the sink and turns on the tap. What has dampened his spirits all of a sudden, is an almost pleasant wave of disappointment. All day, he had felt as if he was about to have an adventure, and now the flowers end up on the fridge because there's no room. That's fine, he thinks. Maybe he got into the car, yesterday, so that he could be disillusioned. Again, and in a different way.