

OBERKAMPF

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I

Many bistros in rue de Bretagne were already full of customers. Only the Marché des Enfants Rouges was taking a little longer to get into gear; open-mouthed fish lay on a bed of ice, while at a food stall mountains of freshly sliced onions were being fried in a gigantic pan. Tables and chairs stood in the sunlight outside the small bistro L'Estaminet, but nobody was sitting there yet; everything was in preparation for the day which, like every day in this city, would assume a festive air, the laid tables and hand-written menus offering gentle relief from the rigours of life. The world won't come to an end in Paris, Jonas thought, and couldn't help laughing at these words because they sounded like a promise.

Jonas had arrived in the middle of the night. The flight was supposed to take off at 7 p.m., but it was delayed by two hours when the plane had to be checked following a technical fault. He wasn't able to sleep during the flight; the tiredness squatted inside his head like a trapped passenger. Jonas stared through the oval window at the marvellous blankets of cloud, floating beneath the sky like islands from the in-flight magazine. The book lay open in his lap, harshly lit by the reading light in the ceiling. It was the latest novel by Richard Stein, a biography of whom Jonas was planning to write over the next ten months: the life story of a man who from the outset had done nothing

but record his own existence. In the aeroplane, high above the earth, the project appeared as ludicrous as a sleigh ride on a spring meadow. What could he do apart from produce a pale imitation of this man's work? Richard Stein had spent his entire career as an author contemplating himself and documenting every day of his life in an overflowing diary.

When did Jonas first feel the urge to tell the life story of this writer, this man who oozed audacity and was shrouded in despair? After he left school he bought his first paperbacks of Stein's stories, and when he opened them it was as if exotic birds were flying straight at him from the pages, as if his reading had reawakened a secret world that had long been inaccessible to the public. Jonas pored over these stories and chronicles like messages from an ancient time when writers could still claim eminence, even though this eminence failed to translate numerically into sales figures. Stein was always a hidden gem, a perennial promise that glowed, but was never made good. Or only for certain readers, such as Jonas, who devoured these books as if they had been written specially for him. As if Richard Stein had drawn up a blueprint for his life, which Jonas merely need follow, page by page, image by image. Be daring, take risks, sever old ties, make a radical break with his life to date and then move on. In his younger years Richard Stein worked as a salaried newspaper editor in Vienna. Married with two children, he used to live in a large apartment near the Westbahnhof – apparently Stein had always insisted on living close to railway stations so whenever he felt the urge to escape he only had to cross the road. He always came back, of course, or at least that is what his books said. Until that summer's day at the start of the 1970s, when he fell in love with a young woman he met at a reading in Paris. Jonas had read about this episode time and again; it featured in at least three of Stein's books. Stein, so the story went, saw her again at a small seaside resort on the French Atlantic coast – a fleeting apparition in a light yellow summer dress and heelless shoes. That evening he tracked her down to the only bar around, but she suddenly vanished, and he pestered the bar owner with questions about her, his increasing desperation almost turning the mood

ugly. Stein spent three evenings at that bar, drinking, smoking and feeling ever more miserable. She then reappeared on the fourth evening and he spent his first night with her, then the second, during which, as he wrote, he became infected with the contagion of love. Finally he hastened back to Vienna to tell his wife everything.

Jonas was stunned by these accounts of a man who abandons control, rejecting all guidance apart from his own passion. Very little happened in Stein's novels and stories, there was hardly any plot to speak of. But the way he wrote about a man being flogged through the world by a wild and melancholy lust for life – Jonas had never seen it described like this before. He read other authors too, of course; just as you have to distance yourself from the father you admire in order that he may eventually become the object of your love again, Jonas sought other gods. But Stein always remained an active shadow in his inner world of books, faithfully reporting back, often when Jonas found himself in difficulty, during a break-up, when he had financial worries or professional setbacks – and there had been quite a few of these over the past couple of years. At such times all Jonas had to do was read a page or two from Richard Stein's diaries, for example the description of a three-week period of loneliness, endlessly long days in the mansard as down below city life carried on, then bleak, sleepless nights full of sheer loathing for other people. While the cafés in the street were full and waiters in restaurants served up the most splendid dishes, the writer was left to struggle with his demons, making do with rock-hard bread and cheap schnapps, and this was Richard Stein or the character who represented him in his books. His writing was not, as people say, 'everybody's cup of tea'. But since when had it been the job of literature to be everybody's cup of tea?

Jonas did not like books that comforted and consoled. What was the point of novels that sought to reassure their readers? True consolation was to be found in bleakness, unconditional resignation. You had to slide to the bottom, the very bottom, to fight your way back up again.

Jonas had spent the last few weeks closing down his agency. For four years he had sourced experts for specialist events – smart-minds.com. Although most of the minds really were smart, they were filled with dead knowledge, statistics, perfectly tailored to the audience and updated as required. Smart Minds could supply anyone: doctors, philosophers, managers, consultants, sociologists. If you needed the world explaining at a conference over several days or at a private gathering with influential friends, you rang Jonas Becker and his team, all of whom you could see grinning back at you from the ‘Who We Are’ section of the website. Miram, Frank, Fabian and Corinna, the woman Jonas had been living with for eleven years – each one of them was commitment personified. Miriam handed in her resignation after two years, having spent one of them on maternity leave. A year later Frank moved to the US as a visiting academic, because he considered himself to be the smartest mind of them all. With Fabian and Corinna, Jonas held out for another eighteen months, then they received fewer enquiries because all of the minds they had on their books had been tried out, and were as good as spent. Somehow they had forgotten to find new minds for hire. Whereas Corinna and he had forgotten that you needed something else apart from a mind, which sentimental individuals would call heart or soul, or whatever the word might be for what had gone missing from both of them. It was as if the two of them were permanently in the same room without ever losing sight of each other. At home they would sit in front of the television, that is to say Corinna zapped through the channels, sometimes so quickly that the fragments of speech from the different programmes created their own messages: acoustic collages of joylessness. However obvious it was, neither she nor Jonas realised that they were winding up not just the agency, but the life they had together too.

Jonas decided to herald his arrival in Paris with a café allongé and a cigarette. On rue de Bretagne the tables stood beneath large patio heaters, their elements glowing red between the grey bars. He sat at Café de la Mairie,

facing the town hall of this arrondissement – a beautiful, solid building from that powerful era when men’s waistcoats burst with bourgeois pride at their indisputable authority over this city. They created a complex bureaucracy; a piece of paper needed to be signed for everything. They tore up the narrow old streets and cut swathes through the wretched warren of houses. Those who boiled over with hatred and misery had once been able to erect their barricades here; soon after they were being laughed at by light open squares. The officials converted the city into a revolution-free zone – architecture against insurrection. Jonas had always admired how good traffic planning could confine anger for long periods.

When Jonas sat down he noticed the old woman with the colourful cigarettes. The way she sat there with her focused dementia, using it to re-enact her lost elegance. The way she pursed her scrappily rouged lips too early, because she could not fish a cigarette out of the light-green plastic box quickly enough. She muttered something rapidly, which sounded like a quiet command, as if she had to make a crucial appointment with the thin, lilac-coloured cigarette. At some point old habits take on a life of their own like string puppets in horror films.

His coffee was served and Jonas took his smartphone from his trouser pocket. He checked the news two or three times a day to keep abreast of things. That morning little of note was happening save for a few gloomy forecasts for stock markets, but ever since the banking crisis these had become a journalistic genre in themselves; all the experts agreed that something terrible was in store for this complacent civilisation of ours. And there were experts aplenty, in fact everyone was an expert on something. Only Jonas was not an expert. Perhaps he was an expert on missed chances, delayed flights and ill-timed arrivals. Here and now in the excessive warmth of the heated outdoor café he could have laughed out loud about the lunacy of last night when he took one of the last local trains from Charles de Gaulle airport to the area which was going to be his ‘neighbourhood’ for almost a year: Oberkampf. [Translator’s note: *It was named after the German-born*

industrialist, but in Jonas's native tongue the word might have the hint of a mighty struggle.] An ironic hint from his publishing house, perhaps, who had rented the small apartment for him to perform his herculean task here? Should he see it as an encouragement to get the best out of himself, to give his publisher an outstanding book, a first-class biography, the standard work on a famous author who nobody read? Oberkampf. This tenacious word had the determination of a clenched fist, and Jonas had immediately delighted in it. Whenever he looked at a map of Paris he was always surprised to see that it was not accompanied by an exclamation mark: Oberkampf!

Shortly after midnight he had come out of the Métro station with the same name, taking the Cirque d'Hiver exit, as advised in the long email he had received from the management of the publishing house. It was snowing slightly, as if someone were dropping fine confetti from above. The café at the station, called Métro Café, was still open and Jonas briefly considered popping in for a glass of wine before going to the apartment, but he did not have the key; the email said he had to get it from the concierge, who no doubt assumed that Jonas would arrive at a decent hour rather than pitching up in the middle of the night. Jonas thought it more prudent, therefore, to sort the key out at once, and wandered down the narrow rue de Malte, where cars were parked densely beneath scaffolding with plastic sheeting that covered the entire stretch of the buildings and flapped in the light breeze. He pulled his large wheelie suitcase behind him, which on the pavement sounded like the rumble of thunder. Jonas turned right into rue Oberkampf, stopping at number 11. He knew the code, 9762, and carefully entered the numbers into the square keypad. The heavy grilled gate gave way to the pressure of his right shoulder without making much noise. Above Jonas's head stood a solid mediaeval archway, while beneath his feet lay bumpy cobbles; his wheelie case rumbled into the night. A few sparse patches of light slanted into the courtyard from the windows that were lit up; everything else was swallowed by darkness.

The entrance to the concierge's office was just off to the left. Peering into the dark room, Jonas could make out a desk with folders on it. Two were open and the white paper stood out faintly in the darkness. The office was empty, however; the concierge must already be asleep in his apartment and the key was probably in some drawer where Jonas could not get to it. Knocking at the door was pointless, but had he not done so he would have left feeling that he had given up prematurely. Nothing was happening, the concierge was asleep, the key was asleep and now all Jonas could do was either wait until morning or take a hotel room, some overpriced joint nearby.

As he stepped out of the arch and back on to rue Oberkampf, he saw smokers standing outside the only place still open in the street: 'Le Kitch'. Jonas ordered a glass of red wine and took it outside, even though it was cold and he did not want a cigarette. But after his flight it was nice to have a bit of space; inside the crowded bar he would have been shoulder to shoulder with other customers. All the people outside here were young, most of them definitely under thirty, and they were all exceptionally good looking. The women in their black short coats, the guys in leather jackets and trench coats. Nobody here wore functional clothing like in Berlin, where it seemed you were on a kind of safari the moment you left the house. They took no notice of Jonas, that is to say one of the young women gave him a fleeting smile, a small signal that he was welcome here in this night-time street, which now belonged to those who were celebrating life, not in that melodramatically southern way like the Italians, but more casually, like a momentary flash of light to prevent the week from becoming too gloomy at this dark time of winter. After a few sips of his wine Jonas did fancy a smoke and he asked the woman who had smiled at him for a cigarette. She held up her own like a trophy and giggled as she indicated the man beside her, who had clearly helped her out too. When Jonas accepted a cigarette and a light he became drawn into the small group, who made him feel welcome with friendly gestures, but did not interrupt their conversation. As he listened to them talk he realised how exhausting it was trying to understand. Although his French

was not particularly good, until now it had always been adequate for a brief chat. Soon it occurred to one of the men that they had not been introduced, so each of them said their name in turn, ending with Jonas, which a couple of them repeated without a French accent.

‘Are you German?’ asked the woman who had scrounged the cigarette. And because she asked in German, Jonas began his answer with the usual, ‘How come you speak—’

‘I studied in Freiburg for a while,’ she said and told him her name was Christine. In her intonation the word ‘while’ assumed a magical, almost suite-like melody, but then she was pulled back into the French language, pulled back by the others with their compliments attired in bright laughter. They felt secure in the warm undertone of their speech, indeed, this is what it must be like to be French: language enveloped you like a soft, plump duvet. When life ripped the clothes from your body and humiliated you like a vulgar coachman, the French language restored your dignity. It allowed your tongue to dance on a sparkling waterfall then laid it in a velvety red-wine bath. Jonas simply talked as his brain assigned him the words. He did not say much, but with the wine and cigarette he gradually acquired a new boldness that encouraged him to talk about himself, to say, for example, that he had tried in vain to reach the concierge across the road.

Christine slapped her head to gesture how nonplussed she was by Jonas’s dilemma. And her boyfriend? Was that her boyfriend with the longish blond hair and elegantly curved chin. He put a hand on Jonas’s shoulder and asked him if he would like another glass of wine, which the third person in the group, Nicholas, promptly went to fetch. Jonas looked at the faces of his new friends, all of whom were almost twenty years younger than him. Mathieu, the one with the chin, might possibly be thirty. There was no naïve ignorance in these faces; for sure they all had their minor tragedies and their rainy afternoons. But rather than sinking into lazy melancholy they would make their conquests day by day. What was there to conquer? Everything, of course. Men, women and the feeling that yet a little more could be scraped

from the daily gold. Jonas looked around at the few people still out and about in the street. Above hung the Christmas decoration, a large, electric snow crystal with a small glass rod beside it, through which a light shot, simulating a dripping icicle, or was it a shooting star, offering a wish to the night owls?

He glanced at the arch, behind which lay the darkness of the courtyard and the apartment he would probably not be able to visit until the morning. Mathieu came out with another glass of wine, Nicholas offered him a cigarette and Christine suggested they sing something to get warm. But they simply went on talking and when Jonas had finished furnishing with them with the broad details about his stay here, and nobody had heard of Richard Stein, Mathieu said that tonight he was celebrating his departure from Paris. ‘One man comes, another goes,’ Mathieu said; that could be the caption of the evening. Nicolas childishly held on tight to his friend and begged, ‘Ne me quitte pas,’ for which he earned laughter and a round of applause. Enthused by the young people’s silliness and insouciance, Jonas hoped that this levity would sustain him for a while through the night.

‘Where are you going?’ Jonas asked.

‘Down, down, all the way down south,’ Mathieu said. And after a short pause – designed, no doubt, for the rest of them to simulate a drumroll in their heads – he added, ‘Montpellier.’

‘A city for people who need good air to be able to breathe freely,’ Nicolas said.

‘What’s wrong with that?’ Jonas asked.

‘Nothing,’ Nicolas said, ‘apart from the fact that those people are usually well over sixty, while our friend here has just turned twenty-nine.’

‘But I’ll have a better chance of making it to sixty than you will.’

‘Why? Because in ten years’ time you live in an area where there might be three doctors left within two hundred kilometres?’

‘Because I won’t need doctors – I’ll live off good air, good wine and a good mood.’

Christine put her arms around the waists of both men and told them not to squabble about things that lay so far in the future. Besides, Jonas had just arrived in Paris and it was not polite to imply he had made the wrong decision.

‘You’re right, Christine,’ Nicolas said. ‘But isn’t it our job to prevent our friend Mathieu from making the biggest mistake of his life? What if he gets fat and unhappy down there with his seven children, three of which later join the Front National and feel ashamed at their father’s wayward youth in Paris?’

Jonas went off to order another round of drinks for himself and the others. He struggled to get inside, as the place was packed and more people kept squeezing in. Behind the bar hung a monster’s head with a broad smile, while a chain of colourful lights sprawled between the wooden shelf with the glasses and the ceiling. Trinkets were littered everywhere, presumably because the owners had to emphasise the bar’s name by every means possible. When the young guy behind the bar had filled the four glasses, Jonas clumsily tried to pick them up, but Christine had already grabbed two of them.

‘Perhaps that’s a bit too much,’ she said. Jonas gave a curt laugh, because that sentence was a wonderful exercise for a French person who spoke German with a strong accent. For the first time he had a clear enough sight of her face to find it beautiful. The large mouth, flanked at either corner by subtle lines, the slightly arched brows above eyes that had not narrowed in spite of her broad smile. A man beside her raised his arm vertically so she could get past. Jonas followed her outside where now it had started to snow gently; delicate, single flakes fell straight to the ground and at once the cars on boulevard Beaumarchais began driving more slowly. Mathieu and Nicolas had turned up the collars of their coats and looked far more elegant and dashing than Jonas in his greasy, grey quilted jacket, the only advantage of which was that prevented every breath of cold from getting to his body.

They clinked glasses and Jonas asked Mathieu why he had decided to leave Paris.

It was a long story, Mathieu said, but what could be more welcome to Jonas than long stories on this night without an apartment or a bed, when he needed to play for time and make the hours pass more quickly?

‘The reason,’ Mathieu said, ‘is right beside you.’ Standing beside Jonas was Christine, who – partly for fun, but partly out of genuine embarrassment – put both her hands in front of her face and slowly slid her fingers down her cheeks.

‘Mathieu, you shouldn’t say that.’

‘But it’s true, chérie. Without you, I mean with you, I’d have stayed here.’

‘You’re a couple, then?’ Jonas asked.

‘Used to be,’ Mathieu said. ‘But last summer Christine decided to become single again. In the way that other people decide to do a yoga course or live without dairy products, Christine opted for a life without me.’

Christine was clearly uncomfortable at this public exposé of her love life, and she flapped her hands in an attempt to shut him up, but to no avail; Mathieu was getting into his stride now as he recounted the story of their relationship and its failure. It had stopped snowing and the pavement was left covered in a fine skin of white. Jonas was straining hard to listen because Mathieu was talking ever more rapidly, and he had to picture the French words in his mind; he relied on seeing them in their written form, even in his imagination. So it had happened during the summer holiday, sometime in mid-August in Greece. They were sitting at a café in Rhodes harbour when Christine started listing the advantages of friendships between men and women. He thought nothing of it at first, Mathieu said. On holiday the days seem longer than usual, so why shouldn’t people discuss subjects at length that they might not even touch upon in everyday life? But then she kept citing ever more examples from her own relationship, the course of which she portrayed as a relentless descent into boredom and monotony. And holidays, like this one on Rhodes, were in sharp contrast to their everyday life, clearly highlighting the vacuum that had developed between them. Well, this

conversation took place right in the middle of their holiday, meaning that they had only spent half of their allotted time away, and now had to try to live with each other for another three weeks as an estranged couple. The indescribable sadness of a love affair that had turned into a corpse on holiday, wickedly embellished by white boats bobbing on the gentle waves of the water in the harbour.

‘That’s a bit over the top, Mathieu,’ Christine said. ‘We got on well in the days that followed, didn’t we? Better than before, in fact. You even said it yourself.’

Mathieu put an arm around Christine’s shoulders and turned her to face Jonas, as if they were posing for a photograph showing them both in a state of relief.

‘Yes, you’re right, chérie,’ Mathieu said, with a rather obtrusive generosity in his voice. ‘At first I thought your decision was cruel, but pretty quickly I understood that you can’t keep holding onto something that’s slipping through your fingers .’

Jonas really wanted to ask how their relationship had developed afterwards. Whether it had been as gruelling as between him and Corinna, or if people in France are generally more lighthearted about these things. Nicolas took the question out of his mouth, but spiced it by remarking that without Christine’s clever decision, it was highly unlikely that Mathieu would be with Delphine now.

Delphine?

‘The woman our unhappy friend will be moving to sunny Montpellier with in the coming week. She comes from there. A real country bumpkin.’

‘A young woman of the people, is what you meant to say,’ Mathieu retorted. ‘You lot know where you can stick your metropolitan arrogance. Take it from me, one day in the not-too-distant future the provinces will triumph.’

The banter descended into drunken laughter, but to Jonas’s ears it no longer sounded jovial. Christine too seemed only to be laughing dutifully.

Who was orchestrating what here, and for whom? Jonas checked the time; it was not even three o'clock. But the bar was gradually emptying and to his horror Jonas saw the landlord put the key in the door to stop new customers from entering.

‘It’s about to close,’ Christine said with a hint of sympathy for Jonas. Nicolas and Mathieu had got more cigarettes and were offering each other a light like silly boys.

‘I’ll pass the time somehow,’ Jonas said. ‘There are enough books in my luggage to see me through till morning.’

Christine nodded. The others had turned away and were busy being puerile. They were no longer paying attention to Jonas, and he did not mind that he was now being left to his own devices.

‘Thanks, anyway, for helping me kill some time.’ Mathieu saw Jonas reach for his wheelee case and gave him an excessively firm embrace.

‘All the best and don’t get too cold in this inhumane city. And if you can’t hack it, come and see us down south.’

Nicolas kissed him on both cheeks; Christine rubbed his shoulder. ‘All the best,’ she said in German, then gave him a peck on the cheek. Jonas watched the three of them part company with nothing more than a curt wave. Christine headed down rue Oberkampf towards Voltaire, while the two men wandered to boulevard Marchais, where Mathieu hailed a black taxi, sent Nicolas off into the night with a clap on the shoulder and then left.

Jonas decided to return to the courtyard, to the darkness of his new home. The thin film of snow had disappeared, it was half past three and so quiet that he could hear the raindrops rustling in the bare bushes like tissue paper. As he went through the arch, Jonas saw that a light was on in the concierge’s office. He lifted the wheelee case to avoid making any noise, but also so that the concierge would not notice him before Jonas had seen the man himself. He wanted to sneak up like a cat to check out what was going on before getting into conversation. Through the window he saw an elderly man with shoulder-length white hair and a straggly beard smoking at a camping

table. The man was tapping away at a tablet, swiping back and forth hectically and clumsily; perhaps it was a work device that he secretly used for private purposes at night, unseen by the owner. When he noticed Jonas he gave another quick swipe, as if caught in the act and desperate to cover his traces. The man got up and trotted with a slight stoop to the door, which he unlocked.

‘Can I help you?’

‘My name is Jonas Becker and I need the key to my apartment.’

With a nod, the man trotted back, opened a drawer, and returned with two keys on a wire ring. Placing a hand on Jonas’s shoulder he said his name was Frankie, pronouncing the ‘A’ in the French way: Fronkie. He began babbling away, rapidly and incomprehensibly, sounding like a pan of boiling water with a rattling lid. Unable to understand a single word, Jonas decided to respond with tried-and-tested phrases, which proved adequate; Frankie even came to unlock the door to his apartment. It was on the fourth floor, perhaps thirty square metres in size, and furnished simply, but not without charm. The bed was in a small room of its own, which it completely filled. Outside the darkness was tempered by the glow of the wall lanterns; it was the hour at which decision-making is impossible. When Frankie finally left, still babbling away and laughing raucously like a drunk, Jonas lay down on the bed fully clothed and tried to get to sleep. He was not tired; no veil of release came to shroud his eyes. He could have got up and gone back out into the street, but right now there was nothing to do in this city, which was squeezing in its night-time shutdown. He had to wait for the end of these dead hours, the cruel interlude when the world gets along without people and humanity, when the homeless are chucked out of the Métro and swept out of railway stations like rubbish.

Now he was here, on the warm bed, feeling almost comforted by the compact dimensions of this student apartment. A table, a few chairs, a little bookshelf – he had often imagined finding comfort in such frugality. You don’t need any more than that, he had frequently told himself as he pictured the daily routine of a writer, something he would have loved to be. A single,

but not lonely, man who gets up at eight o'clock, drinks a coffee, then sits at his laptop without any urgency to begin his day's work. A table, a chair, a cup of coffee. You don't need any more than that. Then Jonas fell asleep for two hours.

When the following morning Jonas had ordered his second café allongé in Café de la Mairie, he felt the urge to smoke in celebration at his arrival. He did not, of course, have any cigarettes on him; last night he had cadged off the youngsters. It was an unwritten law that smokers supply occasional puffers. Smokers are delighted to win over new adherents to the cause and they show their generosity. No hardened smoker will ever deny the occasional smoker a cigarette. Encouraged by this law, Jonas stood and went over to the old woman with the colourful cigarettes.

She looked at him as if he had asked her when she had last slept with a man.

‘That's out of the question, monsieur,’ the woman said.

Jonas apologised and was about to return to his seat when the woman called the waiter, who did not react at first. Only when the woman raised her voice and started sounding shrill did he go over. Jonas heard her ask the waiter to protect her from the clutches of that man and then she pointed a finger at him. The waiter spoke softly to the old woman, who then seemed to calm down gradually. Jonas finished his coffee and left some money on the plate where the receipt was clamped beneath a small plastic tongue. He glanced at the woman, who was still shaking her head in disgust and talking to herself, but it appeared as if she had already forgotten the reason for her indignation. At any rate, she did not look at Jonas again, busying herself instead with rearranging her colourful cigarettes.

As he left the café Jonas felt his mobile vibrating in his trouser pocket. He glanced at the screen and saw it was Fabian, the colleague who was liquidating Smart Minds with him. Jonas hesitated to answer. The agency was the last thing he wanted to deal with. Had he not entered a new realm,

embarked on a new life, or was it the illusion of scrubbing the old misery from the inner lining of his soul with a new activity? But was it not chiefly thanks to Fabian that he had been able to put all this behind him? The talks with the trade inspectorate, the tricks with the tax office, all the manoeuvrings that Fabian had undertaken to ensure that Jonas escaped from the mess as unscathed as possible. He had taken the rearguard action out of Jonas's hands, had covered his back and shouldered every burden himself to bury a professional dream.

‘Who’s disturbing my Parisian reveries?’ Jonas said, intent on employing humour to offset Fabian’s endeavour.

‘What’s going on over there?’ Fabian replied in that slightly cheerful tone, which people who feel overburdened insist on adopting.

‘What do you mean? There’s very little going on here, and I’m delighted to say that’s exactly what I need at the moment,’ Jonas said.

‘Do you ever glance at your phone?’

Jonas did not reply; this was now Fabian’s gig.

‘Some lunatics have stormed the offices of a newspaper and shot all the editors. It’s just come through as breaking news on Spiegel Online.’

‘What paper? Le Monde or something like that?’

‘No idea, no, not Le Monde. Some satirical rag. I’m not really familiar with that sort of stuff.’

‘Charlie Hebdo?’

‘Yes, that’s it. Do you know them?’

One of Fabian’s virtues was that his brain stored barely any useless knowledge. Everything he knew could be applied directly to work, and if he was not acquainted with the name of a speaker, he would enquire as to their suitability without a hint of sarcasm. Jonas did not know anyone else whose thinking stood on more neutral ground than Fabian’s. ‘Should I know them?’ – to begin with Jonas would get irritated by this question, because it usually resonated with the inane arrogance of the ignorant. The question harboured pretensions and contempt for the expert – should I know them, or is the fame

of this questionable individual based on being helped up the ladder by a few elite types who use their specialist knowledge to claim an all-round education?

Coming from Fabian’s mouth, however, it sounded casually professional, without a hint of irony. Should I know them? If so, then I immediately agree and will draw up a comprehensive dossier about them for our clients.

‘Yes, I’ve skimmed the paper a few times,’ Jonas said. ‘They’re known for their caricatures of Muslims, I think.’ Jonas added the ‘I think’ to avoid irritating Fabian with the general knowledge that he always had at his fingertips.

‘The guys are still on the loose,’ Fabian said. ‘So just be careful when acting the flâneur.’

‘Do you have an idea where the offices are?’ Jonas asked.

‘Hold on a sec.’ Jonas could hear Fabian’s fingers tapping on his screen.

‘Rue Nicolas-Appert,’ Fabian said, pronouncing it in German fashion.

‘Where’s that?’ Jonas knew he made Fabian happy by asking him for rapid IT services. He sensed that he missed Fabian, his uncomplicated nature, the absence of any attitude, his ‘no problem’, his ‘sure thing’, the go-getter clichés that used to get on his nerves. Now he missed them as a travelling Catholic would the host.

‘So, Nicolas-Appert is off boulevard – no idea how to pronounce that – Richard-Lenoir. Seems like it’s a big street, the underground station is called Richard-Lenoir too.’

‘Métro.’

‘What?’

‘The underground in Paris is called the Métro.’

‘Whatever. But let me say it again: watch out. The police are advising the public to avoid going out into the street.’

‘I am careful,’ Jonas said, ending the conversation. He looked around; people were still the untroubled passers-by from before, even though they were strolling through a city where an incident like that had just happened. A city that was subjected to an attack was a wounded city; this is what the newspapers would report tomorrow. Jonas checked his mobile. The newsflash had already filled the news websites. No sooner had the incident occurred than it flew around the entire world, everything flew around the world in the matter of seconds. Jonas was here, within walking distance of the catastrophe; he could compare the news to reality, he had the opportunity to seek confirmation about what had happened.

He wandered down rue de Bretagne towards boulevard Beaumarchais, where there was a convoy of police cars with loud sirens. They had blocked access to rue Oberkampf with three vehicles, and after a few more steps Jonas could see further in the distance the red-and-white police tape, behind which a few hundred people, police officers, fire fighters and journalists were now fighting for the survival of the civilised world.

[END OF SAMPLE]