

Thomas Glavinic:

Der Jonas-Komplex

The Jonah Complex

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VIENNA

We don't know who we are. Last time I counted, I came up with at least three people that every one of us is. First the person we are, second the person we think we are, and third the person we want everyone else to think we are. I wake up feeling so awful that I don't want anything to do with any of them.

I'm at home. The New Year concert is on TV. On mute. Somebody's made notes on the wall. There's wrapping paper all over the room. Next to me is a woman. I know her. Her name's Ina. I just don't know what she's doing here. At least her ribcage is rising and falling.

I try to remember the sex. There are no pictures of it in my mind, or what I consider a mind. Maybe it's better that way.

I allow myself a quick inspection of the room. Judging by the state of my clothing I had a run-in with a bus and it didn't go well for me. The Confederate flag in the vase of indefinable liquid exudes a certain air of revolution that I don't like the look of. I certainly can't make sense of the notes on the wall, something about a bear and someone called Peter. The letters are reminiscent of my handwriting.

This year is giving me the creeps already.

Just as I'm about to examine my body for evidence of violence, the doorbell rings. A second's respite and then it rings again. And the third ring never stops. It goes on and on. It rings. And rings. And rings. And rings. And rings. And rings. And rings.

Outside the door is either a) insanity itself or b) the police.

I launch a panicked search for my coke supplies. Not finding any is comforting and annoying in equal measure. Then the ringing stops. So it was the police – insanity never stops.

Ina hasn't moved a muscle, so is presumably either deaf or dead after all.

I can tell by the style of the women I wake up next to how bad the previous evening was. Their external appearance, albeit fully dressed, is an indicator for the intensity of my activities. Ina's tasselled leather jacket is on a hook above the TV. If Ina didn't have plenty of heart, mind and uninhibitedness to offer I'd be here on my own right now. Or who knows who'd be over there in the bed, deaf or dead.

Ina snores. I strip the blood-stained pillow and throw the case in the laundry, stumbling over a biker boot. It looks the worse for wear.

All in all, I have to admit there have been years that started with a tad more elegance.

To be honest, though, some people interpret too much into the first of January. They say the whole year turns out like the first day. As if the rest of the year could help how it started. And anyway I don't need the first day to know how this year will turn out. This year is the logical continuation of the past year. The basic mood remains the same.

There's something on the air, has been for years, that is now increasingly condensing.

The nineties were bright, and where they were dark they were a tingly kind of dark.

Things went downhill for us in the first decade of the new century. We didn't want to see it; we still had light left over from before. In this decade, we've got to where we belong.

The darkness is here.

I take my morning muesli in the kitchenette. It consists of an anti-depressive because I'd throw myself out of a sixth-floor window if I didn't take it, a mood stabilizer because I'd throw other people out of sixth-floor windows if I didn't take it, an antibiotic because I've got tonsillitis, a magnesium tablet because of the cramps in my legs at night, a consequence of excessive alcohol consumption, and a number of vitamin tablets because I'd like to lead a healthy life.

Today I top up my pharmacological muesli with two painkillers for throat, nose and back of the skull. Plus I pop two Xanors, the downer of my choice, because the panic's already hot on my heels due to my unchecked consumption of mood-altering substances.

These panic attacks rarely come out of nowhere and thanks to my routine, I can usually ward them off with benzodiazepines. If I miss the point of no return and take the pills too late I end up trembling in a corner for an hour while the sky falls in on my head. Even when the panic disappears I'm left with the self-accusations, spoken or silent, conscious or white noise.

To put it plainly: Xanax is my last line of defence.

I eat a banana, for my health, and make myself a coffee. The espresso machine sounds like a pneumatic drill but it doesn't usually wake my guests. Presumably they're too heavily sedated – who'd go home sober with someone like me?

I'd rather have a separate kitchen. My bedroom, living room, study and kitchen are the same room. That's because I can't afford a bigger apartment. I don't make bad money but I'm no good at holding onto it. That's how I'd put it. I do know people, however, who have a different interpretation of my situation and speak of costly hobbies and an expensive lifestyle.

To be honest they put it more ruthlessly than that but it makes no difference. I'm permanently broke and my dealer drives a Porsche.

I sit down at my desk with the coffee. My phone is right there. At least it's here and not in a dark corner of some dive. I'm still not going to lay a finger on it, at least not until I've got my memory into some kind of order. I can already imagine who I wrote to and what sort of photos I sent. The reactions tend to come the next morning, and unsurprisingly enough they're not all as positive as I'd thought they would be the night before.

The night before, 31 December, I had a reading. It went something like this:

16.00: I proceed to Café Anzengruber for fortification. A spot of harmless flirting with the owners' children before discussing another patron's dissolute lifestyle with Tomy, the boss. From time to time various rogues pop in for a beer. They place their order, talk about this and that for three minutes, then pay and leave. I often wonder whether they do the same in every bar on Schleifmühlgasse.

17.00: More and more friends and acquaintances begin to arrive. I find it hard to take more than one other person at a time. A white wine spritzer might make the situation more relaxed. I can take more white wine spritzers than people.

17.05: I have realized that one white wine spritzer is too little in the face of the huge crowd, so I order another.

17.10 –18.00: The order is repeated a number of times. The crowd no longer bothers me.

18.20: Around now is a good time to run into Friedrich with the Foot, the coke dealer from Stephansplatz, at the Naschmarkt. I leave the bar for five minutes, return, pop to the gents, and feel I have definitively mastered the situation.

18.30: Enter my lawyer and friend Werner Tomanek, one of the best defence lawyers in the country, if not the best, and incidentally the inventor of the pigs' blood water pistol for dealing with Islamic assassins. We drink a number of digestive bitters and set out for the Sri Lankan restaurant where my reading is taking place.

19.00: Arrival. Werner and I, both bald and robustly built, are met with stares.

19.05: Gents.

19.10: Drinks with Werner and the owner backstage (kitchen).

19.50: Gents.

20.05: The reading begins. Angelika Hager is moderating. Thankfully, she's a longstanding friend of mine, so she knows me well enough to ask her questions slowly.

21.00: Break. Gents.

21.15: The event continues. A heckler is brought to silence without much ado by the always armed Wing Tsun martial arts expert Werner.

22.00: End of the event. Gents. Drinks. I get hot flushes and unbutton my shirt.

22.30: I am stupid enough to do a radio interview in this state.

23.30: Relocation to Otto e mezzo. Texts messages with good wishes for 2015 are dispatched.

Approx. 0.00: Werner and I welcome in the New Year with spirits.

At some point between 1.00 and 5.00: successful booty call.

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TOKYO

His phone rang. He carried on running, although it was more difficult to forge a path through the crowded streets with the phone to his ear.

‘Where are you?’ asked Zach.

Zach. The giant. The only person left to Jonas from his childhood. They weren’t blood relatives but Jonas still regarded him as his closest family member. A kind of uncle. Uncle Zach – Werner would have laughed himself to death at that. Jonas sniggered into the phone.

‘So? Where?’

‘At the other end of the world,’ Jonas answered.

‘That would mean where I am is the end of the world and where you are is the end of the world. But the world is round.’

‘Is that what you’re calling to tell me?’

‘No. I wanted to ask if you’re coming for the anniversary.’

‘Of course.’

‘Glad to hear it. Not that I’d mind seeing you on a more positive occasion for a change. Come a few days earlier. So we have a bit of time.’

‘I’ll do my best. Promise.’

‘You always say that.’

‘But this time I mean it!’

‘You always say that as well.’

‘Glock bless you,’ said Zach.

His home. His mother who had sacrificed her life and her emotions and her children to her wine bottles. His twin brother Mike, who was born with a disability and died during an operation after the postman had shot at him with small-calibre ammunition. And of course Werner. And Picco. And Zach.

Werner – the best friend Jonas had ever had. They knew each other from a young age,

they spent almost every day together, the two of them were the bane of the village. After Jonas had ended up in hospital from a beating by his mother's boyfriend, Werner asked his grandfather Picco to take in Jonas and Mike, and Picco did just that. He took in both boys and their mother's boyfriend was never seen again. Picco had his own idea of justice, and anyone who hurt someone he loved soon got to know that idea.

Even back then, Jonas and Werner could talk about things like that, about people disappearing or other interesting goings-on, without saying a word. At some point the words had been there. In their minds. When they concentrated. One of them thought something and sent off the message, the other received it and answered in the same way. It worked over short distances, at least. They frightened the superstitious gardener to death. They weren't surprised that telepathy really did exist. In Picco's world, you learned that almost anything was possible. Then Werner sat in a wheelchair and rolled down the steep road on which they always tested their courage, and then there were only Picco and Zach left. Two gone already. Neither of them older than 17.

Picco. Secretive. Immeasurably rich. Affectionate, loving and the most dangerous man in the world. They were at home under his roof. He brought them Zach, as a friend, teacher and protector. He arranged for private tutors because no one in the house liked schools, and schools didn't like anyone from the house either. He taught them to overcome fear and seek out life. No, actually he let Werner and Jonas loose on life like two attack dogs on a quarry.

Picco got cancer, died, left his dark fortune to Jonas, and then there was only Zach left. Now there's only you left, Zach, thought Jonas. On the other side of the world. Perhaps I'll come back one day. But if I do, then I won't come alone. Two of us. Or maybe three. But that's a subject Marie and I had better not talk about yet, or else she'll up and leave me again.

He kept running. It was a trip around the world in the space of a second. An instant ago still at home with Zach, now back in Tokyo with all the cars, the strange high voices, the tangles of people. No, not tangles of people; tangles of clothes. The Japanese seemed to vanish into their suits, shirts, their coats.

After Marie had left him and vanished somewhere in the world, he had had to force himself to put on his sneakers every morning and run in every weather. It was much

harder to take the faces of strangers when you only ever wanted to see a particular face everywhere but knew you wouldn't see it, perhaps never again. Nor could he control his thoughts during that time, and when he ran he was often haunted by memories that bore down upon him as if out of nowhere. Wherever he was: the past. Images. Things that had been. Stabs.

But now she was back and she intended to stay.

She worked at the Holy Spirit Hospital and he ran every day. He ran across Roppongi Hills, sometimes to the south, sometimes to the west, and after precisely three quarters of an hour he turned around and thought about the South Pole, where either Marie or himself might die.

After his run he went to the supermarket. He bought what they'd need for the next few days. At home, he put the bags down in the kitchen. He put the perishable food in the fridge, leaving the rest to stand for the meantime.

He checked his mails. A message from Marc. He had something planned for the winter but he'd be happy to contact someone with South Pole experience. Jonas wrote back.

When he raised his head Marie was in the doorway. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. He hadn't expected her to be up at this time, after a twenty-four-hour shift. He swiftly dispatched the email to Marc.

She was wearing nothing but one of his old shirts, which didn't quite reach her mid-thighs. The sight was enough to arouse him although they'd slept together some time in the night, half-conscious, half in a dream, as so often.

She sat on his lap, kissed him and lay her head against his neck as though she wanted to go back to sleep.

'South Pole,' she murmured into his ear.

'What?'

'South Pole. Is there any news?'

'Marie, I...'

Her hand strayed downwards between them. 'OK, OK,' he said. 'You research here, I'll make coffee and research in the kitchen.'

'What are you researching? Coffee beans?'

'Very funny. I'll take my notebook.'

‘Permission granted!’ she said. He left the chair to Marie. She held him back playfully by the belt, only letting him go once he’d turned around and kissed her.

In the kitchen, Jonas established that the dishwasher was broken. While he called the electrical company and made an appointment for a repair, he looked at the website of the agency that had organized his previous trip to the Antarctic – the most important information on expeditions to the South Pole.

It didn’t sound impossible. You flew to Punta Arenas in the south of Chile and from there to Patriot Hill. From there, a smaller plane took you to the 89th parallel, where you spent the first night in a tent. Then came fourteen days on skis, pulling your own luggage behind you on a pulk.

He considered everything else do-able, but could Marie drag an eighty-kilo toboggan for several hours a day over two weeks? Especially because she wouldn’t contemplate the guided expedition and they’d be going it alone. If problems came up, if Marie’s energy ran out, they’d be in no better a situation than his back then on Mount Everest. She was tough, she could perform ten-hour brain operations without interruption, but could she make it in that dead white world? Never mind the champion title, never mind the biathlon – it would be something else that counted there. Something that had saved him on Everest. You only knew whether you had it when it came down to it. It had nothing to do with heroism, as so many believed; it was something else entirely. It was a kind of burning ember of life that went out in some people sooner, in others later. Willpower. Affirmation of existence. And at the depth of her heart, Marie took a sceptical stance towards the world.

His hunches came true all too often, sadly; it made him feel physically sick. Ten minutes before his brother had died, he had known it. An hour before Werner had died, he had sensed it.

I don’t want to go to the South Pole. But I’ll probably have to go. Right to the middle of the fear, through it and out on the other side, young and new. Like it always was. I get bigger every time. That’s a law of nature.

It still might go wrong this time, though, he thought.

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WEST STYRIA

The buzz that the radio alarm clock makes is as aggressive as a dentist's drill. When Uriella's old father stays over with us I set a different alarm, one he's used to the sound of, otherwise he might end up falling out of bed for shock or having a heart attack. It's almost happened twice already.

I like waking up much too early. Especially now in the winter. I turn on the radio and think to myself in the dark. My thoughts are slower this early in the day, not rushing maliciously in on me like bacteria trying to attack me for all they're worth; they seem better disposed towards me or more patient with me.

Apart from that, it's my birthday. I've been thirteen for five hours now, and the earlier I wake up the longer it's my birthday. My birthday is one of those days when I'm glad of my existence. My birth could have done me the favour of choosing a day in spring, though, and not the first of January. No matter what adults try and say – you don't get as many presents. Because of Christmas coming so soon before. So that didn't quite go ideally, I'd say, a spot landing on Easter Sunday for example would have been much better.

A new year. 1985. A good number. I can see numbers, it's always been that way, and 1985 is a very good number. A bit playful, a bit curvy, a bit sharp-witted. For me, it's a figure-skater and a dark grey magnet, almost as big as a blackboard. Everyone else thinks my seeing numbers is stupid but I don't know what's stupid about it. I think it's good when you recognize the nature of things. A number doesn't just happen to be a particular number, it really means it. I'm number 13, I'm not 100, I'm 1985, and only I am 13 or 100 or 1985, and I'm deadly serious about being this number because I was here long before all of you. That's what every number tells us.

I think about school. Already, even though it doesn't start back until a week's time. I think about the subjects we have on the first day. I'm afraid of Chemistry. But everyone should be afraid of Chemistry.

To be honest I'm afraid of almost everything. I'm afraid of people and of dogs, of bad marks and of a bike accident, of ghosts, loneliness, punishment and embarrassment, and

because I don't want to embarrass myself I shy clear of risks. Even in chess, although that's where I'm most confident. I do know that people won't do much to me and dogs can't do anything, because both are on a leash in one way or another. I don't really care about bad marks, I've never had a bike accident, ghosts besiege me but have never done me any harm, and in chess I can presumably achieve whatever I want.

That's the way I am. I see the risks everywhere, not the chances. I read that they call it the Jonah Complex.

I play through chess games in my mind. First my own game from the past weekend. It ended as a draw, which I was more than happy with; my opponent was nominally a stronger player, at least. But I had a better position; I could have played to win. I didn't have the courage.

Uriella's alarm goes off in the next room. I only call her that secretly; she's really called something different. But I like the name Uriella. She really does look like the crazy head of the Fiat Lux sect, even wearing similar absurdly flowing robes that make her look like a ghost in a haunted castle, and she's not averse to occasional religion-like pathos.

I hear the click of a lighter and then her cough. A moment later I smell the cigarette smoke. I hear a second cough. Aha, we've got a visitor. New Year's Eve washed someone else into the house.

The news is on the radio. News is far away, news is the whole world. I love news. I love newspapers. I love out there, the place that gives me an inkling of how much else is possible.

I know more about world events than my classmates, who probably think Fiat Lux is a make of car; there are a few of them whose brains deserve a minute's silence now and then. Not only do I know about Scientology, the Moon sect and other religious movements; I also understand what Salt 1 and Pershing 2 mean, I can list the member countries of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and I can tell you the names of many of the grey-haired Politburo figures clapping from the balcony at Moscow's military parades. I also have opinions on domestic politics. My teachers don't consider them very well thought out. That's fine; from time to time I tell them what I think of them as well.

Dawn breaks. Uriella comes into my room and gives me a kiss. She wishes me a very happy birthday. The man doesn't; he doesn't look me in the eye as he closes the front

door behind him with a muttered goodbye.

Uriella soon leaves as well. She has to make a bit of money on the side and works at parties on Sundays and holidays. I don't know what exactly she does. She persuades people to have their photos taken or buy something, that much I do know. She promises to bring something back for me.

I spend hours switching between my desk and my bed. In bed I read and doze, and at my desk I study world champion chess games. Especially Bobby Fischer's.

Now and then I get myself a slice of white bread from the kitchen. And a Coke to go with it. In the afternoon I find a small bar of chocolate. Uriella normally tells me off when I pinch one, but she won't say anything on my birthday.

At some point I get so tired I fall asleep. By the time I wake up it's dark and I'm scared. I switch on my bedside lamp. Its light illuminates the room so weakly that I feel like I'm in a haunted castle and get even more scared. I switch on all the lights in the flat. After that I feel a bit better.

I help myself to another slice of bread and watch the news. After the weather report, relatives call. I'd rather not pick up the phone at all because they all say the same thing anyway. All the best. What is all the best? A bit of the best would be fine by me.

Uriella comes home at ten thirty. She sways slightly and smells of wine, but she's brought me a little treat. After telling me how her day went she fetches a plastic bag containing my presents from her bedroom.

Twelve chess books and a sweater and cash. Twelve! Books! Openings, middlegames, strategy and tactics, endgames, biographies! I jump for joy and hug Uriella. She laughs and starts cooking.