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Nachtsendung

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Starter

Everyone falls silent after the announcement. The passengers are waiting to see what will happen. No one seems to have any information. A voice from the cockpit has repeatedly informed them that nothing is certain yet. However, the voice has not explained what might be uncertain, merely hinted at it. Very little is happening at the front of the plane. First there was an announcement that drinks would be served again. That was ten minutes ago. Now one of the stewardesses is sitting in her seat next to the cockpit door and has fastened her seatbelt. This seems odd, since the plane is standing still again, and can't possibly experience turbulence. The engines are not even running any more. Another stewardess walks down the aisles again and again, checking that everything is in order. The passengers barely move. No one is still fiddling with the air vents or twitching with their cell phones. It's quiet. The passengers would much rather sit in the terminal and wait. There they could at least get up once in a while, move around a little, perhaps examine the duty free shop if it's still open. Yes, perhaps it would even reopen for them, although it's really far too late. Everyone knows that you can make tremendous amounts of money off people who are waiting interminably. They will go to the newspaper stand and leaf through the leftover international newspapers again, yesterday's newspapers that are likely being packed up for the wholesaler's right now. They will buy perfume and toys in the marvelous shopping world, whisky, vodka, lots of schnapps. They will finger scarves and small, unnecessary key-chains. They will poke at refrigerator magnets and examine amusing mugs, conceived as local messages for travelers passing through, messages that will never reach a final destination. Garishly bright stuffed animals with enormous eyes will gaze at them, small martial arts figures and strange rubber ducks that always seem to appear at cash registers—as if there were any use for them. Anything is better than continuing to wait inside the plane. But that image has already faded, along with the saleswomen, who have grown slow because of the hour.

They are left with only one smile which hovers over the shop counter, removed from humanity. At best, a few laboriously manicured fingernails glide over the buttons of the cash register. For all intents and purposes, the late hour means that plastic chairs might still appear in the terminal, plastic chairs at the gate, in the long hallway, in the rotunda, in front of the large windows. They will have to settle into them several times to find a comfortable position. Then the moment might arrive in which they may begin chatting with one another. Yes, they will gaze out of the windows over the darkening city and ask themselves questions. When might the first house burst into flames? Will the explosions be at all perceptible? Will the smoke dissolve into the night sky, or will the building silently sink into the nocturnal darkness without a single sound? They will ask themselves if this whole city is being sucked back into a landscape of a *world without people*, whether every civilizational framework that one has relied on until now will be leveled. They will begin to talk to each other, and quite naturally come to stories that they might expect to tell in such situations. Leftover stories that they begin to tell somewhat nervously, as if undertaking a ritual. Something that might grant respite, a process that appears impossible in the plane with its rows of seats and honeycomb windows. They will unpack one story after the next.

European Forum Alpbach

No one had seen the woman. –“No one except you!,” they said to Georg Brucker. “That’s the point,” he replied. “I mean, how can no one else have noticed her? She led the panel, she was on screen!” A woman with long hair that fell into her face. She had bustled to and fro on stage, and had seemingly spoken of worrying things. Georg Brucker deduced this from what he had seen on screen. Only upon closer examination had he noticed that she was discussing a PowerPoint presentation. At any rate, she continued to gesture toward the screen behind her, which could only be guessed at on the video screen in the press lounge. But everyone was in agreement now: this woman did not exist. She had never existed, and she would never exist. He had invented her. – “I mean, how late was it? How long had you been working?,” Andruhovitch asked. As if a private vision had crept in amidst all of these collective visions which had been allowed to unfold upstairs in the conference rooms. As if she hadn’t been visible to the outside world on any of the other screens, where the others all lingered. But the others had been busy with other things, it seemed: networking, meeting contacts, and those infamous meet-and-greet events. Something might well happen with 14,000 people in three weeks in late summer: weeks of talks, meetings, working groups, everyone panicked about missing out. But he had too much to do to panic, Andruhovitch joked. After all, his job was to report, report, report. Assess the talks, the results of the talks, the visitors and appearances in this alpine hotel, a sporting locale gussied up into a convention center, a ski paradise completely disguised as conference world. The wooden village usually brightening the faces of tourists now had to be coaxed out of grimacing conference attendees through painstaking journalism. All those pseudo-comforts, mass socializing by a ski lift, evenings by the roaring fire, were organized by this or that foundation, this or that organization, this or that military group that enjoyed the highest blessings of church and state. And he was in the thick of it, reporting on the mood, reports that somehow were supposed to converge with what is called reality, as Andruhovitch said, and which were converging less and less.

Brucker didn’t listen to him and inwardly went through the list of possible people the woman might be. After all, he knew most of the faces. “Knock it off! She doesn’t exist!,” his Viennese colleague said again. “Fact is, we’re stuck in this village in the Alps,” said the man from Gazeta Wyborcza, trying to give it a diplomatic spin. “No one can get in, and no one can

get out; that's how it works!" The matter derailed, and soon, Brucker could no longer explain how strange it was to have been the only person to have noticed this apparition. "Well, why? Was she important?" Andruhovitch insisted. That was true. The only important things were the technology talks between various ministers – ministers whom one could spot walking up and down the little mountain streets along with their assistants in their assistant outfits. The only important things were the inroads that one could point to, the strong interest in the profitable convergence of different futures. Keep a lookout for the survivors, Andruhovitch joked. This made Brucker nervous. No one had spoken of survival until now. Unlike elsewhere, survival wasn't yet being parked in and pulled out.

"Seriously – that lady's made others vanish?" someone behind him asked. He reminded him of Brobovski. But it wasn't Brobovski. He interrupted Brucker's attempt at protest with a sweep of his hand.

"Picture that minister on the mountain road with his cell phone."

"Again?," the Viennese colleague gleefully exclaimed.

They said things like this all the time, and usually, Georg Brucker said them too. Just like the others, he speculated about secret deals struck on the mountain street at a ten-percent grade, which were surely not very different from the deals made at ground-level. But ground-level deals were quotidian, while the agreements on the mountain road had been made with particular flair, in a relaxed atmosphere, which Brucker missed terribly this year. But then the Viennese journalist started up again with "that Meisinger," and Brucker immediately imagined Meisinger in his bed and breakfast, how he let his ski lodge hostess serve him a ski lodge breakfast, just as everyone was leaving for their technology talks on cellphone avenue. He imagined Meisinger staying behind, wrapped up in ski lodge conversations and the everyday life of the ski lodge hostess, although everyone—truly everyone else—was already sitting in their seats. He continued to imagine Meisinger's failings, although he didn't really know him at all, nor the way he had poked fun at the new security measures and given a security expert the run-around the previous evening, which Brucker hadn't been at, because he had been "busy with his holy screen lady," as Andruhovitch put it. Meisinger's image was still firmly before his eyes; it didn't need him anymore, so to speak. It seemed to Brucker that here, people were always already there, even before they appeared in reality, and occasionally this caused conflicts. Conflicts like the

small disturbance that the Ethiopian ex-businessman had caused in the restaurant yesterday, when he had declared that he didn't want to hear these kinds of things about his country anymore. This was surprising, as everyone had thought that his country didn't exist anymore, at least in his head, but all of a sudden it was lying right in front of them on the table of the Tyrolean inn. Some man from some defense department had said something about Ethiopia, but had refused to seriously discuss European economic policy on Africa, which had caused the Ethiopian to rail that no one should be surprised that they were all coming to Europe. He only had to conjure up the horrific image of a mass migration from the south for a moment. The mood was completely ruined.

“You should sleep, that's it!” the Viennese colleague said. Brucker was already busy with other things, though the others appeared to not yet be done with their speculations. They were standing together in front of the press lounge, and the Viennese man imagined how, in this very moment, that panel bimbo, as Andruhovitch called her, Brucker's ghost woman, was walking up and down with her long hair and her face without eyes, as he'd described her. “No, I didn't.” If someone were to see her coming, she would surely let out a silent scream. “We know how that goes!” – “We know how that goes!” and then the person standing opposite her would be swallowed up. Andruhovitch grinned: “Maybe we should go inside and check if she's made people disappear on the podium again.” Brucker was certain that he'd never mentioned such a thing. “We should ask the cameramen what happened,” the Gazeta Wyborcza guy suggested rather prosaically. But Brucker knew that there were no cameramen, only technology, anonymous and abstract, fully automatized in the so-called ORF room, which likely no soul had ever entered. This trust in technology was part of some rite strengthening the European spirit, around which everything was directed. It was said that here, in the Tyrolean Indian summer, one could find traces of a common European story of origin. Beyond Frontex and border protection issues lay the remnants of the postwar spirit out of which everything had developed.

At this very moment, the last wives, clad in cocktail dresses, had minced with their husbands to the technology reception at Hotel Bögerl, “to the local theater,” as Meisinger had called it over breakfast. He enjoyed the theater here, he said, the live atmosphere that could betray more than the never-ending communiqués announcing that the governments would reach the right decisions in the end. That, until now, only time had worked against them. That they had

had to sacrifice some long-term goals for the short-term course of everyday politics, but that finally, expert opinion would prevail.

Yes, and the ski lifts on the slopes watched it all and nonetheless remained still! Brucker almost had to laugh. When they were turned off, they seemed to him like odd artifacts from outer space, props for the technology talks that took place every day, which remained there at night, somewhat unprotected. At this hour, the sky seemed very wide, present, and yet removed, as if it was letting something through, only – what? “Something is coming over the crest of the mountain – look!” said a grinning Andruchovitch, interrupting Brucker’s thoughts. The scales fell from his eyes: they come over the mountain crests, the ghosts, like Hannibal over the Alps. SHE was merely the vanguard. A first faded elephant, he laughed, among many faded elephants, always on the move, although she was going in the opposite direction – toward Africa. He was still gazing up at the pastures and the Alpine amusement park, which had to be somewhere behind the peak, but could barely be glimpsed from where he stood. He could sense only a quiet hum that he couldn’t place. “Are you coming?” Andruchovitch nagged. It suddenly became clear to Brucker that he couldn’t stop his colleagues, and saw them already disappearing into the twilight of the conference building. He could hear his Viennese colleague call out inside, “Sights like this don’t exist anymore!”. He was right. What Brucker saw when he entered the hall seemed straight out of the age of video, as if someone were playing an old reproduction: frayed, colors off, red cast, no contours, almost ridiculous, and yet he was still frightened when she appeared on every screen again. Just as when he first saw her, he could not make out her face; her hair covered it almost completely. She was announcing something he couldn’t catch, yet Brucker immediately understood what she meant.

He suspected that none of them would ever ascend the dark mountain street to the inn again. They would all miss the wonderful moonlight that was bound to emerge from behind the mountain crest at any moment. Someone had said it was one day before the full moon, but who? The Pole? Andruchovitch? Brucker himself? It didn’t matter; it was unimportant. He would no longer see the quaint Tyrolean wooden houses illuminated by moonlight, standing out from their Alpine background. Houses like sudden teeth in an otherwise blank face. He would never experience the quiescence of the pastures and the theme parks on the mountain top, nor

Hannibal's return. But Brucker was sure that there would be quite a bit to see on the screens in the press lounge when they would join her, on stage, in the great conference room.