

Jump

Simone Lappert

Novel

German



A young woman stands on a roof throwing tiles. What is she doing up there? Does she intend to jump off? Will she leap or not leap? More and more people gather to gawp, to film her on their mobiles and to comment on what's happening. Some are smug, some irritated, some sympathetic. Simone Lappert creates a tapestry of ten different perspectives on one and the same event, each displayed with passion and depth to the eyes of her spellbound readers.

"Between the lines of heating wire on the rear windshield, she saw the roof. She saw Manu balancing on it, pulling roofing tiles away from their moorings and piling them up next to the chimney, her head a music note that bobbed up and down between the lines on the pane. Out of tune, thought Astrid."

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Photo: Ayse Yavas

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Excerpt translated by Katy Derbyshire

Edna

Edna felt for the remote on her bedside table. The tip of her forefinger found the On button and screen light flickered across her closed eyelids, a friendly woman's voice informing her about the mating rituals of dwarf crocodiles, mixed with the song from her radio alarm, "Oh baby, baby, it's a wild world, it's hard to get by, just upon a—" Her fist hit Standby dead on target and she eased her itchy eyes open to see morning sun cast against the wall through the strips of the blind. A good day for the tortoise, Edna thought, and coughed. A hot day for old women like me. And Tuesday, it was Tuesday at that. She reached for the full pack of cigarettes on the windowsill, the cellophane removed in anticipation before she went to sleep; she loved the resistance you had to overcome to separate the first cigarette from the others, the jerk that went through the filter. She opened the matchbox, took out a match and pulled off the red tip with her teeth – wonderful, that crunch of sulphur between her teeth – and then a second match, rasped across the strip of sandpaper, the first inhale straight to her lungs, the burning in her night-dry mouth, now, now she was awake. A crow outside in the elder tree messed up the shadows on the wall. Edna folded her cover back and tapped off the ash. She didn't like the light in the morning; it made her varicose veins look thicker and bluer than they really were. She positioned the burning cigarette in the indentation on the edge of the ash tray and turned the TV volume up so it was audible from the hall. In the bathroom, she lit a new cigarette and turned up the little radio as she ran her bathwater. "Oh baby, baby it's a wild world..." She lit another cigarette in the kitchen and in the living room, put the radios on there too, the same station in every room; that way she could walk around, get the toast and the butter knife ready here, water the pot plants there, the laurel, the agave, the banana plants, reward herself for every knee bend in front of the TV with a mouthful of nicotine, and all without dirtying the hall carpet with ash as she walked back and forth.

Her hair still wet, she went out in the garden, a plate of toast, butter and quince jam in her left hand, in the right a bunch of ribwort, sorrel and clover picked by the edge of the woods and put in water overnight. Edna rustled the bunch and took a few steps into the garden, not too far so as not to trample down the knee-high grass; that was Cosima's territory. Edna knew Cosima could smell the fresh herbs. It wasn't long before she stuck her head out of the blades of grass and came juddering towards her. Edna put the herbs down on the gravel by the garden table, sat down and buttered her toast. "I went to visit Magali yesterday," she told Cosima, who launched herself on the clover first. "She was sitting there all tame, that old warthog, in her flowery bed with a nurse plumping up the pillow. And all along she'd got her shotgun under the sofa, the good old double-barrels. I wasn't bad at shooting tin cans, not bad at all. Just shooting animals, though, that was never my thing. Never understood what she thought was so great about it." Cosima was now munching up the sorrel. "Slow down," Edna said, "you'll get the hiccups again." She folded the slice of toast in half and bit into it. "She hardly remembers anything," Edna said with her mouth full. "Only the adventures pop up now and then, the first stag she shot, two or three lovers, that kind of thing." Edna put the toast back on the plate. "I can tell you this. Sometimes I envy her. I mean, if I could find some way. For all my memories to melt away in my head over time. Like an Alka Seltzer, shhhhhhhh, and all that's left is a dull taste. That'd be quite something." She got up and filled Cosima's bowl with fresh water from the hose, watched the bubbles slowly dissolving on the surface, one after another. "You know," she said, "if you lead a healthy life, you can easily get to a hundred and twenty. That's a lot of years. Rather you than me."

There were 87 euros left in the coffee tin on top of the fridge. That would have to do until the end of the month; she didn't want to go back to the office. The new doors there that didn't have a handle, just a buzzer. And then you had to take a number, get called into one of the cubicles, had to render accounts like some kind of criminal. She'd rather have toast and jam, or potato pancakes, as long as she had enough for cigarettes. She put a tenner

in her skirt pocket and checked she'd taken her lighter; she wanted to get going while it was still cool. A coffee at the city park, then maybe pay Magali a quick visit, nab some of her lunch, she hardly ate a bite of the good food they gave her, maybe a walk in the woods if it got hotter, dinner at home in the garden with Cosima, then pop over to Yellow, where it was so lovely and loud and crowded, where she could stand at the bar surrounded by booming bass and didn't have to talk to anyone, because nowhere was a woman of her age more invisible than in a club. And that's where she'd stay, until just before midnight, until this miserable Tuesday was over and done with, that's exactly what she'd do. That's what she did every Tuesday.

Edna saw the woman even before she'd closed the door behind herself. She stopped short, her hand wrapped around the door knob. Up there, on the roof at the other end of the square, on top of the house with the pale green façade, a woman was standing straddling the gable, perfectly still. Determined. Edna didn't move. She felt her heart thudding in her throat, her gums, her temples. Now the woman started moving, putting one foot slowly in front of the other, downwards towards the roof's edge. "Good God," Edna murmured, her hand beginning to hurt around the door knob. The square was almost empty, just a few school children with sports bags crossing it noisily, none of them looking up. Edna let go of the door knob and walked towards the house. The woman seemed to notice her and moved faster towards the edge, slipped on a roof tile, caught herself, stopped at the rim, circled her arms to regain her balance. Edna pressed a hand to her mouth. "I have to get down," the woman called out, leaning over the drop. "I have to get down, right now." The woman's silhouette, the square, the façades, everything went blurry before Edna's eyes, she was hot, terribly hot, it all came rushing back, the gravel between the tracks, the blood, the crushed body, the flashing digital sign on the roof of the soap factory beside the railway. She wasn't going to watch. Not again. Never again. Edna's whole body reacted, set off a trembling alarm, a whole-body trembling she hadn't felt for years. She turned around, something clanked, smashed on the pavement, Edna didn't look over her shoulder, held her

ears shut, didn't want to hear the woman calling, didn't want to hear anything, let alone see it, she pushed the door open, dashed into the kitchen, grabbed the telephone from the wall next to the fridge, put one finger in the hole in the dial, faster, why wouldn't it go faster, 1 - 1 - 0, her hand trembled, her voice too when someone finally picked up at the other end and she could finally say there was someone standing up there who wanted to jump, who meant it, that they had to be quick, very quick.

Three and a half minutes. Three and a half minutes until Edna heard the sirens and saw the flashing blue light brush against her kitchen curtains. She'd counted the seconds on the kitchen clock, her back to the window, her temple on the telephone's cool casing. At last. She reached into her skirt pocket and lit a cigarette. Her left hand smelled of the metal of the door knob. As fast as she could, Edna drew the curtains in the living room, closed the blinds, the bathroom window. In the bedroom, she switched on the TV, turned it to the children's channel where there would definitely be no news. The darkness soothed the trembling in her limbs, limited it to her hands, which were holding her up by the metal bars on the bed. What shocked her was that the woman had shocked her so. It was all years ago now. They had given her this flat to live in, where she felt fine. They left her alone and didn't ask after her. Hardly anyone knew anything about her past; there was even a rumour she was rich because she lived here, the heiress to a Swiss banker or even an aristocrat. Edna enjoyed the biographies people came up with for her, stories she could retreat to when reality got out of hand.

She pulled the cover up to her chin and turned up the volume. Most of them did it on Mondays or Tuesdays. That's what the statistics said. Bugs Bunny tricked a hunter, had a duel with a cowboy, outwitted a vulture. Edna smoked cigarette after cigarette, the ash tray on her stomach so she barely had to move.

Theres

She'd just folded up all the empty cardboard boxes and taken them out back to the storeroom when Werner came into the shop through the side door, rather earlier than she'd expected him, with sleepy, watery eyes, hair neatly combed back, the green shop apron over his shoulder. "Have you stacked the shelves?" he asked. "Did all the stock come in?"

Theres nodded. "How did you sleep?"

Werner shrugged. "This awful heat," he said. "I was tossing and turning like a pregnant cow."

"I got the pirate hippo in my egg today," Theres said. "I've never got a whole series so quickly, it's a real streak of luck."

But Werner wasn't listening. He took a red pen out of the till drawer and began writing reduced prices on the hygiene articles by the door. Theres stroked his hair. "Are you hungry?" she asked. "It's nearly past its sell-by date, all this," Werner said. "Got to go down at least fifty per cent." He paused in the middle of writing and stared into space with a frown, as if trying to remember a name. His thoughts were crowded close together, thought Theres, like the beams of the old farmhouse where he grew up. There wasn't much space in his head between the heavy thoughts, it was a crush; that's why he was always frowning when he thought hard, when he wanted to look behind individual thoughts, had to shift them around to make space for a smile, couldn't do it any other way. He had had that look even as a young man, but only now and then, not several times a day like now. She used to like it, the way he wasn't always making jokes like the others, the way he withdrew into himself occasionally. He'd always just had his own serious mind. It would never have occurred to her to give him a pet name; that would have seemed like a desperate attempt to tame him. She called her husband Werner, not Werni or honey or anything else shabby like that. And he, he called her Theres, not like his friends from the old days who patronized their wives, my pet, my little Lisa, my little angel, as though they might otherwise realize they were sharing their lives with a real person, a whole different individual. It was just that Werner's modern attitude hadn't moved with the times. Like the furniture from back

then, the old toys out of the chocolate eggs or the battered sign above the shop door, it had become an antique gradually gathering dust; vintage, as Roswitha would say. These days, no one wanted to pick their food out of a layer of coloured gelatine, hardly anyone was interested in potted meat any more, or marshmallows or boil-in-the-bag meals. Werner, though, had stopped looking around outside, where people bought organic and coffee to go. He stuck firm to his 1970s concept and suffocated any discussion of it in steely silence.

They worked side by side for a good hour without talking. Theres cleaned the glass of the fridges, the counter and the till drawer, dusted the scratch-card holders and the strip lights, while Werner checked the sell-by dates on the dairy products and then the drinks. "These sirens today," Werner said at some point into the silence, bent over the freezer, "you'd think it was the end of the world."

True, now Theres realized it – first the police ten minutes ago, now an ambulance and a fire engine. "Probably an accident," she said, and she pushed the coins around in the compartments as if counting them.

They soon stopped listening, with the shop door opening more and more often and an unusual number of people coming in. Towards midday, the sirens were still going strong. "Seems to be some kind of major incident," Werner said. "No wonder, with all those giant cars squeezing through the roads these days. They're always knocking everything down. I wouldn't be surprised if a child has got run over or a cyclist." That was one of Werner's favourite subjects. Presumably, he would have talked himself into a rage if five boys and a girl hadn't come into the shop at that moment. The boys' bodies were swathed in oversized T-shirts and baggy pants, two of their voices were still in the middle of breaking, and only one, the one with the big mouth, had something akin to a moustache on his top lip, which he fashioned into a sneer when the girl held a video up on her phone. "Holy shit," he said, pointing at the screen. "What a spazz. That salty old lady's gonna go viral, guys, betcha any money, it's wicked!"

Theres couldn't see what kind of video it was, probably a porno or some other obscene clip. She had no idea what a spazz was, only that it sounded offensive. The

boys strolled along the aisles and gathered up all sorts of things, five cans of Redbull, three ice teas, two packs of popcorn, one of peanuts and two bananas. The very pretty girl merely gave instructions – she wanted an apple and a Diet Coke, and the one with the peach fuzz took care of it for her. At the counter, he asked Werner for a pack of Lucky Strikes and a lighter. A glance over his shoulder to make sure the girl was watching. Werner hesitated; there was no way the boy was eighteen, Theres could tell straight away. But then again, he'd only get the cigarettes somewhere else, and five euros was five euros. Werner was already ringing up the total when Theres intervened: "Could I see some ID, young man?"

The boy gave another sneer. "Keep your wig on," he said. "Never mind then, just the drinks and the other stuff." He slammed a twenty-euro note down on the counter with a long sniff. Theres said nothing, her hands twisting the red pen that Werner had accidentally left among the hygiene articles.

"You mustn't let louts like that intimidate you," she said after they'd left the shop. "It won't get you anywhere." Werner returned the cigarettes to the shelf in silence. The bell on the door rang again and a blond woman entered the shop, sweating strongly, seemingly agitated and in a hurry. She headed for the hygiene articles shelf and brought deodorant, a toothbrush, toothpaste, shower gel, disposable razors and a packet of condoms to the till, along with two bananas and a large bottle of water. The hygiene articles she stuffed in her handbag, and the rest went in the plastic bag Werner gave her. He hadn't yet told her the total when the door opened again; a mother and toddler, behind them an older man with a dog, and through the window, Theres saw two young women beating a path to the shop. She was gradually beginning to find it unusual. Ten minutes later, she was certain it was unusual.

"You see, Theres," Werner said with satisfaction, tightening his apron strings. "I've always said they'll be beating our door down again one day." By that point, a queue had formed all the way out to the street; all kinds of people wanting ice cream, water, biscuits, cigarettes, fruit and sweets. Theres was helping him serve and pack now and there were hardly any transparent plastic

bags left; they'd soon run out of change as well.

"Just like the old days," Werner murmured to her as she opened up a roll of fifty-cent coins and let them rattle into the till. It seemed as if he'd smiled at her as he said it. His forehead was shiny with perspiration. Theres couldn't remember the last time she saw Werner sweat. She took a couple of fifties and hundred-euro notes out of the till and put them in an envelope. It was time she found out where all these people were coming from. "I'll just pop to the bank and get some change," she said. "Make sure you're quick," said Werner. And this time he really did smile.

Once Theres had left the shop and taken a few steps around the corner across the square, she saw a crowd over by the pale green building. There must have been more than a hundred people and someone joined them every few seconds, tipped their head back like the others and took their telephone out of their pocket for a photo or a video. Mothers were sitting on the wall in front of the neighbouring buildings with their children, feeding them drinks, breaking up bread rolls and cleaning ice cream off chins with wet wipes. Pensioners were standing there shaking their heads, and a young girl had spread out a towel and was trying to sunbathe while her boyfriend threw something at her, popcorn or peanuts. Popcorn or peanuts from *their* shop! Theres looked up to what the crowd was gawping at. Up on the roof was a slim figure, her arms crossed in front of her chest. Theres took a few steps closer and saw that it was a young woman wearing short green dungarees. She went a little closer and narrowed her eyes. "Goodness me." She put a hand to her mouth. Screwed her eyes up again to make sure. But yes. It was her. The big ears, the pointed nose, the upright stance. It was Leslie Kühne's daughter. Now blond and grown tall, but it had to be her. She couldn't remember the girl's name; she hadn't seen either Leslie or her daughter for years. All she had heard was occasional gossip. That Leslie apparently lived in Karlsruhe, sold home-made jewellery on eBay under the name Esmeralda_23 and had married for the fourth time. And then of course her older daughter, Astrid, who had gone into politics and was standing as mayor over in Freiburg. There were posters everywhere when you

drove into the town. Theres kneaded the envelope of bank notes between her fingers, searching her memory for the name of the woman on the roof. Nunu. All she came up with was her nickname; the girl's sister used to call her Nunu. She hadn't had it easy, poor thing. A good twenty years ago when they'd still lived on the estate by the edge of the woods, Theres would sometimes look after her when her big sister couldn't manage it. Leslie was already too fond of her drink in those days, and the father would have done more damage if he'd been there than he did by staying away. Once, he had chased Leslie along the road in her pyjamas with his air rifle, right into the woods. The girl couldn't have been much older than twelve, then. Three years later, rumour had it that Astrid, barely turned twenty, was living in the flat alone with her little sister, and their mother had cut and run to look for her husband. Theres remembered an igloo that little Nunu had spent hours building outside the house, her cheeks red and her hands encased in yellow mittens. "When I'm grown up I can go and visit the penguins at the North Pole and live with them," she had told her, and she explained that Astrid had said penguins never left each other, they stayed together their whole lives.

Theres held her breath. Nunu stepped forward, approaching the edge of the roof in small increments, then stopped at the guttering and looked down. "For heaven's sake," Theres murmured, and she darted towards the building; someone had to do something! It was only then that she saw the police and the fire brigade at the front, positioning a rescue mattress. And up in one of the attic windows, she could make out a police officer apparently talking to Nunu. The police siren wailed, blue light flashed across the façade, and Nunu held her arm across her face. "Jump, you coward!" Theres heard a teenage boy yelling from the crowd. "Go on, get it over with!" Nunu took her arm away from her face, clambered back towards the gable to the chimney where there was a white bucket, and rummaged around in it. She grabbed something, ran to the edge of the roof and threw the object down to the road; a hand rake or a small spade, Theres couldn't quite tell. The siren wailed again, Nunu squatted and pulled a roof tile out of its place, and then threw that down to the road as well, towards the spot

where the boy had shouted. The crowd inched back. A young policewoman set about cordoning off a section of the pavement with tape. "Leave me alone," Nunu called from the roof. "Piss off and leave me alone!" A van stopped outside the barrier tape; seven police officers with helmets and shields shoved their way through the sliding door and took up position next to the firemen, who began to set up their own barrier with newly arrived metal fencing. Nunu pulled back when she saw the police and hid behind the chimney; only her blond hair and one green trouser leg were now visible. Theres turned around to the shop and saw that the queue had reached the next turn-off. She remembered the bank notes in her apron pocket. She had to get back and help Werner, whether she liked it or not – there was nothing she could do here.