

Wild Maneuvers

Judith Keller

Novel

German



A spree of curious crimes are committed on a hot summer's night in Zurich. Two women, Vera Savakis and Peli Rouge, are suspected of the wrongdoings. Judith Keller's novel Wild Maneuvers is an entertaining search for answers – witty and profound.

"But I don't want to say it was just about the money. It was more about the meaning that was attached to the money. I don't think that I've properly explained it. I'll have to come back to it later, please remind me. There was something about the meaning."

Title

Wilde Manöver

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Judith Keller, born in Switzerland in 1985, studied creative writing in Leipzig and Biel, and qualified as a German language teacher in Berlin and Bogotá. She has also been an editor at the literary journal Edit. She has won honorary awards from the city and canton of Zurich for her story collection "Die Fragwürdigen" ("The Questionable Ones").

Photo: Ayse Yavas

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Excerpt translated by Tess Lewis

Institute of Early History / Social Sciences
7 May 2098

Subject: Findings

With our in-depth review of the newly added documents, we may have advanced a step. We strongly recommend a closer examination of the attached document 8301.2025. It concerns a file from the period immediately preceding and covering the beginnings, which could revolutionize the current research. The file contains transcripts of interrogations conducted by an inspector named Felix Lombardi of a woman named Vera Savakis in September 2025. On the backs of 41 of the 120 loose DIN-A4 pages, there are dated notes, written in ballpoint pen or pencil by a woman named Shiva Hirz. These notes were written between 2025–2028. If this file is authentic, and all evidence at hand supports its authenticity, we believe it holds the long-sought key to understanding the early stages. It could help us place later events and our present reality in a completely new, previously unrecognized context. And yet, much remains unclear. It leaves us with no fewer mysteries. Did it all begin in Zurich? How do you see it?

We look forward to our meeting on Monday!

Best wishes and stay well,

Samira Ohala and Joaquin Piña

Room A-1-17b, Canton Police Headquarters,
Kasernen Strasse 29, Zurich 8004

Commissioner: Felix Lombardi.

The accused: Vera Savakis

5 September 2025

1. Interrogation

You are accused of having stolen a white Mercedes delivery van from the parking deck of the Glatt Shopping Center in the company of an unknown woman on July 30th at 9:30 pm.

On July 30th, you say? Let me think. So much has happened since then. It's not impossible.

It wasn't all that long ago. A little more than a month. Put yourself back in that day, take your time. Sometimes it takes a bit of patience before you can recall individual memories. Why did you steal the delivery van?

In any case, it's true that we met with our backpacks, Peli and I, on Schwamendinger Platz right by the fountain. That is, it's more a kind of water feature. In any case there are a few cut stones there, or even just one single stone, I think. In any case, water shoots into the air and then disappears into the ground. Or it flows right from the stone into the ground, that's also possible. We'd agreed to meet there, not for the first time.

At what time?

I think it was around four in the afternoon. We watched the chess players for a long time. They pushed the large plastic chess pieces in front of them. The game went on forever and that corroborated us in a strange way. A few people were spooning up a chocolate sundae in the café on the square. An old woman was looking at a shopping list through a magnifying glass. An old man crossed the square, walking like a seagull. Another man in a huge sombrero sat on a bench, staring straight ahead. He looked like he was up to something. That's when we noticed that we were up to something, too. Because

there was no going back. That was the feeling we had.

What gave you that feeling?

It was very hot. That surely had something to do with it. The heat surged over the square and we were thirsty. Sweat was pouring down our faces. With me, it was pearling on my forehead and with Peli, on her upper lip or maybe the other way round, to be honest, I don't remember. Memories fade so quickly. From one moment to the next, what you thought was unforgettable is gone. In any case, my forehead was glowing. We were standing in the sun, after all, which was still burning down on us that afternoon. We felt very distinctly that we were up to something. We just didn't know what yet. In retrospect, it looks like we'd planned everything long in advance, but that's not how it was. Maybe it also had something to do with our apartments. We hadn't yet opened the letters, hadn't taken the calls. The creditors could have shown up at any time. So we thought: let's get out of here now.

You had stopped paying your rent. Why?

There was no specific reason. It was more of a feeling. We probably thought that since we'd been paying our rent for so long, we could just stop. Everything comes to an end at some point, they say. But aside from that, rent was a lot of money and we hardly had any left since we'd stopped working and didn't meet the welfare office requirements.

Then why did you stop working?

I don't know exactly why Peli stopped. Once she mentioned that she was criticized for letting the cargo sway back and forth unnecessarily long before unloading it. She herself said that she was addicted to the swaying. She couldn't help it. She'd caused property damage more than once because of it. But apparently she had good friends there, so that can't be it. For me, it was because I often gave things away. Newspapers and cigarettes, lottery tickets, puzzle magazines, things like that. Then someone said there was no other solution.

Peli... what kind of a name is that?

Peli Rouge is her full name. It's better like that. Right? We never actually talked about how we got our names. It wouldn't have helped. Especially not in her case. Instead, we said, whenever we had the occasion to: That's how it is. You just have to cope with certain decisions others have made. Otherwise it breaks you eventually.

Between July 30th and August 3rd, you were repeatedly seen in the company of a female person with short, dark hair. Is this person... Peli Rouge?

Yes, we were often together in those days.

Why didn't you open the letters?

I pretty sure they were only overdue notices, threats, or summonses. Those letters always intimidate me. Better not open it, I think, because I always give in to strange demands much too quickly. In fact, that's why I'm here.

In the end, you didn't have a choice. What happened after you met your companion on the afternoon of that July 30th at four o'clock?

We stood around on Schwamendinger Platz for a very long time with the sun burning down on us. When we'd had enough, we said: Enough is enough, time will tell. We tightened our shoelaces. Afternoon turned into evening. It was quiet in the courtyard of the Schwamendingen school house; it smelled of lilacs. A pair of speakers on a ping pong table were playing bird songs to a beat. The church bells rang. We passed a man preaching Christianity. It's getting better and better, Peli said. Being fair was very important to her. Then something significant happened: in front of us, a red crane towered in the sky over the buildings of Schwamendingen. That alone wouldn't have been anything special, there were a lot of them. But at the very moment we spotted the crane, it swiveled its neck in slow motion towards the left. We followed it with our eyes, looked at each other, nodded, and walked in the direction it was pointing. Near the Luchsweisen tram stop, a woman was reaching down for cigarette butts. Don't

pick them up, we yelled, but she didn't listen. Then a streetcar arrived, and she got in. The doors clacked shut behind her. We never saw her again. We headed off in a different direction.

Suddenly we saw the members of our orchestra hurrying through the neighborhood. They were carrying angular instrument cases and freshly oiled, folded up music stands that flashed silver. The flautist hurried past with a thermos, the violist was carrying a box of sheet music, and the conductor kept walking a few steps, checking his iPhone, changing directions, and pointing in another. They all had backpacks and were looking around searchingly. When we saw them like that, it was clear that we couldn't go back. Do you understand? There was no going back. All that was left were the cranes. Red or yellow cranes, whose necks towered over the buildings. And then the one yellow crane, whose neck moved toward the east the very moment we looked at it.

Why did you think that you couldn't go back?

The entire context was gone. It's clear you don't know much. But why should you? We'd have been happy to switch with you. But back then we didn't know you. So we kept walking. The soft blue of evening had grown darker and changed into a glowing red. It was still very warm. Three motorcycles stood in a circle in front of a garage. It looked as if they were conferring. That's good, Peli said. The wind blew low over the ground. The leaves twirled on the nearby hedges. We kept walking straight ahead. After a while, we came to that wide, busy bridge that leads up to the Glatt Shopping Center. A noise of propellers came from above.

The glowing letters GLATT shone on the other side of the bridge, and behind them the illuminated shopping center and the Glatt Tower. The sky was now dark blue. We slowly climbed the narrow pedestrian path. Planes flew through the sky overhead, next to us cars drove over the bridge, below us other cars crossed endlessly in the darkness. A scrubby strip of woods began next to the roadway. The darkness, which slowly spread over everything, seemed to come from there. Clusters of trees, entire family clans stood here and there, and no one knew where they'd come from or what they were waiting for.

A few night animals awoke. Two birds circled high above the bridge, over our heads. A pedestrian, his shoulders drawn up, walked toward us. He was one of those people you could have easily wiped off a picture with your index finger. And we had the feeling that we could easily have been erased. The bridge itself was stable, the concrete pillars secure, the street signs well-hung, the asphalt was warm, and the white lighting on the bridge lit up.

We reached the parking deck in front of the shopping center. The lot was almost empty. There was just a large, hefty woman in shorts, sitting in the open back of a delivery van, playing with a ball. The sound echoed all the way to the last Burger King customers. There was a second car in the lot. Its back was open, too. A sunburned man sat next to a blond, curly-haired woman and yelled across the entire parking lot: Is it OK if we have sex now? A male voice murmured indistinctly from the car's speakers. The sunburned man didn't seem to understand it and yelled the same question over and over again across the parking lot. The woman next to him said nothing. We skirted the edges of the parking lot, looked up at the Glatt Tower, looked down at the dark strip of woods, at the roaring highway on the one side, at the Richti mixed use development and the Allianz building on the other. Next to them stood the UPC-Cablecom building. It had large square windows with broad, anthracite-colored hinges, in case you're interested. We weren't interested. But we let it all have an effect on us. Streetcars stopped at the Glatt station and drove off. We studied the view, the shapes of the lights, and the movement of the trees. It wasn't clear what the cranes were doing.

How late was it?

Around six in the evening. It began to rain if I remember correctly. Fat raindrops fell on the parking lot. The customers on the Burger King terrace fled inside, and then it stopped. We wanted to leave the Glatt Shopping Center, but didn't know how to get from the parking deck to the street below without taking the same way back over the bridge. We almost believed we would be stranded forever on this parking deck when I discovered a spiral staircase. We climbed down the stairs. The concrete gave

off an agreeable coolness. One parking level after another opened out before us. There were almost no cars in the parking garage and so we could hardly help but count them. On the first level there were three, none on the second, three on the third, and one on the fourth.

We've counted the cars, Peli said. And now?

And now we've also done that, I replied.

Peli: Was it worth it?

We'll have to wait and see, I answered.

Here, I should probably point out that it was unusual for Peli to ask if anything was worthwhile. Something in her seemed to have changed since we left Schwamendinger Platz. Well, if that's all it is, I thought and turned my attention back to the garage. There was the most room on the lowest level. We wandered around the parking spaces for a while, skirted the concrete walls, triggered the automatic lights, then sat down on the olive drab hood of the only car on the lowest level.

We sat in silence or brooded. At some point, I remarked that this car didn't necessarily need us.

And not just the car, Peli said grimly. Her eyes were dull, filled with shadows. I knew what she meant.

We stood up suddenly. At first we couldn't find any way out from the lowest parking level, so we climbed back up the spiral staircase, which looked as if no one had ever used it before us. Finally, we back under the open sky above the parking deck. Not much had changed in the meantime. The white delivery van was still there, as was the woman playing with the ball in its open back. From the other car, you now heard the man groaning.

It smelled of damp asphalt. The air had grown cooler.

And now? I asked.

They say there's a last door in the Glatt Shopping Center, Peli said.

And yet, something inside us seemed to rebel against this. Still, I'd add. Because we stood at the beginning of it all and had nothing to show.

How late was it when you returned to the parking deck?

It was already late. Just before ten, I think.

So you spent four hours in the parking garage?

Yes, we rested there for a long time. We even fell asleep for a bit. But I can't remember any dreams. All things considered, those were nice hours down there because it was so pleasantly cool.

Four hours is a long time. What did you do besides sleep?

Well, we counted the cars, chased the automatic light, and then it took a long time for us to find the way out.

Did you notice anything in particular while you were waiting? Other people? Cars entering or leaving?

No. We slept most of the time and I just told you about the quality of my sleep: deep and dreamless.

What model was the car you sat on?

It was an olive drab Renault Twingo. After we rested long enough and had returned to the parking deck, it was almost completely dark. The only light came from the Glatt Shopping Center entrance. We thought of how it was inside, the stopped escalators, the slide, and the ornamental flowers. The jewelry lay nicely on velvet; in the pet shop, the mice were awake. The hamster wheel started to turn; the fish rested near the bottom of their tanks. They say there's a last door in the Glatt Shopping Center. Peli repeated this in an imploring tone because she had noticed our hesitation, too. We were just about to go in when a man in blue coveralls pulled down the metal rolling shutters, then he stopped and looked at us.

Do you want to go in? he asked.

Peli: We don't want to keep you from anything.

Alright, he said, locked up, laughed, and walked away. As you see, we didn't make it into the shopping center at the time. Only later did I manage to get in in various ways. But at the time, we couldn't get in.

Fine, we said for the time being, and Peli kicked a tin can because one happened to be lying there. As I said, it was a hot summer. We felt charged by the heat, externally we had a silvery glow, internally we were bright and raw. Now and again laughter came out of us, though we couldn't have said why. We wanted to sink our teeth into everything.

Why the woman with the ball suddenly left the back of the delivery van, why she threw the ball far, across the parking deck and into the trees, and then went clamoring after it, we didn't know. But weren't there other things we didn't know? We looked at each other and climbed into the van. We found the key right away. But we still had no idea why, for what purpose we—as you put it—*stole* the van. But if I've learned anything lately, it's this: If something makes sense, then only in retrospect. You can be sure of that.

What do you mean by: *They say there's a last door in the Glatt Shopping Center?*

Astonishing. You really do come from a completely different world. Anyway. It can mean very different things depending on the context. For example: *Here we go.* Or: *Take it as it is.* Or else: *There your own personal way to transformation is open.* It all depends on the context. At that moment it meant something like: *Do what's right in front of you and come back later.*

And what does that mean?

One step at a time.

Why did you want to enter the Glatt Shopping Center when it was closed?

To look at everything in peace.

But at what exactly?

Everything—the escalator, the slide, the stores when they're closed. Why not? I think it's interesting.

And the sunburned man and the curly blond-haired woman on the parking deck? What connection do you have to them?

None. I think they were porn stars waiting for the director's instructions which came over the speakers. But that only occurred to me later. I did notice that the woman never said anything. Is that normal? I almost called the police.

Why didn't you?

Because that's when it occurred to me that they were just filming a porn movie. And I didn't want to overreact from the start. Besides, the police are often called for nothing and then have to act as if they were needed. And that leads to interrogations like this one.

And what about the other woman, the one in shorts sitting in the delivery van and playing with the ball? Why did she leave the van without locking it?

I wondered about that too. What was peculiar was that at the very moment when she threw the ball, a crane was spinning. No, that is, it was the other way around: The crane swung and she suddenly threw the ball across the parking deck and into the trees, then ran to the railing and climbed down it.

Where were you standing at that moment?

We'd just been turned away when we wanted to enter the shopping center. We were standing in front of the rolling metal shutters.

Did you go directly from the shuttered door to the delivery van or did you first go to the railing?

Straight to the van.

It was just before ten?

Yes.

How could you see that the woman *climbed down* after the ball? First, it was dark. Second, it's a smooth concrete wall.

Really? In any case, she did throw the ball and disappeared over the railing. What exactly she did then, whether she climbed down or just disappeared, I couldn't see.

So, she just threw the ball away?

Yes, as I said, when the crane swung.

What kind of crane?

A construction crane, of course. At the time there were a lot of them, surely more than a dozen. It was one toward the east, yellow, I think.

Look at this video. Do you recognize this woman?

Yes, that's what she looked like. And who's the other one?

The man is in custody. He's registered under the name Dominik Müller. Do you know him?

No, not at all.

He owns the delivery van.

I see, and why not the woman? She was sitting in it.

Her name is Antonia Maria Barrágan. You can see her here on the edge of the cargo hold, playing with a ball. But in the back there, that's Dominik Müller. She checks the time and stands up, but she doesn't throw the ball over the railing, she keeps playing with it as she approaches the man. She hands him something. And just then, right there, there you are and probably Peli, running from the left to the van.

Could we look at it one more time? I'll show you the crane. Focus only on the crane, please. You see, at the exact moment it swings from left to right, we enter the frame. We move from left to right to the van and get in.

What connection do you have to Barragán and Müller?

None, like I said. Why do you ask?

It doesn't often happen that a delivery van is left unlocked with the key in it in a parking lot.

But it can happen.

On August 3rd, Dominik Müller was stopped at the Italian border driving the delivery van you'd stolen. Twenty kilos of cocaine were found in the bumper. You are suspected of being involved.

Isn't cocaine usually smuggled from Italy to Zurich?

Normally, yes. But not in this case.

Listen, we have absolutely nothing to do with this. We had other problems.

Also on August 3rd, thirty-five kilos of marijuana were found on the ground on the lowest level of the Glatt Shopping Center parking garage.

Just lying on the ground?

On July 30th, you and Peli stopped at the Renault Twingo for a long time. The marijuana had been stashed in that car earlier.

Yes, and? What are you implying? Put yourself in our shoes for a moment. Imagine that it's very hot outside. You would go through a parking garage and count the cars. You would start at the top and work your way to the bottom level. On the top level, you'd count three cars, none on the second, on the third you'd count three, and on the lowest only *one*. Assuming you were tired because you walked all the way from Schwamendinger Platz to the Glatt Shopping Center, which car would you sit on?

I'd have chosen the middle car on the third level.

Why?

For the symmetry.

And in the middle car there was nothing unusual?

Not that I know of.

Then order some inquiries. You can't always turn to others for answers.

Don't change the subject.

We stopped at the Renault Twingo for two reasons. First, because we didn't have to choose between several cars, and second, because it was parked on the lowest level, where we were most tired, of course.

And you didn't notice anything particular about the Renault Twingo?

Yes, the color: olive drab.

Four days later, on August 3rd, the surveillance cameras recorded the following. The recordings stop at 5:34 pm.

Why do they suddenly stop?

Because of a power failure in the entire shopping center. The woman you see here—is that Peli?

Yes.

What is she doing?

You can see yourself! But what caused the electricity to go out.

Tell me in your own words what you see on this video recording.

Fine, if you can't see for yourself, I'll gladly tell you! There's this woman, I mean, it's Peli, who's pulling something out of her pants pocket. It could be a key, you can't quite tell, in any case it looks like she opens the olive drab Renault Twingo with whatever she pulled from her pocket. She opens the back right door, leans in. And now she throws something out of the car? You see? It's a package. Then another. And another. And another. And another... There's no end! 35 kilos, you said? Hunh, now another and another, a pretty good pace, oh was that the last one? Something else comes flying out! And now, she's shoving the packages here and there over the floor. She's creating a pattern. Then she gets into the car, comes back out and straightens three of the packages, tilts her

head and seems to examine them all—right? Then she nods and gets in the car—and now—oh, now it's all gone black. The recording breaks off there. What is it in all this that interests you?

You said that Peli was creating a pattern. I don't see any.

Pattern, sign... but it's important! You can't see it. It wasn't meant for you. I'll come back to that.

How did she get the key to that car?

Don't you have a car key?

So the car belongs to her?

If it belonged to her, why would she throw the marijuana out of it? Think about it!

Now look at this tape. Do you know this man?

The one getting out of the Renault Twingo? It's hard to see him. I can't say I do, no, he doesn't look familiar.

This is the owner of the car, Clemens Pohl.

Alright. Now you have the owner. What else do you want?

Let's go back to the delivery van. The van was photographed multiple times on the evening of July 30th. You see, first at 10:30 pm in the parking lot of the Guggenbühl Garden Center in Windisch. About an hour later at Wiesenstrasse 3 in Oberwindisch. What did you do in these two locations?

What nice pictures. Thank you! I had no idea we were being photographed. But to be honest, I'm not surprised. There are so many pictures being taken, there are pictures of everything. I almost forgot how good it looks, that Mercedes delivery van. I almost said *our delivery van*, but it wasn't ours at all. It would only accompany us for a short part of our way. Later, we lost sight of it much too early. But it's important to be able to let things go, otherwise you get too caught up with something

and it turns out badly.

It really does appear that the delivery van was parked for some time in—where did you say it was—in Unterwindisch?

Fine! That night we drove away from the Glatt Shopping Center parking lot. Peli was looking out the open window. She was looking for cranes, but the night had swallowed them up. We drove past construction zones, excavators, and barriers. Then we got to a gas station. It had a large selection of white wines, salted nuts, and cinnamon chewing gum. We said to ourselves, it's always a question of balance. And if you yourself are calm enough, that reassures others. And that's how it was. A little later, we started driving again, drank white wine, and ate the salted nuts and gum. I let an SUV provoke me for a few hundred meters, Peli drummed a rhythm on the roof with her fingers, and then we turned suddenly. We drove out of the city, past car dealers and long company buildings, past more construction zones, through the surrounding villages. The night was tepid, the lights soft. Everything seemed to have been waiting for us.

Peli eyed the houses greedily. They have no idea, she said. As so often, I had to admit she was right. Even the decorative plants had no idea, or the lawn furniture. Especially not the plaster statues, of which there were many that summer, probably more than ever before. How could it be that I'd never noticed them earlier? They stood innocently in the gardens and outside the front doors.

I slowed the van and stopped. Peli opened the heavy van door and followed a narrow path into a garden. The warm night flowed in the open window. My hands were sweating. I watched Peli as she went. She stood in front of a gray metal lawn chair with a yellow seat cushion. She seemed to be collecting herself. The grasses nodded or prayed, it was too dark to see which. A jolt went through her body, she lifted the garden chair over her head and a giggle escaped her as she stood there briefly with the chair raised. Then she carried the chair to the delivery van, opened the back doors, shoved it inside and slammed the doors shut very loudly, it seemed to me, but nothing moved. A few kilometers on, we found a stone swan near a pond. Peli Rouge bent down and picked it up gently, as if it might wake. In that moment, she

reminded me of those pictures of Jesus holding a lost lamb in his arms. The lamb hadn't even noticed that it was lost, but as soon as it was in Jesus' arms, it knew it was in a better place.

Not far from there—a mile south—a yawning plaster lion sat surrounded by lush reeds. It came too. No one objected. And so everything took its natural course. Apparently no one filed any police reports. We took something from everyone. Of course, it's not the case that we *liked* everything we took. Quite the contrary, in fact. But was this a matter of our personal taste? The things were simply there and you have to learn to live with things as they are. That's why we wanted more than two of each kind. Noah's done, Peli said as she lugged the third lion to the van.

You should know that Peli is strong. I could see her flex her muscles before she grabbed things. Soon the two of us had a ritual. When she came hurrying up with something, I would press the gas pedal. She would start running and throw it in the van without stopping, slam the back door shut on the run, and at what seemed the very last moment, she would swing herself onto the passenger seat next to me so that it looked like a robbery. I'd floor it with a howl. We hoped that someone would see us, but nothing moved. Were we disappointed? I'd say, rather, that we were struggling with expectations. Peli said that big changes always happened without being noticed, while everything was concentrated on trifles. That's why we'd only be at the center when we became unimportant. And when I think about it, I have to admit she was right. It's true that back then, we wanted the police to chase us. We longed for sirens and speed. But if you want something especially badly, then that's precisely when you won't get it. And now, when the police are finally taking an interest in me, it doesn't matter to me so much anymore.