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**BEHEMOTH**

Nothing is for real, everything is play, thinks Manon, knowing it would be better not to think about it. Her apartment is in a building with an inner, narrow, cramped courtyard. For days on end she feels anxious in the cramped apartment. These are unpleasant times. Manon uses her apartment for prostitution. Her pimp sends clients and looks in on her every so many days or weeks. Her pimp doesn't see a difference between real and fake prostitution, and maybe there is none.

Manon is pretending. In her free time, of which there is plenty every day, Manon cooks in the tiny kitchen or reads at the small, cramped table in the nook. The only mirror in the apartment is in the bathroom, which is small. She is aware of being anxious, but how else could it be for a woman who lives like that. She yields to the anxiety because it is expected of her; on the other hand, she is aware that she would feel that way even without the expectations. Her pimp doesn't use his name at work, but a nickname. Manon, too, calls him by his nickname, which could be translated as Big or the Big Guy. Manon doesn't know whether it refers to his build, which is big and imposing—the Big Guy, an odd, unfortunate nickname in Manon's native language, is broad shouldered, tall, and strong—or to his penis, which is supposedly big, at least that's what the girls who aren't pretending say, the ones who don't have reason to pretend when she talks with them, that's what they tell Manon, who is pretending in all of her interactions with them, and for that reason feels even more anxiety than she would otherwise, if she were really prostituting herself, and her pretending is that much better because of the increased anxiety. She has never seen her pimp's penis for herself, she doesn't need to, she didn't need an initiation or job interview, that's something in films and books, how would the other girls then know this, from where does the reputation of his prick come from.

At her table, Manon reads books in which people act as if they're something they're really not. She's reading a true story about a man who pretends to his family that he's a doctor, and every day he goes to different towns on his non-existent doctor duties, travels to fake conferences, and performs fake operations while he is in fact unemployed and borrowing more and more money, until the whole thing collapses and in a fit of panic, which Manon knows well from her dreams and life, he kills his family, all of them, including his children, and that's where the story ends—it ends with his attempted suicide, and Manon understands the ending well, how could it really be any different.

It's a good story, thinks Manon as she turns the pages, a story that can be summarized in several simple sentences. That's what good stories are like, but my story is a poor one.

She's aware there are too many holes in it, too many confused motivations.

Clients come and go, nothing special.

The girls that sometimes visit her—"girls" is what they call one another—sniff around her apartment when she's not looking, touch a scarf here and magazines there, and remark that it's nothing special. Manon's apartment faces the courtyard, nothing else. The courtyard is narrow and neglected, no one takes responsibility for it. The girls come one at a time—the apartment is too small for more people—and sit at Manon's table and smoke, putting out their cigarettes in an ashtray in the middle of the table, which Manon, who sits opposite them, empties every once in a while, as they remark on Manon's life and her situation.

It's quite alright, they say. Nothing special. Manon tells them about her most interesting clients, and they tell her about theirs, their clients are real and so are their stories, while Manon's are fake, just like her own story is fake.

Manon adapts her stories to theirs, her behavior to theirs. The girls notice, more or less. Manon knows they like to talk and she complies with their desire to talk. She laughs too loudly and often so as to encourage them to go on without end. She expresses her enthusiasm and fascination too often. Then a girl will look away, halt in a sentence, but then always go on, as if it's nothing. Manon acts as if she doesn't notice anything, and the pretending is infectious.

Sometimes they eat lunch together. Sometimes Manon cooks something, something small, a trifle, for those who'll eat, it's a role she likes, because she can forget about her other role. The girls pick at the food on their plate—my figure, you know, I can't... That's important.

Manon's figure is at the core of her sticking to her role. It knows better than she does what's real and what's fake, and it reacts to fake. When Manon loses her grip, it pulls her back. Her body is a hanger for clothes. And for something else as well, she thinks as she closes a book. You read too much, her pimp says when he visits, better put away the books. The Big Guy isn't bad, just rotten.

Her clients aren't handsome or ugly, they're just a means. And they're fake, a bunch of random features, gestures, and manners that amount to nothing.

When a client gets violent, Manon runs out of the apartment, pulling something on from the floor or hanging on the door, and locks the client in. He bangs on the door, looks out the window but doesn't dare jump from the fifth floor, it's a sensible fear, a smart fear that knows what to attempt and where to stop. The client notices clothes lines strung outside of other windows

but not Manon's and considers whether he can lower himself to the ground on them, along them and quickly realizes he's gone too far, stops thinking about hurting Manon, and thinks only about escaping, but the door is locked tight. Manon retreats to the landing or hides in the ground floor broom closet and calls her pimp. No one is on the stairs, the other residents stay in their apartments. Her pimp comes right away, always right away, he lives somewhere close by or is on his beat all the time. He comes alone or with some other man Manon doesn't know but becomes more familiar with at every such occurrence. Manon wonders if the man could be a pimp himself or if pimps hang out together. The Big Guy has a gun in his belt and an iron bar in his hand when he comes. Manon gives him the apartment key, the Big Guy goes in and whacks the client with the bar. This gives Manon satisfaction, she is not above that. She couldn't stand it if in this situation only her fear were real. When she hears screams, she returns to the apartment and looks at the Big Guy, who is way bigger than her violent client. She doesn't watch or listen to him. Sometimes the Big Guy breaks the client's fingers as he lies bloodied on the floor. Manon looks out of the corner of her eye. She walks around the apartment, turns away, and resumes her cramped life. Maybe she makes a cup of coffee to offer to the Big Guy or straightens herself out in front of the mirror. Only that which pierces deeply is real, and that's how it should be. Broken fingers are real. Manon sits at her table with the steaming coffee. Her pimp kicks the client in the head with restraint, professionally, enough to break his nose if it's not already broken.

The Big Guy isn't stupid, only strange, and big, and strong. It seems to Manon he knows something. If anyone can figure her out, she thinks, it's him, and maybe he already has but doesn't care.

The Big Guy knows what impresses the girls and what impresses Manon. He drags the client to the table, sits him opposite her, and talks with him, explaining the conditions of their relations, explaining his and Manon's situation. The client nods, and Manon, now calm, drinks coffee. The Big Guy talks quietly, and the neighbors never call the police. He takes the client by the hair, wraps his fingers in his thin, disheveled hair, speaking nicely, gives him a crack on the teeth with his bar, and keeps talking.

The client spits out two or three teeth, sometimes more. Manon doesn't look at him, only at the teeth on the small table. After shoving the client out of the apartment, the Big Guy sits back down, drinks his coffee, and gives Manon a friendly look, so to speak. Manon looks through him, any of the girls probably look through him like that, she thinks to herself.

When the Big Guy leaves as well, she straightens up. She carefully wipes the blood off the floor and table with a wet rag and gets rid of the teeth. She puts a hand by the table, wipes them into it, and throws them into the organic waste.

She gives in to the revulsion and satisfaction, and the satisfaction is something monstrous. She wishes she didn't feel it but she can't help herself. If everything has to be real, she says to herself, let this be, too.

After violent clients and the Big Guy's visits, she puts herself together. She stands in front of the only mirror in the apartment, in the bathroom, and looks into it until she no longer sees herself and sees just a fiction. A girl, a woman who recently arrived in the city in search of a better though not a different future, and met a pimp with a reputation for taking good care of his girls. A girl from Eastern Europe who changed her name and came here to earn enough in a few months to make up for several years of doing nothing or going to school at home in the depressed lands everyone is fleeing.

Manon has to commit herself to her role by working hard, otherwise she can't play it convincingly. The girls don't suspect anything. The Big Guy might, but if he does, it changes nothing for him.

Manon is not with the police, she's not undercover, that's obvious to anyone who sees her, and it's obvious to her, too.

Her apartment is long and narrow. It runs straight from the apartment door on the stairway landing to a single window that looks out onto the courtyard. It is an upper apartment, on the fifth floor, and the window looks south, so the windowless, small kitchen and bathroom squeezed into the east side are always dark. The table at which Manon has lunch and dinner and at which she usually reads is under the window. Her books are scattered over the table. They lie where she put them down. Her other things accumulate around the apartment, closer to the door.

Manon doesn't have an opinion about the apartment, she's its resident, it's her surroundings, and a mechanism for existing. She brought nothing to it and will leave with nothing. She doesn't like or dislike it.

She hasn't yet read a story about a woman with the same name and occupations as hers, she can't read such old books.

She doesn't wear anything really old or anything brand new, and the same goes for her apartment. The apartment isn't dingy, worn beyond recognition, but time and her clients have slowly brought entropy into it. Things accumulate.

Manon isn't depressed, only oppressed, but that's normal. Entropy advances relentlessly, as always and everywhere—that's normal.

Her clients are devils.

But they're bearable.

Manon pretends to be a prostitute and hides the fake money under a loose floorboard, aware that her pimp or anyone else who took it into his head would find it in minutes.

The money isn't important, what's important is this life. The money is just a means to it. Manon is at the table on which lies an unfinished plate of food she shoved aside, because of her figure, you know, her figure is important, too. Manon reads books in which people hide things in unexpected, counter-intuitive places, the same ones in which some hide themselves. In one story it's in a house, a large house of the kind Manon doesn't have, inside a smaller replica of the house, inside a yet smaller one, and another, and so on. In some other story it's a letter the protagonist is looking for, which is framed and hanging on the wall. That's her, the character and also the letter he's looking for.

Manon is going through the city, strolling along the gray sidewalks. All sidewalks are gray. She seldom goes out, not every day. The sidewalks are wet from the previous day's rain, the trees in the park are dripping. She passes unnoticed. Like any girl who's not looking for clients, in public she acts like she's someone else, and so she can be herself, but that's dangerous, though that's alright. Her steps are restrained, bashful, heavy—a woman among other women experiencing discomfort.

It rained but now it's no longer raining. All the same, she has a compact umbrella, the forecast is poor. She's going to the store. Sometimes a girl will bring her something from the market or store. Now she's going to the store.

Traffic lights can be seen dimly through the rain, their colors barely distinguishable.

When she passes one of her girls at an intersection, she doesn't stop to talk but just slightly nods. That's nothing unusual, no offence taken. That's how it goes, thinks Manon, and doesn't break her stride walking along the sidewalk. The girl doesn't have a memorable name or face, nor does Manon, at least for herself.

She seldom looks in the mirror, she only uses it to adjust herself.

She wears copper rings on her fingers, what do they mean to her?

Looking right and left, she cautiously enters the store where she shops for things. The cash registers are on the left, four of them, two are staffed, two aren't. At the first two are women in company uniforms, their hair in a bun under company-issue cap. Manon doesn't envy them their work. She uses the right entrance, pushes the door separating outside and inside, space and antespace open. She knows what she's looking for on the shelves. She doesn't need a list, it's all in her head. Food, essential hygiene products, toiletries. Cleaning products, toilet paper. A little alcohol for visitors, male or female. She goes down the aisles with her cart. She's not wide and she shouldn't have to move out of the way but she does all the same. People have to leave their dogs outside the store, and once one was stolen. When she went into the store now, a black dog was parked in front, shivering.

The dog that was stolen looked to be a purebred. Manon can no longer recall the breed, but it was a beautiful dog. She remembers the dog.

Manon never shivers, or she shivers only when she forces herself to.

A cat or a tomcat lives in the courtyard of Manon's building. The residents call it by a name that in Manon's language would mean something like Paws, which is an apt and frequent name for a cat.

The cat knows all the residents and purrs at them, including Manon, whenever she goes into the overgrown courtyard. All the residents like it, the cat, there's not one who doesn't like Paws the Cat.

Manon remembers neighbors at home who hated cats, but these are different places and times.

Children, four of them, roam the store, chasing between the shelves and hollering. They're some kind of mixed race. One of them squirts by her when she's pushing her cart along the shelf with toys, another is hiding somewhere on the other side, and their mom is somewhere else with the cart. Manon thinks of tousling the black hair of one of them when he goes by, but she doesn't do it.

She picks all she needs from the shelves. Standing at the cash register as the cashier quickly scans the things she bought, a neutral combination of things, she thinks, combining them in her head in the order the cashier takes them off the belt—yogurt and bread, bread and apples, apples

and bananas, bananas and cucumbers, cucumbers and chives, then a bunch of greens, the combinations aren't interesting, then onions and peanuts, peanuts and coffee, coffee and a jar of spaghetti sauce, and so on, nothing remarkable, thinks Manon and gets out her money, while standing at the check-out, the little children and their mother are at the next register. They ask for candy from the shelf by the register, she shakes her head. They don't seem to be spoiled, just undisciplined. Their mom is like a very nondescript person, with average color hair, of average build, and average behavior. Manon wishes she could be so nondescript, fit in so well, but she can't change her body.

She heads home with two full bags, one in each hand.

Manon isn't tall but she's thin enough that she looks tall. Her limbs are extensions of her senses, like telescopes, and that's just how they work, even when she's out on the street. Outside, her thin body is tossed back and forth on the sidewalk just as the wind blows trash and fallen leaves.

The rain that fell yesterday and overnight will start again in the morning. She'll be soaked if she goes out without an umbrella.

She won't go out.

In her neutral clothes, she's like an umbrella on an oversized handle, its rainproof material giving cover.

She's rainproof.

If the rain soaks her, she undresses and is dry underneath. She's always dry inside. Inside: here. In her apartment and here inside. Her apartment is dry, the roof is new, although the building itself is poorly maintained and poorly located. Everyone rents, almost everyone, it's that kind of area. Manon hardly knows her landlord, he never comes to look in; if anyone comes, it's workers who repair something once in a while.

The lady in the apartment below hers once said the cat belongs to him, but Manon doesn't believe it. She's old enough not to believe everything.

Manon cooks when Arsinoa comes over. Easily, quickly, and surely, with small, regular, circular movements of her wrist, elbow, and shoulder harmonized in deft, rhythmic circling, she chops the vegetables on a large, heavy board, almost too large and heavy for her light body and small apartment, with a large knife the cutler just sharpened spraying chopped vegetables.

Arsinoa—that's not her real name, Manon doesn't know her real name—is one of the girls, and Manon calls her by her fake name out of politeness. Arsinoa comes up the stairs with the building cat, which shouldn't be inside, who let it in, asks Manon, and Arsinoa shrugs. Come here, I'll take you back downstairs, she says to the cat, but it wraps itself around Arsinoa's legs and then around her, Manon's spindly legs. When she goes down a few steps, the cat rubs up against Arsinoa and is still, it shifts and is still. Manon gives up, returns, approaches, and picks it up. The cat bears it stoically. She asks Arsinoa to please go inside and stir something a little, and carries the cat downstairs, where she opens the door to the courtyard and throws it out. There's no elevator in the building.

Arsinoa is stirring in the kitchen.

They talk over lunch.

Her clients like Manon's pretty face, at least that's what they tell her. She was born with it, but she also invented it some and made it that way. It's a face she cares for professionally and nonchalantly. They like Arsinoa for different reasons. Manon doesn't know which and doesn't ask, and Arsinoa doesn't talk about it. In bed, Manon uses her limbs like an elephant its trunk, which most of her clients like, while others want more meat, according to the Big Guy.

Manon doesn't eat meat and isn't meat; she pretends to be a piece of meat but is actually a piece of rock honed by very hard work.

We girls have to stick together, the two of them swap one-liners, and there's something in the swaps that Manon needs from week to week. A confirmation of companionship that is the more precious for being more fake.

Arsinoa, Svetlana, Kitty, and a few others.

The men in this milieu don't have names, at best they have nicknames. In the books Manon reads, the men are almost always named, sometimes the women aren't.

She's in her element when she thinks about books: in imagined stories that are imagined even if they are true. She doesn't have many on the shelves, because there are few shelves in the apartment; she's always borrowing them from the library and returning them, there's no room for them in the apartment.

She tells this to Arsinoa, who says she never reads. Manon shrugs and leans back.

The curtains are drawn wide and the window is open, so it's light inside, but it's starting to look like rain. The day Manon goes to the store is a day for rain and a day she doesn't have clients.

It rains a lot here. There are a lot of clients. The girls like to go out together, but aren't usually free the same day. Manon never goes along, though she knows it would probably be good if she did.

They make themselves coffee after lunch. Arsinoa pours water into a pan and puts it on the gas. That's how they make coffee in Manon's homeland, not here, but Arsinoa has visited a number of times and knows what she has to do. They don't talk about where they're from, which suits Manon, and clearly suits them all, it's something shared into which she has settled nicely with her non-history. Sometimes they exchange recipes; as Arsinoa says, domesticity is a safe haven and recipes are the homiest thing besides their homes in the career they've chosen, or were forced into, or some combination. Manon likes to cook or at least pretends she likes to.

She stands with the others, she's one of them. Some knit or sew. Arsinoa lives in a two-room apartment and has a sewing machine in her living room. Manon visited only once.

## chapter 7

This is already her third apartment, but the apartment question isn't important at this point. She could move ten times without getting any closer or not move at all and be no farther, but it seemed best to her after the change to move away from her pimp physically and bodily as well, and so she packed her belongings and came here, to this new location.

She told her pimp she was going to work somewhere else, and he took it well, he understood. That didn't surprise Manon, anyone would understand her going to work somewhere else, it was a nice opportunity no one would let slip through their fingers, and the opportunity was even nicer for her, for Manon, even more important, but it wouldn't have been right to show or admit that to her pimp.

Manon doesn't think much about the past, distant or recent.

Now she only works hotels, the clients are rich, her apartment is unremarkable, and no one cares where it is or what it's like or what's the rent. The apartment is in a building on a street named after a locally prominent poet who lived in the city. Manon looks for a book of his selected poems, which she buys and reads.

She seldom reads poetry, she doesn't find purchase or support in it.

Manon knows she's on the right path, any girl in her place would know it. The way you know you've succeeded in this occupation is that you no longer have a pimp but a madam.

In this city, especially Madam Van Rink.

Her old pimp didn't cause trouble. When she met with him and told him she was going to work for Van Rink he whistled and congratulated her.

They were the ones who contacted her. She didn't have to do anything, she was in the right place, knew how to deal with clients the right way, and someone must have informed the madam, and they contacted her even before she contacted them.

One of the madam's main girls called on her, that was still in the old apartment, which Manon doesn't miss, it was as unremarkable as the one she's in now. The girl rang at the door downstairs. Manon asked who she was over the intercom, it was late in the evening and she wasn't expecting anyone, neither clients nor any of the girls, or Ling, the day had ended and the evening was clear, and Manon was sitting in her reading corner, reading something under a dim light, the kitchen still smelled of the dinner she had prepared for herself, it was going to be a pleasant evening, and then there was the ring.

The girl introduced herself, Manon didn't recognize the name, she spoke with a slight Russian accent and when she said Van Rink, Manon let her up. She asked her what floor; the fifth, fourth, or third? she thought to herself, everything a little mixed up, shifting, one time just like another, places, people, and things spinning in a circle, and that's good as it should be, Manon should spin and spin, faster, like a figure skater that pulls in her arms, she has to spin and spin until an adventure falls into her hands and carries her off, she thinks and then immediately stops thinking.

She's not worried they found her. It was no secret how and never was, she asked the girl, and the girl told her, via this and that client, via this and that girl, not her pimp or Ling, via a third party, and that made sense.

Later, Van Rink took care of something with her pimp, some formalities, Manon didn't get involved, these are civilized times and places, and a person doesn't have to understand the bureaucracy in order to become a cog in it, a cog in the machinery.

Manon sits on the inside sill of her apartment window and looks into the street. The window doesn't look out on a courtyard but onto a street, the apartment is a little larger than the last one and some of its windows look out on a yard, and others onto the street. The apartment is on the third floor of a building that doesn't at all differ from other buildings in this part of the city.

It's exactly where it should be, that's useful, and even if it weren't, the sense of that would be pleasant.

It's where the right clients can find it, now all she has to do is sit on a shelf and wait for them to come by and choose her.

It's daytime, the wind carries daytime smells by.

Manon sits on the shelf and listens to indistinct, amplified noise coming from far away. Low tones, of which there are least, reach her first, then mid-tones slowly grow stronger, and finally high ones. Manon knows what it's about, protests were announced for today and now the protests are here. Manon steps away from the window, back inside, to her table, where she glances again at the spread-out newspaper in which the protests were announced, all about it. Manon doesn't know the size of the crowd—yesterday's newspaper predicted many thousands—that is slowly approaching, she guesses it will pass by her window, too.

She returns to the window, everything smells good. Manon inhales deeply and relaxes, if before she was tense.

It's now seldom she feels anxiety, the last weeks she has felt at ease, free, and she doesn't quite know why, but she doesn't question it either.

Everything is natural, this life is natural, she hardly ever thinks about who she is and what she's doing, and she never thinks about why.

Now her clients are rich and polished, everything is very professional, she can play everything out with grace, and charm, and distance, nothing touches her any longer.

I've become thick-skinned, she thinks, or thin-skinned as gauze, everything blows through me, in one side and out the other.

She no longer gets cold, it's that kind of time, a person doesn't get cold.

The glass in her windows and some items in her apartment, the glass items among her furnishings, begin vibrating from the deep bass drum beats or maybe the huge, low-tone amplifiers, Manon thinks. The glass in the kitchen cupboard, which is poorly framed. The wine glasses on the upper shelf, two touch and with the drums' rumbling the touch becomes humming and buzzing. Hearing the sound, Manon gets up and goes to take a look.

The drums thunder, Manon imagines the drummers walking alongside one another drumming, not exactly always in unison, and the sound spreads, the explosions turn into thunder only with remove, distance, thinks Manon, up close it's only a clean pop, a terribly loud, sharp, unbearable pop that shatters the sky, and earth, and a person altogether.

Some people appear at windows on the other side of the street, some closing windows, others opening them. They shoot a glance at Manon and then look away, as she herself does, that's the polite way. Manon carefully leans out of the open window, just a little, to see down the street, and the procession gradually comes close enough for her to understand that the music, the drumming, is recorded, that it's the sound of the amplifiers on a trailer pulled by a small truck driving at the head or almost at the head of the group.

The girls here keep much more to themselves, than the ones before, especially those with the Big Guy. They seldom see one another and Manon doesn't invite them over, and neither do they invite her. They eye her suspiciously, but that doesn't bother Manon, because they eye each other the same way, seeing each other almost only when they accidentally happen to at their base, Van Rink's, when they have some business with her.

They talk casually, about trivial things. I could care less, says one of the girls, Agnes, about the upcoming demonstration, it doesn't concern me, Manon nods, it doesn't concern her either. I

don't have time for ideas, says Agnes, I don't have time because I work hard every day, while these people have too much time, it would be better if they minded their own business.

They're all the same, says Agnes, and Manon nods. All the politicians. They should all be fired, not just one of them.

Agnes is beautiful, they're all beautiful here, in some abstract sense, she's not human, Manon doesn't understand her and in a certain sense doesn't want to.

She herself is ever less human, her body is more and more a cluster of forces or vectors, she's more and more automatic, and that is liberating. Her limbs are more and more a ball of tentacles.

She colors her hair blonde, Slavic blonde, like wheat, it's a very specific color, hard to find in stores. Manon finally found it in some corner store owned by a Polish immigrant who spends entire days and nights in that market of his. Most of the small store owners are Arabs, but he's Polish, and in addition to the standard alcohol and cigarettes and not very fresh fruits and vegetables the store sells various unusual Polish products, things Manon had never seen, all kinds of unfamiliar brands of chocolate, laundry detergent, and even hair color, that specific color Manon buys, and as the Pole scans items, she thinks about where he got it all, how he brings it all from Poland and why, he probably drives it himself, she thinks, he must return to Poland with a van every week, visit his family, and at the same time pick up goods, probably goods that fell off a truck, maybe goods that are just about to expire, and he applies new labels to them, but the labels don't look new, the labels don't look like anything, Manon doesn't trust the Pole, and the color works and doesn't ruin her hair.

And she's exactly right, exactly as she should be, and before she even puts the question why she has to be exactly like that, she's already elsewhere, doing something to keep busy, maybe washing a glass or making herself tea or coffee, maybe reading at her table or on the couch.

She finds instructions for making a braid on the internet, on YouTube. The girl in the video does it in a few minutes, the first time it takes Manon almost an hour, she's never made a braid and her hair doesn't cooperate, like tentacles, and her fingers don't cooperate and they're like tentacles, they catch and get tangled, but with each try it gets better, but in any case, what's most important is the photo and the photo is now ready.

She doesn't have TV here either, and even if she had it, she wouldn't watch it much.

She still reads quite a bit when she has time.

She doesn't always have time.

Now she has a lot of time.

Now she's straining her eyes to make out the first lines of protestors.

Now mid and high tones are reaching her, the buzzing of objects in her apartment is indistinct, because it's spreading in too many frequencies, everything is now vibrating with white noise, which means it's not vibrating at all any longer.

There's something significant in that thought, thinks Manon, but she could again get caught up in analyzing it, so she stops there, sucking in external impressions without categorizing them.

Her window is wide open, so the sounds rush in along with scents, it's a beautiful day.

They will pass by her window, that's what the newspaper announced, the march's planned route is described in the newspaper, the streets that will be closed on account of it are named, including Manon's. She doesn't recognize the names of many other streets. She supposes that she often walks them, but she doesn't recognize their names.

The first lines of the march are black, a Black Bloc, but Manon doesn't see any trouble, nothing is ready to happen, nothing major, the police are just standing here and there on the street, Manon see when she looks down, and more are gradually coming out of side streets.

They're still far away, she decides, but the front lines are all in black.

They came around a corner, but the corner is way far away.

The police are only getting into formation, taking up positions, there's no panic among them, no rush, it will be some time before the demonstrators get here.

Manon won't join them, that wouldn't be smart. Girls like Agnes and her look out for themselves, they don't go to demonstrations, the girls work hard and play hard and don't have political convictions, except very opportunistic ones. If she was still with the Big Guy, it might be different, but she's not.

Now she can see the head protestors as well, behind the Black Bloc, she sees a truck, a small truck with amplifiers whose thundering brought her to the window, she sees the whole convulsion, a huge number of people, it seems to her like many thousands, many tens of thousands or more than a hundred thousand, she'll read about it tomorrow in the newspaper.

Her new apartment is right downtown, close to institutions, and the protestors passing by her are going to the institutions. An expensive apartment in a nice building with no character, and

on a noisy main street, one of the city's thoroughfares, down which mounted police once chased the common people, today cars purr up and down it, but again, not today, because the demonstrators' route has been cleared, there are blockades on the city's streets, you can't get anywhere today, and Manon is not going anywhere, she doesn't have anyone to meet; today her clients are demonstrating or being demonstrated against.

The street below is empty, except for the police, the demonstrators are approaching slowly, calmly, relentlessly, dressed in different colors, gradually becoming as loud as the music from the truck.

Everything is quaking.

The Black Bloc looks straight ahead, they look derisively at the police, their banners stretch across the entire street, and those following them have banners, Manon reads them as they pass by.

Someone sees her at the window, someone she doesn't know; he doesn't see her as Manon, he sees her as a woman at a window, a girl at a window, Julija. Someone next to him notices him looking up and looks up, too, and then several more people, men and women. Manon is sorry she didn't close the window like the people across the street.

They wave at her to come down to the protest.

Manon shrugs her shoulders, she won't, she can hear some calls from down below, the calls escape from the clamor, and Manon can't decide whether to step away from the window and close it or act as if she doesn't see or hear them, but she can't do that, it's too late, but all the same she keeps sitting, she doesn't move from the window.

It goes on a very long time, the whole crowd passing by, and she's at the window the whole time, when the last ones go by she steps away and closes it, now she can close it.

She retreats to the bedroom, which faces the yard, not the street, the din still reaches her through the apartment.

This apartment is the best one yet. She likes the drawers that open without sticking, and the floorplan, which is more functional than the ones before, there's enough room, a good layout. The bedroom is on the inside, there's a balcony, living room, and kitchen on the outside, the kitchen and living room are in once space, she likes that, Manon knows it's not typical for this area and this old building. The apartment must have been recently renovated, it's in too good of condition not to have been, and it must have been completely renovated, radically, a new wood

floor, new wiring, new walls or cut outs in old ones, the supports that bear missing walls' weight and all traces of changes are invisible, everything is tied up nicely, it just right for her, she thinks and wishes the noise from the main street would die down, it bothers her.

She shouldn't have hung out on the window, she kicks herself, that was dumb.

No traces of changes, no faded lines that might show where the old walls ran, she thinks as she slides a hand, her fingers over one of the bedroom walls on the other side of which her apartment continues, an ante-room, she thinks and draws the floorplan in her mind in order to place herself, to orient herself again.

The apartment isn't hers, but how else can she talk about it, she thinks.

Listening devices could be built in here, she thinks as she slides her fingers over the wall. Down here, in the lathes beneath the plaster. She drags a nail over it, a little remains under her nail.

Or in the lights, and wherever else, she thinks.

She can't take everything apart. Finally, she knocks on the wall, where there shouldn't be anything beneath the plaster, and she actually hears nothing, the sound of the knock is dull and full, not hollow and empty. Sturdy brick that conceals nothing.

On the street, the crowd of demonstrators moves off, their shouts become quieter, and the music becomes more and more quiet, the drumming, the drumming, now she'll be able to reassemble her thoughts into a manageable bunch, she thinks and goes back to the window overlooking the street, opens it, leans out, and takes a look, but the crowd is no longer visible, it can only be heard, more and more quietly. She pulls back, she pulls her whole self back, including her long hair, closes the window, and looks through it just long enough to see the first person who dares step into the empty street after the cowboys and gunslingers, he stretches and says, what a beautiful day it is today!

The protestors who passed by anticipate the summit that will take place in the city, which will be full of politicians and statesmen, but that's not important to Manon, Geerts has been here all this time.

Geerts is always there.

She has never seen him, she only recognizes him from photos and videos and knows quite a bit about him, which people he associates with and what he likes.

Several weeks before the summit, they all gathered at Madam Van Rink's, all the girls, and she said there would be a lot of clients. That some had already called her, far in advance, and that

there was a lot of interest in the girls and it would be worth it for each one to take as many as she could, every day, as much as possible, that there would be statesmen and politicians and operatives and secretaries and translators, hundreds, thousands of people, and that there would be translators' secretaries and office managers and public relations figures and protocol supervisors and aides to protocol supervisors, seating planners, and flower arrangers for conference tables, Van Rink went on enumerating them, and besides them, journalists and their editors, photographers, reporters and light men, and so on, but the latter don't interest us, we're interested in the politicians and statesmen and highly placed functionaries, and there would be a big crowd of them, it would be an excellent opportunity, and if the girls would be ready to take on a little more, that would be very nice, the clients would be important, important people, and that's always good, for you and for me, the madam said, and Manon nodded along with the rest, they would just have to manage, the hotels would be full and it will be hard for you to even find rooms, she said, but somehow we'll manage, I'll work it out, don't worry about it, now let's get on with it, she turned and looked at them, one after another as they sat on the salon furniture, let's go, and we'll see how much moolah we can make.

Each one spoke up, Manon didn't feel like standing out, she said she'd be able to every day, and why couldn't she, she thought. The summit would start in three days, Manon doesn't know why the protestors were out in advance, and in two days she would have her first client connected with it.

Van Rink is different than Manon expected. She expected a pompous, tall woman with polished manners and appearance, but she got a surprisingly tiny woman who, given the chance, which is thankfully seldom, runs on forever and uses words like "moolah." Manon thinks, one more person who's hard to read, an unreal person, as Van Rink went on and on at the meeting, got sidetracked and at moments she realized it and came back around, Manon would glance at the other girls and wondered whether they took it the same way, she got carried away by the madam's enumerating, and that was awful, she now thought, that something like that could happen to her, but it clearly happened to all of them, as the madam spoke, she asked herself how someone can get the position she has and no one can contradict her, her success, everyone who is anyone in the city in this line of work knows Madam Van Rink, Manon thinks, but how can a woman who runs on like a village busybody, telling vulgar jokes along the way, gets to where she is. Pull yourself together and listen, she told herself, even if the others aren't listening, you just listen, she told

herself, and Van Rink talked on, about how the police would probably be a little more watchful and they, too, should be more watchful in the hotels, that she didn't have enough money to bribe every one of them, but that on the other hand they would probably attend less to them and more to potential terrorists, and maybe because of that the whole thing would actually be simpler, and Manon asked herself and asks herself at the moment she's recalling this, what it was, what it is beneath the surface, and she didn't know how to get to the bottom of it, maybe Madam Van Rink is through and through exactly what she seems, she thinks, maybe there's nothing underneath, maybe deep down she's just an ordinary small town busybody who at some point came up with enough indecencies that people had to start taking her seriously. Only the World Cup in soccer, she said, was a bigger jackpot, but a jackpot for others, we have better clients than the ones who come to the World Cup, although it's true that politicians attend, too, she said.

An unusual woman, thinks Manon, but things function as they're supposed to. She's thorough. If anyone would bring her the client she was waiting for, it would be her, in this city that is certain, she thinks, and her people know it, too, her group.

She says to herself, she's forced to say it out loud, that this now begins in earnest. Don't think about it.

She should go out to clear her head, but a person gets distracted outside as well.

She should redo her braids—she doesn't do it automatically enough for it to go smoothly, she still has to think about it, pay attention.

She goes into the bathroom and starts, in front of the mirror.

Those ones, too, the anti-globalists, visit others and different kinds, like soccer fans, she thinks. Van Rink didn't give them even a word of mention, only politicians and operatives and their assistants.

Three days later, on the day the summit begins, there are again demonstrations, but elsewhere in the city, Manon doesn't go to watch them and doesn't see them, she reads about them on the internet.

There's a series of clients, all foreigners, and Manon does her job, the clients are satisfied, and she's tired, but she's once again where she has to be, and that's fine, she thinks.

The summit ends, the foreigners leave, once again it's all the same.

Manon doesn't feel young or old, she doesn't feel at all, and that's fine.

Since she's been with Madam Van Rink, she only works hotels, she doesn't have any more home visits, but she still takes care the apartment is in good condition, that it's tidied up as it should be, that everything works, and that the leaves on the plants she has on the window sills and elsewhere in the apartment are pointing in the right direction.

She doesn't have pets, it never occurred to her, even for an instant, to have a pet, and the building doesn't even have a pet, the yard is empty and nicely arranged, pigeons and once in a while some cat sit in it, but the cats belong to other buildings that surround the yard, no one in Manon's building feeds them.

From the very beginning Van Rink emphasized there would be no meetings in the apartment, that's beneath us, you, Manon, what a nice name, said Van Rink, it's a great aunt's name, only in hotels, and good ones, she said, I hope you know how to act, but of course you do, I take Balthasar's word for it, Balthasar is such a sweetie and he really liked you. You don't need a probationary period. Is that your real name? she asked, and Manon nodded. And where are you from? she asked and Manon told her. We'll take care of it, said Van Rink.

So now she only works hotels, her apartment is just for her, and in these surroundings once in a while something pops up that would better remain underground or in the bud. But she conscientiously nips it all, it's nothing. She tells herself.

At least the anxiety is gone, she thinks.

How much longer will this last? she thinks.

*excerpt from the novel translated by Timothy Pogačar*