

Simon **URBAN**

Extracts from the novel *Plan D* (2013)

Chapter 1

Wegener undid the flies of his cords, pulled out his penis with two fingers and relaxed. There was absolute silence for a few seconds and then hot urine splashed on to the dry leaves, coming in spasms; one gush dried up and then came the next, swelling into a steaming arc and then dwindling again. Wegener adjusted his legs wider, counting along. For the tenth, the eleventh, for the twelfth time the thin jet built itself up and shrank away, suddenly interrupted, and then there were only drips.

If you have to leave the crime scene, at least don't come back with piss on your shoes, Früchtl always used to say – and then not managed it himself. Nobody would have noticed his shoes if he hadn't said anything beforehand.

Wegener leaned his head back. Stared up into the night. The metal cladding on the pipeline glinted in the moonlight, a silvery strip vanishing between the trees on either side. That strip would glint on and on if you followed it, if you kept the same distance from the

pipe and let the moonlight hit the metal at the right angle, through a blurred labyrinth of oak trunks and the concrete pillars of the pipeline viaduct, on and on for kilometres over the rustling leaf-strewn ground to the sector border.

This pipe is still lighting the way to the West, thought Wegener. This pipe is the big fat Ariadne's thread of socialism. He couldn't help laughing. The men at the top would sway their heads on their shoulders and say: Superficially, perhaps, but if you look closely you're sure to notice that this pipe is in fact lighting the way to the East, deep into the Socialist Union, into the Urals, all the way to Siberia even, and that's a crucial difference – it's only the gas that goes West, nothing else.

Wegener shook his penis, pushed it back into his trousers and zipped up the fly. In the depths of the forest, the forensics team's lights flared up, glistening spots dissected by tree trunks, more and more of them, quickly melding into one big spot towards which he was now heading half-blind as if towards the light at the end of a dark tunnel, stumbling over branches and shrubs until it was light enough for a glance down at his shoes: two stains on the right, one on the left.

Lienecke and his team had set up eight spotlights, four on either side of the pipeline, which was no longer glinting silvery but looked mottled and mossy, the largest of the many shabby supply channels slicing East Germany into ever thinner strips. Behind the fluttering tape, the man from the Energy Ministry and his security officers had long since petrified into bored, gawping spectators. Next to them, the generator droned on its trailer, red cables snaking like tracks of dried blood up the hill through the fallen leaves. Lienecke was handing out boxes full of rubbish bags. His assistants began raking leaves and tipping them in the sacks with the diligence of

ants, as if the Politburo had just banned dried leaves with immediate effect.

As always when he watched Lienecke and his team at work – diving, climbing, digging, taping, scraping, bagging, sorting, sweeping, scratching – Wegener was glad he had nothing to do with their jigsaw puzzles, glad he could rely on these people who had realized early enough that fortune and misfortune depended on a drop of sweat, sperm or urine on a shoe and that inexhaustible patience was a rare gift which could get you a long way, especially in the German Democratic Republic.

None of the assistants talked as they worked. Lienecke said nothing either. There was only the drone of the generator and the rustling of the leaves. Now and then a branch cracked. The six stolidly rummaging men in their white overalls looked to Wegener like strangely composed animals in a laborious but fruitless search for food. This forensics species communicated via invisible signals, marked out their patch telepathically, possessed a secret choreography, stalked across the forest floor like a lethargic population of albino storks in synchronized slow motion, all in a row, one step per minute.

Wegener turned to the two uniformed men leaning against their Phobos and smoking, showing not the slightest appreciation for Lienecke's leisurely ballet. The People's Policemen gazed into the darkness, presumably envying their colleagues who had driven back to HQ more than an hour ago with the hunter and his two drooling mutts, drawing on wonky cigarettes, their noses inverted chimneys blowing the smoke downwards, although the smoke was not to be fooled and rose skywards undeterred.

Wegener squatted down. He grabbed a handful of dry leaves. It hadn't rained here for days. Maybe even for weeks. The leaf-collectors could hardly reckon on tyre tracks. Footprints were even less likely.

All that remained was the eternal hope of unthinkingly spat out chewing gum, paint marks on oak bark, scraps of paper slipped through holes in trouser pockets. Wegener stood up again and leaned against a tree trunk. His watch said quarter past nine. With a bit of luck they'd start packing up here at eleven. Without, some time between one and two.

A detective is distrustful twenty-four hours a day, Früchtl had said, and a distrustful detective stays until it's all over. A distrustful detective distrusts his colleagues, forensics and the murder victim, because he's distruster number 1. First and foremost, a distrustful detective distrusts himself. The only thing you can trust in is God, Früchtl had said, and you can't even trust in Him in this country.

Lienecke's crew was gradually nearing the pipeline. Bulging sacks piled up next to the generator. The bare forest floor was a wrinkly brown skin rife with rooty veins and holes but bereft of chewing gum and scraps of paper. Lienecke raised his right hand. His men nodded.

These are the pictures that will run around my head in a hamster wheel when I'm ninety, thought Wegener, on a permanent loop in my retirement home bed, once even the last of my synapses have given up the ghost and the saliva drips onto the sheets in threads. While the others are tormented by fever dreams of gorse scrubs and gammon steaks and their old Free German Youth buddies, I'll see two smoking PPs by a floodlit island in the leaves, on which the Köpenick chapter of the Ku Klux Klan performs slow-motion dancing, stalking, rustling while a dead man dangles in the back-ground. And the nurse will say: 'There there, Mr Wegener!' and stroke her gloved hand across my last few grey hairs, almost tenderly, as if her hand didn't have a glove on at all. 'It's all over

now, Mr Wegener, that was back then, your forest, your island in the leaves, your ballet, your dead man, the chubby PPs, the man from the Energy Ministry. That's all behind you now, it played a role in your life for seven or ten days, maybe even a leading role, but not after that. Never, ever again.'

Wegener noticed the tiredness suddenly grabbing hold of him. Wrapping itself stifflingly around his head, a foam mat as thick as a kerbstone, dampening everything, swallowing everything up. He wished he could have slipped right down the rough tree trunk into the dry leaves, curled up and asked Lienecke to turn off the lights, right now, all eight of them.

One of the PPs gave a grunt. Wegener turned around.

Two bright dots flickered across the forest path at a distance, coming closer.

Lienecke raised his head, nodded and looked down again.

His assistants abandoned their digging and delving and adjusted the angle of the front spotlights. One after another, the cones of light shifted towards the pipeline, illuminating a sombre open-air stage: let the show begin. The long, gleaming Phobos Prius came into view. Its oval radiator grille sparkled. Above the car the corpse suddenly shone too. Dissected from the shadow of the gas pipeline, it stood out glaringly against the forest's black, a limp marionette floating on a single string. This dead man's turning his back on us all, thought Wegener. He may be hanging on a rope but that doesn't mean he wants anything to do with the police. His secret's all his. He's got no time for nicotine-addicted PPs, Lienecke's leaf-collecting robots, a dog-tired detective. No one here is interested in the others. Every- one here has his own job staked out: hanging, smoking, staring, searching.

For a second, Wegener was conscious of the element of the bizarre

that every crime scene had about it, the unreal combination of stopped time and automated activity, the objectification of a human being, the enforced, random community in which none of those pre-sent had ever been interested. The coincidence that ended up with one of them hanging and the others digging, and that could easily have been arranged the other way around.

In the present combination I'm a Hauptmann with the People's Police, thought Wegener, and the skinny old man strung up over there with the expensive coat, silk tie, gold watch and knotted-together shoelaces is the victim. Seventy-five or eighty years' life ended beneath the Main Pipeline North by the shores of the Müggelsee lake, for whatever reason, and the whole drama starts up again – the investigation factory, the questions, the lies, the hunches. There are only ever five possible answers: natural causes, accidental death, suicide, manslaughter, murder. One outcome is just as little use as the next, every result comes too late, only ever satisfying bureaucrats' ambitions and dulling relatives' pain but remaining forever inconsequential.

By this time the bouncing rays of light on the forest path had transformed into two headlamps which swept down the slight slope, glided through the hollow and turned in a dazzling arc. The exhaust pipe wheezed. A Wartburg Aktivist, thought Wegener, old but well looked after. The car came to a halt by the generator. The wheezing died down. The ministry delegation gaped. Two aluminium tail fins shimmered, a cloud of rapeseed oil drifted over, that familiar overheated deep-fried stench, and then the headlights went out, the interior light went on, a blond-haired man dug about inside a bag, put something in it, opened the car door, clambered out, greeted the gawping spectators, slammed the door and walked up to Wegener.

‘Doctor Sascha Jocz,’ he said with a slightly breathless voice. ‘Forensic Medicine Mitte, duty pathologist.’

‘Martin Wegener, Köpenick CID,’ said Wegener and had to endure a long, painful handshake.

‘Colonel Wegener?’

‘Captain, Doctor.’

The doctor didn’t smile while squashing strangers’ hands on the job, so Wegener didn’t smile either. Jocz released him and viewed the pipeline, the dead man, the gleaming Prius, the bags of leaves. His eyes wandered from right to left across the scene, then back again from left to right. Scanning it in, thought Wegener. Jocz turned around, strode to his Wartburg, snappily opened the lid of the boot, snappily extracted a large metal briefcase, snappily slammed the lid of the boot, checked his hair in the back window and ran a tender hand across his parting.

The man consists almost entirely of straight edges, thought Wegener, a square skull with a square chin. Below that, square shoulders. Legs like steel struts underneath his trousers, presumably. Muscled girders for marching extra snappily.

‘Who’s rattling so late through the night and the wind?’ Lienecke ducked through beneath the crime scene tape.

‘Ah, the Goethe of the forensics department.’ Jocz held his hand out to Lienecke and both men grabbed hold without moving a muscle in their faces.

‘Evening, Ulf.’

‘Evening, Sascha.’

Wegener wondered who was pressing harder, Ulf or Sascha.

‘Problems with the starter motor?’ Lienecke liberated his hand to scratch his head. The pathologist had won.

‘They can’t get it right. Or not with the winter production

series. It's the second one I've had this year. The pinion keeps on breaking.'

'How much is a starter for a Wartburg?'

'Too much. But I hear the new Agitator is a whole different matter.' Jocicz snapped open his metal case and pulled out a white protective suit.

'You know someone who drives an Agitator?' asked Wegener, looking up at the sky. A strong wind had caught the tops of the trees. The whole forest started rustling.

'I even know someone who drives a Phobos Datscha.'

'Me too,' said Lienecke. 'Chairman Krenz.'

Jocicz smiled a square smile and climbed into his suit.

'What are you expecting of the gas consultations with West Germany, Hauptmann Wegener? My mother always says all politicians are criminals. A detective like you ought to have a feeling in his water for that kind of thing.'

'Your mother's probably right,' said Wegener. 'One thing's for sure – no one's going to get arrested in the end.'

'You're right there.'

'Lafontaine will stuff his face with sausages in Weimar,' said Lienecke, 'while they spend twelve hours arguing over the price of gas, and then he'll go home again. In his VW Phaeton with heated seats and a working starter.'

'Twelve hours isn't nearly enough.' Wegener looked over at the dead man now moving slightly in the wind. The rustling in the treetops had grown stronger. Leaves floated through the floodlight like huge golden snowflakes. 'Who can eat more sausages? Lafontaine or Chairman Krenz?'

'Take a look at Chairman K, the human marsupial. He can beat anyone hands down at sausage-scoffing.'

'That's a six-month stretch right there, Sascha.'

'I said human marsupial, not bacon-belly. Human marsupial only gets you three months.'

Wegener turned and stared out at the darkness, suddenly getting the feeling someone else was there, someone with his eye on him, observing everything. Someone leaning on an oak tree with night-vision goggles and a shotgun microphone. Someone who'd have a lot to tell about what had happened here over the past few hours, and who only wished the search crew would finally end its pointless hunt for clues that didn't exist, because they'd all been removed long ago. So that the observer of the observers could go home at last too.

I can smell you, thought Wegener, you spies, behind your bushes and walls and masquerades. If there's one thing I can count on it's my nose, and you stink, brothers, down from the attics, up from the cellars, out from behind the rubbish skips. I can sniff out your cigarette butts, your bugs, your telephoto lenses, your self-assurance – that most of all.

Wegener was still staring.

Lienecke and the square-edged pathologist were looking at him. Nobody said anything.

Rustling of leaves and droning of the generator, nothing else. Whoever had been standing there now withdrew, soundless, invisible. This would be the moment to kick the PPs in the pants, thought Wegener, then run into the forest with torches until the fleeing shadow might detach itself from some tree trunk, the shadow you never caught anyway but at least you'd know it was really out there.

One of Lienecke's men called out, bent down, kneeling in the dead leaves. Lienecke put on his glasses and climbed over the fluttering tape.

'German forests,' Jocicz said, 'are a source of joy precisely up to the moment when you have to comb them for fingerprints.'

Wegener stepped up to the tape. 'Mind if I take a look at your work from close up?'

'Were you apprenticed to Josef Früchtl?'

'Thankfully, yes.'

'Then I can't say no, can I?'

'No,' said Wegener, 'you can't.'

Jocicz plucked at his protective suit. 'There's another one of these in the case.'

Now the four spotlights on the other side of the pipeline were adjusted as well. The dead man was suddenly backlit, the pipe a dirty bulge of bent metal, welding seams and fat bolt nuts. Awoken by the sudden daylight, moths circled on the air, alive once more. Tomorrow the cold autumn will send you plummeting from the branches in your sleep, thought Wegener as he clambered into the much too large plastic suit. The PPs turned away, smoking on into the darkness.

Jocicz was waiting by the tape. He smiled at the sight of a detective wrapped in cling film, making his square face a little rounder. Jocicz strode off, Wegener following him across the cleared ground, in a semicircle around the right-hand concrete pillar supporting the pipeline. With every step, a little more of the hanged man came into view, now turning hesitantly to his visitors until he finally showed a wrinkled waxy face, a bent beak of a nose, bushy brows, white beard.

Jocicz stopped in front of the dead man and shone his torch down him centimetre by centimetre. Pushed up the trouser legs and examined the pale, hairy calves. Pressed the thumbs of his gloves into the pallid flesh. Photographed the slightly curled hands, the discoloured fingernails, the joints. Eyed the worn-out shoes with their laces tied together, photographed them and said nothing. His

movements had lost all their snappiness. Like a cat, he slunk around the limp body, made notes, climbed on a ladder, fingered the back of the corpse's head, the grey hair, the astounded face, shone his torch into the dead eyes and came down again.

Wegener watched. By the time Jocicz was done the silhouettes of the two PPs were sitting motionless in the car, chins on their chests. The group from the ministry was caught up in discussion. Lienecke's men had cleared the complete inner cordoned ring of leaves. One of them was loading the sacks onto two covered trailers, the others walking through the woods behind the tape barrier with hand-held lamps. Drunken outsized fireflies, they wouldn't find anything as long as they weren't supposed to find anything.

'If you wouldn't mind,' Jocicz had unpacked his friendliest voice. Wegener tried to muster up an interested face despite his tiredness. 'You did want to get close up.'

Jocicz pushed the folding ladder slightly closer to the pipeline, climbed up on the right-hand row of steps and made a gesture of invitation to follow him on the left-hand side. Wegener tugged a pair of gloves out of a pocket in his protective suit, pulled them on and tested the ladder for balance.

'Perfectly safe,' Jocicz called from above.

'A distrustful detective checks the ladder,' said Wegener more to himself than anything else, and climbed up until the dead man's back was forty centimetres away from his face. Now he could see the dark ring eaten into the long neck by the rope. Below them the Phobos Prius waited like a hearse that had been ordered too soon. Two dents in the black roof.

Jocicz looked over the hanging man's shoulder, his hands feeling, his rubber ingers climbing up the taut rope, clenching into a fist, pulling short and hard on it.

Wegener looked Jocz straight in the eye. Jocz held his gaze.

'An execution,' said Wegener.

'That's what it looks like,' said Jocz.

'Or a staged execution.'

'That's possible too.'

'When?'

'About forty-eight hours ago,' said Jocz. 'Probably slightly less. Cause of death not strangulation but a broken neck. They put him on the roof of the car and drove off, a metre and a half's drop: exitus.'

'OK.'

'Shoelaces tied together and a hangman's knot with eight turns, Hauptmann Wegener. A good chance of the shit hitting the fan.'

'So I noticed.'

'And the clothes look like he's a bigwig.'

'Absolutely.'

Jocz ran a hand through his hair. A small yellow leaf that had caught in his parting floated down. Wegener noticed that the body smelled. Of sweat, of dull mould and the gradual onset of decay.

'What are you going to do now?'

Wegener clutched the cold crosspieces of the ladder with both hands. 'Investigate. I'm the investigating officer.'

'An investigating officer who can't arrest anyone.'

'That doesn't matter, nobody ever gets arrested anyway,' said Wegener and climbed slowly back down the ladder.

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CHAPTER 20

eastside resort – the west in the east. Number 1 Alexanderplatz, Berlin (E). Wegener put the business card back down on the polished cherry-wood desk and reached for the contents list of the minibar – 2 cl Putin Vodka, only 9.20 euros/27.60 marks, 0.2 l Red Riding Hood Sparkling Wine medium dry, only 12.50 euros/37.50 marks, 0.33 l Radeberger Pilsner, only 7.40 euros/22.20 marks – and then he laid the list aside and knelt down on the bright blue carpet, which was decorated every fifty centimetres with a golden yellow imitation of a royal crest, soft and mown short like the green of the Wandlitz golf course.

Wegener slumped onto his front. Buried both hands in the fluffy surface. Pressed one cheek firmly to the floor. Rubbed his face against the silky wool, to and fro. So that's how the East German girls felt when they got taken from behind in the Russian gas boys' and West German money men's penthouse suites. Humiliated and secure and fucked.

Between cherry wood and brass. Shoved across the royal pile by

a coked-up Russki or a blind-drunk Swabian. No risk of carpet burns thanks to the quality floor covering.

Wegener rolled onto his back. Almost more comfortable than his own bed. The ceiling was the creamiest-coloured of heavens, replete with white plaster mouldings and little light-bulb stars. Luxury lighting. Saffron-toned wallpaper. The same colour as the tachometer in a Mercedes: Egypt at sundown. A male voice in the corridor. The voice came nearer. I've never been so close to Egypt, thought Wegener and shuffled across the cotton-wool carpet to the minibar, took the mini bottle of Red Riding Hood sparkling wine out of the cooler, tore off the thin skin of aluminum foil and unscrewed the cap. Then he reached for a glass from the shiny cherry-wood shelf next to the shiny cherry-wood desk, poured the foaming wine into it, fished the pack of Ültje peanuts out of the glass dish, kicked the door of the minibar closed with one foot, shuffled ten metres to the wall of sand-coloured curtains and drew the shiny material aside with two hefty tugs: a single window from floor to ceiling, sound-proof double-glazing and below that Berlin, Alexanderplatz, an endless ocean of civilization in greyish-blue dusk, an urban oceanic trench with prefab reefs and concrete cliffs, full of schools of Phobos, darting forward fitfully and then stopping, then darting on again, always in search of the fish in front of them with their glowing fourfold eyes, seeking out an asphalt road through the darkness. You aimless idiots, thought Wegener, you think you can move freely but if you take a single wrong turn you'll smash up against the glass wall of your aquarium.

Then he drank. The icy, bubbly wine scratched his throat, refreshing him, making him wide awake, fizzling out to a breath of scented steam. Wegener leaned his forehead against the cold windowpane and stared down. So that's how they felt, the West German businessmen, the EastSide foreigners for whom it was all just a trip to the zoo, dictatourism with the romantic kick of a safeguarded adventure – charge the danger to my credit card, one night in jail, honey, wish me luck. The detached house in Frankfurt, the yacht in Hamburg, the Porsche in Munich, the loft kitchen in Düsseldorf – it all looked much more attractive from East Berlin; the distance was a magnifying glass, making their possessions properly visible.

It was only the detachment that gave their own wealth a really impressive volume: returning home to all those assets was suddenly the most valuable thing of all. They could savour all they'd achieved in a new light now that they'd missed it for a day or so, the distance had brought them closer to it now they knew that no one in the whole of East Germany had a detached house, a yacht, a Porsche or a loft kitchen to call their own, that they possessed more than an entire nation, that back in Düsseldorf you could be the loft-kitchen king of the GDR, that it was only socialism that could give them back their joy in capitalism.

Wegener opened the second wine bottle, stuffed the salty Ültje nuts in his mouth and gave a patronizing smile down at the Alexanderplatz aquarium. For a couple of minutes he was Hard-Currency Helmut, a West German businessman, an industrialist, a steel trader or a chocolate-factory owner, enjoying the prospect of going home to the Federal Republic and therefore the view of the Democratic Republic, suddenly able to admire its exotic capital city, to value its shabby hugeness, its tasteless giganticness, moved by its anonymity and disfigurement, by its crusted-over scars, by the omnipresent patina of rust, moss, dirt and grease, breathing its scrappy delights through the double glazing of the EastSide facade, hearing the morbid heartbeat of screeching trains, rattling engines and the dull silence of television-tower-deep dives into the dark recesses of a crumbling metropolis, tasting the oily Phobos exhaust fumes between the crumbs of peanuts, even smelling the

citrus-dust-floor-polish charm of the Stasi HQ entrance, the freshly mown grass of Marzahn, Karolina's artificial-flower Action deodorant.

Wegener smelled his whole country, the fusty mildew of the perspiring old buildings, the awkwardness of the frustrated youths, the self-destruction of the opposition activists, the porosity of the half-baked production units and Publicly Owned Companies, the self-aggrandizement of the state's self-presentation, the bitter-almond frustration of former fighters, the overpriced, soured West German cream in the Intershops, the iron mistrust of a people under surveillance, the greasy plastic jackets and fur collars of the old, the faint scent of Nautik soap, the resinous, cotton-reinforced phenoplast of the Phoboses, the nutty intimate cleansing lotion Yvette.

He smelled smoked pork, grilled chicken, Russian solyanka soup, Bino stock cubes, meat in aspic, potato dumplings, bottled peas, carrots and asparagus, Hungarian stewed peppers, the moist feet of young women in tan Esala nylon pantyhose, the fungus between their toes, the wet of their hairy armpits and fannies, he smelled the lardy bumcracks of the Politburo, the bland, stale omnipotence of the snoopers, the treacherous security of the workers and peasants, the verdigris of all the corroding bronze Lenins, the black-and-white pigeon droppings on the Palace of the Republic: he smelled the inevitable end that was coming slowly closer and yet was still so far away.

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Translated from the German by Katy Derbyshire!