



**Jochen Schmidt**

**A project for Otto Kwant**

288 pages

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German title:

Ein Auftrag für Otto Kwant

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Sample translation by Alan Robinson available

selected for new books in german

Otto Kwant, descendant of a dynasty of master builders, studies architecture and, to his amazement, finds himself in Urfustan, a post-soviet, Central Asian state with strange customs, strange laws and with an authoritarian leader, Zültan Tantal. He is here to work on a project with star architect Holm Löb.

But soon, Löb seems to have disappeared, and suddenly Otto Kwant is to build the new German embassy, and, by Zültan Tantal's personal invitation, the 'Palace of Democracy', all by himself. Before long, strange encounters, bizarre attacks and confusing sanctions mean that Otto Kwant only wants one thing: to get out of Urfustan. That turns out to be a difficult venture. On his flight, Otto Kwant comes across the villages of the German minority in Urfustan, hijacks a coach of German pensioners and repeatedly ends up in near-hopeless situations. With melancholy humour, Jochen Schmidt's new novel tells the story of Otto Kwant, who merely wants to make the world more beautiful and ends up in one of its most inscrutable corners.

„Jochen Schmidt is a genius. I have wanted to write this sentence for a long time, so that everyone will get the word ... (he) writes as tenderly as if he were in love with every word and every image of the world that he paints“

*Volker Weidermann, Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung (on Snail'sMill an Sugar Sand)*

„Jochen Schmidt is a virtuoso of entertaining and intelligent cabaret.“ *Alexander Cammann, Die Zeit (on Snail'sMill)*

„Schmidt is a kind, calm magician who regards the terrible miracle of puberty with detailed leniency and has a great sense for loveable shenanigans.“ *Stern*

„Odd, but true: a real fortune“ *Welt am Sonntag*

„So that's how it is: after reading this book you can't help but love Jochen Schmidt with all his lack of ambition, forgetfulness, envy of women's ability to give birth, and multiple layers of meaning...“ *Christoph Bartmann, Süddeutsche Zeitung (on My Most Important Bodily Functions)*

**Jochen Schmidt** was born in East Berlin in 1970 and still lives there today. He is a journalist, author and translator.

Jochen Schmidt

*A Job for Otto Kwant*

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Sample translation by Alan Robinson

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## **Chapter 1**

Otto Kwant reclined on his sofa bed, the least ugly model he'd been able to afford at IKEA, staring down in boredom at the document on his laptop screen: Daniel Le Bihan's intended preface to his coffee table book *Allotment Cabin – Colony – Heterotopia*. Although the text by this photography theorist and architectural newcomer was scarcely longer than his alleged bibliography, for days Otto had been unable to concentrate on his remarks, let alone make proof corrections, even though he did nothing else and restricted himself to one short excursion per hour to his favourite architecture websites, to admire the magnificent houses that were constantly being built around the globe, but which, oddly enough, you rarely got to see in real life. A fruit fly settled on the screen. Otto poked the cursor at it, to no avail, and noticed for the first time that once the cursor reached the edge of the text's white imitation paper background it looked like a rail track in cross-section. Otto pulled his shirt sleeve over his right thumb and wiped the dust from the screen. The spring weather succeeded only in making his room look filthy and shabby, so that his flattering notion in happier moments, of living in the creative chaos of a studio, was unmasked as a sad illusion.

By clicking on the button on the Home tab marked by a misshapen  $\pi$ , Otto turned on the formatting marks in the text, and dots appeared between the words which disappeared when he clicked again. If he repeated this fast enough, the pattern of dots seemed like neon lettering pulsating at night.

Otto discovered an extra space between 'disruptive' and 'design' and deleted it. Afterwards he felt the urge to print out the text once more, so that, with renewed impetus, he could read a fresh, now perfected version. But he'd still probably get stuck halfway. In any case who cared about the preface to *Allotment Cabin – Colony – Heterotopia*? It sounded as stilted, pompous and wilfully obscure as an art critic's eulogy at the opening of his artist friend's exhibition. For a week now Otto had been struggling with this task: during the day he allowed himself to be distracted by other things, at night he lay awake for hours dwelling on his precarious economic existence and fatal dependency on his job as proofreader at 'Sumptuous Sights' Press, which was supposed to finance the leisure he needed to avoid rushing the mandatory Open Space Planning assignment that he required to graduate in architecture and should have submitted well over a week ago. (In pursuing his idea of designing a playground for a refugee hostel and constructing a model of it that he could present in class, Otto had got bogged down in such extensive research that he wanted to take at least six months off, in order to dedicate himself to the project without any distractions. Designing an ideal playground, he discovered, went far beyond aesthetic considerations and demanded theoretical preparatory work. He had to compare material from different cultures that was difficult to obtain, incorporate insights from developmental psychology, cognitive sciences and urban ecology, and evaluate findings from participatory building projects.) He consoled himself with the thought that many of his architectural idols had never studied architecture or at least not completed their studies; Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Peter Behrens, Friedrich Kiesler – who would have enquired if they had a degree? On the contrary, it confirmed their excellence that they hadn't wasted time on such things, after wresting from the university whatever it could offer them. You didn't learn to build in a lecture theatre.

Of course, beginners found it hard to obtain commissions. That's why many architects had made their debut with a building for their parents. Robert Venturi had built a house for his mother (who preferred, however, the house next door in traditional nineteenth-century style): with this direct challenge to modernist purism, a single building had inaugurated postmodernism. (Otto admired the intelligence, the belligerence and the humour with which Venturi promoted his atrocious aesthetic in his books.) Instead of blocking him cognitively by regularly asking how his studies were going, Otto's

parents should have commissioned him to build them a new house. Perhaps one day it too would become an architectural icon and be donated as a residence where students would find peace to work, like the house that Richard Rogers had built for his parents in London. Otto didn't lack ideas, but first their old house would have had to be torn down to create the necessary physical (and intellectual) space, and Otto's parents were too timid for that, they simply didn't trust him. (Otto had had a sheltered upbringing in a largely windowless copy of Egon Eiermann, where you couldn't play tennis against the concrete walls because of their honeycomb structure. The biggest upheavals in his life had been the transitions from QUADRO to DUPLO and finally to LEGO. His childhood had been overshadowed by being forbidden to hang posters in his room and always having to line up his felt pens in their clear plastic case in a correct colour spectrum. On walks Otto's father always carried a refuse sack with him, to collect rubbish lying in front of buildings he admired.)

The unsolicited 'Sumptuous Sights' spring catalogue had yet again been sent to him, entailing a trip to the post office and hours of queueing. As lead title they were promoting a large-format coffee table book on the Burj Khalifa; the designers had outdone themselves and produced an 828-page fold-out, showing every single metre of the tower. It marked a victory for the head of the publishing house, Dr Rainhold Fagner, over the new art director, Brigitte Baran, who, as she'd announced in a strategy meeting, wanted to 'roughen up' the 'Sumptuous Sights' list. *Allotment Cabin – Colony – Heterotopia* was her pet project; she regarded Daniel Le Bihan as one of the most brilliant intellectuals of his generation. Allotment cabins, she maintained, were 'architect-free architecture' which unearthed the collective unconscious; as a building type, like kiosks, garages or public toilets, they were at the bottom of the cityscape hierarchy, but it was high time that architectural preservationists took notice of them. For once it was not architects defining contemporary building styles, but architectural amateurs constructing homes (where, notoriously, many architects failed) in variations characterised by a contradictory and playful process of imitation, rivalry, appropriated clichés, and improvisation. These structures were 'built jazz', she explained, excusing the fact that she sometimes struggled to find the right words in German – Brigitte had been transferred to Cologne from the 'Sumptuous Sights' head office in Paris at the instigation of Dr Fagner's influential daughter and designated successor.

Dr Fagner pointed out that visitors from Third World countries often confused the allotment colonies on the edge of German cities with the slums they knew from home. Brigitte Baran thanked him for this observation, because that was the very point: it was at the margins that newness emerged, who could resist the visual charm of a favela, not for nothing had allotment architecture in its Russian version famously served as inspiration for ‘Vishnyovyi sad’, a luxury settlement built by Le Bihan in a prime location in Moscow. This had landed him the Condé Nast Traveller Innovation & Design Award (Reader’s Choice), which admittedly didn’t mean a great deal, as there were about three dozen architectural prizes, whose names no one could remember, and which only served to keep alive the envy of one’s colleagues. The few people who understood what architects did regarded them as an unnecessary additional expense, while for the vast majority a well-designed house simply had to have a pitched roof and a spacious garage. Nevertheless, Dr Fagner had fixed on the Burj Khalifa as lead title, arguing that one had to keep an eye on the ‘bottom line’, and there’d never been a book in which the world’s highest building was reproduced entirely, so a novelty of that kind could make a big splash, particularly in the largely untapped Arab market. Besides, the sales reps had immediately been keen on this title (although perhaps they were only attracted by the buffet which had been set up outside).

Otto wanted to shut down his computer, but a prompt appeared, asking whether the changes should be saved – after all, he had deleted a space. He tried out whether merely restoring the space would satisfy the computer, but that didn’t work, the computer didn’t recognise that the document hadn’t been altered. On a superficial view, of course, the machine was right: the document’s external appearance hadn’t changed, character for character it was identical, but in a higher sense it had undergone a development, gathered experience and also aged slightly. Otto saved the text and changed the name of the directory where he stored his Word documents from ‘Taxts’ to ‘Texts’, something he’d been putting off for some time. He shut down the computer, put it on the floor next to him, closed his eyes and tried to think of buildings he’d design when his degree was finally in the bag and, after slaving for two years in some architect’s office, he could register with the Chamber of Architects and be authorised to draw up documents for planning permission. The images he saw were blurred, the forms couldn’t be pinned down, but for that very reason he was sometimes overcome while dreaming

by a burning desire finally to build something. After all, that was what he wanted, so why did he keep losing sight of his goal? But he still had to finish his studies and before that get together enough money from proofreading to finance the time he needed for his planning assignment. (Before he developed ideas of his own, Otto felt the need to devote all his efforts to the essential research that Gropius had regarded as the only path to discovering modern, practical, durable, economical and hence beautiful form. At stake was nothing less than an alternative blueprint for society in the form of a playground. A playground was not a marginal place in the city but its very heart.) There must be a way of making his visions a reality without resorting to sketches or expensive software, because his euphoria evaporated all too easily when it came to actual work on a design. And the tingling sensation he experienced while dreaming was sometimes all that reminded him that he was following his passion.

As so often, while dreaming of the future he had fallen asleep and was woken by his phone ringing. He didn't manage to tug it out of his tight trouser pocket in time to answer. Brigitte Baran's office had called and before long he was notified that he had a voicemail message. His mailbox already contained several messages from his mother, to which Otto didn't dare to listen, because he always feared that she'd want to inform him about the latest deaths in the family. He took a deep breath, tapped the display and waited for one of Brigitte Baran's two secretaries to answer. To his surprise, she answered herself. As ever, she sounded severe, her voice leaving no doubt as to the qualities she had needed to succeed as a woman in her profession. Otto was told to come to her office the following morning. What was that supposed to mean? Was he going to be sacked? But perhaps that would be his salvation? Perhaps a further deterioration in his financial situation would compel him to follow his path with even greater resolve, instead of relying on the security of a degree, in the footsteps of Le Corbusier, Mies, Gropius, Behrens and Kiesler? If he achieved so little with his time as in the last few days, then it might look as though he were doing nothing, however he was not doing nothing at all but rather defending himself staunchly against compromises. It took all his strength just to sit tight rather than prostitute himself.

Otto heaved himself off the sofa and went into the kitchen, to pop a handful of raisins into his mouth like pills. That raisins kept for so long deserved kudos. He checked the fruit fly trap that he'd

placed on a shelf. It consisted of a small bottle containing a brown liquid as bait, which stood beneath a barrel roof made of cardboard that was primed on the inside with glue. Fruit flies that were beguiled by the scent and approached the bottle would stick fast if they brushed against the cardboard roof. In the shop Otto had deliberated for a long time over whether to listen to his conscience and choose the slightly more expensive version of the trap, which came with the INSECT RESPECT® seal of approval because roughly 50 cents of the purchase price were invested in compensating the insect decimation caused by this product by creating insect-friendly habitats elsewhere, to counter the dangerous decline in insects worldwide, as ever more land was swallowed up by development: the ‘doughnut effect’, with desolate inner cities as the urban population spread itself into suburban housing, from which they were linked by car to the consumer goods industry, which necessitated increasing areas of land being covered over for roads, shopping centres, and car parks in front of shopping centres, for logistic centres and logistic centre car parks. In the end, with a sigh, Otto had donated the 50 cents. Now he contemplated the small bottle, on which once more several fruit flies had gathered, which, however, whether through skill or luck, had so far managed to avoid touching the sticky roof. Otto gave the arched cardboard a cautious tap, all the flies rose simultaneously to escape the danger, some flew straight to their death, while others fortuitously found the exit but didn’t fly far away from the trap. Before long they would turn back and repeat their mistake: it wasn’t in their nature to learn the right lessons for the future from what had befallen them.

## **Chapter 2**

Otto knocked on the glass door to Brigitte Baran’s office. Although she could see him through the glass pane, it seemed appropriate to knock. He hesitated briefly, uncertain whether to direct his index knuckle to somewhere other than the greasy mark apparently left by others who had knocked before him, or whether it was politer to overcome his revulsion and to knock just there, so as not to spread the contamination any further? Brigitte motioned him to come in, without looking up from the contact

prints that she was poring over. He entered the office, where floor-to-ceiling shelves contained multiple copies of all ‘Sumptuous Sights’ titles – to make space, authors were sent Christmas presents of each other’s books – while, in the gaps between the shelves, piles of glossy magazines proliferated which naturally not even Brigitte glanced at, on the overlapping topics of architecture, fashion, family, garden and ‘lifestyle’. On his last birthday Otto had been allowed to choose three titles from the list and had spent an entire afternoon trying to find one at least that interested him or would do as a present, even if only as a joke (half out of pity, half out of an opportunistic urge to ingratiate himself with his employers, he had settled on *Sleeping Rough: Edgy Homeless Fashion*, one of ‘Sumptuous Sights’ least successful productions). How the Press’s business model could possibly work was a mystery to him. Who would buy a pop-up book of the world’s most famous football stadiums? A cookbook with recipes for ‘Bauhaus canapés’? A coffee table book with the uniforms of every airline? Basically, it didn’t matter what the books were about; what counted was taking up so much shelf space in bookshops that they displaced as many other books as possible. If, after half a year at most, 90% of the Press’s titles were returned and pulped, they had already fulfilled their task as bodyguards for the 10% with some chance of selling. Otto secretly delighted in imagining how in the near future, when the last ancestors of digital natives had died out, people would no longer buy colourfully printed paper for which they’d have to pay rent for the rest of their lives, and the publishing empire, to which ‘Sumptuous Sights’ belonged, would collapse. But probably they’d shift in time to producing mail order catalogues for armaments firms.

Today Brigitte Baran was wearing a Hello Kitty wool pullover, white Adidas track pants and golden pumps. Her clothes seemed like a desperate attempt to make the most of the time remaining before she switched style to a charity gala outfit. Behind Brigitte Baran a muscular little person was standing on a stool and massaging her shoulders. Otto sat down on a Marcel Breuer Wassily Chair, whose armrests always felt trampoline-like on the elbows, and pondered how to explain his delay with *Allotment Cabin – Colony – Heterotopia* without giving away the truth, namely that he found the preface to the book embarrassingly pretentious and utterly superfluous.

‘Mr Kwant, what do you think of Berlin?’

‘The Berlin?’



‘Yes, the capital.’

‘Architecturally?’

‘Architecturally, atmospherically, perspectively, the whole thing.’

‘A bit far to the east, but still always worth a visit, of course. Why?’

‘Because we need you there, assuming you agree. Ahh ... a little higher up, please ... yes, just there, that’s so painful ... ow!’

‘Need? For proofreading?’

‘No, as project supervisor. You’re evidently no fool.’

‘What kind of a project?’

Otto felt exhilaration, because this possibly meant a chance to earn the money to buy some freedom, but also panic, because he sensed instinctively that in this environment he’d fall into depression.

‘Would you have time?’

‘Perhaps in the semester vacation.’

‘When’s that?’

‘I’d have to check.’

‘I think you shouldn’t waver for long. This job offers you a unique opportunity to take the next career step. We’re talking here about “Impro\Babel” ...’

‘The Microsoft of architecture?’

‘Are you being ironic?’

‘I don’t know, they’d probably take it as a compliment.’

Brigitte Baran stood up and paced to and fro behind her desk, while her physiotherapist, now riding piggyback, continued with the massage.

“Impro\Babel” has offered us a three-volume monograph to mark the company’s tenth anniversary and, by the way, they’ll pay for the production themselves. We need a project supervisor. The work will take six months. Perhaps you can impress Dr Löb. Higher up, ow!’

‘Can I think about it overnight?’

‘A samurai takes only seven breaths to decide.’

‘But I’ve still got to finish going through *Allotment Cabin – Colony – Heterotopia*.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ve already done that for you.’

‘And when am I supposed to go to Berlin?’

‘That’s up to you, you’ve just got to be on time. Holm Löb is expecting you tomorrow morning at 8:00 in his office.’

‘But I haven’t agreed yet.’

‘I have, though. And I hope you’re not going to make me revise my decision? You’re in the fast lane now. Seize your chance, you want to make it to the top, don’t you? Or have you got other goals in life?’

‘It’s not that I doubt my ability, but why did you choose me in particular?’

‘You’ve got influential backers.’

‘Surely you don’t mean my father?’

‘There are still some nostalgists in this house who respect his opinion.’

Much to his chagrin, Otto came from a dynasty of architects. During the German Empire his grandfather Otto had designed some monumental post offices and railway stations, during the Weimar Republic he had gone out of fashion and withdrawn in a fit of pique, before later currying favour with the Nazis and building housing estates (in fact, mainly replacing ‘Semitic’ flat roofs with pitched roofs) that were initially planned by SPD City Architects or Jewish developers, thereby cementing the Nazis’ ineradicable reputation for having done something for the little people. Otto’s father, Nepomuk Kwant, had become one of the most important church architects of the Federal Republic, his success earning him the nickname ‘Church-Kwant’. He had designed numerous brutalist churches, some of which had already been deconsecrated and had immediately become targets for the local press, which branded their exposed aggregate concrete facades and flat roofs as eyesores and frequently provoked their demolition. They were replaced by shopping centres or the sites were used for car parks. His purist but nevertheless monumental concrete aesthetic was interpreted by some critics as an attempt to atone for German guilt, other critics saw a desire to distance himself from the past and take refuge in abstraction, while still others detected a sinister stylistic affinity with Organisation Todt’s bunker architecture. Otto had already toyed with the idea of changing his name, but had lacked the courage to

do so, not wanting to disappoint his mother, who had given up her career as a stage designer to devote her entire energy to supporting her husband and taking on all family responsibilities. It was doubtless she who had persuaded his father to intervene on Otto's behalf.

The physiotherapist left the office with Otto. He was pulling behind him an enormous Wilson wheeled sports bag.

'You overpronate.'

'You mean I have flat feet?'

'Pes planovalgus. I notice things like that.'

'Is that dangerous?'

'Have some arch supports made. I've been wearing them ever since I was a child. They make you taller too.'

'Does health insurance cover that?'

'Two pairs in fact, if you get them to write "for hygienic reasons" on the prescription. And from time to time do everything backwards for a day, that trains neuromuscular control.'

'But I don't feel any pain.'

'You're just not aware of it. After the age of twenty everyone has arthrosis. No more maintenance-free years.'

'Thanks for the tip.'

'I'll send you the bill.'

'What bill?'

'For your consultation.'

'But I didn't ask for a consultation!'

'Just joking.'

'Got it.'

'What's actually so bad about "Impro\Babel"?''

'How do you mean?'

'All the others refused point-blank to take the job.'

'All the others?'

'It's been going on all morning. Can you imagine what Brigitte's splenius capitis feels like?'

## Chapter 8

Otto was woken by a woman moaning, followed by a muffled sound, as if someone were punching a pillow. It took him some time to make sense of his surroundings. For a moment he thought he was in his old childhood bedroom, but the flashy crystal chandelier would have been out of place there. Was his bed facing the window? Where was the door? Should he be at school and had overslept? Was he even alone in the room? Only gradually was he able to orient himself and to remember how old he was and how he spent his time. He'd already come to believe that he'd simply imagined the moaning when he heard it again, succeeded by a thud. Otto sat down on the edge of the bed and rested for a moment, because the heat made him woozy. He went over to the picture window, which apart from a small casement window on one side couldn't be opened, and looked out. The high-rise buildings stood in the dazzling sunlight like bleary-eyed early risers. Otto could see onto the roofs of most of them, surfaces that were obviously as little intended for inspection as the back of a bald man's head. Building materials were still lying around, ladders, wheelbarrows, cement sacks, paint buckets. The heads of lift shafts and serpentine ventilation systems reminded him that a house is a machine and modern architecture merely dealt with the screen a few centimetres thick which concealed the technical equipment. A plastic bag floated by like a jellyfish in the sea. The noise that had prevented Otto from falling asleep came from a large fountain in the hotel courtyard that kept loudly springing into action. On a terrace two floors below him Ilona was standing on a bilious green patch of grass, once more putting the shot against a padded wall. A uniformed hotel employee brought it back to her. Otto opened the casement, immediately causing such a strong draught that an unpleasant whistling sound came from the door of the room.

Otto took a long shower with 'Sham Poo' after figuring out that you had to turn the cubistic shower mixer like a pepper mill. The toothbrush was so hard as to be unusable; his gums bled and he

rinsed out his mouth thoroughly and waited for the red foam to disappear down the plughole, finally giving it a helping hand with his finger, to avoid leaving embarrassing stains for the hotel staff. He put on his clothes from the previous day and took the lift down to reception to enquire about his luggage, which still hadn't arrived. Instead he was given free admission to the National Renaissance Tower, a drinks voucher for the hotel bar, a hotel ballpoint pen (dried-out) and a tattered copy in German of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, which former guests who'd lost their luggage had obviously been given to read.

Löb was already sitting in the breakfast room, where Capodimonte porcelain flowers sprouted from the white-tiled walls. The suspended vaulted ceiling was painted with a botched copy of Boucher's *The Four Seasons*. On a platform beneath some plastic palm-trees stood a 'Red October' grand piano. As if they'd been wrapped by Christo, all the chairs had pink damask covers reaching to the ground, with large bows behind the backrests. Several flat-screen TVs were showing an ice hockey game, ensuring that, wherever one looked, one would not be bored.

A carton of rancid Meggle UHT milk in a gold filigree holder awaited him on the table. It came with stale cornflakes from a crystal carafe and a rock-hard pear. Löb was in a bad mood; he was having digestive problems and wanted to 'take it easy' today and stay in the hotel all morning. While Otto ate, Löb leafed through Otto's Moleskine notebook. He tore out a page and crumpled it up. Otto gave him an inquiring look. 'Perspective drawings of buildings are prohibited in Urfustan,' Löb said. Yesterday evening Otto had tried to sketch the view from his window.

Otto would stand in for Löb on the scheduled city tour that was obligatory for all visitors. Löb already knew Mangana, having carried out various building projects. A replica of Villa Hammerschmidt for the general director of the state aluminium enterprise had led to further commissions: businessmen from the capital, but above all from the provinces, had wanted the same villa but with special requirements, such as elaborate fountains à la Fontana di Trevi, or a glass-domed roof.

The lights in the room repeatedly went off and on. Otto and Löb looked round and saw the restaurant manager operating the light switch to make clear to them and the other guests who hadn't yet got up that breakfast was over.

Löb went up to his room and Otto arrived punctually at the meeting point in the lobby. The puddle had moved on slightly, perhaps it was a new one. Otto studied the jewels and diamonds on display in a kiosk: gold watches with Milanese mesh bracelets, a silver eight-horse-drawn carriage, and writing utensils, though the cheapest pencil with platinum-plated eraser tip and pencil extender with integrated sharpener cost \$290. To his surprise, Zarina appeared in the foyer, in high heels and a colourful silk poncho. She was not only the hotel's assistant general manager but also worked for the Ministry of Tourism. She again greeted him with a kiss on the lips.

'Did you sleep well?'

'Like a baby.'

'Like a baby?'

'Yes, very well, I slept very well.'

'How was breakfast?'

'I'm never hungry first thing.'

'Where's Holm?'

'I think the airline meal disagreed with him, he wants to stay in the hotel this morning.'

'Vodka with salt and rice is what he needs, that's good for stomach upsets. I'll have it sent up to him.'

They climbed into a black jeep. Otto wanted to fasten his seat belt but it had been chopped off. The driver smiled nonchalantly, as if to say there was no need for a seat belt, he had quick reflexes. This time a Christmas tree smelling strongly of cinnamon hung from the rearview mirror. Otto had to breathe through his mouth, as he found the smell unpleasant.

'What do you want to see?' asked Zarina.

Otto considered, then said: 'The old town.'

'The old town? There's nothing to see there.'

'Oh, I always find something of interest, especially when at first glance there's nothing to see. It's a matter of intensities.'

'I suggest we drive first to the new opera house, then the Urfustan mall. From there it's not far to the ice hockey stadium. Then we can take a look at the embassy quarter with its sculpture garden.'

After that we can have lunch in the German House. In the afternoon you can choose between the “Palace of Youthful Creativity” and the Presidential Library.’

‘Perhaps you could phone the airport again about my luggage.’

‘Do you need something?’

‘Contact lens solution. And a pen, mine’s run out.’

Otto had a headache, his contact lenses were burning his eyes, and he’d have been glad to have at least his discarded underpants with the Ivan Lendl pattern. The city tour seemed endless and he soon lost all sense of direction. So as not to appear rude, he photographed everything he was shown; that way, he at least didn’t need to look closely at things. The city consisted almost only of high-rise buildings, with endless expanses of green between them, or rather ecological succession areas (sometimes progressive, sometimes regressive), as the vegetation was often left to its own devices and sometimes even potatoes were growing which construction workers from villages had planted. There was no shortage of space and there would have been no need to build vertically. It took at least five minutes to walk from one building to another.

‘Why aren’t there any balconies?’

‘Who needs them? The apartments are large enough and even the smaller ones usually have a storeroom.’

Many buildings lay behind fences with video surveillance and it seemed as if they’d been scattered there arbitrarily, with no organic connection to the city. The uniformed security guards at the entrances were presumably intended to enhance the buildings’ prestige. Each high-rise building seemed to distance itself compulsively from its neighbours. Some were crowned by neo-Gothic pinnacles, others culminated in a glass pyramid, illuminated at night from within by the flickering of coloured firelight. A twenty-storey triumphal arch, which housed the offices of the National Bank and framed a vista of the desert, marked the southern end of an axis at the northern end of which stood a white palace with a portico supported by columns as tall as trees. (‘We’ve liberated Corinthian columns from the clutches of the bankers and restored them to the people.’) The building was surmounted by a revolving glass globe which seemed to hover in an icosahedron structure. Otto was so disconcerted by the sheer crassness of the design that he could hardly take his eyes off it. It looked

as though a child had been playing with building bricks. (Although that was unfair to Froebel's little educational blocks, with which Frank Lloyd Wright had trained his talent as a boy and still enjoyed playing with at 90.)

'Is that the President's official residence?'

'You mean the Architect of the Fatherland? No, that's the headquarters of the traffic police.'

'It seems to be an important institution.'

'You should really see all this by night,' said Zarina. 'The light is gorgeous. Above all by the river – we've got a river as well now, you know.'