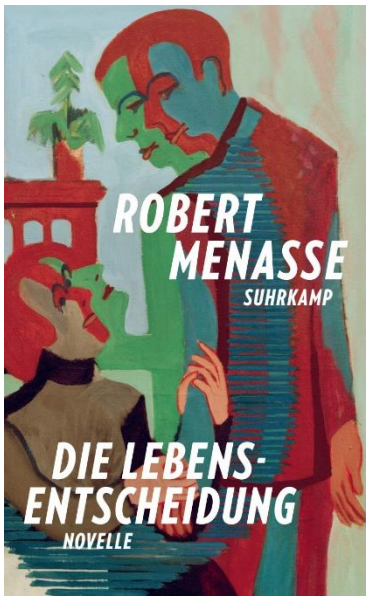

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The Life Decision

A Novella

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Sample translation by Jamie Bulloch

pp. 7 – 22

On 26 February 2024, shortly after midday, Franz Fiala took a life decision. This was the term that came to mind: life decision. He really believed that the choice he'd just made was one of these. It came with great pathos and this did him the world of good. He was going to rid his life of everything that had been frustrating him for a long time – more than that – everything that had been making him angry with increasing regularity and increasing vehemence. For him, pathos was the proof that his decision would be a release.

He allowed his gaze to wander around his office; he was already looking at things as if seeing them for the last time. The typical work cell of a policy officer in the European Commission in Brussels. You could tell his position in the hierarchy by the number of windows. He had two. Essentially it was just one window, but the two halves opened separately and therefore counted as two. Something, at least. The head of department had three windows, the director four, the director-general five.

On the left-hand wall, his locker, on the door of which he'd stuck a sheet of paper, a impersonal-looking certificate congratulating him on twenty years of public service in the European Commission, signed in 2016 by Jean-Claude Juncker. Beside it a small table with a

filter coffee machine for singles: ‘Aromaboy’. He disapproved of capsule machines for environmental reasons, but also because when you inserted a capsule the room didn’t smell of coffee, nor did the coffee itself. A packet of Melitta filters. The old red-and-black *Arabia* coffee tin he’d inherited from his father, who loved to say, ‘You buy your coffee at *Arabia* and your tea at *Meinl*.’ A forgotten world. The coffee cup from *Café Hegel* in Jena with the inscription *Coffee Milk Synthesis*.

In the corner between the locker and the left half of the window, a ficus plant, left behind long ago by a colleague, a miracle of survival. This plant refused die; it would literally rear up until he finally gave it another water rather than chuck it out. The L-shaped desk, on the shorter side his laptop that he took home to do more work, behind it a large screen. A paper diary in addition to the electronic one. A box of Kleenex. On the longer side of the desk three piles of paper: not urgent, urgent, dealt with. A biro, a black file, a red marker and a yellow one.

A still life. Deathly still.

On the floor beside the desk, a cardboard box with printed matter and brochures, copies of reports he’d worked on and which he could or should distribute, but to whom?

Franz Fiala turned around. If you weren’t sitting at the desk you could only take one or two paces in this work cell. He felt a twinge in his back. Lumbar vertebra? Kidneys? He froze and took a few deep breaths.

Had he lent a personal touch to the room? On the right-hand walls were two posters: *The Animals’ Press Conference*, referring to the environmental activists who in 1984 campaigned against the construction of a Danube power station on a floodplain that later became a nature reserve; and a film poster, Fellini’s *And the Ship Sails On*.

A small shelf. On it some folders and, beside these, a framed photograph of Fiala obtaining his doctorate, him standing between his mother and father, holding his certificate. It

was the last picture of his father, who always refused to be photographed after that: ‘I’m not looking photogenic today!’ He died soon afterwards. The man in the photograph was no longer his fun-loving father, but what cancer had turned him into. But his mother. The flourishing life, the new lease of life, the life that surpassed itself, the pride at having survived a background that euphemistically could be described as modest, from a so-called educationally disadvantaged family, without opportunities, despite her intelligence, betrayed by men and a reactionary male-dominated society – and now her son had a PhD. The photograph touched him. Because it showed his father so weak, his mother so full of life and strong, and Franz himself – so dashing. Yes, back then he’d been an extremely handsome academic, his beaming face in the photo signalling that he had a successful and happy life before him.

Franz Fiala turned away and looked at the door. On it were a variety of yellow Post-it notes with messages about where he could be found – in the canteen, outside with the smokers, in a meeting – which he stuck on the outside of the door whenever he left the room, depending on where he’d gone. He went over, pulled them off and tossed them into the wastepaper bin.

These few square metres, privilege and confinement, this mixture of bureaucrat’s cell and nest had been his life for many years. He’d lived for something he’d passionately believed in, he would never deny this. After the graduation ceremony at the university, his parents had invited relatives and friends of the family to celebrate his PhD at the *Zum weissen Rauchfangkehrer* restaurant. During the meal his father had insisted on giving a speech, which Franz could only remember because of an intervention by his mother. The speech was dull, uninspired, his father going on about how proud he was, obviously, and how pleased he was, obviously, and so on… In the middle of all this his mother hurled a Schiller quote at her husband: ‘*Tell him that he should venerate the dreams of his youth when he becomes a man!*’

Only Felicitas, a fellow student and Franz's best friend, had laughed and applauded; the Fialia family weren't that well acquainted with Schiller. Some of them were surprised by the fact that she'd used the word 'venerate'.

No, he had not betrayed his convictions, these were betrayed by the people in whose service he worked. By those unloved elite bureaucrats who were forever telling the uninformed, 'We understand you! Message received!'

Message? It consisted of slurry and manure! Franz Fiala stood at the window, tilted it open and would never forget this moment. The stench. And the silence. This unbelievable silence. He worked in the Directorate-General for the Environment, in Subgroup ENV.D.2 Environment, Natural Capital and Ecosystem Health. That day hundreds, if not thousands of tractors had descended on the capital, blocking the entire European Quarter, rond-point Schuman, rue de la Loi, the whole of Maelbeek. They had honked and hooted incessantly, thrown stink bombs, dumped dozens of manure heaps outside the Berlaymont and outside the building of his Directorate-General in avenue d'Auderghem, set car tyres on fire and emptied barrels of slurry in rue de la Loi. The entire European Quarter was blocked. And in house it had soon become clear that those up above, the ones with lots of windows, would yield to those down below – this had been apparent following the demonstrations in Berlin and Paris at the end of the previous year. Do you want to keep spraying glyphosate, poison that kills not only your consumers but you too? If that's what you want, then fine! You want to scrap the rewilding plans? Sure, why does a farmer need nature? Do what you want, then, everybody knows that nature is the farmer's enemy. Monocultures, no crop rotation, over-fertilisation? If that's what you want, then sure, you're the experts, go ahead and do all of that, just please take your tractors home! Too much bureaucracy? Forms? Franz Fiala was so angry that he felt like slamming his fists against the window. He'd spent years helping to develop the European Commission's *Green Deal* programme, the plan for environmental transformation.

Could this tractor demonstration make those up above shred these plans at a stroke? Less than four per cent of the European population are farmers and they get a third of EU budget subsidies. For that they can't even fill out a form? And they can't switch from carcinogenic toxins to alternatives with a ten-year grace period?

Franz Fiala was only a small cog, but nonetheless a cog in the wheel that wanted to make a better world. And he felt betrayed. He'd had enough. It was pointless. You couldn't work for a better world if it was better for powerful pressure groups to make profits with poisons and death.

When he was younger he'd been active in the student union and naturally had been frustrated on many occasions when elections or ballots didn't go the way he'd hoped. He'd stood for the Social Democratic students, but had been defeated by a Left List candidate, a lesbian woman who he liked, even though he couldn't understand why she always had to parade her sexual orientation like a beacon. Others suggested that one reason he might have lost to her was that he always turned up to university in a suit, which some people – the wrong ones – thought was a good thing, whereas most mistook his appearance as a sign he came from a stuck-up family. His mother believed that the university was a cathedral of education and so you had to dress properly. He had little money as a student and his father's cast-off suits cost nothing. Franz wore them with a sullen indifference while his mother was proud that her son, the undergraduate, 'looked like somebody'. At any rate he'd cooperated well with his colleague from the Left List; they reached sensible compromises on some issues and her contempt for men like him became affectionately ironic. 'I know people in the wrong body,' she'd said, 'but you're a person in the wrong suit.'

The farmers down in the street, however, were not interested in compromise; they didn't even know what the word meant. His anger grew. It was anger at the anger, this stupid, haughty, implacable anger of the demonstrators, or so-called protest voters, the 'people out

there' who had to be 'taken seriously', as the politicians were so keen emphasise, as if the only 'people out there' were farmers, right-wing extremists, fascists or idiots, who supposedly weren't fascists, they just voted fascist, and you had to keep the two separate, which was precisely what politics was: keeping things separate, then promising to build bridges and fill gaps. Now the farmers were filling rue de la Loi with slurry, you had to understand this, but why couldn't the boss, the President of the European Commission, say: We need to understand the anger of Herr Fiala too, we need to take his fears seriously! There were, after all, plenty of Herr Fialas in here and out there as well!

Why didn't he close the window? The stench of burning rubber was acrid. He'd rather have opened the window fully, leant out and looked over the street, but that wasn't possible. In the late 1990s there had been a spate of suicides by officials in the wake of corruption scandals. Quite a lot happened back then, before the much-maligned pedantic monitoring mechanisms of today had been put in place. Everything was cleared up, but because some officials had jumped out of the windows, these had been fixed so that you couldn't open them fully anymore.

The stench. And the silence. It was eerily silent. There were tractors down below but no more demonstrators, no pounding of the engines, no hooting, no whistling, no words bellowed through megaphones, no sirens. The farmers had gone for lunch, filling every possible pub in the district. The landlords of Brussels, they later heard, were very pleased by the demonstration. But as a result of the tractor blockade of the city's most important arteries there was no traffic anymore, no cars, no buses; the loud daily roar had been switched off.

The stench. The silence. As if the city were dead and decomposing. And his life decision. He would leave this room without sticking a Post-it note on the door, noting where he could be found; he would leave the building and never return. His work for the European Commission would soon be history.

Franz Fiala spent the rest of the day at his computer and on the telephone. He researched how he could leave the Commission without facing financial ruin. Soon his plan was settled. Early retirement was possible after at least ten years' employment in the Commission. Yes, there were deductions, but he would receive a large-enough monthly sum. He'd applied for the competitive selection process immediately following Austria's EU accession, and was one of one hundred and fifty successful candidates out of roughly two thousand. He'd become an official in 1996, which meant he'd served for more than enough years and he'd celebrated his fifty-eighth birthday the previous November. What did he have to do? Fill out some forms.

But first he booked a weekend flight to Vienna for his mother's eighty-ninth birthday. What he didn't know, of course, was that after this trip back home the term 'life decision' would assume a very different meaning.

[…]

When the test results came back, internists, surgeons and oncologists told him which therapy they now recommended. An operation? Chemo? But he'd already said he didn't want chemo. Was there a way of giving him another year with his head held high?

The doctors were split over Franz's future treatment. The renowned surgeon, Dr Jehlicka didn't think there was any point in surgery. '*Non credo*,' he said, shaking his head. He, at any rate, wouldn't carry out the operation. Dr Ableidinger, who stood in high repute after performing a precarious operation on a former president, insisted that Herr Fiala's results showed he was a borderline case. Of course his colleague wasn't wrong but, as he said, it was a borderline case. He believed that a Whipple procedure might well give a

significant increase in life expectancy. To put it more accurately, there was no other chance, particularly as the patient had refused chemotherapy point blank.

If, having had the risks explained, the patient were to give his consent, he would–

What's a Whipple procedure? Franz asked.

Putting his fingertips together, Dr Ableidinger said: Well. To put it very simply, a pancreaticoduodenectomy, or Whipple procedure, is a radical intervention in which the head of the pancreas, a large section of the duodenum, the gall bladder, the bile duct, half the liver and part of the stomach are removed. If the operation is successful, the patient will be surprisingly well for a while and–

Surprisingly well

For a while

Surprisingly well

For a while

Surprisingly well

For a while

I'm going to be cleared out, Franz Fiala thought, I'm going to become an empty shell. No, not empty, I'll still have my heart, a strong heart, and my will, and I'll be surprisingly well for a while, surprisingly well for a while – this stomped and pounded in his stomach and in his head and…

It's something you should never do. Spend half the night browsing the internet. He wanted to know everything about a 'Whipple procedure', what to expect and what the prognosis really was. Really? At least on the basis of millions of pieces of data from the internet. He very

quickly came to this information: After the removal of the pancreas diabetes is obviously a possibility because, without the pancreas, the body can no longer produce any insulin, which is why insulin injections are then necessary.

Great. And the insulin cartridges were already in his mother's kitchen. Despite all the love between them, he'd never wished for this kind of symbiosis with his mother.

You sit side by side, injecting insulin like others have a coffee together. You put on a record, listen to the orchestra and you play the sinking of the Titanic. We know we're going to die. But we'll do it with dignity, maybe over a glass of champagne and in selfless loving care for the other person – no. What fantasies was he having? He wept. It wasn't a sobbing, he wasn't shaking, his eyes became wet, then the tears ran, the sap of self-pity, thus setting in motion what he had read on the internet about emotional reactions following a cancer diagnosis. After the initial shock, which was positively numbing, came the phase of tearful accusations against fate, this mother of all gods: Why me? And, simultaneously, the phase of unrealistic hope. There are cases where people are inexplicably cured overnight, look, there's proof there and there! And if without a pancreas you get diabetes, well, you can keep diabetes under control, can't you? He had to talk to his mother. He needed to anyway, to tell her he had to go back 'to Brussels' again – for how long? The hospital stay after surgery was usually fourteen days, he read. But it could last as long as three to four weeks. He would tell his mother he had to go 'to Brussels' for four weeks. What then? In the aftermath of the operation the patient might suffer from shivering fits, a high temperature, and repeated vomiting, although medication was effective at helping combat this. And taking pancreatic enzymes to support the exocrine function, but eventually, around three in the morning, Franz accepted that he didn't understand a thing – exocrine function? And that he couldn't take any more in.