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Michaela Kohlhaas

A Novel

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Sample translation by Katy Derbyshire

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To be honest, I'd rather never have met her. I'd rather have done without all the challenges, embarrassments and impositions, but then I'd have missed out on the fun and geniality, on her abundance, her greed and modesty, then I couldn't have taken her to heart both as task and as friend, and I wouldn't be missing everything she did and was capable of doing and thinking, wouldn't be missing her so terribly right now. For her sake, I want to think there is a life after death; or rather, I want to think that for my sake and to understand the time after death as a place where I can find her again. There's no one already dead whom I'd like to see as much, as urgently as her: Michaela Kohlhaas, the great woman of the century, whose lifetime was not long enough to achieve her full greatness.

Michaela Kohlhaas was born on an ice-cold January night more than forty years ago. Her tamed young mother, who would always want more children but never be destined to have them, wanted to bite the doctor to dole out her pain. She whimpered and screamed as Kohlhaas's birth went on and on. She had never been louder and more vehement than during that night of

her daughter's birth, she would never be more forceful. Kohlhaas was born shortly before midnight in a long cold month; a relatively short life would lie ahead of her, but that wasn't clear at her birth. She grew up in a constricted country and learned over time: most countries these days tend towards constriction. The unruly, rowdy, rebellious life that Kohlhaas was to lead was her delight and her demise. She had no siblings but many sisters-in-arms, though few could match her courage.

At school, Michaela Kohlhaas was an exemplary pupil, the *apple of her parents' eye*; the words *obedient* and *diligent* could have been invented for her. The world seemed to have entrusted rules to the young Kohlhaas for safekeeping; indeed, she obeyed every rule, including and perhaps especially those she did not understand. She was almost a servant to rules, which was later to seem outright ridiculous to her, but that's how it was: for years, she was eager to satisfy the rules, for that was exactly how she'd been brought up by the state, the school and her parents. She was a trimmed tree, a hedge constrained into the shape of a faerie, she hedged her grudges, she was hair cut into a shape that didn't suit her; she was contained in all kinds of ways. Her cage was wrought of concrete, an entire room, though it was called a *box room* and it never went to her head. Kohlhaas – a daughter of hardworking parents once unable to conceive of a life without work, parents who had long since died of vague, useless illnesses caused entirely by wear and tear and overstrain. Kohlhaas was an orphan child, an adult orphan.

By no means an exemplary citizen, instead merely present in an inconspicuous manner, she had convinced herself, once grown, to enjoy paying taxes and thus to live with the fact that the tax office always wanted its bills paying swiftly. She found it hard to ignore the way weightier citizens, even when they cheated the state and dodged both taxes and truths, were not only spared the authorities' wrath, but treated with extreme politeness and even gifted generous payment terms or tax abatements.

Those you see are in the daylight, those in darkness don't get seen, so Kohlhaas warbled her experiences into the world; she got, she felt, enough of the light of day for herself. But sure, of course more light wouldn't be a problem. And sure, of course she'd be willing to share.

Leaving aside that Michaela Kohlhaas mostly called unspectacular objects her own, things that wouldn't cause a sensation at any flea market, she owned approximately nothing. She felt no need, she saw no necessity to change anything about the fact that no special furniture, clothing or artworks belonged to her. The people, though, the ones who had surrounded her to date, were the best, she'd swear as much. All her friends were the best, but the upcoming departure, which Kohlhaas had never thought through, never announced, and yet seemed to have been steering towards ever more determinedly for years, that restart made it necessary to withdraw, to cancel arrangements, to stop suggesting them at all. She changed her direction. She would never have managed to disappear from those contexts of friendship and love and not come back. And she would never admit to herself that what came next was the last stage of her life.

This great woman, who would yet come to greatness and whose greatness would always be contested, lived in Leipzig, close by the banks of the Weisse Elster River in this astonishing present day, which ought to be astonishing to all of us. Michaela Kohlhaas was not unusually righteous, and yet, from her challenged and overwrought sense of justice, a sense overly forced into patience and therefore no longer particularly capable of that virtue, sprang a terrible will to defend herself, a will which would be tremendous and would demand attention. Folks would speak of Michaela Kohlhaas, praise her and curse her. Folks would fear her. Yet her terrible will could never compete with the terribleness of the gangsters and monsters, with all the terribleness of those wielding power in these times; that would soon become clear. Unlike those wielding power, she lacked the will to despise at random and to place her own welfare above

that of all others. Folks would observe her, her actions and her every step with interest and quickly decide how she was, and that she was *mad, crazy, insane*. Soon, Michaela Kohlhaas would have discarded her vanity, fears, caution and good upbringing. Folks would wonder whether she'd always been that way, and would find signs that it was so. Folks would rather see her as sick than as a woman rebelling, contradicting, speaking alleged obscenities for legitimate reasons. Folks would compare her with all kinds of creatures, and never in praise. And anyway, the public would find it hard to grant her the acknowledgement she deserved. Folks would fall back on outdated methods, turn children's heads away and hold their ears shut: Don't look, don't listen.

Michaela Kohlhaas would die alone beside a patch of woods, would want it no differently and would admit that a woman who had gone so far could neither heal, tend nor reverse her life, her thoughts, the traces upon her body. She would meet her death like a triumph, and let us grant her that triumph, since folks refused to acknowledge and celebrate all her others.

Michaela Kohlhaas, that surprise, that event, that possible woman.

January

Later, folks could always say: we should have seen it coming, that whole year with all its events, with Kohlhaas's brutalisation, with everything that happened to her, and especially with all the actions she cast into the world, we should have seen it coming, shouldn't we? Saying that was as right as it was wrong, for after all, every day had its times of day, and you never knew which would mark a beginning and become unforgettable. When did the change of tone take place, when did a turnaround happen, when was A superseded by B, which nobody expected? When did Michaela Kohlhaas decide to leave?

She would set out as if following an entry in her diary, in which, however, nothing of the sort was noted. It would look as if it were not her decision and yet also the most personal decision she could make. An imperceptible switch to a parallel life that had always existed, which coursed discreetly alongside hers and tried to push its way to the front now and then.

Sometimes she awoke in the night and gasped for air. But that was the done thing now.

In the end, it took no great event. It took no huge provocation. It took nothing at all. Kohlhaas was a typically tired person, more tired than some, more awake than others. She tried to keep up, to keep pace, she relativised, only to tell herself her own tiredness counted too. Not only the tiredness of those in the middle of wars counted for something. Besides, no one said very precisely where wars began and more, where they had their interior, their exterior, where exactly the boundary lay or in what time, in what space. Kohlhaas' heart was cast in two daily, but that heart proved robust, wouldn't rend. Symptoms that at her age were no longer attributed to the political and economic circumstances but to hormones, the wear and tear of her age, came to the fore. Michaela Kohlhaas was at the age when, for many, longer or briefer excursions into the health system began, but for the time being she evaded all that, avoided doctors' surgeries, avoided hospitals and assumed, against better judgement, that those two

teeth she'd been missing for years and had not had replaced for fear of the operation would grow back again. She preferred the improbable but desirable possibility of real, home-grown teeth to the insertion of steel rods in her jaw. Why shouldn't new teeth grow in her mouth? She could imagine anything, or a great deal; no one could accuse her of withholding her imagination.

She had an expansive spirit and a regulated life. When Michaela Kohlhaas awoke in the morning, she knew approximately what the evening would bring. The monotony of her days was neither blessing nor calamity, yet it did lead to a vexation she did not yet recognise as such. She secretly wished for more variety, yet equally she enjoyed the similarity of her days. Sure, of course there were still a few surprises, for example every day ended with news unknown to her that morning, news that seemed too intrusive, too catastrophic, international or regional news that agitated her so that she had to talk about it, or rather not because she and all others had no words for it. Increasing sections of her days were made up of silences, out of non-addressing, out of heaping up all the things that were inconceivable but all followed this development that was taking place, unmistakably: begone with everything that was light, joyful, alive and caring. The regional and international monsters had installed specific gravediggers in places both surprising and predictable, and they were burying potentials at increasing speed. All togetherness was forced to its knees and under the earth.

There were brutal amateurs at work, who had no idea of proper beginnings or good endings, but placed great value on an unpleasant course of affairs. There was plenty to grieve, and plenty to fight for. There was no time for either, so it seemed to the soon-to-be-great woman of the century, who in just a few weeks would no longer care what there was time for and what not. Soon she would take the time, which would no longer be a platitude; it would be her whole way of life. Soon she would abandon all that made up her life, and would demand and take what she really needed. Or at least, she would try harder to do so than ever before.