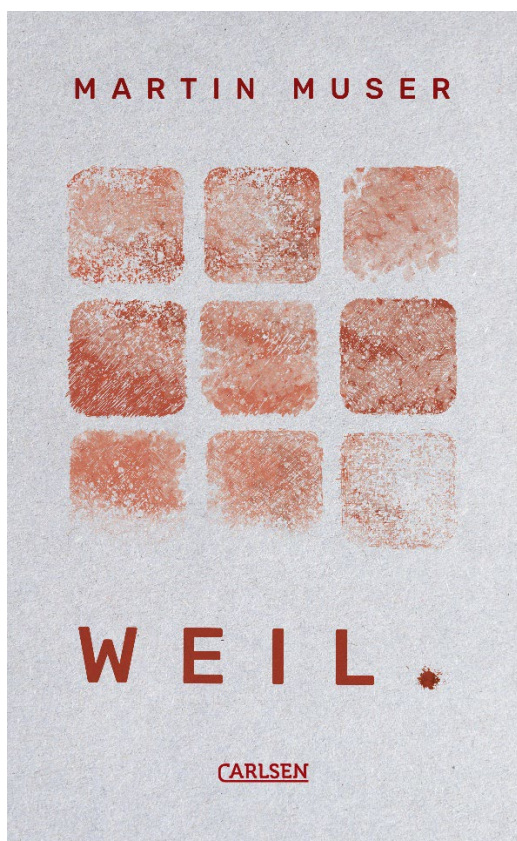


Martin Muser: Because.

Weil.

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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Chapter 1

The central locking system opened with a clack. Knut took the luggage and walked with it to the bus. Someone had written something in the dust on the door in scrawly letters. The neighbouring kids just thought it was funny to paint "Wash me!", stickmen or dick pictures on the cars. Written on the door were the words "Victim." Knut raised his eyebrows. "Victim" - in a neighbourhood where only privileged people actually lived, that had a certain comedy to it.

Knut remembered how he had often thought before falling asleep that he had to thank God. For the fact that him or fate had meant it so well with him. How naïve that had been. Today Knut was fully aware that he had simply hit the jackpot in the lottery of life. As the child of an intact academic family, as a white, non-disabled, heterosexual Central European, raised in a sheltered terraced house district like this.

The tailgate swung open. Knut stowed his luggage in the load compartment. The backpack and the bag with the books Kreilich had mentioned as compulsory reading. Kant, Aristotle, utilitarianism ... these were the exam topics. Kreilich always wanted them to work with the original texts and not just with excerpts. Knut did not regret that he had chosen ethics. The clarity of thought, that was something that really interested him.

He got in and started the engine. Carefully, he steered the VW bus out of the carport in front of the terraced house. Knut had only had his driving licence for four months, on time for his eighteenth birthday. Four months in which he had used the car at every opportunity. Fortunately, his parents were quite relaxed about it. They thought he should gain as much driving experience as quickly as possible. It was fitting that they had flown to Brussels yesterday for a congress and the bus was free all weekend.

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Knut opened the playlist. The basses boomed out of the stereo. Knut drummed on the steering wheel in anticipation. He would easily make it to Europaplatz on time at twelve to pick up the others.

Esther stood at the kitchen counter and packed the provisions. The fresh food boxes were made of 60 percent recycled marine plastic. It was important for Esther to have a value system. To know what was good and what was bad. It was bad that the rich countries destroyed the planet. It was bad that a tenth of the earth's population had to starve. It was bad that there was war and violence in many regions. What was good was that there were more and more people who wanted to do something about it. She counted herself among them.

A dull thud made Esther flinch. She knew the sound and hurried to the large picture window in the living room. A young blackbird was lying on the roof terrace in front of it.

Esther bent over her. Dazed and with a twisted head, the bird twitched helplessly with its wings. Its gleaming eye stared at Esther while its small chest rose and fell frantically. Esther felt her throat tighten. She could not look. Despite the hawk silhouettes they had stuck on the windows, birds kept flying into them and breaking their necks. Normally Lars took care of the disposal, but he and Annette had long since left home. Esther's parents both worked full time at the agency. They had left the key to the holiday home on her table that evening, plus 150 euros to stock up.

Esther wondered what she should do. The bird was always breathing still. Was he injured or just in shock? She carefully reached out her hand. When she touched him, he jerked as if he had received an electric shock. Esther recoiled. Fluttering wildly, the bird staggered across the floor until it managed to take off. It flew over the terrace parapet and dived behind it.

Esther looked after him, but could no longer see him among the dense foliage of the street trees. She returned to the kitchen relieved and quickly packed her things. She had to hurry.

Again, he had been awake all night, tossing and turning. When it got light, he had got up and sat down in the kitchen. It hurt and hurt and hurt. Not even smoking pot helped. The thoughts circled as if in an endless loop. Manuel hoped that the weekend with the others would somehow pull him out. Out of this black hole. He just couldn't believe that Leonie had done it. Just like that! How could she? How could what they had meant nothing to her from one moment to the next? Three days ago, they were still looking forward to the weekend in Rehberg together. Learning together, chilling together, a shared future, blah, blah, blah. And then in the evening came her text message: "*manu, we've tried again and again, but it's just not working out for me anymore.*"

Manuel felt a wave of anger rise up inside him: For you? And what about me?! I hate you, Leonie. - No, shit, I love you. Still do. I can't live without you. Leonie, why have you ruined everything?

it's over. After all you have been for me, what we have been for each other, what I have done for you. You said: We are like a twin star with a double force field. *manu, we tried again and again ...* Again and again he went through the text message word by word, as if the meaning could still change. ... *but it just doesn't work any more ...*

Anyway, ending a relationship by text message - how cheap was that?!

i know now that i want to be free. please don't contact me. please don't write me any more messages. it only makes it harder for both of us. i hope that we can be friends someday. take care. leonie.

Be friends - he wanted to puke. Fuck you, Leonie! He would cut her and all memories of her out of his heart. She didn't deserve someone like him at all.

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I wish you to be unhappy forever and ever! Manuel let out a sob and thought himself ridiculous. He felt like crying, but not a tear came out of him. Not even that was possible. Damn it, Leonie. It was a mistake. Come back, please come back.

She sat wedged in the seat by the window, her backpack in front of her on her lap. The man next to her had his legs spread wide. With every jerk of the tram, Selin felt his knee touching her thigh. "Can you take a little less space?" Her voice sounded sharp. The man hastily drew his legs together and mumbled something unintelligible.

Selin took a deep breath. As a child, she had been notorious for her tantrums. The feeling that something was unfair had made her explode like a bomb. She screamed and rolled on the floor. Fortunately for her parents, the phase had subsided at some point and the attacks had become less frequent. What remained, however, was that Selin still found it difficult to tolerate any form of injustice. Resisting it was like an inner compulsion.

Her seat neighbour got up to get out. Selin breathed a sigh of relief. Since the pandemic, she often found the proximity to strangers oppressive. Then there was the heat in the tram car. The backpack pressed on her legs and she felt the t-shirt sticking to her back. While she was packing, Defne had been pestering her with her curious questions.

"Why are you taking all that make-up stuff when you're really just going to study?"

Selin had been relieved when the door with the salt dough shield "This is where the Yildiz family lives" slammed shut behind her. Relieved to be out of the confines of the three-room flat she shared with her parents and her siblings Defne and Bilge. Her parents were okay. That was not the point. But they just had completely different expectations. They thought she would study and make a

career right after graduating from high school. Law, business studies or even better medicine. But Selin didn't want to study. She had had enough of the constant learning. Politics, history, ethics ... Most of it was just the brainwashing of old white men. She didn't need to study to know that humanity was fucked. Society had to change, radically.

Selin didn't want to fit in. She wanted to live her own life, get involved, help. With or without Philipp. He had been thinking about what to do for ages and couldn't make up his mind. Selin had applied to volunteer at a refugee camp in Greece. A week ago, she got the confirmation that she could start in August. Philipp was just scared to get out of his comfort zone.

Who had actually come up with the idea of choosing Europa Platz as a meeting place? The only thing you could get here was a fine dust lung.

Philipp scanned the stream of traffic and looked out for the VW bus. His mother had dropped him off here on her way to work.

set and he was way too early. He sat on the small wheeled suitcase and checked the messages on his mobile phone while the passers-by rushed past him.

"Do you need help?" A woman with dreadlocks and a rainbow bandana had stopped and smiled at him. Philip shook his head. "It's all right. I'll be fine."

A new message popped up in the group chat. From Knut: +10 because of traffic jam. Philipp looked at his watch: 11:52. He was looking forward to the weekend. Even though they had known each other for a long time, especially Knut and he, they had only really come together as a group in the upper school. And it had always worked well so far, despite - or because of - the couples' number. Well, more or less. Of course it sucked that Leonie had broken up with Manuel. First great love and then everything over from one second to the next. But Manuel would get over it. It was just a pity that Leonie was out of it. Things weren't going so well between Knut and Esther either. She kept putting pressure on them

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about the time after graduation, her internship in New York and said that Knut had to plan things. But Knut himself didn't know exactly what to do next. Study? Get a job? Travelling? Philipp felt the same way, and maybe they would both move around the world a bit first. Africa, Asia, Latin America.

"Weren't we supposed to meet on the other side?" Philip turned around. Selin was standing behind him. With the big backpack on her back, she looked somehow very small.

"It's possible you're right." Philip went to her and they kissed. "Hi."

"I am." Selin pointed at the traffic. "Out of town is that way. And Manu is already there too."

Only now did Philipp notice Manuel standing on the other side of the crossroads. Had he been waiting there the whole time? He stepped from one foot to the other and smoked.

"Hey, Manu!" Philipp called and waved. But Manuel couldn't hear him through the traffic noise. Maybe he also had headphones in.

When Knut reached Europaplatz, the others were all already there. He honked twice briefly, put on his hazard lights and stopped in the right lane.

Manuel, looking pale and sleepy, quipped, "Man, dude, we thought we were going to have to walk."

Knut and Manuel high-fived each other through the window. "Sorry. There was an accident on the ring road. It's all closed up. I had to take a diversion."

Philipp had already opened the tailgate and loaded the luggage.

Esther climbed onto the seat next to Knut, hugged him and pressed her lips to his mouth. "Let's go, guys, off to boot camp!"

Selin shook the sliding door and couldn't get it open.

"Push and pull to the side!" shouted Knut.

Manuel wanted to help, but Selin had already opened the door and got in. Loud honking startled them. Behind them, a bus was jostling to get to the bus stop.

Knut saw the driver gesticulating wildly in the rear-view mirror.

"I'm off already. Don't get upset, you ass!"

Philipp jumped into the bus and quickly pushed the door shut. Knut stepped on the gas, drove off with squealing tyres and threaded his way into the traffic. "All aboard?"

The answer from the back seat: "Yallah!"

Knut raised his thumb with a grin and turned up the music.

Manuel clapped to the beat like a crazed animator.

The bus drove along the country road. Esther held her head in the warm breeze blowing through the open side window. They had left the city behind. Forests, fields and meadows lined the road. Esther was looking forward to Rehberg, to the house, to spending time with the others. She only felt a little sorry for Manuel. When Janik, her first great love, had left her two years ago, she thought the world was coming to an end. She turned to Manuel. "Has Leonie contacted you again?"

"Nah." Manuel, who was sitting between Philipp and Selin on the back seat, shook his head dismissively. "It's better that way."

Philipp took a sip from his club mate. "It's kind of- how crass. You always seemed so harmonious." He cast a quick sideways glance at Selin.

Manuel grinned wryly. "We were. I thought we were. But only until the day before yesterday."

"Maybe Leo will reconsider," Knut said. "She's always a bit impulsive."

Manuel screwed up his face. "I don't know if I'd want that at all. The way she broke up with me..."

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Selin intervened. "It always sucks when you get dumped. But a hard cut is still better than a long slobbering over it. It's like milk that's past its best-before date. If you put it in your coffee, everything will go sour. Better to get rid of it right away.

Philipp felt piqued himself by Selin's remark. "I'm sure that's super comforting for Manu now."

Esther was uncomfortable that the conversation had developed like this and that there was suddenly such tension.

But Manuel waved it off. "That's alright. Let's just look ahead. We said we'd have a nice weekend. And that's what we'll do."

For a while they drove in silence. Knut concentrated on the road. He noticed how many dead animals were lying on the side of the road. In the few kilometres he had already counted two cats, a fox and a bundle of fur deformed beyond recognition, which seemed strange to him.

had appeared large. The sat nav indicated that he should keep to the right at the next junction.

"You'll have to turn right in a minute," Esther said.

Knut, who had only been waiting for this, nodded. "Got my eye on it." Esther smiled and briefly put her hand on his thigh.

Knut liked the way she touched him. He liked that Esther could also show her affection physically. He himself was rather inhibited. They were all like that in his family. He couldn't remember the last time his parents had touched each other in front of him. No kiss, no hug, no tender touch of the hands. As a child, his mother had sometimes cuddled his head and the feeling had sent pleasant shivers down his spine. But at some point she had stopped the physical contact. A short hug to greet and say goodbye was the highest level of intimacy. His father also usually neutralised the gesture with a robust pat on the shoulder: 'So long,

kid.' And afterwards everyone was relieved to be able to keep their distance again. Knut often felt strange and awkward in his own body. As if it didn't really belong to him, but was something like an outpost. And sometimes he worried that he could not offer Esther enough physically. She was his first girlfriend. Esther had had other relationships before him. She said only affairs. But Knut still felt inferior to her somehow. The idea that she had a comparison and he didn't tormented him.

He took the exit. After a few hundred metres there was a parking bay. A hitchhiker was standing in the driveway and stuck his thumb out.

Knut pointed at him. "Should we take him with us?" The others stretched their heads.

"Only if he's good-looking," Esther joked.

All eyes went to the hitchhiker. A young guy in a track jacket and cargo trousers with a black bag over his shoulder.

"I don't know ...", Philipp said irresolutely.

But by then Knut had already turned the wheel. The bus turned into the parking bay at the last second and braked.

The hitchhiker had thin stringy hair. His facial skin looked pale and porous, like porcelain. Selin found him instantly unappealing. After asking which direction they were going, he opened the side door. Selin made room for him and changed forward to Esther. The hitchhiker sat down next to Manuel and Philipp on the back seat. "Cool that you're giving me a lift."

"No big deal." Knut drove out of the parking bay back onto the road.

Selin opened the side window a little further. She felt as if she could feel the hitchhiker's breath on her neck. He bent over and rummaged something out of the bag between his feet. A can of Monster Energy. When he opened it, the liquid

squirted out and dripped onto the seat. Selin saw Knut look in the rearview mirror and frown disapprovingly.

"And so you want to go to Frankfurt?" Manuel tried to make conversation.

"I didn't say I was going to Frankfurt," said the hitchhiker. "I said, 'Towards Frankfurt'."

Silence again. Only interrupted by the loud slurping sound the guy made as he drank. Selin looked at Esther. She could tell she was uncomfortable with the situation too.

Finally, the hitchhiker twisted his face into a wry grimace: "And you? Where are you going?"

"Does Rehberg mean anything to you?" asked Esther.

"Rehberg," the hitchhiker repeated slowly, as if he was a bit obtuse. "What do you want in Rehberg?"

Selin wondered if he had something, a disability or something. Okay, that was the wrong word. But if he had something, then that would be an explanation and she was ashamed that she had judged him too hastily because of that.

We are going to Rehberg because Esther's parents have a weekend house there," Manuel explained.

"That you are from the city is clear anyway." The hitchhiker took another sip.

"You can tell by the number plate." He nodded wisely.

Manuel saw in the rear-view mirror how Knut was making a full-post face at the front wheel. Esther had to giggle. It was too silly. Selin also had trouble suppressing her laughter. The hitchhiker didn't seem to notice.

"The people from the city buy the land from the people here to go on holiday there." The hitchhiker said this as if it were a simple statement.

"We've had the house for 10 years," Esther said, as if she had to defend herself.

"And we don't go on holiday there either," Philipp clarified, "we work there."

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"Working?" The hitchhiker was now chuckling himself. "What do you work at?"

It was getting too stupid for Philipp. Manuel knew the tone in his voice when he had had enough. "Studying. For the Abi," he said dismissively.

"You're doing Abi?" The hitchhiker looked at Philipp and pressed the can so loudly that it cracked.

Philipp narrowed his eyes. "You got a problem with that?"

The hitchhiker shrugged. "I wouldn't have thought so."

"And why not?" Philipp's voice tightened.

Selin had turned her head and was following the dialogue with a furrowed brow.

The hitchhiker smiled wryly. "I just didn't think that someone like you would graduate from high school."

"One like me?", Philipp inquired.

Now everyone was looking eagerly at the hitchhiker. Knut fixed him in the rear-view mirror.

"Well, you know ... because ..."

The hitchhiker raised his hands and grabbed his own face.

"Because I'm black," said Philip. The hitchhiker grinned with a shrug.

Selin could no longer hold on to herself. "Do you actually realise what you are pulling here?" She glared at the hitchhiker past the headrest. "What kind of racist shit is that?" His permanent grin made her even angrier. "How about an apology?!"

The hitchhiker turned to Manuel. "Is she on her period or does she always get upset so quickly?"

"You'd better shut the fuck up real quick now!" said Selin sharply.

"Huh, why?" The hitchhiker didn't understand. Or simply didn't want to understand. "I don't have anything against blacks and I don't have anything against Turkish people. If you don't like it here, you can leave."

"Eeeey!" Manuel demonstratively moved away from the hitchhiker. "You really better shut up now, huh?"

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"That's right," said Knut firmly. "Otherwise YOU can leave right away." He demonstratively stepped on the brakes.

"Okay, okay. I'll say no more."

The hitchhiker turned his head and looked out of the window as if none of this concerned him.

Knut drove on and accelerated again.

Manuel thought he heard the hitchhiker chuckle softly to himself. Manuel understood Philipp's and Selin's indignation. But he also knew that in such cases it usually didn't help.

Knut had stopped at the petrol station even though the tank was still half full.

The bus was standing next to the petrol pump. Knut had gone into the cashier's booth to pay. Philipp leaned against the wing and talked to the others.

"What a disgusting asshole," Selin said.

Esther screwed up her face and shook herself. "It sucks that these guys just dare to do that."

Manuel chewed gum as if he wanted to crush it.

"Yes." Philipp looked in the direction of the toilets where the hitchhiker had disappeared. "But there's something wrong with him."

This was not the usual everyday racism that Philipp knew. The subliminal discrimination that was always shoved into you everywhere. The question of where he actually came from. The bouncer who frisked him for drugs. The granny in the tram who panicked and grabbed her bag when he sat down next to her. *For me, skin colour doesn't matter ...* Those who acted super-liberal were particularly subtle in their exclusion. *I didn't mean that, you're just too sensitive.* But this guy here meant exactly what he said. And yet something about him irritated Philipp.

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Knut came back from the cashier's booth. He put the petrol receipt in his wallet and looked around for the hitchhiker. "Is he still in the toilet?"

Manuel spat the gum in a high arc towards the rubbish bin and hit it. "Probably too stupid to shit."

Knut grimaced.

"We'll just go on without him." Selin said what everyone was thinking.

"Good idea," said Knut.

Manuel grinned broadly. "It may not be completely okay - but that's exactly why it's completely okay."

"It's his own fault. He deserves the lesson." Selin got in. Knut was already behind the wheel. "Let's go then."

Philip felt something in him hesitate. Despite everything, it suddenly seemed cowardly to him to just run away.

Esther waved impatiently. "Now come on!"

"Or do you want to listen to more racist shit?" Selin didn't understand what he had.

Philipp got in last and pushed the side door shut. Knut ignited the engine. "Bye-bye, Asshole!"

He stepped on the gas. The bus rolled towards the exit. Philipp and Manuel turned around on the back seat. They saw through the rear window how the hitchhiker came out of the toilet and looked around in irritation. When he spotted the bus, he quickened his pace and waved. He looked childish and helpless. Finally, he started to run. But then he realised he had no chance and stopped. His mouth twisted, a silent expression of protest that somehow touched Philip.

Suddenly he remembered the phrase about the *war of all against all*. Hobbes, sixteen hundred something. Kreilich had written it in bold red on the Smartboard. *Man is man's wolf*. Or: If I don't flatten you now, you'll flatten me. Permanent struggle as the normal state of affairs.

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Liam supported himself with his hands on his knees and tried to calm his breathing. The thoughts in his head swirled wildly. The bus had gone on without him. Had they forgotten about him or done it on purpose? Liam didn't know. He only knew that the whole thing was a mistake. Mistake, mistake, mistake ... Liam ran his hands over his sweaty face. His hands smelled of liquid soap. He shook his head slowly and felt for the mobile phone in his jacket. Someone had to make up for the mistake.

Man, what a complete idiot!" Manuel laughed out loud. The mood was now exuberant, almost over-excited. Knut drove through the bends with momentum. The windows wide open. He had turned the music up loud again and everyone was shouting their relief.

"He said: 'I don't mind black people.'" - "I don't believe it!" -

"That was the last time I picked up a hitchhiker!" Manuel flicked and pogoed to the beat of the music and felt his foot bumped against something soft. He leaned forward. "Hey, guys ..." He pulled the black bag out from under the back seat. "I think the guy forgot something!"

Philipp, Esther and Selin looked at the black bag.

Knut glanced in the rear-view mirror. "Shit. Is there anything important in it?" The bag was a cheap model made of thin nylon. Manuel opened- she neared and with pointed fingers took out the contents. Two more Monster Energy cans, a crumpled T-shirt, paper towels, a strip of tablets and a Rubik's cube.

Manuel looked at the tablets and raised his eyebrows.

"Drugs?"

Most of them had already been pushed out of the strip. Only four were still inside. Manuel squinted and tried to read the imprint on the aluminium foil:

"*Fleca* ... something ...".

"Shit. I guess we'll have to go back again," Esther sighed.

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