

from:

Twilight over Europe

Alexander Koistinen

introduced and translated by

Ian Giles

It has been clear for some time that a number of the accepted norms in the world of translated literature are shifting – to the extent that new prizes such as the Petrona Award focus on Nordic setting, rather than Nordic origin, while successful books written in their native Swedish by Håkan Nesser and David Lagercrantz can be set largely in England. Alexander Koistinen belongs in this new world of cross-border literature, being a Swede with an extensive background in the defence sector who is now based in Brussels.

This is Koistinen's debut as a writer. The novel, which is set in the not-too-distant future, follows the work of Swedish protagonist Axel Hägerstedt in his work for the EU in Brussels. This is a world in which Sweden has become a republic, the state of Belgium has collapsed, and the EU runs a protectorate in central Brussels while other parts of the city succumb to sharia law. Unrest in Spanish enclaves in North Africa causes a crisis that ignites troubles across Europe, culminating in events taking place in Koistinen's fictional future that, terrifyingly, seem even more relevant now than when the words were first written.

The extract below is taken from the beginning of the novel.

‘Perhaps Huntington was right.’

Axel stared across the Brussels rooftops towards the Gare du Midi, a little more than a mile away. The flames from the burning cars illuminated the office complexes built in a valiant attempt to regenerate the area around the station. Well-to-do commuters from Paris were supposed to be tempted to live and work in a part of the city characterised by dilapidated houses, gangs of youths and litter-strewn streets. A place where every shop had Arabic signage and all the women wore veils.

‘What do you mean?’

Erkki Bagarfors appeared on the terrace with a bottle of Chimay in his hand.



Skymning över Europa, Hjalmarson & Högberg, 2014

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Skymning över Europa was nominated for the European Book Prize 2015.

‘The clash of civilisations.’

Erkki still resembled a human question mark.

‘Maybe. Now for God’s sake let’s have a beer.’

This Sunday evening it was Erkki who was hosting – a bite to eat and a bottle of wine or two. His apartment was on the twelfth floor of a building on the fashionable Avenue Louise on a level with Place du Châtelain. The neighbourhood was popular with EU civil servants thanks to its excellent range of restaurants and lifestyle stores – you could buy a ten-euro loaf of bread, Cuban cigars or minimalist interior design products. They had built tall walls around the recently constructed residential buildings and a private security firm patrolled the perimeter. The streets were only accessible to authorised vehicles.

The flames made the broken glass embedded in the top of the wall glitter in the twilight. The residential area was an oasis in a decaying cityscape. You didn’t have to walk many blocks before you found abandoned houses where the homeless had broken in and telephone lines that had been torn down in the hunt for copper.

The fires and riots had become more common as the years had passed. The first time they had been nothing more than a pale imitation of what had hit the suburbs of France and had thus attracted little attention. The odd car had been set alight by youths inspired by TV news reports from Paris. Now there were entire parts of Brussels considered out of bounds for EU civil servants.

In the distance, the melodic whine of fire engine sirens was increasing in volume. Axel sipped the flavoursome beer and watched the spectacle unfold below at the end of Avenue Louise. The howling was blended with two-tonal, rapidly alternating sounds converging from different directions – like the calls of a male bird attracting females during mating season. The fire engines had come to a halt and were parked in a long row, all in the same traffic lane. There was a gap of ten metres between each vehicle, achieved with almost military precision. The police cars arrived.

‘Column formation point – Palace of Justice,’ he said aloud to himself. It was standard procedure for the fire brigade to request a police escort when called out to extinguish fires in the area around Gare du Midi.

Axel closed the terrace door as he came inside to the airily furnished living room. The spring evenings in Brussels were chilly. He put down the bottle on an ebony commode that housed Erkki’s abundant collection of respectable but old-fashioned CDs. He settled on Jussi Björling’s *Till havs*.

Erkki was a veteran of the EU bureaucracy in Brussels – at least in Swedish terms – and he had become something of an informal mentor to Axel. They had got to know each other by pure chance while standing by the bar at a particularly boozy post-work gathering where they were both trying to chat up the same group of young women from the Maltese Permanent Representation to the EU.

‘Life in Brussels isn’t what it once was,’ Erkki muttered. He had been given his Finnish first name by his mother, who had come to Sweden after the end of the Second World War. Erkki had begun his career as an economist at the Ministry of Finance in Stockholm. In conjunction with the accession to the EU in 1995 he had been one of the first Swedes to apply to the European civil service.

Axel nodded in agreement: 'In the beginning it was a comfortable expat existence. But our gracious host nation gave up the ghost and joined the ranks of countries that have ceased to be – in the good company of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.'

'We lived like kings,' Erkki continued. 'The people of Brussels are said to have called us Eurocrats – did you know that? Nights of absolute perfection at the clubs where the Belgian aristocracy and international businessmen mixed in the crowd.'

'Do you remember Le Cercle?' Axel asked. 'That intimate little bar in the lane by the Sablon Square? A former Bolivian diplomat ran the place – apparently she had got tired of the intrigue and messing about in their foreign service. So she decided to simply do something else.'

'Le Cercle?'

Erkki was quiet for a moment, thinking. Then his face cracked into a wide grin.

'What I remember most of all was that shapely Congolese woman you so persistently courted with champagne and cocktails.'

'Francine? Of course.' Axel blushed. 'Those were good times. But even then there were places we didn't feel entirely welcome. The groups of idle youths hanging out on street corners. The looks. The surprised expressions if you ran an errand in any of the shops.'

Axel took a big gulp of the delicious rioja – a 2017 vintage – while Erkki served more fillet of beef. The Japanese steel carving knife worked its way through the well-done beef with ease.

'Did you see the report on Euronews on Monday?' said Erkki.

'The press conference with the chairman of the Brussels Islamic Welfare Party? Professionally done – with local and international media represented. Introducing sharia law in the districts west of the canal is the natural next step. In the absence of effective legal structures it's understandable.'

'The situation is still unclear. The Protectorate's mandate is pretty broadly worded. Maintain critical societal functions, guarantee human rights and ensure that the EU's institutions continue to operate even though they have no host nation. That leaves a great deal of room for interpretation when it comes to choosing the means,' Erkki continued with an ironic smile.

'If a simple civil servant in middle management is permitted to have a view on the matter, the European Council made a wise decision when they let the Crisis Management and Planning Directorate take the lead in dealing with the aftermath of the collapse of the state. They were the only ones with any practical experience of nation building based on hard won experience in Bosnia, Kosovo and Syria.'

'At the same time, the Commission had to rush to second experts from more or less every policy area,' said Erkki. 'And just like that a bunch of colleagues were pretty much back to square one: Well Mr Schmidt – we can see you were previously responsible for local transportation planning in Hamburg. We have a new challenge for you – Head of Operations at the STIB – Société des transports intercommunaux de Bruxelles. How about that Mrs Sanchez? You've been a judge in the Extremadura Administrative Court? Next month you start at the Palace of Justice – at the end of the Toison d'Or. You're sure to find it. Those affected were not wholly positive towards their new – or rather, their new old postings.'

Axel blinked back tears of laughter.

‘And you should have seen the look on the administrators’ faces at Crisis Management. They were used to dining out on fat hardship contracts in the third world without too much intrusive monitoring from headquarters in Brussels. One report every month about political developments and the implementation of humanitarian projects was more than enough. They were made an offer that they – let’s say – couldn’t possibly refuse. Two years on a mission to create the EU’s first Protectorate – and on home turf.’

Erkki laughed boisterously.

‘But seriously – it’s not easy given the constant monitoring by the international media. Every measure, every statement – the risk is they are repeated on live television and spread around the world in no time at all. The Saudis and the Moroccans haven’t missed a chance yet to whip up sentiment.’

‘We can only wish them luck. It’s like a bloody applied experiment in political science. *Nation building*,’ Erkki snorted.

After rounding off the evening with a tasting of three different kinds of Calvados alongside the coffee, Axel felt it was time to make his excuses. Erkki got out his granite grey iPhone 9 and pulled up the number for Autolux taxis.

‘Please can we order a taxi to Avenue Louise 326. That’s right – the gated residential area. Ask the guard for Bagarfors.’