

Night Work

Thomas Glavinic

Translated by John Brownjohn

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by Jeff Bursey

From the Irwin Allen disaster movies to the latest zombie film, most post-apocalyptic films require the survival of a handful of people led by fascists. In *The Stand*, most of mankind dies and the survivors, singled out to join an aged woman or an emissary of the Devil, meet to re-create society in visions of hope or greed. Will Smith's character in *I Am Legend* stays behind in New York City after everyone else flees in order to find a cure for what has ravaged civilization; for a time he is, by choice, the only human in a sea of once-humans, having sent his family away (but not his dog) in a self-sacrificing mode so that through his efforts alone--the fascist as scientist--the remnants of humanity can be saved. A noble death, and immortality--the legend in the title--is his reward.

Such is not the case in Thomas Glavinic's *Night Work*, which presents a depopulated present-day Vienna and its lifeless streets and public institutions. Every animal is gone. We view this world largely through the consciousness of Jonas, a thirty-five-year-old interior designer whose girlfriend, Marie, is currently in Scotland visiting a relative. She can't be reached on her mobile the morning of July 4th when Jonas wakes to discover that the Internet doesn't work and that no radio or television station is broadcasting. Reading the paper at a bus stop while waiting for the ride to work, he finds it "hard to concentrate on the article. Something was puzzling him." This becomes a theme: "Something about the narrow cellar passage puzzled him"; "Something else puzzled him, but he couldn't put his finger on it"; "Something was bothering him." He occasionally finds out what's wrong, but not always. Unmistakably, things are askew, externally and internally.

In its first pages the novel's tone shifts between creeping unease and giddy humor. Reflecting on what he could do in a world ostensibly his own, Jonas imagines that he "could invest stupidities of all kinds with constitutional status. He could choose another form of government. Indeed, devise a new one. Although the system in which he lived was really anarchy, democracy and dictatorship all in one." The humor is quietly removed as the atmosphere darkens, disappearing as Jonas's plight becomes more distressing. "From below came more and more noises he didn't like the sound of. He was imaging them, of course. But he didn't want to expose himself to them for too long." To get answers to certain questions—is there anyone else alive? what does he do when asleep?—Jonas videotapes his nocturnal life, discovering a double who does inexplicable things in inexplicable fashion. Messages he leaves for himself and others—on telephones, in public places—may be fruitless acts on Jonas' part.

"Had he died and gone to hell?" Jonas asks himself. Reversing Sartre, hell here is the lack of other people, though Jonas has theories that they may be "stumbling through a deserted world," and that "the spell would be broken if two people who belonged together turned up at the same spot simultaneously. That would mean he must go looking for Marie..." A spell, as if this was a case of magic; a journey, as if this were his Odyssey and Marie his Penelope. Flailing around, Jonas attempts the spiritualist technique of letting a ring hover over an image of a person, but he can't recall if the movement of the ring means the person is dead or alive. At another point he imagines different universes. "And Jonas himself? What if a car had killed him?"

Or a disease? Or even a murderer?” Maybe the frightening things he discovers—objects suddenly in his closet that he didn’t put there, knives buried in walls—come from some other world. If Jonas held religious beliefs he might think differently about the absence of human and animal life, speculate on the Rapture, or wonder about God’s purpose in rendering him an Adam without an Eve (or even a Spot) in a prelapsarian world.

Night Work subtly reminds us, among other things, that the act of reading is akin to being in a city by oneself. No one can monitor your thoughts (you can hardly keep track of them yourself), and until you speak no one knows what you’re thinking or feeling as you wander in the world an author has created. Yet this meta-textual level is only a minor aspect of the novel. Glavinic’s novel presents a world without hope, with no great leader—Europe has had enough self-proclaimed great men, and Jonas is not described as noble or fearless—and the mind behind the puzzle, to use a word that occurs often, doesn’t attempt to provide a solution. It’s a refreshing take on the post-apocalyptic theme, and not like Hollywood at all.

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