The Uncountables

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An extract

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Part one

Let them eat cake.

(Marie-Antoinette)

1

It was obvious where it came from, from the east, where the land lies: a dry wind that tautened the skin. It must have swept rain clouds along with it that had been borne down from the north, because the rain that suddenly fell was cold compared with the air temperature, tautening the skin still further.

If I were not careful the cardboard behind which I had barricaded myself would go soft and tear. I was careful and did not move, while in my mind I covered the route that lay ahead, since there was no way I was going back. Contrary to what freedom, which is my right too, might lead one to suppose, I was not going where I wanted: I had to keep to paths that had been marked out by others.

I wasn't in control of the rain either. I didn't move a muscle and still the cardboard tore. I left it behind. I continued along the path I had imagined, freedom is an exhausting business, and the rain did not stop. Soaked to the skin, I washed up at a bridge over a river I hadn't expected in that place, saw the water flowing past, the rain and the river, the rain without banks, and did not dream of reflecting.

Let it all happen, come what may.

But nothing came, not even when the rain finally stopped, and even the night departed. I looked at the water between the banks in which the moon was drifting, over which lay the shadow of the bridge that rested silently on its piers, as if it were not spanning the river but propping up the sky. God knows how long I stood there. The sun gave light, not much, enough to see it was there, but no warmth. I emerged from under the bridge, clambered up the slope, clinging to the

wet grass so as not to lose my footing. The slope was steep. In the distance a dog barked. Something rustled past me, an adder or a hedgehog or some other creepy-crawly. Then I was on the bridge.

A car approached from the opposite direction. I wondered if I should make a sign that the driver could understand or ignore. Perhaps the car would stop; I had no idea who was in it. A vague signal that would awaken curiosity rather than call attention to itself. I made a gesture, impulsively, that I still can't remember. For a moment I had the impression that the car was slowing down, that I was being looked at, I had no idea by how many eyes. The water, which was lying on the road in large flat puddles splashed in broad furrows from the wheels. The car was on the other side of the road: the puddle landed in a grey arc at my feet.

I was wondering what I would have done if the car had stopped, when it actually stopped.

I heard the driver change gear. The car reversed slowly towards me.

The face that leered out at me from the side window that had been wound down was missing an incisor, while two of the remaining teeth were black, one brown and one silver.

'Get in,' said the man. 'I know you.'

'I don't know you,' I said.

'Get in,' said the man, 'and I'll refresh you memory.'

'I'm fresh enough already,' I said.

Then someone moved on the back seat and the door opened. A hand pulled at my arm.

'Don't be pig-headed, get in and tell us what the matter is as we drive along, which way are we going?'

'The voice was quite friendly. The car slowly moved off again. The hand was still gripping me tight, so that I was forced to get in. What harm can it do, I thought, the driver knows me. I closed the door myself. Next to me was a man of my age, with perfect teeth, though they may have been false, while the grin with which he revealed them was undeniably real. There was a scab on his top lip.

The man let go of my arm.

'Which way?' asked the driver.

The man next to me surveyed me in caustic silence. In the front passenger seat was a woman who had not yet said a word. She was beautiful compared with the driver, and undoubtedly with the man next me too. She kept looking the other way, outside where the sun was still giving no warmth. I could only see one of her ears, a jaw, her chin, nose forehead and one onion-shaped eye beneath long lashes that trembled nervously on the fluttering eyelid. Perhaps she was bothered by the light, though it wasn't bright.

'Which way?' repeated the driver.

His voice sounded impatient.

'If it's all the same to you,' I said, 'I'd prefer the way you've come from.'

The man next to me swore. The woman smiled, I could tell from the curling of the one corner of her mouth that was visible. The driver turned the car round. We drove over the bridge. The river flowed greyly on between its banks.

'And now the rest,' said the driver with the same impatience in his voice.

The man next to me pointed his chin at me.

'The rest,' he repeated, 'and quick about it!'

He was obviously not happy with the direction taken.

'What rest,' I said, 'what do you mean?'

'Don't play around,' said the driver.

'I really don't know what you're talking about,' I said,' you know me.'

'I know you all right,' replied the driver, braking abruptly, so that I hit my nose on the headrest of his seat. He immediately pulled off again.

'And who are you?' I asked, rubbing my nose, 'I haven't got a clue.'

'Someone you owe a hundred and fifty dollars.'

'Have you seen my rings?' The man next to me slipped a sharp-edged ring onto his middle finger and then one onto his ring finger.

'Not gold or silver, just steel, but sometimes the effect is amazing.'

'And now let's have it,' said the driver, this time grimly, brooking not contradiction.

He was driving at high speed, and the slightest tug on the steering wheel made the car swerve. The road was full of potholes, not all of which he avoided.

'This has got to be a misunderstanding.'

I looked at the woman, who was obviously left cold by all this.

'I don't even know what forty dollars looks like.'

'A second-rate surgeon can easily cost you ten times as much,' said the man next me, playing with his rings.

'My patience is at an end,' said the driver, 'tell me what you know we want to know.'

‘Right now,’ he added.

‘You’re wrong,’ I repeated, ‘I really don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Go ahead,’ said the driver to the man next to me.

I understood what he meant and kept an arm in front of my chin.

‘Your last chance,’ said the man next to me, spitting on one of the rings.

‘Tell me what it’s about,’ I shouted, I really think I was shouting, perhaps not out loud, but inwardly, ′give me a clue,′ I whined.

‘Coming up,’ said the man next to me, pushing the rings against my raised arm and then lashing out.

‘I believe him,’ said the woman.

‘He made the sign,’ said the driver.

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

‘All three of us saw it.’

I pushed my tongue cautiously against an incisor tooth that was loose, and sucked the blood from my lower lip. The man next to me rubbed his rings with his sleeve and nodded to the driver in agreement.

‘And what of it,’ said the woman, ‘I believe him.’

‘He’s screwing us, he owes me a hundred and fifty dollars.’

‘He knows nothing about it,’ said the woman.

‘His word against the other guy’s,’ said the man with the rings. He meant the driver and me. ‘Who do you believe?’ he asked the woman.

‘He made the sign,’ said the driver, who had slowed down.

‘I believe him,’ said the woman. She meant me. Her voice sounded as if she couldn’t be bothered. My lip was swelling, my jaw was hurting and was probably also swelling.

‘Where shall we dump him?’ asked the man next to me. He slid the rings off his fingers and put them in his jacket pocket.

‘He wanted to go this way,’ said the chauffeur.

‘He made the sign,’ the man next me repeated again.

I had the feeling I was an unpleasant memory for him. But the woman suddenly turned round: I saw her whole face for the first time. Her left eye looked at me with complete indifference, but her right seemed to bore through me like lead.

'Where did you learn that sign?'

'That gesture I made when you came by?' I said. ' It was just an impulse.'

'Do it again.'

I moved my hand, my arm. It wasn't the same gesture.

'He's messing us around,' said the driver.

'I believe him,' the woman repeated.

Her right eye was artificial, made of glass and stared unwitting into the nothingness that had just been me. I breathed a sigh of relief. So they had looked at me with five eyes, recognised my gesture and made a mistake.

'Let him out,' said the woman.

The car was now travelling very slowly. In the distance, low on the horizon, was the outline of something that resembled the blue of the sky. A truck drove past, in the opposite direction.

'Get the hell out of her.'

'He knows us,' said the man next to me.

'He'll forget,' said the woman.

She looked outside again with her one eye, of which I could see only the outermost corner.

'Is that right,' asked the man with the rings in his pocket, thumping my shoulder again.

'Yes,' I said, and I could feel my canine tooth trembling.

(...)

2

I had heard people talk about the sea and it was just as I had heard them describe it. A desert, only made of water. When I arrived in the town, I went straight to the harbour, to look and keep my ears open. There, beyond the docks and the containers the sea lay along the quay, moored, drift, sinking into the salt of the early evening wind. I counted four ships on the quay and one I took for a wreck. There were also two smaller ones on their side in the mud. Among a pile of empty crates I found a large piece of cardboard. I dragged it off with me, no one took any notice. A docker, who wasn't working but sitting on a broken chair trying to find a point of equilibrium for his sturdy body,

pointed me the way to a park between the harbour and what he called the town centre. Dusk was falling so slowly that I had plenty of time. On the way I considered stealing a piece of fish from a stall, but finally I bought a piece, to fend off the worst of my hunger: I didn't feel like running off fast and might have to leave the cardboard behind.

There were not many people in the park. I went and sat on the grass with my back against a tree holding the half-eaten fish, with the cardboard behind my back. Immediately two dogs appeared. They stuck their noses in the air, eager for the fish, their jaws hanging open so that I could smell their stomachs and bowels on their breath. They stood stock still for a second, perhaps to give me the chance to throw them a piece, but I took a bite myself. They jumped for my hands together. I held the fish in the air, protecting my face with the other hand, and felt a claw on my chest and then one on my shoulder. I saw the skinny bodies stretching: among the mangy fur of one I could make out six teats, while the other dog thrust the venomous, red tip of its penis at me. I threw the fish away from me and at the same time felt the bite on my hand, but they let go immediately, leaped after the fish, and the dog's prick brushed my arm dryly.

Where the fish had landed stood a man with a stick, and the dog with the teats was given a thump in its emaciated side. The other dog drew back, the man swung his stick again: they made off, but the stick caught one of the bitch's hind legs.

'Is that your fish?' asked the man, as if he were in doubt, pointing to it.

'Yes,' I said, getting up.

The piece of fish lay in the grass in the dull fading light. A fat black ant crawled over it. With my injured hand I brushed the ant off and picked up what was left of the fish. There was blood on the back of my hand. I tried to rub the grass and sand off the fish, but it fell to pieces and I had to leave it as it was. I put everything in my mouth. The man watched me eat. I could see my hand swelling up, but I couldn't feel it. The blood congealed.

'You're hungry,' said the man, 'or you've got a good appetite.'

I nodded with my mouth full.

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm looking for a ship.'

I could taste sand in my teeth, and spat out grass, together with fragments of fish.

'Going where?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'You made the sign,' said the man, 'you can trust me.'

'What sign?' I asked.

'What's the message?'

‘I haven’t got one,’ I said, ‘it’s a mistake.’

‘Those dogs confused you,’ he said, ‘I understand.’

‘You don’t understand me, I didn’t make a sign.’

‘You’re right, we’ve got to be careful,’ said the man. ‘Those dogs have been wandering around here for months, there’s no one to shoot them.’

‘Where have you come from?’

It might be a trap, I tried to be on my guard, perhaps I had already said too much.

‘I’ll see you later, stick around here, there are no ships right now.’

He left without looking at me. I hid the cardboard under a bush and walked out of the park, back to the harbour.

(...)

4

With my hands in my pockets to stop me making gestures, I entered the narrow streets of the town. Hunger was gnawing at my stomach. I inhaled the smells that drowned out my own stench, searching for what seemed best suited to fill the hole for as long as possible. At a grubby stall I bought a bean stew, dunked bread in it, sucked the crumbs from the crust, and looked curiously all around me. No one I did not want to meet, no one I did want to meet. I wiped the bowl clean with the last crust. I put the crust between my lips, put the bowl back on the counter and went on through the streets. It had given me a thirst, but didn’t dare show my face in a pub. I stank, I was in need of money. In a doorway stood a woman who looked at me. I looked back at her shamelessly, and she beckoned to me with a movement of her head. With my hands in my pockets I crossed the street, followed her through the door. She had delicate features, a gentle, cloudy look in her eyes, a tired mouth, and lovely teeth. She led me up a staircase the steps of which creaked dreadfully.

We reached an attic room containing a bed, a table and chairs, a wardrobe, and in a corner a draining board with well-washed cups and plates and knives. She pointed to a bed that was properly made up, with the creases at right angles.

‘I stink,’ I said, ‘I want to wash first.’

She nodded, took me to a lower floor and showed me a door hanging open. I waited till she had gone, and went in: a cement cubicle with a cracked window in the outside wall, on the ceiling a shower-head almost blocked with lime scale, a plastic curtain on a rod. There were a couple of hooks on the back of the door, which did not lock. I took off my shoes and clothes, and hung the clothes on the hooks. I thought about my shoes, they mustn’t get wet; the only possibility was behind the curtain, but the door did not reach the floor: some one could easily take the shoes through the crack.

I took out the money, a bundle of notes that had become greasy. I rolled them up, knelt down, tore off a piece of the curtain with my teeth and wrapped it round the notes. Kneeling there

I stuffed the roll between my buttocks. I stood up and the rolled was wedged in. I turned on the tap: the water was brown, and it took a while before it ran clear. I scrubbed myself clean with my underpants. I felt like singing, but I controlled myself. Water streamed over my shoulders, my back, my abdomen, my buttocks, formed a grey pool by my feet and flowed slowly away with a gurgling sound.

Finally I turned off the tap, opened the curtain. My shoes were still there, and I used my shirt to dry myself off. I carefully retrieved the money, even the strip of plastic was scarcely wet. I smoothed out the notes, tucked them back in my shoes, putting one note aside. My clothes needed washing too, I had no others. I put my trousers on, my jacket, slipped the remaining note into my inside pocket, and stepped into my shoes. Rolled my underpants inside my shirt, and opened the door. There was no one there. Cautiously I crept downstairs, peering upstairs, listening to see whether I could hear the woman waiting for me. It was dark on the stairs, all I could see were the dark edges of the banisters and the steps. One floor down I bumped into her, and she gave me a piercing look. She pushed me back upstairs without a word.

She had made coffee, which was steaming in a cup with the handle missing. Probably I could have eaten here.

She drank the coffee herself. I saw how it pepped her up, the gulp in her throat, the warm shudder in her breasts. It was a long time since I had heard such a faint, disarming sound. Perhaps it could do no harm to take her in my arms. She put the cup on the table, and seemed to be thinking. I couldn't make up my mind. She took the shirt and the underpants from me, hung them over a chair, wet and dirty. Stinking, like my trousers and jacket. And my socks, which I haven't mentioned yet, which only half stank, since the other half consisted of holes. They were in my jacket pocket, my socks. Even with holes in them they were too thick, I urgently needed to get rid of the money, or I wouldn't be able to get my shoes on.

The woman took off her clothes, I had to be going. Probably she thought that this would be enough to get me to do the same, but I just unbuttoned my trousers, without even letting them drop. She went over to the bed. She had a nice body. I held my trousers up with one hand, and with the other I made a gesture, apologetic or indecisive, I didn't know myself.. She started, I saw her pupils dilate, for a fraction of a second, her eyes started at me, kept staring at me while she herself tried to get her eyes back under control. I saw the nervous tic with which she assumed a straight face, the staring stopped and she smiled.

'What's wrong?' I asked, 'what did you see?'

She did not answer.

'What did you see?' I asked again.

Suddenly she raised her head, looked at me with a pleading look in her eyes. Then she fell back and spread her legs a little. It was almost tenderness that made me go weak when I thought about how long I had avoided this, probably missed it as well. I inhaled her smell, maybe I even bent over her. She lay there motionless, just looking at me. I straightened my back, took the note out of my jacket.

'This is all I have,' I said, 'you can have half, otherwise it'll be no good. Have you got change?'

She raised her head a centimetre, nodded, shook her head, and lowered her head again. I waited to see what would happen, she did not add anything, did not move, just looked at me. The sunlight fell absurdly onto the wall by the head of the bed, a window pulled askew. I realised she did not want my money.

She got dressed.

I looked through the skylight at the seagulls and swallows flying about. She pushed a chair against the back of my knees. I flopped down. She put my shirt and underpants in a bowl, and lathered them. I let her get on with it. How could I get hold of more money? I could start my taking back the note she left on the table. I looked round the room, there was nothing of any value except her body, she knew that herself.

'What do you want from me?' I asked, not intending to attach any importance at all to her reply. But she did not answer, there was nothing but the splashing and rubbing in the bowl.

5

The underpants, the shirt and my jacket were hung out to dry on a line she had strung under the skylight. I had refused to take my trousers off. I sat on the bed thinking with my feet in my shoes. The room smelt of the onions and tomatoes she was preparing. I listed to the chopping of the knife, the crunch of the onions, the sniffing of her nose. She stood with her back to me. I was afraid my newly-washed clothes would start stinking again, this time of onions, and that everything would have been for nothing.

'Would you do that?' I asked.

She went on with what she was doing. She rinsed her hands clean, rubbed her face with her hands, and turned towards me. We looked at each other, her mouth hung open, making her even younger than she was.

'What do you want?' I asked.

I was still sitting on the bed, without moving at all. Again I saw her pupils dilate for an instant, she swallowed her spittle, the swift, mobile tongue, pink and red underneath.

'How did you get hold of those tomatoes?' I asked

She opened her mouth, pointed behind her, gesturing violently. Towards the floor, the street? Her ivory teeth shining with spittle, the dark-pink of her uvula, her tongue undulating, as though retching in her throat, but no sound came out, except a faint rasping gasp. She was as deaf as a post. The banknote was still lying on the table. I got up, took it, put it in my trouser pocket, and sat down again. I knew I would wait until the meal was ready.

She put the pan on the table, placed two forks next to it and a piece of bread.

She sat on my left, at an angle of ninety degrees, and if I looked straight ahead I did not have to see her, but saw the window with the whirling swallows – the seagulls had obviously left.

She burped and smacked her lips, and I could hear her teeth grinding. I let her get on with it. I wiped the pan clean with the last crust of bread. I pushed my chair back, hesitated about getting up – she was sitting staring at the wall. I touched her shoulder.

'And now?' I asked curtly, so that she could read it easily.

There was sauce in the corner of her mouth, red, which made it look as if there were a misplaced smile on her face. Her eyes were dry, and she gave me a fixed stare. She pointed to me, made her hand undulate, rubbed her thumb over her index finger, which I understood to mean money, and again pointed to the two of us, but the rest of her gestures were lost, as I looked away towards the window. Again a seagull flew past.

'I can't understand a thing,' I said, 'can't you write?'

She couldn't write, could only make a few scribbles, holding the pencil the same way she had held the knife she had used to cut the onions. I look at what she had drawn. A boat with two little figures, a house with a cross over it, all simple, crooked lines. I looked from the drawing to her and back at the drawing and shook my head.

'That boat,' I said,' almost spelling out the words, 'is it in the harbour?'

She nodded.

'And those figures, is that us, you and me?' I pointed to the two of us.

She nodded, almost triumphantly. It annoyed me: why was she triumphant, about her plan or because she explained it to me and I understood?

I fell silent. I wiped my face. It had turned warm outside, the window was open.

'I don't know,' I said, 'why should we take that boat? Isn't it good here?'

She watched my lips closely, and shook her head. I took my shirt off the line and out it on as it was dry, the stink of the onion would soon blow out of it. I picked up the underpants.

'Turn round,' I said, 'I've got to get dressed.'

She obeyed. I took off my shoes and trousers, I could see the money in my shoes. I sat down on the bed. She remained standing with her back to me. Obviously she could not know when I was finished. I swore very loudly and she did not react. What was she counting on? My jacket was still hanging there. I nudged her and she looked round.

'Have you any idea what it costs to get on a boat like that?' I asked.

She nodded, and made an expansive gesture with her arms.

'Where the hell are we going to get that much?'

I pull my jacket off the line. She nodded at me, slowly, sheepishly, confident.

'Give me a key,' I said, 'I'll be back. She didn't have one, I understood from her apologetic gestures.

6

I breathed freely in the alleyways full of baskets and stalls full of merchandise, smelled the scent of spices that hung round the stalls and the dogshit. I walked to the end of the longest alley to the sea, no one took any notice of me, another whore tried to entice me, but I yawned at her that I'd already been looked after, she stuck out her broad tongue with a grin, and I looked at the splashing water that foamed as far as the jetties covered in fishing nets. I saw no one I thought I could ask what I wanted to know. I walked along the jetties in the direction of the harbour. In the harbour lay the ship. It was being unloaded. I heard the rattle of the old crane that lifted the crates. A man came in my direction, and I stopped, my thumbs were hooked into my trouser belt and my fingers spread across my hips. The man was close. Without budging I asked: 'Is there someone in the park?'

'In a few hours,' said the man, 'have you got money?'

'How much does it take?'

The man told me the amount.

'And when do we sail?'

'The day after tomorrow,' said the man and walked on. I knew there was little point in going to the park – I didn't have enough. But I wasn't far short, less than half a shoe. One good theft would do. I had two days.

Part two

In my country they all want wheat bread.

No one wants to sow wheat.

(Paul van Ostaijen)

1

Was it the wind getting up? The weatherman hadn't mentioned wind. As if something were clattering. A mop still on the washing line.

Old Schrijvers turned to his wife who was sleeping without a sound. Nothing could be seen of the night through the heavy curtains. Once he was awake it could take a long time before he

nodded off again. He liked getting up early. He didn't need much sleep, but he wanted to fell rested in the morning. He closed his eyes. Automatically he started listening carefully again. After all these years he still didn't know how to switch off his senses in order to drift off.

Was it a cat? A cat climbing across the shed roof? What was it doing there? Now it was as if he could hear leaves being pushed aside. A cat brushing past a bush? It was stupid thinking about it. Shortly he would want to know for sure and then he would have to get up. He preferred to stay in bed.

The morning was half over by the time he discovered. He called his wife who was getting ready to go to the hairdresser's.

For her it had begun one afternoon when she had been about to cut a cauliflower in the garden: the cauliflower had gone, only the leaves were left on the stalk, and the cauliflower next to it had also gone. It came back into her mind as she ran into the garden and looked in response to her husband's shouts. She was flabbergasted, like him.

'Brackx,' she said, 'it's Brackx.'

For him it had begun on the square outside the Central Station. He was buttonholed by a family, a husband, wife, three children. They asked him the way to an address he couldn't understand. He had to disappoint then and catch his train. He still remembered the incident, but did not associate it with what he saw now.

'Brackx,' she said, 'it's Brackx.'

But he didn't believe it.

Brackx was walking up the street when he saw the police car stop. Two policemen got out. He knew one of them. They went into old Schrijvers' garden, gestured, talked, the two policemen, Schrijvers and his wife. One policeman made a note, photos were taken. After fifteen minutes they wandered off*. The police car droved out of the street. Brackx went over to Schrijvers.

'Something happen?'

Old Schrijvers bent down for a potato, and he as picked it up he saw another. He took his rake and dug about in the ground.

'Someone has dug up my potatoes. And made off with them. There were two of them, we could tell from the footprints.'

'Christ Almighty,' said Brackx, who would do a thing like that?'

'People who think they need them more than we do. I don't know if they're right. Have you never taken something that belonged to someone else?'

'What do you mean?' Brackx was on his guard.

'As I say,' said Schrijvers. He unearthed a few dozen good potatoes and threw them into a bucket.

2

The policeman carefully locked his car, although he had put it in the garage and locked the garage too. He took his uniform jacket and his weapon in its holster with him into the living room. He kissed his wife, called out to the children watching television and took his gun and uniform jacket to the bedroom. He pushed the gun with its holster into his bedside table and locked that too. He took off the rest of his uniform and got changed. He went back to the living room.

His wife was busy in the kitchen. He stood behind her as she sliced up tomatoes. He put his chest against her back, his chin in her neck. His mouth to her ear. He could feel the lobe against his lower lip when he spoke.

'Mm, that smells good.'

Did he mean her or the saucepan on the gas? She liked his jokes, the play with ambiguity. She put a slice of tomato in his mouth. He bit.

'Had a good day?' he asked as he chewed. He loved raw tomatoes.

'Yes, I went to see your parents,' she said. 'Your father gave me those tomatoes to take home. How was your day?'

'Odd: potato theft. That dates back a bit. Yesterday there was a report of stolen lettuce and cabbages, And the week before rabbit were stolen. Not just one case, last night potatoes were dug up in three places.'

He sat down.

'Probably the same thieves. Colleagues from other areas have experienced similar things. Trivial incidents, but still... We still love each other, don't we?' he added.

'Walter,' she said, 'you're worried.'

'Maybe I'm wrong, I hope so. I'm afraid it's not going to be an easy summer.'

3

So was that a parabola, the arc that the pebble he threw prescribed before it plopped into the water, or had he not understood a thing? He opted for the latter. Tried with a new stone. Looked at the circlers rippling through the water. He understood circles. He leant back with relief at an angle against the verge. Where had she got to?

She saw him lying there, with his hands in his neck, and she rang her bicycle bell.

He turned his head to one side, with a broad smile, and got up.

On the other side of the dike was a nature reserve, boggy heath covered in thick woodland. They steered their bikes down and hid them under a bush. He chained the two front wheels together, and put the key in his trouser pocket. At this time of day not a soul was walking along the

dike, he had waited for her for almost half an hour and seen no one. Only later when the schools were out would they appear.

They crawled some distance from their bikes, shielded by low-hanging foliage. He took a jacket from his rucksack and laid it on the ground for her. She immediately lay down. He bent over her and kissed her mouth. She pulled him on top of her. They whispered, giggled, let their fingers tingle. She put her hands under his T-shirt, under his trouser belt, ran her nails down his spine, he felt her breasts, perfect parabolas. He stroked her hips with one hand, slid her skirt up. She unbuttoned his trousers.

'Have you got something with you?'

He took a condom out of his trouser pocket. He pushed his trousers down to his ankles. Kicked the shoes off his feet, and removed his trousers completely. He was wearing boxer shorts: he could keep them on with their wide flies. She put the condom on him, and he helped her.

When he was inside her, he closed his eyes, blew his breath into her ear. She kept her eyes open, looked at his face, at his shoulders, to the side, at her knees that protruded above his buttocks. He moved violently, sometimes holding back. She wanted him to stay in her for a long time before he came, so did he; she could hear from his hoarse breathing when he was getting close, the apex of a parabola. He was almost there.

'A snake,' she screamed suddenly. 'Tim, an adder!'

She opened his eyes, saw her startled face under him, and she pulled her knees up higher.

'What is it,' he gasped.

'I thought I saw a snake,' she gulped, 'something shiny, as big as an arm, with a flat snout at our feet.'

He looked over his shoulder, fleetingly, saw nothing.

'You must have been mistaken.' He whispered right in front of her.

She sighed.

'I'm almost there.'

'I know, sorry.'

They finished their lovemaking, he withdrew from her, tenderly, and tied up the condom.

'I had a fright,' she said.

'Doesn't matter.' He kissed her breasts.

They lay next to each other for a while, purring contentedly, stroking each other, then they got up and he pulled on his trousers.

‘Where are my shoes?’

Gone. His shoes had gone, nowhere to be found under the bushes, not in the grass.

‘They were lying here.’

‘Yes, they were lying here, I’m sure of it.’

‘How can something like this happen?’

‘Tim, that adder… it wasn’t an adder, it was an arm.’

4

In the night it had started to rain, she had got out of bed to close the windows. She had gone straight back to sleep. When she got up it was still raining. She hurried out of the bathroom, quickly made a cup of coffee, got her raincoat and an umbrella. The first light of day was glowing grey at the window. She glanced into the children’s room, her husband turned over in bed once more.

She left for the bakery where she had an early job. Usually she cycled, but when it was raining she took the bus. The stop was nearby.

She crossed the street, looking down at the ground where she saw the raindrops falling, the water was pouring in streams into the drains.

She went quickly into the bus shelter.

She started.

There were three men in the shelter. The men were asleep, or pretending to be. They were lying close together, in the corner where there was most protection from the rain, with their legs tucked up. They were sleeping with their heads on their arms, on the bare concrete floor. Two of them had shoes with worn-out soles, one of the shoes seemed to be grinning with a loose lip. The men did not stir.

She hesitated, and looked to see if a bus were coming. No.

The man lying furthest away opened his eyes and looked at her. She was standing half in the shelter, half under her umbrella in the rain. Involuntarily she took a step back. The man said nothing, did nothing, and closed his eyes again.

She waited.

Nothing happened.

The rain clattered down. Then men looked filthy and tired. Foreigners, with their thick eyebrows and moustaches and dark foreheads. What were they doing here? There was a sack at their feet. What was in it? The sack was shapeless, nothing was sticking out.

She started again. One of the men coughed, with a growl. With a dog's voice, she thought. She shivered.

A few minutes later the bus came. She got on. The men did not react.

At the bakery it busy the start, taking the freshly baked croissants, coffee cakes, bread and sandwiches from the hot plates to the racks in the shop. She had entered the bakery via the garage, where she left her umbrella and raincoat to drip dry. When she got of the bus the rain was bucketing down. Her shoes were wet through. She had a pair of slippers in a locker for this kind if problem.' She went into the shop with dry feet.

Right on time she pulled up the blinds in front of the shop window and was about to unbolt the door. She saw him immediately in the doorway. A man like the three at the bus stop. Huddled up against the rain, back bent against the door. She did not dare open up for fear he might tumble inside. She called the baker.

He came at once and stood there with his white baker's cap on his full head of hair, shaking his head.

'A drunk,' was his verdict,' send him packing, Sofie.'

'No,' said Sofie, 'he's not a drunk, I've already seen three of his sort this morning, he's a tramp.'

The baker looked the man over.

'Call the police, he's got to go, our customers can't get in like that.'

The baker hurried back to the bakery, leaving things to Sofie. She cautiously opened the door. The man slid backwards into the shop, and opened his eyes in annoyance.

'The shop is opening,' she said, 'you must leave.'

The man scrambled to his feet, pointed to the rain, mumbled something that she didn't understand, in a language she could not place.

'You can't stay here,' she said and again gestured for him to leave.

The man remained standing in the doorway. Sofie closed the door. She would see what happened when a customer arrived.

A customer arrived. The man let the customer through with no problem, and even gave him a friendly apologetic smile.

'This doorway's too cramped to shelter in,' said the customer.

He made his order. Sofie served him.

'Lousy weather,' she said.

‘As if a bus had dropped them off here, there must be at least ten of them lying about the town sleeping and hiding. The police turn a blind eye.′

‘Provided they don’t break the law.’

‘They do that without our knowing,’ said the customer.

‘Do you think it’s as bad as that?’

‘I don’t think so, I feel it. I wish it were different. You wait and see.’

The customer left, in turn giving a friendly smile to the stranger in the door way. Sofie stayed behind the counter, though there were no other customers in the shop. Again she hesitated as she had at the bus stop. Suddenly she picked up a croissant. She opened the door and thrust the croissant at the man.

‘As long as you go away,’ she said. She gestured with her head.

The man seemed to understand. He took the croissant, gave a grateful nod, and crossed the street in the rain. Sofie watched him go, until he disappeared round a bend.

By the afternoon when she had finished her work the rain had stopped. She could no longer see a tramp at any bus stop.

Her husband was waiting for her at table, and she had brought a loaf. The children had gone to school. The lilac bush by the window was dripping with sunlight that gleamed in the water droplets. She slumped into a chair.

‘What on earth is going on?’ she asked, ‘ there are score of foreigners roaming the town, this morning there were three of them sleeping in the bus shelter nearby. It’s like an invasion.’

‘I heard about it on the radio,′ he said. ′It’s not only here. In France, Spain, German, Italy… A network of human traffickers, they think. There are small groups that turn up here and there.’

‘Scores, is that what they call small groups?’

‘Did you buy a paper?’

She took it out of her bag. He took the loaf and poured her some coffee. Sofie leafed through the paper.

‘It says here they’re coming from all over.’

She read the article.

‘And?’

‘Asia, Africa, Russia… Economic refugees. Lured by promises. There are various trafficking routes, not a single network, but countless small ones, which makes it difficult to arrest the organisers of the trafficking. But the refugees have no chance. If they’re caught, they′re sent back.’

‘Is that what they say?’

‘Yes.’

She took a bite from her sandwich.

‘What do those papers know anyway?’

6

The mayor bent his head, his chin dropped onto his chest, and he reflected. He could not argue with what the commissioner had said. The ministerial guidelines were useless. It was no longer a problem, it had grown too large for that, too intangible, it seemed like just an observed state of affairs. Which was: people are coming here and making a life for themselves. It was hard to say much more with certainty. Of course individual problem occurred here and there, they had to be judged individually, but it was too late for a comprehensive approach to the problem.

What could he say in reply to the commissioner?

They had to detain men and women separately, but with whom did the children belong? They had not been able to catch even one of them stealing. Even begging could not be proved, they simply asked where they could get food and shelter, in their incomprehensible languages. The weather was good, most of them slept under the trees in the park. Yesterday the first tent had gone up. A fire had been lit. The fire brigade had immediately put it out. There had almost been a scuffle. Then the fire brigade commander had had the soup cooked in the fire brigade kitchen. They had not bothered to ask where the ingredients came from, fresh celery, tomatoes, carrots, leeks, cucumbers, even a freshly plucked and chopped-up chicken. With full stomachs they would be more amenable.

He had called the public prosecutor, the agencies, the governor, colleagues. He had ordered the council to distribute rations, soup, milk, bread. He had had a few empty houses fitted out for families with small children. The budget would not permit him to do any more, and yet more had to be done. The complaints of residents, the demonstrations by the opposition. Fortunately the summer had begun and his fiercest opponents were on holiday. He would have liked to go away himself, but in the circumstances no one would have accepted that.

What was he supposed to say to the commissioner?

The mayor raised his head, stared with worried eyes out of the window that gave him a panorama of the town, the house fronts, the roofs, the bell tower, the swimming pool, the tallest trees in the park. Smoke was curling above them, a thin wisp. The fire brigade had given up. Every day new ones arrived. More than thirty of them were already camping in the park. There were also ten or so camping on the verge of the railway behind the station: the railway police would have to look after that.

The commissioner’s question was simple and legitimate. Couldn’t they, now the holidays had begun, requisition a school building and accommodate all the refugees or nomads, or whatever you wanted to call them? You would be able to keep them under control, they would be more or less cleared off the streets, the park would again be available to ordinary people, it would give you two months’ breathing space, their staff could go on holiday as planned, you could put pressure on

the government if other council followed suit, all in all it wasn't a bad idea, but what school was he to sacrifice? The High School, the College, the Technical School, or one of the primary schools, the Nurses' School perhaps?

How would people react? It could hardly be worse than now, every day he was buttonholed, had to face questions, accusations, incomprehension, head-shaking. Was politics really helpless? He had to do something, take the lead, but what if other councils did not follow him, the conversations with his colleagues had not been encouraging, obviously every municipality had its own problems, the countryside was not the same as the town, in M. they had an old, unused police barracks, in H. the biscuit factory was empty, those kinds of buildings were not available here, and if the situation had not improved by September, he would have to evict them again anyway, because no one would accept that the school year could not begin as normal. That would be precisely the pressure on the government that was needed, if other councils followed his lead. Then the government would know that they had exactly two months. Actually the matter should be tackled at European level. But the mayor was the one who had to look the voters in the eye every day, and he was expected to keep the local situation under control. No one gave a damn whose help he called in, the government, Europe, the world or the army. And if no one gave sufficient help, he would have to do it himself. What he most wanted was to go on holiday.

No one had it under control yet. The facts were still just facts. No one calls a volcanic eruption a problem when towering rivers of lava descend thundering and scorching on the village that has been sudden shaken from its sleep. Every man for himself, wait until it is over and then take stock of the damage, what more can you do? The problem occurs when the eruption is expected: how powerful will it be, who should we evacuate, by what route, what shelter should we prepare from how many people by what deadline and what kinds of emergency services do we need? In this case that phase is already behind us, to no avail.

So, what was he going to reply to the commissioner?

He reviewed the schools once more in his mind as he looked at the plume of smoke over the park, he was tempted to look for signals in it. Then he heard a siren, so was the fire brigade responding after all? He reached for the telephone.