

Vermin

Hanlon's Razor:

Do not attribute to malice what can be explained by incompetence.

1 - The accident.

The weather is actually quite pleasant. At twenty degrees, it's a lovely January day. Older people remark that it used to be much cooler at this time of year. This is thought to be due to the greenhouse effect. As a result, it has become considerably warmer in these parts. In itself, that's not such a bad thing, of course, but it also rains a lot more now. Between April and September, it rains almost non-stop. During this period, it is also sweltering hot, an almost unbearable combination. Scientists in the media claim that the greenhouse effect is now self-perpetuating and that the climate will change even further. That does not bode well.

The old bus rumbles and creaks its way slowly along the winding road. The interior is worn out and whatever was still in good condition has been destroyed. The hatches on the roof are open, allowing a little fresh air to get in. The driver is slumped over the steering wheel in his old rags. A bent cigarette hangs from the corner of his mouth, barely burning. His cap is tilted right back; it looks as if it might fall off at any moment.

I'm still thinking about the job interview I had recently. The man seemed genuinely interested in my skills as a technician, and somehow we clicked. The conversation flowed smoothly, and I don't think I made many mistakes. Unfortunately, there is little work for technicians and there are a great many unemployed. I don't envy him the position of interviewer, with all those people saying all sorts of things just to make sure they get the job. Meanwhile, the rural landscape rolls by. Farms alternate with wooded areas and small lakes. Plots of land are marked off by crooked wooden fences and wide ditches. Here and there, there are still barbed-wire fences. These days, metal is unaffordable and people prefer to use natural products like wood again.

There aren't many cows in the meadows these days. When they fell victim to one disease after another, the farmers stopped keeping them. Horses and lambs are still kept, though. I do feel there's little farmland left. Most of the country was urbanised in the 1920s. These towns are a lot emptier these days, as many people have emigrated recently. The country is slowly being flooded due to the greenhouse effect. As a result, large swathes of industrial areas have been inundated, causing economic activity to shift abroad as well. This has left even more people out of work. I am one of those victims.

As I sit lost in thought, I watch a young couple at the back of the bus, who have

eyes only for each other. Out of habit, I always sit facing backwards on public transport. It's nice to see the landscape behind the bus; it doesn't rush past so quickly, so I feel less dizzy. My thoughts drift back to the time I met Irma. At first, we didn't notice each other at all; it was just a fleeting professional encounter. One day, I came home from work and found Elsay, my cat, lying in her vomit and faeces. Her eyes, which are normally bright and lively, were dull and listless. I called my vet, almost in a panic. Unfortunately, her answering machine was on. It said she wasn't on duty that week, and she gave a phone number for another vet.

That turned out to be Irma, who has a practice at the zoo. I'd never realised she also treated private clients, but as it was closer than my old vet, I always went to her from then on whenever there was something wrong with Elsay and Yogi. Sadly, Yogi, my little tomcat, has passed away, something I still regret. I was particularly fond of that sweet and affectionate creature. Whilst Yogi was being treated for his illness, Irma's computer broke down, and as I'm a bit of a techie, I repaired the machine for her whilst she continued to examine the little tomcat. She'd been to various companies and spent a lot of money on it, but the machine was and remained broken. I found only configuration errors, which I corrected. The thing worked perfectly again straight away. She was so pleased that she invited me round for dinner. Needless to say, it turned out to be a very pleasant evening.

"Hey, what was that?" the girl suddenly shrieks. She points outside. My eyes follow her finger, but I can't see anything out of the ordinary there. A piece of wasteland used as a rubbish tip glides past the window, despite a sign stating that this is not permitted.

"It must have been a dog," says the boy. His eyes betray that he doesn't believe it himself. The other bus passengers merely look up, disturbed; no one reacts further. The bus drives on and the couple lose themselves in their love games again. I can't help it, my thoughts wander off again.

I've been unemployed for a while now and have actually given up hope of finding work. Since China became an economic superpower, the standard of living in Europe has fallen sharply. Many people are unemployed. I'm lucky that I'd already paid off the house while I was still working. A small vegetable patch provides me with food, and I don't really need meat every day. I'm therefore as thin as a rake, something people often comment on.

The bus brakes suddenly. An old man falls face-first onto the armrest opposite him, and a briefcase from the overhead rack hits me in the face. A little disoriented, I look around. The old man is bleeding heavily. No one is paying him any attention. I take the first-aid kit off the hook in the bus and pull out a piece of bandage. I roll it into a wad and dab the blood from his face. Now that the blood has been removed, I can see the wound. It's not too bad; he has a cut above his eyebrow.

“Are you all right?” I ask. He nods and mumbles that he’s been through worse. I put a plaster on the wound and help him back into his seat.

“Thank you,” he says politely.

“You’re welcome.”

He nods kindly. I walk to the front to see what’s going on. Through the windscreen, I see the driver talking to two men. Further down the road, two cars have apparently crashed head-on into each other. In one car, a woman with bloodied hands is sobbing in the doorway. It looks like it was a heavy impact; the cars are almost unrecognisable.

I get off the bus and walk over to the sobbing woman.

“Can I help?” I ask as I crouch down beside her.

She shakes her head. I try to hold her hand, but she pulls it away.

“It’s not too bad, I’m not injured, but I’m very shaken. I’ve never been in an accident before.”

“What happened?” I ask.

“I don’t know, the other car suddenly swerved and rammed into us head-on. We spun round a few times and then crashed into that tree.”

The other car is only damaged at the front. As I walk round it, I see that the right-hand side of the car is gaping open. There’s a tear about forty inches long in the door. It looks as if a sharp knife has been drawn horizontally through it. I look around and see nothing that could have caused it. I grab my mobile phone and dial the emergency number. A cold voice curtly asks who I am, where I am and what’s going on. I explain the situation as accurately as possible. It seems she doesn’t believe me, but she says the police are on their way.

The woman is joined by her husband, who sits down beside her, looking pale. The person who caused the accident appears to be uninjured, but is clearly very shaken. Gesturing wildly, he tells his story to the driver, who listens patiently. I think he’ll have to tell his story again because I can hear the police approaching in the distance. And sure enough, less than a minute later, the black-and-white striped car comes racing up with its flashing lights and siren blaring.

The bus driver gets back on the bus, looking sympathetic and shaking his head, and I follow him. It’s still too far to walk. As soon as I’m back in my seat, the bus lurches and jolts into motion. I’m startled awake when I feel a nudge in my side. My neighbour across the aisle has also got on the bus and asks me, with a thick accent:

“Aren’t you getting off here too?” Indeed, the surroundings look very familiar.

“Yes, I do, thank you.”

Feeling a bit stiff, I get up and step outside. Evening is falling and it feels muggy.

It's still more than a kilometre's walk from the bus stop, but I don't mind that. Certainly not when the weather is this lovely. I've walked this route countless times, but I still look around as if I'm seeing the surroundings for the first time. I see children in a paddling pool having a brilliant time. The house cat isn't having any of it and makes a run for it. The parents are chatting in the garden chairs. Further on, a farmer is busy repairing his fence. It looks as though it's been knocked over. His farmhand is painting a shed which has three huge scratches in the wood on one side and new planks nailed on the other. Apparently, someone has been a bit clumsy with their tractor.

When I get home, I'm greeted by Elsay. She meows loudly and circles me, rubbing against my legs. My house is a builder's cottage over a hundred years old. With a single-brick wall and just a tiny kitchen, a small living room and two bedrooms, it's not much, but it's mine. I had to convert one bedroom into a bathroom, as there wasn't one. I head straight to the kitchen to prepare her food.

She's absolutely thrilled whilst I'm busy. Every so often, I wonder whether animals really do love you, or if it's just about the food. But when she comes over to me now and then for a cuddle, I know she loves her boss too.

When Elsay is eating, I prepare my meal. I don't feel like cooking anything elaborate today, so I pop a ready meal in the microwave. I set the timer for five minutes and sit down in front of the telly, flick through the channels and, as usual, end up watching the news. The inevitable bad economic news is followed by a round-up of world events. A Russian submarine is missing. It has probably sunk. Eighty crew members are missing. That old Russian rubbish. Modernise it and send that junk to the scrapyard. Forget about modernising it, too. Why go to war? We'd lose to the Chinese anyway.

I wake with a start when the phone rings. The plate has fallen off my lap and is now being cleaned up by Elsay. It's Irma. I turn the TV down.

"How are you?" comes the question from the other end.

"I'm fine, I'm back from yet another job interview."

"You're probably in a bad mood again, aren't you?"

"No, it's not that bad. There was an accident on the way. Two cars had crashed into each other."

"You weren't involved in that yourself, were you?" she asks, sounding alarmed. She gets worried quickly.

"No, not at all. The driver stopped to see if he could help. But the police were already on their way, so we drove on."

While I'm chatting with Irma, I play with my laser pointer, which I used to need a lot for presentations. This is always a big hit with Elsay; she always chases after the red dot. Just like now. I point it thoughtlessly at the ceiling. Elsay jumps onto the

cupboard to reach it. Her playful movements cause a metal vase to fall from the cupboard. It hits the floor with a loud crash.

“What’s happening?” asks Irma.

“Nothing out of the ordinary, I’m just playing with Elsay, and she knocked a vase over.”

“I can tell, you’re bored. Do you still fancy popping round this evening?”

“Yes, great! What time should I come?”

“Come between eight and nine; I’ve got a bit to do, so I might not be quite ready.”

We agree on this and hang up. Tired, I get up to pick up the vase. Elsay is sitting there, completely unfazed, washing her face on top of the cupboard. She’s oblivious to any trouble.

I put my plate on the worktop with the rest of the washing-up and go upstairs to take off my suit. A pair of jeans and a T-shirt will set the fashion tone tonight, with trainers, of course. Back downstairs, I consider doing the washing-up. Judging by the pile, I decide that tomorrow is a better time. I’ll probably feel the same way tomorrow.

I spend my time on my computer, scouring the internet for job vacancies and replying to my emails. There’s only one email. It’s from Irma, and it says she has to carry out a strange investigation. There has been an act of vandalism at the zoo and a few animals didn’t survive it. It strikes me that a lot has been happening in the neighbourhood lately. This used to be a quiet farming village where the biggest news was a chicken crossing the road without looking.

The air seems to smell fresh and pleasant. You might even wonder if that’s true, given the current air pollution. Irma lives a few miles away from me and I usually walk that distance, but tonight I’m taking my bike. Although the lights aren’t working, I don’t think the police will be checking. They’ve hardly been doing anything lately. I’m surprised that crime isn’t rising dramatically. Apparently, things have gone downhill there too.

Whilst cycling, it turns out to be a problem after all. Not all the streetlights are on; quite a few are broken. In the dark, I can’t see where I’m cycling properly. I know the route very well, so I decide to carry on anyway. In hindsight, it turns out to be a bit of a struggle, so next time I’ll walk again.

It goes well until I hit a pothole. I just manage not to fall. As I’m about to cycle on, I hear a rustling sound beside me. Apparently, an animal has been startled by me. It probably doesn’t have night vision either. The cloud that was in front of the moon has now moved away. I can see the road reasonably well and cycle on quickly before another cloud drifts in front of the moon. The dark blue sky with white-blue glowing clouds, framed by black trees, creates a somewhat spooky

atmosphere.

At Irma's, I go round the back, straight to her laboratory. I know her, and she won't be finished. Sure enough, the light is still on. I look through a small window and see her peering through a microscope. I tap on the window to let her know I'm there and so as not to startle her. The idea is good, but it doesn't work – she's startled anyway. She looks at me and beckons for me to come in.

There's always a strange smell in here, which I can't quite get used to. It's something animal-like, mixed with something chemical. There are metal filing cabinets lining the walls everywhere. In the middle stands a treatment table and a table on which all sorts of equipment sit alongside glass baskets. Irma is sitting at this table. She looks at me.

"Did I give you a fright? I did it precisely so as not to startle you," I say, somewhat apologetically.

"It's all right, I was concentrating and had completely lost track of time," she says as she walks over to give me a kiss.

She switches off some equipment and hangs her lab coat on the coat rack. As we walk to her house, she looks at me with a slightly worried expression. I ask her what's wrong.

"I don't think the animals died as a result of vandalism." She frowns and suddenly asks if I've read her email. I nod in confirmation and look at her questioningly.

"The holes in the fence are very low down, and I find the way the animals were injured strange. At the moment, I can't make head nor tail of it."

"What sort of animals are we talking about?" I ask, partly out of politeness.

"The raccoons, of course; those little creatures are my favourites." She looks doubtful. I shake my head in helplessness. I simply cannot imagine anyone harming such a creature.

"I'm trying my very best, but I don't think the police are going to do anything about it." She's clearly sad. I can well imagine how awful it must be to think the culprits will go unpunished.

She plops down on her soft sofa. She's furnished it in a modern style. Two sofas face each other with a glass table in between. Against the wall stands a large cabinet housing a television. There are also a couple of enormous vases containing large artificial flowers.

"What shall we do tonight?" She looks at me with a smile.

"I've no idea," I say, barely suppressing a grin.

I switch on the TV. The first thing I see is the news report about the lost submarine. No one knows what happened to it.

"Is it just me, or has a lot been happening lately?" I ask her.

"Oh, so you've noticed that too?" She looks at me intently.

I tell her I've only just noticed it today.

"No, I've thought so for a while. It seems humanity has played out its part," she says, sounding a bit despondent.

"I think we've still got a bit to look forward to, but we'll survive."

"Are you sure about that?" I don't answer and walk into the kitchen. Of course, it was an empty phrase, meant to be hopeful rather than based on reality.

I fill the coffee machine with water and search the cupboard for the coffee pods. After a bit of a rummage – the cupboards are clearly less well-organised than the rest of her interior – I find them and switch on the coffee machine. It doesn't take long for the coffee to be ready. I prefer the old machines with a filter and ground coffee, but nobody uses those any more.

I walk back into the room with two cups. Irma has changed meanwhile and is sitting alone in a blouse and jeans. She has let down her long, curly, dark hair, and it now hangs over her shoulders and breasts. Her pale face is lit by a candle on the table. She has folded her legs sideways beneath her. I've never seen her in any other position.

We haven't spoken of the abused raccoons since. My mobile phone rings unexpectedly. It's John. He's in the same boat as me; he was also made redundant when our employer moved production abroad. We often worked together and had developed a close friendship. We used to mope together when we lost our jobs. But not today. John is over the moon: he's found work.

"What are you going to do?" I ask, delighted.

"I'm going to be a lorry driver. The shifts are irregular, but it pays very well."

He'd applied for a job at the chemical company just outside the village. The company is called Biotron and has a bad reputation. But when you're out of work, you're willing to overlook that. I'd do the same. It seems pointless to mention that to John, especially as I don't really care either.

John explains that it's a three-shift rota for transporting hazardous materials. He does need to get his hazardous materials driver's certificate during his probationary period.

"That doesn't really seem like a problem to me," I reply.

"It's about knowing the law and the substances you're transporting, so you know what to do if something goes wrong."

He's a bit less thrilled that his first shift is a night shift. Because he can start straight away, it means he won't be able to sleep tonight. I wish him good luck and hang up. I fear we'll be going out a bit less often after all.

Irma has fallen asleep on the sofa. I pick her up and carry her to the bedroom. As I

take off her blouse and trousers, she wakes up.

“What are you doing?” she asks sleepily.

“I’m putting you to bed,” I reply.

“Hm,” she mumbles. She turns onto her side as I tuck the thin duvet over her.

I sneak out, carefully locking the door behind me. The moon is covered by clouds again, so it’s very dark. I decide to leave my bike at Irma’s and walk home. I don’t fancy taking a nasty tumble. It’s still balmy, and I walk towards the street, enjoying the atmosphere.

I walk on the left-hand side of the road so as not to be hit unexpectedly. In this village, there’s no traffic after ten o’clock, but you never know if a drunk reveller might be driving home. Especially with modern electric engines, you can hardly hear the cars coming any more. Normally, I walk down a footpath, but as there are no lights on there at all, I walk along the village’s main road.

The moon peeks through the clouds now and then, making it feel spooky. This is heightened by patches of white mist drifting across the ground as the temperature drops. I didn’t bring my coat on the way here, and now I’m paying the price. I’m feeling very cold.

After less than five hundred yards, I hear a deep rumbling behind me. It sounds like a convoy of lorries, but they never use this road. Lorry traffic is diverted via the ring road, and that’s quite a distance from here. I look back, but see nothing. I decide to just keep walking; perhaps it’s an excavator or something similar.

The sound is slowly getting louder and seems to be coming my way. I look back again; the moon is just peeking through the clouds, but I still can’t see anything. After a few minutes, the sound is right next to me, and when I look back now, I see a huge vehicle heading straight for me. Instinctively, I take a few steps onto the verge. A couple of large lorries drive past me. They have no lights on, but behind the windows I can see the green eyes of night-vision goggles. Soldiers, I suddenly realise. What are they doing here?

They pay me no mind, and I hear them disappear into the distance. I never knew soldiers drove round here. It occurs to me that it’s certainly dangerous for them to be driving without their lights on. Not that many people drive at night.

I walk on quickly. When I get home, I miss Elsay. She hasn’t come to greet me, which is very rare. I call her name, but there’s no response. I keep calling as I walk through my house. I see her looking down from the top of the loft stairs.

“Come on down! What’s the matter?” I call to her.

She doesn’t respond. This is strange; she’s never done that before. I walk up the

stairs to pick her up. At first, she flinches, but then lets me pick her up quickly. As I walk with her to the kitchen, I speak soothingly to her. At first, it has no effect at all, but a moment later she starts purring after all.

I give her some fresh food and set her down by her bowl. She takes a few bites, but not with much enthusiasm. She's clearly very stressed. I've no idea what might have startled her, and keep talking to her soothingly.

I undress to go to bed. I take Elsay to bed with me and give her some cat treats there. As always, as soon as she's finished them, she curls up on the second pillow and falls asleep, purring loudly. When Irma sleeps here, it always causes a bit of a row: the cat and my girlfriend won't give an inch.

2 - John

I wake up to the first rays of sunlight on my face. Elisah has curled up against me, causing me to unconsciously lie in a strange position. I get up with a stiff back and a leg that's almost numb. Having a pet is quite a burden now and then. Elisah jumps up, full of energy, and I see her trotting down the stairs with her tail held high. I hear her going to her litter tray downstairs. Apparently, she didn't go out last night to do her business. As she walks straight to her water bowl, my gaze falls on her food bowl. She hasn't eaten either. Normally, her food bowl is empty in the morning, and she begs for more. It's starting to look dried out and dark. An uneasy feeling begins to take hold of me. What happened here last night? I've had Elisah since she was six weeks old, but I've never experienced this before. I'm not at all used to cats staying scared for long; normally they've got over it as soon as the 'danger' has passed.

I walk downstairs and switch on the coffee machine and the computer with a listless gesture. As usual, the first thing I do online is read my newspaper and have a cup of coffee. I've been sitting there for less than five minutes when John comes in. My back door is always unlocked; we don't get burgled here. As a result, Elisah runs upstairs again.

"What's wrong with that cat?" asks John, surprised, as he watches her go. "I've no idea, she's been like this since last night," I reply.

He plops down on the sofa, making it creak pitifully at the joints, and spreads his arms wide across the backrest.

"How did it go last night?" I ask with interest.

He laughs; it looks like he's had a good time.

"It's a strange place. I have to do a special training course to be allowed to transport hazardous materials, but they won't tell me what I'm transporting."

I look at him in surprise.

"I wanted to know what was in the tanker, but they really wouldn't say. They claimed it wasn't hazardous materials, but cooling water. It's as plain as day that's not true. I had to dump it in the little pond behind the tip, you know?"

I nod to show I know, whilst handing him his cup of coffee. He continues, stirring his coffee slowly and thoughtfully:

“What I find so strange is that the valves were locked and only one of the drivers has the keys. He was also the only one who connected the hoses. It’s completely mad, of course, that he did that wearing gloves and a face mask. So I reckon it’s definitely not water.”

“I reckon that’s not quite what it seems, either.”

John looks worriedly into his cup.

“I don’t think this is right,” he says. I shake my head too.

“I have to do this job; otherwise I’ll soon be sleeping under the bridge down the road.”

I laugh, but I realise it’s not entirely a joke. We finish our coffee in silence. John is clearly exhausted; he’s slumped in his chair with a worn-out look on his face. Suddenly, he jumps up and announces that he’s going home.

“I haven’t slept for twenty-four hours. I’m off to bed.”

“Will you be able to sleep after that coffee?” I ask. He nods that it’s no problem.

“I’m so tired that the coffee doesn’t matter any more.” He says goodbye and walks out, ducking under the door. John is taller than my door is high.

I stay seated for a moment and finish my coffee. I wonder how much rubbish has already been dumped into that water. It seems to me that could well have consequences. I walk back to my computer and tap the mouse, so the screen snaps to life. I’m barely sat down when Elsie comes over and jumps onto the desk. After walking across the keyboard a few times and standing in front of the monitor with her back arched, she lies down on my lap. Purring, she starts grooming herself, whilst I search for the webpage I was on before Elsie walked across my keyboard.

There’s not much news; the papers are mainly reporting on the sunken submarine, and particularly on the families left behind. To my delight, I see that the weather forecast remains consistently fine for now. At least that means I can go for a bike ride. It suddenly occurs to me that my bike is still at Irma’s. So I’ll have to pick it up from there first, which immediately dampened my spontaneous idea of going for a ride. The paper also reports that analysts believe we’ve now passed the lowest point of the economic downturn. Yeah, yeah, they’ve been writing that for a few years now. Otherwise, there are a few adverts I could respond to. I print these pages and switch off my computer.

It’s already warm this morning, and it promises to be an even warmer day. My father told me that these days, January is as warm as May used to be. Also, many of the plants and shrubs that used to grow here have disappeared. They’ve been replaced by tropical trees and shrubs. Only, we no longer consider them tropical plants these days. The real tropics these days consist of nothing but desert.

I notice that the tool shed is open. I’m sure I closed it, didn’t I? There wasn’t much

in there to begin with, but I suspect there might be even less now. I look inside and wait a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. Fortunately, nothing is missing, as far as I can see. The hedge trimmer, the lawnmower, and the pruning shears are still hanging there, and on the workbench lie all sorts of tools such as pliers and screwdrivers. My bike is usually there too, but that's still at Irma's. I close the rickety door and slam the bolt shut. Or at least, that was my intention, but the wooden bolt turns out to have snapped off. The shed wasn't exactly a paragon of solidity, but this is still rather odd.

I walk into my vegetable patch to check on the plants. Everything looks thriving, although it does need watering. I pick a handful of green beans for tonight. I'm pretty fed up with them; I've grown far too many. We have evolved over more than one and a half million years to the top of the food chain because, both as individuals and as a species, we have been able to adapt to all sorts of situations. The result is that, as individuals, we can barely provide for our food any more. I think to myself, ironically, that this is a perfect situation for a species that might want to take over this lofty position from us.

I take the green beans to the kitchen and see that the rake is lying next to the house. Eh? How on earth did that happen? I definitely put that thing in the shed. I'm also surprised I didn't notice it was missing from the shed. Shaking my head in exasperation, I place the green beans on the worktop. Then I walk round to the side of the house to pick up the rake. I see drag marks; it looks as though it's been dragged along the ground. Could an animal have made off with it?

When I reach the rake, I see a few parallel, curved scratches on the side of my house. They could have been made by the rake, but there are only three, whereas my rake has four tines. The spacing between them doesn't add up either. Strange, very strange. For some reason, these scratches look very familiar to me, but I simply cannot remember where I've seen them before.

I pick up my rake, only to drop it again straight away. There's a sticky substance on the wooden handle. Yuck! I stare at my hand in horror. How gross! What on earth is that? I put the rake down and walk to the kitchen to wash my hand. On the way, my hand starts to tingle and burn. My fingers in particular feel very strange, as if they're being pricked by thousands of tiny needles. I rush to the tap to rinse my hand. The cool water numbs the... er, what is it actually, an itch or pain? As soon as I take my hand out of the stream, the strange tingling starts again straight away. I quickly put my hand back in the water.

After trying a few times to see if I can manage without water, the tingling seems to ease off. A moment later, the sensation is thankfully gone. When I look closely, I can't spot anything unusual about my hand. I ring Irma to ask what this might be, but she doesn't answer. She does an inspection round of the zoo a few times a day,

and it's possible she's busy with that right now. I just hope she's left my bike outside; otherwise I won't be able to get to it. I put the phone in my pocket and walk back to the scene of the incident.

The scratches on the wall still surprise me, but on closer inspection, it turns out they are the only ones. My house stands on its own and I can walk around it. The plot is bordered by a wire mesh fence one metre fifty high. The fence dates back to better times and is in urgent need of maintenance. Yet, I spot a hole I've never noticed before. I walk over to have a closer look. It appears to have been torn open. Right at ground level, there's a hole about 50 cm high.

The edges are bent inwards, suggesting that something has entered my garden. That is almost certainly the case. But what surprises me most is that the mesh is not only bent, but it looks as though a piece is missing. I suspect the local youths know more about this. For as long as I can remember, the local youths seem to take immense pleasure in destroying all sorts of things. Why didn't they climb over it? Is this what Elsay has been afraid of?

I'm going to fetch some wire mesh from my shed to repair the damaged section. I cut off a piece slightly larger than the hole. I secure it to the fence with wire. After half an hour of fiddling with pliers, it's as good as new. I look at the rake suspiciously. I don't dare touch it any more. If I'm already having problems just holding it for a moment, I don't want to know what would have happened if I'd held it for longer.

The phone rings unexpectedly. It's Irma.

"Did you ring?" she asks curtly, even though she could see that on her phone. I tell her what happened. There's a brief silence on the other end.

"How's your hand?"

"Nothing serious, I think. I've rinsed it with plenty of water. That seems to have helped," I reply.

"That's fine, but do come over here anyway, I want to see it!" Of course, I could also go to the only doctor in the village, but he's always drunk. I have to chuckle to myself when I realise I'd rather be treated by a vet. I lock up my house, which I don't normally do. I nimbly jump over the fence and set off on the walk to Irma's. On the way, I see the hole I nearly fell into yesterday. It's a deep hole with sharp edges, and I'm surprised I didn't tumble headlong into it. The edges also look sharp enough to cut through my tyres, which fortunately didn't happen.

Irma walks towards me with concern and takes my hand. Like a seasoned palm reader, she examines my palm.

"Well? What does my future hold?" She looks up with a faint smile. She turns my hand-over and examines the back.

"It's actually not too bad. From your description, it looks like hydrochloric acid."

She takes a litmus paper booklet and tears off a strip. She pushes this strip between my index and ring fingers and holds it there for a moment. The strip changes colour in a few places. I look at her in surprise.

“Hydrochloric acid on my rake? How on earth did that happen?” Irma finds it strange that it has remained on that wooden handle for so long.

“There’s also a sticky substance on the handle, which is why I dropped it so quickly.” I try to describe the slime on the handle as best I can. Irma’s mouth remains open in astonishment. After my account, it snaps shut again. She picks up a cotton ball with a pair of long tweezers and dips it into the liquid from a large white bottle. She begins to dab my hand with it. When she’s finished, I rinse my hands under the tap and dry them with a paper towel.

We walk together to the kitchen, where she carefully washes and dries her hands. Whilst she makes a couple of sandwiches, I put the kettle on. In the living room, we sit eating in silence with our plates on our laps, whilst the TV is on a particularly uninteresting channel.

“It’s as if strange things are happening all over the world. I also get the feeling that it’s all connected.” Irma has a penchant for conspiracy theories and can talk about them for hours on end.

“There’s hardly any real news, there are no wars, and apart from that, the same thing happens every day. I think newspapers publish sensationalist stories just to boost sales a bit,” I reply. Perhaps I’m a bit naive, but I really don’t believe there’s anything on a massive scale going on. Every year, the total destruction of the Earth is predicted. The media are increasingly claiming that UFO sightings are real, naturally as reported by those who have seen them. I have my doubts about that; it’s a vast place up there, so a trip would take a very long time. And why wouldn’t these so-called aliens make contact openly, as one would expect? Although, at the moment, something unsettling is stirring very vaguely in the back of my mind.

“Have you figured out what killed your raccoons yet?” The incident suddenly comes back to me.

“No, it looks as though they’ve been poisoned, but I can’t find any poison. They do have wounds, but none of them are serious enough to kill them. Here and there it looks as though they’ve been stung by a large stinger. But then they would have been stung from above by a large beast, and those don’t exist.”

I get up to pour us another cup of coffee. Irma’s kitchen worktop is full of washing-up, just like mine. The difference is that she has a dishwasher, but it’s always full of washed crockery. I empty it and fill it up again with the dirty washing-up. It’s full again straight away, so I switch it on. Whilst the machine starts up, sloshing and groaning, I wipe the worktop clean. I don’t know why I do that here and not at home.

“I’ve had enough for today, are you coming to the beach with me?” comes an

unexpected voice behind me. Behind the rubbish tip are dunes, and beyond them is another little beach. It's always quiet there because the rubbish tip attracts numerous seagulls, and they in turn scare away the beach goers. I quite fancy the idea. If the wind's blowing the right way, the seagulls aren't too much of a nuisance.

"Yeah, sure, I'll just cycle home quickly to grab my swimming gear. I'll be back in an hour."

I cycle back via a shortcut. It's a winding, bumpy sandy track, but I know it well and manage to avoid all the obstacles. Well, almost all of them... I ride over a black lid, which nearly causes me to fall. Cursing, I come to a halt. People just leave stuff lying around everywhere. I have a closer look... Is it even a manhole cover? It looks strange, and it doesn't have a handle. Uninterested, I cycle on. I race through the bends and potholes as fast as I can. It's going well; I'm really enjoying this. I know this little road like the back of my hand, and it's my sport to complete the course as quickly as possible.

Back home, I quickly gather my swimming gear and switch on the computer. I've got an email from Erik. Hey Erik! I wonder how he's doing. Although I'm curious, I don't take the time to read the email. I got to know Erik when he tried to give me a fine for cycling on the pavement. Erik was a police officer and responsible for keeping order. I got into an argument with him back then, and a good friendship grew out of it.

I quickly feed Elisah and stuff my bath towel into a plastic bag. I have my swimming trunks on under my trousers. I know there's hardly ever anyone on the beach, but it really goes too far for me to undress openly and, above all, in the open. It'll probably just lead to more comments from Irma. I know her well enough for that.

On the way back, I see that lid – or whatever it is – lying there again. I don't stop to take another look. I cycle past at top speed, though the extra manoeuvre to avoid the lid throws me off balance a bit. On the beach, it turns out Irma is prudish too. She's wearing her bikini under her clothes as well. Good, that saves me some comments, I think to myself. It is indeed quiet on the beach. Apart from a couple walking along the water's edge, there's no one else.

Along the edge of the dunes, I see a couple of hares hopping about. They pay little attention to us as they go about their business, looking up now and then to check if any predators are approaching. The dunes are covered in green marram grass, which bends gently in the soft sea breeze. We're in luck; the wind is indeed blowing in the right direction. There are few seagulls. Few, I say? I can't see any seagulls at all. There's nothing flying around over the sea, either.

We have a lovely afternoon together. Irma has brought ice cream in a cool bag, which provides a welcome refreshment. As there is little wind, the sea is as smooth as glass, and it's pleasant to swim. Just before dusk, I invite Irma to stay for dinner. She accepts the invitation, and we pack up our things to cycle to my house. The sun is already touching the water, and it's cooling down quickly by the sea.

At my place, I can smell the rubbish tip. Normally, the wind blows from a different direction and I don't notice it, but today, unfortunately, I do. I can tell from Irma's face that she can smell it too. It's certainly not a pleasant smell. We go inside and throw our swimwear into a corner. Irma rummages her underwear out of a plastic bag and goes upstairs to get changed. I look in the fridge to see what I've got to eat. It all looks a bit meagre.

"Is that the rake?" comes a voice from upstairs. I realise she can see it lying by the window and call back that yes, that's the one. Irma comes back downstairs wearing a thin, barely concealing summer dress and opens my cupboard. She rummages out an empty vegetable jar and a new putty knife. I look at the putty knife in surprise. Did I have such a thing? And what does she want it for?

She grabs the two rubber household gloves hanging next to my worktop and puts them on. As she walks past, she snatches the jar and the knife from the worktop and walks outside. She walks purposefully towards the rake that is still lying next to the house, picks it up by the tip and studies it carefully.

Meanwhile, it has got quite dark, and I walk back inside to fetch my torch. It's an old-fashioned battery-powered torch that gives off a lot of light but only lasts twenty minutes. Probably even less, as the battery isn't exactly spring-fresh either. I switch it on and walk back outside to shine the light on Irma. She looks up briefly before immediately turning her attention back to the rake. She examines the rake from every angle, holding it carefully by the tip. Then she picks up the putty knife and scrapes off some slimy stuff. She then wipes the knife back on the jar. She repeats this three times before screwing the lid back on the jar.

She puts the jar back on the fridge and the putty knife on top of it. We go inside. I hang the torch back on its charger. "I've no idea what it is," she says. "I'll have a look at it tomorrow. It could be anything..."

I suddenly remember that I'd frozen some macaroni. I walk over to the freezer and take the bag out. It's frozen solid into one big lump. I'll never be a proper househusband. I check the microwave to see how to defrost something like this. It's not entirely clear to me, so I grab a bread knife and start sawing the lump in half. It actually works, and the lump is soon divided into four pieces. I set my microwave to defrost and walk back inside. "What on earth were you doing?" "I'm preparing dinner. I assume you're hungry?"

“You can say that again! I’m starving...”

“We’ll eat in twenty minutes.”

The microwave gives its familiar beep and I walk back to the kitchen. There, I put the macaroni in an oven dish and make some cheese sauce. I pour this over the macaroni and stir it through. I cover the whole thing with cheese and put it in the oven.

Irma comes into the kitchen too.

“What are we having?”

"Macaroni with cheese, made entirely to my recipe! It’ll be ready in twenty minutes," I say proudly. She smiles approvingly and gives me a kiss.

“I’m curious...”

I’m slumped on the sofa with the remote control in my hand. Irma is lying next to me with her head in my lap. It was a bit too much macaroni, and we’re both feeling a bit full.

"It was delicious. You’re a good cook."

"Thank you, I’ve got years of experience in that recipe."

"Do you mean that?"

"Well, no, it was a tip on the back of the cheese sauce packet a few years ago. I did tweak the recipe a bit, though."

She laughs. The doorbell rings. Irma lifts her head so I can get up. I walk to the front door. It turns out to be Erik and Els. I invite them in.

"Have you read my email?" asks Erik. I must confess, to my shame, that I haven’t done so yet. He doesn’t seem to mind.

“We want to upgrade our computers. The network we’re using is also falling short. It’s only a temporary job, but I’ve told my boss I know someone. There hasn’t been an application process yet, so you can jump the queue.” While Erik and Els go inside, I refill the coffee machine. I can hear Irma greeting the visitors inside. I carry the tray of coffee in and see that the three of them are taking up the whole sofa, so I have to look for a chair. I drag the office chair over and sit down with my feet up on the coffee table.

“Go on. I’m interested.”

He begins to tell his story. He has a job at a firm that conducts environmental research for clients and also calculates the potential impact of changes. For this, they have a powerful mainframe that is linked nationwide via the internet to standard office computers. The mainframe needs to be replaced by a newer model that is much faster and can therefore process far more complex formulas within a reasonable time. All this needs to be organised, and someone is needed to help with the implementation and supervision. I can certainly say that this project seems interesting to me. We agree that I will speak to his employer.

It turned out to be a pleasant evening, and we chatted about this and that. We didn't mention submarines or such matters again. Erik talks animatedly, gesticulating, about events at work, whilst Els and Irma have a private chat. I couldn't make out everything, but I still get the impression that there was some gossip about us here and there. Erik takes Irma home. She has to get up early and can't stay the night. Giggling, the two girls walk to the car, whilst Erik watches them go. He gives me a slap on the shoulder blade, grins broadly and trots after the ladies.

I walk back inside and my eye falls on the pot of slime and the putty knife. I take a closer look; there's now a bite taken out of the putty knife. I put on the gloves and quickly put it outside. I don't trust this for a second. I'll have to ring Irma about this tomorrow. Apparently, it's quite an aggressive substance.

3 - The disappearance.

The next morning, I wake up early. I open the curtains and enjoy the sunshine on my face. Elisah is lying on a pile of clothes on the floor; it looks like she has no intention of getting up just yet. I bend down to give her a pet on the head, which results in a few enthusiastic little noises.

I'm hungry, so I'm making myself a light breakfast. That's something I rarely do. As I pop the sandwich into my mouth, I switch on the coffee machine. With my coffee in hand, I walk over to the computer as usual and switch it on. With sleep still in my eyes, I watch the screen light up. I wait a moment for the system to load and browse the internet for a bit. There's not much news. My attention is caught by a report about the sunken submarine: they're planning to salvage it. A camera has been sent down to see what might have happened. The footage shows that the exterior is completely intact. It looks as though the submarine came to a standstill in the water for no apparent reason and then slowly sank to the bottom. The boat sank so slowly that it sustained no visible damage when it hit the seabed. That surprises the experts.

I switch off the computer and walk over to the sofa. On the coffee table lies a leather folder containing some papers. That's probably Erik's; I'll return it this evening. I place it on the fridge, so I don't forget. I suddenly remember the little pot and the putty knife. Furthermore, I go outside to have a look. The knife has become a lot shorter and has started to rust at the damaged edge. It's supposed to be rustproof, mind you. The lid of the pot is also full of holes. This has started to rust too, especially where it touches the glass. I don't pick it up; I don't fancy getting my fingers badly cut.

I put some food for Elisah in a clean bowl. The creature recognises those sounds immediately and comes down the stairs meowing loudly. Once she reaches the bowl, she starts eating straight away. It's a lovely sight to see that animal with its eyes half-closed, tucking in. I look at the still life on the worktop and decide to do the washing-up today. I run the sink full of hot water. The washing-up brush had gone missing, so I had to search high and low. Every time I let the washing-up pile up, I curse myself. You have to scrub hard to get those old dishes clean. After an hour and a half, I throw in the towel. Sweat is beading on my forehead, and I'm thoroughly fed up with washing-up again for a few days.

Erik rings the doorbell. He's forgotten his papers, and he needs them today. He's

in his usual cheerful mood. I point to the fridge and he grabs the folder. I offer him a coffee.

“I have to get going quickly; otherwise I’ll be late. But thanks anyway.”

With a jovial wave, he steps out the door again. As he dashes down the street, my eye catches a piece of paper that has apparently fallen out of the folder. I pick it up and look at what’s written on it. It’s a hand-drawn map of the rubbish tip. The pond is nearby, along with some schematic dunes and the sea. At the bottom are all sorts of chemical abbreviations; next to one are a couple of question marks. I’m no chemist, and so I haven’t the faintest idea what it’s about. In any case, it doesn’t look as though Erik needs this rushing. I reckon he knows this scribbles off by heart.

I put it on the fridge and walk outside. Irma’s bike is still leaning against the house. I put it in the shed and, out of habit, walk over to the vegetables. There I see that I’ve forgotten to water them, and they’re looking a bit wilted now. After fifteen minutes, I hear the familiar chug-chug-chug of the sprinkler. It’s not good to water them at this time of day, but they might not survive another day without water.

The rubbish tip smells strongly today. I’d be glad if the wind changed direction. The rest of the village will surely disagree with me, as they’re really bothered by it when the wind comes from the west. There have been disturbances and even a large protest march recently. People have been demonstrating outside the mayor’s house; some even wanted to pitch a tent in his garden. He solemnly promised that he would tackle this issue. He has made such promises before, though, and nothing ever came of them. It is claimed that he has been bribed by industrialists who are illegally dumping waste on that site. People are so angry that I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he were actually attacked one day. Last time, a police officer just managed to stop a protester with similar intentions in the nick of time.

I decide to go for a bike ride today. The weather is lovely: a warm sun with a few scattered white, fleecy clouds. I get on my bike and set off. There’s a sandy track through the dunes and the neighbouring woods. It’s always quiet there, so I enjoy cycling there. The air is much fresher there than at the tip, and that has a positive effect on my mood. When it stinks, at a certain point you’re no longer really aware of it. Subconsciously, though, it’s always there, and that affects you. At one point, the path runs alongside the beach and the sea. There are seagulls here, but I can see a few lying dead here and there. Some are already being eaten by insects; large wounds are teeming with vermin. With revulsion, I turn my head away and cycle on quickly.

The path runs through a small village. It shouldn’t really be called that. There are a few farmhouses clustered together and a small wooden makeshift building set up as a local shop. I’m about to go into that shop to buy something to drink when I

notice flashing lights and a small crowd. I cycle slowly towards it. A chrome tanker lies on its side. The word 'Biotron' is written in clear letters on the side, now harder to read because it's lying on top. A cold shiver runs down my spine. I'm starting to feel very uneasy now and pick up the pace. There is a large pool of liquid with a man in overalls lying in the middle. He lies motionless, as only a dead person can. All the skin you can see is black, as if he had been on fire – only there are no other signs of fire. I try to see if it is John, but it is difficult. I don't think so; the man is clearly heavier than John. Besides, John drives at night. The people around him are silent. It is a horrific sight. A mother holds her hand over her young son's eyes, whilst she herself, pale as a sheet, stares at the dead man.

I cycle on quickly, clearly enjoying the ride far less. The big-city looms grey and monotonous on the horizon. On the outskirts stand factories belching plumes of smoke in varying shades of grey. These spread across the city. More people who would love for the wind to turn back to its normal direction.

As soon as I pass the edge of the city, I see dilapidated houses inhabited by destitute people. This used to be a welfare state, but due to the declining economy, the government no longer had the funds to maintain public services. Nowadays, everyone has to fend for themselves. If you don't have a job, you just have to find a way to survive. Crime is rife. I don't feel at ease and cycle quickly on towards the centre. Wide roads with very little traffic wind their way between grey houses. The sky is tinged orange by air pollution. In the early twentieth century, the country was heavily urbanised, but the economic downturn led to mass emigration, turning the city centres into ghost towns. I'm glad I still have a home in one of the few remaining villages.

In the heart of the city is the shopping centre. Where there used to be a bustling shopping and entertainment district, most of the shops are now boarded up. There are more people out and about now. They walk past the sparse shop windows, their faces grey and expressionless, as items are displayed that nobody needs or can afford any more. Surprisingly, a dealer in exorbitantly expensive cars has a few customers inside. The man, wringing his hands and grinning broadly, shows off all the bells and whistles of the latest model. I've been planning to take up my radio hobby again for some time and take the opportunity to browse the radio shop for second-hand bits and bobs. There's an outdated model on offer at a nice price. Although... 'Nice': it's not a sum I can spend on a whim. I'm drooling over the most beautiful and modern high-tech gear. Unfortunately, I'll never be able to afford it. I'd better head back outside; it's making me greedy, and I can't afford it.

It's now mid-afternoon, but you wouldn't know it from the traffic. It's quiet in the city. I cycle north along a wide arterial road. Every so often, I'm overtaken by a lorry or a bus. As the road descends into a tunnel, more and more puddles appear on the road. I suspect the tunnel doesn't have long left; it's not being maintained,

either. Drops tend to turn into small streams, which grow larger and more ferocious until the tunnel gives way and the water bursts out in a roaring, all-consuming mass. I don't think this will happen today, so I cycle through the tunnel.

Every time a car passes, the sound echoes off the walls until it becomes a deafening roar. I hate so much noise, so I speed up to minimise my time in the tunnel. Leaving the town, I find myself back among wasteland and meadows. Without too much haste, I cycle home. Because of what happened with the tanker, I've lost my enjoyment of cycling today. I listen to the song of the meadow birds and watch the clouds. There are more of them, and they're turning darker: bad weather on the way. The blue of the sky has also turned whiter.

At home, I park my bike next to Irma's and grab a saw and a piece of wood. I make a new latch for the shed door. It won't stop any real thieves, but it will prevent animals from scratching the door open. I go back inside to make some coffee. I flop down on the sofa and switch on the TV. A series about lawyers is on. I watch this quite often and leave it on almost without realising. After half an hour, the episode ends and I start flicking through the channels.

On the local channel, I see the shiny tanker. It's standing behind a journalist who's explaining to the camera what happened. Eyewitnesses have stated that the lorry swerved to avoid an animal and that the driver lost control as a result. According to the papers, the lorry was only supposed to be carrying water, but the driver died from the substance and several bystanders were also taken to hospital. Next, a local politician appears on-screen, claiming that the local authorities will get to the bottom of this and prosecute those responsible. Yeah, right.

I'm going to prepare my dinner. As soon as the vegetables are boiling, I toss a sausage into the pan and watch it wriggle in the heat, as if it were alive. I'm just about to eat when there's a very frantic ring at the doorbell. It's Erik, and he looks terrible. He storms in, causing Elisah to run upstairs in a complete panic. Erik leans his back against the door frame. He's gone pale and is gasping for breath.

"Sit down for a moment and try to calm down." He shakes his head and tries to tell a story whilst still gasping for breath.

"Els has gone..."

I decide to wait patiently until he can tell the whole story. Those two got on well together, and I can't imagine Els would just walk out on him from one day to the next. That turns out not to be the case either. Els and Erik go jogging for an hour and a half every day. They have a set route that leads past the rubbish tip and through the woods, along sandy paths. Normally, Erik runs a little ahead and Els right behind him. It's hard to talk whilst jogging, but occasionally, they exchange a few staccato sentences. Erik asked whether they should take the short or the long

route. No answer. He asked again. Still nothing. He stopped and turned round. Els was gone.

If Els had tripped, he would certainly have heard it. He walked back to the spot where he'd last spoken to her. No sign of her. A search of the immediate vicinity turned up nothing but the bottle of water hanging from her trousers.

The front door had been left open and someone came in, announcing their arrival by knocking on it. It's a colleague of Erik's, who's been looking for him. Erik has called the police on his mobile. His colleagues immediately launched a major search operation in the area. This colleague spotted my car and wants to know how Erik is. I don't need to explain that Erik is a complete wreck. He's sitting numbly by the edge of the table and seems oblivious to his surroundings.

"He needs to see a doctor," I hear.

His colleague guides him to his car, and they drive off down the street. I've lost my appetite and throw the food in the bin. I grab my bike to cycle to the spot in question. It seems to be in vain; the police have cordoned off the area with yellow tape. I walk around the cordon with my bike in hand, looking for clues, though I wouldn't know what they'd look like. A group of officers is searching with dogs barking loudly. Another group has torches; it has grown dark, and it doesn't look as though the dogs have found a trail. They're wandering about aimlessly, their noses to the ground.

I'm stopped by a police officer. Naturally, he wants to know what I'm doing here. I tell him I know Erik, that I'm aware of the sad story, and ask if I can help with the search. He would like to see my ID first and walks over to a colleague with it. The colleague looks at my papers and nods.

"We've got plenty of people here already, and we don't want anyone accidentally destroying important evidence. Thanks for the offer, but we've got enough help for today." I nod; I'd expected something like that.

"Have you discovered anything yet?"

"No, not really. It looks as though Els has been lifted into the air." I shake my head in disappointment, look the man in the eye and say goodbye. He nods and says he'll do everything possible to find out what happened.

I walk back to the forest path and get back on my bike. I'm going to see Irma; she knew Els well, they were good friends. Were? Are, I hope. It's not certain that Els is dead, though I doubt she's still alive. I knock on the door of Irma's lab before walking in. Irma is standing by a table covered with all sorts of equipment. She looks up and immediately sees from my face that something serious has happened.

"What's wrong?" she asks, worried.

I tell her the whole story. She slumps onto a high stool, her mouth agape. We look

at each other in silence for a moment.
“Geez...” is all she can manage to say.

I tell her I wanted to help with the search, but that the police have cordoned off the entire area.

“They couldn’t find an elephant on an empty football pitch,” she snaps.
She asks where Erik is. I can’t give her an answer: A colleague has taken away Erik.
“I think he’s in hospital.”

Irma picks up the phone and calls someone. A brief conversation.

“He’s in Dawn Hospital, the neurology ward. He’s been sedated and isn’t responsive. We’ll have to wait until tomorrow before we can visit him.”

We look at each other in silence again. I stand leaning despondently against the laboratory table. I really don’t know what to do now. A terrible feeling of helplessness overwhelms me.

“Shall we go and look for him ourselves tomorrow? I don’t think the police will spend much time looking,” I suggest, almost rhetorically. Irma nods. She, too, doesn’t believe the police will pay much attention to this. The police have degenerated into a particularly corrupt institution, essentially run by big business. My helplessness is slowly giving way to anger. I’ve always hated politics, but lately, it’s been nothing but lies and deceit. They really think everyone believes what they claim.

Irma asks if I’m staying the night, but I can’t. I’ve forgotten to feed Elsay and have no intention of ever letting her go hungry for a night. As I cycle home, another convoy of blacked-out lorries passes by. This time there are only three. Again, that ghostly green light from the night-vision goggles. This time it barely catches my attention. I feel angry, powerless and sad.

At home, I feed Elsay and change her water. Then I head straight upstairs and flop into bed.

4 - The rubbish tip.

I can't really sleep; there's too much going round in my head. Every time I doze off, I startle awake almost immediately. At least, that's how it feels. I get up and walk downstairs. In the kitchen, I pour a cup of milk and put it in the microwave. After staring into space for a while, I'm startled by the familiar ping. I grab the milk and walk into the room.

I look out of the window as I drink carefully. A full moon hangs high in the sky, flooding the landscape with bluish light. Because so many white clouds reflect the light, there are no truly deep shadows. White wisps of mist drift like stray ghosts across the ground beneath the scattered trees. I hear the crickets chirping and see bats making their eternal circles in the moonlight. Nearby, a bird is startled and flies away, chirping loudly. I think of Elisah involuntarily, but I remember that she is lying on the pillow.

I hear a strange sound getting closer and hurry to the side window. The rake is still there. Through the mesh, I see something dark moving. It moves rapidly across the ground without me seeing any legs. It's hard to estimate how big it is, but it could be larger than a cat, though shorter. Likewise, it most resembles a dung beetle about forty inches wide, with a metallic, shiny black back shell.

I set the milk jug on the windowsill and rush outside. Or at least I try to: in my haste, I can't get the back door open. After a bit of fiddling, I manage it and walk round to the side of the house. But not before I carefully close the door again. I don't know what was out there, but I don't want it inside.

I can't see the thing any more. Although there's a large, almost bare field next to my house and the moon is shining brightly, I can't spot anything. I walk round to the back of the house, but it's not there either; it might be hiding among the bushes. I walk back to the side and scan the field with my eyes. Nothing.

I go inside and switch on all the lights. I look around to see if anything might have got in, but I don't see anything out of the ordinary. Furthermore, I lock the door cautiously. I finish off the last bit of milk, switch off the light and go back to bed. Elisah is still curled up on the pillow. I fluff up my pillow and lie down next to her. I give her a long stroke over her supple little body. She chirps briefly and starts purring. After a few more strokes, I switch off the light here too and finally fall asleep.

The next morning, I have a splitting headache from the restless night. Staying in bed usually worsens it, so I get up quickly. I rummage in the kitchen drawer for two aspirins and take them with water. The coffee is ready by now, so I grab a mug and sit down at my computer. There are no new emails, so I have a browse online.

I read a short piece on a major news site about the overturned tanker. It doesn't go into much detail. There is, however, a photo showing the vehicle from above. Whilst I'm drinking my coffee and visiting various sites, John knocks on the door. He looks surprised that I've locked the door. He isn't behaving as usual with sweeping gestures and flamboyance, but very quietly and modestly. Furthermore, he's heard from Els. I tell him what Erik told me and the events that followed. He suggests we go and look for her together.

"Do you think we can still find her?"

"I'm not really convinced the police are doing their best, and I've heard the regional commander has put the investigation on the back burner. He doesn't think a crime has been committed, but reckons Els and Erik had a row, and she ran away."

I curse under my breath. I've never thought much of the police, but now even less so. Even a colleague...

"Right, then we'll go and look for her together," I decide. John nods; he thinks that's the least we can do.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping now?"

"My shift starts at eleven o'clock tonight. If I'm in bed by five, that's early enough. Otherwise, I'll just sleep in tomorrow."

Erik and John are also good friends, and knowing John, he'll stop at nothing to find Els. When we go outside, I walk straight to the side of the house. John looks at me in surprise and follows me. His surprise doesn't diminish. I lean my chest against the fence and look at the sand on the other side. There are strange tracks here that look most like the tracks of a beetle in the sand, but much larger. I follow the track with my eyes, but it disappears into the grass. We walk back to John's car.

It is indeed quiet at the scene of the incident. The yellow tape still hangs there as a silent witness, along with the many footprints of police officers.

"I don't think there's much left to find here."

I remember that Erik never followed the soft footpath, but always cut across the little hills covered in oak trees. We walk over there, scanning the ground for... well, for what exactly? I can see that the police haven't been here, or hardly at all; the ground is virtually untouched. We examine the whole stretch where I think they walked. Nothing.

“Hey, look at the trees!” John suddenly calls out. The trunks have scratches. Parallel lines, as if something with hard claws had climbed upwards. Instinctively, we follow the lines, but there’s nothing to be seen up in the crown.

“Maybe we should climb too?” I suggest.

The oaks have an almost straight trunk up to five yards, where the first branches are. That’s a tricky climb. I examine the crown from all angles, but discover nothing. The other trees with the same marks are otherwise normal too.

“Perhaps we’d be better off coming back with a ladder. I don’t see any way of climbing there,” John remarks.

We walk down the path to what, I think, was the starting point of the jog. In the sand, we see the same tracks I saw next to my house.

“What are you thinking about?” asks John when he sees the look on my face.

“I’m wondering if those big ‘beetles’ have anything to do with Els’s disappearance.”

“Why do you think that? Even if they’re fifty inches long, they’re still not big enough to make a person vanish.” That sounds realistic enough, but the feeling remains.

“All the tracks lead in the same direction. Shall we see where they come from?”

I lead the way. John takes a moment to examine a spot and quickly follows me. The tracks lead through increasingly dense undergrowth. The vegetation is becoming too thick to get through.

“Now what?” asks John.

“The tip is only a kilometre or so away. Let’s head there.”

We can smell it clearly now. We walk around the reforestation – quite a distance – and end up on the small track leading to the tip. The track is unpaved and the tracks of many lorries are clearly visible. The tip is fenced off with high wire mesh. We walk around it. There are holes in the fence. They look like the hole in my fence.

“Hey! What’s going on!?” we suddenly hear someone shout.

We turn round and see a man in a shabby suit with a double-barrelled shotgun on the landfill site.

“We’re just having a look around,” John shouts. I can tell from his face that he’s particularly annoyed by this man.

“This is a restricted area. I don’t want to find you here!” He leaves no doubt as to what will happen if we stay. I shrug my shoulders and turn back around.

“What a wanker,” mutters John.

“Why does a rubbish tip need armed guards?” I ask. John looks at me for a moment.

“I reckon things are going on here that can’t stand the light of day.” We walk on in silence. Sometimes I inspect the rubbish behind the fence, but I see nothing out of the ordinary. It does strike me, however, that the site is much larger than I thought. Walking around it takes nearly half an hour. We haven’t got much wiser. The only thing I notice is that the large flock of seagulls that always hung around here has thinned out enormously. There’s hardly a single one left.

In the car, John massages his temples.

“Headache?” I ask. He nods. “The air there isn’t good for me. Every time I’m in this area, I get a headache pretty quickly.” I don’t say what I’m thinking: that the air isn’t harmless, given the thinning of the seagull population.

Back at my place, John says he’s going home to crawl into bed. I suspect his headache is worse than he’s willing to admit.

“I’ve got painkillers at home, would you like a couple?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve got enough at home.”

When I’ve got out, he waves and speeds off. I’ve got a bad feeling about all this and decide to visit the rubbish tip again tonight. First, I make some coffee. Slumped on the sofa, I remember I’ve got a video camera with ‘night shot’. The sensor can detect infrared, and with the infrared lamp, you can film in the dark. I take the camera out of the cupboard. It’s old; I never use it any more.

In my study, I open the toolbox. I take the camera apart and remove the lens and the lamp. I attach the lens, rather clumsily it seems, with a few bits of wire to the side of a pair of virtual reality glasses and connect it so that the glasses display what the lens sees. Furthermore, I adjust the zoom lens until the glasses show roughly the same image as I see without them. I attach the infrared lamp to the other side. Both are powered by a battery and a wire. Long enough to put the battery in my pocket.

I’m quite proud of this bit of DIY, though an unsuspecting passer-by would find it laughable. I put the goggles on and walk into the cellar. The goggles are dead heavy; I’ll have to do something about the nose bridge. In the cellar, I switch on the light and look around. After a bit of fiddling with the lens mount, it works perfectly. A proper DIY night-vision goggle. I can use that. I put it back on my workbench and pop the battery into the charger.

Furthermore, I check my torch. As full as it can be – and that’s not much with such an old thing. Ten to fifteen minutes of light, I reckon. Now just to sort out my safety gear.

Later I’ll go to Erik’s to see how he’s getting on. He left the hospital rather drugged up, and I find an almost apathetic Erik, slumped in a chair, staring out of

the window. He says nothing when I come in, and I sit down opposite him in silence. The house is modern and minimalist; it exudes an almost masculine atmosphere. It used to be different – no doubt changed under Els's influence. Before he met her, he was a complete slob.

Now there sits a shadow of the man I knew.

“Can I help you with anything?” He shakes his head despondently. He tells me that the commander has called off the search party.

“I know. John and I have started our search. Did you, as usual, cut across country instead of following the path?” He nods. “That’s precisely where I lost her, too.”

“In any case, the police were looking in the wrong place.”

I tell him that we followed the strange tracks and ended up at the rubbish tip.

“Then you must have walked through some pretty thick bushes.” I explain that we took a detour.

“What are you going to do now?”

“As soon as it’s dark, I’m going back to that spot. We were sent away by a

He looks at me; for a split second I see the old flicker in his eyes, but it quickly fades again. His police jacket and shoulder holster hang over the back of a chair. The gun has a dull sheen. I stand up and walk to the door.

“I’ll pop round tomorrow.”

Erik says nothing. He looks out of the window. I take the gun out of the holster. Erik doesn’t move.

“Be careful with that thing! There’s extra ammunition in the kitchen drawer.” I turn around; he’s still staring out of the window. In the kitchen, I grab two boxes of ammunition and a magazine and walk away. His nonchalant reaction to me taking his gun surprises me.

Back home, I fiddle around with the shiny gun after removing the bullets. If you cock the hammer first, the trigger is surprisingly light. The thing gives me a strange sense of power. False, probably. I load the magazine, click it into place and lay the gun on the table. I load the spare magazine too.

Irma calls. She asks if I have any news. I tell her about the search with John and that I’ve been to see Erik. What I don’t tell her: that I have Erik’s gun and plan to continue searching in the dark.

“You can’t come tonight. A tiger is ill; it needs an operation. At the zoo, and it’s locked up at night.” Relief: no excuse required. I wish her luck with the animal. We hang up. I realise I’m hungry and go to make something to eat. It doesn’t taste good; half the plate is left untouched. My gaze keeps drifting to the gun on the coffee table. Perhaps I should put it away before anyone comes round.

Time passes agonisingly slowly as I wait for the evening. I flick through the channels. A news channel shows a ransacked office. Chairs and desks are overturned; a chaos of paper, as if a tornado had swept through. Curious, I turn up the volume. In an office block in a suburb of Basel, everyone has vanished. The police and army have cordoned off the area. The police suspect a serious crime. No surprise there: nobody leaves like that to go to a staff party. Then an empty sea. A boat has sunk for unknown reasons. No collision – there was no other vessel nearby. No bad weather. No survivors have been found either. Many strange things have been happening lately. Perhaps I watch the news more often since I've been unemployed, but still.

It's finally dark. I gather my things and put them in a large shoulder bag. The weapon and the ammunition, each in a separate compartment. I set off on foot; I don't want to leave my bike behind as a clue that someone is here. It's quite a walk through dark stretches. I don't put on the DIY night-vision goggles yet to save the batteries, and I don't want to meet anyone with such a contraption on my head either.

After half an hour, the rubbish heaps loom into view. Moonlight. Not enough to see everything clearly. I crouch down, unzip the bag, take the device out and put it on my head. The whole thing presses heavily on my nose: I forgot to make an extra support. I feel for the button. Click. The surroundings light up. Green, but sharp. And that's without any auxiliary light.

I can see the little hut where the guard stays during the day. It looks as though there's no one there. The gate is chained shut, but I can easily lift it off its hinges. Not much thought has gone into this. Walking on the landfill is tricky; you could easily twist an ankle. There are all sorts of stuff lying about. A rusty old steamroller, more modern machinery and things I don't recognise. There are all sorts of stuff in the guard's hut. Apparently the man sees value in it; I don't get it. A broken radio that'll never play again, a synthesiser with quite a few missing keys. I press a key and get a right fright. A deafeningly loud beep followed by a shriek from a bird. So I'm not the only one who was startled.

The hut offers nothing else of interest, so I go back outside. The moon momentarily overexposes the sensor; my image goes white. I stand still for a moment until it adjusts. After a few seconds, I can see again. Green hills in pale green moonlight. A gloomy landscape. I shiver involuntarily. I don't feel at ease.

Another sound. Closer. I put the bag down and take out the pistol. The spare magazine in my trouser pocket. I chamber a bullet. A little more confident, I carry on walking. With every step, the now lighter bag bangs irritatingly against my leg. Between the hills lies sandy ground, covered with the familiar tracks. They now crisscross each other; there is no longer any discernible pattern. What does strike

me, however, is that in one direction there are more of them. I decide to head that way. Every so often a cloud drifts across the moon, but I don't want to switch on the auxiliary light just yet to save the battery.

On the other side of the tip, I'm standing by the fence where I was with John this morning. There are loads of tracks in the sand here. I look around as the moon breaks through the clouds. Further on, in a pile of rubbish, there's a strange dark spot.

I walk slowly towards it. What is that?

5 - The tunnel.

It is a tunnel so dark that it looks like a black wall. I switch on my infrared spotlight and the walls of the tunnel become visible. It is as if a hole has been drilled through the rubbish. The walls glisten and look very slimy. I can't bring myself to touch them. Who or what built this? It looks almost alien. The tunnel slopes downwards; I walk into it cautiously. My eyes have adjusted to the darkness, and now the walls stand out clearly. It stinks awfully in the tunnel. It's a musty, rotting smell, and I'm struggling to breathe normally.

The material of the walls changes from rubbish to sand. Here, the tunnel is very irregular in shape so that it looks more like a cave. The sand walls are also covered in slime that drips down here and there. I have to force myself to go further into the cave. The stench is unbearable, and I wonder what I might find here.

The tunnel narrows as I go deeper into the earth. I can barely stand upright. The tunnel branches off into new tunnels to the left, top right and downwards. Some tunnels lead into sort of circular chambers, some of which are considerable. So large that the auxiliary light barely reaches the other side.

My stomach cramps and I feel a strange tingling in my face. I hardly dare breathe. In the faint glow of the torch, I see a huge swarming mass in one of the chambers. Thousands of shiny back shells crawling over one another. Some are smooth, others have six spines: three on each side, jutting upwards at an angle. I look back and take a little cover behind a protruding section. I realise my weapon is completely useless. A small group begins to break away from the large tangle. This group heads for the room's only exit, right where I am standing. I make my escape and duck into another room. The group doesn't notice me. There are five specimens with spines and about ten without.

The room I'm in now is smaller than the other one. There are all sorts of niches in the wall, over two yards high. In these niches stand five large white cocoons, like vases. I walk towards one of them. It is made of a sticky substance that most resembles a spool of tightly wound thread. I switch off my glasses and take them off. In the dark, I take my torch out of my bag. I try to see what is inside the cocoon. When I hold the torch behind the cocoon, a silhouette appears. It has the shape of a human. When I move the light, it moves. I gasp for breath and recoil. I can barely suppress a full-blown panic and want only one thing: to run outside as fast as I can. With the utmost self-control, I put my glasses back on and switch off

my torch. I have to wait a minute for my eyes to adjust, then run outside as fast as I can. Outside, I'm completely blinded by my glasses and have to wait. The first thing I see is the battalion heading towards the gate of the landfill. It's a cool evening; yet I'm completely sweaty. I make a beeline to get away from this place as quickly as possible.

At home, I sit on the sofa, feeling very unsettled. I begin to realise that what I've seen isn't normal. Goodness, me, what on earth did I see? Is it an alien life form? Is it a new kind of insect? I pick up the phone and call Irma. After I've told her the story, she reacts irritably. I think she's angry because I didn't tell her beforehand. Fortunately, she calms down after a few minutes. And to think she doesn't even know I have Erik's weapon.

"Can you make another pair of those night-vision goggles? Then we can both have a look." I'm surprised, but I'm afraid I don't have enough materials for another pair. Irma does have an extra torch, though.

"Let's go with torches, then. I'll wait for you at the gate of the tip."

"Right now?"

"Yes."

"Give me half an hour, and I'll be there."

"OK, see you in a bit!"

That was easy. I hadn't expected her to go there, but I'm glad she did. Irma has always been very decisive; that's why I like her so much. I don't want a pathetic, clumsy woman who needs looking after. I'm taking a bit more with me than the first time. Furthermore, I grab a large bag and put a folding shovel, a couple of bottles of water, my night-vision goggles and a sharp hunting knife in it. I put my mobile phone in my trouser pocket. We meet at the gate, as agreed. Irma is wearing camouflage trousers, a matching jacket and a cap. She looks tough in military gear; I've never seen her like this before. We look at each other, but don't speak. The gate is still just as I left it: off its hinges.

We walk inside; Irma scans everything with her torch. She asks why I haven't turned mine on.

"The battery's old; it won't last much longer."

We walk straight ahead, as far as possible over the uneven terrain, towards the tunnel entrance. I take the goggles out of my bag, switch them on and place them on Irma's head.

"That thing's heavy!" she says.

"You'll get used to it quickly," I whisper.

I take her hand and show her how to adjust the focus. Then I take her other hand and guide it to the button for the auxiliary light.

"Did you make that yourself?" she says, surprised, as she looks around.

“Yes, it’s not as difficult as it looks; just a matter of connecting the right parts together. They’re all standard components.”

We walk inside; I shine her torch around. I’m on edge and look carefully to see if there are any animals about. When we reach the rooms, I hear her gasp.

“There are so many of them,” she whispers.

“Yes, you’d better stay away from them.”

I take her hand and walk towards the room with the alcoves. She walks over to a cocoon and examines it thoroughly. I shine the torch on the back of the cocoon.

“Jesus, they’re people, and they’re alive.” I take the hunting knife out of my bag and hand it to her. She begins to cut open the cocoon carefully. Inside is a naked woman, in a sort of trance or state of shock. The moment she is freed, she falls forward. I catch her and try to get her to sit on the ground. It doesn’t work; she falls forward. Her body is covered in small cuts.

“I’ll take her to the entrance of the landfill,” I say, hoisting the woman over my shoulder.

“Come back as soon as you can; I would rather not stay here alone.” I promise and run as fast as I can to the entrance. There, I lay her down in the grass.

Back at the site, Irma has opened the second cocoon. There is a small, elderly man inside. He is groggy too, but can stand unaided. He mumbles something, but we cannot make him out. We can’t make out his second attempt to say something, either. I try to put him at ease as best I can, whilst Irma opens the third cocoon. It’s another woman; she’s already dead.

“Did you know that people are missing?” I ask Irma. She shakes her head as she opens the fourth cocoon. It’s Els; she looks around with a glazed, confused expression. Her mouth moves as if she wants to say something, but no sound comes out. I take her hand and tell her that everything will be alright, but it seems she doesn’t hear or understand me. Meanwhile, Irma has cut open the last cocoon, but this man isn’t moving either. Irma feels the man’s throat for a heartbeat, but shakes her head.

We each take a victim’s hand and try to guide them out. Irma has a bit more success with the man than I do with Els. So I let Els hang over my shoulder and carry her to the entrance. The naked woman who is already at the entrance is walking in small circles whilst muttering unintelligibly. A moment later, Els also starts muttering unintelligibly.

I call the emergency services to report that I have found three people in a confused state at the entrance to the tip and that an ambulance is urgently required, as I suspect they are showing symptoms of poisoning. I could have told the truth, but I don’t think they would have believed me. The dramatic consequence of that would have been that no ambulance would have been sent. Irma looks at me