VINTAGE

THE EYE OF THE LEOPARD

HENNING MANKELL

Contents

About the Book

Hans Olofson is the son of a Swedish lumberjack. His early life is isolated and difficult, overshadowed by the disappearance of his mother. When he loses both his best friend and girlfriend tragically, his only remaining desire is to fulfill her dream of visiting the grave of a legendary missionary, in the remote hills of Northern Zambia.

On reaching Africa, Hans is struck by its beauty and mystery. After fulfilling his initial quest, an opportunity of employment in the region tempts him to stay, and before long he takes sole responsibility for the farm he manages. Despite his early optimism, he is shocked by the attitude of the local white population to their adopted country, as well as their pitiful vulnerability to alcohol and malaria. As relationships splinter and fray, Hans is soon to discover that his African dream is rapidly turning into a nightmare.

The Eye of the Leopard is a first-rate psychological thriller from the bestselling author of the Wallander mysteries, delving deep into the mind of a man lost in an unknown world.

About the Author

Henning Mankell is the prize-winning and internationally acclaimed author of the Inspector Wallander Mysteries, now dominating bestseller lists throughout Europe. He devotes much of his time to working with Aids charities in Africa, where he is also director of the Teatro Avenida in Maputo.

Steven T. Murray has translated numerous works from the Scandinavian languages, including the Pelle the Conqueror series by Martin Andersen Nexø and three of Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander novels. He is Editor-in-Chief of Fjord Press in Seattle.

Also by Henning Mankell

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Depths
Kennedy's Brain
The Pyramid

Non-fiction

I Die, But the Memory Lives On

Young Adult Fiction

A Bridge to the Stars
Shadows in the Twilight
When the Snow Fell

HENNING MANKELL

The Eye of the Leopard

TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH BY
Steven T. Murray

VINTAGE BOOKS
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PART I

MUTSHATSHA

Chapter One

HE WAKES IN the African night, convinced that his body has split in two. Cracked open, as if his guts had exploded, with the blood running down his face and chest.

In the darkness he fumbles in terror for the light switch, but when he flips it there is no light, and he thinks the electricity must be out again. His hand searches under the bed for a torch, but the batteries are dead and so he lies there in the dark.

It's not blood, he tells himself. It's malaria. I've got the fever, the sweat is being squeezed out of my body. I'm having nightmares, fever dreams. Time and space are dissolving, I don't know where I am, I don't even know if I'm still alive . . .

Insects are crawling across his face, enticed by the moisture that is oozing from his pores. He thinks he ought to get out of bed and find a towel. But he knows he wouldn't be able to stand upright, he would have to crawl, and maybe he wouldn't even be able to make it back to bed. If I die now at least I'll be in my own bed, he thinks, as he feels the next attack of fever coming on.

I don't want to die on the floor. Naked, with cockroaches crawling across my face.

His fingers clutch at the wet sheet as he prepares himself for an attack that will be more violent than the ones before. Feebly, in a voice that is hardly audible, he cries out

in the darkness for Luka, but there is only silence and the chirping cicadas of the African night.

Maybe he's sitting right outside the door, he thinks in desperation. Maybe he's sitting there waiting for me to die.

The fever comes rolling through his body in waves, like sudden storm swells. His head burns as if thousands of insects were stinging and boring into his forehead and temples. Slowly he is dragged away from consciousness, sucked down into the underground corridors of the fever attack, where he glimpses the distorted faces of nightmares among the shadows.

I can't die now, he thinks, gripping the sheet to keep himself alive.

But the suction draught of the malaria attack is stronger than his will. Reality is chopped up, sawed into pieces that fit nowhere. He believes he is sitting in the back seat of an old Saab that is racing through the endless forests of Norrland in Sweden. He can't see who is sitting in front of him: only a black back, no neck, no head.

It's the fever, he thinks again. I have to hold on, keep thinking that it's only the fever, nothing more.

He notices that it has started to snow in the room. White flakes are falling on his face and instantly it's cold all around him.

Now it's snowing in Africa, he thinks. That's odd, it really shouldn't be doing that. I have to get hold of a spade. I have to get up and start shovelling, otherwise I'll be buried in here.

Again he calls for Luka, but no one answers, no one comes. He decides to fire Luka, that's the first thing he'll do if he survives this fever.

Bandits, he thinks in confusion. Of course, that's who cut the electrical line.

He listens and seems to hear the patter of their feet outside the walls of the house. With one hand he grips the revolver under his pillow, forces himself up to a sitting

position, and points the gun at the front door. He has to use both hands just to lift it, and in desperation he fears he doesn't have enough strength in his finger to pull the trigger.

I'm going to give Luka the sack, he thinks in a rage. He's the one who cut the electrical line, he's the one who lured the bandits here. I have to remember to fire him in the morning.

He tries to catch some snowflakes in the barrel of the revolver, but they melt before his eyes.

I have to put on my shoes, he thinks. Otherwise I'll freeze to death.

With all his might he leans over the edge of the bed and searches with one hand, but finds only the dead torch.

The bandits, he thinks groggily. They've stolen my shoes. They've already been inside while I was asleep. Maybe they're still here . . .

He fires the pistol out into the room. The shot roars in the dark and he falls back against the pillows with the recoil, feeling calm, almost content.

Luka is behind it all, naturally. It was he who plotted with the bandits, he who cut the electrical line. But now he's been unmasked, so he has no more power. He will be sacked, chased off the farm.

They won't get me, he thinks. I'm stronger than all of them.

The insects continue boring into his forehead and he is very tired. He wonders whether dawn is far off, and he thinks that he must sleep. The malaria comes and goes, that's what is giving him the nightmares. He has to force himself to distinguish what he's imagining from what's real.

It can't snow here, he thinks. And I'm not sitting in the back seat of an old Saab racing through the bright summer forests of Norrland. I'm in Africa, not in Härjedal. I've been here for eighteen years. I have to keep my mind together.

The fever is compelling me to stir up old memories, bring them to the surface, and to fool myself that they're real.

Memories are dead things, albums and archives that have to be kept cold and under lock and key. Reality requires my consciousness. To have a fever is to lose one's internal directions. I mustn't forget that. I'm in Africa and I've been here for eighteen years. It was never my intention, but that's how it turned out.

I've lost count of how many times I've had malaria. Sometimes the attacks are violent, like now; other times milder, a shadow of fever that quickly passes across my face. The fever is seductive, it wants to lure me away, creating snow even though it's over thirty degrees Celsius. But I'm still here in Africa, I've always been here, ever since I landed and stepped off the plane in Lusaka. I was going to stay a few weeks, but I've been here a long time, and that is the truth. It is not snowing.

His breathing is heavy and he feels the fever dancing inside him. Dancing him back to the beginning, to that early morning eighteen years ago when for the first time he felt the African sun on his face.

From the mists of the fever an instant of great clarity emerges, a landscape in which the contours are sharp and washed clean. He brushes off a large cockroach that is feeling his nostril with its antennae and sees himself standing in the doorway of the big jet at the top of the mobile staircase they have brought out.

He recalls that his first impression of Africa was how the sunshine turned the concrete of the airport completely white. Then a smell, something bitter, like an unknown spice or a charcoal fire.

That's how it was, he thinks. I will be able to reproduce that moment exactly, for as long as I live. It was eighteen years ago. Much of what happened later I've forgotten. For me Africa became a habit. A realisation that I can never feel completely calm when faced with this wounded and

lacerated continent . . . I, Hans Olofson, have grown used to the fact that it's impossible for me to comprehend anything but fractions of this continent. But despite this perpetual disadvantage I have persevered, I have stayed on, learned one of the many languages that exist here, become the employer of over 200 Africans.

I've learned to endure this peculiar life, that involves being both loved and hated at the same time. Each day I stand face to face with 200 black human beings who would gladly murder me, slit my throat, offer up my genitals in sacrifice, eat my heart.

Every morning when I awake I am still, after eighteen years, surprised to be alive. Every evening I check my revolver, rotate the magazine with my fingers, make sure that no one has replaced the cartridges with empty ones.

I, Hans Olofson, have taught myself to endure the greatest loneliness. Never before had I been surrounded by so many people who demand my attention, my decisions, but who at the same time watch over me in the dark; invisible eyes that follow me expectantly, waiting.

But my most vivid memory is still that moment when I descended from the plane at Lusaka International Airport eighteen years ago. I keep returning to that moment, to gather courage, the power to survive; back to a time when I still knew my own intentions . . .

Today my life is a journey through days coloured by unreality. I live a life that belongs neither to me nor to anyone else. I am neither successful nor unsuccessful in what I set out to accomplish.

What possesses me is a constant amazement at what actually did happen. What was it that really brought me here, made me take that long journey from the remote interior of Norrland, still covered in snow, to an Africa that had not summoned me? What is it in my life that I have never understood?

The most curious thing is that I've been here for so long. I was twenty-five when I left Sweden, and now I'm forty-three. My hair began turning grey long ago; my beard, which I never manage to shave off, is already completely white. I've lost three teeth, two in the lower jaw and one in the top left. The tip of my ring finger on my right hand is severed at the first knuckle, and sometimes I suffer from pain in my kidneys. I regularly dig out white worms that have bored underneath the skin on the soles of my feet. In the first few years I could scarcely bring myself to carry out these operations using sterilised tweezers and nail scissors. Now I grab a rusty nail or a knife that's lying about and carve out the parasites living in my heels.

Sometimes I try to view all these years in Africa as a wrinkle in my life, one which will some day turn out to never have happened. Maybe it's an insane dream that will be smashed apart when I finally manage to extricate myself from the life I'm living here. Someday this wrinkle in my life will have to be smoothed out . . .

In his attacks of fever, Olofson is flung against invisible reefs that tear his body apart. For brief moments the storm subsides, and he rocks on the waves and feels himself quickly turning into a block of ice. But just when he thinks the cold has reached his heart and frozen his last heartbeat to stillness, the storm returns and the fever slings him once more against the burning reefs.

In the restless, shredded dreams that rage like demons in his mind he keeps returning to the day he came to Africa. The white sun, the long journey that brought him to Kalulushi, and to this night, eighteen years later.

Like a malevolent figure, with no head or neck, the fever attack stands before him. With one hand he clutches his revolver, as if it were his last salvation.

The malaria attacks come and go.

Hans Olofson, once raised in a grim wooden house on the banks of the Ljusna River, shakes and shivers under his

wet sheet.

From his dreams the past emerges, a reflection of the story he has still not given up hope of someday understanding . . .

Chapter Two

THROUGH THE SWIRLING snow he returns to his childhood. It is midwinter 1956. It's four in the morning and the cold whines and prises at the beams of the old wooden house. That's not the sound that wakes him, but rather a stubborn scraping and muttering from the kitchen. He wakes as abruptly as only a child can, and he knows at once that his father has started scrubbing again. Dressed in his blue-trimmed pyjamas with their permanent snuff stains, with thick rag socks on his feet that are already soaked through from all the hot water he is madly sloshing across the floor, his father chases his demons through the winter night. He has chained up the two grey elkhounds out by the woodshed, hauling on the frozen chains as he stands half-naked in the freezing cold, while the water slowly comes to a boil on the stove.

And now he scrubs, a raging assault on the dirt that is visible to no one but himself. He throws the boiling water on cobwebs that suddenly flare up on the walls, then dumps a whole bucket over the hood of the stove because he's convinced that a knot of filthy snakes is hiding there.

All this the son lies in bed and watches, a twelve-year-old with the woollen blanket pulled up over his chin. He doesn't need to get up and tiptoe across the cold planks of the floor to watch it happen. He knows all about it. And through the door he hears his father's muttering and nervous laughter and desperate outbursts of rage.

It always occurs at night.

The first time he woke up and padded out to the kitchen he was five or six years old. In the pale light from the kitchen lamp with its misty shade he saw his father squelching around in the water, with his brown hair in wild disarray. And he understood, without putting it into words, that he was invisible. It was another kind of vision that occupied his father as he raced about with his scrubbing brush. His father was looking at something that only he could see. It terrified the boy, more so than if his father had suddenly raised an axe over his head.

Now, as he lies in bed listening, he knows that the coming days will be calm. His father will lie motionless in his bed before he finally gets up, pulls on his rough work clothes, and heads out into the forest again, where he cuts trees for Iggesund or Marma Långrör.

Neither father nor son will utter a word about the night-time scrubbing. For the boy in the bed it will fade like a malevolent apparition, until he again awakes in the night to the sound of his father scrubbing away his demons.

But now it is February 1956. Hans Olofson is twelve years old, and in a few hours he will get dressed, munch a few slices of rye bread, take his knapsack and head out into the cold on his way to school.

The darkness of night is a split personality, both friend and foe. From the blackness he can haul up nightmares and inconceivable horrors. The spasms of the roof beams in the hard frost are transformed into fingers that reach out for him. But the darkness can also be a friend, a time in which to weave thoughts about what will come, what people call the future.

He imagines how he will leave this lonely wooden house by the river for the last time, how he will run across the bridge, disappear past the arches of the bridge, out into the world, almost all the way to Orsa Finnmark.

Why am I who I am? he thinks. Why me and not somebody else?

He knows precisely the first time that he had this crucial thought. It was a bright summer evening, and he was playing in the abandoned brickworks behind the hospital. They had divided themselves into friends and enemies, hadn't defined the game any more than that, and they alternately attacked and defended the windowless, half-razed factory building. They often played there, not just because it was forbidden, but because the building provided endlessly adaptable stage sets for their games. Its identity was forgotten, and with their games they lent constantly changing faces to the ruin. The dilapidated brickworks was defenceless; the shadows of the people who had once worked there were no longer present to protect it. Those who played there ruled. Only seldom did a bellowing father come and drag his child away from the wild game. There were shafts to plunge into, rotten steps to fall through, rusty kiln doors that could slam shut on hands and feet. But the boys playing there knew the dangers, avoided them, and had explored the safe paths through the endless building.

And it was there on that bright summer evening, as he was lying hidden behind a rusty, collapsed brick kiln, waiting to be discovered and captured, that he had asked himself for the first time why he was who he was and not someone else. The thought had made him both excited and upset. It was as if an unknown being had crept into his head and whispered to him the password to the future. After that, all his thoughts, the very process of thinking, seemed to come from a voice that was external, that had crept into his head, left its message, and then disappeared.

On that occasion he left the game, sneaked away from the others, vanished among the fir trees surrounding the dead brickworks, and went down to the river.

The forest was quiet; the swarms of mosquitoes had not yet taken over the town, which lay where the river made a bend on its long journey to the sea. A crow squawked its loneliness at the top of a crooked fir and then flapped away over the ridge where Hedevägen wound its way to the west. The moss under his feet was spongy. He had grown tired of the game, and on his way to the river everything changed. For as long as he had not established his own identity, was just *somebody* among all the others, he had possessed a timeless immortality, the privilege of childhood, the most profound manifestation of childishness. At the very moment that the unfamiliar question of why he was who he was crept into his head, he became a definite person and thus mortal. Now he had defined himself; he was who he was and would never be anyone else. He realised the futility of defending himself. Now he had a life ahead of him, in which he would have to be who he was.

By the river he sat down on a rock and looked at the brown water slowly making its way towards the sea. A rowboat lay chafing at its cable and he realised how simple it would be to disappear. From the town, but never from himself.

For a long time he sat by the river, becoming a human being. Everything had acquired limits. He would play again, but never the same way as before. Playing had become a game, nothing more.

Now he clambers over the rocks on the riverbank until he can see the house where he lives. He sits down on an uprooted tree that smells of rain and dirt and looks at the smoke curling out of the chimney.

Who can he tell about his great discovery? Who can be his confidant?

He looks at the house again. Should he knock on the draughty door to the ground floor flat and ask to speak with Egg-Karlsson? Ask to be admitted to the kitchen where it always smells of rancid fat, wet wool, and cat piss? He

can’t talk to Egg-Karlsson, who doesn’t speak to anyone, just shuts his door as if he’s closing an eggshell of iron around himself. All Hans knows about him is that he’s a misanthrope and bull-headed. He rides his bicycle to the farmhouses outside town and buys up eggs, which he then delivers to various grocers. He does all his business in the early morning, and for the rest of the day he lives behind his closed door.

Egg-Karlsson’s silence pervades the house. It hovers like a mist over the neglected currant bushes and the shared potato patch, the front steps, and the stairs to the top floor where Hans lives with his father.

Nor does he consider confiding in old lady Westlund who lives across from Egg-Karlsson. She would sweep him up in her embroidery and her Free Church evangelism, never listening to him, but proceeding at once to fling her holy words at him.

All that remains is the little attic flat he shares with his father. All he can do is go home and talk to his father, Erik Olofson, who was born in Åmsele, far from this cold hole in the interior of melancholy southern Norrland, this town that lies hidden away in the heart of Härjedal. Hans knows how much it hurts his father to have to live so far from the sea, to have to make do with a sluggish river. With a child’s intuition he can see that a man who has been to sea can never thrive where the dense, frozen grey forest conceals the open horizons. He thinks of the sea chart that hangs on the kitchen wall, showing the waters around Mauritius and Réunion, with a glimpse of the east coast of Madagascar on the fading edge of the chart, and the sea floor indicated in places, its inconceivable depth 4,000 metres. It’s a constant reminder of a sailor who wound up in the utterly wrong place, who managed to make landfall where there wasn’t any sea.

On the shelf over the stove sits a full-rigger in a glass case, brought home decades ago from a dim Indian shop in

Mombasa, purchased for a single English pound. In this frigid part of the world, inhabited by ice crystals instead of jacarandas, people have moose skulls and fox tails as wall decorations. Here it should smell of sour rubber boots and lingonberries, not the distant odour of the salty monsoon sea and burned-out charcoal fires. But the full-rigger sits there on the stove shelf, with its dreamy name *Célestine*. Long ago Hans decided that he would never marry a woman who wasn't named Célestine. It would be a form of betrayal; to his father, to the ship, to himself.

He also senses a murky connection between the full-rigger in its dusty case and the recurring nights when his father scrubs out his fury. A sailor finds himself driven ashore in a primeval Norrland forest, where no bearings can be taken, no ocean depths sounded. The boy senses that the sailor lives with a stifled cry of lamentation inside. And it's when the longing grows too strong that the bottles end up on the table, the sea charts are taken out of the chest in the hall, the seven seas are sailed once more, and the sailor metamorphoses into a wreck who is forced to scrub away his longing, transformed into hallucinations dissolved in alcohol.

The answers are always found in the past.

His mother disappeared, was simply gone one day. Hans was so little then that he has no memory either of her or of her departure. The photographs that lie behind the radio in father's unfinished logbook, and her name, Mary, are all he knows.

The two photographs instil in him a sense of dawn and cold. A round face with brown hair, her head tilted a little, maybe a hint of a smile. On the back of the photographs it says *Atelier Strandmark, Sundsvall*.

Sometimes he imagines her as a figurehead on a ship that was wrecked in a heavy storm in the southern seas and has since lain on the bottom in a watery grave 4,000 metres down. He imagines that her invisible mausoleum

lies somewhere on the sea chart that hangs on the kitchen wall. Maybe outside Port Louis, or in the vicinity of the reef off the east coast of Madagascar.

She didn't want to leave. That's the explanation he gets. On the rare occasions that his father talks about her departure, he always uses the same words.

Someone who doesn't want to leave. Quickly, unexpectedly she disappeared, that much he understands. One day she's gone, with a suitcase. Someone saw her get on the train, towards Orsa and Mora. The vastness of Finnmark closed in around her disappearance.

For this disappearance he can manage only a wordless despair. And he assumes that they share the guilt, he and his father. They didn't die. They were left behind, never to receive a sign of life.

He's not sure whether he misses her, either. His mother is two photographs, not a person of flesh and blood who laughs, washes clothes, and tucks the covers under his chin when the winter cold penetrates the walls of the building. The feeling he bears is a kind of fear. And the shame of having been found unworthy.

He decides early on to share the contempt that the decent town has hung like shackles around his runaway mother. He goes along with the decent people, the grown-ups. Enclosed in an iron grip of constancy they pass their life together in the building where the beams scream out their distress during the long drawn-out winters. Sometimes Hans imagines that their house is a ship that has dropped anchor and is waiting for the wind to come up. The chains of the elkhounds out by the woodshed are actually anchor chains, the river a bay of the open sea. The attic flat is the captain's cabin, while the lower flat belongs to the crew. Waiting for the wind takes a long time, but occasionally the anchors are hauled up from the deep. And then the house sets off under full sail to race down the river, saluting one last time where the river bends at the

People’s Park, before the wind carries them away. Towards an Away that doesn’t entail a return.

In an attempt to understand, he creates for himself the only rational explanation for why his father remains in this parched town, every day grabbing his tools and heading out into the forest that prevents him from seeing the ocean, or taking a bearing, or gazing at distant horizons.

Out there, he chops down the forest. Plodding through the heavy snow, chopping down tree after tree, stripping the bark from the trunks and slowly opening the landscape to the endless horizon. The sailor driven ashore has set himself a task – to clear a path back to a distant shoreline.

But Hans Olofson’s life is more than just melancholy mother-lessness and a woodcutter’s bouts of alcoholism. Together they study his father’s detailed world maps and sea charts, go ashore in ports his father has visited, and explore in their imagination places that still await their arrival. The sea charts are taken down from the wall, rolled out, and weighted down with ashtrays and chipped cups. The evenings can be long, because Erik Olofson is a good storyteller. By the age of twelve Hans possesses an exhaustive knowledge of places as distant as Pamplemousse and Bogamaio; he has glimpsed the innermost secrets of seafaring, mysterious ships that vanished in their own enigma, pirate captains and sailors of the utmost benevolence. The secret world and the construct of regulations, so difficult to grasp, with which trading companies and private shippers have to live and comply, he has stratified in his mind without fully understanding them; yet it is as though he has touched on a great and decisive source of wisdom. He knows the smell of soot in Bristol, the indescribable sludge in the Hudson River, the Indian Ocean’s variable monsoons, the threatening beauty of icebergs, and the rattle of palm fronds.

‘Here the wind murmurs in the trees,’ says Erik Olofson. ‘But in the tropics there is no murmuring. The palm leaves rattle.’

He tries to imagine the difference, striking his fork against a glass, but the palms simply refuse to clatter or rattle. They still murmur in his ears, like the firs he is surrounded by.

But when he tells his teacher that palms clatter and that there are water lilies as big as the centre circle on the ice-hockey rink outside the elementary school, he is ridiculed and called a liar. Red in the face, Headmaster Gottfried comes storming out of the musty office where he quells his distaste for teaching by imbibing vermouth assiduously. He grabs Hans by the hair and threatens him with what happens to anyone who is on an excursion to the land of lies.

Afterwards, alone in the schoolyard in the spotlight of derision, he decides never again to share any of his exotic knowledge. In this hellhole of filthy snow and wooden houses, no one understands a thing about the truths that must be sought at sea.

His eyes red and swollen, he comes home, boils potatoes, and waits for his father. Maybe this is when he makes his decision. That his life will be an unbroken journey. Standing over the pot of potatoes, the holy spirit of his journey takes possession of him. His father’s smelly rag socks hang on the stove.

Sails, he thinks. Patched, mended sails . . .

That night, as he lies in bed, he asks his father to tell him one more time about the water lilies on Mauritius. And he falls asleep, assured that Headmaster Gottfried will burn in hell for not believing a sailor’s report.

Later that evening, Erik Olofson drinks his coffee, sunk in the rickety chair next to the radio. He lets the waves of the ether hiss softly, as if he doesn’t really want to listen. As if the hissing is message enough. The breathing of the

sea, far away. The photographs burn in the logbook. All alone, he must guide his son. And no matter how much he reveals to the boy, the forest still seems to tighten around him. Sometimes he thinks that this is the true great defeat of his life, that despite everything he endures.

But for how long? When will he splinter, like a glass that has been heated for too long?

The ether waves hiss and he thinks again about why she left him, left their son. Why did she act like a man? he wonders. Fathers are the ones who leave and disappear. Not mothers. Least of all after conceiving a precise and premeditated plan of escape. How much about another person can you ever understand? Especially someone who lives close to you, in the inner circle of your own life.

In the pale light of the radio Erik Olofson tries to comprehend.

But the questions return, and the next evening are still hanging on their hooks. Erik Olofson tries to force his way into the core of a lie. Tries to understand, tries to endure.

Finally both of them are asleep, the sailor from Åmsele and his twelve-year-old son. The beams writhe in the midwinter darkness. A lone dog runs along the river in the moonlight. The two elkhounds lie curled up next to the stove in the kitchen, shaggy, with ears that prick up and fall again as the beams scrape and complain.

The house by the river sleeps. The dawn is far off on this night in Sweden in 1956.

Chapter Three

HE CAN RECALL his departure for Africa like a dim shadow play.

He imagines the memories he bears to be a forest which was once open and clean, but which has become more and more overgrown. He has no tools for clearing the brush and scrub in this landscape. The growth of his memories is constant, the landscape harder and harder to take in.

Still, something does remain of that early morning in September 1969 when he left all his horizons behind and flew out into the world.

The Swedish sky was heavy that morning. An endless carpet of rain clouds hung over his head as he boarded an aeroplane for the first time. As he walked across the tarmac the damp seeped through his shoes.

I'm leaving Sweden with wet socks, he thought. If I ever make it to Africa I might bring along an autumn greeting in the form of a cold.

On the way to the plane he had turned around, as if someone might be there after all, waving goodbye to him. But the shadowy grey figures on the roof terrace of Arlanda didn't belong to him. His departure was noticed by no one.

As he checked in he suddenly felt an urge to snatch the ticket back, yell that it was all a mistake, and leave the airport. But he said thank you when they handed the ticket back to him, along with his boarding card and the wish for a pleasant trip.

His first stop on the way to foreign horizons was London. Then Cairo, Nairobi, and finally Lusaka.

He imagined that he might just as well be on his way to a distant constellation, the Lyre or one of the faintly glowing fixed stars in Orion’s Belt.

All he knew about Lusaka was that the city was named after an African elephant hunter.

My objective is as unreasonable as it is ridiculous, he thought. Who in the world but me is on his way to a strange mission station deep in the bush of northwest Zambia, far beyond the roads to Kinshasa and Chingola? Who travels to Africa with a fleeting impulse as his only carry-on luggage? I have no detailed itinerary, nobody accompanied me to the airport, nobody will be meeting me. This journey I am about to begin is merely an escape . . .

He remembers that this is what he thought, and then there are only the vague shadows of memory. The way he sat in the plane holding on to himself with a cramplike grip. The vibrating fuselage, the whine of the jet engines, the machine gathering speed.

With a slight bow Hans Olofson made the climb into the air.

Twenty-seven hours later, precisely according to the schedule, he landed at Lusaka International Airport.

Naturally there was no one there to meet him.

Chapter Four

THERE IS NOTHING remarkable about Hans Olofson's first encounter with the African continent, nothing unusual. He is the European visitor, the white man with his pride and his fear, who defends himself against what is foreign by instantly condemning it.

At the airport, disorder and chaos reign: incredibly complicated entry documents to fill out, badly spelled instructions, African immigration officers who seem unfazed by anything as mundane as time or organisation. Hans Olofson stands in a queue for a long time, only to be brusquely shunted to another queue when he finally reaches the brown counter on which black ants are hauling invisible particles of food. He realises that he has joined the queue intended for returning residents, those with Zambian passports or residence permits. Sweat pours out, strange foreign smells fill his nose, and the stamp he finally obtains in his passport is upside down, and he sees that the date of his arrival is wrong. He is handed a new form by an unbelievably beautiful African woman, brushes her hand quickly, and then truthfully fills in the amount of foreign cash he is bringing in.

At customs there is seemingly insurmountable chaos; suitcases are tossed off noisy carts pushed along by excited Africans. Among the pile of cardboard boxes he finally finds his suitcase, half squashed, and when he bends down to pull it out someone bumps into him and sends him

sprawling. When he turns around there is no one apologising, no one seems to have noticed that he fell, only a billowing mass of people pushing towards the customs agents who are angrily ordering everyone to open their bags. He is sucked into this human surge, shoved back and forth like a pawn in some game, and then suddenly all the customs agents vanish and no one asks him to open his battered suitcase. A soldier with a submachine gun and a frayed uniform scratches his forehead with the muzzle of his weapon, and Olofson sees that he is hardly more than seventeen. A creaky swinging door opens and he steps out on to African soil in earnest. But there is no time for reflection; porters grab at his suitcase and his arms, taxi drivers yell out offers of their services. He is dragged off to an indescribably dilapidated car on which someone has painted the word TAXI on one of the doors in sloppy, garish letters. His bag is stuffed into a baggage compartment which already contains two hens with their feet tied together, and the boot lid is held in place by an ingeniously bound steel wire. He tumbles into a back seat with no springs at all, so that it feels as if he is sitting right on the floor. A leaky plastic container of petrol is leaning against one knee, and when the taxi driver climbs into the driver's seat with a burning cigarette in his mouth, Olofson for the first time begins to hate Africa.

This car will never start, he thinks in desperation. Before we even get out of the airport it will explode . . . He watches the driver, who can't be more than fifteen years old, join two loose wires next to the steering wheel; the engine responds reluctantly, and the driver turns to him with a smile and asks where he wants to go.

Home, he wants to answer. Or at least away, away from this continent that makes him feel totally helpless, that has ripped from him all the survival tools he had acquired during his previous life . . .

His thoughts are interrupted by a hand groping at his face, stuck in through the window which has no glass in it. He gives a start, turns around, and looks straight into two dead eyes, a blind woman who is feeling his face with her hand and wants money.

The driver shouts something in a language that Olofson doesn't understand, the woman replies by starting to screech and wail, and Olofson sits on the floor of the car unable to do a thing. With a screech of tyres the driver leaves the begging woman behind, and Olofson hears himself yelling that he wants to be taken to a hotel in the city.

'But not too expensive!' he shouts.

He never hears the driver's reply. A bus with stinking exhaust and a violently racing engine squeezes past and drowns out the driver's voice.

His shirt is sticky with sweat, his back already aches from the uncomfortable sitting position, and he thinks he should have settled on the price before he let himself be forced into the car.

The incredibly hot air, filled with mysterious smells, blows into his face. A landscape drenched with sun as if it were an over-exposed photograph rushes past his eyes.

I'll never survive this, he thinks. I'm going to be killed in a car crash before I've even understood that I'm really in Africa. As if he had unconsciously made a prophecy, the car loses one of its front wheels at that instant and careens off the road into a ditch. Olofson strikes his head against the steel edge of the front seat and then heaves himself out of the car, afraid that it's going to explode.

The driver gives him a surprised look and then squats down in front of the car and looks at the axle, which is bereft and gaping. From the roof of the car he then takes a spare tyre, patched and completely bald. Olofson leans over the red dirt and watches the driver put on the spare tyre as