RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Daniel

Henning Mankell

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About the Book

Hans Bengler, a young entomologist, leaves Sweden for the Kalahari Desert, determined to find a previously undiscovered insect to name after himself and advance his career. Instead, he finds a young boy, whose tribe has been decimated by European raiders.

Accustomed to collecting specimens, Bengler re-names the traumatised child Daniel and brings him home to Sweden, intending to ‘civilise’ him. But Daniel yearns desperately for the desert and his real family. His only consolation is his friendship with a vulnerable young girl who is also an outsider in the community, but even this bond is destined to be violently broken, as Daniel’s isolation and increasing desperation lead to a chilling tragedy.

About the Author

Henning Mankell has become a worldwide phenomenon with his crime writing, gripping thrillers and atmospheric novels set in Africa. His prize-winning and critically acclaimed Inspector Wallander Mysteries are currently dominating bestseller lists all over the globe. His books have been translated into over forty languages and made into numerous international film and television adaptations: most recently the BAFTA-award-winning BBC television series *Wallander*, starring Kenneth Branagh. Mankell devotes much of his free time to working with Aids charities in Africa, where he is also director of the Teatro Avenida in Maputo. In 2008, the University of St Andrews conferred Henning Mankell with an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters in recognition of his major contribution to literature and to the practical exercise of conscience.

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The Cat Who Liked Rain

In memory of Jan Bergman

HENNING MANKELL

Daniel

TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH BY
Steven T. Murray

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PROLOGUE

SKÅNE, SOUTHERN SWEDEN, 1878

THE CROWS WERE fighting. They dived towards the mud, flung themselves up again, and their cries cut through the wind. It had been raining a long time, this August of 1878. The restlessness of the crows was a portent of a long, hard winter. But one of the tenant farmers working below Kågeholm Castle, just north-west of Tomelilla, was bewildered by them. There was something strange about their agitation. And he had seen flocks of crows his whole life. Late in the afternoon he walked alongside a ditch that was filled with water. The crows kept squabbling, but when he approached too closely they fell silent and flapped off. And he, who had come to investigate what was bothering them, discovered at once what it was. A girl lay dead, half buried under the brushwood.

He realised at once that the girl had been murdered. Someone had stabbed her and slit her throat. But when he bent close over her face he noticed something odd, something that frightened him more than her slit throat. Whoever killed her had suffocated her with mud, which he had stuffed down her throat and into her nostrils. He had pressed so hard that he had broken her nose. The girl must have suffered an agonising death.

He ran back the same way he had come. Because it was obviously a murder, Chief Constable Landkvist in Tomelilla called for help from the investigative police in Malmö.

The dead girl’s name was Sanna Sörensdotter and she was regarded by all, including the parish pastor David Hallén, as mentally retarded. She had been missing from her home in Kverrestad for three days before her body was discovered.

According to the doctor who examined the corpse, Dr Madsen of Simrishamn, she had apparently been sexually molested. But since her body was in a state of

decomposition and the crows had done considerable damage to it, he had to admit that the truth might well be something else.

Many rumours flourished as to who had murdered her. One of the simplest claimed that a Polish sailor had been seen in the area just before Sanna disappeared from her home. Although a bulletin was put out all over Sweden, and even in Denmark, the man was never found.

The murderer remained at large.

Only he knew what he had done.

And why.

PART I

THE DESERT

CHAPTER 1

HE HAD WALKED a long way in the intense heat. Several times in the last twenty-four hours he had been struck by vertigo and thought that he was about to die. It had filled him with fear, or perhaps it was actually rage, and he had struggled on in a fury. The desert was endless. He didn't want to die here, not yet, and he had urged on Amos, fat Neka and the other black men he had hired in Cape Town who were driving his three oxen and the wagon in which his entire life was packed and tied with ropes. Somewhere ahead of them, deep inside the blinding heat, there was a trading post, and if he reached it everything would be all right again. He would not die. He would continue to search for his insects, to look for a damned fly that no one had ever seen before, which he would name after himself, *Musca bengleriensis*. He couldn't give up now. He had invested everything in this hunt for an unknown fly. So he struggled onward, and the sand and the sun sliced through his mind like knives.

Two years earlier he had been sitting in his student room on Prästgatan in Lund and listening to the sound of horses' hoofs clattering on the cobblestones outside, as he studied an incomplete German map of the Kalahari Desert. He traced his finger along the coastline of German South-West Africa, north to the border of Angola, south to the land of the Boers, and then inland, towards the centre of southern Africa, which had no name. He was twenty-seven years old then, in 1874, and he had already given up all hope of completing his university studies and passing his exams. When he first came to Lund from the Cathedral School in

Växjö he had thought of becoming a physician, but he fainted and fell like a heavy tree on his first visit to the Anatomy Theatre. The lecturer, Professor Enander, had clearly explained before the doors were opened that they were going to dissect a homeless, unmarried woman who had drunk herself to death at a brothel in Copenhagen and been transported back to Sweden in a pine box. She was a Mamsell Andersson from Kivik, who had fallen into the sinful life and delivered an illegitimate child at the age of fifteen. She had sought happiness in Copenhagen, where there was nothing to be found but misfortune. He could still hear the almost salacious contempt dripping from Professor Enander's introductory words.

'We shall be cutting up a cadaver that was already a cadaver even in life. A whore's cadaver from Österlen.'

Then they had entered the Anatomy Theatre en masse, seven medical students, all men, all equally pale, and Professor Enander had begun to slice open her abdomen. That's when he fainted. He struck his head on one of the hard steel edges of the dissection table; he still had the scar, just above his right eye.

After that he had abandoned all thought of a medical career. He considered joining the army but could envision nothing but a meaningless ritual of marching and screaming young men. He had dabbled in philosophy, and thought about becoming a pastor when he sat drinking with his friends, but there was no God, and finally he wound up among the insects.

He could still recall that morning in early summer. He woke with a start, as if something had bitten him, and when he threw open the window the stench from the street below made him sick. As if aware of sudden danger he quickly threw on his clothes, grabbed his walking stick, and strode out of town to the south, towards Staffanstorp. Somewhere along the road he grew weary and stepped into the bushes

to rest and perhaps masturbate in the shade of a tree. And as he lay there a gaudy-coloured butterfly settled on his hand. It was a brimstone butterfly, but it was something else as well. The play of colours kept shifting on its wings as they slowly opened and closed. The rays of sunshine falling through the foliage transformed the yellow to red, to blue, and back to yellow. The butterfly sat on his hand for a long time, as if it had an important message for him, and then, as it suddenly took flight and vanished, he knew.

Insects.

The world was full of insects which didn't have names and had not been catalogued. Insects that were waiting for him. Waiting to be sorted, described and classified. He had returned to Lund, sought admission to the Botany Department, and although he was already a senior student the professor was kind and accepted him. During the summer he visited his home in Småland, where his father lived as a man of independent means on the family estate outside Hovmantorp. His mother had died when he was fifteen; his two sisters were older, and since they were both married and lived abroad, in Berlin and Verona, only his father was there, with the old housekeeper. The house was decaying, just as his father was slowly rotting away. He had contracted syphilis in his youth when he was in Paris, and now he sat imprisoned inside an arbour in the summer, alone in his chair. The arbour was pruned so that one had to crawl inside through a hole quite close to the ground. In the autumn his father locked himself in his bedchamber and stayed there through the whole six months of winter, motionless, staring at the ceiling and grinding his teeth until the warmth of spring returned.

Bengler's grandfather had been fortunate in his business speculations during the Napoleonic Wars, and there was still some capital left, although it was much diminished. The estate was mortgaged to the rooftops, and every time he

visited his childhood home he realised that this was all the inheritance he could expect. Nothing but the monthly allowances that made it possible for him to survive in Lund.

His father was a shadow and had never been anything else. And yet Bengler visited him in Hovmantorp that summer to obtain his blessing. He had a vague hope that his father would be able to give him a little financial support for the expedition he was planning.

In addition, and this was the most important thing, he knew that it was time to say goodbye. His father would soon be gone.

From Växjö he got a lift from a travelling salesman who was going to Lessebo. The wagon was uncomfortable, the road was bad, and there was a strong smell of mould from the salesman's coat. He was indeed wearing a fur coat even though it was early June – not full summer heat yet, but already warm.

'Hovmantorp,' he said after an hour had passed. 'A fine-sounding name. But there's nothing there.'

Then they introduced themselves. That never would have happened when they met the night before, as he went round the inns in the little town looking for a ride.

'Hans Bengler.'

The travelling salesman pondered for several kilometres before he replied.

'That doesn't sound Swedish,' he said. 'But what is Swedish anyway, other than endless roads through equally endless forests? My name isn't Swedish either. It's Puttmansson, Natanael Puttmansson, and belongs to the chosen yet exiled people. I sell brushes and household remedies for barrenness and gout.'

'There's some Walloon in my lineage,' replied Hans Bengler. 'A bit of French. There's a Huguenot in the family too, and a Finn. And a French cavalry captain who served

under Napoleon and took a shot through the forehead at Austerlitz. But my name is genuine.’

They rattled on further. A lake glittered among the trees. He’s certainly not talkative, Bengler thought. Big forests either make people silent or make them talk incessantly. I’m thankful that this salesman who smells like mould is a man who keeps his mouth shut.

Then the horse died.

It stopped in its tracks, tried to rear up as though it had suddenly encountered an invisible enemy, and then collapsed. The salesman didn’t seem surprised.

‘Swindled,’ he said simply. ‘Someone sells me a horse under false pretences, and the only thing I’ve never learned to judge is horses.’

They parted ways without much ado. Bengler took his knapsack and walked the last ten kilometres to Hovmantorp. Since he was a man devoted to insects, he stopped now and then to study various creeping things, preparing himself to see his father. Just before he reached Hovmantorp it started to rain. He crept into a barn and masturbated for a while as he thought about Matilda, who was his whore and worked in a brothel just north of the cathedral. It was several hours before the rainstorm passed. He sat looking at the dark sky while his member dried off, thinking that the clouds looked like a caravan, and he wondered how it would be to live in a desert where rain almost never fell.

Why had he decided on the desert, anyway?

He didn’t know. When he was studying the maps his first thought was of South America. But the mountain ranges frightened him, since he didn’t like being up high. He had never even dared climb the tower of the cathedral to look out over the fields. It made him dizzy just thinking of it. The choice came down to the great steppes in the realm of the Mongolians, the deserts of Arabia or the white spot in south-

west Africa. His final decision had something to do with German. He spoke German since he had hiked the country with a friend several years earlier. They had made it all the way down to the Tyrol. Then his travelling companion suddenly contracted a fever and died after violent attacks of vomiting, and Bengler hurriedly returned home. But he had learned German.

As he sat there in the barn with his member in his hand, he thought that he was actually an apprentice, sent out into the world by the dead master Linnaeus. But he also worried that he was not at all suited to the task. He had a low tolerance for pain, he wasn't particularly strong and he was scared of loud noises. Yet one thing could be counted as an asset for him, and that was his stubbornness. And behind his stubbornness lay vanity. Somewhere he would be able to discover a butterfly, or maybe a fly, that was not listed in the catalogues of entomology, and then he could name it after himself.

He went home. His father was sitting in the arbour soaking wet when he crept through the hedge. His father's jaws were grinding, he was crumbling away. He was bald, his skin hung loose and he did not recognise his son. It was a living death sitting there in the arbour, his jaws grinding like millstones with no grain, his whole skeleton creaking, his heart heaving like bellows, and Bengler felt that this pilgrimage to his childhood home was like stepping into a nightmare. But he still sat there for a while and chatted with his deranged father. Then he went up to the house, where the housekeeper was pleased to see him, but no more than that. She made up a bed for him in his old room and gave him something to eat. While she was clattering around in the kitchen he walked round the house and picked up any silver he found. He was taking his inheritance in advance,

realising that he would be arriving in the African desert as a quite indigent entomologist.

During the night he lay awake. The housekeeper usually brought in his father at sundown and put him to bed on a sofa downstairs. Sometime in the night he went down there and sat in the shadows looking at his father. He was asleep, but his jaws kept on grinding. Something suddenly made Bengler upset, a sorrow that surprised him, and he went over and stroked his father’s bald head. In that instant, with that touch, he said his farewell. He felt as if he were standing and watching a coffin being lowered into the earth.

Afterwards he lay awake and waited for daybreak. There was no substance to this waiting, no impatience, no dreams, as though his insides were a flat, cold slab of stone.

He left before the housekeeper awoke.

Three days later he returned to Lund. During his first week back he travelled across the Sound and sold the silver in Copenhagen. Just as he had suspected, he didn’t get much money for what he had to offer. The only thing that brought a good price was a snuffbox which had belonged to the ancestor who had his brains blown out at Austerlitz.

By the following year he had learned everything he now knew about insects. The professor had been friendly, and when he asked why a perpetual student had suddenly been gripped by a fascination for the tiniest creatures, Bengler replied that he actually didn’t know. He had studied colour plates and examined the insects preserved in alcohol, floating weightless in the glass jars that stood on mute shelves in the halls of the Biological Institute. He had learned to distinguish and identify, had plucked off wings and dissected. At the same time he had tried to learn about deserts, about the African continent, which was still largely

terra incognita. But in Lund there had been no professors who knew anything about deserts, or barely anything about Africa. He read everything he came across, and went over to Copenhagen a few times to seek out seamen in Nyhavn who had travelled to Cape Town or Dakar and who could tell him about Africa.

He had told no one but Matilda about his plans. She came to him every Thursday between four and six in the afternoon. Besides having sex, always in the missionary position, she also washed his shirts, and afterwards they would drink port and talk. Matilda was nineteen years old and had left her home in Landskrona when her father tried to rape and then set fire to her. For a brief period she had been a maid before she threw away the apron and the subservience and headed for the brothel. She was flat-chested but very nice, and he made no other demands on eroticism but that it should be nice, not troublesome or ecstatic. He told her about the journey on which he would be embarking the next year, early in the spring, when he understood it was not yet too warm in southern Africa. She listened, uninterested beyond the fact that now she would have to look for another steady customer.

Once he had suggested that she come with him.

‘I refuse to travel by sea,’ she replied vehemently. ‘You can die there, sink to the bottom and never come up.’

And nothing more was said about it.

Winter that year was very mild in Skåne. In early May he moved out of the apartment on Prästgatan. He told his few friends that he was going to take a short trip through Europe and would be back soon.

A fishing boat took him to Copenhagen. For three weeks he lived in a cheap boarding house with sailors in Nyhavn. One Sunday he went to watch a beheading. He didn’t go to the theatre or visit the museums. He talked to the sailors

and waited. He had reduced his baggage to a minimum; everything was contained in a simple chest he had found in the attic of the building on Prästgatan. He had packed up his maps, colour plates and books, some shirts, a pair of extra trousers, leather boots. In Copenhagen he had bought a revolver and ammunition. That was all. He changed the money he had left into gold. He carried it in a leather pouch inside his shirt.

He also had his hair cut very short and started to grow a beard. And he waited.

On 23 May he found out that an English schooner, the *Fox*, would be sailing from Helsingør to Cardiff and then on to Cape Town. The same day he left his boarding house and took the post coach north to Helsingør. He paid a visit to the captain of the black-painted schooner and obtained a promise to be accepted on board as a passenger, although there would be no private cabin at his disposal. For the passage he paid about half the contents of his leather pouch.

On the evening of 25 May the *Fox* left Helsingør. He stood by the railing and sensed everything making headway within him. Inside his breastbone he had masts that were raising their sails. Something was pulling at him, as if a line had been lashed around his heart. He was seized by a desire to be a child again, just for a moment. To skip, babble, crawl, learn to walk right there on the scoured deck.

That night he slept heavily.

By dawn the next morning they had already passed Skagen at the northern tip of Denmark and were in another world.

That world was covered by a thick and immovable fog.

CHAPTER 2

ON THE SHIP he was liberated from his name. He was never called anything but ‘the Passenger’. Without knowing how it happened, he underwent a ritual in which he was stripped of his former identity and became the Passenger. Among these pale but hard-working men he was the only one who did nothing but travel. Without a name, without a past, with nothing more than a bunk in the crew’s quarters. And that was fine with him. When he lost his identity, the past disappeared. It was as though the salt water that splashed up over the railing penetrated his consciousness and corroded all the shadowy memories he carried. The sound of his father’s grinding jaws ebbed away, Matilda became an indistinct silhouette and the house in Hovmantorp a ruin. Of his mother and two sisters nothing was left, not even the memory of their voices. When he was transformed into the Passenger he discovered for the first time that something existed which he had heard of but never before comprehended: freedom.

He would always remember the arrival in Cape Town as an extended and surreal dream. Or perhaps it was actually the end of one nightmare that imperceptibly slipped over into another? Even before they reached Cardiff, the captain, whose name was Robertson, had turned out to suffer from recurrent bouts of madness. He would come rushing into the crew’s quarters with knives in his hands, slashing wildly in all directions. They had to tie him down; only when he began weeping some days later would they release him again. Bengler understood that the crew had great love for

the captain. The schooner was actually a floating cathedral with a number of acolytes who were prepared to follow their master into death. Between his attacks, Robertson was very amiable and devoted both interest and time to his lone, taciturn passenger. He was in his forties and had gone to sea when he was nine. At sixteen he underwent a religious crisis, and then, when he became captain, shouldered an invisible mantle which was actually a pastor's robe and not a marine uniform. He told his passenger about many oddities from the African continent. But he had never visited the desert. He assumed an absent, almost sorrowful expression when the Passenger told him about his plans. He didn't reveal his deepest secret, about the mysterious butterfly or fly he would name after himself. But he did talk about the insects, how he was going to catalogue, sort, identify and carry out the arrangements that were necessary for a person to be able to live a decent life.

The talk about the desert, the expanses of sand, made Robertson depressed.

'You can't even drown in sand,' said Robertson.

'But you can be covered up by it,' replied the Passenger.

Robertson observed him for a long time before he made another comment.

'No one has ever seen a god arise from a grain of sand. On the other hand, the Devil has been known to spew burning sand from his maw.'

The Passenger didn't mention the sand again. Instead he enticed Robertson to tell him about the black people, the very short and the very tall, about the women who smeared dung in their hair, the violent dances that were nothing more than shadow images of erotic games. And the Passenger listened. Every evening, except during a heavy storm in the Bay of Biscay, he noted down what the captain had said. After he helped Robertson clean out a severely infected ear, their relationship had deepened. As a special favour, as if he were being allowed to take part in a holy

sacrament, Robertson had taught him to use the sextant. The feeling that he was carrying the ship inside him rather than standing on its deck became ever stronger. Each morning he raised his inner sails, depending on the direction and force of the winds. In the evenings, or when a storm was brewing, he watched the crew clambering up the rigging and took the same measures inside himself.

On 22 June just at sundown, the lookout shouted, ‘Land, ho!’ Robertson let the vessel lie at drift-anchor that night. In the crew’s quarters a strange silence prevailed, as if none of them dared believe that they had survived yet another journey to the distant dark continent. In low voices, as if they were confiding secrets to one another, they began to plan for the days they would spend ashore. He listened attentively to the whispers passing through the cabin. It was like a chant in which two things were murmured time after time: *women and beer, women and beer*. Nothing more. The last night on the ship he tried to reconcile his thoughts with all that he had left behind, but he could not even recall Matilda’s face. There was nothing.

At dawn he took leave of Robertson.

‘We’ll never see each other again,’ said Robertson. ‘I can always tell when I’m saying goodbye to someone for the last time.’

It was as though Robertson were issuing his death warrant. It upset him because it made him fearful. Could Robertson see what lay before him, see into the unknown? He refused to believe that this was true, but Robertson was one of the most mysterious men he had ever met. What was he really? A mad preacher or a mad sea captain? Or a man who actually had the ability to discern the men for whom death was already waiting?

‘Good luck,’ said Robertson, stretching out his hand. ‘Everyone has his path to follow. And that cannot be

altered.’

Then he was rowed ashore. Tafelberg loomed high like a decapitated neck over the city that lay wedged at the foot of the mountain. On the quay there was great confusion; people yelled and shoved, some black men with rings in their ears began to tear at his chest and he was forced to defend himself with his fists. He spoke German, but nobody understood him; all around him English was being spoken. Robertson had given him two addresses, one for a boarding house which was usually free of lice, and one for an old English pilot who for some reason was the honorary consul for the Union of Sweden and Norway in Cape Town. When, after numerous difficulties, he found his way to the boarding house, he was drenched with sweat. The white woman who owned the establishment yelled at a fat mulatto and told her to give the new guest some water. He drank it, knowing that something was going to happen to his stomach. He was shown to a room where the sheet was ironed yet still wet. Everything seemed damp, the floorboards had pores, and he lay down on the bed and thought: Now I’m here and I have absolutely no idea where I am.

The next day, after he had succumbed to the first bout of diarrhoea, he looked up the Swedish-Norwegian honorary consul. This gentleman lived in a white house next to a road that climbed towards the mountains. He was admitted to the house by a black man with no teeth, and he sat waiting for two hours on a wooden chair until Consul Wackman had finished snoring and got up and dressed. Wackman was completely bald, had no eyebrows, and his protruding ears reminded Bengler of swallows’ wings. His legs were short, his stomach held up by a piece of Indian fabric, and on his bare chest sat two bloodsucking leeches. He glanced over the letter that Robertson had written and then tossed it aside.

‘All these Swedish madmen. Why do they always have to come here? What we need are engineers. Competent people who can solve practical problems, or have raw strength, or a little capital. But not all these madmen who either want to import revival or collect the dung that the elephants leave behind. And now this. Insects. Who needs flies and mosquitoes in catalogues?’

With his fat fingers he grabbed a small silver bell and rang it. A black servant, naked except for a thin loincloth, came in and knelt down.

‘What would you like to drink?’ Wackman asked. ‘Gin or not gin?’

‘Gin.’

The black man disappeared from the room. Outside the window Bengler could see that someone had hung up a vulture by its feet and was beating it with a wooden stick.

They drank.

‘I had thought about making a living from ostriches,’ said the Passenger, who was now slowly feeling his name returning. He was again on his way to becoming Hans Bengler from Hovmantorp.

Wackman regarded him for a long time before he replied.

‘So, you’re a madman,’ he said at last. ‘You think you’re going to hunt ostriches and export feathers for ladies’ hats. It won’t pay. The feathers will rot before the ship has even left the harbour.’

With that, all discussion was over. Wackman did, however, exhibit a certain resigned kindness and promised to help him acquire some oxen, a wagon, and hire some ox-drivers. Then he would have to manage on his own. Wackman thought it would be advisable if he left a will with him, in case there was something to be inherited. Or at least the address of a family member who could be informed that his relative’s bones were now resting in an unknown location in an endless desert.

They kept on drinking gin. He thought about the mellow port wine he had drunk with Matilda. That world now seemed like an enigmatic mirage. Now it was raw gin tearing at his throat. And Wackman, breathless, as if he would give up the ghost at any time, told him the strange story of how he, who was born in Glasgow, had wound up in Cape Town and came to be the owner of a brothel and represent the Swedish-Norwegian Union.

The story was about bears and a lithograph that he had once seen in his younger days in the window of a bookseller's in Glasgow. *Bear Hunting in Swedish Wermland*. He had never been able to forget that image. In his twenties he had made his pilgrimage, arriving in Karlstad in the middle of a terrible winter. Several times he had almost died from the terror that the cold aroused in him, not the cold itself. He never saw a live bear, even though he stayed in that awful cold for more than two months. On the other hand, he did see a bear skin at the home of a retired artillery captain who lived by the square. Then he had left Sweden as fast as he could, and by a circuitous route ended up in Cape Town, where he wanted to show his gratitude for seeing the bear skin by taking on the task of serving as the consul of the Swedish-Norwegian Union.

By late afternoon they were both fairly well intoxicated. Wackman ordered his carriage and together they rolled down the steep road and stopped outside the low cement building that housed his brothel. Half-naked black women melted into the darkness in the low rooms and there was a strong smell of unknown spices. Wackman vanished and Bengler suddenly discovered that he was entwined with black snakes: female arms, legs, feet, bellies, and he fled into the gin fog and didn't know whether it was actually Robertson's schooner that slowly sank towards the bottom of the sea, or the ship he carried inside himself.

The next day he awoke on the floor of a room with a veil beside his head. When he forced himself to stand up he discovered a blue spider which was busy weaving its web in the corner between two walls. He reminded himself of his mission and walked through the brothel, where everyone now seemed to be asleep, and found Wackman passed out in an antique rocking chair. Although Wackman was sleeping deeply, he seemed to have been waiting for him. When Bengler stood behind him he awoke with a start.

‘I need nine days,’ Wackman said. ‘And all the cash or all the gold dust you have in that pouch that’s bulging under your shirt, which by the way is filthy and should be washed. Nine days, no more. Then you can be on your way. And I will never see you again. But there is one piece of advice I would give you. Advice about the future.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The pianoforte.’

‘The pianoforte?’

‘It’s all the rage in England. It will spread over the entire continent. Those young mamselles play the piano. Black and white keys. Those pianos need keys. And the keys need ivory.’

Bengler understood. Wackman thought that he ought to go in for elephant hunting.

‘I came here for the tiny creatures,’ he replied. ‘Not the big ones.’

‘Blame yourself and die,’ said Wackman. ‘No one will miss you, no one will remember you.’

But Wackman, whose first name was Erasmus, kept his promise. On the ninth day everything was ready. For lack of anything better, Bengler had left Wackman the address of the housekeeper in Hovmantorp. In the event that he died, she would stuff the letter between his father’s grinding jaws and the last memory of him would be eradicated.

And yet he knew this would not happen. Without being able to explain it, not to mention defend it, he was convinced he would survive.

The sand would not sneak up on him.

On one of the first days in July he set off from Cape Town.

The sluggish oxen moved very slowly. He had purchased a tropical helmet and hung a rifle over his shoulder. Insects buzzed around his face, lured by his sweat. He thought that they would lead him in the right direction. They were his most important travelling companions.

The compass, which had been made in London and was encased in brass, showed that his course was due north, perhaps with a deviation of a few hundredths of a degree to the west.

The first night he changed his clothes before he sat down to eat the dinner served by Amos, his cook. They had made camp by the bank of a small river. The starry sky was clear and close. Suddenly he saw the Big Dipper. It hung upside down. As a last farewell to everything he had left behind, he surprised his ox-drivers by standing on his head and looking at the Big Dipper as he had seen it as a child.

They thought he was praying to a god.

For a long time he lay awake and waited for a beast of prey to roar in the night.

But everything was very quiet.