

When the tramp had finished the pastries, his mien took on a less fatigued and waxy look. He looked me in the eye, nodding appreciatively. His mouth cracked open into a convivial, gap-toothed smile and I witnessed a little life enter the one open eye.

Then he opened the other eye wide as if forcing it to stay open.

'What's...your...name?' he asked, detaching every word, so bad was the shortness of his breath.

'I'm Kvist'.

He smiled and nodded, as if he had somehow heard the name before and knew a thing or two about me that I didn't know myself.

'Have we met before? You look as if you know me.'

'Oh, I know quite a bit about most people', he wheezed, a quizzical smile flickering at the edges of his lips.

'How is that possible?' I asked, a little intrigued. 'I don't come from here. You can't have seen me before. I haven't been to this place since I was a child.'

'Well, I haven't exactly seen you before, but I know who you are.'

'I see. You've read one of my articles?'

'I know you're a writer.'

'How do you know that?'

'I have my ways', he coughed non-committally.

'No, really, I'd like to know. I'm not exactly what you'd call famous, even in my own city'.

He smiled slowly, looking into my eyes.

'I can see you're a striver. You look like a writer. You have that inquisitive look. I was a writer once myself. I know what it's like to slave over a manuscript for months, have it cross-read in an hour and thrown in the bin... I was once very much like you, young and fervent and dejected when the writing didn't work. That's how I know you're a writer. I can see it in the flecks of your raddled irises. It's written all over your fagged-out eyelids...'

He coughed, spat again and resumed talking.

'I've spent most of my life observing people. You could say it's a calling. I've nothing else to do anyway. I watch people pass and never miss a detail. I sometimes spend entire days observing feet or hands. I used to go about doing this in a scientific manner in the old days. Before the Blue, that is... You might say I've graduated with first honours in the art of observation.'

He bark-coughed briefly four or five times, took an empty-looking bronchodilator out of his pocket, inhaled it once as best he could, and pursued his monologue, clearing his throat at regular intervals.

'I used to study my subjects thematically... I've devoted entire chapters of my life to ears and rears, to eyes and thighs, to hands and mammary glands. I know all the tell-tale details of every look, every trait of our anatomy. I can tell you that the way you looked at the left-hand pannier on your bicycle before you entered the bakery the first time reveals that what's inside is important to you. You wouldn't like to get it stolen by a tramp... My guess is that your notebooks and your reams of paper are in there and that the covers of the books are red.'

The accuracy of the guess left me stunned, although on reflection, it did seem within the possible bounds of human intuition to have guessed that accurately.

What was much more surprising to me then was the contrast between my expectations of this wretched, broken-down pariah and the workings of his alert and knowledgeable mind.

The vagabond's face was so wrinkled and weathered it looked like a sheet of crumpled paper, the kind of sheet you straighten out to read again just to make sure that what you've thrown into the bin isn't of interest after all. It was a completely wilted, wizened face.

'I wrote a novel once', he ventured, pursuing his thoughts in front of me, looking up towards the sky, as if I was no longer really present. 'It was both my unmaking and my making. It established me as a writer at the time, though. I had at last proven to myself that I could stand the stint and the massive doses of solitude. But when I tried to write a second one, I seemed to have exhausted my possibilities. It felt like tedious, needless repetition.'

He was seized by a fit of coughing. Pulling out the empty bronchodilator again, he shook it as vigorously as he was able as if there might be something to be salvaged from the bottom of it. He raised the dilator feebly to his lips and pressed the button. It made absolutely no sound, the way those things do when they're empty. He pressed the button again, for good measure, producing exactly the same sound.

Just looking at him trying to inhale the empty cylinder made me want to reach for my own. I refrained for the while, knowing it was better to let my lungs fend for themselves. I had read an article in which it stated unequivocally that prolonged use of corticosteroids could lead to cancer of the airways. I felt a bit guilty about not offering him a puff, but I hardly knew the guy.

'There seemed to be nothing left to say,' he pursued in a wheeze. 'It felt as if I'd have to wait another decade before having anything different to say. I suppose I have enough material for another novel now since the Blue stuff has arrived, but things have changed. I no longer have the will to write. Besides, my circumstances wouldn't really allow me to embark on such an enterprise. I wouldn't even be able to afford the paper. And you need a little comfort to write a long thing like a novel.'

'What was it called?' I queried, curious to see if I had heard of it.

'What?'

'Your novel.'

'Oh, yeah. I did like the title. It had so many associations – perhaps now more than ever. My working title was different, but the one I settled for in the end was definitely the right one. It was published as *The Erasers*, a novel by Hermann Gobb-Rillen. I used to look at the cover and smile with the quiet satisfaction of achievement. It even gained some critical acclaim. I was heralded by a few admirers, mostly in the French and German press. They said I was a *promising and innovating author*. I used to live in Berlin back then. This was in the early twenties. But even my enthusiasts lost interest once it became clear I couldn't sustain my efforts through a whole career.'

'Yes', I offered, as he paused, stumbling against some unseen obstacle in his mind, 'I recall talking about that novel in my student days. It caused something of a stir at the time. I didn't think that I would one day have the honour of meeting its author....'

I was still incredulous that this was in truth the author of *The Erasers*, but I pursued my praise, since praise was due, at least to the real writer of the book.

'I can remember my girlfriend at the time was really taken with it. She even gave it to me as a parting present. This must have been at least twenty years ago... I think I read the first few chapters but I'm afraid to say I never got to the end of it. Strange to say, I can't recall why or where my copy is.... I used to read dozens of books simultaneously back then. Very bad for long-term memorizing. Wait a minute...I think I remember.... That's right. I had it stolen in the train that took me back home from her apartment. It was taken from me on the seat, while I was sleeping. They stole my watch as well. I thought that was rather strange at the time. I can imagine stealing a watch but who would be interested in stealing a paperback novel? Anyway, I thought it was rather fitting that the novel disappeared, seeing as it's all about erasure, right? I'm sorry to say I never got round to buying a new copy. I know I meant to at the time but what with coursework and the piles of books and manuscripts we had to study for assessments. I used to study palaeography...I just never got around to buying it. But ah...I still remember those first chapters quite vividly. Not the actual content exactly. I just remember liking it, though the writing was quite hard to follow. It was quite experimental, if I'm not mistaken.'

The tramp seemed pleased that I knew the novel, but it was a kind of distant pleasure, as if he was fondly summoning a vaguely remembered childhood memory. As if he wasn't really sure the memory was his.

'You will find me rather zany,' he said, cloughing a little to himself, 'but I still carry a bag of erasers in my inside pocket. Like the protagonist in my novel.'

His asymmetrical cyclopean face creased a little as he produced a worn out plastic bag from within the filthy layers of his greatcoat. He proceeded to open the bag out very carefully, folding back the sides of it for easy access.

He tendered the open bag to me.

'Please, I'd like you to have one. I used to give them to my would-be writer fans after my reading venues. Go right ahead and take one...I've plenty to spare. *Bitte, bitte*...I use them as calling cards these days. Not that anyone bothers to talk to me here.... Look, they have my old address written there. Not much use now, seeing as I'm homeless and all, but at least you'll have my name.'

He hawked up another wad of phlegm and spat the stringy, clotted substance at the ground.

Peering into the bag, I saw a dozen variously coloured erasers.

Not knowing which to choose, I stuck my hand in the proffered bag and rummaged about, threading my fingers through the round rubbery shapes.

Closing my eyes, I picked what turned out to be a fluorescent orange eraser. I held it up to the cold winter sun between my slightly frozen fingers.

The vagabond smiled. The little disk of rubber was the exact same colour as his shoes. A bright, vibrant orange.

Hermann Gobb-Rillen appeared in calligraphy on the narrow side of the eraser. The broader flat surface was empty. A long, detailed address was printed all around the thin circumference of the eraser to form a circle with the name.

'Thanks... It's a lovely keepsake. I'll keep it in my pocket.'

I was beginning to feel rather sorry for this poor erstwhile man who claimed he had thrown himself from his pedestal of his own accord.

'Oh, but you're not to keep it in your pocket. It has to be used until the print is gone. It's part of the artwork, an extension of my novel. Ephemeral art. It's what they used to call an ink eraser. I used to love these as a child, I think. Pretty potent rubber. And it never rips the page.'

'I'll bear that in mind. Anyway, it's an honour to have one of your erasers. Would you mind me asking a question?'

'Go right ahead. I love questions. People don't often ask me questions. Especially not in these parts.'

'Well, I hope it's not indiscrete, but I've been wondering since we met. I can hardly take my eyes off your shoes. They're so bright and sort of...unusual. I was wondering where you'd got them.'

'Oh, those...I think I nicked them a few months ago. At one of those trade fairs. There was a cobbler if I recall, from a Scottish city up north. His name escapes me now. He's actually quite well known. The shoes he makes are the most surprising footwear I've seen. Every pair is different, every shoe special in its own way. Those colours were crying out to be stolen. I'm a chromophile, as you'll have guessed, though I'm fond of all colours, not just blue.... Just a second...I need to cough.... Oh God, emphysema is the worst of it...the memory loss doesn't bother me half as much.... I couldn't really afford the shoes back then, or now. I needed the money for food. I'm the patron god of thieves, by the way. I should warn you. It's always been in my nature. I enjoy the thrill, the sense of entitlement thieving offers. It's like picking berries off a bush.'

'Tell me about Brexishire', I wheezed softly after a moment of silence, my chest tightening up, 'this place is unbelievable. The people here...The Blue craze seems to have had some pretty strong repercussions....'

'You can say that again. People in this city have really had a field day with the Blue stuff. Most of them have gone loopy, if you ask me.... They walk around like zombies all day, hardly talking, even to each other. Did you notice that? I mean, they were never very welcoming, even to so-called authorized nationals like me, but now...I feel like a lotus-eater in limbo. Whole days go by and I hardly feel like speaking. And that's saying a lot. I'm sure you've noticed what a chatterbox I am...I should say used to be...I spend most of my time staring into space. Not a thought in my head. It's like being asleep without actually sleeping. Really uncanny, when you think about it. You feel kind of catatonic. Just a sec...I need to...get this...out...Fuck! That hurts.... I sometimes wonder why people even bother walking. I'm sure that if somebody danced out of the town playing a blue pipe, everybody here would follow him out.... Like a horde of rats. It's not just the colour of the ground or even of the buildings or the trees. For some strange reason I can't really fathom, the Blue was taken really seriously here from day one. The Lord Mayor even had the streets blocked off.... Vehicles of any kind were strictly forbidden and anyone who set a foot off the footpaths was subject to a heavy fine at the start. People were ordered to leave all motored vehicles outside the city. We were to keep the Blue entirely intact, in pristine condition, the way it originally fell...this was back before it hardened. Of course, most of us thought that this

was just another of the Lord Mayor's passing whims, but there were policemen posted out on every street and no one dared to contravene the decree.... Just a sec-'

He coughed like one possessed for close to a minute, then recovered his wheeze-peppered narrative. His asthma seemed a good deal worse than the average respiratory disease.

'People grumbled quite a bit about it at the start, but they did their civic duty.... The government was too busy clearing fields and roads in those first weeks to bother responding to any civil rights complaints. Most people in the city never tried to leave as much as a footprint on the roads.... That's the mentality here. Always has been since the city was built, back in the early Brexit years, or so I'm told. A very law-abiding community. You know this city was built by a committee of Brexiteer hard-liners. Anyway...as I said, the Mayor had all the cars and other vehicles removed from the city. Even bikes, rollerblades, hovercraft. Kugelpanzers were *streng, polizeilich verboten*. I say that with a touch of irony or course, being German. People were told they could either store them at home in their garages or dump them outside the centre, in specific city-owned fields. Of course, as usual everyone did as they were told.... There were no nasty strikes or riots and the public peace was maintained.'

'Does that mean I'm breaking the law bringing my bicycle into the city?'

I was a little alarmed at the prospect of a hefty fine draining my resources.

'Oh no, you needn't worry about that any more. When it rained and the Blue stiffened, there was no need for the ban anymore... The reason why there still aren't any vehicles in the centre is that none of them can be retrieved. They're all more or less trapped in the Blue, like flies in the proverbial ointment. You know when it hardened, it also contracted. You know that, right? It contracted ever so slightly...I don't think people are too bothered anyway, because some of the vehicles that could have been removed have just been left to rust. People here simply don't give a damn about anything... Stealing has never been easier, which is just as well because people aren't as generous since the Blue. Or rather, I think that they just don't seem to think about anyone else...the people here brush past you as if you weren't there and when sometimes they actually realize you're sitting on the ground with a cap beside you, they stop and stare as if they can't imagine why my cap is on the ground or why I leave a coin or two inside it...they walk off looking puzzled or just dazed. *Wirklich unheimlich*.... I should take another shot.'

He took two shots of the noiseless, empty bronchodilator.

'I've seen people stop in the middle of the street as if glued to the spot, staring at the ground or the sky. Totally vacant... You haven't the foggiest idea what they're thinking, if they're thinking at all...but it's not the only uncanny thing you'll see around here, I can tell you. You won't have to stay long to notice the most bizarre behaviour you've ever seen, even if you've spent time in a psychiatric ward like I have.'

'It's funny you mention those oblivious stares because I must say you weren't exactly communicative yourself to begin with. I never thought that you'd be so articulate and talkative.'

'Is that a fact?' Hermann, looked down at his shoes with a troubled look on his face. 'How long was I like that?'

'Quite a while if you want to know the truth. In fact I was wondering if you could talk at all. You didn't even seem to notice my presence.'

'Are you serious? *Scheisse*.... That's fucking frightening... I do get the impression that I doze off sometimes, but I'd no idea that it lasted for more than a few seconds.'

'Well you might slip in and out of it, but it certainly took you several minutes to register that I was even addressing you.'

'How very *unheimlich*, and yet I noticed your arrival and you entering the bakery. I thought that the colour of my shoes prevented me from slipping out of consciousness for too long.... You see, every time I feel the giddiness steal up on me, I look at the orange of my shoes and it helps to snap me out of it. I'll have to get myself some orange clothes now too if I'm to survive in this place a little longer, although it'll be pretty difficult to get my hands on any clothes that aren't blue. You can't have missed how everyone wears only blue.... The clothes shops have all dyed their stocks blue or had blue clothes shipped in. It's the only thing that sells, even without the mayoral decree.... The vogue for blue here isn't ready to abate. People are crazy about it. Although crazy probably isn't the right word. More like entranced. It's all they ever talk about. I tell you, the world is

coming to an end.... This is the Second Coming, and it's Blue. It gives me the blue devils anyway. The Earth's like a blue autumn leaf.'

Hermann's second eye had closed but it suddenly opened wide, stared at me hard, and reverted to contemplative shut-eye. I wondered if the squint was a reaction to the glare of the sun on the surface of the Blue. I sometimes had headaches myself because of the sheen.

I noticed that the dusk was falling. My backside was getting numb on the footpath. I was about to get up when a swarm of birds shot through the sky above our heads. Flock was not the right word for what I saw. I have never seen such a vast upsurge of birds in my life. The sky was literally congested with cartwheeling wings, as if all the birds in the country had suddenly upped and headed elsewhere, as if in search of another planet. They tossed and scudded everywhere, swooping down into the streets, stirring the air all around us for minutes and flooding the sky in every direction.

In rapt attendance, hardly sleepy any more, we watched the black forms spin up into the sky like cinders flying up out of smoke, like fall-up from the crematoria of the previous century.

Hermann had a massive bronchospasm and remained doubled up for over a minute with the pain. He couldn't see me so I took a quick shot of my own inhaler. My chest was really starting to flare up. I felt guilty about not sharing again but I didn't want to catch whatever it was he had, despite the fact that it probably wasn't contagious. I couldn't help feeling a little disgusted. The thought of that tramp's lips on my mouthpiece made me queasy.

Looking up at the arrow shower of birds, I realized I had seen and experienced such flying black debris before. As a child, I remember the horrible experience of swallowing the stuff. I'd been lying on my bed, looking through the open window at the sky. Before I knew it, the window let in a rush of thick black particles, like thousands of tiny birds swarming into my lungs. Something I was never able to identify with any certainty projected itself into my mouth and down my lungs, sending me gagging to the bathroom.

As we looked up towards the sky, it dawned on me with a shock of recognition that what had entered me that day had not been chimney soot, but a multitude of diminutive black birds, tiny versions of the ones that now wheeled through the sky. I was only a child at the time and nobody believed me but I knew now with absolute certainty that what I thought I had glimpsed for an instant as I coughed up into the water running down the sink had indeed been mangled beaks and wings.