

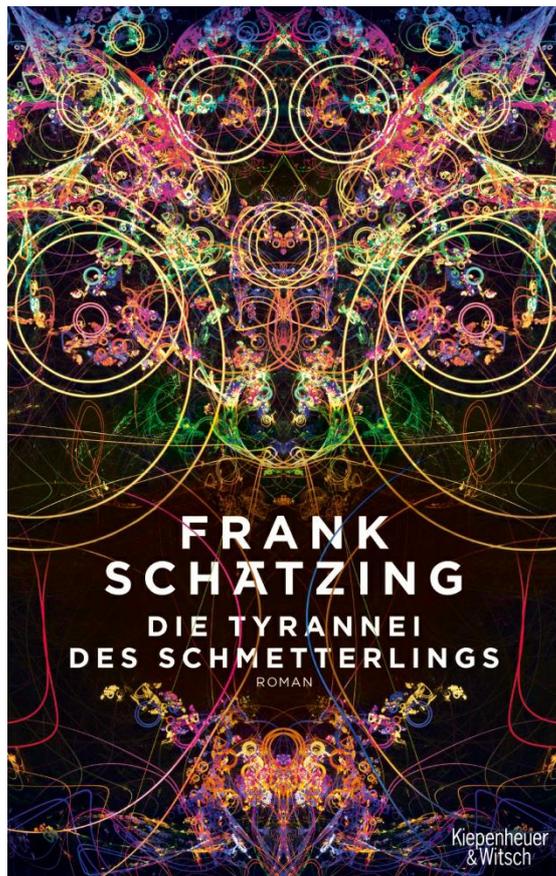
Sample translation (pp. 7-53)

THE TYRANNY OF THE BUTTERFLY

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The first ultraintelligent machine
is the last invention
man will ever make.

(According to Irving John Good)

Part I

ENEMIES

Africa.

The drenched season.

From April to October, the air turns to liquid. The rain fronts hang over the mountains like blue-black planets and push towards the savanna, enlivened by mysterious flashes. Wind spirits sweep across a post-atomic yellow sky, harbingers of the approaching flood. The water planets advance languidly, swallowing horizons and vistas, soaking the day up inside them until, eventually, they have merged into a single, all-enveloping blackness.

A rumble traverses the cloud.

It moves from east to west, as though titanic beings from beyond this world are passing commands along to one another, perhaps even Nhialic himself, now in the form of Dengs. Giving previously arranged signs to commence with the cleansing of the world, but the first downpour has little impact. The cracked, baked earth doesn't seem capable of swallowing the raindrops. Fat and trembling, they balance in the dust momentarily before surrendering their form, leaving behind swiftly paling flecks on the loamy craquelure. A somewhat pitiful spectacle against the awe-inspiring backdrop of impending threat. Then the brief shower ends as suddenly as it began.

Every sound dies away.

Yielding to the silence that precedes complete obliteration.

An ocean comes pouring down.

Within minutes, unpaved streets turn into ravines, as though the land has burst open and turned inside out. Vast quantities of viscous, red sludge ooze out, foamy from the continuously pelting rain. Lakes push their way through meadows and grazing fields, becoming overflowing, bubbling surfaces where tightly-packed flowers shoot up, spritzing water from their blossoms. What was once part of a fixed landscape becomes an island. Mascardit, the Great Black, is raging in the elements, the deity who brings death and fertility, never one without the other. Like a crazed organism, the flood shoots and winds its way through copses and savannas, tearing along with it anything that is dried and withered. Surrendered to ruin, the old world is washed away, every familiar structure broken down, every certainty erased, until the moment of spontaneous reordering.

Sometimes it rains incessantly for days on end.

Then, all of a sudden, the dripping-wet cloud brew gapes apart, as it does now, and a flawless blue reconquers the sky. A blue of such depth and intensity that the men in the mud involuntarily duck and clutch onto their Heckler & Koch rifles, as though the blue could suck them in and spit them out in another dimension.

In the realm of Nhialic.

Nhialic, carried away from mankind after the ancient goddess Abuk divided the Heavens from the Earth and enabled lower deities to guide the fate of the Dinka – one could also say that she undermined the High God's power, by stealing from him in order to give the people more than he had intended them to have. Nhialic retreated, shamed and deeply offended, but he still intervenes as the rain god Deng, to the blessing and ruin of all.

One could almost believe the myths.

Major Joshua Agok is an Anglican and believes in Jesus, which, according to Western European and American understanding, means acute unemployment for pagan deities, but the Dinka are unfamiliar with the either-or nature of Christian monotheism. The missionaries who fell victim to epidemics along the White Nile over a hundred and fifty years ago, then the Catholic Verona Fathers and British Anglicans, and finally the delegates of the Presbyterian Church of America – all of them failed to understand that a person can believe in Jesus and, at the same time, easily incorporate him into the family portrait of inferior deities and venerated ancestors. The ancients had always been there. They would eye the new accession with gazes ranging from the distrustful to the friendly, they would allow his presence, but why should they leave on his account?

Does a cow disappear when you add another to your herd?

Agok tears his gaze away from the blue dome.

We lose ourselves in myths, he thinks.

And why? Because we are no longer able to believe even ourselves. But we need to believe in something. There are a lot of good things in the Bible, and hardly anyone would contest that nature is inhabited by spirits, that the souls of the dead act within her, that in fact everything ever created is the material expression of a world of spirits which move through these objects into our dimension. Only, whatever or whoever it was that gave us reason, they can't have not wanted us to use it to bring an end, once and for all, to this unholy civil war. Otherwise it would all have been in vain. All our suffering and the suffering we inflicted on others in order to implement our concepts of freedom.

And it is these very concepts which are the problem now.

Agok looks behind him.

Creatures made of clay, gleaming eyes set in mud faces. As though the earth itself had risen up. He can't help but think of the legend of Golem as he looks out over his small troop. One hundred and twenty Golems, armed to the teeth. Vanishingly few against Olony's militia, who control the region, but the best around. If you thrust weapons into the hands of a people, enabling them to fight for their independence, they don't become a combat-effective army just because you draw a circle around them and declare the whole thing a state. But these boys are really good. Agok selected them himself, every single one of them. Their expressions taut with concentration, they squat down in the undergrowth, shaded by tamarind and acacia trees. For as long as the sun gives her blazing intermezzo, the leaf canopy offers protection, but it was unable to keep off the rain. During the cloudburst, it makes little difference where you seek shelter. The dampness comes from all sides, and as a result they are soaked up to their knees, the red sludge making them look like a horde of lurking earth spirits.

A short pause to catch their breath, thinks Agok.

Not planned, not unwelcome.

Then they will leave the wood and advance towards Olony's positions.

This is the moment they have been feverishly awaiting for the past two days, ever since the helicopter set them down in the middle of no man's land.

They made their way on foot through the thin wood, dense with low-growing shrubs, to where they are now. Off the dirt roads, which are impassable around this time of year in any case. This far up, in the frontier region to the north, the rain has almost completely isolated the inhabitants. During the coming months, the villages and farmsteads will be unreachable by land. In the entire state territory there are only around 50 kilometres of paved roads, which predominantly serve to give the distant capital a bit of urban flair. When they celebrated the Independence there six years ago, the noisy, vibrantly-colored market town surrounded by huts, with a few prestigious buildings haphazardly thrown in, suddenly became a hotspot. A state was being born, and everyone wanted to play midwife. In the Sahara Resort Hotel, the only impressive address around, diplomats, oil magnates, arms dealers, blue helmets, NGOs and preachers all jostled together, their luggage stuffed with plans for hospitals, universities, airports, oil pipelines and mission stations. As if by magic, the puny stock of motor vehicles evolved overnight into an exemplary exhibition of Japanese 4x4 with satellite antennas. Everything seemed possible. The oil alone would pour billions of dollars into the state coffers, and hundreds of millions of development capital lay at the ready in European relief funds. After decades of bloody conflict, the separation from the dictatorship in the Muslim North, which had exploited the black African South for so long without so much as lifting a finger for its inhabitants, had finally been achieved. The dictator hastened to sign the peace treaty, and promised the very best of relationships with the new neighbouring country. He had eaten so much humble pie he had crumbs around his mouth; there was, after all, an international arrest warrant for crimes against humanity issued against him, so it couldn't hurt to play the reconciler for a change.

What an opportunity we had!, thinks Agok.

And what a mess we made of it.

He peers around the trunk of the acacia tree giving him cover. The savanna stretches out in front of them. A sparsely-covered repeat pattern of bushes and the occasional tree, interspersed with thatched circular huts that serve as dwellings for the nomadic herdsmen during the rainy season. Just a month ago, this region looked like the surface of Mars, now, brilliant green pastures emerge from the saturated ground, treetops burst into leaf as though in time lapse, blossoms explode in their multi-colored splendour, a parody of the Creation. The scent of fresh rain draws in. New cloud behemoths have towered up over the mountains and are driving flocks of birds ahead of them.

Agok relishes this moment; the air has a purity to it which is absent during the dry season. It pushes its way into the lungs so forcefully that it almost hurts. He watches as the first clouds of mist rise up from the plain and the woodland around them begins to steam. The midday sun beats down from its zenith, kindling a frenzied dance of molecules, wresting the water from the

ground almost as soon as the sky has pumped it in. The heat from the evaporation is immense. Soon the savanna will look like a webbed cocoon, and then Agok and his men will be phantoms.

The haze and the rain will veil them. Their only chance out on the open plain.

This is what separates them from the actual mission. Five kilometres lie between them and the town occupied by Olony's fighters, an agglomeration of barracks and containers at the edge of a huge oil production plant which is fused to the plain as though transplanted from another world. The river they will have to cross on their way may have swollen to multiple times its width; rampant greenery at the edge of the woodland obstructs the view onto the oilfield beyond. All Agok can see are some loosely scattered herds of cattle and a few wild animals, heading towards groups of trees in expectation of the next downpour: a few antelopes, and a pair of elephants with their young, who have made themselves comfortable in the shade of a baobab tree and are scratching their tusks on the bark.

From the few satellite photos the Americans have provided them with, they know roughly how the warlord has distributed his people. Just enough information to be able to stay out of their way. To fight them openly would be tantamount to suicide, they might as well tie each other to the trees right here; they would be sure to die a more merciful death. Olony is considered a devil even by the most hardened soldier; his henchmen attack villages, rape, torture and mutilate women, throw their babies into burning houses and drag the older children off to military training camps. There, they teach them to regard everything and everyone with contempt, force them to eat human flesh, to rape, to hack off limbs. Any who don't perish are rewarded with a gun and sent off into battle. Since the outbreak of the civil war, thousands of children have disappeared and resurfaced again as traumatised killers – on both sides.

We have to put an end to this, thinks Agok.

How could we have become so brutal?

From jungle drums to the peal of bells, a chorus of horns, music everywhere. People dancing in the streets, chanting the name of the first freely elected president; a charismatic man, cunning, educated and well versed in the ways of the world. He wears his Stetson - a gift given to him by George W. Bush himself - like a second scalp. The streetlamps are adorned with the new national flag, house façades disappear beneath placards issued by the governing party, which until recently was a rebel army. Plastic flowers line the route to the airport, where guests arrive on an hourly basis, representatives from China, the EU, the Americas, the African Union, the Arab League. Thirty heads of state have announced their visits, Ban Ki Moon climbs out of his vehicle and laughs into the cameras. A pole protrudes from the centre of the roundabout traffic in the town centre, painted black and crowned with neon letters: "We were suppressed together, now we are free together. Happy Independence to all!"

Agok will never forget that day.

Happy independence, he thinks to himself bitterly. An emerging country! It sounded so wonderful and grand. But instead of a phoenix rising from the ashes, the reality was more reminiscent of an angry dog being released from its chains. In Africa, a new beginning is turned into an opportunity to settle old

debts. Open the door to the future for us, and we'll manage to end up in the darkest moment of history. Minds seethe with the fall from grace. It's all about injured pride and stolen cattle, about pastures, footpaths, worn-out myths. Nhialic had two sons, Dinka and Nuer. He promised both of them a present. Dinka was to receive an old cow, Nuer a calf. The following night, Dinka went to the stable and, imitating Nuer's voice, demanded the calf, which was promptly given to him. When Nhialic saw that he had been taken in by his scheming offspring, he was seized by a godly furor. Nuer, he decreed, must be allowed to steal cattle from Dinka for all eternity.

And because of this shit we're at one another's throats!

The age-old question of who started it.

No-one, and that's the crux of the matter. In our vague memories we were only ever victims.

Deflating Olony's pride won't bring an end to the civil war. He's just one butcher amongst many, but a successful offensive would at least convey the message: We may not be able to win – but neither can you.

So make peace!

Agok's people are saboteurs, trained by U.S. military strategists who have shown them how to infiltrate the system and bring it crashing down from the inside. Armed with explosives, poison for wells, false information. Guns to be used only when absolutely unavoidable, so they do everything they can to steer clear of direct confrontation. They know, of course, that despite everything it will eventually come to that, and that their prospects of surviving the mission are anything but rosy.

But there is a chance.

A chance of wreaking considerable havoc.

Agok watches patiently as the clouds move closer. His men are gathered closely around him now, a red-tinted organism, synchronously breathing, trembling and waiting. With every movement, little crusts break away from their combat uniforms where the sun has dried the mud. It looks as though they are sitting in sludge, but in fact they are swimming on oil. The entire South is swimming on oil. Founded on bronze, diamonds, gold and silver. It's almost a miracle that the government of the young state lasted even a year before the vice president – a Nuer – organised a coup. Since then, half the army has been fighting on the side of the president – a Dinka – and the other half for the opposition. Loyalty to the alliance is subject to the kind of fluctuations which make the local weather report seem like the unshakeable commandment of God. Take Olony, for example: until recently he was the General of the armed forces, devoted to the government, but devotion is renegotiated on an hourly basis. Now he is fighting for the disloyal vice.

Or perhaps only for himself.

We all came here, thinks Agok, without any idea of what sets us apart from our tormentors.

But now we know.

Nothing.

We paid the death toll for independence, only to establish that there are no other values that unite us. And how could there be, when the alliances were formed between tribes that, throughout history, have been locked in ongoing

feuds. This continent breeds rebellion as inevitably as the sunlight produces shade, as though we can only develop self-esteem in eternal opposition, and nothing ever becomes tangibly better. Except perhaps for those who supply us with weapons. Who slip us money. Who support power changeovers in exchange for prospecting rights and drilling licenses. Rebellion and corruption form a circle. Generations ago, we were enslaved, today we enslave ourselves and inflict far worse things on each other than foreign suppressors ever subjected us to. Not even the most wrathful of rains can wash from the soil the streams of blood spilled between the Dinka and Nuer alone.

But perhaps we might win a small battle today, in order to end a big one.
He gives his men the signal.

Ducked down, weapons at the ready, they step out of the shelter of the wood and onto the plain.

Above them, the sun drifts along the edge of the rumbling rain front, inside which pale flashes can be seen. Her rays eat into the threatening blackness as though possessing the power to erode it. In a final demonstration of her power, she pulls the curtain of haze even higher and closes it above the soldiers' heads. Her light plays manically in the clouds of vapour, shimmering and gleaming, then, with banal indifference, the immense cloud swallows the sun and drains the world of all its color.

Suddenly, the air cools.

The haze thickens. The savanna transforms into a stage of silhouettes, a multi-layered diorama, one behind the other. Graduations of grey create theatrical depth. The antelopes, which are gathering beneath the trees on the left of Agok's field of vision, white-eared kobs with characteristic coloring and satyr horns, have become antelope sketches, a mere outline, featureless. It's hard to estimate distances when everything is shrouded with mist, but Agok knows the area. He grew up not far from here; this is one of the reasons why he is leading the mission. The landscape markings are familiar to him, especially the colossal baobabs, the monkey bread trees. With their sweeping trunks and strangely twisted branches, they could be mistaken for giant octopuses breaking out of the ground, from whose rigid arms smaller and ever smaller arms sprout forth. Just recently, many of them have begun to bear leaves, which makes them look a little more like trees and less like strange creatures, but the bizarre impression remains.

Legend says that the devil himself planted the baobabs, with the roots growing upwards.

Why? Because that's the kind of thing the devil does.

Agok's lips contort into a grimace. In truth, the only devilish thing about the baobab is the peculiar tendency its blossoms have of emitting a strong stench of decay. The fruit bats love it, and advance in swarms at night for pollination.

He checks the equipment on his belt: knife, water bottle, ammunition. The soldiers spread out, just as they agreed in advance. Each man makes use of the nearest available cover. Darts forwards a little, pauses in the long grass, behind bushes, by the foot of an acacia tree. Runs on, ducked down at all times. Despite the weight they carry with them, explosives and detonators, grenades, supplies, they move with soundless elegance. The apocalyptic cloud above them grows

and swells, writhing convulsively, then drops downwards, twitching with electrical activity.

The first raindrops splash onto the plain.

At once, visibility decreases rapidly. In the distance, Agok can just make out the blurred silhouettes of the elephant family before the haze dissolves them. The men are swiftly drawing near. Just a few hundred metres until the terrain lifts gently before immediately dropping down again to the river. The hilltop is matted with dense, high-growing vegetation. Agok has no doubt that Olony's troops are lying in the bushes on the opposite riverbank, but despite their enormous manpower, they can't be everywhere at the same time. There will be unguarded crossing points. Paths for phantoms to cheat their way through.

To then attack the militiamen from behind –

No, he calls himself to order. Even if the thought is appealing, we'll keep to the plan and avoid open battle.

For as long as possible.

The rain increases in intensity, crosshatching the men to the right and left of Agok. Washing the landscape, humans and animals into a monochrome watercolor, the shadows flowing into one another on the now-grey canvas of mist. At the foot of the hill, a mighty monkey bread tree stands out, its age potentially a thousand years or more. In a titanic gesture, its octopus branches embrace the clouds filling its storehouse. Baobabs are living reservoirs; they hoard an enormous volume of water for the dry season, when elephants come and break open the bark, striking large hollows in order to get to the damp fibres. Their destructive work transforms the baobabs into dens for other creatures to nest and live in; here too, just like in every living being, something parasitical nests down, burrowing its tunnels and pathways into foreign tissue and slowly devouring its host from the inside.

Agok knows this baobab too, of course, one whose trunk at the base is easily thirteen metres in circumference. He pauses as the ever-strengthening rain impairs the visibility further still and covers the ground with a slow-flowing, squelching layer of mud.

Then, something makes him stop in his tracks.

By now the torrent has taken on waterfall-like proportions. It roars in his ears and inside his brain, masking all other sounds. But in the midst of the din, Agok believes – no, he's certain of it – that he heard a weak scream.

Or rather the beginning of a scream, immediately stifled.

A human being had screamed.

And someone – something – had smothered it.

He blinks, wipes the water from his eyes. There are lions here, but attacks are rare. Leopards and hyenas roam around the savanna too, hunting zebras, buffalo and kobs, as well as trying to tear young calves away from the nomads' cattle herds. From time to time a tragedy occurs, but in general the wild animals keep to themselves. There is plenty to eat. Except for the humans, because the never-ending slaughter prevents the farmers from sowing the crops. In one of the most fertile regions in Africa, a famine of historic proportions is looming, but the animals are doing fine.

Where are his men?

There. At least the few he can still see. They appear, disappear. One is right in front of him, like a smudged ink stain before the sprawling mass of the monkey bread tree.

And then he disappears.

Just like that, accompanied by a dull squelch, like something soft and wet being pulled apart.

Agok wheels around, following the ancient impulse of checking for a potential threat from behind, to estimate the distance from possible pursuers, even though the man was directly in front of him when he was –

What? Attacked?

Adrenaline shoots into his muscles. His brain stem offers him schematic decision-making patterns in swift succession, the entire evolutionary catalogue. Agok is proud of his reflexes. In all familiar situations he would proceed in a target-oriented manner, except that in this case there's no easily recognizable target – if, indeed, there really is something requiring a reaction, or is he perhaps stressing over some hallucination?

What exactly was it that alarmed him?

Nothing at all. The scream? A macaw. The man in front of him? He fell down, that's all. Soon he'll jump up and hasten on, loyal to the strategy that Agok has drummed into his men.

He waits.

No one jumps up in front of him.

Instead, another scream pushes its way out of the mist, long, drawn-out and almost unbearable. An expression of extreme horror that ascends to a shrill howl before ending abruptly. At that same moment, the intensity of the rain lets up, and Agok can hear it –

In all its clarity.

The other roaring sound.

In a surge of fear which embarrasses to a distant part of himself, he begins to run, towards the monkey bread tree, but slips and falls down into the mud. The impact presses the air out of his lungs. He tries to get up, but the ground refuses to offer any kind of grip. For a few seconds, Agok has the terrible feeling that the bloated earth is creeping up him like a hungry, blind being, coiling its sticky extremities around his body and pulling him deeper into its rain-soaked insides. Then he manages to get back on his feet after all, and stumbles further towards the baobab tree and the edge of the woodland beyond. The ancestral spirits whisper in his brain, arguing over what is the safest place for him; the impenetrable vegetation on the hilltop, no, better the cavity in the monkey bread tree hollowed out by the elephants, even if there he would be sitting in a trap, but everything here seems to have become a trap, and the roaring –

It's not merely a roaring.

It's the sum of a many-thousand strong presence – a kind of fluttering, except not that of birds' wings, but other, strange oscillations, abnormal patterns – rising to a crescendo –

He runs faster.

Whatever *it* is is hurtling towards him with the force of a self-shifting border through the clouds of mist, which suddenly gape open, as though on the command of some supernatural director who wants Agok to catch a glimpse of what's inside, then abruptly close again, because his brain would be incapable of

processing the sight and he would probably go insane. The screams of his men are now coming from all around. Agok hears them dying, loses his footing again and, as he begins to fall, sees the haze whirl apart and expose the canopy of the monkey bread tree. The outer latticework is interspersed with cocoons, spun artworks of unbelievable intricacy whose architects have incorporated the leaves: weaver ants, which build their nests in bushes and treetops. Every cocoon conceals an entire swarm, gathered around its queen. Sometimes one swarm attacks another, eating up members of its own species, and it seems to Agok, as he stumbles, like the allegorisation of his own people tearing one another to pieces – with the difference that the ants' cold intelligence knows victors, and the continent on which he had the misfortune to be born knows only losers.

He catches himself from falling, gasps for breath. Staggeres towards the tree trunk, which shifts sideways with every step he takes, a mocking game of confusion. Decaying plant sludge releases opiates of suffocating sweetness; the putrid stench of the baobab sweeps down over him. He hallucinates, or perhaps he is losing his mind through sheer fear. He has been familiar with nature and her phenomena since his childhood, so what is it that's unhinging him? What else can it be but the intrusion of the unfamiliar, without any known reference, and therefore the absence of everything that has ever been reflected in his realm of experience, so that nothing remains but the sensation of complete and utter helplessness? Finally his fingers touch the jagged bark, and he turns in a circle, aiming his Heckler & Koch here, there and everywhere. The maelstroms of mist are full of darting shadows, unnameable things which change their position faster than the eye can follow. The air vibrates with gunshots and screaming. He fires blindly into the rain, empties his magazine, reaches for a new one, it slips out of his fingers, then he drops to his knees and searches desperately for it amongst the roots of the baobab. Tiny legs and feelers brush against his fingers. Scrabbling, darting around. Crawling and creeping inside damp abysses. There seems to be something big moving at the edge of his field of vision. When he looks, there is nothing and yet, in his imagination, everything.

Decay and life are one.

The ground breathes, loricated hosts follow erratic routes, the bodies of scavenger beetles glisten amongst leaves torn down by the storm. Motionless praying mantises lie in wait for their quarry. They will still be sitting in the same spot long after we've annihilated one another, thinks Agok. And no time at all will have passed. The rain washes away all time. My existence will have been less than the blink of an eye.

Something crashes against the tree trunk next to him.

He turns his head.

Stares at the thing, and it seems to be staring at him too. If those really are eyes. It can't be said for sure.

Never in his life has he seen anything like it.

The things are everywhere.

His knuckles protrude. He grips onto his rifle as though it were a railing, the only remaining barrier between him and the abyss tearing at him. His mind sends out signals with the insistence of an automatic radio beacon: Duck down. Protect your head with your arms. Try to get into the tree cavity.

But he's far too stunned to avert his gaze.

He lifts his arm to swipe the thing off the tree.

It jumps at him.

Agok screams as it bites into his nose and, with lightning speed, coils itself around his cheekbones. In panic, he tries to pull it from his face. It digs in above his left eye socket, rips out his eyeball and burrows its way into his skull. Half-crazed with pain and horror, Agok stumbles around, his legs twitching, then falls backwards into the rotten hollow of the baobab tree.

The last thing he registers is the surge of burning agony, as more of the things land on his body and begin to eat him alive.

Part II

SIERRA

A bloody angel hovers in the ravine.

Not quite five miles beyond Flume Creek, where the cliff walls plunge vertically and the North Yuba River eats deeply into the bare stone of its bed, before a succession of closely-spaced waterfalls transform it into the beast that lures whitewater canoeists from far and wide, the angel with torn wings made her appearance in front of a vacationing couple from Bakersfield, who promptly capsized their canoe out of sheer shock.

Apparitions of celestial beings are a danger to river traffic safety, Luther Opoku thinks to himself.

Just imagine if one of them were to walk on water, in this day and age.

There'd be a hefty fine, that's for sure.

From Luther's elevated viewpoint, the dead woman is less visible than from the river itself, a good forty metres below. This is because, upon falling into the tree, which is growing out of the rock face about halfway up, she broke through almost all the branches, before becoming entangled in the lower boughs in such a way that she appears to be soaring over the river with her arms and legs spread wide. The branches have thrashed her until she bled and ripped her blouse from her body, the tattered remains of which are now draped over the leaves above her shoulders and billowing in the wind, making it possible, with a little imagination, to see within it a weak flutter, an escape attempt which is doomed to failure.

Now, though, the rescue operation has been taken over by others. To rescue the body, that is. The spirit must have freed itself from its earthly shackles hours ago.

Luther pushes some of the smaller branches to the side and looks down. The edge of the slope is covered with a dense thicket that comes up to chest height, California laurel and a bit of Quercus. Where the barrier is sparser, he can see the men from the voluntary mountain rescue team, secured by ropes, as they free the corpse from the latticework of branches and moor it, their movements well-practiced, in order not to lose it to the river. He hears a chord of splintering boughs as the body briefly slumps, the groan of the pulley.

A bristlecone pine tree, thinks Luther. Needles as sharp as stilettos.

An impaled angel.

Ruth Underwood crouches down next to him. Her strawberry-blond mane, which from behind makes her look like the mother of all *California Girls* in some drug-induced hallucination had by Brian Wilson, takes on a faded appearance as she plunges into the shade the sunlight hasn't yet managed to chase away. The day looks set to be cloudless. In a short while, the shadows will have drained away and taken with them their secrets, ghost images of the tragedy, woven out of moonlight. Every now and then, when Luther is alone in the woods, he could swear that within the sigh of the wind and the many-voiced whisper of the leaves, in all the conspiratorial small sounds which together produce silence, he can hear echoes from a time when elemental forces piled up

the huge granite block now known as the Sierra Nevada, and in the kaleidoscopic play of light across the forest floor, the dead take on form.

"It's barely believable," says Ruth, holding up a freshly-snapped branch. "She must have run into the bushes at full pelt."

Luther's gaze lingers on the opposite slope. The fir trees give off the air of a secret society. They stand there, tightly packed, as far as the eye can see, crowned by the pastel-toned cliffs of the Sierra Buttes, jagged peaks of a colossal, distant summit.

"Who runs towards a precipice in total darkness?" he says, more to himself than Ruth.

"Someone who should have been told there was one there?"

The handle of Ruth's duty gun presses into her ribs as she leans forward to study the opening which has been torn into the bushes.

"There were two people here, that's for sure."

Her uniform is as green as the moss she's crouching down on. In a few weeks' time, once the inhabitants of Sierra County have elected Luther Opoku as their new sheriff, Ruth will take on his current position as undersheriff. The pleasing sound of "second-in-command" is dramatically negated by the fact that she and Luther hardly have anyone to command. The department doesn't have even ten workers, and that's including Kimmy, their managing clerk. She works half days and, strictly speaking, isn't a proper deputy, so that makes nine and a half officers responsible for three and a half thousand widely-dispersed living inhabitants, who find every conceivable reason to invoke, bend or break the law, and that's not taking into account the year-round hordes of tourists, people just travelling through and illegal immigrants growing marijuana in hidden-away creeks. They are a backwater police station showing all the signs of state neglect. The department of a county that could easily have invented the term *backwater*, equipped with prehistoric computers and patrol cars that wouldn't last a minute in *The Fast and the Furious*, and half of which were in urgent need of repair. Considering their limited capacities, it's an absolute luxury that the two of them are here in the same place at the same time. At a crime scene which might perhaps only be an accident scene, yet why would someone go rushing, in the dead of night, through a wilderness where every step should be carefully considered even by day? And how did the off-road vehicle which had crashed into a Douglas fir a little higher up fit into it? The Golden Chain Highway runs up above, a well-developed federal highway which begins on the border with Nevada and winds its way almost three hundred miles down to Oakhurst. It huddles close to the Yuba River for long stretches and only deviates from it on occasion, as though it were trying to give off the impression of independence when seen from the air. In these spots, unsurfaced paths spring up which run alongside the river, mostly ending by fishermen's huts and tool sheds or leading back onto the highway.

What had induced the driver to veer off at high speed into an unlit, steeply sloping woodland path, and one which, to top it all off, borders a canyon?

And where was the driver now?

Was it the woman down there in the branches of the pine tree?

Had she been drunk at the time?

Or high? Her head fogged by grass, which was legalised for medicinal purposes in California in the mid-90s, with the result that a vast number of

people suddenly experienced health problems and ran off to the doctor. All the way along the coast from Venice Beach to San Francisco, there are thousands of quacks diagnosing reputable-sounding malaises in exchange for payment of forty dollars, making out written prescriptions which enable the bearer to be obligingly supplied in the dispensaries. California is revelling in a *green rush*. It's as though there has never been any other form of medicine. So much legal cannabis is in circulation that you could be excused for wondering which other planet in the solar system it's being cultivated on, but in actual fact you don't have to look that far. Just to the backcountry. To the Central Valley, the national parks, the backwaters of the Sierra Nevada, where the legal trade is helped along on a grand scale by illegal cultivation. They are fighting a running battle with this here too: nine and a half guardians of the law against the long arm of the organised drug trade. The guys from the DEA and the FBI don't exactly rush to their aid for every case of illegal cultivation that comes up, not unless there are undoubtedly armed gangs involved. The problem with the absence of doubt, though, is that it often only becomes apparent once you have a bullet hole in your head.

Luther squats down next to Ruth, who is photographing the undergrowth and forest floor from ever-changing perspectives. She hasn't put down her Handycam since they arrived.

"Any signs of a struggle?" he asks.

"Hard to say." She wipes her forearm across her nose. "The undergrowth would be more churned up if there had been. These tracks here must be from our fallen angel."

Beneath the broken twigs, furrows have been torn into the ground. The tracks of someone who ran so quickly into the thicket that they broke through it.

"And it looks like we've got a *him* too."

There is a coarse pattern imprinted in one of the furrows. Outdoor-tread; a man's shoe size. The damp ground has retained every detail in sharp contour. An excellent specimen of a footprint, the kind that makes forensics pop the champagne corks.

"It looks like he just stood there," says Luther.

"And gawked down, yes."

"His footprint is over hers. She was at the edge of the slope before him."

"Not necessarily. He could have been waiting for her."

"And then?"

"Then he gave her some flying lessons." She photographs the boot tread pattern. "I mean, he could have trudged through her prints, right?"

Luther chews on his cheek.

"That doesn't make sense, Ruth. If you've worked up enough momentum, you could divide the hedge like it's the Red Sea, but pushing someone through it? That would have ended in a struggle. And as you said yourself -"

"No struggle."

"Besides, the bushes aren't that high."

"Height is in the eye of the beholder." She stands up and brushes the dirt from her latex gloves. "You're one ninety, Luther."

"Those aren't the footprints of a short man."

"What are you getting at?"

"Well, come on. If I were to try and give you a helping hand down there, what would I do?"

"I don't know, but it would certainly be the *last* thing you did."

I'd throw you over the top of it, he thinks.

Ruth checks the Handycam battery. Back in the light, the sun makes the tips of her hair glow. The deputy shirt stretches across her bony shoulders; in the V of the open neck, her breastbone and the beginnings of her ribs stand out beneath a myriad of freckles. Everything about her seems oddly raw and prototypical, as though she had been the template for a more popular production model which was now flitting through commercials and early evening soaps while she was denied that final polish. She had joined Luther's team five years ago, or more precisely, the current sheriff Carl Mara's team, at Luther's instigation. She was forty-one back then, and already had a hardness to her features, the kind often found in people who'd had something decisive withheld from them for so long that, eventually, they began to withhold it from themselves.

Luther thinks for a moment. "Would he have been able to see her in the tree?"

"From up here?" She shakes her head. "No, I mean, we can barely see her. You have to go down to the river for the box seats. And at night? No chance."

"What about if he shone a light into the branches?"

"Yes, except that the searchlight they use to call Batman is in Hollywood."

He has to admit that she's right. The luminous power of any normal hand-held torch wouldn't have been enough to penetrate the deeper layers of the pine tree and make out the woman within it. Even now, the white of her blouse was only flashing sporadically through the branches.

"So he could only guess as to where she was."

"He clearly didn't consider it advisable to fetch help, in any case."

"No. He wanted something else."

Ruth's pupils widen in expectation. "What?"

Rumbling and crunching sounds approach on the forest path. Pebbles, branches and dead pine needles are being crushed and pressed into the damp ground. Through the gaps in the dense thicket of trees, Luther can see the ambulance as it rolls along the path then comes to an abrupt halt. A grey-haired woman clambers out of the rear seat and presses an absurdly large doctor's case into the hand of one of the two paramedics with her.

"Have they lost their mind?" says Luther with a frown. "Why didn't they park up on the highway?"

"Because we haven't blocked off the access yet."

"And why -"

He spares himself the rest of the question. It was clear why. Because there were too few of them.

"Luther? Hello! I asked you a question!"

"What?"

"What did he want, if he didn't want to fetch help?"

He drags his gaze away from the ambulance and takes a deep breath. If they have destroyed any evidence on the woodland trail, there's nothing he can do about it now.

"He wanted to make sure, that's my guess. That she was dead."

He makes his way slowly up the slope. The thick carpet of needles and rotting leaves cushion his steps. The air beneath the leaf canopy carries the scent of the previous night's downpours, of ozone and essential oils. Creeping willow, wildflowers and ferns grow profusely amongst boulders and sharp-edged quarry stone, low-growing laurel and nutmeg form a matted tangle. He has to look closely to see the snapped twigs which allow the angel's path to be traced back – to the car on the Douglas fir. Before Luther and Ruth lies an open space, scattered with round white pebble stones. There are unmistakable furrows through the mud, small trenches which are still holding water.

"She ran, Luther. All the way down to the cliff edge."

Skidded, slipped, jumped. Lost in a soaking-wet black hole. Her shoes had sunk into the earth and tore it up as she stumbled blindly towards the canyon. She had risked breaking her ankles and tearing the skin from her bones, only to be carried to her death by her own momentum, in a cloud of splintering wood. The shrubbery had concealed the abyss beyond so completely that not even the full moon had been able to show what awaited her.

Emptiness.

Luther imagines her plunging into nothingness. Her bewilderment, the surging panic. The shock of not being unable to undo that last fatal step, or perhaps she could, after all, by quickly opening her eyes – hope, a dancing spark, quickly choked by the knowledge that this isn't a dream, while the moment in which her feet would have needed to find firm ground in order to survive the fall expires. In the racing descent, her options burn out. Her scream explodes between the walls of the canyon, rushes through the night, chases over the dark of the mountains towards the ocean and beyond, flows around the globe, only to meet itself again–

"Luther?"

He is staring between the furrows on the ground. There are more tracks here, less deep, but with clearer edges. Possibly from the man whose footprint they found at the cliff edge.

"Do you want a theory off the top of my head, sheriff, dear sheriff?"

"Out with it."

"Let's presume that the two of them were in the car –"

"And got into an argument."

"A really fiery one." She nods. "It turns violent. He or she hurriedly stops the car at the tree. She jumps out, runs blindly into the bushes, he –"

"What are they doing on the forest path anyway?"

"Well, to know that we'd have to find out where it leads."

"Exactly." Luther looks at her. "That's such a great idea, I'm glad you thought of it."

"And who'll be here to make sure you don't trample everything flat?" Ruth looks over at the road. "What's taking the Highway Patrol so long?" Division of labour. The sheriff investigates the circumstances surrounding the death, the Highway Patrol investigates the details of the car accident. She steps towards the edge of the canyon. "And what about you lot? Can you pick up the pace?"

"Watch it, Ruth!" The mountain rescue leader's voice is muffled by the rock and simultaneously reflected by it, making it sound otherworldly. "We wouldn't want *you* to be the next person we have to pluck out of the tree."

"Kiss my ass, Dexter!"

"Thanks, but even my job has its limits. The lady's ready to depart, okay? We're hoisting her up. You can be there to greet her."

Ready to depart –

Eight years ago, in another life, a different woman who that applied to was leaving Luther's house. She was carrying a suitcase, and would have liked him to have been there to greet her two hours before, when she had fished the key still in her possession out of her handbag – not without first ringing the bell, out of politeness – and walked in. Perhaps she was hoping to be persuaded or convinced, in some way or another, to not even pack her bags in the first place, but Luther wasn't there. Rage and hurt feelings, distilled into childlike stubbornness, had driven him out on an extra patrol, even though Carl Mara had personally offered to take on the drive so that his undersheriff could sort out things at home. Luther, however, believed that anyone intending to carry packed suitcases out of a shared home deserved the full extent of his contempt, which meant that while Jodie was loading the trunk of her Cherokee, he was at the opposite end of the county resolving a case of domestic violence.

Now, as the angel lay there in the moss – bedded in as gently as though there was a danger she could wake up and be frightened – Luther feels a stab of pain. As though someone had touched the splinter in his heart and twisted it just a fraction. His throat tightens, then the moment passes. Habit is a sedative. The pain appears like a returning comet – a comet whose orbit has worn out over the years, making the distance between its appearances greater, but without there being any hope that at some point it would disappear completely.

No pardon, no redemption.

Luther pulls his latex gloves up firmly.

Her eyes are the color of amber. They could be made of glass, the way they stare just past his head. The rain has slicked her dark brown hair down to her scalp; a pixie cut, in the style of Halle Berry. Petite, is Luther's first impression as his gaze wanders over the outstretched body, and toned, his second. Muscular even; small, svelte muscles. Perfectly proportioned. It would be easy to line up attribute after attribute if one were to spend enough time studying this body, which was strikingly similar to Jodie's. It was almost a relief that the lips, chin and cheekbones suggested Mexican genes. Her age? Uncertain. Somewhere in the gravitational field of thirty. The scratches and welts, most of which must have been inflicted as she ran, are too disfiguring for a more accurate assessment. He tries to read into them, sees twigs lash back and thorns tear into her skin. The serious injuries were probably from the pine tree she fell into. Its branches have torn gaping wounds, inside which flies and tiny maggots have made themselves at home and are industriously continuing the process which bacteria commenced hours ago. Her skin is studded with green stilettos, her forehead and cheeks covered with hairline cuts that have bled heavily, giving the appearance of a rusty mask, her eyes gleaming out unnaturally from behind it. Livor mortis and bruises from the impact overlap one another, the left leg – perhaps broken –

No, definitely broken.

But what did she die from?

Luther searches the front pockets of her jeans, lifts her hips and goes through the back pockets too. The rigor mortis is still limited to the eyelids and

facial muscles, meaning that her body reacts flexibly. Nothing except for a few dollars in notes. Her right foot is bare, the left one encased in a mud-smeared sneaker – its counterpart may be at the bottom of the canyon. He turns his head and sees a pair of rod-like legs, clad in tights of a life-negating greyish-brown tone, like Marianne Hatherley tends to wear. The paramedic alongside her places the doctor's case down in the grass and lifts two fingers in greeting.

"Hi Luther."

"Hi, Ted." Luther straightens up, which makes him tower over the mousy-haired woman. "Good morning, Marianne."

"I don't know what's so good about it."

"Well, it's lovely to see you too."

"Sure." She snorts. "Do you not have anything better to do than my job?"

Luther forces a smile. The medical examiner isn't as old as she seems – still under seventy, if he remembers correctly – but looks as though she herself is a case for the forensic scientists. She has a pasty skin color and smells of clothing that hasn't been changed in a long time. Between her fingers are the sticky remains of a chocolate doughnut. Without giving Luther another glance, she opens up her case.

"You two are throwing around theories without a prior inspection of the *corpus delicti*. That's irresponsible. I heard you from up there."

"Why?" says Ruth. "We were only talking about her."

"You were talking shop even while she was still in the tree."

Ruth's ice-blue eyes wander down Marianne's body. Luther nods towards the forest path above.

"Come on. Let's take a look at the car."

The driver's door of the off-road vehicle is wide open. The passenger door, on the other hand, is locked, which is another nail in the coffin for Ruth's theory. In her scenario, both protagonists leap angrily out of the car, rather than one crawling out in a long-winded fashion over the other's seat. The car had obviously been abandoned by just one person.

"Irresponsible!" Ruth vents her frustration. "What *else* do we have to put up from that little field rat?"

"She knows her stuff," says Luther.

"So do other people. We should have asked Carl. Carl is always good for an initial assessment."

Luther walks around the 4x4, inspecting the ground.

"Exactly, you said it: an initial assessment."

"Seriously, Luther, I couldn't care less how well Marianne knows her stuff, or even if she can turn shit into pastry with her bare hands as long as it happens in her so-called institute. We have a sheriff coroner, so why do we need that grouchy old scarecrow?" She takes a deep breath. "And to top it all off, one that stuffs her face at the crime scene!"

Because the sheriff has such bad rheumatism that he can't even get in a squad car anymore, thinks Luther, let alone out of one. But he spares himself the effort of saying it. Ruth would carry Carl there on her back if it meant she could avoid contact with Marianne Hatherley.

"See?" Ruth switches her Handycam onto video mode. "You can't think of anything."

"Yes, I can. There's no one better at establishing the time of death."

"Does that apply to her own, too?"

"Ruth –"

"Can't you ask her some time? Only I'd like to know when the sun will shine more brightly again and the little deer and hares will venture back out of the forest –"

Luther searches the ground in front of the driver's door. High above their heads, pine trees, firs and a few blackjack oaks knit together to form a gloomy cathedral-like dome, which has kept off most of the rain. The drops that did manage to penetrate have been absorbed by fallen needles, making the ground here less muddy than on the slope below. Inconvenient for forensics, but then he discovers a few churned-up spots after all. What he sees confirms his suspicion that the fallen angel was the one behind the wheel of the 4x4, the one who stopped it by the Douglas fir before fleeing hastily on foot. The glove compartment is open. Instruction manual, pen, paper, work gloves and a flashlight are scattered across the floor mat, as though someone had pulled everything out haphazardly. He looks into the door side pocket, searching for odds and ends which could perhaps offer clues on the dead woman's identity. He lifts up the tailgate and sees nothing but an empty space.

"We need someone else here!"

He goes up to the main road, opens the door of the squad car and radios the operations centre in Downieville.

"Where's my backup, Kimmy?"

"Yes, well, it's not that simple, Luther." Kimmy Vogel's voice trills in country mode, a sure sign that she was doing her best Dolly Parton the previous night in the Yuba Theatre. The Sierra version of Dolly Parton, to be precise. With less helium in her voice, but to make up for it she manages the impossible feat of twisting the pathos screw even more than her great idol from the Smoky Mountains. Luther doesn't know whether that speaks for or against a second career as a singer, and right now he couldn't care less.

"We've got a car full of fibres here, hairs, fingerprints, God knows what else. Didn't Tucker say he was coming over as soon as possible?"

"Yes, you see, Tucker – well, he just called through."

Luther waits. He likes Kimmy, some days he downright loves her. She would be a gift from heaven if she didn't have this habit of drawing out every little bit of information like a season of *Game of Thrones*.

"I'm listening."

"It's just that Ines Welborn reported her cat missing."

"So?"

"You know, the stripy one."

Ines Welborn was the owner of a bed-and-breakfast in Goodyears Bar, a hick town with just seventy souls to the west of Downieville, surrounded by woods. Which doesn't serve as much of a description, because practically everything in Sierra County is surrounded by woods.

"Oh, yes," he says.

"Because, she has the black one too," Kimmy hastens to clarify. "Although to be fair that one's a tomcat, but never mind. Anyway, the stripy one has disappeared, and—"

"Can we hurry this up?"

"And now Ines has accused her neighbour of having killed the cat and buried it on his property."

Luther scratches the back of his neck.

"Which neighbour? You don't mean Billy Bob Cawley?"

"Just a moment, Luther." He hears the mouse clicking as she calls up the protocol on the screen. "Yes, Billy Bob."

Cawley, an early-retired man of Native American descent, is the caretaker of the small church cemetery in Goodyears Bar where the folk singer Kate Wolf is buried. Which the town promptly entered into its books as an attraction when Emmylou Harris covered Kate Wolf's songs.

"Billy Bob doesn't kill cats," says Luther.

"Ines says he does."

"What gave her that idea?"

"Because Billy Bob was telling people he did, and now he's backtracking and saying he was only winding Ines up, but Tucker's there and thinks Billy Bob is getting caught up in his own contradictions —"

"And where are the others?"

"Pete is in Alleghany seeing to an abandoned vehicle, and after that he's going to the Pass Creek camping ground, where there may or may not have been a break-in. Troy should be in Sattley by now, some guy who's not from around these parts is causing a disturbance in the Cash Store, bothering people. He's probably just drunk, but he's refusing to leave —"

Drunk at eight thirty in the morning. Over the years you encounter all kinds of breakfast habits.

"And Robbie?"

"A burning rubbish container."

"Excuse me? Calfire's responsible for that."

"Yes, that's right, Luther, and they're taking care of it now. Robbie will be on his way to Sierraville by now, something funny happened there, although — perhaps funny isn't quite the right description, but in any case it was an emergency call and you shouldn't joke about such things. Anyway, the caller said he was coming out of the snack shop earlier and these three men drove past slow as you like and shouted at him."

Luther swallows down his question and practices keeping his composure.

"You'll be for it, too!" Kimmy adds impertinently.

"Are you talking to me?"

"No, that's what they shouted!" She giggles. "Oh God, you thought I was — that was a good one, as if I — Anyway, now he's scared of driving off. I mean, he says he's never seen the men before in his life —"

"Okay. Where's Jamie?"

"Probably in Bassetts."

"Probably?"

"Kate Buchanan called and asked us to check her mains water valve. She's gone to see her sister over in Plumas for a few days and thinks she may have forgotten to turn it off."

Bassett was less than four miles away.

"Good. Tell Jamie to shut off the goddamn valve and get over here at once."

"I'd love to," Kimmy assures him, in such a lachrymose tone you could almost hear the pedal steel guitar whimpering in accompaniment. "But I can't reach him. You remember his radio –"

Broken, right. And had been for three weeks.

"Got it. Kimmy, be a dear and drum one of them up for me, okay? It doesn't matter who. And find out where our colleague from the Highway Patrol – wait a second –"

Ruth is coming up the pass, the mobile phone in her right hand. There is something furtive to her gait. Everything about her looks as though it's been hardened by fire. "I checked the license number."

"And?"

"The truck is registered to a business in Palo Alto. Nordvisk Incorporated."

"The high-tech giant." Luther raises his eyebrows. "Well would you look at that. So it's a company car?"

"Looks like it."

"Okay. – Kimmy? One more thing. Get me a meeting with Phibbs, in my office an hour from now, if at all possible. I need everything on a company from Palo Alto, Nordvisk Incorporated –"

"Nord –" repeats Kimmy, at writing speed, then falls silent.

"V.I.S.K." Ruth speaks up.

"V.I.S.K." repeats Luther. "And also get him to find out what was going on in the area yesterday evening and during the night. You know, parties, booze ups, arguments, whether anyone heard or saw anything, the usual – oh yes, and is Carl there?"

"V.I.S – K", spells Kimmy. "Er, who?"

"The sheriff, Kimmy."

"No, sorry, Luther."

"You don't happen to know where he is, do you?"

"Yes, I do. At the doctor's."

Luther ends the conversation and looks at Ruth. "A company car from the Nordvisk group in Sierra?"

"What exactly do they do, anyway?"

"They're in the I.T. field." He pauses to think. "Of considerable stature. NBC ran this thing recently on early forms of intelligence –"

"Seriously? NBC ran something on Kimmy?"

He tries to refresh his memory. He had been flicking through the channels just before his eyes closed.

No, not early forms of intelligence.

Early forms of *artificial* intelligence.

They make their way back to the off-road vehicle, while Luther's gaze scans every stone and every pine needle. Even at the turn-in to the forest path, where the ground was more exposed to the rain, he had noticed tire tracks which could originate from the dead woman's vehicle. Notably, they lead into the path then, seemingly, out of it and back onto the highway. Which doesn't align with the fact that the car is currently up against the Douglas fir.

"Quite a lot of tire tracks," comments Ruth.

"That's what I was just thinking," says Luther.

"There were two vehicles here, and I don't mean our ambulance. Two with a similar tread. I'd bet that the second vehicle belongs to Mr. Shoe Size 48." She points towards the canyon. "If we go through everything with a fine-tooth comb, we'll find the guy's tracks going back up the slope, don't you think? After she fell, he made his way back."

"You mean, after he forced her off the slope."

"Now, now." Ruth raises her brows mockingly. "Testimonies of that nature without intimate knowledge of the corpus delicti? That's irresponsible, Luther, extremely negligent. And where's Tucker gotten to, by the way?"

"Tied up in a murder case."

"In a -" Ruth stares at him. "What, him too?"

"Tragic story." Luther nods. "A corpse, probably buried in Billy Bob Crawley's garden. Tucker's grilling him right now."

He pulls his hat down over his forehead and goes back towards the corpse.

*

Dr. Marianne Hatherley spent over twenty years with the FBI as a forensic pathologist before going back to her roots and returning to her hometown.

It wasn't that this early phase of her life had been particularly joyous, no more so than her time in Washington had left her with golden memories, and her decision certainly wasn't down to any longing to be closer to her relatives. In Marianne's opinion, family is something that has inspired practically all well-known authors to pen tragedies in which genetically-conditioned depravity leads, with depressing regularity, to a nasty end. And she didn't exclude herself from this disdain. For honesty's sake, according to her credo, it was advisable to back away even in one's younger years from the conviction of having turned out better than one's progenitors, and the Hatherley genealogy really didn't contain anything she wanted to see lying leather-bound on the bedside table. As far as Marianne was able to trace back her lineage, she encountered no end of miserable good-for-nothings, all of whom had handed down the same screwed-up helix to one another, so how could she be any better? And it didn't make any difference that she was the only one in her clan to have made it to academic orders. When you took into account all the failed goldiggers, incestuous chicken breeders and lying Baptist preachers who had laid into her through her childhood, she admittedly had some cause for self-aggrandizement, but no matter how hard you try, nature can't be changed.

And according to Marianne's understanding of herself, this nature was bad, because for hereditary reasons it couldn't be any other way.

And so she responds to accounts about her never having married by saying that no one had wanted to marry a bitch like her, and uses her self-diagnosed inadequacy as an excuse to approach everyone with the sharpness of an open knife. When, eight years ago, her father went fishing while stinking

drunk, and the twelve kilogramm carp he hooked turned out to be stronger than he was, her childhood home in Goodyears Bar suddenly became vacant. When no one else laid claim to it, Marianne decided that twenty years of the FBI were enough, and that Sierra County was sufficiently lacking in social challenges for her not to have to spend every day fretting over not being up to them. She opened a humble practice for general medicine, which she sarcastically named an institute, and has worked ever since as a forensic expert for the sheriff's office, and if there was anyone she liked there, then it was Luther Opuku. He was the only reason she was still willing to be hands-on with corpses. Which she would never admit to him, of course; the sole person she had revealed this to was her best and presumably only friend, but Luther knew regardless.

Your only friend grassed on you, he thinks. At the butcher's, without me even asking her.

The sheriff's office is almost empty. Jamie Withy – intercepted by Kimmy while he was seeking sustenance in the Two Rivers Café after turning off the Buchanan water main, and sent immediately to the crash site – is putting the fragments of the report together and has temporarily taken over the switchboard. Kimmy has gone to fetch milk, after Luther blew into the black of his coffee and asked casually whether they had any. The sheriff has been written off sick by the doctor. The door to Carl's small realm, with the antique desk and the framed awards, stands open. Even though Luther will reside there in just a few weeks' time, it has an air of ultimate abandonment.

"Your Underwood doesn't like me very much," says Marianne by way of a conversation opener when she turns up at midday. Her tone seems to carry the wistful expectation that Luther will agree with her.

"We can sit in Carl's office," he suggests.

"Not that I care, by the way." Marianne follows him. "Because I *really* don't like her." She pulls up one of the visitors' chairs and sinks down into it like a grey, disheveled feather.

"Coffee?"

"Do I look as though I want to spend the night dancing on the ceiling?"

Luther laughs. "It's not that strong. Jamie made it."

"Oh!" Marianne stares with a frown out to where Jamie sits, framed by the glow of the computer, compiling the details of the investigation with his lips pursed in concentration. "Then it must be a very limp brew."

"What do you have for me?"

She pulls a file out of her shoulder bag and lays it down next to him unopened, with a sigh. "Neck fracture. That's what she died of. Between midnight and one o'clock this morning."

"Neck fracture," Luther repeats slowly. "And how –"

"Mother nature. There were splinters of bark in her chin. The collision flung her skull back in such a way that the dens axis didn't stand a chance. Her spinal cord was severed, immediately destroying the respiratory and circulatory centre. By the time she came to a standstill in the branches she was already dead."

"What about the other injuries?"

Marianne shook her head. "Nothing deadly or even close to life-threatening. She had three broken ribs and a shin bone fracture. She did clatter

through the entire tree, after all, but with a little more luck she could have survived."

"So all the injuries are from the fall."

"No." Marianne rubs her knuckles. Her veins wind across the backs of her hands like creeping vines. She looks at Luther. "Do you perhaps have a glass of water for me?"

"Of course."

He goes out to the water cooler and fills a glass. By the time he gets back, she has spread numerous photos out over the desk. They show the dead woman post-autopsy, photographed from a variety of distances and angles. Her countless wounds have been washed, her eyes closed, the Y-cut has been stitched shut. The skin has a waxy, blue-ish shimmer, the postmortem lividity is pronounced. Tattoos of a seemingly Asian nature adorn her arms and back.

"You can't see it at first glance," says Marianne, pulling out one of the photos. It shows a sideways close-up of the head. "The largest part is hidden beneath the hair, but you can see on the cheekbones. The pigmentation, look."

Luther leans forward. The discoloration could be anything.

"In all the places where she's cut or grazed, there are micro particles of the pine tree in her skin," explains Marianne. "But not here. This bruising is different, also in relation to the direction of impact. The tissue and blood vessels were clearly damaged *before* the fall."

"Someone hit her?"

"Yes. And who knows what damage the blow would have caused."

"Would have?"

She places another photo in front of him. Alongside the left elbow, there is a visible welt. It stretches over the forearm at a strange angle, as though –

"Come on, Luther. Give me some hope here in the land of village idiots."

"She fended off the blow."

"She did indeed." Marianne nods contentedly. "The attacker admittedly still hit her on the head, but she took the force out of the blow."

"How long before the fall was this?"

"You're stretching my abilities now. But okay, let me speculate. Not too long before. An hour, perhaps." Her hand claps down on the file. "The small stuff, microbiological and toxicology reports, DNA analysis, are being done by the guys in Sacramento. You should get them tomorrow – oh, and another thing, there were skin traces beneath her fingernails."

She falls into a proud silence. Luther places his fingertips together.

"Would it be stretching your abilities to ask you –"

"No, you'd be flattering me. Without wanting to jump ahead of the molecule robbers, I'd say she scratched a man, and probably on the side of his neck. I found fragments of stubble. As I said, a provisional result. Perhaps it'll turn out to be a particularly striking example of female facial hair. What do I know?"

She knocks back her water, and as she does Jamie comes in. His gaze falls on the photos and blurs with sadness.

"Such a pretty girl," he says.

"Yes." Marianne gathers the photos together. "And what good did it do her?"

No one says a word until she has left the sheriff's office and climbed into her archaic Honda Civic. Jamie stands by the window and watches as the rust-red old banger cranks its way out of the backyard.

"God the Righteous!" he blurts out. "Why do I always want to wipe the place down after she leaves?"

"Because you always want to wipe the place down." In all seriousness, Jamie's obsession with cleanliness was so profound that it was a surprise no disinfectant had been named after him yet. "Could you answer that for a change?"

911. The emergency line. Which wasn't necessarily an indication that someone was having an emergency. Usually it was just someone whose labrador had gone missing.

"They hung up," says Jamie.

Luther puts his Glock into his holster. "Okay. Hold the fort."

"No can do. I have to go up to Loyaltown. Harassment report."

"At least until Kimmy gets back."

"She'll be off again straight after."

"Not until two."

"It's half one now."

Luther feels irritability rising within him. "Which one of us drinks milk in their coffee, anyway?"

"Only you, I think."

"That can't be true."

"Well, that's why she's gone."

He immediately feels guilty. Because Kimmy's fastidious attentiveness is, of course, part of her loving personality, from which no shortage or personal preference goes unnoticed. She mothers the deputies like a wolf does her cubs, tirelessly bringing in trays laden with cake and other devourable delicacies, and stocking up the office as though they were expecting a zombie siege of several weeks' duration. You could win wars with her on your side. Except that, when there was something missing that she thought should be there, the Department of Order inside her head made an alarm that drowned out everything else.

Luther would have to have a word with his emergency hotline clerk.

Disappearing off to the drugstore in search of milk while they're so short of personnel, that screamed for a reorganisation of her priorities.

Jamie positions himself in front of his computer. "So what did the woman die of?"

"A broken neck."

"And what does that mean?" The deputy's fingers hover over the keyboard. "Murder?"

"Not necessarily."

"So what do we have out there? An accident or a crime scene?"

"Possibly both."

"What should I write?"

"Driven to death by sinister forces," murmured Luther, already back at the scene in his thoughts.

"Very poetic. But can I -"

"Of course not, you buffoon. Just leave it blank."

How irritating it was not to be able to simply call it murder. Bodily harm, coercion, failure to render assistance – heavyweight addends in an equation to the right side of which the little word *accident* stands there mockingly; it was laughable. As though what they were dealing with here was the consequence of any old false step. At the same time, doubt hollows out his confidence, and that almost annoys him more. What if it really had just been a false step? What if you misinterpret everything, he thinks, and the tracks, those of the dead woman, of the man, of the second car, only bear witness to a tragedy and not a crime? It doesn't become a murder just because you want it to be one.

Is that what I want?

You know what all this is heading towards. The dead woman in the tree. It's not just a case. You've made her *your* dead woman. You're trying to turn back time.

Nonsense. This has nothing to do with back then.

It only has to do with it! You can't turn back time, no matter how many people you arrest. You can't fix something that can't be fixed.

The emergency line releases him from his thoughts. This time, he gets there before Jamie.

"Sierra County Sheriff Department."

Someone is breathing softly down the line. There are sounds of nature too; birdsong, the volley-like crackle of the wind.

"Hello? Can I help you?"

A few seconds pass by. Then comes a loud bang, as though the telephone has slipped from the caller's hand and collided with something hard. The next moment, the line goes dead, while the number on the display remains for a brief moment as an afterglow. Luther presses redial, listens to the dial tone and checks the connection in the database. The system gives him an address several miles north of Downieville.

"Merle Gruber," he says.

"Old Mrs Merle?"

Very old. And increasingly vulnerable since her husband died of a stroke last year while pruning the rose bushes. In truth, too vulnerable to live alone in a place where her nearest neighbour lived thirty minutes' walk away, but Merle tended to lovingly and stubbornly reference her children's and grandchildren's visits, thanks to whom she claimed she always had company.

But right now that didn't seem to be the case.

"I can drive out to her," offers Jamie. "I should be able to manage it before –"

"No." Luther reaches for his jacket and goes to the door. "I'm going that way anyway. Phibbs is waiting for me."

And it *was* murder, he thinks as he leaves.

Or something like it, at any rate.

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