

Sample Translation

*Marzipan Fingers*

(Vingers van marsepein)

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**B**y noon such a crowd had gathered on Bloemgracht after the waggon, pulled by four horses, had arrived, that a lanky youth fell into the canal, and a little later a child and a dog too. All three were hauled aboard an empty peat barge that was manoeuvred across the water. It was used later in the afternoon as a crossing by those who came from the north side of the canal. There was such a crowd that three hawkers, figuring there was business to be done, were attracted to it. One of the sea captain's servants peddled tin coins with a likeness of the rhinoceros when its horns were still complete. And an accordionist walked round, singing a hastily composed song whose refrain he crooned ostentatiously into women's ears: "Lovely lady, watch that joker, or he'll get you with his poker!".

To accommodate the general curiosity and prevent damage to his house, Frederik Ruysch had ordered the dead marvel to be removed from its crate alongside the canal. For two whole hours the big hulk had lain displayed on the waggon. The stench was less than expected since there'd been a light frost the previous few days. When the three-metre long creature was finally lugged onto tough mattress ticking, dragged from the waggon, and carried into the house by ten men, several distinguished gentlemen, informed that a prehistoric monster from Africa had arrived, came rushing over to the 'House with the Rose' from other parts of the city. The front door was barely wide enough; the angled hallway could be negotiated by the bearers, but the back door to the inner courtyard had to be lifted off its hinges before the monster could be fitted through it – with much difficulty and dexterity.

People thronged through the halls to the inner courtyard despite the best efforts of Hendrik and Gradus and the sea captain's servants to bar unwelcome onlookers. Wigs, hats, caps, lace collars, women dressed up to the nines or with

only a shawl – never before had the house been so crowded. Mistress Ruysch stayed away. She was used to a lot, but the arrival of this animal was simply too much, and she had resisted it tooth and nail. Lucretia, on the other hand, seemed to flourish with all the excitement. She bustled about in her sable jacket, giving instructions, sending away the ruder intruders.

Frederik Ruysch himself was no longer there; he had left to give an anatomy lesson in De Waag. An instructive and unusual case: a woman in labour who had died right before delivery, the baby still in the womb. It was unusual that the surgeons' guild had managed to convince the woman's husband, a waffle seller, to give his consent; they must have reached deep into their pockets. Frederik Ruysch had never deserted his colleagues and students for a personal matter he did not neglect his duty, now, even when a mammoth was being carried into his house.

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In the inner courtyard, Bregtje stood next to the water pump with a runny nose, shivering with cold. Once in a while she'd go inside to warm herself by the kitchen stove, but not for long. Every time she'd warmed up a little she'd go back outside to look at the gigantic, sagging body of the mythical creature and brag to her neighbourhood playmates who had no rhinoceros at home and would never get one.

The first thing that was striking about the rhinoceros – except that he didn't look at all like a horse – was that he had, or at least used to have, not one but two horns. The big one that he had banged off in a Swiss stable, and a horn right behind that which was also rather sizeable even though it, too, was damaged and worn. Hendrik walked round with the larger horn, the front one, to show to everyone who qualified as important. The fractured plane of this horn and that of the stump of the dead animal hardly seemed to belong together. Over the years the stump must have been banged so often against walls, fences, or trees that it was for the most part rounded off and the broken-off part no longer fitted. Bregtje wondered if the second horn had grown there as compensation for the loss of the

first – a bonus as it were – or whether all rhinoceroses in Africa had two. Lucretia would know, but she was too busy at the moment.

The animal had strikingly small eyes, half-closed and slightly sunken in death, and large, wide open nostrils. His creased leather mouth hid big, brown, smoothed-down teeth that you saw when Hendrik or someone else pulled the lips apart. A herbivore's teeth, she had heard people say. While alive, the rhinoceros had eaten nothing but hay, plants, grass, vegetables, and fruit – no other animals and no people. Even though she'd already told some ignorant little kids that afternoon that he lived off children under seven years old, in fact the monster had won her over with that peaceful diet. To look so wild and dangerous and yet eat only flowers and apples!

The rhinoceros' ears were cute: small and round, a little like those of the bear at the fair, but made of leather, with small, bristly tufts of hair on the outer edges; the only hair on the animal's body if you didn't count the pathetic little brush on his tail that you could barely call a brush. On closer observation, the whole lower part of the head reminded her of the head of the sea turtle – many times larger, of course – owned by Uncle Frederik.

She had been in the 'House with the Rose' long enough to wonder if the rhinoceros would remain whole or be cut into pieces after dissection. Everything that was dissected had to go into a vat, – or rather; into several vats in succession, each with different fluids. She saw very little of that because they never wanted to have her there, but it was clear that no vat was large enough to let a whole rhinoceros soak in it, not even just its skeleton. And if Uncle Frederik had such a vat built, how would they be able to get the animal in and out of it every time? She'd already broached the subject in the kitchen, but Nelie and Aaltje didn't know anything about it and felt that these matters were none of her business. She thought she'd go and ask Hendrik who was saying goodbye to the pharmacist from behind the Westerkerk.

But just as she was about to step up to Hendrik, she was startled by a figure in a black coat and a black hat, a man without a wig who came into the inner

courtyard behind several other visitors. Although he lurked there among the visitors and didn't take off his hat, Bregtje recognized the long, bony nose immediately.

Sometimes Bregtje dreamed that she was playing somewhere in the house, all by herself. She might be in the pantry, in the parlour downstairs, or at the bottom of the stairs to the second floor – it varied. In the dream she saw a strange man walk through the hall. Whether he saw her was never completely clear, at any rate he unnerved her and she went quickly to find Nelie or Gradus but there was no one in the kitchen, in the hall to the surgery, nor in Uncle's study. Then she decided to go upstairs, to Aunt Marie or Lucretia. She tried to race up the stairs as fast as possible, but her feet moved agonizingly slowly. Upstairs she opened the doors to Hendrik's room, Lucretia's, Aunt's and Uncle's, but they were empty. Everyone was gone. She was alone in the house with an intruder and he was coming up the stairs.

At this point in her dream her fear grew so intense that she usually failed to get to the next staircase to the attic – which would lure her like a mouse into a trap. Before that moment her leaden legs gave way, and she would wake up. A similar feeling of desolation and dread, of being threatened in supposedly safe territory, now came over her.

The toff had never actually shown up here before. The fact of his walking into their courtyard, just like that, casually, among other people, bewildered her. Did Hendrik know who he was? Bregtje couldn't tell because a married couple that had entered stopped to greet Hendrik at the same time as the man in the black hat, with a slight bow in Hendrik's direction, walked straight to the rhinoceros and stood there looking.

On an impulse she had hidden behind several talkative gentlemen, then skirted around behind everyone, went to the door, and was about to slip into the kitchen, when Lucretia's excited voice came from the open door of the parlour.

"I'll ask my brother!" she called out as she came into the hall.

“Would you tell Hendrik that Mr. Boerhaave wants to speak to him,” she said as soon as she saw Bregtje. “Hurry up!”

Bregtje went out of the back door again, peered round the courtyard, and joined Hendrik who clearly intended to personally point out the particulars of the rhinoceros to the couple, because he was walking there with them, talking.

Bregtje pulled at his coat sleeve.

“Hendrik, you have to...”

“I’m busy!”

“Yes, but Lucretia is asking if you ...”

Annoyed, Hendrik pushed her aside and steered his guests through the crowd of onlookers until they stood in front of the rhinoceros. Bregtje lingered nearby, all the time keeping an eye on the man in the black hat. He was standing with his back to her but turned his head to look round, which made her feel that even if she made herself as small as possible he would still see her. When she finally told Hendrik that Mr. Boerhaave was waiting for him inside, and was trying to sneak back into the house, the toff was suddenly behind her. He whispered above her head, “Come with me into the street.”

“I’m not allowed.”

“Come along.”

They reached the open passageway at the same time. Bregtje considered dashing to the right and into the kitchen where he wouldn’t follow her, but the man in the black hat ordered her tersely: “You first. I’ll be there in a moment.”

Slowly, reluctantly, she walked through the hall, past the parlour door, now closed, behind which came muffled voices. At the front door Gradus was letting in more visitors. What would have been more natural than to say: Grad, there is a spy in the house; he’s coming outside in a minute. Grab him; I’m scared of him. But that was impossible, and not being able to take her own housemates into her confidence made her scared and lonely.

Gradus pulled at her hat and teased: “Watch out for the horses, little girl.”

Haltingly, she went outside to where the sea captain's servants were busy hitching two fresh horses to the empty waggon. They snorted and kicked their hooves against the cobblestones, afraid of the rhinoceros' penetrating stench. She walked a short distance away, paying no attention to the other children in the street, and leaned against the wall of a neighbouring house. She distrusted the toff, and wanted nothing to do with what he was planning, and yet she thought that he might have something new to report. Last time he had said that she shouldn't be so impatient and that everything took its time. But something could have changed, couldn't it? Who knows what new facts might meanwhile have come to light!

There he came sauntering along the street towards her. "Come to Prinsengracht," he said as he passed her, heading, faster now, in that direction. She knew which place he meant and followed at a distance behind. Under the high bridge across Prinsengracht, he went down a few steps to where freshwater fishermen always sold their catch of the day. Once in a while she went there with Anna or Aaltje, but she didn't like to. It smelled, and she thought that the fishermen, who came all the way from Spaarndam or from the Zaan, were rough, dirty people with their unintelligible dialect and their revolting shad, lamprey, and bream with lots of bones. Today, because of all the excitement on Bloemgracht it was more crowded than ever.

At one of the bridge piers the man with the black hat pulled her aside. He chuckled suddenly, distorting his ashen face and exposing a row of small, yellow teeth.

"That was a nice little package I received yesterday," he said.

She didn't know what to say to that and was silent.

"Did you see what was in it?"

"No."

"No?"

"I had to grab something quickly and I delivered it right after our bread supper," she said sullenly.

“Well, it was a good pick,” he grinned.

The chuckle was annoying, more annoying than when he looked stern, as he usually did. Bregtje continued looking fixedly at a fish creel with barbels; the vendor grabbed a few of them by their tails and placed them in a wicker basket. But she wanted to make the most of his “good pick.”

“So? When is he coming? Soon?”

“Hold your horses. Aren’t we in too much of a hurry? What about everything that has to be done first? Have you thought about that? What about the family who don’t want to lose him just like that? There’s a lot of money and effort involved here, you know.”

She nodded and kept staring ahead.

“You haven’t told anyone, have you?”

“No.”

“Remember: only when I say that the time has come.”

“Yes.”

“But everything is going extremely well. We’re halfway there already.”

Only halfway. That was disappointing.

“I don’t want to do it any longer. I’m not a thief!”

“It’s got nothing to do with theft. You’re helping me a bit, that’s all. No one will notice as long as your uncle is busy rearranging his collection. If they find something missing later on, they’ll think that it was lost during the move.”

“But that... isn’t what it’s about.”

“What is it about?”

“My uncle, he... he really loves his specimens. He makes them so beautiful. No one can make things that beautiful, no one in the whole world.”

Immediately she was sorry that she had said that. It seemed like betrayal, mentioning Uncle Frederik’s art to this intruder, this skinny, white man without a carriage, with his scabby, red eyelids and bloodless lips. What did this man understand about the tender care of the small skeletons that stood in the room in

order of size, about the specially made lace collars and caps with ribbons that adorned the small children's heads in the jars; about the devotion involved in setting up the delicate branching of blood and water vessels. She shouldn't have mentioned it. She'd thrown away her uncle's love on the fish market.

"Yes," said the man facing her wheezing, "which is why it works out well that what you have to do now does not involve specimens. It's easy, and you hardly need to take a thing."

She glowered silently at an enormous sturgeon which had slapped its tail so forcefully that it landed on the cobblestones where it continued twisting round and round.

"Now listen carefully. Your uncle is going to embalm the rhinoceros soon. That'll keep him busy for some time."

"Maybe he'll cut it into pieces."

"Quite likely. At any rate he'll keep the head – we'll assume that. Which means the head will go through many different treatments."

He spoke hurriedly, his small, dark eyes darting about. He had a long, thin nose with a bridge that consisted of many flat surfaces, as if it had three times as many bones there as other people's.

"You're a clever little thing," the toff said. "You understand, don't you?"

"What is there to understand?"

"Listen to me. Make sure that you find out what they do with the animal and what they use for it."

"They don't want me there!"

"No, but that head will remain in the courtyard for days on end, weeks even, because of the different baths the animal will have to go into. You're there quite often, aren't you? And if you can't see what they do with it, then you can always ask your cousin Hendrik or the servant, can't you? Pretend you are curious about it yourself. Write down everything they mention or that you see. You can write, can't you?"

"Yes, of course!"

“Good. And what would really please us ...” It was the first time that he said us. “... is that you take samples of the stuff they use in all the new treatments that the animal undergoes. So if they mix in resin, for example, you should write down which resin it is and put a little in a small jar. You understand? And write down which kind of Nantes brandy they use and put a sample in a small bottle if you get a chance. Every time that they put it into another bath or that you notice that they pour something into it or sprinkle herbs into it, fill a new bottle. Very simple.”

“How do I get hold of so many bottles?” Did the man think that in her house jars and bottles were for the taking without anyone noticing?

His eyes flashed back and forth to all sides.

“I’ll make sure that Maaike has enough, so that when you bring a filled one you can take a few empty ones back with you. So do you understand now what you have to do?”

She nodded, reluctantly.

“You’ll see, if you do a good job, we’ll go to Muiden and fetch the boy.”

She looked up at him, trying to read his face. Could she trust him, or was he making a fool of her? She was so suspicious that she could hardly breathe, but the phrase “we’ll go to Muiden and fetch the boy” echoed in her ears.

“Promise?” she asked.

“If it’s up to me, yes,” said the man in the black hat. “If it works. I can’t perform miracles, mind, can I? You should go home now.”

He looked round furtively once again, nodded to her, walked away between the fishmongers, rushed up the steps, and disappeared.

“Smelts for your kitty, young lady,” a fellow bundled up in wool called out to her, holding a handful of small silvery fish. “I’m practically giving them away!”

Deep in thought she walked home, somewhat relieved that she was no longer expected to steal specimens, but troubled nevertheless by the new task and the uncomfortable feeling brought about by every contact with the toff. The waggon with its harnessed horses was now standing on the pavement next to the canal,

and a line of carriages with children swarming around were awaiting the return of the distinguished viewers. Boys climbed on the backs of carriages to be chased away by the coachmen and they pelted one another with horse-droppings. By now everyone in the neighbourhood had seen the rhinoceros.

Bregtje's girlfriends Haesje and Cornelia walked towards her, and the three of them went to Haesje's house to see if they could persuade the maid to make them some hot aniseed milk.

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The commotion went on till late in the evening. People from the city were still coming to look at the rhinoceros, and stable lanterns had been placed around the cadaver, giving it an even more unreal aspect than in the afternoon. Someone had strapped the horn to the stump with strips of sacking to show viewers what the complete rhino horn looked like. Hendrik and Gradus lugged vats and tables ready for the next morning when Frederik Ruysch, in the presence of his good friend Herman Boerhaave, would cut open the animal. Nelie and Aaltje moved mattresses so that overnight guests could be housed. Master Boerhaave had come from Leiden with a pupil, a coachman, and a servant, and was likely to stay several days, and in addition there were a doctor from Haarlem, and an anatomy student who would also be there the next morning. Anna was in the kitchen, preparing one dish after the other, complaining to a flustered Tiffie. Even the happy, quiet little goldfinch, nervous from the draught and the comings and goings, hopped about its cage, not touching its food or its water.

At least an hour later than usual, Bregtje ate her evening bowl of porridge in the kitchen with Gradus and the maids who would sleep in the two kitchens since the attic laundry room was now arranged for the coachmen and the two students. When strangers visited, Gradus had to sleep near the study and the surgery, "so that braggart from Leiden won't get the wrong idea," he said; during the day there had been words between him and Master Boerhaave's coachman.

After dinner Bregtje was at a loose end. From the dining room came the voices of the company still at table, but she wasn't allowed to help Nelie serve or Anna

place sweets on a dish because Aunt Marie counted the sweets. Mistress Troost wanted her to hold wool, but fortunately she saw Hendrik going up stairs with a candlestick.

“Are you going upstairs already?” she asked, quickly following him.

“Indeed I am,” said Hendrik, “I’ve had enough.”

“May I have a quick look at the globe?”

“Tomorrow.”

“No, I’ll just get a candle.”

“Cheeky girl,” said Hendrik, but she was already running downstairs. She grabbed a small scone from the shelf and ran back upstairs. Hendrik had placed his candle on the desk, and she walked with hers to the large, wooden globe on which the whole world was depicted.

“Where’s Africa?”

“Find it yourself. But no touching with dirty hands!”

She held up her candle and turned the copper knob, peering intently at the names of the countries and the oceans that moved past. It was more amusing to look at sea monsters and mermaids on the globe than to decipher the difficult names. But she discovered Africa quickly; it was written with large letters in the middle of a blank, white spot, surrounded by lions and camels and a bird that she knew was called an ostrich.

“That large?”

“Africa is very large.”

“And cold?”

“Cold? What makes you think that? It’s hot there.”

“I thought perhaps that the rhinoceros had such a thick skin against the cold.”

“How did you get so stupid? The sun beats down on him all day long, and with such a thick skin, he doesn’t feel it – that’s what it’s for. And when the savages shoot at the animal, the arrows don’t penetrate the skin – that’s what it’s for too.”

In Bregtje's mind's eye, the rhinoceros ran across the plain in sweltering heat, pursued by fierce, bearded men with long, dirty hair trying to hit him with bows and arrows.

“What kind of savages?”

“Negroes. You've seen the negro in the Warmoesstraat, haven't you?”

“But he isn't wild, is he?”

“No, he's a Christian now. But his tribe, the people where he comes from, those are savages.”

She let the fact sink in that the rhinoceros and the negro in the Warmoesstraat were linked through their native country. When she had seen the negro, he was wearing a shiny yellow coat, more beautiful than any of the other men on the street, and he had on a reddish wig. But his relatives were pursuing rhinoceroses with bows and arrows.

“Where's Amsterdam again?”

Hendrik, who was pulling off his shoes as though they were hurting him, groaned and got up.

“Here.” He brought his nose right next to the globe.

It said “A'redamme “ at the spot that he pointed out.

“Small, isn't it? Where's Diemen?”

“Listen, not everywhere can fit on. The whole Republic is barely on it, let alone Diemen.”

“And where does the tsar of Russia live?”

“How long are you going to go on? Here.”

She studied the word next to his finger. “So why does it say Muscovy?”

“Because that's what it's called there.”

Hendrik went over to a small cupboard, pulled out a carafe, poured something dark red into a glass, and drank it down in one gulp. Bregtje pretended not to see. Aunt didn't like him drinking hippocras alone in his room, but she didn't want to spoil things now, so she kept looking at the globe while holding up her candle, trying to find Antonie van Diemenland, but she couldn't.

“Are you curious about what the rhinoceros will look like tomorrow?” she asked.

“Curious? Extremely! I’m straining at the leash. The devil take it – a rhinoceros was all that was missing!”

Bregtje didn’t know how to react when grownups talked like that. But Hendrik was not ill-disposed toward her – his tone was not directed at her – and he saw her confusion.

“You know how it is, little one?” he said. “A person can see too many corpses and cadavers in his life.”

“But ... Uncle has seen a lot more, hasn’t he?”

“Certainly. Let’s say that it is different for everyone, how much you can take. There are some who never get enough, and there are others who think that there are other things in life that are worth while.”

She nodded. That seemed reasonable.

A few weeks before she had heard Nelie and Aaltje talking about Hendrik. Aaltje, who went everywhere with her sweetheart, had seen the young master at the ladies of the night and was scandalized. Nelie, always more charitable when it came to the family, had said that he really needed to get married, and that it was no wonder that a man who was always forced to cut up corpses would occasionally look for amusement. Why should Hendrik not enjoy himself with the ladies, whoever they were? Was it because he drank wine with them, something Aunt Marie felt should be done only within the family circle? In fact, Bregtje could hardly imagine Hendrik having fun; the only son of Frederik Ruysch was never exuberant, seldom laughed out loud, and didn’t care at all for the jokes and pranks that suppliers, servants, and couriers from the hospital or the surgeons guild pulled off when they came to the house.

He was a bit lazy, slow in his movements, and had little of Aunt’s liveliness or Lucretia’s bossiness, but also little of his father’s dignity. Although Hendrik surpassed him in height, his despondent shoulders and slightly stooped back gave

him a sad aspect, as though the suffering of the people and the animals that his father had made him cut open during the years had stuck dismally. When the two of them went out together, father and son, to a woman in labour for example, Uncle Frederik, despite his age, strode light-footedly and energetically down the street while Hendrik, with the instrument case, seemed to have difficulty keeping up.

Yet Hendrik could sometimes act decisively. The previous year a building under construction across the street had collapsed while eight-year-old twins from their side of the canal were playing with some children from the neighbourhood. Three children were buried in the rubble. Alerted by the panic, Hendrik had rushed over. The twin girl was killed instantly, the twin boy was still breathing when the debris was lifted off him, but with such difficulty that Hendrik decided on the spot on a desperate measure. He stuck the point of a knife into the boy's windpipe from the outside, thus providing the child with an extra hour of air, until he breathed his last in his mother's arms. Then the playmate, whose right leg had been crushed, had it amputated under the knee by Hendrik, with the help of a butcher who'd also come running. Later the wound became gangrenous, and the boy had lain in the hospital for weeks with a stump that became ever shorter, but he was still alive.

Recently Bregtje had quarrelled with Haesje. Haesje had visited her aunt who had given birth and could not move because of the pain. The birth had been so difficult that the midwife had finally asked Hendrik to come. He reproached her for waiting far too long. In the end he managed to deliver the baby and saved both mother and child.

“But they stretched open her whole body!” Haesje exclaimed, and although neither knew how that stretching actually worked, both had been horrified by it and had worried about their future. Should you consider marriage if you were treated so badly during childbirth? However, Haesje had then said something that went down wrong with Bregtje, namely that it was not proper for Hendrik to be a midwife; it was improper for men to do that sort of thing.

“Well, if your aunt had stuck with the midwife, she’d be dead now, and the baby as well!” she had countered. She heard enough talk at home about the ignorance, greed, and alcoholism of midwives. Haesje had agreed while still insisting that Hendrik practised an indecent profession. And wasn’t Frederik Ruysch also a midwife? That was different, Haesje had answered; as a learned, wise old man he stood as it were above decency and indecency. But for a young man it was improper; her whole family agreed with that.

Bregtje had walked away angrily and told Nelie everything. Nelie had said that indeed other men could not become midwives, but that it was to Hendrik’s credit to be able to follow in the footsteps of his father who had trained him since he was young. After all, people thought that anything outside the accepted norm was odd. Bregtje understood that, but the neighbours’ misconception strengthened what she sometimes felt that respect for the son was quite a bit less than that for the father. Was Hendrik aware of that too?

“Birds are worthwhile, aren’t they?” she tried to humour Hendrik so that he might pull out some of the colourful stuffed birds that he kept in wall cupboards in this room. But Hendrik obviously didn’t feel like obliging. He stretched out on his couch, a refilled glass within reach, and opened a book.

“Go to sleep,” he said.

“Yes, but what are you going to do with the rhinoceros tomorrow? Saw off his head?”

“Saw, saw ... it isn’t a tree trunk! Cut very carefully, you mean. A really delicate job. Then the body can go to the hospital to be preserved; they have more space there.”

“And then?”

“What do you mean, then?”

“What’s going to happen to the head?”

“Well, all sorts of things,” Hendrik said, tired. “Father and Master Boerhaave will be busy with that for quite a while.”

“May I help?”

“Hendrik started to laugh. “Oh sure, we’ll need you for that!”

“But I’d really like to.”

“Mother and Lucia are going to Rachel tomorrow. They’ll take you along. The fewer womenfolk around, the better. And now, shoo, out!”

When Bregtje came back into the kitchen, the shutters still hadn’t been closed and she could see through to the inner courtyard. It had started to snow. It had snowed during that winter, but it had never looked so wonderful, with the stable lanterns still burning there, bathing everything in a soft light in which the snowflakes fell like sugar on gingerbread. She grabbed a shawl from the hook and slipped into her clogs that stood next to the door.

“Stay indoors!” shouted the women in the kitchen, but she was already outside.

It was quiet in the courtyard. No voice could be heard, nor horses’ hooves on the street, nor noise of pumps, tools, or buckets – everyone was inside. There the rhinoceros lay, the lanterns arranged in front of him, as if sanctified and ready for adoration. A thin layer of snow covered his leather skin evenly – now really making him look dead. The head, supported by a stack of firewood, lay slightly crooked with the two horns proudly sticking up at an angle, the broken, wrapped first horn receiving more snow than the intact one behind. Now she understood that the horns were of course used to skewer savages in hot Africa. When the negroes ran after him, he would suddenly turn and spear them with his horns so that they were stuck like sweet chestnuts on a fork; that would teach them with their bows and arrows! As long as they didn’t shoot into his small eyes at the very last moment.

The immobility of the cadaver in the quiet courtyard was impressive. She squatted next to the animal, traced the edge of his left ear with a finger and wiped the snow from the tufts of hair. She wiped the snow from round the eye until the large, circular wrinkles were visible again.

“I’ve heard that your name is Caspar,” she said. The sea captain’s servants who had brought the rhinoceros had told everyone who was willing to listen. “Caspar is a holy name.”

She was filled with compassion for the hulking animal. Such a large, strong, armoured beast, first captured, brought by ship from far away to the north, exhibited in chains and in cages, dashing against walls – and now here he lay; covered by snow in a strange land where next day they were going to cut off his head.

“You’re already dead, so don’t be afraid; you don’t need to, not of anything. You can’t be better off with anyone than with us. Actually, you’re being saved from death. Just think, other rhinoceroses don’t have anyone to take care that they will live forever.”

She cleared the snow off the entire head and carefully studied the pattern of folds around his mouth, his nostrils, and his cheeks. Under her hands the cold leather felt like a rough slate. She spoke again, softly.

“And I’m going to draw you. There are almost no rhinos in the world that have been drawn.”

The sunken, glazed, black eyes of the rhinoceros shone dimly in the light of the lantern, and the fold at the mouth cleared of snow seemed to smile vaguely.

“My brother will think you’re terrific! He knows all about animals. Not about rhinos, of course, but about hares and rabbits and herons and ducks. And fish, frogs, and lizards. And martens and weasels. Once he caught a stag beetle. Maybe you don’t know what that is: you probably don’t have them in Africa.”

Gradus came out.

“Come, we’re going in.”

“What if he gets snowed under?”

“It will keep him nice and fresh. Who on earth would stay out in this weather! Silly girl.”

He placed his calloused hand on her neck, squeezed a little, and began to open the lanterns and blow them out.

“Come,” he said again, going indoors lanterns dangling from his hands.

Quickly she bent forward to Caspar’s white-dusted head.

“Misericordium,” she whispered. “That’s my secret word. No one knows it, except you. Misericordium. Can you remember that?”