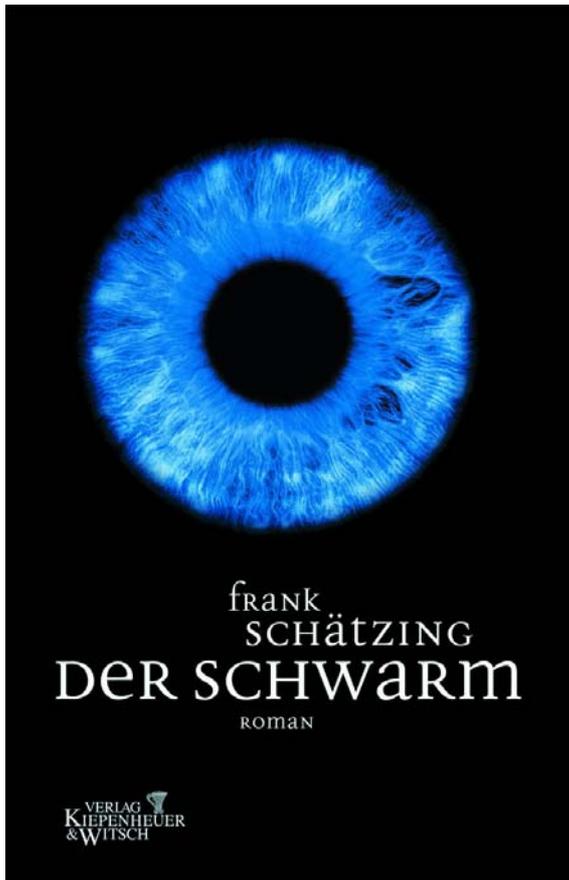


[Sample Translation]

THE SWARM

By Frank Schätzing



Translated from the German
By Peter Constantine

World Rights with Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG

Iris Brandt ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de

Aleksandra Erakovic aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de

January 14

Huanchaco, Peruvian coast

Juan Narciso Ucañan's fate was sealed that Wednesday without the world taking notice.

Only a few weeks later the world was to take notice in a much broader context, but without Ucañan's name ever coming up. By then he was one of too many. If it had been possible to question him right away about the occurrences of that morning of January 14, the parallels with similar incidents around the world would have been clear. And possibly Ucañan's appraisal of the situation would have been useful, because it would have sprung from a fisherman's naïve perspective, revealing a series of complex links that would become clear only later. But neither Juan Narciso Ucañan nor the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Huanchaco in northern Peru revealed anything. Ucañan stayed as silent as the fish he had caught all his life. By the time he was to appear as a statistic, events had already advanced to another stage, and any information concerning his fate was not important.

Not that anyone had been concerned about him or his interests before January 14.

At least that is how Ucañan saw it. He took little comfort that his native Huanchaco had over the years developed into an international resort paradise. It didn't matter to him that foreign tourists thought all was well in a world where natives still put out to sea in primitive reed boats. Though what was truly primitive was that they went out at all. Most of Ucañan's countrymen were now earning their money on factory

trawlers and in the fish-meal and fish-oil factories, thanks to which Peru, notwithstanding the world's dwindling fish reserves, managed to keep its position among the chief fishing nations, along with Chile, Russia, the United States, and the Far Eastern giants. In spite of El Niño, Huanchaco expanded in all directions, with row upon row of hotels. Nature's last reserves were recklessly sacrificed. In the end, everyone managed in some way or other to make a profit. Everyone except for Ucañan, who had almost nothing left but his picturesque little boat, or caballito—“Little Horse”—as the conquistadors had enthusiastically called the quaint little constructions. But by the look of things, the caballitos were not going to last long either.

It was clear that the new millennium had decided to weed out Ucañan.

In the meantime, he was no longer master of his feelings. He felt punished. By El Niño, which had descended upon Peru since time out of mind and which he couldn't do anything about. By the conservationists, who spoke at congresses of overfishing and decimation, so that one could see the heads of the politicians slowly turning toward the trawler-fishing moguls, until they realized that they were looking into a mirror. Their heads continued turning until they saw Ucañan, who could in no way be held responsible for the ecological disaster. He had neither wished for the presence of the floating factories, nor for the Korean and Japanese trawlers lurking outside the 200-mile zone to haul in the local fish. Ucañan was not to blame for anything, but in the meantime he himself hardly believed it. As if he were the one dragging millions of tons of tuna and mackerel from the sea.

He was twenty-eight, and one of the last of his kind.

His five older brothers were all working in Lima. They thought him a fool because he was ready to head out into the barren coastal waters in a boat that was little more than a primitive surfboard to wait for bonito and mackerel that never came. His brothers told him that you could not breathe life into the dead. But what was important to Ucañan was the breath of his father, who despite his almost seventy years had headed out in his caballito every day. At least until a few weeks ago. Now old Ucañan no longer went fishing. He lay in bed with a strange cough and spots on his face, and seemed to be gradually losing his mind, and Juan Narciso clung to the idea that he could keep the old man alive as long as he kept the tradition alive.

Ucañan's forefathers, the Yunga and the Moche, had been using reed boats for over a thousand years, well before the arrival of the Spaniards. They had settled the coastal regions from the north of the country down to the area where the town of Pisco lies today, and had supplied the mighty metropolis of Chan Chan with fish. In those days the region had been rich in wachaques, coastal swamps fed by subterranean springs. Reeds had grown there in wild abundance, from which Ucañan and the remnants of his people still bound their caballitos, just as their forefathers had done. Building a caballito demanded dexterity and inner calm. These reed bundles were light as a feather and practically unsinkable. The construction was remarkable. Three to four yards long, with a pointed bow that curved upward. In the past, thousands of caballitos had sped over the waves of the coastal region that was known in former days as "Golden Fish," because even on bad days the catch was greater than fishermen like Ucañan could now hope for in their wildest dreams.

But the swamps were also disappearing, and with them the reeds.

At least El Niño was predictable. Every few years around Christmas, the otherwise cold Humboldt Current warmed up and lost its nutrients, and the mackerel, bonito, and sardines disappeared. That was why Ucañan's forefathers had called this phenomenon El Niño—the Christ Child. Sometimes the Christ Child limited himself to stirring nature up a little, but every four or five years he sent down the scourge of Heaven, as if he wanted to wipe mankind from the face of the earth: tornadoes, cataclysmic downpours, and deadly mudslides, people losing their lives by the hundreds. El Niño came and went, that's how it had always been. It was a struggle, but one could somehow make do. Nowadays, as the wealth of the Pacific ended up in trawling nets with mouths wide enough to fit twelve jumbo jets, even prayers no longer helped.

As the swell rocked his caballito, Ucañan might have thought: Perhaps I am a fool. Guilty and a fool. We are all guilty, because we've teamed up with a Christian patron saint who does nothing to ward off El Niño, nothing to ward off the fishery associations and our country's fishing treaties.

In the old days, he thought, we had shamans in Peru. Ucañan knew from hearsay what the archaeologists had found in the pre-Columbian temples near Trujillo, right behind the Pyramid of the Moon. Ninety skeletons were lying there, men, women, and children, bludgeoned and stabbed to death. The high priests, in a desperate attempt to curb the rising floods of the year 560, had sacrificed the lives of ninety people, and El Niño had departed.

Who did one have to sacrifice to stop the overfishing?

Ucañan shuddered at his own thought. He was a good Christian. He loved Jesus and loved San Pedro, the patron saint of fishermen. Ucañan always fervently participated

in the festivities of San Pedro Day, when the wooden saint was carried by boat from village to village. And yet in the mornings everyone streamed into the churches, but at night the real flames burned. Shamanism was in full bloom. But what god could come to the rescue when even the Christ Child avowed that he had nothing to do with the fishermen's plight, that his influence was limited to the raging elements, and that everything else was in the province of the politicians and lobbyists.

Ucañan looked up at the sky, his eyes blinking in the light.

It promised to be a fine day.

At this moment, Peru's northern coast seemed idyllic. For days there hadn't been a cloud in the sky. At this early hour all the surfers were still in bed. A half hour ago, before sunrise, Ucañan and a dozen other fishermen had paddled out to sea through the softly rolling waves. Now the sun slowly rose from behind the misty mountains, steeping the sea in a pastel light. The vast expanse, a few moments ago still silvery, was now bathed in soft blue. Beyond the horizon one could picture the silhouettes of mighty freighters heading for Lima.

Ucañan, unimpressed by the beauty of the emerging day, reached back for the calcal, the caballito fishermen's red net that was a few yards long, its edges fitted with hooks of various sizes. He examined the finely woven meshes. He was squatting on his haunches. Caballitos did not have a space for sitting, but a generous storage area in the rear for equipment and nets. His paddle, a spliced guayaquil reed no longer used anywhere else in Peru, lay across the boat in front of him. It belonged to his father. He had taken it with him so that the old man could feel the power with which Juan Narciso plunged it into the water. Every evening since his father had fallen ill, Juan had placed

the paddle at his side and laid his father's hand on it so he could feel it: the continued existence of tradition, his reason for living.

He hoped that his father recognized what it was he was touching. He no longer recognized his son.

Ucañan finished inspecting the calcal. He had already looked it over on land, but nets were valuable and demanded every attention. The loss of a net meant certain ruin. Ucañan might be on the losing side in the poker game for the remaining resources of the Pacific, but he did not intend to yield to the slightest negligence, nor ever give himself up to the bottle. Nothing was more odious to him than the sight of those who had lost hope, who let their nets and boats rot. Ucañan knew that he would die if he ever saw such a sight in his own mirror.

He looked around. The small fleet of caballitos that had set out with him that morning lay fanned out on both sides, now almost a mile from the beach. Today the "little horses" did not bob up and down as usual. The sea was calm. The fishermen would remain out here for the next few hours, patient to the point of fatalism. In the meantime, bigger boats had joined them, wooden ones, and a trawler ploughed past, heading out for the ocean.

Ucañan watched irresolutely as one by one the men and women let their calcals glide into the sea, careful to keep them secured to the boat with a rope. Round, red buoys floated on the water. Ucañan knew that the time had come for him to lower his own net, but he thought of the past few days and continued staring at the others.

A few sardines, that was all.

He watched the trawler gradually grow smaller. There had been an El Niño this year too, but a comparatively harmless one. When it kept within limits, El Niño showed a second face that was smiling and benevolent. Lured by milder temperatures, large yellow-fin tuna and hammerhead sharks strayed into the Humboldt Current, which was usually inhospitable. Then stately portions landed on the fishermen's Christmas tables. Though until then, the few small fish tended to land in the stomachs of the big fish instead of in the fishermen's nets, but one could not have everything. Those who headed out further on a day like this had a good chance of bringing home a good catch.

Idle thoughts. Caballitos didn't head out that far. They might venture some seven miles out from shore in the safety of the group. The "little horses" also defied heavy seas, riding over the crests. The problem out there was the current. And if the sea was rough too, and the wind came blowing offshore, one had to muster a lot of brawn to paddle the caballito back to land.

Some fishermen had not returned.

Ucañan squatted motionless and straight as a plank on the plaited reeds. Waiting for the fish that wouldn't come today either had begun in the early light. He searched the Pacific expanse for the trawler. There had been a time in which he could have quite easily found work on one of the big ships or in the fish-meal factories, but those days were gone too. After the devastating El Niños of the late 'nineties, the factory workers too had lost their jobs. The large schools of sardines had not returned.

What should he do? He simply could not afford another day without a catch.

"You could give the señoritas surfing lessons."

That was the alternative. A job in one of the countless hotels, beneath whose might the old town of Huanchaco cowered. Tourist fishing. Wearing a ridiculous little jacket, mixing cocktails. Or coaxing cries of bliss from the lips of pampered American women—surfing, water-skiing, or in their rooms at night.

But Juan's father would die the day Juan broke the link to the past. Even if the old man had lost his faculties, he had to feel that his youngest son had not given up.

#

Ucañan clenched his fists until his knuckles bulged white. Then he picked up his paddle, and resolutely and with all his might began following the trawler that had disappeared. His movements were vehement, jerking with anger. With every dip of his paddle, the distance from the others grew. He moved forward fast. He knew that today his journey back to land would not be hampered by steep breakers, treacherous currents, or a stiff northerly wind. If he was going to risk it, then today was the day. There were still tuna, bonito, and mackerel in the deeper waters, and they weren't there only for the trawlers. They belonged to him too.

After a long while, he stopped and looked back. Huanchaco, with its cluster of houses, had become much smaller. All he saw around him was water. No caballitos following his lead. The small fleet had stayed far behind.

In the old days here in Peru we lived on the edge of a desert, his father had once said, a desert in the interior of the land. Nowadays we have two deserts: the second one is the sea at our doorstep. We have become a desert people frightened of the rain.

Ucañan was still too close to the coast.

As he continued paddling with powerful thrusts, he felt some of his old confidence returning. He was almost in the grip of high spirits, and imagined riding his “little horse” endlessly over the waters to where thousands upon thousands of sparkling silver backs shot forward beneath the surface, sparkling cascades in the sunlight, and where the swordfish leapt from the water and whales’ gray humps breached. Thrust after thrust, the paddle took him further away from the stench of betrayal. Ucañan’s arms moved as if of their own accord, and when he finally lowered his paddle and looked back again, the fishing village was no more than a silhouette of little boxes surrounded by white dots—the spreading mold of our times glittering in the sun, the hotels.

Ucañan felt uneasiness creeping over him. Never before had he dared head out so far. Not with a caballito. It was, God knows, a different matter to have planks beneath one’s feet instead of squatting on a narrow, sharp-beaked bundle of reeds. The morning mist might be misleading him, but he must be at least eight or nine miles out from Huanchaco, if not more.

He was alone.

Ucañan stopped for a moment. He said a short prayer to San Pedro, asking to be brought home safe and sound, his boat filled with fish. Then he took a deep breath of salty morning air, gathered up the calcal, and let it glide into the water. The meshes and their hooks gradually disappeared into the transparent darkness, until only the red buoy was floating next to the caballito.

What could go wrong? The weather was fine, and besides, Ucañan knew exactly where he was. An underwater mass of solidified lava rose from the seabed, a small craggy mountain range, its peaks almost reaching up to the surface. Sea anemones,

shellfish, and crabs had settled in it. A multitude of small fish lived in its cracks and caves. Large tuna, bonito, and swordfish came hunting. It was too risky for the trawlers to fish here, as they ran the danger of being torn open by the sharp crags, and the area did not yield a big enough catch for them.

But the catch would be more than enough for the brave rider of a caballito.

Ucañan smiled for the first time that day. He was bobbing up and down. The waves here were a little higher than near the coast, but he still felt quite comfortable on his reed boat. He stretched his limbs and blinked in the sun, which had risen pale and yellow over the mountains. Then he seized his paddle again and steered his caballito into the current with a few thrusts. He crouched and prepared himself for the next hour to watch the buoy that was dancing over the water a short distance from the boat.

#

In just under an hour he had caught three bonitos. They lay fat and gleaming at the back of the caballito.

Ucañan's spirits soared. This was better than his whole catch of the past four weeks. Now he could return, but as he was already out here, he might as well stay. The day had begun auspiciously. And it might end even better.

As it was, he had all the time in the world.

While the caballito drifted gently along the rocks, he gave the calcal more rope and watched the buoy skipping away over the water. His eyes kept searching the surface for the lighter patches where the rocks came close to the surface: it was vital that he stay far enough from them to keep his net out of harm's way. He yawned.

He felt a light tugging at the rope.

The next instant, the buoy disappeared between the crests of the waves. It reappeared, shot up, bobbed wildly from side to side for a few seconds, and then was dragged downward again.

Ucañan grabbed the rope. It tautened in his grip and tore the skin off his palms. He swore. The next moment, the caballito had tipped over on its side. Ucañan let go so as not to lose his balance. In the depths below him the buoy flashed red. The rope stretched steeply downward, taut as a tendon, and slowly pulled down the reed boat's stern.

What the hell was happening?

Something must have got into the net, something big and heavy. Perhaps a swordfish. But a swordfish would be swimming faster, dragging the caballito with it. Whatever was caught in the net wanted to go downward.

Ucañan quickly tried to grab hold of the rope again. Another tug shook the boat. He was dragged forward and landed in the waves. As he went under, he got water in his lungs. Coughing and spluttering, he came up for air and saw his caballito half flooded. The pointed bow was rearing into the air. The bonitos he had caught rolled back into the sea. At the sight of the sinking fish he was gripped by rage. He had lost them. He could not dive after them because he had his hands full trying to save the caballito, and himself with it.

A whole morning's catch! All for nothing!

The paddle was floating on the water nearby. Ucañan ignored it. He could get it later. With all his might he hurled himself against the bow, trying to force it downward. Suddenly he found himself underwater together with the caballito, which was still being

mercilessly pulled downward. He crawled feverishly up over the smooth reeds to the stern. His right hand felt through the interior of the storage area until it found what it was looking for. Praised be San Pedro! His knife had not been swept overboard, nor his diving mask, his most precious possession after his calcal.

With a single slash he cut through the rope.

The caballito immediately shot upward and whirled Ucañan around. He saw the sky turning above him, and his head plunged underwater again. Finally he lay panting on the reed boat, which was bobbing calmly again on the water as if nothing had happened.

He sat up in a daze. There was no sign of the buoy. He searched the water for the paddle. It was floating not too far away. He steered the caballito toward it, until he managed to pull in the paddle. He eyed the water around the boat.

There they were, the bright patches in the crystal-clear depths.

Ucañan cursed loudly. He had come too close to the underwater formations, and his calcal had got caught up in them. No wonder the caballito had been pulled downward. He had been daydreaming like a fool. And where the net was, there the buoy would be too. It could not rise as long as the net was caught in the rocks, since it was tied to it.

Ucañan thought what to do.

Yes, that was the answer. He was amazed at the violence with which he had very nearly been dragged to his death. The only plausible explanation seemed to be that he had lost his net on the rocks, but remnants of doubt remained.

He had lost his net!

He could not afford to lose it.

With fast paddle strokes, he brought the caballito to the spot where the brief drama had taken place. He peered into the clear water, but could see nothing except for a few bright, shapeless patches. There was no sign of the net or the buoy.

Was this really the right place?

He was a man of the sea. He had spent his life on these waters. Even without navigational equipment, he knew he was in the right place. This was where he had had to cut the rope so the boat would not be torn apart. His net was down there somewhere.

He would have to go get it.

The thought of diving for it was anything but pleasant. Ucañan swam well, but like most fishermen he didn't like the water. There was hardly a fisherman who really liked the sea. They were drawn to it, day after day. Many who had fished all their lives could not live without the sea's omnipresence, but it was not a happy coexistence. The sea used up their life's blood, with every foray kept some of it, and left behind silent, hopeless, dried up figures in harbor bars.

But Ucañan had a treasure. The gift from a tourist whom he had taken out to sea the previous year. He took the diving mask from the storage area, spat into it, and carefully rubbed away the spit so it would not fog up underwater. Then he rinsed it in the sea, pressed it onto his face, and pulled the strap over his head. It was actually quite an expensive mask, its edges made of soft, pliable latex. He did not have a snorkel, but that wasn't necessary. And he could hold his breath long enough to reach the rocks and free the net.

Ucañan weighed the danger of being attacked by sharks. In this area there usually weren't any that threatened humans. From time to time hammerheads, makos, and

herring sharks had been sighted plundering fishing nets, but that was further out. Great whites almost never appeared near Peru. Furthermore, diving in open waters was quite different from diving near rocks and reefs, which offered some protection. Ucañan was certain it had not been a shark that had dragged down his net.

His own carelessness was to blame. Nothing else.

He pumped up his lungs and dived into the waves. It was vital that he go down quickly, or the air in his lungs would keep him on the surface like a balloon. His body vertical, his head pointing down, he shot toward the bottom. From the boat, the water had seemed dark and impenetrable, but now a bright and friendly world opened up about him, with a clear view of the volcanic reef, which stretched over a few hundred yards. The rocks were speckled with sunlight. He saw hardly any fish at all, but his attention was elsewhere. His eyes were searching the reef for his calcal. He could not stay down too long, as he didn't want to risk his caballito floating away. If he did not catch sight of the net in the next few seconds, he would surface again and attempt a second dive.

Even if he had to dive ten times, or keep diving half the day, he could not return to land without his net.

Then he saw the buoy.

It was floating above a fissured ledge at a depth of thirty-five to forty feet. The net was hanging directly beneath it. It seemed to be caught in various places. Tiny reef fish swarmed around the meshes and scattered as Ucañan approached. He righted himself by the reef, kicked his legs, and began to pry the calcal loose. His open shirt billowed in the current.

He noticed suddenly that the net was completely ripped to pieces.

He looked at the devastation in dismay. It had not been caused by the rocks alone.

What in heaven's name had run amok down here?

And where was this creature now?

Gripped by sudden fear, Ucañan began to tug at the net. There would be quite a few days of mending ahead. He began to run out of air. It seemed as if he might not be able to raise it in a single dive, but even a destroyed calcal was valuable.

He stopped.

There was no point. He would have to surface, see to his caballito, and then dive again.

Suddenly he felt something change. At first he thought a cloud had covered the sun. The dancing patches of light had vanished from the rocks. The crags and plants no longer cast shadows.

He hesitated.

His hands, his net—the color had faded from everything. But even clouds could not have caused this sudden change. Within seconds, the sky above Ucañan had darkened.

He let go of the calcal and looked up.

Just beneath the surface, as far as the eye could see, stretched a school of shimmering, arm-long fish. Ucañan was so taken aback that some air escaped from his lungs and rose in a stream of bubbles to the surface. He wondered where this enormous school of fish had suddenly come from. He had never seen anything like it. Their bodies seemed almost motionless—only now and then he noticed the twitching of a tailfin, or a

single fish darting forward: then, suddenly, the whole school would adjust its position a few degrees, the fish moving collectively, their bodies drawing even closer.

This was typical for a school of fish. And yet something wasn't right. It wasn't so much the behavior of the fish that unsettled him. It was the fish themselves.

There were simply too many of them.

Ucañan spun around. Wherever he looked, the immense number of fish stretched out to infinity. He leaned his head back as far as he could, and through a gap in the fish saw the shadow of his caballito against the crystalline, shimmering, surface. Then this last gap closed too. It grew even darker, and the remaining air in his lungs began to burn sharply.

Mahi-mahi, he thought in bewilderment.

Nobody would have dared hope to see them return. He ought to have been overjoyed. Mahi-mahi brought a good price on the market, and a net filled with them could feed a fisherman and his family for a long time.

But Ucañan felt no joy.

He was overcome by a creeping fear.

This school of fish was unbelievable. It stretched from one horizon to the other. Had the mahi-mahi destroyed his calcal? A school of mahi-mahi? How could that be?

You've got to get out of here, he said to himself.

He pushed away from the rocks. Struggling to keep calm, he rose slowly and carefully, blowing out the rest of the air. He floated up toward the closely packed bodies separating him from the surface, from the sunlight, and from his boat. In the meantime, the school of fish had come to a complete standstill, an endless, indifferent, goggle-eyed

gathering. And yet he felt it was for him alone that these fish had appeared so suddenly from nowhere, as if they were waiting for him.

They want to stop me, suddenly shot through his mind. They want to stop me from getting back to my boat.

Suddenly he was gripped by cold terror. His heart raced. He was no longer careful about how fast he was rising, no longer thought about the tattered calca and the buoy, not even about his caballito. His only thought was to break through the terrible density above, to get back to the surface, back to the light, to safety.

A few fish twitched to the side.

Something came uncoiling toward Ucañan from their midst.

Later, the wind freshened.

There was still not a cloud in the sky. The swell grew a little stronger, without becoming uncomfortable for a man in a small boat.

But no man was to be seen.

Nobody anywhere.

Only the caballito, one of the last of its kind, slowly floating out toward the open ocean.

[...]

[The Swarm, by Frank Schätzing, translated by Peter Constantine. Second sample]

p. 508-516

Montauk, USA

Linda and Darryl Hooper had been married for three weeks and were spending their honeymoon on Long Island. It had become more expensive since the days when the fishermen outnumbered the movie stars. Now hundreds of elegant seafood restaurants looked out onto miles of sandy beaches. New York society came out in style, their mansions neighboring those of America's wealthy industrialists in East Hampton, a picture-postcard town where an average worker could never afford to live. Southampton too, a little further west, was not exactly cheap. But Darryl Hooper had made a name for himself as an up-and-coming young lawyer. In the big law firm in the heart of Manhattan he was seen as the senior partner's protégé. Hooper was still earning comparatively little, but he knew he was on the threshold of making a great deal of money. And he had married a really sweet girl. Linda had been the heartthrob of all the law students but she had chosen him, even though he was losing his hair at an early age and had to wear thick glasses, since contact lenses irritated his eyes.

Hooper was happy. Conscious of impending blessings, he had decided to allow Linda and himself a small extravagance. The hotel in Southampton was too expensive. Every evening they spent over a hundred dollars at one of the nicer restaurants in the neighborhood. But he had no problem with that: They both worked hard and deserved a little bit of luxury. Before long, young Mr. and Mrs. Hooper would be able to afford all the most exclusive places whenever they were in the mood.

He drew his arm tighter around his wife and looked out onto the Atlantic. The sun was about to disappear in the sea. The sky was turning violet. Fields of mist glimmered pink on the horizon. The sea sent flat waves toward the beach, waves that out of consideration for work-worn city folk splashed discreetly instead of breaking thunderously. Hooper wondered whether they should not stay here for a while and return to Southampton later. At the moment there was still quite a lot of traffic along the highway, but in an hour or so they could get through without a problem. If he revved up his Harley, they could do the thirty miles in under twenty minutes. Leaving now would be such a waste.

Furthermore, after sundown this area was reputed to be the ideal place for lovers.

They slowly strolled along the top of the flat cliffs. After a few paces, a large smooth hollow opened up before them. An ideal secluded spot. Hooper was very much in love, and took pleasure in the thought that they were far from prying eyes. He could hear the sea from beyond the cliffs. They were completely alone, it seemed. The beach was just around the corner; most of the lovers were probably walking along it, but here this was his and Linda's world.

Not in his wildest dreams would it have occurred to Hooper that two technicians in a subterranean chamber at Buckley Field were watching via satellite at an altitude of 120 miles how he kissed his wife, how he slid his hands beneath her T-shirt and slipped it off, how he unbuckled his belt, how they undressed one another, how they lay intertwined on their bundle of clothes. He kissed and caressed Linda's body. She rolled onto her back, his lips wandering from her breasts to her stomach, while he tried to be everywhere with his hands.

She giggled. “Don’t. You’re tickling me.”

He removed his hand from her inner thigh and continued kissing her impetuously.

“Hey. What are you doing?”

Hooper looked at her. What was he doing? He was doing what he always did, what he knew she liked.

He kissed her on the mouth and saw her bewildered look. She was looking past him. Hooper turned and looked behind him.

A crab was sitting on Linda’s shin.

She cried out sharply and shook it off. The crab fell onto its back, spread its claws, and managed to right itself.

“My God, what a fright that gave me!”

“I guess he wanted to join in,” Hooper said with a grin. “Sorry, guy, go look for your own mate.”

Linda laughed and propped herself up on her elbows.

“He’s a weird little fellow,” she said. “I’ve never seen one like that before.”

“What’s so weird about him?”

“Don’t you think he looks weird?”

Hooper took a closer look. The crab remained motionless on the rocky ground. It wasn’t particularly big, perhaps about four inches long, and completely white. Its shell shone against the dark ground. Its color was unusual, but there was something else that Hooper couldn’t quite put his finger on. Linda was right. The crab looked weird.

Then he realized what it was.

“It doesn’t have eyes,” he said.

“You’re right.” She rolled over and on her hands and knees crawled toward the crab, which sat there motionless. “How strange! Do you think there’s something wrong with it?”

“It looks more like it never had any.” Hooper ran his fingertips over her backbone. “Who cares? Leave it alone, it’s harmless.”

Linda eyed the crab. Then she threw a pebble at it. It didn’t recoil, and there wasn’t the slightest hint of a reaction. Linda tapped its claw and quickly pulled her finger back, but nothing happened.

“What a stoical creature, don’t you think?”

“Come on, leave the stupid crab alone.”

“It’s not even defending itself.”

Hooper sighed. He crouched down next to her and humored her by giving the crab a little push.

“You’re right. Cool as a cucumber.”

She smiled, turned her head toward him, and kissed him. Hooper felt the tip of her tongue bump and swirl against his. He closed his eyes and yielded to the pleasure.

“Darryl.”

He saw that the crab was suddenly sitting on the hand on which she was still leaning. Behind it sat another. And next to it another. He glanced up the rock that separated the hollow from the beach, and thought he was having a nightmare. The dark rock had disappeared beneath a swarm of armored bodies. White eyeless bodies with claws were packed against each other as far as the eye could see.

Millions of them.

Linda stared at the motionless creatures.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

That same moment, the mass began to move. Hooper had seen small crustaceans darting across beaches before, but had always thought that crabs hobbled along slowly and complacently. But these crabs were fast. Their speed was terrible, like a wave that was streaming toward them. Their hard legs drummed softly on the rocky ground.

Linda jumped up, naked as she was, and began inching away. Hooper tried to gather up her clothes. He staggered. Half of them fell from his hands. The raging army of crabs swarmed over them, and Hooper jumped back.

The crabs followed him.

“They’re harmless!” he shouted halfheartedly, but Linda had already turned around and was running up the cliff.

“Linda!”

She tripped and fell. Hooper ran to her. The next moment the crabs were everywhere, swarming all over them. Linda began screaming shrilly, panic-stricken. Hooper beat the crabs off her back and off his forearms with the flat of his hand. She jumped up, her face wrenched with terror, and flung her hands to her hair. Crabs were scampering over her head. Hooper grabbed her and pushed her forward. He didn’t want to hurt her, he just wanted them to break out of this never-ending avalanche that was pouring over the cliffs, but Linda tripped again, pulling him down. He lost his balance. He fell and felt the small hard bodies crack open beneath his weight. Splinters painfully pierced his flesh. He flailed about, felt hundreds of pointed feet rush over him, saw blood on his fingers, and finally managed to get up and drag Linda with him.

They somehow made it to the top of the cliff. Chitin crackled beneath their feet as they ran naked to the Harley. Hooper looked back as he ran, and gasped. From the pedestal of the lighthouse he could see that the entire beach was swarming with crabs. They were coming out of the sea in countless numbers, more and more of them. The first crabs had now reached the parking lot and seemed to be moving even faster on the smooth surface. Hooper ran as hard as he could, dragging Linda behind him. The soles of his feet were full of splinters. Repulsive slime was clinging to his feet. He had to be careful not to slip and fall. Finally they got to the Harley, jumped on, and Hooper pressed the starter.

They sped off, out of the parking lot and onto the road to Southampton. The bike veered wildly over the pulp of crushed crabs, then they were out of the swarm and shot along the asphalt. Linda clung to him with all her strength. A delivery van was coming toward them. An old man sat at the wheel, staring at them in disbelief. It's only in the movies that you come across such scenes—flashed through Hooper's mind—two people naked on a motorcycle. If all this were not so terrible, he would have split his sides laughing.

The first houses of Montauk appeared. The easternmost point of Long Island was little more than a narrow strip, and the road ran parallel to the coast. As Hooper was heading toward the town, he saw the white flood of crabs approaching from his left. They were apparently coming out of the sea here too. They poured over the cliffs and were making straight for the road.

Hooper revved up his Harley.

The white flood was faster.

A few yards from the town sign, the crabs reached the road and turned the asphalt into a sea of bodies. At the same moment a pickup truck backed out of a driveway. Hooper felt the Harley begin to skid and tried to dodge the truck, but the bike was no longer obeying him.

No, he thought. Oh my God, please no.

The truck rolled diagonally across the road while the Harley skidded toward it. Hooper heard Linda shout, and tore the handlebars around. He veered past the truck's decorated hood by a hair's breadth. The Harley spun around. After a few seconds, Hooper managed to regain control. People jumped out of the way. He paid them no heed. The road before him was free.

He fled toward Southampton at top speed.

#

Buckley Field

“What in God’s name is that?”

“Cody’s fingers sped over the keyboard. He placed different filters over the images, but the result was still a light-colored mass that was emerging from the sea and heading inland with great speed.

“It looks like a breaker,” he said, “like some goddamn giant wave.”

“Our monitors didn’t catch a wave,” Mike replied. “There was no wave. It must be alive.”

“Alive? What the hell do you mean ‘alive’?”

“They are...” Mike stared at the images. He pointed to a spot. “There. Bring it in closer. Give me a detail of a square yard.”

Cody selected the area and enlarged it. The result was an area of light and dark pixels. Mike narrowed his eyes.

“Closer.”

The pixels grew larger. Some were white, others shades of gray.

“Call me crazy,” Mike said slowly, “but these could be...” Was it possible? What else could they be? What else came from the sea and could move so fast?

“Claws,” he said. “These could be shells with claws.”

Cody stared at him. “Claws?”

“Crabs.”

Cody’s mouth fell open. Then he ordered the satellite to continue scanning further along the coast.

The KG-12-4 worked its way from Montauk to East Hampton and then on to Southampton, Mastic Beach and Patchogue. With every new image the probe sent in, Mike felt eerier.

“This can’t be happening,” he said.

“Can’t it?” Cody looked at him. “It is fucking happening! Something is coming up out of the sea. All the way down the coast of Long Island, something is coming out of the goddamn sea. You still wish you were in Montauk?”

Mike rubbed his eyes.

He reached for the phone to call headquarters.

#

Greater New York

Some distance from Montauk, Highway 27 crossed to the Long Island Expressway, leading directly to Queens. The distance from Montauk to New York was about 120 miles, and the closer one got to the city, the busier the Expressway became. Halfway there, after Patchogue, the traffic got much heavier.

Bo Henson ran his own private courier service. He drove the Long Island route twice a day. In Patchogue he had picked up a few packages from the local airport and delivered them throughout the area. Now he was on his way back to Manhattan. It was late, but if one wanted to compete with companies like FedEx one could not afford to complain about working long hours. But Henson's workday was now drawing to a close. As it was, he had finished everything earlier than he had anticipated. He was tired and looking forward to a beer.

Near Amityville, about twenty-five miles from Queens, a car in front of him began to skid.

Henson jammed on the brakes. The driver in front regained control of his car, slowed down, and turned on his warning blinkers. A great stretch of highway was covered with something. At first glance Henson could not make out in the twilight what it was. He only saw that it was moving and that it was coming out of the shrubbery from the left. Then he saw that the highway was swarming with crabs. Small, snow-white crabs. Crowding together, they were trying to cross the highway, but it was proving a hopeless venture. Pulpy tire tracks and crushed shells indicated how many had already paid with their lives.

The traffic crawled forward. The stuff was like soap. Henson cursed out loud. He wondered where these creatures had sprung from. He had read in a magazine that the land crabs of Christmas Island came marching once a year from the mountains to the sea. Some hundred million crabs. But Christmas Island was in the Indian Ocean, and the pictures had shown big, bright red crabs, not a swarming white mass like this.

Henson had never seen anything like it.

Still cursing, he turned on the radio. After searching for a while he found a country station, leaned back, and gave up. Dolly Parton did her best to reconcile him to the situation, but Henson's mood was ruined. Ten minutes passed, the news came on, but there was not a word about a crab invasion. And yet a snowplow suddenly cut a path through the line of cars inching forward, and tried to sweep the crawling mass from the road. The result was a complete standstill. For a while nothing moved. Henson kept switching from one local station to another, but not a word was said about the crabs, which drove him wild, because on top of all his despair he felt ignored. The air-conditioner was blowing an unhealthy stench into the car, so he finally turned it off.

Before the intersection that led to Hempstead on the left and Long Beach on the right, the traffic once more began to pick up. The crabs had evidently not got this far. Henson stepped on the gas pedal and arrived in Queens an hour later than he had expected. He was furious. A few blocks from the East River, he turned left, crossed Newtown Creek, and headed to one of his favorite bars in Greenpoint. He parked, got out, and almost had a fit when he saw what state his van was in. The tires, wheel wells, and the sides of his van all the way to the windows were smeared with crab pulp. A

terrible sight—and he had to be on the road again at the crack of dawn. There was no way he could make his deliveries with the van in this state.

Henson shrugged his shoulders: it was late already, so his beer might as well wait till he had taken the van to the 24-hour carwash nearby. He drove three blocks to the carwash and told the attendants to make sure they hosed down the wheels especially well to get rid of the last bit of gunk. He told them to bring the van over to the bar and walked back so he could finally have his beer.

The carwash was known for doing good, thorough jobs. The greasy layer on the van proved stubborn, but after being hosed for a long time with high-pressured stream, it finally dissolved. The young man who was holding the hose saw the lumps of pulp literally melt away. Like jello in the sun, he thought.

Everything flowed into the drains.

New York had a unique sewerage system. While traffic and subway tunnels went beneath the East River at a depth of only about a hundred feet, the network of pipes for drinking water and drainage reached depths of up to eight hundred feet. Engineers were always digging new tunnels deep in the earth with colossal drills so that the giant metropolis' supply of clean water and the removal of waste did not grind to a halt. Beside this complex network of pipes there was also a series of old tunnels that were no longer in use. According to experts, nobody knew anymore where all these tunnels were. There was no map of the entire network. Some of the tunnels were known only to certain bands of homeless people who kept the secret to themselves. Other tunnels had inspired monster movies, where they served as a breeding ground for all sorts of monsters. One thing was certain: anything that ended up in New York's sewers was regarded as lost.

That evening and in the days that followed a large number of cars that had come in from Long Island were washed in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and Manhattan. The waste flowed into the entrails of the city, spreading out and mixing with other waters until it was pumped back into water-recycling plants and redistributed throughout the boroughs. A few hours after the carwash had brought a spotless van back to Henson, everything was inseparably mixed.

Within six hours, the first ambulances went racing through the streets.