



Fascinating futuristic novel

Marco Kunst

Wiped

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY remain the most important engines of progress. Perhaps technological progress could eventually produce a society like the one described in Marco Kunst's debut novel *Wiped*: the ultimate welfare state where poverty, suffering,

desire, and hunger for knowledge are completely unknown, in which humanity has achieved a permanent state of emotional bliss, driven and guided by a single computer. A fantasy or a terrifying vision of the world to come? The obvious question is whether a society so lacking in emotion would still be 'human'. Would it ever be right for mankind to hand over its power and freedom to a single machine? *Wiped* is Marco Kunst's response to questions like these, a fascinating futuristic novel in three parts, rich in ideas and packed with excitement and adventure.

In a distant future, thousands of towering apartment blocks and office buildings rise high into the sky. 'Floaters' and air scooters criss-cross the air between them. This is the City, 'both a miracle and a monstrosity', where thirteen-year-old Sig seems destined to spend his life. Well-organized, peaceful, but completely artificial, it is enclosed by city walls several kilometres high. Everything, 'right down to your thoughts, feelings and memories,' is regulated by the Central Computer, 'the CC'.

But Sig, dumped on a rubbish heap outside the city walls by accident, discovers that the City is a meaningless illusion, cut off as it is from its surroundings and history.

In the belt, a grimy grey-green no man's land, Sig is rescued by old Plyster, an extraordinary man who shares his fate. With the help of this peculiar character, Sig narrowly escapes having his personality and memory 'wiped' by the CC. Together they set out on an adventurous journey, intending to liberate the inhabitants of the City from the city wall.

After a long struggle, beset by doubts and uncertainty, Sig achieves this goal with the help of Montesquieu's three-branch theory of government (the legislative, executive and judicial branches that balance each other), which turns out to be the key to the liberation.

MIRJAM NOORDUIJN

Marco Kunst (b. 1966) intended *Wiped* to be a gripping read. In *Wiped*, Kunst, a philosophy graduate, adopted the intriguing framework of a thought experiment that would involve lessons about contemporary reality. The book developed into a futuristic novel. It is no coincidence that classics such as *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Torenhoog en Mijlen Breed* by Tonke Dragt and *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende are high on Kunst's list of favourite books.

In Gewist, well-known and fairytale elements are recycled in a witty and ingenious fashion.

JUDITH EISELIN in *NRC HANDELSBLAD*

One of the most extraordinary future-oriented novels for young people to appear in years.

HANNEKE VAN DEN BERG in
NOORD-HOLLANDS DAGBLAD

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An portrait of Marco Kunst

‘From Paradise to the Dump’

by Ernst Jan Rozendaal
(Provinciale Zeeuwse Courant)

translated by Liz Waters

Tomorrow sees the launch in Middelburg of a lengthy young adult novel by Marco Kunst, who was born in 1966 and grew up in Vlissingen. *Wiped* is the first science fiction book ever published by Querido. Eighteen months ago, Kunst sent the publishing house his half-finished manuscript. He received a phone call from the head of the young adult department. ‘He was very curious to know who it was who had helped him overcome his aversion to the science fiction genre.’

This is not Marco Kunst’s first book. Six years ago he wrote a story called *De markies van scharrebak* for a series published in Zeeland called Slibreeks. The following year Kunst, a philosophy graduate who now lives in Amsterdam, became a full member of the literary fraternity when he published the story collection *De genietmachine*, an evocative account of how he grew up.

‘*Wiped* is a very different book,’ Kunst explains. ‘*De genietmachine* was well received by the critics. I was then faced with the most difficult task for any writer – to write a second book. For three years I wrestled with ideas for adult novels. Out of a kind of perversity, I suddenly decided it was no longer what I wanted to do. I put all literary pretensions aside and set out to write the kind of book I used to read under the bedclothes by torchlight when I was a boy of thirteen. I decided to concentrate on enjoying myself as a writer. That gave me an enormous sense of freedom. And it was only then that my imagination really got going.’

The result is *Wiped*. The story of thirteen-year-old Sig is set in the distant future. He lives in a large city surrounded by high walls, where a Central Computer ensures that everyone always feels happy. When Sig is accidentally picked up by a mechanical sweeper and dumped on the rubbish belt outside the city, all memories of him in the city are wiped. His own memory is supposed to be wiped too, but he manages to escape intact. Kunst’s account of Sig’s subsequent experiences outside the city and how he tries to find his way back home is thoroughly gripping.

The province of Zeeland played an important role in his earlier books, but *Wiped* has a very different setting. Nevertheless, Kunst says there is a connection between his own childhood and the city in the book. ‘Until I was ten, Walcheren was my own private domain, a clearly defined landscape behind high dunes. I felt safe there. Everything changed when I was about Sig’s age. I went to middle

school, my grandfather died and my world was broken open. That's what happens to Sig. In a sense he is thrown out of paradise.'

Paradise

But once outside the walls of the city, the boy begins to ask himself whether a world in which all emotions and feelings are influenced by a computer is really such a paradise after all.

Kunst acknowledges that the book is full of implicit questions about contemporary society. 'I have always read a lot of science fiction. To me its most interesting feature is the thought experiment. I have taken several of today's parameters and set them to infinity, then tried to describe the results as cogently as possible. What happens if you take the economic growth we all strive for to its logical conclusion? Where might our innate desire for luxury, ease and security ultimately lead? The story is not just pure fantasy.'

'Now the book is finished, I realise I've included a number of things that have always fascinated me without even realising it. When I was studying philosophy, I learnt that the Anglo Saxon philosophers in particular liked to experiment in ways that are very much like science fiction. I do something similar here. For example, I look at what the effect of thirty years of isolation might be on a person's use of language. The relationship between nature and culture also intrigues me. In this book I show how people can lose touch with their sensory experiences in a high-tech society.'

Kunst hopes that by touching on these themes he has made his book interesting not only to children but to adults as well. 'I didn't write it only for the boy I used to be when I was twelve. It had to be of interest to the person I am now.'

Young adult books

Although he does not dare to predict how *Wiped* will be received, Kunst feels he has been permanently won over to young adult literature. 'Last year, two of my literary short stories were published in *De Gids*. I'm also writing a story for their summer edition. That gives me the chance to concentrate on experimental structures and language. But in the meantime I have three fairly well developed ideas for young adult books. When I work on those I have to use language in a much more conventional manner, but I find I far prefer it. I seem to have discovered a much more fruitful source of inspiration in writing stories for young people.'

Sample translation from

Wiped by Marco Kunst
(Amsterdam: Querido, 2004)

Translated by Liz Waters

Chapter One: The Rail Cleaner

Sig was woken by a voice blaring from the loudspeakers. “Maintenance station Alfa-7, terminus of Line 34. Carriage L17 kindly requests you to alight here and thanks you for your cooperation.”

Sig blinked and looked around. He was the only person left on the metro train. He had fallen asleep and missed his stop.

“Line 34. Carriage L17 kindly and urgently requests you to alight here and thanks you for your cooperation,” the computer voice insisted.

He stood up, shook himself awake, went over to the sliding doors and stepped out of the metro compartment onto the platform. All kinds of maintenance machines and cleaner robots were shuffling and trundling all over the station, but there were no people in sight. There was no reason for anyone to be here. It was a quiet, cold, bleak place. He couldn’t even hear any music. There were no advertisements or decorations on the walls and a cold wind was blowing, with a strange smell. It was very different from all the normal metro stations. Behind him he heard the metro train he’d just stepped out of close its doors and move off with a soft hum. He looked around uncertainly to see where he could get a train back.

“Good afternoon. Maintenance station Alfa-7 kindly requests you to go to platform 2 and await the arrival of line 34 in direction B.” Again a computer voice speaking to him. The loudspeakers were turned up too high. The voice boomed through the station.

Sig walked drowsily along the platform. The maintenance machines slid efficiently out of his way with a hum as he went in search of a pedestrian bridge or a tunnel that would get him to the other side. He was annoyed with himself. How could he have slept for so long?

He’d been on his way home from school as usual. By metro, the same route he took every day after school. For the first six stops he always sat with Omeg and Tau. After that he had another eight stops to go, to station B52.

The last part of the journey was always boring. You could have a good laugh with Tau, Omeg was pretty okay too, but sitting on your own in the metro was dull. There was nothing to see, nothing to do, nothing happening. Only bright lights, plastic bucket seats, dreary piped music and people staring into space.

Today, a few stations after Omeg and Tau got out, Sig had fallen asleep. That was nothing unusual. He almost always woke up in time, just before his own stop. One time he’d had to travel back a few stops. But that was all. Nothing to get upset about. It was just that he fell asleep easily.

This time he hadn’t woken up until the end of the line. At least thirty stops beyond where he was supposed to get out. He must have been asleep for an hour and a half.

“Maintenance station Alfa-7 kindly and urgently requests you to go to platform 2 and await the arrival of line 34, direction B.”

“Okay, okay, take it easy,” Sig muttered. Computers could make such a fuss sometimes. He’d be home hours later than normal now. He tried to call home, but his wrist module didn’t work here. It must be because this was a place for machines, not people. Or had the stupid thing just decided to break down? He tapped the screen with his finger. It lit up. An eye appeared on the screen. The

eye looked at him for a moment and then closed with a look of indifference. That meant, *'Nothing to worry about'*. The screen went dark again. Alright, no calls then. Nobody would be home anyway. There was never anybody home.

Sig looked around. There were no signs with information or arrows, as there would be at a normal station. Which way was he supposed to go?

“Maintenance station Alfa-7 urgently requests you to go to platform 2 and await the arrival of line 34, direction B.”

Sig gave a deep sigh, shrugged, then listened to see if he could hear a train coming. He couldn't hear anything, so he carefully lowered himself from the platform onto the track. He'd just have to cross to the other platform. He knew it was forbidden, but no one would see him here and he was in a hurry. He wanted to get home.

Almost immediately, a rail cleaner came round the bend silently but very fast and swept him up, a great big machine with a shovelling scoop at the front. Sig had watched them go past many times. The scoop was almost always empty, apart from a few scraps of paper or a lost plastic bag and a few bits of fluff, even though they tore through hundreds of kilometres of metro tunnel. Rail cleaners always left the track spotlessly clean behind them and spread sweet flowery scents through the metro stations.

Now he was lying in one of the scoops as the rail cleaner drove on towards the dark entrance to the metro tunnel. He tried to stand up so he could jump out of the scoop back onto the platform, but it was too late. The machine had reached the tunnel entrance and was heading straight on into the darkness. Shocked, and afraid he might hit something in the dark, Stig sat down again with a bump. It was only now that the machine really started to pick up speed. Apparently rail cleaners braked when they came to the stations and raced through the tunnels at great speed once they had passed the platforms.

He was going faster and faster. Sig felt around in the dark for something to grab, but the inside of the scoop was lined with smooth plastic and there was nothing at all to hold on to. Cold air blew in his face and pressed him against the back of the scoop. He felt the machine negotiate a few shallow bends. For the first few seconds they went down deeper into the earth, then they started to climb again. The only sounds he could hear were the wind rushing past and the frantic panting of his own breath. The rail cleaner itself made almost no noise at all.

Sig was frightened. His heart thumped in his throat. He'd never been afraid before in his life. For a moment he even thought about the roller coaster he'd ridden on, which went a lot faster than this and had taken much sharper bends. But he'd never been completely alone in the pitch dark before, heading for an unknown destination. Because what really worried Sig was that the machine was not going back towards the centre of the City but further and further away from it. And even the station where it had scooped him up had been right at the edge of the City.

Less than a minute later – although it seemed to take hours – the tunnel started to lead upwards and Sig began to breathe more easily. He told himself he'd soon arrive at some work station or other and the machine would come to a halt. He'd be able to get out and call home. Or if not, the rail cleaner would eventually turn around and take a different tunnel back into the City. He could shout to the people on the platforms for help at whatever station they came to.

But that was not what happened. Not at all. The rail cleaner went on climbing all right, and it seemed to be braking, but their destination was a place Sig could not even have dreamed about.

The first thing he noticed was a different smell. It smelt a bit like the air that wafted out of the garbage chute in the flat when you threw things into it, but this smell was stronger and the air was colder. Then the darkness in the tunnel started to lift. Soon there was enough light in the tunnel to see the walls as they went by. The walls were no longer lined with smooth, shiny plastic, as they were all over the City. Here the tunnel was roughly hacked out of the rock. After another

shallow bend, Sig saw daylight in the distance. It was only a small point of light, but so bright it made him blink.

They went on upwards and the rocks gave way to smooth walls again, softly reflecting the light. And then finally they rode out of the tunnel. Sig could not believe his eyes. He was no longer in the City! That last smooth wall must have been the city wall itself.

Sig had never been out of the City. No one ever left the City, they never even thought about it. The City was so big that everyone spent his entire life there without being bored for a second. Sig had never learnt anything at school about the world beyond the wall. Everyone knew the city wall, but nobody ever thought about what might be behind it.

The City was a whole world in itself and everyone was perfectly satisfied with it. It was not just a place, it was the Eternal Cycle: a single great complex in which everything had its own fixed place.

The City and the Cycle would last for ever, without needing anything from the outside world. Surrounded by walls that were kilometres higher than the tallest buildings, you simply forgot it was possible for anything to exist anywhere else. The city walls and the gleaming force field above the City had always made Sig feel safe. No one ever talked about the world outside the walls. Never.

And now the City had suddenly spat him out. He'd been puffed out through a tiny hole in the wall, along with a few bits of fluff and an empty lemonade bottle.

Sig was totally unable to comprehend what he was looking at. The rails ran on in a straight line as far as he could see, high above the ground, perhaps forty metres, and apart from that there was nothing but rubbish. They were riding along above an immense range of rubbish mountains, stretching away in every direction. For as far as Sig could see, there was nothing but stinking garbage. Waste, mountains of rubble, discarded furniture, bits of enormous machines. The city walls must be behind him, rising into the sky, but the rail cleaner blocked his view in that direction.

Above the rubbish mountains, strange, shrieking creatures circled in the sky. Most of them were grey and white with hard, pointed yellow beaks and big wings. Others were a bit smaller, and black. They dived into the rubbish piles from high above and then rose again with their spoils, flapping their wings as others attacked them. Sig had only ever known people, tissue culture, plants and robots. The flying creatures looked terrifying. Fortunately they weren't very big and they didn't seem to be paying any attention to him or the rail cleaner.

The stench of refuse hung like a damp cloud above the heaps, blasting into Sig's face in waves. He pressed himself into the back of the rubbish scoop and sat there watching, immobilized. There was nothing else he could do, since the rail cleaner simply raced ahead. The heaps of rubbish joined to form high ridges and great mountain ranges.

Twice Sig saw some kind of maintenance team at work in the distance. He screamed and waved at them, but they didn't react. They were unmanned machines, deafly making their way through the rubbish. Hundreds of flying creatures swarmed in their wake.

Sig refused to believe his eyes, and anyhow he couldn't take it in. Everything at school and everything in the City had been regarded as part of the Cycle. The Cycle of the City: life came out of dead material, went through phases of growth and creativity and then, after an enjoyable and useful existence, was reabsorbed into the Cycle. Everything was part of an eternal whole. That was the point of it and that was the reason a person would want to be an inhabitant of the City. If the Cycle was not interrupted, it would go on for ever. This was what Sig and the rest of his class had been taught at school. The Cycle Guidelines echoed through Sig's head:

The City is the eternal Cycle.

The Cycle is a machine.

Every citizen and every thing is part of the Cycle.

Every citizen and every thing is part of the machine.

The CC is the guardian of the machine

Every citizen is needed as long as he is useful.

Every citizen is useful as long as he is happy.

The aim of the City is the eternal happiness of its citizens.

Happiness is nothing more than the feeling of happiness.

The Cycle is happiness.

The City is eternal happiness.

The CC is the guardian of happiness...

It was as if by reciting the Guidelines Sig was trying to put up a wall between himself and everything he could see, between himself and the endless ocean of garbage. Chunks of concrete, rotting food, shards of plastic, bottles, builders' rubble, old paper – everything all mixed up together, flapping and blowing about in the strong wind. He stopped looking at it, but that didn't help. He could still smell the garbage. He frantically hoped that the rail cleaner would turn around and ride back into the City, so he could forget what he had seen.

The trip on the rail cleaner ended just as suddenly and roughly as it had begun. They reached the last of the rubbish mountains and the machine braked. The garbage scoop swung sideways with one great sweep and Sig, the lemonade bottle and the few bits of fluff the scoop had collected on its way were flung in a wide arc, high into the air. Sig curled up, cushioning his head in his arms, and waited to hit the ground with a crash. It was a crash he could hardly hope to survive from such a great height.

The fall seemed to last for ever. He fell faster and faster towards the ground. The wind rushed past his ears. But he was lucky. Very lucky. An enormous heap of plastic sheeting and packaging material broke his fall. Bumping and jolting, he slid down the rubbish slope, hitting the occasional hard object, rolling over and over, until he came to a halt at the bottom.

He lay there stunned and frightened. He watched the rail cleaner set off again and drive away as if nothing had happened, not back towards the City but across a bare, rocky plain where there was no sign of human civilization apart from the railway. Sig lay there curled up in the awkward position he had landed in, watching the machine go. It was as if the last thing that connected him with home was rapidly disappearing into the distance.

All his strength drained out of him. The ride from the metro terminus had lasted barely half an hour, but he felt as if he'd been travelling for days, as if he'd seen more of the world than in all the previous years of his life put together, only to be discarded afterwards. The City had spat him out, like a garbage bag or an old shoe. Like someone dead and forgotten and no longer part of the Cycle. The Cycle must be a lie anyhow, or where did all this rubbish come from?

One thing was certain: he had to get out of here as quickly as possible. But he would never make it without help, he was far too far from the City for that. Confused, Sig closed his eyes, determined not to open them again until he was found, until a maintenance crew came and rescued him.

Or perhaps until he woke up. His heart leapt at the thought and he immediately grasped at it. That must be it. This was just a bad dream. Someone – Omeg or Tau or some other idiot at school – must have slipped a dream chip into his lunch, a badly programmed or broken dream chip, one that was much too strong. Suddenly he was convinced of it. He was sitting in the metro as usual, and if he really did open his eyes and shake off the dream, everything would be normal again. Maybe he'd even wake up in time to get off at the right stop.

Relieved, he took a deep breath, keeping his eyes shut for a bit longer. Concentrating hard, he thought he could feel the metro seat under him. He only had to wait until the chip had played itself out. He'd get him all right, whoever it was who had done this.

But however hard he tried to think it away, Sig could still hear the depressing flap and rustle of plastic and paper and feel the cold stones under the plastic sticking into his side. His whole body felt bruised by the fall. The memory of the

metro seat vanished. He closed his eyes even tighter, then blinked a couple of times. That was enough to see that he was still lying at the bottom of a rubbish heap. He curled up even smaller and wished he was at home, or at school, or anywhere else in the City. Or even dead, for that matter, reabsorbed into the Cycle – anything rather than having to be here.

When he had been lying like that for several minutes, his wrist module started beeping. Sig opened his eyes with relief and sat up with a big grin on his face. How could he have forgotten his telephone? It was that simple all along. He brushed the hair out of his eyes. His prayer for help had been answered. So it was true that he had landed in a heap of rubbish, and the bruises must be real too, but they were already calling to find out where he was.

They would probably be here in a few minutes to rescue him. When he got home he'd have a long, very hot shower to get rid of the filth and the cold, then have something really nice to eat, and then... He casually tapped the screen, sighing with relief.

A friendly computer voice broke the silence. "You are now in forbidden zone Omega 76, an offence leading to Sanction 2-f: complete historic deletion. Your identity is hereby wiped, in this unit as well as everywhere else in the Cycle. All your belongings, including your body, will be reabsorbed into the Cycle. Any memory of your existence in people or machines is hereby wiped. You should now go at once to the nearest recycling point, where you will be discontinued. The City thanks you kindly for your cooperation."

A tiny beep indicated the message had ended.

It was silent again. The eye on the telephone screen winked one last time and then the screen went blank. And it stayed blank when Sig tapped madly at it. This was not what he had been expecting. Not at all.

So I'm actually dead now, thought Sig, horrified. Dead and forgotten. In a sense he had never even existed. Every memory of him and his existence had been

wiped. Everybody's. All that remained was for his body to be brought back to the recycling point and reabsorbed into the Cycle. Even his parents would forget he had ever existed.

When they were taught at school what Sanction 2-f involved, he had thought it was a fair punishment. It was good that criminals were reabsorbed into the Cycle, so that their raw materials could be put to proper use again. And why should the friends and family of a criminal have to suffer by remembering a failure? It was better to wipe out memories like that.

Anyhow, he had been taught that Sanction 2-f was hardly ever applied, perhaps once or twice a century. There were very few criminals left, since the Central Computer ensured that only well-programmed children were born.

He suddenly felt a lot less sure that Sanction 2-f was such a good idea. And he couldn't manage to see himself as a criminal. Okay, he did try to cross the metro line by walking over the track, and that was indeed forbidden, but other children did the same thing now and then and he'd never heard of any accidents.

Or were all the people who didn't make it across wiped, like he had been? Had people disappeared before, only he couldn't remember because the Central Computer had wiped them from his memory? Were there other people wandering about here, on the rubbish belt, after the same thing had happened to them?

Right now, Sig couldn't care less. He was frightened and tired and he felt cold. And the CC, the Central Computer, might wipe his memory at any moment. Then even *he* would no longer know who he was. Sig tried to get a bit more comfortable on the plastic packaging material and decided to wait there to be wiped.

He pulled a relatively clean-looking sheet of plastic towards him and wrapped it around him as best he could. The sheet would protect him from the gusting wind, and make him a bit less conspicuous too – Sig had no idea who or what he should be hiding from, but you never knew. This was a pretty dismal place. You could never tell what might be wandering around in a place like this. He lay down

again and waited, wondering whether he would notice anything when the moment came for him to be wiped.

It didn't even occur to Sig to go against the decision of the CC. It was pointless to try running away, or to try ringing anyone. Whatever the CC decided happened. There was nothing, absolutely nothing you could do about it. It made him miserable, but resistance was useless, unthinkable.

He looked at the flying creatures above his head and tried to follow their flight with his eyes, until it made him dizzy. Their shrieks were piercing, but they did fly beautifully. Were they a kind of robot? In that case, what was their function? Sig didn't understand. He imagined flying with them, high above the mountains of rubbish, back towards the City, towards the wall, higher and higher up that shiny surface, so he could look over the kilometres-high wall and see the buildings, the high-rise apartments of the district where he lived, the windows of his room and, even further on, the park, the office blocks, past his school and over the sports park...

Slowly it grew dark and the shrieking creatures fell silent and flew off in small groups in the direction the rail cleaner had gone, away across the plain. Sig just lay there, but nothing happened to him. He was still himself. He was still simply Sig, with all his memories, thoughts and feelings. He thought about the fact that the CC took it for granted his body would be discontinued when he reported to the recycling point. It apparently hadn't occurred to the CC that Sig might not go there – if only because he didn't know the way. He wouldn't be wiped, because then he'd never be able to find his way to the recycling point.

Sig wondered whether or not to be happy about this. Wouldn't it be far better to be wiped and no longer exist, than to lead a kind of half life in a desolate no man's land at the edge of these rubbish mountains? He would be alone, no one would ever remember he existed, and he would die of hunger and thirst if he wasn't killed even sooner by some unknown danger. And he would die knowing

that the Cycle did not exist, that everything he'd learnt at school about the Eternal Cycle was a lie.

It was almost pitch dark now. But as Sig took a last nervous look around, he saw a rim of white light appearing above the rubbish belt. It slowly grew bigger. A large round disc rose over the garbage and the railway. It was an amazing sight: a pale, pockmarked light mysteriously climbing up out of nowhere into the sky.

You could see the sun from the City. When it was high in the sky, its light shimmered through the energy field. Sig had never paid any attention to it. But suddenly it seemed as if the night had its own sun, a washed-out sun that was invisible from the City. Its colourless light cast long, erratic shadows. A small black creature flapped through the air over the rubbish, squeaking. The world Sig found himself in was impossible to understand.

Frightened, he turned on one side and buried his head under the greyish plastic. After listening for a long time to the whispering wind and the flapping and rustling of the plastic packaging and sheeting around him, he fell into a trembling sleep. As he slept, salt tears ran down his cheeks and dried white in the cold wind.

Chapter Two: Plyster

After a cold night full of confused dreams, Sig woke up when the wind blew away the piece of plastic that had covered him while he slept. He glanced around and immediately closed his eyes again in horror. It had all really happened. What he'd been through yesterday was not a bad dream, he was still right in the middle of it. He didn't want to be here. This wasn't his world, it was something like a creepy backside of it, or perhaps the outside of the world.

Sig had no idea how he could ever get home, and even then, even if he managed to get back into the City, no one would recognise him or even remember

him. Not even his parents... He had been permanently wiped from the Central Computer and from the memories of all the people who had ever known him. Sig simply could not get his mind around it.

Everything had happened so quickly yesterday that he'd hardly had time to take it all in. It had started so innocently and yet here he was, lost and completely alone, on an empty plain, at the foot of an unbelievably big mountain of rubbish.

Sig sat up. He shuddered. The cold wind blew through his clothes. He pulled up his knees and wrapped his arms around them. He sat huddled up like that, looking out over the plain. Here and there he could see a bit of pale grass or a miserable little shrub, and the sun cast a pale light all the way to the horizon as it rose over the belt behind him. He had never seen the sunrise before. In the City, the pure white streetlights shone day and night.

Sig reckoned he couldn't be more than about fifty kilometres from the city walls. The ride on the rail cleaner had not really lasted all that long – about as long as when you travelled on the express metro from the edge of the City to the centre.

“You have to go back over it all again, Sig,” he said aloud to himself.

If there was no one to talk to, you had to talk to yourself. He'd learnt that long ago. He had always been alone a lot. His parents hardly ever came home until late in the evening.

“Calmly think through exactly what happened, Siggie. And then you have to think what to do. You can't just sit here for ever.”

He took a deep breath and looked towards the watery morning sun for a while. “Okay. What happened, where did it all go wrong and what do I do now?”

Sig turned back towards the plain, shut his eyes and saw in front him everything that had happened the day before. The platform at the maintenance station, the rail cleaner hitting him and sweeping him away, the crazy ride and the fall that had landed him here. It had all happened amazingly quickly, but it was burnt into his memory.

He sat like that for a long time, with his eyes shut, thinking back to yesterday as if thinking could undo what had happened. It didn't help at all. He only got colder from sitting still. On the other hand, he didn't know what he was supposed to do once he opened his eyes. So he just sat there. He simply refused to accept where he was. He vaguely hope that a maintenance team might still find him and take him back to the City. But nothing happened.

A bottle flung in Sig's direction by a passing rail cleaner broke with a crack against a stone next to him and finally brought him back to the here and now. His eyes opened instinctively at the sudden loud noise.

The sun had risen quite a bit further and the wind had died down. It was quiet, now that the plastic waste was no longer flapping in the wind, quieter than Sig had ever known in the City. You could always hear the bustle of people there, the hum of the moving walkways, piped music in shops and metro stations. It was never silent at home either. The holoprojector came on automatically when you got home and even at night there was always the sound of various machines in the kitchen, or the household robots cleaning the house.

The silence, the sun that was now shining warm on his back, and the vast empty plain with a few of those flying creatures passing by in the distance: to Sig it was a terrifying, unknown world, yet so close to where he had always lived. It was strange that he'd never known what was outside the city walls, Sig thought. But actually it was even stranger that he'd never wondered about it.

Why hadn't they ever been taught anything about this at school? Why did no one ever leave the City? These were questions that had simply never occurred to him before. The Central Computer probably filtered questions like that out of your thoughts before you could think them. But why? Sig was no longer cold, but suddenly he shuddered. A rotting smell from the rubbish belt rolled over him in waves and made him retch. His stomach was empty and he was thirsty.

“You’re going to do something now, Sig,” he said to himself. “It doesn’t matter what. Nothing matters any more, but you’re going to do something,” and he stood up.

First he walked back to the railway. The track ran high above the ground, supported on slender metal columns. The rails seemed to run on endlessly in both directions. Looking towards the City, Sig saw that there was almost no rubbish lying directly beneath the railway. Maintenance robots probably kept it relatively clean there.

So under the route of the railway there was a kind of path running along the ground between the rubbish, a path that led down a narrow valley in between mountains of garbage back towards the City. But it wasn’t a lot of use to him, because he remembered that the railway on the other side of the garbage belt entered the city wall high up. Even if he managed to climb onto the track, all those rail cleaners coming towards him would make it impossible to walk along the railway back into the City without getting scooped up again. The route that way was impassable.

Sig looked in the other direction, where the railway disappeared over the horizon and you couldn’t see where it led. The plain looked easy enough to walk across, but the path that led there would only take him further away from the City. On the other hand, the rail cleaners went that way too, and they must surely turn around eventually to drive back. Maybe he could even jump on board somewhere, although he couldn’t see any rocks or hills that reached even half the height of the railway.

First of all he had to find food and water. He hadn’t eaten or drunk anything since yesterday afternoon. His stomach was rumbling and he was so thirsty that he overcame his disgust and walked towards one of the other large garbage heaps – there was nothing but plastic packaging material in the one where he’d landed.

He had often seen robots removing large batches of food packs from the shops, simply because the date on them had passed. At home he had discovered that food was often still perfectly sterile and edible several months later. His parents

usually forgot to do any shopping and Sig had to hunt out a food pack from the store room if he was home alone. Sometimes that meant eating a meal that was well past its date. Maybe the discarded batches from the shops ended up here.

But before Sig could reach the next rubbish mountain, he heard a rustling sound coming from under a large heap of plastic to his right. He froze with shock. Suddenly the wrinkled face of an old man appeared from under the plastic, with a few strands of thin grey hair on top. Either side of his narrow face, sun-reddened ears stuck out. The man's head moved quickly backwards and forwards, then tilted to the left, then to the right – but the sharp eyes stayed fixed on Sig. Only his head was visible, the body belonging to it stayed hidden under the plastic.

In spite of the big cheerful grin, the face had something alarmingly strange about it. Sig had never seen such a person before. People in the City were all far better dressed, fatter and less dirty. And Sig had never seen anyone with a mouthful of irregular, crooked teeth, let alone someone so old – in the City everybody was unceremoniously reabsorbed into the Cycle on their fiftieth birthday. This man must be much older.

“What have we here?” said the man in a brisk voice. “A newie-newie. Prumprum. Sweet flowery scent from the rail-racing around him. Trumtitrum. Lovely flower-mists – I remember them from the shiny stations long ago, deep deep under the ground. Soft little city creature. Soft as butter. They always arrive without warning. Brought by the night. What were you expecting? Going to have a good laugh with this one! Right? Will it be another little washer-wiper or maybe finally finally one who still knows something?” It was as if the man was really talking to himself.

Sig had never seen anyone with such a penetrating stare before, a look that told him he was dealing with a person far wilder than himself, or than anyone else from the City for that matter. In the City everyone was carefully programmed and kept on track, but this man looked different. His body was older, but all the same he seemed much livelier than any of the adults in the City.

“Yeah-hey, I’m a frightening to you, eh?” Two long, skinny arms with large hands appeared and waved in circles. “Woodihawoo!” The man began braying with laughter. “I know your sort, don’t I? Scared, scared, scared, never not seen nothing of the world. Ant of the city heap. Scrubbed and polished, pubbed and scrolished. Anthill fledgling freshly fallen. And it’s me who’s the half-baked half-wit, so they think. But they always turn out to be empty, when they one-two-three-four-five and so forth and then finally get their breathtaking. City creatures.

“Later they learn better. Tierum dum drum. Then they’re happy with Plyster. Hee hee hee hee. Plyster gives them food and drink. But I can’t ever do anything with them, empty little washer-wipers. All of them end up scavengers. I have to let them go again and again. I can’t carry them on my shoulders. Have you been washed and wiped as well? Young, you are, young and small with big empty eyes. Empty as a cloudy night. All of them are. Always. Spooned out by the big City.” The man started laughing again, but this time the laugh gave way to a coughing fit. The head disappeared again under the plastic but the coughing went on, between intervals of mumbling, cursing and ranting.

Sig ran away. Not stopping to think, he followed the railway back towards the City. And he kept on running. He had met a madman. A dangerous madman, it must be. In his shock and confusion he hadn’t understood a word the man had said. Perhaps it was someone who had been wiped and no longer knew who he was, or what he was doing. Sig ran for his life.

Back to the City. That was all he could think about. Back home, back behind that smooth high wall in the distance where he had always lived in safety. But the further he ran along the rubbish belt, the dirtier and greyer the rubbish heaps became – half-rotted building materials, mouldy remains of food, frayed and faded plastic...

The path got increasingly boggy. More and more orange and bright-green puddles blocked his way. At first Sig jumped over them, but the puddles got bigger and the mud splashed higher and higher and with every step he sank deeper into the liquid mud. But he kept on running. Until he was exhausted and

the valley had become almost impassable and the only way forward was by stumbling and staggering through the stinking slime. The rubbish heaps on either side were grey, the garbage here had rotted down to an anonymous sludge. In a few places miserable looking plants grew on the slopes, their pale, transparent leaves on long stalks, reaching up towards the light.

Sig finally stopped. He leaned panting for breath against one of the metal columns that supported the railway, his eyes shut, his forehead pressed against the cold metal. He hadn't got very far. He wasn't used to running. Black spots swam before his eyes. He had covered perhaps three or four kilometres. He couldn't go any further, but he couldn't go back either. Things were getting worse and worse. Hopelessly panting for breath he stood and waited for whatever might happen next.

Images of the City drifted through Sig's mind. He saw the familiar high-rise apartment blocks, the moving walkways rolling quietly forwards, the faint electric light. He could smell the sweet flower scents the machines spread everywhere and the warm smell of the sterile air pumped around by the air fresheners. He thought about school too, about Tau and Omeg, his friends, who would be sitting in the classroom right now without missing him. Unable to remember him.

Just like his parents, who no longer had a son but would not be upset about it. They wouldn't miss Sig. He had simply never existed for them. There was never any sadness in the City. Everything was perfect. Everyone was happy. But Sig didn't belong with them any more and it was only because of some stupid mix-up that he still existed at all. The Cycle had made a slight mistake.

“You, silly idiotwit. That's what you are. Trumteedumb twitwit. I laugh with you, true, but I won't eat you, you know. What did you think, eh? That Plyster was going to eat you, with his hungry look? Puh. It's a good thing you can't run. Otherwise you'd already be there by now. Already too far, I mean. Too far into the slurrick. Never heard of scavenger bands, right? Let alone flyeyes. Obsticated

city creature. By next week you'll be a scavenger yourself, unless, unless...
Brydiedye, brumdiedumb... Unless?"

Sig turned his head. He hadn't heard him coming, but suddenly the same little man was standing right next to him. He wasn't even out of breath. He must be a lot fitter than Sig. A tall, skinny streak of a man, with mismatched clothing. His trousers were held up by a piece of bright orange string. He had a slight stoop. He was making lots of hand signals and his mouth wasn't still for a second, but the grin had gone. In some odd way the rest of his body matched his skinny face and those transparent ears.

The little man stood looking around agitatedly as if he was testing the air for unknown dangers. "Have the flyeyes got wind of him yet?" he muttered. "Haven't seen flyeyes for ages. Humm, fom, fom, fom, he has to get rid of that wristcontrap." He suddenly focused on Sig's wrist module. "Beam brings flyeyes. Hookery hornets. Flying eyes. Sky cameras they call them in the City, don't they? Isn't that right? Fly, flow, flyeyes, smash their little pie-eyes."

The muttering little man no longer seemed so dreadfully dangerous, but the horrible surroundings and Sig's hunger, thirst and exhaustion made him feel desperate. "Go away, filthy old man," he screamed. "Dirty, filthy weirdo. What do you want from me? Leave me alone," and he kicked out in the direction of the little man, who jumped backwards and looked at him with big astonished eyes.

"I have to get out of here!" Sig went on. "Understand? Out! Back to the City. Everyone's waiting for me. My father and mother. They miss me. They're worried. I have to go to school. Understand? You don't understand, do you. You're just a wiped out old madman."

The old man tilted his head to one side, looked at him thoughtfully through those great big eyes, his long arms signalling Sig to be quiet. The man took a deep breath. "You're real, aren't you. Deep inside your little upstairs room it all still lives, right?" He pointed respectfully at Sig's forehead. "Rimdumdyedee. You talk. You have language. Words and a past, history and identilarity. Dumdeeedeum. The City, school, your family... You still know everything.

Escaped the wiper, just like me. The only other real one, in fifty-five years.”

Tears came to the old man’s eyes.

Then Sig started to cry as well, because he knew no one was waiting for him, that no one would miss him, that there was nowhere for him to go. He had only been shouting what he hoped, what he wanted, even though he knew better. He hadn’t a clue what the old man was chattering on about.

“Plyster understands a lot, hush now,” said the old man soothingly. He came closer again and very gently stoked Sig’s arm for a second. “Real, you are. Real and right, turned and tight. After all these years.” Sig jerked his arm away in surprise, but he was less frightened now than a few moments before. The man might be crazy, but he didn’t seem dangerous.

Then the man gave him another inquisitive stare. He seemed to be listening to something and the look in his eyes changed. “Dangerous here, that’s what it is,” he said next. “Talk soon. Whatever you want. Now we must go. The two of us here, sweep, swat, swozzle. Out of the slurrick. And get rid of that wristcontrap, it brings flyeyes.” He put his hand on Sig’s wrist module.

“Hey, get away from that. It’s mine. Get it? Mine,” Sig shouted in alarm, pulling his arm away.

“Good, good, flyeyecatcher see to, be too later. So much at a time. First get out of here, to safe sane sailing. Then we’ll talk about the City and family and friends and flyeyes and everything such and like.”

The little man mumbled on about all kinds of things reassure Sig. But meanwhile he was looking around, getting more and more jittery, as if he could hear the very thing that was worrying him. “They’re coming, they’re coming. There – you can hear them coming, brown phantoms, bad dreams,” he muttered. “Listen and hear.” He stuck a thin forefinger in the air like a signal.

He looked nervously right and left, along the rails, then tilted his head, listening to something Sig couldn’t hear.

“Cry more later, you. No time now. Onwards, onwards. First Plyster has to saferty you from the scavengers, come. Come quick with me, out of the slurrick.”

Long thin fingers clamped themselves around Sig's wrist and a cool hand pulled him away, back along the path under the railway, the way they had come.

“Scavengers, mavengers, evil ravengers, if you don't want to be dead, come now.

Big hoard. Plyster can hear a big big hoard.”

Sig went along without resisting.