

Sputterfly

Simon van der Geest

Translated from the Dutch by Laura Watkinson

21st June

You have no idea what you're holding in your hands.

In this notebook, I've told the story of my war with my brother.

A month ago I started writing all about my insects on these pages. And about my brother and our secrets.

Back then, I didn't know how it would all get out of hand.

Some secrets are best kept deep underground. Some secrets slowly creep out, all by themselves. Some secrets stink and make holes in everything.

This notebook must never fall into the wrong hands!

I'm not sure if you have the right pair of hands or not. I hope you do. Because even though I don't know you, I'm still going to tell you the whole story. Someone has to hear about it.

You need to be aware of what I'm dumping on you. Once you've read this, there's no going back. I have to warn you that I'm going to drag you into our war. If you don't like that thought or if you're too chicken to hear about it, you should stop reading now and find a place to hide the notebook. Somewhere really safe. Somewhere it can only be found by someone who knows how to keep secrets. Someone with the right hands.

But I don't think you're going to do that, are you? Because you're still reading.

You see? You do have the right pair of hands.

I'm going to stick this note at the front of the book, so you know what you're getting yourself into. A month ago, this notebook was empty. I took it out of the cupboard, sat in my cellar and wrote the first pages. That was the day my brother declared war.

Friday, 20th May

Dear whoever you are,

I am going to lose my insects. Every single one. My brother wants to steal my cellar from me. I've spent three years building and improving my insect laboratory. Three years collecting insects and taking care of them. And now they're all supposed to go?

He casually told me, a couple of minutes ago, while we were eating our spaghetti. We were sitting on opposite sides of the table. Mum wasn't there. My brother and I usually eat together, just the two of us, or on our own, because she often works late.

He said, 'Hey Sputterfly,* listen. I'm getting a drum kit. And it's going in the cellar. I'm turning it into a practice room. So you need to buzz off.'

I don't know if you have a brother. I don't know if he's older or younger than you. Mine's older. Lots of big brothers think they're a big deal. They think they can tell you what to do, just because they happen to have been born a couple of years before you. They don't even look at you until they want something that's yours and then, one day, they suddenly tell you to buzz off.

'We've chucked Michael out of the band,' Jeppe went on. 'He was rubbish. Kept snapping his sticks. And he was always late. So now I'm the new drummer.'

'Can you drum, then?' I squeaked.

'Of course I can, dung beetle. But I've got to do loads of practice. Which is why I'm getting the drum kit.'

He stuffed a meatball into his mouth and went on, munching and talking at the same time. 'The Bull's brother's got a van and he's going to bring it round on the Wednesday after next. So the cellar needs to be empty by then. I'll give you a week and a half to clear out all of your creepy-crawlies.'

I just stared at him. It felt like my chair had disappeared, and the table, and the whole room. I was floating in thin air.

'Hellooo?' He waved his hand in front of my eyes.

'But...' I managed to squeeze out, 'the drum kit could just go in your room, couldn't it?'

'You really think that would work? My room's way too small. And, anyway, a drum kit needs to go in a cellar.'

I opened my mouth but no sound came out. It felt like there was a bubble in my throat that was getting bigger and bigger. Until it popped.

'But what about the Deal?' I said. Then I breathed in quickly, as if I could swallow the word back down, but it was already floating around the room. It felt weird saying it out loud after all that time.

Jeppe froze. For a second. Then he raised his arm and slammed his fork into the table. The fork stood upright in the table top, quivering.

Jeppe looked at me from beneath his greasy fringe. 'Watch it, Sputterfly. We were little kids then. And I never said you could have the cellar forever. You've had it long enough. It's my turn now.'

He stood up, opened the dishwasher, chucked his bowl in and stomped off to his room. I couldn't swallow another bite.

So now I'm sitting here in the cellar. Writing this. My hand's still shaking. The crickets and the grasshoppers are chirping really loud, like it's a competition.

When I look around, I can see the lights in the tanks. I can see all the insects crawling across the glass. I can see the tables with my books and stuff on, my plans on the wall, and the half-a-dragon that Ward drew. I've looked at it a thousand times, but everything feels different now.

My cellar. Empty. I try to imagine what that would look like. The whole cellar bare and empty and dark.

* My name's not really Sputterfly, by the way. My brother calls me that to annoy me. I'm actually called Hidde.

Jeppe hasn't done anything yet, nothing's broken, all of my insects are still alive, but it still feels like everything's falling apart. I have to tell the whole story before it's too late. I hope you'll listen, even though we're strangers.

My secret cellar is the best possible place for an insect collection. It's quiet in here, dark and damp, just the way they like it. Outside the cellar, my insects will die.

I've been working on it for so long. I've spent hours – no, days, weeks – looking for new insects. In the woods, on the heath, in the fields. I kitted out every single one of the tanks with sticks, stones, soil, sand and shells, and I put lights in, too. I glued together little ladders for the garden chafers to play on, and I made my old train tunnel into a climbing rock for the crickets. I even built a flashing device for my firefly, so he doesn't get too lonely.

My lab is the very best thing I have in my life.

When my lab's gone and no one knows it ever existed, it'll be like it was never there. Like it was all for nothing.

That's why it's important for someone to read this book one day. I don't know yet who that will be. Maybe it doesn't matter who it is. Just as long as somebody reads it.

And that somebody turned out to be you. Your eyes are now moving over these words. So even if my brother does manage to steal the cellar and there's nothing left of my lab and my insects, you'll still have read my story. Then you can tell people what it was like. And about how my brother spoiled everything.

But I hope I get to keep my cellar. I hope I can make my brother change his mind. It's not going to be easy, because when Jeppe wants something, he charges at it like a rhinoceros.

Right now, I still have:

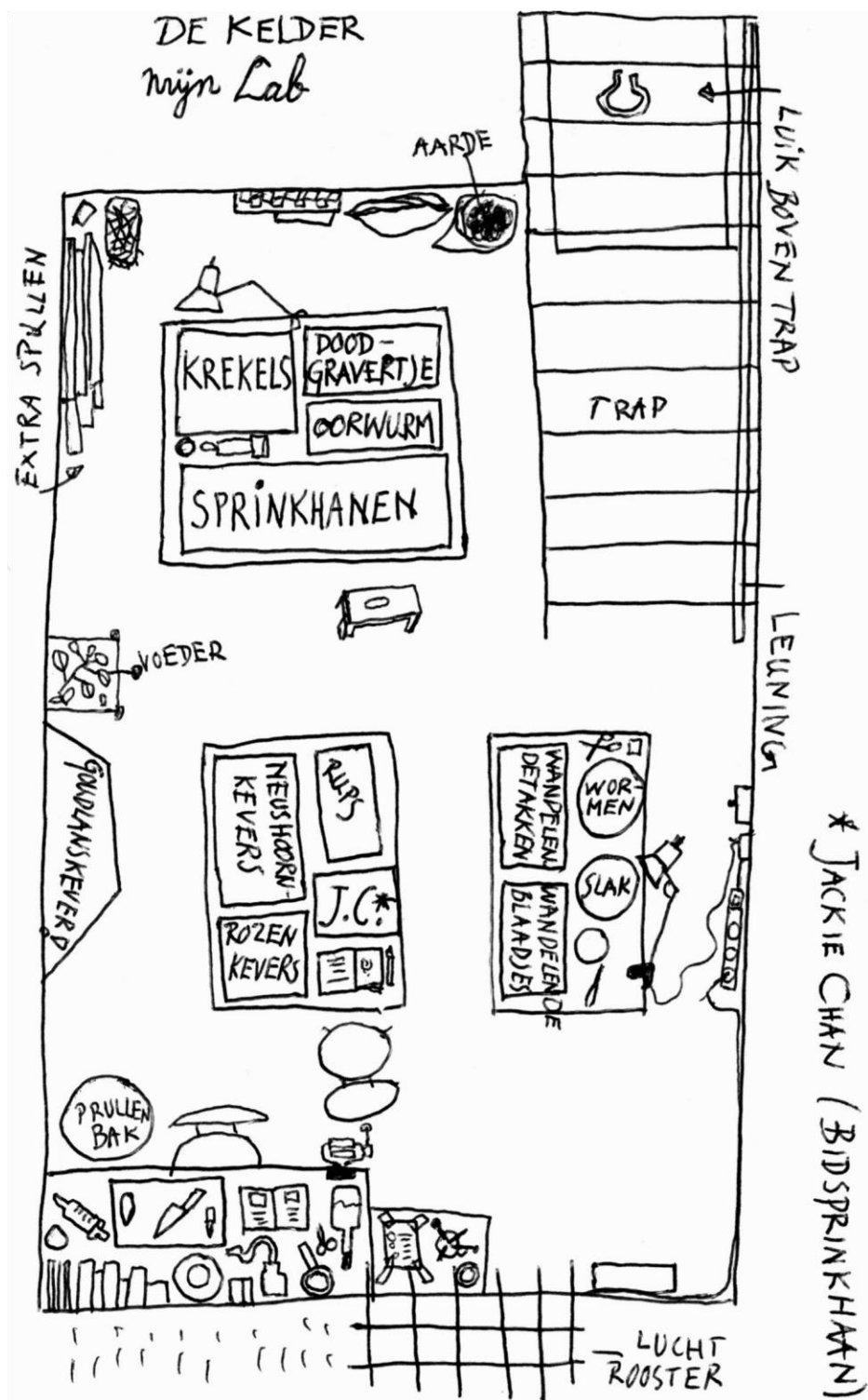
- 2 different kinds of centipedes
- 2 kinds of grasshoppers
- 1 praying mantis (I call him Jackie Chan)
- 4 kinds of worms
- 3 kinds of slugs and snails
- 1 kind of cricket
- 1 kind of earwig
- 1 kind of leaf insect
- 2 kinds of stick insects

and 5 kinds of beetles: garden chafers, gravediggers, rhinoceros beetles, a firefly (fireflies are beetles, too) and a golden spear beetle (she's called Tessa).

I also have a few boxes of unusual dead specimens.

The golden spear beetle is the very rarest of all. It hasn't been officially sighted in the Netherlands since 1967. I probably found the very last one in the country. As I'm writing this, I can see her over there, scuttling around under her lamp. Her shell is gleaming away.

I can't lose my insects. If I do, I'll have nothing left.



I'm so stupid for not realising what Jeppe was up to. For not seeing it coming. I should have paid more attention. Jeppe was already acting weird the day before yesterday. Weirder than normal. Here's what happened...

Day before yesterday
Wednesday, 18th May

Wednesdays are the best days. We have the whole afternoon off, and I get to spend it in my cellar.

I came home from school, made a couple of sandwiches, and grabbed an apple and a banana for the beetles and the snails. I was just about to go down into the cellar when Jeppe came into the kitchen.

'Hey, Hidde, why don't you show me your lab? I haven't been down there for ages.' He hoisted himself up on to the kitchen counter.

I stared at him. He never calls me by my real name. I just mumbled something about having to tidy up.

'Oh, that doesn't matter. I just want to take a look,' he said. His legs were dangling. His heels were banging against the cupboard door. Why did he suddenly want to see my lab? He's never been interested in my creatures. He calls them 'creepy-crawlies'. He calls them 'parasites'. He calls them 'fleas'. Even though fleas are one of the insects I don't have.

'Got any new ones?' he asked.

'Mmh.'

'What you got?'

'A cuckoo bumblebee.'

'What's that?'

'You really want to know?'

'I asked you, didn't I?'

'It's a kind of bumblebee. But much cleverer.' That was all I said.

I can talk about insects for hours, but I always have to be careful with my brother. He usually comes out with some dumb joke or other.

Not this time. He tilted his head and looked like he was listening. 'Why's that, then? Tell me about it.'

'The female's too lazy to build a nest. So she finds one that some other bees have already made.'

'Wow.'

I waited for him to make a lame joke. But he still looked interested. Maybe he'd suddenly grown up. Maybe he really did want to find out more about cuckoo bumblebees. So I told him. I told him about how the cuckoo bumblebee sneaks into the nest of an ordinary bee. And hides there for a few days, to take on their scent. And then, one day, she suddenly launches her big attack and stings the queen to death. Then she lays her own eggs and kindly allows the murdered queen's worker bees to look after them.

I talked and talked. Jeppe listened with big eyes.

'Show me,' he said, jumping down from the counter.

I should have known better. I should never have fallen for it. But I thought he was really interested. That for once he really wanted to see something that belonged to me. That he'd soon be boasting at school, 'My little brother knows everything there is to know about insects.'

So we headed down into the cellar.

'Don't talk too loud, OK?' I said to him.

He switched on the overhead light. 'Don't do that!' I yelled, and I flattened his hand on the switch so the light went out again.

'Sorry. But that light must never go on.' I was still pressing hard on his fingers. They felt warm. I took my hand away.

'Relax,' he whispered. 'And stop yelling. They don't like it.' He snorted.

It smelled good down there. That made me feel calmer. My lab always smells, I don't know, a bit musty, but it also smells like dried grass and like the woods in summertime. Sometimes I catch a whiff of alarm scents from the centipedes or rhinoceros beetles. That doesn't really smell so good, but hey. I can smell that this is my place. My lab.

Jeppe walked around the tanks. He touched the walls. Looked at the ceiling. I didn't think anything of it.

'Do you want to see her?' I asked.

'Huh? Who?'

'My cuckoo bumblebee, of course.'

'Oh, yes. Go on, then. Show me,' said Jeppe, inspecting a plug socket.

I took out the box.

'But that's a dead one!' he shouted.

'What did you expect? I can't keep a live bumblebee in a box, can I? They need at least a whole meadow for their territory.'

Jeppe just glared at me and told me not to act so smart. I wiped the smile off my face and put the box away. Jeppe was back to being the old Jeppe again. He stood in the middle of the cellar, between the grasshoppers and the rhinoceros beetles. Then he spread his arms like wings and looked all around the room one more time.

He smirked. 'I've seen enough. Thanks.' He stomped back upstairs, and closed the hatch with a bang. It left me with a weird feeling, a bit like I was standing there naked. The banging had made the earthworms crawl up to the top of their jam jar and they were wiggling around on top of the soil, looking puzzled. And I still had no idea.

The more I think about it, the more I reckon Jeppe is a hermit crab.

Maybe you've seen hermit crabs on the beach. They look pretty funny, sort of like walking shells with one big pair of pincers. But they're not funny at all. When a hermit crab gets too big for its shell, it goes looking for a new one. It measures them with its pincers until it finds one that's the right size. And if a crab already happens to be living inside the shell and the hermit crab thinks it can beat the other crab, then it chases it out. The hermit crab pinches the little guy until it gives in and leaves the shell. And then the hermit crab stuffs its big fat bum into the conquered shell.

'A drum kit needs to go in a cellar, man.'

We'll see about that, Jeppe. I'm not going to give in that easily.



There are three of us living in this house. I sometimes think we're just like ants. We all have our own routes. Front door-kitchen-television-bedroom-kitchen, and so on. Sometimes we bump into each other. Then we'll pause for a moment. We don't usually say much. When

ants meet, they give each other little taps and pats on the back. That's how they tell the other ants where the food is. Mum just points and says, 'There's a quiche in the fridge.' Or she writes a note for us.

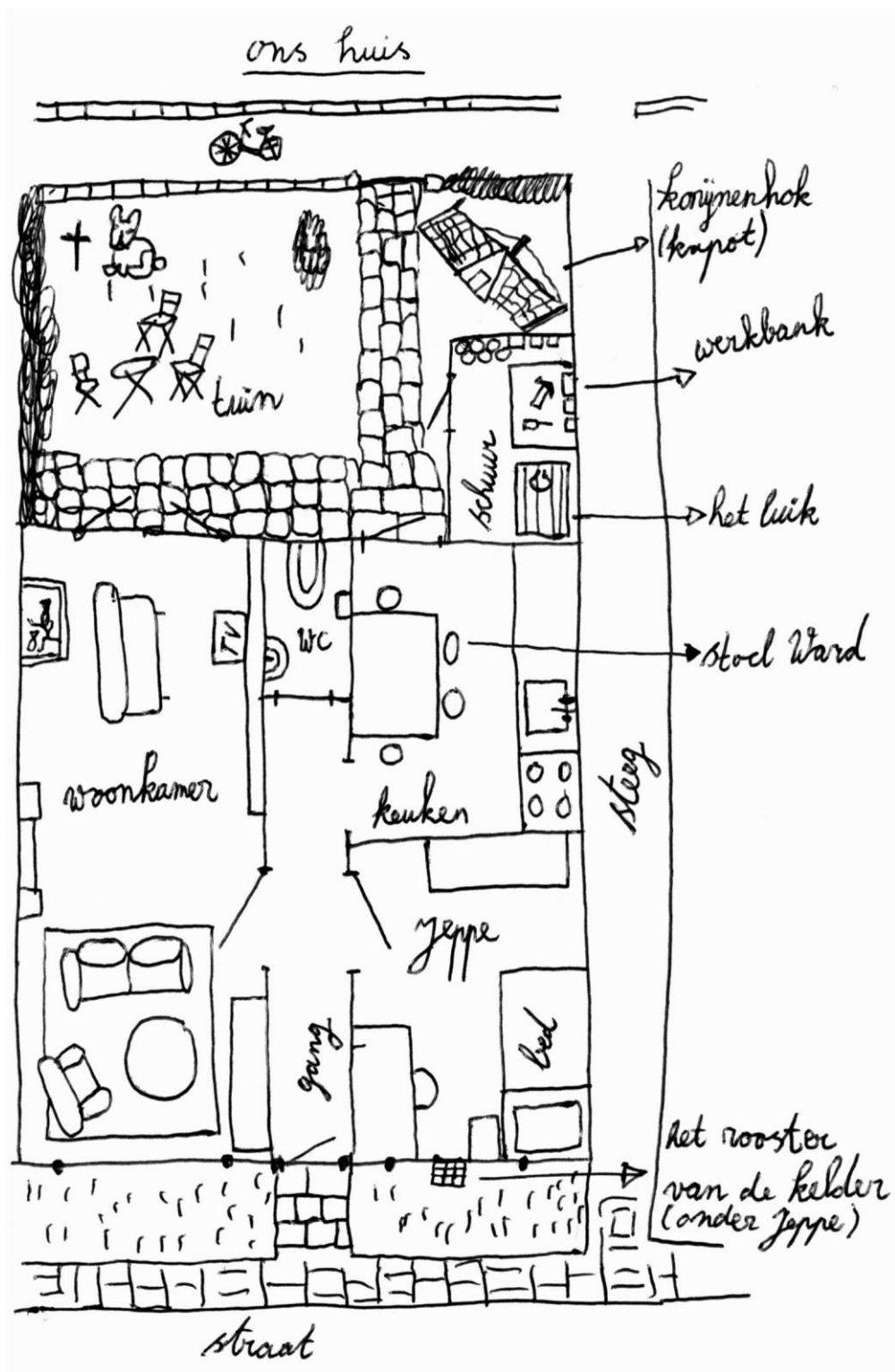
A colony of ants is a family of thousands of creatures. A mother – the queen – and thousands of daughters. They have a father too, but he flies away pretty quick. He's basically not there.

Our dad flew away, too. A long time ago, when I was little. So little that I can hardly remember anything about him. Sandpaper cheeks and a moustache, and that's about it. And now my family's colony has only three members. A mother and two sons. You can't even call that a colony.

There used to be more of us. Jeppe and I had another brother. He was called Ward. He was the oldest. He could whistle through his nose. He used to give me fireman's lifts. And he drew fantastic dragons. He had a plastic bottle of bright red and blue pills, and he used to take a few of them every day. For his superpowers, he always said. I believed him. I wanted to believe him.

He knew how to deal with Jeppe. They sometimes used to roll around in the grass, and Ward would sit on him and push him down on to the ground and kneel on his muscles. It's weird to think that Jeppe once had a big brother too.

Now there are only a few reminders that Ward was ever here. Like his chair, which Mum said has to stay at the table. It always has leaflets and magazines on it. To make it seem less empty.



Today
Friday evening, 20th May



It's getting dark outside but I'm still wide awake at my desk in the cellar. The grasshoppers and the crickets are chirping away. Mum's home now. She probably thinks I'm already in bed. As if I could sleep now!

I don't know what to do. There's no way I can lose my cellar. Where am I going to take all my insects? Anyway, it's *my* cellar. That was the Deal. Then, now, forever. 'We were little kids then' – what was that about? I'm still only 1 metre 41. You can't exactly call that big.

I'm going to have to barricade the cellar. Put a lock on the hatch. I've got this bike chain and if I loop it around the handle and fasten it to a leg of the workbench, I can lock up the cellar.

But Jeppe could still lurk around upstairs by the hatch. You wait and see: he's going to lie in ambush, and just as I put the key in the lock, he'll jump down on top of me, twist my arm behind my back, grab the key, and then what?

If only I had a sting.

Or poisonous hairs with itching powder on, like some caterpillars do.

Or boxer's arms, like a praying mantis.



Maybe you're wondering: why are they arguing about a cellar? If that cellar belongs to you and your brother keeps being such a pain, why don't you tell your mum?

That wouldn't work. And here's why:

1. Our mum is invisible.
2. She doesn't even know we have a cellar.

The cellar's our secret. Not just a little secret, not a little-kiddy-woo-woo-exciting secret, no, a really secret secret. Only Jeppe and I know about it. And Ward did, too. The three of us discovered it together.

We had just moved to W----- Street*. Ward, Jeppe and I didn't really feel any need to move out of the old house – we really liked it there – but Mum wanted to make a 'fresh start'. I didn't get what was so 'fresh' about moving house. It seemed to involve a load of dust.

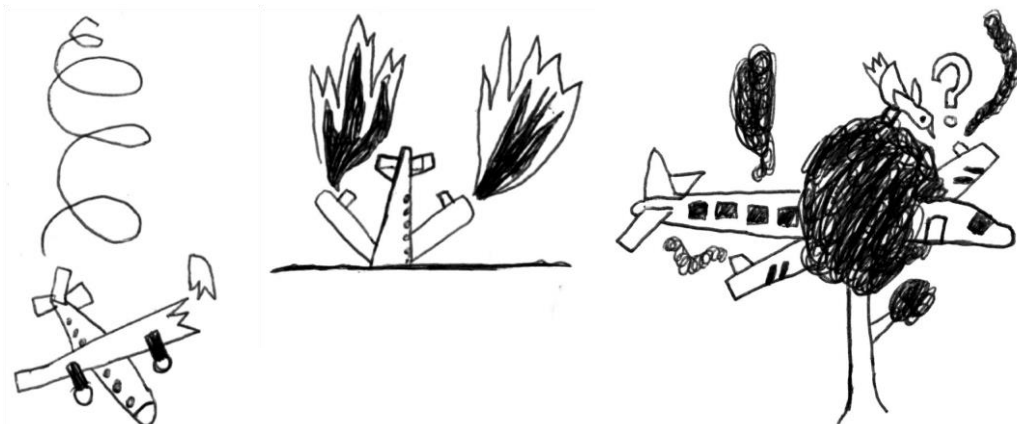
The heating in the new house wasn't working yet. Maybe that's what she meant. It was so 'fresh' inside the house that, for the first few weeks, we had to sit at the dining table with blankets wrapped around our shoulders.

The new house was smaller. Or so we thought. We hadn't discovered the cellar yet.

Back then, Jeppe and I still used to play together. And with Ward, too, of course. It was an old house and luckily it hadn't been entirely cleared out, so there was lots of exploring to do.

This one time we found a box of badly put-together model aeroplanes in the attic.

* Yes, sorry, it's better if you don't know exactly where I live. That's why I crossed out the name of the street. It's not that I don't trust you but it means that you won't go giving it away by accident.



Either the previous resident had really poor eyesight or he was designing a new sort of stunt plane that was super good at flying in circles. We decided to give them a go: Ward stood at the top of the stairs and threw the planes, while Jeppe and I waited at the bottom to catch them. They just whirled around and around in circles. We were rubbish at catching them, partly because we were in fits of laughter. So the planes made spectacular crash-landings.

We went outside, too, and explored the garden shed. If you go out through our kitchen door into the garden, it's on the right, up against the house. There was a pile of old junk in there. Pipes, rusty tins of paint, a sack of cement that had gone rock-hard, rolls of carpet, dusty shelves, an old workbench with a rusty vice and a broken bike. Just as we were about to leave, Jeppe kicked away a couple of planks and lifted up a worn-out old doormat.

'Hey. Look! A ring.'

He was right. There was a big ring sticking out of the floor.

We pulled away the planks and the mat, and brushed off the dust. It was a metal hatch, around a metre square.

Jeppe pulled on the ring with all of his strength. Nothing happened. Ward couldn't get it to move, either. So we made a chain: Ward pulled on the ring, Jeppe pulled on Ward and I hung on to Jeppe. It didn't work. It wouldn't budge even a millimetre. The hatch had rusted shut.

Ward and Jeppe groaned and heaved. Jeppe banged his head on the workbench, and he swore and blamed Ward.

Then I said, 'Cola.'

Jeppe rubbed his head. 'What do you mean, "cola"?''

'Cola dissolves rust. Maybe that'll get it open.'

Ward grinned. 'Clever clogs. My brainy little brother. Let's give it a go.'

Before long, we had emptied three bottles of cola into the cracks of the hatch. I was scared that Mum would be angry, but Jeppe said she probably wouldn't notice.

Then we tried pulling again. The hatch creaked and moved a tiny little bit. My brothers both had red faces and there were beads of sweat on their top lips. Their eyes were gleaming.

Next, we tried using a pipe as a lever. Finally, the hatch started to squeak and give way. Then, all at once, it swung open and the three of us tumbled over.

I could swear I heard the hole sigh with relief.

Cold air rose up through the hatch. You could see just the top of the staircase. The rest was swallowed up by the darkness.

We were so keen to get down there that I could feel a tingling sensation all the way to my toes. I remember us all shouting about how it must be a secret bunker or a torture chamber or a medieval prison or something like that.

We fetched torches and shone them down into the hole. The steps led to a cellar beneath the house. They seemed to go down and down forever.

Ward went first. Step by step, we descended into the cellar. The light from Ward's torch slid down over the stairs. There was a thick layer of dust on them.

Jeppe was in front of me. I held on to his jumper with one hand.

'Jep?' I whispered.

'Yes?'

'What if the roof suddenly caves in?'

I was a bit of a scaredy-cat back then.

'Depends. If we get crushed beneath the rubble and you survive, I guess you can have our Lego.'

I stopped.

'Hey, it was a joke. The roof's not going to collapse.'

'I know,' I mumbled, but I couldn't move another step.

'Wait a minute, Ward,' Jeppe said, turning to look at me. 'Listen, Hidde. We discovered it together, so we're going in together too.' He took my hand and it didn't feel quite so scary any more. We carried on down the stairs.

The walls were made of grey concrete. The ceiling was pretty low. Ward could almost touch it if he stood on tiptoe. There was a ventilation grille high up in one of the walls, on the side facing the street, with ivy growing in through it. The room was rectangular and big and empty. There were two tables in there and a couple of chairs. And that was all. We could tell the cellar must run under the whole house.

'Wow,' said Jeppe, breaking the silence. It echoed.

'Our cellar,' said Ward.

'Our cellar,' I repeated. I wanted to see what it felt like to say it.

Jeppe was standing between us. He put his hands on our shoulders. 'Mum doesn't need to know anything about this.'

'Of course not,' said Ward.

'No one else needs to know about this,' said Jeppe.

'Just us, eh?' I said.

My brothers nodded. Jeppe gently squeezed my shoulder. I still remember that.

We had big plans. It was going to be a music room and a model-railway space. And a carpentry workshop and a space for light shows, and a pen for nocturnal animals.

We were going to do paintings on the walls in fluorescent paint.

We were going to breed bats down there.

We came up with codes, secret knocks that meant: 'Don't open the door. Mum's around,' or 'The coast's clear. It's me,' and each of us had his own special knock.

We rushed straight home after school.

We swept the floor. We painted one and a half of the walls white. Jeppe hung up a light. I put my stick insects down there (I only had one tank then). Ward drew half a dragon on the wall in felt-tip. He never got any further than that. We'd only had the cellar for a week when Ward died. It was because of his illness. I can't tell you much about that though, because I've forgotten it all.

After that, the cellar belonged to me. Jeppe didn't go down there any more.

It feels weird, writing it down like this.

Like Ward is here again for a moment, as if he's walking around on the pages of this notebook.

And it's weird to think that Jeppe and I used to spend time together like that. I can hardly fit that idea into my head these days.

Saturday morning, 21st May
Eleven days until Jeppe and his drum kit arrive

He wants to move in on the Wednesday after next. I have to turn my cellar into a bunker as quickly as possible. Last night I came up with a few ideas:

Bunker plan

1. Make an Alarm Web:

- Stretch thin threads everywhere, like a spider. Put them down low so they won't be spotted. In the shed, in the garden (across the path!) and by the back door.
- Tie a bell to them. Then he'll have to be really sneaky to get by without me hearing him.

2. Scare him off:

- Breed hoverflies and get them to fly around in the shed. The best ones are marmalade hoverflies. They look just like wasps, but they can't sting. (Jeppe absolutely hates wasps. When he was little, he once fell into a wasps' nest.)

3. If he still manages to make it past the hatch: the slime rail!

- Collect slime from slugs. (Their slime is the nastiest slime around. It sticks to everything and your hands still stink even after you've washed them 8 times.)
- Scrape it off and store it in a jar. (Prod the slugs with a stick, so they make extra slime.)
- Smear the slime all over the handrail on the cellar stairs. (Must remember not to use it myself, of course.)

I already have about twenty hoverfly larvae for the Fake Wasps' Nest. I cycled over to the Patch to look for them. It didn't take me long.

The Patch is on the edge of the village, behind the cemetery where Ward is buried. I often cycle over there to look for insects and to get fresh twigs and leaves. Sometimes I visit the grave, too, but I never know what to do when I get there. There's a dragon on his gravestone. So I look at the dragon until I get distracted by a lovely dung beetle. Or a gravedigger. (I don't mean the guy who digs the holes and looks after the graves and the bushes and that – I wish he'd just clear off. It's another name for burying beetles: gravediggers.) So I head over to the Patch instead, because you can find much more unusual insects there. I've sometimes seen the gravedigger (I mean the human sort this time) spraying poison in the cemetery. Like there aren't enough dead bodies in there already.

The Patch is a little field with a few trees, bushes and stinging nettles. It has drainage ditches around three sides and the cemetery hedge on the other. This time of year, in the springtime, you can find loads of insects there. The cemetery compost heap is in one corner. It's always full of dead flowers. That's where I found my cuckoo bumblebee, inside a lily.

There are some bricks lying around, too, beside the hedge. You just have to pick them up and you'll always find some kind of nice little insect lurking under there.

I've found loads of different sorts of insects at the Patch. Field crickets, bush crickets, centipedes, millipedes and a water-meadow grasshopper. And my gravediggers, of course. They may even have been inside Ward's coffin and helped to clear him away. After all, he is only about ten metres from the spot where I found them. If that's true, then they have a tiny piece of Ward inside them. And I've got a tank in my cellar with sixteen mini-Wards in it.



There are butterflies all over the Patch right now. Red admirals, small tortoiseshells, cabbage whites, brimstones, small heaths, and I even saw a comma once! The butterfly kind, of course, not the punctuation mark. Lieke's eyes would be on stalks if she saw all those butterflies!

Lieke's a girl in my class. Butterflies are her favourite creatures. I should ask her one day if she'd like to come along to the Patch with me. But I don't really dare. Ever since all that Sputterfly stuff, she always starts twitching whenever I go anywhere near her.

Perhaps I should explain. I once made a special hybrid* for her. Of a butterfly and a spider.

This was my plan:

1. Anaesthetise both insects with a drop of alcohol.
2. Carefully clip the wings off the butterfly. Don't damage the body.
3. Apply a thin line of glue with a tiny brush.
4. Transplant the wings on to the spider.

I used a peacock butterfly (her favourite kind) and a house spider. I put it in a glass jar, with twigs and leaves, and a sticker on it that said: 'SPUTTERFLY, for Lieke'. Then I left it in her locker at school. For her birthday.

When Lieke saw it, she screamed and screamed.

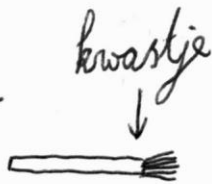
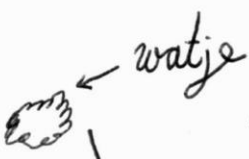
It didn't even work, either. The Sputterfly woke up again, but it started attacking its own wings. Yeah, it was a stupid plan. You shouldn't use glue for that kind of thing. You should really stitch them on instead. With a needle and thread. But that'd be too fiddly.

Lieke moved desks to sit by someone else. And since then, everyone at school has called me Sputterfly.

Jeppie thought it was hilarious. As far as he's concerned, Sputterfly is my name now. He's pretty much forgotten what my real name is.

* A hybrid is when you mix two animals together.

benodigdheden:



STAP ①

STAP ②

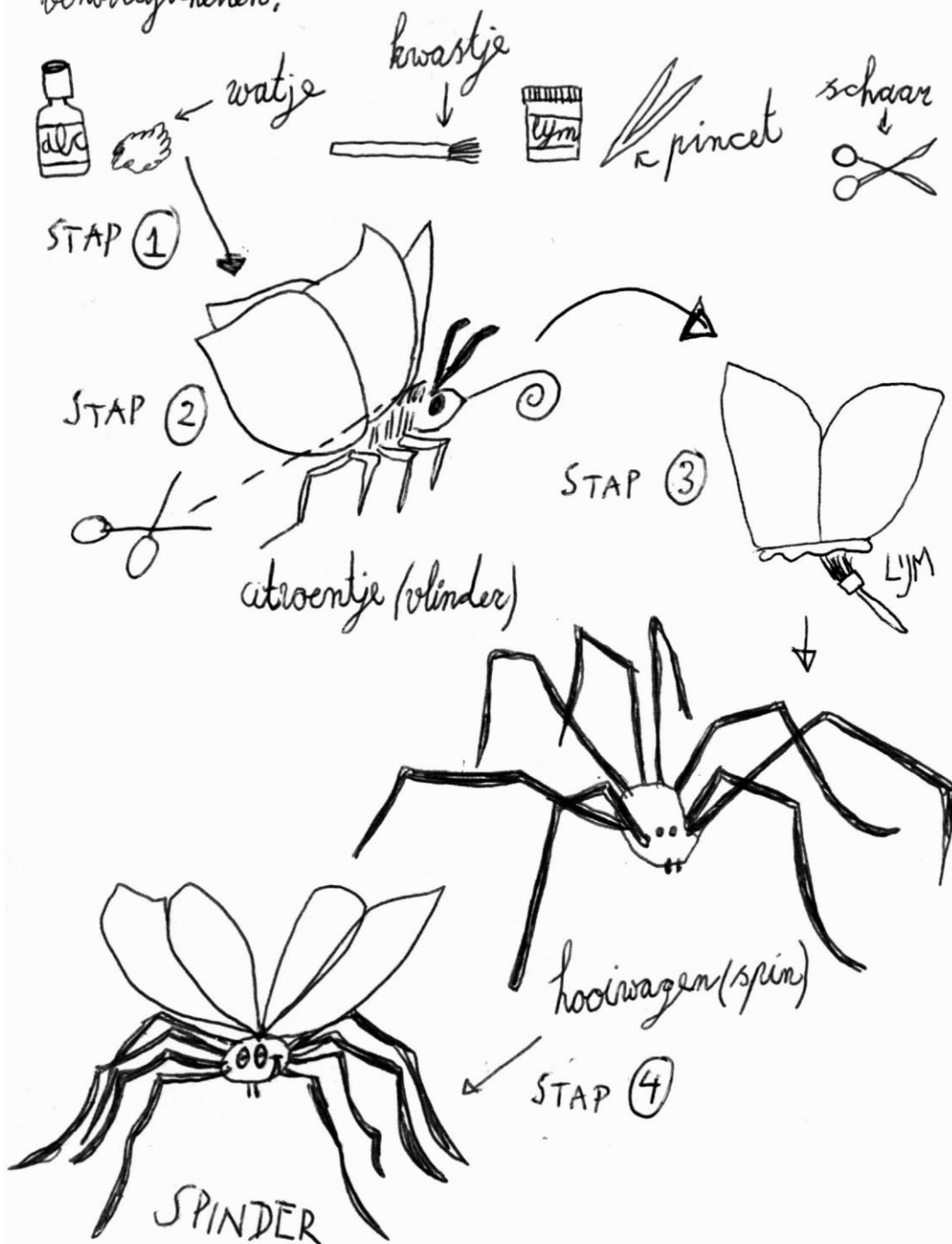
STAP ③

STAP ④

citraentje (vlinder)

hooiwagen (spin)

SPINDER



Sunday, 22nd May
Ten days until drum kit day

So, if Jeppe gets his way, this cellar will turn into a noise-box. I can already picture it: a great big drum kit, amps and strings and guitars all over the place, and an incredible din all day long.

I went to talk to him this morning. He was standing in the garden, guitar case on his back, just taking his bike out of the rack.

‘Jeppe? It won’t work.’

I told him it was a nice idea, but there’s no way he can turn it into a drum cellar.

Everyone will hear him. Then the cellar won’t be a secret any more.

He shrugged.

‘Don’t you get it?’ I whispered. ‘And what about the dragon?’

‘Shut your mouth,’ he hissed. He looked around. ‘I’ll just paint over it,’ he mumbled.

I could tell from his eyes that he was lying. The dragon is sacred. No one touches the dragon.

‘You wouldn’t do that,’ I said.

He gave me a shove and climbed on to his bike. ‘Stop making a fuss. I’ll just hang a poster over it. I’ll think of something.’ He spat on the ground. ‘Anyway... why should you care? It’s going to be my cellar.’ He did a wheelie and rode out of the garden on his back wheel. (The big show-off.)

I’ve done some more work on my bunker plan. Collecting slugs. The handrail is already pretty much covered in slime.

No sign of any activity with the hoverfly larvae yet. They could take a while to hatch.

Mum’s working in her room on some report or other and Jeppe’s gone to the farm to practise, so I’m free to do whatever I want all day. I’ve already put out threads for the Alarm Web in the shed and the garden. All I need to do now is find a bell.

I’ve also built a listening tube.

One of the rusty pipes that runs up the cellar wall comes out in Jeppe’s room, right beneath his bed. (His bedroom is directly above here.) When we discovered the cellar, Ward wanted to make it into a Morse code machine. That was the plan. Ward sawed it off at the top, but he didn’t get any further. I’ve sawed it off in the cellar, exactly at ear level.

Later

I was just feeding the crickets and suddenly the whole cellar started vibrating! I climbed up on to a chair to look out through the grille.

This removal lorry was parking up opposite our house. So it looks like we’re getting new neighbours across the street. A tall, thin man, a woman with dark curls, and a boy stepped out of the lorry. The boy seems about the same age as me. He’s got a jungle of curls on his head, and it bounces as he walks. I could tell right away that he was a loser, the way he stood there staring with his mouth half-open.

Then his sister jumped out of the lorry. At least I think it’s his sister, she’s quite a bit taller than him and she has curls too.

They were messing about. He jumped on her back. She gave him a ride to the front door and then chucked him off. The two of them were completely doubled up. Childish stuff. Jeppe and I haven’t played stupid games like that for years.

Monday evening, 23rd May
Nine days until drum kit day



Was woken up at 6:28 this morning by a scream, clattering and cursing. It was coming from outside. I raced downstairs and into the garden. Mum had tripped over one of the threads of the Alarm Web, which I'd strung across the garden path.

I tried to explain that it was for an experiment, but she wasn't really listening. She didn't want to be late for work. And what would her boss think about the hole in her tights? I thought, *You could repair that really easily with a bit of cobweb*, but I didn't say so. I said sorry. And that I'd do the shopping to make it up to her. She thought that was a good idea and said I could get her a new pair of tights while I was at it. She gave my hair a quick stroke, jumped on her bike and was gone.

It was strange to see my mum on her bike, so awake and in such a hurry. It was strange to see my mum in the morning, full stop.

Our mum is usually invisible. We hardly ever see her. In the mornings she leaves very early for work. Sometimes I hear noises, but whenever I go to look, she's already gone.

Sometimes I look for traces in the kitchen. She must have had something to eat. But I never find anything. Not even a crumb.

I don't find any evidence in her bedroom, either. Her bed is made up as neatly as a hotel bed. Sometimes I wonder if she actually sleeps in this house.

One time I bumped into her at night when I needed a pee. But even then I wasn't sure I'd actually seen her. Her grey nightshirt was like camouflage in the dim hallway.

Just once, I found a hair on her pillow. *You see*, I thought, *she does sleep here*.

I could always open the fridge. I'm sure to find her traces there. She puts plastic tubs of food in there for us. Jeppe and I just have to heat it up.

She usually doesn't get home until late. Even then you barely notice she's there. She suddenly appears in the front room. 'Hello there, my little lad,' she whispers. But she could have been standing there looking at me for ages.

Sometimes she gets home early, though, and then the three of us have dinner together. But even then... I look at her chair. I see someone sitting on it. She smiles. She's there. But I still feel like I'm missing her.

I stood in the garden, staring at the spot where my mum had just been. It was misty, with dewdrops on the grass. I could see the tracks of her bike tyres on the path. She'd ridden over a few of my alarm threads.

As I was awake anyway, I collected a few more slugs. As well as the usual red and black ones, I found a couple of nice leopard slugs.



Monday afternoon, 23rd May

Ran straight home from school to reinforce my cellar. I repaired the threads across the shed door and cleared away the broken ones over the garden path.

The hoverfly larvae still haven't hatched. Maybe it's a bit too cold down here. I put a lamp on them and wrapped a blanket around the tank.

I just saw the new boy again, the loser with the curls. He was sitting on the opposite kerb, putting on his skates. It was taking him ages. I had a good view of him through the gaps in the grille. Something interesting happened...

He'd just stood up (wobble wobble) when a bike skidded to a stop in front of him. Jeppe. Curly looked down at the wheel, which was practically parked between his legs, and then up at Jeppe.

'Should you A: skate on the road, or B: skate on the pavement?' asked Jeppe.

'Um... On the pavement. My mum doesn't like me to...'

'Wrong.' And Jeppe honked like on a TV quiz show. 'Uh-uhnnng!'

'On the road? But...'

'Uh-uhnnng! Wrong again. You're not allowed to skate here. At all. Because I don't like skaters.'

Curly kept his mouth shut. For a moment. Then he grinned. 'Ha. Good one.'

He laughed. The laughter echoed across the street, right into the cellar. I wanted to join in.

Curly held out his hand. 'Hi. We moved in yesterday. My name's Bor.'

Now Jeppe laughed. He stared at the hand for a moment before taking it. He shook it so hard that Bor had to grab Jeppe's handlebars to avoid falling over.

Jeppe said something about a 'special welcome for new residents'. He called it a 'ritual'.

'Oh, that's nice,' prattled Bor. So he really was as dumb as he looked.

'Yeah. We give newbies a baptism. Over there.' Jeppe pointed at the stinky ditch at the end of our street. The boy looked round.

Jeppe dropped his bike on the ground with a clatter and, in a second, was standing behind the kid. He grabbed him by the shoulders. 'Come on.'

He gave him a push. The boy wobbled and flailed his arms around to keep his balance. 'Oh. And you have to sing at the same time. A psalm.'

'But I don't know any psalms.'

'Then make one up.'

At that moment, Bor's sister arrived, also on skates. She has the same curls as her brother (but long), only they look good on her. And, because of her, I made an important discovery about Jeppe.

'Bor?' she said.

Jeppe had let go of him.

'Hi. Um, I... I met this boy,' Bor stammered. 'This is...'

'Jeppe,' mumbled Jeppe. He picked up his bike. 'Hi. I live across the street.' He fiddled with his handlebar grips and sort of ducked into his shoulders.

The girl stared at him. No one said anything. Jeppe yanked up his handlebars and his wheel spun round in the air. Rrrrrrr. I think it was meant to be intimidating, like a cat hissing. But Bor and his sister didn't even look at the wheel.

'What about the baptism?' asked Bor. 'Shouldn't she be baptised as well? My sister's new here, too.'

'Huh?' said Jeppe. He dropped his bike back down with a thud.

'Baptism?' the sister asked. 'Is he one of those Jehovah's Witnesses or something?'

Jeppe spluttered and choked. 'Nah.' He swept his hair over his eyes. 'It was just a joke. You didn't really believe me, did you, Bor?'

Bor did a fake smile.

Jeppe growled a kind of goodbye, bumped down the kerb with his bike, and raced away.

It got me thinking. It was if the girl had somehow made Jeppe lower his pincers. And his shell had fallen off, and he'd gone scuttling off like a naked hermit crab.

If a girl could make Jeppe lose his head, that was obviously how to defend the cellar.

I had to get a girl to come round.

I had to get a girl to be there that Wednesday.

I had to get a girl to stand by my side, so that he wouldn't dare to do anything.

A girl. And I already knew exactly which girl it should be.

Tuesday, 24th May
Eight days until drum kit day

Whenever I find a new insect and I don't know what it eats or what it likes, I always study it closely to start with. Does it prefer darkness or light? Wet or dry? Does it like to eat leaves, grass, apples, bananas or flies? I make a list of everything it does and what I notice about it.

Today I studied Lieke in the same way. Here are my notes:

8:26 L arrives at school. Puts bike in rack. Hangs coat in cloakroom. Coat: bright pink with hood.

8:30 (circle time) L is sitting with two other ♀ (= girls). The three of them are playing with their bracelets. L's has pink and red beads.

8:45 Maths. L is leaning over her book. Can't see exactly what she's doing. Her long hair is in the way.

10:10 (Break) L is eating an apple. Drinking milk from a pink cup. (Milk sticks to her top lip.)

10:15 Playground. L stands in the sunshine, as usual. Skipping with two friends. L laughs a lot.

When friend whispers something in L's ear, L gets angry and wipes her cheek: the friend must have spat on her a bit.

L gives the girl a shove. So: L doesn't like spit.

Girls suddenly point at me. See me writing.

They whisper together. One is coming over to me. Have to stop wri-

That was a close thing. The girl who came over to me – she's called Amber – asked why I was spying on them. I said I wasn't spying. As far as I know, spying is always secret and you have to look round a corner or through a gap in the fence. That's what I said to her.

'Doesn't matter,' she snapped. 'What you're doing is spying, too. And what's that you've got behind your back?'

I lied and said it was a picture. I said I was drawing them.

'And why would you do that?'

I muttered something about thinking it looked nice, the way they were skipping. She spluttered and ran back to her friends. 'Do you know what he said?' I heard her giggling.

It was an infectious kind of giggling, because Lieke and Anouk started giggling, too. And whispering.

When they went back to skipping, something had changed. They kept fiddling with their hair. Tossing it back over one shoulder and then the other. Giggling non-stop. And glancing over at me. It was really winding me up.

I stopped making my list. There was no point now. The same thing happens with insects: as soon as they know you're studying them (because, say, you push a piece of apple towards them with your finger), they go crazy and start running round in circles. That's the end of any natural behaviour.

But, now that I'm looking back at my list and highlighting what stands out, I've made an important discovery.

I already knew this, of course, but my list has given me scientific proof: Lieke loves pink. (It's on my list three times.)

If you add in her favourite creature, you get:

Pink + butterflies = pink butterflies.

She's sure to find pink butterflies irresistible. If I had some, she'd definitely come to see them. Then there'll be a girl in my lab and Jeppe won't dare to do anything. Pincers down. Shell off. Scuttle, scuttle.

I've looked in books and on the internet, but pink butterflies don't exist. I'll have to breed some myself. This is the plan:

- Catch caterpillars that will turn into white butterflies: so, cabbage white butterflies.
- Buy white cabbage (that's what they eat).
- Dye the white cabbage pink.
- Feed the pink cabbage to the caterpillars.
- Wait until they make cocoons and hatch.
- Meanwhile, invite Lieke to come and see pink butterflies on Wednesday...

Wednesday evening, 25th May
Seven days until drum kit day

Bor, the new kid, the one with the curls, is in my class. He's a weird kid when you see him up close, too. I didn't mention that we're neighbours. Because I don't know that, do I? I can hardly tell him I was spying on him from my secret cellar. And besides, I don't need a new neighbour.

But I couldn't avoid him during circle time. Bor said he'd come to live in W----- Street.

'Don't you live there too, Hidde?' squeaked the teacher. 'Have you met Bor already?'

I shook my head and fiddled with my T-shirt. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that he was grinning at me. It was a stupid grin. It made me want to pull his curls.

He's smart, too. During our nature class, the teacher was talking about reproduction and she showed a film of two grebes doing a kind of dance on the water. She told us that all males and females in the animal kingdom use sounds and movements to attract each other.

'Croaking!' Bor called out without putting his hand up. 'Male frogs croak to attract the females!' (Well, yes, duh...)

'Very good, Bor,' said the teacher. 'Croaking. Who knows any other methods?'

'Disco lights,' I said.

The whole class (including Lieke) laughed. My mouth pulled itself into a grin.

The teacher looked at me sternly. 'Disco lights? Hmm.'

And so I told them about fireflies. Girl fireflies who feel lonely send out light signals with their bottoms. It means something like, 'Here I am. Come and say hello.' And any boy fireflies who see it will flash back, 'I'm coming over!'

The class giggled, but everyone thought it was cool. The teacher only half-believed me and said that she was going to look it up. I said I knew it was a fact: I'd tried it at home. She frowned and didn't know what to say. So she quickly went on with the lesson.

(She doesn't know much about this stuff. It isn't true what she said about 'all males and females in the animal kingdom' attracting each other, either. My stick insects can lay eggs without mating. Which is really handy. It means they don't care if no one falls in love with them.)

At break, Bor suddenly appeared beside me. The way a flea can. You don't even see it jump. It's just suddenly there on your arm.

'What number do you live at, then?'

'Uhm...' I mumbled.

He raised his eyebrows and waited. So irritating.

'A long way from you,' I fibbed.

'How do you know where we live?' he said. 'I didn't tell you.'

I could feel my cheeks beginning to glow. Red. *Warning colour*, I thought to myself.

Think of something! Think of something!

So I said that I'd seen the removal lorry from my window. Then where exactly did I live, he wanted to know. Right at the other end, I said. Miles away from his house.

He raised his eyebrows again. Like he was trying to get rid of something on his forehead. The kid was really getting on my nerves.

'If you live in the same street as me,' he said, 'you must know that pain in the neck with his bike and his stupid jokes: Joppe.'

'Not Joppe. Jeppe,' I said, 'and he's not a pain in the neck. He's my brother.' No idea why I said that. Jeppe really is a pain in the neck.

'Bad luck,' said Bor.

I didn't know what to say. Luckily he turned round and bounced off.

At the gate he called over his shoulder: 'You're a weasel. Just like your brother!'

'Oh yeah?' I shouted back. (A weasel? Who says that? And what's so bad about weasels, anyway?)

'Yeah. You're a lying weasel. If he's your brother, you live opposite us.' And off he skipped.

Just now, while we were eating dinner, I asked Jeppe about the new kid. We were having mash. Me from a plate, Jeppe out of the microwave dish. It was supposed to be sausages and mash, but he'd kept both sausages for himself.

It was quiet in the kitchen. All you could hear was Jeppe's munching.

'Have you seen our new neighbour yet?' I asked.

Jeppe nodded. 'What an idiot,' he muttered, his mouth full.

That was one thing we agreed on.

'I almost persuaded him to stick his head in the ditch. But unfortunately it didn't work out,' sniggered Jeppe.

'What went wrong?' I asked.

'None of your bloody business,' he said, smacking his lips.

More silence.

I tried again.

'Do you know,' I asked, 'if he's, like, an only child? Or has he got a sister or something?'

Jeppe almost choked on a big bite of sausage. He started spluttering and had to have a gulp of cola before he could speak again.

'Why do you ask?'

'You know, just wondering.'

'Why don't you ask him?' He put on a stupid voice. 'Oh, hellooo there, I'm Sputterfly, and I was just wondering, are there any preeetty laydies living here?'

I wasn't bothered. Praying mantises and wasps go on the attack when they feel threatened, too.

I asked for my sausage, but he pretended not to hear. He cut it into bits and gobbled them all down, one after the other. I didn't say anything.

Then he burped. 'Right. Change of subject, Sputterfly. You started packing up downstairs yet?'

'Almost.'

'What do you mean, "almost"? A: I'm packing, or B: I haven't started yet?'

I chewed until my mouth was empty. A fly landed on the table, not far from Jeppe's hand. Metallic-green eyes: it had to be a twin-lobed deerfly. They have a nasty bite. I didn't say anything. I hoped Jeppe hadn't spotted it.

'Well?'

I looked straight at him. 'B. Not yet.' I tried to hold his gaze. Hopefully the fly would seize the opportunity to attack in the meantime. The bite swells up and itches for days.

'Then, if I were you, I'd go and do it. Now.' Fast as lightning, without even looking, he slapped his hand down on the fly. I jumped. I couldn't help it. I really jumped. I was gasping for air.

Jeppe lifted his hand. The fly's back half was splatted, but it was still alive. Its wings were trembling, it was digging away at the table top with its front legs, but it wasn't getting anywhere. It was stuck to the table.

Jeppe picked up the fly between two fingers. Looked at it calmly. *Bite him*, I thought. *Bite him, if you still can*. Jeppe pulled off one leg. 'When are you going to start packing?'

I heard its wings fluttering.

'This week,' I whimpered.

Another leg.

'Tomorrow, I think,' I said quickly.

'A: I think, or B: I know...?'

Another leg. And a wing.

'Jeppe...'

'Tomorrow, then...?'

I clenched my jaw.

He squished the fly between his fingers. He looked at the little corpse on his thumb and flicked it off with his finger. Into my mash.

It lay on its back on a bed of potato. A twitch. Then nothing.

I stood up without saying a word and went down into the cellar.

Maybe I should just give up. Pack my things and get out. Leave the cellar to Jeppe. Get rid of my insects. But what then? What would I have left? What would I do without my creatures?

The tank of hoverfly larvae is on the table beside me. They have a transparent membrane now. It's tight. You can already see the yellow and black stripes inside. Before long, I'll have a little army of fake wasps. That should keep Jeppe away for a while.

The caterpillars who ate the pink cabbage have all died.

Plan failed.

Maybe it was the dye.

Thursday morning, 26th May
Six days to go

It's really early. The sun's only just come up. I can't sleep, anyway. Just had such a weird dream.

The cellar was filling with water. It was pouring down the walls and gushing in through the ventilation grille. It was already up to my knees. I splashed through the water from one tank to the next. The caterpillar tank was full of bright purple butterflies. I picked it up and was about to carry it to safety, but Jeppe was standing at the top of the stairs. He was throwing cardboard boxes down. 'You started packing yet?' he kept asking. I waded through the water with the tank in my arms and no idea what to do.

I could hear voices coming from the gravediggers' tank. They said, 'Come in here with us. Come on. You'll be safe with us.'

And then their tank was suddenly a rubber dinghy, the same kind that Jeppe and I used to take out on to the canal. I looked around and all the insects had boats. There were little boats floating all over the cellar. The gravediggers were sitting calmly together in the bottom of their boat, chirping a song. I climbed in and joined them.

Meanwhile, the water kept rising. The ceiling was coming closer, I was already having to duck. In the end I had to lie down on the bottom of the boat with my knees pulled up. I did it really carefully so that I wouldn't crush the gravediggers. The boat pressed so tightly up against the ceiling that it stopped rocking. All I could see was a small strip of light. I was scared I was going to suffocate or drown, but the gravediggers' chirping calmed me down.

'Are you playing hide and seek?' I heard Jeppe shout. 'You're not playing hide and seek, are you?'

Then I woke up with a shock. I threw off the covers and gasped for breath.

The alarm clock said 5:12. Not even Mum is awake at that time.

Moments later I was standing at her bedroom door. I gently pushed it open. In the dim light I could see the lump under the bedclothes.

I stood there for a little while, but I didn't wake her up. I suddenly felt so childish.

I'm feeling better now.

When I came into the cellar, I could hear a very quiet tapping sound. For a moment I thought there was a leak, but it was coming from the hoverfly tank. It was swarming with hoverflies! They've nearly all hatched. I carried the tank up the cellar stairs and released them in the shed. They were really happy and flew off all over the place.

They fly around your head. If you don't know any better, it can be pretty scary.

I've had a good idea about the pink butterflies, by the way. I'm going to feed them a mixture of red and white cabbage. Because red + white = pink. Can't believe I didn't think of it sooner!

I'm going to go and look for new caterpillars right now. I'll try the garden first, maybe there are some there.

Later

Caught.

I was tiptoeing around the garden with a jam jar in my hand, looking for caterpillars. The sky was a really pretty pink and you could hear more and more birds waking up. I wasn't paying any attention. I was kneeling by the hedge, peering at the underside of the leaves. I'd just spotted a nice fat one when I heard Mum's voice behind me.

'What on earth are you doing?'

I hadn't heard her coming. Had she seen me come out of the shed?

I said I was looking for caterpillars.

'At this time in the morning?'

I shrugged. 'Couldn't sleep.'

She nodded and then mumbled, 'The night seems quiet. But I can hear the screams... I can hear the screams.' Her eyes were staring at nothing. She stood there, frozen to the spot.

I had no idea what she was talking about.

'Mum?'

She woke up with a start. 'Why do you keep going into the shed, by the way?' she asked.

So she *had* seen me. She'd seen me coming out of the shed. More than once.

'I'm making something. For school,' I fibbed.

'Oh,' she said, and didn't ask any more questions. She disappeared into the kitchen. If I want to keep the cellar a secret, I'll have to be more careful.

I quickly looked for a few more caterpillars and then headed to the kitchen to have breakfast with Mum, but when I got there she'd disappeared. Without a trace.

Thursday afternoon, 26th May
Six more days

Just got back from school. The caterpillars I found this morning have eaten plenty of the cabbage, the white and the red! They're still wriggling around happily. My plan's going to work.

The earwigs are restless. They're dragging their eggs from one side of the tank to the other and back again. The leaf insects, too: they're walking crisscross over the twigs and wriggling their bums. A couple of them were just fighting, as well. They never do that.

I'm going to have to ask Lieke soon. If she'll come and watch the pink butterflies hatching.

How do you do that?

I don't really talk to her often.

Plan: How am I going to ask Lieke to come round?

A. Write a ~~letter~~ an invitation.

Make it special. Just for her.

Unique event. Only on Wednesday: pink butterflies. Something like that.

or

B. Phone her.

Say: 'Hey, Lieke. It's me, Hidde, ~~I'm in your class at school~~. I was just thinking... you like pink, don't you? And butterflies? So, I've got something to show you that's really ~~amazing irresistible~~ cool: pink butterflies.'

or

C. Just ask her. At break. Go up to her, tell her you've bred some pink butterflies. And she might find it interesting. And she's welcome to come and take a look.

Looking at the plan, A seems like the best option.

Nope. That'll never work. A letter like that, much too stiff.

So, it's on to B, then. I'll do it right away. Then it's done.

Later

I was ready. I'd practised my sentence out loud a few times. Sat there with my book on my lap. Cleared my throat. And then I phoned.

Lieke picked up. When I heard her voice, my mind went blank. I dropped the book.

'Hello...?' she said. 'Hello...?'

My voice had stopped working. I wanted to hang up but then she'd think it was some weirdo calling, or a burglar who wanted to find out if anyone was at home. I didn't want to frighten her. I had to say something. Anything.

'Um, hello. Are you, er, interested in roller blinds?' I blurted, making my voice as low as possible.

'We already have curtains,' Lieke replied.

'Oh. Oh dear. Goodbye, then,' I growled.

Pffff.