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Encircled

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

The woods behind our house, which I have to cross on the way to Michi and his family when I want to watch TV, are growing rampant. I thought I knew them well. I've walked through this wood countless times; I could wander through it with my eyes closed. Now I have to gather up all my courage to set foot in it. I used to think I could smell every section of the path, every small clearing, the points where the trees grow low or high, I could feel the order of the hazel trees, the raspberry shrubs, the willow bushes with my eyes closed, tell when the canopy of spruce branches opened up or closed above me. Now the wood has lost its familiarity. It has joined up with the forest and changed into a green ocean, full of prickly needles and sharp-edged shelters, with a surging, spreading undergrowth of rough bark. The moment I look out of my bedroom window, the wood edges into my sight or lurks behind the grass with its rippled, jagged surface. I'm afraid it will break its banks one day and leave the forest's edge, flooding our thoughts, just as I have the feeling that the forest already occupies the thoughts of the men who work with my father, or come and visit us to go hunting with him.

Going into the woods, in our language, means not only felling trees, hunting or picking mushrooms. It also means, in the stories they tell, hiding, fleeing, ambushing. They slept, cooked and ate in the woods, so the stories go. Men and women went into the woods not only in peacetime, but also in the war. Not into our own wood, no, it was too sparse, too small and compact for that. They set off for the proper forests, they say. The forests gave shelter to many people, they say, a hell in which they hunted game and were hunted like game.

The stories revolve around the woods, just like the woods encircle our farm.

Concealed in them the hunting spots, the feeding spots, the berry-picking spots, the mushroom-picking spots that you don't reveal. Even more secret are the most secret places, to which no paths and no tracks lead, that have to be tracked down via hunting trails and beds of streams, the hiding and survival places, the bunkers where our people, so they say, hid out.

This year a storm wind causes a lot of damage on the slopes of the Count's forest. The hurricane leaves behind a broad swathe of destruction, in which the trees lie snapped, broken off and uprooted on the ground. The loggers from all the Count's old felling crews are called up to clear away the windthrow. For weeks, the whining of the saws, the dull thud of the axes, the cracking of the trunks floats above the valley.

On the weekends the loggers gather at our farmyard to sharpen and repair their tools. Their trousers are strewn with pitch stains, glinting like tiny swamps. From the middle of the swamps, buds of dirt spread out in circles and seep away into the cloth as shadows of pitch clouds. The loggers' shirts are soaked in sweated, the sweaters and jackets they wear over their shoulders are fraying at the sleeves and the edges.

Sitting on a bench, Father repairs a saw that he calls the American Lady. He hammers at the saw with light blows. It bobs to the beat, emitting humming sounds.

You're making the saw dance, says Michi. *As soon as I put it into your hands it's in a good mood.* Uncle Jozi tells his workmates he wants to make radio shows – he's already applied for a recording device from the Slovenian department of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, he says he'll talk to people and record what they say. If his workmates don't mind he'd do a story about them too, the loggers of Count Thurn.

You're not loggers any more, says Father, *you turned your back on the forest long ago.*

You have to think of the future, Michi answers him, you can't just go into the woods every day as if there was nothing else, as if there was no other way of earning a living. He'd joined the socialists, he says. They'd promised him to get him something else.

You want to get into politics, says Father, *but you'll never be mayor, they won't let you, you're Slovenian, they'll never stand for a Slovenian mayor!*

You don't understand it, says Michi.

I understand what I understand, says Father.

He tells us that he went over the green line to the Slovenian side last week from the Mozgans' ridge, where he's been felling trees for the farmers, and had a beer over at Kumer's. The women were pretty amazed that he'd dared to cross the border. They'd asked him about the people from Lepena and told him to say hello to everyone they knew. *Thanks, thanks,* say the loggers, and set off on the walk home. Only Jozi mounts a motorbike and drives off, waving one hand.

Where is the border actually? I ask Father.

Up there, he says, pointing at the ridge that closes off the valley in a semi-circle.

I'd like to go to work with you one day, I say.

Father is so surprised by my request that he promises to take me felling the next day. He has to take some tools up anyway.

In the morning his motorbike is outside the stable, a Puch with a darkly shining tank that looks like the rump of a black dolphin. Father fastens the bulging backpack full of tools and a canister of petrol onto the luggage rack. I sit on the rear seat and place my arms carefully around his torso. He tells me to squeeze up tight to him so I don't fall off the motorbike along the way. At the first curve he calls out, *You're wobbling, hold tight or we'll start swerving.* After my initial fear that rises every time Father brakes and takes a corner, I relax into his acceleration on the straight stretches.

He parks the motorbike behind the Mozgans' farm, tucks a couple of iron clamps behind his belt and shoulders his backpack. We set off on a slow walk. The petrol gurgles in the canister. *You have to stroll on steep ground or you get out of breath,* says father. Then he quickens his pace. I get left behind, taking a run-up on level sections of the path to catch him up. *Were you here in the war?* I ask.

Yes, we had a bunker higher up, he says. *Your grandfather ran the couriers. I did the cooking. It was very dangerous.*

Were you scared? I ask.

I should think I was. I was still a child, only a few years older than you.

Behind us, we hear a flushed deer running for cover.

It got a nose of us, says Father.

Beneath the crest of the woods, between mighty spruces with dense branches almost reaching the ground, a hut is revealed. It is entirely covered with bark, nailed onto a wooden framework underneath layer by layer. *This is where we used to sleep,* says Father, *when we were felling timber.* He unlocks the door and stows the tools and the petrol canister next to the unused bunks.

I have to go to the felling strip, he says, *and then we can go across the border.*

His workplace looks tidy and is marked out by piles of branches. Stripped and unstripped boles are ordered on the ground, with stumps of branches or pruned, as Father says, between

them messy piles of sawdust. The boles have slanted bucks, the cut surfaces of the trunks shining like freshly carved wooden plates.

Father stands in the middle of the clearing and looks out over the space he's made, then collects up the scattered splitting wedges and covers them over with branches. *I'm looking forward to a beer now*, he says, pointing towards the border.

To my surprise, the border runs close to the clearing. From the crest of the woods I can see the Yugoslavian side of the forest sloping down, which to my amazement looks the same as the Austrian side, revealing itself to be a continuation of the familiar landscape. Father leans on a fencepost to jump over the border. He tells me to crawl underneath the barbed wire, pulling the lowest wire up so I don't get caught on the twirled barbs.

He's suddenly in a rush again. He hurries down a sparse wood with large strides. I can barely follow him. Ferns slash into my face. He waits for me below the woods. He's sitting on the grass, looking down at a lower valley that appears to have vanished entirely in its hollow.

Down there behind the Raduha – father points at the ridge of a hill – *that's where I went to school in the war. Not for long. It'll have been about two weeks. I went to school over there, in Luče*, he says. He and his brother were in the courier crew, on a farm. They were only allowed to stay in the bunker with their father for two weeks after they ran away from home. Then they were taken to the Savinja Valley, because the Savinja Valley was liberated territory, he tells me. They had to abandon the command centre in January because the Germans attacked the valley. The Germans shot across the field so much that the earth was spraying all around, Father tells me. He and the couriers buried typewriters in the ground. They dug a hole, threw in a bit of straw and piled the typewriters up on top of it. Then they scattered more straw over them and then earth and grass and snow, until there was no sign of anything. They set off in the afternoon, he tells me, and marched all through the night. *The next day the Germans chased us again*, says Father. *There was snow up to my hips. One of the commanders said I wasn't going to make it.*

He spits forcefully, as if he had to relieve himself after telling the story.

At Kumer's place, we are greeted by two women who know his name. *Zdravko*, they call out, *Zdravko, it's so good to see you again!* They serve Father a beer and me a slice of bread spread with potted liver.

On the way back, father looks at me with an absent smile. I imagine how good it would be if Father took me into his confidence and told me the story again and then asked what I'd been

through, and then I could confide in him that I was being bullied on the way to school and that I dreamed of him cornering the girls and demanding that they stop threatening me right away. In the hope of being able to count on Father, I give him a silent promise which I don't understand myself, an accordance to accompany him on his way home and his way to and from school, on his way to these woods perhaps or to his memory. As we climb up through the woods I wonder whether I ought to stay in my child's body or I want to outgrow myself, and I stay stuck on this day in my short skirt, cotton tights and rubber boots.

When we come to the customs path below the border I look for footprints in the softened earth, where puddles have formed. Father says the customs men might have the day off today, on Sunday, and laughs at his own joke.

We get to the Austrian side without being spotted, and Father asks if I'd like to come along as a beater on a shoot, saying he's seen I'm a good walker. I say yes and decide to overcome my shyness of the woods. On the way to the Mozgans' place, a gap in the woods reveals a view of scattered houses and farms in the valley. We stop to look out from the green undergrowth. Like two fishes, it occurs to me, peeking out of the seaweed. I saw the spritely fish on TV and I imagine Father and me peering through big round eyes out of the tangle of underbrush and then disappearing again, whirling up a little cloud of sand that settles only slowly in the murky water. A sea full of straws, I think. Soon we'll reach the shore.

I'm happy and cheerful as I climb up behind Father on the motorbike. I put my arms tightly around his waist and press up against his back. It's late in the afternoon as we drive down the winding Koprivna road. The sun is hovering at our level. In a sweeping curve, Father stops and smokes a cigarette. There used to be a fence there, he says, blowing the smoke into the air.

Before we come to the bottom of the valley he drives across a wooden bridge to a tumbledown house hidden between plum and apple trees. As we get off the motorbike Father's fellow logger Jaki is standing outside the front door, leaning on a scythe. The cut grass lies in waves on the ground around the house.

I've been out to the nettles, says Jaki. Have you been out felling? Father nods.

It all gets overgrown if you don't cut the grass regularly, says Jaki. He's been up at the Blajs' place this morning, the grass was standing high there too.

Father looks up to a lonely plot of land still in the sunshine.

It's a shame no one's farming the land, he says. Who'd have thought it'd come to this?

How many brothers died in the camp? Jaki asks.

The older three – Jakob, Johi and Lipi, says Vater. Lipi's ashes came from Natzweiler, and the others died in Dachau.

I hear the resounding name of Dachau, which I know already, but Natzweiler is new to me and instantly forgotten.

His uncle fell up there, it occurs to Jaki. He'd just deserted, he says to me, feeling my gaze on him, and he'd been wounded in the first battle with the Germans. He dragged himself across the field to the Jekls' and lay bleeding below the road, behind a bush. The German patrol passed him by without noticing him. But then the last man looked down and shot him. The Jekls had to bury him by the road.

I know, says my father, I know the spot.

The dead leave their cold in this place, where the sun has withdrawn. I wonder whether the coolness making me shiver might be to do with the evening and the woods creeping up on the houses. The light is in a rush to get up on high. Father sinks into motionlessness. I ask him if we can't go home now.

Yes, yes, he says, don't tschentsch like your mother. He only decides to get back on the motorbike when Jaki pushes his round the corner of the house. The three of us drive down the gravel road, but at the fork where we ought to turn left Father turns right and stops by the edge of the road.

You can go home if you like, he says. He's going for another beer.

I take the shortcut across the field belonging to the inn, where sluggish, sated cows beat their tails about themselves. I balance along two tree trunks laid across the Lepena stream to the other side and hurry up a bank, behind which I can hear the pigs squealing in our sty.

The way someone went into the woods or came out of the woods told you everything about them, they say. Was he carrying a rifle, did he have a red star on his cap, was he wearing two pairs of trousers and two coats on top of each other to keep warm, did he come in an unbuttoned shirt, with pitch-stained and ripped trousers, was he carrying a dead deer in his backpack, or was he taking bacon for the Green Cadre up to the highest fir trees? Was he carrying a basket of mushrooms, a can of berries or courier post in his pockets? Did he have a

clean shirt on, did he smell of pitch and bark, or was he rancid and unwashed and stank of earth and fearful sweat, of blood and scabs?

My father's hunting friends wear ironed trousers and jackets in the colours of the trees, carry the smell of moss in their hair and bear twigs of fir in the bands of their hunting hats. From their backpacks dangle the heads of large game that was identified by the gun, bowled over and so brought to book. From the deer's muzzles drip blood and sweat, the dew of the last breath they drew in. The dark tapeta reflect long afterwards in the delicate heads, and their skulls, freed from fur and hair, simmer long afterwards in the peroxide water until they are taken out of the pan, bleached into trophies.

Hunting is part of the family legend, every hunt day a high day, that's the way it's always been, so Father says. He still goes out stalking at dawn and dusk, oils his rifles and shotguns, cleans the telescopic sights, counts the shells. Game is still boiled and roasted in the kitchen, the vapours of chamois soups still awaken our appetite. His hunting friends still frequent our house and tell their stories. He still looks forward to the annual shoot, to the driving he wants to take me along to because I'm a good walker.

When the time comes the shoot is discussed in the early morning, the hunters are served hot tea and fried pastries. The territory is divided up, sections of forest are allocated, the positions decided. I'm to go along with old Pop, who I know well. He's the oldest in the group, and they say he has the worst eyes. Once they put him and his eyesight to the test, so the story goes, and put a cat in a rabbit's fur, dressed the cat in the fur and tied it to its body with string. The cat spat and scratched and escaped up the nearest tree and Pop couldn't believe his eyes, because he could swear he'd seen the first ever rabbit to climb a tree.

Grandmother takes me aside. She's heard the hunt's to finish off at the Gregoričs' place. I'm to say hello to old Mother Gregorička from her. *She carried me out of the camp when the camp was evacuated and I was too weak to walk, says Grandmother. Mother Gregorička carried me three days long, propped me up and wheeled me in a wheelbarrow until the SS made a break for it.* Mother Gregorička went mad in Auschwitz, even before she was transferred to Ravensbrück, and from then on she cursed that the devil who put her in the camp should lead the way out of there again. She'd been a strong lass in her young days, who could take on any man, Grandmother tells me. I nod and say I'll pass on her best wishes.

Pop holds my hand while we walk our section of the woods, beating sticks against trees and bushes. The hunters have laid their shotguns over their shoulders and headed out before us. The dogs drive rabbits and foxes in their direction, all we hear are isolated shots, and we only see a few animals rushing past us.

The bag laid out in front of the Gregoričs' farm is as short as the wake for the dead animals, and the schnapps is soon drunk up. We're invited into the farmhouse parlour. They've made a stew, to celebrate the bag, as they say. Old Mother Gregorička is sitting on the bench by the table. I go up to her to pass on Grandmother's best wishes and give her my hand. Hers is cold and moist. She smells of urine. Mother Gregorička doesn't understand who's sending best wishes; she looks at me through empty eyes. Sveršina tries to explain. The old, mighty woman nods and sways her robust body to and fro as we're eating. I watch her from one side and can't help thinking of Grandmother and how this Gregorička was capable of throwing grown men up in the air and carrying my weakened grandmother out of the camp.

One hunter tells a story about how his neighbour, who has just died and was a Partisan during the war, once told him that he saw a white stag while out on patrol, not in the hide, and he had an intuition that his partisan bunker was going to be betrayed. He'd warned the others but they hadn't listened. The next day the bunker really was raided by the police. It was a sign, and you had to take note of signs, says the hunter. Sveršina thinks it's nonsense, intuition, what intuition, he rants. There was nothing supernatural about being afraid of falling into the Gestapo's hands. After he took Kori to the Partisans it wasn't long before the police turned up at the Brečks' farm. Someone must have got wind of it and that was it for him, off to Mauthausen!

Father asks if the hunters still remember who was the best shot in Lepena. *Ha*, he says, *ha, can't you remember, it was old Farmer Mozgan's wife*, he says after a brief pause, as if he'd played his best card. She had a legendary poacher's hand and bagged many a strong roe. *What do you say to that?* asks Father. *What do you say now, you with those miserable rabbits you've bagged, you can only ever dream of aiming as well as Farmer Mozgan's wife.* She used to do her knitting up in the hide, and when a deer began to graze she didn't bat an eyelid, just raised her rifle and bang and Bob's your uncle! But she didn't survive Ravensbrück, Sveršina throws down the joker, that was the death of her, oh yes, the death of her.

It grows dark and the hunters head home, and I realize Father's had too much to drink. He stands on shaky legs and complains about the long way home he has ahead of him. A torch is pressed into my hand and they send me off with the words, *You'll look after your father well enough.*

I lead the way and try and light up the path for Father and me. He tells me how often he's taken this path on his own and how well he knows it.

The woods begin to draw the darkness in. From all sides, a keen silence befalls us, seeming to lie in wait for our footsteps. I wonder how I might keep Father talking so that the soundlessness doesn't get the upper hand. As we leave the woods and stop in the field behind the Auprichs' farmhouse, I ask the name of the farm we can make out higher up, outlined below the peak of the wooded hill. *That's Hojniks' farm,* says Father, *the Nazi police did their worst there as well.* The family was supposed to be taken away, but old Farmer Hojnik refused to leave his land. So he was beaten to death on the spot. His son and daughter-in-law were shot dead, then they threw the bodies in the cottage and set it on fire. Father's voice suddenly cracks. He speaks in a thin tone. It annoys me.

A slight wind rises. The trees begin to groan as soon as we enter the woods again. The rustling of dead leaves is barely audibly mingled with voices and screams. I ask Father to give me his hand. He laughs and takes a big step forwards to take me by the hand. At that moment, he loses his balance and slips horizontally down a steep slope, coming to a halt prone behind a bush. The torch, which he tore away from me while reaching for my hand, goes out. I can barely see him in the dark, just hear him cursing a long way down. *Hell, oh hell, how on earth am I going to get back up?* he moans. I think he must have hurt himself, and I get ready to slide down to him. *Stay up there,* he shouts, *stay there, I'll be fine on my own.* He starts to crawl up the slope on all fours. *The light's broken, how the hell am I supposed to see anything in this darkness?* curses Father, kicking his mountain shoes into the ground to find his footing. He's near me now and he says, *You can pull me up now,* and I pull with all my might. Father's standing next to me again. *I just need a bit of a rest,* he says, *and then we'll get going again.* He sits down on the forest floor and seems to fall asleep an instant later. I squat down next to him, feeling tears pricking. The woods and the darkness let loose all their ghosts on me, tugging and tearing at me like crazy. I raise my head and try to make out the moon, which is lying low tonight. A dark sphere seems to be lowering itself towards me from the sky. I'm afraid I've fetched it down with my crying, and I close my eyes. The darkness takes hold of me, streaming into my chest and intoxicating me.

Father is lying beside me, stupefied. After an eternity, he opens his eyes and says, *You know, the best thing to do if you're scared in the woods is sing partisan songs.* He's often done it and it always helped, and do I know any? I don't. *Never mind, I'll do the singing,* he says. And Father sings at the top of his voice, partisan fighting songs, although he only remembers a few verses and repeats them over and over all the way home.

Mother is waiting up for us in the kitchen, angry and worried. I don't want to upset her so I don't tell her anything about the fates that awaited us along the way. I'm afraid that death's lodged itself inside me, like a little black button, like dark lace lichen creeping invisibly over my skin.