

Charlotte Weitze
ROSARIUM

Translated from the Danish
by Martin Aitken

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Represented by Annette Orre, Oslo Literary Agency

annette@osloliteraryagency.no

+47 922 53 352

A NOVEL IN THREE PARTS:

Brother and Sister

J.

Pangaea

BROTHER AND SISTER

Mother and Father bent over us. Brother's eyes were consumingly moon-pale. During the night we had contrived to wind our covers together into a kind of fluvial eddy. His soft skin underneath me pressed against mine. We were like some underwater creature with four arms and four legs.

Mother and Father had overcoats on, and swept the dreamwater away. Mother attended to me, Father to my brother. They helped us into our clothes: trouser buttons were done up hurriedly, my dress belted tight at the waist. Winter coat, knitted hat, scarf and mittens on. Feet into boots.

Someone shouted loudly in Russian and thumped on the neighbour's door.

Mother and Father drew us to the window, the one facing the vegetable patch and the forest. Father undid the catches and pushed it open.

Mother and I followed Father and Brother, and we bolted towards the forest's gaping mouth, trampling across the empty vegetable patch. I saw our skinny neighbours stand stiffly outside their homes. Men with hands above their heads and eyes fixed on the barrels of the soldiers' guns. Women who lay on the ground with their legs spread apart.

One of the soldiers was our nearest neighbour, employed by the king to know the hunting forest like the inside of his pocket. He knew where the game was, and punished poachers. I had never before seen him in Russian uniform, and with his blue eyes looking straight at me he fired a shot after us and a bullet flew past my shoulder.

Mother pressed a hand down over my eyes, and as we ran on everything was red. Mother's fingers smelled of the cooking vapours from the soup caldron we had left behind on the stove. I heard a neighbour woman howl, a soldier chastise her, metal smacked against flesh and bone. Mother's hand tightened over my face, while my legs continued their run across the stubble field. I was like a chicken without a head.

'Hurry!'

Brother's voice was undulant. Father hissed: 'Quiet!'

A scrunching of leaves underfoot, a snapping of twigs. A final shot, an arcing bullet that whistled through the branches to be halted by a tree trunk further ahead. Mother's hand bumping up and down as we ran, bobbing to my hair, covering my mouth, bobbing to my hair again. At last she took it away and I saw the forest, its flames of green, loom towards us. Above, the vaulting crowns, in the middle the fungus-coloured barked trunks, below the pillowy moss. The forest had closed around us, but we kept running. Father and Brother were still in front. In the clearings, their necks and hands were radiantly pink like cherry blossom. Beneath the trees they again became grey-green, tinged by the foliage.

Mother and I ducked under the low-hanging branches. But Mother's face was streaked red, lacerated. I made sure to stay in front of her, so as not to get lost. Mother was hobbling as if now she had a wooden leg.

The dark autumn sky and the forest floor squeezed them together. Father must have prepared their escape, for late in the day he came to a halt beneath a cluster of spruce whose skirts reached to the ground. The family sank breathless onto the carpet of smooth, brown needles. They lay down, a blanket under them, a blanket over them, and tried to keep each other warm as they closed their eyes. In his right hand, the only appendage to protrude from this familial heap, Father gripped a pistol. In the dim light of the moon it gleamed beneath the trees, and Sister snuggled closer to Mother, who smelled pungently of iron. Sister wished to wriggle her hand into Mother's, but Mother's fist was tightly clenched. She tried instead to nuzzle Mother's fingers apart with her nose: perhaps they still smelled of soup? But Mother pulled her cold blue hands away.

Sister, freezing, sensed then that she had been struck. The wound on her shoulder was caked with coagulated blood whose scab clung to her as wincingly she tried to pick it away. She pressed her cheek to the wound. Her family's breathing settled into sleep, and she sniffed herself. The wound, her open flesh, smelled like the soup they had left behind in the kitchen: strong, sweet and seasoned. And it made her strangely sated.

Father did not dare to light a fire those first couple of days, though ready at the family's disposal were both a sharpening steel and an iron pot, which he must have concealed at the spot prior to the escape. But a fire is a life-sign. The very thing that could make a home could give them away too.

Owls hooted, a roe deer barked, a fox screamed. Beastly shadows lingered about them. The family knew their sounds, their patterns of movement; Father and Mother had grown up with the forest outside the village. Their ancestors had even lived in the forest and lived from what they could hunt and gather. But now there was no longer a house-wall of felled timber between them and the forest. And the spirits of their ancestors, they who inhabited the village graveyard, could not protect them either.

Mother and Father jumped at the slightest thing and their constant anxiety became transmitted to Brother and Sister, who pricked up their ears and began to sleep only for short intervals, as animal young learn from birth.

No beast of prey approached their bed, not even when the family's apprehension abated and their fleshy arms and legs would stick out from their blankets in turn.

Why did the wolves leave them alone? Were the human family's eyes so tightly closed that none could see them? Did they smell so rankly of fear that none desired to bite? Did Mother's sobbing frighten not Sister alone? Or can animals be more merciful than men?

A pair of roe deer passed close by in the gloom. The click of hooves, the grey antlers, the snorting of breath. Father could have shot one with no trouble at all. Brother rolled from the blankets and gripped a hoof. But the animal kicked out and he was compelled to release it as the frightened beasts took flight.

Brother was angry the next morning. They were in need of food, but Father told him what he already knew: that the game was not theirs, and if anyone caught them shooting they would then not merely be trespassing fugitives, but poachers too. The punishment for poaching was worse than to die of hunger, and Father's pistol, with its single bullet, was to be used only in their utmost peril. A shot ringing out would alert to their presence in the forest. A trap, if discovered, could do likewise.

They had to suffice with catapults and their bare hands. Though such methods were quite as unlawful, they were nonetheless rather less treacherous. All species of deer, as well as wild boar, wolf, elk, bison, lynx and bear were to be passed over. These were the ruler's trophies.

‘How can anyone claim to own the trees?’ Brother snarled. ‘How can anyone claim to own the animals?’

A week after they fled, in the first white shriek of frost, Father ventured to collect tinder, fungus, twigs and sticks, and thicker branches to burn. He lit a fire and fetched water from the spring that bubbled up close by. A couple of days later, Sister was allowed to go with him to the spring. After another couple of days she was allowed to go there on her own, and then she could wash and pick the scab from her shoulder.

Had their neighbour, the king’s gamekeeper, now presumably the tsar’s gamekeeper, shot at them because Sister had recognised him? Had his plan been to let them escape? Had he wished to spare Mother?

The wound bled, a trickle that ran down her chest and into the darkness under her clothing. She bathed it again, and dabbed it with dry moss. She sucked on it, tasting her flesh, and sank to her knees.

Soon the leaves yellowed and browned. Mother still hobbled, and her dress was stained red. She no longer washed herself, and the garment stiffened. When she walked, she clung to the trees so as not fall. Her cheeks were white, she whispered when she spoke, and drank water as if she would exhaust the spring.

Father and Brother quarrelled. Sometimes Brother would storm off and would not return until after dark. All of a sudden he would be standing there, his troubled figure in the yellow light of the fire.

‘It’s prohibited,’ Father repeated.

2

A twig snaps under the trees. Sister opens her eyes, though to no avail: everything is quite as dark.

Brother’s snoring has stopped. The wakeful body will always alert the sleeping, as if they shared the same blood vessels. Four ears prick in the darkness, until Brother taps the back of Sister’s hand three times. It’s nothing, he believes, and goes back to sleep.

Sister closes her eyes and shudders. Brother is cold, she senses. It is the middle of the night. Sister snuggles back against his stomach and tucks her legs to her chest. The blankets are as yet big enough. If they could stretch out, the wool would still reach from throat to foot.

They found the oak hole when Mother and Father were still with them. The hollow tree had just enough room for two children, and Father said that he and Mother would continue to sleep by the fire. They had obtained a hide after skinning an elk Father had found dead. It could only just cover them.

A hurled stone frightened the owl away. The squirrel chattered an alarm, but was struck so hard on the skull that it could be skinned and eaten. The adder lay in hibernation and in its drowsy state could be extricated with a stick to lie dead in the frost the next morning. But they can do nothing about the insects, which tickle all year round, for Brother and Sister’s bodies make the hollow tree warm. An earwig, for instance, wanders across Sister’s throat at this very moment. She brushes it away, breaks a little piece of mouldy wood from the tree and rolls it into a spongy ball between her fingers. Father believed the oak to be perhaps a thousand years old.

Will it come into leaf again in the spring? Last spring, its leaves were small, curled-up mouse ears, not at all as they are supposed to be: as large as children’s hands.

Sister turns, inadvertently disturbing a whole troop of woodlice that now, wakened from slumber, march in line across Brother's face. She sniffs in three of their number and coughs them out of her mouth. Brother's snoring goes on as before, now at Sister's shoulder.

Brother smells of flesh and fur, as bitter as the beasts of prey. She herself smells only, she considers, of the wound in her shoulder, which refuses to heal.

When spring comes, they will be able to wash again. The cold prevents them now, for how will the warmth ever return to them?

Once, the spring water was celestial moisture that precipitated as tepid rain to the uppermost leaves of the trees, then trickled down, level by level, until reaching the forest floor. Here, the droplets percolated through spruce needles, roots, mould and grit, until eventually they reached the subterranean rivers of the ground water.

Brother emits a sound from deep in his throat, faintly reminiscent of the roar of a stag. His legs twitch in sleep, he raises a hand and splutters: *click*.

Sister puts her fingers to Brother's lips and moves the pistol to her own side. She curves her back against his stomach once more, and nestles her head under his chin. He mutters something in his new voice. It is grown-up now and sounds like Father's.

The clock in the parlour ticked. The curtain was drawn. Brother and I lay in the alcove until waking from our afternoon nap.

We went out into the light, where Mother was at work in the vegetable patch. We climbed into the old pear tree that stood by the road. From its top, we could see without being seen.

There were hair partings, circle dresses, the toes of shoes, and men's balding scalps. We looked down on Mother and the neighbour from next door, the king's gamekeeper, who would visit her when Father was not at home. Mother would mostly excuse herself, saying she had something to attend to inside the house, things to be done in the garden. But the king's loyal servant had seemingly little to do, neither game nor poachers to be hunted.

With his wooden rifle, Brother would aim silent pot shots at whatever happened to move in the vicinity of the tree. Filaments of spittle dangled from his mouth. I clung to the pear tree's trunk when it swayed in the wind.

When there was no longer anyone in the garden, we would climb down again. Brother tore about outside the house, shooting his gun in all directions. I would go and play with my friend, a girl with long brown hair and beautiful green eyes. We would sit outside and I would sew doll's clothes of summer-fat oak leaves while she closed here eyes and turned her face to the sun.

We were emaciated long before the Russian soldiers came. Poland and Russia were at war, and our vegetable patch, field and byre were cleared out by our own Polish soldiers, for the army of course needed food.

Two days before we fled, a neighbour died of hunger and was put in the ground among the old graves at the forest fringe. That same evening I lay looking out through the crack in the curtain of the alcove. Mother had gone out; to fetch something, she said. Father was sitting at Mother's place, the lamp reflecting doubly in the pane. On the table was a pistol. The skin of Father's face was tight, his bony hands rested beside the weapon. His eyes were dots of light.

Abruptly, he rose and opened the door for Mother, who staggered in with saucer eyes, the length of her dress stained red. In one hand she held the axe, in the other the bucket from which she plopped something into the soup cauldron on the stove.

Father put his arms around Mother, but she pushed him away, breathing that she had been seen. Hurriedly, she pulled off her dress and washed herself at the washstand. Blood ran down her spindly, yellow-green legs. Its colour was paled by the soapy water. Within a moment, she rolled herself into her and Father's alcove and drew the curtain.

Father stood for a short time, then packed something that clattered into a sack. He went to the window that faced the vegetable patch and the forest. I heard him climb out, and I wanted to call after him.

The next morning, Mother hobbled over and lit the stove underneath the cauldron.

Father had returned.

Brother and I were given soup. It was seasoned and strong. Dark, chewy lumps of meat swimming among fatty gobs that hung in suspension. It had been an age since we'd tasted anything so good. Mother and Father didn't want any. They said it was all for us, and stared as we ate. The silvery gleams of our spoons dulled with each dip into the soup, to gleam again when we lifted the utensils to our lips and guzzled the meal with noisy slurps.

We ate up, and our bowls were replenished. We asked for more, and more again. Eventually, Mother said we should save some for the day after.

3

Sister prods him. If she is to sleep at all before morning, she must sleep now.

Brother does not react. She prods him again, harder this time, but he is as cold as stone.

'Brother,' she says out loud, though she knows to keep a low voice.

She puts her hand to his hollow face and finds him not to be breathing. She takes his bony wrist and feels for his pulse, but there is none to be felt. She presses her ear to his pointed chest, flattening his little curls of hair. A faint thud she detects, but is it merely the echo of her own thumping heart?

'Brother!'

She instructs herself to breathe steadily, her ear remaining pressed between his nipples.

A beat! And another!

Now they are both breathing normally again. She flops back. How foolish and frightened a person can be. Perhaps Brother had simply been fortunate enough to have descended into that deepest, most seldom of sleeps, where everything is but darkness and oblivion.

She kisses him gently on the cheek, and when he inhales with a snore, she tells him in a whisper that he may sleep as long as he likes.

4

Had the forest not been a hunting ground, it would have been cut down many years ago. Kings, princes, tsars and other rulers have need of timber, firewood, and fields with good topsoil. The same applies to their subjects.

But the forest became a hunting ground, the area so boggy as to hinder the transport from it of timber. Horses, timber and men would get stuck in the mud.

The boggy subsoil has also protected the forest from fires of any magnitude.

After the family's neighbours were shot or deported, poor Russian forest folk no doubt moved in to occupy their vacated houses. The former border between Poland and Russia ran just by the village.

Brother and Sister have heard not a shot be fired since fleeing into the forest. No soldiers have been heard on the march. Not even a hunting party has passed by. The area has seemingly become peaceful again.

The Ruler is fat, Father said always.

He would call their king, the Polish one, *the Ruler*.

No one but the Ruler's family, invited guests and hunters in the Ruler's employ was allowed in the forest. Poachers had their eyes poked out, their bones broken one by one, and they would be shot or hanged. At home in the village, dogs had their left hind legs chopped off to prevent them from chasing up the game. The villagers were not permitted to frighten away the game from their fields, even if their crops were devoured. It was prohibited to erect fences, for the deer could injure themselves when leaping over. In winter they were obliged to leave hay in the forest that the animals would not perish from hunger.

Though now it is the Russian tsar who rules over the forest instead of the Polish king, the same rules doubtless apply to the local population. In that respect, it matters not who is the Ruler.

A number of rules were, and presumably still are, to be upheld on the occasion of a hunt, and the locals required to make the forest ready. Trees fallen across hunting roads and paths are to be removed. Green hunters inspect the forest to discover where the finest game is to be found. This takes place under the direction of the local gamekeeper. The ruler makes sure to maintain a loyal servant in the village.

Father had a cousin who lived in one of the huts along the king's way that led into the forest. No doubt it is now referred to as the tsar's way. Once, when the ruler, the Polish king, was to take part in the hunt and everything had been made ready by the local folk, Father went to visit his cousin. For imagine if a man of such power should stop at his cousin's house. It was said that he was fond of the peasants' ale and the simplest fare. For that reason, all who lived along the king's way were obliged to keep a light burning and to have ready a meal.

Father waited with his mother's sister, her husband, his cousin and their blind and deaf grandmother. Their clothes were laundered, the table scrubbed, sand sprinkled on the floor and extra firewood taken in and put by the stove. The lamp above the door outside swung rustily in the wind.

At once, the family were startled. Hunting horns sounded, and a pounding roll of heavy hooves. A cry. *Prrhh*. The family peered through their opaque little pane.

First entered a pair of huntsmen and several red-clad servants who lined up against the plastered walls. Then another servant, this one in pale blue, came in. In his hands were a dark wooden box decorated with carved rosettes. The box was placed at the head of the table.

The Ruler had to stoop as he came through the door.

In the box was his golden cutlery. And also, a bowl and a plate, both of porcelain whose edges were crimped like lace.

Trembling, Father's aunt served the food. The Ruler sat heavily in his bison-skin coat. Its bristles poked this way and that as the various elements of the meal were put before him: porridge, bread, cabbage and a vegetable broth. He poked the broth for meat, of course, and grunted, wishing doubtless for venison, bear, bison, wild boar or elk. Father's uncle was about to explain, but closed his mouth again, and for a short moment the Ruler blushed.

And then he devoured the lot. His cheeks went like pistons, his eyes almost spilling from their sockets, until at last he pushed back his chair, got to his feet, placed a gold coin on the table and gestured for Father to come with him.

Outside in the wind, Father held the white steed that the Ruler could mount. Its belly was flush with the tip of Father's nose; at least, that is how he remembered it. The Ruler tossed a gold coin onto the ground, and then, at a click of his tongue, the party of frozen huntsmen and servants creaked away towards the hunting lodge.

Father picked up the coin and found it still to be warm. He slipped it into his inside pocket, that it might never become cold.

After that, whenever Father accompanied his father to the market he would feel himself tempted. When the family were starving in early spring, before the leaves came out and they were on the brink of slaughtering the cow, Father would turn the golden disc between his fingers. And he did so too when his younger brother lay at death's door, in dire need of a physician. Not until Father met Mother did he know what the coin was for. Mother was in truth too beautiful for him. Every boy in the village would stare at her in awe. But with the coin in his pocket, Father straightened his shoulders, and all of a sudden Mother would indeed care to make daisy chains with him and hold hands by the wayside, eat wild strawberries from the hedgerow, gather mushrooms from the tree stumps and roll bilberries on her tongue.

So Father had the coin melted down and made into two narrow golden rings, and each was set with a stone of white quartz from the rugged mountains to the south.

And then Father married Mother.

Sister wears Father's ring now. It hangs about her neck from a thinly wound thong of bark. Her fingers are too skinny for it to fit.

5

The winter followed a dry summer. The autumn's rain fell late, the trees were already beginning to shed their leaves. Now the rain would not stop. The family were soaked, they were cold and hungrier than ever before.

Sister pressed her nose to her wound; it helped a bit, but not enough. Mother and Father spoke in low voices by the fire, about *showing courage* and *not attracting attention*. Mother was bone-white and would rise only to go behind a tree.

One morning, Brother and Sister were told to remain in the hollow oak: 'Breathe, but do nothing more. Conserve your energy. Wait here, dearest Brother and Sister.'

Father pressed the family's hides and blankets around the children, tucking them snugly in; he kissed them and hung the thong on which his ring was threaded around Sister's neck.

Mother's eyes looked away. She wore her ring around her own neck.

Father placed two wooden bowls of water inside the entrance and the sharpening steel between them. The pistol he placed at Sister's side together with the bullet.

Brother wept gruffly, and Father kissed them each once more before carrying Mother away.

The children lay quite still as the oak unhurriedly grew. Their breathing slowed and became seldom. Their hearts beat at long intervals.

At first, Sister dreamt green, the story Father had been told by his father, who had heard it from his father before him. The one about their ancestors having belonged to a people who inhabited the forest, knew all about the forest and had never been anywhere but the forest.

Sister sank into blackness. The oak roots burrowed, despite their advanced age, yet further into the earth, and the tree's suit of bark tautened. The sounds of the forest grew fainter, but its insects still sucked the two children's blood, until eventually Brother and Sister's memories of their proper names vanished along with the names of their parents and the names of all those who had lived in the village.

6

A thousand years could have passed, and something must have stirred in Brother, because one morning he suddenly sat up. Sister's eyes opened a crack. The light outside was glaring and white. Brother sat hunched, looking out into the cold.

'We were to lie still,' she whispered.

He turned, his limbs creaking, and sent her a kiss. Sister gripped the pistol. A small group of roe hinds passed through the birch to the right of the fire site.

But he would not be able to overpower a deer. Nor would he be able to wrestle the pistol from Sister's clenched fists.

Sister awoke to Brother blowing life into the fire. She awoke again when he pressed the white flesh of a fish into her mouth.

In the days that followed, he caught two, then four, then eight fish. Brother's blood was coursing again. He said that he would now hunt birds and rodents. As Father had tried, only to give up in exhaustion.

Yesterday, Brother killed a badger with his catapult. He roasted the meat until it was dark brown, chewed on a piece and endeavoured to make her eat. He himself swallowed his meat almost raw; his lips were made red by it, and he drew himself up.

Brother lingered at the fire, picking his teeth with a barked twist of birch until every remnant of meat that was stuck between them was removed. His eyes stared like fire into the fire.

7

Sunlight pools on Sister's side of the oak. She turns, reaches for Brother, but he is gone.

She sits up: Brother is not at the fire, but the fire is smoking.

The frost of night has melted and black mud remains. Sister calls Brother's call: two screeches of the crow, one short, one long.

No reply.

Where is the pistol? The pistol is gone too.

Sister takes a deep breath, her nose brushes her wound; she crawls out and stands on her two legs for the first time since Mother and Father left.

The forest smells earthy brown; it is warmed by the sun. The leaves still hide inside their buds, albeit soaking up the light of the sky. Sister goes to the hazelnut bushes, five clustered

together. Perhaps they grew up out of a store of nuts once forgotten by a mouse. Sister presses a bud into her mouth, and chews up some spit. The bud tastes green.

A person must have greens, or else their teeth will fall out, and then they will die, Mother always told her.

Mud cakes to the soles of Sister's boots, and the dead leaves from autumn stick to the mud. The blue dissolved in autumn, leaving yellow and brown behind. Thus the trees closed their eyes. Worms and grubs devour the leaves and expel excrement of the same colour.

Has Brother really gone without waking her? Or did she reply to his farewell in sleep? Did he think she had heard what he said?

The spring bubbles between two rocks. It is no longer shrouded in mist, but still sounds like when the wind ruffles the treetops.

Sister sits down among the horsetail shoots. She scoops water from the sandy bed into her wooden bowl. The water has a taste of spruce; it sloshes in her stomach, icy cold.

She gets to her feet, less dizzy now. She crushes some more buds, chewing, chewing. Her tummy rumbles; she goes in search of more greens. Where the deer have eaten, the buds taste bitter and she leaves them alone. The trees have sensed the sourness of deer spit and have made themselves unappetising.

The leathery leaves of the evergreen shrubs and the prickly spruce needles are always available, though are only poorly digested. Instead, Sister prefers to strip the bark from the saplings, restricting her interventions, however, so as not to arouse suspicion of human presence in the forest. She consumes the light underside. She finds cones beneath the pine, but the seeds have been eaten. Some nettles poke up from among dry sticks in a clearing. She rolls the poison from them in the fabric of her smock and stuffs them into her mouth. At the foot of a rock she finds two succulent violets, sweet as honey; and there, camomile.

Sister loosens mosses and nibbles cautiously from their green extremities. Some may be eaten in small amounts, but are otherwise poisonous if more is consumed. Do as the animals, Mother said. Taste, wait, and listen to what the stomach says. Eat as variedly as possible and never the same plants for any prolonged period of time. There is poison in everything.

Greedy animals die quickly. Young and reckless individuals must learn from their elders. A young one living on its own may die from curiosity.

Returning to the spring, at the bank where the water is still, Sister considers her reflection. Her matted hair divides in the middle like two sticks; her eye sockets are as knots in wood; her nose and skin are grey in hue. Her lips curl up and down when she tries to smile.

Sister disturbs the image, washing her armpits. She lifts up her dress and washes between her legs. The wound on her shoulder she treats too, and it begins to bleed again. She licks the blood and swallows.

Beside the twiglike footprints of a medium-sized bird she spots those of a small deer, planted deep in the soft clay. Sister feels she is being watched. She stiffens; her nostrils quiver.

It is not a beast of prey but carries the smell of plant matter broken down in a stomach, digested in intestines, expelled between bristles of hair.

Human? Mother, Father? Gamekeeper? Brother? No, he ate a badger yesterday.

Cautiously, she lifts her head and finds herself looking into a pair of brown eyes. The little hind munches; its ears twitch. It lowers, then raises its head, a dip in the direction of the water, as if waiting for its turn to drink. As if it can sense she bears no weapon.

Its belly is a bulging curve, the life inside it an indication that the torpor of winter has come to an end. It is spring, and everything is growing.

A click, a shot. Sister and the hind jump, but it is the hind that falls.

Sister cries out in fright as Brother leaps from the thicket and thrusts his knife between the ribs into the heart of the hind. He embraces his sister while the blood runs from its throat.

‘But it was forbidden!’

His hands smear her clothing red. He ties a rope around the hind and leans to drag it away.

Sister hisses with rage as they return to the camp. But she helps him drag his prey. Its head flops from side to side.

Exhausted and trembling with nausea, her nostrils firmly closed, Sister performs the bloody work with Brother. When he cuts open the belly, milk squirts from the teats. Brother wipes his eyes. The womb contains a single foetus. It looks like a pupa.

Angry yet, Sister boils water to cook the toughest sections of meat. She adds more wood to the fire so that the meat may be roasted tender.

Brother won’t stop talking. About how he concealed himself in the thicket and lay in wait. His legs grew numb, but the blood returned to them in the same instant he cocked the gun. How fortunate that Sister had come to the spring. It meant the hind directed its attention to her and did not see him at all.

He tosses his head ludicrously in imitation of the animal’s final spasms, widening his eyes to stare stiffly into space, teeth chattering slowly until grinding to a halt.

Brother removes the foetal membrane, smiles lovingly and places the calf on the fire for his sister.

‘You’re mad!’

He dabs a proud smear of blood on the middle of his forehead and proceeds to skin the hind. He does it well, even the hard part at the lips. The hind legs, shank and round, are removed and hoisted high into the elm tree. The body follows, like an unfolded leaf with veins exposed.

Sister gathers the remains of the bones and disposes of them some way from the camp. She hides the pistol under a rock.

Sister will not eat the meat, no matter that he tries to handfeed her morsels of the heart. She turns away, yet senses the aroma, her rumbling stomach. Eventually she takes a bite and chews. Then another, only to set her teeth into the lead of the bullet, which she spits into the undergrowth. Brother puts more meat on the fire. His cheeks are red, his eyes gleaming.

‘Not too much at once,’ he says, his voice admonishing like a parent. ‘A person must take care not to overfill themselves after a period of hunger.’

He rummages in a pocket, tosses a yellow-white powder into the fire and immediately the flames leap. She blinks and emits a sound: *oh*. Father showed them once what the dried spores of the common club moss can do. That long and creeping, crowberry-like plant. In its needle-shaped sporophylls, Father’s spore dust is found.

The stars twinkle in a circle as round as a well above the siblings’ heads. Sister puts more wood on the fire; in the light of its flames the glittering dots in the sky vanish from sight. Her chest is warmed, her face feels like it is burning. Only her back remains cold.

‘I miss them.’

Brother carves the final cut of the sirloin and places it on the fire. Blood sizzles in the flames.

‘I daren’t sleep again!’

‘We’ll sleep soon, both of us.’

‘You fired the gun!’

‘We’ve never seen a single soul here, yet we’ve starved ourselves every day. No one heard a thing, and one day I’m going to kill a bison.’

Their bodies beneath blankets and hide. Brother kisses Sister’s face. He loves her, he says, more than anything in the world.

‘There is no one else to love.’

‘Dear Sister ...’

Brother’s breath is meat, roasted and chewed. His stomach gurgles; Sister’s bubbles. She presses her face to his chest and holds him as tightly as she can.

‘You must never do it again.’

‘Mother and Father were too cautious. That’s why it ended for them the way it did.’

‘Who says they’re dead?’ She bats his mouth and cries, but he holds her tight and says that if they were trees they would be growing together now. He kisses her; Sister swallows and kisses him back. He slips his hands underneath her clothing; she slips her fingers under his. It is ancient custom: to never marry into any other folk.

While Brother sleeps, Sister creeps away and vomits. The meat comes up, a slimy clump, and she kicks it away between the trees.

Although her stomach now feels empty, some small measure did indeed reach her bowels. It has seeped into her blood and fixes now to her hips and chest as flesh on her bone.

Sister returns to the oak and crawls into bed. Brother’s arms wrap around her again. She senses a sweet, seasoned smell. Is it her wound? No, it comes from outside. The remains of the hind, perhaps? No, it must be something else. She closes her eyes with a smile, rests her hands on her abdomen and falls asleep.

(...)

22

Hunger still bedevils the villages of the forest. To the local inhabitants it makes no difference whether the forest is protected or set aside for hunting. The rules are much the same, and now a war is on its way.

Where the story comes from no one really knows. But perhaps it was Brother who tramped down the path? Or perhaps the rose roots said something, perhaps a signal was sent, some tiny electrical impulses, to the roots of other plants and further, to the trees of the forest that grow up around the village. Did they wave perhaps to the fruit trees by the houses, that they in turn would scrape at the panes?

A story is heard of a woman who inhabits the forest and lives on sunlight alone.

In the night, the villagers go through the darkest forest. Not a berry do they pick, no game do they shoot on their way, not a twig is removed for their stoves. They go by a narrow, winding path, one after another in single file. No one leaves a trace.

The villagers come to Sister’s rose thicket. They see her among the thorns, lying in her rotting nightdress. They stand and sniff the air: bones, skin, flesh. The smell of soup. It is so putrid they

must gasp for air. In late summer, when the roses bloom, it cannot be withstood and they must keep away.

In autumn and winter, the villagers return; the hips are on the branches and resemble drops of blood about to fall into the snow.

As the day wears on, the hungry retain the sight and the hope in their minds. and breathe more freely.

What is it that she does? How can she live without proper food when they cannot? How can it be that she settles their stomachs?

Brother stands on the periphery of these nightly excursions, seen by no one. Each night, a woman he once knew is among their number. Sister's friend from the village, the one with the long brown plaits and green eyes. She too wanders there in the moonlight, drawn towards Sister, the sun departed to the other side of the earth.

Neither the villagers nor Brother appear to notice. But Sister grows thinner and thinner. The skin hangs from her bones. She sheds her hair, and her yellow-green complexion pales by the day. It is the baby inside her, taking the last of her nourishment. Green amniotic fluid seeps into the mould, and a small, prickly body tumbles out onto the forest floor.

J.

(...)

Schooldays
1924-1938

(...)

Margrethe opened the door. Her hair was cut in a pageboy style all of a sudden.

'You can't do that!' I screeched.

'I thought you'd like it.'

'It looks silly,' I said, abruptly lowering my register.

'You've no idea how angry my father will be when he sees me,' she said, and tramped up the stairs ahead of me to her room.

Her skirt was turquoise with a blue flowers on it.

The room was wallpapered pink, the furniture white with gold stripes, and the curtains bulged on either side of the window. The rug on the floor was soft when I sat down on the edge of the bed and placed by stockinged feet neatly next to each other. There was an arched mirror in front of us, beside the wardrobe. Her long, severed plait lay as if to form a border on the washstand.

Margrethe said that she would fetch us some tea; then she forgot the milk, and then the cat had to be let out, and after that she thought she heard a knock at the front door. Suddenly she had to go to the bathroom, and now she wondered if there might be some cake left in the pantry. I stared at her wardrobe.

While she was downstairs I opened it. I had been thinking of her confirmation dress. Did she still have it? Was it now dyed blue?

There were dark-coloured dresses with bright flowers on them, and there were light-coloured dresses with dark flowers on them. There were winter dresses, summer dresses, party dresses and everyday dresses. There was a shelf for her straw hats and sun hats. Everything smelled of lavender soap, and there, in a garment bag, on a chubby hanger, I found the dress. It was still white.

I held it up and a door slammed below. Margrethe would pop over to the baker's, she'd said, if there was no more cake in the pantry.

Before I knew it, my clothes were in a heap on the rug. I had no difficulty doing myself up at the back, for my hands barely trembled at all. The dress ballooned emptily at the bosom and I found two rolled-up pairs of silk socks and stuffed them inside for breasts. My face was almost completely hidden underneath the hat. The patent leather shoes were rather too small for my feet, though this was in no way apparent in the mirror. Nor was it particularly noticeable that the dress itself reached only to my knees. I picked up the long, yellow plait and fixed it to the hat at the rear. At once, light flooded in through the window and splashed onto the floor, exactly between the mirror and me. The trees reached into blue sky. A bird sang, though it was late in the day. A trill escaped my lips; my voice was high-pitched again, and there she stood, in the mirror before me!

The little girl had grown up and now we were standing facing each other. Her face under my hat, my face under her hat. Here was Johanne.

The stair creaked. I tore off the dress, a seam burst, buttons flew. And then I was naked, staring in fright at the rounded marble of my buttocks, the smooth curve of my back, my flat chest in the mirror. I hurried to put on my clothes and returned the confirmation dress to its swaying hanger; I closed the wardrobe, buttoning my shirt into all the wrong buttonholes, with no time to tuck it into my trousers. And on my head was the hat, its plait of hair still attached.

Margrethe stared at me. The tray she carried, its cups and saucers and plates, dropped to the floor. The oatmeal truffles she'd brought back with her rolled away in different directions.

With an anguished roar I dashed the hat to the floor, ran down to my gentleman's bicycle and pedalled home as fast as I could to Snekkersten.

Was there still time?

Could I avoid my voice becoming still deeper?

Could I become Johanne? Could I become the person who perhaps was me?

The house smelled of roast pork and potatoes. Mother called out from the living room. I went upstairs, barricaded the door of my room with piles of books, drew from its sheath the knife that lay on my desk, climbed under the covers, pulled down my trousers and took hold.

I knew there was no quick and easy incision. It was not merely the penis, but also the testicles that had to go. At the same time, I was keenly aware that even if I managed to succeed in getting rid of it all, it would surely be in vain. The rest of my body had already become a man's, and everyone knew me as Johannes.

And yet I cut through the first layer of skin to the blue veins. Perhaps it would suffice and the rest would wither away? I turned my head, bit into the pillow and whispered to myself that pain was but a signal and that resolve resided in the hands.

Was the pain God's punishment or nature's? Or was this in fact a suicide attempt?

Lilly and Viola, I am sorry that you must picture this scene.

The door crashed open. Mother and Father burst in, yet the bed covers revealed nothing. It was all underneath.

I must have been screaming the whole time, but my hearing had been as if disabled.
Father slapped my cheeks. Mother sobbed.

The doctor came with his bag. He dealt with the matter, bandaged me up and administered morphine.

The night was horrific. Downstairs, Mother howled wolf-like and would not be seated. Father's voice was firm and rose up through the floorboards.

After a while, the front door slammed and he shouted after her. For some time, they were gone, and I heard only high wind and the sea.

Then: Mother's chattering teeth, and Father, lugging her heavily up the stairs. Salt water dripped onto the floor as he carried her to the bedroom.

From their big bed, the crying went on. At one point, Father came in and stung my cheeks.

Later, there was the consultant in the cold, tiled room at the Rigshospital. He sniffed my armpits, measured my height, the length and breadth of my feet. He pressed my Adam's apple and examined my testicles.

'Have you had erections? Ejaculations?'

I shook my head.

'There appears to be no functional damage to the penis. You're developing normally and may look forward to life.'

I was told to go out, and Mother was sent in.

'I'm sorry,' she said, as we left through the gate. 'It's my fault.'

'No,' I said. 'The fault is mine.'

Shortly afterwards, my voice broke fully.

(...)

Bialowieza
1939-1940

(...)

The tower room smelled aromatically of flowers. The light of the afternoon seeped in through the big windows on all sides. From a cot behind the bars, two amber-brown eyes stared. A pair of cheeks bulged and the mouth expelled a hoot rather like an owl's. Then the lips pursed again, and the human-seeming creature whistled now like the wind in the treetops before coming quickly to the bars and gripping them with both hands.

It was a woman, for there were two small green breasts with dark, almost purple teats. The hair on her head was as green as that at her crotch. In height she reached almost to my chest, slight of build, though not as sickly emaciated as the nuns. Inquisitively, I crouched down and with caution extended my fingers between the bars. The woman stepped back, dipped her face quickly into a bucket and drank for some time.

‘What’s your name?’ I whispered.

‘We found her in the summer,’ the abbess said. ‘She was sitting alone in a clearing. A massacre had taken place there and she was covered in blood. Perhaps her family had been executed. Perhaps it has made her deranged,’ she said. ‘Or else she may have been living in the forest all her life. We’ve tried to talk to her in many languages, but all she gives out are forest sounds. We’ve offered her cabbage and potatoes, but she won’t touch any of it. She seems to manage much better on sunlight than all of us put together. At first I wondered if she might be some sort of god-child. Which would make us rather like John the Baptist, going before her.’

The abbess could not stifle a snigger.

‘We call her Esther, which of course means star. It was the nicest we could think of.’

Esther’s skin was covered in tiny, knoblike protruberances that gave her a somewhat prickly appearance. The nails of her hands and feet were long and brown. Her back, stomach, arms and legs bore bloody streaks and pale scars.

Esther returned to the bars, curling her fingers inquisitively around mine. For a brief moment she looked at me with an open, loving and hopeful gaze. It was a gaze I did not see again until many years had passed, which later I shall tell you about.

Today my thought is that it was a declaration of confidence. Esther was hoping for love and contact. Had my behaviour been more appropriate, we might perhaps have lived together in peace and community. Perhaps she would even still be alive, and then I could have told you that you were conceived in a mutually blissful act of love.

I reached my hands and forearms through the bars and touched the spiny, viscous mane of hair that bloomed from her scalp in profusion. Its bristles were thick and green in hue. I tugged on one, but Esther winced as if it were a nerve ending. She nuzzled my armpit, her lips passed over the inside of my arm and a tingle immediately ran through my entire body. Her breath smelled of grass, and the floral aroma that permeated the cell clearly emanated from her own body. She closed her eyes and indicated the wall behind me. A key hung there, beside a whip.

‘May I be alone with her?’ I asked.

The abbess enjoined me to be cautious. I had to promise to call for help in the slightest circumstance. When they had found her in the forest, she had been more manageable. Sister Marusja had looked after her then. But once the summer began to wane, and particularly now in winter, her behaviour had become increasingly vicious.

I entered the cage and sat down with the little woman. Her nose ventured to nuzzle again, sniffing the pit of my arm. Indeed, no doubt I smelled differently than the nuns.

‘May I examine you?’ I asked, taking her hands and drawing her closer.

To my astonishment, her skin seemed to be covered with chlorophyll granules, and my hands began at once to shake.

I thought of *Elysia viridis*, a species of slug about which I had read when still at home in Snekkersten. Had her skin developed in such a way because she had been born in the forest and perhaps only ever consumed plants? Could it be the case that photosynthesis allowed her to dispense with food? Yet *Elysia viridis* was compelled to consume vegetable nourishment at intervals in order to sustain its chlorophyll granules.

I had to investigate whether she was respiring, and put my mouth to hers. Yes, she drew in oxygen and expired carbon dioxide. I placed my ear between her small breasts. Indeed, she possessed lungs, for I could sense her chest rising and falling, and heard the beat of a heart. Her pulse was regular, though quicker than my own. But was she also respiring through her skin, as plants, especially in the daytime, ingest carbon dioxide through their stomata? No, it was impossible to investigate without access to any laboratory.

She had urinated in a corner; the smell told me so, though I could see no excrement.

I studied the soles of her feet and the palms of her hands, where the skin was paler, as in humans and apes. Her optical anatomy appeared normal. Her pupils dilated in darkness and were made small by light.

Esther allowed all of these examinations without protest; indeed, I must say to my own defence that she even appeared to enjoy them. She studied my face without blinking for a moment.

When I had finished, it was as if she felt it was now her turn to examine me. She sniffed my bosom, nudging the stuffing inside my brassiere. Then, a cold hand slid slowly underneath my dress to my genitals.

I stiffened. As did my genitals.

I could not help but emit a small cry.

At once, she pulled out my blouse and pulled down my stockings. Feebly, I tried to push her away, but she was strong and my member rose towards her. I endeavoured to suppress it and conceal it between my thighs, but nature prevailed, as when the touch-me-not balsam explodes upon the slightest contact.

I trembled, though no longer with botanical zeal. I had never before experienced what most others surely have. In wonderment, I touched my sticky semen. It smelled of freshly dissected plant stems.

Esther studied my now flaccid penis, sniffing it for quite some time. Apparently, she was quite as fascinated as I by what had just occurred, and her mouth now sought the opening at its tip and her tongue licked away the creamy dribble that continued to emerge.

And then I fell upon her irresistibly, dismissing any remaining notion of scientific investigation. I copulated with her, thrusting backwards and forwards until at last I climaxed again with a long and at once alarming and gleefully glistening squirt.

We stared at each other with astonishment in our eyes. Did either of us even comprehend what had happened?

Oh, we were as the light itself, Esther and I. There, in the beginning darkness of night, we were the sun. All around the tower, it was as if every creature of the world were gazing in on us, as though it were we who gave them life. That was at least the way it felt that first time in the tower.

Only slowly did I return to myself again. The delirious light dimmed slightly. I pushed Esther away and with trembling hands pulled up my stockings and rearranged my dress. She looked at her genitals, from which a tiny trickle of blood mingled with semen ran down her leg.

I felt lust again, but convinced my hands to grip the handle of the cage in order to remove myself from the tower. Esther, however, emitted a badger-like cry. I turned, and put my hand over her mouth. She wrestled free and concealed herself under the skirt of my dress.

She was quiet as she sucked. Each time I tried to push her away, she let out a cry. Then came my eruption, and the light was nearly quite as glittering as on the previous occasion.

The next morning, the two nuns with the scratched skin stood outside the cage.

‘Is Esther asleep?’

I looked down at myself; my attire was thankfully in place.

‘We had a bit of a tustle in the night.’

‘Did she attack you?’

‘It was ... friendly.’

‘Have you been scratched? The wounds must be bathed at once.’

The nuns opened the cage quickly and placed inside a fresh bucket of water for Esther, while I was obliged to step out.

‘I sang to her,’ I lied when they turned the key.

The first sunlight fell into the room and illuminated Esther. She sat up, stretching her arms for some time, opening her eyes wide, turning her face upwards. Thus she sat in those first rays, quite as green as moss, and resembled the most alluring goddess the world had ever seen.

‘Let me look after her,’ I said.

The abbess thanked me. Did I smell of our copulations? Did she notice? She kissed my cheeks.

I spent my time in the light, in the tower, every day. Outside was the sun, a sky of drifting clouds and circling birds of prey. Inside were Esther and I: pale pink on green. She smelled of flowers, I reeked of plant juices. It was such a happy time. Her forest sounds were now but whispers, as if she no longer needed to raise her voice. Was it because the person she had been calling for was now at her side? And was that person me?

Yes, in the daytime she was the sweetest thing. In the mornings she would sit quite still, without moving from where she sat, much as if she had taken root. But in the middle of the day she would rise and turn her body the other way. Thus, her prickly exterior could absorb the light from all sides. She reached out her arms; her veins were barely covered by her skin and resembled the vascular bundles of leaves.

We copulated in the sunlight.

It was in the night that she became wild. Like the nuns, I was obliged to beware. Could it be the lack of sunlight that made her so aggressive then? It ought to have occurred to me, yet blinded as I was by my discovery of pleasure, I was convinced it was because she was in love. That she wanted me, skin and all.

This was how I helped the nuns, who could now sleep again and find peace in their practical chores and sunbathing. I now had a good excuse not to lie down naked with them in the garden, and the abbess was furthermore grateful.

Was I in love? No, not intellectually, for everything with Esther was so physical, though sometimes when she stood at the cage door to receive me I did indeed feel joy in my heart. And then of course came the fact that she did not question me and seemed not to give it a thought that I wore a brassiere stuffed with socks and yet was equipped with a penis. That I wore a long plait of hair and yet the stubble of a beard grew from my face.

Our copulations became no less compelling as the weeks wore on. Occasionally, I considered with dread how joyless my life would have been had I succeeded in slicing off my bits. At the same time, part of me was also strangely vindictive. For what the world in all its prejudice would not grudge me before, I now wished to experience to the full, in its every respect.

Perhaps that was why I did not at first perceive that she began to push me away when we were together during the day. But even when I became aware of it, I could not stop. Not even when she changed colour from green to turquoise-green as when the flower of the lupin changes from yellow-white to purple when visited by the bee. Not even then did I stop.

After each time, Esther would fall back limply, her amber-coloured eyes turned towards the windows.

What was Esther? I philosophised on the matter as I lay by her side, sated and contented. Was she some divine being of the light? Did she require no more than the glow of the sun? Could it really be so?

But Esther's behaviour was certainly not divine, but rather primitive. Was it because she had grown up on her own in the forest? Had she never received love and care? Perhaps she had known no body against which to lean for protection. A hollow tree or a hole in the ground was apparently insufficient to make a proper person of anyone. And who had her parents been? Were they quite ordinary, and Esther merely a peculiar coincidence of genetics? Or were there others in the world like her?

And then there were the strange noises she still emitted, though as noted they were quieter now. Was she communicating with the forest? If she had lived there alone ever since infancy, one would have to say that she had come into the world with extraordinarily well-developed survival instincts.

Sometimes her facial expression would be quite stiff and she would rock backwards and forwards as she sat. Was she retarded, or had she experienced some kind of trauma?

I wondered what would have happened if she had led a good life from birth and received lots of love. Would she then have become a true child of God, perhaps even a greater and more powerful saint than that of the nuns who had found her in her rose thicket? Could we two, Esther and I, then have come together in spiritual unity too? I tried to teach her words in order to cultivate the human side of her, but she never repeated what I said. I tried sign language too, though with quite as little success.

I had yet to find the rose I had come to seek, but I had found Esther. Would her appearance among men be able to right the world? Could I show her off?

These were just some of the thoughts that occupied me as dreamily I lay on the floor of her cell, until I realised how inane my own behaviour had been.

The war raged on. At regular intervals, the bombers flew over the convent. We heard gunfire, and one day a unit of soldiers came marching past. The nuns fetched their weapons and took position on the walls. The abbess boiled tar in a cauldron.

Later in the day, a soldier came almost crawling to the convent and hammered at the gate. His clothes were torn, an arm dangled at an awkward angle. He asked to come in.

We peered down at him.

'Help me,' said the abbess.

She tipped the cauldron. The soldier screamed and dragged himself back into the forest.

The abbess came to me whenever I tried to sleep. Had I discovered anything about Esther? Was she not an interesting phenomenon?

'Fräulein Erichsen, you seem so fatigued. I wonder if you ought to skip a few nights? You never have time to speak to me anymore. And all those scratches she gives you. Do you remember to bathe them? And you wanted to study the volumes we own on roses, yet I never encounter you in the library.'

I nodded. I always made sure to wash myself with soap and water after my visits to the tower.

She sniffed my throat and smiled. She lifted my cover and would climb into bed with me. I pushed her away.

'What on earth is the matter with you?' she laughed.

The winter came, heralded by a fortnight of cloudy weather. One minute Esther was lethargic and drowsy, the next violently aggressive, even in the daytime. More than once she even bit a hole in my shoulder and sucked some small amount of blood when I tried to copulate with her.

My foot healed somewhat; I no longer hobbled.

At mealtimes I dished myself the biggest portions I dared. I was dreadfully hungry and needed to flesh out in case of suddenly having to leave the convent with Esther.

Two nuns did not see the winter out. Their bodies were wrapped in old sheets and taken outside in the wheelbarrow. They were buried under little wooden crosses that would be rotted away before winter came round again.

In their final weeks, the two had been quite shrivelled, though without their condition having concerned the abbess noticeably. Instead, she chattered on about how nuns in the Far East had their own way of becoming one with the plant kingdom and thereby God. They would mummify themselves while still alive, desiccating their bodies over a period of time by ingesting only seeds, spruce needles, bark and a plant-based vomitive. They would then let themselves be buried in the lotus position while chanting prayers. With them under the soil they took a tube through which to breathe air and a bell to ring which allowed them to communicate as long as they remained alive. When death finally occurred, they were dug up and put on display in the nunnery.

I would sleep downstairs in my cell, never with Esther. It was imperative that the nuns did not catch us, and moreover I had no idea what Esther could get up to once I closed my eyes.

But one dark night following yet another copulation during which Esther had scratched and bitten, I nonetheless dozed off and did not wake until again I felt her teeth sink into my arm. I tried to extract myself, only for her then to grip me by the throat. I spluttered and squirmed. She dug her nails into my thigh, piercing the skin. I kicked out, managing thereby to get out of her clutches and thrusting her back into a corner where she lay whimpering for a moment. When again she got to her feet, the moonlight revealed her to me in full figure.

I gasped and dizzied, and was compelled to sit down before I fell.

Her stomach bulged like a balloon beneath swollen breasts.

Her skin had turned a bluer green.

Esther was pregnant.

Why had the thought not occurred to me? I, who called myself a botanist!

For a moment she seemed almost to be smiling at me. Her round, prickly body resembled a seed pod. Her mane of hair was divided in the middle and hung over each shoulder like two seed leaves.

We had to get away, both of us together. The nuns would see through me and believe that as a man I had duped my way into the convent. Esther's life might also be in jeopardy.

The foetus was moving already under the tight skin of her abdomen; she winced, wrapping her arms around her chest and raising her stomach towards the white light that streamed through the windows. She was carrying you, Lilly and Viola. At the time, you frightened me, for I did not know you yet. What on earth would come out of Esther, I wondered, and what on earth would I do about it?

That was when I realised that I had done Esther harm. I had most likely been raping her for some time, perhaps since fertilisation had occurred. What I had taken to be her ferocious lust had presumably been more a form of self-defence.

That ferocity too was something I would not understand until many years later.

'I'm sorry,' I said, though I am certain she did not comprehend.

I took my precautions, which I have been obliged to uphold until now. Before entering the tower again, I wound a long strip of fabric tightly about my loins. I could not allow myself to be led into temptation and was compelled to ensure that my urges were put aside.

The following nights, Esther became increasingly violent. Eventually she took a bite out of my hand and I bled. I bathed and dressed the wound, but the abbess took note of it the following morning at breakfast. 'Henceforth, we cannot allow you into the tower on your own,' she said. 'It has become far, far too dangerous.'

But spring was on its way, and the light poured in through the great windows. Esther became more docile again, even at night.

When I came to her, I would sometimes stand in the doorway a moment and savour what I saw. Indeed, my trussed-up loins would stir, yet I remained at a distance. Esther lay blue-green in the middle of her cell, her arms and legs spread out as a star, the tiny fibres that covered her body all standing on end, the thicker strands of hair on her head seeming to radiate outwards like a halo. Her bulging stomach pointed upwards. It was more than time for us to flee.

The sunlight shimmered from the sky, warming the convent walls. Esther and I would no longer leave treacherous footprints in any snow. I would have little difficulty foraging greens in the forest for us to eat.

To be on the safe side, I stole from the pantry two of the last half-rotten cabbages, which I packed into my rucksack along with my few possessions. I went for a walk along the outer wall, though considered that it would be far too perilous to jump from such a height.

The very same evening that the blackbird settled on top of the tower to sing out its first refrain, the abbess opened the door of my cell and insisted on going with me to see to Esther. Thank goodness she appeared to have settled, she said. And I was rather less mauled than previously.

But then the abbess sniggered and in the blink of an eye was undressed. Esther could look after herself tonight, could she not?

The abbess's thin, pale skin was stretched taut between the bones of her frame, and the key swung like a pendulum in front of her hollow chest.

I trembled and believed my final hour to have come as she pressed herself against my body. Her eyes glistened, her nipples were hard and erect, and her hand slid slowly under my dress.

Discovering my bound state, she looked at me with perplexity. Then with a smile she patiently unbundled me.

Her eyes saw all in the light of the candle.

At first, she looked like someone who would call for help. But instead, she proceeded to scold me with fearful words she spat into the air, directed at something she referred to as "the demon". She hissed and bit, gripping me tighter and tighter. Without warning, she began to pray and to sing hymns. Then, fleetingly, her face became little more than a skull, until suddenly, with a small, explosive gasp, she found release and her expression mellowed. Her eyes gleamed as green as the spring, her hair appearing now to take on a sheen of brown. Her cheeks appeared almost rounded and ruddy. She closed her eyes, her breathing went slack, and the poor confused woman collapsed back onto the cot.

Breathless, I looked down at myself and saw that my member had remained small and limp.

Ought I to have helped the abbess? Should I have called for the nuns?

But I had no other option, and thus your lives too were saved when I removed the convent key from around her neck. Not a sound came from those pale lips as again I bound up my loins. I put on my rucksack and went to fetch Esther.

We paused for a moment, Esther and I, on the stairs behind the convent door. There was a black moon, and my first step into the open was as if into nothingness.

Esther, on the other hand, lifted her nose to the air and immediately scampered away into the forest on all fours. I had to run after her. Thin branches whipped my face; I followed the sound of her feet and hands as they pattered over the thawed soil of spring.

After a short distance she paused. Was she waiting for me? Yes, her cold little hand found mine, and there, beneath the trees, the earth at last stood still again.

The convent bell rang out, but we forged ahead into the spring, leaving the nuns behind. How long would they live? Would the spring be merciful to them, as seemingly it was to Esther? And, indeed, myself.

The red sun rose, and we looked through the darkness and into the light.

Again and again, Esther would stop to roll in the succulent grass. She carressed the fiercely green bumps of the spruce, pressed her face to the bark, skipped into a bog and smeared her smiling face with mud.

As the sunlight transitioned into yellow, Esther positively sprang along.

But where was she heading, and what was I going to do? What would happen when she gave birth? The newborn have need of nourishment and warmth. But wasn't there a war still on?

I kissed her cautiously on the brow as we crept into my sleeping bag. Certainly I did nothing besides that. Her sticky hair had picked up all manner of leaves, seeds and twigs. The night passed without event; she no longer bit. And with every morning she rose and crawled from the tent, her stomach bulged bigger.

In the days that followed, I ate beech leaves, consumed the remainder of the cabbages and caught fish in the streams. Esther stared at the skewered fish as the fire turned them from red to brown, then to white. When I ate, she would gaze down at the flowers and stroke their stems. She lay down on her back, echoing the wind as it rustled in the treetops, creaking with the bark, replying to the calls of the birds. She seemed quite as happy as I had been at Snekkersten when at last I had been allowed to explore the woods on my own.

Oh, if only we could go home to Denmark, I thought.

As soon as I unrolled the sleeping bag, she wriggled inside it too. I was her warmth and protection. I was the one she lay beside.

Esther forged vigorously on through the forests as spring became summer. Occasionally, she would put her ear to a tree or a root. She would sniff the air and bite into a leaf or two. I trudged behind her, feeling both exhausted and emaciated.

I am unsure of how many weeks we wandered those forest tracks. Now and then we hid from aeroplanes. Sometimes, we saw bootprints in the mud or soil. Once, a pair of soldiers marched by, though Esther had long since pulled me into the safety of a thicket.

One afternoon your mother began to hobble. She stopped and clung to a birch. A gurgling sound came from her, and her face turned a blue shade of purple.

It had not been nine months yet; it was far too early. Esther sank down on all fours and crawled in between some saplings of oak. There she sat up on her haunches with her legs apart. Some green matter was discharged from her, and she began to scream like a true human being.

I crawled in to her and pressed my hands to her mouth, making her eyes bulge. She dug her nails into my arms and I clenched my lips so that not a sound would escape me either.

As she endured the birth, presumably unknowing that it was anything other than pain, the sun passed from its evening red to its morning red. In the hours of darkness, I lit a small fire so that I could follow what was happening. I regretted ever having penetrated her.

But then appeared the first pink head. I lay my coat down in the grass and received the afterbirth too. Esther kept pressing, and as I warmed you, Lilly, at my chest, you, Viola, emerged also, splashing my dress red. All my concerns were allayed. The fear I had felt for what Esther's womb might contain was quite unfounded. In almost every respect, you both looked normal. Small, indeed, but quite as pink as any other human infant. Among the hair that tufted from your scalps were a number of thicker green strands, but soft and curly as my own hair. And, I was happy to note, you had both inherited my blue eyes. You squealed like little kittens, and your mouths searched for milk. I helped Esther into the sleeping bag and placed you between her breasts, and immediately you latched onto her teats. Esther descended into sleep and I came to your aid whenever a nipple slipped from your mouths.

Eventually, I squeezed into the sleeping bag beside you and smothered my little girls with kisses.

Oh, how dear you were to me.

Esther was quickly on her feet, yet hobbling and bleeding. She had torn, as far as to the anus, and we had no possibility of stitching the wound.

I carried you, my dear girls, while Esther was compelled to walk alone.

I felt shame when I thought of her as your food depot. I tried to encourage you to suck on my own teats, for perhaps I could be useful as a pacifier, though of course I could not nourish you.

Sometimes, if Esther's milk would not come, I experimented by putting you down in a clearing to see if sunlight would help. But you merely cried and I would have to carry you back into the shade. And yet, dear children, perhaps that seasonal light played a part in your survival.

I was now alone in determining our direction. We emerged from the forests and wandered towards Denmark. Though I had no inkling of what future might await me in my homeland, I considered that it would surely be the best place for you to grow up. I steadied our course whenever Esther's will seemed to waver or veer.

Great companies of soldiers were on the march. Esther heard them always, or perhaps smelled them, and in every instance we managed to conceal ourselves in good time.

Occasionally, the ground would tremble and bombs illuminate the sky.

Esther's gait had become oddly stuttering in the manner of an old woman's. Her wound was healing at the edges, but she was still unable to hold her urine. If I as much as touched her opening, she would recoil with a whimper. My member was as yet reactive, though not as much as before. But now you had come into the world, and I had much else to attend to.

When you cried, I would sing to you in my brightest voice. I stroked, kissed and cuddled you. I gazed into your eyes and talked to you. Esther would not attend to your needs; it was as if her only gratification was for you to empty her taut breasts.

I ventured into a town, fearfully leaving Esther alone with you in a ditch. I purchased baby clothes and linen for nappies; I found a little dress, a top and a hat for Esther.

Your tiny fingers gripped mine as gradually we approached the Baltic Sea. Mostly we walked; occasionally we travelled by train. Autumn was coming. I pulled Esthers hat down well over her brow. Hopefully, people would think only that she was my deformed younger sister.

(...)

PANGAEA

(...)

5

The first time I met my grandmother was two years after Vibeke had at last found her again in the forest.

It was the summer between my first and second years of gymnasium school and I had travelled to the United States on my own to spend the holiday, visiting at first my mother's sister, my uncle Charles and my cousins.

When Johanne learned that I was there, she insisted on seeing me and invited me to stay with her for a few days.

Vibeke drove me there. On the way, she made me promise to phone if I wanted to come home early.

My aunt shook hands with her mother while I stood timidly at her side. My grandmother's face was without expression, her round glasses misted. She welcomed me nonetheless, and scrutinised me for some time. I put out my hand. Hers was calloused, a paw blackened with soil. A long, thin and rather greasy plait of white hair ran down to her waist. On her head she wore a small hat. Her dress was all flounces and frills with a ribbon at the back and seemed oddly out of place on someone who lived in a forest. She wore long, tight stockings and closed, lace-up shoes.

Aunt Vibeke left a bottle of wine and a box of chocolates on the table on the porch. She nodded and drove off again without hanging around.

Grandmother kept looking at me. She reached out and touched my hair, and the skin of my bare arms. I shuddered, she nodded and smiled, went inside to put some coffee on and returned with a freshly baked flan made with berries of the forest. There was so much I wanted to ask her about. All the stories I'd heard over the years. But instead she asked me.

She appeared satisfied that I was choosing biology and chemistry as my main subjects, and encouraged me to apply to do biology at university once I'd completed my exams.

She drained her coffee cup and asked if I preferred summer or winter.

I replied with some puzzlement that the winter made me tired. She nodded. It was how Lilly and Viola felt too, she sensed.

'It's hereditary,' she said. 'You must make sure to get plenty of light.'

She was right, even if her asking did feel rude in a way.

The temperature had climbed to forty degrees Celsius and the forest was a tinderbox of bone-dry twigs. I went about in barely any clothes, and grandma Johanne's house was without air conditioning. She sweated like a horse. It oozed from her hands, her face, her throat and neck.

‘Thank you for coming to see me,’ she said several times, and asked too if there was anything I wanted to do.

‘Is there somewhere to swim?’

She packed a lunchbox and pressed several bottles of water into an old grey canvas rucksack. We tramped along the paths that led through her forest. At one point, I followed her hunched figure across a field, through a tunnel of tall maize. We traversed an area that looked like a battlefield on account of a number of trees having been felled there, and then we came to another forest.

Had we walked for two hours? Our faces were strawberry red. Grandma Johanne tottered at times, but did not complain, and I refrained from suggesting that we turn back.

At last, the blue pond was before us. There was a sandy bank and a rowan tree to provide shade. We sat down beneath it, pulled the corks from our water bottles and drank. I went behind a tree and got changed.

‘Won’t you take a dip?’

Grandmother declined.

‘Not even a paddle?’

She wouldn’t, though her face was flushed from the heat. She drank her water.

I had to wade through the reeds. I went carefully, my bare back making me feel exposed. I couldn’t see the bottom, but it felt like warm liver paste between my toes, and who was to know if the fish would bite? There was weed too, and I recalled that some people were allergic to algae. It makes them itch, and in some cases even nauseous and ill.

I waded towards the open water.

The sun reflected white on the pond’s mirrored surface. Great blue dragonflies flitted about. Behind the banks, the forest was a dry rustle, all but lifeless in its grey-white foliage.

I imagined the worst death of all to be to succumb to a forest fire. To be roasted alive from all sides. At that moment, I was in the safest of all places, in the water, while grandmother sat in peril.

The smoky scent of resin mingled with the insipid smell of pond.

I kept wading. Perhaps it wasn’t very deep?

Grandmother sat on her blanket, her long legs extended in front of her. She squinted at me, then dabbed her face again with her handkerchief. Her round glasses glinted.

I dropped to my knees, the water reaching to my throat, and for the first time in several days I found I could breathe properly again. It was like being at home in the cool climate of Denmark, in a fresh summer breeze. I glanced at Grandmother as I gulped a mouthful of air. I closed my eyes and submerged.

I had forgotten it was a freshwater pond when I tried to open my eyes under the surface. It stung, and everything I could see was olive green; my hands looked like the limbs of a reptile.

I rubbed my eyes and swam further out. Grandmother was a blur of white. I tested the depth, extending my legs towards the bottom, and my head almost bobbed under. But what was that? A rock? An old root? The wreck of a bicycle someone had discarded there? My foot was stuck, and suddenly I felt an icy current against my skin. I couldn’t get free; my mouth could only gulp for oxygen at the surface. Panic gripped me, I kicked and thrashed, my lungs quickly at bursting point, and all I saw was a torrent of bubbles.

Fortunately my hands were above water and I waved them about. For a brief moment, my lips again broke the surface and I could shout for help. Then, with a gurgle, my lungs filled with water.

My legs became colder at once, my torso felt like ice. All I could do was keep trying to free my trapped leg, but I could no longer feel it or my arm.

My eyes caught a watery glimpse of her: a woman rising to her feet, a woman striding into the pond. Her dress will drag her down, I thought to myself, she won't be able to free me and will only drown with me.

'Grandma!'

My final cry was a splutter, the squawk of a bird or some equally prehistoric creature.

And then my head went under again, but at the same time my foot released, quite without aid. I rose to the surface. Johanne was treading water a short distance away, her sun hat askew on her head, her face a picture of terror. I gasped for air and burst into tears. I half swam, half staggered towards the bank. I held her thick hand, I supported her all the way in. Her legs were heavy as she went. Her dress clung to her solid frame.

'I nearly drowned,' I cried out to her. 'What were you thinking?'

She pulled the blanket into the sun and sat down without a word.

I peeled off my wet bathing costume behind her back. My teeth chattered. The water from her dress pooled darkly, soaking into the blanket. Her hands trembling, she began to unpack the lunch, the bottles of squash. But I didn't want her egg sandwich. I didn't want anything to drink.

'I nearly drowned,' I said again.

She looked away, perhaps at the sky. My mother would have held me, my aunt Vibeke would have held me too, but my grandmother did not so much as take my hand. Was she as insensitive as I had been led to believe? She had invited me of her own accord.

It was she who noticed that my foot was bleeding. She produced a white handkerchief and tied it carefully around the wound. A red blotch appeared between its laced edges.

'My dear girl ...' she said in a voice that was suddenly deep, and put her hand to her mouth.

Had she been so frightened that I would die in her care that she had been unable to act? Was she still as petrified, sitting there on that blanket?

We spent the rest of the day at the pond. The warmth returned to me, yet I continued to tremble. Grandmother sat blue-lipped in her wet clothes; her thick dress dried but slowly.

When the sky became tinged with red, she said it was time to head home. I realised I'd been scorched in the sun.

We had not gone very far when she hesitated. Was she not certain of the way? Perhaps it was the night blindness kicking in? She placed a heavy hand on my shoulder, as a blind person would, and asked me about the surroundings, encouraging me to describe them. Thus Grandmother led me through the forests. We walked on near-invisible paths.

She talked with barely a pause for breath. In the chirpiest voice she told me about the trees and plants we passed. About the flowers of the night whose small, radiant petals shone like little stars among the trees.

'In some cases, their scent may be detected from several kilometres away. If one happens to be an animal, that is, or as young as you. Formerly, the matter of how night-blooming plants reproduce was a mystery. Why should they even bother to open in darkness? But Darwin posited that every plant has a pollinating insect. Therefore, nocturnal insects had to be pollinating too. Some species of rose can in fact be nocturnal. And do you know,' she said, halting and drawing in a deep lungful of air, 'that pine trees send out aromatic molecules when they are too hot? The molecules rise up into the air, react with the ozone in the atmosphere and attach to water molecules in passing clouds. The moisture in the clouds condenses and then falls as rain.'

Grandmother's voice ran like velvet from her mouth and into my ears. It was as if the trees themselves were speaking. I would have been scared stiff to walk in the forest on my own, but Johanne seemed not to be perturbed in the slightest.

Animals barked and howled their calls as we went. Now and then we would pass a spot where fireflies winked like fairy lights among the trees. Grandmother's shimmering dress seemed almost to float.

'At night, the trees relax,' she said. 'Properly relax. Their branches hang several centimetres lower than during the day. Mind where you go.'

I ducked, shielding my face and whispering a *thanks*.

'Nature, the realm of the plants, the forest, runs on quite a different conception of time than our own. Human beings appear fleet, impatient almost. We may run away or strike out if attacked, but of course this is not an option for a plant with roots. Yet the plants are nonetheless equipped with powerful mechanisms of defence. Some are poisonous, others can sprout again even when ruthlessly cut down. Some are resilient indeed, and some disperse seeds in their thousands. All these properties are encoded in their genes, which of course are shaped by the plants having existed through millions of years before we humans came along. Do you know that man comprises less than twenty thousand genes, whereas a little plant such as common chickweed has more than twenty-seven thousand? Do you know that wheat has more than a hundred and ten thousand genes? Plants have the potential to develop into us in time. But can we become them?

Some believe that man mentally evolved from ape to human when we consumed hallucinogenic mushrooms. This, the theory suggests, gave to us our consciousness and human ideas. Does that mean that the human consciousness already existed in the mycelium? People who ingest hallucinogenic mushrooms today do so in order to connect with nature, indeed the planet. In their euphoric state, they at last discover happiness inasmuch as they feel themselves to become a part of the universe. Do they strive to return to a time prior to our becoming humans, or do they seek to discover somewhere new? What do the fungus want with us exactly, and what do the plants?'

Johanne began to laugh and could not stop until eventually clearing her throat to speak of Pangaea, the supercontinent that once existed.

'The way man has spread across the globe, the way we now travel, one could get the impression that Pangaea II has already arisen. That the continents as such have come together again. We take plant and animal species with us on our travels along with the microbes and diseases they carry. During the last century we have cancelled out two hundred and fifty million years of separation. We already inhabit the future, Marie,' she said, and gave my shoulder a squeeze.

The forest floor snapped and crackled underfoot as we went. Occasionally we frightened animals that scurried away. The night belongs to the animals, not to people, I thought.

'The natural organisms of the forest, the trees, the plants and the fungi, possess functions that halt their growth. For it is not in their best interests to become too tall, though doubtless they are tempted. But tall stems become unstable and will fall more easily in a storm. Some plants are made to live only a year or two. This is perhaps a strategic device, and why the plants have managed for so long. Sometimes, I can become anxious on man's behalf. We are intelligent, but are we perhaps too intelligent? We invent new technologies that mean we barely need to move, or which give us medicine to counter a vast array of diseases. But in the longer term it will render us weak and may prove to be an error of great dimension. The way we have appropriated the planet means that we can no longer simply roll back time should we discover that we have done something stupid. If we wished to do good for ourselves, we would make sure to become either more or less intelligent. Perhaps a combination of human properties and plant properties would be preferable, if the right blend could be achieved. But to create such a creature requires another with just that blend of intelligence. Because at the end of the day,' Johanne whispered, 'do we need more than food, a safe place to live, and love, in order to live a happy life?'

Between the trees a light shone, but we were going in a different direction. Who lives there? I wanted to ask, only Johanne had expelled such a sigh on uttering the word *love*.

‘Do you have someone?’ she asked. ‘Are you in love?’

I felt myself blush. It was the kind of thing neither my parents nor my aunt Vibeke would ever have asked me.

‘I’d like to have someone,’ I said, and before I knew it I found myself confiding to her about the boys I liked best at school. But I was too scared to tell them, and wasn’t that stupid?

‘Not at all,’ Johanne said. ‘I’ve been scared for most of my life.’

(...)

I open the glass door and enter the tropical world. Some plants look like they’ve been cut down, others have wizened.

Hesitantly, I pick up the hose I find attached to a water tank beneath the gutter. I’m here in my best clothes, as Grandmother no doubt too wears her best clothes when she is at work here. On a small table lies the brush she uses to pollinate the plants. It looks like a magic wand.

The flagstones are overgrown with moss. A toad pauses and looks up, ruby-eyed.

Here in the greenhouse, edible plants were cultivated: tomatoes, chilli, peppers, cucumbers and aubergines. Outdoors, on the other side of the glass, Grandmother grew potatoes, fruit bushes and artichokes. But the vegetable garden too has been cleared, and everything green has been burned.

I give some water to a pair of wilting tomato plants in polystyrene planters.

At the end of the pathway is another greenhouse, the rosarium, containing Grandmother’s collection of roses. I wash my hands with the stub of soap in the dish. I put on the white rubber boots that stand at the entrance, and there on the hook is the long blue canvas coat to be worn over one’s clothes. It reeks of stale sweat. A pale winged insect emerges from a pocket and flutters bewildered into the air. I put on Johanne’s long gloves. They are made out of several layers of different material sewn together, rather like barbecue gloves. There’s a spray bottle too, containing chlorine water.

But the door of the rosarium is locked, or blocked. I peer in through the steamy pane. I’ve never been in there, but Grandmother stood with me here, pointing and explaining.

There are still some rose plants, though quite small. All the big ones seem to have been cut down. Strange, for she was so proud of her roses.

Grandmother told me about her experiments. She took me with her to the greenhouse here when we were waiting for Warren and Paul to come.

‘They communicate with their roots,’ she said, pointing into the rosarium and explaining that she was investigating how a rose can signal to its neighbour, and how those signals are conveyed with the aid of fungus roots, the mycelium. She told me she was close to being able to prove that such communication could occur over long distances and between many different species of plant, though some plants and trees are better at sending and receiving signals than others. Some, then, are more intelligent and further up the hierarchy. Most often, they are the hardiest. The roses in the rosarium here were formidable.

I don’t think I saw any in bloom when I was here. But I remember the fragile rose branches, the tiny leaves and the many thorns.

Grandmother also experimented with the roses and music. She attached an electrode to a leaf and placed another in the soil at its root. Then she connected a small device that measured electrical resistance in the plant. The resistance was converted into sound waves by a synthesiser. The changing electrical impulses in the plant thus became different musical notes. Perhaps it was the plant's rising and falling turgescence or other internal physical phenomena that thereby found expression. Was the music always the same when the plant was thirsty, when it needed more oxygen, nourishment, warmth or coolness? What sounds did the plant make when its flowers were about to bloom, or when it was preparing to shut down for the winter? What did it "say" if a human or animal approached? Could it tell species and individuals apart? Did it react to the moisture given off by our bodies, to their warmth and their various smells? Or to touch or voices? Did it know who it was when someone's shadow fell over them?

Grandmother told me that for fun she had assigned synthetic, computerised voices to the various fluctuations, in that way making some of the roses speak, saying things like: I am thirsty, I need light, I'm too hot, or What are you doing in here?

'It's not their voices, it's only me making their signals human,' she said when I paled and commented that I found it spooky. I held the glass wall as if for support when she told me that sometimes she would try to sing with her roses. Did they register her song? Did they reply? Occasionally it sounded like they did, though she was not entirely sure.

'The plants are so very different from us. Rather as if they were from another planet. But if we practise speaking to them, we might then be better prepared to receive visitors from outer space.'

Grandma Johanne laughed and said who was to know what the future would bring. She proceeded then to tell me about the toxins that plants employ as a method of defence. The production of these poisonous substances may be initiated by means of signals from the leaves or roots of a beleaguered plant in the vicinity. In her experiments, Grandmother had for instance enclosed the leaves and branches of the rose in plastic bags for the purpose of investigating the manner in which the roots alone emitted alarm signals.

Some of the toxins plants produce when under threat can be powerful indeed. Acacia trees of the African savannah are a source of food for the kudu antelope. In periods of extreme drought, the trees will find themselves in peril if thirsty kudu should decide to strip them of their succulent shoots. In the space of only an hour, the acacia may in this case produce such quantities of toxin, whose purpose normally is to stave off insects, that the kudu, often weighing in at several hundred kilos, will perish from eating its leaves. The acacia will moreover transmit signals to other individuals of its species, either through the root systems or through the air, encouraging them to produce more toxin. This occurs even before the kudu have detected danger and moved on.

'This rose,' she said, 'is no less poisonous than the acacia. But toxins by no means necessarily equate with death. Some make do with merely affecting our brains.'

Magister Steen, with whom she had travelled, had at one point ingested a psychoactive plant while the pair were on a stopover in Buenos Aires. He had hallucinated and spoken as if he were in contact with his friend who at the time was in Poland. Could this too be categorised as a form of communication, between human and plant? Can plants perhaps convey directives to the creature that ingests them? Can they in such manner instruct that animal or human to behave in a certain way?

The plant may be ingested by a human or animal, yet the human or animal too may in a certain sense be absorbed by the plant. She repeated to me what she had told me the previous evening: that quite conceivably the reason man became a conscious, thinking being was that in our primal state as apes we had ingested psychedelic mushrooms. And moreover that modern man may

suddenly feel great community with nature under their influence. In other words, plants or fungi may transport us both this way and that in our minds.

When Grandma Johanne had finished talking about her roses, Warren and Paul drove up in front of the house in their pickup truck.

After lunch, when she had gone inside to make coffee, Paul asked if I'd like to go with him into the forest? I glanced at Johanne as she emerged again with the cups. She said I could go along, but that I had to promise to stick with Paul at all times so as not to get lost.

I don't remember Paul in sunlight, only in dimness.

We walked further and further into the forest.

I was on my own with a boy. Someone I didn't know.

Anything could happen, I told myself. Maybe we'll fall in love, or maybe nothing will happen. To begin with, I didn't know what I hoped.

Paul didn't talk much, and seemed almost to avoid looking at me. But then he found some yellow flowers from which we could suck honey. He picked up a jaybird feather and put it in his hair. He handed me another feather, shiny and black. I put it in my hair, where it rested behind my ear.

Paul lived alone with his father. Perhaps he had no mother, or did she live somewhere else? I wanted to ask him, but never did.

There was nobody his own age in the area, Paul said. He was always on his own, home-schooled by his father, required only to take a test in town once a year.

We ate berries from his sticky hand. The inside of his mouth was red and black when suddenly he smiled at me.

With my cousins I was used to starting from scratch every time we met. Such a long time would pass with shyness, all of a sudden two weeks would be gone and it was time to go home. Only when we were little had it been easy. We would splash in the pool all day long.

Everything had always been so relaxed at home with my aunt Vibeke. I could almost have been her own child.

That first day, Paul and I were a bit like kids, even though I'd long since developed breasts and started my periods. It got easier between us very quickly. He wasn't shy, just someone who didn't talk that much.

We paddled in the streams, we climbed in the trees and played "the floor is lava". The forest was a different land, and we could no longer see Johanne or Warren at all.

If Paul was in the slightest doubt about which way to go, he would simply study the moss on the trees and the run of the streams. When it began to thunder, we crawled under the saplings where lightning seldom struck. We hid there with the deer, and Paul took my hand and told me not to be frightened.

When he walked me home it was late.

'Will we do this again?' he said.

'Yes,' I said, and threw my arms around him.

He kissed my hair cautiously.

(...)

Dad is sitting in the kitchen. Fine both wants him and does not want him to come to her room. When he poked his head round the door just before, she pretended to be asleep.

But now the whole house smells of pancakes! Fine loves jam on hers, and white sugar and maple syrup. Usually, they have ice cream in the freezer too. But she's not really that hungry.

Fine closes her eyes. She won't open them again until he comes in, and then it will be a surprise. Like when it was still exciting to receive Christmas presents and birthday presents. Like when she still believed in Father Christmas, or at least hoped that he was real. Now it's as if you have to be so grateful all the time. In fact, she'd much rather open presents with no one watching. A bit like when great-grandma Johanne sends her something. She never peers over your shoulder, and you can write back when you feel like it, or even not bother. Great-grandma Johanne is never in the slightest bit peeved or disappointed, or anything else. Or perhaps she is now? Is that why she has gone for a walk in the forest, as Mum said?

Under the duvet, Fine grips her left ring finger and pulls, as if she were actually wearing a ring that had got stuck. Her joint clicks a couple of times. She has done this for as long as she can remember, except for the times when her dreams come of their own accord. Right now, it's just old habit, for since she's been ill it hasn't been necessary. Now all she has to do is close her eyes for the blood to run up and down beneath the skin of her neck. Green and red blend together as if on a palette.

She used to often be scared that the magic would run out, or that she would no longer be able to think of anything else if she did it too frequently.

Dad switches off the extractor, Fine releases, opens her eyes, turns her head to face the wall and pretends not to hear when something is placed on her desk. But then Dad puts his big hand to her brow, and Fine's hair is smoothed aside.

'Petal?'

She grunts and stirs. He tucks her hair behind her other ear. How delightful it feels.

'There's some pancakes for you, petal.'

Fine sits up slowly, clutching the duvet tightly around her chest.

'You've got soil all over your face,' Dad laughs.

Fine eats five rolled-up pancakes, despite not really being hungry. Some are with sugar on, others with bilberry jam or maple syrup.

'I've asked Mum if I can go over and join her in America if I can get well soon.'

'That's not really on, I'm afraid,' Dad says.

'But you could come too?'

'I don't think I can.'

Dad wipes up the jam from his plate with what's left of a pancake.

'But you could, if you didn't have to work, couldn't you?'

'What do you think Mum would say?'

'Mum said she was missing me very much.'

'You can both go together some other time.'

'But what about great-grandma's birthday?'

Dad nods and gets to his feet, and puts the things back on the tray.

'I'll be in the living room. Have you got any homework to do?'

Dad goes out and opens the dishwasher. She hears the Mac melody and the Skype sound. Now he's speaking English and it'll be a while before he's finished. Last year he spent one hundred and ten days away. This year he's promised it'll only be a hundred.

Fine in fact has a composition to write and it's meant to be about a dream. Her teacher probably means something you want to do in the future. But maybe she could write about what she's dreamt recently instead?

She closes her eyes and wipes her mucky face on the pillow. It only takes a little patience for her to break the membrane or whatever it is and enter inside. It doesn't really hurt, though she is always afraid that it will.

Dad's sounds dissolve; she no longer feels the bed underneath her, but sees everything as if her eyes were open.

The smell is of soil, old leaves and fungus. Worms, beetles and grubs rustle and rummage, and something extends from her: white, radiant filaments striving towards the plants in the window, which too require the sun as they drink up the water she has given them. The pelargoniums and cactuses don't really belong here. But in the tropics they can be as tall as people.

The window stands ajar, she breathes in, rises and prods a finger into the soil of the plants. It feels like an electric shock, not just in her finger, but also in her brain.

Fine breathes in again. The roots of the neighbour's lilac and laurel run deep into the earth, yet still are in need of nourishment. The beech hedge is well, but the elder in the corner struggles to absorb sufficient water. It's advanced age explains it. The apple tree stands at the other end of the garden, but still they have each other. Their roots are there, beneath the lawn, and their purple striations that streak the air between them.

All the plants in all the gardens can feel the roads. The vibrations, and the exhaust fumes of the cars and other vehicles that dapple stems and leaves with their particles.

And then there are the shears and saws the people use to trim and fell. There is the ever-changing weather. This summer was the driest on record, others have been the wettest.

The signals of the plants, beneath and above the ground, stream back and forth. The trees and bushes that line the residential street on which Fine lives push up the paving stones and the tarmac with their roots. The plants inside the gardens send to them extra nourishment.

Fine sends to them from her fingers and feet. They receive her energies, and send their own in return.

The morning light is drawn from leaves into stems. Carbon dioxide is absorbed, oxygen emitted. Fine draws oxygen into her lungs and breathes out carbon dioxide.

Could she remain here forever? In this land, where she can see everything? There would be nothing she wanted for, though probably she would become rather stunted like the plants.

She snatches off her tee shirt and holds her breath. How long can she go without using her lungs? Her skin tingles, her pores open. Some of the carbon dioxide she has exhaled is drawn in through her skin and emitted again as oxygen. I will not die here, she thinks to herself. This is the land of the living. If my organs stopped working, if I closed my eyes, never to see anything ever again, the plant stems would reach out and grow into me. I would live on, I would cast seed.

I'm going to live longer than Mum and Dad.

The streaks of light between the plants are like rainbows. It is as if it has rained and is now clearing up.

Fine double-breathes again and grows ever so slightly.

The world shudders, images fragment like the pieces of a jigsaw pulled apart. Something touches her brow.

'Fine!'

Her eyes snap open.

‘What?’

‘What’s the matter? You were gasping for air.’

Fine looks at her father and feels contentment. She remembers now. It’s all so very close in her memory.

‘Do you want some more pancakes?’

Dad’s voice is a tremble. Is he about to cry?

Blushing, she puts on her tee shirt while Dad fetches his laptop. He’s going to sit beside her and work. She sticks her nose under her pillow. Great-grandma Johanne’s letter is there, and Fine sniffs the greasy, empty plastic bag that still smells of jelly babies.