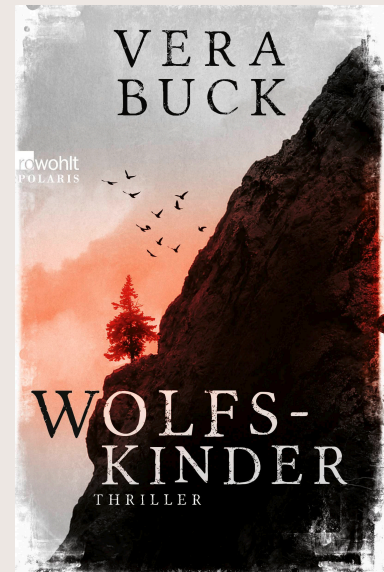


Vera Buck

WOLF CHILDREN

Wolfskinder

- Vera Buck's superb thriller debut.
- With linguistic power and psychological depth, Vera Buck plumbs the darkest depths of human nature.
- English sample translation available.



March 2023 · 416 pages

“This place was not built for living. It was built for hiding.”

The village of Jacob's Ladder lies high up in the mountains, cut off from the modern world, in a forest where wolves still roam. It is a place ruled by the laws of nature – harsh and ruthless, but consistent. At least that's how it has always seemed to Jesse, who grew up in Jacob's Ladder. He and the other children have been taught that everything bad lives down in the city. But his friend Rebekka doesn't believe this, and wants to leave the village. Then she disappears. And she's not the only one. A number of women have gone missing in this mountainous region. Only the young journalist Smilla, who lost her friend Juli in the area years ago, sees a connection between the disappearances. Especially when a scruffy-looking girl bearing a striking resemblance to Juli runs out in front of her car. People are growing increasingly suspicious of the residents of Jacob's Ladder, and Jesse is not the only one to fall victim to a brutal attack. Meanwhile, Smilla is trying to solve a shocking mystery which turns the supposed truth upside down. Where is evil really lurking?

“An incredibly engaging thriller debut, full of both darkness and light.” Romy Hausmann

Rights sold to:

France - Gallmeister | Italy - Giunti

Vera Buck was born in North Rhine-Westphalia, and studied journalism, European literature and scriptwriting in Europe and Hawaii. She has been awarded grants and prizes both at home and abroad. Her first novel *Runa* was nominated for the Friedrich Glauser Prize in 2016. Vera Buck lives and works as a freelance writer in Zurich. *Wolfskinder* is her first thriller.

Vera Buck

Wolfskinder_Wolf Children

Sample translated by Helen MacCormac

PROLOGUE

Black walls. A black floor. The rancid smell of wet stone and decay. My breath coming in short ragged gasps.

Find the exit.

I am on all fours again. It's claustrophobic. Something crawls over my hand. I pull away and hit the rock. Pain shoots through my fingers to my tattered nail tips. I shake my wrists in panic. Whatever it was, it is gone now. I try to calm myself. Probably just a centipede, a millipede, a cockroach. There is nothing down here you don't know.

Lies, all lies, to stop myself going mad with fright. The truth is, I know nothing about this cave, this labyrinth inside the mountain. It's supposed to have a second exit, but it seems endless to me.

Find the exit.

A simple task. Even rats can get out of a labyrinth. But I'm surrounded by darkness as I grope my way forward, no matter which direction I choose. Everything is pitch black. I hear dripping water.

Something drags at my legs, my ankles. Gently.

Not yet, I plead silently.

The second tug is so violent that I forget to scream. I'm that scared. Suddenly my knees are pulled out from under me. I fall on my stomach as I am dragged backwards. I am being sucked back down the tunnel. The tunnel I have just crawled through so desperately. I try to protect my head with my arms. *Too fast*, I think, *too fast*, and the next minute I smash into a piece of rock I couldn't see coming. I am screaming now as I am dragged around the corner, feet first. My body hits the opposite wall. I am being pulled through another arm of the tunnel now. I scream

as loud as I can and try to grab hold of something, but the rock surface is too smooth and the pull on my feet too strong. I know what is waiting out there. There is no way to defend myself. My knees and stomach, my whole body is burning. I cushion my head with my arms and give in. Allow myself to be hauled back without resisting. Like a doll.

How ironic that I was trying to get away from this mountain and now I am caught right inside it.

SMILLA

I haven't mentioned this to anyone. It's just you and me, Julie. It's our secret. Same as last time. Call it careless or stupid if you like, but I am trying to make sure everything is the way it was then. It's like the crag and the forest are part of a scientific experiment.

I've brought a sleeping bag and a thermos flask of cocoa. I have even added a drop of Amaretto for old time sake. We used to put Amaretto in everything, do you remember? Amaretto and orange juice, Amaretto and cherries, Amaretto and hot chocolate. Not more than a thimble full, so we could pretend we were drunk. But we weren't pretending, were we? We really believed it. Oh, we were so naive, Julie. We thought the summer holidays were the only thing ending. We were going to live forever, remember? We were going to go to Uni together. And marry Zac Efron – both of us, of course, because that's what besties do. We thought we'd last forever – you and me and High School Musical, with a new episode every year. But it all stopped, once you were gone, Julie.

You'd be 26 now; you *are* 26, just like me. I always remembered your birthday every year, Julie. And this year on the tenth anniversary of your disappearance, I have come back to spend the night at Faun Crag. That is why I am here. I am not expecting to get any sleep, but who cares? I haven't had a good night's sleep for

ages. Not since that night when someone must have put a hand over your mouth and dragged you away while I was sleeping soundly beside you.

My parents sent me to relaxation therapy, and psychotherapy and to all kinds of doctors. That's how it goes. First, they try to teach you to breathe, then they start telling you to say, "It's not my fault my friend was kidnapped," and in the end they put you on medication. I went along with it all for a while. But nothing really helps in the end. I'll never get away from that last night and you and me and the stranger. I keep trying to picture him in my mind, but his face always fades, becomes more and more indistinct as if he is disappearing into a thick fog. Sometimes, caught between dreaming and waking, in that state of uncertainty, it seems imperative to follow him, to grab his shoulder and make him turn around so that I can see his face at last. Sometimes I actually manage it even. But when I wake up, I can't remember what he looked like. Of course, I can't. How could I?

Science says that the faces we see in our dreams are faces we have seen in real life. But I never saw your kidnapper, Julie. I was fast asleep – a deep, dreamless sleep for the last time in my life.

Faun Crag looks larger than I remember. Although neither of us has grown an inch since that day. I stand staring at the hole in the rock. It's the only reason we were there that night. Because of that stupid hole and some old myth about sunlight casting an image of the devil on the ground when it shone through it. The image of the devil – it is all so ridiculous! The hole is oval; I can't think why we thought we would see something other than an oval shape of light the next morning when the sun came up. Though I suppose if you are dealing with something as abstract as the devil, the form is secondary. What do you think? No one knows what the devil looks like. Except you, Julie. Did he appear when the sun rose after all? Did he find you? Maybe you were lying exactly on the spot where he appeared and that is why he took you – you instead of me. Despite the fact that this charade was my idea from the start.

Do you know what the police officer who took my statement told me? The first thing he said? That wild camping is forbidden in the area. Can you believe it? As if

that was relevant! As if lying around on public property in a sleeping bag without permission was a capital offence! But my crime was so much worse. It is all my fault: I stole your life.

You missed everything coming because of me. The first crush, your school graduation, studying. You missed smart phones and WhatsApp, Tinder and Spotify, and parties, loads of parties where we would have danced to all the hits you've never heard. And never will hear. It might not sound like much, but it all adds up. It's your world. You should be living in it. It is my fault you only experienced a tiny part of what it means to be young.

I roll out my sleeping bag on the spot where I think you must have slept, give or take a few feet. When nightmares are all you can remember, the dimensions warp. There is no cross to mark the spot where I last saw you breathing. There is no cross for you anywhere in fact, although your parents haven't stopped hoping that there might be one, someday. A cross in the dark earth would put their minds at rest. I don't see why. I won't find peace until someone catches the swine who dragged you out of my life, or even better: until I find you, Julie.

I sit down on my sleeping bag and wait. I don't know what I am waiting for. Maybe I am hoping Faun Crag will turn out to be part of an ancient stone circle, which makes people disappear for a while and then brings them back after a given period - like ten years to the day. Or maybe I think someone will come and get me this time.

Maybe that is what I really want, Julie, for someone to come and get me, the way it should have been from the start, instead of you. Why did he take you and leave me behind?

I pour myself a cup of cocoa and drink to you as it begins to get dark. Like in an odd version of Dinner for One. Even the weather is playing along. There is a summer storm gathering beyond the mountain peaks. But the sky here is still clear. My steaming cup gives off an aroma of amaretto. It makes me feel sick. I have to force myself to take a sip. Funny how the memory of a smell can trigger things. I haven't tasted Amaretto since you disappeared, Julie.

Dawn comes slowly but dusk is rapid. It lunges towards me. Suddenly Faun Crag is cloaked in darkness. The trees surrounding the clearing stand out like tall black sentries. I am immediately surrounded by noise: chirps, cries and rustling. When people talk about the quiet of the forest, they mean areas trampled to death by walkers on Sunday afternoons. In reality, the forest is never still. It is full of noises – the stuff of my nightmares.

I feel my pulse pounding in my throat. I know I won't sleep a wink tonight. When a rook crawls nearby, I almost leap out of my skin, spilling my cocoa all over my jumper. I take a deep breath and settle down again, trembling. Now all that is missing is the horror stories we told each other. I haven't forgotten. Everything is just the way it was that night, Julie, but we both know this isn't really an experiment. We don't have to recreate the exact same circumstances or reach the same result. Nor is this an attempt to find out what really happened to you. This is self-punishment.

Because it was my idea. I talked you into this. I calmed you down when you noticed dark clouds forming in the distance and hoped they wouldn't come any closer. The worst thing your innocent young mind could imagine was getting soaked in a shower when we were asleep. God, how naïve we were, Julie.

I raise my beaker. "Cheers," I shout into the darkness, toasting the trees and everything lurking out there. Let it all come. Are you ready for the first horror story, Julie?

EDITH

Entrails are scattered all over the field. They are everywhere, lying in the wet grass like discarded toys. I can even make out bloody scraps over by the Wolfmann forest where it is already starting to get dark. The head, torn off the body, is hanging from a rope tied to a post. It looks odd, but at least no one has to worry about the head rolling away.

Our priest is here as always when something dies. He nudges the mutilated body with the toe of his shoe. Swarms of flies buzz crossly, briefly rising up into the air before settling back down onto the raw flesh, into the eyes and the tattered throat. Flies are stubborn. They won't listen to our priest. Or to my papa even. We cover everything up inside our hut because they are always trying to get to our food. Especially any meat; they like sitting on meat best. On rotting fruit and anything that is dead. Flies can taste things with their feet. Flies lay their eggs everywhere and if you eat the eggs by mistake, you get collywobblers from the maggots that hatch out of the flies' eggs. If you see a white faceless maggot, it is hard to imagine that it will turn into a black fly. But that is exactly what happens. I have seen it.

Actually, flies can't eat things; they drink. They cover everything in spit and the spit dissolves the meat until they can suck it up through their trunks. I know lots about flies. I know a lot about all sorts of things. Everyone thinks Edith can't speak and doesn't go to school so she must be a bit dim in the head, but the exact opposite is true. I don't speak because I know what is going on. You don't need to go to school to be smart.

Our priest turns and stares up at the antenna mast. Then he spits on the ground. Right between his feet where the dead goat is lying. Like a fly come to drink the flesh.

"It's the antenna," he says. "The fucking antenna is the reason those beasts keep coming to Jakobsleiter. Let's take it down before you lose more of your goats."

Jesse's dad doesn't say anything for a while. He is not the sort of man to waste words. But then he growls between his teeth. "I'll shoot the beast that did this first."

"The wolf?" our priest asks. "He's the least of your worries. Honestly, Gabriel, don't you understand? As long as the antenna is here, the wolves will keep on coming. It is driving them mad one by one. We have to get rid of it or we'll go to the dogs, every single one of us."

I watch the two of them. I know what he means by going to the dogs. In the olden days, people used packs of dogs to hunt in the mountains. Dogs are very fast. They pounce on their victims and rip them to pieces. I would love a hunting dog. But Papa has his gun and his good eyesight and he says that's all we need. I like

going hunting with him. I am useful because I can creep up on things better than anyone else can, and I can be as quiet as a mouse. Sometimes I sneak down to Almenen and test how long I can follow someone before they notice. I get so close that I could pat them on the shoulder if I wanted. Then they stop all of a sudden and grab the back of their neck, but by the time they turn around, I am long gone, hiding behind the back of a house. Almenen is great for hiding places, almost as good as the forest.

Our priest spits between his feet again. A huge gob of slime. The goat's head lying there doesn't bother him at all. "That fucking thing will harm us, Gabriel," he says.

SMILLA

Dawn is breaking in the east. It's the eerie hour between night and day when the sun creeps up on you and the sky starts to change colour. It is freezing. Everything has been coated in dew, or drenched by the rain, including me. In the end, the storm did pass overhead. I simply stayed sitting where I was. The idea of the forest being safe is all wrong. It wasn't a safe space for you, Julie.

Perhaps I dozed off every now and then, sitting on my sleeping bag, but it feels like I've not slept a wink in the last 36 hours. The cocoa in the flask is still warm. I pour myself a cup to warm my trembling fingers, which are freezing. My breath forms ghostly shapes in the air. The sun is coming up. It has already set Faun Crag alight. As if a devil were licking the rock with its long glistening tongue. I can't take my eyes off the hole, although I can hardly keep them open. I feel like I've been out dancing and drinking all night, but without the euphoric memories that usually go with that kind of a night. When the sun falls through the gap in the rock, I am blinded by the bright light and have to squint. I am sitting in exactly the right spot. Directly in line with the devil's glow. I look around and see a shape starting to form. We got it wrong. Despite what everyone says. The devil is not darkness, Julie - he is light.

That's when I see it.

Above the blinding circle of morning light, a figure is standing on the cliff calmly watching me. I freeze, with the cup of coca still in my hand.

Of course, I have heard about wolves in this area. Farmers with livestock would cull them if they could. Other people campaign to protect them, putting up signs in their favour. And the rest of us, the ones who aren't directly involved, hear them howling in the night. But I have never seen one before. We stare at each other, the two of us. Blood rushes to my head. I am ready to flee at the spur of a moment as fear grips at my organs. In the few stories I have heard about wolves and humans, we are at their mercy most of the time. We only rule the world within our own manmade boundaries of safety. Nature won't be tamed though. This mountain and forest are wild.

Ideas race through my mind while the wolf stays standing there, watching me as if he is trying to tell me something. But what? You didn't get dragged away by a wolf, did you, Julie? We would have found you somewhere. There'd have been tracks. This is not a fairy tale where the wolves come to gobble you up, with enough room in their bellies for several baby goats and a grandmother. And wolves aren't the devil. They can't simply pick you up and carry you off to the underworld. Or can they? I look back at the shape cast in the sun light.

Suddenly, I feel totally calm. I open my arms wide in welcome.

"Devil, have you come to get me?"

JESSE

I stretch out on the moss next to Rebekka and stare up at the sky. We have spread out our coats on the forest floor because the moss is still wet from last night's shower. The smell of the trees is so intense that all I want is to fill my lungs with it. I'd collect a supply for the winter if I could. The fir trees are like paper cuts lining the sky. Freigeist snuffles around my face. I push him away when he starts licking my chin. He lies down on the grass next me. Rolls on his side. If I turn my neck, his warm belly serves as a cushion.

Summers up here in Jakobsleiter are short and this one is almost over. The forest is snow-free for less than five months. Days like today are special. We really should savour them. But Rebekka is lost in thought. She is thinking about the town she has never been to and about the person who comes from there, who gave her that note. She has it with her now. I can see her clutching it. She has crumpled it up small and it is damp with sweat. I hope it's illegible.

I saw the looks she exchanged with the worker a few days ago. He was a bit older than we are, and not even good looking, but I suppose Rebekka has no one to compare him with – there is no competition here. He had a colleague with him, in his mid-forties I think, with a beard and a beer belly and large patches of sweat under his armpits. The patches of sweat were there before he even started to work. As they climbed up the tower, they kept saying things like “Smart farming” and “Precision farming”. But as we all gathered around holding our tools in our hands, spades and rakes and pickaxes, things that have little to do with digitalisation, they soon changed their tune. We gathered around the mast like a horde ready for a lynching, watching the two men nervously finish their work in silence. Work none of us had asked them to do. Even the antenna didn't want to be here. It took them ages to get it in the right position to be able to attach it to the mast.

Before they put up the mast, the chapel in Jakobsleiter used to be the highest object for miles around. Now it is the antenna. The only thing higher are the mountain peaks, massive three-thousanders, always covered in snow. That's why we need an antenna. It means everyone within a fifteen-kilometre radius can access the internet. That's what our teacher Ms Bender told us at school and she sounded delighted. I like Ms Bender, so I was hoping the antenna wouldn't be as harmful as our priest keeps saying. But that was before the guy who brought it turned Rebekka's head.

The workers were hungry and thirsty when they finally climbed down from the mast after hours of work but no one invited them in for lunch or offered them the customary glass of Schnapps after finishing the job. The workers were not from here. They came from “outside“, town people who represented everything we had

ever been warned about. Rebekka took the note anyway and hid it away in her skirt pocket, when she thought no one was looking. When everyone else was busy staring at the newly installed antenna as if it were an alien object from outer space. I suppose it is in a way. They have installed a communication mast, in a place where silence is all that counts.

I glance at Rebekka. If I had to guess, I'd say there's a phone number on that note. That would mean it is useless anyway, because there aren't any phones in Jakobsleiter. But Rebekka is fingering the note as if it is her ticket to a different life. She wants out, she has been wanting out for a long time already. Now that she has an address or telephone number – anything promising her freedom and adventure – she will use it somehow. Why does she always want to rebel against everything?

Freigeist shifts beneath me as he lifts his head. He hears something or has picked up a scent. Probably just a rabbit, I think and rest my hand on his snout to calm him. "Shush", I say. He stays alert for a few more seconds and then relaxes, dropping his head back down on his paws. I relax. I wish I he would stop hunting.

Eight months ago, my father shot the she-wolf who gave birth to Freigeist. She came too close to our dwellings, too close to our goats. So one night we went off on a wolf hunt. My father pushed a gun into my hand as if he expected me to use it. As if I had ever shot anything other than a couple of tin cans outside our house. Of course, he ended up pulling the trigger in the end. Unlike me, my father never misses. And unlike me, he hates wolves. I get it. Our livelihood depends on the goats. But we also live side by side with these wolves. That is why I can't hate them. After he fired the shot, the dying animal lay ahead of us, its blood soaking into the forest floor. The blood glistened black in the dark. A black hole spreading out beneath it. When I saw its swollen teats, I realised that it was a she-wolf and that her cubs must be somewhere. It took me two days to find them. They were in a cave, all dead but one.

Freigeist.

Rebekka came up with the name "Freigeist" - it means free spirit - because she felt he had come from nowhere. He didn't belong anywhere, according to her, not

to the mountain ghosts or the valley ghosts. So he was a true free spirit, and would be a boundary breaker, Rebekka said. It was a good try, but I could see what she was really thinking: that she is the free spirit.

I pull the leather bracelet out of my bag.

“I made this for you last night,” I say and hold it up. I hope Rebekka can recognise the small, carved figure hanging from it. However, she is still lost in thought, even when she says thank you while I tie the bracelet around her wrist. She doesn’t let go of her note for a moment. She runs her fingers through Freigeist’s fur. Her fingers are very close to my face, her dark hair falls forwards and I can smell the smell of soap coming from her. We all smell of natural curd soap here, soap that can soak into the ground without poisoning anything. They call it biodegradable soap in town, but everything we use is biodegradable anyway. I can’t think why anyone would want to wash themselves with anything else. Especially if it is poisonous!

“It is supposed to be a wolf,” I say and her confused look convinces me that she hasn’t been listening to me. “The pendent, it’s supposed to be a wolf.” She nods. “Freigeist” she says and then she adds, “I don’t believe in the valley ghosts anymore.”

It sounds a bit defiant. As if she is telling me about something she has been deliberating for a long time. I’ve thought about it too. By the time we started going to school, most of us had worked out that the story about the valley ghosts is just that. A story the grownups tell us to make sure we don’t wander too far from home. Whatever really happened to my mother down in the valley in the town has nothing to do with it. Someone harmed her. If there is no such thing as a valley ghost, then it must have been someone from town. We spent days searching for her in the forest after she didn’t come home one night. When my father finally found her and brought her back, something had happened to her head that changed her forever. Her laughter, her clear voice, her whole being - all gone. Since then we, Father and me, have had to look after her like a baby. Mum can’t even go to the loo by herself. She can’t speak. Sometimes I don’t even know if she knows who I am.

Rebekka knows all this, like everyone else. For years, my Mum served as the living proof that valley ghosts exist. “It was the valley ghosts,” my father said when he brought Mum home. And he kept on saying it. As I grew older, the story evolved bit by bit. As if it were growing with me. The story of how my mother was brutally battered until she had a broken skull became more detailed, like a figure in the mist, just a blur in the distance at first, gradually becomes clearer as it approaches and steps out of the surroundings.

I guess there aren’t any valley ghosts. There are just good people and bad ones. One look at my mother is enough to demonstrate what the bad ones are capable of. Rebekka pushes a lock of hair behind her ear and looks at me at last. The forest and the mountains are mirrored in her eyes but I can see something else, something I can’t quite put my finger on. My own eyes have always been full of mountains and trees. They have never longed for anything else.

“We don’t need the world out there,” I say. I am trying to sound confident, but even I realise that I am starting to sound just like my father.

ISAIAH

Our Jesse has disappeared into the forest with Rebekka. I can easily imagine what he is doing to her. Dirty pig. He can pretend to be as innocent as he likes. He is seventeen years old and we have all noticed Rebekka blossoming into a woman recently.

There are only three women in Jakobsleiter, and two of them don’t count. One is drunk all the time and the other has lost her mind. And then there is Rebekka, sixteen years old and plump and soft all of a sudden. I gaze into the forest and scratch my balls through my priest’s gown. Nothing is normal up here anyway. It is a community for men only.

I picture them doing it up in the woods, hidden behind a fallen tree or pressed against the rough trunk of a conifer. I’m about to slip my hand under my gown,

when there is a gust of wind and the smell of shit wafts over. My lust dies instantly. Someone must have forgotten to empty the toilet next to the chapel after mass. I'll have to check the rota to find out who is responsible. They are all such idiots up here. It is the worst fucking place. Sometimes I wonder why I bother with any of them. I turn around to head back to the hut and bump straight into Abel standing behind me. Talk of the devil.

He's holding something wet and slimy he has brought to show me. It is dripping through his fingers like spunk.

"Tsiyah" he says when I give him a disgusted look. I don't really have any choice. Then I realise he is presenting me with broken eggs.

"Not a single chick," he says in his stupid childlike manner. Abel is in his early thirties, but he is one of those people who never grew up properly. He could do with a mother to wipe his bottom for him and remind him to do up his flies. I have no idea why he is here on the mountain. And I am not interested.

I grab his wrist more firmly than I need to and take a look at the broken eggs. They really are empty and dead. Nothing but egg whites.

It is not surprising that Abel has come to me. It is how I have raised my sheep. They come and tell me everything. Nothing happens in this god-awful settlement without my say. I have leadership qualities, always have had. Being a good leader is a talent. You need to show strength, manipulate people and spread fear. If you can manage to intimidate people and be a rock they can lean on, everyone will cling to you when the ground gives way beneath their feet. Abel is a particularly easy victim because he is so soft and devotional. He has always longed for someone like me to come along and lead the way.

I point to the mast.

"Radiation," I say. "We will have to take it down." I do not use the words "should" or "could" because that would sound like an order and that's not what the men here want. No rules, no laws. There is none of that here in Jakobsleiter. It is one reason why we are all here. I do not mention the Ten Commandments when I

say Mass these days. I preach purification of the soul and hellfire and damnation. That is what this rabble wants to hear.

Abel the imbecile looks at me dimly without saying a word.

“It’s the antenna,” I say again in order to make it perfectly clear what I am talking about and to sow a first seed of doubt. It will start to germinate before next Sunday’s sermon and then it can be watered some more. “The radiation is making the chickens infertile. We will all be infertile if we do not watch out, Abel. Mark my words.”

Then I walk off, leaving him standing there with his eggs in his hand. They are the least of my worries. Abel’s eggs or Gabriel’s goats, who gives a fuck. They do not get it of course. The enemy is not radiation or the wolves. The real problem is what the antenna represents. It is the present, breaking into our world all of a sudden. We do not need the Internet. And, we do not need any workers coming up here to disturb our lives.

Only those who live in the past shall remain invisible to the modern world.

EDITH

I tuck the piece of paper and my pencil into my trouser-waist. Then I drop down on all fours and crawl into the cave. Actually, it isn’t really a cave; it is more of a tunnel. But you can’t tell when you are standing at the entrance, because it is so long and labyrinthine, and I think no one except me really knows about it. I discovered the exit on the other side by accident when I was playing in the cave and got lost. In fact, I thought I was never going to get out again. Despite being so clever. I wasn’t a bit clever that day. I crawled into the cave when it was already starting to get dark. Everyone knows that you must never crawl into a cave that is a labyrinth unless it is daylight. Because only the different shades of black will lead you out again. In the centre of the cave, it is so dark that you can’t see a thing, not even yourself. It is as if the cave in the middle of the mountain has swallowed the whole world and you can only feel your way forward. But at the edges, the dark starts to fade and you can make out the shape of your hands on the ground. There is also a

gentle piping sound made by the wind. It sounds like someone touching the surface of water with pointed lips and blowing gently. Only it is much quieter than that. And the closer you get to the entrance, the more the piping sounds turns into a long-drawn howl and you can feel a draft of air. The wind helped me come out of the cave on the other side that day. I thought I was back at the entrance I used to in the first place, but once I stood up and tried to get my bearings in the moonlight, nothing seemed to fit. A bit like when you wake up in bed the wrong way round and try to walk in the wrong direction. I had to wait for the clouds to disappear before I could see anything: I was in a gorge crossing through the belly of the mountain like a tear. That was when I realised that the cave wasn't a cave. It was a tunnel. Now the wind is my friend and the gorge is my secret hiding place. You can't go there in spring because all the glacier water from Obere Schwärze swooshes down into the gorge. But it is almost dry now. It has been a hot summer.

I climb through the hole and jump from one stone to the next until I reach the spot where I discovered the new flower. No one except me has ever seen this flower before. I know for sure because it is not in the big flower and plant book Jesse brought back from school for me. I love the plant book. I hid it when Jesse wanted it back again. He was supposed to take it back to school, but I don't think they really need it there. They have so many other books already. I'm sure no one will even notice. Jesse threatened he'd never bring me another book, if I don't give it back. But I don't care. I don't want any of the other books. If I can keep the flower book, I don't need a book about the sea or a ship or African animals. None of those things even exist here.

If a plant or flower isn't in the big book then that means no one except me has ever seen it. And the person who discovers something for the first time usually names it. That's why many flowers here in my gorge have names only I know. That is what makes my gorge so special. The dear Lord Jesus creates plants here that don't grow anywhere else. Because the tear in the mountain is his laboratory. I sit down. I want to draw a picture of the flower and give it a name. Then I'll give the picture to Jesse. It was his birthday the other day. We don't have parties in

Jakobsleiter. Not like in Almenen. People there sometimes get together in the village square and play music and dance. Parties and music are too noisy, they make people shout at each other and laugh loudly and that doesn't go well with always having to be quiet. I am best at that. Better than anyone. Being quiet - not just with my mouth, but with my feet too, when I move. You have to very quiet here if you want to survive. The women and girls in my secret hiding place didn't realise that.

When I slipped into the woods and climbed the tree, Freigeist was the only one who heard me. And that's not surprising. A wolf hears twice as well as a human can and smell things two kilometres away.

If I draw the picture for Jesse and give to him, perhaps he'll make me a bracelet like the one he made for Rebekka. I was spying on them in the forest and I saw him give it to her. I would love a little carved wolf like that, but Rebekka didn't seem very glad at all. That's why I don't think she deserves to have it. I pull my drawing things out of my waistband and concentrate. You always have to concentrate properly when you are drawing, or else you end up missing one of the petals or you forget to draw some leaves and the picture ends up all wrong. I even draw the little hairs that grow on the leaves. Then I gently pull the flower out of the decayed body so that I can draw the roots. The bodies are why the dear Lord has turned this gorge into his laboratory. It didn't take me long to work that out. He can make the flowers grow in such numbers and make so many new ones because so much stuff here is dead. Dead substance is good for nature.

For example, lots of fungi, mosses, ferns and beetles grow on dead wood. Thirty kilos of carcass provide a hundred years of fertilizer. Papa told me that when he was explaining why we take everything left over from the carcasses back into the forest after a hunt and bury it there. Our forest is so healthy. It only takes four days for the scavengers to gnaw the carcasses to the bone.

When I finish drawing, I put the pencil to my lips as if I wanted someone to be quiet. I do it because I need to think. I have to make up a good name. Without noticing what I am doing, I start chewing the end of the pencil. Jesse hates it when I do that. If he is explaining the meaning of a word like "hallucinations", for

example, and I start chewing around on my pen instead of answering he pulls the pencil out of my mouth. But Jesse isn't here. And chewing helps me think. I smooth the paper out on the stone and write the name of the flower I have just discovered in my neatest handwriting. "Yellow Ribweed", I write. After its colour and the place I found it.

JESSE

It's about an hour's walk from Jakobsleiter to school. A winding path takes us 750 metres down the mountainside. It's more like a trodden track than a path, made by the soles of our own shoes over the years and barely visible in the dense foliage of the forest. There are security measures to protect the settlement just in case, signs warning off any walkers who might happen to stray into this lonely corner of the mountains. "Caution rock fall! Danger!" One of them reads, posted where the path runs parallel to a scree-covered face of rock. Another one can be found a bit further down, at the Schwarz Alm: "Warning. Bull in field." There are not even cows here anymore, to be honest, now that old Janosch has passed away. The barns and house of the Schwarz Alm are nothing more than a burnt out shell. A few years back Rebekka, Edith and I still played hide and seek amongst the old timbers. But that was before Rebekka started behaving more like the other girls at school and less like herself.

There are only two signs that should be here by rights. One warns of the danger of avalanches. The other says "Beware of the wolves!" Our forest is called Wolfstann because of the wolves who have always lived here. Just like us.

Maybe that is why I feel so connected to the wolves. Somehow, they too managed to stay hidden and resist change, while many others were caught and domesticated. We are probably the last existing community of Old Anabaptists in Europe. Our ancestors endured persecution, conversions, looting and deportations. They survived by hiding - first in remote caves in the mountains and then in Jakobsleiter, the small settlement where we still live. Over the course of generations, we may have lost some of our faith, but our history of persecution and exclusion

unites us. Compared to our ancestors, we, the remaining ones, have a good life. It is so sad Rebekka can't see it.

We reach the edge of the forest. Below us, we can see Almenen, a small village surrounded by dark meadows and fields. The squat houses gather around the village centre like thirsty cattle at a watering hole. As if they are all trying to get as close as possible to the post office and village hall, the chemists, the shop and the church. Just one of each because one is plenty. I wish I could remind Rebekka of that too. We always were content with what we had. Before she started yearning for places she doesn't even know, beyond the dark narrow valley.

I turn around and raise a hand to wave goodbye to Edith, who has started following us to school recently. She usually either waits here or roams through the woods until we come back and then follows us home again. I think Edith would like to go to school, too. She is almost nine now. But her dad won't let her go. And it is probably for the best. Rebekka and I are outcasts in our class already. Edith never speaks and she has learnt how to behave by playing with animals. She is the supreme outcast in a group of outcasts. School would probably be hell for her.

Edith stops as if my gesture were a command. But she doesn't wave back. I smile to encourage her. I even consider bringing her another book to cheer her up until I remember that I wasn't going to do that again. She took the last book I brought her and hid it somewhere. And never gave it back. I had to pay for it at school. More money that I don't have and my father doesn't have either. Because the money we earn with the goats is barely enough to buy the very basics we need in the supermarket. If it's a good year that is.

"I'll tell you about everything we learnt today when I get back," I promise instead and then hurry off to catch up with Rebekka who is already marching across the field with her rucksack hanging from her shoulders. Her step seems more determined than usual; she is really stomping along. I don't catch up with her until we get to the school gate. Rebekka carries on walking towards the village centre.

"What are you doing?" I want to know. She checks the church tower clock.

"You go on in," she says. "I need to buy something."

I carry on walking beside her, keeping pace with her. The shop opens at eight o'clock. The same time school starts. So if we have any shopping to do, we usually do it after school.

“Is it that urgent?” I ask and I glance at her hands to see if she is still holding that stupid note.

“Women’s business, you wouldn’t understand”, she snaps and pushes a strand of hair back behind her ear. I turn bright red. Because of her arrogant tone of voice and because I suddenly realise what she is going to buy. I stop walking and she marches off. It is very strange. I’ve known Rebekka as long as I can remember. We used to play hide and seek or go skinny-dipping in the Schwarzbach River. We explored the glacier together, looking for the mysterious caves where our ancestors went to hide. One time we fell down a crevice and got stuck. We had to spend a whole day pressed close together until my father finally found us. The Obere Schwärze is a craggy, dangerous glacier. Few climbers venture there and we shouldn’t have gone either. When you are caught in glacier for a whole day, you have to breathe each other’s breath. You have to wet yourselves together.

After that, I’d have thought there would nothing left to be embarrassed about.

I watch her disappear around a street corner and then head back to school. The school consists of three rooms: the classroom, a utility room for school material, and the staff room or teacher’s office. Until recently Mrs Walsh’s name hung on the door, but now there is a shiny new shield, which says Ms Bender.

The older children used to enjoy a laugh, telling younger pupils that there were two school skeletons. Of course, they were referring to the school skeleton in the utility room and to skinny Mrs Walsh in her office. The joke no longer works now that Mrs Walsh has retired and Ms Bender is here instead. Ms Bender is young and pretty. There are no pointy bones jabbing out of her hips or shoulders. The grownups in the village are still sceptical about her. They are not convinced that such a young teacher can actually teach anyone anything. The truth is, even us pupils didn’t know what to think at first. Ms Bender told us that pupils learned in different age groups at her old school. She says that’s what most schools do. She kept asking

us to move our desks into different positions. First, we tried a horseshoe shape, then semi circles and some other odd formations. It was like being in a Roman legion. Once we settled on a number of group tables she calmed down. I think the atmosphere in the classroom shows that we secretly like her. Not just because she is pretty. She has also binned the ruler Mrs Walsh used to rap across our fingers.

Ms Bender comes from a faraway city. It would take 85 hours to travel there by foot from here. I checked on Google maps. That is something else Ms Bender has made happen: we now have a computer at school. That is how I even know what google maps is. Ms Bender has changed all sorts of things at school, and some people think the antenna in Jakobsleiter was her idea too. After all, she spent the first two weeks saying there was no way she could teach in a school without a decent internet connection. As if people hadn't been learning from books for centuries.

When I enter the classroom, Ms. Bender is already there. She's wearing stretch jeans, a sunny yellow T-shirt, and has done her hair in a loose ponytail. She doesn't look a bit like a teacher as far as I'm concerned. Ms. Walsh only ever wore a dark dress and kept her hair tied back in a tight bun. The same clothes and the same hairstyle every day, as if she hung herself up in the cupboard in the evening and then took herself out again the next day.

Perhaps Ms. Bender is another reason why Rebekka has changed so much. When Rebekka slips into the classroom ten minutes late, mumbling an apology, Ms. Bender smiles kindly and asks her to sit down. She doesn't tell her off for being late, or make an example of her. She doesn't even send Rebekka to sit in the corner, facing the wall. Mrs. Bender comes from a city, but she doesn't fit into the stories we've heard about town people. She is nice, kind and patient. She can be a little jumpy at times though, which makes me think there must be something linked to fear or violence in her past. I notice it when the break bell rings. Each time, Mrs. Bender flinches and then frowns, as if she's annoyed with herself for being scared.

I peek at Rebekka as she sits down. Her cheeks are flushed. Perhaps she rushed to get here, or perhaps she feels embarrassed with everyone watching her. Normally we try to get through the day without attracting too much attention. When Ms.

Bender reads out my essay on the impact of climate change on the Alps to the whole class, I duck my head, feeling shamefaced.

In the long break, Rebekka runs off to the girls' toilets. I wait in our usual place in the schoolyard. The spot below the staff room window. The teacher can see us best from here, which is why most pupils choose to hang out on the other side. It gives us some sense of security. The kicks and punches from our fellow pupils are harder when no one is watching. I stick my hands in my pockets and scuff my shoes on the ground. Everyone else is at the other end of the schoolyard. They must have found something to taunt. I can hear their excited voices and wonder what it is this time. I don't turn around to look. It is safer not to attract attention, whatever happens.

Rebekka is taking a long time on the loo today. How arrogantly she assumed I wouldn't understand what she needed to buy. I probably know more about women's stuff than she does. After all, I've been helping Father to wash Mum's clothes for years. And once a month I bury the blood-soaked rags, he throws in the bucket next to our toilet, behind the goat shed. I wonder if Rebekka has had her period before and who told her everything she would need to do. She doesn't have any friends here at school and I doubt she confided in her mother.

I stop staring at my feet. When I look up, I realise Rebekka is no longer in the loo. I see her standing just outside the school gate by the road, looking away from me. She is staring down the bumpy road that goes around a bend and on down to the valley, leaving the village behind.

When I was a child, I used to think the road just stopped, that it went nowhere. A bit like world maps from the middle ages. The unexplored areas were left blank as if they didn't exist. It is so easy to suppress the idea that there are things out there; that things can exist beyond our imagination.

I could live like that. But Rebekka can't. I slink past the road out of the village as if it were a sleeping dog, while Rebekka faces it head on, keeping her eyes glued to the horizon. Why isn't our world enough for her?

I look over at the others. Luckily, they are still busy chasing something across the yard. Maybe it is a stray dog or cat. Some of the boys in the village like to set dogs' tails alight. And once I saw three of them tie two cats together by their tails and fling them over a washing line. When the cats started panicking, they scratched each other's eyes out.

Without anyone noticing, I sneak through the school gate and walk over to Rebekka. She jumps when I touch her arm, looking shocked and confused at the same time, as if she was expecting to see someone else.

"Hey," I say, kicking a stone across the road towards the village end. We watch it hurtle away. Almost as if we are expecting something to happen. As if the road is going to split open or a hand appear out of thin air and catch it. Of course, nothing does. The stone bounces out of sight, leaving nothing more than harmless broken asphalt behind.

"That stone is freer than we are," Rebekka says darkly, which angers me again.

Before I can say anything back, the shouting starts up behind us again and we turn around. Suddenly I realise what the horde of children are doing, what they were chasing across the yard and have now corned out of sight of the staff room window: it's Edith. The children are standing in a circle around her, screaming and laughing as they shove her around. Edith doesn't defend herself, not even when Lorenz flicks a lighter and holds it to her hair. Someone else pushes her again. Edith stumbles and lands in front of Rick, who immediately starts kicking her.

"Jesse!" Rebekka warns me. But I am already rushing back to the school yard, pushing open the school gate.

The children have closed ranks. Everyone is kicking her now. "Mountain girl!" they shout each time they kick her. "Dumbshit!"

I grab hold of the first shoulder I can reach. It's Rick. He is only sixteen, but he is at least a head taller than me. He's one of the ones who could do with some physically-demanding work to curb his surplus energy. The children in the village don't have to work, so they just hang around outside and get bored. Rick needs a valve to stop him exploding. We mountain children are one such valve.

As if he's been waiting for me, he stops kicking Edith at once and attacks me instead. He wedges his foot behind my leg and knocks me over. It doesn't matter who he ends up kicking as long as he gets to do it. We both know the game.

"Run over to Rebekka," I shout to Edith, who gets on her knees and crawls away between the other children's legs. A few kids try to grab her bare feet and pull her back but most of them have already turned their attention to me. They leave her alone. She stands up and runs over to Rebekka at the school gate before she stops and looks back at me. Then I am surrounded and a sneaker lands in my face. I jerk away, shutting my eyes and wrapping my arms around my head to protect myself.

The damage is worse than I expected. I spit blood into the sink in the school toilets and feel my teeth with my tongue as I count them one by one. I am terrified someone will knock out one of my teeth one day. There isn't a dentist here in the village, and of course, there's no oral surgeon. The chemist can't replace a missing tooth for you. Everything else on my body will heal and mend, it always does. But I can't grow a new tooth. Living in our settlement up in the mountains taught me that. Every time somebody opens their mouth, they show off their rows of missing teeth.

I spit some more. The blood in my mouth feels bitty but it is just my gums bleeding as far as I can tell. None of my teeth feel loose. I stand up straight and wash my mouth with a paper towel. There is a small cut above one eye, which is already starting to swell. My ribcage and kidneys ache. I turn on the taps to wash my face and grazed hands. Then I dry myself off again. As usual, I take my time. The flowing hot water is a luxury for me and I love the brown paper towels that you pull out of a box attached to the wall. Another change instigated by Ms Bender of course. She took one disgusted look at the old towel that used to hang next to the washbasin and announced that it was good for nothing except for bacteria and viruses. I remember her words every time I see my father wiping his hands after work. Our towel is almost black with dirt. Ms Bender wouldn't feel very happy in Jakobsleiter.

When the bell for the next lesson rings, I throw the dirty paper towels into the bin and go back to the classroom. I avoid looking at anyone, especially Ms Bender. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her frown when she notices my face. Then she looks at the other pupils. Ms Bender thinks it is easy to change things for the better, just like the towel in the toilet. But some issues have been around a lot longer than she has and will still be here when she is gone. People are ostracised all over the place.

I thought I would be last person to enter the room, but Rebekka's chair is still empty, too. I slink to my seat and peer out of the window into the yard. Lorenz, sitting opposite me, leans sideways to block my view and the other pupils snigger.

"Shush!" Ms Bender says. Even her "shush!" sounds nice. Not bad tempered, like hot water hissing on a cooker ring. There is something soothing about Ms Bender's "shush!".

She moves around the classroom handing out work for each table. When she gets to us, she looks at the empty chair. And raises her eyebrows in my direction. All I can do is shrug my shoulders.

"Maybe she's on the loo," I say quietly. Two girls on the younger table giggle. Perhaps they are surprised by the sound of my voice because they aren't used to hearing it.

When Rebekka still hasn't returned ten minutes later, Ms Bender asks us to work on our own and leaves the room. I feel fidgety and look around expecting to see the others poking each other in the ribs or grinning secretively. But no one is. They are bent over their work. Anyone looking up seems confused more than anything else. They are listening out for her footsteps, like me. We hear her coming now. There is a sense of urgency in her step all of a sudden, I think. My heart sinks even further. I am full of dread. Something is wrong. Ms Bender enters the room, takes in my swollen face and then looks at everyone sternly.

"Okay, I want to know exactly what happened during break," she says. I watch my fellow pupils closely. They had plenty of time to pick on Rebekka while I was cleaning up my face in the toilets. My stomach twists into a tight knot as hard as

stone while I imagine them dragging her off and locking her up somewhere. Ms Bender folds her arms across her chest.

“I mean it!” she says. “Where is Rebekka?”

No one answers. For once, when there is something important to say, when someone needs to open their mouth and speak up, everyone pinches their lips together and remains silent.

EDITH

Our world consists of zones stacked on top of each other like the floors of a house. You can tell where one zone ends and the next one begins. You just have to look at the trees and flowers and shrubs, and see where they grow. Right at the bottom, for example, where Jesse and Rebekka go to school, there are fields and orchards. Next comes the forest zone where some of the trees are 30 metres high, growing up into the sky. The higher you go the colder it gets and the smaller the trees become. At the edge of the forest, up at the top, the trees and bushes are the same size as me

If you are coming from the village, you have to go through all the zones to get to our settlement 1800 metres above sea level. I learnt the number off by heart. I think it is odd that the height of our world should be measured from somewhere so far away. I’ve never seen the sea and I don’t think I want to. My father showed me what the sea is like, using rainwater collected in our trough. He swung the trough back and forth, and the water sloshed from left to right: slosh, slosh. Papa crouched behind the trough, swinging it harder and harder. He told me that the sea sloshes and rushes, like a storm gathering in the trees. Then he showed me with his mouth. There are plenty of people and children down by the sea, he said, everyone shouting and making a noise. And because the sea doesn't like that, it grabs the children and pulls them under, until they drown. My papa showed me that too. I wasn't loud at all, but he grabbed me anyway and threw me into the ice-cold trough and then he pushed me under the water until I couldn’t breathe. I kicked and sputtered and

coughed. “That's the way it is by the sea,” my papa said, when he let me go. He told me to be glad that I live on the mountain.

People are harder to work out than plants. But it helps when you realise you can sort them into the zones where they thrive best. Take Jesse for example. He likes being in the forest best. And my papa feels best in the zone where our settlement is. He feels so good here he hardly ever goes anywhere else – not even one metre higher or lower. Jesse usually brings us anything we need from Almenen. Even when Papa had the bad tooth, no one could persuade him to go to the dentist in the next town. My papa is like a cork bobbing in the water. When you try to push him under, he keeps popping up again. He tied himself to the bench outside our hut and ordered me to fetch the pliers from the shed. Then he showed me the bad tooth and said. “Seeing a doctor is nonsense, Edith, we can sort this out by ourselves, you and me.” And then he told me to tie his other arm to the bench just in case, to stop him flaying around and accidentally hitting me, while I am the dentist. You need a lot of strength to pull a tooth out of someone’s mouth. I had to stem my foot against the bench where Papa was strung up like Jesus on the cross. I am strong. When the tooth finally loosened and then suddenly came out of Papa’s mouth, I fell backwards onto my bottom. That shows how tightly the bad tooth was wedged between the other teeth. My papa is right. Seeing a doctor is crazy, just like going to school. We do all right by ourselves, him and me.

Anyway, my zone is right at the top. It is the zone with rocks and ice, where mushrooms and lichens grow, and mosses and very rare flowers, and where it is very quiet. You need to be nice and quiet to stay alive. I feel for the piece of paper under my T-shirt, stuck into my trouser waistband. The children didn’t find it when they pushed me around. I’m glad because the note isn’t meant for them. I should have been far more careful when I snuck down to the school and peered in through the window. I clench my fists and punch my head three times as hard as I can. You have to be punished when you do something wrong. One! Two! Three! If it doesn’t hurt then it’s a waste of time, and you will be no wiser. It takes a hard punch to learn anything.

JESSE

I see Edith standing at the usual waiting place as I pant up the path towards the forest. I am relieved to see her. It is good to know she hasn't disappeared, too. Unfortunately, she is on her own. I had been secretly hoping that Rebekka might be with her.

Edith is covered in scratches from the children who attacked her in the schoolyard. She doesn't seem to mind. She is used to far worse. She reaches out and grabs my hand with her fingers. She wants to go. As if she doesn't realise Rebekka is still missing.

"Wait, Edith, wait," I gasp, still completely out of breath. I untwine my fingers and rest one hand on my knees while I cradle my ribs with the other one. I am aching all over. "Did you see Rebekka? You were the last one to be with her. Do you know where she is?"

Of course, Edith doesn't answer. I wasn't expecting her to. She frowns in her concentrated manner and when she grabs my hand again, I find myself thinking she might be going to give me an answer after all and take me to Rebekka. Edith carries on up the mountain again. She tugs at my hand but I won't go any further. Is she trying to tell me that Rebekka is already back in our settlement? I look at the path between the trees and then back at the village. I am trying to think of a reason why Rebekka might have run away from school after break and gone home, but there isn't one.

I crouch down in front of Edith. "We'll search the village first and then go up to Jakobsleiter. Okay?"

Edith doesn't answer, but when I stand up and turn back, she follows me down the grassy slope. I realise that people will stare at Edith down in the village. We usually try not to let anyone see her. Until I spotted her with the children in the schoolyard today, I had no idea that she ever came to Almenen. Edith keeps well away from anyone else if she can. She spends most of her time high up on the

mountain, in between the rocks and snow. It is often nearly dark by the time she gets home to Jakobsleiter, with flowers and leaves in her matted hair and filthy snow-soaked trousers. I often think that Edith probably knows the mountain better than anyone does. She leaps across the cracks in the Obere Schwärze glacier as if she were playing a game. Of course, no one really knows where she disappears to for hours on end. Maybe she roams through Almenen these days too. I look at the fresh scratches and grazes on her cheeks and bare legs. Battle scars from today's fight at school, I think, but I can't really be sure. Edith is always covered in scratches and bruises. Until now I assumed that she gets them playing in the hills. I hold Edith's hand tightly when we get to the village, and don't let go when we enter the shop.

The girl on the till gives Edith a disgusted look, as bad as any she got from people. She looks so disdainful that I start wondering if Edith has ever tried to steal anything off the shelves. I clutch her hand more tightly when her fingers start to slip through my sweaty palms. Rebekka isn't here. The shop is small enough to know at a glance. We search for her in the chemist's and the post office. Then we inspect the outside cellar steps of most of the houses. Finally, we check the sheds and haylofts. Sometimes dogs bark and chase us away. Sometimes the owners shout at us, wanting to know what we think we are doing trespassing on their property.

There is no sign of Rebekka anywhere.