

The Forest (WALD) by Doris Knecht

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Translation by Beth Eggleston (supported by New Books in German, London)

(1)

The sound is tiny. Just a clicking, almost imperceptible, not loud at all, from somewhere below, and it wakes her up. Quickly slipping free from sleep, from a dream, listening: not fearfully, furtively – but the sound is gone. It is quiet. Gloomy and very quiet. She stays still, not wanting the sound of her shifting in the sheets to attract another sound. She isn't scared. She hasn't been scared of strange sounds in the night for a long time now. She was scared before, when she was still with Oliver and couldn't imagine anything else but that; a mysterious, indeed bizarre anxiety had been an intrinsic part of her back then, inexplicable behind the three deluxe locks of her steel-door-reinforced flat, the flat that she couldn't sleep in when Oliver wasn't there, where she lay awake tossing and turning her massaged, epilated, moisturised body in its organic cotton shell. Everything in delicate pastel shades, because she had preferred to sleep in delicate pastels at the time, having read somewhere that women who wore white underwear had less sex. Marian had then distilled this into the formula that white is unsexy, except for white blouses, classically buttoned, which Oliver, at least, and then later Bruno too, had found very sexy. In her pastel underwear, beneath her sandy beige or slate grey linen sheets, Marian had listened to every sound until sleep finally washed away the nervous prickling in her sensitive body and she sank into a dream, a nightmare, a nightmare with props from some American crime series that she left playing on the flatscreen next to the bed, until it was turned off by the sleep function – which didn't exactly do her rest much good. That much, at least, was clear to her.

Anyway, at least the frightening but familiar sounds from the TV drowned out the sounds in her flat that really were alarming, by virtue of not being immediately identifiable – the rustling, the crackling and creaking, the pacing and padding and pitter-pattering from the three unoccupied and,

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most of the time, unused rooms (her home workshop, Oliver's home studio, the guest room), which, when Oliver wasn't there and it was particularly bad, she had sometimes locked. Although this fear – that some intruder, or the ghosts of people who had died here, could be hiding in there – seemed childish and irrational even to the old Marian, who romanticised her hysteria as sensitivity. Idiotic. And yes, hysterical – she admitted it, even to herself. And even though it was obvious to her back then, in her eccentricity, that ghosts in particular hardly let steel locks prevent them from leaving a room. Then Oliver was gone and she was left behind in the big flat, alone, and, lo and behold: she was alright. After a few nights. And yes, after another deluxe lock, a bar lock, and a burglar-proof terrace door, because, after all, a particularly ambitious and acrobatic intruder could have balanced their way across the steep roof and abseiled onto her terrace, or, Spiderman-like, clambered eight storeys up the glass façade from below. The lock had cost her three thousand Euros, which at the time she had considered a good investment – which it was, insofar as she could sleep again afterwards, at any rate for the few months that she still had the flat.

Now, in the bed that her aunt had owned and died in, Marian laughed about that kind of thing – sometimes, anyway. Silly old fears, luxury feelings, first world problems, only recalled and felt with effort. She didn't miss them. Only occasionally did she miss the luxury of an existence in which such fears came as part of the package. She listens again: no sound now. She can't remember whether Bruno was in the dream anymore, or perhaps Oliver – she only senses that it was warm, somebody warm was there, so probably Oliver rather than Bruno. Bruno wasn't warm. Attractive, sexy, quick, fun: but warm? No. The lightning wit that made men attractive, that keenness of mind, it always came with a certain coldness, even in Bruno – especially in Bruno. He had been clever enough to disguise and conceal this coldness, but it was there, and eventually you noticed it, eventually it couldn't be denied any more, and eventually Marian couldn't pretend it away any longer, even though she had succeeded in doing so for a while, longer than was good for her, an unhealthy while longer in the end. Oliver was warm, Oliver was warm for the longest time, almost right up until the end. Was Franz in the dream? Something stirs in her as she searches for Franz in the fast-melting residue of the dream, and it stirs in a place that she doesn't necessarily want it to. Franz, though: maybe. She dreams of Franz now sometimes. There were people in the dream, at any rate; the face of the young guy, the new neighbour, who had knocked on her door yesterday and introduced himself, forces its way into her consciousness – a just about still smooth, slightly dried-out, but very friendly face surrounded by a shock of reddish-blond hair. There was something

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not quite right about the eyes, something in the eyes had been wrong, but the smile so warm, it melts away in her still half-asleep consciousness, only the warmth of the dream remains. It feels as though there were reasonably friendly, decent people in the dream, they don't have names or a shape anymore, it's all gone, only a tender feeling is still left, a baseless and weightless contentment that at any moment will melt away into reality like vapour trails into the blue of the sky.

(2)

She doesn't make any effort to find her way back into the dream. It's pointless anyway. It's gone. It was just a dream. In that sense, the clicking was a blessing: it tore her out of the dream, ended the dream abruptly, without the pain that a slow, gradual awakening sometimes causes if you still believe that's it, that's your own, real life and it's filled with warm, nice people, and if this dream life then fades, steals away, leaves you alone in an entirely different existence. It's not all so warm anymore. Harsher, more honest, more real and without room for soothing lies that let you cheat your way past irregularities, past bigger lies. At least Marian doesn't have bad dreams anymore, or only very rarely. She hasn't had a nightmare for a long time now. In her dreams it's now mostly warm, cuddly, cotton-soft, pastel-coloured, sweet, everything that her life currently isn't, or at least very rarely. When life is really shitty, as Marian now knows, nightmares can be relied upon to stop. Even if you chose that life for yourself, if you decided on it, if you wanted it like Marian wanted it, in spite of all opposition, despite everybody else's better judgement and good intentions.

Just yesterday Kim phoned again, or rather: Kim tried to phone. Marian hadn't taken the call, had snatched the blaring mobile from the windowsill where it lay, normally lifeless, had looked at it, stared at it, with short-sighted narrowed eyes, creating a deep wrinkle on her forehead that would bother her in another life in which wrinkles played a role. She had read the name, had taken the mobile from the sill, let it ring and vibrate in her hand. The window was fogged up in some places, it ought, Marian registered in the meantime, to be cleaned. She had put the mobile back on the windowsill. It shrilled. Outside, the signs of autumn were unmistakable, grey sky, the mobile shrilled, yellow leaves in the meadow that had already been blown down by a brisk autumn wind. The mobile shrilled. The asters were already blooming here and there, and colourful lilies, and the

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violet and green leaves above the globes of red and white cabbage were already wilting, she would be able to harvest the cabbage soon. And the willows. The willows, she knew now, first of all turned green in spring, and in summer the leaves turned first yellow and then fell as a dun-coloured blanket, in such numbers that the grass beneath them choked. It shrilled. She thought about the leaves and about how she would have to rake them soon, she thought about how exhausting raking was, so that she wouldn't have to picture Kim on her mobile, probably a stylish new iPhone, and she thought about everything that would be in store for her in the winter, and she thought that she didn't want to think about the bulge on Kim's smooth forehead, a deep, angry crease that at some point would become as sharply scored in as the one on Marian herself, who now had a fissure in her forehead, severe and ineradicable, like tanned hide. Or perhaps Kim would safeguard herself against this forehead crease, perhaps Kim takes timely preventative measures with Botox or at least with Hyaluron – she would have to recommend it to her – or perhaps they had already discovered something better that would de-score Kim's forehead more permanently than it would Marian's, on which all non-surgical measures had ultimately been in vain. And had eventually gone down the drain, as it's so nicely put.

The telephone shrieked at her, an irritating sound that got really aggravating before it finally cut out. The mobile had stopped ringing, it was quiet now, much quieter than before. The ringing had lasted for a long time, even longer than the day before yesterday, when Marian hadn't picked it up either. And nor on Sunday. During all this, she would have been endlessly happy to hear Kim's voice, the deep, warm cooing in it, she yearned for that voice and its cheerful singsong, she was driven almost crazy by the desire to pick up, by the longing for the kindness and love that were hiding at that exact moment inside this small piece of plastic, and would flood from her ears through her entire body in the form of pure happiness if she would only press that button. It had rung and rung and kept on ringing, twelve times, until it broke off. When it had finally stopped, Marian was a mess, a disaster with wet eyes and a damp collar, even after it had long since fallen silent. But she knew what Kim had to say and she didn't want to hear it, because she would reject it, at first kindly and then brusquely, and Kim wouldn't understand, and disappointment would suppress the cooing, and concern would contaminate the singsong, and eventually nothing would be left over except sadness and Kim's tears and the bitter pain of rejection, loss, misunderstanding, unfulfilled wishes, on this side and the other. And, despite the pain, it was right. It had to be exactly like this. The pain was there anyway, she cannot and will not ask any more of Kim. It's her crisis, she won't make it

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Kim's crisis. It affects her, not Kim. She doesn't want Kim to worry. She doesn't want to be worried about, not by Kim. Kim should be happy. It isn't Kim's job to worry about her, not after everything that happened. She lives in Kim's house, the house that Marian had given her after she had inherited it from her aunt. And now Marian wants things the way they currently are, and despite last winter, and despite everything that she has undergone this winter, and she still wants it. This is how it is now, it doesn't get better than this. She can take care of herself, she's keeping her head above the water, she's already doing it, she doesn't need Kim. The house, her refuge, nothing more, Kim can't do anything more now. She doesn't need anybody, and if she does then there's Franz. She turns onto her side, her hips hurt, they have for a few days now. It always improves once she gets up, she'll get up soon, she opens her eyes briefly to estimate the time of day by the brightness, lets the light in, provided that there is any. There's a little bit: it's still dark, not completely dark any more, blue is already creeping into the black. Before six, she guesses. She rubs her eyes, blue eyes in a now blotchy, doughy face. The face has aged in the last two years, above all in the last year, in the last winter. She knows it, and when she stands in front of the small bathroom mirror, in the morning or evening, she sometimes studies her wrinkles, and she sometimes tells herself that she should do something about them, which she could, under different conditions, a bit of something at least. She would have done before. The things that were once important before, the things that had great, occasionally immense importance two, three years ago, were still present, not just as a memory but as an active part of her consciousness. They're still functioning, on standby. The circumstances have just put them into perspective temporarily. It simply isn't the time for them now, but that certainly doesn't mean that she wants to extinguish them completely. Marian wants them to remain present, she wants the little red lamp to carry on burning, even if it requires energy, apparently wastefully. But it isn't wasteful. It's a beacon. She wants the wrinkles under her eyes and around her lips to bother her, because: if not, what? What if they no longer do, what if she doesn't care, if it doesn't matter to her anymore whether she has wrinkles and whether these wrinkles grow deeper and more numerous, and whether the corners of her mouth form sharp grooves and the skin to the left and right of her chin grows slack, conspicuously so, a little more every day?

It might be that nobody notices, because nobody is there to notice except herself. It matters, the wrinkles, the entire fatally unchecked ageing of her face. (The signs of ageing skin – that was an ancient advertising slogan, impossible to eliminate even from deep in the consciousness, what

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advert was that again, what was it for? Something cheap, second rate, mass-market cosmetics, otherwise it's hardly likely that there would be a slogan for it.) And it mattered even then, too, that her face (Oil of Olay, that was it, she'd never used it, of course not) was getting older and slacker even if, as Bruno had enjoyed doing whenever the opportunity presented itself, you applied the Lacanian doctrine to this fact, according to which only that which can be seen, perceived, exists; defined as existent by an observer, only first materialising in the eye of an observer. But there were no observers, apart from Franz that one time, and Franz seemed utterly indifferent to the texture of her face, so far at least. And where there was no observer (and an observer who was not interested in the observee, who didn't perceive them at all, fell very much into the category of *no observer*, was, as an observer, every bit as non-existent as an inanimate object), there were also no wrinkles. Bruno would have expressed that much more elegantly and precisely, would probably also have brought in Foucault, or if not him then another of his show-off French philosophers, or Hegel, Hegel always works. Anyway, in layman's terms it meant that if there was no Marian-registering consciousness, there was also no Marian, that without the gaze that focused on her, perceived her, Marian didn't exist, either with wrinkles or without. That simple. Last winter, this philosophical problem had almost become very concrete, lethally concrete, after her uncle's schnapps had turned blind the only person who could have seen Marian at the time, namely Marian herself. She hadn't looked in the mirror any more, not in the morning and not in the evening, she hadn't seen herself, and consequently nobody had seen her, and so she effectively hadn't been there at all. If Franz hadn't happened to hear and see her on that February day in the forest, she might literally not be there any more, not just as an unobserved object but objectively not there at all, and, if an observer came to the house now and looked in, there would be nothing left of Marian except a few traces, because she would long since be underground, or, more likely, a handful of ashes in a tin can on a shelf on her sister's modern-rustic (whitewashed oak) living room wall. Or scattered by her somewhere because she had needed the space on the whitewashed shelf for something more important, probably a bric-a-brac elephant, her two-hundred-and-fifty-sixth or three-hundred-and-forty-first bric-a-brac elephant by now, as her sister collected elephants. Had done since she was a child. It had started with a stuffed animal in Schönbrunn Zoo and never stopped. And she would also only have made it onto her sister's shelf if somebody, the nosy Püribäur woman for example, had eventually found Marian, frozen stiff, with an empty bottle of schnapps between her stone-hard fingers.

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But she could still see herself, could see herself in the half-murky mirror again, every evening and every morning. She was there, she was alive. And Franz, too, could now prove that she was there, that she really existed, and so she didn't just perceive herself in this mirror every morning and every evening, but also contemplated and inspected herself and her wrinkles and crinkles and the small rut under her left eye. Why only under the left one? Why not under the right? What makes her left eye, the left half of her face different from the right? These grooves and wrinkles, which, with so little resistance, exploit the under-moisturised state of her face and proliferate on it cheerfully, upset her. She takes this upset as a good sign. Because if they didn't upset Marian any more, if she didn't object to them any more, if she started to overlook these wrinkles or even accept them as a part of her, then she had resigned herself, then she had given up, then she accepted this as her life; but she won't do that, because this is a phase. A phase that might last a while longer, but a phase in any case. A phase that had a beginning and will have an end. A bit like an innocent person being thrown into jail or, in her case, a guilty one. Ultimately, she'd decided for the imprisonment herself, for it and against the parole with restrictions and strict supervision that would have been the other option. This, then, is preferable, even if it isn't her real life, just her current one, one that had mistakenly fallen to her for a while and in which she couldn't currently do much about these wrinkles, but then, but then, but someday.

She raises her tired eyelids again, the blue has become more garish and, if she isn't mistaken, she can detect a pink shimmer in the sky. What she sees and can make out of the weather outside her window gives her hope: It might be enough just to stoke and heat the oven in the kitchen once today, early in the morning, and not the one in the living room as well, perhaps today it would get warm enough again that she wouldn't need any wood until the evening. She looks at the rigid hairs on her arms and the cold-roughened skin, lets her gaze rest on these arms, wake up on them, slowly. Her arms are long, slender, very pale, speckled with brown dots and blemishes, a lot more dots and blemishes than before. She's freezing, but resists the urge to thrust her arms back under the covers. A little longer in bed. Make the most of having been woken up before the alarm by this clicking. She listens once again, but there's nothing, not even the tiniest peep. Maybe the mouse escaped; the best-case scenario was that it had abruptly died. One fewer. She had soon given up counting the mouse cadavers, there must have been dozens by now, maybe even hundreds. She

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still finds it revolting to pick the bloody, disfigured bodies out of the trap. She has specific gloves for that – old, blood-encrusted work gloves that she found in the shed. They're stiff and too big, and make it hard to prise up the spring-loaded wire clamp, but it repels her too much to extricate the squashed mouse corpses from the trap with bare hands. At first she had sometimes thrown the trap along with the mouse cadavers out of the door, but too often the cats didn't just eat the mouse out of it but carried off the mousetrap-mouse mixture, and if she didn't find the trap then she had to provide a new one. She only does that now when, as unfortunately keeps happening, the mouse somehow survives the trap snapping shut and, with a half-squashed body, is twitching in the trap, sometimes presumably for hours. Now and again she finds the traps somewhere completely different from where she placed them because they have been jerked metres away by the clamped, desperately struggling mice bodies.

The first time she had found a mouse writhing in its death throes in the trap, she had been so horrified that she had pushed it out of the front door and down the crumbling steps with a broom, but, before she could reach for the spade to strike the animal dead, the Peneder woman's tomcat had snatched up the struggling creature together with the trap and had dashed behind the house with it. That had been the ginger one, the one that she calls Rolf, even though she's since learned that he's called Muxl. When she found the trap later, only a piece of bone still stuck in it, the rest of the mouse's body had disappeared.

Marian had remembered mice as being smaller, sweeter, more delicate. It's possible that the mice in the city actually are smaller than country mice. Marian, too, had been sweeter and more delicate back then, elegant and occasionally exquisite, she could, when the situation called for it, be uptight and complicated, although she hadn't truly been any of that at all, even then. But when the suspicion that they had a mouse was once confirmed, in the flat in the city, she had reacted exactly as you would expect from a woman like her: with controlled hysteria. A mouse! Oh, God! Scratching, dirt, bacteria, nibbled food, gnawed shoes, ruined evening dresses. She and Oliver had long puzzled over how a mouse gets into a seventh-storey, newly built apartment in the middle of the city: had it come up in the lift? Had it smuggled itself up in a shopping basket? Did it come over the roof, over the terrace? Or could a little mouse actually climb or hop or whatever up all the stairs, can mice do that kind of thing?

They had to reconcile themselves with its existence, anyway, after a long period of not wanting to

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believe that the small black crumbs in her clean drawers were actually mouse droppings. But once the mouse had bitten open and gnawed on a bar of fine dark Belgian chocolate, there was no longer any doubt. She had wanted to call a pest controller, had found several links and sent them to Oliver.

“Because of a mouse?”

“I don't want a mouse in my flat!”

“It's just one single little mouse.”

“How do you know that? Maybe there are two. And maybe the two are in love. And then maybe soon there will be lots.”

“Really, Marian. Don't get hysterical now.”

“But when I think about how the mouse might be running across my face at night...”

“It isn't. There are only droppings in the kitchen. I'll catch it.”

“Then please catch it pronto.”

“Yeah yeah.”

Oliver had put two live traps in the kitchen and one in the hall, and every morning she had refused to leave the bed before Oliver had checked to see whether the creature had let itself be tempted by cheese, bacon or Nutella (she'd read it online). Morning after morning it hadn't, until finally they were both sure that the mouse had moved back out by itself. Have you seen mouse shit anywhere today? No, you? Maybe the mouse had moved to a friendlier flat, because its fodder had become scarce since Marian had sacrificed a Sunday to lock away all the food safely or seal it in airtight, bite-proof glass containers.

Then, one evening, on one of the Tuesdays when she believed Oliver to be playing football with his mates on some meadow, she had invited her friends, old friends whom she knew from her Marianne days, before she had started, during her studies, to omit first one, then two letters of her – as she thought – stuffy, provincial and old-fashioned first name, resulting in: Mariann first, and eventually, because Mariann still sounded too much like Sissi films to her, Marian. Marian: that sounded, she thought, modern, creative, international, mysterious, androgynous, gender-neutral. She thought that it suited a fashion designer better, and she had spent half an increasingly drunken night practising a new signature until it, too, was perfectly suited to the fashion designer that she intended to become: elegant, unconventional, unique, with a hint of pretension in the flourishes.

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Only her passport and her bank account still reminded her of her real name. Along with these few friends, who stubbornly refused to accept her new name and, with it, her new personality, who called her Marianne with obstinate persistence, one of them even Nanni, which she had hated even as a child. She already regretted having invited them, having brought the old clique together on the occasion of one of Sabine's rare visits home, into which she incorporated a visit to the city, including a meeting with her oldest friend, Marianne.

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