

II.

During our first few days at die Hütte, every sunny afternoon blended into each warm evening. I spent my time playing outside with Phyllis, washing all the small things we had found – metal plates, a few pieces of cutlery, wooden bowls – in buckets of water my father hauled up from the river. Although he had made me a shoe from a hessian bag with a carved shingle for the sole, I mostly ran around bare-foot, and naked apart from my pants. In the evenings we rolled plants into rope and told stories around the campfire. At odd times I would remember with a jolt that Ute was dead, and Phyllis and I would crawl inside the tent to cuddle, until she stopped crying.

On the third day of camping outside die Hütte, my father climbed on to the roof with the mended hammer and the nails, and worked on repairing the shingles. At first he made me stand inside and direct him to where I could see sunlight sneaking through, but after a while he didn't seem to need my help and I wandered outside into the sunshine.

'Make yourself useful,' my father called, his words mangled by the nails he held between his lips. 'Take the traps and catch us some dinner.'

I still hadn't been into the forest on my own; the thought made me nervous and excited as I hurried to put on my clothes and my odd shoes, and to collect the nooses. I hesitated on the edge of the clearing, then took a few steps

forward into the trees. Gnarled and mossy roots spread like giant's fingers amongst ferns that came up to my chest. There were as many trunks fallen and rotting as there were upright trees, fighting for the patches of green daylight that filtered down through the leaves. The forest smelled earthy; moist, like the cemetery. I pushed my way through the plants until I came to a massive trunk which must have come down years before, its decaying wood spongy and dark. I stepped up on to it, and the rotten bark gave way, tipping me off so that I stumbled, only just catching myself before I fell. A shiver ran through the trees as though they were laughing, and I had to fight the urge to turn and bolt. At my feet was a thick branch, newly fallen, and I picked it up to whack the trunk with it and beat a path through the ferns and damp plants until the way became clearer and the ground peaty. Looking back at where I had come from, the ferns closed around something quick and low and grey that ran through the undergrowth.

'Wolf!' a voice hissed inside my head. My heart thumped in my throat, but I stood my ground. The forest was testing me. I growled, deep in the back of my throat, and hunkered down with my branch held out, ready to spring forward and fight, but the ferns didn't twitch again, so I sat on the forest floor and then lay back, spreadeagled. The cool, damp earth penetrated my clothes and chilled my skin. I let the trees encircle and lean over me whilst I looked up through the canopy as if I were staring through a fisheye lens. They checked me for one of their own and turned me upside down so that the faraway blue sky, hidden behind their leaves, became the land and I floated free.

When the feeling had faded, I rolled over on to my

stomach, my eyes in line with the mossy forest floor. Spread out in front of me, for as far as I could see, was a forest of giant chanterelles. At ground level they were transformed into exotic trees with egg-yolk-yellow gills, towering over me. I stuffed them in my pockets, cupped them in a hammock made from the bottom of my T-shirt and ran back to die Hütte.

My father and I walked all of the land on our side of the river. Our southern boundary was the water, and our northern, the slope of the mountain. East of the cabin was a forest of deciduous trees.

‘Oak trees, or Wintereichen,’ said my father. ‘The acorn is one of the most nutritionally complete foods, the only food in this forest that contains carbohydrates, protein and fats. What is the acorn?’

‘The acorn is the only food that contains carbohydrates, protein and fats,’ I said.

‘And what’s the name of the tree?’

‘Wintereye,’ I said.

The wintereyes, beech and the occasional hoary yew spread downhill towards the river, until a horseshoe of tall pines then scrubby bushes filled the gap between the mostly deciduous trees and the bank. Through this forest was the gill – a deep channel of mossy rocks which had long ago tumbled down the mountain and settled on top of a gurgling stream that we could hear but couldn’t see. We didn’t cross it; not far beyond, the mountain rose in crumbling scree, which looked impossible to climb. To the west of the cabin was a smaller area of forest, also bounded by the river and the mountain. We named this the rock forest, because

whilst the east side had the gill to funnel the boulders that the mountain threw down, on the other, huge rocks had slammed into the soft earth and lodged there, half buried, amongst the trees. Every day, I walked the same route, checking our nooses for their grisly harvest. If they were empty, there would often be a rabbit in a snare, more mushrooms, as well as leaves and roots, edible berries, fish my father caught, the provisions we had carried with us. We were never hungry that summer.

Each morning since we had arrived, my father had cut notches in die Hütte's door frame, but when he got to sixteen he decided to stop.

'We're not going to live by somebody else's rules of hours and minutes any more,' he said. 'When to get up, when to go to church, when to go to work.'

I couldn't remember my father ever going to church, or even to work.

'Dates only make us aware of how numbered our days are, how much closer to death we are for each one we cross off. From now on, Punzel, we're going to live by the sun and the seasons.' He picked me up and spun me around, laughing. 'Our days will be endless.'

With my father's final notch, time stopped for us on the 20th August 1976.

My father showed me how to hone the knife against a stone to keep it sharp; how to put a nick in the fur behind a rabbit's head and pull off his jacket so that he was left with just his socks on; how to pull his grey insides down and out, but save the heart, liver and kidneys; and how to put him on a spit to roast. In the forest, we used every part of the animals we killed – saving the bones for needles, trying to form

thread from the guts, and making poor attempts at curing the skins. We were busy, too busy for me to question why our fortnight's holiday was slipping into three weeks and then a month.

After a week, my father said we could move out of the tent and into die Hütte. He had pulled out the bramble, patched the holes in the roof, screwed the door back on straight and got the stove working. He stood outside the cabin and cheered as smoke appeared from the metal chimney that poked through the shingles. I jumped up and down and clapped too, without knowing why it was so exciting. The sun shone from a sky so shiny it hurt my eyes to look up into it, whilst the rising wind whipped the smoke away.

'There's still lots to do, but tonight we sleep in die Hütte,' my father announced with his chest sticking out and hands on his hips. 'We should celebrate,' he said, and slapped me on the back as if I had mended the stove. 'What shall we do, Punzel?' He looked at me, laughing.

'Celebrate!' I said, and laughed too, although I wasn't sure at what.

'Let's make a kite. We can fly it from the top ledge.' He shaded his eyes and looked high above the cabin. 'Fetch me the string; I'll cut some sticks.'

I ran into die Hütte and my father went to the woods.

By the time I had found the ball of home-made cord, which was stuck on a peg behind the door, my father was down by the tent, kneeling with his back to me, working away with the knife. I ran to him, holding the ball in the air: 'Papa, I found it!' But here my memory slows, like watching an old cine film, jerky, with all the colours too bright. My

father spoke to the camera but no words came out. He was in front of the tent, slicing it with the knife. Stabbing and jabbing at it, slitting it open as if he were preparing a carcass. He looked over his shoulder at me, smiling and chattering, but all I could see was the gaping hole in the tent's side. And then the sound cut back in, as though I had shaken my ears free of water and I heard him say, 'The wind will be strong up the mountain.' He made a sawing action with the blade, so that a flap of canvas came loose. Watching him made me double over, holding my stomach. 'We can make the tail from these little bits of canvas,' he said, busy working. 'God, this would be so much easier with scissors. There must be scissors somewhere in die Hütte.'

I sat on the ground, tears falling. It was too late to stop him.

'How will we get home, Papa, without a tent?' I said to his back. He turned around and looked at me, confused for a second, but then understanding.

'We are home, Punzel,' he said.