

Carolina Schutti
Heaven is a Small Circle
Novel

Translated by Deirdre McMahon

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Screws and planks on the ground, varnish tins, brushes, everything I can grab hold of. Someone or other is bellowing, the saw is howling. Then sudden quiet when it stops because its trajectory has wrenched the cable from the socket. I hear my breath, too deep and too loud, push its way out of my mouth in little bursts. My in-breaths are a hiss and then the little pushes come again, one, then another, until my lungs empty with a groan coming from the depths of my body. I can hear the groaning but am unaware that I am dribbling. My chin is wet with saliva mixed with blood because I have bitten my tongue. I feel a slight resistance in my foot and a hot wave washes over me because I want strong resistance, because my strength cannot be allowed to sink into weakness. I need my strength back whether as a noise pressing into my ears, louder than the swoosh of blood, or a crash like that made by the planks of an old shed when I cycle over them until they sag under the weight, brittle on the outside and rotten inside. A knocking like an axe breaking up firewood: I have to squeeze my eyes shut because I refuse to wear glasses even though I fear ending up like my father who got a splinter through his iris and could no longer see in three dimensions. How could

I build boats with one eye, how would I check their sight lines or cut the deck-planks measuring by eye. How would I look if anyone came by while I was wearing my father's old, orange-tinted ski-glasses? Daft! I hear it before anyone says it – daft – just look at you! The glasses are hanging on the shed door, the axe goes through the wood, nobody came by, every strike of the axe brought the evening closer, Saturday, Sunday, Monday.

The week begins with steamy meadow grass, brackish water from the irrigation canal, lake water, duck weed and moss. Sleeper-joist. Then, suddenly as if there were an invisible wall, polyester, varnish, metal:

Check the vanishing line, the smoothness of the varnish, the evenness of the joints, Sink the tiny screws in where no one will see them. Burnish the brasses, though sun-cream and sweat will dull them again in a few days.

I want to plane! I want to varnish.

I see the grinning apprentices as if through a magnifying class. I shout, who is daft now, who? I take a step backwards, another one, and one more, a final step. I flinch as my back hits a wall. I stretch out my arms as though I wanted to fly away. There is something wrong with this image - I have tightened my hands into fists, my hard fingernails dig into my palms without the pain reaching my consciousness.

I must tell them:

how it feels to stick my fist into wood splinters, what splintering wood sounds like, what it looks like, the trajectory of the portable circular saw, just narrowly missing the apprentice's head.

Shortly before midday there is hardly a place free at the floor-to-ceiling windows of the dining room; everyone is sitting or standing there, all crowded together. I take a place beside Mark, what's up? what's up? The caretaker is out on the terrace with a garden hose, twisting the nozzle. What's going on? Tell me! Scale insects, says Mark, velvet mites, says someone else. Spiders! Spiders! Spiders! They're tiny, says Mark, just look! And I press my face against the pane but can't see anything. They're tiny, says Mark, but there are so many of them, can you see them? Like a red shawl in the wind. A little red creature scabbles across the glass with deft, angular movements, as though dodging something. I stare at it, but Mark is pointing at the paving slabs and now I see them - thousands of tiny, bright red insects, like a single moving mat. Even before I can say anything, water starts to shoot out of the hose. The caretaker aims at the creatures, water spraying in every direction; countless drops on the windowpane obscure our view. The caretaker moves slowly, calmly moving the hose to and fro. Hope he doesn't miss any, someone says. There's fish and broccoli for lunch, says someone else, and suddenly, the crowd around the window thins out. Chairs are pulled out. People scatter, the odd clatter of cutlery can be heard. Some people arrange their plates and glasses, but I remain standing, watching the caretaker, whose outline blurs beyond the wet window.

You haven't done your trousers up properly, says Mark and I glance down. The zip is open. Thanks, I say and notice that

I'm not wearing slippers either, just thin, pink socks. I had heard the clamour from my room and forgotten to follow Rule Number 5 - slippers must be worn at all times throughout corridors and communal areas of the Institution. I notice too that the toes of my socks are worn almost through; the outline of my big toenail is clearly visible. They won't give me a nail-scissors, just cardboard nail files.

You're only wearing socks, says Mark.

I heard the shouting, I didn't have time, I answer but Mark is no longer listening. Music pulses from his headphones, blending with that of the violins from the loudspeakers. It's a project, they tell us, so there are always three or four students with trays and notepads, watching us as we eat. Sometimes one of them visits us on the women's floor and asks us something or other. Mark tells us that there's one of them on the men's floor now and again, but she only looks around and makes little marks on a list.

The caretaker is standing right in front of us now, hosing down the path between the terrace and the window. Mark presses his forehead against the glass, I press my hands on the pane but, though we are right there, the caretaker takes no notice of us, I knock, no reaction, he keeps his head bent; perhaps the water is just too loud, perhaps the safety glass swallows all sounds. I continue knocking; inside, the sound can be heard clearly. All ears are trained for the sound of glass. Even amidst the greatest racket, the softest shiver or the faintest tinkle of glass is noticed and, in the blink of an eye someone is beside you, as if by coincidence, checking if it was just a bottle falling or if a glass has broken. I know, I say, even though Mark doesn't hear me, I know, little red creatures on the garden wall, I know, but so many of them, and right now, when

all the chairs and tables are supposed to go outdoors, with sun umbrellas for those who prefer the shade. You can take coffee out, you can gaze at the crowns of the sycamore trees and be amazed at how quiet it is here, an island on the edge of the city, surrounded by a rendered grey wall, by hedges, ivy; you could just imagine you were in a castle courtyard, with gardeners and servants constantly enquiring how you are.

I need air, Mark says, and I nod. This means that we will meet up at one thirty, in the park after lunch, on the only bench that is half in sun and half in shade.

He in the sun and me in the shade; I always sit in the shade so that my face doesn't get hot, or my back or stomach. Mark needs the sun like air to breathe, he says, rolling up his trouser legs and even the short sleeves of his t-shirt; he clamps the rolls of fabric under his arms so that they stay up. He believes that maggots have nested under his skin, particularly around the badly healed puncture marks in the crooks of his arms. Nobody can see them, but I believe him. And so, he stays sitting beside me, when I begin a sentence and weave it on in my head. My mouth stops moving while I am talking to him and, nevertheless, he nods now and again. And that is how we keep ourselves going.

I try to memorise the movements of his body, the shoulders drawn together, head bent a little forward, legs akimbo, his left arm on the armrest, his right forearm loose in his lap. He is a cliché, he says himself; thin and tattooed, he is never seen without headphones. His music should have deafened him long ago. Only the long hair is missing; he has always had a short-back-and-sides, he says.

Mark is getting on well here. The scratch-marks on his

arms are fading; his shaking lessening. Unlike me, he won't be here much longer. I am stubborn and difficult and do not want to breathe or dance. And I tell them every day that I do talk - to Mark! But they are not satisfied with that because they cannot imagine that a person can have a conversation without moving their mouth. And they try to, at least, coax a plan, out of me, an image of my future, some teeny-tiny aim I could work towards. And, now and then, I draw a compass, a square and a triangle and they say - a house? - and I find I have had enough.

But Mark is still here. He leans back, shoves the headphones off his ears and clears his throat. They're spider mites, he says, scale insects aren't red.

Mark is right, scale insects are grey, if they are not cooked up for their colour. They live on trees and not on terraces and in the walls of houses. Scale insects are needed for shellac too, not from their shells, no; they produce bubbles of resin which people detach from the branches and this resin is fiery red. But since no one would want red lacquer on wood, people wash out the colour until the lacquer is clear. I want to tell Mark that I would have loved to apply shellac, not with a brush, but a cloth. Dabbing gently on wood, stroking it, its soft shine, its smell. But shellac is not used in boat building; it takes days to get it to shine and years pass before it has hardened fully. Shellac swells up when it comes in contact with water, so it remained just an experiment in trade school. Refinement of wooden surfaces was an afternoon course with an instrument maker. More robust materials were needed for boatbuilding: double coat polyester varnish, two component polyurethane varnish, epoxy-resin, permeable varnish,

except for teak. Teak can only be oiled. Did you even know how much a trunk of teak wood stinks when it is being cut? And it starts off green? Green like unripe walnuts and, within minutes, the wood changes colour; the oil it exudes makes it shine. After releasing the sawn and planed planks from the cotter pins, we laid them on storage racks and, even outside the door, you could smell the new delivery. It happened no more than two or three times a year, probably even less frequently. Who could afford a teak deck? Once I oiled a whole deck; you could use a brush or a cloth. I always used a cloth. Afterwards my hands were greasy, my sleeves and sometimes even my trouser legs, if I wasn't careful.

Mark stares at his feet.

Should I call the cat? I ask.

The shade has moved two centimetres. Mark moves a bit away from me, keeping his face in the sun.

He doesn't say anything, so I call, wait, call again. Sometimes it takes a few minutes; this time it is longer. I call louder than usual, standing up to get a better view, to spot a moving shadow out of the corner of my eye, a movement in the shrubbery. Nothing. Perhaps the cat was on the terrace too; perhaps she got hit by the water spray, perhaps that's why she won't come out of her hiding-place. I call again. Suddenly there's a miaow just behind me. Mark turns his head, opens his eyes; there she is. I ask him if he wants to stroke her, I ask as though she were my cat that only friends were allowed to touch and Mark nods, bends down and tickles the cat between her ears.

Soft, he says.

Hard, I say, can't you feel her bones? And I ask him to smell

his hand, to see if he finds that it now stinks. Mark holds his palm to his nose and shakes his head. Can't smell a thing, he says, and goes on tickling the cat on the head.

I let her tail slide through my fingers.

I've brought you fish today. I unfold the damp napkin on my lap. The fish fillet has completely disintegrated; I scrape it off the napkin with my fingernails, as best I can, and hold the piece of fish in front of the cat's mouth.

She doesn't want to eat.

I wouldn't want it either, says Mark.

Mark doesn't eat fish; he is afraid of the bones. Once, as a child, he almost choked on a bone, not at home but in the hospital. When they tried to remove the bone using a long pincer, without any anaesthetic, his throat went into spasm and he couldn't breathe. Something like that won't happen a second time, I say.

All the same, with short sentences, it isn't easy to get through to someone, to change their mind, persuade them of the unlikelihood of almost choking on a bone twice in a lifetime, even if it is true. I wipe my hands with the edges of the napkin, then burrow them deep into the cat's fur, rubbing her skin with the tips of my fingers. Then she arches her back, rises from the ground and, with a few steps, disappears into the shrubbery.

When Mark sits on the bench, he doesn't think of anything, he says. He focuses his gaze on the sycamore trees, tilts his head backwards and looks up at the sky through the airy branches.

As soon as a person has something to look at, he does not need to think about anything; just sitting on a bench like

this is enough, watching leaves moving gently in the wind, or jet trails spreading out and becoming increasingly transparent until they disappear. When caddisflies form thick swarms above flower beds they never, ever collide, despite their haphazard, almost angular movements. It's a crazy mating dance; yet I never see even one of them fall to earth.

If I miss anything, it is the lake. Only the winter fog evokes its nearness; it spreads out, lying heavily over the city, over villages, over the shores and fields, over the motorway. The lake grasps its surroundings with a damp cold hand, and in its deep grey, you forget the sparkle of the water in summer, the peaceful, shadowy bays, the water weeds stretching up to the surface in the hot months, growing like a deep, silent forest with translucent light-green leaves.

This silky, shimmering water surface on windless days, never stretching to the horizon but always cast up somewhere, rippling restlessly against a bank or somewhere in its centre. Sometimes big waves seem to build up within minutes so that you imagine yourself in the middle of a picture book, checking the position of the fishing rods, a soft splash-splash on the hull of the boat. Then the water suddenly breaks in over the top; you need to hold strong, pull in the lines and quickly, quickly, start up the engine, the flashing storm beacon before your eyes, dark clouds overhead, and sometimes you have the sunshine at your back and there are people on surfboards and air mattresses who will not feel a drop of rain until evening. As if there were random, invisible walls dividing them, weather borders in the middle of the lake.

Mark wears water on his legs, not the lake but the sea, waves and a sailboat, jagged landscapes, ferns, clinging water weed, the skeleton of a snake. As my gaze stills on these images as if I were marvelling at them, how light and shade lie on the cliffs, how powerfully the spray breaks on the coast, how the ship braces itself against the waves, what you think you can see - below decks long since filled with water, the sailors soaked through, hoarse from shouting, exhausted, fighting the storm. I suddenly remember that shellac is an ingredient of tattoo inks. The instrument maker told us that when someone had a problem applying varnish in case some lice had died in the production process, louse larvae really, not even hatched, accidentally pulled off the twigs along with the empty cocoons. Nobody could check all the cocoons. Then he asked, what do you think the ink in your tattoos is made of? The room went so quiet all of a sudden, probably because everyone thought that you can't just spit out a tattoo like a piece of sausage.

I'll say nothing, even though Mark does eat sausage, just not fish or brussels sprouts because of the maggots.

Ina needs an hour to patrol the full circuit if she hurries. From 06:00 to 07:00, from 12:00 to 13:00, from 18:00 to 19:00 and again at midnight. The logbook lies open on the table; the entries have been the same for weeks. She writes in her best handwriting.

The most important thing is nice handwriting, Boris said, that and a good eye.

A good eye, what for?

Columns of smoke, incidents.

She watches out for columns of smoke, for incidents, climbs up onto the first watch tower, scans in all directions: forest, forest, compound, forest.

She walks over the burnt strip of earth, past the charred structure, climbs onto the second watch tower, sees forest, compound, forest, forest. She lingers, letting her gaze sweep over the workshop building, over the accommodation block, the two sheds, over the rolls of coiled barbed wire.

No columns of smoke, no incidents, no rain, no wind.

She crunches her way through brown ferns to the thick rows of trees. Brambles tear at her trousers; dried twigs crack with every step. Between steps she listens carefully to the forest, stops, pricks up her ears, then continues as far the derelict tunnel entrance. She opens the heavy covering, switches on her torch: planks, stones, yellowish clay, a heap of rotten beams, the twisted remains of a short metal ladder. She can take twenty steps, at most; the ladder stands on disturbed ground. Once there must have been a hole there, leading into the depths. Even here: no incidents, no water ingress, nothing.

Then the two sheds, one of them empty, the other filled with barrels, canisters and old equipment. Everything in its place. Nothing abnormal, no change.

Only the gate worries her; the chain is wound loosely around the struts. There is no lock; there never was one. It doesn't look as though the chain has been moved but she has no proof. The cutting leading away from the compound is almost indiscernible; shrubbery and undergrowth are closing the narrow, cleared strip. She watches out for broken branches, for tracks, for paw or shoe prints. She hears Boris's voice as though he were standing beside her.

It must be here. Come on!

They had got out of the four-by-four at the end of the gravel road, continuing through the cutting on foot, into a hollow, side-stepping knee-deep slime. After a few minutes they were at the gate. Barbed wire fencing at head height extended outwards from it on either side, bedded into the undergrowth, lost in the forest. Boris took hold of the chain, then whooped for joy, perplexing her. Why was he so happy? Should there not be a lock, and shouldn't he have the key if someone had offered them this job?

She followed Boris into the compound. There she saw the two-storey house, the galvanised iron hangar with its old machines, high windows, and a pressed fine gravel floor. Like an excited child, Boris ran around the place; after a short while he grabbed Ina by the arm, pulling her back out into the fresh air. Ina shook off his grip; now she went ahead, back to the vehicle, keeping her eyes open along the way, stooping down and picking up thick branches to lay in the mud pit, so that they could drive across them and avoid becoming stuck in at the last few meters.

Go out, check everything, stand on the watchtower and look in all directions, watch out for smoke columns, listen for engine noise, lift the cover of the well, check if the tunnel is secure, the generator ready, all the canisters there.

That is the deal. Then Boris will bring her to the Winter Road, as soon the time comes. There is no point in going any further through the Siberian wastelands only to get stuck sooner or later in the morass; she needs to wait until the swamps freeze, at least. And so, she can be his helper for a few months. All the watchmen have assistants, but he has none yet.

Come on, what difference do two or three months make: A handshake, a contract. Illegible letters, a stamp, Boris's signature and, right at the bottom on the edge, tiny and strongly forwards-leaning, her own.

Did she have money for supplies and two tickets for the ferry? She would get everything back, of course, and good wages too; assistants' pay was good, excellent in fact, when you think all they had to do was be alert and keep notes. There would be no tourists, not like at Pyramiden, where daily visitors meant the place had to be kept in good order. There was no pleasure in that; it was not just the rounds that had to be done; a person had to answer questions and clean and repair on bad weather days, caulk, seal and tighten and even weld.

Pyramiden?

Pyramiden. Mining town in Spitzbergen. Luxury at first, then nothing but ruins, an orchestra and fresh lettuce in glass-houses at first, then dead cats everywhere. It was no picnic: driving away the curious and vandals, robbers and researchers with no papers, adventurers and schemers, keeping the aban-

done rooms in order, the guestrooms, the kitchens, bathrooms. He knew all about it from his cousin; he had all the details although he had never been there himself, never mind worked there. But his cousin had told it so well, he didn't need to make the journey. He'd even told him all about its smell and stink and the crooked doorhandle and the speed with which dust fell on the furniture. You could tell from dust what you were inhaling, pollen or sand or dried mouse shit. In Pyramiden the main issue was the sand which had to be removed from the furniture and the gymnasium, to maintain the lustre of old times, without which the unexpected money geyser would run dry again, like years ago, when they had shut down the mines.

This compound, where she is marooned, is not even a shadow of Pyramiden. Who would steal a canister? Who would interfere with the security? Who would try to get into a tunnel that becomes impassable after only a few metres? She is guarding a small workshop, a compact, two-storey building: a wood-panelled hall with a piano, two washrooms, a kitchen, a pantry and a couple of smaller rooms. Boris insists that everything must be entered in the book, after every round, with date and stamp and signature.

Ina looks in the direction where she assumes the Winter Road is, as though her gaze could beat its way through the shrubbery, snake through the forest, as if her gaze were a sound carried into the distance by the wind.

My computer time is over; we are sitting on the sofa in the visitors' corner where there are never any visitors. Mark is listening to me. One more last time, or a second-last time, we do not know for sure. I force myself to use the opportunity even though I really do not want to talk today, even though everything is sinking into a fog and I don't even know what I am really saying and what is only in my head, which tentacle of the story winds itself around my own throat and which is reaching out to the person opposite me. Mark takes off his jacket, lays it down beside him and stares at the ground. I'm crouched cross-legged in the corner, kneading the soles of my feet. I close my eyes. I begin with the old oil barrel; it is a good story with a beginning and an end and it betrays nothing about me. I tell how I am standing in this barrel, how the crane is drawing me upwards, how I loosen the screws, how I stash the wind gauge, the little flag, all the little wheels and rods in my bum-bag. How the barrel swings to and fro, how I become afraid, how the crane driver is below with the remote control in his hand. How I have to roar so that he eventually lets me down; the mast is finished, ready! How they always stick me into this barrel because I have the slenderest fingers and because I never lose a screw, because I am the person most suited to these delicate tasks. I want to plane! I want to lacquer!

The Controller creeps along the corridor, tinkling a spoon against her coffee cup; I wait until she has disappeared into the next corridor before telling about the sheet lightning over the lake, tell how often the lighthouse beacon flashes, ninety

signals per minute. Storm-warning. In the distance the waves are already building up to foam and the peninsula is no longer visible. The houses, which look like pastel-coloured matchboxes and provide the perfect background for a photo with a liner, paddle-steamer or sailing yacht are also gone. Now the lake is empty. And I am hanging from the crane, shaking with fear; the harbour basin is below me with its grey concrete ramps.

Ninety signals, ninety!

We stop just in time.

And it goes on, breezy at height, my stomach turning over, everything is swaying, one nut won't release. I have to remove one of my gloves, then the second one too; my numb fingers tug at the threads. It starts to rain; I have no hand with which to pull up my hood; the rain spills onto my hair-parting, my forehead; my neck gets wet, the screws especially, and my fingers. An eternity passes before I can put the wind-gauge into my bum-bag. There is a second person below now; they are smoking and chatting, two black hoods. Nobody is watching me; I have to shout down to them. Finished! Don't they hear me? Always smooth, no stress, the crane brings me to the neighbouring boat, one more wind gauge, then another. Finally, I climb out of the oil-barrel. Someone has to hold it steady so that it doesn't turn over. Nevertheless, I lose my balance and bang my chin on the ground.

They want to help you, Mark says.

It is the first time he has said that.

I will start something new, Mark says.

I stare at my feet.

You can sit in a bus and get out somewhere. Nobody knows you. You get to experience something, a great story, an adventure.

He points his finger at the black screen.

Do I want that? Do I not. Do I have to justify myself that I find it quite pleasant here? No, I do not. I press my lips together until they hurt, and Mark doesn't say any more; without a word, he places his jacket on my lap.

That wasn't the sound of an engine: not an SUV, or a motor-bike, nothing, just the creaking of wood, the hammering of blood in her ears, a gust of wind lifting a tarpaulin outside.

Ina rouses herself from her torpor, kneels on the ground again and burrows both hands into the heap of animal skins; she is looking for a longish piece. She pulls a piece out, a piece of fur with one, two, three claws; the fourth one is broken off, the fifth missing. It crunches between the scissors' blades as she tries to cut the paws off. She starts cutting a bit higher, just above the bones, pressing through leather and fur. Reddish hairs flutter onto her hands, sticking to her. The jacket she is sewing lies on the sweat-flecked mattress that she has pulled to the centre of the room. Pale strips of light slant through the dirty windows; it is hot in here too, the sun beating without mercy on the flat metal roof.

Ina rubs her eyes which are watering from the pungent particles of dust fluttering out of the pieces of fur as soon as she picks them up.

She lays the cut pieces onto the long side of the unfinished sleeve and begins sewing.

The preserved skin resists even though she repeatedly sharpens the point of the needle, drawing it along the sharpening stone so that it will puncture the hide more easily.

Do fishermen make their jackets as she does, spending weeks working on them during the summer? She has not seen any fishermen, at any point along the journey but there must be some. Perhaps they only come onto land in winter when the sea is too rough, hurling itself powerfully at them,

holding onto herring and cod for itself. They glide over the ice on skates, over tributaries and lakes, dropping their nets into small holes which they hastily enlarge when surprised by a good catch. She imagines them in their thick coats and trousers, defying snowstorms, the fish growing stiff as soon as they are pulled from the water, the men advising each other, watching out for bears, how the men suddenly disappear again when a bank of cloud hangs low like fog.

She has such difficulty with the little pieces of fur. She remembers her disappointment when she opened the sack shortly after Boris had taken himself off. There was nothing but remnants, little snippets, paws and tails, jaggedly cut strips and leftover edges of coats or helmets or boots. Boris was not there to hear her roars, scraps flying everywhere, her fists beating against the wall. There was nothing within reach for her to batter, nothing for her to kick so she hammered at the cement wall until the rough plaster tore her skin, leaving red imprints behind, until she believed she could hear Boris's voice, repeating the same thing over and over: leave it be, stop it! stop it, stop it!

It was not Boris's fault, of course not; she should have looked more carefully in the bag. It was her groundless trust in the seller, perhaps her stubbornness too, in choosing the skins against Boris's advice, instead of one of the thick, padded jackets lying in heaps on the ground.

She can still see the man in front of her, sitting on his folding chair, wearing camouflage gear, a peaked cap pulled low over his forehead. He was surrounded by tightly knotted sacks, a few pairs of boots and cartons of cigarettes. He point-

ed at his gold tooth with a smile as he offered her the jute sack and she thought this was a sign of friendliness.

Nevertheless, she must keep going; she would die without a jacket. It is still hot, but Boris has warned her. Here winter arrives without any transition, from one hour to the next, as if a darkening sky spread over the flat, unprotected land in the shortest time imaginable, pressing the swarms of mosquitoes to the ground, blowing snow into every cavity, freezing the ponds and rivers, the water in the well and that in the taps.

Within a few hours the marshy land becomes a snowscape and earth and sky can scarcely be distinguished from each other. The snow that falls out of the clouds and that blown around in the wind form a single vortex, which the earth vanquishes after a few hours, holding on to the masses of snow it tears out of the sky. Getting around in winter is easy; ice and snow smooth out the land, laying themselves over its arteries like a second skin. When it freezes a person can leave the forest and follow the scoured backs of the hills; the ice can carry a person over deep swamps, over wide water courses, over streams flowing with fast currents. Weirs, and eddies of the summer months are now tamed and hidden beneath thick ice. The first lorry will soon drive over this ice, a stretch offering the intrepid a link between lonely towns, towns where the streets end at the last house, towns without harbours, towns surrounded by nothing more than endless land.

What do you want with the Winter Road?

Boris' voice in her head.

Everything, I want everything - to build a rest station.

You will go mad there. Minus 50 degrees and whiteouts every

day, so that you have no idea where above and below are, and you are so cut off from the world that you no longer know your mother's name.

That was something she did not know, had never known.

What could Boris say to that, preferably nothing.

The lorry drivers leave their doors open on the Winter Road so that they can jump out at any time if the vehicle goes into an uncontrollable skid. The cigarette clamped between their lips remains unlit. Walking speed, foot pressing the accelerator so gently that it hurts, stomach a heavy ball, tongue stuck to their gums, sweat beginning to stink. Their nerves are like antennae, reacting to every movement of the tyres, every movement of the heavy engine, muscles hard with tension, back ramrod straight. Hands black with motor oil and road dirt, resting ever so gently on the steering wheel. Any hint of violence and the road will always win.

The sun burns down from the sky; the forest stands unmoved at the edge of the clearing, like a wall separating the compound and wilderness. There is not a breath of wind, not a sound to be heard apart from the blows of the axe, rhythmic and steady. Ina is working on the charred remains of the frame; the blackened undergrowth beneath it is square-shaped, as if the extent of the fire had been planned from the beginning. Light-grey ash rises to hang in the shimmering, hot air like a cloud. She stops for a moment to pull the damp cloth more tightly over her mouth and wipe the sweat off her face. She doesn't mind the sweat, or the heaviness in her arms making her work more and more arduous. She is enjoying her activity; every blow brings her closer to her goal. Almost nothing remains of the frame. She has hacked the usable planks into firewood and thrown the charred ones in a heap. As long as the axe is moving, as long as she bends down for the logs, as long as the sweat runs down her back, she forgets about Boris. She forgets to work out how long ago the *couple of days* has been already, the days he wanted to spend somewhere else, to fetch the missing papers. She forgets about asking herself how long the provisions will have to last. And the most important question: when will winter finally arrive.

The smell of fire hangs stubbornly in the air. The planks she is chopping are of various hardnesses, from different kinds of wood. Some fall to bits at the slightest touch while others seem almost indestructible. There are many similar frames, all of them the same; they are spread over the whole compound.

Some are covered with yellowish cucumbers; most of them are surrounded by raspberries and brown ferns. Boris could not explain what they were for either *for some plan or other, maybe for animal skins, for tunnels, for the cucumbers*. Sixteen overly thick upright posts? Two meters high, bound together with thinner beams, and so sturdy that you could walk on them. Boris just accepted them; she did not ask any more. There were frames even between watch towers and barbed wire.

The night when he came shouting to her bed. *Let's go! Get up, get up!* How she ran after him in the darkness, how the fire blazed up between the two watch towers, sparks flew; she was terrified that within minutes everything would go up in flames.

It was a hopeless exercise, fetching two buckets of water, running one hundred metres over and a hundred back. She fell to the ground, tumbling painfully. Nevertheless, Boris urged her on with curses, *Let's go! Get up! Get up!* And it was only later that she noticed how seldom he had run the stretch, but how often he had urged her to hurry up. The noise of the flames, their restless light, their colour darkening bit by bit. At some point, the fire had died down of its own accord. She leaned against the wall of the workshop, coughing, the empty water buckets beside her, face and arms smeared with ash, her knees bloody, Boris shaking his head softly.

Next morning Boris drafted the entry for the logbook and dictated it to her.

03:08 Frame No. 3 in flames, attempts to quench the fire abandoned without success. Alternating fire watch, monitoring of the hotspots until 06:30. 08:31 fire extinguished. Probable cause: lightning strike.

Ina had not heard any thunder or seen any lightning; her face twisted into a question.

There are lightning strikes without thunder too; anything can happen here. You have got to be on your guard here.

And the solitary glowing point in the nights, once a few metres away from the house, once between the tree stumps, once on the watch tower. She said nothing, washed her face and hands and fetched the book.

Four lines in her best handwriting. Boris watched over her shoulder, dictating to her, letter by letter.

Basically, it did not matter. Who would care about the destruction of such an old frame but Boris underlined: *attempts to quench the fire were unsuccessful.*

He placed his signature beneath the entry, an unnecessarily large, illegible, wavy line. And suddenly it did matter; suddenly if felt as if she were in his debt, as if Boris's signature had covered her failure to do her duty properly, as if this incident enabled him to show her the greatness of his heart, his watchman's heart and his leniency towards his assistant, who must make more of an effort to prevent such occurrences in the future.

Finished. A small heap of firewood, a big heap of useless, charred planks. Ina drops the axe and pulls the cloth away from her mouth. She sinks her hands into a bucket of water, rubbing off soot and grime as best she can. She looks at the reddened skin on her hands, broken fingernails, an old scratch on her right forearm. She is cross that she washed herself first rather than drinking. She waits until the black globs of soot in the bucket have sunken somewhat, then scoops up water with both hands and drinks. The water tastes of quenched

fire; it scratches her throat. She turns her gaze upwards to the sky. Its blue stings her eyes; she stretches out her legs and massages her arms. She will carry the wood inside later or even tomorrow, maybe even in a few days. She will stack it carefully, putting a good part of it beside the stove so that it is there ready for when the cold arrives overnight.

But it is still warm, even though the sun is already over the forest: spruce, pine, fir, dwarf shrubs and moss, an occasional yellow larch.

Coniferous forest.

The trees are unusually slender, with brittle, dark-green branches. There are knee-high young trees in wide cleared areas at the forest edge, scattered tree stumps, brownish ferns, a flash of withered dill and these wild gherkins everywhere. Their fruit will never ripen; the nights are too cold already.

She sits on the heavy bench that she dragged with difficulty from upstairs to the front of the house. She stretches out her feet and pulls them back until she has hollowed out a hole in the gravel under the bench. A heavy scratching, a nice sound. How long is it since she has heard any noise that she has not made herself? A clattering, scratching, laughing, whisper, squawk, screech or bark? Even a hubbub of voices?

She pricks up her ears and concentrates. Nothing. Absolute stillness. Not even the hum of insects. Not a single animal, even at the edge of the forest. Sometimes, from the watchtower, she believes she can see a moving shadow; she squints, cranes her neck but she can never say for sure if there is something there, not to mention what kind of animal it is: a fox, a wolf, perhaps a bear. There are bears here but why

do they veer off? Why do they never come any nearer to the compound even though they must sense the presence of food, even though the shed might be attractive or the house which smells of warm food once a day? Ina stands up, walks a few steps, kneels on the ground, pulling up a bit of grass and burrowing a few centimetres deep into the earth. She strews a few particles of soil on the surface of her hand. It looks normal and smells a little of grass, of river, of forest. She touches it carefully with her tongue, licks up a little and spreads it around in her mouth. The soil tastes of earth, limey, silky, soft. Ina does not feel the slightest burning, no shortness of breath. Why are there no animals here? Not a mouse, or a rat, not even a worm? She sees no reason, no cause, not even a possible explanation. She lets the soil fall again, rubs her palms together and spits several times.

Back on the bench. The hollows beneath her feet are so deep already that she would have to push the heap forwards to disturb the silence with her scratching noises. Instead, she draws the heaped edges of earth and gravel back again, stamping it firm.

Hold still.

The sun disappears behind the second watchtower; in a few minutes it will appear on the other side, shortly before it finally sets. That is the time for crazy dreams: for the roar of a torrent, which threatens to sweep her off a mountainside. Or for the birds: the skies are black with them; she hears the beating of their wings as an unimaginable roar; there are hundreds of thousands of them, millions. Or another time, she is standing in the salon beside the piano. She pushes it to one side; it is immensely heavy. She is sweating; eventually she gives up

and, with that, her eye falls on a big heap of black feathers and dried skin, legs waving in the air and a slightly open, yellow beak. A nightmarish metamorphosis of the claws she had cut from the skins the previous day, or the curled nails she had gathered up around the place to hammer straight for emergency use, whenever they were needed.

During the day, in the empty heavens: no birds, no dragonflies, no butterflies. It was only at the forest edge that clouds of mosquitoes flew up as soon as she approached the shrubbery and the spirals of barbed wire.

At least four words: I have lost control
Or seven: I must get out of my head.

Black feathers, little legs splayed, beak open and rigid. And what if it was not a dream? If this heap of dead birds really does exist, in one of the corners, behind a curtain, behind a chest, behind the broken piano? Isn't it possible that she had noticed it out of the corner of her eye, then forgotten it again because she was concentrating on something else, looking for something or busy with something important?

Ina jumps up but is immediately overcome by a sudden weakness; she staggers, supporting herself against the sun-warmed wall. Black spots float before her eyes and there is a momentary hammering in her temples. Perhaps it is just the heat that has returned, more extreme than ever, or perhaps it is from eating so little. Two days ago, she punched a new hole in her belt. Just to be on the safe side, she eats one tin less, even though there are really far too many of them stacked in boxes and on the rusty shelves. 247, 246, 245, *September, October, November, then the snow will arrive, then we will be gone from here again, in December, at the latest, for definite.* 180 tins per person, 360 for the two of them, 40 for emergencies. Better safe than sorry, says Boris, it's on the house, He laughs and pays with Ina's money. Two cartons of crispbread, paprika, two heads of lettuce, a bag of apples.

She could really eat for two people. Her tin, and Boris's, but goodness knows; it feels better like this, even when she gets dizzy, when her hip-bones poke sharply through the fabric of her trousers.

The sun sinks behind the forest. Ina goes into the house, tottering at first, then more steadily, then quickly; moving

does her good. She crosses the hall with big steps leading into the long, dusky connecting corridor. A loose tile rattles under her shoes. The tiles are mottled green, cracked and chipped. The steps of the metal stairs to the upper storey are scratched too. She takes the steps two at a time; she can hardly wait to check. She opens a door and enters the former kitchen. A yellow-painted fly paper hangs from the ceiling like a peeling sunburned skin. Three black ovens stand side-by-side beside the window. Small, turquoise tiles on every wall. Ina looks around: no hidden corners, no dead birds, just rags on the tiled floor and sticky dirt.

A further door leads to the windowless pantry; there cannot be anything there. She goes in there every day. But all the same, she pulls the cord for the ceiling light and stands in front of the tins of food, the packages with crispbread, teabags packed in bags and long-life biscuits. She bends down to an old pot and pushes it to one side but there is nothing under the shelves either, of course not. The door is always kept closed in case of rats or mice, dormice or cockroaches.

Then the bedrooms are left, and the salon. Dusky light. A jumble of footprints on the dusty surfaces, the marks of her hands feeling their way over the furniture. The day they arrived she and Boris had spent almost the whole day here because the morning sun was friendly, and Boris wanted to show her how to work the stove and because they speared the sausages they had brought on metal skewers and grilled them on the fire and because they found treasures in a chest which kept them occupied for hours. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn.

But soon she was overcome with the feeling of suffocating in this room, the feeling of being caught doing something

forbidden, and so she decided to set up camp in the workshop instead.

She believes she can smell cigars, but it is the integrity of the furnishings in this room, the dull smell of the old curtains and furniture, the austere remains of dark wood-panelling on the walls transforming it into a living entity. It is as if people had been here just yesterday, smoking, drinking, and celebrating. She imagines it as a salon for the manager of the complex, the engineer and maybe a few chosen foremen, especially for the manager's wife, who spent most of her time here sitting at the piano, evening after evening; a clumsy, halting Rachmaninov, a few folksongs which were especially appreciated in this environment and reached the rooms of the ordinary workers.

Evening light. Three unobstructed corners, the piano is in the fourth. Ina approaches it slowly and bends over the instrument. Nothing there, just a rolled-up mat, grey with dust; it has been lying there all the time, ever since they arrived.

She looks around once more, just to be sure, then closes the door behind her and goes back downstairs, opening and closing the connecting doors. She goes into the hall, gets the cooker going and makes tea for later. It will soon be dark; she quickly makes her bed too. She makes her bed every day, shaking the mattress and cover vigorously, laying the corners over each other, smoothing out all wrinkles as carefully as if making the bed were her way of preserving a memory and connecting the new with the old, the way other people use something like a postcard, a photo, or a book. She has nothing except the old pictures in her head, things like a scrambled together piece of equipment, an incongruous sofa covered

with red silk pushed into the middle of the room, a patterned rug, an animal skin on the ground, a side-table, a sharpening stone, a knife, some needles and yarn.

Sometimes she feels she is being observed; it is as if she were making her bed under a furtive gaze, like an actor demonstrating movements that have been taught by someone else. Raise the right arm, then the left one, shake the covers vigorously so that even the person in the last row can see you.

Who is staring at her? The man on the vegetable chest. Amber-yellow eyes, a folding knife open beside him. Perhaps he sold heads of cabbage. Perhaps he used the knife to cut off the stumps before dropping the heads into open shopping-bags. But maybe not.

Heavy shoes, heavy trousers, a padded jacket. A chain made of rough metal rings. A bushy fur collar with paws hanging from it. What kind of animal? Not a fox or a weasel. The skin is silky and thick. *In this market you need to let your eyes wander as though you had nothing in mind, look, like this, I'll show you how!* Boris's voice again, over and over. *This way!* And continuing: *Look in the vegetable chests, check the apples, talk to the old women, just don't stare at the men behind the cars!* There is no car here. There is someone sitting here beside a sharp, pointed knife and I want to know what kind of a skin that is. Until the amber-coloured gaze meets the corner of Ina's eye, until something moves there, until a hiss can be heard. The man pulls on the heavy chain, the chain rattles, the animal skin shivers, extending its claws. Ina meets the man's yellow gaze and the cat's green one. The cat is no longer on his shoulders but has jumped and landed beside the knife, what's this! Is he threatening me?! Ina turns her back on him, bending

over jars of pickled beetroot. Where is Boris; Boris was right, he had looked into the distance. Then she feels a hand on her arm, hears Boris's voice. Sorted! Let's go! I've got everything, and side by side, they trot past the folding tables and outspread cloths. Two long distance travellers who bought some provisions, what else.

Boris is lying on the top. When he turns over the whole driver's cab shakes. After a few minutes Ina hears Boris's regular breath; unlike him, she is awake. Mostly she sleeps during the journey, her head lurching forward or sideways for hours on end as they roll away over this endless asphalt ribbon, through monotonous landscape, meeting only lorries coming the opposite way. Now and again, they go through a small town or past a village, over a bridge or through an industrial area. There is nothing worth staying awake for. She is sleepless at night, however. The long rest periods make her nervous; she jumps at every sound, the engines of passing lorries, every bang of a door closing.

She stares at the faint light strip on the back wall of the bunk, orange red like a sunset. She scratches her cheek and her arm; her mosquito bites have swollen into big lumps. She pulls the woollen rug over her legs. Cool night air presses through the curtain into the cabin. Boris always leaves the driver's window open; he is not afraid in supervised car parks either, not nowadays; all that stuff about assaults and throats being slit is exaggerated. At best, the only thing being slit is tarpaulins; that is why he always drives containers, you don't have to worry about loading them and nothing can get into or out of them.

And the road was not an adventure anymore, not the way

anyone would think, and the way she, Ina probably thought too.

Ordinary road, ordinary asphalt. White centre line. Signposts. *As long as you stay on the road, you won't experience any adventure; the road is made for making money, bringing potatoes here and wheels there, that's how it is.*

That's how it is, Ina repeats.

M7, says Boris.

The road of the dead, thinks Ina, thinking of the countless videos she has seen: lorries turned over into roadside ditches, headlights racing towards each other in drifting snow, steering wheels laid on the memorial stones at side of the road. Bald tyres. Blackened hands, bizarrely repaired engines and a weather-beaten, bearded driver who taps the tyres of his juggernaut the way people pat a dog: what would he want with a modern vehicle out here; nobody can repair that kind of vehicle themselves, out here, on the long-distance road, in the middle of nowhere. The road name changes the way a chameleon changes its colour. It is the remains of an abandoned, audacious idea, of brotherly connection between the larger towns, botched together into a much-travelled ribbon, from metropolis to metropolis, from town to town and then somehow further, star-shaped branch connections, laneways, that become increasingly narrow until they simply end in gravelled or marshy tracks.

Dramatic music. Rapid steps. Subtitles you can scarcely read because the black print is almost indistinguishable from the darkness of the night and white blurs out in this drifting snow.

A splinter. Miniscule. So tiny that nobody else has seen it yet. I see it because I am sitting on the visitor sofa, because I have slid completely forward so I can lean my head comfortably on the back rest. My legs are stretched out, splayed in a V-shape. I am wearing wide trousers and rubber slippers. Under the wall cupboard, right back in the corner, something is shining. A fan of rainbow colours blazes onto the wall, scarcely larger than a thumbnail.

There is nobody else here, besides me. Everything is quiet. I look left, right, left again; then I heave myself up quickly, quickly kneel on the floor, feeling under the cupboard for the splinter. I touch it, then pick it up between index finger and thumb and let myself fall back on the sofa. My heart is racing. As if I had stolen something. As if I had done something forbidden.

I lay the splinter on the palm of my hand. It has stopped sparkling, I would have to hold my hand lower, over where the sunbeams are. At this time of day, they lie flat on the ground; a pool of yellow light spreads out, reaching to my knees. Without sunlight the splinter is silver-grey. It is shaped like a drop, as a child would draw one, round at the bottom and sharp at the top.

I take it between my fingers, then place the point on my palm. The splinter can be bored into my skin, just like that, sink into it, maybe it would not even bleed. Perhaps then I could carry something forbidden around under my skin forever, a splinter of glass that belongs only to me, a splinter on whose sharp angles the sunlight broke: redyellowgreenbluevi-

olet. Or: redorangeyellowgreenblueviolet. Or: redorangeyellowturquoisebluelilac.

I press a little harder. I don't like this pain.

I will hold the splinter in my hand. I will only use my fork to eat, I will skip dessert, to finish more quickly, so that I can get back to my room faster. I will tell Mark that I won't come today; I will look for a hiding place, for some corner that is never cleaned, a hollow or a loose piece of veneer.

Boris bends over the cool-box, takes out a salami and bites off a big chunk. Ina takes the last can of lemonade, holding it up as a question.

Take it, says Boris.

05:03 on the digital clock and: 89km/h.

On the left a dark sports car passes them; its rear-lights blur in the rain. The motorway is almost like a country road. There is no variation, no exit, no signpost; only now and again the forest lights up.

Wafts of mist.

Another truck in front of them.

Nothing coming the other way.

Boris lays the salami on his thigh, wipes the fat from his fingers onto his trousers and turns on the radio. Static mixed with music. Boris seems to like the music; he bobs his head up and down and tries to sing along. The salami drowns the smell of old bed linen; Ina leans her head back. The static from the radio gets louder, drowning out the music which she can just about tolerate as it mixes with the monotonous growl of the engine and the persistent squeak of the wind-screen wipers. She ought to talk to Boris, the least she could do, but Ina's silence does not seem to bother him. He drums his fingers on the steering wheel. The salami on his lap hops in time to the music. Ina waits for the sausage to fall but Boris picks it up, takes another big bite, then lifts the top of the cool box with his little finger and lets the rest fall back into it. He licks the tips of his fingers, then his lips, checks his teeth in the rear-view mirror, looks at Ina and asks: Everything ok?

Everything ok, says Ina.

Everything okay, she thinks, as always.

How short the departure had been, just a moment, as if someone had let a glass fall on the ground or struck a match. The yellow painted building at her back; she was not going to give it another glance, the park wall, the porter's cabin. The bus-stop in the drizzling rain. The bus driver she eyed up. The tarnished windowpanes. Her head sinking onto her chest. The petrol-station proprietor wants to chase her off, just as she is getting into a red car. The big bus-station. The crumpled banknotes she drops into the hollow of the ticket booth. The surprisingly comfortable passenger seats. Hours travelling through the night. Coffee in plastic mugs. Endless great expanses of asphalt covered with densely parked lorries.

That is exactly where I want to go.

It is all so easy, like in a film.

Siberian industrial towns, one after the other, wide streets, red and white striped factory chimneys, crumbling plaster, a huge square with a memorial, a roundabout with five exits, trolley buses, graffiti on shelters. Prefab buildings, A ruin behind barbed wire. And there is always something unexpected, something to make Ina turn her head: outsize hoardings on the wall of a derelict house advertise an opera, a group of women in luminously bright dresses walk in an absurd line, two-by-two, a wooden house with a goat in its garden, squashed between new glass and steel houses.

The most dangerous city in the world. As if to prove it, Boris brakes abruptly and points ahead at a military vehicle parked in a narrow gateway; and around the next corner, they see police.

971,233 inhabitants. Good transport links on the rail network. Industry. Cultural offerings - a heritage museum. Sporting activities: an indoor ice rink, a football stadium. Average valuation –

Ina notices that, for the first time on this journey, Boris has become uneasy, turning his head nervously, like a defenceless songbird: backwards, windscreen, rear-view mirror, side-window. Ina cannot discern any pattern; the sequence appears random: rear-window, windscreen, side-window, rear-window.

Has he lost his sense of direction? Is he looking for something? Does he want to make certain that they are not being followed? They have left the city centre behind; they pass strips of weeds, workshops, a waste incinerator. Left, right, left; they do not have a city map, just the GPS whose red arrow advises a crazy zig-zag course. Boris's eyes alternate between the red arrow and the deteriorating roadway. They can't go much faster than walking speed; the asphalt layer is crumbling and only some of the holes in the visibly narrowing tarmac surface have been filled with bitumen. On one side there is a brick wall topped with barbed wire, on the other a terrace of grey houses. There is no pavement. Then they reach a point where they can go no further. Boris bangs his hand off the GPS and swears loudly. The houses in front of them look as if their storeys were stuck together. Hardened grey plaster wells out of the joints; their dusty opaque windows reflect nothing but eat up the meagre daylight penetrating the narrow street. A door opens and someone sticks a head out before disappearing back into the hall.

Dead end.

Boris engages reverse and pushes carefully back out of the

street. Relief, when they can eventually turn around, relief when they turn onto the five-forked roundabout again.

Signs, electricity cables, telephone lines, satellite dishes. Shabby poisonous-green painted walls. Cladded, multi-storey buildings. A blindingly white church with a golden onion tower. A maze of highways, bridges, underpasses and exits. Forests of placards which mean nothing to Ina. Concrete and rust, an occasional glass palace, high walls with barbed wire, prominently placed surveillance cameras, then wasteland again, scattered with paper scraps and plastic bags. Eventually, after almost three hours Boris swears so loudly and so suddenly that Ina gives a start, but this curse is one of relief. They turn into a gateway: workshops, containers ranged end to end, a fuel pump. Boris lowers the window; there is a smell of fuel and cigarette smoke. A man in camouflage gear waves them on. Boris drums on the steering wheel. We will unload here, he says.

Ina nods.

The unloading is completed quickly; the pallets are light, compact, wrapped in centimetre thick layers of plastic. Boris chats with the man who casts an eye into the interior of the lorry. He makes a telephone call, followed immediately by a second one. Ina's questioning looks –

We have to wait, says Boris, settling into the driver's seat, slipping his shoes off and planting his feet on the steering wheel. Ina closes her eyes and pretends to sleep. At some stage she really does fall asleep; she dreams of bearded fishermen who cast out their rods over a green lake and catch snowballs. She dreams of tattoos, which seem to appear on her own arm, a snake, a glaring eye, the open maw of a wolf near her elbow; she tries to wipe it away, but her efforts press the tattoo even

deeper into her skin. She is awakened by a loud noise. The man in camouflage gear is back, holding some sheets of paper in his hand. A few words are thrown around and one of the sheets is signed and given back. Then the gates open with a loud screeching and they reverse out of the compound.

Scared?

Why is he asking that? They only unloaded stuff. The long-distance driver and his companion, nothing more.

And then Boris leaves Ina on her own. *Just for a short while. I'll park the lorry, I'll fetch the four by four, wait here, two hours, three at most.*

How long is a night? Beneath a bridge in a silent freight station, hungry and thirsty? With a grocery shop in sight, afraid that Boris would come back just then, that he would look around in vain and decide that she had changed her mind. Standing with a plastic bag full of bread and beer in one hand, she would see a car disappear off into the distance, leaving her standing there with her travel bag, not knowing where to go. And it would be clear to her that this unique opportunity of being taken thousands of kilometres, had vanished into the air at the very last moment. And so, she forces herself not to look at the time, to put up with the hunger and thirst, and the sour smell between the bridge abutments.

She spreads out an old newspaper on the grey sandy ground so that she can stretch out, lays her head on her bag. Between half-closed eyelids she observes two women on the bridge pillars. One begins to cry, then the other starts crying too, loudly, a rising and falling lamentation, that blends with the lorries thundering over the bridge to become an unbearable howling. Ina blocks her ears.

Two or three hours. What does that mean here – four or five, or maybe even six or seven; perhaps it is something in between and it could go quicker than you would think.

Wait here, it won't be long, no panic if I'm a bit late.

How long is *a bit*?

The length of waiting.

The length of the journey.

The journey, only one wait, basically.

Completely different from a film; with videos they simply cut out everything that is too long; it is just gone. A car drives along a road. Cut. It stops in front of a little house. Cut. Then you are standing in a living-room where you see a friendly Siberian family, who set the table with all the food that they can lay their hands on. There is so little space that the bowls have to be stacked on top of each other. The four children all have to sit squashed up together on one bench trying not to look into the camera because the camera man has explained to them that it is much better if they pretend that he isn't there. Now and again, they do look straight into the lens and grin. The husband puts his arm around his wife's waist and tries to give her a kiss, but she is embarrassed and turns away, stroking his shaven cheek instead.

Yes, of course, she worries about him every time; she feels under her blouse for an amulet which she holds up to the camera.

Every winter there are some who do not return, the man says with a sigh as he looks over at his children.

The camera focuses in on some details: a fly curtain made of dark wooden pearls, a painted landscape, some plastic toys on a shelf, a recorder in a child's hand. A voice speaks to explain that the family lives in a tiny little house, and it is not

unusual to find a hut like this in a city. That is not unusual here. The camera pans over the scene. A friend and colleague of the man pops his head in the door. The man kisses his children one by one; his wife helps him into his jacket. The cameraman follows the two men out into the street where the lorry is waiting, its motor running. They drive off. A warehouse comes into view. The men load up frozen goods. The voice explains that this is invaluable for people in the places at the other end of the Winter Road; in summer any deliveries would have to come by air. Often, they did not even get medicines, unless they had an aunt in the city able to book a flight and come and visit them with a full load of baggage. The voice stops speaking. The men drive on. The streetlights become noticeably fewer and fewer. The voice explains something else. Then, for the first time, there is music. And quite suddenly they are there, at the registration house at the beginning of the Winter Road.

Eight shots on target out of nine, range about 150 metres, back-light (evening sun), no wind.

Get the head in your sights and shoot, Boris said. And: I do not want to find any corpses when I get back. Take care and practise while you are here alone!

He does not accept that the bears will turn away. She is supposed to shoot every day, once in the morning and once in the evening, because, who knows, it could happen anytime. A shot into the air, initially, after that it is either you or the bear.

Ina closes the logbook, throws the punctured cans into an old barrel and leaves the others standing on the tree stumps.

She has done everything properly, pressed the weapon firmly to her shoulder, concentrated on the target in the sight, followed her breath and pulled the trigger immediately after exhaling, using the short moment when her lungs are empty, to prepare for the perfect shot.

Shooting is precision work. Breathing is everything. A person who breathes well, shoots well

As if Boris were standing next to her. Boris is always standing next to her, at every shot, looking over her shoulder when she makes entries in the logbook.

It is amazing how quickly a person can learn to shoot, how easy it is to hit a target, the black crosses on the cans, the red spots on the boards, a miracle once you have made a start.

The calibre much too big for her first shot. She has to hold the butt firmly pressed against her shoulder, in the hollow

between her collarbone and shoulder joint, her cheek laid against the barrel, she has to stiffen her outstretched arm.

The excitement that overcame her suddenly, the awareness that the gunpowder would explode only a few centimetres away from her eye would unleash an unbelievable strength in her. A bullet could kill even from a distance of over five thousand metres. No bears maybe but, who knows, maybe a bear all the same, maybe a person walking unaware through the forest at that moment.

Ina takes her finger off the trigger. Boris laughs.

Nobody strays around this area. Now shoot! Concentrate! Aim and shoot!

Expecting resistance, Ina crooks her index finger too firmly and too fast; she gets to feel the full force of the recoil. The telescopic sight hits her hard on the forehead. Her face contorts with pain. This, along with her roar, makes Boris laugh. He laughs until he cries. You knew that would happen! cries Ina. Of course! Says Boris, wiping the tears from his cheeks and the blood off Ina's face.

A few days later, the light hunting rifle, in a conciliatory move, it was only a bit of fun, but you have got to learn to shoot. And Boris makes a real effort, thinking up exercises, blind-folding Ina, making her take the weapon apart and re-assemble it. He pays attention to her posture, her breath. And then came the idea of the piece of fur. The piece of fur on her shoulder protected her and relaxed her arm. It is a trick she cannot explain, but it works, eight shots on target, that was really good. It doesn't matter that her piece of fur has holes in it and a wildly hacked edge. It just needs to be placed against her bare skin, furry side down, not fastened, just resting there,

as if she were carrying a young stoat on her shoulder. The very worst pieces of fur are good enough for shooting.

Ina lies down in the grass, the weapon beside her, the young stoat beside her. Memory fragments chase each other through her head as soon as she closes her eyes: isolated scraps, unconnected with each other, dream images, landscapes, bodies. It is impossible to see only darkness or a reddish, blurred image when the sun shines on her eyelids:

She sees a wrinkled face, skin like crepe paper. Eyes narrowed to slits, blinking in the sunlight, a toothless mouth.

Siberian forests, she sees them from above, a dark green rug, she hears pompous music and a voice explaining everything.

An image of the first gossamer-light layer of ice at the beginning of winter, like milk-skin on silent puddles, moors and waters, delicate wrinkles on their gently shining surfaces, a hint of shimmering light and even if you gently placed the tips of your fingers ever so gently on the skin, they would still be too rough, and it would break like glass.

She would not get near another market for months, Boris had said; soon there would be hardly any more ferry crossings. Then the period of being marooned would begin. Trying to get though the swampy forests would be worse than swimming the open sea.

Being marooned was not a problem. She had practised being marooned, she answered, from her room to the dining hall, to the day room, to the garden, to the dining room, in front of the television in the common room, into her own room. It was not a problem once you had really practised for

it. Being marooned was nothing to be frightened of; but she had not travelled that far just to prove how well she could be marooned.

She had to watch out for the bears. There were wolves too, but they would not do anything to her. A human being is not a sheep. Wolves are especially scared of people, particularly when a person stretches out his arms and shouts.

She didn't have to prove anything, he said; she just had to be patient. There was no point now talking about how lucky she was to have met him because he had a big heart and that was why he would set out again immediately to fetch the papers with signature and stamps and then everything would be in order.

Boris's intentions were good. She had to watch out for the bears. There were wolves too, but they would not harm her. A human being is not a sheep. Wolves are especially scared of people, particularly if a person stretches out his arms and shouts.

Cold pancake on a white plastic plate, a napkin, no fork, a half-litre PET bottle of multi-vitamin juice. No glass. I sit upright in bed, high enough for my head to be in the dead corner, in the shadow of the locker. I do not want to be seen from above, they must go around the empty bed first and stand at the end of mine if they want to speak to me and look me in the eye at the same time.

I have a dull feeling in my throat, perhaps the tablet got stuck there; it can happen. For a moment I thought I would suffer a laryngeal spasm like Mark, but nothing, just a har-rumphing in my throat.

The Controller speaks:

Take another drink.

I drink.

Focus on your breathing.

I breathe.

I wait impatiently but nothing happens. My breathing calms. I follow my breath as it is warmed in my nose and streams into my lungs and into my belly, though that is complete nonsense, of course. They tell me to breathe into my belly, not my lungs. They tell me that causes tensions, which build up in layers and raise the level of my shoulders, electrify my upper arms and stiffen my lumbar vertebrae. I breathe into my belly. I imagine how air circulates in an empty drum, once, twice, three times; only then do I let it go again.

The tablet takes effect: no sensation when I ball my hands into fists or when I press my jaws together until they crack,

when I emit swear words, so softly that nobody hears me.

Everything in me remains calm.

I think of the shard. I think of my closed fist.

I think about Mark waiting in vain for me on the park bench.

I think about the Controller's hand, prising my fingers open, one at a time and snatching my shard.

I think about the noise in the dining room, the smashed crockery, the soup: on the table, on the ground, on the chairs, all over the place. My legs are long like ladders. My body swells up, filling the room, from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling. It is an exploding cartridge, skin popping. How can skin swell like that? Skin does not tear, skin is firm, skin is hard and suddenly everything goes red, from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling. The red runs off the walls, it drops into my eyes, takes my sight away, sprays everywhere. Blood spurts out of my fists. Get out of my way! Get away everyone! Everyone, everyone! My fists grab everything they can reach; they pick up flower vases, soup plates. My red feet kick the tables. My skin starts burning, foam spurting out of every pore.

The lake comes, lays itself wet over my body, I can just feel how it flows around me, but the lake is really the sea, salty, grimy, dark and heavy; I can hardly set myself against the sea. It rolls over me. My legs are stilts; suddenly they sink into the mud. My head shrinks, becoming a smooth, small stone; my skin begins to flap around my bones. Now! A clear order! Now! Somebody picks up my skin and ties it onto my back in a tight knot.

Screeching, hasty steps, harsh orders, experienced holds, cold rags on my face, my painful shoulders, stepping on the shard, the shock of thinking that my slippers are under the table, that I had slipped out of them because I secretly wanted to eat barefoot, with toes that were free to move, the soles of my feet feeling fresh air. The shard is hidden in the sole of my foot; they only get it out a few hours later. They put a plaster on it, and that's it. But some wounds do not bleed; they're most dangerous ones, and I long for wound spray, for alcohol, for something. My voice is so hoarse, so faint. I want to pull off the plaster myself. The nurse puts iodine on it and offers me a fresh bandage. She leaves the door open all the time and I am very aware that she keeps her distance from my hands.

All at once her head is lying beside the rucksack. The two homeless people have vanished. It is just getting bright. The indistinct rustles of the night have given way to the rumble of traffic, a regular, heavy thumping on the joints of the cement panels; It is as though the heartbeats of the bridge have re-started.

Clouds of smoke, crazy horn-blasts.

You thought I was not coming.

No, no, it's okay.

Get in!

Three little air-freshener trees on the rear-view mirror, worn-out wall rugs on the seats.

Boris has a big heart. Boris keeps his word.

Shake on it! Assistant!

Boris holds her hand firmly for too long; Ina is not comfortable and wriggles her fingers out of his grasp

Okay.

The final stage, over country roads, into a little village, to his cousin's house. The cousin has metal chests for provisions and a roof-rack for the car. The village consists of a handful of wooden huts and a garage. Boris walks in front; Ina follows him. When they reach the garden gate, a watchdog attacks, running up to the fence barking; his front paws reach the top edge of the wire mesh, causing Ina to take a few steps backwards. Nobody there, says Boris leading Ina into the garage but it too is empty. The dog has calmed down. Now Ina can see the hens running around; clucking can be heard. Geese are cackling somewhere; somewhere there is an engine running.

They stand around for a while, uncertain what to do; then Boris starts moving again, heading for the last house on the street. A curtain moves in one of the windows, but there is nobody to be seen. Boris runs a few steps ahead to a shed, waves to Ina. *Come on!* The door is unlocked, they go in and, in between various gadgets, they do see a roof-rack and two big metal boxes.

Boris is transformed. From long-distance driver to adventurer. Most of the time now the radio is silent. Instead, Boris talks, talks about fishing, setting fires, about purifying dirty water, about hunting small wild animals without dogs, about poisonous mushrooms, about injuries. He asks Ina if she knows anything about engines, whether she learns that as part of boatbuilding, but he does not wait for her to answer. He talks about the advantages of basic engines that can be repaired with screwdrivers and pliers, no electronics, no fiddle-faddle, cables and screws, nothing further needed.

At night they close the windows. Boris lays his weapon beside him.

Just to be sure.

It is not far now. Another two or three hours.

They sleep sitting up, heads tilted backwards, mouths open. Another two or three hours, maybe four.

One more night on the road, on the roadside verge. They leave the windows open a crack, finding each other's smell unbearable.

Half a day.

A lake or a river, hard to say. The ramp they are standing on is a construction of concrete blocks and wood. A couple of woodcutters and a family with small children wait along with them. Flower-patterned fabric suitcases, the woman is wearing red shoes with high heels. The children play tag, the father gives them a warning; the mother reaches into her basket and gives each child a bit of cake. The youngest one is wearing mirrored sunglasses. Ina stands by the crooked rusty fencing without leaning on it, staring into the water. You can just about distinguish the direction the water is flowing; it lies like fluid lead in front of her, grey and heavy, fading into the misty horizon.

Beside her, Boris takes off his shirt. Chest hair, armpit hair, pungent smell of sweat. He ties the shirt around his head like a turban. All we need is a horse, Ina thinks; then he would look like a Mongolian horseman, and at that moment, as if he had thought the same thing, Boris gives a shout, startling the people waiting, and points across the water at a little black spot. The adventure begins.

One more day, Mark has already signed the release forms. He hasn't been shaking for ages; he is taking tablets for the maggots beneath his skin. My insecticide is working, he says. Nevertheless, he comes along, as a farewell, or so he thinks.

I sit in silence. I breathe, I don't want to say anything myself, thank you, and, with a nod of my head, I pass the chance on to the person sitting next to me, Mark, who says something: you must say something if this is going to end. But I don't want to say anything. Isn't it enough for me to sit quietly here as if I were frozen? I don't move even the corners of my mouth or raise an eyebrow. I have said hello properly, good morning, I have shaken hands, not too limp, not too firm, I am participating. Participation is obligatory; there are an unbelievable number of people who do not talk. Mark thinks I should just say a few words in a row, just like before or like when I call the cat. Then I really did say something. Everything else happens of its own accord.

I only talk to you, I say.

