

Harvest

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An extract

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1.

The bus comes to a standstill on the marketplace. The doors heave a sigh as they open. Alina makes no preparations to leave yet. She remains seated as the bustle around them increases, her son at her side. She reads the text on the paper in her hands once again, mumbling the words, Lucian yawns languidly and rests his head on her shoulder. Together they watch the people in the aisle, the hauling of pillows and bags, the excitement.

Outside the first passengers gather around the growing pile of suitcases which are being unloaded from the belly of the bus. Backs are stretched, hair is still static because of the covers that serve to protect the headrests on the bus. At the outset of the ride in Romania these were bright white, the longer they travelled, the smudgier the fabric.

On the way to an island of sun and work they drove westward from Botoşani, over hills which slowly became mountains, only to wear down again to a gently undulating landscape. Then came never-ending Hungary, with plains as far as the eye could see. Every now and then a bobbing hamlet appeared on the horizon, a farm, a labourer on the field. Just like the sea, she had said to her son. The sea that Lucian never saw, and she only once. After Hungary Slovenia followed, from east to west, to reach, finally, Italy. All the way across the long length of the promised land, to the foot and onto the ferry. Two days and two nights they voyaged to a new world, where there is work and money, a future for her and Lucian, an income for parents who stayed behind. In the bus a feeling of kinship germinated, solidarity in the face of a new beginning. They had exchanged numbers between themselves, shared packets of biscuits on their breaks at petrol stations. As the long ride progressed Lucian would sit more and more often with his chin wedged between the headrests, talking to Maricara, the woman on the row behind them. She has been making this trip for years, back and forth from the northeast of Romania to Sicily. Outside, by the pile of suitcases, she now beckons them, she waves impatiently.

Alina folds the paper on her lap and plucks the headphones from around her neck.

‘Come boy, go after Maricara.’

She is one of the last to scramble down the stairs, from the stuffy warmth inside the bus to the arid heat of the city. In her head she repeats the introduction sentences in Italian which she had been rereading, the pronunciation of which she was listening to on her headphones.

‘Buongiorno, come stai, nice to meet you. I am Alina and this is my son Lucian. I am looking forward to work for you. Thank you kindly for the offer. I am very happy we can stay with you.

Most bus passengers who have worked on this island for longer have disappeared in the crowd. Only Maricara comes over to say goodbye. Her hands on Alina’s shoulders, warmth in her eyes. Then she gets on one of the dusty pick-up vans that are parked in a row at the edge of the square.

Alina is looking for Dumitriu, her second cousin. During breaks on the way he and his wife had kept aloof. Now too the couple remains at a distance of the remaining group. Seated on one of their gigantic suitcases Ioana looks even more fragile than she normally does, she toys with the bracelet around one of her unbelievably small wrists.

Alina looks at Dumitriu questioningly. What now? He shrugs his shoulders, points with his chin. Bordering the marketplace are terraces where men sit drinking. Coffee, beer and wine, glances in their direction. Only when the bus is completely empty do the men get up from their chairs and move towards them as a singular group. They are all approaching fifty or older, all with the same tawny skin. You recognize hard workers from afar.

When, later, Alina reminisces about their arrival, the image that emerges is that of a wolf pack. Heads low, eyes menacing, prey as good as captured, the prize almost won.

She takes a few steps forward, Lucian trailing her.

'Signore Giuseppe Cascone?' she calls out.

She is curious to see which man will respond.

The smallest man looks up. The man to which her second cousin had recommended her, the man who was going to pay her, the man who would provide shelter for her son and for herself. His shirt dingy, the legs of his trousers shiny with greasy stains. He gives her a quick nod.

Her well-practiced sentences sound crude. Behind her she hears a few women snicker. It seems like Giuseppe Cascone hasn't understood a word as he looks her over, then studies her son. She repeats the sentences, subsequently unable to grasp his reply. He points to the pile of bags and suitcases behind them, then to the row of vans. The four of them follow him. Alina and Lucian, and behind them Dumitriu and Ioana, the wheels of their suitcases rattling over the cobblestones.

The man offers no help when Alina lifts her collections of bags in the boot, nor does Dumitriu. It isn't needed, she has come to work for this Sicilian and she seizes the occasion to demonstrate that her arms are much stronger than one would expect at first sight.

In the van she sits in the front with Lucian, on the two passenger seats next to the driver's seat. The vehicle smells overwhelmingly of dog, sweat, and the cigarette butts on the floor. She looks out the side window to the bus, to the dawdling stragglers. It went too fast. The transition from bus, full of expectations, to this. The four of them with this man in a van. She had imagined it all differently. That she would drive on with the people on the bus, that people would get off one by one, goodbye after goodbye. Prolong the togetherness for a moment. Next to her Lucian jiggles his legs.

The narrow streets are bumpy. The city stretches idly over a modest hill by the sea, with houses in warm colours. Blushing rooftops and glistening white churches. Slowly they leave the rural area behind, and a more extensive landscape takes its place. Hills in hues ranging from ochre to dark green. The road climbs through fields, past meadow walls of stacked stones, behind them a cloud of dust forms and further behind, shimmering in the distance, the sea. The sea.

She looks over to Lucian. He sits with his face pressed against the window, just like in the bus, the landscape absorbing all his attention. He is eleven years old, one leg firmly rooted in infancy, the other already one foot deep in the world of greater understanding. When she told him for the first time that they would be moving to a different country, with a different language, away from Bunic and Bunica – only temporarily, only temporarily, we will be definitely be back – his enthusiasm had been unbridled. He wanted to know everything about Sicily. What they ate on the island, what they wore, and if he could play football there. If Italian is difficult. If he could bring one of his mates. The real questions came later. Wouldn't they be lonely, what was Bunica to do now that Bunic was confined to a wheelchair? Who would collect the eggs in the chicken run and was it really sensible to start working and going to school in a different country? Yes boy, yes, she had replied, stroking his curls as she now does too. If it was sensible she didn't know, however it was certain that no other possibilities remained.

When she looks through the dirty window in the back wall of the cabin, she can see of Dumitriu only his sweaty neck, jouncing and bouncing. Ioana and he are seated on their suitcases in the boot.

Alina attempts repeatedly to make conversation with the man sitting next to her, but every studied sentence falls flat on the cold floor. The few words he does utter, she in turn cannot place. How much longer, to the farm? The road meanders uphill between the fields, left and right endless rows of plastic covered greenhouses with inside a green glimmer behind the opaque white.

They see the barren hills with olive trees, the multifarious cacti along the road, the quaint willows with smooth bark in the valleys. Only once in a while a few houses, a farm now and then, the same plastic and root-proof canvas everywhere, junk and lumber by the roadside. More and more scrubs. Cork trees, olive bushes and ash trees. The other vegetation passes by too quickly to be recognized.

Lucian points to the greenhouses they drive by. She will be working in greenhouses like these. She isn't prepared for the multitude of them, let alone the differences. Some are modern, the biggest ones, with hard plastic walls, higher than all the other ones, basilicas of technology. There are the hybrid ones made of metal with new, tightly strung plastic roofs like vaulted domes. And then there are the older, low greenhouses with pointed roofs and a wooden frame. There are nurseries covered with taut root-resistant membrane, and deserted greenhouses with rampant weeds and flapping plastic. Alina struggles to retain some of the waning hope. It doesn't matter which farm is his, she tells herself. He can provide for Dumitriu and Ioana, he can provide for her and her boy. When there is money, there is a future.

The slope becomes steeper, the flank more jagged. The man at the wheel mumbles something, which makes her suspect that they are finally approaching their destination. A crossroads comes into sight, marked by a small chapel. To the right a dirt road leads to a paltry cluster of whitewashed houses with colourful hatches, to the left a driveway skirted by stone pines runs up to a manor surrounded by a high stone wall, higher than the stone stacked walls they had seen thus far. A glimpse of a bygone era, with vaulted windows and newly painted walls. A terrace? It has to be a terrace, looking out over the hillside, a deftly forged gate, antique too. Alina and Lucian gape, past the man, at the manor. A different building emerges from behind the manor. A bakehouse? A barn? Their house? She can feel the boy squeeze her hand expectantly.

The man doesn't slow down when they reach the junction. Alina laughs off the naïve thought. Yet she can't refrain from looking at the manor as they drive past, the neck of her boy strained like hers. The man notices and points.

'La casa della famiglia Maniscalcoc' he says.

He shifts his attention to the road ahead again. Lucian keeps looking backwards for a long time. On the other side of the road, past the whitewashed houses, a massive pylon. The power line follows in serene arches the increasingly bumpy main road, which plunges into a dense forest with crooked cork trees and olive bushes.

After a few turns the man mumbles something again. The edge of the forest is in sight, the landscape bursts open to reveal a wide wasteland. On the side of the driver the first indications of impending habitation begin to show. Crumpling walls of stacked stones, expanding greenhouses covered in plastic. The roofs are pointed, the frames are made of wood that has turned dark, plastic that needs replacing. The car slows down. Alina extinguishes the slumbering hope, which hisses like a candle wick. The metal gate is surrounded by junk, corroded hubcaps, beams with nails in them, plastic bags filled with debris, everything overgrown by withered grass. This rubble is not recent, this has been here for years. The farm is situated on the higher part of the property. The apex of the roof sags, like the back of a bony horse.

2

A yard should be trim, a flower garden is essential, a house should be tidy and your nails should always be clean. Bunica's voice in her head. Her mother had lived by this aphorism her entire life, and despite Alina's tendency to ridicule it, the words permeate her now for the first time. The people here seemed impervious to tidiness. Two dogs come running towards the pick-up van, a big one with trimmed curls and a small, shapeless object with long ears. As the gets off the big one jumps up against her, until the man yells something at them and they spurt away from the cluttered yard. Giuseppe Cascone opens the valve and Dumitriu and Ioana climb out of the boot with their suitcases. Dumitriu's eyes meet hers for a second. His brown doe eyes and long eyelashes made him hard to resist when he was younger. Now that his face has been hardened by the years, the femininity of his eyes no longer suits his appearance. He thanks Giuseppe Cascone with an air of inscrutable obedience and carries the big suitcases that cannot be rolled here away, Ioana with the smaller bags in his trail. Alina climbs in the boot, pulls her own bags into the yard. Again, she has no clue as to what the man says, but she believes she understands what he is trying to say. He points in the direction where Ioana and Dimitriu have also appeared. Their house. Casa. Except he doesn't say casa, he says camera. Lucian and she follow in his tread to the lower part of the property. Past a rusty barn with a tractor, past piles of debris, undefinable faded plastic bags, old roof tiles, bricks and dust, dust, dust, to a stone shanty on the other side, which stands almost adjacent to the wall bordering the road. Old, robust, the open windows covered with discoloured plastic canvas. A double door of which the right one is ajar.

The man throws open the left door. In the centre of the shanty, perpendicular to the door, a wall has been erected from so-called quick-build-bricks. Alina doesn't enter. The man beckons her and

points. Camera. He turns on the light. No window other than the one that has been taped shut. The back wall has partially collapsed and wooden boards cover the holes, a concrete floor, poured after the construction of the shack, as she can tell from the strip of dirt between the wall and the concrete. A two-person mattress on the concrete floor, the brick wall functioning as headboard. In the far corner a small fridge, a table with a one-burner hob, electric. A chair and a stool. Alina breathes in and out, in and out. Bagno, bathroom.

'Do'vè il bagno?' she asks reluctantly. Is it behind the other door?

He walks outside, Lucian remains standing by the mattress.

There, the man points. A shack of corrugated iron sheets a little ahead, against the barn with the tractor. On the roof a basin for water. On the side a suspended sink with a metal slab, next to it a door. The odour is unmistakable. A room, a kitchen, a sink. Therefore a house. Breathe in, breathe out, go back to your child.

'Dov'è la casa... camera di Dumitriu e Ioana?'

If this is their house, where is the house of her second cousin and his wife? The man points to the right door of the shanty. A taste of gastric acid in the back of her mouth. Dumitriu, who from a young age has displayed a hands-on mentality. The money for the house in the valley next to theirs, extended every year, Ioana's clothes. This is where it originates, they work here, this is it, if they can do it, she can do it. She avoids Lucian's gaze, looks at the man. Then she points to the bags, far back, on the higher part of the yard. Unpacking first. The man nods and leaves without a word. Together they stand beside the mattress. Lucian with gaping eyes, she breathing, because that is all she can muster. In and out, in and out. Deep.

'Mum?'

'Yeah. Smaller than we expected, right!' she finally manages. She sits down, pulls him down next to her on the mattress. The two of them together. She looks around.

'We'll turn this into something nice. Dumitriu said - '

The name reverberates in her head; Dumitriu, fraud, liar, this doghouse, what madness, the bastard, she and her boy, how in god's name...

'Dumitriu said that work only starts next week. And your school even later. We have some time to turn things around. But let's rest for now, darling.'

She doesn't want to see his face, stoops over her handbag, digs for her phone. 18:45. There is a signal. Her thumb hovers over the screen for some time.

Arrived. Everything alright, let's call tomorrow. Love to Bunica she sends to Bunica.

3

Lying on her side, Alina looks on as the daylight sets into motion. Her hand on the dusty concrete floor, she tries to retain some of the coolness of the night. Next to her Lucian still breathes peacefully. When she thrusts her feet out from under the blanket to grope around for the cooling touch of the floor, a lightning bolt of brown and grey shoots away through the crack under the shack's door. A lizard. She feels disgusted.

Outside she can hear the dogs walking up and down, panting, howling every now and then. She looks at the small screen of her phone. Half past five, no reply from Bunica. The room next door is quiet. The sound of the television had ceased at some point during the night. She had tried to visualize how Dumitriu and Ioana had furnished their side of the shanty, had to bite down on her fist to stifle a curse.

She gets up from the mattress and opens the door. She manages to keep the dogs at bay with a gesture of her hand. They have been trained, after all. The door still open, she climbs back in with her boy under the blanket, her shoulders against the coarse wall, the big jumper she had used as a pillow rolled up under her back. Aside from the dogs she can see part of the washing shack, piles of junk, and the wasteland surrounding the farm. The waving of wilted patches of green with a shade of grey. A land of dogged drought. Slowly Lucian wakes up. She stretches out her arm, he curls up against her. Her hand brushes his cheek, her lips by his ear.

'Our first day,' she whispers.

The sepia tones of the rising sun turn a glaring white. The temperature rises with the sun and the heat chases them out of their new lair.

The mother wants coffee, the boy milk, and neither of those is on hand. They stand around tentatively. Last night they had been too tired to wash, they had only rinsed their hands and faces. It was a filthy feeling, crawling into bed with a body that reeks of sweat from travelling. It has to be done more thorough this morning.

'But how, mum?' There is repulsion in Lucian's voice.

She prods him, puts an arm around his shoulders.

It will be a test. Adapting to the shanty and the sleeping together, adapting to the language that in no way resembles the language she had heard through the headphones. Adapting to the new coins and the paper bills. God, there better be many paper bills.

With a bucket they find in the yard and fill at the sink they return to their shack. To wash, thoroughly, from top to bottom. No place for shame, the two of them stark-naked around the bucket. Lucian follows her rhythm, an unsought orchestrated dance. Rinse the washing cloth, face, neck, left ear, right ear. Rinse the washing cloth, left shoulder to left hand. Rinse and continue. Once they are dressed in clean clothes, they arrange the new money they brought on the mattress. The bills and the coins, neatly organized from low to high. One euro is almost five Romanian lei, that speeds up counting. The daughter of a grocer, she has always been quick with numbers, Lucian

just as good, soon maybe even better, he is quick- minded like his grandad. Up until the shop of her parents went bankrupt, the boy could be found there almost every day.

It was Europe that made an unexpected appearance. For decades, Romanians who had no faith in it resisted. For decades, Romanians who were in favour of it had waited. The village was opposed, but her father, who, together with the priest, the schoolteacher, the mayor, and the doctor, had helped the village repeatedly through hard times, was convinced it was the right move, now. With every kilo of potatoes, dried sausage, and can of tomatoes, you got his opinion free of charge. He had the wall between back room and shop demolished, the signboard replaced and a double entrance door installed, with an electric bell that rung upon entering and leaving. The megalomania of a vendor approaching retirement, most customers thought; useful investments, so he believed. Progress stood waiting on the porch, and you better made sure the door was wide enough.

Until it actually came. The skilled workforce washed away as the borders were opened, and in return the chains swept in. Supermarkets supplanted local groceries with prices that were, according to Bunic, insane. Debts came and went if you owned a grocery, but in the history of the shop they had never come without ever going again. Up to that point. Vegetables withered in their display, the shelves emptied and were no longer restocked. Her parents were burdened with debts to suppliers, and shame.

Within five years it was over and done with. That same year the textile factory where she worked as a purchaser decided to up sticks and relocate production to Malaysia. After cashing her last pay cheque and months of fruitless job applications she set aside her pride and gave up her apartment. Lucian's elation to move in with his grandparents tempered her sense of failing, but by God it pained her. Having to move back, as a grownup woman, into her old bedroom. Two mouths more to feed for her parents. The preserves from Bunic's shop had always been a life insurance, a point zero to fall back on in difficult times, but now these were running dry too. Bunica's flourishing vegetable garden a final act of resistance. Kitchen gardens all throughout the village were increasingly neglected. If lettuce costs so little in the new supermarket, why bother battling the snails?

A week after bankruptcy there was that Saturday morning in the yard. Bunic who didn't return from the chickens. Bunica waiting on fresh eggs for an omelette. Lucian who went out into the yard and found his grandad, lying by the garden gate. The screaming, the sprint to the phone, the waiting on the emergency services, the agonizingly long drive to the big city. The days by the bed in Botoşani hospital. The stroke devastated part of her father's lungs. To protect his body from further damage he was hooked up permanently to an oxygen tank. A pricy oxygen tank. The nights at Bunica's kitchen table, the pile of invoices. Bunica's notebook of household expenses, the perpetuum mobile of earning and spending, methodically listed with the blue-red pencil. The red end of the pencil wore off much quicker than the blue end.

They are stood on the higher part of the property in their Sunday best. Her hair brushed and put up, his neatly combed, the curls temporarily subdued. At their arrival yesterday evening the farmer's wife was nowhere to be seen, but now it is she who draws nearer.

'Alessandra Cascone,' she introduces herself. 'Buongiorno signora,' Alina and her boy greet in response. The woman in the doorway has broad hips and short, black hair with a hint of purple in it. She beckons them to come in.

Alina repeats to her the introduction sentences she tried out in vain on the husband the day before. This time it works. She hoots something back from the other end of the narrow hallway. Alina struggles to decipher the reply, although it seems to carry an undertone of appreciation. She

says something about Sicilian and Italian, and something about school and children. Alina's face expresses incomprehension, Alessandra laughs.

Through the hallway they are led into the kitchen. Cigarette smoke infused with the smell of food, a hint of polish as undercurrent. From the plastic panelling images of saints and framed pictures are suspended. Four children, as far as Alina can tell. Three sons, one daughter. Giuseppe Cascone sits at a Formica table in the kitchen drinking coffee and reading the paper, wearing the same dingy shirt as yesterday. Alessandra launches a tirade against him. Alina doesn't understand a word, suspects that the woman wants him to welcome them in. Eventually he looks up and greets them with a short nod.

Lucian gets a piece of bread, Alina coffee. Using their hands and feet they share their plans with the woman, they would like to go to the city, find a shop, a phone card with credit, and then a school for Lucian. Alina has already brought the registration papers with her, see, and she has looked up the address too.

If the Cascone family goes to church on Sundays, is the last thing Alina would like to know. And if so which church, and if she and her boy can come along and celebrate, starting next week. Her priest back home had told her that for want of an Orthodox service they could attend one that is Catholic. God is God, and despite the fact that some ways to serve Him are superior to others, what matters most is the intention, the devotion, the regularity, the steadfastness. At no point in her life had she been overly devout, but always and everywhere, even during her wildest, wildest years, Sunday mass had been a source of strength that kept her afloat. During the years in which she broke away from her parents, during which she lost or found herself – she hasn't reached a conclusion yet – during which she pulled the wrong boys and men into bed time and again, even back then Sunday was a beacon of peace, of a future, of belief that with courage and perseverance everything would turn out right.

Lucian's birth brought forth the reconciliation with her mother, but her father refused to bury the hatchet until many years later. Nevertheless, she consistently attended service in biserica Sfântul Nicolae, together with her parents. No matter the pain of life driving a wedge between child and parent, as long as they sit together in church on Sunday, nothing is ever irretrievably lost.

'Doing those groceries in town, by the way, isn't necessary,' Alessandra says. Bread and milk are being bought anyway, she can simply order it with her. The same goes for the other items Alina and her boy need, she will settle it against her wages

For years Alina's thoughts have centred around lists and bills, purchase prices and selling prices, debts and payments. The language hinders her in this balancing game that is taking place between her and the peasant woman, of keeping close and keeping distance, of never being indebted to those who pay your salary. She settles for a weekly order of bread, milk, and oil, she prefers to buy the rest herself, thank you, very kind, Mrs. Cascone, she says. ***You won't take a single penny from me, Alessandra, she thinks. I'm not staying a day longer than necessary.***

Once outside Giuseppe leads them to the car.

'*Grazie mille, signore Cascone,*' they thank him, Giuseppe, Alina thinks. She will signore and signora them whenever its needed, but Alessandra, Giuseppe, that hovel with its disgusting mattress, the arrogant assumption that she would put up with it, the idea that that that is acceptable and allowed and normal, she will not easily forget it, Alessandra, Giuseppe, and the four children pictured in the entrance hall.

They take the car this time, the pick-up van is left parked in the yard. Giuseppe Cascone is taking them to the city. Again, they drive past the manor by the crossroads with the small chapel, 'famiglia Maniscalco,' Lucian mumbles, and onwards, downhill, until they reach the marketplace where they got off the bus yesterday. The man points to the shop where she can buy phone cards and bus tickets, and to the bus stop. The church is in that direction, the market where she can ask

about the priest's whereabouts is over there and the school yonder. Then he pulls up and leaves them. They are left behind on the square, forsaken.

4

Lucian pokes his head around the door. She is lying on the sheet barefoot, her arms crossed under her head.

'Mum, I'm gonna have a look in the woods.'

'Hm-mm.' She doesn't seem to hear him.

His mother is experiencing a rare moment of tranquillity. For three days she has been running around inside and outside their new dwelling. With orange crates and old boards she has fabricated shelves, a branch suspended from a pulley serves as a rack for their Sunday attire, with plastic hangers she found in a bag outside a clothing shop. Wildflowers stuck in lemonade bottles. Whenever she is not occupied with the room, Dumitriu shows him and his mother around. The doors of the greenhouses are laborious to open, the silence rings hollow, inside a bubble of old rustling plastic. Scorching hot the barren greenhouses await the arrival of new plants. Two days and a lorry will deliver them. Then his mother's work will begin.

The dogs seek out the shadow in the hot yard. They hardly look up when he walks by. The big one with the trimmed coat is called Luigi, Lucian has learned, the little one Rocco. Every morning around seven mister Cascone feeds them out by the barn where the washing place is. Rocco is lying on his side panting, his flank moving up and down rapidly, his legs outstretched. Luigi carries himself with more dignity, flat on his belly, his head on his paws. Lucian briefly entertains the possibility to bring the dogs along to the cool of the forest, but he has no idea how to give a dog commands in Sicilian. He walks out the gate.

The main road that runs past the yard was once paved, but over time it has become obscured by dust and sand, to the extent that it now resembles a dirt road. The roadside vegetation conceals singing crickets and cicadas. Lucian follows the road downhill, in the direction of the crossroads. For the first time he takes notice of the backside of the shanty where his mother is resting. On Dumitriu and Ioana's side a disk antenna perches on the roof.

Once past mister Cascone's greenhouses the road plunges into the forest. He looks for a path but to no avail. He walks up and down a few times but ultimately decides to follow one of the animal tracks, unknown roads to unknown places. They lead him through the dense forest to an open field under the power line. Lucian takes in the sudden view. The forest that stretches over the hill is cut in half by the powerline and the firebreak underneath. The slope is steeper than he initially thought, the powerline runs on past the whitewashed houses by the crossroads, and much further down, all the way across the wide plains with the nurseries to the sea, the roofs of the greenhouses a tapestry of plastic, which, if he squints a little, seamlessly flows over into the glistening sea.

Step by step, bush by bush, he makes the forest his own. In the most densely overgrown part he discovers a creek. He moves slowly. Under cover of the foliage the temperature is bearable. Far from cool, but pleasant and fragrant. Suddenly he freezes. An overwhelming smell hits him in the nose. Ardent and animal, fur and flesh. Like the smell of Bunic and Bunica's garage after the cat has kitted, but sharper, heavier. It isn't just a whiff, it is a smell that is anchored down to this spot. A fox den? His heart begins to skip and he squats down. He steals forward cautiously, with soft steps on the sandy forest floor. It takes a long time before he encounters anything that could

potentially be a den. Eventually, amid the roots of a crooked oak, he finds three burrows, the right distance between them to belong together, not too far or too close apart. The smell is overpowering, the traces easily discernible. He takes up position downwind and lies down. Except for the song of the crickets and cicadas, which surges and ebbs in waves, it is quiet. He breathes slowly, patiently, focused on the burrows.

Aside from two scraggy hares and a vole he sees nothing that afternoon. Foxes are dusk and night animals, he might be able to convince his mother to let him come back here after supper. He turns on his back and looks up at the sky through the leaves. His sweaty neck cakes with sand. Finally he stands up, inspects the trees around the fox den, their distance to the power line. It isn't very far from the road, he should be able to locate this place at twilight.

They eat outside, next to their shanty on a bench they made together from two hefty bricks and a wide shelf that Lucian had found behind the big greenhouse. The meal is simple, bread, cheese, and olives.

'Would you like me to come with?' his mother asks.

He contemplates it. No, the foxes are his. Together they trace the lizards racing over the walls.

It turns out to be a vixen with four kits. The four are almost grown-ups, the summer drawing to a close. Marginally smaller than the mother, and more playful, mostly the latter. Downwind, his chin on the ground, he is observing the animals when he notices a slight movement in the corner of his eye. Very lightly, but remarkable enough not to be part of the forest. A face between the shrubs that dives down. A boy, approximately his age. Then cracking and rustling. The foxes spurt into the burrow, Lucian jumps up. Someone is spying on him. In a reflex he pursues the boy, down the hill. Without further thought he dashes through the bushes, twigs whip his cheeks, scratches on his shins. From the edge of the forest he can see the boy run down the road, lightning fast and agile, over a low wall, across a ditch, behind a bush and out of sight. Spindly legs under his shorts. A little bit shorter than he, but only narrowly so. Lucian waits until he recovers his breath before he climbs back up the hill and returns to his mother. A boy, there is a boy in the woods.

The next day he is more attentive, he will not be caught out once again. Lucian sneaks forward, examines a stretch of forest hitherto unexamined, with impenetrable bushes and lean trees. No trees to climb and few animal tracks, normally not too exciting, but everything has changed now: there might be more children in the forest.

He doesn't find the boy that day, but he does find a camp. Well-concealed and constructed skilfully. The result of several days' work. Starting from a tree that has fallen over, the wide root system vertically, the pit deepened and the walls neatly smoothed, a ditch as a gateway. Heavy boughs expertly piled, smaller branches in between, meticulous wickerwork finished off with leaves and brambles that supposedly serve to discourage visitors. Inside the camp it is dark. It takes a while before Lucian's eyes have adjusted to the filtered light. Two flat sitting stones in the middle. Two boys? The walls have been hollowed out in certain places. Alcoves in the sand, containing treasures. Lucian picks them up carefully, one by one. Shells in different shapes, a little ceramic pot with dragonfly wings, long pods from a carob tree, a lighter, a small statue of an unrecognizable saint and a pocketknife. A pocketknife! He struggles to fold it open. A saw blade and two knives, a pair of scissors and a corkscrew. On the side another small blade. It grinds with sand but is razor sharp. If the boy leaves his treasures here like this, the forest really must be his. Vigilantly he listens, wary of crackling and rustling that is not caused by the wind. He does not want to be caught off-guard in a stranger's camp.

He spends the rest of the day looking for alternate routes in the periphery of the camp. He finds the track that the boys – he is now convinced that there are two of them – use to get to and

from the camp. He treks around the camp in wide circles, practicing his patience. The ideal hiding place is finally discovered in a fir tree, about ten metres away from the camp. The tree is not optimal for climbing. The first branches are just too high up from the ground, and they are not very sturdy either, hence a challenge to climb. The dense mass of needles however provides great cover. After verifying that no-one is coming up or down the hill, he perfects his hideout. He breaks off some twigs to allow him to sit and stand more comfortably. It would be unfortunate if fresh twigs on the ground were to expose him, so he carefully weaves the twigs around the stem of the tree. The resin stains on his shirt and trousers present a more complicated challenge, as he will need to find a way to conceal them from his mother.

These days his mother arranges and organizes, builds and rebuilds, but without singing, without humming. A silence alien to him – the music is always where she is. Well, the silence and absence will give him the opportunity to scrub his clothes in the sink of their so-called bagno, or *baie* in his Romanian. If the rest of the language resembles theirs just as much, there is no need for him to worry about school.
