

# Gloria

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## 5.

The cloud cover dissipated or dropped on that long, strange walk during what daddy and mummy called her first proper holiday, when the buzzards chased them from their picnic spot, in August 2017. It was a dream he'd been preparing for years, by daydreaming, sleeping, talking about his childhood, growing bored at work, hovering aimlessly over the map of Belgium, zooming in and out, edging back and forth, detecting patches of green from an inhuman height, imagining himself the absolute centre of a cosmic forest.

They'd rented a family-friendly cottage in Ælwen in Luxembourg, not too far for the one-year-old girl, just south of the border, close to the three-country-point in Ouren and near two huge shopping complexes, where the cigarettes and petrol were cheap and where they bought, among other things, home-made smoked salmon, a compact and feather-light though sadly too small hiking umbrella for thirty euro, and several bottles of the local Riesling.

In the late afternoon he walked alone up the sloping path from their cottage to a patch of woodland with spruce trees planted in an unnaturally strict, hypnotized rhythm. On the far side of the hill lay Belgium's East Cantons, autonomous, idyllic and forgotten by history. He stood there for two minutes looking into the darkness between the rows of trees.

That evening on the terrace it was so quiet and peaceful that he could hear, above a constant trickle of water, the scheduled flights passing every twenty minutes, evidently somewhere straight above them. Irritated, he stared till his neck cramped, but saw only sky. At night a more thorough silence deepened the waking moments of his fitful sleep and in the morning he was woken early by a pale glow, since no rush hour or bus had announced the breaking of dawn.

It rained quite a lot that last normal summer, and on those rainy days they toured the little country where great European languages flowed together to become Luxembourgish and the baker was called Schmaach ëm de Séi a Méi, and then stopped in Diekirch, Clerveaux and elsewhere at castles with an entrance fee, which mum was reluctant to pay. Just go in on your own, she said, but her lack of interest made him feel lonely and moreover wounded in his old yearning for a chivalrous past. On top of the soft drizzle, the prospect of sheepishly queuing for a ticket and the silent, shameful worry and doubt that accompanied his secretly cherished desire, permeated by a sentimental longing to be ten years old again, made it impossible for him to overcome one more barrier on the way to towers and battlements. So he didn't go. The ruin atop the rocks of Esch-sur-Sûre cost nothing, but after the steep solitary climb up unsteady slate steps he got vertigo and was too scared to go on along the rocky ridge to the tower. On the descent, clinging to the low rail, resisting a profound urge to fling his smartphone into the depths and dive after it, he took a photo of his wife and child, who could not make the climb and were walking around in the charming streets like innocent midgets, visible yet out of reach even by phone, since he had no coverage, and it was as if that distance said something essential about their union. With the pathetic pride of a self-

declared antihero he said, back with his family at last, that he'd failed, that he'd wrapped his soft prissy fingers around rocks and scrambled down backwards. They drifted, still aimless, past souvenirs, across wasp-terrorized café terraces with melting remains of mocha ice cream and other people, tourists who seemed to mirror mum and dad's foolish blind faith in their place on the sociological spectrum. As ever it was hard to look beyond those faces and focus on the sights, to avoid seeing themselves looking at this object that was a village, where people nevertheless lived, as they could see, and they discussed the marvel of that. Fifteen minutes after arriving in quiet, dreamy Esch-sur-Sûre, hemmed in by forests and rocky overhangs, they were on their way to Ēlwen again, via a shopping complex called Knauf, where Gloria sat in a shopping trolley for the first time and laughed deliriously at a man-sized M&M. Perhaps, just as an exercise, we should pay some attention to all the products we never buy, mum said. Bursting out laughing like a young couple in love, but at the same time suppressing the dismal knowledge that if such products existed then there were target groups to go with them, they stood looking at the cans and glass pots of meat products and discovered that Zwan offered not just sausages of the TV, frankfurter, cocktail, party, hotdog and Viennese variety but liver paste and liver spread and canned luncheon meat. Let's try the same thing next time with the ancient grains and the superfoods, she said, and he answered beside the point that he loved her and then a silence fell and they bought the pearly bright Luxembourg Riesling he'd read about.

Their old joke had dried up. Over time, disgust had crept into the joke and eroded it. In his mind the supermarkets and shoppers were multiplying incessantly. Everywhere, he now saw before him, things were produced and delivered and displayed and sold and used in an identical way; everything seemed intended to pass through a human body. It was happening below and above him, as if the shop was being stacked high and they were somewhere inside an endless tube, walking through the same spaces again and again. Everywhere were doppelgangers of that same little family of three on holiday. He measured the virtual abundance – sickening because immeasurably vast – against the space outside. The calculation was beyond him. The slight difference between this and shopping at home made him think of all the houses in the world.

Less than fifty metres further on, new, weak sunlight warmed mossy wet boulders perhaps never seen before, on the floor of a small but impenetrable wood. His eyes were caught by that spot as it disappeared. He looked back from the passenger seat and saw his daughter dreaming. Her finger floated towards the window.

*Dat*, she said. He looked outside again and saw fields, cattle and windmills.

That evening dad, the holiday planner, looked at the map of the East Cantons, a fruity glass of Riesling in hand. They were on holiday, here he could drink as much as he liked, there was no better place and no lighter consciousness he could arrive at.

East of Sankt-Vith was a patchwork of wood pasture, surrounded by vaguely familiar pastoral names like Meyerode, Schönberg, Waldecho and Herresbach. It struck him that in this cottage they were reaffirming holiday habits, closing the chasm between them and Flemish family life that they'd so carefully carved out in their twenties, in big cities, in museums of modern art, backbiting and griping during family car journeys after visiting their parents. Had they perhaps, with the time-constraints, tiredness and uncertainty typical of young parents, grown too susceptible to the familiar, the customary and whatever was presented to them? Had they perhaps, will-less victims of the advice of the Child and Family Agency, ended up unresisting on the rack of the childrearing machine constructed around the danger embodied by a new human being? They wanted to know how it ought to be done, but no one had told them about the sense of doubling, the automatism, the real responsibility. Should they have stayed home with their diesel? He imagined that and said: I know what we can do tomorrow. It's going to be good walking weather. We can have a picnic. And he kept quiet about his dark plan.

Sankt-Vith made dad happy in a suspect way, he thought. There was nothing to see and it was almost as if the twenty-first century hadn't yet arrived. He thought of his mother, who once stayed there in a difficult period in the 1970s, a time of serious intergenerational conflict, when her father, a worker divided because Catholic and royalist, passed on his obtuse inferiority complex, nourished by shattered childhood dreams,

to his children by means of tyrannical strictures and unprovoked outbursts of rage, and she suffered from anorexia, a girl of seventeen who only seemed to get younger. Who by that time looked ten.

The supermarket was a Nopri with posters about events at the kiosk on the square and exhibitions by amateur artists. The broken, speckled paving stones smelt of a corrosive sort of detergent. There they bought bread rolls, apple juice, chocolate with praline filling and Emmentaler cheese. The three women at the counter, three generations of local supermarket history, tried out their best Dutch and complimented the young parents on their beautiful child.

He answered in atrocious German: She certainly is, yes, but then I'm the father *natürlich, nicht?*

Outside he looked at an early drinker on a café terrace beside the busy narrow road, only millimetres away from thundering trucks and turbocharged tractors, and imagined being an artist here.

In the tourist information centre he found a free booklet of walks in the East Cantons and leafed through to Schönberg, trusting the beauty in the name and the title of the walk: Butterfly Valley.

Singing birds, swarming insects, not another soul to be seen. Streams, meadows and mixed woodland create biodiversity in the lost valley, he read in his guide, tracing remnants of the translation from the German and of Romanticism: we are on the trail of happiness. They walked over a little bridge and turned left onto a sloping track of flaky shards of slate that would lead them through the valley of the babbling Kleinweberbach up the mountain to absolute forgetting. Summer, Belgian style, on the boundary between far too hot and slightly chilly; the shade of the broadleaved trees made all the difference in the world.

Before the path began to climb steeply they walked past a small, deathly quiet campsite with caravans turning green, a motionless, immeasurably deep black pool and a distant history of swimsuits, eternally undischarged summer arousal and train-crash domestic quarrels, in the heart of the second half of the twentieth century, bordered by dark time. Next came forests that could have been endless had he not known better, a hint of small mammals in the undergrowth, the promise of solitude and having nothing more to say. High above them the sky murmured, aircraft free. They heard only a rising hum, a monotonous moan and, very occasionally, a distant screeching.

Gloria soon became restless in the buggy. She couldn't quite walk yet but didn't like sitting either. Mum gave her – although the health visitors insisted you must never resort to using food as consolation – a dry slice of bread. He stifled the voice that said all was now lost. After half a kilometre the tall grasses grew in the middle of the path as well, like a third verge. The two tracks remaining were too narrow for the buggy, so they switched between pushing with one wheel on the hard surface, the other on the central verge, and with the wheels on either side of the grass, both of which were impossible.

When the guidebook took them into the valley along a woodland path with rocks, needles, pine cones and overground roots, they set Gloria free. Daddy carried the pram, mummy the child. At the stream they held her hands and she walked across on two beams. He took a good photo, mother and child smiling, his little girl in thick stockings, no shoes, and a fluffy cardigan of beige wool. Short soft hair, snowy white, covered the milk scabs on her round head. Her short fat legs, not yet shaped by walking. A lamb with the smile of her dad, which had always appeared to him degenerate and uncontrolled when he saw it in photos but now seemed only childish, cocky and inalienably theirs. He wondered whether they couldn't just sit here for hours and at the same time felt drawn by the furthest depths of their walk.

On the other side they again came to a wide path, now with big stones and no shade from the sun. He made Gloria get back into her buggy and pushed her uphill, sweating heavily. They saw hundreds of species of grass, and broom, bog gentian and violets, and one lone butterfly, then he was surrounded by a cloud of horseflies, mosquitos, blowflies and dragonflies. It's that water, he swore. Try taking off your hat; I reckon they're attracted by your sweat, his girlfriend answered, and amazingly the insects did indeed disappear when he removed it.

A walk consists of movements and gentle transitions, your eyes gliding along with the changing landscape while the sun pursues its course. On that day and at that place it was moving against their walking direction. In his unreliable guide an imperious narrator saw a beaver's lodge and a graceful black swan flying past. Eventually he put the booklet away; why did he always have to declare himself the

navigator? They carried the pram across a hollow, then back over the stream, which they followed against the current. Dark pinewoods for forestry announced themselves at the top of the slope, where the steady climb flattened onto a plateau. He took stock of the altitude, his altitude, which was relatively low; this was not the rarefied pre-fifteenth-century Andes, nor the weightless cosmos above. Gloria, sshh, listen, the trees are creaking. The mosquitos have gone to sleep. Squirrel! Squirrel! Past the slender trunks, the low royal ferns and the stripped bilberry bushes you could now look far into the depths of the dripping, thinned-out green. Was she similarly impressed by that secret down there? You couldn't be sure whether it was because of the progress of time or the slow passing of clouds or the high veils of vapour or because of the movements of your own body or mood or the unsettled foliage or the presence of your child or because of the inherent unreliability of something as abstract, ubiquitous and fleeting as light itself, but unheeded that light had changed its nature, it was barely recognizable, unreal, and even the eternal moan of a chainsaw belonged now, just as much as the still subliminal screeching of two invisible buzzards, to the whole of the parts that they, walking and waving away insects and breathing and occasionally talking, set moving along with them – and of which neither they, nor their as yet only *dat-* and *dada-* and *Nena-*saying Gloria, nor their already twilight time of holiday homes, cultural sector, crude oil, smoked Scottish salmon, European power and the racism of colleagues lay at the centre.

They seemed not to have spoken for centuries, yet were out of breath nonetheless on reaching the turning point of their walk. Roots stuck out of the ground like the skeletons of immense extinct mammals. They saw they were at the edge of the forest, where the hay meadows began.

At first it seemed like *déjà-vu*, then a spatial kink in his memory, a ghostly familiar experience that he was now going through in reverse. The tarmac road bent to the right around the forest edge, everything was suddenly effortless, they could let gravity operate upon their bodies. There, big birds! In the bend, beyond a café, among full willows and native oaks, was a fish trap covered with a film of frog spawn and fluff. Behind it he heard the past splashing. The water collected in the trap squirted down out of a pipe, a blocked happiness that had found a way out, and accumulated in a pool to become a stream once again and flow through another valley into the river at Schönberg. If he'd actually planned this, then he'd hidden it from himself. Now his suspicion rose out of the ground along with the rain of several days. Cows grazed, butterflies flapped foolishly towards billions of indistinct goals. I was here once, he said. There's a photo of it. I'm standing with my brothers and sisters in underpants playing in that jet of ice-cold water, with our Liesje, our Tinneke and our Brammeke, their identical blond pudding-bowl hair, cut by mother just above their eyes, aglare in a white-hot sun, just before we turn and walk through the spouting water, with our thin child-ribs and soft tummies, straight across the contrasts, the flowering green and the all-consuming shadows of trees and bushes, so dark because the summer was so bright. He wished his girlfriend had been with him then. He saw her snow-white pigtails and round buttocks and heard the ebullient laugh that she sometimes still laughed as an adult. There was love in his desire to break through the loneliness of his memory, he thought, and include her in that life. He wanted the reverse, too.

That rare moment of happiness – because he'd never been a particularly happy child, and moreover his happiness seemed by its nature to presume a momentary, directionless and always already past repose – lost its hard edges and expanded into the space where they were now. All those slow years of change, of trees that grow, or rotting fruit and new plants, were spanned by the realization that this place still existed. Further along, four paths came together; he could easily have gone up the slope to their cottage of that time. At the crossing was a picnic place with a bench and boulders.

There Gloria was set at liberty again. He took a photo of her prising pebbles loose with one finger. They nodded a good-humoured hello to an elderly couple of walkers going in the opposite direction, and presented their own reveries to themselves from an agreeable, human distance. Gloria wouldn't remember any of this, although children certainly could recall things from before they were three or four: where the shop is, for instance, and that they've already been to this gentleman's house and that he's called such and such, or that the doctor once listened to their back. When did that second life start, then, which would cause them to forget the whole of their first life and set real memories in motion and make them flow into the incessant stream of adult forgetfulness?

While they drank apple juice and ate rolls with Swiss cheese, the screeching of the raptors intruded relentlessly. They were unmistakably buzzards, he said; he knew their catlike call from the birdsong book they'd bought for Gloria in the visitors' centre at a nature reserve in Kempen, the day honey was extracted there; don't worry, come and look, people had said and however inept, they'd joined in. He warily scoured the sky and sure enough saw two buzzards in almost identical circles, an ominous, swishing rhythm, their warning cries an auditory counterpoint. Maybe they're trying to defend their nest, mum speculated. He proved unable to visualize the thoughts of birds of prey. Yes, an acquaintance of the brother of a friend was once attacked while out jogging, he said. Buzzards are known to do that to protect their young. Out of here: hup, hup, hup!

His girlfriend tugged their daughter away from the boulder she was cheerfully climbing, innocent of cruel nature. Gloria was startled and cried. He gathered up the remains of their provisions and took a long stick, which he waved in the air while still looking around for their things. We've lost Nena! Where's Nena? Have you looked in your bag? In the bottom of the pram? Gloria stiffened into a plank and screamed as mum fruitlessly tried to crimp her into the buggy. You go on down, we'll never get the pram and a crying child over those tree trunks and rocks and hollows; come on Gloria, hush now, it's nothing, I'll walk back for her toy, here's the guide, this is the map. His girlfriend asked which way, there are ten paths here, but he was already walking towards the woods and could only call back that they needed to go downhill and she'd probably better find herself a stick as well.

Nena was atop a post with a sign for walkers, at the point where they'd gone down into the hollow, half a kilometre from their picnic place. He was relieved, partly because now he would not have to retrace the whole route. Suddenly he had time again. In the whispering forest on the plateau different elements of his life came loose and floated like separate sketches in a circle above him, detailed and realistic as in a surrealist painting: the soft toy, the buggy, his phone, a cigarette, a picture book, a glass of wine, the cypress with a split base in the inner courtyard of the apartment block in Turnhout, which he could see from his work desk, all the other things that he always felt he must have absorbed into his thinking. The circle interlocked with the flight of the buzzards, two motions of the same machine. He felt unseen and unprotected from his strange thoughts. The buzzards were controlling his daughter from a distance; he could hear them ominously shouting her name: Gloria! Gloria! Gloria! Like the eyes of the hobbit under the spell of the ring, the now bright-blue shining eyes of his darling daughter closed and her eyelids vibrated ominously. Her forehead lit up to become a transparent screen and he could see the birds hovering in her otherwise always impenetrable mind. Gloria! Come and join us, Gloria! they shrieked and they took his child with them, into the depths of a far more limitless and dark forest, past waterfalls, undergrowth and cold blue vapour.

He walked once again past the meadow and the pipe, where there were no longer any birds of prey to be seen. Two paths led downwards. He tried his maps but had no reception. It occurred to him meanwhile that his girlfriend lacked any aptitude for map reading and eventually he assumed she'd have taken the tarmac road straight on, which no doubt led directly to Schönberg; that was the only real possibility.

Rarely had he felt more distant from his family and everyone else than during that long steep descent, which, not running, he took with a helpless, swelling alarm previously unknown to him. Nobody. His heavy feet plunked on the tarmac and that was the word he heard hammering away, tarmac tarmac, through coniferous forests and past post-apocalyptic fields of felled spruce, smelling of chalk and skeleton. He heard whining chainsaws, the buzzards screeching again in the distance, and, as so often when rhythm takes over from reason, not long afterwards two verses of a song repeated themselves uninvited and endlessly in his head, one he'd not heard for centuries: *while you are away*, it sang, *my heart comes undone*. Released by the start and end of the day, the afternoon always floats high and purposeless in the stratosphere, far above the rest of time. Never was that clearer than now. You get vertigo if you look up and cannot see the depths; better to keep your head level and eyes on the horizon. Do you fear the infinite height itself perhaps? Might they have gone astray, hopelessly lost, Gloria crying for her distraught mother while night, in reality still far off, relentlessly fell? The fact that this was merely the East Cantons, not endless subarctic tundra, brought him no solace; it was far from inconceivable that a person could end up here in a loop of the same valleys

and forests, over and over. He searched in vain, peering through trees towards the alternative track, which ought to have run along the other side of the valley. He might have shouted but restrained himself. Eventually he saw the other path after all. Scattered with stones and overgrown with grass, it came out onto his tarmac. And then the mossy caravans, the bridge over the river and the village. They must be in Schönberg already, of course, they'd had an enormous head start, and yet, and yet. On the bridge and along the main road and at their car by the tourist office café there was no one.

He had reception now but his girlfriend's phone didn't ring. They were still wandering through the Eifel, across godforsaken volcanic terrain, that much was clear. Thirteen times he paced the last bit of his walk, up and down. Then his phone rang. I can see you, I think, she said, and sure enough he saw a young mother with a buggy hobbling along the other path towards him and stuck Nena in the air.

In my head a whole story played out, I just can't find the words for it, he said on the café terrace at the tourist office, and he told her about the buzzards that had their daughter under their spell, about an obscure, ancient evil hiding in that little head. His girlfriend couldn't stop laughing. It would become one of those stories that parents keep repeating; they would shout the name of their child in buzzard voices when for example she yet again flew into a satanic rage in response to being refused a second biscuit. He looked at that familiar creature, his own stranger. She'd pulled herself upright on an antique handcart converted into a planter, placed on the closely cut grass. Since it looked as if she'd tilted it up and was pushing it along, he took a photo. How typical, he said; perfect for her first holiday album. I reckon she'll be walking within a week, her mother said, and in those words there was hope for far more than just walking.

When on the morning of their last full day in Luxembourg they went into the living room, they thought the hundreds of dung flies that had colonized their cottage during that week had sought out alternative places, perhaps taking pity on humanity. With sleep in his eyes he looked at the ceiling, where masses of them had gathered. Fat, black, hairy, juddering, unknowable dots on a shady, breathing grey surface, thousands of identical portals to another dimension. It was as if he'd caught himself out, his stupidity had stuck itself all over that virtual surface, tactile and foul, so he smiled the crooked smile of unease. Gloria smiled with him, instinctively, socially, mysteriously. Maybe we ought to open up all the doors, said his girlfriend.

There was a stiff wind, the tail end of an anticyclone, and the gusts seemed to be trying to pick up all their temporary belongings and carry them away, far above the waving wheat fields and the windmills, past the abstract, hidden flight paths, far from this loamy, implausible, self-refuting idyll, this rolling Kansas of Europe, he thought, and their daughter was Dorothy, and they were all somewhere else already, in a stranger world, it was just that they'd failed to notice as yet. Their cottage had been ventilated but he was stressed, the pages of his books blew open at random places; everything was multiplied, everything far too light for cohesion, even his own body consisted of scattering particles. Then the door between hall and living room slammed implacably shut and shards of the little glass window flew about, the wind gone: a frozen moment like in an action film. It was a small thing, but in daddy's thoughts the splinters pointed to the greatest imaginable disaster. Never had he been more fragile than on that summer holiday. He quickly picked up the crawling Gloria from the floor and felt a crying fit swell. His girlfriend swept the splinters together. While Gloria slept and mum packed, dad walked up the hill one more time, needing to be alone for a moment. He trudged along sodden paths through the neurotically rhythmmed conifer forest, filmed the rustling wheat on the far side, at the highest point of Luxembourg, near the border with his own country. The stalks waved in unison and he felt the hair on his arms too, its resistance, its sensors; these were all functions of the wind. Everything was far away and endlessly mediated, yet close by as well, and familiar. He must not be afraid. In the car he cried then, all the same, about the small changes to their plans, about the irrevocable leaving behind of a place and time, a deep, infantile homesickness.

Gloria, he said when it stopped. Gloria. But she frowned through the window, and he peered through wet lashes to look outside again and wasn't even unhappy, just open, detached, suggestible, volatile and impersonal.