The Birds

Marleen Nelen

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Translator Laura Watkinson

House of Stone

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Six months ago, when everything was still normal, I was sitting with Mama in the garden. The lime tree was in blossom, its crown buzzing with bees. There was a buzzing inside me too, because it was my birthday. I was turning thirteen. Mama had set up her loom among the lilacs. 'Érik a,' she sang, 'hajlik a búzakalász', as she beat against the reed. She also sang when she did the laundry or just walked from the house to the shed. Her songs were in Hungarian, and they were always about birds and trees, because birds have been everywhere and can go anywhere, and because trees remain.

Great tits darted through the lavender. I sprinkled a few breadcrumbs on my shoulder and sat still in the grass. One landed on my head, a wing, dry and soft, brushing against my cheek.

Mama stopped weaving.

'What do you want to eat today?' she asked.

'Cabbage with minced meat,' I said.

'And?'

'Chimney cake,' we said in unison, and we laughed.

Mama made plaits in her hair and rolled them up on her head.

'We're going for flour,' she called. Papa waved at us with his hammer.

Our house was on the highest hill in the area. We had a stable for our stallion, Ymir, and a woodworking shed for Papa, with square windows that were always covered in sawdust. I walked on my hands ahead of Mama. We went down the hill, to the mill on the other side of the village.

A little later, we walked back through the winding cobbled streets with the flour. A heron stood motionless on one leg, staring into the river. When we were over the bridge, Mama took off her boots and carried them in her hand. She picked some marigolds.

After the bend, our house came into view. Papa had just finished repairing the fence around the front garden, which had been knocked over by wild boar. Only the gate still had to be put back in. With a hoarse cry, the heron flew overhead. Mama watched it go and, as she walked past a pile of broken planks, her skirt snagged on a protruding nail. It tore and she started bleeding from a cut on her ankle. She limped to the pump to wash off the blood and tied a wet handkerchief around it.

Strings of garlic and bunches of rosemary hung from the ceiling in our kitchen, and there were bottles of herbal infusions all over the floor. I prodded the glowing coals in the fireplace with a poker. Mama kneaded dough and rolled it out. When it was very thin, she wrapped it around a stick, which she hung over the fire. Papa came in with a package for me. I knew what was inside, but my heart was still pounding. Carefully, I peeled off the paper and opened up the sketchbook in front of me. The new pencil was made of limewood. I pressed my finger against the tip to feel how sharp it was.

A robin was hopping around outside. The wind blew at his neck feathers, and he looked ruffled. Mama cut a cabbage in two and placed it on the table. The leaves were close together, forming a beautiful pattern. I couldn't quite decide between the robin and the cabbage. As the scent of the chimney cake filled the kitchen, I drew the cabbage. It was so quiet that we could hear Ymir grazing outside.

After dinner, Ymir walked behind me to the stable, and I picked up the orphaned fox cub that the woodcutter had found in the forest and put him on my lap. As I fed him milk from a bottle, he greedily sucked away. Mama and I mucked out the stable and then we did some work in the vegetable garden. She made the holes, and I popped in the delicate leek seedlings and covered them over. I crawled after her on my knees. The handkerchief around her ankle had shifted. There was a stain on it that looked like a poppy.

A week later, Mama wasn't feeling well. She stayed in bed.

'A touch of the flu,' she said. 'I'll sleep it off.'

So, Papa and I ploughed the field behind the house without her. The soil was full of stones that I had to pick out. I put the prettiest ones in my pocket. We stopped only for Kéz the farmer, who came by with a mare with a scraped knee. Papa dripped some dandelion tincture onto it. In the evening, Papa disappeared into the shed, where he worked until late on a cabinet for the shoemaker, who was about to get married.

The next day, Mama was sicker. With trembling hands, she showed Papa the cut. The skin around it was dark and swollen.

'It wasn't deep at all,' she said, 'but it really hurts now.'

Papa sent me to look for St. John's wort. He boiled the root, poured milk on it, kneaded the pulp to make a poultice and wrapped it around Mama's ankle. With her head on the palm of his hand, she fell asleep. After fifteen minutes, he gently freed himself. A beech tree on the estate had blown down, and Papa was going to turn it into a staircase for Count Teleki. Teleki could never wait. Everything always had to happen immediately.

I made tea with the herbs that Papa had prepared, spread some jam onto a slice of bread and went to check on Mama. She was lying still on her back. She was never sick usually. She was the one who always looked after me. When I had a fever, she placed lukewarm cloths on my head, dripped lemon onto a lump of sugar and told me stories, about fairies and werewolves, and especially about the Huns, because those were the stories I liked best of all.

I helped her to sit up. She tried to drink, but she couldn't open her mouth. After a few attempts, tears started streaming down her cheeks.

I rushed outside in a panic. I ran in the direction of the axe blows, the long grass lashing my legs. Papa straightened up and wiped the sweat from his forehead. When he saw me, he threw down the axe and ran towards me, and past me. I couldn't keep up with him. He was already in the room and had thrown off the blanket. Groaning, Mama arched her back. Papa pushed me out of the room.

'Go and fetch the doctor! Quickly!'

I leaped onto Ymir and we galloped away. I pushed my heels into his flanks, even though I knew he couldn't go any faster.

The well-to-do doctor lived two villages away. I rang the bell insistently. The woman who opened the door was red with irritation.

'Please,' I panted. 'The doctor needs to come right now.'

'He's busy,' she said. 'Maybe next week.'

She was about to slam the door, but I put my foot in the way and slipped past her.

'Wait here,' she snapped at me.

The floor was made of black-and-white marble. Mud was curling between my toes, so I stood on a black tile. I heard talking and the scraping of cutlery. The doctor was in no hurry and emptied his plate first. Then he followed me in a calèche drawn by a mare with white socks, who walked infuriatingly slowly.

I wasn't allowed into the room with him. With my nose to the window, I waited for the glass jar of leeches, which would suck the evil juices out of Mama. But the doctor's bag remained closed. The doctor lit a cigar, smoke curling from his nostrils. Whispering, he walked back to the calèche with Papa. As the doctor drove away, Papa staggered. He had to hold onto the gate to stop himself from falling.

Mama had tetanus. She swelled up and her lips turned bluish. In the end, only her eyes still moved, following the swallows who were building a nest under the roof. I chased away a fly that was buzzing around her eye. I laid my head on her chest and listened to the galloping horse racing behind her ribs. It sounded slower and further and further away, and then I couldn't hear it anymore.

In the days that followed, Papa worked on a coffin for Mama. He planed and sanded the wood and decorated it with intricate floral carvings. Dazed, I sat in the doorway, listening to the scraping. Women from the village came to wash Mama and lay her out. A dying bee waved its legs in the air. Dust trembled in a beam of light. I could smell the lime tree, but I didn't know who the voices in our house belonged to or what moment of the day it was. The coffin could only just fit through the door of the bedroom. I didn't want to look but I saw it anyway, as they picked up Mama like an object and laid her in it.

When we came back from the funeral, I saw that the clock had stopped at half past nine. Papa sat down at the table and put his hands on his thighs. I put my hands on my thighs too. Even breathing felt uncomfortable, so I hardly breathed at all. I dug my nails deep into my skin.

Papa drank palinka. When the bottle was empty, he went outside. He stood there under the lime tree, his body swaying, but there was no wind. I followed the grain of the tabletop with my finger, and when I looked up, Papa was gone.

Around the vase were petals of the wilted marigolds. They looked like little boats. I laid the dead bee in one of them and blew it off the table.

Our hill grew with grief. High and lonely, it towered above the village. The fox cub had left, and no one brought any sick or injured animals to Papa anymore. In the house, it was always twilight. During the daytime, Papa kept the shutters closed, and at night he opened them wide. I didn't draw, because nothing was beautiful enough. I pulled some weeds from the beds in the vegetable garden, but it was a lot of work and Papa didn't help me. He didn't feel like doing anything except for walking. I climbed into the lime tree and watched Papa's silhouette moving across the flanks of all the hills around our house. He looked hurried, as if he were trying to catch up with someone. I was afraid he would go on walking and leave me behind.

One day, I went after him. I followed him at a distance, because I expected him to send me away. When he caught sight of me, he waited for me. We didn't keep to the paths but walked straight

through the young oats and wormed our way through prickly gorse. The sun had already set when we got home.

After that, we went for a walk every afternoon. We never spoke about Mama, but we thought about nothing else. We missed her like the rag-and-bone man missed his right leg, which he'd lost in the Revolution. Sometimes he thought it was still there and simply fell over.

The field became overgrown with ground-ivy and goutweed, thistles sprouted in the garden, and the kitchen window cracked when it slammed shut in a draught.

In the middle of July, Árpád the land agent turned up, in his otter-skin boots and with a whip under his arm. He took a pinch of snuff to ward off the stench of the kitchen. Papa filled two glasses with palinka and Árpád poured a splash onto the floor.

'To Antonia,' he said. 'One day we'll follow her.'

They drank and put down their glasses at the same time. Papa filled them again.

'I'm here for business,' said Árpád, opening a notebook with columns. His index finger moved along red numbers.

'Your field doesn't look good,' he concluded. 'The agreement is that you'll hand over part of the profits. And part of nothing is nothing.'

'Give me time,' said Papa. 'My head isn't in the right place.'

'You're going to lose everything if this goes on, Ayan. You need to roll up your sleeves.'

Árpád stood up. He took butter, eggs and an unopened bottle of palinka from the shelf and put them in his bag.

'I'm taking an advance. That'll help me to stay patient.'

After Árpád's visit, Papa flew across the field. He weeded and hoed and allowed me no rest either, as I filled wheelbarrows and worked myself into a sweat. Suddenly Papa stopped and stood stock still in the middle of the field in the sunshine, staring at our house. His shoulders slumped. He put down the rake, and we went for another walk.

A month went by without anything changing. One warm evening, at the end of August, fieldfares and starlings were playing above the hill. They dropped down, hung there on the wind, chased one another and took it in turns to cry 'chak'. Papa sat in the shade in front of the shed, trying to make a carving of Mama. He chiselled and planed, but it was not going as he wanted. With a few angry blows, he ruined the block of wood. His gaze drifted to the path – and his expression darkened even more.

'It's that bloodsucker again,' he growled.

Papa walked towards Árpád with the wood still in his hand. I didn't hear what they said to each other. Then Árpád strode over to Ymir and laid one hand on his flank. Ymir stopped chewing and braced his forelegs, eyes alert. Papa yelled at Árpád to leave, Árpád yelled back at him and gave Papa a shove. Suddenly the block of wood swept straight up and smashed into Árpád's chin, who fell backward. He scrambled up, resting on one knee and bowing his head as if he were about to pray. Blood trickled from his mouth. He smeared it over his chin.

'I'm throwing you out,' he panted. 'You filthy rotten Gypsy.'

Árpád didn't go back along the path, but through the grass. When he was far enough away, he turned and gave a threatening shake of his fist. Papa moved as if to go after him, and Árpád quickly made himself scarce. There were white rings around Papa's eyes. His nostrils twitched. My legs were shaking too, so badly that I could barely stand upright.

Papa looked as if he were about to explode, in fury or tears, it was impossible to tell. It was still early, but I went up to the attic and lay down in bed. A chair downstairs moved, and then it was silent. I slipped out of bed and put my eye to a crack in the floor. Papa was sitting at the window with

his rifle. It was almost an antique, but it still worked. He'd got it from the gamekeeper when he patched up his dog, who'd been attacked by a bear.

I felt chilly, so I crawled back under the blanket and curled up.

The lime tree scraped against the window, and somewhere a woodworm was gnawing away. I had the feeling that something bad would happen if I fell asleep, so I decided to stay awake. When I opened my eyes later, the moon had moved on. Papa was standing beside me. He was dressed in his wedding suit, which was made of black cloth and embroidered with flowers. It was loose on him. All the crying had made him shrink.

'Get dressed,' he said.

I didn't move.

'Come on, Mika,' he said.

'Why do I have to get dressed?'

'Get up. I want to be away from here before it gets light. And bring your blanket.'

It was still pitch dark, but a blackbird was already singing. We rolled the cart out of the shed, pulled the canvas over the iron hoops and harnessed Ymir.

'Where are we going?' I asked.

He did not reply. I followed him inside, where he began to gather things: rice, onions, his favourite chisels, the hunting rifle, blankets, the kettle and the tripod, a length of flowery fabric that could serve as a curtain, a pouch of coins. In desperation, I grabbed things, like the red stone I'd found on the starlings' hill, but Papa put it back.

'We're only taking what we need,' he said.

So, I settled for a pack of cards, the book about birds that Mama had used to teach me to read, a few graphite pencils and the sketchbook. I shoved everything into a bag that Mama had woven from some colourful scraps of yarn.

'Ready?' asked Papa from the driver's seat.

Through the open door, moonlight fell on the drawings of birds on the wall. They might detach themselves from the paper at any moment and fly along with us. Papa made a strange sound with his tongue, but Ymir understood him anyway. He pulled at the cart, and we drove away.

We Don't Belong to Anyone

At a fork in the road, there were some large boulders. They had a coat of moss and hollows of water warmed by the sun. Papa hesitated. To the right was towards Szatmárnémeti. I'd been there a few times with Mama. We'd sold woven scarves and tablecloths there and used the money to buy things that weren't available in the village. But Papa steered left, onto a narrower track. I ducked to avoid a branch and, when I sat back up, another one hit me in the face. A deer leaped over the undergrowth in a graceful arc, the patch on her hindquarters flashing through the trees. As I thought of the fawns that sometimes came up to our house and ate apples from my hand, I felt tears stinging my eyes. I looked up at the swaying trees. The leaves rustled and whispered.

'That's what the waves sound like,' said Papa, tilting his head to hear it better. 'What would you think about heading for the sea?'

'It's such a long way,' I said. 'Must be a thousand kilometres.'

'We have time,' he said.

'Fine, then,' I said.

Papa took his old compass and placed it between us.

'We need to head southeast,' he said.

Strips of sky appeared between the trees and then we were out of the forest. We drove past strange fields and strange houses. Weeding women sang a song I didn't know. I walked beside Ymir and hummed 'Érik a'. Some policemen on horseback approached from the other direction, and Papa quickly turned onto a cart track. We bumped through potholes and over humps. I chased geese out of the way, and they hissed angrily. They were right, it was their path, but we still had to pass through.

The river looked different from at home. It was wide and slow and buffaloes stood lazily on the banks. The mud on their backs had dried and cracked into nice patterns, but I didn't feel like drawing. We filled our waterskins and snapped off reed shoots to cook over the fire later. The river disappeared behind a dyke, and the dyke grew a shadow. The daisies closed, and the sparrows stopped chirping. I climbed the dyke to watch the sun go down. For a moment, the water was red, as if it were burning, and then within a couple of minutes it turned black – a flock of starlings on their way home.

Ymir was getting tired. He pulled to the left, and Papa had to keep correcting him. When it got too dark, Papa climbed down and led him into a field. We pulled the cart out of the wind behind a wall of brambles. I rubbed Ymir dry. While Papa scraped the dirt from Ymir's hooves, I fetched two buckets of water from the river.

'Are we on the run?' I asked while Ymir drank.

'No,' said Papa, rubbing his chin. 'But I couldn't breathe in that house anymore.'

His voice sounded choked, as if he couldn't get enough air now either, so I didn't say anything else, even though I would have liked to talk about the red stone that was still on the kitchen table – it was odd to imagine strangers walking around our house, picking up the stone and examining it from all angles. I also thought about Mama's chair and all the other things that had had something to do with her. I could have kicked myself for not drawing her when I had the chance, as I was afraid that I would forget her. That I would forget Mama.

Papa walked into the blackness. He threw branches and straw into a heap. He struck sparks with the flint until a little flame started flickering. We hung the kettle on the tripod, boiled some rice and fried the reed shoots, which were sweet and tasty. Then Papa poked at the embers to bring the fire to life. We held out our feet to the warmth.

'We're going to Kustendje,' said Papa. 'There's a big harbour there. I'm sure to find work.'

He whittled a spoon from a branch as I stared into the fire. The flames grew, cunningly creeping around each other and then crawling away. Resin hissed. Papa decorated the handle of the spoon with a delicate lime-tree leaf and gave it to me.

It was gently raining now, so we went inside. We hung the flowery material over the opening and rolled out the carpet. The cart was narrow and we only just fitted inside. It swayed along with our movements.

'Just like a boat on the sea,' said Papa, pretending a wave was pulling him under. Flailing his arms, he toppled over.

Papa fell asleep quickly. The cart shrank and swelled like the belly of a whale to the rhythm of his breathing. Rain pattered down, loudly at first and then quieter and quieter. Then came the dripping. My stomach hurt. A moth fluttered in through a crack, landing on Papa's chin and brushing his lip with her feelers. When he breathed out, she flew away. The curtain twitched, as if someone had touched it.

At first, I kept track of every turn we took. I made a map in my head for if Papa wanted to return home, but by the second morning, I was confused. The path we were following came to a dead end on a piece of land. We had to go back a long way. While we were arguing about it, I forgot to look at the road, and after that I gave up. We bought bread and salami and ate it as we drove on. It rained, a man nodded at us from under his umbrella, and I saw a hare, lying in the grass like a big brown stone,

with his ears flat against his back. Clouds moved across the sky, the light changed, the sun fell in rays through the gaps. I drew our lime tree, with lines running like water over her trunk, I gave her branches, twigs and leaves, but she still looked sad.

'Are we nearly there yet?' I asked.

'What?' Papa, startled, was looking ahead. 'No,' he said. 'Nowhere near.'

Just after noon, we came to an orchard with a low wall that was on the verge of collapsing. Papa made Ymir stop. He smoothed down his hair and straightened his crumpled clothes before knocking. The farmer agreed that we could repair the wall for him. We took out the loose stones and put them in a pile. We lined them up and sorted them out and fitted them together. It was a painstaking task, and it took us the rest of the day.

When we were finished, the farmer came to take a look.

'Go on, clear off, and quick about it,' he said. 'That wall's crooked. Count yourself lucky I'm not taking you to court.'

'We're not going anywhere until you pay us,' Papa said with a frown.

We parked the cart in the yard. There was a little chicken scratching around under a bush, and I lured her towards me. She had a funny little crest on her head that wobbled with every step, her feathers were soft and fluffy, and tufts of down grew around her eyes. When we went to bed, I smuggled the little creature into the cart. After a bit of fussing, she snuggled into my armpit. Her heart was beating fast, and I whispered to her not to be afraid, because I was with her.
