

## Oh brother, my brother

Perhaps it was a moment of inattention. Or perhaps the cause had more significance: the growing distance between the men and the land, not really knowing it in the same way anymore, not living off it as their fathers and grandfathers had before them. It is often hard to put a reason to an event such as this one. Perhaps a cloud of misfortune had settled on the place. A bad bargain had been struck. Or perhaps it was simply an accident.

The two brothers entered the forest just past the chapel on the lower edge of the village. A road begins there and penetrates quite deeply into the medieval forest, wending its way beneath the canopy of great trees. The younger brother—a small, compact, and, by appearance, cheerful fellow—drove an old German sedan along the forest road. His name was Marko. The elder brother, Adam, taller and more angular, sat hunched miserably in the passenger seat. He had wanted to drive in a more suitable vehicle but Marko had insisted on taking his. When the road forked now and again, the elder brother held up a finger to show the way. Other than the low hum of the car's engine, the two men travelled in silence.

An unwritten form of primogeniture prevails in this part of the world. Rural estates—if you can use such a grand expression in villages as humble as these—are passed down intact to the eldest son. In order to keep everything legal, younger siblings are pressed to voluntarily sign away their rights. Not surprisingly, this often generates ill feelings. The smaller the estate, the more paltry and pitiful it is, the more passionately the unwritten rule is enforced. Thus the meanest of pigsties are kept together while families fall asunder and brothers turn one against the other.

In this particular family, the unmarried Adam had remained with his still living, though much diminished, father, Herman, and carried on the family business such as it was, a bit of small farming and forestry. Like most men in similar situations, he was compelled to hold down a day job in order to make ends meet. Marko had left the village, married, and gone to work in a small import-export company. Not long after his departure, Marko signed away his rights to the house and the outlying buildings, and most of his father's modest forest holdings in order to prevent the dispersal of the family assets. He had done this at the time of his mother's death, as the house had originally been her family's, and it seemed a good time to set things in order. At the time, Marko was still young and full of hope, and it didn't seem like such a great loss to him. Indeed he had been glad to put the little village behind him, the long hours of work, the bitter cold early mornings milking cows in the barn, the memories of poverty and death, war and emigration that darkened every façade. He would be a modern man. The gleaming city would be his, not the mud and dirt of the farm.

Marko did, as it happened, retain a small share in a bit of forestland that his father had ceded him by way of consolation, but he had not thought about the land for years. Now, however, that good times had failed to materialize, or rather they had come but failed to enrich him, and in any case were now long gone for nearly everyone, Marko remembered it. He needed to pay a bill in connection

with his grown daughter's education and he asked his brother if they might cut a bit of high quality wood from the patch of forest that was his and put it up for sale to raise some cash. It was on this errand that the two brothers set out on an early morning in late November.

On the day of the accident, the sky unfurled its cruel white banner, the sun surrendering before it had properly begun to fight. Though very cold, no snow had yet fallen. In recent winters, snow, once so abundant, had seemed strangely reluctant. The weather, the villagers warned, was changing and not for the better. Villagers rarely said any change was for the better, though, these days, few could argue otherwise. But certainly the last thing either brother expected on the cold sunless morning was beauty. And yet, at one moment, Marko drove over a slight rise and, surveying the dip and swell of the forest before him, felt compelled to stop the car.

"Look," he said.

That was the first word that passed between the two men since they had entered the forest. The elder brother did not answer but his gaze must have taken in the scene. For, rather than its usually variegated palette, the forest offered up only two colors: gold and white, gold and white. Diamond hoarfrost coated every trunk and branch in the glorious upward-reaching tangle. Not the tiniest glint of warm wood shone through. Most of the leaves had already fallen from the deciduous trees and, as snow had not, golden leaves covered the forest floor like a dense gilt blanket tossed over the bed of a princess. There was the odd ash or silver maple that jealously refused to release her leaves, would not allow the tiny twigs to fray and snap, the pretty discs to float free, and so golden blasts of foliage exploded here and there in the treetops, like spectacular fireworks amidst the cold diamond white of the branches.

"It's like a fairytale," said Marko, and, at that moment, he felt loath to cut down even a single tree in such a magical place.

"Let's go," his brother spoke gruffly. "It's just around the next bend."

And so Marko reluctantly restarted the engine and the two men travelled on in silence, the chainsaw resting between them on the backseat of the car.

Though Adam owned and worked the farm, it was usually Marko who was assigned to communicate unpleasant news to the old man. The younger brother had a softer, more jovial manner about him, while the elder was taciturn and hard. Both feared that their father was growing unreasonable, even slightly demented, in his old age. Only a few months before, Adam had asked Marko to inform his father of the decision to sell off the large livestock because it didn't pay anymore to keep a barn full of cows. It was too much work and the dairies were buying their milk from larger, more cost-effective farms. The two men, father and younger son, discussed the decision in the barn itself.

"There's no market for it anymore, father," Marko explained.

"No market?" the old man repeated quietly.

Marko shook his head no. The animals shifted in their stalls. A peculiar sense of wrongdoing filled the barn and, for some reason, Marko felt ashamed, felt as if he were not communicating a practical financial decision but was engaged in an act of treachery.

"No market you say?" His father's voice was slightly louder now.

“It’s a lot of work, father. You make no money from it and you save none. It’s a net loss.”

The old man took a step backward into the dim depths of the barn. His gaze remained fixed incredulously on his younger son who stood framed in the bright doorway.

“They still give milk, don’t they?”

An angry sarcasm that Marko couldn’t remember hearing before had entered his father’s voice. A chain rattled softly in the stalls. The eyes of one of the beasts rolled back in her head, the marble whites traversed by a skein of terrified blue.

“Not enough,” said Marko with a wry laugh. “It’s never enough in this day and age.”

His father ignored the response, the effort to make light of the moment.

“And these hands?”

The old man held them up. They were large and calloused and cracked and dry. They held a lifetime of work in them. A lifetime of loading and lifting and hammering and heaving, shoveling and milking and digging.

“Is there a market for these hands?”

Marko stepped forward toward his father. God knows he sympathized. His hands were far less calloused than the old man’s but there wasn’t much of a market for them either. He wished he could embrace his father, comfort him in some way. But the old man stood bareheaded and unapproachable at the center of the chill space, legs open, chest wide, like some great proletarian statue with the walls he had built all around him, the smell of hay and urine in the air. Instead of embracing his father, Marko turned on his heel and walked out into the cold sunlight, into the clean air. It was just a formality anyway. The decision had already been made. Things would take their course. Soon enough the cows would be sold off or slaughtered for meat and then presumably the barn itself would fall into disrepair. It wouldn’t take long for it to be reclaimed by the forest, for ivy to climb up the interior walls, a crack to open in the rooftop, the rain to fall through.

If this was rape, it was a splendid rape. If this was plunder, it was noble plunder. The two brothers passed the saw between them from hand to hand. They worked in a harmony they had not known since they were boys. Adam had come during the previous week and had marked with white paint the most suitable trees to harvest, both in terms of the value of the timber and of the impact on the tract of forest itself. They would do as much as they could on this first day and then come back with chains and a tractor to pull and stack the wood, cover it, and let it dry for some months before they transported it to the outskirts of the city for sale.

At first, when he had spotted them, Marko had resented those white marks. Could he not be his own master for once? Could he not choose which trees to fell? But then as they worked, he saw the sense of his brother’s decisions, even came to admire the care with which he had planned the desecration. As they worked methodically around the trunk of each marked tree, they had to gauge the angle of the cut, gauge the angle of the impending fall. The hearty wail of the power saw filled the air and dissipated the white haze that had descended on the day. Though it remained cold, the heat of the saw and the men’s bodies

unlocked the armor of frost locked around each trunk. Wood chips flew. Occasionally the men struck a vein of sap and it oozed warmly from the still living tree. The two brothers spoke little, in terse phrases, between the blasts of the saw:

“Angle it down more.”

“That way.”

“Good.”

“It should fall in that direction.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Other side now.”

“Well done.”

“Step away.”

“Back!”

“Now!”

The forest let out a great sigh each time she yielded her treasure to the two men. Little flocks of sparrow and titmice took to the sky in sudden panicked flight, fluttering away from their sinking ship. The falling tree lunged with a breathless whoosh, landing on the forest floor with a slight bounce just as the weight of a ready woman might fall onto a mattress. And afterwards, the two men stood above her, still breathing heavily, regarding her girth, her trembling limbs. Satisfied in some primordial way. At ease with themselves and the world around them.

They worked straight through the day, moving from one marked tree to the next. They took few breaks. During the first one, they ate sandwiches and sipped tea from a shared thermos. During the second, they allowed themselves a mouthful of whiskey from a flask as they had drunk all the tea and the whiskey would warm them. But they were cautious. They knew the danger of the work, respected the weight of the trees, the power of the forest.

By late afternoon, they could sense the sun waning in the west. The haze had cleared almost entirely and the faint orange glow of the setting sun filtered through the trees, casting windmill shadows. The days were short and the light wouldn’t last for long. Marko was the last man to use the saw and he set it down on the ground between them. Later, he would wonder if he had done something wrong, if that bit of whiskey had affected his judgment, or perhaps he was made careless by the unusual sense of satisfaction and fatigue he felt after the long day of shared labor. He wondered if he hadn’t turned the machine off entirely or set the safety clip in place, because the moment he put the saw down, it sprang back to life. It jumped up from the forest floor, like a living creature, a jackal or a small feral wolf, and it set upon his brother, biting at the front of his legs, his knees, snapping its whirring jaws at his thighs. Adam cried out in surprise and tried to swat the crazed thing away with his bare palms. Marko laughed out loud, something he would come to regret for the rest of his days, but that was his first reaction. Because the scene struck him as comical somehow, as payback for all the past slights that had taken place between the brothers. It looked harmless at first, as if a neighborhood dog were jumping up to sniff wetly at his brother’s crotch, and his brother doing an embarrassed little jig to get away.

But then Adam fell to the ground. The saw as well, buzzing uselessly among the leaves, not a living creature anymore but a dumb malfunctioning tool. Marko bent down to turn off the power. Then he turned and looked at the mess

of torn material of his brother's pant legs, such a jigsaw puzzle of jagged tears and rips that their mother would never be able patch them. They would have to be torn up and used for rags. He heard his older brother whimpering and remembered with a sudden pang that their mother was dead.

"Wait," Marko whispered into the air. He looked up toward the sky, and then at the afternoon shadows lying around him on the ground. All the fallen trees. "Stop," he said quietly.

And finally, finally, after what seemed like an eternity in the gold and white forest, Marko took action and hoisted Adam up, holding him under his armpits. The two men moved in a peculiar combination of dragging and hobbling, walking and falling, to the passenger side of the old German sedan. They made a strange couple, dancing there in the winter's dying light. Marko helped his brother into the back seat. He was moaning faintly now, a hand flung over his eyes, trembling from shock and loss of blood, almost unconscious. Marko gingerly arranged his brother's injured legs across the seat like the legs of a limp puppet. He folded his coat and placed it under his brother's head. Then he went and picked up the saw and tossed it into the passenger seat. Before he got into the car himself, he dug his hand into his pocket for his cell phone and placed a call to the stationary phone in his father's house.

"What is it?" The old man answered. His voice sounded thick, as if he hadn't spoken for a long time or had been woken from a deep sleep.

"There's been an accident," Marko spoke breathlessly. "It's Adam. His legs. The saw. I'm not quite sure how it happened."

"Where are you?"

"I'm not sure exactly. I'm not sure how to get back. I wasn't paying attention."

And Marko remembered the moment when he stopped the car at the start of the day, the forest glimmering like the interior of an imperial opera house. How grand it had been, how magnificent, how full of hope the morning. His brother had silently shown the way, lifting his finger, a conductor with his baton: this way and that way along the road.

"We're at that piece of land, father, that piece of land you gave me, in the lower forest, past the chapel at the edge of the village. We were cutting down trees."

"What are you talking about, boy? I didn't give you any land."

"Father?"

"Just drive," the father croaked. "Just drive out of there."

And so he drove. He placed the little phone in the unused car ashtray between the seats. He strained anxiously forward, peering through the windshield as if he were driving through the deepest, darkest night. He thought of that fairytale, the one about the children, the brother and sister, how they left crumbs of bread on the forest trail so they could find their way back home, but the birds had eaten the crumbs, night had fallen, and the forest had become an unfathomable maze. Oh, those birds, those clever little birds! How they had flown from the falling trees! How graceful they had been! How quick to save their own lives!

Adam stirred in the backseat.

"Where are we going?" he called out through the fog of pain.

But Marko's concentration, his powers of observation, were stretched so tightly that he couldn't have possibly answered even the simplest question, let alone the one his brother asked. At each new bend in the road, the forest looked utterly familiar to him, not only as if they'd covered that same ground earlier in the day, but as if he'd been there countless times before, knew it as well as the back of his own hand. And yet at the same time, each new vista, each new arrangement of trees flung across the landscape, looked utterly strange, as if he were driving through a foreign country, a different planet even. There could be no chapel here, he thought, no village. It was inconceivable. Surely they were miles from civilization.

Suddenly, he heard an odd chirping musical sound, high-pitched and mechanical. He turned his head sharply and looked back at his brother to determine if the sound was coming from him. He took in the deathly pale face thrown back against the seat, the dark pool collecting under his legs. *Oh brother, my brother*, Marko mouthed the words, feeling a surge of affection and pity, *don't leave me yet*. And though his brother made no movement, did not respond to Marko's unspoken words, the strange sound continued. It was the phone, it dawned on Marko, it was his own little phone set in the ashtray a few minutes before. He looked out at the road again and took one hand off the steering wheel to pick up the tiny instrument. He hoped it was his father calling, or a neighbor, someone to give him instructions, someone to help him out of his troubles. But his palm was damp and the thing slipped out of it, like a child's toy, and fell to the floor before he could answer. Leaning forward with one hand on the wheel, Marko patted his other around on the floor, searching for the source of the sound. He tried to keep his eyes on the road but at one point lowered them in a vain effort to locate the black phone sliding along the black rug, and at that moment the car too slid off the road with a lurch, and catapulted down a slope, bumping and jostling along the way. When the vehicle finally came to a stop at the bottom, the little phone was still alive, still emitting its maddening cry. And then it stopped, stopped, and the only sound in the sinking vessel was one brother gasping raggedly for air.

He felt as if were still in a dream when he woke. The dream of an emotion, of a feeling, of some untouchable time, a time in which he had never lived but that hovered all about him, permeating each and every solid thing he had ever known. His eyes were closed. He enjoyed the sense of not moving at last, of resting, the silence all around him. Of it being over. He felt a sudden wave of nostalgia. He had never been a soldier, never been a fighting man. His father too had missed the brotherhood of combat, had been a teenager at the end of the last big war. But Marko felt those must have been good times. They must have had a bracing clarity. Life stripped of all but the most essential choices. Survival was everything, the only thing. A cow gave milk and that was good enough. And there'd been enormous optimism in all that destruction. Tens of millions of soldiers could fall in battle and tens of millions more would come to take their place. Whole cities could be turned to rubble, cathedrals wantonly destroyed, bridges collapse into the great waterways beneath them, glorious works of art burned to ash. Not to worry, the generals smiled nonchalantly as the bombs rained down. We'll rebuild better than before. We'll build even greater tributes to the ingenuity of mankind: his ability to invent, his ability to destroy. Our

buildings will be higher, our coffers will overflow—and so they had, so they had. No matter how bad things had been in those dark days, there'd always been the certainty of revival, of reawakening, of winter inevitably being followed by spring, the freeze followed by the thaw. But now for some reason the snow had stopped falling and only leaves carpeted the forest floor, and with this thought of the forest, this thought of unfallen snow, Marko's eyes screeched open and he remembered where he was, remembered what had happened.

He pushed his door open and stepped outside. He took a quick inventory of his own limbs and discovered, that save a bump on his forehead, he was uninjured. The car had come to rest a good distance beneath the road, probably out of sight of it. The front of the car had collided with a large tree trunk and had collapsed like the bellows of an accordion. A faint wisp of smoke escaped from under the hood. He doubted it would start again and, even if it did, he could hardly drive it back up the hill they had come down. He peered in the window of the backseat and saw that his brother had rolled off the seat and lay face down, wedged between the two seats. He lay entirely still. To Marko's relief, his legs didn't appear to be bleeding anymore, though the stain on the seat where he had laid before was dark and wide. It was nearly dark outside as well. The temperature had fallen and the hoarfrost clung once again to the trunks of the trees. Marko looked up at the golden leaves shimmering like sequins amidst the white branches, the moon rising above the trees. A sudden gust of evening wind rose and the ash tree above Marko's head was finally persuaded to release her riches. The leaves fell from her branches in a sudden magnificent torrent, a shower of falling coins. Marko held out his hands and felt them cascading through his fingers.

*Oh, the things they promised, he thought. All that gold.*

But he shook off the dream, shook off the promise. He pulled his sweater off and began to unbutton his shirt. He would tear the fabric and make tourniquets for his brother's legs. He would find the phone. He would get them out of there. Survival was the goal now, the only goal.