

ENGEL DES VERGESSENS / ANGEL OF OBLIVION

BY MAJA HADERLAP

THE WAR is a devious fisher of men. It cast out its net for the adults and trapped them with its fragments of death, its debris of memory. Just one careless act, one brief moment of inattention, and it pulls in its net. Father is immediately snagged on memory's hooks, he's already running for his life, trying to escape the War's omnipotence. The War suddenly looms in hastily spoken sentences, strikes out from the shelter of darkness. It leaves its captives trembling in its net and withdraws for months at a time to prepare a new attack as soon as it's forgotten. If ever it grows feeble, they welcome it into their homes and smile at its armor certain they can win it over, they set a place at table, make up a bed for it.

Father was the youngest partisan, his cousin Peter says when we're gathered in the sitting room to celebrate Grandmother's birthday. The youngest partisan, do you still remember, you were barely twelve years old. Yes, Father says but he'd much rather forget all about it. At night he sometimes wakes with a start and has no idea where he is. In my dreams, I'm still running for my life like I did back then on the Velika Planina, Father says.

Mother of God, the others say, now that was a dog's life!

The day our provisions ran out and the commando came, it was up and out, down the mountain, through the Germans soldiers, over, out, that was some kind of noise, Father recalled. At two in the morning, they slid down the mountainside in deep snow, down a chute that was used to send tree trunks down to the valley. The Germans trained searchlights up from Kamnik, it was so bright, every movement was visible. There was shooting in the valley and all you could see were red and blue streaks. Leaves and branches rained down from the trees and one partisan was lying on the ground, yelling help me, help me, Father tells us, but he just ran as if the devil were on his heels. They'd gotten separated while escaping, he and two other partisans ran across the road and right in front of a German soldier with a machine gun. I'm a dead man, Father told himself,

now I'm going to get shot, but the German made it clear that he should disappear. He waved Father on. Quick, quick, the soldier said. He was a good one, Father says, one of the good ones, I'll never forget him. Father's group reached the river and the commander yelled: Cross through the water, we'll never make it over the bridge! The first one who stepped in the river vanished, washed away like nothing. They'd clung to each other and made it across. The water rushed over him and his brother and this in January. For people in war it's like being hares in a hunt, only much worse, Father says.

Yes, Peter confirmed, we were the hares and hunger was our commander.

He often remembers how hungry he was then, how his stomach was at the core of his delirium and put him in harm's way. When he thinks of it now, how careless he and Lojz were at the Keber farm because they believed the farmer's wife would give them bread, he still gets goose bumps. I can hear the Germans, Peter says: Shoot, shoot, bandits! they'd shouted. Lojz had fired and he'd shot his revolver, there was no possible retreat, they couldn't run up the mountain so they ran across the field, Lojz in front and Peter behind. Then the police dog caught him and tore his pant leg. He fell head over heels and lost his gun. The officer chasing him yelled: Stop, boy, stay where you are! But he kept running like mad. Then the Germans started shooting, all at once, terrifying, but the mountain swallowed them up, him and Lojz.

ON days like these, Father sometimes loses his grip. At the beginning of a celebration, he almost seems shy, wants to be put in the mood, drinks a lot of hard cider or wine. The family's high spirits get him cracking jokes. The relatives convince him to get his harmonica and finally make some music. Father plays with abandon, calls everyone onto the dance floor and stamps his foot to the beat. After a while, his look changes. A second being inside him pushes its back up against his eyes. They turn blank, like false windows you can't see into or out of. He becomes irritable. Our relatives decide they can no longer take him seriously and start to think about leaving. The nervous ones whisper that it's about time to go and clear their throats. It was so much fun, they say, we should do this more often because it does everyone such good to sit together, to dance and sing.

As soon as the last guest is gone, Father's eye-demon takes full possession of him and leads him in a wild polka, flinging him in all directions. The polka to the left throws Father into utter dejection, the one to right sends him into a mad rage that erupts in ear-splitting cries and is sparked by small misunderstandings.

My brother and I are sent out of the room and in our distress we don't know what to do. We stand around the kitchen or run outside. We're convinced the War has moved into our house for a few days and is not prepared to give ground.

We play partisans when Father once again, hunting rifle in hand, threatens to shoot us all at the top of his voice. We run up the slope into the forest, huddle behind a hazel bush, crawl on our stomachs along the edge of the forest, our invisible weapons at the ready, and, lying in the grass, look down at our parents' house and debate when it would be safe to leave our cover and go back to our rooms.

One time Mother flees with us, which makes us anxious because we're afraid she'll draw Father's attention to our hiding place. Our numbed lungs can barely expand. I look at my brother and hope he doesn't understand everything that's going on, but I'm not quite sure. I watch Father, how he wages war with us in a new form and I see myself floating free from the shell of my body and I look down at myself as if at a doll lying in the grass, head drawn in between its shoulders. Even if I'm hit, I won't die, I think, because I've left my body.

A dormant cannon, an undetonated missile has wandered out of the past and onto our farm by mistake and is seeking shelter under the plum trees in our forest. We're the unintended targets, which we never should have been but in the heat of the battle, we're forced to stand in for the real thing.

As soon as Father, overcome with exhaustion, nods off and the gun slips from his hand, we exhale. Mother takes his gun and locks it in the hunting closet. We clean up our hiding place and gingerly hurry past Father as he sleeps, his head propped on his elbows. He seems to sigh in his sleep and lies like a gnarled plum tree branch in the field behind the house, on the floor near the doorstep or on the corner bench in the kitchen.

The dance in the opposite direction opens with Father's self-incriminations. He rhythmically repeats that he's worth nothing, never has been worth anything, a dog is what he is, a dog hiding under the table. Come, little doggy, he says, come out from under the table. Come on now, tu tu tu tu, he coaxes, tu tu tu tu!

But the little dog won't move. It has crawled into a corner, as have I, already guessing what will happen when Father leaves the house. That's not true at all, I try to reassure him. How could he possibly say he's a little dog, how could he even think it, I ask and see my sentences hanging in the air like a line that has broken off before reaching its goal.

Father takes a deep breath to drag his voice up from deep in his belly. He squeezes it into his throat, where it's honed to a cutting edge. Then he fires sentences from his mouth like blistering projectiles. At some point he breaks off mid-sentence and walks, or rather runs, out of the house. Nothing we can say, no amount of pleading helps. Even Grandmother shrinks back and gets out her rosary. Rivers of darkness flow from the small black opening inside me.

Mother says she can't stand it any longer, whether she wants to or not she has to go see where Father's run off to, somebody has to stop him from hurting himself. I grab her hand and try to tell her with the pressure of my fingers that I want to go with her, that she shouldn't even try to shake me off. She does try to pull her hand away. Stay here, she says, you have to let go of my hand! There's no way I'm letting go and I start to cry. I cry because the dead woman from the pond is stirring inside me. She moans and I scream that we have to do something right away so nothing terrible will happen. Mother is surprised by my resolve and lets me go with her.

We run across the courtyard to the barn. Our hearts beat in our throats. We listen intently to hear if anything is moving on the barn floor or in the hay. Our ears are so keen, we would hear even the tiniest mouse scabbling, but in the barn all is still. Then a shot rings out from the bee-house. The stray shot has hit the mark. It has shredded the breath in my wind-pipe and the air sacs in my lungs exude a gas that makes me dizzy. I sway and hurry after Mother racing blindly towards the bee-house. Go away, she screams, get away from me. But I'm determined. If it has to be, then I, too, want to look Father's death in the eye.

We stop at the south side of the small outbuilding and cautiously peer around the corner. Father is lying on his back in the grass below the bee-house, his rifle at a slant beside him as if it had slipped from his hand when he fell. Mother clutches at her heart. She tears herself away from the wall and approaches Father warily. She stops a few steps away and stands looking down at him for a long time, then turns around and walks back to me. He's breathing, she whispers, he didn't shoot himself, he's only playing dead, there's no sign of blood, no wound. Tell Grandmother she should come down and take Father's gun away. If I tried to touch it, he might go after me, you never know, Mother says. Grandmother is already rushing over with a bowl of holy water, which she sprinkles on Father. Holy Mary, Mother of God, what has our family come to, she moans and gropes for the gun.

Father rolls onto his side. He mumbles something I can't understand.

I turn away from him as I'll never turn away from him again. I feel he wants to rob me of my childhood. I feel he's carved a notch in my back, which now hunches slightly and I'm afraid people will see my back, see how it leaves him behind, even if it's not far or forever.

I was planted in my childhood like a wooden stake in a yard that is shaken everyday to see if it can withstand the shaking.

My thoughts are fuzzy. There's a rushing in my head that spreads through my limbs and floods my ribcage, which I look at, perplexed.

Old men from the neighborhood pass by with their strange, moist eyes. Their gazes cling to my shoulders, my face. From time to time, Flori grabs my chest to see if anything is happening. He says he wants to marry me when I'm old enough.

Stefan, who has been renting the garret in our outbuilding for the past year, hides something unrestrained behind his reddened face. He drinks and smells of acrid old sweat. He has a habit of talking past people, as if he can't bring himself to look anyone

in the eye and his words are meant to cheat their way, as if in passing, into the ear canals of those he addresses. He works as a logger for the Count and is making himself comfortable in our family. He sits in our kitchen and drips schnapps into my youngest brother's tea. I'm embarrassed for him and don't know if I should tell Mother because she probably wouldn't believe me. Grandmother can't stand Stefan but Father is grateful when Stefan helps him work in the forest or bring in the hay harvest.

I can't figure out what I'm really living. My feelings aren't on speaking terms with the words I say. Before, if I aimed my words at objects, emotions, and grasses, I'd hit them, now my words bounce off the objects and emotions. Before it seemed to me that the feelings took on the words, but now I'm left behind with everything for which there is no language, or if there is, I can't use it.

Walking is a movement that defines me. I walk to school. I walk home. I walk across the field and back again. I look up at the treetops and reach for the fruit. I walk to the mountain stream; its splashing fills the valley from the bottom up with invisible bubbles like a tub filled with a foam of noise. My thoughts are twisty daydreams, conjectures about Death who's peeling off his old skin and still isn't sure when he'll show himself, when he'll show everything in its true light. Pretensions.

It's always different with the children in my schoolbooks. There's never anyone like me. I consider withdrawing from childhood because its roof has grown leaky, because I run the risk of foundering with it. I also think that much more has happened to me than could possibly be good for any childhood and that I already should have changed into something else, although I have no notion what that might be.

And there are still those words standing around in pretty crinolines, balancing like ballerinas on the tips of their toes, and rumors of being sent to another school. These thoughts seep into me like a clear carillon and I imagine how changing schools could cut me off from these surroundings.

Secret thoughts become vain. Timid, burnished thoughts begin circling in my head. They smell of lilies of the valley and look like they've just emerged from a beauty bath. They wear princess dresses and fur-lined high-heeled shoes.

After school, I like to go see Aunt Malka who lives with Sveršina in the Auprich cottage. She was one of the girls on our farm, Grandfather's youngest and prettiest sister, who'd married the widowed Farmer Auprich and, because he fell in the war, now lives in the small cottage with Sveršina.

Aunt Malka is the only one who finds everything I say enchanting. She doesn't just smile at me when I visit her, she beams, she claps her hands and strokes my cheeks. She gives me a hug. Good Lord, she says, good Lord, my girl, my darling girl, what do you want, what would you like me to give you? She makes me *palatschinken*, pancakes spread with a thick layer of jam. She slips me pieces of candy that glow in my book bag like small spheres of bliss that I keep for myself and don't share with anyone. She sits with me while I eat and wants to know what's new at home. Oh, nothing, I say, Grandmother's doing well. And your father, she asks. He's doing well, too, I answer. The two of them suffered through so much, she observes, enough for several lives. Does your grandmother tell you how things were then, she wants to know. Yes, sometimes, I say, I know a few stories. You should ask her, Malka urges me. She, too, had told her children many stories once they started to be curious, how she and the others were arrested as partisans and taken to Ravensbrück, how the war turned their lives upside down. Of course children shouldn't be frightened too much, it could make them as strange as their parents and grandparents, as crazy as she is herself. Her fear of planes, for example, every time she sees a plane in the sky, she has to run into the house and hide. She has become so childish with time, she says, terribly childish, as if she's turned into a girl instead of an old woman. There's no explanation for it and none for the horrifying dreams she has. Sometimes she dreams she's back in Ravensbrück and she constantly has to calm Sveršina down. When he can't sleep, he also talks about Mauthausen, but he doesn't say much, he's never very talkative. But your grandmother has kept her pride, she hasn't become as fearful as I have, she tells me, not as skittish.

Sveršina, on the other hand, doesn't want to hear anything about me when he joins us at the white enamel table. He never asks after my parents or Grandmother. He sits there without saying a word. He seems to know better than I do.

FATHER avoids us for days after the most recent incident with the gun. He works in the forest and rarely comes home. The mood on our farm is like after a deafening explosion. An inner numbness has us in a stranglehold and makes talking difficult. I wonder if Father's condition might have something to do with me or with Mother's attitude. I can't come up with anything about me that would drive Father to such episodes, so I watch Mother with very closely. I'm suddenly suspicious of her loud laughter, I silently reproach her for never joking as boisterously with Father as she does with a few acquaintances who come to visit or whom she meets after mass.

But Father is also friendlier outside the house than at home. As long as he's not drunk, he smiles engagingly. He drapes his arms casually over various seat and chair backs. He becomes talkative and says "I" and "I have" and "I".

I begin to suspect that he's automatically drawn to those who were chased by the Nazis and that he thinks there's something fishy about people who, as he says, pretend to be better than they are. This doesn't surprise me. I can't remember ever finding it surprising. Grandmother also never stops complaining that Mother wants to be something better, that Mother knows nothing about people or the world because she never suffered a day in her life, because she has no idea what suffering is. I consider whether I should take sides in the argument smoldering between Mother and Grandmother and in the end decide to side with Grandmother because she has been through so much in her life and Mother is always criticizing me.

Father begins to withdraw from social life. When Michi asks him to sing in the Slovenian Cultural Association's mixed choir, Father declines. They should just leave him in peace with their cultural activities, he says. He never wants to step onstage again, his days of acting and music-making are over. Michi is sorry to hear it and asks if Father would at least consider joining the association's yearly excursion, it's always great fun. Yes, Father agrees, for that he'll go along. He also refuses to go to parent-teacher conferences at school. That's only for people who think they're important, he says. He's never been full of himself, he's never been one of those people.

Now and then I go collect him from the neighbors' place, where he's gotten stuck, as he says, after work in the forest. He likes to sit in the kitchen of the Peršman farm with Anči, who survived back when the SS shot the entire family. She was seven years old, Father says, and she was hit six times. You can still see the bullet wounds on her chin and hand. She was able to play dead but the younger children cried and were shot dead.

When I arrive, Father is usually sitting at the end of the kitchen table with a bottle of beer in his hand. Anči presides near the stove on which she keeps her children's dinner warm. As soon as I enter the kitchen, I start to examine her face and hands for scars. She was able to hide behind the cook stove, Anči says, but her little brother, who was in her arms, was shot.

On the front of the house is a marble plaque with the names of the children, the parents and grandparents engraved and gold-plated. Father says he could never live in a house where he'd be reminded of the dead every day, several times a day, every time he went in or out.

WHEN I come home from school one day, Grandmother tells me that old Pečnica is dead and she wants me to go with her to the wake.

As darkness falls, we cross the field behind our house and walk through the woods up to Pečnik's. People stand by the front door, talking in hushed voices. Grandmother and I enter the room in which old Pečnica is laid out. Neighbors sit and pray on the wooden benches that line the walls. The coffin is set before an open window and is surrounded with wreaths and flower arrangements of glowing red and white blossoms.

Grandmother cuts a small chunk of bread from the loaf handed to her. She gives me a bite and says that with this bread, she's cut off a bit of eternity, that by this bread we'll recognize each other in the hereafter, by the bread we eat at wakes. I'm not sure I want to eat this bread because the thought of meeting the dead in the hereafter scares me. I quickly slip the bread out of my mouth and hide it in my coat pocket. On a small table at the foot of the bier are two white candles, a statue of the Virgin Mary, a framed photograph and two teacups with holy water to sprinkle on the dead woman. Only now

do I notice that the coffin is encircled with intertwined red carnations that look like they're growing sideways out of the corpse. Grandmother tells me to take the small twig of boxwood from the teacup and sprinkle the dead woman with holy water. The only part of her I recognize are her strong hands, folded on her stomach. At the head of the bier, Grandmother lifts me slightly so that I can see the woman's face. I see an unfamiliar, round, waxy face, bordered by a dark kerchief and I quickly make a few motions in the shape of a cross with the boxwood twig. Done, I say to Grandmother, who is groaning under my weight. She lowers me to the flower, lays her hand on the dead woman's forearm and makes the sign of the cross with her fingertips. After we've sat down on a bench set close to the bier, I notice that Michi is also sitting on the bench and is crying. I ask Grandmother if Michi is related to the dead woman and she says no, but Pečnica was very good to the neighbor children.

On the way home, Grandmother tells me that on Christmas in '44, Pečnica took in Michi and his sisters Zofka and Bredica after the police had surrounded the Kuchars' house and had shot at Michi's mother and the partisans who were staying there. Luckily Michi held his mother back so she couldn't run out of the house. She would have been immediately mown down by the patrol like Primož who ran out ahead of her. The seven-year-old Michi, his entire body trembling, stepped out in front of the house with the two Knolič sisters, Anni and Malka, who were also partisans. The Knolič sisters were arrested at once and taken to Ravensbrück. Michi had to step over Primož's body and saw the police beat two more partisans who had surrendered with their butts of their guns. One of the wounded partisans was her own brother Cyril, whom I must know, Grandmother tells me. The children went to the Pečniks with just a few possessions. Pečnica warmed them up and took care of them until they'd calmed down enough to go stay with relatives over in Lobnik two weeks later.

After Pečnica's burial, for which Father and Mother drove to Eisenkappel, I overhear a heated conversation between Father and Grandmother in the sitting room.