

# I KNOW

*Johana Langova*

"DO YOU SEE THAT?"

"See what?"

"Over there, on the branch, the bird. Do you see it?"

"It's adorable!" I cry out as she takes my hand and we try to sneak off towards the bird who is hopping around on the branch. As we get a couple meters closer to it, it notices us and flies off.

"Drats," she sighs, her little six year old voice filled with regret as she lets go of my hand.

I laugh at her and shake my head, "Come on, let's go pick raspberries!" I take her hand again and drag her off through the little meadow and back into the trees to the raspberry bushes. The long grass, enveloped in morning dew, soaks our legs and the icy morning chill bites and growls at our goosebumps. Our matching shirts—the same ones that our parents wore when they were younger—are slightly damp against our skin.

I jump into the bushes, ignoring the thorns digging into my skin. I pretend they're the fairies, trying to keep us humans away from their precious treasures.

"You're too obsessed!" her childish laugh dancing through the air as I feverishly attack the raspberry bushes.

"Oh, we should save some for the others! I could make pancakes and berry sauce!" I smile at her and throw a raspberry at her. She shakes her head and I take off my hat, made of straw and falling apart, and start putting raspberries in it.

She sighs, but starts picking raspberries with me, because secretly she wants pancakes and berry sauce too. I look at her, trying to keep my eyes from watering and she looks at me at the moment, noticing my expression, "I know," she says and hugs me.

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"Look at this!"

"Jezisi marja, what is it again?"

"Look! A meadow! Of blueberries!" I pull at her hand in the direction of the meadow, acting like a toddler instead of the twelve year old I am.

"It's beautiful," she says after a while, throw-

ing her cigarette butt on the ground.

The pine forest gives way to a meadow full of knee high blueberry shrubs, with moss and grass mingling amongst them. The sun is shining bright, making everything a perfect temperature for lounging. On the other side of the meadow, there's a slope where you can see the rest of the mountains, green and lush and lower than the one we are on. The slope is white, almost blinding with how it contrasts with the greens and blues of the world around us. We plop down, and start eating the blueberries. After a while I take out a handkerchief and, making a bowl out of it, start collecting berries. I start singing traditional Moravian songs as she starts to hum to them. Soon, she falls asleep beside me and I lay down next to her, staring at the sky framed with pine trees and blueberry bushes, and I desperately wish that I won't have to leave again. Leave this paradise.

Then I notice her eyes on me and she smiles sadly at me, understanding, "I know," is all she says as she puts my head on her lap.

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"Is this one edible?" I ask her as I set my half filled basket on the ground.

Her face is older now, more serious, her voice rough from years of smoking and it makes me think of the harsh past five years she's had to endure. She sighs, "I think so...though it is a bit green, isn't it? Let's leave it be."

"Alright," I say and get up from the pine needle and moss ground. I pick off a few needles from my dress

and grab my basket. She's standing on the slope, overlooking the dark mountain in front of us.

"I miss Dad," she whispers, the shadows from my old straw hat making her face look foreign. I take her hand and squeeze it, "I know," is all I say and she trembles, looking at me with a sad smile, before looking far away again.

"It's just...why?"

"No one can answer that," I tell her and she slides down onto the ground, basket full of mushrooms forgotten. I slide down next to her and embrace her. She just stares off into the dark pines and dark storming skies. I start plaiting her hair, still amazed that she has it. When we were younger, it all fell out. Little pieces of hair on the couch, the bed...all of it falling off in the bathtub. The doctors said it was an immune disorder, switched on by stress. The stress of her father becoming ill all of a sudden. It's a wonder that she has hair now, especially after all that's happened.

And I start to think of my uncle, who for three years laid in the hospital with lock-in-syndrome and ignore the tears that want out- it's too late for tears. I'm too used to their threats. I've seen pictures of him, looking exactly like the picture of my great-grandfather when he was rescued from Mauthausen. A skeleton curling in on itself, with wide open, never blinking eyes. The feeling of horror as you stare at the living corpse and realize that just a few months ago you had been laughing with it, without a care in the world. And now it's not him, it's an it and it can hear your sobs but can't comfort you, because it's paralyzed human flesh. I stare up at the dark clouds for a

minute and sigh.

"I wish I could have seen him before he died," I say as I tie off her hair.

The sky starts to cry-slowly. It's tremors of pain resonating in rumbles and lightning.

"No you don't," then she stops, "I know you wanted to, but it was for the best. If you had collapsed due to the stress of seeing him, it would just add on to everyone's stress. But at least you'll remember him like the way he was."

I snort and help her up, "Shh...I know. I know." I grab our baskets, "It'll start pouring soon, let's get inside."

"Why can't we dance in it like we used to?" she asks, her voice losing its roughness, sounding too much like when we were little. For a minute nostalgia overwhelms me and I want to cry. But I don't, I never do.

"We can," I tell her, "Let's just go put these inside and get the radio, okay?" I had been the one to teach her to dance in the rain. I still remember all the times we'd come back into our grandparents house, mud on our bare feet and wet like cats.

We start the trek back home, the sound of the rain hitting the trees accompanying us. After a kilometer or so of beautiful quiet, we reach the white washed cabin where my mother is sitting with one of our other uncles.

"Oh goodness! You're soaked! Go take a hot bath!" my Mom starts fretting over us as Jiri, our uncle, takes the mushrooms, smiling.

"Jana, let them be. Hmm... there's some yellow mushrooms here..."

My mom looks at him and

glares at being reminded of almost poisoning the entire family.

"We'll be upstairs!" I shout, grabbing my cousin's hand and pulling her inside. We take off our shoes and run through the living room, ignoring the urn as we make our way up the winding wooden staircase and into our attic room. I grab the small portable radio as Eva opens the window and we climb out onto the roof. I close the window and Eva gracefully climbs down to the ground using only the gutter. Once she's on the ground, she helps me down. And not for the first time, I wish I was taller than her. I smile at her and taking each other's hands we run off, in search of a good place to dance.