

FANNY AND
THE MYSTERY
IN THE
GRIEVING FOREST

RUNE CHRISTIANSEN

TRANSLATED BY KARI DICKSON



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TRANSLATED FROM THE NORWEGIAN
BY KARI DICKSON

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DEATH

Slowly, slowly. All that effort. Nothing happens on its own. Neither the unflagging sun nor the most unobserved life in the depths of the ocean was created without effort, without forbearance. A badger looking for a home under the span of a bridge, the stones and clay that force their way up through the soil in plowed fields, the wood that warps and then sighs in the interior of a house, all are unaware of their own patience.

I no longer remember the circumstances, but once when I was young, I claimed it was possible to work out if two people, two strangers, would meet one day. It was simply a matter of mathematics, I believed. This statement flew out into the room like, more than anything, a winged insect with beautiful antennae. Of course it was just nonsense, of course I was just fibbing, telling comforting tales at best, as it is instead the end that can be calculated, the separation that is inevitable and to be counted on.

Let me tell you a story: a woman and her husband were in a car accident. The day was waning, they were on their way home from a shopping centre, and for some unknown reason, the car swerved off the road and straight into a transmission tower. The man's life was not to be saved, and the woman lay in hospital for a week before she too died. They left behind a seventeen-year-old daughter, Fanny, the only remaining person in an otherwise childless branch of the family, and as these tragic events unfolded, autumn swept in with weeks of

incessant rain and soon the corn stood rotting in the fields.

Despite her young age, Fanny was allowed to stay on in her childhood home. The months passed, and grief kept her company, it belonged to her, like her crooked nose, the colour of her eyes, and the shape of her fingers. It was both a strenuous and an undemanding time there in the old house. Fanny did as best she could, it was nothing special, she thought: getting to school, repairing the eavestrough, chopping wood, and weeding.

One morning she was woken by strong winds that had forced the birch trees out in the yard to sway so wildly that the tips of the branches whipped and knocked at the eavestrough. And when she realized there was no chance of going back to sleep, she kicked off the duvet and swung her legs round to sit on the edge of the bed. She folded her hands, not to pray, but to listen. Was there a fox rummaging in the garbage bins out there? It reminded her of the evenings when her mother had rattled through the kitchen cupboards looking for whatever whisk or pan she needed. Her mother, who had left her in the lurch there in the pallid light of the hospital, after she'd shouted, no, screamed, that it was sentimental and sick to sit by a bed and wait for someone to die. Her crazy, terrified mom. With youthful curiosity, Fanny had asked her straight out what she was afraid of. Didn't Fanny know? It was death. Her mother feared death. Not death per se, not death as a fact, but her own death, her own demise. There, she'd said it: it was the inevitability, that was what her mother feared.

Fanny was struck by how vague her memories of that sad time after the accident were. Her mother's face was strangely blurred. It was as though the memory had been diluted, water-logged, was no more than an unclear replica. And her father? The same was true of him. He was constantly travelling, she remembered that, he always had something to do. But some-

times Fanny saw her parents in dreams, sometimes she caught a glimpse of them, both so alive, in a town she had never been to, an imagined town, but still clearly a town with busy streets and green parks and fountains and cobbled squares bustling with people going about their business. These visions were an odd relief: a flock of pigeons taking flight from a busy marketplace, schoolchildren playing in front of a newspaper stand, and an airplane flying overhead, on its way to who knows where. But the pleasure was transient, and soon everything was fluid again, reset, forgotten.

The strange thing was, on the rare occasions that Fanny did think about the circumstances surrounding her parents' death, she always felt so in control, so balanced, despite the pain it caused, and whenever she later saw them—in her dreams, that is—it was as if the classic ghost motif had been turned on its head: it was she, the living, who was haunting the dead, she who disrupted and changed their reality, like a phantom, like a ghost in their existence on the other side.

Slightly irritated by the rude awakening, Fanny got up from the bed and stood by the window. There was a pile of logs in front of the outhouse that needed to be split and stacked. They were wet, and it would take time and energy. But Fanny was good with an axe and saw, and fortunately, the logs had already been cut to the length she wanted. Twelve inches. Perfect for the stove upstairs and the fireplace in the sitting room. “The sitting room” was something she'd inherited from her parents; the names and notions that had been attached to the various rooms and surroundings remained with Fanny, even now that she was alone in the house.

Her mother, and thus Fanny too, came from one of the oldest families in the area, but that had not resulted in prosperity or fame. They came from an industrious, stable, and,

not least, settled family. After all, Fanny did not come from noble stock, but rather from people of modest means: lumberjacks, miners, and sheep farmers, and more recently: dairy employees, artisans, and the odd teacher. They were solid and reliable, one and all, and did not feel the need to travel. But Fanny broke the mould, she was restless and enterprising, and she liked to travel: already as a fifteen-year-old, she had spent the summer cycling alone around Jutland, and the year after, she travelled to southwest England, also alone.

Fanny stretched, yawned loudly, and leaned her forehead against the glass, stood like this and tried to find her way back into her dream. Was it not something about space and a star that went out? No, she had to get a move on. She put on her raincoat and rain boots and went out. She left the front door open to air the house for a bit, and got started on the wood. It was easier work than she had feared, and she was very methodical, carried the chopped wood into the outhouse and stacked the logs against the wall, because she didn't want any sticks of wood left lying around outside.

When she had finished, she hung the axe back in its place and stood looking at the house. It was long and narrow and high. The white paint had blistered on the east wall and was flaking, but it had been like that for as long as she could remember, and the building was otherwise in good condition. The gables stretched up to compete with the trees, the windows reflected the green hillsides, and if you went up into the loft or stood on the slope behind the outhouse, you could glimpse the large lake that stretched along the bottom of the gentle valley.

Fanny had left her bedroom window open upstairs. She heard some irregular bumps and thumps inside the house. She took a few steps back and stretched her neck. A deer appeared in the open window. It paraded hesitantly, erratically, almost fearfully back and forth up there. Then it stuck its head out

and sniffed the air. They looked at each other, Fanny and this creature of the forest. How had it got in? And how would she get it out? She didn't want to risk meeting the animal on the stairs. Perhaps she could throw a stone or a stick at it. Surely the poor thing had some kind of instinct that would help it find its way out to freedom again? If it was frightened enough, it would surely escape danger. Fanny looked around, snatched up a stick, and waved it at the animal. But the deer didn't seem the least bit worried. Fanny ran a few steps and threw the stick up toward it. The animal bolted away, and immediately there was a crash in the room, a crash followed by a loud thump. Then the deer came sailing out the window. With its eyes open wide and tongue flapping from its mouth, it hit the ground. Something crumpled in the dazed body, then it lunged forward without force, tried to run off, to escape, but didn't manage. It looked like it wanted to roar, but all that came out were some pitiful moans from deep in its throat. Fanny closed her eyes and put her hands over her ears, but nothing changed, nothing disappeared, it was as though all the sounds reverberated in her head, as though the pain spilled over into her where she was standing. The deer kicked and flailed. Fanny breathed in, but not out, quick intakes into her lungs. When she finally managed to pull herself together, she went back to the outhouse to get the axe. The head of the axe smelled of fresh resin. Without hesitating, she took hold of the handle, swung her arms up into the air, and with single-minded force she struck the animal's head with the sharp edge. And in an almost unbroken movement, she then threw the weapon down and fell onto the dirt beside the animal. She recognized the metallic smell from the times she'd had a nosebleed. She often did in summer, in the dusty heat, it was probably some kind of allergy, her eyes always stung in the sun. She looked at the dark hole in the deer's skull, something glistened in the deep

wound. What was the point in going into an unknown house? What was to be gained by poking around and wandering up a dodgy staircase? Fanny laid her hand on the animal. Some flowers, some sweet-scented flowers, if you smell them long enough, until the initial rapture has faded, bring to mind death and decay.

A FRIENDSHIP

Once a week, generally on a Saturday morning, Fanny helped out in the church. It was the parish priest, Tobias Alm, who had suggested it. He had confirmed her, and conducted her parents' funeral. Fanny had bumped into him in the vegetable section of the local shop. He asked if she wanted to earn a little extra money. And even though Fanny suspected that he was doing her a favour, that he didn't actually need help, she said yes. The job was simple enough: there was no caretaker, so she swept the floor, ran errands, made sure there were fresh flowers in the two silver vases on the altar. She hung up the psalm numbers on the wrought-iron hooks by the pulpit and got the hymn books ready. There were all kinds of chores, the kind that quickly become routine. Fanny liked these set tasks, and the hours in the church were always pleasant. From the time she put her headphones and coat down on a chair in the vestry, until she cycled home again when she was done, she was in balance; for a while, everything that weighed her down was lifted. Her parents had never had much of a relationship with the church or religion, and nor did Fanny, to be fair, but after she started working for Alm, she started to say a prayer every evening. She didn't give it any thought. It just happened. Perhaps it was the minister who had awakened this in her. Even though he never talked about such things, she picked up bits and pieces when he ran through his sermons, from the psalms he always sang, the scriptures he mumbled. She didn't know

much about him, other than that he had written a couple of books, novels apparently, and that he had been a communist—well, a socialist at least—before studying to become a minister. He had been friendly and open-minded with Fanny when she was preparing for confirmation; she was often not there, but he had turned a blind eye and did not register these absences anywhere.

Alm had a scar on his left cheek. Fanny noticed it when they were rehearsing for communion. He leaned forward, and in the bright sunlight that flooded in through the side windows, she noticed the white line on his otherwise weathered face. Almost as though an axe or a sword had struck his cheek, she imagined. It looked deadly, and she was intrigued, but could not bring herself to ask. She let it go, despite the discovery having as good as stared her in the face. She was certain it had been a fateful event.

The same evening, before sleep took her, Fanny imagined all kinds of scenes in which Alm's cheek had been struck: with a sword in play, a big knife in a bitter fight, a plank on a building site. It might of course have been an accident, an unfortunate episode from Alm's youth, but that didn't invoke the same horror, the same thrill. Fanny liked the minister. She liked the fact that there was a secrecy about him. How old could he be? Mid-fifties? Maybe older? Had he been married? Did he have children? She had no idea.