

Antje Rávic Strubel
**Into the Woods
of the Human Heart**
An episodic novel
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The Beginning of Something

Stora Le, Dalsland, Sweden

Everything was different their second summer in the camp.

The year before the land had lain fallow, overgrown with stinging nettle and yellow rue. An old woodshed had served as a kitchen. In the meantime, the shed was used to store paddles, tents, and lifejackets that all wore the logo *Hemingway*. That was the name of the camp. The participants of the guided canoe tours had complained about the outdated image of masculinity it expressed, here of all places, where they had wanted to get some rest and relaxation. But the camp management held firm to the name. The participants had booked an outdoor vacation that included meals and equipment, first aid kits, and water purification tabs, they were instructed in paddling techniques and taught the rules of conduct in rest areas, they were insured and wore waterproof clothing. The name was the only thing that evoked a true sense of adventure. It brought to mind a struggle for survival in the wilderness, of battling the forces of nature which would be decided by the grand, unambiguous principles of victory or death.

Last summer the scouts had erected teepees. They had felled young trees and trimmed and planed the trunks without having ever done so before. The assembly instructions from an old Cheyenne Indian they found on the internet had helped them, and now there stood Cheyenne teepees with neatly crossed, shiny, logs of pine on the meadow, and they served as a reminder that nothing, and nobody, was predestined for a permanent place in the world.

Katja and René had slept in one of the Teepees the year before, after their long journey from Berlin. They were tall tents. Fresh air came in through a hole at the top. The fire pit in the middle had not been used, but over time the weather had faded the canvas tarps, and made them look like authentic originals.

During the tour, they slept in an easy to assemble Igloo tent. Their group was small. Five canoes sailing on the vast Stora Le, which reached all the way to Norway. Trollön jutted steeply over the lake, an island with a rest area for the canoers high up on a plateau. The water around the island was churning. Waves slammed into the cliff, splashing the path that zigzagged up from the shore. The rock plateau was covered with such a thin, dry layer of earth that when they secured the tent lines, the stakes sprung from the loose soil. But nobody protested. The view from up there compensated for the difficulties.

René and Katja stretched a tarp over the food to protect it from the wind and climbed back down to the shore. They pushed their canoe into the water and paddled out, leaving behind the group and the campfire between the tents. Katja sat in front, René at the back of the boat. Once the bottom dropped off from the shallows, they started to fish. After a while, the animals began to call. The calls came from the other side of the shore and blended with snippets of songs the group had started singing by the campfire, once it sounded like the German national anthem.

“They should sing the Swedish one,” said René, “or the Canadian one.”

“The Canadian one? Just because the guys in the camp claimed they got the teepees from an Indian reservation?”

“The Cheyenne live in North America, not in Canada.”

“They claimed they’d traded the thingies from some strung-out hippy-chiefs for psychedelic drugs,” said Katja. “And the girls believed it.”

“The landscape here kinda’ looks like Canada. Giant lakes, pristine stretches of land. Endless, deep, dark-”

“You and your fetish for the north,” said Katja.

“Have you ever even been to Canada?”

“- Woods,” said René. With a gigantic population of spruce trees.”

“How could they come up with something as idiotic as the national anthem?” Katja dipped the paddle vertically into the water and pulled it, René steadied the course with a precise stroke.

“Maybe because they know some of the lyrics,” said René. “Do you remember the lyrics?”

“Not a priority.”

“It’s more like a folk song.”

Katja said nothing. They paddled slowly and made sure they didn’t get tangled in the fishing line.

Katja then put the paddle aside and René’s strokes kept the boat moving lightly as she steered it on course.

“They aren’t striking,” Katja said.

“Not yet.”

René loved fishing with Katja. They had gone for the first time last year. They had fished from the shore, it was a warm windless morning. The wooden logs were wet from the nightly rain. Katja wore cut-off, frayed jeans, an old suit jacket with rolled-up sleeves and red suspenders. Her white-blond hair was disheveled and stuck out all over. She had brought ginger beer and cooled the small brown bottles in the water. Morning fog drifted over the lake.

Later, Katja had taken off her jacket. She had hung it over a branch and touched René's face as she turned around. Her hand rested on René’s chin, which

she had raised towards her, strong, warm fingers. She had stood so closely that René's skin grazed the rough suspenders.

Katja was older. She had already gone nightclubbing in Berlin, while René was still living in Neuruppin and had just discovered a few classic movies, *Desert Hearts*, *Mädchen in Uniform*, *High Art*. Meanwhile, Katja had been tapping beer in pubs like Roses, Bierhimmel, Berghain, and performed in safe sex shows that she drove to on her cream-colored, chrome chopper, she knew every drag king and every drag king knew her, and on that warm, foggy morning, a year ago, she had tilted back René's head.

René hadn't realized they had come there to kiss. Hadn't expected that the landing nets and the bait in the mason jars, the water bucket, lead weights and rod holders stuck between wet tree trunks in moss would provide the setting for a romantic interlude. René had to smile beneath the kiss. Only when Katja touched her breasts as she held her tightly, did she pull away. They had been drinking ginger beer and gazing at the water, until a perch took a nibble. And as Katja stood at the shore holding a bent rod, in her red suspenders and the same sleeveless hoodie as now, that was the moment when René had fallen in love. During the killing she had looked away.

They still fished in the middle of the lake. The current was weak and the sun came out again from behind the tops of the spruce trees. Katja's closely cropped hair shone in the dwindling light that fell across the canoe.

It was getting cool.

In the water, a shadow glided under them that might be a fish. But in the twilight it was not easy to make out, and when Katja drew the rod out of the water, the bait had been devoured. René watched her hook another worm. She took it from the jar they'd used for collecting the worms while it was still light out.

“They’re feeding,” René said.

“But they won’t strike.”

The canoe rocked as Katja cast wide and let the line run from the reel. It caused a buzz that briefly cut through the calls of the animals and the women’s songs. Then the line blurred into the darkness. All they could see was the teetering red of the spoon bait which was turning gray.

“Campfires are fabulous,” René said, and held the boat on course. “They create the impression of wildness, but have a civilizing effect. No sooner does the wood get burning, everybody starts to sing. And they never seem to run out of lyrics.

“Sing till they drop,” said Katja. “No matter how beat they are. If it says 10 miles, they paddle 10 miles, no matter if they’re totally wiped out, they lug the plastic food barrels up the stupid rocks as if they’d get a medal for it.”

“You also wanted to go to Trollön.” René said. “Just like last year. You liked it back then. You knew how steep it is.”

René made sure her paddle didn’t get caught in the fishing line. When she leaned over the edge of the boat, she couldn’t see anything. During the day, you clearly could see the heads dancing on the waves, but now nothing looked back from the darkness.

It made her think about the text of the German anthem, fathers and brothers, and about the text of the other German anthem, fathers and brothers and ruins, and she preferred to think about her book. She wasn’t thinking about what angle she’d take. She wasn’t concerned about the structure or title, rather she imagined how Katja would react when it finally was written and had found a publisher. She would be impressed. She’d stick her thumbs under her suspenders. Smile skeptically. “So, now we’re gonna’ be famous?”

Katja would want to go to receptions, lectures and parties, which they hadn't been invited to until then. They'd be part of the cultural elite, the high society of Berlin, because she, René, had made a name for herself. A name that would also protect them. Two slim women in suits, one who wore lipstick, the other not, her white-blond, closely-cropped hair spiked with gel, two women who kissed and touched each other, and who made no effort to hide their affection; some people were irritated by it. René even heard educated people wondering whether it was possible, strictly speaking, for them to engage in sexual intercourse. You've got to reckon with a few idiots. But there was also a fear of contact.

They cast the line the same way as before, and then Katja reeled in in the rod. She put it in the boat, grabbed her paddle, and swung the canoe around in an arc, before René could parry it. The canoe tipped. But they were practiced enough to counter steer it in time and paddled at a fast pace towards Trollön.

Even as they nearly reached the shore, Katja did not reduce the speed. The boat went way up the beach. The aluminum scraped the stones and the scout would blame them for the scratches the next morning. But René said nothing. She got out, threw the paddles and the rod onto the grass. They needed all their strength to pull the canoe high up the beach and turn it over so the water could run out.

“What's the matter, Katja?”

“I don't know,” said Katja, and collected wood, even though there was more than enough of it at the campfire for the night. But Katja didn't carry the wood up to the others. She dumped it onto the small, illegal fire pit that somebody had made from rocks in a sandy dune at the shore, and tried to get it going in the slipstream. René didn't say anything about that either, even though she was afraid the scout would come and remind them about the rules of conduct. She went back to the boat

one more time, and when she returned, Katja was making her way up to the plateau.

They wanted to stay with the group for three more days and then continue paddling on their own to the southern end of the lake. A grave with Runes had been made accessible to amateur archaeologists. And even though René didn't care much about Katja's hobby, or at least not about crawling through the dirt on her hands and knees to dig up some shards, she might at least gather a few useful tidbits of information. She had a weakness for the north, and it was her first book, and as soon as they got back home, she would start working on it. So far, she had only written some articles for travel magazines.

The wind blew the smoke toward the point. René spread the blanket between the lake and the fire. She sat on the blanket with the fire to her back and waited for Katja. She thought about nothing. She saw the two nights they had spent in the teepee. First she saw the night from a year ago and then the night this year, after the sweaty bus ride, a *lättöl* on the passenger deck of the Stena Line, and the barbecue at night in the camp. Both times they had a teepee just for themselves. They had slept across from the entrance, and they had made love almost silently in their double sleeping bag before they fell asleep.

René thought about the goose bumps on Katja's belly. She thought about the smooth inner thigh, the white-blond hair, the narrow grassy trail tickling her fingertips. Quietly, she had slid closer to Katja. Only a slight rustle could be heard as she lifted the top of the sleeping bag with her erect body. In the darkness, she had felt Katja's resistance. She had put an arm around Katja's waist and held her down. She had also been gentle. *My girl*, she had said, *my sweet girl*, and Katja had

whispered, whichever way round they did it, it didn't matter, it was all the same, played no role, with René, it was sexy any which way.

There was no difference between the two nights, apart from the small elisions that occur when you think about something a second time. But even so, they were still images you could place exactly on top of each other.

René hugged her knees. It was not quite dark. The firelight went as far as the water and she could see the boats. The fire shimmered on the aluminum.

Katja came back and sat down on the blanket close beside her. Behind them was the steep path that went to the plateau and before them lay the bay that led to Stora Le, where the camp was located on the northern shore. If they had paddled further around Trollön, they'd reach Norway.

Katja had brought some dough and two twigs with sharpened tips to twist the dough around, so they could roast it over the fire. The dough was sweet and tasted of yeast.

"I don't feel like eating," said Katja.

"But you went and got it specially."

"Fine," said Katja.

They molded the dough lightly, so it wouldn't fall off and held the twigs close to the embers. They were careful not to let the flame burn the dough and watched the firelight on the water.

"The moon's going to rise soon," said Katja.

René looked across the bay to the lines that marked the land on the other side. The lines rose sharply against the sky. She knew the moon would rise any minute in back, because the second time around you knew about such things too.

"I know," she said happily.

"You know everything," said Katja.

“Cut it out.”

“I can’t help it,” said Katja. “You do know everything. And I know everything. They taught us everything. That’s the trouble. We’re just two characters here, who got the short end of the stick.”

René said nothing.

“What don’t we already know? We haven’t invented anything new. We can’t invent anything new because everything’s already there. Like these idiotic anthems that get stuck in your head.”

“Oh shut up,” René said. “Just shut up.” And then: “Look, it’s coming.”

“Of course it’s coming. Duh.”

They sat on the blanket without touching each other and watched the moon rise.

A few days ago, Katja remembered, after they had closed the sleeping bag and had lain in the darkness awhile, listening to the wind slapping against the tarp of the teepee, René had pushed up her shirt and turned her on her back, her face was very close. She had grabbed her breasts and caressed them, lustfully, firmly, and slowly got her painfully aroused. And Katja had resisted. She did not acquiesce to René, not this time, and it spurred her on to be more assertive, to hold her wrists more tightly, and whisper things in her ear that she knew excited them both.

My girl, René had said, *my silvery girl*. And although it was a misunderstanding, Katja had remained silent. Although, it had less to do with Katja, than with what Katja was not. It had more to do with any other possible person than with her, had to do with just about anybody other than the single person René had been with in the teepee that night. It didn’t have to do with anything at all, thought Katja, and nevertheless she had left it at that.

Had given in.

Had lain back and searched for fitting images and replied in a whisper that it didn't matter which way round they did it, it played no role, and didn't change anything, and she heard only the rustling of the sheets rubbing against the waterproof outer layer of the sleeping bag. René had kissed her and then fervently and with finesse fucked her, before she seamlessly and without panties fell asleep next to her.

Katja had lain there without sleeping. Her body was barricaded. It was barricaded in places where René's hands had touched her, where Rene's hands should not have been, *not like that, differently, touch me differently, please, do it*, which up to that point Katja always had reinterpreted, secretly, without letting René in on it. She lacked the courage to tell her, or the opportunity. Katja had lain there and known she could not sleep, that she would never again be able to fall asleep, at least not as long as she imagined forcing René's hands to move differently and directing them onto a body that did not exist.

The tension made her unfair.

The summer last year, they also had spent the first night at the camp in a tepee. Next to the fire pit, the zippers of their sleeping bags open. René had said *my sweet girl* and lay on top of her with her gorgeous weight, everything had happened exactly the same way, and it should have been a warning. But the hands she had gotten used to, the fleeting affection, and the morning espresso brewing in a steel pot over the campfire had swept away the tension that tightened Katja's skin that year. The top of her sleeping bag was wet. But she wasn't crying. She never cried, that wasn't part of the equipment. She only opened her mouth, until her jaw grew numb. Kept still. She lay there and heard the wind slapping the outer wall of the teepee, and she heard René whisper *Katja, Katjusha, your hair, it glows in the dark like silvery grass*.

"You don't have to talk silly," René said. "What's really the matter?"

“I don’t know.”

“Of course you know.”

In all the years Katja had been in love, the five or six times, she had never been as in love as with René.

“No, I don’t.”

“Go on. Say it.”

Katja looked at the moon coming up over the hills. “It isn’t fun anymore.”

The moon was abruptly there, glistening, it hung over the treetops.

“It isn’t fun. Not any of it.”

René sat with her back to her, and Katja looked at her back. The neon green inscription glowed on the lifejacket, René hadn’t taken it off because of the cold that came up from the ground. *Hemingway*. Had it been brighter, the water would have reflected the name back as a multiple mirror image.

“I feel as though everything is gone in me.”

René said nothing.

“Now you know. There’s nothing more to say.”

René turned to her. Her face was cast in shadow, obliterated by the moon.

Translated by Zaia Alexander