

Cuisson

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The Doc slides some more twigs beneath me and asks me if I want anything against the pain. Morphine perhaps, or even an anaesthetic. She's brought it all, she whispers, and points to the big black bag at her feet. I shake my head and say that I want to feel everything. She gives me a worried look, and asks if I'm not afraid of the pain, the suffering and the inescapable death that's awaiting me. I reply that I knew what I'd let myself in for when we came here, deep in the woods, away from everything and everyone. That drawing the shortest straw decided who amongst us was granted the shortest life. That in the thirty-seven years that I have been here, I had never, simply never, drawn the longest straw. That I hadn't expected anything else.

I tell her it's my fate, and mine alone. That it's better it's me rather than her or someone else. That someone should be the first. And that I hope that it will stop after this, that we will reach our goal and that everything will be like it used to be, or close to that. She nestles her head against one of her shoulders and nods, places a hand on my stomach as

if that makes any difference and tries to read my thoughts with her piercing bright-green eyes. There aren't any. My head is full of white noise, as white as the snow under her feet.

The fatso with the greasy hair positions himself next to me and checks the ropes. First the one around my neck, then the one around my body, hands and hips and finally the rope around my knees and ankles. The man apologises for the discomfort, but I have to be tied up. That way I will not make a run for it. Because, he assures me, I'll change my mind once the moment has come, once my body is torn by pain and the smell of my own flesh reaches my nose and then my brain. I'll try and wrench myself loose and resist what follows with all my might. The inevitable.

He says that he knows this because he's prepared himself thoroughly for this day, which he calls sad, but also memorable. He's read about it, and not only online. About the fate of witches, heretics and everyone who was different or thought differently, in times that were even darker than ours. About people who preferred fire over the tyranny of an unjust regime. How they doused themselves in gasoline and allowed themselves to be consumed by fire until all that was left of them was a hollow, smoking carcass.

Before he is able to elaborate on what my body will endure once the smoke has asphyxiated me, I ask him to be silent. He growls, incensed because his knowledge, acquired with difficulty, is not being assessed at its true value, he turns around and slouches sulkily back to the chalet, leaving deep footprints behind in the snow.

I don't like him, the man who came up with the idea for this direct action but considers himself too important to sacrifice himself for the common good. The coward who, a mere hour ago, granted himself exemption, held the straws in his hand as I and the others lay ourselves open to fate, but did not take one himself. This corpulent man about whom some in our group say with a voice breaking with admiration that he used to be a top chef. A master of *cuisson*.

I feel the Doc releasing my hand. The creaking of the flakes beneath her rubber boots gives away that she is moving away from me a few paces. Someone asks if I can look towards him while he is filming. He immediately adds that he will record everything during and after the ceremony as well.

I open my eyes and look at him. He's small and gaunt, and is wearing a grey woolen hat, the rim pulled down to his eyebrows. I recognise him. It's the man who sat next to me in the rickety coach which brought us here, sixteen people with an extremely uncertain future. Unlike most of the others who merely stared ahead during the hours long journey between the capital and this immense spruce forest, he continued to rattle on. He wasn't sure, he said. He supported the goal that we had in mind, but didn't want to be the one who would give his life for it. He was no martyr and didn't feel the need to become one. More than anything he seemed afraid, but didn't want to say so explicitly, not even when I asked him.

His fear seems to have disappeared now that the drawing of lots has gone against me. He hovers around me, his

smartphone twenty centimetres away from my face and films everything frenetically. Close-ups of my face, of my numb fingers, long shots of my shivering body on a bed of twigs. I ask him if this is really necessary. He nods and says that his footage is of crucial importance, that it will serve as evidence of our disapproval, of our unwillingness to acquiesce to the policy.

He raises his voice, declaims that the images will be shown during news bulletins, shared and given brief comments on social media, and discussed in detail in opinion pieces and panel discussions on radio and tv. Sociologists, psychologists and other self-proclaimed experts will analyse our motives and dismiss us as a marginal phenomenon in a well-functioning society, taking all the trouble they can not to utter the word 'deranged'.

A small number of people who have changed their views will praise our courage and decisiveness, our selfless pursuit for a return to the old values, to a society in which everyone can lead his or her life in relative freedom. Where everyone, including those who have few means, is allowed to smoke again, to copulate in order to reproduce, drive a car, take a plane and indulge in the meat of animals that have been bred for consumption. Especially the latter, the man with the hat says, because of all the pointless laws and measures that should bring us to a longer, better life and protect us against total annihilation, the Meat Ban is the most ridiculous.

Our act of resistance will haul people out of their comfortable slumber, he predicts. It will force the powers onto

their knees, or at least make them think about what their policy has done, how it has left people with their hands tight. That he thinks it's a shame I won't live to see this happening, but – he adds with a deadpan expression – that there has to be one person who has to eliminate him or herself for the wellbeing of all.

While I drown out his sermon until it's no more than a background murmur, the door to the chalet swings open. Against the light streaming outside I detect a dozen or so silhouettes, the widest of which is that of the chef. Two shadows carry something that looks like trestles, four others a large sheet measuring no less than three by four metres. A woman with long hair lumps a box out of which the sound of plates and cutlery knocking against each other resounds. The man passing through the door last is carrying two jerry-cans in each hand. Flanked by the Chef he approaches me sluggishly, gazing into the distance as if he's just returned from the funeral of a friend and is now heading home, alone with his grief and a head full of memories.

He's the executioner, the man who will fulfil my fate, the one with the straw that was barely a centimetre longer than mine. When he stops next to the wood pile, his moist dog eyes tell me that he himself would rather be somewhere else too. With his family, on the sofa with his dog at his feet, drinking himself senseless with his friends. Anywhere but here, where a task is awaiting him that no one has prepared him for and which will haunt him for the rest of his life.

I give him a wink, if only to calm him, and ask myself if he will also eat me, sink his teeth into a part of my charred

body. And if so, which part will he choose. As he pours the gasoline in quick but generous splashes over the twigs and then over my entire body, I imagine him tearing off the meat from my calves, smacking his lips loudly and in between each bite wiping the blood from the corners of his mouth with a napkin. The thought of such an end should make me shudder, but it doesn't. This is how it's supposed to end.

It's the Chef who, after a brief, meaningless speech in which he thanked me repeatedly for my courage and generous offer, strikes a match and throws it under the pile of twigs. While some other people drape a cloth over the table in the distance and lay this as it should be, the man with the smartphone twirls around me. He films the reactions from the Chef, the bystanders, me as the living roast. I do not move. The only question I keep asking myself is: will I be raw, medium or well-done?

I don't know what sensation I become aware of first. The horrific pain when the first flame licks my right arm or the penetrating stench of burnt hair.