

MARLIS WESSELER

The  
Beech  
Forest

Thistledown  
Press

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*For Evan*

## ONE

On one of the last autumn nights of the visit, Lisa Braun dreams she is Jewish. When she wakes up, she can hear Gerhardt talking, the murmur of Karl's answer, Renata's clear laughter. Despite the dream, she finds the sound of German being spoken indistinctly from another room comforting. It reminds her of visits with her mother's sisters, especially Aunt Gemma who, as the eldest of a large family, retained a German... not accent exactly. What would you call it? Certainly not a lilt. A sound from the back of the throat that could be distinguished even when they all spoke English.

The apartment is old enough to still feature a toilet with a little raised ceramic shelf. This morning it bothers her, just the sight of it. German self-obsession. She gazes into the mirror over the sink that's a bit too high for her, brushing out her brown hair cut in a bob that is now growing too long. Maybe she should get it cut here. She notices some new strands of grey, examines the crow's feet behind her glasses. Her nose is becoming hawklike, just like her dad's.

She practises a bright German *Guten Morgen* before heading to the living/dining room, hoping for a newly made pot of coffee. The apartment is furnished in blond wood with leather couches

and chairs, and glass vases from Sweden are placed attractively around the room. Paintings of scenic views grace cream-coloured walls. Everything shines with the beauty of regular and impeccable housekeeping.

“*Morgen!*” Her mother-in-law looks up from buttering a roll. Renata is now, in her seventies, beginning to put on weight, but she dyes her hair the blonde it has been all her life, and likely anyone who knew her in her twenties would still recognize her.

Karl, white haired and thin, glances at Lisa with his usual benign irony and asks if she has slept well.

“*Ja, sehr gut.*” She smiles and nods, takes her place at the table, and lets them get on with their conversation, exchanging looks with Gerhardt, whose “good morning” shows an undertone of irritation. After three weeks, he is beginning to find the constant conversation an effort and clearly feels she’s not doing her part. “Have you checked your email yet?” she asks during a rare lull, wondering if there’s been any word from their son, who is also in Europe, travelling with his girlfriend. They are supposed to show up for a visit before she and Gerhardt go home.

“Yes,” he says. “Nothing from Tyler.”

Disappointed, she takes a roll from the basket, cuts it in half, and tries to decide which of the variety of spreads and cut meats and cheeses she wants. She will pass as usual on the *Hackfleisch* which, no matter what you call it, is nothing but raw hamburger. “I think I’ll go for a walk in the woods this morning,” she announces in German, avoiding her husband’s eyes. She butters her roll carefully. “I need some exercise.” She adds quickly in English to Gerhardt, “On my own.”

“Good,” he says crisply. “That’s fine.” He pours himself more coffee and turns his attention to his mother’s story about an eccentric neighbour.

THE APARTMENT BUILDING is on the outskirts of a small town about an hour from Berlin, in the former Eastern bloc and on the edge of a beech forest. People in the neighbourhood walk in the forest for exercise, to find peace and quiet, to commune with nature. Nature seems to be very important to Germans, maybe because they haven't conserved much of it.

Today the weather is fine, but since it's a weekday the woods are almost deserted. She stops to sit on a fallen log, admiring the trees, which seem to thrive in Germany mainly among their own kind, unlike the scrub brush at home where pine and poplar, spruce and the odd willow compete for the same sparse nutrients.

This forest is extraordinarily beautiful, and she wishes she had a sketchbook with her, sorry for the first time in years that she gave up painting. Silver-grey beech trees with velvet bark rise, monumental, from the brown earth. Perfect sprays of oval leaves filter the light from above like stained glass, casting emerald clarity on the forest floor. But in spite of the September light, the ground here harbours little but an assortment of last year's leaves, the odd decaying log like the one on which she is resting, and a few branches. Few ferns or bushes grow here, no excess of any kind. Nothing but beech trees. And even with her bad sense of direction, it isn't easy to get lost here. Everything, nature itself, seems well-planned and precise.

The German word for 'beech forest'? *Buchenwald*. No wonder she dreamed about being Jewish, especially after all the TV documentaries last year marking the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war. She can't recall anything much from the dream except that newly discovered heritage and a certain bewilderment.

Her in-laws haven't lived in their apartment very long, but when they refer to *der Buchenwald*, there's no hitch to their voices,

no self-conscious undertone. To them it's just a word for the neighbouring woods. It is next door to them, they go for walks in it, it is as ordinary as *der Kieferwald*, the pine forest down the road where they hunt for mushrooms, and which is supposedly off-limits to the public because of undetonated ammunition left over from the Russians.

A voice calling from the other side of a small brook startles her. It rings alarmingly cheerful, almost exactly like that of her mother-in-law. Even though she knows Renata to be entertaining her son at home, she stands up and walks the other way, leaving the main path.

Now that his parents are older, she and Gerhardt should take more trips to Germany. But visiting Karl and Renata is always exhausting because Renata insists on just that: visiting. Lisa has to leave the apartment or stay in bed if she wants any time to relax. She's rarely left to read for more than half an hour at a time, or to relax in front of the tv. Even during past visits when they had the kids with them, Tyler and Stephanie could laze around, listlessly reading comic books, but she and Gerhardt had to chat.

Having constantly to concentrate on a second language tires her out, but it isn't only all the loquaciousness that bothers her. Karl and Renata talk about their other in-laws with such gleeful spite that she is sure they often mock her too. And in restaurants, visits to the city, on short holidays by the sea, they laugh at strangers, right out in the open. Shy Swedes passing awkwardly by their table, swaddled Turks crossing the street in front of them, fat people on the beach, people who walk funny. Conspicuous chortles or simple har-harring that she hates having anything to do with. She's noticed this in other Germans too. Not all, of course, but enough. Not anything like a Canadian's way of raising a quick eyebrow, widening eyes so slightly that only their friends, supposedly, would notice. It isn't that her countrymen are any kinder, but

their derision is subtler. It could take years before a foreigner grew to hate Canadians.

She recalls taking Tyler to skating lessons in Saskatoon years ago, and a couple of men next to her tying their kids' skates, one saying to the other, "Cold enough for you?" and the other replying, "But it's a dry cold." No grins, no sly glances at each other. Only another Canadian would know they were mocking the banal small talk of a couple of grandparents nearby. She's retained this exchange from years ago because even at the time it typified something to her.

Gerhardt also appreciates quiet Canadian sarcasm in spite of the fact that it could well be directed at him. Berliners are famous, at least in Germany, for their dry humour, although they tend to laugh at their own jokes. With only a few exceptions, usually late at night over too much alcohol, the Brauns' stories of the war and its aftermath are all told with a certain black amusement.





PHOTO: DON HALL

Born in Kinistino, Saskatchewan, Marlis Wessler attended university in Saskatoon and Regina, taught school in the North, travelled extensively and has lived and worked in Regina for over forty years. *The Beech Forest* is her sixth book of fiction. Award-winning and often nominated, her previous books are the short story collections, *Life Skills* and *Imitating Art*, and the novels, *Elvis Unplugged*, *South of the Border*, and *The Last Chance Ladies' Book Club*.