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Opening Extract from...

Stallo

Written by Stefan Spjut

Translated from the Swedish by Susan Beard

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STALLO

A Supernatural Thriller

STEFAN SPJUT

Translated from the Swedish
by Susan Beard

FABER & FABER

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The worm glued to the tarmac is as long as a snake. No, longer. It reaches all the way to the grass verge beside the main road. The boy's eyes follow the slimy ribbon and notice that it stretches across the ditch and curls into the belly of a grey animal. A badger. Dead but still looking. Its eyes are black glass and one paw has stiffened in a wave.

The car door opens and his mother calls, but he cannot tear himself away from the animal.

Then she gets out.

She stands beside the boy. Wrinkles her nose so her glasses ride up.

'It's been run over,' she says.

'But why does it look like that?'

'Those are intestines. A bird pulled them out. Or some other animal.'

He wants to know which bird, which animal.

'Come on now,' she says.

'But I haven't peed yet.'

'Well, do it then.'

He presses his cheek against the window but the pine trees are so tall he can hardly see where they end. His knees are gripping a large Fanta bottle and from time to time he blows into the neck.

The glass is warm and the last few mouthfuls have also been warm. They have been driving for almost three hours, and he has never travelled for such a long time in a car before.

When they stop he does not understand that they have arrived, because they are right in the middle of the forest. There is no sign of a cabin. Only trees.

'Are we there?' he asks.

His mother sits motionless for a while, lost in her thoughts, before pulling the key from the ignition and climbing out. She opens his door.

It is as if the mosquitoes have been waiting for him. They come from all directions and land on him in such a teeming mass that his legs look mottled. He makes no attempt to brush them away but instead stiffens and lets out a plaintive yell.

His mother heaves the bag onto the bonnet and finds a bath towel, which she wraps around him like a cape. After she has tied it round his neck she starts running, with the bag in one hand and the plastic carrier from the supermarket in the other. She leaves a kind of furrow behind her in the long grass. She is wearing a short-sleeved top in green velour, and an oblong-shaped sweat mark is spreading out between her shoulder blades. Her flared jeans flap around her ankles.

He follows after her and the little figures in his backpack rattle inside their plastic box. He holds the shoulder strap with one hand and uses the other to grip the towel to stop it from flying away. Running is difficult and soon his mother's back disappears in the dense greenery in front of him. He calls out to her to wait, but she carries on, calling over her shoulder for him to hurry up.

The ferns have formed tight, thick clumps, and beyond them the fir trees tower above the pitch-black ground. All around him

the spiky stalks of the grass hum and tick with insects, and his cloak flies behind him as he runs.

The forest is a silent reflection on the windowpanes. Pine cones, thin twigs and drifts of old pine needles are piled up on the metal roof. The fir trees sway high above against a sky that has grown pale.

His mother has reached the door. Pulling a face she leans forwards, feeling under a windowsill.

'Oh, please,' she says, bending up the metal and forcing her fingers underneath while blowing puffs of air to each side to keep the mosquitoes away.

The boy has untied the towel and pulled it up over his head like a headscarf. He spins around in pirouettes and his trainers thump on the veranda. Grass has grown up in places between the planks, and he stamps it under his feet. There is an ashtray filled with water resting on the wooden railing, and a fly is floating on the surface. Or could it be a beetle? All he can see are crooked legs sticking out. But when he looks closer he notices more insects. The water is thick with them. It looks like a disgusting soup, the kind witches make.

His mother has knelt down and is trying to look under the windowsill.

'I don't believe it,' she says.

Then she starts hunting in the grass below the window.

The boy watches her for a while. Then he tries the door handle.

'Mummy,' he says, 'it's open.'

She pushes him in front of her, lifts in their luggage and slams the door shut behind them. The boy stands in front of a wall hanging

of dark swirls and hard, staring eyes and he wonders what it is supposed to be. An owl? Then he gets another push from the hand holding the plastic bag. The bag is cold from the milk cartons at the bottom.

'In with you then!'

The words leave his mother's mouth and seem to fasten in something inside, a web left behind by the silence that has reigned for so long inside the cabin. The boy feels it and is hesitant. He would prefer to stand where he is for a while.

'Go in!'

With wary eyes he walks inside and looks around.

The walls are covered in unpainted pine panelling below and woven wallpaper above. Small pictures and copper pans hang here and there. Through a door he sees a bunk bed with fringed bedspreads. He peers in. The room is very small. Beside the bed is a stool with a book on top of it. Outside the window stands a tree. Its pointed leaves almost touch the windowpane.

He lays his rucksack on the kitchen table, unzips it and takes out the plastic box. It is an old ice cream container with BIG PACK written on a wrinkled label on the lid. Carefully he pulls off the elastic band because he knows it might snap, then tips the figures out onto the table. The ones that came free in boxes of biscuits are all tangled up as if to show they belong together. He also has Smurfs. A hippopotamus with a gaping mouth. A gorilla beating its chest. A galloping horse unable to stand up. A man who is sitting down. He is blue all over, even his head.

Opposite the wood-burning stove is a little sofa, and he sits down on it with a Smurf in each hand. A floor lamp with a pleated shade leans over him. There is no light bulb in it, only a gaping hole. They have borrowed the cabin from someone his mother

works with, and the boy wonders why the owner has not put in a bulb. Perhaps for the same reason that there is no television.

He runs his hands over the sofa's upholstery, which is mustard yellow and knobbly. He knows if you play about wildly in a sofa like this you can burn yourself.

There is a small kitchen area, and he walks over to look. The fridge is so small he has to bend down to open it. It is empty inside; no light comes on and it does not even feel cold. He has to push the door firmly to make sure it stays shut. The wall above the draining board has the same cork covering as the floor – reddish brown with a hexagonal pattern.

There is a string of plastic garlic hanging from a nail. He points at it and asks if he can take it down, and she says he can. By climbing on a stool he can get onto the draining board and reach the garlic. Not that he can do much with it, but it is only pretend anyway. He pinches the stiff plastic leaves, testing to see how well they are attached, while his mother walks around opening cupboards and drawers. She opens the fridge too, and shuts it again.

The boy says there is floor on the walls.

'Yes,' she sighs. 'And walls on the floor.'

His mother brings in flowers, a large bunch, which she pushes into a vase and places on the table. They have a powerful, spicy fragrance and are called camomile. The boy notices that the white petals are covered in tiny, tiny insects, but she tells him not to mind. Some of them fall like snow onto the table, and so that he can see them against the grain of the wood he has to lower his head and look closely. The creatures are in a hurry and know exactly where they want to go. He tries to stop them and make them change direction, but he fails.

'Do you know how small these insects are?' he says.

'I'm sure they're minutely small.'

'They are so small they die when I touch them.'

Later that evening they lie on the bunk bed under a quilt patterned with huge fantasy flowers and spiralling stems. They have fitted an insect screen to the window and the whole cabin echoes to the chirping of grasshoppers.

'Listen,' she whispers, her lips against his hair. 'It sounds as if they are indoors, don't you think? As if they are here, in the cabin, playing for us. Under the bed perhaps?'

The boy nods and asks about the shielings she had been talking about in the car.

'Where are they?'

'In the forest.'

'Can we go there?'

'Perhaps.'

'Can we?'

'We'll see.'

In the early morning the rain comes and does not stop. The raindrops are hitting the ashtray on the veranda rail so hard that the water looks as if it is boiling. Now the witch is cooking her soup, he thinks. The wooden seat of his chair is cold and he crouches on it, pulling his sweatshirt over his knees. He is waiting for breakfast. Once more he asks about the huts. Are they far away?

'We'll do it another day,' she says.

He protests loudly and is told they have no rain clothes with them. That disappoints him and he complains. He has his boots, after all. He whines until she strokes his hair.

She looks at him, her thick, shiny brown fringe falling over her large glasses. Her forehead is completely hidden.

They eat cold rosehip soup and bread spread with margarine.

'Boring sandwiches,' she says.

'When-it's-pouring sandwiches,' he replies.

Afterwards they play cards, Beggar My Neighbour. He is an expert at Beggar My Neighbour. You have to be especially careful when you lift your card in case the other person sees it. His mother does not understand that. She sits with her chin resting heavily on her hand, studying the cards that she turns up – she does not stand a chance. The boy triumphs again and again, slapping his palm hard on the tabletop and giggling every time he wins a pile of cards.

Finally she gives up, moves away from the table and curls up with a book on the little sofa. In her bag she has a whole pile of books. She rests her feet on the armrest and curls her toes. Her nails are squares of red varnish. She is wearing a chain around her neck, and as she reads she slides the pendant backwards and forwards, making a rasping noise. There is no point now in trying to talk to her. He knows that only too well.

The wood burner is a cavern and he puts his little figures in there, kneeling down and making the doors creak, and then shouting in a high-pitched voice. The stove is a prison and the figures hate being shut in. It is terrifying in there, dark and with only ash to eat. But they have only themselves to blame! Goofy tries to escape but is caught near the log basket and returned to the sooty cell, howling in protest.

His mother smiles at him.

He dislikes that, so he keeps quiet.

*

Towards afternoon the rain stops, and he gets excited. Now they can go out and look for the shielings! But his mother shakes her head. She says it is still raining in the forest. The trees will be dripping with water and it will be wet everywhere.

'We'll be drenched in no time,' she says, turning the page.

Then she says:

'You can go out on your own and play, can't you?'

He can.

He rolls mosquito repellent on his forehead and chin and over his hands, all the way out to the fingers. Even on his sleeves and the front of his jeans, just to be sure. Then he puts on his boots, pulls up the hood of his sweatshirt, opens the door and shuts it quickly.

The plot is not large, more like a little glade in the forest, and he has soon explored it. The door of the woodshed is open, and inside a grey ball is hovering. A wasp nest. It looks uninhabited, but he does not dare take a closer look.

The silence brought on by the rain is still hanging over the forest. From the top of the steep glistening wall of pine trees come isolated, experimental trills. He walks slowly along the trail, his face upturned, trying to catch a glimpse of the birds, but the trees reveal nothing moving within them. They have secrets.

The forest drops, drips and dribbles. Plips and plops. The glossy, weighted vegetation shines. He feels as if it is coming towards him like the big wet brushes that spin against the windows in the car wash. Here and there are streamers of pinky red. Those flowers are called fox's brush, he knows that. The name is not difficult to remember.

He is thinking he might reach the car soon, that the

chocolate-brown lacquer will flash among the trees. He is not sure what he will do there. Perhaps look at it, peer through one of the windows and then go back.

But then he catches sight of a ditch. The water is completely green, so the bottom is hidden, but it does not look deep. He wonders where the ditch is going and decides to follow it, stumbling over ground made bumpy by tussocks of grass. He tries as far as possible not to put his feet where it looks hollow and risky. With detours and small leaps from stumps to rocks he makes his way forwards. His ears are covered by his hood, so he cannot hear much, but the sounds come mainly from cones and twigs cracking beneath his boots and the wind slowly moving between the wet trees.

A shieling is an unpainted wooden shack – that much he knows, at least. Nobody lives there, but in the old days, long ago, animals lived there. *Alone.*

A house with animals. What would such a house look like? Has it got windows? If so, do the animals stand inside looking out, feeling bored? It was a strange thing to imagine. He is sure animals often feel bored, that they are so used to being bored they never even think how bored they are.

Occasionally the ditch disappears behind some impenetrable undergrowth and spiky clusters of reeds with long leaves. The grass swishes against his boots, and his trousers have gone dark at the front because of the water. It chills his thighs. His mother was right and he wonders if he should turn back.

Then he spots the footbridge and changes his mind.

A couple of dark tree trunks with planks nailed across them.

Is it a bridge to the shieling? Do the animals walk across this bridge?

He stands there with cold legs, hesitating a while.

The water beneath has a pea-green skin. It looks poisonous. A pine cone is floating in it. He could end up like that if he is not careful. He knows that. Someone floating, immobile, face down. Someone drowned.

Holding onto the rail he walks across the bridge. His mother's lips mouth a warning inside him, but he is already on his way into the sea of grass waiting on the other side. It is so tall that he disappears in it. When the wind blows the leaves bend and brush against each other. They become waves that whisper.

He can be just like an animal in the grass. A shrew, perhaps. Nothing is visible apart from strips of green slicing against each other. Holding his hands out in front of him he uses them to part the rustling reeds. This is what it is like for the shrew. Exactly like this.

The boy walks further and further out on the moss.

When he sees water in front of his feet he immediately steps to the side. He does not like the boggy feel of it. From time to time his boots gets stuck, as if the ground is sucking them down. It scares him, and after almost stepping out of one boot he has had enough and turns back. But instead of going back to the wooden bridge he cuts diagonally across the moss and wanders in among some birches he has spotted, and soon the forest is closing in around him.

Now he is walking on a carpet made of spongy moss. It is soft to walk on. It seems to want to spread everywhere and has even crept up the tree trunks. It covers the stones too, making them all as round as each other. He likes the look of that.

The branches fan out above him like a roof, so he does not feel any rain, and the wind that combed the gigantic grass cannot find its way in here.

He looks into the forest.

It is perfectly silent. It is actually odd how quiet it is. Nothing is moving, not even the small leaves on the bushes or the tops of the grass.

There is not much space between the trees. Narrow slits of light and that is all, it seems.

On the ground there is a lot to explore. There are dead things left lying about, a tree that has split open and whose insides are bright red, like meat, and just beyond it a rotted birch trunk that has fallen apart. Scaly shards of bark surround it. He digs the toe of his boot into the birch and presses carefully. It is soft right through.

Another tree trunk is dotted with yellow saucer shapes that look like ears. He tries to count them because there are so very many – how many ears can you actually have? – but he loses count when the mosquitoes fly into his face.

A hollow stump looks like a cauldron among the blueberry branches. A crown of moss surrounds the cavity. He looks down into the stump but there is nothing particularly interesting inside it, only dampness and pine needles stuck together in clumps. He would like to put his hand in and feel down to the bottom – perhaps a mouse is sleeping there – but he does not really dare.

Far, far inside the forest a bird flies soundlessly from one tree to the next, as if drawing a line between the trunks. The boy can see it out of the corner of his eye. He stands up and walks on, singing a little and talking to himself in a soft, jokey voice. His mother has told him there is nothing to fear in the forest, so he is not particularly afraid. No wolves, no bears, nothing that wants to eat him. Apart from the mosquitoes.

Still, when the roots of an overturned tree loom above him his stomach lurches because he almost imagines it is an old man standing there waiting for him. A man who will not move out of the way.

After a while he plucks up enough courage to approach the fallen tree. The underside is a mass of twisted roots, and on the ground is a gaping void, covered in bracken. It is black between the fronds, unpredictable and very deep. Someone lives down there, he is sure. A badger, perhaps. Badgers are underground creatures, piggy-eyed and bad-tempered. They only come out at night to nose around and whisper.

As he stands there, peering down into the bowl below the roots, he hears a crack.

Small furtive footsteps, very close.

Quickly he tugs at his hat so that he can see properly.

His eyes wander between the columns of pines. Someone was there, he is convinced of that.

He takes a little step sideways, at the same time craning his neck to see what is behind the upturned roots. He hardly dares to look.

A movement. A streak of grey fur.

That is what he sees.

And then he runs.

Runs away towards the light where the forest thins out.

Undergrowth and branches whip against his boots.

He follows the forest edge, tripping and stumbling his way forwards.

Not until he has staggered out onto the trail does he dare to stop and look around. He beats at the mosquitoes circling his face. His fear seems to have made them even more excited.

*

His mother is sitting curled up on the sofa with her book, and when he comes in through the doorway she looks up at him with a sharp little crease between her eyes. She has folded the book so that she can hold it in one hand. Around the fingers of the other she is twisting her chain. It digs into the skin of her neck.

She asks where he has been, and when she notices how wet he is she puts the book aside and helps him take off his jacket. His hair is standing on end in damp little tufts and his jumper has ridden up over his stomach in wrinkles, but he hurries to pull it down as he tells her. That he has seen an *animal*.

'What kind of animal?'

'An animal!'

She twists off his boots roughly and finds his socks squashed up, the toes wringing wet. His feet have turned red. 'Oh, Magnus,' she sighs.

To get his jeans off he has to lie down while she pulls and tugs at the legs because the wet fabric has glued itself to him. The boy thumps his head against the floor, and that makes them laugh.

'Let go!' she shouts.

'I can't,' he giggles.

Finally he has to stand up and stamp the trousers off instead. She picks up the jeans and asks him if he has been swimming. He didn't go near the pool, did he?

In the bag, which is open on the floor, he finds a pair of dry underpants patterned with roaring hot rods and motorbikes, and after he has put them on he climbs up onto the sofa and buries himself under the sleeping bag. The zipper is a track of cold steel teeth against his thigh and he changes position to avoid the feel of it on his skin. The knobbly sofa fabric is rough against his legs

and it is warm where his mother has been sitting.

He hears his mother rustling behind the log basket, stuffing wads of newspaper into his boots and hanging up his clothes on the chairs around the table.

He wants to tell her about the animal. That it was grey.

'But what *kind* of animal was it?'

He sits with his mouth open for a while as he thinks.

'I think it could have been a lynx.'

His mother shakes her head. 'I don't think so.'

'A wolf then?'

'It was probably a bird. It generally is a bird.'

'No. It wasn't a bird. Birds don't have fur.'

She has come to sit beside him. With her index finger she lifts a thick lock of hair from his forehead. He stares out through the window and is still in the forest.

'It was an animal, Mum.'

She nods.

It has started to rain again, and soon it is thundering on the roof.

The fox's-brush flowers down by the path are lying on the ground after the downpour. Everything is flattened and changed and glistening moistly. It is still raining slightly and now a wind has started to blow. It can be seen in the swaying pines and the other trees that flicker and reflect the light, and every so often small gusts of wind hurl handfuls of raindrops at the windowpanes.

Groups of dead insects have collected on the windowsill. They have crawled close together to die – flies, mostly, but also wasps grown brittle. A butterfly with closed wings. It has shut itself up like a book. It would not look dead otherwise because it has kept

all its colours. He asks his mother what the butterfly is called, but she does not know.

'A peacock butterfly, perhaps. Or a small tortoiseshell. I don't know . . .'

He reaches for the little box made of bark that is standing on the table. He knows it is empty but looks inside anyway. Something ought to be kept in it, but he does not know what.

Then he has an idea. He picks up the folded butterfly and lays it in the box. He takes great care, and when he has replaced the lid he shakes the little box to hear the butterfly inside.

Darkness has deepened in the forest, and around the glass lamp beside the door moths are flitting about. They rustle against the illuminated globe, entranced. It looks as if they want to get inside. His mother reads to him from one of his comics. In the middle of a speech bubble she stops because the boy has lifted his head from her arm and is looking open-mouthed at the window.

'I heard something!'

His mother raises herself up on one elbow and also listens. The grasshoppers are making their rasping sound, and the shadows under the bunk bed make her face pale and turn her eyes into dark pockets. A gap has opened between her lips.

Then she sinks down again.

'It's nothing.'

The boy does not want to believe her. He jumps down to the floor and pulls aside the towel hanging as a curtain at the window. He rests his hand on the mosquito mesh and cranes his neck, looking down the path.

'It sounded like something was walking out there. Something big.'

His mother has laid her head on the pillow.

'It was nothing,' she says.

So he wriggles down under the quilt again.

Lies there alert.

Listening.

'Shall I carry on reading?'

He sniffs and nods.

Afterwards, when they have turned off the light, they hear a faint rustling on the roof.

The rain is falling softly. As if practising.

He can hear a mosquito moving about the room, but it seems unable to find its way to the bed. It goes quiet from time to time. He thinks it is waiting.

'Mum,' he says, but he can hear from her breathing that she is already asleep.

After flicking through the comics and looking at the pictures on the last page that show what the next comic will be about, he wanders into the main room.

Outside the window he sees a movement. His mother is standing out there, her hair a shining curtain in the morning light. She is bending over something.

When he pushes open the door she instantly straightens up.

'What are you doing?' he asks.

She is wearing a thick jacket. One of her hands is stuffed inside a large gardening glove.

'I think there might be a bat around here somewhere,' she says. 'A dead one.'

'Is there really?' he asks, and moves closer.

They help each other to look, and he is the one who finds it.

The little animal is suspended in the grass. It does not have the weight to slide down so it stays there, trapped, like a brown leaf. He has never seen a bat before. To think they could be so small. A long and oddly curved claw is sticking out from the wing, and his mother pinches hold of it. The skin opens out, a net of folds and wrinkles, criss-crossed by fine veins. The abnormally large eyelids are covered with the same sheer, ancient-looking skin.

'It's got a ring,' he says.

She holds up the bat and the thin wing turns pink as it is hit by the sunlight. A tiny silver ring shines in one ear.

She touches it gently with her index finger.

'Why has it got a ring?'

'I don't know,' she says, reflectively.

She has taken hold of the ring and is studying it closely.

'It must be marked in some way . . .'

'Why is the bat dead?'

His mother does not reply, so he asks again.

'Why is it dead, Mum?'

'It collided with me in the night,' she says, letting go of the ring. 'I went out to pee and it flew at me. Here.'

She puts her fingers on her temple.

'I expect it got confused by my nightdress,' she says. 'They're attracted by light colours. It fastened in my hair and I snatched it out and threw it away from me. Right against that wall. That killed it. It's so tiny. I didn't mean it to die, I just wanted to get it away from me.'

She twitches her hand and the bat bobs up and down.

'Do you want us to bury it?'

The boy leans up close to the ugly little snout. Deeply set in

the crumpled face are black eyes like beads. The teeth sticking out of its mouth are like shards of glass.

He shakes his head.

'Sure?'

He nods.

His mother walks over the grass and throws the bat into the nettles growing like a green sea on the other side of the wooden fence. Then she cranks water out of the pump and rinses her hands, and as she walks towards the boy she smiles, drying her hands on her nightdress, which is hanging down below the old jacket.

They eat breakfast outside, in sunshine that makes them squint their eyes. They have to make the most of it, says his mother, laying out a bedspread. The grass is so stiff that it makes the bedspread stand up in peaks, and together they stamp them down to make it flat and comfortable to sit on. The mosquitoes that are flying around in the morning sun are no bother. There are so few and they do not seem to know what they want.

They have a loaf of white bread and a tube of cod roe spread. They munch, looking at each other. He is crouching and she is sitting cross-legged with the sun falling like a banner across her legs. Between bites she tells him that his grandmother was not affected by the mosquitoes because one day when she was out picking blueberries she was bitten so terribly that she lost her way and went down with a fever. Ever since that day she had been immune and was never bothered by mosquitoes in the slightest.

'But what about bats?' he wants to know. 'Can you be immune to them too?'

She explains that bats do not suck blood.

'It's only in stories,' says the boy. 'Isn't it?'

'Yes. And not in Sweden.'

She wipes away a blob of the cod roe spread from her upper lip with a fingertip.

'Bats here only eat old butterflies and things like that,' she says.

That information disappoints the boy. He has seen for himself that bats have sharp teeth. Like needles. He thinks it is likely they *can* drink blood, if they want to.

'Yes,' she says. 'If they are really hungry.'

'Then perhaps you are immune now, Mummy.'

'Except it didn't bite me.'

'But think if it had!'

'Yes,' she says, nodding with her mouth full of bread. 'Well then, maybe I am.'

There is a beach on the nearby lake, and now that the sun is motionless in the sky and beating down they decide to go swimming and then do some shopping. They pack their swimming things and a mask in a canvas bag and hurry down the path. The boy carries his bathrobe and flaps it about. He allows the mosquitoes to get up close before he hits them.

The sun has been baking the car for hours and a strong smell of upholstery and overheated rubber hits him as he climbs into the back seat. It is so burning hot that he has to sit on his bathrobe, crouching like a monkey.

It is not far to the beach and he is surprised when after only a short while they pull up in a gravel car park. Pine cones crunch under their feet as they follow the path down towards the water.

Alders with large shiny leaves hang down over the jetty and entangle themselves in the reeds. The boy and his mother are

alone, but someone has been there recently because in the grass on the lakeside is a glittering pile of shells. All the shells are tiny and fragile. The boy does not dare to touch them. He does not want to spoil anything.

The water has a strange red colour which he tries to collect in his cupped hands, but the red does not come up with the water. It is only in the lake, which is not actually a lake but part of the Dal River, his mother tells him, as she sits on the jetty with a towel draped around her shoulders and her hand like a sun visor above her glasses.

Using a stick he dredges up dripping seaweed, which he collects in a pile. It is a silent game. The only sound is the water trickling back into the lake. From time to time the sun shines through patches of wispy cloud. Later he tries the swimming mask, seeing the undulating gravel on the lake bed. Something is swimming there, a tiny fish. He tries to catch it in his mask but it darts away.

The shop is located in an old wooden building with empty advertisement boards on the walls and sun-bleached awnings. It looks shut but his mother says it is not. There are steps up to the door and the metal railing is encrusted with rust. His mother is walking quickly. She is in a hurry all of a sudden.

They both fill the basket, the boy putting in a Falu sausage which he thinks they should have for dinner. He goes to fetch milk cartons too, but they are difficult to find because they do not look like the ones at home.

In the queue for the checkout they stand behind an old woman who is buying a bottle of elderflower cordial, and his mother lays her hand on his head, feeling how his hair has begun to dry and stand up from his scalp.

'Was it nice to go swimming?' she asks, but he does not answer. He is engrossed in the comic he has been allowed to buy, guessing what it says in the speech bubbles.

With both hands he hauls the heavy paper carrier bag up the veranda steps and in through the door, which he quickly closes behind him. The air has turned warm in the cabin and he can hear an insect buzzing against one of the windows. He puts the bag down by the fridge, takes out a carton of milk and opens the door. And recoils.

It is lying there on the rack, next to the tube of cod roe spread.

Small, shaggy and greyish-brown, with crumpled wings drawn up tight to its body, its head like a shrunken dog. Strange cupped ears.

He races out so fast the hood of his bathrobe falls down.

His mother is on her way back from the outside toilet. She is carrying a folded newspaper and looks at him in surprise.

Panting and shrieking, he tells her what is in the fridge. But she refuses to believe him. Without a word she walks ahead of him into the cabin.

She stares at the bat and is suddenly angry. She says, 'What the hell . . .?' and blames him. He is the one who has put it there.

Then he bursts into tears, and when she realises that he is distraught and the crying stems from anger, she crouches down in front of him. She asks him if he is sure it was not him.

'Yes, honest!'

He rubs his tear-filled eyes with the palms of his hands and sniffs.

'Well then,' she says, 'someone's playing a joke on us, that's all.'

She tears off a sheet of kitchen roll and uses it to pick up the

bat, then walks outside and throws it from the same place, this time hurling it far in among the trees. The paper falls away and floats like a leaf to the ground.

Then she goes in and gets the fridge rack and stands with it under the pump, scrubbing it with a washing-up brush. The boy asks if there is blood on the rack, but she does not answer.

The pine needles which have collected in the folds of the tarpaulin fall off in huge slabs as they uncover the lawnmower. Spread over the hood is a layer of flattened cardboard boxes. When the boy lifts them off, the earwigs race around like brown sparks.

'What are they doing? What are they doing?' he shouts, excited and alarmed at the same time.

His mother shakes the handle, and when she hears the splashing in the petrol tank she pulls the starter cord. After a couple of attempts she straightens up, grimacing at the sun.

The boy scratches his cheek where he has a row of mosquito bites.

When the motor finally starts with a rattle he runs out of the way and sits on the veranda. He covers his ears with his hands and watches as she forces the machine through the overgrown grass. It is a struggle. The motor keeps stopping. It growls and then falls silent. He squints. The sun has wedged itself between the tree trunks and is shining directly at him now. She crouches down to clear out the clippings from under the hood. He studies his kneecaps and the downy hairs shining on them. Where there was once a scab the skin has turned light red and is slightly raised and there might be a scar, so his mother has said. He presses his thumb against the redness and then immediately starts scratching his calves until he breaks the skin. He has been careful to shut

the door of the cabin, but the mosquitoes come in anyway. It is worst on his calves and ankles – they really feast there while he is asleep. After that they go and sit on the wallpaper and the ceiling and no one knows they are there until night comes. Then they let go and drop down.

'Magnus!'

His mother is half standing and pointing to the edge of the forest diagonally behind the cabin, where the brush-like branches of the trees weave together and make everything dark. What is she pointing at?

At first he can see nothing, but then he notices that something is moving, and the next second a grey head sticks out. Knobbly ears, pointing backwards, and whiskers hanging straight down from its mouth like long strings of saliva. A matted, flattened forehead turned towards them.

'Can you see?' she shouts. 'Can you see the hare?'

It feels exciting having a forest animal on the doorstep, exciting that it wants to be with them, and because they do not want to frighten it they go indoors. Cutting the grass can wait. There is no rush, and perhaps it has its young in the grass? Baby hares so small that they are rabbits?

His mother opens a can of vegetable soup and heats it up on the stove, while the boy sits glued to the window, giving reports about where the hare is and what it is doing. Not that there is much to report. Its jaws move from time to time but mostly it sits looking straight ahead.

When they are sitting with the soup bowls in front of them, blowing on their soup, he asks her who put the bat in the fridge.

She does not know.

Is it the man they borrowed the cabin from?

'It was just someone,' she says quietly, moving her spoon among the steaming pieces of vegetable. 'Someone who walked past in the forest and saw us throw away the bat. There are lots of people here, fishing and camping. It's just someone having a joke.'

Does she think it is a good joke?

'No,' she replies. 'I don't think so.'

'Neither do I,' he says to his plate.

They play cards.

'Snap!' he yells, and shuffles the cards with the blue chequered pattern on the back. His mother rests her elbows on the table and pretends to be annoyed. He likes that.

She is wearing a strappy top with horizontal stripes. The skin shines on her jutting collarbones, and the outside of her upper arms are sunburned. You can see where the towel covered her. It has left a line.

When she wants to stop playing he becomes sulky and tries to play cards on his own, but it is not the same. He finds a fountain pen and scribbles in some of the comics, on the white spaces between the squares. Then he draws on his knuckles, mainly to see if it works, but the ink rubs off.

It is only when he looks to see if the hare is still there that he catches sight of the fox. It is standing at the bottom of the path, staring with round, shiny yellow eyes at the window.

The boy leaps up and shouts out loud.

'Come here! Quick!'

His mother puts down her book and walks to the window.

'Well, look at that,' she says, leaning forwards and resting her cheek against the boy's.

In silence they study the fox for a few moments, until she says:

'It knows there has been a hare around here. The smell stays in the grass for a long time. It thinks the hare is here somewhere.'

'It is,' he says. 'It's there!'

He points and she cranes her neck, seeing that the boy is right. The hare is like a dark-grey patch behind the tufts of grass beside the woodshed.

'I'm sure it's all right,' she says. 'It'll get away, you'll see.'

The fox has opened his ears so they stand like two scoops on top of his head. He directs his black nose towards the hare.

'Now he can sense it,' she says. 'The trail.'

Behind the dipped back and skinny dog's body, with ribs defined like bars, the fox's tail projects like a grey and bushy burden. The corners of its mouth point downwards. The animal starts to creep closer, edging forwards with its head to the ground. The quick, slender legs are dark at the front, as if it has stepped in a forest pool.

The boy feels a whispering breath against his hair.

'It smells very strange because we've been out there too, so he can't find the hare.'

But he can.

The fox walks in a straight line to the pair of long ears that are sticking up out of the grass. The two animals regard each other for an instant and then the fox sits down, immediately next to the hare. And there they sit, beside each other in the grass, their eyes directed at the cabin.

'It looks like they're friends!'

The idea of the hare and the fox being friends makes the boy's mother crane her head forwards. Her eyes are staring behind the lenses of her glasses.

Finally it becomes too much for her and she slaps the palm of her hand against the pane of glass. The boy, who has climbed onto the table, jumps at the sound. She slaps the window again and then thumps it with her fist, making the glass rattle.

'Don't do that!' he wails.

But the animals are not scared by the sound.

They merely sit there.

His mother fetches a couple of saucepans from the kitchen, but on her way to the door she exchanges one of them for the axe.

The animals jerk when the door flies open and the woman comes out onto the step. They move apart slightly but they do not run away. She calls to the boy to stay inside, but he disobeys her. He pads out behind her. He also wants to see.

There is a clang, cling, clang! as the axe hits the saucepan.

Stamping her feet, she strides forwards.

The fox stands up and runs a short distance away, looking at her over its shoulder. Its legs are bent and its chest is down in the grass. Its ears fold back, its nose wrinkles and its lips curl. The sight of the yellow teeth dripping with saliva brings his mother to a halt, but only for an instant, because she then rushes towards them waving the axe. The fox slinks away between the fence posts and disappears.

But the hare sits as if nailed to the spot. It looks as if it is forcing its skinny shanks to be still. It is shuddering and gaping, and yellow shards of teeth are visible in its sloping lower jaw. Its ears are black-tipped and ragged.

Not until she is standing directly over it does the hare leap aside, remarkably elongated. It runs in a loop around them, coming so close to the boy that he cries out. After that it rushes off, like a shudder in the grass.

His mother is breathing heavily through her nose. Her forehead and cheekbones are oily with sweat and her nostrils are shiny. Her lips are pressed tightly together.

The boy inundates her with questions. What he wants to know most of all is why she chased the animals away. Instead of answering she shoves him ahead of her into the cabin, and when they are inside she locks the door.

'There was something wrong with them,' she says, cutting up his sausage. It surprises him that she is cutting up his food because she is always nagging him to do it himself. 'They were sick. Do you understand?'

Her voice sounds tense and her gaze keeps wandering to the window. She has not put any food on her plate yet. It is shiny, and empty apart from some scratches. There are still flickers of sunlight in the grass down at the bottom of the path, but below the trees everything has become black and intertwined.

After a moment she leans forwards, staring at him.

'Do you want to go home?'

The boy has stuffed his mouth full of macaroni.

He eats and looks at her.

'Do you?' he asks, reaching for his glass of milk.

Then she snorts and small wrinkly lines form round her eyes.

He should have gone to bed ages ago, but it seems she has forgotten all about him as he sits by the wood burner. The cork flooring where he is sitting is scattered with splinters of wood and small strips torn from a newspaper. He has pulled up one leg and is resting his chin on his kneecap. The little figures are lined up. He is planning some kind of competition.

His mother has remained at the table, looking out through the window. She has turned to stone over there, her back hunched and her elbows resting on the tabletop, which is why he jumps when she suddenly stands up. The chair scrapes the floor, almost toppling over behind her.

The boy stares.

'What is it?' he asks.

But she does not reply. She just continues staring out of the window.

He walks up to her.

'Is it the fox?' he asks.

She has cupped her hands against the glass and is breathing hard.

'Mummy!'

He tries to climb up on the table, but she pushes him back down. She does it so roughly that he almost falls backwards.

'No!' she says.

He is not sad. But he is angry.

All he wants is to see what she is seeing.

He makes another attempt to get to the window, and when she stands in his way he runs towards the door.

'Magnus!'

She screams at the top of her lungs, a pleading howl that makes her voice crack. She tries to grab hold of him and knocks the kitchen table with her hip.

But he has already run outside.

He is already gone.