



Julia Jost
Hide and Seek

Novel

(Original German title: Wo der spitzeste Zahn der Karawanken in den Himmel hinauf fletscht)

Literal translation of the German title: Where the Sharpest Tooth of the Karawanks Snarls Up Into the Sky

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Sample translation by Adrian Nathan West

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One

Not far from the valley, the Jackal Valley we call it, though it didn't used to be called the Jackal Valley, mind you, it used to have a totally different name, you'll find my parents' inn, the Gratschbacher Inn. Up where the sharpest tooth of the Karawanks snarls up into the sky, it's maybe forty kilometers to the Gratschbacher Inn. From that gigantic alpine throne, which then as now, for many of the locals, marks the edge of the earth, you reach the banks of the Drava River. You can follow the rippling Drava upstream. First comes the village Bruder Elend, where a Roman Catholic mendicant order was bonded out to an eccentric farmer's daughter, and the bridge they call Virgin Spring, not for the season, but because for ages now, the ill-fated have jumped from it to their deaths. Then you got Lake Wörthersee, big as the sea, to your right, a

stage made of mist, weathered and rotting, crumbling bit by bit, endlessly shaken in the harsh winds. Listen close and you'll notice the counterpoint, the *yowling* cry of the Alpe-Adria, and if your ear's sharp, you'll even catch the odd resonant lyric of a concert that will stay with you forever: a stuttered *Pr-Pr-Prince Charming*, let's say, from a long-forgotten year. Don't stop though, you're almost there. Stride into the heart of the country, where there are corn fields, pumpkins, or kohlrabi depending on the time of year, or wildflowers on untilled meadows, or hunting dogs slavering over a pheasant, triple jumping in the freshly plowed fields. In their midst, trees and more trees, lonesome at first, then multiplying, and crowding into the measureless shadow of a coniferous forest. Now you're there. Don't be afraid to go in deeper. Follow the darkness. And the silence. As unease gathers, the branches clear, there's a bit of ground where you can breathe freely, of a beauty such as you'll never forget for the rest of your life. Never. And that's it. This land belongs to my parents, and it is here that the Gratschbacher Inn lies.

You emerge from the forest in golden shoes, or so you think at first in the majestic glow that strikes them. You turn left. Where an ancient fir, uprooted, juts across the forest's edge like a mossy, hibernating animal. You pass this tree, walk on calmly, with sure steps. And further to the right is the red-glowing sand of the tennis court, the air above whirring with the dull wallop of a serve and the sound of Stan Smith sneakers squeaking to a halt. You arrive at the home of some Swabian clans, at the purlin-roofed garage, which the old man, my Stubenhof grandpa, Louis Bressler, built by hand over half a decade. Hacking the boards of this roof, tree by tree. Even now, in the woods, you hear the pounding of the axe, off-beat and hesitant, somewhere an animal hops. You heed the sacred drumming of a woodpecker and see a fawn stumbling on stilt legs. Scents wash over you. Of wood, wildflowers, water. From afar, dogs bark, heated, cussed, horny,

panting and rattling their chains. Bees meander like drunks over the fields, weighed down by their cargo of pollen. You feel blades of grass lash your legs as you walk between guesthouse and house-house over the meadow to the swimming hole. A sheen, a weave of landscape. Insects in the hedges.

Gratschbacher Corner is an eyeless forest. Without brush and branches that bend rustling behind your back in preparation for the mortal fear that brews within you. Or a talking wolf that drivels as it waits for you to stumble into a spring trap. Deceit and wickedness are *gibberish* in the forest. As my mother says. The Gratschbacher Forest and the fields, the meadows, the pond, are the commonplace sum of the plants, waters, and animals living in them. And nothing else. That is all there is to say about Gratschbacher Corner.

Two

In the photo in my hand, taken in nineteen eighty-nine, the third tooth to the top left was missing, and a small tuft of hair points upward in a twirl at my temple. Bowl cut, clam diggers, turquoise sweatshirt. I'm wrinkling my nose, squinting my eyes, and I grimace sassily at the photographer, the look on my face says I must have liked her. The oldest boy in class, Andreas, almost nine, is standing in the middle of the last row of three. He's wearing a yellow pullover with big white letters, *Champion*, over his gray, short-sleeved shirt. He's bending a leg majestically over the bench in front of him, showing us the toe of the spanking new Adidas high tops that would be stolen from the changing room in the gym six months later by the pipsqueak Frieder. The day following, little Frieder stumbled to class in his shanghaied seven-league sneakers, what came afterward you can see from the blood splashed on the cheek of the portrait of Kurt Waldheim glowing beneath Christ on his cross. *Marymotherofgod, he's bleedin'*, the religion teacher was the first to notice the blood, duly and expeditiously she notified Don Marco, the parish priest, who proceeded to the classroom with his Vatican delegation to confirm the authenticity of the Waldheim miracle.

In the photo, Andreas's jeans are light blue, like the bauble in his right earring, his short, ash-blond hair was always parted down the middle. People used to say of Andreas that he had a twin brother, Copernicus, that he'd gobbled down in one bite in his mother's womb. And this twin brother lived on in Andreas, giving him the strength of two boys. His parents' house lay two miles north of the Gratschbacher Inn, in Dirnbach. Dirnbach consists of an abandoned farm, three wine taverns, and seven family homes, four of the mailboxes bear Andreas's surname Kuchnig and three

bear the name Wallach. The tavernkeeper, Marlene Wallach, is Andreas's aunt, but that's beside the point here.

On the bench in front of Andreas sits Karla in her Bleiberg folk costume, skirt nice and short but custom fit, and the inevitable ruffled blouse, which she wears in the woods, at school, at church, on the ski slopes, and at the lake, to keep her from getting sunburned when the temperature shoots above seventy. Under her skirt, she's wearing white leggings knitted by her grandma, with the same pattern as the ruffled blouse. If you follow the tractor trail from my parents' Gratschbacher Inn toward Dirnbach, you'll find a chapel two miles off. Karla's father wrangled this chapel out of the diocese, thanks maybe to his good relations with the priest in charge, and he made his home in it after his wife, Karla's mama, up and vanished one day, never to be seen again nor by man nor beast. If you could zoom in on the photo, you would see through the weave of these leggings where Karla's father burned her with hot grease after she refused to be a good girl, anyway that's what they used to say around here. She spent thirty-six weeks in children's intensive care, and ever since she got out of the hospital, she's practiced ballet, because her burnt skin must constantly, constantly be stretched. When this photo was taken, in nineteen eighty-nine, at the tender age of seven, she already had the makings of a prima ballerina, but those nasty scars on her legs, there was nothing that could be done about them.

On the ground in front of the bench, by Karla's stockinged feet, lies Ludwig, who was mocked as the Lindworm for his extraordinary length and litheness, the Lindworm is the dragon from our region's coat of arms. Before the photo shoot, his snow-white hair was clipped to a quarter-inch, same as every month, by his father, an officer, who was also the source of the terms *hamgong*—the last school bell—and *barracksing*—all day lessons—which Ludwig used to say and everyone else started copying.

On the far right sits Franzi, cross-legged, in cinnamon-red Hammer pants, a pastel purple T-shirt, and blue Pumas with a Velcro hidden pocket. He grins wide at the camera. Franzi was the new kid in class, he'd emigrated from Tyrol to Carinthia because of some delicate and secretive matter known in full only to the Lord on High. From what I gathered eavesdropping on Franzi's mother and mine, it seems to have gone something like this: Franzi was a pupil at a Catholic school in Innsbruck of an impeccable, I mean impeccable reputation, and this school conferred upon him the honor of serving as an altar boy. But one day, Franzi didn't show at Mass, he didn't even come out of the sacristy, and his mother had no choice but to sneak backstage in the Lord's house without permission. And when she saw her boy, she let loose such a cry that the holy wafers crumbled to dust in the holy grail. Franzi was standing naked as a jaybird, legs spread wide, and peeing into the open mouth of the parish priest, who lay on the ground, his head under the boy's crotch. Nearby were three empty bottles of mineral water. The preacher pushed Franzi aside and let loose on his mother: This was God's house, what was she doing snooping around, a woman, of all things, no one could come back there without the express permission of God's emissary on earth, namely him. In a rush, the mother scooped her naked cherub up, stuck him in the car, and hurried home to her half of the rowhouse. They moved out the very next day. Or so said Franzi's mama to mine, crossing herself over and over, while I crouched under the corner bench in the kitchen at the Rucks' place listening in and playing idly with a toy car.

A print hung in Misses Ruck's kitchen of an oil painting by Matthias Holländer, itself a copy of a school photo from the year eighteen eighty-nine. Exactly one hundred years before our own school photo was taken. In the back, toward the last row, the image gets darker, duskier. As if there were endless rows of children stretching off into nighttime toward the beyond. When Mrs. Ruck was watching me, I looked a time or two into the eyes of these children, the same age as me,

standing on the school bench, some with a sausage roll in one hand and a pickle in the other, chewing audibly or smacking my lips, I kept staring at the faces. For almost all the children I knew, there was an equivalent to this picture, a double. The photo developed a sinister draw. Quicksilver. Quicksilver pulls things toward it like a magnet. Children, burned into a timeless past. The one on the lower left, the boy—I wanted to be him. Smock round over his stomach, collar crooked, stocking wrinkly under his knee. I thought at first he was peering into the camera, but looking closer, I could see this wasn't so. A hundred years ago, the exposure times were much longer than today. That meant the children couldn't smile. Their expressions suit their impermanence.

Everyone in my school photo is smiling. Eighteen smiling mouths. The corners of Andrea's lips pull downward when he grins. Adi smirks meekly, like the man agonizing over the Waldheim portrait, lips closed, head turned to the side. Karla's smile is broad, showing both rows of teeth, plus gaps, as if she wanted to prove nothing lay hidden in her mouth.