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I Who Have Never Known Men

Orlanda

JACQUELINE HARPMAN

WE WERE FORBIDDEN

Translated from the French by
Ros Schwartz

***Brief* ENCOUNTERS**
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The Ardennes Forest

We led a furtive existence. The Ardennes is a region of high hills and vast forests where even before the war you could walk for hours without coming across a road. On rainy evenings, we made shelters from branches, and all winter we huddled together for warmth. Sometimes, one of us would go off to die alone in a thicket. We never fought. We had no idea whether the enemy had left or whether they'd won a resounding victory, wiping out all their opponents, but none of us believed we had won. At night, we looked for a place where we could light a fire and roast a few hares or a young boar. We would eat slowly, sitting in a circle around the embers and talking in hushed voices. Sound carries a long way in the forest, and I don't think any of us had spoken in our normal voice for years. Our conversations were brief because we had very little to say since we were together all the time and knew all there was to know about each other. There was no news to share or comment on. We had demanded so much of our memories that they were exhausted and given that we had no plans other than to carry on living and walking, as per our orders, there was no more to say about the future than about the past. We were easily tired, or was it bored? – we could no longer tell the

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difference – and we would lie down to sleep. We didn't understand why we were walking, why we took great care to keep our weapons in working order when we were almost out of ammunition, or why we still thought of ourselves as soldiers. We never saw any planes in the sky and we never heard the sound of bombing. Olga thought we'd been forgotten. Aline wanted someone to go to the edge of the forest on a reconnaissance mission, but that was forbidden, and besides, where was the edge? Ulrich reckoned that in the past, the undergrowth had been carefully kept under control and there had been fire-breaks, now overgrown by younger trees. Occasionally, we saw traces of paint on a trunk. 'That was to mark which trees to fell,' he said.

It is a very ancient forest that covers a vast region, tumbling down into the valleys and hugging the hills. It has taken over the land, the tall trees arresting the gaze and hiding its full extent. You have to climb to the top of one of the rare high peaks to see a silent landscape of motionless trees undulating darkly as far as the horizon. In places, the beeches and oaks are only four or five metres high. According to Ulrich, they're the remains of former farms. The thickets are very dense and it can be hard to find a way through. We sometimes come across deserted roads: the tarmac is cracked, grass grows in the crevices, and new trees push up the heavy black slabs. Or we find a ruin, so overgrown with ivy and brambles that it is unidentifiable.

At first, the silence bothered us. You could hear nothing but the sighing of the wind in the trees, the dead leaves crunching underfoot, or the water babbling when

we were close to a stream. For people whose ears had been assaulted by the sounds of the city, it was almost frightening, which is why we got into the habit of speaking in hushed tones.

We never met a soul. We wondered whether we were the sole survivors. Would humanity die out with us? The women were infertile, having undergone reversible sterilisation to avoid the burden of pregnancy during the war, but we didn't know if there were any operating theatres left. We had been prohibited from leaving the forest unless we received the order to do so, but who would bring us an order? That question still sparked our interest: was there anyone left to deliver orders? And if those who had issued ours were dead, did we still have to obey them? What was the point of our strict compliance if the world where the decisions had been made no longer existed? We were living under the law of a world that might have disappeared: were we not mad? But if we were wrong and there were still leaders, if we disobeyed, we would be deemed to have deserted, to have abandoned the mission and failed those who relied on us. Were we the last? We always came back to that question because the very purpose of our existence depended on the answer: if we were the only ones left, then we were free, demobbed for lack of an army to belong to. Maybe there were still human beings, but no army: so, should we believe that we had become the army and that it was our duty to protect the survivors? By staying hidden in the forest, we didn't know whether we were still following instructions or whether we were letting down the people who needed us.