

A young girl with a braid, wearing a green dress with white lace and gold embroidery, stands in a dense, mossy forest. She is looking towards a large tree trunk. The forest is filled with tall trees, hanging moss, and vibrant green foliage. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a magical atmosphere.

Forest Song

Finding Home

Vila SpiderHawk

Acclaim for *Forest Song: Finding Home*

Forest Song: Finding Home weaves a wondrous tale of a young girl finding her true home and growing to womanhood in a unique and adventurous tale. I felt the characters' thrills and despairs, their highs and lows, their breadth and their depth. Their joys became my joys, their mourning, mine. All are so beautifully created that each and every one touched my soul. In Judy's home, I could feel the wooden floors, the sparseness of decor. I experienced her mother's withdrawal from her, yet also her very solid strength. I felt the cold of the iron fence and smelled the rich pungent earth as Judy walked in the forest. I warmed by the crackling fire and smelled the delicious soup she ate. I sang with her, I cried with her, I winced when her fingers hurt from sewing too long. I also grew with her, hoped with her, and finally, simply loved her. *Forest Song: Finding Home* is a book not to be missed by maiden, mother, or crone. SpiderHawk has done it again! One more MUST read that will become a classic.

—Helen Collins, creator, editor, and publisher of *Folk Music Ministry Magazine*

Vila SpiderHawk has rare narrative gifts. *Forest Song: Finding Home* sings indeed—with verbal imagery and plot turns that keep you eager for every morsel.

—Jim Mc Conkey, author of *Journey to the Far Side of Earth*

This story is for you who have longed to enter the forest... and never come out. It's for anyone who has longed to be able to talk with the trees, earth, and animals as his or her best friends. It's for anyone who has hungered for the wisdom of the wild. If your great treasure is a secret wildness within you, follow Judy into the forest. She will take you to a realm where you can set it free.

—Esmerelda LittleFlame, author of *Temple of the Twelve*

This is a magickal book in every way. Vila SpiderHawk writes like a poet, in beautiful language which is nevertheless fully accessible, never calling attention to itself at the expense of the story. This particular story has a flavour of folk tales. There is a lot of painless teaching here, not only about those old ways of living and interacting with nature, but also about what it is to be human in all its depth and complexity. Nor is she afraid to confront the darker aspects of human nature, which she does with deftness and delicacy whilst never shirking the truth. Overall, her tale is full of sweetness, warmth, and characters we accept as real. As a former children's librarian and the wife of a children's author, I know the test of a good book for children or young adults is whether it can be enjoyed by adults too. This is a book to be reveled in at any age!

—Rosemary Nissen-Wade, Author of *Secret Leopard*

Forest Song is a must read for anyone who is more at home among trees which scrape the sky than brick-and-mortar skyscrapers. Here we meet Judy, a young girl who will stop at nothing to escape the iron-gated prison that is her family home for the trees and creatures of the forest, her true home. Vila SpiderHawk's exquisite prose paints detailed images of Judy's experience; we feel her every emotion, hear every bird call, smell every earthy scent, experience for ourselves everything Judy experiences as she grows from gawky girl into Wise Woman of the Woods. SpiderHawk truly knows the forest, and does a masterful job of conveying the wisdom you will garner if you listen, just listen, to the music of the trees.

—Smoky Trudeau, author of *Redeeming Grace* and *The Cabin*

Forest Song Finding Home

by

Vila SpiderHawk

Vanilla Heart Publishing
USA

Forest Song: Finding Home

Copyright 2008 Vila SpiderHawk

Published by:
Vanilla Heart Publishing
www.vanillabeartpublishing.com
10121 Evergreen Way, 25-156
Everett, WA 98204 USA

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission from the publisher, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to places, events, or persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-0-9814739-8-7
Library of Congress Control Number 2008921217

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 First Edition

First Printing, March 2008
Printed in the United States of America

Cover Design: Kimberlee Williams

Acknowledgements

Nobody writes a book alone, and I am no exception. Deep thanks go out to those who have been so instrumental in writing this volume.

I thank Irmgard Trossbach, a good friend and neighbor, who helped me with advice on things German.

I thank Kasmira Elliot for her patience in helping me write the fence building scene.

I thank our computer gurus, Paul and Denise Siska whose uncanny ability to communicate with and cajole our recalcitrant machines kept me writing, even when I was sure the entire manuscript was lost. I literally wouldn't have a book without the two of them.

I thank Christine Fisher, whose encouragement and facility with the mysteries of the Internet kept me going when I was ready to scream. I don't even want to think about what life would have been like without her support and friendship.

And I thank Helen Collins, my dearest friend and advisor, who fearlessly critiques my work. Helen, nothing I write is finished until you say it is. Further, computer incompetent that I am, I have relied entirely too heavily on your expertise, and you have worked far too hard at helping me do things that I really should know how to do for myself. You have been my rock! You have been so wonderfully patient with me and so incredibly steadfast in your support! I am amazingly blessed to be able to call you my sister of the soul.

Thank you all for your love and encouragement. Together we've nurtured the gleam in my eye so it could grow into a magical work.

Forest Song

It hums
At the fur-wadded vestibule of sleep
Where dream tatters scuttle
Through star-splattered windows
Like fat black spirit cats.

Below the velvet thunder's purr,
Below the padded footsteps of the snow,
Below the fetal memory of my mother's pulsing blood,
It calls
It calls
It calls me to come home.

Chapter One

Come in, child. Oh, please don't apologize. You're not interrupting anything. Besides, I knew you were coming. No, *liebchen*, you're not lost. You're just not quite sure of where you are. Never mind that now. You're cold. Sit by the fire. Have some bread. I just made it. See? It's still warm. And here's some good, hot lentil soup. There's tea steeping on the stove if you'd like.

My name is Judy, not that it matters. Everyone here calls me *Babcia*. That's Polish for grandmother. And you're Inga, are you not? Yes I thought so. Well, Inga, it's good to meet you. I don't see many healthy young people like you. Most people don't knock on my door until they're so sick the doctors can no longer heal them or until they've tried all the medicine they can afford.

Oh, no, I didn't mean to imply that I'm lonely. I'm not lonely. Why, I'm not even alone. In fact, my life is one long conversation. The woods are full of voices. Listen. Even now Matka Sosna, Mother Pine, is whispering a sweet and haunting tune. Can you hear her? Yes she has a lovely voice. She and the rest of the forest raised me, though I called her by a different name at the time.

You look quizzical. You don't believe the woods raised me? Well, I'll tell you about my growing up if you have the time. I know how busy you people are out there. Always rushing here and there, always in a hurry to do whatever it is you do. But you look tired. Would you like a nap? No? Good. Then sit back and relax. And eat. Wait. Let me get your tea. Honey? Lemon? I'm afraid there is no milk. There. Good. No, I've already eaten. You arrived later than I anticipated, and I got too hungry to wait. But you go ahead.

Now if I can just get these cushions right. My back's been grieving me today. Ah, yes, that's better. Now where should I begin? Well, at the beginning I suppose, or at least at the age of seven.

I was smaller than a meter of pump water then, all arms and legs and long yellow hair that Mama kept plaited in tight French braids. But I was strong for my size, even then. And I was in love with the woods.

My first memory is of the forest's call. Oh, no, it wasn't the wind in the trees or the splashing of rain against arthritic trunks. Those sounds were there, in their proper seasons, along with the singing of the birds by day and the chirping of the crickets at night. But there was something else curling through all that, wispy and fragile, that I sometimes could not catch, something as sweet as wistfulness that would whisper near my ear as I lay in my bed. Sometimes late at night I'd awaken with a start and stand on my bed near my slot of a window and watch the shimmering white halo dance like angel wings around the crowns of the trees, and I'd promise, "I'm coming. I'm coming soon."

We lived just at the edge of the frontier, as Mama called it, at the border of civilization. According to her the woods beyond our field was a lawless place, full of perils far worse than I could imagine, and so she made me promise to stay in our back yard or, if I was with my brother or an adult, the field beyond. But never did she allow me near the woods. She worried about the forest and other dangers too, man dangers. That's what she called them. Man dangers.

She wouldn't talk about the man dangers much. All she told me was to stay away from men I didn't know. But she talked about the forest day and night, weaving stories of a dark and hostile place full of girl-eating vines and plants that would grab my ankles and drag me underground, never to be seen again. And she warned of bears and wolves, about their sharp claws and teeth and how they loved to eat children, leaving nothing but bones and bits of tattered cloth. And bandits. She was adamant about the bandits—terrible men with straggly hair and ragged clothes, and eye patches and angry scars, men who snatched up little girls and sold them as slaves. Each time she told them her stories got worse. The forest was darker, her villains more vicious. Her voice would tremble as she described their fearsome features. And I didn't believe a single word. Nothing she said comported with what I knew about the forest. Yet every time she spun her yarns I shivered with excitement, wishing them to be true. I thought it would be thrilling to see a bear or a wolf or even a bandit, but when I said so Mama shook her head and complained that I was a willful wild thing.

She scolded me daily for my willfulness, and I guess she was right, because I shot for the trees at every opportunity. Occasionally, with other children or alone, I managed to race through the oats or meadow grass to the wood line, but I never got beyond the forest's edge before Mama or Papa or Johann, my big brother, would yank me back. Just inside the door, she'd strip me naked and check my body from head to toe for ticks and fleas and signs of other damage. Papa would spank me with his belt, and Mama would lecture me again. And they'd send me to bed without supper. I would listen, my ear

pressed against the wall, catching isolated words and the odd phrase or two while they ate their soup and discussed what to do with me.

And later, after our parents were in bed, Johann would sneak some bread to me. I'd pump him for the parts of the conversation I'd missed, and in conspiratorial tones, he'd tell me what he could remember. I'd gobble the bread, and when it was gone I'd lick my fingers and dab the crumbs from my lap while he told me all he knew. Just a shadow in the dark, his silver blond hair glinting in the moonlight that slanted across my bed, he'd glance over his shoulder every few seconds to assure himself that our parents were still asleep. I cherished those moments with my brother. And, to thank him for the chance I knew he was taking, I often let my free hand rest on his knee while I coaxed more from him than he thought he knew.

Less often Mama would tiptoe in, careful to wait until Papa was snoring. She'd bring an apple or some raisins or a chunk of cold potato wrapped in a cabbage leaf. And she'd will the food into my body as if, no matter how fast I ate, it wasn't fast enough. Her wide eyes darting from my mouth to the door, she'd swear me to silence by all that was holy. I knew not to ask her anything.

It was a beautiful day before Herr Schuler came, sunny and warm for the end of March. The yellow and purple crocuses Mama had planted as a bride had erupted, having spread from a mere handful to a veritable crazy quilt of blooms. Squirrels berated the feral cats while robins squabbled over nesting sites. The earth smelled heavy and wet and rich, and I knew something wonderful would happen before dark. I'm coming, I promised silently to the woods from my narrow bedroom window. Today is the day. And I felt the truth of it as surely as I felt the truth of the coming summer.

Herr Schuler arrived just after breakfast, his rickety wagon loaded with iron. I'd never liked the grinning blacksmith. In truth I still don't, though he's been dead now for years. He looked at me in a way that made me ashamed, as if he could see through my clothes. Short for a grown man, he made up for his lack of height with his bulk. And, though he was bald, he wore a full beard, which made him look like a bold and hairy bear, much more dangerous than any bandit or wolf my mother could devise. I ran to my room when I saw him.

All winter long my father had been threatening to put a fence around our yard. And all winter long I'd taken comfort in the fact that winter passes slowly. Suddenly, however, the snow was gone, and the blacksmith was there with his load of iron. Papa and he took lengths of it from the wagon and laid them side by side in the lane. And people came from all over our little town—the men to help erect the fence, the women bringing food and to help with the cooking.

Jochen Bruner, who lived on the next farm, was there with his laughing, robust mother and his ruddy ox of a father. Twice my age and nearly twice my height, he was my brother's friend, and I had a crush on him. A skinny boy with dusk colored eyes and a broad face full of freckles, he was as beautiful as any god I could imagine. I adored his light brown hair, the way the ends curled at the nape of his neck and bleached every summer to almost blond.

I loved that he pulled on his ear when he was thinking, that he always considered his words before he spoke. Jochen was wise and could talk about anything, but his special talent was with machines. With a touch as sure as the gentlest healer, he could caress a broken contraption in his hands, intuit what had gone awry, and fix it better than any man we knew. All the farmers, including Papa, went to Jochen with equipment they couldn't fix on their own, and every time he made it right, returning it with a shy little smile and refusing to be paid. Jochen worked for the love of machines, not for financial reward. I was convinced that he knew all there was to know about how the universe worked.

And he was kind to me, much kinder than most boys, so that I fostered a fantasy that he had a crush on me too. Normally I would have been glad to see him, might have even flirted a little. But I did not want to see him that day, did not want him to be part of my defeat.

Mama and the women cooked all day, filling canning pots with cabbages and mashed potatoes and making loaves of whole-wheat bread. There was thick, dark ale and even sausages oozing clear fat through their crispy skins. And it was up to the children to serve it all in oversized bowls and borrowed pitchers and tin meat platters as heavy as shields. Jochen tried to help me with the heavier things, but I was too embarrassed to let him.

We set up a table just beside the cellar door at the base of the steps from the kitchen. And all day long I ran in and out with the children from the neighboring farms fetching pitchers of ale and plates of meat while the women washed dishes and filled them up again.

The men gouged out holes with their digging irons, leaving great ugly wounds in the earth as deep as Papa's forearm, as wide as Mama's head, not caring that sometimes they pried up flowers with the stones. Yellow-brown dust flew like swarms of gnats, colonizing everybody's hair. Some of it gritted between my teeth and crusted the ale I carried. The air stank of food and of ale and of sweat and of my humiliation.

Herr Schuler followed me with his eyes, wiping his ale-dribbled beard on his sleeve and grinning as though I had nothing on. Somehow he managed to position himself so that I could not avoid him. When I picked up an empty pitcher he was there, smirking over his digging iron and demanding more to drink. When I staggered under the weight of

a full one he appeared just behind me, his body brushing mine as he reached around me to fill another mug.

I deliberately chose to carry bread when I could, or cabbage or sausage, anything but ale, anything that would keep the blacksmith away. But whatever I carried he was there. Once, when I picked up a tray with only a single sausage left on it, he stayed my hand. He grabbed the sausage and poked my crotch with it, laughing his stinking alcohol laugh, the laugh that made me want to crawl out of my skin. He took a bite then shoved it at my mouth. Jochen saw and turned bright red. I dropped the tray and raced to the kitchen. I wanted to vomit. But Mama shoved a bowl of potatoes into my arms and made me carry it out.

Without warning Herr Schuler swept me up and held me over his head, leering with his crooked yellow-brown teeth.

“We’re building a cage for this one,” he roared, his broad hands rough on my body as, helpless, I dangled like a trophy on display. “This one’s a wild bird,” he bellowed. “Can’t let her fly away!” And all the men laughed except Johann, who, at sixteen, had been working with them.

“Put her down!” His face red with rage, his hands balled to fists, he trembled, actually trembled from his silver-blond hair to the tips of his dirt caked shoes, every muscle hair trigger tense, demanding an excuse to attack. Herr Schuler snorted and, balancing me on one hand by the crotch, he performed a grotesque pirouette.

“Put her down!” he mimicked Johann’s tenor voice, making a song of the taunt. “Oh yes, I have to put the wild bird down.” My brother grabbed a tool and lunged at us, swinging it like a broad axe. Papa and Herr Bruner tackled Johann and disarmed him, but my brother glared at us from the ground, a warning that his anger was not spent.

When Herr Schuler put me down, brusquely rubbing his coarse hands between my legs, my shame overflowed in stinging tears, striping my gritty face. I raced back to the kitchen and collapsed on a chair, my organs fibrillating with the fever of disgrace. The women were too busy to notice.

There was no point in begging to work inside. Mama liked the blacksmith’s wife and, therefore, trusted him. And so, after I had taken a moment, I forced myself to rise, forced my legs to move, forced my arms to carry bowls and pitchers and trays, and ground dust and the remains of my dignity between my teeth.

Papa and Johann were mixing concrete in a wheelbarrow, Papa nagging it with a hoe as my brother dumped the water. I wanted to go over to Johann, to thank him for standing up for me, but he and my father were arguing, their body language shouting though their voices were hushed. I let the moment pass.

After the men had dug all the holes and had braced the posts into place, they filled the gouges with Papa's slurry and relaxed while they waited for the mixture to set. They ate and smoked and drank too much, their voices too loud, their jokes too crude.

The respite gave the blacksmith ample time to torment me again. But he didn't. Whereas I had spent the morning dodging him, suddenly he was side stepping me. I virtually bubbled with the thrill of owning my body, got drunk on the excitement of moving unmolested. I actually felt like a wild bird, rollicking and free. I even allowed myself to look at Jochen. I think I even sang.

When dusk had roosted like a gray dusty hen, the women built fires so the men could see to hoist the barred panels and slide them down, matching panel holes to the uprights. My heart collapsed in on itself.

I'd known there would be a fence at the end of the day, but I hadn't understood that it would be so big. Taller even than my father was with bars as unyielding and straight as soldiers, it was graveyard black, a monstrous jail.

All business, the men labored in the dark, faces slick with exertion and with the heat of the fires, the flames occasionally sputtering sparks like love seeking lightning bugs.

"It's so big!" Mama gasped from the kitchen door, drying her hands on her dirty apron, her face beatific and streaked with light as sporadic sparks darted and died. The blacksmith guided the gate into place, swinging it open and letting it close until he was pleased with the way it moved. When he clanged it shut for a final time and affixed the lock and gave Papa the key, Mama released an involuntary sigh, and my hatred for her was so pure it frightened me.

After the neighbors had gone, reclaiming their pitchers and platters and taking packets of leftover food, Mama filled a bath for me, but I wouldn't take my clothes off until she'd left the room. I could not be naked in front of her, couldn't stand the idea of her hands in my hair lathering the soap and rinsing it. I refused to hear her bedtime story, and, when she tucked me in and blew out the lamp, I turned from her goodnight kiss.

That night, for the first time, I was too disheartened to answer the forest's call.

In the morning when the forest didn't wake me with a song I remembered the fence, and my heart ached once again. I stood up in bed and peered from the window. The early morning shadows of the fence made bars, black and hostile, across the ravaged crocuses. Anger and hurt, shame and outrage roiled in my stomach, erupted, and stuck in my throat. I lay back down, pulled the covers over my head, settled into my gloom, and wept.

I wept savagely, viciously, abandoning myself to brutal, bed-battering sobs. I wept with the passion of a late March storm. And then I resolved to defeat the fence.

When Mama came to wake me I was already up, already dressed, already yanking the brush through my sleep-tangled hair. I'd expected Papa to wake me with his belt

because of my rudeness to Mama over the bath. Papa did not tolerate disrespectful children. But Mama coaxed the hairbrush from my hand and, like a lover who hopes to charm his way out of a lie, she brushed my hair until it shone and braided it with ribbons.

“Guess what!” She worked too hard at perkiness while she sectioned and plaited my hair. “I have a wonderful surprise for you!” I took some satisfaction in her grief-clogged voice. For the first time I used my smile as a tool. Charm and compliance would serve me well until I could plan my escape. “Yes!” She shook her head too vigorously, taking heart in my lying smile. “We’re going to visit Frau Felden.” She clapped her hands once and rubbed her palms together, grinning as if to convince herself. “You like her, remember?” She bounded from the bed and rooted through my closet, pulling out my newest dress, the one I wore to church. “Here, take that off and put this on.” She held up the dress, pink and flowered with a starched white collar and a bright green ribbon sash. I did as she said, and she tied the sash in a big fluffy bow at the small of my back. “You’ll want to look your best.” She patted my hair. “Yes, yes.”

It wasn’t exactly true that I liked Frau Felden. Since I’d met her only once three years earlier when I’d been four, I barely recalled the woman, though I had a vivid memory of her china figurines.

Frau Felden had a rosewood *étagère* on which she kept the statuettes, most of which would fit in a woman’s hand. Some blonde, some dark, all dressed in glossy gowns, their petticoats ruffling at their too-small feet, they drew me like a garden of butterflies. The last time I was there, I had run to the collection, had reached for a doll, had burned with shame when Mama had snatched my hands and clutched them behind my back. I remembered the thrill when Frau Felden had pried me free and had wrapped my fingers around a brown haired beauty. Walking backwards, her hands supporting mine, Frau Felden had somehow found an easy chair, had sat, and had allowed me to hold the figurine over her lap. She’d allowed me to handle the pretty face, the cascading curls, the fancy green dress. And, when I had thoroughly examined the doll, she had let me carry it back to its shelf and place it next to the others. I’d felt deliciously grown up.

Mama pinned a towel over my dress so I wouldn’t spill and spooned out our daily oatmeal. When we’d eaten in silence and she’d finished with the dishes, she checked my hair for a third and final time, tied her shawl over her shoulders, and pulled my winter coat over my arms, buttoning it up to my neck. She kissed Papa and Johann. And then she started walking.

Most people we knew didn’t own cars then, and neither did we. We didn’t even have a horse, though we did own a wagon with a broken wheel. And so we did whatever business we had to do within our small community. Frau Felden, however, lived two towns away, which was a six-hour walk, even at Mama’s pace.

She walked and I trotted through the early spring muck past meadows still bristly from autumn's harvesting. Most of them were empty except for family dogs straining at their chains and ferociously barking while frenetically wagging their tails. My shoes, which were really hand-me-downs from Johann that Mama kept polished so they looked almost new, got streaked with mud to the ankles. Mama's did too, so I knew she wouldn't scold. Frau Dingler, the pretty rotund woman who sold eggs on Saturdays, was feeding her hens. She waved in mid toss, and we waved back, but we didn't stop to talk. She wiped her hands on her apron and waved again, this time in farewell, and went back to tossing seed.

Bored with the monotonous, still sleeping landscape and the silence of the walk, I picked up small clumps of time-dirtied snow and twigs and stones, examined then discarded them, plotting all the while my escape from the fence, alternately falling behind my mother, then racing to catch up. My heels began to hurt, though Mama had stuffed my shoes with wool so they wouldn't rub too much.

The clapboard houses huddled closer together as we approached the town, green tulip stems thumbing their way through the mud against the stone foundations. When we reached the paved sidewalks Mama stamped her feet in a useless attempt to clean them of mud. Following her lead, I did the same with exactly the same results. I paid more attention once we hit the town, watching as merchants opened their stores, nodding whenever Mama did to people who nodded back. We passed Herr Schuler's smithy, our steps synchronizing with the clanging of his hammer, and I tried to disappear behind my mother's skirts. There were three men outside and an old milk wagon, its horse waiting to be shod. Herr Schuler was too busy to notice us, but I didn't breathe freely until we had put the shop a block behind us.

We rushed past the cheese shop, its pungent odors assaulting our nostrils and lingering. Mama pretended not to notice, and so I did the same. We passed the butcher's and the bank and Golgotha Moravian Church where we attended services when the snow wasn't too deep or the spring rains hadn't washed away the roads. We passed Fraulein Hornberger's millinery shop and the dress shop her sister owned. And, as always, I was struck that the mannequins didn't look like any woman I'd ever known. They were too tall, too slender, their painted hair too perfectly waved. Their lips were too red and their cheeks fever bright, and none of them looked harried or tired. We passed the bakery, its window a garden of pink and yellow sugar flowers. The delicious aroma of freshly baked bread followed us for a block, and I begged to buy a loaf.

"Mama, it would be nice to take Frau Felden something—maybe some cookies or a loaf of bread?" We'd have tea, I thought, with cinnamon cookies or warm fragrant bread with jelly or jam. But Mama ignored me, maintaining her pace, and I had to jog to keep up.

I looked over my shoulder as we passed the last shop and stepped down into mud again. We had just crossed the border of all I knew. I wanted to linger, to say goodbye to

the town. For some reason I felt I'd never see it again quite the way it was. I wanted to weep. But Mama kept her footsteps steady and quick, and she tugged me smartly along.

I don't know why, but I expected the country beyond our town to be exotic, maybe wild and a little dangerous. But the fields were the same as the ones we had just passed—muddy and shabby, just molting their snowy down, not yet plumed with the showy colors of spring. We hurried past homesteads just like ours, Mama fiercely trudging at a pace I could not match. My shoes rubbed sore spots on my heels. I could not walk without limping.

Though the air was chilly, sweat trickled down my back; my face burned from within. Knowing Mama wouldn't let me take off my coat, I unbuttoned it, allowing the front to flap in the current of our gait. Cool air trickled through my dress raising goose bumps of relief.

"Have you lost your mind?" Mama stopped in her tracks. "You'll catch your death of cold!" she scolded, doing up the coat around my throat. I sighed and quietly whined to myself, promising I'd never wear a coat again or shoes that rubbed once I got into the woods. Hot and hungry, tired and wanting a nap, my feet so sore I didn't think I could go on, I limped behind my mother, knowing better than to ask how much farther we had to go.

"If you need to pee you'd better do it now," Mama squatted by the road and relieved herself. Nothing about the barren panorama looked different from what we had seen until then. I didn't understand what made that place special. Nonetheless, I obediently squatted and made water. We adjusted our clothing and plodded on, my feet screaming with each step.

When the houses began to cluster I took hope. My heels hurt less, and, though I was hot and hungry, like a mare smelling the hay of her barn after a day of work, I quickened my pace to stay abreast of my mother. I wasn't even terribly disappointed that the houses were as small as ours, just as threadbare, just as badly in need of paint. I didn't mind that their windows were just as shiny, as if the women here, like the ones at home, believed that constant cleaning could wash away the rot. Ordinary laundry just like ours flapped on clotheslines strung between trees. Chickens scratched at the ragged, muddy ground and dogs just like the ones at home pulled at their chains with a terrible racket, their tails wagging just as frantically.

The town was very much like ours as well. The shops were arranged slightly differently, but their windows shone just as brilliantly; their dark canvas awnings were fringed just the same. The sidewalks were paved with the same kind of stone, and old men played chess at the café tables, just as they did at home.

Mama stopped abruptly, and I bumped into her. She plucked a crumbled paper from her pocket, read it, nodded once, and walked again, this time much more slowly,

checking the names on shop windows as we went. We stopped in front of Felden's Dry Goods. Mama checked my hair again, straightened my coat, and fretted over my shoes. She dampened her handkerchief with a little spit and swabbed beside my eye.

"Wipe your feet," she warned, wiping hers on the mat just outside the little shop's door. "And don't forget your pleases and thank yous." She laid her hand on the doorknob and stopped again. "And don't touch anything." She opened the door and a bell I couldn't see jingled a merry welcome.

The store was a fairy tale of cloth. Aside from the clothes on the window mannequins that stood in postures no woman could endure, dresses, aprons, shirts, and blouses overlapped on hangers against the back wall. To the right bolts of cotton—prints and solids and stripes and plaids—and wool and corduroy leftover from winter's need and fabrics I couldn't identify were arranged on shelves according to color. And in front of them maple display cases showed off spools of thread and needles and binding, bias tape, buttons, zippers and cards of snaps and hooks and eyes. Rolls of ribbon and lace and braids and other trims were stacked in the middle of the store on a large round table. And on the left hanks of yarn were strewn on a counter around busts of men and children in knitted sweaters and vests. Mama made all the clothes we wore, but I'd never seen so much fabric in single place. She usually used whatever was at hand—leftover material from things she'd made for neighbors or pieces she'd torn from her own old dresses. Mama had warned me not to touch, but I couldn't keep my hands from the fancy stuff. She snatched my wrist, then clapped her hands on my shoulders, turning me toward the young woman at the counter.

"Good day." She nodded once. "Fraulein Felden?" Her fingernails dug into my coat.

"Good day. How may I help you?" Much taller than Mama, Fraulein Felden was as elegant as a queen. Her black hair was bobbed bluntly at her chin, and her lips and cheeks were mannequin red. When she smiled she crinkled her nose and tilted her head as if to punctuate the question. She was knitting-needle thin in her red drop-waist dress, and she looked like she had no breasts. She wore a long strand of pearls around her neck that framed a gold heart locket. She fondled the pendant, sliding it on its chain, realized what she was doing, and let her hand drop to a skein of yarn. Her nails were talon long and as red as her lips, and I didn't understand how she could do anything without their getting in the way.

"Yes, thank you," Mama said, squeezing my shoulders and backing me into her belly. "I'm Elsa Baumann. I have an appointment with Frau Felden."

"Oh yes, she's been expecting you." Fraulein Felden smiled again, tilting her head, and knocked quietly on the door beside the wall of hanging clothes. Opening it, she motioned for us to wait, and then she disappeared. In a moment she was back to guide us

through a short, narrow hall to another door. She rapped and opened it, inviting us into the most elegant room I'd ever seen.

Everything in the room was covered with cloth. Mahogany tables, reflecting pond glossy wore doilies of genuine lace. The chairs were cushioned with flowered cloth and draped over their backs with pretty fringed shawls. The widows had two layers of cloth as well—floor length lacy sheers that gathered at the top and deeply pleated drapes that were flowered to match the chairs. There was even a cloth on the parquet floor, pearl gray with flowers that matched the drapes and chairs.

Fraulein Felden disappeared with my coat and Mama's shawl, but Mama nodded that it was all right and fluffed the bow she'd made of my sash. Frau Felden, seated on an overstuffed chair, a book resting in her lap, greeted my mother, then turned to me.

"Judy, my sweet! Look how you've grown!" Her smile was just as red as her daughter's, and her nails were just as long. Her cheeks were pink, though her face was very pale against her bobbed auburn hair. Her baby blue calf-length dress was shorter than any I'd ever seen on a woman so old. (You see, I thought she was ancient at the time, though now I think she was in her early fifties.) And her navy blue shoes, blunt toed with little heels and a strap across each instep, were nothing like the work shoes my mother and I wore. "Come, *liebchen*. Do you remember me?" She tilted her head and smiled her daughter's crinkled nose smile. She laid the book on the chair-side table and patted the cushion, making room for me. She was as thin as her daughter.

I knew Mama wanted me to mind my manners, and that meant going promptly to the woman. But she'd also warned me not to touch. To reach Frau Felden I had to walk on the fancy fabric stretched across the floor. I didn't know what to do. Frozen at the edge of the carpet's fringe, I fought tears of indecision until Mama took my hand and strode with me across the woven garden as naturally as if she were walking on wood planks. Frau Felden leaned forward. For less than a moment a frown puckered her brow, giving the lie to her unbroken smile. Mama placed her hand at the small of my back, pushing me closer. I mumbled a greeting.

Frau Felden cupped my face. Her hand was velvet soft. Not a hint of a callus marred her touch. A strong whiff of lavender stuck in my throat, stealing my next breath. I swallowed hard and gulped air. Oxygen filled my lungs; I held it there while she kissed me on both cheeks. She took my hands. My nails were dirty. She winced at my mother, then smiled again.

"You're limping, child. What's wrong with your feet?" Her red lips went flat, and the frown came again, making itself at home.

"Nothing," I lied, my trembling chin betraying me. I wanted to be home. I wanted to eat. I wanted to take off my shoes and go to bed. I swiped a renegade tear from my cheek.

“She’s fine.” Mama rested her hand on my shoulder, a warning not to cry. I knew I had shamed her with my limp and dirty nails. I wanted to sob for the disgrace I’d caused. I didn’t belong in a room with real lace and a rug and windows that had two layers of cloth. I had no business standing in front of a lady who smelled of lavender, whose long polished nails were clean, who had time to read in the middle of the day. Mama squeezed my shoulders. Obediently I sat on the chair beside the woman and allowed her to take off my shoes.

Over Mama’s objection, the lady placed my muddy shoes on her lap, unlaced them, pulled them off, and let them drop, one by one, onto the flowered rug. I flinched as the right one rubbed the wound on my heel and again when the left one did the same. She rolled my socks to my ankles and tried to slip them over my feet, but blood had soaked through the cotton and dried. My socks were brown spotted, stiff, and firmly stuck. Frau Felden shook her head.

“I can’t take these off without hurting her,” she commented to my feet. Then, as if apologizing for a breach of hospitality, she excused herself, held up my legs and, swinging her torso under them, got up from the chair. When she’d left the room Mama dropped to her knees, petted my shins and insteps, and quietly wept. I could not look at her. Frau Felden returned with a basin of warm water and placed it on the floor.

“Here, *liebchen*.” She put my feet into the liquid. “Soak your feet while I fetch some salve and bandages.” My shoes had left mud stains her dress, but she didn’t seem to notice. Mama begged her with her eyes, but I didn’t know if she was begging for help or to be forgiven or for the woman to return to the role of lady and let my mother to do the tending. Maybe she begged for all those things, maybe for something else. I never asked, and she never told.

Blood leached from my socks tingeing the water pink, as if by adding water Frau Felden had brought it back to life. I wiggled my toes in the soothing pool. The sopping cotton clung to them, but the heels of my socks hung heavily from my feet. In moments Frau Felden returned wearing an apron and carrying medical supplies on a silver tray, which she set on the chair-side table. She knelt in front of me, and Mama let out a moan so soft I almost didn’t hear it. The lady easily peeled the socks from my feet and laid them on a kitchen towel folded on the tray.

“I’m afraid I’ve set the stain,” she apologized. Mama didn’t respond. I knew that, discolored or not, those socks would appear in my underwear drawer again. The lady unfolded another towel and dried my feet, gently patting the open wounds. I hardly felt a thing. The black salve stung coldly when she applied it with gauze, but in seconds the pain was gone. She cut strips of white tape and stuck them to the tray so they hung like fringe, then deftly cut and folded clean gauze, which she positioned over the wounds. She nodded at Mama to hold the gauze in place and ripped the tape strips from the tray. In a blink the

bandages were in place, and my heels didn't hurt anymore. It's hard to believe now, but I actually thought she'd performed a magical act. Now that I think of it, I guess in a way she had.

"There, now." Frau Felden got to her feet, smoothed her apron, and placed the tray on a table. She smiled her crinkled-nose smile again, and I noticed for the first time that her eyes crinkled too. "You've had a long journey." It was a simple statement of fact. "I imagine you'd like to wash up before lunch." I'd nearly forgotten how hungry I was, but the moment she mentioned food my stomach growled. Mama looked like she wanted to hide. "Come then." The lady gestured to the kitchen as if she hadn't heard my complaining stomach. Mama and I took her suggestion as a command and obediently followed her to the kitchen sink. The lady offered a step stool so I could reach the sink and primed the pump to get the water running. I lathered up. The soap smelled of lilacs, very different from the lye soap we used at home. Using the nailbrush the woman had handed her, Mama scrubbed my nails until they gleamed and dried my hands on yet another towel.

"Watch what they do and do the same," Mama whispered hoarsely directly into my ear, then turned to follow the lady into the dining room.

"Is there something I can do to help?" Mama's voice was too loud, her footfalls too heavy. Though my mother was small she seemed somehow too big, too fleshy, too real, to fit in the fancy room. Frau Felden shook her head.

Sunshine saturated the room, pouring through lace curtains on the double windows directly ahead and through matching curtains on the French doors at the left. Though the garden was dormant and the view through the doors was of nothing but the stone walls that enclosed it, I could imagine daisies and irises, a lilac and surely some roses in summer. I pictured Frau Felden, wearing gloves against the thorns, maybe with a hat to protect her from the sun, strolling along the flagstone paths and cutting flowers for a crystal vase. And I promised myself that when I grew up I'd have a flower garden with flagstone paths and a chin-high wall of stone. I'd fill vases with roses and put at least one on every table in the house. Though she'd made no effort to dig up our bulbs that had spread so crazily, Mama hadn't approved of growing flowers since she'd borne the two of us. "They'd take up space," she'd protested, "that we need for vegetables."

A mahogany sideboard with a creamy lace runner basked in the windows' sun. On top of it were a crystal bowl filled with greens, a china salver loaded with meat, a tureen, and two ornate silver candelabra sporting five purple candles each. Just beside the kitchen door, there was a tall china closet with beveled glass doors in which the Feldens displayed silver platters and decorative china and cut crystal glasses and bowls.

But the queen of the room was the dining room table. Long and broad with graceful curved legs and shiny brass feet, it occupied the center of the room. Hovering over

it like a crown, a crystal chandelier gleamed with facets that sunshine had turned to dancing rainbows. The table was covered with a real linen cloth, pure white without any stains, and was set with cloth napkins and silver flatware and genuine china dishes—so many dishes, so many spoons and forks. It looked like a table set for a banquet. My breath hissed when I sucked it in.

“No, thank you, Frau Baumann.” Acknowledging my mother’s offer, the lady gestured for us to sit. “Gerda’s taken care of everything. Such a good daughter.” Fraulein Felden glowed in her mother’s praise. Mama sat in the chair the lady had touched, and I sat next to her on the rose colored pillow Gerda Felden had added to boost me to a comfortable height. I felt like a princess on such a soft seat, but in truth everybody’s chair was soft, cushioned with mauve and purple flowered fabric like the violets on the walls.

“Frau Felden sat at one end of the table and her daughter at the other. Mama and I were seated on the side, facing the window, our backs to the china closet. From that vantage point I finally noticed a teacart on one side and the *étagère* on the other of the door that led to the parlor. I was sure I’d remembered the *étagère* in the parlor, but maybe I’d been wrong. Or perhaps they had moved it.

Frau Felden said a blessing in a tongue I didn’t know. Mama bowed her head with her and, therefore, so did I. When the prayer was ended and we’d all said “Amen” the lady rose, brought the tureen to the table, and served each of us, one ladle of steaming soup per bowl. I grabbed for a spoon, but Mama touched my thigh. I waited, promising my empty stomach as I’d promised the woods—soon, soon. The ladies unfolded their napkins and laid them neatly in their laps. Mama and I did the same. Each lifted the large spoon to her right, and so did we. Each skimmed her soup from the middle to the far edge of the bowl, and Mama followed suit. But I noticed that I could see my face in the spoon. Fascinated, I stared, holding the utensil like a mirror. Mama kicked my shin. I skimmed with the ladies and ate without slurping and daintily dabbed the corners of my mouth whenever Frau Felden did. The steamy golden soup was full of chicken chunks and celery leaves with bits of carrot and lots of parsley. When my bowl was nearly empty I automatically went to lift it to drink the last of the broth. Mama stayed my wrist, and, sure enough, the ladies left the last of the soup in their bowls. I couldn’t understand why I had to leave food when my stomach was still complaining.

Gerda Felden cleared the bowls and the plates under them, placing them on the sideboard, and gave each of us a dinner plate. She transferred the tureen to the sideboard too and replaced it with a loaf of bread, a bowl of honey, and another little bowl of jam. She added the salver of cold roast beef sliced and rolled and arranged like the spokes of a wheel, a small bowl of horseradish acting as a hub. Mama and I waited. Frau Felden cut the bread with a long silver knife.

“Would you like some bread?” she asked my mother, passing the partially cut loaf. I did. I’d never seen white bread. To me it was a delicacy, and I simply had to taste. But Mama declined, and Fraulein Felden understood her refusal to apply to me too. Before I could snatch a piece she’d accepted the serving plate from my mother. She took a slice and laid the loaf to her right, too far for me to reach. Three times I mentally asked for bread, trying three different combinations of words. But each time I thought I had gotten it right I remembered Frau Felden’s grimace when she’d noticed my dirty nails. I didn’t want to do it wrong. And so I waited while Gerda Felden spread honey on her slice, while her mother tried, as she’d done since we’d sat down, to engage my mother in conversation. She asked about my father’s health. Mama said he was fine.

“And Johann? He must be so big by now.”

“Yes, quite big,” Mama agreed. “He’s well too, thank you.”

And so it went, with solitary words dangling on long strands of awkward silence.

At last our hostess took a slice of meat and spooned a dab of horseradish onto her plate. She passed the salver to my mother and she served herself and me, passing the meat to Gerda Felden. We cut and speared the meat with knives and forks instead of eating it with our fingers. I thought it tasted better with a fork.

I began to fidget when Frau Felden removed the meat to the sideboard and replaced it with the salad. I wasn’t used to sitting so long, and my booster pillow was getting lumpy. Mama put her arm around my shoulder and leaned into my face.

“Sit still,” she hissed and kissed me roughly on the cheek. I did my best, wrapping my legs around the chair to keep them from dangling and finally settling on resting my feet on the rung. The lady chose a little fork, and we did the same, pronging small bits of spinach and walnut flesh and juicy orange sections.

There was nothing on the sideboard that had not been served. My hunger well sated, I promised restless muscles that the meal was over and soon I’d be able to move. But just when I was ready to get up Fraulein Felden cleared the table, taking the dishes to the kitchen and returning with a chocolate layer cake. She placed it in front of her mother. She returned to the kitchen and came back with a tray containing a matching silver coffee set—a pot, a sugar bowl with ornately fashioned tongs, and a dainty pitcher of cream. Taking small plates from the sideboard, our hostess cut the cake while her daughter poured coffee into small china cups. We never had dessert at home. Mama said she had enough to do without having to make confections.

“Would you like a glass of milk?” Frau Felden asked, smiling her daughter’s crinkly smile.

“Oh, yes!” Milk was a luxury at home. Mama poked her elbow into my ribs. “Yes, please. Thank you,” I amended. Frau Felden moved to rise, but her daughter patted her shoulder.

“I’m up, Mama. I’ll get it.” But when she brought the frosty glass I didn’t know what to do. No one at the table was drinking milk but me. Frau Felden gave me a subtle nod and raised her eyebrows wrinkling her forehead as if we were sharing a private joke. I gulped half the milk, stopped to gasp for breath, then guzzled the rest much too noisily. Mama was mortified. Frau Felden was amused.

“Would you like some more?” Gerda Felden asked, her brown eyes twinkling. I did. I wanted it more than the cake. But I shook my head.

“No, thank you,” I mumbled. Mama let out a sigh and ate her cake, but I did not. I took a bite to make it mine and hoped the Feldens would send it home with me so I could give it to Johann for having stood up to the blacksmith. And that’s exactly what they did. When the meal was finally over and I could move again Frau Felden wrapped the cake in a piece of wax paper, placed it in a little mesh bag, and set it on top of my shoe. She put a large bundle next to my shoes as well.

“Next week will be fine,” she told my mother. But I was too busy admiring the figurines on the *étagère* to pay attention to the women. Gerda Felden came up behind me and placed her hands on my shoulders.

“Would you like to have one?” My mouth dropped open in panic and hope. I glanced at Mama. She was busy with Frau Felden. I nodded, unable to trust my voice. “It’s all right, *liebchen*.” She stroked my head and ran her fingers down my right braid. “Pick one. Choose her carefully, though. Make sure she’s the one you really want.”

I touched a fine one, a lady with hair as black as Fraulein Felden’s but wavy and long and swept up over her head. She had pretty green eyes and a little red mouth and a nose as fragile as a wish. Her sleeveless dress was emerald green and tight at the bodice, but its full gathered skirt flowed from her tiny waist as if caught in the wind, showing off a white petticoat of ribbons and lace. She wore pointy black shoes and stood on a little round base that was as green as her dress. I liked her well enough, but she wasn’t the one.

I touched others too—blonde ones in red and one in yellow with a sun bonnet hanging down her back. I picked up a redhead with flowers in her hair and roses all over her ruffled white dress and little pink shoes with tiny blossoms at the toes. All were beautiful, but none was quite right. Then in the back, partially hidden behind the others, the perfect one winked at me.

She was smaller than the others, about twelve centimeters high, and she wasn’t a lady at all. She was a little girl. Her yellow hair was pulled up in a red bow at the top of her head and fell down to her neck in long finger curls. She had big blue eyes and fat rosy cheeks and a little pink nose. Her bright red lips were parted in a smile as if she wanted to tell me a secret. I could almost hear her voice whispering through her glossy teeth. Her dress was baby blue and had long sleeves. A ribbon sash tied at the waist to a flat bow at her back, its ends streaming down to her ankle length hem. Her bell-shaped skirt showed

the last snowy ruffle of her frilly pantaloons. And in front of her dress, as though it were an apron, she held a broad-brimmed garden hat in both fists. But the thing I liked best about the figurine, the thing that made her mine, was that she wore brown work shoes that looked to be about a size too large. I held her in both hands and stroked her face with my thumb.

“Is she the one?” I’d forgotten Fraulein Felden at my shoulder. I nodded. “Well, then, you’ll have to name her.” I already had. Her name was Heidi. I opened my mouth, but Fraulein Felden shushed me, placing her fingertip over my mouth. “No, don’t tell. Keep her name secret. That way you’ll be the only one she’ll talk to.”

“Come, Judy,” Mama called from the parlor. “It’s time to go.” Reflexively I hid Heidi behind my back.

“It’s all right, *liebchen*.” Fraulein Felden rubbed a little circle on my back with the flat of her hand and addressed my mother. “I’ve given Judy a little gift, something to remember us by,” she said with her crinkled-nose smile, her head tilted to the right. “It’s just a little something. I hope you don’t mind.” She was all charm. I took mental notes. Mama shrugged and thanked her.

“Say ‘thank you’, Judy,” Mama reminded, “and come get your shoes.” It was official. I could keep the figurine. I hugged it and thanked Gerda Felden.

“Her name is Heidi,” I whispered to the woman. “I don’t mind if she talks to you too.” I had no way of knowing how glad I’d be years later that I’d shared Heidi’s name. I carefully placed Heidi in the bag with my cake and sat down to put on my shoes.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for her to put those on just yet,” Frau Felden suggested. “Why don’t I drive you home?” Mama’s protest was tepid. She knew I could not walk, and she knew she couldn’t carry both Frau Felden’s package and me. “Do you mind, Gerda?” Fraulein Felden shook her head, beaming at me as I stroked little Heidi through the mesh of the bag. “Leave the dishes. I’ll do them when I get back. You’ll have enough tending the store.” Mama helped Frau Felden hitch up the carriage, and we rode like ladies, all the way to our front gate.

The minute I saw the fence my world closed in on me again, and I wanted to bolt with Heidi and the cake while I could, before Mama or Frau Felden could catch me. As though she’d read my mind Mama grabbed my wrist and held it much too tight. Frau Felden winced at the iron bars the same way she’d winced when she’d noticed my dirty nails.

“I see you have a new fence, Frau Baumann,” she observed, immediately recovering her smile. Still gripping my hand, Mama nodded without comment and thanked her for the ride. She lifted me out of the carriage then, still clutching my wrist, pulled the parcel out as well. We stood and waved Frau Felden down the road while we waited for Papa to unlock the gate.

Supper was as supper is. Papa and Johann reeked of manure, their work clothes smeared and smudged from having spent the day wiping their hands on their pants and their faces on their sleeves. We ate watered down cabbage and potato soup from mismatched bowls on the bare little table, the men slurping and grunting and smacking their lips as they dipped the brown bread into their broth to soak up every bit.

When the soup was gone and Mama had already gotten up to wash the dishes I went over to the counter and retrieved the wax paper package I'd been saving for Johann. And, as if it were the crown jewels resting on a pillow, I carried it the few steps to his chair.

"I saved this for you," I said simply. Thank you, I wished into his heart, for Herr Schuler and for all the food you've brought to me. And, as I'd done with the bread he'd brought me so many times, he gobbled it up and wet his fingers to dab up every crumb.

That night I placed Heidi on the bureau in my room and, after Mama had kissed me good night, she went over, picked up the doll, and examined her. Without a word, she shook her head, put the little girl statue back on the bureau, and blew out the lamp.

With only a sliver of the moon to guide me, I tiptoed to the bureau, cradled Heidi in my hands, and returned with her to my bed. Leaning toward the glass to gather the silver light, I sat with the statuette, telling her everything I could think of about Johann and Mama and Papa and me. I told her about the call of the woods and about the fence and my plans to defeat it. I talked to her for such a long time, staring into her face, that her head seemed to nod, and her mouth appeared to move. And so I sat quietly and listened for her voice.

I strained for a long time to hear what she was saying, holding her to my ear so I could catch the faintest sound. I listened so hard and for such a long time I didn't even notice that the moon had moved on, leaving us in total darkness. Still listening, I oozed into a thick, black sleep, waking once in the night to crawl under the covers and cuddle little Heidi on my pillow.

I awoke just as the sky was turning gray and heard the familiar forest song.

"Do you hear that?" I asked Heidi, thrilled that, in spite of the fence, the forest still had faith in me. She didn't respond. "Yes, I hear you," I assured the woods. "We're coming," I promised, as I had so often before. "We're coming soon." But my eyes would not stay open. Sleep overtook me on sweet stealthy feet, and this time it carried a dream.

In my dream I sat at a rough wood table inside a windowless house that I did not know but in which I knew I lived. There were three candles on the table, each burning at a different rate. The white one was just about gone while the red one, the thickest of the three, still stood about the height of my hand. The black one, the thinnest of them all, looked practically new, but it was burning fast. I worried that before long it would burn down too, and I'd have only the flicker of a single candle to light my important work.

Pottery shards littered the table, and I was sorting them by color. There was a jar of glue at my elbow, and I knew I had to reassemble the pieces before the light was gone. But each time I thought I had the colors separated I found they were intermingled again. Bits of crystal glinted in the mixture too, shining rainbows into my eyes so that, even with the light, I couldn't quite see what I was doing.

Heidi was there, a living girl, but the same size as the figurine, and she glowed with a blue light as if she wore a halo. She worked beside me at a frantic pace, kneeling among the colored splinters trying to push them to the proper piles, bloodying her knees and her dress and her hands. I looked at my hands, and they were bloody too. I woke up sobbing in my mother's arms.

"Hush, Judy, hush." She rocked me, resting her chin on my head and petting my hair. "It was just a bad dream. It's all over now." But, of course, it hadn't even begun.

A lush green forest scene with a small wooden cabin, a woman, a deer, and a bear. The cabin is on the left, partially obscured by trees. In the center, a woman in a brown dress sits on the ground, talking to a large brown bear. A deer stands behind her. The forest is dense with tall trees and green foliage.

Forest Song Little Mother

Vila SpiderHawk

ACCLAIM for
Forest Song: Little Mother

With her usual superb attention to detail, Vila Spiderhawk brings us another stunning novel. One of learning, of joy, of pain, of loss, of rebirth and life altering decisions.

Being the proud owner of Vila's two previous novels, *Hidden Passages* and *Finding Home*, I see that she has grown and spread her wings with each one. This book reaches the pinnacle of beauty from the other two and I found myself entranced, unable to stop reading. Vila's own life is reflected in this book. Her travels and her cooking are reflected here, for those who are aware of her other passions.

I have read this wonderful tale of spiritual growth and it was such a delightful experience! Vila Spiderhawk can bring conversations to life like no other author I've encountered, and her wonderful passages and the discussions that her characters have are easy to read and understand. The reader becomes as one with them, which is as it should be.

Each of her characters is beautifully crafted. They come alive for the reader and one can empathize with each of them in a manner in which Spiderhawk has no equal.

A truly beautiful book and one which Vila's fans will be clamoring to own. Those of you, who have not had "The Spiderhawk Experience", should do so now! You will be thrilled with your book.

Jo Gray, Author of *Tails from the Cat Basket*.

Forest Song: Little Mother

by
Vila SpiderHawk

Vanilla Heart Publishing
USA

Forest Song: Little Mother

Copyright 2009 Vila SpiderHawk

Published by: Vanilla Heart Publishing

www.vanillaheartbooksandauthors.com

10121 Evergreen Way, 25-156

Everett, WA 98204 USA

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission from the publisher, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to places, events, or persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-935407-47-8

LCCN: 2009920773

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 First Edition

First Printing, March 2009

Printed in the United States of America

Acknowledgements

I thank Rabbi Eric Cytryn for his enormous help in explaining the Seder so that I could understand its subtleties. And I thank Jerry and Evelyn Solomon, good friends for many years, for their verification that I got the mechanics of the ritual meal correct. All three were so patient and so kind in opening the door to this important Jewish experience.

I thank Irmgard Trossbach, good neighbor and good friend, for her help in all things German.

And I thank my dearest friend Helen Collins, www.writerssuccess.com, for her encouragement and support through the past difficult year. I thank her for her editing acumen, for her inspirational coaching, and for her unfailing friendship, support, and strength.

Slithering through my dreams,
reptilian cold,
as thin as pencil strokes and just as black,
they hiss somber warnings.
It's the season of loss,
of corroded aspiration.

This is war.
It's as real
as the rust my tears have made.

I plunge my arms to the shoulders
through November's liquid night,
shove the grumbling clouds aside,
pluck the lunar egg of hope;
tuck it into my worry-scribbled sleep.

Chapter One

Good morning, Inga. Did you have a good rest? Good. Yes, sleeping in the woods is easy. I honestly don't know how people can sleep through the noise of a city or a town. I see you've made some notes, which tells me you have questions. And rest assured that I'll answer them in time. Some will be resolved as I continue the story. Others will have to wait. Sit down now and have some *zupa ze moreli*. It's is a special soup I made just for you. See how pretty, all golden with lemon and apricots and honey from the sacred bees. Wait! It still needs some whipped sour cream. There. Now it's ready. Have some coffee too. Be careful, though. It's still a bit too hot.

Now let me see, I believe we stopped at the rite to celebrate my becoming a woman. Did I tell you the story about building this house? No I didn't think so. Well I guess that's where I'll start.

We waited for the day of the moon's first silver grin, since that is the time when hope becomes beginning. Everybody came. Władysław, the alpha wolf and Bogumiła, his mate, brought their pack to dig the root cellar and the well. Dobiesław and Danuta pressed their beaver clans to work to cut wind-felled trees into logs, which Bronisława, the bear, and her two grown cubs, Czarownica and Rościsław carried to the site. Dobiesława, Czarownica's playful cub, skittered under their feet. Stretching himself to his full impressive height and pointing to the left then to the right and sometimes in both directions at once, Tranoc, his sleeves rolled up to the elbows his shirt pulling out from the waistband of his pants, detonated commands as if the house were meant for him.

I would have laughed at his antics if I had not been confused about having a place of my own. I wanted the house. I had daydreamed about it from the day my childhood crush, Jochen, and I dug our way through Mama's flowers

to squirrel under the new fence and made our great escape for the woods. I had fantasized about it even before I'd met Tranoc and my teacher, Matka Lasu.

On the other hand, I resented it because I'd have to leave the home I loved with Tranoc and my teacher. And so I felt as I had when the neighbors had come to put the fence up around my parents' house. Though the fence had been erected to cage me in, and I was sure that the cottage was meant to push me out, the sense of helpless outrage was the same.

"Why can't I live where I want?" I groused while Matka Lasu, and I gathered stones for the foundation. I hefted a rock the size of a cat into Tranoc's little cart.

"Who says you can't?" She nudged some leaves with her toe and picked up a plum sized piece of *schalenblende*. Brown and beige striped and at home in Germany, it had no place in the Polish soil. She handed it to me. "This one would look pretty embedded with your chimney stones." I huffed and stamped my foot. "Kochanie, there's no law that says you have to move." For the first time I noticed that her hair was all gray and that the lines of her smile did not smooth away when her face relaxed back to a neutral expression. "One day you'll want a place where you can have some privacy."

"I won't!" I pouted and stamped my foot again. "I hate this house!" I lied kicking the cart's wheel. "I want to keep on living with Tranoc and you!"

"Then you shall." She brushed a silver hair wisp from her face and plunked another rock into the cart. "But why don't we build the place anyway in case somebody else wants to live there?" I hadn't considered that somebody else would want to live in the house I had designed. Suddenly possessive of the home I had toured in a trance before my Woman Ritual, I gnawed my thumbnail and scraped the ground with my foot and wrestled with the longing to stay with them while having the new cottage for myself.

"Maybe I could mostly live with you and visit the new place from time to time?" A peach colored thomsonite caught my eye. Roughly trapezoid shaped and the size of a wren, it glinted on the shadow-striped forest floor. It belonged in Russia or in Germany and shouldn't have been just beneath the leaves. I suspected that Tranoc had planted it there and had covered it lightly so I'd find it.

"Exactly so," my teacher beamed, her brown eyes going to blue, the crinkles at her eyes and mouth creeping toward each other. "You'd come and go as you chose. That's precisely what I mean!" I showed her the stone. "It looks like Tranoc's been here."

Having settled the problem of where I would live, I searched with more attention for any special stones that Tranoc might have hidden for me, though I still wasn't sure if he or Matka Lasu had been the one to scatter them about. I found a piece of amber as big as my head and a zincite the size of my fist. While deposits of both were commonly found deep within the Polish soil, they should not have lain among the leaves and the green shoots probing their way into spring. Nor should they have been perfect orbs. On our way back we discovered a chunk of carnelian leaning against a boulder and a few paces later a piece of cobalite, both stones from Africa. Only Tranoc had traveled around the world. Only he would have had access to those stones. If my teacher had left them I knew she'd have done it by pilfering them from his collection. And she wouldn't have taken anything of his unless he had given permission.

"Did you find any stones that caught your eye?" he winked when we arrived back at the site. "No! Those logs go over there!" He swept his arm to the right then, glancing at the bears, he flashed a gap-tooth grin at me.

"Nothing special," I teased. "Just ordinary rocks." His jaw dropped. He frowned. I had his absolute attention. Shoving his rumpled ever-present cap to the back of his head, he grated his scalp, his glance flitting from me, to the cart, and back to me. I shrugged again and ordered the giggles bubbling behind my teeth to settle in my throat or, better, in the pit of my belly. They would not be contained. Tickling my tongue, they sputtered from my lips. Head tilted, he laughed, clapped his hands then chafed his palms.

"You got me, Funny Bunny!" In two long steps he had draped himself over the cart. He plucked the apple of zincite and handed it to me. The humor evaporated from his face and a father's affection glimmered from his eyes.

"Do you know what this is?" The stone stung my hands with the scintillation of a star. Reflexively I dropped it back in the cart and checked my palms for blisters or chars. I nodded. My hands were both whole and pink. "And you know about its magic?" Matka Lasu had taught me everything I knew about women's mysteries and the plants and the beasts, but Tranoc was our resident expert on stones. All the wisdom I possessed about rocks and stones I had gleaned from his patient instruction. Again I nodded, preparing myself for a quiz. Instead he gathered my hands in his and went on. "You'll need this to synthesize your physical power, your psychic energy, and your creativity. You'll draw on it to organize like-minded people so your work can be successfully done." Looking back at the cart, he petted the stone. It sizzled to his touch. "Embed it in your chimney low enough that you can touch it. This stone will serve you well. All of them will." He mounded the planted gems at my feet.

“They all should be part of your hearth.” He barked another order then returned to me. “And Judy? No rock is ordinary.”

Working through the grumbling of our overburdened muscles, Matka Lasu and I went out for seven days searching for stones that would be part of my house, welcoming those that agreed to come along and leaving those that didn’t want to move. Each day we came back from a farther place to pile my treasures at the site. Along with the gray and tan rocks of the woods we found a fire orange hopeite from Africa and a green diabanite from Germany. Satisfied that we’d found all of Tranoc’s secret gifts and longing to rest our quivering arms, we rested on the eighth day to take stock of what we had.

The pile of rocks was pathetically small. Astonished at how much timber and stone was needed to construct a simple house, I consulted Tranoc’s plan again and again, willing the cottage to need less.

I imagined the sacred forest cleared like a field because of my rapacious demands. I visualized Matka Lasu in bed with muscle cramps from lifting far too many stones. I saw construction ending at three-quarters of a house because we’d run out of building supplies. Fretting about the irreparable harm I would do to build the dwelling of my dreams, I gnawed my thumbnail and pouted and twirled a strand of hair.

“Don’t worry, Funny Bunny.” Tranoc patted my cheek. “The woods will still stand and plenty of rocks will work themselves up through the soil. We haven’t taken anything without permission, and after we’re through you won’t notice any change.” He was right. Days later when we had all that we needed, the forest looked the same as it had when we’d begun. But I could barely move my arms.

Working with mortar that the wasps had made, Tranoc and the bears laid the foundation stones. I hectored my thumbnail while they worked, fussing that the hole would be too big. Yet, once the stone walls were as tall as my knee, I complained that it would be too small. I badgered Tranoc and the bears and Matka Lasu, even paced the foundation for myself. Everything was as the plans prescribed. Nonetheless, I became such a constant irritant that Tranoc suggested I go visit the fairies, effectively banishing me from the site.

Anger at being banned from my own house quarreled with the pleasure of adventure. Though I knew the fairy town was somewhere in the woods, I didn’t have an inkling how to get there. I had asked many times, had even secretly searched, but having no idea what signs to look out for, I had wandered around in fruitless circles.

The fairy Małgorzata fluttered in the place behind my eyes before she actually flicked into view. She was dressed all in turquoise, her little white light glinting like quicksilver in the tree-latticed sun. I laughed when I noticed she was wearing pants. My friend Bożena had set the fashion in the woods, and, after she'd made patterns so we could sew our own, Matka Lasu and I nearly always wore pants. The fairy women and girls had embraced the trend too, except for Małgorzata, who had clung to her skirts. The turquoise fairy alit on the crown of Tranoc's cap, barely taller than the feather poking from its braided band. Her giggling was as tuneful as the rippling of a wind chime caught in a gentle April rain.

"Tranoc tells me that you're ready to see what we have done." She tossed her head to the left, and a wayward yellow curl tumbled down over her eye. She blew it out of the way. It plopped back down again. She sighed and tucked it behind her ear.

"Well look at you! The final hold out gives in!" I reached my palm out and she fluttered over to it, landing with a pirouette and bow. "You look amazing! I really expected to see Heidi in pants before you'd even think about it!" Though Heidi had changed herself into a girl for the celebration of my womanhood, she'd shrunk back to her form as a hand-sized figurine, her body and baby blue ankle-length dress returned to their original china. Małgorzata scrunched her shoulders and shook her head but grinned at the compliment.

"I doubt that I'll wear them when the weather gets hot. But for winter and spring they're warmer than skirts." She clapped her hands. "But that's not why I'm here." She smacked her palm to a titter. "You have to see what we've made!" Leaping into flight she snapped her fingers and I stood inside a magic azure bubble. I slapped my hands over Heidi to keep her in my pocket, and fell back on my haunches when the fairy jerked us forward. As she'd done many times, she towed my bubble through the woods by a slender silver cord tied to her waist.

When we stopped and she'd folded the bubble up until it had disintegrated into her hands, we stood in front of a nondescript birch. I had probably passed it a hundred times before without ever taking note. It was an ordinary tree, maybe older than most, but nothing about it drew attention. Małgorzata clapped her hands to the left then to the right. Then she clapped three times at the tree. A door opened inward, its entryway just tall enough for me if I went down on all fours.

"This is it," she announced, going in ahead of me and flitting near my ear while I checked the ceiling's height and discovered that I could comfortably

stand. Leading me down the damp stone stairs, she chattered so quickly I couldn't catch her words.

The risers were shallow, but the long rough-cut treads required two paces to cross. My heels clicked on the stone. The echo was annoying. Though I sat on a step to untie my shoes, the fairy stood on top of the knot. "Let them be," she reassured. "The echo doesn't bother us."

I'd expected the underground staircase to be dark, but, while I couldn't see a lantern or a candle or a torch, light splattered from the lofty root-vaulted roof. I'd expected the air to be musty and dank, but the place smelled of lilies and thyme. I pressed my palm to the dribbling earthen wall then smelled it. It was saturated with the scent.

A hallway, its floor made of roots, rocks, and earth, meandered from the foot of the stairs. And along its rock walls, time-dyed rugged wood doors as tall as cathedrals beckoned me. Dawdling in front of the one nearest me and fondling the knob, I poked my head into the room, ignoring Małgorzata's eager prattle.

A slender runner of hall light unfurled across the floor to the corner where a child cowered in a woman's arms. Their terror gusted at me like a swarm of stinging gnats. I blinked and the people and the painful fear were gone. I threw the door shut, filled my lungs with a deep cleansing breath and then bullied it open again. Nothing, not even a table or chair, interrupted the chamber's rough-hewn brownness. Knowing I'd just witnessed a moment in the future, I tucked it in my heart and promised to remember as I followed the still bragging Małgorzata to the door at the far end of the hall.

The door glided open at the fairy's command and the smell and the noise of the work inside assaulted me like a summer storm. I smacked my hands to my ears. The hammering stopped. Saws stopped in mid saw. Silence overtook the din. Even the air stood still, and I realized the fairies were all holding their breath. Infected with the virus of their anticipation, I held my breath too. All eyes were on me. I didn't know what to do.

Sawdust, bits of wood, and scraps of dark blue cloth littered the barn-size floor. Małgorzata spread her arms and with a thespian bow invited me into the room. Afraid that I might step on a necessary swatch or a vital length of wood or kick a crucial implement, I didn't know where to step. I shuffled as I entered so the worst I would do would be to nudge some of the clutter aside.

"Show her!" she directed, flitting over and around me so fast that her gossamer wings were a blur. The crowd of fairies fell open like wheatgrass in the wind, displaying a dark blue wingback chair. The same style as the green

ones in Matka Lasu's house except that its cushions were still fat, its flawless beauty siphoned a long breath from my lungs. I wondered whom the perfect chair was for. "It's for you! Do you like it?" other than at the elegant lunch at the Feldens' with my mother before I broke for the woods, I'd never seen a chair that wasn't saggy or torn. I couldn't speak. My breath still fizzling from my lips, I reached my hand out but I could not touch the prize. "Try it!" she suggested. "Let's see if it fits." She expected me to sit in the thing!

"You're going to get tired if you never sit or sleep." She nodded toward a bed frame as broad and as long as the one that occupied my parents' room. I'd imagined my bed as a simple pine thing like the one in Matka Lasu's house. But the frame they had made had been carved of ash and was curved at the head and foot like a sleigh. I could not imagine the work they had done to sculpt such a tightly grained wood. In truth I still can't, and even to this day I marvel every time I lie in it. A half-stuffed mattress drooped over a table in the corner, and the unpainted legs of a kitchen table had been carefully tucked against the wall next to it.

Suddenly I had to touch everything—the bed frame, the mattress, my beautiful chair, and the cleverly turned table legs. I stroked wood they had sanded river stone smooth. I let the mattress fabric trickle through my fingers like milk. And I sat in my lapis colored chair. My feet barely touched the floor. Nonetheless, I felt as regal as a diamond drizzled czarina. Małgorzata clucked and the rest of the fairies joined her in a droop of disappointment.

"She needs a footstool," her uncle Lubomir worried. Fingering his lavish auburn beard, he was already calculating what they would need to construct the unanticipated piece. "It's all right," he nodded, his frown smoothing to a smile. "We'll be fine if we can manage two more meters of cloth." From behind me an eager chorus of voices assured that the fabric could be made. Ludmiła, the matriarch of the clan, clapped her hands and then patted her green-trousered hips, her white braid lazily on her shoulder like a snake.

"Well let's go," she demanded. "There's enough work to do. There's no room here for idle hands." She slapped a square of sandpaper onto my hand. Lubomir showed me how to sand the wood, and I discovered that I had a talent for the task. Breathing deeply of the sweet smell of newly cut wood, I smoothed the bumps and little ridges from the table legs, delighting in my power to change roughly turned legs into perfect matching works of art. And when I was through, four chair legs waited for me.

What the fairies lacked in size they made up for in numbers. A half dozen of them worked the treadle of the lathe so that when I had sanded the legs

for the chair, four others had been added to the job. I lost all track of time in the work room of the fairies. When fatigue overtook me, the mattress was stuffed, the extra cloth had been woven, and the table and two chairs were ready to be assembled.

When I awoke, Małgorzata was dressed all in green, her turquoise pants abandoned for an apron and old skirt. She led me to an ante-room where the lily-thyme scent mingled with the odor of paint. Four naked kitchen chairs stood like soldiers in a row, two fairies already painting one of them.

“Choose a color,” one of the painters instructed pointing to a row of pots filled with yellow paint. Laughter tripped on my tongue and almost made it past my lips, before I understood that yellow really was the only choice. I dipped the brush into a pot and sang the simple song Matka Lasu had taught me about yellow’s magic powers:

Yellow’s for wisdom, for youth, and for light.
It’s for love that we celebrate by day and by night.
It commemorates joy and a good harvest too.
And it brings hospitality and kindness to you.

Always ready to pick up a catchy tune, Małgorzata joined in and soon so did the others. Other workers came in, and before I had drawn a single yellow line on the bottom of a seat, everyone was singing my song.

I don’t know how many days I stayed with the fairies, eating without tasting the food that appeared, working until I dropped where I was and sleeping until the sawing woke me. When we finished I had an enormous bed, two overstuffed chairs, one slightly smaller than the other, an ottoman, a table and four matching kitchen chairs with two coats of yellow paint, a maple chest of drawers, and a matching little table for between the perfect lapis colored chairs. I spent the evening bouncing on the bed, testing the chairs and the ottoman, and opening and closing bureau drawers.

But disappointment discolored my moment of joy. I was sorry to see the woodworking end. I would miss the aromas of newly sawed wood and of varnish and of paint meandering through the ambient fragrance of lilies and thyme. I would miss the feel of sandpaper in my hand. I would miss the monotonous rhythm of the work, the hypnotic rasping of the wood beneath my hands, the satisfaction of breathing in cadence with the strokes so that wood, sandpaper, and artisan surrendered to each other and melded to a single entity.

So, though thrilled with the furniture we had made, I felt wounded, as if I had been hacked away from the gratifying call to create.

For the first time I slept on my big double bed though without any blankets or pillow. And for the first time I realized how warm the room was in spite of the lack of a woodstove or hearth. I fended off sleep for as long as I could, puzzling over the source of the heat and awoke in Matka Lasu's narrow bed, sure that I had had a convoluted dream but unable to remember more than snatches.

"Visiting the fairies is like crossing through the veil," my teacher consoled as, seated on the bed, she petted my pillowed hair. "Most people who go can't remember a thing. That's one of the devices the fairies use to keep their town and little ones secure. But you are becoming an *anarkhara* now, and a wise woman knows how to use the proper tools to shatter the enchantment of forgetting."

She was right, though I needed more than a year to reconstruct the memory. I found snippets in my dear friend, the spider's eyes, other scraps of it in meditation. When I remembered to ask, I found some shreds in my dreams. And I chronicled the remnants and the other odds and ends in my *lechebnik*, my book of shadows. Then, like a seamstress assembling a quilt, I stitched all the pieces together. But I have gotten ahead of my tale.

When we returned to the construction, I had a better idea of how long I had been away. The shell of the house was entirely built. The log walls were up; the chimney was constructed; and the wood shingle roof was in place. The doorway was open, but an arched maple door lay on the ground near four of the windows that Tranoc and my teacher had made. The three windows in bedroom had already been installed, and I wondered where they'd gotten the glass.

But all questions skittered from me when I entered the house. Only the sub-flooring had been laid, and I didn't see the planks that would make the final floor, but the hearth step was there, and above the firebox three gray and tan stones protruded from the hearth ready to support a still-missing mantelpiece. The magic stones that Tranoc had planted in the woods gleamed at eye level from the chimney. I went over and touched them. They all radiated heat, but the zincite, having found a home with the others, had cooled to a comforting warmth.

I, on the other hand, didn't feel at home. I felt like a visitor touring the house, unable to grasp that a dwelling so fine could really be meant for me. The empty rooms seemed huge in the unfiltered light of the still leafless early spring

woods. I worried that I would never fill the place up, would never make it feel like a home.

Paradoxically I wondered what memories the walls would sing or moan in the solitary nights. This would be the place where I would laugh with those I loved, where I would argue with them, where I would grieve over their deaths. This would surely be the place where I would die.

I examined the blue veins reassuringly mapping the backs of my hands. Perfect full moons stopped in mid ascendancy on the horizons of my cuticles. A stubby white scar shone on my thumb's first knuckle. Several pink nicks splattered over my wrist. They were healing too and would also leave scars, and for the first time I felt reverence for the body's cunning knack of mending life's big and little tears.

I turned my hands over and inspected my palms. My lifeline was long, as Matka Lasu told me often, and with the arrogance of youth, I formulated an image of living forever in my prime. My love line was short though unusually deep, and I told myself again that it would grow. I touched my thumb to my four fingers and marveled at the tasks that opposable digit let me to do.

What would I do with these self-healing hands that promised endless decades of vigor and youth, with these thumbs that gave me such astonishing potential to make the world a better place? What fissures would I heal with these magnificent hands while residing in this beautiful house? A sense of urgency shoved me forward by my shoulders. The house and my adult life had to be built, and I wanted it done right away.

"Hello the manor lady!" Bożena twittered like a chaffinch from somewhere in the woods. For a breath we all looked at each other in shock, then in greed, as if each would grab the last of a dessert. Smashing into each other, we raced to the exit, all three of us squeezing through the doorway at once.

Wearing bottle green pants and a lemon-lime blouse as if she embodied the potential of spring, she giggled and waved from a fairy cloud of blues and purples and yellows and reds. Her hair was cut to her chin and waved around her face, just a little tag of curl flirting at her neck's nape. I'd never seen a woman with hair so short, yet I thought she looked extremely chic. Laughing, she threw her arms out to us and ran from the fairies to me. She smelled of roses and lilacs.

"A little birdie told me you could use a new floor," she giggled waving at Piegi, the buck, who was pulling the fairy cart. Like sunshine on water, the sparkling love of life glinted in her periwinkle eyes.

“How did you do that?” I touched her yellow hair and found that it was sticky and stiff.

“You don’t want to know!” Spreading her arms, she laughed and turned to model the style. “They’re called Marcel waves, and they take too much work. I’m sorry I cut it this short. But everyone’s doing their hair this way, and I really do like the look.” She shrugged. “Hair grows. I can always change my mind.”

“I like it!” Matka Lasu touched the stiff and sticky waves, and I knew she was planning to experiment on me. I shot her a look. Though I liked it on Bożena, I didn’t want the bother for myself.

“Where do you want the planks for the floor?” The young woman patted Piegі as he and the cart arrived with the fairy entourage. All eyes were on Tranoc, who was running the show. Knocking his cap to the side of his head, he raked his hair and stroked his beardless chin.

“Can you leave them in the cart?” The fairies all nodded. “Good! Then we can take them in as we need them and avoid getting in each other’s way.” He looked at the windows still lying on the ground and then at the cart full of planks. “The windows will be quicker. Let’s do them first.” Then turning to Bożena, “What are you doing here?”

“Oh thanks! I’m glad to see you too!”

“No, why aren’t you teaching or studying or something or working at the rental library?” Unhitching Piegі, Tranoc patted his rump and thanked him for his help with the house.

“Oh, I quit all that.” She flicked her wrist as if dismissing all the jobs that filled her life with so much joy. Then her giggles erupted, giving her away. “Pani Olszanski is visiting her brother so she closed the school today and tomorrow. I have to be back by one o’clock, though, to get to the library. My shift starts at two, but I still have some time.” She checked a watch I hadn’t noticed before. “And I figured with no morning classes to teach I could come and see Judy’s new house. Can I help with the windows? I’m good with a hammer.”

She and Matka Lasu installed the windows while Tranoc, the fairies, and I laid the bedroom floor. The broad pine boards were as smooth as baby lips. I couldn’t keep my hands from stroking them. A vapor of a memory curled around my head then dissipated with my breath. The moment had passed, and I focused on the work, drawing a curious satisfaction from a task I felt I had done some time before. When we broke for lunch my new kitchen windows and the two in the living room glinted in the sun. The bedroom was finished with a new wide-plank pine floor, and we praised ourselves for a job well done.

“We’ve done a good morning’s work!” Tranoc tugged on his cap. “I think we deserve something special for lunch. Will you join us?” He turned to Božena. She consulted her watch, and I thought I could learn very quickly to hate that contraption.

“I still have an hour.”

“And I happen to have a pot of lentil soup up my sleeve.” My teacher winked and invited the fairies to come, but they preferred to go back to their home.

“I wonder where they live,” the woman idly asked, patting her Marcel waves in place. Of course, she couldn’t know that in a couple of years she would know their home as well as her own.