



BIRGIT MATTAUSCH

Bis Wir Wald Werden

**Until we become Forest**

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**A tower block at the edge of the forest is home to Nanush and her great-grandmother, Babulya. Her great-grandmother once carried her from Siberia to Germany, but now every evening Nanush tucks the elderly woman into bed with a quilt. A family novel and poetic tale of great narrative power about the special community of Russian-German immigrants.**

When Babulya says they came from spring, Nanush knows that her great-grandmother doesn't just mean the two of them, but all the residents in the block: Granny Elsa, who speaks neither High German nor Russian, Felek, who fled from Kurdistan, Vitali, whose dog keeps him safe, or Gregorij, who knows how to shell sunflower seeds in his mouth. For years Babulya's kitchen was the centre of all her stories, with the little tomato plants by the window and sage hanging from the ceiling. But now Babulya is so old that she barely leaves her bed. What does it mean for the community in the block, and above all for Nanush, that the guardian of her memories will one day no longer there?

Full of warmth and poetry, Birgit Mattausch tells a story of inseparable family ties and a unique community. At its centre is the world of the "late resettlers", ethnic Germans who returned from Eastern Europe to Germany after 1992 — and their way of life, their sometimes traumatic history, their arrival and being foreign in a country that they considered home for centuries.

Before studying in Hildesheim, Birgit Mattausch spent a decade as a pastor in south Germany. During this intense period, she became particularly familiar with the lives of “late resettlers” from Siberia, who were part of her parish. In *Until we become Forest* she invites the reader to immerse themselves in their richly remembered world, characterised by searching and yearning for a home.



**Birgit Mattausch** studied German studies and Protestant theology. For ten years she was a pastor in south Germany; since 2017 she has worked as a lecturer in pastoral education and training. She worked for several years in a parish that included many ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union, living with them in a high-rise building.

## Until we become Forest by Birgit Mattausch

Sample translation by Lizzy Kinch (extracts)

### Chapter I HOUSE (pp. 1-11)

**Our building has 323 windows.** Nelli, Vitali and I used to pretend that the windows were eyes: approximately 87 of them are open at any one time. The closed windows' eyelids are made of synthetic white lace, threaded curtains, yellow satin, fluted blinds, grey shutters. Some have tattoos on their cornea: unicorns, rainbows and sunflowers applied with water paint.

Just behind the eyes are fake orchids. Plastic roses. A plush E.T. who wants to go home.

Felek, Babulya, Lilli, Granny Elsa, Valentina — they all clean the eye-windows regularly. And then they draw the curtains closed. Then draw them open. They open the window-eyes and again call down below: Come over! There's waffles/ pide/ ice cream/ Germany's Next Top Model/ pelmeni/ homework/ sleep/ a home.

**We live in Babulya's kitchen. It's both small and big.**

Small, because it's a tower block kitchen. A room poured out of concrete at a time when people thought kitchens at home were outdated and microwave meals were the future. Kitchens like alcoves in space ships. A time when Babulya was still waiting for her great-grandfather and for spring, thousands and thousands of kilometres

from here, this spot where concrete blocks were assembled together and later became her kitchen.

Big, because it's Babulya's kitchen. The heart of building. Or its belly. Its store cupboard. Full to the brim with salted pickles, ham, the samovar. A bundle of sage hanging from the ceiling. Tinned fish in the hanging cabinets. Tomato plants by the window. The kitchen has a table around which we sit, rolling and sticking varenyky together, drinking tea, chopping onions (crying all the while); where we did our homework and Vitali copied mine — although none of this was possible in the kitchen at all. It was far too small for all of this, and it still is.

It was possible, though, for Uncle Wladi to knock through a wall with a sledgehammer — Granny Elsa: *You out of your mind. It'll fall!* — and for the building not to collapse, for nobody to notice at all, because after all, making your kitchen bigger is forbidden.

It was also possible for us to move in and for Babulya to say: *This is the kitchen. Put the stove here, Wladi.* To which Uncle Wladi replied: *That's the living room, Babulya.* And Babulya said: *Who needs a living room that's so big?* And Uncle Wladi: *This is Germany, Babulya.* And Babulya: *This is the kitchen.* And Uncle Wladi listened and laid the cable, rerouted the water pipes, dragged the stove over.

And it was possible that it was the air from Siberia (air with the scent of birch resin in the sun, air like freshly melted snow) — Babulya had brought it with her in her hair, under her headscarf, in her lungs, in her suitcase with the pots inside. And this air unsettled the walls of the small tower block kitchen, so that they grew taller and had enough space for the table, the tinned fish, and above all for the

stories that Babulya told Valentina, Granny Elsa, Lilli, and later also Felek. Stories that Vitali, Nelli and I listened to, sitting under the table while Gregorij showed us how to shell sunflower seeds in our mouths. The stories began with swans and nettles, continued with princesses in castles made of ice, made slight detours towards the sea and ended with a wedding. Others told tales of lopsided eyes and freight wagons. Of sacks of cement and rubber stamps on papers. They were acquainted with a red painted table, these stories. A dress with lace edging and a dried flower, pressed into a bible, that performs miracles — when the doves on the gable of the roof cooed at twelve. Except our building has a flat roof and there are no gables far and wide. Only this table and this kitchen. The centre of our universe. A tiny point, around which the planets, the stars and suns all orbit. Can there be a better place to orbit than one full of sage, salted gherkins, pickled shashlik? A place where the butter never runs out and where Babulya pulls me onto her lap and (if I nod) wraps me up in the embroidered quilt, a place where I sleep on the kitchen bench, surrounded by the others' voices and the smell of honey and yeast.

## Chapter II FOREST (pp. 29-30)

**Where we came from — a vast plain, from the woods and the winter.**

*We came from spring, my kitten, said Babulya. From the land of peace. From the land of war. We came from here and went to there.*

*We came from there and went to there. We had to. At last, we came from there and went to here.* She opened my school atlas (when was this? A time when we still had school atlases. Vitali forgot his downstairs in Valentina's flat, so we looked in mine, bending our child's heads over the atlas on Babulya's and my kitchen table). Babulya's finger (much less crooked than it is now) wandered over the green and brown on the blue map. From south Germany to the Caucasus, and further to the Black Sea. Upwards from there. Up to the end of the page.

*Siberia, you see? And some went there.* (The finger moved again, down and to the right) *Kazakhstan. And then... Germany!*, Vitali cried. *Where's our building, Babulya?*

And today Babulya would probably stretch the map apart on a screen with her fingers and thumbs to make it bigger, bigger and bigger, and we'd get closer and closer, like a bird of prey in free fall above our building, claws first. But not back then, because my atlas was made of paper. And so all Babulya said was: *here, here it is.* And we were amazed by the tininess of Germany and the hugeness of Siberia.

*Why aren't we there?*, I asked.

And Babulya: *You're too small to understand that, my kitten.*

And Vitali: *Can we watch TV, Babulya?*

And Babulya: *Get on with your homework first.*

And then we did our writing and sums, and Vitali whispered to me that we'd be better off staying at his downstairs tomorrow, because Valentina never remembered about homework and we were always allowed to watch TV.

Later, I took the atlas to the big bed where Babulya and I slept. Before nighttime and the angel of sleep arrived, I asked: *Where was your family's home, Babulya? In Siberia?*

I put my finger on the spot Babulya showed me and thought about how cold it must've been with all the snow. But Babulya said: *It's spring, my little one. And summer is coming.*

#### Chapter IV OCTOBER (Pp. 110

**At night you can hear our building breathe, at least I think so.**

It breathes like Babulya in her sleep. Evenly and deeply. With her eyes closed in a darkness like the depths of the sea.

Sometimes it makes you jump. When Vitali and Gregorij come home and let the doors slam too loudly. When one of the many babies in the Baptist families screams and falls silent again all too quickly. Or when the glass jar for cigarette butts slips out of my hand in the stairwell. When I can't sleep I sit there in my pyjamas and cardigan and smoke. Sixteen floors beneath me. Take away the outside walls and you'd see me sitting right at the top. A tiny dot with an even tinier flame floating beside it in the air. The stairway poured from concrete like a bony protrusion arising out of the building. Or knotty branches. Take away the outside walls and you'd see Babulya under the flowery quilt. Felek in her husband's arms. The woman from the third floor pacing up and down with the baby. You'd see someone duck under a



hand. And Frau Rappard at the kitchen table bent over her accounts, sleepless like me.

**The morning used to have grey clouds in its hair, wind.** Woke me up. Tea. In the morning Babulya was silent like the forest and the clouds. In the kitchen, she cut the sweet bread into thick slices. She still doesn't understand that locals prefer to eat their wholemeal bread from white or old second-hand plates. Not plates with visibly stuck-on floral patterns. Plates that Babulya is proud of. She stirred marmalade into the tea. Said: *Eat, kitten. Drink.*

I think about how she used to comb my hair.

She'd fix it with pink spangles. They matched my pink shirt perfectly.

I sat still.

*Babulya, I want to sleep. (Me. Back then.)*

*I know, my little one.*

*Where are we when we're asleep?*

*We fly away.*

*To Siberia?*

*Maybe.*

*But we stay together, Babulya?*

*Yes we do, my kitten. We'll always be together.*

*As long as I live. Don't worry.*

*But what if I don't want to go to Siberia?*

*Then you don't have to.*

*But you all want to be there.*

*Yes. But now I'm here. With you.*

*We can go there at night, Babulya. But in the day I really do have to be here. With Vitali and the others.*

*Yes, my little one. You have to be here. And you should be, too.  
Drink up your tea. We're late.*

**Today I wake her up.** Slip into her bedroom, where she's lying under the floral quilt. My small, grey Babulya. I run my fingers through her fluffy hair.

*She jumps. Stares at me. Says: Kitten. They're coming.*

*Hide.*

*You've been having a bad dream, Babulya.*

*Hide!*

She jumps out of the bed. Her thin legs covered in purple veins. Her toes curling outwards. The yellow nails. Under her flannel nightdress, the blue nappy.

*Babulya —*

*Quick, kitten. Under the bed!*

So we crawl underneath it together. In the dark. Waiting. Her breathing shallow. Until I say:

*I think they've gone, Babulya. Shall I make you a cup of tea?*

*And she says: Yes, my kitten. We were lucky again there.*

Chapter VI SPRING (pp. 147-151)

**Julia, Baccara, Bianca, Romana, Tiffany, Denise, Dr. Norden.**

Feverish desire. Blazing passion. Wild like your tenderness. Hotter than embers. And then it was love. Tender hours in the Adriatic. The first time is forever. A reunion with the wicked duke.

Love belongs to spring. And at least as much as plastic, we love romance novels. Thin paperbacks, printed on cheap grey paper. I bring piles of them home from work. They cost between two and five euros. At first Babulya reads, or read, them. She gives, or gave, them to Granny Elsa afterwards. Who gives them to Olga. Then Lilli. Valentina. Lydia. Erika. Hilda. Jewgena. To Nelli, last of all (when she was still around), who shook her head and gave them back to me.

In spring our world is full of small, printed letters in two columns. Full of nurses, pirates, depressive counts rescued by the love of a chamber maid (who, it transpires, is a noble herself — a thousand kisses for the finale.)

We read together lying on sofas, sitting in armchairs, in bed, on the toilet, at the kitchen table. We drink tea at the same time, stroke the dog, wait for the pasta water to boil. Bit by bit, the letters fill the apartments. Dr. Norden takes our blood pressure. The curtains look like those in Versailles (the home of the wicked duke). If we look up and out of the window, the sky is pink. The light falls on our faces and makes them soft and beautiful, like on the book covers. We lay the table with vodka, tea, cigarettes, milk, speck and cold shashlik for Kate, Tate, Dr. Valentino, the beautiful widow, the duke (a good man,

underneath it all) and all the others. Then we fall asleep. When we wake up, the vodka has been drunk, the speck nibbled, there are lipstick marks on the tea mugs and the milk is spilt — drops of starlight on the black wipe-clean placemats. But Kate has ridden away on a white horse — white like her nursing cap and the clouds beyond the window she's galloping through — towards the morning sun. The sky grows lighter and lighter as Dr. Norden goes about his work (taking the blood pressure of the elderly and writing out prescriptions) and the duke disappears off into the forest, the fox and the crow in tow.

*Nanush, you're making things up. You read too much!* (Vitali, who else?)

Lighter and lighter, as Babulya flicks the kettle on for coffee (she'll manage it today, but every day is different) and I put on the sable fur coat and my comfortable shoes and head out to work.

*Always thought you'd be a professor, Nanushkinia. And now the check-out at the supermarket... But if you're happy.* (Granny Elsa)

*But are you happy, Nanush?* (Vitali, later)

**In fact I am, sometimes.** When I pass the blocks of butter, milk cartons, vacuum-packed mincemeat, onions in nets and pink Barbie dresses through the scanner. So quickly that the butter turns a small pirouette, so quickly that my hands are no longer hands, but dancers, not dancers but a dance. Its orchestra is the beeping of the scanner and the clatter of the change and the humming of the small box that

delivers the receipt. My own voice that says *That was with Payback points, yes. Or: without Payback.*

My heart beats calmly and warmly because I know who collects points and who doesn't and who is pleased that I know. Because I don't know (but I can guess) why this piccolo bottle of fizzy wine has appeared on the conveyer belt, why later it's only one tin of tomatoes when it used to be three. Because I know the names of so many people and in the evening I take ten packs of out-of-date smoked salmon, which isn't really allowed but we all do it. Because Felek will surely have baked some bread and Babulya will have salted the butter and given Vitali the jar of dill gherkins for him to open. And we'll sit around the table in Babulya's kitchen and eat the salmon and the bread and butter.

I am happy because I see how clear Babulya's gaze is on this evening. How she laughs at Granny Elsa's grimaces as she tries to pull out the strings of salmon stuck between her teeth. Happy, because I see that Felek has her hair down and is wearing her golden earring. Because for a moment I lay my head on Vitali's shoulder and close my eyes and everything is good.

And probably I wouldn't have been able to do the other thing, the university thing — I couldn't have done it anyway.

*Of course you could have.* (Vitali)

And I'm silent because he might be right. Or I am silent because he's wrong? Or both.

***You had a handkerchief, kitten. Remember?***

And of course I remember. Or: I know that I used to remember. Or: I know that I was told. As a child I had a handkerchief that I used to hold on to. It's how I learned to walk. At first holding Babulya's hand. Then the handkerchief between Babulya's hand and mine. Then just the handkerchief in my hand. It was turquoise with a yellow laughing sun.

*You only ever walked with it in your hands. When you let go — down on the ground! So tiny. And now so tall.* (Granny Elsa, of course.)

*And now so tall.* And yet, I still hold on tightly to the handkerchief. To the idea that something was holding onto me. To all of us. To the building and the forest. So that we didn't fall into the emptiness of the universe. Into the chasm of blackness and cement dust. Maybe it's still enough, to simply imagine Babulya's hand at the other corners of the handkerchief. To imagine it as clearly as possible. Maybe that's enough.

**Trees don't mind where they blossom.** Whether near us, between the bin bags, tower blocks, rubbish skips and the story of the man who went wild like an animal and was chained to the radiator by his family.

Or over in the other areas of the city, with their front gardens and carports.

Trees just blossom. In the morning their scent drifts through the tilted window into Babulya's tiny kitchen, into Felek's, two floors below, into mine and into everyone else's.

It mingles with the smell of the coffee.

Babulya's instant coffee (I just hope she doesn't scald her hand, shaky as she is, I just hope the timer switches the oven off, I — ) and Lili's from the new automatic coffee machine.

I make myself a mocha in the cezve with the red handle that Felek gave me. It boils over, and the coffee powder burns on the hot stove top — flowers of fire. Then I pour it into the cracked mug and drink it standing on the balcony. Leaning against the concrete wall, warmed by the spring sun. The blossoming of the trees, their scent a dress, a crown — invisible on the heads of all the women in the block, making coffee at this exact moment. Glowing even through unclean windows. As simple as the spring simply is and the small times table.