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LAPVONA

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OBSERVER

From the author of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

OTTESSA MOSHFEGH

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Ottessa Moshfegh is a fiction writer from New England. *Eileen*, her first novel, was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Man Booker Prize, and won the PEN/Hemingway Award for debut fiction. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Death in Her Hands*, her second and third novels, were *New York Times* bestsellers. She is also the author of the short-story collection *Homesick for Another World* and a novella, *McGlue*. She lives in Southern California.

ALSO BY OTTESSA MOSHFEGH

McGlue
Eileen
Homesick for Another World
My Year of Rest and Relaxation
Death in Her Hands

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Lapvona

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Vintage is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK

First published in Vintage in 2023

First published in hardback by Jonathan Cape in 2022

penguin.co.uk/vintage

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781529115727

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For

Walter

Lapvona

SPRING

The bandits came again on Easter. This time they slaughtered two men, three women, and two small children. Some smelting tools were stolen from the blacksmith, but no gold or silver, as there was none. One of the bandits was injured by an ax wielded by the slain children's mother—she smashed his left foot. Then he was restrained by neighbors and dragged to the village square, where he was beaten and put in the pillory. Villagers pelted him with mud and animal excrement until nightfall. Grigor, the dead children's grandfather, was too bereft to sleep, so he got up in the night, went to the square, cut off the bandit's ear with a garden knife, and flung it in a lemon tree laden with blossoms. 'For the birds to eat!' he yelled at the bleeding man and sobbed as he slunk away. Nobody could say what specific acts of horror this one pilloried bandit had committed. The rest of the bandits got away and took with them six geese, four goats, six wheels of cheese, and a cask of honey, in addition to the iron tools.

No lambs were stolen, as the lamb herder, Jude, lived in a pasture several miles from the center of the village, and he had his lambs penned and sleeping soundly that night as usual. The pasture was at the foot of a hill, on top of which sat the large stone manor where Villiam, Lapvona's lord and governor, resided. His guards were in position to defend him should any menacing individual ever climb the hill. Between the echoing screams from the village, Jude thought he could hear the gut strings of the guards' bows tighten from where he lay awake by the fire that night. It was not by chance that Jude and his son, Marek, lived in the pasture below the manor. Villiam and Jude shared a blood relation, their great-grandfather. Jude thought of Villiam as his cousin, though the two men had never met.

On Monday, Marek, age thirteen, walked to the village to assist the men in digging a trench to bury the dead. He wanted to be helpful, but cowered when the bodies were laid out on the thick grass of the cemetery and the men took up their shovels. The heads of the dead were covered only in thin cloths. Marek imagined that their faces were still alive. He could see their eyelashes grazing the fabric as a soft wind blew. He saw the outlines of their lips and thought they were moving, speaking to him, warning him to get away. The children's bodies looked like wooden dolls, stiff and adorable. Marek crossed himself and retreated back to the road. The men of the village dug the trench easily without him anyway. Nobody cared that Marek had come and gone. He was like a stray dog that wandered in and out of

the village from time to time, and everyone knew he was a bastard.

Marek was a small boy and had grown crookedly, his spine twisted in the middle so that the right side of his rib cage protruded from his torso, which caused his arm to find its only comfort resting, half bent, across his belly. His left arm hung loose from its socket. His legs were bowed. His head was also misshapen, although he hid his skull under a tattered knit hat and bright red hair that had never once been brushed or cut. His father—whose long, uncut hair was brown—admonished vanity as a cardinal sin. There were no mirrors in their humble home in the pasture, not that they had any earnings to afford one. Jude was the oldest bachelor in Lapvona. Other men took their young cousins as their wives if they needed one—women often died in childbirth—or traded a few sheep or pigs to a village in the north for a tall girl to marry.

Jude could never bear to see his reflection, not even in the clear, icy stream that ran through the valley or in the lake where he went to bathe a few times a year. He also believed that Marek ought not see himself. He was glad to have a son and not a daughter, whose lack of beauty would be much more injurious. Marek was ugly. And fragile. Not at all like Jude, whose bones and muscles were like polished bluffs beaten by an ocean, soft and luminous despite his skin being grimy and often covered in lamb shit. Jude never let on that Marek's face had an unseemly disproportion; the boy's forehead was high and veiny, his nose

bulbous and skewed, his cheeks flat and pale, his lips thin, his chin a stub giving way to a neck that was wrinkled and soft, like a drape of skin over his throat, which was flabby at the apple. 'Beauty is the Devil's shade,' Jude said.

On his way home from the cemetery, Marek passed the pillory where the wounded bandit moaned and cried in a language nobody knew. Marek stopped to say a prayer for the bandit's soul. 'God, forgive him,' he said aloud, but the bandit kept crying. Marek got closer. Nobody was around. Perhaps the stench of excrement had cleared people away in the warm sun of spring. Or perhaps they were all busy watching over the burial of the dead. Marek looked into the bandit's eyes. They were green, like his own. But they were cruel eyes, Marek thought. If he got closer, he thought, he might see the Devil in them. Upon his approach, the bandit cried out again, as if Marek of all people could save him. Even if the boy were strong enough to lift the stocks and help the bandit run away into the woods, he wouldn't. God was watching.

'God forgive you,' Marek said to the bandit.

He got closer still, then deigned to lay a hand on the bandit's arm. Marek could see that his foot was broken, limp, a bone sticking out through the flesh, the skin wrinkled and yellow. His breathing was quick and raspy. Flies swarmed, unbothered by the bandit's repeated cries of jibberish. Marek closed his eyes and

prayed until the bandit stopped wailing. He opened them in time for the bandit to spit in his face. He knew not to flinch, as that would show disgust, and God would judge him. Instead, he bent down and kissed the bandit's head, then licked his lips to taste the salt of the man's sweat and the rancid oils caked into his reddish hair. The bandit winced and stuck out his tongue. Marek curtsied and turned and walked away, feeling that the bandit's cries now were not in anguish or petulance, but in rapture of salvation, even if they sounded exactly the same.

Marek left the square and walked calmly now, a feeling of goodness tingling in his left arm, which he took to mean that he had earned a bit of grace while the rest of the village had reviled the bandit and suffered now in darkness, laying down the dead, who were, unlike the rest of them, at peace.

Outside the village, Marek passed a few of Villiam's guards patrolling the road. He smiled and waved to them. They paid no mind to the boy. The guards were all descended from northerners, so they were tall and strong. Northerners were known to be single-minded and cold. They were physically superior to native Lapvonians, and if they had any interest, they could have sacked the village themselves and stomped into Villiam's manor and killed him with a swift elbow to the heart. But they'd been sufficiently tamed and trained after generations of indenture, and now they did the bidding of Villiam as though he owned them.

He did own them, in fact, and all the servants at his manor, and the entire village and the woods and the farmsteads spread throughout the fiefdom. Villiam owned Jude's pasture and the small cottage he shared with Marek. The pasture was bounded by woods, which were Villiam's also.

As Marek now turned into these woods on his way home, he decided he wouldn't tell his father that he had kissed the bandit. Jude didn't understand forgiveness. He was incapable of forgiveness because he was so addled by his own grief and grudges. This bad blood was what kept Jude's heart pumping. The first grief had been for the deaths of his parents when he was a teenager—they drowned in the lake during a storm. They'd been fishing for krap and their little raft had broken in the wind. So rare was a wind so strong that it seemed to Jude that the tragedy had been aimed at him specifically, an evil air cast up from hell to take from him the only family he knew and loved. The second grief was the loss of Agata, his lady, Marek's mother. She had died in childbirth, Jude liked to recount, bled to death on the floor by the fire. You could still see the stain of her blood thirteen years later. 'There, the red still shows,' Jude said, and pointed to the spot by the hearth where the dirt seemed worn down harder than the rest. Marek could never see the blood. 'You're blind to color, just like your mother,' Jude said. 'That's why.'

'But I see my hair is red,' Marek protested.

A punch in the jaw left Marek's tongue flayed by his own teeth. Blood spilt from his mouth on the very spot on the hearth where his mother had supposedly died. Jude pointed again.

'You see it now? Where she left me to raise a child alone?'

Not that Marek got much raising. Jude never held him or rocked him. Immediately following his lady's departure, he'd handed the boy over to the care of Ina during the day while he tended to his lambs. Ina was the wet nurse then, and something of a legend in the village, a woman without a man or child of her own, whose breasts had fed half the population. Some called her a witch because she was blind and yet she was industrious. And she had an intuition about medicines. She traded mushrooms and nettles for eggs and bread, and some people said the mushrooms gave them visions of hell and others said they gave them visions of heaven, but they always cured their malaise—nobody could doubt her knowledge of medicinal plants. They distrusted Ina because of her wisdom, while they still made use of it. She lived down the valley in a dark patch of woods south of Jude's pasture.

Ina was older than anyone could say, and by now her milk had dried up. Marek loved Ina. At thirteen, he still visited her once a week. She was the only person to caress him and give him a kind word now and then. He brought her flowers from the pasture and lamb's milk and chestnuts when they were in season, bread and cheese when there was some extra.

'Did you dig?' Jude asked when Marek got home. He dunked a cup into their keg of water and handed it to the boy.

'They didn't need me,' Marek answered. 'And I was afraid of the dead. I was afraid they were still alive.'

'Those were good people who got killed,' Jude said. 'Only the evil ones get trapped in their dead bodies. That's their eternal penance; the ones who go to hell rot. The ones who go to heaven disappear. Not a trace of flesh is left. Be good and you'll leave nothing behind. Be bad and you'll live forever in your rotting body in the ground.'

'Why were the good dead people still flesh then? Why hadn't they gone to heaven yet?'

'They've got to go into the ground first. Bury them and they disappear.'

'How do you know?' Marek asked.

'I'm your father,' Jude said. 'I know everything.'

They boiled lamb's milk and covered the pot with a cloth to keep the flies away while it cooled. Marek picked the bugs off some potatoes and plunged them and a few whole apples in the fire. They were old apples from the fall harvest. Jude had eaten only lamb's milk, bread, apples and potatoes, and wild grasses his entire life. Like the rest of Lapvona, he didn't eat meat. Nor did he drink mead, only milk and water. Marek ate what Jude ate, always saving a few bites for God: he knew that sacrifice was the best way to please Him.

'Does your head hurt?' Marek asked his father. Jude was rubbing his temples with his knuckles. He often had headaches. His gums often bled.

'Be quiet,' said Jude. 'A storm is coming, that's all.'

'Will it rain tonight?'

'It will rain on Wednesday. Just in time for the hanging.'

It did rain on Wednesday. As father and son walked to the village square, warm spring rain shook the lemon blossoms and haunted the air under Jude's hood with a smell that brought his brighter childhood memories to mind, which he felt shame for remembering on such a day. Jude had not yet set eyes on the bandit.

'Did bandits really kill my grandparents?' Marek asked.

'My parents drowned. You know that.'

'My mother's parents—did the bandits kill them, really?'

'I've told you a hundred times,' Jude said. He told Marek that his mother had been a victim of an attack on her native village when she was twelve, a year younger than Marek was now. 'First they slashed your grandfather's throat, and then they raped your grandmother. Then they slashed her throat, too. They tied your uncles up with rope and threw them in a well to drown. They were just little boys.'

'What did they do to my mother?'

'They cut out her tongue so she couldn't talk, but she ran away,' Jude told him. 'She was lucky to escape. I found her in the woods, nearly dead. Poor Agata. Why do you like this story so much?'

'Because I love my mother.'

'She was a strong girl, but she carried death with her. Death is like that. Like a beggar that follows you down the road. And kills you.'

'Was my mother very beautiful?'

'What a stupid question,' Jude said. Of course, he had invented the girl's name and history. With no tongue, she couldn't possibly have communicated any of this to Jude—she could barely even understand the language of Lapvona when she first arrived. But Jude thought the story made him sound like a hero. 'She was the only one left alive. Imagine the guilt that comes with that charge. Who cares about beauty?'

'I'll feel guilty when you die,' Marek told Jude.

'Good boy,' Jude said.

The crowd had collected in the square, and as Jude and Marek arrived the bandit was being removed from the pillory. They joined a huddle of villagers and watched as Villiam's guards tied the bandit's hands behind his back and dragged him, his legs bouncing, along the cobblestones. They hefted him up the steps and onto the small platform of the gallows. The villagers spoke quietly amongst themselves, a few women sniffling, a few men shuffling violently, thirsty for blood. Grigor, the old man, stood stoically in front of the gallows and prayed that the souls of his two dead grandchildren find peace. The families of the other slain villagers shouted curses at the bandit. Their anger was righteous. Father Barnabas, their priest, had told them so. 'Chastise an evil-doer and God will know you're good.' Marek covered his ears. He didn't like to hear foul language. He was

delicate in this way. Even Jude's rough words hurt him in the heart: 'Damn him,' Jude said.

The noose dangled in the warm wind, and Villiam's guards grabbed it and looped it around the bandit's neck. They brought a stool for the man to stand on, but he couldn't stand. He was too broken. His head was left uncovered, as was custom for murderers. Men who were hanged for lesser crimes—lone marauders who raped or thieved—got sacks over their heads. Marek looked at the bandit. The blood from his severed ear had painted his face such that only small bits of glinting white from his eyeballs showed as he lifted his gaze out toward the crowd, unashamed. After a few pathetic slips, Villiam's guards finally lifted him onto the stool and held his legs. The bandit didn't struggle or curse. He said only, 'God forgive you,' the same words Marek had said to him a few days earlier. And then the guards pulled the stool away and he was swinging. He swung and swayed and his legs seemed to buck and pull. His body tensed and held itself, his legs stiff and straight. And then he stilled.

'Is he dead yet?' Marek asked.

'My God, are you blind?' Jude looked at Marek and saw that the boy had covered his eyes with his hat. Jude pulled it off his face. 'Have a look.'

Marek opened his eyes just in time to see one of Villiam's men gutting the bandit with a sword, the bowels spilling out and smacking on the gallows floor. The sound echoed over the hush of the crowd. Marek turned and hid his face in the sleeve of his father's wool sweater, which was full of dried grasses and briars

and smelled of the lambs. He gagged and bent and spat at the ground. Something was wrong with his stomach. Jude took him by the arm and led him away from the crowd.

'What's wrong with you?'

'I don't know.'

'Do you feel sorry for the bandit?'

'Yes.'

'Why would you?'

'Maybe he was somebody's father.'

'You think he wouldn't kill his own kin?'

'I don't know.'

'Those bandits don't care for kin. They're the Devil's children. Forget him. He'll rot now. He'll feed the worms. Shall we pick some flowers on the way home?'

'Yes.'

The flowers were still shy and wistful, their buds just breaking into bloom as it was early spring yet. There were bloodred poppies growing alongside the road, and Jude picked some as Villiam's guards passed, marching in tandem toward the village. Jude pretended they didn't exist. He didn't like northerners. He thought they carried an element of evil. Their light hair never seemed dirty, and their skin never showed any signs of wear. He didn't trust men so clean. They only understood the surfaces of things, which was why they appeared so perfect. They took

Jude's depth and pain as weakness, he thought. They didn't respect his thoughtfulness. They saw him and his son as farm animals, no better than the lambs they raised. And they seemed not to care about the villagers' safety. Not once during an attack by bandits had the guards defended the village. They retreated up the mountain to the manor and took aim. That was all. They were cowards, Jude thought. What he didn't know, of course, was that the bandits worked for Villiam. He paid them to ransack the village any time there was a rumor of dissent among the farmers. Father Barnabas conveyed such rumors to the lord. That was his primary function as the village priest: to listen to the confessions of the people down below and report any sagging dispositions or laziness to the man above. Terror and grief were good for morale, Villiam believed.

To get to Agata's grave, Jude and Marek passed into the woods. There were horse chestnuts on the ground. Swine were let to pannage there, and as Marek and Jude walked along they could hear some snorts and squeals. Past those woods was an orchard of apple trees, too old to bear fruit. The silver bark was thick as armor and laced high with the scars from years and years of villagers etching their names with Xs. Past the orchard, the grass was thin, the dirt pale and rocky, but as it had just rained, the ground gave in a pleasant way under Jude's bare feet and Marek's thin-soled shoes. Marek picked a handful of chamomile and cornflowers growing near a trail of runoff, then followed an ostrich fern off the path toward a patch of iris. He picked an iris in bloom and some young sprigs of freesia. Then

they turned toward a grove of black poplars, where, under the largest tree, was Agata's grave.

Marek was solemn as they walked, his stomach churning and his mind still darkened by the scene in the village square. Of course he had seen bandits hanged and disemboweled before, but there was something special about this man. He hadn't looked scared as Villiam's men dragged him to the gallows. Maybe he knew where he was going. Like Jesus on the Cross.

'That bandit,' Marek said. 'Do you think he had a mother?'

'Everybody's got a mother,' Jude replied.

'Is that bandit's mother sorry he's dead?'

'They aren't like us. They have no hearts.'

'Do you think he had a son of his own?'

'A bastard, surely, if he did. Who cares?'

'Did my mother love me?'

'She died for you,' Jude said. 'That should be enough.'

'Will I see her in heaven?'

'Of course you will. As long as you get there.'

'What about you?'

'Don't worry about me, Marek,' Jude said.

But Marek did worry that his father wouldn't get into heaven. The man had an unkind hand. And when he prayed, Marek had the sense that there was anger steaming off his father's shoulders, the cruelty inside him escaping like a vapor. Not that the man was impious. But Jude's piety was a kind of violent urge and not the love and peace it ought to be, Marek thought. Jude whipped himself every Friday and had taught Marek to do the

same. But Marek thought Jude whipped himself a bit too passionately. He'd get sweaty, grunting, moving the whip across one shoulder, then the other, wincing and breathing so hard that spit drooled from his mouth, and then he sucked it in and spat it out violently, as though it pleased him, as though the pain felt good. This frightened Marek because he, too, enjoyed the pain, and he was ashamed of that. Since he was little, a scraped knee or a whipped back, anything to make his body hurt, felt like the hand of God upon him. He knew that wasn't right. So he kept it private, which made his father's shameless display of pain and pleasure seem all the more perverse. All Marek really wanted at this age was to go to heaven, where God and his mother would love him.

'But what if something goes wrong?' he asked Jude. 'What if you don't make it to heaven?''

'If God wills it, I will.'

Agata's grave was marked with a plain, rounded rock from the stream. Jude had hammered a violent chip into the rock as though he really was broken by the girl's death. Jude was illiterate, like everyone else in Lapvona, but he said that the chip in the rock had a meaningful shape.

It was Marek's custom to lie down on his mother's grave, placing his body crosswise as though he were a babe in her dead arms through the dirt. He had always felt that the ground below him was charged with a sense of belonging. He would lie there and gaze up at the swaying branches of the poplar tree and listen for a birdsong. A bee-eater or an oriole might tweet a few happy

notes. Marek would take this as his mother singing down to him from heaven. Now, standing by the grave, he heard a magpie song. It was angry and harsh, raspy chatter like an old lady scolding him from her window.

'Why don't you lie down today?' Jude asked, placing the flowers by the chipped stone.

'Not today. The birds are singing too sad a song.'

Jude didn't believe in birdsong. He didn't trust birds. They weren't of the land, and he was a man of the land. He loved his lambs because they were like him. They were drawn to the comfort of the pasture, following the edge of the sundrawn shadows to stay cool and warm according to the breeze. Jude was like that. He was a slave to the day as it rose and fell, and he felt this was his righteous duty—lamb herding was his God-given occupation. He ignored the church bells. He didn't need to track his time. Nature did it for him. He was born in that pasture and felt he would die in it, too. Why had he not buried Agata in the pasture? Marek had asked a few times. Jude would never entertain such a question.

'Let's go then,' Jude said, already turning back toward the woods.

The path they'd worn from Agata's grave through the woods to the pasture was narrow because Jude and Marek never walked side by side. Jude always walked in front. Marek knew his father's body from behind as well as he knew his hands or his face. Jude's feet landed straight on the ground. Marek's step was outward turning, like a duck's, and if he didn't concentrate, the line

he'd walk would veer to the right, such was the turning of his body against nature. Jude's ankles were fine, the joint bolted and smooth, and the thin of his leg below the calf as narrow as a wrist. Marek's ankles were swollen and freckled, often scraped by briars and bleeding and itchy. His skin was thin and delicate. Ina rubbed salve on his feet from time to time to keep the skin from peeling or rotting and falling off, she said. 'You're like a snake,' she told him. Jude's calves were round and taut and tan, and the backs of his knees had lines from the tendons as fine as gut strings. His pants covered the rest of his legs, and were patched at the seat and between the thighs. His buttocks were high and strong. Marek knew his father's body was beautiful. But he didn't revere it. He simply respected Jude's physique as a part of nature, the way he found a vulture beautiful, or a cow. He knew that he didn't resemble his father. You couldn't compare a plover to a chicken. They were different kinds of animals. No one who saw the two together would ever guess they were of blood relation.

Jude's hips were narrow, his back was long, his shoulders strong and hunched despite their broadness, penitent. He walked with his head bowed. He took this posture having spent so many years looking down at his lambs. Sometimes Marek regarded him with admiration, a man of the harsh world who had given him a roof over his head, had mannered him in his ways, father to son. And other times Marek regarded him as a man living in the shadow of sin. He pretended to sleep while Jude molested himself every new moon under the sour woolen blanket by the

fire in winter, or under the open window in spring. Summers and warm autumn nights they slept in the pasture under the stars with the lambs to make sure the wolves would stay away, Jude said. But Marek knew it was because Jude liked to feel the warm air on his skin as he slept, as though God were touching him in the breeze. Each night that Jude molested himself, he produced a baritone groan of such horror, such pain, only the Devil could be behind it, Marek thought. After the groan, Jude's body stiffened, then rocked, and it seemed to Marek that he was undergoing a spiritual ablution, as though to eject some evil from his body. Marek never let on that he knew this about his father, but he did know it. And it was yet another impediment, he believed, to the man's passage to heaven.

The sky seemed to darken now as they entered the woods. The air was chilled between the trees, no warm wind blew, but the ripeness of the earth smelled sweet and musty still. Jude preferred spring to winter. He loved the color and romance of spring. He loved the sun. Sitting and watching his lambs in an afternoon, not a shadow in sight, Jude could feel God's lips on his cheek every time he turned to face the light. That was God for him—the kiss of sun. God's hand on his bare skin was the one certainty that rose up through the abstractness of truth and thought, everything, and gave Jude a sense of belonging on Earth. He loved the grass between his toes and the soft touch of a lamb against his leg as it passed. He loved the young eyes of his babes smiling at him, their first spring, such wonder and light. He loved the ply of their joints as they moved and sniffed and

chewed the sweet grass, the perk of their ears at the first songs of the titmice and chickadees on their way north. Jude's flock were polled and pure white. They were the gentlest lambs, and they stayed babes for a season longer than sheep of other origins. Even their milk teeth were rounder and flatter than others. But they were hair sheep. Not fur. They were only good for meat. So of his lambs each year, Jude kept only a few for breeding and the rest were sold for slaughter. This was the sacrifice he made, as his father had done, and his father before him. After the sale of his flock each spring, Jude tried and failed to hold his tears until he was safe and alone in his pasture with the remaining lambs—most of them would go to market next year, of course.

The lambs kept for husbandry were in mourning, too. Jude couldn't look them in the eyes. He felt guilty for having sent their brothers and sisters to be murdered. Instead of begging them for forgiveness, he treated the remaining creatures cruelly, pretending to forget them when they came in from pasture, then yelling for them to hurry up, as though they were unwanted, left over from a time he wanted to forget. But he depended on those young sheep to keep the flock of new babes on the home range. He didn't have fences out there in the pasture. He had no dog, either. He understood the rhythms of grazing and thirst, and how the lambs preferred to sleep in the shade of the cottage during the day, but under the open sky at night. The babes Jude had now were only six weeks old. He'd watched the ewes' bellies grow since the fall. As the field went dormant in winter, he had fed them hay by hand, almost apologetically: 'I'm sorry this isn't

fresh grass and forbs.' He helped to birth the babes in the lean-to, forbidding Marek to speak. 'They don't like the sound of your voice,' he said, and it was true. The ewes would bleat and snort and grunt if Marek came around. Jude understood that the sheep knew that Marek was a baby in his own way, that he would steal their milk for himself if he could, that he would suck the motherhood from them because he was so starving for it. 'Stay away,' they told him. 'Baaaa.'

Marek did nurse the ewes when Jude wasn't looking. He pushed the babes away and put his mouth to the sheep's teat and sucked until he felt sick. He felt this was his right as a child of God. He was a lamb himself. Not that his meekness stemmed from weakness. Rather, he was a bridled boy, gentled to be a servant to God. And as God's meek servant, this sheep's milk was his inheritance. Anything could be cajoled into sense if he thought enough about it. As father and son now walked through the woods toward the pasture, Jude was troubled by the number of shoeprints he saw dotting the path. He hoped they were not the tax collector's. He had paid all he could that spring already. Any more and he and his boy would starve.

Contrary to his father, Marek preferred winter to spring. He enjoyed the cold. He understood that God's love burned through the fire in the hearth. He liked the large kindness of that, and so he loved the smell of smoke. He liked the wet of mucus on his lip, how it would crust and pull at his skin and sting when he widened his mouth into a smile. He liked the snow on the boughs and the look of clouds, like a curtain that could be peeled

back. A clear blue sky was hard to take. Marek saw it as emptiness, a place with no heaven in it. He preferred the clouds because he could imagine paradise behind them. He could stare up and focus his eyes on shapes in the clouds, wonder if that was God's face or God's hand making an impression, or if God was spying down at him through the gauzy mist. Maybe, maybe. The heavy cloak he wore in winter weighted him with comfort. If Jude loved the stinging whip, Marek loved the cold for its cruelty. He would suffer, endure it, and thereby increase his score of good deeds and humility. Without that cruel wind, there was no need for protection to be met with a fire in the hearth, there was no prayer to be answered. The oil lamp burned with precision. Its flame was female, thoughtful, like a spirit exacting its will against time. The fire in the hearth was masculine, powerful, instinctual, tireless. Marek never shivered from cold. He felt more at ease in the cold, in fact, as though his eyes could see more sharply, he could hear more clearly, everything pure and clean in the snow and crystal air.

Jude thought the spiky shadows of the trees on the snow were menacing, that the cold welcomed evil, a ghost released in every exhalation. Because things died in winter. There were no flowers, no fruit. There were no leaves on the trees. In summer, Jude was more relaxed. He went bare-chested through the field, his skin got brown and hard, his hair got light. In winter, he was stiff in his coat over layers of wool, never changed his long underwear, afraid to be naked against the chill. Marek had been born in February. Of course, he and his father never marked the