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LOST

VIETNAM, 1992

“Wake up. Wake up! It is five a.m.; we have to go! My driver is picking us up in half an hour.”

Five a.m.? Driver? What driver? What is he talking about?

I wake up, disoriented and groggy, and take in my surroundings. I see Pasje standing at the end of the bed.

This is my first visit to Vietnam, to Pasje—that is what I call Willem, my boyfriend of thirteen years. He had moved there six months before to set up two branches for the ING Bank. As I wake up, I remember the night before—his driver, Mr. Hung, drove me to Pasje’s hotel after I landed at the Ho Chi Minh City airport. Pasje introduced him as his “Mr. Fix-It-All.”

Pasje then hands me a cup of coffee with an apologetic smile. He knows that I hate getting up early. Even more so with jet lag. But five a.m.? What is he thinking? I look at Pasje in his gray, plushy bathrobe. His mother had it embroidered. When he turns around, I see the words “Breda, Leiden, Santiago” on the back. No “Ho Chi Minh City” yet. *She’ll likely hand-stitch that when she visits.* There is something about Pasje in his bathrobe. I love the relaxed laziness it exudes; it complements his slow preparation for the day. His ritual of coffee making. A cup for me in bed, a cup for him at the table. He likes getting to the airport on time. He hates my tight planning when he visits me. He likes to get ready

slowly and thoroughly. I prefer fast and sloppy. Especially if it gives me an extra half hour of sleep. But I love him. And the coffee.

I take my time sipping it, which leaves me about eight minutes to shower and get dressed. Pasje tries to hide his irritation. Once we leave the room—on time—he kisses me gently.

“Well done,” he says.

We are off to a romantic vacation in Nha Trang, a beautiful resort on the South China Sea. That’s all I know. Pasje wants it to be a surprise.

When we get to the lobby, Mr. Hung is dutifully waiting. He gives us a sneaky smile. There’s something about him that makes me uncomfortable. But Willem slaps him on the shoulder in his warm manner. It is strange to see how at ease Pasje looks in this foreign environment. He obviously feels at home, and it makes me feel out of place. *Am I jealous?*

It is still dark outside, as it was last night when we drove into town. Again we pass crowds of people on bikes wearing triangular straw hats and printed handkerchiefs covering their mouths. A Vietnam War movie meets a Western. Our headlights illuminate their pajama-style outfits, one by one. Or rather, five by five. Whole families seem to travel together, sometimes several of them crowded onto one bike.

Though there are fewer people in the streets than the previous night, there are still more than we would see during rush hour when we lived in Amsterdam.

As Hung drops us off at the airport, Pasje gives him a list of things to do in his absence. Off we go, finally. We walk into the 1960s-style airport, with its retro chairs, counters, and lamps; it all resembles an old movie. As always, Pasje takes care of the formalities of checking in, first parking me in a little coffee shop. I feel more at ease once Pasje and I are on the go. This is what we are used to doing. I look around and try to appreciate the different culture. Next to me, a man is noisily slurping a large bowl of soup, just like the Chinese traders do when we have breakfast in New York’s Chinatown.

Pasje returns with our boarding passes in hand. “We have to walk over to the plane,” he says. “No buses here.” I follow him down the stairs onto the tarmac. We pass a few army jets, lined up as if ready for combat. *I have never seen that before!* When we finally stop in front of our plane, my heart sinks. I cannot believe how small it is—I am very claustrophobic.

"I am not going on that!" I exclaim in terror. "There is no way I can do that. You know I can't!"

Pasje is obviously prepared for this. "I know, I know. But I am sure you can do it. This is the only way to get there."

"What do you mean the only way? Can't we take a car?"

"The jungle is very dense, and the road is horrible. It would take days. By the time we get there, we would have to leave again. Please?"

"I'll try," I say with effort. I force myself to climb the steps leading to the rear entrance of the plane. I step inside. My head almost touches the ceiling. I immediately turn around. "Let me out of here!" I beg. Pasje steps in front of the exit. "Please, Pasje, I can't do this." I panic and start beating his chest with both my fists. Pasje takes them in a tight grip and forces me to look into his eyes.

"You can do it; I know you can. You just have to. For me, for us. It is only twenty minutes."

With my heart pounding in my throat, I follow him to the third row. Out of fifteen, I count. I sit down in the aisle seat. I could easily touch the passenger across the aisle if I wanted to. I can touch the ceiling without even straightening my arm. My knees are touching the blue seat in front of me. Pasje puts on his seat belt. It goes across his chest, like the ones they use in a car. I shrug off mine. I feel restrained enough as it is. The stewardess, a tiny, pretty Vietnamese girl, lets me off the hook. She continues with her emergency routine. I try to focus, but I can only think of plotting my exit. I recite things in my head to distract myself, anything I can think of. Homer: "Oh, Muse, tell me about the man who has traveled the seas." Or something like that. OK, "The Lorelei": "*Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten, daß ich so traurig bin.*" "I don't know why I am so blue" is the only poetry I know by heart. It was my German teacher's favorite punishment. "*Ein Märchen aus uralten Zeiten, das kommt mich nicht aus dem Sinn.*" "I can't get my mind off a very old tale." We are taking off. At least we are moving.

I keep my eyes fixed on Pasje's watch, the 1940 Rolex I bought him in Washington, DC last year when I turned thirty. He had told me he wanted to get married by the time I turned thirty, which made me very anxious. But when my actual birthday came, he just laughed it all off. I was so relieved that I splurged on that Rolex as a gift for him. I had seen the way he admired it in a store.

I try to focus on that US trip. There was a wedding in New York. Pasje flew in from Chile, where he was working at the time, and I from Madrid. My parents were there too. And my older sister, who lives in DC. Turns out the deadline was her idea. Having no children of her own, she had wanted nieces and nephews. I was not ready to be a parent, and ate myself up with worry after Pasje's proposal: I lost ten pounds, trying to come up with a "Yes, now!" But it didn't make sense. Yet. We were both doing so well. Careers and money still had to be made before we could settle in the same place. We were a done deal anyway.

My thoughts come back to the plane. Time is creeping by. When I have made it through twenty minutes, there is still no evidence of a descent.

"Why are we not landing?" I ask the stewardess.

"Because the flight is fifty-five minutes," she answers with a smile. I turn to Pasje, who is now avoiding eye contact.

"I knew it was the only way," he says guiltily.

I want to stand up and break free, but realize I will only bump my head. There is nowhere to go, except the even tinier bathroom. I look at the watch. My heart is thumping in my ears. Pasje strokes my arm, but I shake him off.

"How could you do that to me?" I hiss between my teeth. "You tricked me!" I turn my focus back to the watch. And the roaring engines. Forty-nine minutes. Six to go. I keep looking at the watch. Then all of a sudden, we drop. A tremendous drop.

Now Pasje looks straight at me. "This I don't like," he says nervously.

"Of course a shitty little toy plane drops like this!" I reply. "It's just an air pocket; don't worry," I add softly, when I see the fear in his eyes. We drop again. Farther this time. Someone screams. Pasje grabs my hand; I reach for his.

Pitch-black.

The Yak

The Yak, short for Yakovlev Yak-40, is a small, three-engine airliner. Often called the first regional jet transport aircraft, it was introduced in September 1968 by Aeroflot, the Russian airline. It is comparable to a

Boeing 727. Its maximum cruising speed is 341 miles per hour.

Our flight VN 474 was carrying twenty-four passengers, three stewardesses, two pilots, and an engineer. On its descent to the coastal resort of Nha Trang, the aircraft somehow deviated from its assigned flight path. It was descending more steeply than the crew appeared to realize. The pilot is believed to have made a navigational error, estimating the distance to the coast at twelve miles, whereas it was probably twenty-six miles.

According to the descent profile provided by Vietnam Airlines, the weather on the morning of November 14, 1992, took a sudden turn, causing extreme turbulence. The pilot is believed to have struggled to control the aircraft.

VN 474 was flying at a speed of around 300 miles per hour when it struck the ridge of a mountain. The force of impact was tempered by the fact that the plane only lost one wing and kept flying. But a plane that loses its wings turns into a missile (or in our case, half a missile). So when the plane finally crashed into the neighboring mountain, the impact was even greater.

I was sitting in what was said to be the least safe part of the cabin—in front of the wing—with the lowest survival rates. But where I sat turned out to be irrelevant. I wasn't wearing my seat belt. Everyone else was. The seat belt is designed to withstand 3,000 pounds of force—that is 17 g for a typical 170-pound man. Experts say that people can survive this kind of force if they are restrained well. They were. I wasn't. I went flying. I survived. They didn't.

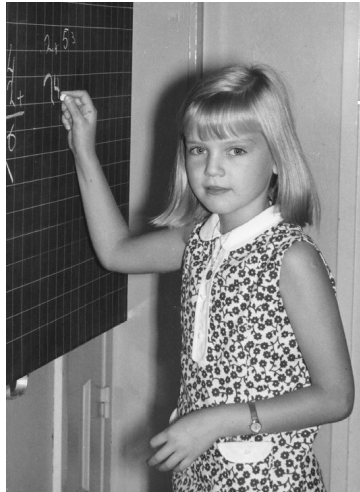
Pasje was killed—his ribs got crushed into his lungs from the impact, whereas I took off from my seat. I don't remember, but I must have tumbled around in the cabin like a lonely piece of laundry in a dryer, hitting my head and limbs against the ceiling, baggage lockers, and chairs. At some point I must have landed and slipped under a seat, legs first, and gotten stuck. This might have kept me in place for the second, bigger impact, which caused the plane to break into three pieces: the cockpit, the remaining wing, and the fuselage.

We were nineteen miles from Nha Trang, our destination, and ten miles from the nearest village.

THE HAGUE, 1979

“It is as if you were born for good luck,” my old classmate said when I interviewed him recently about our high school days. “I know you had that terrible accident,” he continued, “but if you asked me if I ever thought you were doomed somehow, I would say no, on the contrary. Everything about you seemed happy-go-lucky. You were always cheerful. You had those older brothers, so you felt easy around the big boys. You looked good, were successful at school, sports, music, even drawing and painting. You were the leader of your group of friends, yet you moved around easily among other groups. What more can I say?”

Was I lucky, or what? Lucky and privileged. I grew up in a beautiful green neighborhood, with a large extended family. We were quite protected, yet with many Dutch freedoms. With my bike, I could go wherever I wanted. All I had to do was tell my parents where I was. Our mother was warm, open, inclusive: our house was always open to anyone. My father was a lenient parent who kept us grounded—for I kept my judgments in check and never felt superior to others. After school, I would play in one



Elementary school, The Hague, 1970

of the lovely old parks in our area, or cycle to the tennis club and hang out between games. In my teens, I joined a sports club and played competitive field hockey and tennis. My life was all about these clubs, where we would hang out to watch the others play or dance at club parties.

As a teenager, I would go out with my friends to the small cafés in the old center of town, or sing in the Roaring Twenties bar. I would drink a bit, but not too much. I didn't have to. My brothers and sister were there or had been there and done that. That made all the difference.

After school, I went to study law at Leiden University, the oldest university in the Netherlands. In 1575, William I, Prince of Orange, gave this beautiful old town the right to found the university as a reward for Leiden's brave resistance against the Spaniards in the Eighty Years' War. More than my studies, the student society—which was also the country's first—defined my college days. It was a members-only association with influential alumni, located in a grand building with libraries, bars, a restaurant, and even a disco. The society had some rather feudal and eccentric subsocieties. The choice to become a society member was a natural one for many. The tradition was passed on from generation to generation. Everyone could join, but only some did. It was a system based on self-selection, rather than rejection.

Life as a society member was a bit of a survival game, which, if survived well, would guarantee a post-graduation job in the “old boys” network of companies and law firms. There were endless, intricate, uncontested rules of behavior. I can't say they all suited me, but I had a great time nonetheless.

Nightlife revolved around the club. We entered the building at five p.m. and left twelve hours later. Once inside, everything revolved around conversations—either superficial or deep, and often with male friends. For me, conversation only, not sex. Back then, sex would undermine a girl's image.

The “popular” girls lived in “popular” sorority houses, and the “popular” boys lived in “popular” frat houses in the town center, along the beautiful canals of Leiden. Coed houses were frowned upon. There was only one more or less accepted coed house: the one I lived in. The one where Willem van der Pas—or Pasje, as everyone called him—also lived.

WAKING UP

I wake up to the strange sounds of the jungle. I see wild vegetation through an enormous gap in the front of the plane's fuselage. The cockpit has broken off. It is both eerily still and strangely noisy.

I am still inside the plane—stuck under a seat, weighted down by a dead body. I try to push it off me. I can't. I yank my legs from underneath the seat, ripping them open in the process. Then I see Pasje across the aisle. He is lying in his seat, which has somehow flipped backward. He has a smile on his lips. A sweet little smile. He is dead.

I must have gone into shock, because suddenly I am sitting outside the cabin, on the ground, on countless little twigs. In the middle of the jungle. Everything hurts. I can't move. I look down at my bare legs. My wraparound skirt is gone. On my left knee there is a large, gaping wound. My right foot is covered in blood; the skin on my ankle seems to have been torn off. But the worst sight is my shin: I can see four inches of bluish bone sticking out through layers of flesh. Like a picture from a biology book. I make a startled, jerky move, and feel an excruciating pain in my hips. I try to sit up, but the pain in my chest stops me. My breath feels thin and shallow. Thoughts are coming all at once: *What has happened? Where am I?*

I look around. I am sitting on a mountain slope, under the trees, in dense undergrowth. Pieces of wreckage are everywhere. The plane has lost its wings. The cockpit has broken off. A weird, unreal reality. Everything is green. And those jungle sounds! The more I listen to them, the louder they seem to become.

There are a few people lying on the mountain slope, beneath the wreckage.

And I can still hear some of the passengers moaning from inside the plane. About ten feet to my right, a Vietnamese girl is groaning loudly. A bit farther away lies the lifeless body of a man. Then I realize I am sitting right next to someone, a Vietnamese man. Alive. He speaks to me.

"Don't worry. They will come for us," he says, pronouncing his Rs

like Ls. Just like Numachi, my Japanese colleague. I am suddenly aware that I am sitting in my panties. I look shamefully down my legs at my bluish bone proudly sticking out of my flesh. The man sitting next to me opens a little square suitcase he is holding on to for dear life. He hands me a pair of trousers. They are part of a suit. *Polyester*, I cannot help thinking, but I thank him profusely. It hurts like hell to pull the trouser legs over my wounds.

When I get to my hips, I realize something is terribly wrong. An unbelievable pain cuts off my breath. The bones in my bottom feel crushed. Still my manners get the better of me. I grind my teeth and slowly, painfully force the pants over my hips. I quickly close the zipper and thank the man again. He smiles. "I am a very important man," he says. "They will come for me."

"They better!" I answer. *I certainly hope so*, I think, but I feel comforted by his words. By his presence. We both retreat into our injuries. Over the following few hours, we speak a few times, all initiated by me. Bugging him. I ask when he thinks the rescue workers will come. I can see he is getting weaker. "Please don't die," I beg him. "Let's try to locate some water."

"I already had something to drink," he answers, ever so faintly.

Well, that's nice! I think. My mouth is so dry. It tastes foul and sticky. "Will you give me some?" I ask. He closes his eyes, in a more definite manner, it seems. I beg and plead: "Please don't die; please don't leave me!" He does not answer. "Please don't leave me here on my own!" I almost scream.

But he has difficulty breathing. I see the life go out of him. He takes his last breath. He is gone. There are no more sounds coming from the Vietnamese girl. There are no sounds, no movements from any of the other passengers.

Everyone else is dead.

LEIDEN, 1979

Pasje also studied law in Leiden, and we were initiated into our student club in the same year. His friends were all the cool and conservative guys in our club, known as the “Best Boys.” But Pasje was different. Not just older, he was a man in both demeanor and looks. Broad-shouldered, stocky, with curly, brown hair and a manly but friendly face, he had soft, brown eyes, a five-o’clock shadow, and hair on his chest. He was unlike most Dutch boys, who were mostly tall, thin, blue-eyed, and hairless. Moreover, he had his own ideas, not his father’s. Very different, well-informed, articulate ideas about religion, politics, and the world. He called himself an autonomous thinker—an anarchist when he was drunk—and he defied conformity. Yet, his warmth and tolerance made him much liked by everyone.

At first I only eyed him as a prospective housemate. When a male housemate graduated, we needed to replace him, and wanted another “Best Boy.” I approached Pasje in our club’s discotheque. He flirted, which I ignored. I made a big plea for our house, emphasizing its fantastic location on the Rapenburg canal, at the center of social and academic life. He moved in a month later.

He had a bit of a southern accent—I had to overcome my own northern prejudice. Then we became great friends. Real buddies. We studied, shopped for food, made dinner, and watched TV together. At night, we went to the society together. That is where we each went our own way. He said I only had eyes for the older boys. It was true. I knew many because they were my brother’s friends, and I had my heart set on one of them. After a night at the society, I would discuss my progress with Pasje the next day. All the ups and downs of the relationship, which ended in a breakup before it had really begun. Pasje’s broad shoulders were always there to cry on.

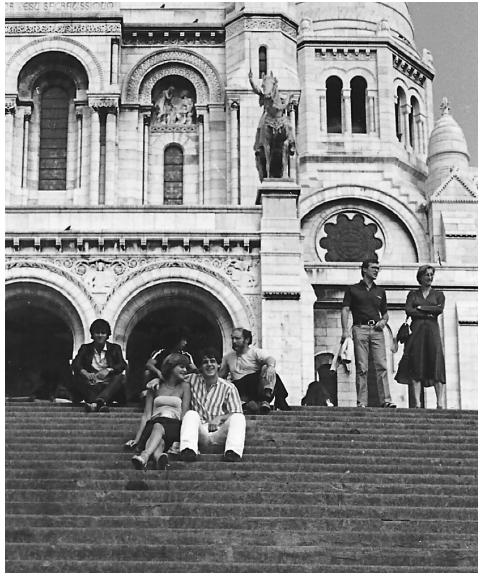
We both said it was the other who started our romance. One evening, we ended up alone in his room. We were having a conversation. I said I had no fears, that I dared everything. He looked me in the eyes,

and suddenly, the tension was palpable. “I know something you wouldn’t dare,” he said, his dark eyes gleaming with anticipation. So I dared . . .

He was my first. Few people would have believed that, because I had a big mouth and moved around in a self-possessed way. “Unaware,” I would call it today. I was fully focused on the outside world, rather than how that world perceived me. I was also used to hanging out with boys. Pasje knew all that and more. Looking back, I now realize how wise and insightful he was.

We had hit the jackpot. Our love was real. At first, we had to keep it a secret because of the coed house rules. To be alone, we would casually stroll across the Rapenburg bridge to the Academy Building and climb over the walls of the Hortus Botanicus botanical garden with a bottle of wine. Weekends, when he would go back home, were endless and full of anticipation. On Sunday night he would show me the poems he had written during our separation.

For our first joint vacation we went to Paris. He proudly showed me the city he knew very well, thanks to an ex-girlfriend who had lived there. From Paris, we hitchhiked to his parents’ country house in Normandy. Both the area and the house were deserted. It felt like a true honeymoon.



Paris, 1981



Costume party, Leiden, 1983

After we went public with our relationship, Pasje had to move out; romantic liaisons were not permitted in our house. He chose to move to the biggest frat house in Leiden. It was big enough to allow him to go his own way. He had both the character and the time to play house with me and still be one of the guys. He never gave in to peer pressure, whether it concerned me, his taste in music, or his political views—all three radical.

There was an enormous intimacy and a total lack of shame between us. He called me a dolphin, or sometimes Flipper, “because of that smile with the little teeth.” I called him a seal, because of his eyes—the sweet brown eyes I kissed immediately when we woke up every time we were together, for thirteen years. I would sign every note with a little drawing of a mouth, an arrow, and an eye.

Yet, I had a longing for the world in the same deep way other girls can long for love, or the idea of love. I liked the idea of seeing the world. Maybe because I already had love, maybe because of my programming or my destiny. Two years after I took Pasje’s dare, when most of our friends were eyeing management jobs at the student club, my focus turned to getting out of there, to Latin America. Preferably with Pasje, but otherwise, for the time being, without.

DAY ONE

Everyone is dead. I am sitting here. In a jungle. Alone. I move my eyes. I see the leaves, the broken plane parts, the bodies. I listen to my breath. It sounds as labored as it feels; my chest hurts so much! But I am breathing. Loud and clear!

Again, I observe: the sounds, the jungle, the leaves, the plane, the bodies. And myself, lying on a bed of twigs. Sharp little twigs. They hurt. I move a bit. It hurts. My hips hurt. Everything hurts. *Help me, dear Lord. Help me!*

My forehead feels as if somebody is pounding on it with a hammer. I cannot move my legs. They seem both cramped and lifeless. I stay on my back and look at my arms. They are covered with blood. There are two gaping wounds near my right elbow. They feel tender. When I graze my fingers over them, I nearly scream.

I go outside myself again. I focus on the leaves. On the broken plane parts. On the bodies. The Vietnamese girl died with her fist clenched. The man next to me looks both peacefully asleep and dead. Like Pasje, with his sweet smile . . . *Don't think of Pasje. Don't think of Pasje.* I look back at the man. He is not scary, just dead. I know what the dead look like. I have seen corpses. I think of the ones I have seen. Mr. Bongaerts. My grandmother. Manuel in Chile. You only have to see one to know that dead is dead. And that they are not scary, that there is nothing to fear. I check the man's watch: ten o'clock. Ironic how that keeps going.

I look at the sky through the trees. There are clouds, but they don't seem to hold rain. *Isn't it rainy season?* I wish I had read up on my travels! I have no idea of where I am. I just know the jungles are endless. And I don't see any planes. *Where is the next plane? The next plane will surely see us.* We seem high up the mountain. Who knows how far from where. I have not even looked at the map! I have no idea what direction we are flying. Pasje is my compass. *Don't think of Pasje!*

I look at the sun coming through the leaves. The palette of light and shade is beautiful. The leaves are radiant. My mother would appreciate

it. My mother always says she does not worry about me when I am with Pasje. She thinks I am safe because I am with Pasje. Pasje who is . . . *Don't think. Don't think of Pasje! Think of mammaie.* She'd be happy to know I got my shots. How smart of her to make me get those. Even tetanus! All arranged against my will, with Jaime, my business partner, as her accomplice. They made sure I had them administered at Schiphol airport. Before my flight to Tokyo. "What for?" I had asked her. "We're not going to the jungle." *Right!*

I look at my feet sticking out of the borrowed pants. They are swollen, really swollen. My favorite shoes—gray-blue woven crocodile leather moccasins from El Corte Inglés—are cutting into bluish flesh that does not seem like mine.

I grab my purse. *How strange that I still have it on me.* I check the contents: very basic travel supplies. No wallet. Pasje has the money. No watch. Pasje has the watch. *Don't think of Pasje!* No cell phone. I always have a cell phone. To call Jaime. I think of Jaime. *What would he say if he knew where I am?* These are going to be the first two business days since we have been working together that I am unable to call him. Since we began at Banco Santander, I always called him. With those big cell phones. Everyone looked at me in the beginning. Sometimes they would point at me in the street in Madrid. In Holland, they would scream that I am a show-off with my phone. No phone now. Can't call Jaime now.

Not until Wednesday. On Wednesday, Pasje and I are scheduled to return to Ho Chi Minh City. Jaime expects me to call immediately when I get back to the hotel. I always call him, from wherever I am. To talk about the markets, to make decisions. If he doesn't hear from me by Thursday, he will definitely make noise. Lots of noise, knowing him.

I continue checking my purse. There is a makeup pouch, a camera, three packages of Philip Morris Super Lights cigarettes, and a Bic lighter. The makeup pouch is from Loewe. Beautiful, soft Spanish leather, evidence of my recent "upgrade" at Banco Santander. No use for it now. The camera I bought with Numachi in Tokyo. Patient Numachi. How my dead neighbor reminds me of him: the way he spoke, or rather, the way he didn't. And the careful way in which he had handed me his trousers. Thank God for those; they protect me somewhat from these

horrible insects! I hope he was right, that they might come for him soon. Nobody will miss me until Wednesday. It's Saturday now. Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. Four days until Wednesday.

It does not occur to me to take pictures. Nor does it cross my mind to open the man's suitcase. And I don't make my way back to the main part of the plane, where the bodies are, to search for food or drinks. I don't even dare to look over my shoulder. I just stay there, looking down the mountain, telling myself this is real, this is where I am. I have no water. *Dear Lord, help me get through this.* My mouth is dry. So dry. I contemplate smoking, but with nothing to eat or drink, I decide this might as well be the moment to finally stop. Pasje would have been proud. He wouldn't have believed it. *Don't think of Pasje! Look at the sun coming through the leaves. Wow! How pretty!* I am normally not really into the woods. I prefer the sun on the water. But this is beautiful!

The sun is setting. Somewhere. I can't see through the trees. It gets dark fast. Very fast. I look at the watch: six o'clock. *Time to go to bed?* I may as well. I am not scared. I wonder why. I have never been so completely alone.