

AT SOME POINT, I GOT LOST. The mountains were gloomy, the sun just about to set, and I'd suddenly emerged on to a path that was covered in a strange kind of undergrowth, hard like artificial grass, jutting out at sharp angles, yet somehow soft at the same time. There was the faint smell of animals. I thought I could feel their body heat—maybe there was an animal trail nearby. Stumbling across this path was surely a stroke of luck, and though my legs had become numb with fatigue, they could probably keep me going. If worse came to worst, I could light a fire and spend the night right here. The very next moment, however, the ground started to move beneath me, like a carpet of giant black caterpillars, and I lost my footing. I fell on to my bottom, and the ground started to undulate, poking into me. Shocked and frightened, I got up and

set off running blindly through the trees, forgetting how tired I was. The next thing I knew I was at the top of a slightly elevated outcrop. Breathing heavily, I looked down at what had, until a few hours previously, been a kind of paradise. The soft jet-black path had swollen into a rocky fortress. I strained to see better, and discovered that the path was actually a countless number of bears, standing on their hind legs, huddled together in formation. They seemed to be moving as one, making their way into the mountains. What's going on? Had I been walking on the backs of those bears? Running on a carpet of their hair, thick with bitumen, here and there matted in hard clumps? I was covered in sweat, but I'd lost my towel while I was running, so I couldn't dry off. I stood there dumbfounded while the bears jostled their way into the distance. Just then, a breeze carrying a fishy tidal smell came wafting from the middle of the sea of black ursine bodies, where a solitary, slightly unbalanced triangular island now appeared. I was wheezing from the exertion, and this thick, warm, salty air was blocking my airways. My throat started to hurt. I wanted some water. I wanted something cool. I looked around, and my eyes fell upon a spring sputtering out of a crack in the rock face just beneath me. Unsteadily, I crouched down and scooped some up in my hands, lifting it to my lips. Immediately, there was a gloopy sweet taste in my mouth, followed by a chill that stung the back of my throat and sent sharp, stabbing pains to the molar that I'd been too lazy to take care of. I cried out. I forgot about

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my thirst, about the carpet of bears, and lay down on the ground. It was all I could do to endure the intense pain in my mouth.

Through the hole in the wooden shutters, a diamond of soft sunlight shone on to the unglazed tile floor. The air in the room was fresh and clean—in fact, it was almost cool—but my body was burning up. I was also thirsty, and my right molar ached, just like it had in the dream. I wasn't sure if this was because of how I was lying on the sofa bed—with my face squashed against the back of the sofa because the bed part wouldn't open out—or because of the dream itself, which had been eerily vivid. I looked at the clock on the table. It was already half past nine. I hadn't heard Yann leave. I got up slowly and went to the bathroom, found some aspirin in the medicine cabinet—who knows how long they'd been there—and tossed a couple of tablets into a cup of water. I watched as the bubbles rushed noisily to the surface. I drank the medicine down, and it stung my tongue. Praying for relief from the pain, I turned the shower on and got under a lukewarm spray.

From the small top-hinged window, I could see a fence of wooden posts pounded into the ground at random intervals. There was no barbed wire between them, just a single thick wire that drooped untidily, like a telephone line. Apparently the nearest neighbours, who owned the vast shrub-filled land, lived on the other side of some far-off hills. There really wasn't any sign of anyone else living around here at all.