From *The Road Through the Winter Forest*

(*Veien gjennom vinterskogen*)

by Helene Uri

Translated from the Norwegian by Alison McCullough

**The very last day of November**

Deep in Littlewood Forest, in an ancient ash tree, two birds sit with their heads close together. The smaller of the two, the one with the bright orange feathers, plucks lovingly at the other bird’s neck with her beak. They snuggle up to each other, chirruping and chirping for a long time. But then something happens and they start to argue, their cries growing loud and shrill.

“Shut your beak!” the bigger bird says. His feathers are black and white.

Then the smaller bird turns her tail to him and flies away. The bigger one stares after her, long after she’s gone.

At the edge of the forest lies a cluster of human houses. One of them is pale blue, and in it lives Leo with his parents. In the smallest of the red houses, the one with the bird table in the garden, lives Ylva with her mum and two little brothers. Ylva has lived in the red house ever since she was born. Leo moved into the blue one just a few days ago.

Leo’s parents and Ylva’s mum have already arranged for the children to walk to school together. There and back through the forest. Every day.

“It’s so nice that Ylva is happy to walk with Leo,” says Leo’s dad.

“She doesn’t have to,” Leo protests, but not very loudly. He’s too afraid to walk through the forest alone. So he’ll either have to walk to school with Ylva, or his parents.

“My clever, grown-up girl,” Ylva’s mum whispers to Ylva.

“Okay,” Ylva says. “See you tomorrow, Leo!”

“Yep, see you tomorrow,” Leo says. Ylva is a year older than he is. She probably has loads of friends in her own class. She probably isn’t interested in getting to know him. Tomorrow will be the start of advent, and tomorrow Leo will start at a new school. One of these things is nice. The other is scary.

In an office in the city, a man and a woman are sitting at a table. In front of them is a map of Littlewood Forest. Across the map, someone has drawn a thick, black line.

This is where the story begins. With two good friends who have become enemies, two strangers who might become friends – and two grown-ups who want to destroy everything.

**The first of December**

The little magpie feels terrible for saying what he did. “You care about no one but yourself!” he had screamed at the jay, even though she’s his best friend. “And you’re a brat!” the jay had said haughtily before she flew away. That was yesterday. Now the little magpie is sitting in the top of a pine tree, feeling sad.

Just across from him, at the very top of the tallest fir tree, sits the jay. From here she has a view of all of Littlewood Forest – and more besides. She can see the motorway. She can see the meadow and the stream. She can see the fox making his way back from the human houses. But she’s pretending not to see the little magpie, sitting there hanging his beak. The jay turns away from him. The old squirrel is on her way down a tree trunk. And on the ground just opposite the fir tree sits the hare. The first snow arrived a few weeks ago, but then it disappeared again. The hare had just had time to change into his winter coat, which now shines white against the grey-brown landscape. You’re never completely safe when you’re a hare – especially if you’re wearing the wrong-coloured coat. A curly-haired dog off its lead might come along. Or a fox. Or worst of all: a lynx.

A boy and a girl are walking through the forest. The year is at its darkest, and the days are short. It’s the first of December, but the hare doesn’t know this. Nor does the squirrel. The squirrel stands on her back legs and looks around: there’s something red and gleaming out there in the meadow. The children are getting closer. The squirrel and the hare keep a close eye on both them and the fox. All the animals know that it’s best to stay away from humans. Only the jay isn’t afraid of them.

Nor does the fox know that it’s the first of December, although he knows a fair bit about the world of humans. Not even the little magpie knows what day it is. But the jay knows. Because the jay knows almost everything. And the boy and the girl know it very well. Before they set out, they had each opened their advent calendar. Leo had unwrapped an eraser in the shape of a lion – his parents have wrapped up twenty-four gifts and hung them from the lamp in the kitchen. In Ylva’s house, everyone has to share a single advent calendar with one chocolate behind each door.

“You’re afraid of quite a lot, aren’t you?” Ylva says. Leo doesn’t answer. He’s about to join a new class at a new school, and is feeling pretty brave. He stopped by the school last week just to say hello to everyone, but today will be his first full day. Maybe Ylva is just teasing him.

Out in the meadow, everything happens very fast. The squirrel has made it over to the object that caught her eye. It’s a bag. Red on the outside and gleaming silver on the inside. The squirrel picks up the bag in her front paws. There’s something inside it, something that smells delicious. She sticks first one paw and then the other down into the bag. Finally, she sticks her head in, too, and using her long, front teeth, she grabs hold of a peanut. That’s when she discovers she can’t get out again. Her head and front paws are inside the bag, but her back legs and tail are on the outside. The more she struggles to get free, the deeper into the bag she slides. She can’t see anything, and now all she wants is to run away, to jump up into a tree and then on to the next one, and the next. She can’t see where she’s going, but she starts to run anyway, because what else is she supposed to do?

The fox stares and stares at the running bag with the bristly brush sticking out of it. Is it dangerous? Or can he eat it? The jay flies down from the fir tree at the exact moment the fox realises that the brush is actually a squirrel-tail. Squirrel-tails are always attached to squirrels – and squirrels are one of the fox’s favourite meals. The jay flies towards the old squirrel as fast as she can. The squirrel runs in blind panic across the meadow. She crashes into a bush and tumbles over backwards, but the bag remains as stuck as ever. The fox sprints towards the squirrel, but the Jay is faster. She swoops down and pecks away the peanut bag. The squirrel is free – she can see again! She makes a sudden turn, sweeping past the fox’s nose and running across the path in bounding leaps before she disappears up a tree, climbing all the way to the top before she jumps on to the next tree, then the next, and the next. As if she’s a young squirrel, and not a great-great-great grandmother. The fox, disappointed, watches her go.

“Long live Littlewood Forest!” the jay cheerfully greets the fox, looking down at him. The fox wants to growl at her in reply, but he answers as he knows he should:

“And long live all the animals in it!”

Now Leo and Ylva have emerged from the forest into the meadow. They didn’t see the drama that has just unfolded. The fox hides in a thicket, watching them through the branches. His nose is full of the smell of humans. The fox has never seen or smelled the boy before, but the girl walks through the forest almost every day. The fox always sees her, but the girl has never seen the fox. When fresh snow has fallen, the humans sometimes notice animal tracks. But mostly, they see nothing. And even more strangely, thinks the fox, they clearly can’t smell him. Even though they’re equipped with noses – small ones, true enough, but still. The fox sticks his magnificent long snout into the air and sniffs. Along with the smell of humans, there’s the whiff of ham from one of their packed lunches, and from the forest comes the scent of hare and squirrel. But the fox is actually full for now. He chewed a hole in a bag of rubbish during the night and found both a crust of bread and some leftover sausage. He yawns. It’s time to creep back into his den, to curl up into a ball and dream of sinking his teeth into an impertinent hare with a white winter coat, or maybe a brazen squirrel. The fox gets up, stretches, and slips back into the forest. The two small humans disappear around the bend. The hare breathes a sigh of relief.

From the top of his pine tree, the little magpie has seen all this happen. Now he feels even worse. He never should have said that the jay thinks of no one but herself. After all, he – more than anyone – knows this isn’t true. Without the jay, the little magpie would never have survived the summer. And the squirrel would be in the fox’s belly right now if the jay hadn’t freed her from the peanut bag. The little magpie should say he’s sorry. But the jay is a vain bird, and it’s hard to apologise to someone who thinks they’re *always* right.

A man in a reflective yellow jacket comes walking along. His nose is red, and under his red nose is a huge moustache. He kicks at the frozen ground and scribbles something down on a notepad. His crocodile-green car stands with its motor running, spewing out stinking fumes. The jay watches him from the fir tree, and the little magpie watches him from the pine. The little magpie cocks his head to one side and thinks that the man is probably just out for a walk through the forest. But the jay thinks: that man wants to harm us.

And the jay is right.

[BOTH THE ANIMALS AND THE CHILDREN REALISE THAT A ROAD IS GOING TO BE BUILT THROUGH THE FOREST. IN THEIR OWN WAYS, THE ANIMALS AND THE CHILDREN START TO DO WHAT THEY CAN TO STOP THE ROAD FROM BEING BUILT.]

**The twelfth of December**

The two owls, the blue tit and the magpie are in position beside the hazel bush. The owls hoot quietly to each other as they make their preparations.

“How’s that?” they ask the little magpie. They’re sitting at either end of the bush, in line with each other, so their heads are the exact same distance from the ground.

“Perfect,” the little magpie says. When a car comes around the bend, the light from its headlamps will hit the owls’ eyes.

“Let’s do a test. Close one eye!” says the little magpie. The owls each wink closed the eye closest to the other owl, creating the greatest possible distance between their open eyes.

“Good! Now hold your positions!” the little magpie shouts. A car comes around the bend, and suddenly it looks as if the world’s biggest lynx is staring straight at him and the blue tit.

“Oh no, oh no!” twitters the blue tit in panic. Of course he knows it’s really just the owls, but the hazel bush looks like a huge, shapeless body, with the two shining eyes hanging above it.

“It works,” says the little magpie to the owls matter-of-factly. “Pull yourself together,” he says to the blue tit. Now all they have to do is wait for the humans in the trucks to turn up. But the first people to come along are the boy and the girl, and for once, the animals fail to notice them. The boy got a head torch in his advent calendar this morning, and it illuminates the treetops, the road and the forest floor. And then it happens. The light from the boy’s head torch hits the dark bush, causing two enormous eyes to shine out of the darkness. The children scream and scurry away. The blue tit gives a sky-high cheer, and the magpie cackles. It works! The long-eared owls carefully open both eyes and blink away the light of the head torch as they hoot, satisfied.

“Ex-hoo-llent!” says old Mr Owl. Old Mrs Owl turns her head all the way around – because owls can do that – and watches the children go with a worried look.

“They’ll be okay,” says the blue tit, who has only just recovered from the shock himself.

“Those small humans are finally gone for good!” the little magpie says. “Now take up your positions. The big ones will be here any moment.”

And so they are. Right now. Two huge trucks come bumping across the meadow.

“Close all four eyes,” the little magpie whispers, and the owls do as he asks. The trucks come closer. Then they turn, and the light from their headlamps hits the hazel bush.

“Now! Open one eye each!” shouts the little magpie. All at once there’s a huge commotion. The first truck slams on the brakes, and shovels and other tools slide to the front of the truck bed. The second truck brakes too, but just a fraction too late – it crashes into the truck in front. Two humans jump out, shouting at each other and flailing their arms. The owls, the blue tit and the little magpie have already flown up into a tree.

“Thank you so much for your hard work,” the little magpie says. “Thank you on behalf of all the animals in the forest!”

“It’s oo-oo-our pleasure!” says old Mr Owl.

“Now there’ll be no more motorway!” cries the blue tit. Down below, the humans are still wandering around and shouting. Beside the hazel bush they use their phones as torches and speak in lowered voices. The one with the moustache kicks at the bush, and then they go back to their trucks and get in.

“Now those humans will twit-twit-quit!” twitters the blue tit.

“Tu-whit-tu-woo-hoo!” cries old Mrs Owl. But had the jay been there, she could have told them that the humans had mumbled something about not giving a hoot. The trucks don’t turn around. They continue on into the meadow. When a gleaming chainsaw is lifted down from one of them, the blue tit glances at the little magpie.

“Why can’t all humans be children?” he asks in a dejected voice.

“So what do we do now?” ask the owls. The little magpie has no answer, and nor does he try to give one. Soon the blue tit flies back to the pine tree, and the owls return to the ash tree that looks like a Y.

Leo and Ylva stand beside the stumps of the two maple trees. Their trunks now stretch far across the ground, and their branches have been sawn off and lie in a pile nearby. Ylva’s throat feels thick with tears. She’s climbed these trees since she was a little girl.

“I know,” she says to Leo. “We’ll go talk to the journalist.”

“Yes! Journalists can fix things using only their words,” Leo says. They walk straight up to the front door of the green house where the journalist lives, and knock. The journalist sticks her curly-haired head around the door, and at her knees a curly-haired dog also peeps out. Ylva asks the journalist if she’s heard about the road that’s going to be built straight through the forest. The journalist says she has.

“Can’t you write about it?” Leo asks.

“I’ve written about the plans already,” the journalist replies.

“But can’t you write something that will stop the road from being built?” Ylva says.

“I’m working on something else,” the journalist says. “A big taste test to find out which brand of Christmas gingerbread is the best.”

“Are you *for* the road? For the forest disappearing?” Ylva says angrily.

“I clicked on the crying emoji on a Facebook post about it, but there’s nothing more I can do,” the journalist says. “The plans have been approved. Nothing can stop the road being built.”

“But why do we even need a new road?” Leo asks.

“Because there are more and more cars. And it will mean people can save four minutes when they drive into the city.”

“Are we really going to destroy an entire forest just to save *four minutes* in a car?” Ylva asks.

“Four minutes is *a lot* on a busy day,” the journalist says. “And now I’m afraid I’m all out of time.”

It’s a good job the mother moose doesn’t know what the journalist thinks about the road being built. She would have demanded that the journalist drop the Christmas gingerbread taste test, and instead write about how many animals get run over each year. There are now three members of the moose family, but this past spring and summer there were four: the mother moose, two girl calves and a slender boy calf.

It happened one warm, summer’s evening. The family had been dozing in the sun, and now they were hungry. On the other side of the motorway grow thickets of rowan and sallow, and the mother moose wanted to take her calves to them so they could eat. She crossed the road first, then called for her calves. The two girl calves followed their mother straight away, but the boy calf stayed standing at the edge of the road. The mother moose listened and heard no cars. She called to her son, and he took a few hesitant steps out into the road. Then a car – a green car – came hurtling straight towards the calf. The mother moose tried to put herself between her son and the speeding vehicle. There was the screeching of brakes, and the car ran over one of her front feet, but she didn’t even notice. Because in the road lay her child, who had been alive for no more than four months, and who she had only just taught to tell rowan leaves from maple. Her son, who still thought his mother’s warm milk was the best thing in all the world. Her son, who was supposed to grow up to become the biggest moose of them all. Now he lay in the middle of the road, his four long legs floundering in the air. Then his thigh muscles jerked, and his legs sank to the ground and stopped moving. He lay on his side, one huge, wet eye turned up to face his mother. As if he was pleading for help. As if he wanted to take the image of his mother with him as he journeyed on to wherever he was going now.

A man with a moustache jumped out of the car. He looked at the calf, then lifted his hands above his head and spread his fingers wide. The mother moose thought he looked like a human tree. She turned towards her son one last time. She looked at his big, brown eye that didn’t want to let her go. Then she limped across the road to her two other calves. She pressed her muzzle into their necks, first one daughter and then the other. She couldn’t bring herself to address the Great Animal of the Earth, as is the custom in Littlewood Forest when someone dies. But her firstborn said the words that must be said:

“To him and to you, O Mighty Animal of the Earth who has dominion over death.”

“Thank you, O Great Animal of the Earth,” said her other daughter, with the deepest solemnity. The mother moose said nothing.

Sometimes she still finds herself standing there beside the road, waiting for her third calf. But he never comes.

**The thirteenth of December**

Two white, fluttering ghosts are hurrying through the forest. It’s Leo and Ylva, who are running late. Under their short jackets they are wearing long, white tunics. It’s Saint Lucy’s Day, and they’re going to take part in the parade. Everyone will hold candles, and they’ll sing. They holler and howl as they run through the dark forest: *The sun has now gone away, the shadows are coming*. In his rucksack, Leo has a cake tin full of saffron buns, which he and his father baked yesterday. They are golden from the saffron, and there’s enough of them for the whole class. But as they reach the bend in the path, Leo trips on his tunic and falls, and his rucksack slips over his head. He gets up, yanks the bag back into place, brushes the snow from his clothes and runs on. But the cake tin is left behind on the path, where a blue tit comes across it. The blue tits always have spies on the lookout in the forest, and when they find something to eat, they notify the rest of the flock. All at once a dozen blue tits are sitting around the cake tin and tweeting and twittering over each other, but no one is able to open the tin’s lid. The birds peck with their beaks and scratch with their claws, but it’s no use. The little magpie is half asleep, but soon realises something is afoot. He takes to his wings and lands in the middle of the flock, startling the blue tits so they scatter, fluttering off in all directions. He thinks for a moment – and flicks off the lid. Then he turns the tin upside down, and the saffron buns tumble out across the snow. The little magpie hops atop the nearest bun and starts to pick out the raisins. The blue tits dare to return, and they all eat quickly and greedily. But it’s the squirrel who snatches the last bun. Just then, a procession of mice comes along. They sniff the air, and look angrily at the empty tin.

Ylva checks the time on her phone and shouts that they can slow down a bit. They’ve almost reached the edge of the meadow when Red Nose comes jogging towards them.

“You tried to dazzle us with two torches yesterday!”

“No we didn’t!” Ylva protests. “We were dazzled, too!”

“Well today it’s something else, I see. Do you think we’re afraid of ghosts or something?”

“No,” Leo manages to say.

“A road is going to be built here, whether you like it or not,” says Red Nose. His voice is now soft and slippery as soap, which makes it even worse.

“We have to get to school,” Ylva says calmly. They don’t want to show that they’re afraid, so they walk slowly away. But Leo has goosebumps all over his body. He shivers, and opens his bag to find his scarf. That’s when he discovers that the cake tin is gone, and says, mostly as a joke, that Red Nose must have taken it.

“He’s a criminal!” he says to Ylva.

“Well even if he is, I’m sure he doesn’t go around stealing little things like saffron buns,” Ylva says. “I bet he gets up to much more serious crimes than that. He’s a shady character.”

“Really? Do you think so?” Leo asks. Ylva thinks hard about it, then nods several times.

“We’re going to find out,” she says firmly.

The little magpie has called another meeting. All the lights are off in the human houses, and only the wreaths in the windows twinkle between the trees. The little magpie stands on the rocky mound. The others have formed a semicircle around him, just like last time. And just like last time, someone outside the group is watching them. This time, she’s lounging in a tall pine tree. She narrows her yellow eyes and considers the animals. She could leap down and sink her claws into any one of them, but she doesn’t.

“Long live Littlewood Forest, and welcome,” says the little magpie. He had hoped he might see the jay, but she isn’t there.

“And long live all the animals in it,” the gathering mumbles flatly.

“We have to admit that Operation Hoodini was a failure,” the magpie says. The animals sigh, and the owls hoot apologetically. The little magpie raises his voice.

“But remember what the woodpecker told us,” he says. “*We’ll have the greatest success if every animal does what he or she does best*. Now everyone must have a think about what they can contribute. We won’t give up!”

“Good!” says the old squirrel enthusiastically. The animals nod, look at each other and begin to speak in low voices. The mood is immediately brighter. The animals of Littlewood Forest have not given up. A field mouse puts up his tail.

“It’s just so terribly unfair,” he says, staring at the little magpie, the blue tits and the squirrel.

“What is?” the little magpie asks, surprised.

“That you ate all the food the children gave us.”

“I don’t think they *gave* it to us, exactly,” the squirrel says warmly. The little magpie hurries to speak.

“The mice are to be given a most honourable assignment,” he says. “Tomorrow, you will sneak into the portacabin.”

“A mouse getting into a house is easy peasy,” says the head mouse.

“That’s where you’ll find the humans’ packed lunches,” says the little magpie. “And your job will be to eat them.”

“Eating a snack in a shack is easy peasy lemon squeezy,” says the head mouse, satisfied. But the mice eating the humans’ packed lunches won’t be much help. Humans don’t have to hunt for food in the forest – they’ll just go out and buy some more. The animals will have to do something else to stop the road from being built. But what? Then the woodpecker asks to speak.

“Yes, please go ahead, woodpecker!” says the little magpie.

“Actually, it’s great spotted woodpecker,” says the woodpecker. “All great spotted woodpeckers are woodpeckers, but not all woodpeckers are…”

“Get to the point!” booms the moose. She’s a single mother and is growing tired of all this time-wasting waffling.

“The beavers can save the day,” the woodpecker says quickly. The little magpie nods. Good thinking!

“An ex-hoo-llent plan!” hoots Mrs Owl. She and old Mr Owl are often down by the beaver dam, and they know how skilled the beavers are.

“But the beaver family are sleeping, and the entrance to their den is underwater,” the squirrel says.

“I can wake the beavers,” the woodpecker says cryptically. “Every animal must do what he or she does best.”

Exactly, thinks the lynx. She yawns soundlessly. She too has a plan. Yesterday was Lussi Long Night – the most frightening night of the year. And every year, when Lussi Long Night is at its deepest, the lynx is granted special powers that will last until Christmas Eve. She now has two weeks to do what *she* does best: Operation Wind and Will.

**The fourteenth of December**

In the meadow, two men are marking trees to be sawn down. A woman is sitting in the cab of a digger, making a ditch. The construction manager struts around with his bristling, bulging moustache. Everyone is busy. Nobody sees the ranks of mice marching towards the portacabin. The mice are able to squeeze through the tiniest of cracks, and soon they are all inside. They chew through the paper wrapped around a pile of sandwiches and eat them. They finish off a box of vegan, gluten-free chia pudding and a packet of ham. A pair of mice swim around in a pot of cloudberry yoghurt, drinking up its sweet goodness as they go. Three apples, which just a moment ago had been standing on the windowsill, have disappeared without a trace. “No more snacks in the shack!” declares the head mouse, and the mice slip out and dart back to their nests.

At the same time, the woodpecker is on his way to the beaver lodge. He navigates by the course of the stream, whose dark shape twists and turns through the white fields below him. He finally catches sight of the dam and the frozen pond in which the beavers’ home sits. Only where the river comes down from the Endless Forest is there open water. The woodpecker flies in a circle to admire the scene. While it’s true that a beaver is much larger than a woodpecker, it certainly isn’t a big animal. But still they manage to chop down huge trees, chew through tree stumps, and build both lodges and dams. The woodpecker can only do one thing – make holes. But on the other hand, he’s exceptionally good at it. And that’s why he’s here right now.

Late in the autumn, the beavers began their long hiber-holiday. Now only the occasional plop can be heard when they slip below the ice to collect the twigs and small branches they have gathered opposite their lodge. Their food stores will last them many months, and they have no plans to leave the lodge again until the spring sun warms the air. They doze, snooze and dream, keeping nice and dry on a bed of shredded wood and sawdust. The lodge is quiet and dark. But then something happens. A sharp knock. One of the beaver children wakes with a start, but nods off again. It was probably just something falling from a tree, out there in the winter forest. Then there’s another knock. And another. Four-five-eight taps in quick succession. Ra-tat-tat-tat! Now the whole family is half-awake. The woodpecker sits on the roof of the beaver lodge and pecks with all his might. Ra-tat-tat-tat! He’s just made a start on his third hole when he sees a shadow by the mouth of the river. A beaver sticks its head up out of the water.

“Long live Littlewood Forest!” cries the woodpecker in happy greeting, but the beaver is so sleepy and dazed he can’t remember how to answer.

“And to you,” he yawns. The woodpecker flies over to the beaver and starts to tell him all about what’s been going on. Even though the sun is setting, it’s much brighter than the beaver’s eyes are accustomed to. The beaver blinks and peers at the woodpecker in confusion. When he finally grasps the reason for the woodpecker’s visit, he gives a slap of his scaly tail and disappears down under the ice. The woodpecker waits and waits. Finally, not just one but five beaver heads pop up – and they all peer at him with narrowed eyes. It’s the beaver father, the beaver mother, and their three beaver kits.

“We’re ready to do our part,” the beaver mother says.

Today, Ylva also goes into the pale blue house. She simply follows Leo through the front door.

“Operation Newspaper was a failure,” she says, kicking off her shoes. “Why don’t you have a bird table?”

“We used to live in an apartment block where it wasn’t allowed,” says Leo.

“All the little birds need something to eat in the winter.”

“Yes,” Leo says. “And we have to come up with another idea to stop the road being built. Would you like a cheese sandwich?”

“Yes please. What did you get in your advent calendar today?”

“Some felt-tip pens,” Leo replies. He’s taken out a frying pan.

“Then we’ll arrange a demonstration!” Ylva shouts suddenly. “We can make placards and come up with slogans! We’ll get everyone in my class and yours to join us.”

When Leo’s parents get home from work, the pale blue house is full of kids. Leo says that after school tomorrow, there’ll be a demonstration.

“To protest against the road being built through the forest?” Leo’s father asks. “I’m against it, too, but it’s already been decided.”

“We know that,” Leo says. “But we still have to try.”

On the dining table are the new felt-tip pens, along with large sheets of paper with STOP THE ROAD written on them. A boy with a long fringe is writing SAVE THE FOREST on a banner. Leo’s mother recognises the flannel sheet from Leo’s bed, but all she says is that they’ll have to cut holes in it. Because without holes, the banner will be impossible to carry – even if there’s only the slightest breeze.

Soon it is evening, and the beaver family has just passed the small wood below the dam. The woodpecker flies back and forth above them, thinking that it’s taking them forever. In the end the beaver mother stops, sits up on her back legs, and peers up at the woodpecker.

“I’m sorry,” she starts. “But we can’t go any faster.”

“We move pretty slowly on land,” the beaver father says.

“We’ve got very short legs,” says one of the beaver children.

“And we don’t have wings,” says another beaver kit.

“We’re doing the best we can,” says the beaver mother. “And nobody can do any more than that.”

The woodpecker apologises. He understands that his impatience isn’t helping. He flies back to Littlewood Forest and lets the little magpie know about the delay.

“Operation Beaver Chew will have to be postponed for a few days, due to short legs,” he reports. The little magpie, who once witnessed a beaver moving through the forest, understands. He thinks for a moment, then asks:

“But what about Operation Great Spotted Woodpecker? Can we start it while we’re waiting?”

“Tomorrow night,” the woodpecker replies quickly. “But let’s just call it Operation Woodpecker. I’m going to need reinforcements, and not all woodpeckers are… oh, forget it!

**The fifteenth of December**

At night, the forest belongs to no one but the animals. Furry paws shuffle along. The owls hoot quietly to each other, and an unlucky vole darts across the snow for the last time in its life. The fox saunters in the direction of the motorway, where his nose tells him there’s a dead deer. The magpie sleeps. The squirrel sleeps. Huddled close to one another are two hares, who have stuck together ever since they met in the alder thicket. The moon shines above snow-covered hills and rocky knolls – and on a digger and a tractor. The lynx sits at the edge of the forest and looks out over the building site. Her eyes are as cold and yellow as the digger. It’s a completely ordinary winter’s night. But then, all at once, it no longer is. All through the forest a piercing drumroll can be heard: ra-tat-tat-tat! Ra-tat-tat-tat! Over and over again. The animals – both the nocturnal ones and those that are usually asleep – know very well what it is, so they’re not afraid. The knocking sounds can even be heard all the way over at the human houses. The journalist wakes up and thinks it’s a hailstorm. I’ll write about that tomorrow, she thinks. *Exploitation of the globe’s resources is leading to extreme weather – including here at home*. Then she puts her pillow over her head to cover her ears and goes back to sleep. Out in the forest, the hammering continues. In the little red house, Ylva’s mother has been lying awake in bed for a long time. Maybe she can borrow some money, just until she gets a new job? Ylva wants a new pair of skis for Christmas, and the boys want a snow racer. When the racket started up, Ylva’s mum thought the boys had sneaked out of bed to play the shoot-’em-up they’re not actually allowed to touch. But when she checks, she sees that her children are fast asleep, all three of them. In the pale blue house, Leo is dreaming that it’s Norway’s National Day and that he’s marching in a long, long, school parade. But then the parade becomes a demonstration. Instead of flags, they’re all holding placards, and instead of *hip hip hooray!*, they’re shouting *STOP THE ROAD!* In the next room, Leo’s mother tumbles out of bed and starts to pull on her trousers and bra. She plays the drums in a rock band, and thinks she’s late for a rehearsal. Leo’s father is woken by the sound of his wife rummaging around.

“Come back to bed! It’s probably just something to do with the construction of the road,” he says – and of course, he’s right. Sort of. Operation Woodpecker is underway.

The meadow is alive with hustle and bustle. The woodpecker has enlisted new recruits, including other great spotted woodpeckers and some distant relatives: four great spotted woodpeckers, six green woodpeckers, a pair of grey-headed woodpeckers, three multi-coloured three-toed woodpeckers with yellow-green caps, and two huge black woodpeckers. As well as a tiny lesser spotted woodpecker, who is only a little larger than a magpie egg. All of them peck – rat-tat-tat-tat! First they tried the digger and the tractor, but not even the huge black woodpeckers can peck holes in metal. But the portacabin is made of wood, and nineteen woodpeckers now sit pecking at its roof and walls – rat-tat-tat-tat! In the middle of all the ruckus a baby mouse peeks out of its mousehole and whispers to its mother that the portacabin looks like a cheese: a huge piece of cheese with countless holes in it. And more and more holes appear in it as the night goes on.

“Operation Woodpecker is complete!” the woodpecker finally cries from one of the maple stumps. The sky is beginning to brighten in the east. The birds stop pecking, stretch their necks and shake out their wings.

“Thank you for all your hard work,” the woodpecker says. “And thanks to you, O Great Animal of the Sky who controls the weather.”

“Thank you, O Great Animal of the Sky,” repeat the other woodpeckers, and all of them look up. A light sprinkling of snowflakes has been coming down for a while, but now its snowing heavily. The wind has grown quick-tempered, and big, heavy snowflakes fall through the holes in the portacabin.

“It’ll feel good to rest now,” says the lesser spotted woodpecker, and all at once everyone realises just how exhausted they are.

“There are several good trees nearby that offer overnight accommodation,” the woodpecker says.

“And I can certainly recommend one of the local bird tables,” says one of the local green woodpeckers, looking at the pair of black woodpeckers in awe and admiration. “The one outside the little red house is always particularly well-stocked.”

Woodpeckers are designed to peck, so it doesn’t give them a headache, as it would humans or other animals. But now the birds are tired. None of them has ever done so much pecking or made so many holes in a single night before. They say their goodbyes and fly off to find shelter from the snowy weather. But the woodpecker won’t be able to sleep until he’s been to see the beavers. He takes to his wings and flies shakily out through the trees, in the direction of the Endless Forest.

The beavers are in the middle of their breakfast, all sitting on their bottoms and crunching on alder bark.

“Long live Littlewood Forest,” the mother beaver says cheerily.

“And long live all the animals in it,” replies the woodpecker automatically. He’s so tired he hardly knows what he’s saying.

“It’s lovely to have some fresh food again,” the beaver father says.

“We’ve had nothing but waterlogged twigs for several weeks,” says the beaver mother. The whole family is well rested, and apparently keen to have a long, cosy chat.

“Alder is the best!” says the littlest beaver kit, sucking on an alder twig.

“No,” the woodpecker says.

“Do you prefer rowan bark?” asks the middle kit, surprised.

“No!” the woodpecker says.

“Or birch?” says the biggest kit in disbelief.

“All I can think is that I have to get some sleep,” says the woodpecker, who doesn’t eat twigs and bark but seeds and insects. But he doesn’t have the energy to explain this now. Instead, he turns to the two adult beavers.

“At this speed, you’ll reach the forest in a few hours,” he says. “Which means that Operation Beaver Chew can begin tonight.”

“We’re ready,” says the beaver mother. The woodpecker nods, but immediately stops. For the first time in his life, he has absolutely no desire to nod his head or move it in any other way.

“Those humans are about to get the surprise of their lives!” says the beaver father.

“Travel safe!” the woodpecker says as he flies up into a dense fir tree. “And good night!”

“He was weird,” says the middle beaver kit.

Ylva, her little brothers and their mother are sitting around the breakfast table. Outside, it’s snowing heavily. They’re eating breakfast cereal. The boys are arguing over the chocolate from the advent calendar. Then they begin to nag their mum for some red fruit squash, even though they know they’re not allowed fruit squash for breakfast. In the end, their mother gets up and slams a glass of squash in front of each of them without speaking. Ylva thinks she looks awfully tired.

“Look, Mum!” shouts one of Ylva’s little brothers, pointing at the bird table. Two big, black birds are greedily helping themselves to the sunflower seeds.

“Those are black woodpeckers!” their mother says excitedly. “The biggest woodpeckers that live here.”

“They’re so pretty!” Ylva says.

“Did you know that the black woodpecker was actually once human?” her mother asks.

“Are they demons?” Ylva’s other brother says.

“Or zombie birds? They have blood on their heads,” says the first.

“Black woodpeckers are also known as Gertrude’s Birds,” their mother says. “Because long, long ago, God and Saint Peter were out taking a stroll here on earth…”

“A guy in the Bible,” Ylva explains, before her brothers can ask. Their mother tells them that a woman named Gertrude baked some pancakes. Saint Peter and God asked to taste them. But Gertrude was miserly and said no. This made God angry, so he turned her into a bird. The bird flew up the chimney, and turned black with soot. Gertrude had been wearing a red cap, and – as you can see – the black woodpecker still wears that very same red cap to this day.

Both boys get up to take a closer look at the woodpeckers’ red caps. One of them bumps the table, causing it to thump against the wall. This frightens the woodpeckers, and they fly away. Ylva’s mum sighs in a way that gives Ylva a gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“That’s a nice story!” Ylva says quickly. Her mum smiles at her, then turns to the boys and asks, in a pretend-strict voice:

“And what is the moral to the story, do you think?”

“What?” says one of the twins.

“Mum means: what can we learn from it?” Ylva says, knowing that right now, her mother is thinking the thing she sometimes says: *My clever, grown-up girl! I don’t know what I’d do without you.*

“That it’s stupid to wear a cap indoors,” one of the boys suggests. Then Ylva and her mum start to laugh so hard that they’re unable to stop. The boys laugh, too, although they have no idea what they’re laughing at. One of them squirts red fruit squash out of his nose, which only makes Ylva’s mum laugh even harder.

Gasping for breath, Ylva’s mum points to the window. Just inside the gate, Leo stands waiting, his hat and shoulders dusted with snow. Ylva goes out to him.

“We’ll implement Operation Demon tomorrow!” she says.

“Red Nose is about to get the surprise of his life,” Leo says.

As they walk across the meadow, they notice that nobody is at work. Instead, all the workers in neon yellow overalls are staring at the portacabin.

Just behind Ylva and Leo, the lesser spotted woodpecker flies past. In the forest, just a few dozen metres away, the magpie says goodbye to the pair of black woodpeckers. They’ve had a wonderful breakfast, they say, and now they’re about to head home to their own forest.

**The sixteenth of December**

When the construction workers arrive at the building site on the sixteenth of December, a fir tree is lying across the digger. The vehicle’s cab has been dented, and it’s windows are smashed. The green car screeches into the meadow, and the construction manager rushes towards the digger.

“Just you wait until you see who’s coming today!” he bellows.

Because today, the blasting experts are coming. They’re going to use dynamite to blow up the rocky mound in the forest. But before they can do that, the fir tree will now have to be cleared away and the digger replaced.

“We might just manage it in time,” says a bearded guy with kind eyes.

“We *have* to manage it in time! And that’s all there is to it!” growls the construction manager. But then he sees it. Many smaller trees, all lying across the access road. The stumps remain like freshly sharpened pencils, and have clear signs of being chewed.

“Kids!” he shouts.

“Beavers,” a woman says. “Unbelievable! Woody Woodpecker yesterday and now Bertie Beaver today!”

The construction manager has no time to reply, because the two blasting experts have arrived and are now suddenly standing in front of him. He smiles nervously, and asks whether they would mind waiting in the portacabin for a little while.

“We only have today,” says one of the experts grumpily.

“If we can’t get the blasting done today, it’s going to have to wait until January,” says the other. “At least.”

“And it’s going to cost you the same, whether we wait in the portacabin or do the work,” the first one says.

Hours pass. The day is waning, the sun making its way back down the sky. The workers are still clearing up after Operation Beaver Chew, and in the portacabin full of holes the two blasting experts still sit, feeling a bit chilly. They read damp newspapers with bumpy pages, scroll on their phones and drink coffee. The construction manager opens the door at regular intervals and shouts: “We’re almost ready! That rocky mound will be razed to the ground today!”

The stoats sit gossiping in the pale sunlight, completely unaware that their home is about to be blown to smithereens. They’re in the middle of a discussion about the awful jay bird when they hear the tramping of many feet coming closer. What in all of Littlewood Forest is this!? Terrified, they hurl themselves into their caves. Down on the path, a group of children comes running. They’ve just finished school, and today it’s time for Operation Demon.

In the pale blue house, the placards and banner are on the dining table. Leo’s mother has been working from home, and now she’s taking a break. She stands in the doorway and counts the children as they arrive: ten, twelve, fifteen, sixteen – nineteen! Which just happens to be the same number as the number of woodpeckers that took part in the operation. But neither the woodpeckers nor the humans know this.

“Help yourselves to the placards!” Leo says.

“But first, you can help yourselves to some hot chocolate,” says Leo’s mother, carrying in a gigantic tray of steaming cups. The house grows quiet, the children’s slurping the only sound. They swallow their last mouthfuls, wipe away their hot chocolate moustaches and are ready for action. Leo’s mother has taken out some saucepan lids, some bongo drums and a whistle. Soon nineteen demonstrators are on the march! STOP THE ROAD! STOP THE ROAD! everyone shouts. They crash the saucepan lids together, blow the whistle and bang the drums. Ylva and Leo walk at the head of the demonstration, holding the banner between them.

The little magpie wakes from his afternoon nap with a start. Great muzzy musk oxen, what’s all this? The hares are also startled, and flee deep into the forest. The squirrel shoots up a tree and looks down on the protest march in terror. The fox growls gruffly, thinking that all humans ever seem to do is make a racket. The stoats have stayed inside their caves, and they certainly see no reason to come out now. The little magpie has had enough. Small humans, shouting and banging drums! This is *our* forest, he thinks. It’s fine for the big humans to take a shortcut through the forest on their way to the bus stop. It’s fine that they take their Sunday afternoon strolls here. It’s fine that the small humans walk through the forest on their way to and from school, and it’s fine that they search for tadpoles, climb the trees and throw snowballs. But it *isn’t* fine for them to come here screaming, making a racket and scaring everyone! And it *most certainly isn’t fine* for the humans to come here to cut down the trees and build a road!

The demonstration approaches the meadow. The workers have now almost finished clearing up the building site. They’ve managed to get hold of a new digger, and have cleared away most of the trees that were strewn all over the place. The clock is ticking, time is money – and the blasting experts are waiting.

“We have to get this done before the end of the working day!” the boss shouts. “Pick up the pace!”

“We’ll soon be done,” the digger driver replies matter-of-factly. Then she catches sight of the children marching into the building site. She smiles and points.

“Look!”

“You’re not permitted to look at those brats while you’re working!” screams the boss at the top of his lungs.

“Red Nose has completely lost it!” Ylva whispers to Leo.

“You can’t stop people from looking at things,” one of the workers says. Several of them wave at the children.

“STOP THE ROAD!” the protest march shouts.

“STOP THE CHILDREN!” screams the boss. “And hurry up! We *are* going to blow that rocky mound to pieces!”

“Which rocky mound is he talking about?” Leo asks in a low voice.

“I think he means the slope we go sledging on,” Ylva replies. Two workers are now standing beside the very last tree that needs to be cleared away.

“We have plenty of time,” one of them says. “There’s only this one left.”

“I’ll tell the blasting experts!” cheers Red Nose, jogging towards the portacabin.

“They’re going to use dynamite,” Leo says, knowing that all hope is now lost.

“Well then we’ll just sit down!” says Ylva. They’ll stage a sit-in! Use new tactics! Nineteen children sit down in the middle of the access road, where the very last tree felled by the beavers has just been cleared away. STOP THE ROAD! STOP THE ROAD! The workers look at the children. Many of them smile. One of them confides that he loves the forest, too. Red Nose returns with the two blasting experts and commands the children to go away. Now! He points at the digger driver.

“You there! Start the digger and lift them away with the claw!”

But the woman only stands there.

“You can’t clear children away with diggers!” says a man wearing glasses.

“Our workday is almost over,” one of the blasting experts informs the boss.

“We *are* going to blow up this mound!” the boss replies. “The children will have to move, otherwise they’ll be blasted into the air.”

“STOP THE ROAD!” the children chant in unison.

“Okay, they’ve made their choice. Blast!” the boss commands. “Get out the dynamite!”

“You can’t blow up children,” one of the experts says.

“Maybe we can carry them away?” suggests one of the workers.

“Yes,” says the man with the beard. “We could just gently pick them up and carry them away from here.”

“That’s it – carry the children away! And don’t bother being gentle about it!” shouts the boss. The workers hesitantly approach the children, pick up one each, and carry them over to the other end of the meadow. But as soon as the children are set down, they run straight back and sit down exactly where they were.

“They’re just children! Tie them all together!” screams the boss. The workers throw a child over each shoulder, or they carry one under each arm as if they’re surfboards. The children go limp and make themselves heavy. They flail their arms and kick their legs. They scream. And once they’re put down, they run straight back. There’s always at least as many children in the middle of the access road as there are at the end of the meadow. The blasting experts stand there watching, their arms crossed.

“We can’t wait any longer,” one of them says after glancing at his watch.

“We’ll be sending you the bill,” says the other. “And it’ll be a big one.”

“The sledging slope is saved!” cheers Ylva. She and Leo fold up the banner, and the children divide the placards between them. Now they’re going to hang them all up in the trees and on lampposts.

That evening, Ylva can’t stop smiling. They beat the grown-ups! The only thing that’s missing now is a new job for her mum. Ylva can hear her singing a lullaby to the boys upstairs:… *now the fox is sleeping too, with his tail tucked under his chin…*

Behind the bins the fox stands and listens, his head cocked to one side. When the song is over, he saunters back to the forest, past the placards that the children have hung up, past the portacabin with all the holes in it, and down into his den. He once told the woodpecker that he would eat his tail if all that pecking ever did anyone but the woodpecker any good. But the woodpecker has apparently forgotten this, luckily enough for the fox. He closes his eyes and sleeps – with his tail tucked under his chin.

**The seventeenth of December**

It’s a couple of hours past midnight, and in the human houses there’s only the cat who isn’t deeply asleep. It lies curled up like a donut on a window sill, peering out into the night.

“Those small humans make such a racket,” says the fox. He’s sitting with the long-eared owls, the magpie and the old squirrel on the outskirts of Littlewood Forest.

“That’s what I’ve always said,” says the little magpie.

“That’s just the way nature is,” admits the squirrel. “Even lynx kittens are cute and fluffy. And fox cubs might *look* harmless, but they’re still foxes at the end of the day.”

“A fox is a fox,” the fox says, licking his lips. “And humans are humans, no matter their size.”

“We must tear down the placards at once!” suggests the squirrel.

“An ex-hoo-llent idea!” hoot the owls. The little magpie starts with the placard on the nearest tree. Making good use of his beak, his claws and his rage, he tears it into long strips. The long-eared owls tear down two placards each, which the fox then takes a good, long pee on. He finishes off by kicking his back paws in disgust. Sticky yellow bits of paper scatter across the snow. The squirrel climbs up and pulls a placard free, then shreds it into tiny pieces using her front paws and teeth.

“That’s all of them,” says Mrs Owl. She has good night vision, and has taken one last look around.

“I wonder what it says here,” the squirrel says. She looks down at the placard beneath her, at its black markings in curved and straight lines. They’re letters, and they mean something.

“If the jay were here, she would know.”

“That dis-hoo-hoo-honest bird can’t read any more than the rest of us can,” protests old Mr Owl.

“But she would have figured it out,” the squirrel replies, chewing on a scrap of paper that says STOP on it. The little magpie thinks of the jay’s eyes, of the bushy little feathers on her head. What if he never sees her again? What if the jay is with the Great Animal of the Earth?

“I’m sure the jay has just moved to a new forest,” the squirrel says softly, as if she can read his thoughts.

The little magpie pulls the banner free and drags it home to his nest. He doesn’t know that it’s made from a bedsheet, but that’s what he uses it for. He lies down, just where it says OP THE RO, and feels satisfied with the night and early morning’s efforts. Ugh, those terrible children!

At eight in the morning on the seventeenth of December, Ylva and Leo hurry to school.

“Today it’s only a week until Christmas Eve!” says Leo, feeling a gust of joy swirl through his tummy. But he can see that Ylva doesn’t feel the same way. He swallows and decides he’ll be brave and ask her why, but just then they notice the placards, which now lie in pieces on the ground.

“Red Nose,” Ylva says dispiritedly.

“We’ll make new ones!” says Leo.

Afternoon arrives, and the workers have gone home for the day. In the dusk the squirrel and the magpie sit on the wire fence that has been put up around the building site.

“We have to do something more about those small humans,” the magpie says.

“And the big ones,” says the squirrel. “They’re the worst.”

“The children are the worst,” says the magpie.

“But it’s the big ones who make all the decisions,” says the squirrel. Then she has an idea. “What if we attack the thing the big humans love most of all?”

“The children, you mean?”

The squirrel shakes her head and points to the meadow. Standing there are three trucks, the new digger and a tractor. While the little magpie and the squirrel consider the vehicles, the beaver family comes plodding along. All five of them look absolutely exhausted and worn out.

“Long live Littlewood Forest,” says the father beaver in greeting.

“And long live all the animals in it,” replies the squirrel in her warmest voice. “Thank you so much for all you’ve done!”

“Stories will be told about you,” says the little magpie. “About how long the humans were forced to work to remove every last trace of a single night’s beaver chewing!”

“If there’s still a forest to tell stories in,” the beaver mother sighs. She says they must start the long journey back to their dam. As the beaver mother speaks, the magpie stares at her long, orange teeth. In the end, he simply can’t help but ask.

“Do you think you could bite holes in the tyres of those trucks over there?”

The beaver mother turns laboriously, takes a look and replies that yes, she’s sure they can. Then the magpie politely asks whether the beavers might consider delaying their journey home for a little while longer. The beaver mother nods, and the squirrel leaps into the air with sheer joy.

“Go get some rest! We’ll wake you later this evening when Operation…,” the little magpie begins, but he can’t think of a suitable name.

“…when Operation Car Crash is underway,” the squirrel finishes excitedly. The beavers yawn, but the squirrel is full of energy and gusto, and bounds back over to the trucks. She says she wants to stuff their exhaust pipes with pinecones, and points to the pipes that stick out from the rear of each vehicle.

“Great! And maybe the stoats can chew through the cables that lead to the engines!” the little magpie suggests.

“I’m sure they won’t” the squirrel says firmly. “The lazy tittle-tattlers!”

“Well, we’ll ask them anyway!” the little magpie decides, and they do. As it turns out, the stoats are more than happy to help. The squirrel feels ashamed. “It seems I was a little too quick to judge a stoat by its gossip.”

“We must give all the animals a chance before we judge them,” the little magpie says. “A wise old squirrel once taught me that.”

The building site is teeming with life. The beavers will carry out the first part of the operation, the stoats the second, and then the squirrels will finish the job. The little magpie tells everyone what to do, allocating each animal its tasks. Little remains of his old insecurities.

“I’m so proud of you,” whispers the squirrel. I wonder whether the jay would be proud of me too, thinks the little magpie.

“*We* are ready,” the oldest stoat says.

“Because we’re lithe and limber,” says the second.

“With razor-sharp teeth,” the oldest says.

“And as if that wasn’t enough, we’re used to getting into tight spaces,” brags the smallest.

“And are the squirrels all set?” the magpie asks. The squirrel gives him a claws up.

The night is at its darkest, and a pale winter’s moon illuminates the snow. The moose family are among the onlookers, standing in the front row. The mother moose hates cars and loud noises, but she loves everything that sparkles and shines. The magpie has promised that Operation Car Crash will be a silent light show.

Then the beavers get down to business. They waddle on their short legs over to the trucks. The maths is simple: there are five vehicles, and five beavers. The beavers sit on their back legs and sink their teeth into the huge tyres. The mother beaver is the first to make a hole. *Puff!* Air shoots out of the tyre at high pressure, sending her tumbling over backwards. Seconds later, another *puff!* is heard. And then another. The beavers fall on their bottoms every time, but they carefully get up and make a start on the next tyre. When the twentieth tyre has been punctured, it’s the stoats’ turn. Three white arrows dart over to the trucks, and – hey presto! – they disappear into the digger’s engine. Neither the squirrel, the magpie nor the stoats have any clue how engines work, but all of them think it’s safe to assume that the engines won’t like three short-tempered carnivores biting and chewing and scratching them. And they’re right! At the edge of the forest the mother moose stands and enjoys the fireworks display of sparks that shoot out, first from the digger and then from the bonnets of the four other trucks. Finally, it’s the squirrels’ turn. They’ve stacked up a pyramid of pinecones, and now they run back and forth between the exhaust pipes and the pile. Soon all the pinecones are gone, and Operation Car Crash is complete. Now all they have to do is wait until morning.

But the beavers must prepare to begin their arduous journey westwards.

“See you in the spring!” the little magpie calls after them. The mother beaver turns.

“We hope we’ll wake to Littlewood Forest as it has always been in springtime, with soft grass, tender shoots on the trees, and newborn babies in all the dens and nests.”

The magpie watches the beavers as they plod away. The stoats, who all have singed whiskers, yawn, wish everyone a good night, and run back to their caves. The mother moose stamps out a flat spot of grass to sleep in, and her calves snuggle up to their mother’s warm body. The squirrel is now wearing her winter coat, but still: has she always been so grey around the snout? Has her fur always looked this dull?

“Go home and rest,” the little magpie says. “You need some sleep.”

“I think you’re right,” replies the squirrel. Then she hops over to the nearest tree, hurries up its trunk, and jumps from one treetop to the next, and then the next. She’s still the fittest great-great-great-grandmother in all of Littlewood Forest.

**The nineteenth of December**

The magpie is flying towards the edge of the forest. The woodpecker, the blue tits and the owls are also on the wing. They’re all on their way to attend Operation Moose on the Loose. The squirrel and the hares hop in the same direction, the mice and the stoats scurry along, and the fox comes stalking after them. More and more construction workers are trickling into the building site. Some get started on their work right away, while others go into the portacabin to fetch a cup of coffee.

In the east, the sky is brightening. The mother moose has spent a long time mooing loudly, calling for the father moose. At last, he answers her with a long, drawn-out moo, then barges his way through the bushes. Just in the nick of time, thinks the little magpie, because they have to start *now*! He gives the ready signal, and the family of moose swagger into the meadow, the mother moose at the helm. She’s limping a little, but her grace and dignity are what everyone sees. The moose – the two large ones and two smaller ones – walk with the confidence all large animals have. They cast no quick glances to either side, make no jumpy sidesteps. They walk straight ahead, no matter what might stand in their way, because here comes the queen of the forest, her consort and their two princesses. If Ylva had seen them, she might have said that they had *attitude*. But she’s standing in the hallway of the little red house, putting on her jacket as Leo waits for her outside. They wave to her little brothers and hurry off into the winter morning. The eastern sky slowly turns more and more pink and chanterelle yellow.

The humans – who usually don’t have the skills needed to see animals, and who usually neither see, hear nor smell them – have no problem noticing the four gigantic creatures that are now approaching.

“Moose!” they cry. Their voices are filled with awe, respect and fear, all at once.

“Don’t shout,” whispers one wearing glasses. “We might frighten them.”

Had the jay been there to interpret what the human with the glasses had said, the moose would have been tickled pink. *Frighten them!* Moose don’t understand the human calendar, but they certainly know when moose-hunting season is over, and that was many weeks ago. They’re not frightened, because they have nothing to fear.

The humans stand huddled together, staring. The moose come closer and closer.

“Look, a magpie!” whispers one of the men. The little magpie flutters towards the mother moose, flaps his wings together and swoops down to one of her hairy ears. It’s so large he could fit his entire body into it.

“Lie down in front of the digger!” he whispers.

The mother moose changes direction, and the other moose follow her. Without warning, she slumps down onto the ground with a thud. Her body hits a marking stick, which snaps, and one half of it shoots off towards the humans. The father moose lies down with an even greater thud, and the calves drop down close to their mother. A total of one and a half tonnes of moose now lies right in front of the digger. The mother moose slowly begins to chew. Her head, with its long, noble nose, is held high. She regurgitates bark and twigs and chews the cud.

“Now take your time, my girls, and chew your food well,” she urges her calves. The moose lie there, chewing. The humans stand there, staring. It’s hard to say how long this might have gone on for if what happened next hadn’t come to pass. A crocodile-green sports car skids into the meadow, and out of it steps a man. What’s this? Why aren’t you working, you lot of lazy layabouts? In a rage he raises his hands above his head and spreads his fingers wide. The moose see his shape silhouetted against the golden-pink sky. For a moment he looks like a tree – a terrifying human tree. Then something seems to come over the mother moose. *It’s him!* She gets to her feet, flattens her ears and snorts. She paws at the ground with her hooves in rage, sending snow and brown tufts of grass flying off in all directions. Then she takes aim – and she charges.

As early as that very same day, impressive tales about what happened begin to circulate, and the stories all begin something like this: That was the day the mother moose got her revenge.

The mother moose topples the construction manager onto his back. He lies there in the snow. Then mother moose sets a hoof – the one on her lame front leg – on his chest. For once, the man’s face is white as a sheet, and his moustache hangs flat and stunned on either side of his mouth. The other humans simply stand there and watch – they have no idea what to do. They daren’t move for fear that the moose will trample the construction manager to bits. But in the end one of them sneaks a phone out of their pocket, carefully taps in a number, and whispers a message. To the construction manager, it probably feels as if he’s been lying there for an eternity with the mother moose’s sharp foot on his chest and her furious eyes glaring down at him. But in reality, it takes just a few minutes before a pickup parks beside the footbridge, and a young woman in camo gear creeps towards the moose, holding a long, dark-brown object in her hand. The calves watch calmly, still convinced of their mother’s invincibility. But the experienced father moose recognises the object. It’s a rifle. A hunting rifle. Surely it’s impossible – it’s no longer hunting season! But he knows what he sees. He lows a warning to the mother moose, but right now she’s deaf and blind to everything but the man she hates. The father moose gets to his feet, nudges the calves, and all three of them stride into the trees. The woman with the rifle is now just a few metres away from the mother moose and the construction manager, and she fires a warning shot up into the air. Everyone gives a start. The mother moose, who is terrified of sudden noises, jumps sky high and hops away from the construction manager, who gets to his feet – and snatches the rifle from the woman.

From the forest, the animals have a good view of the action. But all they can do is watch. No animal can defeat a human with a weapon. In the dense branches of a fir tree sit the magpie, the woodpecker, the blue tits, the owls and the squirrel. They don’t move a muscle. The stoats and the fox have run away. The mice sit quiet as mice in the snow. The hares flatten themselves against the ground. Their ears pick up a hum, a threatening vibration, but it disappears as fast as it came. An icy shudder runs through the hares, because the hum was the lynx hissing in anger. She can wait no longer. She has just four days left until her powers disappear again. She must carry out her plan: Operation Wind and Will.

At this moment Leo and Ylva come out of the forest. They just heard a bang, and thought it must be something to do with the building of the road. But now they stop. They simply can’t believe their eyes. They see the construction workers, all standing stock still. They see a woman in green camo gear. They see a huge, antlerless moose. And they see Red Nose. His face is scarlet with rage, and his moustache is sticking up and bristling angrily. And he’s pointing a rifle straight at the moose.

**The twenty-first of December**

The baby badger sees nothing but darkness, but he can hear, feel and smell. He’s in the middle of a snoring pile of his relatives. Next to him lies his mother, stretched out on her side. Half on top of him sleep his two little brothers, and on the other side of him is an aunt. His father, uncles and cousins are sleeping just across from him. Had the baby badger been able to count, he would have known that they total eleven badgers, all hibernating for the winter. He nudges his mother and gently bites her ears, but she doesn’t even move her head. He wants to go outside, because he knows what it’s like out there. Even though he’s only been alive for a single summer, he remembers the grass under his paws and the light nights with insects buzzing around his snout. Best of all, he remembers how wonderful it is to fill his belly with grubs and earthworms. He just wants to feel all this again before he goes back to sleep. He crawls along a narrow corridor and out of the den. But outside, everything is covered in something white, and he hears no buzzing insects. It’s almost as dark out here as it is in the den, and much colder. Maybe he should just crawl back inside? Then a mouse peeks out from the snow. She looks afraid – and she has good reason to be – because adult badgers will eat mice, given the chance. But there are no mice on the menu for the baby badger. The two young animals look at each other for a long time. The mouse just happens to be the kind of animal who talks and talks out of sheer shyness.

“It’s the middle of the night, so now the cat is asleep,” she says. The baby badger is about to say that he has to get back to bed, too. But then the mouse tells him about the road that’s being built, and about asphalt and diggers. She goes on and on about how easy it is to get a mouse into a house and to eat snacks in a shack. She tells him about Operation Hoodini, about holes in a portacabin, about the beavers, the mother moose, and the squirrels who put the pinecones in the exhaust pipes.

“Everyone except the jay has done their part,” the mouse says. Then she chatters on about the special operation carried out by the mice. The baby badger, who just moments ago felt wide awake, begins to feel sleepy. He yawns, and moves closer to the entrance to the den. But now the mouse asks him what the badgers have done.

“We’ve dug,” the baby badger says proudly. “We’re experts at digging.”

“Oh really?” says the mouse as she scurries around. High above them the long-eared owls are circling, but neither the mouse nor the baby badger has noticed them.

“It’s an extra-special operation,” the baby badger explains. “Top secret. Operation BD.”

“BD?” the mouse repeats in a mocking voice. Now both animals hear the beating of wings – but it’s too late. The mouse is silhouetted against the night sky as she dangles from the claws of the long-eared owl.

The baby badger decides to go over to the building site and take a look for himself before he goes back to the den. He’s sure the mouse was just exaggerating. But she wasn’t. He stands at the edge of the forest and looks out across the building site. Several large trucks and machines are parked there. There are huge piles of rocks everywhere, and the snow around them has been stamped on, making it brown and dirty. Through the trees runs a gravel road, like a wound in the snow. Some bare tree stumps stick up along its edge. The baby badger can’t tell where he is. Only when he sees the group of alders does he understand that he’s looking at the meadow. And that’s when he becomes angry. My ancestors have lived in the corridors beneath Littlewood Forest for hundreds of years, he thinks. He has to do something. If the mice can contribute, then of course the badgers can, too! He pads into the building site and looks around for a place to dig. He wants to destroy all this. He wants Littlewood Forest back the way it was: with flowers, plants and crunchy insects. With soft earthworms that wriggle in your mouth. He slides on his tummy down into a ditch, where he catches sight of a hole, perfectly round, like a bird’s eye. The baby badger crawls inside it.

Top secret operation Badger Dig, aka BD, is underway! It’s cramped and dark, but the baby badger is used to that. He scrambles along, full of furious energy, but then he realises that he’s stuck. He’s completely stuck fast. He can move neither forwards nor backwards – his claws can’t get a grip on the slippery surface. He whimpers and calls for help, but hears only the hollow echo of his own voice, thick with tears. But my mummy will help me, just like she helped me when I fell into the water this past summer, he thinks. Then he remembers that it will be several months before she wakes up. Someone else will come, he thinks. But nobody knows that he’s there.

After school, Ylva and Leo hurry back to the pale blue house. The sheet of paper with the picture of the newts on it must be important, but they don’t understand why. They each take a glass of chocolate milk, sit down in front of Leo’s mum’s computer, and search for *newt*. They find out that the newts that live in Littlewood Forest are northern crested newts: brownish-black in colour, a little lumpy-looking and with saffron-coloured spots on their bellies. *Triturus cristatus*. That’s the one, Ylva says – she’s seen them many times before. As they read on, they realise why the sheet of paper was in the rubbish. There are so few newts left in the wild that the species might die out. Which is why it’s illegal to build houses and roads in areas where the northern crested newt lives! They look at each other, then storm into the hallway, throw on their coats and shoes and run to the building site. They don’t even bother to knock on the door of the portacabin – they just march straight in. Red Nose and a woman are sitting at a table. Ylva slaps the crumpled piece of paper onto the tabletop and says:

“The newts! You have to stop building the road!”

Red Nose looks at them for a while before he smiles and shakes his head.

“There are no newts here,” the woman says.

“But,” Ylva says more quietly, “we found this sheet of paper.”

“We investigated whether any threatened species live in this area,” Red Nose explains, looking as pleased with himself as ever.

“But there aren’t any,” the woman says. “Where did you get that from?”

“We spoke to some biologists, and there are no newts here,” Red Nose says again. He sounds like somebody’s nature-loving uncle. His moustache bristles with kindness.

“Yes there are – I’ve seen them in Littlewood Forest!” Ylva says. “As recently as last autumn.”

“You two need to scram!” Red Nose says, a little more impatiently now. “We have a road to build.”

“But you’re not allowed to!” Leo says despairingly. “Northern crested newts live here!”

“Then find them,” Red Nose says, and his nose changes colour.

“But they’re hibernating now,” Leo says. “And we have no idea where.”

“Surely you understand that it isn’t enough for you to just claim that you’ve seen some,” says the woman, rolling her eyes. Putting one hand on Ylvas back and the other on Leo’s neck, she ushers the children out. As soon as the door is closed behind them, Ylva whispers that Red Nose and the woman are lying.

“I think so too,” Leo says.

“But I *know* they’re lying – because didn’t you notice?” Ylva asks. Leo shakes his head.

“They never asked us if we went into the portacabin and stole the sheet of paper.”

Leo nods. It’s true. The woman only asked where they had got it from once, and then neither she nor Red Nose mentioned it again – and they must have recognised it. Which means they have a guilty conscience.

“We’ll just have to search and search until we find the newts,” Leo says firmly.

The jay flies hesitantly towards the scree, and there, on the rocky mound, sits the magpie! The hare and the squirrel are sitting in the snow in front of him. The wise, kind squirrel. The jay feels happy as a lark when she sees them. But she’s also afraid. Afraid that they will reject her. She can hear that they’re speaking – maybe they’re talking about what can be done to save Littlewood Forest? Now she’s here, and she can help! They still haven’t noticed her. She’s about to fly down to them when she realises that what they’re talking about is *her*.

“She failed us,” the little magpie says.

“A traitor,” says the hare, his voice hard. “The jay has always been deceitful.”

“I think it’s typical…” the squirrel begins, but then the jay can’t bear to hear any more. Even the squirrel hates her! The jay flies away as silently as she can.

“I think it’s typical to react that way when everyone thinks badly of you,” the squirrel goes on.

“She can be childish and hoity-toity, but she’s never mean,” says the little magpie.

“Maybe the squirrel is right,” the hare says thoughtfully.

“The squirrel is usually right,” the little magpie says. “I wish the jay would come back. Because we need her. But mostly because she’s my best friend.”

**The eve of the eve of Christmas Eve**

Early in the morning, Ylva and Leo walk through the forest. Ylva says that she’s seen the newts in and around the little lakes and ponds formed by the stream that runs through Littlewood Forest. She and Leo have read that the newts usually hibernate close to where they live in summer.

“We just have to find the ponds,” Ylva says optimistically. Which sounds easy, but it’s almost impossible. Right now, the summer landscape is sleeping under a thick, white duvet, which makes everything unrecognisable. The children stand still for a while, looking about them. They walk beside the stream and try to imagine where small lakes and ponds might be hidden under the snow. They kneel down, and dig with their hands. They toil away for many hours, and in the end they feel both freezing cold and hungry. Ylva brushes the snow from a tree root and sits down on it.

“This is impossible,” she says.

“But then Red Nose will win,” Leo says. “The road *will* be built.”

“Kids can’t beat grown-ups,” Ylva says. “That’s what your dad said.”

“Let’s go see the journalist,” Leo says. “Come on!”

Three animals have been keeping a watchful eye on Leo and Ylva today. What are the small humans doing? Why are they crawling around on all fours? The fox, sitting behind a hazel bush, has been trying to understand. The magpie has flown from tree to tree as the children followed the stream. He’s still sure that the small humans must be helping the big ones to build the road. But the squirrel isn’t convinced. If only they could understand what the children were talking about! But she knows it’s no use thinking such things. The jay has left Littlewood Forest for good.

“What about the sheet of paper with the newts on it?” the squirrel asks.

“It was a dead end,” the little magpie says dispiritedly. “There’s no point trying to follow that lead anymore.”

“But why was there a picture of the newts in the portacabin?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” the little magpie says. “And I remembered how the humans like to decorate their homes with us. Embroidered blue tits and glass ornaments shaped like bullfinches. Paintings of moose at sunset. Cute magnets shaped like squirrels on their fridges – that sort of thing. The picture of the newts must have been just for decoration.”

“And why did the children run off with it?”

“They must have wanted it to decorate their own homes,” replies the little magpie. “Forget the newts! Let’s focus on trying to work out what the children are up to now.”

The journalist opens the door before Leo and Ylva even have the chance to ring the doorbell.

“You two again,” she says, disappointed. Ylva explains that they’ve discovered a scandal at the building site.

“More scandals involving the construction manager? Bring it on! I’m in!” the journalist says heartily. But when Leo explains what the scandal is about, she loses interest.

“It’s a good story in theory, but I can’t write that two kids *think* there are newts in the forest!”

“But we *know* there are,” Leo says. “Ylva has seen them loads of times.”

“I need proof,” the journalist says, and slams the door in their faces.

The baby badger has been stuck for almost an entire day. He curls up as best he can, and mostly sleeps. He knows that he’ll never see his family again, but that isn’t the worst thing. On the first days spent in the den each autumn, the oldest badgers always tell stories. It takes time for everyone to fall asleep, and the younger animals in particular find it hard to settle down to hibernate. That’s why the badgers snuggle up together in the dark and listen to family chronicles about their ancestors who have achieved great things. Now nobody will ever tell stories about me, the baby badger thinks.

In the middle of the bright day, as the workers are eating their lunch, Ylva and Leo sneak into the building site in the hope of finding out more about the newts. Someone has to know something! They tiptoe over to the portacabin and each crouch down in front of one of the holes made by the woodpeckers. They can hear everything that’s being said inside – about skiing holidays, what people are planning to eat for their Christmas dinners, higher interest rates, a crime show on TV. Ylva looks hopelessly at Leo. But then a loud voice says something about the rocky mound. Ylva grabs the sleeve of Leo’s jacket.

“It turns out the blasting experts are going to blow up the rocky mound before Christmas after all. In fact, they’re coming tomorrow.”

“On the day before Christmas Eve?” another voice asks.

“Yes, after lunch. At one o’clock.”

Ylva stands up.

“They’ve won,” she says, and she can’t even be bothered to whisper any more. “The grown-ups always win!”

“Shh!” says Leo suddenly. “I just heard something! Some scratching sounds.”

“You do realise that the newts won’t be right here? And anyway, they’re hibernating, so they won’t make any noise,” Ylva says, annoyed. But then she hears it too. A clear scrabbling sound, coming from the ditch. They jump down into it.

“It’s coming from that cement pipe,” Leo says.

“Maybe it’s a cat that’s got stuck,” Ylva says. She bends down and peers into the pipe. Deep inside it, she can see fur. She reaches in with an arm.

“Careful,” Leo says. “It might bite!”

“Whatever it is has its bottom facing this way,” Ylva says. She takes a firm hold of the animal and pulls it out. It’s a poor stripey little guy. Dirty, cold, and limp as a sweater.

“It’s a baby badger,” Leo whispers. “Is it dead?”

“Call a vet,” Ylva says. She unzips her jacket and puts the badger against her chest. Leo takes out his phone and searches for the number for the local veterinary surgery. He finds it, calls them, and gives the most important details: what they’ve found, and where they are. The vet arrives just as the workers are finishing lunch. She explains that she needs peace and quiet in order to do her job. They can’t go back to building the road just yet, she says.

“That’s okay,” says the man with the kind eyes and the beard. Some of the workers go back into the portacabin, while others stand and watch. “Poor little thing,” says one. “Uff, what a sorry sight,” says another. Everyone speaks in low voices. The vet sets up a field hospital. She puts the badger on a tarpaulin and examines him thoroughly. It’s a male, she says. She looks in his mouth and carefully prods his stomach. She gives him an injection in one paw. He’s okay. He’s just cold, and probably dehydrated. She puts a blanket over him and massages him gently. Just then, a crocodile-green car comes speeding into the building site. Out of it jumps Red Nose. Why is nobody working? What are those two wretched kids doing here again? And who is that? The vet introduces herself and explains that a badger had got stuck in one of the pipes.

“What a shame!” Red Nose says. “But we have a road to build!”

“This animal is injured and needs peace and quiet,” says the vet as she continues to massage the badger. Only his striped head sticks out from under the blanket.

“We’re getting back to work right now, and that’s that!” Red Nose bellows. As usual, his nose has turned a furious shade of scarlet. The vet stands up. She looks the construction manager in the eye.

“I recognise you from the newspaper,” she says. “You tried to shoot a moose. If you start your work again I’m going to report you to the police and the Society for the Protection of Animals.”

Red Nose mutters something under his breath and looks as if he’s about to explode. But then he turns to the workers, and says in a kind, Santa Claus sort of voice:

“Since it’s almost Christmas, I’ve decided to give you an extra half day off.” He gets back into his car, closes the door and rolls down the window.

“We’re blasting tomorrow!” he screams.

The vet thinks the badger is well enough to go home. She places him in Ylva’s arms and tells the children she knows where the badgers’ den is. Ylva carefully sets down the badger outside the den. He peers about him in a daze, and looks up at Ylva one last time. Then he crawls back inside to his family. The baby badger has no need to feel ashamed. Special Operation BG has delayed the building of the road by half a day. But of course he has no idea of this himself.

“When he wakes in the spring, he’ll think it was just a bad dream,” says the vet.

“But he’ll wake to something worse than a nightmare,” says Leo. “A motorway – right outside his bedroom.”

“It’s such a shame about the new road,” the vet says with an apologetic shrug of her shoulders.

“Do you know anything about newts?” Leo asks hopefully. The vet shakes her head.

“No, I’m sorry – badgers and budgerigars are my areas of expertise.”

**The eve of Christmas Eve**

Leo is in his pyjamas, looking out of the window. Tomorrow will be Christmas Eve. He hasn’t dared ask Ylva whether she’s excited about Christmas coming, but he thinks she’d say no. Leo, on the other hand, can’t wait. But after lunch the blasting experts will arrive, and the children’s sledging slope will be blown to smithereens. Then the road will be built. Leo’s mum has already left for work. His dad, who has a day off, is sitting in the kitchen having his breakfast. He’s set a round gingerbread cookie with orange icing on it on Leo’s plate.

“Freshly baked and freshly iced! It’s the sun!” Leo’s father says proudly. “These days are the shortest in the year – the sun rises late and creeps off to bed early. But yesterday was the winter solstice. From now on, the days will become longer and the nights shorter.”

“I’m going out for a walk,” is all Leo says. His father hands him a paper bag full of gingerbread.

“Remember that we’re having rice porridge for dinner and decorating the tree tonight,” he says.

Leo and Ylva walk slowly into Littlewood Forest, looking around and taking little detours from the path where they think ponds might be hidden under the snow. But they’ve lost hope. Today it’s the jay who’s keeping an eye on them. Rumours spread quickly in Littlewood Forest – they’ve even reached an ashamed jay who is currently in hiding. The jay has heard that the magpie thinks something must be done about the small humans. She’s also heard that the mice saw a picture of the newts. I can figure out these two things, the jay thinks. And once I’ve done that, I’ll leave this place forever. She stays close to the children, and soon picks up that they’re looking for the newts. But why?

“We need a break,” Ylva says. They’ve been searching for over two hours already. She pulls a thermos cup out of her pocket. Leo takes out the bag of sun-shaped gingerbread cookies, and Ylva nods towards a skirted fir tree. They push the lowest branches aside and go in. In the green half-dark they guzzle down fruit squash and eat the crunchy gingerbread. They each keep an eye on the time, sneaking out their phones and checking how long is left until one o’clock. They keep their spirits up by reassuring each other that they’ll find the newts, and then the building of the road will be stopped. Just next to the fir tree sits the jay, straining to hear every word. Great muzzy musk oxen!

“It smells like Christmas,” Ylva says, picking pine needles from her hair. And then something happens that the two of them will never forget. The tree’s branches part, and in hops a bird. It stands before Ylva and Leo, turns around, peers up at them and wanders back out between the branches. The children get up and follow it.

“It’s a jay,” whispers Ylva. “We’ve seen one like it on our bird table.”

“Is it trying to show us something?” Leo asks. The bird has fluttered up into the next fir tree, where it now sits, chattering and cawing. The children look at each other and walk towards it. The bird flies a few metres away, then lands in a rowan tree. The children follow it again. The bird continues to fly ahead of them, and Ylva and Leo follow. The snow is deep, and they stumble and fall and get up again. But the chattering bird is never more than a couple of metres up ahead. Finally, it lands on a wide beech and sits there. And that’s when Ylva recognises where they are. It’s *here*! She remembers the crooked beech, which looks like a bike rack. The ponds are impossible to see, because they’re frozen and covered with snow. But they *are* here. The bird doesn’t move. Leo plops down onto his knees and digs carefully between the beech tree’s roots. Under the snow are leaves and withered grass. Ylva crouches down next to him. They take off their mittens, and gently remove yet another layer of leaves with their bare hands. And there – deep down, under a flat stone that acts as a roof – they are. An entire family of newts, sleeping in a hollow between two roots that makes the cosiest little bedchamber. They lie close together, totally still. With greyish brown backs and spotted orange bellies. Six tiny animals that will stop an entire motorway. Leo fishes his phone from his pocket and takes several photos. Then they put back the rock, and then the leaves and the soil. Finally, they loosely pat the snow on top. When they stand to leave, the bird is gone.

At the very top of the pine tree sits the squirrel, half asleep. She gives a start as the jay lands in front of her.

“Oh!” the squirrel says happily. “It’s you!”

“Long live Littlewood Forest,” the jay says in greeting. “And you, most of all.”

The squirrel quietly smack’s her lips. She looks at the jay for a long time. Her eyes are kind.

“I’ve been eavesdropping,” says the jay.

“The woodpecker said something very wise after you flew off after that first general meeting of the animals,” the squirrel says. The jay cocks her head, curious.

“He said that we’d have the greatest success if every animal did what he or she does best. And nobody is able to eavesdrop like you!”

“That’s why I should have told the magpie what I heard at the time,” says the jay.

“Yes,” the squirrel says. “But why don’t you just tell me what you know now.”

“There isn’t going to be a motorway,” says the jay. She tells the squirrel what the children have been doing over the past few days, and how the sleeping family of newts will save Littlewood Forest.

“Are you sure?” asks the wise old squirrel.

“Absolutely certain,” the jay reassures her. But deep down, she knows that animals can never trust humans.

“Good,” the squirrel says, leaning back against the pine’s rough trunk.

“I have to find the magpie,” says the jay. I’m going to apologise to him, she thinks, but she doesn’t say this out loud. Still, the squirrel calls after her:

“And I hope the little magpie apologises to *you*, too.”

The squirrel was born on a spring day in Littlewood Forest, and she’s lived her squirrel’s life here for seven summers and almost seven winters. And now she knows that the children and grandchildren who come after her will also be able to live on here, climbing the same trees, jumping from treetop to treetop, and eating nuts from the same hazelnut bushes. Littlewood Forest is saved! The squirrel is tired. She closes her eyes, and immediately it’s a warm autumn day. She’s sitting in the maple tree, its red leaves all around her. Then it’s an early June morning, with dew on the grass. She’s just a little squirrel surrounded by the safe smell of her siblings and mother – no, she’s a young mother squirrel with four little bundles of joy in her nest. She feels the sun warm her body. She sits with a ripe, golden hazelnut between her front paws. It’s winter, a glittering day with crisp snow to run across, to reach her well-stocked stores of seeds. She jumps from one treetop to the next, and to the next. She flies through the clear autumn air, through a warm summer’s breeze, through the December mist. Then she is no more. The old squirrel dies up there in the tree, and her body falls through the winter afternoon to land with a soft thud in the snow. Her long squirrel’s life is over. Littlewood Forest’s fittest great-great-great-grandmother is no more. Two hares come hopping along and see the tiny body in the snow. They stop and immediately recognise the wise old squirrel. One of the hares bows his head and says:

“Take her with you, O Mighty Animal of the Earth that has dominion over death.”

“Thank you, O Great Animal of the Earth,” says the other hare with deep respect.

“Thank you, O Great Animal of the Earth,” come the words, like an echo from the tree. It’s the jay, who has returned. She’d had a feeling this might happen. The little magpie lands on the branch just beside her. The jay pecks an untidy down feather from the magpie’s neck. They rub their beaks together and chirrup gently to one another. They say nothing about the squirrel, because there is far too much to say. Nor do they say anything about the road. Because now, it’s all up to the small humans.

[AND OF COURSE EVERYTHING TURNS OUT WELL IN THE END: THE BUILDING OF THE ROAD IS STOPPED. YLVA’S MOTHER FINALLY GETS A JOB, AND THE BEAR CUBS ARE BORN. THE NORTHERN LIGHTS COLOUR THE SKY, AND CHRISTMAS CAN COME FOR EVERYONE ...]