

Translated excerpt

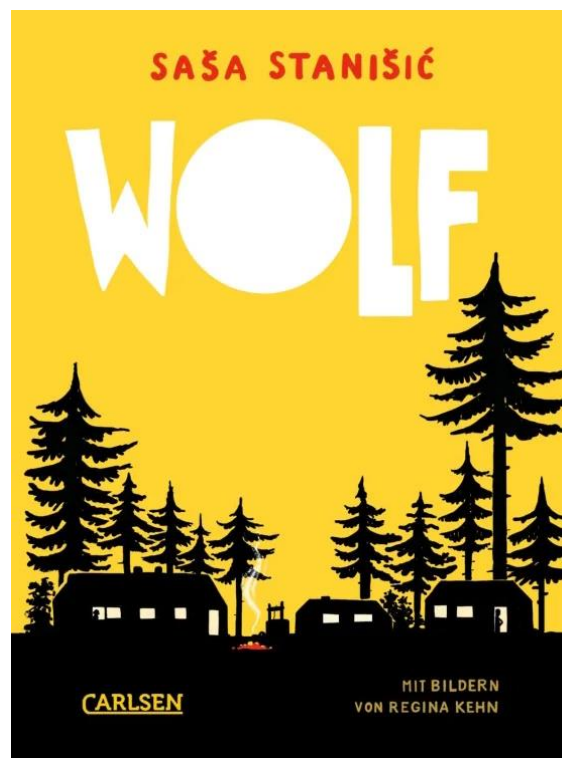
**Saša Stanišić / Regina Kehn**  
***Wolf***

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Translated by Sarah Rimmington



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Mother and I are making salad. I love making salad with Mother, all we talk about is the salad. We're totally there for the salad.

Today, things are different. Today, completely unprovoked, Mother starts a sentence with "by the way". Sentences my mother starts with "by the way" never end well for me.

So: "By the way," my mother says, peeling the garlic, "I've signed you up for a holiday camp."

"Surely you must be joking?" I say, using the cucumber as a microphone and then holding it out to her.

"The first week of the holidays. I can't get the time off. Pass me the garlic crusher, please."

"Ladies and gentlemen," I say, turning to the tomatoes, "the garlic queen is not joking." I pass the crusher and decide to take her seriously. "But I can go to Grandma's," I suggest.

"Grandma's on a painting course in Malente." Mother crushes the garlic firmly into the sauce.

"And anyway, it'd do you good to get outside for a bit."

"Outside? Me? Mama, how long have we known each other?"

"Evenings by the campfire, jacket potatoes in the coals?"

"Smoke in my eyes, a burnt tongue? And please. There's no sadder fire than one with jacket potatoes cooking in it!"

"Listen," says Mother, looking at me. "It's only a week. The camp's in the middle of the forest and –"

"The forest? There's no way I'm going to the forest."

"Almost all of your class are going," says Mother.

“I couldn’t care less about almost all of my class,” I say.

“A week like this might change things,” says Mother

“Why should I want to change anything?” I say.

Mother produces a brightly-coloured holiday camp brochure from her apron. Its title reads:

FOREST ADVENTURES

THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME

On the front is a photo of a couple of cabins in a forest clearing.

“Look how pretty the trees are,” says Mother.

“The only trees I like are ones that’ve been made into cupboards,” I say.

Mother pushes a strand of hair from her face with her wrist. The gesture makes her look completely exhausted.

I sigh and flip open the brochure. The forest in the forest brochure looks as if someone has hoovered it and the clearing in the forest brochure looks as if someone has combed the grass. I bet the cabins in the clearing were given an extra-good scrub for the photos. If you didn’t know how dastardly forests were, this kind of brochure might give you the impression they were completely harmless.

No stinging nettles, no thorny undergrowth – I mean, just the word, “undergrowth”!

There are no insects to be seen either, no ticks, no midges. And midges, midges are the worst. They did a survey of a thousand people, asking what animals they’d be happy to let go extinct, and guess where midges came?

That’s right.

I hand the brochure back to Mother. “Sorry,” I say, “but it’s really not my kind of thing.”

“Sorry,” says Mother, “but it’s not up for discussion. Olive oil, please.”

“But,” I say, “we always discuss decisions that affect me.”

“This decision mostly affects me,” says Mother quietly, more to the salad dressing than me. “So it’s either the holiday camp or holiday care at school.” That hits home. She knows how much I hate holiday care. Supervisors on lousy pay thinking up lousy activities for a bunch of stay-at-home losers in lousy moods because their parents can’t take holiday, or can’t afford it. On the very first day last summer, we had to choose between “crafting with paper maché” and “fun in the school garden” and I just wanted to set fire to it all: the paper maché, the school garden and the fun, which consisted of digging something, watering something and tracking some poor insect or other with a magnifying glass. I got out of there, hid in the toilets and counted the tiles for four hours, which was much more exciting. Mother is chopping chives. “I’ve already made plans. You know how.... everything ... is,” she adds, in a voice that sounds like she’s sorry for the chives. I know, of course I know. Since it’s just been the two of us and we’ve had to manage on our own, Mother has had to work super hard. She doesn’t have much time or energy for herself. The fact that she’s made plans, plans that don’t involve me, isn’t a problem. Mothers are okay. And I’m not easy to deal with. Not long back, I tried to dry a T-shirt in the toaster. “Show me again,” I say, pointing to the brochure, as if there might be something in there I’m actually interested in.

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## VI

### The hike

Going on a group hike is the most unliberating pastime there is. You can’t choose your destination or your route. You can’t leave the trail. You can’t go faster or

slower than the group. You have to learn about fungi because you don't want to poison anyone! Everyone's backs are sweaty and back sweat is the worst sweat of all.

Our destination is the forest, our route is the forest, all the trails are forest trails. The undergrowth catches at me, branches hit me in the face, roots trip me up. Bella walks at the back of our line, humming continuously. Her humming is louder than all the insects in northern Europe put together. It's difficult to concentrate on anything else.

Pietritsch walks at the head of the line, scanning the terrain. He stops every few steps and shoves his plant app camera into a plant's face. If the app recognises it, he reads the info out to us.

The plant app can only recognise ferns.

One time it recognises wild garlic. (The whole place smells of that anyway).

Pietritsch calls the info back over our heads to Bella: "Wild garlic!"

Bella stops humming and calls back, "Wild garlic!" They both laugh and Pietritsch goes back to scanning and Bella goes back to humming.

Benisha is ahead of me. (If she stumbles, I'll be ready to catch her.)

Next to me, hiking boots firmly tied and full of cheerful advice, is Jörg. He tells me I should fasten my chest strap, drink more, put my hat on.

When I complain about my footgear, he produces two poles. "You'll walk quicker with these," he says.

And, "These boots were not made for walking." (Benisha laughs).

The blister on my heel tells me he's right. Jörg gives me a plaster for it. Jörg has a compass. Jörg knows we're walking north. Jörg knows more plants than Pietrich's app. He only tells Benisha and me the names, really quietly. He could really do without being labelled a smart aleck on top of everything else.

But one thing is clear: Jörg knows his stuff, and knowing your stuff normally makes people happy. But it also makes Jörg cautious. In the morning he packed his rucksack enthusiastically, including his head torch and rain poncho, which

seemed a bit over the top for a guided hike in broad daylight without a cloud in the sky. While he was packing, he jabbered on excitedly. About how his father had given him the rucksack, “this old thing”. And how his father had got it from his father. And how the three of them, his father and his father’s father and the rucksack, had hiked all round Europe climbing mountains together.

So now the rucksack belonged to him, Jörg, and Father and he and the rucksack had hiked lots of trails together too, and climbed a few mountains into the bargain.

“And these pins,” says Jörg, “each one is a souvenir. From the end of a hike, from a summit.” He listed all the hiking trails and mountains over breakfast and I immediately forgot them all again. At breakfast, Jörg also filled his water bottle and made himself a sandwich. Did I want him to take ‘provisions’ for me too, he asked?

Now I’m sorry I said no. I’d assumed we’d be stopping at a food stand now and again, but this stinking forest doesn’t even have a single one.

Jörg must have heard my stomach rumbling through my T shirt, because he gives me half his apple.

He also lets me use his mosquito spray (how could I have forgotten that?) and I pretend to spray it on the apple. I want to make Jörg (and Benisha) laugh, but some of the spray actually gets on it. Now I pretend I did it deliberately, and eat the bitter-tasting apple. Next to me, Jörg whittles a lovely hiking stick, shaking his head.

And here’s the thing: I’d have expected Jörg to be stumbling clumsily and half-heartedly through the forest with his strange rucksack, or to conk out quickly. But he actually hikes like some kind of Black Forest ranger, totally together, sure-footed and skilful.

I guess that’s how it is when you’ve got used to underestimating someone. Never taking them seriously because you’ve never really bothered to get to know them.

They've brought an extra sandwich for you after all and then after the break you, or I, my blister and I, can hardly keep up with the stupid line.

So we start out again, and after a couple of metres Marko edges between Jörg and me. Right away we're on the alert. He taps Jörg on the shoulder to let him know he's behind him. Then he says something to Jörg, quietly.

Jörg hunches his shoulders, or pulls his head in, as if he's expecting Marko to hit him.

The right thing to do would be to put myself between Marko and Jörg. Or to distract Marko somehow. The blister pinches at my heel, the plaster's scarcely helping with the pain at all.

I don't overtake Marko and I don't distract him.

He bends over Jörg again, speaking into his neck. His words are lost in the rustling of the trees. Jörg stares straight ahead, placing one foot in front of the other.

The line stops. Pietritsch has probably found another plant. Marko keeps on walking, casually shoving Jörg's rucksack strap off his shoulder as he goes past. His Marko laugh rings through the ferns and the wild garlic.

Jörg's red cheeks.

Jörg's neck, wet with sweat.

I catch up with him. "Hey," I say.

"Leave it," Jörg says.

"What's wrong?" Benisha has turned round and is looking at us.

"Nothing," says Jörg. I say nothing.

I'm not enjoying any of this, the muggy air, the pointless walking, my blister, Jörg's vanished cheerfulness, Patricia Bellmann's apocalyptic humming, or the midges. I'm not enjoying the fact that instead of our destination being an actual destination, "the journey is our destination".

I decide to turn round. I want to go back, I want to lie in the cabin, chill out and read. If anyone asks later, I'll say I couldn't keep up and got lost and somehow found my way back.

I prefer to read about adventures, not have them myself. Blisters in books don't hurt. The only people who have adventures are the ones who want to show other people (the people who don't have adventures) how brave and strong they are. That's why they take photos of themselves high up in the mountains next to goats. Show-offs. In the olden days at least, people used to place bets on who would be the first to ride round the world on the back of a turtle, that kind of thing. Today they appear in TV programmes where they're paid to eat worms in the jungle and ride on each other's backs.

I crouch down and fasten my bootlaces. Everyone gradually overtakes me, Bella last. When I can't hear her humming any more, I turn back.

But turning back isn't as easy as it sounds. Because the forest thinks to itself, "Well, well, what have we here... Aren't you the one who was moaning about my trees and my midges?" Apparently, forests also bear grudges. And I don't have to pretend to get lost – I actually am lost. To begin with, this is frightening, because it means I'll have to spend the rest of my life in the forest and live off roots and moss, which probably taste even worse than the vegetable lasagne in the school canteen.

But I keep going, and suddenly it all seems totally great. The trees are making their tree noises, a little stream is burbling happily and I make friends with some deer. We play a round of FIFA on my Xbox, and all the deer want to play as FC Bayern, and I think, OK, and I let Dietmar, the chief deer, win. You can't be too careful, you don't want to make wild deer even more wild. The deer take me to a meadow covered in wild strawberries and after we've eaten our fill, they come back with me to the clearing. Dietmar and I say goodbye. We kiss each other on both cheeks and promise to stay in touch.



At the fire, in the middle of the clearing, the gigantic man from yesterday is stirring a gigantic, steaming cooking pot with a gigantic wooden spoon. He's got a grinning death's head on his T-shirt and a bony, floury handprint on his shorts is pointing – at me?

Since the man is wearing a chef's hat, I decide: That's the cook.

"What are you doing here?" the cook doesn't ask. He just nods at me, as if he approves of something.

I nod too, because I approve of his nod. The clearing smells of chicken soup.

The cook is about three metres wide and three metres tall. As I walk past him, he dips his thumb in the soup, then puts it in his mouth, then grimaces and throws a gigantic handful of pepper, or soil, into the pot.

He has tattoos on his temples. Each one is labelled: temple.

I go and get my book from the cabin, take it to the well and sit down.

The cook shouts, "What's your book about?" I shout back, "Two boys."

The cook shouts, "What do they want?"

I shout back, "How d'you know they want something?"

The cook shouts, "People in books always want something." I shout back, "They want to do a bunk."

The cook shouts, "And what do they really want?"

I shout back, "How d'you know they want something else?"

The cook shouts, "People in books always want something, but they really want something else." I think for a minute.

I shout, "They don't want to be somewhere where everything's rubbish. I think. Rubbish parents, rubbish school, rubbish at home. They're both outsiders, you see." I emphasise the last word and straight away I feel like a complete idiot.

"Are you reading it for school?" shouts the cook. "I'm reading it for myself," I shout back.

The cook shouts, "Come over here, so we don't have to shout." "Okay," I shout

The cook says, "Will you read it to me?"

I read to the cook. The cook nods and nods, the cook purses his lips when danger rears its head. He's an attentive cook. From time to time a raven wearing an eye patch lands on his shoulder, and the cook feeds it affectionately. If the others weren't here, if it was only the cook and the book and the raven, the holiday camp would be completely okay.

The good times are out with a shout: "What are you doing here?! Where were you?! What's all this?!" Pietritsch charges out of the forest towards me. The hiking group is back.

When someone's this angry, all you can do is be honest:

"I wanted to come back, but I got lost and –"

"Back?! You wanted to come back?! Where do you think you are? You can't just take off without telling anyone!"

"Would you guys have let me go?"

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**WOLF**

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"Back?! You wanted to come back?! Where do you think you are? You can't just take off without telling anyone!"

"Would you guys have let me go?"

"No! But that's not the point. Do you know what they'd have done to me if you'd got lost?" His goatee trembles, as if he's been really frightened.

Well, frightened for himself.

Bella places a hand on his shoulder. "Now then, let's all calm down," she says, but what comes next is worse than all Pietritsch's anger. "You realise we had to cut the hike short because of you?"

I did you a favour, I think, but that's presumably not remotely true. Jörg would have been very happy, though. And if I'm reading Cargo Pants' reproachful look right, he wasn't the only one. I know I'm difficult, but I don't want to be a killjoy. "We'll inform your parents." Pietritsch isn't making a threat, he's stating a fact. At the word "parents", I feel a quick stab behind my ribs.

How will Mother react? She probably won't be surprised. She'll probably be disappointed. I don't know for sure, but I realise: I don't want to know.

"Parents? That's not necessary." It's the cook. He lays his big hand on my head. It's uncomfortably heavy. "He's here after all, nothing happened to him," the cook says. "He admits he made a mistake. Do you admit you made a mistake?"

"Yes," I say seriously. (And gratefully).

"And you can go on another hike," the cook suggests. "Right away, as far as I'm concerned – it'll be a while before the food's ready. Or another day. The forest isn't going to run away. And next time, only take people who want to go."

I breathe in the cook. The cook smells of chicken. His hand on my head weighs several hundred kilos.

Pietritsch answers. Something about an agreement and responsibility. Lots of big words, but it seem to be settled. I'm not really listening any more, and I don't think the cook is either.

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After things have cooled down, I go to find Jörg. He's at the edge of the forest, scratching in the dust with a stick, totally focused again. I decide not to disturb him and to wait: I'm curious about what he's doing.

I suspect Jörg is drawing a picture. Jörg's a really good artist, you see. I mean really really good. Most of us go, "Mum, will you finish this drawing for me?" And even then it's not half as good as he can do. His drawings have things like shadows and perspective, he's brilliant at blending colours, and his faces actually

look like faces and not biscuits. I bet even his potato prints would fetch a good price on eBay.

And he finishes every picture. Jörg really sees his art through. We're at an age where we can't stick at anything longer than fifteen minutes without grumbling or getting distracted. Except gambling, that's all right.

Jörg's finished. He hurls the stick into the forest and shuffles back into the cabin. I wait for a minute, then go over. Yes, he was drawing. I see trees, and a path, and the line with us in it. Jörg has drawn our hike! It's only a few strokes, but it's all there. The fed-up figure flipping its pigtail is me. And here's Pietritsch and his smartphone, surrounded by wild garlic.

Jörg has drawn himself with his compass and his wide-brimmed hat. That's what explorers used to look like in the olden days, I think to myself. On the branch above him, a bird is cleaning its feathers.

I'm completely spellbound by the picture and I spot him too late: Marko's standing next to me. He spits out of the side of his mouth.

"Thanks for saving us today," he says. He stares past me, his head tilted downwards, at Jörg's picture in the dust. And he takes a run-up, and all I manage to get out is, "Hey, wait!" then he's sliding over the dust, over the trees, over the path, over Jörg's explorer's hat.

Once, twice, an unnecessary third time.

Then he surveys what's left, his head bent again, concentrating as hard as Jörg was when he was drawing it.

The bird has survived. It looks confused.

"What were you going to say?" asks Marko. The bird and I don't reply.

"Good," Marko says. "Good."