

Zine **Verschenken**

#27 | october 2024 | forest



Editorial

Welcome back readers,

I hope you are all making the most of this lovely mild and dry autumn. Its the time to get into the favourite German pastimes, hiking, biking outdoor exploring in this months's theme - forests.

As you reflect back on the month and try not to get too gloomy about the beginning of the darker months have you taken some time to admire our surrounding forests. A friend once told me that if she is ever having a tough time, a walk in the forest always brings her back to her centre. And I have taken that onboard to my own self care.

The forests have provided me with plenty over the years during the autumn, I have learned to pick several edible mushrooms and continue to nurture these instinctual gathering skills of our ancestors. I have picked the sloe berries, after the first frost to ferment them in gin and sugar for the next year to enjoy as a schnapps with friends. And most recently, I took a bike ride to visit the famous cherry blossom avenue, a popular spot in spring, but often forgotten in autumn, although just as beautiful.

A trip to the forest can make your senses come alive. Everything tastes better after an adventure, your eyes feel brighter, the fog lifted, the smells breathe life back into your body, it's an infectious feeling.

The Fir Tree

I could smell the pine-scented stillness as soon as I came through the door. A magical presence on the other side of the velvet curtain that separated the kitchen from the sitting room. Of course, I wouldn't have dared to take a peek; that was strictly 'verboten'. But I knew it had come out of the cold woods, all a-shiver, having probably been passed through the window so as not to spoil its pretty shape. Now it stood in its moss-covered bucket, ready and waiting; still cushioned by the black soil it had grown from, its needles as green and glossy as the day it was born. I daresay a fine dusting of snow still lay on its upturned branches, and perhaps a few fir cones were dangling from their stems here and there. Sap was doubtless oozing from its wounded trunk. I knew because I'd heard the axe fall in the woods just yesterday, and smelled the tang of juniper on Papa's hands as he sat down at the table. No, of one thing I was absolutely certain: that a little fir tree had taken root in our cottage. For the moment no fire would be lit in the grate, out of respect for its preference for cool, crisp air, at least until it could be properly dressed for the coming occasion. But that had nothing to do with me. As usual, it would be clothed in utmost secrecy, when I least expected it. I fancied I could hear the tree tremble in anticipation on the other side of the curtain.



"Let's walk up the hill to listen to the fir trees," she said.

And we did.

Spring, Summer, Autumn, but mostly in Winter, because that's when you heard them the most...

Once there, the trees loomed and the wind took over. Waist-high bracken swished wildly around us. The treetops rustled high above, their thin trunks creaking as they swayed, knocking their knees together. Pine needles rained. The odd cone fell.

There we stood at the top of the world. Clouds flurried by. Crows cawed, wheeling in the darkening sky. It was fearful! It was fantastic!

The wind was so strong it blew out our hair, reddened our cheeks, whipped our breath away.

"Woohoo! Listen!" That's how the fir trees whispered to Hansel and Gretel outside the witch's gingerbread cottage," she would howl mischievously in my ear, her voice wafting away on the breeze. Not a comforting thought, but it contributed to the atmosphere as we ran down the hill to our own cottage, faster than the four winds that chased after us, and tea by the fire.

Pohutukawa dawn

The morning after I touched down on Aotearoa, land of the long white cloud, was a propitious one. I walked barefoot down the path to Point Chevalier Beach, West Auckland. Looking through the Pohutukawa trees that straddled the coastal track, the sandy foreshore had all but disappeared. During the night, enticed by the new moon, a king tide had swept in off the ocean, crept stealthily up the sloping beach and was now teetering on the brink of the sea wall. The trees bent over as if to bestow a blessing and gingerly dipped their tangled roots in the softly lapping water as I entered the warm, greeny swell like a new world Pocahontas. The scent of salt and oranges hung in the sea breeze. I was in paradise...

Borne up on the crest of incoming waves it seemed that a primeval canopy of myrtle spread out just above my head. If I raised an arm I might touch their lower branches. Although they had long since lost their crimson blush of spikey blossoms, a wind storm had caused them to suddenly drop their waxen, silver-sided leaves and I found myself floating in a balmy sea of shining multicoloured foliage. Freckled pohutukawa leaves of brilliant green, gold, pink, apricot and russet drifted on the rippled surface and parted before me as I swam slowly to the far side of the bay. In the warmth of the sun that trickled through the trees, a myriad seed pods jostled and bobbed their heads in welcome on the gentle ebb and flow of the water. Visitors from the world's oceans had come to greet me on that golden morning, a floral flotilla that budded and sprouted even as I looked on.

I had seen the dawning of Eden.



Mystic mistletoe

There was something darkly secretive and vaguely sinister about mistletoe. A deceptive innocence, or so I thought. Its lispng name sounded eerie, like the whispered title of a film noir, and although curiously scentless, it exuded a distinct whiff of ever-green magic.

Odd, given its romantic reputation.

Its translucent berries glistened like forbidden fruit, oozing a sticky juice not dissimilar to the glow-in-the-dark poison of a deadly nightshade, or the soapy sap of the tempting but toxic snowberry.

Odder still, given its medicinal properties.

I had always assumed that mistletoe flourished in wintry woodland alongside the holly and the ivy, as per the medieval carol. My flawed understanding was probably rooted in the fact that it was virtually invisible for much of the year - at least to my childish eyes. Perhaps its magic lay in the fact that it was so well-hidden as to be incredibly rare. More often than not, I'd seen it in artificial form, presented as a plastic sprig with rubbery berries attached. On occasion, it was whipped out from behind someone's back and dangled above their head like bait to claim an illicit kiss, or nailed in the doorway for year-round protection and superstitious good luck.

So it wasn't until I visited Germany one November that it revealed it's true nature to me, and I realised I had been mistaken all along.

Walking across the furrowed, frostbitten fields of Lower Saxony, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a line of leafless poplars - or were they limes? - branched out against a wild pink horizon and bristling with what I thought were crows' nests, large and small. As I drew nearer I saw they were nothing other than pendulous swags of greenery that seemed to droop from the bare bones of skeleton trees. Spellbound, clasped as they were in a symbiotic embrace, these mysterious, tangled bundles of supernatural mistletoe were already dotted with pearlescent berries that sparkled like unshed tears, giving them their decorative Christmas appeal. I was so entranced by its benign sorcery that I plucked half a dozen garlands from the branches and took them back with me to pack into my suitcase.

I can well imagine why ancient Celts celebrated Winter Solstice by ceremonially cutting mistletoe from a sacred oak with their golden sickles under a milk-white new moon as, since my own discovery, I too have been bewitched by its irresistible, other-worldly charm. Now I'm a self-confessed compulsive pilferer of ready-made wreaths from lindens, apples and hawthorns alike, and avid purchaser of handpicked bunches of 'mistel' and assorted berried twigs from continental florists, for the princely sum of 2 or 3 Euros apiece, just for the sheer magic of it all.

A basket of fire starters

Forage under the trees and prepare a fragrant basket of natural tinder and kindling for the fireside.

Dry hogweed stems

Dead bracken

Dried orange, lemon and lime peel

Seed pods (shake and disperse first)

Dry pine needles

Pine cones, dried and open

Dried horse chestnut husks

Dry twigs and leaves

Fir tree sprigs

A tinder nest of dead, bone-dry grasses and mosses

Strips of silver birch and cedar bark

Wood shavings

Downy flower heads, eg cattail, thistle, old man's beard (clematis), reed mace, fireweed (rosebay willow herb), goat willow catkins and honeysuckle

Dried fungi (cramp balls) found on dead or dying ash trees that give off a smokey incense as they smoulder

A basket of natural tinder and kindling smells sweeter than a Christmas candle and, when stacked and artfully arranged, makes a useful and welcome seasonal gift. All sorts of woody scraps can come in handy for lighting an autumn bonfire or a fire in the grate. Little can compare with the acrid, citrusy whiff coming from a handful of curly orange peel thrown into the flames, or the charred aroma of chestnut skins that brighten a blaze or spit and crackle merrily as they roast on a shovel. Fir tree sprigs and needles burn well and bring a resinous scent of the outdoors and pine forests into your living room.

The contents of a well-stocked basket of handpicked fire starters can be gathered on an autumnal forage under the trees. Look for small dead twigs on the ground, but never damage a living tree or shrub to build your fire. Tinder has to be quick and easy to light with a lighter, match, or spark and must be bone-dry, while kindling is usually anything that's smaller than a pencil that burns with a good flame. Dried fluffy flower heads can be rolled up inside dried leaves then wrapped with bark and tied with frayed strands of hemp, raffia or jute string, or shaped into a handy 'nest' to hold other materials, before packing them into your basket.

The stubborn pear

If ever I needed a good cry, I'd run up to the top of the garden and stand under the pear tree. No-one was going to hear me there. Though seemingly unmoved, it was a patient listener, no doubt due to the wisdom of its years; it was certainly the oldest tree in the garden. Tall and silent, it appeared quite unruffled by my shameless outpourings. Hardly surprising, it had been rooted to the spot for nigh on two hundred years and nothing was going to change its place in the world. Sometimes I'd ask myself why I'd chosen to vent my feelings to such an indifferent tree. It offered scant shade, verged on the skeletal, suffered from chronic dermatitis and bore nothing but sour, shrivelled fruit - every four years, if it was lucky. So maybe that was why... Disappointment had rendered it reticent and non-committal. Its sap had all but dried up and left a taste of bitter almonds in its mouth. Who could blame it? Of course, it would have weathered a few storms in its time; its limp right arm was testament to that. And by the look of its flaky bark and freckled leaves, no doubt it had seen more than its fair share of natural disasters, too. My punches and pummellings were the least of its worries... "Don't go picking your scabs," it chided; "you know it'll only end in tears." Its sighing matched my own. Perhaps its gnarled heart was just as bruised as mine... Maybe it knew that eventually the clouds would pass, the sun would come out and that when all was said and done, it was bound to survive: superior, defiant, fingers up to all the other cocky trees in the garden. Its stiff, unbending stature bespoke stubborn resilience but also a distinct bloody mindedness: "Well, I'm still standing, how about you?!" it seemed to say. Yet its scrawny, barren branches, unloved and unloving, still beckoned to me, urging me to pull myself together, get a grip, keep calm and carry on.

Bare

The old tree outside my corner apartment block faces into my bedroom window. She lives in the garden with ample grass between the building and the street. This has allowed her to grow to her fullest. Her branches stretch the length of the building, strong, stable, safe. Her height exceeds past the top floor and continues to flourish.

I see her from her main trunk. I watch the animals build nests, climb, play and take comfort in her protection. She is their home. And in many ways, mine too. She is the first being I see each morning and the last each evening.

I observe her changes through the year almost as much as I observe my own. I notice the tiny buds forming at the first signs of warmth after the long winter, marvel at how quickly her leaves pop up once again and how thick and full she blooms in the summer, take in the beauty of her soft pink and white flowers. I watch as the first of her leaves change from green to yellow, patchy at first, then into a warm autumn glow, until finally they all drop and she is stripped bare. Seemingly empty.

Although it may not be her most beautiful phase, this is equally one she must perform to continue to grow. It always catches me off guard, the sudden shedding. I feel as though I had more time, a couple more weeks until she sheds.

Like my own life, I cannot control when it is time to change, but I feel reassured looking out onto the single tree from my window, my urban 'forest' that like her, I have the chance to strip myself bare, get back to the basics of my existence, recognise what changes I need to perform to continue my own growth and build it back up.

Each year as she rejuvenates, her core changes will come back. I mirror her development. Her buds are my excitement, the prospect of new ideas and changes on the horizon. Her leaves, my possibilities, each a pathway which I can choose in any direction I like. Her flowers are what I produce, ideas that bloom into works of art, memories, events and moments to be proud of. And finally her bare branches and trunk, letting it all go, the release, showing my truth, honest and raw to reflect and gather strength to start it all again.

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Do you want to contribute to the zine?
Have any questions?
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