

A PIECE OF WOOD
FROM THE RIVER

Teresa Präauer

I ran along the river with my brother – we had left our bikes further up the path. My brother ran on ahead and I followed up behind. Soon he looked even smaller than he already was.

Wait for me! I called, utterly out of breath. But my brother carried on running until he was down by the stones where no more grass grew. He took off his shoes and I did the same. The stones were sometimes all smooth and round, others were sharp and dug into the soles of our feet.

Like walking across hot coals! we called out, feeling like we were carrying out a dare. We'd lost sight of our parents after we'd ridden off ahead on our bikes.

It'll be the other way round soon, said my brother. Soon we'll be faster than the grown-ups, and stronger.

Yes! I called out, laughing exuberantly.

It was a beautiful summer down by the river. And, at the same time, it was winter up on the mountains, because they were so high that snow remained on their peaks the whole year round.

It's winter at the top and summer at the bottom, I said to my brother and he agreed with me.

Our parents are somewhere in autumn, we both grinned, and made fun of how slow they were on the walk today.

We liked our parents, but sometimes, when they couldn't find us, my brother and me were connected by something special, a type of spring maybe.

The river, said my brother, is made up of snow that melts in the mountains and then flows into the valley as water.

And of rain, I said. It always flows from top to bottom, even when the riverbed looks almost flat.

We ran on, no, we hopped and jumped, and complained pretty loudly about the particularly sharp stones.

Who has the most stamina?!

And when we became tired of this game we sat down on the bank and watched the river flowing from top to bottom, even though it looked almost flat.

So, we sat and sat and started to count what was floating by.

A piece of driftwood, a piece of floating debris.

A piece of flotsam, a piece of swimwood, we said, even though the word swimwood doesn't exist. But it swam so beautifully as it was washed towards us.

To wash along, I said.

To be carried by flowing water.

Like us in the swimming pool when we hold our breath, inflate our belly and let ourselves be carried by the water without doing anything for or against it.

Like sleeping people worshipping the sun, said my brother, his voice heavy with significance.

I fished a broken-off branch out of the river – I held it up in the air and called out loudly that I was the empress of the river.

My brother also got a branch and called out that he was the ruler of the pebbles lying on the riverbank.

That way we shared our realm fairly. The river for flowing and the riverbank for sitting and watching. I used the branch to fish driftwood out of the river. There were smaller and larger sticks, even a piece of trunk, then a rope and half a plastic bottle. We collected everything without really having any use for it.

We could build ourselves a hut by the river!
I shouted excitedly.

Or a throne! called my brother.
Or a raft! I called.
Or a picture for our room back home!
called my brother.
Or a hat! I called. And so on.

And then I reached for a special piece of wood to show how pretty the hat would look. It must have been carried along, been drifting along in the river for a long time, it was so round, so polished. I touched it and it felt warm.

That's a nice piece of driftwood, said my brother.

Yes, I said and took a closer look at it and stroked it every so often with my hand. It was pleasant to the touch, the driftwood, and so I decided to take it with me later and not leave it on the riverbank.

Then we heard our parents calling from the path above where we had left our bikes. Where are you? We're looking for you!

We're here, we said, we just let ourselves get carried away...

Our parents spoke to us strictly and earnestly, but they'd soon forgiven us and looked at the treasure that we'd brought with us.

A piece of wood polished by the river, I said with a finder's pride.

My father held it in his hand and my mother held it in her hand.

It really is very smooth, they both said admiringly.

And it has a hole at the end, look, you can see through here!

The river bored the hole! called out my brother.

A drill made that hole, said our mother.

There used to be a screw in there, said our father.

What was it then? asked my brother.

Maybe a swing, I said.

The seat of a swing that belonged to a child, said our mother.

The child was the same age as us once,
said my brother.

Then the swing broke, because the child
had got too heavy, and they kicked the seat
around, threw it in the river, didn't need the
swing anymore, said our father.

I bet the child is old now, said my brother.

How old then? asked our mother.

Twenty-five years old! I called out.

Oh, ancient then, said our father.

The piece of wood could have been lots
of different things, said our mother then.

Even a hat? I asked, and held it up to my
forehead.

Maybe more like a swing then, laughed our
mother. Come on you two, we're going.

I stuck the driftwood into my trouser pocket –
it was a good fit. And once I was on my bike

I felt myself sway a little on the way home.

Not dangerously, just lightly. And when

I went to bed later, I was still swaying when

I held the piece of wood in my hands, like

in a cradle. And I thought about how one day I might be too old to swing as well and so I needed to swing enough now. Ancient! whispered my brother into my ear. He slept in the bed next to mine. But that's a very long time off, we said.

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