

# The Secret March

By Marco Thunig

Translated from German by Max Landwehrjohann

We're in a cold sweat when we get out of our bunk beds. We brush our teeth with water by Nestlé, walk up to the platoon in the pale morning light, smoke knock-off Marlboros from faded packs. Maharadscha, the Brazilian label says. Christiano, whose actual name is Christian, starts by letting his chainsaw roar, clearing a path through the green as the vanguard for the shovel-mounted vehicles. He once said that he's not going to cut his hair as long as he's here and that he wants everyone to know. Christiano always wears this red bandana over his black curly locks, and sports a mustache and a wooly 70s chest, which, after eleven and a half hours in the weeds, turns into a sticky, brown-grayish pulp. At after-work beers – Corona, for obvious reasons – he always talks of home and his ex-lover and that one time he came home to her lying in bed with a foreigner, or him writing her messages or something else about foreigners, while Gecko, whose actual name is Kovu and who is from Congo, agrees with him along with Wladislav, and they all complain about having had similar experiences. In any case, Christiano has stuck around this whole time and so his mane keeps growing unstoppably, while he masturbates to the lopsided polaroids of his girlfriend stuck to his bed so that he lasts longer when he has sex with the local prostitutes. Pedro, whose actual name is Peter, went home last summer, to Brussels we think, to look after his sick mother because he doesn't care for nursing homes. After God knows how many years here, with broken back and withered lungs, he was sick and tired of toiling. Christiano whines a lot about Pedro being gone, lamenting he was like a brother to him and now has to fend for himself.

After the first cigarette, Erwin, whose actual name is Ralf – and who we jokingly call Bodo from time to time – drives our yellow tank to the front. Since he, like almost all of us, does not understand Portuguese, he's made a playlist for himself which he blasts once his shift has started. Since the engine noise absolutely shreds our ears, we can only make out bits and pieces of his songs, but they keep us on our toes and, since it's always the same playlist, we don't need to look at the time. Erwin's soft spot is socialist anthems. To *Workers, Peasants, Pick Up Those Rifles*, we latch wood and haul gas tanks from the depot and hammer measuring rods into the thin humus crust. To *Annihilate the Fascist Bandit Armies*, saw-teeth bite into tree trunks until thick foliage comes raining down into the thicket and the bucket of Erwin's excavator plucks the weeds.

That morning, as Eislerweinert's music blares from the speakers, a voice comes howling our way from the brushwood. We initially assume that some animal has stumbled onto our path, and Gecko slams his fist against the cab, so Erwin chokes the engine, doffs his helmet. We wait for more screams, which do come, from the veteran, through the peripheral treetops he cleared out for us. Gosh, we all rush there, through the uncombed root maze with flanking leap steps. Shoot. Wladislav falls, a dust-spitting weed wrapped around his ankles, which sends him flying into a hole in the ground. The brush unceremoniously scratches his face bloody. The angry Wolga-German spits out unseemly words in all his mother tongues – slipping through the hazy canopy of leaves ruins the circulation. At over 30 degrees in the steamy

shade, the body bubbles unswervingly and the burning soot from the tank's rear diesels across the brushwood, scorching the nostrils. Gecko catches a shrapnel made of thorn scrub, poisonous at the very least, causing him to hiss like a ricocheting Kalashnikov. In his panic, he throws his arms into the sky, as if that could save him, tumbles backwards and falls beside Wladislav, stuck on the ground this whole time. About twenty lianas bite the dust when the rest of us finally break through, with machetes from Walmart, over to the screams. The Indigenous people used to cut down hectares of land with their knives. Whatever they can do, we can do twice as well. Our work vests are decorated with slain oak leaf clusters. We know each other from Hambach. And Tommy, whose actual name is Thomas, was a security service leader in Iraq.

We see the damned Rambo-like Christiano, hanging in the green hell, colored snares constricting his armpits, deeply entangled with his black curly locks, along with stem-long flowers knotted into his magnificent chest hair, ever more fiercely the harder he resists. The thorns have peeled off his garb, the skin and the blood into the dark of the slanted morning sun, against which the mist breaks up into myriad fluctuating LSD grenades for us. Christiano holds the heavy-as-shit chainsaw in his arm, says the devil may take him, and pinned between his teeth, a half-finished Maharadscha. He screams like a madman. No one has gone this crazy in the rainforest since Kinski against Herzog. The cigarette embers blow a glowing trace into the diesel-fueled, soaking oxygen cinder, as we look up at the chainsaw-man, thunderstruck, seriously wondering what could have possibly made him blow up into the air, how and why he's hanging there now, whether he slipped or jumped down from the treetop.

Doesn't matter, this man needs help. We stumble slapdash through the traversing fire of whipping branches, which we slam into each other's faces. Behind us, Bodo's Bluetooth box is blasting *Friendship!* As we run toward Christiano, we extend our discount bayonets and stab into the twigs, into the underwood and get covered in a buckshot thunderstorm made of brushwood, whose resin gums up our beards. The forest throws thistles onto our heads, like that Facebook emoji puking up green slime, and when we slip, we're surrounded by nettles, which harden the arteries on our throats into red rashes. Some bamboo or reed or whatever flings itself around Christiano's neck and stifles his screams. To the dead-serious sounds of *War Against You, Proletarian* blasting through the bushes, we try to cut down the brush while Deutschmann, whose actual name is Dieter, desperately throws stones at the hedges. All of a sudden, Christiano's chainsaw, the 661 by STIHL, goes flying into the air, drowns out the somber tune, and, moving overhead, cuts his curls out of the noose, removing a major part of his mane. We set Christiano free, soaking with sweat and all brown and bloody, before he decapitates the palm tree and all its kin that scourged him. Tommy builds a Molotov cocktail out of Erwin's emergency ration of Old Spice his aunt sent him for his birthday last week, which we fill up with gasoline, because it initially fails to remove the chopped down traces. The wind carries the ashes into a village whose name I've forgotten, so people don't find it on Google Maps.