

THE WOOD-HACKER

After work all day long in the woods, all I want to do is sleep. Sleep! It's the goal I look towards, as if wood-chopping were only a preliminary to be got through – God knows I work ten hours a day! It's enough to kill you. I know of nothing else I can do; for generations my family has chopped wood here; were I not to take up the ax, I don't know if I could say I am who I am; and saying, "Zoltan, that's me!" is a questionable enough enterprise, I think, without risking everything else that might come were I to give it all up. Do I like chopping wood? It's hard work – not physically, that's taken for granted; I don't train in my time off for nothing, I stay fit, I don't just sit around lazily, I train, I know I have to remain fit for the working day. Yet there's the feeling I have that all this training I do is for nothing: running, lifting weights, jumping about, as if work itself weren't strenuous enough, no, I have to train after work to stay on top of thing; and staying on top is hard, almost impossible. Sometimes it seems that my whole life is training: either after work, in fear that I won't hold out – when I hold my breath for as long as I can during break time, just to see if it can be done; in a fifteen minute break I can get in several trial runs and I have my breath-holding capacity up to two minutes now – two whole minutes without needing to take a breath; I time myself by my wrist watch. Even at work I don't think I'm fit for work! I wind my watch in order to ensure that I stay on time – a minute too late or too soon, I figure, and I'm lost. Now that may seem over-anxious, but to me it seems only prudent; you never know what could happen; it isn't even as if my boss, the chief wood-hacker Herman, were a mean or a demanding man; no, he's a boss, that is, he demands a decent day's work; we laze around, I admit it; we don't do much of anything sometimes.

I see clearly enough how worthless the whole labor is, especially since the city heats itself in winter and fall by gas and no one buys wood stoves anymore, not a soul except for a few elderly couples whom we know personally – for God's sake, it's futile, the whole purpose of wood-chopping is put into question, it's enough to make a hacker ashamed. Yet to stop now would be even more shameful. What would we do – there are three of us; Herman, the boss; myself and 'Sigmund – the day's so long, so never-endingly

long, there's not time for what you want to do, I think, and never enough time to prepare yourself for it.

When Sigmund approached me yesterday, carrying his ax over his shoulder, and said, "Herman says to speed up!" I knew the purpose of words, alone in the woods at that time; so I hurried, chopped down the big oak and proceeded to cut it up into useable portions of transportable log fragments, thinking to myself how Herman was right, that to speed up was the right thing to do, that speed in itself was worthless, only when the words came from Herman's mouth did they have meaning at that time and place – no, I can't and won't even attempt to describe to anyone who's not a wood-hacker, who hasn't sat alone in the woods, chopping away at a big oak, when it seems that you won't ever get it done, that the tree will remain upright as long as you keep hacking at it, that with every stroke of the ax the tree seems to get thicker and sturdier and you seem to grow weaker – that at that moment and at that place, as you are alone in the woods and someone comes to tell you the startling news that you have to speed up and that your boss knows your situation, more or less; that all second thoughts are immaterial, the important thing is that someone cares enough to get the message to you, to say, "Speed up! Get going, Zoltan – don't forget that the work has to end, you're not here to be hopping forever – you've got to finish it!" that chopping, in other words, has a purpose outside of simply keeping your ax in motion to pass the time, that the tree does indeed have to fall; and by your actions, it falls; and that someone knows you're alone in the woods, has taken trouble to get a message to you; they haven't told you to hurry in itself, they aren't mocking you, no, not exactly, they're saying to take care to finish the job even when it seems impossible, when the day seems like it will never end and you're certain you'll stay in the woods and never come out of it. It's then that you receive a message to hurry, to get one job finished. It's worth being alone, hacking at a never-endingly thick oak tree and seeming to get nowhere; how your shoulders feel, how your head aches, how the sweat rolls down your face, how you long for a helper, how it seems that at times like this when you say, "I can't go on anymore!" that some kind of explanation reaches you.

But outside of my training for strength, which is never-ending and occupies most of my free time after work, I sleep a lot. I can't get enough nap time in. sleep! I love it! And my dreams, I can't get enough of them – like after work today, I dreamt that I was sitting alone in a room: I heard nothing but the sound of someone hacking at a thick tree, just the sound echoing in the room – metal against wood – and the room was barely lit and I thought I'd look for a match, but there were none in my pocket. I thought that if I hit something a spark would fly and illumine everything, but there was not ax to use and my own hands seemed so puny in comparison to what an ax might do. My despair was awesome! I reeled in the dark and fell. Woke up then!

So you can see what I mean when I say hackwork is a kind of a solution for me. No matter what my boss says, I accept it as a message – I'm always ready for a message. That's why I keep myself in training, too, even though I don't have to; I sleep as much as I can. I know you can get by with little enough to keep a man swinging an ax, yet without readiness where are you? Alone in the woods swinging an ax probably. Which is good enough, it's as much as most have, isn't it – it's all you can expect. There's only three of us; otherwise I'm alone, I have to do something in this situation; I've never been so proud as to think I'm going to leave the woods tomorrow – I doubt even if it's right, Sigmund and Herman need me, but not too much, I suppose; it's something you can never have a perspective on, can you? It's enough that we chop the wood, that the sound of our axes echo in the woods and that we occasionally, in our exhaustion, speak to one another – that we keep at it. The city heats with gas nowadays. Now if I gave up as reasonable as giving up seems – they might give up, so I go on. Although I know as well as you do that I have nothing much to say to them; yet to tell them “Stay in the woods, keep chopping!” is a little – as if the sound of our chopping alone were something; were I to say more, they'd laugh – only laugh: we are men of the axe, we know nothing else. But all the trees downed why, you might think, except to rot, since no one uses our wood anymore? We keep at it. We don't know for whose sake anymore. Although I think for ours alone.