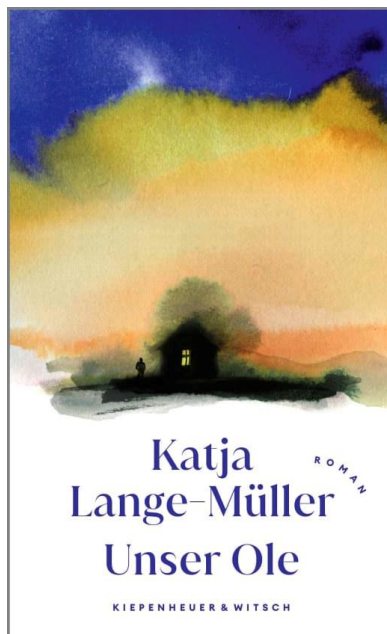


# The Hermit Crab

by Katja Lange-Müller

English sample translation by Simon Pare



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## I

‘Small house by the woods / Tomorrow I’ll be there . . .’ Ida hummed this Herbert Roth hit from her childhood as she packed her bags to move in with Elvira the following day. The old trunk she’d bought at the flea market had room for almost her entire wardrobe, or at least the forty of so items of clothing she still regarded as nice enough; and, to use one of her favourite phrases, she took a *mischievous* pleasure in this. Firstly, this meant she could comply with her new landlady’s request and, secondly, it forced her finally to throw out a few *old rags* and most of the *glittery frippery* that lay in tangled heaps on the lino floor of her ground-floor bedsit. She’d long since *flogged off* her *backstop*—three pieces of *24-carat* jewellery—and had only ever viewed the grim place she’d had to rent after the collapse of her last sort-of-stable relationship as a *stopgap*.

But however this turns out, Ida thought, tomorrow I’m going to slam the door of this stopgap behind me for good.

‘Don’t bring any more than one suitcase of personal belongings with you,’ Elvira had said on the phone. ‘I hate too much stuff lying around, attracting moths, gathering dust. All the essentials are already here, twice and thrice over.’

That was two years ago. And the two women had first met a year before that at a senior fashion show in a department store. Ida had been one of the three models, Elvira a customer who'd been in the rather thin audience by chance, even though she was not looking for anything for herself but for a sweater for her then fifteen-year-old grandson Ole, who, Elvira complained, was 'growing as if someone's feeding him fertiliser'.

Did Elvira, the former draughtswoman whose 'eyes didn't lie', as she boasted, really take an immediate liking to Ida? Or was a plan already forming in her mind? In any case, she'd stayed until the end of the show and then intercepted Ida, who'd changed clothes but hadn't removed her make-up, as the model was about to hurry away.

'May I perhaps steal a couple of minutes of your precious time?' Elvira had purred, grabbing Ida's coat sleeve. 'I would be honoured to invite such an attractive and fabulously self-confident lady like you for a glass of champagne.'

And with an elegant smile Ida, whom compliments rendered helpless, followed her into the store's restaurant.

They met up regularly after that, becoming something akin to friends; and when Ida, who models only occasionally and otherwise has neither a sufficient pension nor any meaningful savings, lost her flat, claiming

not entirely truthfully that she'd been kicked out 'because the owner wants to move in', Elvira offered her a room in her house in the country.

'This well-lit, spacious room, the kitchen, the tiled bathroom and the gorgeous orchards,' she said enticingly, 'are yours for free.'

There was, however, a kicker to Elvira's generous gesture, which was only revealed at the end of their phone call.

'Maybe you can help me a bit around the house and look after Ole,' she said when she noticed that a weight had fallen from Ida's shoulders. 'The boy was never easy, but he's getting a real handful now.'

'Oh lordy!' Ida replied. 'Boys entering puberty, and even more so afterwards, are my speciality. That's no problem, and a three-person flat share will be just right for me—for us, I mean.'

## II

Oh, Ida thought, as she caught sight of Elvira's property after a long and expensive trip in a van taxi she'd taken with a heavy heart because of her even heavier trunk; this isn't Herbert Roth's house by the woods, but there's no going back now.

It was only then that she realised they'd never been to each other's homes and that it was she who had shunned such intimacies.

I couldn't show my stopgap to anyone, not even to my most fleeting acquaintance and least of all to Elvira. And she always paid the bill when we met up in that chic coffee roastery in central Berlin. Why was that? She's much richer than me—and she likes me. Does she perhaps have a hidden lesbian streak? No matter, I can deal with that.

Ida dragged her trunk along the garden path and pressed the bell next to the weathered front door, whose rough, rust-red paint reminded her of a scab. The sobering sight of her new residence didn't dull her optimism. She was half afraid of Elvira's possible lesbian streak because she lacked experience in such things, and half hoping for it because it would prove she was still desirable, and *that* was a role she could play to perfection.

Well, here goes nothing, she encouraged herself. At least you're not putting your fate in the hands of a man this time.

Elvira's 'private home', a grey, roughcast cube with a slate-coloured, fibre-cement roof, is on a corner plot on the edge of a village close to the capital, from where it can be reached easily by car and also by local train and bus, but only until nine at night. Elvira once called this remote spot 'the last gap in Berlin's caviar commuter belt'.

The unprepossessing house, partly hidden behind apple trees, had been built by a displaced family between 1946 and 1955, and from the front it resembled a child's drawing—the roof an isosceles triangle on top of a square with four small square windows in it, two on the left, two on the right and in the centre, farther down, a rectangle of a door.

A Santa Claus house, Ida thought when she went outside again to study it more closely on the evening she arrived; that's what I'd whisper to my crayons as a girl every time I'd finished drawing another one. And then I took the sheet of paper and looked for my mother, even though she didn't want it, never wasted even a tired glance on it. It directly joined all the other Santa Claus houses, matchstick men and yellow suns in the basket by the coatrack in the hall.

The only neighbours are to the left of the plot, whereas on the right it borders a field that is wet virtually all year round, a mosquito breeding

ground whose tenants, the local council, rarely mow because the hay it yields is liable to rot rather than dry. The woods, a plantation of conifers full of feeble trunks standing too close together, begin directly beyond this plain of rich marshland grass, which, Elvira said, had made her rabbits ill.

‘I was so proud of my magnificent bunnies. I had Giant Marburgers, one silver-grey buck and three chequered does. One day, stupidly, Ole started feeding them that disgusting, sour greenery. Maybe it contained some hemlock or some other toxic herb, in any case it gave the poor things the shits. They got so skinny and apathetic, I had no choice but to slaughter them—all four on the same day. Ole may have been banking on a roast—he’d die for rabbit in mustard sauce—but he never got one. The corpses didn’t even make it into the freezer. I buried them before his very eyes, over there, under the redcurrant bushes, singing ‘Bunny rabbit, bunny rabbit, hop, hop, hop’, the only song he knows (through me, of course). That stupid boy couldn’t be rewarded for his wrongdoing. Then again, I couldn’t punish him either because he doesn’t know what he’s doing. It’s his fault, and his fault alone, that I have no more rabbits or any other animals for that matter.’

Apart from Ole, Ida thought—but said nothing, as usual when Elvira talks about her grandson.

### III

To lessen the creaking of the door, which has warped during the rainy summer and autumn, Ida places her delicate hands around the handle and lifts it; but the door to Elvira's Santa Claus house—even after two years there, this is still what she privately calls what is likely to be her last home—creaks nonetheless.

Ida, who feels more insecure than she would ever admit without her contact lenses or at least her *gormless* glasses, yawns, rubs her eyelids and blinks until the contours sharpen before her short-sighted eyeballs and she gets some impression of the closer parts of the overgrown garden.

Dressed in her lime-green morning robe and the purple velvet slippers Elvira finds 'dreadfully kitsch', she steps through the doorway.

These slippers, Ida thinks, staring at her feet, might have been kitsch, but they were also expensive, and the day I arrived under this roof we now share, Ole ripped off the furry bobbles I liked so much and wedged them in his ears.

Ida stretches her limbs and sticks her peroxide-blond curls out into the open air.

Why do we call outside the 'open air'? she thinks first and then: Thank God I don't have to shut this heavy oak door again yet because today's a



beautiful day, as sunny as it's been in ages and extremely warm for the time of year. But Elvira's going to insist I use it to rake up the fallen leaves at long last and cut back the dahlias because their heads have gone black. Their white, yellow or pink flowers faded already in August and hung down all brown and mushy as if they were ashamed.

'Yuck, they're completely rotten now,' Elvira had called out to her yesterday. 'Can you get rid of them please, Ida?! You know I can't bend down. Take note that when the summer and autumn are as wet as this year, dahlias are like dead fish—the head is the first bit to stink. And don't bury the stems in the ground. Anything mouldy goes on the compost heap.'

Ida is naked under the quilted, lime-green silk negligee, a reminder of better days, draping her slender figure and gleaming so seductively in the bright light that she wraps her arms around herself the way she used to back when she sometimes wanted to embrace the whole world—no, not the whole world, just her own.

Ida really is in pretty good shape. Her breasts, from which no baby has ever drunk, arch pertly over the silicon implants, which aren't too massive and have therefore kept the promise the surgeon made at the time; and she can't see her wrinkled neck at the moment or her face, which she has cared for by the village cosmetician, Carla, as often as her modelling income permits—not a lot in recent times. Elvira is unaware

of this; Ida fears being reprimanded along the lines of ‘If you can treat yourself to such luxuries, then you’re welcome to pay your share of our living costs’.

Only last Monday, Carla described Ida’s complexion as ‘astoundingly fresh for someone approaching eighty’, and when she then tried to wrinkle her Botox-smoothed forehead and achieved only a wide-eyed stare, Carla, who will occasionally emphasise that she studied German literature before the Wall came down, smiled and remarked that a woman with fantastic genes like hers remained eternally beautiful.

Ida isn’t ‘approaching eighty’. She’s only just turned seventy-six, and she nurtures this face as if it were an independent and precious being whose condition has always meant the world to her. Recently, however, for example when she examines herself in the mirror morning and evening, cleaning and creaming and massaging it, her face strikes her as strange, almost as *foreign* as her breasts with their numb, dark mamilla, which were removed under general anaesthetic during her operation thirty years ago and sewn back on higher up, and ever since they have been totally unresponsive, not once erect, not even when it’s freezing cold. To her eyes—and no one else’s look at them now—those nipples resemble brown thimbles or the ends of barbecued sausages or the barnacles on the back of the stranded sperm whale she saw in a documentary and which she pitied slightly for its *ugly parasites*.

‘Capsular contracture, but luckily not too pronounced,’ said the doctor to whom she showed her breasts a while back because they sometimes ached.

‘Apart from the dark nipples,’ she said, ‘I still like them, but they’ve got so hard and then there’s this tugging when I turn over in my sleep.’

‘It’s true that your breasts are a bit inflexible, but as long as there’s no deformation, you should leave them the way they are,’ the doctor advised her, ‘even if you’ve been carrying around these antiquated silicon cushions with you for half a lifetime. Otherwise, there are only two options: take them out or change them. And the deadline for that would have been after twenty years at the most. You’re not the only walking museum piece, though, and newer, possibly smaller implants—and, in particular, removing the scar tissue that’s likely to have formed—costs an awful lot of money nowadays, and I can’t promise there won’t be any more hardening.’

My face and my boobs were my only capital, Ida thinks, and then: actually, that isn’t true, or at most for my face. I owe my boobs to a tiny part of Rudolf’s capital after he told me on the last evening of our last holiday together on Lago Maggiore: ‘Oh, Ida, if I could flip you inside out like one of your calf-leather gloves so your insides were facing outwards, do you really think anyone would give you a single glance?’

These consequential words are the first thing Ida thinks whenever her Rudolf pops into her mind. Verbatim. When they hit her like a punch to the gut, the pinnacle of her beauty was not yet past and she'd shed a few genuine tears, although these had not moved Rudolf, her second long-term sugardaddy, and simply caused him to toss his 'sweetie' one of the starched, ironed, snowy-white damask handkerchiefs he boasted he always had 'on his person'.

'Human beings, the most socialised of all the highly developed mammals,' Ida had read in a book called *A Thousand Wise Sayings* she inherited from her mother, 'see themselves primarily through the reactions of other members of their species, and the liking they take to a fellow human being is not determined by appearance alone.'

But my fellow humans, she thought, cannot see inside me, no more than I can see inside them or Rudolf can flip me inside out. And anyway: 'What we look like inside is none of anyone's business.'

These words too are from her mother, a lover of order and order alone, who had maintained an unbridgeable distance to her only child, born four years before the end of the war.

Maybe she was just envious. I grew up when the dark days of defeat and the bombing raids were behind us, in the land of the economic miracle, not particularly cared for but nevertheless in peace, and even as a small child I was much more admired than she ever had been.—Ida has

never come up with a better explanation for her mother's dismissive attitude.

And yes, it is beyond dispute that Ida was exceptionally beautiful once. Which was mainly why she had continued, long after the menopause, to value only how men looked at her, their admiring, hungry, horny looks, whereas how women looked at her—comparing, evaluating, resentful sometimes—had run off her like water off an oiled-up bodybuilder's back. And only when men no longer paid her any attention did she realise that, alongside the elegant and relatively harmless variety, there were and are men whose desire turned to vindictiveness or even vandalism once they had conquered the object or, actually, the subject of their longing.

What if I'd realised sooner? she thinks. It still wouldn't have got me out of my bind. For although I thought I was visually close to perfect, I only ever looked for failings—a spot or a broken fingernail or a hairdo gone wrong, or the small character flaws that all of us has—in myself. Strange that I was so fixated on failings, any failing, nothing but failings. Oh, my little, feminine flaws, my selfishness, my vanities and my one and only blemish, a chest that was first too flat and then too full . . . My bust was to blame; it left Rudolf so cold! Or maybe not? Maybe it had nothing to do with my failings and flaws and that single blemish, my breasts, which I possibly had enlarged too late, but rather what excited Rudi until

those final days were my ‘doe-like eyes’, my ‘sensual lips’, my ‘sublime legs’. Had he tired of these ‘charms’, as he called them, when he suddenly started acting crazy? crazier than ever, but unfortunately not about me. He started to fight me, with systematic cruelty. And why? Did my demands rub him up the wrong way—my ‘addiction to pleasure’, my ‘hang-up about dieting’, ‘my lust for luxury’? Or had he really grown bored of my beauty? My legendary beauty, which had initially put a spell on him and many others of his kind, such a spell that they wanted me almost at any price, which, at the end of all these affairs—none of them love stories—I always wound up paying in tears and shame and fears about what I’d do without a rich benefactor?—Thank God another one always came along soon.—The less beautiful women who envy us have no idea what it’s like to be so attacked for something we can’t help! They’re merely a lid that fits some jar, or the other way around. And because it’s the done thing, they bear their jar or lid jar-kids or lid-kids, whom they love—differently to how my mother loved me. What do I mean, ‘differently’? My mother didn’t love me ‘differently’; she didn’t love me at all.

His loss of desire for me, Ida guessed at the time, might be purely down to my breasts, which testosterone-driven Rudolf doesn’t find large enough. She had this sudden insight when she recalled a comment by his

equally testosterone-driven predecessor, Bernhard, an apparently throwaway line she'd stupidly barely registered: 'You could do with a little more on your ribs!'

And now, as she continues to stare at the discoloured dahlias, as if they held the solution to every mystery, Ida can remember what crossed her mind at that moment: My Bernie's filled out a bit and now he wants his girlfriend a bit chubbier too.

But of course I didn't want to put on weight, she thinks, just to show him how clever I was and that I'd picked up his subtle sarcasm and even the faintest note of criticism. So from then on, when we watched telly in the evening, I'd lay out some classic Swiss praline chocolates with the usual bottle of burgundy, and they vanished, one by one and bing-bam-bom, into Bernhard's pale, expressionless mouth. His eyes were so glued to the screen that he wasn't even aware he was wolfing down the whole box.

But later on, when Rudolf lost all his lust for her too, Ida interpreted Bernhard's comment in a new light and, she believed, the correct one this time: What was on her ribs? Her breasts! She realised that despite the discreetly positioned pralines, she'd underestimated Bernhard once too often because he dumped her only a few weeks later. 'It's over,' he said. 'Over, finished. You've got to leave.'

Oh Bernie, Ida thinks, raising her now moist eyes to the bare top branches of the apple trees; that miserable wretch actually dared to leave me, ban me from his house even, put me out on the street without a penny to my name, but not for someone younger, no, for Britta, a curvaceous, goggle-eyed brunette the same age as him, who'd sneeringly referred to her own monster tits as 'a woman's wonder weapon' at a New Year's ball where I was the universally adored queen and, for a couple of minutes, stood facing her, oblivious to the fact that this tarted-up titaness would be Daddy Bernie's new flame.

Never again! I'm never going to let that happen ever again! Not with Rudi, whose engagement ring I have on my finger, Ida swore, and she decided to have her breasts enlarged.

With this in mind, she began to steal from Rudolf, who mustn't get wind of her plan, even though no one could call him stingy: she only had to 'state' her wishes, say them out loud. But there was no chance of her doing that this time, oh no. When the work was done, she wanted to amaze him and maybe even hint that she was pregnant despite being of mature years.

So Ida took every opportunity to plunder Rudolf's continuously stocked wallet to which he, like most rich people, paid precious little attention, filching small notes from it when he was in the bathroom or at



night when he was asleep, supplemented by the occasional hundred. She was even more shameless when it came to household expenses, claiming that she needed new dresses and underwear that she never bought because Rudolf had long since stopped caring what she wore on top or underneath.

Despite the brazenness with which she misappropriated Rudolf's readies and the housekeeping money, it still took about seven months for her to accumulate the twelve thousand marks she needed for the operation and a week's stay in the clinic and then check into the beauty farm in Wiesbaden and pay Dr El Hakim, a pioneer of plastic surgery famed throughout Germany, in cash.

The only person she let in on her secret was her mother, to whom she told not the truth but merely that she was having some gynaecological results checked. And to make doubly sure, she also winkled out of her mother a promise to keep these 'woman troubles' to herself and, if anyone should ring up, to pretend that, oh yes, Ida was staying with her, but unfortunately, most unfortunately, she was out just then.

She now had an alibi. 'Mum's sick,' she told Rudolf, 'and she needs my help.' She was sure he would never dial her mother's phone number, either in an emergency or because he was missing his fiancée, and indeed he even seemed delighted at the prospect of being without her for a few days.

When Ida came home with her new-look breasts, which hadn't been boosted into *bazoombas* because her physical structure was meant to look harmonious and her enlarged chest complement her narrow waist, although the incisions above her breasts healed quickly, she kept Rudolf in suspense for three weeks before presenting herself to him more seductively than ever in a bright-red *slip of nothing*.

And, sure enough, when Rudolf was once more allowed to avail himself of her, he noticed nothing, nothing at all, not even the slip of nothing that she kept on during sex. And she said nothing—well she couldn't, could she, because that would have betrayed anxiety and prompted questions. She'd have had to explain herself and justify whether the risk had really been worth it and, above all, where she'd got the money.

Who cares that he didn't care or didn't notice and feel anything, Ida thinks. I felt better, at least when I only had to look at those bulging boobs rather than touching them—in the shower, for example, or in bed, where Rudi hardly ever fancied having fun with me. No, he liked to do it on the sofa or, even better, on the dining-room table. And what a silly cow I was, fingering my numb nipples to fire him up, and acting as if I

was hot to trot.—And what good did it do me?! Three or four quickies later, I was history.

Ida is still unnerved that even simple Rudi could become so indifferent and in fact deliberately nasty to her, even though she'd done the right thing this time and taken such risks. After ruminating for a while, she came up with an explanation that at least showed her in a good light. Men who acquire beautiful women—and she'd been beautiful, not just sort-of-pretty!—aren't exactly the greatest lovers with those women.

Oh, those studs, she thinks, still gazing at the heavy, dangling heads of the weather-beaten dahlias. If they're swimming in money, they view their attractive escorts only as matching accessories, part of the illusion that being able to afford trophies like these makes the men interesting in their own right.

What was bound to happen, did, because nothing could have stopped it happening: Rudolf repudiated Ida, just as Bernhard had, shortly before their scheduled wedding, to which a hundred or so guests were invited and then disinvited, the latter task falling to her alone, for Rudolf, as he wrote in a message, was 'finally free of the whole business'.

He wouldn't be tied down, not even my stupid, wild Rudi, she thinks and gulps back the tears that are threatening to choke her. Did his love

for me end in spite or because of my silicon boobs? Or did he too have a new little gem waiting? Or several? The last time I searched his jacket, trouser pockets and desk, I found no clues that he did.

Rudolf's 'desertion', to use one of her mother's war metaphors, didn't plunge her into despair, but she did feel insulted—and unnerved because she didn't know how she was going to fund her glamorous lifestyle for the next while.

Did I ever know any other kind of hardship than financial hardship, she wonders—and she'd rather not even think the answer.

But Ida couldn't bear to 'chuck in the towel', as her mother called any form of resignation, not even after the debacle with Rudolf. And luckily she'd managed to set aside a little above and beyond the necessary sum for the breast op: she called this her *savings*. Even better, Rudolf could no longer endure her accusingly anxious looks, so he put up the 'poor dumpee' at a hotel of her choice 'until she can hopefully stand on her own two feet or find a new cash cow' and paid the bill in advance.

Those one-and-a-half months—Rudolf wouldn't be *roped into* any longer—were enough for Ida. At the bar of the Hotel Excelsior near the Zoologischer Garten she met three generous and therefore solvent men, one after the other, and opted for Johannes, a sixty-five-year-old bank

manager from Munich, who was scouting Dahlem and Schmargendorf for a second flat where a ‘cultivated second wife’—he made it clear that he wasn’t after anything else and, pointedly, ‘nothing serious’—could ‘fix up nicely’.

This prospect made Ida’s heart soar. Johannes would, he said, ‘give her carte blanche financially’; also, he was often away and when he did come to Berlin, he would look forward to spoiling her with gifts and inviting her to the finest restaurants and, above all, she would only rarely be required to let him *have his way* with her.

The truth—albeit one that would elicit not even the smallest shrug from Ida—is that she has not once in her life had an orgasm or, at the very least, derived any pleasure from *fumbling about down there*, not with Bernhard, not with Rudolf or Johannes, not with any other man before or afterwards, not even with herself. Why on earth would she have masturbated?! She’d regarded her body as a sort of treat for well-off men, an undeserved but rewarding extra that demanded discipline and repaid every investment. And it had worked too. After all, she’d had a good time through all those years when rich guys had admired, assailed and put up with her. Hadn’t she?

Foolish philanderers, Ida thinks, would happily tear off one of their own legs if it made it easier for them to get us on our backs and climb the career ladder regardless, maybe even particularly fast, faster at least than us with our two far more attractive legs, which these womanizers like to put up on their shoulders . . . until we take our gazelle legs in our own hands and run away from them.

But Ida hadn't run away from anyone, and these kinds of feminist fancies have only come over her since it's been all over with men.

She looks away from the dahlias towards a hooded crow that's pecking around in the soil. Why, she muses, do people so overrate this in-and-out palaver? Sex is mechanical, and a man, whether straight or gay, doesn't even need a partner, female or male, when he feels the sudden urge—just his 'willy', as her mother called it. She would never have let the words 'penis' or 'cock' pass her lips, let alone what they designate. Every beau of mine, even Rudi, my only nearly-husband, had the occasional wank.—I can see it as if it were yesterday: he was sitting there on the sofa in the middle of the night with his right hand on his dick and a porn magazine in his left. A nightmare had woken me up and I caught him at it while I was on my way to get a quick glass of sherry. 'Sorry, it's nothing against you,' he muttered in embarrassment. 'It's just the way we're made. We like magazines like this and also the films they show in certain establishments, although you'd be disgusted.'—Occasionally, if I

didn't give him enough attention, I think he'd even go about it during the day. He'd disappear into the bathroom, empty-handed and fully clothed, lock the door and flush the toilet several times as cover. Standing there in front of the toilet bowl, he must have made do with the pictures his dirty mind served up, and those film images in his head won't have looked anything like me, the still gorgeous, sensitive Ida Isolde Schosser.

Beautiful, she thinks, stroking her arms, which still feel a little chilly under the silk of her quilted, light-green morning robe, I was so beautiful, and even now I still cut an acceptable figure, or at least I'm no uglier than my friend, no my boss, Elvira—four years younger but equally uncrinkled, equally petite—who, when in a good mood, encourages me to call her Elvi. Why stop there—why not Elfie, eh! And she reckons that dimwit Ole should kindly not call her Grandma and call her Elvi instead, as I do. But generally he doesn't do her the kindness—in fact, only when he wants something from her.

Ida's unbothered by the orgasms she's never experienced—you don't miss what you've never had. But she's never been able to love anyone either—no man, no woman, no child, no pet, canine or feline. Even the decorative zebra fish in Rudolf's aquarium all died because she'd forgotten to scatter the occasional pinch of dried shrimp on the water when he was away for three weeks once.

And plants? She wonders, gazing at the sad, upside-down question marks of the dahlias again. Plants are all right as vegetables, steamed not fried. Do I love and hold myself dear? Love, no; dear, yes. For as long as I could afford it, I've groomed and primped and dressed myself well because I was addicted to men's urge to conquer me, spoil me and, when they'd had enough, drop me, the way some people are hooked on drugs. What do I know about love and men? Basically only that they needed me—no, used me. And I was stupid enough to think it was a good deal . . .

There's a loud, muffled thud behind her, followed by deep silence. Birds only sing in the spring during their mating season, and on a Sunday morning in late November, there's not even the sound of a leaf blower or a lawnmower out here in the countryside; even Ida's thoughts have suddenly gone quiet.

'I should go and have a look,' she whispers. She goes back inside the house and, lifting the handle with both hands, pulls the stubborn, creaking door shut behind her.



## IV

It's just as quiet on the ground floor of the house as it is outside and much quieter than Ida expected after that fearful commotion. The kitchen light Elvira always turns on first is off, although she should really be at the stove now making breakfast for herself and Ole. Scrambled eggs, bacon and toast, only for herself and Ole, because Ida, who usually sleeps until about ten, drinks a cup of weak black coffee at the most in the morning.

Ida presses the hall light switch and goes up a few steps; and there, on the landing between the lower and upper floors is Elvira, lying twisted onto her side with outstretched arms, bent legs and open yet unseeing eyes.

Before she steps any closer, Ida takes a deep breath, pauses and then leans over Elvira, grabs her by the shoulders and says, 'Come round, Elvi!' But Elvira doesn't move. Ida can't spot any blood and is too scared to even catch hold of Elvira's right hand, which is curled inwards, to feel her pulse. Elvira's face, or what Ida can make out of it without her glasses or lenses, is as white as chalk, one cheek hollow, the other grotesquely deformed. As well as Elvira's partial upper dentures, which are jutting out of her mouth and probably broken, a bared incisor has dug itself into her lower lip.

She looks as if she's dead, Ida thinks. No, not as if . . . Elvira's dead.

For several seconds that stretch on and on, Ida's head is completely empty, as empty as outer space. She can't feel her heartbeat and she's afraid she's going to pass out.

Then, to her surprise, something happens that's never happened before—she calls Ole. She calls out in an unfamiliar, shrill voice: Ole, where are you?! Come here, Ole! Please, Ole!

No answer. Nothing. Nothing but the low buzzing of a fly, although this might just be an acoustic hallucination.

Ida walks stiffly up some of the stairs towards Ole's room and then she spies him.

Ole's standing there in the dim upper hallway in only his pyjama bottoms, pressed as flat as a flounder against the wall. His face, even more expressionless than usual, is turned towards the staircase. Is he looking down at Elvira? No, he isn't looking; he's staring at nothing. Everything about him looks frozen, as frozen as Elvira's eyes, the whole of Ole's long, plaster-white body a statue, and this would look odd in any other circumstances.

Ida is drawn towards him as if the two of them were magnetised. She tries to catch his eye, but he doesn't respond, doesn't even raise a hand to fend off this old lady who is no more familiar to him now than on the day she moved in. It dawns on Ida what might have happened. No, what must have happened.

Ole, she thinks, the bear with a sparrow's brain, has had another fit of rage.

She wants to shout at him, shake him, slap him, but his paralysis has spread to her. They're standing almost threateningly close together, Ida and Ole, and nothing happens, nothing that hasn't already happened.

[END OF SAMPLE]