HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS by Ernest Hemingway

The hills across the valley of the Ebro* were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.

"What should we drink?" the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

"It's pretty hot," the man said.

"Let's drink beer."

"Dos cervezas," the man said into the curtain.

"Big ones?" a woman asked from the doorway.

"Yes. Two big ones."

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have."

"I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything."

The girl looked at the bead curtain. "They've painted something on it," she said. "What does it say?"

"Anis del Toro. It's a drink."

* River in the north of Spain

"Could we try it?"

The man called "Listen" through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.

"Four reales."

"We want two Anis del Toro."

"With water?"

"Do you want it with water?"

"I don't know," the girl said. "Is it good with water?"

"It's all right."

"You want them with water?" asked the woman.

"Yes, with water."

"It tastes like licorice," the girl said and put the glass down.

"That's the way with everything."

"Yes," said the girl. "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe."

"Oh, cut it out."

"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."

"Well, let's try and have a fine time."

"All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?"

"That was bright."

"I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?"

" I guess so."

The girl looked across at the hills.

"They're lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees." "Should we have another drink?"

"All right."

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.

"The beer's nice and cool," the man said.

"It's lovely," the girl said.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

" I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."

"Then what will we do afterward?"

"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."

"What makes you think so?"

"That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy."

The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads.

"And you think then we'll be all right and be happy."

"I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people that have done it."

"So have I," said the girl. "And afterward they were all so happy."

"Well," the man said, "if you don't want to you don't have to. I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to. But I know it's perfectly simple."

"And you really want to?"

" I think it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to."

"And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?"

"I love you now. You know I love you."

"I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?"

"I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry."

"If I do it you won't ever worry?"

" I won't worry about that because it's perfectly simple."

"Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me."

"What do you mean?"

" I don't care about me."

"Well, I care about you."

"Oh, yes. But I don't care about me. And I'll do it and then everything will be fine."

" I don't want you to do it if you feel that way."

The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.

"And we could have all this," she said. "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

"What did you say?"

"I said we could have everything."

"We can have everything."

"No, we can't."

"We can have the whole world."

"No, we can't."

"We can go everywhere."

"No, we can't. It isn't ours any more."

"It's ours."

"No, it isn't. And once they take it away, you never get it back."

"But they haven't taken it away."

"We'll wait and see."

"Come on back in the shade," he said. "You mustn't feel that way."

"I don't feel any way," the girl said. "I just know things."

" I don't want you to do anything that you don't want to do—"

"Nor that isn't good for me," she said. "I know. Could we have another beer?"

"All right. But you've got to realize—"

"I realize," the girl said. "Can't we maybe stop talking?"

They sat down at the table and the girl looked across at the hills on the dry side of the valley and the man looked at her and at the table. "You've got to realize," he said, "that I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you."

"Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along."

"Of course it does. But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want any one else. And I know it's perfectly simple."

"Yes, you know it's perfectly simple."

"It's all right for you to say that, but I do know it."

"Would you do something for me now?"

"I'd do anything for you."

"Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?"

He did not say anything but looked at the bags against the wall of the station. There were labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights.

"But I don't want you to," he said, "I don't care anything about it."

"I'll scream," the girl said.

The woman came out through the curtains with two glasses of beer and put them down on the damp felt pads. "The train comes in five minutes," she said.

"What did she say?" asked the girl.

"That the train is coming in five minutes."

The girl smiled brightly at the woman, to thank her.

"I'd better take the bags over to the other side of the station," the man said. She smiled at him.

"All right. Then come back and we'll finish the beer."

He picked up the two heavy bags and carried them around the station to the other tracks. He looked up the tracks but could not see the train. Coming back, he walked through the barroom, where people waiting for the train were drinking. He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train. He went out through the bead curtain. She was sitting at the table and smiled at him.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

"I feel fine," she said. "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine."

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The Umbrella by Tove Ditlevsen

Helga had always—unreasonably—expected more from life than it could deliver. People like her live among us, not differing conspicuously from those who instinctively settle their affairs and figure out precisely how, given their looks, their abilities, and their environment, they can do what they need to do in the world. With respect to these three factors, Helga was only averagely equipped. When she was put on the marriage market, she was a slightly too small and slightly too drab young woman, with narrow lips, a turned-up nose, and—her only promising feature—a pair of large, questioning eyes, which an attentive observer might have called "dreamy." But Helga would have been embarrassed if anyone had asked her what she was dreaming about.

She had never demonstrated a special talent of any kind. She had done adequately in public school and had shown good longevity at her domestic jobs. She didn't mind working hard; in her family, that was as natural as breathing. For the most part, she was accommodating and quiet, without being withdrawn. In the evenings, she went out to dance halls with a couple of girlfriends. They each had a soda and looked for partners. If they had sat for a long time without an offer, her girlfriends grew eager to dance with anyone who asked, even a man with a hunchback. But Helga just stared absent-mindedly around the venue, and if she saw a man who appealed to her—those who did always had dark hair and brown eyes—she gazed at him so steadily, unguarded and serious, that he could not help but notice her. If someone other than her chosen one approached her (this didn't actually happen very often), she looked down at her lap, blushed slightly, and awkwardly excused herself: "I don't dance." A few tables away, a pair of brown eyes would observe this unusual sight. Here was a girl who wasn't going to fall for the first man who came along.

Over time, many small infatuations rippled the surface of her mind, like the spring breeze that makes new leaves tremble without changing their life's course. The man would follow her home and kiss a pair of cold, closed lips, which refused to open in any kind of submission. Helga was very conventional. It wasn't that she wouldn't surrender before marriage, but she had it in her head that she would have a ring on and would present the chosen man to her parents before it came to that. The ones who were too impatient, or not interested enough to wait for this ceremony, went away more or less disappointed. Sometimes she felt a little pang at those moments, but she soon forgot about it in her life's rhythm of work, sleep, and new evenings with new possibilities.

That was until, at the age of twenty-three, she met Egon. He fell in love with her singularity—that indefinable quality which only a few people noticed and even fewer judged an asset.

Egon was a mechanic and was interested in soccer, playing the numbers, pool, and girls. But, since every lovestruck individual is brushed by wingbeats from a higher level of the atmosphere, it so happened that this commonplace person started reading poetry and expressing himself in ways that would have made his buddies at the shop gape in wonder if they had heard him. Later, he looked back on this time as if he had caught a severe illness which left its mark on him for the rest of his life. But, for as long as it lasted, he was proud of and delighted by Helga's carefully preserved chastity, and, when they had put on rings and the presentation to her family was over, he took ownership of his property on the prepared divan in his rented room. Everything was how it was supposed to be. She hadn't tricked him. Satisfied, he fell asleep, leaving Helga in a rather confused state. She cried a bit, because here, in particular, she had been expecting something extraordinary. Her tears were pointless, since her path had now been determined. The wedding date had been set, supplies had been gathered, and she had given notice at her job, because Egon wouldn't have her "scrubbing other people's floors" after they were married. Her friends were appropriately jealous, and her parents were content. Egon was a skilled laborer, and therefore slightly higher up in the world than her father, who had taught her never to lower herself, but not to "cook up fantasies," either.

That evening, Helga had no clear premonition that something fateful was happening to her. Even so, she lay awake for a long time, without thinking of anything in particular. When she was half asleep, a strange desire came drifting into her consciousness: If only I had an umbrella, she thought. It occurred to her suddenly that this item, which for certain people was just a natural necessity, was something she had dreamed of her whole life. As a child, she had filled her Christmas wish lists with sensible, affordable things: a doll, a pair of red mittens, roller skates. And then, when the gifts were lying under the tree on Christmas Eve, she'd been gripped by an ecstasy of expectation. She'd looked at her boxes as if they held the meaning of life itself, and her hands had shaken as she opened them. Afterward, she'd sat crying over the doll, the mittens, and the roller skates she had asked for. "You ungrateful child," her mother had hissed. "You always ruin it for us." Which was true, because the next Christmas the scene would repeat itself. Helga never knew what she was expecting to find inside those festive-looking packages. Maybe she had once written "umbrella" on her wish list and not received one. It would have been ridiculous to give her such a trivial and superfluous thing. Her mother had never owned an umbrella. You took the wind and

the weather as it came, without imagining that you could indulgently protect your precious hair and skin from the rain, which spared nothing else.

Helga eventually turned her attention to her role as a fiancée and, together with her mother, carried out the customary duties. Yet sometimes she would lie awake next to Egon, or in her bed in the maid's room in the house where she worked, nursing her peculiar dream of owning an umbrella.

A certain image started to form in her mind, which gave her secret desire a forbidden and irresponsible tinge and cast a delicate, impalpable veil over her expression throughout the day, causing her fiancé to exclaim, with jealousy and irritation, as if he suspected her of some kind of infidelity, "What are you thinking about?" Once, she answered, "I'm thinking about an umbrella." And, with convincing seriousness, he said, "You're crazy!" By then, he had stopped reading poetry, and he never mentioned her "dreamy eyes" anymore, which didn't mean that he was disappointed in any way. It was just that now she was a permanent part of his life and his routine. She sat through countless soccer matches with him, without ever grasping what it was about this particular form of entertainment that made people shout "Hurray!" or fall silent as if possessed.

The image that arose from her memory was this: she was about ten, sitting in the window of the family bedroom, looking down into the courtyard, which was illuminated with a weak glow by the light over the back stairs. She was in her nightgown, and should have been in bed, but she had developed the habit, before going to sleep, of sitting there for a few minutes and staring out into the night without thinking about anything, while a gentle peace erased the events of the day from her mind. All at once, she saw the gate open, and across the wet cobblestones of the courtyard, onto which raindrops splashed in an excited rhythm, strolled a pretty, dreamlike creature. Her long yellow dress nearly touched the ground, and high above her profusion of silky blond curls floated an umbrella. It was not like the one Helga's grandmother used—round, black, and dome-shaped, with a solid handle—but a flat, bright, translucent thing, which seemed to complement the person who carried it like a butterfly's radiant wings. She had just a brief glimpse, and then the courtyard was deserted as before, but Helga's heart was pounding with strange excitement. She ran into the living room, where her mother and father were sitting. "A lady was walking across the courtyard," she said softly. Then she added, with awe and admiration, "She had such a nice umbrella!"

She stood there barefoot, blinking into the light. The familiar room, which lacked anything with a comparable essence, now seemed to her cramped and poor. Her

mother looked surprised. “A lady?” she asked. Then the corners of her mouth turned downward, as they often did when something displeased or bothered her. “It’s that girl next door,” she said sharply. “It’s scandalous.” Then Helga’s father turned to her with a flash of anger. “Why the devil are you sitting staring out the window when you should be in bed?” he yelled. “Get in there and go to sleep!”

She had seen something that she wasn’t allowed to see. Something had been let into her world that wasn’t there before. After that, every evening—even though she was an obedient child—she crept over to the window to watch the yellow dress drift across the cobblestones, in all kinds of weather, but always with an inexpressibly sweet and secretive air, and always accompanied by that mysterious umbrella, visible or invisible, depending on if it was raining or not. This vision had nothing to do with the sleepy face that appeared in the neighbor’s doorframe when Helga knocked to borrow a bit of margarine or flour for her mother, who was always short on the most important ingredients when she was making gravy. And it made no noticeable difference when, one day, this neighbor moved away. For a long time, the child still waited at the window for that yellow dress and the buoyant, translucent umbrella. When this nightly passage through the darkening courtyard stopped, she just shut her eyes and listened to the rain splashing against something taut and silky and more distant than all her childhood sounds and smells.

Helga and Egon moved into a two-room apartment that was similar to her parents’, and wasn’t far away, either. But it was at street level, and an old wish of Helga’s was fulfilled, now that she could sit in her own house and look out at the traffic. She had what she’d never had before—time—and, since idleness is the root of all evil (she was easy prey for sayings like that), this gave her a slightly guilty conscience. Not toward the husband who provided for her but just in general. She allowed herself to become a gentle, self-effacing individual; she exaggerated the few responsibilities she had, and emphasized her frequent visits to her parents and their visits to her. Her in-laws lived in the country, and she wrote to them often, though she had met them only at the wedding. Her letters—which contained detailed accounts of how she spent her day doing domestic duties and got the most out of Egon’s salary for everyone’s benefit—always ended monotonously, with these lines: “We are both well and hope the same for you. Your devoted daughter-in-law, Helga.”

Every morning, she and her mother went shopping, each with a head scarf and a sturdy shopping bag. Her mother shopped for the best cuts of meat at the butcher: men who work hard need a solid meal, she explained. Helga served a “solid meal” for her husband at precisely six o’clock every evening. But, from the moment he left in the

morning until that hour, she rarely thought of him. When the shopping and the cleaning were done, she sat at the window with some darning that was meant to distract her from the fact that she was sitting there idly, while the people in the street all seemed to have so much to do. From her protected, hidden spot behind the curtain, she observed them with interest and seriousness, the way she had, before Egon, observed all men with brown eyes. She was filled with vague curiosity: Where were they going? Why were they so busy? Although she didn't realize it, she was lonely. She often thought about her mother, because, in Helga's eyes, her mother was a person who, unlike everyone else, never changed. It was a kind of respite for Helga to be with her mother. Mother and child. Comfort. She loved recalling her childhood. She liked hearing her mother talk about things that had happened. Her mother talked a lot. The sentences streamed from her, forming sturdy frames around distant, blurry landscapes. Often she said, "You are doing so well. You should appreciate it more, but you have always been ungrateful." "Ungrateful how?" Helga asked. Then, every time, she got the story about all the tears she had shed when she received gifts. "In the end, we were simply afraid to buy you anything," her mother said. And there in the twilight they sat, shaking their heads at the thought of this unappreciative child who had cried over gifts that would have delighted other children. They talked about this mystery in the same tone one might use to talk about getting over scarlet fever: Good heavens, you were so sick, we thought you might never get over it!

Most of all, Helga loved hearing about everything that was outside the parameters of her own memory: about the first words she'd spoken, when she'd been toilet trained, and so on—things that did not differentiate her at all from any other child a mother might talk about. Her mother liked to end these stories, while getting up and gathering her belongings, by making some remark like "Well, we won't be seeing those times again"—generalizations spoken without the slightest tone of complaint, but that left a small rip in the veil that lay over Helga's innermost being, like the membrane around an unborn child.

When her mother left (always soon before Egon was expected home), Helga waved to her familiar substantial figure for as long as she could see it, then she sat back down at the window without turning on the light. A sadness grew within her and around her. She thought, If only Egon would come home. But when he did come, and filled the small rooms with his noisy company, every enchantment was shattered. Could it be that it wasn't him she was longing for? She walked around quietly, carrying out her housewifely duties, picked at her food like a bird, and said "yes" and "no" when her husband's remarks required an answer. Once, he regarded her closely. "You should have a kid," he said. "I damn well don't understand why it's not happening." Then she blushed, partly at her deficiency in that department, but more because she didn't

actually mind not having a child. Her togetherness with her mother allowed the child Helga to live on within her, and it was as if there weren't room for another one. Sometimes she lied to Egon when he asked if her mother had been over, because for some reason he didn't like her mother to visit so often when he wasn't home.

The days passed without much to distinguish one from the next.

One evening, Helga had the food waiting for an hour before Egon came home, and when he did arrive he was drunk. He threw himself down on the divan, from which he followed her movements through the living room with a furtive, sinister glare. "What's wrong with you?" he asked suddenly. "Your face looks all pasty." She was shocked and quickly put some rouge on her cheeks, but later she got used to his tone. She also got used to making food that was easily reheated, because it became impossible to predict when he would come home. She told her mother: "Egon started drinking." Her mother seemed to be more uneasy about it than Helga was. "When a man drinks, it's because he's dissatisfied with his wife," she declared. And, since she was of the opinion that you could always do something about a problem, she advised her daughter to "talk it out" with Egon and figure out what was the matter. But Helga had never tried to put herself in another person's shoes; it had never been necessary. Her entire character consisted of a pile of memories without a pattern or a plan. There were a number of pairs of brown eyes, a twilight mood, an immense, undefined expectation, a yellow dress, and an umbrella. There were tears and disappointments, and so many other things, and small joys in between. And there was a man who had opened her narrow, pale lips, and for a few moments made her feel the tug of something unknown and wonderful; there was a voice that had said strange and sweet words to her; and over it all stretched the fine silk umbrella canopy of her childhood and her dreams

This had nothing to do with the man who had started drinking. She thought she had given him as much of herself as he could reasonably expect, and her vague feeling of inadequacy with him was only because she wasn't pregnant, as a newly married wife ought to be. But it seemed to her that, as usual, she expected something more for herself, a kind of surfeit that went only to other, unknown individuals. Not that she blamed anyone for anything—she had never done that, because she knew how unreasonable she was. She had written things on her life's wish list that were achievable: time to dream, a husband with brown eyes, and a child—the last one for conventional reasons. Her outward behavior had always been dictated by tangible things, so she assumed that it was something concrete that had made Egon start drinking and speaking harshly to her. She nodded thoughtfully to her mother over her tea and promised to "talk it out" with her husband. But she had already decided that it

was the lack of a child that was bothering him, and matters no one could do anything about were not proper topics of conversation. Not even with her mother.

That evening, Egon came home at midnight. He threw his dirty overalls in the middle of the living room and called for Helga, who was warming up the food.

“I’m fed up to here with it,” he said slowly, swaying on his legs like a sailor. She appeared in the kitchen door, staring at him with her sorrowful, wondering eyes.

“What are you fed up with?” she asked anxiously.

“Everything,” he said, his alcohol breath reeking in her face. “What do you think I am, an idiot?”

She didn’t answer, but pulled back from him a step. Her mind was slow, never fully able to follow a situation, especially a surprising one. Her mind quickened only with memories.

“The food is burning,” she said hesitantly.

He laughed callously.

“I don’t want any food,” he drawled. “I ate already.”

“Where did you eat?” she asked quietly, starting to untie her apron. Her hands trembled slightly. He could see that she was hurt or afraid, and he laughed loudly again.

“With a good-looking girl, if you absolutely must know,” he shouted triumphantly. Then he belched in her face, walked into the bedroom, and lay down on the bed, fully dressed.

Helga followed him. She looked at him, confused, numb to any clear thought or feeling, as she fumbled for a safe, childlike footing. She whispered, “I’m going to tell my mother.” But he was already asleep.

Actually, she didn’t feel any more hurt by the thought that he had very likely cheated on her than she knew a person *ought* to feel. A husband shouldn’t drink, but if he cheats that is much worse. Instead of having her usual fantasies, she imagined him with another woman, but it really didn’t make much difference. It was only her outer life that he was threatening. It didn’t change who she was; her body was the same as before, with one small distinction—it had lessened in value to other men. The term

"other men" hadn't occurred to her since she'd got married. Now, as she slowly undressed, she thought only about that, because she knew that her mother would. Her mother would rationalize that, if this husband neglected his obligations, then she would have to turn to other brown-eyed men for the pursuit of her daily bread—this idea, that the men absolutely had to have brown eyes, came, by the way, from her mother. A remark that had stuck: dark men are goodness itself.

Egon slept heavily beside her, and Helga lay observing him. Despite the late hour, she wasn't sleepy. His chin was relaxed, he had a beard, and he was snoring. This was how one might think about a stranger, not one's husband. Maybe he had been a stranger to her for quite some time—ever since the day she had gone to him with such high expectations, and departed with such deep disappointment, in her own quiet way, without acknowledging it as any great calamity. What does one person mean to another anyway, except when one forces the other to act?

Helga's reaction was strange. The times that she'd stolen a small amount of the household money and hidden it in a little box, originally a jewelry box that she had been given for her confirmation, she hadn't had any particular purpose in mind. Perhaps she had tried to convince herself that it was for Christmas gifts or other things they would struggle to afford. But now she realized why she had saved this money. She smiled suddenly in the dark, and very quietly slipped out of bed and walked to the drawer where she had hidden the box. The moon lit the little room like a false dawn. With the deftness of a thief, she counted the money. There were almost forty kroner. She held them in her hands, smiling gently, redeemed and alone, like a child smiling in her sleep. All she could think of was an open, translucent umbrella with a certain shape and color. She longed for the morning, and her heart pounded fast, the way a woman's heart pounds when she is going to meet her lover. She imagined the street in the rain, and herself wandering beneath this silken canopy. Vague, bright thoughts spread like dandelion tufts across her mind: a house where she had worked, the wife in a dinner dress—*Oh, Helga, bring me my umbrella*. She had held many umbrellas in her hand without thinking about them. Things outside her world didn't really mean anything to her. Until now. Until she acted.

She got back into bed, and her husband reached for her body in his sleep, mumbling something she couldn't make out. Carefully, she laid his limp hand back under the comforter, as a distant tenderness flowed through her. For a second, she felt as much searing emotion as she could ever feel for another person, except for her mother. Recently, Egon had often yelled about getting a divorce, said that he wasn't going to be married to a broom handle, but words slung at her that way passed right through her

as if she were a sieve. Her parents had always yelled like that when they fought. It didn't mean anything, and she was used to it. All that mattered to her was that the neighbors didn't hear. She was never one to argue; she just figured that other people were like that, and she wasn't. She defended herself in another way. There was no way of knowing when it would surface. Maybe Egon had never cheated on her at all, but that didn't matter anymore.

The next morning they both acted as if nothing had happened. That was how their lives were. Helga prepared her husband's lunch, made him coffee, and kissed him on the cheek as he left. Exactly as usual. Then she went shopping, filled with light, expectant thoughts. And there was no one to tell her that she looked beautiful that morning, in the way that perfectly regular people can, once in a while, when they are feeling happy. She brightened the November day like a pale, delicate morning star, trembling gently and devotedly before it is extinguished. She wasn't the same person that she had been the day before. She was a woman walking into shops looking at umbrellas. It took a long time to find the right one. And she carried it awkwardly on the way home, like a man who isn't used to carrying a bouquet of flowers.

Once she was inside, she opened the umbrella and skipped around the apartment with it. Her joy was pristine. She walked exactly like the woman in the yellow dress from her childhood. She walked past piles of dirty dishes, through large, well-lit rooms with palm trees in the corners and paintings on the walls. She entered an illuminated ballroom and remembered her first dance. She lifted the hem of her invisible dress and danced a few steps. The shaft of the umbrella was cool, thin, and strong, something to hold tightly, something to admire, to believe in, to acknowledge. Now she could say to her girlfriends, "I bought an umbrella." And it would still be all hers. She closed it, studying the way it functioned: the shiny ribs, the tiny, adorable silk buttons, and the durable yet translucent cloth, against which the rain would someday thrum its melody of forgotten and lost times.

Her ecstasy lasted most of the day. She didn't think about her mother, she didn't clean, she didn't even dust the furniture. She didn't think about Egon, either.

When he returned, unexpectedly, straight from work, she was sitting in the window at her usual spot, with the darning basket, which was empty, in front of her. She smiled at him and stood up.

"I haven't made any dinner," she said offhandedly, adding as a provocation, which was unlike her, "I thought maybe you would be eating out."

He didn't answer, and she ascertained that he was sober, and that he was trying to avoid her eyes. Why? She wanted to tell him about the umbrella and her little swindle. She needed to share her joy with someone. But he looked so terribly ceremonious as he sat himself at the table and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about yesterday," he said awkwardly. "It wasn't true. I was just drunk."

"I see," she said flatly. All day she hadn't given one thought to what had happened the day before. Even now it was strangely difficult for her to think about anything other than the umbrella, but the situation demanded that she say something. She felt embarrassed, as he did, and she stared down at her hands.

"That's all right," she said truthfully. "I've forgotten all about it."

She didn't notice the shadow darkening his face, and she didn't register how despairingly he tensed his whole body toward her. She was a person who didn't come when she was called. She was the one who called when she needed something, in a thin voice, which was easily drowned out by the storm. Besides, it is very rare that two people call at the same time and both get responses. She was content in herself—she even had a bit extra to share—but her husband had pursued her for a long time like a big clumsy animal, while she, agile and light as a scared gazelle, had run from him into a bright, hidden clearing in the woods.

She sat down across from him, small and erect, and again seemed to him both secretive and alluring. As he had a long time ago, he asked jealously and fearfully, "What are you thinking about?" And, just like back then, her clear, dreamy eyes glided over him as she responded, "An umbrella." And then with sudden animation, "I bought it, Egon. Do you want to see it?" She was already skipping to the entryway, breathless with excitement.

But he followed behind her and abruptly, angrily, pulled the fine object from her hands and broke it in half over his strong knee.

"There's your umbrella!" he shouted, and she stood for a second in shock, staring at the pieces, at the cleverly formed ribs and the torn silk.

Then she walked silently past him into the little living room, back to the manageable, the tolerable, the predetermined. She sat by the window as before, finally realizing that this was her place and that everything was the way it was supposed to be. The colors in her memory mixed together, forming the beginning of a kind of pattern. She realized that she could never be the owner of an umbrella. It was only natural—it made sense

that the umbrella was ruined. She had set herself up against the secret law steering her inner world. Few people, even once in their lives, dare to make the inexpressible real.

Helga smiled distantly at her husband. It was as if he had suddenly caused some string inside her to vibrate slightly, maybe because he had shown her the limits of her potential before it flowed out into nothingness. She didn't think about it like that. She just thought, *This is exactly as if I had cheated on him, and he's forgiven me*. And she nodded, seriously and absently, as if to a child who wanted to take a star down from the sky and give it away, when he, intensely occupied with screwing a new bulb into the ceiling fixture, said to her over his shoulder, "You'll get another umbrella."♦

(Translated, from the Danish, by Michael Favala Goldman.)

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