

Translated extract from

**Brigitte Kronauer**  
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**Brigitte Kronauer**  
**Two Black Hunters**

**Translated by Jutta Ittner**

## **Destruction**

Just look at that elegant woman! How startled she seems sitting at the window! And how ramrod straight she holds herself! In just the past few minutes she's grown paler and paler, and her amazing youthfulness has faded away. You too fell for it at first glance—am I right? Not even the rouge so impeccably applied to her cheekbones can change it.

Helene Pilz has turned as white as a sheet. The man doesn't notice. Of course, he wouldn't have known beforehand what was natural about her blossoming complexion and what was artificial—in fact, he hasn't registered any of it. “There,” she says as if a little tipsy or battling deep exhaustion, “across the street, you can take a good look at the whole lot of them—Mrs. Bernadotte, Mrs. Lemnitz, Mrs. Rottmann, Mrs. Becher-Hahn. No wonder Mrs. Mülleis—Wally Mülleis, she's the big exception—is missing from this gathering.”

Is it possible he doesn't even hear it? He's sitting below her because of the wooden platform her chair is on. A short ramp leads up to her and down to him on the regular floor. The man must be a real athlete—he's in great shape and he has this dynamism despite the first gray hairs that I'm sure you too can see on his crown. He has pressed his forehead against the woman's bare upper arm. Doesn't it look like unintentional contrition?

The gray hair among the dark doesn't escape the woman either once her gaze has moved away from the window. She touches the strands with her free hand. Probably she had a first impulse to rake his thick curls roughly with her five fingers. Then she

reconsidered in mid-motion, surprising herself at the shift and aware of its momentousness. Her lips turn into a sorrowful smile, and she plays just cautiously with this hair and that. You'll also wonder if this caution is really warranted. And whether she isn't in reality playfully reminiscing, and what she's absent-mindedly counting and sorting into its various shades isn't her own memories. The striated pattern seems to be a new experience for her. The head of hair itself isn't—she knows intimately each and every cowlick. He can't see the sadness in her smile.

“The return of the prodigal son,” the woman finally whispers in a strained voice. The ironic tone in particular takes such a great effort.

The man still won't say a word, won't move. So the woman reaches for a knife on the windowsill.

Gradually she scrutinizes her face in the gleaming blade. She isn't about to cry is she? To prevent it she mumbles as if to herself, “My hands have turned into lizards.” This brutality will be hard to undo, so with the tiniest flicker of hope she offers a bait—“I'd better cover them up with gloves.”

At this he actually wakes up and lifts his head—he remembers! He smiles at her. “Helena!” “So there,” the woman whispers and—just look at her closely—blushes a little. He concentrates, curiously puffing up the upper part of his cheeks just the way he used to do. And as he used to do back then he lays the teaspoon on the tablecloth and sets the cup right beside the saucer. Probably to declare his independence.

But left to his own devices he won't remember it all, the woman thinks, as she blanches around the rouged spots on her cheeks. “Wait, it'll come to me—wait, wait.” That too, just like it used to be, the woman thinks—always repeating his words for

emphasis. “Of course...absolutely, the black velvet across the palm and the hotel key in it with the room number visible on top.” “Thirty-eight”—it slips out of the woman’s mouth. She’s annoyed—too late—at her rashness. “Of course!” He lightly slaps his forehead. “Naughty girl, you opened your hand for just a split-second. With your husband sitting right next to you. Wait...and then the key disappeared in your purse. Then...wait...you drove him to the station, evening gown and all. Well, he sure wasn’t the one who spent the night with you. I can vouch for that.” He laughs gleefully, charmingly, roguishly. God, he can still pull it off. “There, it’s all right before my eyes. Oh, darling, it’s been so long—an entire lifetime. I should have come to visit you more often. Such a darling, and such a faithful memory!”

She can’t cry, however, not with the kind of pain that his sweet little nothings incur. It would be crowning her defeat. “That night,” she continues, cleverly pretending now to struggle to come up with more details, “you confessed that when you were eighteen—or was it nineteen—you tried for hours to imitate your father’s signature so you could write checks to yourself in his name.” He doesn’t like that one bit. “For God’s sake, I never actually did it.” “And you confessed that during police interrogations you guys would start with the mild cigarette torture—chain-smoking so the people with the yellowed finger tips would get all worked up and then letting them stew until they were ready.”

“That’s what you remember from a night like that one?”

“That’s what you told me that night, sweetheart.”

Ah, at least that got him miffed! He actually recoils from her. That cute little offended pout of his! “Oh well,” she says, “maybe I’m confusing things, it’s been so long.”

What a pain—and what a treat—to be lying like that!

He even smells the same, and he’s still just as clueless about what she threw away for him without a single cry of lament. *Amour fou*, that wonderful word! No looking back at her husband and their little son—that is, not unless she was all by herself with the door closed—and no fear of the huge age difference.

And yet hadn’t she wished at the birth of her child that God would allow just this one to come into the world? How could such a miracle be a routine event? She would have none of the billions of nursing mothers that made her own baby a dime a dozen, turning her unique treasure into a banality!

But then, some time later, the jolt—that one Tuesday with the window-washer present who wouldn’t be convinced that making a pass at the *hausfraus* wasn’t part of his job description—just as the windowpanes started to gleam in the sunshine—life, love, the abundance of youth! Hadn’t she always been sailing straight for these beacons? Now all of a sudden she realized that she had passed them by, was no longer forging ahead with her eyes fixed on those lights, but still going under full sail she was greedily looking back at them—and she had never even come close.

It was precisely then that he showed up, irresistible, a godsend for a woman in the doldrums. A man who one day—and who couldn’t have predicted it—after four years and two months up and left her. For him it happened gradually, but to her he revealed it, after four years and two months, in a single, devastating split-second. She saw it through

the window of some store where he'd left her waiting, forgetting all about the time—his childishly happy, boastful seducer's smile for the eyes of this budding salesgirl that was still on his face as he came out and wiped off the instant he saw her outside—remembered her. The die was cast, once and for all.

And yet it almost bowls her over how naturally he acts the son with his head lowered again and snuggled in her arm as if contrite. No—irretrievably lost, the slippery customer.

With this irresistibly sly face he approaches the world in all innocence. If only the shape of his eyes were for sale—or on lease—or if only he could be tied down by marriage. Then she'd have a happy-go-lucky view of the world at the tips of her fingers and, who knows, just its facial expressions might rub off on her!

So he has come back—happens to be back—and forced by certain circumstances he needs to stay with his “Dearest”—on erotically neutral terms, as a friend or rather, that's how he sees it now, more like a son, with the motherly beloved who herself has long ago transcended everything naughty and all-too-human—now that life has plucked a few of his tail feathers, maybe even the most glorious ones, who's to know.

She wants to yell and hit him in the face! She can't even run away. It's not that she's indulged in crazy fantasies—she's old, she's sick, she can no longer get anywhere without her wheelchair. But just a few minutes ago as she was excitedly putting on her makeup—makeup so the excitement would show in her face—and as she was considering her neckline, wasn't she hoping for a flicker on the horizon, the refraction of a previous glow? Or if not a flame, a sudden flare, at least a glimmer, at least the distant twinkling of a reminiscent fire?

She is deeply ashamed—just look at her, she lowers her head in humiliation. As she touches the strands of black-and-gray locks beneath—damn if there isn't a whiff of it, the oh-so-familiar bed smell of the lover now forever immune to her in even the most spiritual interpretations. Instead of the lover, the wayward wasted son! Also, isn't this almost the classic pose of the Pietà—and, Jesus, isn't her third given name Maria of all names? She'd have to double-check the family records. How hard it is to speak a fluid sentence and keep the tears at bay.

“So you're no longer head of the national security section in your old police district over there in the East?” Good for her! These words had come out quite smoothly. An earnest, sympathetic inquiry. Did you hear? Syllable after syllable: “So you're no longer head of the national security section in your old police district over there in the East?”

Whew, the wind has changed, and how! An electrical charge shoots through his body. He's already jumped up, bounced up, picturesque with a rage that distorts his scoundrel's face.

“Helene, I'm a broken man!”

For crying out loud! Instead—she doesn't want the man to run off—she tilts her head encouragingly, still in an after-tremor. Inside her head, she feels, there's nothing—it's a dark cellar without even the pathetic aridity of disillusion inside, only the kind of void that makes you hold your breath.

“And what have I done? Just taken the Minister President and the new Minister of National Security at their words!”

Black gloves, and the key on the velvet, which in reality was satin ...

“The previous Minister viewed so-called xenophobic attitudes with a lot of understanding, if you now what I mean. That time when one of our black brothers, that African asylum seeker, made a public nuisance of himself because his girlfriend wouldn’t let him near their son. He burned to death in his police cell, hand-cuffed mind you, and all this senior civil servant gets for his off-the-record joke about how long it took the poor schmuck to die is a reprimand. See what I’m saying, Helene? But the whole squad gangs up on the whistleblower that registered the complaint about him with the Police President and they harrass him until he quits. It gets to the point where you ask for a transfer yourself.”

He is so enamored with his new, embittered unapproachability that she thanks heaven for her almost immobile legs. Otherwise she’d just have to jump up and touch him. Oh, the angry curve of his shameless lips that would take her caress as an insult. Oh come on, you and your bag of tricks and your great tempestuous bravado! At least that’s what she can tell herself to get back at him for her own visible and, she hopes, invisible helplessness.

“So the new guy and the Minister President agree to adopt a tough stance. Fight the Extreme Right! Are you listening? Make sure you’re thorough in your investigations and the case numbers will go up, know what I mean—hey, are you dreaming or what?—it’ll drive up the statistics for extremist right-wing crimes in the state. Which isn’t to everybody’s liking, of course. So then all of a sudden—same old, same old—you’re this pathetic little national security officer who takes his job too seriously and doesn’t know how to look the other way.”

As young children do, he immediately senses the slightest distraction.

“Almost twenty cases were removed from the statistics. And what’s the message the deputy chief of my district has for me? Don’t be in such a hurry to write your reports, let things cool down, don’t be so scrupulous!”

And what about the new regulations from the National Security Minister?” she dutifully asks.

“ ‘Oh well...’ the Deputy said, the Minister just talked the talk, he had no choice. After the hubbub of the Inquiry Committee has died down they’ll probably send that guy out to pasture for covering up a sloppy investigation. Too late for me, though. I couldn’t take it any longer—I left.”

She should ask what exactly is going on. Did he quit his job? Did he request a transfer? Is this just an extended vacation? A nice holiday as a payoff? How he paces back and forth, so vigorously. His intriguingly annoyed gaze. As to her in her place by the window, she feels more drained by the minute—how strange, her life seems to be running out this very moment, oozing out of her, the blood-red, pulsating life, its glow fading away out there behind the windows, the fire of her wasted life. So tenuous.

“Look, over there, the young women, Mrs. Rottmann, Mrs. Becher-Hahn, Mrs. Bernadotte, Mrs. Lemnitz? They’re still huddled together yakking about their little darlings.”

“Do you think I’d take that lying down? Don’t you know me better than that, your good old Tom?”

She ought to be startled and exhilarated by this intimacy, but her exhaustion has become too deep. Infinite disappointment following infinite anticipation—how idiotic could a woman be!

“Of course, I got my revenge—not that I had a whole lot of options. But there was one. The Deputy is this ho-hum guy, a paper-pusher, not a bad sort but gutless and dull as dishwater. Well, his wife’s quite another story—temperamental and proud of it, and really starved for affection. I met her at a police department event. He was there too.”

At last, the key to her whole life, a key without a number but with her name engraved on it: infinite disappointment after infinite anticipation. What was he talking about?

“Oh, you know what I’m talking about, naughty girl that you are—I’d bet money on it. I’m always up for a little fling, and he deserved it. A piece of cake for a snazzy dancer like me. And I enjoyed every minute of it.”

She wants to tell him to get the hell out. But what slips out of her mouth—she’d have slapped it shut if she’d only known—is the feeble question, “So did she actually love you?”

Traces of shadow and light drift across his face—regret and pride? “I’m sure! She’d never experienced anything like it!”

If he’d added “the same as you” as she’d feared—but he didn’t—she’d have mustered all her laughable strength and thrown him out on his ear, this accidental visitor. Even if she’d died doing it. Good thing she didn’t, for something extraordinary happens. It comes as a complete surprise for her too. We hear her say, smilingly, with a genuinely rosy complexion, “Some days someone helps me get to the zoo. On very rare occasions, my lucky days. Once or twice a year—I don’t deserve any more—it’ll be my own son, and he won’t even be too impatient. He told me that his father has become a very successful manager, and he recently had his portrait painted. At the zoo I look at the

tropical birds, they give me strength, the crazy guys. Someone will pick me up as arranged. The birds make me think of these women in the operas nowadays who do their singing barefoot and then at some point feel around for their high-heels without even looking.”

He pays no attention. No matter, she stubbornly keeps going: “There, I was just about to pick this piece of fluff off the tablecloth and it’s a coffee stain. I need my little loupe more and more frequently now. It was the surprise gift inside a chocolate egg.”

She allows herself to drop into old age as into a fainting fit. What bliss to let it happen without justifying it to herself or to him. But why, you’ll ask, why all of a sudden? Isn’t she also glancing furtively in his direction?

“So she was in love with you,” she says, as if to remind herself, in a surprisingly harsh voice that stops him cold. “Deeply in love with you just like that, eh, at the drop of a hat? Then she’ll love you to this day. Seems you’re still the same. Good, very, very good.” Apparently she has a plan, an idea that eases—no, kills—the pain she’s just felt. Her eyes glitter with a piercing joy, they’ve gained a new lease on life, a youthfulness that is, frankly, a little disturbing. She says to herself—it doesn’t yet register with him—“He does it with one hand tied behind his back. He implants a soul into your body, exchanges a heart of stone for one of flesh. Then you’re eating your heart out and chewing on it for the rest of your life.” The man hears, starts, doesn’t get it. “And how it sticks in your craw,” she adds for good measure, truly spirited now. Just look how deep a breath she’s taking in preparation for something!

“They’re still over there, Mrs. Lemnitz, Mrs. Bernadotte, Mrs. Rottmann, Mrs. Becher-Hahn! Four young mothers rolling in dough—not an ounce of flab, proletariat-

bred or blues-induced. Look at them! Rather cute, the four of them standing there. How they blab and fuss about their spoiled little kiddies—each focused on her own—on their daily check-in with the competition, sluggish yet purposeful, the busybodies spinning the hamster wheel of the all-too familiar, driven by their daily chores and well-off in all their self-sacrifice. Do you hear their high milky voices? Got themselves knocked up, yes sirree, but in gossamer mommy-innocence, fluffy pink and powder blue.”

She smiles, darkly amused. Tom sits down on the footstool dumbfounded, looking up at his uncharitable darling. What’s gotten into her?

“Baby pink, baby blue, cotton candy colors—that’s their war-paint. And I’m forced to sit here immobilized and look at the cruel wallpaper pattern of impregnable familial bliss replicated ad infinitum. Packaged, sealed—one, two, three, four, five etc., etc. How they bounce out of their big suburban vans, unmoved and unfazed, far away from heaven and hell. Every day the gigantic, routine loads of groceries, the string of new acquisitions—scooter, helmet, children’s bike, a never-ending border for the wallpaper—it makes me want to take refuge with the screeching lunatics, the birds in the zoo.”

Tom no longer recognizes her voice. Only now does he notice the red spots on her cheeks. My God, he once kissed them passionately, yes indeed he did, way back when. God, yes.

“There, the molly-coddlers cuddling in the sunshine! But do you see their black shadows? That’s the others, the evil mothers, the ones that murder their own offspring. Only last Saturday one killed the baby that she’d accidentally dropped on the stairs, banged him twelve times against the pavement like a fish on the hook and still alive. Afraid of raising a retard she bashed him until he was dead. And afterwards no sign of

remorse from her, only fear of the consequences—the poor soul—of being punished. That was in a different neighborhood—what am I saying, it was in this East Germany of yours. Over here, however, it's the exact opposite. Here it's rockabye baby for the little masters of the future even while the women are busy chitchatting. At the smallest indication of danger they will hunker down, squeaky-clean consciences and all, each family behind security-glass. Dammit, I wish they'd start rocking from the inside, in their godless philistine skulls, their granite hideaways!"

What had she previously said, "far away from heaven and hell"? He, Tom, had come to pour his heart out to her. What had he been looking for? Admiration for him, the ship-wrecked warrior and, just for the time being, a cozy nest. So much for that. What on earth does she want? "What are you complaining about?" he finally asks, numb with disappointment, and he moves around the room to loosen up his muscles, inadvertently parading his powerful body. His back—pure heroic virility! Even the churlishness suits him. Actually, better than anything else.

"Tom, a commission for you. Tom, come here." It's the first time today that she has called him that, and for the first time she looks up at him from below the way she used to in the past—even though she is sitting higher up—all self-assurance, all bold certainty.

For God's sake, what is the woman up to?

"What are you asking for?"

"I want you to barrel into this motherly bliss, Tom. Tear their little frosty hearts to pieces, one after the other. Plunge them into depression and dereliction in this order:

Bernadotte, then Lemnitz, Rottmann, Becher-Hahn. You're the only one who can do it, Tom!"

But spare the fifth, weird little Wally Mülleis, I want to spare her from you. She hasn't done anything.

I want them shattered into a thousand pieces—Mrs. Becher-Hahn who's rushing to the kindergarten and the baker, Mrs. Lemnitz who looks at her watch with a start and whisks her youngest along to get the older one, Mrs. Bernadotte who's heading for the child's dentist, Mrs. Rottmann who's dashing off to relieve the anxious babysitter of her four brats. It's high time! High time! Do you hear their lukewarm laughter? These cold-fish embraces, do you see them? Teach them different ones! Ignite them and then freeze them, plunge them into distraction and delirium. Just think of it, Tom, what great fun—they've never felt anything like it."

He's thunderstruck. 'Who do you think I am? The devil, the messiah? Dear heart, darling, you've gotten a little bit—no offense meant—certifiably mad."

"Even if it ruins them! Do mankind a favor at long last. Destroy them—for their own good demolish them! At no cost to you. They're all fairly good-looking, the four of them, black, blond, brunette, chestnut. Child's play, you've said so yourself. Make them forget the balloons at the front door, make them despise the time-honored scooting and scampering from diaper to baby tooth to pony rides. Dismantle all their propriety and—I beg you—their self-righteousness, Tom."

Tom has turned serious. How his old lover's face is lit up. A storm is brewing in it! He moves as close to her as he can. "You're plotting revenge? Ordering me into their beds? Who do you think I am?"

“A Casanova, what else, that’s who you are and always will be. God’s gift to women, irresistible, whether you want to be or not.” Her eyes flash at him, cajolingly, pitilessly.

“How about if I seduced just one?”

“All four of them, no less. Let’s be fair and square. The sequence is up to you. You’re going to study the quartet of sitting ducks from this vantage point until you’re ready and then off you go. And for your information, their husbands are exactly the types you detest.” Adding archly, “Herewith you’re officially appointed and named The Adulterer. I’m confident you won’t need to avail yourself of my womanly advice as to how to save the poor souls.”

“No jealousy, Helena?”

“I’m done with that. Oh, one more thing: Make them love you! Nothing less will do. When you leave one for the next, she must end up desolate and lonely, at her wits’ end and writhing in pain. The wound must never heal. Listen to me, Tom, you’re the devil-may-care sort and a gigolo, that’s all there is to you—face it. But you can transform them into real human beings that are forever bruised and scarred, the Mmes. Berdadotte, Lemnitz, Rottmann, Becher-Hahn—each single one.

See: Just look at *me!*”