

The Umbrella

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 entered in 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 For the most part she was accommodating and quiet, without being withdrawn.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 sat for a long time without being asked, her girlfriends grew eager to dance with anyone at all, 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 observed 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 made 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 be opened 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 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 noticed and even fewer judged an asset.

Egon was a mechanic who was interested in soccer, playing the numbers, pool, and girls. But since every love-struck 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 as long as it lasted, he was proud 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 was set, supplies were 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 in this world, 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 shook 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,' hissed her mother. '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 obligations. 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 already 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 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. Suddenly, 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 a 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. It was just a brief glimpse, 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 door frame 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 long, yellow dress and the buoyant, translucent umbrella. When the 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 it 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 only had met them at her 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 headscarf 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 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, she was a person, unlike everyone else, who 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 always have been ungrateful.' 'Ungrateful how?' Helga asked. Then she always 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 by getting up and gathering her belongings as she remarked: Well, we won't be seeing those times again, or some similar generalization spoken in a tone devoid 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 just before Egon was expected home) and 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, so it was as if there wasn'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 watchful, 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 about it. '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 pale, narrow 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 which 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 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.