

Marion Brasch

The Guest

It began with the fly that was trying in vain to get through the closed window to the outside. There were two other windows, both of which were wide open, but the insect didn't seem to notice them and kept buzzing stubbornly along the windowpane. I peered at my mobile phone: 23:54. The whole night still lay before me, and I was all alone in this enormous villa. Every local hotel had been booked out when I was asked to come here to do a lecture, so I'd been offered the guest room at the villa, which was reserved for artists. "You'll have the entire place to yourself," the curator had said as she'd given me the key. "No one will disturb you." But I wasn't just alone: the villa was also completely empty of furniture. What a luxury, I'd thought, as I'd walked through the building. I imagined how the architect must have felt when the building was finished and he'd admired his work for the first time. Perhaps then it had been perfect, just for that one moment, because when the owners had moved in their furniture, it wouldn't have looked the same. They'd have brought their own furniture, not tailor-made items that would suit his designs.

I went out onto the patio that faced a large, parklike garden. A mild wind rustled through the tall, forked trees that looked like giants gently sleeping in the moonlight. At the far end of the garden shone a pale, yellowish light from a word lit in neon: *ME*. Not completely alone then, I thought, amused. I turned back to the house, lay down in my bed, which was in the only furnished room, and immediately fell asleep.

Until the bloody fly woke me up, which was now going ballistic against the closed window as if its life depended on it. And it probably did, but what did I care? Even so, I was disturbed by the futility of the creature's rage against the windowpane. I wasn't afraid, but the thought of spending the night in this unknown house with a demented insect, of all things, was a little unnerving. I turned over onto my other side and pulled the cover over my head, but the buzzing coming from the fly against the window kept me awake. Just as I was about to get up and put the insect out of its misery one way or another, I heard a strange creaking sound that seemed to be coming from downstairs. I pricked up my ears in the dark. Silence. Even the fly had given up its frantic work, or perhaps had finally found a way out. Whatever the case, I was now wide awake. And I was thirsty. There wasn't a lamp next to my bed so I used my mobile to see my way to the bathroom. The light there didn't work. Never mind, I thought, drinking straight from the tap before I went back to bed and had almost fallen back to sleep when the creaking sound came again, this time longer and strangely menacing. A cold shiver ran down my back. I remembered that night at my parents' summer house where I had spent the night alone as a teenager for the first time and was woken by eerie sounds. Nearly scared to death, I had fled in panic and barricaded myself in the tool shed. My parents later explained that a house like that "lived and breathed"—the materials expanded and contracted, which you could only hear at night, of course, when everything was quiet. But my parent's wooden house was rickety and worm-eaten, whereas this villa was made of solid brickwork, steel, and glass, and the parquet floor was sealed, so what the hell could be expanding and contracting? My senses were probably playing tricks on me. Enough, I thought, closed my eyes, and tried to imagine myself as a teenager crouching in fear in the tool shed. I hadn't got a wink of sleep that night; what a sissy I'd been back then. Since then I'd spent many a night in deserted houses, and it hadn't bothered me.

"I don't mind," I said quietly to myself when the creaking sound came again. "Why should I mind?" I repeated it more loudly as if I could somehow impress whatever was making the sound. But instead, the opposite happened: now the creaking seemed to come from right below me downstairs. I held my breath and thought at the same moment how ridiculous it was that people held their breath when they were frightened; and so I started breathing again. Keep calm, I thought. Keep calm and think. Sleep was out of the question anyway, so I had no choice other than work out what was going on. I got up, crept on tiptoe to the door, and opened it softly. At the very same moment, everything went quiet in the house. Oddly quiet. I fumbled for the light switch on the landing, turned it on, then something fell to the floor with a thud and someone groaned out loud. My pulse raced.

"Hello?"

No reply.

"Hello, anyone there?"

Silence.

I lit up the corridor with my phone; the next room was a few feet away. This time I made no effort to be quiet as I crossed the parquet floor. Whoever was up to no good here should know I was there. This thought made me feel like I had the upper hand. And so I walked over to the next room, opened the door, and shone my light around. No one. Instead, the silence was broken by another sound: the ticking of a grandfather clock. Slowly and threateningly, it echoed throughout the house. My feeling of having the upper hand disappeared in a puff: what the hell was going on here? In a panic, I tried all the other light switches—none worked. I ran back to my room and locked the door, but

uncannily, the pendulum carried on ticking just as loudly as before. As this realization dawned on me, I was shocked and confused. I shone my light around the room but there was nothing there. I went back onto the landing and shut the door behind me, but the ticking noise didn't diminish. Perhaps someone was playing a joke on me and had hidden a speaker somewhere. I tried to collect my thoughts. Perhaps I should just get away from here? But it was the middle of the night, and where was I supposed to go? The train station was only three kilometers away, but the next train left in six hours. "Ridiculous," I murmured. The sound of the clock's pendulum stopped. "Totally ridiculous." I said this aloud—rather too loudly, in fact. Silence. Whereas a few seconds ago, the silence had been tense and agitated, it was now the kind you feel inside a thick fog that dampens every sound. Determined not to let this house intimidate me any longer, I went back to my room, got dressed, and decided to take hold of the reins. I was convinced that showing fear and weakness would only make my invisible enemy stronger. I left my room and was walking toward the staircase when I suddenly tripped and fell. There was a dull sound as I landed, and the impact was soft. I hadn't fallen onto bare floorboards, but onto a rug: it lay there, half rolled up, like a lifeless animal. Where had it suddenly come from? Or hadn't I noticed it before? Hadn't the curator told me that the architect of this villa was contemptuous of any kind of interior furnishings? My hip hurt, and I suppressed a groan as I struggled back to my feet. Show no weakness, whatever happens. I unrolled the rug so as not to trip over it a second time. It seemed to be the heavy, expensive Persian kind, but this didn't help the pain in my hip. I limped to the stairs and held onto the bannister as I went down. When I was halfway, the light from my phone dimmed. I decided not to let this fluster me, not least of all because the darkness here didn't seem quite as murky, but perhaps I was just getting used to it. Hoping the light down here would work, I flicked the switch. There was a bang, evidently the fuse. Either the wiring in this nearly ninety-year-old villa had finally

given up the ghost, or the ghost was on the point of giving up the house. What a lame pun, I thought. And what an absurd thought. Even if there was something odd was going on here, I didn't believe in ghosts and all that paranormal rubbish. I was convinced there was a reasonable explanation for even the strangest things. Simple cause and effect.

The entrance hall was lit up by the pale light of the neon *ME*. I turned off my almost dead mobile-phone flashlight and looked around, feeling relieved. The building hadn't seemed that large from the outside, but here in the entrance hall, it appeared enormous. As if the rooms literally ran into each other.

"Hello?" My voice echoed clearly and firmly through the entrance hall.

There was a groan in reply.

"Hello . . ." I repeated, more quietly this time. "Who's there?"

Another groan. Pain? Exhaustion? Perhaps both. And where on earth was it coming from?

"Where are you?"

"Over here!" said the other person in a choked voice. "You have to help me!"

I tried to work out where the voice was coming from, but in vain. It echoed through the mysterious expanse of the lower floor.

"Where's 'over here'?"

"In the maid's room, for heaven's sake!" the voice barked back.