

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

THE LITTLE
OLD LADY WHO
BROKE ^{ALL} THE RULES

CATHARINA INGELMAN-SUNDBERG



THE LITTLE OLD LADY WHO BROKE ALL THE RULES

Catharina Ingelman-Sundberg is a Swedish author who has written seventeen books in several genres, including popular science, cartoon, children's and historical fiction.

Her individual writing style, featuring depth of insight, and sense of surprise and humour, gives her books a special appeal. So much so that in 1999 she won the prestigious Widding Prize as the best writer of popular history and historical novels.

Catharina Ingelman-Sundberg is a former journalist and marine archaeologist. She now works full-time as an author.



First published in 2012 by Bokförlaget Forum, Sweden, under the title *Kaffe med Rån*

This edition published 2014 by Pan Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-4472-5061-6

Copyright © Catharina Ingelman-Sundberg 2012 by agreement with
Barbara J. Zitwer Agency in cooperation with Grand Agency

Translation copyright © Rod Bradbury 2013

The right of Catharina Ingelman-Sundberg to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The Macmillan Group has no responsibility for the information provided by
any author websites whose address you obtain from this book ('author websites').

The inclusion of author website addresses in this book does not constitute
an endorsement by or association with us of such sites or the content,
products, advertising or other materials presented on such sites.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form,
or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise)
without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does
any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to
criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Ellipsis Digital Limited, Glasgow
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way
of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated
without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than
that in which it is published and without a similar condition including
this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Visit www.panmacmillan.com to read more about all our books
and to buy them. You will also find features, author interviews and
news of any author events, and you can sign up for e-newsletters
so that you're always first to hear about our new releases.

Prologue

The little old lady gripped the handles of her Zimmer frame, hung her walking stick next to the shopping basket and did her best to look assertive. After all, a woman of seventy-nine about to commit her first bank robbery needed to project an air of authority. She straightened her back, pulled her hat down over her forehead and thrust open the door. Supported by her frame, she walked slowly and determinedly into the bank. It was five minutes before closing time and three customers were waiting in the queue. The Zimmer frame squeaked faintly. She had greased it with olive oil, but one of the wheels had been wobbly ever since she had collided with the cleaning trolley at the retirement home. Not that it really mattered. The most important thing was that it had a large basket with room for a lot of money.

Martha Andersson from Södermalm, Stockholm, walked with a slight stoop, wearing a plain coat of nondescript colour, chosen especially to avoid attracting attention. She was smaller than average and solidly built, but not fat. She wore sensible dark walking shoes which would be perfect for a quick escape if it was necessary. That was assuming she was still able to pick up the speed to run. It wasn't something she had attempted in

a number of years, so she might have to settle with a brisk trot. Her heavily veined hands were hidden inside a pair of well-used leather gloves and her short white hair was concealed under a wide-brimmed brown hat. She had wrapped a neon-coloured scarf around her neck, so if a photo was taken of her with a flash, it would automatically overexpose the rest of the picture and her facial features would disappear. The scarf was mainly an extra safety measure, since her mouth and nose were shadowed by her hat. But if she had to be old, she might as well be wise, too.

The bank's little branch on Götgatan looked like most banks in Sweden these days. There was just one cashier standing behind the solitary service counter; bland and boring walls; a highly polished floor and a small table brimming with brochures about advantageous loans and investment advice. *Dear brochure-writers*, Martha thought, *I know of much better ways of making lots of money!* Martha intended to laugh all the way to the bank, and all the way back out again, too.

She sat down on the customers' sofa and pretended to study the posters advertising savings accounts but found it hard to keep her hands still. She discreetly slipped one hand into her pocket for a fruit pastille. One of those unhealthy sweets that the doctors warned her against and dentists secretly loved. She tried to be good; she tried not to give in to the sugary treats. But if she was going to be rebellious, then today was the day. Surely she was allowed one guilty pleasure?

The queue number changed with a buzz and a man in his forties hurried up to the counter. His business was soon dealt with and then a teenage girl was served almost as quickly. However, the last in line was an elderly gentleman who took much longer

as he was mumbling and fumbling with bits of paper. Martha was growing impatient. She mustn't be in the bank too long. Somebody might notice her body language or some other detail which might give her away. So she tried her best just to look like an old lady getting some cash out of the bank. Ironically, that was exactly what she was going to do, although the cashier was going to have a shock at the amount she was withdrawing and the fact that the money wasn't necessarily hers. But little details . . . Martha fished in her coat pocket for a newspaper cutting. She had saved an article about how much bank robberies cost the banks. The headline read: THIS IS A ROBBERY!. These were, in fact, the very words which had inspired her.

The old man at the counter was nearly finished so Martha began to pull herself up from the sofa, to stand as upright as she possibly could. All her life she had been the sort of honest, dependable person that everyone had relied on – she had even been a prefect at school. Now she was about to become a criminal. But in reality, how else could she survive in her old age? She needed money for a decent place to live for herself – and her friends. She simply couldn't back out now. She and her old choir chums were going to have a bright 'third age'. To put it simply, a bit of fun in the autumn of their lives. She would make sure of it.

The aged gentleman at the counter was taking his time, but finally the buzz sounded and her number appeared above the screen where the cashier stood. Slowly, but with dignity, she approached the counter. She was about to destroy the good reputation that she had built up across an entire lifetime in a single moment. But what else could you do in this modern

society which treated its elderly members so badly? You put up with it and succumbed, or you adapted to the situation. She was the sort of person who adapted.

During those last few steps to the counter window she had a good look around the room before coming to a halt. Then, giving a friendly nod to the female cashier, she handed over the newspaper cutting:

THIS IS A ROBBERY!

The cashier read the headline and looked up with a smile.

‘And how can I help you?’

‘Three million – and quick!’ cried Martha.

The cashier widened her smile. ‘Would you like to withdraw some money?’

‘No, *you* are going to withdraw money for me, *now!*’

‘I see. But the pension money hasn’t come in yet. It doesn’t arrive until the middle of the month, you see, my dear.’

Martha had rather lost her momentum. This wasn’t going the way she had imagined. Best to act quickly. She lifted up her walking stick and poked it through the gap under the window, brandishing it as best she could.

‘Hurry up! My three million now!’

‘But the pensions aren’t—’

‘Do as I say! Three million! In the basket – now!’

By this time the girl had had enough. It was closing time and she wanted to go home. Martha watched as she got up and fetched two male colleagues. Both men looked equally handsome and smiled politely. The one closest to her looked like Gregory Peck – or was it Cary Grant? He said:

‘We’ll sort out your pension, don’t you worry. And my colleague here will be happy to phone for a taxi to take you home.’

Martha peered through the glass. She could see the girl in the back office, already picking up the phone.

‘Oh well, I suppose I will have to rob you another time,’ Martha conceded. She quickly withdrew her walking stick and closed her fist around the newspaper cutting. They all smiled sweetly and helped her out the door and into the taxi. They even folded the Zimmer frame up for her.

‘Diamond House retirement home – OAP rate,’ Martha told the driver as she waved goodbye to the bank staff. She carefully put the cutting back into her pocket. Things hadn’t gone quite according to plan. But, nevertheless, a little old lady could do a great deal of things that people of other ages couldn’t. She put her hand in her pocket for another fruit pastille and hummed contentedly to herself. Martha realized now that in order for her grand plan to work, she needed the support of her friends from the choir group. These were her nearest and dearest friends; the people who she had socialized and sung with for more than twenty years. Of course, she couldn’t ask them straight out if they wanted to become criminals. She would have to persuade them with more subtle means. But afterwards – and she was quite certain of this – they would thank her for having changed their lives for the better.

Martha was awakened by a distant humming sound, followed by a sharp ping. She woke up, opened her eyes and tried to work out where she was. Yes, of course, she was at the retirement home. And it would, of course, be Rake – which was what everybody called her friend Bertil Engström. He always got up in the middle

of the night for a snack. He had a habit of putting food in the microwave only to forget all about it. Martha got out of bed and made her way to the kitchen with the help of her Zimmer frame. Muttering to herself, she opened the microwave and took out one plastic-covered dish of pasta and meatballs in tomato sauce. She stared dreamily at the buildings across the road. A few lamps glowed in the night. On the other side of the street, the houses would surely have proper kitchens, she thought. Here, at the retirement home, they used to have their own fully equipped kitchen but, to save on staff and money, the new owners had axed the catering department. Before Diamond House had taken over the retirement home, the meals had been the highlight of the day and the aroma of good food wafted through to the communal lounge. But now? Martha yawned and leaned against the sink. Almost *everything* had got worse and things were now so bad that she often found herself escaping into dreams. And what a lovely dream she had just woken up from . . . it had felt exactly as if she had been there at the bank for real, as if her subconscious had taken charge and tried to tell her something. At school she had always protested against things that she believed were unjust. Even during her years as a teacher, she had battled against unreasonable regulations and daft innovations. Strangely enough, here at the retirement home, she had just *put up with it all*. How could she have become so docile and lethargic? People who didn't like the rulers of their country started a revolution. They could jolly well do that here, too, if only she could get the support of her friends. But a bank robbery . . . that would be going a bit far, wouldn't it? She gave a nervous little laugh. Because that was what was a bit frightening – her dreams nearly always came true.

1

The next day, while the guests, or the ‘clients’, as they were now called, at Diamond House were drinking their morning coffee in the lounge, Martha thought about what she should do. In her childhood home in Österlen, down in the south of Sweden, people didn’t just sit and wait for somebody else to take action. If the hay must be put in the barn, or a mare was going to foal, then you simply pitched in and did what was necessary. Martha looked at her hands. She was proud of them – they were reliable hands, and showed that she had done her fair share of hard work. The murmur of voices rose and fell all around her as she surveyed the rather shabby lounge. The smell was decidedly reminiscent of the Salvation Army and the furniture seemed to have come straight from the recycling depot. The old grey 1940s building, with its asbestos fibre cement cladding, was like a combination of an old school and a dentist’s waiting room. Surely this wasn’t where she was meant to end her days, with a mug of weak instant coffee to go with a plastic meal? No, damn it, it certainly was not! Martha breathed deeply, pushed her coffee mug aside and leaned forward to speak to her group of friends.

‘You lot. Come with me,’ she said and gave a sign to her

friends to follow her into her room. 'I have something to talk to you about.'

Everybody knew that Martha had a stash of cloudberry liqueur hidden away, so they all nodded and got up straight away. The stylish Rake went first, followed by Brains, the inventor, and Martha's two lady friends – Christina, who loved Belgian chocolate, and Anna-Greta, the old lady who looked so old that all the other old ladies paled in comparison. They looked at each other. Martha usually had something special on the cards when she invited you in for a glass of liqueur. It hadn't happened for quite a while, but now it was evidently time.

Once they were in her room, Martha retrieved the bottle, tidied away her half-finished knitting from the sofa and invited her friends to sit down. She threw a glance at the mahogany table with the freshly ironed floral-patterned cloth. She had wanted to replace the old table for a long while but it was big and solid and there was room for everybody around it so it would have to do for now. As she put the bottle on the table she caught sight of her old family photos on the chest of drawers. Framed behind glass, her parents and sister smiled out at her in front of her childhood home in Brantevik, a small fishing village in Österlen. If only they could see her now . . . they would not approve. They were teetotallers. Defiantly, she set out the liqueur glasses and filled them to the brim.

'Cheers!' she said and raised her glass.

'Cheers!' her friends responded joyfully.

'And now for the drinking song,' Martha insisted, after which they all mimed a silent version of 'Helan går'. Here at the retirement home, it was necessary to keep your voice down during sessions like this, so as not to be discovered with hidden alcohol.

Martha silently mouthed the refrain once more and they all laughed. So far nobody had ever discovered them, and this was all part of the fun. Martha put her glass down and looked at the others out of the corner of her eye. Should she tell them about her dream? No, first she must get them on the same wavelength as herself, then she might be able to persuade them all to go along with her plan. They were a close-knit group of friends and in their late fifties they had decided they would live together in their old age. So now, surely, they could make a new decision together. After all, they had so much in common. When they had become pensioners, the five of them had performed at hospitals and parish halls with their choir, The Vocal Chord, and they had all moved into the same retirement home. For a long time Martha had tried to get them to pool their funds and buy an old country mansion down in the south instead. She thought this option sounded much more exciting than a retirement home. She had read in the paper how old mansions were extremely cheap to buy and several of them even had moats.

‘If you get some unpleasant visitor from the authorities or your children want to get at their inheritance in advance, then all you have to do is raise the drawbridge,’ she had said in an attempt to convince the others. But when they realized that a mansion was expensive in upkeep and required staff, the choice fell on the Lily of the Valley Retirement Home. But their lovely retirement home had been renamed by the ghastly new owners and was now called Diamond House.

‘Did your evening snack taste good?’ Martha asked after Rake had drained the last drops of liqueur from his glass. He looked sleepy but had, of course, had time to put a rose in his lapel and tie a newly ironed cravat round his neck. He was

somewhat grey by now but he still retained his charm and was so elegantly dressed that even younger women stopped to look at him twice.

‘Evening snack? Just something to keep hunger at bay. Not that it worked. The food here is worse than on a ship,’ he said and put down his glass. In his youth he had been at sea, but after going ashore for good he had trained as a gardener. Now he made do with a few flowers and herbs on the balcony. His greatest annoyance in life was that everyone called him Rake. True, he loved gardening and had once tripped over a rake and done himself an injury, but in his opinion that wasn’t a reason for the nickname to stick for the rest of his life. He had tried suggesting other nicknames but nobody had listened.

‘Why don’t you make yourself a cheese sandwich instead? Quiet food that doesn’t go “ping”?’ came a muttering from Anna-Greta who had also been woken by the microwave and had found it hard to get back to sleep. She was an assertive woman who knew her own mind and she was so tall and slim that Rake used to say that she must have been born in a drain-pipe.

‘Yes, but you can always smell the delicious food and spices that the staff are cooking from up on the first floor. So that makes me hungry for more than just a sandwich,’ was Rake’s excuse.

‘You’re right; the staff should cook similar meals for us to eat. The food that we have delivered and served under cellophane wrapping isn’t very filling,’ said Christina Åkerblom as she discreetly filed her nails. The former milliner, who in her youth had dreamed of becoming a librarian, was the youngest of them all – only seventy-seven. She wanted to live a calm and pleasant life, eating good food and doing her watercolour

painting. She did not want to be served junk food. After a long life in Stockholm's poshest district, Östermalm, she was used to a certain standard.

'The staff don't get the same food as us,' Martha agreed. 'The food that we can smell is just for the new owners of Diamond House, who have their office and kitchen on the upper floor.'

'Then we ought to install a lift which can transport their food down to us,' remarked Oscar 'Brains' Krupp who was the solution-finder of the group and was one year older than Christina. Brains was an inventor and used to have his own workshop in Sundbyberg. He also loved good food, which was shown in his plump and cuddly figure. He considered exercise to be a recreation for people with nothing better to do.

'Do you remember the brochure we got when we first came here?' asked Martha. 'Good food from the restaurant, it said. And they also boasted of daily walks, visits from artistes, chiropody and somebody to do our hair. With the new owners, nothing works any more. It is about time we made a stand.'

'Rebellion at the retirement home!' said Christina in her most melodramatic voice, waving her hand vigorously so that the nail file ended up on the floor.

'Yes, that's right, a little mutiny,' Martha agreed.

'A mutiny? We'd have to be at sea first,' snorted Rake in a disbelieving manner.

'But perhaps the new owners have some financial difficulties? It'll get better eventually, wait and see,' said Anna-Greta, straightening her spectacles which dated from the early fifties. She had worked in a bank all her life and understood that entrepreneurs must make a profit.

‘Get better? Like hell it will,’ muttered Rake. ‘Those bastards have already raised the charges several times and we haven’t seen any improvements.’

‘Don’t be so negative,’ said Anna-Greta and she straightened her spectacles again. They were old and worn out and were always slipping down her nose. She never changed spectacles and instead just updated her lenses because she thought her frames were timeless.

‘What do you mean, negative? We must demand improvements. Across the board, but starting with the food!’ Martha said. ‘Now listen, the owners must have something nice to eat in the kitchen upstairs. So when the rest of the staff have gone home, I thought we could . . .’

Enthusiasm spread round the table as Martha talked on. Before long, five pairs of eyes were glowing just as brightly as the water on a lake shore on a sunny summer’s day. They all glanced up, looked at each other and made a thumbs-up sign.

When her friends had left her room, Martha put the cloudberry liqueur back into the depths of her wardrobe and hummed happily to herself. Her dream about the bank robbery seemed to have given her new energy. *Nothing is impossible*, she thought. *But in order to succeed with a change, you must put forward alternatives.* And that was what she was going to do now. Then her friends would think that they had made their decisions all by themselves.

2

After everyone had stepped out of the lift and stood outside the Diamond House office, Martha held up her hand and hushed the others. She had inspected the contents of the key cupboard and had chosen one with a triangular bow, the sort that locksmiths can't copy. She put the key in the lock, gave it a turn and the door opened.

'Just as I thought. The master key. Excellent, in we go, but remember to be quiet.'

'Look who's talking,' muttered Rake, who thought that Martha always talked too much.

'But what if someone discovers us?' Christina worried.

'They won't, we'll be as quiet as mice,' Anna-Greta said loudly. Like all those who are hard of hearing she spoke in a resounding voice without realizing it herself.

The Zimmer frames squeaked out of time as the five of them slowly and cautiously entered the room. It smelt of office and furniture polish, and there were folders arranged in a meticulous order on the desk.

'Hmm, the kitchen must be through that set of doors,' Martha said, pointing across to the other side of the room.

As they entered the next room, Martha took the lead and closed the curtains.

‘Now we can turn the lights on!’

The lights flickered into action and before them appeared a sizeable room with a fridge, freezer and large fitted cupboards on the wall. In the middle was an island on wheels, and beside the window a dining table with six chairs.

‘A proper kitchen,’ declared Brains as he stroked the fridge door.

‘There will certainly be some good food in here,’ Martha declared as she opened the fridge door. The shelves were filled with chicken and fillet steak, a leg of lamb and several different types of cheese. The drawers below contained lettuces, tomatoes, beetroot and fruit.

The door to the freezer took some effort to open. ‘Elk steaks and lobster. Goodness me!’ Martha exclaimed, holding the door open for everyone to see. ‘Everything except a Christmas cake! They must have lots of parties up here.’

For a long while they all stared at the contents without uttering a word. Brains rubbed a hand over his cropped hair, Rake put his hand over his heart and sighed, Christina gasped and Anna-Greta grumbled: ‘This must have cost a pretty penny!’

‘Nobody will notice if we help ourselves to a little bit,’ said Martha.

‘But surely we can’t steal their food?’ Christina queried.

‘We’re not stealing. Whose money do you think bought this food? We are simply taking what we have paid for. Here you are, take this.’

Martha held out a leftover piece of cooked chicken and Rake – who always felt peckish in the evenings – was first to bite.

‘And we need rice, spices and flour so that we can make a sauce,’ said Brains who had now woken up. He wasn’t just an inventor but a good cook too. Since his ex-wife had only made food that was inedible, he had been forced to learn to cook. Then, in time, he had realized that not only was she incompetent in the kitchen but she also saw life itself as one great problem, and so he had divorced her. Still to this day, he had nightmares about her standing beside his bed brandishing a rolling pin in her hand whilst complaining. But she had given him a son, and for that he was grateful.

‘We must have good wine for the sauce too.’ Brains looked around and caught sight of a wine rack on the wall. ‘Well, I never, look at those bottles . . .’

‘We can’t take those. We’d be found out if we did,’ said Martha. ‘If nobody notices that we have been here, we can come back a few more times.’

‘Pah. Food without wine is like a car without wheels,’ announced Brains. He went up to the wine rack and pulled out two bottles of the finest wine. Seeing Martha’s face he put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. ‘We’ll open the wine bottles, drink up the wine and pour beetroot juice into the bottles instead,’ he said.

Martha gave Brains an admiring glance. He always had a solution for everything. He was an eternal optimist who thought that problems were there to be solved. He reminded her of her parents. When she and her sister had dressed up in their parents’ clothes and made a dreadful mess everywhere, her father and mother had, of course, told them that they had been naughty, but then had laughed at the whole thing. Better to have a messy home and happy children than a perfect yard

and unhappy children, they thought. Their guiding motto in life was: 'Everything will sort itself out.' And Martha agreed. It always did.

The chopping boards, frying pans and saucepans were soon in place and they all got involved in cooking the meal. Martha put a fresh chicken in the oven, Brains made a delicious sauce, Rake prepared a tasty salad and Christina tried her best to be of use. She had gone to a domestic science school when she was young, but since then she had had help in the kitchen all her life, and so she had forgotten everything she had ever learned. The only task she really felt safe doing was slicing a cucumber.

Anna-Greta took charge of setting the table and saw to the rice.

'She's good at doing what you tell her,' Martha whispered, nodding towards Anna-Greta. 'But she is so slow and always has to count everything.'

'As long as she doesn't start counting the grains of rice, that's OK,' said Brains.

Soon a delicious aroma spread through the kitchen. Rake went around serving wine and very much looked the part in his blue blazer with a crisp cravat around his neck. He had combed his hair and smelled of a nice aftershave. Christina noticed that he had dressed smartly and she in turn discreetly pulled out her powder and lipstick. When nobody was looking, she added some colour to her lips and powdered her nose lightly.

Talk and laughter mingled with the clatter of plates and pans. Admittedly, it did take rather a long time before the food was ready, but what did that matter when everyone was drinking good wine and having a lovely time? Finally, they settled around the table as happy and enthusiastic as youngsters.

‘Another glass?’

Rake poured out more wine and it was just like the old days when he had been a waiter on cruise ships in the Mediterranean. He was a bit slower now, but he held himself with the same dignity. Between mouthfuls they toasted one another and sang aloud from their choir repertoire, and when Brains found an old bottle of champagne, that did the rounds too. Christina raised her glass and knocked back her wine.

‘Wicked,’ she said – an expression she had picked up from her grandchildren. She liked to try and keep up with the times.

Christina put her glass down and looked about her: ‘Now, dear friends, we must dance!’

‘You can do that,’ said Brains, putting his hands on his stomach.

‘Dance, yes, absolutely,’ said Rake, getting up, but he was so unsteady on his legs that Christina had to dance on her own.

“‘It is better to dare to cast the dice, than to fade away with a withering flame,’” she recited, with her arms out wide. Although Christina had never achieved her dream of becoming a librarian, she had always maintained her interest in literature. And what she didn’t know of the Swedish classics wasn’t worth knowing.

‘Here she goes reciting the old favourites again. As long as she doesn’t recite the *Odyssey* too,’ muttered Martha.

‘Or goes on and on about *Gösta Berling’s Saga* . . .’ Brains added.

“‘It is more beautiful to hear a string that snaps, than never to draw a bow,’” Christina continued.

‘We could have that as our motto!’ Martha suggested.

‘What, a string that snaps?’ Rake interrupted her. ‘No, the

motto should be “It’s better to be in the bed that broke than always to sleep alone.””

Christina, blushing, came to a halt mid-step.

‘Rake! Must you always be so coarse? Behave yourself!’ said Anna-Greta, pouting.

‘Well, we’ve drawn our bow now, haven’t we?’ said Christina. ‘From now on, we must come up here at least once a week.’ She fetched her glass and raised it.

‘Cheers! Here’s to the next time!’

They all toasted each other and they kept going until their eyelids got heavier and heavier and they started slurring their words. Martha reverted to her old southern dialect, something she only did when she was really tired. It was a warning sign, and she saw the danger.

‘Now, dear friends, we must wash the dishes and tidy the kitchen before we go downstairs,’ she said.

‘You’re welcome to start on the dishes,’ Rake replied, as he filled up Martha’s glass.

‘No, we must tidy up and put everything back in the cupboards so that nobody will see that we’ve been here,’ she insisted, and pushed the glass away.

‘If you’re tired, you can rest on my arm,’ said Brains as he gave her a friendly pat on the cheek.

And so it came about that Martha leaned her head against his arm and fell asleep.

The next morning, when Ingmar Mattson, the director of Diamond House, came to work, he heard strange sounds from inside his private rooms. The heavy humming noise sounded like a group of bears had just escaped from the zoo park. He

looked around the office room and saw nothing untoward, but he noticed that the kitchen door was open.

‘What in heaven’s name . . .’ he muttered, before bumping into a Zimmer frame and falling onto the floor. Swearing, he got back on his feet and looked with amazement at the scene before him. The extractor fan was on, and five of the old people from the retirement home were seated around the table, fast asleep. There were dirty dishes on the table, emptied wine glasses, and the fridge door was wide open. Director Mattson looked at the mess. The clients in the retirement home evidently had more freedom than he had been aware of. He must ask Nurse Barbara to deal with the matter.

3

A car alarm was going off down the street, and somewhere far away a fan was whirring. Martha blinked and then opened her eyes properly. A ray of sunshine seeped in through the window and her eyes slowly grew accustomed to the faint light. The windows were dirty and needed to be cleaned and the same could be said about the floral-patterned curtains that she had hung up herself to brighten up the room. Evidently, nobody cared about keeping things clean nowadays, and she certainly couldn't manage such chores herself any more. Martha yawned widely, but her thoughts were all confused and she couldn't really think straight. Oh dear, oh dear, how slow and tired she was feeling. Ever since the party it had felt as if she had small clouds of chewing gum clogging up the inside of her head. Of course, the wine and all the pills she took every day didn't mix very well. But what fun they had had! If only they had had time to tidy up and return to their rooms . . . Yes, if only they hadn't fallen asleep . . .

Martha sat on the edge of her bed and manoeuvred her feet into her slippers. Oh, it had been so embarrassing and Director Mattson had shouted at them in such an irascible manner. She glanced at the bedside table. There lay the corkscrew that

Brains had given her ‘for future parties’, as he had put it. But, sadly, there’d be no more. After the party, Nurse Barbara had locked them all in their rooms and now they could only leave the residents’ floor if a member of staff accompanied them. And on top of that, they had been given small red pills ‘to calm them down’. How boring life had become!

And talking of pills – why did old people always have to have so many pills? They almost seemed to receive more pills than food. Perhaps that’s what had made them so dull? They always used to play cards and had gone into each other’s rooms after 8 p.m. But since Diamond House had taken over, things like that didn’t happen any more. Nowadays they hardly did anything at all, and if they got the chance to play a hand of cards, they either fell asleep or forgot what they were doing. Christina, who loved her literary classics, didn’t even have the energy to thumb through magazines, and Anna-Greta, who had liked to listen to horn concertos and some of the Swedish popular folk singers, now just stared at her record player and couldn’t muster the energy to get any of her records down from the shelf. Brains hadn’t made any inventions for ages, and Rake didn’t look after his plants properly. Most of the time they just watched TV and nobody did anything special. Something was wrong, really horribly wrong.

Martha got up, supported herself on her Zimmer frame and went into the bathroom. While she washed her face, brushed her teeth and went about her morning routine, she mulled everything over. Hadn’t she been the one who had intended to protest and make a revolution? But now here she was, doing nothing again. She stared into the mirror and noticed how worn out she looked. Her face was pale and her white hair

stood on end. Sighing loudly, she stretched out, reaching for her hairbrush, but in so doing happened to knock the bottle of red pills onto the floor. They scattered across the bathroom floor and lay there like angry red dots by her feet. She didn't feel like picking them up. Martha snorted and just swept them all down the floor drain with her foot.

She got rid of some of the other pills too, and after a few days, already felt much chirpier. She started knitting again and, having always loved crime thrillers, went back to working her way through the stack of ghastly murders on her bedside table. And her revolutionary zeal had returned.

When Brains heard the knocks, he knew it must be Martha. Three distinct knocks on the door right next to the handle and then silence. That was definitely her. He dragged himself up from the sofa and pulled his sweater down over his round belly. He hadn't had a visit from Martha for quite some time, and he had wondered if she was OK. Every day he had intended to go and see her in the evening, but instead he had always fallen asleep in front of the telly. He looked around for an empty cardboard box and quickly tidied away the pile of drawings, chisels and screws from the coffee table into the box, before hastily pushing it under his bed. Two blue shirts and some socks with holes in he hid behind the sofa cushions, and he brushed the breadcrumbs scattered across his side table onto the floor. Having done that, he turned off the TV and went to open the door.

'Ah, it is you, come in!'

'Brains, we must have a talk,' Martha said, striding into his room purposefully.

He nodded and put the kettle on. In the cupboard he found two printed circuit cards, a hammer and some cables before he reached the instant coffee. There were two coffee cups behind the coffee jar. When the water had boiled, he filled the cups and added some coffee granules.

‘I haven’t got any biscuits, I’m afraid, but—’

‘That will do just fine,’ said Martha, accepting the cup of coffee and sitting down on the sofa. ‘You know something, this might sound crazy, but I think they are drugging us. We get too many pills. That is why we have been so lethargic.’

‘Really? Do you mean—’ He discreetly pushed aside a gutted Grundig radio under the armchair and hoped she hadn’t noticed it.

‘Well, we can’t allow it to go on!’

‘Exactly! We should have acted when we said we were going to protest.’

He took her hand and patted it lightly.

‘But, my dear, it still isn’t too late.’

Martha’s eyes sparkled and her face lit up.

‘You know what, I’ve been thinking of something. In prison you are allowed out in the fresh air at least once a day, but here we are hardly ever let out at all.’

‘I wonder how fresh the air is around a prison, but yes, I get your point.’

‘Prisoners get out for at least an hour every day, and they are given nourishing food and can take classes in a workshop. In fact, they have it better than we do.’

‘A workshop?’ That got Brains’ attention.

‘You see? I want to live for as long as possible – but I want to live an exciting life for as long as I can too.’ She leaned over and

whispered something in his ear. Brains raised his eyebrows and shook his head. But Martha didn't give up.

'Brains, I have thought this over very carefully . . .'

'OK, why not, why not . . .'

he said. He leaned back in his armchair and burst out laughing.

4

The sound of her heels echoed harshly in the corridor as Nurse Barbara hurried along. She opened the storeroom door, wheeled out her trolley and put the medicines on the tray. Each and every one of the twenty-two clients had an assortment of pills that it was her job to keep track of. Director Mattson was fussy about medication, and each of the elderly clients had their personal prescriptions. But some of the pills, like the red ones, were given to all the residents. As were the light blue pills that he had recently introduced. They helped the old folk to lose their appetite.

‘They will eat less and then we won’t have to buy so much food,’ he had said.

Nurse Barbara wondered if this was ethical, but she hadn’t dared make an issue of it with the director since she wanted to keep in his good books. She wanted to make something of her life. Her mother had been a single mum and had worked as a maid in the posh district of Djursholm. She had never earned very much and they had been quite poor. When Barbara had accompanied her mother to work one day, she had seen fancy paintings, shining silver and patterned parquet floors. She had seen the ‘fancy folk’ her mother worked for dressed in furs and

beautiful clothes. That glimpse of a different sort of life was something she had never forgotten. Director Mattson was one of those successful people too. He was twenty years older than her, energetic, quick-witted, and had many years' experience of doing business. Above all, he had a lot of influence and power, and she realized he could help her along in life. She hung on to his every word and she admired him. He might be carrying a few extra pounds, and perhaps he worked too much as well, but he was rich, and with his brown eyes, dark hair and charming manner he reminded her of an Italian. It wasn't long before she fell in love with him. He was married, but she hoped for more and they soon embarked upon a relationship. And they were going to go on holiday together.

She hurried down the corridor and distributed the pills to the old people. Then she parked the trolley in the storeroom again, and returned to her office. Now all she had to do was tidy up the paperwork on her desk, so that Katia, her replacement while she was on holiday, had a clean desk when she arrived. Nurse Barbara sat in front of her computer with a dreamy look in her eyes. Tomorrow, she thought, tomorrow. At last, she and Ingmar would be able to get away from it all and just be together.

The next day, Martha observed that Director Mattson picked up Nurse Barbara in his car. Aha! She had suspected that there was something going on between them. The director was going to a conference and was taking her with him. Good. That suited her perfectly. The car was barely out of sight before Martha was gathering all her friends to tell them about the pills, which were promptly discarded.

★

A few days later, laughter was heard in the lounge again. Brains and Rake played backgammon, Christina was painting her watercolours, and Anna-Greta listened to music or played patience.

‘Patience is good for keeping your brain in good shape,’ Anna-Greta chirped as she placed the cards out on the table. She was careful not to cheat, and never forgot to tell everyone whenever she solved her card solitaire. Her long, thin face and the bun on her neck made her look like an old school mistress rather than an ex-bank clerk. Some smart investments had made her rich, and she was proud of her ability to do sums in her head so quickly. When, once, the staff at the retirement home had offered to help her with her bank accounts, she had looked daggers at them and nobody had dared ask a second time. She had grown up in Djursholm and had learned the value of money. At school she had always been top of the class in mathematics. Martha looked at her out of the corner of her eye and wondered if it would be possible to get such a correct and proper person to join her on an adventure. She and Brains had concocted a plan and were just waiting for the right opportunity to put it into action.

The days without Nurse Barbara were the calm before the storm. On the surface, everything seemed as normal, but inside each of them, something had changed. The five friends sang ‘Happy as a bird’ and the first movement from Lars-Erik Larsson’s *God in Disguise*, just as they had done before Diamond House took over, and the staff applauded and smiled for the first time in ages. Nineteen-year-old Katia Erikson from Farsta, Nurse Barbara’s temporary replacement, baked some cakes for

afternoon coffee, found some tools for Brains, and let everyone get on with their own thing. The guests at Diamond House became all the more self-confident and when the day came for Katia to cycle home for good, and Nurse Barbara returned, a defiant rebellious seed had started to sprout.

‘Oh well, I suppose we must prepare ourselves for the worst,’ Brains sighed when he saw Nurse Barbara on her way in through the glass doors.

‘She’s probably all set to make even more cuts for Director Mattson,’ said Martha. ‘On the other hand, it might help our cause,’ she added with a barely discernible wink.

‘Yes, you can say that again,’ said Brains and he winked back.

Nurse Barbara had barely been back at the retirement home for a few hours before doors could be heard slamming and her high heels echoed down the corridor. In the afternoon, she asked everybody to come to the lounge. Once she had them there, she cleared her throat and placed a pile of papers on the table.

‘Regrettably, we must make some cuts,’ she started off. Her hair was nicely done up and there was a new gold bracelet visible on her wrist. ‘In bad times we must all do our bit as much as we can. Unfortunately, we must cut down on staff costs, so starting from next week there will be only two members of staff. Besides me, that is. This will mean that you can only go out once a week for a walk.’

‘Prison inmates can get exercise every day, you know. You can’t do that,’ Martha protested loudly. Barbara pretended not to hear.

‘And we must cut costs for food, too,’ she went on. ‘From now on, there will only be one main meal a day. At other times you will be served with sandwiches.’

‘Over my dead body! We must have proper food and you should buy more fruit and veg too,’ Rake roared.

‘I wonder if the upstairs kitchen is locked,’ whispered Martha.

‘Not that kitchen again,’ said Christina, dropping her nail file.

Later that evening, when the staff had gone home for the day, Martha went up to the kitchen anyway. Rake would be so pleased if she could get him a salad. He was rather downhearted because his son hadn’t been in touch, and he needed cheering up. Martha often wished that she had a family too, but the great love of her life had left her when her son was two years old. Her little boy had had dimples and curly blond hair, and for five years he was the joy of her life. The last summer in the countryside they had visited the horses in the stable, picked blueberries in the woods and gone fishing down at the lake. But one Sunday morning, while she was still asleep, he had taken the fishing rod and disappeared off to the jetty. And it was there, next to one of the jetty posts, that she found him. Her life had come to a tragic halt and if it hadn’t been for her parents she probably wouldn’t have found the strength to carry on. She had relationships with several men after the death of her beloved son, but when she had tried to get pregnant again she had miscarried. In the end she grew too old, and gave up on the idea of having a family. Childlessness was her great sorrow, even though she didn’t show it. Instead, she hid her pain, and a laugh can disguise so much. She found people were easy to fool.

Martha shook herself from her thoughts, tip-toed into Nurse Barbara’s office and opened the key cabinet. She remembered

the smell of food and expectantly pulled out the master key. But when she got to the first floor her plans came to an abrupt halt. Instead of the keyhole, there was one of those strange protuberances for plastic cards. Diamond House had transformed the kitchen into an impregnable fortress! Disappointment washed over her and it was a good few minutes before she was able to gather her wits together and leave. But she didn't give up; instead, she pressed the lift button to go down. Perhaps there was a larder or storage area in the cellar.

When the doors of the lift opened, she hesitated for a moment, not sure where she was. At the far end of the corridor she could make out a weak light from an old-fashioned door with a pane of glass at the top. This door was also locked, but the master key worked. Cautiously, she pushed open the door and a cold, invigorating winter air blew in. Lovely, here was a way out! The chill helped to clear her mind and all of a sudden she remembered the old key from her parents' home. It was very similar to the master key with a triangular bow. If she switched keys, she was sure nobody would notice the difference. Martha closed the door to the outside, turned on the light and entered another corridor. On one of the doors was a sign which read: GYM – FOR STAFF ONLY. Martha unlocked the door and looked inside.

There were no windows and it took a while before she could find the light switch. The fluorescent lights blinked to life and she could see skipping ropes, small weights and exercise cycles. There were benches beside the walls, a treadmill, and weird contraptions she didn't know the names of. So Diamond House had cut back on prophylactic exercise for the residents, but at the same time had a gym just for the staff! They had repeatedly

asked to get back their own exercise room, but the new owners had said no. Martha felt like kicking in the door, which would be rather difficult at her age, but instead blurted out all the swear words she could think of, arched her back like a cat, and made a threatening gesture with her fist.

‘You’ll pay for this, just wait!’

Back upstairs she put the old family key under her door and pulled it as hard as she could to bend it out of shape. Then she hung the crooked key in the key cabinet, so that nobody would be suspicious if the key didn’t fit. She hid the master key in her bra, went to bed, and pulled the covers up to her chin. The first step in a revolution was to be able to move about freely. And now they could do just that. Shutting her eyes, and with a smile on her lips, she fell asleep and dreamed of a gang of oldies who robbed a bank and were hailed as heroes when they got to prison.