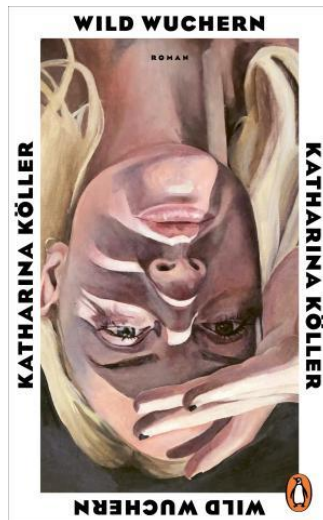


Katharina Köller

Sprawling Wildly

[Wild wuchern]

Outline + Sample Translation



Novel

Penguin, 208 pages, February 2025

“Back where I had been planted, I was like a dainty flower in a pot. Now I’m here, and I’m growing.”

They couldn’t be more different: Marie, the sharp-tongued Viennese lady, a creature of luxury, simultaneously pampered and despised by her husband Peter. And Johanna, the “wild animal in a human body.” Johanna has stopped speaking in adolescence and left humanity behind, leading a hermit life on a remote mountain pasture for years. The cousins have not seen each other since she moved there. But now Marie is hurrying up the mountain to Johanna’s hut, panicked, covered in blood. She is on the run from her violent husband and a world in which many things have gone awry, unnoticed by her.

In her poetical and political novel – fairy tale, parable and pulsating critique of civilisation all in one – Katharina Köller celebrates two women who empower each other and make each other believe in change.

- The hermit Johanna, the glamorous Marie – two very different women whose unusual pact changes everything
- A powerful parable about strength and female self-empowerment
- Touches on key topics of our time: critique of capitalism, the search for a new harmony with nature, alternative lifestyles, violence against women, strong female role models

Katharina Köller was born in Eisenstadt, Austria, in 1984. After studying philosophy and acting, she’s worked as a freelance author, actor, and theatre maker since 2011. Her debut novel “Was ich im Wasser sah” (‘What I Saw in the Water’) was published in 2020 and won the City of Wetzlar’s Fantasy Prize. Katharina Köller lives with her family in Vienna and Innsbruck.

Sample Translation

By Alexandra Berlina

Since the very moment I stopped – just to pause, to breathe, to take a quick look at the moon – I’ve had the feeling that someone was behind me. That someone was following me, chasing me. I know who, too. Of course I do, otherwise I wouldn’t be so scared. But it’s impossible, it can’t be, he can’t have taken the same train, and if he took the car, he’d still be stuck somewhere near Rosenheim at the border. The train, it doesn’t care about the Deutsches Eck, it speeds right through there, but by car, you need to slow down at the autobahn link. On the route between Vienna and Innsbruck, no car can go as fast as the Railjet Express.

And he really can’t have taken the same train, can he? To do that, he’d have needed to follow me as soon as I got out, at a run, and I’m sure he didn’t. In his condition, he couldn’t have run. And I was lucky with the train, too. You wouldn’t think you could be lucky in a pickle like that, but I was! I got into that train at the very last second.

And right before that, I made a decision. On my way to the station, I was still thinking of Italy. I always think of Italy. Italy, where you can stare into the sea. No matter what, the solution is always Italy. A sea to stare into. And an ice cream.

But they’d find me in Italy, I realized at the last moment. He’s found me there many times, after all. Even though I’d been in a different city every time. Once in Venice, once in Trieste, once in Rimini. Here, he can’t find me. He doesn’t know anything about this place. I don’t think he even knows that Johanna exists.

So I don’t need to keep turning round. I don’t need to run faster. But I do. I run, fleeing the images that pop up in my head. Him appearing from behind a rock. Him breaking out of the labyrinth of mountain pines. Sometimes the way he always looks, sometimes – and this is even worse – the way I had left him. In a condition in which he really shouldn’t be able to make it this far.

Once the fear has you, it clings to you like a spider’s web. Threads in your hair, and the spider itself on the back of your neck.

Before that moment, I had no fear at all, not a trace. Even though it’s dark, the deepest night, and I’m all alone in the middle of nowhere. All I have is my smartphone, running out of juice, its screen broken. Briefly, the thought of wolves crosses my mind. Actual wolves are supposed to live here. Lots of them, if you believe the farmers’ association. It lobbies for the right to shoot them on a grand scale. The wolves, this is. Imagine that. Everywhere else, people believe in protecting wild species, they’d be proud to have real wolves. But here, in the Tyrolean mountains, everything is different. A wilderness.

Be it as it may, I haven’t seen a wolf yet. I did hear a noise, but I don’t know if it was one. How am I supposed to know what a wolf sounds like? I assume they don’t really spend most of their time howling in picturesque solitude in front of the full moon like they do in cowboy films. Besides, the moon isn’t even full. It’s just a crescent, and in all the cowboy films I ever saw, not a single wolf has ever been interested in howling at a crescent moon.

I have to keep going. If I stop, it will catch up with me. So I keep going. Quickly. Uphill. Further and further uphill. I no longer have any sense of time. Sometimes, there is forest around me, sometimes a meadow, sometimes rocks or mountain pines. Sometimes I can see the moon, sometimes not. Unbelievably, I actually find the way. I didn't think I'd manage.

My brain is wired to produce its own interfering frequencies if things become too much to bear. It's like when you adjust the aerial on an old radio, and suddenly there's static. Now, for instance, a song is playing in a loop in my head. I don't know the lyrics well, but I sing along, whispering along the few words I do know, and maybe that's why I've stopped turning round and hallucinating people into the landscape.

I'm gripped by another bout of fear when I'm over the ridge and can't see the hut – until I realise that I'm looking at the wrong slope. There is more ground to cover, down and then up again and around the mountain.

If only the wind wasn't hissing so wildly and cutting into my face, then I'd sit down and have a good cry. As it is, I plod on. Downhill now. It's much harder because the moon is no longer shining onto the slope. Besides, going downhill is always harder if you're in a hurry, the chance to stumble greater.

How did I manage to climb all these mountain slopes as a child? It must have taken me hours. I'd never let a six-year-old go down here and then back up again. Not even in still weather and in daylight.

Of course, I'm spoilt and from Vienna, which is almost as bad as Germany. The Tyroleans probably climb all over these mountains as toddlers. Who needs a fixed rope route if the slope isn't vertical?

Johanna never complained about the walking, at any rate. She never cried from exhaustion, never had to be carried. And she's almost exactly the same age as me and also from Vienna. The difference is: she's not a human but a wild animal in a human body.

When the wind's whistling around me grows a little less sharp, I remember what comes next. Namely: walking through a forest. Gadzooks! There'd been a forest section before, but back then, it wasn't really dark yet. Who knows what dangers are lurking in the woods...

But I'm not there yet, am I? As my yoga teacher keeps saying: "Always stay in the moment. Don't worry about the past or future." And now I understand why. Because on the way from the past to the future, you get hit a few more times when you least expect it. By the time you arrive in that future you were thinking about, you'll have a hole in your leggings.

I feel no pain, though, and I don't care whether I'm bleeding. Which I am, from my head under the headband, and who knows where else.

Here is what I'm going to do: I'm going to run through the forest really, really fast, never leaving the path, never looking right or left. I can't fight what might come at me there, anyway. I mean, how am I supposed to defend myself against a wild boar? With a pepper spray?

There it is now, the forest. In front of me. As black as a black hole. Going in there seems like a dream.

My phone has very little juice left, even though I'd switched it to flight mode on the train. Luckily I didn't throw it away at the station, as I had intended to do, because of course I hadn't thought of a torch light. Who needs a torch light in beautiful Italy?

The darkness is thick and furry, and only very slowly do things emerge from it. The undergrowth. Some tree trunks, blacker than the air around them. The path itself is lighter because of the rubble on it. The light from my phone is cutting strange shapes out of the dark.

No, don't you look to the right now, don't look to the left! Keep your head down, light on the path, keep going. I can only hope that Johanna uses this path from time to time, that I won't find it completely overgrown deeper in the forest.

My heart is pounding, and my breathing is so loud that I can't hear a thing. It's still going downhill. I'm so lucky I've got the phone light, I think again. Without it, I'd be stumbling over every branch and root. Some of the roots feel like steps, some like traps.

I hear the stream before I see it, the rushing even louder than my breath. We used to jump or climb over it, I remember. Grandma would take off her boots and wade through so that she could hold my hand while I skipped from stone to stone. Johanna didn't let her hand be held. Maybe she didn't want her grandfather to give her the kind of contemptuous look that he gave me. Me, I couldn't care less. As long as Grandma was there, nothing mattered.

I never asked her how cold the stream was around her bare feet. Now, as I stumble, slip off the first stone, and land with one shoe in the water, it turns out to be freezing. My feet go numb. The stream almost knocks me over. I wade through it as fast as I can. Maybe it's so quick and cold now because of the melting snow? We used to only come here in midsummer, long after all the non-permanent ice was gone...

It only takes a few steps to cross the stream. Now the way's going uphill again. I hold on to branches and tree trunks on my way up along the path, away from the stream.

With every step, the water squelches in my shoes. No matter. It's not far now. On and on uphill. Soon, I'll get to the hut. But the thing with me is: I always make the same mistake at least twice. I just haven't properly internalised the yoga teacher's saying. So now I find myself thinking: it wasn't that bad, was it? No wild boars, no wolves, no bandits. The forest was actually much nicer than the damn ridge and the scree slope... And right when I think this, my phone turns off. Just like that, without warning, I'm standing in the dark.

At first, I'm so shocked I can't move at all. Everything is pitch black. No moon is visible anymore, not even a crescent. No stars, no nothing. Above me, the dense foliage of the early summer forest. No light at all. And no idea which way to go now. Uphill, right, but where exactly? All I know is that I have to go round the mountain. The path is no longer covered with whitish rubble but as black as the rest of the forest floor, what with all the roots, leaves, and earth. I can no longer see the trees, either. Or the bushes. Or the undergrowth.

But now, as I pause, I suddenly hear it. I hear the forest. The cracking and thumping and

chattering and knocking. The rustling in the leaves and the squelching and snorting of animals. The cooing and chirping and whistling. And then also – shit, oh shit – footfalls! Yes, this is definitely someone approaching. Animals can see much better at night than we can, of course, almost all animals can see better than humans, and I've never practised seeing in very low light, I'm not Johanna, after all...

And what if it's not an animal but him? What then? What should I do? I'm so overcome with fear that I just start running. Somewhere uphill. I run and stumble and fall, and the undergrowth catches me, holds me, but I pull myself free, I break through it, and I don't care about the thorns in my arms and my hair or about the scratches on my face.

Whatever is chasing me, be it him or a wolf or just my fear, at least it does the job of driving me on.

By and by, some light begins to filter through the trees, yes, now I can see it shimmer on the path. The black is less and less dense, and soon, I'm truly out of the woods. Sure, I get stuck in the undergrowth again, but what's some thorny hedge compared to my despair? Nothing, nothing at all!

Having freed myself from the undergrowth, I fall, hit my knee against the stone, hiss in pain, pick myself up, and hobble on, out of the forest, up onto the slope. And suddenly, I see it. A small, faint light. Flickering like a distant star's. There's the hut, there it is, I've found it! It really exists, and if there is a light, then Johanna must really be in there, just like her mother has been telling me for years. There she lives, all alone on the mountain.

If I still had any air left in my lungs, I'd cheer. But I can't: the slope is now getting really steep. With my wet shoes, I slip on the boggy meadow and on the rocks as I run diagonally up the slope. Eventually I realise that crawling on all fours would be easier. And I do. Like a beetle, I scuttle towards the light.

Ever since starting on this path, no, actually ever since leaving Vienna, since I and my fancy backpack ended up on the train to Bregenz, I've been asking myself three questions:

1. whether Johanna really still lives there – after all, she might be dead;
2. what she'll say;
3. what she looks like.

Absurdly, I first imagined that she'd be delighted to see me. I imagined her the way she was when I was eighteen, when we met for the last time. Not tall, but taller than me. Not dark, but darker than me. With heavy, thick hair, which I used to style into a French plait. She'd wear the plait until the rubber band slipped off the end and it fell apart by itself, sometimes for a whole week. She had beautiful hair, only she didn't take care of it. It would never be in any kind of shape if I and Anna the Cleaner didn't style it.

At some point, Anna the Cleaner suggested Johanna donate her mane to have wigs made for children with cancer.

"Such a thick plait, enough hair for three children, I'm sure!" she said, and at once, Johanna took a pair of scissors, and the plait was gone.

Because of this, her mother fired Anna the Cleaner, and afterwards she and her sister – Johanna's mother – sat up in the kitchen all night, feeling sorry for themselves.

To this day, they love feeling sorry for themselves. Never for each other. Their conversation

goes something like this:

"You've got Marie, that golden girl! And mine, the silly child, lets the cleaning woman steal her hair!"

"Marie, a golden girl? Good Gracious! This girl hasn't an ounce of good sense in her! Can't imagine what kind of future she'll have. She'll run off with some guy who'd break her heart, I'm sure. No, I'd take Johanna any day."

"No guy is in a hurry to break Johanna's heart!"

"Or come on! At least your husband isn't cheating on you."

"That's just the way it is when you're married to a demigod."

"Demigod or not, you're the one with the perfect bikini body!"

"But nobody gets to see it because I'm wasting my life in Lower Austria!"

They did have good reasons to pity themselves: after all, my grandfather was their father. Especially Johanna's Mum really didn't have it easy.

But I know for sure that Anna the Cleaner did donate the braid to children with cancer rather than selling it on the black market somewhere. She was an utterly wonderful person. Only nobody believed it because she was from Romania.

The house – or rather, a hut – is a black silhouette against the night sky. So is the goat pen behind it. Everything is quiet, no goats bleating in their sleep, no little bells jingling, not a breath stirring the plants in the vegetable garden.

The windows are dark. I don't know what the light was that I saw before; there's certainly none burning here. Maybe it was the moon reflected in the window glass...

The hut is standing on a little bit of plain surface atop a mountain ridge. All around it and behind it, the slope is steep. Not a single tree in sight. Still, it doesn't seem to be windy here.

I pick myself up and stumble over the tamped-down earth, past the well and towards the house. Everything is quiet. It feels ghostly. Up a step to the covered terrace, another step to the door. No one answers my knocking. I push down the handle. The door scrapes on the floor and squeaks on its hinges. I push it open. Inside, it's as dark as in the forest. The moonlight casts a square onto the floorboards. "Johanna?" I whisper, taking a step inside. "Johanna?"

Nobody there. But I've already practised seeing in very little light. And I know, it's not just cats whose pupils get larger in the dark. I blink to help my eyes adjust.

By and by, I make out some objects. The stove, the corner bench. The narrow staircase to the attic. Next to the front door is something large and black, perhaps a clothes rack. I take a step towards the stove and whisper again: "Johanna?"

Further in the room, I can see the bed now. It's empty. Where is she? Is she no longer living here?

A little light is coming in through the tiny window behind the bed. All the windows in this hut are tiny. It used to get on my nerves back when they'd send us up here for weeks. They used to do that to have some peace and quiet. In the light, there's no Johanna whatsoever.

All there is this room, next to it a washroom, and behind it, a pit toilet. I also remember a

storage room of sorts outside and a pantry next to the front door.

Everything looks just like it used to. Only the clothes rack next to the door is new. Strange, really, that Johanna thought of buying one. And actually, she didn't – as I realise a moment later when the clothes rack slowly turns toward me and says: "Marie." Just my name, nothing else.

This "Marie," coming quietly from the corner, startles me so much that I gasp for breath.

How can she stand around without breathing, as if she were an animal on the lookout and not a person seeing her cousin again after years and years? Did she see me climb – crawl – up the slope? Did she position herself here to intercept me? So that she could kill me silently in the dark if necessary?

"So you've recognised me?" I say when I finally get my voice back. I almost laugh, but not quite. I don't dare to.

Johanna doesn't switch on any light, and what filters in from the window is not enough to see her face expression or even to determine if she'd nodded in reply. Probably she simply ignored my question, which was rhetorical anyway. Non-verbal communication – nodding, and all that – was never her thing. Making it easier for the other person wasn't her thing either. She just leaves me standing in the dark, doesn't offer me tea, doesn't pretend to be happy to see me, doesn't even ask me what I'm doing here in the middle of the night.

So weird. I haven't seen her for ages. I grew up, studied in Florence, did internships – in New York, in Paris, all over the place. I attended countless fashion shows, sometimes watching the models wear my shoes on the catwalk, had a contract with a famous designer, lived in London, met Peter again, went back to Vienna, married Peter, went on a wedding trip around the world for over a year, quit my job, kept trying to get a new one, got depressed, was in therapy...

And while all of that was happening, all these years. Johanna has been up here, if her mother is to be believed. All these years, she has studied nothing and hasn't spoken to a soul.

You can't say we're looking at each other, it's too dark for that. Or at least I can't look at her. Maybe she is looking at me, maybe her eyes are cat eyes now.

However, you can say that we are sensing each other, feeling each other's presence. The little light is enough for that. It's just like before, this mixture of superiority and inferiority that I feel. Somehow, Johanna was better than me, I knew that deep down – and at the same time, from our parents' point of view, I was somehow better than her. In any case, there was always an invisible referee watching us, awarding points. I don't know what he'd have said now about this darkness.

"Could you switch on a light, please? I can't see anything."

Johanna hesitates. No idea why.

Finally, she makes up her mind, opens the oven door, throws in a few logs, blows on the embers, and uses a thin stick to light a candle. And as she holds it up, her face finally emerges from the dark.

Johanna's face. It's really her. The girl with the long plait purloined by Anna the Cleaner. The girl with the rats under her jumper, with the insect hotel in the garden. The girl who stood

motionless for hours in the shallow water of the Dechant lake and let the gnats drink her blood until the fish were no longer afraid of her. The girl who was proud when one of the ugly, mangled Viennese pigeons sat on her shoulder. The girl who, one day, suddenly stopped speaking and never really started again.

Still, she sometimes does say a few words. For instance, "Why are you here?"

I hardly knew the dogs. They were called Max and Moritz, names I didn't like at all. I've never understood why anyone would be named after such unlikeable characters, characters who meet such a terrible end to boot. Who finds this kind of thing funny?

Johanna didn't come up with the names herself, though. And anyway, as far as the names in her family are concerned, the dogs weren't the one worst off, not by a long stretch. To wit: Heidi, her mother, called her daughter Johanna because before her, she had a stillbirth, a boy she named Johannes before burying him in the Mödling cemetery. The praying angel over his grave looks the way she and her husband imagined Johannes to look if he lived. With blond curly hair and a cherub's face. They kept visiting his grave, with Johanna in tow, and a few times, with me. Heidi also lit a candle for her dead son in every church she passed and made Johanna light a candle, too.

If Johannes lived, he would have been the perfect child, she seemed to believe. The child she actually had, the girl, was not at all what she wanted. Her hair was the wrong colour, her puberty seemingly never happened, her interests were grotesque – animals, plants, even insects – and her taciturn behaviour was sometimes close to petrification.

"Marie and Johannes would have made such a lovely couple," our mothers used to say, and it took me several hours of therapy to realise that this was not very sound psychologically. As a child, I always thought that if I were Johanna, I'd do my best to replace this dead boy. But that probably wasn't possible. Imaginary Johannes kept growing, meeting every demand. Whatever they needed, there he was. Whatever they wanted, there he was.

"Johannes would have tidied up his room long ago" was the usual drift. And then, when Johanna fell silent, "Johannes would never have done such a thing to us!"

Johannes would probably be Federal Chancellor by now. And the best one ever, too. If not the youngest, then certainly the smartest.

The grandfather was initially quite mad that his two daughters had daughters in their turn, that no one had thought to finally give him a boy – until he realised that Johanna was special, much better than any boy.

But he was and remained the only one who saw it that way. Even my parents would sometimes slip into the St Johannes craze. It would be so incredibly nice to have this perfect little nephew. As for Johanna, all she had was a dead child's name. Nothing else. No parental love, that's for sure.

No wonder she didn't really care about names. She didn't care if the chamois had one. She didn't care that the dogs were called Max and Moritz. In Johanna's mind, I think I know that now, they were her *siblings*. As a little girl, she made no distinction between herself and them. She didn't mind that her beloved brothers were dogs – big, black dogs.

So there she was, a little girl who had a cousin and two brothers. She'd never talked to anyone about these brothers before. She hasn't talked to anyone about anything in a long, long while. Now she has to pick the right words one by one, look at them carefully, consider if any of them fit. This takes time, but we have the whole night.

“Without them – without them, I... I wouldn’t have learnt to walk. I guess I’d have drowned in the garden pond. They always looked out for me. We were always together.”

The parents were grieving for their dead child and had no time for the one still alive.

Besides, they had many social commitments, a large circle of friends, many nights out...

They couldn’t have taken her along, could have? What would a preschool girl do at the Salzburg Festival? She wouldn’t have understood anything about the high art of the opera, it would be a waste of money, and the tickets weren’t cheap, not cheap at all. And you couldn’t just miss the festival. The father of the family, being a politician, had to keep in touch with the Salzburg people. That was the right thing to do. And the mother loved getting out of Mödling where the people didn’t like her because she was a newcomer.

Besides, Salzburg was so beautiful in summer!

They didn’t leave their little daughter alone, of course. There was a nanny, one who found her job very easy indeed. A quiet child who spent all her time playing with the dogs and never asked for anything. She even went to bed on her own.

The nanny quite liked the house with the sauna and the pool in the basement. Her boyfriend appreciated it, too.

The one thing the nanny did take care of was locking the front door so that no one would break in. You never know, after all.

She didn’t consider that the little girl and her dog siblings were biding their time in the dark, their eyes wide open, their ears and noses astute, waiting for the heating in the cellar to start whirring and for the house to smell of sauna oil.

The night whispered through the window in the little girl’s room. The forest behind the garden beckoned with mysterious voices. The girl and her siblings were curious. So out they went. They’d open the back door, sneak across the patio, down the stairs, and over the fence into the forest. Quickly and silently, like shadows.

The little girl couldn’t run as fast as her four-legged brother. But she was much better at climbing. She learnt to move silently. And although she couldn’t hear and smell as well as them, she noticed all the things knocking and throbbing and babbling in the forest. The constant dialogue, which she and her siblings soon joined.

Alas, after spending the nights in the forest, the little girl was often very tired during the day. She’d drag herself through the lessons, and then her mother and aunt would also drag her through the city centre with its shoe shops and coffee houses.

She found it hard to pay attention when asked things like “red ballerinas, or pink”?

Fortunately, she had a cousin who always knew the answers to such questions, and whose skirt rustled so sweetly. Without the cousin, her mother and aunt would have had even less patience for the little girl. With the cousin – she believed – things could go on like this forever.

“Thank you for that,” Johanna says to me now, and I’m glad that I’m sitting in the dark. I lean back, keeping my head out of the flickering light. I don’t want her to know what’s going on with my face right now.

She isn’t looking at me anyway but smiling blissfully at the cupboard, without seeing it, or so it seems to me. In her mind, she is in the forest, or maybe in the coffee house, in Mödling or in Vienna, not in this hut, the storm and rain beating down the windows.

“But things couldn’t really go on like this in the long run,” she says, continuing to smile. Her smile is becoming creepy.

One night, while the little girl was coming out of the forest with her dog brothers, she found the world changed. The garden was flooded with light, brighter than during the day.

People were making their way through the undergrowth, the beams of their torchlights cutting through the darkness. The small animals hid; the large ones ran. The people were shouting the little girl's name. In the background, blue lights were dancing in a circle. It was all so bright, so loud. The girl hid, but her siblings kept nudging her to come out. She let them lead her into the light, and when a beam hit her face, her eyes burned, used to the tender shine of the night.

The torchlight belonged to a policeman. He shouted with surprise when something came out of the woods right into the beam, like a moth fluttering into a candle. With a few steps, he was by the little girl's side, lifting her up and away from her siblings, who were so black they melted into the night.

The girl looked anxiously over the policeman's shoulder and would have liked to protest as he climbed over the fence into the garden. But her voice caught in her throat: she saw her mother and the nanny running across the dark lawn.

The nanny was in tears, sobbing so violently that she was shaking. Then she collapsed on the grass crying. The mother, her face white in the moonlight, cried out again and again, her voice catching: "There you are!" And: "How could you?"

The little girl wanted to stay in the policeman's arms.

But now her father also came panting across the meadow, and while her mother was pale and cold, he was red and sweating.

"There she is!" he snorted, and the little girl clung tightly to the man in blue, her friend and helper – but the man sat her down heartlessly on the grass.

"You're not wearing any shoes!" her mother moaned, close to fainting, holding on to her husband.

"You look like an animal," he remarked.

The policeman felt that he'd become superfluous. All he wanted was to go back to his colleagues, to get into the car, and turn off the flashing blue lights. After all, the emergency was over now, and the neighbours were bound to complain about the disturbance of the peace the next day. He knew they would: in this neighbourhood, night peace was particularly sacred. This is why people decide to live on the edge of the woods in the first place, after all.

But the Member of Parliament held the policeman back, quickly pressing a light green note into his hand, a gesture invisible in the darkness, and whispering a request.

"Please be very discreet. The press doesn't need to know that the child ran away at night, does it?"

That was clear anyway; the policeman hadn't been born yesterday. Johanna's father didn't need to whisper and spit into his ear like that. And now, off with the blue lights, right now!

"Stop the blues and twos, will you!?" The policeman's voice was so loud that the Member of Parliament felt like snatching the hundred from his hand again. But at least it was dark again now, and slowly getting quiet.

Now was the time to deal with the crying nanny, the trembling pale wife, and the mute daughter. But the child and wife had already left, only the nanny was still sobbing in the meadow.

"Get up now, baby doll," said the Member of Parliament, holding out his hand. Baby Doll let herself be pulled up and persuaded to drink a glass of cognac to counter the shock.

What the daughter needed most urgently, it was decided, was a bath. She was dirty from top to bottom, and the bath was good for warmth, too. Barefoot in the woods, she could have caught her death!

So while the little girl was sitting in a sea of pink foam, scrubbed down with one shower gel after another, the soles of her feet rubbed so violently with brushes and pumice stones that she cried, while her mother went on and on about the dangers of the forest, the Member of Parliament sat the nanny down on the couch, explained that it hadn't been her fault at all, and patted her on the knee to calm her down. It wasn't until much later that he remembered the dogs.

"Wolves and wild boars and giant spiders and adders and grass snakes and lynxes and even bears, I've heard! Now there are bears in Lower Austria again! Can you imagine? What would you have done if you met a bear, eh?" her mother scolded.

Where were her siblings, the little girl wondered. Everybody had forgotten all about them. They were probably sneaking around the house, waiting for a sign from her. But her mother didn't care for them at all!

"You really look like an animal, so dirty and scratched and wild! I don't know what to do with you, really! Just why do you have to be like that!?"

At last the little girl was deemed clean and lifted out of the foam. To her own nostrils, she was stinking now, covered in the artificial smell of roses and lilies. The moisturising lotion and hair balm made her cough. Her siblings would be wrinkling their black noses for sure... They'd have to lick her clean before she went back into the forest.

But it didn't come to that. When the Member of Parliament opened the door to the garden, when the siblings rushed inside and the little girl, fresh from the bath, rushed towards them, the girl's mother heard her say something to them in forest language. Not in words. There was just a growl and a nudge of muzzle against forehead. A panting, a whimpering, a hand plodding a flank like a paw. The mother felt an icy shiver run down her spine. Sure, she wanted some distance between herself and this strange dark-haired child. Sure, her *real* child was the golden Johannes; this girl had just somehow slipped in between, fallen into her lap. She wasn't Heidi's best performance. Heidi was better than that. But although she usually didn't care about what was going on in the dark brain of this dark child, now there was that shiver running down her spine. An icy cold breath from the forest. From the wilderness. The feeling that the girl was deeply, deeply *different*. That she didn't *belong*. That she wasn't *human*.

She suddenly realised that it wasn't just her who was rejecting her child – the child was rejecting her right back. She realized that her child had wolf-like siblings with whom she roamed the forest, unafraid of real wolves because she could talk to them. Realized that the child preferred the wilderness to the city of Vienna, that the child only pretended to be a human girl. It all seemed like a scam. A devious deception.

What followed was at the very least this: the siblings' fate was sealed.

But the little girl didn't know it yet.

At night, she was always locked up in her room now, and her siblings in the kennel.

But she'd climb out through the skylight, run along the rain drain on the roof, jump onto the second-floor balcony, then lower herself over the trellis of the blooming clematis, slide onto the garage roof and into the branches of the magnolia. This way, she'd finally find herself standing on firm ground. A dangerous journey, especially for a child. And then she had to get back inside the same way, too. Every time, she succeeded. Except once, when she fell.

She shouldn't have fallen. It was her fault. She shouldn't have. Never. As she talks about it now, a little girl no more, her voice first becomes muffled and strained, and then falters. I pick up a mug of tea from the table and put it into her hand.

Johanna takes a sip. Still, she remains silent. A stony black and white silence interspersed with the sound of rain.

The thunderstorm has moved on, barely audible in the distance. The fire crackles softly. I get up again and feed it some more wood.

In the dancing flame of the lamp, I can't see Johanna's face well. The little light glowing from behind the oven door doesn't help, either, but perhaps it's for the better. Perhaps it's best not to see her too clearly right now.

I'm scared of what's coming. Though somehow, I already know. I mean, I knew that one day, her siblings disappeared. I just didn't realize that this was the day she stopped speaking. I didn't see the connection. It's because I'm stupid. A stupid, ignorant woman who thinks relatives are relatives, and dogs are dogs.

Johanna is pressing her head against the cupboard, staring into the empty room. There is nothing here. Her siblings aren't here, and neither are her parents, or the rain drain where she had stumbled and slipped.