

# Under The Ice by Gisa Klönne

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Translation: Katy Derbyshire / Bennett Owen

## Part 1 Stifling Heat

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In the first moment, fear is the only sensation. Her eyes start open to the familiar surroundings of her bedroom coated in pale, early morning light. She lies back for a while, listening to the blackbirds courting and clamoring outside her window. Then her thoughts turn to Barabbas and she can feel her tired body tense up as she listens. What a fool, she silently scolds herself, worrying about a dog like other women do about their husbands. But she only finds the courage to sit up once she's convinced that the barely audible rasping in the hallway is Barabbas. Pain shoots into her arms and shoulders even before her feet touch the threadbare wool of the rug.

Pull yourself together, she thinks. Don't let go. It's always worst in the morning but you know you can get up. She purses her lips. Wear and tear, a life of bad posture, too much work and stress. That's what the doctors say. They advise painkillers and tell her to go easy on herself. But they hide their real thoughts behind the cold smile of youth, peppering her with sanctimonious questions. Do you live by yourself? How old are you, Mrs. Vogt? 82? A big yard to take care of? And an Alsatian? Don't you think it's a bit too much? And the open pit mine. Let's face it, Frimmersdorf has seen better days. What they really want to say is, "You're old and it would be better for everyone if you were dead." But she won't do them the

favor.

It's early morning and already the heat hangs hunched over her vegetable garden. I'd better take care of the zucchinis and beans and pick the strawberries before the blackbirds get at them, she thinks. The kettle whistles and she brews her coffee before spreading butter and honey on a slice of toast. Then she fills Barabbas' water bowl and tosses him some dog biscuits. He nuzzles up to her and she fondles his ears, ignoring the punishing pain that runs through her bent body. Barabbas slurps his water indoors. She sips her coffee outside on the veranda. It's half past four. In this comfortable moment she has no inkling of the imminent calamity to come.

Instead she thinks, this is the way it's supposed to be, a beginning, not an end, a day so bright and fresh, as if created just for the two of us. A pair of blackbirds flatter from the ground and longing glimmers in Barabbas' brown eyes. When did they take their last long walk? When was the last time he bounded across the fields? The day before yesterday? A week ago? She can't remember, silently cursing her fading memory as another sign of advanced age. You really need a lot of optimism to keep life from getting you down, she thinks. And the older you get the more you need. She takes her dishes into the kitchen and puts Barabbas on the leash, suddenly buoyed by the thought of a long, invigorating walk. She'll pick the strawberries when they return. The vegetables can wait until evening.

She takes the road through the village, keeping Barabbas on the leash even though it's still early. As long as she follows the rules no one can accuse her of not being able to care for such a big

dog, or that she's a nuisance to the community, that the dog should be put down and she relegated to a senior citizens home.

At the edge of town, behind the sports fields, she lets Barabbas run free. The colossal power station never sleeps. Steam hisses into the morning sky, sirens wail and the rumbling and squeaking conveyor belts transport coal by the ton. She chooses the road with the tunnel, crossing the river where the fishermen will gather later on. Barabbas is having a fine time, leaping around like a puppy. Further on, he leaves the road and trots into the woods. She follows him slowly, carefully choosing her steps so as not to trip. The sun is climbing in the sky but the heat is not unbearable yet and the scent of wild chamomile permeates the air.

The sudden roar of an engine startles her. Confused, she whirls around. What was that? The motor revs again, followed by an irritating, sickening hammering sound. These young kids have no respect, she thinks. But then again, wouldn't they be sleeping off their weekend this early on a Sunday morning? For an instant she feels as if the noise is coming towards her. Now there's more hammering and a flash of light over by the road. And suddenly, all goes silent as the sound of the engine moves away.

Where is Barabbas? The night fear grips her again. What would I do without my dog? What will I have left if he dies? She calls out before thankfully finding him in a hollow, rolling in the dirt with joyful abandon. It will take ages to brush the grit out of his fur. Her daughter complains that the whole house reeks of dog, admonishing her mother for not bathing the creature more often. Elisabeth Vogt shakes her head silently but some memories won't go away.

"Barabbas! Here boy! Come here!" Her call sounds like the hoarse croak of an old woman.

"Barabbas!"

Finally the dog deigns to obey, wagging his tail with a most impish grin. She simply can't be angry with him, not even now as he once again slips her grasp to bound in the direction of the hammering and flashing of a second ago. It doesn't really matter which direction they take, so she follows him. The ground is sandy. Dirt sifts into her Birkenstock sandals and the underbrush makes for tough going. She hears the dog's throaty growl before she sees him, a hot shudder running down her spine. The leather handle of the leash rests in her hand like a lifeless eel.

"Bara..." her voice falters. In their 10 years together, she has never had a reason to fear her big dog. But now her first instinct is to run away. She doesn't want to see what it is that has turned her friendly companion into a slavering hound from hell. Still, an insistent force pushes her on through the crippled trees. At first all she sees is Barabbas, his back curved, fur bristling, muscles taut. He has buried his teeth into something, tearing at it, darkness growling in his throat.

"Barabbas, stop!" In her horror, she finds her voice and begins whipping him with the leather strap. In all these years, the worst punishment she has given him is a rap with a folded newspaper. But now she thrashes him, crazed, with strength she thought was long gone. She pulls the dog by his collar, choking him until his growl turns into a whine. He unlocks his bloody jaws.

His prey lies in the dirt, limp and disfigured. A wire-haired

Dachshund. Images flash into Elisabeth's mind. The boy down the street with his little Snowy, eyes alight. Her grandson hugging Barabbas and pleading with his mother to please...please let him have a dog, even a little one. It doesn't have to be an Alsatian. A Dachshund would be fine and he'll never, ever, ever ask for anything else again, not for Christmas or Easter or his birthday and he'll always take care of his dog, I promise mom, I promise. Please, please, please.

Still holding Barabbas in the choking grip of his collar, she closes her eyes for a few merciful moments. She doesn't want to look at what's lying here, doesn't want to stay here, she doesn't want to, she can't. Barabbas' panting and the intrusive buzz of a green-shimmering fly bring her back to reality. We have to go home, she thinks. We mustn't stay here. If they find us and see what Barabbas has done they'll take him away. She clips the leash onto his collar and drags him away, step-by-step. Her back screams with pain and Barabbas seems to be exhausted as well. He's cowering and trembling at her side, a confused old dog. How on earth could she have beaten him like that? Home, she thinks again. We have to go home. We'll be safe there. Everything will be all right once we're home.

The sun is climbing much too quickly into the sky. Elisabeth's dress sticks to her thighs and back and every breath hurts. No one will find out what you've done, Barabbas. I'll look after you, my friend, my companion. They won't put you to sleep. I won't let them. Please forgive me for what I did to you.

Forgive me. Forgive me. With all her remaining strength she forces herself to think of nothing else but that.