

The last red year

by

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Translation

by

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When I saw Rita on TV, I was dumbfounded. I had just come home from the library, a stack of books in my arm, reflexively turned on the TV and opened the window. My feet hurt, I had spent half a day waiting on tourists at a Vienna café, and while I bent down to slip off my shoes, I heard her voice, unmistakable. But when I straightened up she was not on the screen. It was a low-budget, poorly made soap opera about some young people in Berlin, who were constantly bickering, occasionally slapping each other or being kidnapped. I saw two young women at a bar talking about a man, a Freddy or Ferdy, it made no sense to me, when I spotted Rita, in the background, with her hair cut short at a slant, the area above her left ear in a buzz cut. She wore a black blouse and was polishing a wine glass with a white dish towel, before the camera changed angles and she disappeared from the screen. I sat down on my bed, slowly, without taking off my winter jacket and turned up the volume. I could hear her one more time when she interrupted the young women's conversation and said, with a half smile, *Das geht aufs Haus*, before the women left the bar and the screen turned to a new scene in the streets of Berlin. I was left with the image of an adult Rita and her effortless German: *Das geht aufs Haus*. I tried to visualize her again, her short black hair hanging over one eye, the purple lipstick, the black blouse, slightly unbuttoned, her movements as natural as in the past, as if she always belonged exactly there where she happened to be. The memory of her irritated me, stirred something up in me, I was annoyed with her, without exactly knowing why. Of course she was on television, I thought, and of course it was I who was the

real waitress, while she just played one on TV. I watched the whole episode to the end, without Rita appearing again, and then I looked for her on the Internet. I came across her on the soap's cast list, under a new last name: Milo, instead of Horváthova. That was all I found. I called Alan, who, as usual, didn't answer. When he called back days later I had almost forgotten what I had wanted to tell him in the first place. As soon as I mentioned Rita, his voice changed and he became the resentful teenager he used to be. Full of anger he repeated the same old story: the Polish hippie whom she suddenly favored over him, an unkempt pothead, you see, a complete loser who didn't even speak German. His voice still swelled and ebbed uncontrollably whenever her name came up, especially when he was talking to me, as if I could bring justice on his behalf, should I ever see Rita again one day. Today she is on television, tomorrow she will get married or climb Mount Everest and none of it would matter to her one bit, so what, he said, I couldn't care less what she does. I hung up and called father, who had no idea where Rita's family had moved. He turned away from the phone for a moment and asked mother, who was clanging the dishes in the background. We don't know anything, he finally said, you know how chaotic everything was at the end. In Žilina, too, nobody knew anything about her, the few times I had been there in recent years, all I had heard were rumors. Some said that Rita's parents were in Switzerland, while others said no, they were in Spain, someone even mentioned South Africa.

I found her only once I had stopped searching, years later at a charity event organized by my Vienna publisher. I had gone there in a deliberately casual outfit, black pants and a black top, the

only concession a long amber necklace. In my pants and with my short hair I felt particularly free-spirited among the cocktail dresses worn by the other ladies, drinking a screwdriver at the bar with a few of my colleagues when I saw her sitting at one of the tables set with white tablecloths, in an evening gown of the deepest black and an elegant updo. She saw me at the same instant at which I recognized her, and I am not sure what upset me more at that moment: how little her face had changed, how lost she seemed at the empty table or that same serious look with which she quickly scanned my body. Even though years had passed since I had last seen her, the old feeling returned instantly: nobody really knew her, nobody knew who she really was, except me.

1989

Spring

I cannot recall life before Rita and Slavka. Although there used to be a time without them, as I was told, a time in which I was just Miša and Rita was just Rita and Slavka just Slavka. But from the moment in which we moved into a four-room apartment in the Vlčince district, because my father was to start a new job at Tesla in Žilina, we became Miša, Rita and Slavka. The only thing that separated us was a staircase: a few steps up to Rita, a few steps down to Slavka. When it was quiet, I could distinguish the two by their footsteps: Rita bounded up the stairs, accompanied by the clacking of her slippers. Then brief silence followed by a slight knock on the door, in her eyes always that same expression, dark and serious, as if she had something important to discuss. Slavka's steps were slower, with her long legs she took two steps at once, she knocked much harder and as soon as she entered my room, she collapsed on the carpeted floor. Her long blond hair framed her face which in the opinion of all was considered exceptionally beautiful and which the adults admired particularly for its "Slavic cheekbones," a fact that irritated Rita and me, because we had no idea what Slavic cheekbones were supposed to be anyway. Rita and I, at least half a head shorter than Slavka, stood out in different ways: Rita by her combination of black hair and freckles

and her soft chubby body, I, by contrast, boyishly lanky with short blond hair trimmed by my mother. When Slavka was lying on my carpet, arms and legs spread out wide, staring straight up at the ceiling and complaining about being bored because her gymnastics training had been cancelled or speaking about our new history teacher, Comrade Baník, I sat on my desk chair, tilting it backwards to just before it lost its balance, listening to her, her world in dazzling colors before my eyes, the colorful jerseys of the gymnasts, their swinging braids, or the piercingly green eyes of the young Baník. Slavka's world was a kaleidoscope of glamour and grace, while Rita would roughly grab my arm, eager to tell me something, dragging me away with the utmost urgency to show me what she had found, a stray dog, an old love letter in her mother's drawer, new graffiti in the underpass, always full of indignation, how could people act this way, look at that carelessness, who would abandon a dog, what kind of people would deface our city. Slavka was totally unimpressed, who cares, she would interrupt her with an irritated sigh, and Rita would then turn her focus on me and continue her rant. I, by contrast, breathlessly took the stairs to tell them about one of the novels that we had to read for school and to compare my impressions to theirs, which never coincided. All excited I would read a few lines to them, a thought that I found earth-shattering, only to discover that the two of them did not see anything interesting in it at all, as if they had not read the same book. However, all three of us, independently of each other, felt that our friendship was no coincidence, but that it had to be fate that brought us together at the same time in the same place. We had adopted this conviction from our parents, who after moving into the newly constructed

apartment building had discovered to their great delight that the three of us were of the same age, and with great enthusiasm had declared this to be divine providence, without any of them actually believing either in God or providence. We were immediately introduced as friends: Meet your new friend Rita, let me introduce your new friend Slavka. They were elated by our trio and their joy was contagious, so that we simply ignored the differences that we perceived between us. Our friendship was a done deal, and when mother brought me to Slavka, Rita was already there, and when she brought me to Rita, we also called for Slavka to come up. Our parents considered that incredibly practical and thanked each other for the free child care with wine bottles and Bundt cakes until it became a habit that when one of us was missing, they would look in the apartments of the two others. When once in a while a fight broke out between us, they were eager to smooth things over as soon as possible, and we were dispatched to apologize to each other. There was not a day that we didn't spend together, in one of our rooms or outside between the other uniformly drab prefab buildings in our neighborhood, or on the playground behind the house, in the small concrete labyrinth that had been installed there for children. The long dusty grey block on Pieštanská Street No. 5, first, second and third floor, was our world. That is where we had shared our toys, later on our clothes, and, finally, the dismissive attitude towards our parents, who most evenings would sit in our living-room, drinking wine and having discussions. We listened to them talk, about the new merchandise at Tuzex, the old merchandise at the supermarkets, the newly opened thermal spa and the latest television news, such as the proposal of a

rapprochement between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Michal, Rita's father, had no qualms proclaiming that he doubted whether such a proposal actually originated in Prague, all the while getting up to help himself to some more wine or refill the glasses of the others. Rita would shake her head when he embarked on his fiery speeches about the government's hypocrisy, his words increasingly slurred. Slavka would roll her eyes when her mother countered with her eternal optimism that it could very well be that the proposal had come from Prague, and I was upset about my father who with appeasing gestures and conciliatory arguments would try to prevent a fight, invariably feeling far superior to everyone in the room. A trait that he shared with my mother, who rarely let herself be dragged into these discussions, but chose to observe them from her favorite armchair, her head propped up by her hand, her feet with the thick socks folded under her butt. Rita and I listened to their speeches from the hallway where Slavka showed us her latest gymnastics move, a backflip. We marveled at her long, flexible body and the preciseness with which she executed each movement. When Slavka did gymnastics, the time stood still. When she finally rolled onto the floor exhausted, Rita entertained us with shocking, very detailed descriptions of how limbs were amputated, including quotations from the textbooks of her parents, who were both physicians. I, by contrast, attempted to convince the two that the story of *Winnetou* that we had watched at the movies together was much more profound in the book because the real theme, namely that humanity ultimately erases all differences in human beings got lost in the film's many war scenes. Rita found that fascinating while Slavka could only bring herself to give me half-

hearted smile. She thought that all of that was philosophical mumbo-jumbo, in her opinion everyone should be one's own best friend, then everyone would be taken care of.

On those evenings when only our mothers would meet, the get-together was prepared with much more care, with freshly baked cake from Slavka's mother or Argentinean wine that my mother had bought at Tuzex especially for the occasion. As soon as she brought it home she would put it solemnly into the refrigerator, even before taking off her shoes, only then she would hang up the jacket of her pantsuit, throw a cursory glance in the mirror, tug her short permed hair into place and straighten out her blouse. She had never made do with the ugly plaid skirts sold in the stores, but copied the clothes from foreign magazines, simply sewing them herself. Not even the clothing from Tuzex suited her taste, although the outfits came from the West and were very hard to get. The store only accepted foreign currency coupons and father had to take special trips to the pedestrian zone to meet up with a young man with curly hair and a face full of acne, nicknamed Pimpleface. Pimpleface was reliable, he never sold counterfeit coupons and mother could thank his coupons for her shoulder-padded blouses and her genuine Rifle jeans, which, needless to say, she still felt needed altering. Just like her haircut, which after each visit to the beauty parlor she finished off by pulling out the kitchen shears, placing herself in front of the mirror, shaking her head disapprovingly. And yet, she never looked particularly put together, as if these measures were just for herself, not for others. Compliments were waved off and the subject changed. She worked as a draftswoman at the local paper factory, but had been stuck in the same position for years, while

her male colleagues had all long been promoted, a fact she called a bloody injustice, especially when she drank wine, like tonight. She had asked me to place a few glasses on the cocktail table in the living room, even let me take a sip that tasted awful. Shortly thereafter Maria, Slavka's mother, arrived, with a heavenly smelling apricot tart, finally Rita's mother Hana, as usual empty-handed, straight from her long shift at the hospital, with Marcel, Rita's little brother, in tow. We had all gotten used to him toddling behind her everywhere, hardly noticed any longer how he clung to her leg, went with her to the bathroom or fell asleep on her shoulder during those boozy sessions. She would gently move him next to her on the couch and help herself to some more wine, all the while complaining about her husband who had come home in the middle of the night drunk, waking everyone with loud music. Maria argued that for God's sake she should be happy that at least he came home, a card she liked to play at every occasion. Ten years ago her husband, a member of the Czech skiing team, had been sent to take part in a competition in Stockholm, a trip from which he never returned, to the horror of his family. When we were younger, Slavka had several versions of his disappearance handy. Once she told us that he had died in a skiing accident, another time, that he had been falsely accused and imprisoned or that he had become so indispensable in Stockholm that they just wouldn't let him return home. The common thread in all these versions was that he had never left them voluntarily but that something had occurred that prevented their reunion. In part that was even true because anyone who was ever lucky enough to travel to the West from the CSSR definitely needed willpower to return to Žilina. At least that's what father often

claimed after one of his business trips. Maria, who had really not known anything about her husband's plans and even repeatedly asserted that he himself had not planned his failure to return but simply felt overwhelmed by his impressions in the West, was able to affirm her ignorance with enough credibility to keep her job. However, when she herself applied for an exit visa, their passports were confiscated without further ado and they were informed that henceforth comrade Kubička would be their new housemate, who was to reside with them for a few months but whose real job was to surveil them. Even years after he had moved out everyone knew that Slavka's safety continued to be more fragile than a sheet of silk paper: one wrong comment at school, a couple of missed pioneer meetings, and she could lose something of importance to her, the gymnastics training, her apartment, her spot in high school which we were to attend the following year. Maria would never let an opportunity slide to emphasize how lonely she was, something that got on all of our nerves, most of all my mother's, which I noticed by the way she furrowed her brow. Life continues, she would argue, it's time for her to look for somebody new. Maria, however, wanted none of that, seething with rage she threw up her large hands, Vlado was waiting all these years for them to get an exit visa so that they could be reunited. He was sending gifts and writing letters regularly, in recent years they even arrived unopened most of the time. My mother waved all that aside, thought it was crazy to hang on to this marriage, to a man who was absent after all these years. Yes, she herself was married, but glad about any business trip taken by my father, because at home he would invariably get on her nerves before long. Finally all three of them concurred that men were

missing a gene, a compassion gene or even a common sense gene, and they drank considerably more than when their husbands were present and laughed a great deal more, so that Hana's large bosom heaved under her big blouse, mother's high-pitched clear laughter pierced the air and Maria's face threatened to disappear into nothing but laugh lines. Mother was the slimmest of the three and it meant something, not for her, but for her two chubby neighbors: they felt a little uneasy next to her and seemed relieved when she briefly left to use the bathroom or go to the kitchen and they could drop a comment, such as, why don't you pour the bean stalk a little more wine too. I heard it when I entered the living room to retrieve something from a drawer and for a second I felt like opening the locked closet to take out the skull that was deposited there, to put in onto the table for all to see, but I refrained, I had promised Rita not to do it.