



Excerpt from

Simone Scharbert's

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Rosy Shades of Darkness
A Tribulation

I take off my coat, hanging it on the hook by the door. My coat is vast, a whole landscape. My body disappears inside it. Too small for the coat, too small for the city.

My steps cut across the city. Day in, day out. I know all the routes by heart. Sounds swirl in my head. Voices swim together. Among them, my own. A thin thread on a spool that's at its end. Again and again, I try to remember names. My thoughts reach into nothingness. Not a sound, not the beginning of a word, not the calling out of a name. Nothing. I breathe as I walk, take in air quietly. I am my own companion, observe myself carefully. My gait, my boots. My physique, too thin. Wobbly. In a large, too vast coat. As if it were a place to hide. But the city always finds me again, doesn't let me stay. Spits me out again like a tough piece of meat.

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"AT HOME"

Rosa is sitting at the kitchen table. I can see that her feet still don't reach the floor. She's wearing sandals, it's warm out. Probably summer. July. August maybe. She's sitting at the corner of the table, about ten centimeters separate her feet from the floor. Her legs swing back and forth. I wonder how many years fit into ten centimeters. Roll out the measuring tape, reach it into the future. Into uncertainty. Rosa sits quietly.

Someone has braided her dark hair into two thin braids. Maybe me. Her eyes are fixed on me, they're big, almost as big as my coat. Rosa can breathe without anyone seeing. Without me seeing. From the beginning, she could do that, from the first moment she was on this earth. Was in this world. She arrived silently. As if she didn't want to disturb. Nestled herself in, found room in the cracks of our everyday life. A warm bundle that drank at my breast, eyes wide open. A warm bundle that slept through the night, wasn't afraid of anything. Not of the dark or when I sang Brahms' lullaby, *mit Näglein besteckt*. These little nails, these *Näglein*, you use to hammer down the night. On a quilt, on a pillow, on a nightgown, so that they can't slide away. These little nails I was so afraid of as a child. I remember them clearly in my mother's song, didn't know that *Näglein* could also be a sort of spice that led to a different land I would never see, that I would only smell these cloves emanating from roasts, from soups, from Christmas cookies. At night, there was nothing to smell. Silence doesn't have a smell.

Rosa opens her mouth, I see it clearly. She speaks a few words, in slow motion, the up and down of her lips, as if in an aquarium, behind glass. Nothing to be heard, only the delicate, floating air bubbles to be seen. I concentrate. But I can't break through the pane of glass, I'm stuck. Can't get to Rosa, can't hear her. Even though I'm only a few meters away from her. I try to breathe calmly, to hear something, but there's nothing, no voice to make out. In my head, a roaring, a hissing that carries me away, out of the kitchen, past Rosa's open mouth.

I don't know how long it takes. How much time fits into this hissing. How many centimeters till my feet touch the ground again. I hear the ticking of the clock behind me clear as day. Rosa is in front of me, still sitting at the kitchen table, motionless, her big eyes still focused on me, as if no

time had passed, as if everything were still as it had always been, and I reach carefully for the glass, but there's nothing there, no aquarium, no water, only the kitchen, Rosa, and me, and now I can understand her quite clearly, her few words, her bright, high-pitched voice, Rosa's silvery tone.

I'm hungry

and carefully, she nudges out another word,
two syllables, the same sound,
I know what she means by them,

Mama,

I feel like I've been caught,

look back,

Mama,

now with a questioning tone, as if I weren't there, a pleading tone too, and her eyes are still so big, bigger than my coat, has anyone made her breakfast, I wonder, maybe me, but it's unclear how long she has been sitting there, I wonder about that too and now she moves to the edge of the corner seat, slides her feet to the floor, a quick, familiar movement, her sandals make a noise as if they wanted to announce her presence, but I can see her, how she's now standing next to the kitchen table, her little body, her thin braids, see too how she approaches me, taking a few steps, and then hugs my legs, buries her head in my apron, pulls her arms more tightly around me, as if she were holding me fast— a small child holding me—in the present, in the right now.

I separate Rosa from me gently, managing to create distance between us. *Sit down*, but she remains standing, stubborn, won't leave my side. And so I grab her with both hands under the armpits, grab her tightly, feel Rosa's ribs right away, prominent under her dress, lift her up, she is so light, too light, I think, place her down on the buffet. Rosa lets everything happen to her. She stays sitting quietly, her legs reach just about past the drawers of the buffet. Only now do I see her scraped knee. The dried blood. A small, scabby landscape on her skin. I point at it, questioningly. And Rosa shrugs her shoulders, says it's nothing serious, she just tripped. I don't say anything. Don't know what to do in a moment like this. How to help Rosa. I get the small pot out of the buffet, hold it in the sink, and turn the faucet on. Watch the water running into the pot, filling the white enamel. My face is reflected in the pot: it swims in the water, distorted by little waves. And Rosa's head appears next to mine, we are swimming together. Rosa's smile spreads, without fear, and so I turn off the faucet, stop time. Rosa's smile rests quietly on top of the water.

I have to turn on the stove. One hand reaches for the matches, the other presses and turns the knob, holds it down. The gas sizzles quietly, and I try to take a match out of its box with only one hand. But I'm too clumsy. Rosa watches each movement of my hands carefully. I reach the matchbox out to her. She understands immediately, reaches inside, reaches for a singular match. She does it so sure of herself, holds it up triumphantly: As if she wanted to say, see, we can do it, together we'll get it done. I stroke her head. Slowly. Murmur her name, *Rosa*.

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It's the middle of the day. Maybe afternoon. I'm standing in the kitchen. Still standing there or standing there again already. Around me, only Rosas. I can't count them, can't tell them apart from each other. Looking up at me. All of them are wearing the same little dress, their hair plaited into thin braids. Someone must have done that. Wasn't me. That much is sure. I haven't been able to braid hair in a long time, my fingers are too unreliable. The Rosas reach for me, placing their hands on my stomach, on my back. Stroking my arms, my hands. Drawing lines across my clothing, leaving patterns where they touch. Some of them lay their face on my bosom, standing on their tiptoes. It's eerie. Their voices get into formation, humming, first quietly, sounding nice still, but then singular syllables emerge from the song, becoming clearer, louder, *Ma-ma*, this eternally recurring *Ma-ma*, and I see how their faces turn into open mouths, dark vocal cavities for this one word they now scream, together. Drowning themselves out, screeching, crying. They lay their hands on me, grab onto me hard, don't let go, they claw into me, and I don't know how to calm them down, I can't do anything about the pane of glass, against the ravaging of my body, against the trembling stillness in my head.

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I rip pages off the calendar. Numbers, names of the months. Burn them. Secretly. I have my own way of calculating time. Someone says Christmastime is beginning now, that it's Advent. Probably the neighbor. *Advent*. I say the word quietly, pushing it back and forth in my mouth, Advent. It feels strange. My tongue stumbles, gets caught. I nod, try to take a mental note that Advent is now beginning. A hand slips into mine, a voice into my ear.

Mama.

I'm startled.

Mama?

I wince.

Rosa is standing next to me, just standing there.

She doesn't say anything else. Just looks at me.

It's Advent, I say to her.

Rosa nods. Without another word, she pulls on her boots: sits down on the floor, first takes hold of one boot with both hands, then the other, placing her feet inside. I watch her thread the laces through the eyelets. How focused she is. Ties a knot, makes a bow. On both sides. Knotted-up silence between us. Rosa stands up, looks at her boots, then at me. She's probably proud, but she doesn't say anything. I should probably say something but don't know what. And so I take her little coat off the hook. Hold it up so she can slip into it. Her coat, a small landscape. She's clever. First sticks her right arm, then her left one in it. Laughs while she does it, more of a giggle. I kneel in front of her, button up her coat. One button after the other, humming while I do it, *This little button went to market*. Rosa lets herself fall forward, lays her head on my chest. Lies down in the quiet. When I kneel down in front of her, we are almost exactly the same height. At eye level. A conversation between our pupils. I keep singing almost inaudibly.

And this little button stayed home.

Take Rosa in my arm, hold her tight.

Feel her little body. Her breath.

Her heart. How fast it's beating.
Close my eyes.
This little button...

and now Rosa sings quietly with me, her silvery tone in mine, in unison, a wonderful feeling, *Went wee, wee, wee, all the way home*, she giggles again, points at her buttons, easily spotted, red buttons, four of them in total, *it's Advent*, I say, and Rosa nods. I'm calm now. That much is certain.

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Only a faint light over me. It's dawn. My body far away, stiff. Focusing my eyes, an effort. Getting oriented again. Between shelves. Exposed brickwork. In the basement. It smells musty, damp. My hand brushes over individual boxes, I observe my own movements. Don't know why I went downstairs. Three floors down to the basement. What I came here to get, what I'm looking for. If I'm looking for anything at all. In my head, it's suspiciously quiet. I stand up, walking along the shelves, reaching for jars. Recognize my handwriting, read: names for preserved berries, boiled-down red. From another world. From a time back then. Think about how I strained berries and seeds through a dish towel, puréed fruits into sauces, made jelly. Imagine me doing that. And how it looked, red seeds in white linen. Their shine, the way they separated from each other. As if they didn't belong there, were in the wrong place. I keep walking, slowly, only one, two steps, stop by the rhubarb compote. I like rhubarb, like its recalcitrance, that it can set up anywhere. If it's winter, maybe even Christmas, I wonder. Remember that I wanted to keep track of that. Look around for any indications. Christmas decorations. Candles. Warm clothing. A smell, maybe. But no, nothing. Here in the basement, seasons only exist in jars. Preserved, sealed. Nonperishable and good forever, whatever that means.

Suddenly, Rosa is clinging to me, I jump. She's like a cat sometimes, so light-footed and quiet. As well as her way of nuzzling up to me, swaying us into the present. I stroke her hair, she pulls back, turning her face to me. She looks surprised. Her eyes so big, borderless reflect the lightbulb, double it. Filament in her pupils: eerie, those thin, shimmering lines embodied in the small child.

I push Rosa away, motioning for her to stay where she is for a moment. *Wait*. Reach for a jar, turn it so I can read the label. It's dusty, the writing hardly decipherable, the insides dark. My eyes have to adjust first. To this world and how it is now. Rosa presses up against my body, I sense her curiosity. Hear her voice, how it reaches out to me.

Mama? What's in the jar?
Silence.
It looks funny, doesn't it?
A nod. Silence.
Did you make that?
Uncertainty. Silence.

I take the glass in my hand, pull it off the shelf, and hold it up to the light. Turn it gently this way and that, follow the movement of its contents. It looks like red cabbage. Thinly sliced violet, not much liquid, sealed-up November air. I see harvested fields. See the yawning of plants, rotting on the field. And how long it goes on lasting. Endures.

Rosa tugs at my skirt, energetic. I brush away her hand from the fabric, putting the jar back on the shelf. Still don't know what to do. Don't know what I wanted here, in the basement. I turn around abruptly. Rosa trips, almost falling. Doesn't make a sound, catches herself. She's so graceful. And something inside rips wide open, when I see her like that, voices wrap themselves up in coats, in me a vast landscape, blurry images, among them a piercing

Let go of me,

But no, we didn't see that, we couldn't have seen that, we only imagined it, with verbal colors, they stained our fingers, first the tips, then the rest of them. Ashen. Violet. A slight green. The swelling of the silence, the emptiness. Over the field, our inner acres. A wasteland. Followed by the preservation of memory, little slices, cut thin. Unable to take any more, a father who hangs from the ceiling,

Let go of me,

Rosa is crying out now. I can see it but not hear it. I'm standing behind the pane of glass again, pushing myself against it, beating on it, rhythmically, close my eyes, a pulse of the eyelids, a pulse of the heart, a pulse of the fist. A hissing sound.