

Translated excerpt

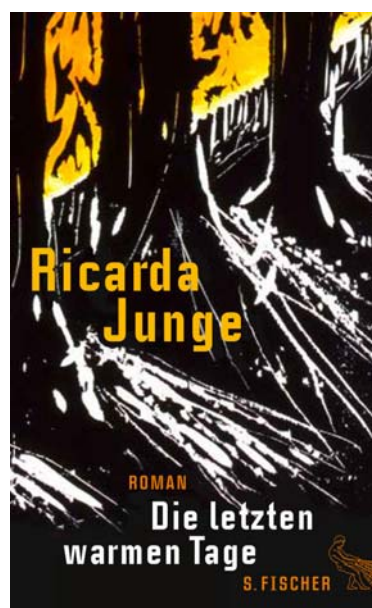
Ricarda Junge
Die letzten warmen Tage
Roman

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Ricarda Junge
The last warm days
Novel

Translated by Zaia Alexander



One

If we are capable of thinking ourselves into a better place than the one we are in at the moment, why shouldn't we stay there? On a bright square surrounded by linden trees, in the middle of the small park, a red marble sphere spun atop a granite block. Water streamed over the sphere and pedestal, forming a fine, silvery film that splashed and glistened when a finger pierced it. A boy and girl in cutoff jeans, T-shirts and plastic sandals climbed onto the granite block. They played wizard and fairy, held the world in their hands and spun it. All else was forgotten. They cupped their hands over the sphere, spread their arms, their slight shoulders rose and sunk. Through their magical powers alone they could make the sphere spin and the water flow.

It was a hot day in a series of hot days that scorched the ground and withered the lawn. Although there was no wind, yellow dust rose from the park paths and settled onto the children's skin like blotting paper. The water had the scent of a subterranean river, cold and clear, and it made their feet tingle. The children retrieved it from the depths with a single gesture of the hand; they could have also interrupted the flow and force the sphere to halt. They knew it and felt their strength, their power. The boy cleared his throat and said: "You are my dearest sister." The girl ran her tongue over her lips and thought how easy it was to say such a thing, after all the two were alone and he had no other sister. Then she realized the significance of the moment and nodded. Feeling awkward, she pierced the water film with her finger, making it splash and glisten and they both got wet.

My brother and me.

I think about this, I wander to this place, when I'm unhappy.

Two

I pause at the door one more time. Look around. Do I need to close the windows before I go? I just want to get some cigarettes. At the convenience store three blocks away. Five, ten minutes at most. Then I'll be right back. But I'll lock the door. Drop the key in my purse. I've got money. My phone too. Do I need anything else? No. It smells of cabbage in the stairway and also of a sharp, vinegary cleanser. And of toilet as well, ancient sewage pipes. How must they look inside? I often had to think about that in Leipzig. My dorm room didn't have a toilet, it was on the landing. It smelled exactly as it does here. When they renovated a building, they tore the old pipes out and tossed them out the window into the containers on the street. They crashed, chipped, banged, yet the pipes almost never broke. They were steeled from inside. Reddish brown encrustations, thick black stalagmites, nearly a century of shit, almost a fossil. I was never able to walk by without looking inside.

My purse flung on my shoulder, I run down the stairs. A rickety wood railing, linoleum on the steps, walls painted mint green, a lightbulb hangs above each landing. The one between the first and the ground floor is kaput. Is somebody watching me? Gazing down at me from above? Absurd. Nonetheless, I feel a tingling sensation in my neck. I turn around and look. Nobody there. Of course not.

I always find a reason to get away from my desk. Nobody's around anymore to stop me and ask: where are you off to this time? Haven't gotten used to living alone yet. Even during the day there's not much going on in the area. Now, at night, the streets are deserted. And yet Prenzlauer Berg isn't all that far away. Three tram stops, a quarter of an hour by foot. The streets are packed with stores and cafes, there are never any parking spots and every apartment house has been renovated ages ago. Here it still smells of brown coal on cold days. A lot of stores are empty. Instead of coffee shops there are Asian fast food joints on deserted construction sites. Just recently a hip new hair salon opened named "Cut n' Edge" and it's taking business away from the old

established places like, "Schröder's Hair Salon" and "Mandy's Haircuts for Men, Women and Children." At the corner of *Richard-Sorge* and *Erich-Mühsam-Straße* there is a sign advertising a construction site for "High-End-Quality" luxury apartments. Somebody sprayed "Fuck off" and "Capitalist pigs" on the sign with red paint.

I walk to the convenience store at the *Frankfurter Tor*, the only one in the area that carries my brand of cigarettes. In Prenzlauer Berg I never had this problem.

Two packs. These days they cost 10.30 Euros. I put my money on the counter and drop the cigarettes in my purse. When I started smoking, a pack had cost five Marks. I was thirteen. "Why of all things do you have to copy this habit of mine?," asked my mother back then. She smoked nonchalantly and elegantly, her head cocked to the side, her hand bent at the wrist, she'd slowly exhale the smoke, gazing after it almost wistfully with half-closed eyes. She rarely smoked more than three or four cigarettes per day. One in the morning, two at noon, and in the evening, she'd always smoke one in front of the bathroom mirror. I loved it when she'd purse her lips and blow the smoke into her reflection. Long, dark hair, a slim face, wide mouth and a nose that was a tad too large – "I got it from my father," she'd say and call it a beak. When I used to scratch my fingernails on the doorframe, very quietly, my mother would cringe and look at me astonished, no, confused. It always seemed as if she had just returned from another world. To me. Then she smiled and waved her hand: "Shoo, shoo go to bed. I'll look in on you later."

Aside from my job - I'm a copywriter for an online mail order house- I am writing a novel, my second one, I'm trying to tell my mother's story, how she escaped from East Germany, but I'm not really getting anywhere with it.

I am sitting on a stone bench embedded in the house wall and light a cigarette. Skaters are skating around the square, the wheels on the boards are rattling over the uneven concrete pavement.

It is the beginning of September. The days are getting shorter. Soon it will be cold and dark again for several months. Last winter it snowed in Berlin and it lasted from December to early March.

I walk down the boulevard at a quick pace through the poplar trees. I have an idea for the novel. I want to get home. Have to get back to my desk. Immediately. For a brief moment I am able to see the story in my mind's eye. If I'm not fast enough the moment will pass. I walk faster. The gravel crunches under my shoes. I'd love to run. The wind blows in the canopy of the poplars. Suddenly this man.

We bump into each other.

I bounce back.

Stumble.

He grabs my arm.

Three

He's wearing a gray suit and a white shirt. His trench coat is draped around his shoulders.

"It's warmer than I expected," he says and continues walking next to me. My arm feels as if his hand left an imprint. I'll get a bruise for sure. The man seemed taller at first glance than he actually is. He is slim, no, slender and is definitely not six feet tall, exudes something tough, goal-oriented. His auburn hair is slicked back severely, as if somebody had unraveled a spool of long copper wire over his head. His skin is extremely light.

"Can we get a bite to eat around here? he asks. "And drink some good rosé?"

There are a few restaurants on the main drag, the *Prager Hopfenstuben*, the Greek, a steak house that advertises it serves the cheapest food in town.

"That doesn't do it for me," he says, and slips his trench coat over his shoulder. He glances at me. His eyebrows are so light, they're barely

visible. He smiles. "There's supposed to be a pretty good bar around here. The Czech Bar or something."

He keeps looking at me. I avert my gaze.

"There's no food there. Just reasonable drinks."

"Reasonable? Very good." He laughs and coughs. Presses his fist to his mouth. Shakes his head impatiently, angrily, seems to me. His eyes tear. With a hoarse voice he says: "That's where we'll go." He clears his throat, looks at me with a smile. "Please don't say no."

I should have closed the windows. He'd only heard of the bar? No.

Because as we entered, the bartender greeted him, and a woman shouted to him from the private room: "We're over here Consti. Why are you so late again?"

"I just met somebody," he says, and as if noticing I want to leave again, he grabs me by the shoulders and shoves me ahead of him. Again this firm grip. He puts his cheek, cool and clean-shaven, to my ear. "What's your name anyway?" he whispers.

"Anna."

"May I introduce you to Anna?" He shouts. Whispers again:

"They are so totally boring, please don't leave me alone with them."

The woman is wearing large coral colored ear clips, tight designer jeans and a loose-fitting gray silk blouse. A clunky red necklace that matches the ear clips is hanging on her flat chest. The others, all men and much older than me, are wearing suits or jackets and jeans.

A glass wall and a door that slides silently to the side separate the private room from the bar.

Muffled music, Jacques Brel, it should actually be played loudly.

We sit down on a low bench. Much too small for the two of us. The bartender recommends a Daiquiri Natural, I'll take that. Consti – I don't like the name. Consti. He orders a bottle of rosé. But I like the table lamp. It has an eggshell-colored shade and a heavy silver foot shaped like a pine cone. Ashtrays are embedded in the low cube-shaped tables between the benches. I light a cigarette. Consti coughs, it sounds dry and rough. The coral woman is talking excitedly and gives me a dirty look. I take a deep

inhale and exhale the smoke through my nose. "Does it bother you Constantin?"

He laughs. "Don't call me that, whatever you do! I'm Consti, it makes me feel too old otherwise."

"I don't like men that have little boy names."

He looks at me. "Just keep smoking."

Constantin works in the Internet business. The others too. I always imagined people like that were more laidback. One of the men, around early forties, square-jawed, bald with black horn-rimmed glasses, is talking about a stock that invests in Berlin start-ups. "I've got a fifty million Euro deal going," he says.

E-commerce, business-to-business, venture capital, I don't have a clue about any of it. Constantin just sold an App that sends alerts about special offers: toilet paper, hotel rooms or luxury cars, he explains that this App always lets you know where you can get the best deals in the area. There were also restaurant, event and wellness Apps.

"And one for female escorts," the guy with the horn-rimmed glasses grins. Constantin ignores him, turns back to me. "They nearly make the old social infrastructure obsolete," he says. "You know your way around, no matter where you are. Feel at home everywhere."

The coral woman butts in: "But that's not why you're in Berlin. Are you going to tell me what you're up to Consti?"

The table silences. Everybody looks over to him. He bends forward, takes a cigarette out of my pack and puts it in his mouth. "You'll be the first to know when it happens. It's not official yet, Chérie."

He only puffs. Smoke covers his face. The coral woman raises her plucked eyebrows. They look like thin arches. "I certainly hope so," she says.

His body tenses. A hoarse croak. He takes a drag on the cigarette again, exhales the smoke immediately and then stubs it out in the ashtray.

After the second drink I want to leave. Say goodbye. Constantin kisses me on both cheeks and sits down again. When I slide the glass door open and leave the private room, he nods to me. I go to the bar to pay. Do I have

enough money? Without looking up, the bartender says: "Not necessary. It's taken care of." He fills a shaker with crushed ice.

When did you do that, Constantin? I think to myself. I want to take a look around for you, and suddenly you're standing next to me.

"I'll escort you," you say, draping your coat over your shoulder.

"You don't need to."

"I won't take no for an answer. You think I'd let you leave by yourself?"

You put your credit card on the counter. The bartender slides it through, tears the receipt off and hands it to you with a pen. I lean over to you; I want to see your signature. My grandfather always said handwriting reveals a lot about a person. He always used a typewriter.

"To stay incognito," as he put it.

You remove a silver fountain pen from the inside pocket of your jacket, unscrew the cap, set it down carefully. Black ink and a hard pointy tip. An equally hard, almost jagged writing movement. Your script is lean, fluid, the capital letters slightly bowed. Like grass in sand dunes when wind blows through it.

It's cold when we leave the bar. You slip on your coat and ask: "Or would you like it?"

I shake my head. "Were they your colleagues?"

"More like sharks in the same tank." You take my hand, fold your fingers around it. "Nice that I get to accompany you."

"You didn't give me a choice," I say, smiling, but suddenly you get pretty aggressive, snap at me:

"Did you defend yourself? Sure didn't look that way. If you don't defend yourself, you can't complain afterwards."

Now what's going on? Did you drink too much? I stand still, but before I can say anything you whisper: "Oh damn." Slowly, as if you just woke up, you lift your hand, spread your index finger and thumb, rub your eyes. "I was still with the sharks. Sometimes I don't make it to land on time and then something hits me, I'm sorry." You drop your hand, lift your head.

"I'm here now." You look me in the eyes. "Take a few steps with me."