

Rita König

RED IS BEAUTIFUL



Chapter 3

The witch's house in the village did not stand on a chicken's foot. It was small and built of dark wood, just like Silke imagined Baba Yaga's house to be. In spring the children sneaked over there to pick violets in the overgrown garden. It was always a test of daring. Silke had heard the rumours that twined around the crooked, windswept cottage like ivy and vine tendrils. People claimed that the hunched old woman who always wore a headscarf and layers of permanently stained aprons was mad. She had gone mad from reading the piles of books on the floor. At the local Konsum grocery store the woman only bought milk and bread, never meat or potatoes. She poured the milk into a series of bowls which she scattered all over the ground around the cottage, so that Silke had to tread carefully to avoid tripping and making a din that would bring the old woman out. The woman ate the orange tabby cats she lured with the milk. "Like the Chinese," people said. "She's probably one herself, you never can tell. Has anybody ever seen her hair?"

And somebody hissed, "Not in front of the children!"

That made Silke imagine the Chinese as women who walked with a stoop and wore layers of aprons.

When there was meat Silke disliked at school dinner she tried to envisage what cat meat tasted like. She pictured their neighbour's fat tomcat lying on its back and stretching out its tongue to twice its normal length, begging to be stroked. She was sure that cat meat had a stringy texture and would be inedible because she hated the feeling of sinews being caught between her teeth and wasting hours trying to pick them out.

The bowls scattered around the plot were all white. In the evening, in the blur from the shadows of the nearby forest, she could not even see whether there was still milk in the bowls. They were so clean on the rims and insides that it was impossible to tell.

The witch's garden had nothing in common with the other gardens in the village because it had no flowerbeds or trimmed lawns, let alone raked paths, nor did it smell of cat like the next-door garden to Silke's house where the tomcat had laid claim to the bush that bordered on their garden. Sometimes the

witch's overgrown patch it smelled like hay, sometimes like freshly sawn wood. The woman herself did not smell, or at least her smell did not penetrate to where Silke hid with the others, although you might have expected it from the stained aprons. She didn't of soap or clean washing, either. But the air was always redolent with the scent of pines. And in spring, of violets. The little house was surrounded by violets, not just the biggest but also the ones with the strongest scent.

Violet and white. Silke made them into little posies and sold them outside the Konsum store to make money for ice cream.

Summer came, her father was working very hard and her mother occasionally went away for a day or two. Silke roamed around with the others. They chewed shepherd's purse with its nutty taste, and looked for violets, but they were all gone.

"Let's go to the garden in the woods. We're sure to find a lot there still!"

"To the witch? In broad daylight? No, we won't go there."

They lay in a grassy field until late afternoon, picking at ribgrass ears and making nose caps with bindweed flowers, white funnels that stayed put as long as they held their breath but fell off when they exhaled through their mouth.

After the others had run off home, Silke clambered around for a while. She did not set off for the witch's house until dusk began to fall. She saw bright light in the cottage, which seemed odd because the people at the Konsum store always claimed the woman had no electricity, only candles. A cat sat washing itself close to the fence. Silke could sit for hours watching their neighbour's cat cleaning itself with the utmost care, and only felt a shudder when it licked its body too hard with its rasping tongue. But this cat simply sat there blocking her way. Silke crouched down and waited. One of the orange tabbies slunk around her legs.

When Silke tried to stroke it, the tabby wriggled out of her grasp and ran away. So did the cat behind the fence. Silke climbed over and saw the tabby bending over a bowl. It lapped with a regular sound, its tongue drumming rhythmically on the rim of the bowl as it slopped the milk into its mouth.

Silke jumped over the gleaming bowls and scurried over the grass till she reached the house wall. The ivy was warm. Feeling for a strong branch, she

pulled herself upwards slowly. At that moment Silke heard her father. Too startled for a quick getaway, she kept still, rooted to the spot and trembling. She was bent over; her fingers clawed at the ivy leaves until she felt the sap and came to her senses. She tried to swallow her fear but the throbbing in her throat simply would not stop.

Now, for the first time, Silke heard the woman's voice. She spoke far more softly than her father. He seemed to be repeating what she said. It took Silke a while to realize that he was mechanically reciting English vocabulary. She didn't understand. Why did her father have anything to do with the witch? What could have induced him to sneak into the cottage in the evening, to the cat-eating woman with the soiled clothes, instead of going to the pub where her mother thought he was?

Stretching up until her hands touched the cool stone of the window ledge, she looked through the glass. The woman's eyes met Silke's. The woman said nothing, just looked at her, and suddenly Silke understood her father. The woman's eyes were rimmed with wrinkles, but she did not look old. She didn't look crazy at all, just very sad. For a moment Silke even believed she had seen little sun flecks in the woman's eyes. But perhaps she was just imagining it. Silke crept back home. She was shivering, although the breeze stroking her bare arms was warm and summery. She stopped looking for violets. She didn't tell the others about the woman. She didn't even say anything to her father.