

Michael Düblin

Daria's World

Short Story

The summers in my country are moody. The weather is feeling its way through the different voices of our mental score. In doing so, now and then a chord is played whose sound is mixing sadly with the milky waft of mist and which still can be heard lasting a minute. On such a day, when people scurry around crouching, only visible as grey shadows, I was waiting under the roof projection of an old townhouse for a merciful end of the mostly short but intensive downpours. It was no special townhouse under whose roof projection I found shelter, it was one among many and I would hardly have remembered it if my life story would have been running on in normal ways. The downpours stopped as they begun, immediately and without notice, without schedule; instead, the water was now exhaling from the chilled but not cool asphalt and made waft of mist climbing up and soaking my shirt. Just when I wanted to break away from the wall to take my place again among the now upright walking figures, I heard a soft sigh beside me, similar to a whispered plea. I had not noticed the person who probably must have been standing beside me for a while and so I scared at the first moment, because I thought I would have been alone in my sheltered world under the roof projection. "Hello, my name is Daria," said the person who I now thought to recognize as a female being because of the soft voice. I was not used to get spoken to like this and even though I was looking around again I was unable to discover any other person who might have taken refuge in this hideout together with us. So I told her my name, although this seemed to be quite senseless for me, as we were not on an island like Robinson; the world around us awoke for new life and a continuation of the civilization seemed to be guaran-

teed to me. In case that I would have known in any way how often our ways would cross and separate again some time soon, I would have used the opportunity to explain to her not only my name but my entire previous existence. I would not have stopped talking until a merciful angel would have come down from heaven and closed my mouth with a magic spell. But I kept quiet. I insistently kept quiet and when she was able to realize that I was not willing to reveal more of me, she walked into the mist and disappeared as if she would be a fleeting thought that, once passed by, won't come back to one's mind with all the will.

Our second encounter happened in a bar where the pianist was crying for emotion and pain. We were all wearing elegant clothes that should measure up to the occasion, when we nearly collided with our glasses filled up to the brim. She held her hand in front of her mouth, in order not to laugh loudly and I just wanted to raise my voice for a question when I noticed that by the abrupt stop in order to prevent this collision, the contents of my narrow glass of champagne had poured out over my shirt.

"You look like at that time in the rain" she remarked with an intimacy that must have sounded for somebody listening by chance as if we would be good acquaintances or even friends. I did not know how I looked at that time under the roof projection with my shirt sticking to my body, but I knew immediately this voice that up to now only spoke the sentences "Hello, my name is Daria" and "You look like at that time in the rain" to me. A man who must have walked behind her dabbed me now with a napkin or a handkerchief even though I declined politely and Daria introduced me by my first name which led him to a frown, no; he

would not know me yet. So Daria and I had our first common ground, our first secret, only based on two coincidences and this had nothing to do with our biographies, which were completely unknown to each other. Still standing up, the man who had luckily stopped dabbling me now involved me in a conversation obviously assuming to meet an old friend of his companion. The men of my group were leering at us; looking questioningly at the two strangers I apparently seemed to amuse with free and easy. Then suddenly, Daria took my hand and led me to another hall where the music was playing and people were dancing. During the following dance, I forgot time and space which came quite close to the real universe of our relationship, but when I closed my eyes for a short while and imagined me in the free fall, she slipped away from me and I was unable to find her again for the rest of the evening. I must admit that in the future I did not try to find out her surname or to interfere in her world. In reality, I had nearly no reminder of the two short encounters. They seemed to me like the blazing light of a sequence out of a dream that suddenly appears without a warning at the surface of our consciousness. But nevertheless, our third encounter was as inevitable as all memories that will be washed ashore again sometime. Daria was wearing a sunhat, how could I have recognized her; it was not any more in the same summer when the weather played us the trick of our first encounter. On a square where a market was taking place and which smelled like jasmine although I was unable to discover such a plant somewhere, she was looking very patiently at the fruit offered for sale and which seemed to be waiting apparently to be bought by ladies with sunhats. I did not recognize her although she was standing directly beside me, but it was the way of our

story thought ahead that she should surprise me with sentences like “Wonderful those fruit, don’t you think so?” and that she put me with these sentences into a time seeming to run contrary to the imperturbable world time. We were loafing across the market, arm in arm, as if we never had done something different, we were laughing at the jugglers, those globetrotters I was envying because of their freedom. When we went to a restaurant for dinner, I had for the first time this feeling, a short interruption of my heartbeat, when I visualized that a part of my reality could not happen. I looked furtively to this being which I had never viewed with profoundness and Daria was casting down her look, but then an idea lightened her features, she laughed clearly and asked me: “Would you like to accompany me a little bit?” And as the last hours already seemed to be more than an eternity for me in view of the period of time of our acquaintance, I hardly could imagine having something different planned in my life and so I accompanied Daria through the lanes before she, leaning against a wall, kissed me tenderly. And while I still felt involved in her warmth, she disappeared behind the next corner of the dark lanes, blown away, a summery evening wind that one wishes to come back again in vain.

After this last encounter, something awoke in me now and was carrying inside, besides longing, also a kind of bitterness. As certain as I knew now that I would meet her again somewhere in the world, as certain I felt that those encounters would never take longer as the time we would need to fulfil the commonplace actions that a meeting brings along. Like the cast-iron stokers at a Venetian tower who carry out the same circles every hour, we would repeat always the same phrases, would tell us the same episodes again and

again. So I decided to force another course upon the next encounter. But as certain as the destiny switches the points of its histories by accident for not arousing suspicion of being predictable, as sure I should have been that the fourth encounter would be the most confusing one for me so far. We just met on a trip that an acquaintance had organized for some business partners and to whom I had offered my help to guarantee a successful course. I could not foresee that one of these business partners was the man who had dabbed the champagne stains from my shirt with his handkerchief. He greeted me, delighted to catch sight of a known face among the more than twenty women and men sharing this occasion. Daria was also among those guests. As I thought she would be here with someone, I did not dare to remind her of our last encounter in the dark lanes, neither with words nor with looks. Since she also did not draw the attention to this incident, this fourth encounter seemed to become a disappointment for me. But towards evening, we all had already opulently dined, a short walk led us along a dark looking, because not visible from the outside, forest. I felt as somebody took my hand and pulled me towards the putatively impenetrable bushes.

I did not notice that Daria had gone behind me, but I let me steal lightly from her despite of my surprise. How wondrous this world seems to me, how strangely unreal this wood, how it smelled, a wild cosmos, towering gnarled trees which hardly let shine a light through. Now, we did not go any longer but we ran, ran through the bushes which hit at me and tugged at my hair. I started laugh, an enthusiastic laugh just like a cannibal which was more like that of a prehistoric monster than of a human being, and now, I heard Daria's laugh from a distance, it sounded much more pleas-

antly and clearly than mine, not following to a sudden primary instinct. We ran a long time, no way was discernible, then my breath exhausted, I had to struggle for breath and panted like an exhausted dog. Daria stopped and looked at me in amazement, like a strange object which cannot be classified in our physical world. Then, she leaned against a tree and kissed me tenderly once more. But I could not return this kiss, on the one hand, I had no breath on the other hand, I was prepared. I had not intended to let her escape once again so easily. Because now there was a blazing fire inside me that heated my blood and threatened to burst my heart and what at first had begun as an episode for which never would be erected a memorial, burned now like a cocktail of bliss and desperation and corroded my throat. In the meantime, it got dark and I felt a kind of ghostly panic. "Daria", I blurt out, "don't go away now! I love you!" And just when I heard my words, I knew its foolishness. We had never exchanged our thoughts, had hammered out a plan, did not know our surnames, never mind our addresses. Just as a confirmation of my considerations, she freed herself gently from me, gave me a lenient smile and disappeared between the dense bushes of the dark wood as if she was a deer that escaped from any pursuer.

The next days, I saw her face when I went on errands, in all mirrors, out of all shop windows, Daria looked at me smilingly but without speaking a word. Even in the same evening, I had dared to ask her companion for her permanent address. But to my amazement, he was not able to give me any details, he meant only he met her sometimes at such events like this one.

Only a few days later, I became aware of the fact that Daria's world slipped out from me. Just as the certainty that our time also hurried away without any effort on our part, I knew that I would meet Daria never again on fragrant marketplaces. And although every of these places aroused my particular interest, the hope was fading away with every day on which I thought to hear her words next to me and I was mistaken every time. Until I lost her picture inside me and only heard the sound of her name through the steaming mist.