

Snowed Under

ANTJE RÁVIC STRUBEL

Greetings from Harrachov

(Ch. 6)

Postal clerk Erik M. Broda, retired for three weeks, though still working part-time, eagerly awaits his female superior Simona's arrival, so he can give her a special wink as he slams his cancellation stamp on the wrong side of a postcard to Mainz.

He doesn't like the card. He has read hundreds of postcards like it in his career. Whenever he doesn't like a postcard, he stamps the postmark wrong side up. Bad postcards are like female superiors. They gab a lot and then forget the most important things. The most important things for a postcard are: first, the stamp, second, the postal code, and third, the signature. The signature is missing on this one.

He covers the card with his left palm, so he's just able to read the message, and pulls over a stack of thick envelopes in need of postmarking.

The stamp hovers in his fist halfway above the desk. That way he can slam it down if Simona came in by surprise.

Ever since she started working here, everything has changed. Back then, he could be sure nobody would disturb him.

Dear Haschi,

Unfortunately, I couldn't find a funny postcard for you. All they've got are ones with sunsets or with Rübzahl, the mountain spirit, on the front. At least they've got super yummy dumplings and pancakes and gorgeous wild icicles. I'm drinking lots of mulled wine with Evy. I'd love to know what's going on in her head, like you always knew with me. Bet she'd like that. But I don't. Say hi to C., whoever he is. You're a lot happier, since you've been together with him. Laughed more last time. Would love to be with you again, but could it work after all these years?

The card makes him angry. There was enough space for a signature. What angers him most, though, is that the card had obviously been written by a man. He admires women. They are completely perfect beings, right from the start, they help him differentiate one day from the next; they give him a rhythm, like Simona with her irregular visits to his office. But he doesn't expect precision from women. They've overtaken us, he thinks, but they'll never take over. He imagines they'll just keep climbing higher than him in the future. Tower over him. But they're standing on a

scaffold with nothing beneath them. And they keep staring downward. They get so scared, they can't move.

Erik M. Broda leans his head back. The leather headrest connects coolly to his neck, as if the chair had been molded to his head.

The glass pane on the office door is turning black, ripple by ripple. Erik M. Broda tips his chair forward, slams the stamp on the card to Mainz, and sweeps it into the open carton next to the desk.

"Domestic mail?"

Simona always flings the door wide-open when she enters the room, as if she expected someone to bar her entry. She wears tight, gray, ankle-length skirts that force her to take tiny steps. But the sound emanating from her stiletto heels more than compensates for it. She's the only one here, who wears long skirts and stilettos. They're completely out of fashion. The waitresses and salesgirls across the street at the Potraviny wear skirts barely larger than a standard, medium-sized envelope and shiny flesh-colored stockings.

"Still in the sorting machine."

"At the last staff meeting we agreed that domestic mail must be processed first because it's business mail and business comes first. Weren't you present?"

The last button of her skirt is open. He can tell because she's wearing a blouse over her skirt, and it leaves a small bulge at the hip. He knows exactly why she wants to get rid of the domestic mail first.

"Sure, I was there. I thought the resolution wasn't going to be enforced until next month. To give the employees a chance to adjust."

"Including you, there are four of us working here. And I don't know of anyone, except for you, who needs a full month to remember that domestic mail needs to be processed before postcards."

"To be honest, Simona," he says, pausing. "I don't think much of your resolution."

"I don't care what you think about it. It has been decided by majority vote. And you will please comply."

"Do you really believe it will make such a difference?"

"It will make the distribution more efficient. If you didn't pay so much attention to what your female colleagues are wearing, you'd have realized as much." "Everything is dispatched at night. It makes no difference whether the letters are processed in the morning or at noon."

It's getting warm in the room. He can take off his jacket now.

"It makes the in-house dispatch more efficient."

"I thought it very efficient as it was."

"Erik, you heard me. In one hour I want the mail in the delivery room."

She exits much too quickly. Her perfume leaves a delicate trail extending from the door to the edge of his seat. If he leans over the armrest, he can smell it. He'd have liked her to keep going. Then his favorite part would come, when he winks at her and she turns red, just a little.

He leans back again, his forearms on the rests, hands loosely draped over the ends. He'll make up for it later. The thought makes him happy. The extra hour she has granted him will only test her patience. When he sits there like that, his neck braced by leather, heat spreading across his back, and a whole stack of postcards lying in front of him, he feels this is exactly the profession he'd wanted to practice since childhood, long before they even had a name for it.

Investigative journalism.

As a rule, he doesn't open letters. But sometimes the envelopes are so thin, they can easily be read if they're held up to the light.

Simona uses a computer to write her letters, and if the inkjet is almost empty, it makes it more difficult for him to decipher them.

Erik M. Broda fans the postcards in his hands as though he was playing skat and spreads them on the table in front of him. He removes a note folded in three from an envelope usually stored in his briefcase for safekeeping. He has made a check-list. The names on the list are in alphabetical order with the dates written in the margin.

It's fun to count how many postcards certain people send per week. That's how he bridges the time until Simona returns.

Every Saturday brings new vacationers. His favorite this week is Gisela Schmidt. She beats the others by a long shot. Gisela Schmidt has sent fourteen postcards in cramped schoolmarm script. Twelve of them went to her four children, three for each.

Gisela Schmidt is the kind of woman he'd refrain from winking at.

Among today's postcard writers, he finds somebody who sends the same picture three times: a shot of the Sňeka. The icy peak looks red-hot against the clouds. He lays the cards in front of him, one next to the other, and starts from the left. Dear Mutsch, Dear Paps, hi George, Greetings from the old stomping grounds. Dvoračky and Elbfallbaude are still around, but they're up to their neck in snow. They've turned Růbezahl into a tourist attraction, and he's wearing a fake beard. We go to the slopes every day and I've got bruises everywhere. We drink cocktails every night because they're still dirt cheap! Yours, Evy. (I'll probably be back before the card arrives.)

Erik M. Broda doesn't pay attention to the little insults anymore. They are just problems people are having with themselves.

Dear Jacqueline,

A ski trip filled with obstacles, just the way you like it. Or, what would you do if a person always wants the opposite of what the other wants? I don't think we know each other well enough. Or, too well? Is a two-year, long-distance relationship too long? As soon as Vera is gone, even for a minute, I start thinking about her again. There was a huge snowstorm here, and when I woke up in the morning, she wasn't there anymore, not even her shoes. Blown away. Maybe I'll let myself be blown away too. Bye, E.

Dear Sebastian, We've got tons of snow. The slopes are like cream, but don't be mad. Not everything's that beautiful. The day before yesterday, a married man said he'd love to watch us doing it, all we need is a man. Imagine a father saying that. Is that how he's going to raise his sons?! The idiot. Unfortunately, they live in the same boarding house with us. And Vera has been acting strange ever since. Whatever. This is a stupid card. I'll send you a nicer one tomorrow. Until then, Evy

The fear women have up there on the scaffold makes them do unpredictable things. First they lure us in, and then they betray us. It depends on the circumstances. At this point, Erik is taking the insult personally. He clasps the three cards together with his index finger so that the corners overlap and files them away.

The telephone rings.

He hangs up right away. He wants her to come to him. He can't wink at her through the telephone. "Why don't you answer the telephone, Herr Broda?" She's just a tad louder than before and she's fastened her button.

"Sorry about that."

She nods.

"Do you have the domestic mail?"

"It's still in the sorter."

His voice sounds sad, a little sluggish. He achieves the effect by lengthening the last syllable.

Simona stands at the door as if she's caught a draft.

He's getting excited now. But he should have taken off his jacket beforehand.

"You finished the mail and put it back in the sorter?"

She's standing her ground. He loosens his tie.

"No, I didn't. Why would I put them back in the sorter after they're postmarked?"

"I'm not going to waste my time having a long discussion with you. I want to know what you did with the domestic mail. The car is waiting below."

"You know, Simona, I was just about to start, when I noticed that the tourists are complaining they can't find any fun postcards here. I had to go through the entire stack first to make sure it really is the case. And, in fact, it's just the Sňeka mountain peak. Sňeka in the morning, Sňeka in the evening, and Sňeka by moonlight. So I asked myself, "What is a fun postcard? I mean, what makes a postcard fun, or not? Do you know, Simona?"

She tries to interrupt him twice, but he persists. She walks to the sorter, and when she bends over, he sees the outline of her spine under her blouse. Then she straightens, her hand firmly placed on hip.

"For example, what would you consider a fun postcard to send Ivan? Assuming, of course, you knew where your husband was, and that you saw your activities here, purely hypothetically, of course, as a vacation."

"I wouldn't want to interrupt your thoughts in any way, Erik," she pauses, and he happily registers the first sign of a blush, starting at the base of her neck, "but they don't interest anybody here. The car waiting down there is interested in one thing only: the domestic mail."

"How about a shot of the old and new boss of *Zlatá Vyhlídka* together in the hotel lounge for a postcard? Your husband together with that...that German, what's his name again? Wouldn't that be fun?" He looks up at her again, sadly, from his chair. Then he gives her two quick winks with his left eye, one a bit longer than the other, and imagines it causes a gust of wind that forces the women up on the scaffold to clutch the railing for safety.

"You're a real wise-cracker," says Simona, pushing a non-existent hair from her forehead. She wears her hair pulled back. "But about my husband, there are things you'd best keep your hands off. You don't have to pay back every injustice with a new injustice. There will never be an end to it if you try. I'm assuming you know exactly what I'm talking about. Right?" He notices she's looking at his hands, but since he doesn't move, she's forced to add something. "Even if the private differences of opinion between me and my husband are absolutely none of your business. Now, will you please take care of the domestic mail?"

First they sleep with a man, and then they ruin him. Erik knows perfectly well that Simona tried to intercept her husband's letters to Germany. And she probably holds the letters from Hof addressed to the Hotel *Zlatá Vyhlídka* up to the light, like he does, and that's why she's developed this tick for the domestic mail. She's trying to distract everybody.

Simona walks backwards through the door, and walking backwards in her tight skirt forces her to take tiny steps. But today something didn't work. He'll have to improve his methods.

Even so, she knows that Erik M. Broda knows more than she dares to imagine.

He starts to tremble. It's a tiny tremble, just nerves, as if someone was twisting his wrists, but it robs him of the strength to slam the stamp full force. He takes off his jacket. Simona would be a good subject for an investigative operation. Both Simona and her husband. That's nothing new for the *Zlatá Vyhlička*. After the fall of the Wall, the hotel was privatized and changed owners soon after. That's why Erik M. Broda insists on continuing to work. He insists because he can't do his investigations outside the office.

translated by: Zaia Alexander