

# Snow Red

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*“And you all know, security  
Is mortals’ chieftest enemy.”*  
-Macbeth III.5

In one winter night, when you think that there is nothing but a blanket of thick endless snow on cars, homes, and barren trees; Snow Red will appear like a drop of fresh blood. The cold weather causes everyone forced to leave homes walk hurriedly and hold their bodies tightly, but she, with a veil and a long red gown covering the ice, stares straight forward, dragging her steps slowly. Sometimes she appears with one or two persons who hurriedly walked to their homes, but not all eyes are able to catch a glimpse of her. She only comes for those who are longing, waking up the buried and the sleeping. So when your time comes, hold your breath, then look away; pretend that you do not see her, and she will pass you by just like you pass so many trifles in your life.

Unless you want otherwise.

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Berlin, 1977. Helga told the legend of Snow Red as Ismail sat quietly, staring outside the window of his work desk. Ismail did this every night, just like brushing his teeth. Helga forgot when this ritual began although they had only been married for a month. Sometimes Helga thought they had already been married for years, not because they really knew each other, but because there was no question of why some things were done. Silence was probably a recipe for happiness. Helga knew what had happened, and it was never enough. The only thing that could save them was the future.

She held her husband from behind as she whispered, "Be careful. You might fall in love with a beautiful woman who walks on the snow."

Ismail turned and kissed Helga's lips. He smiled happily, as if he had been surprised by the coming of his wife, who returned from work earlier than expected. But Helga had been home for hours, cleaning the dining table, washing the dishes, and changing into her nightdress.

She was six when Oma told her a story about a woman in a red dress who walked in snowy night. Oma, in Helga's memory, was a small-built woman with short gray hair. Her pair of brown eyes was big and she had sharp facial features. Oma was not Helga's real grandma, but she asked Helga to call her Oma. At first Helga called her Oma Rachel, and later just Oma. She lived next to Helga's house, with her son and daughter-in-law. There were no children in their house. Whenever she felt lonely, Oma would invite Helga to taste her homemade cakes (Helga was really fond of cherry pie), then she would play the piano or sat in her rocking chair while knitting and telling stories. No one could tell stories as good as she did. Her brown eyes rounded whenever she reached came to the thrilling parts, sending an invitation to believe. Helga had her own grandma from her parents, but now, when she was forty two, she only knew one Oma.

The memories of Oma were also the memories of the woman in the red gown. Helga listened to her story for more than three times, because she was not bored out of it, and there were always new details, every time. The Snow Red, as called by the old people,

was able to bewitch every people to be drunk in love and surrender themselves to be kidnapped. After receiving Snow Red's kiss, someone—a man or a woman—would disappear in the next day, leaving their belongings and their loved ones behind. It was the first and the last kiss. People said, the kissed would follow Snow Red with her evil followers. When her long dress swept the road, Snow Red had marked whoever she wanted to choose. In every victim's forehead appeared an invisible scar, forming an X. We did not know who started this—Snow Red who wanted the victim, or the victim who wanted her.

Worried of her own safety, Helga asked: What if Snow Red wanted to kidnap me? But, Oma said, Snow Red did not kidnap children. Helga did not believe this, and Oma gave her a snow globe. Helga's eyes glimmered. She saw snow fell onto a beautiful small house, which reminded her of Hansel and Gretel's candy house. Take this snow globe everywhere you go. Oma will always be praying for you.

Helga felt calm, but then she worried about Oma. What if the Snow Red kidnapped Oma?

Oma stroked her head while saying that she did not need to worry. Oma was happy, so she would not leave. The Snow Red would only come to those who longed.

Oma, Oma, promise me you will hold your breath when she comes.

Helga remembered saying this with teary eyes. Oma nodded and smiled. But, in the era when the world seemed too big for us, adults often thought in a weird way and we could not understand. Oma promised, but she left anyway.

"Is this Snow Red so powerful?" Ismail asked.

Helga kept silent for a moment. When she was a child, she thought exactly like that. A human who could move another human must be really strong, and it seemed that Snow Red was not a human. Now, as an adult, Helga saw another dimension of the story of Snow Red.

"I think she was a kind of woman the wives are always worried about."

Helga's calm and sweet comment, welcomed with a smile from Ismail's lips, made them sure that they were exchanging joking.

“Don’t worry, she won’t be interested in me.”

Ismail did not say: don’t worry, I only love you. Helga was not surprised. She knew the reason was not because they had passed the age when they would burn out of love. The only thing that was burning and it would not burn out was a city in Ismail’s head. In this city, there were abandoned houses, weapon-holding soldiers, and rows of trucks containing worried adults and children, who were ready to go to the border.

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Their marriage was unspoken pact to save themselves. Ismail, a year younger than Helga, evacuated from Europe after Lebanon was no longer bearable. Even before the civil war, Lebanon was no longer his homeland. He was a refugee from Palestine, sympathized, but it was also hard for him to get a job. Without a passport, he roamed out of his homeland like a ghost. But a ghost did not need a country. Ghost did not need to be excommunicated from his land because his feet did not step on the ground. Whereas, Ismail was a human who needed to bring names, papers, and stamps. He, Ismail Saleh, was a country-less man, *staatenlos*, who went to Europe with *document de voyage* issued by Lebanon.

Helga moved from city to cities – Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam – only to return to Berlin. She thought she was more appropriate to be called refugee than a drifter, although she knew that she could not use the word. It was inappropriate. Helga did not really understand what she was hiding from. Maybe from some unsuccessful relationship, or maybe some other things, which she could not completely grasp. More importantly, her friends said that there were many men moved out of her life, getting married was a crazy decision. Ismail came to her as a damaged man. She did not know how to save Ismail, and Ismail did not wish for her to save him. But Helga believed that both of them were linked into a desperate idea: took refuge in a house.

Helga worked as a local librarian, she went to work at eight in the morning and went home at six. After changing her line of work, this job made her slightly feeling that she could be any of use. Library was a salvation tower of humans from forgetfulness (even though

of course, Helga later thought, it was possible to burn them down). Ismail had not gotten a job, then he spent most of the time at home by writing poems – at least that was he told Helga, who never read her husband’s works. Helga stuck household chores Ismail needed to do in the kitchen cupboard: grocery shopping, threw away the rubbish, went to the laundry. Without the list, he did not have the initiative to do anything, but at least he did the tasks well.

After work, Helga would lie down on the couch and turned on the television. Sometimes Ismail made her a cup of tea, but he never sat in the couch to accompany Helga. He refused to watch the news. At eight thirty, they had dinner. There was nothing much they could talk about, since, as a librarian, Helga did not meet a lot of people, and Ismail did not spend much time outside the house.

“More soup, Honey?”

Helga was never bored to ask questions: Do you want to eat now, Honey? Do you want more? What do you want to eat tomorrow?

At a certain age, we decided to stop being kids. To Ismail, it was twelve, when he and his family were forced to leave their home. Seeing his mother became so sad, Ismail trained himself to keep his feeling to himself. He didn’t whine when he wanted something. Until now, Ismail was trained not to ask for food although he was hungry.

Helga’s plate was always clean. She was a child of the world war. Her parents would be angry if she did not finish her plate. Out there, they said, a lot of people could not eat. And Helga swallowed everything. All of them. She did not complain as it was not appropriate. She even thought that she needed more discipline. She was getting better of cooking in the right portion so that she did not throw away foods.

She was lucky, and Ismail would not beg for food although he was hungry.

One night, when the lights were off and Helga closed her eyes, she heard Ismail whispered next to her.

“I saw her.”

She opened her eyes in the dark. She wanted to ask, but something told her to be silent and waited.

“From the window, I saw her walking slowly with a dog next

to her. Her red dress swayed by the wind. The dog was as white as snow. It was so weird. The dog had three heads.”

Helga did not reply. She pretended to be asleep.

That night Helga tried to fake her irregular breaths. She did not know whether her husband was imagining things or joking, but she wanted to cling on a fact she found shortly after Oma left her: Snow Red did not exist. That afternoon she found an empty house. Snow Red had kidnapped Oma and her family. Oma broke her promise; she did not hold her breath when the woman passed.

She stopped believing on the fairy tale when the neighbors told her the truth. The night before, Oma and her family left town by train. It broke Helga’s heart. If Snow Red kidnapped Oma, she would not be able to buy ticket (at six she knew that people needed money to ride train). Oma did intend to leave, and Snow Red never existed.

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Ismail said nothing the next day, but he became more often, and longer, stared outside the window. Helga had to remind him to leave his work desk to sleep. Ismail complied, just like how he tried to do the household chores as best as he could, but he always returned there, on the corner, as if waiting for his lover. He began to bring whiskey bottle. Helga remembered that Ismail stopped drinking after they moved to serious relationship.

Helga was reading a book in the bed, lighted with a small lamp next to her, when Ismail said softly from his desk.

“I saw her. No, she saw me.”

He turned his back on Helga. His head turned to the right, as if mesmerized by something out there. Helga put her book down.

“The Snow Red,” Ismail murmured.

This was the first time that name was spoken from Ismail’s lips long after Helga told the legend about kidnapping woman. That woman, Ismail continued, stood in front of their apartment building and looked up. She knew Ismail was looking at her. Helga rose up angrily, and walked to the window. She looked down, trying to see whatever her husband was seeing. No one was there.

“You have to stop drinking,” Helga snapped.

"I don't know how long she looked at me," he raved, as if he did not hear Helga. "She smiled, and then she looked ahead and kept walking."

"Really? Is she beautiful?"

"Really beautiful."

Angrily, Helga opened the drawer of Ismail's work desk—*her* work desk—and took a pack of cigarettes. She took one, returned to her bed, and broke her promise one year ago to stop smoking. She felt weird surge of jealousy. She did not even say she loved him when she asked Ismail to live with her, but now she was jealous towards a woman, who might only exist in her husband's head.

The Snow Red officially became the third person in their marriage. "She" always presented between them, sometimes uttered, sometimes knocked in silence. "She" was there on their dinners, whenever they did not know what to talk about, stuck in closed doors, reflected in television screen. Now it was not Helga who turned it on, it was Ismail, he sat firm in the couch, looking for his homeland pictures through news.

When she was little, Helga imagines Palestine as a paradise. She saw palm trees in vast field of sand in Christian books. The pictures of Palestine made her forgive Oma who left without any words. If Oma went there, of course she was happy. Didn't we all want to go to Jerusalem?

"Do you know who stay at your house now?" Helga asked her husband.

Some years ago, Ismail's uncle paid a visit there. A family from Poland stayed at Ismail's house. They offered him a drink and were good-mannered. The baby they brought from Europe in 1948 had grown into a beautiful girl.

"They are not bandits," Ismail said. "The girl, Ilana, she is very beautiful."

Ismail looked at the television with blank stare, but—either because she was stupid or loyal or neither—she decided to stay next to her husband. Ismail walked to the kitchen cupboard, took a bottle of whiskey, and returned to his work desk. "She," the Snow Red, slowly moved from the room corner to the bed, creeping beneath the

blanket. Sometimes Helga felt that she heard someone else's breathing voice between them. Ismail began talking in his sleep. Helga was not even asleep when Ismail, in his restless sleep, called a name. Helga could not hear it clearly, but his delirium shook her. Her husband dreamt of 'her'. And the third person could never get as dangerous when she had a name.

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After work, Ingrid fetched Helga in the library. She was an old friend, born from a devout Catholic family, but some ten years ago she announced that she was an atheist. She did not believe in God but believed in many other things, which Helga could not prove empirically. That afternoon, she took Helga to her oracle.

"Ah, your contradiction," Helga sneered.

"Your marriage could be more contradictive, moreover when we get closer to Aquarius era. But maybe because you are a Taurus. Earth Element. You feel like you need to set your foot on the ground,"

Ingrid's oracle was a red-headed middle-aged woman who called herself with exotic name: Esmeralda. Helga was sure it was not her real name. Esme, as Ingrid called her, began her career by walking up to people in the park and greeted them politely, "I am sorry, but I saw your aura is so dark." She felt she needed to apologize, like feeling sorry of knowing bad omen that could happen in the future. Then she would give them a business card containing address and telephone number if they wanted to hear spiritual advices. Ingrid was one of the card receivers. And maybe because we were welcoming Aquarius era, Esmeralda was always busy with clients.

Helga often heard about Esmeralda's prophecy, but this was the first she visited her with Ingrid. Esmeralda's practice room was painted in dark blue, and covered in colorful curtains. Esme wore a white loose dress and necklace made of green-tosca-colored stones. Ingrid watched carefully when the oracle arranged tarot cards, and, with serious look on her face, explained her reading. Helga listened to blurry lines like 'you had to be careful in making choices,' or 'someone would come and change your life.'

Of course, if you did not take the prophecy seriously, we knew



those lines could lead to anything.

After reading Ingrid's prophecy, Esmeralda turned to Helga. Helga prepared herself for receiving an invitation started from a sentence like 'you had dark aura.' But Esmeralda did not do it. Ingrid made the decision and told Esmeralda to read Helga's fate through tarot card. Unlike before, Helga did not reject it. She thought she needed an entertainment, although based on her experience with an oracle; it would not be entertaining at all. Disbelieving an oracle meant one thing, but listening that bad things could happen to you was another case.

Esmeralda arranged the card. She asked Helga to open some.

"Something could not leave, and maybe could not be forgiven," said the Oracle.

Helga opened the next card, and continued:

"Crossroad. You need to choose. Someone will go very far."

"She did move around a lot," Ingrid added. "Please continue."

Esmeralda looked at the card for a very long time, and then she stared at Helga.

"This card is important for you. The Goddess of Moon who walked in the night," she said. "But I prefer to call her The Goddess of witches. Witches prayed at her."

Feeling ridiculed, Helga asked, "Do you think I look like a witch?"

"I think you are in a crossroad."

They debated about the goddess. Christians, Esmeralda said, ruled out strong woman symbols and replaced them with new symbols. The old women were considered as evil, bad, and associated with witches. Helga was not religious, although her parents gave her Christian story books for kids. She no longer read them, but she also did not believe in Pagan stories.

"I am sure you will meet her soon," Esmeralda said. "Hecate."

The oracle did not say it dramatically. But, right at that moment, Helga felt her body tense up.

The name was familiar to her, so close and warm. She remembered the nights when she heard Ismail's voice next to her, saying something repeatedly, like a hiss.

As she parted, Esmeralda said, "Be good to the three-headed dog."

As they walked home from the oracle, Helga and Ingrid rode a train, but no one talked. Helga was not in the mood to.

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On Sunday, Helga took her husband to do grocery shopping. A Curtain and a new table cloth might bring a small change in their apartment. Ismail looked confused, but Helga kept asking for his opinion for their household needs. Ismail chose cheaper and of poor quality things rather than the long-lasting things. His choices disappointed Helga. Refugee mentality, she sighed.

Or her husband was preparing to leave?

Helga tried to remember whether Oma prepared for her departure by buying second-class furniture.

That day shopping, however, was not that bad. They found a new restaurant in Kreuzberg, and it was enough for someone who did not put her hope too high. Helga now understood how husband and wife could last. They invested on things they could do together – like shopping or taking care of children – until they forgot they were strangers to each another.

When night fell, Ismail called her softly. He was pale.

“She wants to kiss me.”

They were watching television, watching trucks filled with militants and people who walked back and forth.

Ismail said it as if they grasped the same reality. Helga did not turn. She denied believing anything. She knew her decision of taking up a damaged man was madness. She also understood that Ismail was never completely sane after he was exiled from his homeland. But she was not ready to face other madness.

“Don’t ask permission from me to have an affair,” said Helda. “That’s an insult.”

If there was someone mad in their house, let it be her husband. Helga rose from the couch when Ismail grabbed her arm.

“The first kiss,” said Ismail. “was the last kiss.”

Helga sat down, hugged Ismail and stroked his hair. The shadow of Snow Red brought back the fear. She cursed her own thoughts. Maybe she was stupid for believing that another woman – who kept

attracting him like a magnet – wanted to kidnap her husband. She was not supposed to worry – unless Ismail did want to get kidnapped.

But Helga never really knew what her husband wanted.

“What do you want, Ismail?” she whispered.

Ismail did not reply. Her question made Helga helpless. She thought she knew the answer, but it was not enough. It was inappropriate.

That night Ismail fell asleep. He did not talk in his sleep. Helga thought the heater did not work because she was cold. Curling up in her blanket, she kept staring at her husband’s face. But unlike the previous nights, Ismail looked calm. Helga fetched a deep sigh, relieved and heavy. Slowly, she closed her tired eyes.

In her dream, Helga walked in the snowy sidewalk with someone. She was a six year old again, who needed to look up to look at the adults. Oma held her right hand.

Will we board the train, Oma? She asked.

Oma stopped walking, then looked at her peculiar smile on her face. She pulled Helga’s left hand and placed something in it. A snowy globe.

Snow fell harder. Helga put her hands in her coat pocket. That was when she saw her. A fresh color of red, creeping, and slowly ripping the white snow field. The figure became clearer. Yes, the woman, Hecate. Beneath her long red hood and dress, she walked with her dog, a strange three-headed dog. When she woke up, Helga forgot how she looked like, and whether she was old or young. She just remembered that in her dream, her beauty was so threatening.

Oma did not hold her hand anymore. She left with the train, leaving her alone. Helga held her tears back while holding the snow globe in her pocket. Hecate walked closer. Helga looked down. She stopped right in front of her. Motionless. Helga forgot to hold her breath. She began to steal glances. She hesitated, but she slowly regained her courage. Hecate smile at her. She looked as if she wanted to say something. Suddenly, from behind Helga, someone ran fast and dropped on to his knees right in front of Hecate’s feet, hugging her gown. Hecate took off her cloak and enveloped him with red.

Helga thought she knew him.

Snow piled up the next morning. People had gathered when she descended. Ismail threw himself from the ninth floor, hit the car, and now lied in the snow, which absorbed red. Unpretentious red. Hecate's gown, in Helga's dream, was so burning.

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In another winter after Ismail's death, Helga did not extend the lease for her apartment. She walked back and forth from the bedroom to the living room, which was now filled with piles of boxes; she was busy choosing things she would get rid of. She would only keep some things. Ismail did not leave anything for her, and Helga had given all of her husband's belongings to a charity. When she emptied the cupboard, Helga opened the drawer where she kept her valuables, then carefully she pulled something out. A snow globe given by Oma.

That night the train brought Oma to Auschwitz. You did not need a ticket to board the death train.

Helga never told this to Ismail, because she, a six-year-old little girl, had let her beloved grandma to board the train, just like she could not bring back Ismail's house, which was taken away from him. As she was a bystander, who was never exiled or dragged out, but she was cursed for her memories and sight.

Ismail gave up his life to Hecate when Helga finally began to put her hopes in the future. But Helga could not complain because it was not appropriate. Hecate, Snow Red, was the Crossroads Goddess. The Goddess of the homeless. She would be there for those who seek refuge, who often get lost between the adventures and the fugitives.

Helga would leave the next day. She stared at the vast snow field from the window, holding onto her snow globe, saying her prayer to Hecate.

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