

SAMPLE  
TRANSLATION

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MY NAME IS DAMJAN

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## Suzana Tratnik: My name is Damjan

### TERRA ROSSA (an excerpt from the novel)

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But that rarely happens to me, seeing everything red, I'm no junkie. Well, except for the things that are actually red and that everybody sees as red. That earth looks red to anyone. The soil at the seaside is red. It's red in July and August, and probably in winter too, it's red even when it's covered in snow. I often think about that red soil.

Anyway, I've gone completely off topic. One of the reasons I got drunk that night at the club was because I was on my own, without Nela. It was after that huge fight with Sine, Brine and Joc when I first ran into her at the fag club. I was really surprised to see her there, I thought she was normal. She told me she'd had several girlfriends and so she went there. At first, I was so jealous at all the lesbians at the club I didn't know what to do. But after three or four beers, I finally got up the courage to ask her if she meant what she'd said that time at Sine's party about liking me best. She said that she meant it. Every word of it. After that, I was a regular at the club, I was there every single Sunday, not giving a damn what people thought or what the Moste crowd would say if they saw me with her. Sometimes, I was even proud to have her by my side. And she never pried and, unlike everybody else, didn't try to brainwash me and maybe that's why I told her a lot myself. I even told her my real name and, every now and then, I let her call me by it. She was the first person I ever met for coffee in broad daylight without having had anything to drink and without Roki to lean on. No one was there to watch out for me when I met up with her, stone-cold sober. At the beginning, I stared down at the table rather than her, and did more listening than talking. But it was nice, I don't know, completely different than usual. She told me she was no longer just a hairdresser, she was going to college and might become a social worker someday. Not that I get why anyone would want to be a social worker. Still, it's a living. She told me everything: about her sisters, her parents, the great loves of her life. I told her all about my large extended family and how we didn't really get along at home. I even told her I was seeing a shrink, although I'm usually very secretive about it, not even Roki knows all the details. And so, on Sundays, I lived only for Nela and completely forgot about everybody else. If she couldn't make it, I just got hammered with Roki.

But I still think a lot about that red soil.

"Look," said Nela, stooping. More and more often, she'd discover and observe things that no one else paid attention to – she must've gotten that from school. Her delicate hand sifted through the dirt, picking out the needles. She scooped up a handful of the red Mediterranean soil, stood up and held out her hand. She was rarely that cheerful. But for me, she was sometimes happy for me. She spread her palm and the red soil went running through her slender fingers. "Terra rossa," she said. I loved to fantasise that she sometimes glowed in my presence like that

red soil in the sun. Well, when I have enough sleep and no one's pissing me off, I can be kind of romantic, too.

"What?" I asked for no particular reason, not knowing what to say.

"Terra rossa. When you take your geography exam, think of the sea and terra rossa. Then you know almost everything there is to know about geography. Really!"

"Terra rossa," I said.

It sounded so nice. Red and nice. She laughed and took my hand, as if she was going to kiss it. I immediately looked over my shoulder a little nervous – you never know when you might run into a friend or someone from work. After all, the beach is not that far from Ljubljana. I'm already the talk of the town; I don't need this on top of everything else. People won't leave me alone as it is. I don't like stuff going round about me that isn't true. I have no idea what people think when they look at me or when they hear me talk, but I feel normal. I'm not pretending to be something and I'm not playing dress-up, I've been like this practically all my life. I'm not trying to hide who I am either, but I don't feel the need to tell people anything about me. If I say I'm Damjan, everyone's happy, including me. And even if they find out later I'm actually a woman, it's too late for them to have second thoughts or change their minds, so they tend to accept me as I am. I usually don't have any problems with the way I look, as I've said plenty of times. (Even when Sine, Brine and Joc got on my case for "pretending" to be a man, I didn't take them all that seriously. They were only teasing me because they were high and pissed off. Once they blew off some steam, they went back to accepting me for who I was. Anyway, we're not close anymore.) When I open my mouth, people soften up. I can be funny, that is, when I'm in a good mood. And I'm in a good mood most of the time. I can't stand boring people and I can't stand pouters. Nela used to pout sometimes, though not right at the beginning – you learn way too much about people if you get to know them too well. That's why I don't let anyone learn too much about me. So that they don't get fed up with me too fast.

But I gave her that ring because she wrote to me so many times. I'd had people write to me before, but never that kind of stuff. I don't know, I would get an occasional postcard from my brother in Germany, but that was for the whole family, not just me. Or, in the mornings, I would sometimes find a note from my dad that read something like: "Buy bread and keep hands off." That simply meant that I wasn't supposed to touch their bread, that I had to look after myself if I was going to do things my way. So naturally, I'd eat it. But they knew I'd always do what I wasn't supposed to. I've always been like that, I don't know why, or why my parents never got that. If my dad was smart, he would write: "Just take the bread." And then I wouldn't touch it. But we never had the kind of conversations that would lead me to tell him about myself – not that I'd want to. Anyway, mum also wrote to me one time when I was in hospital. I guess I was probably in first grade. I'd hurt my eye – I think I fell off my bike – and I kept screaming I wanted to go home. Mum wrote me that letter, god knows why, I had a hard time seeing with only one eye, plus I couldn't read well yet. But it seemed to me the poor woman must've spent so much time and energy writing me that long letter – I distinctly remember it was two and a half pages long (a little less if I count the spaces for place and date – a letter is not a letter without that); I took it in my hands several times, turning it over and counting the lines, because I didn't know

some of the words. As a matter of fact, I only recognised her signature at the bottom of the letter because I knew every letter begins with “dear so and so” and ends with “your so and so” – unless someone writes a letter to themselves, but not even my family is that crazy.

But Nela sometimes wrote to me even from Ljubljana. She had the time and didn't have to get up in the morning or do much physical work. She wrote to me in the evening, for no particular reason, when I was already fast asleep because I worked mornings and had to wake up early. She would write me these long letters and then give them to me with a blush just before we said goodbye. Like when I was catching a bus. She'd run after me, saying she had something for me. I felt a strange heat coming over me; I kept asking: What is it? What is it? You'll see, she said and ran off. When she gave me the first letter in the middle of the street and ran across the road giggling, I just stood there laughing, watching her disappear. “You're nuts,” I said. I told her that so many times. Just because I was at a loss for words. Because she really said things and did things I wasn't used to and couldn't get my head around. And I'd met so many different people in my life, from bumps to businessmen. But she had a mind of her own. A mind unlike any other. Too much so. Talking to her, you sometimes got the feeling you could tell her anything because she was on an entirely different planet. But I don't know which one. I don't know where all those strange thoughts and words of hers came from. So I had to tell her over and over again that she was nuts. But I didn't mean anything bad by it. When she first told me she loved me – she was sitting on my lap – I didn't say anything. I buried my face in her neck. I wanted to crawl into a hole. She looked at me in surprise, as if she was worried she'd frightened me. “Sorry,” she said, “it's not a big deal.” She stroked my hair and my face. And I kept pressing my head against her neck until I was practically down to her armpit. It was too much. I was really angry at myself for getting so carried away, I knew this wouldn't end well, it never does when you can no longer tell your ass from your elbow.

You see, she'd written to me even before the terra rossa, before we went to the seaside together. Just us, no one else, without the gang. I couldn't have imagined doing that before. But we weren't there long, only three days, and even that turned out to be too much sometimes. I felt I wouldn't be able to be alone with her for very long after all. When I got to know her better, I realised we were very different, but not so different that we couldn't spend a lot of time together. But I decided not to tell her that because I didn't want to start a fight. I always had a vague feeling that Nela couldn't really tell her ass from her elbow either, but she didn't let that bother her, she was absolutely fine with it. Me, I don't like everything to be so upside-down and fucked up. A man needs some kind of order in his life.

Where does terra rossa come from? I never asked her. Or I forgot. I'd dropped out. But for a few weeks, I was resolved to get into some school or other and maybe apply for college one day. Hell, Damjan can go to college too. Needless to say, my family took the piss out of me, waving their arms, “You, go to college, you're not fit for a barn, you're too old anyway, you should've thought about that sooner.” But you know, it doesn't get to me anymore. It would've thrown me off if they'd been supportive for a change. In the end, I didn't need any support as,

thank god, I decided not to go to school, or rather, the idea wore off pretty quickly. They were right, what was done was done and I had to live with what I'd made of my life and work with it. You can't always use school as an excuse and say things are going to get better once you get your education. What did I need it for? Would I be better off if I had an education? Would I have more money? I don't think so. It would only mean years of hard work, cramming and behaving myself. It would be a long time before it paid off. I'm not the kind of guy who just waits and waits – I'm already doing that, slaving away, waiting for a rise or for something to fall out of the sky. And then everything turns to shit and you're back where you started. A waste of time. Not worth the hassle. I'd rather play the lotto. Sometimes it's better to leave things as they are and not do anything. You are where they put you, probably at birth, right? If you're a loser you're a loser, if you're a winner you're a winner, and will probably stay one. Nela didn't buy that at all, she used to dream that both of us would get our education and make something of ourselves, have a better life. She believed we didn't have to live like our parents did, nor our friends from the Moste gang. She had some nerve, that girl; she could be patient, didn't worry much whether or not she had anything in her fridge or whether or not she had enough money for the bus. That is, as long as there were cigarettes and coffee in the house – that's something she did care about. She made sure of it one way or the other, but didn't go to too much trouble for anything else. I'm not saying she was lazy, no, she wasn't lazy, but she was stubborn, so unbelievably stubborn – to a fault. I was frustrated with her sometimes because she could've gotten so much more out of her education and done things much differently. She could've had that better life right then. But no way. She had to do it her way. She didn't want to be a hairdresser anymore. I'm not saying that everyday stuff didn't matter to her at all; she just had these crazy ideas in her head. She once asked me how I would classify her, as a loser or a winner, if I had so much to say on the subject. I didn't say anything. What was I supposed to say? She didn't really fit in either category. They didn't apply to her, it's true. When we started going out, she was nearly broke because she wasn't working anymore, putting all her money in her studies. But she didn't tell me. She never talked about it. I don't know, I guess I figured it out on my own. After work, I would go to the store and then to her place. I would bring her cigarettes, coffee, milk, food. And shampoo and body lotion. I wanted her to use lotion regularly – she deserved it. I had to help her, though I didn't really understand myself. I'd never seen that side of me before. And I didn't want to tell Roki what was going on; he would've teased me about it for sure and say something like, this one really has you wrapped around her little finger. I don't know, she was like a character from a book. A book about witches. Someone once told me – I don't know who, it's one of those ancient truths, as people say – that witches and oracles are always poor. They have that special gift of seeing the future, so they must be poor. She was a witch, but I bought her what I thought she needed. Naturally, she always claimed she didn't need anything. She really was a witch, this Nela, the girl whose wrists I accidentally slashed – I saw it in her eyes. In fact, she was the one who made me slash her wrists after I told her it was an Indian ritual. I know how crazy I can get, I don't deny that, but I also know that I would never cut some normal girl's wrists – not every girl' want to do crazy shit like that... I could never hold her gaze for very long because of all the spots on her corneas. You could get lost in them. And then you couldn't find your way out. Witches have eyes

like that. That's why you can't tell what they're thinking, while they see everything. And it's best not to look them in the eyes for too long. Of course, witches are no longer around, but who knows, there might be a couple of them left, even here in Slovenia. In fact, I read something about witches in the *Moste News* recently (I was reading the article when our group was having a discussion about man-woman relationships, what a crazy topic, who the hell thought of that – it had nothing to do with me), and the piece was written by a serious journalist who generally writes about who stole what, about rapists (the ones with black bars across their eyes) and what the latest alcohol-related death rate is. In short, the bloke wrote about witches in Slovenia, and did most of the investigating himself: where witches could be found, what they did and how they were burned alive at the stake. He's a journalist after all and so he has to be able to dig up such interesting and true stuff. I also heard a story from my grandma who still lives in a village, and those people still know a thing or two about the supernatural. I didn't believe her at first and my brother made fun of her, saying, the old girl's going soft in the head, no wonder, what with everything she's been through; she even lived through World War II. Anyway, grandma said that there was a tree right outside the village, by the entrance to the cemetery, and they said that at every new or full moon, a lost soul was heard crying at the top of that tree. My brother poked me in the ribs as if to say, listen to the old bat, what a load of crap, and I said that there were so many lost souls in the world we would run out of trees if all of them sat crying in the branches. (Everyone cracked up when I said that.) And this lost soul, grandma said, had been up there even before the war, they said it was the soul of some child who died because he'd been neglected and beaten. But man, the strangest thing happened this one time when I was walking alone from the village to my grandma's house and had to pass that tree with the lost soul. But I didn't chicken out, I almost forgot I was walking past the cemetery: I'd had just enough to drink I didn't make too much of a fuss, but when I looked at the tree, I thought I heard a slight rustle at the top – like this: whooooshwhoosh – and something squealed... I'll stop there before someone accuses me of acting like an old lady. It could've been a rat for all I know, but I have no idea what a rat would be doing squealing up in some tree... So I'll say no more, I'm just telling it like it was and then everyone can make up their own minds. But I'll say neglecting children is some really fucked up shit. And I said so at the time, in front of everybody, but mum kicked me under the table as if to say, lay off, I'll have no more of this nonsense. I don't know why she resented me so much for it, maybe she felt guilty – just in case, I made a face at her without her seeing it. That really pisses me off, someone not letting me say something or trying to tell me what I can and cannot talk about.

Even when I told the story to Roki, the first thing he said was that I was just like his mum who performs her superstitious ritual at every new moon to try to make Roki stay at home, turn back into a woman and marry someone of the opposite sex. When I told him he should come with me to visit my grandma for the holidays and walk past that tree with the lost soul at midnight by himself, he got quiet. (Oh yeah, Roki also told his parents that he was who he was, that he was perfectly happy that way and had no intention of changing because he was no trannie.)

Witches or no witches, either way, I couldn't look Nela in the eyes at all at the beginning. As long as we were out partying, I had no problem putting my arm around her, even grabbing her butt for a laugh sometimes, yes, I even slashed her wrists (to this day, she thinks we were performing an Indian ritual) and didn't feel weird at all. But when we were alone and got talking... I felt weird enough talking to women I'd made out with, it's an entirely different thing than just snogging in silence. I'd never been sober with a woman before. So when I started going over to Nela's place, I'd first go round to the pub and have a couple of shots to steady my nerves, get up my courage and pull myself together. It wasn't until later that I changed the pub for the supermarket. After I'd gotten used to seeing her. When we'd lie there talking all afternoon and all night, listening to the same old tape that switched sides automatically. We listened to the music and everything made perfect sense to us.

"I'm scared," she said to me one evening in May. (She had a habit of saying random shit like that. That was another thing I didn't know before, that she could be so damn complicated.) I didn't say anything. I was only scared sometimes when I'd been partying for several days straight. But that was the booze. Otherwise, I was never scared. Why should I be? I couldn't understand why someone who was in love and was having a good time would be scared, why people could only think about the bad stuff and carry their problems around with them.

"Cut the crap," I finally said.

"But I am," she said. "I'm scared!"

"What's gotten into you? We love each other, we're together. You shouldn't be scared when you're with me. Nothing can happen to us, you hear me, nothing bad is going to happen to us! I won't stand for it, I won't let you be scared. And I'll never let you go, never."

That seemed like the thing to say – if you tell a woman you won't let her go, it can't mean anything bad, and they feel it, even if they don't say anything. I don't know, you won't let her leave your side, you won't let her fall and hurt herself, you won't let her run around and you definitely won't let her worry about stuff that has nothing to do with facts – nothing good can come of it. You always have to consider the facts. If you stick to the facts, you shut everybody up. And I tried to have the hardest facts possible in my life so that no one could touch me. Such as a nice salary, a car and my own house. Ah, Roki would waive his hand, you sound just like my parents; they have their noses in their bank statements all the time, always checking who owes what to who. Of course, he was still too dim, didn't have the balls yet to understand the power of hard facts, so I let him be and didn't mention it to him again. But I told Nela I'd get everything done in no time – if I only put my mind to it. Well, not that soon obviously, but we will have it someday, everything from our own place to a barbecue out on the patio and mountain bikes to go cycling in Šmarna gora. (But I don't like dogs, they leave hair everywhere. Well, maybe just a German shepherd to go with the garden, so the whole place doesn't stink of dogs.) Yep, and then I'd have everyone over for lunch, my whole family, I'd even get my brother to come from Germany. And when the whole lot was there, I'd ask them if they were hungry. Then eat what you brought with you, I'd say. I was quite pleased at the thought of finally getting the chance to give them hell because I was also neglected as a child and so had every right to go squealing from

some treetop if I wanted to and had that kind of time. Time and tide wait for no man, that's what my grandma always said and right now, I have to agree with her.

Ok, enough romance. Everyone gets carried away at some point in their life and tricks themselves into thinking of all the things they'd do for someone and help themselves in the process. Not that it's a bad thing, wanting to do something nice for other people, but in the end, it always turns out it wasn't worth it. It's hard to deal with people, it's hard to agree on anything or do stuff together, because at some point, someone is bound to change their mind or find somebody else. So I say you need to save your energy and have some sort of backup – you don't always have to be the one on the losing end, you can avoid that at least. Yeah, what can I do, I know all of this already, I have so many experiences and memories that I'll get my act together soon. So I'm not worried at all if I let myself live a little for a while longer. But I'd still prefer to be a winner. If I can, I want to be a winner. But since I wasn't born into it, I'll find some other way to become a winner. By hook or by crook – that's probably the only way of becoming a winner. Unless you were born one, but that's not the case with me.

Mark my words, Damjan will be a winner someday. It's not too late yet. Hell no, it hasn't even begun.