

Family Ghosts

Anna Ruchat

Novel

Italian



Spettri familiari (Familiar Ghosts), the latest offering from Anna Ruchat, is a novel about a wealthy family who, following an unexpected invitation, find themselves forced to come to terms with their own story and their past. A story that unfolds in two parts (the first set in the 1980s, the second in the present day) and in multiple narratives (third person narration alternates with journals, letters, fragments of 'dead architecture', and confessions in the first person), all following a structure that reflects life's ups and downs: love, hypocrisy, and untellable truths.

"I understood in that moment that the only protection from life is life. Or rather death, he wrote in his last letter, and I realised that I didn't want to die, not yet."

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Spettri familiari

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Anna Ruchat is a translator and author. Born in Zurich in 1959, she studied Philosophy and German Literature in her home city and in Pavia. Her literary career began with translation, specifically Thomas Bernhard's *Breath and In the Cold* (Adelphi). She has translated many German writers, including Paul Celan, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Victor Klemperer, Alexander Kluge, Nelly Sachs, Mariella Mehr and Christine Lavant. Ruchat made her authorial debut in 2004 with the short story collection *In questa vita* (Casagrande). She has gone on to publish many works, most recently: *Gli anni di Nettuno sulla terra* (Ibis, 2018), the poetry collection *La forza prigioniera* (Passigli, 2021) and the novel *Spettri familiari* (Ibis, 2023). As of 2022 she also teaches German literary translation at FUSP in Rimini.

Photo: Maurice Haas

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Excerpt translated by Ruth Clarke

One summer's day in the early eighties, a very poor girl, still young and unworldly, was invited to a German-speaking city in Switzerland for a job interview. For so long she had wanted to get out of the valley where she was born, but not to then come back every day, like her father and brothers, on a bus packed with commuters crossing the border. She truly wanted to leave, to go to another country or city, meet new people, earn a small sum every month and maybe, later, send some money back home.

Teresa was 18, shy, with an oval face, dark eyes, thick eyebrows that met in the middle, and jet-black hair. You only needed to take a proper look at her to tell that she was a bright girl and the apple of her father's eye. He was the one who suggested she should put an advert in the newspaper as an au pair. She was good with children, had essentially raised her younger brothers; she was full of initiative and, while she was prone to tripping and losing her balance, she had the look of a lady.

Her father, originally from Campania, moved to Sondrio when he was still a boy, taken on at the Nuovo Pignone plant in Talamona. There, he married Teresa's mother, a woman from Valtellina, and in the late seventies, when he was let go from the factory, he had started work as a builder in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. Every day, he would go back and forth between the town and the construction sites. He was a lean, angular man. He would rather have handled that business with the advert himself, but he didn't know how to write. The little he had learned in his compulsory schooling, was long forgotten. One day, as he was crouching over a bucket, preparing lime, he recognised the shoes of the architect approaching across the still-drying cement. He stood up, wiping his hands on his work trousers, and nodded hello. Then, hesitant, he approached the man and asked if he could speak to him. The architect took him to one side, and he clumsily explained about the girl and her hopes of moving away.

Happy to be able to help this builder, who he had noticed on site from the very beginning as one of the quickest and most meticulous workers, the architect told him that

he would discuss it with his wife that night, and he would have some news for him the following day.

True to his word, the next day he turned up with an address and a telephone number. It was for a family with two small children, the architect told him, friends of friends. They'd lived in the north for several years, but they spoke Italian, he said. The wife taught at the university – the builder didn't know what she taught, but he didn't dare ask any questions – and she was out almost all day. The husband was a doctor, that's all he said, "a doctor", he worked in a clinic (only in the mornings) and had a private office in the apartment next door to where the family lived. They had a cleaning lady, the architect added, as if to reassure him, someone who went in a couple of times a week, so the girl would only have to take care of the children: drop them off at nursery, pick them up, take them to the park for a couple of hours, make them a snack and their dinner. "So there you have it", the architect said, somewhat embarrassed that he had gone into too much detail. "A nice family, your daughter will be in very safe hands".

And so, Teresa set out one morning in June. She crossed the border on the bus – which was half empty as it was a Sunday – and then took the train into the city, where the family were waiting to meet her. She wore black trousers, which her sister had bought for a relative's wedding, smart shoes, and a flowery shirt from the year before that pinched slightly at the bust. Her dark hair was pulled tightly into a plait that came down to her shoulders. She was carrying a patent leather bag, borrowed from her mother under strict conditions, and inside it her documents, train tickets, a book that had been a birthday gift from an older cousin. The woman she'd spoken to on the telephone, from a phone box in town so as not to put extra pressure on the household bill, had been very nice. She had told her that she would be waiting for her at the station, maybe with the children, and not to worry about the travel expenses, they would be taken care of.

On the train, Teresa fell asleep almost immediately. When she awoke, they were travelling through forests and waterfalls. It had rained a lot in the last few weeks and the water was rushing between the rocks. There was no sun in sight, just scraps of clear blue sky. The girl

tried to read, but after a few lines, nausea compelled her to close her eyes again. She was tired, she'd been awake since five, and fell back to sleep. The second awakening was more pleasant.

The train was on the flat now. Out of the window, Teresa saw a green lake, no different to the lakes she knew, but bigger, and set against the mountains, stern onlookers, plunging straight down to the water.

She checked her watch. There was still over an hour of the journey left. She picked up the book again in her small hands (such a contrast to the rest of her strong, shapely body) but this time she let herself be distracted by the green mirror of the water that appeared between one tunnel and the next, by the landscape changing around her until it opened out into meadows that swept down towards the lake. The day was just as beautiful on the other side of the Alps, and there was hardly a cloud in the sky. Teresa thought about her mother, who had never left the country, and her older sister, Lucia, who probably wouldn't either. And she laughed to herself, with the naive confidence of youth. After a short while, the lake on the left disappeared. Outside the window, the countryside transformed into suburbs. The train made several more stops at small stations and filled with people speaking a language she found incomprehensible.

Then another lake appeared on the right, there was a long tunnel and at the end, the train slowed with the grinding of metal and pulled into Zurich station where its route ended. Teresa stepped out onto the platform, clutching her little patent bag to her chest, and looked around. People were bustling through the station. The girl waited until she was almost alone, and at that moment, she saw a woman rush in with a child trailing behind her. She could hear her speaking to him in Italian as she pulled him along, it had to be her, Teresa thought, and smiled. The woman was sharp, but friendly. She wore no make-up and had brown hair escaping in all directions from a bun at the nape of her neck. Her corduroy jacket was buttoned up wrong, and she had a bulging black bag slung across her body.

"Ah, there you are, at last", she said, as though the girl, not she, was the one arriving late. And instead of shaking her hand, took her by the arm while her free hand attempted to coax out the child who was hovering behind

her. "I'm Maria and he's Giovanni. Giovanni, please! This is Teresa". Introductions were impossible, the boy was hiding. The woman rolled her eyes at Teresa and gave an apologetic shrug. They turned into a narrow street beside the station, where, a few metres away, a car was parked haphazardly on the pavement with its lights on. "There, that's us", the woman said, pulling a huge bunch of keys from her pocket. Little Giovanni wriggled free and ran over to a wall. From there, he turned to give Teresa a sulky glare. Teresa smiled at him. Maria kept on walking and interrogating the girl without listening to her answers, or that's how it felt to Teresa. In the car, the woman lit a cigarette and drove all the way home with the windows down. The air was warm, springlike. Teresa looked out of the window. The tramlines, the streets, the houses, everything here was different. On the pedestrian crossing, she saw a boy with green hair and a duster coat that came down to his ankles. "Right, here we are", Maria said at last, as they reached one of the first buildings on a street slightly wider than the others. As they came to a stop, Teresa could hear the sound of a tram bell.

The three of them walked in single file along the pavement, with the child in the middle. To reach the front door, they had to go through a small gate and down a little path. Once out of the car, the woman grew silent and almost distracted. She pushed open the front door with her shoulder and walked in with Giovanni, who was just as quiet and clinging to his mother. The girl followed behind them. The foyer was small and occupied almost entirely by an old lift. A narrow staircase ran all the way around. As the lift rose slowly and silently, Teresa had time to take in the woman's tense face reflected in the mirror on the back wall: her look of keen concentration on something invisible, the deep furrows at the corners of her mouth, and a bird-like profile that seemed somehow hollowed out by pain.