

THE FALL OF THE RED ARMY

Anna Halas (2021)

The play is one of the winners at the Batumi International Monodrama Festival in Georgia (2021).

Translated into English by Anna Halas

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Actors and objects

Natalka – a woman, aged 30-35

A wardrobe

Red dresses

*In the room stands a sizable wardrobe, its doors slightly ajar. Inside hang several red dresses, each styled differently. **Natalka** enters, dressed in a grey T-shirt and shorts, her hair tied up in a messy ponytail. **Natalka** walks over to the wardrobe, lightly touching each dress before pulling her hand away abruptly.*

Natalka: I've never considered myself pretty. Smart, yes, but not pretty. I felt like I was just... nothing! A plain, nondescript mouse. When I was younger, up until I turned eight, beauty wasn't something that crossed my mind. I was too caught up in childhood fantasies to notice the beauty in the world around me, especially in people.

One day, while visiting my grandmother, a girl from the neighbourhood asked me bluntly, "Why are you so ugly?" I was speechless. She went on, "Boys will never like you if you're ugly like that!" At first, I didn't see why it mattered, but her words echoed in my mind as I grew older and started understanding the world's priorities.

Around the age of thirteen or fourteen, I noticed how the boys in my class were eyeing the schoolgirls. I caught snippets of their conversations a few times. It seemed they didn't see me as one of the girls, and they weren't shy about discussing their favourites in front of me: "What legs she has! And her lips, her lips. I wish I could touch her bum." These conversations made me feel queasy, but I chose to stay silent.

I used to avoid parties, claiming I had no time for nonsense. I had big plans for the future and didn't want to waste time on trivialities. Except for one occasion. I once reluctantly went to a disco and sat in a corner all night. Towards the end, a cute guy from another class approached me and asked, "Hey, do you dance?" For some reason, I jumped up and said, "Sure." He responded with a laugh, "That's good, because I sing." Then he whispered in my ear, "What did you expect, silly? Your face is uglier than the sole of my shoe." I fled the room, fighting back tears. When I got home, I grabbed my dad's clippers and shaved my head. If I was such a freak, I figured I might as well go all in. My appearance in class the next morning caused quite a stir! People noticed me for the first time. They laughed, of course, but I didn't care. I convinced myself I didn't care about anyone.

I doubled down on my studies and aced the university entrance exams. University life was a breeze. I chose to major in nuclear physics. Why bother with anything else? Our group was tight-knit - no random folks, just like-minded scholars. Beauty was irrelevant. When tackling tough problems or conducting experiments, appearances didn't matter.

After my second year, luck finally smiled on me. No, I didn't transform from an ugly duckling into a white swan. Instead, I landed a scholarship for a year at a prestigious university in Scotland. Yes, the same one where the future heir to the British throne studied. Needless to say, I was over the moon! For the first few months, I practically lived in the lab. Even the local architectural marvels couldn't distract me. If you acknowledge the beauty in nature or architecture, then you have to consider that human beauty matters too. But of course, I wasn't ready to admit that.

One time, my roommate talked me into joining her for a traditional Scottish party. She had her eye on a local boyfriend she was infatuated with. What I was supposed to do there wasn't entirely clear to me. The dress code was strict: attire featuring traditional Scottish motifs. Without much deliberation, I headed to a charity shop where people donate all sorts of odds and ends. And that's where I stumbled upon this dress.

Natalka takes her first dress off the hanger, a red tartan one, and puts it on.

Oddly enough, the dress fit me perfectly. It was like it had been tailored just for me. I slipped into it and accompanied my friend to a party. Upon arrival, I immediately sought out a quiet corner to evade unwanted attention. Ha, as if anyone would actually notice me amidst all the beauties there. Just as I was contemplating finding a spot to blend into with a glass of red wine, a man in a kilt approached me excitedly, shouting something. I tried to decipher his intentions. He gestured to his kilt, then to my dress, which matched in colour. Bit by bit, I pieced together his jumbled speech: "Estate... Nanna... dress... anniversary... deceased... beloved." Complete gibberish!

I had to take control and calm the man down a bit. Later, I learned that he had custom-made the dress I wore to the party for his Nanna. It was meant to be a gift for her anniversary. Sadly, she passed away before the occasion, and never got to try it on. So, he donated the dress to charity. It turns out this man holds a Lordship title, with a family castle and coat of arms. He saw my wearing the dress as a sign from his beloved Nanna and stuck by my side the entire evening.

I still can't believe how it all went down, but that guy in the kilt ended up being my first man. After the party, he asked me to visit his family estate, the same place his Nanna lived. I knew where this was heading, but I went along for some reason. We hopped into his old-school car and cruised out of town. He kept me entertained with stories from his life, cracking up at his own jokes while I struggled to keep up with his fancy humour. I was trying to guess his age the whole time - fifty, maybe older? Who cared, though? He

was the first guy who noticed me, or rather, my red dress - although it was still me wearing it.

When we arrived at the estate, a severe thunderstorm began. There was some medieval mysticism in this story. I was expecting the ghost of my grandmother to jump out from behind a corner and make me take off her dress. The ghost didn't appear, but when we were exploring the castle rooms, we heard a loud thunder and the electricity went out. The lord was not confused and lit a fire in the fireplace. Then he silently came to me, pulled up my dress and put me on a round table with carved legs. With a deft movement, he lifted his skirt and, without aiming, hit the spot on the first try. I closed my eyes, expecting painful sensations.

They say the first time always hurts, but oddly enough, it didn't for me. I actually liked it right from the start. The Lord was completely lost in the moment, hardly paying any mind to me. I decided to go with the flow and shut down that nagging rational part of me that was still questioning my actions. A few minutes later, there was this loud thunderclap nearby, and that's when I found out what an orgasm was. Maybe I jumped at the sound, or maybe the guy in the kilt knew his stuff. I'm not sure if he realised he was my first man. We never talked about it. He drove me home in silence, giving me a big smile before I walked away without a backward glance.

I kept the red tartan dress with me after finishing my studies. I never wore it again, but it became the first member of my red army, taking an honourable place in my closet. I was that unnoticed grey mouse, but I had a secret weapon - a red dress! Of course, I didn't realise its power immediately. My second red dress was bought on impulse. Spotting it in a shop window, I purchased it without even trying it on.

Natalka takes the second red dress off the hanger and changes into it. She puts the first dress in a large garbage bag.

The next day, I showed up to university class in that dress. The guys in our group gave me curious looks at first, but soon immersed themselves in problem-solving, paying me no more mind - except for one. He was the sharpest tool in our class, aiming for a Nobel Prize. We nicknamed him “Nobel”. Despite his brilliance, he lacked social finesse. During a break, Nobel approached me and blurted out, “You look stunning in that dress. I’d love to hook up with you.” Surprised, I replied, “Sure, why not? Let’s hang out sometime.” He grinned, “I’m ready right now. Let’s hit the lab. No one’s around.” And off we went. Nobel wasn’t the Lord, but he was always there. We had a deal: whenever I wore a red dress, we’d hit the lab for experiments. After graduation, Nobel moved to the US for a job at a major research firm, and my red dress stayed hanging in his closet.

I found a job after university pretty quickly. The team was friendly, but no one really noticed me as the new specialist. They gave me all sorts of routine work and watched me drown in paperwork. I was honestly bored, so I decided to shake things up a bit. I went shopping for a red dress, this time with a clear plan. I went over different scenarios in my head: who might get hooked? It was hard to guess. There were a lot of men in the team. I ruled out only the old cleaner, the watchman, and the office manager. He was the only one who treated me well and sometimes came over for a friendly chat, but he liked boys, not girls in red dresses. This time, I had to search for a while. Either I had become picky, or the dresses weren’t up to par, but I tried on about ten before I found the one.

Natalka takes the third red dress off the hanger and changes into it. She puts the second dress in a large garbage bag.

The next day, I intentionally arrived a bit late so everyone would already be in place and my entrance wouldn’t go unnoticed. With confident steps, I made my way to my desk, which I had cleared of the usual piles of papers the previous day to ensure the fiery red dress stood out and drew attention. Within half an hour, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that two employees from different parts of the room were craning their necks, trying to get a closer look. Success! The tactic worked. That first day, I ended up having sex with a tall, handsome guy from accounting. Soon after, it was a skinny programmer, then

a married HR manager, a bald physicist, and several others. A few men who were particularly devoted to their wives were impervious to my charms, but I wasn't too upset. My conquests became routine. I stopped seeing obstacles and began to believe I had the right to invade others' spaces and establish my own rules there. My perceived ugliness no longer bothered me. When you have the mighty Red Army on your side, you always feel assured of victory!

I became so engrossed in conquering new territories that I forgot about everything else. Problems started to crop up at work, and eventually, I was asked to leave - politely but insistently. It was the first wake-up call, but I ignored it. "Smart, educated employees like me are always in demand!" I thought and quickly set out to find a new job. I found one pretty quickly, though it had about as much to do with nuclear physics as my face had to do with the beauty industry. Officially, my position was called office manager, but in reality, I was a go-whenever-they-send-me. I was sent a lot and often. Once I settled into the new place, I decided it was time to open the hunting season again. The opportunity came quickly. The company was organising a corporate party to celebrate its tenth anniversary, and they took us to the mountains for three days to strengthen team spirit. Naturally, the first thing I did was get a new red dress.

Natalka takes the fourth red dress off the hanger and changes into it. She puts the third dress in a large garbage bag.

The corporate party was a blast. The organisers set up a drumming session, bringing in a hundred different drums, and we created a wild orchestra together. I pounded so furiously on an African djembe that my whole body vibrated. The conductor of this crazy orchestra was a bearded man with green hair who kept glancing my way. Long story short, we ended up going home together. This drummer was the first man who made me think about the future. Not about a family - no, that thought still terrified me - but I did wonder how long we could stay together. For a few months, I managed to keep his attention, but eventually, I had to surrender the spotlight. You'll never guess to whom! To yellow

rubber ducks! Yes, those little bath toys for kids. What do ducks have to do with anything? It's a strange story.

About ten years ago, a container with these very ducks sank in some ocean somewhere. The container got damaged, and the ducks began to drift out in different directions. Some floated to the US, others to France. They spread all over the world. Some even froze in the harsh ice of the Arctic Ocean, only to thaw, resurface, and continue their journey years later. These ducks amassed thousands of fans who track down new specimens worldwide and buy them for outrageous sums to add to their collections.

My drummer had thirteen of these ducks, and he spent all his money on expanding his collection. He even flew to different countries to personally buy them from the lucky people who had found them. At first, his duck obsession amused me. I searched forums for new information and helped him contact other collectors. But soon, the ducks completely consumed his mind and heart. He abandoned his drums, and my red dress no longer excited him. Realising I couldn't compete with the ducks, I set off on my own. I bought several new red dresses and went back on the hunt.

Natalka takes the fifth red dress off the hanger and changes into it. She puts the fourth dress in a large garbage bag.

At first, things were smooth sailing. The dresses did their job perfectly. But soon enough, I got bored. Everything felt dull, and I craved some excitement. The stakes kept getting higher! I was wrecking families, not because I wanted to replace anyone, but because it became a challenge. That's what a plain Jane with a secret weapon - the Red Army - can pull off! Some of my targets slinked back to their wives defeated, while others lost everything and licked their wounds in misery. I reveled in the power and might of my army! Once content with any man's attention, I now handpicked my prey. Easy wins didn't do it for me anymore – the more they resisted, the more I hungered to conquer them. Crush them, dominate them, and leave them in my wake.

That's how I rolled! Slowly but surely, everything in my closet turned red. I switched jobs like I changed socks and even hopped cities a few times. Thought I was on top of the world. And then, bam! She showed up in my life. No, I didn't switch teams or anything like that. I rarely spoke to women. It's not about that. One day, the doorbell rang. I opened it, expecting to see one of my then-hubbies. Instead, there she was: a small, timid woman with large, tear-filled eyes. It turned out she was the wife of one of the men I had been actively pursuing.

She was heavily pregnant with her third child, though her swollen belly seemed oddly mismatched with her slender frame. Tears streamed down her face as she pleaded with her husband to leave me alone. Why this man told his pregnant wife about me, I don't know. If she came running to me, something in his story must have raised doubts for her. Clearly, he wasn't as innocent as he tried to make himself out to be.

This petite woman with her enormous eyes immediately touched my heart. There was something about her that felt familiar. As I looked at her, I saw a reflection of myself - a fellow grey mouse, but our paths had diverged. She was saying something to me, but I could barely hear her. It wasn't until I promised her I would seek help from a therapist that I snapped out of it. Me? To a shrink? Why? I'm doing just fine! I'm doing great!

Of course, I didn't see a therapist back then. I mean, not right away, but I made sure to stay away from her husband. Her words kept echoing in my mind every day. They planted doubts in my soul, or maybe they just stirred up a dormant volcano. I relocated to another city, but my old lifestyle no longer sparked joy. I bought a red dress, but it never made it out of the closet. There it hangs, brand new, still with the price tag attached.

I don't know how to live any differently now; I can't even remember. I did end up seeing a therapist. It felt like I couldn't handle things on my own anymore. Now my first challenge is to let go of the Red Army. Easier said than done. They've been through thick and thin with me. Who am I without them? Just a grey mouse. A plain, ugly grey mouse.

Natalka takes off the fifth dress, puts it in a large garbage bag, and puts the rest of the red dresses hanging in the closet in the same place.

You'd think the Red Army was unbeatable, right? But no, it suffered a devastating defeat. We lost. Can you believe it? To a little grey mouse who refused to surrender to circumstances.