

Christine Nöstlinger. *Fiery Red Friederike*
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Translation by Eva-Maria Martus



Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Friederike and she had peculiar hair. A few streaks were red as tomatoes, the bangs were the colour of carrots and most of her hair was raspberry red. On top of that, she had freckles and was quite heavy.

Friederike lived in an old house, at the very top, under the roof. Before you reached the front door, you had to climb one hundred stairs. There, Friederike lived together with her aunt and a cat.

The cat was named Tomcat and he was big, fat and old. His fur was fiery red. The entire day he lay on the armchair and slept.

Old cats mostly sleep. They don't climb on the roof, catch any mice or play with little girls. They don't purr either. Sometimes, they sneeze.

The aunt's name was Auntie Anna and she was even older than the cat. When she had been young, she had had red hair like Friederike. And freckles. Now, her hair was white and the freckles had turned pale over time. But she was still heavy. Very heavy in fact.

Auntie Anna never went out. Most of the time, she sat on the armchair beside the cat's chair and knitted or read or slept or thought about things. She held the knitting in her hands while she read, thought about things or slept. The book always lay open in front of her. You never knew if she was knitting, sleeping, reading or thinking. She had been reading the book for over a year. Nevertheless, she was still on the first page.

Friederike went shopping every day. She didn't like doing it at all. All the people were laughing at her. Especially the kids.

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When they saw Friederike, they shouted: "There comes the fiery red Friederike! Fire! Fire!

Her head's on fire!"

Even hiding her hair under a hat didn't help. The children pulled down the hat from her head.

Some children even waited in front of the house for Friederike to go out shopping. Then they followed her and tugged her hair. They thought it was funny.

Friederike had often tried to get rid of her hair. She cut it all off!

One hour later – gone.

Three hours later: Grown back already!

Another two hours later: It's no use!

It's enough to make you weep!

Postman Bruno never laughed about Friederike's hair. Once a month, he came by and brought Auntie Anna money. He didn't notice that Friederike had red hair. He was colour-blind. But nobody knew, not even his own wife.

Whenever the postman had climbed up to Auntie Anna, he had to catch his breath. He sat down in the kitchen with Friederike and told her stories about delivering letters, about his wife and about the director of the post office. And Friederike told him about the children who made fun of her because of her hair.

The postman wondered: "I always hear that children want to have red clothes and red hats and red candy and red balloons. Why don't they want to have red hair?"

"I don't know!" Friederike answered.

"In the newspaper, I saw the picture of a famous actress," the postman said. "Underneath they wrote that she is famous because she has beautiful red hair." "She must have different hair," Friederike said. "A different kind of red maybe."

The postman fell silent then. He didn't know anything about colours.

He said goodbye to Friederike, climbed down the hundred stairs and mumbled to himself:

"It's a shame, it's a shame, a shame it is..."

He was still mumbling when he arrived back home in the evening. His wife asked him what his mumbling was about and he told her about Friederike.

Afterwards, she also mumbled: "It's a shame, it's a shame, a shame it is..."

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Auntie Anna advised Friederike: "Tell the children that there is nothing you can do about your hair and that you want to play with them. Then play with them and if you play well, they will like it and they won't make fun of you again. It's as easy as that!"

Friederike answered: "When they laugh at me, I can't say a word and I can't play well. They will never be my friends and it is not easy at all!"

One day, Auntie Anna said: "Friederike, in three weeks' time you have to go to school."

"I'm afraid of the children," Friederike said. "Can't I rather stay dumb?" "It's not allowed,"

Auntie Anna said. "They will come and get you if you don't go there."

On the first Monday of September, Friederike went to school for the first time. On that day, none of the children laughed at her. But already on the second day of school, when Friederike arrived in class, a child called: "Fire!"

The teacher got angry. The child had to draw two lines of circles as a punishment. Always alternating between drawing a big and a small one.

After a month, almost every child had drawn circles as a punishment because of Friederike. The children couldn't write words yet. They were angry about the drawing punishment. But they didn't stop making fun of Friederike nevertheless.

The teacher asked the schoolmaster for advice. He said: "Pretend you don't see or hear anything. Then the children will soon be bored and will stop making fun of her."

The teacher followed the good advice, which wasn't good at all, and pretended not to see and hear what the children did to Friederike.

Friederike got only best marks. She was well-behaved and hard-working. The teacher praised her every day.

That didn't make the children like her even the slightest bit better.

Once, in the afternoon, Friederike, Auntie Anna and the cat Tomcat were sitting at the table and drank hot chocolate. Suddenly, Friederike asked her aunt: "When you were a child, you had red hair, too. Didn't the children make fun of you?"

"That was a long time ago, I have forgotten," Auntie Anna said.

Suddenly, Tomcat shouted: "Don't lie!"

Tomcat didn't speak often. Only if it was really necessary.

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“Leave me alone!” Auntie Anna said. “I’m old. I want to be left alone!”

Tomcat sat up. He put his front paws on the table. His fur turned thick and brightly red. His eyes sparkled like rubies, which are jewels, and hissed: “So, you want to be left alone, you selfish, old woman! If you won’t tell Friederike how you defended yourself, I will!”

Grumpily, Auntie Anna snarled: “I won’t say anything. There’ll only be trouble!”

“Trouble is better than sorrow!” Tomcat hissed.

“What are you talking about?” Friederike asked.

“About your hair’s ability to burn!” Tomcat called out. He raised a paw and pointed to her aunt. “The children never dared to make fun of her. They were afraid of blisters!”

“Has he gone crazy?” Friederike whispered to her aunt.

Auntie Anna sighed: “We really do have such hair. If we murmur REDA-REDA-GING-GING-GING-GING-FIRE’S-ON-IN-OTTAKRING, they start to burn. If we murmur FIRE’S-ON-IN-WARRING-YOU’RE-A-ROASTED-HERRING, they stop burning.”

Friederike couldn’t believe that.

“Try it. But not here in the flat.”

“REDA-REDA-GING-GING-GING-FIRE’S-ON-IN-OTTAKRING! Great! Great! Great! It works!”

Every day, when Friederike came home from school, Tomcat asked her if she had fought back already. She hadn’t fought back. She didn’t want to burn.

And Auntie Anna said: “You see, Tomcat, it doesn’t help her. I knew it!”

One day, the children had thought of a new way to have fun. When Friederike walked to the greengrocer with her huge shopping bag, they jumped at her.

Three children ripped the bag out of her hand.

Three children grabbed her and stuffed her into the bag.

Three children held one handle of the bag.

Three children held the other.

That way they dragged Friederike through town.

The children who didn’t have to carry anything, walked behind them, laughed and sang:

“We’ll put out the fire! Out of the way, we are the fire brigade! We’ll throw her in the creek!”

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We can't be sure whether the children would really have thrown Friederike into the water.

Friederike, however, believed it and got really scared. The water was deep and she couldn't swim.

The bag rocked back and forth and Friederike couldn't climb out of it. So she murmured:

"REDA-REDA-GING-GING-GING-FIRE'S-ON-IN-OTTAKRING."

Her hair started to crackle and stood on end, pointing in all directions. It got really hot around her head.

The children let go of the bag and ran away. Some screamed loudly.

Friederike murmured "FIRE'S-ON-IN-WARRING-YOU'RE-A-ROASTED-HERRING," climbed out of the bag and went home.

This time, Tomcat didn't have to ask. You could see Friederike had fought back. Her face was blackened by soot and her hair was still standing on end, pointing in all directions. "Well done, my girl," Tomcat praised her.

Not one of the children who had pretended to be the fire brigade had gotten away without burn blisters. The mothers wanted to know where the blisters came from but the children didn't say anything. Only one little girl said to her mother: "Friederike burnt us! Her hair can burn!"

Her mother didn't believe that, of course.

Her great-grandmother, however, did believe it. She remembered that in her childhood, there had been a girl with burning hair, too. But fearing that people might think her crazy, she didn't say anything about that.