

Dana Grigorcea, *The Lady with the Little Berber Dog*
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Translated by Johanna McCalmont

I

It was on one of those bustling weekdays when the lakeside promenade remained deserted, despite the first rays of spring sunshine.

White-sailed boats drifted across the shimmering water; closer to shore, a swan glided by.

A steady, gentle hum from the Bellerivestrasse made its way through the leafy green hedges. It came from the passing city traffic. Zurich. Yet with her eyes closed, Anna imagined herself at the seaside.

When she opened her eyes, she noticed a man at the next table trying to coax her dog over to him.

“He won’t go to you,” she said.

The man picked up the half biscuit he had tossed to the dog with a flick of his wrist.

“Do you come here often?”

Anna stirred her coffee, which she drank without cream or sugar.

“When I’m in the area,” she replied.

She was well-practised in assessing her effect on men. She would further pique their interest in her delicate figure with graceful, well-timed movements.

As a ballerina – which, after all, she still was, even though she now only played character roles, such as enthroned queens, venerable matrons and nurses – she had a feel for the *pas de deux*.

Anna had opted for these dignified supporting roles before anyone had needed to push her in that direction. That was a few years ago now. At the receptions she regularly hosted with her husband, a doctor of many years' standing, she often joked that in her supporting roles, she was now closer to the solo dances than she had ever been as a soloist herself. You get a much better view when looking on from the outside.

The guests would listen to her reverently. They appreciated the arts; or at least they were fond of professing deep artistic appreciation even though, as lawyers or economists, they were generally clueless about artistic matters. After the toasts, they would discuss Anna's roles, when and with whom she had danced, who had directed, what the weather had been like on the night of the premiere.

Anna had created intensely passionate on-stage couples across the world with ever-changing dance partners. Beyond the theatre, too, she had mastered the art of the elegant exit so that her lovers would always remember her fondly.

Her husband had a surgery that was decorated like an apartment, with framed photographs of Anna's ballet performances on the walls. He comported himself with a certain stiffness which he thought distinguished, and with which he attempted to emulate his wife's practised poise. For premieres he would send an enormous bouquet, now disproportionately large, to her dressing room – much to the amusement of the wardrobe and make-up assistants.

The younger dancers would admire Anna when, with a poker-straight back, and the bunch of flowers over one arm, she would stride assuredly out of the opera house, accompanied by her little dog.

It was Anna's style to enflame admiration and spark exchanges of affectionate gestures, all the while feigning to lose control over the situation. In this way, she would help a lover take up his role as an ardent suitor who would soon follow her at

every turn. Only then did she give herself up to him, to that one person she was willing to give herself to: the current one.

She did it for love, she told herself, to give life as good as she got.

Again she felt the appraising, scrutinising gaze of the stranger at the next table.

“It’s still quite cool. Despite the sun,” she said, looking out at the lake.

“Oh, this weather,” he said light-heartedly. “Always against us.”

She laughed quietly. He caught her eye and laughed along with her. Then they both stirred their coffees and drank, looking out at the sparkling lake.

After finishing their coffees, they stood up together, perfectly synchronised, and walked towards the Quay Bridge side by side. And that elated chatter between contented souls began, people who are only too happy to say what a beautiful day it is, the sun shining, white swans on the lake, in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, where the friendly people seem carefree. They talked as they walked along the promenade by Lake Zurich. The reflection on the water dazzled them and the few people they passed had radiant silhouettes.

Anna talked about her little dog that had adopted her on a beach in Algeria. It had looked at her as though it had been waiting for her. Its coat was as yellow as the sand – all it had to do was close its eyes and it blended in. Its small frame suggested it was a mix between a Berber greyhound and a Spitz. She liked the term cross-breed for her little mongrel, she said; it sounded so antiquated. She had smuggled it into her hotel room, and taken it back to Zurich.

And then Anna told him she was a ballet dancer, and that she was also trying her hand as a choreographer on the studio

stage at the Opera House. And that her husband was a doctor with his own practice, a GP, if he was looking for a good one.

She discovered that he was Kurdish, from Turkey, from a small village on the Syrian border, and that he worked at a garden centre in L. as a gardener and contractor. He had recently been promoted to project manager for the development of the green space on the upper north-eastern shore of Lake Zurich between Bellevue and Zurichhorn. They planted mainly periwinkle, a hardy variety, but also delicate, seasonal flowers. He lived in L., in the Aargau Canton, forty minutes by train from Zurich, was married, to a cousin of course – Anna laughed, so did he – and they had three children, two little girls and a boy at school. Anna also learned that he was called Gürkan.

Later, as she walked home up Klosbachstrasse, she thought about him, and how she would definitely meet him the next day too. He would probably be working on the lakeside promenade again, where they were planting pansies.

As she opened the large gate to the grounds of their villa, which she had to push with some force, she thought about how shy this man

actually was – and that he must be much younger than her.

She had noticed how he had tried to adjust his pace to hers and had fallen out of step twice in the attempt to do so. He held his hands clasped behind his back, which gave him an endearingly old-fashioned appearance. She pondered the way he looked at her from the side. He had the studied manliness of an adolescent, laughed heartily, like someone who is happy. And yet she felt there was something pitiful about him.

II

A week had passed since their first encounter. Every day since then, they had met at Lake Zurich.

It was a balmy Föhn-wind Friday, the sky blue, and the sun shining. The snow-capped Alps within arm's reach, the warm downslope wind causing the temperature to rise suddenly. High-school students, with pullovers tied around their waists and shirts rolled up, raced each other around the Horn sports complex in Küsnacht. A few of them jumped straight into the lake with their trousers on, yelling.

Anna and Gürkan sat on a bench under the shade of a yew tree, watching the teenagers. Their eyes burned with the bright light and their lips were dry from the wind. Gürkan had needed to go to the fountain several times to refill Anna's water bottle. He was now on his way across Seestrasse to pick up some strawberries from the supermarket.

It was too cool for Anna in the shade, yet it was too warm in the sun. She moved several times, stood up and walked through the park. As she went, she ran her hand along the rusting iron balustrade, sniffed at some lilac blossom, reached out a few times to catch a bit of poplar fluff, and picked up a folded train ticket. Each of these movements seemed meaningful to her, orchestrated, as though she were being watched by many pairs of eyes – but since she was not inclined to pay them any heed, she was free to do as she wished.

She thought about the final performance that had taken place the previous week, and was tempted to allow the music still echoing in her head to carry her off into the most daring sequence of pirouettes, which would have looked ridiculous

performed in sandals on the stony path, yet which, in her mind's eye, appeared poignant – sublime, even.

She soon thought she could almost feel the rush of air on different parts of her body from the endless turning; then she noticed a small linden leaf that appeared to have a more serrated outline than most. The green of the vast grassy expanse shimmered as a reflection on her nails, and she tried to make a mental note of what she wanted to tell Gürkan when he returned, but she forgot again immediately.

She slipped her arm through his, and they walked through the park, arm in arm, more slowly than they wanted to, past the high-school students and young mothers with their covered prams. The shadows of the branches seemed to intertwine with each gust of wind, then to separate, brushing the soles of Anna and Gürkan's feet.

The passengers on the blue-and-white-flagged lake cruiser to Rapperswil waved, and they waved back enthusiastically, as though to good friends.

When they reached the edge of the park where a green hedge blocked the way to private property, they glanced at each other and laughed. Anna looked into Gürkan's bright eyes, then at his mouth and white teeth. He embraced her, pulled her towards him, their front teeth clashed. Anna burst out laughing, held Gürkan's head and kissed him again. He was wearing an aftershave she had noticed on the stagehands and also more recently in the airport on her way back from Rome.

When she released him, Gürkan looked around nervously.

"Let's go somewhere," he said.

They drove down Seestrasse in Anna's old Volkswagen Beetle, hoping to find a suitable turnoff into the forest or a secluded meadow. Anna normally used her satnav but wanted to find her way without it now.

"There was a field here," she said.

"I think we've driven past it."

Light sprinkled the front and rear windscreens, the rushing sound of the headwind, modulated by the trees and thickets, made its way in through the open windows.

“Don’t gawk at me like that,” Anna said, and laughed.

Gürkan continued to gaze at her, intensely, as though he wanted her to read something in his eyes, the obvious most likely. And then he began to sing, his voice deep and throaty. Anna thought she could make out her name. He looked at her as though he were serenading her, which he probably was, “Anna, Anna.” During the long refrain, however, she became less certain; her name was repeated so often that ‘Anna’ probably meant ‘I’ in his language.

Never before had she heard anyone who was not a professional, or hoping to become one, sing for so long.

Anna had stopped glancing over at Gürkan; smiling, she was now gazing straight ahead at the bright Seestrasse, where oncoming traffic was rare at that time of day. Had that been a speed camera – or just a flash of light coming through the trees? Gürkan was still singing the refrain, and the thought struck Anna that ultimately every artistic performance was only an attempt to represent genuine human desire.

“You have a beautiful voice.”

Gürkan shook his head dismissively and continued to sing, fixing his gaze on Anna.

She turned off the road and parked beside a jetty. She reclined her seat. The song was not yet over, the refrain endless. Anna pulled the man towards her and their front teeth clashed once more as he smiled. His awkwardness spurred her on. The car windows misted up, yet Anna noticed a yellow sports car, which pulled up a couple of spaces away, and the driver too, who seemed to be tapping something into his satnav. She put on Gürkan’s shirt.

They sat there beside each other, gazing out at the bushes and, through the interstices, at the numerous flashes of blue from the lake. The cries of swans reached them through the open windows, like trumpet blasts. Anna took off the unfamiliar shirt, smoothed it with the back of her hand and returned it to Gürkan. She slipped on her dress and bent her arms behind her to pull the zip up to the nape of her neck.

Gürkan, however, sat there, motionless, the shirt thrown over his chest like a blanket. He looked past Anna with a glassy gaze.

“You won’t think well of me,” he said.

“Why?”

“You’ll think I wanted to take advantage of you.”

Anna found a few crackers in the glovebox. Gürkan didn’t want any, so she ate them all.

“You can’t imagine my situation,” he continued as Anna, chewing, placed the soles of her feet against the windscreen, rocked them from heel to toe, and then circled her ankles. She found Gürkan’s unexpected blubbering disrespectful, his snivelling demanded words of reassurance, forced Anna into the role of a mother.

“What do you want?” she asked.

He took her hands and kissed them, hid his face in them.

“Believe me Anna, in the name of God! I am an honest man. I want a life that is honest and free of sin. I don’t know what I’m doing. Please, believe me.”

He kissed her hands, rested his face in them.

“Believe me Anna, I am not the animal you think I am.”

Anna pulled her hands away.

“That’s not what I think.”

Gürkan’s head was reflected in the windscreen, his face pallid and his cheeks now sagging, his eyes wide and shining. How primitive he is, thought Anna, how little he must have lived.

He told her about the inner turmoil he felt, and that he'd been running around a lot recently, as though in a hurry. He'd missed the train, got on the wrong one, and even though he'd only gone one stop, or perhaps two, he had arrived in places he should have long since discovered; they were so close to his route, and he hadn't realised. Of course he'd known those places must exist, but he'd never connected them with the places he had already seen from the window of the train. "You can live in Switzerland, and not go into the mountains, or to the lakes ..."

And then he had found himself standing in a small train station with only two platforms – one out, one in – and had taken a deep breath, that rich smell of grass. The cheerful sound of cow-bells worn by animals roaming free drifted down the slope, and he had pretended he was from the area, or at least somewhere close by, as though he would be able to return at any time, before the poppies were over even.

And then he'd seen Anna, and she had looked at him in that way.

"How?" asked Anna.

He had already noticed her a few days earlier, with her dog at the lakeside. And when she had then sat down at the table next to him and looked at him in that way, a powerful emotion had arisen within him, from deep down, from the ground almost.

Anna started to stroke his head, like a child.

He had married very young, what had he known then! He was the oldest of eight children. This woman is a flower, everyone had said – and he, too, had always told her that she was a flower, but what did that actually mean? They had both wanted to leave and all of their relatives had helped them to do so. And they had done everything together, always done everything together.

"I know what you're thinking now."

Anna stroked his face.

She started to speak to him gently. One didn't have to feel guilty about everything, make life difficult for oneself. What harm

had they done? It was natural. Man is filled with all sorts of wishes and desires. Why work against that? Would it be more honest then to deny one's very self?

Gürkan listened to her in silence.

She hadn't seen all of the cities where she had danced, she said slowly. That didn't bother her, there are many things that one can simply just imagine. Once, she had opened her eyes on a plane and for an instant hadn't known where she was going or where she had just come from. This uncertainty hadn't unsettled her, quite the opposite, she'd wanted to hold on to that sensation a little longer.

Could Gürkan follow what she was saying? He looked at her, his eyes moist. He seemed to alternate between bliss and dejection.

She had looked around her on the plane, and everything had been there – the drinks, the scented wipes, the foldaway screen with a flickering advertisement showing someone flying through the clouds.

Every detail was familiar, even the pinprick hole at the bottom of the window and the condensation between the panes were there, as was the air steward at her side asking if she would like anything else, a glass of champagne perhaps?

Gürkan and Anna were alone in the car park once more, the yellow sports car gone. She opened the car door to let out some of the heat.

Freedom, she said a little more softly, always lies between the dance steps. That is where the power of the choreographer ends.

“Isn't that right?”

Gürkan nodded.

She ran her hand over his hair, a gesture she had already performed thousands of times on stage.

When darkness fell, she accompanied him to the main station, but the train to L. had just left. They strolled through the

vast, labyrinthine train station, and walked outside, past the National Museum, towards the Sihl Quay. The chestnut blossom was white against the dark blue sky, and Gürkan said that he had never seen so many chestnut trees in bloom before, and that the acacias would soon be out further down too, and the jasmine, and then the linden trees on Bahnhofstrasse. One should only ever choose to walk through streets where everything was in bloom. Anna was struck by a sense of delight at the thought that such a thing was possible.

The weather here was changeable, however. Which made everything more difficult. Anna said that all things had their own internal rhythm, but then a new conductor could come along, one who got stage fright, like the Bulgarian with the latest *Anna Karenina*, and have the music played much too fast, out of fear that it would be too slow. As a result, the dancers had moved faster and faster, and performed the roles of the noble characters at such speed that it had almost looked like a mere run-through. That had pleased Anna immensely – the severe Alexei Karenin had looked helpless, and the entire company with him.

Gürkan pulled Anna towards him, she was an intelligent woman, he said, and kissed her hands. They walked along the Sihl Quay in silence, the Sihl flowing north beside them.

An old woman with a wheeled Zimmer frame walked by and quietly wished them good evening. They returned the sentiment. The woman stopped, turned and raised her hand as a greeting – or in blessing.

“Good evenin’ to you both, good evenin’!” she said.

As they walked on, Anna looked at Gürkan’s profile. How handsome he was, with his straight nose and wavy hair.

Over the next few days they met by the lake at lunch time and walked along the Seefeld Quay. Anna brought salad in plastic containers she had bought outside the opera house, or they went to the kiosk nearby that roasted corn on the cob. Sometimes, they

only ate an ice cream – mango, pistachio, coconut, chocolate chip, wild forest berries, coffee or yellow melon – tasting each other’s.

They walked on towards the Zurichhorn. There was so much that Anna wanted to tell Gürkan, but then preferred to just listen to him. Yet she interrupted him time and again, and he interrupted her in turn.

Gürkan complained that he wasn’t sleeping well and was always breathing too fast, he took Anna’s hand and placed it on his heart, “You see.” And Anna then said that she felt the same – and that he was always on her mind.

They walked along arm in arm, and the passers-by smiled at them. And when no one was around, Gürkan pulled Anna close and kissed her passionately. Between kisses, Anna asked him if he was fonder of her than his wife and all the other women he had ever desired, and he said yes, he had never been as happy in his life before.

He told Anna she had a beautiful way of walking. With eyes shining, he told her how much he wanted to take her in his arms.

Anna liked how his movements were becoming more confident and how he obliged her to walk at his pace.

“Do you love me?”

“Why do you want to hear that?” asked Gürkan.

“Then you don’t love me.”

“I love you,” he said and turned pale. “Are you satisfied now?”

It wasn’t long before all the pansies were planted, and the blue, white and pink forget-me-nots, and the irrigation system repaired, and the soil for the roses, trees and bushes turned over and fertilised. Gürkan already had other contracts elsewhere, in Aarau and also in Lucerne.

He had considered putting in delicate plants in exposed areas, close to the road or where they would be unprotected from the elements, so he could remove and replant them – he wanted to gain more time with Anna. But he took pity on the flowers.

“It’s good that you’re leaving,” said Anna.

“Yes,” said Gürkan, “it’s our fate.”

They strolled up the left river bank with its low houses. The glistening swarms of flies had something distant in their presence. The water lapped against the house walls below as a Limmat lake cruiser sailed past.

As they climbed the steps back up to the road, they noticed a car with white blossoms scattered across its roof. They had fallen from a tree it had been parked under earlier.

“How beautiful,” said Anna.

Gürkan nodded.

At the main station there was a dance performance, the end of a festival; in the main hall, couples were moving to music that could barely be heard over the babble of voices. A few people picked up the rhythm as they passed and carried it onto the train.

Gürkan raised his arm and allowed Anna to pirouette, and then once more, held her around her hips and then pushed her away again.

He boarded the train. At the window, he raised his hand to his mouth and made a grand gesture with his arm, as though brushing Anna from head to toe. And Anna blew him a kiss, and then another one. She walked a few steps alongside the train as it departed.

Now, Anna experienced a familiar feeling, one that usually only came at the end of long tours, relief and melancholy combined. An affair was coming to an end, and she had performed perfectly once again, with sensitivity and grace, had played her own role like a true professional, with somewhat less consideration for her partner.

She approached the babble of voices and music in the main hall, alone this time. Her most recent performance now came back to her. There had been a curtain before the second scene, and the principals and a few supporting dancers had come onstage as usual for a quick run-through, in position, of their most difficult routine, all at the same time, yet individually. Anna Karenina writhed on the floor whilst Count Vronsky danced around an imaginary Anna in the left-hand corner upstage, before dropping to his knees, his back still turned to his partner, to abase himself in adulation before a non-existent figure.

Anna was glad she would soon have the performances behind her.