

# *For Love of Anna*

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*'Powerful, emotive work.'*  
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## Chapter One

Guido van Thool, blond head downcast with little round spectacles perusing a book, is about to enter the door of Loti's café in the old quarter of Potence when he bumps into a girl, knocking pumps out of her hands. He apologises, picks up the pumps, lets his book fall in the process, picks it up and rising, reddens slightly, as his eyes are drawn to long shapely legs protruding from a white wool coat.

The girl smiles doe-eyed, and his mind becomes suffused with the idea that he has just bumped into the most beautiful girl he ever saw, and she's about to walk away.

'I re... really am sorry,' he hears his voice saying.

Another smile, revealing the straightest, the whitest of teeth. She's moving away, turning her back, swivelling slightly, nursing the pumps in her arms.

'Please,' he says,

She turns around, shivering a little in the winter cold, waiting for Guido to speak. He's searching frantically, trying to find a word. 'The... the least I can do is buy you a coffee.'

'Don't drink coffee.'

How quick and sharp her reply. A crestfallen Guido.

'I've just been in there,' she says. 'I had to come away; it's too crowded.'

'I know Loti,' says Guido more assuredly. 'She'll get us a table.'

'Well...' She ponders, shaking back her long auburn hair... 'maybe a cranberry juice.'

She smiles, as the little bell tinkles when Guido opens the door. Inside the air is heady with aromas of roasting coffee beans and oven-cooking. It is a

single large room with basic wooden tables covered in bright red and white tablecloths. There's a small TV on a high perch showing the head of a newscaster, his reading silenced by all the clatter, plates and voices vying with each other for dominance.

'Ah Guido,' shouts a tall, greyblond busty woman through the steam of plates as they enter the café. She puts the plates, quite heaped with vegetables and potatoes and chicken legs, on the table of two salivating students, smiling indulgently at them before turning to Guido. 'Is Philippe not coming?' she says, wiping her hands in a beige apron.

'I don't know. He wasn't at lectures.'

'Sit down here,' she says, clearing a table which had just been vacated near a window.

'Sorry,' says Guido, 'this is...'

'Anna.'

'Ah, the word made flesh,' says Loti, and she winks, showing up her crow's feet.

'She's strange,' Anna says, as Loti departs with their order.

He notices her looking around at the walls festooned with pictures of past revolutionaries. 'Loti's heroes,' he says.

'So you're Guido.'

'Guido van Thool.'

She concentrates on him now for the first time full face as he places his book on the side of the table and removes his spectacles, holding them nervously, she notices, with both hands on each arm, pondering perhaps where to place them, and she sees the slight eye strain, the little dint on the bridge of the nose and – approvingly – the high cheek bones set in an

ascetically handsome face.

‘Anna Zweig.’

He feels the warmth still in her palm from her mitten which she removes as they shake hands.

‘The book,’ she says looking down, breaking the awkwardness of the momentary silence.

‘I often study here.’

‘With all that clatter?’

‘I like the clatter.’

‘What’s the book anyway?’

‘Nietzsche.’

‘You study philosophy?’

‘Yes.’

‘I missed out on all of that student stuff,’ she says. ‘You must have great fun as a student, with all the demonstrations and things to keep you amused. Tell me about this Nietzsche guy. What has he got to say about the world? Let me see.’

She takes up the book, a shiny black paperback, with a picture of a solemn looking man with deep-set staring eyes and a huge bushy moustache obliterating his mouth. ‘The corners of the pages,’ she says, flicking through the book, ‘they’re..You...?’

‘Afraid so.’

‘...You eat paper?’

‘Not eat, chew.’

She laughs. 'Why on earth...?'

'I don't know why,' he says dismissively, 'but you asked me what Nietzsche is saying about the world.'

'So I did,' she says still smiling.

'Well, you know the obvious of course...' (he waits momentarily but she does not answer)... 'that God is dead, that there is only this world and no world beyond it? That's why...'

'Yes?' she says.

The spectacles he has been holding all along – an aid for gesticulation, she thinks – he folds and places in an inside pocket of his navy parka.

'...that is why we should attempt to perfect this world if it is all we have.'

She looks at him quizzically. 'Are you for real, Guido van Thool?'

Loti arrives with the beverages and two cream buns on a plate. 'On the house,' she says, 'for our new recruit.'

'What does she mean by recruit?' whispers Anna, as Loti moves to take an order from another table.

'That's just Loti,' says Guido. 'She tries... how shall I put it? to proselytise every newcomer to the café.'

'Proselytise?'

'Sorry,' he says, unable to avert his gaze from the wonderful breathing shapes in her white tanktop. 'You see, you're in her lair. She wants to win you over, turn you into a revolutionary.'

Anna smiles, lifting the cake to her mouth, 'And her method is cream buns.'

He laughs. 'She means well.'

'And you, do you try to proselytise too?'

‘No, but I understand the problem.’

‘The problem?’

‘Yes,’ says Guido, ‘it’s one of language essentially.’

‘Oh really.’

‘Yes. Man imposes meanings on the world to suit his own taste for survival.’

‘What is that supposed to mean?’ she says, scooping the cream into her mouth with her finger.

‘It means we’re free agents. The world is not a universal certainty. We impose our own interpretations on the world, not through honest enquiry, but for ulterior motive, for gain, and then we pretend these interpretations are universal and...’

‘Hold on,’ she shouts.

‘Sorry, what I mean is...’

‘What you mean is we all try to convince others that our lies are the truth.’

‘Exactly,’ says Guido admiringly. ‘That’s exactly it.’

‘And why didn’t you say that in the first place?’ she says mockingly.

Her hand has moved towards his. Is it accidental? Long fingers, like a piano player’s; nails: perfect half moons, colourless varnish, not garish like some girls’ nails, he thinks. He moves his finished plate to the middle of the table, an excuse for his fingers to inch forward; little trembling touch of tips; the sensitive top of the hand; butterfly graze. She looks down, smiles, does not move her hand away. What can he say to her? He wants to ask her where she lives, what paradisaal planet she comes from. Instead he says, ‘Our lecturer says there are these forces all the time, these pressures from society, from the masters.’

‘The masters?’

‘Those who control us. Don’t you ever feel those pressures?’

‘I never thought about it,’ she says.

‘I mean those who force us to chop up the world, to dissect it for capitalist ends...’

‘You’re not a communist?’

‘No no, it’s just... that’s why the world has lost its equilibrium. It’s all broken up.’

She looks seriously straight into his eyes. ‘That’s what you think then, that the world is broken up?’

‘Just look at the news any night,’ he says, casting his eyes in the direction of the TV. ‘What do you see? A series of...’ He stops. Why is he talking like this to her? His words were meant to impress her not to give her that serious look (that is his preserve), not to dim the dimple of her smile like a gloomy cloud pressing down on her.

A minute dollop of cream resting on her chin, he would love to lick, an excuse (an opportunity?) to bring his lips close to hers. Should he point out its presence? It might embarrass, especially someone you have only met. Such thoughts, however, are suddenly nullified by the spontaneous action of her tongue shooting out, sliding down her chin to scoop up, in one lightning movement (like that of a lizard, he thinks), the dollop of cream.

‘A series of?’

‘Disasters.’

Dabbing her lips with her serviette, which is red and white matching the tablecloth, she says, ‘You are a very solemn fellow, Guido van Thool.’

‘Nietzsche says jokes are epitaphs on the deaths of feelings.’ Why did he

say that? he wonders. It just came out of his head like her tongue out of her mouth. But not really. Her action was spontaneous, his conditioned. A pedantic showing off.

‘He does, does he?’

‘Yes,’ says Guido (too late now to retract).

‘It’s time you stopped reading Nietzsche, then.’

He smiles. ‘Sorry. I’m boring you.’

‘No, it’s all right. We all are what we are, aren’t we? Besides I agree with all you say.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes. That’s why I dance.’ She throws her head back, loosening her hair. ‘I dance away all those thoughts that are in my head.’

‘You’re a ballerina?’

‘In the National Ballet.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ he says.

‘It’s bloody hard work.’

She laughs, finishing her juice, her little finger extending, Guido notices, each time she sips. ‘I never had time for things like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Speculation. It’s just dedication to the one thing for me.’

She pauses, looks around the café. The windows are steamed up; she can’t see out on to the street, and there’s a constant traffic of people in and out the door. Loti is in the far corner in polemic with several students.

‘It’s lunchtime,’ says Guido, ‘that’s why it’s so busy.’

She reaches down to her feet. 'You don't mind if I take off my shoe?'

'Shed all you like,' says Guido. 'Sorry I didn't mean...' What is he saying? He can't talk to women; he doesn't have the knack.

She smiles, taking no offence. 'Sometimes my toes ache,' she says.

'How long would you spend on your toes?' (Again the ambiguity. Why can't he ask a simple straightforward question?) 'I mean at any given time?'

'Oh hours,' she says, 'in rehearsals. They get blistered and cramped. I take cider vinegar.'

'Really?'

'My dentist says it'll rot my teeth, but it keeps the inflammation out of my feet'

'It sounds heroic.'

'It's just...' She grunts as she releases the shoe...'if anything ever went wrong you know, I have put all my shells in the one basket.'

Guido smiles. 'You mean eggs.'

'No, I mean shells,' she says almost irately. She tut tuts. 'But look what you've done to me.'

'What have I done?' says Guido.

'You've made me all serious like yourself. I will have to lighten up those eyes,' she says smiling again, examining his face. 'Cobalt blue.'

'What?'

'The colour of your eyes.'

She looks at her watch. 'Got to go.'

'So soon?'

‘Afraid so. Thanks for the juice and the bun, which I shouldn’t have eaten by the way. If I regurgitate on stage I’ll blame you.’

‘Sorry I...’

She reaffixes her shoe and takes up her pumps. ‘Don’t look so sad Guido van Thool. It may never happen, all that gloom you forecast.’ She rises from the chair. ‘Here,’ she says giving Guido a ticket, ‘come to the ballet.’