

ANNA

Family legend has it that my great-great-grandmother coupled with a prince and produced a bastard son. This was a long time ago, during Queen Victoria's reign. In those days, princes went around Europe having sex with milkmaids, governesses, chambermaids and so on. They left behind bastard offspring and baubles, minor gems as tokens of appreciation. I suppose this story is therefore not that unusual except that it remotely concerns me, but the thought of such a remote ancestor is somehow unreal. I do not even know her name. And as for the prince...well, who knows?

I will invent her. I will call her Anna. I could make her into a gentle, innocent young maiden but I do not think so. I see her, a woman at seventeen or eighteen, staring moodily over the brown North German countryside. Behind her is the family inn, the Hotel X, which still stands today. I went there once and drank Schnapps. This was before it was sold to a Greek who turned it into a Greek restaurant there in the village of------. I must be discreet. Times change, but reality is that the family legend is disbelieved by some and flaunted by others. I do not mean disrespect to ancestors.

My Anna lives. She is standing by the fence, there in the Northern German countryside. She is a tall, broad-shouldered young woman, wide-hipped, with light brown hair parted in the middle and drawn back from a smooth, high forehead. A few freckles - she brushes a fly away absently and smooths her hair. A resolute chin, a

Veronica Ross
Liverpool, N.S.

nice, square, even face, with a touch of stubbornness to it. She has been sent out, I think, to pick beans for the noonday meal by her mother, whom I shall call Helga. Helga is a small, pious woman, a great churchgoer. She likes to boss her daughter around. Anna resents this in a sly but silent manner. I suppose in those days young people did not rebel openly against their parents. Anna is saying to herself, she can pick her own beans. Why do I have to do it? Often she sits with her mother in the parlour and sews things, hems on sheets, handkerchiefs. When there are guests and the mother says, Anna, the duckling! Anna does her bidding, flirting a little as she passes the duckling or sausages or whatever, terribly glad that she is young and strong and that her mother is a thin woman in a dark dress.

Behind her is the family vegetable garden. It is a small village where the inn stands. There is a church, a miller, a dry goods store, a bakery, a butcher. Further down the field is a mill where grain is milled (later there will be a marriage between the family of the innkeeper and that of the miller, but this is in the future). There are cows in the field. There is a stream, a small river, where young boys sail wooden boats beneath the thin European sun. There are sunflowers in the garden, which has a wooden fence. I see the sunflowers quite plainly: not the gigantic North American ones, but a smaller variety. There is a breeze and the sunflowers nod a bit. They form a nice background to young Anna's handsome face with its light brown hair and freckles. Just a few freckles though - on the nose maybe three or

four but several more noticeable ones on the forehead. Behind the garden pigs are kept. The pigs will be butchered in the fall: *Schinken*, *Blutwurst*, *Leberwurst* and so on. A woman from the village comes to make the sausages in the back kitchen. The entrails are washed, filled, hung. Big steaming pots of blood are cooked. I think Anna likes the slaughter; she is that type of person. She likes to eat and she likes experiencing physical things. In church she is conscious of the way her corsets dig into her waist, of the hard feel of the family pew against her back, of the colours in the stained glass windows, opulent yet stifling.

She can pick her own beans, she thinks, and looks down the dusty road because the prince is arriving today. Her father, Hansfeld, a large stocky man with a red face, not unpleasant, is already dressed in his good frock coat. He goes around rubbing his hands together and yelling at the help. Is the *Gans* ready? Have the feather beds been aired? Where is the stable boy, the good-for-nothing? Hansfeld is afraid of his wife and never yells at her. The help would rather be yelled at by Hansfeld than be spoken to so icily by his *Frau*.

Anna is wearing a high-necked, light blue dress which goes to her ankles. Over this is a white apron. Earlier, in the kitchen, she wore a white cap but now her head is bare. She also wears several petticoats, a chemise, and the stout woolen underwear, German underwear. She is sweating and watering in her underwear, there, looking down the dusty road, while she awaits her prince.

It has been five months since she saw him.

Her mother calls primly from the kitchen window: "Haven't you picked the beans yet? How can we have the salad without the beans?"

The old woman! Anna thinks, and turns to smile at her mother.

I hope she is dying of jealousy because of the prince, Anna thinks. Her smile says: Tonight I will be with the prince.

There is nothing her mother can do about that. You cannot tell a prince to leave your daughter alone.

One last look down the road, past the red-tiled buildings, the barns with weather vanes, a bare-foot boy. Anna is thinking of the moment when she removes the prince's white nightshirt, revealing blonde hair on fair skin.

She begins to pick the beans, making a pocket of her white apron. The earth is sandy and hot. She would like to take off her shoes and white stockings and feel the warm soil with her bare feet, but of course she does not do this.

In the kitchen, Helga is standing over Else, the kitchen girl. Else has a cleft palate but her hair is the colour of sunshine. Else is crying because she has broken a plate.

"Get the broom and sweep it up," Helga says. "You will of course pay for the plate."

Hansfeld never deducts things from the pay.

"And put the beans on right away." And to her daughter: "Where is your cap? You will have more freckles than ever. I keep telling you."

"Yes, Mama."

"And comb your hair." A jangle of keys, Else sniffing.

"Yes Mama."

A shout in the front. Hansfeld is drinking beer with Herr Puppe, the postmaster. Helga presses her lips together but does not protest: a woman does not boss her husband. Anna knows her mother wants her to marry Herr Puppe, a thin

widower of forty. Hansfeld wants something grander for his daughter. Hansfeld is a fool. Helga and Anna both know this.

Anna thinks she smells of soil and sunshine as she goes into the Bier Stube. Herr Puppe's eyes desire her. The man has no eyelashes and little hair. She imagines his naked body as being bony and white. Anna kisses her father. He smells of tobacco and beer. He is all through yelling now. Once, in a temper, he beat her with a switch. She was ten years old. She has long ago forgiven him for this. She can imagine being in a temper herself and beating someone with a switch.

"The prince is late," she says. "May I have a glass of beer, Papa?"

"A little glass." He chortles fondly, stroking her hand. He looks at his pocket watch. "The prince will be here soon."

Herr Puppe is tongue-tied now.

"The prince likes it here with us," Hansfeld explains to the postmaster. Indeed, the little prince likes drinking beer, getting drunk and singing songs. Actually, the prince is a simple little man. If he were not a prince, he would probably be a third-rate clerk. He can barely read and write. Anna is more intelligent, but she is not a princess.

Herr Puppe rises and says he must leave. Anna keeps her hands hidden. Once, he kissed her hand and for a whole day her hand smelled of garlic and sour breath. The two men shake hands. Hansfeld looks down the road and rubs his hands together. He is never happier than when illustrious guests come to stay.

"Oh, my dear," he says to his daughter.

Papa knows, Anna thinks. This makes her sad.

And yet he is proud.

He is a fool.

So she goes out of the house. She does not want to be here when the prince arrives. Her father will be so ingratiating and plumply humble and her mother will carry her prayer book like a duty.

Through the field of barley and brussel sprouts goes my Anna, past the windmill, past the miller's barnyard where the hens cluck and Hermann, the rooster, angrily flutters his wings. Hermann is very old; Anna was afraid of him as a child. Down to the river-stream goes my Anna, our Anna, and once there, she takes off her shoes and stockings and wets her feet. Boys are flying kites. They are yelling in the cool summer sunshine. Anna lies on the bank and arches her body to the sun and lets the water kiss her feet.

Perhaps I will not go to him tonight, she thinks.

But of course I will.

Would he come to me if I did not go to him?

No, he will not. It is I who must go to him.

Maybe I will not go to him tonight.

The clouds in the sky. A swan, a horse. She closes her eyes and wishes the prince were not a prince. Then they could marry. The prince is really an ordinary young man. He likes being happy. He likes Anna. He likes to stroke the insides of her thighs, and after they make love, he tells her stories about his childhood. His Nanny, an old woman from Silesia, looked after him. He was afraid of his mother, a princess in a silver wig. His father was injured in a duel and spent most of his time sitting in a purple chair in the garden. The mother-princess has a lover (accord-

ing to Hansfeld). The prince's nanny used to make him puddings with raisins inside.

There was also this: the prince was a prince and so there was no hope for a recognizable future with him. It is the rule of the age she lives in, although Anna does not phrase it like this. Instead, this knowledge makes her moody and sad at times, so that her father worries and her mother nags, which makes Anna sad because in her heart she wishes for peace with her mother.

Ah, Anna, dreaming there by the stream one lazy afternoon so long ago in the northern European sunshine. Did this happen? The clouds dance over her head and in a barnyard someone is forking hay. A peasant woman stands wringing clothes, her feet in wooden shoes. Did they wear wooden shoes then? Or leather ones? A family sitting down to sauerkraut and potatoes. Anna dreams, oblivious, and finally, when the sun is going down and the boys have left, she goes home through the fields of grain and brussel sprouts, past the sunflowers, through the garden. The prince has arrived. They are drinking his health. Her father's face is florid and her mother is setting the table. During the absence of Anna, they have eaten the fat goose. Why are they toasting the prince?

The prince is married.

The prince has married a princess.

Anna stands in the doorway of the dining-room, while around her everything continues. The mother with her black dress on has clouted Else for not sweeping the dining hall. In the stable, the prince's horses are being watered and fed and the prince's valet has brushed the prince's velvet jacket for the sixth time, wishing he could drink as well. Two stout housewives are walking along the road.

Ah, Anna, I cannot bear your pain.

Your mother does not ask where you have been and your father, perhaps in kindness, has forgotten about you now. It is at this moment that my Anna thinks of the thin hairless shanks of Herr Puppe. She runs upstairs, but not before she has seen the way the prince's blonde curls touch his collar. Pride sends her downstairs again, but into the kitchen, where Else is stirring the fire. She feels a kinship for Else, poor girl with the beautiful hair and deformed face. Else has very narrow, fine hands, not the hands of a peasant, but they are calloused and the nails are broken. On her left hand is a red mark, the scar of a burn received during the slaughter. Anna feels sorry for Else and she thinks that life is unfair; the conditions of existence are not just. Or is this presumptuous? Would this have happened, or would Anna have accepted everything, everthing?

That evening, Anna sits with her mother in the family parlour. They are sewing baby things for a cousin. She does not go where the men are. They are singing. You can smell the smoke from their pipes. Anna and her mother do not speak. The cousin is a woman of thirty-one, the wife of a pastor. She has lost two children in infancy already. Helga breaks a thread off with her teeth. For a small woman, she has very large teeth. Anna has never noticed this before. Through the open window comes the smell of lilacs. Anna is no longer angry with her mother. She thinks sadly of her mother's life, a woman made thin and old by worrying about kitchens and guests, by (yes) a husband who gets red when he yells. Anna, now, is cold under her layers of stout German clothing.

What I think happens is this:

Anna goes to her bedroom, which is on the third floor. The prince's room is on the second floor. She lies on top of her bed. It is not a night when she looks out of the window at the dusty road and village transformed by moonlight.

I will not go to him, she thinks.



So far, she has not seen the prince's face.

She knows that a prince must marry. A prince must have progeny so that princes and kings will continue. But there is another part to this: she has loved him, they have laughed together. When thinking of him in the past, she experienced a warm rush, a secret passion, so that she wanted to run through fields and press her face to the earth's cool grass.

She hears footsteps. The prince is going to bed. She hears her father's mumbling.

And then, stillness.

The prince comes to her.

"I thought perhaps you had fallen asleep." He uses the familiar "du." He is stroking above her ear.

"I wasn't asleep," she says.

"Why didn't you come to me then?"

Anna considers. Then: "They say you were married."

"My father made me. She looks like a donkey. Why do you care about that?"

A night of passion and tenderness? Perhaps. A child is conceived on this night. Soon the prince goes back to his bed. He has to leave early in the morning because of some urgent princely business.

I think: for three years the prince did not come. A child was born to Anna, a boy. He was born late in the winter, a small child who almost did not live. Else cried and tended the child. Anna was ill in bed for three weeks but then got up, as strong as ever. The child was christened in the Lutheran Church. Herr Puppe was godfather. In the three years (I am making all this up and

none of this is true) Hansfeld got blood poisoning by stepping on a nail but he recovered; Frau Helga had a miscarriage although she was in her forty-eighth year. The child, a fat little boy, toddled around the kitchen where Else baked little cakes for him. When the prince came back, he did not look at the child, but visited Anna again in her bedroom.

Anna grew old, fat, took over the inn. The prince did not come anymore. He himself grew fat and had several mistresses, all of them young. He had three legitimate children, two boys and a girl, and many illegitimate ones, although of these, he only acknowledged one, and that was a son by his favorite mistress, a French actress.

All this is supposition; it all happened so long ago or it did not happen at all. Perhaps it was not the prince at all who sired the little boy, but a simple stable boy. Perhaps Helga created the legend. Perhaps Anna was simply a lusty girl who had various lovers.

But - who knows? Anna and the prince, perhaps, did love each other and never forgot. This is possible. Perhaps they did not move on to become older people, other people: Anna, stout and strong, yelling at Else's replacement (Else married a farmer and had thirteen children, none of them with cleft palates); maybe the prince did not grow fat, diddling with problems of protocol.

Who knows?

But Anna, my Anna. Standing there, that's where she is. She is a strong young woman with a broad intelligent face, leaning over the fence which looks over the brown earth, rich and as yet unsullied, of Northern Germany. She brushes a fly off her face. She has one or two freckles on her nose but several more on her forehead. Behind her are the beans and sunflowers and she stares down the road, looking for signs of her prince.