



**KEITH OATLEY**

therefore

**CHOOSE**

a novel



GOOSE LANE

## 6

**Before Werner left Berlin** for Konstanz, he took George and Anna out to dinner, at a place where they could sit outside in the evening air. They drank white wine, talked about literature, and laughed a lot.

The evening after Werner left, George and Anna went out. As they ate and talked together, George experienced a current between them, something distinct: something he had not previously known with anyone. He did not know if it was only he who felt it. He thought he should not say anything. Anna invited him back to her flat.

“There is something,” said Anna. “Something between us. You felt it too. I could see you did.”

George stayed the night.



Next evening, Anna had plans so George didn't see her. She'd said they would meet the next day, that she'd come round to his pension, that she'd help him find somewhere to live.

After a night of sleeplessness and strange dreams, George lay in bed, in his pension, thinking: Anna... Anna. Making love. Who could have predicted it? An era at an end. Cambridge finished. Now this. He had a bodily memory of Anna, her soft

skin. He pulled his pillow to his chest and hugged it. Now this.

There was a sharp knocking at the door.

“Herr Schmidt!” It was a woman's voice. “Es ist dringend.”

George got out of bed and opened the bedroom door. There stood Anna, with raised eyebrows and a smile.

“I said it was urgent,” she said. “I was told to come up.”

“Sorry,” George said. “It's a bit of a mess, but come in. I'd better put some clothes on.”

“A piece of good luck. I've a friend, Dagmar. She goes away for six weeks and her cats are to be fed. A few other chores to be done. She has a very excellent flat, near the Tiergarten S-Bahn station. I told her we would do it.”

“We would?”

“You said you need somewhere to stay.”

“Well, yes . . .”

“Put on your clothes. I'll take you to breakfast and we'll go to make an inspection.”

The flat was on the top floor of a nineteenth-century building in a small street that ran between the S-Bahn and the river. Anna and George climbed a large staircase and knocked at the front door of the flat. Dagmar appeared and welcomed them. She was a smiley woman, not very tall, so that she had to stretch up a bit to kiss Anna on the cheek. She led them down the hallway, which seemed very long, with rooms off to either side. As they walked along the hallway and glanced into every room, they saw Turkish and Persian carpets on varnished wooden floors. It would have been rude to look too closely. They weren't going to rent it, only take care of it. There was a study, a sitting room, four bedrooms, as well as a kitchen and a bathroom. There were lithographs and prints everywhere. The long, sprawling hallway had nooks, and walls full of books in many categories. The sitting room was large, with upholstered

sofas, and the kitchen had a circular wooden table surrounded by six spoke-back chairs. And there were two cats, neither of which looked troublesome.

After they had made arrangements with Dagmar about how to look after her cats and her flat, George and Anna walked beside the River Spree.

“So we should live together?” said George. “We hardly know each other.”

“You can sleep in a separate room if you wish, like a student. Or do you want to stay in that squalid pension?”

“What about you? What about your flat?”

“It is very good at taking care of itself. I can go two or three times a week to pick up the post.”

“And you will have more space.”

Anna took George’s arm and gave it a squeeze.

Dagmar left next day, and they moved into her flat. Anna’s magazine was not published in the summer months, so she needed to go to her office only in the mornings.

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**Two stairs at a time**, George ran up the big circular staircase towards the flat. In one hand he held a bag of groceries and, as part of each upward movement, he pulled with his other hand on the polished mahogany banister. As he reached the first landing, still moving quickly, he looked up into the octagonal skylight. In the morning the sun shone on the wall that was behind him. At midday, it reached far down the stairwell. At this time, in the afternoon, it cast bright illumination on the embossed beige wallpaper of the upper wall in front of him. The building with this stairwell was not quite exotic, but it was hard to think of it as familiar. When he reached the top, George took the key from his pocket, let himself into the flat, and peered down the corridor of carpets and bookshelves. The feeling of foreignness intensified. It was inviting. But it was unknown.

Somewhat out of breath, he walked through the flat, looking for Anna.

“I’m back.”

He looked into the grand bedroom that they occupied. Anna’s voice called from outside its open front window.

“You’ve been away so long. Whatever have you been doing?”

She had taken cushions from a sofa and put them on the strip of flat roof between the window and a low balustrade. She lay naked in the sun, on her back with one ankle crossed over

the other, her right hand behind her head and her left resting, as in a famous painting, on a certain part of her body.

“Remove, please, your clothes,” she said. “Come out here.”

Anna was not coquettish, but she had a sense of ease with her body that George found astonishing. He took off his clothes, climbed through the window hoping he wouldn’t be seen, sat on a cushion, and peeped over the balustrade towards the houses opposite.

“The perfect place,” she said. “Here’s another perfect place. I’ve been preparing it a bit, to be ready when you returned. Here, put on this thing.”

She uncrossed her ankles and he kneeled between her knees. She reached out, pulled him gently towards the place, and enveloped him.

“There,” she said. “Just as well you didn’t spend too much time out there, at the shops. I don’t know whether I could have waited much longer.”

“I’m not sure I can wait much longer.”

“You don’t have to. I want to feel you inside me. I want to feel you when you come. I’m studying a new kind of natural history. The sexual life of the Englishman. I want to see your face. Then I want to hold your head on my neck, and look into the infinite sky.”

And so it was.

“And you,” George said. “Usually . . .”

“This is not usual. I want you to kneel beside me. If people at the top of the house opposite look out they can see just the top of your head. They wonder whatever you could be doing. You can think of us as characters in one of those very improper French short stories that circulate anonymously.”

“I’m not in the literary world, so they don’t circulate to me.”

“Slowly,” she said.

Afterwards, they lay there for some minutes. George was

infused with a sense of well-being he had never before experienced. He closed his eyes, his mind floated with angel wings, his eyelids were filled with a dappled light, as if inside a gentle waterfall, he became that waterfall . . .

“I told you I could scarcely wait,” Anna said. “I think you’ve got to me.”

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### **George was totally taken up in Anna's affection.**

Sometimes he found himself peering at her face, wondering what he would see if he could look inside her mind. He sensed a small centre of privacy, and felt unnerved by it. For all her assurance, this centre was a kind of reserve, as if she feared the world might suddenly tip into some crevasse, or as if she thought she must be prepared, instantly, to leave. Was that the sense of her that disturbed him? What if he gave himself up to her too completely, came to depend on her, and then suddenly she was not there? He sensed a danger, that he could lose too much. Or, he thought, were these thoughts more to do with him than with her?

"Breakfast!"

George heard a shout, and jumped immediately out of bed. His uneasy thoughts dissolved.

There was Anna, in the kitchen, already seated, already having been out to buy a loaf, already having made coffee.

"You have become quite continental," she said. "Each morning eat fresh bread. Take coffee."

"I'm going to start an import business, in London," he said. "Coffee. I'll make my fortune."

She cut the bread and pushed towards him a little plate of

apricot jam, with a silver spoon, that she had put out along with knives and plates.

"Would you like to see our office?" she said. "Meet my colleagues?"

"You mean this morning?"

"The very moment you have taken your breakfast."

They walked along their side street, under broad-leaved trees, across the main road, into the S-Bahn station with its pale blue wall tiles, and up the stairs. A train came quickly. It was after the time when most people went to work, so they didn't have to stand. Through the window appeared a succession of images: the river, the park, grand buildings, as if projected from a cinematograph, sequence without plot, so one sees what is happening but without understanding. That's what literature does, George thought. It lets one understand. In life one can't, or perhaps not until too late.

Anna nuzzled his upper arm against her breast, which he found beautifully touching, helped a little by the shaking of the train as it rattled along its slightly irregular rails.

"What are you thinking?" she said.

"How literature is about meaning," he said. "So, even if life doesn't have meaning, we still have literature."

"The thing about literature," she said, "is that you can enter the minds of people you never meet. You can be those people."

George turned from the window and looked into her face.

"You think you can really be them?" he said.

"Humanity is broader than that," she said. "Qualities of being human."

"How do you mean?"

"We think of ourselves too much as individuals. A writer provides events, meetings, situations. Any of us can become a lot of other people."

“For your magazine, you choose stories that do that?”

“Imagine someone writing about us, here on the train. The writer must offer sufficient hints about who we are, what we’re doing, how the world appears through our eyes. The reader becomes one of us. Or becomes each in turn. Our hopes and preoccupations. It must work even if the reader is in Moscow or München or Marseilles.”

Anna’s office was on the third floor of an elderly building. The office was two large rooms that were at the front of the building, with sash windows open. Sounds came up from the street, of people and motor vehicles, but, rather than being disturbing, they gave one the sense of being at the centre of things. The first room had filing cabinets and two desks on which were typewriters, though no one sat at them. Anna took George through to the second room, which was lined with bookshelves and had three desks.

“Good morning, esteemed colleagues,” said Anna. “May I introduce my friend George Smith. He’s from England. If we are extremely nice to him, he would perhaps become our London correspondent. This is Judit Frijda, my co-editor. From Amsterdam. And this is Odile Dufour, our executive editor. She does the business side and seeks out new writers. She’s a Parisienne.”

Both women got up from their chairs and came to shake hands.

“I commission poetry and stories,” said Judit. “Do you have a poem to contribute?”

Judit was fair-haired, with a roundish face. She seemed shy, but her smile was friendly.

“I couldn’t write a poem to save my life,” George said. “Certainly not in German.”

“We accept submissions in several languages,” said Odile, who was carefully dressed, the most elegant of the three. “We’re

very international. If you’re a friend of Anna, I don’t believe you couldn’t write a poem to save your life.”

“Do you have to be female?”

“That is contingency,” said Odile. “We have nothing against men; nothing fundamental.”

The three laughed, not unkindly.

“We don’t want to be only a local magazine,” said Anna. “Most of our readers are in Berlin. Our distribution is not as we would like. We want to be European. Or wider, but none of us knows Chinese or Hindi, so that must wait for next year.”

“We want to represent everyone,” said Odile. “That’s what art and music and literature do. That’s what we think. I know three is not many compared with the population of Europe, but perhaps it’s a start.”

The women laughed again.

“Sports and politics, all sorts of things, tend to competition,” said Judit. “Us and them. Not so many tend to unite. Us and us. But literature is one.”

The women suddenly looked serious, as if this was something that united the three of them, something they discussed frequently and earnestly.

Odile broke the silence. “As executive editor, allow me to present you with a copy of our next issue. Be most careful when you go to the street, that you are not set upon by a mob who will wrench it from your hand before its date of publication.”

“Why, thank you,” he said. He looked at the cover, which bore an accomplished charcoal sketch of a woman’s profile. He turned the pages. Then he looked at the three women in turn. “Beautiful,” he said. “May I take you all out for coffee?”

“We have the equipment here,” said Odile. “We have the very latest Bialetti coffee pot, imported specially from Italy. Not only does it make coffee, it makes Italian coffee noises.”

She went to a small side room, then reappeared and held up an aluminum pot shaped like a polyhedron.

“Elegant, you see.” She waved the pot in the air. “Art deco design, Italian engineering, what could be better? Do you like espresso?”

“Perfect.”

“Our magazine,” said Anna. “We started with three principles. Four if you count our stupid, idealistic theme of being for everyone. Mostly it is in German, but each issue has also one thing in French and one in English.”

“Anna looks after the classics, and also commissions book reviews,” said Judit.

“We review literature and some non-fiction,” said Anna. “Philosophy, psychology, that kind of thing. We are quite interested in the psychology of fiction. Our second principle is to choose reviewers who know more about the subject of the book than the person who wrote it.”

“Sounds daunting.”

“People like it. The readers like it. The reviewers like it because although we can’t pay them much, we’ve composed a letter in which we invite them to do the review that explains this principle. The authors like it because it means their book is taken seriously. A magazine tends to be ephemeral. Use it to light the stove. That is its trouble. We’d like it to be more than that.”

“How many principles is that?” said Judit.

Odile came out from the little scullery.

“Another principle,” she said, “is that we include at least one short story and one poem that has been published before but that people might not be able to find so easily. We publish contemporary writers too, but because we can’t afford the most famous and do not always know who the best are, and

because short pieces that will be lasting are hard to find, it’s more difficult.”

“You can see how idealistic we are,” said Anna. “Hopeless, really.”

“By publishing lesser known classics, we hope people would like to keep their copies of our magazine,” said Judit. “With these older pieces, with the story or poem, there’s always a one-page essay. In the next issue, the one that you have, there is a translation of a short story by Chekhov, and Anna wrote the essay.”

George smiled at Anna, who looked away, embarrassed.

“I’ve heard three principles,” he said. “What’s the fourth?”

“We have to enjoy doing it,” said Judit.

“And do you?”

Italian coffee noises were coming from the little scullery.

“When we’re not worrying too much,” said Odile, who went to pour coffee into small green cups with matching saucers. “We try not to worry. Mostly we do enjoy it. A magazine is a good excuse for striking up conversations.”

“Odile is extraordinary at that,” said Anna.

“You worry about finances?”

“We manage, but a magazine is not the way in which one makes the fortune,” said Odile. “But Anna is very good. She puts on her best clothes. She becomes the Prussian aristocrat, and goes to see Herr von this or Baron that. She lets it out, almost by mistake, that we have not quite enough cash just now, and an infusion arrives.”

“Except when it doesn’t,” said Anna.

“You think that the money you hand over when you buy a magazine pays for it,” said Odile. “It doesn’t even cover the costs of producing and distributing it. So we need these infusions. Berlin’s a centre. It is good for it to have a magazine like this.”

“Very much a centre,” said Anna. “International. There’s a French Institute in Berlin. Interesting people come, who want to write.”

“Here’s an example,” said Odile. “Was it last year, or the year before? I met someone called Jean-Paul Sartre, who was at the institute, who I thought was brilliant. He’d come from Paris to study the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, but he wants to write novels and stories in which these ideas are expressed, not just do philosophy. He said he would write something for us.”

“We’re still waiting,” said Anna. “Odile introduced me to him. He is brilliant, also rather flirtatious. Exactly the sort of thing we are interested in.”

“Flirtatiousness?”

“Brilliance.”

George had a flash of recognition about Anna and her magazine. He had observed her when she met people. She had a mixture of confidence and warmth, no sense of ulterior motive, just the expectation that both she and this person would enjoy talking with each other.

“That’s how we work,” said Judit. “Classics, but keeping up, also, with intellectual currents. So we are onto movements like phenomenology as they break into literature.”

“Judit’s the avant garde,” said Anna.

“Just the three of you produce the magazine?” George said.

“A secretary comes in to do letters,” said Anna. “She wears high-heeled shoes. When we’re busy there are two of them. Copy editing is done by freelancers.”

Anna saw him look puzzled. “Copy editing: dealing with the words,” she said. “Marking manuscripts with instructions for the typesetters. Try to minimize spelling mistakes, grammatical — how do you say? — lapses.”

She saw that George had finished his coffee, and she took his cup from him.

“Facts are another thing,” she said.

“The copy editor deals with these?”

“Whose facts? We don’t want too many obvious errors of fact to intrude. Who knows where we would be?”

Despite the women’s protestations of their precarious finances, their mood was confident, as if this was, without serious reservations, clearly the thing to do, the way to live, the means to contribute to society.



The summer with Anna was George’s first love affair. Anna’s gusts of warmth enthralled him. He had known nothing like them. Quite often, at breakfast or when they were walking along the street or were in the kitchen together, as if the idea had suddenly occurred to her in that very moment, she would take his head in her hands and give him the most tremendously affectionate kiss.

George had never felt so close to anyone. It was as if his self, previously individual, expanded to include both of them. He started thinking of their life together. She would move to England, live in London, perhaps somewhere like Hampstead, where they could take long walks on the Heath. Or perhaps they should live in Chelsea, near the river. What would their life be like?

He tried to understand her. Her speaking was sometimes abrupt, but he worked out that the occasions of apparent disconnectedness occurred because she was thinking all the time. New thoughts would come to her in unanticipated ways, and she would just say them, and he would have to make the jump too. It wasn’t that she was self-absorbed. She was always present in the conversation. Just, as Werner had said, she was rather intense.

Her intensity frightened him. There was something demanding about it too. He couldn't believe he could sustain what it was she saw in him.