

SMALL AND PERSONAL TREASONS

A Short Story

by...

Norman King Lloyd

©

2013

Half-awake, Dana heard a man whispering in her ear.

She squinted through dry gritty eyes. The room looked normal; their suitcases still waiting to be unpacked; the shutters drawn. She felt the whisperer's hot breath against her neck. Then his hand. He kept repeating, seductively: 'On a chanté et dansé On a chanté et dansé...' Dana sat up, abruptly. Outside, a pig squealed and a young girl laughed. Her husband opened his eyes for a moment, muttered something about breakfast then went back to sleep. The light through the shutters faded; the room darkened. She lay back and thought about her sister's wedding-cake.

About an hour later, Élise brought their breakfast and a copy of *Le Monde*. Tom dunked his unbuttered croissant boisterously.

And she... well, she felt ready for a fight. 'Why don't you get yourself some new pyjamas!'

He looked at her in astonishment, the croissant never reaching his mouth.

'Look at them! Sleeves half-way up your arms. You're not a medium size any longer.'

Tom tuned his portable radio to a classical music station; then releasing the shutters with a clatter, called back: 'Darling... all those lavender fields we saw burnt to a stubble yesterday...'

Dana broke in: 'Was that about the time you were giving me the good news about Lisa? I can't actually remember which came first, the lavender fields or your holiday confession.'

'I explained about the Lisa business.'

'You certainly did.'

'Well, you wanted the separation in the first place!'

'Needed, Tom.'

‘I was six-months on my own!’

She gazed at a husband who never whispered. ‘I feel like staying in today. You can do what you like.’

When Élise returned, Dana took her to one side, saying quietly: ‘I know the normal meaning of ‘On a chanté et dansé’, but is there another meaning, something colloquial?’ The girl looked confused. ‘I ask Madame, she understand English.’

‘But I’m speaking to you in French you silly girl!’

The maid ran from the room. Tom followed her out; there was a long whispered conversation. When he came back: ‘I don’t see why you should take your bad temper out on poor Élise.’

Later, he said over the top of Le Monde, ‘Last night, I dreamt your hand was on my throat and in the distance someone was playing ‘Pasquinade’ on the piano.’

Dana stopped unpacking and wondered how she’d ever started lying about her dreams. It had been a spur of the moment thing after they’d got back together. Their dreams had coincided once, which gave her the idea; thinking it might bring them closer.

He was becoming insistent. ‘Darling? You said you had a similar dream.’

‘Yes, there was a piano... You were squeezing my throat and...’

‘No! Your hands were on me!’ Tom became very excited. ‘Please concentrate!’

‘You’re right, Tom. My hands were on you.’

He beamed. ‘What did you do, then?’

‘I didn’t struggle. I pretended to be dead.’

Tom was beside himself. ‘I thought we’d just established I was the one being strangled!’

'I can't make my dreams fit in with yours. You were strangling me and that's all there is to it!'

He allowed himself the first of three daily cigarettes. 'You know I still can't get over it - that we're actually dreaming the same dream! The fact that our dreams aren't quite symmetrical makes them even more believable. What time was your dream?'

'I don't know! Probably, just before I woke up and the whispers...'

'What whispers, darling?'

She laughed. 'You know how I live inside my head.'

'What dress were you wearing?'

'My black crêpe de chine with the tiny jewels.' She spoke quickly, knowing this was the right answer.

'And what was I wearing?'

This question completely flummoxed her.

He became impatient. 'Your hands were on me so you must have noticed what I was wearing.'

'If you really want to know, you were stark bollock naked!'

Tom went back to his newspaper. Dana thought: 'What a farce!' And stupid to let slip about the whisperer? Unpacking, she thought about the wedding-cake. She saw a ten-foot high edifice and wondered how the lower tiers of cake did not collapse under the weight. Perhaps, Madame Renée would know. Unfortunately, she had no clear recollection of her own wedding-cake, except that it was short and squat.

'You were wearing a cardigan over your dress!' Tom suddenly exclaimed. 'The corn-yellow one with the bunny buttons.'

There was a knock on the door and Madame Renée entered. Like the maid, she wore dark glasses even indoors. 'You go upsetting poor Élise, yes? You should be ashamed.'

'Tom and I were arguing about the lavender fields.'

Madame Renée looked as if she did not believe a word of it. 'I am no better. Always deranging the poor thing myself. Are you staying in today?'

Dana saw pain in the woman's eyes. 'Sit down, Madame. Can we offer you a drink?'

La Patronne sat in the armchair. 'I was so sad when you tell me about your separation.' She accepted her drink. 'I give a toast that L'Auberge de la Solitude make you great happiness.' Dana knelt on the carpet and took her hand. 'But I am très content you come back to Antibes. You are my favourite lovers.'

'Lovers!' They cried in amazement.

Madame pointed to the Irises on the mantelpiece.

Tom bent down. 'They're completely made of glass.'

'I put different flowers in each room. I hope I choose well.'

'Dana?'

'Perhaps, your wife does not care for them. I can easily replace...'

'They're fine.' Dana responded, curtly.

Tom asked if they could have a light lunch sent up. He had such fond memories of her delicious Gnocchi's with Spinach... and a bottle of Pelure d'Oignon on ice would not go amiss. And if poor Élise was rushed off her feet, he'd happily come downstairs and collect their trays.

At that moment, Élise knocked. The maid was deathly pale; her mouth twitched, involuntarily. Madame Renée got up. 'I must leave you. We are having a party of Polish arriving for lunch.'

'Where's our Mimosa?' Dana called out. 'Every year and God knows we've been coming here since the year zero, there's always been a welcoming vase of Mimosa in our room.'

Madame raised her hands eloquently upwards. 'Oh, my darling, changing it every few days was too much and with only poor Élise... I had no idea it meant so much. And now... I supervise the dumplings! I leave behind my hotel scrapbook. It amused you last year.'

As soon as she left, Dana said: 'But she can spend the money on glass flowers!'

'I cannot believe the fuss you just made!'

Tom leafed through the scrapbook and said, wearily, 'Our twenty-years of August's away.'

'Gin and Kodak faces,' said Dana in disgust. 'What a self-satisfied bunch. Poor Madame. This is all she has to show for her life here. And not a child in sight anywhere.'

Tom shrugged. 'I suppose families with brats, book hotels by the beach.'

Dana resumed unpacking. Suddenly she doubled over, both hands pressed hard against her ears.

Tom rushed across the room as his wife collapsed onto the bed. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.' He ruffled her short boyish hair. 'What is it that's bothering you? Can't we work thing out? Argue the tenderness?'

Dana drew her fingers along his mouth, 'I won't sing a nicer song,' she said, quietly, 'I'd like to, but I can't.'

The telephone rang. It was Madame, inviting them to an aperitif that evening.

Dana lay on her stomach; one arm dangling to the floor. Tom drew up a chair.

‘Whisper something to me.’

‘Why?’

‘I want to hear what you sound like when you whisper.’

‘Dana... You know what I sound like when I whisper.’

‘That’s the point. You don’t ever whisper.’

He opened his mouth, tried to form a word and failed miserably. She swung off the bed, furious. ‘I really can’t stand you!’ She slapped his face. ‘You make a difficulty of even the simplest thing.’ He grabbed her wrist. She screamed and bit his hand, broke free and picked up the vase of Irises, upending them onto the bed. Snapping each stem, she intoned: ‘One-year married, two-years married, three-years married, four-years...’ When she had finished, she scooped up the broken glass and threw it in her husband’s face.

Tom put on his jacket and went to the door. ‘I’m going out for a bit. Down to the town. By the way, Madame Renée’s sending you up a recipe book. Wedding-cakes, I ask you! And Dana... Clear up the glass before anyone else comes in.’

As soon as he left, Dana picked up the telephone and asked for Madame Renée.

. . .

After a walk along the ramparts, Tom bought his wife a present. A small crucifix.

When he returned to the hotel it was deserted. The bar-grill drawn down and locked. The kitchen clean and empty. He wandered into the lounge, the concert piano had been covered with a grey dust sheet. The air was heavy with the imminent rain. In the distance, lightning flashed across the Alps. His face was burning. In the jeweller’s, he had met a very knowledgeable young man. They had visited the Picasso museum, then gone to a private beach. ‘I’ve definitely had too much sun,’ he thought.

In the foyer, he studied some old photographs. A small village square somewhere in Provence. A crumbling and defunct fountain. Four men sitting on the rim. Hats at raffish angles. And at their feet, a goose being drained of blood.

Madame Renée made him jump. 'The Polish have gone. And now my hotel is empty even in August.' She fingered the buttons of her wrap; studied him carefully. 'You look tired.'

They entered her private domain; full of bric-a-brac and heavy furnishings. Without warning, Mignonette, mewling wildly, jumped on to his shoulder. Madame Renée closed the heavy damask curtains. Then pointed to a row of bottles. 'All these are my brother's. How you say? Made at home? Apricot brandy, cherry, fig, nectarine...'

'I'll try the apricot.'

'Madame placed her cool palm on his burning forehead. 'If you do not mind, I first clean your face of dust.'

He drank the brandy. 'I bought Dana a present.'

'I have to tell you your wife was wonderful this afternoon. Poor Élise got one of her fits so we sent her to her room and so Dana helped me with the Polish. What did you buy her?'

'A gold cross.'

Madame Renée did not seem over enthusiastic at this news. 'Did you know how worried she is over this wedding-cake?'

'I don't understand why she doesn't go out and buy one like anyone else.'

Madame Renée picked up the telephone. 'He's back, my darling. Baked in sunshine and longing.'

On the first floor landing, a window swung in the wind. Tom looked out on the garden. It was the last moment of dusk. Thunder still rumbled in the distance. A large insect flew into his face and as he flicked his fingers through his hair, he

saw a white faced woman cradling a dog-like animal in her arms. He sprinted up the remaining stairs.

Dana looked startled. She was reading in an armchair by the bed. A table-lamp cast a soft glow on her face.

‘Élise is in the garden! Everything about her’s so white. What I mean is, she’s naked! I think she’s doing it with an animal.’

Dana placed her book on the small table, leant back and closed her eyes. ‘Open the balcony door and draw the other chair up. I love the rustles and sounds just before a storm and don’t worry about Élise, she’s a child of nature.’

‘You look wonderful,’ he said.

‘What am I wearing, Tom?’

‘Your black dress... the one that sends me mad and your really red lipstick... your white silk scarf... Dana, I got you a present. It’s nothing much. Something small.’

She opened the box. Held the crucifix against the light, the chain dangling across her pale hand.

‘As I say, Dana... its just a plain gold cross.’

‘It’s plainly perfect,’ she said, standing for Tom to fit it around her neck.

Downstairs, Madame Renée could be heard playing the piano.

Tom turned off the table-lamp and in the dark, they began their ‘Chasing Game’. Colliding with furniture, they kept just missing one another. ‘No-more,’ Tom called out, unnerved at Dana’s ability to see in the dark. The game always ended up with his fear. They went on to the balcony. The air was warm and the gyraldic moon strong over the distant sea; the storm clouds gone. They leant over the balustrade. Dana put a hand on her husband’s shoulder. ‘You’re one big chicken, Tom. You were cowering in the corner for ages. Look, a couple in the garden...’

But Tom was listening intently. 'Madame Renée's playing my favourite piece.'

Dana asked Tom to go inside and fetch her coat. When he returned, she said: 'There's something I must tell you. Madame Renée is dying. She wrote to me before we came here; hinting that perhaps we shouldn't come. Then when I phoned her she told me she'd changed her mind and was feeling much better.'

'So it's our last August away...' Tom looked stunned.

'Well, almost certainly.'

'That's why the place is going to pot!' Tom said, irritably. 'Sorry, that sounds awful. Poor Madame. But I have to tell you if I had known, I wouldn't have come. I don't want someone dying on our holiday. I mean, she keeps her distance, doesn't she? Madame Renée this and Madame Renée that! Why we can't just call her by her name? This absurd French correctness!'

Dana waited. And at last she said: 'I keep hearing a man's voice. Whispering. Only when I'm alone with you. When you're asleep or preoccupied...'

'Really. Well, there's this psychiatrist bloke who comes into the shop sometimes - he's absolutely passionate about eighteenth-century riding-crops... If you like, I could ask him. Perhaps, hearing voices means just hearing your own self. Cunningly disguised, of course. Just one of the small tricks of life.'

Dana jumped. 'My God! That's Élise in the garden!'

They went back inside. The music was much louder. 'Should we go downstairs?' Tom queried. 'I feel a bit worried. That's the third time she's played, Pasquinade.'

'Madame Renée is going to help me make the wedding-cake. We can put it on the back seat for the journey home. I couldn't refuse. She seemed so happy to be helping me.'

There was a shout from the garden. Tom closed the door to the balcony and pulled Dana towards him. Dana half-heartedly tried to push him away. 'Listen! Madame Renée has stopped playing.'

Tom touched her neck. 'Did I do that?' he asked, seeing the red weal just under her ear. She answered that it was probably the 'whisperer'. His hands shook slightly as he undid the buttons at the back of her dress. As they slid on to the bed, raised voices came from downstairs; then a door slammed.

'You are my wonderful wife,' he said softly.

'Whisper it.'

He tried. He managed a croak. Then there was a knock at the door. 'Go away!' he shouted.

Élise burst into the room. 'Venez! C'est Madame!'

Downstairs, Tom said, matter-of-factly: 'She's dead.' While Dana held the sobbing Élise who kept crying: 'Maman! Maman!'

Feeling quite drained, Tom sat down, asking Élise in French: 'Is... Was she your Mother?'

. . .

In the night, they both woke at the same time. 'My life depends on it!' Dana screamed.

Tom almost fell out of bed. 'Bloody hell, I'm supposed to be on holiday. Recharging the batteries.' He scrambled around for his cigarettes, saying none too sympathetically, 'How do you mean your life is in danger?'

Dana walked around the room in the dark. 'Why did you give me the cross, Tom?'

He switched on the bedside lamp. Dana was fiddling with the crucifix trying to put it on. Tom said it was three in the morning. His wife then asked Tom to read Madame Renée's note again, which he did, grudgingly:

Forgive me, my darlings, it is so selfish to ruin your holiday but -

‘You’re dead right, there!’ Tom said with feeling. ‘For God’s sake Dana, get us a drink. We need it! And I don’t understand the bit about singing and dancing. Anyhow, it goes on...’

Élise is to be looked after by my brother. Can you stay with her until after the funeral? The hotel is yours. A gift. Quelle surprise, yes? Already, darlings, I feel drowsy. Tom, I have made my CD to play your favourite Gottschalk piece an hour from now. A little trick for by that time I shall no longer be with you. On Saturday’s, there’s singing and dancing in the town square. je vois la lumière éblouissante de l’âme qui.....

Dana translated. ‘I see already the dazzling light of a beckoning soul...’

‘Beckoning? Nothing here about beckoning. What do you think the hotel’s worth?’ Tom asked.

‘In lives?’ Dana responded.

Tom mumbled. ‘So what’s this nonsense about your life being in danger?’

‘Your cross will protect me. Do you think Élise is a... you know, one of those creatures?...’

Tom placed his hands on her shoulders. His expression changed; he leaned closer, his mouth touching her ear. ‘Ah... I understand. Because she’s so pale, you mean? Well, to set your mind at rest. I know she’s not.’

Dana retreated to a corner of the room. She clung to her cross, shaking with terror. For the very first time that she could ever remember... Tom had whispered. He had whispered easily, without any sense of strain and with a horrible smile crinkling his eyes.