

Incarnadine

Anna Camilleri

Anna Camilleri souffre de ce que ses amies appellent un “gène récessif de déménagement,” puisqu’elle a déménagé 17 fois en 10 ans. Elle voit cela, non comme fuir la réalité de sa vie, mais comme avancer vers de nouvelles possibilités. Elle en rit, dit qu’elle a empaqueté ses choses plus souvent que ses amies ont fait le lavage. Encore dans un nouvel appartement, elle jette un drap sur son dos et s’endort à milieu du chaos du déménagement. Mais son sommeil n’est jamais paisible et ses rêves à répétition la force à confronter quelques vérités de son enfance. Elle dit, “ce qui est évident à voir est souvent oublié. . . La partie de moi qui est intouchable aujourd’hui, n’aurait jamais dû être touchée.” Ses souvenirs d’abus sexuel l’aide à comprendre les raisons des ses déménagements. Avec un sentiment de dépossession elle entreprend le processus de porter charge contre son grand-père, de confronter sa famille, et de tenter de poursuivre sa vie, créativement et affectueusement. Comme elle le dit, “Je crois que la vérité est ce qui enflamme les étoiles, pour que nous puissions les voir, faire des vœux lorsqu’on les voit, et s’en souvenir.” Des rêves à propos de l’eau, son désir de nager vers un beau et nouvel endroit continuent. Elle recherche une île où elle sera contrainte de rester quelque temps, une maison océanique confortable.

On a smoke break, a co-worker asks me if I grew up in an unstable household. The formality of her question catches me off-guard. I nearly smart “No, no, not at all, my childhood was a lot like the *Little House on the Prairie* – gives me warm fuzzies just to think of it.” Instead, I respond “Well, you could call it stable. I lived with my parents and brother in a small house. We moved to a bigger house when I was thirteen and my mother, father and brother still live there. My parents have never defaulted on a loan, they collect Canadian Tire coupons, eat a home-cooked meal every night and visit the doctor once a year for a physical.”

“Well, looks like you got the recessive moving gene in your family!”

I had just boasted about being an expert at packing, having moved more times than I can count on both hands. There was always a good

reason to move. Negligent landlord. Crazy neighbours. Expensive utilities. Relationship break-up. Truth is, I've been renting a great place for eight months, best I've ever lived in, and I'm already fantasizing about moving. I've grown accustomed to the ritual of sorting, packing, and unpacking. There's a rhythm to it, like the moon's cycle. The weight of a full box soothes me.

My friends have crossed and replaced my number at least fifteen times. It's a toast. "Cheers to your new place and to us who are stupid enough to help you move again...!...Hey Anna, how about a toast to fresh latex!" And then I chip in "Yeah, I've sorted my stuff more than you've cooked this year." Our voices bounce off the bare walls. We eat greasy pizza on milk crates. Drink warm beer. I imagine how my apartment will look; estimate dimensions, count phone jacks and guess at where the studs are. Scribble notes inside my cigarette pack for the trip to the hardware store. Everyone goes home to their beds, cats, dogs, lovers. I throw a sheet onto the futon, climb under, light a candle, sleep.

I have moved exactly seventeen times, in two different provinces, in the past nine years. There have been a lot of changes. Many lovers, new neighbours and countless garage sales. Nobody asks me what I am running away from. I would be indignant. On a crowded bus when someone's elbow is up under my chin, when I climb out of a stranger's bed, I ask myself. What are you running from? I always come to the same answer. I'm running to, not from, to. I hold fast to this like an exhausted swimmer gripping a raft. I swim some more. My stroke improves. I rest at the next island, dazzled by the view. It cycles like looped video-tape, like the moon, like the seasons. The waters between the islands begin to feel familiar, then the same, then routine, then confining.

I've lost things between moves. The watch my grandmother gave me for my Confirmation. Many pairs of socks. A few beloved plants; they don't like moving. An iron, which I never used. My name has remained. And my dreams.

"I don't dream."

"I don't remember my dreams," that's what I used to say.
I lie.

* * *

I love the quality of early morning light, but I am not a morning person. Waking is often painfully drawn out. I press snooze at least three times. I shuffle about, bumping into everything on the way to the

bathroom. Last week, I woke easily. Jumped right out of bed. Before my lover was awake, I began telling her about my dream, nudged her till her eyes were open and blinking frenetically.

"I was sitting in a concrete yard, leaning against a fence, naked. You walked through the gate and handed me twelve smooth, whittled branches and a sea sponge. You were dressed in army fatigues. In a very business-like manner, you instructed me to put the sponge inside my cunt and then to embed the branches. I was calm and attentive. You explained that in case of rape, the bastard would get pricked, pull out and run away bleeding. I spread my legs, inserted the sponge and branches and whistled into the traffic. No one noticed my lack of clothing, not even you."

"It's a good dream." I beamed, "I'm not scared. I didn't wake up shaking."

She touched my face gently.

When I was a child, I had nightmares about hooded men clawing at my bedroom door, trying to break in. I always woke in a cold sweat and a puddle of warm piss. Limbs stiff as a board. Sometimes I dreamt about rats, hundreds of rats, gnawing at the walls and ceiling. I could not stand up. I lay in bed, looking up at the looking up at the swirly plaster motif. I imagined my dreams to be hovering around the light fixture, like flies waiting until nightfall. Until my breath slowed and deepened, lips parted. Waiting until I looked like a babe in a crib and then, only then, the hooded men and rats descended.

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I stopped pissing my bed when I was sixteen. I went to see my doctor, a handsome twenty-five year old, fresh out of college, told me I had a common condition. That was news to me because I didn't know anyone else who wet their bed. I guess it's not a particular topic like movies or hockey. He said that bed wetting or enuresis, that's the clinical term, is caused by emotional trauma or a physiological problem. He asked if anything traumatic happened to me when I started bed wetting. I said no. Then the words spilled out. "My grandfather molested me." I wasn't planning to tell him that. It's just that he was the first person to ask. My body folded at the waist. The room spun. I held onto my tears, straightened and looked at him. He leaned forward, his face screwed up in a confounded, empathetic expression. I didn't want his kindness. I gathered my bag and darted. I sprinted for a good six blocks before I ran out of breath. Walked

aimlessly all over the city in a fog, convinced that everyone in the world had heard me. The streets were unusually loud, littered. When I arrived at home, my mother asked where I'd been. I said nowhere. And under my breath, nowhere and everywhere.

I first thought about filing charges when I was twenty years old. But I was not ready for a messy family crisis. Not ready to be disbelieved, not ready to speak the details aloud. Simply, not ready. Two years ago, I visited Toronto and walked through the neighbourhood I grew up in. I was looking for answers, or in the very least, one honest answer, one glimpse. "Running to, not from," had begun to feel like lead weights hanging from my shoulders; a show of strength for everyone but me. I walked past my grandparents' house, the house where it all happened, where they still live. Besides some minor exterior renovation, their house is preserved, as my memory. I wanted to open the door, run into my nonna's strong arms, to savour the sweet scent of her skin and the errant hairs from her French bun that would tickle my nose. She would set out provolone and asiago cheese, pannine, prosciutto, antipasto, espresso, red wine. I would protest, saying I had just eaten and she would exclaim "Mangia, Mangia!" I would eventually succumb, as I always had. We would eat together. But I couldn't bring myself to cross the street. I couldn't run to her. Our jovial feasting would eventually come to an end. Encumbered silence would follow. I had told my grandmother what her husband did to me. She turned her cheek, let my words fall to the ground, like leaves. Those leaves, slippery, brown and rotting, I could not cross.

I ran into the wind, rounded the block and sat on the hill in my elementary school yard. That hill, everything, seemed so damn big when I was a child. I remember standing at the top of it, holding a flattened cardboard box in the dead of winter. Took a running start, jumped on my magic carpet, flew all the way down and spun out at the bottom where the snowdrift started. Wax coated vegetable boxes worked best. I saw myself standing there, when I was eight.

I look like Little Red Riding Hood in my red cape. My knees are covered in scabs. My hair, twirled into big ringlets, falls to my waist. My classmates run, laugh, some roll marbles by the school house. I stand against the fence, kick at stones, watch, wait for the recess bell to sound so I can go inside, out of the cold.

I collapsed into bed that night and drifted far out to sea, where the water is immeasurably deep. I dreamt that my body was weightless. I

travelled through a three dimensional maze, with rooms and alcoves of varying shapes and sizes. At the end of the maze, there was a large arch filled with gold light and the girl with the red cape. She held out her hand and said "Come on, let's go... I've been waiting for you Anna. I'm cold." I touched her fingers and woke.

I filed a "victim impact" statement with the Vancouver Sexual Assault Squad on October 2nd, 1995. That's when I stopped dreaming about hooded men and rats. During an arduous two hours with an out of uniform officer, my words were recorded in a small room. A small dictaphone sat on the center of the table with a plastic flower arrangement. The cop asked me lots questions, "Now, we don't want to put words in your mouth but we need to be able to pass information on to Metro Toronto... Exactly what type of assault occurred? Do you need a break? What happened?.. This occurred more than once?...Do your parents know?...Do you have any brothers or sisters?...Do you need a break?...If your grandfather were here today, what would you say to him?...Why did you wait until now to file charges?...Are you employed?" The transcript of our interview is fifteen pages long. My answers were unfocused, long winded. What was the question, I asked repeatedly. What was the question? When he offered to break, I couldn't stop. I would have left.

I wanted to rage and scream, "What do you mean by that lame ass question? Isn't it obvious why I didn't jump up ten years ago to come and tell you about everything that's made me nauseous for my whole fucking life? You want answers? Yes, my parents know. I told them when I left home. I have one younger brother. Not that it's relevant, but yes, I have a job. I was raped by my grandfather. No, I haven't forgotten a thing. I have a full-colour picture album. Want me to describe it? He did every disgusting thing you can imagine; stunk of tobacco, cheap wine and brillantine. Threw my underwear clear across the room. I was five years old when he started messing with me. He used to talk and grunt right through the whole damn thing. He told me that I was ugly and no one would ever love me. The bastard said that everyone would think I was a dirty girl if I ever said a word, "manca 'na parola", and he would have to take me to the hospital and have me sewn up. Then he would force me to say I love you nonno.

"Once? For seven years, at two assaults a week, he raped me over seven hundred times. A couple of years ago, in the middle of sorting my bills, I got a really sick feeling in my stomach. I knew the feeling was about my grandfather. The calculator was right there on my desk, so I started punching in numbers. Seven years of it, times 54 weeks a

year at an average of two assaults a week equals seven hundred. I haven't eaten in a restaurant that many times. I haven't seen seven hundred films. I punched in the numbers again and again and it kept spitting out the same damn number. I didn't want to believe it, still don't. Now that I've told you all my secrets, would you like to trade places? Tell me about the hundred ways your heart has been broken. Tell me."

I didn't yell at him. He is not the man who hurt me. In a strange way, I wished he had been. Had I been able to voice all of my pain, anger, betrayal, fear, ad nauseum, directly to my grandfather, and be heard, I would not have needed to tell my story to a cop. But I would not have been heard, and I am afraid, to this day, of being in a room with my grandfather.

I don't remember what I did after the interview. What I do remember is my friend Cynthia taking my hand. I followed. I signed release forms to have documents retrieved, spoke with the investigating officer three times a week. That was just the beginning. I began to feel afraid while having sex and then, stopped for several months.

Those months stretched out like a cracked Prairie highway, September indistinguishable from April. Context is everything. I have been stubbornly proud of my sexuality, when it would have been more highly regarded for me to have fabricated modesty. And when anyone has looked down upon me from a moral high ground, I have stated "I am not not a lady. Never have been, don't care to be." Have flirted unabashedly. I've been hungry, demanding and patient, having taught more than a few lovers how to please me. And yes, lovers have taught me a thing or two. I never thought that I would be unable to have sex or that I wouldn't want it. It's been an important, exciting part of my life. One night while talking to Cynthia about feeling like I had permanently lost a part of myself, she said "Maybe you're finding something Anna." She meant well. But all I could see was congealed oil on the ocean's surface and pregnant fish floating belly up.

When my grandfather assaulted me, I was stone; cold, rigid, inflexible, pulseless. When he finally let me go, I ran into the bathroom, sure to lock the door, and pleasure myself. I washed my hands and face first. I discovered the vibrating scalp massage, the pulse of the detachable shower head, the power of my own hands. I taught myself how to come in three minutes flat, squatting, laying or standing. I fantasized about heavy petting with Deanna Troy from Star Trek, oral sex with the northern Italian girl who lived next door, restraining and

straddling Mario, the class bully. I learned how to luxuriate in my body, coming slow and easy. When my right hand got sore, I learned how to use my left hand. This was my revenge on the whole damn world. Short of locking me up and throwing away the key, noone, not my grandfather, not the nuns at school, not the neighbourhood signoras, noone, could stop me from coming or thinking about it. Every time I came, I proved that I was alive. He hadn't taken everything.

On the day my grandfather was sentenced to three years in a federal penitentiary, Taste This, the collective I work with, was performing in Seattle. Had I been able to click my heels and make a wish, I would have chosen to be anywhere but in Seattle, onstage. The act of performing is vulnerable. Everyone in the audience is waiting to be made to laugh or feel, to be turned on or off, to be inspired or pissed off. Whatever the reason, every audience member is there for something. And I felt I had nothing to give. But I couldn't bail. I took the stage. Paused for a couple of seconds, feet solidly planted a foot apart, tall posture, head held high, looked around the room, and started. No introductions, no banter. I was not only a performer that night, I was a conjurer, in three different places simultaneously. Right in the middle of performing "I Don't Want," I was in the courtroom when my grandfather pled guilty and then I saw myself in church, giving my first confession.

I walked into a small room with a crucifix. All of my classmates were standing behind me, in a straight line. The priest, Father Racco, closed the door and told me to sit down. I did. He asked if I ever looked at dirty magazines, if I ever touched myself "there," if I ever let anyone touch me "there." He placed his hand on my knee. His other hand was under his brown robe. I squeezed my legs together, answered no to all three questions, eyes fixed on his black shoes. He told me to pray five Hail Mary's and five Our Father's, on my knees. I walked out of the room. My teacher smiled and patted my head.

I came back to my body during the last last line of my piece: *all I see is red*. The audience was laughing, applauding. I said thank-you and walked offstage. I felt as though I had missed a friend's gig. We received a standing ovation. I was floating somewhere above the crowd, somewhere above all of Seattle. It's true, the show must go on. And I love this.

I waited for the first long distance phone call to sound. It was my mother. I held my breath, fearing that once and for all, I would be motherless. She choked out words of pride, love, strength. My mother had never before told me that she was proud of me. Stretching the phone cord across the length of my bachelor, I scrambled for a roll of toilet paper, to mop up my streaked face. She asked if I was ok. I said yes. That's all I could say. We had played our parts so well, so fully; she the wretched, unloving mother, I, the spiteful, rebellious daughter. We had been so far apart and moving in tandem all along; so afraid of touching each other for fear of seeing our own reflections, afraid of the shame that threatens to pour down like a dark, open, sky, every time we look into each other's eyes. I step closer. "I feel shaky, but I'll be ok. Are you ok, mom?" She assures, "I've managed for this long," drops her voice to a whisper, "I'm sorry Anna. I wish I could have done something. I was a terrible mother. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." Through a tight throat, I speak "Mom, mama? Listen to me. It's not your fault. I love you mom. Always have."

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I swim in stormy waters. The waves take me in, push me up again. When lightning strikes the ocean, it's one big pot. Ready to boil. No matter. I swim. When the waters are calm, I float on my back and blink into the sun. Tumble and dive like a seal. I come up for air and breast stroke toward the next island. I see my mother. She is wearing a beautiful red dress, standing on a cliff, waving at me. How strange, I think to myself; her red, against the brown and green land. She calls to me "Anna, come rest – you need to eat. Your skin must be pruned. Are there any big fish in the water?"

I glide in, careful to propel around the sharp barnacle. On shore, I shake myself out like a dog. No, I say, no, there aren't any big fish, just minnows. She looks relieved. My mother doesn't swim. Once, when she was just a girl, someone held her arms and legs under water, in a public pool.

We build a fire together, cook, and eat. The food tastes like wood. I ask why she is wearing such a beautiful red dress. She says it's the dress of her dreams and islands are for dreaming. Sunset moves to night to a star spotted sky. We giggle like girls and feel the beauty in all the world.

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The pronouncement, guilt, ran through me, winded me, like a

blistering snow storm. But a part of me has always been here, out here, in the middle of a storm, in the middle of the ocean. A part of me is cold, untouched. And the truth is, the part of me that is untouchable, should never have been touched. This is obvious. What is plain to see, is often forgotten. So I will say it again. The part of me that is untouchable today, should never have been touched. The verdict, guilt, does not change this. What it does, is aligns the world with the truth I have known for all of my life. I believe that truth is what sets stars on fire, for all of us to gaze at, to wish upon, to remember.

Let me tell you what I wish for. I wish for warm waters to swim in. I wish to find an island that is so beautiful, I will be compelled to stay for a while. And when I swim out into the ocean, I will return, like incarnadine salmon, to this place inside of myself that has always been here, waiting, this place called home.