

The Cannibals

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C'est l'histoire d'Anna, une jeune femme peut-être désillusionnée se prenant pour une tueuse à gage à la recherche de sa cible dans plusieurs milieux urbains au Canada et en Europe. Filature et espionnage deviennent l'allégorie d'une prose lucide: une écriture qui tente de défaire les lois établies du langage et les conventions littéraires tout en scrutant ses propres digressions et néologismes. Les villes sont les textes où, dans sa flânerie, Anna confronte les souvenirs de son enfance et de son premier amour qui l'ont étroitement définie et contrainte à se cacher.

*poor voyager! For joy / she brings us every morning we exchange
an accelerating series of shocks. We are together
cannibals of her spirit, we feast to nurture
our tired bodies, turning music to shit [. . .].*

You don't believe me?

*See her eyes when first she wakes. A visible
tyrant of light yanks their traces, demanding
they stride apace.*

— *George Bowering, Summer Solstice*

*and the mermaid danced and laughed
with the thought of death in her heart.*

— *H.C. Andersen, The Little Mermaid*

Click Click. That's the sound of his stick on the drum.

The show was long over. The light was gone and nobody was left on the street now; only the occasional wretch wandered by, and if he happened to look up and see the little girl's face coming at him, fast out of the dark, he'd raise his arm with a 'hey you!' or freeze in the wind for a minute, getting mauled by a passing wet newspaper. The little girl just walked on. Her hair flew about wet in the wind and her narrow skirt stretched taut, making the sound of a bat's wing with each step. *Flap, flap.*

Lately, all the women Anna K. knew had been going down: one by one, done in by love. She frowned and tried to commit to memory the face of the drummer who had been playing at the new club, *The Starlite*, that night. As it turned

out, there was nothing starry about *The Starlite*; it was little more than a hole in the wall: literally, just a small cave-like room painted red. No place for a boy like him. She thought in a 40's Hollywood voice. *Click Click*. The drumstick tapped nervously in her head. Like a code. The latest assignment she imagined, planted by her nameless faceless boss. Somewhere out in the night the Drummer's living room window was aglow. Anna thought of him and his bandmates: happy and easy moving about in there, with their clinking drinks and arsty things, the ironic music they'd put on after a night of playing their own songs to applause. Their normal, successful, non-assassin-like lives.

The next day Anna woke, turned over, and picked up the book. It opened in her hands to BAT: *the bat is restless next to the blue bird, creature of heaven; its fluttering is uncertain. Unable to glide in the air, it is forced to beat its wings forever to stay in flight. It is therefore considered the symbol of one who is in an intermediate phase of development, no longer on a lower plane, and yet unable to reach a higher.* Dark flight, ground-clinging flight. Nature had tried and failed, produced a hairy membrane. This must be part of the code, thought Anna.

A failed word, a monstrous wing to music.

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Anna closed the book. Before her life as an assassin she'd lived with the 'One True Love' who had led her to believe he was a musician, a saxophone player. This explained why they were always on the move, his saxophone case carried from place to place but kept in the closet. She kept her singing low, so he wouldn't get angry, and when they went out her hand lay lightly on his folded arms. She didn't ask questions when he left in the middle of the night. When he returned, he'd unfold one arm to where Anna lay curled at the foot of the bed, and wrap his long webbed fingers around her skull, which made her head feel like a ball of white electricity. All the while he'd talk of a great leap she must make across a void. Not to worry, the One would say, true love is always expressed best by silence; silence is the best thing you can say; everything exists, finally, in its greatest form, in silence. Etc. And then he'd put her to sleep, like she was a princess—fanning her with his great wings, or sometimes with the slow, blank, yellow leaves of a crumbling book.

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Anna K.'s father, who was a poet, was always telling people that her mother had already read *The Odyssey* by the age of five. When her mother was pregnant, another poet laughed and said she would give birth to a book. These remarks pissed the mother off to no end and she gave birth, instead, to Anna, who stayed purple for a long time on the birthing table, gasping, chin quivering. The poet friend called her 'the baby that ate the world.' Her mother and father lived in a big house fortified with floor to ceiling bookshelves filled with all the most important,

though generally unread, books in the world. The kind that needed to be decoded: for example, Georges Perec's novel written entirely without using the letter e. Her father loved these kinds of writing games, said they involved constraint that gave birth to interesting accidents. But both parents were almost speechless at Anna's birth. "Oh Wow," said the father. "Hello baby," said the mother. The parents held their future-assassin baby tight to their breasts. Their wordless baby held on.

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The 'One True Love' was always about to speak, "I have so much to teach you," he'd say; but the One spun in darkness. They were always on the run and she missed her parents' house, full of books. Her homesickness made him jealous and he told her she was not ready to be taught by a master. He saw words trying to push through her wet, fishy-looking eyes that had become swollen by his monastic silence: *Your word is a gate, call the gate open. Call it open. It is, the one you want.* He knew she was trying to infect his brain with messages like these, lines from minor Canadian poets. This irritated the One and he became distant. Then, one morning, she woke to find him at the window. Tracing a beautiful lady in the frost on the glass while talking into a black telephone in an accent she'd never heard before. The next day he brushed his thumb across her pretty mouth, said, "sorry kido, them's the breaks," and left on a foreign-looking sailors' ship. Anna discovered that, after all, silence was not always the road to enlightenment. Her mouth opened and closed quietly, like a fish heaving when it's just been pulled from water.

After this, their love became an international affair. This is what Anna told people. While he was away, during the long hours of the day spent waiting, she read 19th century novels and fairy tales about princes who needed to be saved. When she fell asleep they would fall from her hands, and the One would return in her dreams to press his cold stiff wings against her. In the morning she would go down to the water and sit fussing and yearning on the rocks just off shore—looking out to sea for him while unspoken words tore about her outsides like a gale. Then, one day, it occurred to her that the One was not coming back. Her tongue felt like lead in her mouth. The word and the world seemed to split, the childhood union gone . . . and the stories she had read became confused in her head. So, she avowed revenge, and went out alone to find him. Out into the wide wide world.

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Anna took the codename A.K.A. and put on some green shark-skin cowboy boots. She worked her way through one European port city after another. Each time she saw a dark figure from far off, as it came towards her, she was pleased the moment she could discern it was not the One. No, the One's stride is not like that. No, the One's hair is not that fair. No, the One's wings would flap more slowly. She would walk along the water and into the city, recalling how the blue-black of the sea

would churn in the One's eyes. Oh One, she would think, where are you in this city? She had a blister on the fourth toe of her left foot.

Whenever she reached a city's centre, Anna would press her back up against the outside walls of little expensive restaurants, and peer through the windows at decadent scenes that looked like 17th century Flemish paintings, broken into details by small black frames. She knew that in the luxurious colours of the firelight the hand coming out of the cuff and resting on the mouth was not the One's because he would not rest his hand on his face quite that way. A professional like me recognizes small things, Anna thought to herself. Can spot a fake. Know the One by a single gesture. A curled fingernail, a ring, the wrist bone alone.

Anna left Belgium for Denmark. When she stepped off the train in Copenhagen, she was back in the city she had once left for good. Where she had first found the One in a storm, when she rescued him from drowning . . . or so she'd thought. She hadn't been aware, then, that princes test potential brides for their threshold of sacrifice. Anna walked down to the sea and stood with her hands behind her back, rocking and looking out at the industry off-shore. It seemed unfair that, after the real Little Mermaid had given up her tail, hair and voice, this famous bronze statue of her in the harbour kept getting its head sawed off and stolen every few years. She heard that eventually they had to make a mould of it and keep it handy.

A homeless man came up to Anna and tried to speak to her in five languages, before English, the one she knew. She gave him 1000 *krøner* and he sent her to a gypsy fisher monger who showed her on a roll of skin where the One was living. And so, Anna headed that way with plans to enter the One's bedroom and steal his saxophone—or possibly just drop it from the window so that it would land in mute pain. Kill the thing in its sleep that never sung. She knew it still might be hard to find him; he always hid out in the most northerly regions. She imagined a cold empty hall, him in a severe looking chair—waiting for some poor unlucky fool who'd lost his way to wander in and get the surprise of his life. It used to bore her when he did this, as did the long hours he'd spend amusing himself by trying to spell out big words like ETERNITY with shards of ice . . . but then forgetting what it was he was trying to write.

Anna wondered if hunting down the One would kill the last shred of goodness in her. Her heart was beating red. When she reached the complex where he lived she thought, "Yes it will." It was large and composed, as though built by a mathematician. It was windy and the flags were blowing. Six huge hexagons alike. And the windows repeated themselves *ad nauseam*. The place was like the One. The place was monstrous like the One and the One might be a small silhouette, arranging and rearranging shapes in one of the windows. Anna stood under a window looking up for a signal, a familiar sign carried over and put into view on the ledge. The salt in the night air stuck to her; she had travelled a long way and was having a hard time, out on the lawn, trying to imagine how this would go down. It was hard to believe he was here in the city at all. Though she could feel him. She could see through his eyes the streets he saw every day. She looked at her forearm as though it were his. That day the sun had been warm on her skin,

and the One would have felt this too. And tonight was so mild, though the One may be in bed fast asleep and not know this. Anna felt her resolve weaken. She had not heard from the One in a long time. How do you shadow someone who is himself a shadow? She walked away down the slope of hill that was like glass, ice.

Anna's little Italian coffee was cold and tasted like shit. Like they used the water straight from the stagnant canal. The One's building lay heavy, in a jagged reflection on the brown water. An ugly waterway, probably just opened again to drum up business. The typical row of cafe umbrellas had an apologetic air for its sudden appearance. Noise and trash were new around the banks that had been reinforced by cement. A modern European canal imitating its own old twisted waterways. Anna sleepily recalled hearing about streams that once wound across the Danish countryside, but were turned into straight rows so as not to interrupt the farmers' fields. Recently the kinks had been put back in—for tourist brochures and visitors who wanted authentic Scandinavian nature. It became a problem for the fishing industry. The fish, who had gotten used to the straightened vistas, became lazy and dawdled at the turns, getting trapped in little whirlpools. Anna pushed the little cup and saucer away, feeling drugged, and off-guard. Though she was following the One, she dreaded spotting him before he saw her. His face familiar, though not exactly life, no. Flat, and all princely business. No image in his eyes . . . *not* imagining her. "I am undoing myself," Anna thought. I'm about to do something inhuman—forgetting for a moment that she was more cold-blooded creature than human. She moved to leave the table. Before she'd left home, a wise friend concerned with her future had brought up the old saying: that you can't step into the same river twice.

At the Youth Hostel she was given a key with a big number one attached. It was quiet. The tourists hadn't come yet and apparently she was alone in a large white building full of plaster-white rooms. She turned a faucet; she found the splash of water still there, resting in the soap groove in the morning. She was the only thing moving here. Day into night. She wrapped a black scarf around her blonde hair and took a cab into town, getting out at a familiar square. It was the one she had imagined often, since leaving, as the setting for the romance stories she read: where characters re-unite in joyous tears by fountains. The square was empty of people. Like an Atget photograph. The scene of a crime with no trace. She must be doing something wrong; when you're doing something right there are always humans milling about. All the people she loved in her old life had left, had built their lives in newer cities. How does your past disappear from a place? Anna wondered. Where does memory go? Deep into the old buildings, into corners like fallen bits off city trees. Or does it blow off the stone like ash? Her time here had melted on the docks like sea foam. She knew this city like the back of her hand, all the narrow curving streets, dark doorways, short cuts and blind alleys. But it didn't remember her. The thing repeating inside her was not here. It was constrained in her chest like a stray and piercing note. . . . But she had come back to Europe for the One, whom she knew was the same. He would recognize her at once. She'd put her hand on his arm and make dinner party smiles, and no

Months go by . . .

Anna kept her mouth shut and her big sunglasses on. Back in her country, far from the coast, in the small desert town of her ancestors, in a bookstore, the book opened in her hands. It said:

And where love ends
Hate begins.

Oh great. Oh terrific. But then she remembered there was a man in Copenhagen, named Jacques Derrida, who said that reconciliation begins with a single word. She wiggled the root that used to be her tongue. It didn't have to be a brilliant word, only a small step, one that leads you from itself to the next. The words on the page looked more like two scratched lines that branched away from each other: like a smiling Matisse mouth, or a split tail of his dove or fish. She felt a pang of nostalgia; she had seen a real Matisse, once: the sketch of a woman, smiling with empty almond eyes and flying hair. In the flash of her light, while she was feeling her way down a hallway of the family she was sent to kill. Anna shook her head; actually, it was a rare print that had belonged to her mother. That her father had taken to his new house and family. Now it hung in the direct sunlight near the door and was beginning to fade.

Anna bought the book. Perhaps she had not been done in. Derrida had said that it was an old Christian tradition—wander long enough alone in the desert and the nomads are bound to find you and will be forced to take you in.

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Back in her own town Anna spent her days sitting at cafe tables, drinking little coffees, twisting apple stems—absentmindedly ripping them off when they reached the One's initials, sometimes ordering a piece of plain cooked fish. Half-heartedly she'd carve oblique messages onto it with the tip of her knife, read it three times, then glumly swallow it and wait for magic; she walked up and down the dusty avenue with an animal she had found tied to a bicycle stand, and buried her face in the fur by its neck—hoping it would lead her somewhere she was supposed to go.

Then one day his face appeared in the crowd. Click. The Drummer. She'd half-forgotten him. Amongst the bodies, people greeting on the street, the drummer bends down to small children and bags of hanging groceries. When he straightens up, his face rises like a bird taking off from water; an 'Ah' escapes from Anna. She wants to say 'Hi', but doesn't want to get caught again: love might escape through the smallest word, any sound . . . and become ordinary. She twines her legs together like a tail and taps her feet nervously. Desire hangs on her in ropes like long wet hair; where her tongue had been it is pulsing with pain; and she has no idea what her face . . . and now her eyebrows have turned to feathers.

Anna had, up until this moment, been sitting at the Cafe Roma on Vancouver's east side reading an upside-down newspaper when suddenly an old friend, codename: 'Little Robber Girl,' passed by. She laughed and said nobody reads a newspaper like that except spies and lovers. "Well how the hell are you supposed to read a newspaper?" Anna thought. But her friend was right. She was about as cool as a nonchalant whistle. She had no interest in what was happening in the world. In Romania, for example. She didn't even know where it was. She only ever noticed the fantastical things just around her, and the recesses of her own enigmatic, deadly self. It was Sunday. Another ordinary Sunday on Commercial Drive. But the street was an endless strip of lights, colourful costumes, fruits and vegetables to juggle or knock over at high speed. Upturned letters, and she thought she saw a man amble by with a donkey's head on. It was really the only street in the city, city of chance. The street where the drummer lived. "Go get him," hissed the Little Robber Girl, her teeth big and shining.

The drummer began to walk in slow motion with his groceries. Anna had to make a quick decision: she had just retired and wanted a normal life—talk to people more, assassinate them less. She was lousy at the spy-element of her job anyway: she couldn't make up riddles and had never been able to de-code a thing. She wanted to tell the drummer the whole story right then; but everyone knows that when the killer stops to confess his plan to the one he's about to kill, he's inevitably off-ed himself. She knew better than to be confessional. She knew that what worked for poets also worked for assassins: the good ones survive by 1) shutting up and staying behind the scenes, or 2) feigning their own death. All the same, she didn't know how much longer she could stand being incognito. Even James Bond couldn't resist a tuxedo or slick hair, not even in the jungle. Spies always look like spies, assassins like assassins, hanging around the park and casually talking into a paper bag, or their lapel; they can't help it. Even Georges Perec, Anna thought, who got away with writing a whole book without the letter e, couldn't avoid the obvious betrayal of his own name on the cover. Everyone, even the pros, eventually have to break for the open.

The drummer is getting close. Anna can't help noticing he's got long arms like the One. But they don't unfold and fold in the same slow gesture of sleep; they are quick; they bash out music. And he is walking along carrying 12 rolls of toilet paper, which is not at all dark & mysterious. But what real people buy . . . and she can see he is alive, he is coming alive. Ok, Anna rationalized, toilet paper does not transform things immediately, like a hot tear falling on a frozen heart, say, or a kiss after a hundred years of sleep and some bush-wacking through a hedge of thorns. In fact, she had spotted three other men in the crowd that morning alone with practical economy-sized packs: content, rather ordinary, probably web designers . . . Not like him, managing the awkward chore so beautifully, with trained precision, in a sharp black suit. Enough already. The drummer is not wearing a sharp black suit, Anna points out. He is not a gangster, or a vampire, or even a beast in prince's clothing. She will not float off into the mist or vanish in the crowd. She will figure out a way to approach him that does not involve lining him up in the crosshairs. Her head begins to hurt.

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No. It hadn't been Anna's mother who birthed the book. Her mother tried to bang out a happy life for them all. She built a beautiful house and put a garden wall around it. But as her father's fame grew the book crept in, lay with feigned innocence on the kitchen counter; a bookmark sticking out of it like a squashed tongue. Her mother couldn't keep them safe from it. Anna was raised on stories of killers, thieves and martyrs: a tell-tale heart, a snow queen, a little mermaid . . . and stories about her father. Nights, her mother fell into a trance and sang to her in a low voice about a little slave girl who slept in the forest after her father had lost his head in a mining accident; and about a queen who walked a bloody tower with her head tucked underneath her arm. Killed for sedition. For years Anna and her mother huddled before the narrow glow of the book that was filled with anxieties, deceits, grief and evil—while her father was out seeing the wide wide world. Then, one year, her mother drifted away to the back of the page, a rhyme in a green felt skirt, and was gone.

Still, even after this, for Anna everything was good. She was a little rainbow fish that flashed through her father's poems: a young girl who stood frozen and sleek with water, up to her knees in a lake or a swimming pool, the landscapes of his youth. Then, one day, Anna's mother died, her husband left her and flew back to Europe, and her father told her it made him feel crazy to talk and she would just have to do things on her own from now on. Anna sat down on a rock, tucked her tail underneath her, and opened the book. She saw the little girl there. Laughing and wet-haired she turned to Anna, smiled smugly, and disappeared.

Now Anna wandered morosely through various cities with 19th century books and her father's early poems in her rucksack, a silent killer. There was nothing else left to be. She knew that in reality every fairy-tale was a story of revenge. For years she had hunted for the One who had always just leapt over a wall, or escaped without remorse out to sea. Anna thought, each year, that she was getting closer. She had been trained to attack: when you find your mortal enemy, don't hesitate, close in quickly and write a poem: *Anna, never read my lines* was a line from one of her father's poems. It was one of an assassin's best tricks, like a snake wrapped up as a gift: & *when / I leave you I will leave you time*. The bite's swelling could be slow, but in the end it was lethal.

Click, Click. Love begins again, with a small sound insisting.

The Drummer, the Drummer. He had played with such talent at *The Starlite* that evening, long ago. Anna felt her heart would burst with song. A question from the book runs through her head, *how can we explain the similarity between a man's hand and a bird's or bat's wings except by evolution?* She imagines a little house in the night. The people outside on the street would see her in the little yellow square of light, bent over the desk, writing down words to the music. Anna tells herself to stay focused; he is almost upon her now. She can feel her legs gaining strength. This job will be quick and clean—she brings her hand down to her boot—and then she'll get out for good.

He has just spotted her. He shifts in expectation of the stranger coming towards him. Is it a stranger? He's confused, perhaps he knows her. She is moving swiftly, without hesitation, growing bigger. Her face comes into extreme close up. He sees the girl's enlarged pores, the lines by her mouth, and green eyes looking at him, wild just under the surface of the page. He hears a muffled 'THE END.' There's just enough time for him to wonder where the little silver fish went, before a flash of light on a blade, and a deafening noise—like a piece of paper the size of the sky being ripped wide open.