

*The Sinners*



*These fits of jealousy, which of late had been more and more frequent with her, horrified him, and however much he tried to disguise the fact, made him feel cold to her, although he knew the cause of her jealousy was her love for him.*

– Lav Nikolaevich Tolstoy

*If you had better sense, you'd have learned by now that nothing thrives as well as wickedness.*

– Kathleen Winsor

The forest stretches endlessly. Thick branches with leaves the colour of fire. Stillness. Eerie quietness. Especially after the noise of the railway station and rumbling of the train that hit me.

Yes, it ran over me. I frantically look down my body. My deep violet dress with velvet dark blue ribbons isn't torn, it is not even wrinkled. My hands are clean, without a bruise or scratch. I raise my hands to my head. Even my hat is intact.

I really don't understand what is happening. Suddenly, I hear the pounding of hooves. They are nearing quickly. A trail meanders between trees with orange and golden leaves and there I make out movement, faster and clearer as the clatter becomes louder. Fear, curiosity and relief are battling inside of me. I don't know where I am, how I found myself here or where the trail leads, but confusion and ignorance can sometimes be better than unwanted company. But I have no choice except to wait and hope that the newcomer will somehow help me instead of worsening this strange condition.

The movement turns into an outline and then I clearly see a man riding his team. Beautiful black horses, bigger than I've ever seen. Their manes, black like a crow, are gleaming with sweat under the sunlight that is penetrating through the thick foliage. Their mouths are foaming and fire is flashing from their eyes. I have never seen finer horses, but there is something ominous about them. Just like with the young man riding them. Tall, sunkissed. Long, straight, pitch black hair is floating behind him, playful black eyes like deep tunnels that hide something unknown and frightening, high sculpted cheekbones, a straight nose, full lips, strong chin, pearly teeth. The personification of youth, strength and carelessness, but also unfathomable, threatening and soothing at the same time. He is oddly dressed: wide olive pants with lots of pockets, and instead of a shirt, a cotton garment hugs his chest. His muscles are tensing while he pulls the reins.

He easily stops the horses and jumps down in front of me.

“Dear Anna Karenina, welcome to my humble abode.”

How does this stranger know my name? “I don't know who you are and it is not proper to address me by my name.”

The young man laughs. “Ah, the newly dead! You are indescribably boring with those formalities. Your body isn't even cold in your grave, yet your biggest concern is proper address. Everything must be proper, right?”

I cannot speak. I cannot move. I cannot breathe. What is this man talking about? Whose cold body? If I was dead, I wouldn't be standing here, stunned and frightened.

But I was run over by a train. I remember the loud clatter of wheels, the piercing whistle, the growing shadow over me while resolution and remorse were battling in me, the wracking pain ... I remember all that. But if I was a run over by a train, I couldn't be standing in the woods and talking with rowdy strangers. Everything must be a dream. Soon I will wake from this nightmare.

It seems like the young man senses what I am thinking about because something vaguely reminiscent of compassion passes over his face.

“You must think you're dreaming. Don't worry. All newcomers feel like that in the beginning.”

“This *is* a dream.”

“My dear, this isn't a dream. The sooner you accept that, the better. I guess,” he replies and bursts out laughing again.

“Young man, can you please explain what is happening? Where are we? You see, if this isn't a dream, I don't understand how I found myself here ... And as you know my name, maybe you know something else. I mean ...” My voice betrays me.

“Poor Anna! You really don't understand. I'll try to explain. You have found yourself in a place where, among many others, all those who take their own lives out of selfishness and wickedness find themselves.”

“But I wouldn't be here talking to you if I took my own life.”

“For God's sake, woman, are you so stupid or are you just refusing to understand? And where would you be if you hadn't killed yourself? On fluffy little clouds while plump rosy little boys fly around, playing the harp?”

The knowledge is so terrible that it makes me stagger. No, this is not possible. I don't deserve this. I know that, according to rules, I deserve exactly this, but rules vary depending on the circumstances, do they not? My reasons were valid, I could no longer stand the

suffering, I had to end that torment or I would have lost my mind. For God's sake, I endured so much pain and now this befalls me? No, I really don't deserve it. I do not accept such a fate.

“Life is a gift that is not to be rejected, Anna. Every deed has consequences. You're not unreasonable so you must be aware of that.”

But it is impossible that I am in hell. This must be a dream, although it is getting harder to believe in that.

“Are you sure this isn't some kind of joke? Or a mistake?”

“It certainly isn't a joke. And in a perfect organization, such as life after death, there are no errors. A single mistake hasn't happened since the creation of the world.”

“Let's assume that this is true. And now what? Will I stay in this forest?”

“There is no need for a lady from high society, who doesn't know even how to dress by herself, to spend eternity in the woods. I came to take you to the castle. Come on, jump in.”

I eye him suspiciously. I have no desire to be on the team with him, but he could have hurt me here if he wanted to. How can the castle be worse than this forest? Something tells me it could be much worse, but that's certainly an unreasonable apprehension.

“I just ... I mean, I didn't picture hell like this. If this is really hell?”

“Everybody has different ideas about hell, but most of them have nothing to do with reality. What have you imagined? A great stinking fire? Sinners roasted on a spit as oxen? That is very naive.”

I wince because of the word ‘sinners.’ “I guess so. Does this mean that you ... Who are you really?”

“I prefer the name Son of Dawn,” he replies with a cheeky wink. “But I have many names and, whether I like it or not, I have to answer to them all.”

The realization finally sinks in. I feel tears rolling down my cheeks. Since I have no choice, I take his hand and climb beside him, sniffing quietly.

As soon as he settles next to me, the horses start racing down the narrow path. I scream and grab his arm.

“Anna, relax. What are you afraid of? You can't get killed because you are already dead,” he says and roars with laughter.

He's right, but I don't find it funny. “But I can break an arm or leg if I fall.”

“You can't. And you won't mar that beautiful face even if you fall upside-down on a stump or rock. That probably concerns you most. Relax for once in your life ... I'm sorry, it wasn't supposed to sound like a cheap joke.”

Surprisingly, his words calm me. If I cannot get killed, hurt or mar my beauty, I should relax and enjoy the ride, the wind in my face, the green blurs with fiery peaks rushing beside us. But I can't. I am afraid.

“And what will happen to me when we get to the castle?”

“How should I know that?”

“Sorry? Don't you know everything that goes on here?”

“Of course I know what's happening. But I can't know what will happen. People wanted free will and they got it. True, they often don't know what to do with it while they are alive and even less after life, but that doesn't mean that I can predict how they will use it.”

“But what is expected of me?”

“Nothing. You can do whatever you want.”

“I can do whatever I want? That must be a joke. What is the point of hell if there is no torture and I have unlimited discretion?”

“Torture comes in many forms. And the subtlest can be the worst. You will see for yourself in good time.”

That ominous statement silences me. Anxiety overwhelms me even though the environment is peaceful and my companion is smiling and carefree. Well, I certainly never imagined that the devil could be so attractive, although rude.

The trees are less dense now and we encounter other people. Other sinners, I suspect. They have spread out brightly coloured blankets on sunny clearings. Some are lying down and shielding their eyes from the sun, others are chatting or helping themselves to drinks and food from large baskets. Everybody looks cheerful. They certainly don't look as if something is bothering them.

“Are they sinners?”

“Of course. I'm the only one here who isn't a sinner.”

“But they seem to be having a good time ...”

“Why shouldn't they entertain themselves? It's a beautiful day for a picnic.”

I don't understand anything, but I will surely make some sense of it once I spend more time here and meet the others. Maybe I will make some friends. The atmosphere among the picnickers seems companionable. Most sinners are young, although it seems that there are more women than men. Some of them are shamefully dressed, although half-dressed is a

more appropriate word. But maybe the criteria are different in hell. Even though I still cannot accept that this place is really hell.

We pass by a river. Several men have thrown hooks and are patiently waiting for the fish to bite. Further down the river, people are happily paddling through the water, jumping from stacked stones, swimming or just basking in the shallows.

“I don't understand why all of them seem so happy, like they are on a holiday instead of being condemned to hell.”

“Desperation loses its allure after a while. Such is human nature. People always try to find entertainment as soon as the tears dry up.”

“I would not say that despair is alluring.”

“You're the last person from whom I expected such a statement.”

It seems to me that his words are always permeated with a subtle, hidden meaning. But I cannot solve his puzzles now. Everything is too new. And disturbing. First of all, I have to accept the fact that I am dead and that I am in hell. If I ever manage to accept something like that. But all the people we encountered looked merry; certainly, I will also adjust with time.

I can already make out the castle built of white stone with many peaked towers, double Gothic windows and a myriad of balconies. It is surrounded by lush gardens swarming with people. Some are lying on the grass and reading, others have set up easels to paint, several groups are chatting or ball-playing. It looks very idyllic.

“Are all inhabitants of hell located in this castle?”

“Of course not. I have innumerable inhabitants and don't even know the number of such castles anymore. If hell wasn't endless, we would have run out of space a long time ago.”

A girl runs past us. She is oddly dressed in something that resembles a two-piece made of tights. Her shoes are equally strange. Her long black hair is tied at the top of her head.

“Hey, Devil!” she greets him cheerfully in passing.

“Olga, how many kilometres today?”

“Twenty-five,” the girl replies breathlessly and hurries away.

“Olga is a girl who has amazed me for two centuries,” the devil explains.

“Two centuries?” I stammer. “That girl is two centuries old?”

“Yes. Ah, her youthful appearance surely confused you. The aging process stops at the moment of death. The famous old dream – eternal youth.”

“Too bad that someone has to die to fulfil their dream,” I reply thoughtfully. “And why is this Olga so amazing?”

“Because of the way she fights despair. You see, she was poor a serf girl whose owner got her pregnant. She drowned the baby in a nearby creek and then, broken by guilty conscience, hanged herself. When she came here, she was already half mad with grief. But as soon as she realized that her baby is in paradise, Olga turned into a different person. Suddenly she lived in a beautiful castle instead of a stinking hovel, wore silks and satins instead of rags, ate delicious meals ...”

“Sorry to interrupt, but all this seems idyllic. We get eternal youth, live in a beautiful castle and are provided with comfort. I don't understand what kind of punishment that is.”

“You will understand, don't worry. Although I am surprised that the concept of eternity doesn't scare you. Who knows, maybe you are like Olga.”

“Why is she so special?”

“Because she has successfully resisted despair for two centuries. In spite of being uneducated, or perhaps because of it, she immediately realized just how terrifying eternity is. Especially eternity without obligations. Human beings are constantly complaining about commitments, not realizing that they would lose their minds without them. So, she promptly set herself a goal: education. And over the years Olga became the most educated resident of hell. Having fulfilled this goal, she immediately set a new one: to become a virtuoso pianist. Then she mastered the violin, harp, even drums. After music, she turned to drawing and painting. Then she became an excellent cook, she is unparalleled in embroidery, no one can beat her in chess. I can't even remember everything she did. Her current goal is to set a marathon record and I have no doubt that she will succeed. Nor that she will find a new passion after that.”

Involuntarily, jealousy creeps in. I don't know why I want the devil to like me, but this desire becomes stronger as I realize that I can't measure up to this Olga, a low-born girl. I didn't excel in anything. Although educated, fluent in French, a good dancer, skilled for embroidering and playing the piano, I was mediocre at everything. The only passion I ever had was Vronsky. Does this mean that my life has passed in vain? Was all the fervour that I could have dedicated to excelling in something wasted on a man? I never really felt the need to stand out in anything.

“So, the key for enduring eternity is setting new challenges?” I ask while he leads me to the magnificent entrance. I pause to accept his hand on the stairs, but he doesn't offer it.

“Of course. Just like in life. But Olga is the only one to succeed. For now. Most give in to despair or become numb from the favourite pastime in hell.”

“And what is that?”

“I’ll show you,” he responds and leads me down a wide hallway with numerous doors spaced at regular intervals. “I don’t like to violate people’s privacy, but I do it when taking naive newcomers like you on a tour.”

He touches a door and it becomes translucent. I squeal at the sight inside. Two girls, a redhead and a brunette, are lying on the huge bed. Naked. They are caressing each other, their legs intertwined. The girls are kissing passionately and I hear their silent dovelike moans of pleasure. They are moving faster now, more frantic, and their sighs are getting louder. The redhead tips the brunette on her back and leans over her. She squeezes her nipple with her thumb and index finger and the girl inadvertently lifts her pelvis. The redhead mischievously flicks her pink tongue, bows her head and licks a circle around the other nipple, which hardens invitingly. The brunette sighs with pleasure and closes her eyes, surrendering completely. Her friend circles around the nipple a few more times and then sucks. The brunette’s head falls on the pillow and her fingers twitch.

I cannot tell which one is enjoying more. Both are beautiful, with delicate features, high cheekbones and full lips. The redhead has big green eyes and charming freckles on her nose. The brunette has warm dark eyes and very red lips. Their bodies are strong and healthy, full breasts, rounded bellies and hips, long powerful legs.

The brunette is getting fidgety as her friend relentlessly sucks one nipple and stubbornly pinches the other. It seems that the pleasure is too strong because she puts one hand between her legs and rubs her brown bush, squeezing her legs.

The redhead lifts her head and removes the girl’s hand. “Let me,” she says reproachfully and lowers her hand between the brunette’s legs. She finds the pink hole and slowly pushes a finger inside. The brunette quickly shoots her hips up, trying to impale herself on the finger.

“Easy, dove. Always in such a hurry,” the redhead warns the girl and pulls her finger out. Her girlfriend lets out a dissatisfied sound, something between a sigh and a groan.

The redhead quickly kisses the girl’s lips and then pushes her wet finger in the brunette’s mouth. I am shocked, but I cannot look away. I have never seen anything like this, I haven’t even heard of such things among women. It seems unnatural, but the scene is attracting me.

The redhead returns her finger to the brunette's hole and easily glides it inside. She is pushing it in and out slowly, spinning in circles, quickening. In the next instant, she adds another one. The brunette is squirming, raising her pelvis to meet the fingers, groaning, shrieking. Meowing. The redhead moves and lowers her head to her girlfriend's crotch. Her tongue presses the pink button. The brunette cries out in rapture, grabs her head with both hands and pulls it closer, as if to suffocate the girl on her crotch.

Heat courses through me and I turn my head. I steal a glance at the devil. He chuckles wryly.

“Giving up when excitement is at its highest?”

“I don't find that exciting. And that is hellish pleasure? Not surprising,” I blurt.

“Just don't pretend to be righteous. Nobody here will fall for it,” he replies impatiently.

“But it's ... it's obscene!”

“Come on, why is it shameless? Well, if a woman's love isn't your cup of tea, maybe this kind of pastime is more to your liking,” the devil says and takes me to another door.

It too becomes transparent under his touch. We are greeted by a sight that I couldn't possibly imagine. There is a big crowd in the room. I don't know how many people are there, but surely more than ten. All are naked or at least half-naked. The scene reminds me of an image of sin dreamt a long time ago: naked bodies are writhing with sweet torment. But separated couples look like they are free from sin. A blonde, burly, bearded man folds a fragile brunette over a chair and is powerfully taking her from behind. The girl is propelling her pink arse to meet his violent assaults. He occasionally grabs her hair and pulls it aside to shower her neck with fiery kisses. Then he takes hold of her waist and pulls her onto himself. From time to time, he raises his hand and smacks her buttocks strongly. The girl's screams become even louder, strangled. But she isn't attempting to break free. It seems that those blows bring her immense pleasure, as much as the man's rough thrusts.

There is a throng on the bed. A curvy blonde is sprawled on her back, her legs draped over the shoulders of a big guy who is taking her so violently that her white breasts with unusually dark nipples are bouncing. So ruthlessly that I hear the knocking of their wet bodies along with mixed groans, sighs, and occasional screams. I believe that the girl is enjoying since she shows no desire to resist, but I cannot see her face to confirm that because another man is kneeling beside her head and she is swallowing his swollen manhood like a delicious treat. It looks alarmingly thick, but the girl wolfs it easily.

Another couple is on the bottom of the bed. Both are dark and slender. They are making love slowly, oblivious to the others in the room. The girl has wrapped her long legs around his waist. He is resting his weight on his elbows while slowly entering her. They are looking at each other ceaselessly like they are talking with their eyes. I look at them for a long time. Although not pretty like the others, their lovemaking has a dreamlike quality, something that stands out from the animal frenzy surrounding them. They look like they are indescribably in love and it seems that their bodies are performing some kind of romantic dance. Their bodies still resemble bodies instead of flesh – like the others.

I wonder how I would look to prying eyes. Did Vronsky and I look like two lustful animals like the couple beside the armchair who, although reduced to flesh, still emanate something attractive that forces me to give them one more look? Or like the quiet couple at the foot of the bed who perform a ballet whose title must contain the word ‘love’? Or is it just my imagination? As much as I thought that my love story was unique and unrepeatable, someone else would have surely found it quite ordinary, even boring. Maybe everyone experiences their own love as unique and someone else's as plain, thus an onlooker would have seen us as a bunch of meat while we were making love. Why am I even thinking about it in this place?

My gaze doesn't stop on the others who are copulating in threesomes or even foursomes. It's hard to figure out who is doing what to whom in the tangle of arms, legs, buttocks, breasts, and hair. They are writhing like insects with numerous legs and I don't care what they are doing. However, my eyes lock on one group. A woman is standing with her legs pressed together, doubled over, with her hands on the thighs of the man in front of her. His manhood is in her mouth. A dark giant is taking her from behind, viciously squeezing her buttocks. I can clearly see marks from his strong fingers. Her arse will surely be dark blue. The man isn't moving, just firmly pulling her on his long shaft and then pushing her away. The other guy's manhood enters and exits her mouth in the same rhythm.

I really don't know why, but suddenly I want to be in her shoes. At that moment my breath catches and I feel a spasm deep in my stomach. A slight pulsing starts between my legs and my nipples become stiff. The feeling is so strong that it makes me stagger toward the transparent door. I snap out of it, ashamed, and turn my back to the scene.

“You are blushing!” The devil laughs. “And that blush isn't caused by shame. Something in that room appealed to you very much.”

“No,” I stutter. “It's just... it's hot and I ... I mean, I ... everything is very strange and unexpected.”

“All right, all right. Don't bother to come up with a lie. You shouldn't be ashamed because something in there is to your taste.”

“Nothing in there is to my liking. I don't want to see what is behind the other doors. I just arrived, for God's sake. I have not yet accepted the fact that I am dead and you expect me to look at such things.”

“I don't expect anything. You asked me what is the favourite pastime in hell and I showed you, the same as on earth.”

“Are you saying that copulation is the favourite pastime during life?”

“Isn't it?”

“Of course not. You cannot put that in front of love, honour ...”

“Anna,” he stops me. “You're talking about serious things. I am talking about the favourite pastime for adults. It's stupid to mix such matters.”

I have never thought sex was a pastime. In marriage, I considered it a duty, not a gruesome one but still a duty, and with Vronsky ... with him it seemed like a compelling need. Who knows, maybe the devil is right.

In silence, we continue down the long white corridor and then climb a white staircase to the second floor.

“These are your quarters,” he says and opens a door. Inside, everything is white: the walls, thick carpet, comfortable chair and a round table in front of the fireplace, dressing table and armchair, wardrobe, bed. Another door leads to the bathroom, also in white.

“Why is everything white? There should be at least a drop of colour.”

“Colours are for life. And there is no life in this castle.”

Of course. But it's hard for me to accept it. I am talking, I am thinking, I am surprised, I am moving, I was even aroused a few moments ago – aren't they indicators of life?

“You will find everything you need in the closet and drawers. I assumed you wanted clothes and other ladies' complex accessories from your time. If you need anything else, just ask someone where the shop is.”

“There are shops here?”

“Of course, what kind of town would this be without a store? It has everything.”

“But I don't have any money.”

“There is no money in hell. Feel free to take whatever you need. The only rule here is to do some work three times a month, as a lady's maid, a waitress and as a servant.”

“To work? But I never did any work, I cannot. I don't even know how to do that.”

“You will learn. It really isn't difficult. Nor is working three days a month a big price if you can do whatever you wish the rest of the time.”

“But I am not a lady's maid, or a servant, let alone a waitress.”

“You will be all that once a month. Incredible, I haven't yet met a noblewoman who didn't react like that. Look at you! Dead, but on the verge of tears because you will have to roll up your sleeves sometimes. You find that the worst of all. I can't say that I'm sorry. I had to organize this place somehow and I did it to my discretion. I will leave you now. Pull the bell beside the fireplace if you want today's servant to bring you tea or hot chocolate.”

“But what shall I do now?”

“Do whatever you want. Take a walk, meet the others, fuck someone, swim, go to the library. You surely don't expect me to tell everyone how to spend their time? In the evening you can go to dinner or the ball. Sometimes people organize performances and concerts, but I don't know when. But there is a ball and dinner every evening. And you can always find people that are in the mood for sex.”

The devil leaves me in the stark white room. I feel imprisoned. Not knowing what to do, I open the closet. One half is filled with dresses, lingerie and nightgowns. Shoes, handbags and hats are stored in the second wing. The dressing table drawers contain all the accessories necessary for feminine beauty.

I peek into the bathroom. The white shelf is stacked with soft fluffy towels and a few bathrobes – everything is white, of course. The long shelf above the tub is loaded with various bottles and, surprise, even their contents are white. The mirror above the sink sits in a white frame.

I return to my room, sit in the armchair and stare at the fireplace. It's comfortable here. I will read and embroider in front of a merry fire. I get up and lie down on the bed. Neither too soft nor too hard. The bed linen smells fresh.

I get up to stand by the window. Maybe I should take a walk and meet some people. But I don't feel like it. Once again, I end up in the armchair. Perhaps I could find the library and choose a book that will keep me occupied. However, the idea of leaving my room fills me with apprehension. But I cannot just sit here forever and stare at the fire. I don't want to think about what has happened to me yet, I just cannot.

Not knowing what else to do, I pull the white ribbon adorned with tassels attached to the bell. Perhaps a cup of hot tea will do me good. Or just the company of someone who shares my fate.

A few minutes later, someone knocks and a young woman enters. She is tall and powerfully built, with unruly black curls and big dark eyes. Her scarlet lips are too plump beneath upper-lip hair that diminishes her wild beauty. She wears a simple green dress, which emphasizes her curves.

“Hello, I am Annette,” she says in French, which is apparently her native language. “You just got here, right?”

“Yes. I am Anna,” I don't say my patronymic since such is the fashion here. “From Russia,” I add, although I don't know why.

“Why are you here?”

“I killed myself,” I answer hesitantly.

“Very stupid move. I tried to kill my husband because I wanted to enjoy being a rich widow with my lover. But he saw when I poured poison into his wine and strangled me with his bare hands. It was horrible,” she minces irritably. “However, it isn't so difficult to talk about it anymore. It happened more than two hundred years ago.”

“Can you tell me more about this place? Everything is very strange.”

“I will gladly tell you everything you want to know tomorrow. Today I am doing my duty as a servant and I can't dawdle any longer. Did you want something?”

“I would like some tea ... no, I would prefer hot chocolate.”

“I will fetch it immediately,” she replies and leaves.

The door closes behind her and suddenly I become aware that we talked like we've known each other for a long time. Just like the devil, that woman has a tendency to become intimate too fast. I cannot say I like it. I really hope that is not usual behaviour here.

Annette returns quickly. She sets down a white tray with a white porcelain cup and a white plate full of cookies with cinnamon and raisins. Of course, the napkins are white. Ghostly refreshment.

“Tell me something,” I say, although her hand is already on the doorknob. “Have you been a servant before, you know, while you were alive?”

“Absolutely not! I am a marquis, for heaven's sake. I loved to punish maids for the smallest mistake by savagely twisting their nipples and hitting their fig with a hairbrush. Some really enjoyed it, even more than me,” she adds. “They intentionally dropped bottles or pulled my hair while brushing me. Those were the days.”

“But didn't you say you had a lover?” I am truly shocked.

“Of course I always had a lover. What does that have to do with anything? Say, you are a juicy morsel. You would be delicious, soaked after smacking with a brush. I would like

to hear you moaning while my tongue and fingers drive you mad, to see you squirming while I hit you. We could do it tomorrow?," she asks hopefully.

"No! Of course not. For God's sake, you cannot talk to me like that." I am flushed with anger. "Stay away from me."

"Don't be so lofty. You will change my mind, eternity is long," she replies and winks. "Pity that I won't be the first to enjoy you. Looks like you will make some man happy," she concludes glumly and finally leaves.

I am petrified. How does this hussy dare suggest something like that? Even if I was willing, how could she ask something like that just seconds after we met? But maybe that should be expected at a place like this.

I raise my cup and inhale the intoxicating aroma of chocolate. Apparently prepared by an excellent cook, the drink is perfectly creamy and its smell is a treat for the senses. Already calmer, I take a sip, but the feast for the palate is missing. The taste is very strange, I recognize chocolate but something important is missing – so much so that this lack becomes the prevailing taste. Disappointed, I set the cup down and nibble a cake. The same story – something is missing and I cannot enjoy the taste. I give up.

And now what? I still don't feel like venturing out to meet some people; maybe many of them are like the Frenchwoman. But I cannot hide in this room forever. My eyes are beginning to hurt from so much whiteness. Perhaps others spend time outside to escape from it.

I decide to take a bath before leaving the room. Since I don't want to see that harlot again, I prepare my bath for the very first time in my life. For someone who is used to sinking into a tub already full of warm scented water, I find it a nuisance to repeatedly check the temperature, to sniff rows of bottles until I find a scent to my taste and wait for the tub to fill. But at least I feel like I am doing something while waiting; I have a goal no matter how insignificant it is. I could get used to doing this every day if the other servants are like Annette.

Undressing is an equal hassle without the help of a lady's maid. Relief washes over me when I finally find myself stark naked. I sink into the warm water and sigh contentedly. A warm scented bath is the best short-term solution for every trouble on earth. It would be even better if I were sipping strong black tea, but I don't want to ring Annette. My hands run over my body, which is finally relaxed. This is the first pleasant thing since I came here, and I don't want to think about what will happen next, what awaits me when I get out of the tub. I will stay here until the water cools completely.

My gaze stops on the brush. I just cannot comprehend that it occurred to someone to hit a girl's delicate flower with a brush, much less that a girl could actually enjoy it. But forgotten memories of conversations between two older cousins are slowly creeping into my mind. I was five or six years old when my mother and I visited relatives in another gubernia. They put me in a room next to two sisters who were old enough for marriage. I remember their nocturnal chats, giggles, sighs, and cries muffled with a pillow. Now I clearly remember their words that taps with a brush cause blissful pleasure. I was a child who didn't understand anything, and they irritated me since I could not sleep because of them. At the time, I just thought they were strange. But now I understand what caused those sighs and cries.

Damned curiosity. Almost unconsciously, I reach for the brush as if my hand has its own volition, totally independent of mine. It is unconceivable to hit myself with a brush, particularly to hit my rose. But curiously, my hand that suddenly has his own will or something else overpowers repulsion. I part my legs wider and lightly hit my flower with the brush. Surprisingly, a delicious shiver runs through my body. I like it. I loathe what I am doing, but at the same time enjoy it very much. I hit myself again. And once again. Strokes follow one after the other. My breathing becomes rapid. I am squeezing my thighs tightly and rubbing myself with the brush. Unbearable dizziness overwhelms me.

I position myself on all fours to lift my flower above the water. Leaning on my knees and one arm, I hit myself with the brush. At first lightly since I am afraid of pain. But mild pain excites me even more, making me put more strength in the strokes. I alternate blows with frantic rubbing. My breathing is broken, my head is spinning, I hear roaring in my ears and feel strong spasms in my stomach, but release doesn't come. Oh, how I wish to be in that room and a man, any man, to be behind me. Fair or black, slim or plump, I don't care who he is or what he looks like. The only thing that is important is his manhood, which I desperately want to feel inside me.

Out of my mind, I push the brush handle into me. It glides easily to the end but doesn't bring relief. It only frustrates me even more. It's too small, too thin. Pulling out the brush, I stick a finger inside. It isn't enough. I add a second finger and one more. I quickly move them in and out, occasionally hitting my swollen button with the brush. My head is spinning like I am going to faint, but relief evades me. It is hovering just a step out of my reach. No matter how much I hit myself and work my fingers – it is useless.

I finally give up, exhausted. On the verge of frustrated tears, I just lie in the tub, clenching my thighs in a futile attempt to ease the relentless pulsating between them.

At last, cold water helps me to come to my senses. I stand up to dry myself, but the towel rubbing my sensitive body immediately awakens the excitement. Angrily, I toss the towel. I am tempted to ring Annette. I would like to beat her up with a brush or my bare hands, to pull her hair, slap her face. She is to blame for this suffering I am enduring. I would bring her pain and then force her to give me relief – with her tongue, her fingers, whatever does the trick.

No. I cannot have such thoughts. I am not here even a day and I'm already thinking about beating a woman and fornicating with her. I cannot let myself behave like that. I must not succumb to temptation regardless of how desperate I feel.

But why? Why should I resist temptation when I am already in hell and won't be leaving? Why is it important to stick to my principles? Are they even my own ethics or were they imposed and instilled in me with the wet nurse's milk? I feel immensely aroused whenever I think of something that I would never do, something I should detest. Maybe I am a harlot by nature. Maybe I never loved Vronsky but just the fact that I was doing something forbidden.

No, that is not true. I loved him with all my heart, from the depths of my soul. I loved him more than myself, more than my children. All these doubts and questions are haunting me because I am confused. Something incomprehensible befell me, and my thoughts and feelings are muddled. Hence the whirlwind in my body – it is only the aftermath of shock.

I feel relieved because of that reasonable explanation and decide to get out of the white room that pressures me. It is evening already. I will dress up and go among people, meet others and chat, listen to their experiences, learn something from them.

I apply make-up to my eyes and lips with great care. Why is it important to look my best? Maybe to have a goal again, no matter how pitiful it is? I tie my hair in a loose bun and let several thick strands frame my face. Then I choose a bright red dress to offset the pervasive whiteness and walk out of the room boldly.

I wander the white hallways, searching for the staircase. On the ground floor, I continue to wander until a murmur behind large double doors makes me stop. I hesitantly open them and find myself in the right place.

The spacious room is full of people. Long tables covered with starched white tablecloths stand along the white walls. White, unusually shaped vases are full of beautiful white rose buds. White trays are heaped with delicious delicacies. White plates and white embroidered napkins. But people liven up the bleak whiteness. All women are dressed in

pastel colours, while men wear black trousers and casual vividly coloured shirts. They are mostly chatting and drinking while a few couples are waltzing.

Suddenly I realize they are all strangers, and hesitation prevents me from entering. But I will never meet anyone if I hide in my room forever.

I throw back my shoulders, stick out my chest, raise my head and boldly approach a table. A small group has gathered there, but they are too immersed in their lively conversation to notice me.

Discouraged, I take a glass of red wine. I prefer white, but everything that has anything to do with that colour currently repels me. I take a sip and frown with surprise. It doesn't really taste bad, but it certainly doesn't taste like the wine that I am used to. Something is missing. Maybe something happened to my sense of taste when I died? But that seems unlikely given that my other senses are perfectly fine.

“Anna, red suits you well,” I hear a familiar voice behind me and turn toward the devil. He looks very nice in a lilac shirt and trousers the colour of coffee with a few drops of milk. I am relieved to see him. At that moment it dawns on me that I was hoping to find him here. Probably because I don't know anybody else here, except Annette.

“Thank you,” I reply somewhat shyly.

“And how was your first day?”

“Well ... I haven't done anything. I was in my room the whole time, just thinking.”

“If you were thinking, then you can't say that you weren't doing anything. And have you come up with some plans or conclusions?”

“I cannot say I have.” I laugh, although I'm painfully aware that nothing is funny.

“Don't worry. Tomorrow is a new day, and you will have plenty of time to think,” he assures me.

“I wish you would stop reminding me that I have enough time,” I snap.

The devil looks at me thoughtfully. I feel uncomfortable under his penetrating gaze. As if reading something on my face, he shakes his head.

“You are right. It's not nice to point that out. But you can't expect me to care for the feelings of all local residents.”

“I think that nobody likes to be reminded that they ended up in hell.”

“It seems that the others aren't as sensitive as you. Maybe it's because you just got here. And, have you met anyone?”

“I have not. But I was hoping to make some acquaintances here.”

“I could introduce you to some people. I think I saw a few who could be to your liking on the dance floor. Or we might go to my quarters, have a glass of wine and talk ... if you have questions about hell.”

I hesitate. I would prefer to sit with him in a quiet room and find out more about this place than to stay in this noisy hall full of happy people. How can they be so cheerful? But I am uncertain. It isn't appropriate to go into a private room with an unknown man. On the other hand, given where I am, does it really matter what is decent? Nonetheless, it seems that I should stick to my principles, no matter how absurd that may be.

The devil looks at me mockingly as if he knows what I am pondering. “Anna, Anna! Just relax! Come on.” He takes my hand and leads me to the door. Immense relief floods me because his decisive gesture saved me from having to decide by myself. It is best to comply, as a child whose parents decide for them.

His quarters are on the ground floor, close to the hall. I exclaim when he opens the door and stands aside to let me pass. The walls are bright yellow and decorated with vividly coloured paintings. Low red sofas are covered with plump green and orange cushions, and numerous larger cushions are scattered on the floor. The tables are made of dark rosewood. Exotic flowers I have never seen before are arranged in unusual colourful vases. The air is heavy with their fragrance.

Two large exotic parrots are sleeping in a huge bamboo cage in one corner. The opposite corner is dominated by a giant aquarium full of various fish.

Stunned, I turn to him. “Such colours, such gaiety! Completely different from everything else in this castle. I really didn't expect it.”

“Why didn't you? I'm not a sinner and there is no reason for me to be deprived of the abundance of colours and scents,” he replies and throws himself on a pile of pillows on the floor. The devil reaches for the bottle and two glasses that are already standing on the small table. “Sit down,” he says, pouring red wine.

Perplexed, I sit down on the sofa across from him. Having found myself in this strange room alone with him, I suddenly don't know what to say. Flustered, I twist a strand of hair around my finger.

“Why are you so spiritless all of a sudden?” he asks while approaching me on his knees to pass me the glass. Then he rests his head on the sofa, stretches his legs in front of him, takes a sip and sighs contentedly.

“I don't know. I had hundreds of questions and now it seems like all of them just vanished from my mind.”

“Hmmm.”

I don't know what to say and take a sip of wine to cover the silence. That vague taste fills my mouth again.

“I noticed that food and drinks taste different here. I don't know if something is wrong with my taste buds or is it usual here?”

“The explanation is simple. You don't need food and drinks because you are dead. People eat and drink here only to enjoy the taste or to occupy themselves with something. But they can't enjoy since they are sinners. Those delicious, creamy chocolate cakes are flavourless for everyone except me. It is the same with all delicacies in hell.”

“That isn't fair!” I blurt childishly.

“No? What kind of hell would this be if you all came here to have the time of your lives?”

“I don't know. Isn't it bad enough that we are in hell and will stay here forever?”

“I personally think that's more than enough, but a few small additional punishments don't hurt.”

“That is why everything is white, colourless?”

“That's right. But you are not deprived of enjoying nature with all its colours, scents, and wonders, which is really a big concession. But people who value that are truly rare. The human mind, unfortunately, tires quickly of everything simple like nature.”

Suddenly I feel very uncomfortable. I don't know what to talk about with him. I feel ignorant beside the devil. But I really want him to like me, even though I don't know why. I am aware that we are alone in his chambers. I suddenly understand the phrase ‘handsome devil’.

I shake my head to clear it. I must not think like that.

“Anna, are you all right?” he asks gently.

I nod unconvincingly. “I should go,” I say tentatively.

“But you just got here,” he replies and cups my face. “I know you want to stay.”

“But ...” I trail off because that is true. I do want to stay.

“Relax. Just close your eyes.”

“Close my eyes? But why?” That idea disturbs me.

“Trust me.”

I look him in the eye and the desire to trust him overwhelms me. I wish he would hug me and convince me that everything will be all right. The devil exudes great authority and immense power. Surely nothing bad can happen to me when he is by my side.

I smile shyly and close my eyes. In the next moment, I feel his lips on mine. I am not surprised, not really. I realize that I was actually longing for that, although I didn't admit it to myself. I return his kiss with a content sigh.

His lips are soft, intoxicating, but decisive at the same time. They eagerly press against mine, parting them. His tongue penetrates my mouth boldly and starts a dizzying dance that makes me sigh with pleasure. I weave my hands in his hair and twist it around my fingers. The devil reaches for my waist and pulls me on the floor beside him.

We kneel facing each other. His palms are traveling up and down my back, purposefully kneading and squeezing. I mirror his movements, enjoying the hard muscles beneath my fingers. With his lips glued to mine, he pushes me on the floor and bends over me. I pull him closer, wishing for his weight to constrain me. He pins me down with his body and I feel safe for the first time since I found myself in hell.

Our kisses are becoming fiery. So intoxicating that they spark a fire in me even without caresses. I want him unrestrainedly, wildly, like I never wanted anyone. My body is burning while my trembling fingers unbutton his pants. My head is spinning, my stomach is spasming and I feel a tremendous void in my centre. Oh, to hell with kisses and caresses, kissing my breasts and rubbing the magic button between my legs. I cannot waste time, I just must feel his manhood in me.

He lifts my dress and tears my underwear. I free his member from his trousers. It's hard, swollen, larger than I am used to. For a moment, anxiety overcomes me – will it hurt? But frenzy overpowers that question as I guide him to my centre.

The devil looks at me, taken aback by my impatience. But a satisfied smile chases the surprise away. He pushes my hand, resolutely takes hold of his manhood and skillfully places it on my entrance. Feverish, I want him to enter me instantly; I cannot wait. Quickly wrapping my legs around his waist and raising my pelvis, I push toward him.

He arches an eyebrow and resolutely jerks his hips. He enters me, suddenly, decisively. I cry out and the devil stops. That sudden assault hurt, but the pain is already diminishing. I feel myself widening to accept him and I want more. I buck impatiently and a new thrust paralyzes me. But I don't give up. Instead, I squirm from side to side to welcome his length.

The devil pounds to the hilt, tearing a cry of pleasure mixed with pain from my lips. He pauses for a moment and then slowly starts a magical dance of retreating and penetrating. I follow his rhythm. Breathless moaning escapes my mouth, breasts, womb, soul. The enjoyment is immense, indescribable. I feel like I am on the verge of release, although the

dance has just begun. Hot cramps are tightening my stomach, it seems that my centre will burst like a volcano and burn me. I want the fire to consume me. I hear drums in my ears and temples. My vision is blurred, but I don't take my eyes from his face. He is really beautiful with flaming eyes, blushed cheeks and slightly parted lips.

He speeds up and I relentlessly keep pace with him. Relief is at my fingertips, but it keeps slipping away. The devil lifts my legs on his shoulders, raises into a kneeling position and enters me firmly. The friction is driving me crazy. I savour the hammering of his scrotum against my sweaty buttocks although my flower seems to be on the point of breaking from his violent assaults.

He is too rough, too fast, it is impossible for me to like this. But I do. I will ignite any moment now, I feel that the dam will burst this instant. This very moment ...

The devil is growling, pounding like crazy and twitching his hips. I feel him pulsing in me; I feel his hot drops, scorching me, encouraging me. Here's release, here it is ...

But it doesn't come. Pleasure slowly gives way to frustration. The devil slowly pulls out of me, frees my legs from his shoulders and lies down beside me.

My flower is tingling from his brutality. I am overwhelmed with shame like never before. I turn my head and cover my naked body with the torn dress. Tears spring to my eyes.

The devil gently cups my face and turns it toward him.

“The same story as with food and drink. Just as you can't enjoy their taste, you can't have an orgasm. Enjoyment is tremendous while it lasts and that is why disappointment is so huge when release doesn't follow.”

“But why?” I ask while hot tears glide down my cheeks.

“You know why.”

“Yes, hell, punishment ... But why does everybody here make love?”

“Ah, excitement doesn't die just because orgasm is elusive. They become aroused and surrender because they feel alive while having sex. And they surely hope that there will be exceptions so they just might have an orgasm at some point. What is unattainable is damn tempting, isn't it?”

“What about you?”

“I have no such trouble. I come with every new arrival.”

I turn my head and tears start once again as I realize what kind of eternity awaits me.

Hope you enjoyed it!

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