

Sonata for a String Quartet

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excerpt from the novel

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Chapter thirteen

Annabelle Koch was small and ugly. Below average in height, with very thin legs bent at the knees, crooked shins, a long, hooked nose, a flat chest and facial features that are not very symmetrical. Annabelle Koch was small and ugly, but it was impossible not to notice her. Everyone noticed Annabelle Koch, but not because of her ugliness.

You could use all sorts of epithets to describe her: ugly, rude, shameless, without taste, harsh, but no one would ever say that Annabelle Koch was ordinary. Annabelle Koch was like fire and not only because of her almond, red hair and freckled face. Annabelle Koch lived on the shore of Mummelsee lake. Annabelle Koch's great-grandmother's great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, also named Annabel, lived in this lake with other nymphs.

The nymphs spent all day at the bottom of the lake, because the King of the lake forbade them to appear in the sun.

They could only come ashore at night, but as in all such tales, the stubborn and restless great Annabelle planned to come ashore during the day. The naked nymph rose to the surface of the water and felt the warmth of the sun on her frozen skin for the first time. She found a large, sun-heated rock, where she lied down. It was only when the sun set behind the mountain that she woke up from a drowsy state of bliss. It was about to get dark and the rest of the nymphs and the King would come ashore too. Annabelle waved to the sun, sent him an airy kiss, and plunged into the water. The king understood everything as soon as he saw Annabelle, because her face and body were completely covered with freckles.

He realized that his beloved nymph had betrayed him with the sun. The enraged king threw Annabelle into an underwater dungeon, but Annabelle did not surrender. She did not eat or drink and became so thin and small that she could actually squeeze through the dungeon bars, were it not for her full breasts.

Annabelle lured the lake eel with a song and the eel sucked on her breasts for so long that her chest almost disappeared. That is how, the captive nymph escaped from the dungeon, furtively arrived to the shore, and continued her life there.

After that, Annabelle's descendants through the maternal line inherited these external traits, but in addition to the appearance, the younger Annabelle also inherited from her great-grandmother the nymph's art in matters of love. In her seemingly ugly body, a beautiful nymph from the lake lived, and so, when Annabelle gave her chastity to Sandro, it seemed that Sandro, who had been with many prostitutes before in Tbilisi, looked more inexperienced than Annabelle Koch. Sandro even said "For me, this was truly the first night". Before that, at the age of 15, he participated in a maturity ritual with two women, Bela or Sveta,

together with his father's friends in a bath house... How can that be called sex? When you are sweating from embarrassment, not only are you ashamed in front of your father's friends, but also about going home, because you know that this ritual is conducted with your father's blessing. Your father knows where you are, and I'll tell you more, your mother is also well aware of such a transition to manhood. Besides that, while you are performing the movements you saw in a film, that leg-spread woman named Bela or Sveta is eating sunflower seeds, looking at the job postings and thinking "Maybe I will find a job; I have a boy almost your age, and my heart breaks, may he never show up here with friends". Meanwhile, you are almost sickened by the combined smell of sulphur from the bathhouse and the sweat of Bela and Sveta, and inside your dismayed heart you curse the mother's ass to the bastards who invented this initiation ritual. And you think that maybe sex is not even worth it at all and that you should not be running from bathhouse to bathhouse with your friends. But Georgianness is a duty, and sometimes you have to pay that duty by visiting prostitutes. And after all of this, Annabelle Koch, the lake nymph who betrayed the king with the sun... That's exactly why Sandro fell into this fire, why he neglected his studies and stopped going to Tbilisi during vacations, and why his mother sounded the alarm. You know, nothing escapes the eyes of a Georgian mother. She immediately knows when another woman stands between her and her child. And there was always another woman and then one more and one more and so on. Georgian mothers-in-law are not particularly fond of foreign daughters-in-law to begin with, and when the woman saw Annabelle Koch's photo, her heart sank. Compare this wretched girl and her handsome son, whom half Tbilisi would like to have as son-in-law.

There is no doubt that she cast a spell on him, his mother thought.

– Did she cast a spell on you, Mommy's dear?

– Oh yes, Mom, she really did magic to me, – Sandro agreed and laughed, because by "magic" he meant what Annabelle Koch did to him in bed.

Her fear was unnecessary, because Annabelle Koch had no plans of marrying him. Actually, she had no plans of marrying anyone. No women of her lineage ever married. They only had children. In fact, they had only one child, always a girl, who would inherit the spirit of the lake nymph. The father could only be a man who agreed to spend just one night with her and would never know the true identity of the nymph or that a girl like a flame of fire was born from his seed. Annabelle Koch and Sandro's relationship was everything except for one night, and Sandro was not the kind of man who would disappear from her life permanently. That is why she let him go when he received an ultimatum letter from his mother. She let him go because she knew he would come back. And she was not wrong. Nymphs are semi-gods and know precisely the weaknesses of humans. It was impossible for Sandro, forged in such fire, not to end up every single day at the threshold of the cabin standing on the outskirts of Schwarzwald.

Annabelle Koch never had breakfast in the morning, got up early at any time of the year, paid for everything, went outside, and laid on the rock for an hour, the same rock on which the first Annabelle once laid and betrayed the king. Even now, on a frosty and foggy October morning, Annabelle Koch laid down like always.

– There is no sun? – The man's voice sounded familiar.

– There is always sun, – replied Annabelle.

This was their traditional dialogue of those days, when there was no sun in Sandro's understanding. Annabelle Koch did not move until this one-hour ritual was over; only her flat chest began to flutter more rapidly. Sandro entered the house and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Annabelle Koch laid under the sun, which was fairly well hidden behind clouds, for another half hour. Finally, she made her hands wet in the lake and ran them over her red hair, went inside the house and put on a robe.

– Did you come back?

– No, I came on business – Sandro answered coldly.

– I know, I just asked.

Annabelle smiled half-heartedly, fastened her gown with a belt, and walked into the kitchen. Sandro followed her and leaned against the door frame.

– I need your help.

– Well, I hear you, – replied Annabelle, without turning around, as she washed her fruit at the sink.

– I'm looking for a man.

– I don't have a man here – she said without looking at him.

– I know you don't have one.

– Well, what do you want from me?

– You have to help me find him, no one else can help me.

– Didn't you think about going to the police? – Annabelle said without turning around.

– I don't want to go to the police, I need to find him in a private manner. It is a personal matter.

– May I also know what business you have with him? – Annabelle said while standing still.

– No, it is a personal matter, only his and mine.

– In that case, find him by yourself. Why should I meddle?

– I can't find him, – Sandro uttered sadly.

– If you can't find him, what will happen?

– Nothing, absolutely nothing will happen, everything will be calm and sluggish, like in a swamp.

– And what if you find him?

– If I find him, there will be agitation like in a storm.

– You are a real poet, – Annabelle burst into laughter.

– I am a wanderer above a sea of fog, – laughed Sandro.

– Yes, a wandering poet who can't stay in one place.

Sandro took a step or two towards Annabelle, who was standing with her back turned.

– Stop, don't come closer to me, Annabelle said harshly.

– Why?

– Go away.

– So you're not helping me?

– Go away and come tomorrow morning. Tell me the name of the person you're looking for.

– Niko, Niko Tsereteli.

Annabelle Koch was still standing with her back. She couldn't turn around, because she was crying

That night, when the moon had already set behind the mountains, Annabelle Koch opened the chest left by her grandmother and took out a small jar. The jar contained the fat of the eel that suckled the first Annabelle. Annabelle Koch took off her clothes and rubbed eel fat all over her freckled skin ensuring that no spot was left uncovered. She went outside and, just like her great ancestor, she went to the lake. As soon as her frail body and face were completely covered with water, Annabelle became a true lake nymph. She didn't know exactly where she was going, but her inner nymphic memory remembered the way precisely.

At the lowest point of the lake stood the King's palace from which Annabelle's great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother was expelled. The palace guards made no problem to Annabelle Koch. The palace was silty and unseemly, just like the bottom of the lake. The walls were built of green and black, glossy stones. The floor was the same as the bottom of the lake, a moss-like sludge in which you sank at every step. The King's reception hall was in the middle of the palace. In the middle of the hall, the huge skeleton of a lake whale was hanging from braided ropes made of sea plants. This was the whale that the King defeated in times immemorial, before taking control of the lake.

At the end of the hall stood a giant open seashell, where the King of the lake uses to rest. Thousands of nymphs swirled around in the hall; nobody noticed Annabel Koch's entrance, as everyone was occupied with their own matters. Only the King stood up from the oyster throne and thundered with his voice: Silence!

Everyone fell silent; only the bones of the whale's skeleton rattled for a few more seconds.

– Come in, madam? We have been waiting for you for more than a thousand years – said the King to Annabelle Koch.

Annabelle did not utter a word, she passed through the living corridor created by the nymphs and stopped with her head bowed in front of the throne.

– Well, I hear you, madam. where have you been for so long? What brought you here now, did you miss us? – the king laughed maliciously.

– I need your help, – Annabelle Koch mumbled with difficulty.

– How did this happen? How did the rebellious and stubborn Annabelle end up needing the help of an old, moss-covered king?

– I am looking for a man and no one else can find him except you.

– A man? – the king roared so loudly that a piece of the whale's rib cracked, broke off and fell to the ground.

– Yes, a man.

– After all this time, you dare to come here and you also want me to find a man for you?

– It is not for me; a friend of mine needs to find him – said Annabelle quickly.

– So, a friend, and who is that friend?

– You know who he is. You think I don't know that your spies are always watching me? Ask them who he is. Yesterday he was at my place; he used to live with me.

– Albrecht! – As soon as the king shouted, an old pike swam to his ear and whispered something to him quickly.

– I got it, so your ex came and asked you to find a certain man.

– Yes – Annabelle agreed.

– Why? Is he gay? – The king burst out laughing.

– I don't know, I don't care – Annabelle answered sharply, not laughing at the king's joke.

– And maybe you can tell me why I should help you?

– If you help me, I will be back forever.

Tell me where that man is and just once, tomorrow morning, I will go up there, tell him where to look, and then I will return forever.

– What can I do? I don't believe you. You betrayed me once and you sneaked away from me.

– Please, King, I'll correct everything,

I am ready to pay anything, – Annabel fell at the king's feet.

The king was silent for a moment, then he sighed, moved Annabelle away from his feet, and said:

– You love that man, so I can't think of a better punishment than splitting you apart. That will be the price, that you will never see him again. By tomorrow morning, I'll know where the person you're looking for is. I will now send all the inhabitants of the water and all the birds that live around the lake, but I will not tell you his location. You will stay here from now on. Nymph Dorothea will go instead of you. I will tell her the address and she will pass it on to your lover. This is my last word. If you agree, let's shake hands.

Annabelle stretched out her hand gravely.

The next day, Sandro arrived at the lake at the time when Annabel Koch used to lay down on the rock. He loved to look at her naked, flat, freckled body. He did not find Annabelle on the

stone. Sandro entered the house. A completely unknown girl was sitting at the kitchen table.

- Hi – Sandro greeted her perplexed.
- Hi – the girl answered warmly.
- Isn't Annabelle here?
- No, Annabelle is gone.
- Where did he go?
- She went to her people.
- What do you mean by “her people”?
- She went to her family, to her father and sisters.
- And when will she come back?
- She won't come back. That is what she decided.
- And who are you?
- I am her sister, Dorothea – the girl smiled again.
- When did she decide to leave. She didn't tell me anything yesterday. Is she fine? Has something happened to her?
- She decided yesterday, after you left. Don't worry, everything is fine. There is nothing wrong. She is with her father. She entrusted me with something for you.
- What is it?

Dorothy handed him a small sheet of paper.

- Here it says where you can find the man.
- Thank you very much, but where can I find Annabelle?

– You can't find Annabelle anymore. When you find one, you inevitably lose the other. That is the way it is, my dear. Everything has a price. I am in a hurry, I must go. I just came to deliver the message. So, good luck.

– The nymph smiled and winked, exactly the way Annabelle used to.

Sandro looked at the paper:

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