

The Lady with the Pet Dog

A short story by Larry Roth



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Through eyes gently filling with tears, Anna looks out the window of her Plaza room across Times Square. She casually notices with some shock, as do most people unfamiliar with the Square, several youths busily trying to entice people into their illicit wares. Finding no comfort in this scene, her now blurry eyes continue on until they come to a brief stop at a derelict sleeping on the sidewalk. She lets out a short, somewhat hysterical laugh, seeing this spectacle as her life. Most will just glance at the surface and see what they want, the old splendor they have come to expect. But a more careful look will reveal the vile and contemptuous activities that are really happening. Perhaps a little pity is warranted.

"Perhaps," she bitterly laughs to herself, "but not from my husband. Not with his precious manhood at stake."

Anna shrinks away as she feels a hand softly come to rest on her shoulder. She turns to face Pauly, tears now flowing beyond her control.

"Why," she almost screams, "Why can't we just end it and forget each other,"

Pauly embraces her, gently whispering in her ear, "If either of use could do that we wouldn't be here right now,"

Angered, but perhaps more hurt, Anna pushes Pauly away and turns to blankly stare at the other side of the room. Quickly gazing across the sparsely furnished room for the answer she has come here to find, she discovers beneath the expected oil painting of a landscape, the bed. It is still in a disarray from their passionate love-making. Suddenly, as if it had been there all along, she realizes it. Spinning around, with a smile on her face from her new found happiness, she rushes to Pauly.

Perhaps reading her mind, it is Pauly who first says, "This doesn't have to be the end. This can be our beginning."

Embracing with the excitement of the first time and the comfort that comes from the experience of old lovers, they find their way to the bed to consummate their revived relationship.

It was almost a year ago that Anna announced to her family that she needed to take a vacation by herself. Her husband, thinking of how lately his every word seemed to bring her

anger, gladly agreed. Her children however, had mixed emotions. Her daughter, the oldest of the two, worried about her parents recent fighting and was apprehensive of them spending time apart. So many of her 8th grade playmates had parents who were divorced and she saw this trip as the beginning of just that. As for her son, like any four-year-old, he couldn't understand why his mother would want to be away from him. None of this affected Anna, though. Regardless of what feelings her family showed, she chose to leave the following week. Arranging to stay at a friend's empty beach house on Cape Cod, she hoped that a return to the shores of her summer childhood would snap her out of the recent depression that had set upon her.

It was the second day of her seclusion that she quite literally ran into Pauly. Chasing her hat down the beach, she didn't see Pauly scrambling down from the life guard tower to help with the pursuit. Running at top speed, mindful only of catching the escaping hat, they met in a flash and tumbled to the sand. Anna, already making her apologies as Pauly helped her up, stood with a sheepish grin on her face. While the two of them stumbled with niceties, a lobster-red boy ran up with the elusive hat, After thanking him, Anna turned her attention back to apologizing to Pauly.

The apologies turned into friendly banter, ending—as Pauly had to get back to work—with promises to meet later for a drink. Deciding to leave the noon-time sun before her woefully white skin turned to painfully pink, Anna made her way back down the beach towards the cottages, her hat now safely imprisoned in her bag.

After a short afternoon nap—ever since her 35th birthday, three years ago, naps have been very enjoyable—an early supper, and a quick check in the mirror, she set out to meet Pauly for happy hour at a local hotel lounge. Walking in to the dimly lit bar, she drew more than her share of glances from the local gentry before catching Pauly's wave from a booth in the back.

"I wan't sure if you could pick me out," Pauly offered jokingly in a voice that belonged to the only African-American in the room.

Anna laughed good-naturedly and sipped the margarita that Pauly had taken the liberty to buy for her. But what else would one drink after being at the beach all day? After some polite conversation about careers and dinner plans, it was Anna who made the first mention of their spouses.

"Don't you miss your family, being away all summer. I've only been gone a couple of days and I already miss my kids terribly," she said. "...But not my husband," her eyes added. "I like to

spend the summers alone," Pauly told, "and this job is a welcome change from the stock exchange."

The tete-a-tete switched to remembrances of old sweethearts and forgotten loves, and four hours and six drinks later they stumbled their way onto the beach to watch the sunset. Shortly after the last of the brilliant red fireball had extinguished itself into the distant horizon, they found themselves frolicking in the surf, their clothes in a forgotten pile by the empty margarita glasses. After some playful kisses they made their way back to Anna's cottage.

The next day, Anna found it increasingly hard to maintain her ambivalence towards her infidelity. What was more surprising to her was the ease with which Pauly seemed to accept their adulterous relationship, the ease that could only come from experience in such despicable acts. She, on the other hand, had never been with another person in her 18 years of marriage. Even after she began to realize that she had married mistaking dependence for love, she never considered searching for a new relationship. Now her husband's face haunted her every moment. Accusing her over and over, the image persisted until she despised herself with every fiber of her being. Nevertheless, she continued to see Pauly, their affections bringing out a stronger emotion that she had not experienced with anyone else.

Still, her feelings of insecurity would bring her to continuously interrogate Pauly with the same question.

"Do you love me?" she would ask.

Pauly, answering in the most noncommittal way possible, would quickly embrace her and kiss her passionately. While this gesture was accepted in the comfort of their bedrooms, on the boardwalk it brought murmurs of disapproval from the conservative New England crowd. Anna herself, felt a little uneasy at being such a spectacle. Even when they walked hand-in-hand there would be someone who could not contain themselves from expressing their opinion of the odd couple.

The one person that did offer them some kindness was an elderly woman who they passed occasionally on their after supper walks down the beach. As she always had with her a rambunctious collie puppy, Pauly took to referring to her as "the lady with the pet dog."

This old woman, perhaps remembering something from her now distant past, seemed to sense the situation they were in, and was fond of telling them that youth and love could conquer all. Pauly, who didn't show middle age, but had two years on Anna, would always laugh at this and assure her that if they saw any young'ns they would be sure to tell them.

"I have to go," Anna announced one morning.

Pauly, apparently ignorant to the fact that this day would come, tried to convince her to stay for another week. But Anna had prepared herself for this moment and had vowed to herself to stay strong.

"You will be glad to get back to your summer of solitude," Anna offered.

As Anna quickly packed in silence, a now sullen Pauly offered to drive her to the train station. As they said their goodbyes on the platform, Anna thought of how her feelings for Pauly would dwindle as she got back to her forgotten life.

Summing all her strength, Anna said, "I wish it could have been " She quickly turned as the tears fell to her cheeks.

Pauly stood at the station watching the train vanish into the distance. Even as it snaked a way around the final corner, disappearing into the trees, the memory of Anna lingered at the station to keep a misty-eyed Pauly company.

Safely in the distance, Anna tried to concentrate on her family whom lately she had been thinking less and less about. But as the miles passed, the more the image of Pauly invaded her thoughts. She confided in herself that these feelings would soon fade. As the days lingered on, Anna found herself daydreaming more and more about Pauly and the time they spent together. Her nights were likewise spent in deep dreams about the love she had left behind. In the morning she would suspiciously look at her husband's face, fearful that she must have yelled out something incriminating in the night.

Slowly the days dragged into weeks, the weeks reluctantly gave way to months, and that feeling she shared with Pauly had only grown stronger. Her husband, wondering what had happened to their relationship and quite sure it was his fault, arranged an evening for just the two of them. When he presented the opera tickets to Anna, she exclaimed her joy.

"Perhaps this was what I need to put the past behind me," she thought. Yes, her husband was in his forties, getting a little soft around the middle, a little thin on top, and maybe he wasn't as romantic as he used to be, but he did love her, that she was sure of. "Why should he be romantic," she reminded herself, "Certainly I haven't given him any reason to."

Sitting at the theater listening to the overture, she allowed herself to be carried away by the music. As the music continued, she drifted into the first act and away from her troubles. Before she knew it, the lights had come on signaling the intermission. Her husband excused himself and retired to the lobby. Anna sat there amazed at how much fun she was having for the first time since She cast the thought out of her mind. Glancing to see if her husband was returning, she suddenly froze. She was staring directly at Pauly, only it couldn't be. Surely it must be her conscience chastising her for having a good time. She accepted this theory of a Freudian delusion until Pauly approached her and started to talk. Anna quickly interrupted with a disdainful look.

"What are you doing here!!", she shrieked. "Please leave before my husband comes back", she scornfully added.

"I cannot live without you. I need to see you again", Pauly pleaded.

"You mustn't stay, you must go now! Please!," Anna begged, feeling herself on the verge of tears. "There was nothing between us, I am sorry it ever happened."

"I know you feel the same way that I feel about you. I love you Anna, please come see me in New York," Pauly implored her.

Before Anna has a chance to even think of her response, she saw her husband coming down the aisle. At once she felt faint. Even though the urge for her to run away was great, she was frozen.

"And who's this?" her husband asked inquisitively.

Anna introduced Pauly as "a friend she had meet at the shore last summer."

Her husband seemingly delighted that she had made the acquaintance of other people, immediately immersed into a conversation with Pauly. Anna stood dumbfounded, holding the back of the chair for fear she might fall. The lights blinked three times, signaling the end of the intermission, prompting Pauly to mention the previous proposition.

"I asked Anna to come see me in New York. We had so much fun at the beach I wanted to show her around my town," Pauly offered.

"That would be great," her husband chimed in, "and she could always use the rest. You must consider it Anna."

"I can't, I..I have too much to do," a shocked Anna replied.

"Nonsense, the kids and I can manage just fine and I know you can get the time off from work," her husband insisted.

"Then it is settled," Pauly added, "call me when you decide on a weekend."

Two weeks later Anna found herself on a plane bound for New York City. She thought back to the lady with the pet dog, and she wondered if indeed it could be possible. Taking a room in The Plaza, she called Pauly to announce her arrival.

Pauly arrived to 'show her the town', which consisted of little else than her hotel room and a nearby Chinese restaurant. They joked about the innocence Anna's husband saw in their relationship. They talked about the loneliness they felt in each other's absence. They relived the feelings they had for one another. But mostly they just made love.

All of Anna's visits, which were every two or three weeks, were much the same. Mostly ordering room service, they seldom strayed far from the hotel. Although their appearance together was more accepted in New York than in Cape Cod, they preferred the solitude of each other's company over the bustle of the city.

Although these trips only increased Anna's desire to be with Pauly, after five months she decided to end the relationship. It was this bitter argument and after many tears when they came to their revelation that this was not the end.

Now believing the lady with the pet dog, and seeing a new beginning, she could hardly contain her joy. It wouldn't be easy but she loved Paulina and Paulina loved her. They would embark on a new beginning. Love could conquer all.