

Another Country

By Margo Lanagan

‘Can you take me to Anna’s tonight?’

He stands in the kitchen doorway. His look says, *Not that I care or anything*. That terrible hair all the boys have right now, it makes them look as if they’ve just come in from a howling windstorm and not quite straightened themselves out yet.

‘I suppose.’ I’m ashamed of how small and squashed my voice is.

‘Thanks, Mum-ma,’ he brays, loudly and cheerfully so that I can’t back down.

He turns on his heel back to his room.

The artillery’s very loud tonight in the east, a rolling rumble with never a break. If you didn’t know what was being done, it might be a comforting kind of sound, like having your ear to the chest of a snoring dog—or even a snoring *husband*; think of that. You might mistake it for traffic, an enormous motorway full of what the boy used to call *monster-trucks* trundling back and forth, changing gears, racketing air brakes, revving their engines just for the hell of it. I wouldn’t know what to do without the noise now, it’s been so constant for so long. If it fell silent, I’d worry. I’d get edgy. *What are they up to?* I’d wonder. *What have they got up their sleeves for us now? Are they ramping up? Where will they start in again?*

He’s *singing* in there as he digs in the mess for whatever he needs, singing along with that tinny transistor radio he uses now that the networks are down. It’s awful, that underground station he listens to—the music’s relentlessly offensive, and the announcers can barely string a sentence together. But the fact that it keeps playing, in this mess of a

half-existent city... If I ever feel anything like hope it's because of things like that, the kids just *going on*, propelled by a core energy I can't seem to summon any more, *doing their thing*. Even *having* a thing. How do they do it? Myself, I'm reduced to sheltering and getting food and such, keeping us going just bodily; that takes enough out of me. I look at my son and want to apologise for bringing him into this life, this time and place. I don't *do* that, of course, I don't *say*, because he has no idea, really, that everyone's life wasn't always like this; he's been stepping over rubble and bloodstains and shards of glass all his life, falling asleep to gunfire and waking up to it again in the morning.

'Have you got money, Mum?'

I look him up and down. 'Is it a costume party?'

'Kinda.' He shrugs at himself and looks at me through the money-question.

'Some,' I say. 'As long as you're not shouting a big round of drinks.' That's kind of a joke; he's not drinking age yet. But then, what bar would be together enough, would care enough, to card him?

'It's just for me.' He and Anna are good like that, each paying their own way. And they're very fair-minded about the transport, too; Chas or Gracy bring Anna across just as often as I drive the boy over that bridge.

I slide out some raggy notes, pick through my coin-purse for the yellows. 'That be enough?'

'That's fine.' He always says that; I check his face to see if it really is. It is.

'Thanks, Mum-ma.' He looks at the money, not at me. That's the way we do it, now that he's a teen and cool. I love every spot of him, every ragged fingernail, every stripe of hair across his forehead.

Back to his room he goes. More burrowing, more banging. I concentrate on scouring the porridge-pan. I have to do it in this poor light now, whereas I used to wait for daylight so as to be sure to do a proper job. Oh, the things I cared about! How clothes

looked instead of how they would wear; what people thought of me, instead of who might save my life, in a pinch; how to occupy myself some summery weekend full of garden scents, when I was free of school, or of work. What I'd do for a job now, for anything like a job! What I'd give to wave my boy off to a real school every morning, through silent sunshine!

I busy myself so as not to sit and feel frightened. With our little dark crammed-full home, I can fiddle and tidy and rearrange forever, though I can never clean it properly. Little cleanings, I can do: this pot, the useless sink and splashback, the shelf-top with the ornaments. But the dust. There is no point. The air settles and settles from the endless rumbling, and the filth with it.

'You ready?' He appears again, with his bag. A big rumble comes then, and everything shakes. The glasses ring together on their shelf, sounding alarmed.

'Let's go, then,' I say, not too briskly. I weave my way out through the clutter and snatch the keys from the drawer.

Down and down the fire-trap stairway we go and out the bottom into the car park. I un-padlock the roller door and he holds it up as I take the car out, lowers it for me to come back and lock. It's the safest part of any journey. I wish this was all in reverse order and I was bringing us home.

'Very well.' We belt ourselves in. I hardly know why, but that's what I was taught, and that's what I've taught him, so that's what we do.

It's dusk—it's always dusk. The sky is low and puffy, orange to the east where all the action is. We drive that way for a while. There are no new hazards since last time; I skirt that crater at the corner of Nancy Street with a coolness I wouldn't have believed the first time I did it. *Ohmygodohmygod*, Leanne said, peering out her window into the hole as I scraped along the wall, and then we got the giggles with relief for a good ten minutes afterwards. Leanne. Yes.

‘Is it a party, then?’

‘It’s a *gathering*.’

‘Ah,’ I ladle on the false tranquillity. ‘So only a *few* of you getting together and taking hard drugs.’

‘Yeah. Just me and Anna and Felix and Erin. More to go around, that way.’

‘I don’t need to worry about you, do I.’ I can spare him a glance even as I dodge the car bodies and concrete barriers and rubbish heaps. This is not even a conversation; this is ritual noise to hold back the fear.

We turn and drive down Sniper Alley, which is quite a cheerful place these days, all the little braziers, and the plastic tents shining and rippling in the drafts. Someone runs alongside us. ‘Take me to the Maxiplex!’ he bellows, beating the window. ‘I wanna go dancing!’ And he falls behind. The beauty of having a teenage boy? You’re not afraid of teenage boys any more. Well, not that sort—harmless hoodies with a bit of home-distillery in them.

I go slowly along beside the canal, pretending I have to take care. Up ahead, the bridge isn’t really glowing, or pulsing—that’s only in my mind. It’s just a grey arch in the greyness, over an S-curve of water bordered with rubbish and who knows how many rats. The S is bright with orange sky reflection. It leads your eye to the sky—*that’s* pulsing, with the glow of someone’s neighbourhood exploding, someone’s apartment block, someone’s mosque or museum, someone’s day care centre or bunker or homeless camp. Smoke drifts across the orange.

My boy is humming beside me, just below the engine noise. Unless there’s a big bang that scares everyone, this is as much nervousness as he ever shows; he goes still, stops joking and hums.

‘Okay?’ I turn onto the bridge, and his humming stops.

A man in a good black coat is walking from the other end. As I slow, he slows.

‘You can see he’s steeling himself,’ I say.

‘Doing a run-up now,’ says the boy.

But the man is only striding fast, not running. His eyes are trying to fix on the Catharsis, but there’s nothing to see. When he hits it we see, though. His face pales and flattens as if struck by a gust of wind or a wave of water. His hair flies up off his brow, his coat and trousers flap wildly. He keeps his eyes and mouth closed, concentrating, determined. He pushes through to our side. His self and body and clothes slip forward around him again.

‘Oh, it’s going to be so *uncomfortable!*’ The boy pretends a little tantrum beside me, stamping his feet, pounding his knees with his fists. ‘It’s horrible!’

I touch his arm and slow.

‘Keep going! Don’t stop,’ he says. ‘Let’s get it over with.’

‘You’re sure?’ On the other side, the grey and yellow buildings are just as grimy as ours, the streets no clearer and in no better repair. To all appearances, it’s the same place.

‘She’s worth it.’ He’s staring ahead beyond what we must pass through. ‘Anna Anna Anna.’

‘Hold that thought, sweet boy.’

*

Some people have to go through this every day. That man was probably one of them, the way he ignored us, his business-like approach, his quick recovery—look at him striding on past us, relieved, only a bit dewy around the eyes.

I hardly ever had cause to go through when my boy was little. Once we had to get him across to the Children’s Hospital (Axel was with me then); another time a school

friend who had moved there invited the boy to a birthday party and I couldn't talk him out of it.

The *Tharsis*, he used to call it. Axel corrected him, but the boy misheard again, and for a while called it *Thukkatharsis*, and he was still calling it that when Axel and I split up. Then the world took Axel away from us completely, and the word, the wrong word, was for a while one of a chain of mistakes that had caused that ultimate wrong thing, the demolishing of our little trio, which had held life steady and safe. I never minded the boy saying *Thukkatharsis*. I rather liked it; I thought it captured something of the feeling of going through the thing. But someone at the school set him right, and laughed at him. He came home and accused me of letting him embarrass himself. *I knew you would work it out some time, my darling*, I told him. He had the tiniest sulk in the world, but we both knew we had bigger fish to fry—and the schools were closed right around then, so it hardly mattered what anyone there thought of him.

And then he met Anna. At first we had networks and it was easy for them, Skyping and chatting. They were happy crossing once a week—so, once a fortnight for the escorting parents. Then everything went down, and the snail-mail just didn't cut it with the young ones. They were in deeper by then; they *needed* to see each other more often. And so we took them. And so we take them.

It hurts, of course; it hurts like being blown apart cell from cell, then reassembled very quickly, very roughly. Worse than the pain are the changes of pressure; suddenly you're afloat, completely unbalanced—where is the sky? *Is there a sky, or a ground?* And then you're being crushed from every side; you can't take a breath, and it all hurts. But worst is what happens in your head, the funnelling feeling, the rushing-through of the *stuff*, memories, dream-matter, old fears new fears and fears yet to attack, forgotten ecstasies, hoped-for wonders. All of this is brilliantly coloured, harshly detailed—but fast,

too fast. And sharp edged. It's like having your brain clawed out of your skull by some creature in a desperate hurry.

Because they're young, Anna and the boy recover fast. But there's only one of me, no Axel to share the load, or to talk things through afterwards. For me the blow is a blow, every time. It's never the small price I'm paying to see my love, to touch her, to walk alongside her awhile, in whatever costume, with our other-side friends.

*

It's best to kind of *jump* through, then to brake straight afterwards and proceed slowly off the bridge. The bridge itself is always safe and clear; no one likes to hang about near this thing.

My boy has taken it badly this time; he's come as close to crawling into my lap as he can, the gearstick poking up at his hip, one foot in its ragged sneaker jammed up on the dead CD player. He's crying, and crying out, on my thigh. I stop the car for a moment and wipe my eyes, wipe his, pat his scungy hair, rub his bony back.

'Those *shoes*,' I say wetly. 'They hardly *exist!* And I can smell them from here!'

'I *love* these shoes,' he says, and I know he's coming good.

I laugh at him, scratching his warm scalp. 'There's more hole than shoe, look at them!'

He hides the shoe from me, back in the footwell, and sits up, clearing away tears from his eyes as if they were just bothersome water. The look between us, the puff of air, the dropped shoulders—he thinks it's done. And perhaps it is, for him.

Anna's flat is a little farther from the bridge than ours is. There's some kind of festival on; young people fill the streets. Quite a few boys are dressed like my son, in the chopped-off black pants and jacket with the stiff white shirt-front. Where in this filthy world did they find such brilliant whites?

'What is this?' A pack of them saunters past, laughing. 'What's it to celebrate?'

‘It’s a band,’ he says. ‘It’s what the band wears.’

‘Oh, so these are all headed to the Stadium? No, they can’t be.’ I can’t *remember* the last time a concert was allowed there.

‘There are just gatherings everywhere, Mum. To celebrate a big gig they’re playing in New York. Everyone’s making their own little concert.’

We thread through several more trails and gangs of fans. ‘Popular band.’

‘Popular because they’re the *best*.’

‘Would my son follow anything less?’

I pull up in front of Anna’s. Before he gets out he gives me one of his big angular one-armed hugs, kisses my cheek with his only-just-scrapy face. ‘Thanks for driving me, Mum,’ he says. ‘You be careful, going back through that ol’ Tharsis.’

‘Don’t you worry about me. I’m a tougher chook than I look.’

He unfolds himself from the car and goes. Anna meets him at the bottom of the stairs, hugs him, waves to me, gathers him in. When their feet step up the stairs out of view, I drive away, drive back, through the concert-goers and other hazards. At one crossroads another car comes from the other direction, and it’s funny—we revert to the rules, pulling each as far left as we can, and he indicates right and waits for me, and I drive on past him, and for a moment we’re back in the old world, full of the old courtesies, prosperous, easy, clean. My boy will never know that world, except for what I tell him—and why should I want him to, if he can’t have it? It’s much better for him to be managing in this funny feral here-and-now than to be yearning for what’s gone.

I turn onto the bridge. I’m already leaking and mopping a bit, leftover tears from last time, that I held back while I had the boy with me. I pause and breathe and look through the nothing-to-see, to the ordinariness of the other side. However happy I know he is, I hate having this brute of a thing between us, this invisible violence on people who just want to get to work, or visit a friend, or walk the *other* side of the canal for a change. One

day I'll throw a pillow and blankets in the boot, and when I've dropped him off I'll find a quiet place on this near side and sleep the night in the back seat. Plenty of people camp out in cars. No one would notice, least of all the boy.

But that's the Catharsis talking, its proximity and my fear. I lift my foot off the brake and creep forward. I'll take it slowly this time. I'll glide through and feel every burst and crush, every regret, every dazzling claw-mark on my mind. Then when I'm through, I'll get off the bridge and pull over and park. There's a whole box of tissues in the back footwell. I can cry for as long as I need to.

Copyright © 2010, Margo Lanagan. All rights reserved.

Supported through the Scottish Government's Edinburgh Festivals Expo Fund.