

Journey of Hope: Anna's Choice

A Short Story by Dan Silvia

In the quiet café, Anna's voice, just above a whisper, hinted at fragility. "I'm worried, Jordan. We had dreams and plans for our future, but everything's changed now. It's not just about us anymore." Jordan reached across the table and clasped Anna's hand. His eyes held the weight of their situation. "Anna, look at me. I'm here for you, for both of us."

The server approached and asked, "What will you have?" Jordan nodded to Anna.

"A coffee with cream and sugar for me," she said. "Make my coffee black with no sugar," he said.

"Is that all?" the server asked. Jordan nodded. "Yes, for now."

The server returned with their steamed coffee cups and placed them on paper napkins.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the room, painting it in hues of orange and red. Anna's gaze drifted out the café window. "Look, Jordan, at the street lamps. Their light looks like halos on angels."

“I haven’t noticed anything like that,” Jordan said.

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t have,” she said.

“I’m interested in why we’re here,” he said.

He cleared his throat. “I read it’s a simple procedure; all you’ll feel is a little air from a small vacuum. It usually takes five to ten minutes. If you decide, I’ll go with you to the clinic. If not, I understand.” Anna’s eyes spoke of vulnerability as she listened.

“And, Jordan, what comes after? Will things return to normal? Will you love me as you do now?”

“I’ll love you no matter what,” he reassured her. “We’ll navigate it together, and it’ll be alright afterwards.”

She removed the napkin from under the coffee cup and dabbed her eyes. She looked out the window. It was getting dark and the street lights were getting brighter.

Jordan held Anna’s hands. “Do you have something to tell me?” Her coffee cup tinkled as she stirred her coffee.

“Jordan, I have a few days off from work. Would it be alright if I spent a few days alone in New York? Some space between us might help me make my decision.”

“Of course, Anna. When you return, regardless of what your heart tells you, we’ll face it together.”

The Amtrak train screeched to an abrupt halt midway between Providence and New York, causing a jolt that reverberated through the cabins. Startled passengers exchanged glances as the sudden stop jostled and confused them. A voice crackled over the train’s intercom, breaking the silence.

The conductor announced, “Attention passengers! We apologize for the inconvenience, but there is a vehicle stalled at the train crossing ahead. We’re waiting for a New Haven fire station crew to arrive and remove the obstruction. Thank you for your patience.” The passengers groaned in frustration as the delay continued.

Two hours later, the intercom sounded again in a somber voice. “We regret to inform you they have towed the vehicle, but because of the extended delay, our train to Penn Station will be about two hours behind schedule.”

Anna, dressed in a sleek pantsuit with a bright red beret tilted over one eye, sat at the dining cabin table. Her lustrous black hair cascaded in gentle curls, brushing her shoulders. A delicate gold chain adorned her neck with a small black onyx cross.

The man strode towards the dining car, his tall and lean frame moving with grace. He sported a hound-tooth jacket that matched his tan Docker pants. Despite his gray hairline, his hair was full and curly at the back, giving him an air of distinguished elegance.

When the man entered the dining car, an empty seat across Anna's table beckoned him; his tall and lean frame caught Anna's attention, and her hazel eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“Do you mind if I sit here?”

“Not at all,” she responded.

“Do you travel to New York often?” he asked.

“I'm taking advantage of a few days off and heading to the city to attend a concert and enjoy what else New York offers.”

“Are your leisure weekends limited?” she asked. He looked out the window at the passing landscape. “Yes.” His tone hinted at resignation. “Yes, they are busy.”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t be too friendly talking to strangers on a train to New York,” she said.

He smiled and eased her concern. “I suppose I have a friendly face. Please allow me to introduce myself. Doctor Samuel Korman.”

She smiled and said, “Nice to meet you, Doctor. Anna Allegretto.”

As their conversation flowed, he ventured, “So, you’re on a holiday trip to the Big City as well?” he asked.

Her eyes lit up. “Yes, I love visiting New York. My favorite thing to do is visit St. Patrick’s Cathedral. It’s my first stop and a tradition for me.”

“That’s quite fascinating; I can understand how special that must be for you.”

“Are you going to do anything special?” she asked.

“I’m going to an opera tomorrow night at the Met,” he said.

“What do you specialize in, Doctor?”

“I’m an obstetrician,” he answered, with a hint of pride in his voice.

Her eyes widened as she shifted in her seat. “An obstetrician. I’m impressed. Bringing life into the world must be such a challenging and rewarding experience for you.”

“Yes, it’s a privilege I never take for granted.”

“What do you do for a living, Anna?”

“I work as a secretary at a law firm in Providence. Work can be overwhelming, **and** I needed some free time. This is my first break in a while.”

“You’re traveling alone. I assume you’re not married?” he asked.

A wistful expression flitted across her face. “No, I have a fiancé. We’re planning to marry soon. But, well, we’re quite different. I’m Catholic; he’s a Baptist. Our interests don’t align too well. He’s a mechanic at a local car dealership. We’re both nineteen years old; I hope time will bridge the divide.”

The unexpected delay turned into a fortuitous meeting, allowing two strangers to forge a connection amidst the chaos of their journey.

“It’s obvious that you’re more mature than he is,” he said.

Anna shrugged her shoulders and nodded. “He’s a good guy, and I know he’ll be a wonderful provider, and above all, we love each other very much.”

The conversation shifted gears as Anna turned the spotlight on the doctor.

“Are you married, Doctor?”

A hint of sadness flashed in his eyes. “No, I’ve been a widower for thirty-three years. It’s been so long that I’ve forgotten how many years have passed.”

With a half-smile, “Thirty-three years can dull even the sharpest memories.”

Anna’s face colored her response. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Dr. Korman rose from his chair. “Excuse me; I’m headed to the sandwich bar. It’s open. Can I get you something?”

“Yes, a coffee would be fine, thank you.”

“What do you put in your coffee, Anna?”

“I’ll have cream and sugar, please.”

He returned with two cups of steaming coffee. They both gazed out the window, lost in contemplation. “Doctor, you appear to have something on your mind; I’m sure you have many responsibilities in your profession.”

“I didn’t realize it was so obvious. Yes, people in my profession are overwhelmed; now and then we have troubling setbacks in our work.”

Dr. Korman took a sip of his coffee. A month ago, I had a heartbreaking event during the difficult birth of a teenage young girl.

Anna listened and leaned in, her eyes filled with curiosity. “What happened? Why was it so heartbreaking, if you don’t mind my asking?”

The doctor sighed, his gaze distant, as he recalled the young girl’s ordeal. “She wasn’t even nineteen when she found out she was pregnant. It was a complicated situation. She had undergone an abortion at a Planned Parenthood clinic a year ago. It left her with lingering health issues.”

Dr. Korman continued, “I examined her in my office and delivered a somber prognosis. I explained the dangers and perilous odds of both her and the baby surviving a difficult Caesarian procedure. But she and her husband were determined to take that risk. I urged her to see another doctor for a second opinion, but she wanted me to do surgery.” Compassion filled Anna’s voice. “That must have been incredibly difficult for you, Doctor.”

Taking another sip of his coffee, Dr. Korman looked out the window at the passing world. I asked an obstetrician friend to assist me with surgery. In addition, I

requested a respiratory specialist to stand by as a precaution. The procedure went well, and I was thrilled when I delivered the baby.”

Anna sensed there was more to the story and gently probed. “But something went wrong?”

Dr. Korman’s hands trembled as he held his cup. He recounted the tragic turn of events. “Yes, the next morning, I hurried to the maternity ward, eager to check on the young family. But when I arrived, a nurse delivered the devastating news. The girl didn’t make it through the night. They tried to reach me, but I accidentally turned my phone off. I never received their call.”

Anna gasped, her hands covering her mouth in shock. “Oh, Dr. Korman, I can’t imagine how you felt.”

The doctor’s eyes moistened as he continued, “The intensity of that young girl’s passion and desire to have her baby was so overwhelming. She willed to risk her life on the operating table. I asked about her baby, and the nurse assured me the child was doing well.

His voice cracked. “It devastated me.” Guilt, grief, the sense of responsibility—it all crashed down on me. I felt like I had failed her and failed that family.” He paused, his emotions threatening to consume him. “I couldn’t bear the weight of it.

I canceled the rest of my appointments for the day and have taken some time off from my practice.”

Tears streamed down Anna’s cheeks. Dr. Korman handed her a napkin. She leaned forward and clasped his hand. “I’m so sorry, Doctor. You did everything you could.”

I hope I can eventually accept what happened and find the courage to keep practicing. The train’s sudden jolt signaled the end of the delay. The conductor’s voice boomed over the intercom. “I thank all passengers for their patience. Security measures prevented a tragedy on the tracks. We expect to arrive at Penn Station in two hours.”

As the train arrived at Penn Station, passengers poured out onto the landing. The Doctor’s voice cut through the noise. “Look at the traffic, it’s a bit more than Providence, wouldn’t you say?” Anna nodded and smiled in agreement.

“My first stop is St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Madison Avenue,” Anna said.

Dr. Korman winked. “Yes, I remember what you said about your first stop.”

“Anna, I’m staying at the Plaza Hotel; if it’s alright with you, we can share a taxi and stop at St. Patrick’s. I’ll walk to my hotel from there; it’s a couple of blocks from the cathedral.”

“Oh, that’s so thoughtful. Thank you, Doctor.”

He hailed a taxi. “St. Patrick’s Cathedral,” he instructed. The cab driver nodded, acknowledging the request.

The taxi weaved through the chaos of the teeming streets. During the ride, Dr. Korman provided casual commentary. “The ride to St. Patrick’s on Madison Avenue is just fifteen minutes away, depending on traffic.”

As the taxi navigated through Madison Avenue, Anna looked forward to visit the cathedral, ready to embrace whatever lay ahead.

Anna’s curiosity surfaced, and she asked, “You mentioned you were going to an opera. Which opera is it?” He answered with a hint of nostalgia, “Aida. I saw it twelve years ago in Rome at the Cara Calla ruins. It was a spectacular and magical outdoor performance. Her eyes lit up when he mentioned Rome and Italy. “I’d love to visit Italy someday. My grandfather came from Cortona in Tuscany.”

“I passed through Cortona on my way to Florence,” he said. “Our tourist group stopped at a café. I met an old man in the café who talked about Tuscany lore. We enjoyed each other’s company that afternoon, and he shared a local legend with me.”

“A legend?” she asked.

“Yes. Legend claims that 100,000 years after the Great Flood, Noah arrived in Cortona via the Tiber River. He found it fertile and settled there for thirty years. His son, Crano, built the city on a hilltop 270 years later.”

Anna arched her eyebrows. “Do you believe it’s true?”

He chuckled. “The old man swore by it. Italy has many legends. This is one of the more outlandish ones.” They both laughed. Anna and Dr. Korman found solace in each other’s company, forging an unexpected bond amid the dialogue of their individual journeys.

“Here we are, St. Patrick’s Cathedral,” the cabbie announced.

As they stepped out of the cab, the tower bells were ringing, and their harmonious melody soared above the avenue.

“Thank you, Doctor. Our meeting made the train ride much more enjoyable, and thank you for the history lesson,” she giggled.

They hugged and shook hands. “Enjoy your weekend, Anna, and have a safe trip home.”

Dr. Korman walked toward his hotel, stopped and thought for a moment. He retraced his steps back to the cathedral. The afternoon Mass had just ended, leaving

the alluring odor of incense. He walked down the center aisle of the nave, his roller luggage bag in tow. Spotting Anna's distinctive red beret at the right side altar of the cathedral, he sat a few pews behind her.

Anna was immersed in prayer. Her eyes shimmered in the glow of the votive candles. With her fingers entwined around her rosary beads, she fixed on the painted depiction of the pregnant Lady of Guadalupe adorning the altar. This sacred image represented life and hope for countless expectant mothers who followed the Catholic faith. Anna's gaze lingered on the Lady's image, as if a wordless, mystical connection had transpired between them. She stood up from the kneeling bench, lit a candle, made the sign of the cross, adjusted her backpack, and departed the cathedral as quietly as she had entered. She hailed a taxi and requested, "Please take me to Penn Station." The cab driver responded with a Spanish accent, "You go to Providence, yes? The train leaves in one hour.

I know the schedule. I'll get you there in fifteen minutes; plenty of time to catch your train."

Doctor Korman walked to the Plaza Hotel and settled into his room. The city skyline was a tapestry of lights. As he lay in bed, his thoughts drifted back to the train ride and meeting Anna.

Eight months passed. Dr. Korman continued his work, attending to his patients and finding fulfillment in bringing new life into the world. He often thought of Anna and hoped she had found the answers and happiness she sought.

After a lengthy day, Dr. Korman settled into his office. Sifting through his mail, one envelope caught his attention: it had a striking yellow hue. A glance at the postmark showed its origin as Providence; it bore no sign of the sender's return address. He slit it open.

Dear Dr. Korman,

I wish to share the joyous news that I am now the mother of a beautiful baby girl.

Thank you and God bless you.

Anna Allegretto

As he read the note, the memory of their encounter on the train flashed back. He delivered countless babies as an obstetrician, but this note of gratitude was special to him. He held onto the memory of Anna and her baby girl, a symbol of hope, renewal, and the enduring power of life's choices.

THE END

