

Lonely Adventure

by Anna Blaman

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One

[Twist of fate] When summer came, we escaped to the forest for a few months. We rented a wooden cottage with terraces on all sides. In the woodwork on the low façade was the house's name: *Mon Repos*. My plan was to write a detective novel based on theories that I had already enthusiastically outlined for Alide. It was about a murder, and all clues pointed to a woman: not a femme fatale, not a tragic, vindictive type, no—but to a young, cheerful, innocent-looking woman who lured her victim into her spider's web and took him by surprise. But there was no proof, so the detective has to try to trap her in his psychological net. Tensions mount dramatically between the two! Ever so carefully, the detective constructs a similar situation to entice her into almost committing a second murder. In other words, it was a detective novel, but written from a psychological perspective: Is there really a difference between reality and appearances, between the life we lead in secret and the one we present to the outside world? Alide didn't seem particularly pleased with these questions. But why not?

"Everyone has other lives," she objected, "other interests in the depths of their soul. That mystery is simply what makes them human, the complete being they are, a person with dreams, and even secrets."

"No," I replied, "if you ask me, man is an entity, and it is only his lack of insight and intuition that make him paradoxical. Which is why my poisoner is a bright, young, wide-eyed woman, but in hindsight, the reader is able to spot, even in form and color, the born villain behind that innocent façade."

"What I mean," Alide continued, "is that there are often contrasts, deep contrasts between the way a person lives outwardly and the inner depths of their soul."

"But that doesn't change the entity," I replied.

"But then," she said, chuckling with irony and hesitation, "but then you'd be able to see through everyone."

"Yes," I said, "Do you see through me?"

"Maybe, I don't know."

"Alide!" I threw my arms around her. Why all this useless speculation? I'm going to write the novel either way. So I became playful. I pretended to be shy, cunning: "You don't know if you know me? Why it's true, you don't know me, not entirely. I do have a secret life, another woman. In fact, there are two women to whom I can say 'Oh I'm just crazy about you'. Even I, with all my puritanical

ideas about language, can still use the superlative *dearest* for two different women at the time. That's not what you had in mind, now is it? But alas, it's true."

"Dearest no," she pulled my sly, theatrical grin closer to hers, "don't say that." Then she began to caress me protectively.

"You see," I murmured triumphantly, though I was also deeply touched, "you could never believe a thing like that, *if* you know me. I assure you, the depths of my soul most certainly match my façade, so you do know me, and you know that I could never do something like that."

"You're right, darling," she said softly, as if finally convinced. "But then," she added stubbornly, illogically—I really had to laugh— "but then, maybe *you* are capable of murder."

That summer, Alide was incredibly lazy. She spent entire days lounging on the terraces at Mon Repos. In the mornings, she'd lie out front in a chaise longue, as naked as she could get away with, slathered in sun oil, glistening, drowsy, her eyes closed and her dreamy, voluptuous mouth half open. I often looked up from my writing and gazed at the golden sickles of her eyelashes on her narrow face. Oftentimes, I'd go out and stroke her sun-kissed hair or caress her damp, salty forehead. Later in the afternoon, she'd move to the terrace on the side of the house, and eventually to the one on the back. The evening sun made her quiet, rosy. Sometimes we'd go for a walk, or I'd read to her aloud from my manuscript:

"Before he rang the doorbell, King examined the façade of the house that Juliette lived in. It was the first time she'd given him permission to come by. A detective is a magnificent actor. Not only did he already know the façade, he knew which rooms were hers. He knew how she lived, who her friends were, her tastes, her evolution, her dreams and her desires. And now, it was up to him, King, to try to reach this creature in her fantasy world. Last night, at the nightclub, he achieved his first success. Although he was tall and dark, he was also hideous, with bad teeth, a receding chin, a clown nose. The one thing that was handsome about him, he knew, was something that few women could appreciate: his clear, grey, intelligent eyes. Eyes that betrayed a supple sense of understanding and supple powers of the imagination. But very rarely can a man fascinate a woman with his intelligence, refinement and tact. Fortunately, King was a sensational dancer, which made him irresistible, commanding. He whisked her off her feet and up to slow fox heaven in his arms. He was calm, agile, elegant—and when it was all over they celebrated with a glass of champie..."

I glanced up. Alide did not look amused. There was an irritable, hostile look in her eyes. "You don't like it," I say.

“Why in god’s name would you call it *champie*?” she snapped.

“No, that’s not it,” I said decisively. “You just feel contempt for women.” I closed the manuscript, sat down at her feet and pulled her arms around me. “I will explain why King is so cynical. King is me. Juliette, on the other hand, is an average woman who allows herself, just once, to act on her secret, criminal instincts. I, too, have a natural contempt for women, but it’s only because I’m so jealous. Did you know that? That I’m a horribly jealous person? Male jealousy is rooted in contempt for women. Why do I despise women, you ask? The woman is a Delilah by nature, a traitor. And perhaps she’s also a La Voisin, a great poisoner. Moreover, my languorous disposition makes me cynical; it’s the dark side of my romanticism. But mostly, King is a cynical modern devil because that’s just the modern style—and because he’s got a poisoner on his hands.”

So that’s how I kept her and myself entertained, with all the adventures of my imagination. Alide stroked my hair as if I were a child until finally, she conceded: “Well, you can leave that *champie* in there I guess...”

Then came the day when I needed to go into the city on business. I decided to stop by our house to check that everything was as we’d left it. Alide, don’t let yourself get lonely while I’m away. Why don’t you go over to the neighbors’ tonight for a cup of a tea? There was a group of girls staying next door at *Mon Plaisir*, girls who wore Wild West-style vacation clothes with all kinds of belts and straps for banjos and field canteens...

Back in the city, I roamed the streets as if I were a guest, a foreigner. I felt pleasantly adventurous without Alide. I walked around a pampered, happy person trying, almost lasciviously, to empathize with the woes of lost, abandoned souls. It wasn’t easy with the memory of her goodbye kiss still so fresh, the echo of her being still resounding so loudly in mine. But suppose that echo started to fade, suppose I never saw her again...the very thought of it left a pit in my stomach. I shouldn’t think such grave thoughts. I needed something adventurous, playful: let’s say Alide was away. I had gotten on a boat and disembarked in South Africa, where I disappeared into the dark forest. There, I was met by drum-beating cannibals and women with long, stretched-out earlobes and lips. At first, I was inspected like a curiosity, but in the end, they roasted me alive and consumed my flesh. That thought turned out to be less painful than my nostalgic longing for Alide...But still, I could have kicked myself—there I was, walking down the street in the sun, her goodbye kiss still warm on my lips, wearing my impeccable gray suit, with nothing standing in the way of my happiness, my life or my plans! Was I really such a masochist? A self-tormenter? I turned down our

street and noticed how, even on a summer's afternoon, most of the blinds were drawn. This street was like the one in my story, tidy and lined with secretive-looking houses. Juliette lived in such a house. In my mind, as King, I had already called on her once before. She received me with the elegance of a princess. Tea and cakes and cigarettes, a slow foxtrot playing on the portable gramophone, a kiss—but not too sensual on King's part and not too promising on hers, their relationship needed to be sensible, sustainable, at least for four months or so. But on this particular afternoon, I fantasized, King knew she wasn't home. He knew exactly where she was and what time she would be back. King was a slender young man in a gray suit. He wore a soft hat that he could pull down over his eyes. But don't think it was a disguise. Disguises were out of fashion in his opinion. Nowadays, it was all about the psychological disguise, about carrying out tactics to their greatest and subtlest consequences. For example, King wanted to win over Juliette. So he danced with her at nightclubs—very properly, of course—and treated her to lavish amounts of *champie*. He seldom looked at her while she was looking, only when she wasn't. And even then, he gazed at her with the eyes of a deeply quiet, deeply intrigued, seriously moved man. Once she looked up, he'd switch back to his cool, superficial air. He's in love with me, Juliette will start to think, but he doesn't want to be in love with me, and that's why he dares to be so immensely difficult. She'll start talking herself into this kind of nonsense psychology—all it takes is the slightest suggestion. The more complex and refined people are, the more sensitive they are to false romance. And that will be Juliette's downfall. She is going to take King *au sérieux*. And King is going to crush her, mercilessly, like a boa constrictor to its white prey.

So, with his hat pulled down over his eyes, King makes his way down the street where she, Juliette, the treacherous poisoner, lives. He walks briskly, nonchalantly, clutching a set of counterfeit keys. Softly, swiftly, he enters the house. He stands in the doorway for a few minutes, listening intently. No footsteps outside on the street, no footsteps upstairs. He tiptoes up the staircase—you know the white one, with the red runner. He has the fake keys to the rooms and cabinet ready in his hand. Using his keen detective's sense like a dowsing rod, he hopes to tap out the mystery of this woman's life—here, alone, where her thoughts first entered her mind, where her fantasies came to inhabit her gestures and shaped her view of the world.

In other words, I was playing King. I saw the matte green silk scarf hanging on the hat stand, Alide, the one that you didn't wear anymore and used to hoist the wheel of your bike halfway up the stairs. I stopped in front of the bedroom door to listen, just as King would. Was that the sound of breathing I heard? The unsuspecting breath of Juliette, assuming she was safe, that no one could see into her imagination? Then I opened the door and saw our bed, Alide, the nightstands on either side. I saw that big, old-fashioned tile painting that was so ugly yet so expensive. And that French print,

the one with the *amoureuse* draped in white sitting between the Greek pillars on a marble terrace, her dreamy eyes gazing out at the horizon sweetly awaiting *Le Retour des Colombes*. In the golden twilight streaming in through the blinds, I saw the carpet on the floor, blue carpet. This is where Alide walked around barefoot, where she let her silk clothes slip off her body, where I watched her from the bed with half-open eyes as she dressed. She always moves so harmoniously; her attention fully fixated on what she was doing. One time, when she noticed me watching, she laughed, her thoughts far away in some small, pleasant place.

“What were you thinking about? You looked so deeply absorbed.”

“Oh, something silly.”

“Well, let’s hear it.”

“That I should alter this dress.”

“Why?”

“Because...” she sat down beside me on the bed and explained, faithfully. And I listened, faithfully.

“How can you possibly find this interesting?”

“There’s nothing I’d rather listen to more, everything you say, Alide...”

But I force myself back into my role. King tiptoes over to the windows and silently rolls up the blinds, one by one. He doesn’t have to worry about neighbors across the way—there’s nothing but an old fence with a wild, abandoned garden on the other side. Now that he had some light, he could use his gray, intelligent eyes to scan the carpet and bed, the nightstands and the mantel, the contents of the drawers. At first, he empathizes with the woman who inhabits this room, alone or perhaps with a lover. She is far from ugly, that Juliette. It’s possible that she already has a lover, that she sees him as nothing more than a fling. Or maybe she doesn’t trust King and was only associating with him to confirm her distrust. King, however, doesn’t discover any signs of a lover. Then again, could it be someone who only comes at night, in secret? A married man, for example, supposedly traveling on business? Cautiously, King corrects himself: Don’t make too many assumptions, you’ll lose track. The truth is always banal, and generally obvious. So Juliette doesn’t have a lover, she spends her nights alone here in her bedroom. What does she hide in her nightstand? Not secrets, but items that reveal her habits. Where then does she hide the clues to her secrets? In her lingerie drawer, or at the bottom of her sewing box. It’s highly doubtful that there are any concrete clues at all. So let’s just start with the nightstand. The woman who goes out, hails taxis, raises a glass of

champie in your direction at a nightclub is, of course, very different from the one who rummages through her nightstand drawer alone in her nightdress or pajamas looking for a sleeping pill, a corn remover, or a tube of night cream. A nightdress or pajamas! King looks under the pillow. A nightdress, like Alide's! Usually, this kind of nighttime finery is only worn by the wives of men who appreciate it—or by lonely, virtuous women who suffer from some kind of degenerative childhood complex. At least that's what me and King thought.

And now for the contents of the drawer. Just a bunch of knickknacks to the untrained eye, but King sees in them the relics of lonely, sinister, sleepless nights: aspirin, caffeine, sleeping pills, curlers, broken earrings, a severed string of pearls, a mystery novel titled *The Flawless Crime*. The book was most certainly a psychological clue. Hadn't she, Juliette, committed the flawless crime herself? King makes a mental note of the title and author. He doesn't write anything down; he doesn't want to create a trail. Needless to say, he's an excellent detective. He even notes which pages looked the most thumbed and dogeared. God only knew what they described—medicine, poison, an inheritance that the heroine would come into if someone were to die. And what does King do next? He looks in the vases on the mantel, in her lingerie drawer, in her sewing box. He discovers that Juliette is quite flirtatious, even more flirtatious than you might think by looking at her. He would have noticed, being the great detective that he is, that Alide only had jewelry to match every other dress. My Alide was tremendously economical; she could buy three times as much as other people for the same money, simply because she shopped so deliberately. That's how King would have searched the room. But then what happens? Something that almost makes his heart stop. The doorbell rings.

At that point, I was so deep in my character that I jumped in shock too. A short, cold ring had invaded the danger-filled silence of my imagination, mine *and* King's silence! At that moment, King—yes, detective King—disappeared, evaporated into thin air. His disappearance reminded me of a film, a detective film, that cuts off right in the middle of the most suspenseful scene. The entire audience is shocked with disappointment; the people down in front start protesting. But the screen stays blank. The crowd grows impatient, there's stomping and whistling. The lights turn on. Some kind of compère steps out in front of the screen: "Ladies and gentlemen, we regret to inform you that part of the film has caught fire. We need some time to repair it. In the meantime, we will be showing a hilarious one-act called *The Barber in Love*."

I walked back to the stairs and looked down. Standing at the front door, which was part latticed glass, was a gentleman I didn't recognize. I pulled the door open from the top of the stairs. He stepped into the doorway and said, "I would like to speak to you."

“I beg your pardon?” I ask, making my way down the stairs.

Then the man said, “Do you mind if I come in? It’s very important.”

Even still, I descended slowly. “Who are you, sir, and what is this about?” I asked.

He met me with a long, silent gaze. Then, in almost a whisper, he said, “It’s about me and your wife.”