

Empathy

LITTLE SISTER'S CLASSICS



# Empathy

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ARSENAL PULP PRESS  
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EMPATHY

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## Prologue

Anna sat in the dark as the radio crackled like one emotion too many. Her passion was like sweat without the sweat. It had no idea. No idea of what clarity is. It was two holes burned in the sheet. It was one long neck from lip to chest, as long as a highway. Hot black tar, even at night. A guy spits in the next apartment. There's a dog on the roof.

In Anna's mind they were two scarves, two straps, two pieces of fresh pine wood. How many body parts can a person have? It's unfathomable.

### MY SUGGESTION

*ANNA O. and the woman she loves are together in Anna's stark apartment. The WOMAN, handsome and wicked, is sitting in a simple chair. ANNA is standing cooly within range of her lover's arms. They refrain from touching. ANNA feels casual and pleurably feminine.*

### ANNA

I don't think it affects me, actually. I don't have any problem with it. Don't you believe me? Honey?

### WOMAN

I believe you.

ANNA

You're very sexy to me.

WOMAN

Does that make you nervous?

ANNA

No, it makes me feel good.

WOMAN

Talk some more so I can watch your mouth move.

*ANNA looks at her inquisitively, wondering if that was an order. But she gets so caught up in the woman's beauty that the question gets lost.*

ANNA

About?

WOMAN

About romance and ... a car.

ANNA

A car and a lover and a loud radio. The top was down. The sun was bright. I drove with my left hand and got her off with my right. I felt her come in my hand as I was speeding and I remember thinking, *This is love. This is fun.* Then we pulled over and laughed. I was so comfortable.

WOMAN

Happy.

ANNA

Yes. Relaxed. More?

WOMAN

Tell me about a mistake you made. A big one.

ANNA

A mistake?

*She hesitates, surprised.*

ANNA

Wait.

WOMAN

What are you doing?

ANNA

I'm looking to see if I can trust you.

*(Looks)*

Yes, I trust you. I met a woman and a man and we got too close. There was the inevitable night of drinking and teasing until we decided to play a game.

WOMAN

At whose suggestion?

ANNA

My suggestion. We decided that each one would say their fantasy and the other two would fulfill it.

WOMAN

Uh-oh. I don't do *that* anymore. So, the man went first ...

ANNA

The man went first and he wanted us to ...



WOMAN

Make love in front of him.

ANNA

No, not so easy. He wanted his dick in our mouths. Then it was Joanie's turn.

WOMAN

And she wanted you to get him off.

ANNA

Of course she knew I hadn't fucked a man in about eight years, but she wanted me to climb on top of him and fuck him. And I did. No problem, like I said. I have no problem with it.

WOMAN

Then it was your turn.

ANNA

I said I wanted Jack to leave the room and I wanted to make love to her, but she said no.

WOMAN

No?

ANNA

She refused. Now what do you want me to do?

WOMAN

There's this peach slip that has been under your dress all evening. Let me touch it.

*ANNA O. takes off her dress and stands in front of the WOMAN in her slip.  
The WOMAN touches it.*

BLACKOUT

Later there was a whipping in a hotel room. That woman made her pay a dollar before she let her come. There was sex in a telephone booth, on the pier, in a public bathroom. She kissed her with someone else's pussy on her breath.

Anna walked to the end of the bedroom and looked out the window through the hot iron gates. She walked through the kitchen, dirty linoleum sludging underneath her feet. The cigarette was burning. She opened the front door to see a different kind of light. Someone was coming up the stairs. It was cooler in the hallway. The moon was red through the staircase window.

Up close that woman looked very different. She was still a princely beauty but she wore a rough, white, dirty, sleeveless T-shirt like some guy. Her nipples hooked its edges. The hair under her arms was black smoke, wire, a raccoon tail, dry polish.

"What's the matter?" Anna said.

"Remember that fight we had last winter?"

"Yes."

"Well, I was thinking about it," the woman said. "And then I finally realized something."

"What?"

"I realized that I'm not a lesbian anymore. I realized that women don't have fun together. I realized that that's not love. I realized that men are heroes after all."

As for Anna, she was caught in a burning apartment. There were flaming rafters and charred beams falling all around her. There was smoke choking her. But it had happened so fast she had not yet decided to flee. She was still, unrealistically, trying to determine which items to take along.

“What is your definition of a hero?” she asked.

“A hero is someone you can be proud of,” the woman said. “To be proud of someone he has to be bigger than you so you can look up to him. You can feel safe when he is near you. Especially a man who has soft skin. When a man is near you who has soft skin, soft and sloping like a woman’s, then you can feel safe.”

“But he’s not a woman?”

“No.”

Anna did not want to understand. She knew this word *he*. She’d heard it before in every circumstance of her life. But what did it mean? What did it really mean?

“What is your definition of fun?” she asked.

“Fun,” the woman explained, “is when you get what you’ve always imagined. When you’ve always known what you want and then you get it. With a woman you can’t have this because you’ve never imagined what you’ve wanted. There’s no gratification. No gratification at all.”

“This is so brutal,” Anna said. “Why is this happening to me?”

“Don’t give up so easily. You’re too weak.”

“There’s something very important that I don’t understand. How can I be a woman and still be happy?”

“Shut up,” the woman said. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

*What are you talking about?* Anna thought. *What does this mean about me?*

That night and for many nights to come, Anna could not sleep. Months passed and still she could not find peace. Finally one night, tossing and turning, she found herself in bed in the middle of an old-fashioned thunderstorm. Branches howled and scraped against her window. It could have been any lonely night in any storybook with one contemporary exception. Nowadays, when a lightning bolt hits, it sets off car alarms all over the neighborhood. That old reverberating crackle in nature is no more.

Some nights Anna flies away in bed. That night, awake in the

dark, sheets of ice sailed between the stars. They flashed in the moonlight as her covers slid to the floor, as the secret was revealed. Anna's pudgy white body looked like diamonds between those sheets. Those crystal slabs of shine. But then the lightning flash set off car alarms and so Anna, interrupted, pulled the covers over her demurely supple flesh. Back on earth she lay, dissatisfied, between two pieces of printed cotton. Those sirens droned on all night.

*What happened?* she asked herself. *What just happened?*

Then a few other questions came to mind.

*What happened to the world that I was promised back in first grade in 1965?*

Not only had she been promised successful middle-class romance, but other treats had been mentioned as well, like the Jetsons, robots, and the metric system. In fact, when Anna was a girl, *The Weekly Reader* had said that by 1990 she'd be flying around with jet packs. People would speak Esperanto and wear high-topped sneakers as they suited up for lift-off. As a kid she'd bought a roll of aluminum foil and Scotch-taped it on her own chest to make one of those silver suits. Then she jumped up. Flying seemed desirable, something everyone would want to do. Before her lay a universe of neon Ping-Pong balls, as everything imaginable was endless. With a pixie haircut she played with the boys because towheaded American males were birds then. Those guys were rockets, superheroes, untouchable.

Anna turned over in bed, rain sliding down the window. She remembered the promise of an antiseptic future: domed cities and artificial weather. Somehow this was supposed to be good. Anna O. knew that hers was the last generation to believe the future would be better. Now, she feared the future. With that last thought Anna fell into a troubled sleep.