

# An Enormous Child

by

Marion Menna

She had been wandering for days. Luckily the weather was mild, and she had found a place to stay at a women's shelter with clean beds and a warm shower. The bad dream had not come as often as before.

She knew where she could get the things she liked to eat—grilled cheese sandwiches, tomato soup, mushrooms and onions, and always coffee, many cups of coffee, refills they called them, from an endless samovar. She had money in her handbag, some bills and a lot of coins, heavy at the bottom of the bag. She was not sure how much. She felt uneasy when it came time to pay the check, so she handed out the bill with the biggest number on it, and it always seemed to be enough. Sometimes she even got money back.

As she left the café, she held tightly to the wooden handles of her bag. It had been her mother's. Long ago she had watched her make it, using strips of an old red velvet dress, a piece of navy blue blanket, gray woolen stockings that had ripped beyond repair. There were keys on a silver ring at the bottom of the bag, but she had no idea what they were for. Most important, however, was the black hair brush. She had felt the sting of the bristles on her scalp as her mother brushed her long hair.

This morning, after breakfast at the cafe, she thought how clear the sky was and how clean the air smelled after all the rain and wind of the day before. What was it called,

yes, spring, they called it. She would be able to stay out later at night as the weather warmed and the days grew long. She thought she would like to sleep down by the river out in the open. Maybe with just a blanket, or her old coat. At least as long as this money lasted. She would have to be careful, eat less, only when she felt hungry. She'd wait until she felt the emptiness in her belly that knocked in her brain and filled her mouth with saliva; then she would let herself eat something warm and filling. She could have coffee, though, as much as she wanted in the refillable cup.

She walked with her head down and her hands in her pockets. Her feet in the thick-soled shoes touched the ground, heel, toe, heel, toe. She paid attention to the sound of her footsteps, as if listening for something. Perhaps her name. She would like to know her name. Nothing else seemed important.

Each day she passed a shop that had many pretty things in the window, long pieces of silk in reds, purples, and deep blues, and knitted things in violets, golds, and greens. She liked stopping there to look at the things, liked the colors, the delicate look of the silks, the knobbiness of the wool. She also looked at her reflection in the glass and wondered at it: A tall, strong-looking woman in a navy blue coat with the collar turned up, her dark hair pulled back from her face, her eyes wide open and deep brown under heavy brows. Her cheekbones were very pronounced and reddened by weather. She did not smile at her reflection, just stood still trying to recognize herself. She knew it was her reflection. There was no doubt that this was herself, only she did not understand what self was, what it might feel like to be a self.

On this late March day, a woman emerged from the shop and stood near her. They looked at each other's reflections in the window. This woman was smiling. She was large and blond, wearing a long, loose sweater of indigo blue.

"Would you like to see what's inside?" she asked. "Come on in out of the cold. I have a pot of coffee brewing in the back."

It was light and warm in the shop. They sat at a small table, and the smell of fresh coffee filled the air. "I've seen you pass by so often," the woman said. "Why did you never come in?" There was no answer.

"What's your name?" Again no answer.

"I'll call you Anna, shall I? You look like an Anna to me. Is that ok with you?" This time there was a soft yes.

"Anna, would you like to see the scarves in the window?"

"Yes," she said. She let her eyes wander over the display of softs and roughs, reds and purples, and she reached out her hand to touch a cream-colored scarf, smooth as silk but made of wool, almost hidden in the pile of colorful others. She knew this wool, remembered it from another time and place.

"Is that the one you like the best? Want to put it on?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, please."

With the soft scarf around her neck she felt different. She had something she wanted to say and found she could speak. "This wool is from llamas, llamas from Peru. Women care for the llamas and shear their wool when it is time. It is very clean. They comb it out many times, and soak it in river water. It dries in the sun until the color is clear and it smells sweet."

The store owner stared at Anna in surprise, but no more surprised than Anna herself. "That's exactly right, but how do you know all that?"

Anna shook her head. She moved away from the woman's stare and went to look at herself in a mirror hanging behind the door. She liked the way the scarf settled about her neck, like a baby against its mother's throat.

"It looks lovely on you with your dark hair and the navy coat. Don't you think so, Anna?"

"Yes, lovely, it is lovely," Anna said. She took it off and handed it to the woman, shaking her head no.

"No money, eh?" said the woman. "It is expensive. But you should have it. It was made for you. Sit down here. More coffee?" Anna nodded her head, yes.

It was decided that Anna should return the next morning and help in the shop. There was a lot of work she could do. Meanwhile she could keep the scarf.

"My name is Hermione," said the woman, "but call me Hermi, it's easier. I don't know why my mother chose that name. What do you think? Funny, huh?" They laughed. "See you tomorrow then?"

"Yes," Anna, said. "Tomorrow, please, thank you."

Hermione was curious about Anna. But more than that, the young woman reminded her of her daughter, Sara. Sara had read everything she could find, books, newspapers, but how much of it she understood or remembered, Hermione was never sure. However, she was sure that Anna would return tomorrow. Sara had always kept her promises. Hermione also had tried hard to keep her own, to keep their routines the same,

to have enough of the same food on hand so there were never any surprises. Sara did not like surprises. One day, she had taken them both by surprise by taking her own life.

That night at the shelter Anna slept with the cashmere scarf wrapped around her neck. She loved the way it felt, and she did not want to lose it. She did not have her bad dream that night. In the morning, after breakfast at the cafe, Anna walked to the knitting shop. Looking at the scarves, she stood outside the window in the cold for a long time. Finally Hermione noticed her there and opened the door.

"Come in," she said. "Why didn't you knock? Tomorrow, you knock, okay?"

"Yes, please," said Anna.

Anna took off her coat and unwrapped the scarf from her neck, handing it to Hermione. "No, that's yours," she said. "You keep it on. It will warm you up. It gets cold in here, even with the heat on." Pleased, Anna wrapped the scarf back around her neck, over the dark sweater she was wearing.

"What a beautiful sweater," Hermione said. "It looks handmade. Did you knit it?" Anna shook her head no. There was a moment of silence as Hermione waited for a further explanation, but none came.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Yes, please," Anna said.

They sat together at the small table, drinking their coffee. Hermione smiled at Anna. Anna dropped her head. "Mother," she said.

"What, what was that?"

"Mother," Anna said.

"Oh, your mother made that sweater. How beautiful it is. What a lovely color. And how soft it looks."

"Yes," said Anna.

"We call that color aubergine," said Hermione. "Like an eggplant. It looks great with the scarf, doesn't it?" Anna stared at her for a minute and began to laugh. "What?" said Hermione. "Oh, I know, aubergine is a funny word, isn't it?"

When they had finished the coffee, Anna took the cups, set them in the sink, washed them carefully, and put them in the rack to dry. "More," she said.

"More what? You want more tasks to do? You can start unpacking the new wool that just came in. See those big boxes there. Find the right racks out front and put the skeins in there neatly. Can you do that?" Anna nodded her head.

After an hour, Hermione checked on Anna. She had worked slowly and carefully, matching color and feel. She had made no mistakes. "More," she said to Hermione.

"Not right now. I want you to sit here and show me what you know." She handed Anna a pair of large knitting needles and a ball of purple wool, very thick with nubs of lavender and pale green running through it. Anna stared at the wool and the needles for a minute before jumping up and getting her coat, ready to leave.

"Wait, don't go," Hermione said. "You don't have to knit if you don't want to. I just thought you might like it."

Anna shook her head. Touching the scarf around her neck, she looked questioningly at Hermione. "Yes, you keep that," Hermione said. "See you tomorrow then?"

Anna walked hurriedly to the café. She had to eat. When the server came to the table, she pointed to the menu. "Soup and sandwich, as usual?" the girl said. "Today's soup is barley and mushroom. That all right?" Anna nodded her head, yes. "Cheese sandwich?" Again, yes. Anna ate quickly, enjoying the warm food, letting the tastes mingle in her mouth. She felt the shaking inside her stop.

When she left the café, a bitter wind was blowing in from the river. She had hoped to find a patch of sunlight to sit in at the park, but the sky was very gray. Snow, she thought to herself. "Snow," she said softly, and smiled.

She found herself once again outside the shop window. She looked at her reflection, the dark coat, dark hair, the cream-colored scarf, the deep purple-red sweater underneath, "Aberdeen," she thought. She knocked on the door and went in.

Hermione looked up. She was knitting a scarf with the thick, pretty purple wool, the pink and green nubs showing randomly in the stitches. "You're back," she said to Anna, who was taking off her coat and hanging it on the hook.

Anna sat down next to Hermione and watched as her fingers handled the wool expertly, the needles going in and out of the stitches in a calm and orderly way. When the row was finished, her fingers turned the piece around and she began again. Only the colors varied: purple, then pink, and then a light green nub and purple again.

"This is called purling," Hermione said. "It's easy. You don't want a fancy stitch when the wool is this varied. Want to try?"

"Yes, please," Anna said. She took the needles, and Hermione showed her how to hold them, how to keep the thread of wool between thumb and forefinger, how to insert

the needle into each succeeding loop, and when to turn the piece over to begin another row.

A little bell rang as the door opened and a customer entered the shop. Anna had not noticed the bell before. It made her feel safe. A little bell rang when someone came in, there was a mirror behind the door and hooks for coats, and there were racks of different colored wool. The small kitchen in the back had coffee, cups, milk, and sugar, and there was a light above the table. It was good. She was Anna now. She was knitting. It was not wool from Peru. It made her laugh that she never knew when purple would be pink or green. Alberdeen made her laugh. She was knitting a scarf. She was working, again. She was working.

It was evening and no customers had come for a long time. Hermione straightened the counter and the shelves. "You've almost finished that scarf. Did your mother teach you to knit when you were younger?" she asked. Anna shook her head no. She put the needles and the wool down on the table and stood up. Her insides felt empty, pulling at her attention, and she began to leave.

"No, don't go. Stay for dinner, please. I have a nice stew cooking upstairs." Hermione pointed to another door at the far end of the kitchen. "I live upstairs, you know, my apartment." Anna allowed herself to be lead up a small flight of stairs into the most beautiful room she had ever seen. Large quilts of wonderful colors and patterns hung on the walls. Rugs of all sizes and designs were spread on the floor. A gleaming wooden table and four chairs stood in the center of the room under a light made of shimmering shell-like material. The one big window was filled with green plants, growing tall and luxurious in their terra cotta pots. Anna could smell the odor of something delicious,

spicy, and hot, filling the air. Her mouth began to water, and her eyes filled with tears. She hid her face in both hands.

Hermione put her arms around Anna, patting her softly on the back. "That's all right. I know, Anna, I know," she crooned as she used to do when Sara was little, before she became intolerant of touch. Anna allowed herself to be comforted, and when the food was served on plain white dishes, she began to eat furiously.

"Bread," she said at last. "Bread?"

"Of course, we must have bread." Hermione brought a plate covered with a white napkin. On it sat three brown rolls, their tops twisted in a delicate knot. "And butter. Here's butter for the rolls." But Anna had already taken one of the rolls, broken it open and was dipping it into the rich brown gravy of the stew.

"My mother said this is the best part."

Both women smiled. Anna had spoken loudly, clearly, a memory, a cherished moment. There were tears in Anna's eyes again. Hermione rose. "You go ahead and cry, Anna. I'll take care of the washing up."

After coffee and cookies, they sat by the window in silence and watched the sunset fade in the west. Hermione thought of the mountain range beyond the city, Bright Mountains, they were called. Mountains of light. She'd like to take Anna to see them one day.

"It's too late for you to walk home," Hermione said finally. "Stay the night. I'll fix the other bed for you." It was Sara's bed, of course, still covered with the quilt they had sewn together, using only greens, Sara's favorite color, all hues and textures, like a bed of moss. She laid out a white nightgown on the pillow, and also a white towel and face

cloth. "No toothbrush, I'm afraid," she called to Anna. "You'll have to use your finger." They both laughed at that. "Good night, my dear," Hermione said.

"Good night," Anna said. "Thank you, please."

Hermione turned off all the lights and went into her own bedroom. There she opened a small window and lit a cigarette, smoking in a chair by the window. It was still snowing, and there was a moon. A silver world, she thought. Tomorrow she'll tell me her story. At least, I hope so.

That night the dream returned. Anna was on a huge ship, lifting and floundering in a heavy storm out at sea. She was curled under the bunk in the cabin. Her mother was asleep on the bed, in such a deep sleep even the pounding of the sea could not wake her. Anna's body stretched and recoiled, moving with the roiling of the waves. She called out to her mother, but her voice was lost in the thundering noise of the storm. And then she let go, and felt herself drift away from the ship, her mother, into the ocean and the dark night. She slept late into the morning.

Anna pulled on her jeans and soft sweater. Aubertine, she thought to herself, smiling. She washed her face, rinsed out her mouth, and looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. Smiling at her reflection, she liked what she saw, the clear brown eyes and heavy brows, the high cheekbones, the weather-roughened skin. "Anna?" She shook her head. "Not Anna." Then the smile left. Her hair needed brushing. Her brush was at the shelter. She needed her bag. She could feel the emptiness begin to rise inside, like the crest of a wave. She ran out of the room and down the stairs.

Hermione was in the kitchen, cooking at the stove. She heard the sound of Anna's footsteps coming down the stairs, heard the front door open and close, the ting of the little

bell. She was too late. Anna had left, was already running down the street. Hermione hoped she would return, but this time was not sure.

Sara had seemed so happy, the day before she killed herself. She had been doing well at school, working on a painting project, rehearsing songs for the assembly show, wanting to get her hair cut short. Hermione had agreed reluctantly.

She had not seen it coming at all, could not imagine the desperation it took to throw oneself off a bridge into a dark river in the late afternoon. The doctors blamed it on the new medication, but Hermione thought perhaps something as simple as a boy teasing her could have driven her to it. She put her hands together, the left cupping the right, and whispered, "Help me, please."

By noon the snow had turned to rain. Anna walked with her head down, listening to the sound of her shoes against the pavement. She had the feeling of walking on water, very dark water, the sound of the waves under her feet. She found herself outside the knitting shop, knocked at the door, and went in. Hermione took her wet coat, hanging it on the hook. Anna lifted her hands, extending her fingers and moving them gracefully, making the motion of knitting.

They sat at the table, and Anna took up the nubby scarf and began to knit quickly. Her fingers remembered. The room was very warm; no customers came. Less than an hour passed, and the scarf was finished. Hermione showed her how to do the last row of stitches and secure the wool in a hidden knot. Anna laid it around Hermione's shoulders and stepped back to look at her. "You have green eyes," she said, "but sometimes purple. Like the scarf." They both laughed.

"Well, I guess you could call them hazel."

"For you, Hazel," Anna said.

"And for you, lunch," Hermione said, "if you don't mind having last night's stew."

Anna was very hungry. They ate in silence until Hermione got up to get the rolls from the bread box. Anna took one from her and held it to her nose, breathing in the sweet, yeasty fragrance.

"We baked the bread. She let me do it," Anna said, making the motions of kneading bread, her fingers open then curled into fists, punching the dough down.

"Yes, that's it. Your mother taught you that?"

"When I was little, before we came to this place."

Hermione took Anna's hands in hers, and held them. To her surprise, Anna started singing in a low, soft voice, "Lily, little Lily, you are my darling, little Lily in the garden."

The singing stopped. The story will come now, Hermione thought.

"Can we have coffee, Hazel?"

"Yes, Lily, yes, of course."