

Uršula Cetinski

Lonely Voyage

In 1995 I wrote a play *Alma* and, with Slovene actress Polona Vetrici we created a one-woman show based on the autobiography of Alma Karlin.

Alma Maximiliana Karlin was born in 1889 in the Slovene town of Celje. She studied languages in London (English, Norwegian, Danish, Italian, Spanish, French, Russian). She also took up Sanskrit, Chinese, Egyptology and Hebrew, and passed exams in eight languages at the London Society of Arts with honours. In 1920 she boarded the ship *Bologna* in Genoa, and sailed for Japan via South America. She left Japan in July 1923 and set out for Korea, then to Manchuria and China. In Hong Kong she bought a ticket to Australia. Alma lived among the natives of Fiji, New Caledonia, New Hebrides, the Caroline Islands and New Guinea. She contracted malaria and narrowly escaped cannibals. She visited India and travelled across Bab-el-Mandeb (The Gate of Tears). She returned to Celje in 1928. During her eight-year voyage of self-discovery she made her way by teaching, translating and interpreting, writing articles for no less than twenty-five European newspapers. Between 1930 and 1940, after her return to Slovenia, she published twenty books, novels and travelogues, lectured at European universities and held a correspondence with Selma Lagerlöf. She lived with the Swedish painter Thea Gamelin. During World War II they were persecuted by the Nazis because of their political views. After the war Alma and Thea moved into a little house on the hill above Pecovnik, a village on the outskirts of Celje. Alma died in 1950, of cancer, and was buried during a snow blizzard.

In my play I respected all the facts connected with her life, as described in her autobiography *Lonely Voyage*. Alma Karlin was an almost unknown writer in Slovene society since all her writings were published in German. Her mysterious emotional life was born in my imagination. The performance stimulated the translation of her books into Slovene and inspired recognition of her work fifty years after her death. Our experience is an example of the fact that theatre

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about you.
The only thing right for you
is what you think is right.
People can't grow as
others bend them.
The path you've chosen
is a strange one.
But it's right for you.
Nobody has the right
to put you down."*

has the power to rewrite history, especially that of women.

ALMA

PICTURE I

"When you've gone, I'm never going to eat fish again," my aunt said.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not a cannibal. The Scotland Maru's returning empty to Japan. You'll be the only woman on board. The sailors will throw you into the sea. The fish will eat what's left of you."

I didn't want to upset her. I decided to travel to Japan through South America.

I had already prepared for my journey round the world when I was studying in London. I spent hours in the library. I buried myself in books. I composed a dictionary of ten foreign languages. I thought: "My strength will be that I'll be able to understand everything wherever I go."

They had sent me my first novel in Celje. For hours I gazed at my name on the flyleaf: Alma Maximiliana Wilhelmina Karlin. I whispered it a thousand times, like a charm. "Now she'll finally settle down," my mother thought. Every day she told me a new story. About some girl in the street who became Mrs So and So, who sends her love and asks: "Anything new at your place, too?"

Her stories persuaded me that I was not like other women.

"My life's only just started, but not here in Celje. Far away, where I can be what I really am. I'll heal my wounds in foreign lands, about which I'll write. I'll go far away, so I can finally be myself. I'll travel the world in three years."

People at that time - after the First World War of 1914/1918 - used to stay at home, so

my family thought I was a little crazy. They sent me to the psychiatrist. He just glanced at me: "The girl's quite all right." He even gave me a certificate.

I put a few clothes into a suitcase, the dictionary, 130 dollars and 54 marks. I got Erica, my typewriter, ready and I said: "If you don't go further than the sheep, you won't see much more than they do."

PICTURE II

I travelled third class on the Bologna. I was squeezed into the hold: "Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate."

In the upper beds lay women wrapped in wide, heavy skirts. They clucked constantly, like hens. That I could take. But I couldn't take the macaroni that they spewed past me to the floor. I've great respect for the rule that what's in the stomach should remain there.

I watched a tiny blond in the corner. She never spoke. After a few days she came to me and gave me her white hand: "I'm Ema."

Whenever the sea was rough, she sat on the edge of my bed. There we were silent together.

One night I dreamed I was sitting on a great pile of walnut kernels and eating them. I squeezed them into my mouth like a lunatic, but I couldn't get enough. Strange cries wakened me. It was Ema. Men weren't allowed in our sleeping quarters at night. But her husband, a Peruvian, was visiting her. I heard how he persuaded her. He wanted her to go on deck with him so he could satisfy his lust. She resisted. Then he beat her for a long time.

In the morning, on the deck, she apologised to me: "You know, he's a good man. But the cheese he gets on the ship overheats his blood."

"Why did you marry him?"

"Because he was the only one to lead me to the altar."

I took her by the hand: "Look we're leaving Gibraltar. Look how the ships are whistling us farewell. That's how human souls slide past each other."

She disembarked at the port of Puerto Cabello. She was in a black silk dress, with a yellow cascade of pale lace. Next to her was the Peruvian. They meant to walk to Peru, through South America. Entering a new world like getting onto a tram. Slowly. With nothing. Not even a handkerchief. I thought: "She'll die, before the sun sets."

I am sure he killed her.

PICTURE III

I disembarked at Mollendo. Don Luis waved farewell. The morning transfixed me. The people devoured me with hungry eyes. I felt in every fibre: "Now I'm really alone."

A train took me high into the Andes, to Arequipa. There I saw Misti, the miraculous Peruvian hill. Misti has a soul that belongs to eternity. Long buried secrets link us. We were born from the thought and the dream of one and the same being. Great and invisible.

I saw the world through Misti's eyes. I saw myself: my soul left my body and I was floating above myself. Then I turned my head slightly and I was watching my own self sitting on the bench.

PICTURE IV

The most prominent lawyer in Arequipa offered me my first job: "I've thirteen daughters. It would be fine if you could teach them something. But not too much. Just what's suitable for a woman. I'll expect you tomorrow at nine." On my way I met my fellow traveller from the Bologna. Don José offered to accompany me. We crossed the fields. I always wear gloves outdoors. I wore

them even when it was very hot. Then something occurred to me: I took them off and put them in my handbag.

At that moment, a man grabs me. He drags me into a ditch: "*Déjame! No me toques!*"

I can't move. I sink my teeth into his paw. He lets go.

"No me toques, no me toques nunca más!"

"Si me tocas, te mato! Te mato!"

The beast in man still frightens me. I don't want to be touched. I'll never let them touch me again. Men I know say: "You don't know anything about love. You can only ever be a friend."

After three weeks in Arequipa, I heard strange voices in the street.

"I'm going to see what's wrong," Don José said to me.

"Some Cholos, Indians, are standing in front of the house. They say you're a Bolivian or a Chilean spy. They say you're not a woman. That no woman has such short hair as you. They've decided to strip you and see for themselves..."

(Alma grabs a knife. The fingers that grip the knife let go. The knife falls to the ground.)

PICTURE V

I was so relieved to leave Peru in one piece. I arrived in Panama with five dollars in my pocket. I went straight to the Red Cross.

"I need work urgently. Anything... I give lessons. I translate. I type. I paint. I take photographs. I help in hospitals... I could wash the floor. I could wash the night pans..."

"Would you be a waitress?"

"Yes. Yes."

"I'm sorry. It wouldn't work. You are too fragile."

A Panamanian photographer finally took pity on me. We rinsed the plates together in his darkroom. He was the only man in beau-

tiful, sinful Panama who said to me:

"Don't mind what they say about you. The only thing right for you is what you think is right. People can't grow as others bend them. The path you've chosen is a strange one. But it's right for you. Nobody has the right to put you down."

He was a Jew. He had a lot of qualities that many Christians lack.

Then I took a court interpreter's exam. It wasn't easy: I had to translate from two foreign languages into a third. When I walked along the street, they pointed behind my back and whispered: "*El señor intérprete!*"

PICTURE VI

I discovered a fine custom in North America. In San Francisco modern women also have to run errands at night. If they're walking out alone at night, they wrap themselves in the national flag, with the stars and stripes. Any man who harasses them, dishonours the flag. So he can be sent to prison for fifteen years.

North America is another planet. A real paradise for a woman like me! Whenever things go wrong in the kitchen, you go to the shop. They sell ready-made paté, meat and vegetables in tins there. They have running water in the houses. An electric washing machine washes their clothes, and they iron them with an electric iron. There I decided to collect recipes and the spices to go with them. I promised myself that I would most certainly learn the art of cooking... If I had time.

American women are beautiful, tall, elegant. I even saw them in trousers. Mainly when they were riding. They sit on a horse like men. Women can go where they want. Alone or with a man. But I don't understand why they have to enter a hotel through a special door. I also don't understand why

Americans are always weighing themselves. There are scales everywhere. They leap onto them like mad.

In San Francisco I was given the addresses of five Austrian newspapers. I sent them my articles. They didn't answer at all. They probably threw them away. One published my piece, and I got an answer from the fifth, the editor of the *Klagenfurter Zeitung*. He wrote: "Dear Mr Karlin! *Sehr geehrter Herr Karlin!*" Later a certain Mr Anton visited him. The editor talked a great deal about the heroic world traveller, "*Sehr geehrter Herr Karlin!*" Mr Anton replied: "I agree with you. But Mr. Karlin has only one child. And that's a Miss."

PICTURE VII

I then embarked on the ship, the Empire State. A band played on the shore. People cried and waved. Nobody cried for me.

The journey round the world changed me a great deal. I became a communist. I knew that the poor people with whom I travelled were better people than the rich in first class. It seemed to me that they had a lot more heart. Above all the women. Whenever I quarrelled with God and the world, they often prevented me from breaking down.

Before disembarking in Hawaii, a Chinese girl hastily pressed a letter into my hand. On shore, I tried to post it. I found that it had no address. I opened it, and found a dollar which she had given me. Even she had noticed how poor I was. She helped me, as one woman to another woman.

On the deck of the Empire State, I also talked to people who could afford to travel first class. They never talked to me. Empty words flew from their mouths. They were totally uninterested in who I was and what I thought about. I thought that they never

noticed anything except themselves. But they noticed. They noticed my worn out dress and hat.

The Americans are always talking about democracy. But those of us crammed into the ship's belly were of a completely different world from those above us. There was no way of moving from one to the other. Like wanting to go from hell to heaven.

I was interviewed for the first time when I got to Hawaii. They published a whole column in the *Star Bulletin* about me and about my travels. They described all the horrors I went through and what my future plans were.

My friend Thea wrote to tell me that a German publishing house had published my first novel *My Little Chinese*. She sent me the book and some fairly good reviews. I put them above the bed. I felt divine. I said to myself: "Girl, you were born for great things!"

PICTURE VIII

"Excuse me, are you a man or a woman?"

In front of me was standing a porter at Tokyo station.

"A woman."

"That's what I thought, but you've been standing the whole time beside the men."

In Japan, I got to know some fairly modern women who wanted to change their lives.

"I'd rather die than live like my mother," Sanchiko told me. "When my mother was thirteen years old, they found her a husband, my father. She left her parent's home dressed in white. The house was blessed, like for a corpse. She came to my father and his mother, who she had never met until then. She helped in the kitchen, she washed and she sewed. During meals, she served on her knees. And every year she was pregnant."

Sanchiko was involved with the freeing of the geishas. The police were always knocking on her door. The last time I visited her, she pulled me fearfully into the house. There I met a beautiful young woman. She had marvellous white skin, like the finest fragile porcelain. She awoke in me a strange desire to touch her face.

"I helped her to escape from Yoshivara," Sanchiko said. "She'd been taken to Yoshivara when she was three years old. Her parents sold her to some elderly geisha. She taught her to dance the old dances, to recite, she showed her how to arrange flowers. Five years ago, they put her by the open doorway in winter. There she had to stay until she got pneumonia. She got a husky, quiet voice, like all geishas have to have. If we hadn't succeeded last night, she would have stayed in Yoshivara until she died."

On the way home, I bought a bag of peaches. I thought about the beautiful young geisha, and suddenly became very sad. I remembered that I, too, had left my home behind many years ago. That I was travelling the world like a stone that gathers no moss. I love no-one and no-one loves me: no man, no woman, no child. Is it always going to be like this?

PICTURE IX

I got three students as soon as I reached Taiwan. Gentlemen in the city administration to whom I taught English. Mr Lee was the best of them. I'd never before met anyone who could learn with such energy. In every corner of the world, I carefully divided my time: time for study, reading, painting, writing. I never broke my schedule. Taiwan was the only exception. On Tuesdays and Sundays, Mr Lee joined me on the terrace after class. But he didn't bother me. He told me things I'd never have been able

to discover myself. The Tayals, head-hunters, interested me most of all.

"The Tayals lie hidden together in the grass for days," he told me. "When they spot a victim, they fling themselves on him or her: they cut off the head, and leave the body. Every young Tayal, before getting married, must bring home at least one head."

"I have to go and see them," I said.

"Out of the question, it's too dangerous... Well, maybe it would be possible with a police escort. And I'll come with you myself. Such a tiny thing as you are could disappear and be lost in the high grass," he answered.

One afternoon, we were sitting at the table. Mr Lee was strangely absentminded.

"Maybe he's tired," I thought.

I had shut the textbook earlier than usual. I waited. He had promised me that, just for me, he would find out more about the one hundred plus poisonous snakes that live in Taiwan. Mr Lee does what he promises. I waited for a new story.

"May I touch your hair, Alma?"

"Yes."

He stands up. Slowly. He comes behind my back. I feel a soft touch. Butterflies are walking across my hair. Fire burns at the end of his fingers. My skin answers. It unites with his. I don't know where I end and he begins.

PICTURE X

God knows how many soft Japanese handkerchiefs I soaked when I fled from Taiwan. A strange force wanted to burst my breast. I could have stayed. I could have woken every morning beside my own man and every evening gone to sleep by him. My life could have been warm and safe, such as it had never been. Only, it would no longer be me. Above all, it would have brought the feeling that I had got stuck half way.

I travelled Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea, Java, Siam, Cambodia and India. Everywhere, I wrote, painted and explored

like mad. I wanted to forget Taiwan. During the day, I could. But every night before I closed my eyes, there came a moment of loneliness and truth. Everywhere I went to sleep, I felt again how we had parted from each other.

Lee's hands enfold me like a tropical flower. He whispers, "stay".

"Yes, I'll stay," I think. I feel as if I've finally found a father or brother. I look at him, to tell him how grateful I am. I read in his eyes that gratitude is not enough, that it's not a daughter or sister he's looking for. On an island far from home, I finally recognised:

"Neither he or any other man will ever find in me what he seeks. Because it doesn't exist."

When I embarked on the boat at Genoa I dreamed:

"I'll come back home in three years. There'll be a great crowd at the station waiting for me. A little girl will bring me a great bunch of yellow roses. The mayor will make a speech. Then they'll offer me sausages."

After eight years I arrived in Celje. The station was completely empty.

PICTURE XI

As soon I got back, I wrote a lot and gave a lot of lectures. In almost every university in Europe. Last of all in Stockholm. The city was grey. Tiny droplets of rain sprayed from the sky. I set out for the university on foot, with Thea. Thea had a fairly large, light study in which she painted. She'd surrendered the room to me, as well as her large woollen blanket, in which I wrapped myself so as not to freeze.

The lecture room was packed out. When I entered, the students became respectfully silent. I began with an anecdote from New Guinea. I told them how I had met with cannibals. How they had surrounded me,

pinched me and felt my skin. Then, fortunately, the moonlight shone on me. What disappointment: "Just bones for soup," they thought. When I left, they didn't chase me. I ran like lightning. My steps only just touched the ground.

Then I suddenly felt really bad. I don't remember how Thea got me home and put me to bed. I felt cold, like being locked in a cube of ice. I trembled like Chinese bells above the door. I was drowning in a pure new world.

Thea had sat awake beside me all night: "The doctor says it's malaria. He's prescribed quinine."

I peered from the pile of blankets like an unhappy hamster.

"You are so smart, I don't know why you take such bad care of yourself," Thea said.

She painted in the mornings, and in the afternoons snuggled down in an armchair by my bed. She spoke little. I talked and talked. About myself and about my life. I even told her things I'd thought I'd forgotten long ago. I told her everything.

I was already missing her when she walked me to the station.

PICTURE XII

In Celje, I began putting together a new book: *Mystery of the South Sea*. I'm only happy when I'm writing!

Then one afternoon someone knocked on my door.

"Can't you leave me in peace!"

I opened it.

"*Du? Du bist endlich gekommen!*"

It was Thea. She was breathless from carrying a suitcase and easel from the station. I made up a bed so she could rest. I remembered that I hadn't asked how long she would stay. When I went to the room, she was still sleeping. Her hair was strewn over the white pillow. Thin, transparent lids covered her eyes. She was breathing peacefully and deeply.

I don't know why, but I didn't even ask next morning how long she'd be with me. Nor the following morning, nor any of the mornings that have happened to us in all these years. I am sure that neither of us will go anywhere, until God so decides.

Travelling never scared me. When my time comes, I'll sail far, far into eternal space. I'll find a star from which the earth can't be seen.

Translated from Slovene by Martin Creegan

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