

Translated excerpt

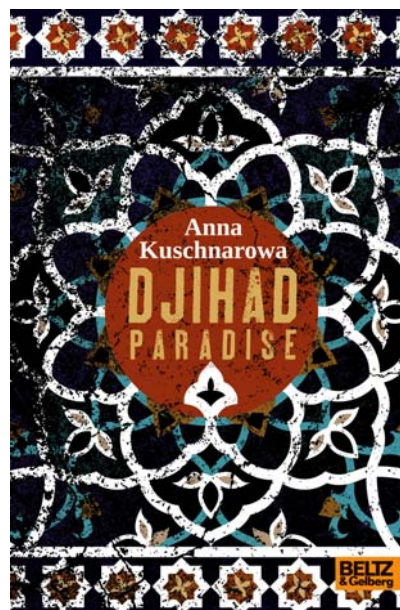
**Anna Kuschnarowa**  
***Djihad Paradise***

Beltz & Gelberg, Weinheim/Basel 2013  
ISBN 978-3-407-81155-4

pp. 229-240

**Anna Kuschnarowa**  
***Jihad Paradise***

Translated by Sheridan Marshall



That really was the crowning day of my life. I'd said the Shahada straight after Romea and now felt as though I'd been redeemed. Now I was no longer the kafir Julian Engelmann, but Abdel Jabbar, servant of the Almighty.

And now I was going to be getting married too. I'd made it. At nineteen I'd really made it – achieved what many people look for their whole lives and never find. I was the rock amid the flames. Nothing more could go wrong now that Allah, the Almighty, was at my side and in a few minutes I'd be betrothed to my dream woman forever. Awesome.

The imam had said that you're always a winner with Allah at your side. And he was fucking right. Of course he was right. He'd been studying it all for years.

At that moment the wali arrived – the guardian who had been selected for Romea from the community, and who was going to sign the marriage certificate for her. Our imam, Mustafa Metwally, was also here to look over the certificate and make sure everything was being done in accordance with sharia law. Saad was there too, a member of the community who was Romea's witness. Why had the imam chosen him as a witness though? This slimy piece of work, this sniveler, with a knack of suddenly appearing when you least expected it. But I made myself ignore how much Saad's presence was annoying me. I chose to concentrate on my witness, Murat, who was dancing from one leg to the other and couldn't seem to stand up straight. He was nervous and I didn't know why. He could have been a bit happier about the fact that his best friend was getting married.

But before I could get annoyed, the imam passed me the certificate for me to sign and my hand shook a little as I wrote my name. Then I passed the clipboard to the wali. And the marriage contract was complete. Then the imam came and said something I didn't understand in Arabic, before crossing the mosque to see Romea, who was waiting in the other corner of the room with Shirin and another woman. He said something to her, which she repeated, and in ten minutes we were married.

Awesome. How quickly things can change sometimes. I was a tiny bit disappointed. I'd imagined it all as being a bit more celebratory. But never mind. Now I could spend my whole life with Romea. Be as close to her as I wanted. A year ago my life was still a disaster and now, now I was following Allah. A real man with a real woman at his side.

And then came the celebrations. The men celebrated and the women as well. I was on a high and at the same time I couldn't wait for the party finally to be over. I hadn't been alone with Romea for two months.

From tonight Romea and I would be able to share the room that I had lived in with Murat since our arrival in the community.

"Oh great. And what about me? Do I have to share with any old person now?" Murat had asked the previous day.

"You'll survive," I replied.

"At least I'd got used to your snoring," said Murat.

"But you want me to be happy, don't you? Hey, old man, are we best friends or are we best friends?" I countered.

Murat gave me a long look which was difficult to interpret. I looked at him questioningly and it felt like an eternity before he answered: "Yes." He sighed. "Of course man, friends ... We're friends."

I held my hand out and, after a brief hesitation, he shook it. Then he packed up his stuff and cleared the decks for Romea.

And now, finally, here we were. I perched on the edge of the bed and waited and waited. It was strange, but I was really nervous, as though Romea was a stranger and not the woman I'd already been together with for more than a year.

And then when the door finally opened, it was actually a bit like a stranger coming in. I wasn't used to her henna tattoos and somehow I still wasn't used to her headscarf either. Shirin had come with her and now she hugged her. Then she left and Romea stood there in the doorway so that she could have a good look around the room.

I couldn't do anything to stop it – my heart leapt in my chest and when I stood up to go to her my legs were like jelly. And then, then we stood opposite one another, Romea and Julian. We stood opposite one another and something was different, new, strange. I would have liked to say Romea's name, but somehow it wasn't possible to call this woman by that name. Could somebody change so much in two months?

We stared at each other. But then I couldn't stand it anymore and I carefully pulled Romea's headscarf away. Her hair fell forwards and Romea smiled.

"I'm afraid it's going to be difficult for me to call you Abdel at first, " she said.

"I ... I don't think I can call you Romea anymore."

She looked at me quizzically and I laughed.

"Don't look so horrified, it's a good thing, isn't it? Didn't we want to become different people?"

Shania smiled and nodded. "Yes, Jul... Abdel."

She pushed her hands up under my shirt and then everything was clear. Shania and Abdel – ours must have been the best love story the community had ever seen.

S

And during our wedding night the last vestiges of Romea Achenbach fell away from me. Abdel made me into Shania and only Shania. And I can't say that I was sorry to say goodbye to Romea. I could live perfectly well without her. Really. I had found my place and was now living beside the man I loved and with the people who were always there for me. It's true that it was a quiet life – a small life, even – but why conquer the world when I was happy here?

And Abdel was the most wonderful husband it was possible to imagine. Admittedly he spent a great deal of time discussing important things with the other men, but when he was there he was the personification of tenderness.

Since I had said the Shahada I was permanently connected to the umbilical cord of all life. I could sense Allah – I felt his existence at every moment and that in turn fulfilled my own existence. Every bit of me was full of him. All at once everything had a purpose; suddenly I could see the world as it really was. It stood before me, clear and beautiful. My thoughts were also as clear as a mountain stream – so pure and at the same time so razor sharp that I could resist all temptations. Now I could only laugh about how malleable I had once been. How I had once succumbed to all the cheap superficiality in the world. I had finally recognised my role. I was strong, but in a different way to how I had once thought. Now, first and foremost, I was proud of being a Muslim woman. It was strange but even though it really wasn't all that long ago, my old life already felt so distant that it almost seemed to me as though it had never existed.

I was really growing into my role. My former life was so far away. Back in an unimaginably distant past. All ties had been severed. Over.

But then one day, around three months after the wedding, Zihan, my wali, came to me. "There are some people outside who claim that they are your parents."

"What?", I asked. My parents? Really. I'd had parents. Used to have. At one time. In that endlessly far away past as Romea Achenbach.

"They've been coming here everyday for days wanting to speak to you," said Zihan.

I started to panic. How had they found me? What did they want here? Now, after such a long time?

"Just send them away."

"I've been trying to. But they are extremely persistent."

My sense of panic grew and grew, surging in before me like a huge wave which wanted to snatch me away.

"I don't care. Just do something to make them go away." I looked at him pleadingly. "Please!"

"Fine," he said and turned round.

My heart raced, stopped, started again. Systole, diastole, pause, nothing, systole, pause. Nothing. There was a rushing in my ears. Why had they come now? Why right now? I asked myself why they hadn't found me earlier. They were normally pretty smart. Or had they been reading that brilliant child rearing manual again and found out that they shouldn't do anything, because children who run away are bound to be back whimpering at the door again at some point? They'd be waiting a long time before that happened. Did they not understand that I was a lot better off without them? How could they be so selfish?

Irritated, I went to the window and lifted the curtain a little. They were actually standing outside there. Susanne and Michael Achenbach. Their faces set in determined we're-getting-our-daughter-back expressions. And there was a whole crowd of people out there with them too. Journalists. Camera flashes. The imam talking patiently to them. My father gesticulating hysterically. Hakim, who was just putting his hand over one of the camera lenses and Mohammed, who was keeping the nosy horde of journalists out.

I let go of the end of the curtains which graciously obscured the scene before me. Hopefully they wouldn't let them in. I really had barely missed them. Everything was spinning inside my head, or perhaps it was the world that was spinning, faster and faster. A series of merry-go-rounds in continuous

acceleration that threatened to hurl me from my seat at any moment and crack me open on the asphalt. My temples were throbbing and, half-blind with pain, I felt my way back into our room. I'd hardly got in there when: cut.

"Hey, Shania, sweetheart!"

I heard a voice coming from very far away. Abdel's voice.

"Hey!"

I came round very slowly. "They're there," I whispered.

"Who? Who's there?" he asked.

"My parents."

"Calm yourself, sweetheart. No one is going to force you to speak to them if you don't want to. Mohammed and Hakim won't let them in."

I straightened up. "I know. But ... they just shouldn't come here. It makes me mad that they're ambushing me outside the house."

Abdel kissed me. Then he maneuvered me onto the bed and brought me some tea. "Listen, I'll speak to them tomorrow, ok?"

"Really? Do you want to do that?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yes of course. I'd do anything for you."

And the next evening, when my parents resumed their sit-in in front of the communal house, Abdel actually went down. I stood behind the curtains again and watched the scene. They had scarcely seen Abdel when Susanne and Michael Achenbach transformed into furies and set upon him. I couldn't hear what they were saying but I couldn't bear to see how they were treating Abdel. I sighed. I had no choice but to go down there myself.

As soon as I went outside they let go of Abdel and stared at me. I stared back. What else was I supposed to do? But at once the two of them threw themselves at me, as though they'd planned it in advance. They hung on to me and the physical contact with them was so abhorrent to me, two lead balls known as the past, but I couldn't think of anything better than to freeze and to throw myself to the floor internally. But, praise be to God, at some point they let go of me again.

The woman who had once been my mother scrutinised me. Her horror was written plainly in her face.

"What are you doing child? You were so pretty and now ... this shapeless dress and this headscarf. I would hardly have recognised you."

I said nothing.

"Why are you doing this to us? What have we done to you that you could just leave us in the dark like this? Do you know what we've been through in the last few months?"

There it was again. It was only ever about her.

"I really don't mean to offend you, but I'm doing fine. Much better than I ever was in your clock-watching existence."

They looked at me uncomprehendingly.

"Romea, just come home with us!", said the man who had once been my father.

What was he thinking?

"This is my home," I said.

My parents exchanged looks.

"You probably don't know yet, but Abdel – I mean, Julian – and I, we – we are married and we're really happy," I tried to explain.

Susanne Achenbach shook her head incredulously. "You – you've already converted? And you're married? – that's not possible. You're only seventeen!"

"Yes. So what?"

"But I don't understand. Why?", she asked.

"Because it makes me happy," I replied.

"Happy? Happy?!" My father was getting himself in a rage. "You're not trying to tell me that that," he pointed at my headscarf, "that that makes you happy. What have they done to you? Have they given you drugs? Or threatened to kill you if you tell the truth?" My father gripped my shoulders and shook me. The TV crew were there again today, filming everything.

"Don't take it personally, but I'd be so grateful if you could just leave me alone."

My parents seemed like strangers to me. It was unbelievable that until six months ago I'd been living under the same roof as them.

"Michael! Leave her now," my ex-mother interjected.

"I won't. They've done something to my daughter! This isn't Romea. They've given her drugs or brainwashed her or done something else to her. I won't have it!" He pointed angrily to the imam and the boys. "I won't let these terrorists take my daughter away from me!"

"You don't need to worry. I'm fine. Absolutely fine," I said, then turned around and went back into the house.

Perfect. The press had filmed everything. The Achenbachs would be able to watch it over and over again at home. And perhaps at some point they'd actually start to understand.

I saw that my father wanted to get into the house, but Abdel, Hakim and Mohammed wouldn't let him in.

There was no more Romea anymore. Praise be to God.