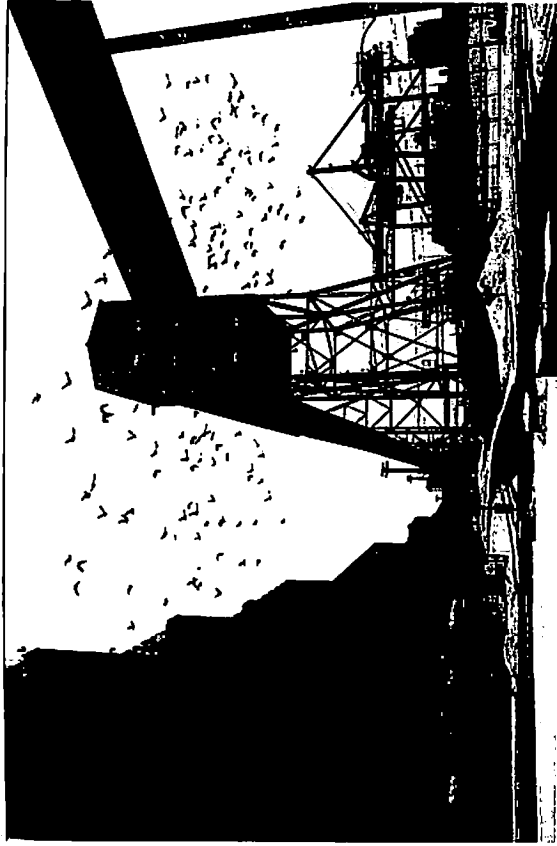


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Nicolaus and Anna
Fiction by Phil Harvey

"It appears to me, Mr. Nicolaus, that the sun goes around the Earth," Anna said. She paused for a second. "Or over it. The sun goes over the Earth. It doesn't have to go around anything, does it?"

Nicolaus gave a long sigh. Anna seemed to enjoy being housekeeper to a man with revolutionary ideas. And there was no denying that he enjoyed having her in his home. Short and slender, she looked younger than her thirty-seven years. Her black hair was carefully gathered at the nape of her neck in a neat roll. Her dark eyes gleamed when she spoke, giving her face an animated and attentive look that other men also found attractive. But she was strong willed, sometimes stubborn. He had to work hard to clarify his theories to her.

"The sun doesn't move at all, my dear Anna," Nicolaus said, not for the first time. "The Earth moves around it. The only reasonable way to explain the movement of stars and the sun and the other planets is with the sun at the center of the planetary orbits. I hope I can convince you one day. Others too," he said after a moment.

Nicolaus sat at a large round wooden table in the center of the main room of his house. There was a separate rectangular table for dining at the end of the room. Out the window above the dining table a large walnut tree dominated the view and, beyond, a twisting cobblestone street led to two other stone-and-wood houses. A half dozen sheep grazed in the grassy areas between.

Nicolaus referred to his large round table as the solar plane or, sometimes, the heliocentric universe. The table had five intricately carved legs that ended in three-toed claws clasping wooden spheres. At the center of the table stood a huge candle in an ornate candleholder, its drippings spattered on a mat beneath. When lit, this was the sun.

He kept several marked wooden balls on a shelf near the table. The one labeled E was a lustrous shiny sphere given him by an English acquaintance. Some of the others were larger, some smaller. These, and the flickering sun, he used

to explain his views about the solar system to other astronomers and mathematicians, to friends and relatives. "There," he said to Anna on an afternoon several weeks later when they had finished another session with the balls, using the light from the candle-sun to show day and night on Earth as it rotated and circled the sun.

"It looks upside-down to me," Anna said. "I suppose this construction is possible, but why would one dream up such a wild theory when things don't appear to be like that at all? You have always said that if something doesn't comport with the senses there's probably something wrong with it, and my eyes tell me that the sun goes from the east to the west over our heads and the Earth is not the body that is moving."

"I know it seems strange," Nicolaus said. "But when we deal with things this big and far away, appearances are misleading. I tell you there is no other way to explain the movements in the heavens except this way."

"Why didn't some other astronomer think of this a long time ago?"

"We get new information all the time, Anna. And I've gathered quite a lot of it."

"And you're smarter than the others, I know that." She regarded him. "You've gone and twisted that vest again, and your left shoe is coming unbuckled." She pulled the back of his frock coat with a practiced motion, straightening his waistcoat. "You'd better fix the shoe. You're a gentleman, canon of Warmia. You should look proper."

"When I go out, dear Anna, I will look like a gentleman. For your sake I will do it." He resisted the impulse to touch her arm in punctuation to his thought. Instead, he said, "You know the Bishop thinks it is not proper for you to be living in this house with me. Did you know that?"

"Yes," she said. She stood and stared at the shoe. "But surely there's no harm in it. We are both of an advanced age. I'm almost forty. You are..."

"Older."

"Somewhat older. What a silly thing." She started toward the kitchen, turned back. "Your work should live forever. I run this house, you map the universe. That is all."

She stopped briefly. "The Bishop is a pompous buffoon."

Nicolaus laughed out loud. "Yes," he said. "But I would not dare to say it. You speak so bravely. It is quite wonderful." He looked away. "He may be worse than a fool," he said in a low voice. He stopped and turned. "He has power."

"I've made your favorite dinner for tonight," Anna said, changing the subject. "Dumplings with pork and steamed cabbage."

To please Anna, Nicholas tried to remember the dishes he was supposed to favor, though many seemed nearly identical. But Anna's dumplings were excellent. He always said something about those. And he could smell them now, the pleasant, reassuring odor of baking dough, and butter.

That evening after supper Anna fluffed up Nicolaus' favorite pillow and put it between his back and the chair at the table where he worked. She took special care to smooth out the silken cover of the pillow, her hands moving in easy motions until the cover fit correctly. She lit two fresh candles and moved the lantern into the position that gave him the best visibility. "No observations tonight? No sky-watching?"

"No," he said. "Tonight I'll work on my book. I know where all the planets will be for the next two or three weeks."

"Astronomers," she said, addressing the sun candle. "Mathematicians." She turned to Nicolaus. "You don't know where your own stockings are half the time, but you know where the planets will be tomorrow."

"The planets are easier. They follow laws. They follow patterns." He looked up. "People are much harder to predict."

"Would you have it otherwise?"

He thought for a moment, his head tilted. "In some ways, I would. If evil were more predictable we could prevent it."

"And love?"

Nicolaus laughed. "My dear Anna," he said. "What is love? Would it be less lovely if more predictable?"

"Yes," she said. "I think it would be." She picked up the

E ball and spun it on the table. Nicolaus turned away, focused on his work.

"May I use the balls for a little while?"

Nicolaus aligned the pages of the bound folio that held his manuscript. Then he looked up. "Of course," he said. "Am I beginning to convince you?"

"Not really, Mister Nicolaus." She grinned. "But I'd like to try that orbit again with the Earth."

"Light a fresh candle for the sun," Nicolaus said. "The sun is always brightest. No one questions that."

Returning to his manuscript, Nicholas carefully transposed a long series of numbers from his notes into a set of columns that occupied a full right-hand page.

He dipped his quill into the inkpot, which was nearly empty. He looked at Anna. "Where do we keep the ink?"

"You—we—keep it on the third shelf in the hallway closet," Anna said. "I'll get it."

After refilling the inkwell, Anna stood, held the Earth in her right hand and walked around the fresh bright sun, turning the Earth as it orbited the candle. "Why does the Earth have to move at all?" she asked.

Nicolaus looked up. Suppressing a twinge of annoyance he said: "I'm not absolutely certain about this, but I think that if the Earth stopped moving around the sun it would crash into the sun and be destroyed."

"Why?"

"As I said, I'm not absolutely sure. But everything moves. All of the planets move constantly in orbit around the sun and the Earth is no exception. I think that movement is a necessary part of the explanation of the universe."

"My, oh my," she said with a little smile. "Explanation of the universe."

"I try to think about all of it," Nicholas said. "Venus, Mars, Mercury, the firmament." He pushed his chair back and stood. "Let me show you again." He walked to her, took the Earth from her fingers, moved it around the sun and gave her a smaller wooden ball. "That's Venus. Move it around the sun, closer in, while I move the Earth in a bigger orbit outside. Slower. That's it. Now you see the position of Venus against the position of the Earth and both in posi-

tion with the sun. That's how we observe Venus as we do, appearing, disappearing, always on the sun side because its orbit is closer to the sun than ours. I observe these things month after month, year after year. These circling orbits are the only possible way to explain it all."

"I think I'm beginning to understand," she said. "God keeps these things going, I guess."

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe God keeps all this going. That we don't know."

The next evening they dined together, as they often did. Although Anna usually volunteered to eat in the kitchen, it seemed pointless if they wanted to talk. At the end of the meal, Nicolaus sat back in his chair. The dumplings, as usual, had been excellent, and he savored them. "You take very good care of me," he said.

"I do my best," she said. "I'm your housekeeper."

"I don't know what I should do if the Bishop decreed that you must stop living here," he said.

"Oh, you'd manage," she said. "But I'd be out in the cold. There aren't many places a woman of my station can find a home." She paused. "Besides I am happy here with you."

"Yes," he said. "Yes." There was a long silence. The curtains breathed gently in and out at the open window. A quiet breeze relieved the close air in the room. Unconsciously, they both adjusted their postures to take advantage of it.

Nicolaus moved to sit down at his desk and turned to his manuscript. "We will ignore the Bishop as long as we can," he said.

When Anna had cleared and cleaned the table she stood behind Nicolaus and said, "He's asked to see me next Thursday."

"What?" Nicolaus turned. "Who?"

"The Bishop. I'm to appear at his offices at the cathedral next Thursday at six. It was a formal message, delivered by Gregori. I was afraid to tell you."

"But you should have told me!" Nicolaus said. "What if he says you must leave me?"

"I will talk him out of it," Anna said. "That is the best

way. It will not do to try to hide from him. He could make my life miserable. It will interfere with your work...."

"He could make anyone's life miserable around here, for that matter," Nicolaus said. "But I'm afraid for you. Take someone with you. Take my cousin Sveti."

"I can't," Anna said. "I'm to come alone. It was very clear." She paused and brushed off the front of her dress, straightening the ankle-length skirt. "I'll be all right. Don't worry. I know how to take care of myself."

For the next three days Nicolaus buried himself in his manuscript so fully that he forgot the Bishop and Anna's visit. At breakfast on Friday as she served him a boiled egg and strips of smoked herring, he suddenly remembered. "What happened with the Bishop? What did he say?"

She looked down briefly. "It's all right. He gave a little speech about appearances. He gave a lecture about how it must look to others to have me living in the same house, alone with you. This house could be seen as 'notorious' in the eyes of the church, he said. I told him that we have always exercised the utmost propriety and that we would continue to do so." She turned away. "His voice seemed to threaten me, though."

"How so?"

"He said I must come back on the Thursday after Whitsunday. And he said something very curious. He said when I come back I must bind up my breasts to make my figure as flat as possible. And I must be there at six. Alone."

"I don't like this," Nicolaus said. "I don't like this at all." He looked at her for a long moment, his eyes soft. Then he turned away. "Perhaps you should move out before you fall under this man's power."

"I won't move out. I can't. I am nearly forty. There is no work for me in Warmia. I am still my uncle's legal ward and he despises me. When I stayed there before I was beaten. And..." Anna stopped.

"Anna. I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"I have nowhere to go," she said. "Nowhere."

Nicolaus stood. A dozen walnuts were scattered on the solar table. He took two nuts between his palms and

squeezed. One of the nuts cracked.

"Besides," she said. "You need me. I run this house, and help your work succeed. Your work is more important than the Bishop."

"It's true that I could hardly manage without you."

"I won't move out," she said.

They regarded each other for a long moment and then, simultaneously, both looked away.

On the Thursday after Whitsunday Nicolaus sat at the round wooden table, drumming his fingers. All the windows in the room were open but the heat was oppressive. He rose, pulled back the heavy drapes at the central window and propped them aside with a chair. The dark portrait of his great uncle stared down at him. The clock on his mantelpiece struck the half hour. He watched as Anna entered through the front door.

Anna's mouth was grim. "He says I can stay for now."

"That's all? You persuaded him?"

"Yes. For now." She paused. "I must go back again in one month."

"Why?" Nicolaus stood, his body unsteady.

"He says..." She searched for words. "I think, because I must assure him, I must repeat...repeat to him every month about our propriety, about our...that everything is proper." Her lower lip began to tremble. She turned, straightened her shoulders, and walked quickly out into the kitchen.

For nearly six months, they did not speak of the Bishop. Nicolaus' manuscript, *De Revolutionibus*, was taking shape. It filled three folios now and Nicolaus was becoming more and more confident, more certain of his conclusions. On some days Anna seemed distant, distracted, but she kept the inkwell full, cooked his favorite cabbage and pork and dumplings, and made his clothing presentable. When he asked if she was feeling well she assured him that she was. On some days he did not believe her.

From time to time, Nicolaus would find Anna moving the planets around the candle/sun, her concentration avid. He drew her diagrams providing more detail than he himself was certain about. "Could Mercury be here?" she asked one afternoon, holding a ball that was much smaller than the

well-worn Earth.

"Mercury could be there only briefly, I think," he said. "That far out of position it would shoot off into space. Here." He brought Mercury back into orbit.

"I see," she said. "I think I understand that part. But then it seems out of position with the others if the orbits are circles."

"Yes," Nicolaus said. "But it's very close. And there's no other explanation."

"Do the orbits have to be round? Couldn't Mercury go like this?" Anna moved Mercury around the sun as she spoke.

"An elliptical orbit? Could that be possible?" Nicolaus paused. "It would explain a great deal, but I don't think it's possible. The orbital laws..." For the second time, he stopped. "Still. I must think about that. An elliptical orbit. An interesting idea."

A week before Christmas, Nicolaus returned home with two bottles of wine, something very unusual for him. As he entered the house, Anna appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. "A celebration!" Nicolaus said. "I have finished the first draft of my work. And Wolinsky has agreed to write a preface."

"You told me that Igor Wolinsky is a fool," Anna said.

"Doesn't matter," Nicolaus said, with a laugh. "In this case I need someone accepted by the church and by the academy. Doesn't matter if he's a fool." He paused for a moment. "He is, of course." He grinned. Anna smiled.

"Besides," Nicolaus said, "It's your birthday next week. We can celebrate that too. Fetch us some glasses."

Returning with two crystal goblets, Anna placed them on the table in line with the normal Martian and Venusian orbits. Nicolaus filled the goblets with the dark red wine, raised his glass to Anna and said, "To your birthday. And to my book."

Anna raised her glass and drank several swallows.

"Not so fast," Nicolaus said, his tone friendly. "Let's make this celebration last all evening. It is such a pleasure for me to be here with you, to have you taking care of me." Anna put her glass down and turned away. "Is something the matter?"

"No," she said quickly. "It is very good for me to be here with you. It is quite wonderful for me to be here with you." She took another drink of wine and stood, carrying the glass in her right hand.

"I'll just be a minute," she said. "I must see to the roast." She walked slowly to the kitchen and returned a few minutes later. She sat down directly opposite Nicolaus, took a sip of her wine, set the wine down on the table near the extinct sun, and looked into the fire, now warm and burning low.

"I will not go back again," she said, her voice hard.

"Go back where?"

"To the Bishop. I will not go back to the Bishop."

"What has happened?"

"He...has befouled me."

"What?"

She sat up straighter in her chair, squared her shoulders. "You know I said he told me to bind my breasts to make my figure flat?"

"Yes?"

"I did as he asked. It seemed a small thing. When I went back that way he said how nice I looked. How much better I looked. 'Almost like a boy,' he said." She paused. "The man is a worm, a reptile." She took a sip of wine. "He handed me a choir robe. He said 'Go in the other room and take off your skirts and put this on.' I said I couldn't do that. He said, very slowly and very clearly, 'You must do as I say or you will have to leave that man's house.' I was afraid." She stopped and looked at Nicolaus. She took another sip of wine.

"I thought about what my choices might be. I thought about what a foul creature that man is, a nothing. I thought about how some people break their backs for years to please others just to have something to eat, just to be able to live, just to survive. They sweat and toil for years! What he wanted would take only a minute. I would give nothing of myself. It would have no meaning for me. I thought, 'Why not?'" She stopped, picked up the E ball, and moved it in a little piece of arc around the dead sun. "I came back wearing the choir robe, with my breasts flattened, my hair tucked up in a biretta."

"My God," Nicolaus whispered.

"I thought it would be a small price to pay for staying here with you and helping the Earth go around the sun." She took a drink of wine. "I believe it now. The Earth does go around the sun." She looked at him, a look of triumph. "I do believe it now." She stood, and lit the candle in the middle of the solar plane. "I know now that it is true."

"It is true."

"When I came back he made me bend over the rail, right in front of the altar in the little chapel at the side of the cathedral in full view of the God he worships. Oh, the man is a foul beast, a pig's canker, even his privates are ugly."

"Anna!"

"He penetrated me the way he would penetrate a boy. It hurt, but it didn't last long. The only part of me he had was...appropriate to the nature of the man."

"Anna!"

"But I won't go back again. I can't."

"Of course not."

She looked down at the floor, then at the glowing fire. "I have perhaps another month and then I will have to leave."

Nicolaus stood, speechless. She moved toward him and let her glance move over his face. "You must finish your book," she said. "It will change everything."

"We can meet, after you leave..."

"No," she said. "We cannot meet. Then we would be as bad as he. We must not meet."

She let him hold her. They touched, gently, pressed close together.

Nicolaus' tears dampened Anna's hair. "We'll think of something," he said. "That man will not destroy us. I will not allow it."

He pressed her to him more closely. Over her shoulder, through the window, the night sky was crowded with stars. Venus, he observed, was right where it belonged.

Note: All accounts of Copernicus' life agree that he had a housekeeper named Anna, that she was considerably younger than he was, and that the Bishop of Dantiscus somehow ordered him to get her out of his house. The rest of this story is fiction, as far as I know.