# Another Life

## Sara MacDonald

## Published by HarperCollins

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

# *Prologue*

**Montreal, Quebec 1998**

Mark went down to the basement to take one last look at Isabella before he wrapped her up in bubble wrap and placed her in the crate. He had become so used to her being down there that it would seem strange not to have her dominating the room. Despite the ravages of her age and the sea, her presence filled the space. Her eyes in the damaged face watched him with a look that was mysterious and resolute, as if she had seen everything and nothing could surprise her any more.

Her expression seemed to change in the varying light. A face that was made up of such a multiplicity of emotions that Mark thought the carver must have known his model well. This was not a face merely glimpsed or remembered. This face he had created was mobile and frighteningly alive. Her carver had seen and captured the essence of the woman, and even now, a decade later, Mark believed he could glimpse an innocent sensuousness. A consciousness of self that was part of being a beautiful woman and seeing herself reflected in a man's eyes.

The paint had flaked on the left cheek giving her an air of having been abandoned. There was a deep cut in the wood above her right ear, probably made by a propeller. When Mark first saw her in the garden of a house he never meant to revisit, he had been startled, for it seemed to him that he must have been guided there solely in order to rescue her.

Who better than a historian to discover her origins?

His exasperated family admitted that no one else would be foolish enough to ship her from Newfoundland to a basement in Montreal in order to find out who she was and where she had come from.

'You're so fanciful, Dad. I guess you believe she was waiting for *you* to come along, huh?'

Of course, he wouldn't admit to it. Neither could he quite understand how his family were not equally enchanted by her.

'In the right place, I might be,' Veronique said. 'But not in my basement, watching me. Her eyes follow me about. I forget she is in here and at night when I switch the light on she gives me a terrible fright.'

'This is one of the loveliest figureheads I've ever seen. It's worth preserving,' Mark said. 'Pity she belonged to a British schooner, not one of ours . . . Various bodies in England are funding most of the cost, but it's the same over there as it is for us here, they have to fight for every penny they get.'

Mark turned and Inez was standing behind him, hip jutted out to support Daisy who was sleepily sucking her thumb. Inez put her on the ground and they carefully started to wrap the figurehead in layers and layers of bubble wrap, until she resembled a mummy and her face and features were distorted by plastic.

Sitting on the floor, Daisy looked up and pointed. 'Poor lady gone?'

Mark picked the child up. 'Yes. She is going to fly on an aeroplane over the sea and someone a long way away is going to make her better.'

'I like lady,' she said. 'What name?'

'Isabella.' The child's hair smelt of butter. 'The lady used to stand on the front of a ship and swim through the waves and look very beautiful. Her name is Isabella, and we have wrapped her up in a thick coat of bubbles so she won't get hurt on the aeroplane.'

'Poor lady,' Daisy said again as they went up the stairs, and

Mark wondered how he could appease his wife for flying off with his wooden angel.

He was not ready to give her up yet; and he needed to know who he was going to give her up to.

# *Chapter 1*

Through the trees Gabby could see the yellow arm of the mechanical digger in the top field. It was the end of an era. No more cattle or the sweet grassy smell of them bringing the flies into the garden in summer. No sound of cows' teeth munching the new green blades in sharp little stretch and pulling sounds. No wheezy human-sounding bovine coughs making them jump in the dark.

Charlie had occasionally ploughed a portion of the top field for cabbages or kale, and when Josh was small he and his friends had wrinkled their noses at the smell of rotting greens. But cabbages had been infinitely better than executive houses.

'I wouldn't have sold an acre of land if I'd had a choice,' Charlie said miserably, watching the digger throwing up dark earth in all directions like an angry elephant. He was secretly appalled by that great arm tearing at his sacred field. Gabby and Nell could see that, despite his effort to appear businesslike, he felt as sick as they did.

'We'll get used to it,' Nell said quickly. 'We'll make a windbreak to hide the houses. We can fill the gap with trees.'

'Of course we'll get used to it,' Gabby said, wanting to cry. 'Charlie, you had to do it, we know that, it's just . . .'

'*I know*,' Charlie said abruptly, turning away and striding in his muddy boots across the farmyard. He hoisted himself up into the Land Rover and drove noisily down the lane to look at his pheasant chicks, something he always did when he wanted to be alone.

'Oh, Nell,' Gabby said. 'This is far worse for you; you've lived here longer than either of us.'

Nell lifted her shoulders in a pragmatic little shrug.

'I hate seeing any of the land go, Gabby, but we have to survive and it's better than losing the farm or having the financial worries Ted and I had. Charlie is more businesslike than his father. That huge field had its limitations; it slopes, it's exposed to the wind, and it's stony. At least we keep the south end and the views. Those houses are going to lose the sun early and they won't have a view. It's just that we're all sentimentally attached, it's such a beautiful field. Does Josh know work has started?'

'No, not yet, I've avoided mentioning it. You know how Josh likes things to stay exactly the same, he and Charlie argued about it last summer. Josh knows Charlie had no choice, but he refused to see why the paddock by the road couldn't be sold instead. He wouldn't accept that the paddock wouldn't bring in enough money. Also, Nell, he feels guilty about minding so much when he's not prepared to take on the farm himself.'

They walked slowly back towards the house, and as Nell reached her cottage she said, 'You realize Charlie hasn't given up on that one? He thinks Josh will come into the business later when he's a bit older, when he's tired of doing his own thing.'

Gabby hesitated. She was sure Josh would not change his mind. He had chosen his career and she felt, so strongly that it shocked her, that she did not want him to change it.

'He might, Nell, but I doubt it. He loves it here, it's his home, but farming isn't something to do lightly or for sentimental reasons, is it? It gets harder every year. He would have to go to agricultural college, he'd have to be totally committed, and who knows what farming is going to be like for his generation? I mean, few jobs are for life any more.'

Nell laughed. 'You sound like a little old general.'

Gabby made a face. 'Do I? How is that huge picture of yours coming on?'

'It's a nightmare! Come and have a look. It feels like the Forth Bridge. All I've done so far is run some tests.'

They went into Nell's chaotic cottage. Her two old cats lay curled together in the lid of a sewing basket in front of the Aga. Nell led the way, treading over old Sunday papers that littered the floor, into her pristine workroom where Mahler was playing quietly. Gabby never ceased to be amazed at how Nell managed to keep this one room like an operating theatre when the rest of the house grew more like an animal refuge every year.

Both women stood staring at the painting of a stout, bosomy lady clad in pearls and evening dress in an attractive oval frame. The painting looked as if it had been housed in a damp attic for many years, and Nell rather wished it had stayed there.

'It's a lovely frame,' Gabby said. 'The woman is . . .'

'. . . Hideous!' Nell snorted. 'The canvas is in a bad way, as you can see, but it is a quality painting, although I'm unsure if it's as valuable as the Browns believe it to be. I've told them to seek expert opinion; I'm out of date with valuations.'

'I suppose they want you to clean and restore it before they have it valued?'

'I think they hope to send it to Christies.'

Gabby peered more closely at it. It had craquelure or crocodiling almost everywhere and the paint on the dress was flaking badly. In the hands of someone less expert than Nell the picture could end up more restoration than painting.

'Nell, I'm not surprised you're quailing. This is going to take a lot of work. I thought you were going to refuse larger paintings?'

'I was. They caught me at a weak moment. They've dated her around 1892. She's been restored before, twice they think, possibly in the 1930s. It looks as though it's been consolidated with wax-resin and just surface cleaned, but I'd have said it had been cleaned at a later date, possibly in the 1950s.'

Gabby and Nell stared down at the painting. The discoloration of both the varnish and overpaints had affected the image, and excessive restoration in the background meant that no detail could be seen and all sense of the painting was impaired. Gabby was interested in the process of the restoration.

'I could come and help you as soon as I've finished cleaning *The Cobbler's Cats*.'

'I thought you had this figurehead restoration in St Piran coming up?'

'Peter's asked me to go and look at it but I'm not sure I'll get the job, Nell. I haven't got any experience of figureheads. Anyway, I could help you in the evenings.'

'See what happens before you commit yourself to helping me. When are you going to see it?'

'It's arriving in London from Canada and is being driven down to Cornwall next week. Oh, Nell, I'd really love to be given the chance of restoring her.'

'There's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't be offered the job, Gabby. You've got a growing reputation and it reflects the work you're starting to be offered.'

Gabby smiled. 'I've had an excellent teacher.'

Nell patted her arm. 'Coffee?'

'I'd better get to work, Nell, half the morning has gone.' Gabby preferred her coffee without cat hairs in it. 'Let me help you get this doughty woman out of her frame before I go.'

They eased the painting out of its frame and laid it carefully on Nell's table, face up and uncovered to avoid any more paint loss. The portrait was large and had obviously been moved frequently as there were lines of stretcher marks where it had been folded, and the craquelure followed the lines of a stretcher and had caused the most damage.

'I wonder if she was passed from one family member to another in desperation, constantly being removed from her frame, poor old dear,' Gabby said.

'Well, someone loved her enough to commission a huge

six-foot painting of her. Removing the overpaint is going to take the most time.' Nell peered at the woman's bosoms with a magnifying glass. 'I'll remove that varnish with isopropanol. Can you see? There's a thin layer of discoloured natural resin. I'm going to have to remove most of the more recent restorations. I suspect . . .' Nell moved over to the foreground of the lady's sumptuous dress '. . . that each restorer has altered the tone of the previous overpaint, rather than removing it. I'm pretty sure I'll find layers concealing more damage . . .'

Gabby smiled as she watched Nell. She was already caught in the excitement of restoring. Her face had come suddenly alive as her eyes darted to and fro, assessing the damage with a keen and professional eye. It was this, Nell's passionate interest in her work, that had fired Gabby's imagination and curiosity all those years ago.

Gabby walked across the farmyard back to the house. Despite the distant noise of the digger a feeling of contentment filled her. She had been afraid when Josh left home that the gap he left would yawn before her, yet slowly but steadily the work had come in to distract her. She had now got to the stage of having to refuse commissions. For the first time in her life she was able to make a financial contribution to the farm, and it felt wonderful.

She walked through the kitchen to her workroom, which was the oldest part of the house with a cobbled floor that had once been Charlie's office. The window looked out on the small, walled garden which dipped downhill to the daffodil fields.

At the start of every daffodil season Gabby would stand transfixed by the green and yellow sloping fields full of emerging buds and the startling vivid blue of the ocean behind them. The scene was reminiscent of the poster of daffodil pickers that had been stuck on the classroom wall at school. It had been that poster that had enticed her to run away and climb on a coach to Cornwall.

She moved away from the window to the small painting

propped up on an easel. She wanted to finish it today. It was the last of her backlog as she had decided not to take on any more commissions until she had seen the figurehead next week.

Ever since Peter Fletcher, the curator from the museum in Truro, had rung her she had felt restless with anticipation. She thought about this lost figurehead making its way from Canada on its last voyage home. She tried not to think how disappointed she would be if she was not offered the job of restoring it.

She picked up a swab of cotton wool on a stick from the jam-jar beside her and started to work, concentrating, engrossed, as her fingers moved deftly, defining detail and discovering small hidden surprises out of layers of dirt. She smiled as she discovered under the old cobbler's hands, not darkness, but a beautiful drawer of nails.

# *Chapter 2*

Gabby set off to see the figurehead at St Piran a week after the digger started to scar the top field. At the top of the hill she got out and climbed onto the gate. She looked down on the farm crouched in the trees, so familiar; and yet, as she gripped the top of the gate all seemed suddenly unfamiliar, as if she was a stranger looking down on a homestead containing the lives of people she knew nothing about.

A small figure came out of the barn and walked across the yard. Charlie? She could not see from here. The odd sensation persisted. The hot, still day pressed down on her, the heat shimmered above the grass and hedgerow. The morning swelled with the sound of bees settling on the honeysuckle in the hedge. Horseflies hovered in petrol-blue clouds over the cowpats in the field beyond the gate.

Still she stood on the gate looking downwards, suspended and held by the day that slowly wound forward to the next minute and the next and the next. In her mind's eye she saw the hands of a clock crawling round the face in slow motion, so imperceptibly towards something that she was afraid they might stop altogether and she would forever be suspended, held here, above her life, waiting.

The sun bounced and glinted off the sea, dazzling her. Her hands on the gate seemed extraordinarily translucent, her body torpid and yet light as if she might blow away like a leaf, hither and thither across the field having no weight at all. She thought suddenly, *I would have no place down there if it wasn't for Josh. If my child had never existed Nell*

*and Charlie would be a memory only. A memory I reached for in the dark because it reminded me of what I had been running from, that first cold day when I stood here looking down at the pickers bent to the tight green buds of daffodils in a freezing wind.*

She stared beyond the gate, away to the horizon, across Charlie and Nell's five hundred acres below her, then she turned abruptly and got back into the car.

As she drove away from the sea she began to think about the figurehead. Peter Fletcher had told her, briefly, that it had come from a trade schooner called the *Lady Isabella*, which had set sail from St Piran and foundered in Canadian waters in 1867 with all hands on board.

The figurehead must have been salvaged years ago, but had only recently been discovered by a Canadian historian who had taken the time and trouble to trace a figurehead, from a foreign vessel, all the way back to the small Cornish port from where it had started its journey.

Gabby had been to the library and got out everything on marine figureheads she could find. Nell had given her a list of maritime museums and suggested she go over and visit Valhalla on Tresco to view the collection of figureheads more closely. She had also dug out old restoration books from her lecturing days which she thought Gabby might find useful.

Gabby pored over the photographs, fascinated by the wealth and beauty of the ships and figureheads inside the books she had borrowed. She had surprised herself with her sudden overriding conviction that this figurehead was a commission she must have. It was the first time she had been approached for the sort of work Nell herself had never undertaken and it astonished her that her opinion was being sought; that she had credibility on the basis of her own work, not Nell's reputation.

Nell was sure that one of the reasons Gabby had been approached was her skill with intricate church panels. Gabby was more patient than Nell had been in her younger days. On wood it was necessary to peel away centuries of wax, stain

and varnish, to reveal, after a tiring and lengthy process, if you were lucky, a hidden painting. The moment of discovery, the moment a fleck of colour appeared under your fingers like magic, was incomparable. Gabby never tired of the excitement and anticipation of a discovery. Nell preferred the satisfaction of simply transforming what she was working on to the comparative rarity of finding a concealed painting that had not been ruined.

As Gabby entered the village a small wind gusted from the sea, rocking her car. It carried with it a sudden presentiment that was disturbing. She felt a sharp stab of anxiety that made her breathless. She parked her car near the small museum and walked towards the group of people waiting for her in the porch.

For a moment Gabby hesitated with her hand on the latch of the old Methodist chapel that was now a museum. The group of men waiting for her were in shadow, she could not see their faces.

There was a second when she could have turned and run back to the car, driven away fast, back to the farmhouse lying squat and secure amid small trees all bent one way by the winds like figures frozen in a Russian landscape.

She could have run and never known the possibilities the future could hold. But someone called out and the moment slid away into impossibility. She opened the gate and passed through it, towards the men who stood in shadow and the sound of her name being called.