
Opening Extract from...

The Illuminations

Written by Andrew O'Hagan

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TO KARL MILLER

Author's Note

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'Photography takes an instant out of time, altering life by holding it still.'

DOROTHEA LANGE

NEIGHBOURS

Snow was falling past the window and in her sleep she pictured a small girl and her father in a railway carriage. The train passed into Ayrshire and the girl looked at nothing over the fields, losing herself in a sense of winter and the smell of soap on her father's hands. *It's cold, Mog*. He carried a light for her all his life and proved she was easy to love. Maureen opened her eyes and found that sixty years had gone by in an instant. Snowflakes poured from the street lamp like sparks from a bonfire. The night was empty and there wasn't a sound in the flat except for the echo of yesterday's talk shows.

This weather would put years on you. The sentence ran through her mind and then she wiped her eyes. Things are slow at that hour and you can easily miss a knock at the door or someone calling your name. Her memory had taken her to another place, where snow blew around a vanished train, and now she was home in her own warm bed and already tense for the day's share of things sent to try her. Her thoughts came out at night like mice and the old scratching woke her up.

How hard can it be to stop what you're doing for five minutes and dial your mother's number? I could be lying dead, thought Maureen. You give them the best years of your life and then you get the sob stories, the hard-done-to stuff, as if you hadn't given them everything under the sun.

She moved the pillows up. They have short memories. No she didn't take them to art galleries and no she didn't sit down with the homework. She was too busy putting a meal on the table. Short memories, she thought again, looking to the window. Some day she would write something down on paper from her heart, just to tell the truth. Her father often said it was good to write a letter because it's something people can keep. They can look at it again and think about what they did. And they can write back and say sorry because they think the world of you.

It wasn't even five in the morning. She reached for the clock and knocked over a pile of audio books. 'Some people have too many friends to be a good friend to anyone,' she said. Then the sound registered, a knock at the door. She swung her legs and waited to hear it again, then she was up, putting on a cardigan and turning on the lamps. Maureen told herself the roads would be bad unless the lorries were out with the salt. She couldn't find her carpet slippers and she kept the door-chain on.

'It's you, Anne.'

Anne was her neighbour, eighty-two, and a bad sleeper. She had taken to wandering the corridors at night. Her neighbours often saw her shadow passing their glass doors, but they were used to upsets. It was a sheltered housing complex and none of the residents was young. The flats had front doors onto the street but the other doors, glass ones, led to a common area made up of a breakfast room, a reception, a launderette.

'It's me, Maureen. I'm so sorry.'

Maureen undid the chain. Anne was fully dressed, biting her lip. The ferns behind her made it look as if she had just walked in from the woods. But Anne always looked like she'd seen the world. She had beautiful skin. And her skirts were always made of the best.

'Good God,' Maureen said. 'You're like somebody dressed for a summer dance. Come away in.'

'I won't come in.'

'What's wrong?'

'Can I borrow your tin opener?'

Anne was holding a tin of Heinz tomato soup. It didn't do to argue with her at a time like this, so Maureen went off to find her slippers. When she came back Anne was in the middle of saying something about how she loved Blackpool and how the Illuminations were the best thing about it, the night when they turned on all the lights. She wanted to see it again. She put her arms across her chest and tapped rapidly at her own shoulder. Maureen had seen that before.

'Come on, then,' she said.

Anne's flat was like a palace. Maureen loved the story it told, not that she knew it, but a person with taste always has a story. Once they were inside, Anne walked to the microwave and turned round. 'The rabbit wants his dinner,' she said. 'He's not had a thing all day.'

'Who?'

'The rabbit.'

Anne nodded towards the breakfast bar. The rabbit was ceramic, about six inches tall with green eyes and crumbs of bread at its feet. Maureen noticed the snow falling past the window in the living room. The rabbit looked creepy. 'Now, Anne,' she said, 'we need to make sure we're not telling stories.'

'I know it's daft,' Anne said. 'But it's okay. He's only sitting and it's cold outside.'

'But, Anne . . .'

'He's awful hungry.'

Anne's mind opened onto itself. She thought of water for a second and the warm baths she used to draw. *Children don't like it too warm. The same as a photographic solution in fact, one hundred and twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit. That's what you want. Let the chemicals dissolve in the listed order and make sure it's not too hot or the solution can't take it and the image will be blurred.*

Maureen looked into the rabbit's eyes.

'This is his favourite,' Anne said. 'Soup is all he ever wants for his dinner.' Then she wiped the tin with a damp cloth and handed it to Maureen. 'Some of these things have a ring you can pull, but this one doesn't for some reason.'

BLACKPOOL

In a photograph pinned above the kettle, the face of George Formby was peeking round a door. 'Turned out nice again!' it said in ink under his name, a curly signature. He was smiling for the whole of Britain. The electricity sockets were covered over with Elastoplast, and the rings on the cooker were out of bounds, too, taped over with a saltire of white plastic tape. Maureen thought it was like the stuff the police put up around the murder scene in those crime dramas. No hot kettles or rings. It was Jackie the warden's decision, and it was made, Maureen knew, in consultation with Social Services. They were sorry but Anne just couldn't operate these electrical goods because she might burn herself. Maureen warmed the soup and Anne stood back ready to say something. 'I'd like to take him to Blackpool, by the sea, by the sea, by the beautiful sea,' she said, half-singing. 'I always thought I would end up there.'

Anne was fine most days, but she was changing. The rules at Lochranza Court stated clearly that any resident incapable of working a kettle would have to be moved to a nursing home. Nobody wanted that. Every few months it happened to one of the residents, but Anne needed her friends. 'That's right, Maureen,' said Jackie. Anne added somehow to the dignity of the place, with her past and her pictures and all her nice cushions. So the warden was in cahoots with Maureen, at sixty-eight the youngest resident in the complex. They pretended it was still fine for Anne to be in the flat by herself, but she wasn't able to use the kitchen. The microwave was okay.

Maureen was looking at the rabbit again.

'Once upon a time, I used to go to restaurants,' Anne said. 'Fancy ones. In New York. Now it's "ping" this and "ping" that. The cooker doesn't work. And the rabbit doesn't like his soup cold.'

'How do you know that, Anne?'

'Well, it's me that lives with him.'

Anne used to read lots of books. Somebody said she was a well-known photographer years ago and Maureen could believe it. You knew by the way Anne arranged her lamps – and by the lamps themselves, the beautiful shades – that she had travelled. She had the kind of rugs you can't buy in Saltcoats. You just don't see rugs like that. And what a lovely radio she had by the sofa next to all those paperweights showing Blackpool in the old days. When Maureen visited the flat next door she always went round looking at the faces of the people in the framed photographs. She loved seeing them caught in the middle of their interesting lives. That was a thing. People who didn't know Maureen immediately had her respect, as if not knowing her was part of their achievement.

Anne talked about him with the kind of deference that keeps its own counsel against the living. There was nobody wiser than Harry. And he did look like a man in charge, peering from holiday snaps taken on the Isle of Arran. They weren't snaps, actually, but carefully taken photographs, developed, printed and framed with love, and they tended to involve the sky or the sea or a beautiful mixture of both. The one hanging over the telephone table showed the Pladda lighthouse at the end of a field of bluebells, and by her bed she had Harry sitting near a loch. He was smoking a pipe and looking down at a model aeroplane in his hands. His smile was a private note to Anne. They might have been hiding out from the world.

'I owe everything to him,' she once said.

'Is that right?'

'My history begins with Harry.' She looked happy to say it.

'That can't be true,' Maureen said. 'What about everything else? Your childhood and your career?'

'It began again with him. That's how it felt.'

Maureen didn't know what she was looking at in the photographs but she was certain they showed contentment. She herself had never been with a man with that kind of patience. The longer she looked at the photographs the more she could tell Harry was a generous person who had wanted to bring out Anne's intelligence. Maureen had seen things like that on television and it was lovely to think about. She looked out the window and imagined the coast was filled with Harry.

He had never lived in Saltcoats. It seemed he had died in the 1970s, but the details were sketchy and Maureen felt it would test Anne's patience to ask for more information. It didn't matter.

It was just nice to know there were men like that in the world. 'This one's my favourite.' Maureen picked up a black-and-white portrait from the 1950s. It showed a man in a short-sleeved shirt sitting at a bar with a bottle of beer in front of him and an empty camera case. A monkey was eating nuts out of his hand. 'Exotic,' Maureen said. The man was young in the picture and so was the Queen in a poster tacked to the wall behind him.

'That's my Harry at his best,' Anne said. 'He was serving with the army in Singapore.'

'But that's an English bottle of beer.'

'It's Singapore, Mrs Ward.'

Maureen knew when to let things go. A full bowl of soup sat between them and Anne stared at it as if she was remembering something important. 'Don't drive tonight,' she said. And when Maureen told her she didn't have a car Anne just looked blank and said, 'That's true.'

It was around New Year that Maureen had first noticed Anne getting mixed up about dates. At Lochranza Court they often saw the onset of dementia, but with Anne it was different because she appeared to be trying to climb out of herself before it was too late. Whatever vessel Anne had sailed in all her life, it began to drift and that was the start of it all. She rolled into a darkness where everything old was suddenly new, and when she returned to the surface her life's materials were bobbing up around her. 'We all have flotsam, Mum,' said Esther on the phone. (Esther was a therapist.) 'No matter how we weight it and sink it to the bottom, it comes loose. And that's what's happening to your nice lady next door.'

Maureen poured the soup away and her neighbour sauntered over to stare at the bright red splashes in the sink. Anne spoke about a book she and her grandson once read. He was doing it at university and she bought a copy. She couldn't remember the book's name but the man in the story was Sergeant Troy and he wore a nice red coat. Maureen washed the bowl and was quietly amazed.

Anne sat on the sofa. She looked at the window, her hands neatly clasped in her lap. 'The rabbit was out there in the cold,' she said. 'He was by himself in the middle of the road.'

'When?'

'At Christmas. The snow was falling. Nice, if you like snow. But rabbits don't.'

'Don't they?'

'No. Not a bit. Or the dark. They don't like the dark. They like to be out playing with the other boys.' Anne said she'd been standing at the window not doing anything, just looking into the road, and she saw the rabbit come from the dark at the top of the shore. 'It came from the bandstand where the Punch and Judy thing used to be.'

'Just there, beside the beach?'

'That's right,' she said. 'And it just hopped up the road. I was watching it. And you know what, Maureen? It stopped and looked at me. Just looked. Then it kept going. Disappeared.'

'Just like that?'

'Just like that through the snow.'

Maureen had finished washing up and she leaned on the breakfast bar with both hands. 'Don't think about it,' she said. 'You had better get some sleep or you'll be shattered tomorrow.'

'But he's all right now. He likes it here.'

Maureen got her friend into bed and closed the blinds. Anne wanted the rabbit on the wicker chair but Maureen said no and got an unhappy look. 'You're not in charge,' Anne said, leaning back. She stared into the corner at a pair of old suitcases and recalled the day one of the cases was sitting on the station platform at Preston. It was a long time ago. It was raining. She stood that afternoon and looked back at the Park Hotel, where she'd just had tea with Harry and he'd told her about his other life. He drove back to Manchester and she waited for the train to Blackpool, her heart racing, the suitcase filled with negligees and film spools.

I've got the flat for good, Harry. And all the beakers are there and the safelights. All the solutions. Paper. Everything we need. It will do as a darkroom but a place to stay as well. It will just be ours. We can spend the night, in the summer.

'Go to sleep, Anne,' Maureen said.

'You're not the boss.'

Before closing the door, Maureen looked at a picture of a handsome young man in uniform that hung above the light-switch. 'That's Luke,' Anne said, her eyes shining.

'He's a fine boy.'

'He's a captain in the British army.'

SALTCOATS

Maureen went out every day to buy milk. On her way to the Spar she passed the empty boating pond and looked over to Arran; it was nice to be out in the fresh air; the island was clear and

romantic, like one of those pictures you could buy for over the sofa. The mountains were covered in snow and the top of Goatfell looked dangerous, as if the man in the Milk Tray advert was about to come down on his skis. She used to like that man in the black polo-neck who raced down mountains and dived off cliffs to bring the lady a box of chocolates. In the summer, Arran was a totally different place because the hills were brown and cheery and if the sky was blue it seemed the whole island was close enough to touch.

Maureen considered herself the warden's deputy. It wasn't a real job or anything like that but she could help the older ones with their laundry. She watered the plants and went for the milk, tasks that gave her a feeling of usefulness she had missed. When Ian, Esther and Alex were children she seldom had a minute to herself. If she wasn't ironing shirts she was filling in school forms or making beds, or cooking. But people looked after their kids in those days. You put in the work and enjoyed their young years. Not like nowadays when everybody's harassed and the mothers line up at the school gates in their giant jeeps. Her three walked to school. But by the time Esther was fifteen it was all over with the parenting. Finished. And one by one they left the house with their LPs and their T-shirts. That's what happens, Maureen thought. That's how it is. You kill yourself looking after them and then they get up and leave you.

She never imagined she'd end up in a place like Lochranza Court, but it had been six years and she was used to it. Her house in Stobbs Crescent had got too big and then a couple of druggies smashed the patio doors one night and stole her television. She was terrified. In the morning there was broken glass all over the carpet and her ornaments were scattered around the garden and

the gate was nearly off its hinges. Maureen remembered looking at all this and seeing that her old life was spoiled. After a few weeks, Esther drove over from Edinburgh to try bringing a bit of calm to the situation. She could see the point of a new house but not an old people's home.

'It's not a home,' Alex said. There was booze on his breath. 'Get a grip, Esther, it's not a home. It's retirement housing.'

'That's right,' Ian said. Esther knew the matter was settled when Ian backed the plan. (Ian worked with computers, as Maureen often liked to remind them. By this she meant he was always likely to be right. 'And he keeps up his annual membership at the gym.')

'It's sheltered housing accommodation,' Ian said. 'She'll have a door onto the street, like a normal person. But the other door goes into the complex, where all the people can have breakfast together. There's a warden. It's safe. And there's a tropical plants area.'

'People die in there,' Esther said. 'Every day. And she's only sixty-two.'

'What's dying?' Alex said. 'People die every day all the time.'

Ian made a face like he couldn't understand what was wrong with people. 'What?'

'Everybody dies.'

'Not if they look after themselves, they don't.'

'It's a home,' Esther said. 'I've got patients, Ian, and I've seen what happens when they give up. They dwindle. And Mum's prone to depression. She's been closing down her life since we were teenagers. She's gone from marital crisis to infirmity without a break in between, and that makes me sad, Ian, because I'd always hoped for a bit of optimism. A bit of hope. Just once to see our mother happy.'

'You know everything,' Ian said. 'Keep that shit for your patients, Esther. She's not asking for gold. She wants to be safe at night and this place is the answer.'

Maureen never heard the details of this argument, but Alex later gave her a few clues and it upset her to think of them not getting on. She didn't want the boys being too hard on Esther just because she was different. Esther had a lot on her mind and she sometimes blamed people, that was her problem, and you have to remember, Maureen noted, that Esther wasn't too happy in her own life, not nearly as happy as she liked to think, and she sometimes took it out on other people. It was only natural. When you had a big job like Esther's, people could expect too much. That's right. Esther was her own worst enemy.

On her way back from the Spar, hugging the milk, Maureen saw the street lights switching off. In winter it was often dark when she went out and getting light as she returned. She liked the sudden change of atmosphere and the sense of a new day beginning. Only when she went to cross the road to Lochranza House did Maureen spot the fire-engine and notice that smoke was escaping from an open window. Jackie the warden was standing out in the car park with a clipboard, the elderly residents gathered around in their dressing-gowns.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, what's the matter?' Maureen said, putting the milk down on a bench.

'It's Mr MacDonald in 29,' Jackie said. 'Burnt the toast again.'

'Oh dear,' Maureen said.

'Evacuation.'

'Heaven help us,' said Mrs Souter from flat 24. 'Is this what they call an evacuation?'

'It has different meanings,' Jackie said.