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The Taxi Driver's Daughter

Julia Darling

Extract

Mac wishes Caris wasn't there. All day he's been hanging about in the waiting rooms of the law courts, fetching cups of tea, looking on the bright side. Not far away from the room in which they waited, the optimistic river Tyne glittered, and the new bridge arched itself in a yawn of delight. He and Louise had sat there, along with a collection of car thieves and petty criminals wearing borrowed suits and staring sulkily at the 'NO SMOKING' signs, waiting to be called, and all the time Mac was thinking, I shouldn't be here with these losers; and what if someone recognises me – what do I say? He watched barristers and solicitors pacing along the corridors in urgent discussions, looking as if they knew everything, while he, Mac, knew nothing. He sat next to sober drunks, pulling at their too-tight collars and trying to look innocent. And still Mac had believed that it would all turn out right in the end. But the bright side never happened. From the moment they stepped inside the courtroom everything became gloomy. It was all so confusing and unexplained, with clerks whispering into one another's ears, and a sense of emptiness, as if they were performing in a theatre with no audience. Even the judge seemed to have been marinated in melancholy, holding papers in his hands as if they were lead weights. When he spoke about Louise he made her sound like a criminal, with a previous conviction from when she was eighteen and she and a friend were caught giggling with a bottle of perfume, and now this, the theft of a very expensive shoe combined with an assault upon a police officer. Mac was ashamed. Ashamed of being there, ashamed of his wife, and afraid of the future. This was not how it was supposed to be. Now Mac wishes he could just be by himself for a bit, to think things through, to stop the images of Louise being ushered from the court by a frog-faced policewoman, and feeling a rush of pain that he couldn't control and doesn't know how to stop.

'It will pass in no time,' he tells Caris.

'My mother has gone to prison!'

'We're going to have to pull together, love.'

'We should appeal,' says Caris, hating the way her father sits there, cowed, as if nothing can be done.

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'It won't do any good,' says Mac.

'Don't you think she must have had a reason to go out stealing stuff?'

Mac wants to shake Caris. Does she think he hasn't thought these things? That he hasn't asked Louise again and again? He can think of men who might have hit out, or taken to drink with the thoughts he's had. He thinks about the other taxi drivers, laughing at him, huddled around their cabs. These thoughts taste so bitter that they make the veins stand up on his head.

He turns on the television, hoping to shut Caris up.

Then Caris bursts out laughing. Her laughter fills the room. It sounds awful, like a series of barks, like a mad person's laughter. Mac looks at her grimacing face, and for a moment he hates his daughter. He wishes that he had never had children, nor met Louise. He thinks, My daughter is wicked. Caris abruptly stops laughing, shocked by the shine in his brown eyes, by the dislike that flickers across his mouth.

Inside Mac's chest it feels as if a large building has collapsed, leaving a pile of dust and rubble. He gets up and walks out of the room. Caris can hear him putting his coat back on, picking up his keys, and going back to the safety of the taxi with its warm velvet seats, and turning on the engine.

'They've stolen my mother,' she says to herself. 'The bastards.'

She doesn't know what to do. She wishes he would come back. She wants to have the conversation again. She wants it to be different. She wishes she hadn't laughed. She goes upstairs to her parents' bedroom and looks at her mother's clothes in the cold wardrobe, at her creams and lipsticks and brushes on the dresser. She wonders what her mother will do without her things. Her hair will get greasy, her skin will dry out, and her nails will crack, she thinks. She sees her sitting in front of the mirror, brushing her long hair with endless sweeping movements, even when it didn't need brushing. Caris remembers leaning against her, watching her dip her fingers into ointment jars and slowly rub her face with circling fingers, and the room filling with a sweet, creamy smell.

Caris takes a pair of her mother's shoes from under the bed and puts them on her feet. They fit her well, but she's not used to heels and wobbles about on them. She picks up a photo in a frame and a blue coral necklace, and carries the things to her untidy room. She clears a space in the corner, then goes downstairs and roots through the cupboard under the stairs until she finds the Christmas box. She pulls out fairy-lights and tinsel, and baubles. Upstairs she arranges all these things into a kind of shrine, with her mother's photograph in the middle, hanging the fairy-lights around the edge. She gets so absorbed in making this altar that she almost forgets about her mother, who is simultaneously being checked in, and who has just had a conversation with a very pleasant murderer called Carol. Louise shows Carol a photograph of Caris and Stella, and Carol shows Louise a picture of her adolescent son. The two women peer at the faces in these photographs as if hoping to communicate with the children who look back at them.

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Caris doesn't even hear Mac coming back, feeling too depressed to continue working, nor Stella and her grasp of horror as she hears the news, and then the sound of her sister and father reassuring one another that 'things will be all right'. Neither does she hear Mac phoning Nana Price, who makes a long whistling sound rather like a distant train. By the time Caris finishes her shrine-making and goes downstairs the house has reassembled itself and Stella and her father sit side by side on the settee watching Star Trek as if nothing has happened.

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