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Opening Extract from...

I Hope You Dance

Written by Beth Moran

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I Hope You Dance

BETH MORAN



LION FICTION

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Chapter One

My mother always told me I had lousy timing.

This afternoon, in front of my boss, my boss's boss and a whole load of his most lucrative clients, I proved her right.

Of course, she was talking about the Viennese waltz, the Argentinian tango and the foxtrot.

"Come on now, darling; you have to feel the beat. Embrace the rhythm of the music. Feel it. One, two, three. One, two, three. Da, dum, dum. No, *feel it.* FEEL IT!"

My current timing issue involved five Chinese businessmen and a psychological breakdown.

I had managed to quite successfully assume my usual role of note-taker, head-nodder and occasional bland comment-maker from the corner of the table. However, my delightful boss, Cramer Spence, then asked me a question.

"What do you think, Ruth?"

I looked up from the sketch of a great-crested newt I had been doodling onto my notepad. The newt clawed frantically at the sides of a compost bin, trying to scrabble its way out, its black tongue dangling out of one side of its mouth. Sliding against the bin, slick with rotting vegetable juices, the newt slipped deeper into the mush of month-old carrot peelings and banana skins. Cramer raised one plucked eyebrow at me. He did this a lot, the eyebrow raise. It was, according to Alice, his signature move. Alice was the twenty-one-year-old temp he had been sleeping with until he fired her, a month ago.

I lowered my eyes back to the pad. What I thought was this: I wanted to take the pencil waggling about in Cramer Spence's grubby fingers and jab it into his eye. The one beneath the signature-move eyebrow. I am not a violent person. That this thought didn't horrify me, horrified me.

Cramer Spence coughed. I could hear the impatience in his voice. "Ruth?"

I stared at the newt. At the way its tiny, webbed feet clung to the plastic surface in a desperate attempt to escape the decomposing mess it was drowning in. I remembered the feel of Cramer Spence's fingers as they had slithered and slimed their way down my spine in the staff kitchen only two hours earlier. I felt again his hot, damp breath as he murmured how he really loved the way my chest looked in the top I was wearing, and how about popping a button undone to make the Chinese clients feel happy? My hand subconsciously pressed to the top of my high-necked blouse, sagging where my flesh had wittered and worried away until my collar bone poked out like a scrawny chicken carcass. Something inside my brain exploded into a million pieces.

The newt was me.

"I think that when you groped my backside last week your hand felt like a plastic bag full of sausages so old and rancid they started squiggling about inside the bag."

Cramer choked. His boss sat up straighter in his chair and for the first time looked interested.

"And I think that when you whined at me to stop being so uptight your breath smelt like you'd been eating slugs."

The Chinese businessmen clients frowned. Their interpreter, a long-legged Asian woman with glossy lipstick and thick, swingy hair, snorted.

I stood up, carefully tucking my chair back under the conference table. How professional! Even in the middle of a personal breakdown I attended to company policy on health and safety. "I also think that I no longer want to work for someone whose eyebrows make them appear like a very ugly woman in drag."

Chapter One

I picked up my bottle of water, swung my nine pound ninety-nine handbag over my shoulder and marched out of the room. I made it down all three flights of stairs to the lobby, and out onto the deserted street, before breaking down into the kind of hysterical, juddering sobs that sounded more as though they came from my fourteen-year-old daughter.

Slumped against the concrete wall of the adjacent building, out of sight of the office windows, I marvelled at the sheer awfulness of what I had just said and done. During the bus ride home to Woolton, the suburb in South Liverpool where I lived, I ignored the stares of the other bus passengers, tried to get a grip on myself and trawled through my current problems to find a bright side. No job. A pile of unopened bills. A teenage daughter who *needed* to dye her hair and wear Dr Martens. A dead partner who had left no will, no life insurance and no way to pay the upkeep on our four-bedroomed detached house with ensuite bathroom, double garage and serious negative equity. No way out. Except one.

I was going to have to call my mother.

Fraser had been killed in a car accident eighteen months earlier. Having known great loss once before, I expected to feel the anger, shock, despair, physical pain like a vice compressing my heart until I couldn't breathe. I knew I would get through it, that there was another side to the thick, black swamp of grief. I knew our daughter, Maggie, would survive, although the scars would mark her heart and shape her spirit for the rest of her life. I fretted and at times panicked about how I would find the strength to put the bin out, deal with the car when it broke down, handle Fraser's mother.

But it never crossed my mind to worry about coping financially. Maggie's father had been rich. *We* had been rich. Then I started opening bank statements. And bills. And answering the phone. And out of the secret shadows of Fraser's man cave crawled a great, writhing debt monster that grew bigger and uglier with every menacing step.

My job, obsessive penny-counting and tactical delays with creditors kept the monster from eating us alive. Until Cramer Spence decided it would be fun to launch a campaign of seduction aimed at the tragic widow. I was out of control, out of my mind with worry and out of options.

Most of all, I was furious. Not at Fraser, or Cramer Spence. At myself.

I couldn't fight it any more. We were going home.

Three weeks later, the van I had hired to ferry the remains of our stuff from Liverpool to Southwell, a small market town in Nottinghamshire, slunk around the corner into the cul-de-sac where I had been born and raised. Our house sat at the end of the row of five 1970s detached boxes lining one side of the street. On the opposite side, five nearly identical houses faced them. I hunched lower in the van, eyes sweeping both rows, searching for signs of life. It had been eight years. Nothing much seemed to have changed. Me included. This felt a long way from the victorious, I-showed-them, hero's return I'd dreamt about. Quite the contrary. Everything the neighbours, old friends, school reports and postman had predicted would happen, had.

I didn't look at the house at the end of the street, the only one to stand apart from the box-sets, the one everyone called the Big House. Not yet.

Inching so reluctantly up the shallow slope of my parents' driveway that the van stalled, I switched off the engine, took a moment to breathe. My eyes welling up for the squillionth time that day, the first sight my mother had of me as she yanked open the front door and marched down the path was her youngest daughter wiping a dribble of snot on her sleeve while keening like a baby.

Did I mention I was an emotional wreck? I thanked God, yet again, that Mum had the good sense to arrange for Maggie to spend a week with her paternal grandmother while I sorted things out in Southwell.

Chapter One

Mum stepped up into the van, handed me a neatly ironed handkerchief and gripped hold of my hand tightly. With her other hand she gently turned my face towards hers, boring deep into my eyes and, beyond that, to my splintered soul.

"Welcome home, my darling girl. Welcome home! Now. I'm going to put the kettle on. Take a moment to remember this is not a step down, a step backwards or a step into a pit of deadly snakes. This is a stride onwards and upwards! Things have been tough. I have ground my teeth down to the bone in sympathy for the toughness of your tragedy. But now you are home. No more tears today. We are celebrating. Our girl is home!"

She skipped her lithe dancer's frame back into the house to make tea, her white ponytail the only hint she carried a free bus pass. I knew Mum would have laid out one of the best china plates with home-made cookies and my favourite chocolate slices; dug out the green mug with blue spots that my eldest sister, Esther, gave me for my sixteenth birthday. The tablecloth would be ironed, and fresh flowers in colours that I loved – reds, purples and blues – arranged in a vase on the table. I did not doubt for one second that my mother had willed me home with the unbreakable force of her love for me. Even stronger than my many attempts to shut it out.

I sat in the hub of the van and took a moment. I looked at the garden, at the bright green baby fruit nesting in the Bramley apple trees. I pretended to be absorbed in the geraniums, the dahlias and palest pink clematis blooming on the fence. I examined carefully the front of the house, the large bay windows and Victorian lamp beside the door, slowly moving my eyes along to the gate dividing the front from the back garden. Then carried on, across to the left, an inch of view at a time. I forced myself to breathe slowly, to relax my hands on the steering wheel, to not make this a big deal. Prepared myself to find it gone, or changed, or dead. But there it was. In front of the Big House. In front of David's house. The willow tree. From the driver's seat of the van, I drank it in.

I had left the best chunk of my heart under the boughs of that willow tree, right beside where my initials were carved, RH, underneath David's DC. I could tell what month it was from the size and the colour of the leaves. Guess the hour of the day by lying underneath and watching how the sun dappled through the branches and where its shadows fell. I sat there, and like a peek inside a stolen treasure box, or someone else's diary, I let myself remember. And in doing so, I found the strength to stick on a smile, pull my shoulders into a posture fitting of a champion ballroom dancer's daughter, and step back into the house I once swore I would never enter again.

Four hours later, I slouched at the kitchen table drinking tea, waiting to get the next hurdle over with. The front door slamming had announced Dad's return. Mum, icing cakes at the kitchen counter for one of the many "causes" she took upon herself, bustled into the hall. To give her some credit, she tried to whisper.

"Gil! Where have you *been*? I told you Ruth would be here at one. It's nearly five o'clock. We had to unload the van by ourselves!" There was an indistinguishable mumble. "She's in the kitchen. Please be welcoming."

Dad came into the kitchen. He looked old. His hair was still a thick mop roosting on the top of his head, and he stood, like my mother, as if he had a broom up his shirt. But his energy had clearly faded, like a torch running out of battery. Maybe due to my presence in his kitchen. Or the fact that, temporarily, it was my kitchen now too.

"Hi, Dad."

He nodded. "Ruth" – his eyes flickered everywhere except at me – "you got here."

"Yes, thanks."

"Coffee?"

"I already have tea."

"Right. Well. I've got some papers to sort out. I'll be in my office."

He opened the door, pausing with his hand on the knob. I could picture Mum gesticulating at him from the hallway. He coughed. "Anyway. It's nice to see you. Glad you could come and stay."

He left. *Oh, Dad*, I thought. *Really? "Nice"?*

I tried not to mind. Not to feel as though he'd slam-dunked my heart into the kitchen bin. I knew we were both to blame. But I was weak, and tired, and lost and afraid. *Nice?*

To take my mind off the limp welcome, I gazed into the bottom of my teacup, pondering the offhand comment Mum had made about unloading the van. Mum had not only tried to make Dad feel guilty – unusual enough in itself – but I couldn't remember hearing her lie before.

We hadn't unloaded the van by ourselves. By the time Mum and I unrolled the door to the hold, an enormous tropical bird had flown out of the Big House and flapped across to join us. The tropical bird's name was Ana Luisa. She was in fact a young Brazilian woman disguised behind a rainbow coloured, feathered and fringed sun dress, with a matching scarf wrapped around her head, and huge red-rimmed sunglasses that she pushed up to reveal chocolate pools for eyes and skin like butterscotch. She had the body of an Amazon underneath that fluffy dress, with the strength to accompany it. She never stopped smiling, never broke a sweat or became short of breath and emptied boxes faster than Mum and I put together.

"Oh, yes, I have to be strong to clean that big, dusty house for Mr Arnold. When Mr David is home he tidies up after himself, not a problem, but Mr Arnold – my, my! He is so much in the world of his studies and his important research, and planning lectures or writing the next chapter of his book, he doesn't even notice the gas left on or a pair of shoes right in the hallway where he will trip and smash his head on the flagstones. I am telling you, if I was not here to take care of him I don't know what would become of him. He would starve to death sitting in that office thinking of some old scroll with an Egyptian lady's shopping list from ten thousand years ago written on it…"

I had stopped processing at *when Mr David is home*. Mr David still called the Big House home? Why wasn't he married to some gorgeous television producer who followed him around the world filming his kids' wildlife programme, renting out penthouse apartments in between shows? Why didn't he have some rambling farmhouse where a rosy-cheeked wife who thought nothing of castrating a few bulls before breakfast waited to greet him with home-made ice-cream and a back rub? Where were his blond-haired, grey-eyed children, waiting for Daddy to bring back treasures from his travels? Why didn't he spend his time off taking them camping in the woods, climbing mountains, teaching them how to fish and start a fire with a bunch of dead leaves?

And if David sometimes came home, was he home now? Was he home soon? This year? This month? And how could I ask without my voice betraying me, my head spinning and my legs giving way?

I lay in bed watching the moon glimmering through the gap in my old curtains as the clock ticked off those strange hours that dwell in the middle of a sleepless night. Everything felt the same. The same bed, same pale blue walls. It was all clean and fresh, but under the scent of freesias wafting from a vase on my dressing table, it still smelt exactly the same. Pencil shavings. Rose-scented drawer linings and the faintest whiff of the nail polish remover I used to scrub away my enforced dance-show prettiness. In the moonlight I could trace the outline of the pictures covering the far wall. My sketches and paintings of animals, reptiles and birds. One or two insects. All drawn from real-life observation, all scientifically accurate and annotated with David's facts about the species, habitat, eating habits and other information he deemed relevant.

Every picture recounted a story, a quest, an adventure. A memory. I felt some comfort there, in the dreams and sunny days of my childhood. I had once found a way to be happy here. To survive.

I had known who I was, then. Could I do it again? Eventually, sleep came, the animals racing with me through my dreams. Fast and urgent, we ran. Running to escape the darkness that hunted us. Desperate for safety. For home.