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Opening Extract from...

The Child Garden

Written by Catriona McPherson

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CONSTABLE

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ONE

2013

Monday

I've never thought my life was a tragedy. Not mine, not Nicky's, certainly not Miss Drumm's. I know other people don't agree. I can tell what they think from the looks on their faces when they think it, with their heads tilted and their mouths dimpled in at the corners. But as far as I'm concerned, I'm lucky. I've got the best kind of job—important yet easy—and a son who lets me hug him and a good friend. I wish I didn't have to shave her neck, but it's a small price to pay. I've got a beautiful house and an ancient monument to tend to. How many people get that?

But when the knock came on the door that night and turned my life into an adventure, I wasn't sorry. And if I'd known what was coming, I'd still have answered. If I'd had a crystal ball and seen the whole of my future sitting there inside it, sharp and tiny, I wouldn't change a thing.

Work had been fine, two new bookings for offsite and no distress calls. Things went okay at the home too. Miss Drumm let me read

the Margaret Atwood to her without arguing about whether it could really happen. She didn't ask about Walter Scott, hardly mentioned the election at all, and didn't make me go and complain to the nurses about the plug-in air fresheners, or ask me to tell them again about using a waxed jam-pot cover to stop the cocoa getting a skin on top when they came round with the supper trolley.

Quite a good visit. I like the home at that time of year, when it's dark outside and the lamps are lit, the fire crackling. It feels like a nest; warm and dry with good things on the telly. Later in the winter when the windows have been shut for months and no one's been out and someone's died—because somewhere around January time, someone always dies—it starts to feel more like what it is.

"A warehouse for damaged goods," Miss Drumm would say when she was in one of her black moods. "No good for Oxfam, no takers on eBay."

"I've a good mind to list you," I'd tell her. "See if you're right."

Sometimes she'd just glare at me out of her blind eyes, but sometimes she'd bark that laugh of hers. One time she asked me what I would say.

"'Old lady. Good conversationalist but somewhat grumpy. No reserve.'"

That night, though, she was docile. When I got to the end of the second chapter, she waved a hand at me, telling me to stop.

"Are you rocking the stone?" she said.

"Every day."

"Twelve times?"

"You really don't have to ask every night, you know."

"If you're not rocking the stone, you'd be better off not living there at all," she told me.

"What about Walter?"

She nodded, her lip trembling, then she told me to ring for the nurse and be on my way.

It was Iveta who came to answer the call bell; I passed her in the passageway.

"What's the weather like, Glo?" she said, tipping her head towards Miss Drumm's door.

"Light cloud with a chance of politics," I said.

Iveta shook her head, laughing. "She's the only one in here who still votes," she said. "And she nags all the staff to vote. If they get in again, I don't know if it'll keep her alive out of pure rage or finish her off completely."

I tried to smile but Iveta must have seen the look that flashed over my face, because she put out a hand and shook my arm, her glittery-tipped acrylics flashing in the lamplight.

"She'll outlive us all," she said. "Now get along there and see that angel boy."

Nicky was in good form too. Carole had been in during the day to cut his hair, using a picture he and I had found in a music magazine. The new look suited him. He could have been in a boy band, could have had girls screaming every time he flicked the long front piece out of his eyes.

"Heartbreaker," I told him. "That's what your granny used to call you when you were a baby. Those big eyes and the lashes that could knock you over. 'You're going to break some hearts, Nicholas,' she used to say." He didn't answer. "Just the one so far, eh?"

I traced the line of dark hair on his lip, making him twitch. He'd be shaving soon.

"Right," I said. "Where were we up to? 'My Bed Is A Boat'. 'My bed is like a little boat, Nurse helps me in when I embark'." Then I

broke off. "Nicky?" I said. "You would tell me if you were sick of this book, wouldn't you?"

But he was fine with it, so I carried on.

"'She girds me in my sailor's coat and starts me in the dark'."

It's always been one of my favourites, that little boy in the boat-bed, steering across the darkness with his eyes closed until morning comes again. He's as safe and cosy as Nicky and Miss Drumm and all the other residents, tucked up with the curtains drawn and the doors locked, while the wind whips around the house and howls across the hills.

At eight o'clock, I pulled my anorak hood down close around my head with the toggles—no use even thinking of an umbrella that night—and scuttled across the gravel to my car.

It's a single-track road to my place from the home, twisting for ten miles between nowhere and nowhere else, cattle grids every hundred yards, and unless the care workers are changing shift, you never meet a soul. I started to unwind on the way.

Tonight though, the puddles on the road were deep enough to float a car, so I stayed in the middle, clear of the worst bits, trying to look past the hypnotising wipers (Iveta was only kidding around), trying to see through the sheets of rain coming in waves (what if Miss Drumm died first?) like a tide of water washing over me, again and again (how could I even *think* "first"?), and the windscreen wipers ticked back and forth, shoving the water like snow in front of a plough but making no difference and—

Nicky!

Blinded by headlights, I felt the wheels go out as I stamped on the brake, felt that sudden weightlessness as I drifted on the skim of surface water. I braced myself, arms locked, released the brakes, then slammed them on again and felt the jolt as they bit just in time. I stopped dead and peered out of the side window at the guy's face in the other car. It was pure white with wide eyes, just like mine must

be. We stared at each other for maybe ten seconds, but neither one of us opened a door or even rolled down a window. Then I turned away. The car had stalled. I shifted to neutral, checked the handbrake, turned the key, and crawled off in second gear, shaking.

Only, in the mirror, I thought I saw him doing a turn, as if to follow me, so I shifted up to third and chanced another skid to get away. Would anyone really chase down a near-miss and start kicking off tonight? In this? It wasn't as if I had scraped him.

I could see his headlights getting closer, starry and blurred through the rain on the back window. He really was coming after me. Well, maybe he was lost or wanted to apologise. But if he was lost, he must be a stranger and yet he was gaining on me; me who knows this road. And that was a lot of determination for an apology. I got my phone out of my bag and put it in my lap.

At the top of the hill, I paused. If I went down the track, there was no way out and no one for miles around. That was usually a good thing—the main reason I agreed to come here. Looking round on a summer's afternoon, with the swifts wheeling and a warm breeze wafting the coconut scent of the gorse blossom in at the windows, the silence was the best bit. Like I could have been the last person alive in the world. I could scream until my eyes turned bloody and no one would try to stop me.

Tonight, though … One bar on my phone and the black night filthy and wild, and a man in a car behind me and gaining. The clever thing to do was keep driving, bump all the way to the main road and go where people were.

But I wanted to be home, to have my feet in slippers, a whisky in one hand, a book in the other, and something whirling in the microwave. So I swung onto the track and rattled over the grid, told myself I was imagining things and why shouldn't someone else be driving this road as well as me?

I'd always been glad it was a grid instead of a gate, especially on nights like this when the wind blatted gouts of rain in every direction and the trees along the track thrashed and groaned. Sometimes the gales got so fierce they battered rocks right out of the dry stone wall, rolling them into the wheel ruts. They lay there like trolls on the track, waiting for me.

Tonight, though … I'd have taken a drenching to open a gate and shut it behind me. He was still there, but I could see the red of his taillights as well as the white of his headlights. He must be sitting right across the mouth of the lane. I trundled on, watching. Just before I turned the last bend, where the track gets narrow and rough, suddenly the lights were gone.

I blinked. They hadn't moved off; they'd gone out. He had switched off his engine, but he was still sitting there. Or was I wrong about where the view of the road-end disappeared? That must be it. I had never driven along watching in the mirror before, had I? I was always looking forward to the sight of the house or minding out for animals. I had just driven out of sight of him—that was it—and the trees had cut off the view.

Thinking of the animals, I speeded up again, bumping and splashing in the potholes. I'd have to do something about the track this winter. Ask someone or go to the builders' yard myself and get sacks of gravel to empty into the dips. I could drive the car over and back and tamp it down. Only, that seemed like the kind of job that would be easy with a tractor, even a little one, but hours of toil for a woman with a hatchback and a snow shovel.

It was strange to arrive with no one to greet me: the byre cats trotting through the long grass, lifting their feet like dressage ponies, tails high and waving at the tips; Walter Scott with his paws on the windowsill and his snout against the glass at the sound of the car.

No cat would be out tonight, and it had been a few weeks since Walter last smudged the window. He wasn't in pain, the vet assured me, but if this was the final slide, it was a steep one.

Even without the animals, I felt welcomed home. Rough House was well named, but I only loved it the more. It was long and lower than it should be at the front, the ground level too high and the downstairs walls showing it with a creeping line of damp. Round the back, the hill dropped away and from here the house was gaunt and dreary. Rough indeed. It never bothered me because I knew what was inside and what the views were, but sometimes visitors' faces would fall when they saw the tumble-down sheds and looked up at the windows, set so high that I had to stand a ladder on the concrete apron to wash even the downstairs ones. I had never washed the upstairs back windows at all, just the two of them in the guest bedrooms, slim as arrow slits. They were dappled with years of dust and rain now, bolls of insect eggs lined up along the transoms and spiders' webs clogging every corner. I had hung lace curtains to hide the grime, and I never had guests anyway.

The noise of water teeming out of clogged gutters and pouring down the walls drowned out all other sound but, when I turned the key in the back door and opened it, both house cats were there, weaving and purring, Dorothy collapsing on her back on the doormat and looking up at me, paws waving. I stepped over them and up into the kitchen, into the oily smell of the old Rayburn cooker and the sharper stink of the old dog who lay in front of it, in his basket under the oven door, thumping his tail. He didn't stand, and I hurried over.

"Walter?" I said, crouching down beside him. "You okay?" The tail picked up speed and he pushed his head under my hand as the cats came coiling around, trampling on his legs and nosing at me. I stood, pulled the kettle forward, and went to feed them.

Walter Scott didn't follow me at first. I rinsed bowls and opened tins, listening, and then at last, with a rush of warmth in my chest, I heard him get to his feet and the sound of his nails on the lino as he plodded out to the scullery sink to see about his dinner.

"Don't you dare give up on me," I said, setting the bowl of mush down on his mat. "You're third in the queue, and I told you that months ago."

I put the double dish of cat food on top of the chest freezer and watched Dorothy and William spring soundlessly up and start to eat in dainty bites. Walter Scott had driven his bowl hard against the loft stairs like he always did and was slobbering and grunting at it, as though he was devouring some beast he had slain instead of a packet of the soft little nodules chosen to spare his teeth and keep his diabetes and his ancient bladder from turning on him.

Back in the kitchen, I kicked off my boots and stood in my damp socks in Walter's basket in front of the stove, warming my hands on the kettle, waiting for it to boil. I sometimes worried about the water, drawn from a well, sitting tepid at the back of the Rayburn all day, since I couldn't afford to let myself get ill. When the kettle was too hot to touch, I went to get the milk from the fridge down in the scullery. The cats were on the freezer top beside their clean dish, knowing I would splash some in there for them.

"Pretty things," I said, smiling at the way they were sitting there, paws pursed in front of them, still licking their lips with that little flag of pink tongue so startling against the black of their fur. They waited as I tipped the carton, just a puddle of milk in each side—enough for a treat but not enough to upset them—and I smiled again at the way they stretched up, arching their backs, and settled dow—

Nicky!

My arm jolted and a spout of milk doused the freezer top. The cats scattered, streaking away, leaving the dish rattling. I caught it

and held it still. Had I imagined that noise or had someone just knocked on the front door?

At the pictures, every single person in the audience, every single time, asks why that idiot woman is going to see what the noise was, why that moron is going to answer the door. And every one of them, if the same thing happened for real, would do it too. I barely paused to think, certainly didn't pick up my phone or a poker on the way. I crept back through the kitchen and into the passageway, edged opened the glass door, and sidled out into the porch, listening.

There was no mistaking it the second time; that was a quiet but definite knock. I flicked the switch to turn the outside light on and heard the quick sound of his feet shifting. I had startled him. *Him*? *His* feet? Was I sure?

I opened the door anyway, on the chain, and put my face to the gap.

"Hello?"

He was soaked through to the skin, standing there with his shirt plastered to him and his suit trousers clinging round his legs. His face was red now, stung ruddy by the needles of rain, but it was the same face.

"Look, I'm sorry about that up there on the road," I said. He didn't *look* angry. But if he had followed me all the way down here and splashed through the garden from wherever he'd left his car, he must be fairly bothered one way or another. "But we're both okay, aren't we?" I went on. "Unless you've got whiplash or you banged your knee. I can give you a bag of peas to put on it."

"It *is* you, isn't it?" he said. "Knickerbocker Gloria."

It took my breath away to hear that name after all these years. When I got it back again I was laughing.

"How do you know that?"

"You don't recognise me," he said. So I looked closer, past the bald head and the beer belly, past the dress shirt and the suit trousers, past the glasses covered in raindrops. I looked right into his eyes.

"Stig of the Dump!" I said and closed the door to undo the chain, let him in out of the rain.

TWO

Stig of the Dump, Stephen Tarrant, came from Castle Douglas like me, but his family went to Saudi Arabia when he was six and so when they came home again, five years later, rich and different, he was a new boy. He joined Mrs. Hill's primary seven class and thanks to her theories, he sat next to me. Mrs. Hill reckoned the boys would fling fewer spit balls and the girls would giggle a bit less and in a lower key. Of course, what actually happened was that the girls giggled even more, flirting, and the boys threw monster spit balls, showing off, but Mrs. Hill hated admitting she was wrong and so I had spent a year close enough to Stig Tarrant to know that he sneezed in sunlight and that he washed his hair on a Sunday night and a Wednesday. It felt like yesterday.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him once we were in the kitchen. I meant why was he driving the back roads on a night like this, but a bit of me sort of meant *How can you be here, in this room, where no one ever comes?* And another bit of me sort of meant *How can Stig of the Dump be a man with stubbly jowls and a bad crown that's getting black along the gumline? How can Stig Tarrant be rubbing his bald head dry on that warm tea towel from the Rayburn rail,*

the tea towel I ironed on Sunday, because I like ironing and I ran out of clothes before the end of the good stuff on the radio?

"Aw, that feels good," he said. "What am I doing here? I'm having the worst night of my life."

"Did you come to see me?" I said. "How did you know where I lived?"

"I didn't," he said. "It was like a … I mean, seeing your face through all that rain? You've still got the same hairstyle, Gloria. It's thirty years later, and you look exactly the same."

"It's twenty-eight," I said, and I hoped I wasn't blushing. I turned to the kettle to make the tea in case I was. He was right about my hair. My mum used to do it in a centre parting and two plaits, then wind the plaits around my head and pin them. I loved it when I was a girl; it felt so clean and airy to have all my hair up away from my neck and yet it felt so secure to have it pinned there, safe and tight. It wasn't until I had left college and started working that I realised people were laughing at me: the girls in the buying office calling me Helga and the men in packing asking me what time it was, because I looked like the wife in a cuckoo clock. I kept thinking of cutting it or leaving it hanging down, but every morning I could see the kinks of the plaits, my hair telling me what it wanted to do. And even after I washed it—especially after I washed it—I couldn't resist the way the wet hair would really bite and the plaits would be so hard and tight and it would dry kind of crisp and tingly.

Coming up to my wedding day, I mentioned going to a salon for an up-do and my husband (not quite my husband then, and not my husband again now) said he forbade me to mess up my hair on the very day I should look most like the girl he loved.

"You forbid me?" I'd said, not quite sure enough to smile.

"You'll have to obey me as of next weekend," he'd answered. "Why not start now?" Then I was sure he was joking, and I laughed and did

my plaits as usual on my wedding day. I tucked little white silk rosebuds in around them to have something special, but he plucked them out during the first waltz and let them drop on the floor.

"So why is it the worst night of your life?" I asked Stig, setting a mug of tea down in front of him and pushing the sugar bowl close in case he wanted any. I couldn't stop watching him. The way his hand curled around the teaspoon was the same way it curled around a pencil when he turned it upside down to rub out a mistake. The way he plucked the wet shirt away from his back was the same way he had pulled at his school shirt when it was hot at playtime and he got sweaty running round the football pitch.

"I can give you a dressing gown," I said. "I haven't got a dryer, but I can spin your things and hang them over the rail there."

He smiled and it was the same smile, stolen from the boy and used by this man, shining out from the middle of his plump face. "I'm going out again," he said, "and I don't think turning up in your nightie would be a great idea." He took a slurp of his tea. "It's the worst night of my life because I've got a stalker and I've agreed to meet her."

"Dressing gown," I said, "not nightie." And then: "A stalker?"

He put his mug down, put his head in his hands, and groaned. "A girl I was at school with. Nice enough lassie, but she's popped up again out of nowhere and kind of got her claws into me."

I hadn't felt this for years, this burning in my cheeks and the heavy feeling in my middle. Not that people didn't still tease, but these days I usually didn't care. I tried to sound light when I answered him.

"I think someone might have been playing a trick on both of us," I said. He looked up sharply. "Because … this girl from school. Do you mean me?"

"What?" he said. Then he laughed again. "No! You bampot. Her name's April Cowan. From *high* school, Gloria. Well, from Eden. That's why I'm here."

Eden. I had almost forgotten. The care home had been a care home for nearly twenty years and I'd been there every day for the last ten until it was like the back of my hand, like my face in the mirror. But before that, and very briefly, it was a boarding school. Eden, they called it, and they couldn't have been more wrong.

"I don't think I knew you went there," I said. In truth, when we scattered after primary I paid no attention to anyone who didn't just trot along to Castle Douglas High School like me. I knew some went to St. Joe's in Dumfries, some with enough money went up to Ayr to Wellington's, but I had forgotten—if I ever knew—where Stig had disappeared to. "Were you there when … what was it?"

"We both were," Stig said. "April Cowan and me."

I was trying to remember the story, but I had been twelve (and quite a dreamy twelve) and my parents hadn't wanted to tell me. I knew they didn't approve of Eden. *Hippies*, my mother had said. *Running wild*. And when it happened, whatever it was that I could only just remember, she had said, *Well, what do you expect if you let them just*—But my dad had shushed her. He was always the kind one.

"Then Moped died," said Stig, "and the school closed and I never saw her again." He was gulping his tea and his face was turning a more normal colour from the warmth and the sugar, neither the white I had seen in the headlights nor the blue-pink from the freezing rain. "Never heard from her again until a couple of months ago."

"That's right," I said. "I remember now. There was an accident. 'Mo-ped'?"

"Mitchell Best," said Stig. "He drowned."

"And this April Cowan … what?"

"She found me on Facebook, usual story." Walter Scott had finally got his gums around the last of his mushy dinner and he lumbered back into the kitchen. He stood in the doorway a minute, tail waving, looking at us. Maybe he was as surprised as me to have a

visitor. Then he went straight to Stig, ignored his basket completely, and rested his muzzle on one of the wet trouser legs. Stig fondled his ears absently, hardly looking.

"Divorced, of course," he said. "Hitting forty, looking back and wondering where it all went wrong. Aren't we all?" I didn't say a word but he put a hand up, the one that wasn't resting on Walter's head.

"Sorry," he said. "Maybe your life's working out fine. Anyway, April and me started messaging back and forth: 'Ever see any of the crowd these days?' Chitchat, chitchat. Then it changed. I remember it really clearly. I was at work on my lunch and she sent this text. 'The worst thing, Stephen, is not knowing who knows what. Not knowing who knows.' I remember it because who sends a text that long that just says the same thing over and over again?"

"Bingo Little," I said. "Except with him it was telegrams."

"What?"

"Sorry. It's in a book."

"Still got your head stuck in a book then, eh Glo?"

"What did she mean?" I asked, ignoring him teasing me.

"Moped," said Stig. "She was talking about the night Moped died."

I said it over to myself: *The worst thing is not knowing who knows what*. Then he was talking again.

"That was when she started asking to meet. She said something like 'if I could just talk it through once and for all, face to face' and after that there was no stopping her. Where did I live, what sort of free time did I get, wife, girlfriend, how about a coffee then?" He laughed, a harsh sound that made Walter Scott jerk out of his standing-up doze and move off to his basket at last. Stig shivered as though the old dog leaning against his legs had been keeping him warm.

"Starbucks at lunchtime, Glo. Like I was some kind of Internet guy. As if for fuck's sake *she* hadn't been the one pestering *me*."

I tried not to look startled. Everyone says that word now; I know that. Even the nurses at the home say it sometimes, though not in front of Miss Drumm, and the nice ones don't say it in front of Nicky.

"But she never showed up. I waited an hour then left. Told myself I'd delete her next one, shake her off. But it was a phone call and she caught me. Said she was sorry, said she'd chickened out. I told her she was doing my head in. That was when she started pleading. Really going for it—begging nearly. 'I just want to talk to you. I need to talk. I need to straighten things out. Whether it's you or not, Stephen. I've got to talk to someone.'"

"That doesn't sound like begging," I said. "That sounds like threats."

He frowned and for a minute he seemed to be thinking hard. Then he nodded. "But what would she be threatening me with?" he said. "Or about? Or however you—And now tonight she sent me an ultimatum." He dug in his back pocket and pulled out a phone, clicked, scrolled, and passed it over.

I'm at the huttie. Come now. I'm waiting.

"The huttie?" I said.

"At Eden," said Stig. He shivered again as a fierce squall of rain hit the window and the gale moaned in the chimney. "She'll be freezing to bloody death."

"If she's actually there."

"Yeah," said Stig. "If."

"Do you think you could find it? In the dark?"

"I could find it dead drunk and in a blindfold," he said. Strange to think that Stig of the Dump drank. Stig who used to pour his school milk down his throat from a foot above his thrown-back head because he hated straws, cardboard cartons, and the taste of milk.

"If it's still there," I said.

"It will be," said Stig. "It's not really a huttie. It's this wee stone building, pretty amazing actually, like a chapel or something."

"Wait," I said. "You don't mean the crypt? Round building with railings outside?"

Stig stared at me. "How do you—A crypt? God, if we'd known that we wouldn't have—"

"I know every inch of the grounds," I told him. "I used to ramble all over the woods with Walter Scott, before he got too frail."

"I suppose you would, living here," said Stig. "How did you end up here, Glo?" He was looking around the kitchen as if noticing it for the first time, and I tried not to care about how shabby it all was: the old, green-distempered walls with the damp showing through; lino down to the backing weave; everything plugged into a six-way board at the only socket. Maybe I made the suggestion to distract him.

"I could come with you," I said. "It's better to have a witness in case she turns nasty."

He waited a long time before he answered. "Who's Walter Scott?"

I pointed at the basket. "The dog. Not the real Walter Scott, obviously. For one, I don't believe in ghosts, and for two, I prefer Stevenson."

"Who?" said Stig.

"Writers," I told him.

"You and your books, Knickerbocker Gloria," he said, standing. "Okay, you're on."

So it was my idea. It was never him who asked me. That's one thing to be clear about straight away.