Maggie's Tree

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Extract

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The Beginning



Maggie is missing: within an hour of her arrival. One moment there, the next gone, like a death she had slipped away into a freezing Manhattan dusk, leaving Luke and Cissie turning circles on the spot in bewilderment. Leaving them spitting expletives and accusations at one another.

'Christ! Well didn't you . . .?'

'I thought you said . . .?' then wandering along the vast sidewalks in the descending darkness, yards of angry space between them, like lovers in a tiff. Peering through the windows of bars and restaurants, fairly certain that she wouldn't be inside. Now four hours have passed and they stand on the steps of the Elmscote Hotel staring at the traffic hoping somehow that their very anxiety will draw her back to them.

'Cissie, why on earth did you bring her in this state? You must have known she was heading for this?' Luke is now staring down at his feet, holding his glasses in place and his face is flushed as he speaks. 'I mean for heavens . . .'

'No! She was a bit quiet last week, that's all . . . and I suppose coming here was a bit . . . spur of the moment . . . on my part . . . so I probably wasn't concentrating. She just very quickly went downhill on the flight.'

'Well, if you can locate a few fellow passengers with similar symptoms – you know, paranoid delusions, hallucinations, general insanity – we may have a case for litigation . . . But I don't think you can blame everything on the airline food.'

Cissie slumps down onto the step, eyes gritty with jet-lag, her small, dark head falling heavily into her waiting hands.

'And goodness knows what Dame Helena is going to make of all this.' He joins her on the step and Cissie slips her arm through his and shuffles her body into him. 'She's hardly going to want to spend the last week of the run in pursuit of Maggie. Friend or no, I'm afraid her patience has just about run out with regard to Maggie's bouts of insanity.' He then jumps up abruptly. 'Oh good God, Cissie, that step is freezing, we really don't want to be adding piles to our problems.'

Cissie gets up with a little grunt of strain. 'Oh Luke, what have I gone and done?'

'Well. . . she can't have gone far.'

But Maggie is in another place, where the disappearance of her friends and the falling darkness are special indicators. She has been watching the entrance of a bar for several minutes and she can smell its beery breath from across the street. Now, as she enters, a tiny voice informs 'and it's getting colder, folks!' and the barman reaches up and turns the television off, showing her a sweat-soaked armpit. She tries to catch his beady swivelling eye as she approaches the bar but, with the briefest of glances, he turns his back on her. She stares at the large expanse of beige polyester as if it were a computer screen about to display urgent information, but all there is is another small, spreading stain sitting in its centre. Then without warning he whips around, like 'Grandmother's footsteps', his red face shining and expectant.

Suddenly there isn't enough air; her lungs are filled with panic; she flares her nostrils to suck in the scanty stuff and gulps at it, frantically, like a stranded fish. Oh no, they cannot give up on her now, not on the brink of her deliverance! Bringing her hand up to sweep the hair from her clammy forehead there is a startling crimson flash. It was, and it is, her hand, bright and burning like a scarlet glove. The other one, the same, instantly joins it. She spreads her fingers and gapes.

'WHAT CAN I GET YOU?' his voice, booming and distorted somehow. Despite her heart hammering at her throat and a cool film gathering on her forehead, she manages a smile and says,

'Ahhh . . . You tell me.'

With a slow, world-weary blink of the eyes the barman suggests, 'Beer?' She feels a little spasm of anger in her stomach. How dare he? knowing all he knows.

'Vodka! neat! no ice!' She wants to add 'you arsehole!' but thinks better of it. Before showing his back to her again, he returns a small

smile and in it Maggie is sure she detects a hint of admiration. 'Thank you!' The sheer volume of her voice spins the barman round on the spot.

'You're welcome.'

Is it the slight shock in his voice that makes her want to laugh? All at once the panic leaves her chest and turns itself into great walloping bubbles of mirth hooting out and halting every bit of chatter in the place.

Into the silence comes the clunk of her glass as the barman places it on the bar. She reaches for it, at the same time checking her hand. It is quite an ordinary pink now, as is its fellow and both are tingling with a friendly warmth. Putting down the glass, she spreads her fingers and examines her palms, little maps of her life, and in an instant her throat is bunched with sorrow. 'OH, Maggie, Maggie, MAGGIE.' She downs the vodka, to stem the flow. She cannot give vent to this now, not with all she has to do. It would pour out of her, on and on, taking all her precious strength with it, leaving a damp, empty sack. The vodka slows her heart. After several strangled sobs she is calm but overwhelmed with tiredness. She longs to thump her head down on the bar and snore her way to oblivion, but she can't let herself be taken, for fear of where she might go.

'Same again, Mack.' The voice is low and throaty and pure Raymond Chandler. It reverberates through her body to the point of thrill. She knows this is right. She doesn't need to check out the barman's smile, but she knows he's smiling and now he really is of no more use to her. He's saying something but it drops down into the gloom behind the bar. With a practised toss the second vodka is gone, and exhilarated by her performance she slowly turns to face the room. And they are waiting for her, everyone is staring, not like on the street where not a single pair of eyes dared to look. Now unbelievably, as if on cue, in unison they turn away, back to their chat, back to their drinks, eyes to the wall, eyes to the floor, to their shoes, their nails, their newspaper; muffled giggles and whispers and sneaky backward glances. God! She wasn't ready for this. Far from being Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*, she is a tiny frozen thing in a vast, unfriendly landscape. Her skin ruched into a million goose pimples, she begins to shiver. This cannot be happening. The arms which a moment ago had been stretched sensuously across the bar in a crucifix pose of

supreme confidence now recoil and wrap themselves around her, a voluntary straitjacket to quell the shaking. Her right foot begins to tap, and then to stamp, keeping an angry rhythm with the rest of her body. STAMP IT OUT. STAMP IT OUT. STAMP IT. STAMP IT. STOP IT. STOP IT. STOP IT.

She looks down at the workman's boot going up and down, up and down, furious little thing, mutinous and strong. It makes her laugh – it's Charlie Chaplin, it's Minnie Mouse. She buries her chin deep into her chest and laughs and laughs and laughs. There is so much laughter she has to scream to get it out; but she knows that really she is crying. Then a quick involuntary burst below sends a hot rivulet down the inside of her other leg. She waits to see if it will get as far as her little girl's white sock and sure enough it streaks straight across the cuff, leaving behind its yellow trail, and trips cheekily over the boot and onto the black rubber mat, to become a small round pond next to a flattened cigarette butt. She stares down at it, her mind vacant from exhaustion.

At a loss as to how to prevent some horror filling the vacuum, she is relieved when at the periphery of her vision she sees a pair of feet. They are in well-worn brogues, brown and shiny and cared-for. She drops down onto her haunches, joints cracking like sticks on a fire, and sits on the thick brass footrail that runs along beside the bar. She has an urge to touch the leather and squeak her fingers along the creases of these shoes. She can smell the polish and she begins to cry. She reaches out and gently rubs the back of her fingers down the soft black corduroy of his trousers.

'My favourite pants.' He bends down onto one knee and startles her, his face only a foot or so from hers. It is pale and freckled, with very round eyes. The eyes have the same colour as the shoes, a warm, reddish brown. He is smiling.

'Would you care to sit down?' A gentle hand is at her elbow.

'Come on,' almost a whisper. He hauls her to her feet and Maggie allows herself to be steered towards a nearby booth. She bumps her damp bottom down onto the thinly covered seat and he sits opposite her. On the table, alongside an almost finished glass of beer, is a copy of *Time* magazine, carefully placed, angled towards Maggie, the letters juddering and jostling. She quickly switches it back to face him.

'Are you alright?' He is handing her a handkerchief, one corner frayed, but it is freshly laundered.

'Am I going to need this?'

'I just thought you might want to blow your nose.'

She lifts the soft square to her face and breathes in its clean washing-powder smell. She sees her mother's quick arm at the ironing board, the worn pink hand sliding the iron skilfully back and forth, and again sorrow rises in her throat. Swallowing it, she looks across at the man, his soft dark curls, his face creased with concern. 'Is this it? Is this my *Time*?' She lifts the magazine up in front of him, careful not to touch the pulsating letters.

'Sure, it's yours, take it. I don't want it.'

She takes a huge breath and in a voice so low it barely leaves her lips she says, 'O.K., I'm ready.'

'Excuse me?'

How long had Maggie been looking for this moment? Was it all her life? However long, it had dodged and evaded her. It had hidden round corners and appeared in disguises that she had blundered past, only to recognise them long after the opportunity was lost. And now it has finally come. She has cornered it, here, in this bar. 'Am I supposed to fuck you or something?'

The Darkness



'She's probably out fucking Brad Pitt or somebody in his private penthouse, while we're here, playing worried aunties, and not getting our beauty sleep.' Helena lands with a bounce in the unwelcoming armchair that smells vaguely of cigarettes and people, long gone. 'I don't suppose there is any chance that she has been sensible enough to have her mobile on her is there?' No one speaks. 'No . . . silly me, what a daft question.'

She swings her long white feet with their darkly painted nails up into the air and brings them down with a crash onto the sticky surface of the coffee table; the cups and saucers jump and jiggle in surprise. She begins to towel dry the thick, shoulder-length hair that she swears takes twenty-four hours to dry and eyes Cissie who is slumped opposite, her head bowed. She could be asleep but Helena knows that she isn't. She feels a wave of annoyance as she looks from Cissie to Luke who is sitting on the sofa poring over Maggie's lunatic ramblings, his mouth a wet pout of concentration. A brief scenario plays itself out in her mind: she lunges across the table, crockery and spoons flying, rips the notepad from his hands and beats him savagely about the head with it. She is ecstatic as she pictures his startled, hurt expression, the large eyes larger, the pout dropping into a gape. She snatches at the round, gold-rimmed glasses, the frightened eyes trapped behind, the lashes like spiders under glass, and rips them roughly from his face. She will smash them underfoot!

'Oh God my feet are ugly.' She reaches down beside her chair for the bottle of Bulls Blood and lets out a whoop which cracks into tinkling giggles.

Luke's voice a monotone: 'What's got into you?'

'That's for me to know darling and for you to only guess at.' The wine gushes and bubbles into the cheap tumbler. Luke stares at her, frozen in his moment of bewilderment. Staring straight back at him, she addresses Cissie.

'Oh, come on, ickle Ciss, have some more wine, for God's sake, it's Saturday night.'

Cissie's head snaps up as if someone had unexpectedly entered the room, her face momentarily blank. 'Oh, oh yeah, go on then.'

'Don't look now, darling, but Lukey is doing his "reptile at the zoo" impersonation.'

They both look at him. In freeze-frame he continues to stare at Helena but his eyes have darkened.

'It hasn't moved you know. Is it real? Oh! No, wait a minute it just blinked, I saw it blink! Ahhhh, it's quite sweet really . . . for a lizard.' Luke shifts his gaze from Helena down to the uneasy clutter of the coffee table, a piece of newspaper ingrained in its veneer, where something has been spilt and not cleaned up. He feels his face go hot, and without a word he stands to leave the room.

'Oh Lukey, don't be such a Nelly.'

'Have you not an iota of concern for that poor girl?'

'Oh for God's sake you don't honestly expect us to go scouring the streets do you? I have just done two bloody shows and it's midnight – in Manhattan! Oh, Ciss, cue for a song.' Helena sings out, a high, lilting voice:

'This ain't no time to get cute.'

Cissie joins her in strident discord: 'It's a mad dog's promenade!'

Then they wait. Looking up at Luke. Faces like children's at a puppet show. He is motionless. Looking down at them. Then almost imperceptibly a smile disturbs the thin straight line of his mouth; he closes his eyes and cocks his head as if listening to the perfect plan. Nodding his agreement he taps his foot; head and foot exactly in time, now joined by the clicking fingers of his left hand. The women click too, eyes shining, smiles spreading as they watch the long awkward body convulse; sucking in air, the narrow shoulders gather up, the head drops back and out of the mouth, now wide and sensual, comes a clear, sweet note.

Helena closes her eyes and allows his voice to fill her. She thinks of

a small dark room in the eaves of a tall Victorian house and a thin young man talking about blackness and inertia into the small hours of a bitter Sunday morning. She thinks of a tiny disused church, its floor and walls occasionally spattered with pigeon droppings; lit by a thick shaft of hot sunlight. In the corner is an old upright piano, behind which sits Miss Hyland: great white hands hovering like birds of prey above the keyboard; her large, plain face a picture of encouragement, with its half-open mouth poised for song. Next to her, in an agony of self-consciousness, stands a pale, uncoordinated beanpole of a youth, with nothing to recommend him. She plays again the opening bars of Paul McCartney's 'Yesterday', and, when nothing happens, pings out a note repeatedly as a reminder of the key in which it should be sung.

Several snorts and titters can be heard as the boy's face turns purple. Then suddenly he strikes a pose more reminiscent of being shot in the stomach than of singing a song. One of his fellow students tries to muffle an embarrassed screech of laughter and the look of kind coaxing in Miss Hyland's small blue eyes rapidly changes to alarm; but then in turn to a kind of rapture when up through the lanky throat, with its shaving scars and spots, comes a sound so unexpected she is simply paralysed, the birds of prey momentarily suspended, before diving down in a panicked chaos of fingers and notes. After this, whenever they met unexpectedly in the tatty corridors of the All Saints School of Theatre, Miss Hyland would blush.

Helena throws her head forward with such force that the thick, damp swathe of hair sends a pair of spoons skidding across the table, and grabbing up the towel she begins to rub at the hair ferociously; until the singing stops. Then through its dark curtain she watches Luke. He has removed his glasses and with his eyes closed he has that inert Buddha look about him. And then with some alarm she sees that Cissie is staring right at her through the damp strings, eye to eye, like a hunter peering into a lair.

'. . . What?'

'. . . Nothing, you just made me jump with your hair.'

'. . . O.K. kiddiewinkies, matinée tomorrow, time for megabobos.' Dragging the large white bathrobe around her Helena bends down and takes Cissie's face firmly in both hands.

'We are not going to let her do this. This is your holiday. This is

my time. We are not going to let her do it. Not this time. The buck stops wherever she is.' Then squashing the small even features into a fleshy gargoyle, 'God you're beautiful!' She plants an extravagant kiss on her forehead and one in the air just above Luke and leaves.

Energy rushes from the room, like the last dregs of a bathtub. Nothing now, just the hum of the building, a low, migraine hum. Cissie's head is heavy and thick with fatigue. Then through the grey slot of a window, from somewhere out in the darkness, comes what sounds like a distant yelp of pain. Her heart instantly quickens. But there is nothing again, just the hum; no sound of rushing feet, no cries of 'Stop him! He went that way!', no police sirens. Just the hum and the darkness.

Cissie considers for a moment that the noise had been inside her head.

'I'm going to call the police.' It is Luke, myopically holding Maggie's spiral notepad about a quarter of an inch from his face. Cissie can't decide whether this is comical or not. It certainly had been on many an occasion in the past, but the pale eye mechanically scanning the tangled letters of each and every line is somehow unnerving. Putting the notepad down, the eyes collapse into puffy slits as he gropes for his spectacles amongst the debris of the coffee table.

'You can't call the . . . they're not going to turn up because somebody shouted somewhere. There are people shouting all over New York.'

Spectacles in place, the eyes focus on Cissie; they look blank or full of hatred, she cannot see which.

'What's the matter?'

'"What's the matter?"! Your very, very dear friend, of God knows how many years' standing, is missing, in a strange city, in a very, very strange state. Has it not occurred to you that she may be in some need of assistance?'

It is hatred. And now there's a self-righteous anger, which brings her own shooting to the surface.

'Fuck you!' and then with a face purple and quivering, 'Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, MAG-GIEEEEEEEE!, I couldn't give a flying bollock if she's been shagged senseless by King Kong and impaled on the Statue of Liberty's fucking torch! I was thinking about me for once! MEEE!' She stabs a bruising finger repeatedly into her own chest. 'Have you any fucking idea how

many times I've run myself ragged, this last couple of years, getting that cow out of one bleeding mess after another?' Luke's face is again blank, or hateful or perhaps fearful; to be decided. She cannot wait and stomps from the room, blundering into the unexpected darkness of the bedroom.

She stands there for a moment disorientated by its complete blackness and its heady mix of warm body and Chanel Number God knows what. Helena's breathing comes deep and rhythmical from the direction of the bed. Cissie is startled by the desire to get in with her, to bury her face in the damp hair, to cry and rage and lose herself. Instead she feels her way to the bathroom, stumbling over one of Helena's shoes.

Once inside she pulls the light cord and is plunged into a series of nightmarish flashes as the cold fluorescent strip stutters into being. The room is damp with washing. Tiny pairs of coloured briefs hang like bunting; underneath, the bath is filled with washing, suspended in murky-looking water. She turns to look at her reflection in the small rectangular mirror, the unkind light throwing into sharp focus the dark circles beneath her eyes and draining the colour from her face. Behind her the jolly rows of panties mocking and crowding. She checks her watch and whilst doing so, sees that her hands are still shaking from the outburst.

It is twenty past six in the morning in England. Jenny will still be asleep. Or perhaps not; Cissie can quite easily see her standing barefoot in the kitchen, a Pooh Bear figure in her striped winceyette pyjamas; a cigarette burning lazily in a saucer, she is leaning forward, her palms against the worktop. With shoulders hunched and head bowed she stares at the kettle as it builds to the boil. Cissie tries to catch a glimpse of her face, but her mind's eye refuses to conjure it. Instead, alarmingly, it throws up Frances: her older sister's face looks hard and grim. And then her mother's. She yanks at the light cord. Standing there in the darkness, she realises that she has been holding her breath and lets it out with a dry little sob.

She opens the bathroom door and silently makes her way through the bedroom. About halfway across, a long, rattling snore comes from the bed; at its crescendo it is exhaled with a great wet puff and a flapping of lips. Cissie imagines Helena's appalled expression at hearing such a snore from anyone else and goes back into the living room smiling.