

The Perfect Mother

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Published by MIRA Books

Extract

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MARGARET LEROY



C H A P T E R 1

Daisy hears them first: the crunch of feet on the gravel, the resonant clearing of throats outside our living-room window.

She darts to the window, tugs at the curtain.

‘They’re here,’ she says.

She kneels on the sofa, presses her face to the glass. Her warm breath mists the pane.

I turn off the light, so the room is lit by the dancing red of the firelight, and go to stand beside her, pulling the curtain open. My head is close to hers; I smell the musky sweetness of her hair. Sinead hangs back, fiddling with

her new velvet choker, an early Christmas present from her mother. She's reached that age when enthusiasms have to be carefully concealed; and anyway hip-hop is really more her thing.

I glance at Richard. He folds his *Times* and turns towards the window. In the shadowed room and the flickering of the firelight, I can't see if he's smiling.

'Look,' says Daisy. 'They've got snowflakes on their eyelashes.'

There are ten of them in the darkness by the steps to our front door. They're bundled in coats and scarves, the everyday colour leached from their clothes and faces by the torchlight. Their breath is thick, there are siftings of snow on their shoulders. They move around and shuffle into position. Nicky is there, in a woollen hat that hides her crisp black hair, with little reindeer dangling from her ears. She looks up at Daisy, grins and blows her a kiss. The earrings shiver.

The others have their eyes down; they're fumbling through their music books with clumsy wet-gloved fingers. There are women I recognise from Daisy's class at school, Kate's mother, Natalie's mother—women I only know by the names of their children—and men from the choir at the church round the corner, and two or three teenage children. The torches they carry suffuse their faces with red: a myriad little torches glimmer in their eyes. Next to Nicky there's a man I don't recognise. He has unruly fair hair, a darkly gleaming leather jacket; I can just make out his heavy eyebrows and the line of his

jaw. Above them a nail-paring moon shines briefly through the cloud. Nicky knows what this moon is meant to mean: she's been through Feng Shui and aromatherapy and her current passion is witchcraft—the kind of bland designer witchcraft you can read about in lavish books with pastel velour covers—and she says that the moons have names, and this is the birch moon—the first moon of the year, the moon of beginnings.

The snow began this morning, with a perfect, theatrical sense of timing. In our garden, there's a milky skin of ice on the pond, and the dangling tendrils of forsythia are white knotted strands of wool, and the stone frog fountain has a hat of snow. We played snowballs, Sinead and Daisy and me, staying out far too long, not realising how chilled we were, and when we finally came back into the warmth of the kitchen Daisy's fingers were red and shiny in spite of her gloves, and she cried as the blood came back into them. I told her they hurt because they were getting better, warming up, but it didn't help to know that, she couldn't stop crying. In the cold the foxes are getting bolder, coming close to the house. This afternoon I saw them on the patio, looking in at the French window then shying away, mangy, thin, golden, one with a paw that it couldn't touch to the ground, quite silent yet leaving perfect footprints. Since then more snow has fallen, blotting out the foxes' footprints and our own, so our back garden looks as though no one has ever been there. If you went out there now, you would feel a thing you rarely feel in London, a sense of how high the sky is, of the immensity of the night.

The singers clear their throats and start to sing. Their faces are lifted, eager, their breath like smoke. Singing voices sound different outside, fragile, thinner, half their resonance swallowed up by the air; yet so precise and perfect. I see the ships in my mind's eye: they're like the ships in a toddler's picture book, with rainbow-painted prows and many silken sails, playful, gaudy, cresting the curled waves.

Daisy gives a little sigh and rests her head against me. Sinead comes close, sits on the arm of the sofa. They're both thoroughly irreverent, they have their own salacious parodies of carols, picked up in the playground, yet they're held, stilled, by the song. The room smells of cinnamon and warm wine, of the forest freshness of juniper, of the apple-cake that is cooling in the kitchen, moist and sweet and crusted on top with sugar. I want to hold this moment, to make it last for ever, the scents and the singing and firelight and Daisy's head against me.

There's a long still moment after the end of the song, like a held breath. Then Daisy applauds extravagantly, and I turn on the lights and hurry to the door and open it wide.

There are seven stone steps up to our door. Nicky comes first, bounding up two at a time. She's pink-skinned, eager-eyed.

'Catriona—you look so *good*.'

I kiss her; her face is cold.

'Were we brilliant?' she says.

'You were wonderful.'

She pulls off her hat, shakes out her spiky hair. Wetness

sprays from her, the reindeer earrings dance. She holds out the Christian Aid tin, rattles it hopefully. Daisy puts in our money, with a satisfactory clatter.

The others follow her, noisily talking; they are themselves again, separate, banal, the braid of music that bound them together unwoven. They shrug off their wet heavy clothes; the powdering of snow on their hair is melting already. They stretch out their arms and relish the warmth. The house is suddenly full of noise, of energy.

I bring the saucepan from the kitchen and dole the wine into tumblers. Daisy and Sinead hand the glasses round, carrying them like precious things, holding them right at the top so as not to burn their fingers. I see their heads as they weave their way through the crush: Sinead with hair that's dark and thick like her mother's, pulled back and fastened with a flower scrunchie; and Daisy, blonde like me.

Nicky, passing, whispers in my ear: 'D'you like my new recruit?' She gestures rather obviously towards the man in the leather jacket.

I nod.

'Fergal O'Connor. He's a sweetie—bringing up his little boy on his own. Jamie goes to St Mark's, I think. Remind me to introduce you.'

She moves off to talk to Richard.

I chat for a while to Kate's mother and Natalie's mother. They drink eagerly, cradling the tumblers between their hands to warm them.

Natalie's mother looks greedily round the room.

‘Nice house,’ she says.

Her teeth are already stained purple by the wine.

I shrug a little. ‘Well, we’re so lucky to live here.’

‘I’ll say.’ Her fervour isn’t quite polite.

They talk about their children: about homework, what a pain, quite honestly you end up having to do it yourself; and the eleven-plus and how ghastly it is, last year some girls were so nervous, they puked up before they went in; and whether eight is really too young for your child to have her first mobile.

These themes are familiar and I only half join in. I look round the room, feeling a warm sense of satisfaction, seeing it with Natalie’s mother’s eyes, recognising what I have achieved here. Because any woman might look at it now in that greedy appraising way. Yet when Richard and I first came here, and walked between the stone dogs and up the seven steps, and the woman from Foxton’s unlocked and ushered us in, I felt such uncertainty. It was empty; it smelt musty, unused, and there were green streaks of damp, and horrible flowered wallpaper. But it still had a kind of grandeur, with its parquet floors and cornices and mantelpieces of marble, suggesting to me a whole way of life that I’d probably gleaned from TV costume drama: men taking a rest from empire building who warm their backs at the fire, port, political conversations. I couldn’t begin to imagine that I could feel at home in these imposing spaces. I walked round the edge of this room, my footsteps echoing in the emptiness, and felt flimsy, insubstantial, as though I might float to the ceiling, as

though nothing weighed me down. Richard put his arm round me—he did that often then—and I felt his warmth, his weight, his opulent smell of cigars and aftershave, grounding me, making me real. And the estate agent, a pleasant woman, canny about such things, read my hesitation. ‘Let me show you something,’ she said. She took us through the French windows and into the garden. It was big for a town garden, and secluded, with a round rose bed, badly neglected, just a few tattered rags of roses still clinging to the gangly blood-red stems, and a pond, empty of water, with weeds growing up from the concrete. The starlings in the birch tree were puffed up with the cold, like fruit ready to fall. There were worm-casts in the grass and water lying on the lawn and it all terribly needed tending. But the lovely shapes of it were there—the rosebed and the pond and the way the trees leaned in around the lawn, encircling it with a kind of intimacy. And I saw how it could be, saw the stone frog spewing water from his wide cheerful mouth, saw the lily pads and the old-fashioned roses, palest pink and amber, single flowers not lasting long but scented, clambering up the wall.

From that moment it was easy. We bought it and moved in, and I knew just what to do with it, decorating most of it myself. I seemed to expand to fill the space; it started to feel right for me. And now it is all as it should be, elegant, established, with velvet curtains and tiebacks with tassels and heavy pelmets edged with plum-coloured braid. Our things look right here, in this setting, every-

thing seems to fit: Richard's Chinese vases and his violin, and the two ceramic masks, one white, one black, that we brought back from our honeymoon, and a little painting I did of a poppy, that I thought was maybe good enough to frame and go up on the wall; and on the mantelpiece there's a cardboard Nativity scene, intricate, in rich dark colours, that I bought from Benjamin Pollock's toyshop in Covent Garden. The Nativity scene was my choice, not the girls'; they'd probably have gone for something more contemporary and plastic. But I love traditional things—I'm always hunting them out, in junk shops and on market stalls: things made to old designs, or with a patina of use, a bit of history. Like when I'd decorated Daisy's room, the floors stripped and varnished to a pale honey colour, the ceiling night-sky blue with a stencilling of stars, and I knew there was something missing. It needed something old, loved, a teddy bear to sit in the cane chair, an old bear with bits of fur worn off, like people sometimes keep in trunks in their attics. And I wondered what it would be like to have had a childhood that left such traces—old toys, photos perhaps—things that are worn with use, with loving, to store away then come upon years later and show to your own children, with a little stir of sentiment or mildly embarrassed amusement or nostalgia. In the end I found a bear in a department store: it had old-fashioned curly fur and was dressed in Edwardian clothes, but it smelt of the factory. I bought it anyway. It was the best I could do.

The women are reminiscing about their children's toy

obsessions. Natalie's mother, who has four children, remembers Tamagotchis, these pocket computer animals that you had to feed and care for; the mothers had to look after them while the children were at school. I'm only half listening. Over their shoulders I can see Richard talking to somebody's teenage daughter. He looks too smart for the company in his jacket and tie—he isn't very good at casual dressing. The girl is perhaps eighteen, just a little younger than I was when he met me. She's wearing a sleeveless top despite the snow, showing off her prettily sloping shoulders. Her arms are thin and white and her hair is watered silk and she has a big gleamy smile. I can tell he's charming her; he comes from that privileged class of men who are always charming—perhaps most charming—with strangers. And Richard likes young women; it's what he was drawn to in me, that new gloss. I know I'm not like I was when first we met: I don't have that sheen any more.

Nicky is next to Richard, talking to the man with the unruly hair. She's getting in close—not surprising, really, he's quite attractive. Now that she's taken off her coat, she looks like a picture from a magazine. There's something altogether contemporary about Nicky. She loves biker boots and little tartan skirts, and she works at an advertising agency, where, in spite of—or maybe because of—the niceness and easygoingness of Neil, her husband, who is an inventive cook and a devoted parent, she exchanges erotic e-mails with the creative director. 'You see, we're not like you and Richard,' she says to me some-

times, leaning across the table at the Café Rouge towards me. ‘You two are so transparently everything to each other. I mean, it’s wonderful if you can be like that—if you’ve got that kind of marriage—what could be lovelier? But Neil and I aren’t like that, especially since the kids. I don’t think I’m built to be completely faithful, it’s just not in my genes...’

She feels my eyes on her. She turns, speaks to the man again. They come towards me. Kate’s mother and Natalie’s mother move away.

He smiles at me. His eyes are grey and steady. Nicky puts her hand on my arm.

‘Meet Fergal,’ she says. ‘Our latest recruit. A tenor. Tenors are like gold dust. I love my tenors to bits.’

I smile. He says hello. I remember how much I like Irish voices.

She takes her last bite of apple-cake and licks her sugary fingers. ‘Catriona, your cooking is out of this world. I have to have more of this.’

Sinead walks past with a plate. Nicky lunges after her.

My boots have high heels and my eyes are just on a level with his. We look at one another and there’s a brief embarrassed pause.

‘I liked the carols,’ I tell him. Then think how vacuous this sounds.

‘Well,’ he says, and shrugs a little. ‘It’s been fun.’

I note the past tense. I rapidly decide that he’s not the sort of man who’d like me. I know how I must seem to him, a privileged sheltered woman.

‘Nicky’s good at arranging things,’ I say. ‘Making things happen.’

He nods vaguely. He’s looking over my shoulder—I’ve bored him already.

But then I see he is looking at my picture—the painting of poppies that I hung on the wall. It’s just behind me.

‘Who did the painting?’ he says.

‘I did.’

‘I wondered if it was you,’ he says. ‘I like it.’

I feel a little embarrassed, but acknowledge to myself that I am quite pleased with this painting. The petals are that dark purple that is almost black, yet there’s a gleam on them.

‘I don’t do much,’ I say. ‘It just makes a nice break. I can hide away in my attic and the girls know not to disturb me. I suppose it’s a bit conceited to put it up on the wall.’

‘D’you always do that?’ he says.

‘Do what?’

‘Run yourself down like that?’

‘Probably. I guess it’s irritating.’

We both smile.

‘When you paint, is it always flowers?’ he says.

‘Always. I can’t do people. I’m really limited.’

He looks at me quizzically. His eyes are full of laughter.

‘OK, I know I’m doing it again,’ I say. ‘But it’s true. And I can’t draw out of my head either. It has to be something I can put on the table in front of me. I can only paint what I see.’

‘D’you sell them?’ he says.

I nod, flattered he should ask. 'There's a gift shop in town that takes them sometimes.'

He turns to look at it again. 'It's not very cheerful. For a flower. It's kind of ominous. All that shadow around it.'

'Really. How can you read all that into a picture?' But I'm pleased. There's something rather trivial about doing paintings of flowers and selling them in a gift shop alongside scented candles and boxed sets of soap. I like that he can see a kind of darkness in it.

I realise I am happy. My body fluid and easy with the wine, my room hospitable, beautiful, this man with the Irish lilt in his voice approving of my picture; this is easy, this is how things should be.

He's looking at me with those steady grey eyes. There's something in his look that I can't work out: sex, or something else, more obscure, more troubling.

'I know you,' he says suddenly. 'Don't I?'

I laugh politely. 'I don't think so.'

Someone is leaving. The door opens, the cold and the night come in.

'I do,' he says. 'I'm sure I know you. I recognise your face.'

He's staring at me, trying to work it out. It sounds like a come-on, but his look is puzzled, serious. The fear that is never far from me lays its cold hand on my skin.

'Well, I don't know where you could have seen me.' My voice is casual, light. 'Perhaps the school gate at St Mark's? Daisy goes there.' But I know this isn't right, I

know I'd have noticed him. 'Nicky says that's where your little boy goes,' I add, trying to drag the conversation away to somewhere safe.

He shakes his head. 'Jamie doesn't start till after Christmas.'

'You'll like it,' I tell him. 'Daisy's eight, she's in year three, she has the nicest teacher...'

But he won't let it rest. 'Where d'you work?' he says.

'I don't.' Then, biting back the urge to apologise for my life, which must sound so passive— 'I mean, not outside the home. I used to work in a nursery school before I got married. But that's ages ago now.'

'It wasn't there. Forget it. It doesn't matter.'

But I'm upset and he knows it. He tries to carry on, he asks what I'm painting now, but the mood is spoilt, it can't be restored or recovered. As soon as he decently can, he leaves me. All evening I feel troubled: even when the singers have gone, calling out their thanks and Christmas wishes, setting off into the snow which is falling more thickly now, casting its nets over everything, under the chill thin light of the moon of beginnings.

We stand there in the suddenly quiet room. It looks banal now. There are cake crumbs on the carpet, and every glass has a purplish, spicy sediment.

'I'll do the washing-up,' says Richard.

Normally I'd say, No, let me, you sit down, but tonight I give in gratefully. Sinead goes to help him.

I turn off the light again, and the firelight plays on

every shiny surface. My living room seems like a room from another time. I stretch out on the sofa. Daisy comes and folds herself into me. Her limbs are loose, heavy, her skin is hot and dry; I feel her tiredness seeping into me.

‘Did you enjoy it?’ I ask her.

To my surprise, she shakes her head. In the red erratic firelight, her face looks sharper, thinner. Little bright flames glitter in her eyes. Suddenly, without warning, she starts crying.

I hug her. ‘It’s ever so late,’ I tell her. ‘You’ll be fine in the morning.’ She rubs her damp face against me.

I don’t want her to go to sleep unhappy. I can never bear it when she’s sad—which is silly really, I know that, because children often cry, but I always rush in to smooth things over, want to keep everything perfect. So I try to distract her with shadow shapes, the animal patterns I learnt how to make from a booklet I bought from the toyshop in Covent Garden. I move my hands in the beam of light from the open door to the hall, casting shadows across the wall by the fireplace. I make the seagull, flapping my hands together; and the crab, my fingers hunched, so it sidles along the mantelpiece; and the alligator, snapping at the board games on the bookshelf. Daisy wipes her face and starts to smile.

I make the shape of the weasel; we wait and wait, Daisy holding her breath: this is her favourite. And just when you’ve stopped expecting it, it comes, the weasel’s pounce, down into some poor defenceless thing behind the skirting board.

She lets out a brief thrilled scream, and even I start a little. Yet these animals, these teeth, this predatoriness: these are only the shadows of my hands.

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Published in Great Britain 2010
MIRA Books, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

THE PERFECT MOTHER © Margaret Leroy 2010

This is the revised text of a work first published as POSTCARDS
FROM BERLIN by Little, Brown and Company in 2003.
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ISBN 978 0 7783 0352 7

59-0310

Printed in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc