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The Hand That First Held Mine

Written by Maggie O'Farrell

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THE HAND THAT FIRST HELD MINE

Maggie O'Farrell

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And we forget because we must

Matthew Arnold

PART ONE

Listen. The trees in this story are stirring, trembling, readjusting themselves. A breeze is coming in gusts off the sea, and it is almost as if the trees know, in their restlessness, in their head-tossing impatience, that something is about to happen.

The garden is empty, the patio deserted, save for some pots with geraniums and delphiniums shuddering in the wind. A bench stands on the lawn, two chairs facing politely away from it. A bicycle is propped up against the house but its pedals are stationary, the oiled chain motionless. A baby has been put out to sleep in a pram and it lies inside its stiff cocoon of blankets, eyes obligingly shut tight. A seagull hangs suspended in the sky above and even that is silent, beak closed, wings outstretched to catch the high thermal draughts.

The house is set apart from the rest of the village, behind dense hedge, on the crest of a cliff. This is the border between Devon and Cornwall, where the two counties crouch, eyeing each other. It is a much-disputed piece of land. It would not do to look too long at the soil here, soaked as it will be with the blood of Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Romans, filled out with the rubble of their bones.

However, this happens in a time of relative peace for Britain: late summer in the mid-1950s. A gravelled path curves towards the front door of the house. On the washing-line, petticoats and vests, socks

and stays, nappies and handkerchiefs snap and writhe in the breeze. A radio can be heard from somewhere, one of the neighbouring houses perhaps, and the muffled thwack of an axe falling on wood.

The garden waits. The trees wait. The seagull, balancing in the sky above the washing, waits. And then, just as if this is a stage set and there is an audience, watching from a hushed dark, there are voices. Noises off. Somebody screams, another person shouts, something heavy hits the floor. The back door of the house is wrenched open. 'I can't bear it! I tell you, I can't!' the someone shrieks. The back door is slammed, resoundingly, and a person appears.

She is twenty-one, soon to be twenty-two. She is wearing a blue cotton dress with red buttons. A yellow scarf holds back her hair. She is marching across the patio and she is holding a book. In her bare feet, she stamps down the steps and across the lawn. She doesn't notice the seagull, which has turned in the air to look down on her, she doesn't notice the trees, which are tossing their branches to herald her arrival, she doesn't even notice the baby as she sweeps past the pram, heading for a tree stump at the bottom of the garden.

She sits herself down on this tree stump and, attempting to ignore the rage fanning through her veins, she balances the book on her lap and begins to read. *Death be not proud,* the words begin, *though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful*.

She bends with tense concentration over the page, sighing and flexing her shoulders. Then, without warning, she lets out a sudden growl and flings the book away from her. It hits the grass with a subdued thud, its pages fluttering closed. There it lies, surrounded by grass.

She gets to her feet. She doesn't do it as anybody else would, gradually moving from sitting to standing. She leaps, she starts, she bounds, she seems to stamp on the soil as she rises as if, like Rumpelstiltskin, she would crack it open.

Standing, she is at once confronted by the sight of a farmer in the lane, driving a flock of sheep, a switch in one hand, a dog darting about him. These sheep encapsulate what she hates about her home: their shredded, filthy backsides, their numb-faced stupidity, their witless bleating. She would like to drive them all into a threshing machine, over the cliff, anything, just to rid herself of the sight.

She turns away from the sheep, away from the house. She keeps only the sea in her sights. She has had a creeping fear of late that what she wants most – for her life to begin, to take on some meaning, to turn from blurred monochrome into glorious technicolour – may pass her by. That she might not recognise it if it comes her way, might fail to grasp for it.

She is closing her eyes to the sea, to the presence of the cast-aside book, when there is the sound of feet thudding through grass and a voice, saying, 'Sandra?'

She snaps upright as if she has received an electric shock. '*Alex*andra!' she corrects. This is her name, given to her at birth, but her mother later decided she didn't like it and shortened it to its final syllables.

'Alexandra,' the child repeats obediently. 'Mother says, "What are you doing and will you come in and—"'

'Away!' Alexandra screams. 'Go away!' And she returns crossly to her stump, to the book, to her analysis of Death and its needless pride.

At the exact same moment, half a mile away, Innes Kent – aged thirty-four, art dealer, journalist, critic, self-confessed hedonist – is kneeling on the dirt to examine the underside of his car. He has no idea what he is looking for but feels that he ought to look anyway. He is ever the optimist. The car is a silver and ice-blue MG; Innes loves it more than almost anything else in the world and it has just ground to a standstill at the side of this country lane. He straightens up.

And he does what he does in most situations that frustrate him: he lights a cigarette. He gives the wheel an experimental kick, then regrets it.

Innes has been in St Ives, visiting the studio of an artist whose work he'd been hoping to buy. He had found the artist rather drunk and the work far from completion. The whole excursion has been a raging disaster. And now this. He grinds his cigarette underfoot, then sets off down the lane. He can see a cluster of houses ahead, the curved wall of a harbour reaching out into the sea. Someone will know the whereabouts of a garage, if they have garages in this god-forsaken place.

Alexandra does not – cannot – know the proximity of Innes Kent. She doesn't know that he is coming, getting ever closer with every passing second, walking in his hand-made shoes along the roads that separate them, the distance between them shrinking with every well-shod step. Life as she will know it is about to begin but she is absorbed, finally, in her reading, in a long-dead man's struggle with mortality.

As Innes Kent turns into her road, Alexandra raises her head. She places the book on the ground again, this time more gently, and stretches, her arms held high. She twirls a strand of hair between finger and thumb, hooks a daisy between her toes and plucks it – she has always had gymnastic joints; it is something of which she is rather proud. She does this again and again until all eight gaps between her toes hold the frank yellow eye of a daisy.

Innes comes to a halt beside a gap in a thick hedge. He peers through. A pretty sort of country house with bushes, grass, flowers, that kind of thing – a garden, he supposes. Then he sees, close by, seated under a tree, a woman. Innes's interest never fails to be piqued by the proximity of a woman.

This specimen is without shoes, hair held off her neck in a yellow

scarf. He raises himself on tiptoe to see better. The most exquisite column of a neck, he decides. If he were pressed to write a description of it, he would be forced to employ the word 'sculptural' and possibly even 'alabaster', which are not terms he would bandy about lightly. Innes's background is in art. Or perhaps 'foreground' would be a more accurate term. Art is not a background for Innes. It is what he breathes, what makes life continue; he looks and he doesn't see a tree, a car, a street, he sees a potential still-life, he sees an interplay of light and shade and colour, he sees a deliberate arrangement of chosen objects.

And what he sees when he looks at Alexandra in her yellow scarf and blue dress is a scene from a fresco. Innes believes he is beholding a perfect rural madonna, in profile, in a marvellously – he thinks – tight-fitting blue frock, with her baby slumbering a few feet away. He shuts one eye and regards the scene first with one eye, then the other. Really, it's a beautiful composition, with the tree overhead counterpointed by the flat stretch of grass and the uprightness of the woman and her neck. He would like to see it painted by one of the Italian masters, by Piero della Francesca or Andrea del Sarto perhaps. She can even pick flowers with her toes! What a creature!

Innes is smiling to himself, trying it out again with both eyes, when the scene is shattered by the madonna saying in a clear voice, 'Don't you know it's very bad manners to spy on people?'

He is so taken aback that for a moment he is speechless (not something to which he is accustomed) and he watches, fascinated, as the woman stands up from her tree stump. The della Francesca madonna morphs before his very eyes into a version of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. What a sight! The woman coming towards him down the raised lawn echoes Duchamp's effect exactly! Her anger seems to spike the very air!

Innes has been steeped in the Dadaists of late, so much so that

two nights previously he had a dream entirely within one of their paintings. 'My second favourite dream', he rates it. (The first is too graphic to relate.)

'It is also,' the madonna is bearing down on him, jaw set, hands on hips, and he has to say he is rather glad of the hedge between them, 'illegal. I am perfectly within my rights to summon a policeman.'

'I'm sorry,' he manages to say. 'My car. It seems to have broken down. I'm looking for a garage.'

'Does this look like a garage to you?' Her voice is not, as he might have expected, smoothed with a Devonian burr but sharp and cut like a diamond.

'Um. No. It does not.'

'Well, then,' she is advancing ever closer to her side of the hedge, 'goodbye.'

As she says this, Alexandra gets her first proper look at the peeping Tom. He has hair quite a bit longer than she has ever seen on a man. His shirt has an unusually high collar and is daffodil yellow. His suit is light grey needle cord and has no collar at all; the tie he is wearing is the colour of duck eggs. Alexandra comes two steps closer. Daffodils, her mind reiterates, duck eggs.

'I wasn't spying,' the man is protesting, 'I assure you. I'm seeking aid. I find myself in a bit of a fix. My car has broken down. Would you happen to know of a garage near here? I don't mean to tear you away from your baby but I have to be back in London sharpish as I have a print deadline. Nightmare upon nightmare. Any assistance and I'm your grateful slave.'

She blinks. She has never heard anyone speak like this before. *Sharpish*, *fix*, *print deadline*, *nightmare upon nightmare*, *grateful slave*. She would like to ask him to say it all again. Then part of the speech filters through to her. 'It's not my baby,' she snaps. 'It's nothing to do with me. It's my mother's.'

'Ah.' The man inclines his head sideways. 'I'm not sure I would categorise that as *nothing* to do with you.'

'Wouldn't you?'

'No. It must at least be acknowledged as your sibling.'

There is a slight pause. Alexandra tries, without success, not to examine his clothes again. The shirt, that tie. Daffodils and eggs. 'You're from London, then?' she asks.

'I am.'

She sniffs. She adjusts the scarf across her forehead. She examines the bristles on the man's chin and wonders why he hasn't shaved. And, unfathomably, a half-formed plan of hers crystallises into a definite desire. 'I'm planning,' she says, 'on going to live in London myself.'

'Is that so?' The man starts to rummage animatedly in his pockets. He brings out an enamelled green cigarette case, removes two cigarettes and offers her one. She has to lean over the hedge to take it.

'Thank you,' she says. He lights it for her, cupping the match in his hands, then uses the same match on his own cigarette. Close up, she thinks, he smells of hair-oil, cologne and something else. But he moves back before she can identify it.

'Thanks,' she says again, indicating the cigarette, and inhales.

'And what,' the man says, as he shakes out the match and tosses it aside, 'may I ask, is holding you back?'

She thinks about this. 'Nothing,' she answers, and laughs. Because it's true. Nothing stands in her way. She nods towards the house. 'They don't know yet. And they'll be set against it. But they can't stop me.'

'That's the spirit,' he says, smoke curling from his mouth. 'So, you're running away to the capital?'

'Running,' Alexandra replies, drawing herself up to her full height, 'but not away. You can't run away from home if you've already left. I've been away at university.' She takes a draw on her cigarette, glances

towards the house, then back at the man. 'Actually, I was sent down and—'

'From university?' the man cuts in, cigarette halfway to his mouth.

'Yes.'

'How very dramatic. For what crime?'

'For no crime at all,' she returns, rather more heatedly than necessary because the injustice of it still stings. 'I was walking out of an exam and I came out of a door reserved for men. I'm not allowed to graduate unless I apologise. They,' she nods again at the house, 'didn't even want me to go to university in the first place but now they're not speaking to me until I go back and apologise.'

The man is looking at her as if committing her to memory. The stitching on his shirt is in blue cotton, she notices, the cuffs and the collar. 'And are you going to apologise?'

She flicks ash from her cigarette and shakes her head. 'I don't see why I should. I didn't even know it was only for men. There was no sign. And I said to them, "Well, where's the door for women?" and they said there wasn't one. So why should I say sorry?'

'Quite. Never say sorry unless you are sorry.' They smoke for a moment, not looking at each other. 'So,' the man says, eventually, 'what are you going to do in London?'

'I'm going to work of course. Though I might not get a job,' she says, suddenly despondent. 'Someone told me that for secretarial work you need a typing speed of sixty words per minute and I'm currently up to about three.'

He smiles. 'And where will you be living?'

'You ask a lot of questions.'

'Force of habit.' He shrugs unapologetically. 'I'm a journalist, among other things. So. Your digs. Where will they be?'

'I don't know if I want to tell you.'

'Why ever not? I shan't tell a soul. I'm very good about secrets.'

She throws her cigarette butt into the green, unfurling leaves of the hedge. 'Well, a friend gave me the address of a house for single women in Kentish Town. She said—'

His face betrays only the slightest twitch of amusement. 'A house for single women?'

'Yes. What's funny about that?'

'Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It sounds . . .' he gestures '. . . marvellous. Kentish Town. We'll be practically neighbours. I'm in Haverstock Hill. You should come and visit, if they allow you out.'

Alexandra arches her brows, as if pretending to think about it. Part of her doesn't want to give in to this man. There is something about him that suggests he is used to getting his way. For some reason she thinks thwarting him would do him good. 'That might be possible, I really don't know. Perhaps—'

Unfortunately for everyone, Dorothy chooses that moment to make her entrance. Some signal on her maternal radar has informed her of a male predator in the vicinity of her eldest daughter. 'May I help you?' she calls, in a tone that contradicts the sentence.

Alexandra whirls around to see her mother advancing down the lawn, baby's bottle held out like a pistol. She watches as Dorothy takes in the man, all the way from his light grey shoes to his collarless suit. By the sour turn to her mouth, Alexandra can tell at once that she does not like what she sees.

The man gives Dorothy a dazzling smile and his teeth appear very white against his tanned skin. 'Thank you, but this lady,' he gestures towards Alexandra, 'was assisting me.'

'My *daughter*,' Dorothy stresses the word, 'is rather busy this morning. Sandra, I thought you would be keeping an eye on the baby. Now, what can we—'

'*Alexandra!*' Alexandra shouts at her mother. 'My name is Alexandra!'

She is aware that she is behaving like a cross child but she cannot bear this man to think her name is Sandra.

But her mother is adept at two things: ignoring her daughter's tantrums and extracting information from people. Dorothy listens to the story about the broken-down car and, within seconds, has dispatched the man off down the road with directions to a mechanic. He looks back once, raises his hand and waves.

Alexandra feels something close to rage, to grief, as she hears his footsteps recede down the lane towards the village. To have been so close to someone like him and then for him to be snatched away. She kicks the tree stump, then the baby's pram wheel. It is a particular brand of fury, peculiar to youth, that stifling, oppressive sensation of your elders outmanoeuvring you.

'What on earth is wrong with you?' Dorothy hisses, jiggling the pram handle because the baby has woken up, squawking and tussling. 'I come down here to find you flirting with some – some gypsy over the hedge. In broad daylight! For all to see. Where is your sense of decorum? What kind of an example are you setting for your brothers and sisters?'

'And, speaking of them,' Alexandra pauses before adding, '*all of them*, where's your sense of decorum?' She sets off up the garden. She cannot spend another second in her mother's company.

Dorothy stops jiggling the handle of the pram and stares after her, open-mouthed. 'What do you mean?' she shouts, forgetting momentarily the proximity of the neighbours. 'How dare you? How dare you address me in such a fashion? I'll be speaking to your father about this, I will, as soon as he—'

'Speak! Speak away!' Alexandra hurls over her shoulder as she sprints up the garden and crashes her way into the house surprising, as she does so, a patient of her father's who is waiting in the hallway.

As she reaches the bedroom she is forced to share with three of

her younger siblings, she can still hear her mother's voice, screeching from the garden: 'Am I the only one in this house to demand standards? I don't know where you think you're going. You're supposed to be helping me today. You're meant to be minding the baby. And the silver needs doing and the china. Who do you think is going to do it? The ghosts?'