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Opening Extract from...

The Butterfly Cabinet

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Maddie McGlade,

Resident, Oranmore Nursing Home,
Portstewart, Northern Ireland,
Sunday 8 September 1968

Anna. You're the spit of your mother standing there – Florence, God rest her, and you have the light of her sharp wit in your eyes. Give me your hand till I see you better. There's not much change on you, apart from what we both know. Ah, you needn't look at me like that. Sure, why else would you be here? I know by the face of you there's a baby on the way, even if you're not showing. It's an odd thing, isn't it, the way the past has no interest for the young till it comes galloping up on the back of the future. And then they can't get enough of it, peering after it, asking it where it's been. I suppose that's always been the way. I suppose we're none of us interested in the stories of our people till we have children of our own to tell them to.

You couldn't have known it, but you've come on my birthday, of all days. At least, it's the day I call my birthday. When I was born, Daddy went to register the birth but not having had much schooling he wasn't sure of the date. If it's not the exact day, it's not far off it. One thing's certain: within the week I'll be ninety-two. If you stay for your tea you'll get a bit of cake.

Sit down, Anna. Can you smell that? Gravel, after the rain. You must have carried it in on your feet. Metallic tasting: like the shock you get when your tongue hits the tine on a tarnished fork. I'll never forget that smell, that taste in my mouth: it's as strong as the day, nearly eighty years ago, that I was made to lie down on the avenue with my nose buried in it. Your grandmother was a hard woman, Anna, brittle as yellowman and fond of her 'apt punishments'. This was to teach me to keep my nose out of the affairs of my betters, she said, and in the dirt where it belonged. Oh, don't look so shocked: I survived that and many another thing. And, hard as she was, I think I understand her better now. I know something now about what it is to feel trapped and though it's a strange thing to say, with all the money they had, I think that must have been how she felt. She suffered for what she did. I bear no grudges against the dead. There's none of us blameless.

She was such a presence about the place, there's days I half expect to meet her on the landing, standing up, straight as a willow, her thick auburn hair tucked up tight, her face

like a mask, never a smile on it. She went about her business indoors like a wound-up toy: everything to be done on time and any exception put her into bad humour. If the gas wasn't lit or the table wasn't set or there was a spot on a napkin, you'd feel the beam of her eyes on you like a grip on your arm. She was like a dark sun and all the rest of us – the servants and the weans and the Master – all turned round her like planets, trying not to annoy or upset her in any way, trying to keep the peace.

I'll never forget the first time I saw her in evening dress. I wasn't long started at the Castle, and I came up the back stairs to dampen down the fire in the drawing room because Peig, the housekeeper, said the Master and Mistress were going out to a ball. When I came back out, she was standing at the top of the main staircase, the Master at the foot, and she was in a black satin cape, all covered in black cock feathers, tipped at the ends with green. She looked like a raven about to take flight, half bird, half woman, like she'd sprouted wings from her shoulders. I couldn't see where her arms ended and the cape began. It was stunning and scaresome all at the same time. I've never been so frightened of a person in my life! She stood at the top of the stairs, her arms spread out, waiting for the Master's opinion, and when she peered down and saw me she looked the way a hawk might look at a sparrow. I wouldn't have been one bit surprised if she'd raised herself up on her toes and flapped those great feathery black wings and taken off over the banister, swooped down through the

house and picked me up in her beak. I went into the kitchen shivering, and Peig looked at me and asked me what was wrong. I told her I thought the Mistress might eat me, and she laughed till her eyes streamed and she had to wipe them with her apron. When she finally recovered she said there was that many animals had gone into the outfitting of her that I could be forgiven for wondering if there was any portion left of the Mistress that was human!

Don't look like that, Anna. You needn't worry: you have nothing of hers that you need fear. Your mother knew the Mistress's story, for she put me over it a dozen times or more, and she read all the newspaper cuttings that I'd kept and many's the time she cried sore tears for her sister, Charlotte, that she never knew. She promised to take care of you better than any child was ever taken care of, and she did, for seven short years, for as long as she could. For as long as her lungs allowed her, before the TB took her. She fought hard to stay with you, Anna, she knew what it was to grow up motherless and she didn't want that for you, but she was no match for it. She said to me, after she got sick, that she'd always felt there was prison air in her lungs, damp and cold, on account of where she'd been born. She was only a wean o' days old when the Master brought her back here to the Castle: she couldn't have remembered anything about Grangegorman Prison, but she had that notion in her head. 'Prison air,' she said, trapped in her chest, and her body only then trying to cough it up. I'd have

taken over from her, Anna, looked after you myself if I'd been able, and I did try for a while. But your father could see it was a struggle for me and that was when he hit on the idea of the Dominicans, and sent you away to school at Aquinas Hall. I think he was trying to do what your mother would have wanted for you.

You have her sweet nature, Anna. You've waited for a child nearly as long as Florence waited for you. You must be, thirty-two? Am I right? Not far off it. September babies, the pair of us. What does that make us? Virgo and Libra: that'd be right. I remember the night you were born, the Big Sunday, September the twenty-seventh 1936. The place was full of day-trippers, pouring into the town from the crack of dawn, taking their last chance at the weather, putting a full stop at the end of the summer. The Parade crammed with stalls selling ice cream and minerals, and the spinning pierrots, and the bay full of dancing boats: green and yellow and blue. Your mother and father were living in the yellow house where you are now, at Victoria Terrace, only yards away from the harbour. The young fellas started as usual to push each other out on to the greasy pole, and every time one of them fell in, there was a splash in the water and a roar went up from the crowd, and poor Florence gave another groan out of her and another cry. Ten hours, she was in labour with you. Poor Mrs Avery, the midwife, was exhausted. And your father, pacing up and down the hall outside, drinking one pot of tea after another, smoking a whole packet of Players, and then going

down to switch on the wireless as if there'd be some news of you on there. The psalm music was coming up from below: the BBC Chorus and then 'Hallelujah!', and one last cry, and there you were. Little Anna, with a rosy face and a smile that would melt an unlit candle. You were born into love the like of no other child I've known. You've heard that story before, Anna, but you never tire of it, do you? Everyone should have a person in their life to tell them stories of their birth.

Florence got shockin' upset, a month or so before you were born. A baby was got in the river, up at the Cutts in Coleraine. A baby girl, it was, or part of one: she'd been in the river a long time. The coroner couldn't tell if her lungs had ever drawn a breath, the paper said. Your mother walked about for days after it, cradling her belly, talking to you. She mourned for that baby like it was her own, took it severely to heart that someone could do such a thing to an innocent child. And I was thinking that somewhere up the country, near where the Bann runs fast, there was a girl, standing in a farmhouse kitchen maybe, or behind a counter in a shop, a girl who had been waiting for that news, a girl with the paper in her hands, reading, knowing that was her baby that was got in the fishing gates, a girl with the insides torn out of her.

It's an odd thing I ended up back here after all these years. You know, it is a kind of home to me, for when you add up the time I was here as a servant and the time I've been here as a resident, I've lived here longer than I've

lived anywhere. The first time I came, Anna, the first time I set foot over the door of this house, I was fourteen years old. I'd never seen anything like the Castle. Oh, I'd seen it from the outside, sure enough, you couldn't miss it. Grew up in its shadow, you might say, the way it stands on the headland looking down over Bone Row and the Parade and the Harbour and the Green Hill at the far end. On a day like this, you can look out over the sea to the hills of Donegal in the west, Scotland to the east and the Atlantic as far north as you can see. It was never what you would call a pretty building. There's always been a touch of the fortress about it: grey, nothing heartsome. Ah, but inside: inside it was a palace. Rooms the size of churches, not all divided up like they are now, everything light and airy, full of fine-looking furniture but spacious, you would say, nothing too close to anything else. And smelling of lilies: the Mistress loved lilies. I hated them, still do: those white petals like curled tongues when they open; the choking way they catch at the back of your throat; the rusty pollen that stains your hands for days. Give me a bunch of snowdrops any day, or bluebells: bluebells from Knockancor Wood. But your grandmother loved the lilies, would have filled the house with them if she could. She thought they cloaked the smell of the gas. Better than the smell of the place now, anyway: Jeyes fluid and boiled spuds. Washable surfaces – that's what's important now: lino and emulsion; the smell of disinfectant everywhere. Why is it that people come to the sea to

die? Is it the sound they're after? The first sound? Mistaking the crash and suck of the ocean for the swill of warm blood in their ears? Is it a return?

Do you see that, Anna, that little mark above my wrist? I saw that same mark on my mother's hand not long before she died. It would put you in mind of a swift in full flight: two dark wings, a divided tail. I know where that little bird is headed: swift by name and swift by nature, straight to the blood. I've been hiding it up my sleeve; I don't want the doctor near me. Let the hare sit, that's what I say. What's the point of rising it now? My time's near as well, but in a different way to yours, thank God. I'm glad you've come. Sure, everybody should tell a story when they're dying – what have they to lose?

There's Nurse Jenny, Anna. Do you see her, in her lovely white uniform? She can smell death on a person. She's never said anything, but I've seen her face change, one day when she was helping oul' Mrs Wilson up out of the chair; another day when she was spooning Jimmy's dinner into him. There's a grey look comes over her round face; a furrow comes in her brow, and then she's very gentle, gentler even than before. Oul' Mrs Wilson was dead within two days; Jimmy that very night. It'll not be long now, I'm thinking, till she smells it on me.

There's something I want to show you, up in my room, behind the door. Do you know what it is? It's your grandmother's butterfly cabinet: I've had it these years. The keeper of secrets, the Mistress's treasure. Ebony, I think it

is, very solid: four big balled feet on it. The darkest wood I've ever seen. There was never any warmth in it, not even when the light from the fire fell on it. Twelve tiny drawers, every one with its own small wooden knob. None of us was allowed to go near it: it was the one thing in the house that the Mistress saw to herself. I'll never solve the problem of her: what's the point of keeping a dead thing? No luck could ever come of it. Mammy used to say that a white butterfly was the soul of a child and that you daren't harm it or the soul would never find rest. The cabinet ended up in Peig's house, and when I opened it all those years ago and looked inside there was nothing left but dust and mould and rusted pins where the butterflies would have been. It was one of the saddest things I'd ever seen and for the first time ever – I don't know why – I felt sorry for the Mistress and I cried for her. I cried for her loss of Charlotte and her loss of the boys and her loss of the Master, and for the days she spent in prison and for the misery of her sad lonely life. And most of all I cried that she didn't know what she had and what she'd lost. Every drawer was the same: dust and mould and the dried-up bodies of carpet beetles and spiders, a waste of small lives. But when I went to close it up again, one of the drawers wouldn't slide back in: I could tell there was something behind it. I slid the drawer out and reached in and felt a book and when I pulled it out, I thought it was a missal, bound in black leather with a metal trim. I opened it and saw the date in pencil on the first page and then I knew straight away what

it was: the diary the Mistress had kept in prison. Her writing was very neat always, small and careful, but here and there, there'd be a stumble forward to the loop of an 'l' or an 'f', like the pencil was trying to get away from her and start some jig of its own.

I read three lines, and I closed it up again and put it back. You might find that hard to believe, Anna, but it wasn't meant for me. Maybe she put it there that first visit back to the house. Maybe she meant to come back. Maybe she intended to destroy it. Maybe it was for your mother. Who's to say? But, I think, it was her chance to speak, and she must have wanted someone to listen and she wouldn't have wanted it to be me. After Peig died, the cabinet and the diary passed into my hands. I decided I'd give them both to Florence some day, when you'd grown up a bit, when she'd proved to herself that there was no curse, that she was deserving of the name of 'mother'. But I waited too long. And now I'm giving them to you. You may say there's no blood between us, Anna: old Nanny Madd, everyone's nanny with no child to call her own. But you are the true heir to the story, and to the butterfly cabinet. You're to have them both. You're the diary's only reader, Anna. Who better than you?

I'm tired, daughter. You'll come back? I could tell you more, maybe, another day. There's more to tell. But the story runs away from me, the like of a woollen sleeve caught on a barbed wire fence. It unravels before my eyes. I am trying with my words to gather it up but it's a useless

shape at times and doesn't resemble at all the thing that it was. It's hard to do, to tell one story, when there are so many stories to tell.