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Garnethill

Written by Denise Mina

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GARNETHILL

Denise Mina



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Maureen

Maureen dried her eyes impatiently, lit a cigarette, walked over to the bedroom window, and threw open the heavy red curtains. Her flat was at the top of Garnethill, the highest hill in Glasgow, and the craggy North Side lay before her, polka-dotted with cloud shadows. In the street below, art students were winding their way up to their morning classes.

When she first met Douglas she knew that this would be a big one. His voice was soft and when he spoke her name she felt that God was calling or something. She fell in love despite Elsbeth, despite his lies, despite her friends' disapproval. She remembered a time when she would watch him sleep, his eyes fluttering behind the lids, and she found the sight so beautiful that it winded her. But on Monday night she woke up and looked at him and knew it was over. Eight long months of emotional turmoil had passed as suddenly as a fart.

At work she told Liz.

'Oh, I know, I know,' said Liz, backcombing her blonde hair with her fingers. 'Before I met Garry I used to go dancing . . .'

Liz was crap to talk to. It didn't matter what the subject was she always brought it back round to her and Garry. Garry was a sex god, everyone fancied him, said Liz, she had been lucky to get him. Maureen was sure that Garry

was the source of this information. He came by the ticket booth sometimes, hanging in the window, flirting at Maureen when Liz wasn't looking.

Liz began a rambling story about liking Garry and then not liking him and then liking him again. Two sentences into it Maureen realized she had heard the story before. Her head began to ache. 'Liz,' she said, 'would you do me a favour and get the phones today? He's supposed to phone and I don't want to talk to him.'

'Sure,' said Liz. 'No bother.'

At half-ten Liz opened her eyes wide. 'Sorry,' she said theatrically into the phone, 'she's not here. No, she won't be in then either. Try tomorrow.' She hung up abruptly and looked at Maureen, 'Pips went.'

'Pips? Was he calling from a phone box?'

'Aye.'

Maureen looked at her watch. 'That's strange,' she said. 'He should be at work.'

Half an hour later Liz answered the phone again. 'No,' she said flatly, 'I told you she's not in. Try tomorrow.' She put the phone down. 'Well,' she said, clearly impressed, 'he's eager.'

'Was he calling from a phone box again?'

'Sounded like it. I could hear people talking in the background like before.'

The ticket booth was at the front of the Apollo Theatre, set into a triangular dip in the neo-classical façade so that customers didn't have to stand in the rain while they bought their tickets. It was a dull grey day outside the window, the first bitter day of autumn, coming just as warm afternoons had begun to feel like a birthright. The cold wind brushed under the window, eddying in the change tray. The second post brought a letter stamped with an Edinburgh postmark and addressed to Maureen.

She folded it in half and slipped it into her pocket, pulled the blind down at her window and told Liz she was going to the loo.

Douglas said he was living with Elsbeth but Maureen felt sure they were married: twelve years together seemed like a lifetime and he lied about everything else. Three months ago the elections for the European Parliament had been held and Douglas's mother was returned for a second term as the MEP for Strathclyde. All the local newspapers carried variations of the same carefully staged photo opportunity. Carol Brady was standing on the forecourt of a big Glasgow hotel, smiling and holding a bunch of roses. Douglas was standing in the background next to the Provost, his arm slung casually around a pretty blonde woman's waist. The caption named her as Elsbeth Brady, his wife.

Maureen had written to the General Registrar in Edinburgh, sending a postal order and Douglas's details, asking for a fifteen-year search on the public marriage register. She remembered caring desperately when she sent the letter three months ago but now the response had arrived it was just a curiosity.

The outer door was jammed open by Audrey's mop bucket. One of the cubicle doors was shut and a thin string of smoke rose from behind the door. Maureen tiptoed over the freshly mopped floor, locked the cubicle door and sat on the edge of the toilet, ripping the fold open with her finger.

The marriage certificate said that he had been married in 1987 to Elsbeth Mary McGregor. Maureen felt a burst of lethargy like an acid rush in her stomach.

'Hello?' called Audrey from the other cubicle, speaking in the strangled accent she reserved for addressing the management.

'It's all right,' said Maureen. 'It's only me. Smoke on.'

When she got back to the office Liz was excited. 'He phoned again,' she said, looking at Maureen as if this were great news. 'I said you weren't in today and he shouldn't phone back. He must be mad for you.'

Maureen couldn't be arsed responding. 'I really don't think so,' she said, and slipped his marriage certificate into her handbag.

At six o'clock Maureen phoned Leslie at work. 'Listen, d'ye fancy meeting an hour earlier?'

'I thought your appointment with the psychiatrist was on Wednesdays.'

'Auch, aye,' said Maureen, cringing. 'I'll just dog it today.'

'Right, doll,' said Leslie. 'I'll get you there at, what, half-six?'

'Half-six it is,' said Maureen.

Liz helped to shut up the booth and then left Maureen to carry the day's takings around the corner to the night safe. Maureen walked slowly, taking the long way through the town, avoiding the Albert Hospital. Cathedral Street is a wind tunnel. It's a long slip-road for the M8 motorway and was built as a dual carriageway to accommodate the heavy traffic. The tall office buildings on either side prevent cross breezes from tempering the eastern wind as it rolls down the hill, gathering nippy momentum as it crosses the graveyard and sweeps down the broad street. Maureen had misjudged the weather, her thin cotton dress and woollen jacket did nothing to keep out the cold and her toes were numb in her boots.

Louisa would be sitting behind her desk on the ninth floor of the Albert right now, her hands clenched in front of her, watching the door, waiting for her. Maureen didn't want to go. The echoey corridors and smell of industrial

disinfectant freaked her every time, reminding her of her stay in the Northern. The nurses there were kind but they fed her with food she didn't like and dressed her with the curtains open. The toilets didn't have locks on them so that the patients couldn't misuse the privilege of privacy for a suicide bid. When she first got out, each day was a trial: she was terrified that she might snap and again be a piece of meat to be dressed every morning in case of visitors. Her current therapist, Dr Louisa Wishart, said that her terror was a fear of vulnerability, not loss of dignity. And every time she went to see Louisa the same fifty-year-old underweight man was sitting in the waiting room. He kept trying to catch her eye and talk to her. She cut her waiting time as thin as possible to avoid him, sitting in one of the toilets or havering around in the lobby.

She had been attending the Albert since Angus Farrell at the Rainbow Clinic referred her eight months before. By the time she had her first session with Louisa she knew she was going to be all right, that therapy was an empty gesture to medicalize a deep sadness. She tried to stop going to Louisa but her mother, Winnie, caused an almighty fuss, phoning her four times a day to ask how she was. She went back to the Albert and said she had been resisting a breakthrough in her therapy.

Having been brought up Catholic it seemed that she had always been passing her inner life in front of someone or other for approval. So she lied, changing the names and making up story-lines to entertain herself. She rarely talked about her family. Louisa smiled sadly and gave her obvious advice.

She took a cut-off to the High Street and walked down to the Pizza Pie Palace, a badly Americanized restaurant destined for insolvency from the first. The walls were varnished red brick, hung with chipped tin adverts for

cigarettes and gasoline. Two battered papier-maché cacti stood on either side of the door. The bonnet of a Cadillac had been unwisely attached to the wall just above the till, at forehead level. She could see Leslie sitting at a table at the back of the room, still wearing her battered biker's leathers, with two enormous cocktails in front of her and a cigarette in her hand. Her short dark hair was kept perpetually dirty by her crash helmet and stuck out in all directions. Her nose was flat and broad, her eyes were large and deep brown, verging on black, her teeth were big and regular. The overall effect was mad and sexy. She pushed one of the cocktail glasses towards Maureen as she walked over to the table.

'Aloha.' She grinned.

A shiny-faced young waiter came over to the table and interrupted Leslie's pizza order to tell her he thought her leathers were sexy. Leslie blew a column of smoke at him. 'Get us a fucking waitress,' she said, and watched as he walked away.

'Leslie,' said Maureen, 'you shouldn't speak to people like that. He doesn't know what he's done to offend you.'

'Fuck him, he can work it out for himself. And if he can't, well, he'll be offended and that makes two of us.'

'It's rude. He doesn't know what he's done.'

'You are correct, Mauri,' she said, 'but I think that the important lesson for our young friend to learn is that I'm a rude woman and he should stay the fuck out of my face.'

A bouncy young waitress came over to the table. Leslie ordered a large crispy pizza for the two of them to share with anchovies, mushrooms and black olives. Maureen ordered a carafe of their cheapest red wine.

Unlike Liz, Leslie was great to talk to. Whatever had happened she unconditionally took her pal's side, happily

badmouthed the opposition and then never mentioned it again, but she hated Douglas and she was pleased now that Maureen said she wanted to finish it. 'He's an arse.' She fished a cherry out of her glass with her fingers. 'That was abuse. You were a minute out of hospital when he nipped you.'

'He didn't nip me,' said Maureen. 'I nipped him.'

'Doesn't matter. Getting involved with a patient is abuse.'

'But I wasn't his patient, though,' said Maureen, instantly defensive. 'I was Angus's patient.'

'He met you at the clinic, didn't he?'

'Yeah,' Maureen conceded uncomfortably.

'And it's a clinic for victims of sexual abuse?'

'Yeah.'

'And he worked there and knew you were a patient?' 'Yeah, but—'

'Then it's abuse,' said Leslie and, lifting the cocktail, drank it far too quickly.

'Oh, I dunno, Leslie, everything can't be abuse, you know? I mean, I wanted it. I was as much part of it as he was.'

'Yeah,' she said adamantly. 'Everything can't be abuse but that was. Do you think he could have guessed that your consent was compromised by being four months out of a psychiatric hospital?'

'I dunno.'

'Maureen, four months out of the laughing academy, come on, even a prick like Douglas knows it's not right. He's with someone else, he asks you to keep it a secret, he's got a lot of power over you. It's abusive.'

'He didn't ask me to keep it a secret, actually,' said Maureen, blushing with annoyance.

'Did he take you home to meet his mum?' Leslie smiled

softly. 'What's your damage about this guy, Mauri? He's got access to your fucking psychiatric record, how equal can that be?'

The waitress brought the carafe of wine and poured it for them as if it was nice. She lifted the empty cocktail glasses. Maureen couldn't think of anything to say. She nursed her cigarette to mask her discomfort, rolling the tip on the floor of the glass ashtray. Leslie was right. Douglas was a sad old wanker.

The carafe was half empty by the time the giant pizza arrived. They ate it with their fingers, catching up with the news and gossip. The funding to the domestic violence shelter where Leslie worked had been cut and it might have to shut in a month. She was conducting a campaign to have the funding reinstated and was getting the rubber ear everywhere. 'God, it's depressing,' she said. 'We got so desperate we even sent a mail-shot to the papers telling them that eighty per cent of battered women are turned away as it is, and not one of them phoned us. No one seems to give a shit.'

'Can't you ask the women to speak to the papers? I bet they'd cover a human interest story.'

Leslie drained a glass of wine and thought about it. 'That's a hideous idea,' she said flatly. 'We can't ask these women to prostitute their experience for our sake. They've been used all their lives and most of them are still being hunted down by their own personal psychopath.'

'Auch, right enough.' Maureen sat forward. 'I can't help thinking that we never win the abortion debate at a media level because the anti-abortionists coach women to cry on telly and use photographs of dead babies and we always use statistics. We should use emotive narratives and arguments.'

Leslie grinned. It must be very cheap wine, her teeth

were stained dark red. Maureen supposed hers must be too.

'Frothy emotionalism,' said Leslie. 'Best way to engage the ignorant.'

'Precisely. You should do that.'

'I'm sick of trying to win arguments,' said Leslie quietly. 'I don't understand why we don't all just band together and attack. Doris Lessing says that men are frightened of women because they think women'll laugh at them and women are frightened of men because they think men'll kill them. We should all turn rabid and scare the living shit out of them – let them see what it feels like.'

'But what justification would there be for adopting violent tactics?'

'Negotiations,' said Leslie, adopting a Belfast accent, 'have irretrievably broken down.'

'I don't accept that,' said Maureen. 'I think what you mean is you've lost patience.'

It was unfair of Maureen to say that: Leslie worked in the shelter with women who had been systematically beaten and raped by their partners. In Leslie's world men rape children, they kick women in the tits and teeth and shove bottles up their backsides; they steal their money and leave them for dead and then feel wronged when they leave. If anyone could justifiably lose patience Leslie could.

Leslie thought about it for a minute. She looked despairingly at her glass and struggled with some thought. Her face collapsed with exhaustion. 'Fuck it,' she said. 'Let's get really pissed.'

And they did.

Maureen's head was fuzzy with red wine. She put on her softest T-shirt straight from the wash to make herself feel coddled and went to bed. She took more than the prescribed

dose of an over-the-counter liquid sleeping draught and fell asleep with her eye makeup half off and her leg hanging out of the bed.