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Faith

Written by Lesley Pearse

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Faith

LESLEY PEARSE

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1995

'Dried-up auld fuckwit!' Donna Ferguson said loudly and scathingly as she dolloped broccoli on to Laura Brannigan's plate.

Laura had always found that particular Scottish insult amusing yet she stifled her laughter as she knew Donna, the eighteen-year-old behind the serving counter, would see that as further evidence of her dementia. But then, as Donna weighed close on twenty stone, she probably thought anyone asking for more broccoli and less mashed potato was seriously barmy.

'I may be old and dried-up but broccoli keeps my wits sharp and my body slim,' Laura retorted. 'Maybe you should try it.'

As she turned away with her tray to find a seat in the dining room, she could sense the charge in the air which always came when her fellow prisoners thought a fight might kick off. But they would be disappointed today, as they had been on so many occasions when someone insulted Laura. It was tough enough to be fifty and serving a life sentence for a crime she hadn't committed, without looking for trouble. Besides, Laura felt sorry for Donna; she was forced to act tough to make up for looking like a beached whale.

Glancing around the dining hall at the thirty or so women, Laura thought how wrong film-makers got it when they portrayed women prisoners. There were no sexy-looking beauties here, and precious little intelligence. They came in all shapes and sizes, ranging from seventeen to over sixty, but they were unified by the same dull skin, lacklustre

hair, and a look of defeat. She saw the same look staring back at her each time she was foolish enough to glance in a mirror.

'Come and sit by me, Law,' Maureen Crosby called out. 'Us auld fuckwits should stick together!'

Laura did smile then for it was uncharacteristic of Maureen to display a sense of humour. She was a rather dour Glaswegian of fifty-two who liked her own company and rarely involved herself in anything which was going on around her.

'Thanks, Maureen,' Laura said, taking her up on her offer. 'Did I commit a cardinal sin by wanting more broccoli?'

Two years earlier, when Laura first arrived on remand in Cornton Vale, Scotland's only women's prison, Maureen was one of the few inmates who made no sarcastic remarks about her age, her English accent or her insistence that the police had made a terrible mistake in charging her with murder. This could have been purely because Maureen was a similar age to her, but more likely because she'd been through too much misery in her own life to wish to inflict any on anyone else. There were scars on her cheeks made by a razor and her wrist stuck out awkwardly, the result of a break which had never healed properly. Most of her teeth were broken and she had a recurring back problem.

'You're looking very nice today. Expecting a visitor?' Laura said as she began to eat. Maureen was a big woman and usually slopped around in a black tracksuit which did nothing for her rotund shape or her sallow complexion. But today she was wearing a pair of smart grey trousers and a pale pink shirt. Her grey hair had been washed and blow-dried, and she'd even made up her face.

'Aye, my Jenny's coming,' Maureen replied, her voice lifting from its usual dejected tone.

'That's great,' Laura exclaimed. Maureen had confided in

her a few weeks earlier that when she was convicted of grievous bodily harm for driving a car at her husband, her eldest daughter had vowed she'd never see her again. 'What changed her mind?'

Maureen shrugged to imply she didn't know exactly. 'I done what you said and wrote and told her how I felt about her. Maybe it was that.'

Laura nodded. Maureen was on the point of leaving her abusive husband when she discovered he'd stolen the stash of money she'd been saving to make good her escape. That same evening he beat her up again, and early the following morning as she was driving home from her office-cleaning job, she spotted him coming out of the house of a woman who she had long suspected he was having an affair with. In a fit of rage she drove the car straight at him, breaking both his legs and causing massive internal injuries, from which he would probably never completely recover.

Jenny had taken her father's part, refusing to acknowledge the humiliation and brutality he'd put Maureen through over the years. She had even refused to allow her younger siblings to see their mother.

'I expect your husband has shown his true colours to her too,' Laura said thoughtfully. 'And your younger children will probably have told Jenny things they saw and heard him doing to you in the past. She'll have weighed it all up and realized you were at your wits' end. Girls need their mothers and I'm sure she's missed you terribly.'

'You're a good woman,' Maureen said unexpectedly. 'I didnae believe you was innocent at first, but I do now. You haven't got it in youse to kill anyone, specially an auld pal like Jackie.'

Laura smiled ruefully. Two years ago such a remark would have filled her with hope; she would have believed the lawyers, police and jury would all see her that way too. But

the jury had found her guilty and her lawyer had said they had no grounds for an appeal.

She knew now that everyone involved in the case was totally convinced of her guilt, and that was the hardest thing of all to bear. 'It means a lot that you believe in me,' she sighed. 'But don't let's talk about that today. You must be so excited about your visit.'

'That I am.' Maureen beamed. 'Just to look at her pretty wee face again will be enough. She's thirty now, with a second wean on the way, and I didnae even know I had a grandson.'

'Try not to mention her father,' Laura suggested gently. 'Ask her about your grandson, her pregnancy, home and stuff like that. She'll be feeling awkward because of how she was with you, but she must want to build bridges or she wouldn't be coming.'

Maureen looked at Laura speculatively. 'Why don't you get visitors, Law?' she asked. 'A good woman like you must have had loads of pals.'

'I wasn't a good woman,' Laura said ruefully. 'I treated people badly and used them. Jackie was the only person whose opinion of me ever counted for anything and I loved her. But now I've been convicted of her murder, the few people I liked to think of as friends vanished, and there's no one left that gives a jot about me.'

When Laura got back to her cell after dinner, she lay down on her bed and closed her eyes. Her fellow prisoners had decorated their cells with pictures and photographs, but apart from a picture of a white rose which she'd cut from a glossy magazine, the walls of her cell were as bare as they were when she was first given it a year ago after she received her sentence.

Back then she'd felt too outraged to consider the idea of

making it more homely, for that would have seemed like acceptance of what had happened to her. In her darkest moments she would stare at the grille over the window and contemplate hanging herself from it. Yet suicide seemed more like an apology than a declaration of her innocence.

Leaving the cell bleak and depersonalized was a form of protest. She didn't mind its small size – she had lived in equally small rooms in the past. She could escape to a certain extent by listening to her radio and by looking at the view of hills from her window. But the constant noise in this place often made her feel she was going mad.

Banging, singing, crying, shouting, talking and raucous laughter were incessant in Bravo Block. She could shut the other women out with her door, she could even avoid the smoke and stink of their cigarettes, but the noise was there all the time, and sometimes she wanted to scream out for silence.

She could remember how much she had loved the Scottish accent when she first came to live in Scotland, but now it grated; even the gentler burr of those from places like Inverness irritated her. She thought she'd give anything to hear a London accent, a Brummie or a Geordie, but even her own voice, after twenty-three years in Scotland, had little trace of its London origins left.

She got up wearily from her bed to find her earplugs. They didn't shut out the noise, but at least they muted it. She found them on the wash basin, and as she put them in, caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

The sight only depressed her further, for her face reflected her weary and hopeless state of mind, and her hair had the colour and texture of dirty straw. As a child it had been mousey-brown, but for all of her adult life she had coloured it – black, red, dark brown, blonde and even pink once – so it was hard to recall its exact original colour. Yet she could

remember precisely how it looked the day she'd found Jackie dead, for she'd been to the hairdresser's the previous day and had it cut short and bouncy, with blonde highlights.

It was long and straggly now, so she kept it tied back with a rubber band, but when she did brush it out, those highlights amounted to nothing more than orange tips at the ends, the rest an ugly pepper-and-salt grey.

Glamorous, chic, elegant, perfectly groomed, those were the phrases people used to describe her two years ago when she had her shop. Five feet five, a perfect size ten, she still got wolf whistles when she passed a building site, and there was hardly a night out when some man didn't try to chat her up, for she looked closer to thirty-five than in her late forties.

No man would look at her twice now. She might still be slender, but her skin was as grey as her hair, and her brown eyes, so often described as lustrous, were dull now. Even if she were to be dressed up in a smart suit, with high heels, hair cut and recoloured, and her face made up, she knew she could never look the way she once did, for it was as if a light had been switched off within her.

'Brannigan!'

Laura turned at her name being called, to see Prison Officer Beadington at the door. She was universally known as Beady, a nickname that suited her perfectly as she was short and stout with beady dark eyes. Laura pulled out her earplugs.

'A letter was handed in for you,' Beady said, holding out the sheet of paper. 'The man came here just now, wanting to visit you. The officers at the gate had to turn him away, but they told him he could write and ask you for a visiting slip.'

Laura's heart lurched as she saw the familiar handwriting.

She might not have seen it for years, but it was unmistakable.

'It's not another of those journalists, is it?' Beady asked. 'You know how the governor feels about them!'

Laura was too stunned by the letter in her hand to answer immediately. She looked blankly at Beady for a few moments as if she'd spoken in a foreign language.

'No. No, it's not,' she said when she realized she had to reply.

She had sent visiting slips to several journalists just after she was convicted, in the hope they would take up her cause. Almost all of them came, but they cared nothing for her plight; not one believed that she was innocent. All they really wanted was more dirt, about her, and the series of suicides that had taken place in this prison in recent months. They used her as a reason to write sensational articles about the prison and the governor had been very angry that she had unwittingly given them inside information.

'It's from a man I knew a long time ago,' Laura said weakly. 'It's a bit of a shock!'

'They said he was a hunk,' Beady said with a wide smile.

Laura half smiled. Beady was a decent woman; she had a hard outer shell, and she could come down on anyone like a ton of bricks if they upset her, but that was to protect her soft centre. Laura had seen her comforting girls when their man had dumped them, or their children were being taken into care. Her heart was in the right place.

'He was always a hunk,' Laura said sadly. 'And a good man too, but us women are often guilty of not recognizing a man's true worth until it's too late.'

'He came looking for you,' Beady said pointedly. 'So you get a visiting slip off to him pronto.'

Laura shut her cell door and sat down on her bunk to read the letter. '*Dear Laura*,' she read.

I have only just returned to the UK from South America, and was horrified to hear about Jackie's death. We may not have seen one another for a very long while, but I cannot believe you would have killed her, for I know what you meant to one another. They wouldn't let me in to see you, they said I needed a slip. Please send me one to my hotel, for I cannot leave Scotland again until I've talked to you.

Stuart

A tear ran down Laura's cheek unchecked as she stared at his handwriting. Twenty years ago he used to write her notes scribbled in pencil, often embellished with funny little faces. She'd received a beautiful sympathy card too when Barney died, his deep sorrow etched into each word. This one was more formal, written on embossed headed paper from the Balmoral Hotel in Edinburgh, evidence of how far removed he was from her now.

She could picture him that summer's day in 1972 when she first met him in Castle Douglas. Tall, bare-chested, his cut-down Levi shorts threatening to slide off his slim hips. Chestnut-brown hair in need of a wash tangling on his shoulders, bare feet as brown as new conkers, and the widest, warmest smile she'd ever seen.

He was twenty-one, still an innocent boy full of exuberance and joy. She was twenty-seven, a calculating, wordly woman who should have known better than to run off to a hippy enclave with her two-year-old son. She was clutching at straws of course – anything was better than staying in London and letting people see she'd messed up.

She seduced Stuart that same night on a mattress on the floor of a place that was little more than a shed, and he woke the following morning to tell her he loved her.

Running a finger over the embossed letter heading, Laura

could imagine the sophistication of the world he lived in now: king-size beds, sumptuous bathrooms, fast cars and designer clothes. She had had many reports from Jackie over the years about how successful he was, that he was head-hunted by national companies to act as their project manager all over the world. Yet according to Jackie, he'd made that climb from the Edinburgh tenement he'd been brought up in, not by sharp practice and conniving, but with his skill, hard work and total honesty, just the way he'd always claimed he would.

How different her life might have been if she'd only believed in him!

Holding the letter to her heart, she flopped down on to her bed, sobbing.

Nineteen seventy-two was her 'summer of love', when for just a few short weeks everything was golden. No other man, before or since, had ever touched her in quite the same way, and what they had was precious and beautiful. But she had destroyed it, just as she had so often before, and after, destroyed so much that was good in her life.