

Wilderness House Literary Review 1/4

HIS DARLING

She wasn't beautiful or elegant like the girls he'd admired, even worshipped, when he was twenty. But she was his Deirdre. He was always clear about the women in his life. Even in the early days whenever he fell for a girl it was final. Like his wife. Poor Mona. His darling till the day of her death and for a long time afterwards.

He'd always been protective towards Mona and wanted to bring her home from hospital so he could mind her himself. The doctor, however, told him firmly she'd be better off with proper medical care. Meaning he was incapable of minding his own wife and now would he please mind his own business and let the doctors get on with theirs. This only intensified his desire to protect her in her final struggle, driving him to placate the nurses with gifts, waylay the doctor for extra snippets of information and fiercely guard Mona from unwelcome visitors.

His sister was the worst offender. She'd arrive by stealth, creep into Mona's private room, jabber away about Reverend Mother's plans to renovate the convent or other such nonsense, and exhaust his wife, whose suffering was now on display for visitors. For a visitor was all his sister would ever be. They hadn't been a close family. Not such a bad thing. It meant that when he met and captured Mona he could devote his entire heart to her. She was breathtaking with her blue laughing eyes and bobbed hair. And what a voice! No wonder she was in constant demand at musical evenings. And what's more she could play the piano with finesse. As if tasting a vintage claret, he savoured the memory of those days when the house rang with music and laughter.

He poured a cup of tea. Plenty for one in the tiny teapot. After Mona died he'd sorted out the kitchen, using one place setting to save the good china. He stored her hoard of rice, lentils, tea, and tall brown bags of sugar in the top kitchen

press, safe out of harm's way. What a devil for hoarding she was! 'You'll be glad of what's on the top shelf,' she often joked. Afterwards he hadn't the heart to interfere with her store of dried goods. However, when his sister swooped in 'to help' she discovered weevils in the rice and chastised him for harbouring germs. How dare she stand tiptoe on Mona's kitchen steps and peer into the Holy of Holies! He'd given her a right roasting for interference. Since that day she had never darkened his door, something for which he'd be eternally grateful.

After Mona's death people pitied him because he had to cook and clean for himself. They didn't know that menial tasks kept him sane when the ache in his heart became too great. He'd lived with the ache so long it now seemed part of him. At first when the wound was raw and smarting he'd clung to it as the one true feeling in his life. Then, when it dulled, he grew fearful that the only real part of her he possessed would disappear, leaving him to his solitary cups of tea and lonely evenings. He felt guilty when the wound became less sensitive to the touch. Gradually the nagging ache lessened. And then, one day, it was as if she had finally left.

He decided to sell the house and contacted an estate agent. He was expecting a crisp young man, eager for a quick sale but instead a pleasant looking girl arrived, neat and trim with her briefcase. They hit it off right away. She wanted to know why he was selling and went around the house touching things in a proprietary way that told him she knew quality when she came across it. He could see her approving glance giving the French clock the once over. He offered her a glass of the wine he'd brought back from Portugal. When they met again he might offer his own *Chateau Lambay* and chat about the wine club. Lord, how Mona loved her wine!

'The way I see it,' she asserted, 'most people sell because they're forced to.' He nodded. How right she was! She laughed, 'I wouldn't want you selling for the wrong reasons.' He was surprised by her candour. 'But what about your

commission?' he countered. 'Oh, I won't be with the firm much longer.' She sighed, 'I want to follow my dream.' He refilled their glasses. 'Yes?' During the pause that followed he waited in the absurd hope that she'd confide her dream to him, a perfect stranger. But that didn't come till later.

Over several visits Deirdre told him about herself. Her mother, who owned a small hotel down the country, needed her help during the busy season. As she craved independence, this was a cause of endless friction. So in order to avoid her mother's excessive demands she'd ended up in the city, taking the first job on offer but felt stifled by the commercial side of the property business. 'I'd love to open my own hotel and cook for people myself,' Deirdre confided. He nodded appreciatively, impressed by her enterprising spirit. 'I'd make people feel at home,' she added with shining eyes. 'I'm sure you would,' he offered and was touched by the warmth of her smile. Later she announced she was going to take evening classes in advanced cooking so that she'd be up to scratch for the challenge ahead.

He began having doubts about selling the house. Once someone expressed interest he raised the asking price. 'Take your time,' Deirdre advised him. Torn with the thought of moving to a strange place, he decided to take it off the market. 'I think you're doing the right thing,' she confirmed. 'Especially if your heart isn't in it.' So overnight the *For Sale* sign was removed.

He took his crockery to the sink and cleared away the bread, butter and honey, dusting the crumbs near the sugar bowl that hadn't moved from the same spot since he took over the house. Mona was forever fidgeting with the kitchen, disturbing its order so that one week they ate facing the garden, the next with their backs to it. And she couldn't keep a definite place for anything. He'd changed all that. Pleased, he noted the tidy sink, glinting draining board, marble topped table already set for his next meal, and felt the presence of order.

After he'd finished, from lifelong habit, he brushed his teeth. No fillings and every tooth in his head. Not like Mona. Lord, how she loved chocolates! Her eyes would light up whenever he'd bring her favourite box of Double Centres or bars of Toblerone.

At first she used visit him in his dreams every night, then less frequently. Often she was in green velvet and wore long silver earrings that dangled. She was as he had first known her-beautiful and beyond his reach-as she was now. When the dreams ceased he felt a new pang of guilt. The ache of her was gone, and then the dreams. He redoubled his efforts to lure her back, making a shrine of her picture in the sitting room, which he denuded of all other faces. In the evenings he would keep vigil, sitting in the burgundy velvet armchair she'd so desperately wanted, though the house bulged with enough chairs to seat a regiment.

Even after he'd taken the house off the market Deirdre continued to call. He was flattered and looked forward to her visits. She brought a slow, easy warmth into the house, dropping in unexpectedly on her way into town to the theatre or cinema. Sometimes she'd turn up for tea, bringing a cake or apple tart, promising to surprise him with haute cuisine once her advanced cookery course ended. Scoffing at homely dishes like bacon and cabbage, she produced a book with pictures of mouthwatering dishes that she would serve in her own hotel when the time was ripe. And, watching her gleaming eyes as she outlined her plans, he recognised her as a girl of spirit. If she wanted something she was sure to get it. He murmured approvingly over images of boeuf en croute and cassoulet. When alone, however, he had to admit it was hard to beat a nice piece of collar of bacon. With the cabbage cooked in the bacon water. Wasn't he and the whole of Ireland reared on it? Indeed it was now his mainstay unless he took the bus into town for lunch at Bradley's staff canteen, where he was treated like royalty- though he'd never worked there. Simply turning up and smiling at the waitress had

done the trick.

After her course ended, Deirdre, who needed to practise her culinary skills, offered to cook for him if he wished to entertain. He was delighted and flattered. Mona's idea of gastronomic efforts had been a tray of savouries at their musical evenings. In contrast his dear girl hadn't a note in her head but she was a dab hand at dinner parties, and soon his carefully selected guests were dazzled by her beef stroganoff and creme brulée. He was ashamed to find himself comparing these dishes with Mona's plain cooking for he considered loyalty one of the cardinal virtues. But the Mona he knew in the old days, the laughing singing Mona, would understand that he had to survive as best he could in a dead house full of empty fireplaces and the sound of soccer on the telly.

For too long he had brooded and now thanks to his dear girl he was literally reborn. People remarked on his zest for life. Neighbours, whose invitations tended to clash with Deirdre's visits were now finding their ministrations redundant. As an attempt to repay her generosity he took her out to dinner. Well dressed and attentive to his needs, she was captivating company. He fancied other men envied him his young lively companion. Before long he was alternating suppers at home with meals in the latest restaurants, where he often arranged for her to inspect the kitchens. For she needed to keep abreast of culinary trends in order to follow her dream. Whenever he was invited anywhere he asked if he could bring his Deirdre and pined if he had to go alone. He could barely wait for evening when she would call with a surprise. He wondered what delight she was planning for him now. For Christmas it had been a brandy glass, the perfect match of one given by a member of the family last year.

In the bedroom he selected a tie he'd bought recently. A bold red with yellow stripes. He would wear the new tie pin. A man could be dead long enough. 'Love me, dee-ee-ee-rest,

love me,' he sang while he combed his hair. As he waited in the sitting room it struck him that a great part of the joy he derived from his dear girl lay in the sweet ache of anticipation. If she ever went away he'd miss that almost as much as her company. He turned on the telly - boon to the solitary. They'd bought it after Mona sold the piano. Lord, how she loved those weepy films! After watching a replay of highlights from a recent match he turned it off. The clock winked the remaining minutes at him. It was one of Mona's more successful buys. She was a terrible woman for bargains, always off to auctions down the country with one of her cronies. He'd shuddered when moth-eaten sofas, dressing tables and enormous wardrobes arrived by lorry, making their suburban home swell with furniture that belonged in a mansion. Yet, after she was gone he couldn't bring himself to remove her 'bargains.' And he had to admit she had an eye for smaller items - like the French clock that kept perfect time and was now ticking each minute until Deirdre's visit. He put two glasses on the mahogany coffee table and brought cheese and wine from the kitchen. She might be peckish. He eyed his preparations approvingly. Maybe she'd stay longer this time. He smiled, anticipating an amiable chat over several glasses of wine, even half hoping for a minor crisis in her life. For these crises provided welcome opportunities to comfort her. Like the time her car was broken into and her handbag stolen. On the phone her voice had sounded full of unshed tears 'I don't know what to do. When I rang Daddy he ate the face off me.'

'Where are you?'

'At the flat.'

'Don't move. I'll be over in 10 minutes and you can tell me all about it then.'

Replacing the receiver, he'd secretly admitted it was asking for trouble to leave a handbag unattended in a car. Then, blessing his good fortune, he'd dashed from his telly to shield

her from adversity.

Over coffee it all spilled out. 'You see I was out in Howth - with the chap at work I told you about. On the spur of the moment we decided to go for a walk. You know how these things happen.' He did indeed and listened intently as she continued, 'We went to the end of the pier and didn't notice the time passing.' Her eyes clouding over, she went on, 'When we got back the car window had been smashed and my bag taken. He brought me home by taxi and went off to tell the guards.'

'Don't worry your head, darling. I'll sort everything out for you.'

With a neighbour's help he'd managed to tow her car back to his own garage where he minded it jealously till it could be repaired.

Mention of the chap at work opened up the possibility of some young fellow laying claim to his Deirdre. He realized, of course, that such a lively girl would be surrounded by admirers. Indeed, the conquest of hugging so much of her time and talent to himself was heightened by the prospect of capturing her from rivals. Soon afterwards, he was forced to acknowledge the existence of such a rival when she brought him along one evening. Her shining eyes made him wonder how involved she was with this nondescript fellow, who'd made her throw caution to the winds and leave her handbag in the car, a silly thing for a sensible girl to do.

'Heard such a lot about you, sir. It's a great pleasure to meet you.' The fellow's tone was deferential, with the 'sir' trumpeting the gulf of years between them. Inwardly cursing the young man who could bring that gleam to her eyes, he'd made a special effort to be cheerful, exchanging pleasantries as they sipped drinks. Yet they'd barely arrived when it seemed they were off.

'What's your hurry?' he asked, trying to pour them another drink.

'Dan has an early start in the morning,' Deirdre explained.

So, in order that Dan might be fit for his early start, he'd gone for their coats. When he returned they were looking at Mona's picture.

'I was just saying that your wife must have been a very beautiful woman,' Dan offered.

'My wife was one in a million. A truly remarkable person.'

They'd stood for moment in silence, locked in their own thoughts.

Lately the young man hadn't been mentioned once in conversation and by this time could well be out of the picture. Out of sight, out of mind, he thought gratefully as things slipped deliciously back into how they'd been before.

The clock ticked away. It was only a question of time now. He glanced around. Everything shipshape. He sang:

'Just a song at twilight when the lights are low,
When the flickering shadows softly come and go.'
Though the heart is weary, sad the day and long,
Still to us at twilight comes –'

His heart fluttered as the bell rang. In the hall he hurriedly opened the door to his Deirdre. She had an unusual air of excitement about her.

'Come in, come in. Don't stand out here in the cold. Let me take your coat.' He led her into the sitting room and offered cheese and wine.

'I've eaten, thanks, but I'd love a glass of wine.'

They were seated on the sofa that belonged in a mansion when she showed him the ring. For a moment he felt as if someone had knocked the air out of his stomach and kept glancing from the cluster of diamonds to her face, unable to say anything.

'Isn't it gorgeous?' she breathed, admiring it with her eyes.

'Well, well, this is certainly a surprise,' he managed to say at last.

'I wanted you to be the first to know. Tell me, are you pleased?' She was like a child telling a secret, eager and appealing, and looking into her eyes, he thought she'd never seemed so delectable and so beyond his reach.

'You know, my dear, there's no man at all who would be worthy of you.'

'Of course you'll be first to be asked to the wedding. Golly, what a lot of things to do.' As her eyes glazed over at the challenge ahead, he coughed, 'I suppose when you're married you'll soon forget all about your old friends.'

'Ah now,' she teased with a turn of the head that was at once perky and chiding. 'Sure I couldn't possibly forget you.'

Just as he was about to pour the wine she covered the glass with her hand. The diamonds winked at him, and in that moment he hated the hard little glittering pieces that would never leave her finger.

'I'd love another glass, honestly, but I really must go.'

In the hall he helped her into her coat. 'Call in soon again,' he commanded.

'I'm working down the country next week,' she replied.

'I'll miss you,' he sighed, 'You know I always love to see you.'

'Well, you'll have to wait till I get back,' she laughed before stepping through the hall door.

'Make it soon,' he urged, feeling a sudden rush of abandonment.

He waved her off down the garden path and in that gesture waved away his Deirdre as he had known her.

Alone in the silent house, he sang softly, 'When the flickering shadows softly come and go.' Back in the sitting room he stood, glass in hand, looking at the French clock and reflected that Mona's taste in clocks was exquisite.

Miriam Gallagher
53 Upper Beechwood Ave.,
Ranelagh, Dublin 6.
Ireland
Email: gallaghermiriam@eircom.net
Web: www.miriamgallagher.ie

Miriam Gallagher is a playwright, novelist & screenwriter, currently completing her first collection of short stories. Her work has been published & translated, staged and screened in Ireland, UK, Europe, USA, and Canada. Ms. Gallagher's work has been profiled in Irish Women Writers: An A-Z Guide (Greenwood Press, Ct., USA, 2006). She is the author of Song for Salamander, a novel. Her work has appeared recently in Fancy Footwork and Kalahari Blues & Other Plays. Ms. Gallagher has served as former vice president and committee member of Irish PEN, as council member of the Society of Irish Playwrights, as committee member of Irish Writers Union, as a judge for O.Z. Whitehead Play Competition, and on the awards panel for Arts & Disability. Ms. Gallagher's work is available from Internet Theatre Bookshop (www.stageplays.com) or from the playwright (www.miriamgallagher.ie)

|