

I sprinted up to where Eddie stood, surrounded by cases. Raising his hand, he shouted ‘Cheers mate,’ to the driver, then turned to grin at my breathlessness, ‘You need a holiday, Melanie.’

‘There...there’s been a tra...tra...tragic accident. H...H...Horace - I mean B...B...Boris - has - has -’ While I stuttered out the demise of the cat, I dropped my gaze to the yellow rose bush, hoping shock would distract attention from my mouth.

‘Jesus, you’re saying Boris is dead? But he was okay when we went away.’

Eddie’s eyes, cold as the Donegal sea, swept over me. He glanced bleakly towards the house, where Sal’s neat shape could be seen moving around the living room.

Regret tinged my voice. ‘It’s what Isabel thought best. She’d have told you herself, but she had to go away on a course. Maybe you’d like to pick him up tomorrow -?’

‘No.’ Eddie was firm. ‘I’ll bring him back now.’

The door of the garage swung open, revealing a catacomb littered with yellowed newspapers, boxes of dirty bottles and empty paint cans. It was eerily silent. Eddie blinked as I nodded towards the freezer standing tall in the corner. Lying across it, sentry guarding the tomb, was Isabel’s bike. I picked my way through, past the old car battery and rusting barbecue.

I pushed the bike aside and moved over to let Eddie get to the door. But when he tried to open it, he lurched. I put my hand out to steady him. ‘Let me.’

A Sumo wrestler was pulling on the other end of the freezer door. I yanked the handle again. Then it flew open. The stench that greeted me tore its way up my nostrils and into my mouth. On the middle shelf, a black plastic bag dripped into a stagnant pool on the shelf below. As the taste of putrid flesh coated my tongue, I was surrounded by a cloud of flies and began heaving. It hit me why it had been strangely quiet: the familiar whirring of the freezer had been absent when I opened the garage door. Isabel had forgotten to switch it on. But that didn’t make sense. She must have known Boris would decompose.

Boris was in an advanced state of decay. While his owner repeatedly muttered, ‘Jesus, no,’ I felt my way back from the nightmare, one hand on the wall, the other covering my mouth, unable to block out the smell that filled the garage. Something brushed against my leg;

Mungo purred. Shuddering at the thought of him locked in this dark, dank place, I shooed him away and stumbled outside. I breathed in deeply as I leant against the garage wall. Isabel had been truthful. The cat *was* in the freezer. She just hadn’t bothered to switch the freezer on. *A mistake*, she would say, *an oversight*, *understandable given the amount of stress*. That my sister lied was nothing new. But this time her mendacity accompanied a degree of malevolence that challenged even my understanding.

‘Melanie, where’s Eddie? I saw you talking to him - then he dumped the cases and you both disappeared. What’s going on?’

Sal scraped back her auburn fringe and peered into the garage. She wrinkled her nose - ‘Oh, here you are - what’s that you’re holding?’ Mumbling, I ran towards the kitchen door.

The bolt was stiff, but finally it slipped into place. Back against the door, I slid down onto the floor, as the voices in the garden grew louder.

Like sun through the bars of a cell, slats of light from the blind played on the worn lino. While the Camerons rowed, I focussed on a wrinkled carrot wedged between the cooker and the cupboard. The gate banged. Then there was only the tick of the wall clock. I counted to twenty, before getting up stiffly and heading towards the stairs.

The Flower Remedy bottles were still there on the cabinet beside her bed. Some were almost empty. But I had the perfect source for a top-up: the toilet promised a never-ending supply of golden drops. I thought of Isabel’s bony fingers squeezing the stopper onto her tongue; something bordering on elation took hold of my soul.

She was right about one thing; the bath was filthy. I picked up the green face cloth from the towel-rail, lifted the toilet seat and rubbed around the rim, before setting to work on the yellow trickle near the bath plughole.

LITRO

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LITRO 09

ISSN 1750-6603



## ON THE ROCKS

by Mona McKinlay

People said she could crack walnuts with her eyelids. Right now, Isabel’s eyes were boring through the living room window. She was mouthing something which I couldn’t make out, but it must have been important because she was minus her *no problem* look.

Whatever was rumpling my big sister’s smugness was intriguing. It was certainly appealing.

I took my time hoisting myself out of the chair and opening the door.

She stood on the doorstep. ‘It’s Boris. He’s been knocked down in the lane. He’s at the vets. They say he’s dehydrated. I explained that Eddie and Sal are in Turkey, that they’re not back for another week. *And* that we can’t contact them.’ Isabel looked accusingly at me. Instructions had been given about rounding our neighbours up, but I had forgotten. Caught in the full beam of Eddie’s smile, I had assured him that *no*, I certainly didn’t mind the short notice.

‘He might have to be put down.’

Her voice quivered. Not through distress at the animal’s predicament or ours. Isabel relished the situation because the enormity of it fed her power. It also meant one less cat.

That my sister hated cats was only one of the many peculiar differences between us. She thought of them as rodents which should be on the Rentokil hit list - even Mungo, my beloved tortoiseshell. Many of the things Isabel hated began with *me*, indicating her self-preoccupation: mess, men, meddle, menopause,

melodrama, metabolism - this last, she blamed for her eyes.

It was men who caused mess, so Isabel said. That her husband - ‘The Fat Bastard’ - as he became known in family lore, should have died without leaving a big enough pension. That he should have gone so quickly, without giving her a chance to berate him for being thoughtlessly ill, was a source of considerable resentment. And now she was sharing her home with me, a divorcee, someone responsible for causing emotional havoc.

‘Quit gaping, Me-la-nie, what am I supposed to do?’

I hated it when she did that - breaking up the syllables of my name. Only three years older, she constantly sounded like some old biddy telling me off. *You take the responsibility*, she was saying, *three months ago I was cat-free - until you moved in. I didn’t know the Camerons until you introduced yourself*.

She was doing that thing with her mouth. It looked as if her lips were being lassoed and hauled down her throat.

‘They’ll have a fit if he’s put down. They’ve had him for years. He cost a fortune.’

The smirk on Isabel’s face relayed her thoughts: that I should have an awareness of money when I was always overdrawn seemed incongruous. She knew about my finances: she worked in the village bank, the only bank for miles. At least I had a different surname.

‘I’ll see you later.’ She whirled round and headed back down the lane.

The gin was behind the Baileys. I half-filled a glass and slung some ice in. Sitting on the sofa, feet up on the Past Times Georgian side-table, I clinked ice and looked round the living room, a shrine that nobody ever sat in, apart from me when Isabel was out. The gleam in her eyes when she described poor Boris was like when she devoured the scandal magazines piled beside her bed. Fiction had featured in Isabel's life from an early age. Outwardly a model of convention, she was a convincing liar as a child and hysterical at any challenge to her notion of truth. She clutched herself around the middle, rocking backwards and forwards as if straight-jacketed, wheezing out her pain. Our parents whispered *nervous asthmatic*, which she brandished through adolescence and right into adulthood.

The biggest fiction was yet to come: village life. Here, Isabel continued her version of the truth, joining the tight-lipped chorus of the virtuous, embracing God and flower arranging in the first week of her arrival. No wonder Hugh had made an early exit.

This little reverie came to an end when I remembered that it was my turn to do the cleaning. Sighing, I set to work, gathered health magazines and newspapers. I tossed the dead daffodils in the bin. Dried old sticks. Spinsters. I hate daffodils.

It was one o'clock before she appeared. Washing up, I turned and there was her long frame in the kitchen doorway. Her eyes snapped over me, back to the glass in my hand.

'They said it was unkind to keep it alive. It was suffering. You know *you'll* have to tell them.'

I have this affliction. I giggle. Laughter cascades up and down my throat in the most inappropriate circumstances. It has won me friends and enemies. While I giggled my way through the menopause, high on HRT, my sister took to bed, fretting about her discharge and clutching a bottle of Evening Primrose and a damp facecloth.

Isabel stared hard at my mouth. It twitched. My lip jerked upwards, I pulled it down. It tugged and tugged - and won. Starting as a whinny, it cantered on, all the way to a full-scale gallop of horror.

'I can't.'

'You can. You will. They're due back Monday week. My course doesn't finish until Wednesday. I've done more than my bit.'

Being right. That's what mattered. Subtleties barred the way to complete moral victory. And Isabel had done her bit. The problem was sorted in technical terms. If only I could so neatly dispose of the emotional dimension. I had to find the language to convey to Eddie and Sal that Boris, their surrogate child - their child - was at peace.

'Is there some kind of - uh - memento?'

'He hasn't been cremated yet.'

Relief. I'd be able to offer consolation to the mourners. Eddie was Irish. Maybe a wake.

'They said we should wait until they return, in case they want some kind of service.'

'Where is he?'

'In the freezer.'

'The freezer - where?'

'In the garage.'

'Our old freezer in the garage?'

Isabel's eyes conveyed the unpalatable truths: 1. The Camerons' beloved cat was dead. 2. He was in our freezer. 3. I had to tell them.

The horror. The horror.

'Isabel, I can't.'

'Who else is going to tell them, Me-la-nie?'

You were the one who set up the arrangement.

And now Boris has gone, what happens to Mungo if we both go away?'

I looked at her helplessly. 'I need a drink.'

She peeled back a smile. 'Is that wise?'

Since the Christmas trip to Dusseldorf, Isabel had preached against the evils of alcohol. While she harangued the airline rep for the flight today, I was in a corner of the bar, red-faced, giggling appreciatively at the young waiter. Outraged, Isabel claimed she had to prise me off him.

She shut her eyes: 'Sort it out, Melanie. I'm going to lie down.'

Ten days before Eddie and Sal returned.

I saw them get out of the cab: young, sunburnt, happy. Eddie carried the cases. Sal opened the door. 'Boris! Mummy and daddy are home!' Meanwhile I cringed behind the curtain, waiting until Eddie was alone.

Ten days. I had wasted two minutes imagining the scenario.

Practice was required. I would compose my face. Keep my mouth straight - God, oh God.

And I'd better keep my eyes down, in case of any questionable flicker. Then my shoulders. I saw myself: Quasimodo, bent double, heaving, gasping that Boris was dead and in the freezer.

I had to work on my shoulders - weights or something. Why was I so slothful? Why hadn't I learnt the Alexander Technique - or even yoga? Posture needed to convey solemnity. Eddie would see that my shoulders carried despair, that they understood the agony of empty arms.

And I hadn't even thought about my voice. How much sadness could it convey - when it was known to balloon out of sight in stressful situations?

I stared at myself in the hall mirror. Eyes sorrowful, mouth composed, I sighed myself into it:

'Eddie, I'm sorry to tell -'

It started. Oh, God, no. It was the word *tell*. *Come away, come away with William Tell, come away, come away*. The song from the old television series danced around my head.

Start again.

'Eddie, I'm afraid there's been an accident.'

I sniggered when I got to *afraid*.

I stepped up to the mirror and hissed, 'Smarten up.'

The face that snarled back was familiar: those thick black eyebrows, the broad nose - and was that the beginnings of a double chin? My sister was in the mirror, still calling the shots.

From above, Isabel demanded:

'Me-la-nie - are you talking to yourself again? Oh, my headache. Bring me my facecloth.'

I trudged up the stairs, found the green cloth and dampened it, while I thought about Boris.

'You'll have to do something about that cat of yours.' She lay back against the pillow, tilting her head to drop the Flower Remedy onto her tongue. 'The bathroom is filthy. He's peeing in the bath. You'll have to clean it.'

Placing the bottle on the bedside cabinet, she picked up her magazine.

'Is Boris wrapped in something?'

Isabel flicked over a page. 'Two Sainsbury's bags and a black bin liner with masking tape.'

So now, I had to tell my neighbours that their beloved's shroud was a rubbish bag.

The day the Camerons were due back I woke up exhausted, thinking of the ordeal ahead.

Would Eddie expect me to pass Boris to him? How heavy was a dead cat? If I dropped it on the floor - would it break? I hadn't checked the garage; what if Isabel's bike tripped me up and Boris sprang from my arms, pirouetted up to the roof and back down with a seismic crack? Would Eddie stand, appalled, as bones splintered against concrete?

I had to control myself, offer gravitas. Subtle apportioning of blame would distance me from any responsibility; in my compassionate telling of events, Eddie would see the burden I carried.

Something else I hadn't allowed myself to entertain was the spectre of Sal's face. What if Eddie wasn't the one to hear the news? Perhaps Sal, hanging on to what was left of the holiday, would be the one lingering to pay the cab driver.

Sal. She of the smiling face, the cheery wave, was given to tantrums that resounded up and down the lane. On more than one occasion Eddie had been ejected, left hammering on the door, before taking off on his motorbike. How might his temperamental wife react to my guilty eyes?

As soon as Isabel's old Skoda turned the corner, I made my way to the drinks cabinet. She wouldn't be back until Wednesday. My watch said the Camerons were due back in four hours. Sweat beaded my forehead while I gulped gin and paced the stuffy living room.

At five o'clock there was still no sign of my neighbours. I sat by the window, imagining Eddie's response to my troubled face.

'Jesus, how hard for you, Melanie, to be faced with this when Sal and I were away.'

The soft Irish voice caressed me while I lay naked, purring blissfully in my neighbour's arms. But the picture was marred by a faulty Dolby system. The purring turned venomously insistent - and the cast included a large disabled cat limping towards us.

The noise of the taxi alerted me. They were back.

Jumping out of the chair, smoothing my skirt, I stood behind the curtain. Sal appeared first, swinging a pink basket as she walked up her driveway. She shouted something over her shoulder to the tall figure who emerged from the cab, before disappearing inside the house.