

WOMEN AND LOVE

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WOMEN AND LOVE

THE LUCK OF LOVE

MY MIND PULLS ON any rope that ties it, so I like my job because my mind is free. My clients speak slowly, using simple words, when they talk to me. I'm an emigrant with a PhD in English Literature, but I let them think I'm uneducated and a little stupid.

The Hewitts live in North London, in a big old house with high ceilings, long windows and a garden that has been photographed for a magazine. The carved oak dining-room table came from the refectory of a French monastery and the teak four-poster bed was made in Goa. Mrs Hewitt bid for her furniture at auctions, one piece at a time, and had the damaged pieces restored. She went to artists' studios with plastic bags full of cash to haggle about the price of the abstract expressionist paintings that cover her walls. Mrs Hewitt loves the house, and everything in it, except her husband. They bought the house when it was a warren of bedsits – she showed me the photos – and she made it beautiful. The house is her life's work. Everything in her home looks like it cost much more than she paid for it, with the exception of her husband.

Mrs Hewitt worked as a solicitor, helping people buy and sell their homes, which must be a terrible job – boring legal work combined with having to deal with people at their maddest. She got out as soon as she had finished renovating and furnishing the house. Mr Hewitt is a director of a management consultancy firm.

Georgina, their daughter, is thirty years old and lives in her bedroom. She wears a lavender one-piece suit with a fur-trimmed hood, and she has the face of a child on the body of a woman. When Georgina was bullied at school, her parents employed tutors to educate her at home. It is many years since she has felt the sun on her skin. I looked at her search history when I was cleaning her room, and discovered she spends her days following female celebrities: the woman nobody knows spends her life learning about the lives of women everyone knows.

I was cleaning the kitchen cupboards last Monday morning when Mr Hewitt came into the room, dressed in a navy suit that fitted too well to be off the peg. His grey hair was as short as a newly mown lawn and his beard was carefully sculpted. His wife and daughter were sitting at the mosaic table drinking vegetable juice. I am very interested in couples, in how they survive without killing each other or themselves, so I watched and listened.

‘Will you be home for supper?’ asked Mrs Hewitt, without looking at him.

‘I’m not sure.’ He knew this would infuriate her.

Controlling her irritation, she said, ‘I just want to make sure I have enough fish.’

Georgina stared at her father with the loathing her mother was concealing.

'It depends on whether I have to work late, and that depends on how often I'm interrupted. Can't you buy enough fish for three and freeze some if I can't make it?'

'It's never as good if you freeze it.'

'Put my portion in the fridge and I'll eat it when I get home if I'm late.'

'You never eat when you come home late. The meal will be thrown out.'

'Couldn't you get some steak? That'll keep.'

'Georgina doesn't eat meat any more, and I'm not going to cook two different meals.'

'I'll ring as soon as I know what's happening.' He didn't want to give her the pleasure of anticipating his absence.

'It would make life easier if you made a decision now.'

'And your life is so hard.'

Mrs Hewitt got up from the table, turned her back on him and started loading the dishwasher. Georgina glared at him and rushed out of the room.

Mr Hewitt felt guilty because he loves his sullen hermit daughter.

'I'll ring before eleven to let you know.'

'I don't care what you fucking do.'

He walked out the kitchen door, stood at the bottom of the stairs and shouted up: 'Goodbye, Georgina.'

She didn't reply.

'Enjoy your day, Georgina.'

There was no answer.

‘We’re lesbians,’ said Margo, on the first day I met them. ‘If you can’t deal with that, we won’t employ you.’

Every family in my country has an aunt who lives with a special friend, or a cousin who shares his life with a man he met in the army or in a bar. We don’t attach words to it, but we accept them. The English seem to think they invented homosexuality.

‘I’m a composer,’ Margo said. She teaches piano to schoolchildren and she’s been working on an opera for ten years. The opera will never be completed. She wears her hair a little wild and she tilts her head so that she resembles a bust of Beethoven.

Jo is a carpenter and she makes sets for theatre companies. She has short blond hair that stands up on her head and her fine-boned, symmetrical face is a pleasure to look at. She is about twenty years younger than Margo.

They’ve knocked down the internal walls of their small terraced house in South London, and put windows in the roof, and Jo has made fitted furniture for all the rooms, so the house feels much bigger than it is. They can’t afford a cleaner, but they have me once a fortnight because Margo says she can’t take time out from her opera to do her share of the cleaning.

I was defrosting their fridge last Tuesday while they were having a goat’s cheese salad for lunch at the ash breakfast bar in the kitchen. *Der Rosenkavalier* was playing through their multi-room hi-fi system.

‘Who will we invite round this weekend?’ asked Jo.

‘Do we have to have people every weekend, darling?’ Margo stabbed a cherry tomato with her fork.

BEYOND LOVE

I SIT IN MY BLACK LEATHER Eames chair at night, with my legs on the footstool, and smoke a few joints. My building is on the bank of the Thames, and it looks like a great ocean liner. I look out of the floor-to-ceiling windows at cranes that rise from the ground like giant one-eyed insects, their red eyes a warning to the helicopters that fly day and night to the nearby heliport. There are always cranes – this city has been under construction since the Iron Age. My Madeiran maid, Immaculata, empties the roaches from my ashtray every morning, and one day she asked, ‘Why does an old lady smoke drugs?’

‘Why doesn’t a young lady smoke drugs?’ I replied.

My windows become a screen, the lights of the city disappear and the past is my present.

They said I was going on a little holiday, and they spoke as if it was a great treat. I’d never been on a holiday.

‘You’ll have other children to play with,’ he said. ‘It’ll be good for you.’

‘Aren’t you coming with me?’ I asked.

‘It’s a holiday for children,’ he replied.

‘The air will be very healthy. It’s in the country,’ said my mother.

I’d read about the country in books, so I was curious to see it.

We took a coach, and they argued all the way. They always argued, but this argument had extra heat. I became fearful about what was ahead. It was a long walk from the coach stop, and I struggled to keep up with them. They were each lost in their silent rages, oblivious to my presence. My father was carrying a suitcase, and I noticed for the first time how big it was, and realised they must have packed all my clothes.

The door to the large red-brick house was opened by a thin woman with a chin that jutted out and turned up slightly at the end, like the witches in my fairy stories. She bent down and put her warm hands around my cold face.

‘Welcome, Klara. I’m sure you’ll be very happy with us. Let’s get you inside out of the cold. I’m Auntie Violet. I’m your house mother.’

She looked up at my parents. ‘We’ll take good care of her.’

My father said, ‘We need to leave now to catch the next coach.’

‘That’s for the best.’

I turned to my parents, and in a quiet voice said, ‘Don’t leave me.’

My mother looked at my father, who said, ‘We’ll be back soon, darling.’

I looked into my mother’s eyes, but she turned away. My body started trembling, and the woman who called herself my aunt put her arms tightly around me. My

parents started to walk quickly away. I stood watching them until they were out of sight. They didn't look back.

Auntie Violet took me to a room where seven noisy children were eating at a long table. They ranged in age from about nine to sixteen.

She clapped her hands. 'Quiet, children. I want to introduce you to Klara.'

They all turned to stare at me. I was wearing a dark-blue wool coat with a red velvet collar that my mother had found in a second-hand shop, black patent shoes, white socks and white gloves. My hairband matched the red of my coat collar. I was small for my ten years, and slight. A boy of about thirteen started sniggering.

'I want you all to tell Klara your name.'

After they'd introduced themselves, Auntie Violet said, 'Klara, tell the other children a little about yourself – where you're from, and what your hobbies are.'

I shook my head. I had seen the hostility and scorn evoked by my appearance.

'Feeling a little shy? You'll soon get used to us.' She took my hand. 'Come and sit by me and I'll get you something to eat.'

The children shouted at each other throughout the meal, they picked up food with their hands, they spoke when their mouths were full and they elbowed and pushed each other whenever Auntie Violet was out of the room. I couldn't touch my plate of tongue and ham and sliced white bread; I was battling to keep down a sandwich I had eaten five hours earlier.

I was left alone with the other children in the games room after the meal. They crowded around me, and a tall,

ungainly girl of about fifteen who had food stains on her jumper asked, 'Where you from?'

I didn't answer.

'If you don't answer I'll slap you.'

I remained silent. The girl raised her hand and hit me hard on the side of the head. I was knocked off balance and had to grab the back of a chair to stop myself falling. I started to cry very quietly.

'Leave her alone, you little bitch.' It was the voice of the oldest boy in the group. He moved so that he was standing between me and the girl. He pushed his face up against hers; she turned, gave my ankle a hard kick and walked out of the room. The group dispersed to play games. I found a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* on a bookshelf and took it to a corner, where I pretended to read.

Auntie Violet came to tell us it was bedtime at nine o'clock. She took me by the hand, saying, 'I'll show you to your room, Klara. You'll be sharing with Julie. I've unpacked your clothes and hung them up, because I know you must be very tired.'

We climbed a wide set of stairs covered in green linoleum, and walked along a dark corridor that smelled of disinfectant. She opened the last door and I saw the girl who had hit me sitting on one of the two beds in the room. She stared hard at me, and the message was clear: she'd make my life hell if I reported what she had done.

'Julie will show you where the bathroom is, and there's a towel on your bed. Sleep well, children, and I'll see you in the morning.' She closed the door quietly behind her.

I stood by the entrance, unable to move.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A writer from the west of Ireland, Miriam Burke's short stories have been widely published in anthologies and journals, including *The Manchester Review*, *Litro Magazine*, *Fairlight Shorts*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Bookanista* and *Writers' Forum*.

Miriam's short story 'A Splash of Words' was the runner-up for the 2011 Tom-Gallon Trust Award, and her work has been shortlisted for the *Msllexia* Short Story Competition, the William Trevor/Elizabeth Bowen International Short Story Competition, the *Grist Anthology of New Writing* competition and the novel category of the Yeovil Literary Prize.

Miriam has a PhD in Psychology, and before becoming a writer she worked for many years as a Clinical Psychologist in London hospitals and GP practices. *Women and Love* is her debut collection.

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