

FORGET ME NOT

Rain blew across the lonely street as I clutched my holdall tightly in one hand. In the other were the divorce papers, love now reduced to lines on a page outlining the settlement. I set the holdall down and fumbling for my keys, inserted the key and turned the lock to the rented flat in South Kensington. It was horrendously expensive but that had been the price for my sin of neglect, she got the house and chattels, I got to walk free.

“Good morning.”

I turned, only registering now the scent of wild blossom perfume.

The woman was lightly tanned and slightly built. Wearing a leopard-skin, print blouse and short skirt, she carried herself with youthful poise. The hand she held out was dry and chapped however, the lines around her eyes gave her away as being late forties or even early fifties, but the smile seemed to emanate from a fountain of youth.

“Ethel Morgan,” she smiled and caressed my hand tenderly, “you’re my new neighbour I rather suspect.”

“Charles,” I replied, “Charles Smith.”

“I knew a Charles,” she glanced down at the carnations at her feet.

It was only then I noticed the flowers adorning the covered entranceway to the block. Spread out over the ground, they were even hanging from the ceiling and walls and for a split second I was lost in the aroma.

“I’m only here for a few months,” I smiled tightly.

“Oh,” she released my hand and fiddled with the attached collar tie of her blouse, “so you’re just passing through?”

“Yes,” I rested my hand on the doorknob, “I’m booked in for a course in teaching English as a foreign language, this flat is just around the corner from the institute.”

“You’re a teacher?”

“Supply teacher,” I rested my hand on the door, “so I can work and travel at the same time, China’s looking good right now.”

She smiled and fluffed out her hair.

“Pretty garden though,” I glanced around.

“You like my flowers?”

“You planted them?”

“Yes,” she glanced around and fluffed out her blonde hair, “it’s taken nearly thirty years but I try to do something different every few months,” she nodded at a sprig of holly.

“Christmas is a few months away, I think I’ll hang some of that outside my door.”

“Quite,” I nodded.

“Well, feel free to drop in,” she nodded at her door, “I’m just across the way from you, always good to meet new people.”

“I might just do that, I’ve got a lot on my plate right now but sure, we’ll catch up.”

Nevertheless, it was three weeks before we met again. I had seen her coming and going but my studies kept me busy.

“Planting again?” I stopped in the entranceway.

“Yes,” she wiped her eyes, “my carnations are looking a little sad, I thought I’d give them a little love and attention. Flowers are like men, you need to let them know they’re important every now and then.”

I smirked but Ethel didn’t seem to notice as she plucked at dead petals.

“I planted this in memory of Charles, an old boyfriend.”

“I’m sorry,” I blushed.

“Oh he’s not dead,” she smiled dreamily, “he was such a handsome young man, he had a car dealership out in Camden. He would turn up every other night in a different car to take me out, other times we would stay in and drink French champagne.”

“Well he owned a dealership,” I replied, “I guess he had that luxury.”

“Oh but he had his own car,” she replied, “but his wife had suspected him of having an affair, he had to change cars whenever he came to see me.”

I felt a slight weakness in my belly and Ethel sat back and smiled.

“There, Charles is looking good now,” she looked up, “he was a wonderful man, but unfortunately he could never bring himself to leave his wife, so I had to let him go, but every time I smell the carnations I think of Charles.”

“You planted flowers for him?” I leaned against my door and glanced out at the street, the wind had picked up in the last hour and I was glad to be sheltered from its icy fingers.

“I plant flowers for all my men,” she rose slowly and pulling off her gloves, wiped her eyes and glanced around.

“Those tulips are for Harry, my actor friend, they were my first. I’ve replaced them a few times over the last few years. He did die I’m afraid, AIDS. I was the last person he spoke to before he fell into a coma. He was such a beautiful lover, we used to drive down to Cornwall at the weekends and pick a hotel at random. We’d sign in under the names of famous actors and actresses, it was a silly little prank we’d play. You might hear of Tom Jones and Lauren Bacall signing the hotel register together, but they were never there.”

“I’m sorry for Harry,” I finally managed.

Ethel didn’t seem to hear as she pointed out different flowers, each planted in memory of either a lover or a friend. I found my depression lifting slightly, to have loved so many and lost so much.

“But most of the men I’ve loved have been beautiful men,” she finally finished.

I stared past her, a lump in my throat.

“And what of you, dear?” Ethel looked up suddenly, “a fine young man like you, have you got a lady in your life?”

“Not any more,” I sighed.

The silence seemed to hang over the fragrant garden like a thick, grey blanket, Ethel’s eyes softened as she tucked the lemon-coloured blouse into her tan slacks.

“A girlfriend or was it more serious?”

“Serious,” I loosened my tie, “my ex wife, we were childhood sweethearts.”

“Ah,” her eyes misted over, “the first cut.”

She nodded at her door.

“A cup of tea?”

She was twice my age but she seemed twenty years younger, and it was with mounting curiosity and anxiety that I entered her flat. She moved with all the grace of a model and as I arranged myself on the sofa my eyes fell on a steamy love novel.

“The Fire Within,” I picked it up and stared at the voluptuous blonde, her bared legs wrapped around a muscular long haired man.

“Fiona MacDonald,” she set the teapot down, “one of my favourite authors, you might want to take it with you when you leave.”

“Afraid passion is one thing I’m short of,” I sighed, “this relationship has taken the best years of my life.”

“That’s a shame,” her eyes softened, “you should learn to dance like nobody’s watching.”

I shifted in my seat and eventually picked it up again.

“A steamy romance, what the hell, it can’t hurt.”

“And at least she can’t take the house,” her eyes twinkled merrily.

I finished *The Fire Within* three days later. Romance hadn’t been one of my favourite genres, give me a good crime story or a Tom Clancy, but romance? Nevertheless, it was with a smile that I closed the book and leaned back into the sofa. The story was a simple one, boy meets girl, girl resists his approach, but through a complicated set of circumstances comes to understand that he is the one she has been searching for all her life.

But it was the way it was told, mercifully free of clichés and incredibly erotic, the love scenes had definitely aroused part of my anatomy that had lain dormant for too long. The characters seemed to have been plucked from real life and preserved forever in lines on a page. Innocence lost and subtly regained in the space of three hundred pages and I found I wanted more, I wanted the fires within.

“This woman writes with passion,” I murmured as I handed the book back to her, “I thought it was one of those chick lit books, but it has passion and power.”

“I liked it,” Ethel smiled, “here, try *The Dancer*, it was one of her earliest ones.”

Over the course of the next three months I read all of Fiona MacDonald's books, twenty five to be exact and became an erotic romance fan. And many a long hour was spent in the seclusion of our living rooms discussing the plot twists and hidden subtext that Ethel was able to bring to life. I had never thought of reading lesbian romance through heterosexual glasses.

"She's saying, look at me through new eyes, even though you've seen me a thousand times before but this once, look at me as though tonight is the first time. Examine my body and get to know its secret longings and desires. Treat my body like a holy shrine and when I am done I will take you deep inside and show you a sensual world unsoiled by human hands and a way of loving only experienced by the most sensitive and intuitive males. Let me show you the female orgasm, deep and as restless as the ocean and so few men can bring us to orgasm."

"And you get all this from a lesbian romance?" I raised the mug smilingly.

"She's only written three," Ethel flipped through the pages, "but they work on two levels I've found, the purely lesbian level, and the heterosexual longing for sensuality. We women crave a man who is sensitive between the sheets and a man around the house, just as men want a whore in the bedroom and a virgin in front of his friends."

"Seems to me we're coming at each other from different ends of the spectrum."

"You want to learn how we think," she set the book down, "then read what we read and you're in with a chance."

Her words hit a soft spot, a place I had kept hidden but as I flipped through the pages that night I resolved to pay more attention to the mysterious world of the female orgasm and I had learned a great deal about the female orgasm from these books. By day I worked and studied hard, but every chance I got I found time to plough through a few more pages. Desire, longing, tantalising looks, the breathless sigh as he entered her, his tongue on her labia. From time to time I wondered if I was becoming fixated with erotica but then I would turn the next few pages and there would be another revelation into the female psyche. The words were vaguely familiar, I had heard Emma say similar things and as we discussed the hidden subtexts, I began exorcising my demons. Another time and place I would have held back, afraid of the vulnerability and the intimate confessions to an older woman. But here in this place it felt secure, safe and incredibly cathartic. I had never discussed sex with a woman without indulging in the act, but with Ethel we discussed everything and if it is possible to achieve coitus without touching then we were lovers. Ethel oozed sensuality, unlike the women I mingled with every day who flaunted their tacky sexuality. At nights I found myself wondering more and more what it would be like to enter her soft inviting folds and listen to her contented purring. It seemed almost sinful, debase and yet so right. I never telegraphed my secret longings but now and then I'd catch her looking at me.

All good things must come to an end however and as I farewelled Ethel, my passport in hand I felt an overpowering urge to hold her.

"Dance like nobody's watching," she rubbed my back and whispered in my ear, "forget me not my handsome prince."

I walked down the street that cold January morning with a feeling of regret in my heart. A love un consummated or a love that could never have been?

It was twelve months before I returned to my old haunts. China had opened my eyes to the goodness in mankind, and the cruelty. I had sent a few postcards, but received only one reply.

Dear Charles,

I got your letter the other day and shed a little tear. You were such a gentleman and I am happy you are beginning to let go of your bitter regrets. When my John left me I was twenty three, a year younger than you and my world fell apart. I felt as if my heart had been ripped from my chest and impaled on a pole for all the world to see.

Never be afraid to admit you are hurting, it is the cure for a hurting world. You brought so much into my life with your questions. You are one of the few men I have ever known who bothered to stop and ask the essential question. How does it feel?

We feel many things but most of all we feel left out, passed over for promotion and exiled to the furthest corner in a clinic's waiting room with women's problems. Learn to listen to our hearts and we will surround you with our love and understanding. If couples spent as much time listening as they did arguing, we could fire all the divorce lawyers and close the family courts overnight. Now

wouldn't that be a novel idea?

Never stop asking questions, Charles. Asking stupid questions prevents us making stupid mistakes. I have learned in the last fifty three years that we never stop learning until the day we die, and then I suppose we learn to die, thankfully none of us fail that lesson.

I am enclosing the latest Fiona MacDonald book, A Questioning Heart, I hope you never stop questioning life. Grab it with white knuckles, shake it furiously, and demand it answer your questions.

Your Friend,

Ethel.

Ethel didn't answer the door when I rang the bell and then I noticed the name on the door. Jane Smith, a chill ran down my spine.

"You knew Ethel, didn't you?"

I turned around to find myself looking at the older man. Tom and I had nodded at each other in passing more than once and shared a quiet joke a few weeks before I left.

"Yes," I swallowed, "I lived in number two last year."

"Ah," he smiled, "wait here, I have something for you."

He reappeared a few minutes later with a package, it had my name on it but no name on the back.

The cover showed a young man standing by a windmill dressed in period 18th century costume, the buxom woman at his side had a stary look in her eyes and I smiled wistfully.

"Passion Reborn by Fiona MacDonald."

"She said you were to have this if you ever returned, she's living in Stockholm now."

"Thanks," I murmured as he moved away.

I opened the cover and stared at the inscription inside.

"Dance like nobody's watching; love like you've never been hurt. Sing like nobody's listening; live like it's heaven on earth."

Mark Twain.

P.S Forget Me Not, and thank you for your inspiration.

Ethel.

I glanced down suddenly at the Forget Me Nots. They hadn't been there the day I left. *Forget me not*, I smiled and bending down, lifted the pot and sniffed them. My eyes fell on the laminated business card and with trembling fingers I picked it up and read the name.

Fiona MacDonald, Freelance Writer.

I flipped the card over and smiled at the Stockholm address and the neatly penned words.

Fancy dinner in Stockholm?

Ethel.

Written by Alastair Rosie 2006 ©

Word Count: 2,600