



A LONG TIME
ON THE WAY

Elaine M. McPherson

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ONE

It had been a long time since Erin had felt such a feeling of contentment. So long that she didn't want it ever to end.

It was like the feeling you got as a child when you came back inside after playing for hours in the snow, your hands and toes so numb that they were beyond pain. And as you sat there, feet almost in the fire, with the slicing agony of cold seducing the blood to pump warmth back into your shivering body, you suddenly sensed that you were on the verge of something, though you don't know what. But then, as you lay there in front of the roaring fire, your limbs limp and every nerve in your body nurtured by the warmth of the broth spreading from your stomach, it came.

That was the feeling Erin was experiencing.

It had been so long since she'd felt it that she didn't want it to end; so much so that, for an instant, she could happily die like this.

Conscious recognition of her thought spoiled the moment and her limbs tensed with that familiar pressure

bearing down on her chest, trying, she was sure, to force the very life out of her.

She sat up in bed and, feeling her heart begin to race, took a series of deep breaths.

Connor was still sleeping peacefully at her side.

“I’ll have to go,” she whispered, gently shaking his cold, naked shoulder.

“Hhmn,” he murmured, still asleep.

“I have to go.”

“Stay,” he said, putting his hands on her hips and pulling her towards him. “Stay forever.”

“I have stayed forever,” she replied.

“Then stay longer than forever.

“It’s almost six. I’ll need to go. Really.”

“Stay forever more.”

They made love slowly. Softly. Sleepily. Although they had done so hundreds of times before, something about this morning was different; something about it had turned her on without him even having to touch her.

Erin came for the first time within moments, her whole body gently shuddering.

Her fingers tingled as she unfurled her fists and ran her nails lightly along Connor’s spine.

He was a generous and considerate lover, and had been from the very start of their relationship. She was glad they had waited a few months before sleeping together, glad they had taken it slowly, glad they had savoured each other in small morsels before finally giving themselves to each other.

And this morning they had taken another step forward in their deepening relationship, waking up having spent the whole night together for the first time.

Erin pushed the hint of guilt circling on the edge of her thoughts to the back of her mind and concentrated on the irresistible sensation which was taking over her body again.

She came again as Connor did, and when their breathing settled into a common rhythm, she slipped from under him.

“I have to go.”

“I know. Will you stay again tonight?”

“I don’t know.”

“Erin, please ...”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You have to live your own life.”

“I have to go...” she said, kissing Connor's forehead.

He sighed and turned over.

"... home."

Well, she called it home. And, certainly, it had all the characteristics of a home, including family members, possessions and other useless objects. It had places (like the big yellow plate on the kitchen table) where people knew to put things (like the day's mail); it had smells (like disinfectant) that only other people (like Connor) ever noticed; it had nooks and crannies (like the little corner window on the second floor where her mother had loved to sit) which people (like Erin) had soft spots for; and it had secrets (like the sealed envelope in the right hand dresser drawer) that nobody (like Erin, Freya and Laurence) ever talked about.

But, somehow, it didn't really feel like home, at least not her home; and somehow Erin felt more at home in someone else's apartment, surrounded by someone else's things, lying in someone else's bed. Yet except for when she had been away on holiday, this was the first time she had spent the night away from the place which was her home.

The dawn was a calm, damp grey. Dew covered the untamed verges which ran alongside the tracks and

raindrops clung obstinately to windows of the train. Erin felt in her jacket pocket for her earrings and polished them with some tissue paper.

They were her own designs, long, twisting strands of silver finished off with little gobbets of ruby: among her favourites, even though no one else seemed to like them; the boxful of similar ones she had sitting unsold at home was testimony to that.

Yet at the market, people would pick them up and run their fingers down the smooth strands, then they'd hold them up to their ears as they peered into the mirror taped to the side of the stall; but finally they'd pin them back up on the velvet board and say apologetically, *'No, I'll just leave them, thanks,'* or dishonestly, *'I'll think about it,'* or genuinely, *'They looked quite nice up there but I don't think they're really me.'*

Which surprised Erin because when she had designed them she had just assumed that they were everybody because they were so her. But the market place was no respecter of ego and the sum total of zero sales weekend after weekend was a pretty clear message that her thinking was out of joint with the times. But still she

persevered, unable to conceive that her creations, her creativity - her very being - could so easily be rejected.

For the first few weeks, that was, until she could no longer bear the humiliation of the same sympathetic half-smiles on the same faces that passed by her stall week after week after week.

So she took the earrings and put them in a box, determined not to open it again until she had designed and created something that people wanted as their own.

It wasn't long until the original box was joined by another one, and then another one. And now Erin had so many boxes piled up on her work station that she really needed to buy a big cabinet to keep them in. She recalled that there was soon to be a sale of surplus equipment at the office so maybe she could pick up something there for a nominal amount.

She slipped the earrings on then opened her makeup bag in search of moisturiser. Noticing a packet of her pills, Erin tried to remember if this was one of her days for taking them. (Sometimes when she was trying to taper off then by taking one every alternate day, she lost track of where she was with them.) It was strange how sometimes she couldn't remember what she had done

only the day before yet she could remember with clarity things she had done years before, things she didn't always want to remember. She hoped that at thirty one she wasn't going prematurely senile or something - you never knew with mobile phones and mad cows and too much caffeine. More likely, though, short-term memory loss was one of the side effects of her pills, which was another good reason to try and get off them. And keep off them.

She had tried getting off them before, last summer while on holiday in France. She had thought that the relaxed way of life in the gite and the distance from her usual concerns would be a good launchpad for the start of her new, healthy, lifestyle. But it turned out to be yet another valiant but misguided attempt which had only served to make her feel even worse. For after five days cold turkey, she had developed terrible abdominal pains, her limbs were twitching uncontrollably and her head felt as if it was going to burst open in a hail of chemical fireworks. So she took to her bed at four in the afternoon, with a cock and bull story about sun-stroke and food poisoning, and slept till noon the next day. And when she awoke to find her body feeling as wrung out as her mind

was, she gave in and popped one of her pills, too desperate to castigate herself for yet another failure.

That had been eighteen months ago and she'd been on the pills full-time since then - until now. And now she was going to come off them properly, sensibly; now she was going to be herself again for Connor. Which she supposed was a bit of a risk because he had fallen in love with her when she was on the pills so, presumably, he kind of liked the relaxed, *laissez-faire*, in control Erin; the Erin who was solid and reliable and dependable; the Erin who was a big, fat shadow of her former self.

Well, he might - but she didn't.

The train pulled in and Erin made her way to street level, her pace quickening as she neared her home, just a few hundred yards from the station.

It was ten past seven and she had only fifty minutes to get in and out again in time for work. She'd be lucky to make it because usually she prepared Laurence's breakfast and clothes the night before so that all she had to do the next morning was take his tray and his coathanger into him. But not last night. Last night she had been Connor's and Connor's alone.

As she approached the house, she glanced up to Laurence's bedroom. Sometimes if he woke early and couldn't get back to sleep, he would sit flicking through his photograph albums and listening for the first signs of movement in the rest of the house. However, she was relieved to see that it was still in darkness.

Erin prayed that he was still asleep as she gently turned the key in the front door and crept along the corridor towards the kitchen. Once inside with the door closed behind her, she turned the light on.

“Gotcha!”

Erin jumped, startled.

“Freya, shit!”

“Caught!”

"What are you doing sitting there?"

"Never mind that," Freya asked, tapping her watch, "where have you been?"

"You almost gave me a heart-attack."

“Oh, I don't think that's why you're looking so flushed.”

“What are you doing sneaking about at this time?”

Erin rasped.

“A, I’m not sneaking about, I’m just getting in from work and B ...”

“Work? Clubbing till seven in the morning isn’t work.”

“I’ve told you, I help out behind the bar.”

“Yeah, you help out drinking what’s behind the bar more like.”

“That’s not fair. Rico says I’m an asset to the business.”

“Well, that’s one way of putting it.”

“... and B, at least people know where I am when I stay out all night.”

“What do you mean?” Erin asked, defensively.

“Does Laurence know where you spent the night?”

“As far as Laurence is concerned, I spent the night here and I want it to stay that way.”

“Why? In case you shatter all his illusions about his precious Erin?”

“It’s nothing to do with that. He’d get anxious, that’s all, if he thought there was no one in the house to help. In case something happened.”

“In case what happened?”

“I don’t know! Just something.”

“I’ve told you, get him a live-in nurse or home-help or something.”

“And I’ve told you, he doesn’t want anyone else living here.”

“So we’ve to live our lives round about his whims, have we?”

“We?” Erin asked.

“Don’t start that again. You have a choice, too, you know.”

“No, let’s not.”

“Anyway, how was the lovely Connor last night? Make the earth move for you?”

“Must you, Freya?”

“Must I what?”

“There’s more to our relationship than sex,” Erin sneered.

“Yeah, yeah, but who’s interested in all that other shit? We don’t want to know how he likes his eggs, or what colour his bathroom is, or that he irons his own shirts, or what kind of underwear he wears. Though, actually, I don’t know about that last one ... what’s he into? I bet he’d look good in a black leather posing pouch...”

“Freya!”

“Anyway, we don’t want to hear about that shit. The sex is what we want to hear about.”

“Well, you’re going to be disappointed if that’s the case.”

“I mean, me and Rico," Freya began, "last night we ...”

“I don’t want to know, thank you.”

“So you say. But I bet you do. Deep down I bet you’re dying to know.”

"No. But what I am dying to do is get ready for work. I’m going to be late.”

“That’s so you, bailing out when we start to pin you down,” Freya said, going to the fridge and taking out a bottle of Perrier water.

Erin smiled, recalling with affection one of Connor’s little indulgences, that he liked to clean his teeth in Perrier. He said that the feeling of the bubbles swirling around in his mouth gave him a high. Which Erin found a bit strange; but she supposed it was a safer way to get high than some of Freya’s methods. Erin had tried it with Connor and had pretended to understand what he was talking about. Then she had tried it again alone at home

but still couldn't quite grasp any sort of high. But then, she wasn't a great one for highs. Lows were more her forte.

"What are you smiling at?" Freya asked.

"Oh, nothing," Erin said, grinning even wider. "Nothing."

"Oh, come on, don't be a tease."

"It's nothing. You just reminded me about something about Connor."

"What about him?" Freya asked, looking at the water. "Oh, God, don't tell me he does something kinky with Perrier bottles!"

"Of course not!"

"He doesn't like to, you know ..." Freya asked, sticking the bottle between her legs.

"Oh, for God's sake."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Erin snapped.

"Oh, no, he doesn't like to" Freya asked, poking her fingers in and out of the bottle's neck.

"Oh, for Christ sake. All he does is ... he just cleans his teeth in Perrier."

"What?" Freya laughed. "What do you mean, '*He just cleans his teeth in Perrier,*'?"

"Just what I say. He cleans his teeth in Perrier. That's all."

"Is his water contaminated?"

"No."

"Is he an obsessive-compulsive?"

"Don't be stupid."

"An eccentric millionaire?"

"Freya ..."

"Is he a ponce?"

"Of course not."

"So what's the deal, then?"

"Nothing's the deal," Erin said, lifting the ironing board from the cupboard. "Listen, you couldn't do me a favour and iron a shirt for Laurence, could you?"

"No way. I've told you before, get someone in."

"And I've told you before, he doesn't want anyone in."

"Anyone else you mean. So, anyway, about Connor. He cleans his teeth in Perrier and there's no deal?"

"No," Erin hissed. "He just cleans his teeth in Perrier. Okay?"

"Oh, Erin," Freya laughed.

Erin grimaced at the two words designed to spear her soul and crush her spirits. But then Freya always had a downer on the men in Erin's life (on Erin's life for that matter). Why? She didn't know. But you name them - any of them - and Freya would have something cruel to say.

Take Jack. A nicer guy you could not have met. Yet all Freya could say about him was that the cardboard models in Austin Reed's window had more about them than he did.

Then Sean. He was tall and tanned and good-looking. But what did Freya hone in on? The fact that he'd dropped out of university and ended up working on a production line. And the fact that he hadn't told Erin about his job before someone else had.

'That's no use to you,' Freya had said, 'you need someone who can indulge you, not the other way around.'

And Dan. She hadn't liked him much either. Okay, so he'd turned out to be the cheating, lying bastard she said he was, but that wasn't the point.

But Connor - how could she have a downer on Connor? After all, he was everything that Freya wanted in a man; or, at least, everything she had told Erin she wanted in a man when, as teenagers, they had shared such intimate secrets.

So he cleaned his teeth in Perrier - what was the big deal? At worst it was merely profligate. And Freya of all people couldn't criticise anybody else for that because she was no slouch herself when it came to being profligate.

In any other circumstances, Erin would have said Freya was jealous. But the fact that she was engaged to the most gorgeous and gargantuanly wealthy man within a hundred mile radius kind of put paid to that theory. But, then again, Freya was the type who was only happy when she was making other people unhappy.

Not that Freya had any reason not to be happy. Unlike Erin, who had a chemical imbalance in her brain which made her unhappy (or so her doctor told her, though Erin thought he just said that to keep her spirits up). In fact, the chemical imbalance didn't make her unhappy, rather depressed. Because they were very different things, though people didn't often realise it, especially those

fortunates who were merely unhappy. In fact, Erin wasn't unhappy at all. But she was depressed. Which was something different to what Freya got, something dangerous, something desperate.

Sometimes Erin wondered why she hadn't been born normal, like Freya. And how it had come to be that she had ended up with the chemical imbalance while Freya had ended up with just the unhappiness? After all, they had both come from the same womb.

Erin could only put it down to their respective fathers. If it was true what they said, that a propensity to a chemical imbalance could run in families, then she and Freya must have taken after their fathers rather than their mother. Mind you, if that was the case, it was a pity that Freya had only taken on Joe's bad points.

Erin stifled a yelp as she burned her hand on the iron trying to hold down the pointed ends of Laurence's shirt collar. That would teach her to think ill of the dead, even if it was Joe.

She ran her arm under the cold tap, unashamed to admit that she had shed few tears when she'd heard about his accident. Sure it was a tragedy, the death of one so relatively young, but maybe it was retribution for the

damage he had wreaked on others, on her. After all, he had been the one Erin's mother had left her father for, he had been the one who had made her father leave Erin, and the country, and he had been the one who had produced Freya.

And even in death he'd still wreaked damage, causing her mother to drink herself into a stupor night after night until Laurence had rescued her from oblivion, and causing Freya to, '*go off the rails,*' as they liked to refer to it now. Erin suspected that Freya would have gone off the rails whether Joe had lived or died but, whatever, her half-sister had made sure that Joe's death was given as the *raison d'être* for every one of her misdemeanours, from sleeping late and missing work to getting arrested for possessing coke.

Yep, a death in the family was an A1 excuse for a host of delinquent acts in the politically correct eyes of the nineties. Except when it happened to her. For when her mother finally succumbed to the cancer which racked her body and Erin retreated into herself, all they said to her was that she couldn't go on like that, that she should pull herself together and get on with her life. Even her father; who should have known better, his nature being her

nature. But then, one thing Erin had learned in her thirty one years was that life was anything but fair.

She put away the iron, draped Laurence's shirt on a hangar, hooked it over the handle of his breakfast tray and made her way gingerly upstairs.

When she went into his room, Laurence was already sitting in his wheelchair, his faded blue dressing gown hanging loosely from his gaunt frame.

"Morning," Erin said, hoping she sounded as she usually did. However that was.

"Morning."

Laurence's voice was clear and strong, the voice of someone who had been awake and waiting for some time.

"How are you?" Erin asked warily, trying to glimpse a hint in his eyes as to whether or not he was aware of her nocturnal excursion.

"Fine. But I'll need a change of sheets. Sorry."

"Don't worry. No problem," Erin said, her heart sinking. Even though Laurence wetting the bed was a fairly regular occurrence these days, she still wasn't used to it. "I'll get them in a minute. Here's your shirt," she said, hanging it over the back of his chair. "I thought that one would be nice for today."

“It’s nice that you still think about these things even though there’s no point.”

“Of course there’s a point. You want to look good for your public, don’t you?” Erin said, kissing Laurence’s cold forehead. “And who knows? You know what Dr Ferris said, you could go into remission as quickly as you went out of it.”

“Ferris is an idiot.”

“He may well be but he is a qualified doctor...”

"All right, he's a qualified idiot."

"... so I would venture that he knows a bit more about it than you do," Erin joshed, though secretly she agreed with Laurence’s assessment of Dr Ferris.

But then that was medics for you - satisficing, calming, smoothing over the rough edges for as long as they could, until they couldn’t avoid facing the harsh truth, by which time it would be too late to do anything about it.

So Erin knew better than to believe anything Dr Ferris said. She had read up about MS and she knew the only thing Laurence was going to get was worse. He had been getting progressively worse since her mother had died. Although Dr Ferris claimed that Laurence would have

had the disease long before her death, Erin was convinced the start of it could be traced to that time, that night, that very moment that her mother's hand went limp in his and her breathing slowly faded away.

Ten years on and Laurence's body was giving up the same way that her mother's had.

"Anyway, isn't it your day for the physio?" she asked.

"I don't know why they bother with it."

"I'll take that as a yes."

"They'd be better concentrating their efforts on someone who it'll do some good."

"So you don't want to be a bit more mobile for mum's anniversary," Erin said, knowing that she was hitting Laurence below the belt. And, even he, despite his paralysis in that area, wasn't immune to that sort of manipulation.

"I suppose so. Your father will be coming, I take it?"

"I suppose so. I'll call him later just to make sure. I'm due to speak to him. It's been a while."

"Well, tell him he can't not come. It might be our last time all together. It might be the last time I see him."

“Why? Where are you planning on going?” Laurence gave her one of his withering looks. “Don’t be stupid. You’ve a few years in you yet. You’ve heard Dr Ferris.”

“Idiot that he is.”

Erin looked away in an attempt to rid her eyes of the tears which were beginning to form. It upset her when Laurence talked that way though she never let him see that it did. But more than that, she was beginning to feel anticipatory upset at the imminent anniversary of her mother’s death and dread at the prospect of Laurence’s family get-together, which only he seemed to have a morbid appetite for ten years on. But Erin had never dared suggest that he not go ahead with the annual ritual. Even Freya knew better than to do that.

The only good thing about it was that she got to see her father as he had religiously attended the soiree every year from the first. But then, in his own way, Erin’s father had been as devastated as Laurence at Leila’s death. For despite the fact that she had left him for Joe, Erin’s father had never stopped loving Leila. It had been the reason for his move to Italy, the fact that he couldn’t stand to be in the same country as Leila but not be with

her. At least in another land he had the comfort of distance.

Erin understood his reasoning, if reasoning it could be called, because his reasoning was her reasoning and she was her father's, not her mother's, daughter.

"And what about Connor?" Laurence continued, the prospect of his annual tribute to Leila seeming to lift his spirits. "It would be nice to see him there, too."

"Well, I'm not sure," Erin replied, reflecting that inviting boyfriends to this event was the surest way of losing them, "I'll need to check to see if he's free."

"I'm sure if you tell him what it is and how much it means to you, he'll make sure his diary's clear."

"Hhmn," Erin muttered, sensing her options were closing quickly.

"You and he seem to be getting quite serious."

Erin stopped breathing, convinced Laurence was about to confront her about her overnight sojourn.

"Look, I ..."

"I'm pleased. He seems like a nice young man."

"Oh," Erin blushed with guilty relief.

"Your mother would have liked him."

"No, I don't think he's her type at all."

After all, he was considerate and loyal and caring.

“She used to say that all she wanted for you was that you...”

“I’ll just go and get you your change of sheets,” Erin said, shutting Laurence out and going quickly from the room.