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RESOLUTION

Denise Mina



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I

Angus Farrell

It was quiet in the grey corridor. High summer shone through the consecutive windows, lighting the lazy dust; window bars cast chilly shadows on to cracked plaster. They were waiting in the corridor-in-between for the door to be opened to the visitors' block. The police were out there. Angus didn't know what they were going to charge him with yet. He guessed the murders and not the rapes. They didn't have any good witnesses for the rapes. A guard at the far end watched them lethargically, standing on one leg.

The sour smell of disinfectant was making Angus's battered sinuses ache again; he was sure he had a fragment of bone stuck in there. He sat forward suddenly, hanging his head between his knees. Henry, the burly nurse sitting next to him, shifted his legs out of splatter range.

'Are you gonnae be sick?' he asked.

'No,' said Angus, bending lower. 'My head hurts.'

Henry grunted. 'Tell them at meds.'

Medication was four hours away. 'Thanks, Henry,' said Angus, 'I will.'

He looked between his legs. The wooden bench was bolted to the wall, the mysterious point of attachment plastered over so that no one could wrench it off and use it as a weapon. Angus had understood the rationale of institutional vigilance during his career as a psychologist. It wasn't until he became a patient that he began to appreciate the psychic impact of static furniture, of lukewarm food and

blunt knives. The minor amendments caught his attention every time, making him speculate about the behaviour being deterred.

Henry shifted his weight forward, straining the bench from the wall. He had deodorant on, an acrid, hollow smell. Angus shut his eyes and remembered. It had been so dark outside the window that night. His most searing sensual memory was a light lemony aftershave billowing out towards him as Douglas opened the front door of Maureen O'Donnell's flat. He'd whispered angrily to Angus, asking him what he wanted, what was he doing there. Angus had stepped into the hallway, clicked the door shut behind him and, in a single fluid movement, grabbed Douglas by the hair and pulled him down, kneeing him sharply on the chin, knocking him off his feet. He held on to him by the hair, letting him down slowly to the floor, dropping him quietly. There was so much blood at the end, running off the rim of the chair. Angus had stood at the bedroom door, looking in at her through the crack in the door. Maureen was snoring lightly and it made him smile. Her clothes were on the floor by the bed, a stepped-out-of dress, kicked-off shoes. So much blood. Angus couldn't remember the first cut properly, just the build-up and the outcome. Disappointed, he sighed.

'Don't worry,' said Henry. 'You'll be fine.'

Angus sat upright, making a brave face and nodding.

'They're just going to charge ye,' said Henry. 'They're not even going to question ye today.'

Angus had been here for almost a year. For the first eight months he had been deluded and terrified, hadn't known where he was, what was real or imagined. Reality came in snippets at first and he began quickly to yearn for the alien confusion. The noise and the smell of the hospital were unbearable. Two men on his block were nocturnal, a moaner

and an idiot who tapped on the pipes all night. Angus listened for two months, using his experience of crosswords, trying to decipher the message. There was no message, just a rhythm, over and over, as if the man was trying to tell a careful listener that he was still alive and almost sentient.

Henry was picking his nose. It was a straightforward, unceremonious hoick, an index finger rammed up his nostril, searching for congealed mucus. The doctors here picked at their arses, nurses swore, domestic staff stared with open-mouthed amusement at the patients and stopped working when supervisors left the room. It didn't matter how many social conventions they breached, they still felt better than their charges because state mental patients were credited with no opinions, no judgement. They were empty vessels. Angus knew that being in here superseded everything else he had ever been.

No one had thought that he might be familiar with the criminal justice process, not his lawyer, not Dr Heikle, his psychiatrist, not even the police. It astonished him. He had worked in the health service for seventeen years but he'd also done court reports and diversions. They had forgotten his career because he was a patient now, a nothing.

He looked up and down the bleak corridor. Maureen O'Donnell had brought him to this and she was going to get him out.

Polis

Hugh McAskill and Joe McEwan sat side by side on Maureen O'Donnell's settee. They were tall men. Joe would have been attractive if he hadn't been such a prick. He had blond hair, turning white in the recent wave of sunshine, a deep tan, and he was always smartly dressed, in chinos and well-fitting shirts and jumpers. When Maureen first met Joe, his tan looked as if he'd just come back from a nice holiday somewhere Mediterranean. In the past year the tan had become more orange and sunbed-ish but it might have been her jaundiced view of him: they had an unhappy history. Hugh looked far more Scottish. His hair was a russet red, flecked with silver at the temples. His eyes were blue and his skin flushed red or white depending on the season. The living room window was pushed right up and the evening was cooler than the day but the men were still sweating into their collars.

Usually, Glasgow's weather vacillates between freezing rain and not-so-freezing rain but sometimes, on a five-to-ten-year cycle, the weather turns and the city doesn't know itself. This was such a time. Unconditional sunshine had arrived one week ago. Virulent, fecund plant life had sprung up everywhere: trees and bushes were heavy with deep green leaves, growth appeared on buildings, between cracks in the pavement, on bins. The city burst into life and everyone began to farm their skin. Water-white cheeks and necks withered and puckered with relentless exposure. Casualty

departments heaved under the strain of sunburn and heat stroke. Everyone in the unaccustomed city was dressing as if they'd woken up naked in a bush and had to borrow clothes to get home: old women wore young women's summer dresses, vest tops were stretched over belly rolls, short sleeves showed off straps from industrial bras. Every night felt like Friday night and parties went on too long. Fantastic blood-alcohol levels were attained by conscientious individuals. Everyone was dangerously out of character.

Hugh sipped the coffee and Joe lit a super-low-tar cigarette.

'Are ye sure I can't get you anything, Joe?' said Maureen.

'Just sit down,' said Joe impatiently. 'We need to talk to you.'

'I'll just go to the loo,' she said, and Joe rolled his eyes.

Maureen sat on the toilet and held her head in her hands. The timing couldn't have been worse. Her big sister Una was expecting a baby any day now, her father Michael was back in Glasgow, floating around like a toxic cloud, and the dreams and flashbacks were getting worse and worse. When she thought of Michael in her city, the air caught in her throat, the light stung her skin and scratched her eyes. She would rather have been dead than share the air with him. And now Joe and Hugh were back up at her door asking about Angus Farrell again.

Joe had never liked her much but he treated her with frank contempt now. She'd lied about Angus writing to her from the hospital and had kept all the letters back from them for as long as she could. She couldn't hand over those letters. Angus had written them to make the police think he was insane, to give himself a defence, but she read between the lines and knew that he wasn't. The irrationality was too ordered, too carefully set. Angus had a plan. He'd

hinted at what had happened between himself and Maureen in almost every letter, hinted that she had drugged him with acid. If she handed over the letters she'd be damning herself and giving him evidence for an insanity defence. The police had searched her house, got hold of them anyway and Joe had loathed her ever since. However much she tried to convince herself that it didn't matter because she didn't like him either, it was hard to be in his company.

She dug her nails into her scalp, deep into the skin, promising herself a cigarette if she went back into the living room. She stood up and flushed the toilet for authenticity, lifting the lid so it was loud enough for Joe and Hugh to hear.

They had their elbows on their knees, their ankles crossed, mirroring one another.

'This place looks pretty empty,' said Joe, glancing around the sparse living room. 'Are you moving?'

'No,' she said, sitting cross-legged on the floor. 'I'm just chucking stuff out.'

She was emptying the room gradually and had recently given away all her precious books and chucked out the broken video. The books were a big step. She wasn't sure why she was doing it, but the house felt better without the clutter. She felt as if she was stripping the set, getting ready to leave with no idea of where she was moving to.

Joe looked at the far wall. 'Where's all the books?'

She shrugged and lit a cigarette. 'I gave them away to a charity shop.'

'If you're moving you need to tell us.'

'I'm not moving, Joe.'

'We need to get in touch with ye.'

'I'm not moving, Joe.'

A man with the merest smattering of manners would have let it go at that but Joe didn't care if he offended or

bored or annoyed her. 'You look as if you're moving.'

Maureen sighed and shrugged helplessly. Hugh reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a notebook. Joe was looking unhappily around the room, at the portable television balanced on a kitchen chair and the blood-stained floorboards. 'Ye might have painted over that,' he said, flinching.

Maureen looked at the bloody mess. It was a flattened stain, squashed out of shape because the carpet had been over it when Douglas, her boyfriend, was murdered. She looked back at Joe. 'Are you an interior decorator now?'

'Maureen,' said Hugh, butting in before they got started, 'we need to ask you some questions about Angus Farrell.'

She nodded.

'You know his trial is coming up, don't you?'

Maureen sat up straight. 'No,' she said, 'I thought he'd had a trial already.'

'That was just a preliminary hearing. This is the full trial. He's mentioned you in his defence and we need to ask you what you're going to say in court.'

'I had to go and see his lawyer yesterday. Was that about the same thing?'

'Yeah,' said Hugh.

'He kept asking about my brother.' She smiled nervously. 'D'you think they'll ask about him? I won't have to be a witness in court, will I?'

Unable to give her a blanket assurance, Hugh looked at his notebook. 'Maybe not. Wait and see.'

'Did you drug Farrell in Millport?' said Joe suddenly.

'No,' she lied. 'I didn't.'

'Did you tie him up?'

'No, I never touched him.'

'Have you ever even been to Millport?' he asked sarcastically. The previous winter the papers had carried a large

photograph of her with a tricycle on Millport seafront.

'I have been to Millport in the past,' she said.

'Did you go there at any point last September?' asked Hugh.

'No.'

Hugh made a note and spoke again. 'That fifteen grand Douglas paid into your bank account, what was that about?'

Maureen shrugged. 'I never did find out. An apology, maybe.'

'For what?' said Joe.

She was going to tell him that when Douglas found out that Angus had been raping patients it had made him look at his own behaviour, that he had probably found it hard to square having an affair with Maureen when she was a patient at his clinic, but she knew Joe'd say something nasty. 'I don't know,' she said. A thought struck her and she cringed. 'D'ye think they'll ask me about being in hospital?'

'Yeah,' said Joe unkindly. 'I think your stay in a mental hospital might be material.'

Hugh glanced at his boss's knee, and Maureen had had enough. 'Fuck off, Joe,' she snapped. 'You're a cheeky bitch.'

He was on his feet and pointing at her. 'Don't you talk to me like that.'

And suddenly she was up and angry and couldn't be arsed being nice about two big men coming into her house looking for a fight. 'Why did you come here?' she shouted at him.

'You're *legally obliged* to co-operate with us,' yelled Joe.

She turned on Hugh. 'Why did you bring him up here? What's he doing here?'

'I can come here if I want.'

'You're a cheeky bugger and you're here making trouble.'

'Don't you swear at me.'

They were head to head, Joe a foot and a half taller than her. They hesitated. They had escalated the fight too fast.

Now would be the moment to start punching each other and neither of them was about to do that.

‘Sit down,’ said Hugh, sounding tired, ‘and we’ll continue.’

They backed off. Joe glanced behind him to check the settee was still there before sitting down and Maureen lurched forward, as if she was making him sit down. Joe stood up again and they both heard Hugh muttering, ‘For-fucksake,’ under his breath. The anger passed and it all seemed ridiculous to Maureen. She smiled as she sat down on the floor and Joe took offence, which made her smile all the more. It felt as if they had all known each other for ever. The only person she fought with like that was her brother. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry, Hugh. Ask me anything you want.’

Hugh held up a hand and spoke to both of them. ‘I’m not refereeing.’

‘Sorry,’ said Maureen, and Joe sat on the settee. She didn’t know anything about the police but she knew that Joe was too senior to be here. He had chosen to come, knowing it would be incendiary, knowing it would affect the quality of information Hugh could get for the prosecution. ‘Sorry,’ she said again. ‘I’ll be good. Ask me anything.’

‘I was gonnae,’ said Hugh flatly, letting her know that he didn’t need her permission.

‘Well, go on, then.’ She smiled, getting the last word.

‘When I’m ready,’ said Hugh, grinning at his notes.

Maureen nodded at his notebook. ‘Shoot,’ she said.

On the way out she stopped Hugh by the door, letting Joe jog down the stairs ahead of him. ‘Hugh,’ she said, ‘what are the chances Angus’ll get off?’

‘Oh,’ Hugh frowned, ‘hard to say until the defence case is submitted.’

‘If he does get off,’ she said quietly, ‘he’ll come for me, won’t he?’

‘If he gets out we’ll protect you,’ said Hugh seriously. ‘Don’t worry about that. If he gets off the murder charge we’ll get him on the rapes.’

Downstairs Joe pulled the close door open to the street and called back up to Hugh to come on.

‘If it goes to a rape case,’ said Maureen, ‘would Siobhain McCloud need to give evidence?’

‘Sorry. She may not be a good witness but she’s the best we’ve got,’ Hugh replied.

Siobhain was one of the patients Angus had raped in the Northern Psychiatric Hospital. Maureen had been with Siobhain when she was questioned about it by the police. She hadn’t talked for days afterwards – she could hardly walk from the station to the taxi. Hugh saw how downcast Maureen looked. ‘Listen, there’ll be fifty policemen in this close if he gets out. We’d have to protect you because of the threats in his letters.’ He reached forward and rubbed her arm. ‘If he gets out, I promise we’ll be here.’

Maureen sat alone on the settee. They were going to bring up Liam’s history of drug-dealing in court. If the university found out they might even chuck him out. She wouldn’t tell him. She’d wait and see what happened. Everything was coming to an end.

Sunshine lingered in the living room, puddled in a corner of the bay window. It was ten o’clock and the sun would be going down soon. Taking a glass from the kitchen, she stood by the living room window and poured herself a large whisky, rolling it in her mouth before swallowing. The sunshine gilded the city below. Shards of glass in the yellow and burgundy sandstone glinted against a blue sky back-

drop. In the street below, excited midges caught the sun, shimmering like animated flecks of gold.

She watched the high summer sun set quickly, like an orange rolling off a table, and suddenly found herself sitting in a blue gloom, holding an empty glass, looking out over the street at closing time. Dispensing with formalities, she drank straight from the whisky bottle, the tiny vacuum in the neck kissing the tip of her tongue. At the foot of the dark hill a string of orange street-lights flickered awake. It was a beautiful city and Maureen was glad she had lived here.