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The Great Escape

Written by Fiona Gibson

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FIONA GIBSON

The Great Escape

A V O N

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For the fabulous Dolphinton writers

ONE

Garnet Street, Glasgow, 1998

‘*Tadaaaa!* All hail the party buffet . . .’ With a flourish, despite the fact that she’s alone in the kitchen, Hannah sets out three bowls on the worktop. She’s wearing an outsized white T-shirt, sipping beer from a bottle and pretending to be hosting a TV cookery show. ‘Here on the left, we have sumptuous tortilla chips, chilli flavour, the ones with red dust on . . . moving along, we have dry-roasted peanuts and this, the *pièce de résistance*, is my very own dip, which you can whip together in just a few minutes with some beans, garlic and, er . . .’ She swigs her beer, and detecting a garlicky whiff on her fingers, tries to remember what the other stuff was.

‘Ugh, has someone been sick?’

Hannah’s flatmate, Lou, has appeared at her shoulder, her freshly washed hair dripping rivulets down her cheeks.

‘It’s our buffet,’ Hannah explains with exaggerated patience. ‘Come on, you’re supposed to be impressed. I’ve finally managed to cook something before I leave. You should be in *awe*.’

‘I don’t think that counts as cooking.’ Lou winces as if Hannah might have scraped the stuff in the bowl off the pavement.

‘Well, I was going to make hummus but we didn’t have chickpeas, so I mashed up those butter beans instead.’

‘It looks ill. Kind of . . . beige.’

‘It’ll be fine once everyone’s had a few drinks,’ Hannah insists, mopping up a smear from the worktop.

Lou smirks. ‘Han, those butter beans have been in the cupboard since we moved in. Three years they’ve been sitting there. Your parents brought them in your emergency rations box, remember?’

‘Isn’t that the whole point of canning? They find tins at the bottom of the sea that have rolled out of shipwrecks, and when they open them they’re perfectly fine. These things just don’t go off.’

Now Sadie appears, swathed in a silky robe, dark hair pinned up with an assortment of clips. She peers at the dip from a safe distance. ‘Is that all we’ve got to eat?’

‘Well,’ Hannah says, ‘I was thinking of knocking up a banquet, wild boar on a spit, ice sculptures and all that, but . . .’ She checks her watch. ‘I kind of ran out of time.’

‘How late is it?’ Sadie asks.

‘Just gone seven . . .’

‘Hell . . .’ In a flash of red silk, Sadie flies out of the kitchen to the bathroom where she turns on the juddering tap (the tank only holds a bath-and-a-half’s worth of hot water, so the three girls are accustomed to a water-sharing system that requires a frequently flaunted no-clipping-of-toenails rule). Hannah glances down at the dip. *Oh well*, she thinks as Lou drifts back to her room, *it’ll do for filling in that crack in the bathroom wall*. It can be her parting gift to the flat.

Hannah doesn’t want to think of tonight as an end-of-era party. It’s a celebration, that’s what it is: of four years at art school, three spent living with Sadie and Lou on the first floor of a red sandstone tenement block perched on a perilously steep hill around the corner from college. *Funny*,

she reflects, *how a place so distinctly unlovely, with its mould-speckled bathroom and grumbling pipes, can feel like the most palatial abode when you're about to leave it. It's like getting a haircut. You can hate your hair, absolutely despise it to the point of wearing a hat at all times. Then, as you trot off to the salon, you glimpse your reflection in a shop window and think, actually, it looks great.*

She wanders into the living room. It's oppressively orange, thanks to the embossed patterned wallpaper which the girls' landlord had said they were welcome to remove – as if three art students would be likely to get around to stripping it off and redecorating. *Anyway, orange isn't ugly*, Hannah thinks now – *it's warm and cosy*. Her beanbag, too, looks strangely lovely, even though it has long lost its squishiness and now resembles a large cowpat in brown corduroy. There were two beanbags originally; the other burst mysteriously at a previous party, disgorging its beany contents all over the floor. Johnny from the upstairs flat had accompanied Hannah to buy them from a closing-down sale. He'd insisted on carrying both beanbags – unwrapped, clutched in front of his body – with the sole purpose of pretending they were unfeasibly large testicles.

Hannah looks around the room, taking in the dog-eared magazines on the shelves, the film and exhibition posters fraying at the edges on the walls. A rush of panic engulfs her as she tries to imagine no Sadie, no Lou, no Johnny; no orangey living room to hang out in late into the night, no kitchen table to congregate around over breakfast. *Don't be maudlin*, she tells herself firmly. *This was never supposed to be forever. You've got a new job, a new life and it'll be fantastic . . .* At the sound of running water, Hannah makes for the bathroom and raps on the door. 'Sadie, you nearly finished in there?'

'Yeah, won't be a minute . . .'

'Hurry up, it's nearly half seven . . .'

‘God, sorry, didn’t realise . . .’ There’s a squeak as Sadie’s wet feet hit the glittery lino. She emerges from the bathroom, damp dark hair tumbling around the shoulders of her robe. Her toenails are painted fuchsia, her dark brows arched dramatically against her creamy skin. Sexy Sadie, the boys call her, although Sadie is blasé about her allure, a combination of Italian colouring and sensational curves. Catching Hannah’s eye, she pauses in the hallway.

‘You okay, Han? Feeling a bit wobbly about tonight?’

Hannah shakes her head firmly. ‘I’m fine, honestly.’

‘Just wondered,’ Sadie adds gently, ‘with this being our last party, end of an era and all that . . .’

Hannah musters a wide smile. ‘Yeah. Don’t remind me.’ Her eyes moisten, but she quickly blinks away the tears. ‘Anyway, better make myself look presentable. We’ve still got to sort out the music *and* I’ve got to get this garlicky stink off my hands . . .’

‘I’ll do the music. You go and beautify yourself.’

‘Okay. And look, I know you might find it hard to control yourself, but keep your fingers out of that butter bean dip, okay?’ With that, Hannah strides into the bathroom, dropping her T-shirt and underwear onto the floor where they lie next to Lou and Sadie’s discarded clothing. Sadie’s red fluffy mules have been kicked off by the washbasin; Lou’s beaded Indian slippers are neatly paired up by the door. Hannah sinks into the lukewarm water, detecting a prickle of toenail at the base of her spine. Shifting up onto her knees, she fits the pink plastic hose over the taps and lets the water pour over her wavy fair hair. It’s shudderingly cold at first, then come the gurgles as the last dregs of hot water splutter through.

She can hear Lou singing through the thin bathroom wall. Hannah knows she’s probably trying on dress after dress in those weeny vintage sizes that only someone with her doll-sized proportions could ever hope to squeeze into.

Hannah is more athletically built, with taut, defined calves from cycling furiously around Glasgow's hilly streets. Will London be like that? Will it be possible to cycle to work without getting flattened under a bus? She hasn't even figured out her work route yet. Archway to Islington isn't that far, apparently, but how will she get from one page of the A-Z to another whilst riding her bike? Hannah doesn't want to look like a tourist, peering at maps. She wants to be a proper, breezy London girl who *belongs*.

Her stomach whirls as she turns off the hose. She's always anxious before a party and this one matters more than most. Drying herself with a towel that has all the softness of a road surface, she can hardly believe she's leaving. She'll miss those hungover breakfasts of bendy white toast and Philadelphia cheese. She'll miss all of them piling into Johnny's battered pillarbox-red Beetle and planning numerous jaunts to Loch Lomond, but never quite making it because there was always some party to go to instead. She'll miss whiling away entire afternoons in Puccini's, the best Italian café in Glasgow. The thought of those ordinary things no longer being part of her life triggers an ache in her gut. Hannah can't cry, though. Not now.

Glimpsing her wide blue eyes in the tarnished bathroom mirror, she wills herself not to lose it tonight. She's a grown-up now – no longer a student, but a real woman with a job waiting for her, *and* a flat, albeit with the dimensions of a Shreddies box. And she's not planning to ruin her last night here by being a blubbering wreck.

TWO

‘Lighten up, Lou-Lou. Hannah’s not dying, she’s only going to London.’ Spike, Lou’s boyfriend, rolls his eyes and looks up at the multicoloured plastic chandelier in mock exasperation.

‘You don’t understand,’ Lou retorts. ‘It’s a *huge* deal actually.’

Hannah moves away and grabs her glass from the top of a speaker. For the past five hours she’s been as bright and bouncy as it’s possible to be, and now she’s flagging a little. London, she keeps thinking. By this time tomorrow, I’ll be tucked up in bed in *London*. Hannah has only been there twice – the first time was on a mini-break with her parents when she was ten years old. All she can remember are monkeys hurling themselves around in their zoo enclosure, and her parents taking zillions of pictures of Big Ben while she tried to understand what was so thrilling about an enormous clock. You don’t get that in a tiny Fife fishing village, she’d concluded.

On her second London trip, six weeks ago now, Hannah had travelled down alone on an overnight coach to meet her new colleagues (the very word thrills her) at Catfish, the small design company that offered her a job as an

in-house illustrator after her final degree show. Her new boss, Michael, put her in touch with a property-letting agency, where a Japanese girl who looked about fifteen took her to see a studio flat in Archway. 'See, it's all freshly decorated, perfect for someone like you who's starting out,' the girl enthused.

Starting out. That's it, Hannah decides. It's a new chapter, waiting for her to dive right in. Right now, though, of more immediate concern is the fact that there doesn't appear to be a drop of alcohol left in the flat. Someone hands Spike a drink, and he's appalled to discover it's plain lemonade.

'What's *this*?' he cries, in a voice that suggests they're trying to poison him.

'He's such an arse sometimes,' Lou mutters, sidling up to Hannah.

'You love him really,' Hannah teases.

'Do I? Sometimes I don't know. Sometimes, and I know this sounds awful and I really shouldn't say it, but . . .'

'What?'

'I wish I was you. God, Han, I do love him, he's great, but it feels so scary now, having no lectures to go to, no structure, no nothing. It's just me. Me and Spike.'

'Hey, you.' Hannah pulls in Lou for a hug. 'You'll be fine. We all will. Anyway, as soon as I'm sorted, you and Sadie are coming down to visit and maybe you'll move too . . .'

'*He* won't,' Lou says dryly.

'Well, maybe he will.' Hannah hesitates, then takes Lou by the hand and leads her to the beanbag where they both flop down. 'Anyway,' she adds, 'it's really about what *you* want, isn't it?'

Lou nods mutely. Sadie is dancing in front of them, her outrageous curves encased in a black Lycra dress. It's gone 3 am and around twenty people are still here, mostly dancing, some kissing in corners. It's a warm June night,

and Hannah hasn't kissed anyone – at least not properly – since their New Year party, which Lou and Sadie regard as a serious snog drought. It's better this way, Hannah decides now, spotting Johnny locked in conversation with his new girlfriend Rona. Being ensconced in a relationship, like Lou is with Spike, would just be too complicated.

'Dancing, Han?' Having managed to detach himself from Rona, Johnny has appeared in front of her, all gangly limbs and dark Irish eyes and clothes that always look a shade too big for him.

Hannah laughs and shakes her head. 'I'm knackered, Johnny. Completely done in. I'm having a little sabbatical here.'

'Oh c'mon, lightweight.' He bobs down and grabs her hand.

'I've been dancing for hours!' she protests.

He cocks his head to one side. 'Come on, Han. Last chance.'

Grinning, she allows him to pull her up to her feet. She dances, conscious of Rona watching her intently, as if she might be planning to kidnap Johnny, stuff him into one of her crates and whisk him off to her studio flat in Archway. 'I'm dying of thirst,' she announces as the song finishes.

'There's definitely nothing left to drink,' announces Sadie, glossy red lipstick somewhat smeared.

'We must have *something*,' Hannah declares, heading for the kitchen as Rona reclaims Johnny with a sharp tug of his arm.

'Spike saves the day!' Spike announces, brandishing a bottle of red wine like a trophy.

'Where d'you find that?' Hannah asks.

'Ah, well . . .' He taps the side of his nose. 'It was hiding at the back of your cupboard behind Lou's bird food cereal.'

'Spike, you can't drink that!' Lou shrieks from the doorway.

‘Why not?’ He grips the bottle to his chest as if someone might try to wrestle it from him.

‘My parents gave it to me the day I left home. It’s to stay unopened for fifteen years – that’s why it was hidden – and then it’ll be worth a *fortune*.’

‘Fifteen years?’ Spike looks bereft. ‘How can anyone be expected to wait that long for a drink?’

‘Mum and Dad’ll go crazy,’ Lou laments. ‘God, Spike, you’ll have to jam the cork back in. Quick, before air gets in and ruins it . . .’

‘Jeez . . .’ Spike rakes a hand through his hair. ‘Sorry, Lou-Lou. I just thought, seeing as it’s still early . . .’

Lou pauses, then her small, dainty face erupts into a grin. ‘You honestly think my parents would trust me to keep a bottle of wine for fifteen years? It’s just ordinary stuff we must have forgotten about. Come on, get it open.’ Obediently, and clearly relieved, Spike pours a glass.

‘You’re not actually planning to drink that, are you?’ Rona has wandered into the kitchen, and is gripping Johnny’s hand firmly.

Spike raises his glass unsteadily. ‘Yeah. Why not?’

‘Because it’s disgusting. It’s got *bits* in it. Look.’ Rona steps forward – she’s all bones and sharp edges, Hannah decides – and prods his glass with a burgundy fingernail.

Spike peers at it. ‘Right. Well, they’re probably just bits of grape, and fruit’s good for you, isn’t it . . .’

‘. . . says Glasgow’s top wine connoisseur,’ someone quips.

‘No one would drink that unless they had some kind of problem,’ Rona retorts, glaring at Johnny as if expecting him to agree.

‘The only problem Spike’s got,’ he chuckles, ‘is how to strain out the bits.’

Spike frowns as if faced with a tough mathematical equation. ‘Yeah, you’re right. What can we use?’

‘A colander?’ someone suggests.

‘I know.’ Spike brightens. ‘Get me some tights, Lou. Clean ones, not fishnet, and not grubby old things out of your linen basket either . . .’

‘What for?’

‘Straining. Rona’s right – there are bits floating about in it. God knows, you girls keep a terrible wine cellar.’

Giggling, Lou rushes off to her room, returning with a pair of black tights, which Spike carefully stretches over a stripey milk jug so a leg dangles down at each side. He pours out the contents of his glass, and then the rest of the wine from the bottle into the gusset. Filtration complete, he removes Lou’s wine-sodden hosiery from the jug and shares out the wine. A disgusted Rona clip-clops back to the living room.

Someone has turned the music down, and a sense of quiet – or, perhaps, hushed respect for Spike’s ingenuity – settles over the group. ‘Where did you learn to do that, Spike?’ asks Sadie.

‘Boy scouts,’ he sniggers, ‘although there wasn’t a badge for it, sadly.’

With a smile, Hannah sips from her glass and lets her gaze skim over her favourite people in the whole world:

Lou, a talented jeweller, who, despite the odd flash of exasperation, is bonkers in love with the most flirtatious man in Glasgow (even now, with Lou in the room, Spike is sneaking quick glances at some friend of a friend with a long blonde plait coiled ingeniously on top of her head).

Sadie, the half-Italian beauty, who’s already had orders for her sensational hand-printed corsets, and on whom pretty much every boy in their year has nurtured an ill-disguised crush.

Johnny from upstairs, a catering student, virtually their fourth flatmate and provider of emergency rations ever since, one bleak winter’s night, he popped down to find

the girls stony broke, trying to pretend that Weetabix and lime marmalade constituted a perfectly well-balanced meal. Johnny, whose new girlfriend is, although icily beautiful, a most *unsuitable* choice.

Hannah knows, too, that Johnny's love life is none of her business, especially now, when she's leaving. Feeling her stomach tighten, she glances again at Sadie and Lou who catch the look on her face, and who at once wrap their arms tightly around her. 'Don't forget us, will you?' Sadie murmurs.

'Are you mad? Of course I won't . . .' Then, as Rona comes in search of her fake alligator bag which someone must have 'stolen' – she finds it wedged behind the kitchen door – Johnny grabs Hannah by the arm and says, 'Great party, Han. The best.'

'Thanks, Johnny.' She blinks, not knowing what else to say.

He meets her gaze, and she's surprised by the flicker of sadness she sees in his eyes. 'A new start, isn't it?' he adds.

'Guess so. It's bloody terrifying, though . . .'

'Yeah, I know what you mean,' he mutters.

Hannah frowns. 'What, London?'

He glances around the girls' devastated kitchen. 'Um . . . yeah. Sort of.'

'Johnny?' says Rona sharply. 'You ready to go now? I've got a pounding headache.'

'Yep, just coming.' He smiles stoically. 'So you're off tomorrow?'

Hannah nods. 'Mum and Dad are coming with the van at eleven. The way Dad drives, it should only take us about three weeks to get to London.'

Johnny laughs. 'Bye, then, Han.'

'Bye, Johnny.' They pause, and he hugs her before Rona takes his hand and leads him to the door.

The final stragglers leave amidst drunken good-lucks,

and Spike totters unsteadily towards Lou's bedroom, a smear of pink, which doesn't match Lou's lipstick, on his cheek. 'My God,' Lou breathes, taking in the nuts and tortilla chips crunched into the cork-tiled floor, the gigantic pub ashtray piled high with butts and the table crammed with smeared glasses and empty bottles. 'We really should make a start on this.'

Hannah nods wearily. 'Yeah, let's do it now.'

'No,' Sadie declares, 'not on your last night. Me and Lou will do it tomorrow after you've gone.'

'But I can't leave you with this!'

'Course you can,' Lou cuts in. 'It'll keep us busy – stop us pining for you, sobbing into your beanbag.'

'Well, if you insist . . . ' Suddenly, Hannah's attention is caught by a tissue-wrapped bottle nestling between the bread bin and the microwave. 'Look, someone's left this.' Frowning, she examines the gift tag attached to its neck and rips off the wrapping. 'It's from Johnny. Oh, that's sweet of him. Look, there's something else too.' As Sadie wrestles out the cork, and Lou grabs three plastic cups, Hannah peels the lid from a faded Tupperware box. GIRLS – FOR YOUR LAST BREAKFAST TOGETHER MAYBE? J x is written neatly across it in felt-tip. It's an apple tart, the segments fanning out in circles beneath a golden glaze. Hannah smiles, snaps off a fragment of pastry and lets it dissolve on her tongue.

There's a card, too, propped up against the bread bin. She studies Johnny's old-fashioned forward-sloping writing on the envelope and rips it open. The card depicts a wobbly line drawing of Glasgow, with the famous buildings all jammed in together, jostling for space. *Dear Han,* it reads, *So you're off! We're all going to miss you like mad, you know. What's going to become of us? Who knows? And we'll definitely miss your cooking! Haha. But we'll be okay as long as you remember us and wear a bloody bike helmet*

in London. That's an absolute order, and I've alerted the police to keep an eye on you too. Love, J.

'Oh, Johnny,' Hannah murmurs as Sadie fills the cups with tepid champagne. Raising hers to her lips, she wipes away the hot tears that have sprung to her eyes. 'I'd like to make a speech,' she says.

'Speech! Speech!' cry Sadie and Lou.

Hannah takes a deep breath. 'I just want to say . . . I love both of you and we're never going to lose touch, okay?' She pauses as her friends murmur their agreement, then adds, 'And there's another thing.'

'What?' Sadie asks.

'Johnny's apple tart. I don't think I can wait till breakfast, can you?'