

My Lover's Lover

by Maggie O'Farrell

She steps from the taxi, pushing at the metal weight of the door, clutching cigarettes, change and the thorned stems of roses. Sarah says something to her over the taxi roof and she half turns. She's aware too late of her foot catching on the granite curve of the kerb, and the next moment she is airborne, falling upwards.

Lily sees the world swivel on its axis, her hair, lighter than her, flowing past her face, her fingers shedding roses and spinning discs of coins. As she arches through space she sees, walking along the pavement towards her, a man. It seems odd somehow that he should be alone because he strikes her, in that split-second shutter-snap moment, as the kind of person who is rarely without others. He walks with a peculiar emphasis, as if trying to leave an imprint of himself on the air. Then concrete and grit smack against her body, and the skin is flayed from her hands.

At the touch of fingers, tight as ivy on her sleeve, she looks up. His eyes are a surprising, unambiguous blue. The flowers are crushed beneath her, seeping yellow pigment into her clothes. He is helping her upright, speaking to her, asking her you all right, are you hurt. Her hands feel scalded, raw, and when she looks at them she sees beads of blood springing from the skin in neat rows. Then Sarah has made it round from the other side of the taxi and is holding her arm, pressing tissues to her grazes, thanking the man. When Lily looks round, he's vanished.

'My God,' Sarah says, peering at her. 'Are you OK?'

'Yeah,' she says, laughing now, embarrassed, 'I'm fine. Don't know what happened there.' And they walk through the night air, towards the party. A repetitive, thrumming pulse of music is stretching at the walls of the building.

Inside, the rooms and corridors are crushed with people and hung with heavy nimbuses of smoke. It's the exhibition launch of a friend of Sarah's, but no one's looking at the art - photo-realistic paintings of people and animals being consumed by fire. Lily has the sensation of wanting to stretch up to the ceiling where there might be more air. Her injured hands feel sensitised, peeled like eggs.

She leaves Sarah in the main room, talking to a girl in a turquoise dress. The dress is rimmed with silky, frail fur, strands of which cling to the moistness of the girl's skin like seaweed. The people all seem to be of a type, or wearing some kind of uniform. The girls are small and gamine with cropped hair and dark-kohled eyes. The men are brash, filling their clothes complacently, gripping cigarettes between meaty fingers. Maybe it's the fall, or the pain in her hands, but she can't get over how distant everyone seems, as if she's looking at them down the wrong end of a telescope.

At the drinks table, she picks up a fragile-feeling plastic cup filled with acidic pale wine. Next to her, a woman is fanning herself vigorously with the exhibition catalogue, her cup-rim stained with a simulacrum of her violent crimson lips. Holding her drink above her head, Lily starts pushing her way through groups of people and cross-currents of conversation, towards the back and shoulders of a man she knows. She hears the rub of her black corduroy trousers as her legs move under her - a sound of secret, velvet friction. She had a lover who'd been obsessed with these trousers. 'Cor-du-roy,' he would say as he eased them off her, separating each syllable in a fake French accent, 'cord of kings.'

A hand darts through the crowd and seizes her arm. It's brown-skinned, crooked-fingered, with silver nails. She stares down at it, surprised, then leans around the back of the thickset woman with bristly hair to see Phoebe, Sarah's friend who works at the gallery. 'Hi,' she says. 'How are you?'

'Come and talk to us.' Phoebe tugs at her. The abrasions on her palms and wrists ache, threatening to split apart. 'This is my cousin, Marky Mark.'

Phoebe moves to one side and Lily sees the man who'd picked her up off the pavement. Phoebe holds out her hand, flat, palm up. 'This is Lily.'

Lily steps forward. He looks different in the light. His shirt, hectically patterned, is rolled up at the sleeves, one higher than the other so that she can see the line of his tan. The curve of his bicep is a pale, milky white, his forearms a deep brown. His fingers are stained with green ink and he has the heel of his right shoe balanced on the toe of his left.

'Marky Mark?' she repeats, when she is close enough for him to hear her. 'That's a funny name.'

'It's Marcus,' he murmurs, lifting his glittering blue gaze to hers. He scans her face for a second or two, then smiles. 'How are your hands?'

Lily holds his gaze. She refuses to be intimidated by flirtatious men. 'All right, thanks.'

'What's wrong with your hands?' Phoebe is saying, but neither of them replies.

'Can I see?' he asks

She holds out her wrist. He transfers his beer can into his other hand and reaches out for her arm, curling his fingers around it. His touch is surprisingly hot. Around the pressure points of her fingertips, her skin empties of blood.

'Hmm,' he says, leaning close, 'nasty. You should get it cleaned up properly.'

Lily retracts her arm. 'I'm sure I'll live.'

Again, he smiles. 'I'm sure you will.'

'What happened? What happened?' Phoebe twitters.

'Lily fell,' Marcus replies, still looking at Lily. 'Outside. Tell me. Do you make a habit of falling - '

'Not really,' she cuts across him.

'- at people's feet?'

There is a pause.

'No' she says again. 'No. I don't.'

'Marcus,' Phoebe begins, in a strident, bossy voice, obviously put out, 'I want to hear about you.'

Lily raises her eyebrows at Marcus, but then becomes aware of a shift between the three of them. Marcus looks at Phoebe quickly, moving his mouth as if about to speak. Phoebe is gazing at him intently and he is staring back at his cousin with a strange, wry, almost pained expression, one hand pressed, oddly, to the centre of his thorax.

'How are you doing?' Phoebe's voice is nearly a whisper. Something private, hidden, is being referred to. Lily looks from one to the other, suddenly wanting to be away from them both. Whatever this is, it has nothing to do with her.

'Well, I -' He stops. Slowly, he rubs his nose with his knuckle, managing to keep his beer can upright at the same time. Someone passes in the corridor beyond the kitchen door, saying, 'And she never knew, never found out.'

Marcus sniffs in a deep breath, seems to be examining the lino on the floor. Lily sees in horror that he might cry. But then he grins and says, 'I think I need a new flatmate.'

He and Phoebe collapse into sudden hysterics. Phoebe hoots with laughter, leans on Marcus while the two of them giggle and snort and hiccup and wipe their eyes. Lily smiles at them both and turns towards the wall of people and sound. As she walks away, she hears Phoebe, behind her, ask: 'What on earth happened?'

Last night, the radio he'd thought long broken sputtered into life. Suddenly, a woman's voice, in the cracked vowels of a language he couldn't fathom, was sliding down the spiral staircase of his ear.

Aidan flicks over a page of the magazine, and takes a tentative sip of his tongue-flayingly hot coffee. He'd lain there for a while, listening to the sound of a distant radio station, broadcasting from somewhere, surfacing in his room. He hadn't been able to get back to sleep and half an hour later he'd been sitting on the edge of his mattress, screwdriver in hand, the radio in pieces around him, trying to find the loose connection.

The magazine is one he found in the cafe. It's about 'lifestyle choices', it tells him, and is full of soap stars he's never heard of in their underwear. He spends a few minutes doing a ridiculous questionnaire entitled 'So you think you're immune to love?', and scores dismally low, putting him at highly infectious. He does it again, fiddling his answers, until he gets cross with himself and turns instead to an article about a testicle festival in Montana.

He's been to see a movie and he knows he won't sleep for a while, so has found this late-night coffee bar. He had to go out, had to leave the flat, had to pretend he'd had other plans all along. He's supposed to be at Phoebe's exhibition launch, but just couldn't face it.

He sits on a high stool with an iron rung for his feet and a mirror in front of him. He avoids his own eye and looks instead at the room behind him. The people under the white strip-lights look pallid and vitamin-less. Cigarettes balance between fingers or in ashtrays, legs are crossed, feet dangling in the air, napkins are concertina-folded against the table surface. No one talks much. The Italian man behind the counter mutter monosyllabically to each other and gaze at the large TV screen where two teams zigzag up and down a lurid green pitch. Outside, late-night crowds drift past the glass door.

Without warning, a huge yawn overtakes him, and his jaw hinge cracks - a startling, inappropriate noise that from inside his head sounds like gunshot. He suppresses an urge to laugh, and glances about him to see if anyone else has heard it. What would he say? Sorry to have disturbed you, that was just my malfunctioning mandibular joint. A man brushes past him, putting on his coat. The waiter flaps a tablecloth free of crumbs at the door. Someone standing in the corner lets a cup of coffee slip from their fingers and it shatter-smashes, a hot, dark lake of coffee spreading over the neat chess-squares of lino.

Lily slips into the back stairs of the gallery, in search of another bathroom. There's a toilet on the ground floor, but a long queue of people is snaked around its door. The sweat she's broken out in from being crammed in a room with too many people cools on her skin. As she climbs the stairs she imagines she's leaving a swirl of water molecules in her wake.

The gallery is in one of those Victorian terraced houses that stretch in rows all over the city. They are all roughly the same layout, but where the bathroom usually is - at the back of the house on the first floor - Lily finds a small office smelling faintly of wet coffee granules.

She leans on the spiralling banister and looks down. From this distance, the mass of voices sound like frogs, high-pitched and regular. Then she hears something else - heavy footsteps of someone descending the staircase.

The floor judders as Marcus comes down from the upper floor. She straightens up, turning towards him in the half-light. But he moves nearer and, without speaking, slides one arm around her shoulders and the other around her waist. The length of his body rests against hers. He bends his head and presses his lips to the dip just below her cheekbone.

Lily is so shocked she does nothing. She stands in the cage of his arms, breathing in the scent of his hair, his skin, the wool of his sweater, the wine on his breath. His face feels damp, as if he's just washed it.

Then she feels something else entirely. A movement of air, tiny, imperceptible, a slight disturbance in the atmosphere. Someone else is there. Someone else is with them, watching them. She pulls away from him, twisting her head round. No one there. She cranes her head past him. No one there either.

She looks back at him, slightly thrown. It's in her mind to ask him a question, but she can't quite form what it is. The moment see-saws between them, and it's one of a peculiar, febrile clarity: she can hear the blood-throb of his heart, the static shift of her shoe-soles against the carpet. There are textures everywhere: he scratches his head and hair-shaft crackles against scalp, nails against follicles. Their clothes, moving on their bodies, are bonfires of silk against cotton, wool against denim.

He is rooting for something in his back pocket. 'I've got something to show you.' He makes an elaborate circling movement with his hands, like an illusionist revealing the final apparition of a trick. He opens his palm, flat, and holds it out to her. In its centre is a slip of paper. 'It's a piece of paper,' he says.

Lily reaches up and touches the place where his lips had been. 'I can see that.'

'Do you want it?'

They look at it together, a tiny runway on his outstretched hand. She keeps her face serious. 'Not really.'

'How about if I write my phone number on it?'

Lily laughs.

'Well?' he says.

'No,' she says, an inexplicable belligerence taking hold of her, 'still don't want it.'

'That's very rude,' he says. He stretches the paper between his hands and snaps it against the air. 'Didn't your mother ever teach you any manners?' Leaning on the banister, he scribbles on it with the narrow lead of a propelling pencil. 'Here,' he says, pushing it into her pocket. 'Promise you'll call me.' He keeps his hand in her pocket, pulling her to him. 'Promise?'

And because she doesn't want to give him what he wants, or at least not yet, doesn't want to let him have things his way, she asks, 'Are you really looking for a new flatmate?'

He blinks. The hand in her pocket moves, tenses, then withdraws. 'Maybe. Why?'

'I know someone who's looking.'

'Who?'

'Me. I've been living at my mother's for two months and it's driving me mad.'

He studies her face with such intensity that she knows he's thinking about something else. 'You,' he says, as if weighing the word on his tongue. The he swallows. 'Yes,' he says, 'yes I am. You have to call me now,' he shouts, as he thunders down the stairs.