



2019 Winner

The Lady in Black

by

Charlotte Derrick

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The Lady in Black

You don't know whether to tell this auld cunt to fuck right off or dig her one.

“It's lovely, isn't it?” she chirps.

You can always do both. There's nothin stoppin you.

“It really is just lovely.”

Except she just keeps fuckin *talkin*.

“It's very popular among tourists—”

You'll do yourself in before the day's out.

The auld doll is the curator of the museum. Her nametag says so. It explains the wide smile plastered over her cheerfully red face. It's like a rubber band pulled taut, ready to snap at any second. But even then, she stays perky. It fuckin radiates off her in waves and translates into a high whistle with every soft 's.' You can't help laughin. Why museums gave people like that the job of a curator, you'd never know. It's not supposed to be a personality contest. Christ, personal qualities aren't goin to stop someone from stealin a fuckin sarcophagus. Then again, it's hardly like anyone's on the lookout for Turner's *The Dawn Of Christianity*. That was big city caper, like when a Vermeer was stolen over in Boston. The Ulster Museum is for sad cunts like you walkin about, lookin at the same Lavery paintin every cuntin time.

Your woman's starin up at it like she's witnessin a Madonna and Child, proper pious on it, like. It's a shite wee paintin, *The Lady in Black*, so you don't know why she's gettin on like that. It's an oil work of a woman in a black dress. Hardly rivetin, and the title's hardly fuckin original, like, but no matter how hard you rip in til it you always find yourself drawn

to it and the eyes of her, Mrs Trevor, eyes that are large and brown and all encompassin.
They're just like Eileen's.

“Do you like it yourself, then?”

“My wife,” you say before you can catch yourself. “My wife did. It was her favourite.”

The rubber band snaps.

“Oh,” she says.

*

“Do you think I look like Mrs Trevor?”

“Who?”

“Her,” Eileen said, her fuzzy head noddin in the direction of *The Lady in Black*. She'd been on your back about goin to see it for weeks. You'd said no every time. It became the centre of most of your arguments. She couldn't understand that you didn't have time to be fuckin roun museums. You'd exams to revise for, you'd a ma and your teachers naggin at you about plannin a future for yourself. The only thing she'd to do was write her cuntin poetry whenever she could actually be fucked writin it. She'd all the time in the world but it wasn't enough – she'd to have yours, too.

But after two months of yappin she finally got you there to see it. You looked between the woman on the canvas and your wife and decided they looked fuck-all alike. Mrs Trevor, for one, had hair. It was hidden under a wide brimmed hat, but it was there, bistre brown and unobtrusive. Eileen'd hacked her mohawk off with a pair of kitchen scissors in favour of a buzzcut. She passed a hand over it and smirked.

Hair wasn't the only difference. There was the woman's chiffon gown and Eileen's charity shop t-shirt and jeans, the woman's soft jaw and Eileen's hollow cheeks. Aye, practically fuckin twins, like.

Where you could see potential was the eyes. They weren't the denim eyes you were used to. Both pairs were dark, set deep into the face and slightly droopin at the corners. They were nothin extraordinary, like, but they saw you and that was exactly it. Eileen's eyes were what you first noticed about her back then, and now they blinked at you, wide and expectant. You shrugged.

"Aye, maybe a bit."

She frowned.

"D'you love me?"

You thrusted your rings in her face.

"Why else would I be wearin these?"

She'd proposed to you in Botanic Gardens when you were just sixteen. The ring was cheap – the gem was made of glass and the band was painted silver. But the followin year, up in her flat in North Belfast, she gave you a weddin band of real white gold. She'd given you plenty of chances to say 'no.' She'd tell you, over and over, how there weren't any legal bindins to your marriage, there was nothin keepin you there, but the thought of ever sayin that word'd never crossed your mind and, half a year later, it still didn't.

"They don't count," Eileen said and, Christ the night, the face on her when you handed her the rings and said:

"You can shove these up your hole, then."

But you were laughin before the words were out and she was on you in a second, wrappin her twiggy arms roun you and holdin you tight. The two of you stayed in each other's arms for a long time in that bright, sunny gallery.

"I fuckin love you," she said into your ear.

"I know."

*

Someone's wee girl's runnin roun in the next room like a madwoman, yellin her head off and throwin her sticky hands at the leerin faces on the walls. People start cooin at her like she's dead sweet and all. Aye, because desecratin the great works of the dead is fuckin adorable, like. You can hear your teeth grindin in your skull and you take a minute to steady yourself. She's wee, and she has a point. Some of the paintins need a bit of a slap, or at least the ones that're all sombre and muted, usually religious. The only colours there are in the faces and the eyes, startlinly white and starin, so you can't really blame her. She's only three. She's not used to them yet.

You knew what Eileen'd say about the ma who's sat there on her phone instead of keepin an eye out: 'She should've given it up to God when she'd the chance,' like an old nun in a Magdalene laundry. Not that Eileen was one for religious sentiments. She just liked hearin herself talk. But she hated them wee fuckers, pure and proper. She'd smack them up the head if they came too close and made it out to be an accident, but they were always too afraid to say somethin anyway, both parents and kids. They didn't see her Mrs Trevor eyes. They saw the shaved head, the piercins – nose, dimples, eyebrows, lips – that made her look like a pincushion, her wild, toothy grin. They didn't understand what she was, if she was only half woman or somethin else entirely.

The two of you agreed to never have kids. It was for the best. No one'd ever see you and some *thing* as fit enough parents to a child.

“Muh-uh-ummm!” the wee girl screeches, and thon curator smiles.

“Kids,” she says.

Aye, kids.

*

“Get over here—”

“I can't—”

“Get over here *now!*”

The line went dead.

It was Eileen's flatmate, Ciara. It was the first time she'd ever rang your phone. You didn't want to think about what it could mean.

School was easily ditched. You faked a stomach bug to your teacher and walked to the nearest bus stop that'd take you into town, then on another bus headed up North. You could see the flats before you were off the bus, two towerin grey blocks that seemed to touch the sky. Ciara was perched on an electricity box outside the first buildin, still in her pyjamas. They were red and green tartan, Christmas colours, like. But the dozy cow had them ruined — little brown chunks, wet with the creamy chyme of her stomach, stuck to her shirt. What wasn't down her front had crusted in milky dribbles at the corners of her mouth. She didn't rub them away when she saw you comin.

“Eileen,” was all she said.

She didn't follow you into the room. She'd already seen it, Eileen's body hangin from the curtain rail. Eileen'd used the bedsheets you'd bought her as a housewarmin present.

They were colourful and Tesco's finest – you couldn't afford anythin else. At the time, she'd loved them. Now they were tightly wound roun the dirty white skin of her neck. You never should've bought them. For fuck's sake, Eileen. For fuck's sake.

“Help me get her down,” you said, but Ciara stayed where she was. She stood at the threshold of Eileen's room, her head bent to the floor, ashamed. She couldn't do this to you now. She couldn't just stand aroun. She'd to make herself useful, do somethin, do fuckin anythin except stand there like a spare fuckin prick, but she couldn't. She didn't move, didn't even breathe. She avoided the suspended body in front of her by sayin, “I don't think we should shift her,” but the words were choked on, and she began to sob.

“Ciara, mon,” you pleaded. You needed her. The room was close, the air too thick to swallow. You could barely get a breath in, never mind loosenin the fuckin knot by yourself. It was neat and secure. She'd practised. She'd fuckin *practised*. For Christ's sake, why'd you have to buy those sheets?

Ciara finally relented when she saw you strugglin. She was hesitant to approach the body, but once her bloodshot eyes stopped registerin it, her fingers worked mechanically at the knot. She'd the thing down in a minute. You were there at its feet, waitin for it to drop. It slumped forward unnaturally and stilled. Ciara'd to help you prop it against the wall because it could no longer move by itself. It was nothin more than a cold, limp slab of bloodless meat soaked in shit and piss.

It didn't look like the paintin at all.

“Jesus, Eileen,” you said, but its wide brown eyes just stared back.

*

You can't stay in the museum. Everythin's too loud and too close, magnified and blarin, the dazzlin white walls and the wee girl and her howlin throat and people's feet

stampin between the rooms, it's all right into your eyes and ears, all right fuckin there and it's just too much, you have to get out, so you stumble down the stairs because you can't be in a lift, too small, too intimate with people you want to avoid, and you manage to get to the park but it's sunny and the plants are dead and people are out to look at them anyway and you can't get away from anythin, can't get any peace in this hellhole, you don't want to touch them but you have to push past and they get indignant like lords arses and tell you to watch where you're goin and they sound distorted, like radios at high frequency and it doesn't make sense because voices like that don't belong to grown men, watch it, move, fuckin *move*, they back away and other people are partin at the gates and you feel like Moses but you'd rather be dead.

Your head's fucked. Your thoughts are all over the place and you can't seem to organise yourself and you're grindin your teeth again and it travels beyond your skull, it drills deep into your brain and you can't fuckin *think*, and you end up in the middle of the road before the lights turn red with wet cheeks and mouth tremblin and someone screechin at you to get off the fah-kin road, a tourist or a student, maybe they're both, but their voice rises to a shatterin crescendo as a car sounds its horn and squeals to a sudden break, just short of a metal kiss.

The driver stays in his seat. You see the red, weathered face glarin out, the broken veins on his cheeks like snapped purple thread. He beats his palms against the wheel and opens his mouth wide, a row of craggy yellow teeth. You can hear fuck-all with the glass between you, but you make out the words, "The fuck is wrong with you?" and run off before he can say anythin else.

*

The paramedics were first to arrive. Two men in fluorescent green safety jackets didn't know what to make of it when they came into the room and found Ciara standing over you while you cradled the bloated body and whispered in its blue ear that everything would be alright. One of them tried to pry the body from your arms. You tore into the poor cunt: you threw your fists at his face and shouted any kind of abuse at him when he was just trying to do his job. Him and his mate were the only ones who could confirm Eileen's death and make it fact.

The police followed shortly after. They wanted to know why a twenty-two-year-old would want to off herself and why the responsibility fell onto someone five years younger than her. One of the constables asked you question after question about Eileen, what she was like, how she got on day to day, if she'd a history of mental illness. The last question struck you hard. You didn't know what to say because you didn't know. Christ, you didn't know your wife at all.

"It must be a shock," the constable said. "Should I ring someone? Maybe your mum?"

He gestured to your school uniform. You didn't get a chance to change. You shook your head, said that you'd be fine. He followed up with more questions:

"What about the days leading up to this? Was she upset about something, maybe an argument you two had?"

Your breathing stopped.

"What's that supposed to mean?" you said, but the words stuck in your throat and turned sour. You wanted to heave but nothing came up. Jesus fuck, you needed air, you needed out of that room, you needed—

"I know how upset you must be," he went on, as if to justify his accusations, but you wouldn't let him finish, you couldn't. You spoke over him, fucking yelled so loud he'd hear:

“Aye, I fuckin am upset!” You threw your hands high above your head. “You think I strung her up there? You think I fuckin did it?”

Ciara was instantly by your side to calm you down. The constable seemed relieved. She was someone who knew how you felt. She’d shared the terrible hours with you in that room. Surely that meant somethin to you – but it didn’t. You shoved her away, shoved her hard into the window ledge. An enormous clang drowned out her shrieks. She used her whole body to make that sound and no matter how much they shushed and patted her, she just kept screamin. You were sorry for ever pushin her. It was the spot where she’d found Eileen. The walls beneath the ledge were scuffed black in Eileen’s struggle against the sheets. You wished to God they’d spared you that detail.

You could hear the paramedics shufflin about behind you. They’d gotten hold of the body and were haulin it into a large black bag. They’d done it hundreds of times, you could tell. Their movements were fluid and precise. In no time at all they’d the thing zipped up and carted off on a clankin gurney to hand over to the local coroner.

You positioned yourself between the gurney and the door.

“Will you make sure she has her nails painted?” you asked. The man wheelin the bag turned to the other. A look passed between them as if to say, ‘What the fuck is she talkin about?’

*

You often went back to the flat to see it. You made a weekly ritual out of it for the better part of a year. Ciara didn’t mind your intrusion, or at least didn’t seem to – she was always there to let you in when you called. She never went in with you and you never asked. You were glad of it. It meant you didn’t have to tell her to leave you the fuck alone.

The room was perfectly preserved: the bare double mattress; the wardrobe with its missing door that was stuffed full of her clothes, your clothes; notebooks of half-finished poems; the ashtray that was filled with neglected rollies and dead ash; the postcard you'd bought her of *The Lady in Black* from the museum that she'd blu-tacked to her mirror. Beside it was a photo of you and Eileen on holiday in Portrush. The two of you wore matching Regatta raincoats because it lashed the entire time you were there. They were cheap and God-awful, those coats, but the photo still makes you smile even now.

Ciara didn't feel like she'd have the right to go in. She thought, somehow, that Eileen'd emerge from the void, putrefied and pustular, just so she could say, "Away to fuck round your own door, you nosy bastard!" You wouldn't put it past her.

You made a circuit round all these things that made up Eileen's life, but you always ended up sprawled on the bed with the company of one of her old, matted jumpers. You'd lie there for a long time, just staring at the ceiling. When you first visited, you thought about your wife and what she did, how it necessitated a need you weren't privy to, or maybe, just maybe – but you never got to finish your thinking with all their screams. You couldn't get away from them. The walls of Eileen's room were thin and new people moved in all the time. No one wanted to live next to the dead. A man and woman who weren't long moved in shrieked at each other – one of them was a lying, cheating bastard, the other a useless cunt, although you were never quite sure which was which.

You couldn't bear to listen to them, so you buried your head further into Eileen's jumper till it was quiet and light with the new morning. You took that as your signal to leave.

Ciara never expected a goodbye. She was used to it by then.

She's been out of the flat for over a year now. You pass those two towering blocks on the 2G bus, but you don't get off.

About the author

Charlotte Derrick is an emerging prose writer from Belfast, Northern Ireland. She is currently on the MA in Creative Writing at Queen's University Belfast. Her work has been featured in *The Honest Ulsterman* and *Coming Out*.