The Unkept Promise

Prologue to The Return of Annie Kaye,

A novel by Lana Citron

"I'm going," she threatened, "I swear to god, I am."

"Go on then," I said. She'd been telling me for ages she was dying. "What are you waiting for woman? There's the road ahead of you, Dorothy's Yellow Brick…"

Her eyes narrowed to slits and her features took on a look of disgust. "Jaysus Hannah, you're a piece of work," and she told me not to be annoying her.

She looked sad, dreadful sad. I suggested we go for a walk. Nothing too expeditious, a slow meander around the back streets of London's Saint Johns Wood, where she and my father lived. She had on her a majestic black coat. It fell to the pavement in a grand statement. She was swamped by it. Her head poked out like a peanut.

We set off at a slow pace, an awful slow pace and I tried to chivvy her along. "Come on now Mrs," I said, "the Nazis are coming. They'll have us if we don't get a move on."

"Jaysus," she sighed, "The fucking bastard Nazis, shite-bag, brown-shirt bastards".

Beyond the distant roar of traffic from the Finchley Road, we could hear the echo stomp of Storm Troopers. No need to backward glance for confirmation. They're there, always looming, ever present, scrape the surface….

"It's a proven fact." I said, "Did you know Mother that within the average distance of an exhalation there's a Jew hater lurking, ready to stoke the ovens, deny the six million murdered, blame it on *Mossad*, or believe in the Elders of Zion."

The St Johns Wood League of Nazis were on the hunt for a contender, and truth was she had a look of Barbara Streisand about her. As my father drummed into us from an early age, a Jew is a Jew is a Jew. "It's them and us," he'd say. "Or is it, us and them? Whatever no matter." He'd continue, "Hannah, remember we're different."

It was a bleak, bitter-cold November Saturday. The fat from the roast lamb lunch had whitened, hardened and was clogging our vessels. "Get *yerself* wrapped up in that big, black, death

coat woman, and let's get you out in the freezing winter cold. Never mind you have a bit of a chesty cough on you. It's only a month to Christmas…"

So out we went to face the elements, with the baby in the buggy. We called her Frankie. She was a result of a mid-life crisis. A late bloomer, I had reached the end of my thirties without acquiring any sort of personal responsibility or having produced anything of any value. My life lacked substantial meaning. Frankie was the answer. She lay in the buggy about to drop off. She'd be asleep in a minute, dribble running down her chin.

We had only made it three steps from the driveway to the pavement and already Mrs. Kaye was huffing. Her chest bubbled with the ghosts of a million Dunhill Gold, her middle distended with cake and biscuits. Her hair was thin and her scalp showed through. This was a recent mark of decay. Yet, she continued to have her hair coloured and sprayed rigid like a wire mesh. Every fortnight for five years, Deniz, her Turkish hairdresser had attended her. She even had her nails painted shellac red. Still, despite her efforts, she wasn't herself. We both knew she was not the woman she used to be.

When the Celtic Tiger roared its last in 2008 my mother suffered a stroke. She was, as her own country, left to ruin. The stroke knocked her for six and we, her *kinder* swooped to her bedside. It was decided she should leave the fairest of cities, close her business, wave her friends farewell and live in London. The decision was easy. Her Dublin days were over. Didn't it only make sense? She and my father could spend more time with us (their progenies) living in the land of the Sassanach. Isn't that the idyll, the natural order of things? Her face frozen from the stroke groaned an affirmation, at least that's what it sounded like to us.

So over they came but she hated London, loathed it. She had nothing but bad things to say about it. She had nothing to do but slowly die. When the movement came back to her lips she swore, "How much is it you hate me? To have brought me here, to have pulled me from Ireland, the land I love?" Spittle lined the edges of her lips, "You hapless load of half-witted crap merchants, may *yous* all rot in hell." She damned us, "Heartless you are."

Over the next few years, she disintegrated and as Yeats would have it *a terrible beauty was born*. The weight piled on and depression inveigled its way into each and every cell of her being. Her back hunched over and a thick wedge of fat lay at the base of her neck. It was covered in downy hair and once I couldn't help myself, but I had to reach out and stroke it. I found

great comfort in that moment. Her life had become a round of doctor appointments. Everything ached. Nothing was working properly. She struggled to get in and out of a bath, to dress herself. Oftentimes I'd find her in her room like an abandoned half capsized ship lying on the edge of her bed, from which she'd occasionally fall off.

"It's upsetting to see you like this," I said.

"Like what?"

"Enfeebled and weak."

"Hark at you. You're a disgrace Hannah Kaye. An utter disgrace."

"Takes one to know one."

"Leave me alone and don't start. I did my best," she protested and the edges of her lips turned downward.

It was a Saturday in November, Mrs Kaye and I were on the run from imagined North London Nazis. My mother groaned, "I don't feel well".

"Neither do I. Lack of sleep," and I pointed to Frankie, "she's three months old and still doesn't go through the night. I reckon sleep deprivation is a form of female repression."

"I'm trying to tell you," she said, "I have no energy."

"Except for the 24-7 moaning."

"Are you listening?"

To all intents and purposes my fingers were stuck in my ears wagging like deer antlers. "I'm dying, Hannah." She declared and ended the sentence there. That was it, no continuation, like "dying to tell you something" or "dying to show you something".

"Have you nothing to say?" she asked.

"Dying?" I replied, "We are all of us dying mother from the day we are born."

"Tsk," she said, "You're such a disappointment."

Slowly she shuffled forward, each lurch accompanied with a groan or a wince. "It's these shoes, these things are killing me." She pointed down to her new footwear specifically purchased to get her motivated. "You'll be running marathons in these Mrs Kaye," the salesman had promised. "They're ergonomic, technological with toe separators and cushioned souls. It'll feel like you are walking on air."

"I'll be walking on air soon enough," she'd whined, pointing to the heavens above.

"They're killing me, Hannah," she said, "release the locks, my bunion needs to breathe." She'd grimaced as I bent down to loosen the laces. "Any better?" I stood back up and watched as she gingerly stepped forward. "Can you do the shuffle?"

"Time was I could jive." She sighed. "Look Hannah I'm dying…"

"There's a life vest in the panel above your head," I teased.

"You don't want to know do you? You don't care and our little fatherless Frankie, she won't remember me." Frankie was asleep, dreaming of the Milk Lady with her hanging churns, the splish and the splosh of white, wonder rapids.

"Isn't she only a dote." My mother adored Frankie in a way that was heart melty. She went gooey soft over her, almost maternal. It was a side rarely seen.

"Agh," she said, "You'll be sorry when I'm gone."

There we were, *kvetching* our way south toward the High Street and then left, down Queens Grove. She kept stalling to catch her breath, so she could peek through the cracks of high walls and glimpse the fancy houses hidden behind. "I would have loved a house like that… a life of luxury…. I'll not have it now," she sighed. "How much longer till we get home?"

We were two-thirds of the way round the block. "Nearly there Mrs, come on you're doing great. Look how far you've come?"

"I haven't come far at all. I haven't done anything with my life." She was weighing up her achievements. Nothing was registering on the scales. I told her to stop being so morbid. I told her she did the best she could. Didn't she have us, the Prince and myself?

"Exactly," she said, "what a mess I made of that. I wished you'd married. I'm scared about you being on your own, raising a child on your own. I won't be much use to you down below…."

The light was diminishing and her long black coat swept the pavement in its wake, as shadow Nazis gathered in the falling dusk. We continued on the homeward bound and soon enough were outside the apartment block. I watched as she hauled herself up the three steps to the porch. She looked a miserable sight, and I thought about giving her a hug. She could have done with a hug, a tiny show of love, of human comfort. I held back as she pushed the key in the door then turned to face me. "Promise me one thing Hannah…"

"Now what?"

"Hannah please, would you do this one thing for me…. Would you?"

"I might."

“Promise me Hannah.”

“What?”

“Promise you’ll bury me in Dublin?”