

## Life, Death and Love by Catalina Ribas Pearce

There is something particularly hazy about a warm summer's day filtering in through the living room window. It seems to make the sofa even cosier and my lack of activity more acceptable. A soft drone caused by the combination of cars and flies numbs my mind blissfully and the only thing I manage to momentarily focus my attention on is a group of young, attractive women walking past my window in the latest fashions. Their smooth, tanned skin and youthful nonchalance at their own good looks causes me to stare at them as they walk away. This is not a usual occurrence, I don't live in a particularly attractive neighbourhood in any sense of the word. But summer seems to draw out all of the beautiful people, don't you think? It's as if they are solar powered.

I am snapped out of my daydreams by a door slamming and a shrill noise. The New Margaret, or "Margie" as she now insists on being called, has arrived. "Henry!" she practically shouts, looking at me in surprise, as though I were the last person she expected to see sitting on the sofa in our own home. "Well, what do you think you're doing?" my mind buzzed: anniversary? Birthday? Vet appointment for the cat? I couldn't think of a thing so I stared back at her blankly, "What do you mean, love?" I notice she is wearing a tight tank-top and jogging bottoms, her hair scraped back from her face. The New Margaret is looking much slimmer these days, which is good I suppose, but I just wish she wouldn't shout so much. Why do toned people always shout? "It's a beautiful day", she replied, as though that were an answer in itself. After a short pause she continued "All you've done all morning is sit in front of the TV. You will become permanently attached to that sofa soon. When are you going to start looking after yourself like I do? Maybe go for a jog or a light walk. It wouldn't kill you to get moving and eat some salad", she said the last sentence staring critically at my less-than-toned midriff. "Margaret" I started, she tutted, "Margie, Henry, everybody calls me Margie now", "Ok, Margie" I started again, my mind conjuring up the image of a tub of warm margarine, "I'm happy that you have decided to reinvent yourself. I know that the move to Ashford meant a lot to you, but I'm fine as I am." "Margie" gave me one last withering look before storming upstairs. I know it upsets her that I don't go along with her new regime, but I can't quite understand it. "New friends, new job, new life" she had told me of our move from Folkestone, but I didn't see what was so bad about our old life. The day she turned fifty it felt as though someone had replaced my lovely wife with a cold dictator of health. Some more young girls walked past my window, this time accompanied by a group of boys, and as I stared after them I wondered how much longer I would be able to handle "Margie".

That night whilst silently lying next to my wife, I reminisced on the days when we would spend these precious hours talking about the days' events and chuckling with each other. A wave of melancholy swept over me and I felt the need to leave the house, just for a little bit. As I ease my bulky frame out of the bed Margie mumbles some sort of question. "I'm going out for a drive" I whisper back to the already sleeping woman in front of me.

As I step out into the crisp, dark night the heaviness lifts itself a little from my chest. I get in the car and start the engine, its roar making my haste to leave even more urgent. I reverse speedily out of the driveway... and that's when it happened. A piercing cry rang out through the night. Partly my own suddenly shrill voice and partly the cats', however I think the cats' cry may have been more justified than mine.

Oh dear God. Panic floods through me. The cat! That's just about the only thing my wife still cuddles and shows affection for these days. This is it, my life pans out bleakly before my eyes. This is the end of our marriage.

What do I do with it? Throw it in a bin? Too macabre. Bury it in the garden? Too cliché. I end up putting it in a cardboard box we had left out for recycling and sat staring at the closed box for approximately half an hour. When I had gathered myself together I crept back indoors and stashed the box in the compartment underneath the sofa, the only place I couldn't imagine Margie coming near. Then I crept back into bed and waited nervously for the morning to arrive.

Margie was awake bright and early the next day. I could hear the whirring of the juice blender from the bedroom. I tip toed down the stairs as silently as I could, hoping I wouldn't be heard and could avoid confrontation until after breakfast. "Henry!" Margie shouted from the kitchen. I spin round, terrified. "You're up early" she stated. I breathe a sigh of relief and walk into the kitchen in the most casual way I could manage. Margie looked up from her plain porridge, "Why are you walking like that?" Realising my cover of feigned innocence had been blown I stopped and leant against the counter. She gave me an odd look and shrugged, "Have you seen Lucy around anywhere this morning? She hasn't eaten her breakfast yet." I begin to feel flustered, "No, why would I know where the cat is? I don't keep a timetable of its social life. She's probably next door", my reply came out sharper and more jumpy than I had intended it to and Margie gave me another odd look before loading the dishwasher.

I was sure that she suspected something. When she went out for her morning jog I checked under the sofa, half hoping that Lucy would spring out, unharmed. But alas, she was still dead, and I had to think of a distraction.

By the time Margie came back I was already halfway through mopping the living room floor. "The house!" she exclaimed, scanning the room, "It's so tidy and clean". "I just thought it would be nice", I grinned nervously. She scanned my face, "But Henry, in all our years of marriage you have never, ever cleaned the house of your own accord". "Well you know, whatever keeps you happy love" I replied, still grinning manically. She stared at me for a second longer before running upstairs.

As I lay awake that night I began thinking, maybe I have been too tough on Margie these past few weeks. After all she is just trying to fit into a new town. And everybody seems so health conscious these days, maybe it would do me some good to listen to her now and again. I decided I was going to confess to everything: the incident with the cat, my fears on our crumbling relationship, everything. Then we could start again, and I may even get my Margaret back.

The next day however, my courage had dissipated. I think I must have sweated it out during our morning jog together. Her mouth literally dropped a little when I'd suggested it earlier, and she kept giving me that odd look again whilst we were getting ready. The looks worry me; I feel as though she knows something and is waiting to pin me down for it. To be honest with you I'd had no real intention of going jogging when I'd first woken up that morning, but I found Margie emotionally calling the neighbours to ask if they had seen Lucy, "missing" posters of her littering the table, so I quickly suggested a joint run in order to take our minds off of things.

That afternoon I realised something would have to be done. As I perched myself in my usual spot on the sofa, an unpleasant smell began to waft up to me. The cat would have to go. I spent the rest of the day tensing up whenever Margie walked into the room in case she smelt it too and rumbled me. She didn't seem to notice though. She had spent most of the afternoon walking around Ashford high street putting up the "missing" posters. When she did arrive home she seemed distracted and tense. It seemed to me that she wouldn't even look me in the eyes, am I getting paranoid? I was certain that she blamed me for the death.

That night I silently crept out again to bury Lucy in a nearby park. As I brushed the soil from my hands I felt a rush of relief, maybe this would all blow over.

The whole house seemed silent and awkward the following day, as though it were anticipating a confrontation. There was an elephant in the room that was so big Margie and I couldn't fit into the same area of the house at the same time, or so it seemed by the way she kept avoiding me.

I couldn't hold it in anymore by dinnertime. "Margie" I started, she froze. "Margie, I think we need to talk. There's something I need to tell you" I took a deep breath. She looked up at me and I was surprised to see that she was crying. "I knew it" she choked, big fat tears rolling down into her plate, watering down the sauce on her steamed fish even more, "why didn't you just tell me Henry? Why did you lie to me?" I hung my head in shame, "I know I should have confessed sooner love. I was...I was just worried that it would be the end of our marriage", I faltered at the last sentence, how could she have found out? "The end of our marriage? Oh Henry, how could we let it get to this?" I held her hand over the table, "I'm so sorry love, but it's only a cat, and it was an accident...", Margie pulled her hand out of mine, "What are you on about?" She stared at me. I realised it was time to explain everything. "I was pulling out of the driveway the other night. I wasn't looking, and it just happened. I really am sorry." "Is that all it was?" I looked at her, she was still crying but there was relief in her face and she even laughed in a slightly hysterical way. Confused and concerned I stuttered "Yes, I don't know wha..." "Oh Henry, I thought you were having an affair" she interrupted, sobbing again. It was my turn to stare blankly, "Well what with the move and all the changes I feel like we've barely been talking recently. I thought you resented me for how I was behaving. And there were all those mysterious trips out at night and irregular behaviour. You even started jogging for Christ's sake! I thought you'd found someone else." I shook my head, trying to take in everything that was being said. "I've been so worried Henry, worried that people wouldn't notice me here now that I'm older, worried that you would stop finding me attractive. And all that's come out of it is you distancing yourself from me and killing our cat." Her voice went high-pitched and squeaky at the end of the sentence, signalling another sobbing fit. I walked round to the other side of the table and held her close. "Oh love, I think you are beautiful no matter what. We have both been acting a little ridiculously recently, it must be something in the air around here. I've never stopped loving you, I just miss the old us. I told you we should have stayed in Folkestone Margie" I said winking at her. "Margaret" she corrected, smiling at me. And I smiled back.