

An Extract from *Across the Channel*

By Annelies Beck

On the pretext of a summer holiday, Marie Claes travels to Glasgow with her parents in 1914. It soon becomes clear, though, that there is no question of returning. War has broken out and Belgian refugees are pouring in by the thousands. Initially the Glaswegians are full of sympathy at the arrival of 'their Belgians', but as the realisation dawns that the war will not be over quickly, the inevitable frictions surface. The Belgians in Glasgow try to create a place for themselves, but how far can you go as a guest? Cracks start to appear in the close-knit community. One person's misfortune is another person's opportunity. And the Scots have their own problems. Rents skyrocket and more and more people are evicted from their homes. The refugees are safe and sound while the men of Glasgow are fighting at the front. This novel gives readers a glimpse of a society in disarray, a world which, confronted with strangers, is confronted with itself.

Life is there to be lived. Perhaps that was it? Even after all those years she still couldn't explain it. In a community in exile, where everyone has at least one story of a broken heart, fear, sadness and loss, people seek each other out and live it up every so often with a big party. Shameless, innocent, without scruples. As if the group makes a silent pact: we grant one another a night's respite, a moment's freedom from waiting for the end of the war, from longing to be reunited with loved ones. It had been wonderful, the party: the ecstatic atmosphere and the feeling of being beautiful. But for her that evening would always be associated with what came next. As if it hadn't been permitted after all. Not without punishment. But in that case how should you live?

When it came to parties the Belgians had a reputation to maintain. Funnily enough they never had to defend or explain these events to the Scots, who were all too happy to join them drinking and dancing. Of course there was always the good cause that served to reconcile potential conscientious objectors with frivolities like parties. There was always a game or tombola, the takings going to our boys at the front, or to the home front. Conscience soothed, refill your glass. Anyone who still found it necessary to trot out arguments in justification of this or that explained it as a way of thanking the host city and the men and women who had been so welcoming.

It had been a close call according to some members of the organising committee. The riots in London had been big news in Glasgow too and stubborn ru-

mours were doing the rounds about Belgians taking advantage of the situation. Do we have to come out with this just now, make ourselves so conspicuous? The discussion between those for and those against a party had been undecided, but those for had won out and the preparations had now been under way for weeks. It was a question of supplies, lights and location, bar staff and hands to fetch and carry, money, flags and representation, speeches or the absence thereof, cleaning and security. Her father sometimes came home dead tired after yet another consultation.

'Now we've had to decide all over again if every association should have their own placard or if we should just have one big banner for all the Belgians.' Her father gestured to her mother to sit down; he wanted to get something off his chest. 'Really, it's enough to drive you mad. Even in these circumstances some people just can't manage to leave politics at home.'

Her mother pushed a glass towards him. 'Did you come to an agreement?'

'Well, yes, long may it last.' Her father laughed. 'The only one who still manages to bring some character to those meetings is August.' Her mother looked happy. It turned out August had a talent for party committees. In Aalst he'd been a member of the maypole society, not just as a carpenter, but as one of the organisers. He could keep a group of people together and get them enthusiastic about a communal task – at least for a party. His aptitude had first surfaced in his own neighbourhood, but now he was invited along whenever a Belgian or Flemish association organised anything.

Marie had mixed feelings. Naturally she was looking forward to dancing and having a jolly evening. She had asked Edith along, and of course August would be there. He was coming, but he had omitted to mention that he would be bringing Mary – Marie had to hear that from Edith.

It was a beautiful evening. The dark blue of the sky seemed to light up and the little lamps around the dance floor added colour. The food was set out on long tables on the edge of the lawn. An improvised bar had been decorated with flags: Belgian and Flemish, but also Scottish and British. Someone had even found a poster of Glasgow's coat of arms. The baking and cooking went on all afternoon. Marie and her mother had contributed too, not just pancakes this time, but an apple pie and three dishes of stew. As seven o'clock approached they had gone home to get ready and pick up her father.

Her dress was a bit on the long side. Specially selected and bought for the occasion, a first real ball gown. The shop assistant had held another one up to her, exactly her size, but Marie wanted this one, completed with feminine detailing. She would work something out. Now she was fussing with an elastic

band. Not very elegant and it took some effort to hide it in a fold so it looked as if it was meant to be that way. Really she was a little disappointed that her appearance wasn't quite complete. She hoped the elastic would at least hold.

'I hope you can enjoy yourself, this evening.' Marie stood at the mirror brushing her hair. She felt caught in the act when her mother came and stood behind her.

'I have something for you. For the belle of the ball.' She held one of her necklaces in front of Marie: a little silver pendant on a gossamer-thin chain. Marie looked and looked and had to bite her lip not to cry. What was that all about?

'Hair loose or in a plait?'

'Whichever you feel like. I'll put it up for you if you want.'

Marie couldn't get enough of the woman she saw in the mirror, as if with her pinned up hair and exposed throat two images were suddenly overlaid: herself and her mother in one. Her mother stood close to her, gazing as if she saw Marie for the first time.

'Just enjoy it.'

Compliments from Edith and her father who asked her for the first number on her dance card. Marie felt light and strong when she arrived at the party. The orchestra was warmed up and a couple of pairs were already venturing onto the dance floor.

'Let's have something to eat first. I want to try that stew of yours,' said Edith. 'Gives us a chance to take a good look at who's here.' Marie was happy to follow along. If she had said yes, she could have had a glass of beer or cider in her hand moments later, but she declined. 'Why didn't you bring anyone yourself?'

They stood leaning against a table, on one side of the dance floor, with a view of the bar opposite. To the left they saw the latecomers arriving. To the right people sat in groups eating and talking. Edith wiped some sauce from her mouth. 'I'm here with you, aren't I?'

'Yes, but strictly speaking I brought you. Do you have a fiancé?'

'No.'

'Isn't there anyone you like?'

'Well you're very forward! Why do you ask?'

Marie shuffled back and forth. 'Just wondering. Sorry.'

'I don't mind. There was someone, briefly, but not anymore.'

'What happened?'

Edith thought a moment. 'Let's just say we wanted different things.'

Marie tried to imagine what that might mean. Edith looked at her teasingly, as if daring her to keep asking. When Marie said nothing, she asked, 'What about you, Marie?'

'What?'

'Still unhappy about August?'

Something inside Marie broke open.

'I'm sorry.' Edith looked away, as if she regretted her question but couldn't take it back. 'I've seen how you look at him.'

It was a moment before Marie could hear the music again and understand what Edith was saying.

'I'm going to get another drink, would you like one?'

'Yes please.'

Marie watched Edith walk away, crossing the dance floor with confidence, in between the dancing couples, laughing cheerfully whenever she bumped into anyone. Everyone seemed to think it was funny. No one was offended by her. Apparently Edith knew her better than she knew herself, and that wasn't a pleasant feeling.

Edith was now on the other side. There was a queue for the buffet, but she didn't join the back. She stepped up to a man in the middle of the line, opening her arms. He saw her and wavered a moment as she embraced him. Everyone backed away from the passionate greeting. Marie had to move her head from side to side to see what was happening between the dancing couples. Was that the lover of 'not anymore'? He was a good-looking man, tall and dark, somewhat older than Edith, she thought, with a short beard. They didn't kiss, but they stood talking animatedly. He struck Marie as vaguely familiar. A glass of cider in each hand, Edith nodded to her, and the man turned in her direction. Marie half raised her hand. Did they want her to go over there? He didn't really seem to see her. Before she could decide Edith was back, walking slowly to minimise spillages.

'There you are! Already dying of thirst?'

'Thanks. Who was that?'

Edith took three big gulps of her cider.

'That was William. Just back from the front.'

'Your fiancé?'

'What? Mine? God, no! No, no. William was married to my eldest sister who died.'

'I didn't know you had another sister. Or that she died. Sorry.'

'Doesn't matter. Her name was Cathy. It was two years ago. William's still family, even if we see less of him now.' Edith leaned against the table and tapped her foot to the rhythm of the music. Marie tried not to stare at Edith; she hadn't seen her this way before. At the bar she saw William making jokes with other drinkers.

'Soldier?'

'No, he was at the front before, but...'

'Ah, here's the lady on my dance card!'

'Daddy!'

Edith set her glass on the table, took a step back and gestured towards the dance floor with a theatrical bow.

Marie had seen her father's disapproving look at her drink, but she didn't care. She laid her hand on his arm and let him lead her to the dance floor. This was her father at his best. Graceful, that was how Marie imagined herself on the dance floor, graceful in the arms of her father. He seemed to be enjoying himself too. During their second dance they crossed paths with Edith and William.

'I'm dancing the next one with your father,' Edith called out to her.

'Do you think she's already had too much to drink?' whispered her father in her ear.

'I think she just wants a good dance partner.' He laughed.

'Changez!' shouted her father when they crossed paths again and in three nimble steps he took over from William and waltzed away with Edith.

'Miss Claes, may I?' William had a deep, gravelly voice.

Marie nodded. She felt small, deserted by her gracefulness. 'Sorry. I'm not a very good dancer.'

'Nonsense. You're doing fine. Edith tells me you've learnt perfect English in no time.

'Not perfect.'

'Marie, isn't it?' He pronounced it right. She smiled.

'Yes.' She relaxed and decided to enjoy it, dancing with strangers. 'Edith said you'd been at the front, but not as a soldier.'

'No, as a journalist.'

'Where?'

'Near Neuve Chapelle. Among other places.'

It didn't ring any bells for Marie. 'Do you write about it in the newspaper then?'

'Yes, "War Notes".'

'In The Glasgow Evening News? That's you? Edith told me about you, I remember now.'

Her father and Edith came up to them again. Her father winked at her. He seemed tireless and she'd never seen Edith so elated. Marie nodded and then saw how Edith's face tightened and her eyes narrowed to slits. Marie followed her gaze, just as William manoeuvred her into a lock step and with light pressure on her shoulder blade steered her into a most elegant turn. And so she saw August and Mary sweep by, August with his arm around Mary's middle. Mary was stunningly beautiful, in a colourful gown, with a flower placed as if nonchalantly in her loose, dark hair. A bohemian with a style quite out of keeping with the setting, but with that polished dandy at her side she immediately gave the party that sparkle which had been missing until then. Drink, dance and that image. Marie took leave of William and went to rest on the side.

The musicians were finished with the waltz and she saw Edith part company from her father and approach August and Mary. August quickly withdrew his arm. Edith tried to take Mary aside, but she resisted. Mary tried to ignore her

sister, but when that didn't work, she snapped a couple of words at Edith and made her way to the buffet, August in tow.

Other people were observing the couple too now. A pair of young men by the bar commented, laughing. William stood a little way from them drinking his beer. Marie's mother looked troubled, trying to catch sight of her father. Looking at Zech-Dupont, who had taken up position by the tombola table, Marie couldn't tell whether he was smiling or biting back a grimace.

Plate in hand the couple slowly made their way round the semicircle of the dance floor to Marie.

'Hello Marie.' August, cheerful as always. Or perhaps a little nervous after all? 'You look splendid, Marie. Your hair really suits you that way. More grown up.'

'Hello August. Mary.'

'Are you all on your own over here?' He held his plate out to her. 'Want a bite?'

'I've just overdone the dancing a bit. And it's nice to watch people.' She took another sip. 'Why was Edith so cross just then?'

'Oh, Edith. She always worries much too much.' Mary pulled a face as she said it.

'Worries? What about?'

August wanted to keep it friendly, but Mary was ahead of him.

'You know, Marie, things aren't always as simple as Edith likes to imagine. I couldn't care less what she does or doesn't do with her life, but she shouldn't tell me what to do with mine. Nor you for that matter.'

'Anyone for another drink?' asked August.

Mary must have thought she had made Marie uncomfortable with her violent reaction against Edith, as a little later, when they all had full glasses in their hands, she added, 'Don't let it bother you. Sisters quarrel sometimes. It'll be fine.'

Marie didn't really care. She thought. But when August came a bit later on to cut in with a tap on the shoulder and take over from her Scottish dance partner, she was surprised to find her legs momentarily shaky.

He complimented her on her necklace. Was it her birthday perhaps? Marie felt herself floating along. The dance could go on forever. Before he could step back and relinquish her, she said, 'Another one. It's not often I get to go to a dance.'

He laughed and grabbed her hand. The next dance was faster and Marie gladly let him set the pace and rhythm, one hand firmly on hers, the other on her lower back, steering her. Her feet naturally synchronised with his. Eyes closed she was almost in ecstasy. The belle of the ball after all.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw August look over her shoulder at something happening behind her. With every turn, or half-turn, he kept his eyes fixed on what was going on. Mary of course. She was standing further up, surrounded by three men and two women.

August turned her away from him. 'Sorry, Marie, just going to see if everything's ok,' and he left her standing on the dance floor. The ring around Mary

opened for him and suddenly it was five against two. Marie pushed her way through the dancing couples to where her glass was, not far from what was beginning to look like a real stampede. She drank a couple of sips of her cider and moved a little closer.

'Aha, look, the Belgian, high and dry. Nice and easy, huh, a bit of partying with our girls?'

'And in the meantime her sweetheart's fighting at the front.'

August attempted to smooth things over. 'We're just friends, nothing more.'

'Yeah yeah, just friends and just in Glasgow, while we fight for your country.'

The orchestra switched to a slow waltz. One of the women turned to Mary. 'And you! Have you nothing better to do than run around making a spectacle of yourself? With your peculiar clothes and sweet talk.'

'A proper "new woman".' It was an older woman speaking now.

'Let your sister be an example to you. At least she knows what's important.'

Mary squared her shoulders and stuck her chin in the air, aloofness personified, but Marie saw her clasp her hands behind her back until the knuckles went white. The woman who had just spoken gave Mary a firm push. 'Whore!'

August pulled Mary behind him in one swift movement and raised his hands to the woman. 'Stop that. This is a party. We're not here by choice.'

'And talking down our hospitality too!' The man spat directly at August's face. The waltz grew louder and the tempo quickened. Suddenly other Belgians emerged behind August, including the young men who had been standing at the bar. 'Problems?'

With an emphatic flourish the orchestra concluded the waltz; the final note hung in the air, loud and shrill. The mood had turned. Marie emptied her glass in one gulp and went in search of Edith and her parents, even Zech-Dupont if need be. Someone had to do something. But she wasn't even half way across the dance floor, when the first chair flew through the air and someone yanked the Belgian flag from the bar. Marie stumbled over the hem of her dress; the elastic had given up.

The party ended in havoc, police and injuries – nothing serious, a few cuts and bruises, although the memory would remain with a number of Belgians and Scots. The party food had made the least damaging missiles, but a couple of chairs and tables hadn't survived the evening either. And Marie had missed the lot.

She had never been so sick. She barely made it beyond the dance floor in search of help, because when she fell over everything began to spin and whether she lay flat on the floor or bent forward, nothing helped. Until she suddenly bent double and threw up. After that she had collapsed where she stood and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she was at home in bed and indescribably thirsty. On the bunk below hers, beside the stove, lay August, apparently dead to the world, one eye swollen shut and an ugly cut in his cheek.

Her mother sat at the table, her back to them.

'Mama, water.' Her mother was at her side immediately. She dabbed her lips and helped her up so she could drink.

'What a party.' Marie had no reply. 'Sleep a bit more. It'll get better, you'll see.'
She sounded gentle, her mother, Marie thought as she slipped away again. ■

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