

**The Madonna at The
Midland**

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Patricia Duncker was appointed writer in residence at The Midland Hotel in April 2011 and was co-commissioned by The Midland and Manchester Literature Festival to write a short story set in the hotel. The resulting story, *The Madonna at the Midland*, was performed at a special Afternoon Tea event as part of Manchester Literature Festival in The Midland's French Restaurant on Wednesday 19th October 2011.

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THE MADONNA AT THE MIDLAND

I should never have come. Some appalling sentimental delusion must have possessed me. Everything has changed. I've changed. Clarissa Dalloway sank into the mass of cushions and pillows strewn across her soundproofed bedroom at the Midland, overlooking the public library, closed for refurbishment, sprinkled eau de cologne on her handkerchief and pressed it to her forehead. Where have I put the Nurofen? Did I bring it up from London? I should never have come. And indeed, even from this interesting position of supine luxury the Manchester expedition did now smack of inevitable disaster.

Today is Saturday, and today is my 70th birthday. Sally will be 70 on Sunday. We always dreamed of being old ladies together, both war babies, born in '41, with identical memories, filling our hot water bottles from the tea urn in the school dining room, kicking our heels on those giant yellow radiators, trying on our new school uniforms in John Lewis, matching each other's footsteps in the frost. Our first birthday together and we celebrated with a bottle of Strongbow and a packet of Jaffa cakes and all the chocolate melted. I licked your fingers and you licked mine. I wore your jerseys and you wore my hats. I was two sizes smaller than you, so you couldn't get into my clothes. But you wrapped yourself up in my scarves and shawls. Your jerseys smelled of cinnamon, *Je reviens*, Hamlet cigars, you. You sat on the floor – yes, that is my first memory of Sally – you sat on the floor with your arms round your knees, smoking a cigarette. And you had that extraordinary beauty of the kind I most admired, dark, large-eyed, and that odd quality of abandonment, as if you could say anything, do anything and your beautiful voice made everything you said sound like a caress. We walked on the terrace before dinner, strolled past a stone urn overflowing with flowers. And you stopped, picked a flower, turned towards me, and kissed me on the lips. You kissed me.

Clarissa Dalloway seized her address book, the kiss still on her lips, peered at a row of faded numbers, chose the most recent, and snatched up the phone. *The number you have dialled has not been recognised, the number you have dialled has not been recognised, the number you have dialled...* She let the phone slide into the cushions. Twenty years. I haven't heard your voice in twenty years.

There had been cards at Christmas of course, and a skiing photograph from Vermont. There stood Sally, her face muffled in red scarves, poised and glamorous, amidst a mass of young men, her famous sons, all wielding their skis like machine guns, ready for the charge. I still have that photograph. But I have no children, and you are surrounded by sons. She rummaged in the sheets and bedspreads, as if Sally herself, or some of her fragrant belongings, lay burrowed

against her cold thighs. What did I imagine? That a wealthy woman with five sons would welcome her elderly widowed friend, a friend she hasn't seen for twenty years, a trembling, tentative woman, frightened of her birthday and the long sigh of old age ahead. Her cleaning lady, Mrs B, - for that was their little joke, Mrs B who does for Mrs D, - at least she demonstrated some genuine interest. And how are you celebrating your birthday, Mrs D? And she had replied, all chipper and snappy, putting a brave face on things, I'm going up to Manchester to see an old friend. Well, isn't that nice, Mrs D. Good for you. Get you out a bit. And now here she was, cuddling a headache, disgruntled and ashamed, hiding her loneliness from her cleaning lady in a red terracotta palace of Grade II listed Edwardian magnificence, opened in 1903 and still going strong in a blaze of good-tempered elegance. *The number you have dialled has not been recognised.* She stumbled into the beige modernity of her tiled bathroom to avoid the rain, now leering into her bedroom, slicing down the windows, smirking at her through the white nets.

But here was Sally's voice again, booming through the little soaps and piles of towels. It always pours buckets in Manchester. Bring your brolly and galoshes, and if it eases up we'll pop out up the Peaks. Still got your walking shoes? We've got plenty of sticks and dogs! Do the whole thing in style with cream tea in Buxton at the end of the afternoon. Terrific. Why had she never travelled North? How can you lose touch with someone you love? Clarissa swallowed two Nurofen tablets, Extra Strength, and watched the water roaring into the bath. She had followed Richard abroad, given up her life for his career, as women once did, with everybody's blessing, trailed through compounds in Africa, smiled at a gift of snakes in Viet Nam, played hostess at embassies in the Middle East where one day they were besieged with trays of sweetmeats, and the next evacuated in a fleet of armoured cars, racing through a torrent of explosions. Returning home to England, to the woodlands and orchards of Hampshire, flooded with calm and mossy lawns, she simply feared advancing beyond the French windows and the terrace, where she lurked, head down, guarded by goldenrod and Michaelmas daisies. Now I'm here, I won't move. And she was beginning to think just that once more, floating in the bath, disguised in foam. I've paid for the weekend. I'm here till Monday. I'll sit in the bath until Monday comes.

No, no, one more try. She scuttled back to the bed and stood dripping on a hand towel.

'Directory Enquiries please.'

'I'm sorry caller, the number you require is Ex-Directory.'

The number you require...

Clarissa Dalloway flung the phone back into the bedclothes, delighted. So she lives here still. And she still uses her own name. Get up, get dressed, get out. You might meet her in the street. Clarissa never considered how unlikely this was; she had picked up Sally's scent and was now fixed, like a bloodhound, head down, on the trail of her beloved. Forth she went in her green mackintosh and transparent rubber galoshes, twittering in the rain, - what a lark! what a plunge! -

determined to scout the art galleries, the bookshops, the pubs, like a knight seeking a damsel to rescue. In the end, defeated by drizzle, she mounted an extended attack on Harvey Nichols, and spent three hours, fingering lingerie, dress materials, ceramics, light autumn coats in the new colours, Scottish mist, Renaissance blue, that paradise blue of the Della Robbia Madonna, but buying nothing.

She confronted Saturday afternoon flat on her back, with the television whispering in the distance, wishing everything gone, vanished, annihilated, including every single one of her 70 years. This isn't what I longed for, hoped for, bought into, I've paid up my life's debts, and now I'm lonely and alone, washed up in a posh hotel bedroom with nothing, nothing, nothing. And is this all? Is this all there is? Towards six o' clock the rain increased, and fell in heavier, grey, vertical waves. She decided to change her ticket and return to London early the next day, and so she slid surreptitiously out of the Edwardian magnificence in her drenched green mackintosh, the galoshes grotesque upon her frumpish lace-up shoes.

Returning from Manchester Piccadilly, her first-class getaway return safely stashed in her purse, Clarissa Dalloway immediately noticed that something truly awful was taking place in the bowels of The Midland. A long queue of cars and taxis jostled before the great curves of the entrance on either side of the Wyvern's extended claws. Lights, laughter, grey-slicked umbrellas shimmered through the drizzle. As she approached the ramp Clarissa saw two of the receptionists shaking with merriment and followed the line of their gaze.

King Kong and the Virgin Mary were climbing out of a taxi.

A very tall man in a gorilla suit ducked and bent before straightening to a colossal height. He nodded to the giggling receptionists; then let out a fearsome muffled roar and beat his chest. The Virgin Mary swatted his hairy arm. She stepped carefully onto the ramp, lifting her classic blue and white robes above the wet, and steadied her crown. This wobbling circular wire cage, which formed a most extraordinary fascinator, covered in glittering *papier maché* fluorescent stars, floated in an arc above her head. Her veil fell back graceful, folded away from her young, shining face. She mirrored every tacky nineteenth-century plaster cast statue of the Blessed Virgin, worshipped right across Europe and sneered at by tourists. Clarissa shuddered. Had she walked straight into the yawning jaws of a fancy dress ball?

For indeed she had. Shrieks of disbelief and recognition erupted in the foyer. The Octagon terrace was roped off like a crime scene and the Trafford Room entirely commandeered for the event. A small passage still remained open for clients assaying the French Restaurant. Clarissa scuttled in, shrunken inside her mackintosh and galoshes, a social sacrifice, unfashionable and demoralised. A hoard of revellers filled the foyer and laid siege to the Reception desks. She

paused, walled in by smiles and jolly shouts. Clearly most of them were staying in the hotel. No rational pattern could be deduced from the costumes. She recognised Mae West in gold lamé and massive falsies, chatting to Marlene Dietrich, who posed, luscious in spangles, high heels, top hat and tails, showing a leg in black fishnet tights. The Blue Angel twirled before the crowd, so that her tails spun out behind her, scooped a cigarette lighter out of her tiny glittering evening bag, and actually lit up two cigarettes.

‘Here you are, darling.’ She handed one to Mae West. The Hotel Functions Director, pink with horrified amusement, ushered them out through the swing doors, deftly popping a purple feather boa round Mae West’s massive bare shoulders.

‘You can’t smoke in here, Ladies,’ he grinned.

As they strode out Clarissa realised that both these glamorous stars of times past, were in fact, men. They paused to kiss Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, who arrived with an elegant young woman captured between them, as if under arrest. Her forties outfit, straight skirt, seamed stockings, wonderful cream shoes with block heels and a flower on each foot perched above her painted toes, gave no clue to the disguise. But she was hauling a large wooden Dalmatian on red wheels whose tail stood straight up like a mast.

‘I’m supposed to have 100 more, you know,’ she said, cheerfully addressing Clarissa, ‘but what the hell. You’re most mysterious. Can’t guess at all. Who are you meant to be?’

But here were two young men in Tony Blair and Gordon Brown masks, punching each other as they rolled into the foyer, and then a gang of friends, disgorged from three taxis, all dressed up as the entire cast of Coronation Street in its heyday, Elsie Tanner and an enormous Ena Sharples, tiny pink curlers clamped under his black hairnet, arm in arm, leading the ghastly crew. Clarissa, retreating in horror, bumped into Posh and Becks, or at least, a couple that looked exactly like the Beckhams, emerging from the lift. No, maybe the woman’s hips curved in a more opulent undulation, Victoria Beckham’s anorexic style blossoming into voluptuousness.

Clarissa Dalloway stood looking at this rippling mass of the young and the beautiful, however brazenly attired, and knew herself to be old.

The Director of Functions, Events, Banquets, Weddings and Ceremonies hovered at her elbow.

‘Please forgive the disturbance, Mrs Dalloway. Lady Rosseter is holding a fancy dress ball for her family and friends.’ Who on earth was Lady Rosseter?

Glorious above the crowd, standing on the rim of the Octagon, towered the couple who were clearly the hosts, older than their guests, yet more glamorous, the woman swish and gleaming in a 1930s ball gown, swathes of green silk, elbow length white gloves, an authentic cap of red and green feathers, and several endless coils of pearls, ivory against the shimmering green. Who is this tall and vivid woman, heavily made up like an actress, a lorgnette vibrating on her

bosom? The man beside her caught her arm.

‘Darling, here they are! Both looking absolutely ridiculous.’

The suave impresario resembled someone famous. But who? A grey smoking jacket, all silk and velvet, the hair slicked back and the profile uncannily exact, - ah! the pastiche voice has given his identity away. This is the Second Coming of Noel Coward. He might burst into *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* or *the Bar at the Piccola Marina* at any minute.

King Kong and the Virgin Mary bounced up the steps to hug them both. The hostess (for is this indeed Lady Rosseter?) pulled the ape’s hairy ears and kissed the Virgin Mary with a jubilant smack, so that all her stars jiggled in the firmament. Clarissa heard every shouted word.

‘Sweethearts, you’ve driven all this way. How divine! But you’ve missed the point entirely. And I did send you a list. You’re supposed to come dressed up as famous people who stayed at the Midland, not as cinema monsters or Bible idols!’

King Kong lifted his head off and the eyes went blank. A cheerful blonde face appeared.

‘Doesn’t matter, Mama. King Kong and the Blessed Virgin will be staying here tonight. You did book us a room, didn’t you?’

The heady laugh and the extravagant gesture of affection were utterly familiar. The actress slipped her arm through that of the Madonna, and handed her a glass of champagne.

‘My love, whatever possessed you to come as the Virgin Mary? Gavin has ape fantasies, and he’s never been the same since he read Darwin at college, but you’re not religious, are you?’

Unblushing, mischievous, the young woman in her blue and white robes more or less announced to all the Octagon, the foyer, even the passing guests in the Wyvern, bent on escaping the decorated mass of young people.

‘An angel told me to do it! And to bring you the Good News. I’m pregnant!’

‘Never!’

‘Yup! Four months gone.’

The low rising whoop from the older woman, her shivering pearls, the wild triumphant grin, suddenly snapped into focus, a sharpened image, as if an old sepia photograph, or a fuzzy shot of a skiing party resolved into digital Technicolor and High Definition. That laugh! That voice! Sally Seton! Sally Seton! After all these years, still flying high, showing off, glamorous, gorgeous, extraordinary! No one else ever laughed like that. This enormous exotic green serpent is my friend. This is the woman I came to Manchester to find. This is the woman I have not seen for two decades. This is the woman I loved.

Clarissa stood forgotten in the crowd, shocked, damp and horrified. I came here to find you Sally and I am dressed like an unemployed primary school teacher down on her luck. And if that is Noel Coward, then you are Gertrude Lawrence, (*Private Lives, Hay Fever, Oh God*, all my parents’ favourite plays), but we shall never manage to pull off even the briefest of encounters.

Tonight is your night, not mine. I am Cinderella, unable to go to the ball.

Clarissa dashed for the lift.

Push the buttons. Quick. Carry me away in elderly shame to my luxury suite, where I shall call for Room Service, eat nothing but sandwiches, and escape in the morning before anyone else appears downstairs. Sally Seton. Sally Seton, the mother of sons. Bring forth men-children only. And that's just what Sally did. She had more testosterone in her little finger than most men have in their entire bodies. But I thought she'd married a miner's son, who'd earned every penny of his wealth, a balding manufacturer, not a Noel Coward look-alike.

Clarissa emerged on the fourth floor and wandered in aimless confusion, peering at the doors, before she realised her mistake.

Quick! Back to the lift. Second floor.

At first she didn't notice that someone else already stood inside the lift, leaning against the mirrors, reflected to eternity. But out of the edge of her eye she saw herself, in her evil green mackintosh and spattered handbag, accompanied by a figure in blue and white robes. The *papier maché* stars seemed to have faded a little, the stick-on spangles reduced to a gentle, circular glow.

'Come back downstairs,' said the Virgin Mary. 'Sally's expecting you and hoping against hope that you'll come. She talked of nothing else last night. You are invited to the ball, and you ought to come.'

'I never received an invitation.' Clarissa addressed the image in the mirror.

'But you did. It came this morning. And Sally found your number too. She actually went through her contacts in the foreign office. She rang. At once. Just at the moment you tried to ring her. And she spoke to Mrs B.'

'Mrs B?'

'Yes. And Mrs B told her that you were already on your way to Manchester, and that you were looking forward to celebrating your birthday with your oldest friend.'

The Virgin Mary chuckled.

'You should have heard her laugh. You always loved to hear her laugh.'

A brown hand slid forth from the Biblical sleeves, overrode the lift's commands and pressed Ground Floor. Clarissa gazed at the hand, transfixed, for it was not a young woman's hand; the skin, dehydrated and shrivelled, blotched with dark liver spots, the nails yellowed with age, flecks of soil engrained in the creases. This hand, a working woman's hand, a hand that had planted seeds, tended goats, hammered tent pegs into stony desert earth, now clamped firm upon the gleaming metal of futurity, this hand was as old as Solomon.

Clarissa recoiled in horror. The doors sprang open and she was ejected back into the foyer, straight into the arms of Winston Churchill, Luciano Pavarotti and Sarah Bernhardt, clearly impersonating Salomé, eyes black-rimmed with kohl, and carrying a snake. Pavarotti caught her

handbag, steadied her gently and bowed.

‘Scusi, Signorina.’

He bowed again. The vast stomach, held in place by a scarlet cummerbund, looked appallingly inauthentic. He peered at her closely.

‘Aunt Clarissa? Yes, yes, it is you. Fabulous. Come quick. Mummy will be overjoyed!’

O Lord. The eldest son remembers me.

But as they approached the Octagon, Clarissa’s whirling feet barely skimming the floor, Sally Seton, whose restless gaze interrogated every mad mask and hat, suddenly saw them coming and hurtled over the tapes, her face alight, her lips round and howling.

‘Clarissa!’

A great screech of joy accompanied the embrace and Clarissa Dalloway swallowed a mouthful of green feathers.

‘Shit,’ cried Sally, ‘my hat’s come off!’

All on top of each other, embarrassed, laughing words tumbled out and Clarissa turned, with Sally’s hand in hers, to see the rooms full of smiling hoards, to glimpse candlesticks on the bar, the trays of champagne buckets and glittering flutes, ready for the toast, the canapés nestling in lettuce and vine leaves, the blowing curtains, the night banished outside and Luciano Pavarotti, his black curls askew, presenting her with a gigantic bouquet of white roses.

‘Happy Birthday, darling,’ whispered Sally, twenty years of unspoken love blossoming in her extraordinary, abandoned smile.

For some reason the entire company began to clap. The guest of honour is come among us. Let the festivities begin.

Sally Seton gabbled in her ear.

‘You must have a costume, my sweetheart, my angel. This’ll go on all night and people will start asking who you are. At the moment you look like that awful feminist who taught us at school, Miss Kilman in her mackintosh. Come upstairs. I’ve brought just the thing. I knew you wouldn’t have time to sort it all out. Are you still two sizes smaller than I am?’

Unfortunately, not. Sally had expanded and Clarissa had shrunk. The sailor suit trousers were much too wide and had to be belted up, but the jaunty cap and blue Breton stripes fitted exactly.

‘Well, at least our heads are still the same size.’ Sally stood behind her, ogling their combined reflections. ‘Do you remember? I always wore your hats and scarves.’

‘Who am I supposed to be?’

‘Daphne du Maurier of course. Gertrude’s dearest friend. Friends for life they were. As we are.’

And she smothered Clarissa in pearls, silk, feathers and kisses.

‘Come and meet Max. People keep calling him Lord Rosseter and he can’t stand it.’

Sally Seton’s husband stayed suave and in character as he looked her over, assessing her costume like the director of the play.

‘I say, you’ll do splendidly old thing!’ And he actually winked. ‘Has everyone got a glass of champagne?’ He addressed the crowded Octagon.

‘A formal speech of welcome to all our family and friends probably isn’t appropriate tonight, and so I’ll sing a song about a respectable British matron, who discovered in the nick of time that life was for living.’

In a bar on the Piccola Marina

Life called to Mrs Wentworth-Brewster

Fate beckoned her and introduced her

Into a queer, unfamiliar atmosphere

She’d just sit there, propping up the bar

(Clarissa stealthily removed her elbow off the gleaming counter, adjusted her sailor’s hat, and tried not to look too obviously implicated. Sally’s arm coiled around her waist)

Beside a fisherman who sang to a guitar,

When accused of having gone too far

She merely cried” Funiculi, just fancy me, funicula”

When he bellowed “Que bella Signorina”

(Luciano Pavarotti joined in at this point and the song became a roaring duet)

Sheer ecstasy at once produced a wild shriek

From Mrs Wentworth-Brewster

(Sally produced one. Everybody cheered)

Changing her whole demeanour

When both her daughters and her son said, “Please come home Mama”

(King Kong could be heard delivering the line with gusto)

She answered, rather bibulously “Who do you think you are?”

(Sally – at the top of her voice. Then everybody joined in. This was evidently Lord Rosseter’s party piece)

Nobody can afford to be so la-di-bloody-da

In a bar on the Piccola Marina!

Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the Birthday Girls! Sally and Clarissa!’

Across the strangely Oriental space of the Octagon Clarissa picked out a distant *papier maché* halo, the stars vibrating with satisfaction, righteousness, and joy.