

"Beautifully crafted... captures the heart-gripping consequences of forbidden love."
—MARY BETH KEANE, author of *ASK AGAIN, YES*

A FAMILY MATTER



A NOVEL

CLAIRE LYNCH

Additional praise for

A FAMILY MATTER

and

CLAIRE LYNCH

“A beautiful and tender exploration of parental love, prejudice, and the things we carry that we don’t even fully understand; the terrible decisions made in ignorance, and the almost unbearable consequences.”

—Rachel Joyce, author of *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*

“Claire Lynch takes elements of shame and stigma in our recent history and turns them into fiction that is beautiful, moving, and challenging. Every page sings out with empathy and love, pain and honesty. This unputdownable book—so precise, so deceptively simple, so beautiful in its tiny moments—will change the way you look at the world.”

—Emilie Pine, author of *Notes to Self*

“I was blown away by this book. To tackle heart-wrenching emotion with such precision and restraint takes one hell of a talent. *A Family Matter* is an impeccable debut that turns the mess of life into something beautiful. A timely reminder of love’s redemptive power.”

—Lotte Jeffs, author of *This Love*

“I’m full of admiration for this novel, which strikes the satisfying balance of being both quietly observed and deeply felt. It’s an intimate portrait of expectation, love, and restraint written with great sensitivity and warmth. I adored it.”

—Chloë Ashby, author of *Wet Paint*

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A
FAMILY
MATTER

//////////////////////////////////// A Novel //////////////////////////////////////

CLAIRE LYNCH

SCRIBNER

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
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*To all those who try their best.
That is all you can ever do.*

*why shouldn't
something
I have always
known be the
very best there is. I love
you from my
childhood,
starting back
there when
one day was
just like the
rest, random
growth and
breezes, constant
love, a sand-
wich in the
middle of
day*

FROM EILEEN MYLES, "PEANUT BUTTER," 1991

*I've walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but don't be fooled
this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here,
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,
its own ways of making people disappear.*

FROM ADRIENNE RICH, "WHAT KIND OF TIMES ARE THESE," 1995

JULY 2022

An unexpected item

Five and a half hours after he found out he was dying, Heron drove to his favorite supermarket. In the absence of an alternative, and because it was a Thursday, he decided to stick to his routine.

It is no secret that Heron likes to do his weekly food shop on a Thursday. In the evening, if at all possible, late afternoon at the earliest. His family teases him about it, his strange inflexibilities.

“Live a little,” his daughter had said last week. “Go shopping on a Monday morning, I dare you.”

But Thursdays are quiet and that suits him. Thursdays are sensible. Heron likes to start the weekend with a full fridge, although his weekends are, in truth, much like any other day of the week now.

At the top of the escalator he finds a small shopping cart; a perfect compromise, he has always thought, since a big cart is really too much, a basket not quite enough. Heron is an organized shopper, placing each item into the reusable bag he has labeled for its corresponding kitchen cupboard. He keeps the cleaning products separate from the bread. He doesn't rush, or forget the milk, or squash the salad. Heron isn't one of those people who minds when they change the layout of the supermarket from time to time. If anything, he sort of enjoys it, the hint of scavenger hunt it gives to tracking down the thin-cut marmalade. He could not say, if asked, why he shops in this particular way, the system speaks for itself.

Heron pushes his small cart to the farthest, coldest corner of the supermarket. For obvious reasons, frozen foods are always selected last. Today, in a significant break from routine, he slides open the glass lid of a waist-high chest freezer, flattens out the bags of potato smiley faces, and climbs inside.

It is the smell rather than the cold he notices first. Even with the lid slightly open, the air inside the freezer is stale and starchy. He is as surprised as anyone to find it is actually quite comfortable inside a chest freezer, even with the frost starting to soak through at the backs of his knees. Heron adjusts his shoulder blades, stretches out his legs, and the frozen potato faces settle beneath him. He lies still in the muffled peace of the chest freezer, and he lives.

Heron had felt sorry for the doctor in a way, a youngish woman, fiddling with her pen despite her best intentions. It can't be easy to have to say it out loud to someone.

"There are leaflets. And websites," the doctor had said, and then she moved, just slightly, reaching out to touch her desk to show him that this part, at least, was over. Heron had stood up too fast, tangling his jacket on the back of the chair, saying, absurdly, "It's showerproof."

And still, it wasn't as cold as you would think, in the freezer, or maybe it was so cold he couldn't tell anymore; that was a thought.

Heron looks up through the fog on the glass lid. He looks beyond, to the fluorescent lights and steel joists of the supermarket ceiling.

There are things he will have to do now. Things he will have to say. Admit.

He looks at the ice dripping and shining on the inside walls of the freezer beside his head. The manic smiles and hollow eyes of the potato faces. He looks at these things and he is fine. Heron is so fine that he might have simply stayed in the freezer forever, had a woman not slid open his lid in search of frozen petits pois and screamed.

It takes three members of staff to get him out. He is, as it turns out, quite cold indeed. The back of his head wet, his knees sore and stiffened. The manager is very good about it, cheerful even, when he says, "Let's get you out of there, sir, shall we?" and, "Is there someone we can call?"

It is only when he gets home that Heron understands the tone of the manager's voice. Calm, tolerant, as if a man reclining in a freezer was just something one expects in a varied

retail career. Heron understands then what the manager saw. A confused old man. Not quite all there. Not quite all here.

Local news

Before bed, Heron calls his daughter on the landline. He doesn't like to use his mobile in the house. "Just me," he says, as he always does. Then he pauses, waits for her to say, "Hello stranger," or "Long time no hear," as she does, without fail, every night.

When Maggie asks Heron about his day, he has plenty to say. He tells her about the young couple across the street, laying a new lawn, as if they haven't even noticed the hosepipe ban. He tells her, in quite some detail, about an interesting radio documentary on wind farms. Had she caught it?

She hadn't.

Heron talks and Maggie makes the sounds of listening.

Uh-hmm. Yup. "Interesting," she says, or "Lovely."

Heron talks, but some things don't come up. The hospital, for example. The supermarket. Some things are best papered over, Heron thinks. For now. All of that would come out the wrong way if he tried to explain it. Instead, he sticks to safer topics: the new seed catalog that arrived yesterday. The free coffee waiting for him on his loyalty card. Maggie listens, and she waits for a gap, the chance to escape the conversation with, "Well, I'd better let you go. Sleep well."

Heron lets her take it, a way out for both of them.

"You too."

"Night, then. Goodnight."

"Let's hear it," Conor says. "What's the latest press release from the neighbor's loft conversion?"

"Nothing to report," Maggie tells her husband. "It's a slow news day."

She pours two glasses of wine, fridge-cold and slightly too full for a Thursday evening. As she hands one to Conor, she can see he's a bit disappointed. Heron's nightly phone calls are usually a rich seam. She'd heard Conor at a party once, joking with their friends that he knew more about his father-in-law's greenfly problem than he did about politics in the Middle East. She knew she was supposed to laugh along, see the funny side of Heron's strangeness. But Maggie hadn't found it funny. She didn't mind that her dad told her everything; it had always been like that. All the little details of his day, his current thoughts and theories. Conor couldn't understand it, or wouldn't. Instead of laughing, Maggie had said in front of everyone, "Maybe you should try reading the newspapers a bit more carefully, darling," and they had driven home from the party in silence.

Glasses empty, they lock up the house, feed the cat. Conor gathers up his laptop and charger for work in the morning, saving time. Maggie checks the schedule on the fridge, all the things the children will need tomorrow. Tom's hockey stick, the packed lunches, a form Olivia needs Maggie to sign for the school camping trip. There are different things for the next day and the day after that. It is her job to remember the things, even though the children aren't babies anymore, even though Conor is a grown man quite capable of managing harder tasks than reading the carpool rota for himself. Still, she will do it, keep them all moving forward. Keep them all on track.

JULY 1982

A jumble

On the front steps of the church hall, two teenage girls shake a plastic bucket of change, making the coins jump and ring.

“Twenty pence to come in. Ten for children,” they shout on singsong repeat.

Dawn checks her purse. It’s early in the month, so she’s fine, but she needs to make it last. A new salon has opened on the high street and the apprentices will give you a cut and blow-dry for free if you come in after hours. If she does that, she can put her haircut money toward the denim jacket she’s seen in the catalog.

She can see that the proceeds from the jumble sale are going toward something or other. The church roof? The lepers? She can’t read the label taped onto the bucket, the carefully felt-tipped bubble writing. “It’s for us!” the Girl Guides say when they see her squinting to read it. “We need a new camping stove.”

Dawn recognizes one of the girls; she went to school with her older sister, a lifetime ago, five minutes ago. She drops her coins into the bucket and the girls smile their matching metal smiles back at her.

When she was little, Dawn’s nan took her to jumble sales near the posh houses on the weekends. Dawn liked to buy one thing to wear and one thing she could hold in her hand. On a good day the contents of her beaded purse would stretch to both. A new skirt and a bangle, say, or, on one memorable occasion, an almost new PVC raincoat and a key ring of the Eiffel Tower. On the bus journeys home, her nan would gossip with women who still wore hatpins, and Dawn would pray that nobody at school would recognize her new favorite top as their own castoff. Dawn still liked the bus ride across town, and she still had a taste for fashion that didn’t match her budget. She came to the jumble sales on

her own now, searching for treasure under the piles of discarded slacks, the outgrown school uniforms.

Everybody knew that the best clothes would go first. Older women pulling tartan trolleys outmaneuvered young women leaning on prams. All of them experts, selecting or discarding, checking labels in search of St. Michael, the patron saint of sturdy seams. Dawn works her way around the hall, smooth and smiling as a politician, never turning up her nose at a stained blouse, just in case its former owner turns out to be the woman on the other side of the trestle table. She runs her hand over some children's clothes, a pair of worn-in jeans, a mustard-yellow jacket with Rupert the Bear embroidered on the chest pocket. She keeps close to the tables, reaching out to touch sleeves and hems, the fabrics and patterns of other people's memories.

Halfway round the hall Dawn finds it, the perfect thing she didn't know she was looking for. From underneath a pile of crocheted baby blankets, she pulls out an Aran cardigan in wool the color of fresh cream. The last thing anyone else would want to buy in July. As she holds it up against herself for size, the woman across the table says, "Seventy-five pence." Then, laughing, "I'd say a pound, but God knows what'll happen when you try and wash it." Dawn thanks her, drops her coins in the ice cream tub, and takes one last look around to check nothing has been overlooked. The table of bric-a-brac is more than she can face today, as are the shoes, shaped by other people's feet, bound in their pairs by rubber bands.

Nobody is expecting her home for at least an hour, so Dawn finds the refreshments table and splurges on a cup of tea and a butterfly cake. Across the hall, a pair of elderly women are appraising some flesh-colored support garments, and Dawn watches as they tug from opposite sides, checking whether or not they'd be up to another deployment.

"Carnaby Street, eat your heart out," says the woman at the next table, and Dawn splutters a mouthful of tea back into her cup. She looks up to see a young woman scraping her chair over to the table, setting her blue cup and saucer right beside Dawn's. She leans toward her, smiles at her as if they weren't complete strangers.

"Any good finds?"

And that is it, they are talking.

They talk about the things they didn't buy, the things they did. Dawn fishes the cardigan from her shopping bag and holds it up for inspection. The buttons are like horse chestnuts, Dawn thinks, that is what it is.

"Hand-knitted." The woman nods her approval. "Must have taken hours."

"That's what I thought too. She gave it to me for less than a quid. You?"

The woman reaches into the wicker basket at her feet and begins to unwrap one of the newspaper packages. Dawn takes the chance to look at her, to work her out. They are the same age, or thereabouts. She seems tall, although it's hard to tell when she's sitting down. A bit posh, Dawn thinks, from the way she speaks. From the way she takes it for granted that Dawn wants to talk to her. Dawn wants to ask her where her earrings are from. The package unwrapped, crumpled newspaper spread across her lap, the woman holds out a champagne coupe from a set of four, small and shallow with a delicate green stem. The women look at the glass together, the light catching it. A beautiful but impractical thing.

"For all the dinner parties I never have," she says. "Chin-chin!"

She raises the empty glass with a flourish, her voice a little too loud for a person sitting in the refreshment corner of a church jumble sale, and sets the Mother's Union committee tutting. The woman grins and Dawn blushes, hot to her hairline, as people turn to look. Dawn had come here for a break, the chance to hide in an old version of herself for a couple of hours. It is a surprise that the morning has become a tiny adventure. When the woman catches her eye, Dawn feels she is an accomplice, caught, as she always had been at school, in the company of someone bolder, on the edge of fun that wasn't quite hers. The woman hadn't minded making a scene at all, she simply rewrapped the glass in its newspaper, placed her empty teacup carefully back on its saucer, and said, "I think I'll head off."

And Dawn, to her immense surprise, heard herself say, "Me too."

It was nothing, what happened next, the two of them bursting through the swing doors of the church hall like they were fleeing the scene of a bank raid. Hazel, becoming Hazel

to her, introducing herself.

“Named for the color of my hair, apparently. Or was it my eyes? Who knows. My brother always said it was because they could tell I’d be nuts.”

Her pretend sulk when Dawn had laughed and said, “No, I get it. I mean, I’ve only known you five minutes, but I see his point.”

It was the best kind of summer Saturday. Cut grass everywhere and somebody lighting up a barbecue. Hazel, chatting, unstoppable, telling Dawn that she’d just moved to town, a little flat right beside the school so she’d be ready for the start of term.

“It’s only my second job since training college. The kids are going to eat me alive,” she said, hoping it was a joke. Dawn, who had lived in the village all her life, tried to impress when Hazel quizzed her about the local pubs, or what there was to do in this place that seemed to be just fields and houses. Houses and fields. When she thinks of it in bed that night, Dawn squeezes her eyes shut with embarrassment, pictures herself telling Hazel with such country-mouse certainty that the Horse and Groom was better than the Plough. Cringes at the way she’d gone on about the chips being tastier at the Princes Fish Bar, even though it was a shorter walk to Captain’s Chippy. She remembers how Hazel had laughed and said, “Just the insider information I was hoping for,” and Dawn had blushed again, trying desperately to muster up something more appealing to say about her hometown.

“The trains to London are regular,” she had offered, finally, which just made Hazel laugh even more.

When they arrived outside Dawn’s house, she had nodded at it, at its pebbledash and hanging baskets, and said only, “This is me.”

Hazel had smiled, told her how great it had been to chat with someone who wasn’t a hundred years old, or seven. And then she had waved at Dawn, huge enthusiastic waves, as if she were heading off on a long sea voyage, not just walking down the concrete path to her front door.

She knew she should have mentioned them, the husband and child waiting inside, her real life. It wasn’t a lie, Dawn told herself, just a break, a few hours of being a different

kind of young again. Not caring about anything except shopping and new friends and talking. She would tell Hazel the next time, if she even saw her again. Dawn had closed the door behind her that day and imagined Hazel walking away, down the dip of the hill into the center of the village, past the second-best pub and the bus shelter. She imagined her walking along the last little streets and up the stairs to her flat beside the school gates. Then she filled the kitchen sink with cold water and put her new-old cardigan in to soak.

AUGUST 2022

On rest

Maggie holds her phone above her head and snaps a photo of the sky, picture-perfect blue, to prove it or record it. For a few seconds she looks at the blue square, then she presses delete. She is pleased with her luck, finding a spot on this bench, warm in the lunchtime sun. It is one of those modern designs, divided by armrests, to save people from the awkwardness of touching elbows with a stranger. To deny the homeless the relative dignity of sleeping on a bench. She eats and she watches people dashing across the square with salads and green juices or taking phone calls with the thin air. She is surrounded by people with unseen purpose, their walking almost a jog, a little skip and hop of self-important busyness. Taking a proper lunch break is her boss's idea. "For balance," she had said, and more nauseatingly, "Rest is self-care, Maggie." As if sitting on a bench eating a Pret sandwich was indistinguishable from a weeklong Nordic spa break. Maggie is skeptical on the topic of rest. She suspects it is a waste, perhaps even a weakness. She is prone to thoughts like this lately, about time passing too quickly, or running out altogether. About everything slipping out of her grasp. When she told Conor she felt this way, he said it was just her age, textbook midlife crisis. Maggie had advised him, on the grounds of his own health and safety, not to offer that as an explanation again. She takes another picture of the blue sky and posts it online.

Maggie had argued that morning with her son, the usual battle over what kind and how much food made for a suitable breakfast. Then something about people taking too long, or not long enough, in the shower. And it was fine. Just family life, bustling and real. Except sometimes, when it was lonely. Tom made fun of her, she knew that, and lately he patronized her, too. Maggie thought it was probably inevitable, a necessary pulling away. But this morning she saw it more clearly, observed them all as a visitor might. She has