Vengeance

A Short Story from an Idea by Erin

By Maryanne Peters

My name was Michael Inders Moog. Actually it still is, but everyone calls me Mim. It’s my initials you see. I would have hated that when I was just Mike, but I am not Mike anymore. And I don’t use Moog either these days. It is such an awful name. Like a pig with horns and an udder. I have a better surname now – one that I love.

Michael Inders Moog was a successful lawyer. Perhaps successful by having the wrong clients – ruthless and dishonest Wall Street hyenas. He was not so proud of his work.

He was a man of intellect, but isn’t it strange that such men always fall for completely the wrong woman? Michael adored Paula. He wooed and married her, and for a matter of only months he considered himself the happiest husband in the world.

She spent his money, and if that made her happy, then he was happy. She wanted a home larger than he could afford so he borrowed to see that she had it. But that was all Michael was to Paula Nolan - she rightly declined to go by Moog. He was spending money and buying by instalment a luxurious palace to call home when it was never going to be that.

Even successful lawyers have lean times and when it came to tightening the belt that was a game Paula was not playing. She was gone - into the arms of Gordon Trevette, who (it turns out) was somebody she had been having an affair with for some time. It seemed like everybody knew except poor Mike.

Poor Mike. That was who I was. So sad – so pathetic.

How could somebody so weak drag himself into work every day let alone do his job. Good lawyers must be winners, or at least appear to be. He was the opposite. Paula had hollowed him out.

The house was sold. The money was gone. There was no job. Also there was no family to run too as Mike was an only child with both parents long passed. No friends outside the job he once had – in the time they were married Paula had seen to that. All friends they had shared were her friends, and no friends of his.

What is a man to do if a man is as pathetic as Mike Inders Moog?

It seemed that the street was a place to die. You are so distraught that you lay yourself down and await your fate. Die from the cold perhaps, or be run over by a dumpster truck, or beaten to death by a stranger? Mike took his place among the derelicts and the junkies and awaited his fate.

The instinct to survive kept him alive. When you are hungry you sift the trashcans for food. You cover yourself at night with anything you can. But there is no need to wash or to shave or to cut your hair. After only a month or so Mike Moog was unrecognizable.

Maybe just a glimmer of light appears to remind you that you once lived in the sunshine. That would be Dolly Barton. No, not Dolly Parton, but the shemale prostitute and junkie, who was once Dave Barton. Of course she had to become Dolly.

She danced and shook her new implants at a club down on Falcon Street, and if she made tips, she would take Mike down to the dive all-night diner across from the club and buy him a hot meal and a hot drink. She was kind, but she also just needed somebody to talk to, and Mike knew how to do that. He used to charge money to do that.

She would talk about her dreams and her problems. She dreamt that one day she would be a complete woman, and maybe meet a guy and live as his wife in the suburbs. Her problems were that she was just not woman enough, even after the breast implants. She had become disheartened. If money could not fix her body then the money went on another fix. Drugs were doing worse that killing her, they were robbing her of her dream.

Like Mike she had nobody. Her family were not dead but they had abandoned her.

“If I OD it will be in my sleazy apartment and nobody will know,” she said. “Promise me that if I don’t appear on my corner you will come and find me. Take my spare key. And the same goes for you. if I don’t see you for more than a few days, who should I call?”

“Waste disposal.” That is what I said to her. But I took the key.

She was a glimmer of light because she was somebody who cared about me, and who I cared about. Sometimes that is all you need to give you a reason to live. So when the day came that she had not been seen for too long, and she missed her gig at the club, I went to her place and used the key. You might expect that finding her lifeless body with the needle hanging out of her arm, would have been the end for me. In fact, it was the beginning.

In that moment I saw myself lying there, and by chance outside a woman’s high-pitched laughter cut through the night outside. Just street noise, but it reminded me of Paula, laughing in my face while hanging off Gordon’s arm. It was her laughing at me lying dead. That was the thought I had.

There was a fury in me that seemed to come out of nowhere. Paula had left me to this, and she was laughing. Here was a squalid apartment with a dead body which was 100 times better than the street, but where was Paula living? What kind of comfort or luxury? As my friend lay dead, my fury grew.

I looked around. There was not a single thing of value that I could see in the place. There was jewellery if you can call it that, but too cheap even to pawn. It seemed as if every penny that Dolly had earned since she bought her tits, not spent on drugs, had been spent on clothes and cosmetics. That was all there was. Plenty of it.

I carried her body to the bed and lay her there gently. She would never be the suburban housewife. At least when she died, she died with a purpose. I touched up her lipstick. I wanted her to be as pretty as she could be when she was found.

The ID in her purse said “David Laurence Barton” and there was a picture of a guy on it. Somebody who looked a lot like me. It was then that this whole thing took form, like a curtain being drawn open. All I knew was that I did not want to come back from the streets as Mike Moog. How would that allow me to do anything? I needed to be somebody completely different. Completely.

The apartment had a toilet, a basin and a shower in a room cluttered with what a girl needed, if a a girl was not really a girl. There was a “home electrolysis unit” for facial hair and compounds ad razors for body hair, there was hair dye and wiglets of the same color, combs and clips of all kinds. There were eyebrow shapers and eyelash applicators, makeup of all kinds and magazines showing how to find a look and paint it on. In the drawers were panties and bras, and false breasts even though Dolly no longer needed them, and there were panties and the devices to go inside those, to make the manhood disappear.

My hair had grown as I had not cut it for months, but It needed her de-tangling shampoo and prolonged brushing to make it look presentable, and then there were volumizing sprays and technique to give it body and shine. It was all new to me, but from all the material that Dolly had collected it was clear that it had been new to her not so long ago.

We were a similar size, although Dolly was broader in the shoulders and across the back. In many of her clothes I looked better than she did. But I was not interested in the slutty looks that belonged on the street. I was headed up, and by good fortune there was enough in her wardrobe to allow me to find the style that I was looking for.

I had never worn women’s clothes in my life before that morning, but I knew how a woman should dress. Paula dressed well. It may even have been the first thing that drew me to her. It was her sense of style and her haughty demeanor that told me that I needed to have her. The truth is that I never could have her, but maybe I could be her, or like her.

Dolly had a suitcase. A small one on wheels. I had to be selective. Clothes that did not scream working girl, but I did choose one that came close. It was black and sexily skimpy, so I called it my BASS outfit. The truth is, that I had a better body than Dolly even after all those hormones. It was slighter and less angular, and my legs looked great.

I packed the suitcase and a shoulder bag. I found a burner phone still in the plastic – I took that too. I took her ID with some reluctance. If I was stopped I needed something and this old ID with a male face seemed to have worked for Dolly. Still, I did not like the idea of her disappearing into anonymity without something there to give a name to her. So when I was well clear of her apartment I made a call to the police from a payphone.

“I have just left the apartment of David Dolly Barton,” I said in the deepest voice I could muster. “It looks like she shot up some bad stuff. She’s dead. She is a friend, but I can’t be involved. Sorry.”

It seemed the best I could do. But later I was to track down her family and reach out, for what that was worth.

I had tried to disguise my voice over the phone, but it made me realize that my own voice was not a fit for the person I was pretending to be. I needed time to get this right. But first I needed to move up.

I saw it in a movie once. A woman checks out late from a hotel before a shift change, and never notices the person lurking behind her. When the new receptionist comes on, I rush back in and say: “I’ve missed my flight. Is my room still available?” I give the details I have overheard. The room is available because with late checkouts it cannot be easily relet. I stroll in. The credit card is on record.

I may have just lucked out, but it did work. Despite my shitty little suitcase (“the rest of my luggage I have left at the airport”) and perhaps an odd appearance I found myself ensconced in the best hotel in town for at least one night, with an account to spend.

It is fraud of course. You don’t need to tell a lawyer, least of all a lawyer who – let’s be honest- aided and abetted fraud. The clients of Michael Inders Moog always got away with it. There is no such thing as karma. I knew that. If you want those who have wronged to pay, you need to make them pay.

There was a salon and beauty spa attached to the hotel – an entrance on the street and another into the hotel lobby. I was worried that my look was not up to scratch so before taking the elevator up, I called in to see if I could make an appointment. The lady looked at me and smiled – the look was definitely not right but she knew how to sell. Her name tag read “Florence”.

“Girls like you are just so pretty you put us to shame,” she said. “But I suggest I catch you early tomorrow. Do not shave. Come down with a scarf around your chin and we will get rid of that unwanted growth for you. And we can add some more hair on top. And perhaps even a Brazilian wax? Are you staying in the hotel? Oh good. You can just charge it to your room.”

Having booked a session I went up and I used the online facility on the TV to search for my ex-wife.

I needed money, and the solution seemed simple. I had clients and I knew where the bodies were buried, or rather where the cash was buried. Michael Inders Moog always said that he followed the rules: Clients’ information is confidential, if you receive information about past crimes you cannot disclose them but you represent somebody who confesses to crime nor argue based on a known lie;

future crimes you are bound to report – but surely not your own.

I used the phone to contact a private number that Mike knew by heart. I used text only. I explained that I had come into possession of files that might be of value to the receiver of my messages. I put a price on them, and a means of payment – a known independent stakeholder.

I sent the final text: “I am aware that you have this amount in cash in the required denominations, so do ask for time. Supply to the stakeholder in a brown paper bag by 12:00 noon tomorrow. The file will be delivered to you tomorrow.”

The stakeholder’s office was a busy office in a busier building. They could not follow everybody going in and out with a bag that would not be large based on the limited amount of large bills. I could have been greedier, but if I took too much they would demand an exchange and work harder to find the money. Given the scale of their crimes this was breadcrumbs.

But they would be looking for Mike. It would not take much to work out that he could be the source of the file. There was no file. Not with me anyway. I had only just clawed myself out of the sewer. But I was not Mike, and any trace of him was about to be torn away.

I slept in luxury and went down to the salon in the morning, and that is just what they did. All traces of Mike were scrubbed away or painted over.

Florence, the lady I had met the day before, took charge.

“Body hair has to go and head hair needs to grow. Skin needs treatment today and every day of your life from now on. Eyebrows less and eyelashes more. Applying lipstick is an art in itself, my Dear – ley me show you how. Eyes are any woman’s key asset and you are blessed with a fine pair – make them stand out. No, no – keep your hands down and your elbows in – you flap and walk like a duck. We have work to do.”

I was ready to change. You cannot become somebody else in an instant. It might take years. In my case I only had half a day.

Florence wiped away a tear. “This is the moment when I think that I have the best job in the world. Mud walked in and I have made a porcelain vessel, smoothed, painted and glazed. A true work of art. Now, give me your room number and I will send in the account.”

That bill included a bag to take away full of things that would allow this work of art to stay just as glorious, for a few weeks at least.

I called myself Miriam Poine – Miriam from my nickname and Poine is the name of a Greek goddess of vengeance. Miriam was the one who walked out of the salon. She went to the office building occupied by the stakeholder well before noon and visited several waiting rooms pausing to read a book. During the lunch hour she went down to the stakeholders office and produced a piece of paper with the name of their staff member and the code.

A man duly appeared with a paper bag. I had estimated the size of the stash and I had a shoulder bag which the package could sit inside, but that was inside another bag, just in case.

“I’m just collecting,” I explained to the man as he asked for more details.

He said: “You don’t have to answer this, but I have been asked whether you are collecting on behalf of Michael Moog.”

I had rehearsed for something like this – at the exchange or being stopped in the lift or the lobby on the way out. It required my best imitation of a dumb blonde: “Michael Moo? I am sorry, I don’t know who that is. Oh, what a minute. That is the name of her ex-husband. Oops. I had better be going. Please ignore anything I said, but I think that Mr. Moo might be dead.”

What I wanted to do was to point the finger at Paula Nolan, my ex wife.

It was too late to check out of the hotel, so I decided to stay one more night. I ordered room service – Champagne but not the most expensive, plus some nice but fairly inexpensive treats. It was not my money, and it seemed to be wrong to overdo it, but whatever scruples Mike had once, they seemed to have faded.

There in that hotel room, I could well have relapsed and become Mike, but I did not want to. I wanted to be Miriam. To me Michael Moog was dead – a loser. Miriam was very much alive – and a winner. Her smooth body reclined in the bath, her lengthened hair clipped on her head, a glass of Champagne in her hand, admiring her painted toenails. Why would I not want to be her?

In the morning I put my key on the reception counter and hurried out to avoid questions. I used the cash I had to buy some clothes and a better suitcase. And I bought a tablet with an access plan as I had research to do. I decided that it was time to seek out Paula Nolan.

It was not difficult. She did have a penchant for self-promotion.

She was living in an inner-city townhouse – not a big one but in a good neighborhood. There was a coffee bar on the corner with a view of the front door. I had checked to see that the owner was one Declan Gerrard, who recorded his status as “In a relationship with Paula Nolan”. It was not Gordon Trevette, the an she had let me for. Somebody else. Somebody like me.

I waited, using my tablet to find out as much as I could with one eye on the townhouse. It was late afternoon before I saw her leave the apartment. She walked towards me at the coffee shop window and around the corner in front of me and get into a car with a man. No, not Declan Gerrard but Gordon Trevette. I could see them embrace in the front seat. It was like history repeating. She was up to her old tricks.

They were close. But the photos from my cellphone were not great. Perhaps just enough?

What is vengeance? I confess that as I saw her walking from her door I wondered what I should do. Pursuing a person is one thing – it is almost an end in itself. I looked out the window and the light was such that a simple refocus revealed my own reflection. A pretty woman sat demurely with a lipstick trace on her half cup of cappuccino. They say success is revenge. Was that enough.

Had I ever contemplated murder? No. Her death perhaps, but not at my hand. Not even if I could get away with it. I was not that person. Could I ever make her life as miserable as mine had been? Unlikely. Here she was with another. Nobody meant enough to her to break her heart. I suppose that I wondered then if the whole thing had been a waste of time. In which case: Who was I? What next for me?

I pulled out my tablet. I brought up the image of Declan. He looked like a kind person. He was handsome in his own way. Decent. How could he end up with Paula?

Just then the low battery warning started to flash. I needed to plug in. I had been using the battery all day.

“I am sorry but we are closing up now,” the girl said. “Right now in fact.”

I felt as if I had been unceremonious dumped on the sidewalk as if I was still the tramp I had been only weeks before, with my case in tow, my bag over my should and my tablet in my hand. I was watching as the screen faded to black and saying: “Damn. Damn!”

“Can I help you?” Men seldom get asked, but I of course I was a woman now. I looked up and saw him. Declan Gerrard. The image had faded from the screen and as if by magic he was standing in front of me.

“I have run out of power,” I stammered. “There is still a light on. Maybe I can save my work if I just get to a power socket?”

“I live just over there,” he said, pointing. “If you are prepared to risk an invitation from a stranger you could use my power to get back up and running.”

It was as if things were converging. Perhaps everything had since I had found Dolly dead, and I began to swim up to the surface.

“I wouldn’t want to impose…”. It was something I had to say, but I wanted to get into his house. I wanted to show him the pictures on my phone. But maybe not just yet.

The house was warm and inviting. He invited me into the lounge. There was art on the walls but photographs on shelves that caught my attention. Photos of his family. But in front of them, photos of Paula as if to block out his past.

“My wife died and those are my kids, now away at college,” he said. “And that is my fiancée Paula. She is at some charity thing tonight.” I had to smirk.

There was a side table and a socket nearby. He unravelled the cord and plugged it in. The screen burst into life before I could cross the room. It was an image of him. I just froze.”

He turned slowly to me, and said: “Why do you have an image of me on your tablet?”

“I am so sorry. I should not have accepted your invitation,” I said. “My name is Miriam. My ex-husband Mike was married to your fiancée. He killed himself. I have to explain that I hold Paula responsible, although now that I am here, I am not sure what to do about that, except perhaps to warn you?”

“Whatever are you talking about?” he said.

“She is back with Gordon Trevette. I just saw them together. I have a snap of them here, with the date and time. Less than an hour ago.”

His hand seemed to be shaking as he took the phone that I offered him. He drew in a deep breath as he scrolled through the grainy images.

“I had my suspicions,” he said. “I did not want to believe it”.

“To doubt the one you love is a terrible thing,” I said. “But better that than a broken heart. I should know.”

There were tears in my eyes. I put it down to Dolly’s hormones. I felt as if I needed them to complete my transformation, but also in some way to keep her dream going. Now they seemed to be messing with me.

With Declan’s arms around me those tears turned to shivers and sobs, but the feeling of being held close to another body was what I needed. It seemed as if it had been years.

“Stay for dinner,” he said. “Nothing special, but enough for two. Your tablet can charge up and you can show me what else you have on it, if you like?”

So I did.

We ate and we talked, and shared a bottle of wine, and we discussed retribution.

When she arrived at the door we got quickly to our positions. She may have assumed that he was already in bed but she looked into the living room and must have seen us in our sensual embrace, our lips locked.

“What the fuck is this!” she shouted. “And who is this in my house?”

“It is not your house it is mine,” Declan shouted back. “I can invite who I like. In fact if Gordon Trevette is waiting outside, you can invite him in.”

“Where are my photos?” she said. I seemed odd that in this moment she noticed they were missing.

“Miriam here packed them up,” he said. “She doesn’t like another woman watching while she has sex. So she put them in your suitcase with your other things. Its on the landing.”

“Darling, this is a misunderstanding…”. It seemed that she might be considering a way of retrieving the situation, but my glance at her was putting her off. I could see that she was looking at me and thinking ‘I know that face’ but of course, she didn’t. I just hoped that she saw somebody better than her was in the arms of her man.

“Fuck it,” she said. And she turned and walked away. It was just as I thought, how can you hurt somebody who does not know love?

“That worked,” I said as the door slammed behind Paula and her suitcase.

“Perhaps now we can get back to what we were doing, but for real now,” he said. I grabbed his head and pulled his face to mine. We melted into one another. My life was changed forever. I had felt it happening for the weeks I had been living as Miriam, now I knew that I was her.

That night we met he faced the hurtful truth of Paula’s deceit, but also the equally hurtful lie of mine. How could I let him fall in love with me when I was not who he thought I was. But it was too late. He did not know it when I left his house in tears, but it did not take him too long to realize.

He could never have found me, as I was almost new on the planet, so he advertised in the personal column. Strange too because I never read that column before. But somehow the messages are comforting to somebody who lost in love. Then one day I read the words: “Miriam, I met the perfect woman. Please forgive me for not realizing it. Declan”.

I stood on his doorstep wearing something that showed off my new breasts. It was the first work I had done. He paid for more. But feeling his embrace crush those breasts and feeling his tongue in my mouth confirmed that giving up who I was, was the right thing.

And perhaps the easiest thing to give up was the notion of vengeance. Those who cannot love (like Paula) will never have a full life, those who can love will always find joy somewhere.

The End

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*Erin’s seed: A successful lawyer and businessman falls in love with the wrong woman. She betrayed him to a rival and left him destitute - he became a street person living from garbage can to thrift shop to homeless shelter until years later he sees the girl who betrayed him with someone who is not the man she left him for. She's up to her old tricks and he decides to watch as she works her deceptive magic on two more men so he decides he should warn the new guy what is going on and disguises himself as a woman to get to the guy, but things never turn out the way people expect and they fall in love. The betrayer is incensed at this and tries to kill our heroine and is instead killed by her former accomplice who goes to prison leaving the hero-ine and her intended victim to enjoy life.*