

TLC Showcase

MAGGIE BARRETT

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Introduction to *Felicity*

F*elicity* is the story of a seventy year-old, sober, feisty and furious woman who is on a mission to discover where her anger comes from and how to dissipate it while she still has time. Over a period of eighteen months we journey with Felicity as she revisits her past while struggling in present time with the rejection of her latest novel. The arrival of the #MeToo movement surprises her with the revelation that not only is her anger older than her, but that the personal and the political are always entwined.

I felt compelled to write about a woman's anger but knew that it could be off-putting. By the time I finished the first draft I was unable to tell if I had created an impelling, yet likeable enough character for the reader to want go the distance. I knew I needed professional advice. So how very fortunate to be introduced, by Tracy Chevalier, to TLC. The brilliant and supportive Joe Sedgwick assigned Rose Gaete to assess my manuscript and I will be forever indebted to her for her insightful feedback and editorial suggestions, all of which I followed. A further report by Anna South, convinced me that I had written something worth reading. I cannot thank Rose and Anna enough for their positivity and encouragement. I am currently working on another novel and will most certainly return to TLC for editorial guidance when the first draft is complete.

Extract from *Felicity* by Maggie Barrett

Felicity sits at her desk, uncaps her pen, writes "Chapter 22" and stops. What is she trying to say? Not just now, in this minute, but altogether? What is this thing she's writing? Novel? Memoir? Primal Scream? Self-indulgent moan? She feels she's lost sight of the beginning, of what impelled her to begin. Anger. Fury. Rage. Some deep urge to let everyone have it. How long had it been since someone else's novel had enraged her and what exactly about that novel had ticked her off?

Felicity sits, pen poised, brain fuddled. Anger seems so far away, replaced now by fear and sadness, those inconvenient feelings which anger is so quick to mask.

So, what are you afraid of, Felicity? What was it about that novel that was so frightening you had to get far away from it as quickly as possible? It had been the author's tone of complaint, the description of ailing body parts, a creep of decrepitude and the hint of resignation to come. That's what scares Felicity. She doesn't want to become resigned. It terrifies her. Surrender, that was different somehow. It lacked bitterness and leaned more toward acceptance whereas resignation was like a letter to self, terminating one's employment of capability, of courage, of belief, goddammit; belief that it was never too late...for what?

Success, of course. Never too late for success. The old haunting. What the ageing characters and, let's be honest, the ageing author, had seemed to be implying was that success was, in the end, never enough. And isn't that what Felicity is struggling with? The struggle to accept that no matter what, nothing will ever be enough? What was frightening Felicity, hidden beneath her anger, was the fact that the other writer's novel held no struggle. The protagonist had merely put down her end of the rope. Now *that* was really scary. *Rage, rage, against the dying of the light*. And there's the sadness. It is, at seventy, no longer the light at the end of the tunnel. It is just the end of the tunnel.

Felicity isn't afraid of dying. She's been close a couple of times and has tasted the possibility of peaceful surrender. No, what frightens Felicity is the accruing regret she feels at having failed herself and that it *is* too late to rectify that; that once

again she is to blame and as she inks the word blame onto the page a thousand 'shoulds' burst forth like startled birds shot out of a tree. She should have had more courage. She should have gone for what she'd wanted. She should have submitted that application to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. RADA or nada. She'd chosen nada. Filled in the form, seventeen years old, alone in a bedsit in Earls Court. Never mailed it. Instead she'd caved to insecurity, to the vision of embarrassing herself before jurors. Had caved to the fear of ridicule and rejection.

Instead, she'd taken her auditions in the beds of men she hardly knew, performing like a star, her dirty blonde hair, tousled and tossed on rarely-washed pillow-cases, her then lovely young body giving it everything she had in the hopes of an encore. When it came to her physicality she had no doubt of her talent; dancing, shooting the netball right into the hoop, swimming for a win, leaping from rock to rock, cycling downhill no hands. Even after she broke her neck she was still a hot number. Wasn't it she, trapped inside a halo-vest, its metal rods drilled into her head, the rods attached to a metal vest immobilizing her from the waist up while C4 through C7 healed in their fusion with the dead man's rib? Wasn't it she who thus attired had urged Spouse # 5-to-be to make love with abandon? "It's all good from the waist down," she'd laughed as she saw the shock on his face.

So, love comes into it after all, Felicity thinks, the pen pausing for breath. Sitting here now, reading over the last few chapters, she feels the sadness of all that is lost, everyday, now and then? Back then, in that first marriage and the mental home. Had she been an angry person then? No, not really. No, she had had to become alcoholic and drug addicted in order to locate that repressed emotion. The beast that had remained in its cave for years would need a large intake of spirits before it could be let loose.

And let loose it is, on a San Francisco bus. The first bus that comes along outside the courthouse where she has just lost custody of her four-year old daughter. There is a fountain splashing somewhere. And the lawyer's hand on her shoulder and then she is alone, wailing and walking on disappeared legs. Faster. Faster. She needs to go faster. Get away. Run. Run for the bus. The driver looks at her and looks away. She sits on a side seat, all tears and snot and unspeakable anguish. Passengers look away. Except for one. One passenger looks at her in obvious amazement, and years of

injustice and rage rip out of Felicity, "What the fuck are you looking at?" she screams at the passenger, and rides the bus to nowhere.

Pen in hand, Felicity sits at her desk. She looks up but sees nothing. It's all right while the ink is flowing; somehow the act of actually committing a memory like that to paper is, yes, okay, somewhat cathartic. But when the pen stops, when the ink no longer flows, then something like terror begins its throttled entrance because you cannot control memory. Once a memory is claimed in writing the dominoes begin to fall and that snaking line of black and white makes an angular turn, goes back on itself, the dots careening out of control and the last memory becomes the first, knocking into the next, or the one before, and the teeming energy of life lived clatters swiftly through the tiles and depending on how you set it up to begin with, this random display of numerical dots, each of them a memory, an event in real time, now lies exposed upon the surface of the table, itself chosen for its hoarded memories, the unbidden stories waxed into the grain. Or, if the dominoes are knocked in the other direction, you are faced with the blank, black, impenetrable facade of denial, of eradication, of meaninglessness. No, when Felicity let loose her rage on the San Francisco bus, that was not when she became an angry person. That was merely the moment she ripped off the mask of sadness and anguish and fear and pretense and longing and wanting and hoping and yes, the bloody English politeness. *That* mask. The one she reached up for and tore from her face, exposing a near murderous rage. Because in that moment in the courtroom, when the judge had looked at her in pity and told her he was bound by the law to award custody to the New York parent because the joint custody agreement was executed there, back then, when Felicity had thought all had been reasonable, when everyone was sleeping with everyone because it was the Seventies and you had the right to happiness and if something made you happy then by extension everyone in your life would be happy, this, the hedonistic philosophy of the decade that followed on the heels of the naïve Sixties philosophy that agreed with the Beatles: "Love is all you need," ta-da, da-da-dah.

Except in the courtroom there is no love. Only law and what lawyers like to call its interpretation, but which is in fact manipulation. And Felicity had been manipulated by Spouse #2 and his expensive lawyer and by the lawyer who had been recommended to her. The best, she was told. And she can see him now, behind his mahogany desk, the photos of his family on the bookcase, the only sign of life amongst the

leather-bound tomes of jurisdiction and this person-v-that and a thousand clauses that can form either a loophole or a noose. And she had sat there telling him her story. How she and Spouse #2 had agreed to share custody for a year, alternating three months each with their daughter and how he had not kept to the agreement. How he had kept their child to himself that Christmas. Sending the child to her with mutual friends a week late.

And the lawyer who was the best had listened. Told her to go home and write an essay that night on who she was as a mother and why she deserved custody of her daughter. And she gives him the essay the next day. And he reads it in front of her, and agrees with her. She does deserve custody. And then he says, "The problem is you can't afford me." And if she remembers correctly, Felicity had sat there nodding because it was easier to make nice than it was to reach across the desk and punch him in the face until he became unrecognizable in the eyes of the law.

Felicity blinks and looks down at the page. "Oh," she says, "Oh, this is hard." This, she realizes, is why she has never wanted to write a memoir. Because if it is to have any merit at all, she will have to be brutally honest. She would have to be willing to see every moment of cowardice she's succumbed to. She will have to see not only that the world is full of cruelty and malice aforethought, that there is no fairness, or justice for all, but that as an adult responsibility for one's life is imperative. She will have to see that at sixteen, when she left home, she had still been a child and while that may have been an act of courage in one way, in another it was a misguided one-way trip in search of freedom without responsibility. A search for fame without belief. A search for love without discernment. From sixteen until forty-four, when she became sober, Felicity had lived with the domino-effect of life lived through magical thinking, each domino a black and white decision made from the ephemeral mist of delusion.

On their last night together Felicity takes her little girl to the Ice Capades. A futile attempt at distraction; of creating something magically memorable for her child. And all the while as the wee one sits mesmerized Felicity feels herself disappearing into the ice. Feels herself cut to ribbons with every blade, the precision of metal on ice, the ice impenetrable, the blades curling and swooshing, the pretty designs so temporary, the impending loss of her child so permanent. The cruel art of skating and

she herself on ice so thin she longs to be taken beneath its surface rather than be frozen out of her child's life.

Felicity caps her pen. How much life can be lived in a day? Soon the sun will set. She and Spouse will sit in the wicker chairs out front and watch the light turn this lamentable world into a golden globe of wonder. The hills will radiate the warmth of the day returning the light soaked into the earth. A day of truth and beauty; truth cleansing the soul; the soul reflecting it's own radiance. Two strangers sitting there, woven together in the sun's last rays.

About the Writer

To say Maggie Barrett has had a colourful life would be an understatement. Maggie has a background in theatre, dance, music and waitressing. Now sober for 30+ years, she previously had a career in alcohol and drugs.

Felicity is Maggie's 4th novel and is available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Waterstones. She also has a collection of short stories and in the late 90's wrote and performed her play, "Give It Up" Off Broadway. Originally from England, Maggie has lived in Canada and the USA.



She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College and now resides with her husband in Tuscany where she is currently working on a new novel and a collection of essays. You can contact Maggie at idea@maggiebarrett.com or follow her adventures at: www.feelingourwayaround.com