

FLING!

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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This novel began in what is real, but became, in fact, fiction. None of the characters bear any relation to living persons, except that love or loss lends a reality to what is imagined.

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1. a brief period of indulging one's impulses
2. a usually brief attempt or effort
3. a brief sexual or romantic relationship
4. a Scottish Highland dance
5. a novel by Lily Iona MacKenzie

CONTENTS

Isle of Skye, 1906 / 1
Calgary, June 1996
On the Road
San Francisco, 1996
Puerto Vallarta, 1996
Portree, Isle of Skye, 1916
Mexico City, 1996
Calgary, 1955
Portree, Isle of Skye, 1920
Mexico City, 1996
Canada, 1921-1924
Mexico City, 1996
Mexico, 1924
Mexico, 1996
Calgary, 1950
San Miguel, 1996
Adrift in the 1950s
The Circus, Circa 1960s
San Miguel, 1996: La Cueva
Eineeq
Fiesta
Shaman
Eineeq's Return
Feather's Resurrection
Mama Mia
Don Miguel's World
Los Dias de Muertos

ISLE OF SKYE, 1906

Malcolm—Heather MacGregor's grandfather on her mother's side—told anyone who was willing to listen that his granddaughter hadn't been born the usual way. She'd danced right off one of his paintings, landing in the family's potato patch, except the land was too barren to produce much by the time she came along. It wasn't a promising beginning.

She made the best of it. At least it hadn't been an onion patch.

The family and villagers had heard the story so often they were sick of it. Yet no one doubted Heather's origins (or Bubbles', as she was later known). The Scots, reputed to have a sixth sense, know unpredictable things happen, and there's no telling when something out of the ordinary will occur. They give lip service to Christianity, but the old religion hasn't gone anywhere.

She grew up knowing that the sea was the province of Manannan mac Lir, King of the Land-Under-Wave. And the Tuatha De Danaan, the supernatural race, lived in the glens, appearing to mortals as birds or animals. In front of the hearth, while stirring the broth, her granny sang to Heather from the time she was a babe in a cradle:

Wisdom of serpent be thine

Wisdom of raven be thine

Wisdom of valiant eagle . . .

The prayers didn't help her much—at least her granny didn't think so. Granny thought that wisdom would appear as good sense and judgment. As she told Heather's mother, after whom Heather was named, "Maybe it will just take longer for wisdom to reach her in Skye."

And what of Feather, her only daughter? She didn't visit Skye until she was a middle-aged woman, accompanying her mother there to meet the remaining relatives. Yet Feather also seemed infected by the Scots sensibility, expressing through her art Manannan mac Lir's underworld. It permeated everything she did or created.

CALGARY, JUNE 1996

The Air Canada Airbus soars through the stratosphere, a flying dinosaur carrying its passengers to Calgary. An oil-rich city, from the air, it seems to be levitating. Never quite losing its rural origins, its boundaries extend in all directions.

That's how it appears to Feather.

She grips the armrests of her seat, eyes wedded to the seatbelt light that just flashed on, wondering what it portended for this trip home. Landing is always the worst part of returning to Calgary, the place where she grew up. The air currents near the airport make for a bumpy ride before the airplane finally touches down and she can breathe again. Not a great fan of flying, she believes if humans were meant to do it, they would have been born with wings. But her fears don't stop her from traveling by air, even though turbulence causes her heart to do triple time. Some weed to puff on would help settle her down.

But landing isn't the only bad part about arriving in Calgary. At fifty-seven, Feather has lived in the San Francisco Bay area for more years than she lived in Canada. Dealing with Bubbles, her mother, who lives in a one-bedroom cottage that's part of Bow Lodge, an old-folks' center, puts Feather on edge. She loves her mum. But it's very difficult to connect with her. The name suits Bubbles. She actually lives inside

one she's never burst, making it nearly impossible for anyone to engage her, including Feather.

The two women talk on the phone several times a week. Feather tries to give Bubbles the emotional support she needs at this stage in her life, but it's a one-way street. Bubbles rattles on about whatever comes to mind, usually memories from the near or distant past, things that Feather has heard over and over. Since both of Feather's half-brothers are too wrapped up in their own lives to reach out much, the responsibility falls on her shoulders to keep tabs on their mother. But most of the time, she makes the phone calls from a sense of duty, not a spontaneous and sincere desire to talk to Bubbles. She always ends up the listener, her mother rarely asking questions about Feather's life. It's hard to be a wall, an object, and not a living, breathing person.

The only reason she is making this current trip home is because of Bubbles' ninetieth birthday, a major event to celebrate. But she also had called Feather in a panic a few days earlier: "We need to fly to Mexico City after my party and pick up Mother's ashes." Feather knew the story of her grandmother taking off for Mexico City with Jimmy Campbell, the man who had employed her as a housekeeper in his Mount Royal home back in the 1920s. That's about all she knew.

On the phone, she tried to keep her cool, remembering that Bubbles could distort things. "Hold on, your mum's been dead for over seventy years. Why would her ashes turn up now?"

Bubbles said the dead letter office in Mexico City had sent her a letter.

"A letter from the dead-letter office in MC?" Feather frowned. She's expected this phone call for some time. Senility was bound to claim even her mum, who has seemed immortal to those who know her. The woman enjoys a zest for life not often seen among her peers. She still lives on her own, cleaning the house before her monthly housekeeper shows up so "the poor woman doesn't have to clean up my messes." She also does her own cooking, laundry, and shopping.

FLING!

Nevertheless, this latest story about her grandmother's ashes crossed the line of believability. If Feather weren't her mother's daughter, she might have considered moving her to a different facility where she could get more attention. But just as the Air Canada Airbus reminds her of what now are almost mythic creatures, so too did Bubbles' story seem plausible. Mysterious things happen all the time. Life is unpredictable. If nothing else, the ashes' appearance made a good story to tell her friends.



Waiting for Bubbles to answer the door, Feather dangles her straw tote bag from one shoulder. She's wearing an ankle-length red peasant skirt with matching top and scuffed brown leather hiking boots. A yellow cotton triangle partly conceals her long dark auburn hair, now streaked with gray.

The door opens, and before Feather can speak, words rush out of Bubbles' mouth: "Mother's ashes, they're in the dead letter office. Mexico City." Feather sighs and steps inside, sets down her bag, and gives her mum a tentative hug. The corset she's wearing prevents Feather from feeling her generous curves, and she can smell urine. The scent is mixed with cheap Evening in Paris perfume. As usual, she feels overwhelmed by this woman who gave birth to her.

Bubbles pulls away and pats her hair. "I'm telling you, we need to make plane reservations right away."

"Cool it, Mum. You'll have a heart attack!"

Pure white hair a frizzed halo, scalp pink as a baby's, she checks out Feather from head to foot and shakes her head. "I thought you'd be dressed up for my party."

"I *am* dressed up!" Feather should be used to her mother's scrutiny by now and her disapproval of anything that isn't the latest in fashion. But she isn't. It still stings when she doesn't accept her as she is, a leftover hippie from the '60s.

Bubbles swerves away from Feather and lurches toward the coffee table, snatching a creased, brown manila envelope from among the clutter there. “I’m serious! Mother’s ashes—” She hands her the letter. “Look: it says Mexico City. But I can’t make out these words: *Oficina de cartas perdidas*. What do they mean?”

“I think it’s the office of lost packages.” Or maybe it means office of lost souls. Given the little she knows of her granny, she seemed a lost soul, unable to adapt to life in the new world after leaving the Isle of Skye. Maybe she does need to be rescued, locked in some in-between world for the sins she committed against her children, leaving them in the dust to follow her lover south of the border. The feminist in Feather applauds her granny for striking out on her own and going against the flow. But the mother in her knows the damage she did by abandoning her kids. She left much sorrow in her wake. Bubbles seems stuck psychologically at the age she was when her mother left, and Feather’s uncles didn’t fare well, either. Their lives were hollow shells, like something discarded on the beach. Still, she can’t be too harsh on her grandmother, a woman who followed her heart, not always an easy thing to do.

Feather flops onto the love seat, sending up a cloud of dust, and reads the letter aloud: “Dear Madam: There big box dead letter office address you name. Come get box. Mrs. Heather MacDonald ashes. Nun found box and note for family. Have box many years. No send ashes by mail for health reasons. When you pick up?”

“Granny’s ashes? She popped off years ago.”

Bubbles paces, the bunny ears on her slippers flopping back and forth, almost tripping her. “You’ve got to take me to Mexico City. It’ll be like old times. Traveling together.”

Feather throws up her hands. “Mexico City? No way. They kill tourists there. Anyway, I already have plans for the summer. I’m doing research in Puerto Vallarta and San Miguel de Allende on matriarchal cultures.” She’s been interested in spending more time in Mexico since doing her earth goddess series of sculptures. The matriarchy still lives

FLING!

there, hidden under the layers of modern life. There's something very primitive hovering in that country.

Bubbles scowls. "I can't just leave her in a foreign country. I could get killed here, too. Gangs are attacking old people all the time. Never mind, I'll get Buddy to take me."

"Buddy! Jesus, Mum, he can't handle a trip like that. I'd be a nervous wreck with the two of you wandering around Mexico together." She thinks of her younger brother and the mental condition that the doctors can't quite diagnose—psychosis, schizophrenia, whatever. It's kept him from living a normal life, and at fifty, he's still totally dependent on his mother.

Bubbles plants herself in front of Feather, hands on her hips. "I'm surprised at you. I thought you'd jump at the chance to travel there with me." She gets a hurt look on her face and purses her Betty Boop-painted lips, pouting.

Feather digs in her heels, refusing to let Bubbles guilt trip her. "You're too old, Mum. What if you get sick?"

She stamps her foot, and the bunny ears quiver. "Too old! Mother went there and she wasn't too old."

"She wasn't ninety."

"That's not so old. You know I don't look or feel my age."

Feather nods, wishing she were like other mothers and *did* look and act her age. "I'd worry the whole time. You need to be on a leash."

"What a thing to say! I'm no dog."

"No, but you're high maintenance."

"We can't leave Mother with those foreigners." Bubbles' voice falters, and tears creep down her cheeks. "I can't go to my grave in peace if she isn't buried properly."

"A trip like this could put you in your grave sooner than you'd like."

"Then I could be buried with Mother and you'd be rid of me."

Feather throws up her hands. "Okay! Okay! I'll take you. But I've already paid for a condo in Puerto Vallarta for a week. I can't back out

now or I'll lose a lot of money. And I've signed up for art classes in San Miguel de Allende after that."

Bubbles frowns. "You've always got other plans. You never have time for me."

"I said I'd take you."

"You're always telling me to 'go with the flow.' But *you* never do."

"You're not listening! You can join me in PV *and* San Miguel. But we can't stay in Mexico City for more than a few days."

"Just long enough to get the ashes, I promise," Bubbles says.

"Don't forget we'll be doing a lot of flying. San Francisco. Puerto Vallarta. Mexico City. You hate planes. And we have to leave right after your party."

"Don't worry. I'm planning to win a Ford Bronco. I was hoping you'd drive."

Feather laughs. "Yeah, right."

Though Feather hadn't included the capital in her travel plans because of the dangers lurking there, she realizes it could be the centerpiece for her summer research. An eight-ton disc-like statue of the moon goddess that the Aztecs worshipped stands in the Great Temple in Mexico City. Carlos Castenada's books have further convinced her there's something mysterious going on south of the border. That's why she hoped to find a shaman—male or female—who could guide her. That had been her plan until Bubbles talked Feather into this mad expedition to pick up her mother's ashes. Feather hadn't anticipated Bubbles being the shaman she sought, but who knows. In Mexico, anything could happen.

Still, she feels her wings have been clipped again. Weighed down by Bubbles' demand to travel with her, Feather also feels guilty for resenting it, knowing this could be their last trip together. Even so, she had anticipated a summer free of responsibility, with time to explore and expand and try out new modes of art. Pushing the envelope. Throwing off the restraints of teaching and being in control.

FLING!

Bubbles' abundant energy suddenly makes *her* feel old, though it dawns on her that she'll be orphaned one of these days. Though Bubbles seems immortal at times, she can't go on forever. That thought makes Feather think of the upcoming Mexico trip differently. It could be an opportunity for them to make a deeper connection before . . . She doesn't want to finish the sentence.

She looks around the cluttered cottage, inhaling the musty odor that's part decaying flesh and part rotting food that Bubbles has forgotten in the fridge. Doilies and afghans that she's crocheted cover every available surface. Photos of Feather and her brothers at younger ages sit on top of the TV. And a forest of ninetieth birthday cards covers the coffee table. The birthday has brought an outpouring of greetings from relatives in Scotland and from friends far and wide—even from Jean Chrétien, Canada's Prime Minister. Of course, Chrétien's office staff had sent the card as part of the government's attempt to acknowledge the country's oldsters. He didn't know her mum personally or he might not have sent it.

Bubbles rummages through a box of See's chocolates, a birthday gift. Her pudgy fingers select two chewy, soft-centered ones. She pops them into her mouth, cheeks puffing out like a chipmunk's. Then she turns on the TV. It flickers, and lines zigzag across the screen, distorting the actors' features. She grips the remote control in her right hand, jiggling it, aiming at the set, trying to unscramble the images. A fake green stone glints on her pinkie, and her eyebrows meet in a "V" of vexation.

Feather knows her mother's routine so well that she can picture what her days are like. She's just rushed home from cruising The Hudson's Bay, her hangout for years (the cafeteria on the fifth floor, the beauty salon on the second, and all the new fashions she likes to inspect), to watch *The Young and the Restless*, her favorite program.

Eloise, a nurse, has lost her job at a hospital because she's been caught stealing her patients' drugs and selling them on the side. Bubbles shakes her head. "I never would have suspected the nurse of stealing. She seemed like such a nice girl, though she was living a

pretty fast life, running around with drug addicts who smoked Mary something. It would break my heart if you ever did those things.”

Feather conceals a smile and grabs a chocolate while there are still a few left. “Mary something” is one of her good friends, relaxing Feather during tense times and expanding her vision, giving her insight into things she would otherwise overlook. Bubbles switches off the set, heaves herself off the chesterfield, and patters into the kitchen. Feather says, “Where’d you find the bunny slippers?”

“Where do you think? The Bay. I thought they’d be a nice gift for one of my granddaughters. But they’re too warm and cozy to give up. Those girls get enough from me anyway. And what do I get in return? Nothing but great-grandchildren. They produce babies as if they were rabbits themselves, and all from different fathers.”

Feather follows Bubbles into the tiny kitchen, amazed that at ninety she still has so much vitality. And spunk. Amazed, too, that they are daughter and mother. The two of them are so different, physically and otherwise.

Bubbles stops in front of the fridge. “Did you know Blessed, the youngest girl, had twins the last time she got pregnant? I had twins myself once. Stillborn. Beautiful babies. Boys. She must get it from me.”

Feather frowns. “Get what?”

“You know, the ability to have so many babies. I guess I should be grateful. But at my age, each new great-grandchild is like a nail in my coffin. Well, I refuse to think about that. I’ve still got a lot of living to do. One of my grannies lived till she was 105. I’m going to outlive her.”

Feather has heard these stories so many times that it’s hard to pay attention any longer: The dead twins. The granny that lived to 105. Another reason why she doesn’t look forward to spending a lot of time with her mother this summer. Bubbles’ endless stream of verbiage wears her out.

Feather watches her open the fridge door. A sour odor overpowers the room. Bubbles pretends to gag and says, “It reminds me of Ernie, that no good Englishman. I should’ve known better than to marry an

FLING!

Englishman after what they did to the Scots—my people. My father and granda would turn over in the grave if they knew. Was Ernie my third or fourth spouse? I can't keep track. Of course I didn't marry Manny, but we were as good as married. Lived common-law for more years than I can remember."



Bubbles hums, "I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair," relieved that it's Ernie who is now underground and not herself. They buried him a few weeks earlier. The two had tied the knot when she was seventy, in her prime. Met at a singles' dance, and it was love at first sight. Nine years her junior, he was quite a dresser in his white tux with a red bow tie and red cummerbund. All the women wanted to get their hands on him, but he chose her.

If she had known then what she knows now, she never would have married the bastard. He couldn't get it up the whole time they were together, and he ran her ragged. It's a wonder she isn't in the grave and not him. "Mother, get me my dinner. Mother, I need some razor blades." Mother this, Mother that. It drove her crazy.

He also put a good dent in her savings.

When she viewed him for the last time at the funeral home, she had asked for a few minutes alone with the body, wanting to leave something for him to remember her by. The others tiptoed out of the viewing room, and she stared for a few minutes at that face she'd grown to hate. The crooked Popeye nose with the black hair growing out of the nostrils. The mouth permanently twisted in a cruel smirk. Well, she'd get the last laugh on him. A waste of twenty good years. She could have met someone else and had a nice life.

She can still see Ernie sitting in that lumpy chair of his. She covered the ugly thing with one of her crocheted afghans, geometric patterns of orange and yellow and rust partially hiding it. The top of a concealed rum bottle is sticking up in the space between the chair's arm and the

cushion, and a *Penthouse* magazine is open on the footstool in front of him. Gray hairs on his chest show through the ‘V’ in the navy blue bathrobe. He wore it constantly in his last years, no longer bothering to dress. He hollers, “Mother, get me some milk, my ulcer’s acting up.”

Well, his ulcer won’t act up any more.

Bubbles had leaned over the coffin and picked up his left hand, the fingers stiff and resisting. She wrangled with the wedding band she had bought him until it flew off, landing on the floor. She bent over, snatched it up, and dropped it into her coat pocket. He wasn’t going to the grave with her ring on his finger.

She shoved his hand back under the white satin sheet covering the lower half of his body, opened her purse, unfolded the Kleenex she’d tucked in there, and carefully removed a razor blade. Gripping it between thumb and forefinger, she slipped it under his shirt, next to his heart. He wouldn’t need razor blades where he was going, but she left him one, just in case.

Determined to put him out of her mind, she grabs a jar of maraschino cherries from the fridge, slams the door, drops the lid on the kitchen table, and shuffles to the living room, popping cherries into her mouth and swallowing them whole. Some of the red juice dribbles down the creases on both sides of her mouth. The thought that her own mother might still be alive makes sense. No one saw the body. Bubbles just assumed it was buried in Mexico. Maybe she didn’t die after all. Maybe she’s remembered her birthday.

A whirl of movement, Bubbles pauses in front of Feather, who has settled on the love seat, and says, “You know, strange things have happened in our family. You remember Malcolm MacGregor, Mother’s father? He was a portrait and landscape painter. He died three times. Each time they put him in the coffin and were ready to bury him, he sat up and scared everyone to death. He had lead poisoning from the paint he used. It made him appear dead when he wasn’t. The last time it happened, the family didn’t believe he really was gone, so they kept his body in the house for two weeks—until it started smelling.”

FLING!

“What a great story, Mum. You never told me that one before.”

“You’re usually too wrapped up in your art to listen to me.”

“Not true. All I do is listen to you.”

Bubbles turns away, her feet moving to the rhythms of “La Cucaracha,” a tune that she hums. She dances around the room in the arms of a handsome Mexican with a thin black mustache. He’s wearing one of those floppy sombreros. After bumping into the TV set, she falls, out of breath, onto the couch, laughing, and grabs the letter from Mexico’s dead letter office, fanning her face with it, feeling hot suddenly, though she shouldn’t be getting hot flashes at her age. She still can’t believe it. Her mother’s ashes? She’s heard how bad the mail service can be in Mexico from Feather, who sent her a post card once from Puerto Vallarta that reached her two years later. Everything mañana. But seventy years! Holy smoke. It’s just like her mother to make a surprise visit.

Of course, Feather is full of surprises, too. Once, when she was driving up from California, she detoured to visit a sweat lodge in Summerland, B.C. Bubbles waited a week that time for her to show up. She changed her name from Heather to Feather not long after, hurting Bubbles’ feelings. After all, it was a family name.

She had named her daughter Heather after herself and *her* mother so they all could have the same initials—HHH. The letters look like a fence, or three women with their arms around each other’s waists in a cancan line. Bubbles could have been a dancer herself. It came naturally to her. She could do a Highland fling or a sword dance with the best of them. But her father put an end to that idea. “No daughter of mine is going on the stage!” She had tried to teach Feather the steps, but that girl could never get them right.

Never mind. They can keep their stage. She’s always up dancing before the music even starts, the life of the party. Dancing is in her bones. She heaves herself off the sofa and glides into the bedroom. Her bones creak a little as she slips nylon stockings over her legs. She calls out to Feather, “Look, I’ve still got pretty good gams. Strong. Shapely.”

Not like Feather's spindly legs. She wonders how she can walk on those two sticks. Bubbles hooks the nylons onto her girdle, her body shaped a little like the rain barrels they kept on the farm. What can you expect at her age? The flesh has a mind of its own, and rain barrels don't have legs like hers.

"I need you to help me put on my shoes."

Feather comes into the room and kneels on the floor. Bubbles hands her the new blue satin shoes she bought for the occasion, and Feather slips her mother's feet into them. "I bought them with money Ernie left me."

"I thought he left everything to his two boys."

Bubbles snorts. "They aren't boys. They're both in their forties. I went to an attorney and claimed what was rightly mine. What was left of his pension. I didn't nurse and cook for him all those years for nothing. I was entitled to something in return. Besides, he used up all *my* money."

"Good for you! You do deserve something from him."

Bubbles stands up and admires the shoes. They match her blue dress, flounces of chiffon setting off her hips. Her grandson Marvel, one of Abbot's brood, had given her a discarded gown of his to wear, but it was too small for her. She never could figure out why that boy wanted to wear dresses. It wasn't right for him to dress like a girl. Anyway, she wanted a new outfit. She didn't turn ninety every day.

She twirls in front of the mirror, preening. "Not bad for an old bird, eh?" she cackles.

Feather laughs. "You don't look like an old bird to me."

Bubbles agrees. Her hairdresser claims she doesn't look a day over seventy, and she doesn't feel it. Not anymore. She gets a sharp pain in her side now and then, and she has lots of gas. Her doctor said she should have some tests done, but tests are for school kids. She's too old for that stuff. She doesn't need a herd of doctors poking at her.

Otherwise, she's fit as a fiddle, and she's had a new zest for life since Ernie died. His dying freed her, made her feel indestructible in some

FLING!

way. She started writing poetry again and baking. She made the best pastry the day of Ernie's funeral, flaky and light. She froze some of the apple pie she made and has been feeding off it ever since.

A little of that flaky piecrust would taste good right now. She hasn't had any lunch. "Want some pie, dear?"

"How old is it?"

"It's still good. I froze it."

They both head for the kitchen. On the way, Bubbles notices her father's picture on the wall. He would be proud of her, outliving everyone, though he probably would have skipped the party. He'd be holed up with a book somewhere, hiding himself away like a hermit. Some of the books were in Latin or Greek. A real scholar. That's what drove her mother away—he never talked to her. That and her father's temper. He could wither you with a look when he got angry.

She's almost forgotten about her mother as well as Feather, who is waiting to take her to the party. Bubbles says, "I'm going to pack my suitcase right now so we can make a fast getaway."