

The Eternal Return of
art The Eternal Return
al Return of Clara Ha
Eternal Return of Cla
f Clara Hart The Eter
of Clara Hart The Etc

© Louise Finch 2022

"What a voice.
An amazing debut."

– Sue Wallman,
author of *I Know You Did It*

LOUISE FINCH

**The
Eternal
Return
of
Clara
Hart**

© Louise Finch 2022

The Eternal Return of Clara Hart

© Louise Finch 2022
LOUISE FINCH



THE ETERNAL RETURN OF CLARA HART

First published in 2022 by
Little Island Books
7 Kenilworth Park
Dublin 6w
Ireland

First published in the USA by Little Island Books in 2023

© Louise Finch 2022

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any means (including electronic/digital, mechanical, photocopying, scanning, recording or otherwise, by means now known or hereinafter invented) without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

A British Library Cataloguing in Publication record for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN: 978-1-915071-02-6

Cover title lettering by Holly Pereira
Cover design and typesetting by Niall McCormack
Proofread by Emma Dunne
Printed in the UK by CPI

Little Island has received funding to support this book from the Arts Council of Ireland



10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For someone so much braver
than anyone should ever have to be

© Louise Finch 2022

There's a body at my feet again.

The sky is pierced with stars and there's glass littering the ground. Cold, damp air and leaves on the verge. Blood on the road, grit in her skin. My breath scratches my throat. My knuckles plug my mouth and I bite.

What's wrong with this day? Death's strung through it like barbed wire – the one from a year ago, and this one now. Five is too many times to watch the same girl die.

There's a body at my feet and her eyes are closed, but not for long. A few more hours to go before she wakes up and we do this all over again.

I'm sorry.

I crouch. Smooth her hair. Lean in.

Wake up, Clara. We're in this together, you and me.

THE FIRST TIME

1.1

This day's a thief.

People call it Mum's 'anniversary'. But nah, that doesn't sound right to me. Not for a day like this. A date that's been lurking on the calendar, stealing happiness day by day and preparing for the sucker punch. I've kept my head low – don't look directly at it – but every morning wondered, is it here yet? Today?

How typical that when today finally arrives, this question isn't the first on my mind at all. It's this:

Did some prick just hit my car?

Bloody hell, this day's fulfilled its destiny within seconds. Exceeded expectations. Of course, I don't believe in destiny. Irony, though? Cheers, Universe, but really, you shouldn't have.

I flick away eye-crust and yawn. Waking up in my car is a new low; my neck complains from a night against the door, my joints snap, tie's too tight and mouth's thick and grungy as dishwasher. There's a slice of school car park in the rear-view

mirror. Ah, yeah, here, I remember. Tucked in the corner where the teachers won't notice. Apparently neither did this idiot.

The car that hit me pulls into the next space over, some battered red Micra – another rare student driver, though I don't recognise the wheels. I fall out my door, tuck in my rumpled shirt and stride down the side of the offending vehicle. I jam my body in the driver's open door before they've got more than a leg out.

'Oi,' I say.

I clock her, Clara Hart. Black hair, pointy nose studded and ears to match, but a pristine uniform. Her lips are pulled together in her usual disapproval under narrowed eyes. No wonder she hit me – probably couldn't see past her own inflated sense of superiority.

'You've just hit my bloody car.'

'Happy Friday to you too, Spence. You know you're late for form room?' Clara tries to squeeze by.

I grab her arm and pull. 'Look here.'

'Excuse me.' She rips her arm free and shoots me a dirty glance, but follows me round the back of my classic MG. I jab a finger towards the shining silver rear and then stop. After hundreds of hours in a garage with that car, I know every inch better than the hands I worked on it with. And the bumper's flawless. It's damn perfect.

I say, 'Bumper's scuffed.'

'Sorry, where?'

'Right. There.' Even to my own ears I sound unconvincing.

Clara squints, hands to hips. 'There's nothing. What would you like me to do about literally nothing? You want my insurance details?'

Her dark eyebrows are raised ready for combat. I slide my eyes over her dinged-up Micra. Slick my tongue over my teeth and feel the warm creep of embarrassment up my chest. Aren't I the asshole?

I say, 'Surprised anyone would insure yours.'

She holds up two fingers and folds the first one down. 'Firstly, I didn't even hit your car, look at it! Secondly, not everyone has a minted mummy and daddy to buy their cars.'

'Don't say?' But my heart winces. Shows what she knows. Hardly minted. No mum.

'Can I go now?' Her second finger's still pointed as if she's forgotten it's there. 'Some of us actually have standards to uphold.'

'You what?'

'Did you sleep in a ditch?' Her nose wrinkles.

'You learn to drive in one?'

Jesus, *drive in a ditch?* I ignore my own shit comeback and pop my boot to grab my bag. Can't stomach the sight of Clara's self-satisfied face. Sure, I might be hanging this morning, but at least I'm not smacking other people's cars. That's what I should've said.

Clara hauls her stuff from her car and stamps off, bag bumping her hip and black sketchbook wedged under one arm. She's an over-stretched exclamation point, dark hair, navy uniform and black stompy shoes interrupted by the pastiest legs you've ever seen.

I'm gearing up to shout something witty and cutting after her when she throws 'Take a shower!' back over her shoulder. Her ankle rolls over and she stumbles, nearly falls. She doesn't turn to see me creasing with laughter. Instant karma's a bitch, Clara.

I trail her at a decent distance to make sure I don't catch up. Wouldn't bother with form room at all 'cept I know Anthony'd be pissed off having to stick it out alone. He's sent a message asking where I am too and I reckon maybe he's remembered the day, which is pretty touching.

I gurn apologetically at Mr Barnes as I slide into a chair. Anthony claps a hand on my shoulder and looks me over, frown deepening. Maybe I do stink. Hard to judge now I've entered Anthony's Hugo Boss cloud.

'Did you have a blow-out with your dad again?' he says.

I shake my head, eyes on the desk. 'Can't fight if you don't talk.'

Can't talk if you don't stay home. And I reckon Anthony's about to acknowledge the day, but then he says, 'Good, mate, good. Did you finish that philosophy essay?'

'Sure.' That memory's somewhere in last night's blur. Started the essay two beers down, but I could write unconscious and churn out something passable. Anyway, it doesn't count for anything much. Few weeks till study leave and exams and then none of this will matter. Besides, I'll proof it. Quality control and all that.

Anthony folds a paper plane and crashes it against my head. 'Not just a pretty face, eh?'

'Not even.'

Around us students are slumped to their desks, revision-sapped and Friday-feeling, waiting to tumble into the weekend. Clara's a few rows over scribbling in a notebook. I stare, willing her to turn and be embarrassed all over again that she almost crunched my bumper, but she keeps her head down.

The bell goes. I stand with the crowd, but Mr Barnes catches me with, 'James Spencer? A word.' He shuts the door on a tangle

of students waiting to take their seats for first period and we're alone.

Barnes shuffles on the corner of his desk until he gets uncomfortable enough to blurt out what's on his mind. His eyes go over my crumpled shirt, my wonky tie, my hair that hasn't seen a shower in days. Here it comes:

'Is everything OK, James?'

'Fine, yeah.'

'You were late again this morning.'

Yeah, obviously. He's an all-right guy, Mr Barnes. Thin up to the ceiling and bald. Dressed in brown today with a lime-green tie to quirk up the look; his blazer makes my eyes itch. Don't want to be rude, he gets enough of that, but Clara was late too and is she getting this third degree?

'Fine,' I repeat.

'Your work is suffering too.'

'Right, yeah.'

A pause. Maybe Barnes watches the top of my head.

'You know you can come to me, or any of the teachers, if you need to talk? OK?'

There it is. Wondered when he'd get to the point. Barnes wants what they all want, only my deepest, darkest. Scrape out my feelings for him to examine then tell me they're not as important as an A-star in my exams. No thanks.

'Can I go?'

'I'll see you in philosophy. Try not to be late.' Barnes folds his hands, presses his lips tight. Picture of concern. I know why, of course. They don't want me crying, self-medicating or turning vandal on their watch. Don't want another student statistic going off the rails; at least, not

before achieving decent exam results to slap on their school record. Barnes is nice, like I said, but it's better to remember none of them properly knows me. Don't fall into that trap. I'm another kid on the conveyor belt. A job to leave at the end of the day.

I waste the first half of free period at the gym block getting showered. Body spray takes the edge off what's lingering on yesterday's shirt. Still looks slept in, but once the blazer's on you couldn't tell. Gum sorts my teeth. Two paracetamol tackle my clanging brain.

By the time I re-join my friends I'm halfway human.

Anthony and Worm are in the cafeteria where we fritter away free periods. The two of them look like dinner – an expensive slab of steak next to a piss-poor serving of skinny fries on the grey table. There's a perpetual smell of overcooked veggies in the caf, but it's better than the common room which is all a bit, well, common.

Anthony has his feet on a chair and a grin on his face. Worm's wearing a pout. I've missed something juicy, but can't summon the interest. The caf's nearly empty. Just occasional traffic for the vending machine. This is why Anthony, in particular, likes this place. He's an avid bird-spotter.

'Give us a smile, Mia,' he shouts to the girl making her way across the room. As I slump into a chair, Anthony turns to me and Worm and adds, 'I know what would cheer her up.'

'Chocolate?' I say as Mia feeds coins to the vending machine. She chances a glance over her shoulder, and I swing her a sympathetic smile. It's embarrassing the way Anthony

carries on. He goes to say something, but I scramble away from the table, checking my pockets for change and passing Mia as, snack secured, she heads back out.

Anthony shouts, 'Party tonight. Bring your sister.'

Mia doesn't look, doesn't stop.

I fumble a fifty-pence piece at the vending machine for a Mars and return to the table where Anthony says, 'Mia's three and a half stars – wouldn't buy again, but does the job.'

This still. Like I've got brain power to waste on rating Mia. Anthony pokes me with his foot and, since he's forced me to put a number on it, I say, 'Nah, dunno about that. Three max.'

Anthony says, 'You would, given the chance.'

'Nah.'

His smile dips. 'You'll meet me at seven?'

Oh. Yeah. I put my hands to my belly to hold in the grumbles, chew the inside of my cheek. I make a non-committal sound in Anthony's direction. Should've said something weeks ago when the party date was first set. Somehow I'd hoped Anthony'd just twig, spontaneously remember it was Mum's anniversary and rearrange. But I guess he's forgotten – she's not his mum after all – and now here's me, bottom of this deep hole staring up. I say, 'Might –'

'Gonna go easy tonight, Ant,' Worm says, beating me to the punch.

'Yeah, right,' I snort.

Worm'll go easy when he's dead.

Anthony's parties are legendary. Since year ten when his parents first left him home alone they've evolved from soft, beginner's anarchy – games of shit-faced sardines, twenty kids

piling into the under-stairs cupboard – to the reputation-breaking carnage of the latest iterations.

Everyone remembers a Mansbridge party, or, at least, the first seventy-five per cent of one. Last time Worm ended up bare-ass naked pissing in the hot tub at 9 p.m. He's not over it. I wouldn't be either if the girls at school still called me 'red rocket.' Not that it's worse than 'Worm', but the rumour is his junk's more canine than man.

Worm looks queasy on those memories.

'Know what? Reckon I'll not make it tonight,' I say, tone packed with apology.

'What?' Anthony gently boots me in the ribs. 'Don't be like that. You can't deprive us of your company just because you had too much fun on your own last night. Come on, strap some balls on.' The judgement in his eyes makes my neck hot.

'Reckon I should lay off a bit.'

'No way. Hair of the dog et cetera.'

'Yeah, but –'

'And we're nearly done with all this bullshit.' He waves a hand at the wipe-clean landscape. 'The last party before proper revision and exams kick off. I know you want to celebrate that, mate.'

I peel my lips from my teeth. No point in pushing the issue and earning a friendship deep-freeze for as long as suits Anthony. He can be petty that way and I can't hack this day alone.

Maybe he'd leave it if I said why I can't go. But there are dead parent rules: don't bring it up more than you strictly have to; death's a hell of a downer. My trauma is far less interesting to other people than it is to me. Besides, aside from the party, my other option is an evening in with Dad,

skirting the subject. Pretending the anniversary isn't today. Pretending she'll be back from work in a tick. Nah, if I have to pretend, better to do it around people who don't know the truth.

'Anyway,' Anthony says with a sideways glance. 'What kind of friend would you be if you didn't help celebrate me and Bee parting ways?'

There it is, the ace card, the break-up. Anthony's got me.

He's right. Can't ditch a mate who's just been dumped. Not even if it's only his pride that's stinging. Not even if I've a raging hangover. Not even if I'm the last person who should be commiserating.

'So you're coming?' Anthony says.

I glance at Worm, who's fiddling with his tie.

'Spence, use your words, mate,' Anthony says and then, distracted, 'Oh hello, look at this.'

'Christ.'

It's her again, the idiot who did my car, strutting across the cafeteria as though she can't see us, like we're not even here.

'What?' Anthony says, catching my expression. 'She is fine. Didn't you used to be into her, Spence?'

'No,' I say too fast.

'I'd smash the life outta that,' Worm agrees. 'She always gone here?'

'God bless puberty,' Anthony says. 'Amazing, isn't it? One minute they're sad little freaks, all black lipstick and chub, and the next, all the fat in their body's been sucked into their boobs and bum.' He makes a thick slurping sound and grabs his chest.

'Yeah, that's how it works,' I say. 'Fuck science, right?'

‘Four stars. Looks the real deal from a distance. Would recommend to a friend.’

‘No stars. Arrived damaged,’ I grumble, mind on my car and its emotional scars.

‘I’m going to invite her.’

‘Go on, Ant,’ Worm chuckles.

I say, ‘Nah, just –’

‘Hey. Party tonight at mine?’

Clara stops. Pauses, unwrapped Bounty hoisted to her mouth – shit taste in snacks added to her offences – and says, ‘Yeah, no thanks.’

‘Come on,’ Anthony says. ‘You’re guaranteed to have fun or your money back. Come to one party, get another free. Special introductory offer. I’ll give you the guided tour personally.’

Clara checks out the floor. Probably feels awkward even talking to Anthony.

He’s not wrong. Maybe, once upon a time, I might’ve been interested for five minutes. We’re a small year group. Small town. Limited pool of girls. And Clara’s not hideous, though the nose stud and tunnels through her multi-pierced ears smack of effort. If Anthony pushed me I’d give her three and a half stars now – points deducted for driving and personality. Clara’s one of those who don’t participate. The sort standing self-consciously apart from the crowd, as though *she’s* the one rejecting *us*. Someone none of us will recognise in five years when we dig out the year photo. Not fun. Not memorable. Not anything.

People like Clara twitch my nostrils; figuring themselves so above the rest of us who’re all trying our best to get by. Parties, sports teams and ill-advised behaviour is all part of the collective uniform she refuses to wear. She’s always been that

way, always, ever since I can remember. Depending on your perspective her attitude could be intriguing or infuriating, and I know where I stand.

Clara jerks her head up and, inexplicably, it's me she addresses, not Anthony. 'No thanks. I've heard about your parties and I've got better things to do with my night than watch someone take a dump on a table or get myself an STD.'

She takes a bite of coconut nastiness and saunters off, head too high.

'If you change your mind,' Anthony shouts after her. Under his breath he adds, 'Pfft. STD. She wishes.'

I begin to laugh, but pain jolts up my spine, an echo of the phantom impact that woke me, and I lurch forward just in time to hear Anthony say again, 'Pfft. STD. She wishes.'

This time I don't laugh, because what the hell? Some proper insistent kind of *déjà vu* there, the kind that gets you in the kidneys.

Just this day finding strange new ways to kick me when I'm down.

1.2

I scramble through my school day – free period, philosophy, lunch, history, free – and make it out the other side. At home I stand outside my front door, key in hand, eyes on the climbing rose by the window, trying to remember the name of it. Weird how plants have names. Weird how plants outlive us. Give myself a shake and go inside.