

The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending

by Catherine Brunelle

(A taster excerpt from Chapter 2: Elizabeth Claire Earl-Grey's story, 1980. Liz is the second Claire we meet in the novel, and Amelia's mother . . .)

Imagine a woman who appears normal. Her hair is a mass of soft brown curls that are resting upon a red knit scarf tied around her neck. Her overalls are plain blue, under which she wears a light red sweater with the sleeves pushed up. There are gold bangles on her wrists, ears with plain studs, a ring of silver on her finger . . . and when she smiles at you and introduces herself, “I’m Elizabeth Claire, my friends call me Liz,” you smile back and say hello and don’t suspect she’s anyone special; certainly no more special than the other women around campus.

But have you looked inside her pocket? Have you asked about that envelope?

Go on, ask her now.

“Oh this?” she’ll say, patting her hip. “It’s something I carry. Postcards from my mom, and her mom and our family. That’s all. It’s just a few of them, most are at home.” And suddenly she’ll become quiet. Words will form in her mouth and you’ll see her tasting them, sucking them, swallowing them whole. She won’t speak again, *not* once you ask about the postcards. Not until a new idea springs into mind.

“I’m pregnant, you know” she’ll suddenly say. (She’s been saying this to anyone who’ll listen.) The words will spill from her lips as though a pipe’s been unplugged. She’ll tell you how far, “Six weeks,” and the father, “My husband Eddie, he’s a caretaker here,” the gender, “A girl, I think, of course we don’t know yet but all the women in my family have girls first,” and she’ll tell you the baby’s name, “If she’s a girl then Claire will be the middle. Eddie and I are still thinking of a first, and Earl will be her last name. I’m not worried about the Grey, my brothers, Alan and Joseph, can pass that on.”

And then she'll go quiet again because she isn't a natural talker. Eventually, when it's most polite, she'll say "Nice to have met you" and slip away, because right now, at this very moment, she's late for an appointment and only stopped because you asked.

Off walks Elizabeth C. Earl-Grey, twenty-three year old mother-to-be, known to her friends as Liz. She slips on her Walkman (a wedding present and more expensive than she could afford) and cranks up the music; Blondie trails behind her as she crosses the lawn and disappears between the impressive stone buildings. It's 1980, November 2nd and the weather's fine in downtown Toronto. She's just a normal girl, floating about like any other . . .

The smell of roasted duck was on the autumn breeze as Liz hurried down College Street toward Mrs. Wong's apartment.

She was already late. Mrs. Wong would have laid the tea, let out the cats and was probably now waiting outside her front door, fanning herself like always despite the autumn cold, with sweat upon her brow and frown lines fixed into place.

Mrs. Wong would be waiting, and Liz was already late.

But that smell, that wonderful smell of roasted duck with salted skin and hot fat dripping – saliva pinched as it flooded her mouth . . . it wasn't her, figured Liz, it was the baby. The baby wanted to suck on the wing of a crispy duck.

Turning the corner onto Spandina Street, signs burst from their buildings in protruding, colourful Chinese characters. Everything around her: people—billboards—flyers, called in Mandarin and Cantonese with hasty English translations. *Happy lucky treats, Crispy Duck Buffet, cheap purses cheap, Lily Valley store, Fresh Fruit and Veg, fried Noodles two for one, all you can eat.* Liz switched off her Walkman and wove between the sidewalk shoppers; she passed vendors holding prawns, watches, apples, bags, scarves, dumplings, paper fans, carrots, peas and more to be snapped up.

This was Chinatown – always thriving, always ready to make a deal. From the windows above a drum beat and children shouted in unison, *Sie-Sie-Sie-Sie!* Red bits of paper, decomposing leaves and left-over crackers littered the gutters from last Saturday's parade; the dragons had come out and thrown lettuce to the crowd.

It was her favourite part of town, excepting the university campus.

Slowing ever further, Liz studied the restaurant windows. Red, dead and hanging ducks were roasting behind glass after glass. The cooks lounged inside, watching her as she watched them, as the fat dripped off and sizzled. *Yummy yummy! Half duck half price only three dollars!*

Liz was late. But this – she breathed deeply and imagined the salt on her tongue – *this* was for her baby.

Hello you ;)

You've just read an excerpt from

The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending,

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Thanks!

-Catherine :)

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