

LAST NIGHT OUT

by Lara Zielinsky

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"I can't believe you're just up and leaving."

In the front passenger seat of the Nissan Altima tooling down narrow King Street, Margaret O'Halloran lifted her right arm from the window and dusted her fingers through the reddish brown locks over her right ear. Her eyes remained on the scenery, the row houses, store fronts and street activity so familiar after 20 years.

"Margaret?"

"Morgan, Mary was right. I am the best choice."

Morgan LeTrec, a brunette only slightly younger than Margaret, turned her green eyes from the road, anger flaring in them in a bright flash which sharpened her already narrow angular features. "They don't think you have a life. Tell them that you do."

Rubbing her chin, half covering her mouth as if to hold back words, Margaret shook her head. "I can't," she denied, knowing the fear of her father's reaction to the revelation of her lifestyle had put the hesitant waver in her words.

Unerringly, her closest friend of 20 years in this place pegged her for her lack of backbone. "Certainly it can't be all that important anymore."

"Family is always important," Margaret countered. "You may have gotten over losing yours but I'm not you." She bit her lip as the faintly lined corners of Morgan's eyes tighten behind her glasses. "Damn. Morgan, I'm sorry."

She reached over the central console and put her hand over Morgan's on the gear shift. Morgan pulled her hand away. Margaret winced.

"You know I was proud to be with you," Morgan sighed. "I wanted everybody to know."

"I was too new, Morgan, you know that."

"So why not now?"

The car pulled up in front of one of the row houses. 212 King Street was imposing in brick reface and pristine white painted shutters flanking every window as it towered three stories above the street. Margaret stepped out, answering Morgan's question, though she knew she was avoiding it as well. "Because I'm moving home."

"Alexandria is home," Morgan replied turning around to the back of the car as she popped the trunk. She

had her hands on Margaret's luggage before the other woman could. "You've known it since your first midnight walk along the Potomac."

Margaret frowned. Morgan was right. She had fallen in love with the place this minute she arrived at American University to study. Georgetown on the Maryland side had been her haunt then, but as she shifted from International Relations studies to the more "domestic" Secondary Education English, her focus had shifted to the other side of the river, to Alexandria. Her teaching internships had both been in Alexandria schools, and she had taken her first position teaching English at Alexandria High in 1979. Commuting would have been a nightmare so she and another new teaching graduate from American University, had acquired this home together on King Street, just a few blocks west of the river. When Haakon Verult, her roommate, had left the school district to teach in the more prosperous Virginia suburbs around Richmond, Margaret had bought out his half of the mortgage in the mid-1980s. She had lived alone in the 4 bedroom, 2 1/2 bath row house ever since.

She had also discovered who she really was here. While a graduate student at night, and working days at Alexandria High, Margaret met Morgan, an out and proud lesbian and activist. Over coffee as they studied the psychology texts together, Morgan informed her boldly that her 'gaydar' had pegged her. And with that the bold blonde had asked her out.

She had been surprised by the enthusiastic kiss on her steps one late spring evening in 1980. However, she had been far from turned off. Their affair lasted through 1986, just after Verult had moved out. Morgan had wanted to move in.

It seemed the perfect way to establish themselves. Morgan took Margaret home to meet her family in November, only to have them both thrown out and told never to return. Morgan had craved family after that. While dismissing reconciliation with her own, she pushed Margaret more and more to introduce her to her family in Boston. Margaret's refusal, and leaving alone for the Christmas family gathering, had broken their relationship completely. Morgan moved out while Margaret was away.

Reconciliation had taken time, but over the next six years, Margaret had finally made Morgan understand that she had loved her, but after seeing Morgan's family's reaction, she would never risk her own.

That fear lived with her, but like now, was only painful when touched. She had become comfortable living the two lives, inasmuch as 500 miles made it easier to be the daughter in Boston, and the dyke in Alexandria. To Morgan, it was a personal flaw in Margaret's character, but Margaret had never seen a reason to change it.

Maybe, she thought sadly, I never loved Morgan quite as much as she loved me. But they were certainly close friends, having been there for one another after each of Morgan's breakups and the few disappointments, like political wrangling that lost Margaret her first shot at department chair.

Margaret looked up as she entered her front door, flipping on the light switch to her right, scanning the sitting room. The paper rack by her reading chair overflowed with newspapers and magazines. The small table next to it held a basket of the rest of her mail, spilling onto the highly shined cherrywood surface in front of a gilded filigree design rotary telephone.

Guiltily she turned to Morgan and held out her hand. The other woman placed the spare key in her palm. "I didn't ask you to do that," Margaret said.

"You didn't have to," Morgan replied. "Maggie, I will always love you."

Margaret swallowed as she caught the sheen in Morgan's eyes, and realized for the first time, what she really was giving up. "I..." She shook her head. "If I..."

Morgan warned, "Just come back and visit. Frequently."

Margaret nodded.

Morgan lifted the bags she had brought in and left Margaret briefly alone as she took them up the nearby staircase, her footsteps fading until they crossed the ceiling overhead as Margaret fingered through the pile of envelopes.

She was separating bills from correspondence when Morgan's voice drifted down. "What are your plans in Boston?"

Margaret turned as Morgan reentered the front room. "I'll be living with my father."

"Damn, you could sell this place and buy one of your own outright even up there. That would at least give you a chance to bring home a girl or two."

Margaret shook her head. "That's not the point. He needs me."

"Handywoman that you are, eh?" Morgan sighed. "You always did splice an electrical wire better than any other woman I ever met." The long-bodied woman settled into the cushions of the thickly stuffed small couch, and put her hands up behind her head as she leaned back against the arm and knocked off her shoes, putting her sock covered feet up on the other arm.

Margaret smiled at her friend's sybaritic maneuver and settled into her reading chair, their strained exchange completely past. "And people think you're the butch babe."

"Are you still going to teach? Or retire?"

"I'm not in my pensioning years. But I haven't settled on where yet. I might substitute for a bit, get the lay of the land."

"Just don't lay any of that land if you don't want your father to find out."

"That won't be a problem," Margaret said quickly.

"This isn't just a weekend holiday with the folks. And Boston's got some beautiful women."

"Met some?" Margaret asked. Determinedly she kept her mind off the image which had flitted across her mind of the young teacher, Ronnie Cook, who had so gregariously shown her around Winslow High

School. She would have gotten a more thorough tour from Steven, she knew, but there was something energizing about Ronnie when they had spoken. Even after Margaret had taken the opening about the textbook and basically trashed the author, Ronnie had gamely soldiered on.

She remembered being that gung ho about her teaching. She still was to a great extent, just realism had curtailed her a bit in two decades. Settling to the divan she looked around at her home, struck by the years of memories here. The small couch where Morgan sprawled had been her second purchase, only after the huge oak queen-size bed that graced her bedroom upstairs. For a long time, that, and a folding table in the corner of the kitchen which served as both eating and paper-grading space, were all the furniture she owned. The oval area rug under their feet had been a rummage sale acquisition, a rainbow in dark hues radiating out from a sunset-colored centerpoint, which now shone up through the glass-topped coffee table. She and Morgan had enthusiastically once made love on that very table with Morgan's wild idea to put a neon strobe light underneath. She blushed at the memory then sighed. She wasn't 25 anymore.

"You hungry?" Morgan asked suddenly.

"No, well..."

"We could call up a few of the girls, give you a send off down at Murphy's."

"Why don't we just order in from Bertucci's?"

"Pizza?" Morgan curled up her nose. "I wanna get plastered and get you on a dance floor one last time. Garlic gives me horrible breath."

"It's Sunday night, and it's preseason. You really want to brave the crowds in the bar?"

By way of answer, Morgan asked, "Which teams are playing tonight?"

"I think there's a Pats game starting at 7. They're away at Indianapolis though..." Morgan's smirk broadened and Margaret slowly trickled her thoughts to silence. "You fink!"

"Ah, hey, can I help it if I know what you like?"

"You do. You always do. All right. See who can join us at Murphy's in an hour. I need to shower." She nodded toward the elegant rotary dial phone on a side table as she pushed to her feet, and started to the hallway.

"Phone duty while a beautiful woman is in the shower!" Morgan screwed up her face in exaggerated disappointment. Margaret's laugh was enough solace though that she picked up the receiver and began dialing out a familiar number. "Alex?" she questioned as soon as the line opened. "Get your butt in gear and meet us at Murphy's in an hour." She paused. "Yeah, Jeff, this is Morgan." She smiled. "I'll smoke your butt at pool too. All right. You're on. You can come too. We're giving Margaret a send-off. She's decided to move back to Boston." She shook her head. "Damn fool notion if you ask me, but maybe you can convince her better."

"Double or nothing," the man said as the eight ball sank into a side pocket, put there by the woman across the table from him, just straightening and tucking an errant lock of auburn hair behind her left ear.

"That'd make eight drinks you'd owe me, Lou," she said with an easy smirk. "And I'm not that thirsty tonight. Just have the four brought to my table." She turned and headed toward a table near the live music stage where two other women and a man, all dark-haired, were closely chatting.

The conversation died as she neared and Margaret knew that she had been the topic of conversation as Morgan gave her a glance. "Plotting to sabotage my train?" she asked. Her voice was light; the two icy beers she had already consumed, and her recent win at pool, made her forgive them for plotting to keep her here. If she hadn't other obligations, she knew she would always be happy here.

She slid onto the remaining vacant stool and lifted a longneck bottle to her lips.

"Who'll win our drinks for us?" the man asked as he sorted the newly arrived bottles from the waitress's tray.

Margaret slapped his near thigh then let him capture her hand and bring it to the table top. "I am gonna miss you," she said softly, sincerely. He had been the first colleague at Alexandria High she had come out to. Straight and married, to the woman to his right at the table, Alexis, he had guessed really, when she had been in the throes of her breakup with Morgan. Since the woman had accompanied Margaret as a "companion" to several faculty and family functions, he had guessed they were more than friends pretty quickly, and been unfazed by it. "Jeff, I've known you 15 years. Can't you once buy your own beer?"

"It's much more fun winning them off you, you shark." He leaned over, clinking his bottle neck to hers and stole a quick peck on her cheek. After downing a large swallow of his Dickie's Lager, one of the mini-brews, he fished out the last of the complimentary peanuts and declared, "Time for a real appetizer. Skins or wings?"

"Wings definitely," Morgan answered. Margaret nodded.

Jeff scrounged in his back pocket for his wallet and waved over the waitress. "Large order of T-wings," he said. "And start our tab." He grinned at Margaret. "The rest of this night is on me. Anything the lady wants."

"What if all I want is a cold beer and a warm bed," Margaret winked at him.

"I'll have you talk to her about that," Jeff nudged a finger toward Morgan, who ducked behind the neck of her bottle.

"Dance with me?" Margaret asked. She decided better now than later, to settle Morgan, who was taking this a lot harder than Margaret ever thought she would.

Morgan looked up from her distracted examination of the drink coaster, cardboard imprinted with the tavern's logo. Margaret grasped her hand. "All right."

"We'll be back in a few minutes," Margaret said to Alexis and Jeff, who nodded.

"Honey," Alexis asked softly, leaning close to Jeff as Margaret and Morgan settled into a spot on the dancefloor about 15 feet away. "Is she going to be all right?"

"Margaret'll see to it. She cares for her. Just not the way Morgan wanted."

"No, I mean Margaret."

"She is pretty determined to make this move."

"But that doesn't mean she's happy about it."

"Well, she'll have to work that out. Apparently her father's in pretty tough straits."

"She should just come out."

"Not with her family," Jeff had heard the reasons long ago, when Margaret explained why she would never have taken Morgan home, which had led to their break up. "He's old Irish Catholic, from the Old Country."

"That explains a lot, but it doesn't make it any easier."

"No, it doesn't." He hugged his wife to him, aware acutely how easy he had it, and conversely how uneasy life could be for others. "I hope she can find a balance."

"Otherwise she'll be back here for a lot of visits."

"And that will just kill Morgan," he concluded sagely.

The women they discussed had just cuddled together on the dance floor, the slightly taller Morgan cradled against Margaret's shoulder as they whispered, moving slightly to the beat of MUSIC

"Maggie," Morgan whispered. "It's just not going to be the same."

"It hasn't been the same since this town became the Republicans hang out," Margaret pointed out.

Morgan chuckled. "Damn Gore for losing," she countered wryly. "We worked so hard on that campaign."

"I know we did. And it was a helluva lot of fun."

"So you think this town's going to the dogs?"

"Certainly are other places more amenable to our way of thinking," Margaret pointed out.

"Boston?"

Margaret shrugged. "I don't know."

"I'll Google Boston's gay scene. Maybe I can come for a visit." Margaret stiffened. Morgan recanted, "Or not."

"It's not that I don't want to see you. But... well, you know it would be awkward."

"What's awkward? A friend comes for a visit."

Margaret exhaled and this time laid her head on Morgan's chest as the taller woman put her arms around her back. "I'll think about it."

Margaret stepped out of the DC summer sun and into the front hall of Alexandria High, adjusting the shoulder strap on her purse. She had called the principal, Jackson Clermont, just an hour ago, and asked for this meeting, but trepidation slowed her steps on the tile, each click of her heel echoing slightly.

Clermont had been quite a gifted teacher when she knew him in that role as a mathematics teacher. His sense of fairness and deep abiding love for the classroom had continued to color his actions as he moved into administration. In Alexandria, classroom time was sacred. She had appreciated that so much over the previous administration, which seemed to find every excuse to interrupt, and when complained to, told teachers to "get over it" rather than setting better guidelines for what was a valid reason to interrupt a class and what clearly was not.

Establishing his guidelines his first day as principal, Clermont had made it clear to every club sponsor, every teacher aide, every teacher, and every custodian that they had a responsibility to see that every student spent every minute possible with their teachers engaged in productive learning, and positive reinforcement.

It extended to teachers and their professional training as well. Every teacher received professional days, on or off-calendar, fully paid, and substitutes were assigned from a small cadre of retired teachers who worked in your discipline and could handle actually instructing competent lesson plans left behind.

Margaret had flourished professionally in such an environment, learning more about being a skilled teacher, and aide to her students as they learned. She had learned about the diversity of lecturing techniques and guided project methods, as well as good old fashioned, kick-em-in-the-pants motivation. She had brought computers effectively into her classroom, for research, and presentations. Her classes had been the first to meet the International Baccalaureate standards and become the cornerstone of the IB program when it launched at Alexandria High.

She loved her work, loved her kids, and loved the positions of influence she had attained in 15 years.

"All right," she said. "I don't think I'll have just one name, but I will give it careful thought."

"What do your instincts say?" he asked.

She thought that a little uncharacteristic. Apparently the impending school year, only three weeks away here, had him a bit nervous. She ticked through her English department colleagues.

Marshall? She shook her head. The man was almost at retirement himself, and openly preferred spending as little time as possible on the campus. The extra hours, despite the extra pay, would be of little interest to him. He might do it, but he wouldn't do it justice.

Bucholtz? Lydia Bucholtz was a solid teacher, but young. And with a new baby. She had enough distractions.

Gagneaux? The Cajun-born transplant had energy to burn, ten years teaching under his belt, and would be her choice for department chair. Would he be interested in taking on the challenges of IB? He had his masters if she remembered correctly, and the curriculum practically directed itself now. He just had to dot the i's, cross the t's, and mind his p's and q's when talking with administration outside, since he had a tendency to be garrulous and chatty.

The rest of the department quickly slipped by her mind. She had an instinct that Gagneaux would do the best job. She lifted her eyes from the floor where she had sent them to focus inward while she thought. Clermont waited expectantly. "Gagneaux," she decided.

He nodded. Obviously with his own knowledge of the faculty, he had been leaning that way as well. "Just for English?" he asked.

"No. While Michaelson could take over as IB chair, I think if you want to give it all over to one person, Gagneaux's got the time to devote, the energy, and the talent to work with my kids."

Jackson smiled broadly. "Can I buy you a drink? Tell me about this area where you're moving?"

She declined. "I still have a bit of a hangover from last night." She rubbed her temple.

"All right. You know, if you have any notes to leave behind, I'd appreciate them to give to Greg."

"I'm packing at home. I'll keep the box separate and bring it by the end of the week."

"Anything in your room you need?"

She had taken most of her classroom materials home at the end of post-planning back in June, but Margaret figured she had better make a walk-through just to be sure. Jackson invited himself to walk with her.

As they walked through the corridors, to the sectioned off wing that held all the IB classes, Margaret drifted back to her tour at Winslow. The wall coverings at Winslow were different from Alexandria's, but only in scope, she realized. The pride of student work, the dedication of teachers sponsoring

groups, with flyers and notices, on the corkboards, was all the same. The drama productions, the choral rehearsals, the band sessions. Winslow had a chamber choir. Alexandria had a jazz band. Winslow had advertised a flower sale for a group's fundraiser. Student Government at Alexandria High had sold corsages for the Christmas dance to raise money and buy blankets for a homeless shelter.

She entered her classroom with her key, and then paused a moment to slip it from the keyring. She passed it to Jackson without comment.

She looked at the freshly repainted walls, and the new carpet underfoot. The student desks had been repainted, and some replaced. "Where'd you get the funding?" she asked.

"IB grant came through," he said. "Two of them actually."

"And the rest of the school?"

"We got an AYP boost, and the School Board approved a 3% budget increase."

"Across the whole district?" Jackson nodded. Margaret was floored. The school district hadn't approved a budget increase to match inflation in more than six years.

"Looks like I'm leaving just as things are getting good," Margaret said. She certainly didn't have this sort of windfall to look forward to. For all that Steven was probably putting a positive spin on a decent place, Winslow was an inner city school in a poorer section of Boston. She knew how funding distribution fueled by politics worked.

It wouldn't be easy.

"Having second thoughts?"

"Yeah," she admitted.

"Well, what you've done here, I have no doubt you'll do in Boston, or anywhere you go," Jackson assured. "It's never been about the resources. The first teachers had only stones and chisels and we did all right."

Margaret laughed. "I'll remember that." She however walked over to her desk. They were encouraged to take personal items home over the summer, so the custodial staff wouldn't have to worry about breaking something. The pen set and stand had been a gift from her seniors, A pen hole tucked in the back of the head of an array of four busts of World Literature's finest writers. Her students had researched the authors looks and two of her students, also art students, had created and fired the busts. They had raised money to buy the four different feather quills, and the vial of India ink which sat cupped in the curved hands of a chalice. "Drink from Life's Wonders... Read", read the inscription on the base which joined the five objects into one.

She hadn't had a place suitable for it at home, so had left it here, where it had the front and center spot on her desk. Besides, her students' work deserved to be shared.

And it reminded her she had the power to inspire. So she picked it up in both hands from the desk surface now.

"Nice," Jackson said.

"From my students," she said. Yeah, they might be passing on to other teachers, and professors in college. But they would always have once been hers. Her legacy. She gently held it to her chest.

"Do you need a box for anything?" Jackson had turned from her and noticed other things on the desk.

"None of its mine. The reference books that are mine, I took home. The rest here is all registered to the school or the district. Greg will need them."

When the realtor came on Thursday to show the house, Margaret was very nearly done packing. Almost all of her belongings had been boxed, the furniture sold through a consignment dealer.

The doorbell rang. Dusting her hands off on her jeans, Margaret got to her feet just as Jessica, another friend and neighbor, could reach the door.

"Realtor," she said, stepping back as Margaret walked up.

"Hey," she said. "Good to see you again."

"I think these are the ones, Ms. O'Halloran. They're a young couple. I think this place will be just the place they want to grow. I'm going to tout your attic room as a nursery."

"It's empty and freshly painted, neutral in white."

"And the morning sun's coming through that big window up there. Perfect." The woman turned briskly and gestured to the couple standing back and looking up the front of Margaret's home, the tall three story row house imposing and roomy looking even from outside with its brick painted to blend easily into the neighbors left and right.

Her flower boxes, in both the first and second story front-facing windows, had cooperated, managing to look bright with their beds of Alchemilla and white Campanula. Her back gardens were a little more sparse, filled with more spring blooming perennial varieties, but the Heliopsis were at least blooming which lined the fences separating her yard from her neighbors. She had not had time to restrain the back gate, since leaving to be with her family, and such a short time returned, but the hinges all had been freshly painted with black rust-proof paint at the beginning of her summer break, and still shined.

The staircase banisters had been polished. The few remaining furnishings she intended to take for her bedroom and sitting room at her father's home, remained scattered through the house, to help prospective buyers realistically estimate the space in a given room.

"Welcome," she said to the couple taking the stones one at a time up to her front steps.

"Hello." The husband looked up at her, and from the way he was solicitously guiding his wife's elbow, Margaret knew the woman was pregnant, and probably not very far along since her reed-thin body looked almost devoid of any curves.

"Please come in," she said, holding the door for the couple stepping inside.

Jessica pulled off the mop-woman's scarf she had tied around her hair and shook it out, stepping back as well. Her movement into the front living room was inviting and the couple followed her. The small elegant sofa remained, Margaret unable to part with it, and it helped describe the wall length very well, with end table width clearances on both sides.

The couple studied the front view at length, opening the curtains to look down at the street. Margaret always wondered, as she watched these people move through her home, what each would gravitate toward, or take to, in the place.

The husband knocked around the baseboards with the toe of his shoe and tested the stability of the bannister before walking past it and the closet tucked underneath it, and headed into the formal dining room, and through that, into the kitchen. He asked which appliances were staying. Margaret indicated all of them. He seemed surprised. She told him that she was moving someplace already furnished.

"Where?"

"Boston?"

"We're from Russell, Texas," he said.

"What brings you to Washington?"

"Government," he said. "Probably like most."

Margaret was stunned. "What area?"

"EPA."

"What did you do back in Texas?"

"Corporate Law." The wife answered.

"It's her posting," the husband belated explained. "I'm just a teacher."

A lawyer and a teacher. What a small world , Margaret thought, instantly thinking of Ronnie Cook. Clearing her throat, she asked what subject. He indicated high school biology. She explained she was an English teacher.

"How's the schools around here?"

"I'm partial to them. I worked at Alexandria High, which runs an IB program. Jackson Clermont is the principal." She pulled a piece of paper from her refrigerator note pad and scribbled the School Board address and HR number, Jackson's name and number, and Alexandria High's address. "Alexandria's just about 2 miles away, just go west on King Street." She smiled. "It's a nice walk."

"There seems to be a great deal of activity on the street."

"Rolls up around 6 and gives way to a quiet nightlife. Most folks move indoors after dark." She was now guiding them up to the second floor. "You can see all the fireworks from the third floor porch here. And most folks spend Sundays down on the riverfront."

"Good neighbors?"

Margaret turned to Jessica. "Jessica lives in 806 King Street. She and her family have been here 30 years. She took over the house when her parents decided to move to the Virginia countryside."

Margaret stood back as the couple introduced themselves to Jessica, as Don and Beth Ritliner. Jessica, who not only lived here currently, but had spent her high school years here as well, was a fountain of information as the five moved through the house, and finally reached the third floor room, with its balcony doors. The morning sun was streaming in, and the room was cast with a slight glow. Don continued his habit of kicking baseboards, and when they stepped out onto the balcony, he checked the latches on the doors, and the steadiness of the balcony railing. Beth listened avidly as the realtor conveyed her idea for this as the baby's nursery, and even Margaret could see Beth imagining sitting on the balcony in a rocking chair singing to her child as they looked out toward the river.

She could practically see the sign changing in her front yard to "sold."

As she brushed her hand down the bannister, following the couple and the realtor this time instead of leading, she thought, *I'm leaving this place in good hands*. Don was obviously something of a handyman. The home didn't need anything extravagant in the way of skills, but upkeep was pretty steady, albeit satisfying.

Margaret was right. By Thursday night, the Ritliners had made an offer on the house, slightly less than for what she had asked. The dickering was done inside half an hour though, and the closing date was set for Monday afternoon. As long as the inspection by their home inspector went well on Friday.

So, it was done. Monday morning the moving company would collect the last of her furnishings and begin trucking them to her new address in Boston, and Monday afternoon she would sign away her home in Alexandria, Virginia.

Her last night she spent sitting on that third floor balcony, sipping from a paper thermos of hot coffee and eating the last of carry out from Murphy's Tavern, closing one very long chapter in her life, and wondering what lay ahead in the new one.

THE END

Next Story: Story 3: Conflict of Interest