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CLOSED DOORS



LISA O'DONNELL

Author of *The Death of Bees*,

WINNER OF THE COMMONWEALTH BOOK PRIZE 2013

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About the Book

'There are no strangers in Rothesay, Michael. Everyone knows who you are and always will. It's a blessing but it's also a curse.'

Eleven-year-old Michael Murray is the best at two things: keepy-uppies and keeping secrets. His family think he's too young to hear grown-up stuff, but he listens at doors; it's the only way to find out anything. And Michael's heard a secret, one that might explain the bruises on his mother's face.

When the whispers at home and on the street become too loud to ignore, Michael begins to wonder if there is an even bigger secret he doesn't know about. Scared of what might happen if anyone finds out, and desperate for life to return to normal, Michael sets out to piece together the truth. But he also has to prepare for the upcoming talent show, keep an eye out for Dirty Alice, his arch-nemesis from down the street, and avoid eating Granny's watery stew.

Closed Doors is the startling new novel from the acclaimed author of *The Death of Bees*. It is a vivid evocation of the fears and freedoms of childhood in the 1980s and a powerful tale of love, the loss of innocence and the importance of family in difficult times.

About the Author

Lisa O'Donnell won the Orange Screenwriting Prize in 2000 for her screenplay *The Wedding Gift*. Recently she took a break from screenwriting when she moved to LA with her two children. *The Death of Bees* is her first novel.

Also by Lisa O'Donnell

The Death of Bees

Closed Doors

Lisa O'Donnell



WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

To my sister Helen, our wee Nelly.

ONE

I'M NOT SPYING on Mrs Connor, I only watch her dance because her windows are so low and I can reach. All the houses have low windows where we live because all the houses are the same. A sort of sandy orange colour, except Alice McFadden says they're peach and I don't know the first thing about colour because I'm a boy.

'Michael Murray, I hate you, you don't know anything about anything and your fly is always open.' I look down when she says this in case my fly is open but it's not open and then she goes 'Ha, made you look' and skips away to find someone to tell. I want to punch her in the face for it and if she was a boy then that's what I'd do. I'd smack her so hard. I wonder if I can punch her on the arm next time I see her but I know she'll go bawling to her brother and so I shout after her and call her a 'cow' but then she goes bawling to my ma who calls me in and makes me apologise to Alice and her fake tears. She loves getting people in trouble, that Alice. I don't know how Marianne Cameron can stand her. They hang around together all the time, mostly singing and dancing. They're practising for their talent show and who knows when that will be. They're always going on about it. I bet it never happens. They've had posters Sellotaped on every lamp post in Barone for months and months. They're mostly drawn by Marianne who's brilliant at art, although Alice drew the one next to Mrs Connor's house. It's rubbish. They say they're going to have the concert in the car park and are having auditions, but some of the girls on the street don't want to sing because Marianne is singing and they can't dance either because Marianne is doing

some Highland dancing and some ballet. Tracey Stewart and her mad ginger hair says it isn't fair Marianne is doing all the good stuff so Marianne says Tracey can make the costumes and Fiona Brown with the longest legs in the whole wide world is going to help her. They're also doing some backing vocals on a few of Marianne's songs with Alice. Paul MacDonald is going to dribble his football for everyone to see because Paul thinks he's great at football, but he's not as good as me. I'm going to do keepy-uppies on my knee. Fat Ralph wants to flip over but because the car park is made of concrete Marianne says he'll kill himself and it won't be safe, so he's going to jump up and down with an invisible guitar or something like that. I'm looking forward to hearing Marianne sing, she sings really well. Alice doesn't. Alice can't do anything Marianne can do. Marianne is brilliant. Her hair is nice and she looks clean. Alice looks dirty and so I call her Dirty Alice, but not to her face, behind her back. It always makes people laugh when I say it, except Marianne, she doesn't laugh, not one bit.

'That McFadden girl needs a good bath and a comb put through her hair,' says Ma.

'Poor man,' whispers Granny and then crosses herself because Dirty Alice's ma died, leaving her with her big brother and a father who never opens the curtains.

'Can't move for the grief and there's Luke left to do everything for the girl and him only fourteen years of age,' says Ma.

'I saw him taking two big bags of shopping into the house last week,' Granny says. 'It's no way to live,' she adds.

'Know you're lucky,' Ma spits at me even though she's always sending me to the shops for this thing and that thing and sometimes for women's things. That's what Da called them.

'It's a disgrace. Get them yourself. Don't be embarrassing the boy. Hide them under your jacket, son.'

And that's what I did. I don't mind really. I do all sorts for my ma.

'Angel baby,' she'll say, 'go do your ma a wee favour.' Angel baby is her special name for me. It also means I'll get some money out of it for sweets. I love this name.

All the houses on Barone sit high on a hill and overlook the sea and the town where we live. Ma says people in other parts of the world pay huge fortunes for beautiful views and stretches of sand.

'Good luck to them,' says Da.

Ma loves where we live and like Da and Granny she has lived here her whole life. She doesn't want to go anywhere else, not even when she could have. Everyone says Ma is very smart and could have gone to university or something like it, but she was too in love with my da and mad for the island, even though people here gossip all the time and want to know all your business. It makes my granny crazy, even though she gossips all the time and wants to know everyone's business.

'You can watch the ferry going in and out from the harbour all day long,' says Ma. 'Who wouldn't want a view like that?' she tells my da.

Ma says we did good getting a house on Barone Hill and it was brilliant of Margaret Thatcher to build them for us. That's when Da tells her to 'Shut the "F" up' because Da hates Margaret Thatcher and because she didn't build them anyway. A big fight always happens when he says the F-word, and words like 'beer', 'bitch', 'dole', 'stupid', 'unemployment' and 'lazy arse' go flying around the kitchen until a door slams and locks all the words away. Da quickly grabs his coat and goes to the pub after a fight like this and Granny says that's why he started the fight in the first place, so he can get out of the house and drink.

'He'll be home later stinking of beer and eating chips,' says Granny. 'You see if he won't.'

Later I sneak out of bed to share the chips. Da is always pleased to see me. He does smell of beer but I don't care because the chips are so good. He'll switch on the telly and we'll watch Barry Norman telling us about all the great films we can see when we go to the mainland in Glasgow, except no one ever goes to the mainland in my house. If you want to see a movie with Al Pacino or Indiana Jones in Rothesay you have to get it on pirate tapes from Knobby Doyle, but you also need a video recorder and we don't have one of them. Da says he can borrow one, maybe at Christmas, and that gets me excited.

'Why do you hate the prime minister, Da?' I ask him.

'She only cares for rich people,' he says.

'Ma likes her and she's not rich.'

'Ma likes the house, Michael, and she wants to buy it with my old man's money and pretend she's rich.'

'It's a nice house. I like it.'

'Let me tell you something about Margaret Thatcher. If she gets away with it she'll have us paying for everything. Education, son. Medicine. Now she wants me to buy the house and make all her problems my problems. I wouldn't waste one penny of my father's money buying this place. Your mother's a madwoman. The place would blow away in a storm.'

'Is there going to be a storm, Da?' I ask.

'No, son,' he sighs. He lets me finish the chips first before he packs me off to bed. He's like that, my da.

TWO

MRS CONNOR LOOKS like Blondie but then all the ladies look like Blondie round here, except Katie Calderwood, she wants to be Suzi Quatro and has her hair all spiky and wears a leather jacket. Ma says Katie Calderwood looks like a man but she would never say that to her face.

‘She’s built like a brick shithouse,’ says Granny. ‘She’d smack you in the gob.’

This makes Granny and Ma laugh until they’re falling about the place.

‘And what about that father of hers?’

Ma and Granny exchange looks.

‘What about him?’ Da says from behind his paper.

‘You know fine well,’ says Granny to Da, but Da doesn’t know ‘fine well’ and tells her so.

‘He’s a willy wofter,’ says Granny.

‘Away you go,’ says Da.

‘He definitely curls his hair,’ says Ma.

‘The man has a natural kink. He has two children for gawd’s sake.’

Da is getting annoyed. He hates the gossiping of Ma and Granny.

‘You’re only defending him cause you drink with him,’ says Ma.

‘I’m defending him because he is a man like I am. He drinks pints, has babies and works in construction, that’s no place for a homosexual,’ says Da.

‘What’s a homosexual, Da?’ I ask.

Da looks uncomfortable, so do Ma and Granny. This means I’m going to get tossed from the room or lied to. I get tossed

from the room.

I take my football to the garden and think of Mrs Connor, who mostly wears a dressing gown when she's dancing, except when she goes down the road to the shops, she dresses up then and wears a stripy skintight dress or a pair of satin trousers like Olivia Newton-John from *Grease*. She looks paler in the sunlight, but she's still Mrs Connor and looks nice.

'It's a shame her husband left her,' Da says. 'He must have been mad.'

'She looks like a prostitute,' says Ma.

'And drinks like a fish,' says Granny.

Da tells Granny to be quiet and mind her business, but Granny can't. She loves to talk about other people and their business, it's her favourite thing in the whole world, and so she waits till Da is out of the room and calls Mrs Connor a slut. Then she whispers a story to Ma. I can't hear them but Ma nods and tuts and sighs.

'Disgusting,' Ma says to Granny.

Granny nods. 'I told you. A regular wee hussy,' spits Granny.

Ma sees to the laundry. I really hate our laundry. It always stinks of cigarettes because Granny and Ma smoke like chimneys. I bet my teachers think I smoke I stink so badly.

'How many times do I have to tell you, Rosemary? I hate the smell of fags on my shirts. Can you not stop for five minutes, at least while you're doing the washing?' snaps Da.

'Why don't you do the washing?' Ma says and flings a vest at him.

'You're a couple of fishwives, you know that? You could spend all day in this kitchen smoking and talking shite about folk. It's a disgrace.'

'Not all day. She has a job, remember?' Granny says.

Ma's a cleaner at my school. When we finish our adding and our writing she comes through the park with her leather handbag and gets to mopping up the mess. It's a big job

because there's linoleum everywhere, but they have these huge machines with giant brushes to make the floors shiny and the next day when you're at school you can slide on them like an ice skater.

'Filthy little buggers they are,' she tells Granny. 'The crap I've cleaned up in that place, you wouldn't believe it. And don't get me started on the teachers' lounge. Now there's a shithole for you.'

'Why? What's it like?'

'Fags squashed into teacups if you can believe it,' says Ma.

'Dirty bitches,' says Granny and shakes her head as if she's been told a million people have died in the yard.

'And the headmistress . . . let's just say I know the reason she's so bloody happy all the time.' Ma tips her head back and pretends she's drinking something.

'No,' says Granny in astonishment.

'Yes,' says Ma.

When Ma's working, Granny makes the tea. Da hates Granny's stew. He complains and gags every time she makes it.

'You try cooking for four on what we're living on. You'll eat it and you'll like it,' she says.

'Will I?' Da growls and puts the fork down. He fetches himself bread and jam instead. I'm not allowed the bread and jam. I have to eat the watery stew.

My granny rolls her eyes when Da gets like this and when he leaves the room she tells me he's a 'moaning whining bastard who needs a job'. She shouldn't say the B-word to me but she does anyway and then she crosses herself to make it all right with God. My da says Granny is a mixer and I'm not to listen to anything she says and since she's his ma he should know.

They mostly don't get on, my granny and da. She likes my ma better because they're women and because my granny doesn't like how my da has turned out in life, working on

building sites and painting folks' houses. 'It's a wee island,' says Granny. 'Only so many houses you can build and only so many you can paint.'

'It's a developing community,' says Da.

'Developing?' smirks Granny.

Da doesn't want to fight with her. He just pulls a face and sticks his head in his newspaper. Later he goes to Old Mrs Thompson's house and paints her front room for thirty pounds.

'Spend it all on drink he will,' says Granny, but he doesn't. He gives it all to my ma and this makes Granny happy and so she gives Da a wink. This makes Da pleased with himself and there is no fighting for a while.

Granny can be tough sometimes but she is a good helper around the house and would lay her life down for her family. This is what Ma says and Da agrees. Granny used to be a nurse but retired to enjoy her life with Grandpa Jake, but then Grandpa Jake died and Granny came to live with us. He had a heart attack and left Da all his money; it wasn't a lot of money but enough to make Granny hurt. Da said it was for the best because Granny is addicted to catalogues and Woolworths. He said she would have spent the money in a week and we need it for the future. He lets her live with us because she cried so much after Grandpa Jake died and wouldn't get out of bed.

Ma likes to have her stay with us. They talk all the time and Granny helps her in the house. Ma's an orphan. Granny told me but Da shook his head when she said this because Ma was a grown woman when her parents died.

'She's hardly Oliver Twist,' says Da.

Ma's parents died when I was just a baby. Words like *orphan* scare me because it means you have no one. Granny says I've not to worry. 'You'll always have me in the event of a crisis, Michael.'

Da laughs at this. He says my granny is right and will outlive us all. Ma thinks this isn't a nice thing to say and

gives Da a right dirty look.

‘Can you not take a joke, Rosemary?’

Ma ignores him and lights another cigarette. Da rustles his paper and shakes his head.

‘Would you two just stop?’ snaps Granny. And they do stop, but not in a nice way.

THREE

EVERYONE IS PLAYING Kick the Can. It's a great game. One team covers the can while the other team hides, then the other team comes out of hiding to try and kick the can without being caught and being sent to jail. The winner is the team who can kick the can without being tagged. It's my most favourite game in the whole wide world, except on Saturday when I catch Marianne and Paul MacDonald kissing next to Paul's da's garden shed with Dirty Alice keeping watch, except she isn't very good at keeping watch and lets me see. It makes me ill. They were crouching like frogs. Marianne wasn't even touching him but he was all over her. He had his hand on her shoulders and was right next to her face, while his other hand was holding on to her arm like he thought he might fall over or something. I would never have kissed her like that. I'd have given her a big hug or touched her hair. I hate Paul MacDonald for touching her and I hate Marianne Cameron for letting him near her.

It wasn't fair and so I go tell Marianne's da. This causes Marianne's da to go to Paul's da to make a big fuss. Paul's father isn't even bothered though and keeps nodding and shrugging his shoulders at Marianne's da, who is very thin and called Skinny Rab. I can't hear what they are saying but when they start to laugh and stuff I know no one cares Marianne and Paul have been kissing. Marianne hates me now and won't let me do keepy-uppies at her stupid talent show because even though Marianne's da and Paul's da were laughing, Marianne and Paul have to stop kissing now. Even the girls hate me because it's spoiled Marianne and Paul from being boyfriend and girlfriend. I'm glad though

because it's got rid of the sick feeling I had in my stomach when Dirty Alice made me see them kissing. I hate Dirty Alice and I will punch her in the arm next time I see her.

FOUR

I AM WOKEN from my bed and it's still night-time. Everyone is talking at once, my ma is screaming and my granny is asking for God. I can hear my da but he doesn't sound quite like Da. He sounds like someone else. His voice is higher than usual and I wonder if the house is on fire. I put my slippers on and sneak downstairs, but I am heard on the step and Da is quick to the staircase.

'Michael, go back to bed,' he says. His face is red and frightened. I don't like it one bit. I hear my ma crying and my granny whispering in the background; her words are soft, the kind you say to a child who has fallen.

'What's the matter, Da? Why is Ma crying?' I demand.

'Go to bed, Michael.' He sounds desperate and wants to go back to the kitchen. He keeps looking at the door. There's something behind it and I'm not supposed to see.

'Please, Michael. Just go upstairs,' he begs and then uses the wall to hold him up, like he thinks he might fall over or something.

Da never talks to me like this and so I go upstairs, but I let him know I'm not happy about it. Da watches me go. I can feel his eyes on me. He waits at the bottom of the stairs until he knows I am in my room and then he removes himself and goes to the kitchen. The door is closed tight behind him. I wait for five minutes until a new commotion begins downstairs. It's like they can't stop themselves. I decide I've had enough and go downstairs. I am very careful to avoid the creaky step this time. I make it to the kitchen door and no one has heard me. I'm quite pleased with myself and lean against the door.

'You must have seen something. Think!' begs Granny.

'He has a gold chain on his wrist. It was heavy,' cries Ma.

'What else?' says Da.

'He was tall,' whispers Ma. 'I don't remember anything else. It was dark. Oh God, he wouldn't let me go till he had a smoke.' She starts to scream. Granny has to get her to calm down. She's probably worried about the neighbours. Granny is always worried about the neighbours.

'We have to call the police,' says Da.

'No,' cries Ma.

'What are you talking about?' says Granny. 'There's a madman out there.'

'No, Shirley,' begs Ma. 'I don't want people to know.'

Granny and Da go quiet. Ma whispers something else through sobs and I can't hear anything.

'No,' says Da. 'You don't know what you're saying!'

'It's what I want. We'll say I fell. I won't go to the police. I won't. They'll say things about me. Terrible things. Oh God,' Ma yells out. The crying continues and so much of it. I wonder what's wrong with her. Then Da tells Ma she shouldn't have been walking through the park at all. 'If I've told you once then I've told you a thousand times go down the high street. Why the hell would you walk through the park anyway? It's pitch black.' I hear him cry like a baby. I haven't heard my da cry since John Lennon died and I must have made a noise because the next thing the door is suddenly ripped open and Da is standing there, his face wet with tears.

'What do you think you're doing?'

I look past him to Ma. Her face is bloody and Granny is holding her so tight I wonder if Ma can breathe.

'What happened to Ma?' I gasp. I want to go to her straight away, but Da won't let me past him. 'What's wrong, Ma?' I ask. Ma buries her head in Granny's chest. She can't even look at me.

That's when Granny tells me Ma has seen a flasher. Da gives Granny a terrible look as if she's said something mad.

'What's a flasher?' I ask.

'A pervert,' Granny screams and grabs Ma tighter.

'Why is there all this blood, Da?' I ask. It's making me scared and I think I might cry.

'Ma fell over, son. She ran away from the bad man and then she fell, don't worry, son, away to bed now,' says Da.

'That's right, Michael. This man flashed your ma and scared the life out of her, then she tripped and then she fell and . . .' Granny doesn't finish. She starts bawling her eyes out instead. 'Take him upstairs,' snaps Granny at Da.

'What about Ma?' I plead. 'She's hurt. I want to stay with her, Da.'

'Come on, son,' says Da. He puts his hand on my shoulder and leads me from the kitchen all the way upstairs to my bedroom. Da sits me down on the bed. He tells me I've not to say anything about the flasher.

'Why?' I ask.

'People might say things,' says Da.

'What things?'

Da is running out of words and rubs at his forehead.

'I don't know,' he whispers.

I worry he'll get upset again but I still want to know about the blood and Ma and the flasher.

'Da?' I ask. 'Tell me why we can't say anything.'

'Because they might not believe there really was a flasher, Michael,' whispers Da.

'But why?' I ask. Nothing makes sense to me. Nothing.

'For Christ's sake, Michael, just say Ma fell down the concrete stairs in front of our house, will you?' Da is getting mad, but I don't care. Everything feels wrong to me.

'But why? Should he not go to jail for flashing at Ma and making her fall like that?'

'No one is to know about the flasher. Do you understand, Michael?'