

The Fan Club Man

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I'm on the train to meet Mona. I'm so excited I'll say it again. I'm on the train to meet Mona. I can hardly sit still. I've been up most of the night with nerves and I kept mother awake a lot too. I wonder if I should have a drink to calm myself down. I decide against it; it's only 10.17am and 35, 36 seconds.

The man with the refreshment trolley comes into the carriage.

"Could I have a tea and a croissant, please?"

Mister trolley man flashes a smile.

"You going all the way?"

I'm aware I shouldn't flirt as I don't know the rules.

"Just for the day."

"Meeting a friend?"

I try to play it cool and not snort down my nose with excitement. I fail. Oh, if only I could tell him about Mona.

Let me tell you about Mona.

Mona Webb is an icon to the world. Since Sunday February 23rd 1975, 8pm, Mona Webb has played the cougar of the court Suzie West, it's the character she plays in *Jasper Court* on TV. Mona's been in that show for so long, she *is* Jasper Court. Without her there would simply be no show.

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She's a true pro, always puts the work in, never fluffs her lines. She's part-woman, part-myth. And she's asked to see me.

Me!

She never gives interviews, doesn't turn up for awards, nothing. An original copy of the one interview she gave (The Manchester Courant, Monday June 1986, *Mona Webb's Manchester*, pages 36-38 with a full colour profile on page 37) has its own currency on eBay. The last time I saw one (Sunday, September 6, 2015, 3.17am) the bidding was up to £85.63. And today, she wants to speak to me.

I'm Jack, by the way. I run the MonaWeb, a fan site for *Jasper Court*. Mother lets me use her laptop. I was checking my email last Monday night, that's when mother does her line-dancing, and I was in the house alone.

I thought Mona might have an agent to do her email, but the message came from Mona herself. She's given me all the details I need to get to Manchester, as far as Piccadilly station, and then she's sending a driver. I'm to look for a man in a blue suit who'll be holding up my name – Jack Viner – on a board. And then he's going to drive me to her apartment. Her email said she's got exclusive news that she wants me to break on MonaWeb. She's offered me lunch. I'm not sure I'll be able to eat in her presence. I'm not even sure I'll be able to speak.

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I've got crumbs from the croissant everywhere. They've gone on my new trousers. Oh yes, new trousers, new shirt. I haven't had new trousers since dad's funeral. I've even polished my shoes and bought a new notepad. It's just a small one with wire at the top and I've got my list of questions, all numbered down the side. There's 47.

I started MonaWeb five years ago when I left work after the incident. (Industrial tribunal, restraining order, blood, hospital, tablets, tablets, counselling, tablets). Anyway, MonaWeb gets a good following, thousands of people each month. I love doing it, it's like having a job. Except I don't need to leave the house, Doctor Carter says. Some days I wear my pyjamas all day but mother tries to make me dress. I have to admit I was in my pyjamas (blue with black stripe, Marks and Spencer, easy-care, non-iron, size L, 65% polyester, 35% cotton) when I read Mona's email last Monday. When mother came home from her class, I was all giddy kipper.

“Why's a famous actress emailing you? What's she up to, inviting you all the way to her home? It sounds very rum to me,” mother said. “What if I went with you?”

I shook my head, no.

“What if me and your Aunty Jean go with you, make a day of it, eh?” she went on. “Then we could all meet Mona Webb. What do you think, Jack?”

“No.”

“But, Jack..”

“No.”

“Really, Jack, I think...”

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“No.”

“But what if you have a relapse...”

“No.”

“Please, Jack?”

“No.”

“Ok, have it your way,” mother sighed. She stood and looked down at me. I was staring at Mona’s email.

“Jack...” she said, softly. “I was wondering... if you’re thinking about going to Manchester on your own, do you think you might be ready to sleep in your own bed?”

I shook my head.

“No.”

This train will shortly be arriving into Manchester Piccadilly station. If you are leaving the train, please make sure you take all of your personal belongings with you.

I did what the voice told me to, it’s what I like to do.

My heart is trying to escape. I’m sweaty as I walk down the platform looking for a man with my name. He shakes my wet hand and tells me his name is Don and he’ll be my driver today. Inside the car smells nice. It’s quiet and I feel safe. It’s like traveling in a cloud on my way to heaven.

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We pull up outside fancy gates in a high brick wall. The gates slide open and the car glides in. There are lawns and trees and in front of us a block of flats. Every flat's got a balcony. I do what Don tells me and I follow him in. He tells me we'll be going up to the third floor in the lift. He's very polite and says yes, we can walk up the stairs instead when I tell him I can't do the lift. (13 steps to each floor, yellow walls).

“Well! Look at you! What a handsome man, you are!”

Mona kisses me on my left cheek. “It's so lovely to meet you!”

She kisses me on my right cheek. She takes my sweaty hand and leads me to her living room and all I can think is *'this is the life'*.

“Would you like some tea? Coffee? Perhaps a cheeky sherry?” she looks at her watch and doesn't wait for an answer. “Let's have a sherry, it's almost noon.”

Don is in the kitchen, opening cupboards, clinking glasses. Mona sits on one of her sofas and I sit on another. She's throwing questions at me about the weather, the website, my family. I just want to drink her all in.

She's tiny. Shorter, thinner, younger looking than she is on TV.

Mother will want to know what the inside of her apartment was like so I make a note to remember the cushions and curtains. I put my notepad on the sofa and nip myself on my leg to see if I can wake myself up. Don hands me a glass of dark liquid and I say my first words in her presence: “Thank you.”

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“So, tell me,” Mona says. “How many people read your website?”

She raises her glass to her lips and I watch as she chucks it down her throat in one go. I try not to gasp and I fail.

“Thousands, every month. Sometimes as many as fifty thousand.” (51,691, Sunday 5 January 2018).

She turns her head and shouts to Don.

“Be a sweetie darling, fill Mona’s glass.”

Don does as he’s told and I watch as she chucks another sherry down in one.

“Well, I’ve got some news for you that’ll double that figure.”

She gives me a stare that I don’t like, mother had warned me about theatrical types. I put my glass on a side table, open my notepad and take my pen from the pocket of my coat.

“Yeah, you write it down, babe,” she nods.

Don appears, refills her glass and goes back to the kitchen. Again, she gulps it down in one go.

“Write this,” she says. “Write... write that Mona Webb is leaving TV show *Jasper Court*. Say that she’s in discussions with Hollywood, that she’s enjoyed her time on the show, yada yada, blah blah, you’ll know what to say to make it sound right.”

My hand shakes. She can’t leave the show! Not Mona! How will *Jasper Court* continue without her?

“Don!” she yells. He reappears with the sherry bottle (Fortified wine, Jerez de la Frontera, Alcohol 17% ABV) and fills her glass again.

“Mona, don’t do this,” he tells her in a low voice. “Let it go.”

I do my best to write but I’m shaking and I think she can tell.

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“Have you got a girlfriend, lovey?” she eyes my new trousers. “Or a boyfriend? I bet you’ve got a boyfriend. I love the gays, Jock.”

“It’s Jack,” I say, finally finding my voice.

I smile because I’m trying to be polite but even I know, with what the hospital report said were my limited social skills, that the conversation has gone somewhere it shouldn’t. I should have brought mother. She’d have known what to do. Mona calls Don to fill her glass again. But this time when he comes to the living room, there’s no bottle in his hand. “I think I should drive you to the station,” he tells me. Even though I haven’t asked Mona any of my 47 questions yet, I know I want to leave.

“It was nice meeting you, Mona,” I lie. I’m not very good at lying.

She dismisses me with a wave of her hand.

“Whatever.” Her eyes close and she slumps on her sofa.

“She’ll be all right when she sobers up,” Don says. “Come on, let’s get you to your train.”

My train doesn’t leave until 16.08 (super saver advance return £45.90, quiet coach, window seat, near the toilet) and I don’t know what to do. I haven’t been on my own in a train station before. Mother said to come straight home but it’s not even 1pm and my train doesn’t leave for three hours. I decide to wait in a café, keep safe in a well-lit area. I walk into the blue and white strip-lit cavern of WHSmiths (founded 1792, headquarters Swindon). Mother takes *The Daily Mail* and so I go for that one, it’s the only one I know. There’s a picture of Mona on the front, my Mona. The Mona I’ve just left in her apartment, drunk. The Mona who’s going to Hollywood. There’s a picture of

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Mona on the front all of the papers, different pictures, some bigger than others, but she's there, her face on every single front page.

“Sexy Suzie Sacked in Drink and Drugs Shocker!”

“Mona Webb Sacked from Jasper Court!”

“Moaning Mona – get outta my pub!”

“Veteran TV actress sacked after being caught on camera in cocaine binge”

I don't understand. I need some fresh air. I need to get out of the railway station before my head explodes.

I walk up and down the main street. I only allow myself as far as Greggs because if I go any further it means crossing a road and I don't think I dare. Back up to the station, back down to Greggs. I walk. It's 1.32pm. I keep walking. It's 2.13pm. I have less than two hours until I can get on my train and go home. I think about my seat reservation for the return journey (quiet coach, window seat, beside the toilet). It's 2.43pm and 11, 12 seconds when I feel calm enough to re-enter the station and find a café. I choose one that's dark like a cave. I order a tea and a brown cake. I sit by the window and breathe, breathe deeply, like mother and Doctor Carter told me to do. When I feel ready, I walk back to Smiths. I pick up a paper with Mona's face on the front and pay at the counter. I'm ready to read it and find out the truth. And I breathe, two, three, four....

ENDS

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