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The Boy Who Could See Death

Written by Salley Vickers

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The Boy Who Could See Death

SALLEY VICKERS

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For the Hosking Houses Trust, with thanks for their kind hospitality,
And in memory of Deborah Rogers, who loved stories

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Author's Note

I suppose that behind each story there is always another story. Perhaps this is more likely to be the case with a short story than with a novel, which must be a sort of portmanteau of experiences, whereas a short story usually springs from a single idea or train of thought. People who have read my novels will recognize in this collection some familiar themes: most distinctively, the interplay between life and death, sometimes in a psychological and sometimes in a somewhat supernatural strain. But they may also recognize my preoccupation with place. I have never been able to write about any place that I do not know fairly intimately and I never take my locations on trust from others' accounts. All of these stories have been fostered in some way or other by a particular place, either by my having been there at the time the story occurred to me or through that place having become the locus where a fledgling story idea seemed naturally to settle.

But, reviewing the stories for publication, I was also interested to find that each of them also has some special association with a particular friend, or, in some cases, friends, or member of my family. Again, this is

less likely to be the case with a novel, where the scope is naturally wider. But it has pleased me to see how kinship and friendship have often formed the spark that has warmed a latent idea into life.

This collection is dedicated in part to the Hosking Houses Trust, whose generous hospitality I enjoyed while writing several of these stories. The opening story, 'The Churchyard', in particular is informed by my stay at Church Cottage in the little village of Clifford Chambers, close to Stratford-upon-Avon. The physical details of the cottage itself, the churchyard which it overlooks and the white-berried rowan tree growing among the graves may all be seen there by the curious visitor. Even the mistle thrush, with which I became enamoured, may, with luck, still be gracing with its song the rowan outside the bedroom window. And, while I never take any character from life, I did borrow my principal character's Christian name from Sarah Hosking, my kind hostess, who bears a resemblance to Sarah's landlady Clovissa by virtue of her generosity.

Clifford Chambers was also the place where I wrote 'Rescue', which was inspired by the funeral of my dear friend Deborah Rogers, to whom this collection is also dedicated. In no sense is it an account of her funeral except for the fact that that sad event reminded me of the way that death can cause one to see other people, and indeed oneself, with fresh eyes. Deborah was a close friend before I became a writer. We agreed that our

friendship was too precious to risk by our becoming professionally involved and for that reason she was never my literary agent. But we spent many, many happy hours together sharing our somewhat forensic and sometimes fantastical view of human nature. I wanted to write a story for her that she, at least, would have relished.

I think Deborah might have also enjoyed 'Kleptomania', since she was a fan of Pekes and eccentrics both. The setting for this story was occasioned by a stay in a house in Dorset that I took one Easter for my family and myself. Happily, our holiday was free from any of the tensions in the story, the only real-life mishap being my somehow managing to make a double order to Waitrose with the result that we were coming down with excess food. We were visited there by a small dog, which my son named Tandoori and with which my elder granddaughter, Rowan, a devotee of all animals but dogs most especially, fell in love. Ho Chi Minh owes something to Tandoori and this story was written for Rowan, who is herself already an accomplished writer.

'A Sad Tale' is also dedicated to Rowan, as she has come to share my love of Shakespeare and was drawn to the fairytale element in *The Winter's Tale* and also to its dark under-themes. The story was conceived when staying with my old psychoanalytic colleague, fellow author and longtime friend, Anthony Stevens, in his house in Corfu. When asked recently by the *Observer* for a choice

of summer reading, writers were also asked to divulge their holiday destinations. I, as did the other contributors, obeyed and revealed that I was going as usual to my summer retreat at my friend's lovely old Corfiot farmhouse. For some reason this was considered sufficiently pretentious to appear in *Private Eye*. I've waited years to be in *Private Eye* and could wish it were a funnier entrance but beggars can't be choosers.

Anthony also shares a love of Shakespeare. As a psychoanalyst myself, I'm intrigued by those of Shakespeare's characters who, while central to the plot, lack any substantial physical presence. Or extensive presence. For Mamillius – the boy child who dies in *The Winter's Tale*, and the protagonist in my story – has a crucial dramatic role, curtailed as his appearance is in the play. It is he who, when asked by his mother to tell her a story, gives the play its title, and it is his brief but lambent words that I borrowed for the title of the story I found myself wanting to write about him. I have always baulked at the idea that there is somehow 'redemption' at the close of this play (redemption is a word too glibly bandied about these days); Mamillius, in the play, dies from grief, as a result of his father's insane jealousy, and, unlike his mother and his sister, who are merely believed dead, never returns to us. My story is some attempt to redeem that tragedy by having him develop into a storyteller – and a playwright – himself.

My enthusiasm for children and childhood is well

known among my family (who could sometimes do with less of it) and that has given me a special interest in Shakespeare's children. This story is a relative of 'The Indian Child', which appeared in my last collection, *Aphrodite's Hat*, and its subject was the changeling child in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and his role in Shakespeare's imagination. It was written for my grandson, Sam, who, as a baby, lay beside me in his carry-cot while I wrote it. It is therefore fitting that 'A Sad Tale' should be dedicated to his beloved cousin Rowan, with whom he has always shared an almost preternatural, indeed Shakespearean, affinity.

'A Christmas Gift' was written in Corfu, though its locus is Venice, scene of my first novel, *Miss Garnet's Angel*. It was once possible to sail from Venice to Corfu, and when I could afford it this was my preferred way of travelling there. (Sadly, no ferry now serves the direct route.) On my mother's side I come from seafarers and perhaps for this reason I am drawn to the sea. I have been privileged to see few sights as sheerly lovely as the view of Corfu approached across the Adriatic at dawn.

'The Train That Left When It Was Not Supposed To' has its footing in Windsor Great Park, which is also the location of Cumberland Lodge, the educational trust for which, at the time of writing, I am a trustee. I am grateful for Cumberland Lodge for many reasons: the excellence of the work it does, the companionship of my colleagues and the good company I have met there

over the years. But perhaps I am most grateful for the opportunity to get to know Windsor Great Park. The park is a mysterious and ancient place where it is easy to imagine all kinds of supernatural events occurring. And of course it is the location of one of Shakespeare's funniest plays, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The Shakespeare scholar Professor L. C. Knights used to say that there were some scenes in literature that, no matter what, always made him laugh and one was Falstaff hiding in the laundry basket. The anarchy that is in Falstaff's blood seemed to get into the veins of this story.

'Vacation' has its roots in the Western Isles of Scotland, which has some of the most heavenly locations in the British Isles. I have visited many of the Western Isles and I don't know why this location should have brought to mind the idea of a deep and lasting maternal betrayal. As a psychoanalyst, maternal betrayal is not a novel idea to me. And there is something about an island that suggests both abandonment and intensity.

The location of 'The Sofa' is more parochial: Hampstead, and the flat of the parents of an old university friend, Daniel Wolf. After his parents' death my friend took over the flat and, deciding that the old sofa was irreparable, was about to throw it out. I had admired both his parents, Jewish refugees, and their story, and I had a special fondness for his mother, who was kind to me at a time when I was much in need of kindness. For some years I kept the sofa as a tribute to her and the

story is its immaterial counterpart. My friend the actor Paul Rhys read it on Radio 4 and his subtle gift for emotional nuance brought out the pathos of a traumatized childhood.

Finally, my title story, 'The Boy Who Could See Death'. This derives from almost a lifetime's interest in death. So far as I can tell, even as a child death never frightened me and as an analyst I worked very often with those who had lost someone close to them or had themselves attempted or nursed a wish for suicide. My oldest friend, another writer, Petrie Harbouri, and I often discuss how helpful it would be to know the hour and date of one's own death. It was she who reminded me of the line in the Order for the Burial of the Dead in the Book of Common Prayer: 'Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days: that I may be certified how long I have to live.' Some mixture of these influences must have quickened poor Eli into consciousness. If his life ends in the Welsh Marches, this is because this is another part of the British Isles that has become part of my inner landscape. It was also loved by Deborah Rogers, who, with her husband, the composer, Michael Berkeley, made a home there, which I visited often. Deborah is buried in the sloping grassy graveyard of her little local church at Stowe.

Salley Vickers

2015

The Churchyard

When Sarah Palliser looked through the window that morning, the man was standing there. The window wasn't hers. It belonged to the cottage she'd been renting while deciding where, finally, to settle. Quince Cottage (named for a tree allegedly planted for the coronation of Queen Anne) was small, no more than one up and one down if you didn't count the lavatory. But it was tangibly old, and it sided on to a churchyard that could be entered through a door in the high weed-embroidered wall that bound in the garden. From the west face of the church tower a clock magisterially struck the hour. And from the once ancient, now prudently double glazed, windows in the kitchen the stones marking the patient dead could be observed. It was this last that had decided her to take the cottage on a six-month lease.

The dead made good neighbours: unintrusive, incurious. Each morning, when Sarah came down to make her morning tea, she stood looking out at the gravestones while the kettle boiled. One stone in particular she had become strangely attached to. It recalled Charles Blakey of this parish, who had lived thirty-seven years and died

in 1836, thus ensuring his short life narrowly spanned the two centuries.

The mornings in the churchyard possessed a soothing similarity. The dead stayed exactly as they were. Few living bodies crossed her line of sight. Only the birds. In all weathers there were birds: blackbirds, the male birds, their yellow bills assertively foremost, hopping with easy familiarity around the gravestones on which robins perched confidently atop; rooks priestly above on the seventeenth-century tower. And the mistle thrush.

The mistle thrush was an especial bonus. On the church side of the cottage's garden wall there grew a rowan tree, that rare enough thing a white rowan, whose berries, against the tawny late November sky, when she had first come, had shone like drops of luminous hail.

It was some time before she had twigged that the mistle thrush's obsession with these berries must be connected to their likeness to those of mistletoe. Though of course the bird was reputed also to eat holly berries, which rather did for that argument. She looked up 'mistletoe' in the dictionary that sat beside Mrs Beeton on the bookshelf. 'Mistle' seemed to derive from 'mizzle', fine mist or rain. The misty origins of the thrush's name appealed to her and had tipped her into approaching Clovissa Jenkins to see if she might consider extending the letting terms from six to twelve months.

Clovissa Jenkins was agreeable, as so far she had been

over most matters. She had obligingly provided, when the weather turned chilly, a hot-water bottle, comfortingly cocooned in pink crochet, and brought round occasional eggs from her hens. The hens, and their imperious rooster ('better than an alarm clock'), had had their part in encouraging Sarah to stay on in Quince Cottage. And of course there was the box.

For she had sworn to herself that she would move nowhere till she had tackled the box.

By the time the year had turned past the vernal equinox and the churchyard was alight with daffodils, Sarah had begun to wonder how she was ever going to leave. For the box remained lurking under the far reaches of the stairs, an invisible but expressive presence of something palpably untackled.

Aside from the perpetual reproach of the box, life in the cottage was simple and sustaining. It was furnished with Edwardian furniture that Clovissa Jenkins had apparently inherited from an aunt. Upstairs was an Arts and Crafts bed with a formidably hard mattress ('such a comfortable bed', Clovissa had assured), a matching chest of drawers, a marble-topped dressing table and a large roll-top cast-iron bath.

The bath stood regally in the bedroom, defying anyone to judge it an unnecessary use of space. On the shelf that ran beside it, Clovissa Jenkins had ranged green glass bottles of an earlier era, and Sarah had provided flowers for one of the several jugs from

the workshops of the many esteemed potters with whom her landlady had apparently conducted affairs. She had conveyed this information with a pride that left Sarah uncertain whether it was the number of the affairs or the aesthetic judgement shown by her choice of lovers that fuelled it.

It was after an early bath, when she had gone downstairs in her dressing gown to make tea, that she first saw the man. Or, rather, his feet because the line of the window was only a little higher than the level of the graveyard ground. The brown shoes were standing by Charles Blakey of this parish and, on seeing them, she felt something like indignation. No one, to her knowledge, had approached Charles Blakey since her tenure had begun. She had unconsciously grown proprietorial about his last retiring place. Then, with the freedom that living alone brings (one of its compensations), she laughed aloud at her silliness.

She spent the day wondering whether it was time to open the unbroached box. By 6 p.m. she had contrived to avoid a decision and poured herself a large drink while she watched the news.

The cottage was equipped with both a TV and a DVD player, luxuries that she had been used to doing without since Phillip had disapproved of them. There was something reassuring about the six o'clock news. The violence and prevailing gloom were palliatives to a savaged breast. 'Tomorrow I *will* do it,' she said aloud,

pouring another glass of wine. 'Tomorrow I'll be brave.'

The next day she woke to rain and went into Stratford on the pretext of looking at houses. Not any house in particular; more a kind of prowl around to see if she could live there. Stratford had many virtues: the river, the theatre and of course Shakespeare. She and Phillip had rowed about Shakespeare and she had thrown a copy of *The Tempest* at him. 'You're an absurd snob,' she had declared. 'That cloth-eared Earl of Oxford could never have written so sublimely.'

But today Stratford was wet and filled with tourists. If Shakespeare had lived and died there his spirit was sensibly not abroad.

That night the rain cleared and she was wakened by blue moonlight pooling on to the old elm floorboards. It was so bright that it summoned her to sit upright and then pulled her out of bed. Across a sky still ragged with rain clouds the moon was speeding, its lopsided disc conveying a look of manic madness.

A night bird peeped and something moved below. A cat mousing, sliding through the uncut grass. All cats are grey in the dark. If she stood at the window longer she might see an owl. She nursed a hankering for an owl, born of the occasion a barn owl had passed, pale and serene, through the white beam of the car headlights, when she and Phillip still lived together in what she had kidded herself was harmony.

Something else was moving besides the cat. Out of the territory of shadows a shape emerged. A person. A man. And she knew with a shock through her bones that it was the man whose blunt brown shoes she had witnessed the morning before. The interloper on Charles Blakey's grave.

A kind of joyous dread flooded through her. What could he want there alone in the moonlight? As she watched he came towards the cottage and stood as if staring up at her. Could he see her in the uncurtained room?

For some minutes he stood below, a dark pillar in the surrounding darkness, and then he turned away and walked out of sight. For minutes longer she stood looking out of the window while the moon continued its endless race through the torn clouds.

She slept fitfully but near morning fell into a sleep so deep that it was after nine when she descended the stairs for her tea. She was almost afraid to look through the window, unsure whether or not she wanted to see him there again. But only the memory of Charles Blakey faced her stonily.

Later that morning, braced by three cups of coffee, she peeled brown tape back from the box and extracted a clutch of long white envelopes.

'Darling Girl,' began the first letter written in Phillip's distinctive black hand. 'I miss you as I would miss the blood from my veins.'

Squatting on the floor she read on. 'When I was a boy,

walking to school down the country lanes, I would imagine all the little hedge creatures my special friends. That is how I see you – shy and retiring, known truly to no one but me.'

It was terrible how nauseatingly this read now, when once it had thrilled her. Punishing herself, she read more. 'Darling creature, I shall only treat you with the gentleness your loving timid nature deserves –'

Sentimental garbage written by a man who had dumped her only two years after writing it, two years during which, progressively, she had felt as if her skin were being peeled back layer by layer. But of course, all sentimentalists are sadists. She knew that; had always known it. Suddenly, unnervingly, she began to cry.

The box was full of hundreds of such communications, letters, notes, cards she had faithfully, insanely, stored away. Desperately she opened another long white envelope.

'Beloved Sah, what would I do without you?'

Clearly very well was the short answer to this. Should she torch the whole horrible collection and thus put it out of her mind, which it wouldn't? Or should she make herself read his filthy fickle words and cure herself by despising him into oblivion? Putting on her boots, she left the cottage with wet cheeks and walked determinedly down the lane to the river.

A heron stood staring aloofly into the water. She was past wanting to throw herself in but how convenient to

be a bird without a heart to be broken. Not broken, she corrected. Paltered with. Worse than broken.

Back at the cottage the open box greeted her balefully. Picking it up, she carried it outside to the garden, where a shed housed a washing machine and a tumble dryer, no longer functioning. 'You can stay there, pig face,' she said and kicked the box hard.

The moonlight didn't waken her that night but towards dawn she was roused by a cry outside. Perhaps an animal in its death throes caught by the churchyard cat? The clock on the church had chimed. Light was pearling hazily through the window, and she got up more for the pleasure of watching the coming dawn than to check the time.

And there he was. Standing, quite visibly this time, by Charles Blakey, with his head bowed as if paying his respects.

Very quietly Sarah opened the window. The man didn't look up, and she heard that he was weeping. Harsh raw sobs. Deeply shocking. Instinctively she called out, 'Please don't cry.'

He looked up then and she had an image of a white face and dark hair and dark, dark eyes. For a long moment he held her in his gaze before she turned and ran downstairs. But when she reached the kitchen window to look again he had gone.

*

The following morning, when Clovissa Jenkins was passing, Sarah asked if there were anywhere she might make a bonfire.

'Not in the garden, please. It's far too small.' For once her landlady sounded sharp.

'Oh, no,' Sarah hurried to reassure. 'I wondered if at the end of your garden, maybe.' She had seen an old dustbin there that looked as if it served as an incinerator.

'If you give me whatever it is, I'll see to it.'

But of course she couldn't do that. The box would have to stay in the shed until she found some means to dispose of it.

But its presence pricked her attention viciously so that she couldn't settle. She set off in her car to tour the nearby villages, pretending to be on a mission to find a suitable place to move. But it was hopeless. Until she had dealt with Phillip she would never be able to contemplate being settled. And soon she would have to look for a job. The money he had tossed at her was running out. Frugal as she'd been, she would have to earn a living again soon.

By the time she got back to the cottage she was worn to a ravelling and only a bath in the regal tub offered remedy. Well soaked and wrapped in a towel, she opened a bottle of wine, determined to get soaked in that other sense. She had missed the TV news so she turned on the radio. But as she adjusted the dial she heard a noise outside.

Opening the front door, she saw the shed door was

ajar. A wave of anger engulfed her. Clovissa. No doubt seeking to 'help' by removing her papers. Oblivious to the towel, which was all that covered her, she stormed into the shed.

The man was bending over the box.

'Shall I take these?' His voice had a quiet country burr.

'Why not?' she found herself saying. It seemed so easy to let him.

'Better they're gone.'

She wondered if she should ask him in for a drink – but that seemed somehow impertinent. 'Is there anything –' she began to ask but he forestalled her.

'Nothing,' he said, and looked at her as if he were someone who had known her, loved her even. 'Nothing more to be done now.'

She saw he was looking towards the door that led from the garden into the churchyard and she went to open it. 'Shall I see you again?' she couldn't help asking.

'Perhaps.'

'Perhaps?'

'Oh, it depends.' His smile was gently respectful.

Looking after him through the open door, she saw nothing more than Charles Blakey's solitary stone.

The next morning two men were there. Loud men, smoking and laughing, with diggers. How dare they. How dare they molest his resting place. Opening the

door to the churchyard, still in her dressing gown, she shouted, 'What are you doing?'

'Only their business.' It was her landlady with eggs. 'The Blakey family is burying their son.'

'Charles Blakey of this parish?'

'His great-great-grandchild. Quite a young man but his wife had left him, apparently, and one doesn't like to speculate but the means of death hasn't been . . .' Too well bred to spell out the regrettable, her landlady faded into silence.

'What was his name?'

'Peter. No, Phillip. Yes, Phillip. Not an attractive name but then I'm so lucky with mine.'

Sarah watched the funeral from the kitchen window. When the last of the mourners left she saw that the mistle thrush had returned to the rowan and was busily devouring the last few mizzle drops of berries.