

We are all searching for something... for answers... for love... or God perhaps. (Many would say for happiness.) Or could it be for those precious unexpected moments when life hovers pain-free...life's 'cameos'?

As for the enigmatic Giulia, her search to uncover family truths finds her caught between two colliding worlds, or maybe three or four. Where exactly does she fit in? Should she speak of what she discovers?

She finds solace in the beauty of the natural world and in man's highest creative achievements set against her own strict Catholic formation.

But nature can also destroy... and not all of humankind sets out to make our time on Earth more bearable, more poetic.

Each chapter... or 'cameo'... tells a little story of its own, each slotted within the bigger picture of Giulia's journey. She is not alone. She has the support of a dear friend and, whether she likes it or not, of an elusive man in the outer shadows of her existence.

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Chapter 1 - Star House

A good few years before the parakeets had arrived and turned the sky a screechy green, a rather unusual woman resided at Star House.....alone. It was an elegant house, a tangible echo from a distant epoch; a past age of gables; drawing rooms; servants` quarters and decorative brickwork; an age which had inadvertently been wiped out by a terrible war and had made way, so they say, for a more tolerant, fluid and equal society...but then came yet another terrible war.

Visitors to the house came and went, some repeatedly, others only once or twice. This included a regular stream of young people, and of course the Parish Priest, Father John. But some years later a family moved in. The young woman remained, keeping a wing of the house for herself. Life appeared to go on as usual.

The house was located down a lane, in a tiny concealed pocket of the world, though a busy high street beckoned insidiously from a short distance. It was the kind of place very few knew existed, a place no one ever actually stumbled across. Star House was nestled amongst lofty horse chestnut trees, secular oaks...sturdy in their own importance; flirty camellias and magnolias...and the woman`s own personal favourite: a luscious fig tree.

This solitary tree occupied one of the few patches of earth at the front of the house. It generously yielded up ...twice yearly...vast quantities of fruit, and so the many tentacle-like branches were forced to curve and bow low. Its owner loved the huge-leafed tree; the deliverer of vivid proof that summer was on its way or had already arrived. She also relished its anomalous position in the garden and for the poetry of its gently swaying green canopy.

Its produce – the figs – were sweet and fleshy. Year upon year the woman continued to pick and savour these earthy treasures with a childlike delight, in all their sweet, gritty stickiness, which oozed in trickles from pink-tinged flesh. Yet unsuspecting visitors remained less favourably impressed, as at such times of year, they were invariably attacked by the overgrown monster, while trying to enter through the silent black gate of wrought iron.

Newly fallen leaves, ample as outspread male hands, some like crumpled paper, others a bright yellow... a colour which always reminded her of her

father`s Strega liqueur...had to be cleared daily, together with remnants of squashed or discarded fruit, which left a dark treacly mess on the surrounding paving stones.

Planting such a tree, in such a position, would have been unthinkable in the distant place her family had come from ... a symbol of fallen women residing within, like a medieval advertisement for a certain type of pleasure house. No one here would or could have known. She possessed her own wry joke against a system; a green and hidden counter attack; a cowardly act perhaps, yet necessary all the same.

Casa Stella – Star House - had been given to Giulia by her father, together with a few other bits and pieces, which once belonged to a former owner. This assorted collection had included some coloured glass drinking goblets, which she hoped had been hand blown in Murano. But with no visible mark of proof, she had concluded that it was of no consequence, as she loved them anyway. They remained unused; awaiting that special moment. There was also a Raffaele Monti bust; mother Mary dismissing, with her downward gaze, all the beauty of an Aphrodite bestowed upon her by her sculptor. Spode bowls took pride of place in the oak dresser, occasionally catching the careless glances of guests with their pretty Oriental design covering base and rim.

The house also came with a huge Bible in 3 volumes, printed in Italian, her mother language.

Giulia had chosen the name of Star House because her father had been born in a road called Via Stella, in a house where the humans lived upstairs, and their animals below. It also tied in nicely, so Giulia thought, with the nativity story...

And it was books, especially fiction, which had begun to take root all over the house, in ever-increasing numbers and somewhere Rimbaud sat uncomfortably next to Jane Austen; precious volumes of The Golden Bough, next to Butler`s Lives of the Saints, and Lawrence`s Sons and Lovers. One day there would be time enough to read them all, to sort them...

The heart of her world was in fact fixed deep within Casa Stella; an imposing building, which she had over time, lovingly draped and swathed with silks, velvets and damasks. From its high ceilings she had hung (second-hand) crystal chandeliers, whose pendants nightly trapped the light`s golden drizzle, transforming rooms into temples of white. And she had littered the floors with

patterned rugs, which transposed ancient fables and histories from far-flung places for those willing to read into the woven worlds beneath their feet.

To visitors her drawing room opened its doors onto a giddy boutique of pretty watercolour princesses; faded roses on bone china; trapped seascapes spread out in gilt frames; black and white photographs of 100 bemused schoolgirls; veiled Madonnas; tiny lacquered and enamelled boxes; pink and red handmade thankyou's; books in towers; books in rows; glass bowls of tiny sweets glistening in their wrappers. The whole room – a mother's womb with the mother tightly clasping her universe. Each object, grand or simple, with its own history; its individual right of occupancy; its emotional links with its owner.

And from the drawing room it was possible to make out a large garden to the rear. This garden had known both long periods of silence, and over the years, the buoyant laughter, shouts and protests of many children. It had survived the winds, hail and rain of winter months...and had absorbed the seasonal sun and birdsong. There the world of adults had not really made its mark. Did the grown-ups ever wonder just how the children might have arranged their time here? Probably not. So all the better for them; the garden remained their secret, yet temporary space, their place to explore and inhabit, deliciously free of the shadow of adult intervention.

Yes, it was a place that coincided with the stories they read, the plays they devised and the dreams that invaded their heads at night, when life on Earth is a very different creature. A place where human flying is the norm and the poison of evil can be destroyed with the casting of a few well-chosen spells. They would possibly all, one day, look back on those garden adventures and this would provide an alternative escape route from the overwhelming harshness of everyday living...

Some of these children were destined to become Giulia's students.

There was one corner of the house however which didn't exude the same quasi-Bohemian feel of the other rooms. Even insects, both the flying and crawling varieties, were said to avoid it! It was a spacious square-shaped room, which Giulia had chosen to be her study. It was located just off the entrance hall. In here she inhabited a more organised and regimented world. Here the books occupied shelves and were also arranged in a coherent order,

thus quickly identifiable and within easy reach. There were a few classic novels among them and several slim volumes of poetry but by and large they were school books, consisting of a range of dictionaries, atlases, encyclopaedias and text books; as well as the necessary foreign language courses. For her younger pupils there were also some large colourfully appealing picture books.

And occupying the very centre of the room sat an oversized desk that Giulia had bought from a local antique dealer; one of her earlier acquisitions. Mrs. Mogden kept it dusted and polished with due reverence. At any time of day it was possible to see arranged on its vast table top a wooden box of sharpened HB pencils; blue, black and red biro, straight as soldiers; a set of coloured pencils, rainbow perfect, and her own precious dark green fountain pen. All exercise books and sheets of paper were kept out of the way in the deep desk drawers. On the walls hung a collection of meandering Fielding House school photographs, presented in chronological order, and a series of pictures of some of her creative heroes from the past including: Raphael, Michelangelo, Mozart, Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, Jane Austen, Saint Catherine of Siena, Oscar Wilde, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein; and her latest exhibit: a photograph of Sylvia Plath.

She didn't want a wall clock or any other kind of visible timepiece in her study. Even though each lesson lasted a precise 60 minutes, she always set out to create a timeless, other-worldly atmosphere in which to weave the desired magic; how irritating she mused to catch sight of a student's wandering eyes as the last remaining minutes of the lesson were being counted!

Each week of the academic year Giulia spent many an hour here. She gave lessons in English, French and Italian to a range of students. In effect it was her way of transforming the many gifts and blessings life had already bestowed upon her. She was completely aware she wouldn't have survived a single day as a school-based teacher, with all its constraints and rigours. She was not interested in school rules, correct uniform, staff meetings or setting detentions...in fact any kind of brutalising, institutionalised learning. One teacher for one student at a time was her precious way of doing things.

First and foremost she felt her principal task was to open up her students' hearts and minds to the wonder of knowledge, the creative arts and the beauty of the world around them. An impossibly tall order...but there had also been some minor successes. Of course most of their parents were far more interested in examination results and getting so-called value for money. She

fully understood this expectation; in a society such as ours, no-one wanted to take the risk of jeopardising the future chances of their own beloved children. However this had to be balanced against her own idea as to the true meaning of education: the magic key which opened a box of irreplaceable treasures.

It still caused her great sorrow, sometimes bordering on a quivering yet silent rage, that so many adults of her acquaintance had forgotten the enquiring minds of their own childhoods. Up until a certain age every child in the world asks the infuriating BUT WHY again and again. It is of course part of the child's need for attention and subsequent enjoyment of the frustrated parent's inability to deliver up, at best, some half-baked answer. But surely they had already become little experts in that field! No. The child wants to know and then know more and more still. And at some point this deep yet fundamental desire gets put out, turned off, extinguished...

Perhaps most of us take out of life no more than we think we need for everyday survival?

Each Summer Giulia's teaching year would end magnificently with her students performing, for her and their parents, an eclectic mix of poem recitals in various languages, violin pieces they had practised over again, songs delivered a cappella, and once in a while a magic show!

Chapter 2 - The Piece of Paper

At St. Raphael's Catholic Church, it was the Priest's day off, if such an event were possible. Many years ago he had taken Holy Orders, in The Vatican itself, and a while before that, the much discussed Vow of Celibacy, which would free him up entirely for God, his future Parishioners, for the good of all mankind...

The training in Rome had been long and arduous but he had never once questioned the path he believed God had chosen for him. He had also made some deep friendships there. He had struggled with the acquiring of Latin and had also learned, with great difficulty, how to deal with the natural longings which surged all too regularly during his seven years in the Eternal City, which churches aside, was also a place full of beautiful women.