Star Gazing

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Extract

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Chapter One

Marianne

This is not a ghost story. Not really. But it was Christmas and I did feel as if I'd seen a ghost. Or rather *heard* a ghost. Except that you don't hear ghosts, do you? Clanking chains, hideous moans perhaps, but on the whole people see ghosts, or so I understand. It's an experience I've been spared.

But I thought I'd heard one.

The woman takes care getting out of the taxi, reaches inside and removes a briefcase and carrier bag. She sets them carefully on the kerb and fumbles in a capacious handbag for her purse.

As the taxi pulls away she turns to face the grey Georgian terrace, elegantly anonymous, typical of many in Edinburgh. Dressed in a full-length woollen coat and dashing velvet hat, the woman extends a booted toe and places it, deliberately, on a manhole cover. She bends and picks up her bags, straightens, pauses for a moment, then without looking to left or right, she strides across the pavement towards the steps leading up to a front door. A keen-eared observer might hear her counting under her breath.

Before she has taken four paces there is a hiss of braking wheels and the sound of a bicycle skidding on pavement, followed by an angry adolescent shout.

'*Jesus*! Didn't you see me coming? Are you blind or what?'

Shaken, the woman turns to face the cyclist. As she adjusts

her hat, knocked askew, her hands are unsteady but her voice is firm. 'Yes. As a matter of fact, I am.'

Marianne
That's right, I'm blind.

I'll just give you a moment or two to adjust your prejudices.

But, I hear you ask, shouldn't I have been escorted by a Golden Labrador? Or waving a white stick? At the very least, shouldn't I have been wearing enormous dark glasses, as favoured by Roy Orbison and Ray Charles?

I know, I know – it really was my own stupid fault for wandering about looking *normal*. (Well, I'm told I do. How would I know?)

'I *am* blind and *you* have no right to be cycling on the pavement. If you have a bell, might I suggest you try using it in future?'

But the cyclist is already gone. She bends to pick up the bag she dropped, feels the shifting of broken glass, hears the steady drip of liquid onto the pavement. With sinking heart she mounts the steps and delves into her handbag again for her door key. The loss of the Burgundy is a disaster – how will they cook *boeuf bourguignonne* without it? And the meringue nests will be as shattered as her nerves. Encountering the cold metal of her phone, she wonders whether to ring her sister with a last-minute shopping-list.

The door key falls from her chilled fingers. She gasps, straining her ears to locate the direction of the small sound it makes as it hits the ground. She bends, sweeps the stone with bare hands, cursing the cyclist, Christmas and most particularly her blindness. Something wet and weightless lands on the back of her hands.

Snow ...

She feels the prickle of tears, blinks rapidly and sweeps the doorstep again, then plunges her hand into the evergreen foliage of a potted plant, shaking it, listening for the clink of a falling key.

Silence.

She is considering what comfort might be derived from

sitting on the steps and bursting into tears when she hears footsteps approach, then come to a halt. She registers a habitual flutter of apprehension. The footsteps are male.

'Can I help?' A man's voice, not local, nor one that she knows. Or ...?

'I've dropped my door key and I can't find it. I'm blind.'

She hears the sound of change jingling in pockets as he mounts the steps quickly. After a moment he says, 'It's fallen onto the basement stair … Here you are.' He takes her chilled hand, places the key in her palm and murmurs, '*Che gelida manina ...*'

'Yes, I've lost my gloves too. Must have dropped them somewhere.'

'No, they're dangling from your coat pocket.'

'Are they?' She feels for the gloves. 'Thank you. And thank you for finding my key.'

'No bother. I hate to tell you this, but your shopping seems to be bleeding.'

'It's red wine. I dropped it. It's been one of those days.' She opens her handbag and pushes the gloves inside. 'Do you like opera? Or do you just break out in Italian every so often?'

'I'm a sucker for Puccini.'

She considers. 'Musically very appealing, but ideologically unsound, I always think. Women as passive victims of glamorous men. Rather repellent in the twenty-first century.'

'I hadn't really thought about it like that.'

'You wouldn't. You're a man.'

'A chromosomal accident. I'm sorry.'

She laughs. 'No, *I'm* sorry. For being so rude. Forgive me – I was rather shaken, losing my key. Cross with myself and taking it out on you. Hardly fair. I keep my key on a chain that I put round my wrist so I *can't* drop it, but I was in a hurry and I didn't bother ... Are you from Skye?'

He pauses a moment before answering. 'Aye. Well, I was brought up there. I was born on Harris. But my parents hankered after bright lights and the big city. So they moved to Portree.' She laughs again. 'I take it you know Portree?'

'Only by reputation. I knew a Skye man ... A *Sgiathanach*.'

'*Sgiathanaich* are loyal. We tend to go back.'

‘Do you?’

‘Aye, when I can. It’s a great place. As long as you don’t crave excitement.’

‘Your parents were disappointed then?’

‘Och no, they died happy in their beds.’ She senses a smile. ‘Of culture shock.’

‘Well, there are worse ways to die.’

‘Aye. A lot worse.’

‘Thanks for your help.’

‘No bother. Will you manage with the broken glass?’

‘Oh, yes, my sister will deal with it, after she’s given me a thorough scolding for being so damned independent. I’ll just leave the bag on the doorstep. The food’s ruined anyway.’

‘Well, if you’re sure there’s nothing more I can do?’

‘Thanks, I’ll be fine now.’

She hears his feet on the steps again. He calls up, his voice more distant now. ‘I’ll run into you at the opera, maybe? I presume *Turandot* meets your stringent feminist criteria?’

‘Ah, now *she’s* a girl after my own heart. Chews men up and spits them out. And if they can’t guess the riddles – off with their head!’

‘But the prince confounds her. With his name.’

‘Yes. Puccini’s misogyny always triumphs in the end.’

‘You’re getting cold. Away indoors. And wipe your feet – you’re standing in a pool of red wine.’

‘It was very nearly a pool of tears.’

‘I’ll see you around, maybe.’

‘Well, you might see *me*, but I definitely won’t see you. Goodbye.’

Marianne

Has it ever struck you how language favours the sighted? (Of course not, because you can see.) I don’t just have a problem seeing, I have a problem *talking*, trying to find words and phrases appropriate to my experience. Just listen to how people go on: *Oh, I see what you mean ... Now look here ... The way I see it ... Reading between the lines ... I didn’t see* that *coming*! ... *It depends on your point of view ...*

You get the picture?
I, of course, don't.

People often ask me why I go to the opera when I can't see the singers act, I can't see the set or costumes and I can't see any lighting effects. Why don't I just stay home and listen to a CD – surely it's the same? I ask them if they think it's the same looking at a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* as standing in front of the actual painting? (I wouldn't know, of course, but I do know people who have stood before that canvas and wept.)

I tell sceptics and doubters that I go to the opera because opera pours a vision of a wider world into my ears in a way that no other art form that I can access does. Sculpture and textiles, on the rare occasion I'm permitted to touch them, excite me. Plays, novels and poems move, entertain and educate me, but they don't rock me to my foundations and make me *see*. I can read Tolstoy's account of the French retreat from Moscow, either in Braille or as an audio-book, but I have never seen a city. Or snow. I've never seen a man, let alone an army. Tolstoy uses a visual language that I can read, haltingly. It's not my mother tongue.

But music I can 'read' much more easily. In fact, I don't need to read it at all. When I hear music it goes directly to my heart, it pierces my soul and stirs me with nameless emotions, countless ideas and aural pictures. Nowhere am I more conscious of this than at the opera. At times I am so shaken by what I hear, by what I feel, I wonder if my constitution could actually cope with the addition of a visual component.

I lied to the man on my doorstep about my dislike of Puccini's victim-heroines, or rather I told him a half-truth. What I cannot bear is their *pain*, and when their suffering seems random, pointless – as Tosca's, Mimi's and Butterfly's does – I think what I feel, at some deep level, is angry. And I don't want to feel angry, especially not in the opera house.

I have far too much to be angry about.
Anger is a place I don't go, a colour I never wear.

I have two wardrobes in my large bedroom. One of them contains black clothes and the other contains cream and ivory. (These

adjectives are labels that my elder sister Louisa has allocated for me. For all I know she could be dressing me in sky-blue pink, as our mother used to say, a colour no more difficult for me to imagine than black or ivory.)

Wearing coloured clothes would be too complicated for me. If I wish to look smart for work or for my limited social life, and if I wish to be independent, I have to have clothes that will match or blend. Louisa and I thought this through carefully. She rejected navy blue because there are apparently many different types of navy. (She also said she couldn't bear to look at me in navy since this was the colour we wore for years as school uniform.) Louisa said black and cream would co-ordinate if I got confused and put an item of clothing away in the wrong wardrobe.

Light-coloured clothes are hazardous of course. They show stains and dirt. Eating when you're blind is fraught with difficulties, so I spend a fortune on dry-cleaning. I rely on Lou to tell me when it needs to be done, but at least I don't ever have to stand in front of a mirror agonising over what to wear. It's either a cream day or a black day. Occasionally Lou prevails upon me to wear a brightly coloured scarf or pashmina to ring the changes. She says my eyes are an attractive opal blue and certain colours bring it out.

I hope the colour is more attractive than the word. 'Opal' is an ugly-sounding word, like all words for which there is no rhyme, such as 'pint' and 'orange'. Perhaps they aren't ugly sounds, merely unique, and therefore odd. When you cannot see what words describe, you tend to focus on the words themselves. Words are a form of music and I suppose I hear them differently from the sighted. Louisa describes my opal eyes in breathless tones, as if she is paying me a huge compliment based, I gather, on a comparison with the precious stone, which she tells me is quite spectacular. I just hear an ugly, faintly ridiculous word.

I don't wear colours.

I don't do anger.

Nor, I'm afraid, love. Not any more.

A monochrome existence, the sighted might say, but even that implies the presence of one colour. *You* might use the word 'colourless', but what colour do you then see? People seem to

describe dull things as 'colourless' when – apparently – they are grey or brown.

When we were young I asked Louisa if anything was *literally* colourless. She thought for a while and said 'glass'. Then she said 'rain'. I asked her if all water was colourless and she said, no, not from a distance. The sea or a lake is coloured because it reflects the sky, but she said individual drops of water were colourless; rain, as it fell through the air, was colourless.

It's a paradox. Things that look colourless to you are my artist's palette. Rain is the only thing apart from my sense of touch that gives me any sense of three dimensions. Water falling from the sky defines shape, size and quality by the sounds it makes when it lands.

Water colourless? Not for me.

Harvey was dead. Long dead. I hardly even thought about him any more, perhaps because I'd never had any visual memories of him – no photographs, no wedding video to watch to keep the memories alive, no children to remind me of him. To me Harvey was just a body and a voice. A very faint one now, but then he was always soft-spoken, perhaps to compensate for the fact that some people believe blindness affects the ears as well as the eyes, so they raise their voice when speaking to you. Harvey didn't do that. He knew how sensitive my hearing was, how I saw with my ears.

But Harvey died.

I didn't see *that* coming either.

I ran into him again. Not Harvey, the man from Skye. At the theatre. The opera, in fact. During the interval of *Die Walküre* Louisa bought us both drinks, settled me at a table and went off to join the queue in the Ladies. She left me stewing in a soup of sound, the kind of aural overload that I find distressing: the quack of elderly ladies; the clatter of teaspoons and the chink of sturdy cups; the murmur of male voices breathing urgently into their mobiles; English women sounding like neighing horses; Scotsmen scouring the ear with aural Brillo pads. I'd already taken a hammering from Wagner and was thinking of abandoning the two G&Ts and joining Louisa in the

Ladies when a male voice asked me if a chair was taken. I recognised him immediately. I was about to reply but by then he'd recognised me and was sitting down, asking me what I thought of the singing.

His voice was so similar. Like toffee. Smooth and pitched low. But this voice didn't have the drop of vanilla, the hint of a drawl that Harvey had inherited from his Canadian mother. This voice was more like a good dark chocolate, the kind that's succulent, almost fruity, but with a hint of bitterness. He hit his Highland consonants with the same satisfying 'click' that good chocolate makes when you snap it into pieces. (The blind are as fetishistic about voices as the sighted are about appearances, so allow me, if you will, to describe this man's voice as chocolate. *Serious* chocolate. Green & Black's, not Cadbury's.)

When I'd met him on my doorstep I knew immediately it wasn't Harvey's voice. In any case, Harvey was dead. (I may be blind but I'm not stupid.) When I heard that voice for the second time, I knew at once who it was, but again I remembered ... So I was already thinking about Harvey when he told me his name.

'Harvey.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'My name's Harvey. Keir Harvey.'

'Did you say Hardy?'

'*Harvey*. Keir Hardie was the founder of the Labour Party.'

'I'm aware of that. He's also dead.'

'Aye, but his spirit lives on.'

'In you?'

'Not that I'm aware. It could have taken up residence without my knowing, I suppose.'

'Do you have socialist leanings?'

'Practically toppling over.'

'Well, that might account for it. If you were possessed, I mean.'

'Do I strike you as possessed?'

'No … Self-possessed, perhaps.'

'That's an odd expression. I mean, who else would own you?'

‘Well, in your case, possibly Keir Hardie. Perhaps you should change your name.’

‘It’s *Harvey*. Like the rabbit.’

‘What rabbit?’

‘In the film. With James Stewart.’

‘What film?’

‘*Harvey*.’

‘I’ve never seen it.’

‘Have you ever seen any film?’

‘No. I’ve been blind since birth.’

‘Aye, well, you missed a good one there. Harvey is a six-foot rabbit that only James Stewart can see, which could have something to do with him being always out on the bevvy. But the rabbit is remarkably good company, for all he’s invisible.’

‘You didn’t apologise.’

‘What for?’

‘When I told you I’ve been blind since birth, you didn’t say, “I’m sorry” in a tragic voice. People usually do.’

‘Well, it wasn’t my fault, so I don’t really see why I should apologise. Is it obligatory?’

‘I think it’s said more as an expression of compassion. Fellow feeling.’

‘Embarassment, more like.’

‘Yes, very probably. And you’re not embarrassed.’

‘Not by your inability to see. I’m deeply embarrassed that you mistook me for a dead socialist.’

‘It could have been worse. I might have taken you for a six-foot rabbit.’

‘How d’you know I’m not?’

The middle-aged woman who bustles through the crowded bar is small but determined. She adjusts a beaded pashmina draped round her plump shoulders and, with a well-aimed nudge of her elbow, squeezes her way through the press of suits and evening gowns to a low table where a woman sits nursing a gin and tonic, staring into space. The family resemblance is striking. Both women are fair, even-featured, blue-eyed. The extravagant blondeness of the woman on her feet owes much to the

skills of her hairdresser. The fair hair of her seated sister, Marianne, is ashen, in places grey, drawn back into a simple chignon suggesting the pale, poised severity of a ballerina. Despite her greying hair she is evidently younger than the sister who now bears down on her, round face shining despite recent ministrations with a powder compact.

'Sorry I was so long, darling.' She bends, picks up a glass and takes a large swig. 'Oh, God – the ice has melted!' She puts the glass down again. 'There was an interminable queue in the Ladies and then I was accosted by a fan. She wanted to know when *Eldest Night and Chaos* was coming out. So I gave her a bookmark – I had some in my handbag. She was thrilled.'

Marianne doesn't look up but sighs. 'Really, Lou, the imbecility of your titles beggars belief.'

'That's Milton, I'll have you know.'

'I'm aware it's Milton. You, my dear, are not. Now be quiet a moment and let me introduce you to Mr Harvey.' She indicates a chair on her right with a wave of her hand. 'This is the kind man who retrieved my door key for me – when I lost it at Christmas, do you remember? Mr Harvey, this is my sister, Louisa Potter who, in another guise, is a famous author. Of very silly books.'

Louisa laughs nervously. 'Marianne, darling, there's nobody there! The chair's empty.'

'Is it?' Marianne's large eyes register no emotion but her head inclines slightly towards the adjacent chair as if she is listening. 'Well, he was here a moment ago. He was talking to me just before you arrived. How very odd!'

Louisa sinks into the empty chair beside her sister and thinks about kicking off her high-heeled shoes. She considers the worse discomfort of trying to get them back on again after the interval and decides to suffer. 'Did you have a nice chat? With your mystery man?'

'Yes, thanks.'

'I wonder why he slipped off like that without saying anything? Very bad-mannered.' Louisa swirls the remains of her ice cubes around in her glass. 'Perhaps he spotted someone

he knew. Or maybe he was paged. A medical emergency. He might have been a surgeon.'

'For goodness sake, Lou, do you have to turn everything into a melodrama?'

'Well, *you* said it was odd, disappearing like that. I was trying to account for it.'

'He wasn't a surgeon anyway.'

'Oh? What does he do?'

'I've no idea, but he's not a surgeon. We shook hands. His was rough and decidedly workmanlike. I'd say he works outdoors.'

'Now who's inventing mysteries?'

'I'm not inventing, I'm *deducing*. From the evidence of my senses.'

'Damn, that's the bell for Act Two.' Louisa takes another mouthful of watery gin and struggles to her aching feet. 'Listen out for his voice. He might be sitting near us.'

'He won't be talking. He's here on his own.'

'Well, now I *am* intrigued. A man who works outdoors with his hands and goes to the opera *alone* ... I presume he's not elderly?'

'The handshake wasn't.'

'Young, then?'

'No, not young. Well, he didn't *sound* young. I can't always tell with voices.'

'Was he chatting you up?'

'No, of course not! Lou, you really are impossible.'

'Not impossible – just an incurable romantic and a diehard optimist.'

'A nauseating combination, if I may say so.'

'Thank you, sweetie. Love you too.'

As Marianne rises from her chair and reaches for her cane, Louisa turns the pages of her programme. 'How many more acts of this musical torture do we have to endure?'

'Two. Add philistinism to your long list of failings.'

'I know Wagner was supposed to be an orchestral genius – you've told me often enough – but I just feel sorry for the poor singers, rambling on and on in search of a tune. Give me Puccini any day.'

‘You and Mr Harvey both.’ Marianne extends her arm in the direction of her sister’s voice. Louisa searches her inscrutable face, then takes her arm and links it affectionately with her own as they join the chattering throng moving slowly towards the auditorium. ‘I’d really like to meet this man. A solitary, male opera-goer with labourer’s hands, who loves Puccini. Fascinating! If you put him in a book no one would believe you.’

‘I wasn’t aware that credibility was a criterion in fiction these days. Especially not yours.’

‘I write fantasy, darling,’ Louisa replies amiably, patting her sister’s hand. ‘Anything goes. You don’t have to believe it. You just *consume* it. Like chocolate.’