The Glass Painter's Daughter

Rachel Hore

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In old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put into theirs, which leads them forth gently towards a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's/

*George Elio*t, Silas Marner

Woman is like the Archangel Michael as he stands upon Saint Angelo at Rome. She has an immense provision of wings, which seem as if they would bear her over earth and heaven, but when she tries to use them, she is petrified into stone, her feet are grown into the earth, chained to the bronze pedestal.

Florence Nightingale, Cassandra

Prologue

London, 3rd September 1993

The stained-glass shop had worn its Closed *sign for nearly a week, though that hadn't stopped people from testing the door handle or staring in through the window, hoping for signs of life. Some of the lights were on, after all, and passers-by were startled from their early-morning stupor by the exquisite items on display: the angel glowing centre stage in its arched pane; delicate suncatchers – dragonflies and fairies – quivering in some draught; myriad Tiffany-style lampshades receding across the shop ceiling like lush flowers studding a tropical rainforest canopy.*

One very young woman who stopped by every day noticed that sometimes the door at the back of the shop stood open and sometimes it was closed, that sometimes there were two or three cardboard boxes stacked on the counter and sometimes none.

Someone visited the shop several times that week: a middle-aged man with a military bearing, dressed in a tweed jacket and clerical collar. The first morning, he tried the door and found it locked. He stepped back to inspect the words Minster Glass *gleaming over the shop-front, adjusted his spectacles to read the opening times listed beneath the* Closed *sign, then frowned before setting off back across the public garden of the Square. The next day he pushed a white envelope through the letterbox. On the third occasion, as he scrawled the phone*

number given on the sign into a small notebook, a woman in a plastic apron and with a fat purse in her hand emerged from the coffee shop next door.

'You wanting Mr Morrison?' she asked, looking the man up and down as if to satisfy herself that he wasn't one of them down-and-outs. 'He's not at all well. The ambulance come last week.' She knew no more. He thanked her anyway as he pocketed the notebook and turned away.

Eventually, mid-afternoon on Friday, a black cab sailed out of the traffic and pulled up outside the shop. A slight, neat woman with shoulder-length dark hair and a pale complexion climbed out and started dragging an assortment of baggage onto the pavement.

Anita in the café, glancing out of the window as she waited for the coffee machine to deliver an espresso, surveyed the scuffed leather holdall and the overflowing rucksack, and wondered what could be in the hard, odd-shaped case. Must be a musical instrument of some sort, she supposed. Either that, or the shape suggested a very small elephant.

The girl dismissed the cab and stood among her belongings gazing wistfully at Minster Glass. *In her short tailored coat and striped scarf, and with her brown eyes soulful below her fringe, she looked like a reluctant schoolgirl returning to her institution after a glorious summer break. Anita was new to the café, otherwise she might have guessed the younger woman's identity, and realised that, as she contemplated her father's shop, Fran Morrison's entire life was passing before her eyes.*

Chapter 1

Tears, such as angels weep, burst forth.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Sometimes, if I wake early on a summer's morning, I lie in a day dream whilst the rest of the household slumbers, remembering how it all started. I pinpoint that moment, ten years ago now, that precise milli-second when, staring at the closed and empty shop, I recognised that everything had changed, changed irrevocably and for ever.

We talk about going 'back home' as though it's a regression, and that's what I'd believed, but on this occasion it turned out to be a step forward into a new life. It's been on my mind a great deal, this story that is my story – my 'angel reach'. Now that I've brooded about it for so long, seen its consequences, like ripples spreading outwards on a pond after the stone is thrown, the time has come to write it all down. And so each evening, while the light is long in the sky, I climb the stairs to the attic, sit at Dad's old desk and take up my pen. How quickly I am absorbed in my task.

Home was absolutely the last place I wanted to be, that gloriously balmy autumn of 1993. Given the choice, I'd have picked

an old *palazzo* apartment in Venice perhaps, or a neat townhouse *pension* in Heidelberg, or some glittering high-rise hotel in New York or Tokyo. Somewhere different, exotic, where I could live entirely in the present and forget the past. But sometimes life doesn't give us a choice. And so I found myself in London again – a desolate homecoming, given the circumstances. Yet, knowing what I do now, I can see that the timing was exactly right.

The day before, when Zac finally tracked me down with the news, I had been in Athens, dozing away a baking afternoon in a hostel in the older part of the city. The caretaker's son, a wary, tongue-tied sixteen year old, had tapped on the door then led me to the phone in a cool tiled recess of the reception lobby.

'*Fran!* Finally,' cried the voice down the line.

'Zac, what's the matter?' I'd have known that Scottish burr anywhere. Zac was Dad's assistant at *Minster Glass*.

'Why the heck don't you pick up your messages?'

No 'How are you?' or 'I haven't seen you for months'. In fact, he sounded so agitated that I didn't bother to ask where he'd left messages or how he'd found my number here.

'I didn't get any messages, that's why. Zac, what is it?' But I knew instinctively what was wrong.

The annoyance went out of Zac's voice, to be replaced by desperation. 'You've got to come home. *Now*. Your father's in hospital – and this time it's not just one of his funny turns. Fran, it's a stroke, a bad one.'

As I packed that evening, I tried to think straight. There was no one in Athens I needed to contact. The concert tour had finished a few nights ago. The orchestra had dispersed the next morning, everybody air-kissing in the hotel lobby and promising to keep in touch. Nick went too. I had decided some time before to find somewhere cheaper to stay on for a few days'

holiday, and he found me out as I loitered miserably, envying other people's excitement at going home. He smiled, his expression soft, then kissed me chastely on the cheek and muttered, 'Goodbye. Watch out for yourself. It's been . . .'

'I always do. Goodbye, Nick,' I cut in, as coolly as I could, and watched him heft his luggage outside. To torture myself further I peeped between the pot plants in the window, saw him stow his cello in the boot of the taxi and drive off, out of my life.

After everyone had gone I removed myself with my bags and my tuba to the shabby Aphrodite Hostel. My original plan had been to mosey about sightseeing until my diary service told me where I might be required to play next on someone else's expenses – somewhere glamorous, I hoped, Munich, Rio or Paris – but in the event I was so downcast I couldn't summon the energy to trudge round the tourist spots. And then Zac rang and everything changed once more.

So here I was outside our old shop in Greycoat Square, my fingers remembering the trick of working the keys. *Minster Glass*, the place where I was born. I don't mean that literally, of course. That had been thirty years ago in the same hospital where my father lay now, the same hospital probably where my mother had died when I was tiny.

It is a strange secret area, this part of Westminster, bounded by the looming gothic Abbey and the ornate Italian-style Catholic Cathedral, tucked away between busy Victoria Street to the north and the River Thames to the south; an area of hidden garden squares like ours, of rows of Victorian terraces cut off from the pavement by black iron palings, the office doorways often studded with polished brass plates advertising the most unlikely-sounding organizations – the London Theosophical Society, the Royal Order of Griffins, the *Bookbinders Gazette*. I suppose *Minster Glass* was itself another oddity. I loved it all.

A Victorian stained-glass shop, with bay windows and a tiled porch, though delightfully quaint, wouldn't be most people's idea of home. Dad and I had camped – I can't think of a better word for our haphazard living arrangements – in the flat above the shop. There should have been plenty of space for the two of us, given the living room, large kitchen, three bedrooms and enormous attics. But every spare nook and cranny was crammed with stuff: books, boxes, files and papers, together representing the entire history of *Minster Glass*.

The door leading up to the flat was accessed from the workroom behind the front shop. I remembered how I'd creep down the bare wooden stairs of a gloomy winter's morning and through the icy workroom, braving its dark corners and sinister acrid smells, terrified of Dad's temper should I break anything, to meet my friend Jo and walk to school. Jo's family lived in a mansion block nearby, her father being a hotshot City lawyer.

On my way out to the street I loved to linger in the front shop, for it was beautiful, a fantasy of ever-changing coloured light, especially when the sun slanted through the window, setting the suncatchers turning, pouring dusty pools of ruby, emerald and sapphire upon the wooden floor so it seemed a hallowed place.

It was this peaceful beauty that soothed my troubled feelings now, as I turned the key in the shop door, pushed down the handle and walked in, the bell jangling mournfully overhead. For a moment I stood breathing in the familiar smells, the fustiness of old wood overlaid by a hint of something chemical. And for that moment I could have been a little girl again, dancing in the dusty shafts of coloured light.

Something caught my eye – a stiff white envelope lying on the mat. I picked it up, noticing a crest embossed on the back, but it was addressed to Dad so I dropped it unopened on the counter.

Locking up – the last thing I could cope with right now was some demanding customer – I left my luggage in the shop, opened the door behind the counter and walked into the workshop.

If the front shop always felt like a welcoming church, the workshop was its chilly crypt. I flipped on the ceiling lights, temporarily dazzled by the bright whiteness. Fragments of glass crunched under my feet as I crossed the concrete floor.

Through the rectangle of window I glimpsed the same old scrubby yard and garage, accessed by a drive to the right of the shop. On a worktop next to me, pinned to a wooden board the size of a tea tray, lay a leadwork window, partly soldered. This must have been what Dad had been working on when it happened. Zac said he'd been sitting in the cubbyhole of an office when he'd heard Dad groan, had seen him crumple to the floor, the stool spinning over the concrete.

I perched on this stool now with a feeling of heaviness. With one finger I traced the Celtic knot pattern Dad had made; one of his favourite devices for borders and filling in small spaces, and which he used on occasion as his craftsman's signature. He liked it, he always said, because he could draw it in a single, continuous line. Under the bench my foot struck something, sending it rolling. I bent down to look. It was the tip of a broken soldering iron. The rest of it was there, too. Zac must have unplugged it, but in the confusion, left it where it lay. I picked up the pieces and examined them, then noticed something else glinting amongst the dustballs under the bench. I reached for it.

It was a small brooch wrought in gold, set with glittering blue stones, shaped in the figure of an angel. Pretty and perhaps valuable. Where it came from I'd no idea – I'd never seen it before. I laid it on the work surface next to the jagged bits of soldering iron and Dad's stained craft-knife.

A blob of paint on the knife bore Dad's fingerprint, and suddenly his absence shifted sharply into focus. Covering my face with my hands, I finally allowed myself to remember how I'd seen him a couple of hours before.

There'd been no one at Heathrow Airport to meet me, but then I hadn't even told Zac the time of my flight. I'd travelled straight to the hospital, where a nurse led me down a small ward to a bed at the far end.

It took me a moment to adjust to the fact that the figure in the bed was Dad, my dad, helpless as I'd never seen him before. His eyes were closed. Tubes, running from cannulas on the back of his hand, were looped above his bed, reminding me for all the world of the long strips of lead solder draped over hooks in his workshop. A monitor beside him pulsing steady red zigzags was the only clear sign of life.

I sat down on a chair beside the bed and studied the pale sleeping face. 'Dad, Daddy,' I whispered, with a flutter of unease. There was no indication that he had heard. I touched his cheek. It was cool against the back of my hand.

In some ways he was the same, I thought, trying to calm myself. His sparse greying hair was combed back in its usual neat style; the long skull with its high cheekbones and hawkish nose still conveyed an air of dignity. But his pallid skin, the thread of saliva between greyish lips, a twitching eyelid, all these made me fear that some dreadful, strange being now lurked beneath his skin. I asked myself, not for the first time in my life, what was he really like, this man, my father?

They say you can never truly know anyone, and there were great swathes of Edward Morrison's inner life that he had never allowed even me, his only child, to penetrate. He was not a cruel man, but often distant, lacking in tenderness and easily irritated. Anything could annoy him – someone ringing up while we

were eating, a neighbouring shopkeeper piling rubbish on the pavement when it wasn't collection day. This worsened as he got older, and I wondered how Zac put up with it.

Dad was peaceful enough now. I sat waiting for a rush of emotion, a release of tears. Instead, there was only numbness.

'We think he will come round before long.' Mr Bashir, the consultant, who arrived a moment later, was a calm, portly, middle-aged Pakistani. 'There are signs that his coma is lightening, but the scans indicate that the stroke was a serious one. We do not know how he will be when he wakes.'

'He's only sixty-one,' I managed to blurt out. 'Isn't that still young for something like this?'

'I am afraid it is not so unusual. Especially with your father having type one diabetes. His high blood pressure was a contributory factor.' Diabetes was something Dad had suffered from since his teens. I remembered the bad spells on the rare occasions when he was late with his insulin injections. This stroke, however, was uncharted territory.

After Mr Bashir had gone I stared out of the window at the great expanse of clear sky. At least when Dad woke – and he would wake, I told myself fiercely – he would be able to see the changing light he loved, watch birds and clouds crossing the heavens, twilight fading into darkness, the lights of planes winking against the stars.

And as I whispered goodbye, stroking his hand, dry and callused, this thought comforted me.

It wasn't until late afternoon that I remembered the formal-looking letter I'd left on the shop counter. I'd inspected the flat, finding it tidy though not very clean, made up the bed in my old room, unpacked, then gone to buy some supplies from the express supermarket around the corner. It was when I returned

with my carrier bags that I noticed the letter again. With that crest it might be something important. I tore open the envelope.

The single page inside was headed *The Rectory, Parish of St Martin's Westminster*, the letter obviously typed by the rector himself for it paid no heed to layout or margins.

Dear Ted,
I called by yesterday but the shop was closed. Perhaps you're away? If so, I hope this letter will find you on your return. I wonder whether you would telephone me at an early opportunity as I've made a discovery I think will interest you and which certainly needs your expertise, given that your firm was responsible for some of our stained glass. This might also be a good time for you to inspect the windows, as I have already mentioned to you, in line with the findings in our recent quinquennial buildings report.

Look forward to hearing from you. I so enjoy our conversations.

Kind regards,
Jeremy
Rev. Jeremy Quentin

St Martin's was the sandstone Victorian-gothic church in Vincent Street, which skimmed the opposite corner of Greycoat Square, running roughly parallel to Victoria Street. I don't remember ever going inside the church – it always appeared locked up when I passed – but I'd noticed coloured glass behind several of the metal grilles that shielded the windows and had wondered vaguely what scenes they depicted. I had a faint memory, come to think of it, of Dad telling me *Minster Glass* had been responsible for their creation back in Victorian times.

I'd also been christened in the church as a baby, he told me,

yet on the odd Sunday we attended a service when I was growing up, we always went to Westminster Abbey. We both loved the music and Dad found the sermons suitably intellectual. It was also easy to creep out after the service without anybody engaging him in intrusive conversation. In matters spiritual, as in everything else in life, he liked to keep himself private. It intrigued me how he'd become so friendly with the Reverend Quentin.

I stuffed the letter back in its envelope and left it on the counter, resolving to ring the vicar myself when I had a moment and break the news about Dad's illness.

That evening, partly to take my mind off my troubles, I gave the flat a thorough clean, throwing old food out of the larder, mopping the faded lino, scrubbing the chipped old bath and vacuuming the living room as best I could with Dad's whining, worn-out machine. Afterwards, exhausted by emotion, by the day's early start and the unaccustomed physical labour, I collapsed into the armchair by the living-room window and picked at a pre-packed chicken salad.

The gardens turned golden in the sunset, then silver, as darkness fell. One by one, lights came on in the windows of houses all around and the pavements glimmered in the soft yellow sulphur streetlamps. I'd forgotten how beautiful and peaceful the Square could be. It was difficult to believe it was in the heart of a huge city.

Half a dozen doors down, next to an antiquarian bookshop, was a new wine bar, where people spilled out into the warm, still evening. Above the murmur of voices I became aware of the distant soaring notes of Elgar's Cello Concerto. I got up to listen, as its heartrending phrases wafted from somewhere across the square. And suddenly I longed to speak to Nick again so desperately, the pain was almost physical.

I'd met him in Belgrade three weeks before, when I'd joined the Royal London Orchestra on its tour of Eastern Europe. Nick Parton was a couple of years younger than me, a liberally talented cellist and very ambitious. His energy was one of the things I found most attractive about him: that, his soft teasing voice, and – for I had the opportunity to gaze at him night after night from my place at the back of the orchestra – his smooth olive skin and perfect profile.

'I can't believe you're strong enough to play that monster,' were his first, careless words to me, eyeing the tuba cradled in my arms.

'Just watch me,' I sparked back. I pursed my lips and delivered such an ear-shattering blast on the instrument that the crusty leader of the orchestra knocked over his music stand and swore. Nick merely threw back his head and laughed.

I was aware of his eyes on me all the time after that. He sought me out with exaggerated solicitousness, teasingly offering to carry my instrument case for me because I was 'too delicate', then, when I irritably refused, holding open the door with a gallant bow to allow me through first, despite his own considerable burden. After a few days of this I allowed myself to melt slightly. We got together properly one night when, both a little the worse for wear after a late meal in a restaurant, we shared a taxi back to the hotel and a nightcap in the bar.

There was only one evening left after that in Belgrade, but then the orchestra moved on to Prague, Zagreb and Budapest – one glorious setting after another, so that our romance never had the opportunity to grow routine. There was one little problem, however, which I didn't identify until our last night in Athens, and that was the existence of a fiancée, Fiona, back home in Birmingham. It turned out that Nick saw our little duet as his final 'fling' before they married in October. And so the last night

of the tour was our finale too, ending in tears and recriminations – mine – and sulks – his.

As I lay on my rickety bed in that Greek hostel, going over and over everything Nick had said and done during the previous few weeks, I realised that he had dropped various hints but that I had blanked out their meaning. For though I was angry and upset when he told me about Fiona, part of me hadn't been surprised, and now a lot of things began to make sense. His refusal to stay on with me in Athens, for instance, the frequent phone messages he took, his avoidance of any discussion about what would happen after the tour.

I tried to make myself feel better by concentrating on how horrible it must be for poor duped Fiona, to imagine how I would feel if our positions were reversed and I found that my fiancé had been playing away. Surely, I told myself, she must suspect. Was it worse that she didn't, or that she did and would marry him anyway? I couldn't decide. At least I knew the truth and had discovered it before I was in too deep. Though it wasn't the first time I had got myself in a mess like this. You could say I had a gift for it.

I didn't mean to fall in love with unobtainable men, it just happened that way. Perhaps I was hard-wired to respond to some strange pheromone that they exuded, these men who were married or who never intended to stay the course.

I listened to the soaring song of the cello and mulled over my love of movies in which lovers came together on sinking ships or as cities fell to the enemy or an asteroid was about to hit the earth . . . situations in which love was desperate, snatched, a long way from humdrum reality.

I was mature enough to recognise this painful cycle I put myself through over and over again, and I knew it was about time I broke it. Sitting alone in this scruffy old flat, which I still

called home despite everything, for I had nowhere else, I fought the urge to look up Nick's number and ring him. What finally stopped me was the thought of poor Fiona answering. I wanted Nick badly. But not a Nick who would up and leave. I knew now that I wanted someone who was wholly and eternally mine.