



SISTERS

THEY'RE THREE SISTERS – that's evocative . . . they could be Russian – frustrated, horrible or anorexic.

None of those.

If you've a childhood in a sect – it's a big room that gets smaller and smaller when you've closed the door on it, but it's still your birth-room. The travail's a memory that stays. Lots of early things, left inside you.

One, works in a white coat: super conductors, looking for something that lasts for ever – it's what the cat already has, if you don't think it'll ever end, you can remember everything (or forget it) and it's all good or bad, and it always has exactly the same value, the same weight – a kindness or a kick. A cat lives so. Nothing is wiped away or buried. It's all yours. But you keep schtum about it, like a cat.

Another sister – does everything she wants, just ricketing around, always reacting, attracting, repelling – the kind you'd want to see on screen, you'd want to go to bed with her – but then – you want to go to bed with almost anyone. She discriminates somewhat, you don't.

A biking accident – her guy, the pilot, lobotomised . . . sweet and gentle for ever, useless but courteous. She, paralysed wholly. For ever, a lump unleavened on a narrow bunk. No story there.

The third's gone, looking after an older man's kids. Some sex, probably, but not shown.

So – back to the first. Who's to tell who's story? She's been hunted. Usually, it's the hunter who's remorseful. Or proud. Not this time. This hunter isn't into story-telling.

Doctor Gritt, her boss – takes his crew up to his camp, his cottage in the wilds. It's a training, he sells it as a favour, fun.

'No, it's a bore,' she says. She won't go – she's wrong, a mistake.

She's always been a hard one. Trained to be a surgeon – but . . . all those poor animals, cut up in exam rooms – no, better lead a battle. . . 'Everyone cut off their index finger – show we're for nature, and not nurture. . .' That's what she said – the

only one so expert with the scalpel. Off it goes – no pointing, prodding, ever more – and one career she'll never have.

'Thoreau,' she shouts out to the Prof, 'says a free person is one who speaks her mind.'

'That's so,' the guy says, in a sweat, 'if that is all you want. But with that face-veil – you're anonymous.'

'A book,' says Masha – that's her name, no secret there . . . it could be an invention, though. 'It has no face. Its covers hide its thought. But once inside it – you speak quite free. That is my veil . . . a book. My freedom.'

'It's crap,' the lecturer shouts. 'What's in books – it may be free, or not. But there are maybe more important things that contents can be – or else are not.'

'Well,' says Masha. 'True. The voice is rather limited. Quite individual. That freedom – well, so what?'

'That's heavy thoughts,' the guy says. 'I'm only here to lecture on eternity, and some machine to take us there. A conductor – like on a bus, time back. You can't critique what you believe, you have to take a stand. That way you're free, and then, maybe – you're not. . .'

She's wondered what her town looks like, when it's been pounded – that cheap cement back into dust, ready for another round. The people not like her, and those she doesn't like – laid out, quiet, carried to the holy ground. . . Now, she has her chance to see it all, the end.

It's a kind of prayer, she says, running down the beach: and God can fix it. But He doesn't calm the waters, nor adjust the motor on the dinghy, nor glue her shoe soles gaping on the long walk. He's non-proven, for her. She doesn't wear the veil when she's with Doctor Gritt, her boss – and doesn't want to bond with him, his ego.

'You must be from Dagestan,' says Doctor Gritt. 'An Eden. Too bad you don't like nature.'

She's not from there – she'd quite like to be. She doesn't wear the veil – most don't here. A veil's a veil a veil. A *persienne*. It's not a voice – it's silent, and you're silent too, behind it. It isn't her, but not much is, except herself. With Doctor Gritt, she has herself: that's a disadvantage too.

'Look, Masha,' says Doctor Gritt, 'I don't care where you're from. But – I see in you extremes. Are you by chance, Masha, an extremist?'

'Oh yes, Doctor Gritt,' says Masha, sweetly, 'I'm an extremist. Everyone around me has extreme existences, has done extreme things. You could call them radical, when they've time to think. I've worn the veil. I've thrown it off. Don't underestimate me, Doctor Gritt.'

'Oh,' he says, 'I'd not do that. The point is – our research – is done by teams. Teamwork is something you don't like.'

‘You’re obsessed with this,’ says Masha. ‘Teams, bands, gangs, sects. My clothes – once, they make the point. Just once: then it’s all changed. You change, your clothes are changed, they’re past. Tattoos – they remember those, because they’re on your skin. Skin’s remembered – it’s big and wrapped around. Your face – is not memorable. My skin’s pristine. My face – is like the others. . . I’ve always had people round – but not a team. A team’s to make the money, lots of it. Not for me. The people I know, they’d like an easy life: you do only what’s expected – don’t try to innovate. Our work. . . A conductor, super? An Über and an Ober? A machine eternal, cool for ever? Soft firm hands. . . I don’t believe it. If you make it, and the money that goes with, I’m not interested. Someone’ll be on your heels; some luck, they get there first.’

‘It’s you who’s looking for eternity,’ says Doctor Gritt. ‘For me – it’s just preserving energy that’s not squandered. Not stasis, not perpetual immobility. Without an index, Masha, you’re no use. What an impulse! If you’d cut off your great toes, you’d fall over endlessly – but I’d have found a chair for you. Without a point, a pointer, there’s left for you – only the mind’s life. How the world seems. No thing stands out, it’s all worth equally. Happenstance – I’m sure you’ve seen the cats – that’s how they live. There is no focus, resolution, no here, no there. If it had been your thumb – no hitching rides – that’s dangerous anyway. Nothing to distinguish you from thumbless jaguars – except you don’t run fast, and you’ve no tail. But – the finger. Remember, how it points, it wrote, “Weighed in the balance . . . wanting.” We all want, but, Masha, at a glance, you’re wanting! If I make a parcel – I can’t ask you to block the string. No pen to hold, no brush, even to pick your nose. . .’

‘I know,’ says Masha. ‘It’s half a tragedy.’

‘Another hand,’ the Doctor says. ‘A spare . . . it’s not the same. That missing length . . . castration! A void – you’ll gyre your life around it. . . I took you on – I pitied you, and felt sorry for myself. Now – you’re fired – I feel pity for myself – but, Masha, most problems can’t be solved. Sometimes fighting and a massacre will help. For most hard places, it’s time, dissatisfaction, generations of bad dreams. You’re now in one of those. No one can help you – anyway, you didn’t ask for help. Don’t be surprised when that help doesn’t come: you’re self-inflicted. The mind, Masha, the mind. See how it unfolds, like paper flowers in water. Or in gin. The choice is yours. Maybe you’ll hallucinate, adopt a child, turn to religion, or away.’

‘It could have been a heel, an eye, my wound,’ says Masha. ‘You’re not from here, dear Doctor. Do you have identity? Or just a personality? And do you care? I could have been in China – they move about so much, and miss their mothers, get beaten, fired, and beaten up again, fall in with bandits, or the bus . . . topples down the unkempt hillside . . . so, here I stand. I can’t stand elsewhere.’

‘I told you – you’ve your toes,’ the Doctor says. ‘You’ll walk and walk.’

*

It's better so. Already a flight, a revolution exploded in its box, armies from everywhere to sort it out . . . and then a job, what luck! its heavy body lying on her, grunting and getting fat and bald. Kids arriving like the witch's curse, around the doorframe, there they stand with greedy eyes and rickety legs. . . Most people take a Russian name, when they get out – the Russians don't just hit, they win.

Many people live in hard states, really hard. Stalin without Stalin. Without the mission, just camps and prisons of every kind. I had all those people round me. Sleeping close, too close, hands in my sack. You need a mission, or it's just all scoundrels and ghosts.

No, Masha thinks, I've lived one life right through. I need find something else.

*

'I envy you, Masha, leaving the team,' Delia says. 'I would too – but I've no country to go back to.'

'No one can win the war back home, and no one can be defeated,' Masha says. 'The people should move out. Just armies. Armies are inexhaustible. My sisters – one died for love, the other – entombed for family. That leaves me free. I'll stay. I'll roam. I'll look for somewhere enchanted, and a way to keep the others out.'

'They'll make you do the therapy,' says Delia. 'In case you are extreme. They'll draw it out: your brain – comes tumbling down your nose.'

'I'm free,' says Masha. 'If I want, I'll choose my chains and snap them on, and hear them! Clank!'

'It's not a joke,' says Delia. 'No one laughs round here.'

*

There's an inflection here – moresques twined round the voice, the orange fruit, inside it's – red. The passion flowers, the bignonias – red. Orange. Depends on distance – orange, red or pink. The old man says, 'It's frightening – you're not aware your brain has gone – it's like a puzzle dropped and broken, the pieces higgled here and there, under a chair, a carpet fringe. You scrabble round – what was the picture? What got broke – it didn't signify a lot when it was whole, but now – it's crumbs.'

'Yes,' Masha says, not interested: 'I'd heard. Another fear arrives when the past has gone, and there's no future left.'

It's hot, there's sea, white light all over – it's like the beach where Caravaggio

ran after the ship with all his pictures – died exhausted. . . A story, that. Invention; a naughty boy is dead, another makes a lie about what happened.

‘If there’s a picture, old man – it’s always breaking up. The scenes are stacked high in our heads, ready to topple. War, hunger, chased out, held fast so’s to experience unwanted dirty tricks – do people go through this, and then they must behave bad, as a response, infection? No, it can’t be so – they’re here, therefore they can’t have had their guts ripped out, or else we shouldn’t see them. They’ve heard it, seen it on a screen, watched it, the final battle, run away. . . It’s an excuse for them to struggle harder, so’s they can survive, and so that others can’t. They steal and elbow, take your name and document and food: – of course. Anybody would. Saints can’t be saintly all the time – they must defend their haloes, or they would be nicked.’ Masha doesn’t say all this, she thinks it, how it would be wasted on this amnesiac old guy, who’s seen it all but now forgotten, anyway, it’s late – though even when it’s early, it’s irrelevant.

The distant pink, the red, the orange, sometimes sweet, and sometimes fire and flame.

It’s an experience, she thinks, sitting here, no questions, no destination, no special anxiety, no empty future to fill up.

*

‘What’s it like’, she’s asked, ‘being you? All those experiences! Just say, in your own words, and we would broadcast it.’

There’s a purpose for sure, behind this, but it’s not hers.

‘Do you pay me?’ she asks.

‘No,’ says the guy doing the interview: ‘It’s against the ethic. But I guess there is expenses. . .’

‘I have those too,’ says Masha. ‘It’s my words, but it’s your purpose, my expenses, your cash.’

‘Yes,’ says the guy. ‘But you must suppose you’re interesting, or we’ll talk to someone else.’

‘I could make something up,’ says Masha. ‘That’ll be interesting. For me, as well.’

They find someone else – Masha doesn’t care.

*

Delia has a sister too – Alina. They perch in their tree-house, drinking a red Corvo.

‘Masha’s drifted far from the shore,’ says Delia. ‘We’ve put gender behind us, but there’s still the culture. It has its rules and codes. Men, women. . . One day,

we'll all converge on something in the middle, between those old men, old women, when they're gone. Or – not the middle: just splaying out all over, keen or indifferent. Maybe we'll be dead. Maybe it'll come, our something, hybrid, or vengeful, and we shan't notice. Sex or faith. Or the bell jar, the antheap, where we all do our things. Maybe it's here now, and Masha's fighting ghosts. . .'

'Maybe she's a ghost,' Alina says. 'There's nothing else for her to do – she's the sheep who smells the knife and runs. You don't want to find another flock, another hypocrite, a shepherd who saves you from the wolves and gifts you to the pigs.'

'What comes after,' Delia says. 'After everyone, is monsters. That's the issue: they have codes and rules. A solitary monster – that you'd recognise. Lurking in the woods. not finding one virgin in the village – famished and frustrated. And then – there's the crowd of them – the devils. A master of the dance, a Mephisto? – we don't believe in one alone. Satan – he converged. He was male and female, had a culture. He must have had a team. Remember the Damnation – there was a bunch of creatures, named, that spurred them on, on to the abyss. And yet, that great devil was progressive. Draining the Pontine marsh – that was his plan, and then she – the soprano – touched his female part: – he lets Margherita off the drop.'

'Well,' says Alina. 'About Masha. Is she a monster too? She's been dead once. . .'

'Oh, absolutely,' Delia says. 'Stay clear of her. Everybody does – she's learned her script, and no one else can speak a line. She hides behind the trees – but roars.'

'Another one that roars,' Alina says, 'is Doctor Gritt. Wants his troupe of females. The best thing would be – they don't lie down to have their kids in hospitals: they're on all fours and drop them in the bush; and if the offspring stand – they'll go into flourishing trades, and marry lovely herbivores.'

'Well, Alina,' Delia says, kissing her sister on the nose. 'We want none of that, do we? And if the soldiers come – the leaves will hide us. . . We mustn't throw the bottles down – that's a big giveaway in life.'

It starts to rain – on the leaves, it's like raisins or almonds dropped on paper – it doesn't get to them. 'Masha says you're supposed to want peace, when there's war all round and war inside. She doesn't want the peace, she says. It's a con, what you're supposed to want, and how to get there,' Alina says. 'She needs some work – maybe something not invented yet, or something obsolete.'

'No,' Delia says. 'She doesn't want to work. It's enough to say you do. You don't.'

The tree rocks – 'We should have kept our tails,' says Alina. 'That way, you cling. I've an aunt, no mother. You've a mother and no aunt – and yet we're sisters. Kiss me, Delia,' and Delia leans to her, but doesn't kiss.

'Doctor Gritt is evil,' Delia says. 'And we are geniuses. Masha too – especially. We should come down now, come to earth. . . They catch quails with sultanas, like

under this mulberry tree. They can't tell fruit from fruit – like us. We're quails, Alina, but no one's going to catch us.'

'They catch Sultanas with the quails,' Alina says. 'No one's catching me! The Sultan fell off his elephant, got trampled on his wedding day . . . in recognition, I'll eat no animal flesh. Maybe organs though. . .'

'Doctor Gritt says his device will last for ever – but it won't. It'll last till we're not here, and can't bear witness. Do you think souls last for ever, Alina?' Delia asks. 'Stars don't, and they used to say they were the souls, the old, old souls of. . .'

'Monsters!' Alina says. 'Certainly – monsters. Like Doctor Gritt – circling round up there in turgid galaxies, waiting for his Plouf! and – there! he's gone.'

'Doctor Gritt – he has sisters too,' says Delia. 'Two stayed back, in his village. They have traditional lives, they toil with their traditional hands, digging the world we lost and long for but at all costs hope we can avoid. . . You guess what their deaths will be, and their descendants' too. I danced the *zouk* with Doctor Gritt – it's the raunchiest! You wave your haunches – like ibexes. . . He came on too strong – I accused him. . . But he said the sister who came with him to Germany, she was big in arty circles. . . If he fired me, he said, he'd put in a word with her. She's called Linda. Be Linda – that's how strong!'

'He represents the fleeting victory, ephemeral ascendancy, of power,' says Alina, solemnly. 'But the *zouk* and him – it throws a different light. . .'

'I shan't go to his camp again,' says Delia, 'I promise, Alina dearest.'

'You should tell him,' Alina says. 'Some moon moths are born for sex and death – but they've no mouths. Those aren't essential. They don't eat, just procreate – so, learn the lesson, Doctor Gritt!'

*

Delia says, 'Doctor Gritt told me, "You're talking about stagnation. Our work, our science, gets us out of it. You're stuck there, Delia! We start from what is stagnant – maybe in the end, that's the state that we produce. It's what you need, you want, you get, if you have things that last, go on for ever. Energy that doesn't dissipate. It seems dynamic when you seek – but in the end – it's steady-state. . . For ever – nullity." That's fine. Logical. A paradox: I like it. It's him that I don't care for.'

'You're narrow, Delia,' says Alina. 'Though I don't mind.'

'He says,' says Delia, "'I love giving the traumatised some hope. A job. There are so many of them, who've lived their lives right through, and still they walk among us. The work we do, our experiments, those white coats we wear, ethereal. Eternity – the point, the value, must be clear.'"

'I told you,' says Alina. 'He's arrogant. A turkey cock. A hungry feast will come to him!'

‘Gritt is therapy,’ Delia says. ‘Whatever your trauma – whatever that may mean – if you don’t follow him, you’ve no hope, no help. The conductor: – it’s the future for us all. A future more stable than the past.’

‘Oh Delia,’ Alina says, ‘don’t exaggerate! Masha will find another job, where you don’t need to point a finger, nor to press a tab.’

‘People like Masha,’ Delia says, ‘who’ve seen deaths, been threatened, been an inch away – they must be cured, turned around – or else they’re barren, rotten, like the others they were with. Some were robbers, others linked arms with her – it’s all the same, you’re all scrambling up the stair. . . . When you’ve climbed the tower, survived – you don’t look up: that would be logical, but no, at the top – you look down. To where you were. You fear the fall: not that you might fly. So it is with her. That’s the lesson. You look up, although there’s nothing there. Her history – it’s all around, in heads and screens – truths from every angle, big and small, partial and shaky. . . . Forget all that. You fix on what Masha has become, submerging in her history for ever. No! You mustn’t stay behind, earthbound. She isn’t what’s she’s been. You must climb the tower, keep on, ever upward – look high into the void. . . . You, she, we. . . .’

She laughs. It isn’t humorous.

‘Leaves, my dear,’ Alina says. ‘If you’re lucky, you see leaves. A sole, a pad, a paw, that skitters up, a life higher than you’ll ever be.’

They look up at the tree, the worms that prowl among the fruit. ‘Oh the lovely lassies’, you might think.

‘When you get off work,’ Alina says, ‘we’ll do the *zouk* together. . . .’

‘Better not,’ says Delia, and laughs.

