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## *Her lies*

They changed with every telling, as perhaps they had to do if they were to convince a child like me who asked too many questions. But her first and most inspired lie, about the butterfly, was the one that changed least. It began without fail in a Brooklyn brownstone in the winter of 1938, with a girl idling a Sunday afternoon away in her father's favourite armchair, fiddling now and again with the dials on the radio at the tail end of a roast beef dinner she had politely but resolutely refused to touch, until happening upon a voice singing its soul away in a language she thought must be Italian, though she had no proof.

The girl, whose name was Grace, was only nine years old in the winter of 1938, but she had listened to enough radio dramas by then to know that this man was in desperate straits, teetering, perhaps, on the edge of perdition, and though she could not understand a word he sang, she could follow the tenor's meaning. Look out the window, he pleaded. There is more to the world than meets the eye. The lights in the brownstone across the street are but illusions. So please, look right through them. Seek the horizon, for beyond it is your fate.

The singer's name would remain a mystery, because when the announcer came on at the end of what Grace did not yet know to be an aria, the family chorus drowned him out. Turn off that racket! cried her aunt, who lived downstairs. She

clapped her hands over her ears, while the others applauded her with laughter, failing to notice that Grace had turned the volume down only to turn it up again, notch by notch, once their backs were turned. And so it was that Grace was able to hear the life story of the next singer, and embrace it as the blueprint for her own future.

Because this second soprano had begun her life in Brooklyn, only streets away from where Grace herself was now sitting. But then she had done what no one in Grace's cosseted circle had ever even considered: at the same age as Grace was at that precise moment, she had persuaded her parents to abandon Brooklyn's safe brown streets for an adventure that would take her to all the great capitals of South America. And in each and every one of them, she had studied Voice. After travelling across the Atlantic 'in lieu of college' to study with the even greater Voices of Rome and Paris, she had returned to the city of her birth to attend the Julliard School of Music. And now here she was, on The Metropolitan Opera Auditions of the Air.

Though the announcer had said that 'this fine new talent' would be sure to convey the delights of being young in Paris, Grace knew at once that she had somehow left her soul there: to sing of those delights was now her only way to breathe. It was not until the third piece, a duet sung in what she thought might be French, that she grasped the key to the mystery. Whatever their language, this soprano and this tenor sang with one voice. They were urging her to embrace life without fear, for to keep one's heart open was worth any price.

The setting for this duet was an oasis in a desert, and now the tenor had become a young monk, the soprano an innocent maiden soon to join a nunnery. Rather than reveal their true feelings, they sang of bathing their hands and lips in water. Hands and lips, Grace thought. Had the nuns who taught her ever bathed their hands and lips? She took this question to school with her the next morning, and after gazing out the window at another row of brownstones, which would, if she could look through it, have revealed another row just like it,

she lifted her eyes to the weak lemon sun hanging above them, and under her scrutiny it seemed to slip from its place, like a cardboard disc inexpertly fastened to a stage set. When her eyes returned to the classroom, everything inside it – the rows of desks and straight-backed girls, their braids fastened with identical white ribbons, the dry husk of a nun tapping her stick against the blackboard – seemed paper thin.

Until that moment, her life had been ruled by ragtime, because her father, who owned a radio repair shop, could play it by ear. He had a few standard bass chords, and to these he could add any tune after hearing it just once. On Sundays when the weather was good, they would go out in the family car to Sheepshead Bay, where her mother's best friend's husband rented out fishing boats. Down the road from their house was a piano bar called Max's, and if her father could be persuaded to play, there would be another round of highballs as the two families crowded around the piano to sing along, and woe to the child who had the temerity to mention homework. Grace never lost her love of ragtime. But after her conversion to opera, ragtime came to remind her of a cradle, rocking in place.

From time to time her father would let a few blue notes waft in, but if he saw so much as a single spirit wilting, he'd switch to something with more bounce to it, like *Oh You Beautiful Doll*, or *I Can't Tell a Lie*. Perhaps that was why even he, with his musical ear, was not partial to opera. But he doted on Grace. And her rebellion against roast beef had shaken him, as had her refusal to explain her reasons. The truth is she'd turned against roast beef because she'd overheard her father telling a visitor that he, the cook of the family, served it every Sunday on account of his eldest and youngest children being just crazy about it. When the visitor asked about Grace, he'd said, 'Oh, *she'll* eat anything.'

She never told him how mad, how *hopping furious*, that had made her. But with opera as with roast beef, silence proved effective, because soon her parents had agreed to let her listen to opera once a week, even if it hurt people's ears a little.

Usually this would be on Saturday night, when *The Chicago Theater of the Air* offered one-hour adaptations of works deemed suitable for family listening. So most ended happily ever after; with exceptions edited to minimise their sting. Because no one wanted to listen to a ponderous historical lecture by Col Robert R. McCormick during the intermission, Grace had agreed to turn the dial way down until he was through droning on and on about some battle no one cared about. But one night she was listening to *Madame Butterfly*, and, fearful of missing the opening strains of the second half, she turned the dial up a minute too soon, whereupon they clapped their hands on their ears in unison, chanting *turn off that racket!* To drown them out, Grace pressed her ear against the radio. She closed her eyes until she had left her father's favourite armchair for the tragedy still unfolding in a Japanese garden, halfway around the world.

Was it true, Cio Cio San asked, that, in foreign lands, a man would catch a butterfly and pin its wings to a table? It was, said Colonel Pinkerton, but only to keep it from flying away. Embracing her, he added, 'I have caught you. You are mine.' And she replied, 'Yes, for life.' But by the intermission he had abandoned his butterfly, and though he returned, it was only to stain her honour and take away their son. There was just one thing he hadn't been able to take from her, and that was her voice.

So when the nine-year-old girl who would become my mother went to bed that night, a butterfly flew in after her. 'Beware!' it cried. 'Keep your wings well hidden. If you don't, some man might try to pin them to a table. Then he'll board a ship, promising to return for you, just as soon as the robins make their nests. But you trust him at your peril.'

'Why?' Grace asked. And then the butterfly told her: it is still a man's world – even in 1938, when ladies could at last wear trousers, and sing on the radio, and travel across the ocean in lieu of college, there to bathe their lips and hands. If Grace wanted to spread her wings one day, she had to do more

than to dream of the horizon. She had to make a plan, and then she had to stick to it. ‘Last but not least,’ said the butterfly, ‘You must never, ever trust a man boarding a ship. Even if he’s promised to take you around the world, don’t take his word for it. Make sure you’re right there next to him, holding the tickets.’

Young Grace thanked the butterfly and took her words to heart. She made a plan, and for the next twenty two years, she stuck to it, with such discretion that it wasn’t until the summer of 1960, when we were packing to leave for Turkey, that my grandparents had the first inkling. They’d forgotten the operas by then, and the roast beef, and the string of eligible but deadly dull suitors Grace had refused just as firmly as roast beef. She’d been such a good girl, after all – going off to secretarial college with a skip and a smile, and then finding herself a nice job in that shipping company, and never once complaining (as did so many other girls her age) that she couldn’t buy her own clothes. At the end of the month, she’d just hand her pay cheque over. She even thanked them for the lunch money they left for her on the sideboard each morning. They had no idea that she was saving it up to enrol in the St John’s Great Books Program, or that from the day she did, she was reading Greek philosophers to and from Manhattan on the subway, or that, if ever she took a shortcut through the lobby of the Waldorf, she’d pretend to be looking for the porter with her trunks.

When Grace came home late on Tuesdays, they thought she’d been out at the movies with Estelle, her chum from stage school, with whom she’d once starred in a tap extravaganza called *American Patrol*, dressed as George Washington. What she really did was to go to a musical academy in the Lower East Side where she was the only white pupil. Even on that Sunday afternoon in 1947, when she went with her family to a piano bar in Flatbush named the Welcome Inn, to stun all in attendance with her new repertoire, it never occurred to my grandparents to ask how she had woken up that morning, suddenly able to sing the blues.

Propping up the bar that day was a wild boy just out of the navy. After listening, awestruck, to Grace's rendition of *Stormy Weather*, he had come over to introduce himself. And soon it was Grace doing the listening, as she sipped her ginger ale and the wild boy knocked back one beer after another, talking of his wartime adventures as a frogman in the Pacific, and his journey overland to China through the Burmese jungle just before they dropped The Bomb. Before long he was asking for advice. The more Grace's eyes widened, the more he talked about ships. And books. And philosophers with strange names. This set the tone for the courtship – day and night, he would talk about ships, and books, and philosophers with strange names. He would drone on and on and on until my grandparents' eyes were rolling in their sockets and there couldn't be a thing they hadn't heard a hundred times before (about ships, and the ports they visited, and the cockamamie ideas those philosophers had cooked up in those ports, but then, if Grace so much as smiled, he'd start up on a new story.

How relieved my grandparents were to see marriage bring him down to earth. This was not to say he hadn't worried them sick on occasion. First there was that bad business at Fort Monmouth. If it hadn't been for wise, old Mr Guttman, keeping him on the straight and narrow, God only knows how it might have ended. But by 1960, the tearaway had become a father of three, with a brand new PhD in physics that was getting him enticing job offers from some of the biggest colleges in the Tristate Area, not to mention Washington DC and NASA. My grandparents were innocently hoping that he wouldn't want to take us too far away, and so they were rooting for the nice community college in their own township.

This was because they knew nothing of the promise my father had made Grace when he had proposed to her twelve years earlier. They would have been shocked to hear that (as she sat there perched on a tombstone in the cemetery where her future father-in-law worked as a gravedigger) it had been Grace who had set the terms.