opening extract from

Escape From Shangri-La

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1 A BIT OF AN OLD GOAT

I WAS KNEELING UP AGAINST THE BACK OF THE sofa looking out of the window. Summer holidays and raining, raining streams. 'He's been there all day,' I said.

'Who has?' My mother was still doing the ironing. 'I don't know why,' she went on, 'but I love ironing. Therapeutic, restorative, satisfying. Not like teaching at all. Teaching's definitely not therapeutic.' She talked a lot about teaching, even in the holidays.

'That man. He just stands there. He just stands there staring at us.'

'It's a free world, isn't it?'

The old man was standing on the opposite side of the road outside Mrs Martin's house underneath the lamppost. Sometimes he'd be leaning up against it, and sometimes

he'd be just standing there, shoulders hunched, his hands deep in his pockets. But always he'd be looking, looking right at me. He was wearing a blue donkey jacket – or perhaps it was a sailor's jacket, I couldn't tell – the collar turned up against the rain. His hair was long, long and white, and it seemed to be tied up in a ponytail behind him. He looked like some ancient Viking warlord.

'Come and see,' I said. 'He's strange, really strange.' But she never even looked up. How anyone could be so obsessively absorbed in ironing was beyond me. She was patting the shirt she'd finished, sadly, her head on one side, just as if she was saying goodbye to an old dog. I turned to the window again.

'What's he up to? He must be soaked. Mum!' At last she came over. She was kneeling beside me on the sofa now and smelling all freshly ironed herself. 'All day, he's been there all day, ever since breakfast. Honest.'

'All that hair,' she tutted. 'He looks a bit of a tramp if you ask me, a bit of an old goat.' And she wrinkled up her nose in disapproval, as if she could smell him, even from this far away.

'And what's wrong with tramps, then?' I said. 'I thought you said it was a free world.'

'Free-ish, Cessie dear, only free-ish.' And she leant across me and closed the curtains. 'There, now he can look at the back of our William Morris lily pattern to his heart's content, and we don't have to look at him any more, do

we?' She smiled her ever so knowing smile at me. 'Do you think I was born yesterday, Cessie Stevens? Do you think I don't know what this is all about? It's the "p" word, isn't it? Pro . . . cras . . . tin . . . ation.' She was right of course. She enunciated it excruciatingly slowly, deliberately teasing the word out for greatest effect. She was expert at it. My mother wasn't a teacher for nothing. 'Violin practice, Cessie. First you said you'd do it this morning, then you were going to do it this afternoon. And now it's already this evening and you still haven't done it, have you?'

She was off the sofa now and crouching down in front of me, looking into my face, her hands on mine. 'Come on. Before your dad gets home. You know how it upsets him when you don't practise. Be an angel.'

'I am not an angel,' I said firmly. 'And I don't want to be an angel either.' I was out of the room and up the stairs before she could say another word.

I was ambivalent about my mother. I was closer to her than anyone else in this world. She had always been my only confidant, my most trusted friend. Whatever I did, she would always defend me to the hilt. I'd overhear her talking about me. 'She's just going through that awkward prickly stage,' she'd explain. 'Half girl, half woman. Not the one thing, nor the other. She'll come out of it.' But sometimes she just couldn't stop playing teacher. Worst of all, she would use my father as a weapon against me. In fact, my father was never really upset when I didn't practise my

violin, but I knew that he would be disappointed. And I hated to disappoint him – she knew that too.

Whenever he could, whenever he was home, my father would come up to my room to hear me play. He'd sit back in my chair, put his hands behind his head and close his eyes. When I played well – and I usually did when he was there – he would give me a huge bear hug afterwards, and say something like, 'Eat your heart out, Yehudi.' But just recently, ever since we moved house, my father hadn't been able to hear me that much. His new job at the radio station kept him busier than ever – he had two shows a day and some at weekends too. I'd listen in from time to time just to hear his voice, but it was never the same. He was never my father on the radio.

I was ambivalent about my violin too. The truth was that I loved it with a passion. I loved the secrecy of its hidden life shut away in its green baize case, the soft snuggle of the pad under my chin, the smoothness of the horsehair when I drew my bow across the inside of my wrist to test its tautness. I loved playing my violin too, but I had always hated practising, and in particular I hated being told to practise. Once I could forget that I was practising, once I could lose myself in the music, then I could play quite happily for hours on end and not even notice the passing of time.

I was just beginning to enjoy it, just beginning to feel at one with my violin. I was playing Handel's *Largo* so well I

could feel my skin pricking with pleasure all down my arms. But then the doorbell rang. The magic was broken. I was immediately back to hateful practising. The bell rang again. Any excuse to avoid practising was good enough. I put the violin down on my bed, and my bow too, and went to the top of the stairs to see who it was. I heard the front door opening. There was a shadow down in the hallway, and my mother was standing beside it, motionless.

'Who is it?' I said, as I came down the stairs.

The shadow moved suddenly into the light of the hallway and became the old man from across the road. He was standing there, dripping. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I don't want to intrude.'

His face tremored into a smile as he saw me. 'Cessie?' He knew my name! 'You must be Cessie. I know this is going to sound a bit odd, but I'm your grandad. I'm your dad's dad, so that makes me your grandad, doesn't it?' He looked full at my mother now. 'It's true, true as I'm standing here. I'm young Arthur's dad. When I knew him last he was only little, five years old, and that's near enough fifty years ago. Long time.' For a moment or two, he didn't seem to know what else to say. 'Big ears. Born with big ears, he was, like a baby elephant. That's why we called him Arthur. You know those Babar books, do you?' I nodded because I couldn't speak. 'I was Babar, if you see what I mean. His mum was Celeste, and so the little fellow, our son, was called Arthur. He didn't have a trunk of course.' I smiled at

that, and he caught it and tossed it back at me, his eyes suddenly bright.

'You'd be a bit old for all that now, I suppose. All grown up, I expect.' He was scrutinising me now. 'Come to think of it, you look a bit like little Arthur too, except for the ears of course. You've got nice ears, nice and neat, like they should be. Not flapping around in the wind like his were. What are you? Thirteen? Fourteen?'

'Eleven,' I said. I felt my mother take my hand and hold on to it tightly, so tightly it was hurting me.

'Seventy-five.' The old man was pointing to himself. 'I'm seventy-five. Old as the hills, eh? Do you know what your dad used to call me when he was little? "Popsicle". "Pops" to start off with. Then it was Popsicle. Don't know why. It's what everyone's always called me ever since – Popsicle, Popsicle Stevens.'

'You can't be,' my mother whispered, pulling me close to her. 'You can't be him. Arthur hasn't got a father.' The old man seemed suddenly unsteady on his feet. He swayed and staggered forward. Instinctively we both backed away from him. He was dripping from his ears, from his chin, from his fingers too. It was as if his whole body was weeping tears. His hair, I noticed, wasn't really white at all, but creamy, almost yellow in places. It didn't look very clean. None of him did.

'Everyone's got a father,' he said, and he was holding out his arms towards us – just like ghosts do, I thought. 'I'm

not a ghost, Cessie.' We backed further away. Ghosts can read minds. 'I'm telling you, I'm Popsicle Stevens and I'm Arthur's father, and I'm alive, alive, oh. I mean ghosts don't get hungry, do they? And they don't get fruzzed either.' He reached out suddenly and caught me by my wrist. 'Feel that?' He was as cold as stone, but he was real. He was no ghost. 'You wouldn't have a nice cup of tea, would you, just to warm a fellow through?'

My mother stood her ground now, pulling me behind her, clasping my hand even tighter still. 'How do I know? You could be anyone, couldn't you? Coming in off the street like that, you could be anyone. How do I know you're who you say you are?'

The old man took a deep breath before he spoke. 'Listen, these old grey cells up here' – he was tapping his temple – 'they may not be what they once were, but there's some things you don't get wrong. If you've got an Arthur Stevens living here, and he grew up in a little place called Bradwell-on-Sea – on the Essex coast it is – if he's your husband, and if he's your dad, then, unless I'm mistaken – which I don't think I am – we're kith and kin, all of us. I just thought I'd look him up, that's all. I didn't think it could do any harm – not now, not any more.'

In the silence of the hallway I could almost hear my mother thinking, perhaps because we were thinking the same thing. My father *had* grown up on the Essex coast. We'd been there. We'd seen the house where he was born.

His childhood was a bit of a mystery. He'd been a Barnado's boy – I knew that much. His mother, my grandmother, had died young – I knew that too – a long time before I was born. As for his father, I'd known little or nothing of him. My father had never spoken of him, not in my hearing anyway. If I had thought about him at all, and I am not sure that I had, then I suppose I had simply presumed he was dead, like my grandmother was.

The old man was unbuttoning his jacket now, and fumbling deep inside. My mother still held me by the hand in a grip of steel. The wallet he took out was stuffed full, like some battered leather sandwich. He opened it up with great care, almost reverently. With shaky fingers he pulled out an old photograph, faded to sepia, torn at the edges and criss-crossed with creases. He gave it to us. A young man looked at me out of the photograph. He was standing in front of a clapperboard house with roses growing up around the windows. Astride his shoulders sat a small boy clutching his hair with both fists. Beside them stood a young woman who was looking up at them adoringly.

'That's your grandmother,' he said, 'and there's me with little Arthur, your dad, that is, pulling my hair by the roots. He was always doing that, little rascal. Summer 1950. That was the last summer we were all together.'

'What was she called?' My mother was still interrogating him. 'Arthur's mother. What was she called?'

The question clearly troubled him. He seemed reluctant

to answer, but when he spoke at last he spoke very deliberately. 'Cecilia,' he said. 'She was called Cecilia.' Then he was looking at me and beaming. 'Of course. I didn't think of it till now, Cessie. That'd be after your grandmother, wouldn't it?'

He was right. He'd been right about everything. I felt a warm shiver creeping up the back of my neck. My grandmother *had* been called Cecilia, and I *had* been named after her, I'd always known that. There was a photograph of her on top of the piano in the sitting-room. She was young in the photograph, somehow too young for me to have ever thought of her as a grandmother.

I looked up into his face. The eyes were deep-set and gentle. They were blue. He had blue eyes. My father had blue eyes. I had blue eyes. That was the moment the last doubts vanished. This man had to be my father's father, my grandfather.

For some time we just stood there and stared at him.

I squeezed my mother's hand, urging her to do something, say something, anything. She looked down at me. I could see she was still unsure. But I knew he was not lying. I knew what lying was all about. I did it a lot. This man was not doing it. It takes a liar to know a liar.

'You'd better come in,' I said.

I broke free of my mother's grasp, took my grandfather gently by the arm and led him into the warmth of the kitchen.