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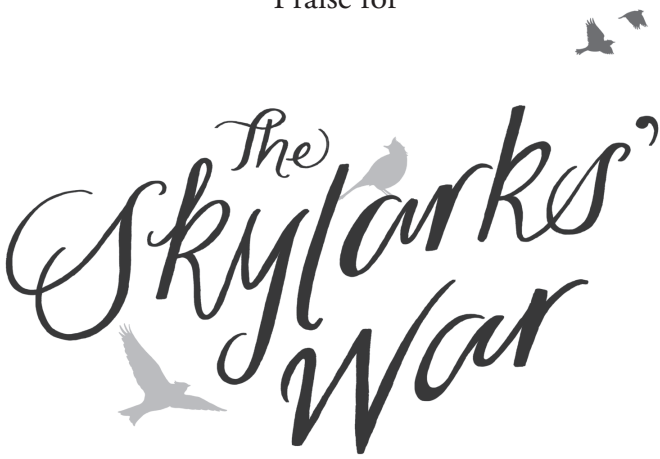

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HILARY MCKAY

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For Kevin

'So on the morn there fell new tidings and other adventures'

And with love to everyone who helped me on the way

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1902–1908

One
Clarry and Peter

More than one hundred years ago, in the time of gas lamps and candlelight, when shops had wooden counters and the streets were full of horses, a baby girl was born. Nobody was pleased about this except the baby's mother. The baby's father did not like children, not even his own, and Peter, the baby's brother, was only three years old and did not understand the need for any extra people in his world.

But the baby's mother *was* pleased. She named the baby Clarissa, after her own lost mother. '*Clear and bright*,' she whispered to her brand-new baby. 'That's what your name means: *Clear and bright*. Clarry.'

Clarry was three days old when her mother died. Many things were said about this great calamity, and some of them were regretted later, when people had calmed down and there were fewer tears and more worried frowns in the narrow stone house where the baby had so inconsiderately arrived and her mother had so inconveniently departed. For it was, as the baby's father remarked (in no one's presence, unless a

week-old baby counted), a blasted nuisance. And if it had to happen, and she had to die, the father added bitterly, then it was a pity that the baby had not also . . .

Luckily, at this point three-year-old Peter stamped into the room, and stopped the awful words that might have come next. Peter was kinder than his father. He merely gripped the bars of the baby's cot and screamed.

'Go away, go away,' he screamed at the quiet baby. 'Mumma, Mumma, Mumma, Mumma, Mumma!'

Poor Peter's voice was hoarse with shrieking; he had been protesting in this way for what seemed to him a lifetime, but he did not give up. Long after his fingers had been unpeeled one by one from the cot's bars, and he had been hauled downstairs and handed to his grandmother, he kept up his lament.

'It is all completely beyond me,' said Peter's father truthfully to his own mother, the children's grandmother, when she arrived at the house. After Clarry's birth, he took refuge in his office in town as often as possible. There, he did who-knew-what in blissful peace for as long as he could make the hours stretch. He never came home willingly.

The children's grandmother was not there willingly either. The house in Plymouth where Peter and Clarry lived was a long and inconvenient distance from her own Cornish home. Also, she already had one unrequested child living with her, her not-quite-seven-year-old grandson Rupert, whose parents were in India. Rupert had been left behind with his grandfather when she had hurried to take charge at Peter and Clarry's home.

‘Which is not an arrangement that can continue for long,’ she told her son sternly, ‘Rupert being such a handful! I didn’t like leaving him at all!’

‘I expect the best thing would be to take Peter and the . . . er . . . the other one . . . back with you when you leave,’ said the children’s father hopefully as he sidled towards the door. ‘And then all three cousins could be brought up together. Nicer,’ he added, although he did not say for whom.

The children’s grandmother had been expecting this proposal and had prepared a reply. She said very decisively that she would not dream of depriving Clarry and Peter of their father’s company. ‘Even if,’ she added, ‘at my age, I felt able to cope with bringing up three such very young children—’

‘Sixty-five is nothing these days,’ protested her panic-stricken son.

‘I have my heart and my knees,’ his mother said firmly. ‘Your poor father has his chest. However,’ she added (since a look of imminent orphanages was appearing in the panicking one’s eyes), ‘for the present I will stay here and help as best I can.’

To make it possible for Clarry and Peter’s grandmother to stay with them, Rupert in Cornwall was packed off to boarding school. Then, for the next year or so, the children’s grandmother juggled the interviewing of servants, the demands of her abandoned husband, Peter’s rages, Clarry’s teething and their father’s total lack of interest.

‘He’s grieving,’ suggested Miss Vane, who lived across the road.

'No, he isn't,' said the children's grandmother robustly.

'Then the poor man is still in shock.'

'Selfish,' said the children's grandmother. 'Also spoiled. I spoiled both my boys and now I suffer the consequences.'

'Mrs Penrose!' exclaimed Miss Vane.

'Spoiled, selfish, immature and irresponsible,' continued the children's grandmother.

Miss Vane laughed nervously and said that dear Mrs Penrose had a very droll sense of humour.

'If you insist,' said the children's grandmother as she wiped Clarry's chin for the hundredth time that afternoon and removed Peter from the coal scuttle. She considered it a great relief when a few days later she heard that her abandoned husband had caught pneumonia.

'There's no one in Cornwall that I trust to be capable of nursing him,' she told the children's father. 'Clarry is walking and almost talking. Peter is quite able to manage by himself. I have found you an excellent general servant who is fond of children, and I absolutely must go home!'

Then, despite Clarry's startled eyes, Peter's wails of 'Come back! Come back! Gramma, Gramma, Gramma, Gramma!' and their father's outraged disbelief, she hurried off to Cornwall, by way of horse-drawn cab, steam train and pony trap.

Fortunately for Peter and Clarry, and their despairing parent, in those days almost everybody was either a servant, or employed servants themselves. They were a part of life. Over

the next few years the children were cared for by one after another of a long stream of grumbling, hurrying, short-tempered, tired and underpaid women, who trundled, stomped, tiptoed and bustled through the house. They swept carpets with brooms, boiled puddings in saucepans, washed their charges' hands with hard yellow soap and their faces with the corners of aprons, carried coals, cleared ashes, fried chops, mopped tiles, polished shoes, chased away cats and pigeons, jerked hairbrushes through tangles, made stale-bread-and-milk suppers, shook dust from rugs, sat down with sighs and rose with groans, irritated the children's father with every breath they took, and left as soon as they possibly could to find work that wasn't so hard.

Inside the narrow house, the wallpaper faded and the furniture became shabby but the children grew and grew. Peter became such a nuisance that he was sent to a day school. There, he was discovered to be extremely clever, which Miss Vane said probably accounted for his often shocking temper. Clarry was not a nuisance; she was brown-haired and round-faced, and more or less happy. Miss Vane popped over the road to invite her to join her Sunday School class.

'She doesn't believe in God,' said nine-year-old Peter, who had answered the door. 'I've told her he's not true, haven't I, Clarry?'

Clarry, who had pushed under Peter's arm to smile at Miss Vane, nodded in agreement.

'I think I would prefer to talk about this with your father,' said Miss Vane.

'Father wouldn't listen,' said Peter, and then Mrs Morgan, by far the most long-lasting servant, came hurrying over, dislodged Peter from the doorknob with a bat from a damp dishcloth, removed Clarry's thumb from her mouth, ordered, 'Upstairs, the pair of you. You're forever where you're not wanted!' and told Miss Vane that she was sure Mr Penrose would be very pleased to have Clarry out of mischief for an hour or so on Sundays, and they'd send her across in something clean or as best as could be managed.

And this was the beginning of Miss Vane's Good Deed and Christian Duty of Keeping an Eye on the Family, which was sometimes helpful, and sometimes not, and often made Peter growl.

'I dare say she's one of those people who need to make themselves feel useful,' said the children's father to Mrs Morgan. 'She's offered to help sort out whatever it is the . . . Clarry wears. Her grandmother can't be relied on, since she still insists on living in Cornwall. Miss Vane is harmless enough. I can't see why anyone should find the arrangement a problem.'

'She stands too close and she smells of cats,' said Peter, after a particularly dreary Miss Vane afternoon.

'Cat *food*,' said Clarry fairly. 'Liver. She boils it. She was boiling it when I went there for her to pin up the hem on my dress.' Clarry sighed. Already she was suffering far more than Peter from their neighbour's helpfulness. Miss Vane took her for long, chilly walks, murmuring instructions about pleasant behaviour. She had knitted her an itchy striped scarf. And

when Clarry's winter dress was scorched beyond repair by Mrs Morgan drying it over the kitchen fire, Miss Vane had made a brand-new one in hideous green-and-mustard tartan. Clarry had had to stand on a chair while Miss Vane jerked and pulled and stuck in dozens of pins.

'The joins don't match and those brown buttons look awful,' Peter had remarked the first time she'd worn it. 'But I don't suppose anyone will care.'

'She's knitting you a scarf too,' Clarry told him.

'Let her,' said Peter. 'I'll drop it in the river.'

'You couldn't drop a scarf that a poor old lady has knitted for you into the river,' said Clarry, very shocked.

'I could. She's not poor either. She's not even that old.'

But to six-year-old Clarry, Miss Vane was very ancient indeed, and so were all Miss Vane's friends. Two of them ran a school for girls at the top of yet another tall, bare house. They were called the Miss Pinkses.

'The what?' asked Clarry's father.

'The Miss Pinkses,' repeated Miss Vane earnestly. 'I do agree, it *is* quaint. As is the school. Old-fashioned values. I mention it because it is just round the corner. I believe the girls start at about Clarry's age.'

'Her grandmother was saying that it was time I found her a school,' admitted Clarry's father, and the next thing Clarry knew, she was climbing the three flights of stairs to the Miss Pinkses' schoolrooms.

The first of many climbs, year after year.

At the Miss Pinkses', the light was dim, the street felt very

far away and there were always dead bluebottles lying upside down on the windowsills. By mid-afternoon the suffocating fumes from the oil stoves that warmed the rooms made heads ache and eyes blur, so that it was hard to stay awake.

But at least, as her father said, even if she didn't learn anything, she was out of the house.

Two
Lessons and Stars

Right from her youngest days, Clarry had understood that all the uncomfortable difficulties of their lives – Miss Vane and the itchy knitting, the uncertain cooking of Mrs Morgan and her kind, the remote unhappiness of her father, the increasing shabbiness of the house, the bread-and-milk suppers and the desperate fierceness of Peter's temper – were because she, Clarry, had been born and her mother had died. Nobody ever said it quite as plainly as that, but, if they had, Clarry would have bowed her head and agreed that it was true.

Nevertheless, she hummed when she was drawing. She skipped downstairs in long airy jumps, she stopped to speak to cats and horses, and she was never frightened by Peter's moods.

'You don't want to put up with him bossing you around,' advised Mrs Morgan, as they peeled potatoes together. 'You've no cause to go running every time he shouts. What's he wanting now?'

'Homework,' said Clarry, already half out of the kitchen.

'Tell him he must manage without you!'

'No, no, no,' exclaimed Clarry, and left before Mrs Morgan could make any more ridiculous suggestions. Homework with Peter had begun the day he started school. Ever since, every evening, he had demanded that she understand and help with whatever he brought home. It didn't matter to Peter that she was a girl and three years younger. Doggedly he shoved and nagged her through maths, history, Latin vocabulary, science, geography and all his current obsessions. Clarry never questioned the use of being able to locate on a map the Roman roads of England, or to know what went on inside the hall clock or any of the rest.

'Where would you find the nearest black rat if you had to find one right now?' Peter would demand over his shoulder as he left for school. 'The nearest golden oriole? Basking shark? Wild peacock?' Clarry didn't know, but she learned how to find out. The two dusty shelves of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that once lived in the sitting room had long since been relocated to the middle of her bedroom floor.

This evening Clarry found Peter at the foot of the stairs, carefully unpacking something from his bag.

'Where've you been for so long?' he demanded. 'We've maths and some stupid Shakespeare to learn and I've got this book to borrow. Look!'

It was called *The Story of the Heavens* and was bound in dark blue and cream. There was a pattern of gold rings on the front.

Halos, thought Clarry, and opened it, expecting to see

angels. Instead she found herself looking at an engraving of a lens as it gathered and made visible the light from a star.

'Look!' cried Clarry. 'It's all about stars! It's showing you how a telescope works!'

'Of course,' said Peter.

'And there's a comet!' Clarry looked again at the cover of the book. The halos turned out to be the orbits of planets. There were gold-edged pages, and constellations embossed on the spine. She had never seen anything so beautiful and so new.

'Where did you get it from?' she asked, touching the stars.

'It'd just come into the library. We can keep it for two weeks.'

Clarry glowed at the 'we'.

'It's exactly the sort of book I'm going to write!' she said admiringly, and then they both heard their father's dry, impatient 'Oh, please!' as he came through the door behind them.

'I could,' said Clarry, rather hurt. 'Don't you think it would be nice?'

'What I think would be nice,' said her father, 'would be to not have your brother continually encouraging you to imitate everything he says and does and thinks! It'll be a very good thing when . . .' He paused, took a deep breath and shrugged.

'When what?' asked Peter, looking at him with extreme suspicion.

'Nothing. Excuse me, please, both of you. I'm in a rush. Peter, shouldn't you be getting on with homework? And

Clarry, surely you might be helping Mrs Morgan?'

'I was. I will. I just . . .'

'Off you go, then.'

'Yes,' said Clarry, and turned back to the door behind the stairs which led to the part of the house her father had not visited for years: the kitchen, scullery and low dank cellars that were beyond his geography.

'Wait!' ordered Peter, pushing past their father to reach her before she vanished. 'Here's the book! Have it. Read it.'

'That is exactly the sort of thing I wish you would not take it upon yourself to do!' snapped their father, but Clarry was gone, and Peter turned away as if he had not heard.

'Well!' said Mrs Morgan, looking up as Clarry came in. 'I was listening! Them two squabbling as usual, and you in the middle of it!'

'It was only about a book,' said Clarry. 'This one. Peter brought it home from the library. It's about the moon and stars and planets.'

'Fortune-telling!' said Mrs Morgan, sniffing. 'I'm not surprised your father wasn't pleased!'

'No, no – telescopes and things!' said Clarry. 'Science!'

'I can't see your father caring for telescopes either,' said Mrs Morgan. 'Never mind, sit down and read me a bit while I get these greens washed.'

Clarry sat down, flicked through the pages and read aloud: '*Who is there that has not watched, with ad . . . with admiration, the beautiful series of changes through which the moon passes*

every month? We first see her as an ex . . . as an exquis . . . exquisite crescent . . .'

'Grey,' remarked Mrs Morgan, hacking at a cabbage with a blunt knife. 'Grey and patchy it looks! Piled up with dust! Go on!'

'*An exquisite crescent of pale light in the western sky . . .*'

'Exquisite, indeed!' said Mrs Morgan. 'Washed out, more like. Always looks washed out to me, does the moon. Like that father of yours!'

'Father? Washed out?'

'Fearful, you might call it,' said Mrs Morgan. 'Afraid of the world. When he snaps at you, that's just his fear coming out. Now don't you stare at me like that, madam! I've made up my mind to say a few words and I'm telling you for your own comfort. So as you don't let him upset you so often as he does.'

Clarry turned her face away.

'Now, *my* father,' said Mrs Morgan, sweeping a heap of cabbage into her saucepan and beginning on another pile of wrinkled green leaves, 'took a belt to me! Regular!'

'A belt!' exclaimed Clarry, horrified. 'Why?'

'Well, for what I got up to. Cheeking him. Climbing out of my bedroom window to go off with the boys. Going away with his horse to get to the fair. Took it out of the shafts of the cart, I did, while my father stood outside the cottage and never noticed till I'd gone! Too busy staring at the chimney!'

'What was the matter with the chimney?'

'It was afire,' said Mrs Morgan placidly. 'I was bound I'd

get to the fair that year, so I'd stoked up the hearth good and hot inside, and put on a bundle of straw. I'd missed the fair the time before, you see. I was out all night, and me only fourteen! What a performance when I got back the next day!'

Clarry gazed at Mrs Morgan in complete admiration, all her troubles forgotten.

'Oh, he was a very determined man, my father!' said Mrs Morgan, nodding. 'But yours is a gentleman, whatever his temper. Is that enough greens?'

'Yes,' said Clarry, who was not fond of cabbage. 'Thank you, Mrs Morgan.'