
Opening Extract from...

The Unfinished Symphony of You and Me

Written by Lucy Robinson

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This one is for you, Grandpa.
Thank you for the music.

Overture

I was pretty horrified by my reflection in the mirror. I looked like a shrivelled grey boggle. 'Arggh,' I said helplessly, at my reflection.

'Arggh,' said the alien in the mirror.

I had spent most of the day in the wardrobe with my old teddy bear. His name was Carrot. We'd hidden in there because tomorrow my life was going to change significantly and I was terrified.

I wasn't normally a victim of intense fear. By and large my life had been quite free of drama and I'd gone to some effort to keep it that way. But on the rare occasions when I faced danger beyond my control I would crawl into my wardrobe, shut the door and emerge only when I felt safe again.

I wasn't looking for Narnia in there. In fact, I'd have been furious if some jolly man with a furry bottom and cloven hoofs had turned up. I was there for the solitude, the silence and the safety. And Carrot.

Normally, those four solid wooden walls did the trick. I'd stew in there, hot and helpless, until eventually I managed to boil myself down to some sort of equilibrium. Steadier and saner, I would crawl out again, ready to face the world.

That had not happened today. I had stewed for hours on end, hot fear singeing my face and burning painfully

down my back, but calm hadn't come. I'd eventually had to drag myself out, half mad, half shaking. *Not even my wardrobe can help me*, I thought hysterically, staring at my boggly reflection. *This is an emergency!*

It was an emergency. Tomorrow I was starting a postgraduate diploma in opera at the Royal College of Music, alongside ten of the world's most talented young singers. Even though I was not a performer of any kind. Let alone an opera singer, with a wardrobe full of satin gowns and a family who owned a large country estate in Gloucestershire with butlers and horses. I was a quiet girl from a council estate in the Midlands, who hated attention. Did you hear me? *I was not an opera singer.*

I stood still as my insides, like some amateur microbrewery, contracted and pressed against each other. 'Arggh,' I whispered again. It was a helpless, mewling sort of sound.

I stared palely in the direction of the kitchen and wondered if food would help. Food normally helped. Maybe a little gentle bingeing?

Slowly, woodenly, I shuffled out of my bedroom and over to the fridge, rolling up my sleeves.

But Fate was against me. As I served up my Wiltshire pork belly fifty minutes later, making a pathetic attempt at a jolly whistle, an unexpected visitor – a man – was making his way towards my front door. And this man had nothing to do with tomorrow and the singing: this man would change my life *today.*

Sunday night was M&S Meal Deal Night; something I normally relished. According to Barry from Barry Island,

it was inevitable that a peasant like me was so fond of meal deals. The combination of maximum food at minimum price was designed for 'my sort'.

Barry never hesitated to share his views on my eating habits. Or indeed anything, really, and the reason I allowed him to insult me with such impunity was his Welsh accent. I so deeply loved it, was so completely entranced by everything he said, that I had somehow lost the instinct to defend myself.

'Sally, you're a greedy pig,' he'd tell me matter-of-factly. 'You look nice now but you're headin' towards chronic obesity, Chicken.' He'd smile sadly, then return to his grilled goldfish or whatever stupid morsel was on his plate. I would return to my half-price-but-full-fat lasagne, muttering amiably that he was a Welsh devil and deserved to get hugely fat when he retired from ballet.

As was customary for Meal Deal Night, Barry had declined to eat his half of the spread so I was sitting alone at the table surrounded by food. It looked splendid: pork belly, rosemary potatoes and some funny-sounding little thing called Berrymisu for dessert.

Yet the sight of it did nothing for me. I felt sicker than ever.

Barry was trying out a new dance belt in his bedroom. He had a lot of trouble with dance belts, for the same reason that I had trouble with G-strings. Neither of us liked anything synthetic wedged up our private parts.

'Barry?' I called pointlessly, in the direction of his bedroom door, through which Shakira was pumping. Perhaps if he came and sat with me I'd be able to stomach at least one mouthful.

I had never known fear like this. Even after the catastrophic things that had happened in New York last year I had still been *myself*, Sally Howlett. Calm, short of stature, wide of bottom. Reliable, measured, articulate. Now I was a wobbly ball of highly explosive gas.

'Barry?' I tried again. The flat was shaking slightly, which meant that he was performing flamboyant Amazonian dance movements in front of his mirror to 'Hips Don't Lie'. He went wild for Shakira and was often caught shaking a billowing Latino mane that he didn't possess.

'BARREEEEEEEE!'

Barry was not coming. I needed to do something, fast.

The iPad that my (very rich) friend Bea had impulse-bought for me last autumn – along with a Fendi handbag and a rare Robert Piguet perfume, all designed to cheer me up after the New York trip of doom – was on the work surface. I grabbed it and started hammering out an email, my useless fingers landing on all of the wrong keys. The big ugly diamanté ring on my right hand, which I hadn't quite brought myself to remove since getting back from New York, made my typing still worse.

fOina, please come home. I need you here funnyface, I;m fecking TERRIFIED ARGHHH! I really muiss you, Freckle. Please come back soon. I so hate you not being here. Tomorrow is all your fault anyway. You and your 'seize the day' nonsense! I love you, please come back.xxxxxxxzzx

I pressed send and then reread the email, imagining my cousin Fiona reading it. When Fiona wasn't being manic, she had such a beautiful smile; the sort of smile that would

be described in the opening pages of an epic Russian novel from the nineteenth century.

I missed Fiona terribly. We'd grown up as sisters, not cousins. Played horses together, written love letters to boys together, compared our first pubes. When I moved from Stourbridge to London, Fiona had been my housemate for seven (mostly) lovely years. But after last year's drama she'd refused to leave New York and had yet to change her mind even though I had begged her repeatedly to come home. (Barry, less optimistic about the chances of her returning, had moved into her room about nine months ago. I'd swapped my pale, freckly, difficult cousin for a pale, freckly rude little shit from Barry Island. Although, for all his appalling comments, I loved him madly.)

Momentarily, I allowed a Fiona-pain to glow somewhere in my chest, then pinched it down, returning my attention to the inbox in case she happened to be online. And reply instantly.

She didn't.

In the absence of her or Barry, I toyed with the idea of calling Bea for support. Bea was down in Glyndebourne, having finally left the Royal Opera House after ten years at the helm of the makeup and wigs department. Now she was attaching curly beards and prosthetic noses to opera singers in a dappled Sussex country estate and was evidently very busy: we'd spoken for all of ten minutes since their season opened five months ago in May.

I called her now, just in case. She didn't answer.

I even pondered the idea of calling home, but felt agitated and angry just thinking about my parents. Mum and

Dad were stunned and clearly appalled that I was starting this course; they'd doubtless encourage me to pull out if they detected uncertainty. 'Do you really think you belong in that world?' Mum had asked. 'With *those* sorts of people? All posh and snobby?'

Of course I didn't.

But I still resented her asking.

Someone knocked on the front door.

I looked round at my empty kitchen, taken by surprise. Someone must have got into my apartment building and up to my front door – which, these days, was quite a feat since a forgotten bunch of forgotten Occupy London people had helped themselves to an empty flat on the fifth floor, and Mustafa the security man had taken up residence.

I jumped up from the table, forgetting that I was wearing pyjamas with pigs on them, and threw open the front door with my best smile in case it was God, there to help.

The man standing at the door, with a strange sort of a smile on his face, did not look like God. But he was definitely familiar. So familiar, in fact, that I wondered if he was famous. He was certainly attractive enough to be famous. Impossibly handsome and stylish; the sort that had a large house in Santa Barbara and did photo shoots at sundown on his private beach.

An absolute show-stopper of a man, I marvelled, in my momentary trance, *although not really my sort of thing*. He had long shiny hair and a blindingly smart shirt worn with crisp jeans and pointy brogues. Some luxury musky aftershave floating off his pampered, tanned skin and a big fat Rolex. I half smiled, baffled. What was a man like this

doing on my doorstep? And why did he look so familiar? Had I once fitted a costume on him or something?

It was only a few seconds later, when he said, 'Hey,' in a half-Devon, half-American accent, and I found myself thinking that it was a huge mistake for him to grow his hair long, and wondered why he'd changed his perfume, that I realized he was not a celebrity, or a singer from the Royal Opera House, but someone I knew very well.

He was also someone I'd never wanted to see again. Whom I'd worked so hard to strike from memory that he had all but ceased to exist.

The room started to bleach white and I closed my eyes.

When I opened them again he was still standing there.

'Hey,' he repeated sheepishly. It felt like half a lifetime since I'd heard his voice. That accent. The oddest accent in history. 'I guess this is a bit of a surprise, right?'

I tried to reply but nothing happened. I looked down at my pig pyjamas and didn't even care. The floor wobbled miles below me.

'Sally?' he said gently. 'Are you OK?' He watched me, patently anxious. For a few strange, flabby seconds I watched him back, still incredulous. Only his face was that of the man I'd once known. The rest of him was unrecognizable. Smart, crackly, groomed. An alien landscape.

'Oh, man, Sally, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have just *come*. But I didn't know how else to . . . to . . . Hang on.' He started rooting around in his pockets.

It was as if I had one foot jammed on the accelerator and the other flat on the brake.

He pulled a little piece of yellow paper from his jeans pocket and his hands shook slightly as he tried to unfold

it. I noticed he had a smart, starchy man-bag I'd not seen before. Then I recognized the Post-it note in his hand.

'I wondered if this was still valid,' he said quietly, holding it out. *Varlud*. Nobody else on earth had an accent like his. A cross-bred silly joke of an accent. Once accompanied by fluffy hair and forgetfulness. Once so dear to me.

I didn't look at the Post-it because I knew what it said. 'Go away, please,' I heard myself whisper. 'Please can you go away and not come back.'

He smiled sympathetically. How *dare* he look at me like that? As if I were a tantruming child?

'Go, please,' I repeated more clearly. I started to close the door as anger compacted and heaved upwards in me. How could he? How could he just march in, after he had . . . after he . . . ?

After a brief consideration, he shrugged. 'OK. I'll go for now. But, Sal, I *can't* leave you alone. You see –'

'GO!' I shrieked. (I shrieked? I had never shrieked in my life!) 'GET OUT OF MY HOUSE! DON'T YOU DARE BOTHER ME AGAIN! EVER!' I was charged. Super-charged. Maybe even dangerous. Although probably not.

The man pushed the door back open with one of his expensive shoes. The air between us flexed and rumbled angrily, like sheet metal.

'Now, listen up,' he began, apparently not having heard me. 'Sal, if you'll let me explain . . .'

Then something happened that I found very surprising. I, Sally Howlett, avoider of *anything* that resembled confrontation, spun round and grabbed my Marks &

Spencer pork belly from the table. And then I spun back round, like a shot-putter, and lobbed it at the man standing at my front door. Straight at his face. I missed him, of course – I'd always been poor at hand/eye coordination – and it whistled past his ear, hitting the wall outside where it slid to the floor leaving a greasy track mark. It was accompanied by a little scream, which had apparently come from me.

The man looked round at the cooked meat on the hallway carpet, then back at me. There was a long, weighted silence.

'I hate you,' I whispered. And I did. Violently. A great pit of fury and sadness burned in my chest. 'I don't ever want to hear from you again.'

I slammed the front door in his face.

I stood there until I heard him move away, then I turned back to the table.

'No way,' breathed Barry from Barry Island, in his amazing Welsh accent.

He was standing at his bedroom door, naked apart from the flesh-coloured thong. His frighteningly pale skin and freckles seemed almost Day-Glo under the kitchen light. He ran his hands through his fine strawberry-blond hair and left them on the side of his face in a dramatic, end-of-world fashion. 'Was that who I think it was?' he whispered. 'Dressed as a poncy get?'

I nodded, and started crying.

Barry's eyes widened. 'Oh . . . my . . . *God*,' he said, in awed tones. He looked at me and I looked back at him. Neither of us had the faintest idea what to do.

The Woman Who Sang in the Wardrobe

An Opera in Five Acts

ACT ONE

Scene One

Stourbridge, West Midlands, 1990–2004

It all began on an April day in 1990. I was playing horses in the kitchen with Fiona, my cousin, who had recently moved in with us because she didn't have any parents of her own. We were in the final round of a tense show-jumping competition when I heard an unusual sound coming out of the radio.

One of the DJs on Beacon FM was playing Cio-Cio-San's famous aria from *Madam Butterfly*, 'Un bel di vedremo' ('One Fine Day'). Opera was not the norm on Beacon FM; as I recall, it was part of a very unfunny DJ joke. But the sheer spine-tingling tragedy of the tune took me by surprise. I looked over at Fiona who, at seven, had already endured more tragedy than most people would in a lifetime, and promptly burst into tears.

The show-jumping was paused while I cried and hugged my little cousin, who was embarrassed by my actions and told me that I was being something called a lesbian.

When the aria ended, I stared, awed, at the radio. What had that been?

It was my first exposure to opera. I liked it.

But the second time I heard opera, later that year in July, I *loved* it. I loved it so much that my insides started to do funny things. I stopped eating the choc-ice that I had in my chubby little hand. It was ten fifteen p.m. and I shouldn't have been awake, let alone eating choc-ices, but Mum and Dad were at a bingo dinner and had left Karen Castle babysitting Dennis, Fiona and me. Karen Castle was the closest thing to liberal and artsy that my parents would allow in their house.

I had been asleep about an hour when she arrived in my room, holding my big brother Dennis by the hand, and told me that we had to go downstairs and watch a very important thing on the telly. It was the 1990 World Cup and the famous Three Tenors concert was being beamed in live from Rome.

'Forget Live Aid,' Karen Castle whispered fiercely. 'This is one of the most important moments in music history. It's going to bring opera to the masses. It's *huge*.'

'Don't want to,' Dennis mumbled sleepily, but I remembered exactly what opera was and flew down the stairs like a precision missile in pink pyjamas.

Pavarotti, Domingo and Carreras changed my life that night. I found their Andrew Lloyd Webber megamix a bit so-so, but when they started the serious stuff, I was listening. And when they brought that ancient stadium thundering down with 'Nessun dorma', I knew that nothing could ever be the same again.

Fiona had been completely unmoved. Dennis had fallen asleep.

I raided my piggy bank and bought a tape called *Opera*

Favourites. *Everything* on it became my favourite. I tingled with pleasure listening to it and after a while – singing as quietly as I could – began to join in. While my school friends rapped along with MC Hammer I kept it real with Joan Sutherland and Marilyn Horne, who sang words I couldn't understand to tunes that I really could.

If there was anything odder than a seven-year-old girl developing an opera-singing habit, it was a seven-year-old developing a top-secret opera habit. I couldn't quite put my finger on why but I felt instinctively that I could never, and *should* never, sing in front of anyone else. So I sang in my wardrobe where nobody could hear me.

And I never really questioned this because extreme privacy was a core value in the Howlett family. Mum and Dad, in spite of living on a council estate where private issues were mostly discussed in murderous screams, shared a strangely fearful, Victorian attitude towards privacy. They spent their lives muttering about how our neighbours had no shame, living their lives on show like that, and tried with all their quiet might to be completely invisible.

Which was quite a problem for them, because the circumstances under which Fiona had come to live with us recently had been reported not just in the local papers but the nationals.

Woman's body found in Midlands Canal

Where's the daddy? Nationwide search mounted for touring actor: who will claim this little girl?

No father for Fiona: Canal orphan taken in by dead woman's sister

We were a family 'beset by tragedy', the papers had said. They showed pictures of Mum at her sister's funeral and gave them captions like 'Frozen with grief, Brenda Howlett with her little niece Fiona'. At school Fiona and I overheard a special assembly (from which we had been banned) where the head told everyone that our family had been torn apart by a dreadful catastrophe and must be treated with the greatest sensitivity and respect.

I wondered if everyone had confused us with a different family. There was no grieving in our house. No sense of catastrophe. When Mum was told that her sister had been found floating in a lonely section of the canal, she thanked the officers for their time and went to bed for a week. Then she got up, put on a black nylon dress for the funeral and never spoke about it again.

Dad had busied himself making Fiona a bedroom while a half-hearted search for Fiona's dad had taken place, and Fiona had just watched TV all day and all night. Dennis and I hadn't said anything about it because nobody else was saying anything about it.

That was just the way we did things in our family.

The press, hoping for a big circus of grief and hysteria, didn't like it. They stayed on our doorstep way longer than necessary. 'Tell us how you're all coping,' they wheedled, through the letter box.

'We don't air our dirty laundry in public,' Mum reminded us all. There was a frightening edge to her voice. 'Mandy has gone and we don't talk about her, in or out of this house. Understood?'

So, by the time all the fuss had died down, the press had straggled off our estate and Fiona had been installed in the

converted cupboard under the stairs, just like Harry Potter, Mum and Dad's hatred of being visible had become pathological. 'Seen and not heard' was no longer enough. From now on, the Howletts did not wish even to be seen.

Years later, a man with intense blue eyes and an unironed T-shirt would hold my hand in a jazz bar in Harlem and remind me that grief made us behave in very strange ways.

But back to 1990. Summer. IRA car bombs and scorching weather, bright green ice pops and scabby knees. Little Sally and little Fiona living together for the first time on a small council estate in Stourbridge; the Howlett family learning to breathe again after weeks of press hounding.

My wardrobe singing had become the highlight of my day. Singing made me feel tingly and alive: feeling the breath rush in through my mouth and expand deep into my belly, and hearing it coming back out in a proper tune – in the right key, and in the right time, and with a richness that amazed me – was better than cheese and pickle cobs or oven chips or Wotsits. It was better even than Arctic Roll.

Singing insulated me from the hollowness of my family and the tragedy we weren't meant to discuss. It stopped me worrying obsessively about Fiona, who couldn't possibly be happy in our house. It lifted me high above everything my little mind worried about and suspended me above my life, as if I was in a hot-air balloon on a summer evening.

But top-secret opera habits are seldom simple.

Fiona was my best friend but she was also very

annoying and, somehow, she managed to overhear me one night. The next day she teased me noisily at school, saying that I sounded like a posh old fat woman, and would only stop when I agreed to dump Eddie Spencer on her behalf, then punch him on the arm and tell him he smelt of bad poos. I did it and Fi, mercifully, stopped teasing me.

Next came the problem of taking opera to the masses. Even though I didn't want anyone to know that I sang, I did feel quite strongly that the world – or at the very least the town of Stourbridge – needed to know about opera. I began by playing my *Opera Favourites* tape to my first boyfriend, Jim Babcock, who looked bored and farted and said that my music was rubbish. Then at Saturday-morning roller-skating I asked the DJ if he could stop playing 'Ghostbusters' and try some Puccini. He announced my request to the leisure centre, the crowd revolted and everyone, including Fiona, told me I was a massive wazzock.

Fiona bought me a blue Slush Puppy from the café afterwards to say sorry, but my lesson had been learned. Opera and Stourbridge would not be friends.

Unfortunately, Mrs Badger – a failed concert pianist and the deputy head of my primary school – had other ideas. She had overheard Fiona teasing me and pulled me to one side during lunch hour. She was armed with a big smile and a very persuasive tone. Somehow, she talked me into singing a short solo in the Christmas concert, even though the concert was usually for the top-year juniors. But Fiona, who was already an outstanding little ballet dancer, was going to do a solo too, and Mrs Badger promised me chocolate and I gave in because I found it almost impossible to say no to anyone.

'You'll be wonderful,' Mrs Badger assured me. 'Think how proud your mum'll be!' I wasn't convinced but Mrs Badger's eyes were flashing emotionally. She told me that it would be one of the most memorable nights of my young life so far.

Mrs Badger was not wrong.

By the day of the concert I was ill with nerves. Jim Babcock had hated my opera music. The leisure centre had hated my opera music. And Mum and Dad would . . . I didn't know what they'd do, but I knew they would be really upset and possibly angry that I was singing a solo when we were still meant to be in lockdown.

But an innocent, sweet, stubborn little part of me maintained that if opera singing could make me feel so happy, maybe it would cheer up Mum and Dad. Maybe they wouldn't be so embarrassed and awkward if they could hear how lovely it was.

To calm the nerves I had to eat everything in my lunch box, and then everything in Fi's lunch box. (Fi, aged eight, was already on her first diet.) Nonetheless, by the time I stepped on stage I was shaking visibly and my breath was short and shuddering.

In a hazy sea of faces I caught sight of Mum and Dad, who had obviously just realized what was going to happen. Mum's eyes were bursting out of her head. With pride or embarrassment I'd never know, although pride was unlikely. All I knew was that as Mrs Badger started playing the introduction to 'L'ho perduta' I felt a stunning certainty that nothing was going to come out of my mouth.

Nothing came out of my mouth. I stood, frozen, a little

girl with a scab on her chin and a badly fitting pinafore dress, completely mute.

Mrs Badger was having none of it, and started the intro again so that I could collect myself. Once again I caught sight of my parents, who seemed like they were in cardiac arrest. Mum's face, white and frozen, looked like it did the day the police came round and told her that the woman found in the Wolverhampton canal was her sister Mandy.

Then I felt warm liquid run down the inside of my left leg. I stood right there on stage, in front of all the other parents (*and* Jim Babcock, who I knew was going to dump me), and felt the warmth sliding down towards my feet, pooling in a fat oval shape on the floor. I stopped thinking, maybe even breathing, and stood there until Fiona ran on from the wings and dragged me off.

When we got home, Mum marched upstairs where she ran a bath. She filled it with Matey bubbles and rubber ducks, even though it had been years since I'd liked rubber ducks and they were all mouldy and black on the bottom. While it was filling she took me into my bedroom and said, in a scary voice, 'Where is it?' It wasn't a question, it was a command.

I didn't even bother to ask what 'it' was. I simply reached into my wardrobe for my *Opera Favourites* cassette and handed it to her, along with the *Opera* magazine I'd bought a few weeks ago so that I could stare solemnly at the pictures of big-boobed singers.

Mum looked at the cassette and magazine as if I had presented her with a steaming pile of dog shit, and took them downstairs. 'Sally,' she called sharply. I followed. Mum threw both in the kitchen bin, then scraped the

remains of Dennis's ketchupy fish fingers on top of them. For good measure she added a pile of orange mush, the remains of Fi's. Fi's favourite thing at the moment was to mash up her dinner and not actually eat any of it. I could see Maria Callas's face with blobs of deep-fried breadcrumbs sliding slowly down it.

'No more singing,' Mum stated.

My lip wobbled. In spite of what had happened tonight, I knew I loved singing. It was the best feeling I'd ever known.

'You can't do that!' Fiona butted in. Fiona was the only person in the house who ever dared take on Mum. 'She's really good at it!'

Mum didn't even look at her.

'*No more singing*,' she repeated. 'If I catch you at it again there'll be serious trouble. It's for your own good, Sally.' Mum never really raised her voice, just hissed in varying shades of angry snake. 'We don't need no more trouble with . . .' Mum paused. 'With *performing arts*,' she concluded shakily. 'Now go upstairs and get yourself clean, Sally.'

That was that.

But that wasn't that, not really. I carried on singing because I couldn't not. Now I did it *only* in my wardrobe and *only* when there was no one else in the house. 'Nobody,' I promised myself, 'will ever hear me sing again.'

On the outside Sally Howlett resumed being normal, dependable and solid. There would have been no point in trying to be alternative and unreliable even if I'd wanted to be: Fiona provided enough drama to keep the entire primary school (indeed, at times what seemed like the whole world) entertained. It sent Mum and Dad crazy

and Fiona was punished again and again, although seldom with any effect. Fiona set fire to things. She tormented people. She showed her flat chest to the boys during Thursday-afternoon hymn practice, then flashed at the headmaster when he tried to tell her off. She cheated at netball and she stole from the canteen. Frequently she implicated me in her crimes but she was seldom believed.

And I didn't really mind, because she whacked anyone who caused me trouble and wrote stories about me being a brave and beautiful princess and made up pop songs about us being together for ever. She climbed into my bed every night and hugged me and told me she loved me. And I told her I loved her back because I did; more than Dennis, more than Mum and Dad.

'You shouldn't spend all your time with Fiona,' Mum often said. 'Don't put all your eggs in one basket, Sally. Find some other friends.'

I ignored her. Fiona was my best friend in the whole world.

Fiona Lane, that naughty, tragic little girl whose father ran off with the theatre, whose mother had gone barmy and drowned herself in the Wolverhampton canal. And Sally Howlett, her chunky, reliable cousin, who never caused any trouble, ever. I did what I was told and kept people happy. I solved problems, never created them, and at all times I was calm and cheerful. As a girl, as a teenager, as an adult, I was one and the same.

On the day that the man arrived at my front door and had pork belly thrown at him, I was thirty years old yet I looked pretty much the same as I had aged seven when I heard my first aria. Dumpy, short and wide of bottom.

Unnaturally thick blonde hair (once described by a hairdresser as 'coarser than a shire horse's tail') and what I thought to be an unremarkable kind of face.

Wherever I went, whatever age I was, people said things to me like 'You're a rock,' or 'What a calm influence you have on this place, Sally!'

Sometimes I wondered what they'd think if they knew that I sang opera in my wardrobe, and that as the years passed I had continued to listen to it on my Walkman, then my Discman, then my iPod. I found VHS, then DVD, then internet masterclasses of famous singers tutoring eager pupils and used those recordings to teach myself.

There was no denying that my voice was good, however alien self-praise might have been to me. But I could also tell that I had missed some vital stages in my training by going straight in at the top with professional masterclasses. Largely because a lot of the things my video tutors said sounded completely mental. 'Hold that stentando all the way to the end!' they shouted. I imagined what a stentando might be and pictured an iron-age weapon.

'More diaphragmatic attack!' they'd yell, or 'You're being misled by those accents, this is NOT SFORZANDO!' (A Russian bread?)

But nothing, not even my inability to understand most of what my VHS tutors said, or the fear of what people would think if they ever found out, detracted from the creamy dollops of pleasure I felt at hearing an operatic sound coming from my own mouth. 'L'ho perduta . . . Blum blum bluuum blum . . . ackie saaa duh duuuh duh duh . . .' I sang, quietly alight with pride. (I had yet to learn Italian.)

Fiona, aged eleven, was packed off to the Royal Ballet School to honour the request her mother had made before dying, leaving the house suffocatingly quiet. Although I was glad she'd escaped my seemingly emotionless parents, her absence made my life seem beige and pointless, and Mum made it very difficult for us to see each other in the holidays. She encouraged me instead to play with Lisa from next door. But I hated Lisa. She was patronizing and evil and all she ever wanted to do was follow my brother Dennis around.

Singing took the edge off all of that. Nothing on earth felt quite so comforting as that first breath, the feeling of muscles contracting, the feeling of my vocal cords coming together, seemingly without any help from my brain, and producing a sound that was fairly reminiscent of my *Opera Favourites*.

So I became the little girl who sang in the wardrobe. I sang in that wardrobe every day, and when I moved to London fourteen years later I made Dad drive it down the M6 in Pete-from-next-door's Transit. And nobody ever knew.