

MY SISTER'S EYES

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Before, we were a plain-looking family, my father, my mother and myself. Brownish, unremarkable, like wrens merging into the reed beds, causing barely a flutter. It wasn't something I'd given thought to until I was fifteen and Triduana arrived, gloriously fair, with wide open eyes the colour of kingfishers.

No one in the whole of Constantinople had eyes that colour, with a dark outline around the iris, with eyelashes so abundant. My sister's eyes were considered a marvel from the moment she opened them and took her first look at the world. Neighbours came to see for themselves. Some said that she was not Father's child. Not that they were accusing Mother of adultery. No. They whispered that, like Mary before her, our mother had had a visitation from the angel Gabriel and this infant was truly the daughter of God.

Father spoke out angrily against such blasphemy and trembled lest the authorities should hear of it. He forbade Triduana to be taken outside where she could be gossiped about; for fresh air she must be confined to our small courtyard. Such adulation of a mere mortal, and a girl at that, was not to be countenanced, he said. But when we were alone I saw him gaze upon his second daughter as though she really were sent from heaven. She almost made up, I heard him whisper, for the seven sons before her who had not lived past early infancy.

Despite, or because of, Father's restrictions on her life, fascination for Triduana did not wane as she grew up. Many subterfuges were used to gain admission to our home and if Father was asked permission once to approach her as a suitor he was asked a hundred times. When she was fourteen he chose a husband for her, the son of a wealthy merchant.

My sister's eyes shone in her pale face – but not with love for the fine young man. Nothing our father said would make her change her mind. Eventually he conceded. He could see that her eyes blazed for Christ alone and she spent many hours with them closed, in prayer.

Father was old by then and, anticipating the day when he would be no more, he gave us into the care of the church, to live in the bishopric on the hillside. When a visitor, Regulus, first arrived from Greece with a mysterious bundle we could not dream how

much our lives would change, that soon we would be asked to do God's will and cross the world.

My sister's eyes were the colour of the sea on the hot day we left Constantinople with our precious cargo. I looked at the settlement along the shores of the Bosphorus, seeing it as it must look to travellers arriving for the first time, knowing that for us it would be the last.

Bishop Regulus had been told in a vision to take the bones of Andrew the apostle to a distant land for safe-keeping, to the green island St Patrick had made his own. We were asked – as devout women, consecrated virgins – to accompany him on the long journey. Triduana begged me to say yes. It was, she said, her calling.

Would Triduana have gone even if I'd refused? The question haunts me still although I know I would brave the great waters rather than be left without her.

It was those great waters, tossing and tumbling our small craft onto rocks, that caused us to falter in our mission. Instead of the green island, we made land under strange sea cliffs and were too weary to begin again.

Nechtan was brought two pieces of astounding news the day he buried his wife.

A boat had arrived, his kinsman told him, on the eastern shore of the kingdom, carrying a man of God who brought relics of one who had sat by the Cross at Calvary! Claspng the two young princes to him, Nechtan fell to his knees, the loss of their mother forgotten. This was a sign of grace from an all-seeing God, acknowledgement of Nechtan's pioussness.

The other news he thought about again later, lying alone on his straw bed. Two women had come with the bishop, his kinsman said. One plain, of little account. The other – the man's voice grew hoarse at the memory – the other was surely a celestial being with a halo of golden hair and eyes like the sky in midsummer.

A celestial being or a flesh and blood woman? Whichever she was, Nechtan reflected, she would not dare to refuse the king of the Picts.

Nechtan arrived on the east coast of his kingdom, where the square-sailed boat from far away had washed up. Bishop Regulus received him. If he did not exude sufficient awe in greeting a king Nechtan let it pass. After all, did not the man possess the bones of Andrew, the great apostle, called from the waters of Galilee to be a fisher of men? And had not Regulus been told by God himself that the kingdom of the Picts was where those

six-hundred-year-old bones should have their final rest? Nechtan did not need the bishop's approval.

Regulus drew aside a cloth and revealed what were undoubtedly three finger bones. Two, less easily identifiable, were, the bishop said, the upper bone of an arm and a kneecap. A single tooth rolled in the corner of the casket.

Nechtán glared at the bishop. Was this some kind of trick? But Regulus was looking at his own hands, spread above the relics, forbidding them to be touched. Nechtán felt foolish, an unusual and unpleasant feeling. He would never admit that he had imagined that all the saint's bones, still joined together as God had intended, would have lasted these centuries.

When the bishop decided that Nechtán had knelt by the bones long enough, he offered refreshment. Two figures came to them, one a drab little woman bringing bread and ale. Regulus proffered the casket to the second whose head and face were obscured by a cloak but whose hand, Nechtán could see, was as delicate as a flower petal. He ate and drank while the bishop told him that foundations must be laid for a shrine to Andrew. Pilgrims would travel here; it would become a place of worship.

From time to time, Nechtán glanced around for the cloaked figure but she was nowhere to be seen. He asked if he might once more be privileged to view the relics. This time from his kneeling position he saw the face under the hood and could not but gasp.

Golden hair, yes, and skin like milk. But he did not see the eyes as summer-sky blue but the colour of moss, like the glass beads he had brought as a gift for her.

He did not look like the king he claimed to be. He was short, his garments were ragged and there were strange markings on his skin. But he looked like a man certain, as were many before him, that he could win my sister's hand by plying her with trinkets. She shrank away from him, clasping her cloak, but that cursed chill wind blew it back. He dropped the jewels he had been trying to press upon her. Grasping her arm with one hand he lifted her chin with the other. I saw the awe on his face and I felt it myself as if I were seeing her for the first time. Her hair rose up behind her like an angel's in a fresco and the wind whipped colour into her cheeks. Her eyes were shut.

At that moment Regulus came up the path. The king – Nechtán – released Triduana and stepped back but I knew he would not be dissuaded from approaching her again.

We could not contrive to avoid him for the two days he was with us. We provided food and our presence was required by Regulus during the many hours he spent with the

king in prayer. Once I glanced sideways and saw our visitor openly staring at Triduana's bowed head. I shuddered at the look on his face – I was not unfamiliar with it. That look had been on the lustful faces of the callers to my father's house and I had prayed not to see it again.

My spirits rose when I saw him depart but Regulus told us that he would be returning with men to help build the shrine. I could see that the king was puffed with pride that here, on his land, the apostle would lie for all eternity. I longed to tell him that this had not been our chosen destination. Longed to tell him to keep his hands off my sister.

The thought of waking up every morning with those eyes next to him sustained Nechtan on his journey back to the east. He had ordered more glass beads to be made and put them in a sack along with a penannular brooch for fastening her cloak and a feasting bowl they would use in their life together. He would speak to her gently and convey his wishes with gestures and a smile sweet as honey. He would caress her with his hands and with his lips and if she resisted he would have her anyway.

He came back with that look still on his face and this time with a sackful of treasures. I endeavoured to stay by Triduana but as far as Nechtan was concerned there was no one else in the world; he did not see me even as I stood beside them.

He knelt and poured a handful of glass beads through his fingers, then another. Their colours merged and shimmered, like the arc God puts in the sky after rain. Holding Triduana's wrist he dropped beads one by one into her hand until they began to spill over. He laughed, looking up at her, inviting her to join in. Then, as if struck afresh by her appearance, he put his hands up either side of her temples, and gazed at her in wonder. There was softness in his face then, I will say. But Triduana shook her head violently and took a step back.

His face changed but, evidently thinking he could still win her, he reached into his sack for a brooch of some dull metal, and a bowl engraved with symbols, and laid them at her feet. She did not look down but, beseechingly, towards me. I reached for her but at a nod from Nechtan two of his men took hold of me. He pulled Triduana to him and kissed her roughly even as she tried to push him away. His hands began to explore her body. She went limp as if she had succumbed and he loosened his grip, secure, I expect, in the knowledge that she would not get far if she ran.

My sister put her hands to her eyes as if she were crying and then, after two swift movements, she held out her palms to him.

If you think they are so beautiful, she said, take them.

You must leave, Regulus said sorrowfully. He blessed us both and, with his hand still on her head, he told Triduana that she had many years as a healer before her, and that when her time came she would walk with the saints on the streets of glory.

I led her away. If she dwelt on the unearthly howl Nechtan had given she did not talk about it, and I did not tell her how he cast her eyes over the cliff before retching until he had nothing left.

It was some time after we had settled in a place they called Restalrig before I could look upon her face with equanimity, but when I had got used to it I saw the girl I'd always known, my little sister with wide open eyes the colour of kingfishers.