

Blue Slipper Bay

by

Wendy K Harris

A NOTE TO THE READER

If you should visit the Isle of Wight, you can find many of the places mentioned in this story. But some of them belong in the realms of the imagination, or may have been washed away by the sea.

WKH Isle of Wight 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wendy K Harris was born in Surrey in an air raid shelter during a doodlebug attack. The youngest of four sisters, attending a girls' grammar school, she needed to write in order to get a word in edgeways. The writing of short stories and poetry was interwoven with working as a nurse, homoeopath, counsellor, interfaith minister and sharing the upbringing of five children.

A rattling old Herefordshire rectory and an aching back precipitated a change of life and she moved with her husband and a laptop into a caravan and trundled around Wales and England, finally becoming ensnared by The Undercliff of the Isle of Wight, entranced by its history of smuggling, shipwrecking and landslips. Here she was inspired by tumbling cliffs and precarious cottages to write *The Sorrow Of Sisters* which has been translated into German, Dutch and Norwegian. *Blue Slipper Bay* is the second of The Undercliff Novels. She is now working on a third, *Rocken Edge*.

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For Michael, Debbie, Samuel and Lachlan.

On the other side of the world, but here in my heart.

CHAPTER 1

There was something troubling Ash. Jill watched him from the balcony of Cormorants, their imposing Victorian house overlooking Ventnor beach. His pale sweatshirt picked up the glimmer of dawn. Spying, she thought, I'm spying on him and he wouldn't like that. Ash never did anything underhand. Jill shivered and huddled deeper into her black velvet dressing gown. It wasn't unusual for Ash to be up early, exercising. 'Good for the bones,' he informed everybody. 'Got to keep my own in working order if I'm to fix other people's.' And whatever the weather he would be out at daybreak jogging along the curve of orange beach – or the esplanade if the tide was in – pausing to stretch ligaments and flex joints, a living example of how a set of two hundred and six middle-aged bones could be kept fully functional. Jill told him the locals referred to him as Bone Man. Ash lifted his chin as if honoured by this title. She imagined that one day he might slough off his thin layer of muscle and skin and revel in the full glory of his skeleton.

But this morning, Ash wasn't running or bending. He wasn't doing anything at all, except staring out to sea. His shoulders seemed hunched, his neck drawn down between them like a turtle. The sharp salty air stung Jill's nostrils; she shuddered and clutched at her collar. Maybe he's overextended himself, she thought, letting herself back into the warm, yeasty kitchen. Or perhaps he's missing Rose. Yesterday, Ash had driven their eldest daughter back to her student digs near the Royal Academy of Music after a short visit. He'd been bereft for days the first time she went away. 'London's such a dangerous place compared to the Isle of Wight,' he'd said, moping around the house,

irritating Jill. 'Rose will cope, she was born there – it's in her blood,' she'd retorted, wishing Ash would get back into his bones.

Jill switched on the kettle and heaved herself onto the hefty iron radiator, poking her frozen toes between its ribs. How nice it was to feel cold for a change and enjoy the comfort of warming up. The house was always overheated. Ash stoked the woodburner as if his loved ones were tropical plants in danger of frost bite. Jill sometimes felt she might spontaneously combust, like one of Dickens's characters. Relishing the heat beginning to seep through to her, she surveyed the large room with its cheery clutter of bright crockery, the tray of rising croissants, the photo-camouflaged fridge and the kids' blobby artwork tacked on the walls. One of Fleur's insect paintings caught her attention – dozens of tiny red ladybirds crawled over the paper. In her mind she began sorting the dotty creatures into pairs, feeling the addictive anticipation of whether or not it would work out evenly. Damn, one left over, perhaps she'd miscounted. She shook her head, dismissing the temptation to begin the ritual again.

Flooded with heat, she shuffled her bottom off the radiator and undid her dressing gown. She noticed her big leather bag on a chair, flopped open. Rummaging inside, she unzipped an inner compartment and felt for the small sealed plastic envelope. Anxiety niggled – it wasn't enough – she'd have to get more. She fastened her bag – shouldn't leave it lying around like this. The kids might decide to have a nose. Propping herself against the table, she put on her reading glasses, yanked a few hairs from her head and studied them, wondering if any natural auburn – titian, she liked to call it – still survived beneath the henna. Either way the roots were grey.

She sighed. If she were efficient she could shower and prepare breakfast before Tom and Fleur woke. Sometimes she felt too old to be the mother of two small children, aged seven and eight. If she'd stopped after having Rose she would be in the almost-child-free-zone by now. Should have moved to the island sooner, had them younger. But that wasn't how it had worked. And she wouldn't be without them, even though they were perpetually locked in mortal combat.

She yawned, made a mug of coffee, slung her bag over her shoulder and crept back upstairs. It was Saturday, no school run, kids unconscious, no obsessive clients to deal with – only herself. She took off her dressing gown and clambered naked into the big bed which still held pockets of warmth and smelled of Ash's embrocation. She wished he would come indoors, share his worries and revert to his normal predictable self. She needed the strength of those long, sound bones of his. They were the scaffold on which she supported her own unreliable body.

Rose, she thought again. Was that all that was troubling Ash? She couldn't think of anything else it might be. Cormorant's Health Centre – his life's ambition – was up and running, well attended. Their relationship trundled along in its comfortable rut – except their busy schedules didn't allow much time together these days. It had to be Rose. Ash had overheard her talking with a friend about busking in London. He was convinced that she would never do such a thing, but it had alarmed him. Jill finished her coffee and slumped against the pillows, her limbs feeling heavy. She felt less fired up when Rose was away. Something inside her seemed to cool and slacken, like hot air leaving a taut balloon. She closed her eyes, hearing the drone of the sea and the creak of

the old house as if it were a boat straining at anchor. She wasn't missing her eldest daughter at all.

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Nick woke suffused with desire. He'd been dreaming of Keri again. He could feel the texture of her soft skin under his hands, making his palms tingle. He longed to drift back to her, to let his whole being immerse itself in the creation his mind had reproduced so flawlessly.

The dreams were becoming more frequent – overwhelming images imprisoned behind his iron curtain were seeping through. I have to stop this, he thought, my mind is a trickster. He threw off his sleeping bag, hoping the chill of the night air might cool his lust. He rolled off his bed and walked naked to the window. The newborn pink of dawn was brushing the horizon. He switched on the light to act as a guiding beacon, ran down the wooden stairs and opened the door onto the strip of concrete path that separated his cottage from the drop to the beach. He stood listening to the hiss and slide of the waves, feeling his passion subsiding as the little sorcerer residing in his brain lost its hallucinatory power. He jumped down onto the wet sand. It sucked at his feet as he walked to meet the sea.

He gasped as the freezing water welled against his legs, but he ploughed on. When the first wave slapped at his retreating genitals the shock momentarily seized his breath and he plunged in and started to swim. He should have worn his wetsuit; his muscles already felt leaden with the cold; he mustn't stay in for long or go out too far. He stopped and turned over to look back at the shore. He could see the light in his window,

burning bright against the dark void of the cliff. He hadn't swum as far as he'd thought. Above him the heavens were softening, pearly, with a tinge of green.

Suddenly, he was reminded of Lake Tekapo in New Zealand – Keri's favourite place on earth, she told him, as they wandered waist high in pastel lupins at the edge of the turquoise water, the air sweet as honey. He remembered hoping it might become his favourite place too – their favourite place. A place they could return to for celebrations. A vision had rolled out before him of anniversaries and birthdays – maybe a child – Keri and he still clasping hands.

Nick shook his head. The sorcerer was sneaking back. He ducked below the surface, listening for the muffled thrum, the strange pulsing pressure of the undersea world. He opened his eyes and saw his arms floating like dead fish, the black tattoos stark against his pale flesh. He felt for the cord of plaited silk that Keri had woven. She'd made two, which they'd tied around each other's wrists the day they were married in the tiny Church of the Good Shepherd on the lake shore. 'Never thought I'd get hitched to a Pom,' she'd joked.

He wondered if her ashes might have found their way from the light water of Lake Tekapo, along underground streams, sensing their passage like migrating birds, merging with the drift of oceans, warm and cold, finding him in the dark waves of the English Channel that lapped Blue Slipper Bay.

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Sophie stood in the bay window nibbling a slice of burnt toast, sipping orange juice, watching the mist shrouding the black branches of the trees above the wall of the cemetery across the road. She liked the fact there were no houses opposite –unusual for

London – and the proximity of the dead didn't faze her. Her childhood home above the old theatre had backed onto a neglected graveyard through which she dawdled on the way home from school, patting the crumbling tombstones and wriggling between rusting railings of forgotten mausoleums.

Recalling those days triggered a vision of Tiggy in his spiky fur hat sitting on a bench, and she remembered her miracle box in the attic. She hadn't thought about it for ages. She felt an urge to rush up and retrieve it. She glanced at her watch. *Your life is now* – that's what Tiggy would say. But she didn't have time. She had to walk to Mum's and make sure she was decently dressed and fed before catching the bus to the clinic to supervise the Saturday morning bereavement group. A thick blanket of fatigue draped itself over her and she felt her body sag, her eyelids droop. She rocked her narrow shoulders as if casting it off. At least she had next weekend free. Audrey, her sister, was going to look after Mum, and Jill was driving up from the Isle of Wight. They often spent a few days together when Peter, Sophie's husband, was away. Rarely, Jill brought the children – but never Ash. Jill said the men were inhibiting, she and Sophie could indulge themselves better without Bone Man and Peter Pan around.

Sophie smiled, buoyed by her thoughts. Jill was always full of ideas, planning an itinerary of exhibitions to visit, new places to explore. But inevitably they would eat a great deal, drink too much and spend hours sifting through the jumble of their lives.

Sophie pushed up the sash window, swept the crumbs from her plate onto the sill for the robin, and took a chilly gulp of exhausted air before lowering it. She shivered. It wasn't much warmer inside the house. Or was it just her? She sometimes found it difficult to warm up these days, as if her internal thermostat had been turned down.

Defiantly, she left her plate and glass on Peter's precious white oak table, wondering whether he would sense this imposition in America.

She went to the bathroom to clean her teeth and tame her hair and then pulled on her brown winter coat, glad of the warmth. Standing in the hallway, ready to tackle her day, she imagined she could hear her mother's plaintive voice wailing for a cup of tea.

'I'm on my way, Mum,' she called, her voice echoing around her cold empty house.

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'Could you pop in to see Rose next weekend, while you're at Sophie's?' Ash asked. Jill was snuggled in an armchair with Fleur, listening to her read from her homework book. Jill looked up at him. He appeared quite frightening sometimes for such a mild man. His eyebrows needed a trim, they were sticking up – two stiff tufts above his beaky nose – making him look hawkish.

'Oh, Ash! I won't be there long—'

'You could go on Thursday, instead of Friday. It would give you more time.'

'No! She's only just been home. She'll think we're checking up on her.'

'Okay, just wondered.' He opened the door of the woodburner and forced another log into the blaze, releasing a puff of sparky smoke.

Jill watched him, her eyes watering, only half-listening to Fleur. He picked up his new book on Egyptian mythology, flicked through it, put it down, paced around the room, then stood by the door holding onto the brass knob as if he couldn't decide where to go. He slowly bent his knees and straightened up again like a ballet dancer at the barre. Why couldn't he just sit down or go into the music room and play his cello? He hadn't

practised for ages. It used to get on Jill's nerves – him grinding away, all bow and elbows – but right now she wished he would.

'I'll go and pick up Tom from his flute lesson,' he said.

'Bit early.'

'Well, I need to call at Wraith Cottage on the way – to see Marguerite about a patient we saw today.'

'Couldn't you phone her?'

'She's deaf, remember?'

Jill remembered but wasn't so sure about that. In fact she wasn't at all sure about Marguerite, a middle-aged child with flowing silver hair. 'I understood that Jane interprets for her.'

Ash went out to the hall and came back putting on his leather jacket. 'Too complicated,' he muttered. 'Anyway, it's hardly satisfactory having her sister listening in to our private conversations.'

'Private?'

'Case histories and stuff—'

'Can I come, Daddy?' Fleur struggled to get out of the armchair, but Jill held onto her.

'Not tonight, sweetheart. Business.' Ash picked up a heap of files and blew a kiss as he went out. 'And you haven't done your piano practice, young lady,' he called back.

Jill sat twiddling a lock of Fleur's glossy brown hair, resisting the temptation to divide it into an even number of strands. Ash was still not himself; a bit of him was

absent. He said it was preoccupation with the health centre. But whatever was really causing his distraction, he wasn't saying. And she'd given up asking.

Fleur rubbed her eyes and looked up as if sensing that Jill wasn't listening to the word she was stumbling over. 'Can I come to London to see Aunty Sophie with you, Mummy?'

'Not this weekend, pet. Perhaps next time. Or, maybe I'll persuade her to come here.' If I can lever her away from all her bloody dependents, she thought.

Fleur toyed with Jill's chunky gold bracelet. 'Has Sophie got a daddy?'

'A daddy?'

'Like you and Daddy.'

'Oh, a husband you mean.' Fleur nodded, sleepily. 'Yes. He's called Peter, you've never met him.' And I wish to God I never had to meet the bastard again, Jill thought. Since she and Ash had swapped their Dulwich house with Ash's parents for Cormorants, she'd only seen Peter if she absolutely had to. He and Ash weren't close friends and it was easy for Jill to visit Sophie when Peter was away. Occasionally she took the kids; she wanted them to know Sophie, and Sophie could never organise enough time to come over to the island. Funny how that little stretch of water was such a barrier. Solent Syndrome it was known as locally. But the main obstacle was Sophie's mother – demanding old cow – pretending to be helpless. And Peter – still going through his adolescence in his forties. Sophie – beautiful wild-haired Sophie – could have had her pick of men, and a couple of gorgeous kids, if it wasn't for Peter. And the worst thing was, Jill had encouraged her to marry him. She remembered young Sophie's bewilderment, her soulful Italian eyes heavy with doubt. Jill had laughed. 'Good-looking men are incorrigible flirts – doesn't mean

anything. And he's chosen you – lucky girl – don't let him go!' A hot flush of guilt radiated through her. She pushed her glasses to the top of her head and fanned herself with Fleur's book. Sophie's biological clock was ticking away – it was time to get things sorted.

'Why hasn't Sophie got any little girls?' Fleur murmured. 'Or boys?' she added as if they were a mere afterthought.

Jill hugged her tight. 'Poor Sophie hasn't been as lucky as me.' She felt Fleur squirm and released her. Next weekend she would bully Sophie – challenge her to change her life. And a glorious vision of a final confrontation with Peter rose in Jill's mind.

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Nick walked. He should be at work. But only furious walking could release the knots of tension that seemed lodged in his brain, his guts, his muscles. He'd woken drenched with sweat – not aching with desire this time – but after a violent nightmare, his head ringing with bitter words, heavy with grief and remorse. Fighting hard not to remember the details, he'd tried to sit and watch his mind, like the monks had taught him. But the turmoil was too great; he had to walk. He set off early from the shelter of Blue Slipper Bay, through the Botanic Gardens where the palms were lashing, along the cliff path to Ventnor, deserted by all but the hardy. Rachel's café wasn't yet open for business. Too early in the year for tourists, although Rachel always told him to pop upstairs to her flat for a cup of something if passing. It was tempting, he was sorely in need of a soft heart, but he knew he couldn't speak without breaking down. So he pressed on, pulling his woollen hat down over his shaven head as the east wind scoured his flesh.

When he reached Bonchurch, his clothes damp from sea spray, he bought apple juice and biscuits in the village store and sat on a sharp stone wall watching ducks rippling the glassy surface of the pond. He was calmer now, hadn't felt that bad for a while – even found himself wanting a drink – imagining what it would be like to go into a pub and sink a few beers. He hadn't touched alcohol for many years – no drugs of any description. The strange thing was he seemed capable of destroying lives whether he was on drugs or working against them. Perhaps that was his dilemma, he couldn't trust himself; he had no confidence that his best motives would cause no harm. Harmlessness, that's what the monks had lived by. And Nick had tried, was trying.

He rubbed his cold hands together. The knuckles were scarred – they'd thrown a few punches in their time. Not at people – he'd never hit anyone as far as he could remember – just a few walls and doors.

The ducks had gathered, watching him expectantly. Nick looked at his packet of chocolate digestives and back at the ducks. Maybe he should have chosen a healthier option.