

*Ophelia  
in Pieces*

by *Michelle Wildgen*



*Ophelia  
in Pieces*

CLARE JACOB



First published in 2011 by  
Short Books  
3A Exmouth House  
Pine Street, EC1R 0JH

Copyright ©  
Clare Jacob 2011

Clare Jacob has asserted her right under the Copyright,  
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the  
author of this work. All rights reserved. No part of this publication  
may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any  
form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, or otherwise) without  
the prior written permission of both the copyright owners  
and the publisher.

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-907595-14-1

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk





## Chapter One

It had started over a jar of capers. She'd bought skate for dinner specially to go with the capers, capers she'd been given by a grateful deli-owning client some years ago. It was true that they'd sat untouched in the cupboard ever since and were probably long past their best-before date. But she hadn't thought of that as she had stood in the slush in the fishmonger's. She'd told herself that at last she was going to cook: she would stake a claim to a normal existence with a skate and caper dinner and she'd wear that red dress he said suited her. Or used to say suited her.

So far it had all gone well. Her idea had been cemented by the fishmonger.

'Skate, madam? Lovely with capers...' He had given the fish an extra toss in the air to express the joy of it. She'd bought a bottle of the driest Chablis, and some raspberries so fat you could fit a finger inside. They had seemed miraculous, these perfect plump fruits waiting for her to pluck them from the dirty astroturf display on Camberwell Church Street.

Ophelia stopped at the pub window to apply a fresh coat of lipstick, checking its outline and checking for something else too: that composed but open expression that she wanted to carry away with her. The air was warm,

sustaining, and the late June sun would make it pleasant to eat supper in the backyard. Alex would be tired after his rugby, happy to go to bed and let his parents dine and talk properly for once. It was going to be a lovely evening.

But when she came in Alex and Patrick were eating ice cream together in the kitchen and scarcely raised their heads. Alex presented a mop of upstanding hair as he peered into the depths of his bowl. His arms had traces of mud. Patrick nodded but didn't raise his eyes. A frown-line bisected his forehead. Both Alex and Patrick wore jumpers with sleeves pulled out of shape. Neither said 'Hi!' or 'You're back!'

She put her shopping down noisily. 'I hope you aren't spoiling your appetite, Patrick. I'm cooking skate with Corvino's capers for dinner.'

Patrick looked up at her uncomprehendingly.

'You know, *dinner*? At least you'll remember Corvino, the murdering deli-guy who promised me a whole ham if he got off but just sent me a jar of capers?'

This wasn't how she'd meant it to be. Patrick was far away and her reiteration was bringing him no nearer. Alex was staring into his bowl. She thought of the stupid thing her client had said earlier: 'Venus isn't in the ascendant for you today.'

Patrick shrugged, as though he'd caught her line of thought and didn't particularly care for it. 'I'm not sure we've still got those capers. I had a clear-out to make room for my curries.' His voice was so cold it sounded like dislike.

She felt the floor lurch under her, felt he'd thrown her out with the capers and she didn't belong here any more, with her bony wing of a fish and her crisp black suit. The months of late nights in chambers, the struggling home to find Alex asleep and Patrick deep in his computer, the weekends spent at her desk while Alex and Patrick giggled in the



kitchen or played ball games in the churchyard, the snatched meals and perfunctory conversations all seemed to gather in a great growing wave which crashed over her, leaving her clinging to a chair back, full of despair.

Patrick exchanged glances with Alex. They were like teenagers resenting an adult presence. She didn't know how to join them so she swung herself round and walked quickly out of the room and up to her bed. For a while she sobbed into her pillow. No one came and she began to think perhaps *she* was the childish one, a grown woman having a tantrum.

She lay very still and listened. Alex and Patrick were upstairs now. Patrick was tucking Alex into his bed, wishing him goodnight with a cheerful ease in his voice, as though nothing had happened. She bit into her arm until it struck her as silly.

Patrick came in with his loose limbs and drooping eyelids. His lashes were longer than hers and hid far more. He sat down on the bed next to her, not touching her, not looking at her. They both stared at the carpet without speaking for a while, as though their conversation – her questions, his answers, the sorry conclusion – were all legible in the zigzags around the edge of the rug. Although they were close – she could see that his jeans were worn thin at the thigh – they seemed inexorably separate, like flies caught in adjoining webs, suspended in time and space, unable to have the conversation, or to refuse to have it. It was Ophelia who struggled into speech.

'What's going on, Patrick?'

'Nothing.'

It was so unfair, him forcing her to force this out of him. This was certainly not nothing.

'Come on, Patrick. Don't lie. I know it's not nothing. And the more you say it's nothing the bigger the thing seems.'

How could it be nothing, the heaviness on her chest, the invisible wall that made it impossible to reach over and touch him, the atmosphere that chilled and slowed his responses? She balled her fists.

‘Patrick!’

‘OK.’ He touched her knee and then moved his hand away quickly.

She relaxed her hands and put them palm down on the bed, on either side of her hips. Patrick was rubbing the top of his thighs. No wonder the jeans were worn there. How had she missed this new variation on his age-old fidgeting? It was new, this and so much else; and all the while she’d been running along with the old Patrick, with their old conversations keeping her company in her head.

And then: ‘Yup. There is something going on.’

No, words were not better. She gripped her knees. She needed to get through this. It was a bit like giving birth.

He looked away, out of the window, and his body was still, as though he’d left it behind. ‘I’ve felt, for a very long time, that you haven’t been here. You haven’t been available for anything, jokes, stories... even physically... You’re always working and preoccupied. I need more than that. I need to feel loved. You know how it is.’

He still didn’t look at her. It was this, even more than what he said, that made things clear to her.

Her shrill voice hurt her own ears: ‘So, you are having an affair?’

He sighed, as if weary of himself, her, the banality of it all. ‘If you want to call it that.’

She felt like she’d been dipped in icy water.

She got up and went to the window but she didn’t look out. Instead, she looked back. She realised that she had known about this, deep down, for months, since Christmas.

A week before his office Christmas party, Patrick, whose hair had always hung in thick, dirty curls down to his collar, had come home with a haircut. It was a number one at the back and sides and a number two on top, a cross between Grace Jones and an American marine.

‘What the hell?’ Ophelia had said, stopping dead on the stairs.

Patrick, just inside the hall and still in his coat, had run his hand over the pelt on his scalp and said, ‘Soft and clean as a cat!’ with a grin.

Ophelia had liked his Byronic look, and she’d loved twisting her fingers in his hair when they kissed. ‘I’m not sure I want to be married to a cat,’ she’d said, giving an exaggerated frown to hide a deeper misgiving.

He’d pounced forward and given her a winning smile. It almost worked, but not quite.

‘What made you do it?’ she’d asked, not coming closer. ‘Won’t you get cold?’

‘Come on, Feely. It’s good to have a change sometimes. I’m just sharpening up a little.’

‘So long as you don’t become uncomfortably pointy,’ she’d said and given him the hug he’d been waiting for.

It suited him. You could see his high-cut cheekbones better, but she’d regretted the alien feel and look of it. Several times in the following week she’d caught herself staring at him as if he were a stranger.

The window reflected Patrick on the bed behind her. His face was turned towards their dresser, away from her.

*‘Are you having an affair?’*

*‘If you want to call it that.’*

What else could you call it? She didn’t want any of this. All because she’d bought skate for dinner. Her throat burned. ‘This is unbearable,’ she said.

He turned to her with his mouth open, as though he had something to say; but no sound came out. He looked at her beseechingly and she almost reached out to him. Then, to her disgust, he looked away.

She stood up, full of the vigour and righteousness of her anger, clinging to it.

‘You can go. Go now. It is enough.’

And, to her amazement, he did. He got up unsteadily, stuffed some clothes in a bag and walked to the door. He gave her a horrified backward look and this time it was she who turned away. She heard the door shut, kedunk, and he was gone.