opening extract from

The White Darkness

written by

Geraldine McCaughrean

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The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Chapter One
'Titus'

I have been in love with Titus Oates for quite a while now—which is ridiculous, since he's been dead for ninety years. But look at it this way. In ninety years I'll be dead, too, and then the age difference won't matter.

Besides, he isn't dead inside my head. We talk about all kinds of things. From whether hair colour can change spontaneously to whether friends are better than family, and the best age for marrying: 14 or 125. Generally speaking, he knows more than I do, but on that particular subject we are even. He wasn't married—at least, he wasn't when he died, which must have substantially cut down his chances.

Uncle Victor says I shouldn't marry at all. Uncle Victor knows about these things and he says that 'marriage is a bourgeois relic of Victorian sentimentality'. That suits me. No one would match up to Titus. And we have a kind of understanding, Titus and I.

Uncle Victor is marvellous: he's done so much for us—for Mum and me, I mean. And anyway, he's just so clever. Uncle Victor knows a fantastic amount. He knows at what temperature glass turns to liquid, and where Communism went wrong and how the Clifton Suspension Bridge was built and just what the Government ought to be doing: you can't fault him. He's read books about everything: history, geography, politics, astrology, animals . . . The Fount of All Knowledge, Dad used to call him.

I would get stuck doing my homework, and Dad would say, 'Ask the Fount of All Knowledge.' And I'd telephone Victor and he would tell me. Quite often he knew more than the teachers, so they'd think I'd got my homework wrong, but as Victor says, 'What teachers don't understand is that the body of learning is still growing. They reckon it stopped the day they came out of college. That, or they're bog ignorant. Lot of ignorance in yon schools.'

It's true that none of my teachers knows much about Antarctica. When Dad and Victor and I went to Iceland, one of the teachers had been, too, and knew all about Dettifoss and the hot springs and people having stinking saunas in their back gardens. But none of the teachers at school has been to Antarctica. Some of them know about Scott of the Antarctic going to the South Pole and not coming back. But they mostly mean John Mills in the movie. I don't.

In the general way of things, I don't know much about anything. Uncle Victor says I'm 'the victim of a shoddy education system'. But I do know about the Polar Regions. The bookshelves over my bed are full of books about the North and South Poles. Ice-bound almost. A glacial cliff-face teetering over my bed. I remember: the night after Dad had been rushed into hospital, one of the shelves sheared off and crashed down on me. I woke up thinking the house was collapsing—books gouging at my head, bouncing off the bed-frame, slapping flat on the floor. I looked at the hole in the wall and the rawlplugs on the pillow and I didn't know what to do.

About the shelf. About anything.

So I went back to sleep, and dreamt I was sailing towards the Ross Ice Barrier, and that crags were splitting off its face, plunging down, massive as sea-going liners foundering.

Come to think of it, Uncle Victor gave me most of my ice books. Every birthday and Christmas. Books about

The Ice and the North Pole; about Shackleton and Scott, Laurence Gould and Vivian Fuchs, Nansen and Barents, Franklin and Peary; about penguins and polar bears, whales and seals and boreales . . . About Captain Lawrence Oates—the one they called 'Titus'. Uncle Victor understands how the whole idea creeps up on you like pack ice—pressing in and pressing against your head, then crushing the hull and tumbling inside . . . If we ever did a project at school on Antarctica, I could shine. Like Mount Erebus in midsummer, I could, I could shine!

Except that I don't think I would choose to. It's all bound up with Titus, and I know better than to mention Titus at school. I do now, anyway. I made that mistake once. I won't do it again.

'Symone has a pretend friend! Symone has a pretend friend!'

It was the conversation about snogging. Like the ant nest in the larder: you think you've done everything to be rid of it—that it can't possibly come back again—but there it is: 'How many boys have you snogged?' There is no right answer. You say 'None' and you're sad and frigid or they know someone whose brother would be willing to snog you for a quid. You refuse to answer and you are sadder still—or hiding something, or prefer girls, or . . . It's not that they care; they only want to tell you how many they've snogged—chiefly because they like saying the word. It makes them feel as if they are wearing red underwear. But on and on they go: 'How many boys, Sym? How many boys have you snogged?'

Why is it that all the words to do with sex are ugly? Words to do with love aren't. No wonder Titus thought women were a nuisance. No wonder he died without ever . . . getting mixed up with all that.

Anyway, I said that I could do without it. (At least that's

what I tried to say. I don't explain things very well out loud.) I tried to say that I was happy to stick with imagining for the time being, thanks all the same. Later, maybe. If I ever met anyone who could compare with Titus . . .

And after that I was the mad girl—sad, frigid, and mad; all three—the retard who had an imaginary friend: 'Like little kids do, oo-hoo. Like little kids do!'

The day I came into school and said my dad had died, I heard Maxine say to Nats, 'Don't worry. I expect she just *imagined* it.'

So that's when I sealed myself inside. Laced up the tent, so to speak. Filled the locks with water so that they would freeze. That's when Titus and I looked at one another and decided we could do without them, so long as we had each other. *'You and me now, Sym.'*

'You and me now, Titus.'

'Warm, isn't it.'

'Who fancies a trip to Paris, then?' said Uncle Victor.

Mum was surprised, because money's been so short lately.

'It's one of those newspaper promotions,' said Victor. 'Free tickets on Eurostar and two nights in a two-star hotel.'

I wanted Mum to smile and widen her eyes and say 'How lovely!' because it was such a kind thought. It seemed wrong of her to pucker her forehead and look harassed and confused. It's not the last place on earth a person might want to go, is it: Paris? But Mum just looked uneasy. 'Sym has exams coming up.'

'Say again?'

'Sym has exams.'

'The child worrits her life away on exams! Exams in what? What are they trying to measure? Her potential? Her usefulness? Her knack at taking exams, is all! You'd

like to go to Paris, wouldn't you, girl? Cradle of Art and Town-Planning?'

'I'd like to go up the Eiffel Tower,' I said.

Mum's face accused me of treachery; in mentioning the exams she had thrown me an invisible hint and I had muffed the catch. Why can't she say things out loud? Why does no one in this house say anything out loud? Anyway, why wouldn't she want to go to Paris? Uncle Victor is only trying to cheer her up! 'Can't we go after the exams?' I said, trying to satisfy them both.

'Lillian will write you a note, won't you, Lillian: *Regret any inconvenience* manner of thing. The only real school is the School of Life!'

It's one of Victor's favourite sayings, that.

It suited me. Every way I look at it, it suited me. No Chemistry exam meant no revision either. I loved the thought of telling Nikki I wouldn't be around for the Chemistry papers because I was going to Paris. I'd send her a postcard, in case she thought I was making it up. The weather outside was horrible, but even Paris in the pouring rain had to be better than school and exams.

So I got the weekend case out of the loft, and Mum packed it and cancelled the dentist and wrote a note to school and got some euros from the Post Office and found some guide books at the library and looked out the passports and hoovered the house (in case we all drowned in mid-Channel, I suppose, and neighbours had to break in and were scandalized by the state of our carpets). Meanwhile, Victor found a 360 degree virtual view from the top of the Eiffel Tower, on the computer. He had his passport in his jacket pocket—said he carries it with him at all times. It made him sound like a spy waiting for his next mission.

* * *

'Can't do Chemistry next week,' I told Nikki, casual as anything. 'Be in Paris.'

'Lucky cow,' said Nikki without looking up from her magazine. She was filling in a questionnaire to find out what kind of boy she should date.

'Two nights and three days,' I said.

'Oh là là,' said Nikki flatly.

The article was called *Foto-Fit!!!* Exclamation marks infest all Nikki's magazines. Like head lice. Given the amount of time she spends with her head in a magazine, you'd think Nikki might have caught some, but oddly, whenever she speaks, there's no sign of an exclamation mark anywhere.

'Uncle Victor is taking Mum and me.'

'Can't he afford a week?'

Beside each question in the questionnaire was a row of photographs: boys' faces, boys' legs, boys differently dressed . . . *'PICK THE BUFFest BOY!!'* said the caption.

'The Eiffel Tower. Everything,' I said.

'Snails' legs,' said Nikki with a grimace.

Even Titus was mildly intrigued by the magazine article. *'Buff? Buff as in polished? Well bred?'* he said inside my head.

'No, Titus.'

'Buff as in Blind Man's?'

'No, Titus.'

'Buff as in "Steady the Buffs"?'

'I don't think so . . .'

'Buff as in envelopes?'

'No, Titus.'

'Buff as in stark naked?'

'Captain!'

'Sorry.'

'Buff as in "fit",' I explained.

'Ah,' said Titus, but looked doubtful.

So I assured him, 'You're fit. You're really fit!'

And he agreed: *'Up to a point I was very fit . . . Until death set in. Death is inclined to undermine one's fitness.'*

'No, no. Not that kind of fit. "Fit" as in "handsome", I meant.'

But now he looked plain mutinous. Words ought to retain at least some of their meaning from one century to the next, or conversations can't keep their footing.

Actually, I've never looked at a boy and thought 'fit!!' or 'Be still my beating heart'. Those obscene jerks they offer us with their forearms; trying to outdo each other in dirty words at the back of the bus: none of that stirs me to curiosity—doesn't stir me to anything, except perhaps a slight desire to see them fall off the bus into the path of oncoming traffic.

'We're going Eurostar,' I told Nikki, but she was engrossed. Of course I should have been telling my teacher really, not Nikki. The letter from Mum was still in my skirt pocket; I wanted to leave asking until it was too late for Mrs Floyd to say no.

The teachers at school don't like me. Uncle Victor says so, and he ought to know; he always insists on going to Parents' Evening now Dad's gone. Uncle Victor says teachers are a 'barrier to enlightenment', so he spends a lot of time up at the school trying to enlighten them. The geography teacher in particular seems to vex him: 'You learn your subject [he told her once] then regurgitate it year after year! Round and round, staler and staler. Like astronauts drinking their own piss.' I don't think Miss Cox took in his argument: didn't take in anything except the p-word.

The next string of photos in Nikki's magazine was not of boys but of their interests—a computer, a car, a Walkman, a football, a book. As if boys can only have one interest.

'Where are the horses?' said Titus. *'I'm a horse man.'*

'That would count as cars, I suppose. Or sport. How about sport?'

'Well, polo, of course. I played tennis a lot in Egypt. Raced camels. Boxed in India. At Hut Point we played football to keep . . . er . . . oh dear . . . fit. And ice hockey. Are you including motorized sledges among cars? Motorized sledges are a waste of time and money. For a thousand quid I could buy myself a team of polo ponies.'

'Not any more, you couldn't. How about music?'

'So long as I don't have to dance to it.'

'Books?'

'Aha, well. Perhaps the books for my major's exam.'

Cold hands, Titus. Cold hands. It's what he wrote asking his mother to send him, the day he set out for the Pole: the books for his exams. He would need them, he said, when he got back.

Sometimes, quite unbidden, Titus says something and it's as if he has laid icy hands on the back of my neck. But why, in that instant, did other words congeal against my brain: *Sooner Chemistry than Paris.*

Maxine drifted past.

'Sym's uncle's taking her to Paris,' said Nikki, and a surge of happiness went through me, because Nikki had been listening after all.

'What, for a dirty weekend?' said Maxine. With any thought behind it, it would have been a vile thing to say. But Maxine doesn't do thinking. Maxine is just so full of sewage she only has to move sharply to slop over at the mouth.

'Holiday,' I mumbled.

'Me, I'd go down the Moulin Rouge—get off with all the rich men,' and wrapping her arms behind her head, she shut her eyes and flicked her hips at us. 'But don't you bother, Sym,'—looking me over, contempt weighing down her eyelids—'you can't give it away for free, can you?'

I could feel my cheeks burning, my guts churning. What's wrong with me? Is there something wrong with me? What's

wrong with me? We're fourteen. It's illegal. 'Adults-only', it says on the box. And yet everyone I know at school seems to be pushing and jostling to play. Or talking about it. Lots of talking about it. And what with not doing talking, really, and not wanting to talk about it anyway . . .

Nikki began doodling glasses and moustaches on the boys' faces in the magazine. 'Bet your uncle drags you round loads of dreary art museums, Sym,' she said, filling up the awful silence, dredging me out of Maxine's sewage. And I thanked her by nodding and wincing and smiling ruefully.

"Spect so.'

'In the rain.'

"Spect so.'

'I'm game. I'll come,' said Titus brightly. *'We were always going on holiday when I was young. My adoring mother fled the English winters,'* and he gave his low, ironic laugh. *'Thought the cold might be the death of me.'* That's right, Titus. Put things into proportion.

And I cheered up instantly, knowing that he would be there in Paris, and Maxine wouldn't.

The trains at Waterloo Station were all as shiny and sleek as intercontinental missiles. A mere excursion to the other side of the Channel seemed beneath their dignity—film stars finding themselves on a bucket-and-spade weekend when they had been expecting to go to the Cannes Film Festival.

'Have you *been,* Lillian? Sym?' said Uncle Victor loudly, from some distance away. Mum tried to ignore him, but Victor only repeated it more loudly still: 'Have you *been*? Think on. You should both go before we set off!'—offering to mind our shoulder bags while we found the station toilet.

'Sometimes!' hissed Mum under her breath, investing

the word with a wealth of pent-up embarrassment and resentment.

We were no sooner back than the train doors opened with a mechanical gasp that seemed to come from inside my chest. I didn't lift my foot high enough to clear the sill, stumbling into the train. Elegant as a swan, me.

But Mum was still on the platform, rummaging through her handbag, crouching down to set it on the ground and look with two hands. Uncle Victor was unzipping our single suitcase, sighing patiently, lifting out clothes. 'Your mother has left her passport behind,' he said and managed a martyred smile.

'No! No, I had it! I know I did!'

'Calmly, Lillian, calmly. Think on. Calm oils the cogwheels.'

But though she searched through every pocket, every compartment of her shoulder bag, between every page of her library book and under the cardboard stiffener in the cheap suitcase, there was no sign of either her passport or her calm. 'Are you sure I didn't give it to you to mind, Victor?'

Victor's hands padded slowly, methodically over the luggage. Mum's darted and flickered in growing panic. 'So stupid!'

'*You* aren't stupid, Lillian,' said Uncle Victor smiling and shaking his head, 'but sometimes the things you do are . . .' Mum didn't appreciate the distinction: she almost zipped Victor's hand into the suitcase.

The clock over the station clicked round. The guard appeared holding a green paddle the shape of a ping-pong bat. Mum had begun to cry with frustration and annoyance. My stomach swung like a cat flap. 'We'll just have to catch a later train!' I said.

But apparently the tickets were valid only on the eight o'clock. When the doors finally closed, Victor and I were

on the inside with the suitcase, Mum was on the outside, her arms full of her own freshly ironed holiday clothing. It dangled from her grasp and she stooped awkwardly to stop the silky blouses slithering to the ground. She looked like a marble Madonna holding someone dead on her lap, head cocked sideways in grief.

'Back on Saturday,' I mouthed through the window and kissed the glass.

'It's a common mistake,' said uncle, cracking open the newspaper. 'Lack of organization. Success comes down to getting organized. Keeping your eye on the ball. Think on, Sym.'

'Maybe someone pickpocketed her,' I suggested.

'Say again?'

'Stole Mum's passport. Someone. Maybe.'

'And happen she'll find it just where she put it, more like. The ladies, eh? God bless 'em.' It was said with a conspiratorial wink—which must mean I'm not really female but an honorary man. A good thing, I think. A compliment.

'So! We're off,' said Titus settling into the seat beside me, stretching out his long legs, opening *The Life of Napoleon* as Waterloo slipped slowly behind us in a flicker of brick and scaffolding.

And it didn't matter: Mum hadn't wanted to go in the first place. And at least I'd have Titus. Now, if he were to rest his head against my shoulder, I would feel the black crispness of his curly hair under my cheekbone, smell the pipe tobacco inside his leather jacket. If I were to shut my eyes and imagine his arm around my shoulders, we could be going anywhere in the whole round world and not just on a three-day, educationally informative trip to Paris.

'Just you and me, eh, Titus?'

'Just you and me, ma chère.'

And Uncle Victor, of course.