

THE STAR GAZER

(a monologue)

by

Michael Sharp

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Stage directions have been avoided, thus giving scope for the monologue to be played either as a series of short scenes, punctuated by blackouts, or as one continuous scene. The use of props is optional. Actress and ambience may be deciding factors.

The character is upwards of sixty and, as the text ultimately reveals, is a lonely woman in need of an audience.

SIOBHAN: *(initially gushing with enthusiasm)* The last thing I expected was to have Greta Garbo sitting at the next table ordering sausage, egg and chips. I wanted to say something. I wanted to say, ‘You’re Greta Garbo and I’m going to take your photograph.’ Not that I had a camera with me. And anyway, I couldn’t have been so heartless. You have to give a bit of respect to someone that shuns publicity and ‘wants to be alone’. Which on this particular occasion seemed a contradiction in terms, seeing as the café was chock-a-block.

(a touch of disdain creeping in) Her skin was wrinkled and the hair was greyish brown and badly in need of a perm. She was quite ordinary looking really... Quite inconsequential sitting there in her camel-coloured duffel coat, fingering her toggles and patiently waiting for her order to emerge from the kitchen.

Hollywood was a far cry from her present setting. By no stretch of the imagination could this greasy spoon café be likened to Grand Hotel.

(BEAT PAUSE)

I'd already finished my meal and was about to ask for the bill, but decided to hold fast and ordered a mug of tea.

Keeping her under surveillance, without making it blatantly obvious, required considerable effort on my part. Give the game away and she could quite easily have found herself besieged by autograph hunters or over zealous admirers demanding locks of her hair.

(reflectively) Then again, perhaps not.

A beatnik type, in shabby corduroys and open toed sandals, who up until now had escaped my notice, suddenly got up from his table and went across to where Miss Garbo sat. *(an anxious murmur)* This is it, I thought – he knows. He knows who she is and he's going to throw himself at her feet and make a complete spectacle of himself. They call themselves students of film, his sort, and spend long hot summer afternoons sitting in the National Film Theatre in much the same way other people religiously go to church.

(slightly surprised) But no, I was wrong – all he wanted was the sugar shaker, which he took without so much as a by your leave. *(raising voice)* 'Manners maketh the man,' I wanted to call out. But I thought better of it.

(feigning an accent) ‘Want the bill?’ said the waiter in his broken English, just as I’d taken my last swig of tea. He must’ve been hovering behind me for quite some time, waiting to pounce. ‘I’ll have another mug please,’ I said.

Miss Garbo had pushed one of her sausages to the side of the plate and I can’t say I blamed her. They simply oozed grease. Next thing I know, she’s picking it up, wrapping it in her hanky and popping it into the pocket of her duffel coat. Well, this was not the act of a woman one associates with Queen Christina or for that matter Anna Karenina – but there you are, that’s actors for you, totally unpredictable. I remember once seeing Noel Coward do a handstand in the middle of Shaftesbury Avenue. Or was it Ivor Novello?

(BEAT PAUSE)

By now I’d finished my second mug of tea and as a whiff of garlic continued to permeate my nostrils, I knew the waiter was lurking. Anyway, I just sat tight, trying to be nonchalant and casting the occasional glance in Greta Garbo’s direction. Only she wasn’t there! Suddenly she’d gone. Vanished.

My immediate thought was that I'd imagined the whole thing, that Greta Garbo's presence had been a figment of my imagination – at which point she re-appeared from behind the door marked “Ladies”, and I gave a huge sigh of relief.

(BEAT PAUSE)

I deliberately held back until she'd settled her bill before doing likewise and it was at this point that I had a slight contretemps with the waiter. Mushy peas. He insisted that I'd had mushy peas with my steak and kidney pie and two veg – which in effect would have meant steak and kidney pie and three veg. He was not a man to see reason and I decided to pay the extra forty p. and be done with it. I told him he needn't bother to expect me to patronize his establishment again, knowing full well it was water off a duck's back – but you get nowhere by bottling things up. I very rarely eat out anyway, and I only decided to indulge myself on this occasion because I'd missed my connection from the crematorium.

(BEAT PAUSE)

When I finally got away from the café, I fully expected to see that Greta Garbo was nowhere to be seen – but no, there she stood, fifth in line in the queue at the bus stop opposite. I tagged myself on at the end, two places behind her and still no one realized who she was and I for one certainly wasn't going to let on.

We all surged forward when the number six finally came into sight and it was immediately apparent that the whole queue, which had grown considerably in length, wanted this particular bus. 'I'll take the first five,' said the surely driver/conductor and with that it was every man, woman and child for themselves. Now I'm not a violent person by nature, but a sharp kick on the shin never fails to unbalance the unsuspecting – which is precisely what I did to the woman in the musquash coat, before pushing past her. I certainly had no qualms about this, seeing as she appeared to have scant regard for the unfortunate musk rats that had gone into the making of her three-quarter-length obscenity. I was an anti-fur campaigner long before they had the campaigns. Though I must confess to slipping into my sheepskin moccasins whenever we have a cold snap. Now some might say this is the indulgence of a hypocrite – but not so. No. The moccasins were a present from an elderly aunt who would have been deeply

offended had I refused her tactless gift. Poor Auntie Fabia.

She spent her declining years trying to get a hat to fit and worrying about who was going to dust the top of her wardrobe.

Once on the single decker bus, I plonked myself down beside this West Indian woman with a carrier bag full of yams on her lap. Not that I was immediately cognizant of the contents. 'What's that you've got there?' I asked. 'Yams.' she said. 'Oh,' says I, wanting to do my bit for race relations, 'and what's a yam?' 'Yams is what I got in this bag,' said she. Well, there's only so far you can carry some conversations and as I'd yet to ascertain the whereabouts of Greta Garbo, I casually turned my head and gazed towards the rear of the bus.

Greta Garbo was sitting on the seat over the wheel, which I thought a mite unwise seeing as she'd not long eaten. Seated beside her, next to the window, was a pale youth who looked as though he was going to be sick at any moment. And five minutes later, he was. All down the smartly dressed gent on the seat in front. Well, there was pandemonium and fragrant the air was not.

