

YOUR HEART'S RIGHT THERE.

By Jo Nestor

Every night this week after supper I've watched you, a stranger to me, linger in Palazzola's communal refectory, hesitant as a schoolgirl afraid of missing out. Despite smiling and nodding in our direction, decades of duty mean you turn instead and join your sisters, dressed in your distinctive blue cardigans and sensible shoes, to shuffle single-file towards the cool chapel for evening prayers.

By contrast, we're a rowdy secular choir on holiday, and we chose this Italian hilltop monastery for its acoustic qualities and excellent food. After breakfast, we gather for vocal exercises beneath vaulted whitewashed ceilings. Sitting in my wheelchair, arms dangling like jellied eels, I breathe deep into my belly, then push air upwards through my chest. With a prolonged 'Aah' on an out-breath, I visualise it emerging like steam from a kettle through the top of my head.

Later, as we practice fifteenth-century choral pieces in four-part harmony, something transcendent happens; vibrations tip-tap across my scalp, prickles scurry along my shoulders and ripple down my back. This daily Palazzola high never disappoints.

Afternoons, when others go sightseeing by minibus, I wheel myself in warm sunshine along monastic paths, brushing past lavender and rosemary, craning my neck as dozens of swifts shriek above me, swooping like miniature crossbows. Below, Lago Albano's water shines like polished steel under the Italian sun.

Our choir has paid scant regard to words painted on the refectory wall – *'Eat Slowly, Chew Well'* – but tonight, we're reluctant to leave the long glossy oak tables, even after the dishes have been cleared away. One of our tenors launches into *The Fields of Athenry*, and we accompany him with intuitive harmonies: *'Oh, baby, let the free birds fly ...'*

Rounding the final chorus, we swing straight into *The Auld Triangle* and I observe you leaving your chapel-bound sisters, all apparent reticence gone, and your smiling face alive with expectation as you approach us. You ask in a hard-to-locate Irish accent where we're all from – it's your ticket into our company. We offer you a litany of placenames – *Buncrana, Carrick-on-Shannon, Knockvicar, Boyle* – and our voices echo between the refectory's high ceiling and its wood-panelled walls.

You plant yourself opposite my wheelchair without looking at me. You're like an airport passenger scanning Arrivals for a familiar face. From where I'm sitting, I watch you curl your fingers over the back of a wooden dining chair, your clenched knuckles turning white within seconds.

'Anyone here from Tipperary?'

None of us are, but it doesn't stop us singing, *'It's a long way to go.'* You join in, your voice clear, unwavering, familiar lyrics pouring from you like sand through an hourglass. We finish the song, and during the lull, someone attempts the age-old Irish tradition of joining the heritage dots by asking where you live. Disinterested, your response is clipped and ambiguous, and I'm impressed you haven't lost the Irish habit of not giving away too much too soon.

'England. This long time. Serving my order. Retired now.'

Your gaze hovers in the warm air above our heads, and then you sing the opening bars of *Molly Malone*, and party animals that we are, we sing along with you. From my wheelchair, I watch your throat, your mouth, your eyes, and I feel an ache pulsing across

the table from you. It's like the Irishness of your soul is easing open with the oil of song, as you wheel your own wheelbarrow through the melody.

When there's another pause between ballads, you notice me and smile, and I lean forward to ask about your Irish origins. You straighten yourself and rattle your full name and Tipperary townland at me like a military roll call. Your grip on the chair remains firm, but now I can see kinship glistening in your eyes like flakes of gold in a prospector's pan, and I realise this is what tribal reconnection looks like. You're soaking up our company, absorbing every note and lyric, lest Heaven forbid, you become disconnected once more.

Gathered here in the refectory it's a proper *seisún* now with everyone singing and having the *craic*, but all I can think about are your white knuckles.