" Beneath A Stained Glass Sky"

A Journey

William W. Collins

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: Encounter

Walking down a sidewalk is when I saw her. I was going my way. Rougher part of town. I understood that – but never understood my feelings at core of my apprehension. Not of the neighborhood. But being around those that lived there. More, existed there.

And the squalor was not to be ignored. The trash, the piles. The discarded food, bottles. However.

I was polite. I was unnecessarily uncomfortable. Why. Huh. More to think about but need to be alert of my surroundings. Sure enough. People asking for money, food. Other stuff.

Most stayed put. A few approached. One girl, way too young to be there. What was her story, I thought in passing. She spoke to me. I continued to walk. She did not walk alongside me – she walked parallel to me. She had short dark hair which partly covered her eyes which she brushed away with a constant and practiced nervousness. She was talking to me in a very rapid and excited manner, my first inclination was that she was on something until she looked at my eyes, held the glance just long enough. No, she did not look like she was under the influence. But who was I to really know. I was listening. I was not listening. Two doves descended, one at a time from the trees behind her - and yet she did not react. The birds broke me from this pattern of inattention. I started listening. I gave her my focus.

She spoke so quickly I had a hard time following her, figuring out what she wanted. She brushed her hair back with the back of her other hand this time. She had a bent cigarette between two fingers, and a syringe with a needle in the other. As I continued to walk, and every time she brushed her hair back with that hand, my stomach knotted as she came inches or less away from that needle. But as often as she brushed that short mop back, I realized that this mannerism was a constant. There was no recent scratch or mark near where that needle passed. I said nothing. About the needle at least.

I continued to walk, though a bit slower. I started listening to her. She would not stop talking. And she wasn’t really asking for anything. Yet, I thought.

And then she did. Not for money, she asked me in that quick voice if I had something (I could not understand) and then something about “an edible or something.” I stopped and faced her. She stopped and then looked up at me. She looked directly into my eyes, as if to determine if I was safe I figured. But it was something more. Like she was trying to assess my energy or soul or something. I held her gaze.

“You seem cool. Are you light?” she finally said, still looking into my eyes.

I answered back to those eyes, the sunlight at that angle of midmorning illuminated them. There was intelligence there. Depth. Those eyes of green also held pain. Way back there in the recesses. Not in the soul, but somewhere back there. Before I could answer she asked again.

“You’re light, right?” she said it in a manner as if she wanted me to agree. I did not.

“Hardly. And if I appear that way it’s probably only cuz I’m standing in it.”

“You mean like God, or something.”

“Not really.”

“Cuz I can tell things about people.”

“I’m sure you can,” I replied, being just agreeable.

“Yes. I can. Your eyes are different.”

“So are yours. And I meant it.” I added without thinking, “Why are you here?”

Now she looked away. But then again right back. “You mean here. Hanging with my homies?” Then a nervous laugh. “They know me. They don’t judge. They’re my people.”

“Hmm.”

“You look uncomfortable here.” She laughed.

“No. Well. I was.” She was right, but wrong. The interaction had distracted me. Stopped there, I no longer was, really. The very thing I was uncomfortable about, consciously or otherwise, had greeted me. Discomfort for a moment had vanished. Yet now I was again conscious of my surroundings. She looked away again. I saw both our reflections in the window behind. Hers waiflike, more the form of a child seemingly, mine towering behind her. Glancing back to her eyes, the eyes of a young woman who had perhaps seen too much for her years.

“Wow. I don’t usually wander this far down the block,” she said. “By the way, my name is Lydia but they call me Itty. I know I know,” she saved me from asking. “Ittly Bitty. It’s a name they just call me.” She looked back at my eyes. “Yeah, you have light. I’m good at seeing that. I am. And I can see darkness too. But mostly light.”

I evaded the dialogue. “Are you light?”

“Yes,” Lydia said. “Well. Maybe not. I mean look at me.”

She was barefoot. Thin, but not short. A bit lanky, boyish figure. Dirty feet. Somewhat unkempt hands but surprisingly short nails. I figured she was in her early to mid-20s. Beyond those deep eyes that hinted at a deep soul, street life seemed to have yet aged her. I wondered if her parents even knew where she was. Did she even have parents?

“No. Thinking of her eyes again, “You have a light in your eyes.” It was a much-needed compliment, it seemed. Yet she did not smile. Just all look back at my own, “You’re different.”

“We all are a bit.”

She held me under the microscope with those eyes. Still catching the sunlight. “Not really.” And behind those two words I understood saw in the same depth more of that deep pain. I stopped myself from thinking. I did not want to even imagine. I changed the subject. It was Sunday. I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Do you want to go to church next week?”

“With you?”

“No. Not really with me. Just there.”

“Where there? Will God be there?”

I thought she was joking a bit. When she continued her gaze, I realized she was not.

“Well. Yes. He will be there.” As I said the words I realized, going to church though often sporadically, I believed He was. But had myself not thought of it in that context in a while. But she had. A slight remorse and shame, though brief, washed over me. I doubled down.

“Yes. He definitely will be there.”

“Cool. Cuz He’s hard to find around here. I mean I’ve looked. Not real hard. But I have. But you have a bit of it. Light. So, I do see signs some of the time. I look for signs, you know. They’re easier to find. Harder to read.”

“Do you read?” I felt stupid as soon as I asked. Stupider as she looked at me a “are you just stupid look.” She took pity on my ignorance and said, “Of course I can.” She was looking at my eyes again.

“So tell me about the church thing. I mean look at me. I couldn’t show up like this. Hah.”

I lied. “You could show up anyway you want.”

“Hah,” she said again. “You’re a terrible liar.”

And I was. So, truthfully, I answered. “You should be able to show up however you want. Hypothetically. But not.”

“And I left my Sunday dresses at home.” She laughed a small laugh for the first time. Like her frame. It was small and guarded.

“Do you believe in Karma?”

“Not sure. I guess. Or that you reap what you sow. Like that.”

“Yeah. I believe I did something right. You know. Without knowing it. And that’s what I think. Must have, since this morning showed me some light.” And, she laughed briefly again and continued that doe-eyed, soul-piercing gaze. “Lots of peeps ask me to do things. But you’re the first one who asked me to go to church. That’s a first, boy. Hah. That’s a real first.” She paused. “Why’d you ask me? Why me?”

Half-joking, I said, “Because I saw a light in your eyes.”

“Ah, you’re making fun of me.”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm...”

“Is that all you saw? A light? It must have been a pretty dim dull bulb.”

“Actually, it was small. But distinct and bright.”

“So, you can see light, too. And you’re not even crazy. I mean, like some people around here. And I’m from around here. Ha.” She laughed her small nervous laugh.

She suddenly said, “So, give me your arm,” and in with the other hand she dropped the cigarette, the hypo, and then reached in her pocket. “I use this pen to write. Yes, hah, I can write too. Biting, accurate.” She wrote her number in large, no huge digits across the complete underside of my left arm. She noticed her fingers and added, “No, you won’t catch anything.” She looked up from my arm and looked at me again with those eyes. Now bearing a small mischievousness.

“You asked, so yes. You have a church date.”

“It’s really not a...”

“Yeah, yeah. See you next Sunday. Unless I see you when I see you. You know, before that. Beforehand.”

“Gotcha,” I muttered.

“Guess I should know your name.”

“William.”

“Well, William. Sunday then.”

“Yes, Lydia,” which I read off my arm.

“I’ll be here next week. 9ish?”

“Actually half past. I’ll be walking the same way. Then about 10 or so minutes that way,” I pointed vaguely off in the general distance.

“I see you then.”

“Will you?”

“Yes, William. I might be crazy but I will not be late for church. You will not have a problem getting me to the church on time...”

She shook my hand somewhat firmly and with slight exaggeration. She did not smile. Yet her eyes did.

“Until then.”

“Until then.”

As I walked away, and for several days afterward I pondered that meeting. And if I would ever see her again. It was a haunting few days. No explanation as to why. Just was. As Sunday approached I both looked forward to and feared that meeting. No change was expected in my life up to that point. It was not welcome. That was not part of the plan. Then wind gusted as I left that part of the neighborhood. I spent the rest of the walk blinking and trying to lose a piece of grit that was blown up from the street and lodged in my left eye.

CHAPTER 2: The Following Sunday

The week went by both slowly and quickly. With anticipation and some degree of dread.

William ventured outside. Brisk. Nice, he thought. The weather is changing. And the crisp air carried with it the scent of fallen leaves, a mix of earthiness and the faint sweetness of that old decay that both buries and hits at future resurrection - rebirth. The autumn morning sun cast long shadows and as it did, distinguished it sullenly from the sun and glare of the heat of summer. Under the autumn sky the world felt both new and ancient.

Back inside and taking care to rid his darkened leather boots from the first of the oak trees onslaught of autumn leaves, he stepped upon the marble floored entry. It shined. He liked this apartment from the moment he first saw it. It was his apartment, with its cozy corners and well-worn dark leather furniture, which was both a sanctuary and a place of quiet solitude. The forest green cup was a splash of color against the dark wood of the table, a reminder of his morning rituals. It was carefully accented as well. Gilt-Framed Monet, Degas and the occasional Van Gough graced his walls in the ant-room to the left. His study to the right with its spacious alcove that faced the large bay window facing the street. He walked into this room, and always took in the street before him. The lawn, the oaks. The golden floor of golden, red and green leaves that carpeted the lawn after their spiraling decent to the verdant green rest below. Solace. And then the reality of meeting Lydia interrupted.

“What was I thinking” superimposed with both the joy of newness. He rested his hands on the desk before him, still staring out of the large squares of the same window. And fear of change. His mind vacillated. It was the time of year where the weather disagreed with late heat and argued for and was torn between the calm of summer and a beckoning early chill. There was that overwhelming feel of fall, and as he watched, the leaves that continued to spiral down from their heights agreed.

As he dressed he wondered at her attire. What? He pictured her as she was. And surprised himself in realizing that he would really not care what she wore. But then decided that was not entirely truthful. He pictured her the dress that she alluded to – and wondered if she had ever had such of life. Obviously so, no one is born in that situation – they somehow through a series of mismanaged decisions, find themselves there. He marveled at each person’s lot in life and journey. How different. Yet how much the same. We all often wander and are lost, different stages and different plays, but really more commonality than difference. He thought of the distant light in her eyes. He wondered how she would look. Whether she had overcome her madness to meet him, walk with him again. Talk.

He finished his coffee, and set the forest green cup back upon the small, quaint table. He loved its dark walnut legs and its scrolled feet, its marble surface. It was a good companion. No, the best of companions. Whether for his solitary comings and goings each day. As he shook hands with the doors rich brass hand and it greeted him to take the load off his leather satchel or his burdens, he felt a certain solidarity and a consistency it offered to offset the loneliness of his journeys to and from town. So much more the case when he visited his countryside estate. A place that he purposely told not a living soul about. This was his holy of holies – where no matter what life threw at him, he could find sanctuary and retreat.

He did not bring his Bible. The door thumped behind him as it closed, its black surface with its bright-brass knocker clacked its goodbye. He glanced behind, which was unusual for him, taking a small pleasure in the door's contrast against the rich red brick façade of the 4-story building.

It was early, giving him time enough for both walking and navigating through the unfamiliar path to the neighborhood where he had met Lydia. It is amazing, that one wrong turn or one choice of a different path can lead to the unexpected. And toward perhaps a means for either ruin or happiness. But the road less traveled literally had led him to where he now went with direction – with no purpose other than to be held accountable to what he had put into motion. Decisive felt good. And the cool brace of the crisp early autumn air confirmed his resolve.

The streets were quieter than usual, the typical bustle subdued by the early hour. As he approached their meeting spot, he glanced around, this looked the spot. Yes, definitely the place he thought as he continued looking for the figure of the young woman with short dark hair and piercing green eyes.

Now Lydia, true to her word, was there, standing under a streetlamp that still flickered despite the daylight. She was wearing the same or similar clothes as the previous encounter but had made an effort to appear much cleaner – bathed and bright. Her hair was brushed back a bit, and the nervous energy she had previously exuded seemed more contained.

She spotted William and waved, a small, tentative smile momentarily appearing on her face. He adjusted his collar for the third time that morning, a nervous habit.

"Morning, William," she said as he approached.

"Good morning, Miss Lydia. Ready for church I see?" William asked, trying to match her brief and fleeting smile.

"Well yes," she replied, the hint of apprehension in her voice masked by bravado. "Did you bring him as well?" She pointed to something imaginary to his left.

He looked where she pointed. Momentarily confused, but then, sheepishly, boy-like, "Oh, yes, Him. Yes. He’s walking with us. I assume He needs no introduction and is more than welcome? Playing back to the banter. "And of course, He will be there to greet us as well."

Lydia lowered her head slightly, involuntarily forcing the dark bangs back over her face. William, noticing her more newly assumed shyness, struggled to pay her a compliment regarding her appearance. He noticed the same attire. Though less unkempt. So, he opted to move his eyes to hers. She raised her head and peered up to his. And the very instant he saw those green-blue eyes, he thought and reminisced of the sea.

"Foolishness," he muttered, thinking his reply silly, awkward.

"Excuse me?" she said, confused.

"Ah, nothing. We need to be on our way or they will have us cleaning the pews after the service."

"Really?"

"No."

"Oh. Humor. I see." In an assumed air, she said, "Then let’s be off, shall we?"

William looked at her and muttered again, "Fascinating."

"What is?" Oh, fascinating. Yes. Me going to church. I must agree."

"Yes. I mean No. Something else. Yes, shall we go?". He silently cursed and tried to tame his nervousness while questioning why he was so.

So, after timid cordialities, the two walked in silence for a several minutes, the sounds of the city then gradually giving way to the quieter streets leading to the church.

William noticed Lydia's eyes darting around, taking in her surroundings with a mix of curiosity and wariness. She continued in silence, as did he – and their interaction differed drastically from their first meeting.

Her eyes looked to the windows, and fixated briefly on a lace shawl placed elegantly over a black blouse posed prominently in the window. She did not stop to look at it, but William followed her glance and saw her eyes had lit momentarily on the figure. She was wearing black. He spoke.

"Are you cold. Yes you must be with autumn approaching. Just a second." He turned and approached the shop door, there was a key left in the door. Thinking someone mistakenly left it in the lock, he removed it and entered. At first it appeared that no one was there.

After entering the shop with the intention of securing the blouse he realized spontaneity had backfired. Not only would he have to have the shopkeeper remove the white lace shawl from the mannequin, but there was Lydia directly outside. Then, "Oh my God. She’ll think I am ashamed of how she looks." The best of plans, he thought. Damned fool! He spoke some other impossible atrocities to himself. And, now, how to get out of a woman’s boutique with a legitimate excuse. What was to be done. Nothing, something. No nothing! Oh Godding and damning himself, and on the way to church. He decided.

Outside, he heard the door behind him clang shut along with the ringing bells on the door announcing his grand and illustrious exit.

"Lydia?"

"Yes, William."

He loved the way she spoke his name. But Ah. Focus focus.

"Can I be honest?"

"Yes."

"I believe I saw you look at that shawl."

Lydia just looked at him, puzzled. Her expressive eyes begging him to continue.

"Well."

"Yes?"

"You have a black sweater on," he felt his face flush.

She looked down at her sweater, and held out her arms, her small thumbs protruding through the finger holes at the end of its sleeves.

"Yes. Is it appropriate for your church?"

God, how much worse would he make this! "Why yes, of course. The window there. Where you looked. It seems. Well. I mean…"

She saved him. "Ah, you saw me glance at the lace shawl. Very pretty. You are quite the observant one."

"Well, I guess, well. I was thinking. Well that... I thought. Umm."

"William, just say it. Whatever it is."

"Well, you looked cold. Autumn approaching and all. And I thought…"

She completed his sentence. "That you might get it for me?"

His shoulders relaxed. "Why, yes."

"Thoughtful. I accept. But just this once. It will be my turn next."

Surprised. He just stood there in silence.

"Lydia said, Church, William."

"Ah yes. Be right back." And he was in and out as fast as possible. From the inside of the store, the store owner, watching the awkward dialogue and the unique pair, smiled as he lifted the shawl over her head and draped it across her narrow shoulder. She felt its warmth and the warmth of the moment. She looked left and right at the lace on her shoulders.

She looked up at him and he saw that light again. He took a short inward breath as she said,

"Perfect. William, it's perfect. Thank you."

"My privilege," he responded. "You looked cold."

"You said that already."

"I’ll shut up then."

And they walked away from the storefront and onward toward the small church which was just past the park with the tall old oaks, and just across the street from the old cemetery with the scrolled iron gates.

William broke the silence just as they climbed the first of 3 tiers of steps. "Have you been to a church before?" William asked, breaking the silence.

"Yes and no," Lydia replied. "Yes. I mean, I’ve seen many, walked by them, but even though I ventured in to one or two in my braver moments, I never felt like I belonged inside. You know? And it did not help to see the stares when I actually entered in. I felt between the solemn nature of the place and onlooker stares that demons might fly out of me at any moment."

"I understand," William said. "But truly, everyone is welcome. Truly. Even I am – God help me."

Lydia nodded but didn't respond. She couldn’t fathom him doing much wrong – so prim and proper – but she thought, everyone has a story. And through experience, her own personal experience, many a demon can live behind the holiest and most innocent of masks.

She seemed lost in thought, her pace slowing as they neared the church.

As they entered, she reached out and touched his arm. He paused.

"William, you don’t have to worry about me. I mean the shawl. I did not think that you thought me unacceptable. I mean, I know I’m not exactly. But I could tell that you were caring about me. Not if I was acceptable. You know, church and all. Remember, I saw light in you. I saw that in your eyes when you came out of the shop, well, befuddled and such. I’m OK. OK?"

The transparency and honesty of this girl, he thought in brief reverie. He felt an honor unearned. And looking into her eyes just below those dark bangs. He just stared.

"William?"

"Yes?"

"Church?"

"Yes. Why yes." And they entered with the only sound being their footsteps on the marble floors and the small echo they made among those hallowed vestibule walls and brilliant stained glass windows.

Noticing the noise from both their shoes, he realized that he had spent the entirety of the time mainly focused on her eyes, and had not really looked closely to all she was wearing – including the elegant soft suede heeled shoes she was wearing. She caught him looking. And as he raised his eyes they met hers. Her eyes smiled.

"Pretty."

He nodded and muttered yes. He knew she meant her shoes. His nod though, recognized her beauty. Inward as well as outward. Such an unexpected surprise. And as they entered the main of the church he held out his arm, and hers naturally slipped in. And there they were.

CHAPTER 3: Church

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CHAPTER 4: COFFEE SHOP

The tall church doors were open and the crowd spilled out and poured down the steps and among the rose and herb garden below. They stood still for a second as William adjusted her shawl.

"Shall I walk you home?"

"William? Not quite yet if you don’t mind. Can we walk some more?"

"Of course."

Lydia hesitated, then shrugged. "In case you’re wondering. There is really not much to tell about me other than that I grew up around here. Life's been tough. I’ve made a series of bad choices. I’m still trying to figure things out. And just when I think I have, I realize I still don’t have a clue."

"Aren’t we all like that? We all have stories. Our ups and our downs," William said gently. "And it's never too late to write a new chapter."

Lydia looked at him, her eyes searching his face for sincerity. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"I do," William said. "I've seen people turn their lives around. I’ve turned my life around. It takes time, but it’s possible. It’s really not an event, though there are those. But more of a constant process of change, punctuated with moments of joy, and of sorrow."

"This part of the city is so much nicer. I would like to get used to this."

Their walk took them past a small coffee shop. Her senses brightened at the aroma of coffee. Good coffee. And the faint smell of chocolate. And of cinnamon. William watched her tilt her head back and inhale. Her bangs framed her face as she did so. And he was able to again and without witness, look at her. Her eyes opened up and her face formed a small smile.

"I feel safe with you."

"Coffee?"

"Yes. And I’ll treat for chocolate," Lydia replied.

William insisted no, but lost the short argument.

A Glimmer of Hope

As they sat with their coffees, Lydia seemed more at ease. She even smiled a few more times, real smiles that started with her mouth and then reached her eyes. William felt a sense of hope for her. And also, something stirred within him as well.

"Thank you, William," Lydia said. "For inviting me. For listening." She looked down at her hands and then at him directly. "For creating this."

William was at a loss for words. He merely reached out and placed his hand over hers, which she had circled around the cup of coffee and laid out palms down before her. He then kindly held those three fingers of the same hand that he had at church. She placed her other hand over his and pressed down.

"I haven’t felt this good for a long time, William."

"Glad to be of assistance," he replied with a smirk. Not of arrogance, or wryness. More of slight embarrassment.

Lydia looked down at their hands. "I really don’t want to leave yet."

"Then let’s not. Agreed?" And Lydia did not protest.

5 CHAPTER NAME

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