

Friday

Isolde falters after the first six bars.

'I haven't practised,' she says at once. 'I have got an excuse, though. Do you want to hear it?'

The saxophone teacher looks at her and sips her black-leaf tea. Excuses are almost her favourite part.

Isolde takes a moment to smooth her kilt and prepare. She draws a breath.

'I was watching TV last night,' she says, 'and Dad comes in with his face all serious and his fingers sort of picking at his tie like it's strangling him, and eventually he just takes it off and lays it to one side—'

She unhooks her saxophone from her neckstrap and places it upon a chair, miming loosening the neckstrap as if it has been very tight.

'—and says sit down, even though I'm

"Your sister has been abused by one of the teachers at school.' She darts a look at the saxophone teacher now, quickly, and then looks away. 'And then he says "sexually", just to clarify, in case I thought the teacher had yelled at her at a traffic light or something."

already sitting down, and then rubs his hands together really hard.'

She rubs her hands together really hard.

'He says, your mother thinks that I shouldn't tell you this just yet, but your sister has been abused by one of the teachers at school.' She darts a look at the saxophone teacher now, quickly, and then looks away. 'And then he says "sexually", just to clarify, in case I thought the teacher had yelled at her at a traffic light or something.'

The overhead lights have dimmed and she is lit only by a pale flicking blue, a frosty sparkle like the on-off glow of a TV screen. The saxophone teacher is thrust into shadow so half her face is iron grey and the other half is pale and glinting.

'So he starts talking in this weird tight little voice about this Mr Saladin or whatever, and how he teaches senior jazz band and orchestra and senior jazz ensemble, all on Wednesday morning one after the other. I won't have him till sixth form, and that's if I even want to take jazz band, because it clashes with netball so I'll have to make a choice.

'Dad's looking at me with this scared expression like I'm going to do something insane or really emotional and he won't know how to deal with it. So I go, How do you know? And he goes—'

She crouches down beside the chair, speaking earnestly and spreading her hands wide—

'Honey, from what I understand of it, he started off real slow, just resting his hand really lightly on her shoulder sometimes, like that.'

Isolde reaches out and touches her fingertips to the upper end of the saxophone, which is

lying on its side upon the chair. As her fingers touch the instrument a steady pulse begins, like a heartbeat. The teacher is sitting very still.

'And then sometimes when no one was watching he would lean close and breathe into her hair—'

She puts her cheek against the instrument and breathes down its length—

'—like that, really tentative and shy, because he doesn't know if she wants it yet and he doesn't want to get done. But she's friendly because she kind of likes him and she thinks she has a crush on him, and soon his hand is going down, down—'

Her hand snakes down the saxophone and trails around the edge of the bell—

'—down, and she sort of starts to respond, and she smiles at him in lessons sometimes and it makes his heart race, and when they're alone, in the music cupboard or after school

or when they go places in his car, which they do sometimes, when they're alone he calls her my gypsy girl—he says it over and over, my gypsy girl, he says—and she wishes she had something to say back, something she could whisper into his hair, something really special, something nobody's ever said before.'

The backing music ceases. Isolde looks at her teacher and says, 'She can't think of anything.'

The lights come up again, as normal. Isolde scowls and flops down on to an armchair. 'But anyway,' she says angrily, 'she's run out of time, it's too late, because her friends have started to notice the way she is sometimes, the way she puts her chin down and to the side like she's flirting, and that's how it all starts to come undone, crashing down on itself like a castle of cards.'

'I see why you haven't had time to practise,' says the saxophone teacher.

'Even this morning,' Isolde says, 'I went to play some scales or whatever before school, but when I started playing she was all like, Can't you at least be sensitive? and ran out of the room with this fake sob noise which I knew was fake because if she was really crying she wouldn't have run off, she would have wanted me to see.' Isolde digs the heel of her kilt pin into her knee. 'They're treating her like a fucking artefact.'

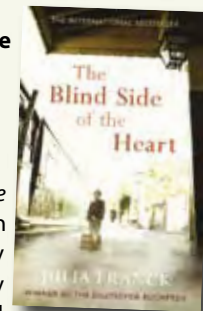
End of book extract

Copyright © Eleanor Catton 2009, extracted from *The Rehearsal* published by Granta Books.

New Releases

The Blind Side of the Heart

Julia Franck
Harvill Secker



The *Blind Side of the Heart* begins in 1945 with a boy abandoned at a railway station in provincial

Germany. Helene is there with her son, and after surviving the horrors of war; she leaves him on the station platform never to return. Years earlier, Helene and her sister Martha are confronted with the First World War and the struggles it brings with their father heading off to the Eastern Front.

Helene's life is a series of painful struggles, which started as a child by not receiving the affection she yearned for from her mother, and then moving into adulthood, she falls in love twice, but both relationships end in tragedy. She feels she cannot provide the love needed for her young son, and so she reaches a shocking conclusion.

The Blind Side of the Heart is nothing short of a masterpiece. The novel is epic in its proportions and tells the story of two World Wars and the consequences, loneliness and despair that result from a series of hardships.

Cherie Federico

On Black Sisters' Street

Chika Unigwe
Jonathan Cape



Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce are prostitutes, illegally trafficked into Antwerp to profit the unctuous Dele. The action pivots around the house on Zwarterzusterstraat, where the four young women share their lives under the watchful eyes of their Madam and her baleful aide Segun.

As illegal workers in Belgium, the women concealed their true names and pasts even from each other. It takes the murder of the most enigmatic of the group, Sisi, to shock Ama, Efe and Joyce into revealing their true selves. The women's narratives reveal histories torn apart by war, sexual abuse and family breakdown. Poverty made the women vulnerable to the solicitous attentions of Dele, and the desperate desire to escape their circumstances for the mirage of an affluent new life in the West.

At times heartbreaking and disturbingly graphic, *On Black Sisters' Street* is ultimately a story of female strength and resilience. With the narrative interspersed with African turn of phrase, the book draws on a rich oral story telling tradition to illuminate the West from an under-represented perspective.

Samantha Cracknell