

# Nicola Jones

## Hermione

*'If you can behold it,  
I'll make the statue move indeed; descend,  
And take you by the hand.'*

Paulina, *The Winter's Tale*

A small child, a girl, blue dungarees, yellow t-shirt, gallops across the grass.  
And stops dead at the sight of me.

Some children, of course, will rush straight over. Some will touch. Poke. Pinch, even. Run their sticky fingers down the folds of my gown. Inspect my feet to see if they are flesh or stone. 'Is she a queen?' they ask when they see my crown of flowers. 'A princess? A fairy?' These will happily pose for a picture; readily accept my hand. Some even tell me that I'm pretty.

Others are wary. Disturbed by the idea of me. Unsure what I am. Real or unreal, or something in-between. These hang back and, if encouraged by eager mums and dads to drop a coin into the basket, recoil in shock as I spring to life, quick to retreat behind parental legs. *Blue Dungarees* is one of these. She stares, mouth open, eyes wide, not trusting to her senses.

I scan the area and wonder where her parents are. Not that I think there is any danger. Not today. A bright sunny technicolour day. The season almost over but the gardens still full of laughter, chatter. People enjoying ice-creams. Sharing chips. Crocodiles of tourists pursuing yellow-coated guides. Every language, every nation. All here because of a man.

As am I, I suppose.

A young couple wearing shorts and t-shirts walk into view. The husband has a rucksack over one shoulder. The woman squints in the sun. She holds out a hand and *Blue Dungarees* rushes to grasp it. The constancy, reliability, of flesh and blood. Of a mother's love. Order is restored. The girl quickly forgets me. They turn and head towards the river.

A tour group approaches. Italian, possibly. Yes, definitely Italian. Six women. Six men. The males crowd around me for a selfie, and I wonder

if they've noticed the basket at my feet. A few coins, plus a couple of five-pound notes I've added to get things rolling. Well, you live in hope. One of the men, tall, tanned, salt and pepper hair, in a sweater even though it's a warm day, raises his phone to take the photo as the others shout something in unison. A word I cannot catch. And I wonder whether Italians say *cheese*, and what word that would be. *Formaggio*? Their wives, at least, I assume they are their wives, their mistresses, maybe, urgently call to them, demanding they return and listen to their guide who is speaking rapidly and waving his arms in the direction of the theatre. The men reluctantly rejoin them, leaving nothing behind, not a euro, not even a cent. I watch as the group moves on, no time to dawdle, a whistlestop visit. And I wonder where their travels will take them next. Warwick. Oxford. London. A well-worn flight path like that of the swallows which still circle high above our heads on this late summer's day. And soon, like the tourists, they will also be gone. I try to remember the name of the place where they head each winter. Somewhere in Africa. The swallows, I mean, not the Italians. I give up and follow the tour group until they disappear. Never to be seen again.

Some people you do see again. Two old men shake hands and part each day at the fountain. In my mind, they meet each morning for a coffee and a walk. I picture them crossing the river, walking as far as the footbridge and returning via the churchyard and gardens. Widowers, I decide. An arrangement born from sadness that has blossomed into something else. Companionship. Friendship. Love, even. They take no notice of me. I am simply another fixture on their daily route. Like the cast-iron lamp posts. Or the swans.

Or there's the girl in a hurry, rushing towards the café by the canal basin, her dark hair tied back in a scrunchie. Or the elderly lady, spry but delicate as a bird, who always offers a cheery 'good morning' as she pushes her husband in his wheelchair. Or the man killing time before the start of his shift. Thinning hair. Kind face. A red lanyard around his neck. I must have seen him ten, eleven, twelve, times now. Though I guess, he may also be here on other days. Hidden by throngs of tourists, their minds distracted by facts and photo opportunities. Or maybe he chooses a different bench to wait on. One that is out of my line of sight.

'It's a beautiful day in the neighbourhood,' sings a female voice. American. Or Canadian. I can never tell the difference. She comes into view. Early 20s, I'd say. Fresh faced. Everything still in front of her. Beautiful, as all young people are. She's wearing jeans and a blue college sweatshirt. *Columbia*. American, then. There are five of them. Mother, father, and, I'm guessing, three siblings - the singing girl, a younger sister, and a kid brother who hangs back, kicking his heels, looking as if he'd rather be anywhere else. The husband, fifties, athletic, inspects a tourist map: 'We follow the river to the church.'

The wife looks around, suddenly clocks me, and takes a step back. 'Well, that just about gives me the creeps.'

The singing girl inspects the sign at my feet. 'Hermione.'

'What? From Harry Potter?' asks the boy, brightening a little. 'She doesn't look anything like her.'

'From Shakespeare,' says his sister, rolling her eyes. 'From *The Winter's Tale*.'

The boy shrugs, disappointed, and the family move off to be replaced by an elderly Japanese couple who take a photograph and drop a few coins into my basket.

I come to life, dipping low, extending my hand towards them, a gesture I've honed and practiced a million times. Mechanical, as if stone is breaking, shattering, yet graceful too. My dancer's training. I see passersby lift their phones to capture the moment. The Japanese lady nervously takes my gloved hand but quickly releases it. I bow to her and straighten again, returning to my pose.

'Odd way to earn a living,' I hear someone say.

'A doddle,' a woman replies.

People think it must be easy. Doing nothing at all. And, true, some days it can be that way. When you get into the zone. When you manage to live entirely inside your head. Start dreaming (although, of course, there are some dreams you don't want to relive. Some places, and some times, that are best forgotten). The key is to slow down your breathing, your heartbeat. Relax your muscles to prevent them shaking. Lower your eyes to stop them blinking. Ignore those who are waiting for a slip, a tremor, a

breath, to shatter the illusion. Clear your mind. Create a forcefield others cannot pierce. And, as for turning flesh to stone, well, that also takes time and effort. My thick white make-up. My off-white gown, the folds stiff with masonry paint. My wig. My beautiful crown of flowers.

'Is she real?'

'How does she keep so still?'

A middle-aged woman pushes a buggy along the footpath, forcing pedestrians to side-step onto the grass. And it's only as she pauses to reach inside, that I realise it contains not a baby but a tiny dog. She carefully lifts it out so that it can also enjoy the view. She chats away to it, but she is too far away for me to hear. Is she asking its opinion, its thoughts on the place? Small dogs seem to be everywhere. Is this what women of a *certain age* now do instead of buying cats. If that's the case, maybe I should join them. A rescue dog, though, not some delicate pure breed. And you won't catch me pushing it around or dressing it in ridiculous outfits.

A man's voice. Loud. From somewhere to my left. 'I thought it would be older, somehow. Though you can't beat the setting.' I guess he is talking about the theatre. Some people love it. Some don't. 'Can you go up that tower?' Yes, but only when there's no matinee. And when it's not closed for maintenance.

A toddler runs past me in the direction of the river followed by a harassed looking mum who is vaping furiously. The sickly smell of pink bubble gum fills my nostrils.

A woman pulls a trolley with a plastic crate of identical books. I read the title as she goes past. *Brooklyn*. A good choice.

Fragments of conversations float all around me:

'Well, I'm sorry, old pal, but you're going to have to change it...'

'I didn't get any sleep. I was awake 'til 4...'

'That's right, you catch a train from Edinburgh to London ...'

'It's not a city, it's a town...'

'Well, you might say that, but I've been caught out that way before...'

'One more day and we're off to Liverpool...'

'Apparently every dish is based on a play...'

'Screaming is definitely not going to get you ice-cream.'

A woman's voice, West Midlands accent, from somewhere behind me. 'Yes, they say it's on the increase, vi-.'

The word is cut off mid flow and I wonder what she is talking about. Violence? Viola playing?

It's sometimes tempting to try and make sense of these random snatches. To see a pattern emerging. To find some connection, however weak, between all the nonsense. Or pretend you're in a spy movie. Recording snippets of conversation, coded messages, to replay to your handler.

'The geese are flying low.'

'The pigeons roost at midnight.'

A dog starts yapping somewhere in the distance and I wonder if it's the same small dog, finally released from its carriage and allowed to return to its true nature and feel the grass beneath its feet, the paving stones beneath its paws. And maybe getting a dog isn't such a bad idea. I let my mind drift and start picturing peaceful walks along the Greenway, my imaginary canine companion at my side.

A man in his late 20s, blue t-shirt and jeans, suddenly steps in front of me and clicks his fingers directly in my face. I'm instantly back in the present. I can hear laughter, so I guess he's being egged on. I relax my eyes, determined not to blink. And it's not the worst thing that can happen. It's not only children who sometimes like to touch. Some men make sexual overtures. Foul remarks. Rather than five-pound notes, I've had mobile numbers on scraps of paper. And I wonder what they are expecting from the transaction and how they'd react if I called them: 'Oh, hi, it's me. The woman made from stone.' Which makes me think of the story of the sculptor who falls in love with his own creation. A perfect woman hewn from marble. Is that what these men are after? A silent, passive, fantasy. I shudder and remind myself that there must also be good people, good men, out there. Somewhere.

The man grows bored and moves away. I take a breath and try to slow down my pounding heart. I make myself gently breathe in and out. Breathe in and breathe out. Time to meditate and return to my walk where everything is calm and serene. Let the hubbub wash over me. Become

detached. Uninvolved. The way I choose it. The way I think I like it. But it isn't always easy. Other people's lives keep getting in the way.

A man in a red football strip storms past, raging, livid. 'I'm not angry,' he says, not bothering to turn and face whoever this is aimed at, 'I'm disappointed.'

A woman runs to catch him up, and I wonder what she's done wrong to make him so angry. Or so 'not' angry. Or, maybe, it's simply a case of what he *believes* she's done.

And this makes me think of my namesake. Wronged for doing nothing at all. Abused. Humiliated. Left for dead. And I remind myself that I've also travelled a long way to find this place of sanctuary.

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I've allowed myself to finish a little early to catch the last of the sun, be a tourist for an hour or so. I'm out of costume, the makeup wiped from my face, my alter-ego squished back into her holdall and returned to the boot of my car until her next outing.

Book in hand, I'm at one of my favourite places, on the theatre terrace overlooking the river. A few tables away, are the American family. Mom, Dad, three siblings. They don't recognise me, of course. No-one ever does. The adults are chatting, busy making plans, but the kids are all glued to their phones. Too much culture for one day, perhaps. Like a gallery visit where one masterpiece starts to meld into another, our brains overloaded by beauty. Or maybe they've simply had enough old stuff, so much history in one place, and need to reconnect with the 21<sup>st</sup> century, catch up with friends, report their lives on social media.

I see the woman get up and head towards my table. She holds out her phone. 'Hi there. Would you mind taking our picture?' I wait for them to arrange themselves and take a couple of photos before handing it back. She inspects my work. 'Lovely. Thanks so much. We've taken that many this trip. Hundreds and hundreds.' I always think it strange that there must also be hundreds of images of me on strangers' phones. Not the real me, of course. I doubt if there is a single one of those. Who would take it? I return to my seat, gather my things, and head down the steps towards the riverbank.

The squawk of angry gulls. A teenage girl is feeding the birds by the pleasure boats, and I stop to watch the swans as they swim over, the greedy gulls divebombing from above. Hopeful pigeons are already gathering on the bank, and the Canada geese, all swagger and attitude, are quick to barge in, determined not to miss out on the action.

As I continue along the curve of the footbridge, I think again of the two old men I see each morning. About how important it is to have friends. A skill I seem to have lost with age. And perhaps I should try and do something about that. I cross the Tramway bridge and walk towards the bandstand in search of another peaceful spot. There are still a few people around, enjoying a late walk, a ball game, having fun. People nod and smile, some even say 'hi', as they walk by. As usual, I try to avoid eye contact, not so much unwilling to engage, but out of practice. And ahead, grazing on the grass, I see my favourite flock of white geese, like something straight out of a picture book. And there's an empty bench.

As I sit, a girl and a boy, aged around seven or eight, though I'm no expert, run past me heading straight for the geese. I assume they are going to feed them, or simply inspect them, perhaps they've never seen any close-up before, but the boy has other ideas. He suddenly charges, foot raised and aims a karate kick at the nearest bird. The goose panics and runs. As the boy turns, I see a look on his face. One that I have seen before. Triumphant, spiteful, cruel. He runs and aims his foot at another. It flees towards the river and drops into the water.

I quickly look around for his parents but there's only one possibility that I can see. A woman, 30s, expensive highlights and haircut, in smart designer jeans and one of those tops that exposes your bare shoulders. She stands a little distance from my bench, a mobile phone pressed to her ear. From her body language, it's clear that she's agitated. She starts to pace around, running her free hand through her hair. I look to see the boy charge once more. Why hasn't she noticed what he's up to. Why doesn't she do something? The boy runs down the remaining geese which scatter in all directions across the grass. He raises his foot again, aiming another kick. I jump up. 'Stop that!' The little girl, watching her brother from the sidelines, looks alarmed and runs towards the woman. The boy takes no

notice, choosing instead to pursue the startled geese as they run for safety. I quickly head towards him. 'Stop that,' I shout again. 'Stop that right now!' I feel a tug on my arm and spin around to see the woman, her face contorted by anger. 'What the hell do you think you're doing? Leave my children alone.' The boy, bored with tormenting geese, comes across to watch. A new entertainment. His mother, the phone still in her hand, starts to jab it in my face. 'I've read about people like you. I'll ring the police. I'll have you arrested.'

I could have avoided this, of course. Looked the other way. Made it someone else's problem. But I look over at the geese who are still alarmed and fearful. The woman, spoiling for a fight, watches me expectantly, waiting for a reaction. And I feel the panic starting to rise inside me. Like the old days. Blood pumps in my ears and my breathing becomes shallow and fast. I take some deep breaths to calm myself. 'He was frightening the geese,' I manage to spit out. 'Chasing them. Trying to kick them. Trying to hurt them.' 'And what the hell has that got to do with you?' she asks. 'And it's only your word against mine.' She holds up her phone again. 'And I mean it. I'll ring the police. I will. I'll report you.'

'You're the one who should be reported,' I hear someone say. 'For allowing your son to behave like that.' I turn to see a man approaching. Thinning hair. Kind face. A red lanyard around his neck.

The woman bristles. 'Are you with her? Well, you can keep your bloody nose out of it as well.'

The man shakes his head in disbelief before gently touching my arm. 'Come away,' he says. 'It won't do any good. There's no telling her. She won't listen.'

I nod and head back towards my bench as he waits for me to collect my things. And we walk, side-by-side, along the footpath, the woman still shouting at our retreating backs.

I risk a glance over my shoulder and see that the geese have all gathered at the river's edge. They lower their heads and slide into the water one by one.

The season's officially over. The swallows have gone. The crowds have thinned. Clouds gather overhead and the remaining tourists wrap themselves in fleeces and raincoats. I'm in my usual spot and feeling happy that I've seen all of my usual suspects. The two old men still meet for their walk; the girl with the scrunchie is still late for work; the elderly lady pushes her husband, now cocooned in blankets, through the gardens on their daily excursion.

And there, on his usual bench, is a man. Thinning hair. Kind face. A red lanyard around his neck. He watches as I strike my pose and then smiles and raises a hand in greeting. Butterflies dance in my stomach. For I have discovered that, with time, it is possible for stone to return to flesh. For broken hearts to mend. I lift my hand to my mouth and blow him a slow but extravagant kiss.