

# TLC Showcase

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JANE LIFFEN

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## Introduction to *The Slipper Chapel*

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**T**he *Slipper Chapel* is a literary novel about Marian, a modern-day mystic. When her visionary gift is ignited as a child it is met with her mother's anger. The girl hides her abilities but in adulthood they begin to re-emerge. Breaking free from her mother's control will restore Marian's gift and in doing so she will discover the secret that has kept them both enchained.

The novel has two narrative strands. One follows Marian as an adult in 1998, after her mother has thrown her out of the family home believing her to be pregnant. Marian's point of view as a child is explored in the second strand that threads through the novel. Set in the 1970s, the young girl negotiates the complexities of family relationships and struggles with responsibilities unique to her mystical sensibility.

Adult Marian cleans residents' rooms in a care home. She goes over each one twice to be sure, but it doesn't stop her worrying that she's left something undone. Even the pregnancy test came back positive. If only she could remember what happened the night of Dad's funeral.

Marian hasn't attended services for years, but Mother falls ill and she agrees to take on her caretaking duties in the church. A homeless man, John, sleeps on the steps. When he is attacked, she offers him shelter in the cell where an anchoress had visions. As she cares for him, Marian's gift begins to return.

Mother was poorly and couldn't go to the school Nativity. Afterwards, young Marian saw a cloud around Mother with a baby inside. She thought it might be Jesus come to heal her, but Mother couldn't see him. She grew cross and shouted at Marian and the baby disappeared.

Young Marian received a red rosary from Auntie Pat for her First Communion. Mother cut up her wedding dress to make Marian's gown. The girl fainted and spilled communion wine down the front of it. Mother saw the stain and ripped the rosary beads from Marian's neck. A lady appeared in Marian's bedroom mirror and comforted the child. When glamorous Pat turned up that summer bestowing affection, the reunion between sisters was short-lived and Marian can't recall why.

A case of mistaken identity and a violent incident in the pub leads adult Marian to uncover family secrets. At breaking point she embarks on her own dark pilgrimage to find out the truth and finally rediscover her gift.

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I pushed *The Slipper Chapel* as far as I could before submitting to TLC for a manuscript assessment in 2015 and was delighted when TLC reader Anna South recommended it for consideration as a quality manuscript, subject to amendments. Anna suggested stylistic changes to the opening that helped improve it and Aki Schilz provided insight with regards to restructuring the beginning of the novel to aid clarity and flow. It has been so useful to have input from industry professionals and the report was invaluable in terms of identifying strengths and weaknesses. TLC is currently submitting *The Slipper Chapel* to literary agents and I am grateful to Rebecca and Aki for their efforts.

## The Slipper Chapel, by Jane Liffen

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In the allotment shed, Dad tries to mend my red rosary.

"At least there is no chance of anyone walking in unannounced," he says.

It takes a lot of patience, a whole morning's worth, but he is determined and when he eventually fixes it he tells me that he'll give it back later before we get home.

"Keep it in its box in your bedside cupboard in future," he says. "Out of harm's way," he mumbles at the end. Dad lets me go with him most Saturday afternoons when Mother is arranging the flowers in church.

Dad grows flowers of his own in a strip of meadow at the end of the allotment by the river. Sometimes it's so quiet you only hear flowing water and bees busying themselves in the buds. The flowers have animal names: dog rose and foxglove and harebell. We sit in the meadow to eat our dinner. There's an apple tree in the middle with blossoms on it. Every week Dad inspects it. Last Saturday he said that it might fruit soon. I checked for apples today. I thought we could have one each after our sandwiches but there aren't any yet. I hope they will grow soon.

Dad let me have a patch of ground. I planted catnip in it just in case Nanny's cat, Jim, comes to visit. He never has. Animals are not allowed on the allotment but if they do make an appearance they have to behave themselves and not use it as a toilet or flatten the vegetables.

I carry the silver watering can down to the communal tap. When I drop it on the gravel it rumbles like an empty stomach. I imagine it's a camel at an oasis about to drink. I lean my weight on top of the tap and a burst of water gushes into the can. Inside, it looks foamy to begin with, as if I've captured the ocean. But when I take my weight away the water stops bubbling and the surface wobbles, a reflection in a hall of mirrors. Then it's still as a lake reflecting the night sky.

I started wetting the bed after Christmas. Peter had just gone back to university when it first happened and Mother threatened to put me back in nappies. I tried hard not to wee. I got better at hiding the evidence. The morning after my First Communion I must have forgotten because that's the day I saw the white towels

hanging over the banister. They looked innocent enough. But in the corner of one was a safety-pin in the shape of a mouth waiting to break into a smile.

She'd called me into the kitchen just before bed. One of the white cloths was folded in a triangle on the rug.

"Lift up your nightdress and lay down on the napkin," she said. I thought she was playing and I laughed. But she wasn't smiling and she said it again. She grabbed my wrist and I started to cry.

"I don't want you messing up the sheets again," she said, pulling my arm. I fell over and she put her hand over my heart so I couldn't escape. I pretended to be a doll; a Tiny Tears being cared for. A real baby would be grabbing its feet and gurgling. She had to take her hand off my chest while she wrestled with the safety-pin. She couldn't undo it. I took my chance and tried to wriggle free. It was then that she let out a scream. I stopped struggling when I saw drops of blood falling onto the white towel. I hadn't meant to hurt her. I lay back on the nappy and imagined I had pricked my finger on a spindle. I tried to be still and breathe quietly like when we play Dead Lions at parties. I thought if I could do this I might disappear, or else fall asleep for a hundred years.

I pick up the watering can and stagger back, both arms wrapped around its silver belly. It's as though I'm carrying a new born baby, only it's cold against my bare skin. The metal cools me as I walk and water sloshes to and fro but I am careful not to spill a drop and it's all kept within.

Dad dug over my patch afresh. He said that I could grow anything. After mending the rosary, we set about planting sunflower seeds. He makes the holes in the earth with his fat first finger and I put two seeds in and cover them over with soil. They keep each other company in the seed-bed. Last week, Mother said to Dad something about Auntie Pat making her bed and lying in it. If she was ill and had no one to look after her she would have to get out of her bed and make it for herself. As I cover the sunflower seeds, I imagine Auntie Pat buried up to her neck in soil. I don't know what she looks like, so I picture her the same as Mother but with a few more grey hairs, because she's older, and paler than Mother, because she's poorly and has to lie down. I don't plant her with anybody else. I don't think she is married. But she could have a secret husband she sleeps with. I don't know why the sunflower seeds

are sown in twos. Maybe together they make a baby seedling. I don't want to ask Dad if this is true, so I keep quiet and water the soil and a worm comes to the surface to celebrate the wedding of the seeds underground.

When Annie Reilly came round for tea last year she noticed the dandelions growing in our garden. She pointed at them and cried out loud,

"I've never seen so many piss-in-the-beds!" I'd never heard them called that before. I laughed so much I cried. I started Annie off too, she is such a giggler. When she'd calmed down she said that she'd nearly wet herself laughing and we laughed all over again. Mother heard us from the kitchen and said afterwards that Annie wasn't allowed around any more on account of her colourful language.

I didn't know then that I'd be wetting the bed now. I must have sniffed a dandelion in the past by accident. I couldn't be sure I hadn't. When Annie came round we were laughing too much to sniff anything. I liked her colourful language. I didn't see what was wrong with colours. I didn't see why nappies had to be white either. It's a silly colour for them. They should be yellow, like dandelions.

Dad has plants of different colours in his allotment. He said that he grows what he can from seed. The shed is full of old packets of seeds and ones he's saved from flowers he's grown. When I asked him where the wild ones came from he said that the birds must have brought them. How kind of them to help Dad with his gardening. I had seen the blackbirds and their babies, living in a nest in the hedgerow. They must fly in a team, like the Red Arrows, with the stem of a foxglove in their beaks. The dove in the Bible brings Noah an olive branch so I don't see why Dad should make it up.

"You need to be patient with your plot, the sunflowers will need plenty of water if they are to come to anything," he warns.

Apart from the flowers and the apple tree in the meadow Dad mostly grows vegetables: carrots, lettuces and different kinds of potatoes, as well as beanstalks grown from magic beans. He says that beans will grow on the beanstalks; that the stalks will wind themselves around the canes until they reach the top. He must fix the canes in place before any magic beans grow. That's what he is doing when he asks me to bring him the string.

It is dark in the shed. The string is kept in the cupboard. I try to find it by feeling inside with my hand and pray no earwigs live within. I touch the spiky end of garden wire, the rest of it is smoothly wound on a reel, and the pointy blades of the clippers poke into my fingertip but I cannot feel the hairy string. My eyes get used to the dark. The top shelf is scattered with brightly coloured sticks that Dad uses to mark the ends of the seed rows. Underneath, mouldy pots huddle together, but I see no brown string. I look around the shed. Onions hang down from one corner like shrunken heads knotted together by their hair. Camouflaged in the shadows below is a web, caked with dirt.

Dad's cabinet drawer is the last place the string could be. I've looked everywhere else. It must be in there. He usually keeps our sandwiches inside, locked up until dinnertime, but we've only just eaten them and the drawer is open. I decide to check he has not put the string in it by mistake. I know he has told me not to go in there, but it's the only place I haven't looked and we've eaten our sandwiches so I cannot see what harm it will do. I open it wide. Nothing is inside except for mugs and spoons and an old coffee jar. I am disappointed. When I try shutting the drawer it won't go back in properly. I take the whole thing out and there's a piece of paper jammed at the back. It's a photograph of two women at a fair. They are like twins; both of them holding toffee apples. But when I look closer I see how different they are. One is facing the camera straight on, her hair is tied back and she's scowling. She's got one arm folded in front of her, like she has a stomach-ache. It's Mother. The other one is taking a bite out of her apple, her head is thrown back and her hair streams in the wind. She's beautiful. I turn the photo over and on the back it says 1950 and two names: Frances and Pat.

"Marian!" Dad shouts from outside.

I put the photo back and try to slot the drawer into the cupboard. I can't line it up. I hear Dad's footsteps. I am shaking. I pray it will go in. Somehow, the drawer fits and I slide it to and turn to face Dad as he stands in the doorway blocking out most of the light.

"Couldn't see it for looking," he says, opening out his hand. There's an apple in his palm: the tree has had a baby. No, it's a doll's head; I can see her hairs quivering in fear. Dad squats down beside me, letting the light in. It's not a head or an apple he's holding. It's the ball of string.

I go to fetch more water but I am thinking about the picture. In the black and white photograph, Auntie Pat's lips are the same shade as the toffee apples. She must have worn the reddest of lipsticks. She is as pretty as any of the ladies in swimming costumes on Miss World. I keep the snapshot of her frozen in my memory like ice-cream in a freezer; to be dipped into as a special treat.

On the way home from the allotment, we pull up in the church car park. I open the car door but before I go in Dad taps me on the arm and hands me my rosary in its box.

"Not a word to Mother," he says. He looks straight ahead, as if he's still driving and concentrating on the road.

I put the box deep into the pocket of my tracksuit top and grab the iron handle of the church door, twist it and push with all my might. I can't see Mother but the sacristy door is open so I go in to look for her.

I like the sacristy. It's full of treasure: golden candlesticks and goblets, little brass bells and silver snuffers that put the candles out. In the corner is a dressing up box where the vestments are kept. Today the sun's coming in the high window. It shines through the glass bottles on the top shelf. Some are full of clear liquid labelled 'Holy Water' and a few are dark green and full to the brim. On the shelf underneath there's something that looks like a wooden stage for a puppet show. It has a crown on top of it and a wreath made of artificial flowers.

We have pretend flowers at home too. Sometimes Mother brings them in to church. She said that they perk up the arrangements if there are dead that need replacing. The flowers are arranged every week without fail. Mother buys real ones from the florists. I went with her one day when Dad was ill and we couldn't go to the allotment. We walked past the market on the way, with its stalls selling flowers all the colours of the rainbow. When we got to the shop, Mother chose white lilies to decorate the Virgin and chrysanthemums to fill in the gaps because, she said, they keep. I asked why she put lilies by the statue of Mary.

"They are symbols of purity, the angels of grace hold them in heaven," she said. When I asked her what chrysanthemums stand for, she answered:

“Everlasting life, providing the oasis is kept topped up with water during the week.”

If she’s spent a lot on flowers for a special festival she brings plastic ones in the following Saturday instead of buying fresh. They look so much like the others. I couldn’t tell the difference. But one week she used them instead of real roses. It was the scent that gave her away. Father Thomas told me that angels smell of roses so they must grow them in heaven. I imagine an angelic host at the perfume counter in Debenhams, fanning their fragrance through the ground floor as though they’ve squirted testers on their wings.

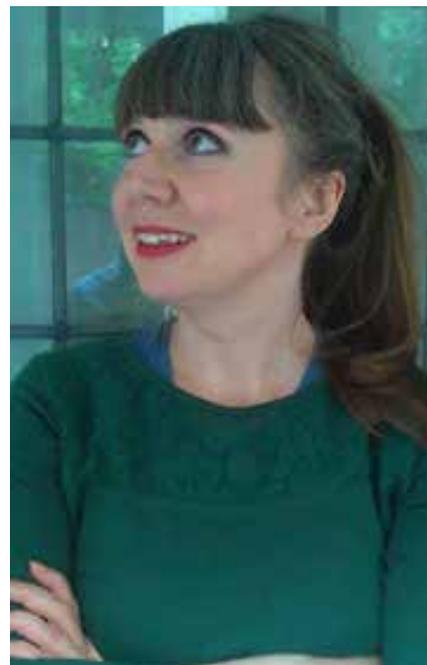
Beside the puppet stage with the crown is a see-through flask with a pink drink in it. Light pours through it. It looks like strawberry-ade. But it must be communion wine, or else the rose-flavoured perfume the angels wear.

## About the Writer

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Jane Liffen specialised in creative writing and cultural theory in her third year of the BA (Hons.) degree in Cultural Studies at Norwich School of Art and Design and received a first class degree and the APU Student of the Year award in 2002.

Previously employed by University of Lincoln as a part time Lecturer, she has also been a Visiting Tutor at Arts University Bournemouth. She was awarded a PhD from University of Loughborough in 2008 and has exhibited multi-media artwork and video installations made in response to her PhD research, and shown visual work in solo and collaborative exhibitions. She has also contributed to a feature on BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour.



Jane has worked in a freelance film-making capacity on community projects relating to renewable energy and local government initiatives. Other jobs include film and television extra, boat cleaner, and tractor driver.

Currently, she is working on a novel called *The Beautifuls*, set in Edwardian Dorset, and hopes to complete a polished draft by the end of 2016.