

George Galway and the Magic Flute

Text © Samantha Jellett 2020

Illustrations © Bethany Luckins 2020

Chapter 1: No More School

Friday 20 March

It was the last day of school today. Not the tidy-up-the-classroom-and-watch-videos kind. Not even the kind where Mrs Ross lets us tell jokes and chat about our holiday plans for days out and pizza in restaurants. But a dull, flat sort of day with Maths and English and the teachers talking in strangely quiet voices. It wasn't even the proper last day of school- there are still two whole weeks of term left- but on Wednesday the Prime Minister with the funny hair said that all the schools have to close because of the Virus. I don't understand why- I'm pretty sure the Virus isn't at my school, and none of my friends or even teachers have got sick.

'Bye, Eddie,' I called to my best friend as we walked out of school for the last time. 'See you on Facetime, maybe?'

Eddie nodded and we elbow bumped (we aren't allowed to fist bump anymore- too many germs). 'Yes, see you on the iPad, George'.

Eddie's Mum was wearing sunglasses even though it wasn't sunny. Her cheeks were a bit wet. Had she been crying? I looked at Mum, who gave me a quick bright smile and asked me if I would like fish and chips for tea. Fish and chips? When school has finished for almost ever?

At 5 o'clock we all watched the Prime Minister with the funny hair on TV. Me, Mum, my two grown-up sisters Lucy and Hannah - even Dad came out of his office to see it. He said it was like the war when people used to crowd around the wireless to hear the news about cities being bombed or the result of a big battle, but I haven't seen any bombs or soldiers and the March sunshine is beginning to open up the spring flowers. It's hard to believe that a microscopic super-army is really invading the country.

It must be, though, because every day the Prime Minister with the funny hair tells us more things that we aren't allowed to do because the Virus is spreading. Today he closed the cafes, restaurants, pubs and gyms. My oldest sister Lucy was very happy. She works in a gym. Mum told her that she would have to help out a lot at home instead, and she went back to being grumpy.

They were watching the news for ages. I got bored, so I went into the playroom to get Tamino out. Tamino is my flute. It's a funny sort of name for a flute- well, I suppose people would say that any name is a funny sort of name for a flute- but I didn't choose it.

Dad bought the flute for me from eBay. He said it was a bargain. It arrived one Saturday morning, wrapped in layers of brown paper and parcel tape that we had to carefully cut away. It didn't look like much at first- the black rectangular case was covered in scratches- but inside, on a bed of the softest black velvet, a beautiful silver flute shone like a sliver of new moon on the darkest night. I gently lifted the flute out and ran my

fingers over the silky-smooth body, pressing the keys down and wondering how it all worked.

The only other thing in the case was a small scrap of folded paper, which I picked up and opened. 'My name is Tamino,' I read. Where had it come from? Who had written it?

Tamino and I got to know each other as I learnt to play him. There are too many grown-ups in my house, so I talk to Tamino as if he was the little-bit-older brother I wish I had. He talks back to me when I play him; a soft, silvery voice which is sometimes breathy but if I blow just right he makes the sweetest, clearest sound like the bird that sings in the tree outside my room every morning.

Tamino and I have the best adventures together: I play fast pieces that take us soaring through the air like a bird of prey or a jet plane, old pieces that whizz us back in time to the courts of kings and queens, Rock and Roll pieces that make us dance until we collapse with laughter.



But today I didn't feel like playing 'Flute on Holiday' or 'Jammin 'Jive'. I played 'A Sad Song' so slowly that I kept running out of breath. When I got to the end I couldn't play anymore, and gently laid Tamino down in his velvet bed.

'Sorry, Tam,' I muttered, lowering the lid of his case. Just before it shut I heard a strange, gentle sound like the sigh of a summer breeze. *'It's OK.'*

My heart leapt. 'Tamino?' I whispered slowly, opening the case again. Did I see the mouthpiece move ever so slightly? I shook my head; surely not. Nothing has seemed real today- especially not a talking flute.

Chapter 2: Lockdown

Monday 23 March

Two bad things today:

1. Homeschool. It's all the boring bits of school without any of the fun: no mud fights with Eddie and Isaac at breaktime, no football matches, no chocolate brownies on Fridays. No school play- I was going to be the Scarecrow in The Wizard of Oz next week and had learnt all of my lines. No end-of-term talent show- Tamino and I had been working so hard for it. No Cross Country festival, no Spring Fun Day, no Easter Bonnet Parade. Just me, a kitchen table, and teachers sending emails with a LOT of work.
It is alright for my sisters. Lucy slept in all morning then pranced round the house doing keep fit exercises to loud music all afternoon. Hannah's university hasn't even sent her any

work- how unfair is that?- so she has done nothing so far except putting make-up on and eating. Right in front of me.

2. The Prime Minister with the funny hair has put the whole country into something called Lockdown. I hope they aren't going to lock us in our houses like prisoners in cells. I would worry about getting out if there was a fire. Mum says they won't, but we do have to stay home almost all of the time. She says that one of us will be allowed to go shopping for food, but not me. I won't be able to get my Saturday morning sweets, and toy shops won't be open at all! I had saved up enough pocket money for a SuperBot 4000 and Dad had promised to take me to *Toys4You* this weekend. Worst of all, though, my birthday party is CANCELLED! Just like that! It was going to be at Lazer Battle on my birthday, 18th April, and all the boys in my class were coming. I'm not sure things could get any worse.

‘Come on, George, you’ve only written two sentences in half an hour!’ nagged Mum halfway through the longest afternoon of my life. The morning hadn’t been much better. At school I normally do my work quite quickly, but sat on my own I found myself staring out of the window at a sleepy bumble bee exploring the spring garden. Even the bees are freer than me at the moment. I looked at my work. ‘Write a description of a day in the life of a Victorian factory worker’, it ordered. Probably better than a day in my life, I thought, anger rising up inside me like a pan of water about to boil over. ‘I don’t want to do it!’ I couldn’t help shouting, ‘It’s not school!’

I ran out of the kitchen and into the playroom. At the weekend I had made a den in the space between the sofa and the piano, cutting up an old cardboard box to make the walls. I grabbed Tamino a bit too roughly and we huddled under the blanket roof together. I felt suddenly calm as I began to run my fingers over the cool smoothness of his metal body.

‘It’s not fair, Tam,’ I complained, ‘I can’t see my friends, buy sweets or a SuperBot 4000, and my birthday is cancelled. I will probably be eight forever.’

I looked at Tam, willing him, daring him, to answer.

Nothing, of course. He’s just a flute, I thought to myself, a metal tube with a load of keys and a mouthpiece.

Mum came into the playroom. She looked a bit stressed, but came over to the den and climbed in with us. It was a tight squeeze but she managed to sit down with her chin pinned to her chest. Until now I hadn’t noticed that Mum was still in her pyjamas; she was already working on her laptop when I woke up and couldn’t have had time to shower. I suddenly felt bad for making a fuss about my schoolwork. I was too old to sit on her lap anymore, but I climbed on to it now. I liked the feel of her long fair hair as it brushed against my face, as soft and light as the blossom on our cherry tree.

‘It’s hard for all of us, George,’ she said gently. ‘Shall we leave school for today and play a game?’

‘Can we?’ I could hardly believe it. ‘How about Monopoly?’ I suggested, jumping up so quickly that the roof of the den collapsed. Mum laughed as we clambered out and opened the toy cupboard.

‘Let’s see if your sisters want to play too,’ Mum said, her smile turning into a frown, ‘But only if Hannah promises not to tip the board over again...’

I smiled and passed Mum the huge Monopoly box. ‘Can you start to set it up?’ I asked. ‘I just need to put Tam away.’

Mum nodded and left the room as I went to put Tam in his case. As I carried him, his top key quickly closed and opened again. That was strange; maybe the key was sticking and needed a little grease? Or... was he winking at me?

Chapter 3: A Good Day

Thursday 26 March

I'm getting used to it, I guess. Mum and I have made a deal that if I get all my schoolwork done in the mornings, I can play outside all afternoon. It's not the same as being with my friends, and I can't really bring Tam outside, but I can ride my bike, kick a football around with Dad on his lunch break, and Mum has been teaching me to play darts. I had never noticed the darts board before, fixed to the wall outside the back door and covered in cobwebs. Together Mum and I cleaned it up and discovered three darts with colourful tails stuck in the board, their tips still needle-sharp. I couldn't wait to play. It was hard to get the darts to land on the board at first, but I soon got really good at it. This afternoon, after I had beaten Mum by seventy points (I scored three bullseyes, can you believe it?), she told me that I should make a list of the good things about Lockdown instead of thinking about the bad, so here it is:

1. There is no rushing anymore. No rushing in the mornings, with Dad running for his train at 7:51 and Mum and I jumping into the car at 8.06. No rushing in the evenings, a jumble of clubs, homework and bedtime for me, only seeing Dad for a few minutes and sometimes not at all. Now, we all eat dinner together every night. All five of us, sitting at the dining table! I used to have my dinner in the car on the way home from clubs, or by myself in the living room watching TV because no-one else was there.
2. Lucy and Hannah are already bored of their keep fit and make-up and have been doing lots of things with me; yesterday we all painted a giant rainbow to hang in the window to cheer people up as they walk past. It's the biggest rainbow on our street. They have also been coming on walks and bike rides. Walks! My sisters normally drive everywhere, even to the corner shop to buy chocolate. And I didn't even know they had

bikes. They must have stopped riding them a few years ago, when boys and mobile phones started to take up all of their time.

3. The weather has been really sunny every day and feels a bit like summer even though it's only March. When I'm building cities out of sand in the huge sandbox that Dad built for me last year, it's easy to pretend that I'm on holiday by the seaside.

In fact, I had almost forgotten about The Virus until this evening. I had put on my pyjamas earlier than usual and had climbed into bed with a book, tired from a long bike ride through the woods, when I heard what sounded like hundreds of bullets being fired. Bullets! In my own street! Had the microscopic soldiers mutated into giant ones? Or were the police shooting anyone who had left their homes? Suddenly, there was a huge explosion that rattled my window. A bomb? Terrified, I tore downstairs. The front door was open, and my whole family was standing on the doorstep.

'Come inside!' I shrieked, yanking Hannah towards me by her hoodie.

It was then that I realised. They were all clapping, and so was everyone in the street, from doorways, windows, high up on the balconies of the flats opposite. I could hear the village church bells chiming in the distance and fireworks were shooting up into the sky- silver rockets exploding into bright blue stars.

Mum pulled me close to her side. 'Sorry, George, I thought you'd gone to sleep.'

Dad told me that we were clapping for the NHS: the doctors, nurses, and everyone working at the front line of the battle.

I joined in, clapping until my hands hurt, thinking of the poor people who were ill and those who were helping them, but feeling happy that my family and I were safe.

Afterwards, Mum and Dad let me stay up and play cards with them all. I didn't really understand the rules of Blackjack but Lucy let me be on her team so it didn't matter. It was ten o'clock when we finally all went up to

bed, exhausted but laughing at Dad who was still complaining about losing. Halfway up the stairs, I suddenly stopped.

'Back in a minute,' I told Mum, leaping back down two stairs at a time and turning into the playroom.

I never go to bed without saying goodnight to Tamino. His silver body felt as light as air in my hands and gleamed brightly in the dark room.

'Night, Tam,' I whispered softly, 'It's been a good day.'

Tam looked different, but I couldn't work out why. I studied his keys, watching to see if they would move again. Nothing. I stared and stared at him, and finally I saw it. His mouthpiece had changed shape. Only a tiny bit, and no one else would know, but I knew. He was smiling at me.

Chapter 4: Gigi

Wednesday 15 April

The holidays are definitely better than homeschool. There isn't much to do, but I see Eddie on Facetime every day. Sometimes we run out of things to say so we build Meccano models or Lego spaceships, stopping every now and then to show each other, silent but together. We've even played chess a couple of times, which was a bit tricky but fun: 'Move my queen two squares to the left- no, *my left*, not your left!'

I get to spend so much time with Tamino! He hasn't moved again and I'm beginning to think that it was all in my imagination, but it doesn't matter; he's real to me. I'm so good at playing him now and can play really fast. Our surname is Clark but my family have started to call me 'George Galway', after James Galway, the famous flautist. A flautist is a flute player; only the Americans call them flutists. Not many people know that. People

also think that the flute is a girl's instrument, but it's not true. Some of the best flautists in the world are men, and I want to be like them one day.

Tam and I were exploring the African plains today. I was playing 'Safari Sunset' and we were galloping alongside gazelles and swimming with hippos. We were having so much fun and had nearly reached the end of the piece when I noticed Mum and Dad standing very still watching me. Dad looked very serious and Mum's cheeks were a sort of pale grey.

I stopped playing and slowly lifted Tam away from my lips. 'What's the matter?' I asked, suddenly scared.

'It's Gigi,' Dad told me in a quiet voice. 'Let's sit down.' They both came over to me and gently led me to our old, tatty sofa that we covered up with a brightly-coloured Aztec throw. My den was still connected to it but we all managed to squeeze on. I was holding Tamino tightly.

Gigi is my grandmother. She didn't want to be called 'Granny' or 'Grandma' as she said those names were for old people, not cool and crazy superwomen like her. Gigi is very glamorous and dresses more like my sisters than my Mum. She helps with cookery lessons at my school, goes to rock concerts and drags my grandad Pops along to Ballroom Dancing twice a week. We call her 'The Entertainer' as everything she says makes us laugh. When Mum told Gigi that we would bring food to her in Lockdown as she shouldn't be going anywhere at her age, her eyes rolled and she threw her head back with laughter. 'Pah!' she cried, 'No-one is locking me down!' Pops, however, gave her a stern look and her expression changed to one of serene dignity. 'Then I shall be the Queen and you shall be the servants,' she purred, eyes twinkling. 'Champagne and caviar for my next delivery, please.'

'Gigi's ok, isn't she?' I knew that Gigi had not been feeling herself this week, but it wasn't the Virus. She said it was probably a bit of hayfever- and a lot of

boredom from being cooped up. She had still been weeding the garden though and practising her dance moves across the patio- she had showed me on Facetime and I hadn't been able to stop laughing.

'Gigi has become very poorly,' explained Mum gently.

'She is finding it hard to breathe, so an ambulance has taken her to hospital. We think she has the Virus.'

'No!' I shouted, 'Not Gigi! The Virus can't have got her, you told me we were keeping her and Pops safe! You said we were all safe!'

Had the microscopic soldiers slid through the letterbox, or sneaked in through an open window? Or had they hitched a ride into their house on the side of a shopping bag?

'The Virus is very powerful,' explained Dad, putting a hand on my shoulder. 'No-one knows how to stop it completely yet.'

Mum nodded and was trying to smile. 'They are going to help her at the hospital and will do everything they can to make her better.'

'I want to see her, Mum!' I was crying now. Gigi would hate the hospital. She likes bright colours, pretty flowers, fancy perfumes- not cold grey wards filled with doctors in scary protective suits. I've seen the pictures on TV.

'George, no one is allowed to see her,' Mum told me with tears in her eyes, 'Not even us. There's too much risk of infection. But she is in wonderful hands.'

Mum and Dad both gave me a hug and said they had to go and tell my sisters. I was left sitting on the sofa alone, holding Tam and not knowing what to do.

'Play me.'

This time it was unmistakeable. Tam's mouthpiece- his lips- were moving and the words were clear.

‘Tam!’ I had a wonderful warm feeling inside despite the tears that were still wet on my cheeks. ‘I’m not sure I can... Gigi... the Virus...’

Tam’s headjoint moved as if he was nodding and his top two keys- his eyes- blinked. His mouth moved again.

‘You can do it, George.’

I slowly got up and walked over to the music stand, suddenly feeling rather foolish. Was this a dream? Or was I so upset about Gigi that I really did believe that my flute was alive?

But as I reached the music stand Tam nodded again, in the direction of the piece of music on the opposite page to ‘Sunset Safari’. It was ‘Caribbean Carnival’, a piece I normally only play when I’m feeling really happy and full of energy. It’s got lots of fast notes in it and tricky Calypso rhythms. I shook my head.

‘Play me,’ Tam said again. How could I not?

I began to play, slower than usual at first but the music took over and was soon bouncing along at our normal

lively speed. After the first two lines I have a few beats'
rest. It was here when Tam spoke one more time.

'Close your eyes.'

I froze. I could do it- I knew the piece really well and
didn't need to look at the music. But should I?

I closed my eyes and played.

Chapter 5: Tamino

The softest sand between my toes, the warmest sun on my back. Was I in my garden sand box? I opened my eyes; definitely not- my house had vanished and I was sat on the most beautiful beach I had ever seen.

Coconuts hung from palm trees and the ocean water lapping against the sand was so clear that I could see brightly coloured fish darting back and forth.

‘Hello, George.’

I turned around to see a boy stood behind me, a little taller than me with dark, wavy hair. He was smiling. His eyes, his lips, they were just...right.

‘Tamino!’ I exclaimed. ‘You’re a boy like me!’

The boy sat down next to me. ‘I can be whoever you want- would you rather I was a girl?’ he asked, giving me a friendly punch.

I shook my head, laughing. ‘Where are we, Tam?’

‘Well, the Caribbean, obviously... but which island? I think Jamaica.’ Tamino jumped up. ‘Come on, we’ve got so much to do! How about a sandcastle?’

Tamino passed me a spade and we began to build a magnificent sand fort, big enough for us both to fit inside. We decorated it with shells and palm leaves, then sat inside drinking water out of coconuts and watching the waves run in and out of the moat. Lucy will be so jealous, I thought. Her holiday to the Caribbean had just been cancelled because of the Virus.

I remember one morning last year when, rushing to school still eating my breakfast with my shirt half undone, I had silently wished that the whole world would stop. I never thought that it actually would. Planes have stopped. Cars have stopped. People have stopped. With everyone tucked away in their houses like animals in underground burrows, the world is quiet and still. New York City, the city that never sleeps, is sleeping. Be careful what you wish for, I thought. And yet here I was, unlike almost everyone else in the world, free and having the most wonderful time.

‘Come on, George!’ Tamino was pointing towards a town in the distance. ‘The carnival is starting!’

‘How will we get there?’ I wondered. I blinked and Tam and I were stood on a carnival float painted in all the colours of the rainbow and decorated with streamers. Tam was covered in luminous green feathers.

‘You’re a bird!’ I teased, prodding his feathers and pointing at his headdress.

Tam burst out laughing. ‘So are you- a flamingo!’

I looked down and saw that my arms had wings attached to them, made out of giant feathers. I ran my hands over the pointed beak on my head. And I was...completely...pink.

Our carnival float was filled with other people dressed as birds: parrots, toucans, birds of paradise. A sea of faces crowded the streets to watch the parade.

‘Those people are standing too close together!’ I told Tamino, alarmed.

‘There’s no Virus here, George,’ smiled Tam.

The music was starting. A steel pan band was playing, a wonderful deep, rich sound with pulsating rhythms.

‘It’s our tune, Tam!’

‘Of course it is!’ Tam replied as the float began to move.



The carnival was like the biggest party in the world: the loud music, the burst of colours, the smell of Caribbean food. Everyone on the float was dancing and Tam and I joined in, shaking our feathers in time to the music.

Eventually we came to the end of the carnival route and our float stopped.

‘That was incredible!’ I exclaimed.

‘The best,’ Tamino agreed. ‘Now, how about some fun in the rainforest?’

Before I could say ‘What?’, I blinked again and we were perched on top of a waterfall, our feathered costumes replaced by swimming trunks. I grabbed on to a rock that was jutting out of the flowing water.

‘Tam! Is this safe?’ I yelled over the roar of the waterfall.

‘Let’s find out!’ cried Tam, grabbing my hand and pulling me over the edge. I expected to fall through the air and crash into the pool below, but we found ourselves gliding down smoothly on a chute made of rock, twisting and turning to the bottom, better than any water slide I

had ever been on. We were catapulted into the deep pool and burst into laughter as our heads surfaced.

‘Awesome!’ I shouted, shaking the water out of my hair, ‘Can we do it again, Tam?’

We went round and round again, clambering up the steep rocks and launching ourselves down the rock slide, until we were so exhausted that we climbed out of the pool and flopped on to the soft, mossy ground.

We sat there talking until the sun began to go down and the rainforest became a mass of shadowy shapes.

Tamino told me about his previous owner, who had left the note in his case for me to find, a lonely old man who had loved him dearly. Tam had been his most cherished companion until the old man became too frail to play anymore. Tam also made me laugh with stories of owners that he hadn’t liked so much- children who played him with sticky hands or left him alone in his case until the day of their music lesson, when they got him out grumpily and played him quickly and roughly. ‘I may have played a few tricks on those ones,’ Tam revealed with a glint in his eye.

One minute we were in the rainforest watching the sunset, and the next... we were back in the playroom, Tam a flute again but still smiling. Mum appeared in the doorway.

‘You’ve been playing the same piece for ages, George!’
I nodded and smiled. ‘It felt like a whole day actually... but I had so much fun.’

That night Dad came to sit by my bedside, tucking me in like he used to when I was small. ‘Gigi is comfortable in hospital and they are giving her the oxygen she needs. That’s good, isn’t it?’ He looked at me, worried. ‘Are you ok, George?’

I thought about our wonderful adventure, and best of all meeting Tamino.

‘Yes, Dad,’ I replied, hugging him, ‘Yes, I am.’

Chapter 6: The Magic Flute

Saturday 18 April

My birthday! I was woken up at 6 a.m. by the unmistakable sound of a flute.

‘Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you...’

‘George?’ Came Dad’s sleepy voice from next door.

‘Isn’t it a bit early to be playing your flute?’

‘Yes, and why are you playing Happy Birthday to yourself, silly?’ Hannah was not happy at being woken up.

I ran downstairs. Tam’s case was open even though I always close it every night. He was laying there innocent and still, pretending to be a normal flute, but I could tell that he was trying hard not to smile.

‘Tam...’ I scolded, but found myself giggling instead.

‘Thank you.’

I suddenly noticed a thin rectangular package on the music stand. Tied around the brown paper was a silver

ribbon which sparkled in the early morning sun, and attached to it was a small label.

‘*Love from Tamino*,’ I read. A joke from Mum and Dad, probably... but I didn’t recognise the handwriting. I tore open the package.

It was an old music book with a wrinkled cover and yellowed pages. It didn’t look like it had come from a shop. *The Magic Flute* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, said the title in swirly, decorative writing. I was filled with wonder. I have always wanted to play something by Mozart, one of the greatest composers of all time, but most of his flute music is really tricky. However... I looked at the notes on the first page, and thought that maybe I could play them. I would try later; I didn’t want to annoy anyone else at this time in the morning.

Having a birthday in lockdown wasn’t as bad as I thought it might be. Dad set up a video call for all of the boys in my class, and even though it was a bit crazy with everyone shouting ‘Happy Birthday!’ at the same time, I felt really special. And Mum and Dad bought me a

SuperBot 4000! They must have had it delivered. It's the coolest toy ever; you build the robot and then you can code it to do all sorts of things, like kick a football or draw a picture. Dad and I spent all morning poring over the instructions and putting the hundreds of little pieces together.

We were all having lunch- burgers and chips followed by the best robot birthday cake ever- when the phone rang. I jumped up.

'I'll get it!' I shouted, running into the hall. It was probably Auntie Joan ringing to wish me a happy birthday. But it wasn't- it was Pops, and he seemed to have forgotten it was my birthday as he just asked to speak to Mum, his voice quiet. Puzzled, and a little disappointed, I passed Mum the phone. After a moment she disappeared into the living room. Dad followed her, so Lucy, Hannah and I (and SuperBot) were left at the table with our half-eaten pieces of birthday cake, wondering what was happening.

'It will be ok, George,' Lucy told me.

But it wasn't ok. Dad came back into the kitchen alone and sat down at the table.

‘Gigi has... taken a turn for the worse.’ He was finding it hard to talk. ‘They have put her on a ventilator.’

I know what ventilators are, I have seen the news. They are sort of robot machines, not funny ones that do tricks like my SuperBot 4000, but ones that breathe for people and try to keep them alive.

‘Gigi is being very brave,’ Dad told us, ‘So we all have to be brave too.’

Hannah and Lucy nodded and went to find Mum to comfort her. I didn’t feel brave. I wanted to run away, far away- out of the house, down the road, out of the village, to run and run until I couldn’t run any more. I went to put my trainers on, but as I passed the playroom I heard a long, low, gentle sound. Tam was calling me...

‘Tam?’ I picked him up. ‘Do you want to come with me?’ Tam shook his headjoint, turning it towards the music on the stand, *The Magic Flute*.

I thought for a moment. An adventure with Tam would be better than running away, especially if we could build sandcastles and slide down waterfalls again. But what was this music that Tam had given me? I played the first

piece through without blowing, just moving my fingers and letting them learn the notes. It was fast with lots of notes, but I could do it. I took a deep breath and began.

Chapter 7: Queen Nera

Sand again. I opened my eyes, full of excitement, expecting to see the beautiful beach scene. But there was just sand, more sand, and yet more sand, formed into dunes and stretching as far as I could see.

‘Tam?’ I called, bewildered.

‘I’m here, George,’ answered a voice- a deeper voice than I was expecting.

I turned around; perched above me on the side of the dune was a tall, dark-haired boy- almost a man. I recognised him immediately.

‘Tamino?’ I wondered, ‘What has happened to you?’

Tam smiled and slid down to join me. ‘I told you,’ he said, running sand through his fingers, ‘I don’t always look the same. Hmm, where are we? I’m not sure I’ve been here before.’

I studied the horizon more closely. ‘Definitely a desert,’ I decided, ‘But there’s something else in the distance, some kind of building..’

‘A pyramid?’ exclaimed Tam. ‘Hey, maybe we are going to have some kind of cool Egyptian Mummy adventure. George and Tamino have tea with Tutankhamen ...’

As I laughed, the ground began to shake. The sand was moving. Or rather, something in the sand was moving. Something very big, long, and shaped like a serpent. ‘Run!’ Shouted Tamino. We ran.

Except it’s impossible to run in sand dunes- with every step we tried to take we slid further back into the soft, shifting sand. The serpent-monster was rising up now, revealing a huge, scaly green body, yellow flashing eyes and sharp, dripping fangs. It was coming nearer and nearer, casting its shadow over us, until all went dark.

A flash of silver stars in the blackness, the swish of a cloak, and an ear-piercing, female voice: ‘Be gone, Serpent!’

In an instant we were blinded by the bright sunlight as the serpent shrank to the size of a small snake and vanished into the sand. The only shadow left over us was that of a tall, thin figure. We looked up warily to see a

lady wearing a long black dress studded with diamonds and covered with a black tuile cloak. Her silver hair was piled up on her head underneath a crown of glittering stars. She had eyes the colour of the moon and a sharp, pointed nose.

‘I am Queen Nera,’ she announced, looking down at us as if we were ants.

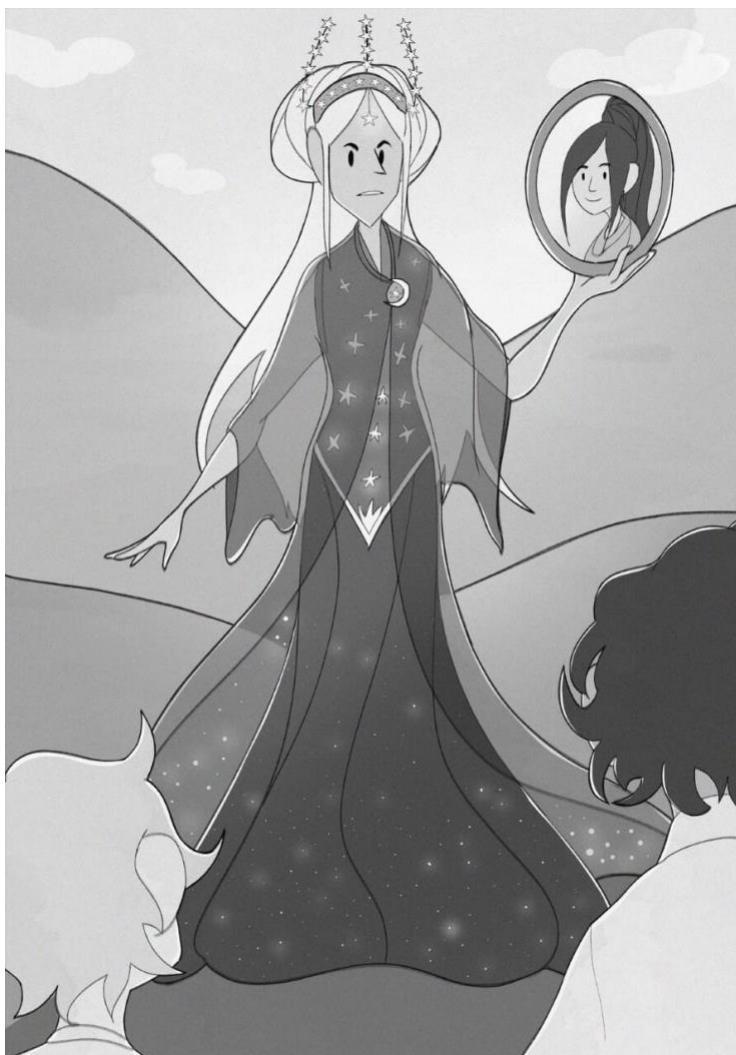
Tamino and I quickly stood up, brushing the sand from our clothes. Tam bowed and I curtsied. I don’t know why, I think I must have panicked. Tam raised his eyebrows at me, stifling a laugh. The Queen studied Tamino for a moment and her thin lips began to form a smile.

‘A prince, I see!’

‘A prince?. I... er... Yes, Prince Tamino at your service, Ma’am... Your Majesty...Your Most High Blackness..’

‘And I’m George,’ I added quickly. ‘Just George. Thank you for rescuing us. How can we repay you?’ It just came out. I thought that was what you should probably say to a slightly scary queen who had just saved you from a serpent.

‘Well...’ mused the Queen, ‘Since you ask...’



Queen Nera reached into her cloak and pulled out an oval silver picture frame. She turned it around to reveal a painting of a beautiful young girl. Tamino's eyes lit up.

'This is my daughter, Pamina,' the Queen told us. 'She has been captured by the wicked Sarastro and is imprisoned in his palace. You, Prince Tamino, must find and free her. And I suppose you can go along too, George.'

Phew, I thought, I don't fancy my chances alone in this desert. But wait a minute- rescue a princess from an evil guy? I had been trying to run away from having to be brave. But then I thought of Gigi and stood up a little straighter, nodding at the Queen.

'It shall be our pleasure, O Queen,' gushed Tam, but I could see that his legs were wobbling. 'How do we get there?'

'Across the desert and through the forest,' Queen Nera said. A forest? Next to a desert? 'These will help and protect you on your quest.' She reached into her cloak again, this time with both hands. I was hoping that she

might present us with swords or magic wands or something, but one hand emerged holding a flute and the other a set of bells. The Queen handed the flute to Tamino and the bells to me. Lucky Tam, I thought. Well, a flute for a flute...only fair. And at least the bells looked like they could play a tune; five differently- sized brass bells hung from a golden cord. 'Use them wisely,' Queen Nera instructed us, then instantly disappeared in a cloud of dust.

'She's a bit weird,' remarked Tamino.

I nodded, then something hit me. 'Tam! The music- *The Magic Flute!*'

Tamino held the flute aloft. 'Of course...and I'm sure one of the pieces is about bells- that's you!'

I slid my hand along the string of bells. The desert landscape was filled with an ethereal sound, higher-pitched than anything I had heard before. The flies buzzing around our heads stopped still in the air until the echo had died away. I felt elated, and a little bold.

'Come on, Tam, let's go.'

We set off across the sand.

‘George, time for bed!’

What? I opened my eyes and I was standing in front of the music stand in the playroom, holding Tam.

‘Tam? But the adventure is only just starting! Don’t you want a girlfriend?’ I joked.

But Tam was silent and still.

‘What are you talking about, George?’ asked Mum, coming into the room. ‘Still playing your flute? And on your birthday, too... I’m so sorry that we haven’t been able to celebrate much this afternoon.’

‘It’s ok, Mum,’ I told her, putting Tam away then taking her hand as we climbed the stairs. ‘Gigi is more important. Will she be ok? The ventilator will work, won’t it?’

Mum took a deep breath. Her lips were wobbling. ‘I can’t promise anything George...but Gigi is a fighter.’

Chapter 8: Sarastro

Thursday 23 April

I have tried so many times to go back to the Magic Flute adventure. I can play all of the pieces in the book really well now, but every time I play and close my eyes, nothing happens. Tam has been completely quiet too. I really miss him.

School has started again, so everything is very hectic here. Dad is shut away in the office all day while mum tries to work on her laptop and help me with school.

Hannah has online university lectures and assignments, and is constantly stressing about how everyone is using too much internet and ruining her connection. Lucy is really bored now and stays in her room most of the day. At the front of everyone's mind is Gigi, who has been put into a deep sleep so that the ventilator can do its work. Tamino and I recorded some relaxing music to send to the hospital. We don't think that Gigi can hear

anything, but the nurses have promised that they are playing it to her anyway, just in case.

Dinner time came this evening but there was no sign of any food. I went to find Mum, and eventually realised that she was in Dad's office. From outside the door I could hear them talking.

‘And I can't cook another meal... I'm tired out, I haven't got the right ingredients and we can't just pop to the shops anymore. I had to queue for an hour just to get into the supermarket the other day...And Lucy won't get out of bed to help me...’

Normally Dad would have just said we could get a takeaway but even the fish and chip shop is shut now. Mum sounded very upset.

‘But it's not really the food...it's... Gigi...’

Mum must have moved closer to Dad as I could only hear parts of what she was saying: ‘critical’... ‘can't tell the children’... ‘might never see her again...’

I couldn't bear to listen to any more. I had to play Tam.

I knew it would be different this time. When I picked Tam up, it was as if he was...awake, his eyes looking at me intently. I knew he was feeling what I felt. I selected the next piece from *The Magic Flute*. I had only played a few notes when I opened my eyes to another world.

We were in a dense forest, the sunlight barely managing to reach us through the mass of pine trees. Tam stood in front of me with open arms, and we hugged.

‘I’ve missed you so much!’ I exclaimed. ‘Why did you go away?’

‘I’m here when you need me most, George.’

We started to walk through the forest, Tamino carrying the magic flute and me the bells, kicking the leaves on the forest floor as we went. My heart began to feel lighter and we were soon laughing and joking again.

‘Tamino-Pamina-Tamino-Pamina-Tamina-Pamino,’ I recited, tripping over the words. ‘Hey, it’s a great tongue-twister!’



‘Very funny, George. Anyway, I’m not going to marry the princess, just rescue her, remember?’

‘We’ll see,’ I teased. ‘Look, we are nearly at the edge of the forest!’

The trees were thinning out and a grand palace was coming into view. It was vast with high walls, and the entrance was surrounded by menacing-looking guards holding long, sharp swords.

‘Um...I’ve changed my mind,’ I told Tam as we hid behind a tree wondering what to do. ‘I shouldn’t have wished so hard for the adventure to carry on...’

‘We can do it, George,’ Tamino assured me. ‘Ready, NOW!’

We stepped out into the open and made our way slowly towards the palace, Tamino just in front of me. My legs felt as if they were made of concrete; with each step I had to unglue them from the ground. What would happen when the guards noticed us?

‘INTRUDERS!’ boomed a voice, whose owner was pointing a hand directly at us. ‘Release the dogs!’

Out of nowhere a pack of dogs came tearing towards us, snarling and howling. I was about to scream and run the other way but Tamino stopped me, lifting up his flute. He began to play, a beautiful, sweet sound that sang throughout the landscape.

The dogs stopped instantly in their tracks, falling to the ground. We approached them, Tam still playing, and found that they were all sleeping. As we neared the palace, we could see that the guards had fallen asleep too and were slumped against the walls. We crept inside.

Tam and I didn't know where to look first. The palace was a maze of corridors and passages, some opening out into vast chambers and others just endlessly winding on. 'We need to split up,' Tam told me after we had wandered for a while. 'You go that way, and call me if you find anything.'

Before I could say 'You can't be serious?' Tam had gone. I crept nervously along the corridor, sticking as close as I could to the cold stone walls. My footsteps echoed as loudly as horses' hooves in the still palace. I suddenly hit a dead end- but a wooden door was

embedded in the rock. I decided to open it; maybe I could hide out of sight for a bit while I decided where to look next.

I gasped as I stepped through the door. It was her- the princess, tied to a chair in the middle of the room. She had long, shiny hair the colour of dark chocolate and a beautiful, kind face.

‘Princess Pamina?’ I exclaimed.

She looked very surprised. ‘Yes...’ she answered slowly, ‘Who are-‘

‘WHAT IS GOING ON?’

Uh oh. This was not good. A short, wide man with a screwed-up face entered the room and lurched towards me. Sarastro! I darted out of the way and began to ring my bells, shaking the whole set so furiously that the palace resounded with a cacophony of overlapping tones.

Immediately Tamino appeared at the door, followed by someone else, a tall man with rounded cheeks and piercing blue eyes.

‘NOSTOS!’ the tall man shouted angrily. ‘What have you done?’

The short man jumped back and shook his head.

‘Nothing, sir...it was him!’

He was pointing at me.

‘I haven’t done anything,’ I said quickly. ‘We have come to rescue Princess Pamina.’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Tam, stepping further into the room and pointing at the short man, ‘You aren’t Sarastro?’

‘I am Sarastro.’ The taller man stepped forwards. ‘And it seems that my servant here has tied up poor Pamina. Be gone, Nostos, I’ll deal with you later!’

Sarastro untied Pamina as Nostos skulked away.

‘I do apologise,’ he said to us, putting his arm around Pamina. ‘Are you alright, my dear?’

Pamina smiled, her eyes were glued on Tamino. ‘Yes, thank you, Father.’

‘Now I’m really confused!’ Tam said to Sarastro, ‘We thought that you were the bad guy.’

‘I can guess who told you that,’ said Sarastro as he led us out of the small room and into a large banqueting hall.

‘Ms. Nera, the Queen of the Night, am I correct?’

We nodded, sitting down at the huge wooden table. It was laden with dishes of food.

‘That viperess!’ Sarastro continued. ‘Pamina is like a daughter to me and I have been protecting her from her mother- Queen Nera wants to turn the whole world into darkness and there are only a few of us trying to stop her. I thought that Mr Stinky Nostrils was on my side but it appears not.’

We understood now- Queen Nera had tricked us into bringing Pamina to her, and had given us the magical instruments to make sure we succeeded. Well, they were ours now.

Sarastro looked at Tamino and Pamina, who were now gazing into each other’s eyes over a plate of oysters.

‘But this could work...’ he mused, ‘Love conquers all, light over darkness and all that...Tamino, I have a plan.’

Chapter 9: The Final Quest

‘Let me get this straight, Sarastro... so we have to cross a river and collect a crystal thing from a mountain, right?’ When Tamino put it like that, Sarastro’s request didn’t sound too bad.

‘Yes,’ replied Sarastro. ‘The Rushing River and Mount Fury will test both your bravery and love for Pamina. If you succeed, then you may have her hand in marriage, and the Crystal of Light will allow us to defeat Queen Nera once and for all.’

I had a sudden thought. ‘Sarastro... Maybe I could just wait at the palace and help you with some housework or something? I don’t want to marry a princess...’

Sarastro looked at me earnestly. ‘Tamino needs you,’ he told me. ‘And if you complete the trials, you shall have your own heart’s desire.’

Gigi... I thought. I knew I was going to have to be really brave now.

Sarastro had given us a map. It didn't look like too far to go: over a hill and through a valley to the Rushing River. The valley, however, soon became a deep canyon with steep sides of jagged rock, and the only way out seemed to be along a shallow stream.

'I think we're going to have to get our feet wet,' laughed Tamino. 'But this is just a tiny stream- where is the Rushing River?'

As soon as we stepped into the stream, a tidal wave of water engulfed us and swept us away at the speed of light.

'Tam!' I shouted, clinging on to my bells and trying not to swallow too much of the churning water, 'I think we've found the Rushing River!'

Tam's head kept appearing and disappearing in the foam: 'We're...not...in the...Caribbean...anymore...George!'

There were huge rocks jutting out of the river, making a deadly obstacle course. Tamino was in front of me, leaning from side to side to dodge the rocks; he suddenly sped up and I could see why- there was a whirlpool ahead and Tamino was being pulled towards it!

‘Play your flute!’ I shouted at him, but he couldn’t hear me over the roaring din. It was up to me to save him. It took all of my strength to shake the bells against the force of the rushing water. Were they sounding? I couldn’t tell. But suddenly the river’s waves became smooth as if they were a crumpled shirt that had been ironed. Now I could swim to Tamino, who was almost at the edge of the whirlpool now. I sped towards him with my best front crawl, the bells chiming each time they rose out of the water into the air. Tamino turned his head and saw me, a look of fear on his face as he began to enter the whirlpool. I held out my free hand to him, and pulled with all my might to release him from the swirling currents. It worked! Tamino landed on top of me, pushing me down the river bed and giving me more than a few bruises.

‘Is your flute ok?’ I asked him when I surfaced. I was more worried about that than my bruises. Shaking the water out of the flute, Tam blew into it, sending into the air a long, mellow sound like the midnight hoot of an owl.

The river was flowing slowly now and brought us to land on a sandy bank. We sat for a minute, exhausted. Something was strange though; the sun was high in the clear blue sky yet the whole world seemed to be in shadow. Standing up, we saw why. A huge mountain was looming over us, a mass of dark grey rock rising into the sky so high that we couldn't see the top.

'Must be Mount Fury,' Tam declared. 'Doesn't look too furious to me...'

'Don't count on it,' I advised him, 'The Rushing River certainly lived up to its name...I wonder how we find the crystal?'

'Climbing it would be a good start,' decided Tam, standing up and pulling me up beside him. We started to walk along the river bank. 'Do you have a head for heights?'

I had been terrified when we went on the London Eye last Christmas and don't even like going in lifts. Fear hit me, rooting me to the spot, and I barely managed to shake my head.

'You'll be ok, George,' Tam assured me, 'You saved me, remember?'

It turned out that the height of the mountain was the least of our worries. As we climbed, trying hard not to look down, the ground under our feet was becoming warmer, almost hot, and the grey rock was showing streaks of red. When the top came in sight, there was no pretty dusting of snow; instead thick white smoke was pouring out of a large crater.

‘Tam- it’s not a mountain: it’s a VOLCANO!’ I cried, ready to run back down as fast as my feet would carry me.

Tamino put an arm out to stop me. ‘We have my flute, and your bells,’ he reminded me. Plus, I really like Pamina...’

I rolled my eyes. ‘All this for a girl?’ But then I thought about Gigi. ‘OK. I trust you, Tam.’

We were near the crater now. I have never felt such heat, not even when Mum let me get the cookies out of the oven last week and I nearly dropped the tray. Our feet were starting to burn as we climbed. Tam took a deep breath and blew into his flute, playing a short, soft

note with every step he took. I stopped for a second to check the soles of my trainers, expecting to find them half melted away, but they were completely intact! Feeling a little more confident, I followed Tam to the very top.

I gasped as we peered over the edge of the crater. A mass of bright orange lava bubbled angrily, hissing and spitting at us.

‘Seems like this is the end of the road,’ I said, ‘Maybe we should start to look for the crystal.’

We walked gingerly around the crater, scanning the crevices in the steaming rock.

‘I’ve found it!’ Tamino shouted suddenly.

‘Hooray!’ I exclaimed. My smile disappeared when I realised where he was pointing. Into the volcano. Right into the volcano. Into the midst of the boiling lava, where a dazzling crystal the size of a watermelon rested on a single column of stone.

‘You have to be joking...’ I muttered.

Chapter 10: Darkness and Rainbows

Tam and I held hands, perched on the crater's narrow rim.

‘So on the count of three, we jump.’ I had never seen Tamino look this scared. ‘And don’t forget, you **MUST** ring your bells as we fall.’

Fall. Did he have to put it like that?

‘Tam, I-’. My voice was shaking, ‘I...do you think that whatever happens to us here, changes things in the...real world?’

Tam’s face was serious as he stared down into the lava.

‘I think it does, George. But I also know that we are doing the right thing. Come on, three, two-’

He jumped! He jumped on ‘two’, pulling me over the edge with him. I think he knew that if he got to ‘one’ I would have changed my mind...

It wasn’t far down to the pool of lava, but it felt as if we were falling from the edge of space to the earth. Tam held on to me, managing to play his flute with one hand. I barely needed to shake my bells as the air rushing past

us made them play a tune all of their own, a lovely, calming melody. Which is a very strange thing when you are about to be plunged into lava.

I braced myself for the landing, my body stiff with fear. And then... Glub...glub... We gently slipped into the lava. The beautifully warm, gently bubbling lava. It was a little sticky, a bit like the strawberry sauce I have on my ice cream, but wonderful all the same.

‘Tam!’ I exclaimed, ecstatic. ‘It’s just like a hot tub!’ Tam was reclined on his back, humming softly as he floated. He just needed cucumbers on his eyes and he would look like he was at a fancy spa. I took charge. ‘Come on, Tam,’ I said, moving slowly through the lava towards the crystal. Tam followed.

We reached the stone column and he hoisted me up. Hesitating for a moment, I handed him my bells and slowly lifted the heavy, angular crystal into my arms. The movement sent rainbow upon rainbow dancing into the air, landing on the surface of the lava and bouncing off the sides of the crater.

Tamino clambered onto the column, wanting to be part of this moment. He put his hand upon the crystal, and all went black.

We opened our eyes to find ourselves on top of the hill that we had climbed at the start of our quest. We were completely dry and there was no sign of the sticky lava.

‘Look, Tam,’ I cried, pointing. ‘The palace!’

Sarastro’s palace looked different: a huge, thick black cloud hung ominously over it. We hurried there, worried about Sarastro and Pamina. As we ran into the gloomy courtyard, we stopped still. Queen Nera was there, towering over Sarastro, who quivered on the ground with his hands and feet bound. Nostos was by the Queen’s side, holding a terrified Pamina in his grip.

‘Well, if it isn’t Prince Trembly Pants and Gormless George,’ hissed the evil Queen. ‘You’re a bit late to the party. Never mind, you can still see my grand finale, when I shall turn the whole world as dark as Sarastro’s little house here.’

‘Tamino!’ cried Pamina, trying to reach out to him.

‘My love!’ replied Tam. (That was a bit much, I thought.)

The Queen threw her head back and cackled coldly. ‘This is wonderful,’ she mocked, ‘A Prince and a Princess in love!’

Tamino stepped boldly forwards. ‘Yeah, well, I’m not really a prince,’ he told her, ‘And you’re just a silly coward of a queen who doesn’t know how to be nice to people.’

Queen Nera seemed to grow a little taller, and a lot angrier.

‘I WILL SHOW YOU!’ She bellowed, lifting her arms into the air and showering the courtyard with silver stars. ‘Let darkness spread throughout the world!’

I knew I had to do something. I ran up to the Queen and lifted the crystal high above my head. Immediately, rays of bright white light as sharp as lasers shot out, piercing first her eyes and then her very heart. With a scream she shriveled to almost nothing and then disappeared.

It all happened so quickly: the black cloud evaporating and rainbow-streaked sunlight flooding the palace,

Tamino cutting Sarastro free and tearing Pamina from Nostos' grip, Sarastro calling his soldiers to take Nostos and throw him into the Rushing River.

'Your marriage has my blessing,' Sarastro told Tam, who was holding hands with Pamina and gazing into her eyes. As for you, George—'

'George, George!'...strange voices, getting louder and louder.

'GEORGE! OPEN YOUR EYES!'

What? But my eyes were open. I could see everything... Sarastro, Pamina, Tamino... but I forced my eyes open even wider.

I was back in the playroom, holding Tam, and my sisters were slapping me on my back.

'George, are you in a trance or something?' Hannah giggled. 'Have you not heard what's going on?'

Lucy was twirling around the room in pirouettes. 'She's awake, she's awake!'

'Queen Nera?' I exclaimed, a look of terror spreading across my face.

‘What are you talking about, you idiot? It’s GIGI! They’ve woken her up and she’s going to get better!’ Mum and Dad came rushing into the room. ‘Does he know?’ Mum asked, her eyes shining.

I hugged them, too happy to know what to say.

‘Come on,’ said Dad, ‘The clapping is starting!’

The clapping? Of course, it was Thursday; we clapped for the NHS at 8 o’clock.

Crammed together on our doorstep, our family started to clap, louder than any other on the street. In the distance, past the church and over the fields, a faint rainbow hung in the sky, as if it had been painted there. I was suddenly aware of a music so quiet that only I could hear it underneath the clapping; it was coming from the playroom. Tam! I quickly ran inside.

‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow, Tam?’ I smiled as I picked him up and took him to the front door with me. ‘Good idea.’

I stood on our drive, playing Tam with the strongest sound we have ever made. The melody carried into our street, into the air, across the village, maybe even to the

hospital where Gigi was. The music, and the clapping,
went on, and on, and on.

Epilogue: The War is Over

Friday 23 October

The microscopic soldiers have finally gone now, forced into a retreat, and hopefully for good. Things are just about back to normal. School is the same as it ever was, with some boring bits and some fun bits, but I'm so glad to be with my friends again. I had my party at Lazer Battle last weekend, on my half birthday! It was definitely worth waiting for.

Not everything is exactly as it was before the Virus, but in a good way. We still have dinner all together every night: Dad gets an earlier train home and I'm allowed to stay up a bit longer as well. Lucy and Hannah love riding their bikes now and let me come with them, the three of us bombing down trails in the woods near our house that we first discovered in Lockdown, even though they had been there all along.

I still go on adventures with Tam. I never know when, but it's always the right time. I know that we will be friends forever.

* * * * *

‘And the winning act in tonight’s talent show is...

George Galway and Tamino the Magic Flute!’

In a daze, I climbed the stairs to the stage to collect our prize. As I walked across the stage, I looked out to the mass of faces in the audience. My family was sat in the front row- Mum, Dad, Lucy, Hannah, Pops- and Gigi, almost herself again now, her eyes sparkling as she clapped and cheered for me as I had done for her and for all of the people who had made her better.

I gasped when I saw the trophy. A glittering crystal sat atop a mock-stone column, a miniature version of the Crystal of Light. I would keep it in my bedroom and the sunlight would fill the room with rainbows. I smiled down at Tam, who replied with a wink and the quietest of whispers: ‘Bravo, George!’

**These pictures have been drawn by
children in lockdown, April-May 2020**



Megan, aged 10





Sofia, aged 9



Caitlin, aged 10