

The Frozen Fields

By
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The Frozen Fields

Characters

THE GIRL

THE TRAVELLER

FIRST STRANGER

THE YOUNG MAN

SECOND STRANGER

Introduction

The Frozen Fields was commissioned by St Mark's in Newnham, Cambridge where it had its first performance in December 2017. The commission asked for an alternative to the somewhat cosy representation of Christmas we're sometimes given.

Part of the inspiration for the play was the painting *The Census at Bethlehem* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It's a picture that shows Mary and Joseph as part of a diverse crowd, some intent on the journey, others variously distracted. And it's clearly very cold.

The play first appeared in a promenade performance which started in the church's community hall. The audience was then shepherded outside and to various locations in the church itself. It was subsequently performed in promenade at another Cambridgeshire church, St Andrew's, Stapleford.

The Frozen Fields can, however, be performed in a single location and without moving the audience at all. Different stages of the journey can be suggested by simple changes to set or scenery. Music can also help with this. (Our production was enhanced by music specially created for us by composer Janet Wheeler.)

Sometimes the characters in the play address the audience directly, and sometimes they break into dialogue. Direct address has the effect of drawing the audience into the story. Some of the characters – specifically the Strangers – may emerge from or through the audience.

The parallels with the Christmas story are sometimes obvious and sometimes not. For example, the Girl is clearly a version of Mary, but is the Traveller simply a traveller to the census, or is he a Wise Man? The old man – who is mentioned in the script but doesn't appear – doesn't represent anyone in the Christmas story. It's a modern telling of that story but it includes many of the old elements. As the First Stranger puts it in the play's opening

“This is the story of a journey. It's very old. And happening now”

THE FROZEN FIELDS

THE FIRST LOCATION/SCENE

THE LIGHTS ARE UP. THE FIRST STRANGER APPEARS AND ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE.

STRANGER #1: This is the story of a journey. It's very old. And happening now. The story starts before the journey. It starts here, in a new house. It's empty at the moment, waiting to be inhabited, but the girl who intends to live here comes to look round ...

SHE GESTURES AND THE GIRL COMES ON AND ALSO ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE ...

GIRL: When I'd finished helping mother, I went to see the house, the little house that would be ours. And first I walked through the empty rooms and I pictured some of the things I'd set in them. Full wide-weave curtains. And a wooden chest for rugs and blankets, just there. And a shelf with pegs for mugs to hang, all different mugs for anyone who might drop by. And while I was there I looked at the open door and imagined him coming through and putting down his bag, and me looking up. Knowing it was him.

Then I went into the garden at the front. It was bare, nothing in it but soil. Everywhere was coming into warmth, though, and I did what I did with the rooms: I pictured how the garden was going to look. I closed my eyes and dreamed how it would be after a summer's growth. Herbs in hazy clumps, either side of the path.

When I opened my eyes there was a woman stopped at the gate. I don't know how long she'd been there, watching me. I felt something turn over inside because I thought I was on my own, and it was strange, strange to see her there as if she belonged, as if she always was.

I said, "Are you all right? Can I help?"

She said, "You're busy. Lost in your own world there."

I didn't say anything and she asked me what I meant to plant.

"Camomile," I said. "I'm making a little herb garden, just along the edge here."

THE SECOND STRANGER HAS APPEARED FROM THE AUDIENCE.

She said, "You've got it all planned, haven't you?"

STRANGER #2: It's all worked out, isn't it?

SHE COMES FORWARD AS IF TO LOOK AT THE LITTLE HERB GARDEN.

GIRL: And she came into the garden.

STRANGER #2: You've got it all planned.

GIRL: "You can't just let things happen," I said. (Directly to the Stranger) You have to plan.

STRANGER #2: Don't things get in the way sometimes?

GIRL: Well, yes, they do, but you can take account of things that might happen.

STRANGER #2: Can you?

GIRL: Yes. You plan for contingencies. It's one of my strengths, planning.

STRANGER #2: (Looking round) Well, I can see. Do you have others?

GIRL: Others?

STRANGER #2: Strengths. One of my strengths, you said. Do you have many?

GIRL: No. Well, I have two mainly.

STRANGER #2: Only two?

GIRL: So far.

STRANGER #2: Planning and one other?

GIRL: Yes.

STRANGER #2: Which is?

GIRL: (A smile) I'm nice.

STRANGER #2: Well, of course.

GIRL: I mean, I talk to people. I put them at ease.

STRANGER #2: You do, I can see that.

GIRL: And they talk to me. Though sometimes I wonder if it's the same thing. You know, it's just one strength really.

STRANGER #2: How?

GIRL: Because if I'm nice to people then I can get them to help me.

STRANGER #2: To do what you want?

GIRL: Yes. Sometimes.

STRANGER #2: And that's part of the plan?

GIRL: It's not always deliberate. But sometimes it is.

STRANGER #2: Well, you're also honest.

GIRL: That's not really a strength, though, is it?

STRANGER #2: Isn't it? You tell people the truth?

GIRL: Sometimes.

STRANGER #2: So do I.

GIRL: And sometimes I keep quiet. I don't want to hurt them.

THE STRANGER LOOKS AT THE GARDEN AGAIN.

STRANGER #2: What will happen when you have to leave?

GIRL: Leave?

STRANGER #2: To the garden? What will happen to the garden?

GIRL: I'm not leaving. I haven't even moved in yet.

STRANGER #2: But if you have to?

GIRL: I won't. This is what I'm doing. When we're married we'll move in and we'll have a market garden. That's what he does, he's a gardener.

STRANGER #2: He has his own garden?

GIRL: No, not yet. He gardens for other people. But he will have, he'll have this one. Fruit and vegetables at the back, a little herb garden just here. He'll still work for other people but he'll also cultivate things here, at home, for us. When it is our home.

STRANGER #2: And this is his plan?

GIRL: Yes.

STRANGER #2: His?

GIRL: Yes. Well, it will be. He's good, he's very good with plants, but he needs nudging on a bit.

STRANGER #2: So it's actually your plan?

GIRL: But he will want to do it. I'm bringing him round.

STRANGER #2: Well, yes, I can imagine.

GIRL: I mean bringing him round to the house, tonight. To show him the herb garden. And he'll say, "What's this?" and I'll say, "I've made this for you, this little garden in the front, planted as a gift, with my love. It's our future. This is where it all starts."

STRANGER #2: And he'll be happy about that?

GIRL: Of course. He'll love it.

So the garden will be all right. In fact, it'll be better, because I don't really know what I'm doing with herbs, and he'll be taking over. It's a five-year plan.

STRANGER #2: Five years?

GIRL: At least.

STRANGER #2: Unless things happen otherwise.

GIRL: Things?

STRANGER #2: Other things.

GIRL: They don't.

STRANGER #2: They always have before, even in the ordinary way. Spring and then summer, and then the summer fades. In winter all this will be frozen. It will become lifeless.

GIRL: But that won't change anything. There'll be another spring.

STRANGER #2: Not the same.

PAUSE.

GIRL: Why are you saying this?

STRANGER #2: Because there are other plans.

GIRL: What other plans?

STRANGER #2: Not yours.

GIRL: Whose?

THE STRANGER FINDS A CHAIR AND SETS IT DOWN FOR THE GIRL.

STRANGER #2: Sit down.

GIRL: I don't want to sit down.

STRANGER #2: All the same.

THE GIRL, NOW WORRIED, SITS.

GIRL: What do you want? What are you telling me?

STRANGER #2: Don't be afraid.

GIRL: You're making me afraid.

STRANGER #2: God has other plans for you.

GIRL: God?

STRANGER #2: Yes.

GIRL: You say don't be afraid and then you say God?

STRANGER #2: Take my hand.

THE GIRL HESITATES.

Take my hand.

SHE DOES. THE STRANGER CLASPS HER HAND.

You won't be on your own. You won't ever be alone, though sometimes you will feel it.

But ... not this house, waiting to be filled, and not this garden coming into warmth.

GIRL: What, then?

STRANGER #2: A frozen field to start with, far from here. You can dream how this house will be?

GIRL: I don't know.

STRANGER #2: That's what you were doing: the chest, the mugs on pegs -

GIRL: Yes but -

STRANGER #2: Then you can also dream these fields. Look, there. (Pointing these things out) The ground white with cold. Nothing growing there. The thin bones and ribs of trees, and a red sun going down behind them. A stooped old woman looking for sticks to burn. A cart broken in the snow. The farmyard pond, frozen hard. You see?

GIRL: Yes. It's unfriendly. I don't like it.

STRANGER #2: But you will have to go there. A stranger, surrounded by strangers. And you'll have to place yourself in their hands.

GIRL: No, I couldn't do it. I'd be helpless.

STRANGER #2: You wouldn't.

GIRL: Why are you telling me this? This would crush me.

STRANGER #2: No.

GIRL: I know it would.

STRANGER #2: It's not an easy thing I'm telling you, I know, but don't be afraid of it. You think too little of yourself. You have strengths you don't yet understand.

THE STRANGER BEGINS TO BACK AWAY.

GIRL: (To the audience) She said, "Helplessness will be your gift."

STRANGER #2: It will become a blessing

The world will go dark and still, and then it will begin to turn again.

THE STRANGER GOES.

GIRL: "And there'll be a child," she said. "You'll have a child."