

I SWALLOWED A TREBLE CLEF KEY

OPHÉLIE GIORDANA



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

She wasn't born into royalty like the Shakespearian Ophelia, but she has her own story to tell.

Ophélie Giordana is passionate with Celtic culture since a very young age. Her parents are teachers, and she learned that Literature and travels are shaping the mind, that the New World is not necessarily taught in school books.

She was born in Cannes — the star city of the French Riviera — on July 31, 1996 and that's probably why she wished for a bright future.

The journey she undergone in New Zealand — when she was 21 — had a huge impact on her. She always had an appeal for freedom and adventure, and this experience abroad fulfilled her.

She wrote her first stories at the age of 13, and she knew since then that writing was her ultimate life goal. She loves reading English literature books, and she admires Mary Shelley's, Doris Lessing's, Jane Austen's and Francis Scott Fitzgerald's work. The authors that inspired her the most are Fernando Pessoa, JK Rowling, JRR Tolkien, Roald Dahl, George RR Martin, Amélie Nothomb, Jane Austen and Sartre.

She's ambitious and it's with an open heart that she's doing anything in her power to succeed in what she loves and carry out her projects. Ophélie is really interested in cinema, and visual art. She has undergone a lot of different drawing contests and some of her relatives advised her not to drop drawing and painting. That's probably why she has an eye for detail. Books are like paintings, the choice of pigments is as much important as the choice of the pattern. She likes gothic literature because she likes to describe dark atmospheres as well, but she also feels the need to bring on a shred of mystery, joy and poetry into her writing.

She's got a Bachelor's degree in Law and she's currently undergoing studies in Political Sciences.

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My window had opened on a still life. The one made of colorful pigments. One without eyes to see, nor souls to simply be. That morning, there was a vivid light cast upon the trees, breaking in through the windows. It was one of those cold and misty mornings. I knew something had changed. Some sounds were dancing in my mind, they were striking me, my skull and my house shutters as well.

I suddenly felt my wife's hand on my shoulder. Lena really had a rather emaciated face and ivory complexion which turned out to be strongly repulsive. Yet, despite those noticeable strong facial features of hers that I loathed, she was my muse.

When her hand settled on my shoulder, I pictured a treble clef key in my mind, sliding off her palm and stretching on my shoulder before settling in my heart.

She whispered to me, "My sweet Nicolăi, you're causing yourself great pain to produce your music" but I found myself struggling to process her words.

I felt her breath on my neck, but that was all.

I was drinking my coffee sip by sip when she arrived : the tortuous melody everyone fears. She was crawling back at me, this sinuous little creature. Then she settled her fingers on my shoulder and made time stand still. It was a gruesome, scrawny creature. I knew I shouldn't listen to her, but the sirens' song is stronger than human being's common sense.

Was it the sound of '*Spring's Melody*' by Igor Stravinsky that I was hearing from my gramophone ? It was an astonishing melody, you could almost cut the atmosphere with a knife.

"Nicolăi, you haven't even touched your cup of tea !" Lena's voice breaking through my thoughts.

"My tea ?" I enquired slowly.

Which tea ? I was utterly convinced that I had already finished it.

No. My cup of tea was still on the coffee table. The vapour was twisting and curving into a wild dance. I wondered where my mind had gone. I thought maybe I had gone crazy. In reality, I was still in front of my cup, looking at the shiny dust glowering under the rays of sunlight.

"Are you listening to me, Nicolaï ?"

I apologised.

"I have a lot planned for you today. You will be looking for logs and splitting the pieces. I'm telling you for the 1000th time that my parents are coming for dinner !"

Parents and dinner was a combination of words that was getting me easily sick. It was not the secret mixture for happy marriages. Fortunately, I was still married to Lena.

Time had slipped away when my wife finally removed the turntable of the record player. She turned on the radio in order to make me listen to what she considered, actual music, of *Christine and the queens*. I was very disappointed. Contemporary society doesn't know what they're missing out on when they're getting rid of more and more classic songs of a more satisfying past time.

She grinned, even though I knew she felt sorry for my pitiful self.

"I'm sorry, my love, but your friend Stravinsky was giving me a headache."

You can guess what's happening when you're getting married to a modern woman : *it's a plague on both your houses*.

"Why don't you try to compose something with your beautiful acoustic guitar ? Or your violin ?" Lena asked.

Nicolaï remained silent.

She raised an eyebrow. I didn't want to make jokes or even answer her. It was making me tired. I was tired. The thought of meeting with her parents was tiring me more than the thought of being tired. It was a viscous cycle.

"Lena ?" I heard myself say.

She granted me a deep sigh, however a wrinkle appeared on her forehead which expressed a lack of understanding.

"What is your favorite piece of music ?"

Her wrinkled forehead suddenly dissolved into a wonderful grin.

"*Memory*, from Barbra Streisand," she replied instantly, "I love the peaceful melody she creates."

I considered her response. "It's still a modern piece though."

"Of course, if you are insistent on comparing her to your antiquity of *Spring's melody* !"

I was discouraged in responding by the slight note of exasperation in her voice.

"I strongly refuse to meet with your parents. They are boring to death. They are the only antiquities I have ever heard about. Since I know them, I've got the disturbing feeling of witnessing the renewal of the pyramids !"

The frying pan flew through the air and had its first flight, before making a crash landing where it dropped down, dead at my feet. My shoes, which used to be beautifully polished, were reflecting the moody, crimson, facial expression of my poor Lena.

"Don't you dare talk about them that way ! I shall remind you that it is thanks to them that we have this house !" Lena angered further. "WITHOUT them, we would be..."

"Happy ?" I questioned.

She had been throwing me the stink eye — even darker than a black hole where no light could escape — even though no one had ever seen such an adorable glower.

It was at this right moment that *Memory* was on the radio. It was like the hazard was hitting my door, trying to scramble each signal, cloud the issue and make us believe that life was planning each of my single move like a tailor-made suit.

The melody was so absorbing and soft that I almost had watery eyes and the music seemed to have a calming effect on my wife. I had the feeling of going back in time, but to a different period. It wasn't a pagan Russia with blazing and powerful colours, but a gloomy, poor, lifeless, and bleak America.

An ocean of colours were dancing around me, and broke into my open eyes. I was haunted. The music was trying to hug me with its ghostly arms. I couldn't move. I could only hold my breath.

"Don't you think you should get inspired by her for your next piece of work ?" Lena remarked, as the tune came and continued on.

"Inspired by a piece from Streisand ?" I scoffed, "Streisand's canned foods ? This will NEVER happen !"

"Stop criticizing her ! She is a brilliant artist !"

"A brilliant artist ? I'm sticking with my own point of view on this, darling dearest. I don't put my trust in other people's opinion anyway."

The music covered our words, and our argument. If people had passed by and had looked through our window, they would have noticed a young couple, acting like old people. It was so obvious : our skin and our bodies were young, yet we had greying hair, dark circles under our eyes and empty eyeballs reflecting the vastness surrounding us and how we craved for a better future.

Witnessing my wife crying, I got up. My anger had diffused and turned to vapor thanks to the music which helped to ease the tension. I felt full of energy and satisfaction while *Woman in love* was playing. I gently held her hand, and gently spun her round, losing herself into a whirlwind of emotion.

I noticed her golden hair for the first time. It wasn't silver as I had previously thought, but it was a complex blonde colour, filled with light. It was a rare mix of gold and silver. Unfortunately, those moments of happiness were spoilt... the music was taking me away and took possession of me to the extent that it was controlling every single step of mine. I wasn't dancing on my own, but the music itself was. HER. The music. She was the one who was controlling everything since the beginning of time. From the memorable melodies of slaves' singing, to national anthems, to the most mesmerizing songs of the most famous singers! It was an unrealistic thought to believe

that mankind was controlling her, because she was passing through time and it seemed like she was possessing us all.

"Nicolai ! Don't you hear me for God's sake ?! My parents will arrive soon, they won't be long."

I shook my head out of my thoughts, "What ?!" I stammered.

I had collapsed on the sofa without even noticing, I had had another blackout. I was overwhelmed with a strange feeling, that was easily identified as embarrassment.

"We were dancing, weren't we ?"

"Dancing ?" answered Lena, "Yes, but you suddenly sat on the sofa and you stayed there".

"It's her fault..." I murmured, not completely sure of my own words.

"What are you talking about, hey ? Who's fault ?"

Lena had wide eyes.

"Nicolai, you have got to wake up ! My parents will arrive in ten minutes, help me set the table !"

She swiftly moved towards the coffee table, grabbed knives, forks, everything she could land her hands on : the cutlery was freshly clean. She took the porcelain-made plates and spread them across the table like a fan in her hands. She was as swift as an Olympic athlete ! It was like she trained her entire life for that moment.

Someone knocks on the door and mother-in-law and father-in-law were here, *what a pleasure* ! This is how irony looks like when I'm meeting with them.

"Lena, sweetie ! Oh... Nicolai, my chick !" Tania gushed.

"Please Tania, you do not wish to see him in your dish, do you ?"

Actually she would gladly dig me a grave and see me buried in it.

"Vaughn, please," said Tania, with a little grin.

She finally roared with laughter. It was a frenetic laugh that will stay with me for the rest of my life. She caressed her own golden hair, probably checking she still had some. It didn't make any sense that a woman like her had such beautiful hair. However, I was glad that her genes had allowed my own wife to have such beautiful hair, as well.

"Boy ! I love your outfit so much, such a work of art, a masterpiece even, it suits you," said dad-in-law with much enthusiasm.

He was full of energy, and always as happy as a lark.

A well advised and educated qualified translator would have understood this : finally I do not pity you for putting on odd multicolored socks, suiting your thick tangled hair. This is what Vaughn probably meant.

"Well, Daddy and Mummy, shall we..." Lena interjected.

"Eat." I thought, finished her sentence with relief.

Then I realised I had actually thought out loud. I felt my cheeks colour.

Dad-in-law and Mother-in-law were not dressed up to the nines, they were not chic or sophisticated either. They were standing up, rooted in the ground, staring at me with owl eyes, like brainless golden fishes.

Tania's neck was adorned with jewelry and pearls that a friend of hers had given her for Christmas — in order to ease the tension of their friendship. She handed me a bottle of vodka that she brought with her while she gave me a sidelong look.

They sat in silence at the table while Tania pulled a little on her skirt, like she was afraid of getting cold : however, it was impossible for her to be as cold as she was probably endangering her life by sitting close to the roaring fire in their giant fireplace. Dad-in-law was constantly glancing at his watch. It was known to all parties that standing at the table together was unbearable and tormented us with an inextinguible will to slap each other in the face.

We were undoubtedly condemned to such torment.

This irony of mine — stemmed up from my wit — will never be successful in filling the gap which was emerging like the cliffs of Moher in the fog. When I had been travelling, I saw those greenish giants with their big mouths appearing from nowhere,

consuming the ocean. I felt that way. I swallowed each tiny, bitter remark from my parents-in-law without nodding.

My father-in-law stood up abruptly and looked like he feigned an air of enthusiasm.

"Before we eat, I would like to make a toast, and raise my glass to the most fantastic son-in-law of Russia !"

"You always have this unrelenting argument to drink alcohol, honey. First appetizer and then what ? Are you going to stop with drinking vodka ?" giggled Tania, directing her speech at her husband.

Father-in-law didn't give her his full attention. He lit a cigar, and waved at me, gesturing for me to follow. He grabbed a wine glass with an exuberance of style that reminded me that this guy was originally a dandy. A dandy with a name that left its mark in people : Vaughn meant *royal* in Russian.

"Come with me boy, we should let the women chat about what they usually chat about : cooking, stitching, and all those things that make men proud of being men." He smirked.

Lena and her mum shot us a glance. The kind of glance that would have killed a man cold. Tania couldn't stop herself, she arose — with her usual imperial look I was used to — and shouted :

"So be it ! Walk away ! Put the world to rights, you bloody communists ! All the while I will call on some feminist friends of mine !"

Father-in-law raised an eyebrow at his daughter, before giving the faintest of smiles underneath his copper moustache.

"They can probably hear you in Manhattan sweet pea, but not the feminists. And I'm not a nobody, I'm a man of the people. " Father-in-law said calmly.

He took advantage of the temporarily calm atmosphere to leave the room, without even waiting for me to follow. Anyway, I had better things to do than follow him, but there he was, sat on my armchair, in my own office. This was a sacred place for me, it was where I spent my nights and days composing music. My armchair was dear to my heart, especially because it was wrapped with colourful and soft fabrics, covered with

Japanese patterns. Our house was a smart layout and assortment of all culture possible.

"What a beautiful gramophone you're having here ! A gift from Lena I suppose ?

"No, I bought it myself."

He stood up and touch the handle of the gramophone and the reader head without even listening to a word I was saying. I saw in his eyes that something had changed : his look had a sense of melancholy, something not quite distinct, in the reflection of a broken glass ; a little tiny spark in the darkest of times.

His mood changed instantly when he realised that he was not alone.

"I love old things. I have the soul of a collector ! Don't mistake my words, I'm not an advocate of Tolstoï and his love for tragic endings."

Vaughn had his eyes filled with emotion, and he poured himself a drink, and nearly choked himself with the liquid. So close. It was harsh to think, but at that moment, I was so close to the burden of the parents-in-law being halved and I had felt joy. I swiftly came to the realisation that I much preferred Vaughn company over Tania's. What could possibly be more hateful than a Mother-in-law ? Or perhaps I was being bitter again.

"With all my respect, don't drink too much vodka..." I said, falsely concerned about Vaughn's health. Well, at least, I was good at pretending.

"I love witnessing houses getting close to the road when I'm having a drink."

"Well, now I can say that I'm relieved !"

He paused.

"Are you happy with my daughter, son ?" He questioned.

I had had enough with those impertinent questions, those relating to being a good son-in-law. I had married a modern woman, yet her parents were old-school.

"I couldn't be more of a fulfilled husband." I replied, "Lena plays piano with such talent. Have you ever seen the movie *Anna Karenina* ?" I did not wait for a response, "She can play several of Dario Marianelli's compositions divinely !"

"I'm glad, Nicolai, so now you're ready to get down to serious business and go a step further in your relationship, right ?" A rather hopeful tone dominating his father-in-law's voice.

"Lena and I don't want any children." I remarked abruptly.

Vaughn spat out the vodka he had had in his mouth.

"Holy Christ and Mother of God ! Musicians, are they all bloody insane ?"

"There is no need to remind me of how much you dislike me as I am fully aware." I replied calmly, slightly irritated by his prejudice of musicians.

"Well, I think that this is of an important matter that this decision would be set in stone, and that you become fully aware of it ! I'm telling you boy and I don't want you to forget it !"

"Well, at least you know what a stone is ! Maybe you were born before the Bronze Ages after all ! Is the Paleolithic era an accurate guess ?" I snapped.

"Lena must have played way too much of her Marianelli's compositions for you to feel this disturbed !"

Vaughn removed his round glasses and stared at me with a long, hard look, with his characteristic icy gaze : intense blue eyes which shook me up immensely. I understood why he kept those eyes hidden behind dense glasses. I could comprehend his attitude, I had a clear vision of his expectations and how I marked up to them : I wasn't the son-in-law he had wished for all this time.

He rose a cigar to his lips — quivering with emotion — and belched the smoke like an old darkened chimney. He was definitely hurt deep in his heart, that much I could sense.

"May I suggest that you accompany me to church ?" He asked me humbly.

I had a genuine laugh. In fact, as strange as it seemed, he smiled back at me with the same hateful smile. We both hated each other, but we had respect for one another, even though he wouldn't acknowledge it even if it was directly asked of us to do so, especially by Tania. He was certainly fearing the backlash. Tania was a fearsome woman, not to say frightening.

"Father, Nicolaï !" came Lena's voice echoing through the house, "Come here ! We're supposed to be having dinner !"

The singing voice of Lena urged calm and discipline.

It was time : without even running a finger across the bottle of vodka, I felt already dizzy and tipsy. Vaughn left his glass lying on the dusty bookcase. I picked it up to bring back to him, then I noticed that the dust had printed the shapes of the glass. For the first time I saw the shadows drawn by the variety of furnitures and objects emerging from the semi-darkness. It was beautiful shadow puppets that my mind was playing with, making them alive. They took life in front of my own eyes and I found myself captivated by it. A muffled sound numbed my ears, a soft melody ran for my pure delight.

"Nicolaï ! "Lena's voice becoming ever more impatient.

I thought it was best not to test her temper.

Meal after meal passed before my lifeless eyes. I wasn't even hungry anymore. It was a strange feeling though, especially because a couple of hours ago, my stomach was swelling from hunger. The smell of the warm bread, and the turkey was enhancing the need. And yet, in those moments, my senses were on hold, I wasn't hearing anything : I had a music scroll drawn in my mind, catchy melodies and words were floating and settled in every corner of my spirit. Each tiny little piece of it. The music was filling my loneliness with cluster of glitter.

Tania was eating with an easy elegance, dabbing her mouth with delicacy and talking with dedication. No matter how passionate her conviction of speech, I couldn't hear a single word of what she was saying. I couldn't hear anything really. I had a fixed gaze. I was unable to obtain a clear vision of what was actually happening before my eyes, and I was overwhelmed by little details : such as, the copper mustache of Vaughn, the blue-green eyes of Tania, the fine porcelain dishes, the thin crack in the wine glass, the scratch in the tin of the teaspoon, the red light glowing out of the reading lamp. I believed I heard a bowed string. Was a force playing of my violin ? Suddenly, my breathing became sporadic as I struggled to find air... Was the dessert served already ? No, it was time for turkey... nop, not my Mother-in-law, the turkey, the bird...

A piano added to my insanity.

I rose up slowly into an initial phase of rigor mortis. Lena's mouth was distorting with horror, but I ignored the reason why. My feet drove me to my room. Alone. It was as lovely as always, this organised mess I was used to. A hand took mine, and I saw Lena's blue eyes staring at me with concern. I wanted to tell her I must write, compose, but I couldn't speak, the words were stock in my throat. I couldn't hear anything. I pointed weakly at my desk made of exquisite rosewood. She rolled her eyes at me and she let me be. The door slammed shut.

I sat at my desk without even thinking about it. The melody of the piano embraced the sound made by the fiddle. A bunch of sounds, noises were bumping into each other, overlaying, embracing, melting and separating. I was on the right track, I found the perfectly suitable melody ! The music ! It was mine ! She was. She was soothing me with her mortal arms, I could feel her breath on my wet forehead, her poison in my veins. I knew something had changed. It was something approaching me cautiously and windingly, something in my gut, something in my veins, in my fingers which was drawing some strange shapes on the paper. I felt I was a better version of myself. The ink was bleeding, but it didn't matter, I had a stack of papers that I had piled up in a drawer a couple of days ago. I've been to the printing company and I used my savings to buy some. It was surely the reason why — Lena and I — took the resolution to eat chestnut purée and chestnut soupe only, just so I could be unimpeded in this moment.

I stayed there, by the fading yellowish light of the fire, the smoke dancing in the chimney. But, in spite of that fire, the icy vibe was much like any paranormal events. Then, I heard the piano only, the sounds were around me, holding hands, becoming a sinister farandole, hammering my skull like a hailstorm.

'NO !' I was about to lose her ! I was about to lose the melody !

I started writing faster and faster on the paper, scribbling like a mad man, a virtuoso burned with the flickering flame of surviving. My life was the game, I was gambling, I had waited for this moment my entire life ! It was my insurance for immortality !

I suddenly heard the laughter of Lena, in the next room, then the one of her mother. The melody didn't vanish... until I heard the dishes colliding. The laughs became louder, I heard really clearly Lena proclaiming :

"I believe that Father loved my dessert ! It's home-made, I picked the chestnuts in the forest of Khimki. It was far too cold that day. »

"Sweet pea, he doesn't deserve you..."

"Mother ! You know perfectly well what I think of your venom !" Lena exclaimed.

The violins became more insistent, but started to fade away of my mental orchestra.

I stood up from my desk, I was loosing track of the melody ! She was slipping away little by little, until she disappeared like a marvelous mirage.

‘No, I have to put an end to this tragedy !’ I thought to myself.

"Sweet pea, I only tell you what I deeply feel in my tender heart, that's all," came the irritable remarks of my mother-in-law :

"Do you plan to live in this half rotting shack covered with dust until the end of your life ? Yes, I admit that we passed it on to you, but only with deep regrets because you turndown our offer to yield you the apartment in Moscow ! Your dreadful husband can't stand air pollution, he rather prefers the smell of dead corpses and decay."

"That's far enough Tania!" Said Vaughn, his amused tone was scratching and as sharp as a knife to my ears.

I run to the gramophone. It was of an ebony color and my fingers couldn't stop running along its darkish texture. I admired the splendid rotating plate until my vision got blurred. It occurred to me that it was moving by itself. I slipped in the dining room where Vaughn and Tania were finally at peace, relaxed, and full. They were giving a toast to happy days. But they seemed to move as well, twisting like the smoke, and distorting like the wind, such as they were in fact anamorphosis.

"What about theatre, sweet pea ? I hope you didn't put aside your precious values. Would you like to attend a performance ? What do you say about the end of the week ?" Lena's father asked her, trying to steer the conversation to a more positive topic.

"Nicolai doesn't like when I'm out for too long. He says he has trouble thinking when I'm away, that the melodies are somewhat, instable and vanish as quick as being

swept away by the wind."

"What a fool your husband is, however it is not any of my concern. But I implore you to think about your mental health first, little dove !" her mother remarked, trying to stay a slight bit positive. "May God helps you in those dark times ! When I met your father, we were going out every night, have dinner among worthy people, representatives and aristocrats. We were true nightbirds, always partying !"

Her mother and father exchanged a nostalgic look as they briefly remembered those times.

"Well, sounds like you were vampires to me !" Lena replied, in a weak defense of her action.

"I'm not kidding, Lenouchka, don't play it down ! Don't be a child ! I'm trying to reason with you, I'm worried. A mother is entitled to be worried about her children and your musician does seem strange to me. I believe you deserve so much better !"

"Much like the psychotic Sherlock Holmes you arranged me a date with once ?" Lena asked her mother, incredulously. "Don't you ever give a thought that I would like to marry for love ?"

"Don't be silly !"

"My dear," her mother continued in fake, sugary like tones, "did I ever tell you that love comes after marriage ?" She paused taking in her daughter's expression of disbelief. "Everybody knows this motto ! You should have found a gentleman of the Russian aristocracy and you would have been really fulfilled, well supported, with many children ! Right now you're the maid of an untidy musician, spending his time to witness the seasonal cycle without even moving a toe to help you ! You are putting more into this relationship than he is and at the end what have you got to show for it ?"

Her mother raised an eyebrow at her, awaiting a response.

I slid over to the table, not slowly and carefully like a snake about to sink his fangs in the skin of his prey, but more with purpose and determination. This is probably why they didn't really realised I was there at first.

Then they heard me, and they looked at me with an expression of discontent on

their pretty royal faces. I put down the gramophone on the dinner table, hand on a cold metal object jammed in my belt.

Three gunshots resonated in the house.

The sound was deafening and everlasting. The wine was entirely spilt on the table, all over the off-white tablecloth... the huge red spot caused by it didn't bother me for some strange reasons.

I hoped the silence would fall once again, but the music was suddenly perfectly audible... it was my melody !

It was coming from the gramophone.

It was the *The Phantom of the Opera*.