

# *The Secret of Hagia Sophia*

*By*

## *Sarah Stuart*

I should be in an office on Canary Wharf, where I've spent almost every weekday for thirteen years, and then dutifully visiting my family for Christmas. I'm not at work and I'm staying here until January, alone.

"Keep following the lollipop, and do remember I'm number *nine*."

Our guide to one of the most fabulous buildings in Istanbul waves an imperious hand. An hour from now, maximum, he'll be guiding another group and inflicting the same boring lecture on them.

You gather from that I dislike guides? Right. If I want to know something I can read a leaflet or Google when I get back to the hotel. This guide has already said the Hagia Sophia has the second biggest dome in Europe, or was it the world? Half the time he's drowned out by guide number five. Anyway, I cricked my neck admiring the way the dome seems to hover over the nave, sunlight reflecting on the floor. And I already knew the Hagia Sophia was a Greek Orthodox basilica and then an imperial mosque, until somebody or other decided it would trap more tourists as a museum.

I can see that the mosaics are wonderful colours and it's obvious what they represent. What I want to find, if I can remember the exact location, is a hole.

Not any old hole: this one grants wishes if you put your thumb inside and twist it through the full three hundred and sixty degrees. That isn't easy.

You don't believe me? Consider the evidence. Last time I came to Istanbul I heard the story of the thumb hole from a couple equally intent on escaping their guide so they could wish for a grandson. Not having children, never mind married children, or offspring with partners, my wish was for a Kindle Fire. Surprised? No. Why would you be when you like reading books?

A Kindle Fire is exactly what Dad gave me for Christmas, with none of the usual nagging for a list of desirable gifts. That Christmas I didn't write a list. I sat in my flat talking to the family on the phone, ostentatiously praising my ancient Kindle that shows book covers in shades of grey. Sarah, a bored train commuter since university, wanted a Kindle Fire? No way.

There are a lot of columns inside Hagia Sophia. - It means The Shrine of The Holy of God, in English, if you were wondering. - I suppose they're there to hold the place up though they're carved like works of art, or most of them are. The one I'm looking for is fairly plain, probably because it isn't on view and never would have been sought out by any but the nosiest worshippers, Christian or Muslim.

Oh glory! I hope that guide can't count. A lot more people have heard about the Wishing Column: there's a queue, a long winding queue, and no way am I going to be walking out of the exit when guide number nine expects me to leave.

How shall we pass the time? Any ideas? No? Fortunately I have: we'll both take a guess at what each person desires most in the whole world.

You want to know what the first one looks like? Of course you do: how can you guess when you can't see them? It's a shame I can't ask them if either of us is right, but everybody knows if you tell somebody what you wished for it doesn't come true.

The Wishing Column is so big even a man with arms that resemble a gorilla's can't clasp them round it. The chap at the front of the queue just tried and you don't need to know what he looks like, apart from he's hairy perhaps. It's his two children that want to wish, not him. It's going to take ages. Listen, their mum's grumbling about time.

"Brad, if you plan on waiting while both of them twiddle their thumbs, which looks impossible to me, you'll find me in the Grand Bazaar."

Bearded, long-haired, Brad, frowns. "Where in the Grand Bazaar?"

Mum looks down her nose at him. - Yes, it is possible. – "The shops that do all the handmade table linen."

"Maria, some of it costs a fortune!"

"If you'd had more patience yesterday, I could have got the tablecloths I wanted then. I brought all the measurements, in centimetres and inches."

She marches off, leaving Brad spluttering. Making stuff to measure, using your choice of the handmade patterns, only takes two hours, but Brad's right about the price. With luck, he'll lift up those children for their goes quickly. He's telling them to stop chasing each other round the column. "Come here, Jed, and don't you go wandering off, Rosie."

Brad perches Jed on one arm. What the heck do you suppose the boy's full name is? He's about eight, I'd say. Fair hair, snub nose, grubby hands: not

much to go on, but I'm not clairvoyant. Based on what he looks like, my guess is a computer game. Yours?

"I've done it, Dad. I wished for an Xbox for my birthday."

He won't get it, unless Brad wanted ideas, but I wasn't too far off.

Let's try Rosie. She's older: about ten, long pink sundress, matching hat dangling down her back, and she's a true ash blonde. I bet she'll be after a princess costume, or maybe not. She's no little lady; the only way she gets her thumb through three hundred and sixty degrees is with Brad turning her upside-down. No, telling you the colour of her panties wouldn't help but it does say Tuesday on them. According to the rhyme, she's full of grace. Make what you like of...

I thought they'd finished! Brad's having a go. I think we can agree on his wish. If he's too late to stop Maria ordering made-to-measure tablecloths, he gets to the Grand Bazaar before she reaches the jewellery section to while away her two hours spending money there.

Next? I can describe him in one word: phantom. No, be fair, Sarah, five words: The Phantom of the Opera, one eye covered, cape, the lot, or almost. He's up to no good, unless he's in love again. I suppose he might be and he's probably wishing for five gold rings. No, that's a line from a Christmas song. It is almost Christmas and on the cold side for a holiday in Turkey.

"*We three kings of...*" Sorry, I can't even sing Happy Birthday in tune. Helped me no end when the music teacher wrote *satisfactory* on my school report. Mum didn't believe a word any teacher said about me, ever again.

Whatever the phantom wished for, he's gone. I wonder if he put the evil eye on the next couple. It sounds like it.

"Hurry up, Eve. Have you forgotten I booked dinner on a boat down the Bosphorus?"

"Gregory! I thought you were joking."

Sorry, reader, I ought to have told you Gregory's about twenty years older than Eve and he looks very rich: bespoke suit, platinum tiepin, Cartier watch...

"I promised you the first meal of our honeymoon would be a romantic river cruise."

"That's not a river! It's got waves on it. We saw them from the bridge."

"I chose Istanbul because the part of the city on this side of the river is in Europe and the other is Asian. Where else would you find a city on two continents?"

"You chose, Gregory. I agreed because you went on about buying me a necklace at the Grand Bazaar."

That bazaar has a lot to answer for... and Eve's shoved in front of Gregory to twist her thumb.

You still reckon she's wishing for calm water or a necklace? My bet is she's thinking of a fire at the solicitor's office where they signed the prenup. It's Gregory's go now and he looks worried. It can't be about paying for two romantic dinners, or a necklace. A fast response from the fire brigade before she takes him for half his worldly goods?

I wish there was somewhere to sit. My feet hurt. It's all very well for you, reading in a comfy armchair, or lounging on the sofa, or in bed. I'm the one in the queue.

Next? Okay, okay. Patience. She's Japanese. No kimono, but half-close your eyes and you can see one. Turquoise, with sequins, and boy is she slim.

I wish I hadn't eaten all the chocolate I bought at the bazaar. No, I haven't wasted my wish: there are still about twenty people in front of me, though maybe some of them are here to watch. This girl makes me feel fat, untidy, and too tall. How the heck is she going to reach? If Brad the gorilla was still here she wouldn't be so undignified as to let him turn *her* upside-down...

I don't believe this! The next chap in the queue is on his hands and knees, and she's standing on his back. Either he fancies his chances with her or his feet hurt too.

What could a beauty like her possibly want?

I do wish you'd think *louder*. You're leaving me to do all the guessing. She's on her own. True love? Whatever it was, she's turned her thumb, and if that chap spends much longer brushing dust off his trouser knees he won't see which way she goes. He must want something else.

Right, think Elvis and you've got him. Did you know there's massive rock by the side of a road from England into mid-Wales with *Elvis* painted on it? You didn't want to know? Fair enough. I'm dithering now. Is he wishing for a trip to Graceland with an Elvis look-alike included, or his own karaoke machine? Neither? Just to be able to sing like Elvis? You could be right. In my dreams I'm the next Celine Dion.

"Every night..." Sorry, though perhaps if I did sing these people would decide to come back tomorrow. What do you mean, it would spoil the game? Never a thought for a girl's sore feet, or it being cold! Rosie must have been frozen in that sundress.

Get on with it, Sarah. Elvis has gone and this chap must be eighty if he's a day, the one twisting his thumb now. He'll dislocate it turning it that slowly, but

you do see what I mean? As long as your thumb is twisting through three hundred and sixty degrees in that hole - not any old hole, if there are more, that one - you can think, and what you wish will come true. I could have made Mum buy me the Kindle Fire if I'd believed this worked. I did it for fun so I had to keep quiet about presents. The tag on a flat oblong gift read *Happy Christmas, Sarah. Love from Dad.*

The eighty-year-old has coat sleeves with worn leather patches on the elbows and he can't be as tall as me. He's on tiptoe and his shoes need soling. No, I didn't realise you could have new soles applied either. They do it in the Grand Bazaar.

Does he want a new coat, new shoes, or both? Yes, he does look Turkish. How did you guess? You must be thinking louder, and making sense. He's only just found out that in the city where he's lived all his life is a column that could grant him riches. *That's* what he wants, comfort in his old age... he was ogling Eve earlier. He could have her; it would save her worrying about whether the fire will consume the prenup before Gregory's fire engine arrives. She must have guessed about the fire brigade. Now what? Even I don't know what happens if two people make conflicting wishes.

Okay, we've got him sorted. See what you think of this one. Is he Turkish too? Yes, definitely. Fortyish and... you'll never guess in a million years. He's got a wooden lollipop under his arm and the number on it is *nine*. Start praying! No it doesn't matter which God you believe in. If you don't believe in any of them, borrow Zeus: he's the Greek God of Thunder... harmless, unless you get struck by lightning.

What am I panicking about? I'm not panicking. I never panic, except when my party guide gets to make his wish before me. Suppose he wishes everyone in his group would file out right now and never come back? He's hated us from the start.

Keep praying. He's gone, and my feet aren't hobbling towards the exit. They still hurt. I think it's the boots I bought in the... yes, the Grand Bazaar. What do you mean, I must be missing somebody? I started this game, like a sort of *I Spy*, to pass my time, not yours.

Her name is Patsy-Ann, or she's borrowed a friend's rucksack: that's the name on it, and she's American. Of course she is; who else could wear a baseball cap back to front and still look like she should be on the front cover of Vogue? Not enough evidence? Okay, I cheated. Her passport's sticking out of the back pocket of her jeans. She's with a group of friends, but she's the only one who queued to put her thumb in the hole. That was quick! Three hundred and sixty degrees, no problem. It's taking her longer to hoist that rucksack onto her shoulders. They've all got them, and loads of bags from the bazaar. My best guess is she wished for a night in a spa hotel for her and her mates, not that they'll spend much time there. The nightlife in Istanbul is too lively.

Two teenage boys, and they've got massive backpacks hung about with frying pans and all sorts of other camping gear. They'd like a night in a hotel, sure to. No? Only if it's the same one the girls picked. You could be right. Keep thinking loudly; it's more fun, and I might need you to pray again.

Who's next? I know who's joined the back of the queue: hairy Brad and spendthrift Maria. They've bought Rosie a coat, matching hat, gloves, and winter shoes. Either she wished for them or she was shivering with cold. If

they both wish to find a stash of money they'll bang their heads together bending down to grab it: they're still arguing, but not as much as Eve and Gregory. I expect Brad and Maria will stay married. I hope so. Rosie's a sweetie, and who'd adopt a boy called Jed if neither of them wanted him?

*Next* to put his thumb in the hole, impatient reader, is a Frenchman. I don't need to see his passport: his girlfriend is with him and she's talking.

"Pierre, ne se dépêcher. J'ai mal aux pieds."

French was a subject my teacher was honest about. *Sarah must try harder*, but I'm pretty sure pieds are feet and mal is bad. I bet her feet hurt. She's wearing boots just like mine. The man at the Grand Bazaar said they were a one-off, unique. I thought his English was good, knowing a word like unique.

Pierre is twenty-five, twenty-six maybe? Drop-dead gorgeous. Some girls have all the luck. She looks like a Vogue model too, so he won't wish for a replacement. If I thought he might, I'd ask you to pray. It would be worth learning French to spend one night... never mind.

Will he wish for stardom? I wonder if he can sing. He might wish to be in films... he *is* in films, and if I move to ask for his autograph I'll lose my place in the queue. He's wishing for a holiday without a single fan bothering him? I expect you're right. He's come to Istanbul because it's the only place that has a wish-granting thumbhole.

I think the girl behind him recognises him too. I'm sure she does: she's found a pen and paper. She's close enough not to lose her turn if she asks for his autograph, but she isn't saying a word. Unless you thought of the same wish for Pierre as me, I'm one up. I was definitely right.

What's she like, the other thwarted autograph hunter? Pierre's age, roughly. Long brown hair, hazel eyes, what looks like a fur coat that I hope is fake, and boots like mine. How long does that wretched man wait before he puts another *unique* pair on his stall? If I didn't need my wish for something else I'd use it to make him design every single pair of boots differently. If her feet feel like mine, and Pierre's girlfriend's "pieds", she'll wish the cheating hawker down among Istanbul's sewer rats.

Next, here in the Hagia Sophia, is a private queue. I was hoping only one of those four intended to make a wish. Oh no, they all want a go. Meet Valery, Linda, Jeff and Todd. I don't have to describe them individually. You can tell from the names which ones wear skirts. Fiftyish, dyed hair, dark with grey roots, specs - not that there's anything wrong with specs: they picked the wrong frames - overweight but wearing denim jackets and jeans, or skirts as appropriate, only they're not appropriate: they're stretched like a second skin and the first can't be good. The best wish for them? A month's stay in a boot camp. If you've any idea what their real wishes are, think louder.

The Hagia Sophia closes at five o'clock. Running out of time is getting more worrying than the cold and the state of my feet. I wish I hadn't dumped my comfy old flatties in a litter bin. It's okay; that wasn't a wasted wish either. Until I put my thumb in that hole it doesn't count, and I'm not taking pity on Brad and Maria and letting them go in front of me. If I wanted to, I think the people queuing behind me, and in front of them, might turn violent, especially the lady who I've just noticed is wearing *unique* boots. If they fit, the nails will be sticking in her feet. Mine are, and it isn't far from the Grand Bazaar to the Hagia Sophia: it just feels like ten miles across a plantation of miniature cacti.

Another boy, three or four: I'm not an expert on small children. I hope he isn't called Jed and his parents don't want wishes too. He's being lifted but he's okay with the thumb twist. I wonder if he wants an Xbox.

"I wish that bump in Mummy's tummy was a boy not a girl."

Well, we know, but so do his parents, who very likely thought they were on their way to completing the perfect family. The only way that wish could come true is 'Mummy' having twins, but it won't: he said it out loud.

Next? I thought it was a couple. They are a couple, but the man sports a padded sling on his front. You're not going to believe this, or maybe you are given the other lunatics. Dad holds a tiny baby up to the right height, and Mum guides the nearest thumb round the hole. Rosie could have told her that doesn't work. Dad turns *it* - yellow clothes instead of pink or blue so I can't tell if it's a boy or a girl - upside-down.

Mum does the talking, aloud and not even a whisper, in a squeaky voice. "I wish for a holiday in New Zealand with Grandma and Grandpa."

Dad hisses at her. "Mummy, you... Wayne forgot to say Christchurch! We could land on North Island, not South."

"It's okay, Daddy. Wayne's... My thumb has another inch to go. Grandma and Grandpa live in Christchurch."

I'm not heartless, truly, but it looks like justice: Wayne is being sick all over the pair of them.

Hang in there, reader, not much longer to wait. Have a coffee... I wish I could have a frothy hot coffee.

Next is a Jenny Agutter look-alike. Not quite as young as she looked in the original *Railway Children* film, but with that same mix of innocence and

understanding: the archetypical elder sister, only without any children needing to be turned upside-down. After Rosie's Tuesday panties and the projectile vomiting I'm pleased about that; I'm getting close to the thumbhole.

She – let's call her Jenny, it suits her - is lovely, young, and alone. I'm not sure how safe Istanbul is for somebody who's any of those things, never mind all of them. The doorman at my hotel issued *awful warnings* about taxies. I can't remember exactly what; I didn't intend to take one. The romantic in me is screaming *love* for Jenny's wish, but it could be absolutely anything. Very likely a good wish for somebody else, or am I muddling her with the film character? Probably.

One more person, and he looks nice in a laid-back way. Not a man to buy a girl *unique* boots. If he doesn't disappear while I'm making my wish I might bump into him, accidentally. It's not until now I realise that while I've been talking to you, he's been watching me.

"Maybe, this time..." Quiet Sarah, and concentrate. This reader, who's been thinking hard, and praying, deserves a chance to guess what my nice, laid-back man is wishing for. It won't be dating me that's for sure.

Do you think, loudly please, that it might be? That it very likely is? Your trouble, reader, is being a romantic softie, and you don't know the real me.

He's gone, and it's my turn. My thumb is in the hole, turning very slowly...

*Janus Tyler, this is my wish for you. Propose to a girl and promise her a new beginning. She will accept, but leave you standing at the altar. You will feel rejected, unlovable, ugly, embarrassed, and like your world just ended. Apt, for you're named for the Roman God of beginnings and endings. On New Year's Eve you will come to Istanbul. At midnight, you will walk beside the*

*Bosporus but you will not see me until it is too late and you are falling backwards into the icy water. You cannot swim and you will scream “Sarah”; you know I could save you, but I will not. You will die in your own month of January, my two-faced erstwhile lover.*

You didn't guess *my* wish, did you? I didn't say a word. I even thought quietly. You did, but you don't believe anybody will drown in the Bosporus on New Year's Eve; it's just a story and nobody's wishes will come true. Where is *your* evidence, dear reader? Visit the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and test it for yourself: the thumbhole is there, in a column less ornate than many others.

Oh, before you go, remember the old saying, *be careful what you wish for.*

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