

A Goodbye Kind of Wave

Earlier the same day, I had seen the woman in the hat crossing the road in front of the bookshop. I noted the frayed green hat and startling unmatched shoes, one a plastic gardening clog and the other a brown boot.

Now, I caught sight of her again—brief glimpses—between the dunes at Forrest Inlet. It was without a doubt the same woman, walking slowly now, the crown of that hat bobbing in and out of sight between tussocks of saltbush and grass and the fence sunken between them. She walked slowly, but it did not feel leisurely. There was cheerlessness in that gait, a despondency speaking of weariness that was more than physical. And I tried to decide between catching up with her and engaging in a chat, or leaving her to her own devices. Leaving her alone meant not intruding on a privacy that seemed to travel with her; a bubble that kept everything out. I wondered if she noticed her surroundings.

And then she turned, and head down, wove back through the saltbush, catching me—and herself—by surprise. We stood face to face.

‘Oh,’ she said, and stopped abruptly, looking at my shoes. ‘You can’t be a painter, because ... look at your shoes.’

I looked down. ‘I ... ah ...’ What could I say?

She looked out from under the brim of the hat, looked at my face, under the brim of mine, like it was a shop window in which she sought something she might like. ‘Ever been painted?’

It was a surprising question. My face must have shown it. ‘No.’

Turning her back to me, she pointed inland. ‘You know that abandoned ruin a bit back that way? I’ve turned it into a studio.’ Without turning again, she walked on. ‘Come round one day, and we’ll see.’

It was an invitation, and yet it was not. I sensed in her the kind of solitariness that did not like to be dropped in on. I recognized in the way she dressed and walked a lack of conformity.

I watched her walk away, gait uneven, her back a hunched silhouette in the setting sun, conscious of the fact I had mumbled a mere three syllables to her. It did not feel good; perhaps I could make up for the bad show the next time I saw her. If I ever did. But wasn't that an invitation I heard from her?

I knew the ruin, as she called it. It stood not far from a cliff at the end of a broad margin of grass, near a white house with glittering windows. Whoever lived in that perfect home had the kind of dedication and house-pride I could never muster. And time, time. Who has the time or energy to wash windows? I wondered how well they tolerated the shambles bordering on their property.

It was not unreasonable to argue—just to myself—that a visit to someone's studio was not like dropping in when they were at home. It was not as much an intrusion to wander up to a studio door, where the artist might be in the middle of some sort of creative occupation. Wasn't a studio much like an office? Not as much an intrusion as a visit might find me, on some days, still in my dressing gown, coffee going cold as I leafed through magazines. Picture after picture of enviable houses, renovated houses, newly-built houses. It didn't hurt as much as a year ago to look at photos of beautifully styled rooms. An abrupt end to a career in interior design was starting to feel like a relief rather than a loss.

My own studio—or office, if you like—was a long way away, in Melbourne, and it was no longer mine, even if all my folders were left in the cabinet when I walked off, and most of my digital creations still resided on the computer on that desk with a city view. Perfect desk, grossly imperfect atmosphere. It was starting not to matter what they did with all my stuff.

Come round, one day, and we'll see. I was just as fascinated by the invitation as I was by her appearance and aura. She seemed twice as old as me, but despite her heavy carriage, light-

minded. I wondered where she lived; I wondered whether the studio she had made in that abandoned shack was not just a euphemism for a squat, somewhere unoccupied where she could stay, unhindered. Perhaps she was one of the thousands of older single women who became homeless, like they showed on the news.

I held my hand mid-air for a hesitant instant before I rapped knuckles on the door. They stung. Knocking with bare knuckles in the cold is never a good idea, especially not when it's weather-beaten wood crying out for a lick of some timber restorer.

'I knew you'd come.' She nodded and turned, walking into a large room stacked with frames, easels, dozens of canvasses on their sides, boxes, crates, and rolls of fabric and canvas leaning against each other. Light streamed in from a wall of windows, invisible from the lane, making it an impressive space.

A rectangular canvas stood on its longer side on an easel streaked with the dribbled paint of decades. All shades of blue, brown, white, orange. She didn't turn back to face me, so I looked at what was sketched on the canvas. It was the cliff outside, the long stretch of grass, blades all bent in one direction suggesting a strong westerly. And to one side, the outline of a tall thin woman wearing a large hat with a droopy rim. Unfinished, unfilled, a stark female outline of creamy canvas, exposed inside the landscape.

It was unmistakable. It was me.

The silence in the studio allowed in the rush of ocean sounds from outside, through a partly-open window. For a long time I listened and gazed at the stylized lines, the shimmering tracery of shapes on that canvas, which suggested grass and cliff edge and yes, even a corner of the well-kept house with shiny windows. And the outline just off to one side of the centre which was empty, incomplete, but which clearly was me.

‘I can hear the sea.’

At my words, she turned. Her face beamed, transformed. It was like she approved of the words, glad I did not say something about that incomplete shape. Glad I didn’t put myself first. She discovered something tiny about me. Possibly something she liked. The awkwardness I felt was starting to dissipate. My shoulders relaxed.

‘That’s one of the few things that stops me procrastinating, that sound.’ She nodded and looked at her feet. As introverted as me, I guessed.

It did not look like she was a procrastinator. The room was packed with paintings; the walls hung with dozens of canvases; the signs of a hard worker

I pointed at the wall opposite the windows. ‘My goodness, linocuts.’

She smiled widely again. ‘I don’t do them anymore. Too fiddly now, for these hands. Something that must stay in the past.’

I knew all about things held safely in the past. ‘They’re very much in the present, hanging there.’

She nodded. Glad, perhaps for the attention to her work.

I looked again at the unfinished picture, and back at the room. ‘This is a wonderful space ...’

‘Exactly the reason it’s perfect for a ... I had to use it as a studio, see? The place I was before became cramped.’ She waved a hand, taking in the abundance of paintings, the stacked canvasses. Turning away, she shook her head and mumbled. ‘The water is hot.’

There was a wood burner in the corner, with a kettle on top, all looking very old but searing hot, with steam shooting out of the spout. The lid started to wobble as we looked at it. It was as if she had timed it to my arrival. I wished I had not arrived empty-handed. I wished for doughnuts, biscuits, anything.

‘Do you get many ...?’

‘No, no—no visitors. I don’t invite people here.’

But she had asked me.

‘You’re more an intriguing subject than a visitor, with your Virginia Woolf hat and long coat.’

I laughed.

‘Besides, you’re ... you seem solitary. I wasn’t afraid you’d turn up with a party of curious friends behind you.’

I hardly knew anyone in the small village. Certainly not enough to round up ‘a party’.

She tilted her head and took a long look at her wall of windows. ‘I’m Irma. And you are ...?’

‘Josephine.’

We sat in rickety cane chairs she attempted to make more comfortable with cushions, and had tea in mugs. She conjured up a plate of buttered teacakes.

‘I need to catch sight of you again, with the light as it was that day, the edge of the cliff behind you, in this long coat.’ She pointed and looked again at my shoes. ‘The day you appeared there, I had just dropped a blob of blue on the toe of my boot, so I heeled it off very carefully, to save the paint. They might not dry quickly, oil paints, but cost the earth, the right kind ... and I wasn’t about to waste it.’

I saw she wore both boots, with a bluish stain on the toe of one.

‘It’s on there now, that paint.’ She inclined her square chin towards the painting on the easel. ‘The line of ocean in the distance is the boot blob, with some titanium white stroked in. Ha ha!’

I turned and looked. How many people could guess there were stories behind even perfectly normal streaks of oil paint?

October had started when I saw her again. I walked along the path on the edge of Stream Beach. Irma was a long way from her studio. I turned to walk back the way I came, after I saw her wave. It's not, perhaps, a startling fact that people can distinguish between different kinds of gesticulations and gestures; it was a goodbye kind of wave. I did not approach. I imitated her stance and waved goodbye too.

Making my way to my own place, I thought of her and her many canvases, and the wall of bright windows, which were, if I remembered correctly and curiously, just as shiny and clean as the ones on the white house further along the way. It's important for an artist to have good clear light. That day, I finished writing the second of a series of articles on eat-in kitchens, offered to and accepted by a magazine in Sydney.

Perhaps it was her. Perhaps she motivated me to do something with my days. A wall of coastal paintings, a jar of brushes, an oilcloth covered in drips and streaks on the floor in front of an old easel; all spoke of hard work, discipline, optimism. And they were all things I had once wanted for myself. Irma had got me working. Not that she would ever know it. I rarely spoke about my writing.

I was curious to discover whether she had made any progress on the long painting that caught me in the sun on one side of the stretch of grass. This time, my hands were warm from the walk. Rapping on the door, however, brought no response. It was locked. There were no windows at the right height to peer into the studio on that side of the old place. A roof tile had slid down and lay lopsided near the doorstep.

In another week I had received two nice cheques from publishers in Sydney, the weather turned unseasonably chill, and there was no smoke from the chimney at the studio. In two weeks I had many thoughts about Irma and her ramshackle studio. I walked the clifftop back and forth from my place twice, hesitant and curious. And not only about the painting. She could

after all have had a *pentimento*, and painted me out of that long landscape. Just like writers can draw a line through an entire paragraph, a painter can sweep a broad brush across a canvas and change everything.

I dreamed about it; dreamed about Irma sweeping me out of that long picture with the broad strokes of a household paintbrush loaded with chalky whitewash, and woke to a wet gale that had my curtains ballooning inward like spinnakers. I imagined her in front of that old roaring wood burner. But when I crossed the way, scarf pulled up about my face and coat collar turned up, there still was no smoke.

I turned and walked the other way. The big white house looked like something out of one of my magazines, window panes glittering and all paintwork immaculate. There was a shape in the open doorway, a willowy form wearing something flowing. She waved. Not a goodbye wave. It was the kind of sign one gives to attract attention, to narrow distance.

I stopped about fifty metres from the house, noting the perfect fence, and how beautiful the woman who stood at the door was. A pixie haircut framed perfect cheekbones, and as I neared, her eyes sparkled green. Her lips rounded when she called. ‘Josephine!’

Surprised she knew my name, I stopped a few paces from her, right at her gate. ‘I’m sorry ... I’m ... Irma isn’t in her studio and I ...’ Why was I always tongue-tied with strangers?

‘You’d better come in.’ She stood aside and I stepped into her glorious house, just as perfect indoors as it looked from the outside. The sitting room she showed me into was styled in timber and straw tones, blues and mints, and cream, cream everywhere. Sheer ceiling-to-floor curtains played with the light at the windows. ‘There’s something you must see.’

Before I could say a word, she motioned to a sofa and I perched on the edge of its seat.

‘It was your coat, you see. I recognized the coat.’ She pointed at my head. ‘And the hat, of course.’

‘I’m looking for Irma. I knocked on the studio door. And last week, too.’

‘Hmm.’ She swallowed and looked away, and it was not a feeling of neighbour disputes I sensed, but something else. ‘Josephine,’ she said, ‘I’m afraid the news is not good. Irma died in hospital ... the night before last.’

The grief in her eyes suddenly became the most striking thing on her face. I watched her grab for a handful of tissues, which she crunched and ruffled about her face. They did not quite hide her eyes.

To distract her, to try to stem the tears, I had to say something. I remembered Irma’s gait, her strong back hunched as she walked in the dunes. It was not cheerlessness. It must have been illness, or pain. ‘You know my name.’

‘She talked about you. She ... she said your name. Oh—oh! I must show you this. Come.’ She led the way to the back of that marvellous house, past a mud room, into a kind of conservatory ... an orangery, if you like, which had a high square dome, a lantern, I knew it was called, in the roof. Light streamed in from all sides. On a clean new easel in the middle of the room stood the long painting.

‘Mummy said so many times that ...’

‘*Mummy?*’

She turned to face me. ‘I’m her daughter. We live ... *lived* here, together, after my divorce. Which is when she said she’d turn the ruin into a studio.’ Her eyes filled with tears and she raised her face to the dome, swallowing hard. ‘Which she did, and ...’

We both turned to look at the painting. More work had been done on it. The grass gleamed, the line of ocean in the distance shimmered. A few clouds puffed overhead, and the windows of the white house shone flatly. And there I stood—the image of me stood—in my long coat and wide-brimmed hat, the ochres and greens brilliant together, the light perfect. She had me staring right at the viewer, with one hand in a pocket, the other grasping the lapel of that coat, that long coat, which dropped to mid-calf. And then, eyes drawn downward, I saw

the feet were only sketched in, the canvas still bare, creamy, stark and new. The shapes of shoes were drawn in, roughly, perhaps with charcoal, but they remained unpainted, flat. Flat.

‘It will have to stay unfinished,’ she said.

For something to say, I looked out and up and opened my mouth at last. ‘I had no idea this house was hers.’ Then, ‘I’m sorry, I don’t even know your ...’

‘Claudia. I should have said. Claudia.’ She did not hold out a hand. But she did turn away and tried a smile. ‘Let’s put the kettle on. Mummy said you liked my teacakes.’

‘She never said they were *yours*.’

‘She was shy—difficult with strangers. I’m surprised you ever saw the inside of that place. She never allowed a soul in. Not even me. When she was in hospital I took the key to see whether the wood burner was out. I brought the big canvas here because she mentioned it—and you—a lot. I thought that if she saw it when she came back ...’ she swiped a tear from her cheek. ‘But she never did come back, did she?’

There was nothing I could say.

‘Josephine, Josephine—she would say your name and how she felt comfortable with you.’

We turned from the orangery toward the kitchen. I looked back at the painting. Was it my imagination? The right hand turned from the collar in the vestige of a wave. It was not, perhaps, a goodbye kind of wave.