

Jane Downing

THE SHADOW OF A DEPARTING LOVER

He said he wanted to have her portrait done and that he had a friend who was an artist who would do it at a special rate, still a considerable sum seeing he was going to come to regret it.

She wondered if he knew what she was going to tell him. She'd been planning it for weeks but could never find the right moment, knowing she was being unfair but hoping he knew already from what she did not say, that absence of familiar words, those absences behind the words spoken.

Maybe he did know and the portrait was a last attempt at a reconciliation, if not a return to the glory days of their falling in love. That he wanted her on paper, for perpetuity, should impress her with his devotion. No woman could ask for more. She must love him for it.

Then, maybe it was a more primitive desire: a desperate attempt not to woo but to capture her. To trap her face if not her soul. The legendary origin of painting was after all the tracing of a lover's shadow on the wall as she departed.

But then, maybe he didn't know and he was as insensitive as she sometimes screamed in those fights that proved, to him, that at least she cared enough to fight and proved to her that it was all over.

His idea did not drift away on her non-committal reaction as she'd expected. Over "The Age" on Saturday he announced, by-the-way, that his friend, the one who was the artist, would be happy to have the sitting before lunch.

How could she say, to those eyes she'd once written (bad) poetry in ode to, and read to him from a passion-wrought bed, that he was a fool, and an unlovable one at that? She reinvoked instead his insensitivity: his obsession with material possessions and the nebulosity of art and beauty, even now in the midst of carnage and inhumanity, graphically portrayed in the papers on the bed, strewn as the sheets had once been. Serbia, Papua New Guinea, Northern Ireland, the Amazonian rainforest, were thrown like native spears to prick his social conscience.

Eating his crusts had not saved the starving children in China and cancelling a sitting would save one piece of paper, not a rainforest, not a minority race, not one innocent child. He accepted no guilt and saw only generosity in his idea.

She got into the car, but did nothing to her face, her hair, her clothes, conceding no ground on her antagonism, directed now more at herself for her cowardice than at him for his sickening naivety. She was not the type to kick a nuisance puppy either.

It was lunchtime by the clock when they arrived at the house of the artist, enmity being less swift than cupid's arrow. She wondered if an apology would be necessary and composed vague excuses as they took a side path from the front gate and pushed their way through overhanging wisteria, the purple blooms long since withered on the vine. Trails of sticky grass-weed caught at the hem of her jeans and coupled themselves to her socks. He went ahead undeterred, opening the back door without knocking.

Breakfast was hardly over by the look of the kitchen. She said nothing. She had no need of her formal words: punctuality is not an issue with ants and they were the only living creatures in sight, some busy carrying off crumbs from about a flip-sided toaster, more intoxicated in a honeypot of no-name jam.

He called out and a voice as rough as the kitchen bench returned greetings. They followed the voice's path to a room filled with sunshine. He knew the way into an unhesitating embrace with the artist. He had never brought her there before.

Self-consciousness twitched her lips and blurred the natural curve of her chin. She sat at a table waiting for the sitting, waiting for the artist to finish flapping about in preparations. The portrait was taken there as she waited, without ceremony. She didn't want the portrait; she had wanted ceremony.

A lover bobbed in, kissed the artist on the top of the head, sat on the edge of the table, lost interest, left on a tide of laughter. Peace hung in the room. The artist said little but she could tell it was a companionable silence with her boyfriend. Then it was over, with only the picture to pick up when it had dried.

She did not ask to look, though her curious ego wanted her pride to give in for just a moment so she could. He gave up cajoling her with flattery—for the beauty of the portrait and by implication of herself and not just the skill of the artist—and accepted instead a cup of tea.

The kitchen was now shared by the ants and a changing parade of friends, finding their way through the weeds to the tea-pot. There was a writer, a younger artist, a protégé perhaps, an actor who had a week's work and had to dash. The artist's lover poured from a brown tea-pot, unadorned except for a chip in the lid. She had hers without milk. The carton had been sitting on the bench with the jam when, and long before, they'd arrived. He had a second cup. She stood on the edge.

They made love slowly, wordlessly when they got home. It wasn't the portrait in itself that had worked this magic, for all he would take each nuzzled sigh as thanks. It was something in the artist's house. The mess. Even as the sight made her skin crawl as with the ants themselves, she was attracted by what it represented. Inhibition cast aside. A complete disregard for bourgeois cleanliness-next-to-Godliness. Unrepresented creativity that had no need for tidiness. That he was accepted in this house, that he was welcomed home in this ant-jammed kitchen, piqued her curiosity. There was more to him than he'd so far revealed, more to explore, perhaps, even, more to love.

On Sunday she explored.

On Monday he went to buy a frame for the portrait after work, arriving home with it and the painting itself. She looked into her charcoal and watercolour face as he detailed, in every detail, his search for a frame: the different backings available, the colours, the weights, the glass, reflecting or not. She did not see her reflection in the paper. The eyes were smaller than she wished, the nose oddly thin, there was too much hair in a flourish of strokes. The face looked nice enough, but there was judgement in the lips, bitterness across the brow.

He took it to place in the expensive frame, fiddling with finger sized screwdrivers, a size for every contingency, pedantically straightening, squaring, squinting, making right, neat, correct, proudly holding up the portrait that did not look like her but probably was her.

When he asked her where she wanted to hang it she said she did not care. When he insisted that she must care she shouted that it did not matter because she would not be around to see it.

In the event, weeks later when she did leave, she took the portrait with her. She didn't want it, but it didn't seem right to have the image of a lost love on the wall, though in this, as in everything, he did not agree.

Still, she could not throw it in the hopper outside her new apartment block as she had intended. The signature across the shoulder held her back. The name of the artist, a known artist, with exhibitions, with ambitions, with cachet. The portrait was put in the back of a cupboard with the other shadows, until his memory was leached from it, and it was remembered as an investment in property, not love.