

Linda Bell

THE UPPER NEPEAN

"The Upper Nepean" by Tasmanian artist, W.C. Piquenit, painted in 1888, hangs in the Art Gallery of NSW.

No one spoke to me on the bus coming in today. I think they all had the Monday blues. Must be the rain. Funny isn't it how all those people can be squashed together in a moving metal cage and not speak unless they know someone. In fact they try to avoid speaking. I've noticed. They read very intently so that you'd feel rude speaking to them. Or they stare out the window with a sort of vacant expression. Sometimes you meet their eyes in the reflection in the glass and they look away. How strange, looking into reflected eyes. Some pretend they're having a quick snooze. I say pretend because you can tell they're not asleep. They open their eyes every so often to check they're not near their stop.

Concentrate, focus on the painting and just let the pen flow across the page. Funny how even in this tender light I feel jittery looking at the dark, brooding river with light cracking the clouds, struggling and just making it through. A shawl of mist hangs over the rock face, hiding its form, menacing, like it might ooze across the whole painting. The river's trapped between the cliffs. Will light break through the clouds and bounce and glitter on the surface and light up the cliffs or will the mist seep further into the gorge?

Yes, the sun will break through. The mist will retreat. The water will twinkle and the cliffs will warm. The strangling, seeping mist will be melted by the warmth — overpowered by the sunlight. No wonder the picture scares me. Evil lurks so powerfully there and it's only my belief that the light will triumph that settles my nerves. What was Piquenit's mood when he painted it? Did he feel the struggle I feel? Maybe not. On the surface it's a very calm scene.

When I'm home I'll add these notes to my folder. I've got one of those school folders with the rings and I put all my notes in it. I don't have a computer. I don't really want one either because I like writing by hand. Those screens and keyboards make everybody write the same. I don't like that. I like looking back at my notes and seeing what mood I was in just by looking at the writing.

I file my gallery notes every Monday evening and every so often I get the folder out and read the notes and try to arrange them into some sort of order. Hasn't worked yet but it will. I'm writing a book based on my ideas from the

paintings. I've seen lots of books on what paintings are supposed to mean but these are my personal reactions. I choose one each visit to focus on. I try very hard not to look at the other paintings round about and I just stare at one painting. I don't time myself but now I find I've got a pretty good idea of about half an hour. Then I write whatever comes from the painting.

People in here sometimes look at me in a funny way. See I like beachcombing the op shops and putting things together for effect. Today I'm wearing a purple velvet hat (over my bad perm) to which I pinned a large yellow fabric flower I found last week. The hat had a bow on but I prefer the flower. My coat is one that someone else has worn for evenings out. At least that's what I think. It's probably been to many more exciting places than I have. It's black with a furry collar and a silver thread running through the fabric. Quite glam actually. But the shoes let me down. It's hard to find good shoes in Vinnies so these black ones are heavy and flat and don't go with the coat. Can't wear heels because of my back. "You right there madam?"

"Yes I'm fine thanks, just fine." He's gone now. Probably thinks I'm a total nutter sitting here in my velvet hat with a notepad staring at a painting for half an hour. Boss probably told him to check out the old girl in the hat.

She likes it too. She's looking really carefully at it. Never seen her here before. Lovely hair. Expensive jacket. Probably thinks I'm a bag lady. "Excuse me, do you know anything about this painting?" Oh, didn't expect that. That type usually gives me a wide berth. "No sorry, 'fraid not. It just intrigues me."

"Yes, yes, it is, as you say, intriguing. That's a good word for it isn't it. Mysterious. Forbidding. Something rather dark about it isn't there?"

"Yeh, but look at that light eh. Just look at it behind those clouds. That's where the mystery is. Magical I reckon."

She's smiling at my comment and she's gonna walk on nodding slightly. She doesn't want to hang around in case I start talking to her. So why did she speak tome to start with? Another mystery.

"Do you like it?" He's pretending he can't hear me. Too embarrassed to talk to an old dear in weird clothes. If I was forty years younger, then he would've answered. "Sort of mysterious isn't it?"

"Yes I guess you could say."

"Do you like it?"

"Well, it's not really a question I ask of paintings myself. You know do you like it?"

"Oh." Thinks he's pretty smart I'd say. Hasn't learned the simplicity of age. "Well what do you think of it then?"

"Well Piquenit was a man of his time ..."

"You know a lot about paintings then?"

"Oh I suppose you could say that. I read a lot. Self taught. Well, enjoy your day." Didn't ask me my opinion. I notice these things. I'd say he didn't because he thinks I'm a stupid old woman in with nothing better to do than sit alone in the art gallery and make a nuisance of myself.

Here comes another one. Goodness she looks upset. She's been crying. What should I say? I'm not very good at these things but she looks so upset poor dear I should say something. "You OK love?" Oh no she's started crying again. I've upset her. "Oh love, come on I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

"Look it's fine, it's not you. It's nothing to do with you, I don't even know you. It's me. I came here to get some peace but it doesn't work. Nothing works. There is no peace."

"Peace from what love?"

"From everything from all of them, from everyone."

"Everyone?"

"Yeh, you know the family, the kids. Everyone." Should I ask her something about her family or is that rude? But if I don't I look mean, like I don't care. But I don't even know her. I'll have to say something. "Do you often come here?" That was really stupid, as if that's the thing to say to someone who's upset. "I mean where do you usually go when everyone's upset you?"

"Anywhere, anywhere where it's quiet and they won't follow me."

"So you like quiet?"

"I live for quiet. I live for escape from noise. Noise day and night. I can't sleep for the noise in my head."

"In your head?"

"Yep my head rings at night with all the thoughts they're like dreams only I'm awake."

"You don't get much sleep?"

"Not with the kids waking up, him snoring and my head spinning."

"No I'm not surprised." That sounds stupid. "So do you ever feel alright?"

"Only when I'm away and alone."

"You like that?"

"It keeps me alive."

"Really?"

"Yeh sometimes I think I'll die if I don't get away. In fact I've thought that it might be nice, it'd be the quietest, calmest place. Have you ever thought about it?"

"What?"

"Death." God I'm silly of course she meant death. She wants to die. I know how she feels. No I don't. I'm eighty she's about thirty. I don't know how she feels.

"Yes, yes of course I've thought about it. I'm getting on as you can see so I get to thinking about it often these days."

"And?"

"I wonder where and when I'll go."

"Do you really?"

"Yes I mean I come here a lot and I sometimes wonder what'd happen if I just keeled over on one of these seats and that was it."

"I think about what happens afterwards."

"Afterwards."

"You know, after it all and you're either ashes or you're lying there in a box under the ground in the cold soil."

"I don't think it matters really I mean once you're gone you're gone."

"Yeh but are you? I mean are you really? I often wonder if you can still think but you can't speak. You know, that the mind stays alive. You wouldn't know would you?"

"That's a bit creepy."

"Why?"

"Well to be still thinking but be dead."

"Yeh but we really don't know do we because no-one's ever come back and told us. What if they're sort of trapped there inside that box. So lonely." God she's cooky this one. I've had enough of this, I'll tell her I've got to go.

"Look I've gotta get going love. You feeling a bit better now?"

"I guess. Are you lonely?"

"Look, yes, I get lonely. Who wouldn't? I live alone. I have no children or grandchildren."

"What does it feel like?"

"What does what feel like? Living alone?"

"No being lonely?" This is too much. She's getting annoying now.

"I really must go."

"No please, just a few minutes. That's all."

"Well not long."

"No just tell me what it's like to feel lonely?"

"Right. Well, it's hard to describe. It's sort of empty."

"Where?"

"What do you mean where?" I'm sounding cranky now.

"Where, in your head in your stomach?"

"Where? Well in here somewhere I suppose, please ..."

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

"It doesn't ache?"

"No, I really must go now." She's one of those persistent ones.

"Well what does it feel like?"

"What does it feel like? I said it feels empty."

"What does empty feel like."

"It feels like, it feels like a little kid."

"Yeh?"

"I suppose. I don't know. But you know when you see pictures of sad little kids sucking their thumbs on those charity ads. It feels like that." My throat's getting tight, and achey. I'm going. "I must go."

"Oh must you?" I can't believe it. I'm going to cry. I never cry. Tough as old boots and I'm gonna blubber.

"I'm sorry. Please, look, I must go." I feel bad, very bad. What's going on? What's happening to me?

"Let me come with you. I've upset you. Sorry, it's my fault. I'm sorry honestly." She's putting her arm round my shoulder. I'm going outside I'll feel stronger in the fresh air and the light.

"Let me sit down." She's standing looking at me. Why can't she just go away?

"Let me get you a cup of tea. I insist. Do you take milk?"

"Yes, yes, milk please."

"Wont be long. You just stay there and don't move. Just relax. I'll be back."
I'm going.

A walk across the park, that's what I need. Please don't follow me. Just leave me. Drink my tea. Sit on the seat. Just don't follow me. I'm an old woman I want to be alone. Loneliness doesn't hurt me now. I like being alone. What's she shouting?

She's standing there with two cups of tea. She looks a bit silly. I don't care I'll just keep walking. I won't turn and look at her. The sun's breaking through the clouds. It's warm on my back. I'll be home soon.

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