

Colourist

1,830 words

I don't want to paint her portrait. I wish my brother had never asked me. Of course I know who she is, young virtuoso Marina, blind and brilliant, taking the music world by storm. Her career is just beginning. Mine is nearly over. My fingers cannot hold the brush as I once did, my neck aches when I paint, eyes sting and sometimes the nostril-blasting pong of turpentine makes me nauseous. I look at my hands. They are large. Some have said more like those of a man than a woman. I have marvelled myself at the way they have caressed colours onto a canvas so delicately.

My brother is aware that I haven't painted for months, that I spend hours in bed, curtains drawn, wondering what is the point, why paint, why anything? He knows Marina. I'm not sure how they met. I haven't asked. Nothing interests me. He said that Marina wants me, and me only, to do the portrait. I snapped, "I don't see why. She can't see, so she won't know if I've painted her, or not." I saw the disappointment on his face. "That's not the sister I know." As I marched away I called, "I am no longer that sister."

That night, looking out of my window, I felt guilty. How awful it must be not to see the changing colours of the sky: the black blanket hush of starry midnight, a bruised expanse before a storm, pink-fingered sunsets, cotton wool clouds in cornflower blue...I used to rejoice in the tiniest visual delight. A spider's web diamonded with dew would send me rushing to my easel to capture it on canvas. Not now.

I don't want to paint Marina's portrait, but I will do so. The next day I phone my brother.

Having looked at pictures of Marina on-line I feel that I know the contours of her face, her green eyes, black hair and unblemished coffee cream skin. She is beautiful, but can never see herself. When she arrives I realise that the photographs do not do her justice. There is a vibrancy about her whole being that cannot be contained in a snap. Her eyes remind me of

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motes of sun dappling leaves and she exudes energy. On entering my studio I notice that she inhales a little and presses a slender finger to her nose. She has dainty hands.

I say, "I'll do the portrait in the drawing room as the turps and oil might be too strong for you in here."

She laughs. "The drawing room, that's an apt name. Sorry for covering my nose, but I am very sensitive to smells. Sounds also. You have weariness in your voice, but I do so want you to paint me. I have heard people say that you can show the soul of your sitters. I wish that I could view your portraits myself, but it's exciting for me to imagine the images."

I feel selfish and guilty again. Here have I been moping about the house and feeling sorry for myself whilst Marina is excited at what's in her head, not gloomy as I am at my own ponderings.

Whilst I pour us glasses of lemonade I ask, "Is it OK if I make some preliminary pencil sketches first?"

Marina exclaims, "I'll leave everything to you. I'm just so thrilled to be here. Mmm, this lemonade is delicious. It has bits that ting my tongue and fizzle my lips. I shall sip slowly and savour the sensation."

"There is plenty of lemonade. Just ask when you want some more. I need to send a quick text then we can begin."

I pick up my phone and type a message to my brother asking him, if he has time, to pick up some home-made mini flans and iced cakes from the lady who made the lemonade.

Marina asks, "May I feel your face to see what you look like?"

I think it odd that she uses the word "see", but apprehensively I walk towards her and place her delicate tan fingers on my cheek. Using both hands she moves gently across my forehead, trails tresses of hair, touches my nose, lips and around my eyes. It all feels soothing.

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Marina says, “There is tension. You are sad. Your forehead frowns and your lips are dripping down.”

“That’s quite poetic.”

She laughs again, a joyous sound.

“Oh, I’m so excited to be here, to have you paint me. What colour are your eyes?”

“Brown.”

“Tell me what brown is like.”

I know that Marina has been blind from birth. How do I describe colours to someone who has never seen anything?

The sun is spilling into the room and she upturns her face.

“I can feel the warmth. I know that it is sun. It’s light. It’s so lovely.”

I am still wondering how to describe brown. I think about many of the things I have painted and past enjoyments.

“Brown has many colours. It can be like hot chocolate.”

“Yum,” she sighs.

I make a mental note to buy hot chocolate.

“Or brown can be like your skin glowing with vitality, or like the knobbly bark of trees, or the rump of a horse.”

She claps her hands. “Oh yes, sleek and soft.”

Interest is stirring in me as I search for more items.

“Of course there’s mud.”

“Squelchy or crumbly?”

I laugh. “Both.”

She says, “I see colours as scents or sounds or sensations. Red is chilli hot, fire, fierce and noisy, yellow is sunny and joyful, green is mint, cool and lapping, like a river rippling my toes.”

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I am becoming ecstatic about colours. Now I want to rush to my paints, but I must do some preliminary sketches first. As I hold a pencil in my chunky hand and fetch a pristine sheet of paper I notice that my fingers are trembling. I have not felt this enthusiastic for ages.

Marina sits in the chair I have provided.

“This is comfy, an armchair with velvety covers. What colour are they?”

“Lime green.”

“Like leaves.”

“Like freshly unfurling leaves.”

“Wonderful. I love spring when everything’s new and delicate. There’s a blackbird that sings in the early morning outside my bedroom window. He trills so sweetly I want to fetch my recorder and do a duet.”

I feel guilty again. I too have heard a blackbird whilst lying in bed and have muttered, “Shut up, you noisy bird. I want to lie here in silence.”

My brother duly turns up with the savoury flans and exquisitely iced cakes. He makes a pot of tea and we eat the baking. The extra mature cheese in the flans tantalises my taste buds and I am surprised at how much I enjoy the droolingly delicious cakes. Such sweetness. All food has tasted bland recently.

Marina is thrilled by everything.

Holding up a chocolate cake she asks, “Brown like your eyes?”

My brother says, “Her eyes are more like the colour of conkers.”

Marina replies, “So shiny and strong.”

For the first time in ages I feel shiny and strong.

The next time Marina arrives I am ready to start painting.

Before sitting down she asks, “Can I feel the easel?”

She runs her hand around the wood, across the canvas.

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“It will be quite a big picture of me.”

“It will. I hope I can do you justice. You’re a very beautiful woman.”

“Never mind that. Capture my soul, please. Put joy onto the canvas,”

It’s what I try to do. As I work I thrill at the brush strokes. My fingers stink of turpentine and the bedaubed rags seem to wink colour. I feel my old zest returning.

Taking a new brush over to Marina I put her fingers on the bristles.

She gasps, “That’s so lovely, like stroking an animal.”

“Real hair,” I state proudly as if I am informing someone that my crowning glory is my own and not a wig.

I giggle at my own thoughts and tell these to Marina.

She asks to feel my face again.

“Your frown is fading and you are smiling. I think your face is applauding life now.”

When I finish work for the day I step back and look at the painting. It is taking shape and soon I will see Marina’s soul and character showing through. I can depict her laughing eyes, her smiling mouth, her pure face, but can I capture her charisma and soul that soars?

My eyesight is not as sharp as it was, my fingers can be stiff like twigs and my legs ache when standing for too long, but I am fired up and I am alive. I think of the Latin quotation, “Vita brevis, ars longa” and, instead of existential angst at life being short, I am filled with enthusiasm for life and art.

At the final sitting, when Marina and I take a break, she tells me, “Although I can play several instruments I particularly like the recorder. Its sounds remind me of the sweet songs of birds.”

She fetches her recorder. I sit in the armchair, eyes closed, whilst she treats me to “Greensleeves”. The notes dance over me and pain drops gently to the ground.

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Opening my eyes I watch Marina's delicate fingers gracefully flitting up and down the instrument. Part of me is eager to finish the portrait, but I want this shared time of peace and joy to last forever. I paint slowly, enjoying every exquisite sweep of brush on canvas.

When the work is complete my brother arrives to give his verdict. I know from his gasp of admiration that I have succeeded.

He exclaims, "I can almost see Marina breathe. You have her perfectly, the impish smile, the delight in her eyes."

Marina does a little jig.

She puts her hand on mine.

"Describe me to me. Tell me the colours."

"Well your hair is black like a raven's wing, the tresses long, shiny as rocks lapped by the sea. Your eyes are like leaves – spring ones – lit by sun, and your whole being seems about to burst from the painting."

She laughs.

I continue. "You are all colours, a riotous rainbow, passionate, explosive red, nature-rich brown, warm cheering yellow, bright bursting blues, serene, reflective greens...a cornucopia."

Marina beams.

"That's wonderful. We're friends now aren't we, so you must go to my next concert, I'll get you a ticket and please let me come here to see more of your paintings,"

I notice that she has used the word "see" again.

"Of course, Marina. I thought I might do a pastel portrait of you next."

She giggles. "Painting with jelly sweets, that's novel."

I laugh. "You know what I mean."

Riffling through my box of pastels to see if I need to order any new colours I notice Marina wink at my brother and do a little thumbs up with her dainty hand.

I pretend not to see.