

Works of Art and Love

Prenez donc ce miroir, et regardez-vous-y. On se plaint quelquefois des écrivains qui disent moi. Parlez-nous de nous, leur crie-t-on. Hélas! quand je vous parle de moi, je vous parle de vous. Comment ne le sentez-vous pas? Ah! insensé, qui crois que je ne suis pas toi!

Take this mirror and look at yourself. People sometimes complain about writers, crying: "Tell us about us." Alas! When I speak to you about me, I speak to you about you. How can you not feel it? Oh, you fool who thinks I am not you!

Victor Hugo: *Les Contemplations*

Foreword

How can you know someone? How can you know a life? An artist especially, for so much of his life is lived within himself – in his mind, his imagination, and what he puts on canvas is only what he wants you to see, the story he wants to tell.

I knew Frank Furley. I knew him for over forty years, from when we were both young. I visited him, was his friend, a sitter for his portraits; I observed him and watched his painting from every angle and perspective – in front of his easel, behind it, unseen from the dark corners of his room, lying beside him in the grass. I lived with him, loved him, slept in his bed. I gave myself to him in every way I could.

Yet did I know him? Even now I cannot answer that. I knew a man who called himself Frank Furley, but whether it was the real man, I cannot tell. For we all see different things and make fictions of what we see, of the people we know, the people we love, and in the process make a fiction of our own selves and lives.

I knew a man who was kind, generous, creative, who could see further than any other man I have met; a man who could make love blossom out of nothing, and light the way forward through life. A man who taught me not to regret. And yet I knew a man who was arrogant, unforgiving; who was troubled, almost shrivelled, and angry and helpless and lost. A man willing to destroy everything, including himself for the sake of his art and his search for the truth. A man full of guilt and regrets. In Frank I knew all sorts of men. Were any of them real?

All those years I have tried to understand, to know him, to see the true man amongst all the men he was. For all those years I failed, though never ceased

trying, for he needed that – to be known, to be understood, and I needed to know him. But now, I will try once more. For I have his paintings. And perhaps they will help me find out who he was.

1. Summer and winter, 1960

This is the beginning.

Summer. He lies in the grass on the bank by the pond. The sun is high, and he lies with his arm thrown over his brow, shielding his eyes from its rays. His body is still wet from the water, glistening. A fly buzzes at his chest, and with his other hand, lazily, he flaps it away. The grass pricks at the skin as he moves, clover heads tickle him. He stretches his legs.

He has been swimming with Alan. Alan is his best friend. Sometimes, he thinks, his only friend, the only one that counts. He has friends at school, boys like himself, the sons of farm-workers or butchers or bakers, some of teachers or solicitors or men who work in banks – people more-or-less in the same social class, workers of one sort or another; boys he plays football or cricket with at lunch-time, when the weather is good, or shove-halfpenny, on the boards scored into the desks if it's raining; boys he sits next to in class. But none of those is close in the way that Alan is. Someone he would share secrets with, open his heart to in moments of dismay or joy. Someone whose company he cherishes even when are doing nothing but lying in the grass, chewing sweetness from the foxtail stems, or in the darkness beneath the roof of the hay-barn, made heady by the musty air.

That they are friends at all is nevertheless a surprise; so much divides them.

He, Frank, a farm-workers son; Alan the son of wealthy land-owners from the manor house by the church – with lords and dukes in their ancestry and a coat arms over their door. Frank into art and nature-spotting, Alan into astronomy and trains. He sturdy, strong, defiant; Alan pale and nervy and timid so that

But difference can be a bond, for it provides scope for individuality to mesh. Frank needed someone to lord over and lead; Alan, someone he could follow – a hero who could be Batman to his Robin, Biggles to his Ginger, Don Quixote to his Sancha Panza. Within hours of first meeting, they had quickly become best friends.

Best, but not quite inseparable, for their different schooling kept them apart. Frank went to the local boys' grammar school in Lewes, Alan boarded at a public school in the Cotswolds. During those months, they wrote, albeit with some degree of embarrassment, for it seemed a girlish thing to do, and they could not be sure who might read the letters, or simply would find out about their correspondence and expose them to the mockery of their friends for such a vapid pursuit. So their letters were brief and stilted, and mainly about the absurdities of minor events and characters at school.

It is now, in the holidays, that their friendship comes into being, and their lives can mesh. They spend almost every hour of the day in each other's company. Only Frank's duties on the farm, helping his father, or Alan's trips to London with his mother, keep them apart. They choose their activities with instinctive fairness, to satisfy each other's interests. For Frank's benefit, they wander the countryside, dig into old gravel cuttings in search of fossils, wait in the shadows of the wood for a peregrine to appear, sit in a field somewhere talking, while Frank paints. For Alan's, they walk the old railway line to Horsted, seeking pieces of abandoned signalling or track in the undergrowth, and on clear winter evenings, stand in the darkness of the churchyard, trying to place their small lives amidst the vast panoply of stars. And in the summer, they come to the ponds in Piltdown, and swim.

They had done so that afternoon.

For a while, they swam side-by-side, exchanging calls, splashing, racing, wrestling. But Alan was by far the better swimmer, and Frank soon tired. He let Alan swim away. Then he got out of the water, walked back around the edge of the pond, staying close to the reeds where dab chicks paddled and the buntings darted and the warblers sang. And back on the grassy bank, he unfurled his towel stretched out on it, lay down.

His mind drifted. He thought of the weeks of the summer holidays ahead. He dozed, woke, dozed again.

He is still lying there, half asleep, when the girl appears.

He does not see her or hear her arrive, merely senses her presence through the pores of his skin. A slight change in the temperature, a shadow dimming the sun's glare against his closed eyes. She might be a cloud, and he takes no notice, keeps his arm crooked over his forehead, waiting for it to move. Yet it remains there, fixed, like a cold hand across his world.

"You must be Frank."

The voice is light yet matter-of-fact. It suggests that he could acknowledge her or ignore as he wishes; she will not care.

He half moves his arm, slowly opens his eyes.

"Hi. I'm Nia."

Still he cannot see her, just the dark shape of her body, penumbra-ed by the sun. The halo of tousled hair. One hand, held slightly away from her hip as if in greeting.

It is that image, later, which he tries to capture, first in his mind as a memory, then on paper with his paints.

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And this is the end.

Winter. Early morning, the sun low over the trees, spreading long shadows on the grass. The grass stiff and bristling with frost, the ground hard, air taut. Silence, the birds not yet awake, save for a single blackbird that pipes its thin song from a fence-post at the edge of the field.

The boy stands centre-stage, his back to the sun. The slanting light catches his mop of light brown hair and makes from it a halo of misted gold. His shadow reaches beyond him, three times his height, laid flat.

From his stature, from his pose, one might guess him as in his middling teenage years. Fourteen or fifteen, perhaps, at that age when he does not quite know who he is, what he represents, how to hold himself in a way that shows it. Muddle and doubt. Yet he is clearly a working boy – the son of a farmhand. Broad shouldered, strongly built – what once, half a century before, would have been thought of as good country stock. Probably in his last year of schooling, therefore, because boys of that ilk are unlikely to stay on, striving for A-levels and university.

As if knowing his future, and resigned to it, he stands hunched, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his shapeless duffel coat. His feet are apart, bracing him. He stands as if he has been there for a long time, maybe for an hour or more, in this cold and brittle day, waiting for whatever will unfold. Yet he seems patient rather than intent, as if whatever event he awaits, and however delayed it may be, he knows it will happen. As if it is inevitable.

Around him, the land also seems to wait, though more tightly. Nothing moves. The frost remains unmelted, pale. The ice in the dark dry pock-marks where the cattle trod days ago is stretched into thin grey sheets and silvery needles, and at their edges makes delicate towers, each holding a tiny clod of soil aloft. A yard or so away, a dock leaf hangs, limp on its stem, the veins white against the rimy grey of the blade. Two yards further is the rounded shape of a hollow in the grass, compressed, frost-free – the place where a hare huddled, warm through the night, before loping away in the first light of the day, mingling its footprints with those of the rabbits and weasels and stoats. In the opposite direction, the boy's own solid prints stamp his signature on the scene. They lead back to the gate into the trackway beyond. There, a bicycle is just visible, leaning against the gatepost, its handlebars flared like the horns of a skeletal bull.

In the further distance, beyond the field where he stands, the landscape is almost instantly recognisable, at least to anyone who knows this part of England. Hedgerow and wood, meadow and dark ploughed field, the sinuous thread of the river picked out by willows and reeds, red pantiled houses scattered here and there, a clustered village, a church spire gold in the sun. The Sussex countryside winding and wending and rolling its way haphazardly to the far rim of the Downs. Within it all there is just one false feature. A line of ragged hawthorn and elder, the strands of a wire fence glinting in the sunlight between. It runs along the edge of the field in front of him, cuts the scene in two. It is the one straight feature in the entire landscape, and for that reason seems contrived and out of place, yet important for its inaptness.

Perhaps, even then, as he stands there, he has the essence of the picture in his mind. A boy in a field, waiting. A self-portrait, the artist in his world. And the

inevitable questions for the viewer: why is he there? what does he see? what is in his mind?

But for the boy, the story does not fix there. Slowly, it moves on.

Moments stretch out, time not so much ticking as falling reluctantly away. In tiny increments, the rising sun lifts itself, shadows shorten, the rays reach out and touch his back. Ice cracks, soil yields, water drips; a mouse rustles as the air begins to warm.

Then, from far away, comes another sound. A clank, as if of a gate shutting, a door latch let drop. A snake-like hiss.

The world stirring.

But then, silence once more. Nature's silence, with its clicks and creaks and whispered sibilances, its snuffles and sighs and sighs.

The boy moves slightly, straining to hear.

And then it comes again, that hiss. Louder this time. Harsh into all that stillness, like a knife cutting through silk. And in its wake, another sound, breathy and braying, rising over the land. A shriek. A scream. A whistle. Held for a moment, it hangs like a question in the air, wavers, fades, and from some distant fold in the landscape is answered by its own voice.

With the sound, the boy turns, looks, and is rewarded. Above the far trees, a mile away, a pale plume rises, reaches out, billowing into the cold sky.

Another pause. Breath gathered. Options considered, perhaps: which way might the day go?

Then, like a wild animal awakened, a rumbling snarl, a seething snort. And suddenly, the sounds spill out. They flow across the countryside, disperse, change shape and rhythm, become muffled and magnified, are broken by the

hedgerows and woodlands and low hills. Bark and growl, clunk and clank and cough.

The boy tenses, feels a stab of anticipation, the answering thud of dread.

Soon, he thinks.

Not yet.

Can he resist it any longer? Can he hold time back?

Another whistle pierces the air. Plaintive and plangent, like a bleat of sorrow and pain. And as it wanes, the sound of the engine bursts through, echoing from the embankment half way from the station, picking up speed. Grumble and growl, rumble and roar. The chuntering clamour of the pistons, the squeal of steel against steel, all blending into the same crescendo of noise.

It grows and grows, and he waits.

And now the waiting is different, for the world is no longer stilled, but churning and turbulent, filling the air with sound. His own thoughts adding to the din, demanding to be heard. Will she be there? What will her answer be?

Then, hurriedly, as if late for its cue, the engine blazes from the cutting, in a torrent of fury and noise. It clatters across the embankment beyond the straight stretch of the fence. Pistons thunder, wheels screech, firebox spits, the track sighs and groans. Grey smoke streams backwards, as if trying to escape from the scene. The carriages race beneath it, clunking and clattering.

Sunlight splashes on the windows.

The boy leans forward, peering intently at the speeding train, one arm thrown up against the glare of the reflected sun.

2. First portrait, 1966

“Sit up straight,” my mother said, and I did. I sat erect, prim, my knees together, feet tucked slightly back beneath the chair, my hands folded neatly on the lap of my blue and white gingham frock.

My parents had moved away, now, and stood by the railings of the pier, watching with those heavy, appraising eyes. I tried to ignore them, but I tried also to avoid looking at the man. He was perched on a canvas stool, a yard in front of me, leaning forward on one elbow, as if he was about to start a conversation. I was hoping that he would not, for the whole thing had already become an ordeal almost too much to bear, without having to find words to talk to a stranger.

I sneaked a look nevertheless. He was sitting, gazing at his canvas, as if pondering what lay ahead. His brow was furrowed, his lips straight. Was he regretting what he had agreed to do: paint me?

He looked up, caught my eyes on him, gave a small grimace.

“Just you and me, then,” he said.

I made the smallest of nods, unsure what he meant.

“You can relax a little,” he said. And when I did not move: “Go on. Hang loose.”

The phrase amused me, shocked me. I wondered if my parents had heard. They disliked colloquialisms and slang, all the stuff that teenagers said today. They thought it common. Is that what they would think of him? Yet to me, it sounded funny. It made me think of the old women I sometimes saw in the market at home in York, sitting on their stools, leaning forward, their bosoms drooping. I fought back the urge to laugh.

“That’s much better,” he said.

But as I sat there, I felt my body tighten again. I did not want to be stuck there, in a stiff pose, like this – or even hanging loose. I wanted to be on the beach, or in town shopping. Even less did I want another portrait of me in the house. It would be hung in the hallway and shown off to their friends. No doubt, it would stay there for years, and when people looked at it my mother would say: “That’s Elise, last year” or “when she was ten.” It would become another memento of my life, like the baby photographs, and my first tooth and the first drawing I did at school, and the certificate that I won for arithmetic. No longer mine, but just a historic artefact, belonging to anyone.

The man picked up a large note-pad, opened it on his knee, then selected a pencil from the small fold-out table beside him. He sat for a moment, the pencil poised, his lips pursed, looking at me. I wondered what he saw – or, from his look, what he was trying to see but could not.

“You’ve nice bones,” he said.

Again, his words amused me. They made me sound like a skeleton – or perhaps were the words my mother would have used to the butcher when she asked for treats for the dog. A smile wavered on my lips. I bit it back.

He seemed to notice and gave a laugh himself. “They show in your face. They make you interesting to do.”

He started to draw. He did so quickly, with light squiggles of his pencil, now and then a small rub of his hand as if to erase or blur a line.

I wondered what he was drawing, how he was making me look. Whether he could make me appear, not just interesting, but pretty: the way my parents wanted me to be. It was what they hoped – that the painting would transform

me, not just on the canvas but in reality. Like the twelve times table that they had pinned to the wall of my bedroom: an achievement that I should aspire to, my next goal. Be beautiful, child.

If he did, I thought – if he made me look pretty – it would prove that he was no good. It would prove that he was not painting what he saw, but some caricature just to please the customer. The thought made me frown. It would feel like a double insult. A portrait hanging there that was not of me at all, and painted by a bad artist.

Though, maybe if it was really bad, I persuaded myself, my mother might refuse to take it. That would be good. Perhaps it was the best I could hope for, now. To be rejected, refused.

I wondered what he would do with it then. Perhaps he would hang it on the railings, along with the others that he had pinned up, presumably to show off his skills – the pictures that had so impressed my parents as we walked along the pier that they had stopped and insisted that I should have my portrait done.

But then another thought came: that would be far worse than having it hanging in the hall at home – there, where everyone could see it and smirk. “Look at this one. Look, she’s got buck teeth. Pixie ears. Doesn’t she look silly.”

My frown had deepened, and the man had seen it, for he said: “Don’t look so cross. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“Sorry,” I said.

He smiled the apology away.

I sat, trying to be normal, thinking nice thoughts. And a few moments later, the man put his pad down.

“Is that it?” I ask, and started to get out of the chair.

He laughed, held up a hand in restraint. "That's just a sketch. So that I can work out how to paint you." He turned the pad round so that I could see the picture. It was in pencil, drawn with bold strokes, here and there roughly shaded in. Yet I could see the likeness, and it was neither pretty nor ugly. It was just me. As if he had extracted some essence of me, a summary that somehow described me in a dozen words. I liked it, was impressed.

"Now," he said, "Let's just sort that pose out – and get you to relax. You look like a stuffed dummy. You need to be comfortable; you're going to have to hold it for the next half hour. But it's got to be real. Not a pose just for me. I need to see the person you really are." He shook his shoulders, like a dog coming out of water. "There. Loosen up a bit, like this. Now, turn away a little; more, away from me." He stood up, stepped towards me, then stopped, his hand half extended as though he wanted to touch me but dare not. Instead, he waved his hand vaguely in a slightly upward gesture, to my left. I followed his hand, lifted my head.

"That's good," he said. "Now fix your eyes on something, and think about that."

"Like that seagull?"

He laughed. It was a pleasant laugh, made with a small shrug of his body, real, unforced. "No. Preferably something that will stay still."

"I want to look at you," I blurted, suddenly made bold. "I want to watch what you do."

He hesitated, then nodded. "OK. But no staring. Imagine that you've been sitting there watching me do this for years, and are lost in your own thoughts. That's what I want. You just thinking about whatever you usually think about."

"I don't know what I think about," I said, and it was true. My mind found its own way in the world. It did not work to my beck and call.

“It’ll come. Just let it.”

At last he seemed satisfied and started to paint. I watched him, trying not to study him, so that his actions might seem just to happen in front of my eyes, like a film. He worked in short bursts. A brief look up, then a moment of wetting his brush, carefully wiping the excess water away, a stir of the paint or a touch of the brush to his palette, then a few swift brush strokes, and another look.

He was working in water colours. I knew little about painting, but I knew that much. It seemed a childish thing to do – not the way grown-ups would paint, and I wondered how serious he really was – whether he was a proper artist. He did not look like one. He looked too young, only eighteen or maybe twenty. He had light brown curly hair, which he had allowed to grow long, and hung loose and untidy around his ears. He was broad-shouldered, had wide hands with short, strong fingers. He looked too powerfully built for an artist, lacking in delicacy. Not a real artist at all, I decided: just a student making some money in his summer vacation, or one of those hawkers – gypsies my mother called them – who wandered the country conning people in whatever way they could.

“How old are you?”

His question broke into my thoughts, and I looked up in surprise, then realised what I had done. I apologised, tried to find my position again. He paused in his painting, waited, nodded when I had got it right.

“So?” he asked, again: “How old?”

“Ten,” I said. Then, unable to stop myself: “And fifteen days.”

“Ten,” he repeated, then grinned – “and fifteen days. Happy ten and fifteen days birthday.”

I grinned.

He painted on, silently, then after a while looked up, spoke again.

“What’s your name?”

“It’s Elise,” I said emphatically. “Elise Aubuchon.”

“An interesting name. Is it French?”

“Yes. We were puritans. Hugenots.” I pronounced it the French way, wanting to impress him with my ancestry, and for an instant he seemed to have to reach into his mind for its meaning. Then he smiled.

“Bien sûr, mademoiselle. Je peux voir ta finesse – c’est française pour sûr.”

The words meant nothing to me, and I sat, scowling, feeling unfairly out-smarted. “I don’t speak the language, though,” I said.

Another smile. “I said that I can see your French style.”

I looked down, blushing.

“Do you like art?”

I shook my head, apologised once more.

“So – you don’t paint then?”

“No.” It sounded rude, and I searched for something to say that might be more appeasing. “I want to be a scientist.”

“Good for you. What sort of scientist?”

The question caught me off-guard. I was hardly even aware that there were different sorts of science. Quickly, I tried to think of a reason – one that might sound convincing – and found myself confronted by a future I had hardly considered. What did I want to be? What did the question even mean – to be something?

“I want to work with animals,” I said, then faced more regret, for the suggestion brought with it a picture of the family vet, cuddling a cute kitten or guinea pig. “A zoologist.”

He nodded, but said nothing. Perhaps he had seen through my deceptions, seen the panic that lay beneath.

“They probably won’t let me, though,” I mumbled.

He stopped, looked up, as if in surprise. “Your parents, you mean? Why on Earth not?”

I shrugged, tried again to make the gesture tiny so that it did not disturb my hard-won pose.

“My dad’s a doctor. He’ll want me to be a nurse. My mum will just want me to get married, have children, be like her.”

“So, you have brothers and sisters then.”

“Yes. Two sisters. They’re older than me.” I glanced quickly to where my parents were still standing, watching, from the edge of the pier. “I was an afterthought. Or an accident.”

He laughed. “A nice accident in that case, I’m sure.”

I allowed myself another small, economical shrug. “Maybe. I think I was meant to be a boy.”

He painted on for a moment, then looked up and said: “I can make you into one if you like. I haven’t painted your hair yet.”

It took me a moment to understand what he meant, then I giggled, had to put a hand to my mouth to suppress it, apologised once more.

“No,” he said. “Not such a good idea perhaps. Not in a gingham dress.”

He asked me where we come from, what we are doing there in Brighton. I told him that we were from York, and were on holiday.

“So, what have you done? Where have you been?”

I shrugged. “Not much. We went to Winchester one day to see the Roman ruins, that was good. And to Devil’s Dyke.”

He nodded.

“Devil’s Dyke was boring,” I said. “It’s just a valley.”

“No devils, you mean?”

“I didn’t mean that,” I began to say, cross at being made to seem silly, then realised that he was joking. “It was just – well – ordinary.”

“It’s special to me.”

“Why?”

He glanced at my parents, as if to check that they are not listening, and in an exaggerated whisper said: “I had my first kiss there.”

I felt myself blush, and looked down to hide it.

I blushed easily these days, I told myself: I did not know why. Somehow it seemed to be part of the process of growing up. Things happening inside, outside, things that I did not understand, did not want. Worst of all were the changes that seem to be happening to my head. It was as if my mind was rearranging itself, my senses; as though the bits of my brain no longer quite fitted; as if, somewhere within me, there was another person trying to get out, someone who had been there all along and had got tired of waiting to be released. It felt scary, as if she might tear me apart in the endeavour.

I tried to think of something to ask him. "Are you a painter?" I said, then immediately realised the foolishness of my words. "I mean. Do you do it for a living?"

"I wish," he said, and when I asked him what he meant, he explained: he wanted to be an artist, but you couldn't earn a living painting, so he just did it as a hobby, and painted when he could. "I can make a little money like this," he said. "Painting portraits for tourists. But it's not real art."

"Oh." I did not know what else to say. It felt like a reprimand, as though it was my fault, as though I wasn't good enough, not beautiful enough, to make it proper art.

Perhaps he saw my hurt, or heard the unintended meaning in his own words, for he apologised and said: "Maybe this one will be, this picture – of you. Because you're a bit special, I think. Not everyone I paint is as good as you."

I wrinkled my nose, in what was intended to be an expression of disbelief, or disapproval: you can't fool me. But he just laughed.

"I mean it. Like I've said, you've nice bones. That's what makes a good portrait – well, as long as the artist is good enough to do them justice. It gives the face shape, depth, something unique."

"So how do you earn money, then?" I asked, eager to change the subject.

"Oh – odd jobs. Working on a farm. Gardening. Anything I can get."

He painted on for a while, then paused and said, almost to himself or to the world at large, not looking at me, so that I could hardly hear: "But I'd rather go to art school, and be an artist."

He looked at me, and his face was sad, grave.

"You could," I said. "I'm sure you're good enough."

“Perhaps you should reserve your judgement about that – until you’ve seen the finished thing.”

He returned to his painting and I sank back into my own thoughts. It was another revelation – that even when you were an adult, you couldn’t always do what you wanted. That growing up was not necessarily an escape.

“There,” he said. “What do think?”

He swivelled the easel around. I looked at the painting blankly for a moment, hardly taking the picture in. Then my eyes seemed to find focus, my thoughts caught up, and a little ‘Oooh’ escaped from my lips.

“Don’t you like it?”

“No. I mean, yes I do.”

It was not at all what I had expected. I had anticipated something carefully crafted, with delicate lines, details of my features and limbs and dress. There were elements of that, but they seemed fragmentary and lightly done, as if by accident. One eye, the line of my nose. The way my hair hung over one shoulder, catching the sun. My hands, where they lay in my lap. But the rest was much more simply and coarsely painted. Bold brush-strokes, in unlikely colours – reds and greens and whites, touches of yellow, black – that seemed deliberately to shy away from the truth. In places it seemed hardly finished. There were gaps, areas of pale wash. In other places, the colours had merged one into the other, so that my skin and my dress and the hinted at sea beyond seemed to be all part of the same thing. And yet, after that first glance, and each time I returned to it and let the image settle, I could see myself there. And only then, as I studied it more carefully, tried to delve into it, did the image break up and all the different brush-strokes and colours come crowding from the canvas, as if shouting for attention.

“I love it,” I said, and I meant it. “I love it. I really do.” I swivelled round, called to my parents. “Come here. Look at this.”

When I turned back to the painting, I caught again that likeness, and within it the faintest hint of something else. Another me.

I glanced at the man in sudden awe, almost fear. Is that what he had seen? Had he peered inside me, so deep?

He returned my look with a wry and hopeful smile.

It brought a sudden flood of doubt. Would my parents like it? Or would they hate it and refuse to accept it, just as I had hoped they would half an hour or so before? Would there be a scene?

For a moment, it seemed possible. My mother frowned as she looked at it, began to say something – “It’s –” then stopped. “It’s very good. Well done,” she said.

As he wrapped up the painting, I noticed another detail that I had missed before. His name in the right hand corner, added with a thin, dark brush. ‘F Furley.’ I wondered what the first ‘F’ stood for, and was about to ask, then saw his business cards on the table, took one, studied it. ‘Frank Furley’.

I liked the sound of the name, its alliteration. I liked him. More than that, I felt a sense of deep admiration, as if I had met someone from another world. I told myself that I would remember him whenever I looked at the picture, and I would remember sitting there, having it done.

My mother took the painting, tucked it under her arm. My father wrote out a cheque, handed it across. We turned to leave. But at the last moment I ran back. I reached up to the man, whispered in his ear. “I think you should be a painter,” I said. Then, embarrassed, I turned and ran back to my mother’s side.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“Nothing. I just thanked him.”

She nodded. “That was kind of you.”

I was led away, my hand held tight in her grip. As we walked back to our hotel, I tried to see the picture again, in my mind, but it would not come. It would be like that, I thought; invisible, irreproducible, until the moment I looked at it again. It would always be like that.