



For the Love of Art

Mary Howley

Turning off the ignition in my Mini Coupe, I sit for a stretch of time, harnessing all of the emotional strength I can muster. The grand house is alluring with its sweeping view of the hills and the captivating blue of the sea. And yet, as I made the journey this morning around the curves of the Great Ocean Road, I considered making a U-turn. It was the phone call from old Rex, the owner of the service station where my mother fuels her Range Rover, that brought me here. He told me that my mother was as skinny as a greyhound and had the bark of a German shepherd.

‘She’s crook,’ he said. ‘You should go see her.’

A bridge of thirty-two years exists between the past and the present. I’ve returned older, but certainly not

wiser. As I stare at the bluestone house, the memories hanker to be unearthed and revisited. I try to resist. Best to leave them dead and buried, I tell myself. But they're like a scab; it doesn't take much to scratch the surface... to make it bleed.

The wooden presence of Winston feels imposing as he guards the verandah. The crenulations in his dragon wings transport me to that overcast day on my tenth birthday. My father, Lucian, was standing in the front garden, eyeing the remnant of a tree trunk from the grey gum. It had been a casualty of the cyclone that had marred the summer of '72.

Pulling the cord of the chainsaw—and uncharacteristically in a good mood—he called me and my brother, Icarus, to come over and watch. Hour after hour his chainsaw wrestled with the hunk of wood, a cigarette at the end of his weather-beaten lips, ash falling into the breeze. Eventually a massive dragon appeared, sculpted from the lump of wood. Lucian christened him Winston—reckoned he could see Winston Churchill in the dragon's face. I smile as I take the keys out of the ignition. In my artillery of memories, that was a good one. I wish I had more.

There are no lights on in the house. I take a box of groceries and the book on modern art that I'd brought all the way from MOMA in New York out of the boot of my car. The front door is unlocked as usual; her reasoning

being that thieves would do her a favour if they stole the inherited antiques. The house is as dark as I remember it and I instinctively reach for the light switch on the left side of the wall. As the light hits the hallway I notice that the open fire is smouldering. She would have lit it early in the morning and then gone to her studio... brushstrokes being her only priority.

Walking into the kitchen, I notice that nothing has changed. The wooden cupboards are still the sage green that she'd painted them forty years ago. Placing the book on the kitchen table, a large rectangular envelope with the words Peter MacCallum Cancer Clinic stamped on the front catches my eye. It's unsealed and for a few seconds I wonder if I should look inside the envelope, but I don't. Instead, I decide to tackle the thing I've been dreading.

I walk out of the house and head towards the studio. Music filters into the air and once again I'm transported back to my childhood. My mother—who always insists on being called by her given name, Daria—is a creature of habit. Here she is, still painting to music. My brother and I grew up on a varied diet of classical music combined with the gravelly sounds of the Rolling Stones, as well as the smoky, sultry tones of jazz.

It's Vivaldi today. She'll be making sweeping strokes with her paintbrush like a conductor in front of an orchestra. I knock on the studio door as I let myself in. She's humming as she dabs her brush into her palette.

‘Hey, Daria,’ I call out over the music. My pace is timid, cautious.

She turns around, paintbrush in one hand while her other hand pushes her glasses down her nose, her eyes peering over them. She turns down the music. ‘Misty? Is that you?’ Her eyes squint and her mouth turns down in a scowl. ‘What the hell brings you here?’

‘Old Rex called me...’

Her eyes flash. ‘Old Rex should mind his own bloody business.’

My steps falter. I didn’t expect her to welcome me with open arms, but her reaction still hits me like a slap in the face.

‘You were a wisp of a girl when you left.’ Her gaze is cold. ‘Why are you here?’

The bones of her face are prominent and her eyes are sunken in sallow flesh. I can’t help staring at her as I search for an answer.

‘Are you here for money? Is that what you want?’ She coughs out the last few words.

I take a step back. I’m shocked by her gaunt appearance, but I’m even more appalled at her accusation. ‘I’ve never asked you for money, ever. I thought I’d come see you and cook you a meal.’

Glancing back at her canvas, she waves her brush with a twist of her wrist, pointing to the packets of crisps in a basket underneath her easel. ‘I don’t need anyone

cooking for me. I'm fine on my own.'

She turns her back to me. Paintings are propped on easels around the studio; the smell of turpentine lingers heavy in the air. 'This has to be completed for my exhibition next month. I'm running out of time.'

I wonder if she intended that as a double entendre as she draws a wheezy breath. Her fingers, thin like matchsticks, clasp her paintbrush tightly.

'Well... I brought ingredients to cook you my signature dish.' I wait for a response, but she turns the music to a deafening level and goes back to painting.

I wait for a moment, unsure what to say or do. Walking out of the studio, I feel that familiar emotional bruising I lived with as a child and as a teenager. The back door creaks as I walk into the house; it feels as soulless as a mortuary. Despite all her money, Daria has never made the house feel homely. Her heart has always been in her studio.

Washing a punnet of mixed herbs under the tap, I recall how I used to watch her wash her paintbrushes. She'd wrap them in flannel cloths with such tenderness, such care. Icarus and I had hungered for that same attention.

When I finish cooking, I arrange the ingredients on a plate with the measured precision that earned my restaurant a Michelin Star. I realise, not for the first time, the instinct to create is sewn into the fabric of who I am. And, like my parents, my personal relationships have also suffered, all in the name of my craft.

I walk out to the studio and call out to her through the wire door.

‘I hear you,’ she says. Her impatience curls around her words. ‘I’ll come when I’m ready.’

I sit in the kitchen; my hands cup a glass of the best sauvignon blanc I could find in the cellar of my restaurant. An hour ticks by and the truffle-infused sauce on the plate congeals into a jelly. Walking over to the bay window that faces the beach, I feel the tug of the ocean and I run out of the front door and follow the screech of the seagulls.

The sea is a murky green, turbulent and ferocious, thundering as it crashes against the rocks that tower like dinosaurs. I can taste the sea salt on my lips. The waves batter their way to the shore in the same way my emotions churn within me. Fingers of sea foam claw at the sand and I remember how Icarus and I used to skim stones here for hours, filling in time, not wanting to go home. We’d spend afternoons after school searching for pippies and mussels in the rock pools, hoping to satisfy our growling bellies when a bare pantry and empty fridge would send us scuttling here. Our threadbare clothing and the holes in our shoes couldn’t hide the neglect.

Sitting on the sand, the wind beating at my back, I can see his dirt-stained hand holding mine as we crossed the busy highway to get to school. Icarus looked after me, but who looked after him? Not Daria or Lucian—they lived for their art, their egos pumped by their social status.

Daria and Lucian Rochford, the rock stars of the art world.

As I stare at the roiling waves, I can hear Icarus's voice calling me the way he used to... M-I-I-I-S-T-Y. Picking up a shell I carve his name into the sand. My mind takes me back to the day I found his lifeless body in his room, a handwritten note next to him:

Happy endings only exist in fairy tales.

When I walk back from the beach I throw out the untouched food and write Daria a note:

Call me if you need me.

I stare at my note for a moment before I screw it up and put it in my pocket. She'd told me all my life that she needs no-one. 'Never love and never care because you'll be disappointed.'

Lucian was unfaithful throughout their relationship and I know that disappointment is the reason she clings to her art. It was ironic that she yearned for love from Lucian and he couldn't give it to her; Icarus and I craved love from her but she couldn't give that to us either.

The house is cold now. Shivering, I waver between going to say a final goodbye to her or just leaving. In the end I scrawl my number on the white envelope and leave it beside the book I brought her.

Driving around the curves of the long driveway and out of the black iron gates, my shoulders relax and the tension in my back dissipates. I'm once again leaving it behind.

I make a call and Nick, my assistant chef, answers.

‘Hey, Mist, how you doing?’

‘I’m on my way back.’

I can hear the sounds that nourish my soul. Voices shouting orders, the clatter of pans, the sizzling of oil. I want to be back there, feeling the adrenaline from the frenetic pulse of the kitchen, hearing the background hum of patrons savouring the flavours of my art.

The sea glimmers under the fledgling rays of the sun as I end the call and make my way back along the Great Ocean Road to Melbourne. I glance over to the passenger seat, imagining a 16-year-old Icarus sitting there beside me. His dishevelled blond hair and freckled face are clear as day as he grins at me.

‘You see, Icarus,’ I say, ‘the absurdity of my life is this. Most people try hard to keep remembering their past, but me—well, apart from you—the past is something I want to forget.’

I laugh as tears prickle my eyes. My foot pushes down on the accelerator as I wind down the window and put my arm out, hoping to capture the headwind in my hand.

Mary Howley’s fiction and nonfiction stories have been published in print and online magazines. She has completed a crime fiction novel and is currently writing a YA manuscript, which has been shortlisted and highly commended for the Wheeler Centre Hot Desk Fellowship. Find her work at maryhowley.com.