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What Alice Knew

Written by T. A. Cotterell

Published by Black Swan

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WHAT ALICE KNEW

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BLACK SWAN

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Rd, London W5 5SA
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published in Great Britain as an ebook
in 2016 by Transworld Digital,
an imprint of Transworld Publishers.
This edition first published in 2017 by Black Swan,
an imprint of Transworld Publishers.

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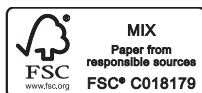
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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781784162399

Typeset in 12/15pt Adobe Caslon by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our
business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest
Stewardship Council® certified paper.





A portrait is a quest for the truth. It spares no one.

I was painting the portrait of Julie Applegarth. She was sitting in a high-backed chair covered in crushed scarlet velvet in the drawing room of Applegarth Park. Julie had golden highlights, the green marble eyes of an alley cat, and was beautiful in the way of a woman who was not yet handsome but no longer a girl. Her dress was too tight, her hair too big and blowsy, and her caramel tan spoke of Monaco and Mustique, but she was more Harlow than Hollywood.

It had not been an easy sitting. I had hoped we would finish before tea but the demon time had marched too fast. Julie had tried but concentration was not her forte and she wasn't used to being told what to do, at least not by anyone other than her husband. Certainly not by another woman, particularly as I was only a hired hand – and what is a portrait painter if not literally a hired hand? She couldn't sit still for longer than it took to have her legs waxed without calling a friend or

making a hair appointment. She fidgeted. She wriggled. She posed like a tragic actress. She gave the impression she had important business to think about, but that was a fiction. Julie played at business as she played at being chatelaine of the park, yo-yoing between self-assured entitlement and the fear she'd be rumbled.

She had been sitting in her high-backed chair, with breaks, for nearly five days. I had been standing at my easel looking directly at her and thinking about her, thinking around her, painting the idea of her, for almost five days. Mine, by some distance, was the more interesting task. It demanded full concentration. I don't like talking while I work. I pick up everything I need to know in the breaks and the meetings I have before a sitting. These are always more useful when the sitter is female. Men – successful men as my sitters invariably are – are always positioning themselves as something they're not, nicer perhaps, more generous or more cultured, better connected, and they have to flirt, it's a power thing. It all finds its way into the painting.

As we neared the end of day five, an unscheduled but necessary extension into Saturday, Julie seemed bored. She'd been through the usual stages: the early excitement, wallowing in the attention, pretending being painted was just another inconvenience of her in-demand life. Then the novelty and self-obsession wore off and the hard grind of sitting with nothing to do but thinking began. Yet still sometimes she refocused, gathered herself around the attention and basked in the hot eye of an artist paid a not inconsiderable sum to do

nothing other than capture her beauty for the benefit of posterity and her husband.

At the far end of the room the double doors opened simultaneously. They were painted a spirit-sapping mustard, a colour that could only have been chosen by a very expensive interior designer. I'd tried, not entirely successfully, to avoid looking at them. Sir Raymond Applegarth – 'Call me Ray, darlin' – entered with the anticipatory air of a man who had two ladies and a drinks cabinet to hand.

'Ah, there you are the both of you. How's it going Jules?'

He pronounced her name with two syllables, 'jewels'. Somehow he managed to sound surprised to find us exactly where we'd been for the best part of a week. Maybe he'd expected me simply to take a photo and disappear, or to finish the painting *en plein air* like some latter-day Monet. Ray had a shiny skull with a band of grey hair semicircling his head like a slipped halo and eyes that absorbed the light. Even in his sixties his body was packed tight in his camouflage of combat trousers and wheat-coloured shirt. Most people over the age of eight who wear combats are children's TV presenters or lone gunmen – and Sir Raymond was not a children's TV presenter. His nose was wide and broken, the result, he told me, of park rugby in south Ipswich where he scrummed down on Sunday mornings until his early forties with men who didn't believe in rules.

Julie twisted a band of hair into a rope. Her calves tapered impressively, expensively honed in gym and pool.

'I think we're nearly done here . . .?'

Her voice registered an octave higher for her husband than for the friends she gossiped with on her mobile during breaks. She told him what he wanted to hear, tilting her head, offering a coquettish smile. He nodded briskly and looked at me. I glanced at my palette. The ochre needed replenishing. It was Julie's portrait but my reputation. Art was little more than decoration for the Julies of the world, an expression of wealth and status, acquired culture. As I looked for the tube on the trolley I said,

'The rest of the day to be really done.'

Julie rolled her eyes at Ray. He pulled a face – the little boy denied his toys – walked round and stood beside me. Julie twitched in the chair as if momentarily tempted to follow. Ray had checked on my progress regularly since the first morning, as if he had not only paid for the portrait but the right to watch it painted. He always stood too close, smelling of aftershave and the spearmint gum he chewed to stop smoking. Ray gazed at the portrait with a cyclopean eye. There was still a bit to do but I could see my way to the end. Eventually he nodded, the self-made dealmaker satisfied he'd got more than he paid for, and said,

'S'great. Looks just like her.'

'Thank you.' I hoped it did rather more than that.

'It's definitely Jules but . . .' he paused, searching for the right sentiment in an unfamiliar language, '. . . at the same time it's somehow more, there's something extra.' He tilted his head and squinted down his nose at Julie as if he was the portraitist. 'Sort of like you've

painted her as she really is.' Julie frowned, uncertain whether it was a compliment. 'Don't get me wrong, you look great, babe. Alice here has done you proud. You wanna look?'

She shook her head. Julie had said at the start she didn't want to see the painting until it was finished. She thought it might bring bad luck. I preferred it that way too. I like the drama of the moment when the sitter finally sees their portrait, the adrenaline rush of all that hope and expectation and fear and vanity squeezed into a single second, the first impression.

Ray said, 'Oh come on, babe, just a peek,' but Julie shook her head again.

He looked at me as if maybe I could persuade her but I shrugged helplessly. Ray continued looking at the portrait. He didn't want to seem disappointed, though it was obvious he couldn't wait for them to look at it together, to rejoice in her youth and beauty and his money, the age-old combination that had made it possible. Ray winked at her tenderly. The way the old bruiser did it I could have forgiven him anything. Julie wrinkled her nose at him fondly but didn't move.

I took a step back and scanned the portrait sitting on the easel. Not bad. It might have taken a day longer than expected but it had been worth the extra time. Perhaps I had been more forgiving than I should have been with the age of the hands and the womanly strength of her shoulders. Ah well. These little generousities cost nothing and they bring such pleasure. They didn't affect the final portrait. I had caught the determined flexibility of

Julie's character. That, after all, was how she came to be sitting on a crushed velvet chair looking mournfully out over Applegarth Park when women no less pretty and certainly no less intelligent were scrapping for braised meat in blue-lined bags in Tesco. The great Joseph Mallord William Turner painted light; I had painted a faux-girly voice and a belief in the redistributive power of shopping.

But that was only the surface. I had also painted the subterfuge. This was a portrait of someone stronger than they seemed, wiler too, someone apparently shaped by a powerful man but who had everything she wanted. I had painted the tug-of-war between a rich, pug-faced older husband and his younger, more beautiful wife. I had painted the fragile interplay of power and trust, money and fear, love and mobility. I had painted the portrait of a second marriage.

When finally we had finished, Julie disappeared to fetch Ray. He had retreated to his study, a room the size of a runway where he barked orders into a pair of phones and kept callers stacked up like planes above Heathrow. I wandered over to the floor-to-ceiling windows and looked out across the park. The grass stretched away under a blank sky towards the lake. Away to the left a speckled fawn appeared at the edge of the trees, paused, sniffed, and disappeared back into the protective darkness. I half expected to see a Cuyp-cow nosing around the water-meadow or Constable's lad flat on his stomach, drinking from the stream.

I pulled my mobile out of my smock. There was a text from Nell saying Ed wasn't back yet but everything was OK. Translation: she'd eaten cereal straight out of the packet and Arthur was plugged into the TV and therefore not bothering her. She didn't ask what time I was getting home or say what she was doing. She didn't have to. Like every other fourteen-year-old girl in the world she was texting. I couldn't be on the phone when Sir Ray reappeared to survey his investment so I simply replied that work meant I was going to be late back but I couldn't wait to see her. Hugs and kisses. They knew the form. Art doesn't always work nine-to-five. Ed had texted that he would see me 'at Pete Spurling's' but he was 'totally boxed' and wouldn't stay late. Oh God! I'd completely forgotten about the party. Peter Spurling was Ed's protégé. He'd just passed his final obstetrics exams, the MRCOG IIs, and was having a party to celebrate. I replied saying the portrait had taken longer than expected and I wouldn't be back in time.

He signed off with three kisses. For a moment I wondered how Sir Ray signed off his texts to Julie, and whether it had changed now she was his wife rather than his lover. She would be the first to notice. The second wife, particularly of a rich man, is intimately attuned to these things, I imagine, her antennae always fizzing. Uneasy lies the head that wears that crown. By contrast, Ed's three kisses were as predictable as sunrise and I loved every one. The double doors swung open and Sir Raymond barrelled into the room, Julie a step and a half behind. I felt a surge of confidence in

the reception my work would receive and secure in the knowledge I was about to head home to wrap myself around my wonderful husband and kiss the head of my sweet sleeping children.

It is a long drive from Suffolk to Bristol, particularly as I try to avoid motorways. They're as interesting as processed cheese. If I'm alone in the car I stick to A or, better still, B roads wherever possible. I'm happy to swap the time for the nuance. The drive seemed even longer that night as there was nothing on the radio worth listening to – politicians bickering, luvvies loving, the distant crackle of Texan property prices misbehaving. No matter. I was in a good mood, feeling alive and optimistic, a sure sign the portrait had gone well. At a remote Edward Hopperish service station where the cashier fingered her phone in a bright desolate booth and even the oranges were in cellophane, I bought hazelnut yoghurt and a smoothie with disingenuous bonhomie on the carton. Passing a sign to Cambridge, I was reminded of my tutor's ginger goatee, his elegant study with its floor-to-ceiling bookcases and tall windows looking down King's Parade, Jerry Streeter jumping off Clare Bridge naked except for a dinner jacket and a smile as wide as the Cam, and I wondered, as everyone does, how I had got from there to here. Soon after, I swung right and headed towards Oxford and the west, white lines unfurling in front of me, buried memories unearthed by stray signposts.

I find driving at night wonderfully therapeutic, alone

in my car, the darkness warm and silky, headlights sweeping the road, the thrum of the engine the only sound in the silence, no family to fuss over, no food to cook, no clothes to wash, no tables to clear. No sitters to satisfy. It's like being at sea.

It is even better when I'm driving home through the night from a job well done and I can luxuriate in the warm glow of another sitter understood and represented, a creative impulse temporarily stilled. It is the best feeling in the world. I don't know how people get through life purely as consumers, never needing to scratch the creative itch or to leave their daub. They breathe in but they never breathe out.

He may not be an artist but Ed will leave his daub. Not on canvas but on the thousands of lives he has touched at birth and the not inconsiderable number of babies he has delivered and saved. He doesn't need the consolation of art; he has the consolation of life.

I was passing the sign to Bicester when my mobile burst into song on the passenger seat, 'Home' backlit in the rectangular screen. I glanced at the digital clock on the dashboard, 23.48, slowed down and scanned my rear-view before picking it up.

'Hello?'

'Mummy?'

Nell. I had expected Ed, startled awake by exhaustion and the still-empty bed, the lamp switched on, wondering where I was, checking I was OK, eager to know what time I would be back.

'Nell darling, what is it? Why aren't you in bed?'

'Mummy, Daddy hasn't come home.'

It was a child's voice again, stripped of the teenage ennui of her text.

'Have you tried his mobile?'

'Yup. No answer. I left a message.'

'St Anthony's?'

'They said he left about eight and hasn't been back.'

'And there hasn't been any emergency call-out?'

'Not that I know of.'

'OK, well I know he was going to Peter Spurling's party. Maybe he stayed on later than he expected?'

'Maybe. Only . . .'

'Only what?'

'Only he rang before he left the hospital and said he was really tired and would be back by nine thirty at the absolute latest and it's . . .'

'Late. I know.'

'And he was working all night last night. Though he did come back for literally five minutes to check we were OK around supertime.'

An all-nighter? We'd agreed he would never do all-nighters when I was away, barring a life-and-death. He was as insistent about it as I was, maybe even more so. It wasn't fair on the children. They were too young to be left alone all night, even if it was just about legal. I was going to pick up on it but now wasn't the time. Besides, I should have been there. It wasn't the first time my work had taken precedence.

'Mmm . . . OK, maybe he ran into someone he hadn't seen for ages at the party?'

Silence. She'd picked up the doubt in my voice. I couldn't blame her. It would be completely out of character for Ed to stay late at a party or to renege on a promise he'd made to the children.

'Is Arthur awake?'

'No. He's at Mikey Sutton's.' She left a telling pause. 'Remember?'

'Sorry, yes, of course. Well look, why don't you go back to bed? You can get into ours, if you want. I'll head on to the M4 so I'll be quicker. I should be back in about an hour and a half.'

'OK . . .'

'Yes? You sound unsure?'

'Do you think everything's OK?'

'Of course it is.'

'Because it's not like Daddy to—'

'I know. But, darling, don't you worry. There'll be some totally ordinary explanation.'

I truly believed it. Ed was the most reliable man I had ever met. I don't mean reliable in a Health & Safety, two-pens-in-his-breast-pocket way – he was too sharp for that – but in a family-means-everything way that made us all feel secure.

'Don't you worry, my darling,' I put on the 'there we go' voice I used when she lost a school hockey match. 'Everything will be fine. He'll probably be back before I am.'