

LINES IN THE SAND

BY

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When Analiese Jacob went to the gallery to meet Caio Ferreira she wondered how he would greet her. She arrived at the assigned meeting place, in front of the pre-determined painting, with precision. She glanced at her watch to ascertain how long she had until the designated hour then paused to survey each of the people in the room. It could be that he too had arrived early, and she was impatient to see him. After discounting each potential candidate she decided to check the other rooms and, under the guise of inspecting the works of art, went in search of him.

She wandered through the gallery chambers trying to distract her mind. She forced her attention to the paintings, the changing hues of the wooden floor, the sunlight adding its own artistic perspective; but what she was really looking at were the people around her, searching their faces for his. When she finished her reconnaissance she returned to the painting before which they were to meet, sitting on the bench nearest it, in reverence as much as in appreciation.

Analiese took a moment to adjust her posture. She sat upright before the painting, crossing her legs so that her calves cushioned each other at a 45-degree angle to her body. She'd once read this is how a lady would sit and wanted to appear to be as ladylike as possible. Not least because she hoped looking like a lady might somehow compensate for not having behaved like one.

Analiese was a firm believer in first impressions and wanted to make the right one this time round. The entrance to the room was to her right and she positioned herself so she could see everyone coming through it. Then, she tilted her head to look at the artwork, arranging her hair so it fell partially over one shoulder with the remainder flowing in waves against her back. She placed one hand on her thigh, the other on her bag, and waited, statuesque in her stillness.

Her eyes refused to comply, incited by nervousness to glance at her watch; the second hand raced against her heartbeat. She expected he would turn up at any moment. The gallery was not the most convenient place to reach. She knew she should have chosen a place that was easier for him to get to, but she hadn't been able to. After finding his image in the gallery years earlier, she had developed an attachment to it, and needed to experience the real and the imagined in one place. She wanted to show him the painting and explain that in some small way they hadn't been parted at all.

She changed the position of her legs, folding right over left. Then, looking for something to occupy her, she took a silver atomiser from her bag and pressed twice. The delicate floral and citrus notes of Blenheim Bouquet brought her an air of calm. It was lavender picked on a summer's day in Provence, grated lemon rind waiting to decorate a cake. It was a fleeting distraction. She leaned forward and stole a quick glance around the room to make sure he hadn't arrived and was mistakenly waiting by another painting. She knew this to be unlikely as there was only one painting of this name, but felt a need to verify his absence.

She imagined him rushing in, shirt un-tucked, sleeves rolled up, hair mopping his face. This was how he'd appeared in the last photo she'd seen of him. Sorry, sorry, he would say as they brushed cheeks in courteous and mandatory greeting. She would move along the bench to allow him space to sit down. After that she could not be sure how to proceed. Would she be bold enough to launch into her speech, apologise, feign some sort of explanation, justify an entirely unjustifiable act? Would he interrupt her, would he start talking first, what would he say, what could he say? Her thoughts were winding in ever tightening circles and with a forced breath she ordered her focus to change. Instead of contorting every consideration, she began twirling her hair around her index finger and pulling it through the length of her polished tresses.

Anaiese was practiced in hiding turmoil. It was the tug at the end of the hair twirl, pulling her scalp to the threshold of pain, that told of her anxiety, the depth of a tooth biting against her lip that spoke of frustration, the methodical stretch and curl of her toes within her heels that betrayed her fear. But none passing her by would know this.

Where was he? More than an hour had passed and she was growing irritated, even though she had no claim on impatience given the circumstances. A sudden movement caught her eye and she turned to the entrance of the room. It was him. She saw the side of his head first as he surveyed the room, his shoulder-length hair tousled just like in the photo in her bag. I'm here, Anaiese wanted to shout, turn around. But, prevented by the sensation of a blow to the stomach, she was unable to utter a sound. Instead she stood up to face him. He turned as she did so. They stood face to face on opposite sides of the room. It was him, wasn't it? She'd met him in distant memory and imagination before, his reality existing only on photographic paper. She raised a hand in greeting and forced a smile. She knew it looked entirely unnatural and hated herself for not being relaxed. But no one in this position would be. When she smiled naturally she'd been told she could light up a room. How she wanted that to happen now.

He caught her gaze, passed a hand through his hair and looked behind him, as if he didn't realise she was waving at him. He must recognise me, Analiese thought. She'd emailed him a photo. She was even wearing the same navy dress. It was him, wasn't it, she asked herself again. She clutched her bag wanting to check the image she was carrying and wishing she didn't need to. She remained standing as a blonde girl came into view, rushing over and reaching her arms around his neck. Analiese watched as he slid an arm around the girl's waist. She sat down on the bench, hiding her embarrassment by looking at the floor as they passed her.

It could have been him, she told herself. She'd always thought she would know him by instinct alone, and was disappointed to realise she was wrong. The hair, the eyes, they were so similar to those of the young man in the photo. The age too would have been about the same. A silly mistake, she told herself, acknowledging and blaming her nerves in equal measure. There's still time. There could be an infinite number of reasons for his lateness. There were always delays on the buses and trains. He might have overslept. Probably he'd been out the night before, exploring London and his alarm hadn't gone off, or he hadn't set it.

Analiese was prepared to wait for him as long as she needed to. She'd never known if this moment would come. She'd dreamt of it year after year, replaying a multitude of scenarios in her head. She'd been with him in nightmares, waking in shock, in fear. She'd woken smiling after a night with him, only to discover he wasn't there. She would wait because she needed resolution. She needed to talk about what had happened. She needed to know how he felt, what he wanted. She wished to ask him about their future. When he arrived they would sit together talking long into the evening. They would walk from the gallery to the village, where they would have an early dinner at the new Italian place opposite the flower shop, or drinks at the pub. After that she knew what she wanted to happen, yet dared not anticipate it.

As time continued to stretch, Analiese fell into a pattern: casting her eyes to her watch, the entrance hall, the painting. She watched as the dulled tones of dusk crept into the room through the skylight diffusing the vibrancy of the painting, and marvelled at how the young man in the centre of the work still refused to retreat into the shadows, instead using the sunset tones to convey an intimacy Analiese hadn't witnessed before.

Piero Di Cosimo, you have indeed created a captivating character even if the title "Portrait of a Young Man" fails to indicate so, she thought, examining the protagonist from different angles. After spending so long with him in one sitting, Analiese felt closer than ever to the depiction of this man standing proud against a pure blue background.

She'd found the painting years earlier when she'd come to the gallery in search of solace, looking for a place where she could sit with her shame, rather than hide it. She'd never been sure of exactly what it was in the painting that reminded her of the young man she was now waiting for, but each time she'd sat before the portrait, she'd found him there.

It was the oldest painting in the gallery and when it was originally bought had been attributed to Leonardo Da Vinci then later to Bolraffio and finally to Piero. The portrait was painted on wood using

tempera and the iridescence of colour in the work was captivating. Analiese smiled back as he looked at her, this 500-year old young man, his skin translucent and radiant, dark hair falling to his broad shoulders, eyes warm, mood pensive. She admired his handsomeness, more enticing for the lack of perfection, his uneven lips and pert nose.

Analiese wondered about the young man she was waiting for. Bringing a finger to her face and running it up and down her nose, she remembered his nose and decided it was like that of the young man in the portrait, a smidgen too broad and too long. Not that she was in a position to judge, her own nose being too long for her face, ruler straight and with a blob at the end that looked like Blu-tack. She held her forefinger against the point of her nose, forcing her eyes to engage with the painting rather than drifting back to the doorway.

The rhythm of footsteps behind her caused her to jump and she sat upright with a start, having long forgotten about her initial attempts to perfect her posture in anticipation of his arrival. Her nerves like beads in a shaker, she turned to face the sound, unsure of whether she was going to say something about his tardiness or launch into a hug.

“Closing for the day now. If you could make your way to the exit please.” There was no warmth to the words, a mechanical phrase uttered by the security guard day in, day out. Analiese frowned, nodding in acquiescence. She bowed her head before the painting as she stood, accepting without admitting that the only young man she was going to meet that day had been hanging before her for the best part of the afternoon. She sighed a long drawn out breath, trying to disperse the suffocating sadness.

As she left the gallery, her posture, with its curved shoulders, bent head and downward eyes, spoke of defeat. Her mood was a fading grey against the terracotta bricks of the gallery, its verdant lawns and rainbow flowerbeds. The dainty pastel petals of new roses brightened Analiese’s path as she left the gallery, their scent tainting the cooling night air. Had she not been distracted by her sorrow, she might have noticed them swaying in the breeze, waiting to be praised for their beautiful spectacle.

And had she not been lost in a fog of remorse, she might have seen the young man, not dissimilar to the one from the gallery, standing across the street, watching her.