

Too Soon Made Glad

by Rachel Gardner

Kettle's House was established in Cambridge by Jim Ede in 1956.

That's my last painting on the wall, there, snuck between Joan Miro's 'Tic Tic' and Barbara Hepworth's 'Three Personages'. I don't blame you for not noticing it. It's small—I've never been accused of grandness, admittedly—but to my mind, perfectly lifelike. Jim had always tried to pair our paintings with little objects, which he placed, in an artful manner that bordered on carelessness, around the rooms themselves. Miro's yellow dot hung above a single, plated, wax lemon. Hepworth's 'Three Personages' was positioned opposite a pair of wedding rings, interlinked. It took Jim a long time to work out what to pair with my painting, perhaps because the thing was so damnably difficult to interpret. If he had asked me, I would have told him that I was trying to capture the way silk shimmers under water, pierced with shafts of light and twirled out of shape by the eddies. There's no label underneath it—Jim always insisted no labels—so it never got the explanation it deserved. Perhaps that's why I'm writing now.

We had all heard of the great Jim Ede long before he set up Kettle's House. I had met him first at the Tate, where he had been a curator, and a damned good one at that. It was he who introduced me to Maria, a sculptor (or should I say sylph?) only three years my junior. When I next held her gaze, it was over Jim's dining room table—as artists and alumni, we had been invited to see the Kettle's House collection with our own eyes. The table was packed with all sorts, men and women from all over the continent and even, dare I say, one from Scotland. We helped ourselves to big bowls of stew with wedges of bread, throwing around audacious theories and pointed fingers. I had an appetite for drink in those days, I'll say. That night, however, my first with Maria, I was distracted. Her lips were shaped in the most precise bow, curved at each end and raised in the middle. It was impish, charming. I kept my own eyes fixed on them throughout the night and traced their pattern on my leg underneath the table. Tired with the heckling conversation that had long since turned from earnest discussion into snobbish showmanship, Maria finished her soup and rose to leave—and as she went, she took the air right out of the room with her.

Jim had originally only invited us to visit, but we stayed to paint. As long as Maria would stay, so would I. We often found ourselves by the Cam, tucked into nooks along the river edge where our conversation would only bother the ducks. She had first used that spot to pray. She said she always felt closer to God by the water because the trickling music of the stream always brought with it the reassurance of a reply. Most afternoons, she would gaze into the water, grey eyes clouded by strands of shimmering, golden hair, and her lips would murmur missives to a God far beyond my reach. As she prayed, eyes open and hands twirling the grass beside her ankles, I would sketch. My notebook back then was littered with fragments of her: the arch of her nose, her mud-rimmed fingernails. In those moments, time had truly suspended itself. She teased me (that smile again) that she had become my muse—and I had no reply.

Of course, nothing of *that* sort ever happened between us. I couldn't bring myself to sully her with romance—in fact, I truly believed that if anything unbecoming or vulgar came out of her mouth, I would have had to cast myself into the river or leave the city forever. Jim tried to talk to me once, actually, saying something about 'expectations' and 'self-restraint', and I could see what the old boy was getting at, but it never concerned me: Maria would never stoop and, for my part, I would never give her cause to.

A month or so later, while I was sharing breakfast with Jim in the walled garden, I met Isaac Montgomery. A painter from London, he also attempted oil landscapes, like me, although with a greenness that bordered on inexperience. Isaac had arranged to stay with Jim to paint the Fens, it appeared, and would be taking the room next to mine. As he settled down to breakfast with us,

he pulled out his sketchbook and flipped through a few drawings of the sights he had encountered already on his trip from Grandchester. The usual scribblings of punters, cowslips and dragonflies affronted us. He turned the page once more and alighted on a semi-drawn portrait of a woman's face. It was only half finished, he assured us, as he had only had time to capture the eyes and the smile. The face's eyes were grey, and her lips were like a bow, impishly curled at each corner.

I flushed. The likeness was unmistakable. Maria, courting with others? Breathlessly encouraging the impositions of other men's pens? I inquired politely where he had drawn such a striking sketch of the girl. 'In a nook by the river, old chap', he replied gayly. I excused myself, quickly. If Maria were at the river, dandling herself in the same spot where I had, on many an occasion, sat and gazed at her, I would not bear it. I would take it as a sign of her infidelity. There would be no talking to her— for to even raise with her such an assumption would sully her. It would be like asking a flower to bend its pliant stem and bury its petals in the muck. And I could not make her stoop. I hurried through the willows towards our spot.

There she was. She was dressed in blue silk, the colour of cornflowers, which skated over her shoulders and tented slightly over her bent knees. Her head was turned, grey eyes cast out over the water. Her lips moved, lightly, in prayer. I was taken up once again with the faithful simplicity of her expression, her gentle frown, her hand combing the water. It was almost enough to make me forget Montgomery, cast myself down at her feet and beg forgiveness for something I wasn't sure I had the courage to do. Almost.

When I arrived back at the House, I found Montgomery again and complimented him on the exactness of his drawing—how much it looked like the real thing! He blinked a little and smiled hesitantly. 'I don't believe you've met my wife, Isabella, have you? She's visiting for the weekend to spend time with her sister Maria', he chirped. 'I've been told they look awfully similar—although I've never seen her sister, so I couldn't say for sure. You're looking awfully pale—why do you ask?'

Of course, I was on the train when the news broke. Maria had been found in the Cam, weighed down by her dress and pulled by the currents away from the slippery banks. I've been told that Jim paired my painting—my last to be displayed at Kettle's House—with a vase of blue cornflowers. When they let me out, I'll make sure to visit.