

Return to Porthfeddon

by Sandra Davies

Unlike his contemporaries the older he got the more he sought the flash and vivacity of the urban. Its haste, the potential for action, reaction; for meeting, separating, for hate and for love. For violence.

He'd long ago ceased to be interested in the rural, the coastal, though God knows there was more than enough violence to be found there. Perhaps it was just that death had coloured what had once been idyllic, had brought sickness; the sickness and the customary guilt of over-indulgence.

But coming here had been a mistake. All those negotiations, preceded by research, ending with expenditure, might well end with his death. Death from fright if not as a result of miscalculation by one of the still-learning pilots. He'd hoped to find a different inspiration, but landing lights, from this viewpoint at least, was not going to provide it.

.oOo.

Thin, with more than a trace of aristocratic hauteur — breeding — about her, her ankles especially, resembling those of an elegantly-posed greyhound, she stood in front of the painting, silently contemplating.

Its muted tones matched hers: pale creams of once-, twice- and thrice-primed canvas, aligned and delineated by several shades of grey. These ranged from the merest smudge of dampened graphite to the devil-drawn noir of compressed charcoal, shiny from the addition of linseed oil. The same could be said of her hair. The subtleties of shape and line were augmented by butterfly-blue squares that matched her eyes, as well as being sparkled here and —

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precisely — there, with the briefest touch of slightly scorched vermilion which echoed and exchanged Morse code messages with the tips of her fingers and her toes.

This was the third consecutive morning she'd come to the gallery. Sebastian had seen her stepping from a chauffeured car, her smiling thanks to the driver, who had reappeared precisely one hour later, at which point she had murmured her thanks and left.

Today he'd ask her.

Definitely.

Her name, at least.

.oOo.

But fright was not as ... frighteningly final as death. You could recover from fright. Compared to the pain of dying fright was little more than stomach cramps following a dodgy curry.

And, in truth — and typically — yesterday's terror had been converted into visual form. An unanticipated direction, true, 'twas ever thus, and he doubted his mad, two in the morning idea of using neon light to create what he had in mind would go down well.

Come the dawn, and sanity, he'd sketched out some ideas to take to the gallery tomorrow. They excited him, at least and while Crispin was — had to be given the overheads — as profit-driven as anyone in this business, they had a good enough relationship for Crispin to allow him a little freedom to experiment.

Although he could hear the delicately-put (but potentially threatening) doubt that returning to his roots might, just might, not be an entirely ... wise decision.

.oOo.

'K-Kensington, milady?' His Lordship was within earshot, watching her settle herself on the generous width of the back seat of the car.

Remembering the uses this self-same leather upholstery had recently been put to John made an extra effort to school his face to servile blankness. Waited for the automatic words of farewell to her, the usual admonition to him to 'Drive carefully', full knowing that his Lordship was more concerned for the vehicle's paintwork than the soft flesh of his wife.

Once upon a time he'd thought her as cold a fish as her aristocratic husband, but then, hearing the complicity in her voice as she changed her destination to Cork Street; watching her face in the rear-view mirror as they left the gallery and returned home, told him that the blood which flowed through her veins was red as his, was hot as her face when she asked him to stop when they reached the cool of the forest.

Later he'd made her laugh: 'So his prick really is a bloater?'

'Yes,' she'd said, 'But a baby one, and frozen solid.'

.oOo.

She arrived ten minutes earlier than usual. Usual calm cream clothing, her smile of acknowledgement several degrees warmer than yesterday's merely polite as she positioned herself once again in front of 'Porthfeddon: line and circle'.

As was Sebastian's. He knew the artist was due to arrive in half an hour's time; knew that she usually stayed for at least that long.

Debated with himself whether or not to tell her. Decided to keep it a surprise (while acknowledging that it was nervousness on his part that prevented him. Even though she did look less forbidding today.)

Crispin arrived, letting himself in the back door; called Sebastian through to give him instructions for the day. When Sebastian returned to the gallery he saw through the plate glass window the black bulk of the car draw up outside.

Fifteen minutes early.

Saw the man they were expecting pause on the pavement outside to look at the painting in the window.

Fifteen minutes early.

Saw her glance outside, her smile suddenly more glorious than ever before. Whew! There'd been no need to tell her about the artist's arrival.

Saw her turn and walk to the door, watched the artist open it for her. Continued to watch as the artist stood aside, saw that his smile echoed what must have been merely her polite acknowledgement as she passed him. Saw that it was the chauffeur, already on the pavement, car door open, who smiled more warmly than usual. Watched her slide elegantly in before the chauffeur closed the door, walked round to the driver's side, still smiling, got in and drove away.

The artist, entering the gallery, paused in front of 'Porthfeddon: line and circle'.

Smiled at Sebastian, 'You'd better take that down — I'm about to tell Crispin I want it shipped back to Porthfeddon. I don't suppose anyone's looked at it in months.'

