

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG WOMAN

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

On the 5.42 Southbound, passengers in the third carriage were trying not to stare at a young woman in blue.

It wasn't just that her clothes were blue, the colour seemed to be softly weeping from her skin. The impact was immediate, except when the passengers looked more closely, they couldn't see anything so odd after all. There were two smears of lapis beneath the woman's eyes, which were dark, and her hair was also dark, so dark that it looked blue beneath the carriage lights. The illusion was surely the sum of these things. At any rate, nobody said anything. Nobody ever did, on the 5.42.

For her part, the young woman looked right back at the other passengers, although this was out of curiosity rather than annoyance. She was fidgety, picking up a newspaper only to put it down, or taking out again the ticket she'd purchased minutes before, and thumbing its already tattered edges. She'd never been on a train.

Except... the experience didn't feel entirely new to the young woman. Without any trouble at all, she had known to go to the ticket office and ask for a single journey, and now as she sat, rocked back and forth by the train's progress, the young woman thought that she was a bit like a train herself. How she'd got to the station, why she was travelling – these things weren't nearly as important as getting to her destination. It was right that she should be going to the South City, and she was glad to be on the move. So much of her time had been spent sitting still, absorbing the world.

Picking up the newspaper again, the young woman turned to a random page. At the top of it, letters constellated to form a word she'd heard somewhere and recognised, slowly, on sight:

H o r o s c o p e s

Down the left margin there were pictures of small animals – a bull, a crab; there were also different animals stitched together, and a vase of water spilling over. Next to each of these pictures were dates, and a neat paragraph that promised good fortune or warned of danger. This all seemed too important to be in such small print, and at the back of the newspaper. Not knowing which paragraph she was meant to read – for the young woman realised that you were probably only meant to read one – she picked the paragraph that corresponded to today's date, which her ticket told her was February the 1st.

Aquarius

Your birthday sees the Snow Moon move into Leo. There will be many revelations this month as well as the chance to transform your dreams into reality. You will feel a powerful urge to find your true voice.

The young woman read the paragraph over and over, then looked out of the black window in search of the Snow Moon. She saw only the carriage lights, and her own face looking back at her.

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Meanwhile, Violet Beauchene was preparing dinner. She took two small bowls out of the cupboard. The bowls were the last survivors of a set, and a pale fish swam across each. Violet remembered how she'd cried when Gabriel had broken the first bowl, and she, the second. She was not a materialistic person, and she did not tie her relationships to such things, but she did like objects. Perhaps it was all that still life she did at art school.

Placing the bowls on the counter, Violet thought back now to her wedding day, and the table which guests had flooded with flowers, and crockery. How strange it was that relatives she'd never met were so delighted with the union, they wished to celebrate with bowls. Elegant bowls,

and cups with slim, curling handles, and plates in duck-egg and mint. In all her years alone, struggling to make both art and dinner, no one had ever given Violet chinaware.

Nonetheless, following the wedding, ‘Mrs. Beauchene’ had replied to each guest with a handwritten *thank you*, because she was grateful, and she loved her husband, even if the title disagreed with her.

In the pan, the soup gleamed. Violet pictured its effect on canvas. She thought of sunsets, horsehair, rust. She thought of autumn. These were not, though, the kinds of things Violet usually painted.

Violet usually painted people.

Gabriel, getting up from the table, said:

‘I am looking forward to this creation.’

Violet offered him the bowl with a care that was almost stern.

‘Marriage is built on honesty, my love.’

Gabriel’s face creased in delight. Paper skin creasing around the eyes, and a mouth forever smiling, even when it wasn’t. It was the same face Violet had loved all these years, though it had accumulated different shapes and textures. Gabriel’s hair, formerly reddish gold, was now a cloud of white, and on his cheek, there was a new, pink crescent – left over from a biopsy he’d undergone the previous year. Violet remembered how the lesion had first raised, then blackened, and following its excision, bloomed red through a row of stitches that looked just like fishing wire. Violet frequently kissed Gabriel’s scar. It comforted her, this emblem of good health. That’s what she took it for, anyway, whatever the truth.

The couple took their seats. Violet noted the single yellow rosebud on the table (Gabriel never failed to place a flower in the little sherry glass they used as a vase – for romance and for fragrance, he said).

‘Roses already,’ Violet blew on her soup. ‘They get earlier every year. This one, I might paint.’

Though it was only February, the weather was already warm. Cool mornings, softening like butter as the sun climbed towards noon.

Gabriel raised his bowl.

‘Tchin-tchin! Cheers, Vi.’

His imitation of her East City accent had never improved. Violet mock-scowled, and the couple clinked bowls.

‘Careful...’

As he tasted his first spoonful, Gabriel closed his eyes.

‘Delicious,’ he said.

Violet laughed. The soup was over-seasoned and thick with tomato, skin snagging on her teeth.

‘When you’re hungry,’ she said, ‘anything tastes good.’

Violet was hungry, and tired. She had spent the whole day in her studio, unable to elevate a portrait above the level of a good likeness. The portrait was of and for a friend – a birthday gift – and Violet had found herself unable to conjure any quirk or soul from the palette. Her friend's face stared blankly back at her from the canvas, no hint of the person who was shy upon first meeting but who had a secret love of dirty jokes, who still mourned her long-dead bird, and who ate almonds like there was no tomorrow. It was extremely upsetting to Violet, the thought of presenting this soulless article to a woman she'd known for over thirty years.

Gabriel sympathised.

'Ah, Violette. Perhaps you need a rest.'

'I rested yesterday.' Violet heard the frustration in her voice. If only, she thought, she could recapture whatever magic she'd lost. As a young woman, she'd been so full of creative energy – you could see it in her self-portrait.

What she needed, Violet thought, was the stars to align – or at the least an opportunity to reacquaint herself with that young woman. Rediscover the spark.

An alumnus of the London Library Emerging Writers programme, Charlotte Newman's writing has been published by Popshot, The London Magazine, and Litro, among other titles. She is currently working on a book from which this story is taken. Find her on Instagram: @charlotte.a.newman.