

The Perfect Muse

George Mackay

She was sitting on the wall holding her white rabbit when they first drove past: a flash of gold hair, bare feet on the dashboard, surfboards stacked on the roof. At dinner her Mum talked about them, the new young neighbours from up country – artists they called themselves.

“Can I get down?” she asked and she sidled outside.

She clipped the lead on the rabbit and shoved open the front gate. Turning down the shadowed lane towards the wood she saw the cottage which had been asleep for as long as she could remember. It had woken up and its windows were lit with a fresh glamour.

The rabbit stopped to nibble a dandelion on the verge and she got a really good look in. Eyes sharp into each of the four windows. They were brightly lit in the kitchen dancing or kissing or something. It felt at the same time bad and very good to watch them. Her heart thudded in her chest as she picked up the rabbit and walked slowly back up the lane.

Back at the house her Mum was elbow deep in fairy liquid and her brothers were draped across the sofa, chins dropped in slack mouthed concentration, hands clicking consoles. No one noticed her come back as they hadn't notice her go. She often roamed the lane in the evenings and it would never occur to them that she might be unsafe.

She began seeing her new neighbours daily. They drove past the farm on the way to and from the main road and, as it was the first week of the long summer holidays, she was often dawdling in the front yard waiting for something to happen. They started waving at her and she waved back and then she started waiting for them and running to the sound of their van.

It wasn't long before they spoke to her. She was walking towards the cottage with her rabbit on the lead and they were standing in the road with friends. They circled her and asked the bunny's name and the lady with golden red hair asked her name and she said, "Melwyn."

The lady smiled and her green eyes glittered. "Beautiful," she said.

It was the first time anyone had ever said anything was beautiful about Melwyn. "It's Cornish," she told the woman, "it means *fair as honey*."

"That's cool." The sandy haired man had a wide smile.

Melwyn's cheeks prickled hot. "Thanks."

She picked up Nibbles and told them it was time for the rabbit's dinner. If she stuck around they would soon realise she wasn't cool or beautiful. And if she rushed home and found a quiet corner she could bask in the dream that it was true.

But her house ponged of cat food and her brothers sweaty trainers and it was impossible to feel beautiful there. So she went down to the river in the wood, where she lay under her favourite swaying beech and let the sun dapple her through the green green leaves.

Her Mum and brothers were less dazzled by their new neighbours as they were busy in their own worlds. The boys were staying out of trouble that summer working on the farm and her mum was always busy with something: sighing over piles of mysteriously unmatched socks, weeding the veg patch, making pies and scones, or locked in the bathroom with The Archers on shouting, "Give me a moment's peace why don't you?" when they rattled the door. And her Dad started work before light and came back after dark and hardly noticed the people in his own house, let alone the newcomers down the lane.

However, occasionally over the next fortnight the subject of the new neighbours drifted into the dinner chat and every time they were mentioned Melwyn stopped playing with her food, alert to every word:

“Have you seen the daft colour they painted the door?”

“They chopped back the old rhododendron, Jory must be turning in his grave.”

“Got visitors again, cluttering up the road – tractor couldn’t get by earlier.”

And one night, “What’s that in the hall?”

“What?”

“The parcel by the door?”

“Postman asked if I’d take it for next door.”

“What do you think it is?”

“Dunno, front door mat?”

“Maybe it’s a roll of paper – artists aren’t they?”

Melwyn said in a huffy voice that she was going down the woods so might as well take the parcel, like it was the most boring burden, but like she might as well. It was lighter than expected. She read the name on the label and walked down the lane mouthing it to herself: Lydia Stone, Lydia Stone, Lydia Stone.

She clicked open the white wooden gate and stepped into the front garden. It felt like coming home as she had been sneaking in there for years pretending the cottage was hers. She stepped over the cracks of the mossy path to the front door, which had been painted a cheerful daffodil yellow, and knocked loudly once. Her hand hovered in the air and then Lydia was there. She was wearing something like a slinky dressing gown, but longer and flowy, with a silky pattern of blossomed branches and birds. No slippers, just neon pink toenails on the slate, and hair swirled loosely in a nest on top of her head.

Melwyn held out the parcel. “It came to ours, but it’s yours.”

“Ah, my new yoga mat.” Lydia hugged the parcel to her chest. “I was wondering where it got to.” She gave Melwyn an impish pointy toothed smile. “Do you like apricots?”

Melwyn didn't know but she nodded enthusiastically hoping it would mean she could go inside. She followed Lydia into the kitchen where there was a large wooden bowl piled with apricots.

“We don't like them,” Lydia drawled, “but I had to do this illustration for The Guardian and now we've got this whole bowl full. Do you want some?”

“Yes please.”

Melwyn watched Lydia pull an orange Sainsbury's bag from under the sink. Since Lidl arrived on the outskirts of town Melwyn's mum said anyone must be mad as a hatter to be wasting their money in 'burys still. Lydia placed the apricots carefully in the bag one at a time while Melwyn looked at a large painting of a naked lady riding a zebra above the fireplace.

“Do you like it?” Lydia asked.

Melwyn nodded and blushed. She liked it so much she wanted to burst.

“It's me.” Lydia stretched an arm to the ceiling and yawned. “Jay painted it.” Her sleeve dropped and Melwyn spied the milky curve of her breast.

“Did you actually ride a zebra?” she asked.

“Ha, I wish. No – it's all made up. He makes people up for a living.”

Melwyn had never heard of adults making things up. Something about it seemed thrilling and also a little worrying. Lydia was stretching her arm over her head arching to one side when she heard the van pull up outside. Melwyn suddenly wanted to leave but she couldn't think how.

The blonde man stepped into the kitchen and Lydia said, "Hey Jay, look what we have here."

"Oh hello, Miss Honey Fair."

"How was the surf my love?" Lydia draped her arms around him and kissed his unshaven cheek.

"Pumping." His straw hair was messy wet and his eyes shone from the sea. He kissed Lydia on the nose and went to the fridge and glugged some funny blue coloured juice straight from a bottle that said Innocent.

He grinned at Melwyn and asked, "Where's your bunny rabbit?"

"At home. Actually I better go and check on him."

And the next thing Melwyn knew she was running back up the road with a bag full of apricots and a head full of zebras.

The following Sunday her brothers were on the lane tinkering with the tractor and Melwyn was cleaning out the rabbit hutch when she heard one of her brothers grunt, "Alright."

Lydia and Jay were standing at the gate smiling. They had come to ask something: would Melwyn like to be in a painting with her rabbit? They could give her pocket money for her time. Were her Mum and Dad about?

That evening Melwyn's family sat around the table, forking slit potatoes oozing butter, helping themselves to gammon sliced in thick pink piles and *all* they talked about were the neighbours.

"He said it's for a London gallery, so they must go for something."

"Go on then, Google him."

"I thought we weren't allowed phones at table?"

“Just do it.”

“What’s his name Mel?”

“I don’t know. She calls him Jay. He paints zebras.”

“Jay...artist...zebra painting.”

“Zebras? What the hell’s he doing in Cornwall painting zebras?”

“Here we go – Jay Dixon. Does this look like one of his?”

A painting of a bearded man lying in the arms of a panda.

“Maybe, I think so.”

Her brother whistled and held up his phone. “This one sold for £6800.”

Forks stopped midway to mouths.

“How much did you say he was paying you Melwyn?”

The day she went to be painted she stole her mum’s conditioner for the first time and her hair was satin sleek and smelled of coconuts. She sat on a stool with a pumpkin orange blanket draped over her shoulders and she could feel the feather heartbeat of the rabbit on her thigh.

They were upstairs in a back bedroom. It was cobwebby and the floorboards were splintered rough. An easel stood in the middle by a metal trolley crowded with jars of brushes. Jay sat in a red velvet armchair, hunched over a sketchbook on his knee, pencil scribbling over page after page. Music wound around them from a scratchy record player – a lady singing in another language which sounded at the same time summery and sad.

At Melwyn's feet was a wooden bowl full of cherries. It is much harder than you think – sitting still and doing nothing. She had been told to look out of the window so she pretended she was a buzzard looking for a mouse, but that got boring because nothing stirred in the blonde grass except the wind. Flashing glances at the glossy cherries her mouth dried and it took all her effort not to reach out and lift one by the stalk.

When the hour was up Jay's phone made a tinkling bell sound pulling him out of his sketching. "That felt like 5 minutes," he said. "Thanks – you were amazing. Wasn't Nibbles good too? Here have a cherry."

They went downstairs and Lydia looked up from her laptop and said, "How did it go?"

"She was great," Jay said.

Melwyn added the great to the amazing to the cool to the beautiful and she never wanted to go home. But Jay held open the front door and handed her a five pound note with some ceremony. Her family had told her to ask for at least twenty but he seemed like he was being really generous so it made her feel squirmy to ask for more.

She clipped the lead on Nibbles and said, "Thanks."

And Jay said, "No, thank you. You were brilliant."

Brilliant she beamed as she ran back home.

Melwyn went back three more times and Jay moved from the sketchbook on his knee to a canvas on the easel. He said she couldn't look at the canvas, as the soul hadn't settled in yet, so she painted in her mind all the ways she might be. Her favourite was a kaleidoscope of herself lying under the beech tree through all the seasons.

During the second sitting Jay asked her to look straight at him. She stared at him staring at her and imagined he was her subject. More than anything she wanted to dip and swirl a brush into the gleaming colours of his palette and blur them into fresh shades.

The next time he said she didn't have to look at him so she followed the neat progress of her father's tractor cutting the wheat into heavy lines. And the last time the field was striped stubble and a wasp was trapped in the window and she meant to set it free, but when they were finished Jay said, "Ice cream?" and she forgot.

They ate bowls of raspberry ripple sitting on faded deckchairs beside the apple tree and Lydia talked about making special brownies for a beach barbecue that evening. Melwyn wanted to go with them, as her mum didn't do the beach in summer as it was *all rip-off-carparks and teeming with emmets so not worth the hassle.*

Melwyn was plucking up the courage to ask if she could go with them when Jay said, "Well Melwyn, I think we might be done."

"Done?" Her heart gloomed, the raspberry ripple trickling cold in her tummy.

"I can finish it on my own now." Jay smiled his wide white smile. "You've been great though. The perfect muse."

Later that evening Melwyn stole her older brothers' iPad and Googled *muse*. She discovered she had been an, 'inspiration to an artist'. Something ballooned in her chest and she lay in bed remembering everything she told them that only she knew: the secret place where you could cross the river over a fallen tree, why the daffodil field was left unpicked and did they know that dragonflies ate wasps – she saw it with her own bare eyes. She drifted off to sleep imagining Lydia's musky perfume sprayed on her own wrists.

In the morning she didn't even wait for the Weetabix to soak in the milk – she ate it crunchy and raced down the lane.

Jay opened the door in his boxer shorts. “Melwyn! Bright and early.”

She joined them at the kitchen table and told them it was the cabbage whites they loved so much that were eating their cauliflowers and did they know that her family call cauliflowers broccoli and broccoli calabrese? Lydia smiled vaguely as she was flicking through Instagram on her phone. When she finished her last bite of toast she stood up and said, “We better get going Melwyn. What are you up to today?”

The next day and the next and the next Melwyn visited them at breakfast and tried to think of new things to inspire them with: where the chamomile grew in the corner of the sheep field and how to seep it for tea, how blackbirds mated for life (she blushed when she said mated but they seemed to like that one), and the best time to pick the rose hips in the garden for jam.

She started popping round later in the day too and one dusk when they didn't answer the door she walked around to the back garden. They were sprawled on a blanket under the apple tree with their eyes closed. Jay only had denim shorts on and Lydia only had denim shorts on too. Her breasts were different to Melwyn's mum's – smaller and paler with rosy pink nipples rather than brown.

Lydia made a strange sound and Melwyn froze.

Then Jay opened one eye and his hand flew from Lydia's shorts. “Melwyn! We didn't see you there.”

Lydia scrambled to sit, grabbing the blanket and pulling it across her breasts. “Wow, um, hi – isn't it a bit late for visiting? Your Mum will be wondering where you are...”

Ten minutes after Melwyn got home the front door knock knocked. Her mother talked to them for a moment then stepped into the porch and closed the door behind her.

Tucking Melwyn into bed that night she explained about Privacy and that Melwyn should always wait to be Invited.

Melwyn fell asleep wondering if the invite would be painted by them as Chloe at school had arty parents and she always painted her birthday invitations. But two days went by without them dropping anything around. They must be sending it in the post, the grown up way, so when the collie barked at the Postman's van Melwyn dropped whatever she was doing to go and meet him. But all he handed her were pizza leaflets and boring bills which she shredded into tiny pieces and scattered in her rabbit's cage.

After a fortnight of nothing she started sneaking into their garden whenever they went out. She made marks and took souvenirs: a knife sliced all the way down a navy deckchair stripe, rose hips crushed in the drain, a pink sock stolen from the washing line.

Sometimes she went when they were there. After dark she hid in the ivy and watched them all lit up inside. One night the cat brought her a dead blackbird and she arranged it on their doorstep wings wide. She wanted to make them jump scared and didn't expect Jay to lift it gently and take it inside like a gift.

In the last weekend of the holidays she was down by the river trying to draw her beech tree when Lydia walked by with a friend.

They both said hi and Melwyn hid the paper behind her back.

Lydia asked her how she was and Melwyn mumbled, "Alright."

Lydia looked up at the swaying branches. "Isn't it beautiful? All the colours about to fade?"

Melwyn ignored her and scuffed the mud off her wellies.

“Bye then,” Lydia said brightly, crossing the stile into the field beyond the wood.

“Bye then,” mimicked Melwyn precisely, nastily.

She snuck under the branches of a twisted willow and shadowed them walking along the other side of the bushes.

The friend said, “She's a funny one.”

“Didn't I tell you about her?” Lydia said. “Jay calls her The Bunny Boiler.”

The friend snorted a laugh and something twisted in Melwyn as she stepped around the opening of a badger's set.

“He painted this great painting of her,” Lydia went on. “He's going to enter it for the Portrait Prize and I swear he might win this time. Anyway, she became a bit obsessed with us and it all got a bit creepy. We had to freeze her out...”

Melwyn's brothers were finding it hard to explain what a Bunny Boiler was. They had watched Fatal Attraction once on their uncle's old video machine, so they found the clip on YouTube and sat either side of her sniggering while she watched: a pretty lady walking slowly towards a steaming pan/ a child running across a lawn towards a rabbit hutch/ the lady lifting the lid/ the child screaming/ the ladies hands going to her face/ the lady screaming. Then it zoomed in and there was a white rabbit like Nibbles submerged in milky bubbles, spitted with red blood. And there was the sound of boiling.

Melwyn struggled off the sofa and ran past her mother who was ironing name tags on her new school uniform. She made her way across the courtyard on rubbery legs. Nibbles was still there, busy with his peelings, but that didn't stop Melwyn from wanting to scream, hands to face, like on the screen.

She lifted Nibbles out of his hutch and he bucked a little as she whispered how much she loved him. Stroking down his velvet ears she walked to the wall and clambered up shaking to sit in her usual spot. Ten minutes later, when they drove past and waved she did not wave back. Instead she tried to let them know how much she hated them with her eyes. Lydia frowned and clutched the steering wheel and Jay grinned his big grin and waved like he was a king.

After they turned the corner she jumped off the wall and put Nibbles back in his pen. Then she ran down the lane to their cottage. The window in the downstairs toilet was ajar, so she climbed through the honeysuckle and hoisted herself in. Ignoring the half eaten carrot cake on the kitchen table she ran upstairs to the studio.

There she was – alone on the far wall. The dead blackbird lay across her lap instead of Nibbles. She stroked its stiff wings and remembered Lydia saying: he makes people up. She looked into her own searching eyes and blinked.

The £20 Jay had paid her was enough to buy a new hairbrush, neon pink nail varnish like Lydias, and a pack of crayons from Lidl. But the crayons where crap and the green was nothing like the shades of the beech. So she walked to the trolley in the middle of the room and pocketed three sable brushes and five tubes of paint: red, yellow, blue, white and green.

The colours gleamed on the easel as she took a brush out of a pot and swirled it slowly as if in a dream. She didn't know what she was going to do until she reached the canvas and then it was obvious: she painted cartoon bunny ears coming out of her head and added some buck teeth biting a carrot.

She grabbed a sketchbook from a pile on the floor and left as quickly as she came. Out the window and down the lane, through the woods to where the beech tree swayed over the river. Where for the first time, a flame leapt inside her as she blended together the colours of her world.