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art

teacher

KJ Hutchings

The Art Teacher

A short story by

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When men pose for Isabel she plumps them out as if she sees them widened in a fun fair hall of mirrors. She prefers fat men, with their sausage flesh, hairy un-nourishing breasts and barren pregnant bellies.

She tells them how to stand or sit or where to look; the flesh on their out-stretched arms hangs like white sails and when they stand with their massive legs apart their genitals look minuscule in comparison to the rest of their bulk. Isabel steps back and looks, allows her gaze to travel a languorous journey over their bodies, dissects the myriad of colours, the fascinating fall of light from the studio's high windows on the creases and rolls of skin.

And this is when she begins, slathering the paint on to the canvas, sometimes in handfuls, smearing it on, layer by layer.

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He had watched her ever since she was eleven years old in her first year at the all girls' school. At such an age she was a little runt, boyishly thin, her nipples forming swelling buds under her regulation blouse, the pink areolas faintly dark under the white cotton. He was squat, middle aged, with a colourless complexion and greased hair, and it seemed that only his eyes, which were beady and of indeterminate colour, were truly alive.

Forewarned by the grown-up looking girls in the years above, Isabel and her classmates had prepared themselves for the prospect of Mr Carroll, the art master, looking down their blouses or up their navy skirts at any opportunity he got. Not only was it rumoured that he was lecherous when it came to young nubile flesh such as theirs, but that he would look at pornographic magazines behind his desk during lessons to assuage his lust. It was an allegation widely believed and served to whip up a fervour of adolescent excitement, since none of the girls, no matter how worldly wise they pretended to be, had seen such a magazine, but had accumulated an idea of what sort of man read them. Undoubtedly a pervert, who drooled and twitched in his dirty raincoat as he lurked behind park bushes, poised for obscene acts. The sort of man their parents warned them about, which was why it had been all the more exciting to have such a man for their teacher.

Yet reality can rarely compete with rumour where girlish imaginations and

sensibilities are concerned. Most of the rumours were disappointingly unfulfilled and eventually became uninspiring. Isabel, however, could rarely forget on account of the way he looked at her. At first she thought she was imagining it; her parents had always said it got the better of her, but by the time she was fourteen, fifteen, she knew she was right. It was as if he knew something about her that she had yet to fathom.

The discovery of his ludicrous first name, which happened to be Anton, provoked a short-lived resurrection but generally he was forgotten because he seemed so dull, with his old looking suits and droning voice. Only occasionally did his strangeness serve to invoke the sharpest edges of their gossip and boredom. In the subdued classroom where they toiled over yet another numbing still life of candles, wine bottle and flowers, only the sound of Anton Carroll clearing his throat punctuated the quiet. The rattle deep in his throat, with its rumbling build up and the meaningful creak of his chair soon became his trademark and the easiest target of reference and ridicule.

“Who’s this?” whispered Natasha, puffing herself up and then rattling her throat exaggeratedly before she broke into snorts of laughter. “Get on with your work,” ordered Anton Carroll from his desk.

Natasha was the first to pester Isabel to do her drawing for her, frustrated by her own lack of ability in comparison to Isabel’s burgeoning artistic prowess. It came as a surprise to them all that Isabel, who was the sort of girl people tended to overlook, had such a talent. At first she was happy to oblige, shyly tasting the fickle fruit of popularity while the others thrust their drawing books at her, pleading sweetly. But then she realised with dismay how neglected her own work had become. She began to refuse, bending her brown head over her picture in an attempt to deflect their glares.

“You have considerable talent,” Anton Carroll said behind her chair. She froze. There was a pause and he cleared his throat. Isabel stared at her drawing board avoiding her classmates’ knowing looks. The remark both delighted and repulsed her, because it had come from him.

Natasha would pass her notes with “Anton. YUK! YUK!” written on them, crossing her eyes and puckering her lips. It was not before long other notes were passed to her in handwriting she did not recognise, the faces around her insinuating, smug. They would even appear in her bag, her coat pockets in the

cloakroom. "Isabel loves Anton" was written on each one.

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The fat man strolls around the studio in his thick boots and a white shirt looking at the canvases Isabel has stacked against the wall. He sometimes models at the local art college and is, thankfully, professional. He never comments on her work, which she prefers, but only looks at the pictures with an idle curiosity. She likes his unquestioning silence and wishes all her other models were like this. To begin with some of them thought that a young woman who only painted naked men must have ulterior motives; they usually flattered themselves until they saw the end results. Once, one of the men had inspected her first painting of him and turned to her, shocked. "Is that what you see?" he asked scratching his stubble at the canvas. "Is that how you see me?" She had said it was nothing personal and handed him his money. The man had shaken his head in puzzlement. "I'm just surprised, that's all." She knew he thought the picture was cruel, disparaging, but she no longer cared. He had served his purpose and got paid for it. It was simply an exchange of services, it was what men and women did all the time, except with far less honesty.

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Anton Carroll would show them slides and the darkened room was a welcome reprieve for Isabel, a way to hide from his gaze. Some of the slides were of works by artists he reverently referred to as Old Masters, paintings and sculptures of naked women whose bodies were formed and curved to a man's specifications. The girls could barely suppress their giggles when it was evident that Anton Carroll was transfixed by the lopsided slide before them. Out of the corner of her eye, Isabel saw him staring ahead, licking his lips before emerging from whatever dream he had succumbed to. He would then trace a ruler along the woman's pose and the marble smooth skin, pausing at the curve of the breast, which induced more smothered giggles from the class. Isabel thought the woman seemed like another version of a still life, positioned like the wine bottles or fruit; a fleshy decorative arrangement. She envied her timeless beauty.

There were other women that Anton Carroll revealed. Picasso's women had twisted faces, were bare-breasted and deformed; evil-faced women, mutilated

women, their vaginas nothing more than a slash, a wound. Women made ugly, fragmented, turned this way and that, eyes plucked and placed elsewhere. Isabel did not even realise that men could see women in such a way. Intrigued, she had borrowed a book from the school library filled with Picasso's drawings. She looked at it surreptitiously behind her drawing board, half listening to Anton Carroll's monotone on Impressionism, Surrealism. The first sections were innocent enough, sketches executed with the expected skill and mastery, spontaneous lines, confident strokes. Considering the school's apathy to art, Isabel thought it was an unexpected find.

She turned the pages, impressed, inspired, while his voice droned on like low background noise to her thoughts. At first she did not register what she saw or its explicitness. Women reclining and squatting, singularly or in pairs, their clothes dishevelled, hair loosened, while their hands appeared to strum between their gaping legs. A shadow fell over the page and to her horror she looked up to see Anton Carroll above her, a curious smile on his lips. It was too late to shut the book, she had been caught red handed.

"Picasso," Anton Carroll said with unaccustomed clarity as he turned to the rest of the class, "was a genius."

Some of the girls stirred from their slouching, exchanged cross-eyed glances. Isabel raised her hands to cover her scorched cheeks. When everyone filed out of the room he was determined to catch her eye and when he smiled her stomach jumped. The incident appeared to give him confidence while her sense of composure diminished further. He began to appear in her life with alarming regularity: in the corridors, the library, the school gardens, the smaller art room. Once, he approached her in the high street while she dawdled by a shop window contemplating what to buy with her pocket money. He had caught her unawares and tried to engage her in a conversation and Isabel had been mortified, embarrassed, barely able to respond to him, feeling awkward in her own skin. In fact, it no longer felt like her own skin, her own body. Still in the thrall of changes and polished so often by his gaze, it appeared to her that he knew her body's contours better than she did herself.

In her bedroom, their brief and broken meeting recalled itself uncomfortably to her mind. She studied her face in the mirror, turning around to scrutinise her figure with cold objectivity. She would watch herself as if outside her body, the way she moved, imagining, with a sense of detachment, what her back

must look like to Anton Carroll, her profile, the curl in her hair, the nape of her neck. She wondered if he found her beautiful.

During art lessons she would picture herself crossing the room to get more sheets of paper, or watch herself sitting down, her skirt tightening over her thighs; each movement felt contrived, utterly self-conscious. Flustered, her charcoal would snap, she dropped pencils, knocked over jars and bumped into tables and chairs. The possible implications of his interest frightened her, excited her. It reminded Isabel of rare occasions of walking alone at night, the shiver of vulnerability in every hurried step. He seemed to represent her virginal view on all things concerning sex: glistening lips, lecherous looks, the smell of sweat permeating through a checked cotton shirt, guttural noises, secret fumbling and words, darkness and pictures of naked flesh.

She began to have reoccurring dreams. A shadowy man would chase her down alleyways with a knife or a loaded gun, he was faceless because she knew he was ugly and unworthy of her, gripping her around the waist, imprinting his mouth into her belly. She always struggled and tried to push him away, the same mechanical, ineffectual movements. It was as if a trapped bird was fluttering almost painfully inside her and the man was holding it in, pressing harder and harder until she cried out.

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She wonders if the men think she is worshipping the male form or is little more than a glorified crotch-watcher, who labels herself a painter. As they pose the room is silent except for the whirring of the little electric heater at their feet and the low drum beat of her brush and fingers on the stretched canvas. Isabel fantasises that the men think she will approach them as if she has a fetish for sallow fat men, middle aged on the whole, unsavoury, whiskered, sweaty. She half expects to hear them clear their throats, the creak of a chair, a darkness befalling the room.

She knows she is reworking a replica, over and over, the same full-blown body that would be concealed yet oddly accentuated by old-fashioned clothes. The men leave their own clothes neatly draped by the screen, the only marks of their individuality, and Isabel thinks they are generally a sad sorry lot, which is why they appeal to her. They carry with them the impression of being lost, cast out. Sometimes she pities them, feels what she registers as tenderness for

them as they stand before her awaiting her instruction. The bodies of the older men remind her of the inevitability of nothingness and that soon her own skin will begin to sag and eventually rot. She tries to imagine if he is like this now, some years older, the form deteriorated but the sentiment basically the same.

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Isabel began to hide. She retreated to the school library during art lessons on the premise of researching for the impending exam. Anton Carroll would nod, allow her to go and she would sit at one of the huge wooden tables and stare out of the window until the lunch bell rang. Only then would she slip back into the empty classroom to paint in peace.

One afternoon the door opened and Anton Carroll started slightly when he saw her perched at the easel.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” he said gruffly, closing the door and shuffling to his desk where he cautiously opened the top drawer. “Sorry,” she mumbled and began to hurriedly pack her things away. It seemed that an awkward silence had immediately followed, resounding about the room and filling all the space, making it hard for her to breathe. He closed the draw. “Let me see,” he said and walked heavily towards her, his hands in his trouser pockets. Bending forward a little, which made his belly sag, he studied her picture for a long time and all the while Isabel’s skin burned beneath her clothes, agitated by his proximity.

“It’s quite good,” he finally said, not taking his eyes from it. “Are you using this in your portfolio?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going onto to do A-Level?” He peered closer, his face in align with her chest.

“Yes,” she replied, tortured.

“Good.” He cleared his throat. “You should do well.”

Isabel snapped shut her little suitcase, which contained her pastels and paints, her prized possessions that she had bought with her frugal pocket money, and tried not to think about the fact that Anton Carroll barred her escape route to the door in case her panic should overrun. The blood pulsated in her head and she could not bear to even glance to see where his eyes now rested. She

wanted to knock the easel away and run out of the room.

“I’d like to paint you,” he said suddenly, his hands jumping and turning in his pockets. Isabel stared at her dirty hands clutching the suitcase handle. “I have a studio in my house. Well, it’s just a room really. You could come after school...I live near you...”

She looked at him in surprise. How did he know where she lived? He stared back at her and for the first time she noticed that his eyes were grey with flecks of yellow and that his skin was surprising line-less. He was not as old as she or the other girls in the school had assumed.

The ensuing silence was so heavy it was almost palpable.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said gently.

She was shocked, ashamed. “I know.” She had to look at him again; his whiskers were peppered with gold. His lips shone wetly with saliva, the tongue appeared, snake-like, licked and disappeared. For a brief moment she pictured herself languid on a chaise longue, naked of course, as an Old Master’s muse. The thought of his hands...the squat fingers...upon one a wedding ring was squeezed. His hand rested on her suitcase.

“Would you like to?” he asked softly.

She nodded, mute, and could barely listen as he told her the time he wanted her to come and began to write down his address in the familiar handwriting that had written a succession of A grades on her school report. “What should I wear?” she blushed furiously as he looked up from his writing. “Anything you like,” he smiled. “It doesn’t matter.” He held the slip of paper out to her like a treat and gingerly she took it.

The day came, a balmy Saturday afternoon, and Isabel slowly turned the corner into Anton Carroll’s leafy street, wearing her best summer dress. She had even put on some make-up, for once she was glad of her parents’ disinterest in her whereabouts and goings on. She was early despite dawdling all the way from her own house. She counted the sedate terrace houses until she saw his, surprised at its neat and well-kept appearance with its trimmed hedge and clean paintwork. Her nausea began as she drew nearer. What had

before been a nervous excitement as she chose her dress that morning and pinned up her hair was now a churning sickness as she poised by a large tree staring up at the glinting skylight which she supposed might be his studio. He would encase her there, sit or lie her down and stare at her for as long as he wanted, all in the name of art. Isabel tried to focus on what the painting might look like, but her vanity crumbled when she realised she had no idea of Anton Carroll's style. He might pluck out her eyes or slash her about.

A woman with dark curly hair came out of the door, walking a toddler down the path with coaxing steps. She turned and waved to someone in the doorway. Isabel peeped from behind the tree to get a better look and saw Anton Carroll smile and wave back at the woman and child.

"Wave 'bye 'bye to Daddy, Nicholas," Isabel heard the woman instruct the child and saw her manipulate the little boy's hand into a limp waggle. "We'll be home after six, darling," she called to Anton Carroll and blew him a kiss. Isabel bolted from the tree and ran back down the street, ducking into an alleyway where she promptly vomited. Her parents did not notice when she returned home and crept up to the bathroom and soaked in the bath for an hour, scrubbing her face, wrenching at her hair. She stayed in her room for the rest of the day looking at herself in the mirror, feeling detached from the red face reflected back.

Anton Carroll never mentioned what had happened or asked why she did not come. Words had never been his favoured language. Isabel noticed that her painting next to the blackboard had been removed from the art room wall, usurped by a mediocre pastel drawing. She stared at the wall with chilly realisation and wondered if he had thrown her picture away. She found that she understood everything now and was bemused as to why she had once been so puzzled. These were life's rules, she told herself. When she tried to get into the art room at lunchtime to finish her painting she was not surprised to find that the door was locked.

A few days later, Anton Carroll announced to the class that not one of them would receive an A grade for their exam. Few were worried or upset, although the girl next to Isabel grinned nastily and elbowed her arm. Isabel stared at her work before her, the drawings of wine bottles and apples and wanted to scrawl over every sheet. Anton Carroll strolled around the room, slowly weaving his way between the tables and paused before Isabel and announced that he had

more news for them. Not many of the girls looked up.

“I’m leaving at the end of term,” he said and it was as if his words fell heavily on the crown of her head. “I’ve had enough of this school.”

Isabel could not be bothered to look at him. She did not even blush. Instead she smiled sardonically down at her desk, her fingers tearing a little fringe at the top of her picture. She slowly and painstakingly ripped until the picture was in shreds. Anton Carroll’s shadow disappeared from the pieces, the table, the paints and his footsteps echoed away. “What did you do that for?” the girl beside her sneered, digging in her elbow again.

“It was a horrible painting,” Isabel said, sharply elbowing the girl back. “He was a terrible teacher.” She knew Anton Carroll was watching her and listening. Emboldened, she met his gaze, twisted a smile and balanced her drawing board on her knees, taping a fresh sheet of paper to it. Then she began. First, she sketched his face, which still looked out at her, and then she pencilled in his bloated body. She thought the result was better than any still life she had done. He had ceased to be Mr Anton Carroll, the art teacher, and was simply a fat man, her model.

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Sometimes, Isabel thinks she sees him on her infrequent visits home. In the high street she would see a short fat man in an old fashioned suit and her heart would catch. But it is never him. She imagines, as she cleans her brushes, glad that the model has at last gone home, that Anton Carroll has probably moved house, aged badly or even died. Had he been handsome, or even younger, he would have been much sought after by them all with schoolgirl vigour. But he was not, so they did not. Instead he was viewed with contempt, distaste, ridiculed for his silly name and everything else, barely tolerated, yet she felt that she understood him only too well.

She wonders if he has ever seen her work, skulked around the galleries and come face to face with himself. She can only hope that he has. People still ask her why she consistently paints men. If she were a man painting only women the question would never arise. She always says the same: she is merely trying to even the balance of nudity, even the balance of the power of the gaze. This is partly true, but she also knows she is getting paid for reliving her past.

Isabel has had considerable success so far; enough to be able to comfortably afford her airy studio in London. The tall windows remind her of the ones at school. She slots another stretched canvas into the easel's vice and imagines she is fifteen again, wearing her best summer dress, her hair pinned up. The light is streaming through the windows, dancing dust particles trapped in its beams. The chair in the corner creaks with a familiar rhythm. A throat clears. The faint breeze of breath is bitter from wine, but not unpleasant. His wet lips place a light kiss on the back of her neck, a moist branding. He withdraws, moves away, but before he is gone forever she says: "Close your eyes."

And he does.

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