

The Creative Urge
by Jonathan Elsom

Isobel Quisby gazed fondly at Fred through the glass and wondered idly whether he viewed her just as affectionately. His bulging eyes swivelled and fixed her with an implacable stare.

“You really are the most handsome goldfish,” said Isobel, tapping the aquarium gently. “And you look just as bored as I am.”

Fred continued to open and close his mouth at regular intervals, but otherwise made no comment. Below the dining room window of 31 Braceley Towers the Harbour glittered in the early morning sun. A distant ferry chugged towards Manly beneath the cloudless sky and a flock of raucous cockatoos erupted suddenly across the skyline in heated argument and as swiftly scattered towards Rushcutter’s Bay. Isobel sensed it was going to be another hot and airless day.

Isobel hated early summer, and knew she would have to spend much of it beneath her parasol if she decided to venture out in the stifling heat. Harry had been particularly grumpy at breakfast, emerging only briefly from behind the Sydney Morning Herald to butter his toast, and had then finally retreated to tackle the crossword on a seat in the gardens below. Another day of uneventful monotony stretched ahead of her, and even Archy, their elderly dachshund, yawned noisily and looked bored at the prospect.

She poured herself a second cup of coffee and toyed with the idea of spending the morning pottering around yet another David Jones Annual Sale... the third this month... and then, with the thought of all the parking problems, rejected the idea.

Thumbing through the latest Wentworth Courier her eye was caught by a brief announcement under General Notices. “Eastern Suburbs Art Exhibition. Paintings,

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Sculpture, etc.,- submissions invited from local artists for Annual Exhibition on the theme of 'Domestic Bliss'. Handing In Day – November 12th.”

Domestic bliss was hardly a subject on which Isobel could pretend to have much first-hand knowledge she had to admit; but something stirred briefly within her imagination and she looked reflectively out at the distant yachts wheeling and scudding below. She had frequently felt the creative urge to put brush to canvas and see if the talent she had once shown at school could be developed, even after all the ensuing years. During a particularly barren marital patch she had adventurously bought a set of acrylic paints and a number of ready primed canvases, but these still lay unused in the little spare room.

Until recently, most of her energies had been devoted to Curios & Curiouser, the Surry Hills antique shop which she and Harry had run between them. Harry's constant demands on her time had left little opportunity for relaxation. Now, however, the business had been sold, at a considerable profit, although Harry's irritability seemed to have increased with their leisure time. He loathed golf and had refused to join the Wentworth Golf Club. The advent of what looked suspiciously like gout had not improved his temper, and now, apart from occasional sorties to local garage sales-("Just to keep my hand in"), Harry prowled around their apartment like a wounded lion. She had Archy to exercise twice daily around Rushcutter's Bay of course, and Fred to be fed; not to mention the gaggle of talkative cockatoos to be greeted on the balcony from time to time – but none of this occupied her for long.

Archy turned noisily in his basket and let out a fretful yap in the midst of some doggy dream. The slap of his ears as he shook himself roused her from her reverie and she began to gather up the breakfast things. Submission Day for the Exhibition

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lay just over a month away and she wondered if one of the unused canvases would be large enough to contain the composition which was formulating in her mind...

“For God’s sake, Isobel!” trumpeted Harry through the closed door of the spare room which had lately become her studio. “It’s after 5pm and you know I’ve got my Reunion dinner at seven-thirty. Where’s my afternoon tea?”

He was startled to find the door locked and rattled furiously at the door knob. A gentle murmur came from within, and eventually the key was turned in the lock and Isobel appeared quietly in the doorway. She looked unusually dishevelled. Her jet black hair hung lankly at her waist and there were smudges of acrylic paint on one cheek. Two paintbrushes were clenched between her teeth and she was clutching a fully laden palette.

“Darling, I am sorry,” she mumbled, removing the brushes. “I’d quite forgotten your reunion. There’s some duck pate and a few gherkins somewhere in the fridge, can you make do with that in place of tea? I’m not quite ready to stop yet... Do you mind?”

“For God’s sake,” barked Harry for the second time, and his gout gave him a nasty nip. “What on earth’s for into you lately? Ever since you took up this painting lark everything’s gone to pot! The dishes are still in the sink from lunch, Archy’s pining to go out, and I haven’t even got a clean shirt for tonight!”

Isobel, who had turned away and was contemplating a canvas on the easel behind her, murmured, “Well, darling, you could always take Archy out yourself, and I think you will find a clean shirt in the second drawer of your dressing table.”

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She turned distracted brown eyes upon him, but clearly her mind was on other more important things and she drifted away from the door towards the easel. Harry, catching sight of the painting, gave a bark of derision and followed her into the room.

“What in God’s name is that supposed to be?” he demanded, arms akimbo and staring at the picture. Isobel flinched, and tried to block the vivid impressionistic painting from view.

“It’s supposed to be a Mother and Child, and it represents ‘domestic bliss’, if you must be so rude. It’s not finished yet, and I intend to enter it in that competition I told you about. Why do you always have to criticise everything I do?” She was suddenly flushed and trembling, and a pair of haggard eyes were fixed defiantly on her husband. “It’s just my first attempt, and,...oh, why are you always so critical...?”

“Oh, don’t be so sensitive,” he snapped. “If you must take up this canvas daubing you have to expect some constructive comments. Why do you go for all this Picasso rubbish anyway? Can’t you paint something life-like? We did this sort of thing in kindergarten.” He leaned forward and peered aggressively at the bold slashes of colour. “What’s this meant to be then? A hand or a foot? And where’s her neck? She looks like the Hunchback of Notre Dame!”

Tears sprang in Isobel’s eyes and she brushed them away fiercely, leaving a smear of vermilion across the bridge of her nose. She had gone very pale and her mascara had begun to run. Placing her palette carefully on the workbench she turned on her heel and left the room without a word. Harry continued to glare balefully at the canvas.

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Archy shook his head and the flapping of his ears sounded like a scattering of applause as he dug his little paws into the turf and refused to walk any further. Ever since his normally indulgent mistress had taken to her studio the twice daily walks through Rushcutter's Park had proved exhausting and frustrating. No longer allowed to forage among tantalizing bushes and tree trunks, or amble as slowly as he wished, he was now dragged bad-temperedly around the Park at what was for him, breakneck speed, by an irritable and gout-ridden Harry. "Walkies" had become something to be dreaded, and he longed for Isobel to abandon her brushes and canvases and re-emerge from her self-imposed isolation.

"Come along you bloody mutt," growled Quisby, tugging ruthlessly on the leash. "Let's get home to the so called 'Artist in Residence', for God's sake! My feet are killing me". And Archy found himself propelled unwillingly towards Onslow Gardens.

Fred had been equally puzzled by the sudden change of routine and swam listlessly around his aquarium, eyes swivelling ceaselessly in search of Isobel. Her gentle daily scattering of fish flakes had now turned into a veritable snowstorm flung by a large male fist. The startled goldfish had become bloated with overeating, unlike the visiting cockatoos who had evidently given up waiting for their daily food scraps and deserted the balcony of 31 Braceley Towers for more generous pickings elsewhere...

Isobel had taken to wearing an extraordinary array of long flowing smocks and a look of feverish preoccupation. She appeared briefly for meals and spoke to the taciturn Harry as little as possible. Her paints and canvases had been abandoned, possibly as a result of Harry's harsh criticisms, and finding the spare room somewhat cramped she had been permitted by the Braceley Towers Board to move into a large

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disused room in the basement. The sounds of hammering and smells of glue size which emanated from behind the locked door seemed to indicate that the budding artist had opted for something three dimensional and constructionist. Lengths of timber, sheets of glass, and pots of pungent liquids were delivered by a laconic handyman; and as the submission date drew nearer Isobel's normally fastidious appearance grew more unkempt. Gone were the elegant tailored suits and the beautifully manicured hands of which Isobel had once been so proud. She no longer bothered with rouge or eye makeup. Any use of the paintbrush seemed to be confined to the mysterious structure on which she worked so tirelessly in the basement.

Shopping lists for easily prepared meals were left for Harry from time to time however, often scrawled in charcoal or daubed in a variety of acrylic paints, and he found himself, for the first time in his life, queuing in the local Macleay Street supermarket. He soon discovered it was easier to eat out, and so took to dining at the local R.S.L. Club of an evening. He complained bitterly about being abandoned by his "Arty Farty" wife to the few cronies who would listen, and took to sleeping in the spare room which now reeked of turpentine. To make matters worse, he returned one morning from a particularly exhausting shopping expedition to find his favourite ladder-backed dining chair had disappeared in his absence.

"What the hell have you done with my chair?" he barked, as he eased his bulk into a lumpy armchair and lowered his pulsating foot onto the rug.

"It was looking terribly shabby, dear" said Isobel mildly. "I arranged for David Jones to collect it today. They are going to French polish it and you'll just have to do without it for a few weeks."

"For God's sake, woman!" he shouted. "First you deprive me of regular meals, and now you start removing the furniture!"

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“Oh, don’t be such a bear, Harry”, said Isobel with surprising irritation. “You’ll be reunited with it in due course, and meanwhile we’ve plenty of other chairs to lounge about in.” And she shoved a footstool perilously close to his outstretched foot and headed briskly towards the hall.

Unable to resist the daily avalanche of fish flakes showered upon him Fred finally turned up his fins and was discovered one morning floating upside down in the bottom of his aquarium. He had grown alarmingly corpulent, and looked like a small barrage balloon as he drifted lifelessly among the oxygen weeds.

“Poor Fred,” murmured Isobel, spooning muesli into a bowl, “He was such a handsome fellow in his slimmer days. I’ll fish him out after breakfast, and bury him in the garden.”

“Never did see the point of him anyway,” muttered Harry from behind The Sydney Morning Herald. “Give him to the neighbourhood cat. More of a square meal than I’ve been getting lately...”

Isobel fixed the newspaper with a penetrating look and went in search of a soup ladle to retrieve Fred from his watery grave. Archy padded into the kitchen behind her and nosed his food bowl in a listless manner. Unlike the late lamented Fred his appetite seemed to have diminished, and as the goldfish had expanded the once portly dachshund had now taken on an undernourished air.

“Back to your bloody studio I suppose,” growled Harry, emerging from behind the newspaper. “I can’t think what you’re doing down there day after day. Michelangelo spent less time painting the Sistine Chapel!” And he slammed out of

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the dining room and headed for the lift to wrestle with 9 Down, 12 Across in the communal gardens.

Isobel gazed silently at his departing back. Her coal black tresses, now somewhat matted with varnish, framed an ashen mask and it seemed as if she had hardly heard him, were it not for the whitened knuckles grasping the soup ladle. She giggled suddenly, turned to the aquarium and plunged the spoon into its depths.

Sometime later, Miss Featherstone, who lived below at number 22, was startled to encounter a strange trio as she stepped into the lift. Isobel, accompanied by the faithful Archy, stood silently in one corner bearing a large and lifeless goldfish in a soup ladle. Her face was set, and Miss Featherstone thought it wiser to make no comment.

“I can’t believe you could be so stupid!” roared Harry when Archy’s absence was eventually discovered. “How could you just leave him in the garden and forget him? Someone must have left the gates open and now he could be anywhere...”

His face was suffused with anger and Isobel was interested to note that he’d gone a sort of mottled red.

“If I were painting his portrait,” she thought, “I’d probably use a lot of Indian Red and a touch of Alazarin Crimson. He really does look like an irritable turkey-cock when he’s roused.” She drifted wraithlike towards the apartment in her husband’s wake. A great deal of heavy lacquering had evidently been going on in the studio and Harry wrinkled his nose in disgust at the pungent odour which clung to her painting smock.

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“What in God’s name are you getting up to down there?” he barked, and the apartment door shuddered behind him. “There’s a terrible stink coming from the basement. Why can’t you daub away in ordinary watercolours like most little old ladies do?”

“Because I’m not daubing and I’m not a little old lady, as you so rudely put it,” said Isobel with sudden vehemence, fixing fathomless brown eyes upon him. “And furthermore, what I’m creating is not in the least ordinary.” Her raven locks quivered in sympathy and Harry was startled to realize suddenly that his once mild and elegant wife had somehow been replaced in recent weeks by a sort of paint streaked Medusa. The unblinking intensity of her gaze was disconcerting.

“Just because I’ve discovered something I really want to do at last, there’s no need to be so rude and impatient,” said Isobel crisply. “I can’t believe I have wasted all these years in boring domesticity when I could have been so creative.

“My installation... well, more of a domestic tableau, really, is almost complete.” Her head was cocked quizzically on one side and she seemed to be observing him as if for the first time. Harry felt rather like a specimen under a microscope.

“Just one more piece to be fitted in, and perhaps when you see it you’ll appreciate what I’ve been trying to do.” She turned towards the front door again, eager to be gone. Harry felt distinctly sorry for himself and his foot throbbed in sympathy. Even Archy had apparently deserted him and taken off for a life elsewhere.

“Well, if you can’t be bothered looking for the bloody dog, I’ll have to walk around Elizabeth Bay myself... even with my wretched foot. Somebody’s got to find him.” He gazed balefully at her retreating figure.

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“Oh, I’m sure he’ll turn up eventually,” called Isobel from the lift. “He’s probably somewhere in the grounds.” The lift door clanged shut and she headed down to the basement once more.

With the November deadline looming Isobel had become even more preoccupied and edgy. Archy had not returned, and the apartment was now strangely silent, the empty aquarium and vacant dog basket being the only evidence of its past occupants.

“I want you to come down to the basement and take a look at what I’ve been working on,” said Isobel unexpectedly one evening. An electric storm was brewing, and intermittent flashes of lightning danced across the Harbour accompanied by growls of distant thunder. She fixed Harry with an unwavering gaze. His gouty foot, inflamed by a particularly delicious Cabernet Sauvignon throbbed insistently.

“It’ll keep ‘til tomorrow, surely,” he muttered. “After all these weeks of secrecy a few more hours won’t make any difference either way, and my bloody gout is giving me gip.” He shifted awkwardly in the less comfortable chair and wondered if he dare venture onto a glass of port.

“Harry, I really want your opinion,” she urged, with quiet intensity. The deep set eyes glittered momentarily as a brilliant zigzag of lightning lit up the North Shore skyline and a salvo of thunder rumbled across the Bay.

“I realise now that you were absolutely right,” she said. “I couldn’t really express what I wanted to say on canvas. The theme of ‘Domestic Bliss’ deserved something much more structural and cohesive.” Isobel brushed a strand of hair from

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her brow, and Harry noticed how stained and uncared for her hands had become. He gave a non-committal grunt.

“You keep asking what I’ve been working on since I discarded my painting. Oh, do come down and look...” She gave a sudden girlish skip and the pallid face, now devoid of any makeup, lit up briefly.

“Well, if I have to give it the once over and you’re not prepared to wait,” muttered Harry, “I suppose I’ll have to humour you. God knows you’ve neglected everything else for long enough. But don’t expect me to like it if you’ve turned out more of that arty crafty stuff...”

Painfully he heaved himself from his chair and with ill grace limped towards the hall door. He was intrigued and curious, but determined not to admit as much. Isobel gave a sudden and disconcerting whoop and darted to the lift ahead of him. She seemed simultaneously nervous and excited.

The ancient lift shuddered downwards and the silence was broken only by Harry’s heavy breathing and an intermittent crack of thunder. The garish neon lighting in the basement corridor gave Isobel’s ivory complexion the look of a waxwork as she swept towards the locked studio with Harry stumping along in her wake. She fumbled with the key, but finally thrust the door open and flicking on the light switch stood abruptly to one side. Her smock whispered around her. The strange acrid smell Harry had noticed before assailed his nostrils and he hesitated in the doorway.

To his left stood a long workbench cluttered with what appeared to be scalpels and various tools. Around the walls were arranged an odd assortment of murky bell-jars and heavy containers. Harry blinked momentarily under the harsh glare of the

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single light bulb, and then in a terrible rush of comprehension he took in the tableau before him.

It was as if the other previous occupants of 31 Braceley Towers had decided to congregate in the basement. On a small gilded plinth stood his favourite wooden armchair, and behind it, framed in a freestanding casement window structure, and suspended on wires, three stuffed cockatoos swooped in flight. Elaborate lacquered curtains billowed artistically in frozen suspension on either side of the window, and beneath it, on a gilded stand stood a large aquarium, in which hovered the rotund shape of the now defunct Fred, seemingly imprisoned in solid Perspex. In the foreground, with paws resting on the armchair, perched an equally defunct Archy. He fixed Harry with a glassy stare and seemed, in death, to have somehow regained much of his former corpulence. The whole ghastly edifice appeared to have been heavily varnished, although even the varnish couldn't mask the unmistakable odour of embalming fluid which hung in the air.

“What in God's name have you done?” croaked Harry after a deathly silence. He clutched at the workbench beside him and sank onto a stool. A large book entitled ‘Taxidermy for Beginners’ lay open at his elbow, which explained, perhaps, the decidedly lumpy cockatoos and Archy's misshapen rotundity. The door behind him shut with a decisive click and he turned to look at his wife.

Isobel stood motionless in the shadows. She was gazing with obvious delight at the bizarre group of figures before her and giggling quietly. Head cocked to one side she seemed to have forgotten Harry completely. But then, as another flicker of lightning lit up the night sky the room sprang into momentary relief. Isobel blinked, and turned to look at Harry as a drum roll of thunder reverberated above them.

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“Of course the installation is not quite complete yet,” she whispered confidentially as she edged towards him. With her hands clasped behind her and unkempt hair falling carelessly about the pallid little face she looked like a naughty schoolgirl. The ravaged eyes studied him intently. “I’m convinced the composition needs a focal point of human interest, don’t you agree?”

And as he caught sight of the swiftly raised hammer in his wife’s hand Harry realized Isobel would only achieve ‘Domestic Bliss’ when he was permanently reunited with Archy and Fred and sitting in his favourite armchair once again.

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