EDEN

On the first day, Eve began. Well, it wasn't actually the first day. It had been four and a half weeks since they moved, but she had needed that time. She deserved a little holiday, and boxes didn't just unpack themselves into a new house. But now that she felt rested, and everything had been put away, she was ready to begin.

First, she would need breakfast. She couldn't begin on an empty stomach. And since it was such a significant day, she felt, breakfast should be somewhat celebratory. One of the farewell presents from the girls in the office was an apron printed with a picture of Michelango's David. She put it on, wishing they could see her now: ducking out to the shed in her gumboots to get an egg from underneath one of her own hens. She made pancakes, stacked them with maple syrup and banana slices, and took her plate out onto the veranda.

It was on this veranda that Eve had fallen in love with the place. The real estate agent, a chestnut-haired woman whom Eve was fairly sure was on Valium, had brought them out onto it to show them the view. 'Paradise,' she had sighed, parking her tortoiseshell glasses on top of her head and gesturing to the thoroughly unexceptional rural scene before her. In one direction there were rugged-up horses in a field of apple-tree stumps, and in the other an orchard of gnarled trees that dropped economically unviable fruit onto the grass. But to Eve, it was Paradise, this old pickers' hut flaking its green paint into a valley an hour's drive from the city. She loved the ruffles of sweet william along the driveway and the letterbox that perched in the forked branches of an old peach tree. Inside, the hut was daggy and funny, with chequered linoleum lifting in all the corners and incongruous, ostentatious light fittings. But after the sale of the city apartment, they'd been able to buy it outright and still have enough left over to buy a nice car for Adam, to take the sting out of commuting.

It was still dark in the mornings when he came into the bedroom to bring Eve a cup of tea just before he left for work.

'Today's the day, hey?' he had said this morning, and kissed her cheek.

'Yep. Today. Today, I begin.'

Eve finished her pancakes and washed the dishes. In the shower, she shaved her legs and noticed that her toenails were quite long. When she got out, she trimmed them with clippers. Then filed them into a nice shape. And since they were such a nice shape, it seemed a shame not to paint them. And so she did, in a shade of polish called

Rose Madder Lake, which was exactly the same name as that of pencil number twenty-one in her set of Derwent Watercolours. Rose Madder Lake. It really ought, Eve thought as she applied a second coat, to have been the name of a famous synchronised swimmer. She sat for a while with her feet in front of the fan heater. And smiled when she realised that she had just begun. No-one could say that she hadn't painted anything today.

On the second day, Eve decided, she would begin properly. But what to wear? Everyone knows that there is no sense beginning a new gym campaign without a series of new lycra outfits; or horse-riding without jodhpurs and a nice velvet hat; or ballet classes without pointe shoes and a tutu. And Eve knew that she could not begin, seriously and formally, as a painter until she was dressed as one.

She had given away all her office clothes as a kind of insurance against going back and this had left her with a wardrobe full of smart casuals and party clothes. Back when she was only a hobbyist, dabbling with her paints in the sunroom of the city apartment on weekends, she used to wear Adam's old T-shirts and track pants. And they wouldn't do anymore.

There was a small town about twenty winding kilometres away. It had suffered a fatal blow ten years back when the arse fell out of the apple industry, but was being kept on life support by the hippies who came in once or twice a week from their shacks in the hills. It had no bank or post office, but it did have a café that made reasonable chai, and an op shop. Eve calculated that she could be back home inside an hour and a half.

'Swednesday,' said some passing dreadlocks to Eve on the street outside the op shop.

'Sorry?'

'It's …Wednesday.'

'Oh?'

'Doesn't open till two on Wednesdays.'

Eve looked at her watch. It was only noon.

'Oh. Two? Thanks.'

So Eve sat on a lumpy leather couch by the café's blue velvet curtains, drinking chai, reading old copies of Wellbeing magazine and watching the op shop's door. It was not entirely unproductive time, however. She also thought some bitchy thoughts about the abstract paintings on the café walls; an activity that certainly counted towards artistic practice.

The op shop opened a little after two and smelled like a silverfish's banquet of polyester armpits, mould and inner soles. But on a rack in the back room, Eve found what she was looking for. It was the perfect painter's shirt: striped and collarless, the fabric worn through at the folded edges of the cuffs. Someone had already worn it for painting. Probably they had thrown it out because of its smattering of small, hardened circles of paint. These paint spots were mostly in earth colours, and in reds and yellows, which was a good sign, since these were the colours with which Eve herself felt most comfortable. In general she stayed away from the violets and the deeper, more aggressive of the blues.

At home, in front of the bathroom mirror, Eve tried on her purchases. She admired how the shirt fell off her shoulders but clung just nicely to the sides of her breasts. The timber handle of a fine brush speared her hair just above her ponytail, which was tied off with a purple scarf she had found in a basket by the op shop's cash register. The trousers were loose and navy blue, the clogs leather and well worn. She felt pleased. Her canvas was blank and Adam would be home in half an hour, but she looked every bit the artist, and that wasn't a bad start.

On the third day, Eve slept in. She woke to the digital clock binking 10.37am and knew that she would have to begin without breakfast. She lumbered her easel out through the narrow kitchen door to the veranda and assembled all her paints and brushes on a conveniently deep windowsill. This is what she had imagined, the first time she had stood on this veranda: herself painting while her hens clucked encouragingly from the lawn below. She was only there a few moments, however, before it became quite clear that she would soon be too cold in her striped painter's shirt.

She took her easel back inside and set it down in the living room at an angle to the window that looked out over the orchard and some distant hills. Not that she was going to look at the view. But if she did happen to pause for a moment and look around, there would be a calming vista just over her shoulder. The window also delivered good natural light to the canvas she now placed on the easel, and to the spot on the table where she was about to set up a still life scene.

Eve had been envisaging the composition for weeks, collecting gradually the component parts. For the backdrop, a square of chocolate velvet, scrunched into soft mountains to draw the eye up valleys and along ridges to the centre of the picture. Slightly to the left of centre would be a pewter pitcher, dull and bulbous as an atom bomb against the fabric. Clustering at the pitcher's base would be the fruit. There would be three apples, the first of them pinkish-red, a colossal Fuji, perfect and round as a Japanese valentine; the second, golden-skinned and tapered like a tooth. The third would bring the other two together, marry them in its bright stripes of red, orange and yellow. Called a Cox's Orange Pippin and collected as a windfall from the neighbouring orchard, it was a low, squat apple with a deep dimple for its stem. The solitary pear

would sit, upright, to the left, keeping a respectful distance from the pitcher and the family of apples. But when Eve assembled the scene, just as she had imagined it, she saw immediately that there was a problem with the pear.

The pear was all wrong. One of the smooth, brown-skinned varieties of pear, it sat over to one side looking — in comparison with the vibrant apples — two dimensional and lifeless. Brown on brown just didn't work. What was needed, clearly, was a green pear. A fresh pear. A knobbly pear. One that would stand up for itself with its bright waxy skin, with bumps like hard, misplaced buttocks and breasts. Eve looked at her watch. She could make it to town and back in an hour and a half. Tops. Two if she had a quick bite of lunch while she was there.

When she returned, Eve picked out the greenest and knobbliest of the pears in a kilo bag and rested it on its base a few inches from the pewter pitcher. She stood back, by her easel, upon which her canvas was stretched. And blank. She observed her still life study in the centre of the table. The colours harmonised, the composition was in perfect balance. It was just right. It was five o'clock.

On the fourth day, Eve sat at her easel. She got up and walked around the room. She sat at her easel. She got up and made herself a cup of tea. Herbal. She sat at her easel. She sighed. Her tin of Derwent Watercolour pencils caught her eye. It had been months since she last used them, and when she opened the tin and lifted out the top tray she could see immediately that the pencils were out of order. She emptied them onto the table beside the still life ensemble and sorted them by number until she had a pleasing rainbow where there had been a jumble of shades. Some of her colours — number sixty-two, Burnt Sienna, and number fifty-six, Raw Umber — were now down to half-size. Others — like number thirty-seven, Oriental Blue, and number twenty-three, Imperial Purple — were still as tall as they were when brand-new. But even many of the lesser-used ones were quite blunt. And so she took up her metal pencil sharpener and began. At number one, Zinc Yellow.

She was up to number forty-one, Jade Green, when she heard the sound of a car in the driveway. Through the window she saw coming to a standstill the decrepit red mini with a stoved-in driver's side door that belonged to her friend Rosie. (Yes, that would be me, having made the difficult decision to cut Friday's media ethics lecture in favour of a drive in the country. She watched as I crawled out of the passenger-side door and hefted a wicker picnic basket — its gingham-covered lid concealing two bottles of cheap plonk — out of the back seat.)

'Rosie …' she started.

'Don't look at me like that. You can stop long enough to eat lunch.'

'Lunch?'

‘Evie, it’s one thirty.’

Eve took the basket, carried it into the house and placed it on the table where she thought it might conceal the pile of shavings edged with every colour of two-thirds of a rainbow. No such luck.

‘I …um,’ Eve said, trying to conjure up a justification.

‘Oh dear. That bad?’

On the fifth day, Eve lost her confidence in the Cox’s Orange Pippin. What she had wanted for the apple occupying that position in her painting — what she had seen when she had dreamed it — was the kind of luminous apple painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder in the tree above the auburn heads of his Adam and Eve.

Eve could picture almost every detail of the Cranach in her mind. She could conjure Eve’s naked body, lumpy as her own knobbled pear. She could see Adam’s befuddled scratching of his head, the zoo of placid animals at his feet and the serpent bending into a reverse S against the tree trunk. But although she could remember the apples bursting like stars all over the canopy of leaves, and although she could remember their gorgeous shades of gold and blood orange, she could not recall whether or not they had stripes. She flicked in her mind’s eye between competing versions of the image. Striped apples, plain apples, striped apples, plain apples. Striped. Plain. The authentic version would not declare itself.

Somewhere in her bookshelf, Eve knew, she would have a reproduction. Somewhere in one of the expensive art history volumes she had failed to resist in the bookshop next door to her old office, there would be a reproduction of the Cranach to answer the riddle and determine the fate of the Cox’s Orange Pippin.

She pulled down book after book, looking in their indexes. Cézanne, Chagall, Constable …Degas. Not trusting the apparent omission, she leafed through each book, page by careful page. It was lunchtime when Adam came in from the shed to find her sitting, disconsolate, in a puddle of splayed books.

‘Come on, Evie,’ he said. ‘Give it a rest now.’

On the sixth day, it was Sunday, and that was a good enough excuse.

On the seventh day, by mid-morning, Eve had almost finished. She was up to number sixty-six, Chocolate. She had not intended, on this day, to touch the pencils. In fact, she had strictly forbidden herself any more sharpening. But then she realised that if she finished sharpening all of the pencils, it would offer up some kind of proof that she

was capable of finishing things. And as soon as she had finished the pencils, she could begin painting.

When she heard a knock at the door, Eve decided not to answer it. Whoever it was could go away. She picked up pencil number sixty-seven, Ivory Black, and inserted it in the sharpener. Then a face moved into the frame of the window. The man belonging to the face had wild, windblown hair and wore a checked scarf knotted tightly around his neck. The hand he held in the air, which was about to knock on the window, turned from a rapping fist into a coy little wave. The only reason Eve opened the door was to go outside and shout at him.

'Who the fuck are you?'

He hunched himself apologetically.

'I am ever so sorry…' 'If I had wanted to talk to you, I would have opened the door. Now fuck off.'

He appeared not to notice her displeasure. He was smiling and nodding, as if in assent. She could see the monolithic white teeth in his wide mouth, which sat above a goatee and a nose that one might describe as …well, how would one describe his nose?

A Word from Rosie Little on:

Writing About Noses

I could get all writerly about it, and call it an 'aquiline nose', but to do so would be to confine its owner for all time to the pages of fiction, for how could I ever expect you to believe that he truly existed if I were to plonk such a literary phenomenon squarely in the middle of his face? An actual nose — a nose of flesh and bone and cartilage — might in fact be aquiline in profile, but it is a strange fact of life that it is almost never so described unless the describer has a pen in her hand or a keyboard beneath her fingertips.

I cannot account for the magnetism that so routinely brings the words 'aquiline' and 'nose' end to end in the midst of a writer's description of a face. But I have been told that in the French language, the two halves of nez aquilin are so rarely separated that to spy any other word cosying up to aquilin would be akin to witnessing an infidelity. It just seems to be a fact of linguistic life, as obvious as the proverbial, that 'aquiline' has a peculiar adjectival jurisdiction when it comes to the literary rendering of the olfactory organ. And so, numbered among the great aquiline noses of literary history, are those of Bram Stoker's Count Dracula (and at least two of his vampiric consorts), Peter Carey's Harry Joy, the doctor (but only the doctor?) in Mario Vargas Llosa's Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter and Monsieur de Rênal, the mayor of Vérrieres in Stendhal's

The Red and the Black. Anton Chekov was fond of the aquiline nose, giving one to a doctor and one to a professor who appear in his short stories. George Eliot may even have had an aquiline nose complex, given that she put one in Chapter 21 of Adam Bede, one in Chapter 58 of Middle-march and one in Chapter 7 of The Mill on the Floss. I could keep going, of course, but I would begin to bore you. Instead, I shall prove my point by leaving you some space to jot down the next five aquiline noses that you encounter in your reading career, and betting that it won't be very long until they're all filled:

Aquiline Nose 1. _____

Aquiline Nose 2. _____

Aquiline Nose 3. _____

Aquiline Nose 4. _____

Aquiline Nose 5. _____

But what precisely does an aquiline nose look like? I am certain that I read and envisaged a great many before I ever bothered to find out. 'Aquiline', to me, had always suggested something watery; the kind of long, thin nose given to unfortunate dripping. When in fact, I have lately discovered, it is curved like the beak of an eagle and indicates — to some psychic face-readers at least — a strong will, independence and the promise of prosperous mid-years.

'Well go away then.'

'Yes, yes.'

'You're not going.'

'Yes indeed. I have something for you, you see.'

Eve noticed the convertible near her peach tree letterbox, and thought it unlikely that he was delivering parcels for Australia Post.

'Are you a salesman?'

'May I come inside? I find this winter of yours very cold.'

'You are a salesman.'

'Salesman. Such an unattractive word, don't you think?'

‘Right. I’m not interested, thanks. I’ve got work to do. So if you don’t mind — goodbye.’

‘But I do have something for you,’ he said.

‘You’re still not going. Go on. Off you go.’

‘You don’t want then, to see a reproduction of the Cranach?’

‘Is this a joke?’

‘You are Eve?’

‘Did someone get you to come here for a joke? Do you work with Adam? Are you from a some radio station?’

‘No, no, but all reasonable suspicions, for I see I have hit the nail on the head. But it’s no practical joke. It’s obvious, my dear. Here you are, an artist in an apple grove. Of course you would be looking for the Cranach. Of course you should paint apple trees, and apples. Small red apples with sweet snow-white insides, the big green globes of the Cleos, the carnival stripes of the Cox’s Orange Pippin. Yes, especially those. Apples are your calling. It doesn’t take a genius to see that.’

‘Well, show me then.’

He gestured to gathering storm clouds.

‘All right then. Just for a minute though. And I’m not buying anything, okay? Are you clear on that?’

‘Quite.’

‘Absolutely clear?’

‘Absolutement,’ he said, handing Eve an embossed postcard.’

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‘Drivel,’ the salesman said.

‘Pardon?’

‘Drivel, don’t you think? Now I — I would never insult you with such pedestrian prose.’

He fanned the seven pristine volumes across Eve’s table like a card sharp fans a deck.

‘Think of a painting, any painting,’ he dared her.

‘I just want to see the Cranach.’

‘Please. Think of any painting. Any painter. Any period. I think I may prove to you that any painting you desire to see before your eyes is here, within these pages.’

‘I told you I wasn’t buying anything, so you’re wasting your time.’

‘Time, I have plenty of. Think. Allow a painting to take shape in your mind. And I shall show it to you.’

She thought. Of the Cranach.

‘Come, now. That’s hardly a challenge. I already know you want to see that. Now think of something else.’

It was a nude. Titian’s Venus of Urbino, lying langorously upon a bed of cushions. Eve tried to think instead of the Mona Lisa. The Titian was too sexy; he might take it as a come-on. And besides, he’d never guess anything as obvious as the da Vinci. But still, the irrepressible nude pushed to the forefront of Eve’s mind.

His hand passed over the fan of books like a magician’s. He selected a volume. The pages fluttered and then the book fell open in his hands.

‘Ah, Titian. He was very great, Titian, was he not? There was a limerick — rather blue, I’m afraid:

As Titian was mixing rose madder, his model reclined on a ladder.

Her position, to Titian,

suggested coition,

so he climbed up the ladder and had her.

Quite good, don’t you think?’

Eve was silent, blanched.

‘I do hope I’ve not offended.’

Eve thought of Chagall’s brides and grooms floating through the air past weeping candelabras, of Kahlo’s face beneath the antlers of a deer, of an apple tree by Klimt. And each the encyclopaedia salesman was able to produce, there upon the page.

‘I have proved myself to you, no? Shall you take a set, young Eve? A valuable addition to the library of any young artist. Surely you agree?’

‘I’m not an artist. My father is an artist. I just sharpen pencils.’

‘Now that cannot be true. I see you have your still life assembled here. A sensible place to begin. Let me see your canvas.’

The encylopaedia salesman slid past her.

‘Ah, I see,’ he said, registering the blankness. ‘Perhaps I can help.’

He took up a palette and oozed several bright worms of paint onto its smeared surface. He handed it to her, placed a brush in her hand.

‘Paint.’

‘I can’t — this is ridiculous.’

‘Paint!’

‘I can’t just …paint.’

‘Paint. Just paint what you see.’

She stood before her easel, and lifted the brush.

‘I can’t. I can’t do this.’

‘I think you’ll find that you can.’

And then the brush, seemingly of its own accord, plunged towards the palette. And Eve began to paint. Slowly at first, as if the air around her was too thick. Then faster,

the brush moving between canvas and palette, seeming to pick and mix colours all by itself. It carried her hand behind its hovering point, touching deftly to the canvas, tracking in perfect arcs with this colour, then that. So subtle. Appearing before her was her own vision. What she saw in her mind's eye was transporting itself to the canvas through the conduit of the brush. No sooner did the paint touch the canvas than it was dry and ready to receive the next layer. The brush picked up yet more speed, towing streaks of paint away from the centre in broad, brave strokes. Apples filled out and ripened on the canvas before her. The flow of the paint was positively ecstatic. She painted and painted, and oh! painted. And then the brush stopped, stalling in her hand, its tip just millimetres from the surface. The painting, Eve could see, was one leaf-green brushstroke from finished. But the brush would not move. Even though completion was so close. She was so on the brink. It was unbearable. It could not possibly. Stop.

'Cherie, one thing first. Sign here.'

In place of the brush, he placed a pen, and she dashed off her signature before grabbing back the brush, which applied itself, with a final flourish, to the dainty, curling leaf. And then Eve felt herself fainting. She was falling, falling. And the last thing she saw before the blackness was his smile, its colossal white teeth and, between them, flicking quick as whiplash, a forked tongue.

'Au revoir, cherie,' said the encyclopaedia salesman to the unconscious Eve, who had fallen — her hair streaked carmine, viridian, sulphurous yellow — across the table next to her fruits. Which were almost undisturbed. Only the pear had rolled onto its knobbled side.

When she came to, Eve found her house empty of the seller of the Encyclopaedia Atlantica and other fine publications. But her painting — her painting! — was still there. And it was beautiful. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever painted. It was a painting of dream apples, and it was perfect. Except for one small thing. She looked at the Cox's Orange Pippin in the painting. On the skin of its curving edge there was a mark. She looked at its model, the apple upon the table. But it was untouched. She moved closer to the canvas, peering into the structure of the paint itself. Adjusting her focus she saw it, in the striped skin of the painted apple: a set of teeth marks surrounding a sickle of sweet, white flesh.