

ST KILDA MADONNA

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I kept standing by my window well past the hour when she would normally have turned the Robe Street corner holding young Joshua by a hand, approached then with an upward glance at my studio, and entered through the doorway into the foyer below to ascend the echoing flight of stairs.

I had phoned; I had scoured the length of The Esplanade below left to right; and had myself several times gone downstairs and waited about the corner.

But to no avail.

No Marita on the phone; no Marita in the street below. Only a steady stream of cars, cyclists, vans, trams and people coursing around the wide arcuate thoroughfare in which I lived and which overlooked a broad richly green and blue sweep of beach front with its scattered nature strips, footbridges, kiosks and palm-bordered paths all glowing bright in the late afternoon sun, and overlooked too, still more exhilaratingly - when one's mood was tuned for exhilaration - the flickering shimmering yacht-studded waters of the harbour which melded seamlessly - and carried one with them - into sea, into ocean, into sky and into infinitude beyond.

By the window, I continued to wait. I invented a succession of scenarios to explain her delay, some ordinary and run-of-the-mill - a visit to a friend and obliviousness to the time, a visit to the doctor with young Joshua suffering an earache - others more unsettling, more disturbing, worrisome that I preferred to dispel as soon as they presented. Suffice it that she had not yet come. That itself was enough, without her absence being attended by added anxieties over imagined possibilities when I was already being tossed by still another concern; namely, that my painting, so sublimely crystalline in my vision at its outset, moved, the nearer it approached completion, increasingly further from that catalytic near-ecstatic conception that had so launched me into the work with near-manic impetus and fire.

The canvas on its easel stood but an arm's-length away. On that canvas, settled on a cushion in a quarter turn, sat a slender young woman with dark-hair in black dress, black cardigan and sienna-coloured beads about her neck in counterpoint to the lint-like pallor of her face, holding an infant in her lap in muted patterned shirt, short pants and sandals, whose blond head she reflectively kissed, the convergence of heads - her pallid face and the child's blond hair - constituting the centrepiece of the work. Behind them, against a cracked, stained and dun-brown wall on which hung a wrinkled calendar and wooden wall-clock, stood a table and, on the table, a fruit-bowl with apples, pears and cherries, an egg cup beside it and an upturned shell. A butterfly hovered over Mother and child. These bric-a-brac - these externals - satisfied me well enough. But she herself, Marita, in the role I intended for her, Marita did not wholly convince. Nor the little one Joshua. Their separate postures - Marita's bearing, the downward cast of her gaze upon the infant's head, and the toddler held to her in her lap - these were realistic enough. They were true as a set-up photograph might be true.

But the spark, the spark of divinity, the glow...

It was for this that I needed Marita now, and the child no less.

And when, with time on the one hand crawling, on the other fleeting, it became increasingly clear that they would not appear, the disquieting unease swelling within broke its bounds to drive me, with sea-wind and brine at my back, in pursuit of them, unable, against better counsel, more simply to shrug off their non-appearance and continue with my work trusting to memory, to expertise and to the recapturing of that pristine vision of the work I had embarked upon that I carried within.

So did I made for her home, at the address she had given me, in Dalgety Street several blocks away.

Turning into Robe Street, lined with broad-fronted one-time elect Victorian mansions, and narrow secretive gabled cottages, two-storeyed terraces with half-drawn blinds variously torn, grimy or askew, and recently-raised flats obscenely graffitied and already far advanced in disrepair, I wore only a T-shirt, jeans and a faded hand-me-down jacket from Methuselah. The sun was still high in the soft smooth wash of cloudless sky, but the draughts that swept in from the sea behind me bit deep into my spine.

Having set out, however, I pressed on. With the completion of the portrait and the competition's closing date both so near, I needed Marita to sit for me one last time. Needed? - No, wanted ! My initial sketches notwithstanding, without her and the child in their actuality and fullness occupying a part of the ambience in which I worked, the figures on the canvas fell light-years short of the essence I strived for. A watcher over my shoulder might have deemed the evolving portrait workmanlike, and, if asked directly for his views, might well have answered, "Hm, not bad", or "Yes, there is certainly a clear likeness there of mother and child", or "It's an

appealing study, to be sure"; and to that extent, to the extent that I had by now, after a long apprenticeship through trial and error, attained to a tested trust in my craft, I myself recognised the overall sound technical quality of the work.

But being merely sound or workmanlike did not of themselves win prizes, and, although I had, along my artistic travails, collected an encouraging few, one competition that I did not want to let go begging without an all-out effort was the Inaugural Biennial Justus Goodfriend Award for a work of art depicting motherhood. With the Award carrying, in addition to a hand-crafted bronze plaque from the Goodfriend Family Foundation, a healthy cheque for twenty thousand dollars, permanent display in the National Gallery of the winning work and, not to be scoffed at, the likelihood of any number of potentially valuable commissions as a tangential reward, this was one opportunity too good to pass. The fact that I scorned religious beliefs and articles of faith as the stuff of delusions, superstitions or myths certainly made my choice of subject paradoxical; but, as obvious as it was and foreseeably the most likely motif of not a few other contenders, the Madonna and Child nonetheless ranked supreme above and beyond - or alone - among any vaunted parallels in other traditions, other faiths. And precisely because of the logic behind the motif and the rivalry I would encounter, I needed Marita, I needed her infant, I needed their direct, visible and palpable presence; for, however conventional her present pose, mine was not to be just one more in a jumble sale of celestial, beatific, vestal, but otherwise so vacuous Madonnas, but one who... one in whom... one for whom... - How capture, how begin to capture with any economy of words what the mind, eye and hand as one aspire towards with paint: the tangled, protean and concurrent melding yet distinct individual separateness of mother and child, the heart's adoration coupled with protective wariness against threat, the manifest evidences of experiences past and fervent coveting of blessings conceivably in store, and, with all these - as, early on, I intuited in Marita more than I had any way of knowing - the ever-tidal inner alternating between grit, resilience, bewilderment, trepidation and fragility?

Recalling details - the composite of brow, eyes, nose, cheeks and chin and the nuances that were uniquely hers, her often timid yet sometimes less guarded voice, or the quiver in her fingers and the way she brushed at her hair, licked a crumb from a lip, or absently scratched at a mole - I followed the lead of my shadow along the length of Robe Street on the way to Grey Street at its other end. Notwithstanding the increasing traffic of locals just then coming home by foot or by car, the street was still in lazy mode. Cats groomed themselves in doorways; dogs soaked up whatever sun was still to be had on upper landings; pigeons and sparrows pecked at crusts fallen from garbage bins; electric and telephone wires hummed above; smells of the sea and car exhaust yielded increasingly to that of roasts and sauces being prepared indoors.

Even as I, with my own pressing urgency, pushed on, the street - indeed, the area as a whole - was still in lazy mode in yet another way. For, Robe Street and those around that by day were fine and orderly thoroughfares in a bayside suburbia, became at night transformed into a triangular feral playground bordered by Barkly, Fitzroy and Acland Streets, where, while one genus of humanitas was just then settling down to sleep, another came out for sport. What small print details I might still have lacked of the area despite my own frequent sojourns there after a day in the studio, the weekly Southern Cross supplied to a goodly extent; more still from the models I had engaged from time to time; and then from Marita - Marita too - herself drafted some time before, become less a willing player than a puck in the dog-eat-dog hustlings of the night.

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She, Marita, had been one of a handful of respondents to a notice on a local gallery window come with their children to model for me, and both at first glance, before she had yet murmured, standing as if on tacks on the threshold of my studio, "I...I'm Mar... Marita", and then at second, when I looked upon her clinging knock-kneed child, I concluded that, for what I wanted, she had come to the wrong door.

This notwithstanding, if only for formality's sake, I invited her inside. Dressed wholly in black - cheap cotton dress, lacklustre cardigan, and shoes, stockings and shawl - she presented as a thin, pale, undernourished and timid twenty-two-year-old who, on entering with her palms advancing the child, looked warily about the clutter of canvases, ashes, sketches, easel, palette, paints, thinners and other paraphernalia that crammed the studio. Stranger that I was to her, she was wary of me too as she approached the chair near the centre of the studio where I bade her sit, glancing two, three, four times over her shoulder on my shutting the door behind her and coming back to another chair facing her.

She, Marita, sat as far back in her seat as she could, not for a blinking taking her eyes from me as she held her child with one hand and covered a cheek with the other, that cheek, when I came to see it soon after - for she could not indefinitely conceal it - being a jot more puffy

and more bluish than the other. With mother and child a pair, the child, not one bit less, kept the furthest distance from me that it could without ceding hold of its mother.

"What a handsome little fellow you are," I said, squatting before him with a squeezing of eyes and mouth as a mime might do in a ploy for levity. "And what is your name?" I added, conversely opening wide my eyes like a merry clown.

The child, placing thumb in mouth, turned away its face to bury it in its mother's waist.

"Win some, lose some," I said, rising from my squatting position to seat myself opposite her.

Marita draped an arm about the child.

"His name... his name is Joshua," she said, quietly, tensely, hesitantly, with her gaze flitting between the little one's head and me. "He's... He's just turned three."

"Joshua," I repeated. "A biblical name, I believe."

Marita gave the faintest shrug of her shoulders.

"I... I heard it once and... and liked the sound of it."

I was bemused by her unwitting ingenuousness.

"Well, then," I said then with the time for business ripe. "You saw the notice, you said when you phoned. I gather you have modelled before?"

Whether she had or had not scarcely mattered. Her stammering hesitancy, her sombreness and tenseness apart, the oval of her face was too small and angular for the Madonna I contemplated, her nose, also, too thin, her hair too cropped, her neck too long and her breasts too slight, her whole frame, in fact, too lean and unmatriarchal for my subject; while the child, a miniature facsimile of its mother, save for its blondness, was scarcely one that, transposed to canvas, had it in him to stir in any spectator - let alone the Goodfriend judges - the least intimation of veneration, divinity, transcendent sublimeness. They were not the models of which Madonnas and their children as expressions of divine delectability, composure, gladness and light were forged. And it did not help matters that this girl - this dark, timorous and seemingly joyless Marita - had never worked as a model before. As a waitress, shop assistant, supermarket cashier, usherette and girl Friday, yes, but as model, no.

Allowing for the passage of decent time, during which I clarified what I wanted and put her through a sequence of poses together with her sometimes less than compliant Joshua, the moment came - always the hardest - to confront her with a suitably cushioned, sympathetically regretful "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid, Marita, that..." and so on.

We were seated back in our places, she with Joshua on her lap nibbling at the tip of a finger he held raised to her lips as, for the first time, he looked at me squarely, and myself partly turned in my chair with leg crossed over thigh in a contemplative pose of my own before delivering that apologetically regretful - and, for her, that patently feared - "I'm sorry, but..."

But before I let fall that hammer blow, Marita, stealing herself and gaining in resolve, fixed her own gaze issuing from dark, deeply-set and shadowed sockets upon me and said, "Please, Mr Fine. I... I need the work. I... I need the money. I...I... I want another life for myself."

"Oh?" I asked.

Money was motive behind work of most sorts. But the wanting of another life?

That intrigued; it fascinated; it aroused curiosity; and where, earlier, when she presented so unprepossessing at my door, I had glanced once, and had then glanced a second time, I now allowed myself to glance - even to study her - a third.

"I... I mean," she replied, "I... I just want a better life... a... a... cleaner life, a... I... I don't know how else to put it..."

I sat opposite her, more squarely now, watching her and waiting to hear what else she might say.

I was ready enough to listen, but it was not for me to extract from her anything she preferred to hold back. She had, after all, come to me as would-be model to an artist, and not as a penitent to a father confessor. To the extent, then, that our separate motives converged, to that extent was I prepared to be drawn into her life and aspirations. Beyond that, it went without saying - and such was the accepted wisdom - that any artist-model interaction demanded, as in other similar circumstance, correct, prudent, but cordial professional distancing.

As I watched, the serial knitting of brow, flitting of eyes, pursing of lips, drawing of breath and pensive contemplation of fingernails as she held to her infant on her lap was mirror to a succession of subtle transformations which, in their sum - whatever thought or sensation each separate nuance might have expressed - told of hurts, entrapment, arrested possibilities, a reaching for straws.

In the end, having come to some ordering of words that might have summed up her inner troubledness, she said softly, "I suppose I want to know that I truly am or can be more than I am."

The long and short of what followed - and in the way of a paradox for one so given to a more customary clear-headed and very practical bent - is that I hired her.

I hired her.

Out of pity, charity, samaritanism? Maybe. Out of a failure of resolve or an unwillingness to hurt or to give her the benefit of my dubiousness? Any of these, too, maybe. Or was it because some inner eye - the artist's conceit - perceived that deep within this unhappy young woman living in the seedy Devil's playground nearby, there were to be found those proverbial pieces of gold that, with but a reaching, could be brought to the surface? And, again, that too, maybe. Suffice it to say that, as I sat facing her and observing her every gesture, I questioned where any edict had ever been carved in stone dictating that Holy Mother and Holy Child had to be well-nourished, high-coloured, flaxen-haired Florentine graces in ripe and rosy bloom, while, if Marita had never yet modelled nor met my requirements as I had conceived them before, who was to say that I might not yet mould her to my purposes or, with her (and her Joshua) as my subjects, mould my own art to a higher, truer authenticity? Seen this way, was this not, after all, the gauntlet thrown down to the artist - as it was for the sculptor out of clay masterly magic make, or the poet out of a fleeting image or the composer out of the simplest chord?

So I hired her. I revised my conception. I broke for myself the boundaries of the traditional, and, in the hold of that new, vivid and raptly vivifying conception, recognised how passe and commonplace my version of the Madonna before Marita might have been.

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That had been several weeks before.

In the intervening time, the work had progressed well. Novice though she was to modelling, Marita's inexperience proved a lesser handicap than I had feared. For, once she reined in to more manageable degree her initial anxious timidity and wariness and loosened her brow, chin, shoulders and limbs, she proved distinctly pliant and sat with uncommon patience as, first, I sketched and, then, painted her, even while, every so often, there flickered across a cheek a fleeting grimace issuing from an inner hurt or a resurgent thought, which, piece by piece, layer by layer, week by week, she unpeeled before me. As for toddler Joshua, the more familiar he became with the studio, its paraphernalia and its assorted odours of thinners and paint, the more retreating and clinging did he prove, whereupon he too sat well when required on Marita's lap and was rewarded with one or other remnant toy of many I had found in my own seven-year-old Federica's room before Stella, taking Federica with her, made off with a wealthy, polished and smooth-talking gallery curator.

Now, however, with Marita and Joshua not having turned up for their sitting, with an unwonted panic setting in because my canvas madonna and canvas child were failing the vision that had put them there, and out of fears of another sort, I was in unnerved pursuit of them. And, in pursuing them, I turned into the broader Grey Street, protected from the sea-wind there but with mounting perspiration causing my T-shirt beneath the jacket to cling to my spine.

Host to more apartment houses, churches, run-down mansions turned rooming-house, hotel and backpackers' digs, and to medical clinics, welfare addresses, phone booths, electric wires, traffic poles and graffiti, Grey Street was a thoroughfare far wider, busier, more exposed; but its reputation scarcely better. The daytime hours were modest with their clues - stubble-cheeked vagrants in worn-through jackets begging for ten, twenty, fifty cents from strangers, thin vacant-eyed youngsters drifting in the grip of drugs, and lone men, kinless women roaming biding away slow-moving hours till, with the fading of day's light, their shelters opened again their doors against the night. At times, day saw other dramas, too: the eviction of a family unable to pay its rent, electricity and gas; a man emerging on an upper window ledge setting to hurl himself down because he's had enough of everything, enough, enough, enough!; and another springing from concealment in an apartment archway in broad daylight to snatch a purse, a handbag, a parcel from a passing older woman's grasp.

If this was by day, what of the night in this playground, in this arena that lay both but a hand's span behind my studio and squarely in the heart of Marita's habitat home? While the suburb - and the city more widely - slept, in their own homes, in rooming-houses or in shelters, out came the nocturnal owls: heavily lipsticked and mascaraed women touting for wild oats custom at street corners and in gateways; mechanics, salesmen, clerks and senior managers by day negotiating prices for their services or crawling the gutters, one, two, three to a car by night; and, in unadorned sparsely-furnished rooms or in lanes, doorways and telephone booths, fly-by-nights doing business of other kinds, with powder sachets, pill bottles and pilfered goods transmuted near magically into instant cash in secretive, lightning, near-wordless exchanges unwitting to the public eye. Never mind, meanwhile, the cars stolen and the cars stripped; the strangling by a client of a daughter of joy in her own professional bed; or the stabbing of a man

outside the pub in a drink-fuelled brawl; or the finding of a teenage boy or a girl, in a toilet nearby, livid blue and mottled in the contraction of rigor mortis at the end of a syringe from a misjudged or, perhaps, deliberately judged heroin dose.

And if these were but the more public, the more evident or reported, what of the unseen, the wall-window-and-door-hidden mayhem occurring daily in bedroom and kitchen that so necessitated - as Grey Street itself evidenced through its facilities - such a network in the area of crisis and accommodation centres, half-way houses, correctional services and family support services, family stores and opportunity shops? - a boy's setting of the family flat on fire when his mother, a deserted Home Help worker with the council, refused him money for a games parlour; or a twelve-year-old girl sent into the streets to maintain her father's gambling; or... or...

There seemed to be no end to it all, and the nearer I came to Marita's Dalgety Street, the more vivid, immediately real and pressing became the plea she made on that first sad and plaintive visit to my studio: "Please, Mr Fine. I... I need the work. I... I need the money. I...I... I want another life for myself... I... I just want a better life... a... a... cleaner life."

That life of hers she had peel by peel unpeeled for me. In thin layerings, small gestures, without drama, unravelling it piecemeal towards an irreducible inner core that concentrated both my vision and my every brush stroke towards captivity on canvas.

The sum of it was that Marita had from early on been child of a jungle home and of jungle streets. Her mother had died young of meningitis. Soon after, one of her lorry-driver father's runs took him to Queensland. Finding there that an uncurbed living under the year-long Ipswich sun was more to his liking than parental fetters in erratic Melbourne, he had left Marita - more correctly, palmed her off - to her mother's sister, Carrie. This Carrie, who herself had two children, both boys, and afterwards bore two more, with different fathers all, some time later brought into the house yet another man, a work-shunning former Pentridge inmate who, when Marita returned from school, would come upon her wherever she was and whatever she was doing and paw at her about her neck, a shoulder, a breast, her...

Marita did not elaborate. "Keith was a pig!" said it all.

And that was when sober; when he was drunk, he was downright violent - with her, with Carrie and the boys - to the extent that police or welfare officers were often called, rescue by them alternating with stayovers in shelters, or with girlfriends, then boyfriends until each storm blew over - and until, at fifteen, she left home altogether. It had not helped matters that the older boys, too, had, at different times in their evolving randiness, ventured liberties of their own with her.

If this was common history in these parts - albeit kept invisible within private walls - what followed was common history more public: truancy, an empty purse, single-purpose rooms above nondescript doorways, a drag at marijuana now, at other times a needle fix, now and again a fly by night Reg, Pete or Jeff, an unwanted visitation, an abortion, then another conception, this one carried through to carry the name Joshua, and, some three months before she came to me and in a following of her aunt Carrie's sorry model, a moving in with an older man of short fuse and quick fist through whose string of massage parlours, Marita was caught in a bigger-time world than she had to this time known of prostitution and pederasty, drugs and big money, and standovers, assaults, shootings, stabbings and other fare that could keep any latter-day Bosch busy throughout a winter of rainy days.

The canvas was in my studio behind me. And I knew Marita's story which had sharpened my art. But still I needed her for my work's completion. Her initial plea had gained a heightened poignancy; and, much as I had Marita and her Joshua securely replicated as themselves in paint, I had not yet achieved their transformation from mere fidelity to visual form to the transcendence of finer art: both in her own right and as painted Madonna, the fully realised rendering of her feminine vulnerability, the capturing of her sorely-experienced pain, the poignancy of her entrapment - hers and the child's, for what awaited Joshua if he too could not escape? - and, transcending all else, through artistic magic to render immortal precisely that which was mortal, in this instance, Marita and Joshua - as even the one-time true-life Madonna and Child had to be mortal. This was creativity; this was art: a cheating of time through the endowment of life not only to subject but to creator too beyond their mortal span, serving thereby as redemption of sorts, if not Messianic, then not any the less valuable for being wholly man-made. And though I may not have been able to alleviate the rough and ugly and criminal surrounds in which she lived, on a different plain, and through the filtering sieve of art, I could perhaps yet capture and elevate the pained, wanting, aspiring-for-better inner core.

It was this that now drove me, that propelled me on as, with mounting momentum and with the wind in my back again, I turned into Dalgety Street towards Marita's, passing indigent houses with slummy gardens, crumbling fences and rusted letterboxes, battered Holdens, Humbers and hand-me-down Chevys, and dogs sitting on patios, cats in doorways, and more scavenger pigeons, sparrows and seagulls.

At the end of the street, where another car was just then backing out and straightening before passing me as it rode away, was Marita's home, a broad-fronted house which, with its high arched windows, stained glass, fluted columns and long balcony may well have been a one-time eating-and-accommodation house. But whatever its past, it was now a grimy ramshackle slum fronted by a leached threadbare garden in which the only visible green was offered by grass tufts growing through the cracks in the path, and which was willy-nilly strewn with dried-out fruit peel, drink cans and greasy potato chips paper, and an overturned tricycle, a worn-through mattress, a football, a discarded lounge chair. Only the pellucid balmy brightness of sunlight in its last hour before abandoning the day leavened the impact of what an intemperate day might have made.

I walked through the gateway, along the path, on the balcony and came to the door. I paused there, took deep breath, placed my thumb upon the bell. If seeking out Marita was madness, so let it be. My reasons for doing so, these were simple, they were natural, they were ordinary enough. Whatever the order of priority, the competition was fast approaching; I needed her and the child for another sitting; I was also concerned that all was well.

But the consequences? What of these?

What would be would be, if only because it had to be; for to get so near to the water and not to drink was now wholly out of the reckoning.

A faint sound, a peculiar sound, something of a whine coming from within urged my hand.

I pressed the bell.

I pressed it again, and a third time, then rapped at the dark crimson glass panelling on the side of the door.

None of these met response. But when I heard that sound again - twice in short succession, artist became trespasser and I turned the doorknob.

The door gave. I met with an onslaught of must, naphthalene and heavy dampness, and heard now not only a whine but also sobbing and wailing accompanied by the younger higher-pitched cries of a child.

"Hello!" I called, "Hello!" the while nearing warily the source of the weeping along the hallway.

The consequences, the consequences?

What was I doing?

I came upon them in the lounge-room where, plumb in the sunlight streaming through the window with the fullness of the bay behind, Marita was on her knees with head and back bowed, face covered, shoulders convulsing and her whole body rocking with her weeping while Joshua, with tears runneling in a stream down his cheeks to his chin clung to her and beat his small fists against her shoulders, crying "Mummy! Mummy! Mummy!"

I approached them.

"Marita!" I said, myself getting on a knee before her, pained to see them so. "What... What happened... What's been happening? You didn't come, so I came to see... Marita!"

I placed a hand on an arm. Joshua, seeing this, raised his own to push it away.

"Marita!" I tried again. "It's me... Felix... Felix Fine... I came... I was worried... Marita!"

Marita's rocking eased; her shoulders calmed; slowly she raised her head and uncovered her face.

It was Marita, but not my Marita, my familiar Marita, my canvas Marita.

Where, before, she had been pale, thin and undernourished, none of this was recognisable now. A pair of solid fists, or worse, had put paid to all that, making a piteous purple moon of her face, with cheeks ballooned out, hard and tight, and a punctured lip besides, her nose clotted with blood, and eyes but slits engorged between unsightly puffed-up purple pads. As for infant Joshua, although spared the greater brutality, on looking closely, he too bore the tell-tale marks of a hand having lashed his cheeks.

"Marita!" I said again, appalled, aching for her, unsettled at seeing her so.

She tried to speak, but her speech was slurred. It took effort to put just three words together and I couldn't make them out. She clasped between her hands the child's blond head and placated his own sobbing by grasping him to her breast. Looking on, it was not the earlier poignancy of entrapment that cried out to me here. Nor was this meet place of any kind for shooting the breeze with talk of transcendence through art, or the magical transforming powers of paint, or of rendering hallowed and holy the vulnerable and the brittle, or immortal the mortal.

More than any of these, there was horror. In both Marita's wincing and the child's still spasming sobs, there was also pain and in her batteredness, however unwonted, there was shame, and, for a moment I looked around me, scanning the room and the doorway behind, lest the agent of all this might still be about.

When I turned back, in an apparition too fanciful, too contrived, surely, to be real, with her back to the sunlight as she knelt and held her Joshua to her breast, a glow of gilded light encompassed them and, separately, aureoles of similar gold limned their heads, one dark, the other blond, as hers, the mother's beaten one, rested on his, the child's. Through the window behind them shone mote-laden sunlight out of a sky still numinously pure; the bay dotted with small boats shimmered with a glittering luminous blue of its own; the variegated garden greens, the summer vermilion, orange and lemon floral formations, the palms, the sands - all these, too, they shone, shone in one vast harmonious composite fullness such as, even with an artist's eye, I had never before yet seen.

Witness to all this - to embattled mother and child before me and a splendour and grandeur around them and beyond that opened out to possibilities to be had but for the reaching - I kneeled nearer still towards Marita and towards the child.

On its easel in my studio stood a Madonna and Child, my St Kilda Madonna as I was intending to call it. I would in time complete it and submit it, too, whether or not it carried the magic I wanted of it for the intended award.

As an artist, I had a course to follow.

But, beyond that?

What of Marita now that my work was nearly done, what of Joshua the child?

Having kneeled nearer, I reached out a hand, drew it back, reached out again.

"Marita," I said.

She looked up, focused upon me as well as her slitted puffed-out eyes allowed. I was moved by her cowed intimidated posture, her fragility, her helplessness.

"Marita," I said again.

Infant Joshua, too, now turned his head, clinging the while more firmly about Marita's neck.

I was tossed, and I was torn, caught on the horns of who knew what possible consequences.

For, if I proceeded, what consequences might ensue?

But if I did not proceed, what other consequences might then ensue?

I proceeded, venturing to lean forward still nearer, to reach out more fully, to touch, with one hand Marita's shoulder, with the other Joshua's head.

"Marita," I said a third time. "You wanted another life, you said. You wanted a better life, a cleaner life. Let me be the one to give it to you. Come away from here. Now. And the child, too. The painting isn't everything. Art may transcend reality, it may reveal the soul, and make the earthly holy and the timebound eternal. But you and Joshua are Madonna and Child in the here and now. You are of this earth and of this time. You are like mother, like child everywhere, and - Marita, Marita, if you will only trust me! - having every right to be free, to be free of... of this ugliness, this brutality, of... of this... of this death in life."

To which I added, "As artist, Marita, I can make of you a Madonna most lovely, sublime and authentic of all, but, as myself, ordinary man who cares for you, who simply cares, I can do so much, I can do so much more."

Whereupon, feeling the clean clear warmth of the afternoon's gilded glow fall through the window and enfold me in its aureole too, I leaned towards Marita and Joshua as far as I could and, praying wordlessly that, come what may, I should have the strength to see it through, embraced them with arms firm, resolute and secure.

From collection of stories *Voices from the Corner*.