

Golden Time

As Anne entered the roundabout the engine lost power, then cut out. She coasted on to the left verge and pulled up facing the house with the small studio at the back. The studio's decorative turret had always intrigued her as she drove past on the way to work. Reaching into her handbag she tried to find her phone. *Shit!* Must have left it on the kitchen bench. The ache across her forehead radiated to the back of her skull. Her eyelids felt heavy and sockets grainy. She hadn't slept well last night, had dreamt about a baby—again. Woken by the dawn light, she'd lain next to Jack's warmth, tense with discontent. He'd said they'd have to wait. For a year at least. Maybe two. She pressed her forehead hard against the coolness of the steering wheel. She'd be thirty-six next birthday.

The previous week, scrawny, clever, barely fourteen year old Rebecca, had hung back in Anne's English class, waiting for the last of her fellow students to exit before approaching her.

'I like his poems,' Rebecca had announced holding up a book of Shakespeare's sonnets. 'But I don't get some bits.' She opened the book at the third sonnet and pointed to the lines:

For where is she so fair whose unear'd womb

Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?

'I wouldn't have understood that at your age either, Rebecca.' Or even quite a few years later, Anne thought as she explained the meaning of 'unear'd', 'tillage' and 'husbandry' in the context of the poem.

'Most people worked on the land in Shakespeare's day,' she added. 'Children were their wealth. They wanted lots of them.'

'Yeah, I get it, Mrs Farrow. They needed children to look after them in their old age.'

‘Right. And work on the farm or in the family trade.’

‘Can I read you my favourite lines?’

‘Of course.’

Rebecca’s clear, serious voice filled the space between them.

‘Thou art thy mother’s glass, and she in thee

Calls back the lovely April of her prime;

So thou through windows of thine age shall see,

Despite of wrinkles, this thy golden time.’

‘I’d forgotten how wonderful those lines are,’ Anne said, suddenly filled with maternal longing.

‘My mother laughed when I read them to her. Said that all she can remember about the lovely April of *her* prime are nappy changes, 2.00am feeds and feeling tired all the time.’

‘Being a Mum *is* hard work,’ Anne replied, remembering the compact woman she’d met at the beginning of the year, who carried a very tiny baby under her right arm with matter-of-fact assurance, while holding a sturdy toddler close with her left hand and explaining that she thought her daughter needed to put more effort into Maths and Science.

‘I know Mum works really hard looking after all of us. But I still love those lines.’

‘I do too. And hearing you read them gave me goose bumps. Now go and have a break.’

Anne watched the girl open the door and enter the vortex of energy and noise that was the schoolyard. What she also recalled about Rebecca’s mother was how the silky material of her shift clung to her torso, showing its contours, still softly rounded from her recent pregnancy.

Anne unclipped the seat belt, stepped out of the car and walked up to the house. She'd ask to use the phone. She didn't want to miss the appointment she had with Rebecca's mother. Her daughter was falling back in Maths, the mother had said over the phone, and spent too much time on English. The mother wanted to take Rebecca out of the English enrichment classes.

As Anne stepped on to the veranda, a woman in dark, well-cut linen slacks and a white blouse came out of the house. She carried a briefcase and a stack of files.

Leaving for work, Anne thought. Just my luck.

'Are you from the College?' the woman asked, tilting her head in the direction of the car on the verge. 'This street is a no-parking zone.'

'My car's broken down and I've left my mobile at home,' Anne replied.

'Oh, I see. You could use our phone to ring the RAC.'

Anne looked grateful. 'Thanks. That would be a great help. But I'll call my husband first. We're only a few minutes away. He should be able to come over get the car going.'

'Go in then,' the woman said, opening the heavy, jarrah front door. 'I've got to rush. My husband will look after you. He's an artist, works at home.'

Therefore, the studio with the turret, Anne thought as she stepped into a spacious entrance at the end of which was a flight of stairs.

'Darling,' the woman called up to the next level. 'There's a young woman here whose car has broken down. She needs to use our phone.'

'Yeah, sure, send her up,' a male voice replied from above.

The woman turned to Anne. 'He's in the kitchen. Up there,' she said, pointing to the stairs. 'Must go. Bye.'

Anne was conscious of the clack of her heels on wood as she made her way upstairs. In the kitchen, the fridge door was open and a man was searching inside. On the bench was a

bowl with packet of muesli next to it. He stepped back from the fridge and closed the door, a carton of milk in his hand.

‘Hi, I’m Peter. The phone’s over there,’ he said waving the milk carton towards a small table against the wall of the broad corridor that led away from the kitchen to the rest of the house.

‘I’m Anne. Thanks so much.’

Anne called Jack. As she listened to the phone ringing in her house, she glanced at what looked like a reproduction of a Renaissance painting hanging above the phone table. The painting was of a tall, young woman in a high-waisted, sky blue dress that parted slightly under her breasts to reveal a white undergarment. She was flanked by two angels, each one holding heavy drapes. They seemed poised to draw the drapes across the pavilion in which she stood. With right hand resting on her belly and left supporting her lower back, she looked at Anne through lowered lids, her expression one of intense inward concentration. Above her braided blonde hair was a halo. Who had painted this picture of the Virgin Mary near the end of her third trimester? Anne wondered.

‘Hello, hello—’ her husband’s voice, edged with annoyance interrupted Anne’s speculation. She explained what had happened and gave him the address. He was due at work in half an hour but could make it if he came straight away. She’d probably still have to call the RAC, he said before hanging up.

Anne put down the phone and returned to the picture. The solidity of the Virgin’s body and her total self-absorption transfixed her. It was as if she were waiting for the next kick of her soon-to-be-born child, or the surge of an early contraction.

‘All OK?’ Peter’s call from the kitchen interrupted her reverie.

‘Yes, thanks. My husband will be here in a few minutes ’

She walked back to the kitchen and stood awkwardly at the end of the bench, fidgeting with car keys, while Peter swallowed a mouthful of muesli.

‘This is a huge help,’ she said. He was slight and had a crop of curly, sandy-coloured hair. His face reminded Anne of the young Brett Whiteley. ‘I’ll go and wait in the car. I’ve got an important meeting with a parent just after ten.’

‘No. Wait here.’ He pointed to a chair and smiled. ‘Please. I prefer to eat breakfast in company.’

She liked his smile. Anne propped her handbag against the base of the bench and sat down.

‘So you’re a teacher?’

‘Yes. And you’re an artist? That’s what your wife said.’

He nodded.

‘The painting above the phone—when was it painted?’

‘During the Renaissance.’

‘And the painter?’

‘Piero della Francesca. The original is in a small chapel in Monterchi, near Piero’s hometown in Tuscany. You like it?’

‘It’s extraordinary. So powerful. I feel as if I’m right there with her.’

‘It’s known as *La Madonna del Parto*. Some say Pietro wanted us to think she’s about to go into labour. That’s why the angels seem to be closing the curtains.’

‘*La Madonna del Parto*. I guessed she was the Virgin Mary. But I didn’t know she was ever painted pregnant.’

‘By quite a few painters of that era. But Piero’s Madonna is very special.’

‘It is. I feel she’s summoning all her body’s strength—for—for the future, her child’s future.’

‘That’s partly because Piero was a gifted mathematician, and based his human figures on geometric forms. But I’m sure you understand her state far better than I do.’

Anne eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. She turned away and blinked hard.

‘Forgive me,’ he said, and waited for her to turn back. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘I’m fine. Not your fault. Took me by surprise. It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately.’

‘Having a child?’

‘Yes. My husband and I, we see things differently at the moment.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry.’

Through the window above the sink, Anne saw Jack’s car pull up behind hers.

‘My husband’s arrived.’ She stood up. Peter also stood.

‘Thank you for the use of the phone,’ she said, holding out her hand. He took it with both hands and held it.

‘And, for Piero’s *Madonna del Parto*,’ she added, when he released her hand.

Jack was waiting by the driver’s door. She handed him the keys. He tried to start the car, without success. He peered at the instrument panel.

‘Out of petrol,’ he said.

Anne felt foolish. ‘Didn’t think to check. Thought you said you’d filled it up yesterday.’

‘No,’ he replied, closing the car door with more force than Anne thought was necessary. ‘Yesterday, I reminded *you* to get petrol.’

‘Must have been distracted. Sorry.’

Jack ignored Anne’s response and strode to his car. He came back carrying a jerry can and a large, red funnel.

‘This’ll give you enough petrol to get started.’ he said, unscrewing the fuel cap, inserting the funnel and pouring in the petrol. ‘Start the engine to be sure everything’s fine.’

Anne got into the car. The engine coughed, then hummed into action.

Jack came to the driver’s door, bent down and kissed her dutifully on the cheek.

‘Don’t forget to fill up. At the nearest petrol station.’

In the rear vision mirror, Anne watched Jack carefully place the jerry can and funnel in the boot and slam the lid shut. She closed her eyes as the engine revved and opened them when she heard the squeal of tyres as he sped away.

As she pushed the clutch into first gear, she glanced towards the house. Peter was on the veranda, waving and holding up her handbag. She put the gears back into neutral and her foot on the brake. He walked down to her. Anne held out her hand for the bag, smiling apologetically.

‘Seems to be my day for forgetting. Sorry!’

‘You have a lot on your mind. A parent meeting, for one thing.’

Anne smiled. ‘Yes, that too!’

‘Besides, I wanted to give you a small gift.’ He handed her a postcard.

Anne gazed at *La Madonna del Parto*, resplendent between heavy curtains held by angels.

‘I remembered I had it from when we visited Monterchi. I’d really like you to have it.’

She held the postcard close and looked up at Peter. ‘Thank you. Thank you so much.’

‘I hoped it would please you.’

‘You can’t imagine how much.’ Anne lifted the postcard and kissed the hand resting on the *Madonna’s* belly. ‘And what strength it gives me.’

‘Then hold tightly on to that.’ He squeezed her hand hard. ‘Take care and good luck.’

Anne watched him walk towards the veranda. She kissed the *Madonna* again before slipping the postcard into her bag. Then she engaged the clutch and pressed down on the accelerator. She'd show the postcard of the *Madonna* to Rebecca's mother and tell her how Piero's hobby was writing books on mathematics and geometry. And read that third sonnet to Jack, sometime soon.

Rita Tognini