

Kingfisher

By Adair Broughton

The windows were grey, opaque with dust and time. An accumulation of the dirt from fumes and city pollution now hid anything within from prying eyes, but it mattered little as there was nothing within. It reminded him of when he looked through the window of the women's house only to realise she had gone from his life.

The man moved his sharp features away from his ghostly reflection; the thin mist caused by warmth from invisible breath shrank rapidly into nothingness. He stepped back and looked down at the key in his hand. Recently he had come to the realisation that having this shop was what he had always wanted, to have his own identity and something to focus his attention and dedicate his roaming energy too. He had felt alive but empty for so long. There was a lot to accomplish.

He pushed his hood back, like a monk facing reality for the first time. He slowly pushed the key into the lock, taking his time, trying to make the moment meaningful, knowing this was as much about the past as it was the future. How long did the present actually last? What bordered it? If time were a measure of change then the turning key in his hand would be like winding up a ticking clock. An end was about to begin.

The old bookshop had been abandoned for some unspecified time hence dust and emptiness was now the prevailing view. He had made one previous visit weeks before, to acknowledge that the shop was adequate and to agree the purchase that same day. It had surprised him that in the buoyant market it was still cheap and had not been purchased earlier. It was possible the amount of work needed would put people off. It was not for him to worry or care why others did not want the premises. He could cope with hard work; maybe that was the reason he had brokered a special price. He had focus, knew he would feel satisfaction when the work was complete. Other people wanted convenience. This benefited him by keeping the price at the lowest cost he could highly afford.

The door was stiff from infrequent use and seasons warping wood. He pushed a little harder, making a mental note to bring a tool next time he came so that he could fix the door. The stiffness gave way, the noise a sigh of relief. His own exhale surprised him. What was there to be tense about? A stone trapped between the door and the floor made a grating noise as it pushed open, scratching thoughts into his brain as it polished the floor with a minute piece of geology.

It echoed inside, reminding him of a church when he was young and his mother's heels as she walked him round holding his hand. Her hands were so big then, forceful and protective, more so than the cathedral. When she died he remembered thinking of her hands, how small they had become, the wrinkles lying about her age. She had still ruffled his hair and he remembered how cold her hands had felt. Since then, those big dark-echoing cathedrals of faith had made him edgy and nervous. If God had said 'let there be light' why were churches and cathedrals always so dark? He didn't want that memory now. He would give this workplace character. This was, after all, his genesis.

Inside was dark and musty. Only the faintest shards of light could pierce the glass, creating crawling shadows as people walked past the window; little angels of beauty too small to make a difference in the dark world but offering moments of magnificence. They were exotic butterflies of light beating their silent wings in golden fleeting flame.

He flicked the light switch but nothing happened except an audible click. He should have purchased some bulbs but there was time for that later and the rush of excitement about holding the key had banished a deeper reflection of what would be useful this day. It was a short visit only; to get his bearings, to create a list of required jobs and consolidate the belief the shop was really his to own and work in. Just by being there, smelling the dusty air and listening to each sharp noise had done that.

It was surprising how something so small could accentuate noise and echo so loudly. He picked up the small shard of stone and placed it in his pocket. He would polish the tiles to help the floor forget its minor scars.

The shelves were bare except for two books, probably abandoned in a sad haste rather than a mournful malaise. It was as if the room was cleared in a hurry. People slowly arrived but always left quickly when it came to business; the opposite of life he thought. Cut your losses and run. That was a motto he did not want to follow anymore. He looked at his hand and decided he preferred flight anyway. He stroked the tattoo then shook his head as if a thought occurred but had to be dismissed.

He often thought about those beginnings, of cells duplicating and multiplying in the womb. That incubation of nine months gave everyone time to prepare, to celebrate in the joyousness of a life being born. Death was an unknown; even for the terminally ill they could never know the day or what it meant or what was to be. Why couldn't there be nine months of acceptance which ended in a 'disappearance into death' but also a celebration for that transfer from life. They were two opposite ends to the same journey. Why couldn't they be thought of in the same way? His thoughts were about wanting something more than the false happiness present in some wakes, suggested comments about how the deceased would have wanted 'this' or how they would be missed.

At other times he thought life should be lived on the edge. Having those unknowns was what kept an interest, uniqueness. What made everybody act differently ultimately produced colour in the world. There was no answer to this duality. It was lucky the burden of thought had recently changed to one of action, change motivated by memory, by the girl on the streetcar and with acceptance of a mystery. That was why he was here now, in this dead bookshop.

There was sadness mixed in with the mustiness that had been given nowhere to escape. He could imagine the bookshop years ago, its daily silence, apart from the random rustle of pages and smell. He thought of the old people perusing yellowing pages with all the time in the world while they had so little of it left. Images sprinkled his mind, wrinkled fingers and faces that took a break from the page to raise their head and look out the window at all the young people rushing by outside who actually did have the time. Aching limbs were a burden of proof for that unfair paradox that

people slowed in relation to how they aged. Why was it youth rushed around while the old wait patiently for times passage? Life was upside down.

Maybe that image was wrong, but he could close his eyes and his senses would become overloaded with imagination blended with presumption that would take him to this earlier place he had never seen, stereotypes engulfing common sense. Those few books represented shelves and shelves of literature that people had not wanted anymore. Why had those two books been left when thousands of other books had been taken? And what had happened to all the other books that had been on the shelves unwanted as orphans of lost potential. Books could change lives. He knew his 'service' would do that too. He hadn't even noticed them when he had decided to buy the place.

He walked over to the inked lovers nestled together. The low light and dusty atmosphere reminded him of a bad fog of loneliness. Today was not the day for tidying someone else's rejected word but he brushed his hand over the thick sheet of dust that covered the top book. He still couldn't see the title but he could see the book was old, the thickness of the hardcover the biggest clue. Where did all the dust come from? Was it mostly deadly skin like he had been told when he was young? He sneezed and without looking at what the books were he placed them under his arm and walked from the shop, carefully locking the creaking door.

The day he had first made a visit to the 'shop' he had asked why the previous owner had closed down the bookshop but no informative response was given. 'Unable to make the repayments' was the only detail divulged by the agent, nonchalantly, uncaring as to whether he made the sell. Maybe the enthusiasm for this property had gone with its prior owner. The man wanted to change that. But what other answer had he expected. People make so much money they sell to move on to bigger things or people make so little cash they have to sell anyway.

He would have more luck with his shop than the last owner; there was a genuine need for his product, a need based in vanity that rarely waned but only changed form as style directed fashion that filtered down into a feeling of need on the street. Some would argue that nothing could have begun without the history of decorating the body. He had heard it was a Eurasian practice since Neolithic times; maybe as a means of being nearer to nature or a God, for intimidation in battle or war or to entice a partner. It had become more common in his western culture, even while he was alive.

To him, it had become something more than art, something bigger than helping people look or feel good. He was engaging his soul in what he did. His was a long-term commitment and investment that people had to keep for a long time; not like a book that is read once and generally forgotten. It was something sharp and sudden and with bite but it lasted years rather than moments and the scar was often beautiful.

People's lives were soaked in modernity, the need for newness and cleanliness evaporating common sense and frugality. People could not be coerced into wanting word, it was with them or it wasn't. His art was direct; it would become part of them in ways even they would not have guessed.

Strangely, he always felt books were for people with imagination rather than those without. Why were books read mainly by the people who did not need to be fed their thoughts? He wasn't sure if it was a strange irony or a simple twist to the tale. In other ways books were catalysts to what was unreal; the books he read at least. Those with imaginations could paint the story themselves, absorb word and produce action and colour and empathy with characters. He missed that.

He had stopped reading. He had found something different, something he would never have believed, not even in a book. From then a change occurred, and something even now he was trying to comprehend. It was like he had become an author himself, he could not imagine the story because he was living it and creating it. It was like reading a book but not understanding the words, formulating the story from the formation of the sentences and the look of the paragraphs.

Bit by bit it was like he was stepping into a picture where all the surroundings were hazy. There was a semblance of colour and order and knowledge of what the picture was but he could manipulate everything within it, subtly changing the painting to his ideal, rewriting the words. He had been given the characters to build with but no script to follow. As a writer he was missing a key analogy.

He felt this now. Previously it had only slowly and gradually dawned on him that he was influencing reality outside of the inanimate. He was influencing his surroundings with something he had touched but more than that, directing and coercing existence outside of what was natural, normal or even needed. People could alter the future; of course they could, but only in certain ways, with actions or decisions that could influence. This was why it was hard for him to understand because how people affect our environments is limited by the boundaries imposed by physics or social requirements or legality. This was beyond that, as if he could smooth over space-time and free his own ideas and thoughts into the open but without physical contact, without manipulating through coercion of speech or action. How did a person even get to grips with that?

At first, even with this information he knew he was blind to something and had dismissed it, thinking himself naïve or arrogant or even strange that it could be true. Yet what was more real than one's own experience, one's feelings or intuition? Consistency always drowned common sense and pride. The shop was acting out a possibility and had only happened as soon as he had marked himself, had put a tattoo on his hand. It was just ink; just a tattoo of a kingfisher yet so much had changed because of it.

There were links to an invisible chain that bounded him to other people and as yet he did not know why. Why him? Why me? This was the question that everybody asked at some point in their lives? He had begun to question a lot of things about his life.

He saw the bookshop as a dying man, a forgotten relative, so much information and knowledge lost to insouciant calamity for something that could never be reached. The world had drifted from the warmth of analogue to the precise coolness of digital. He missed vinyl records, he missed lots of things, but he knew in his art that he still brokered dreams.

His art of the tattoo was simple, if only for the fact that it could be seen in seconds and understood. It was instantaneous. Opinions formed rightly or wrongly but what he wanted and knew he could achieve was something longer lasting, something good he could help create and influence. He remembered the girl on the streetcar, he had positioned his hand so she would see the tattoo but still she hadn't made sense of it or at least gave clues of acknowledgment. It was then that he knew it had not been her or some apparition of her, a daughter or a young sister or even the woman herself. She had reminded him so much of that other woman that he had felt a need to sit near her, for her to talk to him. He had become confused and perplexed by the similarities but he knew the age difference was reality, not imagination. With all that he had realised lately, maybe, just maybe it wasn't inconceivable that the girl was the same woman who he had painted for.

Silence was the only voice she gave and he accepted the inevitable. She had made up his mind. He was on his own; there were no clues or help left. It was an uncanny resemblance, uncannily so, but that is all it was.

He would miss the girl on the streetcar but he had to categorise her separately, keep her in a special place, move on and begin taking charge of his destiny. It disappointed him that she did not recognise the tattoo or see any significance with it. He was wrong to have presumed, and for a short while he returned to thinking it was all in his mind, that there was no special gift or reason for how his life had recently panned out. She could be the stranger he would always think about without knowing why, she would be the special person he never got to know. Everybody needed somebody like that. Everyone needed the hidden dream and the distant princess who showed a possibility stuck in the quicksand of impossibility. For now he had other things on his mind.

It was like he was escaping before he was trapped. It was like he was showering in shards of glass rather than water.

People's jump into the modernity did not drown out the desire to tarnish their bodies with ink and art. The needle was clean, sharp and distinctive; an event that showed people they could still rebel could still strike out against what was pure. There was enough pain to make it cool but not enough to put people off. It was fashion. More and more people wanted their bodies worked upon. The tattoos were lasting statements that broke up the smooth curves and lines of bodies as people fled their daily lives to weekend bars and clubs or as they walked with attentive poise down beaches or stripped naked for lovers to pounce.

The tattoo had at least as much history as the written word. Patterns and inks had dominated early societies. The tattoo was a statement for the outside world without harming anything internal. Was it a message that the body needed to be read? Often they were placed in areas that couldn't be seen by the self, so they were flags of attention for those who shared intimacy. On some they were visual displays of aggression designed to intimidate. Tattoos meant different things to different people but they became part of the body and therefore self. Having a tattoo meant willingness for change and an acceptance that the body was not eternal. The tattoo was both a signature and a watermark as well as a more vivid statement.

It was not a drug but they could become addictive. Yet he wanted something sparse to give to people, something engaging without ostentation. He would choose carefully about who he helped. He would need to feel a bond, something he could work with and nurture. He wasn't just placing a colour on a person's body. This would change their lives. He would reject more than he would accept. Money, he hoped, would not be an issue.

In many ways what he had was priceless. He had been living in the underground, too scared of his 'talent' even though bad things were not happening because of it. He believed in balance and it took a long time to reject the idea that he was not wasting something valuable. If he could do good, even though good did not seem to be a perfect description of what was happening, then did somebody have the ability to do bad things? He could not compare like with like. He realised he saw bad actions everyday, just more directly, and that was only the ones he could see. It had taken time to separate what he had from a subjective feeling of distaste in being able to manipulate.

He had not even believed the women when she said he had a rare talent that was dangerously attractive and with her disappearance he had closed off that part of his life for some time, refusing to think about it or even her. He had been glad of the respite. Looking back had he forced her to leave? Had something happened to her because of him?

Before this he had been a street artist, painting on sidewalks for small change, and even that work had evolved from his higher impact 'street art' created and evolving simultaneous to friendships. Every alleyway had his tag. Nobody knew him outside of that small group of people but he often heard his name mentioned on the subway or streetcar as some of his bigger works were noticed by friends telling friends. He never even smiled to himself, gave no information to anyone that he was the tag. His friends upheld that anonymity as he did theirs. It felt meaningless in some ways, so why did he do it if not for the recognition. Often he submerged himself with alleyways late into the night on his own. He liked that solitude with danger.

His youth was spent caring about this street art more than schooling. He stopped going to school, his mum's death an excuse he needed. The sadness something separate, held within with no exposure to the outside world. The years became weeks that coalesced into days. As the group lost numbers, those same friends he was closest too began staying in, working on schoolwork then getting girlfriends, painting passion rather than walls. College exams forced ponder and worry and time became something exclusive that pushed away the ties to the recent past. He had continued with his art, without direction, without falling for the impulse to gain recognition.

He had sensed that he was the stable one, that he wasn't the drifter. It was them that had drifted from their ideals. He had stayed the same by fracturing responsibility. That stubbornness was as powerful to him as wrinkles were to others.

He had made some money. Choosing less pedestrian parts of town he could make just enough to still be at home. Did his art mean more the less people saw of it? This had become his routine and somehow he had become an adult. But over time rain had become a burden. Sometimes it could rain for a week with only short breaks in

between. The days were few when it didn't rain and the pavement became dry enough for his work. Within a small time his creations would be washed away with the incessant fall of water, rarely worn away by people's feet as he had imagined them to be. He had liked the slowly fading end to his work. Like life, things were important because they were transient.

Then the woman had come, commissioned him to do some work in her studio. It was only then that the strange occurrences happened and even then, they were not direct or obvious. He felt a change was happening inside him, a change occurring that was outside of normal feelings of getting to know or beginning to like somebody. He didn't think it was love; there was attraction but not love. He felt he was charmed. She had stood over him, watching him. He was not easily unnerved back then, he felt himself at one with the street. He felt he knew the people and who to avoid but he could not see past this woman's eyes into her soul. She was the one he never figured but she was no threat. She calmed him, made him feel he belonged. He just didn't know what to.

He remembered thanking her for the work indoors, especially as it was nearing the chill of winter. He thought about her indifference to a lot of what he said but equally her unbridled passion for his work. What was she seeing in him that he never could? He had tried to find a reason for her interest at first because she seemed to know exactly what she wanted by not specifying what that was.

She talked to him about work, offering advice teaching him about different styles, initiating ideas that he didn't know were ideas until she had left forever. She would ask him to sketch things and provide comment and she would state things about his work that he had not realised but could see were true. She criticized him with coercion that he would only realise in hindsight. There were many phrases, when he looked back, that suggested the art's interaction with real life. He had missed the analogies at the time.

Often he had thought she had left her apartment because it was so quiet but he would turn round and see her watching him. It did not unnerve him. She would walk towards him, brush by him, a delicate touch of air and nothing more than a whisper above silence, atoms tickling each other for fun. At the time it tormented him to arousal. He was attracted to her, her brown hair soft and long, shining with softness but he knew she never spent any time on it. She never flicked it from her face but it never seemed to get in her way. At some moments he would swap the world for one kiss.

Often he couldn't concentrate because of her presence, but she gave no recognition. He felt as light and as fragile as a leaf in autumn. Winter never fails to appear. He went to her apartment to finish off the painting. It had taken a while but in some ways he was glad of that time. It made it priceless, personal, as if he had poured himself into it and not be coloured by judgement. It meant he had spent a lot of time with her. They had created the piece together but he had made each stroke, adding to the canvas the blood from her mind.

No answer from her door became a knocking that echoed into the subsequent week. He would have cried if he knew how too. He looked through the two windows but everything had gone. Emptiness expanded from the room and engulfed him.

He had lost sleep as well as her. His spirit had felt as vacuous as the room. She hadn't paid him the full amount of money owed, a brief reference when they first agreed but it wasn't that which had upset him, it was the silent goodbye. The canvas was gone too, so at least she had some memory of him. It had needed little work to finish; all those days and weeks had taken shape, all the colours and vibrancy creating the effulgent bird that he had previously not known about, the kingfisher. The shimmering colours reflected life and the canvass shone like it was made of liquid jewels. But no last goodbye was what hurt the most. It hurt so much it had destroyed his passion for what he was doing.

This was not the sorrow of lovers disentangled from romance or companionship. The relationship was without skin on skin or lips on lips. Even though he was attracted to her it was about losing the communication they had, of someone taking an interest in him, teaching him but not smothering him with thought on the future or pressure of wanting what couldn't be given.. He had wanted freedom in his life and she had given it to him and now he was upset because of it. How was he to understand that?

His concern melted into solitude and he did no art for nearly two years. Late nights, cigarettes, computer games and a six month job packing boxes at a warehouse became his life. He never spoke to anyone so they got rid of him, the easiest one to lay-off. Nothing really mattered. Nobody kept his interest like she had done. He hated life's cliché that there was no one else like her.

He had the house from when his mother died. There were always a few coins to buy food. His only struggle was finding a reason to wake.

It had taken months to realise he was depressed. He rode the streetcar pretending he had somewhere to go. Staring out the window, watching life pass gave him at least a feeling that he was embedded within it. He was the cat that would sit on the windowsill for hours, engaged in the world but looking composed and reflective, all the time with the knowledge that the calmness belied the power and devastating claw that could be sprung at any time.

He decided to forget all about the women and the way she had just left or disappeared. He started a course at night on tattoos and found he could master the delicacy of charming skin with colour and pattern, gaining experience with each cartoon character or animal he was asked to do. It was a different thing entirely painting on the animate.

He still rode the streetcar at different times but mainly during the night. One morning he was lying in bed awake after not sleeping at all. Time has passed but his only sense of motion was the odd shadows that streetlights performed on his ceiling when clouds passed overhead. Slowly the room lightened signifying dawn. He tried to yawn but failed, he was just not tired at all. It was as if there was nothing in his mind except the darkness gradually getting lighter.

Something had been on his mind, a block to sleep but he felt blank and unable to reason what it was. He dressed himself and just stepped out of the house without an idea of what he would do. He walked onto the streetcar and saw the girl, a younger reflection of the woman who had left him. Too dumbfounded to speak, almost

thinking he must still be dreaming, he had sat next to her. That night he had his reason why he could not sleep.

This pattern repeated itself but he found he could not sleep at all, his body was aching, and his mind almost melting with the few moments of rest it could catch at intermittent times during the day. Only early on did he miss catching the same car. It was a small piece of routine he liked and looked forward to.

Was he not sleeping because of this new girl or because of the stories that were building up around his tattoos?

People came back to him, telling him about little stories that all seemed related to the tattoo. He had contacted old friends, offered them one for free so he could practice. They came back to him with little stories and quirky happenings all related to the tattoo he had given.

With the first few he took no notice knowing many strange things in life were just coincidence or luck that seemed mysterious but were not. It built up, gathered pace and he soon knew it was each and every one he had created. Something wasn't right, but what?

He remembered conversations with the women as they had both stared at the blank canvass. She had kept him there, paid him for the day telling him it didn't matter that nothing was on the canvass yet.

"The mind is blank" she said. "Look at what you can already do."

"What do you mean?"

She walked away and he had sat there not sure what to create or begin. He had shaken his head the first time he left her apartment, thinking how strange she was, but he liked the idea of using canvass and being indoors. Now that it was raining so much he had no real choice.

She had never spoken of her history, he would ask a question and there would be no answer. There wasn't an uncomfortable silence, just no answer. He wanted to ask her if it had been him that was remembering wrongly that it never used to rain so much. When he had asked people they insisted it always rained and they looked at him as if he was a foreigner. She had just shrugged her shoulders as if the question was an irrelevance.

Now all that time later it seemed to rain more than ever. But just recently, since he had purchased the shop it had been dry. Within two weeks dust was even swirling in the street. He felt something ominous about it, which was strange, how nice weather, hot weather could induce that feeling.

The first person who came to him had wanted to get another because it had brought him so much luck. The friend enthused about how he had met a woman in a bar who had commented on the tattoo. Now they were engaged. He smiled at that but hardly

registered the relevance of the tattoo. To him a sudden engagement like that seemed naïve

More friends came and days later would each come back with a story about their particular tattoo. Another wanted a tattoo of their dog that had gone missing months before, a reminder. As soon as they had gone home that night it was on the doorstep, its tongue out and panting and its tail wagging.

They were all insignificant but bit by bit he felt it strange they would come back and tell him this news as if they were surprised also. This soon became a burden to him but each time he created a tattoo he couldn't help think about what would happen next.

For this reason he began to add small things to the tattoo to see if they would be mentioned in the stories. Friends had told friends and now he did not know a lot of the people he spent time with so his thoughts were without bias. It took longer but the people would come back and although not directly relevant to their own story they wanted to tell, they did mention what he had added. It was all integrated. He was changing things by his designs.

He knew enough of science for his doubt to last a long time. He was sceptical, refusing to believe even in the face of direct observation. He felt the shop would bring him down to earth, the professionalism a reason to wake him from the dream denial of impossibility. It was just impossible for a tattoo to influence its surroundings in that way. Yet the evidence....

He entered his apartment and placed the two books down next to the seat. He sat in the seat not caring the books were still dusty. He blew away the dust and wiped the front cover with his hand. The book just said 'Art'. He smiled at the weird coincidence that was becoming as regular in his life as breathing.

He opened it slowly but the first page was blank. As he turned each one he found the same thing every time. Blank. It reminded him of that original canvass he had started in the woman's house.

Picking up the second book he did not even bother to wipe the dust away. He allowed it to fall on his lap, opening as it did so. More blank pages stared at him. He knew what it would say if he looked at the front, 'Mind'. He let it rest there and closed his eyes. The confusion had become as smooth and as chilling as ice. Hairs stood up on his neck and a shiver wracked his body. It soon past, like ice to water, that chill became a smile.

He could rationalise it by asking himself who would want to keep books with blank pages. That was the reason they were left there. It was the title of the books that made this more than just a chance find. It was directly relevant to him. It made him realise something else. That maybe it was the woman who had this power and not him. He had thought he was photoshoping reality but maybe all along he had been engaging in her game, in her reality.

What was it she had told him once, that she wanted to invent an ink that contains visualisation stimulus that could affect the brain. He had thought of it like LSD for the eyes rather than swallowing some pill or piece of acid lined paper. Yet it was him who had tested what he could do, had noticed the strange stories. None of this had happened until she had left. She could not know what materials or medium of art he would use next.

He cleaned the books, placing them on the bottom of his shelf; a cheap Buddha he had found in a thrift store sat on top them.

She would not affect his success at the shop. It was still what he needed to focus his attention on, independent of the strange interference she appeared to be creating. It wasn't like any of this frightened him.

He placed an advert in a local paper, a few lines hidden beneath classifieds of people searching for hope more than love. He had the reputation of his friends but he had kept the shop quiet, wanting its reputation to build slowly so he could choose more discreetly about who he would tattoo.

He sat at the desk, looking round at the sparse walls with some of his designs on. He had seen people walk past, occasionally stop to see what type of shop it was but then carry on. He had removed the solemn aura from the bookshop but maybe some hidden atmosphere was evident that he couldn't extinguish yet. The morning became afternoon and he decided to place another tattoo on his opposite hand but in the same area as the first.

It would heal soon but he could already see the outline. He wasn't even sure why he had done it, the shadow of a woman carrying two books. He knew who it really was; the women from the streetcar.

With that recognition he heard the door to his shop open.