

O C A S O P R E S S : A N O V E L

All the Bright
Contagions



Colin Holcombe

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by Colin Holcombe

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ALL THE BRIGHT CONTAGIONS

—A NOVEL—

Colin Holcombe

CHAPTER ONE

I worked some more colour into the background until the phone rang a third time.

‘Ah, there you are’, said my dealer. ‘You remember the lunch we talked about? Well, I have Mrs Stumpfl with me now. Shall we say one thirty?’

So it had come back, one of those advances that were always threatening the little sandcastles I built to women’s charms.

‘So that’s a yes, is it, old boy?’ he continued.

‘Reg, I spent the whole weekend there. Toured the estate, admired the pictures, did everything

needed, but not once did a commission come up. There's a living to earn, and if Sir Richard's portrait isn't finished on time—as the secretary keeps ringing to tell me—there will be blood on the moon.'

'Then we've good news for you.' The voice broadened into sunny cordiality, and over the phone came a picture of the scene at the Cope Street Gallery. Reg Ecclestone with green tie under crumpled corduroy suit, glasses pushed up over a great dome of a head, probably lunging about the desk, waving the receiver in the air. Opposite would be Mrs Stumpfl, her neat figure dressed in something from Stehle or Catherine Walker. I can give you the jottings. A suave Russian beauty, controlled in her movements, with brilliant, grey-blue eyes that seemed larger than their surroundings. Heinrich Stumpfl got the same treatment, though with less approval: the travelled executive with the smooth manners, the frizzled hair thinning and scraped back.

That's what came to me as we sat at table: the Stumpfls, an MP acquaintance and an American couple staying the night. Natalie Stumpfl was poised and correct, that shimmering body hardly belonging to its dress. Heinrich Stumpfl was politely affable, like a Swiss banker with important clients, leaving his wife to arrange the seating and lead the conversation. I was intrigued, but also annoyed as the evening wore on and there was still no talk of a commission. Reg's bullying rankled, though I hadn't been looking forward to another stay with Christine's parents, which the weekend was replacing.

Of course I should have done more research when Stumpfl's name drew a blank on my library shelves, and taken my chances when asked to explain the Daily Telegraph's snooty review of my last show. I only smiled, however, and said that was journalism for you, at which our American friend thumped the table and exclaimed, 'Hell, that was right: these newspaper men didn't know a damn thing.' We laughed and talked about the

shipping business, new regulations from Europe, and their Bermuda holidays, while silently, all the time, I felt the exotic Mrs Stumpfpl was weighing me up with a professional innocence.

Perhaps these recollections detained me, as I was late getting to the restaurant, but on giving Reg's and then the gallery's name, I saw Natalie Stumpfpl sat at a table for two. 'Reg not joining us?' I said, taking the napkin from the waiter and filling our glasses.

'No', she said, the expression holding me at a distance. 'Is that difficult for you?'

'Not at all. Delighted to see you, Mrs Stumpfpl.'

She looked at me for a moment, and then went back to the menu.

'So you've been shopping', I said when the waiter had taken our orders.

‘Just a jacket and a belt.’ She reached for the shiny bag at her feet. ‘Something for one of Heinrich’s conferences.’

‘This season’s colours should suit you.’

She replaced the bag, and looked at me carefully. ‘Is that what you usually do, Mr Staunton? Start by advising women on their appearance?’

‘For a commission I often have to. What did you have in mind?’

‘No. That would be something else.’

I toyed with the glass. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘this is going to be difficult, but perhaps I should say I’d be only too pleased to paint your portrait. A captivating face, but not easy to get.’

‘My likeness you are talking about?’

‘The inner likeness. Faces are what we show to the world, but the truth is more difficult. Long pencil studies, careful squaring up and then the utmost patience.’

'Not the artist's response, what he feels towards the sitter?'

Of course that's the essence, the manners and personality of the whole body to be conveyed in a few features, but the obvious was escaping me as I breezed on. 'Tedious hours of sitting by you, and a large bill from me. Frankly, I'd do it for nothing, for the simple pleasure of painting you, but that's not being professional. Or sensible from your point of view.'

She looked down, as though swallowing her thoughts, but I drew the last bolts across. 'Now, Mrs Stumpfl, you know what we're talking about. If you'd wanted to commission something you should have discussed it when I was up at your place a couple of months ago. Or at least with my dealer present. No doubt I'm adding two and two to make five, but a private tête-à-tête causes misunderstandings, with outsiders, and the parties concerned. Crass of me to mention it, but all I undertake is portraits to the best of my ability.'

'Portraits. I see.' The voice was detached and colourless. 'Not the "Christine Sitting: Study Number Three" I bought?'

'Ah, one of my life studies. I'd forgotten Reg had those. For your husband?'

'Your model is beautiful, is she not?'

'Professional.'

I'd swear I could see the thoughts working in the interval, but I was wrong. 'Mr Staunton,' she said, 'your private life does not concern me. My task was to find out who we would be dealing with. That is why I arranged this meeting, which you have read too much into, though your looks and charm get a lot of unwanted attention, I expect.'

To say that I felt aggrieved is to underestimate my annoyance. I was now without a script, as if I'd blundered on to the stage in the wrong production and stood blinking at the lights. More than clumsy, I felt ashamed, as though I'd been caught in an act

of gross public indecency. 'Then I owe you an apology. Inexcusable of me.'

The mouth opened, and she almost laughed. 'No, that is too much. Could you not call me Natalie? If I can call you Patrick.'

'Just as you like.'

'Well of course I have no designs on your virtue. You have your way to make in a world that depends on contacts and recommendations. That speaks for itself.'

I didn't reply.

'Though no woman's going to be insulted to learn that she can still turn heads', she continued. 'In her own particular way, I am saying.'

I wondered how far she'd push this nonsense, but the voice suddenly dropped its playfulness. 'So we must talk about Botes. How did you find the house?'

Familiar ground. However little I may have learned about the rich, this I did know, and had prepared a few compliments, even for the Stumpfls' place, which seemed odd. You went down a steep drive from the electrified gateway, through parkland and trees, and then, half hidden in the wooded hollow, saw an extended Jacobean facade, genuine, and all that survived the waggish attentions of some nineteenth-century restorer. Natalie Stumpfl was expecting more than the usual banalities, of course, and I said, 'Botes Manor? Striking exterior, of course. And the inside . . .'

'It is an empty shell, I know.'

'It could do with some personal touches, but it's an office as well. Your husband works from home, doesn't he?'

'You are good', she said, smiling at last, the first unaffected smile I'd seen of hers. 'I am not a worldly creature, as my husband will tell you, but I did finish my courses. In Moscow and in Paris.'

'A reference to my Oxford years. Well, I accept the admonishment.'

'Patrick, what is the trouble? We are at Botes again. All the time I was trying to bring you out and you put me down. Here is the famous Patrick Staunton, I thought, the up-and-coming portrait painter, the gangling figure with his enthusiasms and his good opinion of himself. Heinrich found you entertaining, but to me you seemed a fraud.'

The conversation was taking a familiar turn, but I put on a mournful expression, heavy with personal injury. She stopped, and looked exasperated. 'Well, that is what I thought. Wrong, but understandable, I think.'

'Well, I'm sorry to hear that, because I really took to you. From the moment you held out your hand and made the introductions.'

'I tried.' The silence continued, but I could afford to wait. 'Yes,' she continued, 'perhaps I have spo-

ken out of . . . not well. Rather rudely, Mr Staunton . . . Excuse me.'

'Mrs Stumpfl, Natalie, I'm a painter, without expertise in anything else. If someone wants my opinion I say what everybody else says. If that makes me evasive or patronizing or sycophantic then no doubt I am. Painting is all I understand, and not even that sometimes. Whatever you learned in art courses, I see it only as a practical skill, nothing different from plastering or playing golf.'

Gingerly she took the line. 'I did take a course, yes. I wrote a dissertation. How did you know that?'

'Nothing unusual, and no harm done, provided you understand that writing is not painting.' I gave her a magnanimous smile, but Natalie Stumpfl had lost her self-possession, and was looking at the tablecloth. Seconds ticked past. She opened and rearranged the handbag again. I could see the warm skin tightening over the collarbones, spreading under the lapels of the bouclé jacket, and the gleaming curves of the lashes, their vitality almost

tangible. I was in no hurry, and had now stopped transferring skin tones to paint, imagining only that fragrant body in its neat clothes.

She looked up, her eyes inches from mine. 'You are laughing at me! You are, aren't you?'

'At this little comedy, Natalie. You are very pretty when you frown.'

The sharp tap she gave my hand came with a sudden girlishness that was enchanting, and then unsettling. I tried not to look at the pink nails, or the small teeth that opened to take the slices of fruit. Do not get involved, I said silently, repeating it over and over as Natalie Stumpfl laid out her plans for the commission. There was a whole year of work. Portraits of Natalie and her husband, formal full-length pieces, and a couple of small character studies. Fine, fine, I said. And some landscapes, views of the house and perhaps some interiors. Why not? I said with careless imbecility: not my speciality but I was sure to cope. Each stage drew Natalie closer, more candid and confiding. It was a

long-cherished plan of hers. Whatever arrangements suited me would be fine for them. My social commitments in London, my once a week class at the adult education centre: they were understood. The work could be exhibited, yes, of course. As we left the restaurant, I was not so much drugged with happiness as transfixed by danger. She asked what we could do now. There was a moment of deep longing, and then the sharpest awakening. I was penniless, without social credentials, and had on my arm the wife of someone rich enough to end my career.

‘Some shopping?’ I said.

‘We are not going to see something? You have talked so much about artists.’

‘Exactly. You’ve had enough of my prating.’

She stopped. ‘That was different. You came down the stairs, you said good morning and you went straight to our Kustodiev in the corner. I like the picture, but no one else has heard of him.’

'Boris was good enough in his way.'

'I know. And what you said was true.'

'Well then.'

'Because I was angry. The night before you treat me like a simpleton, and now you are playing games. That is why I walked out.'

'What was the point? No one else in your place cared about painting. I didn't think you did until I saw the Kustodiev and then the Serov. It was a peace-offering.'

'Patrick, I have had two months to know that.' Her fingers tightened on my arm. 'You don't understand? I wanted you as a friend. I built up these hopes, and then you walked in and dashed them. Why are you so unapproachable?'

'Shall we try the National Gallery?' The word 'friend' caught me short of breath as we climbed the stairs to the entrance and pushed through the revolving door.

‘So where do we start?’ said Natalie. ‘The Impressionists?’

‘Bit crowded usually.’

‘Not aristocratic enough?’

‘Natalie, none of the best art of this century has been painted for a social elite. An intellectual or political one, yes, but not one that stresses good manners, tolerance and a detachment from life.’

‘So why did you not accept our Moscow invitation? We could have opened doors.’

‘Because you weren’t being serious.’

‘And you had not told Christine.’ She swung round. ‘Is that not true?’

‘Very likely. Let’s try the Venetians.’

She took the stairs, and I followed her into a room that looked airless this weekday afternoon. Sometimes paintings will blaze into speech, but now they seemed only repositories of craft, what

painters discuss and understand. Occasionally Natalie called me over and I explained how the work had evolved, the successes and the patchings over. Carried away with these expositions, I wasn't thinking when I added, 'Some things can be perfect. Wouldn't say you were too far off it.'

She shot me a surprised glance, but was smiling again. 'The Titian you do not like?'

'Lived too long. Around him all kinds of wonderful things were being done, but his hands weren't up to it. Of course our demented critics have praised the freedom and spontaneity of the work, but it's only rather sad.'

'Is that what you are afraid of?'

'Some were prodigiously gifted to the end. Tiepolo was. Those over there. Just scenery painting, but wonderful.'

'It is very accomplished.'

'You should have come to the Venetian exhibition at the Academy two years ago. Good deal more than that.'

'It is better than Boris, I know.'

'Kustodiev was a colourist. So was Matisse. But they kept everything in a high key. No shadows. Tiepolo brought in tone and colour in a way that no one else ever has. See how the tertiaries work together, the yellows and greens all tied in. Same with the other colours. That's more than craftsmanship. Boucher, Veronese: they're not in it at all.'

'So where is Patrick Hugh Staunton?'

'Don't. I have my strengths, but they're nothing like this. Students in those days were apprenticed from the age of five to painters who knew their craft. Hour after hour, day after day they were drilled and encouraged, for years and years. Not just their craft, it was their life, how they saw and understood themselves. Perhaps you see that dedication in dancers at the Kirov, or American

basketball players, but nowhere else. Today it's just words from critics who don't know what they're talking about.'

I'd said too much, and we'd collected a small crowd. 'Patrick,' she said, slipping an arm through, 'I understand. Can we have some tea now?'

'Shouldn't have gone on like that. Lots more to see.'

'I must go back soon.'

'St. Martin's crypt? The Meridian Hotel?'

'There is a cafeteria downstairs. Heinrich is collecting me at four.'

We found an empty table, and I brought over the Earl Grey tea she'd wanted, with a slice of lemon. The eyes flickered as she took it, and she angled herself out of direct view. Neither of us spoke for a while, and I only reluctantly pointed out the usual crowd of students, visitors and the out-of-work that would make an ideal pencil sketch. You

should try, she responded, allowing a long silence to follow. It had to be got out, however, and so I asked again. Yes, the commission was still on, if I wanted it.

Somehow we got through the fifteen minutes before the Daimler arrived. Heinrich climbed out, exchanged a few words with me about his wife's hair appointment, and then saw Natalie into the back. She gave me what I thought was a despairing glance, as though she had tried to make a conquest but had only hurt herself. That was a conjecture, a trick of the light, however, and I told myself that this was simply an important commission that would get me launched.

Frankly, it wasn't Natalie concerning me as I walked round to see Ecclestone. Or the vigilant husband, whose features I had been assessing again: the hard intelligence, and the eyes that sat waiting in their sockets. Not even Christine, I decided when I reached the plate glass door of the Cope Street Gallery and pressed the buzzer. My

Miss Manderson was currently out of town, enjoying a budget holiday with a sister up north, a prelude to the usual nesting instinct. Something deeper worried me as I peered into the gallery that afternoon. Several minutes went by. Then the customer, a portly gentleman in a blue pinstripe, was at the door and Reg was ushering him out with every show of genial favour.

Ecclestone led me through to the small back-office and listened with a faraway expression. 'Yes, I thought you would.' The thirty-five per cent had come rather easily, I thought, but any grievance was snatched away by the contract Reg took from the drawer. All the details were in place, confirmed by Reg's scrawl and the precise signature of Natalie M. Stumpfl.

'All we have to hope now,' I said as I handed the contract back, 'is that the painter can deliver. Hasn't been consulted too much so far, has he?'

'Wouldn't worry, old boy. Everyone has complete faith in you. They wouldn't have made you painter-in-residence otherwise. Private people.'

The eyes shifted and didn't respond to my inquiry. But Reg had finished his patter, and it was time to start mine. 'More Natalie Stumpfl's idea than her husband's, would you say?'

'Well, you know how it is', he said carelessly. The young wife who wants to make something of the house, but Herr Stumpfl is behind her. All the way.' There was a pause, a momentary hesitation, as he added, 'I'm sure you can look after yourself.'

'As usual', I said as Ecclestone began to rearrange his pens. 'Well, I'll be off then. Thanks for the commission, and I'll keep you posted.'

'Do', he said, and held out a friendly hand. 'You deserve it, and I'm sure you'll acquit yourself admirably.' He accompanied me to the door and gave his special boyish grin. 'For both of us.'

'Right you are', I said, feeling the pursed look following me till the corner was turned into Bond Street. I joined the rush-hour crowds making their way down Piccadilly and paused for no reason outside the Meridian Hotel. What I was looking for I cannot imagine, except some friendly stranger with whom I could escape the thought that I was already far out to sea.

As there was no one at the bar, I settled in the lounge, insisting on coffee from the Thai or Malay waitress who came over with the tourist menu. Coffee to replace tea? Just a straight pot of coffee. Could she do that, in this over-gilt room of mirrors and chandeliers? She conferred with the head-waiter, and coffee appeared. For a while I turned over the events of the day, only vaguely following the movements of the waitress as she floated round. She laughed at my request for the bill, and another deluge of fragrant coffee was splashed into the cup. The woman left with such an air of happiness that I wondered when the smiling apsara came off duty. Unreal, but I wanted reassurance,

and company, and that compliant young body without life's troublesome complications.

Perhaps Natalie had been in the room some time, but it was only then I heard that soft and slightly husky voice. Cautiously I looked round. She was sitting a few tables away, with her back to me, happily chatting to the MP I'd seen at Botes. My first impulse was to leave. It was none of my business, and the two of them might well have been waiting for Stumpfl. Only I didn't think so, not in the Meridian Hotel, and Natalie's hair looked the same. Why the lie, given so glibly when Stumpfl had collected her? That he didn't want Natalie around after she'd played her part, I could understand, but why such an obvious falsehood? I strained to hear what was being said. Odd rushes of words. Laughter. They knew each other well, I realized with a stab of pain, and then came the obvious.

I had been a fool. Stumpfl knew exactly what his wife was up to. She had her life and he had his. It was as clear as day. She had teased me on Tie-

polo's rococo beauties and I'd given her a lecture on the painter's craft.

I slunk off to the basement bar and ordered a double whisky. An American in shirtsleeves was already in place, stuffing fistfuls of peanuts into his mouth, and there were some Chinese, with a spiky intelligence behind rimless glasses. The lounge waitress came through for a signature. 'No, I'm not staying here.' I said with a smile. There was a look, the dark irises disappearing into the upper lid and reappearing with a hint of reproach that stilled the blood. 'Unfortunately,' I added, 'but keep the change . . .'

'Sompong', she said as she took the note. 'Thank you, sir.'

It was the 'sir', inflected and smoothed away into a rustle of sibilants that brought my resolution to its knees, causing me to order another double, and perhaps another after that, though I don't remember, or the tube journey back, though I found myself undressed when I woke the following morn-

ing with a hangover that was soon to be the least of my troubles.