

## Secrets and Lies

People say we all tell lies, we all have secrets, it's the size, the shape, the depth of them that matters, and of course the consequences.

Most of my life I drifted along with little white lies, oh yes that dress really suits you, or little inconsequential secrets, squirreling away a few pounds from the household bills to buy an extra pair of shoes, that I bought in the sales, naturally.

How did I manage to slip into larger lies and secrets that changed me, but somehow everyone else remained the same!

We need to go back, about five years I suppose. The children had left home and only returned when they needed something, usually money, laundry or a shoulder to cry on. Gerald was busy ingratiating himself with the new Chairman. Our social life was routine to the point of tedium and our sex life consisted of comfort couplings with occasional passionate encounters when he felt he had beaten the Chief Accountant in some minor skirmish. I joined the usual associations, volunteer work, bridge parties, book clubs and art classes. I used to go to the painting group with Joan but she got bored with it all, while I discovered that I was actually quite good. No one took the art too seriously but we were a very social little group. As well as painting every week in the village hall we made regular visits to art galleries, both local and up in town.

And so it continued until Muriel joined the group. She was a larger than life character who had a large booming voice and addressed everyone as Darling and most importantly she painted in oils, while the rest of us painted in watercolour producing neat little views and tidy domestic scenes.

I used to watch her splash the paint around using great sweeping movements building up her pictures with layers of colour. I loved the smell of the oils, the untidiness of the tubes, the apparent carelessness of her actions.

'Why don't you try,' she said one morning. 'Live a little'

Why not I thought. 'Come round to my house, I use the shed at the back as a studio.'

And so I found myself at Muriel's one Wednesday afternoon, standing in front of a blank canvas. I picked up a brush and tentatively reached forward and started to paint. It was love at first stroke.

Excitement bubbled up inside me; I felt like a toddler experimenting with paint for the first time. I breathed in the smell; I felt the texture of the paint through the brush and up my arm which seemed to act of its own volition across the canvas.

I heard Muriel laugh behind me and this seemed to spur me on. Eventually I stepped back, breathing heavily and looked at what I had done. It was a glorious, gleaming mass of colour leaping off the canvas at me and I was hooked.

With Muriel's encouragement I bought all the paraphernalia required and set up beside her in the shed. She gave me a key to the back gate so I could paint at any time and oh how I wanted to. I tried painting in watercolours with the group but it was no use. With much tutting and head shaking I started using the oils. I gave up my bridge group; it only seemed fair as I couldn't keep cancelling at the last minute. After a brief discussion with the charity shop I gave that up as well, all I wanted to do was paint in my glorious oils.

I began to take photos on my mobile phone of things, places, faces, even views that I could transfer onto my canvasses. The shed became my world, my universe and I spent every possible minute there.

Whenever I met friends in the street they remarked on my absences and changed appearance. I fobbed them off with little white lies only mentioning in passing that I was spending more time on my painting and had found new interests. I felt it only fair to tell Gerald that I was devoting more time to my painting as I had found a new friend at the Art Class.

So that frenzied year continued and the date of the Art Group Annual Summer Exhibition approached. With Muriel's help I selected five canvasses and dug out two of my old watercolours. How insipid they looked beside my new work.

The big day dawned and I began to be apprehensive as to Gerald's response to my work. He never really enjoyed the exhibition, with warm white wine and whiskery old women who thought they could paint, but he always came to show his support.

When we entered the hall all I could see was a mass of people crowding round in the area of my oils and then I heard the laughter. As we walked forward the crowd fell silent and parted until we stood in front of my work.

Gerald leaned forward and examined each painting closely, then he stepped back and looked at them again. He turned, looked at me, softly smiled, and we then started to sip our wine and view the rest of the exhibition making polite conversation to all and sundry. I introduced him to Muriel and her husband, and discovered that the men recognised each other from the train up to town.

After what seemed like hours we finally took our leave and began to make our way home, but Gerald at the last minute drove the car up to the top of Havering Hill. We sat and looked out over the dusky view of the valley and listened to the last of the birdsong.

He turned to me. 'Is that what you have been doing for the last nine months?' he asked quietly

I nodded.

'Why didn't you tell me, why did it have to be secret?'

I had no response. I felt deflated and confused.

He gently pulled me toward him and held me close.

'I thought you were having an affair, I thought I had lost you.'

'It was a kind of madness, an obsession that seemed to have a hold on me. I had to smell the paint, the canvas, even the turps; I had to hold the brushes, to feel the texture of the paint. What I painted never was that important, I just had to paint.' I finally blurted out. 'It was never about us, it was just about me'

After a few more minutes Gerald started the car and home we went.

My oil paintings were never referred to again, and after our summer holiday I resumed all my old activities.

Gerald's retired now and we travel quite a lot. He indulges me with visits to art galleries featuring modern art. He usually sits in the airy cafes drinking cappuccinos and reading day old newspapers while I wander the rooms and corridors contrasting and comparing all around me.

Muriel has kept all my paintings in the shed and occasionally I go to visit them. I love them, they are my secret children. Who knows, one day long after I am dead and gone they will be discovered and my genius will finally be recognised.