

THE KEEPER

SAMPLE

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CHAPTER ONE

Nearly half her life was gone, and Martha was with the wrong man in the wrong place.

Her London friends would disagree. They thought she had the perfect life – working as an artist, living in a fancy apartment, being practically married to a gorgeous man who even her parents approved of. But none of it was the way she had imagined her life would turn out.

Carl wasn't the one, no matter how much Martha willed him to be. He was generous, kind and considerate, an easy man to live with most of the time, but there was no profound connection between them. Their friends didn't see that; they saw the act he put on of the loving partner showing her off to the world. They were the golden couple who had witnessed friends' weddings and divorces, become a fixture on the social calendar of parties, then fancy restaurants, and now dinner parties in endless rotation. Sometimes Martha felt she was in a play, acting out some other person's life. It wasn't supposed to be hers. This wasn't the

plan. She didn't know what the plan had been, but she knew this wasn't it.

It was all okay. Just okay. She had nothing to want for, but everything to desire from a heart that had been mothballed for years.

She had been seriously in love only once, as a teenager. It hadn't run its course, and those who didn't understand her dismissed it as a schoolgirl crush. Crushes rarely last, but on the brink of middle-age her feelings for him hadn't changed.

Sometimes she wondered if she was looking back with rose-tinted spectacles. But when she reread his letters, her love for him overwhelmed her and the ache of loss cut deep. Time hadn't dulled it, only driven it under. At first, she couldn't accept he had gone. He had planned to start painting again when he left her, and she always thought of him when she was painting. It felt as though she was working with him looking over her shoulder like before. She would look back and, finding he wasn't there, feel his absence like a cold blow to the heart of her.

In the early years, she had tried to find him. She had never given up hope and regularly browsed the art annuals, magazines and gallery brochures, hoping to get a glimpse of his work. There was nothing. Wider searches came up short: no friends reuniting, no death or marriage. It was as if he had never existed.

Just at the point she thought she might never find him, she saw the painting, and it reignited the fire that they had tried to put out. It had smouldered for years, smothered by the ashes of time, yet persisting. An underground fire waiting for oxygen.

The painting was oxygen.

The passion came back to her like the waves she loved on the north Cornish coast, crashing into her and leaving her breathless. As a young woman, she had pursued her dreams, battling through the breakers to put herself in position to ride the waves. Then she had struggled to get to the back and had been idling there for too long, waiting for her ride, losing her nerve, failing to find it. Now she believed she could do it and she knew there was one other person who would believe in her too, as he had all that time ago. She had to find him. The man behind the painting.

CHAPTER TWO

Martha remembered the day she had first seen him. It was January 1990 and she was on the bus, staring out of the window on the bottom deck, listening to her Walkman. Janis Ian was singing from the seventies about not fitting in, not being popular, and being unloved. Martha wanted to reach out down the years to Janis, to offer her friendship. A new decade and a new school didn't hold the same appeal.

Moving house promised an opportunity to reinvent herself, become someone cool, maybe even someone everyone wanted to be with. Martha had told herself this before; it never worked. It's not worth being different when you're seventeen. Far better to dress the same way, listen to the same bands and do all the same boring things as everybody else. That's how you get to have friends. That's how you get to be popular. By selling out and sucking up. It was so stupid. Infantile. She wasn't any good at being a teenager, no matter how hard she tried.

Damn it.

What was the point of even trying? It was a stupid game with stupid rules, and winning meant cheating on herself by betraying her beliefs. Better this time not to make friends. Then there was no one to turn on you and bring you down. It was impossible to be like them, anyway. She had no interest in fashion, she didn't want to talk about the latest TV heartthrob, and she couldn't bear the music that was in the charts. Martha loved listening to singer-songwriters from the seventies; her hobbies were painting and gardening. Her dad laughed at her, saying that if she'd only listen to Radio 4, she would pass for a middle-aged woman. It was a compliment to Martha, who felt more comfortable at home than anywhere else. She had always found it easier to talk to her parents' generation than her own. It would be better to not talk to hers at all.

So that was the plan. Don't talk to anyone. Keep her head down and get through the rest of this school year and the next before she could leave. Nearly two years more. Ugh. This plan wouldn't work. She couldn't be invisible and besides, her life was boring enough as it was without drawing out the months at school into days, hours and minutes of endless clock-watching. Surely she could find one person like her. One person to connect with. One person who didn't think Jason Donovan and Hammer pants were the answer to life, the universe, and everything. A person like no one she had met before.

Maybe it was easier to stick to the plan.

The bus stopped to let the boys out at their school. Martha watched them larking around, swearing at each other, pushing and shoving and spitting out hormones. Boys her

age were so immature; it was depressing. She looked around her. Most of the girls left on the lower deck were younger: thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds. Laughter tumbled down the steps from the older girls on the top deck. She turned up the volume on her Walkman and looked back out of the window, watching the terraced houses, corner-shops and pubs pass by. The driver turned into Kingswood Avenue, a straight road lined with horse chestnut trees knitted together overhead like a cathedral nave. Then they were at the gates and the girls spilled out of the bus, chatting and giggling, deep in their own worlds. Martha was invisible to them. Perfect. She waited until the last three bovver-booted girls clomped down the steps. Their hair was brushed straight and pony-tailed, but packet black. Martha followed them off the bus and passed them as they sat on the kerb to change into the uniform's grey, flat shoes. They slipped into the grounds as the prefects shut the large spiked wrought-iron gates before ushering the stragglers up the steps to the main entrance.

Martha wrinkled her nose. The pale green and grey corridors smelled of chemical disinfectant applied by the gallon. She looked at the sun streaming through the east-facing window and visualised where she was on the orientation map the school had sent her, confidently walking through the science block, rounding the corner by the windows that looked out onto the playing fields, then taking the stairs past the art room two at a time. Catching her breath, her memory failed her. She stopped and rifled through her satchel to sneak another look at the map.

“Are you lost?” A deep voice behind her.

Martha fumbled through the satchel and pulled out the welcome pack. “No, I’m –”

“What form are you?”

She turned around and looked up at the man. He struck her as more lumberjack than teacher; a checked flannel shirt was tucked into jeans and matched with a chunky belt and a pair of grunty, lace-up tan boots that seemed overkill for walking up and down concrete-floored corridors. He was tall and slim and his hair was slightly dishevelled, but not carefully; there wasn’t a hint of product. It looked as if he hadn’t shaved for a few days. His stubble was dotted with grey but his unlined face suggested he couldn’t be much more than thirty.

He looked at her, waiting for her answer. And those eyes. Oh boy.

“6B,” she said.

His eyes creased as he smiled. “Mrs Madison. History teacher. Stickler for being on time. She runs a tight ship at registration and you’re now late. Follow me and I’ll get you in.”

As he loped away, Martha stuffed the welcome pack back into her satchel and hurried to catch up. He was up another flight of steps and had opened a door to the left to announce, “I found a straggler, Mrs Madison. I think she’s new here. Don’t let her get away.” His hand on her back, guiding her into the classroom, and he was gone.

“Oh, you must be Martha Carson. Hurry up and sit down... Simone Fitzgibbons?”

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“Here.”

“Catherine Godley?”

“Here.”

CHAPTER THREE

After registration, the girls filed into the main hall and sat in plastic chairs facing the stage. Assembly was standard issue. The headteacher, Miss Staverly, introduced herself to the new girls and welcomed the old ones back. There were reminders about the behaviour expected of Stoneview School girls, particularly out of school where they were its representatives in the community: a community that would be sure to contact Miss Staverly if there were transgressions. And then there was the part about the importance of study and hard work and blah blah blah. The usual guff plus a turgid hymn that the girls mumbled along to, accompanied by an out-of-tune piano.

Martha looked out of the window to the rolling fields beyond. The expanse of green calmed her, as it always had. In Somerset, they had lived in a small house with an enormous garden. Martha had loved helping her dad there, getting her hands dirty, planting seeds, weeding and harvesting fruit and vegetables for the kitchen. When her dad's job forced him to move to Cornwall in a hurry, they

bought the house in the same rush. The garden was tiny. The previous owners had clearly preferred sitting outside to gardening in it. Martha's family had traded a kitchen garden, fruit bushes, and an orchard for a patio with a built-in barbecue and decorative, but unproductive, flowerbeds.

She was outside looking at the dead flower heads on the following Saturday when a soft voice floated from the neighbour's garden. "It looks lovely in the spring, you know." An impish old lady with bright white curly hair was leaning over the fence.

"Okay. But I prefer growing veggies."

"Me too."

Martha walked to the fence and looked over it at the lawn, small pond and borders of shrubs and perennials. "Where are they?"

"I have an allotment. Why don't you sign up for one, er...?"

"Martha." She smiled. "An allotment would be great."

"Nice to meet you, Martha. I'm Joan. How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"Oh. You have to be eighteen, though I guess it doesn't matter – there's a two-year wait at the moment."

Martha's smile vanished.

Joan's face crumpled with concern.. "Do you like gardening that much?"

"I love it. Everything tastes better when you've grown it yourself."

“Doesn’t it? Yes. Well. This could be perfect.”

“What do you mean? I can’t grow much here, even if I take up the flower beds and cover the patio in pots.”

“True. Which is why you should join me in my allotment.”

“Oh, I don’t know – ”

“Yes, you must. I’ve got one of the bigger plots and I can’t keep on top of it like I used to. Half of it is becoming a jungle. We could share it, if you’re keen. Share the work and share the harvest.”

“And the cost. How much is it? I don’t have a job yet, but I have some savings.”

“Don’t worry about that. The council charge me peanuts because I’m a pensioner. Come over tomorrow with some gloves and you can see if you want to invest your time and a bit of blood, sweat and tears.”

“Blood, sweat and tears?”

“The brambles are vicious.”

That was how Martha began working with Joan in her allotment. She spent the next day and would spend the whole of the following weekend hacking away at the briars that grew beyond head height, before digging out their massive roots. But it was a good feeling to look at the ground she had cleared, as she and Joan chatted over a cup of tea and a super-rich chocolate cake.

Time passed quickly in a garden, but it dragged in school. As they stacked all the chairs by the side of the assembly hall, Martha reflected on the nearly two years she would have to endure before her parents would let her start a horticulture course. What a drag. She had picked biology, as she thought it might have some relevance. She was doing Spanish because she wanted to travel and it seemed easier than French. The only A-level that she was likely to do well at was art.

All the art teachers she had had before let her do her own thing, recognising that her talent would carry her through the exams. She hoped the new art teacher would be the same. Martha went into the classroom and found a space at a table near the back. The other girls were chattering as usual, but then the door opened and a rapt quiet smothered the room. The silence dissipated as some girls nudged each other and giggled when the teacher came in. It was the man from the hallway. He wasn't like Martha's previous art teachers. He wasn't like them at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dean Finlay ambled into the art room as if he had all the time in the world. Then he dropped his leather shoulder bag on his chair, stacked his books on the desk, and ran his hands through his hair to brush it back from his eyes. Those glacier-blue eyes. It was no wonder all the girls fancied him. When he looked at you, there was an intensity that made most girls look away. Except for Martha, who he was looking at right now.

“I see we have a new victim in this class today.”

The girls giggled again. Martha said nothing, but held his gaze. It seemed like minutes, but must have only been a second before he coughed and looked down at the register. All the girls’ eyes were now on Martha.

“Martha Carson. Welcome to art and art history. I’m Dean Finlay and you could call me Dean, but the school insists that you call me Mr Finlay, so we’re stuck with that.”

The other girls giggled some more, but Martha kept quiet.

“Right, let’s get back to our use of light, exemplified by the work of the Spanish painters we’re studying. Can anyone explain to me what ‘chiaroscuro’ means?”

A raft of hands shot up, and the class started in earnest. Martha opened her sketchbook and began to draw. She was immersed in capturing the way a beam of sunlight picked out locks of hair in light and shade when she became aware of a presence behind her. She looked up to see Mr Finlay looking at the drawing she had done of him. His smile showed kindness, but his tone was less forgiving.

“Miss Carson, that sketch isn’t without merit, but it’s not what you’re supposed to be working on.”

“Chiaroscuro is the use of light and shade. I was demonstrating that, rather than writing about it.”

“I’m afraid examiners in art history papers will need writing, Miss Carson. We’re out of time now. Here’s the textbook and your assignment book. I’d like you to write 500 words or more on what you understand by ‘chiaroscuro’ and hand it in to me tomorrow.”

Martha looked down.

“Can you do that, or do you have a hot date this evening?”

The other girls laughed, and Martha flushed red from ear to ear. She said nothing.

“I’ll take that as a yes. And a no,” said Mr Finlay, as he walked back to his desk. He put his books and papers in his bag and zipped it shut as the bell rang. “See you all on Thursday.”

The girls drifted out of class and Martha tried to blend in between them, desperate to disappear.

“That was a bit harsh,” said a lanky girl with long, glossy dark hair, as they flowed through the corridor.

“It’s no big deal,” said Martha, as the blood rushed back to her face.

“Mr Finlay is normally really nice.”

Martha said nothing and hugged her bag to her chest.

“My name’s Amy, Amy Chen. And you’re... Martha,” the girl said, holding out her hand.

Martha let her bag drop to her side, shook her hand, and replied, “I know.”

Amy laughed. “Don’t let it bother you, Martha. See you later.” And she peeled off towards the language block.

But it did bother Martha. She was hoping to cruise through these two years of school, unnoticed. And here she was, first day in the new school and very much noticed.

Martha spent the evening combing through the art history textbook for every mention of chiaroscuro. She rewrote it all in her own words, 501 of them. The next day, she slipped into the art room before registration and left her red assignment book on the desk. As she was leaving, she bumped into Mr Finlay coming in.

“Shit,” she said, caught by surprise, and then, “Sorry, sir. I mean, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“This is the art room and I’m the art teacher.”

“Yes, I know, but... never mind. Sorry.”

Mr Finlay laughed. “I see you brought your homework. Any problems?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. I look forward to reading it.” He smiled at her and walked to his desk as Martha bolted out of the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

Thursday's art lesson passed without incident. The class was painting a still life of a collection of objects in the middle of the room. Martha was in her element and relaxed into the work. The bell rang before she realised everyone else had already packed up. She hurriedly put her paint away and went to wash out her brushes.

When she came back, Mr Finlay was holding out her red book. "See you next Tuesday, Miss Carson."

She grabbed the book and left.

Martha waited until she was on the bus home before looking at what Mr Finlay had written. The big, red C startled her. She had never received a C in art before. Yes, in other subjects (and worse), but her grades in art were always As or Bs. She read what Mr Finlay had written:

You have summed up the contents of the textbook adequately. C.

Wasn't that what he wanted? Wasn't that what all teachers wanted? To follow the syllabus, learn the key points in the textbooks, regurgitate it all in the exams? What more did he want? Martha shoved the book in her bag and turned up her music as she watched the countryside go by.

The next assignment was about artists and a sense of place. Martha used the textbook and a book from the library to write her essay. When she got her red book back, she was aghast to see that Mr Finlay had given her a D-. He had written:

Why are you not even trying to think about the art assignments I've set you? You are a competent draughtsperson and talented painter, but you are not using your brain to answer the questions. You are getting someone else to do the thinking for you. Interest and passion in a subject will take you further in life than parroting other people's opinions. It is a lesson worth learning early.

With her next essay, Martha thought she had done a superb job. But Mr Finlay gave her a D-, with the note:

Don't the works of talented artists interest you? The best way to develop your art is to learn from what has gone before you. All the great artists learned from the artists before them. Do you really think you are so different, that you have been delivered to the world with a fully formed, god-like ability?

At first, Martha was furious. She knew she had ticked all the boxes with the essays because she had researched them all thoroughly and copied the work of the best art historians. In her own words, of course. That was more than any other teacher had wanted from her. But not Mr Finlay. He didn't want an analysis of the best in the field. What the hell. Fine. If he wanted her to wing it, she would. She would stop reading her textbook, look at the paintings, and he could read what she really thought of those.

He set the next essay on the development of Picasso. For most of the next week, she spent her lunch hours at the library and studied all his work, from 'Le Picador' to his blue period, through to cubism and beyond. She read everything she could about his life. When she had exhausted all the books, she started the essay, writing about his early years in Malaga and La Coruña, where he learned to paint far better than most working artists today. She described how he broke through impressionism to be one of the founders of cubism. Then she described what happened during the Spanish Civil War, reflecting on how, with 'Guer-nica', he could communicate the atrocities of war far more than a conventional painting ever could. And then she shot him down in flames:

Picasso squandered his ability. He squandered his talent because of his ego. At first, he pushed boundaries, but then he only sought to get attention for himself. The idea of himself as a genius artist consumed him and he forgot about art. If he had treated women better, his art would have continued to evolve beyond that of a man who became a spoiled brat.

When Mr Finlay handed Martha her red book, she opened it with trepidation. He had written, 'I can't say I agree with your analysis of Picasso's later work. I'm glad it is Picasso who was the target of your vitriol and not me! A-'

In Martha's next essay, she included a slip of paper:

I may have attacked Picasso because he neglected his art, but at least he kept creating it all of his life. Do you create art or only teach it?

When she picked up her red book the next time, Mr Finlay had written, 'Your argument that Salvador Dali was little more than a pale imitation of Hieronymus Bosch was interesting, if a little simplistic. B+'

He had stapled a note within:

Teaching art is sometimes as challenging as practising it. Yes, Picasso kept creating art and didn't become a teacher. He had success early, before life got in the way. It was simple for him to choose his own path and create what he wanted throughout his life. Sometimes events change the path you are on, or the path you might have taken. You can choose anything right now. Why not build on your talent and study art? Miss Staverly says you are planning to study horticulture. I can't imagine you are as good at growing plants as you are at painting them. Your painting, 'Trees Behind Water Treatment Plant', was inspired (even if the title might preclude early commercial success).

No, I don't paint. Not now.

Martha replied:

Surely, if you are keen enough, you can create art any time. Studying horticulture wouldn't stop me painting. And I know there's paid work for me at the end. I don't want to end up like Mum and Dad and never have money for anything but holidays in a tent or leaky caravan. As for early success driving future creativity, van Gogh wasn't recognised in his lifetime, but he didn't stop. He continued until he died.

I guess he wasn't married with children like you. Is that why you don't paint?

M

PS I love those trees and wouldn't want to sell that painting, anyway. Dad says it looks perfect in the downstairs loo!

Dear M

Studying horticulture may not stop you painting, but it will push it to the sidelines. Exactly at the point when you should nurture and develop your talent, you will stagnate. Now is the time to focus on your art, to grasp the opportunities that won't be available to you later. Unlike a horticulture course, which you could do in your thirties, if the art doesn't work out (which it will, I am sure). Where will you be at thirty? In a backwater garden centre, answering endless

questions about how to overwinter citrus, prune roses and keep slugs at bay? Or in your studio, preparing for your next exhibition?

You are too young to be worried about what will bring in the money. You don't have a mortgage or kids (or any plans to have either soon, I imagine), so you can work at a nursery part time to pay the bills and put your best time and passion into painting.

I'm married, yes, but I don't have children. I'm not painting because my paintings expressed my sense of self. It is better for me not to do that right now. Seeing how students express themselves is much more rewarding, which is why I would love you to continue to develop your art. I want to see you expressed in that drawing of the winter storm at Maudlin Pool, not in a perfectly potted hydrangea cutting.

D

Dear D

You seem to have a fab life: living in the beautiful countryside with a wife and a good job. Why aren't you painting? What happened to you?

M

Dear M

You are young and until now most of the important decisions in life will have been made for you by other people.

The decisions you have had to make are straightforward (which cereal to have for your breakfast, what outfit to wear on a Friday night, which band's album to buy on a Saturday morning), but you'll see that life becomes more complicated. I was stupid and reckless as a kid and I chose to do the right thing as a grown man. That meant giving up my art to provide for my family. There isn't a single day where I don't think about what might have been if I hadn't. But I know I made the only decision I could as a decent person.

Your choice is your own and doing a horticulture course will get you a job and maybe painting won't do that for you straightaway. But it will. You have a talent rarely seen and an intelligence that can push that forward if nothing substantial gets in your way. Right now, the only thing in your way is you. Sometimes you can be too sensible, especially when you don't have responsibilities to anyone but yourself.

D

In her next assignment, Martha stapled the note:

Goya is part of our course, 'The Spanish Artists of Light'? More like darkness. I've never seen anything so depressing. Enough of war, loss, and doom and gloom! Don't you like anyone whose work brings joy to the world? Does everything have to be refracted through a prism of bitterness? What happened to you to be such a downer?

When she got her red book back, it only had the grade, A. There was no note. She continued to get good grades for her essays about Velázquez, Murillo, and Zurbarán. But she had

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upset him. Well, tough. He needed to be told. What was so bad about his life, anyway?

CHAPTER SIX

Then he introduced her to Joaquín Sorolla. It was like stepping out of the darkness into the light.

Dear D

Now we're talking. This guy can paint. The paintings show life in a way that photographs never can. This is the reason to be an artist. To supercharge what you see with the way it makes you feel. The joy of children playing on the beach or a mother's love for her baby. Though there is a sadness too, knowing that these moments don't last. But he doesn't dwell on that, doesn't go psycho like Goya.

I look at these paintings and I'm jealous of the life these people led. That newborn baby in the mother's bed didn't grow up with the worries I have about the world. Things were a lot simpler back then.

M

Dear M

I share your opinion of Sorolla. How I would've loved my work to have been a tenth as good as his. He didn't let his ego get in the way of his soul. As for things being simpler then, well, yes, they were. But that meant people didn't have the medical advances we have now. That meant that the baby in the painting only had a 50-50 chance of reaching your age. Make the most of the time you are born into and don't wish for the past. You have a bright future ahead of you. What worries do you have at your age? The world is yours for the taking if you work hard and make the right choices.

D

Dear D

Yes, but one of those choices has to be not to have kids. There are five billion people on the planet right now and there will be a billion more by the end of the century. We are polluting the world by burning coal and oil and cutting down the rainforest. What kind of world would a child of mine grow up in? It doesn't look good!

M

Dear M

You are too young to be deciding something so serious as whether to have children. We don't know how the world will be in twenty or thirty years. Technology and education have made many improvements in society that we couldn't have predicted back in the sixties. The next millennium could be a much better world for the next generation. Keep an open mind.

That said, you will have to decide very soon about your studies. I can't stress enough how rare your talent for painting is. I'm sure you could get into any art college you wanted, so let me know and I will write a personal recommendation for you.

D

Dear D

It's hard to get a job with an art degree and the tuition and materials would cost a fortune. My parents earn just enough for me not to qualify for a grant, but not enough to pay for me without it hurting them financially. If I study horticulture, it will be cheaper and when I graduate I can get a job and pay my parents back. I can always paint in my spare time.

M

Dear M

As I've said before, now is exactly the time you should follow your passions and take risks. You're young enough to do what you want to do. If you don't capitalise on that talent, you'll regret it. You can't paint in your spare time and expect it to be your best work. We'll apply for scholarships, or you'll work to pay your way through college. The time to do it is now, now, NOW.

D

Dear D

Why are you so keen for me to paint when you don't?

Why aren't you a working artist?

Why are you teaching art in a school in the back of beyond?

M

Dean wrote:

I can't answer those sorts of questions this way, Martha.

Martha replied with a letter:

Dear Mr Finlay

I'd really like to know why you aren't a painter. You can't ask me to focus on painting without explaining why you aren't. Why aren't you a full-time painter? When you demonstrate painting techniques in class, I can see you're not an ordinary art teacher. There is something more there, isn't there? Why are you wasting your time teaching us?

Apart from that, I have some other questions for you:

- 1.What is your favourite book?
- 2.Who would you like to have round to dinner? What would you cook them?
- 3.What did you do last weekend?
- 4.Would you like to go to Mars?
- 5.When did you last paint something for yourself?

Answer me soon!

Martha

Martha knew better than to staple that letter in her red book. Instead, she stapled the following note:

If you want to persuade me to choose art over horticulture as a career, there is a lot to discuss. We should write to each other properly and honestly. There's a white post in the far corner of the playing field. Nobody goes there, and it's very overgrown. You'll find an envelope wrapped in a plastic bag. You'll have to mind the brambles!

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Martha was excited to find a plastic bag at the white post the very next day. At lunchtime, she found a quiet spot in the library, opened the letter and read.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dear M

I enjoy teaching young people like you to paint more than I enjoy painting myself.

I've been teaching for about a decade and I've seen the work of a lot of students. Many of them have been talented and have gone on to study art at college. I know a few who are working as artists now. But none of them had the raw talent you have. Your unique way of seeing things and your style of drawing and painting are gifts. Like all the best gifts, you should value them and look after them, not discard them or neglect them. If your art tuition ends when you leave school, it will be like pushing an albatross out of the nest before it's ready to fly. Your art is a beautiful thing, but it could be spectacular. I'm afraid that if you only do it as a hobby, you'll never progress. Other people may still enjoy what you do, but you'll be missing a chance to create meaningful work that can change how people view the world. The kind of art that can move them and make them connect

with concepts that cannot be put into words. The best art does that, and yours isn't there yet. It could be.

Seeing art in books gives you a shadow of the experience of seeing the real work. It's vital that artists see actual great art. I've talked to the headmistress, and she has agreed to a subsidised gallery trip for the class. Details are coming out this week, but I hope you'll come, as we'll visit three of London's best galleries – the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery and the Tate.

To your questions:

1. My favourite book is *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. He wrote it a long time ago, but it seems just as relevant now.

2. I'm not much of a dinner party person. It's more fun for me to go somewhere I can collect wild mussels to cook on a campfire with a bit of white wine and garlic and a good loaf of bread. I'd invite the Prime Minister and see if I could talk some sense into her.

3. I worked on the drawers for the desk I'm making, went on a couple of long walks and marked a lot of homework. It's an exciting life!

4. No, I wouldn't go to Mars. There are too many beautiful places on Earth I haven't seen.

5. When did I last paint something for myself? A long time ago.

Okay, so I have some questions for you:

1. What do you like to do with your free time? Do you ever paint or draw when it is not an assignment?

2. What would you like to be better at depicting in your art?
3. What are you kids listening to these days?

D

Dear D

In my free time, I love to garden. When I'm working in the garden, I don't know where the time goes. I'm never happier than when I've been planting out seedlings, picking vegetables, or even weeding. Joan (my neighbour who owns the allotment) makes a flask of tea and we sit with our backs to the shed, our faces to the garden, and we talk. Mostly about the plants, but sometimes about the world and politics and so on. She must be in her 80s (whenever I ask her age, she says she is a hundred years old). She met her future husband when she was my age, married him at twenty-one, and he died when she was in her forties. They never had children (I don't know why and don't want to ask, in case she couldn't). I asked why she didn't marry again and she said other men couldn't compare to her husband, that they would fall "so short she couldn't see them any more". Now she says she is happy being on her own. Most of her friends her age have lost their husbands. The others spend too much time moaning about the ones they still have. She knows all sorts of people around here and goes out a lot to clubs, meetings and outings. She has a better social life than any of us! I wish she would come out for a night with me. She would be more fun than the school crowd.

Yes, I draw in my spare time (cheeky question!). I nearly always have a sketchbook with me to draw what's around

me. Travelling abroad would give me more to draw and improve my art, I guess. The furthest I've been is France, and it was so cool to be in a different country where they speak a different language and have different food. Mind you, I wasn't that keen on snails!

I don't really know what the 'kids' are listening to these days, as I like to listen to other music, like records I find in Dad's collection. He has loads of great albums from the 1970s. I think that was the best decade for music and that the 1980s was the worst. Let's hope the 1990s get better. I use Dad's records and ones that I've bought from charity shops to make mix tapes. I love Bread and The Carpenters, and James Taylor has the most amazing voice.

1. What do you like doing in your free time?
2. What music do you listen to?
3. Do you play an instrument?

Martha

Dear M

I can see that you love gardening and growing plants. Your paintings of plants are some of your best work. As I said in class, you have a way of making cabbages look like super-models. But, again, now is not the time to take the easy path. You are still marked down for that horticulture course, I see. Why won't you take a TINY risk and test your artistic talent on the world? You have nothing to lose. Try that first and yes, if you don't find the success/life you want doing that, you can return to the security of a career as a nursery

woman. I'm sure it wouldn't take much to retrain. But if you do it first and settle for that career, you'll never put your heart into your painting. You won't have the same drive to develop and succeed.

You may think you have little to learn about painting, but there is a mountain of knowledge hidden from view. It's not just a matter of a change of scene. You represent what you see very well, but not what you feel. Your essays (and your writing to me) articulate your feelings far better. If you connect the two, your work will reach another level.

Techniques I can teach you in class (and you are learning them well), but that connection is something you will have to look for. And you will know it when you feel it. The work will become easier in a way, but more demanding too. You should find time flies, it speeds up, but you will be exhausted and spent with the channelling of that emotional energy – art is not for the fainthearted.

I have been asking around, and I am sure that you could study at a great school. St Hibbert's has scholarships for applicants with talent like yours.

You would receive good tuition, of course, but just as valuable would be the fellow students you'd meet. Being immersed in a creative atmosphere like that speeds up the development of your work, your style. And you'd have some fun into the bargain. You have said you are keen to travel and broaden your horizons – well, this is a good first step.

I haven't bought an album in ages, but sometimes I listen to the radio. I guess I'm not into music much anymore, so I'm a bit out of touch, but you may be right about the 1980s. All my music is on vinyl and I am an old fogey, but try Jackson

Browne and Joni Mitchell if you like the seventies, and singer-songwriters like James Taylor. Bread and the Carpenters are a little too schmaltzy for me. You should also dip into the sixties and go through the Beatles back catalogue. It's fascinating to see how they developed from the simplicity of *Please Please Me* to (what was very experimental in 1967) *Sergeant Pepper*. And you have to listen to the White Album. *While My Guitar Gently Weeps* is my favourite Beatles song and it wasn't even written by Lennon and McCartney. Of course I shouldn't write about the Beatles and the White Album without mentioning *Martha My Dear*. It is a sweet tune written by Paul McCartney and he named it after the old English sheepdog he had, though the lyrics are more about his relationship with Jane Asher, which was complicated, as are most relationships. But I'm blathering on now...

I used to play the guitar. I was never in a band or anything like that, but it was fun to head off to a beach at the weekend with my art school mates. We would sit around the fire we had cooked over to sing until the early hours, or until the police came and moved us on. I miss those days.

In answer to your question about what I *like* to do in my free time, apart from a little carpentry, I love to bike. Not to dress up in Lycra and break any records, but to explore. If it looks like a nice day and there is nothing else I have to do, I go for a ride. I pick a place on the Ordnance Survey map, like an Iron Age hillfort or an old castle, and I cycle out there to take a look. Then I find a pub on the way home and stop there for a pint and a bite to eat. Very exciting, I know.

D

Dear D

I cycle a lot too, but it's mainly because we live in the middle of nowhere and I don't want to get lifts from my parents all the time. Mum says that the way I drive, I won't pass my test until I'm 40. Mum and Dad gave up taking me out after I lost the second wing mirror, and lessons cost a fortune. Luckily, I can save up now that I've got a Saturday job at the garden centre. Cycling there takes me about half an hour, but I ride through beautiful countryside and I always notice something new.

Oh my god, Joni Mitchell is amazing. I can't believe Dad doesn't have any of her records. When I talked to him about this, he said it was because her voice was like a dying banshee.

He is so wrong.

Qs. 1. Where are your friends from art school now, and do you still sing with them?

2. What would be your ideal home? Do you already live there?

3. Do you believe in God?

M

Dear M

As. 1. I've lost touch with most of my friends from art school, apart from the odd Christmas card. I do have one good

friend I keep in touch with, but Robert loathes singing and winces when I bring out my guitar. So the answer to that is “no way”!

2. I would like to live out in the countryside and immerse myself in nature. It would be nice never to have to drive anywhere, at least not day-to-day. I don't have to drive much now, but I'm not keen on being in town. The truth is, I enjoy time to myself, and space. We live in town because that was the house we could afford when we moved here. My wife, Kristina, also prefers being in town, so it is better for her. At the end of our cul-de-sac there is a public footpath, and it takes ten minutes to walk down that to be out in a field and another ten minutes to get to the forest, so it's not too bad if I want to escape.

I guess what I'm saying is that the house I live in isn't as important as the place. I could live in a palace, or a shed, or a caravan, if it was somewhere I could get away from people (not all people, just the annoying ones!) and be surrounded by nature. Nature is a wild garden and used to provide everything we needed before we decided we needed more than we really do. I'm going down the rabbit hole here. You must think me misanthropic, but it's not that I dislike people, only that I want to choose when I'm with them. Being in a town feels claustrophobic.

3. No. Do you?

Question: Are you going to apply to St Hibbert's? Time is running out.

Dear D

It sounds like you need to escape from your cul-de-sad-sack! Most of the kids at school hate the countryside, think it's boring and believe that town has everything they want. That's fine if all you want is to get shit-faced at the bars that turn a blind eye to underage drinkers, or hang out at the rec centre to do bugger all. I'd rather bike to the beach or find something of interest I can photograph or draw.

Toph (a boy who works at the garden centre) says that I'm a 'throwback weirdo', but I say that's better than being a throw-up weirdo like the kids in town.

I used to believe in God when I was little, but I used to believe in Father Christmas too... I think with all the terrible things that happen in the world, with innocent children getting awful diseases and so on, that there can't be a god. If there was, he or she would work in horrible ways, not mysterious ones!

In answer to your question, if I studied art, it might put me off the painting I enjoy now. Is that what happened to you?

M

Dear M

You are a little cynical for someone so young. Yes, terrible things happen in the world, but amazing things too. Overall, I think people are good and I have often seen (and experienced) the kindness of strangers, especially when travelling.

But no, I don't believe in a god, at least not a religious god, a single being who directs things. Perhaps the universe functions like some kind of super-intelligent consciousness, the

way that our consciousness comes out of a collection of interconnected nerve cells. But if that were the case, I'm sure it would be beyond our understanding.

As Arthur C. Clarke said, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." I think same is true of science. We don't have the science to explain everything yet, and because of this, some people have to ascribe the existence of the world and what happens to a supernatural being. It is interesting that every society, every civilisation, has its own religions, its own god/s, and they are there to serve a purpose, to help people come to terms with things they don't understand. Nowadays, I think science can do that. And there will always be things we don't understand, but that is part of the joy of life. How boring to understand it all!

Science gives us a way to appreciate life, and art gives us the way to show that appreciation. There is a lot of good in the world, a lot of joy too. You should find a way to celebrate that in your art. And no, going to art college didn't put me off painting. Going to art college would make you more passionate about your art, I'm sure.

D

Dear D

I'm so glad that you aren't a religious nut. Yes, there are good religious people in the world but there are also good atheists! Yes, religious people do good, but bad things are done in the name of religion too. And even with science to help us, we appear to go two steps forward and one step back. We

fight fewer wars, right, but is it because we have nuclear weapons as a deterrent? What if someone decides to press the button? Bloody terrifying.

Toph asked me out yesterday, but I didn't feel like going into town to kick cans around with the rec centre deadbeats. I'd have liked to bike out to lunch at a pub garden, but it was hosing down. What do you do in bad weather like we've had this weekend? I've been going stir crazy!

M

P.S. I've got the application form for St Hibbert's in front of me. I might fill it in if you fill me in on WHY you stopped painting.

Dear M

Lighten up a little on the home front. You're a teenager and you should enjoy the freedom of those years. Hang out with your friends and talk about whatever is important to teenagers these days. Go out with Toph.

When I was your age, I was so excited about the future and what the world offered. I felt I was just beginning to discover myself and how to express my feelings through my painting, and the possibilities were endless. Don't you feel that way too?

Yes, the weather has been diabolical. You have to have something to do inside in England when it's bucketing down. There are always projects to be done in our old house. It is a 200-year-old survivor of a country estate that Barratt boxes have erased. At the moment, I'm replacing rotten floor-

boards. All my tools are in a small shed and I work on other projects in there. That's the only indoor space I dream of having – a workshop where I could practise more carpentry. I'd like to get better at making furniture and progress beyond bookshelves, desks and coffee tables. I really hate having to buy furniture that I know I could make if I had the space. My wife dragged me to IKEA once, and walking around there with crowds of people was my idea of a living hell.

I'd also like to have a dog. They make you go out whatever the weather!

D

P.S. If you give me the signed, completed St Hibbert's application, I'll write about why I stopped painting.

Dear D

You don't remember what it's like to be a teenager. There is so much pressure to fit in, and some girls can be really judgemental. The boys aren't as bad. At least they are rude to your face. I've had so-called friends who are lovely when they are around me and then I find them laughing at me behind my back. And all about such superficial things – what clothes you wear, how you have your hair cut, which pop star you fancy, which stupid soap operas you watch on TV! These aren't the important things in life, unless you are a teenager and don't want to be banished to the far corners of the playground. I had enough of that at my last school. Girls blowing hot and cold with me because of something I said (or didn't say) about a new jacket or something they

had done with their hair or a LOOK I had given god knows who!

It's easier to keep myself to myself most of the time. There is one girl here (Amy) who seems okay, but I don't want to ruin things with her by saying too much! We mostly talk about school and teachers (not you, of course... well, maybe a little!).

I love dogs! We had a pointer/collie cross called Charlie until a couple of years ago. When Charlie died, I cried for weeks. Dad was really upset, too. Mum says our new house's garden is too small to have a dog, but I don't think dogs care about that as long as you walk them. You could have a dog for sure!

M

P.S. I've nearly finished the form for St Hibbert's, but the essay is hard. It's lucky you've taught me how to write them! In the meantime, tell me what your paintings were like.

Dear M

Kristina is allergic to dogs. When we have stayed with her sister (who has two lovely retired greyhounds) she has been fine, but she insists that living with one would be a problem. I don't know. Maybe she just doesn't like dogs. I grew up with a family that loved them. We had four in total before I left home. All mutts and all completely different apart from their absolute loyalty. Dogs are non-judgemental and never argue with you (unless it is over something revolting they found in the street that you have to wrestle from them...).

I used to paint all kinds of things: portraits, landscapes, abstracts. I was still finding my style, working things out. If I didn't like my paintings, I would paint over the canvases. If you X-rayed some of my old canvases, you'd find a dozen paintings under many of them. Sometimes my friend Robert would take a liking to them and sell them without my knowledge. So I guess there must be a few paintings out there, but I'm finished with painting for now.

D

P.S. I don't mind you talking about me to other students, but you probably shouldn't mention these letters. Other people might get the wrong idea.

Dear D

Don't worry, I don't show these letters to anyone, And I definitely wouldn't talk about them. They are a private thing, our own little world, and I love getting them. The only other person I can have grown-up conversations with is Joan. She's cool, but if we chat too long, she stares at the garden as if the weeds will take over before our very eyes.

I read that book you like, *Brave New World*. It's very bleak! I can't believe he wrote it in 1931 – there are so many things that haven't dated at all. Do you think there is any hope for civilisation, or are we doomed to a bleak future, too?

I haven't read too many other science fiction books. Only *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Which is hilarious. Have you read it? I love how mice designed planet Earth as the successor to Deep Thought, the computer that found that

the answer to life, the universe and everything was 42. And just before it found what the question was, this supercomputer, Earth, was destroyed (oops... I hope you've read the books!). Let's hope we don't destroy our planet before I can work out the meaning of my life.

M

Dear M

I haven't read *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, but I listened to the radio programmes. Funny stuff. Personally, I think the meaning of life is to find happiness and bring happiness to others. Easier said than done, but it's worth a try.

If you want another good science fiction book about our possible future, try *Neuromancer* by William Gibson. A story about living in a computer-linked 'cyberspace', where there is a threat of artificial intelligence taking over. I certainly hope that is a long way off!

D

P.S. Is that application ready and do you know where your towel is?

Dear D

The books you suggested sound a lot more interesting than what I had to read for my English literature GCSE. They stuffed the syllabus with books so old-fashioned it was impossible to relate to them. *Cider with Rosie* was a self-

indulgent mess of a novel. Dickens was okay once you got used to the language, but I prefer to see the adaptations on the BBC (I know – my dad says I’m a philistine). I did like *Jane Eyre*. That book was way ahead of its time with its feisty heroine. But then there was Shakespeare. Strip back the language and the stories don’t stand up, in my opinion, ha, ha. They would have been entertaining at the time, but now they’ve dated! Moving into the more modern (ha!) books we read, I loved *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but found *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* way too tragic. I enjoyed the West Country locations though, so I tried a couple of his others, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the Obscure*. They were tragic too! Couldn’t Thomas Hardy write happy?

M

P.S. Not quite and yes, I am one hoopy frood.

Dear M

You can’t be serious about Shakespeare. I’ll have to find a video I can lend you. The plays come to life on the stage.

If you like Thomas Hardy’s writing but not the tragic endings, try *Under the Greenwood Tree*. It’s an earlier novel that was a little lighter. You might like it more than he would; like many novelists, I don’t think Hardy would have enjoyed re-reading his early work.

D

Dear D

Under the Greenwood Tree – thanks for that suggestion – I loved the ending way more than his other stuff. Thomas Hardy can turn in his grave over that.

M

Dear M

That seems appropriate. As a young man, Thomas Hardy was working as an engineer for the railways. When they needed land in north London, he had the job of disinterring many of the graves at St Pancras churchyard. If you go there now, you can see a tree that has grown into the gravestones he moved.

D

Dear D

When I go to London (I've never been!) I'm going to have to check that tree out. In the meantime, exploring is limited to around here. I bought myself a 1 to 25,000 scale Ordnance Survey map. It's incredible how many prehistoric remains there are around this county. Yesterday I cycled out past Porthwinger to the Iron Age hillfort of Long Castle and on towards Karmouth. The map showed a path to a tiny circle of standing stones. We must have driven past those stones dozens of times and never would have known they were there.

M

Dear M

That's the thing about cycling (or walking) – you see so much more than you do from a car window.

I used to take a sketchbook out with me and draw my discoveries. There is something about drawing that helps me to see things properly, and I remember them better than when I have taken a photo.

D

Dear D

You 'used to' take a sketchbook out to draw? Why have you given up? I can't imagine anything that would stop me from drawing. It expresses your soul, doesn't it? When the class draws an object, the drawings are all different. There wouldn't be so much of a difference if you asked us to photograph the object.

So why don't you draw or paint in your free time?

Do you think your painting is no good? You could practise and get better. It's never too late to start again. You are always on at me to spend more time painting. Well, why can't you? What's stopping you? I've nearly finished that essay, so tell me!

M

Dear D

Why don't I draw or paint? I guess it is what you said about it expressing your soul. My soul has been in an awful place for a long time. I found my paintings were expressing a side of me I didn't want to see. Not quite Goya, but dark.

It was different when I was your age, when I had my whole life in front of me, when things were less complicated. I wanted to be a great painter. Perhaps I would've been, but sometimes life takes a turn you don't expect. That is why I'm so excited to see your potential, and hope that you can continue with your work and become a brilliant painter.

D

Dear D

Okay, explain that. Why is your soul dark? You're an arts teacher in a sleepy Cornish town! What happened? What was so big that it stopped you from doing the thing you love, the thing you were meant to do?

M

Dear M

That's just it. I didn't want to be an art teacher, and I never wanted to live in a town. Sometimes choices are made for

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you, though in my case it was my actions that made that choice.

D

Dear D

Then choose something different! What is so hard about that? It's the 1990s. You don't even have kids to worry about. What's stopping you from changing your life right now?

The application form and essay are on your desk.

Your turn.

M

Dear M

Okay, I'll tell you if you can promise to keep it to yourself.

D

Dear D

I promise. Tell me.

M

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A X Wilkinson

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