

Last night I dreamt I lived among the blue and yellow crystals at the bottom of a kaleidoscope. Hands only had to twist me a fraction and my whole world changed shape. Just as I thought I understood what people meant, could gauge the distance between us, click clack and my world whizzed into dizzying confusion.

All afternoon I have been staring out the window, wondering what to do. Boats bob up and down as rain splashes into the harbour. Cyclists hurry along Bayswater Road, their chins tuck into their chests as they try to avoid the bitter wind that corkscrews down the street. I like watching the rain, the way it breaks up the surface like needles piercing a pretty but conniving picture. Slick puddles and dripping walls wash away Auckland's polished veneer to reveal the bones of the city. I rearrange the glass vase of lilies again. Orange pollen stains my fingers but I am too preoccupied to clean my hands. I sink onto our black leather sofa, light another cigarette and hope Vincent has been exaggerating. Patrick will be home soon and I must plan what to say. Events rarely turn out the way I think they will.

Through the bars of sunlight Vincent van Gogh stared at me with manic joy. You have no idea how often I have contemplated his bandaged ear and red bowtie. Great blobs of colour melted and burned around his face. Together we have wept noisily at the trials in our lives. The canvas covered most of one wall and I told my young visitors that Vincent watched them, didn't miss a trick.

Julio Paz, the man that painted this picture, had this crazy idea that Vincent could have saved himself if he had lived in Argentina. It's romantic nonsense, of course, the kind of fantasy artists claim is their privilege. Wouldn't all those wide smiles, big tits and southern sunshine have gone to his head? Why should Paz count on Argentina to provide a safe haven for Vincent's passions? I mean, it might have been Vincent the Dictator, instead of Vincent the Fruitcake.

Perhaps we were all just distortions in someone else's mirror. Take Vincent, our exotic canvas. Turned out he wasn't painted by Julio Paz after all. It was just a copy by an unknown woman, a student with a sharp eye for detail who got high on risks. Brent, our buyer, rang us up in the middle of a dinner party to break the news. He was so distraught at his mistake he offered to buy back the fraud, to refund us in full. Brent had been careless, he said so himself. But he wasn't stupid and realised that he could not afford to fall out with us.

While I ate pinwheels of smoked eel and salmon, I listened to Brent tell me it was amazing that Miss Nobody had passed off a Julio Paz in her first year of art school.

"It's amazing, isn't it Laila? The kid must be brilliant," Brent said. Buyers use con words as freely as amateurs copy masters.

I should explain that modern art is more than a hobby for Patrick and me. Since my operation art has become my life, my future. Almost half my inheritance has been spent on paintings. Patrick has a good eye, more than that, he sniffs out young talent and keeps tabs on who does what and where. In his spare time Patrick visits art schools and takes meticulous notes in black notebooks. Over the years we have filled the walls with a selection of oils, pastels, acrylics, chalks, and the odd etching. We have no installations or sculptures - too much diversity weakens the collection. Our reputation is growing, not just within New Zealand. Last year we were featured in *Esprit*, a Parisian magazine. The article was translated into English and reappeared in *The Sunday Times*. It didn't mean much though, all that happened was our insurance doubled the following month.

My face came out in a blotchy rash when I discovered we had been conned. Patrick was sweet and arranged for a healer to restore my complexion and equilibrium. For a while I wanted to get even. It wasn't about money; it was more to do with pride. I wanted to yell at Brent, "Hey, get me the real thing. And get it now!" God, I sounded like a Coke advertisement. Truth is, I liked this picture, with its scabby yellow sun hat and uneven green line that shadows Vincent's nose.

I hired a professional to compare our fraud with the Paz's *Possible Vincent* painted in 1983 and, sure enough, there were subtle but distinct differences. The original was smooth where ours was lumpy; the exact shade of red in his cheek did not flare with the same degree of incandescent anger. I didn't want to swap the picture; I just wanted Julio Paz to put his signature on the bottom of our fraud. Simple. No hard feelings Julio, but you could learn a thing or two from Miss Nobody.

Flossie walked in and burrowed her wet nose into my lap. I rubbed her soft hair behind her ears and told her she was a sappy dog. Flossie was getting old and her coat did not gleam like polished chestnuts anymore. It was grey, almost white in patches and rubbed so thin it looked as if I had scrubbed her with bath cleaner. Flossie gave me her perfected look of beseeching adoration so I snapped off a piece of chocolate and tossed it towards her.

I glanced up at Vincent and asked him what he would do. He shrugged his shoulders and then his row of tiny teeth zinged like a zip undoing.

"If it's me you like, this particular image you have come to trust and love, then your money has not been wasted," said Vincent.

Flossie was less articulate and wagged her tail as she licked off the last flecks of chocolate from her beard. My hair was short and grey like Flossie's. But I dyed it blonde, almost white, and it had been precisely cut. Flossie and Vincent, my loyal friends. Do not try to find other similarities.

Flossie farted contentedly and Vincent's acid-green eyes narrowed as he screwed up his nose.

"I've got an idea," said Vincent.

"I'm all ears," I replied but he didn't smile.

"Ask the young woman who copied me to paint something else for you. See what she can do on her own. She's obviously talented. If you like it, buy it. If it's dross, no loss. Make a deal with no strings. Well?"

It is just like Vincent to have considered the artist's point of view. But I didn't come up with a better plan so that's what happened. We kept the fraud and enjoyed it all the more knowing that Vincent had been created just for us, by fair means or foul. That made Vincent more secure, once he knew he was going to stay put. He opened up quite a bit. We swapped secrets, gave advice and laughed at the right moments.

Patrick met the young woman in a bar in Ponsonby and six weeks later we had blue angels roaring out of a rusty bathtub. It hung above our bed. The first in a series. Angels flitting above a pile of pillows, angels with gossamer wings reading The New Zealand Herald, angels with thigh-length boots riding wild pigs and, best of all, angels feeding devils with huge glossy chillies. The Breakfast Show aired the story and Patrick helped Petra organise her first exhibition.

Patrick gave up a lot of his time and introduced Petra to gallery owners, journalists and his brother, Cameron, who hosts a chat show on television. From the way she laughed and cocked her head throughout the interview, I guessed that Petra's interest in Cameron was more than professional. Petra didn't need much coaching, she had a nose for success. She gave up copying modern greats and devoted her time to painting angels and getting her face seen. Rumour had it that Brent and Petra got together. When I asked Patrick about it, he just laughed and said Petra had more sense.

At first Patrick put up a fight when I refused to marry him. What was the point when I couldn't have children? Diamonds are not my scene and white has never suited me. I was not being pig-headed to prove a point, I simply prefer being Laila Verbeek to Mrs Hampton. As much as I would sometimes like to, I cannot rub out my past and pretend I am a Kiwi. My father's rusty barge on the Prinsengracht canal, my mother's beige foundation cream and the smell of lemon over a white beer, these are mine for keeps. Over the years Patrick has come full circle. Last week I heard him tell Brent that marriage was superfluous.

Patrick worked as a family lawyer. He saw no virtue in ambition and declined the offer of a partnership. He liked regular hours.

The house was mine. We chose it together but I paid for it with my inheritance from my parents. Patrick appreciated my style and I am happy to tell you that there was not one frilly or flowery thing in the house.

Patrick always met Petra at bars. He never said much about her or discussed her paintings with me, so I invited her over for dinner. Even small parties are something Patrick and I do well together. Petra bought me a selection of handmade chocolates and winked when she gave them to me. Her eyes said one thing and her body another. Petra's hair fanned out around her face in a mass of tight golden ringlets. It looked as if she must have scavenged a few hundred Barbie dolls and stuck their scrunched-up curls on top of her scalp. I swear Vincent grinned the entire time she graced our house. Oh Vincent, I thought you had more taste.

"Hi Vince," said Petra, lifting her hand in a mock salute as she greeted her painting.

"He's forgotten his English," I said lightly, "but he speaks perfect Dutch if you address him respectfully."

"You'd think he'd learnt Kiwi by now," she tut tutted.

Petra hitched up her dress and wagged her chunky black boots at Vincent's face.

"Remember these?" Petra laughed at their private joke and I felt a stab of curiosity.

"If he'd been left to Julio Paz, Vincent would be a native Spanish speaker by now, drinking rioja in Argentina," said Patrick with an amused smile.

"Sit down, Petra, and tell us about your new work."

Petra was bored of her angel theme and asked Patrick's advice. She showed us photographs of all her works in progress and vowed the upcoming exhibition would feature something utterly different.

Flossie walked towards her and wagged her head over Petra's lap. She had been drinking and a spray of water splattered across Petra's red dress as Flossie's beard bobbed up and down. Flossie sniffed her and Petra crossed her legs before Patrick called Flossie to his side.

As I served slices of brown bread with mozzarella and rocket sprinkled with fresh basil and walnut oil, Petra leapt up and kissed me.

"That's it. Laila you're a genius!" She clapped her hands together like a child. I swear I heard Vincent giggle but I just raised my eyebrows to encourage her to continue.

"Don't you see?" Petra asked Patrick.

"Something to do with food?"

"Oh, Patrick, sometimes you're so literal. Look at the colours. Green and white against a brown background. What does that combination make you think of?"

"Birds in the forest," I suggested, winking at Vincent.

"Hmm," Petra was still looking at Patrick, "yeah, maybe."

"Tell us what you have in mind, Petra." Patrick was smiling but I could tell he was ruffled.

"Maori chiefs in all their glory. Wearing a feather robe, carrying a spear beneath a moonless night. It's a better symbol to send up than my angels and it's not PC."

"Do some sketches and then we can decide," said Patrick without conviction.

"Could be too kitsch," I said, "paint one chief holding a spear and you'll be labelled a clichéd artist forever more."

"Maybe Laila has a point," conceded Petra. "Forget the spear but I want to do something with one of the chiefs."

Several months passed before I saw Petra again. Patrick gave me vague generalities about her progress and Vincent and I amused ourselves with the rise and rise of an artist who began life as a con merchant. The leaves outside my window uncurled and transformed the streets into a haze of shadow and suggestion.

"Theo would like her," Vincent decided, one spring morning.

"Why?"

"She sticks to her deadlines, doesn't have tantrums and each new exhibition brings her more attention."

"She might be flavour of the season but I doubt if she will be remembered once she's gone." I gave the required assurance.

"Her mouth," Vincent sighed. "And such intensity in her eyes."

"You don't...?"

"Hadn't you guessed?"

"No," I said honestly, "I had no idea."

"And I'm not the only one." He opened his green eyes wide but his mouth zipped shut.

Vincent was as stubborn on canvas as he was in life. The more I pushed him for an explanation, the more he stared out trying to convince me he was no more than a jigsaw of colours. I climbed upstairs to the roof garden and smoked a few cigarettes as I watched my neighbours plant aloes. I resolved to confront the problem. I marched straight up to Vincent and banged on his frame.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I wanted to be sure," he said evenly.

"What makes you so sure now?"

"I've watched him, seen the way he stands in the middle of the room, staring over my shoulder. Patrick was right about one thing. I rely on my eyes."

"You should have warned me," I hissed, unable to control myself.

"It's not my fault."

"It was your idea that brought them together."

"People always blame me," said Vincent morosely.

"Go on, act the victim."

"I wanted to see her again, to watch her move."

"Not you too."

"Petra." He sang her name as if there were at least four syllables.

"Don't," I snapped, "just don't."

Patrick arrives home early and puts fresh lilies in the vase and lights the ivory candles that intersperse the flowers. When I stare into the series of reflections of white against ivory seen through glass, I feel myself falling to the bottom of my kaleidoscope. For a second I wonder if I have grasped the pattern, seen things the way they really happened. Patrick opens a bottle of Pinot Noir and hands me a glass before sitting down. We both stare at the flickering flames. From the silence that follows it's obvious we are watching different images tease and disappear in the scarlet flames.

I glance at Vincent, needing a cue to launch me into my speech but he looks away. Every time I try to catch his eye his focus slides around the lilies. Vincent cocks

his head to one side, bandage up, proving he doesn't need to play deaf. I don't need reminding and am hurt but not surprised that Vincent's nerve is weakening. He never did like a battle.

Before I can think how to start, Patrick stands up and faces me.

"Laila, it's about Petra," he says a fraction too loudly.

"I already know."

"Who told you?" Patrick looks surprised.

"Vincent."

"Vincent?" Patrick looks confused for a moment and walks towards Flossie. He strokes her short fur with rapid movements.

"I'm afraid there's more to it," he pauses, straightens up and stares across at Vincent on the opposite wall. His eyes scan the painting seeking clues in the arrangement of colours but Vincent has ducked out of the picture.

"Petra is pregnant."

I can tell Patrick has rehearsed this, just as he does before he goes into court, the way he says each word so precisely. He looks cheated when I don't say anything.

"I'm sorry Laila," I ignore his outstretched hand. "I know you wouldn't want me to lie," his voice deepens.

"It's not just the baby. I tried to stop seeing her but then I realised I couldn't. I didn't want to stop."

For a second I see Petra's red dress lift and swirl as she dances in the candle flames. I can sense Vincent's face draining of colour at the sting of Patrick's words but he does nothing to help me. Trapped in a spiral replaying his own rejections Vincent starts to whimper. Patrick clears his throat expecting me to say something. Flossie picks up the tension and pads a triangular pattern between Vincent, Patrick, and my curled body on the black sofa.

"I'll go and pack," he says quietly.

He waits for me to give him permission to leave but I am unable to move or speak. It is only after Patrick shuts the front door that I react. I stare at the flames as they throw spectacular shadows over the white petals. Flossie whines as I leap up and smash the vase to the ground. Glass, water, candles and lilies splatter across my feet in an ugly pattern. Like a mad woman I pick up a shard of glass and gouge out Vincent's acid-green eyes.

