

October 2007 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

The Art War by Maris Morton

The members of the Jerragong Art Prize Committee always met in the family room of Yvonne's comfortable old house. This afternoon they'd already dealt with the minutes, business arising and treasurer's report when Yvonne asked the secretary, Carly, for the correspondence. As the only communication they were expecting was confirmation from the bank that Head Office had approved their contribution of a substantial prize, they were a bit surprised when Carly didn't at first reply; instead, feeling their eyes upon her, she blushed deeply.

She cleared her throat. 'Nothing from the bank yet,' she told them, filling the expectant silence. 'But...' After a silent pause she opened her bag and drew out an envelope, looking down at it as if it might bite.

'Well?' Yvonne was impatient. 'What is it?'

Carly sighed. 'It's from Celie.'

The silence in the room deepened like an indrawn breath. Yvonne was the first to ask, in her normal brisk tone: 'Well, what's she on about this time?'

Carly unfolded the sheets of paper, pressing out the creases before passing the document over to Yvonne. 'Read it,' she said.

Yvonne scanned the laser-printed pages and began to read the text aloud. 'She says, as a courtesy,' at this word Yvonne looked at them over the top of her glasses, 'a *courtesy*, no less, she's sending us a copy of a letter that she's written to the Arts Council, the Australia Council, and the Ministry for the Arts.' Yvonne put aside the top sheet and scanned the one beneath. 'Which consists of - surprise - another hysterical diatribe about

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the crusade being waged by the local arts coterie (that's us), led with singular malice by Samantha Hardcastle,' here Yvonne aimed an admonitory finger at Sam, 'that's destroying her career as a nationally-recognised artist. She goes on to demand that the Arts Council, the Australia Council, and the Ministry for the Arts put a stop to this campaign of vilification forthwith.' Yvonne put the pages aside, her face expressionless. 'She doesn't say how she expects them to do this.' She sent a brief, compassionate smile across the room to Sam, whose face was pale with shock and dismay. 'Sorry about that, Sam. She hasn't given up, evidently.'

The five women sat in silence. This was nothing new, just another skirmish in a war that had been going on ever since Celie had moved into town and failed to win a prize in the biennial art competition. Naturally, as soon as they'd realised how upset she was they'd tried to appease her with kindness and make her feel welcome. But these efforts had failed dismally, and in the end, after several fruitless - and embarrassing - meetings with her, they'd agreed that she was a difficult person and it would be best to ignore her ravings. Still, the stress of being in the firing line was wearing them down. It was especially hard on Sam, always the main focus of Celie's rage, and probably the one least equipped to withstand it.

'That's the first time she's brought out the big guns,' Diana observed. 'I wonder if people in high places take any notice of letters like this?'

'Probably get a truckload every week.' Yvonne grimaced. 'There's something about art that brings out the madness in people. Present company excepted, naturally...'

'Still, it's awful for Sam,' Carly commiserated.

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But Sam resisted the temptation to wallow in their sympathy: they had a meeting to get through. She sorted the papers in her lap and looked across to Yvonne. ‘Okay. What’s next?’

These women had been organising the art prize from its beginning, ten years ago, and nobody knew better than they did that beneath all the organisational details there ever flowed an undercurrent of local politics. In a country town like theirs you couldn’t expect anything else. Individually, there were times when they wondered whether the Prize was worth all the fuss, but the question was never raised at meetings because that would call into question the value of all the hard work they’d put into it over the years.

Yes, of course it was worth it, they told everyone. They loved every minute of it. The whole town flocked to the exhibition in the Town Hall. They got to meet a distinguished judge, and feel connected to the greater world of art. As well as that, the Prize gave them a chance to put their own work on display, and, if they were lucky, to sell it.

‘Yes, let’s get on,’ Diana agreed.

Yvonne checked off the arrangements: ‘Judge all set, likewise his billet; Mayor okay to open. Wait a minute: we’ve checked the Town Hall booking, haven’t we?’ She looked at the others with concern. One year they’d failed to double and treble check, and found at the last minute that some dimwit had double-booked. Naturally, the Rotary ball had taken priority over the doings of a group of mere women...

Diana was quick to reply, ‘Yes, I did it ages ago, and again yesterday.’

Yvonne crossed that item off her list. ‘Prize money all present and correct?’

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‘Except for the bank,’ Carly contributed, ‘but the rest are all set, and I managed to up Bob’s to \$750 this time. I’ve got the invoices all ready to send out as soon as the bank confirms.’

‘I wish they’d get on with it,’ Diana sounded irritated; her husband was the bank manager. ‘I’ll stir him along.’

‘That’s the only hold-up now, so you’d better,’ Yvonne agreed. ‘We need to finalise the entry forms and get them to the printer in plenty of time. Nobody wants to make any more changes?’ She glanced around at them. ‘Last chance? Speak now or forever hold your peace...’ They all shook their heads. ‘O-kay.’ She pushed papers into the folder on her lap. ‘Then I think we’ve earned a coffee.’

When she went out to the kitchen Sam went with her. As they waited for the kettle to boil Yvonne took in Sam’s pale, set face and put an arm around the younger woman’s shoulders. ‘You mustn’t let her get to you, Sammie,’ she said kindly.

Sam shook her head. ‘I know. But it’s hard...’ She tried a smile.

Back in the family room the others had sorted their papers and filed them away, the business of the day over. Sam and Yvonne brought in the coffee and carrot cake and once everyone was served they settled down for the best part of the afternoon.

With her mouth full of cake Janet asked, ‘Have you finished your paintings yet, Sam?’ They all entered something, but Sam was the one who most often won a prize.

‘I’m doing two this year,’ Sam told them, ‘and they’re just about finished. Landscapes, again. I think they’ll be okay.’ A smile lit her face. ‘I found the most amazing old tree...’

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‘Ha, Miss Modesty,’ Janet snorted with a grin. ‘If you think they’re okay, they’re bound to win something, hey?’ None of them resented Sam’s success. She really did paint well, putting her heart into it far more than any of the rest of them did. They could tell themselves that if they put as much effort into their work as she did they’d do well too, but they knew deep down that it wasn’t true. Apart from the passion, Sam had an awesome level of technical skill, which was remarkable seeing she’d never been to art school. At the same time, and knowing all this, they’d been surprised when she’d won the major prize in that first competition. After all, entries had come in from all over the State, from professionals as well as amateurs like them. They’d listened with a new respect as the judge explained that he’d chosen Sam’s work for ‘its honesty and lack of pretension combined with a sophisticated grasp of tone and colour.’

‘If she does, we’ll have to watch out for fireworks,’ Diana predicted. ‘That’s what sets Celie off: Sam winning.’

‘And Celie not winning,’ Janet reminded them. ‘What I can’t understand is why none of the judges has picked her work. Most of them have been into Post-Modernism, and that’s what she says her stuff is.’

‘Maybe it’s not even good Post-Modernism,’ Diana suggested. Sam stayed out of these discussions.

‘But she *says* it’s good!’ Janet protested, mock-seriously. ‘She’s shown her work in *Sydney!*’

Yvonne took up the role of devil’s advocate. ‘I can understand her disappointment, you know. She does put a lot of effort into it.’

‘Yeah!’ Janet jeered. ‘Gluing dead birds onto bits of old crate.’

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‘Don’t forget the tampons,’ Diana reminded them, and they all shuddered.

Yvonne just smiled and shrugged. ‘It must mean something to her,’ she suggested.

‘Pity it means nothing to anyone else,’ Janet objected.

‘What I can’t understand,’ Carly offered, her tone thoughtful, ‘is why, if she’s had such a huge career in Sydney, she bothers to enter our little competition. Why isn’t she still exhibiting there?’

It was a question that had occurred to all of them but there was no obvious answer.

Yvonne, the mediator, had a suggestion. ‘I was thinking that maybe I ought to go and have a chat with her. You never know, it might help...’

This was greeted with a respectful silence. ‘That’s brave of you,’ Diana offered. ‘If you’re willing to stick your neck out...?’

At Yvonne’s offer Sam felt a rush of relief. She really hated all this enmity and anything that had even a remote chance of ending it had her vote. She’d tried, herself, once. After the scene Celie had made at the opening that first time, when Sam had almost died of embarrassment and hadn’t been able to sleep properly for days, she’d braced herself and gone around to Celie’s flat, trembling inside, but with her resolution bolstered by the fervent wish to avoid any repetition of that horrible scene. But the whole thing had been an embarrassing waste of time, and with hindsight she resented the amount of nervous energy she’d wasted on it.

The thing that bugged Sam was the injustice, the madness of it all. She wasn’t ambitious. She was content with her life. She loved her painting. It was a way of celebrating the beauty of the landscape, the feeling of abundant life that teemed all around her, the play of colour and light, the dry golds of summer, the greens and blues of

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winter. Painting was something separate from her life as wife and mother, and she treasured the hours she could spend on it.

The injustice of this latest outburst was particularly distressing. While Sam had no ambition for her work to be appreciated by a wider audience and certainly had no plans to apply for any grant or favour from any of the big arts organisations, the knowledge that her name had been put before those influential people, wearing the label of a spiteful trouble maker, was profoundly upsetting; and she had no idea how to stop the lunacy. What would Celie come up with next? Sam's heart was heavy with dread.

The only good thing was that Yvonne - brave, resolute Yvonne - understood how she felt and was going in to battle on her behalf.

But at the next meeting, Yvonne's news was disappointing.

'I don't think I achieved anything,' she reported. 'She was polite enough and listened to what I had to say, but I had the feeling that it wasn't sinking in; it was as if she just didn't quite have the nerve to throw me out.'

The others looked at her unhappily. They'd really hoped for some kind of a breakthrough this time. If even Yvonne had failed, what other weapons did they have?

'Did you ask her about the letter?' Carly wondered.

Yvonne nodded. 'Of course.' She sighed. 'She really believes that we, and you in particular, Sam, are out to destroy her career, so it's quite legitimate for her to fight back with whatever weapons she can lay her hands on.'

'She's mad. Barking mad,' Janet said.

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‘Mad she may be,’ Carly commented, ‘but that letter doesn’t sound mad. It sounds as if she has a genuine axe to grind. There’s nothing loopy about it; there aren’t even any spelling mistakes.’

‘It’s a worry,’ Diana agreed. ‘But I can’t think of anything we can do about it.’

Arrangements for the Prize reached their climax. The bank came good with their promised cash, bumping the prize pool to an impressive figure. Entries had come in from all around the State, and after a Herculean effort by the committee and their husbands and families, they’d all been hung and the Town Hall looked magnificent. The catalogue was due from the printers any minute, the catering for the opening was all organised, and the judge, the personable Justin Stuart, was hard at work. They’d selected him not only for his present position at the State gallery, but because before that he’d been head of the Visual Arts faculty at their regional University, and was familiar with the local community and its landscape.

Janet went around with him as he deliberated, not because he needed her help, but because she always found it fascinating to listen to an expert’s comments, and he seemed to enjoy having an audience.

She couldn’t believe it when he stopped in front of Celie’s entry, which this time consisted of a series of Perspex boxes. A strong miasma of decay was hanging in the air around it.

I hope he likes it, Janet told herself; he must understand Post-Modernism and if he gives her a prize that would solve the problem nicely. But Justin was laughing with disbelief.

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‘Well,’ he exclaimed. ‘Celie Huddleston lives! We all thought she’d given up and gone home.’

‘She lives here now,’ Janet told him. ‘This is her home.’

He gave her a sharp look. ‘Celie made this #### thing,’ he rubbed a finger over the plastic surface, leaving a mark in the dust, ‘in her final year of College,’ he explained. ‘I’m sure it’s the same one. Look, those poor bloody fish are biodegrading nicely...’ Sure enough, the base of each of the boxes was carpeted with a fine layer of decomposing particles.

‘When was that?’ Janet asked. None of them had ever met anyone who’d known Celie before she’d turned up in Jerragong.

‘Oh, seven or eight years ago,’ he recalled. ‘The year before I was called to higher things.’ He gave self-deprecating grin, and Janet thought he really was quite charming. ‘She failed, incidentally,’ he told her, moving on.

But Janet wasn’t ready to let this pass. ‘Failed?’ She had the idea that nobody failed visual art courses. ‘Why did she fail?’

Justin gave her a kind smile. ‘Well, for a start it’s not even well-made.’ He turned back to run his finger around one of the boxes, pointing out a bad join that was probably where the foul odour was escaping. ‘I imagine she was trying to make some kind of statement about death and decay, but it’s all been done so many times before, by better artists than she’ll ever be, that we simply couldn’t allow her to pass.’ He grinned at her. ‘*Appropriation*’s all very well, but sometimes the line dividing it from *plagiarism* is a very, very fine one.’

‘Oh!’ Janet breathed, taking in this new information.

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At the opening ceremony the Mayor spoke entertainingly and nobody was too surprised to hear that Sam had won one of the major prizes. Everyone was glad, too, that Diana and Carly had done well, and Janet had sold a drawing. In fact, as soon as the announcements were over there'd been a bit of a feeding frenzy among would-be buyers, and red stickers had proliferated like a rash.

Janet waited until the crowd had all gone home and the committee members were cleaning up and counting the night's takings before telling them her news. As soon as they had the hall to themselves she called them to attention. 'Girls! Listen to this! We've got her cold!' The others looked at her, puzzled. 'Celie, of course,' Janet explained. She went on: 'That wonderful artwork,' she indicated the odiferous fishes with a sweep of her arm, 'doesn't conform to the rules. It's seven or eight years old. The rules say, and correct me if I'm wrong,' she grinned around at each of them, knowing that she wasn't, 'that the work has to be not more than two years old. Not so?' The others nodded mystified agreement. 'So it would have to be disqualified.'

'Are you sure about that?' Yvonne asked.

'Yes,' Janet was definite. 'She admitted it.'

'What?' They were all listening now.

'Yes. You missed it, Yvonne, but it was really quite exciting.' She paused. Now that she had their attention she wanted to make the most of it. 'As soon as Justin had finished announcing the prize-winners,' she began, 'Celie marched up and demanded to know why he hadn't given her the bank prize, which was evidently the one she'd set her heart on. Obviously, she didn't remember him from College, because she really took to

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him, foaming at the mouth as only Celie can... Luckily, since *he'd* remembered *her* only too well, he managed to keep his cool.'

They were listening, picturing the scene. Janet went on. 'Of course, when he was so calm and reasonable she *really* went ballistic! Wait till you hear this...' She stopped and drew a breath. 'She actually accused him of *having his way* with our Sam, only she put it much more crudely than that, and *that* was why he gave her the prize! Can you believe it?'

It took a second or two for this to sink in.

'But he's gay!' Diana protested. 'Isn't he?'

'That's not the point,' Yvonne imposed reason. 'It was a stupid thing to say.'

Pleased with their reaction, Janet went on. 'Anyway, with that one she'd gone too far. Justin took to her, in that quiet voice, reminding her that she'd been an abject failure at College and as far as anyone knew hadn't done any work worth a damn then or since. "What right do you have to call yourself an artist?" and so on, still in that calm voice, politely waiting for an answer before he went on but of course she didn't have one, "when there are real artists here who create from their hearts, with honesty and integrity, yes, and often even with impressive *skill!*" Both barrels!' She paused and looked around at their faces.

There was a brief silence. Then 'Ulp,' Diana said.

'Quite,' Yvonne agreed.

Sam was grinning like a Cheshire cat, wordless. Carly hugged her.

'And then what happened, do I hear you ask?' Janet went on.

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‘And then what happened?’ they all asked, glancing at each other with unconcealed glee and speaking in unison.

‘And then,’ Janet went on, ‘Celie just stood there as if he’d hit her. White as a sheet. Then she turned around - I think it would be fair to say she turned on her heel - and marched off. By this time there was quite a little audience standing there, and they parted like the Red Sea to let her through, nobody offering to touch her or offer her a word of comfort. Then they just closed ranks again as if nothing had happened.’ Her grin was so wide that her eyes had all but vanished. ‘Somehow I don’t think our Celie has much credibility left.’

They were silent while they digested this news until Yvonne spoke. ‘Then Celie must have been...’ she shrugged her shoulders, ‘...just *fantasising* about being an artist.’ She was thoughtful for a moment. ‘That’s... so sad.’

‘And we believed her,’ Sam said, wonderingly. ‘We let her be a monster, when she was really only a clown.’ She searched for the right words: ‘Maybe if we hadn’t been so quick to cast ourselves as her victims, we’d have managed to pity her.’

‘Or simply ignore the silly woman...’ Janet said.

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