

A witty portrayal of family rivalry

**A
BLANK
CANVAS**

**Robert
Hollingworth**



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For Robert Hunter, 1947 - 2014
An artist and friend who never conformed

1 The Abstractionist

How could he be eighty-one already? Looking out through his one decent eye, nothing appeared to have changed at all. It was only others who saw the decline, the body marred and blunted from a lifetime of misuse, the virility draining away like the blood of a slaughtered ox. To other people, he was *past it*, positively archaeological. But looking out from the inside of his raw-boned skull, Giles Paumen lacked this credible evidence and could easily purport to be the man he always was, despite the commiserative gasps of those a third his age. *Doltish neophytes*. Long before they were born, he was a great artist.

The darkened dining room in which he stood was not his own. Rather, it was the home of his elderly sister-in-law. Yes, she was *elderly*; she'd cheerily accepted the appellation and, what's more, maintained a home just as antiquated. He couldn't imagine living in such stuffy Victorian conditions, let alone sharing its poky interior with the handful of mopish guests who were standing behind him. Giles kept his back to them, preferring to face the ornate mantle on which sat a photograph of his wife at twenty-three. The picture had been placed there especially for this solemn

occasion. With one finger, he nudged the chrome-edged frame and his wife, now dead, turned respectfully towards him.

The photograph was taken on the lawn outside the Keswick Reception Centre the day they'd married. Fortunately, Giles wasn't in the picture. He had worn a fawn three-piece suit, and he winced at the thought of it, at his readiness to conform. He hated the way men dressed back then. *Tidy* would describe it perfectly: short-back-and-sides, cardigans, pleated trousers, shoes so well shined you could see, theoretically, right up a lady's frock.

In the distant background of the photo, he noted for the first time a gardener pushing a wheelbarrow. What was he doing at their wedding reception? The year was 1960, which Giles could readily recall because Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* had just been released, and both he and Helen wanted to catch a screening of it before they dashed off on their honeymoon. *Their honeymoon*: what a voyage of discovery – they'd hardly ventured beyond the hotel's in-ground pool.

The framed picture of his bride sat above a fireplace, ostensibly still in use. Giles looked into the dark, arched recess and noted the blackened bricks, the result of a hundred years of burnt fuel – how many trees had gone up this one chimney? A large vase of flowers sat in the cavity, a colourful spray of delphiniums and freesias interspersed with sprigs of eucalypt, a species with round leaves similar to the trees he and Helen used to walk among on their property, Chatsworth. Those were the days: that beautiful woman, now dead, full of vitality and optimism, performing any task with bountiful grace. Giles conjured an image of her lying naked in front of their own big open fire. He recalled the heat and

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hiss of green timber, the light of the flames licking across her pale, young skin. Now dead.

Murmurings behind him drew him into the present. Giles was suddenly aware of the compression of Helen's friends, old and new, who had come to pay their respects. Yet Giles remained turned away. He assumed a reflective pose and feigned a moment of bereft melancholy that enabled him to ignore them a little longer. Was he being disingenuous? 'I'm alone,' he muttered gloomily, and as the idea took shape, he felt obliged to grasp the mantelpiece until a semblance of strength returned to his legs.

There were few present who actually knew him, though Giles felt sure they'd want to say something, to reassure him: Helen was *a remarkable person, a dear friend, a great loss, one of a kind*. All true, of course. Yes, he would say, yes, yes – and *yes*. But he would not face that obligation just yet. Instead, he chose an action quite opposed to the accepted norm – yet wasn't it one of his artistic creeds, to act contrary to deadening social dictates? He unzipped his trousers and, while gazing at the youthful picture of his deceased wife, urinated full stream into the fireplace, aiming a little to the left of the elegant vase of flowers. The brassy rivulet trickled out onto the Delft blue tiles of the hearth, dust particles rolling with it, and as if by some unseen force, first one guest then another reeled and angled towards the door. Only one among them – a middle-aged collector of Giles' own paintings – saw fit to do something. She stalked off on glossy-black high-heels to alert the man's granddaughter.

Sophie rushed in as Giles was readjusting his trousers.

'Grandad! Are you mad? This is Gran's wake, how dare you play one of your stupid, selfish pranks!'

‘What do you mean, *prank*? Can’t you see? I’m making a point.’

‘*A point*? What point?’

‘Isn’t it obvious? I remember a time when one never had to explain one’s actions, when one could rely on the intelligence of –’

‘Enough, Grandad!’

Sophie ordered Giles out of the room. Upon reaching the wide entrance hall, she asked a child to stand and unceremoniously pressed her aged relative onto the Queen Anne padded chair, its legs thin and bowed not unlike those of its new occupant. She stood in front of her grandfather, her feet apart, and Giles noted her lean, stockinged legs disappearing beneath the shortest skirt he’d seen since 1966. She pointed a thin bare arm straight at him, a freckled missile tapering to a forefinger aimed at his chest.

‘Stay there, Grandad. Don’t go anywhere.’

He looked up at her, his one good eye small and rheumy, a pale halo surrounding the grey iris. Sophie stared back, daring him to defy her. In the excellent light coming through the front door that stood open to welcome new arrivals, Giles’ face was clearly illuminated, a crazed mess of spots, lesions and dirty pores. His ears were large, his nose somewhat bulbous, testament to a truth about ageing: all that was left to evolve was the size of those three perfectly adequate appendages. Wispy hair floated down almost to his collar, and through it his sun-ravaged scalp was clearly visible, an index of all those years painting *en plein air*. His lower eyelids hung heavily, a glassy film at their rim that spilled down his pock-marked cheeks.

‘Really, Grandad. Pissing in the fireplace?’

‘If Jackson can do it, why not me?’ he said miserably.

Sophie had the distinct feeling he was not only referring

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to the famous American painter's bad behaviour but also to his achieved fame. It was the lament of all ageing artists, she imagined: the accomplishments of people like her grandfather were not adequately acknowledged. No doubt, the great Giles Paumen believed he deserved more, considering his six decades of dedication to the subject.

Her heels clicked on the stone steps leading to the back garden. Where was her great-aunt Dawn? Across the clipped grass, Sophie spied her father leaning casually against a wrought-iron gazebo, with a few white roses hanging down so close to the top of his head that he appeared to be wearing some sort of unusual women's millinery. Predictably, he was talking to a youngish woman in fishnet stockings and a black dress half a size too small, her pale chest having no alternative but to spill from the stressed fabric. She held a cigarette at arm's length, and her other hand pinched the stem of a champagne flute between three astonishingly long, red fingernails. Inappropriately, she released a barking laugh and Sophie's father reciprocated with a generous presentation of his new, dental veneers. He stood favouring one leg, four fingers of his right hand inserted into the pocket of his grey jacket, his thumb hooked clownishly on the outside. He cocked his head a little. Such a shame to interrupt them.

'Dad, you need to attend to Grandad. He thinks he's Jackson Pollock.' Sophie ignored the woman. 'He's just pissed in the fireplace. The dining room. I've cleared the guests, but someone has to clean it up.'

Laurence frowned. 'What? Where's Dawn?' He craned his neck, scanning the immediate vicinity without appreciably altering his pose. 'Where's the laundry? Dawn will know.'

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‘Is your grandfather alright?’ The woman with the black dress and compacted chest drew Sophie’s attention. She noted the vivid magenta of the woman’s lips, which had been transferred to the rim of her glass, to the white filter of her Karelia Blue, and to her father’s dimpled cheek, missing his lips by millimetres. Sophie went to speak but her father interrupted.

‘He’s okay, the least of our worries.’ Laurence looked at his daughter. ‘Do you want to find Dawn, or shall I?’

Sophie stormed off in the direction of the side gate. No doubt her great-aunt was out on the footpath still greeting arrivals. She wasn’t. Instead, Sophie found her on the garden path instructing one of the caterers. The young man held a neat stack of cloth napkins, jewels of perspiration poised on his incompetently shaved lip. Sophie ignored him and explained the situation to Dawn, who was visibly dismayed.

‘Where’s Laurence?’ she groaned. ‘Can’t he attend to it? I’m rather caught up right now. Could you do it, love?’

And so it was that Sophie went full circle, back to the dining room via the laundry, with a bucket, gloves and a large roll of paper towel. On hands and knees, she held her breath and dealt with it. She wanted to be angry but felt instead an overwhelming sense of loss. Gran was gone, forever. But was her grandfather going as well? How different he was from the robust man she’d idolised at Chatsworth. Clumps of sodden towelling came up ashen brown. She dumped them into the bucket and tried to conjure a different man, a tall, swaggering one from her childhood, so agile, so charming.



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On the other side of the hallway, Giles noted an irregularity in the wallpaper, a patch worn through to a different pattern underneath. It was probably caused by the handles of walking sticks that had once been placed in a mahogany umbrella stand, now empty, still positioned against the wall. Giles observed the raking light; it caught the worn region beautifully, a whole universe right there in Dawn's hallway.

Park him in the passage, would they? Well, it so happened it suited him nicely, qualifying him to stay well away from the disagreeable proceedings. Guests passed right in front of him, though he refused to raise his eyes above the procession of scissoring legs. As each passed, he kept his good eye fixed on the worn region of the flocked wallpaper and decided his own assessment had brought that tiny universe into being. On the other hand, perhaps it was always there and it didn't require the attention of an old abstract artist to justify its existence anymore than he required the attention of this endless parade of –

'Hello there, nice to see you.' Some garrulous fool paused right in front of him, blocking the view.

'I've been told to stay here,' Giles declared, and glanced up long enough to identify the man's haloed visage. He used to be an art critic for one of the newspapers. Giles tried to remember whether the monster had ever penned a kind word about him. Probably not. *Critics criticise just as plumbers plumb*, he'd once told an auditorium full of undergraduates, clarifying nothing.

He heard glassware clinking in another room and a cork popped – a distinctive sound more typically signifying festivity. Giles huffed. He could hear the polite chatter of acquaintances catching up when otherwise they would have no intention of it, taking the

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opportunity to drink good wine guiltlessly in the middle of a hot day. He looked down to see a big glass of red in his own hand – who had put it there?

Dawn came through the front entrance attended by a small throng and disappeared down the antique passageway. Ah, *Dawn*, what fond memories. Perhaps he should have told Helen about his liaison with her sister. Too late now. But would anything meaningful have resulted from such shared information? In truth, he wished he hadn't been told about his wife's own brief affair. The beauty of the past must remain with those who'd experienced it, or with those who were never there, nothing in between.

His sister-in-law shot past a second time, her haste clearly identifying her as the host for the day. She did not seem to notice Giles. They still enjoyed each other's company yet, oddly, neither had ever raised the subject of that sudden infatuation of 1963. More than half a century ago, the year Laurence was born.

Dear Laurence; out in Dawn's backyard chatting up Brandon's ex-wife. He was Giles' only child. *We should have another*, Helen had tried to insist. *Let's not ruin the planet*, he'd countered, but perhaps he should have been a little more circumspect. He'd once said that if a species were to survive, it needed to reproduce itself and one other; especially true, he'd added, when it came to artists. He and Helen hadn't quite managed it, popping out just the one. But a *conceptual* artist? Why couldn't Laurence have been another abstractionist? No doubt his son was a product of his times, just as they all were – in another era he'd have been a cubist or a neo-romantic. But at least his son had created a granddaughter – what better reason for having one's own child? Where the hell was Sophie, anyway?

Once more his view was impaired, this time by a pair of rather unusual knees, and he looked up to see Rebecca Maine, the owner of the gallery that represented him. She beamed down benevolently and began with all the appropriate phrases – *sorry for your loss, wonderful woman, we'll all miss her* – before moving on to the subject of art. Giles gulped his wine and swirled the sediment in the big-bottomed glass. Whatever happened to claret? Rebecca suggested they should do another show of his work, soon. That *soon* might very well have been a polite qualification to cheer him. Or it could have been the generic *soon*: some bloody indeterminate time between now and his imminent death. Though it wouldn't surprise him if she didn't wait for the latter, a time when he was just dust blowing off the cliff at Portsea. It would make the show profitable, at least. Giles sighed. Nothing wrong with a bit of cynicism.

Rebecca Maine continued her reassurances, going on and on about the importance of gestural painting at a time *when digital technology is so mainstream*. Giles could feel a fart approaching, a neat bubble of gas working its way purposefully along his colon. He decided to allow its progression and, as she emphasised the importance of his perseverance at this difficult time, he released it in small increments, deftly, silently and, to his olfactories at least, without the slightest hint of malodorousness.

Helen would have laughed. What a gift to share a life with someone entirely relaxed about bodily functions – a kind of intimacy rarer than one might think. What about the day they'd stood side by side and urinated off the seawall at L'Escala! It was to honour the spectacularly good luck of having found each other, and a defiant gesture towards a future when nothing at all could

dislodge their shared happiness. *Pissing with the wind*, they'd declared.

And today, in the fireplace. Well, what of it? *I'm an octogenarian widower*, he could have protested, *and if Helen was here, no doubt she'd* –

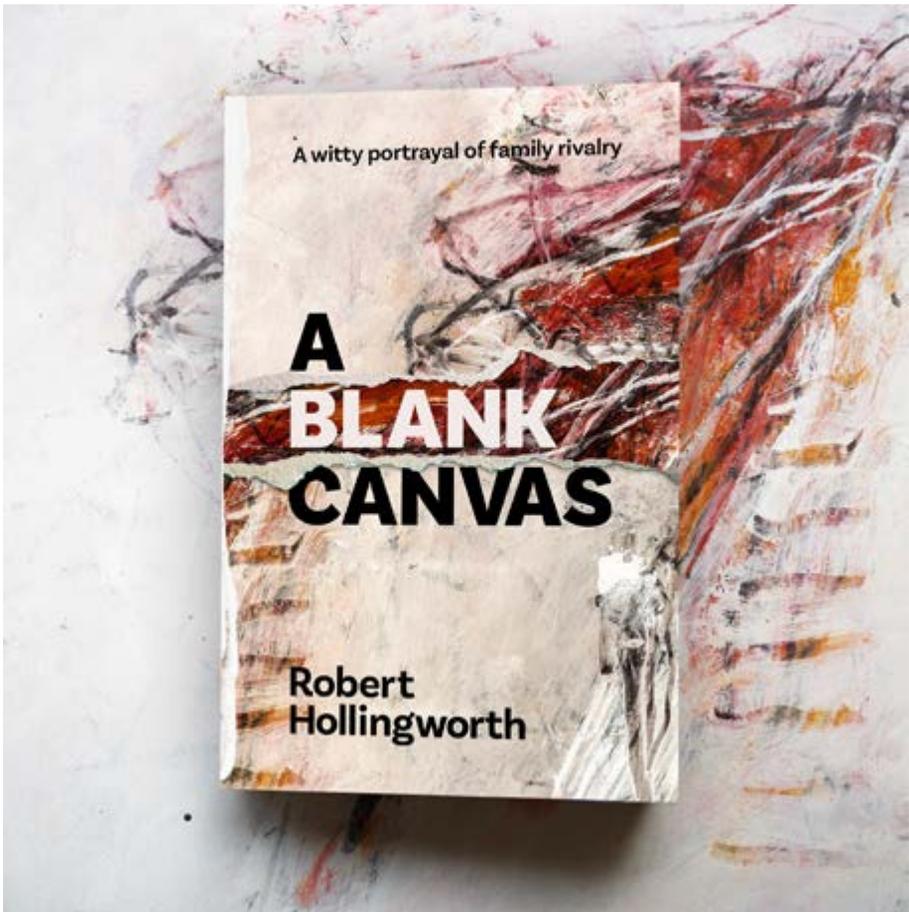
'You okay, Grandad?' Through a watery film, Giles looked up at the lovely young girl before him. 'We're all going into the garden now,' she said. 'You might like to say a few words. Feel up to it?' Sophie placed a hand gently on her grandfather's shoulder. 'I'll leave you to collect your thoughts,' she said and abruptly vanished.

Giles looked again at the floor. *Say a few words*. Of course he would. When was he ever short of words? In the past, he'd been called upon to explain the entire history of art, the theory of postmodernism, the workings of the existential mind. Though what words could possibly convey the beauty that had just recently disappeared from earth?

He swiped his face, conscious of the loose skin sliding compliantly beneath his palm. With his vision cleared, Giles was surprised to see a tiny infant crawling along the empty passageway, thumping its pudgy fists on the patterned hallway runner. It raised its bobbing head, too heavy for such a frail neck, and fixed its gaze upon him. Its eyes were of the clearest blue Giles had ever seen. A string of saliva fell from the baby's pouting lip and connected to the worn carpet. The sunlight, refracted from the bevel on a hallstand mirror, touched that viscous drool with such astounding elegance that the man was moved, once more, to tears.



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