

*This short story won the New South Wales, Australia, Society of Women Writers National Short Story competition in 2021*

## THE ARTIST

Most days he sat on a small stool at Manly seafront. In summer he wore a paint-stained Leonardo da Vinci tee-shirt he'd picked up years ago in Italy. In winter, he pulled a grubby jacket over it. He hid his face under a battered hat worn low on his forehead, over his unruly hair.

He sketched pencil portraits and charged ten dollars for them. He signed them *Grob*, a nickname from his former life, when he was Graham Richard Oliver Bentley, Captain, Australian Special Forces Task Group in Iraq 2006... Service number...

Grob got used to people discussing him as if he didn't exist, suggesting he was 'on the spectrum' or wondering why the police didn't move him along more often.

'Ten bucks minimum—or whatever ya think it's worth!' he said, when he turned the image towards the sitter.

Grob liked leaning back against the sea wall and watching them discuss its merits in front of him. Should they give him more than ten dollars?

'No, Sharon, ten's enough. *Jeez*—he's got your nose wrong... look...'

He never handed over the portrait until he'd stuffed the payment in the pouch round his neck.

'Much obliged,' he growled.

He figured that's what they expected—a talented, growling weirdo.

### **Early March 2020**

He was packing up for the day when he heard someone murmuring in Arabic. He turned round, reaching instinctively for his weapon. He shook his head. *You're in Manly, idiot!*

A woman in her twenties stood in front of him, arm-in-arm with an older man.

'He's very skilful, *Baba*,' she said in her own language.

*Baba* meant Daddy. At first glance he'd assumed she was a youthful wife.

'Hello,' she ventured.

He picked up his pad and pencil and raised his eyebrows.

'Ya want a portrait?'

'Maybe my father... not me. I'll ask him.'

She translated with a smile, her father hesitated, then nodded. Grob frowned as he sketched. The man looked familiar, but how could he be?

'We're ya from—originally?'

'Iraq,' she paused, 'But we live in Liverpool now.'

Grob already knew they were Iraqi. He'd worked as a volunteer in Baghdad during his gap year. He learned Arabic, taught English, loved the ancient history. Following a family tradition, Grob enlisted in the Army in 2001. The ADF paid his University fees, in return for eight years' service.

### **September 2006    Iraq**

US Intelligence was on Captain Bentley's case again. Aerial reconnaissance had sighted insurgents in a town fifty kilometres outside Baghdad.

'Take a patrol. Check it out. *Over.*'

The house-to-house search found only terrified families huddled in corners of shattered homes. In the town's small museum two curators rushed to store precious artefacts in a cellar. They backed against a wall while the soldiers, weapons ready, searched the dusty building.

'Nothing, sir!' Sergeant Roberts reported.

The floor shook under their feet from the dull thud of an explosion, then another. The Sergeant's walkie-talkie crackled.

'Enemy mortar fire five kilometres away, sir. Best get out.'

'Okay, take over Sergeant, give me a minute.'

Captain Bentley turned to the curators.

‘Let me help...’

Grob had gone over that decision in his mind a million times. His duty was to stay with his men. Instead, he wasted precious time helping take ancient artefacts into the cellar.

When he got outside he choked on the dust, which rose from the wasteland at the edge of town. He ran towards the truck, laughing as the driver punished him by accelerating forward. His unit in the back egged him on, yelling an *Angels*’ song at him: ‘*Am I ever gonna see your face again?*’

He woke up in a US military hospital in Germany. A shell had demolished the truck. He was the only survivor. He never forgave himself.

### **Early March 2020**

A seagull squawked, jolting him back to Manly and the seaside; the swish of the surf, the smell of fish and chips. He finished the drawing and looked up.

‘Not good in Iraq, eh?’ he said.

The woman nodded and told him how her home town was bombed in 2006. Her father worked in the local museum. When he got home, their apartment block was in ruins.

‘My mother was killed,’ she frowned. ‘Even now, my father can’t forgive himself for looking after antiquities, instead of her.’ She shook her head.

Grob smoothed his hand across the sketch and passed it to her.

‘I’m sorry for your loss. No payment.’

She remonstrated, then thanked him and linked her arm through her father’s. As they waited to cross the road, she turned and waved. He nodded, watching them disappear into the home-going crowd.

Grob finished packing his things in the rucksack and threw it over his shoulder. In the Hotel Steyne, a few of the regulars greeted him as he ordered a beer.

‘Colourful locals,’ he heard a tourist comment as he leaned on the bar.

**Late April 2020**

Grob's old terraced house was in a street just off Manly Esplanade. It belonged to a former army buddy, Bingo. Every week, Bingo lost most of his Army pension in the pokies and drank the rest. Grob paused by the gate with his bag of shopping. The usually busy street was deserted now because of the Corona Virus lock down... but someone was around.

'Hi there!'

His neighbour, Sienna, was sitting on the Juliette balcony of her recently renovated house. Dressed in gym gear, she cradled a goblet of white wine in her lap. She waved and flicked her blond ponytail.

'Yeah, g'day, 'Grob touched his hat as he looked up at her. She leaned over the flimsy white-painted rail, her breasts fighting to escape from her top.

'When's Bingo gonna start renos on your place?'

'Dunno.'

She wasn't fazed by his curt answer and launched into her favourite subject. His semi and that *knock-down* next door would look *amazing* after a make-over.

'Stephen and Jeremy have *tons* of ideas for it,' she waved her wine glass at a *bijou* semi across the street.

'Ask the man, 'Grob grunted. *It's my home, fuck off*, he thought. He pushed open his rickety gate.

He hadn't seen Bingo since the Covid 19 lock down in March. Grob assumed his mate was semi-conscious on his couch, placing bets on his phone and drinking his way through the crisis. Stephen and Jeremy usually avoided Grob. Sometimes they called out '*Ciao*' on their evening *Passagiata*. Now they had a government-sanctioned excuse for ignoring him, and his house with its his scruffy front garden, broken fence and scratched front door.

Sienna was still talking as he put his key in the lock. It was *devastating* that her gym *Fit For All* was shut!

'Hey, the neighbours are doing Anzac Day dawn tomorrow. Synchronising the *Last Post* on our phones,' she leaned over slopping her wine. 'You should of got a flyer. *Wow!* You got a new hair cut?'

Grob shrugged and pushed the door open. *Should of!* he muttered.

'See ya!' she called.

The narrow hall was dark after the bright light in the street. Grob dumped his shopping on the kitchen table and went to his studio. He stood in the doorway, arms folded, and inhaled the satisfying smell of paint and turps. The evening sun shone through the ancient skylight as Grob observed the portrait of the Iraqi man propped on the easel. He'd finished it yesterday from the rough sketch he made when they met in March. No more final touches, he thought. It's done.

'F...ing good!' he said, echoing Sergeant Roberts's favourite words.

In the kitchen Grob stowed his shopping in the antiquated fridge and cupboards. Although he'd collected bits of furniture over the years, he knew the place looked like a squat. Anyway, he didn't encourage visitors. He sat down on a chair, avoiding the rip in the padded seat, and sorted through the post on the table. He found the Anzac Day flyer.

*'Dear Neighbour... stand in your driveway at six a.m... bring a torch or candle... Covid 19... isolated... unite on Anzac Day... Lest we forget.'* He crumpled the paper and threw it at the bin.

After Iraq, Captain Bentley had no stomach for Anzac Day or the dawn service. He deleted emails from his old regiment and ignored the Facebook page. Because of him, several children had lost their dads that day in Iraq. How could he march and honour the fallen when he was culpable?

In Iraq, they would believe *Kismet* brought him and the curator together again in Manly, Grob thought. Like him, the Iraqi lived with his guilt. But unlike him, he didn't have the opportunity to publicly honour the dead.

**Anzac Day 25 April 2020**

Captain Graham Richard Oliver Bentley opened his front door at 05.58 and adjusted his medals against his worn suit jacket. Shoulders back, he marched to his gate. He heard his neighbours gasp in the pre-dawn silence. On the first note of the *Last Post*, he raised his arm and saluted his fallen mates.