

John Ravenscroft

Sentinel

Peter came into my room last night. He lay beside me and whispered into my ear. He told me that things are going to change, told me that his friends are coming for him soon, coming for both of us.

I wish I could believe him - but in my heart I know he's deluded.

This morning I watched him in Art Therapy.

Dr Lombard was towering over him, talking and talking in that oh-so-understanding way of hers, puffing herself up, making him feel even smaller than he really is. She talked at him, not to him, *sotto voce*, but all the time looking down her nose, self-fascinated, wrapped up in being Dr Wonderful, Dr Important. I saw Peter wince as she gestured towards his painting, her elegant hands dancing like a TV weather girl's. I saw her lips pucker and pout as she whispered one of her Therapeutic Comments.

Dr Lombard has a way about her. A way of reducing you, shrinking you down to less than nothing. I don't like her at all. I don't like her soft voice, or her pretty face, or her attractive figure. I don't like the fact that she has such power over us.

'Changes are in the air, Melissa,' Peter told me last night. 'I've been watching for them, waiting for them, and now they're in the air. I can almost smell them.' He sounded so sure, so full of confidence.

But this morning in Art Therapy he wasn't like that at all.

When he glanced across the Recreation Room and found me at my easel, I fixed him with my third eye. I opened it wide and tried to feed him, tried to channel my strength and my comfort into him, but the poor man can't accept such gifts, not yet. He still doesn't know his own worth, doesn't really believe. Try as I might I can never get him to open himself up to the truth.

'Peter?' I mouthed, but he couldn't hear me.

I could see he was agitated, confused, upset by whatever Dr Lombard was telling him. Her good looks intimidate him, I know. He has a particular thing about her nose, about the way she looks down it. That's partly because his own nose is so... unfortunate. It's angry-red and sponge-ugly from the drink, broken and bent from the kicks it received when he was living in the gutter. When he's upset he taps the side of his sponge-ugly nose, hops from one foot to the other, makes little deep-down squeaks and squeals of distress that only I can hear.

I watched Dr Lombard position herself directly in front of him - and I felt my anger growing. I know Peter, I know his buttons, his switches, his internal wiring. And so does Dr Lombard. I could tell he was suffering agonies of embarrassment. He's not even five feet tall. He had no option but to stare into the terrifying cleft that separates Dr Lombard's perfect bra-less breasts. It's always seemed to me that she parades herself like this on purpose, although I suppose it's possible she's simply oblivious, aware of nothing but The Amazing Dr Lombard Show looping through her idiot skull twenty four hours a day.

Stupid woman! I don't care how many degrees and diplomas she has, how many letters she scrawls after her name. They mean nothing.

Eventually she moved away. Peter watched her go, relief flooding across his poor, life-battered face. In celebration I added a rich blue curve to my painting, a looped line from egg to doorway. For those with eyes to see, it signified his relief - and the promise of what he was to become.

Dr Lombard headed for her office. Notes to write up. Such bullshit! In truth she'd just be tapping out yet more meaningless psychobabble to fatten our files and her own sense of self-worth. She has no notion of what Peter really is, of what I really am. No notion at all. To her we're just problems to be solved. Churchillian puzzles wrapped in enigmas surrounded by mysteries. I suspect that makes her uncomfortable. During my time here I've noticed that Dr Lombard hates mysteries. Lack of understanding unsettles her.

Well, perhaps she has good reason to be unsettled these days. Days and days and days. Every dog has one, says Peter. *And our days lie just around the corner, Melissa.*

I wish I could believe him.

Returning to my work, I spent a few moments thinking about Winston Churchill. I decided I'd have references to him in my painting - a good fat cigar burning at both ends and a black dog and a black hat. A bowler, I thought. A nod to René Magritte. I've read books about both of them during my various incarcerations and I remember details with ozone clarity. Like the moment I realised that they too were Sentinels. They'd been charged with the task of watching over my father, just as I've been told to watch over Peter. During the war my father's life had been saved on several occasions. That was Churchill's doing, aided by Magritte. The world had never made aware, but then that's hardly surprising. The world is rarely aware of anything.

On the other side of the Recreation Room, Peter was back at work, brush in hand, concentrating hard. To look at him you'd never have guessed how special he is. But then, how many truly special people actually look special? And how many people who do look special - the Dr Lombards, the beautiful, the rich, the famous - are in truth nothing but flashing glitter on hollow shells?

I'm not allowed to cross the room and take a look at his painting - Dr Lombard would chain us to our easels if she could - but if I were I know what I would see. Another spaceship. Peter always paints spaceships in Art Therapy. He has over two dozen now. At first glance you'd probably say they were identical, but you'd be wrong. There are subtle variations, tiny differences: an extra landing-light here, an alteration in the angle of a supporting strut there. With each new painting Peter tries to produce an accurate picture of the vision stored inside his head. He always fails. How could he not? His vision is false - but I've yet to convince him of that. His delusion is that one day, when he gets his painting just right, the spaceship that brought him here will finally return and take him back to where he belongs.

'Back home, Melissa,' he says. 'Back home.'

There is such need in his eyes. Such longing. At moments like that he almost breaks my heart.

'Peter,' I say. 'You must try to understand.'

'My sweet Earthling,' he says. 'I understand everything.'

Peter believes that his home is a blue-green planet much like Earth - he painted it for me once - orbiting a type G2V star in the outer fringes of the Andromeda galaxy. He believes he's an alien - which of course he is, although not in the sense he imagines.

'When I was bleeding in the gutter, Melissa, when they were kicking, the truth came to me and then I understood. I understood everything.'

'I know, Peter. I know.'

'And when you came I saw golden lights and heard noise and thought my ship had returned. But it hadn't. It was you, Melissa. You came with your golden lights and scattered them, those thugs, and the pain went away. And I remembered how you'd helped me. And I was grateful.'

'Yes.'

In my own paintings - I do watchtowers, eyes, telescopes, things suited to a Sentinel's duties - I always include a small group of figures. One lies on the ground, curled up in foetal position, hands protecting the head. Six other figures surround it, kicking, stamping, a drunken frenzy of violence. There is blood pooling and running towards the drain. An eye watches. A hand reaches from above.

'What do these figures mean to you, Melissa?' Dr Lombard invariably asks, her voice low and slow and oh-so-concerned.

Almost as invariably, I say nothing.

She points with her long, elegant, weather-girl fingers. 'This figure on the ground - am I right? Is it you?'

Stupid woman. She sees nothing, understands nothing, knows nothing. She is nothing.

One time I lied and said yes, correct, she was right, it was me. She was delighted. I watched her nod carefully. I could tell she sensed a potential breakthrough and was afraid of saying the wrong thing, afraid of closing me down again. The stench of her perfume made me feel sick.

'And tell me,' she said, actually licking her stupid, pretty lips, 'if you could say something to that figure on the ground, what would it be, Melissa?'

I had her complete attention at that moment, had her almost panting for my answer.

'I'd say...'

'Yes?' She leaned closer, her breasts invading my personal space.

'I'd say... always remember to wear a bra when you're on duty.'

I enjoyed the startled expression in her eyes for a second or two, then pointedly dropped my gaze.

She glared at me even after I'd turned away to continue with my painting. Then she spun on her heel and stamped back to the safety of her office. It's a fond memory I have. I re-run it often.

A while ago I noticed Peter had begun rocking from side-to-side. He looked excited.

Sometimes, late at night, I find my way out of my locked room - how is not important - and into Peter's. I tempt him, tease him, make him watch me undress. Each time he is just as shy as the time before, but I am infinitely patient with him as we make love. Afterwards I wrap him in my arms and spend the night watching over him.

I ought not to have fallen in love with him - a Sentinel should remain detached - but I'm afraid I have. It worries me. When the Others come pouring through the black doorway, I hope they will understand. I believe they will. The Others, I am told, are wise beyond wisdom. We are to them as apes are to us.

But it is wrong to think of these things. Dangerous. I force myself to return to my work.

As I was painting a hint of eyes way back in the darkest part of the doorway, Peter gave a sudden shout of joy. My brush twitched and a blob of white paint landed on Churchill's hat. I looked up and saw Peter racing across the room towards me, his painting in his hands. The other patients were staring at him. Dr Lombard emerged from her office with a couple of orderlies.

Peter reached me and thrust his painting at my face.

'Melissa,' he said. 'Melissa, look! I've finally got it right!'

It was the same spaceship as ever, but there did seem to be something extra about it. Some special quality that I couldn't quite place.

Peter cocked his head and raised a finger. 'Listen,' he said, as Dr Lombard and the orderlies arrived.

'Peter, please take your painting back to your easel,' said Dr Lombard.

'Listen,' Peter said again.

And then I heard it. Engines. The sound of something flying through the air, getting closer, louder.

'They're coming for us!' shouted Peter.

His face was ecstatic and he was hopping from one foot to the other in excitement.

Suddenly I was terrified. Could I be wrong? All this time, could I be the one who had it wrong while Peter had it right? Could it be that his people had finally come to take us?

Or - oh such a thought - to take him? Him alone? To take him from me?

I couldn't let that happen. It was impossible.

As the noise of the spaceship became deafening, I reached out, snatched Peter's painting, and tore it in two. He stared at me, disbelief in his eyes, his jaw slack with shock. I dropped the two halves on the floor.

'Melissa,' whispered Peter, his eyes fixed on mine.

'Peter,' I said.

Sobbing, he turned to Dr Lombard, who wrapped her arms about him, glared at me, then guided him towards her office.

'Peter,' I said. But he wouldn't even look at me.

I turned to the window. Half a mile away a low jet was heading for Heathrow and the noise of Peter's ship was abating. Of course.

I saw the truth.

It was over.

I'd lost him.

I've never been able to cry. Perhaps it would be better if I could.

I stared at my own work, uncertain now what I was meant to do.

The eyes way back in the darkest part of the doorway were red and angry-looking. There seemed to be more of them, and they appeared to be coming closer. Quickly, I added a second doorway, and then a window. I imagined it opening wider and wider.

Changes are in the air. Changes, Melissa.

But as I looked out at what stood before me I knew nothing had changed.