

Louise's Jago Story

I am sitting here writing this story looking at the watercolour picture of Farthings, my home for eleven years, that Jago painted soon after I met him.

I was 15 years old at the time and it was the school summer holidays in 1968. I was sitting in the sunshine on the step of the front porch - a sun trap - wearing my favourite dress. With me were our two West Highland White Terriers, Timmy and Taffy. I had either just let them out or taken them for a walk and the day was too beautiful to leave to go inside.

A stranger walked up the drive - dark haired and I think wearing jeans, a white shirt and a black waistcoat. He was carrying what I later learnt were watercolour painting materials. He paused and said "Shouldn't one of them be black?" At the time there was a Whisky advert with a Black Scottie and a White Westie. I remember laughing. He sat down beside me and explained that he was walking around the neighbourhood to see if anyone wanted a watercolour of their house. Did we want a watercolour? Would any of the neighbours? I said I was not sure if my parents would or wouldn't. He stayed for a while longer and then walked off down the road.

He returned a couple of days later when my mother was at home and asked again. She - much to my extreme embarrassment - responded with a string of questions. Where was he living? Was he making

enough money? He volunteered that he was squatting in one of the large old houses that were then empty (now seriously expensive flats) close to the heart of our village of Gerrard's Cross in Buckinghamshire. Squatting was not then something that common. And in my village, unheard of I think. She ploughed on. Was there water? Electricity? How did he wash? I wanted the floor to open up and me to disappear, especially when she then said that he could use our downstairs toilet. Now, I suspect he was winding her up.

Nevertheless, Jago did get his commission and the family got their watercolour of Farthings. Neighbours whom my parents socialized with also commissioned works from Jago. One of them was Helen, an Australian lady married to an Englishman and the mother of three sons. She had a knowledge and interest in art – more than my mother did! And she did her best to support and encourage this new arrival. I remember being told that Jago was now living in a caravan or mobile home and that he had a partner and a baby with him. I now think the baby must have been Chris Stone who was born in 1968 by his own account. I thought there was another child too and that their mother had been a nurse – she was liked by those who met her and considered to be good for Jago.

Helen took Jago under her wing and arranged an exhibition for him – in an Eton gallery I think. Prior to this exhibition my mother had asked him to paint an oil painting to fit a space in the hallway – it had to be

a certain size and to match the mock red velvet curtains which hung over the front door. Jago obliged. But then he asked to borrow it for the exhibition. Weeks passed. It was not returned despite my mother asking for it more than once. Eventually she declared: 'You have sold it!' He admitted the offence, acknowledged he had got a good price, and promised to paint a copy just as good. It is that oil painting which is now in my home. "The Fancy Dress Party." I now appreciate the likely hidden message behind this painting. My parents gave this work to me when they moved from Farthings to Aldeburgh and no longer had space for it.

At some stage in the next two years, Jago accompanied my parents and Helen and her husband to visit a couple who had supported him, providing him with studio space in a barn – I think this was in Bardon, Somerset. It was from them that my parents learnt of his childhood and the story does fit with what I have discovered more recently. They also bought a painting from his collection in Somerset that I also now have in my home. It has 'Bardon 1968' at the bottom.

My father commissioned him to produce an oil painting for his office. He was at that time working for the firm that made Oil of Ulay perfume. This painting is called 'The Makers of Sweet Smells'. It is also now in my home. My father gave it to me when he changed jobs and no longer had that office. It used to hang over the desk in my study in our home in Suffolk.

I don't think that it was much longer after that commission that Jago moved on – where to I don't know. He came to say good bye with two oil paintings as gifts – one for me and one for my sister. The painting I was gifted has been in every home I and Rob have owned.

After my father's death this year I brought back to our house the watercolour he painted of the house where I met him on that summer's day in of 1968 and another oil painting of Jago's whose buying I have no memory of but I do remember it hanging in the hallway.

When I think back to Jago's departure after playing an important part in the lives of those around me, it now surprises me that there were no hard feelings – just an acceptance that it was time for him to move on. Looking back to my meeting with him on that summer's day I recall an event from my earlier childhood. I must have been about five. I was in the garden with my grandfather and a lovely butterfly had settled on my arm. My grandfather told me to remain still. If I did so the butterfly would rest there for a while, but if I tried to hold on to it the butterfly would fly away.

I see that meeting with Jago in a similar way – he was the butterfly who rested for a while but then needed to leave - and he left happy memories.