

ALEX REECE ABBOTT

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## *When the Call Comes...*

When the call comes, get the hell out of Townhead. Leave your adopted home, your higgledy-piggledy, East End Lascaux. Leave your sunny, top-lit studio above the scrap-metal store. Down the spiral stairs, return the sleeping babbie you've been minding to his sister, playing with her broken toys out on Rottenrow's grimy cobbles.

Leave crying weans and squinty, snot-nosed bairns in the friendly backstreets, rich with life. Leave the mithers gossiping in shadowed doorways, the fathers clustering on the gloomy street corners. Whatever the time, leg it down St James's Road, pass the crumbling, scaffolded tenements with their gaunt, ruddy faces.

Take the first train from Glasgow Queen Street and ride over one hundred and thirty miles, northeast to Stonehaven.

Grab the battered, black *Lambretta* that you store at the station. Fire her up and drive, drive those final six miles to the east coast. Go, lassie, go, as if your life depends on it.

Go to isolation, where you can paint with freedom and power.

The news forces others indoors, but that phone call promising a Catterline bowder draws you out; every storm a gift.

Arrive in time for the wild North Sea to show you her teeth. Land at South Row, your cliff-top perch scoured low by wind and tide.

Seize easel, paints, brushes, rags and boards too. Get outdoors as fast as you can.

Plant yourself on Arbutnott's stone pier. Stand, a monolith against the soft crescent bay. Root yourself in the landscape, capture

this perfect light, this perfect day. Paint between reality and abstraction; this place and you, both liminal. Draw emotion from what your eyes show you, this remote beauty, this perfect storm.

Get up on the brae. Draw, draw, draw. Paint clogging and dripping, make this moment indelible with pigments of oil and pastel. Nothing escapes your eye. Take the temporary, the mundane and make it beautiful.

Choose your unlikely subjects. The gable end of your cottage. The margin where wildflowers meet the crops. The crab creels. Six low-bottomed boats, hunched on the stony shore. The breaking waves.

Look past the picture postcard pretty. Down on the Makin Green, beyond the old stone bothy, the giant bag nets hang from larch pole crosses, waiting for the next salmon run. Find beauty and order in the chaos of golden webs drying in the morning sun.

Burnished happy by the seasons and the work outdoors. Hair, plain and wild, your collar skewiff. Smock spattered with paint. Flat, sturdy shoes. Baggy cords and thick jumpers against the elements. A fur coat for the worst. Draw, draw, drawing since you could reach the kitchen table. Pastel, paint. A scrap of paper, a large canvas. Recto, verso.

Tell her: I don't really know what I'm painting, I'm just trying to paint.

Retreat indoors to your primitive cottage; an earth floor igloo. No electricity, sanitation, or running water. No post or milk. Unphased by deprivation, make do with an outside pump and an open fire. Everything you need lies at your backdoor: garden, cliff tops, fields and harbour, your studio.

Rest, rare rest.

Read, beneath the old lantern that hangs in the window. Kant, Ezra Pound and Burton your companions. And her. Single-minded, not single. Write, write, write to her daily.

Dear, dear her; the tension to communicate, to share, to paint.

Live quietly among the villagers. Earn respect with your iron determination, your quiet, kind, hardworking ways; they will love the tough artist for loving their harbour on the edge. This place speaks to you and you answer in the best way you know. Draw, draw,

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drawn by time and tide, a dozen paintings on the go. When the weather's too bad, no matter. Draw still life from your studio, one eye on the desolate bay.

Rise. Early as you can. Catch the terrific light before it changes.

Draw, draw, draw. Find joy, still and quiet in one place until that place becomes you.

Grab another canvas. Set up, the way you like it. Study the light, the colours, the composition. The skies, the clouds that grow from the sea. The harvest field, coming flowers, the growing colours. Take another view from the same spot, another and another, in different weather—the notion of missing something is unbearable.

Capture it on fine-tooth paper, static, yet dynamic. Bold strokes, so fresh and free they might take flight from the page at any moment. Forceful, delicate, the immediacy of pastel. Score deep with brush end, gouge with palette knife. Collage: metal paper and sweet wrappers. Graffiti, grit, grass seedheads and sand in your oil, accomplices anchoring your work in this moment.

Sit in peace and find the essence, an honest truth.

Tell her: no one comes near and you can work away, undisturbed.

Fall for the country, the sea and the fields behind it. Return to your spot, day after day until you mark that land. Decay and decline do not frighten you. A leaning haystack—tomorrow's fodder—transforms to a brooding monument by a failing fence. Yarrow, tansy, sedges, carline thistle, elderberry and willow. Wind shuffles the barley, the tall fescue sways. True to your subjects, true to yourself. Find the essence. A blasted hedgerow. A wee, wind-blown tree. Beehives. Your white cottage sanctuary on the edge of the village.

No people, yet your landscapes sing, alive.

Draw fieldscapes untamed as your seascapes. Tell her you have found the absolute best, best and most beautiful spot in the village.

Drawn by the wildness of town and country, work in wonder, knowing that as it is being lost, you are being lost.

A blow's a coming, hold fast. From the sliding cliff top, south of the cottages, look back on the grey, stormy day; the bay frothing and fermenting until the pier is almost gone.

Find your spot, face the storm. Fearless.

The skies and the winds; Kale Tap, the rocky mound; the

lighthouse at Tod Head; the Reath fields; the uneasy tumult of Neptune's waves—they cannot escape you. So vast, so many subjects, it's hard to keep up. The silent, snow-bound village, the angry roar implicit in the Kincardineshire coast; find infinite space in nature and the unknown.

Tell her that the more you know of something, the more you can get out of it. Work away, out in all weathers, the grimmer the better, brush fully charged. Paint on boards; they take the gales and rain better than canvas. Relentless, the urgent sea beats and tears at the rocks. Understand the bewitching waves that can sustain; waves that can kill.

Fight the raging storm. Relentless, anchor your easel and hold fast. Drunk on wind and tide, wield your independence against the menacing waves; like this place, beyond any pigeon hole.

Fight the empty board with paint. Where others see sombre black and white, see splashes of colour. Among the constant shift and turmoil, seize a fleeting moment, make it permanent. Paint for hours, express nature's raw power until the breakthrough comes. Cuss and swear, when the gale lifts your enormous board up and flings it face down on the shingle.

Scrape and scrape and start again. Tough, indomitable.

Stand firm. Paint the changing light. Every time it looks a bit different. Face the elements with resilience, day after day.

Mostly, you win.

Hard blows the east wind, churning the sea to whiteness, the shingle bay thick with yellow foam. The blizzard blasts, does not abate.

You do not abate.

Look ruin and decay in the eye directly.

Express it now. Scrape chunks of paint straight off the palette, bang them on your canvas, urgent marks, stronger and more confident, each passing day. Easel anchored down to the shoreline, paint, paint, paint. Never satisfied.

The sky morphs, against the wide horizon, running bright to dreich. The north-east wind bites. The receding tide, the sinister undertow. Great mists swirl, suds from the big, rough seas come over the cottage and into the fields, reclaiming you.

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Immerse yourself. Think of your father, his black dog nipping at your heels, the hound biding his time to walk with you. Occupy your mind; leave no space for the lurking, melancholy cur to feed on doubt.

Battered and salt-crusted, as night closes in, when the ice is too bad and the gale too fierce to bring up your gear, cover it. Fix it down with rocks and leave it out overnight.

If you can, haul your work back up the ice-bound cliff. Drag the heavy hardboard that's bruised and marked, where the gale has torn it from the grip of your G-clamps. Bash the corners as you struggle home.

Work in the face of nature's violence, storm ravaged while another storm ravages you.

Face your ruin. In sickness and in health, you are bound—every living moment, paint.

Time and tide rush at you.

Draw, draw from your last bed.

The light ebbs but you can't stop recording things in your mind.

Tell her: tomorrow, perhaps there will be the possibility of this sun again.

Tell her: I must get it out of me.

Tell her that she is in all the paintings anyway, makers bonded.

The sweeping beam of the lighthouse cuts the water no more.

Face the final fall.

Return in ashes to the land and waters to which you are long wedded.

Every storm your gift.

*Artist, Joan Eardley (1921-1963) is famed for her wild Catterline seascapes painted en plein air. The villagers would phone her in Glasgow's East End to let her know when a storm was on its way so she could reach her cliffside studio to capture the gale in real time before it passed.*