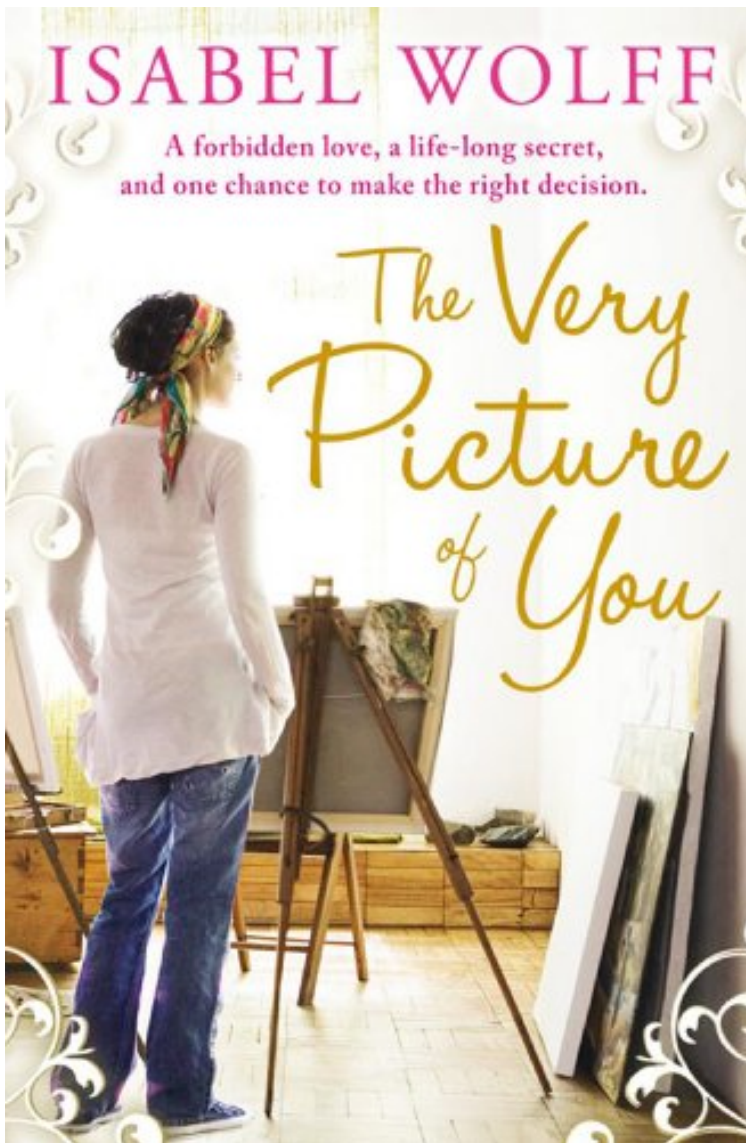


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The Very Picture of You



Par Isabel Wolff
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBecause a picture paints a thousand words.Ella has always been an artist, jotting down pictures from a young age, and now in her thirties she has made it her profession. Commissioned to capture memories, fading beauty and family moments, her sitters often reveal more about themselves than merely their outward appearance.When Ella's younger sister Chloe asks her to paint a portrait of her new fianc Nate,

Ella is reluctant. He is a brash American who Ella thinks has proposed far too fast, so the thought of spending many hours alone with him fills her with dread. But before long Ella realises there is more to Nate than meets the eye.Beautifully inter-weaving the stories of Ella's sitters from the old lady with a wartime secret, to the handsome politician who has a confession to make with Ella's own hunt for her real father and slow realization that she is falling in love with the wrong man, Isabel Wolff delivers a mesmerizing story

that delivers a powerful emotional punch. A truly unforgettable portrait of the many aspects of love.

Extrait One "Sorry about this," the radio reporter, Clare, said to me early this evening as she fiddled with her small tape recorder. She tucked a hank of Titian red hair behind one ear. "I just need to check that the machine's recorded everything . . . ?there seems to be a gremlin . . . " "Don't worry . . . " I stole an anxious glance at the clock. I'd need to leave soon. "I really appreciate your time," Clare added as she lifted out the tiny cassette with perfectly manicured fingers. I try not to glance at my stained ones. "But with radio you need to record quite a lot." "Of course." How old was she? I'd been unsure, as she was very made up. Thirty-five I now decided-my age. "I'm glad to be included," I added as she slotted the tape back in and snapped the machine shut. "Well, I'd already heard of you, and then I read that piece about you in The Times last month . . . " I felt my stomach clench. "And I thought you'd be perfect for my programme-if I can just get this damn thing to work . . . " Through the makeup I could see Clare's cheeks flush as she stabbed at the buttons. And when did you first realise that you were going to be a painter? "Phew . . . " She clapped her hand to her chest. "It's still there." I knew I wanted to be a painter from eight or nine . . . She smiled. "I was worried that I'd erased it." I simply drew and painted all the time . . . Now, as she pressed fast forward, my voice became a Minnie Mouse squeak then slowed again to normal. Painting's always been, in a way, my . . . solace. "Great," she said as I scratched a blob of dried Prussian blue off my paint-stiffened apron. "We can go on." She glanced at her watch. "Can you spare another twenty minutes?" My heart sank. She'd already been here for an hour and a half-most of which had been spent in idle chatter or in fussing with her tape recorder. But being in a Radio 4 documentary might lead to another commission, so I quelled my frustration. "That's fine." She picked up her microphone then glanced around the studio. "This must be a nice place to work." "It is . . . That's why I bought the house, because of this big attic. Plus the light's perfect-it faces northeast." "And you have a glorious view!" Clare laughed. Through the two large dormer windows loomed the massive rust-coloured rotunda of Fulham's Imperial Gas Works. "Actually I like industrial architecture," she added hastily, as if worried that she might have offended me. "So do I-I think gas tanks have a kind of grandeur; and on the other side I've got the old Lots Road Power Station. So, no, it's not exactly green and pleasant but I like the area and there are lots of artists and designers around here, so I feel at home." "It's a bit of a no-man's-land, though," Clare observed. "You have to come all the way down the King's Road to get here." "True . . . but Fulham Broadway's not far. In any case, I usually cycle everywhere." "That's brave of you. Anyway . . . " Sheriff led through her sheaf of notes on the low glass table. "Where were we?" I moved the pot of hyacinths aside to give her more room. "We'd started with your background," she said. "The Saturdays you spent as a teenager in the National Gallery copying old masters, the foundation course you did at the Slade; we'd talked about the painters you most admire-Rembrandt, Velquez and Lucian Freud . . . ?I adore Lucian Freud." She gave a little shudder of appreciation. "So lovely and . . . fleshy." "Very fleshy," I agreed. "Then we'd come to your big break with the BP Portrait Award four years ago-" "I didn't win it," I interjected. "I was a runner-up. But they used my painting on the poster for the competition which led to several new commissions which meant that I could give up teaching and start painting full-time. So yes, that was a big step forward." "And now the Duchess of Cornwall has put you right on the map!" "I . . . guess she has. I was thrilled when the National Portrait Gallery asked me to paint her." "And that's brought you some nice exposure." I flinched, but Clare prattled on, oblivious. "So have you had many famous sitters?" I shook my head. "Most of them are 'ordinary' people who simply like the idea of having themselves or someone they love painted; the rest are either in public life in one way or another or have had a distinguished career which the portrait is intended to commemorate." "So we're talking about the great and the good, then." I shrugged. "You could call them that-professors and politicians, captains of industry, singers, conductors . . . ?a few actors." Clare nodded at a small unframed painting hanging by the door. "I love that one of David Walliams-the way his face looms out of the darkness." "That's not the finished portrait," I explained. "He has that of course. This is just the model I did to make sure that the close-up composition was going to work." "It reminds me of Caravaggio," she mused. I wished she'd get on with it. "He looks a bit like Young Bacchus . . ." "I'm sorry, Clare," I interjected. "But can we . . . ??" I nodded at the tape recorder. "Oh-I keep chatting, don't I-let's crack on." She lifted her headphones onto her coppery bob then held the microphone towards me. "So . . . " She started the tape. "Why do you paint portraits, Ella, rather than, say, landscapes?" "Well . . . landscape painting's very solitary," I answered carefully. "It's just you and the view. But with portraits you're with another human being and that's what's always fascinated me." Clare nodded and smiled for me to expand. "I feel excited when I look at a person for the very first time. When they sit in front of me I drink in everything I can about them. I study the colour and shape of their eyes, the line of their nose, the shade and

texture of the skin, the outline of the mouth. I'm also registering how they are, physically." "You mean their body language?" "Yes. I'm looking at the way they tilt their head, and the way they smile; whether they look me in the eye, or keep glancing away; I'm looking at the way they fold their arms or cross their legs, or if they don't sit on the chair properly but perch forward on it or slouch down into it-because all that will tell me what I need to know about that person to be able to paint them truthfully." "But-" A motorbike was roaring down the street. Clare waited for the noise to recede. "What does 'truthfully' mean-that the portrait looks like the person?" "It ought to look like them." I rubbed a smear of chrome green off the palm of my hand. "But a good portrait should also reveal aspects of the sitter's character. It should capture both an outer and an inner likeness." "You mean body and soul?" "Yes . . . It should show the person, body and soul." Clare glanced at her notes again. "Do you work from photographs?" "No. I need to have the living person in front of me. I want to be able to look at them from every angle and to see the relationship between each part of their face. Above all I need to see the way the light bounces off their features, because that's what will give me the form and the proportions. Painting is all about seeing the light. So I paint only from life, and I ask for six two-hour sittings." Clare's green eyes widened. "That's a big commitment-for you both." "It is. But then, a portrait is a significant undertaking, in which the painter and sitter work together-there's a complicity to it-as though there's a pact between these two people." She held the microphone a little closer. "And do your sitters open up to you?" I didn't reply. "I mean, there you are, on your own with them, for hours at a time. Do they confide in you?" "Well . . ." I didn't like to say that my sitters confide the most extraordinary things. "They do sometimes talk about their marriages or their relationships," I answered carefully. "They'll even tell me about their tragedies, and their regrets. But I regard what happens during the sittings as not just confidential, but almost sacrosanct." "So it's a bit like a Confessional, then," Clare suggested teasingly. "In a way it is. A portrait sitting is a very special space. It has . . . ?an intimacy: painting another human being is an act of intimacy." "So . . . ?have you ever fallen in love with any of your sitters?" I smiled to hide the fact that I found the question intrusive. "I did once fall in love with a dachshund that someone wanted in the picture, but I've never fallen for a human sitter, no." I didn't add that as most of my male subjects were married they were in any case off-limits. I thought of the mess that Chloe had got herself into . . . "Is there any kind of person you particularly enjoy painting?" Clare asked. I paused while I considered the question. "I suppose I'm drawn to people who are a little bit dark-who haven't had happy-ever-after sort of lives. I like painting people who I sense are . . . complex." "Why do you think that is?" "I . . . find it more interesting to see the fight between the conflicting parts of someone's personality going on in the face." I glanced at the clock. It was half past six. I had to go. But . . . "Surely you have enough material now." Clare nodded. "Yes, plenty." She lifted off her headphones, then smoothed down her glossy hair. "But could I have a quick look at your work?" "Sure." I suppressed a sigh. "I'll get my portfolio." As I fetched the big black folder from the other side of the studio Clare walked over to my big studio easel and studied the canvas standing on it. "Who's this?" "That's my mother." I heaved the portfolio onto the table, then came and stood next to her. "She popped by this morning so I did a bit more. It's for her sixtieth birthday later this year." "She's beautiful." I studied my mother's round blue eyes with their large, exposed lids beneath perfectly arching eyebrows, at her sculpted cheekbones and her aquiline nose and at her left hand resting elegantly against her breast bone. Her skin was lined, but time had otherwise been kind. "It's almost finished." Clare cocked her head to one side. "She has . . . ?poise." "She was a ballet dancer." "Ah." She nodded thoughtfully. "I remember now, it said so in that article about you." She looked at me. "And was she successful?" "Yes-she was with English National Ballet then with the Northern Ballet Theatre in Manchester-this was in the seventies. That's her actually, on the wall, over there . . ." Clare followed my gaze to a framed poster of a ballerina in a full-length white tutu and bridal veil. "Giselle," Clare murmured. "How lovely . . . It's such a touching story, isn't it-innocence betrayed . . ." "It was my mother's favourite role-that was in '79. Sadly she had to retire just a few months later." "Why?" Clare asked. "Because of having children?" "No-I was nearly five by then. It was because she was injured." "In rehearsal?" I shook my head. "At home. She fell, and broke her ankle-very badly." Clare's brow pleated in sympathy. "How terrible." She looked at the portrait again, as if seeking signs of that disappointment in my mother's face. "It was hard . . ." I had a sudden memory of my mother sitting at the kitchen table in our old flat, her head in her hands. She used to stay like that for a long time. "What did she do then?" I heard Clare ask. "She decided that we'd move to London; once she'd recovered enough she began a new career as a ballet mistress." Clare looked at me enquiringly. "It's something that older or injured dancers often do. They work with a company, refreshing the choreography or rehearsing particular roles: my mother did it with the Festival Ballet for some years, then with Ballet Rambert." "Does

she still do that?" "No-she's more or less retired. She teaches one day a week at the English National Ballet School, otherwise she mostly does charity work; in fact she's organised a big gala auction tonight for Save the Children, which is why I'm pushed for time, as I have to be there, but in here" "I went back to the table and opened the folder. ". . . are the photos of all my portraits. There are about fifty." "So it's your Face Book," Clare said with a smile. She sat on the sofa again and began to browse the images. "Fisherman" she murmured. "That one's on your website, isn't it? Ursula Sleeping . . . Emma. Polly's Face" She gave me a puzzled look. "Why did you call this one Polly's Face, given that it's a portrait?" "Oh, because Polly's my best friend-we've known each other since primary school; she's a hand-and-foot model and was jokingly complaining that no-one ever showed any interest in her face so I said I'd paint it." "Ah" I pointed to the next image. "That's Baroness Hale-the first woman Law Lord; this is Sir Philip Watts, a former chairman of Shell." Clare turned the page again. "And there's the Duchess of Cornwall. She looks rather humourous." "She is, and that's the quality I most wanted people to see." "And did the prince like it?" I gave a shrug. "He seemed to. He said nice things about it when he came to the unveiling at the National Portrait Gallery last month." Clare turned to the next photo. "And who's this girl with the cropped hair?" "That's my sister, Chloe. She works for an ethical PR agency called PRoud, so anything to do with fair trade, green technology, organic food and farming-that kind of thing." Clare nodded. "She's very like your mother." "She is-she has her fair complexion and ballerina physique." Whereas I am dark and sturdy, I reflected balefully-more Paula Rego than Degas. From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* Engrossing, warm, and downright delightful. Sarah Pekkanen *The Very Picture of You* is a funny, poignant story about the relationships that shape who we are. Isabel Wolff writes about how staying true to ourselves ultimately gives us the things we want the very most. Darien Gee, author of *Friendship Bread* Captivating, seductive . . . This novel reflects how beauty exists in all facets of life, especially in people. *RT Book s* *The Very Picture of You* is absolutely charming. You'll root for Ella, the engaging heroine, and find yourself wishing you could sit for one of her portraits. Whitney Gaskell, author of *Good Luck*