

**THE PORTRAITS
ON THE
WALL**

**FIVE CHERISHED PETS
FIVE SPECIAL STORIES**

Zoë Jasko

Printed edition:

Also available in multiple e-book formats.

Published by:

The Endless Bookcase Ltd,
Suite 14 STANTA Business Centre, 3 Soothouse Spring,
St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL3 6PF, UK.

More information can be found at:

www.theendlessbookcase.com.

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ISBN: 978-1-914151-70-5

Illustrations: **Peter Waine**

Cover Design: **Stephen Hill**

Author photo by **Andrew Mason**

This book is a work of fiction. Any reference to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places and events are products of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual events, persons or pets, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

For Stuart, my wonderful Dad.

I love you forever.

By the same author

*What The Wind Saw: Short Stories
from the Heart of Hertfordshire*

Hope is Daffodil Bright

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoë's third book, *The Portraits on the Wall*, is a collection of five novella length stories inspired by portraits of imaginary pets. It follows hot on the heels of her first novel *Hope is Daffodil Bright* (The Endless Bookcase, 2023) and her first book, an anthology with a twist, *What the Wind Saw: Short Stories from the Heart of Hertfordshire* (The Endless Bookcase, 2022).

A trained singer, she is co-founder and creative director of the Hertfordshire-based Felici Opera, and now, in addition to performing, she enjoys turning her story telling skills to writing and speaking engagements.

Zoë has a BA in French and History (University of Exeter) and an MA in Victorian Studies - 19th Century art, history, and literature (Birkbeck College, University of London). She has been an active member of a marvellous book club since 2008.

She lives in Hertfordshire with her husband and four children.

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Photo credit: Andrew Mason



ENDORSEMENTS

The imagery Zoë Jasko conjures up with her poetic language, where each sentence rises and falls like the cadence of a song to the rhythm of the heart, is every bit as rich and vivid a painting as the pet portraits from which she draws her initial inspiration. Her narrator describes the feeling of ‘sitting at the edge of a picture, up close against the frame’, but her prose takes us over that edge, right to the core of each scene. Her stories of love, friendship, acceptance, loss and personal growth stir more feelings than I can name, leaving my jaw aching from smiling and my eyes stinging with tears.

Anna McNay #TheCriticWithTheDog

Zoë has imagination in abundance and a talent at being able to keep the reader guessing until the very end and it's often unexpected and this, her latest book of five cherished pets, does exactly that. Each story is different and, as a pet lover, had me hooked, playing with the mind and heartstrings alike. I enjoyed them all, but if I had to choose a favourite, it would be ‘Guy’, as he was quite a character.

Zoë's books are for anyone wishing to escape, if only for a moment, and immerse themselves in the wonders of fiction, fact and fantasy and have been a pleasure to read and re-read.

Shelagh Fairbank, author and illustrator

This book will resonate instantly with all pet lovers. Zoë's prose effortlessly captures the many meaningful levels of mutual understanding between two equals. These portraits, both in prose and pictures - are a poignant manifestation and a permanent reminder of those unquestioning partnerships. A new classic has been safely delivered.

Peter Waine, author and illustrator

Winnie - what a beautiful story! Ultimately an uplifting tale about the never-ending bond between dog and human, and how this endures even through the brutality of war. Seen through the eyes of Anna, a freshly de-mobbed former WAAF member, the reader is taken through the emotional ups and downs of her recent life story told to an equally freshly demobbed soldier sharing the same railway carriage. There is fear, despair, anger, and tragic loss.....but in the end the emotions of hope and a lasting love leave the reader knowing.....all will be well.

Kevan Hodges, CEO Ferne Animal Sanctuary

AUTHOR'S NOTE

All books begin their life with a seed of an idea in an author's imagination. This seed could be an event, a character, a scene, a feeling. *The Portrait on the Wall's* seed was the emotional response I had to Peter Waine's portraits of imaginary pets. I looked at his painting of the parrot I named 'Guy' and thought instantly, 'This is a belle époque parrot who now lives on a houseboat in the Lake District.' I saw the little brown and black dog I called 'Winnie' and knew immediately she was a creation of the Second World War, and then asked myself, 'How on earth could you feed your dog when there was rationing?' I held on to my first thoughts about these pets and then imagined their owners and their unique situations.

It is debatable whether a pet recognises themselves in a painting. They certainly don't ask to be painted. We, loving our pets, value their image, we take photos of them and maybe even commission portraits and drawings of their likeness. As a writer, I was keen to explore this manifestation of love and I had great fun thinking of the different ways a painting can be used in a plot.

Whether you are an animal lover or an art lover, neither, or both, I hope you enjoy *The Portrait on the Wall: Five Special Paintings, Five Cherished Pets*.

Zoë Jasko, 2024

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PACO



PACO

The old man lifted the little girl up to look closely at the painting on the wall. It was a small oil canvas of a terracotta dog with a white bridge to its nose and a white muzzle. Its eyes and nose were as black and shiny as the hair of the little great-granddaughter the old man carried in his arms.

“What is its name, great-grandfather?” the little one asked.

The old man didn’t reply. He stayed still, cuddling the child into his chest, looking with elderly eyes at the well-known face of the dog.

“You do remember, don’t you, great-grandfather?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes, Conchita, sweetheart, I remember. I remember.”

Consuelo ran, feet clattering on the old, cobbled stones, away from the wide plaza with the white stone church and along the narrow street which led to the working-class district. Women with woven baskets stood aside to let the bright-eyed child pass, some smiling at her glowing face and flying black locks, others tutting at her lack of decorum.

The street narrowed further as the buildings on either side stretched across the cobbles to meet each other. No doubt they were becoming deaf in their old age and so needed to lean closer to their friend’s ear to indulge in the

quarter's gossip. Yet bright sunlight from the clear blue sky could still find a way through to touch the high balconies and kiss good morning and good evening to the pots of spring flowers that decorated the sills.

Out of breath, Consuelo arrived at her destination and banged noisily on the heavy wooden door.

"Felipe, he says yes. Papá says yes!" she called out, too impatient to wait for the door to open before announcing her important news.

The door swung open to reveal a boy who was still too narrow for his new height. He smiled broadly at his friend and pulled her, laughing, into his home.

"Consuelo, is it true? Did he agree? What did you do to make him say you could go?" the words tumbled from his mouth, pattering like dry beans spilt on the kitchen table.

"Get me a drink. I'm hot," Consuelo ordered. "Then I will tell you."

A brown earthenware jug, newly filled from the pump, stood on the dresser. Felipe obediently filled a wooden cup while she spoke.

"I ran all the way here. I couldn't wait. Once I've told you, then your Papá will know, and my Papá can't change his mind."

She drank the cool water gratefully, noticing again how shabby Felipe's home was compared to hers. Her jugs were glass, filled by a maid with water from the tap. Her family's rooms drank in the sunshine from the wide balconied

windows. Her house boasted a pretty courtyard where vines grew up the walls, and orange trees stood to attention in great ceramic pots. In the centre of her beautiful outside room was a fountain surrounded by expensive blue and white tiles. It was an oasis hidden in the city - a secret place where Consuelo liked to play or read and especially to dance. Felipe's home was small and dark. There was no maid, little sunshine, certainly no pretty courtyard, and no mother.

"I told Papá that your Papá had promised to look after us and not to bring me home late. I also promised to wear my sensible Sunday clothes and not to ask Mamá for a new dress."

That had been a hard promise for her to make. She knew from the servants that all the women and girls wore their best, brightest, festive dresses to the *Feria de Abril de Sevilla*. Consuelo would have loved to go to the fair in party clothes to match how brightly her heart shone in anticipation. Instead, she would wear a sober black dress and sensible shoes.

"It's alright. You will still look lovely," Felipe reassured her. Ever since he was a tiny boy, he had been in the thrall of the charismatic daughter of his father's old school friend.

"Now, come with me and bring your guitar," Consuelo ordered, leaving the empty cup on the table and heading for the door. "I want to dance."

The friends made their way through the busy streets far from the rich quarter of Consuelo's home and far from the poorer district of Felipe's and crossed Queen Isabella's bridge to the side of the river where they would neither be

known nor disturbed. Felipe had picked up his guitar at Consuelo's command. It was an old instrument which had belonged to his father's father, precious to him because of whose it had been and because he could afford no other.

Once Consuelo was satisfied with the spot, Felipe sat down and made music. He played Spanish airs in the classic style, his fingers plucking the strings so they babbled like a brook, he played folk tunes sad and joyful, and when fully warmed up, he experimented with rhythms and melodies of his own. His dark brown eyes were by turns cheerful or thunderous depending on where he felt his heart as he played. Consuelo, for her part, danced to the music Felipe created. She turned and swirled in freedom, free from the niceties of her family and the conformity of the womanhood that awaited her in a future coming closer month by month.

Boats laden with goods passed them, ships from Seville to Cadiz and from Cadiz to Seville. Sailors who noticed the pair waved and smiled. A young lad with olive skin and a serious face watched as he passed on his boat but neither smiled nor waved - only frowned. A dog sat at his feet, alert and expectant, his tongue hanging out, giving the mutt the expression of a smile.

The day of the fair arrived. Consuelo felt like a bright hot air balloon; with any more breaths of excitement, she would burst, and if Felipe let go of her hand, she would float away into the sky. Felipe's father had come to her home to collect her, doffing his hat to his old friend, her father.

The *Feria de Abril de Sevilla* - a cattle fair, a festival, a party

for the inhabitants of Seville, for the dwellers of the surrounding Andalusian villages and tourists to Spain. Consuelo's heart was in her mouth as she gripped tightly onto Felipe's hand, fearing she might lose him in the thronging streets, jostled and nudged by a hundred people as they approached the entrance to the fair. Posters of a white-dressed lady wrapped in a long pink shawl smiled at Consuelo from every street corner. The beautiful lady, advertising the *Gran Feria de Abril de Sevilla 1910*, seemed to be saying to the excited child, "Come with me, Consuelo. Join us at the fair." Her poster companion, a man, held his guitar so that it pointed towards the fair on the poster horizon, his eyes fixed in the direction of this Spanish celestial city, guiding the white-dressed lady to the festival paradise, just as Felipe held and guided Consuelo.

Carried by the crowd, they arrived before the colossal iron gateway illuminated with nearly eight hundred gas lights, shining like a heavenly beacon, forecasting untold joys on the other side. The crowd pressed forward; women bright in red, yellow, green, and blue dresses tight at the waist and wide at the hip from which cascaded layers and layers of ruffles, bedecked in shawls, from black to white with every colour of the rainbow in between; men in their dark Sunday best suits or dressed to match the bullfight, the *corridas de Toros*.

Felipe's father steered the children through the crowd to a Japanese-style temple covered with paper lanterns and decorated with parasols, where they purchased delicate paper fan mementoes. He took them to admire the prize-winning cattle where the bulls stood proud and where the cows were

plump and shining; to the coconut shy, where Felipe struck gold, winning two tough hairy brown coconuts, the stand's plump proprietor stuffing them into a brown paper bag which threatened to tear under its load if not carried carefully by the child's father. He treated them to mounds of pink fluffed candyfloss covering their mouths, cheeks, and hands in sugar as if they had smothered themselves in a cream to soften their skin and sweeten their ecstatic souls.

Consuelo licked her face and fingers with her tongue. She was not at that moment at all elegant. Her mother would have been horrified by her daughter's lack of dignity. But Consuelo threw this thought to the wind. There was only one more thing she wanted to see, one thing so lower-class as to give her mother palpitations - the flamenco.

Felipe's keen ears caught the strains of the *toque*, the guitarist and then all three could hear the *cantaor*, the singer, his baritone voice rising and falling in a *cante chico*, a folk song. Felipe was drawn like a magnet to the source of the sound, dragging Consuelo and his father in his wake, drawn as if his life depended on finding the musicians and hearing them close. A large crowd had gathered around a tent. The crowd was clapping and shouting. Felipe nudged with his elbows and slipped through gaps until he stood, with Consuelo beside him, in the front row of the impromptu audience.

A man in black high-waisted trousers, a black bolero jacket, and a white embroidered shirt was sitting on an upturned wine box, holding his guitar as a beloved creature, absorbed in the melodies his fingers were creating. A second man, the singer, stood close by dressed the same, but his jacket was red. The singer's cheerful song had ended, and

now he was taking the audience to a troubled place of sadness, his voice painting a picture of an Andalucía of old.

“Excuse me, Sir, who are they?” Felipe, wide-eyed, asked a thin man with a goatee beard who stood alongside him.

“They are the Rodríguez brothers, Enrique and Ramón, famous throughout Andalucía - and here is their sister Isidra,” he said, nodding towards a woman with ebony hair pulled back tight into a bun, who stood several metres from her brothers, almost in the arms of the crowd. Her red satin dress gleamed in the golden evening light, and the ruffles at her calves and ankles flowed like red waves as she stepped slowly and languidly to the rhythms dreamt by her brother’s fingers. Around her shoulders, she had tied a black shawl with embroidered red and white silk roses embraced by green silk leaves. Slowly she stepped, shawl tassels swinging, limbs swaying like an almond tree in a gentle summer breeze, raising her arms above her head in graceful *floreo*. The music entered her body through her ears and was carried through her blood to her heart, where she interpreted its meaning in her beautiful limbs. Her sensual movements were silent and hypnotic. Then suddenly, at the very instant that her brothers changed their tone, she cracked the castanets held in an arc over her head and tapped her heels and toes, breaking the reverie.

Consuelo stood entranced. Never had she seen such dancing as Isidra’s. Never had she witnessed such authentic flamenco. Occasionally, she had spied snippets of dancing and heard snatches of refrains as she had passed by the city’s *Café Cantantes*, the coffee houses with flamenco performances, but she had never been taken to watch or

dared to enter alone. She squeezed Felipe's hand to make sure she was not in a dream, and he answered with a squeeze in kind.

A tall youth with olive skin and a furrowed brow watched the children from where he stood among his gypsy kin and scowled. A terracotta dog sat at his feet, his tongue hanging from his mouth in a smile. The mutt's eyes darted from the dancers to the crowd to the dancers. It sat because it had been ordered to by its master, but it was clear for all to see that its passion was with the crowd and the dancers and that at the slightest hint that his master might tolerate his absence, he would be off.

Felipe's father was true to his word and returned Consuelo to her home before the evening was late. She was sticky and dirty but content. Her parents were waiting for her in their pristine drawing room, her mother sitting on a French guilt-lacquered sofa, a book of poems resting on her baby-swollen belly, her father writing at a walnut table nestling in the alcove. He smiled at his daughter,

"So, Consuelo, my treasure, how was the fair?" he asked. "Were the cows worth their prizes?"

"Oh Papá, thank you for letting me go." She ran across the room and jumped onto his welcoming lap, rather too big for that special place but reluctant to give it up.

"Consuelo, you are filthy," her mother commented from her throne. "Alejandro, tell her to wash."

"Candyfloss," he said when he kissed his daughter's cheek, and he winked conspiratorially as he bid her go to her

room.

“Felipe, I want to dance,” Consuelo called from the street to the open window the next day. He grabbed his precious guitar in response and headed with her to the riverside.

“Look, I am Isidra. Watch me dance. You are Ramón.” Consuelo held her arms aloft, turning her wrists and stamping her feet. The Seville sun shone warmly on the pair pretending their flamenco to the audience of sailors on the boats passing by.

A tall gypsy lad with olive skin and dark coal eyes was sitting on the grass, whistling a pipe from wood. His terracotta dog lay in the sunshine by his feet. The lad looked up with scorn and called,

“You will never be Isidra. You can never be Ramón.”

Consuelo stamped her foot. How dare this peasant speak to her in such a tone!

“You should mind your own business. Nobody asked anything of you,” she retorted hotly, and she continued to twirl, ignoring his adolescent rudeness.

The youth stood up from the grass and walked towards Consuelo and Felipe. As if a reflection, the dog got up also, moving closer to the unknown children and sniffing their scents.

“You can never perform the flamenco. You are not gypsy. You will never know how to,” the gypsy lad asserted, waving his woodwork in the air in front of their faces for

emphasis.

“Teach me then!” The words flew from Consuelo’s lips before her brain had considered how to respond, and then for a split second, she wondered if she meant it. This tall stranger was dirty and shabby. He had adolescent spots on his cheeks, and his trousers swung above his ankles. His dark hair was greasy and in a ponytail - a ponytail. What self-respecting young man would wear his hair in that fashion? But what if he knew the secrets of flamenco? She stared at him intently.

“Teach you?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes.” She was sure now.

“How old are you?” the stranger asked.

“We are thirteen.”

“Too old. Flamenco is an art you grow with.”

“How old are you?” she probed.

“Fifteen.”

“So old!”

Felipe was watching, anxiously cupping his guitar to his body to keep it safe, but now he reached forward to protect Consuelo from this gypsy stranger and said, “Señor. We love your music, and we do want to learn.”

An olive branch had been extended. The youth shrugged in response.

“My name is Bartolo. I have been listening. You don’t

play too badly. You seem to have the spirit for your guitar, but her dancing is terrible. I could teach you both, but you will need a *cantaor*, a singer. You are lucky. I like to sing. You must pay me.”

Consuelo and Felipe exchanged silent glances. This was strange. This was unexpected. Consuelo could see that Felipe was hesitant but not her. She would take the risk.

“Of course,” Consuelo agreed. “Meet us here next week.” The bargain was struck.

Bartolo nodded in response but said no more. He turned on his heels and whistled for his dog to follow him. The terracotta mutt turned swiftly, fixed to his master’s side, but then changed his mind, returning to the children with his tail wagging and eyes bright, almost as if to leave without saying goodbye was too rude. The white hair on the bridge of his nose and around his muzzle made his black eyes bright and his dark nose shiny. He looked for friendship with enthusiasm, an enthusiasm lacking in his master. Consuelo squatted to the dog’s height and rubbed his head and ears with her hands, laughing at the dog’s affection and the prospect of real, authentic flamenco lessons with his master.

“Paco!” Bartolo called angrily to his dog. “Come, Paco!”

Paco tore himself away from his new, pretty-smelling friend and trotted happily after his young master.

Consuelo and Felipe returned to the city. As they crossed the Queen Isabella bridge and made their way through the city streets, Felipe wondered how Consuelo would pay Bartolo. He knew she had no money. She had no need.

Whatever she wanted, she was given. He was sure her parents would not pay for dancing lessons with a gypsy boy.

“I have a plan,” she assured him, leading him by the hand past the cathedral to the fountain. Silently, they gazed down at the pesetas, strewn wishes, gleaming in the water.

“No, Consuelo, you cannot use these coins to pay Bartolo. This is money for the church,” he whispered in disbelief as he began to understand her intentions.

“The church has a lot,” she shrugged nonchalantly, and looking around to check that she was not being watched, she dipped her hand into the fountain and fished for pesetas.

“Consuelo!” Felipe was shocked.

“Felipe, it’s fine. I promise I will pay the money back to the church in the future. I will remember how many pesetas I have taken, and I will throw it all back in when I am older, more even. I will take it for both of us. This has nothing to do with you. It is between Bartolo and me.”

“You and our Lord,” he added silently and crossed himself, asking his Saviour in advance for forgiveness.

Bartolo was not a good teacher, at least not at first. Fired by the passion of youth and filled with the flame of the flamenco, he was neither wise nor patient. Their lessons were frequently more filled with shouting than music as Consuelo’s own temper quickened. But one thing was true - Bartolo did like to sing. He had a tenor voice that soared into the blue sky like a wintering swallow, a voice that could tell any story, live any feeling. Paco, too seemed to enjoy the lessons. When the tempo was fast, the key a lively major, he