

## The Accidental Showpiece

I mix the paints slowly. The knife clacks against the pallet as I move it through cool colors.

Today is a sad day.

I watch with detached interest as cobalt streaks the lighter blue, like a tiny freeway running through a prairie. I imagine myself in a car, flying down the road, windows down, symphonic rock vibrating the speakers. It feels...epic. That's the thing about symphonic rock. You listen to it enough, it makes everything feel epic.

Last week, my studio time was angry. I plunged my knives into the paint and slammed them into the pallet, combining apple, blood, scarlet, brick, crimson, ruby, merlot. Red has a lot of good shades. I stood at the easel and waited, groping for a brainchild, summoning inspiration, craving release.

After standing there for nearly an hour, I broke, and hurled my pallet at the easel. The paint streaked down the canvas, reds and oranges running together to form an indiscriminate blob. Panting, watching, I realized that I was hoping the paints would make some sort of intricate design, and it would become an accidental showpiece. 'That's the one', they would say. 'Fire River. She created it in a fit of rage'.

But the canvas ended up behind the shed, stacked against the others, and I sat next to them that evening, forlorn and silent companions. I drank an entire big bottle of cheap wine from the corner store, still in the brown paper bag. A new low for me. I was fuming at first, then sentimental, and then blank, like a painting done in reverse.

Today, I have no ire.

I dip the brush and move it in broad horizontal strokes, vaguely picturing a sky. I'm not sure what I have in mind, so I simply let my hand move of its own free will, rather than trying to impose my puny ideas on the universe. Not that I have many these days, puny or otherwise.

Rain is pounding the roof, perfect for my mood, and it is snug in the studio, warm and dry. I blend the colors, and try to feel the landscape come together. I am the sky. The sky is me.

I add the edge of a pond, reeds, an empty gazebo with white latticework and roses climbing the side. A wide-brimmed hat sits on the steps, the mauve ribbon of the band trailing off the edge.

Who wore this hat? Why did they leave it? Are they coming back?

Tears well in my eyes, and I sit for a moment, contemplating the painting. It is all right. Not great. It is somehow off. The gazebo should be more in the foreground, but it is lost against the enormous sky. Not only that, but I feel like I've seen this painting before...maybe in a hotel room, or my mother's guest bath. I dip my biggest brush into black and slash it across the painting.

Slash.

Slash.

Slash.

This will join the stack behind the shed.

I take another trip to the corner store and return to the studio. Listening to rain on the roof, I wander through the room and sip.

I want to fume, but I lack the energy, so I settle for contemplation. Why can't I do this? What has gone wrong? My earlier successes haunt me. Recently, I have heard rumors of rumors, like whispers on the wind, containing phrases like "washed up", and "has been".

It is true that something has changed. My old ardor burned bright, getting me out of bed in the middle of the night to come to the studio, distracting me from menial daily tasks, consuming my thoughts to where I would feel more real at the imaginary easel in my mind than I did while at the grocery store, or the bank, or cooking dinner in my kitchen.

My passion has cooled, and in its wake I am left bewildered and caged, helpless without the release that I took for granted most of my life.

Painting for the sake of painting, with no inspiration, tends to lead to trite works with badly formed gazebos and spatial issues.

As I move through the room, I catch my shadowy reflection in the antique mirror mounted on the back wall. I am a slight figure in a flowing smock, cradling an oversized wine glass with both hands, shoulders hunched, head drooping. I turn and approach the mirror, fascinated for a moment, closer, closer, until I am there, my forehead resting against the cool glass, staring into my own eyes.

They regard me, wide and troubled. I am struck by how sad they are. There are fine wrinkles beginning to fan out from the edges, but these do not bother me. As a child, I used to think that crow's feet indicated that people smiled and laughed a lot, and that must mean they were kind. I smile grimly, and scornfully reject my early naiveté.

I have since learned that what is behind a smile and a laugh is not necessarily kind or good.

I turn from the mirror and keep moving. Maybe I need to travel. That could provide some inspiration.

Or maybe...just take a break.

The thought instantly terrifies me. This has been my companion, my bread and butter, my best friend, since I was big enough to hold a paintbrush. Take a break? It would be like removing a limb. How do you take a break from your very soul?

But now my best friend, my life companion, is turning on me, refusing to answer when I call, silent and unresponsive. Bitterness wells within me, and I yearn for my art as one would for a lost lover.

The blank canvas sits in the corner by the window, mocking me. As is my custom, I had cleaned the pallet earlier, rinsed the knives, and neatly put all of the paints away in the cupboard. My ritual also includes placing a blank canvas on the easel so it will be ready for next time.

Until recently, I needed a canvas ready, because I would usually burst into the studio with an idea that couldn't be contained for another moment. In fact, it wasn't unusual to be brimming with ideas, but able to choose only one, while the rest clamored like excited children in my head, each insisting that it was their turn to escape, and be born into the world through my brush.

I cross the room and sit at the easel, brooding.

The image of my shadow self in the mirror, despair clothing me like a mourning gown, my big haunted eyes, comes back to me.

What I need to do is take a good long look at myself and figure out what the hell went wrong. That's the only way I can try to make it right again.

A self-portrait seems appropriate.

I open the cupboard and reach for the blacks and grays.