

## Emerge

Branden put down his brush and stepped back from the canvas. It was finished. Before the paint dried, the specter returned, always in the form of the same question he had asked himself since he took up a crayon in kindergarten. Does anybody care? To buoy his spirits, he recited well-worn mantras of positivity like a seasoned Buddhist monk, though an undisciplined one. For the fear of insignificance – the fear no one would remember him or his work for eternity – drove him relentlessly. Someday, he thought, everyone will know my name.

A fierce banging shattered his reverie and he yanked open the door. An acrid cloud billowed from the apartment across the hall.

“Fire!” yelled his neighbor. His face contorted in confusion. “Help me. I gotta get my stuff out.”

“The others,” shouted Branden. “Where are they?”

“What? I don’t know.” The question had not occurred to the panicked man.

The artist felt the grip of the painting behind him. He had bled his soul into the work for over a year. Struggling to calm himself, he pointed across the room and issued his instructions.

“Grab my phone. Call 911 and get yourself out.”

Then he shrugged off his worldly bindings and disappeared into the smoke.

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Weekday evenings are quiet in Grimes. Like most towns scattered across coal country, it offers little away from the television except bars and Baptist churches and, increasingly, whatever pills one can buy or steal or trade for flesh. On Wednesday nights, even the bars are subdued because many patrons have been wrangled by wife or conscience to seek forgiveness.

It's the one night altar call replaces last call as the most popular activity in town. On that particular Wednesday, Jean Dombroski was home with a good book, her emergency scanner tuned, hoping for something to happen. She was the free-lance reporter for the Simpson County Sentinel.

It was mid-December. An early cold front had swept through. In these parts, summers last to Thanksgiving. Mild temperatures are the rule till Christmas. Folks had pulled out their space heaters for the first time of the season, which always meant an uptick in fire calls, so Jean was optimistic that a news story might be smoldering out there, somewhere. She turned off the lights but listened through her slumber to the dispatcher doling out routine calls. Around midnight, the radio crackled with heightened urgency.

“Fire reported at two-story multiple dwelling. Jefferson Street at 25<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Both floors heavily involved. Occupants inside.”

Before the dispatcher could repeat the address, Jean donned her boots. Before the fire station responded, she was out the door.

Jefferson Street was once the backbone of the town. Over the decades, it experienced the fate of most middle-class neighborhoods. Richer folks moved out, chasing dreams of security, good schools, and like-minded neighbors to cookie-cutter subdivisions on the outskirts. The ones who remained lacked either money or health to leave. Poorer folk moved in, most of them hard-working and God-fearing. But you still pay to stay in a poor neighborhood. Many eventually left their investment to the weeds. As homes went vacant, they became crash houses where anybody not run off by a brave neighbor would squat until some anonymous complaint dragged in the reluctant police. The larger houses were divided into small units – maybe four apartments could

be squeezed from one house, if it had once been a show-place residence of an original upstanding family. The house at Jefferson and 25<sup>th</sup> was one of those.

It wasn't the first fire Jean had witnessed, but it was the most ferocious. She yanked her car into the yard across the road, arm out the window, furiously snapping photos. Scrambling out, she kept shooting, looking for the best angle to capture the beast in all its glory. She caught a man in her sights and tightened the focus. He stood shirtless, clinging to a large rectangular object, shielding himself from the heat and the fright. Every few seconds a window shattered and the fire roared, like a chained dragon raging against the night.

Jean rushed to the cowering man, her camera clicking while simultaneously turning on her phone video – a talented multi-tasker.

“Is this your place? Are you okay?” She spoke crisp, loud words that would come through clearly on the video. Victims would not have her presence of mind, she knew, so she thrust her phone near his face, keeping his features squarely in the screen.

“Who... are you?” he stammered.

Jean tried to keep him focused. “What’s your name, sir? Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay, but...”

“What’s your name?” she asked again. It’s important to get a subject’s name at the beginning of an interview. You never knew when things would change.

He stared at the dragon with wild eyes. “Michael Frailey,” he whispered.

“Frailey,” she repeated so the phone would catch it clearly. “Michael, tell me what happened,” she commanded.

“Look, they’re inside.” He pulled free from the grasp of the beast and stumbled away. “Where are the goddamn fire trucks?”

“Who’s in there?” It was one of the six most important questions a reporter should ask. She reeled him back firmly by the elbow.

“Old Miss Alfred. She lives upstairs. And... and Emily, she takes care of her.” He saw, for the first time, the phone in Jean’s hand. Suddenly aware of his chance to explain why he was safely outside and the rest were not, his voice calmed instantly. “I tried to save them, you know.”

“Tell me what happened,” Jean demanded again. “The firemen are here now.” Behind Michael, a helmeted man leapt from a truck and directed his squadron. Several grabbed axes, and others pulled hoses. Jean panned the phone to catch the action.

Michael continued. “I ran up the stairs. It was too late. Everything was burning. I tried. I just couldn’t make it. Poor Miss Alfred. This is bad.” He rocked back and forth, moaning softly.

“You saved something,” said Jean, pulling the object away from his body. It was a painting, freshly completed based on the color on Michael’s hands. “You do this?” she asked.

He tugged back. “Look, I tried to save them people. It was just too hot. I couldn’t get to ‘em. And I was losing everything so I took what I could.”

Chief Turner hustled in and pulled Michael away, peppering him with questions. “Leave that thing with her,” he ordered. “If people are in there, you got to tell me where to find them.”

“I’m with the paper, Michael. We’ll keep it safe.” Jean felt a flush of satisfaction for helping the poor guy.

“Go home, Jean,” said the Chief. She knew from experience Turner hated reporters. There’d be nothing more till tomorrow.

Overall, it was a good night, thought Jean. The video footage would be posted on the website by daylight. Then she’d work up an article for the print edition when she got the victims’ names. A two-fer. Worth some pocket change.

It was not until that moment that Jean closely inspected the painting. The young woman looking back stole her breath.

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Words cannot adequately describe the Girl on the Four-Poster Bed. That's the name her boss at the Sentinel gave her when Jean showed him the painting. Jean studied art history along with all the other kids wasting time in college. She had seen a few masterpieces, most in books. She appreciated good work, and this was stunning, but Gus, the Sentinel's editor, saw more. He immediately tasked her with describing the painting for the article.

"Fires get their attention. People will read the paper to see who died. Then they'll realize what neighborhood we're talking about. If the names aren't familiar, they'll forget the whole thing before they get to the sports. This," he said, holding up the painting, "is the real story: beauty born from squalor. Your job is to make people want more. Do it right, they'll eat it up and ask for seconds."

"Might take a while to find Frailey," said Jean.

"If you find him in time, great. If you don't, tease 'em with what you got." He shook his head in wonder at the portrait. "We can't print a photo of this till Frailey gives permission, which he might refuse even if you do find him. So it's up to you to tell the world about her."

"Simpson County isn't exactly the world."

"This girl might be from Simpson County," Gus nodded to the painting. "But she isn't going to stay here. Get to work," he said. "I need something by the time they release the names."

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*On December 15<sup>th</sup>, fire destroyed the homes and took the lives of three Grimes residents. Firefighters from four stations responded to the blaze, but the house was fully engulfed when*

*they arrived. Despite heroic efforts, Roberta Alfred, Emily James, and Brandon Smith succumbed in the tragedy. Alfred, 74, was a member of the Westside Missionary Baptist Church, but had not attended for some time because of health problems. James was 38 and unemployed. No details about Smith are currently available.*

*One person survived the fire. Michael Frailey, 43, reportedly made several attempts to rescue the others but was beaten back by the vicious flames. With all else destroyed, Frailey managed to save his prized possession, a painting called “Girl on the Four-Poster Bed.”*

*It is not hyperbole for this reporter, who has studied art, to state that the painting is perhaps the most beautiful work I have ever seen. A journalist is trained to be unemotional and report only the facts. Opinions are better left to the editorial page. However, because the work of art cannot be reproduced at this time, it is my responsibility to attempt to convey the sublime wonder of this special portrait. – Simpson County Sentinel (original article in the series)*

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Jean felt her written words failed her. The setting in the painting was unremarkable – a nude on a bed. Nothing unique about that. It was the way the artist played with the light, almost as if it was another color on his palette, that made this one special. The woman was reclined, the left side of her body uncovered and uninhibited, a glow radiating from her skin. Prisms of color projected behind her. Her left arm reached toward the viewer, who instinctively extended their own fingers.

Her right side was mostly covered, details obscured in dark shades that deepened to the edge. Half her body was overtaken by shadow. Her right hand curled into a fist clenching the sheet and drawing it over her mouth.

Her eyes were hypnotic, wide in wonder or fear, depending on which you gazed into. The left was vivid green around a glistening indigo pupil. A tiny reflection was visible there – two hands outstretched to each other, fingers nearly touching. The right eye was dark, the shadow too deep to see the color. A reflection was visible there too, but it was vague, waiting for recognition.

The response, as feeble as Jean felt her description had been, was unbelievable. Messages poured in for days begging the Sentinel to publish a photograph of the piece. Some claimed to know the girl. Some thought she might be their missing sister or daughter or wife or lover. Almost all wanted more. Dig up the story. The artist survived – give us him.

It took a few days to find Michael. A friend with the Salvation Army tipped her off. The residents were not allowed to stay at the shelter in the daytime, so Jean waited till evening. He showed up at supertime and Jean caught him on the sidewalk.

“Michael, can I talk to you more about the other night?”

“You’re that reporter, ain’t you?” he said. “Where’s my picture?”

“Name’s Jean Dombroski. I work for the Sentinel.”

“Dumb what?” he said. “You ain’t from here, are ya?”

“Nope. Polish. Chicago,” said Jean.

“Must have some kinda family makes you want to come here all the way from Chicago.”

He pulled out a cigarette and straightened it. “Got a lighter?”

“Maybe.” She rummaged through her junk until a matchbook surfaced. “Here. Can we talk?”

“I don’t get inside, they start without me. You don’t want me to go hungry, do ya?”

“How about I buy you supper. You like steak?”

“You wanna talk to me bad. But I don’t catch the sermon, I don’t get a bed neither. Got room in yours?” He grinned. Many of his teeth were missing, and the others were in sore need of care.

“No, my bed’s full. I can put you up at the motel on Granger Street.”

“There’s a Holiday Inn by the Interstate. Get me something there and we’ll talk,” he said. His grin widened.

“Done,” she said.

“Two nights. I’m tired of this shithole,” he said, waving to the lighted cross.

“I know the sheriff’s been talking to you,” said Jean. “I’ll let them know where you’re staying.” Jean thought it might intimidate him, but he grinned again.

“They’ll have to put me up too if they wanna talk some more. County jail ain’t that bad,” he said. “But right now, a shower and a big TV sounds real good.”

They talked over steak and more than a few beers. Frailey told her about the custom painted tee-shirt business he lost in the fire. Said they would’ve sold like hotcakes. He told her about the job in the mines until they shut down. He told her about his four children, all from different women who wanted his money but didn’t want him in their lives. He said they were better off without him. He never mentioned the portrait again, until Jean asked first. She showed him the article and the stack of emails.

“People like that thing, huh?”

“Yeah,” she said. “People are interested. I want to know who she is. Maybe the young woman that died in the fire?”

“Nah, that one was ugly, like hard-on-your-eyes ugly, Big scars all over. This girl might just be somebody I made up. Got a good imagination.” He eyed Jean while he wolfed down the coconut pie he ordered.

“How much you think it’s worth?” he asked after his eyes and his stomach were full.

“You can’t tell me who she is?” Jean’s instincts tingled. “Why should I believe you painted it?”

“Who else gonna go in that fire to save it,” he said. “She’s mine alright. You don’t think somebody like me can do somethin’ like this? Shit, an artist gotta starve before he’s any good.”

“How much does a starving artist need to sell his painting?” she said.

“I knowed it was worth something – right off.” He pulled out a penknife and picked out a chunk of rare meat. “You can have it for the right price,” he said, licking his lips.

Jean ordered another two beers. They settled on \$300.00, the price of his last car, and the most she could get from an ATM. She wrote a bill of sale on a napkin and took him to get the cash.

At the motel, she declined his offer to come in a while.

“Come back in a couple days. Might remember something if you ask me nice,” said Frailey.

A day later he was dead under the bridge. He had \$2.36 in his pocket.

After Frailey’s cremation – reluctantly paid by the county because state law required it – and a service at the Blood of the Lamb Assembly – because poor churches are often the most generous – Gus assigned another article.

“You’ve got the painting; can’t reimburse you for it. You’ve got the artist. Now, go tell the story.

“It’s not a pretty story,” said Jean.

“No, but it’s a sad one. It’ll sell papers.”

The Sentinel published the photo, inappropriate parts blurred to avoid offending Simpson County sensibilities, along with a two-page article about the opioid plague. The story centered on one man who overcame his circumstances, if only for a too-brief moment, to bring beauty to a desperate world.

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*Michael Frailey, painter of the remarkable Girl on the Four-Poster Bed, died last week of a drug overdose. He was an unlikely artist who had never before produced any notable work. The demons he battled took everything he had: family, job, friends, home, even his life. Yet, what he left us will be long remembered. The good people of Grimes believe everyone has a purpose. If a mission is ordained by God, nothing can stop it. Not poverty. Not fire. Not OxyContin. –*  
Simpson County Sentinel (2<sup>nd</sup> article in series)

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Gus was right. The photo and article, complete with Jean’s byline, were picked up by the regional papers first, but soon made it to the big cities, who demanded unedited copies of the photograph. On the internet, it spread like wildfire.

Redemption stories are good, but they only satisfy for a while. The mystery of the artist was solved. The mystery of the model remained. Tips poured in – people around the world claimed to know the woman, though only a handful had heard of Grimes. Jean wrote several articles on the phenomenon, each speculating on the Girl’s identity. It did not matter that facts were scarce. Jean fed them just enough to keep them hungry.

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*She may be the most famous person to have come from Simpson County, a place known more for dead coal mines and opioid addicts than for beauty. Her anonymity has only heightened her fame. Everybody thinks she looks like someone they have seen, but now that the artist is dead, another victim of the county's culture of desperation, no one may ever learn the name of the Girl on the Four-Poster Bed. – Simpson County Sentinel (4<sup>th</sup> article in series)*

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The ongoing stories were a hit. Jean fielded offers from three on-line magazines and two major newspapers. She didn't consider overtures from less influential rags, which flooded her mailboxes, laced with bromides about respecting her creativity and allowing her freedom. The one she favored was a prominent on-line service in Chicago. She hadn't lived there for 20 years, but her doubters still remained. Living there now would not be required, electronic tentacles being what they are, but it would be good to show her face in town, at high-profile functions, with well-known political and literary figures. Recognition is good. Recognition from your critics even better.

Yet, the offers still didn't match what she knew to be her worth. The question hung ripe in the air, and the one to answer it would reap the real bonanza.

Who is the Girl on the Four-Poster Bed?

Jean read each of the thousands of tips, conscious that her competitors were baying on the trail. One hand-written letter caught her eye, at first for the misspellings. As she read it, a name grabbed her attention and her heart pounded. There was no number in the letter, so she jumped in her car and drove all night.

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Frances Rutland lived in a drab house in a small town 85 miles west of Houston. Jean stood at her door at 8 AM. It was spring, but somebody forgot to tell Texas. Jean was tired and sweaty, the AC having quit in Beaumont. Her hair was matted to her head like a helmet. Her eyes were red. Her butt was sore. She chugged three energy drinks in the last three hours. Now she had to piss like a fire hydrant. She was ready.

Mrs. Rutland opened the door before she knocked.

“Did you bring the painting?” she asked.

“I did, Mrs. Rutland,” said Jean. “Can I let you look it over while I use your bathroom? Been driving for a long time.”

Jean took mental notes as she went through the house and reviewed them on the toilet. Though the exterior of the house was badly in need of paint, the interior was spotless. Two religious paintings adorned the living room: the Sacred Heart and the Angel on the Bridge. Jean had loved the Angel in her own living room growing up. The kitchen and bedroom were off the hall to the right. A closed room and bathroom were to the left. In the bedroom, the covers were neat and pulled tight. A crucifix hung over the headboard. The bathroom was clean, although rust stains had browned the tub long ago. Prescriptions for diabetes lined the medicine cabinet. Most were out of date.

When Jean returned, Mrs. Rutland called from the kitchen.

“In here, sweetheart,” she said.

Jean pulled out the metal-frame chair with a torn plastic covering. The formica on the tabletop was heavily chipped but still shined in the morning sun. A copy of Star magazine lay open by a plastic dish rack, which cradled an upside-down Mason jar and one melamine plate adorned with faded roses.

“Sweet Jesus, it’s a good day. My baby’s come home.” Mrs. Rutland held the painting in her lap, rocking it like an infant.

“Mrs. Rutland, I have to be careful in identifying the girl in the painting. You have no idea how many people have claimed her.”

“So many lost souls wandering in the desert. There’s no doubt, honey. This is my Emily.” Mrs. Rutland’s large green eyes looked almost exactly like the girl’s in the painting.

The letter had mentioned the name Emily. It was the reason Jean had come. “Mrs. Rutland,” she said, “I have to be sure.”

“Honey, call me Frances. Only one ever called me Mrs. Rutland was Mr. Rutland. He was my second after my first husband passed.”

“Maybe you have a picture, Frances,” Jean prodded.

“Let me show you.” Frances reached for another object in her lap. “I’ve been carrying this for years. Look. You’ll know it’s her.”

The photograph was in a wooden frame, stained with the oil of constantly caressing fingertips. A younger Frances stood with her arm around her daughter, who was 18 or so. The girl wore a halter top with shorts and a ball cap with the bill backwards. Most of the right side of her body was covered in scars and pale skin grafts, like a patch-work doll sewn with whatever odd pieces at hand. Her right eyebrow was missing. Three fingers on her right hand were gone. The right side of her mouth was a half-inch shorter than the left and her expression on that side was frozen as if the skin melted into hard plastic. Amazingly, her lips on the left side were lifted in a huge smile.

“Her Daddy, that was my first husband, he took this at the lake about a month before he died. He was the only one could ever get Emily out of her shell.” Frances stroked the frame softly.

“But the girl in the painting... she doesn’t have these scars.”

“Jean, is it?” Frances said as if talking to a child. “The scars are there, honey. You just don’t see them. Look close at her leg and around her belly-button. See that heart-shaped patch on her chest. Whoever painted her took all her flaws and made them beautiful. The light and the shadow, they play with each other like twins, like two sides of the same person. Dear, there’s no doubt, this is my Emily. Oh Lord, I can’t wait to find her. You will help me, won’t you?”

Jean sucked in a sharp breath. Until she had received the letter, she had not given much thought to the victims of the fire. She assumed the sheriff and fire department had notified all the next of kin. Now she faced the unavoidable task of shattering a mother’s dream. Neither one of them were prepared.

“Frances, did the Simpson County authorities ever get in touch with you?”

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“Chief, who else did you leave in the dark?” Jean was angry, and she had the Fire Chief in her sights.

“Miss Dombroski, before you go throwing around accusations, maybe you better look in the mirror. They’re all just names to you, aren’t they? And a fake story to sell more papers. We didn’t have any information on Miss James except what her landlord gave us. She didn’t even have a driver’s license. So now I get to ask some questions. Why’d you make this Frailey guy a fucking hero?”

“He tried to save the others. What’d you expect him to do, burn himself up?”

“When you saw him that night, what was he wearing? Did you bother to look?”

“Long pants, I think. Didn’t have a shirt. That’s all I remember.” Jean sounded defensive, and she hated herself for it.

“No shoes either. Not a single damn burn anywhere on his body. Not one. Not even a singed eyebrow. He didn’t do anything but grab something valuable and run out the house. This guy took you for a ride and you just went along like a friggin’ sheep. Now get the hell out of my firehouse.” The Chief stalked into his office and slammed the door.

Jean slumped into a visitor’s chair and stared at the wall. Her ego was bruised, but she’d taken much worse. She deserved that lashing, she thought. After a while, the emotion left, and her reasoning kicked in.

She knocked on the Chief’s door.

“What?” he shouted from the other side. She opened it in spite of the implied threat.

“Chief, did you find the young man’s family. His name was Brandon Smith.”

“His name, as it turns out, was misspelled on the lease. You didn’t follow up on that either, did you?”

“I am now, Chief.”

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Daniel Smythe emigrated from Jamaica in 1979. He worked on drill rigs and construction jobs for two decades, the last few years dragging his small family with him. When his son reached high school, he realized it was time to plant his roots. He chose Savannah. He made good friends over the years, who appreciated his drive and work ethic. He landed a longshoreman’s job, paying decent union wages. He was frugal, spending only what he needed for clean work clothes and a reliable truck, except when it came to his son.

Branden had talent. In his father's eyes, there was never an artist as brilliant as his son. No one who could perform such magic with simple oil paints. He helped Branden enter contests through school. The boy even won honorable mention in several. But in the father's eyes, there was something in Branden's style that struck the judges as too different. More than once, he wondered if the boy's skin color was too different.

"Talent is talent, Branden would say. He never once used his race as an excuse."

Mr. Smythe told everyone about his son. Jean wanted to listen, now that she had resolved to get to the bottom of the story.

"Why'd he leave Savannah, Mr. Smythe? The art college is here. The town offers good support for artists."

"The college turned him down. Don't know why. There were rumors about drugs, but I never saw him use anything in his life. He just got fed up. Said he would explore the world like his father. Find what he was looking for. Instead he found a town of thieves." He slumped his shoulders.

"Daniel. May I call you Daniel?"

He interrupted her.

"I've seen my boy's painting, Miss Dombroski. I know it's his."

"I know it too, Mr. Smythe."

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Gus was ecstatic to publish the article identifying the Girl on the Four-Poster Bed, especially once her mother gave her blessing. It lauded her courage; it honored her resilience; it celebrated her beauty. It was a great and fitting end to the series.

But another article admitting the paper had woven such an outlandish story about a sham artist was a bridge too far for even Gus to cross. It was neglectful deceit at a minimum, maybe much worse. Gus demanded Jean drop the story.

“This thing dies here,” he said. “We’re not touching it anymore. You’d be smart to let it go, too. Remember, you couldn’t give away a story after Chicago. You’d be cleaning grills if I hadn’t given you a chance. Push this thing and I’ll make sure everybody in the country knows you made up half of it. There’s no place for a twice-admitted liar in a legitimate newsroom.”

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Jean sat at her laptop and read the piece again. It had to be perfect. This time there would be no one to guide her. This time, nobody would tell her what would sell or what the story should be. This time it would be the truth. But then, she thought, does anybody care?

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*“On December 15<sup>th</sup>, fire destroyed the homes and took the lives of three Grimes residents. Firefighters from four stations responded to the blaze, but the house was fully engulfed when they arrived. Despite heroic efforts, Roberta Alfred, Emily James, and Brandon Smith succumbed in the tragedy.”*

*That was the story I filed after the fire. I was dead wrong. You now know that Emily James is the famous Girl on the Four-Poster Bed. What you don’t know is the name of the real artist, the real hero, the name unforgivably misspelled in the original article. He was the man who found inspiration in a poor backwoods Southern county.*

*That’s the thing about inspiration... and truth. You can find them anywhere, if you’re willing to look.*

*Branden Edward Smythe was his real name, and this is his story.*