

The Silver Locket

Rounding the big curve on Tifton Road, the one that cuts through the pecan farm of the same name, I think back to when I was a kid. These trees weren't much more than saplings then. The old orchard's grown into a forest now, huge pecans arching over the road for miles, promising to go on forever. But the end of the curve will surprise you. The woods part to a thousand-acre cotton field with a flood of light that's almost a religious experience.

I have to squint behind my dark glasses at the sea of cotton that glows pink in the afternoon sun. My eyes are watering like spigots, but at least they still work, thanks to these trips to the specialist.

I used to take Tifton road just to scope out this spot—how it might look on a certain day in winter, say. I've painted it in every season. When Trish and I were first together, we'd drive through here on a Sunday afternoon, freewheeling in the old convertible. "Hey hon, how about a ridey-didey?" She'd say. Nothing better than her laugh, the wind whipping strands of straw-colored hair into her mouth.

I make a living as an artist. I'm self-taught, paint in oils because that's what I started on, and I'm no good at anything else. Found that out, among other things, during my eight months at the Arts college in Savannah. I remember being proud when they hailed me, Jake Sanders, as a Georgia folk artist...until I found out it wasn't a compliment. Seems the school preferred to graduate *fine* artists. When they tried to smooth over everything that made my work mine, we parted ways. Hell, what's art for anyway, if not folk?

I figure I've painted the landscapes of Beulah County from every angle. Sometimes I imagine I see the whole thing at once. Seeing is something I always took for granted, until the eye disease hit. Now *seeing* is changing into something new. It's playing games with my brain. The disease must be responsible, but I have no clue how.

My right eye feels like I switched a nettle through it. I'm almost scared to check the rear view mirror, but I tip up my sunglasses and take a look. Circling the iris is a bright red ring, with little branches spidering out from it. The shots do that, but it looks worse than last time. Better use my drops. I know a clay road up ahead that cuts through the field. I can pull the truck over and stop there.

This happens to be the exact place I'd parked when the disease started. Six months ago, almost to the day. It was dawn, and I wanted to catch the rose light. The new cotton crop was all popped up in parallel lines of shoots, an endless army of little green soldiers. I had my canvas set up and was working some paint into it when this grayish *hole* opened up in the center. Not an actual rip, but painted into the middle of the landscape. I looked out over the easel for a hole or hollow area in the field, but none was there.

Nobody but me could've painted that hole, but it spooked the hell out of me. I dipped my brush into the paint and raised it to the gray blot, to get rid of it, fill it in, restore everything to green perfection. But I pulled back the brush before it touched the canvas. Strange. It felt right just as it was.

A week later the hole came back. Only this time it wasn't in a painting. Smack in the middle of everything I looked at, there it was. I didn't tell Trish for another week, but when it didn't go away...well, here I am driving two hours each way to a retina specialist in Valdosta. It's

macular degeneration, the serious one. Blinds you from the center out. When the doctor told me that first visit that they could slow it down with injections, I barely heard.

No walk in the park, these eyeball shots, but they're working. Or so the doc says. And maybe they are. I'm able to paint. I still have my driver's license, thank God. I dread the day Trish has to drive me everywhere. The back-and-forth to the retina guy alone is an all-day affair every couple weeks.

The drops are easing the sting. I probably shouldn't stare out at the cotton field with my dark glasses off. I just can't stop trying to displace the hole. Why couldn't it be out *there*? Then I'd just drive by it, a chunk out of somebody else's land. But there's no driving by. The hole follows me everywhere.

And the weird part...the sightless spot—it's being replaced by this *second* sight. I just call it the *seeing*. The hole was a fluke, I thought. A coincidence. I never believed in that psychic nonsense. But lately I'm convinced the seeing is real, and it knows things I don't.

It's getting stronger, too, as my normal vision gets weaker. Back in March I flunked an eye test the same day I got a great commission, a mural for the town library. I was really pleased with the finished piece. Trish had been the one to come up with the idea: Shakespeare, Clemens, and Angelou in an animated discussion over a book. The title I painted on that book, for no particular reason, was *Fahrenheit 451* by Bradbury. So three Saturdays after the unveiling, just before closing time, a kid lit a match in the stacks and set off a three-alarmer that incinerated the building and the mural along with it. I was pretty upset having my work go up in flames, but thankful no people did.

My dark glasses are sitting on top of the dash. I reach for them and notice the clock says 4:45. Later than I thought. I should call Trish.

“Hey honey,” her Georgia drawl. “You almost home? There’s a cold beer waiting, and I’ve got that tenderloin in the oven.”

“Sounds great. Be there in half an hour. I had to stop a minute and use the eyedrops.”

“Had to stop? Are you okay? How’d the appointment go?”

“Good. I’m fine. The eye’s burning a lot less than it was.”

“Jeez, hon, why don’t you let me drive you next time?”

“Babe, we’ve been through that. I’m perfectly capable of driving myself.”

She knows it’s pointless to continue, so she gives me an admonishment to be careful and a promise to keep the beer cold.

The gravel driveway crackles its welcome as I pull up to the house. Always liked the sound of the little stones scrambling and spitting under the tires. That was the first thing I heard when we came to look at this old farmhouse six years ago. We made an offer that day. The house sits on eleven acres a little swampy at the edge, but high and dry enough for a garden. Trish loved the mossy oaks at first sight, and the barn out back clinched it for me. Perfect for a studio. I finally had enough space for large scale pieces.

One of those pieces is in there now. Homer Preble, owner and president of Preble Bank downtown, decided the lobby needed a full-length portrait of him. Now he has one. I think he’ll be happy with it. Makes him appear to be way less of an asshole than he actually is.

I'm glad to get out of the truck. A dull ache's been creeping into my knees. Damn, is this what being 56 is? A slew of maladies? Trish shows up at the door to greet me with a kiss and a Bud longneck. She has a little sheen of sweat on her face. You always know when she's been cooking.

"Come on honey," she wipes her forehead, "stretch out and relax a few minutes 'til supper. I just have to go stir the polenta."

"The what?"

"Polenta. It's a creamy corn...sort of mush. I thought I'd try something new. So how's the eye?" She brings her face close to mine. I catch the scent of jasmine with a tinge of garlic.

"Okay. Doc said I'm holding my own. How's it look to you?"

"Look over to your left? Little red...but actually, not bad."

"I think the beer's helping it. Or maybe it's seeing you. Cheers." I raise the bottle and head for my favorite chair in the living room, an Eames chair I won in a county auction, complete with the hassock. Picked it up for a song, because I was the only bidder who knew what it was. It isn't perfect—has a split or two in the black leather—but I love that chair. Trish thinks it's funny that I'm always so careful not to sit in it with paint-spattered jeans.

"Soup's on," she calls from the kitchen. She's got the tenderloin plated up, along with a side of zucchini and something that looks like yellow grits.

I pick up the bowl and take a whiff. "So this is...?"

"Polenta. Now quit sniffing like some hound and try it."

"Apologies to the chef. Looks delicious."

Trish wants to know about my day, and rolls her eyes when I answer “same old.” But does she really want a blow-by-blow of the antiseptic, the numbing drops, the needle piercing my eyeball?

I haven’t told Trish about the seeing. If I start rambling on about some weird second sight coming through my painting, she’ll question my sanity. I might question it myself.

I change the subject. “So what’d you do today, babe? Besides whipping up this amazing polenta.”

“Now, be nice,” she smiles and takes a sip from her Bud Light. Foam washes her upper lip and then dissolves. “Okay, well, let’s see. Picked the squash you’re eating. Also planted some tomatoes, fingers crossed they do better than last year. Made you a haircut appointment.”

“Haircut? I was sort of liking myself in the ponytail.”

“I love you, but the hair, not so much.” She laughs. “Little too scraggly. And I can still see some paint in it from yesterday.”

“Just makes me more colorful.”

“Oh, the most important thing! The check for the portrait. I went down to the bank to get it from Homer, but he wasn’t there. I got the impression he was out sick. I asked that assistant of his, the one he’s fooling around with, did she think he’d be back in this week. And she was...I don’t know...kind of *evasive*. Strange.”

“Wonder what’s up? Okay, I’ll try to call tomorrow. The portrait’s been ready for a week, just have to haul it down there.”

“I’ll be glad when you don’t have to deal with that Homer Preble anymore. He gives me the creeps. Now his wife Betty’s nice—or always seemed like it. She deserves better than that philandering jerk.”

“Well, maybe she enjoys the lifestyle. Or could be the gossip’s overblown.”

“Overblown? You told me yourself, he all but *confessed* at that sitting. That old fart’s been a skirt-chaser for years. If I was her, I’d have gotten a good settlement a long time ago.”

In the morning I’m serving up my favorite breakfast. “Here, have some grits. That polenta was good, but *this* is the real deal.”

“They’re two different things,” says Trish.

“One has a fancy name, is all.”

The discussion ends with a ringtone.

“Who’d be calling so early?” I look at my cell phone.

Preble Bank.

“Hm. Bank’s not even open yet. I’d better take this.”

I get up and take the call out on the front porch. Trish has a habit of feeding comments in my other ear, and I prefer to hear one word stream at a time. I spot her looking out the window. She probably sees me reacting to the conversation. Which isn’t going well.

“So was that Homer?” She asks when I come back in.

“No, it was Ray Spangrel, the VP up at the Macon branch. Calling to tell me he was ‘very sorry,’ but they won’t be hanging the portrait at this time. Preble didn’t cut the last check because—”

“Shit, he still owes \$1800. You worked for months on that.”

“Hold on...let me finish. You know how you thought Homer was out sick? Well, he’s not just sick, he’s in ICU over at Northview in Valdosta. Apparently slipped and fell down the stairs to the basement. They have him in an induced coma.”

“Oh my God.”

“And what’s more, just between us, Spangrel told me the cops think the fall may not have been an accident. They’re questioning *Betty* Preble about the circumstances. Said she’s a ‘person of interest.’”

“Sweet Jesus. Hello, mini-series.”

Trish wonders out loud about sending Betty a card, but thinks better of it. She picks up my plate. “Want me to warm this up? You hardly ate any of it.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ve got to get to the studio.”

I all but sprint out to the barn, pull the door wide open, and switch on the lights. The eight-foot portrait of Homer Preble, now a magnificent white elephant in oils, stands against one wall.

He’s posed in his banker’s pinstripes, framed by an antique tapestry. A crystal chandelier illuminates his graying head and rounded torso. I feel a twinge of pride in the transparency of the crystals. Scanning the painting, I don’t see anything unusual. No, nothing there...I back up and take in the piece from across the room. The shadow behind him—it has the shape of a human

figure. But then, why wouldn't it? Still, something's wrong. The light should have cast the shadow the opposite way. *How did I make such a rookie mistake?* I squint and blink. The shadow's right arm isn't Preble's. That arm belongs to someone else, and it's clearly giving Preble a nudge. Maybe even a shove.

My heart is pounding in my ears. My paintings keep predicting these goddamn disasters. Or are they *causing* them? My latest subject could end up dead. I never planned, or even vaguely wished this. I never know what the seeing is up to until it's too late. And what if I *am* painting things into reality? Could I change the future with the stroke of a brush? But then I'd have to know it while I was doing it. It spins like a never-ending paradox.

There's another portrait in the barn's back room, draped in a sheet of muslin. I walk over to where it rests on an easel, and stand there looking at the folds of cloth. I reach for a corner, then stop myself. I can handle whatever happens to Preble, but not her.

Please God, not her.

This portrait was supposed to be a surprise for Trish's 45th birthday. I started it before the seeing had really sunk in. It's nearly finished, but I've been leaving it neglected. My brush—the one that flicked lights into the hazel eyes, swept a strand of straw-colored hair over the face, washed the rose tones into the cheeks—did that brush paint some signal in here too, some gremlin disguised as a shadow, or a play of light?

I think about burning the portrait. Would that make any difference? Or I could just paint over the whole thing...but why kid myself? I tried that back in the cotton field.

An idea: What if I do *multiple* portraits? I could show Trish in different clothes, posed in all sorts of ways, backgrounds and settings. It'll take weeks, but her birthday isn't for a couple of months yet.

Instead of some inexorable fate, I'll create *possibilities*.

I keep a stack of canvases stretched on wooden frames all ready to go. I pick one up and fix it to an easel. I'm looking through the open barn door at the biggest oak on the property, Trish's favorite. Good place to start.

I have the tree roughed in when Trish shows up with a plate of food. "Hey, hon...you were out here so long, I figured you got into a painting. How about some lunch?"

"Thanks. I kind of lost my appetite after that call this morning, but now I'm a little hungry." I try a bite of a sandwich. "That's nice. Leftover tenderloin?"

"Yeah, it's good cold. I was thinking about that call too...you put so much into that painting. And poor old Homer, now I feel kind of bad I was trashing him. Do you think Betty really—" She looks at the canvas I've started. "Jake, I love this! My tree. What's going under it?"

"Still deciding on that." I'll paint her in later, maybe in a swing.

I think of telling Trish the whole deal right now—the strange yin-yang spin of my dying eyesight with this ever-more alive *other* sight. But I can't bring myself to. What good could come of it? If she doesn't worry that I'm crazy, she'll worry about what turns up in the next painting. Lose-lose.

"Well, I know how much you love shoulder-lookers," she says, "so I'm going back in. Can't wait to see it when you're done."

“You may have to wait a *little*. I have an idea for a whole series...and then I’ll do an unveiling just for you.”

“A whole series! Now I’m really curious.”

Dawn to dusk every day for the next two months I’m out in the studio, except the one day every two weeks when I go to Valdosta for my eye shot.

Homer Preble pulled through, great news to me because it means the seeing hasn’t gotten anyone killed. He did spend four weeks in the hospital and three more in rehab. He never pressed charges, rumor has it because Betty’s his full-time caregiver now.

It’s almost the seventeenth of November, Trish’s birthday, and I’ve got eight portraits done. I told her they have to stay draped. I think she suspects it might have something to do with her birthday, but she’s playing along.

So far, so good. Maybe my many-portrait plan *is* keeping the future open.

On the morning of the seventeenth, I make up my special blueberry pancakes, and afterward take Trish out to the studio.

“Okay, close your eyes, no peeking.” I lead her to a chair and sit her down in it.

“This is so exciting. I’ve got butterflies.”

I’ve got the eight paintings lined up. “Okay, open ‘em up.”

“Oh Jake...honey...” She starts to cry. “This is...”

“All the ways I think of you. Happy birthday, babe. Love you. Hope you like ‘em.”

“Like ‘em? I love them! And you!” She jumps up and gives me a kiss. Her tears wet my face. Or maybe it’s me tearing up.

“Look at this, it’s the oak tree. With me in a swing! So now we need to get a swing,” she laughs. “And here I am in the living room, reading. Such beautiful lighting.”

“How do you like this one of you in the convertible?”

“Oh no, my face is all covered with blowing hair! You must’ve been tired of painting it.”

“Never. Most fun I ever had painting.” It’s at least half true.

“They’re all so *different*. Really, each one is its own masterpiece.” She takes a step back. “But that’s curious...”

“Curious?”

“Mama’s necklace.”

“What?”

“The locket. I just noticed, I’m wearing it in every single one.”

My heart freezes. In each painting, gracing Trish’s throat is a fine silver chain with a tiny heart-shaped locket.

“I’m surprised you even knew about that necklace. I never wear it, it just sits in my jewelry box. The chain’s so delicate, I was always afraid I’d break it. Mama gave it to me years ago. There’s a little picture in the locket—of my father. Did you know that?”

It’s happening again. How did I dream I would outwit the seeing?

“Jake? Honey?”

“Sorry, babe.” I shake my head to clear it. “No, I didn’t.”

“Mama told me, when Daddy gave her the necklace she promised never to take it off. Right after that she got pregnant with me. She wore it until...”

“—your dad—”

“—died of that heart attack, in her ninth month, with me coming just two weeks later. She couldn’t bring herself to wear it after that. When she gave it to me, I remember what she said. That I should keep it safe, because it’s a little part of the daddy I never knew.”

“You’ve never told me this story...about the necklace.”

“Haven’t I? I’m not sure why...maybe I thought Mama wanted it just between the two of us. But you must’ve seen it at some point, or how would you have painted it?”

It’s easiest just to nod *Yes, that has to be it.*

We go back to talking about the paintings, where we’ll hang them, how friends will see them and marvel at the great gift I created for Trish. I love to see her so happy and thrilled.

My happiness evaporates twenty minutes later. What a fool’s journey, trying to trick this blind vision. All this time, it’s been playing me. I sit alone in the studio, staring at the eight portraits, wishing away the necklace. But there it is, Death in silver filigree, just waiting in the wings. Maybe for me. It just can’t, *will not*, be for her.

Trish comes back in. “Hey, I just wanted to—” her smile turns down when she sees my face. “What’s wrong? You look like you just lost your best friend.”

“No, no, I’m fine. Just...got into a little pity party over my eyesight.” Not quite a lie. “Forget that. It’s *your* day.”

“I know it’s hard, honey. But look,” she points to the paintings, “look at how well you still *can* see. Speaking of which...notice anything?”

On her throat is a fine silver chain with a heart-shaped locket.

My first impulse is to grab the chain and rip it off of her. I swallow hard. “You sure you want to wear it after all this time?”

“Maybe it’s the power of suggestion, seeing myself in it eight times over,” she laughs. “Something told me to put it on.”

“It does look pretty on you,” I can’t help but smile. “Silver’s nice on your skin.”

“Thanks. It *is* pretty, isn’t it? Funny, a thought just came to me. What if this is a good luck charm? You know, right after Daddy gave it to Mama she got pregnant with me. I mean, I am 45, but you never know. Maybe we’ll finally get that little Jake Sanders Junior we never had.”

I gather her into my arms and hug her a long time. More for me than for her.

She has no idea she just gave me a ray of hope.

She goes out to pick a few zucchini from the garden, and I stay in the studio a little longer with the eight paintings. I never did finish the ninth one, the original portrait in the back room.

I go back there and look at the piece still shrouded in its muslin drape. I’m as sure as I can be that Trish isn’t wearing the locket in this one. I’m also dead sure something else is hidden in this painting. Something that will decide which future the silver locket foretells. All I need to do is uncover it.

Later...

Maybe later.

