

The Widower's Muse

An artist's greatest work appears in what she really pours her heart into. The kind of creation where, as long as there's a paint brush in her hand, she sees nothing but the painting in front of her. That is until her eyes flicker a little farther back, to the muse – the source of the painting's passion and the artist's devotion. It's paintings like these where, if the artist is so lucky, she'll find herself staring into the eyes of her canvas muse and getting lost in them, thinking they're the real thing. She knows those eyes so well after gazing into them time after time again and she knows all of their secrets. The muse of course, thinks he's far more gaze worthy than a simple mixture of pigments and canvas. But once he walks around and stares into his own eyes, some part of him can never be the same. You see, there is no known comparison to the feeling of seeing your wife's portrayal of you, all these details you never even knew were in you, and just knowing all over again that she – or rather that I – am completely in love with you.

As real as my canvas husbands may have been, I never would've picked them over the real one had I been given the choice. But with one twitch of a finger and the firing of a gun, one terribly confused and disturbed guy made that nightmare a reality, and said, "Screw you," to my choice.

This day was cold, like its replica 365 days earlier. The texts and emails flooding my phone tried to tell me I wasn't alone and that I had a whole community looking after me, but my heart insisted they were lying. The apartment was an island and the elevators, surrounding city, and hundreds of paintings lining the walls made up waters so treacherous no one had attempted to cross them in months. The belief that their messages in bottles would fill the emptiness was satisfying enough to them, and so the island remained mine alone.

Every self-help book I'd flipped through and all the inspirational posts I'd scrolled past told me to celebrate my loved one's life with people I love and who had loved him on the anniversary of his death. But that was a tricky thing to do alone. I'd started to see crazy reflected in the canvas eyes I tried to confide in and had made a promise to one especially realistic lookalike that I'd stop talking when no real person was around to answer. In absence of someone to reflect with or a garden to plant a memorial tree in, I plotted to get through the day the best way I knew how: Denial and distraction.

"Holly? I thought you'd take the day off today?"

"What?" I couldn't help but wish that pitiful look she was giving me would've taken the day off. "There's art to be sold, silly!"

"Okay, well you let me know if you need anything." She grazed my shoulder with a theoretically comforting hand, and I shrugged it off with a theoretically happy smile.

I claimed my favourite spot in the gallery and started greeting customers who were eager to talk about the artwork in front of them. One man yelled at me on a count of overpriced paintings and terrible parking. I smiled and recited the scripted response I had typed up for employees a few years back. I liked angry customers. They never wanted to ask me about my personal life.

More art buyers and critics wandered through the gallery and I let myself become completely immersed in their questions and comments, until another employee-turned-nanny felt the need to check-in on me.

“Holly! There you are. Why don’t you take a lunch break now?”

“I’m really not hungry, thanks.”

Pity again. It was in her eyes, her slanted lips, and her furrowed brow. “I really think it would be best.”

“Whose gallery is this?”

My mind flickered to the man who had taught me to paint and appreciate visual art, and had converted my dancer’s mind into that of a painter. When his employee hesitated to give an answer, I realized that maybe it wasn’t the best day for that particular question.

I gathered myself and tried again. “I’m in charge. I’ll take a break when it’s possible. We’re just too busy right now, okay?”

She looked around, at the handful of people mulling about, and bit her tongue.

I finally took my lunch break six hours later; three hours after closing. Reluctantly, I locked up my vault of memories disguised as an art gallery, and I left.

When I got home, however, I wished I could’ve been anywhere else. The paintings that had been sources of comfort, expression, and relief were staring at me with their eyes that weren’t quite his, their hair that was pigments away from the right colour and millimetres from being parted properly. His nose that was too crooked, too straight, or too round, and his skin that wasn’t what I remembered feeling. Even the slightest mistakes were jumping out at me, cursing me for forgetting how they were supposed to be. Biting back tears, I picked up as many as my arms could handle and I ran to the elevator. But it was stopped at the 12th floor and I couldn’t bear standing still for any longer. So from my seventh floor apartment, I ran down the stairs to throw the paintings in the back of my car, and then I ran right back up again to get more. Seven trips later, my legs stopped moving, my lungs cried for help, and my skull tried with all its might to keep the mess inside of it from breaking out.

I sped out of the parkade, cautious of the fact that I was unable to see through my back window thanks to the stack of canvases, but at the same time not really caring if someone wanted to come around and plow into the back of my car. I started driving with the intention of stopping at the dump, but I blew past that turn-off after concluding that it couldn’t handle all the emotional waste I was carrying. But I made the mistake of closing my eyes to pass it, hoping to avoid any second guessing that way. A heavy thud made me open them again, only to realize that I had landed myself in the ditch.

I turned the car off and waited for the lights to time out and do the same. Then, in complete darkness with only the moon and distant street lights to keep me company, I let my tears fall without stopping them. With each tear came a mountain of emotions and memories that I had held captive in the darkest parts of my mind for the past year. It started with the fact that I’d just driven myself and 35 portraits of my late husband into the ditch, but then images started to appear in my mind and melted together to form the gloomiest montage I’d ever witnessed.

It started with a scene dating all the way back to math class in junior high when we first met. The scene that followed was set at the ice cream parlour when he asked me to be his girlfriend. Fast forward through years of talking, laughing, going to school, and getting to know each other, and we were back in

the same ice cream parlour only this time his question ended with “wife”. The next few scenes weren’t nearly as cheery. I argued with my parents and he argued with his, although with less severe consequences in the end. They criticized us for believing we could survive together when we were both working towards fine arts degrees they were sure would earn us nothing. When they tired of that angle, it was our age that caused a problem. We stood our ground and a few months later, he lifted my veil and kissed me, with no one to give me away but myself.

My mind’s movie zoomed out until you could hardly make out my long, white dress and his sharp, black tux heading back down the aisle, as man and wife. I paused the movie, knowing very well what came next. First, my phone would ring but I wouldn’t answer it because I was too focused on whatever it was I was painting. An hour or so later, when I was satisfied with the colours and shapes I’d matched together on the canvas, I would play the message. Sitting and listening to his voice saying he was about to leave the office and he would pick up takeout on his way home, I’d get another call. I’d answer it, expecting to hear him confirming my order for supper, but it wouldn’t be him on the other end. The police officer would address me by the last name I’d been so lucky to inherit, and he would deliver the bad news. The worst news I’d ever heard. I would fall to the ground and crawl numbly to the basket by the door where he kept his keys. I would pull myself up by the doorknob before turning it to let myself out of our apartment – *his* apartment. By this point in the movie, some sad song like the one they play when everyone’s drowning in *Titanic* would start to engulf me and I’d probably end up running through the hospital in dramatic slow motion as I searched desperately for my husband. Finally, I would find him, and I would wish so hard that I hadn’t. I would be standing there like I had, and he’d be lying there like he had; a ghost of the man I loved. I would turn away to hide my tears even though his eyes were shut and wouldn’t open again. The nurses would guide me outside and I wouldn’t see him again until the funeral.

Our movie together ended there. Sure there’d be a sequel, but everyone knows those are never as good as the original. Especially when the wonderful love interest – the only thing that really kept anyone watching – was killed off in a brutal car accident. This man written into my life to love and take care of me was a truly gifted artist with a fascination for film. He had trained me well to appreciate every artist involved, and never ever skip the credits at the end of a movie. So even if the only theatre this one was showing at was the one managed by the memory centres of my brain, I sat in my car and let the credits roll by.

The cast list was so much greater than I expected it to be. There was of course me and him in our starring roles, and our families and close friends. But on top of that, there was the man who sold him my engagement ring, the artist we both loved that sparked conversations on an otherwise awkward first date, the teenagers who scooped our ice cream on both proposal days, and so many more. Even more than these characters I’d forgotten, the three words at the end of the credits were what really made my heart swell: “In loving memory”.

I wiped away the tears that had escaped and pulled myself back onto the highway. It was two o’clock in the morning. I figured the dump was probably closed so there’d really been no sense contemplating going anyways. Either way, I spent the next hundred miles trying to remember if dumps actually do close or if people really can add their crap to the pile at all hours, even on holidays. With no solid answer in mind and no urge to turn around and check, I kept driving.

Four A.M. hit and I decided some caffeine would be necessary if I wanted to keep going. I picked up all the caffeinated drinks some random town's solitary gas station had to offer, and I continued on my quest to put as much distance as possible between me and that stupid apartment that wasn't really even mine until he died and couldn't pay the rent anymore. Ironically enough, I was doing so in the car he also stopped paying for on a count of being dead.

The best part about driving at night was I was almost completely alone, meaning I could go as fast or as slow as I wanted. I took full advantage of it. Every once and awhile someone appeared and I'd try to get closer to the speed limit, although I gave up on that for a little while between 5:00 and 6:00 and did whatever I wanted. It was nice before the sun came up, not having to wave at people I passed. We were both content being alone and conveniently, each of our headlights hid the other's face.

The sun started to show around 6:00 and I lost that luxury. But bit by bit I was feeling a little more personable and by 8:00, I'd waved at three people. Only one of them just got the one finger. But he deserved it. By the time 9:00 came around, I was feeling so human-like I was even in the mood for breakfast. Just a drive-thru, but it was progress nonetheless.

I ate my egg McMuffin in the parking lot, avoiding the looks of people passing by and telling myself that eventually I would find a town that had a dump and this adventure will have been worth something. It would only take a few more hours and about a week's worth of hindsight for me to realize that the trip was never really about going to the dump.

I rolled into the next town, ready to blow right through it. I waited out a red light impatiently at the only traffic light I'd seen in the town, and I took in my surroundings. To my left was your average small-town diner. I'd learned along the way that there was a diner much like this one in every single small town. If there wasn't one, it probably wasn't worth stopping. I looked to my right expecting to see the average town square – another element of the small town formula. And I did, but it was like none that I'd seen before. It was filled with easels and stools, artists and interested townsfolk-turned-muses. I turned down my music and just sat there, taking it all in until a car horn behind me shattered my perfect little moment. I looked up to see the green light that convention told me to drive straight through. Before I really understood what I was doing, my turn signal was ticking and my hands were turning the wheel. I pulled in behind a car with some tacky bumper sticker I was too preoccupied to process, and my feet, followed by the rest of me, took me over to the town square.

There was a sign on the sidewalk to tell passersby like myself that the square was hosting artists from all over the state that would be happy to do a portrait for anyone with some money to spare. I continued past the sign towards the artists. My eyes jumped from water-coloured eyes to charcoal noses and from there to acrylic mouths. Finally, they landed on a blank canvas and an empty chair. Thank goodness I'd had twenty-eight years for my feet to learn how to walk because in that moment, my brain sure didn't remember how. My heart overhauled my mind as I sat down in the vacant spot. My fingers danced from pencil to pen to paint brush, trying to choose the perfect one to partner up with. Finally, they picked a particularly clean paint brush that I wouldn't hesitate to mess-up. I squared my shoulders to the canvas, ready to go, but was overcome with sudden stage fright. What if I forgot the right steps to create the perfect masterpiece? What if someone changed the music and I was left with no clue of what to do? My brain had reclaimed its territory but not for long. My heart and soul overrode its commands once again and gave my hands the cue to assume first position. Muscle memory kicked in and I watched my hand and its brush chassé and dosado across the canvas. I had forgotten how good it

felt to let go and let my hand take the lead, as choreographed by my heart. I was scared to take my eyes away from the canvas in case it would all disappear like a dream, but the brush demanded a new colour and I had no choice but to oblige. I mixed the blue with some white until I found the perfect shade. A few tears had inexplicably added themselves to the mixture, but I didn't mind. In fact, I was happy for it. It made sense. I watched globs of paint integrate themselves into the melody of the canvas stroke by stroke until the very last beat. I sat back and I saw at last the perfect portrait. I stared into the sky-blue eyes that I wanted so badly to be real, and the little bit of stubble I could still feel against my skin if I closed my eyes tightly enough. I was just about ready to reach out and hold the two-dimensional face in my paint-stained hands when I felt a tap on my shoulder. My heart jumped, believing for a second that those same eyes that were on the canvas would welcome me when I turned around. They didn't. These eyes were brown and unimpressed. They stared right through me at the art station I'd commandeered.

"This is my spot," the man said coldly.

"Right, of course." I turned to pick up my canvas and wipe away another few runaway tears. Embarrassed, I hoped to leave the square and its town without any further interaction, but I wasn't so lucky.

"Wait, hold up." The coldness in the man's voice had thawed to reveal something almost soothing. "You're crying."

"No, I am so not." I laughed his comment away, acting in a way I hoped appeared as cool and collected. But another tear escaped, blowing my cover.

"I'm sorry, please don't cry." The man was flustered, and I couldn't help but let out a laugh – a real one this time. For a second, he just looked at me in confusion. But when I couldn't seem to stop laughing, he joined me, admitting, "I never know what to do when people cry."

I shrugged. "To be fair, I haven't cried in a while and I can't remember what I'm supposed to do either."

"Why don't we take a walk. Maybe we'll find our answers somewhere along the way." It was a cheesy invitation, but still one that I accepted graciously.

"I'll just stick this in my car first."

"Sure," he said. "I'll be here. Gotta clean up my station so no one else tries to claim it, you know." He chuckled lightly and any harshness that remained left his smiling face all together.

I started towards my car, holding the canvas awkwardly in front of me, a few inches from my chest so I wouldn't smudge the drying paint. But those sky-blue eyes peered right into my soul, tear-filled clouds darkening their otherwise clear day. It may have been the emotions talking, or the energy drinks, or the sleep deprivation, but I swear those eyes were watching me.

I turned him away and held him at my side. I looked back at the square and realized his eyes were staring right at it. What if he thought I was moving on with the artist guy? Anywhere I pointed him felt wrong, and eventually I just gave up, resorting to what felt like my only option. I wasn't at my car yet but my hands burned with a need to let go that just couldn't wait another block. Angrily, I smudged the eyes

of the man whose life I'd been living for approximately 366 days and I threw him in the bush. I turned and walked back to the square, feeling lighter than I had in years and free of any binding gaze.