

City of Murals

Sug was sick of driving, and it was about time for lunch anyway. “Tea!”

No answer.

“Tea!” she tried it one octave higher. “Geez, you gonna snore the whole damn day away?”

“Hm?” Tea forgot where she was for a second, having been in the middle of some weird dream about Mama. She wiped a small trickle from the corner of her mouth. “Oh...where are we? Sorry. I didn’t sleep too great last night.”

“We’re somewhere in Georgia,” said Sug, slightly ticked that Tea was not taking her duties as navigator seriously. “See if you can find us on the map. Look, there’s a sign that says *Lakeville 3 miles*. Not sure if I accidentally got off 137 back away. I don’t remember a Lakeville.”

“All right, don’t get your nose out of joint.” Tea perused the dog-eared Georgia map. “I can’t find it, but let’s just stop when we get there. We can ask directions, and maybe get some lunch, how’s that?”

“Fine.” Sug was rethinking this road trip. Tea, having seen the film “Thelma and Louise” five times, had concocted the idea as a little escape. Sug, having reminded her sister that Thelma and Louise did not end up in a good place, thought maybe it would have been better just to deal with everything at home.

Ever since Mama had died two months ago, nothing was solid. Everywhere you stepped, it was like the sand shifted under you. Mama was the rock all those years after Daddy passed, the safe harbor the twins came to with each new mess they made

of their lives. Sugar was the older of the two, born exactly seven minutes earlier than Tea. They were not identical, but looked so much alike it could be hard to tell them apart, if you didn't know Sug's eyes were hazel and Tea's yellow-green, like a cat's.

Mama, a South Carolina girl through and through, had named her daughters after her favorite drink. Neither of them proved to be the sweet little girl Mama had hoped for, but to her dying day, they'd never felt one ounce of disapproval from her. Maybe a little disappointment when Sug decided to divorce her second husband Tommy, because he *was* the father of Sug's only child Tiffany, and Mama liked him. But what she never knew was that Tommy's happy-go-lucky persona was maintained by snorting ever-higher doses of cocaine, tempered at night by combinations of Ambien and bourbon. Sug had always had a forgiving nature, but there was a limit. She wasn't even sure where it was until Tommy had pushed her over it. In fact she'd surprised herself the day after he'd missed Tiff's eighteenth birthday to come crawling home at six in the morning. Sug had put on her sweetest smile and told him to crawl the fuck back *out*, permanently.

On the subject of decisions, Mama used to joke that Tea made more bad ones than anyone else she knew. She'd gone to college on an art scholarship, but never finished. She never seemed to finish anything, despite starting out on a million of what she called "great ideas". When she'd get one, her cat-green eyes would dance. But at this point, at age forty-six all her great ideas added up to one lousy marriage, a nonexistent art career, no kids, and an alcohol habit.

In the weeks after Mama's funeral, Sug and Tea had been spending a lot of time at the old house sorting through stuff and getting the place fixed up enough to put on the market. Sug kept herself under control by being all business, but Tea would find

something--an old family picture, a favorite bottle of cologne--and forget everything. Case in point, she had uncapped the White Shoulders and misted the air with it. The familiar fragrance of jasmine and moss was still there, but something was wrong. "Sug...Sug, it's Mama's scent, but it died with her!" Tea had spent the rest of that afternoon on Mama's bed hugging the pillows and weeping.

And the worst was yet to come. Tired from a morning of cleaning out Mama's attic, Sug had gone home early and walked in on Gary and Tiff. In *her* house, on *her* bed. Tea's asshole of a husband could be counted on to do something like this, but *Tiffany*? Sug at that moment made up her mind to take Tea up on the road trip and get the hell away from here. Tiff at twenty-four was a big girl now, and if this was how she planned to handle her life, Sug was not having any part of it.

Tea left a text message for Gary before she and Sug left, although he didn't deserve it. She'd made it succinct--*Taking time off, maybe finally decide something right, don't call.*

"Look, here it is!" Tea pointed to a sign that said *Welcome to Lakeville, City of Murals.*

"City of *Murals*," said Sug, looking around for somewhere to pick up a sandwich for lunch. "Well, this must be quite the art capital. Right up your alley. Wonder if they actually have any lakes?"

Tea spotted a Subway on the right. “Hey, how about here? They have good ham and cheese subs.”

“Okay, but let’s find a park, or something. I hate eating in these places.”

The Subway was nearly empty but for one or two customers. Sug ordered the subs while Tea went to pee, and then took her turn while Tea asked where the nearest park was. It turned out they could walk to it, and yes, there was a lake in the center.

Main Street in Lakeville at first glance was not much to look at. There were some open businesses, but just as many buildings looked abandoned, dilapidated as though time had left them to molder into dust.

“Hey look, there’s one of the murals!” Tea pointed to a life-size scene painted on the side of a building. It showed a great coal-black locomotive spewing steam, the train station in the background, and had a cut-out relief figure of a man standing in front of the train. There was a little plaque telling the history behind the mural. “Wow, it says here *1898--Lakeville Depot--Tom Gentry, Chief Engineer.*”

“It’s cool the way they made the man stand out in 3D,” said Sug. “Look, over there’s another one.” It was a depiction of the Lakeville General Store with a dour-looking elderly couple, also in a relief-type cutout, sitting in front. “*Edna and George Davis*. Says they ran the store till 1910, when George passed, and Edna sold the business. Think she was cryin’ over that, or dancin’ a jig?”

Up in the window of one deserted building was a cut-out, but no mural. It was a girl around eleven or twelve years old, with very long, mussed honey-blond hair and watery blue eyes.

“Hey Sug--up there. That little girl, she looks...sad, or scared. All alone like that in the window, no mural, nobody around--wonder what’s the story behind that?”

Sug looked, and something stirred inside her. She felt like crying, for some reason. She didn’t know that child, although she did remind her of Tiff at that age, just a little. *Get hold of yourself, girl, it’s only a picture.*

“You okay?” said Tea.

“Yeah, fine. I just felt--funny when I looked at that silhouette in the window. It’s gone now.”

They turned the corner toward the park, and on the right was the First Baptist Church, built of solid brick with white columns, stained glass windows and a respectable steeple. On the side wall was another mural. It portrayed the church itself, incorporating the actual windows. Some congregation folks milled around in the background, and a large relief figure stood prominently in the foreground.

“*The Reverend Billy Dixon,*” read Tea off the plaque. They looked at the life-size cut-out. He was a big man, at least six-foot-four, with cobalt eyes that gazed off into the horizon, as though trying to see something faraway. He had auburn hair and a handlebar mustache, and was wearing a proper cleric’s collar and black suit.

“He’s a hottie,” said Sug. “*Him* I wouldn’t mind gettin’ to know.”

Tea snickered something under her breath, and when Sug tried to get it out of her, she turned and ran down the street until she got to the entrance to the park.

After lunch, they decided to get back on the road. As they walked back by the Subway shop, Tea stopped.

“What? You need to go again?” said Sug.

“No, but hold on a second, I just wanna ask the girl in there a question.”

“Okay, but make it quick. I’ll be in the car. You’re gonna drive, right?”

When Tea came to join Sug in the car, she had a Subway napkin with something scrawled on it.

“What’s that?”

“Well...I asked who did those murals. Just wanted to find out--such an amazing artist. She told me a Jack Sanders painted ‘em. He still lives here, and his house is on Chestnut Street, right over the hill there.”

Tea started up the car, and made a left turn out of the Subway parking lot.

“Hey, you should’a turned right,” said Sug. “We came in this way.”

“I know, I just want to check out that artist’s place. Chestnut street. See if you can see a street sign.”

“What? Are you serious? Tea--”

“Come on, where’s your sense of adventure? Why’d we do this trip in the first place, if we’re just gonna buzz down a highway without really *seeing* anything? We’ll just see if he’s there. Maybe find out a little about the murals.”

Sug rolled her eyes. There would be no arguing at this point, and who knew, maybe Tea was right.

Chestnut street was only half a mile away. The name didn’t quite fit, because there were no chestnut trees in sight. The houses looked a little on the shabby side, but clean. No junk in the yards, at least.

“Now, how do we figure out which one’s his?”

“Some of the mailboxes have names on ‘em,” said Sug. Here, wait--this one’s painted up like a woman--that’s gotta be it. Yep! *Sanders*, didn’t you say that’s his name?”

“You’re a goddam genius, sis. Okie-doke, let’s see if he’s home.”

The house was a clapboard bungalow with a rusty tin roof and big wrap-around porch. The front door had an added screen door, cracker house style. Next to the door were two wicker chairs that looked as if they might cave in any minute.

Screen doors always made that sproingy squeak when you opened them, and this one was no exception as Tea opened it to reach a tarnished door-knocker shaped like a bull’s head. The bull’s nose ring was the knocker part. She rapped a few times. The door opened, and Jack Sanders was asking “What can I do for you?”

Sug and Tea stood there with the same thought: This was possibly the oddest-looking man they had ever encountered. He was fiftyish, tall, average build, but that was where average ended. On his head grew a thin plot of gray hair, pulled back in a scraggly ponytail that was at least two feet long. His complexion was studded with red blotches amidst craggy lines, and he had gray eyebrows so bushy they hung down over his eyes. His nose had clearly been fractured in the past. The most striking thing, though, was a long beard that was somehow still carrot-red. He wore no shirt, just a pair of overalls so spattered with paint that it was hard to tell they’d been blue denim at one point.

“Mr. Sanders?” said Tea.

“You found him.”

“We were just passin’ through, and...well, we heard about you being the one who did all the art in town.”

“Yep, long time ago.” His voice was distinctly southern, but more clipped than some. Like he didn’t do small talk.

Tea persisted. “Well, I’m an artist--not like you! But I was admirin’ your work. I thought...maybe we could learn a little more about how you came to paint all these murals, and my sister here is into history, so...”

Sug gave Tea her best *so now I’m a historian* look.

“Well, like I said, been a long while since I did those. But you girls took the trouble to stop by, so come on in, let’s don’t keep the door open. Lets the flies out.” Jack Sanders smiled, showing a surprisingly white set of teeth.

“Oh thanks, Mr. Sanders--just for a little bit, though. We won’t bother you long,” said Tea. “By the way, I’m Tea, and this is my sister Sug.”

“Call me Jack. Y’all twins, I take it.”

“Yes, but not identical. We *look* a lot alike, but no. In fact, Mama used to say she could tell us apart more by what came outta the inside than by the outside!” Tea laughed a little nervously.

The interior of the bungalow was either an eclectic masterpiece, or a haphazard mishmash, take your pick. Folksy paintings and wood cut-outs of people and animals covered the walls. Sug and Tea sat down on a red velvet sofa.

“How about somethin’ to drink?” said Jack. “Just bought a six-pack of Bud. Or, if it’s too early for that, I got some sweet tea in the fridge.”

Tea was about to accept the beer, when Sug said “Why don’t we have some of our namesake?”

Jack frowned for a second, then the gray shrubs above his eyes rose. “Oh, Sug and Tea. So your name’s prob’ly Sugar?”

“Good guess,” smiled Sug.

They ended up chatting for two hours over sweet tea and beer nuts. Jack Sanders was fifty-two, never married, born in a nearby town called Armadillo after some of its peculiar wildlife. He had come to Lakeville in the early ‘seventies after his mother left for Atlanta. She’d never talked to Jack about his daddy, but his grandmother told him she was lovesick, and went to be with him. Gramma had been Jack’s savior-- raised him after his mama had opted out of his life. She was the only child of Reverend Dixon, and she had told Jack countless stories about those days. He’d taken an interest as he grew up, and learned all he could from old records, letters, photos, and the like. Finally he needed to say something himself, and started on the murals. It was just the one at first--the church with his great-granddaddy the Reverend. But then the bug took hold, and the murals had just come out of him.

“Jack,” said Tea softly, “By the way, who’s that sweet little girl in that deserted window, all by herself? We thought the look on her face was...almost haunted.”

“Oh, you saw her,” he said. He seemed to change, as though washed over with sadness. “Her name’s Daisy. My grandmother. Her daddy--”

“That handsome Reverend,” said Sug.

“Yes ma’am. They lost her mama Junie to diphtheria when Gramma was just eleven. He never remarried. It fell on Daisy to be housekeeper, cook, hostess for

guests, and all. She never got over losin' her mama. She had this--sense of mourning about her all her eighty-three years--like nothin' would ever be quite right again. I painted the little girl I saw inside her--little Daisy with the sad eyes."

Sug and Tea absorbed this silently. Somehow it felt respectful to say nothing.

When it seemed right, Sug asked "So, you still painting?" She paused. "Silly question, that looks to be fresh paint on your clothes."

"Yep, still at it," he said, "but damned if I didn't get diagnosed with this eye disease. Somethin' that usually comes on later in life, but I got the fuckin' thing--pardon my language, ladies--early on. Causes blindness in the worst cases, and Doc Barnes says I got the serious kind."

"On no," said Tea, "You mean you'll go blind? How terrible!"

"Well, I'm takin' this medicine that seems to be controlling it. Shots in the eyes, every couple'a months. Lucky I got it covered by Medicaid, or I'd be blinder'n a bat by now."

"In the eyes! Sounds awful, but thank goodness they got treatment," said Sug.

"No shit. I dunno how I'd be eatin' right now. I sell just enough paintings to make a living--people seem to think it's valuable 'folk art'." He laughed. "My website gets a lot of hits, can you believe it?"

Sug was nearly as drawn in by this strange man as Tea, but she happened to look at her watch and notice it was 3:30.

"Tea, we need to let Jack get on with his day. We been takin' up way too much of his time."

"Oh, my word, you're right," Tea sounded breathy.

Jack said “You gals sure you don’t wanna stay awhile? From what you said, you got no immediate destination, and I been sittin’ here thinkin’...I wouldn’t mind painting the two of you.”

“What?” said Tea.

Sug widened her eyes.

“Yeah. Just now, occurred to me y’all would make an intriguing subject.”

“Really? Us?” said Tea. “What on *earth* would be interesting about us?”

“You just...*have* somethin’. Hard to explain.”

Sug shot Tea a doubtful look, but Tea’s eyes were already dancing.

“Now, wait...” Sug started.

“It’ll be wonderful! Imagine, an artist like Jack wanting to paint *us!*”

“Jack,” said Sug, “I don’t know quite what to say...it’s so flattering--but how long would you need us to be here?”

“Maybe a week or two. I prefer to paint from sittings rather than photos. Always captures the soul way better. And to be honest, my eyes are gettin’ too lousy to make out photos.”

“Come on, Sug, we gotta do this! Please.”

It dawned on Sug she was going to lose this one.

And so it was that Sug and Tea checked into the only motel in Lakeville for the next week or two while Jack Sanders worked his magic on an expanse of wood. Daily

they took a walk over to his place and did their best to pose exactly as he requested. He gave Tea some daisies to hold, because his Gramma always loved them. All the while, he told them some of her old stories--how Reverend Dixon had been so loved by his congregation, but could never bring himself to love them back after Junie was taken. Daisy had never been sure if he'd stopped loving *her*, or even God.

The three of them traded stories of heartache, and some joy too. They got on so well, the whole thing seemed almost magical. Whenever his curious subjects would beg Jack to show them the painting in progress, he would smile and say it would ruin the whole thing if they looked before it was done.

Then Jack brought up the plan, which came as something of a surprise, even to Tea. Sug thought it was just plain crazy. Well what about Gary and Tiff, she said, are we just gonna up and abandon them?

"Abandon *them*?" Tea's words were full of acid. "Sug, except for Mama, when was the last time you felt loved or appreciated? Honestly."

Sug was about to argue back, when Jack motioned them to come around to his side of the huge wooden canvas.

"But it's not complete, you said..."

"I know, and I was wrong...you both need to see it now," he said.

Sug fell silent. Even Tea was wordless. The decision was made, for better or worse.

On the second Sunday in Lakeville after Jack Sanders had started painting Sug and Tea, the work was finished.

That afternoon after services, some members of the First Baptist Church congregation happened to stroll by the side wall and notice the mural. No one had any idea that Jack Sanders was still doing work on this scale, but then he *was* kind of a loner. Betty Finch mentioned she had seen him greeting two women on his front porch. She wondered who they were, but didn't feel right asking, not knowing him that well-- even with her living on the same street.

Everyone agreed on one thing: This was by far his most magnificent piece.

The Reverend Billy Dixon still towered proudly in the center of the mural. But now he was flanked by two middle-aged women, youngish-looking for their age. The one with dancing cat-green eyes stood with her left hand on Billy's shoulder. In her right hand was a bouquet of daisies. The other, with soft hazel eyes and sweet smile, was seated in a wicker chair, leaning slightly forward, her slender hands braiding locks of long, honey-colored hair belonging to a beautiful child of about eleven.

Reverend Potts, the current occupant of the pulpit at First Baptist, came out to see what the hubbub was about. "Lord," he whispered. "All those years, Daisy was alone. Looks like now she has not just one, but *two* mamas to care for her and her daddy."

By now the whole town was gathered around the mural, marveling at its realism. Doc Barnes said he must've been keeping Jack's eyes in better shape than he thought. The painting seemed to speak to each one of them at some level.

Joey, Reverend Potts' oldest, came sprinting up at top speed. "Daddy," he panted, "Come see! I went to see if Mister Jack the painter was home, and he wudn't--but come look what I seen on the way back!"

He led them to the abandoned building on Main. From the upstairs window no longer peered the sad face of Daisy Dixon; having taken her place was another painted silhouette with a craggy face and carrot-red beard. His right arm stretched out the window in the direction of the church.

In the days and weeks that followed, everyone would remark there was something in Jack's self-portrait that they'd never seen in the man himself. Some thought it was contentment; others detected something more, maybe even love. Whatever it was, it kept alive a steady stream of gossip about the two mystery women, and what happened between them and Jack. The mystery was deepened by the fact that he never showed up to claim his accolades for the Masterpiece. Betty Finch kept looking out her window to see if she could catch him coming or going from his house, but she gave up after a couple of weeks.

Funny thing, they all knew Jack Sanders, but no one ever thought to look for him thirty miles away in Armadillo. Turned out he still had a lot of paintings left in him, and with Tea learning the trade and Sug managing website sales, they lacked for nothing and no one. Tea had a vegetable garden, surrounded by clusters of yellow-and-white daisies that grew so lush they were crowding out the tomatoes.

By and by Sug even started to notice how much Jack looked like his handsome great-granddaddy, albeit a little rougher around the edges.

