

When Pricing the Priceless

By: Patty Reed

Ceaselessly she labored, one brush stroke at a time, perfectly placed on the canvases surrounding her. The landscape in her imagination needed a place to be, to exist in the world, and these canvases were their homes. They needed a place to dwell, and the artist delivered, placing their colors and details together, swishing them into reality with every swish of paint. She birthed new worlds in her art that told stories of beauty and hope, dreams and realities swirling together in one unexpected place. The abilities of her hands were one of a kind, unmatched and carrying an awe that resonated in the soul of every onlooker. She created magic in her tiny studio, the artist did. She captured wonder and made it possible for one to physically see the heart of a person. The artist was a gift to the world around her, but the artist could not believe it, and the artist was sad.

The sad she carried wasn't the kind of sad that comes and goes from hearing unkind words or forgetting something important. It wasn't the sad that worries for a friend or longs for a lover. It wasn't a circumstance sort of sad. The artist's sad was a wedge in her very spirit, a feeling in her gut that she had gotten used to over the years—a feeling of just this. She was what she was, her art was her art, and her life simply carried on as just this. She would always be just this. Her art would always be just this. Her life would always be just this. Sometime in her past, this feeling had settled in her that she—her art and her life—weren't worth anything.

In her tiny studio hung hundreds of canvases accompanied by the faint haze of dust in the air. As she painted she would hear the bell on her door jingle as interested passers-by poked their heads in to look around. A jingle on the way in, and shortly after, a jingle on the way out. Jingle, jingle. Jingle, jingle. Thus was the backdrop for her creation. Every once in a while, the jingles would be slightly farther apart as someone made their way to the back of the studio to meet her. The ones who could see through the dim and the dust would catch a glimpse of the wonder that was before their eyes, curious to see more. They would exchange their greetings and compliment her work, which she was certain was only a bit of politeness in action, nice people simply desiring not to offend before the ring of the second jingle followed them out the door. She had grown used to this routine, painting and creating, a few jingles, and back to her art.

The air around her was not void of praise. As customers entered, she would hear their murmurings of delight over her art. Oohs and ahhs,

compliments and encouragements. They would use words like magical and amazing, magnificent and incredible. They would tell her she had a gift, that she had talent with a paintbrush that was, in their humble opinion, unmatched. A swirl of truth surrounded her, but she could not make herself buy into all their compliments. She didn't consciously think every one of these people was lying to her, she just could not believe these wonderful things could ever be true about her art. Detached from the words that should fill her, she heard them, but could not receive them. She had been hardened by just this--the sadness that built up around her heart an impenetrable wall. In these praises, all she felt were waves of resistance, giant fists pushing away anything that might threaten the sadness.

On occasion, someone would inquire about purchasing one of her pieces, an occurrence that always shocked her, forcing her to question why someone, who likely could have anything they desired, would settle for just this. She judged them, her naive customers, for looking upon her work as something that it surely wasn't, for seeing it as something to be treasured and valued. She scoffed at them as they jingled out the door, so carefully carrying such a worthless painting under their arm like it was made of crystal. "What do they think they are getting?" she thought as she handed over her masterpieces to people who could see in her artwork what she could not. She felt as if she was deceiving them, taking money for these silly things she made. She believed it so much so, in fact, that she always took whatever amount the customer suggested. One dollar, 5 dollars, 20 dollars. Her customers received these works of beauty for nothing, and as such, they began to be blinded by her sadness as well, seeing her work through the lens of the price they paid for such beauty.

What should have been priceless instead took on the value of mere dirt, one-of-a-kind masterpieces being treated as mass produced prints. Her work ended up in people's attics and garbage cans, hanging behind doors and above toilets. The owners of these pieces forgot the wonder they initially saw as the mistreated paintings took on the value at which they were sold. "It was only 10 dollars," they would say as they replaced it with something they liked more, "not much of a loss." They weren't inclined to care much about something that had come so cheap, but the artist couldn't fathom anyone ever agreeing to pay more for her work, so she settled. Day in and day out, she settled. "Better to be sold for little than not be sold at all," she thought, and so she kept giving her treasures away for pennies, allowing the beauty she was creating to be trampled on and abused, neglected and ignored.

The artist watched her art leave in the hands of the people that decided its meager value, and the artist grew sadder.

On one particularly grey morning, the artist went to her studio as usual, ready to participate in yet another ordinary day. She shuffled up to her door, fidgeted around with the lock, and entered her studio expectant for nothing special. As she sat in her studio, preparing her paints and canvases, the hovering clouds moved ominously outside her window. Their colors spoke of thunder and rain, and the little town sat in stillness waiting for its announcement. As the hours passed, she dove into her creative solitude with the relief of knowing that the storm would keep away the interruptions of customers. At least today, she wouldn't have to appease their meaningless chatter. She could work in the peace of the gusts of wind and rapping of rain on the back windows, kept company only by her thoughts and the black clouds stealing glances into her oasis.

Then came the jingle of the door. She emerged from the back of her studio confused and shocked. "Who could possibly be out strolling in this chaos?" she asked herself. As she turned the corner out into the shop, she spotted the cause of the jingle, a little old man dripping a puddle of water onto her floor. He looked up at her as he squeezed his hat out, streams of water dripping into the river he had created at his feet. His face was drawn with desperation and relief, and as her eyes locked on his she was overcome with compassion for this poor man who had been caught in the dreadful storm.

"Yours was the only door unlocked, Madame, I am so sorry for the mess I am making."

"Oh, not at all," she responded as she rushed over to him, grabbing a chair on her way. "Please, have a seat and rest as I get you some tea to warm up."

They sat in silence for a moment longer than felt normal, just listening to the storm rage outside the windows of the shop. As the man settled down, finally able to relax from his trek through the unexpected downpour, he began to look around through the steam rising off his mug at the place into which he had stumbled. The artist watched as his eyes moved slowly from painting to painting across the walls of the shop. "Here it comes," she thought, "here comes the part where this sweet old man is going to say nice polite things because he is stuck here until the rain lets up."

The seconds passed as if she were waiting for infinity. His eyes lingered

on each piece as if he were taking a long drink of water in the desert. He wasn't looking at her, but the artist felt as if he were seeing straight through her with the intensity of his stare. As he gazed upon her work, she wanted to disappear into nothingness and hide from the strangers deafening presence. She squirmed, trying to blend into the back of her wooden chair and become unnoticeable. If she could have covered every painting, removing them from his sight in a split second, she thought she might have done it. She had had many customers, but this man was different. He carried something with him that felt important, and she didn't know if she could handle watching him judge her work.

She risked a moment of looking up from her tea and caught a glimpse of a tear running down the man's cheek. As he brushed it away, he turned to look at her. With a deep breath and a look of wonder, he simply whispered, "These are marvelous." And as he lifted himself off of his chair to inch himself closer to the canvases adorning the walls, the artist felt something in her core that she had trouble defining--something like a tiny flash of belief. There was a twinge in her gut that believed this man, and he thought her pieces were marvelous.

He scooted around the room, painting to painting, drinking in each one for minutes at a time. Eventually, she rose to join him, standing just behind him as he looked upon one of her best pieces.

"How much do you sell these for, my dear?"

The artist had had this conversation dozens of times. She shuffled her feet and looked down at the ground as she prepared herself for what would inevitably follow her answer to his question—an offer of small change for something she had worked so hard to create. Without looking up she gave him her standard speech.

"You may have it for whatever you feel is worth paying. My pieces are sold for what you decide."

As the man watched her discomfort and listened to her shaky words, a frown crept across his face. He heard the sadness in her heart coming through these words, each word carrying an emptiness with it he didn't expect from such a normal question, from such a magnificent artist. He hadn't anticipated his simple inquiry to be met with such a rehearsed answer, and her sadness saddened his heart. Noticing that the storm had calmed down, he shook off his grief and began to gather up his hat and coat.

The artist was confused by the man's sudden change of demeanor. He had been so taken with her art, and now he was leaving. She was used to the leaving, the jingle, but somehow the idea of this stranger walking out of her shop without a painting didn't sit well in her soul. This moment could not end like this. Something wasn't right.

"Sir," she stopped him as he reached for the door to let himself out after stoically thanking her for the tea and kindness, "may I ask you why you don't want to take a painting? If it's about money, I told you I will take whatever you wish to give."

He turned and looked at her, carefully thinking of what to say. He scanned the room again, looking upon the works of her hands. His eyes wide, he let them rest back on her. As he let out a long sigh, he finally settled on what he needed to say.

"My dear, it is absolutely about money. I understand you will take whatever a person will give, and I suspect that you have been given many small sums for dozens of your beautiful paintings. I want so badly to leave with even the smallest bit of the beauty you are able to create under my arm, but you said that it costs what I feel it is worth, and I simply do not have the entire world to give you. I reckon you would take what I have, even if I feel it is not enough, but I cannot in good conscience leave you with that insult. I will not take advantage of your beauty by allowing it to be traded for so little. You, my dear artist, are priceless, and such are your pieces."

His words swirled around her head in such a fury that she almost couldn't grasp them. They were words she had never heard before, and she didn't know what they were supposed to mean. Words of worth and value, respect and honor. This man was saying things which, to her ears, sounded so foreign, but to her heart somehow sounded so familiar. It was all new, but somehow his voice sounded like home as he spoke, the sentences taking on a heavy weight in her soul that she wanted so desperately to hold onto. As she listened, she felt as if she might drop them, and that drew her even deeper into all that this old man's eyes were trying to communicate. His hand rested on the doorknob as he finished speaking, and the artist wondered if maybe—just maybe—all that the man was saying was true.

"It has been a pleasure to be in your presence, I thank the storm for this gift."

With that, he turned the knob and left her standing in her shop in shock.

As the days passed she longed for the old man to wander into her shop again. Something had happened in her that day that she had never felt before. There was a hesitant excitement in her, a joy and passion that was fueling her newest paintings. She looked at her art in amazement, seeing that it was beautiful and radiant, wondering what had happened to make this change. What had that day done to her? These new pieces still looked like her, but they had a brilliance that emanated something entirely different. She felt alive, and for the first time in her life, she looked upon herself and felt worthy to live.

Working in her studio one morning, she heard the faint jingle of her door opening. She felt her heart flip with excitement as she rose to greet the customer she hoped would be the old man, but as she turned the corner she found a new stranger perusing her shop. Disappointed, she wove through the shop towards the man, greeting him on the way. She watched as he wandered around quicker than she liked, giving her paintings a few simple glances as he passed through. He stopped before one of her new pieces, enthralled by the colors on the canvas, and asked the artist her dreaded question.

"How much for this?"

She considered defaulting to her normal response—telling the man that he could have it for whatever he wished to pay—but something in her heart stopped her. She hesitated for a moment as she considered the painting he was interested in. She saw the sheer magnitude of it, the way the colors flowed together and swept across the page. She saw the details and the intricacies. She noticed each stroke and every splash of paint, placed so lovingly on the canvas by her own brush, guided by her own fingers. She looked at this piece and saw its glory, and she was proud. Too proud to trade it for pennies.

"That painting is special," she responded, "and you may have it for \$1000."

She was almost embarrassed to have asked so much, but she quickly pushed the feeling aside, for something in her gut told her that this piece was important. It was worth the price.

The man nodded his head and considered for a moment, looking the painting up and down as he furrowed his eyebrows and rubbed his

chin. "Would you take \$700?" he finally said.

And with a ferocity that rose up in her from some unknown place, she looked him in the eye and answered, "No sir, the value of that painting is non-negotiable."

With that, he tipped his cap, said a polite thank you, and walked out of her shop with a jingle. She noticed as the door clicked shut that the jingle sounded less intrusive today, as if the sound had been a bit muffled and subdued. As she went to the window to watch the man make his way down the street without having made a purchase, she spotted the old man standing under the shade of the tree opposite her shop. He looked at her with love in his eyes and gave her a simple nod. She nodded back, let a smile slowly creep across her face, and silently realized that her world had changed. She was all of a sudden delighted to be living just this.

And the artist was happy.