

2,856 words

Blind Painter

It had rained all morning. Construction workers all over the city were still in bars, some of them. Tom was on Kathleen's couch, on his way to sleep, her children in school, when Kathleen called, and Tom said that when he napped, seconds before sleep, he could sense a slight sway as if he were in a rather recalcitrant hammock, though there wasn't a hammock, nor was there any sway, none.

"Maybe you have inner ear cancer."

It might be presumed that Tom would have others credit him with a hunger for verities alien to those achieved by the strictly rational. It might be presumed, too, that he'd have them dismiss the possibility that his philosophies were the rationalizations of a loser.

This was May, 1991, close enough to a hundred years since Frederick Jackson Turner declared an end of the American frontier, and Tom would have found this of interest, would have said that he had the sense of a frontier closing, too, and likely had made the analogy several times, would make it several more. Once or twice, he'd say that

theirs was a peculiar frontier, one which, though it no longer existed, was crossed every day.

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Tom stopped to fill his thermos with coffee at the Sunoco on Route 2 before heading out into the flat farmland sectioned into exact square miles by narrow asphalt roads with deep drainage ditches on either side. The roads were noticeably crowned. The ditches were close to the road and deep.

The billiard-table flatness, the regularity of the windbreak trees, the dead-straight roads, nondescript houses and barns maintained well enough, the absence of the drama and isolation of the Great Plains gave many to consider this among the ugliest of landscapes.

The land once had been part of the Great Black Swamp. It didn't drain at all except by buried tiles that emptied into deep ditches. The digging and laying of the tiles was the history alluded to in the novels of Sherwood Anderson.

The folks who'd cut down the million black oaks, drained the swamp, farmed it, built the houses, barns, and roads—maybe they didn't have much imagination. Maybe they didn't in other places either, except by necessities no longer seen or necessary. Nonetheless, or precisely because of the illusion of greater imagination endemic elsewhere, some folks went looking for a postcard to go live in. This was the opposite. This was where the postcards got sent to.

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Tom arrived to the farmhouse, and Jerry’s mother led Tom to a stiff, upholstered chair in the parlor at the front of the house, and while waiting for Jerry, she served tea on a plastic tray. The pot, cups, saucers, sugar bowl, cream pitcher were mismatched. Tom brought out his pocket-sized tape recorder and official AP reporter’s notebooks. She asked if he would like a sandwich. She had leftover tuna salad, with dill.

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Jerry said he’d taken a degree in art from BGSU, Bowling Green State University, twenty miles south of Toledo, out on the flattest farmland in the world, and with his degree in art and talent like ten thousand others, he was glad for a low-paying job making charcoal or ink drawings of women wearing lingerie for full-page newspaper ads for LaSalle’s, a large and known department store. He drew without living models, drew from photographs the lingerie companies sent, drew El Greco elongated figures, drew to elicit and mock prurient stirrings and otherwise his friends, one by one, disappeared, but on weekends, some weekends, he’d get out his hundred jars of paints and fifty different brushes and intend that soon enough Ohio wouldn’t look like a Paris wanna-be or an attenuated Winslow Homer or cruder Grandma Moses or accessible Joan Miro, though what northwestern Ohio and Ohioans would look like, he hadn’t known, not when he’d had in his hand a paint brush, not when he’d had in front of his face a canvas, a blank canvas, then the tiny blood vessels in his eyes, one by one, a few every hour, had burst, and the cells of his retina had died and flaked off.

You stared at the sun and the world went blindingly white. It had been like that, but in slow motion. His vision, bit by bit, had gone blindingly white. Then the white had dimmed, went gray, dark gray, dark. Nothing'd come back.

A doctor had told him, “You have stage four kidney disease.”

“Stage four? What's stage five?”

“Death,” he'd said, and Schlievert had moved back into the old farmhouse with his mother, though she'd wanted him to go to southern Ohio, a school for the blind, braille, vocational training. He'd stayed in his room, and his mother had waited on him hand and foot, and after period of weeks, he'd got the notion to resume painting. Holding a brush again, dipping in paint, smelling paint and turpentine, all that, had appeal, and in the small barn, he'd lined up his paints on a bench. His mother sprung for a dozen large canvases, four feet by five, though she'd not watch him after breakfast tap his white cane along the stone path to the small barn where he'd sit alone in the dark with canvas and paint and brushes until he'd see a painting, every shape, shade, brush stroke.

Once he'd got there, he'd go over it all again until he was sure of every detail, and then he'd get to work, methodically, carefully, except for the three days a week, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, that the medical transport van would arrive to the front of the farm house, and he'd tap his white cane down the three steps and along the narrow strip of the concrete walk until the driver'd meet him and guide him into the van for the forty-five minute drive to the dialysis center. At the center, he'd have to wait one to two hours for the treatment, which would last three to four hours. Afterwards he'd have to wait one to two hours for the van and a ride home.

Kathleen, who often drove the med transport van, was also chatty beyond endurance, Tom said, a pathology, really. She'd fancy she was part of each patient's medical team.

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Tom asked if he could see the barn, see a painting. Schlievert's mother said there was no light out there. Jerry said there was, and Tom followed him and his white cane down the very narrow stone path to the barn. The flags of shale limestone had been laid down a long time before, and the ground had grown up three or four inches above the edges, an eighth inch every year. Jerry's cane searched for the discernable click of the next small stone. The hundred-foot walk was a long one, and along the way, Tom told him the sky was like the dirty underbelly of a mythological sheep so big it had no legs, and the sky, hardly a hundred feet up, extended over the land the same hundred feet as far as the eye could see, yet there was light like somewhere over the horizon were lamps that must have been a million watts.

Jerry found the switch, lit a bare bulb in a rusting socket dangling on BX cable dropped from a beam overhead. BX cable was the old conduit of metal coils with cardboard insulation. Tom said that they'd stopped making it in the 40's, but those in the know said it was all right so long as it hadn't been moved around.

Amid tractor parts and rusting implements, Tom could see an easel with a canvas upon it, a stool, a plank bench with lined with paint jars and brushes. Against a wall, seven or eight finished paintings leaned. Tom looked through them in the sixty-watt light and offered to buy a painting. “How much?”

Schlievert said a friend had come and taken a few of his better paintings to a gallery. Four had, so far, sold, the last two for six hundred dollars apiece.

Tom said he was going outside for a smoke.

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Jerry was almost thirty, maybe five-ten, thin, balding, blue eyes, and dying of the kidney disease that had taken his sight when he'd been twenty-three. He had months to live. He likely didn't know that, but likely suspected so. Tom sensed that Jerry suspected so, and maybe this was why Jerry suspected so. The neuronal patterns that lit in Tom's brain when he spoke were reproduced in Jerry's brain pretty much, and vice versa.

Were a man was blind and couldn't see you looking at him, you could stare, stare hard, and though the blind man couldn't know this, he would suspect it was so, that others were staring at him, and in Jerry's case were seeing a young man dying alone, dying blind, and he'd have the same thought pretty much.

Those staring hadn't the notion that they might have anosognosia—the psychological malady of not knowing one's own disorder, of being blind, for example, but believing you can see, or being paralyzed, but believing you can feel—and because of this, he couldn't imagine that what was unshared within him might amount to much. He'd have to die knowing that he wasn't knowing what those staring didn't know they didn't know their own disorder.

It couldn't be a prerequisite for a writer to know when he was part of the coda to a man's life.

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In the barn, Tom took a back seat on a crate. Jerry had gone to the canvas on his easel. Already there was paint on it. The white gesso, a layer of yellow roughly to within a few inches of the edges, then a layer of cobalt blue roughly shy of the edges of the yellow. The canvas was four feet wide, five feet high, and its bottom edge was about a foot and a half off the ground. Jerry kind of seized the painting by its edges and felt along the perimeter, ran his hands over its surface as if smoothing down a silk sheet. Then he sat down on a short, three-legged milking stool. Next to him was a console table with brushes, palette knives, rags and cans of thinners. Behind him, lined up on a long, low bench, were cans of paint. He sat still and silent and stared at the canvas, stared for a long time, ten minutes, maybe more.

Tom watched Jerry's head cock this way, then that way, turn and count down the row of paint cans. Carefully he'd open a can. The paint was no house paint, but thick, like the ooze that came out of a Grumbacher tube. With a palette knife he'd carefully cut some on to the blade, stand, lean a little toward the canvas, finding its left edge with his left elbow.

About two-thirds from the right edge, a foot from the top, Jerry made a vertical, lumpy line tailing down until the palette knife had only a smear of paint on it. He sat down, closed the can, put it back, wiped the knife. Two, three minutes later, an interminable time really, he selected another can, a pinker red, and a brush one inch wide, and made a small square near the upper right corner. Then he sat down, closed the can, put it back, cleaned the brush.

There were more than a dozen paintings scattered throughout the barn. All were the same size. Each was covered in paint thickly. A thousand strokes of the two just described. Maybe ten thousand. They were explosions of colors and textures, suggestions of former shapes, forms, ideas. One was reminiscent of a big green birthday cake that had in it a thousand colors and was simultaneously melting and exploding, seen through misty eyes. One moment it was merry, almost funny, another it was terrifying. Then not a cake at all.

Tom didn't know much about painting. Michelangelo was five hundred years dead, probably gay. Van Gogh was cool because folks saw in his work their hope that one needn't be technically great to be a great artist, only emotionally great. Jackson Pollock was a drunk, which, apparently, had got him by.

Put him, Tom, in the right circumstance, he could say that to art, its history, there was a progression—medieval icons and triptychs to the Renaissance and so on through to the Baroque, Rococo, Impressionism, Dadaism, Abstract Expressionism—but one that'd ended, shot its wad.

Schlievert didn't know much about abstract art, neither theory nor practice, not anymore, not that what could be done. He said he didn't give it much thought, hadn't before going blind, not after either. He said he sat in the dark before a blank canvas like waiting for a bus, and the bus would come.

A friend had come and taken a few of his paintings to a gallery. Four had, so far, sold, the last two for six hundred dollars apiece.

“Six hundred dollars! You get six hundred dollars for these.”

“The ones that sell.”

“Do they know you’re blind?”

His paintings might have given the impression of having been done hurriedly, spastically, frenziedly, but in watching him paint, Tom saw that every stroke had been consciously thought out, planned, executed, remembered, yet with every stroke an observer would want to jump up, forward, describe for him what he was doing, ask, “Is that what you meant? Is that what you meant?”

Tom watched him paint by the light of a bare bulb in a swaying, rusting socket dangling on a dangerous cable. The light had to have been rarely on, rarely swayed. Schlievert had to have painted in the dark, alone, every day his health allowed, and had no way to know whether his intent had been executed so another might see it.

Tom couldn’t tell, not honestly, if the paintings were good or interesting or even worth the price of the canvas they were painted on and wondered that the buyers weren’t buying the gimmick. He didn’t at any rate have six hundred dollars for a painting of any quality, but he did the story, and Toledo Metropolitan Magazine published it, and the editor and Tom thought it might be a prize winner or something, but nothing much would come of it.

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Weeks after his visit to the farm upon the ugliest of rural landscapes, Schlievert called Tom. He was in the hospital and had had time to think and had been thinking about a question Tom had asked him, and two days later Tom went and faked an interview, asked him to tell about his college days at BGSU, where he had been a fine arts major.

He asked him if, when he'd gone blind, he'd considered that it might be like Beethoven going deaf, or was more akin to a religious experience, a slo-mo Saul-to-Paul thing.

Before going blind, Jerry said, he was normal and not unusually good at art, though being normal, part of it, he supposed, was not being good at anything.

“Were you ever in love?”

“BGSU had a secret they never advertised because if they had, it would have ceased to exist: seventy percent of its student body was female, pretty girls in May sun, thousands of them walking along campus trails, summer dresses—it was a lovely thing for all time.”

“Did you think back then that you'd become a great painter?”

So on.

Tom shook Jerry's pallid hand, left, and two or three weeks later, Kathleen told him that Jerry had died. No matching donor kidneys had come available.

“Guess who died?” she'd said.

“Who?”

“Who you should have bought one of his paintings.”

She and Tom went to the funeral home. Jerry's mother was there, and two of his uncles, and one of their wives. That was it. Tom told Mrs. Schlievert how much he'd enjoyed getting to know Jerry.

So on.

Schlievert’s mother had one painting on display. She’d leaned it at the foot of the casket among a modest assortment of flowers. It was a smaller painting, eighteen inches by thirty, an impressionistic Bowling Green landscape Jerry had done when sighted.

Tom asked if she liked the paintings Jerry had done when blind, if she had gone to the gallery in Toledo?

She seemed not to hear, not correctly anyway, not what he was saying. She looked down on the painting at the base of the casket. “Jerry painted that for me, for Mother’s Day, his first year away at college.”

Tom asked if she had ever gone out to the small barn and turned on the one bare bulb light dangling from the ancient cable and watched him paint, saw what he was doing, saw any of his blind paintings at all?

She shook her head. “Every morning tap-tap-tapping his way to the barn to sit all alone in the dark. If he painted a masterpiece, he could never know. He could never trust, either, what people said because they were always kind to him, to his paintings, like you were, with your story.”