

Beneath the Coloured Coating

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"I guess you could say I'm prolific," he said as he ushered me through the beaded curtains into the studio. Paintings – all of them portraits – covered every millimetre of wall space; they were even nailed to the ceiling. "I can knock out three or four each day, got a whole shed full of 'em out the back too."

These were not the works of a master. These were the sort of paintings people picked up at flea markets; the sort of paintings that new owners would gleefully kick the canvas from so that they could reuse the frames. Yet despite the amateurish quality of the brushwork and the deranged sense of colour, the portraits did possess an unnerving, hypnotic quality - it was impossible not to look at them! It was the eyes. Each pair possessed a bewildered look, as if they were trapped - entombed somehow - beneath the varnish.

The big man closed the single window, shutting out the sweet desert air and locking in the heavy scent of oil paint and turpentine. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "I came out here for the solitude, but finding subjects is a problem. Lucky you saw my sign by the highway."

He patted the top of a paint-splattered stool. "Now perch yourself up here and get comfortable."

The painter took up his pallet and chose three brushes from an old coffee tin. He jabbed one behind an ear, clenched one between his teeth, and swirled the third through a moist lump of burnt sienna.

"Just relax my young friend," he whispered, dabbing the second brush into a splotch of vermillion red, "painting is a journey where *anything* can happen."

As time passed, the more unfocused I became. I fiercely concentrated on the muted colours of a portrait on the opposite wall. I blinked and shook my head a little as the dull emerald and muddy magenta appeared to swirl together.

"Only a little longer my friend."

A wave of irritation swept over me, washing away my polite expression.

"Does it normally take this long to paint a picture?" The words burst from my lips without my meaning to. Hastily I reigned in my anger and annoyance before looking up to see whether or not he was offended.

"No it does not, my impatient companion. But to complete a work of art is to perfectly capture the emotions in one's face, to bring to life the wistfulness and longing, or the contentment and peace." The artist explained as if talking to a very young child. He smiled slightly as he said this like he was enjoying an inside joke.

Anger swelled up inside me that I fought to control. Assuming an artificially attentive expression, I asked, "How long do you normally spend on each painting?"

His brow furrowed into lines of thought. "Each work of art is usually complete by the end of the second hour. However you are particularly difficult as the turmoil of your numerous thoughts flit across your face like an open book."

I felt colour seep into my cheeks as he said this. I'd never thought of myself as easy to read. In the past I'd been described as unemotional – one with a face as hard as stone. Suspicion rose from my thoughts that I quickly dismissed. Maybe today I was being a little more receptive.

Sighing I resumed my earlier hobby – staring out of the window. Sunset was now well underway, as beautiful as ever despite the hanging clouds. The combination of blazing orange, rose pink and faded indigo cast a warm light on the endless dunes and lonely studio. I caught my breath at the amazing sight before remembering my need to breathe. Looking back at the big man busy at work I took a long, deep breath. The musty smell of oil paints and turpentine filled my nostrils.

"My goodness, it's stuffy in here. Do you mind opening the window?" I managed to splutter before sneezing explosively several times.

"All in good time, all in good time," replied the artist cheerfully, "I've just started to apply the finishing touches to my work. It shouldn't be long now."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. He'd said that numerous times already. Gripping the edges of the stool upon which I was seated I closed the air passage to my nose and breathed through my mouth instead. It didn't have quite the effect I had hoped for. The taste of turpentine rolled over my tongue making me feel slightly sick. At least I wasn't suffocating.

“Ah, there we are!” His shockingly loud voice broke the silence startling the wits out of me. Clutching my heart and gasping for breath I wheezed, “Is it finished?”

“Indeed it is my friend. I will go now to collect the varnish. Stay here.” Scooping the artwork into his large hands, he strode out of the room looking very satisfied.

As soon as his heels disappeared around the door, I leapt to my feet and sprinted over to the window for some fresh air. Yanking it open I breathed in the cool nightly scents with pleasure. As I was revelling in the sweet air, his words came back to me. *I will go now to collect the varnish.* The varnish? Surely the painting wasn't dry already?

The sound of heavy footsteps making their way up the stairs came to my attention. Slowly I crossed the room to sit once again on the stool. With a broad smile the artist reappeared and moved over to me.

“Do you like it?” I surveyed the portrait with interest. My eyes didn't have the beseeching look that the others seemed to have. I took the artwork in my hands and stared into the eyes of my mirror image. Instantly I felt myself being drawn towards the portrait. Though my body stayed still my mind seemed to be crossing through my flesh and entering the canvas. I looked in horror at the artist who had dropped his kind manner and was watching me with a wicked grin. I took a few gasping breaths before my spirit had left my body entirely leaving it still and staring. Trapped beneath the varnish, I opened my mouth in a silent scream as the artist slung the empty shell of my body over his shoulder before throwing it into a chest for disposal.

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