

The Runaway Man

By Sara Borman

Year 9 Moriah College

Story Starter by John Danalis

"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."

I sat on the stool uneasily, second guessing my decision to come here. The midday sun blazed through the desert and the only sound in the room was the ticking of a small clock

perched on the table beside his easel. I could barely believe it – the man by the side of the highway, who would paint any man who came his way...as children in my hometown, we'd all told each other stories about him. In fact, I was only here on a whim, testing out my own curiosity. As if reading my thoughts, his voice cut through the silence, rough and worn like old leather, the same texture as his skin.

“What brings you to this neck of the woods?” he asked, his eyes not wavering from the canvas. He laughed dryly at his own little joke, as the existence of “the woods” was severely lacking.

“I suppose...curiosity?” My words went unacknowledged, and the silence made me uncomfortable. “It's not everyday you see a sign like that...”

“What were you leaving?”

“Most people would ask me where I was going.” I was genuinely confused...more about the answer, than the question. In all honesty, where was I leaving? My destination, that I knew, but what was it? An escape? Me, running away from consequences again?

The question hung in the air, remaining unanswered. Perhaps he was being sensitive, and allowing me to shirk responsibility and play the “naive” card for a little while longer. He began to hum softly, modifying the melody to match his brush strokes.

“Are you this interested in the lives of all of your subjects?” I interrupted. After a long pause, he responded.

“How can I paint someone without knowing where they come from?”

I named my town, a small, relatively quiet place two hours north of this place. Somehow, though, I got the vibe that it wasn't the answer he was looking for. He merely raised his eyebrows, feigning interest, and continued painting. “I got scared. I had to get out. Next thing you know, I was cruising down the highway with all of my possessions in my backseat.”

His eyes, black like coal, flicked up for the first time since he had begun the painting. “You do that often?”

“What? Run away whenever life gets too tough, then end up running straight back when

I'm not satisfied with the way my new life turns out?" He nodded wordlessly. "I suppose." It sounded surreal to hear the words. Thoughts and actions are two completely different things, and though I had been thinking about the real reason I kept leaving, I'd never spoken it aloud. For some reason, my eyes began to well up.

"There you go." His face cracked into a smile, not a smirk, but a broad grin from ear to ear. His hands, which had previously been moving with slow, deliberate strokes, took on a whole other life, madly striking up and down the page. Colours flicked on to the canvas with alarming speed; he did not stop smiling once. Rather a look of intense focus clouded his eyes, detracting from his cheerful demeanour.

Time became an object; he commanded it. When he finally looked up from his canvas, it seemed like only seconds had passed, though the sunlight beaming through the window that slowly became dimmer and dimmer begged to differ. He picked up the canvas, glanced out the window and turned to face me. He turned the painting around, and expectingly prompted me. "Well?"

"Wow." The person on the canvas was simultaneously a completely different person to me, while at the same time a more accurate representation of me than a mirror could provide. It's eyes – my eyes – were blurred with regret and hesitation, fear of the unknown. The shadows darkened one side of it's face, the flickering of the sunlight as it faded captured, almost liquid in stillness.

"I have to go." Suddenly it all became clear.

"Where?" He said, but his eyes said that he knew. Though he turned his back, I sensed his smile.

After a moment's hesitation, I knew what I had to say.

"Home."