

## Mary's Canvas (The short story)

### Chapter 1

As he gazed out of the window at the swing hanging from the old oak tree swaying slowly back and forward as if someone was sitting on it patiently waiting for him; he lifted his right hand, grasped his left arm and smiled.

"It's not quite as frightening as I thought it would be"; he said.

"Are you ok?" I asked as his face turned a pasty grey.

"That's the last thing she ever said to me; but now I know what she meant."

His eyes slowly closed and he fell to the floor like a puppet that had suddenly lost the support of its strings; and he was gone.

As I stood next to his grave side, I was surprised by the absence of tears but in each persons eyes there was something deeper than tears as they seemed to be reflecting on how he had touched their lives in some very special way.

The simple invitation that would change my life forever came to my attention on January the first. It was for most people a public holiday but as I had no family of my own to share it with I made use of the day to catch up with the pile of papers that had not made it to my priority tray throughout the year.

One particular pile held together with a paper clip caught my attention, as it had several times before.

Small town artists were not the type of people I would usually have taken four days out of my busy schedule to visit personally; but there was a tone of sincerity that I had rarely come across in the stream of letters I received over the years from his neighbors that I could no longer ignore. What tipped the balance was the letter I received from him personally.

Mr Dobrivorski

As the Curator of the national art gallery I am sure that your time is precious so I won't waste it.

I am dying and have little if any time to waste myself; I would like to say I'm grateful for the long and healthy life I was blessed with; but it's a life I sacrificed when captivated by a passion and desire for life that I could never personally come close to although I did try desperately.

What you will find if you decide to visit me is the end result of a 55 year journey and a glimpse into the heart of a woman who died young but whose short existence expressed more about life than any artist could ever capture in a single lifetime.

I am therefore inviting you personally to view my life's work and would like to donate it to you to dispose of as you feel fit.

I look forward to your arrival ...

Regards

It had been a long time since I'd taken a road-trip but it was nice to relax in my car without the stress of airport check-ins, body scans and the prospect of sitting in a tin can 30 thousand feet above the ground.

It also gave me a lot of time to think about some things other than the works of prima donna artists hocking their self proclaimed genius to a market looking to make a fast buck by flipping a canvas or two; and without so much as a glance at the colors on the canvases surface; let alone trying to figure out what the genius who painted it was trying to say.

I had never personally created a work of art myself apart from the vivid images I had created in my mind of what my parents faces might have looked like had I known them. My adopted mother never found the courage to tell me while she was alive that I was not her natural son. She left the job to the appointed trustee of her substantial estate; left to her by the man who unsuccessfully played the role of my father.

A stony faced trustee broke the news to me as he read it from her will as a short opening paragraph without so much as a Dear son. It was only then that the chain of boarding schools and lack of any emotional connection with my mother made any real sense. It did however leave me feeling empty and at a loss to understand how any mother could give up her son at birth. And although angry and deeply hurt; I still felt a strong love and life long connection to her, whoever she may have been.

Growing up in New York City I had spent little if any time in small town suburbs but this one seemed vaguely familiar.

As I drove into town a large banner straddled the main street which read; Town hall, bring and buy jumble. The town hall wasn't hard to find as it seemed to be the only place with any sign of life. I was met at the door by an old man who ask me; "Are you bringing or buying".

"Oh I'm sorry I'm not. I mean I'm looking for Mr".

It suddenly hit me that I didn't know the name of the person I had come all this way to see. I searched my mind for a name but realized that everyone had only referred to him as 'The artist'. I pulled out his letter and looked at the bottom of the page and was amazed to find that there was no name. Just a simple; Regards.

How could I not have noticed this?

The old man looked at me and repeated. "So bringing or buying".

I felt a hand grip my elbow and a woman gently pulled me aside.

"I'm sorry but I couldn't help but notice that you seem a little lost. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Yes I know this may seem strange but I don't actually know the name of the person I'm looking for".

"Oh you must be looking for the artist. Nobody was ever able to find out his name. It was a little strange to tell you the truth when he first arrived in town but everyone stopped asking after a while once we all got used to him. We all just call him the artist now. His paintings are amazing. Nobody has ever seen them all to tell you the truth. He only ever shows one of his paintings at once which he puts in his window after he returns from his latest adventure. He travels a lot you know but he hasn't been away for some time now. The strangest thing though is the canvas in the window at the moment. It's white; pure white."

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"Yes of course; he lives in the cottage at the end of Kinkade. If you go left out of the building and follow your nose you can't miss it. He's very friendly and always has some great words of wisdom that I'm sure he'll be happy to share with you."

As I walked down the street towards his house my heart began to beat faster for no apparent reason. I felt a feeling of anticipation and seemed strangely disturbed as I approached the white picket fence and old stone pathway that led to the arched wooden door. I reached up to knock the brass door knocker but the door opened before I could reach it.

"You're taller than I imagined". He said "Come in, tea? I don't have coffee as it clouds my mind you know".

I wasn't quite sure what to say as I wasn't even sure why I was here in the first place.

"My name is". He interrupted me mid sentence as if he had known me all his life.

"I know who you are young man, now sit down as my time may be short and I have so much to tell you".

"Yes of course but maybe I could look at your collection to give us something to talk about?"

"Oh we have plenty to talk about but of course it's through here".

As I walked through to a small room at the back of the house I was struck by the stark whiteness of the room he led me to. In the center of the room there was a single canvas on a white easel that appeared to be painted with a thick layer of white paint.

"Is this some kind of a joke?" I ask as I looked around for his collection.

"No not at all. It is anything but a joke and if you will be so kind as to sit for a moment with me I will be happy to tell you the whole story."

During my career as an art critic I had met many eccentric people and this had become somewhat normal for me. I returned to the living room and made myself comfortable in a soft armchair next to an open fire. He handed me a hot cup of tea in an ornate teacup and saucer; walked over to the window and sat down on a small window box, and he began.

## Chapter 2

"I was a young artist passionate or so I thought about capturing the characteristics on the many faces that I found in the cafes peppered around Paris.

When I first saw her I began to scribble as I often did but this time it was different. There was something that eluded the dryness of my charcoal. I tore at my paper in my futile attempts to capture the passion in her eyes that now consumed and beguiled me. She laughed and entertained her table guests who seemed to be drawn deeper and deeper under her spell and to her endless source of passion that entangled them.

"Would you like another coffee sir".

I turned briefly away and a waiter stood patiently waiting for my reply.

"Yes another coffee please; yes thank you that would be great".

I quickly turned my attention back toward my subject but she was gone.

Like a child who had lost their parent I jumped to my feet and looked around frantically but there was no sign of her. I hurried to her table and ask at first politely:

"Excuse me could you tell me who the young lady who was sitting with you might be".

Their suspicious looks greedily shunning my enquiries as if they had already claimed her as their own enraged me. My politeness turned to anger as I clutched the lapel of one and ask again.

"I simply wish to know who she is and where she may be from".

I looked down at the terrified face that stared back at me and slowly released him as I wondered what had possessed me to behave in such a way.

"I'm sorry! but we just met her and have no idea who she is or where she's from" he stuttered.

It seemed like a lifetime passed me by as I searched in vain for her in every café and side street in Paris. I scribbled in my studio until my eyes closed as I tried to recall her face but soon her image faded until only a shadow remained.

I returned to my life as if I had momentarily been abducted by aliens and dropped back down to earth being left with nothing but a hazy memory of what had actually taken place.

Paris was tingling with the sound of war approaching and the tensions were already showing on the frightened faces in the cafés that were previously filled with talk of prosperity and flamboyant frivolity.

I returned to the small café and watched people hurry by yet few took the time anymore to simply sit, relax and sip a little wine.

“Hello there; how are you”?

I didn’t need to turn my head to know the sound of a voice I had never actually heard; but there she was standing right behind me like an angel who had fallen from the sky and I wasn’t about to let her out of my sight again.

“Can I join you for a moment”?

“S’il vous plait” I repeated several times as I stood up and pulled out a chair.

“May I ask your name”; I ask as she sat down.”

“It’s Mary and thank you so much! It’s nice to see there are still gentlemen left in these crazy times. Did you ever finish my portrait? I am sorry I had to leave so quickly before you may have had chance to finish.”

I was surprised that she had even noticed me let alone remembered me from so long ago.

“I don’t remember you ever looking at me while I was sketching you.”

“A woman’s peripheral vision is extensive. It helps us to watch out for predators that may be after our men”. She said with a wink and a smile that seemed to light up the Eiffel tower that stood behind her.

The moment was broken by a fight that broke out nearby and a man knocked over several tables next to us.

I stood up placing myself between her and the ensuing scuffle.

“Paris has gone crazy. Would you like to walk a little?” I ask her.

“Of course! So tell me; what are your plans for getting out of Paris before the Germans arrive?”

“Well I hadn’t planned on leaving”.

Leaving Paris had never even occurred to me as I now considered it my home. But I had never quite believed that the Germans would ever get so close, even though I could now hear the sound of cannon fire in the distance.

“You must leave immediately.” She insisted fervently. “I am leaving tomorrow with my parents for New York. The train leaves in the morning if you want to join us. I can arrange a ticket for you if you come”.

It all seemed so surreal the thought of leaving my home the very next day for a country I had hardly given a thought to in my whole life.

But there I was sitting on the deck of a sea liner, looking across at the bemused look on her mother and fathers faces that must have mirrored my own from their perspective.

### Chapter 3

The statue of liberty greeted our arrival as I'm sure it had many other lost souls before us, but Mary looked anything but lost as she grinned from ear to ear as the ticker tapes streamed from the top decks as we approach my new home.

The apartment was quite large and what became my room for the next 2 years had large lofted windows and turned out to be the perfect studio with its spectacular views over the Hudson River and the lights of the city on the other side.

Mary and I became what I can only describe as the best of friends until her mother became sick and died suddenly. Her father died 2 days later of what can only be described as a broken heart. It seemed strange standing next to the single grave of two people at the same time. Mary didn't shed a tear as they lowered the coffins into the ground one on top of the other. She celebrated their lives by presenting a slide show of the funniest photographs she could find of them and her friends and family laughed and danced till midnight. The next morning she woke early and I could hear her preparing breakfast as usual in the kitchen.

"Are you ok"? I ask as I walked up behind her.

"Of course I'm ok they had a great life and they went together without any suffering, it couldn't have worked out better for both of them if they had planned it that way."

"But what about you?"

"What about me? I'll be fine as usual."

She lent over to turn the pancakes and burned her hand on the edge of the pan.

"Ouch; damit!"

She quickly ran her hand under the cold water and a tear welled up in her eyes and she didn't stop crying for 3 days.

We talked for a month about what she wanted to do and Mary's passion began to shine like it never had before. There it was that passion that had been missing for so long, it was the Mary I had seen in that small café in Paris. The Mary that I fell in love with and married a year later.

My career as an artist seemed to be put on hold since my arrival in New York and time had moved so fast that I sometimes wondered if I would ever paint again. Mary surprised me by redecorating the loft studio for my birthday one year and asked me to paint her in return.

Capturing the true spirit of Mary became as elusive as it was all those years ago and my frustration grew once again with every attempt.



One evening Mary was sitting for me and I ask her if she would pose naked in front of the open fire. She shyly folder her arms across the front of her body and looked down as if she was holding something gently in her arms. As she looked into my eyes her spirit seemed to flow through my hands and onto the canvas. There it was the spirit of Mary as if the very canvas that it was painted on was breathing and bursting with life.

Her modesty prevented me from ever showing it to anyone and it hung in my studio as the inspiration that drove my newly restored talents.

## Chapter 4

It was a beautiful spring day and the blossoms were in full bloom when I came home early to find her crying.

All she could say through her tears was: "I wanted to do so much, why didn't we do it sooner? Why?"

Mary's cancer was a silent monster and had been hiding in her lungs for so long that by the time they found it, it was too late.

Two weeks is all we had. Two miserable weeks as I watched her spirit and passion fade.

It was her final words that haunted me and became my life's passion. But her passion painted my life also with so many beautiful colors that I would never have seen, if I had never met her in that small café in Paris.

"Paint it for me; paint the life I should have had. Share it with the world in colors that shows them my passion. Don't let my life simply end this way, please I beg of you find the thing I loved so much and had to let go of too soon."

On the night she died I drank myself unconscious in the hope that it would drown the pain. When I woke up I discovered that I had painted over her canvas with black paint in my anger. That summer I returned to Paris and painted the café where we met on Mary's canvas and it seemed to dance with a vibrancy that others stared at in wonder. I felt her spirit come alive again and it seemed to be living in her canvas. I traveled the world and painted every place she ever dreamed of visiting; people she would have liked to know and culinary delights she had only spoken of. You see my life's work is on one canvas; Mary's canvas.

But in her dying words the part that never really made sense was the words 'find the thing that I loved so much and had to let go of too soon'. That was until I found you. When Mary was 15 when she made a mistake and her passion was mistaken by a fool as desire for him. Mary was so ashamed but couldn't end the life that was now growing within her. Her parents found a family to adopt him in New York where she knew she could be close to him. She followed your life as if it was her own but could never hurt the family that she thought had grown to love and cherish you.

Mary's canvas is now yours. And it is finally complete and worthy to hang in the great art gallery called life. I will share the same place as we all will someday until the grand tapestry is complete and the master returns to view his great collection of masterpieces with their unique layers of colors.

Mary wasn't afraid of dying; she was only afraid that she may never have lived long enough to share the passion within her."

As they lowered the artists' body into the ground I realized that life is truly represented within this graveyard that I now stood in. With colors so vivid that they can never truly be represented by the pail surfaces of our skin. I looked around one last time and said my goodbyes to those who came to honor a simple man with no name who gave his life so the passion of one could be shared with so many.

It was late when I finally arrived home. I hung the white canvas on my wall and fell asleep with a peace in my heart that I had never felt before.

When I awoke, the pail white canvas was gone and in its place was a painting of a naked woman with a newborn child snuggled against her breast.

The end

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