

Paintings of the Deceased

By Nova Collison

Most people had a home that they had lived in since childbirth, or at least one that they spent most of their premature life in. For me however, that is not the case. My mother died of cancer in the lungs five days after my second birthday and my dad overdosed on methamphetamine in his room only three months later. So for the past thirteen years since those *tragic* incidents, (notice the sarcasm) I have been tossed from house to house like a hot potato.

My mother was a heavy smoker and wasn't light on her drinking. She was never without some sort of drink in one hand and a cigarette in between her index and middle finger in the other. Of course I was a baby then so who was I to know anything, but within the past few years I had tried to contact some of my parents old family and friends. They were hesitant but agreed to talk to me. I met with my mother's half sister and then my father's step sister. All they told me was that my mom was always smoking and drinking and my dad got into drugs as the years went on.

Just yesterday I had been notified that my current foster parents are taking in two new children and I needed to move to a new family. So here I stand, the next day, standing on a very large whitewashed porch. In each corner of the porch stood a large white pillar that lead all the way up to the overhead roof. Placed in front of me were two ten feet tall white doors with golden handles on each as well as golden door knockers.

My fist clenched tightly around the handle of my dark blue suitcase as I took in a deep breath through my nose. This place was nothing like the other places I had stayed.

Just as I was about to reach up to knock on the door, one of the large white doors swung open revealing a woman.

Her hair was long, black, and hung down to the middle of her waist. She seemed to be about five foot nine and looked as though her waist could fit into a womens petite jeans. Her nails were short and had no colour as she clapped her hands together in joy, creating a loud smack noise.

Her white dress had no sleeves and flowed down almost to the floor. The smile on her face was bright and happy as her bright blue eyes looked into mine. She squealed in joy as she ran towards me and pulled me into a tight hug making me tighten my grip on my suitcase till my

knuckles turned white,

She looked very young but also very old at the same time. She looked as though she could be between thirty to forty. She smelled like the strawberry shampoo you buy at the drugstore but the smell of roast beef flooded my nose just after.

She placed her long and skinny fingers on my shoulders and pulled away from me to look at my face.

“Oh my,” She sighed as she placed a section of my long brown hair in her fingertips. She twirled it around and then tucked it behind my ear. “You're even more beautiful than in the pictures.” She stated as she pulled away and took a step back while lacing her fingers together in front of her. “They are going to love you.” She said rather quietly. It was almost too quiet to hear.

“Pardon?” I asked in wonder. Who else was I going to see? The rest of the family? But I was told it was just one woman.

Her face flushed red and her eyes widened. “Oh, nothing sweetheart. Please, come in!” The shocked expression was soon replaced with another smile as she moved to the side and motioned for me to enter the large white house.

As my foot hit the hardwood floor, my eyes scanned my surroundings. The walls were white, the floor was a dark shade of brown, almost like dark chocolate, and there was one large main room in the front. In this room sat no furniture of any sort, not even a simple coffee table or rug. At the back of the room, two large staircases lead to an upper floor on either side. As I placed my suitcase on the floor and the door closed behind me, I wondered why there isn't some sort of echo. But that was when I realized that there were paintings lining the walls. There were at least twenty paintings along each wall, some even over top and under. There must have been hundreds.

The style of painting was the same throughout them all. None of them were landscapes of fields or cities and none were of vehicles or parks. In fact, everyone of them was just a portrait of a single person with a smile on their face.

My thoughts were interrupted when her high pitched and almost angel like voice rang through the room.

“Quinn,” . . . Quinn, yes that is my name. I don't know where it came from or why I got it but I did. Not many people call me by my name. Usually its replaced with honey or sweetheart,

sometimes they would even call me little girl.

A strange pleasure ran through my body hearing her call me by my name. “Your room is just up the stairs and at the end of the left hall. You have your own bathroom. Go ahead and get settled in your room. I'll give you a full tour when you come down.” She started walking off into what seemed to be the kitchen which was just behind the right staircase.

“Thank you.” I responded in a hesitant but almost happy voice. I had the slightest feeling that I might actually like it here.

My room was almost exactly as you could imagine it be in a house like this. There was a large queen bed in the center of the room with a window right behind it that looked out to the front yard which held a large garden. The walls were white and the carpet was a very light shade of grey. A grey dresser was placed on the other side of the room with a small desk.

The room was large and extremely gorgeous but wasn't too extravagant. I was very glad to see no colour in the room. At all the other houses I had stayed at, the rooms were always painted pink or yellow before I had arrived. This room felt light and airy.

I placed my suitcase on the floor next to my bed and unzipped it, not wanting to wreck the bed with the dirt that may have floated onto my suitcase. Although, this house was very neat and tidy.

I removed each piece of clothing and placed in the spot I believed it belonged then grabbed my bathroom bag. My bathroom was just across the hall from my room and had the exact same look to it. All white and very open. There was a single person shower next to a normal bathtub. There were double sinks in front of one very large mirror. Tiles covered the floors with a light shade of grey.

Once everything was in place, I made my way down one of the large staircases. The smell of roast beef had not left the house and had gotten stronger as I made my way to the kitchen.

Once again, it was white everywhere with accents of light grey. The whole house was very modern.

There she stood, at the counter plating the roast beef onto two separate plates. As soon as she lifted her head, she noticed me standing there.

“Oh, hello Quinn. Well I guess you found the kitchen. Dinner is ready now, so if you'd like, you can grab a plate and have a seat at the table. Or you can eat in your room today if you'd

prefer.” I may be non-social and not like a normal teenage girl, but I could do something as easy as

eating at the dinner table with my new guardian.

“No. . . I’ll eat with you.” I said as I grabbed my plate and walked over to the large dining table. She smiled wide and grabbed two cups from the cupboard. She then filled both with water and placed them on the table along with her plate. Utensils were already set as I picked up my fork and took a bite.

“I know this type of thing isn't new to you so I'll just get it over with now.” She said with a sigh. I looked up at her in wonder. “Basic rules. You make a mess, you clean it up.” I nodded in understanding. “This isn't a rule but since there is no school anywhere close to here, I will be homeschooling you.” A small smile spread across my face. After having to move from school to school, being able to learn from the comfort of my own home seemed very nice. “Lastly, once it is ten in the evening, please go to your room and stay there.” Confusion washed over me as she said that last sentence. Why? What was the reason? “At least for now, you're a young girl. You need your sleep.” I nodded, still not understanding why.

Days passed and everything seemed to be perfectly normal. I never left my room after ten and always cleaned up after myself. The woman was a very nice woman. Her name was Elizabeth. She took me out to dinner last night and right before that, we went golfing. I have to say, after only four days, I felt like she was the best person I had ever stayed with. She was very kind and caring and all of the meals she cooked were amazing. She seemed like a totally normal human being . . . at least, until I had to go downstairs.

One night I woke up so incredibly thirsty that I didn't even think for a second that I had to stay in my room. I opened my door slowly, waiting for it to creak, and then stepped into the hallway. All the lights were off so she must have still been asleep.

I turned to my right and began to walk towards the staircase, but as soon as I reached the first step I froze. My breath caught in my throat and I felt as though my whole body had been glued to the floor. What I saw before me was so confusing and hard to comprehend. What was she *doing*?

She seemed to be walking from painting to painting and . . . talking?

“Yes!” She cheered to one of the paintings. “She's perfect! I don't doubt for a second that

she won't." Who is she talking about? *What* is she talking about? It was silent for a second. "Please, just trust me." She said, turning around and walking to another painting that was across the room.

Was she nuts? Who in the world talks to paintings?

I shifted my weight, getting ready to go back to my room when the floor creaked. Out of all times to creak, it does it now. Within the next second, her head whipped around to where I stood. Her eyes were wide and frantic as she looked at me. I turned to run to my room.

"Wait!" She called after me. I stopped in my tracks. "Come down here please." She said with a soft voice.

I didn't even know what I was feeling at that moment. I was kinda scared, a little worried, but I was also curious.

I slowly turned on my heels and started down the stairs. A small smile appeared on her face. It wasn't a smirk or a creepy smile, it was a genuine smile of joy. I placed my foot at the bottom of the stairs and stood still.

"I know this may seem . . . odd but I promise it will all make sense once I've explained it." I rubbed my hands together and stepped closer to her. "I'll answer your first question. No, I am not mentally ill. There is a good explanation." I nodded my head, eager to hear what she had to say.

She motioned her hands around the room.

"These paintings . . ." she began. "These paintings are special. They're not like normal paintings." Special. That word rang in my head over and over. How could they be special? I didn't speak. I couldn't. She seemed completely sane but why was she speaking to them?

"This is going to be hard to explain, so maybe we should go to the living room." She reached for my hand and pulled me to the other room. She sat me down on the large white sofa and held my hands tightly in hers. She smiled at me, not a scary smile though, a nice warm smile. This comforted me. I was feeling many emotions and this helped settle my worries.

"It started many years ago." Was the first thing she said. "Before you passed you would paint a portrait of yourself. Then once you passed, your child or whoever was in the house after you would hang the painting." She paused, waiting for me to say something.

"So that's what all of those are? From other people who had lived here?" I asked. I didn't want to ask any questions but I wanted to fill the awkward silence. She nodded.

“I began painting mine about ten years ago. You’re supposed to do it when you believe you are in your best state. Mine was my twenties. Would you like to see it?” She asked, a smile spreading across her face.

“Yes please.” I responded, standing up as she did.

She lead me to a small closet that I had never noticed before. The room wasn't very large but it was full of paints and easels and canvases. Right in the center of the room was placed a portrait that wasn't quite finished. It looked exactly like Elizabeth but much more youthful.

“This one is mine, as you can see. I should be done soon.” She said as she walked over to it.

“What happens once it is hung?” I asked. Her smile faded and she laced her fingers together in front of her.

“This is where things get complicated.” She stated. “Before I had mentioned that these paintings are special. Well, the paint that we use is what makes it that way.” She said. “Lets go to the main room, okay?” She suggested as she walked out of the room. I trailed shortly behind her. She talked as she walked to the room. “They may seem perfectly normal.” She motioned to all of the paintings in the room. “But you don't notice their uniqueness until you've . . . accepted it.” This puzzled me.

“Accepted what?” I asked. I would have never expected what she said to come next.

“That they speak.”

“So let me get this straight,” I began as we were both sitting at the kitchen table eating an early breakfast. We had not slept since Id gotten up. “You paint a portrait of yourself when you look the best, but you use special paints. Then once you die you get the next person to hang it. Then from there your painting can . . . speak.” I struggled with that last word. I hadn't gotten used to that yet even though it has only been a few hours. I was not positive I ever would.

“Correct.” She said, taking a sip of coffee from her cup.

“You can hear them speak.”

“Yes.” She placed her cup down “Anything else?”

“Why can't I hear them?”

“You must hang my painting before you can hear them. Once you do, they can speak to you and you to them.” She said, grabbing a piece of toast from a plate and placing it on hers.

“But that means that I won't be able to hear them until . . .” I couldn't finish the sentence.
“I die.”

We spent the next few weeks learning painting techniques. She said she wanted to make sure I could paint as nice as possible so mine would end up looking as realistic as the rest of them. I asked her how she ended up getting the paint but she said she didn't know either. They had tubs and tubs of it so she didn't even have to worry about running out and neither will I.

As the days passed, I slowly got a little more used to the idea. She would talk to the paintings and tell me what they were saying back and introduced me to them all so by the time I could speak to them I would already know who each of them were. They seemed nice.

Months went by and my artistic skills skyrocketed. That was pretty much all I worked on. I never did much school. I never really had to worry much about getting a job or anything because she was quite wealthy, so she always reassured me that I would be alright financially.

She was the nicest person I had ever met. The best person I had ever lived with.

On the one year anniversary of me staying there, she signed the papers to adopt me. That was the best day of my life, I almost cried. That night she cooked me an amazing dinner and we watched a movie in the living room.

“Thank you.” I said to her quietly as the credits rolled down the screen.

“Pardon?” She asked, turning her head to me.

“Thank you, for adopting me. I've never met anyone as nice as you.” A large smile spread across her face. She pulled me into a hug.

“I love you.” She said.

“I love you too.”

My paintbrush made its final stroke across the canvas just as there was a knock on the door. A smile grew on my face and I clapped my hands together.

“Just one moment please!” I called to the front door as I turned to reach for the finished painting across the small room. I quickly stepped across the livingroom floor to the small hook that hung on the wall. I took a deep breath as I lifted the painting to its final resting place.

A sigh escaped my lips as I stood back to get a better look at it.

“Hello Elizabeth.” I said quietly to her.

“Hello Quinn, it's nice to finally speak again.” A tear rolled down my cheek and my smile

grew wider.

“Yeah.” I turned my head to all the others. “Hello everyone.” Many different types of hellos filled the room. Some from women and some from men but all were very youthful.

“I must get the door, Braiden is here.” I said, motioning to the door.

“Yes.” Elizabeth said with a smile. “Go, we can catch up tonight.”

I turned on the balls of my feet and stepped in front of the door. My somewhat wrinkled hand grasped the doorknob and turned it to open the door, revealing a short blonde head and light skinned boy with bright blue eyes and a timid smile on his face.

“Hello there, My name is Quinn. Welcome to your new home.”