

The Painting on the Wall

by Sean Byrnes

*The past, present and future have something in common.
They all happen in the same place.*

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As people get older they change. It's just a fact of life, you can't stay the same forever. A person is a sum total of all of their experiences and elderly people, well, they just have more experience. Many people become wise with age, some suffer the years poorly and others lose touch.

My Uncle Gregory, however, simply became odd.

A lifetime ago he was a young man, but when I knew him he was spoken of in hushed tones when he wasn't around. The same hushed tones that people use when they speak of people that aren't yet dead but people believe might be close to it. When the family did speak of him it was always the same discussion of his odd behavior. Why did he not talk to us? Why did he still live in that big house by himself? Why did he sit that way?

That last one was a very good question. My distinctive memory of Uncle Gregory was of him sitting in his worn arm chair of his living room staring at the mantle above his fireplace. Sure, he would visit us occasionally. He would take me to baseball games when my dad had to work on the weekends. He would cook for us when we visited him for dinner. Although he did not speak much, when he did speak he had a pleasant and friendly voice, softened by the years. He would often flash me his crooked smile when no one else was looking and he caught me up to some kind of mischief.

But most of the time he sat in his armchair. There was no television in the house, nor any radio. The only distraction at all was the amazing collection of paintings hung over every square inch of wall in the entire house. Paintings of landscapes, flowers, fruit, imaginary things and people I could never recognize. Each painting was carefully hung in such a way that the paintings did not seem messy or chaotic but somehow fit exactly right. Somehow the paintings were the way they should be, no more and no less. It was a very strange sensation, being in that house.

I remember my first visit to Uncle Gregory's house. I must have been four or five years old and I had never seen a real painting up close. Real paints on real canvases. I ran through the entire house looking for the paintings with the brightest colors, the prettiest sunsets and the greenest trees. When I had exhausted myself I collapsed on the floor of his living room and he flashed me a smile. He was sitting in his arm chair, of course, looking up above his mantle.

Above the mantle, of course, was the only spot in the entire house that had no painting. It had nothing, in fact, but bare wall. If it wasn't for that spot I would never have known that the walls were painted an off-white color. I remember lying on the floor that day and following Uncle Gregory's eyes to the spot over the mantle to try and figure out what he saw. I could never figure it out, no matter how hard I looked.

Over the years many things changed. I grew up, little by little. I played sports but was never very

good. I tried writing but the words wouldn't come. But painting. I loved to paint. It was surprising then when my mom told me that there was another painter in the family. I scanned through my memories for anyone who had shown any artistic skill of any kind but none came to mind. Uncle Gregory, my month informed me, was a painter in his youth. I could not envision the quiet old man sitting on his armchair and painting. As soon as I could arrange it I went by his house to find out for myself.

“Uncle, were you ever a painter?”

He averted his gaze from the space above the mantle to meet my eyes. I saw his eyes become glassy as memories flooded back behind them.

“What did you paint? I would love to see some of your work.”

He smiled at me. With a wink he raised his hand and swept it around the room. All the paintings that were hung around his home were paintings that he had done himself. Every sunset. Every mountain top. Every smile and every tear. Every picture was something he had done with his own hands.

I remember wandering around his house that day and seeing it all again for the first time. They were no longer just pictures with pretty colors. They were images and memories from his life. I quietly walked back to the living room and sat on the floor at the foot of his armchair.

“Do you paint anymore, Uncle?”

Again he met my gaze with weary eyes and a crooked smile.

“Painting for me was never something I did well on my own. I would try to paint a sunrise and it would come out all wrong. I wanted so badly to be good at it, even if I didn't know why. But I was a young and impatient man and the skill never came.”

“Until I met Helena. She was so beautiful. Her smile was like a million sunrises. I would think of her all the time. When I would paint and think of her, I did not paint the sunrise, it drew itself on the canvas through me. That feeling, that amazing feeling, is something that as an artist I could never express in a way other than painting. So I painted.”

“Helena and I were married and spent our lives in this house. She would often scold me for spending too long in the basement painting while she prepared dinner upstairs. I couldn't help it, the paintings wanted to come out. I had to put them on a canvas. I loved her so much... I couldn't keep the love inside. I had to let some of it out onto the canvas.”

“We had such a wonderful life together. I painted so many paintings. But she died a few years before you were born. After that I would try to paint, just to remember. I couldn’t do it. I could move the brush but the pictures wouldn’t come. It was as if my body didn’t want the love I had left to get out.”

“So instead I hung up the paintings that she inspired around the house. Every one a little piece of our love. She’s always here, always around. Always with me.”

I noticed Uncle Gregory was crying softly. Being young I had no idea what to do when an adult cries so I did the only thing my young mind could. I asked the question that I couldn’t resist.

“But why is there no painting hung over the mantle?”

Uncle Gregory closed his eyes for a moment. I think I might have seen his lips quiver as he found the words.

“There was a painting I was working on when she died. I had only just started it, but it was to be my masterpiece. Helena decided that when it was done we would hang it over the mantle and show it off to all of our guests. She was so very proud of all the art I made and I was so very grateful to her for inspiring it.”

“But then she died and I could never look at it again to finish it. Sitting here I can look and see how it might have been, how the painting might have looked. How our lives might still be, if she were here with me.”

I remember feeling my cheeks were wet with tears, just like Uncle Gregory’s. He looked down at me and smiled again.

“Don’t cry, there is no sadness here. Life is always moving forward. Helena and I had many wonderful years together and I don’t sit here thinking about the way things could be to miss her. I sit here thinking about how things could have been to remember her. To appreciate everything we had.”

Somehow that had made me feel better although I am not entirely sure why. I rubbed my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt and perked up.

“Will you ever finish the painting, Uncle?”

“No, that painting is long lost. I guess the part of me that is afraid of losing my love for her is

also afraid of forgetting. All my memories of painting are of Helena. I don't want to create any new memories that might erase them."

I looked back to the mantle and tried to imagine what Uncle Gregory's masterpiece would have looked like if it hung there. I saw soaring clouds and raging seas, unicorns and dragons and beautiful sunrises. None of the pictures I could imagine ever fit quite right and I started to understand why Uncle Gregory sat in his armchair and stared at the wall.

It was only a few years later that Uncle Gregory died. At the graveyard they buried Uncle Gregory right next to his beloved Helena. I remember asking my mother for a second flower so I could leave one on each of their graves, although I'm sure she wondered why I would have done that.

The next day the whole family was over at Uncle Gregory's house to pack up his things. Painting after painting was wrapped up and placed into a box. An entire lifetime of memories, taken down piece by piece. I walked into the living room and sat down on Uncle Gregory's armchair.

That's when I noticed something had changed.

The space above the mantle was no longer bare. Perfectly framed was a large painting of a young man and young woman holding each other. Clearly in love, they were watching the sunset together. It was beyond beautiful, the most amazing painting in the entire house. My mother walked by and I asked her where it had come from.

"Oh, that? That's a painting of Gregory and Helena right after they were married. I assume he did it himself back when he was a painter. It's an amazing likeness of them, you know."

I watched my mom walk away and looked back to the painting. I closed my eyes and opened them again to make sure it was there, that it was real. I could see in the smile of the young man the same smile that Uncle Gregory had flashed for me so many times. He looked so happy.

I smiled to myself and jumped up from the armchair and got back to helping pack up the house.