

Chapter 9

This was not going to be an ordinary Sunday. Peter reached sleepily for the pen and spiral notebook that always sat on his nightstand to capture his dreams before they vanished. He wrote:

I am in a bucolic setting, maybe Tuscany with a gorgeous landscape, rolling hills, bright blue sky. I have a canvas, paint and a paintbrush. I start to paint, but as I add color to the canvas it spreads into a black blob. I try different colors, with the same result, and soon the canvas is all black. It's like a black hole absorbing any color that's applied to it. It's ruined, and there's no other canvas. But then, out of nowhere, a beautiful Italian in a roman tunic comes to my side, says something like "tut-tut" and turns the canvas around, revealing an impressionist-style painting of the landscape (that makes no sense, a canvas isn't double-sided). "Bravo!" he says. He comes to give me a kiss on the cheek, and then vanishes.

He read it again, wondering if he could attach any meaning to it. It was true that his paintings had been the subject of unusual scrutiny, from Gerald's "you just thought he was hot, so you painted him," to Andrew's ecstatic blind experience, to Sam's convergence of Dorian Gray. Perhaps this dream meant that Peter couldn't see the beauty of his art until a beautiful boy presented it to him. Perhaps it meant his art was dark, and the other image revealed by the beautiful boy was intended to teach him how it should have been. Perhaps the dream related to the difficulty, the anxiety attached to every additional stroke of the paintbrush, as if the decision to touch the canvas with a particular color became a matter of life and death. Perhaps the beautiful Italian congratulated him on figuring out the better side of him. Or perhaps it meant nothing, Peter finally thought.

He saw darkness in the coffee he prepared, first as he ground the beans, and then as he poured boiling water into the filter covering the rainbow mug. With the slow awakening effect of caffeine he proceeded to set up a new, larger, blank canvas. He smiled at the thought there had only been one brush in the dream, as he took the large one to spread immaculate whiteness on the entire surface. Now it was as if he stared at a window on an extremely bright day outside, when one can see nothing but intense sunlight, until one squints and puts on a good pair of sunglasses. Peter squinted and saw sheep grazing in a green pasture.

Serenity felt unusual in Peter's world, or perhaps it felt like the exclusive domain of yoga and meditation classes, om chanting, and Tibetan bells chiming. He wouldn't know how he had conjured up the image of sheep in a pasture, but the green he mixed and applied to the canvas remained green

like a pasture. Colors and strokes of the brushes followed in harmony, and nothing an external judge would see in it looked like a pastoral scene. He thought how the dream had showed two sides of a painting, one a true image, the other an image of the artist's mind. He took a break to brew more coffee.

He would be happy as a shepherd, he thought, preferably in a place like the Swiss Alps (were there sheep in the Swiss Alps, he wondered? He had only seen cows in images of Switzerland). The green grass, the vast expanse, the wind, and the rain... There was the rain to account for the green grass. Shepherds, it pleased him to imagine, weren't subject to dealing with farmers, markets, and slaughterhouses. They only made sure their flock was safe and happy.

Behind tall blades of grass and against the grayness of stones, he could discern a pair of eyes, observing him and his flock. It gave him goose bumps. He dipped a fine brush into black paint, applied it in the upper right area. As if abandoning the dark thought, he developed the opposite corner in shades of blue sky, like a boy's room when parents color coded their home. The scene in his mind was serene again.

He was pleased, after all, that Max had seen the paintings, but also intrigued by the sensuality Andrew had found in them. He imagined the two going around town, hand in hand, united in their mutual discoveries. That image of boys holding hands always felt new and refreshing to him, even after years of living and working in the Castro. It was romantic.

Against Sam's expert opinion, he felt his art had nothing to do with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, unless of course one could capture the emotions the painting expressed, and imprison life's roller coaster inside. But unlike Dorian Gray's picture, the emotions captured here were the painter's, and it was true that Peter would enjoy living forever in the bliss of his original painting. It was also true that his second painting had expressed something very similar, suggesting the painter had put all of himself into his art. Sam's eyes looking into Peter's had betrayed a kind of jealousy, a judgment from above that one's art could be exposing the secrets of the artist's mind. Attempting to be an artist meant that you could be taken to the scaffold where an enthusiastic crowd awaited your execution.

Peter did not believe in God, but Sam's brown eyes appeared in the blue sky, watching the scene, deciding if it would end up capturing smoke above a fireplace, featured at a museum, or thrown away. Perhaps hanging, unnoticed, in an office, or stored in a warehouse with thousands of similar representations of pastoral musings. Someone who was not a shepherd watched over the scene and judged. The paintbrush felt heavier, the paint loaded with gunpowder.

Gerald and his matter of fact words came to spoil the image. Yes, there were guys who were “hot” and others who, perhaps, weren't. Had Peter become a predator by having a muse? He couldn't sympathize with Gerald's words and way of thinking that people were consumers and producers of sorts. That once you were past the “enjoy by” date, you no longer were the object of anyone's desire. That people could be like the “cosmetically challenged” fruit set aside at the market for discounted sales. At the same time, the likes of Gerald were the wolves of the pastoral scene, ready to spoil it.

Peter dipped in red tones and completed the picture. He didn't know what to make of it, as he took a step back to look at it. He was satisfied in the abstract representation of his current state of mind, and he hoped that this time it wouldn't be so obvious.

He got dressed and went out to take a walk.