

Years 9 & 10
3rd Place: Aydee Bull
Year 9, Kelmscott Senior High School

The Beauty in Doubt

Life was simple.

As simple as the apricot-coloured sky; the long wisps of clouds that swept across her vision. As simple as the potted plant that rested on the glass table beside her, its leaves glistening in the golden sunlight.

Myra furrowed her brows at the canvas in front of her, her dainty hands flecked with a variety of colours that had mysteriously appeared there.

This was her favourite time of day – when the sun reluctantly set, slipping into a deep slumber while the night crawled over the horizon. In rain or shine it reared its delicate flaxen head, sleeping for yet another restless night.

Myra fumbled with the hasty knot she had tied at her back, and let out a sigh as the apron came loose. Another attempt to create a masterpiece. Another failure.

She would try again tomorrow – try and fail to recreate that beauty. It was what she was made for, after all. To ascertain the most beautiful skies and creatures and people, and to mould them into some kind of material thing. Something that a rich woman would gawk at with beady eyes one hundred years from now, hung on the walls of an ancient, crumbling museum far away from here.

But until then, she was stuck here. Under a patio of plastic, the paint of its wooden columns flaking at the edges. No riches, no mansion. Just the red bricks and the sickening feeling of inadequacy.

Myra hastily grabbed the paint brushes on the table, carrying them to the sink on the other side of the porch. The water splattered for a moment before becoming a constant stream, and she rubbed the paint from her brush with a tentative finger. Myra turned to the doorway, letting out a huff as she observed who stood there.

“Still painting, I see?”

“When am I not?” she countered, tying her mousy hair into a small bun. Her friend stared back at her, her eyes showing little to no emotion, a look Myra was familiar with. The flyscreen door fell back against the doorway as her friend stepped forward. Leanne walked towards the painting, stopping to observe.

“It’s very good,” she said simply, pushing a wisp of black hair out of her face. Myra shook her head.

“Not good enough.” Myra placed her paintbrushes on the side of the sink, colours still leaking from their tips. The faded colour slipped gracefully over the metal, tracing idle patterns across its surface. Myra felt her friend’s eyes on her, and she glanced upwards.

“You judge yourself too harshly Myra,” the girl said, taking a seat on Myra’s stool that boasted a comfortable indent from the many times she had sat there.

“It’s beautiful, truly.”

Myra shook her head, though she knew arguing with her friend was a waste of time. Leanne had the strongest will she had seen in a long time, and no emotion to batter them into a listless pulp. It made her a formidable opponent, and one she was glad she didn’t have to face. Myra stared into the sky, frowning as the light shifted to a

dark haze. She was hoping to try painting at least one more scene, but her scenery suggested otherwise. Her friend traced a finger across the golden frame, following the grooves of the wood.

"I leave tomorrow," she stated simply, turning her head but not maintaining eye contact. Myra stiffened.

"Ah yes, I suppose that's why you came to see me," she answered. Leanne glared back at her, the dark pools of her eyes reflecting the moon that had just begun to inch its way across the horizon.

"Don't speak like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you're disappointed."

"I'm not," Myra said, turning towards her painting. Her stomach churned, an uneasy feeling that she was well accustomed to by now.

"Is the painting good? Really?"

Leanne laughed. "It would be better if you actually enjoyed it," she replied, her lips curling into a lopsided smile. Myra struggled for words.

"I love painting."

"No, you don't. You're a perfectionist. Why do you think you paint the same sunset over and over again?"

"I have a vision," Myra answered, though her voice trembled slightly. This statement was met with a laugh from Leanne.

"And what would that be? To paint a masterpiece? To become famous for your dazzling sunset that captures the essence of life itself? Darling, as much as you wish it weren't true, acrylics have their limits."

"You're insufferable."

"I'm realistic," Leanne countered, resting a hand on the table beside her. "When will you just paint for the joy of it? You're good, that's undeniable. But when will you paint for you?"

"Painting is meant to be enjoyed by others," Myra said, but she felt a kernel of doubt unfurl within her stomach. Maybe Leanne was right, but it didn't matter. What was her work without someone to appreciate it? It was just a meaningless object, unlovable and cast to the side. She was made for more than that surely.

Leanne stared at her, her obsidian eyes cast with the approaching moonlight. Those eyes had made even the most stubborn of men weep, and yet somehow, she felt no intimidation from them, only the shame of being scolded by a primary school teacher. Leanne sighed, seeming to realize this.

"Just . . . promise me that you won't continue this fantasy of yours," Leanne glanced down at her watch, brushing her spare hand down her jeans as she stood up from the stool. She turned to walk away, but halted for a moment. Myra lifted an eyebrow as Leanne turned again.

"Try painting. No schedule, no specific goal. Just paint. See how it goes."

Myra huffed at statement, waiting for her to go. She frowned as Leanne sat in one of the patio chairs, her face remaining wholly unimpressed. Myra turned back to her painting. Somehow, through that exchange, its colours had dulled slightly. Myra sighed deeply, hanging her head with defeat. She should have known. Beauty would never be a palpable thing.

Would she ever be that person that she longed to be? Dazzled by spotlight, praised by all. She had always been a tad unrealistic, but she deserved it. Didn't she?

The sun had gone to rest only a few minutes ago, and the sky gleamed with freckle like stars. Darkness had descended, illuminated only by the moon and the kaleidoscopic fairy lights that spilt their fractured colours across the floor.

She swiped at the paintbrushes that rested beside her, offering an exasperated sigh in her acquaintance's direction.

She had never painted during this time, despite the certain charm that it possessed. But . . . she would try. If not to discover an unseen talent, to prove to Leanne that she was capable of such a thing.

And so, she began, the rough wood of the paintbrush pressed into her hand. She began with the trees that encompassing her home, the galahs rustling through the trees as the night drenched their squawking. She painted the brick beneath her, its worn surface smiling up at her speaking of thousands of days not unlike these, having not blinked for what seemed like hours. She painted the sky that blanketed her with its murky depths, the stars that twinkled with gleaming eyes. Painting not for beauty, but for love. Not for routine, but for passion. At some point, a smile had crept along her face. And as she finished, Myra stared blankly at the painting before her. It wasn't beautiful, that was clear enough. The acrylics had smudged in places, and the scene seemed . . . wrong. Like it had been distorted. Unbelievable. No unlocked potential, no stardom. Just an ugly painting and a heavy heart. Great. She turned back to Leanne, the disappointment seeping into every inch of her body.

"See? It doesn't matter what intention I have. I just can't do it."

Leanne furrowed her brows, the lines of her face creasing as she did so. She huffed. "Myra . . . look at it again."

Myra turned her head to look at the painting. It was hideous. The light was all wrong, the angles shoddy. It looked like something out of a child's sketchbook, not the work of an experienced artist. She had spent so many years, arising at the crack of dawn, sleeping restlessly as a result of her perfectionism, and this was what it had all amounted to? The painting disgusted her, made her sick with contempt. Leanne rested a gentle hand on her back.

"It doesn't need to be beautiful. It doesn't need to be perfect. The real question is, did you enjoy making it?"

Myra paused for an awkward moment. Leanne repeated her question.

"Did you enjoy making it?"

"I suppose so," Myra said, her voice wavering with uncertainty. She did feel something while making it. She wasn't sure what it was, but it was something.

Almost as if her childlike desires had returned to her, vanishing as she lifted the brush from the canvas. Leanne smiled almost triumphantly, taking a few steps back.

"I'd best be off then," she said, smiling as she turned to walk away.

"It still isn't a good painting," Myra blurted, keeping her eyes on the canvas before her. Leanne paused in the doorway, her features masked in the darkness that had shrouded the sky.

"Maybe not. But that's not my decision." And with that, Leanne left, her feet thudding against the wooden floor of the house.

Myra waited until she heard the car pull out from the driveway, rumbling across the gravel path before being replaced by the sound of the night creatures. The moon still shone from above her, its silver face spilling heavenly light over her small home. She turned back to her painting that was now illuminated by the same silver light. It bore the same frame as before, the same shape, the same colour. Nothing had changed of its structure, nor the scenery that it had depicted. But as Myra stared at this painting, the same painting that had once filled her with such displeasure, a warm spark ignited within her chest. It consumed her body, its golden light eradicating any doubt that she once had. It shone with the same hue as the sunset, slowly retreating into the night, into the darkness. The painting may never be beautiful, it may never be applauded by critics and the common folk, but it was hers. A smile tugged at the corner of Myra's lips as she lifted it again. Hers.