

WHY I AM A PAINTER

Frank has this new thing for oranges. He read somewhere that vitamin-C would be good for his immune system and bought a twenty pound bag this afternoon. I can hear him struggling with it out in the driveway but this is *his* idea and he'd only get angry if I tried to help.

I've been working on a painting in the garage since he left. We bought a second easel and I was supposed to teach him how to paint, but Frank lost his patience with everything this spring. He said he didn't have enough time left to become good at it. "Besides Michael," he said, "I might turn out to like it and that would be the worst thing of all."

Frank drags the bag to the side door, where he is sure I can see it, and walks into the house. He must be tired. I lay down my brushes and bring the bag with me into the kitchen. Frank and I have an unspoken agreement: if he starts something he can't finish, he leaves it for me to do.

I take a couple of oranges and put them in the porcelain bowl on the dining room table. Even if he doesn't eat them, I want him to see them. I want him to feel like he's accomplished something, however small. I cut up two oranges, squeeze them into a glass, and pick out his afternoon medication. There's a whole drawer where Frank keeps the pills that didn't work, usually expensive imports he found on the Internet. But this too is part of my job: always having hope.

Frank has his own room, off the kitchen. He moved down there in the fall when he

became too weak to manage the stairs. “Want some juice?” I call out to him. I don’t enjoy going in there anymore. I spent two weeks in a chair beside his bed spoon-feeding him rainbow sherbet to cool the thrush. After the fever broke, I needed a change. I covered the room in photographs, tacked up get-well cards, and glued cheap, plastic toys to the ceiling. One by one he’s taken them down as though plucking petals from a flower: *Love me? Love me not?*

Frank is not listening. I walk to the doorway and see he’s seated in front of the goldfish I bought him last week. He’s touching the bowl as if speaking to the fish in sign language.

“I went to the store today,” he says, dipping his finger into the water. The goldfish drops lower. “It wasn’t the same. It wasn’t as... Never mind.”

“No, tell me. As what?” I set the glass on the corner of the desk.

He thinks for another minute. I know Frank worries about being too critical, but these long, plaintive silences make me want to scream. I put my hand on the back of his neck. The skin is warm and slightly damp. His body looks as though it has been sprinkled with a fine, white dust.

“Lately, the only time I’m happy is when I’m taking care of these fish.” He narrows his eyes. “Do you feel that way about me?”

“What do you mean by that?”

He covers the top of the juice glass with his hand.

I can’t have this conversation now. This is my afternoon to work and I don’t want to spend it playing detective to Frank’s feelings. “C’mon. Get into bed. You must be exhausted from your day.”

Frank climbs underneath the covers and I hand him his pills.

“I know these things make me difficult. I don’t feel right anymore, Michael. I don’t really enjoy the attention, but it would be better if I knew it made you happy to give it.” He lays his head back onto the pillow.

But I can’t – I won’t say anything in return. I turn off the light. It’s not really dark enough to sleep. Can he read my expression? I hide my face in my hand and turn away for the door.

We moved three years ago from the city. We thought a living near the ocean might help. Out here, we enjoy a privacy that is neither respectful nor indifferent. I have only told one person – Valeska, who lives next door – that Frank and I are partners, but I am sure everyone knows how ill he is. They can see how thin he’s become. We’ve cut ourselves off from the rest of our friends. They wept at the sight of Frank and, after he would go to bed, I was left to cheer them up. What was the point? Frank was taxing enough, I couldn’t waste my energy. They wanted to be absolved; they wanted to say, at parties we no longer attended, *Have you seen Frank lately?*

I walk back into the garage to finish my painting. The light in here is poor but it makes little difference. When I find time to work, all I can do are seascapes or flowers or covered bridges – hotel room crap. There is one gallery in town; they only want things that look nice over a living room couch.

I used to paint nudes on canvasses ten feet tall. I had a show at Whitney, plus galleries representing me on both coasts. Frank was my best model until, suddenly, he was sick. He’d

already moved in with me. What was I supposed to do, turn him out in the street? His parents wouldn't take him in that condition, for sure.

I should be painting again. My lover is dying and I should be recording that somehow, not for his sake but for my own. I should turn this into art. Instead, I busy myself by making pictures of flowers, immortalizing what blooms to fade away.

Valeska comes over while Frank takes his nap. She stands in the doorway of the garage, holding a tallboy of Pabst Blue Ribbon. She is originally from Poland, but now works in the high school cafeteria during the week, a fact which endears me towards her. Kids at that age are nasty and you have to have a particular strength of character to put up with them.

I genuinely like Valeska, although when I explained I was gay, she told me how her husband ran off with her sister as if we were commiserating in a similar, not identical, kind of sorrow. But maybe she already knew about Frank, maybe she'd heard us screaming at each other in the night, maybe that was her way of letting on.

"Good afternoon, Michael," she says. "I see that you are at the paint."

Mistress of the obvious is how Frank describes her. I think she has a hard time being alone and yet, I make her nervous. Maybe I'm at that comfortable distance where she trusts me, but can control how often she sees me. In her eyes, I'm still a stranger. Some people like to tell the big things to strangers – priests, shrinks, AA groups, that sort of thing.

I turn the canvas so she can see it: a pond of water lilies reach up to a scarlet ibis climbing the sky. "It's lousy," I tell her.

"Eh," she says. "Better than I do."

I put it back onto the easel. “What brings you by?”

“I do not know. It is such beautiful day. The children are visiting father. I was in the house.” She considers her can for a moment. “There are all these junks,” she says. “I want to get rid of them. I was wanting a sale. The whole street maybe.”

I rinse out a brush into jar of dirty turpentine. “I’ll think about it,” I say. “I’m not very good at getting rid of things.”

“That is point,” she says. “Who is?”

I’m already frustrated with the painting, but Valeska’s presence is making it worse. Something is wrong with where I’ve put the sun. The reflection off the water is stilted when it should seem tranquil. The scene looks phony. I darken the waves again to give them substance.

Valeska steps inside the garage and leans against the wall. She takes another pull on her beer, then asks the question she came here with. “What do men want?”

“Men? Straight men?” I say, marking out my boundaries.

“You should know. You are a man but you also know what is to love a man.”

“I’ve been with one person for so long,” I say, by way of excuse. Secretly, I think her husband running off was the best thing for her. She dropped ten pounds like *that*. “It’s different for everyone.”

“But there is to be one answer?” she says. “There has to be single answer?”

I wipe paint off my brush. “Men have always been a mystery to me as well.” Before I can say anything more, from inside the house comes the sound of breaking glass.

END EXCERPT