Charcoal Barrier

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Abstract

"Good morning, Anne. You’re certainly here early this morning."...
GOOD morning, Anne. You’re certainly here early this morning.

"Hi, Mrs. Walton. Didn’t David tell you I was coming?"

"No. After he took you home last night he went right back up there, and he hasn’t been down this morning. Go on up if you want to. Anne, I don’t know why you put up with all this. Why, he hasn’t taken you out anyplace for weeks."

Anne mumbled an appeasement and slipped away from the unwanted confidences.

The corduroy of her tan slacks hummed when one knee brushed against the other as she groped for each high step. Her hand passed hastily over short, wind-blown hair, her fingers trying to act as a comb. Reaching the top of the stairs, she opened the door quietly, then leaned against it after closing it behind her. She knew he was there — knew exactly where he was standing, but she avoided looking at him — saving the pleasure just as she had always saved the best piece of candy when she was little.

The odor of paint and turpentine clung to the stale smoke and was stinging in contrast to the fresh morning breezes. She breathed deeply, wanting the thick air to fill her lungs again. Sunlight pushed through the east wall of
windows and landed in crazy splotches on the sketches and paintings stacked around the small studio. Some rays spotlighted a packing crate, pointing to the address printed in bold, black letters—IOWA AMATEUR ART SHOW, DES MOINES ART INSTITUTE, DES MOINES, IOWA. Anne tossed her trench coat on the unmade cot and moved slowly to stand behind David.

“Hi, honey,” he said as he added a dark streak to the already darkening sky of the water-color. Wiping his agile hands on the sides of his paint-smearred khakis, he turned and kissed her lightly on the mouth. “Back for more punishment?” They laughed, both enjoying the pleasure they felt in this studio—David’s because he loved to paint and Anne’s because she loved David.

“I’m glad you’re here so early. I’d like to do a little more retouching on that charcoal of you before I mat it for the show.”

“But, David, it’s perfect now!”

“No, it isn’t ready yet. The nose and lips aren’t yours. They have to be, or it won’t be you.”

She sat cross-legged on the cement floor, appraising him as he studied her. His face was the kind that would lend perfectly to treatment in charcoal, and had, in some of his self-portraits. His dark hair framed a high forehead and thin, sensitive features. The dark shadow of yesterday’s beard accentuated thin cheeks and a long chin. Brown eyes that studied the sketch were her way into his brain, into his heart. He held the broken piece of vine charcoal easily in his long, smudged fingers. His back was straight in the gray turtle neck while his arm made sweeping strokes, and his spine curved over the sketch pad balanced on his knees when he bent for short, careful lines.

He slammed the charcoal to the floor. “I can’t get you, Anne. I’m not ready yet.”

She stood and moved behind him, surveying the work over his shoulders. “But it’s good! Look. It is me. It’s the way you see me and I like it.”

“No, I’m not ready. You like it, but you don’t know. I like some of my work because it is mine and I have fallen in love with the idea of creating. But the judges at the show will look for art, not a young man’s dreams on paper.”
“But you’ve already filled out the blanks for the show.”
“I know, but the pieces I wanted to send just won’t come through.”

She stepped in front of him, trying to catch his evasive eyes. “David, you’ve already decided on the oils. The frames you made and stained are right — you know that. I was going to start crating them this morning while you mat the charcoals and water-colors.”

“Well, the oils aren’t too bad.” Looking at her now. “I guess it’s this charcoal. It doesn’t say what I want it to.”

“Then don’t send it. Leave it here for me — you know how I feel about it.”

“But, Anne, it has promise! With just a little more work...”

“I know, David. I know.” Moving toward the doorway, “Want something to eat?”

“O.K.,” he mumbled, his head buried between hunched shoulders. “Damn,” he said aloud. “Why won’t it come through?” Hair is good — damn good — the nose is coming — but the eyes — not Anne's — He strode to the canvas resting on the easel. Watercolor is improving — a few more touches—God! What if I mess it up! — What if I — I'm not ready! He threw himself full-length on the wrinkled sheets of the cot, his smudged hands covering his eyes.

In the kitchen Anne found that Mrs. Walton had already started scrambling some eggs. Anne poured water in the coffee pot, waiting for the inevitable discussion. Mrs. Walton enjoyed telling her friends that her son David had a little studio upstairs and had painted some very pretty pictures. She loved her only son, so much that she wanted to save him from any disappointments.

“What is he doing now, Anne?” she asked as she brushed graying hair away from her handsome face, which had given David's its fine features.

“He's working on that charcoal of me.”

Mrs. Walton looked up, her brown eyes filled with questioning. “But he finished that weeks ago!”

“Yes, but he feels it needs a few touches before he sends it to the amateur show.” Anne's back was turned as she watched the progress of the coffee.
"Oh, Anne, can't you talk him out of entering his pictures? I'm so afraid for him."

Anne turned, faced her head-on. "Why, Mrs. Walton? Why are you afraid?"

"Well, after all, he isn't an artist. He's going to be an engineer."

"But he loves art! He has to find out if he is any good!"

"Is he any good, Anne?"

"I don't know. I can't tell him and neither can you. All I can do is encourage him—in spite of your protests." The hurt flowed into David's mother's eyes. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Walton, I really am. It's just that David lacks confidence. Sometimes he thinks he is pretty good, and then some barrier leaps up and stops him."

Mrs. Walton filled two plates with scrambled eggs, keeping her eyes lowered to try to hide her shaken composure. "I just don't want him to be hurt."

Anne tried to erase the thoughtful look which had settled on her tanned face as she climbed the stairs with the two trays. She and David sat on the edge of the cot, talking as they ate breakfast.

"Mom talked to you again, didn't she?" He asked between mouthfuls.

"Yes."

"She's probably right, Anne. I don't know if I could face disappointment."

"David, the show could prove to be a success for you. Why don't you think of that instead of dwelling on the idea of defeat?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm not ready yet. With a little more time. . . ."

Anne stopped the conversation by continuing to eat her eggs. They both ate in silence. Anne put her dishes on the tray. "Well, I have to go home and pack. Wish I could stay, but I promised I'd go to that wedding."

"Oh, Anne, honey, what shall I do?"

"It's your decision, David. You know that."

As he kissed her good-bye his dark eyes searched hers, looking for the answer he couldn't find. When she had left, taking with her much of the room's brightness, he picked
up the sketch again. Damn, he thought, why can’t my fingers put down what my brain demands? The highlights on her hair are good—really not bad at all. But the details—her lips—damn! His eyes flashed from the charcoal and found the framed oil painting of a city street. My best, he thought. He strode to the other side of the room so his eyes could blend the dabs of oil into the desired effect. Maybe it’s too dark. The judges might not feel as I do about a city street. Can’t lighten it, though—it wouldn’t be mine. Damn! Maybe I won’t score at all! The frame on that landscape looks so amateurish. Well, hell, that’s what I am—maybe not even that.

He stalked back to the charcoal, trying to channel his torrential thoughts. He gazed at the sketch, studied it, absorbed it into his heart, then into his brain where he stared at it through the barrier which had leaped up to cloud his deep eyes.

Carefully he picked up each piece of work and put it in the crate addressed in bold, black letters. Tension pulled his muscles taut across his wide but thin shoulders as he carried the crate to a half-door across from the stairway. He did not pause as he shoved the crate into the stale blackness of the attic storage room.

Sunlight pushed through the window on the west wall and placed its rectangles around the barren studio.

The Introvert

By Peter Proul

As I sat dreaming, a child came to me and asked, “Why are you happy?” I turned away and felt foolish for smiling in the sun.