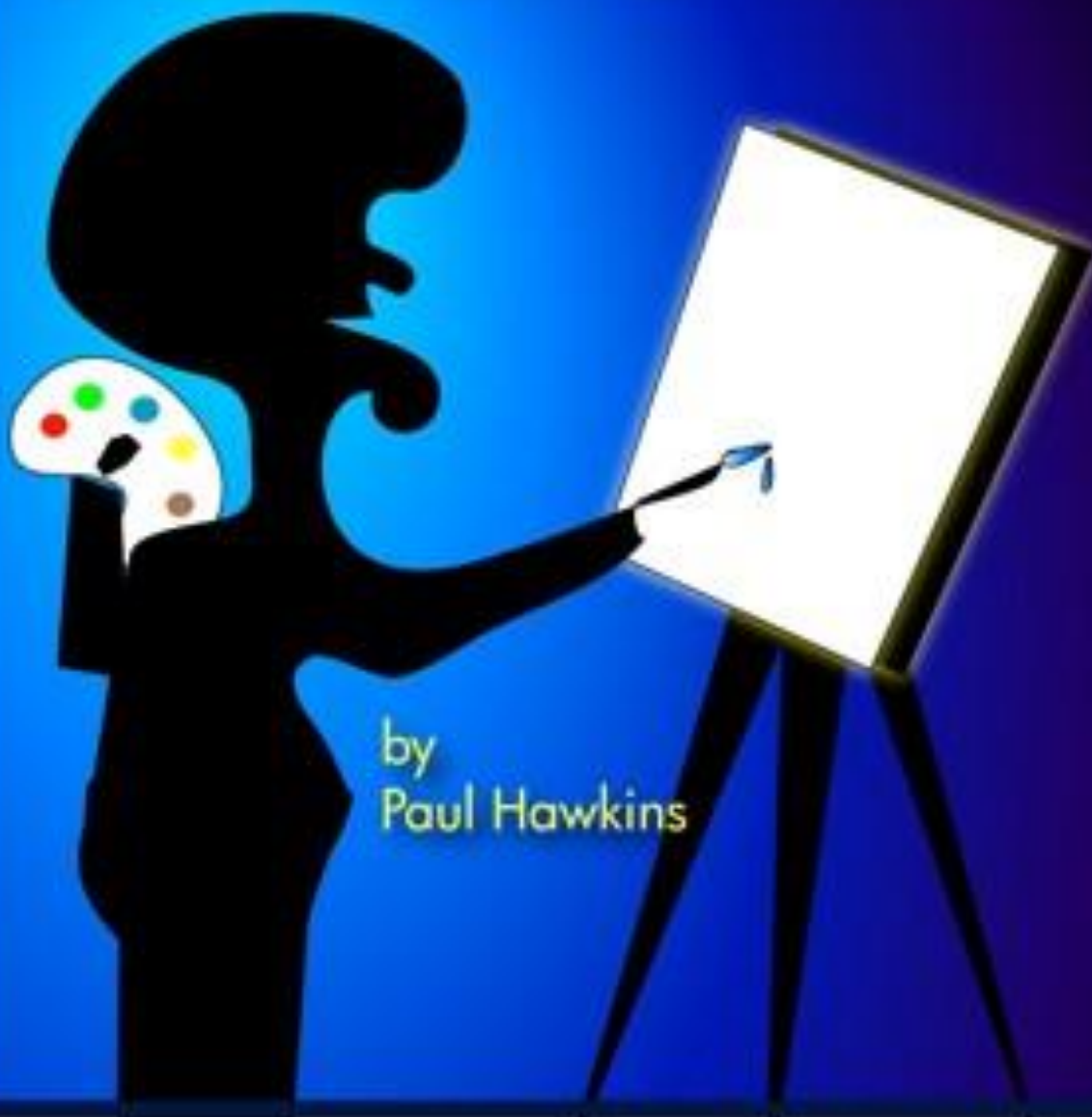


The PBS Painter's Tale



by
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I won't tell my secrets. No landscape painter who's ever had a show on PBS ever tells all his secrets – how you can paint a tree in a minute, a whole forest in ten, how you can make a river or a lake sparkle like glass and *still look real* – these are secrets no painter will ever betray outside of his mail-order set of video instruction tutorials (\$19.95 per episode). He'll take them to his grave, leaving them to be rediscovered by future generations of starving, idealistic souls – so don't wait, buy that landscape today.

I had a landscape painting show on the local PBS affiliate at one time, but now that all seems a world and a lifetime away – before the big boys from Boston muscled in and told my channel to buy their bundled "Art with Eleanor" program if they ever wanted to hear from their precious "Nova" and "Frontline" again. So these days, I paint in malls – set up an easel, practice my craft like I'm oblivious to passers by, and bring an empty canvas to blue and green and moonlit sparkling life as crowds of traumatized shoppers shuffle by.

I've painted in and outside every kind of mall imaginable, from the colossal arctic-cool mega-malls of suburban Atlanta and Dallas and Minneapolis to hot street-front shopping centers in Laramie, and Farmington and Medford and Shamrock, where I've pitched a canvas tent in the parking lot in springtime. And in every one of those places I've seen the panoply of human life pass by. I've seen couples hand in hand choosing wedding rings in jewelry store windows and I've seen those same personae later, in the same location, walking pensive and alone. I've seen the movie lines in early fall, boys watching girls watching boys, wearing bright new sweaters on the first chilly day of the season, streets getting dark early and air crackling with crisp energy. I've seen robberies too, and senseless escalator accidents, and even the wounding of noble mall security guards for the price of a jacket or a fancy new cell phone. I've seen people entering shops seeking bargains and I want to say "hey that's no bargain — you can get a better one for half the price across the mall!" But that's not my job. That's not the job of any mall painter who wants to be invited back next season.

I'll tell you what my job is. In this press of humanity, in the hustle the rush of vanity and necessity and desperation, of comedy and tragedy and frustration and indifference, I paint trees. Trees, and rivers that sparkle like glass, and moons and snow-topped mountains not too far away, and sunshine and meadows and hidden trails and hills and flowers and forgotten wells and welcome places you can be, when you want to, and feel like a part of a beautiful world. That's my job. I've never described it before, but that's how I'd say it. I am that shining moment when people feel they are themselves, I am that mirror of what they know they really are, and how they'd love to be if only dinner weren't already late, if only the credit limit hadn't been exceeded or their house foreclosed upon, if only they

hadn't changed the styles just when their wardrobes were complete. That is all I am, and all I ever want to be.

My son is different. Like I'd want him to be the same as me? I paint the untamed peak, the rambling trail, the wild and growing green ..! No, that's me of twenty years ago. Even Nature has its sweet and comforting order, I've realized, its beautiful seasons, each inheriting the fruits of the last. So yeah, part of the rebel in me is gone, and I admit I'd like to see a little of me in him. But he's 19 and restless. Like his mother used to be. Like I used to be! God, he's so unjaded that the bright colors of love and the world pierce right through him, put a grumbling in his stomach, always hungry. He sees bright things in the world and wants their love. He wants to know how to get it. I love him, but I'm too close to him right now for that to mean much. I can't say anything right, can't do anything right. I just let him be. My shiny worlds don't move him much. He knows too much about where they come from, and he knows that they can't help him buy his own car, the latest clothes, or that brand of aftershave that drives girls wild. And I don't blame him. I never said they could do that. I never promised but maybe I pretended? Maybe some world-weary customers thought that, and I knew they thought that, and I let them? Maybe I have done that, maybe he's seen me do it.

I get home from a slow day — too close to people's bill time for much business — wait til next week. But I've got my own masterpiece to come home to. I paint glimpses of paradise for everyone else in 30 minutes or less (guaranteed), but at home I've got this painting I can never complete. I'll eat dinner then sit down and stare at it some more. Maybe take out the brushes, cover a few things up, add some others.

I walk up to my trailer and the door's already open.

"Honee ..?" I call.

I met Honee at the State Fair last summer. Me, graying hippy-man looking at the 'Round the World exhibits, Josh in black concert t-shirt several paces behind, scowling at the world, and at me. There's always weird stuff at the 'Round the World exhibit — some beautiful, mostly garish junk.

Behind me, Josh has knocked over a table full of fake tribal masks. Did he do it on purpose? I think so. We exit quickly (what he wanted) and there's Honee selling sno-cones. She has such wonderful eyes. I think she's beautiful, and I go up and talk to her. Josh thinks I talk to everybody too much. I do. Josh stalks away. That's the night I hear the speech again.

The speech. He's not happy. I'm too lazy. I ask too many questions. I don't care about him. An actual hint of violence underneath ... one of these days?

Behind it all I see his mother. He's like her ..? No, he misses her. Someone to take sides with against me. Hey, I agree. Families ought to be odd-numbered to tip the scales one way or the other. It's the smoldering stalemates that do all the damage. And it's my fault she left us?

Maybe, and I'd admit as much to make him feel better. But he'd think it's a trap. So I let him light into me, then disappear.

When I step into the trailer I am met by a hostile face. It's not Honee, it's Darlene, a girl Josh met at the Junior College. She's got a shotgun across her knee and aims it right at me as I walk in.

She sucks on a cigarette then takes it from her mouth. "Sit yer skinny butt down in that chair old man," she hisses, gesturing with the barrel.

"That's my favorite chair. Promise not to shoot me in it?"

She scowls. I sit down quickly and look around. The trailer's been ransacked.

Darlene has a wicked way of staring at me like nobody I've ever known. Is it the eyeshadow, or bags under her eyes? I don't know how kids her age wear make-up, though I've heard a sort of zombie look is in. And Darlene is definitely the kind for that. Ozark zombie punk she is shapeless black dress like a sack, paisley tights, weird pillbox hat stuck on with one wickedly huge pin. And yet, in spite of all that, she might still be attractive – the leg she's hanging over the arm of my Lazy-boy has a good shape.

But she's not here for me. She and Josh have been hanging around a lot together lately, and she's staring at me like I can drop dead.

"Would you like a beer?" I ask her.

She blows smoke.

The Junior College is the best thing that ever happened to Josh – and it was his idea. Out of the blue – here it is, this is when it starts, these are the days he'll be attending. Fine with me.

I think he's made a nice little circle of friends. He's so secretive though, like my knowing too much about whatever he's doing will ruin it. And then Darlene starts showing up. No introduction. I know she's Darlene 'cause I've heard him call her that. He's secretive about her too, though I'm not too old to figure this one out.

Finally, when she's sucked down enough nicotine to give her voice just the right degree of raspiness, she says: "We're gonna rob you, then we're gonna kill you."

I hear rustling coming from the other part of the mobile home. Josh comes in the room. He gives Darlene a quick kiss – then she grabs his head and locks his lips for one full lascivious minute.

He glances at me at me at the other end of Darlene's shotgun. Some emotion or another starts to well up in his face but he squelches it down. He cuts his eyes quickly to Darlene.

"I got the money and my things," he says, "Let's go."

He wants to go, get out the door, steal my money and my truck without seeing me again. But not Darlene. She's riled up on behalf of her man. There's a glint of satisfaction in her eyes, and I can see she has a self-righteous speech all ready.

She throws her cigarette toward the fireplace. I don't have a chance to tell her it's just painted on the wall. She says:

"The whole world's fulla the likes of you, old man. Don't you know what your lying does to people – keepin' them hoping for something that isn't there? That will never be there? Just think of your boy growing up with your shiny, fluffy, foresty worlds of make believe and when he finds out the real world's all there is, it breaks his heart. He can't walk into them pretty pictures. He's gotta walk down concrete streets with an ache in his feet and a hunger in his gut, just hunting for a way to survive in this back-stabbing, rotten world. It makes people feel low, like trash, worthless and hopeless, like something's wrong with them, when the world aint full of the lies you paint. You don't bring pleasure, old man, you bring pain. And to keep you from doing it again, we're gonna cut your fingers off!"

She whips out a shiny machete but Josh jumps forward, grabs hold of her hand, and their eyes meet. "There's no need to maim the old fart," my son says. "Sure, I mean, he preys on people's hopes and gives them crazy dreams... but I found you, didn't I?"

Tears well up in my eyes.

"Well..." Darlene says.

My son continues. "I admit he mixes a lot of lies into them paintings, but if he keeps people hoping till they find the real thing, like I found you ..." their eyes meet and spark "... then, I mean, there can't be that much harm in letting him go on about it, can there?"

Their eyes are so full of stars now - they're in love. I sniffle silently.

Slowly she lowers the blade. "I reckon not ...but we can still tie him up."

"Sure darlin', let's tie him up good."

I'm bawling now. I'm so proud of him! I instruct them to take the truck keys out of my pocket before they tie me up. Tacitly they comply. They've donned their somber masks again and are so professional about all this I bite my tongue, not wanting to disrupt their mood. Pull the rope tight, I think, double over, sheepshank knot – just like I taught him from years of tying down tents. Then without another word, they pick their things up to depart. The screen door yawns then slams; out in the night I hear the pickup's engine roar to life.

"Check that oil level every hundred miles or so!" I want to call out – but I do not. They're adults now, they're pursuing their own dream, cast in the colors and the hues that they now imagine together. It's their bright fantasies, projected on the blank canvas of the future – not my poor ones – that lead them on now. Good luck, fledgling artists – farewell!

And far later that night – I'm still tied up – but I've gotten to my painting equipment with my teeth. My unfinished masterpiece is in front of me; I'm humming softly to myself. I look at it from this angle – I scoot away and look at it from that. A paint brush is in my mouth. I add a detail here, cover up an old one there. Is it the truth? Is it a lie? I'm not in the business to say. But glancing at it from this chair in which I'm bound, with the moonlight and the starlight shining on it through the still open screen door, I feel like it will turn out better than I'd hoped.

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