



Face Painting

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image info

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I KEPT GETTING LIFE WRONG. IN HIGH school, I was all math and science. In university, it was engineering, but I fared poorly, switched to commerce, and rented a bachelor apartment to escape the distractions of residence living. Two years running, my grades hovered at the low end of acceptable, so I took an art history course to raise my average. Like a bottle rocket, my professor flared with brilliance as she hammered home a new philosophy: life is a quest for beauty.

But was that enough?

I transferred to the arts faculty and spent the summer validating her theory. Living near Ottawa's bustling and vibrant ByWard Market, I watched the farmers' stands, flower stalls, and craft vendors of the daytime surrender each evening to diners, drinkers, and dancers on their way to myriad popular establishments tucked away in buildings old and new, on roads originally laid out for horses and buggies.

One night, with a festival underway, several side streets were blocked and stages erected for jugglers, musicians, and acrobats. Artificial light proved a more powerful draw than melodies or mayhem. How else could two silent face painters have attracted a larger crowd than the twin sister act of bikini-clad unicyclists or the exotic band of dark-skinned,

long-haired Peruvians enrobed in white, playing homemade instruments, harmonizing in their native language?

Requiring light for their cosmetic artistry, two intense floodlights set up on tall, telescopic tripods outshone any memory of daylight. Under their influence, a rusting, pale olive dumpster, overflowing with black garbage bags bound by pumpkin-colored twist ties, became a shimmering backdrop, radiating warmth and honesty; the white linen cloth, draped over a makeshift plywood and cinderblock table, glowed like a paper lampshade.

Scattered on the table were small glass jars and dozens of squeezable tubes filled with rainbow fragments. Lids were littered alongside random rags, sponges, and paper towels, each stained with smears and splatters of saffron, turquoise, auburn, and amethyst—each color borne from a tarnished brass tray serving as a palette for both men. Assorted brushes were strewn about, along with eyeliner pencils, lipstick tubes, foundation, cold cream, Vaseline, and mascara.

One painter, wearing denim coveralls and a green T-shirt, specialized in clowns—white faces with exaggerated smiles and expressive eyes outlined in orange, red, or black, adorned with butterflies, ladybugs, or geometric patterns.



The second artist wore beige canvas cargo pants, sandals, and an oversized white T-shirt. Like a butcher's apron, it grew more colorful as his work progressed. He painted galaxies, masterworks of light and infinity. Natural contours of chins, brows, and cheek bones gave depth to planetary surfaces; freckles were repainted as starscapes; tiny spacecraft perched on noses, surveying the heavens beyond, full of asteroids, meteors, black holes, quasars, red giants, and white dwarfs.

The clown painter's models were mostly giddy children and impatient fat men. Unable to resist the sweet smelling air wafting by, they departed for Hooker's Beavertails or Lois & Frima's Ice Cream as soon as they were done. But the flesh canvases of the astronomer lingered in his gravitational field. They were young women with open-necked blouses, seemingly intent on wearing their fresh faces to dance halls afterward.

When the newest celestial formation vacated the chair, the spotlight was claimed by a confident woman with dark, silky hair. Attended by the universe designer's patient hands, one hundred people watched, enthralled, as the myth of creation became real. We witnessed the birth of a solar system while she saw only the face painter. Trusting and submissive as his hands enhanced her features, she sat passively, breathing him in. Her smile caused the galaxy to bend. The light in her eyes went supernova.

Young, ardent, and foolish, I felt jealous of the familiarity the artist enjoyed with his model. Closing her eyes as he blew a nebula of sparkles into her coiling hair, it seemed the greatest intimacy. Turning away, I contemplated the power required to completely mesmerize an audience, even a solitary person. Escaping the crowd, I walked past the basilica onto the

promontory overlooking the river. Listening to the rush of water below, I stared into the night sky, the infinite cosmos, the original canvas of creation—just beyond my grasp.

Cutting across Major's Hill Park, I re-entered the market on York Street, drawn by a lone busker with an acoustic guitar singing: "For Emily, Whenever I May Find Her." Emboldened, I returned to the face painter, hoping the woman I saw earlier would be among the constellation of admirers, but the crowd had disappeared. Floodlights beamed, brilliantly illuminating stark, hollow desolation. The white tablecloth glowed, yet the chairs were empty. The paints, brushes, and palette were gone. Only spills and detritus remained.

The festival's music, bustle, and commotion continued but I wandered from the market to a quieter neighborhood where each house was built in a different architectural style, covering several eras. Two or three red brick houses featured exquisite painted wooden balconies, sporting spandrels, dentils, and detail.

On one of these platforms, I spotted a rainbow splattered white T-shirt and recognized the face painter. He reached out in a gentle, familiar gesture, not to me but to someone with him on the balcony. Emerging from the shadows, taking his hand, was a woman whose face was a galaxy—the woman I desired. He raised her hand to his lips, kissed it, then pulled her close.

The lesson I learned sustains me still. Instead of feeling humiliated, losing to someone with more talent and originality, I stared at the painted face and realized she was a random canvas, a mere raindrop in a hurricane. Anyone can find beauty, but the real joy, the richest reward, lies in its creation, in crafting a universe from whatever materials are in reach. ❖



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