To Paint a Phantom

One fine, spring morning in the middle of my sixtieth year, as I sat with my mahogany easel, my red paint box, and some canvases by the river Danube in my favourite spot, I came across a phantom.

 The day had started out like all the others since I’d been travelling on my own. I woke up in my single room at the Bed and Breakfast in town, ordered eggs and bacon at one of the cafes lined up along the quay, and ate in silence while watching the families make plans for the day. I finished my meal and tipped the waitress, but did not return her cheerful smile because it made me nervous. Then I left to pick up my easel and supplies before setting up in a little nook created by an arched stone balustrade not fifteen metres from the water’s edge. I had leaned a couple of my unsold paintings against the balustrade in the hopes of attracting someone’s eye, before taking out a blank canvas and beginning to sketch the endless sky, the pearly blue-green ribbon of water, and the picturesque wooden cottages which lined the opposite side of the bank, among which my little travelling boat floated.

 Not two hours into my artistic process, I was somewhat annoyed to see that a young man in a light, soft grey sweater, the kind mothers often knit and young men seldom wore, had wandered with his hands in his pressed trouser pockets along the stone wall and stood admiring the view a few metres away from me. I frowned. A sidelong glance found him staring at me, or rather at the canvas I was working on. He bowed his head to me slightly, said “Good morning,” and continued wandering along the quay.

 The next day he was back. Again, around the same time, he walked aimlessly along the stretch, stopping here and there to perch with his legs dangling off the stone wall and look out at the river, while I could not focus on my art and instead looked at him. He’d often turn that day, as if noticing me stare, and would always bow his head the same funny little way. It seemed he was alone, too, and though solitude was expected for an old grouch like me, I could not for the life of me figure out what a young man like him could be doing in an obscure little town on the Danube, far from all metropolises which sporadically dotted it and brought all its fame. Whatever his reasons, the youth stayed in the town, and day after day I saw him on the quay and eventually got used to his ghost-like presence, as he haunted me while I worked.

 After two weeks of this daily routine, I looked over to my silent companion’s usual perch to receive his daily head-nod, and was stunned to see an empty expanse of the glittering, white stone.

 “Good morning.”

 I jumped, for the voice was right behind me, and I turned to see the youth’s grinning face.

 “I didn’t mean to frighten you!” he laughed, though his smile faded when I failed to return it.

 I eyed him suspiciously. “Morning.”

 “I’ve been around a few weeks,” he said, “and I’ve seen you working on your stuff.” As he spoke he moved to my right and bent over to observe more closely some of the paintings I had set out beside my feet. “Thought I’d come over and introduce myself out of courtesy.”

 “You shouldn’t worry about courtesy with me,” I replied, watching him as he stretched back up and extended his hand.

 “I’m Peter, and I like your paintings a lot.”

 “I’m Eugene, and in that case, which one’ll you have, son?” I was hoping to wrap this exchange up quickly, for while having your very own phantom was one thing, hearing it speak, and so *chirpily* too, was enough to put one off painting.

 “About that…” he began, my hopes of an early lunch evaporating. “I’d really rather commission you to paint me a new one. You know, something personal, that I could give as a gift.” He shrugged nonchalantly, but I knew he had a specific idea in mind.

 “What kind of painting would that be?”

 “Oh, I don’t know.” Peter feigned uncertainty, then lit up with a grin. “Could you paint me, here, by the river?”

 I laughed in spite of myself. Me? Paint a person? “I’m sorry, son,” I replied. “I don’t paint people.”

 His face fell. He had a beautiful face. “But why not? You paint the Danube!”

 “I paint the river,” I nodded, “because the river is free, but people- well, people just aren’t.”

 Peter leaned against the edge of the stone wall and frowned slightly, pondering my statement. All of a sudden a breeze picked up and shook the strands of gold from his hair as he faced the water, profile glowing in the fresh, spring sun. Perhaps I had become lonely after all the years I’d spent wandering from place to place, because as I watched him there, face alight with captivating thoughts and dreams at which I could only guess, I found myself reaching for a blank canvas.

 “I knew you’d do it, Eugene,” he smiled. But I did not reply. I was too busy outlining him in all his strong, youthful glory.

 The next few days were spent like before, where I woke up in my single room in the Bed and Breakfast, ate eggs and bacon in a cafe by the quay, and set up my supplies in my nook in the town. The only difference was that now, my nook was never empty, and I would be greeted each morning with a funny little head nod and would spend the day painting my phantom.

 We talked for hours as I worked, and he told me about his studies in music, from which he was taking a break, and his dog Millie, and his girlfriend Dana, and his friend Michael, who had once almost gotten them expelled from school for a third-grade prank. He always talked of nonsense like that, but I loved it, and remembered vaguely the time when I, too, had had stories to tell. But God, Peter knew how to tell the funny ones. His Polaroid camera caught more than one of my fits of mirth, and I’d often scold him for fidgeting with it while I painted him.

 “Stay still!” I’d try and sound stern. “Put that camera down!”

 “I can’t!” he’d laugh, making faces at the seagulls and clicking away. “There’s just too much to see!”

 And so I grew to love the sound of my phantom’s voice as he revealed to me the beauty of a world I had only watched as an outsider for years. I looked forward to painting everyday now, and barely noticed when one day the waitress’s eyes lit up and I realized I must have smiled at her.

 One evening, when the sun was setting in a sky that made a man want to live forever, Peter and I sat with our chairs right up against the Danube’s edge and let its soothing waters dampen our feet as the clink of our china cups and chipped saucers flavoured our Turkish coffee and the haunting wails of the gypsy’s harmonica painted the night. Peter was flipping through a pile of photographs he’d brought with him from home, and I could tell he had something on his mind. I had learned to read the lines on his face the way a Portuguese sailor learned to read the stars which led him home.

 “Look at this one.” He sounded hollow. “Look at what a rascal I was.” A five-year old Peter beamed up at me mischievously from the photograph I took from his hands.

 “A real little trouble-maker.” I took a sip of coffee, waiting.

 “And this one, look at this,” he murmered. “My hair! Oh God, I had cut it myself.”

 “Mm,” I nodded, “Your mother must have had her hands full with you.” I was trying to get him to laugh, but was shocked to see him stiffen. “Peter?”

 His face clouded in a thin veil of night, Peter’s expression was unreadable. “Yeah. I suppose she did.”

 Now it was my turn to stiffen. “It was a joke, Peter.” I sought his eyes in the night. “Just a joke, that’s all.”

 Peter exhaled. Time stopped.

 When he spoke next, it was with an artificial lightness that made my mouth go dry. “I was a burden to my father, so he left when I was a baby.” A glint of moonlight reflected off the glossy photos he turned round and round in his hands. “Which means my mother *did* have her hands full.”

 Neither of us usually spoke of our families, and this revelation was more personal to me than he knew. There was a secret I had to tell him.

 “Your father may have left for other reasons.”

 “There is no other reason.”

 “There might have been!” I lowered my cup into its saucer with a harsh *clink.* “There might have been plenty!”
 “What do you know about it anyway?” he shouted suddenly, shifting in his chair. I saw him then in the light of the pale moon and I saw the oppressive lines which made tracks in my young Atlas’s face, and I saw what I had to tell him. “What do you know about anything?”

 “I know.” My eyes met his. “I, too, left a little boy once.”

 Peter fell back into the shadows as if slapped. “*You-”*

 “I left.” I sped up, trying to explain, “And it wasn’t my son that made me leave! I just couldn’t handle the responsibility. I was young, and I needed so much, and-”

 The accusations which played across Peter’s features threatened to drown me. “So… you couldn’t handle having someone *rely* on you?” Peter spat the words at me and leaned forward again. “Or need *love* from you? Is that it*?”* His eyes poured into mine as he cried, “Damn you! Damn you and your freedom!” He pointed to the river. He had not forgotten my words.

 “Peter, I was young-”

 “No! DAMN YOU!”

 “If you only knew how much I regretted-”
 “So what?” he screamed, clutching his head with white knuckles. “So what? You did to some other kid what my father did to me!”

 “Yes,” I whispered.

 “How could you do it? How?” Peter sprang up from his chair and ran, displacing the stack of pictures. I bent to retrieve them, vision blurred by guilt, but froze when I saw the back of one of the older photographs. It read simply “Dad and Me”. Heart thudding, I could no longer think or speak, but swam in and out of reality and thought only that I needed to see what this other monster looked like. Did he know, too, that it hadn’t been worth it? I flipped the picture over, a thousand regrets clouding my mind…

 That terrible night passed, as its kind always did, and the next, confused morning marked the last day of our friendship. I had gone to my nook an hour early, and sat on my stool with my supplies all packed and stowed on my little boat. I had only my bag containing Peter’s finished portrait, and it was only when I saw him from across the street, nodding to me in the way I loved so well, that I realized how scared I had been. Scared he might not come.

 “Hello, Eugene,” he blushed sheepishly. “Er, I just wanted to say…”

 “No, don’t,” I said. “I know.” And I did. I knew that the joy he showed on the outside masked a sadness which could not be erased, though God knows I tried to paint over it with every paint stroke I made last night, after Peter left and I stayed with my thoughts.

 “You’ve been a great listener, Eugene. A great friend.”

 “Thanks, son,” I smiled. How easy it was to do that now!

 “No, thank you!” Peter held the bag I gave him and looked up at me with sparkling eyes. “What do you say, Eugene? Is it time for me to see it?”

 “It’s time,” I nodded. “Go ahead.”

 The look of wonder which crossed his face when he unveiled the painting made my heart beat painfully, as I watched his eyes take in the turquoise sky, the rolling river, and, in the centre, the boy whose smile buried a need for love and answers.

 “It’s beautiful,” he laughed. He was always laughing.

 “Say, Peter,” I cleared my throat. “Don’t be too hard on your old man. Maybe one day he’ll come back.”

 Peter was still absorbed in the painting. “I don’t think so,” he said thoughtfully, “And I don’t think he’d deserve to, anyway.”

 Something inside me left my body then, floated away into the morning mist. It was nothing, just a whisper of unrecoverable time.

 “Come on, Eugene,” cried Peter, grabbing his camera. “Smile, one last time!”

 The last photo I ever saw him take was of the two of us in my little nook by the Danube, the stone balustrade enveloping us and the sun beaming straight into the lens which faced us. He shook the print for a minute or two and then handed it to me with a grin.

 “Well, so long, Eugene. I’d better get back home.”

 “Mother’ll be worried, huh?” I managed through a throat which threatened to collapse. He nodded, packing his camera away.

 “Goodbye, son.”

 “Goodbye, Eugene.” He grinned, backing away. “Say, did I ever tell you my old man could supposedly paint as well?”

 All I could do was laugh. I waved until I could no longer see his retreating figure and watched the river resentfully for a while. Then, heart heavy, I glanced down at the photograph in my hand and began to weep.

 There, by the Danube, stood an old grouch who had learned to smile and a young boy who glowed like spring, though the beam of sunlight which followed him wherever he went blurred him a bit and made him look transparent- almost as if he had never been there at all. *Almost* as if he were a phantom.

Word Count: 2398