

Short story

Kara Stein, 3rd Year

My life wasn't supposed to be like this. Not the way I had dreamed of it anyway. Gazing at a young couple picnicking on the banks of the river Seine, their eyes filled with joy and love. That's what I should be doing. That's what I thought I would be doing, not sitting here in the freezing studio on the top floor of his building. My back arched, my eyes fixed on him, daring not to move an inch.

He's been working on it two and a half years now. The public never see it. They only see the ones he exhibits; they only take him a day, at least. Nobody gets to see this painting; he covers it over when spectators come to see his work. It is as though he wants to own it, as if he wants this picture all to himself.

My mother worked for him before Father became ill. She cleaned his studio, I accompanied her often, enchanted by his work. I loved the smells of turpentine and linseed oil, now however, the scent sickens me. When papa grew ill, I took over from her then, planning to save some money. I dreamt every night of bettering myself and not ending up like my poor mother. I wanted to learn, maybe be a teacher.

On my fifth day of cleaning for him, he asked me to sit on a chair in the corner of the studio and he began to paint me. He told me that when the painting was finished he would pay my university fees.

The first year was the worst; I couldn't handle the hunger and the cold. His black eyes bore into me, invading not only my body but also my mind, soul, hopes and dreams, taking control of every bit of me. That was when I still had feelings.

I am now used to it.

Papa's getting worse. He used to be full of energy. His wit and smile charmed everyone, everywhere we went. On weekends he took me on his bike, I would sit on the handle bars and we would cycle into the country side, the fresh air wiping any worries away. If we had enough money we would bring a picnic and eat it in a park. Papa loved poetry; he would fill my mind with the beauty of French poems, his favourite was Rimbaud. "Rimbaud's Complete Works" was his prized possession, given to him from his great uncle Philippe. We would read it together, analysing every word and fragment of each poem, finding the inner meaning.

"Sur l'onde calme et noire ou doment les étoiles
La blanche Ophéilia flotte comme un grand lys".

That unfortunately is all over.

He has now lost his sight. At night, after my work I read to him from Rimbaud's book. That is now the only thing that will cheer him up.

I am now used to it. Used to sitting in this position from morning to evening without breaks, without food or water, without dignity.

He would never touch me, nor speak to me. His body language controlled me; his cold, fierce eyes terrified me. If I moved he'd flinch, his body would turn rigid and any colour in his face would drain, his eyes would transfix on the part of my body that challenged to move. These were the worst days. He'd open the window letting the freezing winter's air penetrate the room, with only the blue cotton scarf to keep me warm.

I never brought my discomfort home with me. Even though we couldn't afford heating the family's love enveloped me with warmth.

It's normally potage for dinner, made with mostly water and old vegetables. No one complained.

After reading to Papa I go to sleep. I share a bed with Marie-Christine and Ann. They are both younger than me, still in primary school. They tell me of all their friends and of their many boyfriends. I miss my friends. We did everything together: played hopscotch, sang danced and laughed. I can't remember the last time I laughed.

When he has visitors, the painting gets covered and locked away. He becomes a different person. He cracks jokes with the men and flirts with the women. He is the life and soul of the event. These are the days when I clean for him. I scrub his pallets and set up his paints and oils in neat rows. These are the days he lights a fire. He fills the fridge with wine and cheese.

These days he makes me wait outside for the party to end. He puts out the fire and opens the window, getting rid of the heat and I sit down on the chair in the corner, back arch, eyes fixed on him, daring not to move an inch with only the blue scarf to keep me warm.

He had a wife. She died five years ago, no one knows how. When she was alive he painted landscapes. Beautiful pictures of lakes and fields. Now he only paints portraits, as though he wants to create life for himself.

I've never seen his painting of me, I don't want to. The picture is filthy, full of wrong and bad intentions.

As I sit here, two and a half years from when the picture began, I thought of Rimbaud's Ophelia, "Your great visions strangled your words- And fearful Infinity terrified your blue eye!". I don't want to end up like Ophelia, whose dreams don't come true and result in her killing herself. Remembering the days in the country side with Rimbaud and Father gave me strength. I never returned to his studio again.

A year later I came across his death in the newspaper, along with the painting of me. I received a letter from his solicitor, informing me that he had left me all his money in his will.

I heard the painting was hung in the Louvre, a huge success. I never went to see it.