



MM KENT

A
Coward's
Guide
to
Oil Painting
the Novel

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to Oil Painting

by
MM Kent

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CLIFF

The subject of a work of art is not the most critical thing. The attitude of the artist is more important. And attention. For best results, you'll want to bring all your faculties to bear on the task at hand: your mind, your emotion, your freedom of movement. The work will take every bit of effort you can muster.

May, 1969

The windmill stood silent in the dead calm of morning. Two men walked through the pasture, kicking up a cloud of caliche, one man tall and crisp in slacks and white button-up shirt, the shorter man dusty as the Texas hill country, from the sweat-stained hat to the worn-down boots. A dribble of snuff leaked through the patchy stubble on his chin as he limped along the two-rut track, recounting events of the previous evening.

“I heard the sound of the plane. For a minute I listened, trying to get the direction. I knowed somethin’ was wrong. The engine cut out, then started again, like it was runnin’ out of gas. I seen the glare as the plane banked and straightened up, headin’ this way. By then, I knowed it was comin’ in too low, so I run over to the bank there for cover, such as it is. I seen it pass in slow motion, like a dream. Read the numbers, N34TZ. Bullet holes in the fuselage. So close I could almost touch it.”

The two men stopped fifty yards from the crash site beside the windmill’s galvanized water tank. Across the track, a ’55 Chevy pick-up sat rusting in the weeds. The rancher paused and lifted his hat to wipe his weathered forehead with a shirt sleeve, leaving a streak of ochre on the faded blue fabric. Then he continued, “I seen a flash and heard thunder. The earth shook, I’m a tellin’ you. I hit the dirt flat out. A heat wave passed over me and I got the shivers. I’d been holdin’ my breath. *Run*, I thought. *No. Get help! Maybe someone’s alive.* I must’ve froze for a minute, maybe longer. When I stood up, I could see the plane had wrecked my house. Fire everywhere, hot as a pistol. Nobody could’ve survived that.”

Grayson, the tall man, slapped a horsefly on his neck and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to clean up the mess. He gazed beyond the scorched liveoaks to the pile of ashes where the house had stood. He wasn’t eager to move any closer. The muscles around his anus clinched involuntarily, and waves of revulsion passed through his body as he processed the event that had taken place. *Please God*, he prayed, *let it be someone else in that cockpit and not my sons.* Blaine, the older one, had taken combat hits in Vietnam and never lost an aircraft. He wouldn’t have screwed up like this.

“Must’a been tryin’ to land on the highway up there.” The rancher pointed to the top of a low bluff across the creek-bed, then paused to pull a sand burr off his jeans and flick it away. “The thing is, I got a look at that pilot when the plane passed. It was almost dark, and I only seen him for a second, but I’d swear he was a Mexican.” The rancher spat on the ground and drifted away toward his pick-up.

Remains of the old farmstead were strewn over half an acre. The plane’s wings had been ripped away on impact and the fuselage had blasted straight into the single-story farmhouse, drawing fire along with it. A thin cloud of white smoke still lingered and the odor of

burning leaves permeated the air. Beside a smoldering tree trunk someone was bent over a five-gallon bucket, peering inside. The man wore a Stetson and a white western shirt with a star pinned on.

He straightened as Grayson approached and held out a hand. "John Pierce."

"Wayman Grayson, sheriff."

"I notified the FAA and FBI, Mr. Grayson. We have a crime scene unit on the way from DPS. The coroner is coming when he gets loose. Newspaper man will be right behind."

"Can I see the bodies?"

"What with the intensity of the fire, getting an ID will be difficult. I'll show you what I've found, but don't touch anything. Until the state boys arrive, my job is to protect the scene. There's at least one crime been committed here." Pierce turned to the wreckage. "It looks to me like the plane hit the butane tank and flipped over, belly-up. The explosion drove it through the wall of the house and telescoped the engine into the cockpit. What's left of the bodies is under there."

Grayson followed the sheriff's nod to the upside-down fuselage lying among the ashes alongside the remains of a blackened refrigerator and cookstove. The burned and crumpled piece of scrap-metal seemed incredibly small—no protection for vulnerable flesh and blood. Imagining bodies burnt to a crisp, Grayson's gut lurched, and he turned away from the other man to empty the contents of his stomach. After wiping his mouth and gathering himself, he sensed the sheriff beside him.

"Sir, I'm real sorry about your son, if it was him in there. You must be as wrecked as the plane." The sheriff held his hat in his hands and fiddled with the brim. "I follow our Texas boys over there, you know. Across the water. Major Grayson was a fine airman. Someone to be proud of . . . an American hero." At that point, Pierce ran out of gas for giving speeches and concluded quickly, "Stay as long as you like. The coroner should be here any minute, and he's bringing coffee and doughnuts. Looks like I'll be around for awhile."

Sheriff Pierce started to walk away, then circled around Grayson to indicate the remnants of a gunny sack. "Sir, I found evidence of smuggling here. These bags of marijuana—what's left of them—were still smoldering when I got here. I've hauled water for days trying to put out the fires."

Grayson cocked his head at Pierce, thinking, *days?* and said, “I thought I recognized the smell of pot, walking down here. You just got here this morning, right?”

The sheriff seemed confused for a minute. “Yeah, well it feels like a week.” He took off his hat and scratched his head. “There’s one thing about those bags of dope that puzzles me. Some of it’s just hay. I don’t know much about marijuana, but I’d know Johnsongrass anywhere.”

They say the part of the brain that stores memories is situated right next to the part responsible for the imagination. That must be why it’s so easy for one part to borrow from the other—for an axon or a thought to wander across that scant border in search of freedom or truth or fiction . . . Like a Oaxacan cook, say, crossing the Rio Grande to look for work.

My name’s Clifford Grayson, or Cliff for short, but since I started flying under the radar, I’ve been going by CJ MacRae. This story is half mine. At the time of the plane crash in sixty-nine, I’d just graduated from high school in Travis County, Texas, where I was a good student and a fair athlete. I’d always been sheltered from most of the world’s harsher realities, but that was about to change. And the troubles that were coming my way? I brought them all on myself.

Before I ever thought about telling a story, I painted, first in watercolor, then oil. Before that, I drew, with fingers, crayons, and pencils—whatever was at hand. It’s all the same, really, making a picture, leaving a track. So here I’m learning to paint with words, instead of brushes, looking to capture an elusive trail of light. I expect I’ll write the same as I paint, by plunging in and thrashing around until the words start to make sense. But I do know this—before you begin a story, it helps to have a picture in your mind of how the story goes. Then the words just come, like prayers to a believer.

I wasn’t there on the scene, so I must have dreamed it, what happened that Saturday in Texas with the rancher and my dad. Or maybe they told me the details later. After my brother’s airplane crashed the night before, Mr. Cole the rancher had driven three-

quarters of a mile to his neighbor's house. From there he called Sheriff Pierce, who told him to sit tight until morning and keep quiet. Pierce sent a deputy to guard the crash site overnight and had himself arrived at 6 a.m. and sent the deputy home. From the numbers Mr. Cole had seen as the plane passed, they'd checked the registration and discovered the owner was Blaine Grayson, my brother.

Someone knew he was the son of a State Representative from Travis County. The DPS was called in and Hal Watkins, the director, made a phone call to Wayman Grayson, his old college football buddy. Grayson, my father, had taken the call in his office near the State Capitol building in Austin, where he'd gone in on a Saturday morning. He was hoping to get away before noon.

"Wayman, I have some bad news," Watkins had said. "We had an airplane crash yesterday evening down near Pearsall, by the state highway. Two jets from Lackland Air Force Base confirmed the location after dark, when the fire was still burning. It looks like your son's plane. There's not much left of it. I'm sorry. There are two bodies . . . I.D.'s going to be difficult. You might want to get hold of your son's dental records." Watkins went on, "We're trying to shake loose our unit that deals with crashes. Normally we'd be right on it, but my people are slammed, and the FAA is busy with two situations right now, one in Hebbronville, and one near Houston. Don't know when they'll get around to us . . ."

"There's one more thing," Watkins said. "The aircraft was loaded with marijuana. Probably came from Mexico. The FBI will be involved, so I thought you'd want to get down there. The county sheriff is there now. He'll need to ask you some questions."

My father was already packing his briefcase and planning his next moves while he listened to Watkins. He checked his watch at 8:30 am, made a quick call to his wife, Martha, then called the airport to ask for a plane and pilot . . . Then the dentist, to have records sent. By 10:30 AM, my father had landed at the tiny Pearsall, Texas airport. The deputy who was waiting drove him to the crash site where they met the rancher, Mr. Cole.

It feels like getting my wisdom teeth pulled, exposing this part of my life, with all the remorse around my carelessness and the dire way it affected other people. My nature is to keep secrets, not to spill the beans—that's how I stay safe and maintain control. But at the same time, I feel the urge to lay down my burden, come clean, and tell it all. Maybe not *the* truth, exactly, but *a* truth.

Earlier that same week of the crash, I'd had a minor scrape with the law, and to let things cool off, I'd persuaded Blaine to take me with him to Mexico. We'd flown to Acapulco and checked into a fancy hotel for a short vacation—body surfing in the Pacific, eating enchiladas, playing volleyball in the sand—and I tried to forget about the incidents that led to my departure from Texas. Well, not *all* the incidents. There was a girl . . . a woman, I mean. No chance I'd be forgetting her after what happened at the waterfall that night.

If I could have time-travelled backward three months from the day the plane crashed, and landed in New Orleans a week or so before Mardi Gras, I might have wandered along Magazine street, stopped at Joe's Po-Boy Shop and ordered a bowl of gumbo. If my timing had been right, I might have seen her then—hazel-green eyes, dark blonde hair, spirited and strong.

I know her as Mariah now, but I knew her before I knew her name, and before that I didn't know her at all.

2

MARIAH

*How to conquer a blank white canvas?
And what moves are necessary to
accomplish a finished painting? The
answer will always be embedded in the
questions you ask.*

Feb 6, 1969, three months before the crash

New Orleans is a city of contrasts. Blinding hues are jammed up against sooty old brickwork, hung-over doormen stand attentive in tuxedos beside overflowing trash cans, and on a morning trolley ride you see the dingy underbelly of a culture designed for darkness.

But here in Audubon Park, people are turned out in full color, like human flowers, with faces to the sun. It's warmer than last week, just right for my cotton print skirt and scoop-neck peasant blouse. A good day to celebrate nature with a brisk walk around the grounds. That is, until I hear an approaching commotion. I cover my ears and skip off the concrete as the combo streaks past, fast as a photograph—the scrambling boxer straining at the leash, the skateboard, its wheels howling, and the afro, blown back in the wind.

“Maniac!” I yell at the rapidly disappearing clamor. But I love it. The gleeful exuberance. The audacity. The edge.

With the excitement over, gentler sounds return. Last year’s liveoak leaves crunch underfoot, and stones clatter in the creek-bed, launched by the hands of children. Near the park entrance, an empty seat beckons. Dappled sunlight splashes onto a fountain where I stop to rest, soothed by the sound of falling water. I don’t consider how long it takes to produce the chalky patina of verdigris on a bronze sculpture. I only sense the security of age and culture and permanence here.

Pulling *The Wizard of Earthsea* out of my bag, I allow myself to become part of the scene, vanishing into a world created by Ursula LeGuinn. But I’m not invisible, it seems. I’m turning a dog-eared page of the book when a pair of Converse high-tops shuffles to a stop in front of me. The shoes I recognize (I have brothers), but the voice belongs to a stranger.

“Mind if I sit with you?”

I shrug and shift to make room. “It’s a free country.”

“I’m Blaine.” The guy offers a hand. “From Austin . . . I call it ‘the other’ Texas.”

I put down my book and shake his hand. “Mariah, from Illinois. I’m actually on my way to Austin, looking for land.”

“What brings you here, Mariah?” Blue-gray eyes. Pale skin. Freckles.

“A yellow submarine.” I suppress a grin.

“No kidding?” Blaine chuckles. The eyes crinkle at the corners. “Did you drive it?”

“Sometimes. I have a commercial license, but my friends and I take turns. We went together and bought an old school bus.”

“So, it’s like the song.”

“It is,” I nod. “We’re living in it.”

“Hey.” Blaine glances down the street. “There’s a Po-Boy shop about five blocks from here. I’ve heard they make a great gumbo. Want to try it?” *He sure isn’t wasting any time.*

“Well, why not?” I’m already on my feet. “But only because I’m starving.”

The aroma of fried fish meets us half a block away, luring us into the diner. The ancient screen door slaps shut and propels us to the counter, where Blaine orders the chicken and sausage gumbo.

"No gumbo." The voice coming out of the black beard has the treble turned all the way down and the bass all the way up—deep and sort of mushy.

"No gumbo!?" Blaine looks alarmed.

"Can't sell it—too old."

"You have it, but you won't sell it?" I ask, incredulous. *What kind of guy won't sell his gumbo?*

"Right." The man folds his arms across his chest.

Blaine's voice elevates a notch on the decibel scale. "I bet it's just fine."

"No. It's ain't *fine*." The man jams hands on hips. "Chicken's stringy now. Made it three days ago and I can't sell it, *now*." His thick Louisiana accent obscures his words, but one thing is perfectly clear—the man won't sell us any gumbo. I've put a hand on Blaine's arm, wanting to avoid a scene, since the two roosters have their feathers puffed up, and I'm the peacemaker here.

"But I've had a taste for gumbo all week." Blaine has a dreamy look in his eye. "Hot, thick, spicy . . ."

"Wait." The proprietor struts back to the refrigerator, pulls out a big pot, and brings it to the counter. He opens the lid and shows it to us. "You can *have* a bowl if you want, but you can't *buy* it."

"Looks great to me." Blaine gives a thumbs-up. "Fix us up with two bowls, would you, and a sausage Po-Boy to split."

Noticing the two males have bonded, I wink at the proprietor and point at Blaine. "Thanks, he clearly hasn't eaten all week."

Two steaming bowlfuls arrive in a few minutes—flavors perfectly merged, plenty of spice—and the stringy chicken melts in our mouths, bringing sighs of satisfaction.

Blaine wipes his chin. "Earlier, you said something about looking for land."

"Yeah, well, I want to be close to the Earth, away from all the commercial hype . . . somewhere safe."

"That's funny. I just bought a farm in Arkansas—for the same reason. I'd like to be up there before winter comes. Try some fishing. Maybe go deer hunting."

A glint of sunlight angles from the front window across the polished linoleum floor and up on our table. It lands on the wall amid a stunning assortment of feathered masks and a hand-written sign that reads ‘Extra Help Needed for Mardi Gras Week.’

The gumbo grouch appears at our table as I’m taking my last bite. “Where y’at?” His black eyebrows are joined above the bridge of his nose and a blue bandana clings to his head. Dark eyes hover over a long beard. He means “How are we doing?” in New Orleans speak.

Blaine assures him all’s well, then I ask, “Do you still need extra help at Mardi Gras?”

“Sure do, I got *no* help. Can you take orders?”

“I’ve waitressed a little.” Not exactly the truth, but I’m game, and I need some kind of job.

“You’re on, then—tomorrow from 10 ’til 2. Five dollars a day in cash. You keep your tips an’ eat free. I’m Joe, by de way.”

“Mariah.” I give him the peace sign. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Joe.”

As Blaine and I turn toward the door, Joe glances down appreciatively, then back up. “Wear that skirt, sister.”

On good days my braided ponytail attends me like a pleasant companion. On bad days it feels like a ferret has attached itself to the back of my head. Today it’s all piled in a coil on top like some old lady’s hair. I’ve picked my muslin blouse with the ruffled neckline to accompany the print skirt for my first day on the job.

Joe will be pleased. Shoot! *I’m* pleased. My *dad* would be pleased. Thinking of Dad sends a warm shot of feel-good to my heart. He always told me to remember that I can do anything I want. *Not true*. He was the one, really, who could do anything—fix a toaster, tune up a car, build a house. Mother never approved of me. Her standards were unattainable. Still are. I’m positive she’d approve of Blaine, though. Dad, too. Why wouldn’t they? Courteous, clean-cut All-American?

Carrying a change of clothes in my bag, just in case, I catch a trolley from the French Quarter to Joe’s Po-boys and pull a shift waitressing for the lunch crowd. Then I let my hair down and explore

the garden district with Blaine. New Orleans blows my mind—white and black and color all mixed up like Joe's gumbo, a savory stew composed of structure, enterprise and humanity. Somehow, it's more alive than other places I've been, and I've never seen a city with more cemeteries. So maybe it's the contrast between life and death.

The Garden district is all decked out, poised for celebration with banners hanging and bright fabrics flying. On Magazine Street I sense the proximity of treasure. It's palpable among the array of feathered masks, stage costumes and gypsy clothes. Sure enough, on a rack in the back of a thrift shop, the jacket awaits—tan leather, interspersed with patches of red and purple velvet, all whip-stitched by hand with heavy gold thread. It reminds me of a print I saw once by Gustav Klimt. *The Kiss*, maybe. The thrill of discovery is intoxicating. And it fits perfectly. *Yes!*

The jacket is coming apart, of course, and some of the fringe is missing. Why else, besides sudden death, would someone give up such a cool garment? I pounce on it, show the imperfect places to a clerk at the register and bargain for a lower price.

“Okay, lady, okay.” The clerk makes a face. “Please, take it away. And get outta here.”

Oh, happy day! *Did he say Lady? Cripes, I'm only twenty-two.*

Outside, the temperature has dropped along with the sun, and I'm glad to have the jacket as we poke along some other shops. Further down the street is a small hole-in-the-wall art gallery. Closed, but on the door a paper sign reads, ‘model wanted for life drawing class—good rates paid.’ Thumbtacked below the sign is a line drawing of a nude woman. Always alert for new adventure, I take down the phone number while Blaine gazes skeptically.

“It is a little naughty, maybe, but it's an opportunity for work,” I explain. “I have no experience, but you never know.” The fact is, I've been so ordinary for so long that experimenting is at the top of my agenda.

We catch a trolley to the Quarter, smoke a J and continue window shopping until the exertion leads to hunger. On Dauphine Street, a white mountain of oyster shells rises beside a tin roof. Under the roof, on the back porch of the establishment, two ancient men are yakking and tossing shells into the pile. An oceanic aroma wafts across the street.

“Oyster Bar,” Blaine reads the sign. “They’ll be fresh at this joint—you like oysters?”

“I have no idea. Midwestern girls don’t have many chances to eat exotic seafood. No oysters in the Mississippi river.”

“You better try some, then.”

Inside we find a sawdust floor, three high stools at the bar and six tiny tables. On the jukebox, Mississippi John Hurt is playing acoustic blues. Above the dark paneled bar, glassware hangs upside down and sparkles. We take a table and Blaine orders me a Coke. He has a bottle of Jax, the local beer. A platter soon appears, and the ill-fated feast begins. Blaine demonstrates, picking up a half-shell and letting the oyster slip into his mouth. I slide one of the slimy things down my throat and gag. It comes back up and I chase it across the table with a napkin, snagging it before it reaches the floor. Thinking everyone in the bar is watching, and trying to be nonchalant, I find a trash can, deposit the offending bite and take a minute before returning to the table.

“I wonder how much beer it takes to appreciate that?” I ask.

“I think drinking is the idea.” Blaine sucks an oyster down, followed by a huge gulp from his glass.

“Well, I’m not impressed. I’ve no doubt eating raw oysters is what prompted our ancestors to discover fire.”

Blaine laughs and further inspects the menu. “Looks like you can have ’em baked. ‘Rockefeller,’ ‘Bienville,’ garlic and lemon . . .”

“Now *that* sounds interesting.”

“I’ll get a sample plate,” he says.

The ‘Bienville’ are my favorite—made with mushrooms, wine, Parmesan and breadcrumbs—although the other styles are delicious, too. They’re savory, palate charming and sublime. Whoever invented baked oysters is my hero.

“Be some good jazz a little later in the club.” The bartender indicates a door at the back of the room. “Five-dollar cover charge.”

“Thanks, we’ll see.” Blaine turns to me, raising an eyebrow.

After another toke outside, we try the door. It opens to a candle-lit room where a host appears, takes our money and leads us to a table beside the stage. Somewhere in back a jukebox plays. The singer keeps shouting “Salt Peanuts,” or maybe it’s “Soft Penis,” I can’t tell. A waitress takes my order for a rum and Coke. Blaine orders

bourbon. When my eyes adjust to the dim lighting, I see the place is packed with people, their faces glowing orange and gold in the soft light. Restrained laughter and muted conversation complement the tinkle of glasses, producing an atmosphere of anticipation. Drinks arrive, and we savor them while waiting for something to happen.

Blaine has just asked if I want to leave and find someplace more exciting when the jukebox goes silent, the curtain parts and a huge stand-up bass fiddle creeps on stage. Under it, bent over and grizzled, is a man who looks like one of Snow White's dwarves. He straightens and the bass settles on the floor, then he spins around to embrace it and sound erupts. Notes pulse and spill from the plucked and patted strings.

I have never seen anyone make love to an instrument before, but there is no other way to describe the spectacle. *Oh, to be embraced that way, enveloped in a perfect wrap and stroked until music spills from all my seams.* Ten feet away, the man plays a solo—part warm up, part tuning, part melody, all beautiful—all with his eyes closed.

Now a middle-aged woman enters stage left, glances at the audience and sits at the keyboard, rocking back and forth for a measure, like Stevie Wonder, before be-bopping into the beat. My fingers twitch on imaginary keys. A drummer sneaks onto his stool and plunges into the mix, first teasing, then pounding the crowd's collective pelvic floor. *Who ever thought jazz would be like this?* If rock is sex, then jazz must be love.

At the beginning of the second set, a barefoot waif joins the trio of musicians, dragging a battered brass instrument onto the stage. She's wearing a threadbare dress that drapes to her knees. Limp blonde hair hangs on her shoulders. When she looks up at the audience, a grin breaks out on her face, showing dimples and crows-feet, revealing she's not a kid.

"What's that monster thing she has?" I whisper to Blaine.

"I believe they call it a baritone sax."

Just then it breaks wind with a discrete 'blat.' The woman is testing her lip. She grins again, and hollers in a clear voice, "Let's party, y'all."

The drummer pushes the combo into a Dixieland beat, the bass backs it up, and the piano slips in with a melody. When the elfin woman starts blowing her horn, the crowd goes crazy. Notes erupt

from the sax like cannon shots. People catapult out of their seats and tables scatter into the corners. I hop up, grab Blaine and drag him into the music, the ragged sound piercing me to the bone.

We end up staying for all three sets and dance until my feet burn. At the end I'm physically altered. Molecules have rearranged. Music has done its work, with a little help from the weed and alcohol. After the show, we take a cab back to Blaine's place and make love, accompanied by the radio. Compared to the combo at the club, this music has no substance, only intensity. Blaine's eyes are closed. Mine are open.

Propelled by hard rock, it's over too quickly, and the condom is ripped. Now I have sperm in me. *I should have gotten the IUD.* This is my first time for sex in nearly a year and I'm too aroused to sleep, so I lie in bed, looking occasionally at the money belt Blaine has casually thrown on top of his clothes and thinking about oysters and jazz.
