

The Wounded Painter's Return

by Clay Rooks

In the spring of the year when the war ended, Graham returned home from the military hospital in Hawaii.

He was concentrating on the final touches of a painting he'd entitled, "Return to the World" when he heard his mother come into his room. He set a spark of light in the corner of the eye of the young man foremost on the large canvas. His mother watched him silently from the chair near his bed. He drew his brush back and looked at the eye for several moments, then, satisfied, he laid his brush in the easel tray and turned around.

"Hello, Mom," he said.

"It looks very nice," she said. "Is it finished now?"

"Almost." His hand was hurting again and he rubbed it with his good hand.

"Oh," she said, looking away, "am I disturbing you dear?" She stood up. "I'll go downstairs."

"No, Momma. Sit down. The light's going anyway. I'll easily be done tomorrow."

He looked out the tall windows, two double sets coming into the corner where he painted. His mother had had them built for him when he'd been released from the hospital. With the drapes drawn back they gave good light, and he'd painted by the light they allowed to flood his room nearly every day.

"There are a lot of people in that painting," his mother said, still looking at the canvas on the easel.

"There were a lot of people in the war."

"They look...different."

"How do you mean? Different because I included some who are wounded? Some on crutches?"

"No," she said, quickly, putting her head down. "You know I don't mean that. I wish

you wouldn't talk that way. I understand those things."

"Many have returned crippled, Momma. It's not something to hide. Just as many, actually more of the people in the painting, don't show any wounds."

"I didn't mean that when I said 'different.' Please don't talk about...the hurt ones, dear." She looked away, wiping at her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Graham said, walking over beside her and laying his good hand on her shoulder. "I want to hear what you think about my painting. What did you mean by 'different'?"

His mother raised her head, looking up at him. She glanced quickly at his hand lying on her shoulder, then covered it with her own. After a moment, she looked across the wide room again at the painting on the easel.

"Well," she said, choosing her words carefully. "By 'different' I meant that the people are young, but there's something...old about them. You can see it in their faces. The war's aged them." She touched the tip of her tongue to her lips. "I'm not being critical, dear, but I can't help noticing it."

Graham smiled. "Thank you, Mother," he said quietly. "Thank you." And he kissed her gently on the top of her graying hair.

"But I do like it, dear. It's very good," she said, quickly. "And I like it better than those odd paintings you did before."

"I know. You mean what I was painting before? My Jackson Pollock period."

"I did like them, too, dear. But I didn't...understand them." She looked slightly embarrassed. "The colors were nice..."

"I still like some of them, too."

"You've always been a fine painter. I've said so all along. No matter what you paint. You're gifted, dear. Even your father said so before he died."

"Really? You hadn't told me that."

Suddenly she seemed embarrassed. "I'm sorry I mentioned him."

"Why? I wish you would talk about him. I miss him, and you've never told me what passed between you two."

"Oh, Graham," she cried. "I'm still so ashamed. I've never forgiven him for making you go to the war. He was hateful. God punished him, and He'll punish me too. I wish I could bring myself to forgive him."

"Mom," Graham said, patting her shoulder, "it wasn't his fault. And God didn't kill him. Dad died of cancer."

"He made you go. He fought with you every day. I remember those terrible fights. He forced you to leave."

"He didn't force me. I had to go. I had to get away. It was time for me to leave."

"But you should have gone to art school, not the war."

"We couldn't afford it. The Art Institute is very expensive."

She bit her lip, then she said, suddenly, "He had the money. But he wanted you to go to college to be an engineer or an accountant. He had money for your tuition for art school, but he wasn't going to give it to you to be a painter."

"I didn't know that." Graham said nothing for a long while.

The room became silent as the afternoon light faded toward evening. Both of them were lost for a time in their thoughts.

"Perhaps I should hate him," Graham said, "but I can't. He was right. I was immature and self-centered."

"No, you weren't. Don't say that, son."

"But it's true, Momma. You learn about yourself when you face death."

"Don't say that, don't say it," she said.

Graham stepped over to her and put his arm around her. "I didn't die, Mom. I'm here."

"I know, and I thank God you are."

"Mom, I know that Dad and I parted badly...but I miss him. I wanted to come home and see him again. I wanted him to be proud of me."

She looked up at him. "Oh, he was, Graham. He was very proud of you. He bragged to his friends about your Bronze Star and your Purple Heart."

"I wish he could have seen them. I would have given them to him."

She leaned her head against his chest. "He was afraid when he heard you were wounded. He thought you might die. I think he felt a little guilty then. I told him, 'You should have given Graham the money to go to art school and he wouldn't be lying in a military hospital half dead. It's your fault.'"

He could tell she was weeping.

"I shouldn't have said that," she cried, against his chest. "I was still mad at him when he died. I shouldn't have said that. He was sick with cancer but I was angry."

Graham held her tenderly until her crying quieted.

"I'm sorry, son," she said. "I should have stood up to him and made him give you the money for the art institute."

"It's okay, Mom. It doesn't matter. I am using it now. All of my art supplies have come from that money. It's worked out better for me than having spent it on tuition. I didn't need any more training, but I didn't know it then, and I was afraid to quit and really be a painter."

"That doesn't excuse what he did. Look what happened to you," she cried.

"Momma," Graham said softly, lightly stroking her hair. "You must stop blaming him, and forgive him. He is not the one who shot me. I don't hold it against him."

His mother took a deep breath and raised her head. "You're right, dear. I've been so hateful I've been ashamed to go to church. When I look up from the pew at the Cross I know Christ sees my sin."

"Momma, He'll forgive you."

"I know. But not until after I forgive your father." She bowed her head.

"Well..."

"You're right. I'll go tomorrow."

Graham kissed the top of her head and she looked up at him.

"You aren't angry with me, are you, dear?"

"No, of course not."

"When I heard what happened to your hand, I just couldn't stand it."

"It's okay now."

"No, it isn't."

"I meant I've learned to paint left-handed. You can see I have. I might even be better. It's forced me to concentrate on every stroke. It's improved my work."

"My poor son..." she sobbed, once again.

"I wasn't hurt that bad. The hospital was full of men wounded much worse. Besides, my chest wound was more critical than my hand."

"I'm so thankful they made you well. I mean that they could fix your wounds."

"They did a pretty good job."

"I know, you've told me." She was tiring and sat down.

"I wish you'd look at my hand. I mean really look at it instead of glancing at it when you think I don't see you."

"Graham...!"

"Please. It's hard for me to keep hiding my hand in my pocket or behind my hip like it's a claw."

"Don't, dear, please," she cried. "That's cruel and callous. I can't help the way I feel about it. I just can't bear to see it."

"Mom, Mom," he said softly. "It's not as bad as you imagine it. Really. Aunt Harriet's arthritis is worse."

"Oh, her hands are crippled so terribly."

"My hand doesn't look like that."

"I'm afraid to see it."

Graham knelt down on one knee beside her. "My hand looks bad." She turned her head away. "No, please, listen to me. It looks bad, but it's not grotesque. It's... damaged, because the bullet went through it, but it doesn't look like something out of a horror movie."

"Oh, my dear," she said sadly. Then she kissed him on the forehead.

"Please," he said. "It would be better to get this thing about my hand settled and out of the way."

She didn't say anything.

"Listen," he said. "Hold my hand between your hands for a while, then when you're ready you can look at it. Okay?"

His mother looked at him with her tear-wet eyes for several moments. Then she nodded slightly. She kept her eyes on his face as Graham gently placed his right hand between her hands.

For many long minutes she held his hand on her lap, not looking at it, but finally rubbing it tenderly between her palms. Graham could feel almost no sensation, but he didn't say anything. He knew the nerves were gone. But he could sense enough to feel her checking his fingers and betraying slight surprise that they were all there.

Graham watched as, hesitantly, she peered down at his hand still covered by hers. The ends of the long, tapered fingers looked pale, but not misshapen. Slowly she slid her hand away, but he saw her lips were pressed tightly together. His hand was whitish and cupped and lifeless, though it wasn't without warmth. Finally, she turned it over and looked at the coin-size scar on the back. Then tears fell from her eyes wetting the crippled hand. She kept her composure, though her tears didn't stop. Then, she lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it ever so gently. She laid it against her cheek and held it there a long time, without making a sound, and tears trickled down her face till Graham wiped them away. She kissed his hand once more, then laid it on his knee. She seemed relieved and calm now.

"Thank you," he said, just above a whisper. Then he covered his wounded hand with

his good one.

"I'm so sorry, dear."

"For what?"

"For what you had to go through, for your poor hand."

"I know it's...not pretty. But I still have it at least."

"Yes, I'm thankful for that, too."

"Was it so bad?"

Tears were still in her eyes. "Well, I'm glad it's over, but I guess it wasn't as bad as I'd imagined," she said.

"It isn't nearly as ugly as some of the things I saw in the war. Or in the hospital. I would need a stronger word than ugly to describe them."

"Please don't, dear."

"I won't. There was enough ugliness without bringing it back home. I left it over there, except for my slight reminders." He looked at his hand. "I wanted desperately to see beauty then."

"Please, let's talk about something else now."

He looked at her face again. "What else would you like to talk about?"

"Oh, I didn't mean anything exactly. I just don't want to talk about this anymore."

"Okay." Graham stood up, walked across the room to his easel, and picked up his brushes. He began cleaning them and humming.

His mother sat, watching him. Now and then, she would glance over toward his dresser. He noticed, but at first he didn't say anything.

After he finished with his brushes, he asked her. "What else is on your mind, Mom?"

She didn't answer right away. It seemed she couldn't decide to mention what she was thinking.

Graham walked across the room to the easel and examined his painting. He liked

what he saw. He looked forward to finishing it.

"Graham," his mother said. "I saw some other of your paintings while I was tidying your room yesterday."

"You did?"

He turned towards her.

"The ones standing over there," she said, pointing. "Between the dresser and the corner."

"Oh." He knew which ones she meant. "Did you like them?"

"I didn't like a couple of them."

Graham walked to the corner and carefully pulled out a canvas. "Would this be one of them?" It was a painting of a young, nude woman contemplating a rose.

"Yes," his mother said, flatly.

"Why don't you like it?"

"How can you ask that, Graham? Not only is she...totally naked, but I know who that girl is."

"So do I. She posed for me for over a week."

"I don't approve of you doing that when I'm not home. Actually, I don't approve of that at all. She's naked. She was naked in my house."

"I know. But isn't she beautiful?"

"Graham, this is not a large town. If anyone sees that painting they'll know...they'll think she was in your bed."

"That wasn't my interest in her, Mom."

"I should hope not. But how could you...display her body? It could ruin her reputation, if it isn't ruined already."

"It's just a painting, mother. Many painters have painted nudes, many great painters."

"I know, but she's..." She stopped.

As he stood near the window holding the painting, it took on a lustrous glow.

"That's not what matters," Graham said, slowly. "Can't you see? Look just with your eyes. See? She's so very...beautiful. Her skin is flawless, not a mark, not a scar. She's beautiful."

Graham stared at the painting caressed in evening light. He didn't hear his mother leave the room. He was mesmerized holding the painting of the demure beauty caught by his brush...his proof that he had made his return to the world.

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