

PICTURE PAINTING

Matt “sick and twisted” Ueckermann

Garland, he loved Stark. Simply looking at his horse standing outside grazing, muscles rippling underneath the yellow coat excited him. When he became one with Stark, moving in absolute harmony as they tore up the ground beneath them, he felt complete. Riding was his passion, his addiction, and his life.

Stark was a magnificent beast. A horse of the highest quality. Strong and powerful, but not bulky and clumsy. Elegant, graceful, agile, and surprisingly fast. Beautiful too. The horse’s yellow coat sometimes shimmered in the light. His gleaming gold mane was the envy of any girl. Then again, so was Garland. In particular, a girl named Felicia took interest in this teenage prodigy. Who would not though? Garland and Stark had won every horse race in the province, gaining them national fame, and making the family rich. They were the best, and certainly headed towards greatness. Next, the boy was a strong, athletic youth, muscles sculpted, an artist’s dream. His eyes were emerald green, and sparkled with vitality. Additionally, Garland’s attitude was commendable, remaining humble, kind, and modest.

Felicia did not see Garland’s personality, or, at least, she was not interested in that. She wanted popularity, fame, and acclamation. Her interest was unhealthy. When they started dating, everyone could see that Felicia was simply using Garland, but they did not say anything. Garland was gullible, and not too bright.

Felicia was pretty, but not stunningly beautiful like his horse. She had deep, dark blue eyes, almost black eyes because you could barely discern the pupils. Her hair was a dusty blond, and it refused to grow longer than shoulder length. She was small, fragile, but feminine, and she appeared innocent, like a princess needing a brave knight on a horse, to save her, protect her.

Garland had liked being her knight. Whenever they were together, Felicia would have her arms hugging his, holding him... owning him. He realized it now, and were it not for her seductive smile, her female curves, her “damsel in distress” demeanor, he would have realized it sooner. But he was glad that he finally did. Breaking up with her, earlier that day, was tough, but staying with her would have been murder.

Stark had finished grazing, so Garland took him to the stables. He always enjoyed tucking his friend in for the night, but Felicia was still on his mind. She never liked Stark much. It was almost as if she envied him when Garland gave Stark attention. It was an

ugly breakup. Garland never knew that anyone could get that red, or scream that much. He went to bed unsettled.

He woke up during the middle of the night, bathed in reeking cold sweat. Did he have a nightmare? Garland could not remember, but he thought he heard Stark. The moon shone through his open window. He stared at it for a while, but could not get back to sleep. His thoughts were still plagued by the breakup. It was horrible. The whole relationship was horrible, and it still hurt. He got out of his bed and slipped his feet into some worn-out slippers. Stark would give him comfort.

Stepping outside the house, something seemed wrong. The moon was shining, but the stars were dim. Thin clouds rolled through the night sky. A gentle summer breeze. It was warm, yet, a chill ran down Garland's back. Perhaps it was the wind, cooling his drenched body, or perhaps it was the smell. Something was wrong with the atmosphere, the way things smelled, it was evil.

Maybe he did hear Stark. Maybe something was wrong. Garland hurried. He opened the stable, and found Stark, lying in a heap, painted in crimson red. In some places the paint was spilt in great pools on the floor, shining in the moonlight, still wet. Other places marked fine, horrible strokes on the horse's yellow canvas, spelling out the message, "I did love you." The stomach was cut open, pink ribbons covered in the same paint peeling out. The throat was severed, silencing him. Stark's mane was cut off, mutilated as if by an insane barber. And the eyes stared lifeless out at the world, gleaming hazily in the moonlight.

* * *

Elisha was new to the city. She had only moved to it a short while ago. Being raised on the farm, she often visited the park. She loved the closeness to nature that she had experienced while growing up, the sweet smell of grass, the cool shadow of the trees, and the soothing sound of birds. But the city was so artificial with its concrete, ordered structures. At least the park delivered some escape, but it was small, and the continuous drone of traffic annoyed her. She was miserable.

Looking around at the people in the park she mostly saw workers taking a lunch break, all seeming content simply sitting amongst the trees. They did not know any better; they were the progeny of the city. None of them felt the torture that Elisha had to endure, the confines of the big city. None save for, perhaps, a simple hotdog vendor. He had his cart set up between two trees next to the path that led through the park. Even with his hat

on, the shadow covering his face, Elisha could see the haunted look in his eyes. He served customers unceremoniously, carelessly, automatically like some soulless machine. Elisha decided that it was, clearly, the city that had created this shell of a man. The city had already destroyed his will, his love, his joy, just as it was starting to destroy hers.

She did not like hotdogs, but she felt a bond between her and the stranger. He was lost, just like she was, and maybe, together, it would be different. They were different, and, perhaps, they could be friends. Together they could share each other's despair. Elisha yearned for someone, someone to listen to her woes.

Brushing her black dress off, she stood up, and started to stride towards him. He was wearing a Blue Jays hat, and wild tufts of hair sprung out underneath the edges. His clothes were wrinkled, and his apron stained with mustard and mayonnaise. Folds in the apron, just under his chest, indicated a beer belly, but he was not grotesquely fat. Elisha examined his features, a strong jaw, high cheekbones. Handsome features, were it not for his eyes. Green eyes, that sparkled with light. But the sparkle was dim, hazy, as if covered by a cloud. It was like a symbol of potential, lost, buried deep underneath something terrible. Then, those haunted eyes looked up, straight at her. It was Garland.

"Can I help you," Garland said. The girl was pretty, dressed in formal black, high heels digging into the grass as she approached. She was wearing a hat, matching her outfit. He had seen her looking at him. Her high heels clicked as she stepped onto the path.

"Oh, I was wondering if I could get a hotdog?" She smiled, warmly, hoping to start a conversation.

"Two Deaneries."

"Oh, um... okay, I have that," she said, somewhat startled at the short, firm reply. "What kinds are there?"

Garland simply glared at her. Was she mocking him? He sold hotdogs, that was all he did, day in and day out. Never complaining, though, because it was the only job he could keep.

"Are there different kinds?" Elisha asked tentatively. The man's coldness made her uncomfortable.

"They're hotdogs."

"Oh... I see. Well, just give me one then."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

“You need to pay me.”

“Of course,” Elisha replied, somewhat surprised. She did not actually mean that he had to give her a hotdog, but did he know that? She dropped two Deaneries on the counter. Before they stopped jingling, Garland went to work.

He was starting to get quite annoyed at his customer. First she mocked him, and then she tried to get a free hotdog. After the bun was buttered, and the hotdog was on it he asked, “Mustard?”

“No thanks.”

“Salt, pepper?”

“No.”

“Relish?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s relish.”

“Uh, no,” Elisha said, still not knowing what it was.

“Mayonnaise?”

“Sure.”

Garland picked up the container of mayonnaise, and squeezed a few strands over the sausage. Before asking his final question, he paused. “Ketchup?”

“Yes.”

He picked up the container, and started to squeeze strands out over the sausage. His face became grim, a vision of horror passing over it. The painting of his horse, colored in the same crimson red, was still framed, clearly in his mind. He always took his time, being careful with the ketchup, not wanting to spill it.

Elisha was growing uncomfortable. Her attempt to converse with the stranger had failed. The setting sun was beating down on her hat, and this encounter made her sweat. Garland wrapped the hotdog. She took off her hat, and reached for the package. Her golden hair fell down her shoulders, bouncing, then coming to rest above her waist. She smiled.

“I’m Elisha. What’s your name?” she said, trying one final time.

“Garland.”

His reply was distant, automatic, so she turned away and kept walking. Garland stared after her, her hair, bouncing at every step, shimmering, flowing through the wind, brilliant, just like Stark’s. As soon as she removed her hat, he was rendered dumb, unable to process thought. There was only the image of his horse who was, for once, no longer

painted in crimson, but instead tinted in gold, shimmering in the sun, running on the track, Garland on top. Her hair was Stark's hair; they looked the same. Then, the image of his dead horse returned. Felicia killed him.

Thoughts started crashing through Garland's mind. Why did she kill his horse? Her hair, Stark's hair! What was that girl's name? She said it was... it was she! Felicia had returned, returned to taunt him. It all made sense to him now. Felicia stole Stark's hair, and killed him. A rational man would have known that these thoughts were crazy, but Garland was no longer rational. The only thing in his twisted mind, always in his mind, was his horse, and now he found someone to blame, someone who had to pay.

He reached under the counter and pulled out a knife. Then he removed his apron, grabbed his knapsack, stowed the knife away, and swung the bag over his shoulder. Elisha was just exiting the park. Garland followed, leaving the hotdog cart, money and all, behind.

The sun was setting quickly now, the long shadows of the buildings flooding the streets. Elisha's high heels clicked as she walked along the road. She was in a more isolated part of town now, and she could see fewer people. The clicking of her shoes echoed through the emptiness. Soon she reached her apartment, the dull grey building stretching into the sky. She opened the door and went inside. Within there was a simple staircase and an elevator. She pressed the button to go up, her room was on the fifth floor. The door to the outside opened again, and a man entered wearing sunglasses. She did not recognize him as a tenant of the building, but he looked familiar. It was strange that he wore sunglasses, but then again, many people in the city did that. There was a jovial 'ding' and the elevator door slid open. Elisha entered and the man followed.

It was an awkward, silent ride to the fifth floor. Elisha hated the silence, and wanted to talk, but after her encounter with the hotdog man today she did not want to. The man reminded her of the hotdog man, but she could not tell, for sure, if it was he. The elevator stopped. Relieved, she exited at her floor, and quickly made her way to her room. Keys jingled, and the door opened. She looked back at the elevator. He was staring at her, seeing where she lived. Elisha shivered. Then the elevator doors slid close, and Elisha went into her apartment.

Garland did not have the mind of a killer, he was not careful enough, not smart enough, but he got lucky. After riding the elevator for a while, he took the stairs to the fifth floor. He made his way to Elisha's room and tried the handle. It was open. Elisha

had run out, quickly, to take out the garbage, and she had left her room unlocked. Garland entered, and pulled the knife from his knapsack. Stark's death was going to be avenged.

Elisha returned to her room. She opened the door, then locked it as soon as she was inside. She sighed, relieved. All she wanted to do now was relax. Deciding to take a shower, she started to undress. Her room was a mess. The wallpaper was peeling, one window was cracked, clothes littered the carpet, and her bed was unmade. The apartment was small with only two rooms, a bedroom and a bathroom, but at least there was a big closet. The closet was Elisha's favorite part of the room, the closet where Garland was now hiding.

Through a slit in the door, Garland watched Elisha take off her dress. Elisha was pretty, almost as pretty as his horse. Looking at her almost made him happy. She was attractive, the curve of her hips, the arch of her back, the gentle swaying of her hair. Her hair! Hate boiled up in him.

Elisha, now in her underwear, turned on the shower. She started to hum a song. The water was loud. Steam was beginning to rise up to the ceiling. She turned around to close the bathroom door. Green, menacing eyes stared down at her. Her throat tightened as a chilling shock ran through her body. Instantly tears started to trickle down her cheeks. She was too afraid to scream, so instead she whimpered, "What are you going to do to me?"

Joseph Garland took out the knife. He had suffered, for a long time. When he had lost his horse, he had lost part of himself. His dreams had been shattered, his ambitions had been destroyed. Perhaps he had loved Stark too much, and now, with his horse, dead, he was unable to love. Stark was beautiful. Felicia was evil. This girl in front of him was beautiful, but she was Felicia. Felicia was evil, but this girl was scared. She was hugging herself, crying, whimpering pathetically, her hair streaming over her shoulders. His eye twitched.

"I want to paint you."