

2022-07-11 Shopkeeper & Shepherdess

Their love was filled with the smell of dust and paint thinner and old varnished picture frames. From the moment they caught each other's eyes across the young painter's studio, they'd been fixed fast together.

He was a portrait of a young shopkeeper, polishing an apple against his billowing white sleeve, while keeping an eagle-eye out for rich customers. She was a demure young shepherdess in a landscape painting, loving the rush of wind on her face from the gully just outside the picture frame. Their lives had been happy together until their artist had grown famous for a recently-discovered portrait of a once-obscure general. Then, all his paintings sold too quickly, and in a rush they separated.

He found himself bundled away to a sprawling museum, surrounded by tourists more interested in the artist's name on his plaque than the subtle play of light and air across his red curls. She, poor shepherdess, didn't even have that company. She was locked away in a private collection. Not even the artist's name, but rather the price paid, was what gave her distinction there. Her only company were faceless scrawls, abstract jutting forms, and ancient relics whose eyes were too faded to reach out and greet her.

Time flowed past, dripping seconds and rushing centuries. Their comrades changed; new arts were born. But, they always remembered each other, and that first moment they'd shared in the paint-logged air of a second-story flat, surrounded by still-blank canvases. They each changed hands a dozen times: 'Gift of X,' 'Bequeathed by Y,' 'On Loan from Anonymous Private Collection,' or some such excuse. Each new gallery they found themselves in, they couldn't help the rush they felt, deep in their pigments, to search around for each other's eyes, to remember those precious years they'd spent together.

Too long apart, after almost giving up hope of hope, there was a tricentennial of their artist's birthday. One prominent art gallery held an exhibition of all his works, the most complete ever displayed in one place. The shepherdess was nervous, hopeful, seeing so many of her old friends together. There was just one pair of eyes missing, and almost all the paintings revealed.

Then, behind the last curtain to be lifted, she saw her shopkeeper. All grown up, but still in the same brash-stroked face, his eyes lit up across the room. They were together again.

And, they saw, they were the icons of the gallery. Their faces reprinted on huge banners spanning the entry way. Everyone who walked into the room must have felt their love, born years ago across a dusty, paint-strewn studio.