

# Painting

TAKEN FROM

## Fight the Sky

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES  
BY SINÉAD KENT

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First published in 2010 by Painting Lies

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Typeset in Palatino Linotype by Zapf

Published by Painting Lies  
[publishing@paintinglies.com](mailto:publishing@paintinglies.com)  
[www.paintinglies.com](http://www.paintinglies.com)  
[www.paintinglies.com/fighththesky](http://www.paintinglies.com/fighththesky)

# Painting

He was a painter. The city people knew little else about him.

His shop hadn't been open long, perhaps two months at the most, and customers were never seen entering or leaving through the open door. Through the bay window that looked onto the road, endless rows of portraits could be seen; the works were framed with gold and hung across the walls with no space between them. The shop would glimmer in the corner of the eye as a person walked past.

Of those who wandered by each morning, none stopped to turn their heads in order to examine the beautiful paintings; none dared to cross the threshold. If they had, they would have found the painter sitting there by the window as he always did, a grim expression on his face, staring back at the world as it passed him by without so much as a cursory glance. He wouldn't say anything. He wouldn't get up from his seat or offer a greeting. He would sit and stare, the hundreds of eyes of his glamorous portraits looking down upon him: pressing and searching, never looking away.

There was a reason, of course, why the city people avoided the picture shop, why they disliked its owner with such conviction. They had been warned away by the shop's first and final paying customer; a girl by the name of Ronanda Wiltworth.

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Ronanda was the city's most renowned and infamous inhabitant. Young enough for an education (though never once had she been forced to attend school), Ronanda was the daughter of Raymond, the landlord of The Oaken Fields. This tavern was at the very heart of the city and boasted more frequent customers and profits than any of the other taverns combined. So far as the desirables of Derrie were concerned, The Oaken Fields was the only place to be seen. Reservations at the eatery were rarely available, and the inn above the main bar wasn't the sort of place you might find a free room, should you be passing through the area late at night. The Wiltworths – completed by Raymond's wife, Olive – were at the pinnacle of society, and they knew it. They were the first to sample the newest restaurants, the first to visit the city's museum upon its opening; they were also invited to every dinner party, and one was to be considered lucky if they attended. Yes, the Wiltworths were first in line wherever they went, which is why, of course, upon discovering the new picture shop on the outskirts of the city, their daughter Ronanda simply *had* to sit for the artist before anybody else.

Needless to say, the painter took an immediate disliking to the girl as she stepped into his shop that one morning. She breezed about with her nose stuck in the air, constantly adjusting her corset, shouting at her mother and father as they paused to examine the paintings.

“These are all very beautiful, *darling*. Yours shall look lovely above the bar; everyone will compliment you!”

The girl snorted and rolled her eyes. “Of course they will, they always do! Where is this painter? I want to be home as soon as possible.”

The painter was sat at his easel preparing a fresh canvas. As he saw the family approach, he stood.

“Pleased to meet you, good sir; my name is Raymond Wiltworth. This is my wife Olive and my daughter Ronanda. I expect to see you down at The Oaken Fields tonight, yes? We run the finest family establishment in Derrie! Now, paint one of these fine portraits for my girl; I will pay you well.”

The painter eyed the specimen. She was horrid that day, though he doubted she had made a special effort for the occasion. Fried blonde hair piled on top of her head with smudged red lipstick smeared on her face: there was nothing beautiful about her. He felt sick as she sat down, complaining loudly about the décor of his shop, wishing already that she could be gone. She told the painter to hurry up. She told the painter to use only *warm* colours as she didn't feel blues or greens flattered her features.

"I shall paint as I always paint," he replied, reaching for his browns and greys. "I will paint the beauty that I see."

Silently, he worked on bringing Ronanda's face to life with his brush. After the initial shapes had been set with his pencil, he painted in the bags under her eyes, the shadows beneath her chin and the rolls of flesh that the corset could not contain. He slaved over the dark stain on the front of her bodice, the split ends that clung to her forehead and the dead look buried within her brown eyes. He took a full ten minutes painting the venomous mole perched precariously on her upper lip. Her thick eyebrows were a laborious effort, but looked particularly effective when surrounded by the blotchy, spotty skin that was plastered in thick orange powder.

It was a full three hours before the portrait was complete. Disappearing for a moment, the painter produced a gilded frame from a cupboard in the back of the shop and fitted the canvas inside. He viewed the finished article.

It was horrid. Dark, ugly and vapid; a portrait that no one could love. The painter felt a little bud of pride blossom somewhere deep within him. He smiled and flipped the portrait around in his hands so that the Wiltworths could see.

The smug look on Ronanda's face faded quickly. Olive Wiltworth fainted and smacked her forehead off the tiled floor. Raymond stood silently absorbing the sight, his eyes flicking between the framed effigy and his daughter's actual face. His eyebrows reached dizzying new heights before he span on his heels and left the shop, tossing crumpled notes over his shoulder as he went. The sobbing form of Ronanda managed to stagger away from her seat and prod at her mother. It took a few moments for Olive to remember where she was: when she did, she howled and crawled towards the door.

"I'll ruin you!" the girl had cried. She snatched the portrait out of his hands and threw it at the wall. The other paintings rattled in their frames. All eyes were on Ronanda. "I'll tell everyone about your treachery! You will not have another person pass through that door! You are *finished!*"

And with an arm around her mother's waist she left, climbing into a waiting carriage that whisked them away down the quiet cobbled road.

The painter moved to the window and watched them go. He was still smiling. He wouldn't stop for some time, though no one would see.

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After that, as promised, there were no others. Ronanda was true to her word, and the vicious rumours were soon spread. The story of the painter and his betrayal became part of the city's folklore and unforgiving rumour mill. Children were told stories of the man in the picture shop, twisted and alone, waiting for foolish boys and girls to wander into his lair so he could capture them and entomb them in his golden frames. Once the children were in bed, the parents would leave for The Oaken Fields where Raymond Wiltworth would recount the tale of the awful stranger who had painted his daughter as a monster and stolen his money. The city's opinion of the picture shop was unanimous: not to be trusted, the city's occupants would rather perish than set foot in so terrible a place.

Though initially amused by the dark looks and hurried whispers, the painter soon found himself struggling to pass the days. With no customers, paying bills became difficult. The man who had rented him the shop was good friends with Raymond Wiltworth, and had since

demanded he pay double the previously agreed amount to retain his residency. The painter was in trouble; cutting his food budget in half had done little to aid his plight.

All efforts to provide an income for himself failed. He propped some of his best portraits outside one day, but they went ignored. He put three empty frames outside the next, thinking that the glimmering gold would catch someone's eye, but still nothing. Two were kicked over and the other was stolen by laughing children. He hadn't the energy to chase them.

Alone with his thoughts, the painter mulled over his situation from dawn until dusk. He examined Ronanda's portrait endlessly, trying to find reason for her family's disgust. He knew that it was ugly. He didn't think he had done a bad job. He had said at the beginning that he was going to paint the beauty that he saw. Honest and true, this was a portrait of her face, nothing less than what she might find in her own reflection each day. He knew it wasn't what they wanted. They wanted a portrait like the ones that adorned the walls of the shop: beautiful, radiant and alluring.

"But she is not beautiful," the painter would say as he paced the floor, considering a way out of his predicament. "She is not flawless, radiant *or* alluring. Why should I draw her as such? Why do these women want to be lied to?"

With no one to answer his questions, the painter turned to the portraits around him. He felt that they were looking at him: watching as he sat by the window, criticising when he stretched a fresh canvas across the easel. He would stand before them and look closely at each in turn. All attractive girls, smiling and perfect, sat with their backs straight, hands curled neatly in their laps. Several of the portraits were of the same woman. It was these that he stared at most intently. Her soft brown curls, the flecks of gold in her blue eyes, the rosy tint to her cheeks. Wonderful. The portraits featuring this woman were the finest. It was she who stared most fervently back at him, scrutinising, picking him apart as he observed her. His eyes wandered.

There was a gap in the middle of the east wall.

It wasn't a large gap, but it looked obvious and wrong. A single hook was placed there, waiting patiently for the day that a painting would be hung on it. The painter would often stare at this hook and then turn to look at Ronanda's unwanted portrait, covered now with a dust sheet so that her gaze was averted. Though he longed to fill the gap, he couldn't bring himself to do so. He couldn't make himself hang her face on the wall amidst the sea of beautiful people. Though the gap teased and taunted him, he resisted. It niggled at the back of his mind as he sat by the window each day, staring out at the people with their heads turned away.

Many times he considered setting fire to the shop and leaving, thus giving the Wiltworths more to talk about, more to spin stories of. He hesitated because he was afraid; not of what would happen to his life's work, but of where to go. He had left his home for the city and could not go back with nothing to his name. Though the shop was dying and with it his craft, it was still the only place that housed him.

It was all that he had, and so he would stay.

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One morning the painter sat, as always, in his seat by the window, considering such things as arson, wondering if his landlord would mind or indeed notice what he'd done. Outside, the world was cold and layered in frost. He had woken later than usual and so had missed the parade of children who ran past each day. Sitting with his robe wrapped tight, his eyes followed the slow progress of a horse and its rider as it trotted down the street, leaving dark prints on the cobbles.

Standing, the painter crossed to the door and pulled it open. Not a scowl in sight. He smiled and stepped down onto the road. The bushes and railing opposite looked beautiful against the cold morning. The painter wondered if he should bring his stool and easel outside to draw; it was the first pretty morning he had seen in the city. He was turning to go inside and dress when

he noticed the discarded newspaper in the road. He walked to it and picked it up, its pages stiff and stuck together. The painter supposed it had been dropped there in the night; he looked at the date.

Yesterday.

He rubbed the cover with his sleeve and some of the stubborn cold gave way, making the paper damp. The painter could make out a headline: a double murder at Green Leaf tavern, the landlord and lady both found dead in the cellar. Police were investigating. No clues had been found.

The painter concluded that this was good news. The gossip's focus, for once, wouldn't be on him or his shop. The Oaken Fields and its clientele were surely preoccupied with the killings, and couldn't possibly be concerned with spreading further stories of Ronanda's tormentor. He hoped there would be someone new to town that day, someone who had evaded the warnings and stories about the picture shop. He hoped faintly that someone would find his shop and wander in, if only to talk and look at his work, though he didn't allow himself to entertain the idea as anything other than fantasy.

Tucking the sodden paper under his arm, he pulled his robe tighter and turned back to the shop. He stopped.

A wet footprint on the doorstep.

He looked left and then right. Still no one on the street. He frowned and stepped inside, cautious and quiet. He looked to the window when he entered: no one there. He placed the newspaper on the low table and looked around the room. Nothing had been disturbed, but he was anxious. Thoughts filled his head of the killer the headline hunted. Suddenly aware of how vulnerable he was in his robe, the painter headed for his easel; that, too, was fine; none of the paints or brushes had been moved. The canvas hadn't been touched. Furrowing his brow, the painter wondered if he had imagined the wet footprint. He hated how unnerved he felt. He assured himself that the cold was making it worse, and that he should dress and take his easel outside to paint the morning.

"What goes here?"

The painter jumped, span on his heels, saw the intruder. The person was standing with his back to the painter, staring up at the gap in the middle of the east wall.

"Was it stolen? Have you hidden it away?"

His heart raced. The painter looked around for a weapon, anything he might use to defend himself. The intruder looked slight and his voice was young, but the painter was frightened. He thought quickly about the questions the intruder had posed. He edged quietly to his right, towards the cupboard where he kept his frames. He thought to bludgeon the stranger before he had chance to mount his own attack.

"What do you mean? Nothing was ever hung there."

The stranger didn't turn, nor did he acknowledge the other man's reply. He merely stood staring up at the many faces.

"Why are so many of these of the same person? Is she your wife?"

The painter felt a great pain burst between his ribs. Wounded, he let his hand slide off the cupboard door. All will to move escaped his body. He reached around with panic, feeling a window sill, the nearest painting, before slumping onto his stool, breathing heavily.

"...Are you all right?"

The voice was closer. The painter watched the tiled floor spin as two black shoes came into view. The stranger was crouched, talking loudly, offering water. A hand on his shoulder. The painter recoiled. The stranger leaned closer, his voice concerned, asking ever more questions. The painter looked up, met his gaze; his breath caught.

This was not the face of a killer. It was the face of a man, a *young* man, one that many would still call a boy. His features were creased with worry. The painter knocked the hand away and stood. The boy straightened up and returned his quizzical look.

"Your eyes are different colours."

The boy looked surprised. He brought a hand up to his face and smiled slightly. "Are they really?"

The painter raised an eyebrow. "You hadn't noticed?"

The boy turned back to face the east wall.

"I can't see colour."

The painter thought for a moment. "I'm sorry," he managed, "That must be terrible. They're very bright. One's blue and the other is green."

The boy nodded, not listening, looking again at the gap.

"You must tell me where it is. I looked all over the city for this place! I need to see it before I leave."

"What do you mean?" the painter asked, suspicious. "Why would you want to come here?"

The boy turned to him and grinned. "You must know how famous you are! I've only been here two days, and you're all I've heard about!"

The painter groaned and fell back onto the stool. "I thought the murders would have made more riveting conversation."

"Oh, they talk about *that*, too. They talk about everything at the inn, but the conversation always comes back to you." The boy paced the room, touching the canvases, exploring the many faces with his fingertips. "Most of them think you did it. The murders, I mean. You don't have to prompt them too much to get them talking about you and that painting."

From his seat by the easel, the painter felt his face redden. "Ronanda..."

"Yes!" the boy said laughing, still circling the room. "Or, *The Legend of Ronanda*, as I have decided to call it! This portrait of hers is all people care about. Don't you have it anymore? Her father told me that he didn't take it back to the inn. I thought it would be here, hung on the wall. After how it was described, I thought I would recognise it straight away, but none of these are even *close* to monstrous." He paused and looked around. "In fact, they're all very beautiful..."

The painter stood up and crossed the room. He kicked off the dust sheet and picked up the heavy frame that lay beneath. His eyes met with those of the vacuous witch that had ruined him, as she had promised she would. He heard the boy's footsteps behind him, his curious face peering over his shoulder.

"Ah, *there* she is!"

He pulled the portrait away from the painter's hands and moved towards the bay window to examine it. He sat in the painter's seat, his legs curled under him, tilting the portrait this way and that so as to catch light on its surface. After some time, he stopped looking and propped it up against the glass pane.

"I'm very disappointed."

The painter said nothing.

"It's not nearly as monstrous as they all said."

The boy moved back to where the gap was, looking round at the other portraits.

"I mean, sure, in comparison it isn't *pretty*, but it's very accurate. Ronanda looks exactly like that. Why would they hate you for painting her so well?"

The painter shrugged. "Her father wasn't paying for a detailed depiction of her reflection. Look at these others...they are *perfect*. They wanted their daughter to look like a goddess; I only gave them what she already is."

His voice was shaking. The boy turned to face him once again.

"Why *didn't* you paint her like this? Don't you need the money?"

The other man sighed. His shoulders fell. In that moment he looked old. "I am tired of painting those people."

He turned away to face the little window next to his easel. He looked out at nothing in particular.

"Where are you from?"

"Do you ask so much of everyone you meet?" he snapped. The boy, however, was far from rattled. He repeated his question and the painter was surprised to find himself relenting. "...Doolin. It's a small village very far from here. Have you ever visited?"

A shake of the head. The painter expected as much.

"I left Doolin for the city two months ago. I opened my shop and hung up all of my paintings. These women, the faces that you see...I found them in Doolin."

The boy stared in wonder at the painter. "*All* of them? In that case, Doolin must be full of beautiful people. Ronanda would *not* fit in!"

A slight laugh. His expression softened. "Not all of them were beautiful. Very few of them, in fact...but like that petulant child and her parents, they didn't want a truthful portrait."

The boy understood. "They wanted perfection. I see now; no wonder you're tired of working like this! So many faces to disguise...it must have been difficult. I wonder what they really looked like."

The painter laughed.

"You wouldn't like it. Ronanda was a princess compared to most of them."

"Why did you keep them all, if you hate them? Did the girls not want them?"

He sighed. "Doolin is the smallest place I've ever been to, and not very upmarket. They couldn't pay me for the pictures and had no need for them, even if they would. There's no 'high society' like there is here; no one to impress, no important neighbours to judge and criticise. They sat for me and I painted them for free, trading for supplies whenever I could...and at first, I enjoyed it. But by the time I had painted everyone in Doolin, I was tired of lying to them. I chose to move away, to come here, and I swore never to paint another deceptive portrait. I..." he faltered. The boy was the first person he had spoken to since that day with the Wiltworths, and yet the words seemed easy to find. "...I swore to only paint the truth. If there was beauty in a person, I would paint it. In Ronanda's case, there was none."

The boy looked back at Ronanda's picture. His eyes narrowed.

"What about this other person, the lady you've painted so many times? Did you not think *she* was beautiful?"

The painter felt that familiar sting deep inside. He swallowed the ill-feeling, desperate to stop it from surfacing. "Yes," he said quietly. "She was one of the beautiful ones. But she's gone now."

The boy apologised and the painter raised his hands, insisting it was not necessary. The two stood quietly looking at each other. The painter thought that he had a very nice face. Dark hair down to his collar, darker eyebrows, and those unusual eyes. His skin was smooth and uninterrupted, whiter than he'd ever seen. His lips were pale. There was a mark of some sort, a mole or a freckle perhaps, underneath and to the right of his mouth.

The painter thought he would quite like to draw him.

"So where do you get your money from?" the young voice asked, inquisitive but not intrusive. "If you haven't had any customers, you must have another job. You can't expect me to believe you eat frames for supper."

The painter shook his head.

"I don't have any money. I'm behind on the rent and can barely afford to eat. I keep hoping that the stories they tell will grow stale, and new people will move here who don't mind that I paint honestly. If what you say is true, then there's little chance of that happening."

He smiled wryly. The boy smiled back.

"Couldn't you sell the frames, then? Or pawn them? They must be worth money."

The painter laughed and pulled the nearest portrait off the wall. "Look closely. Drag your fingers along the edges."

The boy did, and found flakes of gold peeling off beneath his fingernails. He gasped. "It's not real! What *is* this?"

"I know you can't see the colour," he said quickly, returning the portrait to its hook on the wall, "but long ago in Doolin I mixed a shade that was almost identical to the colour of gold. It's metallic and smooth and shines in the light. I found old frames in antique shops, in the rubbish that people disposed of, and some of them I made myself. They're all metal, but none are gold. I painted them all so that a customer might think the frame they have is precious. They're worth very little, if anything at all."

The boy laughed loudly. "That's genius! You'd never be able to tell unless you were told what to look for." He moved to where the painter's brushes lay and started to inspect them one by one, picking them up and turning them over in his hands.

"Say, I'm only staying one more night. How about I sit for you? I've seen the legendary portrait and have decided I'd like to employ you!" The boy sat on the chair opposite the painter, his smile dropping a little. "But I'm afraid I don't have any money to pay you. I don't have a job, either."

The painter pulled his easel closer, gathering his brushes and organising his paints.

"Where do you live?" he asked, intrigued by the boy as he started sketching out the shape of his face. An oval, very pleasing.

"I don't, really. I'm a traveller." The boy sat up straight and tucked his hair behind his ears, then seemed to think better of it and let it hang loose. He asked if he should tie it back; the painter said it was fine how it was.

"I go from place to place, earning money by doing odd-jobs and helping others whenever I can. I haven't had a home for a few years now."

"Did you run away?"

"Yes," he said quietly, "I suppose I did. I was upset at the time and I didn't tell anyone where I was going, because I didn't know. I left and haven't been back since. I'll return eventually, when I'm tired of travelling, or when I feel the time is right."

"It sounds wonderfully free."

"It is."

The boy was quiet for a while after, shifting slightly in his seat, tapping his fingers on his knees. The painter sketched quickly and was ready to add colour within the hour. He reached for his vast array of pots, not sure where he would start, only knowing he wanted to save the eyes for last.

"Use warm colours!" the boy said. "Use warm colours so that I can imagine them."

The painter obliged, using a soft pink on his lips and a vibrant red on the collar of his shirt. He painted his hair in a rich shade of mahogany, shot through with black and the darkest of browns. It all looked so *alive*. The portrait wasn't half finished, but it was already glorious.

The painter tried to fight it. He thought of Ronanda and her awful face. He thought of how she was as ugly inside as she appeared at first glance. He thought of the city people, of their vendetta against him; the children who had laughed as they kicked over his frames. Conflict raged in his head of his vow to paint honestly, how *tired* he was of constantly creating beautiful

portraits, and yet here he was making another one. But the painter couldn't lie to himself. With every brush stroke, the portrait became ever more exquisite. The boy's features were to blame; his young face was so whimsical, so buoyed by its owner youth, that it was hard not to paint it as such. He didn't want to create false beauty, but he knew that wasn't what was happening. He was painting what he was really seeing. It felt odd to him; it felt new.

He was soon lost in the movement of the brush. He was distantly aware of the boy's voice: his humming somewhere far away in the corner, talking about his life and his dreams and the different people he had met. The painter wasn't listening. He felt he didn't need to. All he needed to do was look at his face, absorb every last part of it, imprint it on the back of his eyelids and transfer it to the canvas.

It was some time before he spoke, and when he did, it was to pose a question that at that moment felt like the only question that remained in the world. It had to be asked. It burned his tongue and begged to be set free.

"What's your name?"

The boy replied, and it was a name that the painter had never heard before, but he liked it immediately. It was six letters, two syllables, vaguely exotic and absolutely the perfect name for his face. The painter promised that he wouldn't forget it. He told the boy his own name.

"I met a man in Cora called that! It's strange that I should meet you, too. He told me so many stories...much better than the ones they tell here."

The painter nodded, reaching for a fresh brush, dipping it into the small pot of blue. He wasn't sure if he should try to re-create the exact shade of the boy's left eye. It was very deep and yet so bright: something he had never seen before. He painted with the blue that he had and added gold, amber, brown and white, until the eye was so detailed it was almost liquid. He filled in the green eye and it was equally intense. Never had he painted so well. Never had he painted so well and *enjoyed* it.

By the time the final strokes were added, the sun was setting and the day was drawing to a close. He completed the painting by signing his name at the bottom and adding the name of the boy to the top. He asked if the boy would like it framed, but he said no. He asked if he would like to see it, and he said yes. The painter took the canvas from the easel and walked over to where the boy sat. Nervously, he gave it to him, warning him that a lot of it would still be wet.

The boy's eyes skimmed quickly over the surface, taking in everything. The painter couldn't read his expression. He couldn't tell if he was pleased or offended. The boy stood.

"Thank you," he said quietly, "For painting me so honestly."

The painter was silent.

"You noticed my mole," he said, bringing his fingers to his lips, "And my thin nose. My hair looks as uncontrollable as it really is, and my chin is pointed."

The painter was outraged. "How could you look for faults? It's perfect!"

"They're not faults," the boy countered. "It's what I am! I'm comfortable with all of my differences. I didn't want you to paint me like these women...I wanted you to notice all of the things *I* notice, and you did. Thank you."

He moved to the east wall and balanced his portrait on the solitary hook. The painter watched him and felt helplessly hollow.

"But I did paint you like them," he whispered, desperate and hurt. "It's the best one on that wall. It's the best I've ever painted."

The boy smiled but didn't say anything. He walked over to the bay window and picked up the portrait of Ronanda. Pausing for a moment, he gathered up the dust sheet that lay on the floor and wrapped it around the picture. He moved to the doorway.

"I can pay you, after all." He waved the portrait above his head. "I'll leave this on my bed

before I leave. It'll be a nice shock for Wiltworth in the morning! He'll think he's being haunted!" He laughed then, and left, leaving the painter standing by the easel in silence. He wasn't sure what spurred him, but he moved quicker than he had in a long time and reached the doorstep. He shouted after the boy, who had the awful portrait held close to his chest. He asked where he was going.

"I don't know!" the boy shouted, shrugging exaggeratedly. "Maybe Doolin, if I can find out where it is!"

The painter waited and watched him disappear around the corner. The hollow feeling in his stomach remained: it was something he had felt before, back in the village when painting lies was his speciality. He stepped back into the shop. He stared at the new addition to the east wall, so odd without a frame, but still so perfect. The beautiful faces either side and above paled in comparison. Even the woman he had drawn so many times could not hold a candle to the portrait in the middle. The painter knew now why he had never been able to hang Ronanda's face there. She was simply not good enough.

His head was spinning and his body was numb. He was vaguely aware of still being in his robe. Adopting his usual seat by the window, the painter picked up the newspaper he had found that morning. The ink on the front page was smudged, the majority of the article illegible. He read the headline again and again: the Green Leaf murders, the policemen left without a lead. Nothing could get him to focus. Nothing could get him to think. His mind reeled from the day's events, and even though it was freezing outside, he felt a shiver of warmth creep through him.

He fell asleep there, with the door wide open, the night cold creeping in. The draft did not wake him, and nor did the banging of the door when the wind picked up. Nothing could stir him from his seat by the window, the seat he had sat in for so long, during so many days of waiting for a customer who would save him from his situation. He had no money and no hope but he slept well. The gap on the east wall had been filled. The gap on the east wall was no longer there to taunt him.

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In the morning he was expected to be there, sitting by the window, staring back at the world as he always had been. The children skipped by as usual, the people passing whilst purposely not turning their heads. The door stood wide open as it always did. Everything was as it should be. An enraged Raymond Wiltworth took note of this fact and so was understandably confused when he barged into the picture shop to find the window seat empty. Furious, he began punching the portraits nearest to him, bruising his knuckles on the corners of the frames. Under his arm was tucked a portrait so hideously honest it hurt. It hurt *him*. It had hurt him that morning after seeing out his young guest. Now, standing beneath the painter's gallery, he felt his rage consume him.

He stormed through the shop, knocking over the easel, spilling the paints and tearing the hairs out of the brushes. Colours mixed together at his feet: bright and wonderful colours that hadn't touched the canvas he held. Screaming the painter's name at the top of his lungs, Wiltworth pulled open the cupboard door, only to find it bare. A few empty frames were cluttering up the bottom shelf, but otherwise, nothing. No money, no documents, *no sign*. He found the stairs and raced up them, finding the bed made and undisturbed.

It hadn't been slept in. It didn't make sense.

Back downstairs, still nothing, no trace of the painter. He screamed again, and this time people outside came to the door, peering in, curious as to what was happening.

There was madness in the picture shop.

Wiltworth asked the crowd if he had been seen; they asked who, he said the painter, they said no, no sign, they all thought he would be sat at the window, but no one had looked, no one

was *allowed*.

With the spilt paint gathering around his toes, spoiling his fine leather shoes, Wiltworth turned and found himself staring at the east wall. Covered head to toe in portraits, all framed in gold, it was at once the most wonderful and terrible sight that he had seen once before, and one he wished never to see again. The faces of a hundred different women looked down on him, all beautiful and perfect and miles away from his own world. Their flawless features were haunting and infuriating, and oh, how Wiltworth *wished* he could find the painter. How he wished he could ask him about the games he was playing.

In the very centre of the wall was a peculiar sight. Wiltworth stopped and stared.

A single nail was placed there, as if waiting patiently for the day that a painting would be hung on it.

There was a gap in the middle of the east wall.

So far as Wiltworth knew, it had always been there.

So far as Wiltworth knew, it had never been filled.