
BREAKING DOWN
A Short Story
H.B. BOLTON

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Last summer, Gramps taught me to paint.

That's the thing that keeps turning over in my mind. Not the fishing, which I never really liked, or the camping, which was mostly bug bites. The painting.

"It's in our blood," he said, mixing three blues into a sky that didn't exist anywhere but the canvas. His hands were spotted and enormous and they never once shook.

Now it's October, and we're driving through the mountains of North Carolina. Gramps was buried four months ago.

"Look at the leaves," Mom says from the front seat. "You don't get color like this in Florida. Keira. *Keira*. Are you even listening?"

I'm listening. I'm just not answering. There's a difference, and at fourteen I've decided that distinction matters.

"Can we jump in them when we get there?" my brother, Keats, asks. He's nine. He gets to say things like that.

"Absolutely," Mom says, bright as a stage light. "We'll make this whole trip fun. Okay?"

Her hands are tight on the wheel, and I know — the way you know things about your own mother — that she's holding herself together by the skin of her teeth. Gramps was her dad. She's allowed to fall apart, but she won't, not in front of us.

* * *

Grams is a black belt in karate. Most of my friends' grandmothers sit on porches; mine swings from a tire tied to the highest branch of the oak out back. She wears perfume that smells like somewhere far away, and she has never once baked me a cookie in her life. I love her for all of it.

She comes out to meet us with her arms stretched wide, smiling the whole way down, even if it takes her a long time to get down the porch steps. Last summer we hiked a mountain trail together. I still can't figure out how she managed to beat me to the top without breathing hard.

"Does Grams look okay to you?" I ask Mom, quiet, before we get out of the car.

"It's been hard on her," Mom says, watching her mother. "Our job is to cheer her up."

Our job. As if grief is a chore you can cross off a list.

Inside, the house is a wreck. Dishes heaped in the sink, laundry spread across the dining table, cardboard boxes stacked along every wall — all of them with Gramps's name on them. And the

strangest part: the old farmhouse doesn't smell like anything. It used to smell like oil paint and the jasmine growing by the front door. How am I supposed to act like any of this is normal? It's bad enough I've had to pretend that the phony smile plastered on Grams's face is genuine.

"Grams," I say, "you haven't put anything in these boxes. Where are all of Gramps's things?"

"I haven't done anything with them." She says it the way you'd say the weather.

"We'll take care of Dad's things," Mom says. "That's why we're here."

"Thanks, dear." Grams loops her arm through Mom's, and the two of them drift into the back room.

"Hey, Keira, wanna help me pile up some leaves?" Keats asks, already halfway out the door.

"Not right now. Maybe later, okay?"

"Okay, but I'm starting without you." He skips outside.

Ah, to be nine again. I'll bet he's forgotten why we're even here. I wish I could.

* * *

But here's the thing. I came with a mission, and it isn't folding laundry.

Gramps's studio is at the bottom of the basement stairs. Well, most everyone else calls it the basement. I call it what it is. An

artist's sanctuary. I shove a few boxes out of my way and stand at the top of the steps. I swear I can hear him down there, whistling off-key while he works.

"I can do this," I say, and take the first step.

It's dark. I feel my way down the last few stairs before I can reach the light. At the bottom I gulp a big lungful of air and hold it, which is pointless, because it's pitch black and closing your eyes wouldn't change anything. Five more feet and I'll be able to see. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Lights on.

It looks exactly the way I remember. Half-finished canvases resting on easels. Rolled tubes of paint standing in a row like toy soldiers. Brushes waiting in jars of linseed oil. The whole room smells like chemicals and damp concrete, and I love it.

There's the canvas he was working on last summer. Our fishing trip — the pond with the sun glinting off the water, dragonflies hanging in the air, fresh green leaves turning in the wind. I might not have liked fishing, but I always liked being next to him.

It's almost finished, but something is seriously wrong.

I move closer and stare. Gramps painted those leaves a bright summer green. The tube of green paint is still sitting on his palette, dried crust on the cap. So why are the leaves orange now? Red, yellow, and brown, curling at the edges? Why would he repaint his own summer into fall?

I turn to the wall of portraits. There's Grams as a teenager — the one he was going to give her as a surprise. I lean in and study her face. For crying out loud. Why does she have wrinkles? Fine lines around her eyes that weren't there before. And her hair: dark brown when it should be streaked with grey at the temples. She couldn't have had grey streaks at that age.

Something isn't right.

I take the stairs two at a time and find Grams and Mom folding clothes in the family room, like nothing I just saw could possibly matter.

"Grams, some of Gramps's paintings seem off. Why did he change them so much?" I ask, and my voice comes out too high. "They looked good the way they were last summer."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Keira. I haven't been down to that studio in months." She shivers, small and quick. "It's too dark down there for me."

"You know how Gramps was always changing his mind," Mom says, smooth as butter. "He probably wanted to jazz up his paintings."

"Maybe." But I don't believe her. "I think I'll help Keats with the leaves."

"That's a great idea. Go have fun." Mom doesn't look up from the shirt she's folding.

* * *

Outside, the air is crisp and clean and full of October. Keats has already raked a mound of leaves nearly as tall as he is. I watch him work for a second, until an overwhelming urge floods through me. I can't help it. Those leaves are practically inviting me to join them. I take off running, but my foot catches on a buckled board.

The wood gives way with a horrible crack. My foot punches straight through the porch deck, and I land hard on my rear. Mom bursts through the door. Grams follows behind her, slowly, holding the rail.

"What happened?" Mom hauls me up by both arms.

"I fell through the deck!" I'm shaking. "I don't know how."

Mom crouches down and taps the boards. Her knuckles sound hollow. "We'll have to hire someone. This wood's decayed."

"That doesn't make any sense," Grams says, from the top of the steps. "Those boards are sound."

"Maybe they used old wood," Mom says.

"I can assure you that they did not." Grams is still shaking her head when they both go back inside.

"Don't worry about me," I mutter to nobody. "I'll be fine."

I'm not in the mood for the leaves anymore. I'll sneak over to the tire swing, as long as Keats doesn't hear me. No point fighting over who swings first.

The tire hangs exactly the way it should. At least one thing still looks like I remember. I race over and dive onto it, ready to fly. The branch snaps like a gunshot and I drop hard to the ground.

"Nice," I snap, brushing dirt off my jeans. I look up at the sky. "Gramps, are you mad at me? Did I do something wrong? Why is everything breaking?" Nothing. Not even wind. "Hello?"

Fine. I'll go inside.

I creep back up the porch steps — carefully, this time — and I'm reaching for the door when I feel something on my shoulder, light as a fingertip.

A spider.

I whip my hands across my back and fling it off, and it lands on the rail and skitters away. That's when I finally look *up*.

Cobwebs. Woven thick across the entire porch ceiling, corner to corner, draped between the eaves like somebody has been decorating for Halloween since August.

I slam through the front door and press my back against it. "Grams, what is going on with the cobwebs out there?"

"Keira, what're you talking about?" Mom frowns. "I was just out there. I didn't see any cobwebs."

"They're there. Go look."

"Why don't you sit with us for a minute? I'll check in a second." She's watching me the way you'd watch a dog walking in circles to bite its tail.

"I'm not imagining things."

"I didn't say that." She sets down her folding and lowers her voice. "I'm saying this trip might be harder on you than I thought."

"It's not easy. But I'm fine, and there are cobwebs out there, and the tire swing branch just snapped—"

"The tire swing broke?" Grams looks up. "That swing has hung there for thirty years."

"Don't worry about it," Mom says. Then, to me: "Keira, come with me a second. Grams, we'll be right back."

She takes my arm, steers me down the hall into Grams's bedroom, and shuts the door.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I ask.

"All I'm asking is that you help me through this." Her voice is thin.

"Okay. Maybe I overreacted a little. But don't you think it's strange how everything keeps breaking?"

"Maybe it's your mind playing tricks on you."

"I know what I saw."

"I know you think you do." She sighs and sits on the edge of the bed. "Can you please not say things like that in front of Grams? Not today."

"I can manage that."

"Thank you." She kisses my forehead and stands up. "We'll get through this. You'll see."

"I know." I look around at their things: his watch on the dresser, her brush, forty years of a life pressed into one room. "I think I'll stay here a while."

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you too."

* * *

Gramps's pocket watch is sitting on the dresser exactly where it has always sat. I pick it up. The gold is warm from the window, worn smooth on the back from his thumb.

The hands are frozen.

I twist the little knob, gently, the way I've watched him do it a hundred times. The second hand shivers. Then it starts to move.

At least I've fixed one thing today.

I set the watch back and look up at the painting above the dresser. Their white farmhouse, fresh-painted, standing in an impossibly blue sky. I remember the day he painted it. I was maybe eight. He set up his easel on the lawn and let me add clouds, even though he'd already painted a cloudless day.

"Every sky needs one thing it didn't plan for," he said, and handed me the brush.

The painting looks right. Almost.

Except there are cracks under the upstairs window that I'm sure weren't there. And dark lines creeping between the boards, grey and damp, like something has gotten in behind the paint.

I lean closer.

There are cobwebs on the front porch. Denser than the ones outside. Strings of them across the doorframe, hanging off the eaves, wrapping the posts.

"Mom!" Keats's voice comes from outside, high and thin. "I can't get in! There's cobwebs all over, and I'm *not* going through them!"

I run. The front door won't budge. I throw my whole weight on it, but it doesn't move. The window! I shove the curtains aside and cobwebs are smeared across the glass, and through them I can see the entire porch gone white with them, and my little brother stuck on the lawn.

"Keats, go around back!" I yell. "The back door!"

Behind me, something falls. A soft thud, like a coat slipping off a hook. Then Mom screams my name.

She's crouched on the floor of the family room with Grams's head in her lap.

"What's wrong with her?" I'm kneeling before I know I've moved.

"I don't know." Mom's hands are trembling. "Keira, I don't know."

Grams's eyes are open but they're not quite looking at us. The lines in her face have cut deeper, all at once, like someone drew them in with a harder pencil. Her skin looks thin enough to see through.

She has aged ten years in ten minutes.

"Without your Gramps, everything around here is falling apart." She says it almost like a joke. "I suppose that includes me."

"Don't talk like that."

"He used to call himself the groundskeeper." She laughs, quiet and broken. "I never understood it. He never lifted a finger around this house — all he ever wanted was to paint. And yet, somehow everything got done. Fresh paint, mended fence, the garden in. Always." She closes her eyes. "He used to say he had to keep touching up his paintings, or the whole world would go dull."

The back door bangs open. Keats skids in, leaves stuck to his socks.

"You won't believe it," he says, breathless. "I raked this huge pile, and when I went to jump in, it was all brown and dead. Crunchy. Like it's been there for *years*."

Goose bumps climb my arms. "Mom. The painting in Grams's room. The one of this house. There were cobwebs on the porch in the painting. And the ones in Gramps's studio — the portrait of Grams — she's *older* in it."

Mom's jaw tightens. "Not now, Keira."

"Mom—"

"Keats. Wet cloth from the kitchen. Go."

He rushes out of the room.

This cannot be happening. Not Grams. Not her too.

I back out of the room without deciding to. Then I turn and run for the basement stairs.

* * *

Five more feet. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Lights on.

I go straight for Grams's portrait, and there is no pretending this time. The paint is fine as a spiderweb, the color going thin and chalky where her face should be. A chip of it flakes loose under my thumb. I sit down on the concrete floor and cry, hard, with my back against the wall, and I don't stop for a long time.

Then I get angry.

I'm so furious at all of it — at the paintings, at the house, at every easel and every tube of stupid beautiful paint — that I could put my fist through all of them. I storm across the studio to a far wall, to a canvas I've never really noticed, and I stop.

It's Gramps.

A portrait of Gramps, propped on the floor, and I've never seen a painting of him anywhere in this house. Not once. He painted everyone but himself.

And he's frowning.

Not angry. Not exactly sad. Frowning the way you frown at something you're about to have to let go of.

I lift the canvas and nearly drop it.

There's another painting behind it.

"How can that be?" I whisper.

It's the same frame, the same light, the same studio. He's painted the room I'm standing in. Except in the painting the studio is bright, tidy, brushed and swept, and it's *summer* through one small window. He's sitting on the stool with his palette on his knee. And standing beside him, holding a brush, is me.

I'm maybe eleven. My hair's shorter. I have paint on my cheek and I'm grinning like I've just gotten away with something.

A little brass plate is fixed to the bottom of the frame.

In small letters, it says: *Keira.*

I sit down on the floor, holding the painting, and I can feel my heart going in my ears.

He knew.

He painted me into his studio years before I ever stepped into it and called it a name, and then he was careless — no. Not

careless. He was careful. He put it facing the wall where nobody would see it until somebody went looking.

He was waiting for me to come down.

* * *

I find the green paint on his palette and the flats of red and gold beside it. I find a brush, and I clean it the way he taught me, rolling it in the rag instead of crushing the bristles, and I set the fishing canvas on the easel and I stand there and look at it for a long time.

Because this isn't just repainting. I don't know what it is exactly, but the longer I look at those leaves turning brown, the more I understand something I can't put into words — that the summer in the painting isn't a memory of a summer. It *is* the summer. He was keeping it alive the only way he knew how.

So I mix the green. Too dark. Try again. Too bright, cartoon green, nothing like the leaves he put there. My third try is close, and I touch the brush to the canvas at the edge, one small stroke where the brown is creeping in.

Nothing happens.

Of course nothing happens. It's a painting. I'm a fourteen-year-old with a brush and a dead grandfather and paint I mixed wrong.

I almost throw the brush across the room.

Instead, I think about him. I think about the way he stood when he painted: weight on one hip, elbow locked tight, the brush a

loose grip he could rotate. I think about how he never painted *what he saw*. He painted what he wanted to be true. That's what the house painting was. That's why he'd let an eight-year-old add clouds to a cloudless sky.

So I stop painting the leaves I remember.

I paint the leaves the way he'd want them. Green the way summer is green in the first week of June, when it hasn't been baked yet. The green of leaves that don't have to be over.

The paint goes down and it's warm under the brush, warmer than a cold basement and old linseed oil should allow, and when I look up, the canvas is holding the light differently.

Behind me, something smells like jasmine.

* * *

I don't run upstairs. I make myself walk, because running makes you look like you've seen something.

Grams is sitting up on the sofa with a cup of tea and a color on her face that wasn't there ten minutes ago. Mom's beside her, blinking like she's just woken up.

"All right," I say. "I need a straight answer."

"Keira—" Mom starts.

"What did Gramps mean," I say, to Grams, "when he said he was the groundskeeper?"

Grams looks at me a long moment. Then she sets down the tea.

"He meant it literally, dear. He painted this place. Every version of it. When the fence rotted, he painted the fence. When my hair went grey, he painted it back. When the house needed paint … well." She smiles, tired and real. "You saw his house. Always white."

"And the paintings age because he isn't here to fix them."

"You've worked it out."

"Oh, honestly," Mom says. "The two of you. She's a child. This is a *grief thing,* Keira, and I need you to—"

"Mom." I take her hand. "Grams's color came back the moment I finished a painting of a pond. Look at her face and tell me that isn't true."

Mom looks at Grams. She stares for a long time. Then her shoulders come down, about an inch, and something in her gives up its grip.

"I don't understand any of this," she says. "But I sat here and watched my mother age ten years and then come back. So tell me what you need."

"I need to work."

* * *

I don't sleep much. Every winter in every painting means weeks of work, and there's a whole house of canvases waiting.

By the time the sun comes up, I've brought the front porch back from a war it was losing to webs, repainted the tire swing

branch, mended the fence line in the hill painting, and given Grams back her hair.

The last one is Gramps.

I carry his portrait from the far wall and set it on the easel. I stand there with the brush in one hand and the palette in the other.

I can't touch it. That frown is the one honest thing he ever painted — the face of a man who knew he was leaving and had no idea who he was handing it to.

But it isn't the ending. It's where he stopped.

So I paint. Not the smile I want him to have. The one he'd want me to have — from that last afternoon, the one that said *it's in our blood* like he was handing me a key.

I mix the color slowly. This one I take my time with.

And when I finish it, I step back. He's smiling. I'm crying. The room smells like jasmine and oil paint, and it's going to be all right.

* * *

By the next morning, the house is almost itself. Grams is back on the tire swing, dragging her feet through the grass like she has nowhere to be. Mom is at the kitchen sink with the radio on, and she's singing, badly, which means she's okay.

Keats has raked a brand-new pile and is currently refusing to jump in it until he's certain the leaves won't instantly turn damp and moldy again.

"I'm glad you touched up Gramps's paintings," Grams says, drifting back and forth. "It feels better, somehow. Knowing the two of you still have something to share."

"Grams. How often did he do this?"

"Like clockwork," she says. "Every fall and every spring, he'd set to work."

"Then I guess I'll have to visit more often."

"I hope you do, dear." She smiles up at me from the tire, and her eyes are clear. "I hope you do."

That's the whole trick of it, I think. Everyone I know is going to grow up, and everything I know is going to wear out, and the only thing standing between the world and going grey is somebody willing to keep mixing the color.

Gramps did that for forty years, and in all that time Grams was the only one who knew.

But knowing isn't the same as keeping. She couldn't climb those stairs anymore, and she never could mix the greens the way he did. So he painted her into the story just as surely as he painted me — and then he waited.

For somebody who would come down the stairs.

And now it's my turn.

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