

————— A —————

Dead people have started talking to me. The famous, infamous, and virtually unknown.

I don't go into a trance. I'm not victimized by auditory "hallucinations." I'm not schizophrenic (those other people are just good friends).

It's like turning on a radio to see if anything good's on. Except I'm not the one who turns it on...or chooses the stations.

In places crowded with the living and the dead—libraries, museums, cemeteries—I feel like I'm surrounded by an army of rambunctious 10-year-olds fighting to get their hands on the remote, while I try to hit "mute."

I defend myself by softening my ears—the aural equivalent of staring. My mind isn't still in the meditative sense; rather I focus on the place between the sounds *within* and *without* until they blend into a one low murmur...and make way for whoever's knocking.

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# I. Real Creativity

Inside The Metropolitan Museum of Art, it sounds like a chorus of out-of-tune angels.

The sopranos of hormonal students clash with the annoyed *mezza mezza* of aficionados and the nervous tenor of tourists. Tour-guide solos are easily drowned out in the din.

Each room has its own distinct tone. You can't look at a dancing Shiva, mounted knight in mid-canter, or depression-era face, without hearing the call of distant times.

For a while, I focus on manageable details: an oddly childish family scene drawn by an Egyptian Pharaoh; the hair streaming out of the ears of a Papuan turtle spirit; and the blank stares in the statuesque eyes of a Roman emperor.

After speculating on the sex life of the couple who slept in that Colonial New England canopy bed, I take refuge in the cafeteria, where I sip on a half-decent double *latte* and debate whether to call it a day or take on the second floor.

Since a friend told me there was a Miró I *must* see ("it'll remind you of the inside of your brain, Dave"), I walk back out to the main gallery and up the crowded stairs, excusing myself as I pass people in various stages of leg fatigue and visual overwhelm.

"Let's look at the paintings...the ones to the right."

I turn around quickly, but nobody's talking to me. And, rather than sounding conversational, the voice carries the echoes of centuries, not just marble halls.

Amused by this ventriloquist trick, I turn right and enter the gallery as directed. Weighty portraits and mythic scenes in ornate gilded frames. I walk around slowly, clearing my vision after each one by looking down at the parquet floor. While waiting for further "instructions," I sit on a cushioned bench and look directly at Rubens' *Venus and Adonis*: his muscles in such firm tension...her mythic breasts...their surprisingly structural elbows and knees. She struggles to keep him from leaving. An infant angel holds his leg. His dogs are alert, ready for the adventure to come.

"Not much life left." The voice returns with a touch of nostalgia, but devoid of self-pity.

"What do you mean?" I object immediately, glancing to my right and left: "Look at that dog's nose...you can almost smell the woods through that thing."

"Yes, but it is simply a record of the past. Great artists take us into the future."

“Isn’t that what scientists do?” I ask, swiveling my head even more quickly to catch whoever’s talking in the act.

“Scientists ground the vision. But the artist can show us the way to places where no human has gone before. Inside. *Inside!*”

His intensity gives me pause. I wait a beat, breath hovering. Another beat. And another. Look around again. The gallery’s still empty except for a kid sketching. The impossible now seems obvious. I take a long slow breath and call the bluff: “You painted it, right?”

“Yes. Painted. Past tense.”

Those four simple words describe the feeling I’ve always had in museums. Outside, life is chaotic, unruly...but alive. Inside, it’s organized, manageable...inspiring, but static. The art is exquisite, but the artists have moved on.

“Exactly. I already said what I had to say then. I’m here to say what I have to say *now.*”

“Which is?”

His chuckle is like a light rumble at the bottom of a deep cavern: “No. Not here. I need the proper tools.”

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“This is more like it,” Rubens’ grandfatherly voice whispers, as we enter a world that puts his 17<sup>th</sup> C. palette to shame.

The Crayola Crayon Factory *Museum* is in downtown Easton, PA, about an hour’s drive from New York City. It’s a psychedelic showcase to the “Crayola Experience,” built during the 1990s, so the company’s lawyers could finally stop having nightmares about innocent children tumbling into vats of molten paraffin. The real factory is at some undisclosed location nearby.

The museum is a place where the operative compound adjectives are “multi-colored,” “larger-than-life,” and “hands-on.” And the air is not so delicately fragranced with a pervasive *eau de crayon* that waxes and wanes as you go from room to room.

“Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating. Let’s take a stroll, shall we?” The Master suggests.

First, we stare with childlike fascination at The World’s Largest Crayon. It’s blue, 15’ long, and 16” in diameter, weighs 1,500 pounds, and is made from 123,000 blue Crayola crayon nubs contributed by kids from all over the country.

“A terrible waste,” he grumbles. “What on earth could they possibly use *that* for?”

To paint the Sistine Chapel without scaffolding, I think. But decide he may not be ready yet for irreverent 20<sup>th</sup> C. humor.

Then, we watch a demonstration of a “real” crayon-making machine, where kids eagerly raise their hands to answer questions from a guy who has to make this presentation every half hour—and it shows.

The highlight is a display that keeps a running tally of how many Crayola crayons have been made in history—more than 125 billion, and somehow still counting.

Rubens shakes his head. “How would you blend them? The colors must conform to the painting...not vice versa,” he explains.

As we continue our self-guided tour, I feel increasingly conspicuous. I’m not the only grownup there. But I’m the only grownup who isn’t either working or accompanied by a child under the age of ten. And I’m definitely the only grownup being lectured by a 17<sup>th</sup> C. Flemish Master. I imagine the elderly volunteers, who wear *Jazzberry Jam* shirts under official-looking *Black* or *Outer Space* aprons, keep a close eye on middle-aged guys wandering around and mumbling to themselves.

“Don’t concern yourself. They don’t really see you.”

“No,” I whisper, “they don’t really see *you*. They see me just fine.”

Frankly, I think the person they should be keeping an eye on is the guy who’s wearing a kind of hula skirt made from strips of different colored cloth that swish around his khaki pants and sneakers. His jersey is a tie-dyed *Midnight Blue* with large *Laser Lemon* circles on a field of good-old reliable *Red*. But the most endearing (or disturbing) piece of his wardrobe is a high conical hat, shaped exactly like a crayon, made of small diamond patches of different colors. Maybe Rubens is about to get blown out of my ears by the biblical Joseph.

Eventually, we choose one of the omnipresent drawing tables, and I straddle a stool to await further instructions. A 4-foot (yes *foot*) diameter *Ultra Yellow* teacup filled with 5-foot (yes *foot*) high crayons anchors a revolving carousel with 30 or so plastic bins of regular-sized crayons. It looks like a stage set for a production of *Alice in Wonderland*. And I’m auditioning for the lead.

“What are you waiting for? Draw!”

My head jerks up...whew...flashback...2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Flash forward: I grab a large piece of drawing paper, a handful of crayons, and start scribbling—lines, shapes, swirls, whatever.

“Behold! A riot of flesh! Men tumble to their deaths, faces frozen in rigors of fear. Women, their bodies contorted, shield their eyes from unspeakable fates. Tortured cries, despaired of redemption. Faces etched with gashes of anguish. Lucifer himself waits with a self-satisfied sneer!”

I close my eyes and begin grabbing crayons at random, stroking boldly across the page like a conductor leading an orchestra.

“But look above!” the Master continues. “Sweet faces of care, compassion, and hope. Confident muscles clutch the faithful. The soft curves of bodies at peace, rising towards Lord Jesus, Blessed Mary, and the saints, as angels go about their business, anointing the blessed—like bees from flower to flower.”

As Rubens talks, my crayon-filled fists continue to fly, coating the edges of my hands in a thin film of wax.

At last, his voice fades and I open my eyes to examine my poor excuse for a Pollock. But Jackson would undoubtedly consider me tragically old-fashioned...because (“Behold!”) I have drawn a passable, crayon-colored Rubens.

I look around...furtive...guilty. But all the other innocents are still standing or kneeling on stools, totally focused, as if reality itself depended on their ability to depict it. Fortunately, none of them seems to mind that I’ve been monopolizing the flesh tones.

The Master gives me no time to bask in the glow of my newfound talent: “Good. Now step back and see this entire, apocalyptic scene—hellish fires and celestial light—as nothing more than color, shape, and shadow.”

I do, softening my eyes to a blur.

“To reject any part would be to reject the whole,” he sighs, speaking as much to the heavens as to me. He gives me a moment to ponder this unsettling truism before commanding: “New sheet of paper!”

This time, humbled by undeniable grace—I reach for colors that are more vibrant, and draw carefully, confidently.

“Christ is lowered from the cross,” the Master instructs. “The full weight of his humanity about to tumble to earth. Celestial radiance illuminates his power. Each brushstroke a balm for the grieving.”

He sighs as my hand dabs streaks of *Hot Magenta* blood along Christ’s forearm and the wound at his side. I color Magdalene’s cloak with *Scarlet*, softening it by rubbing with my

thumb. I reach for browns and yellows (*Inch Worm, Desert Sand, Macaroni and Cheese*) for the cross itself, and to highlight the beard of the apostle who's struggling to support the torsioned right shoulder of his lifeless Lord.

The Master resumes his lecture:

"Where others use Christ's torment to stoke the fires of hatred, I stroke it gently...soothe his suffering to rest at long last...so we can move on. With acceptance. With grace. With forgiveness and compassion."

Like lights slowly illuminating a darkened auditorium, I become aware of myself. Hunched over the paper. Muscles and ligaments stretched taught across my shoulders. Hands clenching crayons. Eyes squeezed in intense focus.

"Many have come to earth with words of wisdom and love," he continues. "But the path from mind to heart is long and arduous, filled with twists and turns. Ideals of love metamorphosing into excuses for hate."

He pauses a moment, considering his own words before taking me to the next step: "Imagine *yourself* being lowered off the cross," he says simply.

I gasp. A wave of release flows through my body as I fall under the sway of deep blues and indigos, the firm grasp of Rubens' ancient hand, and the soft insistence of his voice and vision:

"Now imagine your bitterest enemy being lowered off the cross."

A long-forgotten face comes to mind—a petty tyrant of a client, whose grandiose praise barely concealed an insatiable desire to manipulate...control...crush. I see him full-figured, naked, loin-clothed...the Christ.

Oh my.

"Back to the first drawing!"

I dutifully reach for my day of judgment and place it gently atop my crucifixion. A little girl, with predictably cherubic cheeks and carefully cropped blonde bangs slides off her stool and catches a glimpse as she runs off to show someone her own divine drawing. "That's pretty," she says before skipping away.

"New piece of paper!" Rubens commands. "New *Day of Judgment*. This time put yourself and all whom you know and love into the painting. Some fall to the fires. Others rise to the heavens."

I don't have to think. I don't have to choose. Friends, relatives, and familiar-but-nameless faces appear one-by-one, as if volunteering for bit parts in my epic.

“Now take those who were ascending and put them in the fires of hell and take those who were falling and raise them to the right hand of the Lord. Continue. Continue. Continue!”

I do as he commands. Coloring, coloring, coloring... a multitude of forms and faces in various throes of finality. Minute by minute, the painting becomes more complex until I'm startled to a halt by Rubens' voice, soft, sad, avuncular:

“This simplest and most elusive of truths surrounds us. Whether in paintings of startling realism or total abstraction. Your enemy is that stroke of red. You are that stroke of blue. You complete each other.

“For, in the end, each spirit is nothing more, nor less, than an infinitely complex but extraordinarily simple swath of colored light.”

I take a deep breath and look at all three drawings side by side.

I see nothing but scribbles.