



The rain rapped the window, a jumping beat, dancing to its own music. It did its job, washing the world again without Tally's notice or approval. Her hand had fallen to her lap. She stared at the message on the computer screen: Are you sure you want to delete this account: *I Stare At People?*

She wasn't a writer. Nor an artist, really. She simply posted sketches and paintings of people on her blog. The approval in the comments brought her comfort. Her boss, the instructor at Craft Angels, raised an eyebrow at the idea. She'd always told wanna-be artists, "You paint for one of two reasons: the approval of others, or the sake of expressing yourself. You have to decide between the two."

Tally had chosen. She painted truth. Exactly what she saw in the faces around her. But she still posted her work and checked for comments, secretly wondering, didn't all artists need an audience?

Capturing faces wasn't difficult for her, but most students who came to Craft Angel painted landscapes. After all, Austin was listed as one of the prettiest, happiest places in America.

She sold white gesso to those who painted the city's limestone buildings, oranges for flaming sunsets on Ladybird Lake, and blacks for the one and half million bats flying from under Congress Bridge on summer nights. Reds and auburns were needed for still lifes of LoneStar tallboys or honkytonks festooned with lights. Anyone buying viridian green was trying to capture the Colorado River slicing through the heart of the city, moving in swirls of color.

But she captured the truth in *people*. Recorded it as fact. She could sense the aches and longings in another person, see it in their face. It was the one intuitive piece of her amateur skills she was sure of.

The local swimming hole, Barton Springs, was a good place to stare at people. She'd spread a blanket on the grassy banks of the three-acre spring-fed pool and wait. Families, hipsters, and tech executives frequented the place. Robert Redford had learned to swim here when he was five years old. Eventually eyes or wrinkles or a broken frown with a story would pass near. Sometimes it was a child, hands clutching the adult who was tossing her into the pool. Or it may be woman, herding too many cranky kids out of the heat. Or a tan-skinned man parked on a bench, studying the cracks in his boots. Tally stared and sketched.

Children were likely to plop down beside the twenty-five-year-old, curious about her hand strokes. She didn't mind. Drawing was a universal language. But their presence often brought an adult. "That's ... uh ... unique," they'd say as they collected their child, looking back and forth between her work and the subject, usually scaring the subject away. "So, you sit here and draw strangers?"

"Just practice." Tally wouldn't look up, her strokes becoming more brisk, trying to summarize what she remembered.

"You wanna do a practice sketch of Betsy here?"

Tally flat-smiled. "Thanks, but I don't like to draw children." She wore the same smile she had when she used to say, "I'm not hungry, you eat the rest." She didn't mind children. Most kid's faces were like newly-laid eggs. They had no stories. If she happened to see one that did, she was overwhelmed with the urge to call 9-1-1. She could imagine how *that* would go.

"This is 9-1-1. What's your emergency?"

"There's a child at Barton Springs. He's in trouble."

"Is he drowning?"

"Not in water. But it's something that will leave a rut in the rest of his life. I recognize it. I've seen it before."

It was hard not to stare after such a child, even as he left, taking hesitant steps into a clouded future and sometimes jerked into healing by an adult. She forced her hand across the paper, capturing that look. She drew truth.

She tried to make herself small and unnoticeable on her blanket, sketching a man in a jaunty leather Tyrolean cap, a tall feather waving from the side.

"You need to show his swimming trunks. That's what makes it hilarious," said a woman who'd paused behind her.

Tally didn't paint hilarious or explain that she only chose one detail to tell a story, giving it life so it would contrast with what was missing. The rest of the image was a few lines of impression. The fancy hat made the face beneath it speak of long-gone happiness for the crooked-back old man.



When she returned from the outing, she posted the work on her blog with the other portraits. Strangers could look at strangers. “Haunting,” the comments read. “Aching.” “I can feel this person’s loss.”

Commenters left kind words. But people were scaredy-cats. They were attracted to snoop in others’ lives—they didn’t want to be at the front of the line doing it. They liked peeking over her shoulder. And she liked their praise. Maybe even needed it. She was unsure how she should feel about that.

Knowing what was normal was challenging, like being in another country when she’d never been out of her own. Perhaps it was time for another long walk. It had helped the night she’d left eastern Colorado. The plodding pace had let her examine what she believed had been true.

She knew it had been true that when the dust of a vehicle roiled on the prairie horizon, she had fifteen minutes to heat up food. Her arms, legs, teeth, and skin depended on a hot supper waiting when Joe Dean’s truck stopped at the door. But he was right ... what else did she have to do all day? She’d lost the telephone over a late meal. Ripped out of the wall. Never replaced. “What if there’s a fire?” she’d asked.

“Then you better find the hose.”

It was also true there were hundreds of acres between her and the closest neighbor. When Joe Dean was in one of his moods, she got out of the house, walked the pastures. But ranching was hard. The drought had made it even worse. She could forgive her husband for his worries.

Countless days passed, staring at the grasslands. If she spotted a coyote, a quarter-mile away, tracking a rabbit, she screamed, high-pitched, hawk-like, waving her arms to alert the rabbit. But on a walk, a half-mile from the house, antelope bounded the back-acre fence, stealing the cattle’s winter hay. She watched. No yelling, no waving.

Joe Dean had seen her from the barn. Shot right past her, dirt flying at the antelope’s feet where the bullet hit. That night he didn’t let her eat, saying, “Now you know what cattle feel when they can’t get food.”

That was a truth she already knew—how hunger felt—like the edges of her stomach were dissolving. The bastard had hidden his demons till after he’d trapped her in marriage. But it was her fault. He was right. Maybe she wasn’t fat, but she sure wasn’t pretty. He was probably the only one who’d have her.

He often reminded her she didn’t understand the country and needed him. “You’ve got the survival instinct of a worm crawling across the pavement, expecting to find a soft spot to live. This ain’t it. Everything out here will bite you, kill you, or eat you. I expect to find you dead someday—snakebit or something if you’re not careful.”

Snakes she respected. Snakes had manners, crawling away when they heard her. Rattling out a warning before they would strike her.

On the night she started walking, she didn’t care about snakes. Holding a towel to her mouth, she slipped out the door while he slept in front of Monday Night Football. She dug up the plastic-wrapped backpack she’d buried in the barn. Was it two months ago or four? She’d lived between the fear of needing it and horror that he’d find it. Maybe he was right. She was a worm, expecting a soft spot to appear in their marriage—that it would get easier.

He would expect her to go to the neighbors, so she cut across pastures heading south.

She avoided the town of Holly. True, someone there may help her, but this was his community; his family had lived here for years. She wouldn’t take the chance.

Darkness made her stumble into ditches, but she knew the facts of the land; a profile could be seen for miles across flat acres. It was safer to walk at night.

At daybreak, she slept at Camp Amache, between the old well and one of the many houseless foundations. When the sound of an occasional truck passed along the road, she didn’t peek over the weeds and grasses—didn’t take the chance.

The next evening, she walked again, discovering her tooth was no longer in her pocket. The night she’d left she’d looked for it, rescuing it off the floor, refusing to leave any more of herself behind.

The eye-tooth was like a kernel of white corn. It had probably fallen out as she slept. Now it was planted in the earth. What if it grew a new her? Wouldn’t that be something?

She must be exhausted. There was no truth in crazy thoughts like that. Besides, if a new her sprouted, tethered to this dry land, it would wither and die. She had to keep moving. It was fitting for the tooth to rest in Camp Amache, the old Japanese Internment Center, a place where dreams didn’t come true.

The twenty-eight miles to Lamar took longer than she expected.

“You know,” her counselor replied, “there are really only two emotions. Love and fear. Everything else—happy, sad, worry, surprise—are variations of these two.”

Women’s services took over when she stumbled inside. Months of legalese, court documents, and waiting followed, and when they finally asked her, “Where would you like to go?”

She said, “Someplace happy.”

“You know,” her counselor replied, “there are really only two emotions. Love and fear. Everything else—happy, sad, worry, surprise—are variations of these two.”

“So why is fear overwhelming? Stronger?”

“Because love is learned. No one ever has, or ever will be able to love, until they’ve been loved.”

She frowned. “That’s like Catch-22 in getting a job. No one will hire you unless you have experience, and you can’t get experience until you’re hired.”

“Or until someone gives you a break.” The counselor wore the maddening smile of an old crone with a secret. “That’s a variation of love.”

Tally wasn’t looking for love—just new opportunities, and Austin had them. She liked the job the local Women’s Center had arranged for her at the art store. She liked her tiny studio apartment in a neighborhood of cozy eateries. SpiderMonkey Coffeehouse was the best because lattice-work booths made it easy to sneak quick portraits of interesting customers, like the tiny gray-haired woman who came through the door.

Tally’s heart thudded in her chest. Alarm bells went off. She wasn’t sure why. She didn’t know any seniors in Austin, but she was sure that a store-bought coffee was a rare treat for this old woman. Perhaps a reward for a terrible day.

The lady stood, head down, feet so close together a nudge would topple her. The black coat she wore was clean with a “two-sizes-too-big-but-it-was-on-sale” look. The only glamour about the woman was a pearl-headed-angel pin on her lapel. A gift. Tally was sure of it.

She had to see that face. Sliding from the booth, she pretended to study a bag of coffee, glancing beyond it. The old woman turned further away, clutching her hard-sided, vinyl purse to her chest, her hands crossed over it like a corpse.

Tally moved to the other side of the coffee shop for a better angle, but the woman turned, too, her arc synced as though she could feel staring-eyes pinned to her back.

In some unspoken sphere, Tally was certain she was ruining the treat the old woman was allowing herself. She was being unkind and selfish. She picked up her paints and left, hoping it would clear the air of her presence. She didn’t wait in her car, trying to sneak a peek.

But the woman stayed on her mind for days. Surely birdlike legs filled those loose, straight-legged pants. It wasn’t the gray hair overrun with white. It was the woman’s movements, how she tried to take up as little space as possible. It reminded her of her mother.

Tally’s tongue smoothed over her fake tooth as she remembered how she’d bided her time, waiting for her mother to die before she left. Joe Dean hadn’t been as patient. He’d started selling things as soon as her mom had gotten sick. “Hell, she’s dying. She won’t be using the lawnmower.”

Once, when straightening pillows on her mom’s hospital bed, lightning bolts shot through Tally. An unintentional gasp escaped.

“Natalie, you okay? Taking care of yourself?” her mom had whispered.

With the Ace bandage supporting her broken rib, Tally could barely breathe. She’d fought to keep a few pieces of her mom’s jewelry. They weren’t expensive, but still, it was a painful loss. “I’m fine, Mom.”

Her only relative. The only friend she had left. She wouldn’t tell the one person who loved her. It wasn’t right to fret a dying woman. She’d wait.

“How’s Libbie?” Joe Dean had asked when he picked her up from the hospital.

Tally stared out the passenger window, watching the wind shake the weeds. “I think she’s getting better. Sitting up. Gabbing like a chickadee.” She couldn’t lie to his face. He’d see it in her. Maybe he could also see she was dreaming of ways *he* could die.

“Damn.” He’d thumped the steering wheel. “She’s a tough ol’ buzzard. Listen, hon, we need to sell her car.”

Twelve months after Tally left Colorado, Lamar Women’s Services notified her that Joe Dean had died. Killed in a fight. Tally cried. Not for that jackass. If only he would’ve died sooner and her mom had lived longer, they could have talked.

Bit by bit she tried to piecemeal forgiveness for being the kind of daughter who abandoned the dead. She had her mom’s ashes sent from the mortuary where they’d sat alone and unclaimed. A few more months passed before she dared to share her art. The blog helped. It had been a long time since she’d created anything that anyone had approved of.

She volunteered at the nursing home. Payback for the lies she’d told. Or maybe she was looking for the mother she missed. It was an uncomfortable place. It was what she deserved.

The people there stared.

Their eyes probed. Searching for something. When she sat down to visit and paint, they didn’t react to her like they did to the lady who brought around the dog. With Snowball, their faces softened and their stiff fingers combed through the Spitz’s fur.

She figured it was because she took rather than gave. So she left them with her tiny portraits. Faces floating on a white background. She didn’t include the nursing home’s yellow walls. It was a cheery, lying color, intended to psychologically boost the residents. She’d even dropped yellow from her palette. She wanted to capture the truth. Maybe a part of the world would accept her peace offering.

It had taken a while to learn to stare back. Some of the residents’ heads were cocked at strange angles, their necks frozen by time, drool stringing from paralyzed mouths. Others peered from rheumy, red eyes, crying

without reason—or maybe for reasons buried in layers of life. A few wore the hollowed-out look of someone who'd crossed into another dimension, waiting for their body to follow.

Tally experimented: shading, pupil size, muscle tension around the eyes. But when she blended White #1 into the iris, the vacant stare rose from the canvas. "Got it," she whispered. She painted them just like they were. The residents didn't seem to mind—except Hazel Lee.

It was storming the afternoon Tally slipped into Hazel's room. The old matron sat in one of two rocking chairs in front of floor-to-ceiling glass. She stared at the flowerbed being pounded by Texas-size raindrops.

"Hello, ma'am. It's your turn to have your picture painted."

"Heavens, no! Gimme a break." Hazel's focus remained outside the windows.

"It won't cost anything. It's a gift."

"I don't want it. I look half-dead already. A portrait would be a daily reminder to pray, 'Take me now, Lord!' My eyes aren't as good as they used to be, but I don't wanna see depressing crap."

"I paint the truth. The way we are."

"Look out there." Hazel pointed. "Whadda ya see?"

Tally looked back and forth between the woman and the drizzle. "Uh ... a storm?"

Hazel Lee's eyes latched onto her as though she were x-raying her soul, probing, looking into crannies. Tally tried to smile. She couldn't. Nor did she think she could move.

The old gal's eyes softened as she whispered, "I know you."

"Uh...no, Mrs. Lee. I'm not from here."

"You're the frightened girl who comes around."

"I'm not afraid." Tally checked her reflection in the window, touching her cheek, fearing what her face revealed. "I come because I want to."

"You ever ask yourself why you hang out with a bunch of live wires like us?" Mrs. Lee flicked the question away. "Most folks here don't talk. Don't ask questions. They'll take you just like you are. You're safe here. Doesn't matter what you hide from yourself."

Tally looked away. Did the things she'd done show in her face? The dog food she'd served Joe Dean? The pills she'd ground into his food? Each day she'd tried to convince herself to use one of the knives she'd hidden around the house. She'd nursed so many evil wishes, planned so many murderous plots. Some of Joe Dean's monsters had surely settled inside of her. Did they peek out of her face? Pinching the bridge of her nose, she squeezed back tears.

"Cry, hon. I know about fear. I hung onto it so long it became part of my skin. It wore me down till I stopped pretendin' it wasn't there. You can't squeeze all the darkness out by yourself. There's no such thing as a perfect human. So dive into your shadows. Then remind yourself that's only a teeny little part of who you are. "

"If people really knew—"

"Oh, horsefeathers! Everybody's mucked up and dirty. That's the gospel truth. You're no better, no worse, than anybody else. When you grab hold of that, you'll stop draggin' the dead-bones of your fears around. Aren't you tired of being afraid?"

The words thundered through Tally. She barely moved her chin to nod, worried some part of her would crack.

"Then c'mon, sit with me." Hazel patted the rocking chair next to her.

Tally blinked, slowly lowering herself, wondering what was supposed to happen. Minutes passed. They stared at nothing. The rain faded to a whisper, waiting for the steel-gray clouds on the horizon to provide reinforcement. Neither woman spoke. Tally closed her eyes.

She'd left gifts, tried to be the best employee, the most honest artist, the smallest interruption to anyone's day. It seemed this old gal simply wanted her company. The idea that she didn't have to do anything to earn kindness made her sigh. She pushed the last bit of breath out of her body until she coughed. A counselor had once told her some people never stirred their air. Old people. Worried people. Those who were afraid. The bottom of their lungs harbored the same stale molecules for years. How long had it been for her? Was she still carrying the air she'd shared with Joe Dean? She forced out another long breath. Cool air returned in gasps, like a drowning victim breaking above the surface.

A counselor had once told her some people never stirred their air. Old people. Worried people. Those who were afraid. The bottom of their lungs harbored the same stale molecules for years. How long had it been for her?

When she opened her eyes, Hazel was leaning close to the glass, watching outside. Tally studied the woman's time-worn face, not for structure or shape, but awash in humility. When she'd first entered the room, Hazel Lee had appeared old and cranky.

The same wrinkles were there, but being this near and looking this closely, she saw the creases curved above the mouth. The features weren't sharp—only the nose. Her cheeks carried a bit of padding. The eyes had always been alert, but now they appeared to know a mystery. Tally stared.

This woman had a story, but it seemed to lie far below the skin and change by the moment. Perhaps it would take a lifetime of studying her face to truly understand what she'd been through. Maybe that was the same for any face?

Tally looked at her own reflection again. Perhaps she'd been wrong,

thinking she captured truth in quick glances. Her portraits may only have been moments of truth. She'd been painting hunches, partial judgments, maybe even her own fears.

"Lookit!" Hazel grabbed Tally's hand.

A blob of mud oozed next to the window. The rain pelted it, droplets rebounding off the ground. The mud-blob stopped. It grew an eye. Slick gray caliche ran in rivulets from the mound until it took the shape of a toad.

"Ha!" Hazel wore a hyena-grin. "That's what comes from muck. Life! Warts 'n' all."

Tally let out another long breath.

They spent the afternoon talking, sometimes hand in hand, gazing at the storm, looking for more miracles, watching the toad and the world be washed clean again.

By the time Hazel Lee moved to her wheel chair, two more toads had appeared. "Okay, push me to the cafeteria," she told Tally. "Then come back tomorrow and paint my picture. But gimme a soft smile. And make me look wise like I know ever'thing about life."

"A portrait of hope?" Tally said as she pushed her down the hallway.

"Hope? You're gonna make me look twenty-one again? Now that's hope."

On the way home, Tally stopped at Craft Angel to pick up art supplies. Splashing through the parking lot back to her car, she paused, tilted her head back and let the rain tap her face, baptizing it like—

Beep, beep! A Toyota honked, wanting the parking spot where she stood. She laughed. Enlightenment wasn't always a glorious moment shared by everyone.

Later that night, she sat at her desk, the downpour rapping the window, inviting her back into its dance. She weighed the consequences of the message on her computer screen:

Are you sure you want to delete your blog account: *I Stare At People?*

The blog was beginning to feel like an old photo album—showcasing the experiences she'd already gone through, especially since life was unfurling again. And still, those two warring emotions waited for her: love and fear. She knew which one she wanted to make a habit of this time. To do that, she'd have to let love in—even for the toad in herself—and pass it on, like a channel moving water from the source to places of need.

According to Hazel Lee, the world needed more sources of inspiration. "You know," the old gal had said, "showing the beauty *left* in a person is also painting the truth."

"I suppose—maybe." Tally unconsciously tongued her fake tooth.

Hazel had watched her, a crone-smile growing across the wrinkled face. "I'm telling you, hon, *that's* the difference between staring and seeing."

Tally clicked "Keep the Blog."

She'd change the blog-title later. For now, a push of a button shut down the computer. She'd have time before dinner to clean brushes. And then to add yellow paint back to her palette.

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