

Lavender, Violet, Indigo

When reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* once for an English class, I came by a quote Oscar Wilde wrote in a letter to his readers. He stated that, “All art is quite useless.” I thought so too. Personally, I took art to get an easy hundred for my GPA. I could draw a little, if doodling eyes and flowers on my notes counted, so I figured, *how hard could it be?*

The first day of class we were given sketchbooks. With only five tables for four people each, six of us were stranded on the floor, unless we squeezed in like sardines. But artists like their space, so the floor kids became a permanent feature. Mrs. Bell said she’d speak to the janitors about getting a couple desks to make up for it...

Disclaimer, they never found any.

Our first assignment seemed simple enough.

“You’re used to being... rigid.” Mrs. Bell squeezed her fist and held them out to the air like she was in a gospel church praising the Lord. “The rules of your classes have restricted your creativity!”

The class was silent. A couple of the floor kids started to pick at their shoes, untying and retying their laces.

“I want to change that!” she declared with a smile that stretched widely across her wrinkled cheeks. “Today is about loosening your hand and your mind. I want you to draw something, anything you want but you can’t lift your hand from the paper! Get used to figuring out new ways to craft your art.”

In the centre of each round table there were two pots, one for pens and one for pencils. I took a blue Bic and opened the sketchbook. The simplest thing for me to do was scribble circles

on circles on circles until, at some point in the ten minutes I'd been scribbling, they turned into furious tornados.

I felt a small hand on my shoulder, Mrs. Bell's. Her hand was warm; I envied her for that because the lack of heating in the school had left my nails blue and my teeth chattering.

“You lifted the pen!”

I turned to meet her eyes. She wore a bright smile, one that stretched across her face, and I couldn't see anything ingenuine about it, so I gave her a small one back.

“Well, I'm finished.”

I wasn't the only person who'd lifted their hands off the paper. It was silly that she'd fixate on me.

“Art never finishes! As long as you have a medium to work on, you are only held back by your own imagination and motivation.”

“But I finished the assignment...”

“Ah! Yes. Yes, you did!”

She stumbled away, chattering on about “art this!” and “art that!” With no further directions, I spent the rest of class finishing the science lab I forgot about.

The days that followed this one were very similar. She gave a simple prompt that took me no longer than ten minutes, and I used the rest of my time as a free period. I found myself enjoying the class, and, well, so did my gradebook. There was no homework in the class and so it honestly became my cool off period, one where I could doodle without getting in trouble, or catch up on the work that had been weighing me down like a ton of bricks.

“I want you all to try a new medium! We have so much access to materials here and it’s a waste to not use them all. So go, be free, let art pour from you like... like...”

“Lemonade from a jug?” someone offered.

“Yes! Exactly! Like lemonade from a jug.”

Whatever she was taking, I needed. Mrs. Bell had an energy that did not diminish, even when her brat students (and yes, I’m included in that description) mocked her insane positivity and philosophy.

A new medium? A pencil? A pencil... It was a harmless pencil! Reaching for it though, I felt a presence that prickled over my arms and my neck. I looked up and met the bright eyes of Mrs Bell. She was watching... waiting... smiling? I felt like I was in this horror movie where the adorable little girl with pigtails stares, smiles, and shakes her round little head as a warning. The main difference was I didn’t think she’d teleport in front of me and stab me with a knife she’d been hiding behind her back. Still, it would be a bad idea to invite the wrath of the bubbly woman in pigtails. There were crayons, pastels, coloured pencils, but I was still seeing smiles and knives, so I looked for something else. Instead, I ended up with paintbrushes and watercolours.

“Wonderful choice!” Mrs. Bell had appeared behind me, patting my back in encouragement. I couldn’t help but jump a little.

Mrs. Bell brought over a water cup and a roll of 2-ply paper towels. One alone would’ve disintegrated under a wet brush.

“What inspires you all? What motivates you? I want to see more of that,” she directed this at one of the floor kids who’d decided to “doodle” maths equations. He argued that he was motivated, motivated by the very real, very scary maths test he had coming up.

What inspired me? A grade...

I looked at the colour palette. There was what had been a bright yellow now stained in the middle with orange and a blue that appeared to be well loved, so almost completely empty. There were the colours that had been hated and avoided (black, green, and the sickly orange that looked like a cross between diarrhoea brown and a clementine), and my favourite, used but not overly so, purple.

I took a brush and dunked it in the water. It was one with thin bristles that I twisted to make the size of my trusty 0.7 Bic. I let the beads of water drip from the brush onto the purple, bringing it from a dry dull state to bright and usable, then dipped the brush in. The last time I’d actually painted was in fifth grade when the teacher somehow still let us use our fingers in the acrylics.

How, I thought, *do you hold a paintbrush?* I believe strongly in the fact that there are stupid questions to ask, no matter what a teacher tries to have you believe. Rather than ask Mrs. Bell, I figured I’d just hold it like a pen. How different could it be?

I quickly learned that with painting, you couldn’t just scribble and hope for the best, you had to plan. I hadn’t really considered that though when I picked the purple. My first stroke was random, a line across the middle, so faint that when I leaned back it just looked like the paper was wet.

“Hm...”

I dipped and let the brush glide over the wet spot again, and while the purple became more prominent than it had been, it was still faint. I repeated this action until I finally saw the colour come to life. But the centre of the paper ripped from being soaked.

“Crap.”

I flipped the page to a clean one, but the water had seeped through. Ignoring the issue, I flipped the book over and went from the back where the water hadn't gone to.

“Try using less water,” Mrs. Bell said.

How long has she been there for?

“I suggest sketching something out first before painting. Lightly though!”

Back to pencils, I guess.

I did not get to do homework. After scrolling for what felt like hours, truly only about forty minutes, I settled for something I found on Pinterest: a moth. But then there was the buzz (our school were against the classic bell sound), and I hadn't even laid out a sketch. I would have to wait until the next day to finish it.

“Colour, or lack thereof, is symbolic in art. What do you think of when you see a black and white? What do you feel when you see a bright painting? I want you all to think about this today when you paint. I want to know what emotion you were feeling when you create your piece! Enlighten me!”

She was okay with me continuing with what I had done yesterday. We weren't *really* an assignment-by-assignment based class, more of a "fill your page with wonder!" and whatever she yapped on about in class.

I thought a lot about the colour purple. My first room was lavender, my favourite shirt a similar shade, and my favourite perfume bottle plum-like in colour. I didn't really feel much else about it. It was just... pretty.

I lightly sketched out the moth. For once I wasn't worried about getting points deducted for drawing something on my paper because it was in fact supposed to be there. Mrs. Bell put out all my materials for me, so right after finishing my drawing I grabbed a brush and started. After soaking the purple, I dried the brush and dipped it back into the paint. Focusing on the wings, I used soft strokes. I didn't feel much emotionally, just a motivation to get the assignment done. Once I got a good base layer down, I stared at the palette again. I didn't want to use one of the contaminated colours, I was stuck with purple, but a plain purple painting seemed boring.

How do I fix this?

I looked back and forth from my seat and the supply cupboard. I didn't want to move, but I figured there would be more colours there. Before I could move though, Mrs Bell's soft hand was on my shoulder, but I didn't jump; at some point I'd gotten over the horror story nightmares.

"A tip for you sweetheart, try using different amounts of water. More water dilutes the colour, less makes it the pretty bright one you have right now."

So, I did what she'd said. In the spaces where I hadn't put any purple yet, I put the diluted version there. I tried a red, so watered down that as the paint bled into the page, into the purple, it looked like the soft pink of the hydrangeas Mum planted (and killed) when I was younger. Alas,

once again, by the time I had gotten into the groove of painting, the school speakers buzzed, and I hadn't done any homework.

I thought about my painting all day. I thought about the purples I'd made, ways I could improve the painting, and ways I could add new mediums. I doodle moths on my maths worksheet, my new Biology lab, in my English journal, on a desk (that I erased soon after because I am absolutely not a vandal), and, at some point when I'd run out of canvases, on my hand. I was so ready to finish it.

When I got to class the next day, however, our sketchbooks were locked in Mrs. Bell's cabinet, and she wasn't there to unlock it. The janitors were conveniently cleaning the bathrooms (I think for the first time this week) and the substitute told us to make it a study period because he had no lesson plan for us. No one objected. I took out some work to do but rather than be productive like I had for so long in this class, I doodled more moths.

The following days blurred. She was out sick still. Some sort of flu had been going around the school, and she fell victim to it. The cabinet remained locked, and I had to get over not being able to paint. Unfortunately, I couldn't seem to stop thinking about my moth though. My maths teacher was particularly frustrated with me, taking off point after point, assignment after assignment. Normally I would have been motivated to get those points back, normally I would just stop the drawing, but not this time. Mum was sick of seeing my hands covered in blue ink, but she didn't care enough to scold me about it. I was sick of Mrs. Bell not being there. The sub was getting on my nerves too; he chewed loudly, and we weren't allowed to listen to music in classes anymore, not since some idiot used his phone to record a teacher scolding a class.

When I say I felt overwhelmed with joy when Mrs. Bell, pigtails and smiles, was waiting for us the next week, our sketchbooks in hand, I mean I almost ran and hugged her. My hands shook with excitement as I grabbed the book from her, beaming. I rushed to my seat, determined to finish before the buzz, and it was like she knew I'd found a new passion for painting because all my materials were there for me again.

The paint seemed to pour from me, not from the brush. The moth looked less like an inanimate scribble and more like the idea I had pictured when I saw the reference photo. I took a fine sharpie adding detailed patterns to the wings, colouring in the stripes of the body, and adding florals into the background. By the time the period was over I was finished. I wanted my moth to fly off the paper and let the sun glimmer off its purple wings. I wanted to make something new. I didn't want to do the biology write up that I forgot about.

"This is beautiful!" Mrs. Bell beamed.

I smiled back.

After a while, I went back to using my Bic pen and yes, I did make up those points in maths. My moth didn't make me change my opinion on that Oscar Wilde quote. I did... No, I do still think art is quite useless. Art is ink, it's paint, it's collages and music and theatre. They aren't useful to me, but they do make me happy. They make me feel and smile and occasionally infuriate my maths teacher. Art is useless but I love it nonetheless.