MY MURAL

Sarah I-Xin Tan

“Shea, put that sketchbook away!” Mum’s voice is a Venus flytrap; patient, but deadly. I jerk up. Three reproving sets of eyes glare over my Domino’s pizza.

“Don’t you ever stop drawing?” Uncle Koa belches a laugh.

“She doesn’t,” smirks Hemi. “She draws on the bus, at lunch, in class…”

“…but not when we have guests over. Shea, *put it away.*”

Locking eyes with her, I lift my sketchpad from the table and onto my lap– but it stays resolutely open. Mum sighs. “Hemi, tell your uncle about the shop.”

“Aw yeah, we’re doing good,” Hemi drawls, tossing his car-greased hair in that cocky way he’s got. “Got a big job yesterday.”

“How big?”

Hemi flashes seven fingers ten times. Koa whistles and slaps him hard enough to break a rib.

“We’ve got a working kid in the family!” Mum teases proudly. I close my eyes and press my lips together, desperately sealing all exits before my annoyance can spill out. I already know what’s coming next.

“What? Shea, don’t you have a gig yet?”

The table goes tombstone quiet. I shake my head, hiding behind the shelter of my eyelids; but Koa’s obnoxious laugh pierces right through. “Come on Shea, you’re letting your brother get ahead of you!”

Then I'm walking away; anywhere that laugh can't get at me. Mum barks my name. She wants me to go back to that torture chair and let them keep shooting at me, but I've received enough bullets for tonight.

Slamming my door behind me, I listen to bits of the wall crumble. There's a dry orange blob of paint on the ceiling, fading germ-yellow around the edges from my last fight with Mum– I never got it cleaned up. Something crunches beneath my feet. Reaching down, my hand sifts through a litter of half-finished paintings before fishing out the crumpled drawing. It's nothing much; just a faded crayola picture of a girl and old man, cheesy smiles smeared over their faces. Staring at it makes the bullet wounds sting; but I smooth it out on my desk anyway.

Fetching a brush and paints from opposite sides of the room, I start painting. Blood oozes out of my wounds, through the brush and onto the paper, pulsing in a whirl of colour. When I finally stop, two iridescent eyes stare out of the page. A girl's face, my face, looms up in the background– but it's not the me I see in the mirror. It's the girl from the crayola drawing, bright and oozing hope. My cheeks grow hot. It's not ugly– it's real.

So I slam the book shut.

Next morning, I'm stuck in Mr. Lawrence's English class, staring at a blank worksheet with 'WHO ARE *YOU*?' stretched in hideously boring font at the top. Everyone else is scribbling away. I can just imagine Hemi, seething about how stupid this is– which is exactly why I've got to do it.

Who am I? *Shea Raki, sister of the new Welly Motors co-manager*. I make a face. There's no way that'll fit a whole page. Sifting through the papers, I catch sight of my sketchbook, expertly hidden beneath two worksheets. I rifle through its pages, looking for something, anything, any sort of inspiration. My fingers halt at the last page. The eyes from last night stare up at me. For a moment, the colours swallow me whole. Then a shadow falls over them, and Mr Lawrence is by my desk. "What do we have here?" His eyebrows shoot up. He takes my sketchpad; I hate the way teachers grab everything without asking, but apprehended criminals can't indulge in indignation. This is the third time I've been caught with my pad in class, and the last thing I need is another call back home…

“Interesting perspective,” Mr Lawrence smiles, nodding. I blink. “Shea, can you hang back after class for five minutes?” I don’t have a choice. He doesn’t seem angry, but teachers are human volcanoes: They seem totally fine until they blow their tops off.

When the bell rings, I fight my way through the crowd and up to his desk. Mr Lawrence is perched casually on the edge of his table: a new move. Most teachers glare over their desktop like they’re visiting a jail convict. “Good to see you, Shea.” He holds out my sketchpad. “How did you make this?”

What does he want me to say, with my toes? “Two brushes, five colours. Can I just have my sketchpad back?”

“Intriguing…” he mutters, still eyeballing my work like Pythagoras contemplating his first triangle. “Shea, this is going to sound sudden, but… what would you think of painting a mural?”

My jaw hits the floor. I know what a mural is. It’s a huge painting. It’s on a wall– and it’s on my bucket list. “How… How could I paint a mural?”

“I received an offer from a construction company. They want to paint one close to the skateboard park. I may be an English teacher,” he continues, catching my confusion, “but I’m also an artist. Unfortunately, Term 3 internals are killing me– so I could use some help. All you need to do is replicate that painting in your notebook. You’d get paid.”

“*Paid?*” There’s no question anymore. I’m shaking his hand before he even reaches out.

7:00AM, Saturday morning. We’re in the skate-park. Mr Lawrence wears paint-splattered overalls that go terribly with his teacher’s haircut. One look at the wall, and my stomach dissolves into jelly.

It’s huge. Forget canvas paintings, this is like blowing an iPhone into an iMax cinema: Everyone’ll see the cracks. Suddenly, Mr. Lawrence is right beside me. “Hey, don’t think about anyone watching. This is your space.” He hands me the paints. “Make it yours.”

The wind flutters over my cheeks. It spreads through my soul, right down to my fingertips until everything is light as a feather… and suddenly, I'm painting. The first colours gleam bright against the granite– a smile breaking through grey clouds.

Mr. Lawrence stretches out on a bench and frowns at his sleek teacher's laptop. At least a thousand buzzers tumble out of his inbox; it sounds like he's getting buried alive.

"So, what made you become an English teacher? If you used to be an artist?"

"You make it sound like they're incompatible," he laughs, pushing his computer aside. "They're not very different jobs, really. They're both the study of language."

"Art isn't a language."

"Oh?" He leans forward. "You carry that sketchpad around every day. Why's drawing so special to you?"

"It's the only place I can say what I like… oh, shut up," I groan, seeing the smile spreading over his face. "You didn't hear anything."

The painting blossoms rapidly over the wall; a flower blooming beneath my hand. "You're a natural," Mr Lawrence eventually comments. "What are your plans after college?"

"I'm going to paint. All day, every day."

"What do your parents think of that?"

"It's only Mum and Hemi. And, uh…" I scrunch my face up and quote, "'*Name one artist who became rich or famous before they died.'*" Mr Lawrence laughs out loud.

“Some people just don’t see things the way we do,” he sighs. “That’s one of the things I love most about your drawing: those eyes. It’s the way we see things that shapes who we are, isn’t it?”

I shake my head. “You may be an artist, but you’re definitely still an English teacher.”

By the time I finish the mural, a pink sunset is leaking over the sky. I step back to admire it: The human mural set against the natural one. My right arm feels like a strained sausage dangling from my shoulder socket, and I’m so hungry I think I might faint. But my gaze feasts on the painting; the colours, the girl, the eyes… Mr Lawrence’s words turn over in my mind. ‘*It’s the way we see things that shapes who we are.’* I sling my backpack off my shoulder, and extract my unfinished English homework from its binder.

‘*WHO ARE YOU?*’

Pulling out a pencil, I draw a single object: An eye.

A small crowd’s begun to gather, gawking at my mural. A cacophony of clicks and flashes fills the air; the symphony of admiration. But my eyes aren’t fixed on the photo-snappers. Slowly, I stroll over to the first two onlookers. Hemi’s hair is thick with oil and his shorts are a work of art in themselves, but he squints down at me just the same.

“You missed dishes today,” he says. I punch his shoulder and he knuckles my head, laughing.

“Looks good, Shea.”

“You did this?” Mum tries to sound brisk, but her eyes can’t leave the mural. A grin breaks over my face and I wave a hundred-dollar bill– my first wages– in the air.

“You’ve got a working kid in the family!”