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# The Portrait of Grandmother Lorelei

by Meg Gillogly

Connie paced around her studio, setting up her easel and hiding abstract paintings, boxes of odds and ends, and containers of paint more vibrant than anything found in the wild. Grandmother Lorelei was coming to visit, and Connie was less than thrilled. She wasn't family—Connie had heard about Grandmother Lorelei from her best friend, Rosie. Rosie was Grandmother Lorelei's granddaughter, and although the grandmother and granddaughter were family they certainly weren't friends. This was the first time Connie was meeting Grandmother Lorelei and after hearing the stories Rosie had to tell about her, Connie was not excited.

Grandmother Lorelei didn't know that Connie painted only abstract portraits. A quick Google search would have pulled up images of Connie next to paintings even she didn't understand the meaning of, and she was their creator. Thankfully, Grandmother Lorelei didn't own a computer, a detail that would make Rosie's plan much easier to execute.

When Rosie had first approached Connie with Mission Lorelei, Connie flat out refused.

"I'm not going to participate in some twisted plan of yours, Rosie!"

"Come on Connie, help a friend out. Grandmother is loaded, and I know you need the money. Waitressing at night isn't going to help you keep your studio, you need something—or someone—to help you out." Rosie was right; there was no way Connie was going to be able to keep her studio and her apartment on her waitressing salary. As much as painting was a priority, sleeping in a bed was even more so, and it was only a matter of weeks before she was kicked out of her precious workspace. The facts were indisputable, and with one sad glance around the studio Connie had agreed to the plan.

It was actually Connie's studio that made the plan perfect. Grandmother Lorelei would only get her portrait done by a *real* artist, and the studio made Connie look credible. A few white sheets draped over pending work, a few more award winning pieces in the back storage closet, and Connie finished the transformation. Precisely three sharp knocks sliced through the air. It was time.

When Connie opened the door, she expected a soft, cool handshake from the shrunken woman standing before her. Instead Grand-

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mother Lorelei barreled right past Connie and into the studio, more like a dog hot on the trail than an old woman looking to get her portrait painted. Her sharp eyes processed the paint splatters on the table, the skylights in the ceiling, and the dark brown sofa in the middle of the room. Connie was shocked, but she was able to push the feeling down and replace it with a cool politeness that she hoped mirrored the old woman's.

"Right, let's get started. My name is Mrs. Woodsen, which you knew. I am here to have my portrait painted by a professional. Are you a professional?"

"Of course—I mean, yes, yes I am." The plan, thought Connie. Think of Rosie's plan.

"Well if you are a professional then you must have a place for me to pose. Tell me dear, where is my spot?"

"I-I thought you could sit on the couch."

"Is this how you treat all your guests, dear? By placing them on dirty couches?"

Connie was horrified at the blatant insults being thrown at her beloved couch. She had found it on the side of the road, forlorn and abandoned by a previous owner who had not dared to see its true value. She and Rosie had taken it to the studio and steamed it themselves. Connie used it for everything: for long nights spent painting her latest inspiration, for hurried dinners before her evening shift at the local restaurant, and for daydreams about her future as an artist in some far off city, perhaps Paris? The couch was special, the couch was good, and the couch did not deserve to be insulted.

Connie remembered an old armchair hidden away in the back of the closet, and figured that using it was better than listening to Grandmother Lorelei complain for the next few hours. It was the ugliest thing she had ever laid eyes on, from its gaudy feet and arms to its slightly faded 90's attempt at ornamental pattern upholstery. Thankfully Connie hadn't converted it into her next project, and it lay ugly and intact in the back of the storage closet.

"Wait right here... Mrs. Woodsen. I can get you another chair." Connie went to the back room.

Grandmother Lorelei stood still, a look of slight disgust perched upon her face. Grandmother Lorelei was many things: the widow of a successful lawyer, the mother of one doctor and one wedding planner, and the owner of enough stock to finance an overpriced apartment in the nicest part of the city. She was unofficial queen of the city's social circle, and she made decisions on matters as important as who was decidedly "in" and who was most definitely

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“out.” She did not associate with dirt, had a tense relationship with anyone below the upper middle class, and struggled to see the value in anything used. She would have never graced Connie with her presence if it weren’t for her granddaughter. Rosie was Grandmother Lorelei’s weakness, and it was a weakness the young girl had finally decided to exploit.

Connie burst out of the back room, pulling the chair behind her. “Here. Is. The. Chair.” She panted.

“I guess that will do, won’t it dear?”

“I don’t know, will it?” Connie muttered.

“What was that dear?”

“I said would you like to get started?” The two took their positions, Connie at her easel and Grandmother Lorelei on the chair. And the day passed.

The thing about Grandmother Lorelei was she was especially good at picking favorites. This time, it was Connie who was privilege to her favor.

“Tell me dear, how is my Rosie doing?” she would ask. And Connie would tell her about the ice cream they ate that afternoon, the boys they liked. Sometimes Connie would let a small secret slip, like that Rosie was in trouble of failing one of her classes, but Grandmother Lorelei never reacted harshly. Connie found herself not hating Grandmother Lorelei. In fact, they may have even become friendly. Not best friends, not life long confidants or laughers at the same joke, but they could hold a conversation. A pleasant conversation. It was this friendliness that made the plan so much more difficult.

By the end of her fifth visit, Grandmother Lorelei had coaxed enough secrets out of Connie to fill a small basket. Grandmother Lorelei was also more than a little impatient to see Connie’s work.

“Connie dear, when are you going to let me see this beautiful painting of yours?”

“Remember Grandmother Lorelei, Rosie wants it to be a surprise. You can see it at the gallery show. “

“Yes dear, we have to talk about this don’t we. I have decided to invite several of my society friends, not too many but there is this young woman Mindy whom you have to meet. She knows everything about art and I think she could be an asset to your budding career.

“Your... your society friends?” Connie stuttered. This was not part of the plan. Fluster Grandmother Lorelei? Yes. Humiliate her? Absolutely not.

“I don’t think so Mrs. Woodsen. Thanks for the offer though.”

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“Dear I’m not asking, I’m telling. You will show my friends your work. They will absolutely love it.”

“Mrs. Woodsen I really don’t want to—”

“If I know the details of this little arrangement correctly, Rosie is paying you for giving me the gift of my portrait. But Rosie gets her money from me. Since I am the true customer, you will do as I ask and that is final.” Connie was beginning to see why Rosie didn’t like her grandmother.

“Absolutely NOT.”

“Connie this is even more perfect, we couldn’t have planned it if we tried.”

“Rosie I don’t want a part of this.”

“Connie you have to. You promised. You need the money to keep your studio; you know you can’t keep up your work without it. You really have no other option.”

Connie was trapped between a moral dilemma and a financial hard place.

The air was crisp on the day of the art show. Connie was wearing a dress that was too tight with tights that were too sheer and a coat that was too light. She was sitting on her favorite brown couch, rolling the dilemma around in her head like a glass marble between her fingers. It was late afternoon, mere hours before the gallery showing. Connie hated the late afternoon.

There was something about the way the sun sat in the sky that perturbed her, something about the waiting—waiting for dinner, waiting for evening plans, waiting for the 3 o’ clock exhaustion to fade—that made those hours completely unappealing. She did her worst thinking during that time, and her worst paining. The portrait of Grandmother Lorelei sat before her, and it was truly a stunning piece. Horrific and cruel, but stunning none the less. Say what you want about Connie, but she was a terrific artist. Her use of color, shading and detail highlighted Grandmother Lorelei’s worst qualities. Her eyes were bird-like, her posture unnaturally erect, her nails as long as talons. And the colors—oh the colors used to describe her! Grays and blacks, deep purples and blues depicted soulless eyes and a stone cold heart. She was a statue, not Michelangelo’s David adored by all but more closely a figure from Dante’s inferno that all loved to despise. The portrait was everything Rosie had asked for, it was all of Connie’s talent summed up in one square.

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Connie hated it.

Connie sat looking at all these things, the details that worked together to compose her painting. She sat as the late afternoon passed her by, as the sun left for the night and the moon and stars came to play. Connie considered many things in these few hours—the state of her fridge (empty), the state of her cupboards (bare), the state of her bank account (dismal). With a final sigh she stood and made her way down to the gallery showing.

Grandmother Lorelei was the first person Connie saw when she arrived at the gallery that night.

“Oh darling, I’m so glad you’ve made it. The gallery is simply stunning isn’t it? Come with me. I have someone you must meet.” And so the night progressed. Connie felt like she had met everyone that was anyone from the upper crust of the city. Stuffy lawyers shook her hand with meaty fingers, critical doctors advised her on the best time to start Botox treatments (the answer varied, but each doctor assured Connie that he was best for the job). There were business owners, fashion designers, and artists—so many artists! Artists from Paris, New York, Rome. Connie had never been happier than she was in that moment, stuffing her face with little sandwiches and discussing the techniques of Picasso with an expensive glass of champagne in her hand.

Except she wasn’t happy. The painting still loomed in her mind, the dilemma of what to do, what to do, do I have time to change my mind? And where is Rosie? Grandmother Lorelei’s presence unnerved her; Rosie’s tardiness irked her until she thought she couldn’t take the waiting one second longer.

“Excuse me; can I have everyone’s attention?” Grandmother Lorelei stood at the front of the gallery beside a large white sheet.

“Hey, did I miss anything?” Rosie sidled up beside Connie with one sandwich in each hand and a third in her mouth. Connie couldn’t answer. Connie didn’t answer.

Grandmother Lorelei’s speech was long and monotonous, yet Connie wished that it would never end. However, like all good things it finally did, and Grandmother Lorelei swept the sheet off the painting with a flourish of her hand. A hush fell over the room and for a moment all was still, like how the world feels after landing underwater after a large cannon ball. Suspended, that’s how Connie felt. And then her head broke to the surface.

The room filled with the buzzing of hundreds of people as the painting was viewed, for the first time, by eyes that weren’t Connie’s. Grandmother

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Lorelei's face grew to match the horrific painting as she turned to look at it herself.

Connie didn't want to see the look of shock on Grandmother Lorelei's face; she didn't want to see color rise to her cheeks as she suppressed both embarrassment and rage. Behind her Rosie snickered, and Connie was positive she heard a congratulation or two. But Connie couldn't make herself stay, so she didn't.