

THE MEMORY OF TREES

An unnatural request.

BY LYNETTE MEJÍA

The old man held the brush above the paper, his fingers trembling as the sound of footsteps grew louder in the hallway. Around him the pale walls shivered, their pastel colours twisting and swirling together in rapid succession.

A guard entered, striding with broad, confident steps over to where the wizened figure sat in front of the easel. He glanced down at the thick, creamy paper affixed to its surface, his eyes momentarily flicking to the walls. Then he looked at the old man and sniffed, wrinkling his nose as if detecting a slightly offensive odour.

"Nothing yet, I see," he said.

"No," answered the old man.

The guard crossed his arms. "I don't understand what the problem is," he said, beginning to pace. "We explained it all to you. Anything you can visualize, anything at all, appears on the walls around you. Just paint what you see."

"Yes, I know," said the old man. He rubbed his forehead with one hand, felt one of the implants bulging slightly beneath the skin. "I tried to explain to the young man who ..." He looked up at the guard and swallowed. "... interviewed me when I arrived here. That's not how it works, you see. That was never how it worked."

The guard took a deep breath and crossed the room, settling himself upon the small, hard cot in the corner. Reaching into a pocket he pulled out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter, sighing with pleasure as he lit one and pulled the smoke into his lungs.

"You don't mind?" he asked, although the old man knew he wasn't really asking. "Synthetic, of course, but I figure you might appreciate it. A little taste of home, eh?" He smiled, tapping grey ash onto the floor. "That's how I got this assignment, you know.

It's because I like old-fashioned stuff, collecting things. Always been a hobby of mine."

He smiled again,

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although his eyes were distinctly colder now. Leaning forward, he tossed the cigarette onto the floor before grinding it under his heel.

"See, the thing is, Mr Bradstreet, you've been here a long time now. People are starting to lose patience. I'd say you need to produce something soon. Do you understand what I'm saying to you? You need to make a painting, a drawing, something."

"I can do an abstract," the old man said wearily, "but not landscapes. Not in here."

"Oh, I beg to differ," the guard said, rising. "We don't need abstracts, Mr Bradstreet. We did our research. You were quite the renowned landscape artist in your day. It's why we spent all that money to bring you back. You were nothing but a pile of bones, on the fast track to oblivion. Now you have a chance to be remembered for ever."

The artist looked down at the floor. He felt so tired.

"Cloning has its issues," the guard said, as if reading his thoughts. "Life spans are considerably shorter. If you don't give us something, we'll have to start this whole goddamned process over again, and I can promise you, the next go-round won't be nearly as pleasant as this one was."

He came closer, and the old man cringed as he leaned in.

"We got you the paints," he said in a low, snarling voice. "We got you the brushes. Do you know how hard it was figuring out the ingredients? We had to take paint samples from the few surviving fragments, do full spectral analysis, reproduce the compounds. Suffice it to say that the whole thing was very expensive."

The old man stared blankly at the wall in front of him. "I need to go outside," he said finally, turning. Around them the walls suddenly danced with colour and shadow, the images resolving themselves into a lush green landscape full of trees and flowers. Overhead the sun shone in a cloudless blue sky. Flowers nodded in a phantom breeze, while bees buzzed lazily between nodding blossoms.

The guard clapped. "There you go! That's perfect! Now just paint that!"

The old man looked up at him, his face sad and tired. "I need to go outside," he repeated. "This isn't the same, don't you see? I can't paint the memory of trees."

The guard sighed, walking slowly to the door. "We're dying, Mr Bradstreet," he said. "What's left of us is committing suicide by the thousands every day." He ran a hand through his hair. "We have the tech, you see, but we've lost the ability. Photos just aren't cutting it. We need to feel it. Can you understand that now that you've been here a while?" From his pocket he pulled a small device and pressed a button on its side. Instantly one of the walls went transparent, revealing a burned and blackened landscape populated only by sparse patches of dried, dead grasses. The old man began to weep softly.

"You see Mr Bradstreet?" the guard said as he turned the knob to go. "You are the memory of trees." ■

Lynette Mejía writes science fiction, fantasy and horror prose and poetry. Her work has been nominated for the Rhysling Award and the Million Writers Award. You can find her online at www.lynettemejia.com.