

His housemate had only one non-negotiable rule for him:

“The third floor is off-limits.”

The older, half-blind man did not further elaborate, and he often spent his days mumbling in the garden, hunched over scattered papers and worn pictures of his late wife.

Despite the pitiful man’s rule, the young man could no longer suppress his curiosity.

Traversing up the creaky, carpeted stairs—past the kitchen on the bottom floor, and past the master bedroom of the second floor—the third floor was home to jackets of dust and strewn cream sheets.

The attic—the land of locked away memories, left to rot.

Flowers of color, increasing in saturation, blossom under his finger as he trails it along forgotten articles caked with films of dust, a perennial gown of dimness swimming across his eyes. As he dawdles and explores, a glint flashes across his line of sight, slicing through the dreary bubble around him.

Under a yellowing cloth, an opulent golden frame glows in the darkness of the loft, encapsulating streaks and mottles of weathered paint colors on a vast canvas. With eyes trailing across the planes of hues and shades, a shoulder joins a smooth neck, climbing up to an angular face that stares back with beady eyes and a pronounced grimace.

The grimacing woman is decorated with an ash-gray frock, nearly blending into the shadows of the room. Her hair cascades down in streaks of sickly yellow, straws of hay against the rich gold frame.

The voids of her eyes seem to dim and brighten the longer he studies her, rooted to the spot. He reaches a finger out, the tablet of dust trapped on his fingertip smearing across her chalky jugular.

He flinches back and chokes up a gasp as the grays of dust drag across the portrait, chips of the aged paint fluttering to the floorboards after making contact with his finger. Spooked and suddenly conscious of how her beady eyes seem to darken at the action, he quickly flees the gloomy attic, sweating and profusely rubbing the dust off his finger and onto his shoulder sleeve.

The next time he works up the courage to revisit the attic, it is only a few days later.

The woman is frozen in the same state he left her in; except, no longer is her smooth neck marred by the streak of flaked-away paint. Now, she was just as when he had first found her—unblemished, with her tight grimace and soulless eyes.

His steps halt at the revelation, his mouth gaping into a small 'o'. Her eyes seemed to find him as he slowly shuffled towards her frame, and he could swear that just briefly, her grimace flickered into a smirk.

His confusion melts into awe, which quickly burns away into irritation. The longer he stares, the more he wants to ruin the portrait— an inexplicable fit of annoyance biting at his nerves. His fingers twitch as a fleeting image of clawing at the canvas flashes through his head. A satisfying echo of tearing fabric bounces around in his mind as he takes a deep breath.

He clenches his jaw and quickly rubs his hand all along the surface of the portrait, feeling the leaves of paint crumbling and shaking free to the floor from under his palms. Stepping back, he takes a deep breath and rubs his hand along a nearby cardboard box to try and brush off the remnants of paint flakes clinging to his palm.

Feeling the fog in his head clear, he bites his tongue as he realizes the box, once coated in dust, now transferred the collection of grays to his hand. His eyes shift towards the damaged painting once more, noting that the woman's face has, for the most part, chipped away, leaving only the penetrating stare of one eye.

He quickly pivots on his heel and exits the attic, rubbing his hand along the sleeve of his shirt to clean the dust off his hand.

Infuriatingly, the woman returned to her unmarked condition the next time he visited. He could feel his initial curiosity chipping away into a stone-hard resolve as he conjured up new methods to try and permanently mark the portrait.

He quickly escalated his tactics into using real paints, splattering and brushing on an array of colors, layer after layer, in an attempt to escape her tantalizing stare.

The lurid artwork he painted over her face also vanished without a trace.

His thoughts remain consumed with the woman in the portrait, and a blinding irritation—a prickly feeling that scaled his spine and clutched onto his lungs, quickly condensed into a boiling pressure that threatened to consume him whole.

He holed up inside his room for days, in part to put distance between himself and the woman and also to jot down all of his racing thoughts.

Time blurred into a reel of haze, and he felt like a walking corpse from the lack of sleep and overwhelming emotions that plagued him. His floor was littered with piles and pools of sketches and pages of unfinished rambles.

His hands grip at the roots of his hair, eyes glued to his disorderly room as his thoughts fade from a muffled silence to a cacophony of mangled syllables. Gently pounding his fists against his temples, he mutters to himself and maniacally begins to dig through his drawers, harshly throwing aside different objects that looked too foreign for him these days—shapes and colors that he found unrecognizable amidst his flurry of thoughts.

The fog in his head lifts slightly as he finally finds what his thoughts are screaming for.

His feet crumple the leaflets of paper in his path as he stumbles out of his bedroom, clambering up the stairs with glazed eyes and bated breath.

The attic is much darker than he remembered, but everything seemed unfamiliar to him these days; the edges and contrasts between objects in his world warping and blurring into undefinable blobs.

His legs seem to remember his desired destination better than his mind.

He keeps his head down as he stops a few paces away, fumbling with the object in his hand before he grins sharply as a petal of light illuminates the space around him. The flame dances from the lighter and reflects a faint orange hue onto the floorboards beneath him.

As he looks up, knuckles white from clutching the pocket lighter, his drive to set the portrait alight dwindles as he is faced with a blank canvas.

The smooth cloth seems to laugh at him, a fuzzy outline of the grimacing woman flashing across his vision and onto the naked canvas.

His breathing hitches and he feels his body grow warm with spite. He brings his hand across the clean canvas, attempting to swipe it off the wall in his fit of hysterics.

His hand brushes across the canvas, and the golden frame swings from side to side wildly due to the impact.

The lighter falls to the floor with a faint *thump*, extinguishing the faint light source.

In the gardens, the old man sighs and leans back, staring down at the photo of his late wife and a notebook of indistinguishable scribbles.

The picture of his wife stares up at him with mischievous eyes and a half smile, her yellow hair draping around her face neatly.

He shakes his head faintly before turning to look up at his house, eyes immediately flickering to the attic.

“When will you be satisfied, honey?”

*Silence.*

In the attic, the frame sways gently as it sinks into a still balance once again.

The canvas is no longer starkly blank; instead, a disheveled young man sits and peers out into the darkness of the attic, streaks of dust-colored paint curling on the shoulder of his shirt.