

## Don't Drink the Watercolors

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Blagoje Mihajlović was the best artist in town; no one could argue. Every day he'd walk down to the Danube at the edge of a certain town whose name is still very much unpronounceable to foreigners. There, with a leather bag full of materials to keep him company, he'd sit and paint for hours. But he never painted the Danube. No, it was merely inspiration...

Blagoje Mihajlović no longer painted his landscapes for anyone, much less himself. She didn't like them; they were all the same, all depressing, ergo neither did he, they depressed him as well.

She liked simple, dark paintings; "classics". In fact, it was her critique of his work in a gallery that had led them to meet. The colors were bland, but his simplicity fascinated her.

Among one of the things they disagreed upon were colors, or rather materials. He loved watercolors, you see. He liked candy wrappings and he liked the way spider webs glistened in the morning light. He liked delicate things. And he liked her, which was contradictory.

He liked the way water altered the paint into something beautiful he could manipulate, something you can't do with other materials, with other arts. Yes, music is beautiful, but a maiden's voice is forgotten as we age, and orchestras never seem to agree upon how a piece should be played. A theater play is never the same twice, even with the same actors, and books are not intended to become a feast for mold and termites in the back of a respectable study.

But art, *true* art, was made to withstand the challenges of time. You may look at a piece differently throughout your life, but it doesn't change; it's constant and stable, or so he thought.

And so, he wanted to live his life as in a painting. That, of course, was impossible, so he did the next best thing. He became an artist.

He worked hard all his life to become one, to succeed, and then she showed up. Beautiful, charming, brutally and painfully honest... She ruined his life. He knew it as well as anyone, but he didn't care. Subconsciously, he'd been waiting for her; every true artist, the great artists, had their own Jezebel or Salome, their *femme fatale*, their own downfall.

Drugs, alcohol and women. The holy trinity of sins artists had to choose from. Some found their inspiration in them. Others perished by them and others used art to escape from them. Whatever the case, they were always there, in the back of the master mind, and now he was free to choose one. Just one...

They met in a relatively conventional way. She appeared whenever she wanted and left the same way. She stayed for days at a time or disappeared for months. She only gave him reasons when she wanted to, and he only asked for excuses when he felt there should be one. ("How did you celebrate my birthday"? "How was your summer? I haven't heard from you since spring,,") Other than that, he didn't mind. He finally had something to suffer for, something to blame his sadness on,

All his life it had been the same sad ambience around him that made people stay away, or so he thought. But how could one change? The child of an honorable, well-established family should not have a worry in the world except social gatherings and small talk; everything else would be provided.

But he was different. He knew it. He could see; he was a dark child in a family of blue-eyed blond cherubs. He looked too much like his mother and not enough like their father. and his eyes, those agonizingly beautiful grey eyes, as his mother called them...

She seemed startled when she looked into them sometimes. *She*, not his mother. She sometimes looked uncomfortable, like she felt them piercing into her...

She was so unlike his mother.

She barely cooked and took him out to restaurants instead. (Still, he paid). She refused to let him paint her in watercolors, and she could go out of her way to make up an argument. If the sun came out or if it didn't, she would have surely found a way to blame it on him. He was sure it had to be a talent.

She was conceited. She could have anything she wanted, and it was her duty to let the world know, She loved attention; she craved it more than anything. She loved to be the life of the party, she like to drink and liked nothing better than a life full of excitement...Although he didn't mind it a bit; she was a fun character to be around. She had flaws. He knew. She didn't.

But she was a sight to behold. Just beautiful. Hazel eyes, chestnut silk hair, a lovely smile that was more of a smirk, and a body that would look good in anything. She spoke with confidence, defying anyone, treating everyone the same, which many frowned upon. She dressed extravagantly and had expensive tastes, which gave her a false air of glamour and superiority. She was the type of person one either loves or hates. But most of all, she was controlling. His masochistic heart jumped at the thought.

Within weeks into their relationship she had him change media and subjects completely. His watercolor Danubes and city life were replaced by oil still lifes and dark pictures of herself. And it was in such a harsh way she did it, so wonderfully masked behind a delicate façade. He couldn't stay away...But she could.

After some time away imposed by family matters and against his will, he returned to his beloved town, his Danube, his art, his love. Flowers in hand, he set out to find her. He roamed every cobblestone street with high hopes, finally feeling like the protagonist of his story,

He rounded a narrow alley, finally reaching the plaza. Under the shade of a café he found the most charming couple. Chatting affectionately and in a manner he knew too well were a beautiful smirking lady dressed in fitted clothes with strands of chestnut hair, and an elegant blue-eyed cherub that looked too much like his father. The cherub smiled and waved when he noticed him. The femme fatale seemed unfazed by the situation. If only he hadn't looked at her with those eyes, those painfully beautiful eyes.

He never knew how he did it, but he lived through the false introductions. Somehow he managed to return home. He didn't remember how, but he spent the next months of his life alone, ignoring the outside world, painting dark still lifes and portraits. His mind flooded with thoughts that had never occurred to him before. His heart couldn't make up his mind; he was finally miserable. This was when he was supposed to produce his greatest pieces. This could mean he was finally on the same level as the masters...Should he be happy?

That didn't matter anymore. He had been waiting for this all his life; there was no time to waste. He had to be better than what was in front of him. He thought about it every day, just as he thought about her. It wasn't in a resentful way; rather he thanked her more than he could

express. He couldn't believe his luck even if that masochistic heart of his still missed her. Despite this, he was dedicated to his art completely. He never saw her again in person, but she haunted him through every canvas he filled with her face of her beloved still lifes.

For months at a time, he tried to express everything he was feeling, everything he'd ever felt through his art. He experimented; he painted her with inverted colors, he drew still lifes, he painted himself in every possible way he could think of; he even attempted the forbidden and drew a beautiful sketch of his mothers. but he soon noticed a little problem; he didn't feel his work improve, nor did it get worse. He was stuck. His art was going nowhere and he himself had rarely left the house for months, in fear that should he see her, even from afar, the encounter would ruin what little progress he had made in his work.

Just when he was beginning to wonder if that was really such a good idea, he received another flash of inspiration in the form of a real tragedy.

You see, Blagoje had the talent to paint and draw, yes, but he also had another one, one that might be a gift or a curse, depending on the situation. He could shut himself out of the world as easily and effectively as he had literally been doing in his house for months. He'd had many years of practice during his youth, so it was no surprise he had been able to completely ignore the war. No bombs, no turmoil, no soldiers knocking on his door had been able to disrupt him or his fantasy world. Not even the recruiting letters that had been piling up, ignored, in a corner could distract him from his work.

On one particular evening, however, as he was forced to leave his shelter for lack of provisions, he was finally brought back to reality. She was gone. The country, his beloved

country, had successfully been cleansed of people like her. This was a success, the first in Europe to be capable of such a feat!

...She was gone. He kept repeating it over and over in his head. *She was gone*. He mysteriously made it back home once again. The next few days were spent in bed, his mind running faster than he could register. *She was gone...Gone. **She was dead, damn it!***

Once his mind had completely processed it, he went back to work. Now there really was no time to waste. He tried; he really did try to make the best piece he could ever come up with. But once again, he realized there was something missing. The more he thought about it, the more he convinced himself that he knew exactly what it was. Nothing an artist's trinity couldn't fix. He'd already chosen the most appealing and it was beginning to fail him; now all he needed to do was move on to the next one.

During the next period of his life, he drank. Every night he mixed his liquor with colors, memories and dreams. Every night as he was mixing, he wondered to himself why he hadn't done this before, only to be reminded in the morning, when every little thing bothered him to no end. Still, he didn't regret his actions; they cleared his mind, allowed him to think freely and, sure enough, helped him forget. And it was precisely during one of these moments that he had an epiphany; why not go back to watercolors? She was gone anyway.

And with this, he began again, slowly, as a beginner. He found that he had forgotten how to work with them. Had he really been the one that had filled page after page with that thin, fragile color? How do you get the shadows right...?

Hell, how do you “paint” without dissolving the paper?! She had corrupted him by forcing him to paint her and her lousy fruits, flowers and pottery with oil for so long... He couldn't even hold up a brush properly...!

...Or maybe he was just drunk.

Yes, that must have been it, since he woke up sprawled out on the floor, face full of colors and a canvas with what had started off as a vase and progressed to a colorful mess. Without the will or strength to do anything, he slept through the day.

As weeks passed, his work began to develop; his dark painting gradually switched to lighter colors and eventually led to his beloved watercolors. All this progress, all he'd been through to get to where he was and hopefully move forward was only disrupted by another tragedy, one maybe even worse than all others, a real catastrophe; his fantasy world was being invaded.

It was decided that he had ignored the war long enough. Soldier after soldier had gone to his humble abode to kindly request he do what was expected of him for once and serve his country, but he turned them all down.

“I've done my part for this country,” he'd reply, “and am doing it still.”

He was a child of the first war; he knew those who had suffered just as much as any soldier sent to the frontlines. If anyone was a living example, it was he.

He was also sure it was his father's good name that had allowed him to roam about freely as he had for so long, but the time came when even that wasn't enough to keep the military at bay. So, after one too many harassments, family reproaches and the sad realization that his art hadn't

even reached the point where it was before *she* showed up, he decided that all he needed was a rest from everything.

He took a day off just to think. He didn't do anything else except meditate, relive some memories, try to forget others...he was sadly able to summarize his life in just one day...He decided he was tired of how he was living, and he made a decision.

So one day he went to the Danube at midmorning, set himself down as usual and went to work. With his beloved watercolors, for the first time in months, he painted what he saw, how he saw the Danube, one last time.

The war was in full range, the soldiers had bothered him enough already, and he'd made a decision. This would be the last time he'd see his beloved *Danube*.

*That night was the last drop, and the vase spilled the water...*

A knock resounded through the small house on a crisp spring evening. The group of soldiers entered easily through the unlocked doors and into the living room of the old building.

Music from an old phonograph filled the air, which had the pleasant scent of a woman's perfume. A lighted fireplace and candles made it even more inviting, along with an opened bottle of wine and a plate of bread and cheese on a table, accompanied by the portrait of a beautiful young woman.

A note under the wine read:

*"Please pardon my absence, gentlemen, but I'm afraid I've more pressing matters to tend to at the moment. I know the reason for your sudden visit, but as I've explained on previous*



*occasions, I've already done more for my country than it has done for me in the past, and so I have no interest in participating in your slaughterhouse wars anywhere in the near future.*

*However, since I don't want to be a further bother to you, and to atone for not being able to serve you, please help yourselves to the food and drink your stress away for the night.*

*God knows you'll need it.*

### B. Mihajlović

Their first reaction to this insolent act was to search the house, the officer's exasperated cries mixing with the soft background music. It didn't take too long to find him, just a few steps from the living room in his bedroom.

He lay fully dressed on the floor, hair and the top buttons of his shirt undone, his left hand grasping the bed sheets loosely. Grey eyes, agonizingly beautiful grey eyes stared off into space through half opened lids, and his parted lips seemed to be telling a secret. From them flowed a thin strand of red liquid, followed by shades of blues, purples, greens...