

The Face Painter

Tremore never paints the finest faces, but each week he always paints some, and these they load up in steam wagons and carry around to the hospitals. It's a demanding job, not the kind he pictured himself taking up as an artist, but it does a good to the world. With all the old machines broken down, it is good of him to provide his labor in maintaining the slim surplus.

A moral qualm about it keeps him up at night. He knows his work is not top quality. Better to have a baby with an amateur face than none at all, right? This is what he hopes the parents say to the wagon-men when they bring in the selections.

It is rare to meet one of his own creations, but he has suffered such an encounter on occasion. It takes a second look to recognize them, though he is never mistaken. He does not go up to them, talk to them; they are twenty or fifty years younger than him at best, and it would make an odd conversation. When he watches them he feels a peculiar sense of culpability, like watching a dish towel you'd gifted a friend being used to wipe up spittle. The people, his creations, they always notice this look in his eyes. They stare at him, their lopsided, stretched faces unmoving, taken aback. Then Tremore parts ways with the strangers, but every time he knows he has revealed himself.

He labors over the faces most hours of the day. His apartment is barren and musty, dappled with paint smears and smelling of mineral spirits. He stations a tall mirror next to his easel where he checks his own features for the placement of highlights and creases. Painting a face is a balancing act: this eye gets smaller, that lid needs to be taken down, that eyebrow needs to be lowered, and now that widow's peak seems too high. His work has gotten better with years of practice, but it will never be photorealistic. Photorealism is not expected in his line of work.

Some face painters with especially distinct styles make it big. They paint faces with bold lines or rosy cheeks or a specific Nordic glint in the eyes. These famous painters are the only ones the industry talks about, the only ones the tabloids get a hold of. The nameless, no-talent face painters like Tremore produce work all similar and dull in quality. There is a supply in demand, though, and the nameless do their jobs well enough. The children their uneven faces adorn blend into the adult world without trouble.

There are some tricks to the discipline. Nameless painters like Tremore learn the rules and never break them; to do so would be a cruelty to the clients. The nameless paint a variety of features and skin tones, because it is essential to produce at least a dozen different-looking masks in a week to give parents a semblance of choice. It is expected, though, to stray close to one's own features when a lack of skill presents itself. One is never to "invent features," never to paint a nose no human has ever worn. The painter's own face is referenced in all steps of the process. Of course the painter learns proportion and studies a multitude of examples, but for a low-talent like Tremore, one's own face is the only trustworthy library. It is a guaranteed human example, a free copy of the natural original the painters seek to emulate. To reference another artist's work is to stray dangerously from the source material. If you keep copying and copying, say the experts, one day all the faces will end up like old Egyptian cartoons.

Only one artist is known to make the best, most photorealistic faces. It is said that his faces cannot be distinguished from natural ones. He takes rich commissions, never giving to ordinary hospitals. Still, he is beloved, and they call him Tintofacto. Tremore has never met him, and of course is dissuaded from using his art as reference. He doesn't want to end up with Egyptian cartoons, no matter how disproportionate and uninspired his own sad faces look.

At the end of this month there quickly approaches the annual Face Painter's Convention, which Tremore always attends with his friend Garavach. Garavach lives down in the Back Bay and makes twice as many faces as Tremore does in a week, though his apartment is always filled with smog and sea-smell. Garavach has a wife who works in travel management for a big meat cartel, so he can devote more time to painting without worry for finances. Tremore barely makes enough to get by in his old apartment. He would live completely alone if not Garavach's visits, and for the old boyfriends who stop by to bring him lunch and compliment his work, showing off their wedding rings.

At the Face Painter's Convention, the low-talent nameless painters and the stars and the fans all converge. The scientists are there, too, but Tremore and Garavach agree that the scientists aren't all that interesting. They stand around in a big room with poster-boards announcing things like, "Cure for infant facial loss may be possible with new epigenetic serum," or "Infants with facial loss found at high risk for bullying and juvenile justice involvement." Tremore and Garavach never spend much time in the science room, instead wandering between the workshops, the interviews, and the shows from the big stars.

The workshops are informative, sometimes. An artisan will present a technique for skin texturing, and Tremore will incorporate it into his own work. The interviews are usually useless, if not entertaining, because the advice about freedom and creative flow does not apply to Tremore and Garavach in their old age and no-talent positions. The shows always entice them, though they are of little working value, because the two old men would never think to imitate the paint-splattered, pattern-gilded faces hung proudly on the walls.

This year Tremore and Garavach stand in the hall looking over the program booklet, their lanyards slung lazily around their thick necks.

“There’s bone structurin’ at three,” mutters Garavach. “We could go see that. Hasn’t been a workshop on bones in a damn minute.”

“I wanted to see the short film at three,” says Tremore.

Garavach shrugs. “Fine with me. What about this show at six tonight...”

They both lean into the program in disbelief.

“Holy,” says Garavach, “they really got a Tintofacto show here? I thought he was too stuck up.”

“It’s right here on the page,” Tremore gapes.

After the short film at three, which goes slowly and makes Tremore melancholy, the two friends make their way to the larger conference rooms. The shows from the big stars always take up the fancy, well-lit business halls while the films and workshops huddle in the forgotten, 20-person occupancy closet-rooms. The men approach the banner announcing the Tintofacto show, peering inside at the endless displays of wondrous faces.

They walk through the rows, slowly dragging their eyes over each perfect painting. It would unsettle them, had they not already been in the profession. Garavach comments on the eerie realism, makes some off-color joke about slicing real human faces and passing them off as art. Tremore dismisses him with a wave of his hand; it is possible, if you look close, to see the sheen of varnish on the finished faces. Still, he would never be able to point them out in a crowd of naturals.

In his periphery Tremore spots a tall man in a gaudy trench coat, the kind only an artist could wear to his own show. The man is talking coolly with a pair of stout women whose clean hands and expensive bracelets indicate their likely position as clients.

“You think that’s him?” Tremore asks Garavach, pointing to the tall man.

Garavach shrugs. "You could ask."

Before Tremore can move to approach, the man finishes his conversation and starts down the room in Tremore's direction. For a brief moment they make eye contact. A peculiar look of recognition passes over Tintofacto's face, an unmissable pride and guilt and slight sense of nausea. Like watching a dish towel you'd gifted a friend being used to mop up spittle.

Then they part ways, and Tremore continues through the convention with his friend, but he knows what he saw. He will need to take down the mirror in his studio.