

When I Paint My Masterpiece

Alexander Varner

I sit at my desk with a computer monitor and a keyboard as my tools. This is the simple setting for this warm Friday night, but it is indeed a fitting one. While my friends are out enjoying the nightlife and enjoying the splendor of being young, naïve, and carefree, I find myself staring at this vacant monitor. Only I sit at this desk with a mission—to write an emotional novel about the utter anguish and pain one must go through living life without a father. I stare at the monitor with the smallest pinch of anxiety. Years and years of emotion boil down into one singular moment—I hardly know where to begin.

Can I possibly convey the pain I felt when my father left our family one cloudy Tuesday night, without any warning? Can I describe effectively how the world swallowed him whole, a cold, depressed alcoholic? Can I even begin to write how I wondered every adolescent night *what if things had been different?* We were all affected, my older brother Matthew in particular. He became impersonal, reluctant to let anyone get close to protect himself from reliving the pain he endured when Father left for good. Can I possibly capture his pain as well? The answer: I shall soon find out.

The phone begins to ring—I pick it up and hear the lovely voice of my gal Maria, informing me when she will arrive home from work. Sad, isn't it? A nice and inviting night with everyone in the Twin Cities taking advantage of the opportunity, and she is confined to working a late shift waitressing at the Chili's a few blocks away. Yet with her unbridled optimism never matched and her beautifully sweet nature, nothing could ever

keep her down. Her luxuriously golden hair delights me; her sweet and innocent spirit warms me. How I would do anything for her and her for me. How I love her.

“Hey honey, how was work? . . . You all right? . . . Yeah, I’ll definitely be up when you get home. . . . No, it’s just that I’m about to start my story, and I’ll be up a while. . . . Well, it’s something that I’ve wanted to do for a while. . . . All right, see ya.”

Our brief conversation ends and I sit back down and contemplate every single aspect about this story even more. Sure, it might seem like a stretch to simply decide to take up writing, but after spending years and years toiling in a dull and lifeless existence as an accountant, the freedom of writing seems invigorating. I mean, to go from crunching numbers like a small and generally useless machine, to dealing with words, feelings, and meaning? It’s as if the One above suddenly spoke to me and decreed, “Oh young Alex, allow yourself to enjoy life once again.”

No fears of inexperience can be allowed to weigh me down either. After all, it was JFK who said that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. And it still rings true today, for any little smidgen of doubt that says I have too little experience can only prevent me from painting what could potentially be my ultimate work of art. Besides, my brother has been a writer for years, getting that proverbial first foot off the ground just by picking up a pen and writing. Writing just might be embedded into my genes too, and I can easily call him for advice whenever I hit a fork in the road, so the odds seem to be stacking overwhelmingly in my favor. Oh, and a certain man named Orson Welles hadn’t directed a feature film before he made the seminal *Casablanca*. I can easily start writing a novel.

Which is what I have to do now. To waste a moment would be wasting ounces of potential brilliance. Page one, *Untitled*, by Alexander Varner. I begin to type:

“Woof. Woof woof woof. Woooooooooof.”

A dog is standing right next to me. Why, I don’t know. Nevertheless, its constant barking woke me up. Oy vey. I get up out of my cardboard box and I stretch out a bit. Yeah, I’m homeless. It sucks.

Ugh. The stupid pavement is really uncomfortable. The dog keeps barking, for some reason. I start to think about my current situation and how far I have fallen. Look at my homeless clothes. My homeless shoes. My homeless body. My homeless spirit. I do nothing but sit around and look dirty all day.

Man, I’m hungry. I am right next to a McDonald’s, but I don’t have any money on me. And their food sucks. So I’m screwed. But then I look at the dog . . . man, it does look kind of appetizing. I begin to drool as I stare. It does seem nice and fat, as well, which makes it look even more delicious. I guess PETA might be up my ass if I try to kill it, but I have no other option: I have to eat it. I’m homeless.

I quickly dive after the dog, but it escapes and starts running off. Well, crap. Now I’m left homeless, with no money, and with nothing to eat.

Dad did this to me. He’s the reason I’m in this cardboard box outside a McDonald’s. He was always too drunk to care or look out for me, and now look where I am. Every single thing that has ever happened has been his fault. I hate him. But he’s gone and I have only myself to get out of this mess.

I get up and can say only one thing. “Fuck. Fuck fuckity fuck fuck.”

Goodness. Only one page in, and my fingers are already beginning to tingle thanks to the sheer poetic brilliance of this story. I chose to make the character, based on myself obviously, a homeless man to convey just

how far he has fallen thanks to the failures of his father. An utterly brilliant move on my part, as it captures the despair, the hopelessness of a man who is stranded alone in this cold, unforgiving world. Another stroke of genius was my attempt to give a bit of an “edge” to the character, since he is now “on the streets” and living the hard life, by throwing in some cursing. This story has been the veritable floodgate for my creativity; once I started this story, the good ideas began to pour in, washing out everything else on my mind. The sudden thought of film prospects leapt into my mind—Spielberg would definitely want to get his hands on this.

I collect my thoughts and get into my car. I decide to drive to my brother's apartment and tell him about this crazy shit. He's gonna be like "Wha???" I know it. I get there and knock on his door. No answer. I knock again. WTF? Why ain't he answering? Oh, at least the door is unlocked. Yay, I guess.

And then I discover Matt lying on the floor. He has a lot of bruises and all that stuff. His place is a mess. Matt slowly gets up after I barge in. I feel like taking him to the hospital right then and there, but first I want some answers. Like what the hell happened.

"What the hell happened?" I yell out.

"I don't know, man, I don't know," he replies, grimacing with every word he spits out.

I take a look around the place, look at his battered body, and realize the shocking facts of the situation: "Somebody beat you up and fuckin' trashed the joint."

The story has taken yet another brilliant turn, coming out of left field to amaze the millions with the kind of play that SportsCenter will replay for ages. I lean as far back as the stiff wooden chair will allow, and break into a smile produced only by the sense of accomplishment. Yet, just

as I was about to resume painting this intricate little picture, my gal arrives home.

Maria lets out a sigh, and sets her purse down on the little white table she painted a few weeks ago. “Hi Alex,” she mumbles, moving towards the kitchen.

“Hey, honey. You all right?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Well . . . it was just a bit of a rough day at work. A customer was unhappy and made a scene. I’m fine, though. Sorry.”

“Well, I know the perfect way to make you feel better. Come over here,” I eagerly shout out, excitedly waving my arms in a circular motion. “Here, read this.”

I stand up and allow her to take my seat, as she quizzically sits down. Visions of her exuberance and yelling out its splendid beauty as she elatedly kisses me after reading my work cloud my mind as she begins to read.

I gaze at her heavenly face, anxiously awaiting that reaction of pure and utter delight as she delves into my work. The hint of amusement immediately creeps onto her face, and a few seconds later Maria tries to fight the urge to break into laughter, much to my confusion. I presume that she enjoys the text so much that the thought that I penned it is too much for her to bear. This has to be the only explanation.

“Wow . . . umm, wow.” She can only muster a few words, still fighting the urge to break into hysteria over its wonder, and struggling to come up with the right words to say after coming face-to-face with sheer, unadulterated magnificence. “I . . . I’m not sure what to say . . . is this actually serious?”

“Of course it is,” I immediately respond, with a gleam of pride.

“Seriously? Oh.” Maria quiets her voice and lowers her head. “Sorry, it’s been a long day, and I’m tired. But the story . . . was definitely interesting. Yes.”

I suddenly feel a wave of ecstasy rush over every fiber of my being. “Really? You really liked it?”

Not wanting to build my ego too much, she hesitates, “Well . . . umm . . . it was definitely entertaining. Yes. I’m pretty tired, though. I think I’m going to—”

“What was your favorite part?”

Maria freezes immediately. The thought of deciding the greatest part when greatness oozed from every pixel on the monitor seems to be too much for her. A few seconds pass, and she still cannot move her lips one inch. I have to fill in the silence.

“If it’s all right to ask. I know it’s hard and all, since it’s—”

“Oh, no, it’s all right, I was just . . . I liked how you related the pain you felt from your father to the toils and struggles of the homeless. Yeah . . . that was . . . that was good. Kind of like . . . gives it sort of a twist on issues in today’s society. Or . . . yeah. I really am tired, though. I really need to get to bed.”

“All right. ‘Night Maria.”

As she arises from the chair and plods slowly into our bedroom, I immediately contemplate what she had just told me. You know, perhaps it would be a better idea to incorporate the issues of today’s society into my work. This springs another wave of ideas, and I allow them all to crash ashore and onto this screen:

Right away, I knew exactly who was behind this vicious and brutal attack on

my brother. It was too obvious; too expected . . . it had to be them.

“Al Qaeda.”

“Hub?” Matthen, still a bit groggy, takes a seat on his ravaged sofa.

“Think about it, brother. What’s the one organization that can orchestrate devils plans as they sit in some cave in Zimbabwe or something? They obviously have the ability to take you out . . . but for some reason, they let you survive. . . .”

“But why would they want to attack me?”

“Well no shit Matt,” I said as I pace around the room. Why I’m pacing, I don’t know. Anyway. “You wouldn’t expect Al Qaeda to take you out, that’s why they did. They obviously want to send a message to this country, and they chose you to make that statement.”

Matthew pauses for a second, and then asked, “So what are we going to do?”

“We’re going to fight back. For America.”

Soon enough, we are ordering first class tickets to Africa, arming ourselves with knives, machine guns, and explosives, all to take on our biggest foe—Osama and his henchmen. As we are miles up in the air, I begin to think about my father and how we wouldn’t have had to resort to this had he not been a complete douche. Then I saw that Angelina Jolie was on the plane as well. That was cool.

I continue to write and write, at a pace resembling that of a six-year-old OD’d on sugar. The story is taking so many twists and turns, it is guaranteed to leave every person who reads this speechless; even I don’t know what to expect next. But as I am about to hit page 20, an innocent glance towards the clock reveals yet another little twist in a night where I conceived many of them: 3:00 a.m. As much as I want to continue working and perfecting my story, wisdom wins out and I go to shut off the computer. But wait.

I open up my e-mail. I begin to type:

Matt,

I'm working on this story that I hope you will like. It's about our father, and I know it's a rough spot for you, but I hope it accurately conveys the pain we endured when we were younger. And since you're a professional at this and all, I would be very grateful if you could look the story over and offer some constructive compliments. Attached is the story; not completely finished, but as it is right now, I still think that you'll enjoy it. Perhaps even change your life. Thanks.

Sent. Finally I make my way to bed, but too much anticipation weighs upon my mind to allow me to get to sleep right away. How much would Matt enjoy it? When will he find the time to read it? Will it affect him as much as I would hope? Eventually I force myself to sleep, but soon after that, the alarm rings in the morning. I rush out of the bedroom and crash into the computer chair.

I head straight towards the e-mail inbox. Scrolling down towards the latest e-mail . . . goodness, he has replied already. This is another writer reading my work, so once he reads it, this will be vindication that I am on the right path. I wait a few short seconds just to bask in the moment and savor this feeling that my life will change forever in mere moments.

Finally, I open the email:

Good God . . .

Seriously, I don't know whether this is a joke or not, but to be honest brother ... this is just horrendous. There's really no other way to describe this. The plot is utterly ridiculous and completely nonsensical, there are too many factual errors to count, and the first paragraph of the story was just about the most bizarre, idiotic thing I've ever read. Seriously, what the hell does Al Qaeda have anything to do with our father?

I'm trying to think of some way to possibly improve on this, but it's impossible. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but you're just not meant to be a writer. You're good with accounting, just stick with that, all right?

I close the e-mail. Immediately, I bring up my story, to insert the latest twist to this ever evolving plot, this one the cruelest and most gut-wrenching yet:

"Oh yeah, Bin Laden," I chuckled, "we sure got you now!"

"HA! This is where I reveal my most devious plan yet!" Bin Laden yelled in defiance. "MATT, ATTACK HIM NOW!!!"

GAH!!! Matt stabs me right in the back! My own flesh and blood . . . turns on me. Blood pours out on my body, and the newly-aligned Matt and Bin Laden start to leave.

"Heh," Matthew smiles evilly. "Now you know who's been behind it all along."

With that, they leave, leaving me to fend for my bloodied self. This backstabbing may have come as a surprise, and it just goes to show that you never know where someone's true allegiance lies. They may have won the battle, but not the war. No matter what side my brother is on, and no matter if I fight this battle alone, I will continue to fight, and will never ever give up.

Damn you, Father.