

The Artist

By
Lawrence Buentello

Eli was an artist, and he was beautiful; in his prime, at twenty years, and producing remarkable pictures on the canvases that he had bought with money earned lifting boxes in a warehouse in the middle of the night, he was thin and had a fine, symmetrical body. He was pale, his hair a light color, and he had deep blue eyes. He wasn't feminine, but when he sat in the summer sun or lay in the sand by the sea, he seemed more of a work of art himself, a sculpture from smooth stone, alabaster, or pure marble. He was talented; many people admired his paintings, and at twenty he was beginning to sell his work. He believed that soon he wouldn't have to lift boxes anymore. Many people, men and women, considered his physical beauty a natural gift, and some loved him, though most only wanted to experience the aura of the beautiful boy who was also a talented artist.

But no one loved him as much as Megan, and she told him so. "I'm the that one you love. Say it, please? I'm the one that you love?"

"You're the one that I love," he said.

They sat in her room; his canvases leaned against a wall. She guarded them carefully—no one was allowed in the room without her permission, and even when they were admitted she insisted that she be present at all times. She didn't want anyone left alone with his paintings.

Megan was a very pretty girl. She was a student, and considered herself enlightened to all forms of art and human endeavor. She was slight, and dark; brown hair, brown eyes and black brows gave the impression of intense interest to her expression. She held his hand and refused to release it until she felt that it was the appropriate moment. She leaned her body close to his, breathing softly, as if she could inhale his presence and hold him in her body for as long as his fragrance remained in the room.

Eli sat easily; he was an easy-going boy, and he loved to pass long afternoons staring out to sea or watching films or reading poetry in books under trees. Much of what Megan thought she that knew of him she never did, because she was too concerned with her interior concept of his love for her, and so never objectively assessed his actions or motivations. But he was a decent boy, who worked to earn his pleasures, and he didn't smoke or drink, except when someone invited him to dinner or for private discussions in rooms let for such a rendezvous. She never

asked if he made love to other women, she only assumed that he didn't, but he wouldn't have lied if she had asked. In a world where too much beauty is never enough, those who loved beauty gravitated to him, and exulted in his touch, or his faith. A young artist, especially a gifted artist, and a physically beautiful one, was a special kind of grace.

"Can you prove that you love me?" she asked. She was very serious; she was obsessed with the question, though he didn't know the depth of her obsession. "Can you?"

"If I *say* I love you—"

"But how would I know for *certain*?"

"You have to believe."

"You don't love me. If you loved me you would find a way."

"I could paint your picture."

"You've painted my picture. Many times."

"I could paint your picture again and again until my work becomes famous and your face becomes famous, too, because all of my paintings would be of you."

"That's very clever," she said. She squeezed his hand, and wouldn't release her hold. "But how I can be certain that you'll only paint pictures of me?"

He smiled and said, "You must believe me."

She smiled, too. "You have too much talent to paint only one picture. That's why I love you so much."

They sat together in the room for a very long time before making love. She rejoiced in his body; she rejoiced in the way that he touched her, and in the pleasure that she gave him. They moved together on the bed, his lips forming shapes over her breasts, her hands, her feet; she imagined that they were one sensual creature, she imagined that all of him was in her, and all of her in him. She wanted very much to be a part of him; to *be* him. She wished to be pale, beautiful and artistic, she wished it very much, and she thought that she loved him; but it was something else.

Eli's life, had he been allowed to survive Megan's obsessive love for him, would have changed phenomenally in the coming years—he would have left San Francisco to live in New York, he would have struggled in the smoke-filled arena of the cafes and the stolid climate of *academia*; he would have visited Paris and London; he would have had many lovers, male and female, and his life would have been as celebrated as his art. But it wasn't to be; though of the days that he spent loafing by the Pacific shore and tossing bread to the arrogant sea birds much can be said, of a simple desire for a meaningful life lived, and for luscious environments captured in his arrangements of flowing pigment. As a distillation of the simple esthetic much can be said, though it was an esthetic filled with a cyclic austerity. The sorrowful note of unfulfilled possibilities must be played as denouement—

Megan was filled with an obsession, after all; she had come from the university and found Eli, this was true, but others had discovered him, too. Her affection for him was validated by his youth, and his desire to fulfill romantic ideals; but even while their love remained relatively simple, the socialization and bastardization of his personality had already begun, and in his mind he was already separating the concepts of lust and love. In *her* mind she contemplated the meaning of his artistic gift; she had no gift, and knew the community from where

they came was too discerning to permit the creation of too many geniuses. Why she, herself, wasn't a genius of a kind she didn't know, and only her suffering grades gave affirmation to the worry that she never would be. So while he threw crusts of bread to the petulant sea birds she walked back and forth across the sand, her arms together behind her back, her long hair falling over her face, because her head was bowed in thought. And her thoughts were always the same: *he is so beautiful and I love him so much and I'll never know what to do with myself and I wish that we were in my bed right now, oh, he paints such powerful pictures I could never conceive of such pictures but what if he goes away and never returns or will he forget me if he becomes famous and why can't I be famous, too?*

Her thoughts were so intense that they might have echoed across the ocean to the Asian shores.

And then a terrible thing happened; a terrible thing.

In her room one evening, on the evening before she was to leave again for the university, she invited Eli to make love to her one last time. She gave him wine.

"What is this?" he asked. He lay naked on the bed, his thin body curved to the shape of the hard mattress. He held the glass before himself self-consciously. She couldn't remember the last time that he seemed so vulnerable.

"Some wine, to celebrate," she said. She stood naked by the window, a dark wisp of a girl, though soft and practiced. "Drink."

He was excited, and drank the wine. He set the glass aside.

She came to him, and they lay together, but while he was caressing her, inhaling her scent, and while she held him as a mother holds a drowsy child, he lost consciousness and became limp; she rolled him onto the mattress. She wept and she wept, but still she found the reasons within herself, and eventually pressed the pillow over his beautiful face and smothered him. She lay upon his motionless body trying to feel his soul leaving his body and entering her own. She pulled away the pillow and kissed his pale lips; then she removed the tools, folded in a blanket, from underneath the bed.

Later, when she was finished doing the terrible thing, and the smothering was only merciful in light of what she had done, she filled his neglected glass with more wine, found her pills and poisoned herself.

When the old man and woman who owned the boarding house, because of the strange noises they had heard the previous night, entered the room the next morning they found Megan's nude body on the bed; her expression, they saw, was serene and peaceful. Next to her head, written on fine paper, was a letter.

What remained of Eli was wrapped in bed linen below the window box; drying blood held the fabric to the fragile shape of the body. And to one side of the window, waiting for the sunrise, stood an easel on which was secured with several heavy nails a wooden plank; and nailed to the plank, cleansed of any trace of blood which might have marred the purity of the display, were Eli's hands. The old woman turned her head down into the old man's shoulder. Even the old man, who had seen war, was horrified. A title was written below the hands, which were carefully positioned as if in prayer: *My Struggle—*

And this is what she wrote in her letter:

As a student of the arts, I have discovered a philosophy that describes the value of all things perceived as beautiful. That is, simply stated, that beauty can only be experienced once, and thereafter becomes a remembrance of the initial experience. Our experience of beauty thereafter diminishes by degree, until it becomes mere representational truth. Don't mourn Eli; he carried his beauty with him wherever he went, and now carries his beauty into death. Pity me, for I only had the opportunity to experience his beauty once, and to thereafter envy all those who would yet see his beauty new. I had no beauty of my own to carry with me, and so I thought that I could carry his perpetually—but I couldn't. Don't mourn. The most beautiful things born to the world should be forgotten before they become mundane.

But her justification for the act was never taken seriously.