

The "I Am Canvas" Scene from the *Cathedral of the Senses* Novel

(Author's note: This scene describes what I mean by the "I Am Canvas." The three subsequent short chapters in Practically Here that follow this one, describe how to use this "mechanism"—and another associated with it—to better understand how life works and perhaps to improve your experience of it.)

The dirt road that led to Michael's house was lined with weeping willow trees for as far as the eye could see. The trees were about thirty feet tall and spaced about fifty feet apart. I felt as though I was walking down a vast and endless natural tunnel.

Finally I came to a dirt driveway and turned down it. About a hundred yards down the road I came to a stone house topped by a thatched roof that spilled over the house's frame randomly, in some places nearly touching the ground.

A man sat on a stool in the yard, in front of an easel and canvas, looking out upon wheat fields that waved lazily in a warm summer breeze. He looked to be in his sixties. He had reddish hair that was beginning to recede. His beard was the same color as the hair on his head and his complexion seemed oddly lighter than I would expect it to be given the amount of time the man probably spent painting outdoors. Of course I had no way of knowing how much time he spent outdoors, except that the canvases strewn about on the porch and on the lawn were of landscapes, most of which appeared to be of the surrounding land.

His eyes were friendly yet his face bore the wrinkles and look of a life lived hard and at the edges.

"Michael?" I asked, extending my hand as I did so.

"Yes. You must be Nick Sands. Owen said you'd be coming by," said the man as we shook hands.

He stood. "I was going to take a break and have a glass of wine and something to eat. Care to join me?"

"Sure."

He went inside and returned with a bottle and a couple of glasses in one hand, and a linen bag in the other. He poured us each a glass of red wine, removed a wheel of cheese and a loaf of bread from the bag and set them onto a paint-stained drop cloth he laid out between us. He sliced a piece of bread and carved a small wedge of cheese and handed them to me. He prepared a similar snack for himself, but allowed himself a much bigger wedge of cheese.

"So, what brings you here?" asked Michael just before he bit into his cheese sandwich.

I told him my story. "I know that sounds odd," I said when I finished.

"I've heard stranger tales than that."

"So, you live here full time?"

"I wouldn't put it that way exactly. But yes, I'm here and I don't have any plans to be anywhere else."

"What are you working on?" I said, tilting my head in the direction of the canvas he was sitting in front of when I arrived.

"A chair."

I nodded.

“It might not seem like much. It certainly isn’t grand or expensive. If the painting sells it’ll sell for more than the chair is worth. But I like this chair.”

I looked at the shabby piece of furniture and tried to see what the artist saw in it. I could not. It seemed old, even rickety and it showed considerable wear. I stood, wine in hand, and walked over to the chair. The artist’s eyes followed me. I stopped in front of the chair and stared at it. Still, I saw nothing. It looked like a hundred other chairs I’d seen at garage sales—or in dumpsters—every weekend in San Pedro.

I sipped my wine and said, “What do you see that I don’t?”

“I see what it is. Nothing more, nothing less.”

I started to say something flip, maybe even a little rude, but I sat on the grass in front of the chair and looked at it from a slightly different angle. I took another sip of wine and continued to look at the chair.

“Tell me something you like about that chair,” said Michael after a while.

The question took me by surprise. Clearly there was *nothing* I liked about the chair. If it were mine, I would toss it in the trash or give it away.

“Look closely. Tell me if you see anything about the chair you like.”

I started to shake my head, but instead I moved in closer. When I did I noticed something that made me like the chair even less. “It’s scratched,” I said.

“Really...” The artist did not seem surprised.

I leaned closer and the scratch I saw turned out to be four letters: T-H-E-O. “Theo?” I said aloud.

“My brother gave me that chair. We shared it as children and eventually it became his chair. When I moved here he gave it to me as a housewarming gift. Sometimes when I feel alone, isolated, I sit in that chair for hours, smoke my pipe and just look at the hills, the trees, the sun, the moon, the river. And sometimes when I cross the room and the chair is tucked under the table, I touch the back of the chair and it makes me feel good. Makes me feel in touch with something greater than myself. I love that chair,” said the artist with a smile so sweet it was as though the years and the weariness I saw when I’d first laid eyes on him had fallen off his face like dead skin, revealing something innocent and fresh beneath.

I looked at the chair again. I touched it. Maybe there *was* something appealing about that old piece of furniture. “Mind if I sit in it?”

“Be my guest,” said Michael, seemingly pleased to share something he valued.

As I sat in the chair I was surprised to find it so comfortable. It was made of cherry wood, hard but smooth. Its design made it not only sturdy but deceptively comfortable as well. The chair’s back was positioned at just such an angle that, in conjunction with the angle and height of the arms, it created a kind of comfort I had never experienced with any piece of furniture. Sitting in that chair, looking out upon the wheat fields, the trees and the thatched roof cottage, I felt as though I had a royal box view of the world.

“Do you see the chair differently now?”

I saw everything differently. “Yes. It’s great.”

“What do you see now that you didn’t see before?”

"I see myself in it."

"That's what I see too. I see myself in that chair," said Michael, although he clearly meant something different than I did. "What I see in myself, the spark that animates me... I see that spark in the chair. The energy that vibrates and shapes this world into form is the same energy that I am. The energy that animates me, the chair, the animals, you... I see that energy in everything, the large and the small. That is what my work is about. It's me recognizing myself in the world."

I looked around and it was as though a dimmer switch on the wall of the world had been turned higher.

"Let me paint you," said Michael.

I thought about arguing, but why not? I was curious to see how the artist perceived me. "Where do you want me?"

"In the chair. That's perfect." The artist stood, walked over to his easel and picked up an odd looking brush and what looked to be a palette of some kind.

"The brush... It looks strange," I said.

"There's a crystal on the end of the brush. When I hold it to your forehead and press a button on the brush handle, it will essentially make a 'copy' of your beliefs."

"You're losing me." I had no idea what he was talking about.

"The crystal and its innate power are able to locate and make an exact duplicate of your true beliefs. I then transfer those beliefs to this palette and they become the colors with which I paint your portrait. It's easier just to show you."

"I'm not sure about this," I said warily.

Michael laughed. "It's harmless. I'm not sucking out your brain or anything. Trust me."

I probably shouldn't have, but I did.

The artist touched the tip of the crystal at the end of a long wood brush to my forehead, then pressed a button about halfway up the brush's shaft. I felt nothing, but Michael seemed pleased as he removed the crystal from my head.

He then placed the tip of the crystal onto eight pads on the palette, one at a time. Each time he touched the crystal to a tiny round pad, a shimmering, liquid pool of something emerged from the tip of the crystal onto the pad. When he was finished there were eight pools of shimmering substance on the palette.

"Those are my beliefs?" I said incredulously.

"Yes. Your *true* beliefs. Let's see the picture they create."

The artist walked a few steps to his easel, brush and palette in hand, and began to paint. He dabbed at the palette, then the canvas, several times and a form began to emerge. It was me—at least an image of me. A moving image. The "canvas me" seemed to be aware only of the world taking shape on the canvas.

Suddenly, and without the aid of brushstrokes, the canvas began to fill with landscape elements, people, even a dog I recognized: Ace, my loyal Chinese Shar Pei.

"Why is the canvas continuing to fill with images even though you're not touching it?"

“The image I painted of you is constructed solely upon your true beliefs. The paint I used to create your image is ‘magnetic’ in that it attracts similar colors, sounds and images to it, all based on your beliefs. Think of it as ‘like attracts like.’”

A wise man I knew, who died recently, used to use those exact words often. I knew what they meant, mainly from a philosophical perspective, but this was something quite different.

I looked at the canvas as it began to fill. The “painting” evoked in me a dark, yet somehow familiar feeling. As it took shape I began to recognize certain things. There was my loft/office in the San Pedro cathedral. I was sitting under a broken stained glass window playing my guitar. A late afternoon sun filtered through the various colors and shapes of glass over my head. An angel in the blue glass pieces looked down on me. I seemed lost in sadness.

A woman I recognized, but whose name I couldn’t remember, walked into the picture and sat down next to me. She smiled but it was not a cheerful smile. After a moment, the woman kissed me on my forehead, brushed my hair lightly, stood and walked out of the church.

I was playing a song called “Homeless.” *We had a wet hot passion/But it seldom reappears/I watch the sun die in the ocean/A legacy of lover’s tears/But I can’t help but feel/It’s so unreal/Should I really feel this sad/I’m feeling homeless.../Homeless.../Homeless...*

Ace looked up at me. He looked serious. But then he always looked serious, except when his tongue hung out after he ran.

The mood of the painting was unmistakably dark. I recalled seeing Van Gogh’s paintings in Amsterdam. All his work from the “potato eaters” period consisted almost exclusively of blacks, browns and grays. There was little light. The world through the painter’s eyes seemed bleak. Hopeless.

My world as depicted on the canvas was not as bleak, but it emanated a similar sense of desperation.

“What do you think?” said Michael finally.

I didn’t know where to start. Clearly, what I saw was not a painting. At least not in the traditional sense. It was a glimpse of something. Something that had no name. It was not my past. Not exactly. It seemed more like a vibrational depiction of who I was as I sat in the artist’s chair. As though someone had struck a tuning fork with the exact vibration or tone that epitomized my life and these were the colors and shapes that formed around that vibration.

As I looked at the images, heard the sounds, sensed the feeling of the man on the canvas, they resonated deeply within me. I could argue with none of it.

What was there might not represent all I believed myself to be, but what *was* there was, for better or worse, an accurate picture of who I was at that moment.

It felt like truth.

“I don’t know what to say,” I said.

“Do you know what this is?”

I shook my head and continued to look at the scene as it played out on the magic canvas.

“This is you.”

“What *is* it though? It’s not like any painting I’ve ever seen. I mean, what am I looking at?”

“The ‘I Am Canvas.’”

“What?”

“It’s the ‘canvas’ on which you paint your life. When you say ‘I am,’ the words or thoughts that follow ‘I am’ create what you see on the canvas. Those words and thoughts create your life experience. When you say, ‘I am hungry,’ you become hungry and your life is animated accordingly. When you say, ‘I am poor,’ you create an image of yourself on the ‘I Am Canvas.’ Your image is created from the ‘paint,’ which is essentially your beliefs, which then attract other images and scenarios that are the ‘form equivalent’ of what you truly believe. When you say or think, ‘I am afraid,’ you create an image of yourself on the I Am Canvas that attracts certain scenarios; scenarios that are different from the image you create of yourself when you say or think, ‘I am *not* afraid.’”

“But real life isn’t a canvas.”

“Real life is actually an energy field. *That’s* the canvas on which you paint your life. Life flows out of you automatically onto the canvas when your beliefs interact with ‘what is’...with what is here, now, in this moment.”

I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t very well argue. Clearly, the man knew something—apparently lots of things—I didn’t know. Still, I didn’t feel comfortable agreeing with him either. The whole idea was fantastic and, frankly, hard to believe.

“Let’s try something,” said Michael. He picked up the crystal-tipped brush and pressed a button on its handle several times. “I’m going to retouch the painting.”

“Retouch?”

“I’m going to show you how things can change in an instant by changing a single belief.”

He touched the crystal tip of the brush to my forehead, tapped the button on the handle a couple of more times, then reached over and touched the brush to the canvas again. Instantly the scene began to change. I could see more light in the “painting,” even though the light through the stained glass window in the painting remained the same.

Suddenly there was a different feel, mood and tone to the image I now saw. On the canvas Ace looked up at me. I couldn’t prove it but it seemed like he was smiling. The same woman from the previous scene walked in. She embraced me warmly and sat down close to me.

This painting had many of the same images as the first one. It looked a lot like my life. But something wasn’t right.

“This isn’t my life,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“It’s not what I remember.”

The artist didn’t answer. He just looked at me as though waiting for me to speak.

Finally, I did. “You said you changed one belief. What was it?”

“What do you think it was?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look at the painting. How do you feel when you look at it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Focus. Look at the painting. Open your senses. Allow yourself to feel.”

I looked at the painting for another minute or two. I took it all in and one thought kept coming back to me. I took a deep breath and looked at Michael. "I don't deserve that life," I said softly.

"What?"

"That kind of happiness. That kind of love. I don't deserve it."

"That's what you believe. But I changed one belief: I made you believe that you were worthy to have what makes you feel good."

"What if I don't really believe that?"

"What if you did?" said Michael, turning his attention away from me and looking toward the painting.

After a moment the artist picked up a paint-spattered drop cloth and tossed it over the magic canvas. I blinked as though I were coming out of a trance.

"That's it," said Michael.

I nodded. My mind was racing. I needed a break. I needed to slow things down and think about what had just happened.

Michael said he was going to take a nap before dinner and went inside the thatched cottage. I stood and started walking toward the fields. The sun was ablaze over the wheat fields as I walked along a dirt road that ran through the middle of two large fields.

I took a path that was no more than three feet wide, not well trodden, to the top of a small hill. I could see above the line of trees that had led like a natural and regal hallway to Michael's cottage. Mountains surrounded the entire landscape, making it appear as though Michael's house was at the bottom of an immense bowl.

I watched as the sun slowly disappeared behind a mountain and shadows began to capture light.

As I saw the grand scene changing, losing light, I could sense in me a similar process. The single belief that Michael had changed—that I was not worthy of what I wanted—was now reverting to its original form. My anxieties, fears, insecurities, and doubts started coming back to me, weighing me down again. I felt tightness on and behind my forehead, at almost the exact spot Michael had touched with the crystal brush.

An orange moon rose over a distant mountain and shined like a midnight sun. Though my world had been redrawn back to its previous borders and limitations, I was not sad. I was melancholy. While I longed to maintain the feeling that Michael had shown me, I accepted that this was not to be. At least not yet.

I had read about such experiences and known people who promised, for a price, to deliver such rich epiphany. Yet what I had just seen, what I had just experienced, was not intellectual and I knew that it was beyond the reach of money. It was not something I could tell people and expect them to truly understand. But I had experienced it. I had seen it through eyes that understood what I saw, if even for a brief moment.

As I sat on the hill looking out at the world of light and shadow, I knew that even if my life returned to "normal," I would never forget what had happened today.