

Ahmed Zawad Chowdhury
Wa403, 3 Ames Street
Cambridge, MA 02142
zawadx@mit.edu

1800 words

The Mural

The sun always smiled in Eliza's dorm room. It was on the wall- a large disk of yellow paint, with sunglasses and grin fixed onto its face. Its rays shone down upon a rolling meadow populated by all sorts of fantastic creatures. There were dragons, unicorns, some treants to the side, and one little dancing girl. In fact, if you looked closely you'd see that all the creatures were dancing in their own way. And when the day's first light broke through the blinds, the smiling sun started dancing as well, its golden rays darting in and out amongst the creatures reveling below.

But it had to be painted over.

Every time Eliza looked at it, she would see her roommate's amateur strokes. She would spot the gap between the dragon's back and belly, the careless curve in the unicorn's horn, or the rushed stick figure her roommate had put in with the leftover paint. The yellow sun had glistened on her wall like a mold infestation all of last year, smiling relentlessly despite her piling schoolwork and loneliness. It had been the totem for her roommate's friend circle. In front of it they had gathered every weekend, often forcing her to head to the lounge to do homework.

But now, the painting was hers, to change as she wished. Eliza had bought plus-sized brushes and tubs of paint last year, and she would finally get to use them! She had cleared the way to the mural, moving the desk and bunk bed to the other corner by the dressers. Her laptop lay open on that desk, the screen taken over by the Picasso she would be recreating. It was titled "The Artist and His Model 2", her favorite out of Picasso's many attempts at the same subject. She loved how it detailed its characters, with the Artist

reduced to a toiling face and one attentive, disembodied eye, and the Model melting into a mess of limbs and appendages, distorted in the Artist's eye.

She picked out her largest brush, the one that would create the background. "Ok, I need yellow and- is that ultramarine?" Her stomach sank. She had a tub of blue, but it wouldn't be good enough to recreate Picasso's background. She would have to get the paint from her hall's supplies. The hall paint was for painting murals, but she didn't think everyone would approve of painting this wall.

Eliza peered out of her room, scanning the hallway from end to end. Her eyes found only the murals on the walls. She crept out, passing the incomplete fractal of jigsaw puzzles right across her door. She hurried through the lounge, maneuvering past the Risk map drawn on a blackboard using campus buildings instead of countries. She even rushed past the Pollock rendition without a second look, something she usually considered a felony. But Eliza didn't want to explain to anyone why she needed paint.

She finally reached the kitchen door, and opened the supply closet across from it. She was greeted by a mess of power tools, cocoa powder and a vacuum cleaner. Moving those out of the way, she stuck her hand in, all the way to the back, until it emerged with a jug of ultramarine paint. She was putting the vacuum cleaner back in when Maya stepped out from the kitchen.

"I see you're taking my advice and making your contribution to the walls of hall. What are you painting?"

The paint almost slipped out of Eliza's hand. She turned, staring at Maya's flowing black hair and sharp cheekbones for several seconds before saying, "I'm not doing anything on the hallway. This is... just for something in my room."

"Oooh that sounds fun too. Will it be on the wall across 'The Smiling Sun'?" Maya grinned.

"No..." Eliza couldn't look at Maya anymore. An unbearable heat crept up

her face. "I'm painting over it."

"Oh." Maya looked away, suddenly very interested in brushing dust off the vacuum cleaner Eliza hadn't managed to shove back in. "Well," she began after several seconds, "I guess... you wouldn't want many memories of her sticking around."

Eliza didn't reply. No, she didn't want the memories of having to ignore the truth and dare circle in her room to go do homework. Or how someone new would appear in her room every couple of months, always friendly but never understanding of her workload. Or the lights staying on till 2am, their overbearing glare always leaving her drowsy in her 9am classes.

Just as the silence was getting awkward, a mass of curly brown hair emerged from the door behind Maya. Johnny was her roommate's ex. He looked at Eliza, then at the jug of color in her hand. And then he looked back at her, his jaw set and eyes glaring. 'It's been two weeks since the funeral, and a month since you broke up,' Eliza thought. 'Get a move on!' She sighed with relief once Johnny left her sight, allowing her gaze to return to Maya.

"I love your new cut, by the way," Maya finally said, not looking up from the vacuum cleaner. And so she didn't see Eliza jump and try to look away as fast as possible.

"Uhh, yeah." Eliza replied, trying to divert blood away from her cheeks and into her feet for a quick getaway.

"Oh, I didn't mean to keep you from the painting!" Maya smiled again. "Actually, before you start, could you give me a second with it? To say goodbye? I'll be there in a minute." She ran off into the kitchen.

Eliza returned to her room. She set the ultramarine paint down on the floor in front of the painting. She'd talked to Maya for the first time right there, starting with art and murals and somehow ending up on the economics of poverty alleviation. After that night, Eliza had sometimes skipped homework and sat in the mural's gentle glow during her roommate's parties, just to talk

with Maya. She beamed at the memory.

"I knew that you were gonna paint over her mural!"

Eliza turned to see Johnny at the doorway, rushing towards her. She veered out of the way, and he ended up between her and the wall. Eliza began backing up, her head spinning as she looked around the room for something to grab. But before she could do anything, Johnny started shouting again.

"Don't you see? Alita's still in this room! You can't just take her out like that!"

Eliza shook as he mentioned her roommate's name. She kept scanning the room, but everything on top of the dressers and desks had been removed before she started painting. Only the walls were untouched, and indeed Alita's mementos lingered there. There were still sticky notes right by where the bunk bed usually stood, in all the colors of the rainbow. One color for each class Alita was taking. By the mirror was the Legally Blonde poster, signed by all the actors, including Alita herself. That was the half-semester Eliza had gotten the room to herself, as Alita would only return from practice at midnight, too exhausted to host room parties. There was even a picture of Johnny with Alita, right about the dressers. Alita hadn't returned to the room since the breakup.

"Whatever you paint over this mural, I'll just come and destroy it!" Johnny growled.

'I'll just repaint it then!' Eliza was feeling more annoyed than sorry for Johnny. 'Alita left all of us a mess, you know!' She wanted to shout back at him. But she couldn't, not in this room. Her gaze went back to the post-it notes, but something in her eyes made them hard to see clearly. 'If only she hadn't been such a mess herself...'

"Johnny, get out." Maya stood in the doorway, looking a foot taller than usual and twice as imposing. For a second Johnny seemed like he would switch his shouting to Maya. But instead he stood silent for a few seconds,

breathing heavily, and then left.

"Did he do anything to you?" Maya stepped close. Eliza shook her head, blinking fast to get rid of her tears before Maya saw them. But he had done something. She wasn't sure if she was fit to be painting "The Artist and His Model 2" anymore.

Maya took a few more moments to make sure Eliza was ok, and then turned to the mural. Her hands glided over the bumps of dried paint, tracing the dancing stick figure. Then her touch moved to the creatures, petting the unicorn like a mother caressing her child to sleep.

"You really hated this mural, didn't you?" Maya finally said, her eyes fixed onto the painted sun.

Avoiding the answer, Eliza looked at the sun as well, but she looked away after a second. The mural had been the only thing she'd seen Alita do by herself. Everywhere else, from room parties to stage productions, Alita would be the leader of a bunch. But when she was painting this mural, she had been alone, taking the whole weekend to do what was at most two hours worth of work. But Alita had loved every moment of it.

Eliza had hated the mural, how it loomed over her room, just as her roommate took over her life. But her roommate didn't have a life any more.

After a long time, Maya moved from her reverent state. She traced the dancing girl one last time, and whispered, "Sayonara."

Eliza walked up to Maya, and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Even if this mural is gone," Eliza looked at Alita's mementos scattered on the walls, "She will live on, you know? Through us." She wanted to add, "I'll make sure of it," but didn't have the courage to make that promise. Not yet.

Maya reached up, squeezing Eliza's hand with hers. "Yeah. But I do wish we could keep more parts of Alita alive." She took one last look at the mural, her skin shining with the gentle yellow of the sun. "Good luck, with whatever you replace it with. I'm sure it will be beautiful."

Eliza didn't start painting for a long time after Maya left. She'd always dreamt of repainting "The Artist and His Model 2" since she first saw the Picasso. But this wall wasn't the proper canvas - painting it here would disrespect both the artist and the model. This wall was always meant to house a dance party.

"But what will the dancers do, once the sun sets and the little girl has to go away?" Eliza asked herself. And in reply, she began painting. The sun's gleaming rays were replaced by the velvet darkness of night. But the dragons and unicorns still danced, and now the treants joined in at the centre of the circle. And the little girl danced above them all, angelic wings arcing across the painting as she drew all the creatures together.