

Deepest Shade

by Jamie Grove

Barbara double-checked the reference image. Sure enough some idiot had put the tree in backwards. In addition, there were two figures in the clearing ahead instead of one. It wasn't her job to fix these things. No doubt QA would catch the error, but Barbara didn't see any reason to chance it. She started by tearing the tree out of the ground and tossing it out of the gallery.

"Some people might call that littering."

Ali's avatar winked into the gallery next to Barbara. It floated a few inches off the ground, the body clad in black leather. Barbara tried to ignore the tall cheese stick Ali had stuck to the top of the avatar's head.

"Since when did you develop a conscience?" she asked.

"After that last service pack. Aren't you glad to see me?"

"I thought I locked this gallery."

"Um, technically, this gallery still resides in my allocated memory space so you can't really lock me out of here. Besides, being sysadmin has its privileges."

"Well maybe you could turn up the heat," Barbara said.

"It's freezing in here."

Barbara reached into the gallery's palette and brought out a fresh wireframe. After scaling the tree to the right height, she dropped it into the hole. She gripped the trunk with a firm hand and twisted the wireframe's grid so that the canopy of the tree arched over the garden path.

White blossoms appeared on the tips of the branches. The flowers grew quickly, exploding into into puff balls that flowed over one another. The branches sagged under the weight.

"This Samuel Palmer dude had some peculiar ideas about apple trees."

"It's called a romantic idyll."

"Yeah, I remember that line from the context file the Victoria and Albert Museum sent over. Usual crap vids and stuffy commentary it was too. Have a listen."

Ali cleared his throat and began to recite in a rich tone that resonated throughout the gallery.

"'Calling themselves the Ancients, these artists sought to live close to nature and to paint and draw in a state of poetic rapture.'"

"Where did you get that voice?" Barbara asked.

"Came with the file."

"It certainly adds gravitas."

"Whatever. The whole thing sounds like bullshit to me."

Barbara glanced at the wobbly cheese stick. "Good thing too. Until you computers can figure out why it's not bullshit, I get to keep my job."

The gallery converted works of art into spaces patrons could experience directly. Context files, like the one the V&A sent over, could only lend so much sense to the work. People like Barbara fed sensory impressions into the models. There was a great deal of research involved, especially when working with artists who had long since passed, but there was always a tight deadline.

The clearing was a little further along the garden path. At the center, the figure of a lady tilted her face toward the sun. The lady was all alone now. Ali drifted over and ruffled the train of the lady's rose-colored gown.

"Can you have sex with her?"

Barbara reset the figure. Ali could easily override her, but Barbara made such a show of locking it down that he backed off.

"There was another figure here," Barbara said.

"It's not in the reference image."

"I know that, but it was here. Just before you winked in."

"There's nothing in the changelog, dear. Maybe you should take a break."

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt. I'm almost done here anyway. Just some minor tuning left to handle."

#

Back her own apartment, Barbara went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine. Outside, the sky was gray and thick with leftover clouds from the March snowstorm that surprised the city. Cars crawled through the muck.

Barbara drained her glass, thoughts of a second were interrupted by a ping from her boss. She hoped she wouldn't slur her words too much.

"Shoreham Garden is great," Lindsey said.

"I think it could use a little more work."

"Fiddle away, you're the artist. Just remember, the auction goes live tomorrow. I've scheduled Ali to chown rights to the client at eight sharp tonight."

It was the polite thing to say, but Lindsey was just covering herself. Her call meant that QA was already crawling over the gallery.

"You didn't call just to give me a pat on the back."

"No, there's another rush job."

"Anyone interesting?"

"How about Ella Schilling?"

"She has to be at least ninety, right?"

"Ninety-four, actually, but her health is failing. The client acquired what will probably be her last painting. He'd like to flip it in twenty-four hours complete with a live capture."

Lindsey beamed over the background file and the contract. There was a substantial bonus if Barbara could finish on time, and a significant penalty for the gallery if she failed. In the background file, a very old photo showed the artist standing in front of a Victorian house, her dark eyes averted from the camera.

"I don't know, Lindsey. I'm really tired, and I haven't been sleeping well."

"I understand, Barb, but there's no one else I can trust with this work."

"I'll bet she doesn't even own a pair of goggles."

"Maybe not, but from what I understand, she still paints every day. She even uses a shikkoku wall."

The art created on those huge sheets of quantum dot glass tended to be as intense as their price. No wonder there was such a rush. Barbara thought of the bonus and felt her fatigue slipping as she put her digital signature on the contract.

"This isn't fair," Barbara said.

"I thought the shikkoku might interest you."

"No, it's not that. I'm half delirious. I know I'm going to regret this."

#

The Victorian house stood at the end of a straight, gravel lane. Barbara's hands ached from clenching the steering wheel. When she closed her eyes, she could still see the orange line her map superimposed over the slushy roads.

It didn't look like anyone was home, but Barbara parked close to the house and hauled her bag onto the porch. A sharp wind cut through her jacket and Barbara leaned on the doorbell. After few minutes of silence, she cupped her hand to the stained glass set into the heavy door and rang again.

The door swung open before Barbara could step back. A tall woman filled the frame. Save for a shock of white running through her black hair, she was the mirror image of Schilling.

"Christ, you're impatient!" the woman shouted.

"Sorry, I'm from Gallery Reginald."

The woman fixed Barbara in a stare. She pointed at the black bag on the porch, which had the gallery's day-glo green logo splayed across the side.

"I'm old, but I'm not senile."

"I've been sent to see Ella Schilling. She's supposed to be expecting me... Are you her daughter?"

"Not likely. I'm pretty certain I never had any children."

"Oh! I thought, well, I expected."

Schilling held up her hand. "Hormone treatments do a wonder for the looks, sweetie, but I don't recommend them. Let's just say time has a way of catching up with you."

Another blast of cold air swept across the porch. Schilling stepped back.

"Well, are you going to come in or are you going to stand out there until we freeze our asses off?"

Schilling led the way into the living room and flopped into an overstuffed chair. Paintings of various sizes and styles covered the walls. Images of distant cities and landscapes, dark foreign faces, violent streaks of color and surrealistic shapes, but there were gaps too. Ghostly outlines where

pictures had clearly hung for years. Schilling noticed Barbara looking at the blank spaces.

"I've been selling them off for the last few years," the artist said. "Private collectors mostly. The money's nice. Helps pay for the treatments, but really I just need the room. Loads more need hanging. In fact, that's what I was doing when you started hammering on the door."

"Sorry about that."

"You know, that's the third time you've apologized. Do you have a problem or something? Anyway, I don't even know why I agreed to do this. There's so little time left."

Before setting up for a live capture, Barbara usually did her best to make small talk. It made it easier to get the artist into the state of mind necessary for a clean thought stream. She was just about to ask more questions about the paintings when Schilling stood up and took Barbara's hand.

"We'd better get to work. Clock's ticking."

#

There was a long table in the center of artist's studio. The top of the table was crowded with crushed tubes of paint and jars filled with brushes. Along one wall, fifteen feet of seamless glass looked out onto the field behind the house.

Light snow fell making a pretty scene of a ruined barn and the woods beyond.

Schilling waved her hand in front of the glass and the snow collapsed into the polished void of the shikkoku wall.

"A little intimidating, isn't it?" Barbara asked.

"Did you know that shikkoku is the Japanese word for black lacquer?"

Barbara shook her head.

"A long time ago, I worked with a traditional lacquer artist. I thought the technique for making the lacquer would be difficult, but it was relatively easy compared to the effort that went into working with the wood. In the end, the hard part was just getting past the idea of the darkness."

Schilling touched the glass lightly, then turned and pulled out a wooden chair. She down carefully and watched Barbara unpack the recording equipment.

"These goggles are a little old," Barbara said. "You'll have to relax. Otherwise, I'm not going to get anything but static."

Barbara placed the thick rubber goggles on Schilling's face. She made a few adjustments for fit and then tapped the artist's thought stream.

"Try to relax so the goggles can get used to you."

"I heard you the first time."

The artist placed her hands palm down on her knees and took a deep breath. On the Shikkoku wall, a swirling mass of purple crawled out of the abyss and began to resolve itself into a painting. The grim shape of an oak tree outlined by the colors of a faded sunset. A young man seated at the base of the trunk. Up in the tree, a second figure remained obscured by the branches.

"We stayed out so late that night," Schilling said. "I didn't expect I'd be able to see anything when I got up into that tree, but somehow it was like someone had turned on floodlights."

"So that's you in the tree?"

"Yes, I was fifteen. The boy's name was Cole. He would have been about seventeen."

Barbara tapped into the stream and winked into a warm summer evening.

A group of children stood outside. An older boy, Cole, stood on the porch. He was tall and thin. They were all going to play hide and seek.

Cole started counting and the children ran for the barn. Ella's long legs carried her quickly past the barn and up the hill. She slipped into the family cemetery through a low iron

gate and walked between the headstones. In her bare feet, she quickly climbed into the branches of the oak tree at the back of the cemetery.

The little cherry of Cole's cigarette bobbed along in the dark. Someone peeked out of the hay loft, then ducked back inside. Cole made a pass around the barn and then headed up the hill toward the cemetery. When he reached the oak, he sat down and exhaled a wispy trail of smoke.

"Are you going to come down from there or do I have to come up?"

"The other kids are hiding in the barn, you know."

Cole laughed. "Hiding? No, they're playing in there. I think they've already forgotten that we're playing hide and seek."

Ella swung down and sat next to Cole. He stubbed out the cigarette and turned to face her. A chill drove the two young lovers together.

A chill? Ella and Cole didn't seem to notice much of anything except each others hands, but Barbara definitely felt colder. She looked around the cemetery. There was another figure standing near the gate. She left Ella and Cole and walked toward the shadow.

All around the shadow the damp cemetery grass had taken on a layer of frost. Barbara shivered in the cold. Her hand shook violently as she reached out to touch the figure.

Even though this was Schilling's thought stream, something made Barbara whisper.

"Who are you?"

The figure snatched Barbara's wrist. A freezing burn shot up her arm. She tried to pull away but the shadow held her firmly. Barbara felt herself drifting to the ground, guided by the pressure at her wrist. She stopped struggling and slipped into the cold void.

#

When she opened her eyes, Barbara was on the floor of the studio. Schilling was standing by the the shikkoku wall. The painting was gone. The glass was transparent. Outside, the snow had stopped.

"Is it usual to pass out during one of these sessions?" Schilling asked.

"No, never before. I've been working a lot lately, seeing things that aren't there."

"What kind of things?"

"Figures. Shadows in the paintings. They aren't supposed to be there and then they disappear."

Barbara explained what happened before she passed out. She started shivering at the thought of the cold. Schilling held out a hand and helped Barbara to her feet.

"Let's have some tea."

They went into the kitchen and Schilling put the kettle on to boil. Barbara sat at the worn farm table, holding her head between her hands. Schilling moved over to a tall oak cupboard and reached for one of the drawers. She hesitated before opening it.

"When I was a girl, we were told never to open this drawer. Ever. My father's been dead for fifty years, but even now you can see it's not easy for me to open. Still, there's something in there I want to show you."

Schilling grasped the handle of the drawer and opened it slowly. She reached in and pulled out a pistol.

"This is my father's gun. He had it that night up in the cemetery when Cole and I were together. He stood at the edge of the tombstones by the gate and watched us. I don't think he ever said a word, at least I don't remember him saying anything. All I remember is seeing him standing there with the gun aimed at us. When I saw him, I shouted. He fired once. The bullet went through my wrist and embedded itself in the trunk of the tree."

Schilling put the gun on the table and showed Barbara her wrist.

"I was lucky to be able to use the hand again, but that's when I learned how to paint. It was supposed to be therapy and I guess it was in a way."

Barbara looked at the gun.

"And Cole?" she asked.

"My father only meant to scare him off. I guess it worked, because Cole disappeared and I never saw him again."

"So you think I saw your father?"

"I don't know what you're seeing in these paintings, Barbara. There's an old saying that the deepest shade in the graveyard is the place where the dead meet this world, but I don't believe in ghosts."

#

Barbara couldn't recall the drive back to the city, but she had the bonus to prove she'd finished her work. Schilling passed away a few days later. Lindsey called with the news and some work.

"I need some time," said Barbara.

"Sure, you're the artist."

In her living room, Barbara decided to work her way through a bottle of wine, but a postal agent interrupted her. Barbara

brought up the agent on screen. The avatar smiled in the most courteous manner.

"Miss Weldon, the postal service is delighted to inform you that you have received a postcard. The cost to transfer physical media today is \$14.95 plus shipping and handling. Would you care to confirm the transfer, or shall we destroy the physical media?"

"Can I see it?" Barbara asked.

"Absolutely, please confirm the convenience charge of \$1.99."

It was a hand-painted picture of a kitchen. A bouquet of flowers, newspaper in a jumbled heap, a bright blue bowl filled with red apples. All of it arranged on the neat linen tablecloth. Outside the kitchen window, deep snow stretched toward naked, black trees.

"Can I see the other side of the card?"

The agent flipped the card over. In contrast to the care of the painting, Schilling's scrawl was nearly impossible to read.

Move past the darkness. -- Ella

"The cost to transfer physical media..."

Barbara confirmed the transfer and cut off the agent. She pinged Ali and asked him to set up an empty gallery.

"I want to see Shoreham Garden again," Barbara said.

"That file shipped last week," Ali said.

"I know, but I also know that you keep pirate copies of all this stuff."

Ali smiled. "Which version do you want?"

"The one before I made my last edits, when the apple tree was in backwards."

Ali loaded the file and Barbara winked into the gallery.

The lady with the rose-colored gown stood alone in the clearing, but a moment later the gallery grew cold. A shadow appeared next to lady. Barbara watched the shadow. It moved slowly, caressing the lady as the artist must have worked her figure with the brush then the shadow disappeared.

"What are you looking for?" Ali asked.

"Nothing," Barbara said. "Just something thought I saw."

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