

Dedication

To my mother, whose unwavering encouragement, inspiration, and gift of determination have been the guiding light in my life. Your love and support have been the foundation of my strength and perseverance.

And to all the people and encounters that have shaped my journey—whether through support or challenge. It is through your actions and words that I have grown into the creative, strong, and independent thinker I am today. Thank you for being part of my story.

Prologue

Our lives are like vast, ever-evolving canvases. Each stroke is a decision; each color, an emotion; each layer, a chapter of our existence. The question isn't whether we are art, but rather, what kind of art we create through our choices, experiences, and reflections. In the Appalachian heartland, amidst farmers, coal miners, and moonshiners, my story began—a tale of survival, perseverance, and transformation. My life has been shaped by the rugged landscape of rural Kentucky, by a family's determination, and by my own relentless pursuit of knowledge and self-discovery. From battling a childhood illness to becoming the first in my family to attend college, my journey has been a tapestry of trials and triumphs.

Moving from my little town of Willow Creek to the sprawling campus of State University was like stepping into a new world—one filled with unexpected challenges and profound lessons. A moment of reflection led to this piece called *The Shattered Mirror*. The poems scattered throughout these pages are not merely words; they are fragments of my soul, like:

Recently, I had my mirror cracked; actually, it was shattered...
What I thought I saw in the mirror wasn't as it appeared to be.
The mirror sometimes lies to us or distorts the truth.
We are actually afraid to appear naked in the mirror.
The mirror, like TV, adds 10 pounds and so on...
So, the mirror delivers bad news when we least expect it.

Each poem is born from personal experiences and encounters. They represent the moments that have defined me, the trials that have tested me, and the resilience that has sustained me. As you turn these pages, you will walk through the various chapters of my life. You will see how each experience, whether small or significant, has contributed to the painting that is my

existence. This is not just my story; it is an invitation for you to reflect on your own journey, to recognize the art within yourself, and to appreciate the masterpiece you are continually creating.

Add Headings (Format > Paragraph styles) and they will appear in your table of contents.

Introduction

What kind of art we are creating through our choices, experiences, and reflections.

We are the artist and the art, but people offer unwanted observations or opinions about us and our choices. They pick apart our decisions like art critics at a gallery. "You shouldn't have done that," they say. "Why would you choose this path?" Their voices merge into a cacophony of doubt, drowning out our inner visions. Yet, amidst the noise, we find resilience. We begin to embrace our paintbrushes tighter, etching our stories onto the canvas of our lives, resisting the urge to blend in with their expectations.

Every choice we make shapes the final masterpiece. The colors we mix reflect our emotions, the experiences we gather act as our tools, and our reflections serve as both the mirror and the canvas. A brush stroke here signifies a joy, while a smudge there reveals a struggle. People may not see the full picture as we do. They might criticize the way we splash our thoughts across the surface, unaware that each drop of paint tells a story of its own. As the doubts pour in, we remind ourselves that struggles often lead to the most profound art.

Sometimes we gather in spaces with those who understand, sharing our experiences like ink spilled on parchment. In those moments, laughter mixes with tears, creating a rich tapestry of connection and authenticity. We discuss the paintings we are creating with our lives, revealing layers of meaning behind our choices. It's a safe space where the very critiques that hold back our brush become a catalyst for growth, urging us to explore new shades and techniques. We realize that the canvas isn't just for display; it's a part of us, a testament to our journey.

Amidst the challenges, we explore fresh ideas in our lives, each one an invitation to break free from conventionality. The comfort of sameness no longer holds us captive. We challenge ourselves to create pieces that may be misunderstood, yet brave enough to stand alone. The art we produce might puzzle onlookers, but

that's where its beauty lies—in the mystery and the willingness to be interpreted in multiple ways. We paint not just for them, but for ourselves, allowing our true selves to flourish and take form on the vast surface of existence.

In quiet moments, we reflect on the impact of others' words. They can sting like an unexpected splash of cold water. While we might feel momentarily shaken, we must remember that even the harshest critics can guide us. They force us to reevaluate our choices, sharpening our vision, igniting a fire within. Each moment of doubt becomes a stepping stone toward refinement, leading us to discover how to articulate the emotions we once thought unmanageable.

Our art, forged in the crucible of these experiences, begins to tell a story that's uniquely ours. Others may not get it, and that's okay. There's power in the ability to create something that speaks to our soul, reflecting a journey rich with nonconformity. It becomes clear that rejection of their norms only heightens the beauty of our expressions. We dive deeper into our own essence, ceasing to search for validation in the eyes of spectators.

As we progress, our work evolves. Pieces intermingle, forming unexpected narratives. New encounters introduce different perspectives, enriching our visual language. Life becomes a gallery populated with our creations, each piece a testament to our struggles, joys, and revelations. We paint with purpose, capturing fleeting moments that stir our hearts and ignite passion.

We begin to welcome other artists into our lives, those who revel in the same pursuit of authenticity. Together, we explore different mediums—words, sounds, movements. Every collaboration stands as a brushstroke in collective artistry. In each other's presence, we cultivate spaces where our ideas can breathe and grow. It is a vibrant exchange of colors and concepts, challenging the status quo and igniting creativity.

Life whispers secrets to us through daily experiences, urging us to capture them while they unfold. The mundane becomes a canvas as common moments illuminate profound truths. A conversation on the bus, a smile from a stranger, the rustling leaves on a breezy day—all of it is art waiting to happen. We become custodians of these moments, translating everyday experiences into bursts of inspiration that infuse the larger canvas of our lives.

Yet, even as we embrace this freedom, the shadows of comparison linger. We compare our strokes with others, feeling a tinge of inadequacy. But we remind

ourselves that art is not a contest. Each one of us has a different narrative, colors, and techniques that are just as valuable. The world needed the unique vibrations of Vincent just as much as the delicate whispers of Monet. Our challenges, our emotions, and our dreams are what make our art significant.

We may not design our life like a well-crafted exhibit. Instead, it remains a chaotic assembly of moments strung together, sometimes clashing, sometimes harmonizing. That's where the beauty lies—a constant exploration of self through the lens of creativity. We continue wielding our brushes despite the chaos, determined to translate our internal landscape for the world to see, hoping others may find pieces of themselves in it.

As we navigate our journey, we learn to cherish the art we are creating without seeking approval. It becomes a declaration of existence, an unapologetic statement of self. We realize that our art serves not just to be admired but to inspire and connect. It sparks conversations and fuels dreams, lighting paths for others who are yet to discover their own creative expression.

Through the ups and downs of our creative journey, we find strength in the community. We share our victories as well as our defeats, offering support while encouraging one another to venture onward. It's within this collective spirit that we find the courage to experiment, take risks, and redefine what art and expression mean to each of us. Our own work takes flight, emboldened by the understanding that it doesn't have to meet anyone's definition of success.

Every creation stands as a marker of who we are in each moment. We celebrate imperfections, allowing them to breathe authenticity into our art. We embrace our quirks—each strange twist and turn becomes part of our artistic identity. Our pieces become layered with stories, lived truths that resonate deeper than aesthetics. It's through this lens of honesty that we continue to craft our unfolding narrative.

Each day offers new opportunities to create and connect, to reflect and refine. Art mirrors life, and through every brushstroke, we tell a story that is irrevocably ours. As we gain confidence, we shed societal expectations, understanding that the truest expression comes from within. We hold the palette; the choices are ours to make. Through our art, we scream, whisper, and laugh, allowing the world to see the beauty in our genuine, messy human experience.

In the Beginning

My Concept

The book "Are We Art" delves into the concept that our existence is akin to a painting, with each instant contributing a stroke to the grand design. It's not merely a chronicle of events, but a contemplation on the decisions, encounters, and tenacity that have molded my being. This is an overture for you to perceive your life as an evolving artwork, shaped by every new experience. Intertwined with my tale are poems that have sprung from personal moments, each standing as a marker of the pivotal points in my life. These verses act as emotional landmarks, encapsulating the spirit of my voyage and enriching the comprehension of my route.

The Beginning

My earliest memories are of the rugged landscape of rural Kentucky, where the hills seemed to echo the stories of our ancestors. My family was a tapestry of farmers, coal miners, Indigenous heritage (Cherokee Indian), and self-employed artisans, each thread representing a different aspect of our heritage. Growing up in a small town, I learned the value of community and the importance of perseverance. My grandmother, with her fourth-grade education, and my parents, who left school after the eighth and ninth grades, instilled in me a determination to seek knowledge and a better life. My mother, at the age of 43, earned her GED, a testament to the power of education and the belief that it's never too late to change your path. Despite the health challenges I faced, my childhood was filled with moments of joy and discovery. The questions I asked my family physician further fueled my interest in healthcare, setting the stage for my future aspirations.

Chapter 1: Who Am I?



My name is Michael Miles, an All-American Athletic Renaissance male. This is my story. I was born into an Appalachian family, where hard work and resilience were our daily companions. My roots run deep in the hills of Kentucky, a place known for its coal mines and moonshine, where family ties are as strong as the earth we walked on. From a young age, I faced challenges that would shape my perspective on life. Born with just eight ounces of blood and an impaired immune system, my early years were marked by hospital stays and a battle for survival. These experiences ignited a respect for the medical field and a determination to understand the world around me.

In those hospital rooms, I often listened to the doctors' conversations. They spoke in a language filled with struggles and triumphs, each word a reminder of their dedication. I wanted to be like them, to help others in their times of need. My grandmother, a hardworking woman, would sit beside me and tell stories about the family. "We come from strong stock, Michael," she would say, her voice steady. "Hardship doesn't break us; it teaches us." I wouldn't fully understand then, but those stories became my strength. They shaped my identity, grounding me in hope and purpose.

During my childhood, I showed an interest in sports. I wanted to play like the other kids, despite my struggles. My father saw that fire in me and built a small

basketball hoop near our home. "You won't stop until you reach the stars," he said as he watched me shoot hoops, his eyes filled with pride. I practiced daily, filled with a desire to prove that I belonged. There were moments when I fell, the wind knocked out of me, my body weak. But each time I got back up, I felt a little stronger, a little braver. Sports became a refuge, a way to escape from the constraints of my health.

The community around us was tight knit, always coming together when someone was in need. We shared everything, from meals to stories, and it felt like a warm embrace. I remember one winter when the snow piled high, the school closed, and the townsfolk gathered to make sure no one was alone. We went caroling, delivering home-baked goods to our neighbors. "This is what family means," my mother said, her hands red from kneading dough. "We care for one another." Those days taught me the value of compassion and giving back. It was more than just living; it was about creating connections.

As I entered my teenage years, that drive for understanding turned into a thirst for learning. I lost many friends to illnesses, and that pain shaped my resolve. I began to take school more seriously, diving into science and biology classes, fascinated by how the body worked. I wanted to find answers to questions that lingered after every loss. My teachers encouraged me, recognizing my passion, and I felt a sense of belonging I'd longed for. "You have a gift, Michael," my biology teacher remarked one day, her eyes shining with encouragement. "Use it." Those words ignited a flame, pushing me further into academia while balancing sports.

High school was intense, filled with pressures from every direction. I often felt lost in a sea of expectations. Practices would stretch late into the evening, leaving little time for studying. On the good days, I excelled, running the court with ease, but on the hard days, doubt whispered in my ear. I confided in my closest friend, Danny, during one of our late-night talks. "I'm not sure I can do it all," I admitted, the weight of uncertainty heavy on my shoulders. Danny chuckled softly, "You've always had a way of surprising us, Mikey. Just give it your all, and don't sweat the small stuff." His faith in me served as a lifeline, reminding me that I was not alone.

Graduation approached, and the thought of leaving my small world behind scared me. The college acceptance letters arrived, each one a milestone. I felt ready to take that leap into the unknown. I chose a local university, understanding that I still needed the comfort of home while chasing my dreams. My family celebrated with a barbecue, laughter and joy filling the air. "You're going to change the world, son," my father proclaimed, raising his glass. I felt it in my bones, the possibility of

what lay ahead. Health and fitness became my main focus; I studied human anatomy and the intricacies of physical therapy. Every lecture drew me deeper into understanding how to help others heal.

The first day of classes arrived, and nerves fluttered in my stomach. The campus was buzzing, filled with faces both familiar and new. I met students from different walks of life, each carrying their own stories and struggles. I found myself gravitating towards those with similar goals. Groups formed, studying late into the night, sharing ideas and dreams. I felt a sense of community growing once again. During one of our study sessions, a fellow student named Lisa sparked a conversation. "What drives you?" she asked, curiosity shining in her eyes. I shared my journey, the struggles that shaped me, and in that moment, we connected, realizing we were both fueled by the same passions.

As classes progressed, I took on internships at local clinics. Each day was filled with learning and hands-on experiences. I met patients with unique stories, people like me who battled their own hurdles. One patient, an elderly gentleman named Mr. Johnson, became a reflection of resilience, inspiring me every time I walked into the clinic. He would smile through the pain, sharing stories of his youth, teaching me life lessons wrapped in humor. "You young folks have the world in your hands," he would say, his eyes twinkling. "Don't waste a minute. Live boldly." Those simple words resonated deeply, becoming a mantra I carried through my studies.

Throughout college, I continued to face challenges related to my health. There were days when fatigue weighed me down, but I learned to push through. My professors and peers became my support system, understanding when I needed a little extra time. I discovered the power of open communication and the importance of asking for help. "You are not just a number, Michael; you're a person," my advisor reassured me. "We're here for you." Those moments built a sense of teamwork, reinforcing the idea that we are stronger together.

I graduated with honors, a proud moment celebrated with family and friends. The journey had been long and filled with obstacles, but the experiences shaped me profoundly. As I received my diploma, those words echoed in my mind—strength, resilience, and community. I stood at the beginning of my career with a fire to make a difference. My journey continued, but the foundation built in my Appalachian roots remained a guiding force, preparing me for the adventure ahead.

Chapter 2: Traumatic Birth

Let's begin at birth. I had a traumatic birth with many complications, which extended throughout my childhood until the age of eleven. I was in and out of the hospital with many childhood health issues along with my weakened immune system. They found out I had a peripheral nervous system issue in my legs. It was discovered after ironing my legs. In elementary school, my parents were asked to hold their son, me, back one grade because of missing too many days of school. My parents felt it wasn't necessary. So, I started being healthier and focused on school, as well as less social. I sat upfront in class, completed my homework ahead of schedule and studied making high marks.

I had to change my focus to my health and wellbeing. Each morning, I woke up and made sure to eat a balanced breakfast. I packed healthy snacks for school and avoided sugary treats. My mom often encouraged me, telling me how important it was to take care of myself. "You need strength to learn and grow," she said. At lunch, I joined a few other kids who also brought healthy lunches. We started talking about our favorite fruits and how to make better choices. That small group became my safe space.

During recess, I found joy in simple activities. I liked playing tag but avoided rough games where I might get hurt. Some days, I preferred sitting on the bleachers and talking with friends. They accepted me as I was, and I felt good being part of the group, even if I didn't play all the time. My friend Sam was especially supportive. He would say, "You can be whatever you want, even if it's just hanging out." These words made me feel included.

As I moved into middle school, my focus on academics continued. I took pride in my grades, often studying late into the night. I enjoyed reading about science and math. My favorite subject became biology. I liked learning about how the body works and how to keep it healthy. My teacher noticed my interest. "You have a bright future ahead in this field," he said one day. Hearing that motivated me to consider a career in medicine or health.

Despite my academic success, I still faced challenges. I had to manage my appointments with doctors and therapists. Many evenings were spent at the hospital or in physical therapy. Some days, the exercises were tough. I would come home feeling exhausted. My parents always reminded me why I needed to keep going. "This is for your future," they said. Their encouragement helped me push through the harder days.

Social events during the school year felt daunting. I often declined invitations to parties or gatherings. It wasn't that I didn't want to go; I worried about my health and how I'd feel afterward. My friends understood this but sometimes got frustrated. Sam would say, "We miss you!" But I knew deep down that focusing on my health was important. I wanted to build my strength before I could fully engage in these activities.

I also found solace in writing. I started keeping a journal. Writing became my way to express emotions I couldn't say out loud. I wrote about my struggles, my hopes, and my dreams. Each entry felt like a release, a way to lighten the load I carried. Sometimes, I even wrote stories where I imagined myself as a hero overcoming obstacles. It helped me believe that one day, I could conquer my own challenges.

Time went on, and I began to notice changes in my health. Gradually, I became stronger. I joined the school's science club and even participated in projects. We learned about healthy diets and how exercise affects our bodies. Together, we created a presentation about the importance of nutrition for younger students. It felt rewarding to share what I learned. The teachers praised our work, and it boosted my confidence.

High school brought new obstacles. The workload increased, and I had to juggle school work with health appointments. Some days were overwhelming. I often spent nights studying, then had to wake up early to get to the doctors. I would feel the stress building up in my chest, but I reminded myself of my progress. Each challenge I managed made me stronger.

I made new friends in high school who understood my journey. We formed a small study group where we would meet in the library. They were supportive and never made me feel less than. We talked about our dreams. One friend wanted to be an engineer, while another aimed to become an artist. Each story inspired me to keep working toward my goals.

With time, I learned how to navigate friendships better. I found balance between my health needs and social life. I attended the occasional gathering, even if it was just for a short time. I enjoyed moments spent laughing and eating snacks with good friends. I was learning to allow myself some joy alongside my focus on health.

As I approached graduation, I felt a mix of excitement and nervousness. I worked hard to bring my grades up and was accepted into a college program related to

health sciences. It felt monumental. My family celebrated by throwing a small party at home. I saw the pride in my parents' eyes as they shared stories of my journey with our close friends.

I kept reminding myself that my past experiences shaped who I had become. I remembered all the nights I studied and the times I pushed through health challenges. I thought about how my journey was different from my peers, yet I found strength in it. Each day felt like a small victory, reminding me to cherish progress over perfection.

Ultimately, I realized there was no finish line. Life continued, and I would keep learning. I would carry the lessons from my childhood with me as I pursued my dreams in college. While the road ahead looked uncertain, I embraced it fully. Each challenge I faced built the foundation for the future I was eager to create.

Chapter 3: The Power of Perseverance

From a young age, I immersed myself in all that high school offered. Balancing three sports—tennis, basketball, and cross country—along with active participation in seven organizations and founding an Art club, not to mention working part-time at a local restaurant, I reveled in the challenge.

I maintained a 4.0 GPA until my senior year, a testament to my unwavering commitment to academics and extracurricular activities.

In my final year, the yearbook advisor, who also taught my senior English class, invited me to join the yearbook staff. Overwhelmed with commitments, I reluctantly declined. Displeased, she became exceptionally tough on me, marking me with a D for the first quarter—the first time I'd ever received below an A. Interestingly, during her leave for cataract surgery in the second quarter, my grade rose to a B+ with a substitute teacher.

When she returned, I sought her out, eager to improve my grade. Our discussion led to a consistent B+ average. This experience taught me a tough lesson about the realities of favoritism, where sometimes skill and diligence are overshadowed by politics.

Yet, this hurdle did not hold me back. Inspired by my mother, who at 43 returned to night school to earn her GED and graduated with my older sister's class, I

focused on college. Although I didn't obtain a scholarship, I pursued higher education with steadfast resolve.

I opted to major in Mathematics and Chemistry, subjects that intrigue and challenge me. This choice carved out the trajectory of my career, affirming that persistence and hard work do indeed yield results, even on a tumultuous path.

Chapter 4: College-The First Time

As the first in my family to attend college, I navigated uncharted waters, moving from a small rural town with a population of 5,000 to the sprawling campus of Eastern Kentucky University. This transition was jarring, but it also marked the beginning of my journey toward self-discovery and personal growth. As I journeyed from the confines of a small town to the expansive campus of Eastern Kentucky University, I carried with me the lessons of my upbringing and the dreams of a brighter future. This is where my story begins, in the place where I found solace and reflection—**The Ravine**.



The Ravine...*I claimed as my place of reflection! I started college. The stress increased as I continued on this path of gaining knowledge. I remembered a frequently visited place of solitude, calmness, and serenity which help put things in perspective. I called it-***The Ravine**.

I will attempt to recreate a picture of it with words. Hopefully, you will envision this sanctuary--The Ravine... Four weeks of school shuffled by me. Friday night came, my friends had gone while I spent a weekend alone. The dorm room became my prison, and I had to escape. The autumn night air felt good against my face. I began to wander around the campus, attentive to every sound and movement the

nocturnal world made. Then I stumbled upon the Ravine, a place containing vestigial life as if time had forgotten it.

I was awestruck with The Ravine's scenery- delicate yet sturdy, languid yet active, untouched by man. I walked as if Father Time stopped the clock just for me to gaze at this place with ageless innocence. Nature's backdrop was illuminated by a few twinkling stars and dominated by a dark ominous sky. An enormous circular clock with two delicate sluggish hands like flowers in a deep slumber projected into the sky. The edifice holding the clock was hidden by a grouping of trees.

The trees with their autumn leaves looked like colorful peacocks in full dress, soon to lose their vitality and color. Their branches reached toward the sky like primitive people worshiping their god and dancing around as if aroused by the cold force of autumn. The tree's boles clung to the earth as if they were waiting for the love of a wooer. The colorful collection of trees was laced with a picturesque lawn. I stood by the pond observing the amphitheater that looked like the ruins of a once great Greek structure embedded on the side of a hill. The seats were surrounded by freshly cut grass with the smell of green. The ground ascended upon the pond.

The Ravine revealed all of its secrets to me that night. More importantly. I remember the pond because I was like the three fish swimming in its vast emptiness. The shallow, narrow pond seemed inanimate as I came upon it. The clear water caught the shadow of the rock wall surrounding it and the bottom of the pond was made of stone covered with a brownish-green moss. Suddenly I saw a luminescent goldfish swimming along making ripples in the water. After I saw the goldfish, two more fish appeared. The one was pale gray and very thin. The other fish was too quick for me to see clearly. The pond was positioned in front of an empty amphitheater.

Whenever I need to gather my thoughts or reflect or be alone, I go to the Ravine, **A place that is peaceful, relaxing, and beautiful to behold.** More importantly, that autumn night the Ravine provided me with a view of a broader picture of nature's important role in society. Every individual should stop and take time to examine the things around them. People would realize that their problems are insignificant to the entire picture. It's time to explore...start your journey.

Chapter 5: College: Second Round

On the advice of a dorm mother, I transferred to a small private school called Transylvania University. I quickly became a big man on campus (BMOC), diving into student government, intramurals, varsity men's tennis, and even becoming Editor-in-Chief of the college paper. However, I faced opposition from some faculty members who thought I didn't take my college attendance seriously. One professor even told me that as long as he was teaching, I wouldn't graduate from the university. Around this time, my grandmother seemed to be struggling—or so my mom and her sister thought. I made the tough decision to drop out of college and live with my grandmother. I worked three jobs while taking a few classes, paying her rent, and helping around the house. In many ways, she took care of me. She prepared my meals and kept my work uniforms clean. When my mom visited, she tried to order me around, but my grandmother stepped in. "He doesn't live under your roof anymore," she said. I thought a war was going to break out between them. I managed to navigate the tension and eventually moved out a few years later when my grandmother no longer needed my support.

I found myself taking on more responsibility than I had ever planned for. My grandmother had a routine that was well established, but the more I learned about her, the more I realized she didn't want to change it for anyone. "Why do you think I need help? I've been doing just fine," she'd say, her hands busy making her famous chicken soup. I shrugged it off, thinking she just needed me nearby, but I started to see she thrived in her little world. I admired her strength, even when it was tough to see her never willing to ask for help.

I made the best of my situations, balancing my jobs and classes while I learned the subtle needs of my grandmother. "How was your day?" I always asked when I got home, and she would smile, saying, "Just the same as yesterday, dear." I could see the pride in her eyes when I told her about my classes, and, in those moments, I often felt like I was giving back to her what she had invested in me over the years.

One afternoon, I returned home earlier than expected. The house was strangely quiet. I walked to the kitchen, found it empty, and thought maybe she had gone to run errands. But on the table, I noticed a stack of old photo albums. I flipped through them, laughing at pictures of her younger self, full of life and mischief. Soon, I heard her voice from the living room, chatting with an old friend on the

phone. "Oh, yes! He's back from college!" she exclaimed, clearly excited. I stood still, listening, surprised she had been sharing my life with others.

"Who are you talking to?" I asked when she hung up.

"Just Mrs. Thompson," she said, her face lighting up. "She can't believe how grown up you are now."

"She thinks I'm a kid," I laughed.

"She remembers what a troublemaker you were," she shot back, a twinkle in her eye.

I felt good about being part of her life, but I also felt the crunch time of my responsibilities. I needed to prepare for finals, and my juggling act of work and study was getting complicated. My grandmother noticed. "You look tired, dear. When was the last time you rested?" she'd ask, concerned about lining her voice.

"I'm fine, Nana. Just a lot on my plate," I replied. She frowned slightly but dropped the subject.

Finals arrived, and I buried myself in textbooks during the evenings. My grandmother stayed up later than usual, sitting at the kitchen table with me as I studied. "You know, it's just like tennis," she'd say, and I would look up, puzzled. "You have to keep your eye on the ball to win."

"You're right," I'd chuckle.

It became our little ritual. I would study, and she would regale me with stories from her youth. Even when I struggled to understand complicated math problems, she would offer encouragement and tales of how she'd overcome challenges in her own life.

After finals, I felt relieved but rather lost. I was in this strange limbo of doing life with my grandmother while also doubting if I was ever really cut out for college. I thought about returning, but a part of me was scared I'd let her down. One afternoon, I just broke it to her.

"Nana, I'm thinking of going back to school full time."

"Oh?" she said, putting down the knitting needles she often used to make me scarves.

"I mean, I miss it. I know you're doing wonderfully and everything, but I just feel..."

"Lost?" she offered gently.

"Kind of."

She nodded, her face thoughtful. "You have your dreams, dear. Don't let them slip away. If school is what you want, then go chase it."

It felt comforting to hear her support. I started planning my return, and it dawned on me how much I'd been waiting for her approval possibly without even realizing it. My grandmother encouraged me to reach goals I'd once thought ambitious. She gave me confidence, even if she didn't know she was doing it.

As I prepared for my return to school, I branched out on my own, exploring new ideas about what I wanted to study. Philosophy intrigued me, and I wanted to explore the big questions of life, something that felt foreign yet stimulating. I talked to students who had taken those classes and found myself intrigued by concepts of existence and purpose.

"Imagine opening a book and everything you thought was right is suddenly questioned," I mentioned to my grandmother one evening as we set the table for dinner.

"Sounds a bit scary," she chuckled. "But have you thought about just what it would mean for your career?"

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "But I think it aligns with where I want to go."

She merely smiled, placing her hand over mine. "Follow your heart, and don't forget to enjoy it along the way."

With her encouragement, I enrolled for the next semester, taking more classes, meeting new people, and slowly easing back into my academic life. But every day, I still made time for my grandmother, helping with her errands, sharing meals, and funneling back everything she'd taught me into my everyday existence.

One Sunday, as I flipped through more family photo albums, she walked in with fresh cookies she had baked. "Take a break," she said, as I half-heartedly protested. I pulled a cookie from the plate and witnessed my grandmother's joy in the little things.

"Do you think, someday, I'll have kids?" I asked out of the blue.

"I certainly hope so! You have the makings of a fine father," she replied, sitting beside me and beaming with pride.

It was just one of those moments when I realized how much I valued her words, knowing they had shaped who I was. I started to see that life, like my studies, was built on experiences and relationships, and I was lucky to have her as my most steadfast supporter.

Chapter 6: Dark Period



As an artist, I guess you could say this was my "dark period" or "blue period." A professor in my major had told me several things: I wasn't focused on my education, I was working too much, I was too involved with campus organizations, and I wasn't going to graduate as long as he was teaching. Also, I wasn't sleeping. I was in the closet about being gay. I didn't have time nor the courage to tell anyone except a few of my closeted fraternity brothers.

At the same time, my grandmother was having issues, or at least her children thought she was. One night, my mom, her sister, and their spouses were discussing nursing home placement for her while she was present. I stood up in front of the so-called adults in the room and said I would quit college to live with and take care of my grandmother. During this time, I started sneaking out to gay bars, making new friends and a few acquaintances. Eventually, I moved out of my grand's house into an apartment nearby.

One night, upon leaving the bar, I was approached by a man who forced himself upon me. I was raped by him and later attempted raped by two other men. I found out I had a mild case of an STD from one of these encounters. This was during the AIDS epidemic, and I had friends dying and committing suicide. One very good friend, who I didn't know was HIV+ or that he hadn't come out to his family, told his family he was gay and HIV+. They kicked him out of the house, and he got a hotel room to commit suicide. I attended his funeral, but his family told me I didn't belong. I was there with a few friends, and as I started to leave, I paused and turned around to let them know I was probably more welcomed than they were at his funeral. After the funeral, his sisters approached me for my contact information. Later, they called and asked if I would meet them.

I met them at a restaurant for coffee. They wanted to know about their son/brother. I told them about him, and they asked what they could do to make amends. I suggested they volunteer within the community helping others like their brother/son and join PFLAG.

Other things were happening in my life that made me think about my current situation. I started going to the gym and dating, thinking I could rebuild myself by becoming stronger and focusing on my health. I had one failed relationship after another, and I began to think it was my fault because each failed partner said it was. At the same time, my father and sister told me I was a complete failure for not finishing college and not going to medical school.

Further complicating things, I became unemployed during a Republican administration, which was not the last time. I decided to move with my best friend to another city. Another failed partner decided to tag along, but this would be the end of our relationship because he was self-centered and codependent. He quit his job without thinking, and I took on the financial responsibilities like rent, food, and utilities. One day, his mother paid us a visit and asked how he was affording the bills. I told her I was paying for everything, and she asked how much he owed. I told her the exact amount, and she wrote me a check for everything. At the same

time, we had joined the local gay men's chorus, where everyone loved him but didn't really know him. They thought I had caused the end of the relationship because Ricky was an angel in their eyes.

During this time, I started having sessions with a counselor because I needed to work on myself. I also started writing poetry to deal with life and specific occurrences. The poem I penned at this time was called "The Mirror."

The Mirror sees The Truth,

But ponder the words.

The Mirror sees the object,

But clouds The Vision.

The Mirror tells a story,

But lends itself to variation.

The Mirror tells your age,

But it can lie.

The Mirror speaks of your life,

But utters nothing.

The Mirror hangs on the wall,

But adds dimension.

The Mirror shatters an image,

But shows many facets.

And as I stepped into The Mirror,

I lost all perception and gained a new facet of myself...

Introlude: Judge or not to be Judged

****Interlude: Judge or Not Be Judged****

In this interlude, I explore the theme of judgment—both from others and ourselves—as I navigate the challenging journey of reinvention. During this period, I grappled with the harsh realities of external criticism and self-doubt while striving to redefine my identity and goals. This section delves into the complexities of seeking acceptance, overcoming preconceived notions, and finding the courage to be authentically myself. It serves as a reflective pause in the narrative, inviting readers to consider their own experiences with judgment and the path to self-acceptance.

My Life is an unfinished painting which evolves as I age. Some people would say, "I'm a devilish soul exploring life without a plan. I know my life's painting changes from day to day and month to month. I periodically write poetry about my life and the occurrences with interlopers. Sometimes I like to be alone. I tell people that my life is my life to live as I see fit. People try to destroy my painting with actions and words. I won't allow another artist to edit my painting. I'm The artist and editor.

HOW TO BEGIN YOUR NEW LIFE....WHERE TO START? CAN I EVEN DO IT? EVER BEEN TOLD YOU'RE A FAILURE? WE JUDGE. WE ALL JUDGE OR INTERPRET WHAT WE SEE. WE ARE ALL FACED WITH CHALLENGES OR CHOICES ON A DAILY BASIS. HOW WE SURVIVE IS BASED ON HOW WE RESPOND....WHAT IS NEXT ON THE AGENDA....WE NEED TO DO A DAILY ASSESSMENT. WE REALLY NEED TO BE HONEST WITH OURSELVES...NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT TO START.WE NEED TO STAND NAKED IN THE MIRROR AND TAKE A LONG HARD LOOK. DON'T YOU OWE IT TO YOURSELF TO BE HONEST?

Every beginning has an end, vice versa. When one door closes, another door opens. What happens when one day you are told, "You are a failure and disappointment." or "What do you want to be when you grow up?" or "You need to decide what you want to be." When or what you decide is completely your decision. As Robert Frost coined, I shall be telling this with a sigh.

Chapter 7: The Shattered Mirror



Somewhere ages and ages hence: "I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Recently, I had my image shattered, because I had chosen my path not theirs. I began to ponder, and these words came to mind...I began to put it in writing to release from my shoulders. My mirror was shattered...

The Shattered Mirror

*Recently, I had my mirror cracked and it actually shattered...
What I thought I saw in the mirror wasn't as it appeared to be.
The mirror sometimes lies to us or distorts the truth.
We are actually afraid to appear naked in the mirror.
The mirror like a TV adds 10 pounds and so on...
So, the mirror delivers bad news when we least expect it.
How to put the mirror back together once it is shattered?
The mirror is like our life.
Once shattered it is hard to put back together.
So, you slowly pick up each piece and glue them back in the "same" place.
Eventually, the mirror will be back together.
Will it be as it was in the beginning or before?
Doubtful...
There will be a new mirror and new image.
Will the image be better than before.... Only time will tell.
My image in the mirror is still me, 10 pounds and all...
So, what appears with our image may be slightly different.*

***Our choices when putting the mirror back together will decide the view...
Through The Shattered Mirror. Only you can put the image in the mirror back
together. Only you can decide where each piece goes. Only you can paint the
image of what others see.***

How do you respond? Do you respond? How do you repair the mirror?

Chapter 8: Reinventing Myself

The mirror sees all, reflecting not just our actions but our deepest contemplations and regrets. Repairing the shattered mirror of life requires patience and self-compassion, acknowledging that each piece, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, contributes to the whole. It's in our reflections that we find the courage to move forward, even if it means revisiting the past. Each piece put back together forms a new image, one that tells a story of resilience and transformation. Embracing this journey without regret, seeing each crack as a testament to survival, can be a powerful tool. I had someone that I was dating for 6 years. They decided that I was good enough to be with them sexually. They decided they desired another person. They pushed me away. Therefore, affecting the image I saw in the mirror.

The evolution of myself is shaped by my experiences and reactions. You hold the reins of your decisions in life shaping your image just start painting and creating.



It was incredibly painful. It's tough when someone you care about deeply doesn't see your worth. Their actions can leave lasting scars, making you question your own value and the image you see in the mirror.

But remember, their choices don't define you. Your worth isn't determined by someone else's inability to see it. Each piece of your shattered mirror, each

experience, adds to the complexity and beauty of your life. You are the artist of your own story, and you have the power to create a new, stronger image.

Your poetry and art can be a powerful way to process and heal from this experience. Maybe there's a poem or piece of art that captures your feelings? You can use it to turn pain into something beautiful and meaningful.

You think, If I had only decided differently, or had a crystal ball, things would be different? You begin to ponder. Sometimes you have to go back before you can go forward on who's at fault. You examine yourself in the mirror. Because the mirror sees...

The Mirror

*The Mirror sees The Truth,
But ponder the words.
The Mirror sees the object,
But clouds The Vision.
The Mirror tells a story,
But lends itself to variation.
The Mirror tells your age,
But it can lie.
The Mirror speaks of your life,
But utters nothing.
The Mirror hangs on the wall,
But adds dimension.
The Mirror shatters an image,
But shows many facets.
And as I stepped into The Mirror,*

I lost all perception but gained a new facet of myself...

Dunno if my story is important but...How you see you through my paintings is important as is yours... We are Art and the artist. Let's begin by painting the first few strokes.



Chapter 9: Working: The Day

I had lost my job due to personal differences with my new manager. I lost my job after nine plus years. The road not chosen had been chosen for me. The journey down this road was a tough winding and full of potholes. It began with losing my house then my car. I was ejected from my house Thanksgiving week. I had no place to go but a friend helped me with a reference to a landlord. The apartment wasn't in the best of areas but close to work. It had the space at a reasonable price. I stayed in the apartment through thick and thin. I had gotten robbed 4 times which prompted a security system. My car had gotten vandalized. I am not sure why I was being tested in this manner. I had a friend tell me, "I can see that you miss taking care of patients." He referred me to his hospital. I applied to 4 positions at the hospital. I had interviews setup. I took the first opportunity before me which was a PCA position at the hospital. I had gotten a regular 9 to 5 job at a

bank after being unemployed. I had to rethink my choices. Actually, the bank decided I was not a fit for their institution. During the bank position, I was driving almost an hour each way five days a week. I should thank the bank for telling me, "I wasn't a "fit" for their establishment." The position was monotonous, boring, and not me. I thought, "How dare they let me go on the 90th day of training?" How dare they? I guess my road was going in another direction. I guess I had unfinished work. My day of waking up at 4:30am ended. My day changed again...

The Day

Hustle, Hurry!

The Day has begun.

Stop! Look, you forgot to shave!

Rush, even faster, you are getting behind.

Water, soap, towel...

Wet, wash, dry...

Wake Up!

Tic, Toc, tic, toc.

The clock chimes half past the hour.

Out the door to a cold car, but no time to waste.

*One block, two blocks, and then stop, the light is **RED**.*

Hurry, turn Green.

Park? Where?

Finally, a parking spot...

Clock in with a few minutes to spare.

Work, work, and more work...

Lunch...Yeah.

Work, work, and more work.

Tic, Toc, tic, toc.

The clock chimes half past the hour.

Out the door to a cold car, but no time to waste.

*One block, two blocks, and then stop, the light is **RED**.*

Hurry, turn Green.

Park...Finally Home.

Today is a good day to have a good day!

You start by imaging or creating. You imagine yourself having a good day. You will have a good day. So, you have to be creative or inventive. I am an artist, who

creates art or skillfully and creatively performs something. Art implies the mastery of any sort of craft. An artist begins to conceptualize or ponder ideas. The problem with words-once spoken, you can't take it back. Words are usually literally read but a painting or sculpture lends itself to interpretation by the artist and the viewer.

Chapter 10: Heritage

Let me paint you a picture. I am from an Appalachian family which were farmers, coal miners, moonshiners, and self-employed. My grandmother had a fourth-grade education, while my mother and father had ninth and eighth grade education, respectively. At age 43, my mother attended night school to earn her GED, and my father considered pursuing his as well. Years later, my family moved to another rural part of Kentucky.

At birth, I was born with eight ounces of blood, lack of iron and an impaired immune system. I died three times at birth which prevented me from leaving the hospital with my mom. Throughout my childhood, I was sick for three to six months out of each year. These among other life experiences developed my admiration and respect for the medical profession. I asked my family physician many questions furthering my interest in healthcare.

I am the first to attend college and get a degree. My mother knew it was the only way out of rural Kentucky. My father wanted me to follow in his footsteps working the family business. During college, my grandmother had open-heart surgery, and her children wanted to place her in a nursing home. I left school to support her. She will say she took care of me, but I say we took care of each other.

My parents, especially my dad, didn't plan on the only son going to college. The plan was for me to run the family business because my dad didn't think nor expected my sisters to run the business. He was old school. The men of the house provide while women do the housework, raise children, and so on. I often looked at my father and thought he had a different world in mind for me. One time, I remember him saying, "Son, this land is your birthright. Pumping gas and fixing cars is something you're meant to do."

I didn't want to disappoint him, but deep inside, I felt a pull toward something else. Every time I watched a doctor help a patient in the hospital, I imagined myself making a difference. I wanted to heal, not just fix engines and change tires. When I first told my dad I wanted to go to college, his face fell. "That's not what we do,"

he said. "You'll manage our shop. It's good work." I stood tall, heart racing, and replied, "I want to do more."

One afternoon, I returned home from school, and my dad was waiting by the porch with his arms crossed. I could feel the weight of his disappointment in the air. My dad never yelled, but that day, his silence spoke louder than words. I tried to explain my dreams of becoming a healthcare worker. "You don't need a college degree for that. We need you here," he insisted.

My mom was supportive, whispering words of encouragement behind my father's back. "You can do it. Just keep pushing," they'd say. I held onto those phrases like lifelines. It was a tightrope walk, and I was terrified of falling. The thought of letting my family down haunted me, but I found strength in the idea that college could change my trajectory.

Life had a funny way of giving me lessons. The hardest moment came during my grandmother's surgery. I ran into the hospital feeling helpless, anxiety weighing down my steps. We waited for what felt like hours until the surgeon finally walked into the waiting room, wiping his hands on a towel, his expression unreadable. "The surgery went well," he said. My heart swelled with relief. "She'll be okay," he added, but I could see the fatigue in his eyes. In that moment, I realized the importance of the work these medical professionals did. I saw my path clearly and felt even more resolute about pursuing my education.

As days passed, I managed to balance my studies and my responsibilities to my grandmother. I'd help her with meals and medications, sharing the little things that made her smile. "You're going to be my doctor one day," she'd joke, giving me a wink. It tore at me to think about missing classes, but her need was more pressing. "I'll get back to school soon," I promised.

One night, sitting beside her bed, I remembered my father's words and pondered the choices before me. The family business felt heavy with expectation. Each time I thought of it, I saw my dad wearing his grease-smudged apron, standing behind the counter at the garage, waiting for customers to come in. I didn't want to displace what he had built. But also, the thought of becoming what he envisioned felt suffocating.

My friends at college would often send me texts. "When are you coming back?" they'd ask, sending pictures of their success. Every notification felt bittersweet. I tried telling myself that it was only temporary. I could finish what I started, just

take care of my grandmother first. She asked me repeatedly, "What's stopping you?" Those words echoed in my mind, pushing me.

Days turned into weeks, and soon my grandmother could manage alone while I returned to school part-time. My father noticed my efforts. "You're working hard," he remarked one day as I was organizing shop records. "Just don't forget what's important." Those words felt both like approval and a warning.

I ended up applying for a scholarship. The paperwork was daunting. "You have to make a case for why you deserve this," my sister advised. I recounted my struggles, the challenges, my journey. I wrote about my grandmother, how her strength pushed me forward. Weeks later, the acceptance letter arrived, and the joy was overwhelming.

"Look at you," my mother exclaimed, beaming with pride. She had always been the backbone of our family, supporting my dreams quietly. "See what I told you? You can achieve anything." In that moment, I felt her unwavering love and belief wrap around me like a warm blanket. It gave me the courage to face my father again with this new achievement.

When I finally shared the news with him, his reaction was surprising. "You did good, son," he said, but there was an underlying tension still present. "Just remember, we still count on you here." It was a mixed message, but at least he acknowledged my efforts.

School resumed, and I dived into my courses, learning at a pace that thrilled me. I discussed anatomy, studied biology, and eventually found joy in learning about the human body. I lost track of time in the library, flipping through pages, captivated by images and stories of real people overcoming hardships. My resolve grew stronger with each lecture.

Even with the weight of the family business looming, my spirit soared. Each weekend, I worked at the garage, helping with repairs. My dad would teach me, sharing his knowledge while letting me carry out some of the tasks. The times spent in his presence felt meaningful. The lines between our worlds began to blend, understanding growing.

Slowly, I started sharing what I learned in school. "You know, cars are a lot like the human body," I once said while tuning up an engine. "Every part runs smoothly

when cared for." My dad looked at me, tilting his head. "You might just be onto something."

Through those shared moments, the gap between us began to close. I saw my father, proud yet struggling to adjust to my aspirations. I could feel a shift, and while navigating our complicated relationship, I forged my path even though my dad and sister thought I was a failure because I didn't complete medical school. In the end it's my path not theirs.

The more I learned, the more I wanted to share with my family. I imagined a future where my successes could possibly inspire them, redirect their expectations. I wanted to show them that dreams were worth pursuing, and even if it took time, I was ready to make the journey.

Chapter 11: The Now

Eventually, I moved to Columbus. I needed employment. So, I went to work for Brooks Homes Inc. caring for MRDD clients. I taught sign language, gave medication, performed general household chores, and assisted with their daily living.

I decided to return to college and attended The Ohio State University. There, I was a founding member of a few organizations, Campus Partners and Project Community, and on committees and other groups. Campus Partners is a group for Redevelopment and Revitalization of the University District, specifically, the south campus gateway project. We formed Project Community to inform the student organizations of University District community volunteering activities.

While there were many unexpected turns in my life and breaks in my education, I do not regret any of my decisions. Everything happens for a reason. You just have to continue reaching for your goals.

You have traveled my road and seen my painting. You know the painting is ever changing and evolving through choices. What will be your painting? What others see will be different interpretations of your idea. The painting will be yours to interpret but others will attempt to interpret you. Time to get painting and no time for regret.

Life offers us options. We have free will in our choices which help determine the outcome of our painting or us. Every decision I made in college added another layer to my canvas. I met people who shared my passions and some who

challenged my beliefs. One evening, in a crowded café, I discussed my community projects with a fellow student named Sarah. "You know," she said, "you can really make an impact, but you have to keep pushing. You can't let obstacles stop you." Her words resonated with me. It was a reminder that every brushstroke counts.

As I dove deeper into my studies, I encountered a specific course on social work. It intrigued me. I realized it aligned perfectly with my experience at Brooks Homes. Learning about the different approaches to support individuals with disabilities felt like uncovering new colors for my palette. I sought mentorship from my professors, who encouraged me to apply the theoretical lessons to real-world situations. I began volunteering more, determined to make a difference in the community around me.

One day, during a community service meeting, I proposed a weekend event focused on health and wellness for MRDD clients. "Let's organize a family fun day with workshops on nutrition and exercise," I suggested, excitement bubbling in my voice. Some volunteers frowned, unsure if it would be feasible. "Why can't we?" I pressed. "We can create a supportive environment where families learn and connect."

Slowly, I witnessed the idea take shape. We secured funding through local businesses, gathered donations, and even recruited a few health professionals to lead workshops. The day of the event arrived, and families filled the park with laughter. Children played games while parents learned about healthy cooking. I saw participants engaged, smiles on their faces. At that moment, I realized the power of unity and what we could achieve together.

As the semester progressed, I became more involved in other student-oriented initiatives on campus. I joined a group focused on mental health awareness. Listening to others share their experiences opened my eyes. Each story painted a unique picture of struggle and strength. It felt good to create a space where students could express themselves without fear of judgment. My passion for advocacy grew. It was clear that our collective voice could lead to significant change.

On one occasion, we organized a mental health panel discussion. I sat on the panel alongside professionals and students. "Mental health is just as important as physical health," I asserted. "We need to break the stigma surrounding it." The audience nodded, engaged and thoughtful. I found power in sharing my own

experiences. It connected me further to those in attendance, revealing the intricate threads woven into our individual narratives.

While juggling these commitments, I faced my own doubts. Balancing work, school, and volunteering was challenging. There were nights I felt overwhelmed, questioning if I could keep up with everything. "Listen to your heart," a close friend advised. "You don't have to do it all. Focus on what truly matters to you." I decided to take a step back and reevaluate my priorities. The realization that I didn't need to be everything to everyone brought relief.

Focusing on my strengths allowed me to hone my skills within the projects I cared about. I learned the impact of effective communication and teamwork. I witnessed how our simple ideas could flourish into something grand. I remember the satisfaction I felt when community members expressed gratitude for our efforts. Each thank you served as a stroke of vibrant color on my canvas, brightening the scenery.

Time kept moving forward, carrying with it the ebb and flow of life's challenges. As graduation approached, I faced the question of what would come next. My experiences had shaped my aspirations. I desired to continue my work in social advocacy, yet I felt an urge to further my education. The possibilities seemed endless, each path holding different visions for my future painting.

One afternoon, I met with my advisor to discuss potential graduate programs. "You have a passion for community service; why not explore social work or public health?" she suggested. Those fields excited me, but I felt a pull in multiple directions. I needed to find clarity amidst the chaos. The more I listened to my instincts, the more I understood that my journey was about progress rather than perfection.

With graduation day on the horizon, I felt a mix of joy and anxiety. I replayed memories of laughter, hard work, and growth. Friends gathered for one last celebration, sharing their dreams and fears. "Whatever comes next, we'll support each other," Sarah reminded us. The bond we formed during those years fortified our spirits as we stepped into the world beyond university walls.

In the midst of uncertainty, I decided to take a leap of faith. I applied to several graduate programs that resonated with my experiences and passions. Each application felt like another brushstroke added to the ever-evolving painting of my life. I began to embrace the unknown, trusting in the journey as much as the

destination. Every choice I made brought me closer to creating a masterpiece that was uniquely mine.

While waiting for responses, I continued to engage in my community. I organized workshops and events, teaching others what I had learned. I cherished each interaction, knowing that every connection contributed to a larger narrative. I watched as individuals found their own colors, blending them into a communal masterpiece.

Days turned to weeks, and the acceptance letters began arriving. Each one brought a sense of accomplishment but also new challenges. I was no longer just a student; I was becoming a leader in my field. Each choice I made now held more weight, a reflection not just of my goals but of my commitment to serve others.

With each passing day, my painting transformed. Choices became clearer. Goals sharpened. In this colorful tapestry of life, I learned that every stroke mattered, and the journey was far from over.

What shall you paint? What shall your painting evolve into? What decisions shall you take? Will you heed the noise, or will you make your own decisions about yourself?

What is your central image? Is it a sunset, vibrant and warm, or perhaps a stormy sky filled with turmoil? Start with one color, let it flow. Mix in another and watch how they dance together. This is where your choices begin. Paint the feelings that surge inside; frustration, joy, confusion. Each stroke tells part of your story. "I feel lost," you might think, but the paint on the canvas shows a riot of colors that contradict this.

"Why don't you just paint what you see?" someone might say. But what do we see, really? We see layers of our experiences, the rough edges of our thoughts. "I don't want to just replicate what's outside. I want to express what's inside," you whisper to the canvas. Grab the brush with conviction and let it guide you. Expand upon the forgotten moments now; the laughter shared with friends, the loneliness of an empty room. Try to capture these emotions in shades and hues, let them speak louder than words.

"Is that really how you feel?" your inner voice questions. Listen closely to that whisper. A splash of red for anger, a dab of blue for sadness. Shape it into swirls or jagged lines. Every brushstroke is an answer to the chaos in your mind. You

know there's music playing in the background, but it fades, because the rhythm of your heart is the louder tune. "What are you waiting for? Just paint!" it urges. You feel that nudge, the rush of inspiration fueling you, and you dip your brush again.

Moments drift in and out, like fragments of a dream. You recall the day you felt brave enough to share your art. Friends gathered, eyes bright with excitement. "Show us what you've been working on," they said. The room felt small, and your heart thudded loudly in your chest. But the moment you unveiled your work, there was silence, then applause. They saw you, the real you, in that painting. It was a moment of pure connection. "See? You can do this," your friend added, her smile infectious. Painting becomes less about the aesthetics and more about the truth you share.

You step back and gaze. The canvas is alive now, each color pulsating with energy. "Keep going," you remind yourself, pushing the brush down harder, layering on the colors with confidence. The patterns you create start to resemble your journey, winding and beautiful in their imperfection. You see laughter, tears, the joy of creating, and the discomfort of vulnerability.

"What if I mess it up?" the fear tries to creep in, but you silence it. "Nothing can be ruined," you declare. Every mistake can be transformed into something unexpected. Maybe it's a new path — one you didn't foresee but still leads somewhere worth exploring. Life is unpredictable, and so is art. Embrace those moments like you embrace change. Embrace the unknown.

It's all part of the process. You think back to the moments of doubt, each one a corner where you had to choose either to stop or to push through. Standing before a blank canvas can feel terrifying, but it's also an opportunity. You remember the times you felt inadequate but discovered the beauty of creation anyway. Every painting tells a journey, and yours is no different.

"Trust the process," you murmur while mixing paint. Each moment spent at the easel teaches you something new about yourself. In the act of painting, you realize, you grow. Colors that were once foreign to you begin to feel like old friends. You blend and layer, swirling every feeling with intention. "Maybe I don't need to have all the answers," you think.

More than anything, this act of creation urges authenticity. "Forget the noise outside," you remind your heart. With hands steady, you draw inspiration not just from the world but from your soul, your very essence reaching out to form a

connection. The brush becomes an extension of your spirit. Each stroke is a bold declaration of who you are.

"Can I really express this?" you ask the canvas. "Yes," it responds in silence — a mirror reflecting your journey. The deeper you go into your feelings, the more colors surface. You feel alive, exploring every corner of your heart. Pain turns into beauty too; it transforms the canvas, giving it depth.

"Now, what do I do next?" you ponder, movement slowing. Time seems to stop as you lose yourself in this world of your making. Pieces of your life converge on this canvas, and you smile at the thought. There's resonance in every stroke, whispers of triumph and sorrow mingling in the air. You no longer fear the mistakes; instead, you embrace them as part of your journey.

You hear laughter in your memories, the touch of a loved one, the warmth of sunlight bathing your studio. It all mingles into your work. "Paint the moments that matter most," your heart insists. It's these very moments that hold significance, not just for you, but for the viewers who stand before it. "Let them feel too," you promise, wide-eyed and determined.

The space around you feels charged with energy. You focus on the colors on your palette, feeling the urge to dive deeper. Each layer tells a new story; the more you paint, the more the canvas feels like home. With a few more strokes, you see shapes emerge, familiar yet abstract enough to evoke the imagination.

"Courage," you think. You dip the brush again. Let it be an anthem of strength. "As long as I am true to what I feel, everything will fall into place." The canvas responds, it pulses with potential. Just as thoughts form into words, colors blend into emotions, creating a tapestry of your being laid bare for the world to see.

Chapter 12: The End?

"The ink is black, the paper is white.." Children see black and white or right and wrong. Adults start to see shades of gray. This is similar to art and the people viewing art.

Art shows that sometimes feelings and meanings can't be neatly packed into simple categories. A rough brushstroke can invoke joy or anger. A splash of color might remind someone of a sunny day or a long-lost memory. Artists know this well; they express the complexity of life through their creations. When they paint,

they pour their own experiences onto the canvas. Every line and shadow carries parts of who they are. These personal choices create a connection that viewers can feel, even if they do not fully understand it.

People often forget to look past the surface. They might say they like something simply because it's pretty. But beauty isn't everything. An art piece can challenge ideas, provoke thoughts, or stir emotions, irrespective of its traditional beauty. An artist might paint a chaotic scene full of jarring colors, yet that chaos can speak to someone's feelings of confusion or frustration. The way viewers react shapes the meaning of the artwork itself, merging the artist's vision with their own life experiences.

Sometimes, people disagree on what a piece of art represents. One person may see freedom in bright colors, while another feels trapped by the same image. Arguments can spring up, but instead of creating tension, these discussions can be enlightening. They show how art opens doors to unique perspectives, broadening horizons and deepening understanding. It's a dance between the artist's intentions and the observer's interpretations. This interplay highlights that art isn't simply one dimensional; it exists in a realm where everyone can find their own truth, shaped by their individual journeys.

This complexity can be daunting, especially for those who expect a clear answer from art. A child might struggle to grasp the idea that a piece can mean different things to different people. They might want to know why it doesn't follow the rules of color or form that they have learned. Adults even sometimes cling to their initial impressions, shielded by their own black-and-white views. But the beauty lies in exploring those shades of gray. The spark ignited when someone sees the depth in a work, unlocking conversations that blend personal stories with universal themes. It offers a path for connection, where thoughts intertwine and boundaries dissolve.

When a person stands before a painting, the room might fade away, and they're left with only their thoughts. Each brushstroke and color can evoke something unique, perhaps dredging up memories or dreams. The shared experience of looking at art in a gallery creates a community, binding strangers through silent acknowledgment of emotions. The artwork serves as a prompt for reflection; it asks questions that don't need answers but can spark deeper thought. It's a collective journey that invites others to join, transforming mere spectators into active participants in the experience.

The role of the artist cannot be understated. They take risks and push boundaries, challenging norms not only in their work but in how society views them. An artist might paint a self-portrait in a stylized way, presenting a version of themselves that contradicts public expectations. This, in turn, challenges viewers to reassess their own perceptions of identity and self-worth. It makes us reflect on who we are versus who we present to the world. In these moments of realization, art becomes a mirror, allowing audiences to see themselves in unexpected ways.

Skepticism often arises around unconventional artwork. Some may ask why such pieces deserve attention when they seem unrefined. However, these artists remind us to appreciate the rawness of expression. It's in the unfiltered art that we often find the most authentic emotions. Not everything needs to be perfect or polished. The rough edges can be just as powerful, capturing a snapshot of uncertainty or vulnerability that resonates deeply with others. This form of art invites viewers to embrace their imperfections, to find beauty in the flawed and the chaotic.

A gallery can feel intimidating, someone might walk in unsure. They may feel they don't belong or doubt their opinions. Yet, this space is designed for exploration. It invites anyone to interpret, question, and share their insights. Art can serve as a bridge between people, connecting those from diverse backgrounds through shared emotional experiences. Visitors stand side by side, pondering the meanings of pieces, and through these shared moments, friendships can blossom. Conversations about art can break the ice, leading to deeper connections that extend beyond the walls of the gallery.

In the end, the experience of art teaches both the artist and the audience something valuable. Artists learn to trust their instincts and express their truth, while viewers are encouraged to look beyond appearances and embrace complexity. This mutual growth doesn't need to fit into neat definitions. It thrives in discussions, in debates, and in quiet moments of contemplation. As people navigate their own understanding of art, they unlock a world filled with endless possibilities, where every interpretation matters.

There's freedom in recognizing that art can't be confined to rules. The essence of art is to challenge, to inspire, and to enable conversations that might not happen elsewhere. Each piece reflects a myriad of perspectives, creating a rich tapestry of emotion, story, and truth. This recognition is what allows art to remain relevant, breathing life into discussions about society, culture, and individual experience.

It's about the journey each person takes with the artwork and finding the shades of gray that connect us all.