

CECILE

Patrick Michael Denny

Cecile enjoyed the solitary repose of her new home. Gone were the multitude of people and responsibilities, dulled by unrelated events, ushered through vignette after vignette of endless days. Children were disappointing, husbands were disappointing, even the few items that she treasured as unique became as useless and un-glossy as an old weathered piano unable to connect mallet to string. The retirement home was a permanent change and this meant a great deal more to her than any of life's milestones, captured by pointless photographs too muffled to be saved. Preferring to leave behind the memories of her old life, she burned most of her pictures before she arrived at St. Josephine's, choosing to fill her bags and dresser drawers with the little sketches that she'd become accustomed to creating when she felt nervous or afraid. The past three years without Gilbert had gradually allowed her fear to give way to small paintings that she would work on furiously, hours at a time, sometimes unaware that it was a different sun that greeted her back porch. Cecile spent her time trying to learn all forms and methods of placing drawing implements upon a surface. There were never people in the images she

drew, instead she focused on drawing silly little half-animal and half-fairy figurines that were weighed down by too much movement or color.

Unsure of their mother's sanity, Cecile's children removed her from their childhood dwelling and entrusted her to the comfortable confines of St. Josephine's Home of Elderly Care, an upstart living facility that touted both the religion of their childhood and the breadth of their dead father's pocketbook. Guaranteeing a population of sedentary, socially-equal inhabitants, and a guilt-free staff of professionals, St. Josephine welcomed its newest member with a slightly larger than normal room and a clear window that faced the river.

Cecile began to awaken for the first time in what had seemed like a thousand frozen years. Colors now became her only focus, and she started to purchase them in large amounts, undaunted by their weight or price. The tidy stipend that her late husband's retirement had afforded was slowly eaten away by the obsession to create layer upon layer of materials and colored sticks.

In her previous life, Cecile hadn't been fascinated by art. She'd liked museums, but not the ones containing artwork, and had never studied, beyond a passing glance, the works of famous painters, sculptors or photographers. Her intrinsic gift was similar to a person that was naturally funny, but didn't tell jokes, and preferred horror films to comedies. It never occurred to her that she was an artist. She simply needed to focus all of her energy on something, and art was the medium that gave her the most pleasure. She didn't expect others to acknowledge her work, and at first that expectation was met—unless you take into account the

logistics the St. Josephine's staff created to help monitor her furious periods of creativity. The administration was very attentive to her workflow and made sure that someone was checking in on her every ninety minutes, lest she run out of sketching material and resort to discovering other less artistic tools of expression. In addition to this monitoring, someone would take her to a Michaels every week or so to load up on relatively non-toxic colors, hues, and viscosities, hoping to assuage her ever-increasing appetite to explore color, craft, and every scribble that came into her head.

On one Sunday afternoon, when a recently-hired caregiver was distracted by the ever-wandering Mr. Patterson, Cecile was left alone for a staggering two hundred and six minutes. When the nurse did return to Cecile's room, she found the poor woman exhausted, but pleased with her work. The official weight of the drawing she had created came in just shy of two pounds, and could be viewed from the side as well as the front, in a type of topographical sediment that showed its growth in minutes rather than years. Layer upon layer of crayon crusted on top of each other, featured the melted wax of over 613 Crayola crayons. Upon first glance, what looked to be just a solid onyx of black, transformed into an intimate complexity that reflected fifteen different shades of color. Cecile focused on this type of foundation, and soon cookie sheets were employed to support the depths of her layered masterpieces.

Although the local population at St. Josephine's Home of Elderly Care was amused and fascinated at the speed by which Cecile created, the administrative

staff became unsure of whether or not it was within their best interest to continue supporting the fevered pace of her artistic output. Two growing concerns were raised with regards to the shrinking amount of space afforded to her, and the difficulty that the staff had navigating through canvas after canvas of crusted creations. At first they tried limiting the number of crayons she had access to, but this only led to her pilfering pens and other writing utensils shared by the staff and occupants of the public spaces. They then tried to eliminate the crayons all together, replacing them with water colors, but this led to an unsanitary situation where she was able to mix that day's stolen scraps of leftover food with the seemingly washed out paints, producing work that attracted more bugs than appreciative onlookers. Finally, the staff gave up and started looking for additional spaces throughout the campus to store her work.

Coincidentally, at that time the Archdiocese came under pressure to start releasing certain real-estate assets in order to lessen its ever increasing tax burden. When the proposal to expand the campus of St. Josephine's was made public, some of the gossiping residents questioned whether the new design was a direct response to Cecile's burgeoning collection of paintings. The immediate result was that there would be more room for her work and Cecile would no longer be encumbered by institutional walls. The artist was finally left alone to create, finding a peace her former existence had never afforded.

Cameras were not allowed into the St. Josephine's Home of Elderly Care, not that the occupants of its recently renovated rooms would have much use for them.

The “rule” had been created several years before Cecile’s residency, when a then-lucid Mr. Jovakanich fancied himself an older Hugh Hefner and decided that a “Playboy for very mature audiences,” would be the focal point of his twilight years. Publishing a monthly magazine was not the issue for Mr. Jovakanich, as he was employed as a photographer in the tabloid industry for forty-two years. The great hurdle for this new endeavor would be to find an audience for the rag, and more importantly, a professional staff with which he could entrust his vision. A copy editor, assignment desk supervisor, and photo editor were quickly found, but it was the position of assistant photographer that became the most coveted hire of the fledgling skin rag. Gradually, after months and months of trial tests, printing samples, color swatches and hard-nosed reporting, the first issue of the cleverly named *LangZyne* quickly jumped in front of National Geographic as the most sought after glossy-paged binding in the five-borough campus that made up St. Josephine’s.

Mr. Jovakanich was by all reports a gentleman, but within the elderly population there developed a significant amount of judgment upon his editorial practices. Ironically, it was his loneliness that had inspired the magazine’s creation, and although most would later admit that they understood his desire to have companionship, it was the internal jealousy of those who had stopped even trying to remember the past that caused him so much consternation. Almost immediately a tersely-worded condemnation of *LangZyne* was plastered across the front page of the *Residence Review*. Blindsided by such a steep criticism of his work, Frederick

agreed to an exclusive interview with RR's editor, Peggy Wiggins, a devout Christian who found the use of all thesauri to be literary folly.

The published piece was viewed as more of a character assassination than a measured dialogue between two literary giants. Outrage led to sweet Mrs. Basile uncharacteristically calling out Ms. Wiggins for her hatchet job against Frederick. A new will and testament was drawn up stipulating that her centerfold spread in issue 13 be proudly displayed at her funeral, despite the objections of her three policeman sons and district attorney daughter. The newly-minted St. Josephine's Ethics and Best Practices Board was formed and immediately implemented a strict "No Camera Policy" two days after Lola's burial. Even though the scandal faded from the conversations within bingo circles and pudding night parties, the rule about cameras held firm, and no one seemed to mind looking at older photographs that reminded them of better times and fewer wrinkles.

The invention of the camera-phone put the St. Josephine's Ethics and Best Practices Board in a quandary, as more and more children of its residents demanded that their parents carry a mobile phone, all of which possessed this new technology. With proper hesitation, an amendment was passed to allow the use of cellular phones with photographic capability, but a recommendation from the three-person board stipulated that indecent or immoral images would not be tolerated. This in no small measure changed the life of Cecile, and the rest of the inhabitants at the St. Josephine Home of Elderly Care.

Cecile had finished her best friend's picture three days before Julie passed. It wasn't a portrait of Mrs. Spitzerton, rather a jumble of things that Julie had spoken of frequently throughout their friendship. No one knew for sure what all of the caked-on colors and scrawls meant, not even Cecile. To a person, no one was displeased by the rather large work, and the staff commented on how comforting it was to have a piece of Julie left, as she was greatly adored for her ability to find the little things beneath a person's rough edges. They asked Cecile if she would like to have the work displayed at Julie's memorial service, but she declined, not wishing to contribute to "the departed worship," a phrase that Julie had coined and was fond of using. Cecile was also worried that she might be obligated to attend the service if her painting was there, a commitment both Julie and she had released each other from when the topic of the after-life came up, usually during Tuesday night's questionable dessert choice.

It wasn't until several days after the burial that she was approached by one of Mrs. Spitzerton's relatives, a rather short woman in both hair length and patience, who inquired if she may take a look at the mysterious painting that everyone had been talking about. At first Cecile agreed, her daily routines left her unfamiliar with casual conversation or requests of such nature. However, after sixteen phone calls within a two-day period, Cecile reflected upon her answer and promptly changed it. She found that she grew to rather dislike the little woman with cauliflower glasses who repeated herself far too often to be interesting. Cecile, of

course, did not express this decision openly, rather she hid behind a bout of confusion and pretended to not know where she had left the painting. This was a great disappointment to Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff, whose marriage to a wealthy stock exchanger had given her a great deal of financial authority and purchasing power in the modern art world. Within two weeks, Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff donated three hundred and fifty thousand dollars to St. Josephine's in honor of her aunt, and in return was allowed to sub-rent her aunt's former room in the hope that Cecile would eventually remember where the "Aunt Julie Work" was located. Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff had on retainer several professional appraisers who worked with successful modern artists of this decade and decided to send her personal assistant, a Ms. Jane Alpernia, to help facilitate its discovery. After three days onsite, one of the newer staff members located the painting, and soon thereafter, darkly dressed strangers started arriving at the retirement home, setting up professional grade equipment with which to work. The Aunt Julie painting was impressive to the three professionals who took great care in assessing the artwork. An entire conservator package was delivered to the retirement home, and a curation license was issued as a way to protect Cecile's work from outside interests. The ensuing three years are the most well-documented period of Cecile's life, but for her, the only thing that she enjoyed was her friendship with Jane.

There has been much written about Ms. Alpernia's role in Cecile's rise to fame, but very little in the way of personal introspection. In a forward that Jane wrote after Cecile's passing, she began with the emotion she experienced upon

discovering her work, “I felt as though I had emerged from the great darkness into a brilliant sun.” It was not her appreciation of the work that first endeared the two women to each other, rather a choice of hairstyle, a slight ponytail worn much the same way Cecile had braided her own hair decades before. Familiarity had become a staple in the artist’s life, and although Jane reminded Cecile of herself in some ways, their immediate friendship was sparked from the vacancy left by Julie. As Cecile’s trust of Jane grew, so did the caretakers’, and they quietly opened up rooms that had been set aside for Cecile’s work. After several years of curation, they found it easier to amass her collection behind locked doors, lest Cecile enter the room and spend hours organizing and reorganizing each piece into a collage of its own.

Cecile's popularity started as Jane began taking photos of her artwork and uploading images to Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff, unaware that one of her social media applications automatically sent those same pictures to an artist’s forum she subscribed to. At first the stream was viewed as some type of hoax, a materialized textile project that had gone wrong. Aside from the complexity, there was the sheer number of pieces that seemed to flow from an almost endless phantasm of mantled paint. Comments began to multiply on the site, but were soon replaced by more images, and the thread moved back and forth so often that a gibberish of reactions spattered across the screen, making any type of dialogue about the work impossible to follow. This only heightened the interest in the work, as more and more critics, artists and casual peepers tried to ingest a meal that they could not

visually afford. Immediately, users started sharing these images to other sites, inspiring what was eventually coined the “Golden Years Rush.” Hundreds of art dealers and collectors began the quest to find the artist who had not realized she was changing the world.

By chance, Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff’s nephew was visiting and showed her the electronic frenzy surrounding her assistant. Within two phone calls Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff was whisked away on her private jet, and once again entered the sleepy village of part-time participants just as the sun peaked above the man-made lake. Outside of the gates lay a rabble of news reporters and internet thrill-seekers that very much resembled the scene of Floyd Collins’ Great Sand Cave, days before his untimely demise. Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff made her way through the onslaught of galleries, goons and gerents, and immediately called for a meeting of the St. Josephine’s Board of Directors to discuss a formalized method by which she could exhibit Cecile’s work. Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff entered that meeting with the fury of four hundred and fifty thousand dollars and demanded that she be allowed to purchase not only her aunt’s piece, but all of the work that was created in her aunt’s company. A second meeting was scheduled for the following Tuesday in order to allow the proper amount of time to get the artist’s permission. Cecile refused to allow any more than five paintings be sold, and rejected any discussions concerning the sale or distribution of her art. This of course, only heightened the public’s desire to possess her work, and once they found out

that five paintings had been released and sent immediately to the Museum of Modern Art for an unannounced viewing, a flurry of websites and social media pages were created to monitor her work.

History has demonstrated that although Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff unwittingly lit the spark beneath Cecile's career, one may argue that the rocket had already been built and would have been greatly admired, even if it never ascended into the night sky. Because the five paintings were immediately publicized, and the MOMA world premiere announced during a Super Bowl commercial, the demand with which the world longed for more access shot that rocket to the sun and back, fifty-fold. Cecile's name was expanding beyond the confines of the art world, and into the water coolers and late-night comedy routines of the everyday man. In fact, it was the everyman quality of the five paintings that spurred a cottage industry of homemade merchandise that aimed to mimic the intricacy of the work, (unfortunately, five-inch thick mouse pads did not do as well as the Etsy crowd had hoped). This fervor infected everyone, and it could be said that Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff. had become quite engrossed with the envelope of notoriety that came with being the sole benefactor of the more complicated Simone Hantai. She became so enamored by the movement that it started to eat away at her when the public demanded more work, and she was left powerless to deliver it. Several lawyers were used to try and persuade all parties involved to release more of the paintings, and Mrs. Spitzerton-Hausoff leaned heavily upon her assistant to talk some sense into the artist. She argued unsuccessfully that it was Jane's moral duty

to set up some type of painting exchange with Cecile, so that the museums of the world might celebrate the creations of a master artist while there was still time. This proved to be a rather tedious rationale in a place where the passing of the clock was measured in pudding cups, not grand gestures. Eventually, even M.H.S. recognized the futility of her efforts, and simply made Jane redundant, opening the door for another benefactor to enter Cecile's life.

Monsignor Apaletto had shared only a handful of meals with the Pontiff, and was delighted that he had chosen a tiny village outside of Genoa for their next dinner together. After the formality of the security detail had passed, Dominic brought to the Pope's attention some of the unusual events inside of a retirement home within their jurisdiction. The Americans, while very successful at managing the real estate portion of their affairs, had failed to recognize the artistic accomplishments of a particular resident and was in need of their guidance. Monsignor Apalleto had spent most of his religious life studying the great works of art throughout the Church's history, and recognized the existential link between Cecile's paintings and God.

The Catholic church does not formally recognize their connection to the art world, nor the amount of money they have placed in the hands of 'benefactors' who are instructed to provide starving artists with the morsels of worldly sustenance needed to fuel works of creation. Even when these artists inadvertently produce pieces that attack the Church, the direct result has always been a steady up-

tick in membership. Art as intellect, art as distraction, art as comfort, art as commonality had been used by the Church for centuries to create a direct pathway to God. The Monsignor found this simplicity in the five pieces at MOMA, and decided that what the world needed was an unencumbered way of absorbing the work.

After a few weeks of preparations and phone calls, Jane was informed that she would be granted residential rights at St. Josephine's, and asked if she would be willing to accept the dual position of Artistic Curator and Special Events Coordinator at the retirement home. Jane readily accepted, and a new chapter of religious and artistic cohabitation began. Quietly, the Church began to send several priests to St. Josephine's to assist Ms. Alpernia in organizing the vast rooms of Cecile's work, and to set up a proper Bingo room that everyone could enjoy. After she had scheduled several outings to the Botanical Gardens, the Symphony Orchestra and a new fondue restaurant eager for the afternoon crowds, Jane turned her attention towards facilitating Cecile's growth as a painter. Although she had been freed from the responsibility of acting as the artist's agent, the public's obsessive compulsion to extract more work made it necessary for her to address the many problems that arose. Despite the retirement home's best efforts to shield its occupants and staff from the media, the genie had been let out of the bottle. Although the residents feigned indifference to the mounting scrutiny, they secretly felt an obligation to help Cecile's career in any way the newspapers and internet memes suggested. Trips to Michaels and other art supply stores increased three-

fold as staff members were told by experts on CNN, NBC and THE ART CHANNEL that their contribution to Cecile's work was similar to the person who brought Picasso the gentle blues and dollops of green during his first phase of existence. Many of Cecile's cohabitants felt that their generation had lacked focus and missed out on giving the world a signature line that history could make its mark upon. Cecile was their call to action, and to say that they went a bit above and beyond would be an understatement. Jane was shocked to find that after several funerals at St. Josephine's, obituaries mentioned how their subject's passing would free up a room to store Cecile's artwork, as the board elected not to fill the room vacancies. Through all of this, Cecile continued to work diligently, unaware of the throngs willing to pay six or seven figures for just a wisp of what she was creating.

The reader must also realize that although this account of Cecile's catalog appears brief and somewhat cursory, the final number of paintings that Cecile created was enough to fill the most publicized art galleries in three major cities, her favorite being Chicago, as it was one of the few urban centers that she had visited as a child. What was most amazing was not the breadth of her talent, but rather the humanity with which she dispatched her gift. Over the next year Jane and Cecile became fast friends, discussing their lives, the work they now controlled, and a sense of importance that began to be realized in each other's presence. For the first time in Cecile's life, there was an ease about her, a confidence that she had never allowed herself to enjoy. Her entire life had been about the

other people who populated her existence, and now that those people had been replaced by slabs of colored virtuosity, she was free to focus on her own contributions. Jane had become a pair of glasses, enabling clear vision which swept beyond her nose and into the vast world that heralded Cecile as something unique. As with many things, however, Cecile started to change, and Jane noticed that she might be fading in some incongruous manner. It wasn't her outward appearance or demeanor that had shifted, but rather her concentration. Cecile started to fixate on "repairing" the visual grammar of the work in a way that suggested to Jane that something was changing. Although just as energetic and rich in its inception, the execution was missing an attentiveness that everyone had recognized as genius. A doctor's visit confirmed the worst.

In television, movies, and short stories alike, there is a noble sensibility that consumes the dying painter; a frenzied sort of focus that allows them to create their greatest work in the face of their final abstraction. This is not what happened because Cecile had no interest in prolonging her work. Someone suggested that she should name the compositions, but this overwhelmed her to the point where she thought it best to just give the paintings numbers, a chronological record if nothing else, a practical way to enjoy her final days without getting bogged down by the vocabulary of others. The St. Josephine staff and inhabitants set about to help her with the task, and all told, there were some thirty-four hundred and seventeen pieces in all. Cecile seemed quite pleased with that number, and was even more delighted to know that she had skipped numbers two hundred and six, and

three hundred forty-nine on purpose, the only really eccentric indulgence that she employed under the grand title of Master Artist. It was with great consideration that Jane kept Cecile's health questions under wraps and talked to the outside world as though everything was continuing as usual, seasons and all.

The only occurrence of note happened on a Tuesday, three months before Cecile's passing, when she asked Jane for the yellow pages. Later that day she was visited by a man who brought with him a small briefcase, and stayed with her for several hours. It was obvious to Jane that Cecile must be making funeral arrangements, a topic that would come up from time to time when she spoke of her late husband, or on occasion mentioned her children, with whom she had attempted to contact after years of isolation. She asked Jane to make sure that they were the first ones notified at her passing on July twenty-eighth, three months into her seventy-seventh year.

Jane was also entrusted with Cecile's memorial service and was surprised to find that not one arrangement had been made, nor one iota of text could be found on what Cecile desired for her funeral service. She, as she had often done, trusted in the decision making of her latter life to the people who housed and homed her, and truth be told, she hadn't really given much thought to her body after she left it. As a result of her lapse of specificity, the staff at St. Josephine's went above and beyond all expectations for her remembrance.

All in all, the afternoon felt very much like one of her paintings, layer upon layer of complementary colors, something that Cecile would have constructed

herself, which is all anyone really wanted to accomplish. Jane was at a loss when the man she assumed to be the funeral director showed up at the service and started handing out small envelopes to everyone, seventy-eight in all. Inside each envelope was an appointment slip with a time scheduled over the subsequent four weeks. The first meeting would be the following Monday, which allowed several days for speculation and intrigue. It didn't take long for everyone to figure out that Cecile had created a will, and that she had left them all some consideration before her passing.

As a follow-up to her original article, Lisa Manzo of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* delivered a five-page essay that would be published on the front pages of arts syndication columns across the United States:

“ARTIST SHARES WITH THOSE WHO INSPIRED HER.”

On the third of August, local resident and internationally celebrated artist Cecile Livingston was honored upon her death by the residents of the St. Josephine Home of Elderly Care, located in Kirkwood, Missouri. Upon the completion of the festivities, everyone was invited to an individual reading of Mrs. Livingston's last wishes, where each person's inspirational role was mentioned specifically. When we last visited St. Josephine's, Mrs. Livingston's art was heralded by critics and collectors alike as one of the truly unique voices to rise up through the scene in several decades. The explosion of artwork she created,

some three thousand four hundred and seventeen fine art pieces, was so sought after by private collectors and large museums that the true worth of the entire collection has been estimated in the hundreds of millions. Some of the catalog has been inherited by her immediate family, but the most prized canvases have been left to each member of the St. Josephine residents and staff, netting each a potentially significant sum of money. The only note from Mrs. Livingston's will stated that she "wanted them to be able to retire from their retirement if they so desired, or at least have a little bit of mad money to spend on themselves."

Several days later, the newspaper printed a correction stating that the total number of paintings listed had decreased by two with those two paintings apparently missing. Many of the residents at St. Josephine's speculated on where the missing canvases could have gone. The story Jane told was that Cecile had taken them with her, which in fact she had.

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