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Our concern is not how to worship in the catacombs, but rather how to remain human in the skyscrapers.

— *Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*

The Life Artist

Christopher J. Levinson

Monica Davis stood with a dozen people in the *Daniel Ryan* Art Gallery, sipping a glass of win. Cigarette smoke caught in her lungs. She suppressed a cough.

Glass at her lips, she subtly surveyed the faces around her. Other than interest she could discern nothing from their expressions, yet it struck her just how much they were alike. The men in power suits and ties, with their distinguished hundred-fifty dollar haircuts; the plastic women emulating some ideal of perfection born of BOTOX and surgery, dresses designed for eye-fuls of flesh, cigarettes tucked between two fingers.

They came from a different world to everyone else, a privileged world. Trapped by their ideals of perfection, they had forgotten how it was to truly *feel* anything — just as once Monica herself had, before Daniel Ryan had helped her. They came here, to this gallery, to try and buy that sense of life they lacked within themselves. Monica both understood these people, and pitied them.

James Kelly paused to study a particular portrait. Monica moved behind him. The small display screen on the wall showed a man reaching for something that couldn't be seen, but it was the detail that caught the eye. Storm-clouds had gathered and city-lights filled the backdrop, a thousand other lives highlighted beyond this one. What brought it to life was the pain in this man. It spoke through eyes, through tension in spread fingers, the form of lips fighting to speak. He was hurting and it made the portrait real.

Was he reaching for a lover never to return his embrace, a child separated by death, a memory of another life? No-one knew but it was infused with humanity, with a sense of life. That was what made these portraits special, what made anything by a Life Artist special. They contained an understanding of life within them and people came to find that, to touch that. Daniel Ryan was a Life Artist; he painted a quality of life itself. To most it was art that spoke to them on some other level they had never felt before; to Daniel, gave meaning to his existence.

"It's strange," Kelly said. "The focus is this man, yet it doesn't explain anything of his life. It's so... empty."

"You think so?" she replied. "I think that's what makes it so haunting. Look at his eyes. Who needs to know what has made him who he is when you can see it right there in his face; all he has loved, all he has lost."

"But how can you tell the sum of a man without knowing what has made him who he is?" Kelly asked. "When you don't know his life, how can you see him as a person?"

"You don't," Monica said. "You see the man before you. His life can be even more honest that way, because you have seen him as he wants to be seen."

Kelly nodded, looking at the portrait a moment longer. "How much for it?"

"Twenty-five thousand."

"I'll write you a cheque."

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Monica looked at it again as Kelly took his chequebook from a pocket. "You know, the point isn't that he's reaching, it's the idea he still feels compelled to. We all live that way sometimes, chasing the unobtainable for no other reason than we can't have it. We want it all the more. The question we should be asking ourselves is: if we get there, is it worth it?"

"I don't know if that has an answer. It means something different to each person."

Monica smiled. "As it's meant to."

Kelly tore off the slip and handed it to her. "When can I collect it?"

She folded the cheque away in her purse. "The collection is on public display for three weeks. After that, it's yours."

Just then a police siren sounded outside, then a second.

"What a godforsaken place for a gallery," someone said.

Monica didn't respond, knowing they wouldn't understand. To desperate people Daniel Ryan brought hope with this exhibition, as a Life Artist found inspiration in everything, everyone, around him. It was the whole point that the gallery should be here, showing how they lived.

At last she turned from the window. "Ladies and gentlemen, there are more portraits in the second wing. If you will follow me."

She led them to another room, to a quality of life they could never grasp.

Somewhere in the trees, an owl hooted.

Daniel didn't let the sound bother him. He stood alone amidst a hundred graves, the voice of his thoughts urging him onward. He stepped forward slowly, letting it lead him.

The cemetery was large, with graves and tombs guarded by rusting gates and gargoyles. Trees rose many metres above him, providing some semblance of privacy for the lost coming to grieve. Winds whispered through the trees, bending their branches as though they were moving, speaking, and the statues heard every confession. The cemetery seemed *alive* at night. This was Daniel's world, how a Life Artist lived; always in shadows.

Daniel thought of all the people who had died, all the moments of their lives. Few people ever stood and thought about the past lying beneath their feet. For Daniel this was what gave meaning to his existence — yet now all he wanted was to touch the soul of a little girl, to bring peace to those she had left behind.

His mind fell silent before a solitary gravestone. He knelt, reading the inscription.

AMY HAMILTON
JUNE 15, 2004 - MARCH 22, 2012
DAUGHTER OF ROBERT & HELEN
ALWAYS ALIVE IN OUR HEARTS

For a long moment he didn't move. Touching others was how Daniel understood their lives, recreating them as portraits, but it was sombre. That he could only ever come to know them after death was sometimes more than he could handle, and when the life he was meant to touch was a child's, it felt more poignant.

He'd come because he had sensed that Amy's spirit had not found peace. She had not said all the things she had wanted to in her short life, and now she was asking to speak through him

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so she could let go. He was here to look through her life, as a Life Artist was meant to — but it didn't mean he was ready. He was never ready to touch pain.

Slowly he reached toward the gravestone, reached to touch her name and to touch *her* beyond death. With the touch, flashes came together to form pictures in his mind. Words, thoughts, came as well. He began to see Amy as she had lived, seeing into her life to understand her in death.

It was as if he could touch her image, touch her in the moments she had lived. He got a sense of her, of all she enjoyed, favourite food, favourite clothes. A flash of Amy running barefoot on a beach, laughing as grains of sand slid between her toes. Her birthday, unwrapping gifts, a Winnie the Pooh doll, a soft jumper her fingers kept stroking. A picture above her bed of dolphins frolicking in water, leaping, splashing. Another flash. Amy going to the aquarium with her parents, holding her father's hand. She saw dolphins there for the first time, bodies glistening as they broke the surface, and she had loved them then ever after. Dancing to a CD and singing along, hugging Pooh to her chest, a thousand moments of her life cascading over him in no particular order, everything that had made her who she was, he experienced them all. Then the perspective changed. He felt her dark thoughts, when it seemed that no-one understood her and she only ever wanted to be alone. He saw her crying over a grazed knee, a tired scream. Amy with her first cold, then in hospital, asking her mother what leukaemia was who didn't know how to tell her, just stroked her hair. Amy losing her hair, vomiting, sick from the chemotherapy, crying softly. This person didn't seem like Amy; the strength was all gone from her, replaced with only pain spreading throughout her. Daniel touched it, felt it with her. Then she was lying in a coffin with people all around her, Amy's mother with tears on her cheeks, taking comfort from the arm of her husband. It was as if Daniel were there himself, looking at Amy's small form, hurting with her loss.

Finally it ended. Minutes had passed but it — quite literally — felt like a lifetime. Daniel glanced slowly to his left. He saw Amy there, skipping and playing, smiling. It was only a ghost he saw, a remnant of the connection, but it hurt afresh to see this last part of her fade away forever.

He had seen into her soul and in a way Daniel had come to love her. He had shared in her life and now he had to live with the hollow ache of her pain inside him. That was Daniel's life. He was a Life Artist. It was how he captured their essence, by seeing them from the inside out, mourning them. He'd found what he had needed here. He would make something of it, pass on the message she'd given him beyond death. Perhaps he could bring her parents some sense of peace, knowing their daughter would always love them.

Slowly Daniel stood, his mind already thinking of images that carried the essence of Amy's love and pain to bring her back to life, and walked back out of into the shadows of the night.

Two days later Daniel had finished. He had not slept or eaten, dedicating himself solely to Amy's life. One portrait had not been enough to represent her— it was difficult to recreate a child's innocence in only one way. Instead he had made a collection of four different aspects of her life.

One cuddling Pooh, another as she slept, seemingly at peace, a third after treatment for cancer, face twisted in pain, and the last pushed by her parents on a swing tied to the branch of a tree behind their home. Together they displayed Amy's life through her death; here her essence was captured for a part of her to live forever.

It was this very last portrait Daniel connected with the most. These days and nights had been an exploration of Amy's person, and he thought it was this that represented her the best of all. Both her parents pushed her from behind and Amy laughed as she went higher. The sense he had was that these times had been the most important to her, when she had felt closest to her parents without ever saying it. This was how she had been as she had loved them.

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The connection was still there as he looked at it once more, the wounds of reliving her death still raw. Now that it was over he felt unable to release it, unable to mourn for the child he'd never known in life — only death. The scene seemed to come to life for him.

He heard Amy's voice, long dead: "*Higher. I want to go higher.*"

"*You're too high now, honey.*" her mother said.

"*Oh, a little more won't hurt her,*" her father said, pushing her.

"*I'm flying,*" Amy said.

"*Can you touch the sky?*" her father asked.

A little hand reaching for it. "*No, but it's all around me,*" Amy said.

"*You live to try, don't you?*" her mother said, laughing.

"*Higher...*," Amy said again.

Tears came, forcing their way down his face. Lost within a memory of a life not his own, Daniel ran outside. He sat against a tree. In his mind he still saw Amy on the swing and he curled against the trunk, trying to push his way closer to that memory, that life he hadn't shared in but which now was a part of his own with the others reconciling inside him, memories of lives gone and futures not meant to be — the Life Artist's burden, forever hurting him, forever haunting him.

"God," Daniel murmured. "Oh God. Make it stop, *make it stop.*"

It was a long time before it ever did.

Monica had also seen the four portraits. Once again Daniel had brought new understanding to her. She stood at Amy's graveside and knelt to leave a single red rose for the memory of this girl she had never known but who, because of Daniel Ryan, she now would never forget. That was the power a Life Artist possessed, to make a person see another life, feel for them, *to be moved*.

Slowly the entire world was learning how to truly love.

She left it there and stood, looking down. "Goodbye, Amy. I hope your spirit can find peace now."

A moment later she walked away.