

A posthumous conversation with Bob Ross

A dim light splashes through a door left slightly open, a familiar scene in a sprawling middle-American evening, Janie is sitting at her kitchen table in what is now a familiar domestic silence since her husband (who turned out to be a psychopath) took her two beautiful (but equally monstrous) children off her hands. She juggles a used tea bag between her hands and stares vacantly into the kitchen. She is wearing a paint-smattered smock and doesn't seem to mind when excess tea from the chamomile bag splashes her wrist, it used to be perfume she thinks, but hey that's what... Slowly, silently, the light from the decouped lightshade above is interrupted by a huge round billowing shadow that engulfs the pale woodgrain-streaked laminex tabletop. Her mouth gaping open, whilst her eyes follow the shadow up a skinny body to the brightest smile this kitchen has seen in years. Crowned with an afro the light encircles a momentous globe of hair; momentarily Janie believes an angel is in her kitchen because for some people isolated on the margins of what is already a lonely and isolated world seeing an angel can suddenly seem as real as a neighbour dropping by for some gossip. A gasping primal sound threatens to erupt in her throat. Slowly the silence is engulfed by his smile, and she takes a moment to look harder and notes it's less of a halo or afro and more of a wafro stumbling down into a soft accidental beard framing the smile. His dark brown eyes that resemble quotation marks are beaming down on her in a "trust me" kind of fatherly way. The figure is dressed in a plain casual business shirt and flannel trousers, as though painted tightly round a telephone pole. She just manages to chortle out two incomprehensible muffled words: "Bob... Rossss!"

"Hey, hey, shhhhh, don't go screaming or nothing there beautiful lady. I usually knock, but I thought you might need some company here tonight. I can see from your face you know who I am?" She nods dumbfounded.

"Yeah well sometimes I just do this you know, pop in on people. I consider myself a neighbor of the world now. America is the land of neighbours you know! And well who could resist your pretty little home."

"But I thought you were... dead," blurts out Janie, as her throat finally opens the dam that held back comprehensible sounds in her speech.

"Well, that's... ahhhh a debateable point there Miss Janie", quickly switching the topic "I can tell you liked my video painting classes" he surveys the kitchen. Numerous canvases are awkwardly crammed into remaining spaces, depicting mountain scenes with sumptuous fir trees bending in the snow, all anchored by lonely cabins in the vastness that you'd wanna stumble onto if lost in the alps. And... strangely, none of the cabins have chimneys. The painting style compliments the quaint domestic setting, as though the paint was applied with a butter knife and pastry

glazing brush to reveal mayonnaise skies and Nutella trees. He crouches and gently plomps his elbows on the table looking deep and caring into her eyes.

"You know how many millions of people watched my videos and TV shows? How many languages they've been dubbed into? German, Japanese, Dutch, even some African dialects! Every thirty minutes on a public TV station in the US of A. I'm starting up or polishing off a masterpiece – that's everyday of the year! How many versions of that painting I demonstrated have been made? And how many thrift stores they decay in, some may say. But what I ask these cynics is, how many people still find hope with me behind the easel everyday on TV? Well Janie, it's millions and millions. So you think I'm dead eh? My mama said to me years ago that I was damn well givin' Jesus a run for his money as Mr Popular," he chuckles then takes a breath and continues his well-practised sermon.

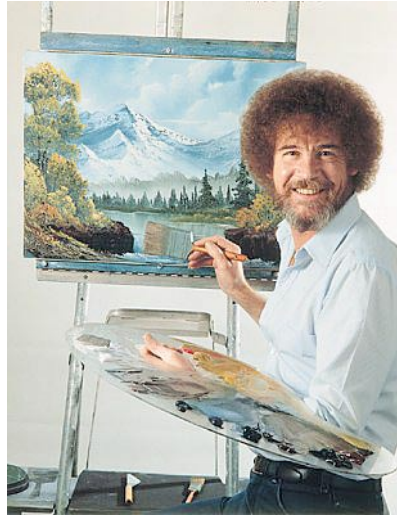
"We want happy, happy paintings, if you want sad things watch the news," he intones as though he was instantly back in the PBS studios.

"Well Janie, sweetie, it wasn't just all love and grub, you know times got hard and... well every pretty tree casts a shadow. Some people say amateur painting, paint by formula, is cheatin', but my company sold millions of my specially designed brushes that make painting easier! Everybody can be an artist; everybody deserves the right to enjoy making paintings, just like that famous German artist, what was his name... Joseph Boys? So I put love into my work. I gave a whole lotta of love, the greatest prize to all, and you know everybody understands the language of love. A puppy, a villain, a priest, and even a murderer, they all understand a soothing pat on their twisted little heads. I was the great artist of love! The twentieth century's Botticelli, Titian, Watteau! That's the best anyone can ever do! Can I tell you a story Miss Janie?" She nods staring at him as though hypnotised by his smile, peckered lips and tiny frame below the globe of his wafro.

"One night me and my wife were at dinner with a big group. I usually had to be careful dining with people I didn't know well cos, some ladies... fell in love with me from my videos. Oh you should have seen the panties regularly stuck in my mailbox. Anyways, we're at this Chinese restaurant on Lincoln Street, where we lived; this was a great restaurant called the Dragon's Leg. The house specialty is called the five-legged dragon soup, it's made with secret spices; you should go there one day. I knew it was delicious so I promptly ordered it. And this particular evening another artist, yup just like me, was there. This guy had some obscure 'conceptual practice', as he called it, sounds more like something the doctor would gravely advise you of doesn't it? Well he spoke a whole lot of jumbo about theorists, cultural this and cultural that, historical cycles... he was sayin' stuff like modern art is dead, and he even went on sayin' that art itself was dead.

Before that I was thinking at least this guy wasn't a lady burnt red with size 98 passion for me, coz as you can see I'm a little man. His conversation turned into a monologue, about stealing images, originality, philosophy, anti-aesthetics, the sublime works of Nazis, discourse of blah blah post-structuralist this, invagination that, neo-Aristotelianism, tectonic pseudo-aestheticism, placelessness and when he got onto what he called neo-conservative mercantilist aesthetic scavenging he really started to boil. He got real hot looking like a pepper in the face, he started talking louder and louder till people in the restaurant started looking around. He was burning with a passion like a steam-engine on a one-way trip to hell, exhaust pipes spewing fire from his ears and nose. Well I just stared into my five-legged dragon soup and let him power on up that fiery hill cos I never cared for all that mumbo jumbo, but I know it's got its place in all them halls of learning. Soon enough this guy was just screaming incoherently, until the restaurant went all quiet and all eyes were on him. Still, he boiled and bubbled away in his own words, consumed with a passion only I ever seen a preacher possessed by. He was like a volcano of fire, and finally he collapsed, his face was only a hair's breadth from mine and he was panting and drooling. I was always able to keep composure even when I was a kid, so I just let him breathe as he stared at me with his eyes as sharp as knives. He lay there like a man just pulled an inch from drowning in a murky soup, with that spluttering kind of breathing. Some time passed and I say to him quietly: 'So, you've never heard about my dream then have you?'. I felt like I had a little explaining to do for this confused young fella. I thought I should tell him about what it was that made me become an artist for the people. Janie, it came to me in a dream one night."

"When I was a boy I went on a camp with my dad who loved me like no one in the world. We were in a particularly strange neck of The Rockies with my scout troop. 'My dad was scout leader,' I tell him still proud as punch to that day. Whilst asleep in my cabin that night, the wind howled outside, and as I lay resting the waves of sleep rocked about me like giant waves in the middle of the Pacific. Suddenly one particularly big wave loomed; I started to be drawn up its enormous unfathomable face. The water soon changed from the green of the deep sea to the green of the dollar bill and I looked around and saw all of mankind struggling to swim up the mountain of money. But some people had bright smiles on their faces. There were professors, soldiers, mechanics, schoolteachers, pilots, waitresses, the whole lot. The sky deepened and rays of sun shot like yellow lasers from behind clouds. Angels dipped their long wings in the bills and the mountain kept growing; I looked around again and saw some people starting to drown, you could swim for them but they were always the same distance away, only those with smiles on their faces kept happily swimming up the bulging monolith of green. Somehow, I don't know why, I felt those people were drowning because of me. This scene went on for what felt like ages and we were all tired



but went on relentlessly. And then as suddenly as though the lights were cut we were on the top of that mountain and there were only a few of us left. We knew we were lucky, angels swooped around us and we could see all the phases of creation happening all around, planets being born and dying in a second, super novas, colonies of strange species flourishing and shrivelling. The group was at first silent then got worked up into a frenzy with screams of joy. The angels were tall and slender Renaissance-style beauties that were swooping around splashing colors in the sky with paintbrushes. One little man who looked like a dental nurse started touching people, then these folks would drop languidly to the ground. It was so hazy in the disco lights of creation that I couldn't see why these people were dropping limp around this dentist type man. He came closer to me and held out a paintbrush with the handle facing me; it was covered in blood. He pressed it to my palm and motioned for me to take it. I don't know why but I took the bloodied brush and without thinking twice drove it into his stomach, once, twice, three times. As he lay wounded and dying with his warm blood trickling onto my flannel jeans, he whispered in my ear; 'the trivial and the terrible walk hand in hand'.

"At the end of my dream story, I noticed that the restaurant was still deadly quiet and all eyes were still fixed on us. The lady friend of that fiery fella had been trying to pretend she was just part of the furniture. Then she gently helped her friend to his feet, even though he was still panting and drooling. As they left the restaurant his eyes were still fixed piercingly on me, his hair ruffled and his tie at an unusual angle against his designer suit.

"Janie, he sure did look like the man in my dream, well maybe not the clothes, but the eyes and that dental nurses' look you can spot anywhere. And me, not being some supernatural freak, I don't say that lightly. I don't know quite what I realized in that dream but after a short stint in the airforce I built an empire in paint. I began to teach love through the brush, and that's why Janie you've been sitting here crying tonight cos since watching my videos you've fallen in love with me, and your friend Marcie just told you that I died a few years ago! No, no, don't look surprised sweet Janie, I know what I'm talking about! We zombies, walking dead, ghosts, whatever you wanna call us, see all..." With those last words he bent down to Janie, brushed away her wiry fringe and kissed her on the lips.

David Keating is a Melbourne artist currently based in Berlin.

Please note this is a work of fiction and the events described are fictional scenarios invented for the sake of this essay.