



**KAL'S
KALEIDOSCOPE**

Miss Effie, Rembrandt, and Me

It begins each morning. By the time I've finished sipping my first cup of steaming, jet-black coffee, it's in full swing - the vacation I take each morning. Without leaving the comforts of home, I can feel the heat from Arizona's dry-hot deserts, dangle my feet in the placid, cool waters of Florida's Suwannee



Center, and later became one of her private pupils. By the time I came into her life, Miss Effie was in her early 80s. Energetic and bubbly, she was also kind and patient, which was a plus for me because my mastery of oils and watercolors was, at best, elementary.

River, and rub the gritty sand of Georgia's Jekyll Island between my fingers. I can also gaze upon the majesty of Colorado's Cross Mountain, and taste the salt-sea spray of the crashing, plunging waves along California's Pacific Coast Highway. And keeping me company during my travels is the mournful howl of an old hound.

I know what you're thinking, *"Kal, if you're seein' and hearin' all this without leavin' home, apparently there's more than just caffeine in your morning coffee."* Hate to disappoint, but there's only caffeine in the coffee, but it's the caffeine that simulates all that I see. And what I see are oil paintings given to me by Mrs. Effie Gridley.

Miss Effie, as everyone called her, taught art at the old Gulfport Recreation Center during the 50s until she retired in the late 60s to teach private art lessons. I was introduced to her at the

After surveying my latest artist endeavor, I can remember Miss Effie saying, "Why Anthony, that's an unusual rendering..." Unusual rendering? She was kind. It was just awful! A blob of paint. A smudge of color. The results less than pleasing. Miss Effie always salvaged what she could, helping me to put the final touches on my latest masterpiece. With a flourish I signed the canvas, proudly exhibiting it as my own; the truth of the matter somewhat layered beneath my teenage boastfulness.

As I look back on those days, I now know it was Miss Effie who helped cement my love of art, and enhance my appreciation of history. Thankfully she took a shine to me, and I to her. Unlike her other students who couldn't wait for class to end, dashing home like Baptists dashing out the church-house door after a long sermon, I was in no rush to leave. Those long, late afternoons with just Miss Effie and me sitting in front of her fireplace, the burning logs crackling like music, were the foundations for some



of my fondest teenage memories.

Over sweet tea and home-made sugar cookies, Miss Effie waxed eloquent about her years in Paris studying art, just as the war clouds of World War I gathered over the horizon. She beguiled me with stories about meeting Renoir, watching him paint with hands bent and crippled by arthritis. She chuckled about Monet's passion for painting water lilies and his Japanese footbridge. "I think I could have found something else to paint!" she quipped. She sighed about Degas' aloofness, and raised an eyebrow when speaking of his anti-Semitism.

Even at the ripe old age of seventeen, I knew Miss Effie was someone special, a link to a day and age long gone. Her family hailed from Syracuse, New York, and her father - most avant-garde for his day - indulged his daughter's desire to study art and painting, a somewhat unacceptable vocation for young ladies of the day. But his indulgence ceased one fateful day in May, 1915.

Like all good Americans, Miss Effie rushed home as the "Great War" erupted in Europe, drenching all it touched with the blood of those whom Ernest Hemingway would call "The Lost Generation." But her desire to continue her art studies was greater than her sense of good judgement. After much heated discussion, her father consented, allowing his daughter to return, not to Paris, but to England. As Miss Effie said to me with a twinkle in her eye, "Those English boys weren't as effervescent as the French boys, but at least we didn't have to waste time translating the language."

On the day Miss Effie was to sail for England, she and her family ate breakfast in the old Waldorf Astoria Hotel, located on the sight of the present-day Empire State Building. They had spent the night in the hotel after arriving from Syracuse by train. While they were eating, her father read the now famous shipping notice in the New York Times warning people that a state of war existed between Germany, Great Britain, and their allies. He quickly read between the lines.

"Effie, you're going to England on an American boat," said Miss Effie, imitating her father's stern voice. "I'm calling the steamship office and booking passage for you."

"But Papa you can't!" said Miss Effie, in a high-pitched little girl voice. "My luggage has already been loaded on the other boat!"

"You can get it when you arrive in England..."

Miss Effie did arrive in England aboard an American steamer, but her luggage didn't. Because it, along with 1198 people, went to the bottom of the Irish Sea when the *Lusitania* was torpedoed May 7th, 1915, by a German submarine. Miss Effie's tale concerning the *Lusitania* and her brush with death riveted me to my chair. It still does.



the time.

It's those paintings that transport me each morning to far-away places that I've never seen, and leave me wondering if those places still exist, or has progress crushed them in its relentless press forward? But Kal, what about that howling hound you mentioned earlier? What's that got to do with your story?

One of my favorite paintings by Miss Effie is that of her favorite dog, Rembrandt. She told me the dog would sit at her feet while she painted, and when she left home, the last thing she would see and hear would be Rembrandt sitting on the porch, howling mournfully until she returned.

I returned to Miss Effie's old house some months ago. It's still occupied, but has fallen upon hard times. Old cars on blocks litter the yard. Weeds choke Miss Effie's flowerbeds. And herds of sweaty, no-neck children shatter its once serene silence. But one fading remembrance of old times past remains - a glass window in the shape of an artist pallet. The window, inset in the rough-hewn, home-made door of her artist studio, still bears traces of oil paint representing the color spectrum that Miss Effie and I put there almost forty-five years ago.

It was through that window that I last saw Miss Effie. I quit taking art, graduated high school, and went off to college. And she, due to age and declining health, returned to Syracuse where I assume she lived out her last days with her only son. I never heard from her again. But through her art, I am able to retrace her cross-country travels, and enjoy the peace and serenity that she encountered. I know she's painting from a porch in Heaven, surrounded by the Masters that she admired. And Rembrandt must wait no longer for his master's return, because Miss Effie's home for good.

Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless, and keep a song in your heart!

Kal



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