

Resting on Vincent

My room, like most of my life is a mess. Several piles of clothing loom high a top my mahogany dresser creating a mountain range with sock covered peaks. My walk in closet is stuffed to the brim with forgotten remnants of my past: half finished paintings, stacks of journals, boxes of pictures, and a pristine white sewing machine sit blanketed in dust. A smorgasbord of summer clothes and winter sweaters spill out of my closet onto my fuzzy tan carpeted floor; creating a colorful river of mismatched clothing. My queen sized bed sits pushed against one of the white washed walls that holds my room together; covered in a neon pink Sherpa blanket the bed is a peninsula of chaos made of pillows, sheets, and stuffed animals. Books of all shapes and sizes are scattered throughout my entire room. There is one book that stands alone from the rest.

Sitting idle on my fake oak nightstand is a book covered in a transparent parchment jacket. The faintest outline of a strong jaw covered with red hair emerges from beneath the jacket, a red beard trails around his thin lips and ear; a dark almond shape where his blue eyes sit pop beneath the parchment. The pages that fill the book are torn, ruffled, and marked with fading yellow post its. The spine of the book reads Van Gogh the Life in bold, orange block letters.

This book that is the heart of my messy living space holds more than just the life and paintings of Vincent Van Gogh. My eyes have skimmed every word that is written on the over touched pages. My long fingers have trailed and outlined every picture inside. This book that makes Vincent real, is more than just a book I rest my glasses on every night. This book is where I have rested my fears, apprehensions, and insecurities about life and myself. Amongst these pages Vincent and I have a mutual understanding, a shared feeling of desperate sadness hand in hand with creative beauty. The craziness that the world labeled us with faded away. I was not my illness and neither he was he. We just were.

Vincent and I go way back. I remember the very first time I was introduced to him. I was in the third grade, sitting in art class when the teacher Mrs. Schwab, a short Philippino woman with wire rimmed glasses that slid slightly off the bridge of her nose, handed out a photocopy of Van Gogh's "Starry Night". As I stared at the painting my mind and heart formed an unexplainable understanding about Van Gogh. The way the blues and yellows swirled together on the canvas. The deep black fiery structure that catapulted towards the beautiful starry sky. At only nine or ten years old I found comfort in the masterpiece that lay before me. A sadness, unknowns to me at that moment that I would become very familiar with later in my life lived in the painting. I felt a deep connection to this Vincent Van Gogh guy.

“Starry Night” is a prime example of the brilliance that can come from the depths of depression. The painting is a reflection of what he saw as he peered out the metal barred windows of his room at Saint-Remy-de-Provence mental institution. He sat in his small, cream-colored room adjoined to another lonely cell that was his studio. A neatly made single bed rested in the corner, lead based paint peeled off of the low rising ceiling while four walls entrapped him alone with his sadness. His always-forgiving easel was his only comfort. His eyes fixed on the revolving world that didn’t understand him, that world that he would never truly feel he belonged in, still turned outside despite his sorrow. Luring him to put his feelings to canvas his deep sadness helped create a masterpiece.

Vincent Van Gogh was a brilliant artist who impacted the world in a monumental way. When Vincent was alive, everyone looked at him through hazy eyes. Sunken crystal blue eyes shone brightly through his dark trimmed eye sockets. Un combed, red fiery hair sprouted in all directions from his sun burnt head. Vincent would wake up with the rising sun, walking miles to an abundant yellow field of wheat, a garden of cypress trees, or whatever spot stirred his artistic urge. Spending whole days in the rain, the searing sun, or gusting winds Vincent devoted himself to all of his paintings. He was seen as unstable, crazy, and a very disturbed individual; the locals referred to him as “the redheaded mad man.” spurts of “euphoric creative energy” and deep spouts of “immense sadness” were frequent for Vincent both hindering and helping his creativity.

Was I so drawn to Vincent and his paintings because I had the same depression and sadness brewing inside of me? Did my heart and soul already accept the perpetual sadness that pulsed throughout my veins before I ever became aware that something wasn’t quite right? I never had the urge to take a razor blade and slice my ear off but was it bad that I understood why he would do it? I may have not cut one of my appendages off or shot myself but I starved myself down to eighty pounds, I would sleep for days on end, I hid away from the world because for the longest time I never felt apart of it. I like Vincent punished myself. Vincent’s sorrow drove him to paint. My sadness drove me to create, to put pen to paper.

Society thrusts a hateful stigma on mental illness making the masses fear what they do not know or understand. Depression and many other disorders are portrayed as horrific monsters that instead of terrorizing the person it burdens terrorize the other people it doesn’t. Judgment sears the souls of those who suffer, deepening the feeling of not belonging. Striving for the unreachable standards of the world is a daunting task. Having a passion that saves you from the world can make all the difference. No matter how deep in the dark trenches of shit you are, creating something from your own personal hell carries a healing power, if not for yourself it may for others.

Vincent and his paintings have and will always be a constant comfort for me. I find solace in the swirls of “Starry Night” and the golden blades of wheat in “The

Harvest". Whenever I peer into the eyes of Vincent in any of his self portraits I feel a little less alone, a little farther from the identity thrust upon me from doctors and peers. "The Café Terrace on the Place du Forum, Arles, at Night" ignites a passion for life inside of me that I so often have forgotten exists. A glimpse of a star studded sky above a vibrant little café filled with people enjoying the company of each other reminded me that even though I felt isolated from the world I wasn't. His brush strokes of yellow and dark blue catapulted me into a place where I wasn't judged. Through his sadness Vincent unknowingly created hope for me.

Many doctors, psychiatrists, and anyone interested in what drove Vincent to both his death and creative greatness have tried to diagnose his "infections". As a society we cannot simply slap a diagnosis on someone to make things more understandable. It shouldn't matter what disorder Van Gogh, or anyone suffers from. Van Gogh owned his sorrow, he understood that it drove his passion and appreciated it. Without suffering, without sorrow the world would ironically be a much darker place. I, like Vincent have had many labels slung my way: anorexic, crazy, unstable, and depressed. I have been bullied, judged, and crumpled up like a piece of paper being tossed in the trash. There is nothing worse than being told by others that you are "damaged" or not good enough because you are wired differently. Being criticized for being you is definitely more fucked up than slicing off your ear and sending it to a prostitute.

Vincent's favorite saying was a passage from the Bible. Corinthians, *"sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."* Vincent once wrote *"I've found a joy in sorrow. Sorrow is better than laughter."* Even in the depths of despair Vincent created. His way of staying alive for as long as he did was to put his sorrow to canvas. When you are struggling to find just a glimpse of happiness or a feeling of being alive having an outlet to pour all of your pain into can be your only saving grace, even if just for a moment. Vincent held on as long as he could. He painted until the very moment that he wrapped his paint stained fingers around the handle of a revolver and shot himself. He was done. Vincent is a constant reminder to me that I am not.

Vincent and I have more than just pale skin and red hair in common. We have both been put into a box of judgment and stigmas. Like so many others we have been branded into the crazy herd. Depression is not a hindrance to society. Being physically wired differently to feel sorrow so deeply isn't a crime. Being in a prison of your own sadness that you can't escape from is torture enough. Society needs to take a deep breath, remove the stick they cast judgment with from their asses and open their eyes. Creativity, beauty, and actual human beings live behind the disorders that are thrust upon people like Vincent and I.

There is a subtle beauty in human suffering. Invisible lines of pure life thread through painful scars, memories, and insecurities; with the darkness of suffering a beauty can blossom. Through my whole messy life Vincent has and continues to be there for me. Even if covered by a storm of clothes, or lost amongst a pile of unfinished poems or sketches, he is there. Chipped coffee mugs, pens, water bottles,

and my glasses aren't the only things I rest upon Vincent every day. Upon Vincent I rest my soul.