

## The Gray Portrait

By

M. R. Klass

Engulfed in blackness, the glass house looms above the winking lights of Tinseltown like an ultra-modern gargoyle sitting in judgement. Slow and precise movements make Basil almost invisible as he swirls the caramel-colored liquid in his glass. His face, ordinary yet aristocratic, stares back at him, reflected in the floor-to-ceiling glass wall.

*It's only a matter of time. Time. A mortal's concept and a fool's errand.* He chortles into his whiskey glass, draining it. He hurls the glass at the floor. It explodes in a shower of crystal. He paces. Glass shards crunch under his bare feet. He stops at the enormous white-noise-filled flat screen on the floor. A fist-sized crack spider-webs from the center. The whitewashed monolithic brick wall, erected centermost, plays artist's canvas as the television's snowy face casts shadows that dance like tall, slender demons giving in to their carnal desires.

"MY art... stolen!" Basil kicks the television. "Mine!" He kicks it again. "MY life at risk!" Basil kicks the television until it's dead. He stops, chest heaving. He straightens his body and calms his breathing.

"I take it you've heard?" said Miranda behind him, just inside the room.

"Clearly."

"What will you do?"

"Wait." Basil removes himself from the television. "I've done it for a century and a half. I can do it a century more if these heathens choose to torture my kind soul."

"Sir... your feet."

Basil stops and meanders to the brick wall. “You know what I am, correct?”

“Basil Gray. An art dealer.”

“What, not *whom*, you ignorant twat,” said Basil. He strikes the brick with a dull thud.

“Sir... please don’t.”

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thwack. Blood, like a bloom of roses, splatters the whitewash. Thud, thwack, thud, thwack. Basil’s fingers crack and splinter like dried twigs. He strikes the brick hard and fast. Bits of flesh left stuck in the course brick with each contact.

“Sir!” said Miranda, voice shrill and quaking.

Basil stops and faces the thin, blonde woman. He thrusts his hand, the visage of a mangled chew toy, in her face. She recoils.

“Watch,” Basil said.

“I can’t.” Miranda averts her eyes.

“You can and you *will*.”

He seizes the back of her neck and forces her to look. Meaty remnants of his hand begin to mend. Bone scrapes on bone as it straightens and clicks back into place. Muscles and nerves interweave over healed bone. Strands of new flesh join with torn until nary a scar remains. Basil leaves a streak of red upon Miranda’s cheek as he lowers his hand. Basil turns away and waves his reborn hand as if shooing a fly.

“Be gone.”

Covering her mouth, she obeys. Her stilettos stab the marble floor with an authoritative and hurried gate. Basil shambles to the lone piece of furniture situated in front of the brick wall: a black, low-sitting leather chair. He throws himself into it, arms draped on either side. He stares at the dead television.

“Fuck. I’m going to miss ‘Stranger Things’.”

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Sunlight, muted by the Los Angeles fog, filters in through smudged glass. Plastic litters the floor while bits of glass, stained with blood, shine with the coming sun. The piercing buzz of the doorbell breaks the silence. Basil snorts, coughs, and sits up. The buzz sounds once more, longer, more intense. Basil remains seated.

“Miranda!” Basil said. He looks around. *Where is that girl?* “Miranda!” A loud, hollow repetitive thud sounds on the wooden door. “God dammit! Door!” Quiet footsteps grow louder as they approach. “It’s about time, Miranda. Get the door.”

“She quit,” said Marvin, a young man, stout and husky, impeccably dressed.

“You’re a horrible manservant, Marvin.”

“Yes, sir.”

Basil leans back into the chair and closes his eyes. He cringes at the obnoxious sound of creaky metal hinges as the door opens. Hinges, high-pitched, sound as the door closes. Footsteps approach.

Marvin kicks shards of glass out of his way as he sets a large rectangular object, wrapped in brown paper, in front of Basil. “You have a package, sir.”

Basil sits up, grunts, and opens his eyes. He studies it. “Unwrap it.”

Marvin rips and shreds the brown paper like a kid on Christmas morning. Pieces of paper join the blood-stained glass as a canvas and frame are exposed. It faces Marvin.

“What is it?” said Basil, awake and focused.

“There’s a note.” Marvin rips open the small envelope and removes the silver-embossed ‘Thank You’ card. “To Dorian – Clever, but not clever enough. No strings attached.” Marvin looks at the card. “It’s signed, Sibyl Vale.” Marvin turns the card in his fingers. “That’s it.”

“Turn that damned painting around.”

Marvin complies. “We may need to call the authorities.”

“Shut up.” Basil stands. “It’s Rembrandt. ‘Return of The Prodigal Son’. I thought I hid it well.” He smiles.

“There’s a string between the frame and canvas.” Marvin reaches for it.

Basil swats Marvin’s hand away. “No!”

Marvin raises his hand, the string between his fingertips. “What? Did I do something wrong? I’m sorry, sir.”

The top of the frame pops away. Viscous fluid oozes over the painting. The acrid substance annihilates taste and smell. The oil dissolves to reveal a man admiring himself in front of a mirror. His face shriveled and sunken. Hair stringy and patchy. Eye sockets shallow. Basil lifts his hands in front of his face. They shake. The solvent eats through the next layer of oil. His own hands shrivel and shrink.

Marvin throws the painting to the floor. He removes his jacket. On all fours, he wipes at the solvent in vain. “I’ll fix this, sir.”

“No,” Basil said. “It’s done... you broke my clock.”

Basil returns to his chair. Helpless, he watches the solvent devour the painting and himself with it. His hands, now more bone than flesh, sit limp. His face gaunt, torso concave. Soon, Basil resembles an Egyptian mummy more than the aristocratic Englishman Marvin served for close to a decade.