

MAHLER'S FAREWELL

by Maggie Smith

Mahler's Farewell © December 15, 2018

Draft Three

Maggie Smith

maggiesmithwrites@gmail.com

CHARACTERS

DOROTHY — a twenty-three-year-old woman, recently diagnosed with stage three breast cancer and focused on creating a legacy for herself

AUGUST — Dorothy's best friend since high school, caring and supportive, visiting Dorothy after not hearing from her for six days

SETTING

Dorothy's Apartment

TIME

Too Late

MAHLER'S FAREWELL

[The living room of DOROTHY'S apartment. There is a second-hand sofa set centerstage, with a scuffed coffee table in front of it. On the table is a book and a cup of paint water. An easel is set up next to the sofa. There is a door to the left that leads to the hallway of the apartment building. There are canvases that show paintings at varying stages of completion, some completely filled, others barely started. DOROTHY is standing at an easel, wearing a smock and furiously painting. DOROTHY goes to set the brush down and accidentally spills a cup of dingy paint water.]

DOROTHY

Goddamnit.

[DOROTHY takes off her smock and the flannel overshirt she was wearing. She uses the shirt to mop up the spill and leaves it on the table. As she moves to sit on the sofa a knock comes from the door.]

AUGUST

Dorothy? Dorothy, are you in there? Open the door.

[AUGUST'S knocking and calling continues until DOROTHY has had enough and gets up to open the door.]

AUGUST

Oh look at that, you're alive.

DOROTHY

Do you need something?

AUGUST

Yeah, let me inside.

[DOROTHY widens the door as AUGUST enters.]

DOROTHY

You don't need to ask to come in.

AUGUST

Forgive me for being polite.

[AUGUST moves to the couch and sits down. DOROTHY closes the door and turns to face the room.]

AUGUST

Where have you been? I haven't talked to you in, like, six days.

DOROTHY

I've been painting.

[AUGUST scoffs, then sees that DOROTHY isn't joking.]

AUGUST

You don't paint.

DOROTHY

I do now.

AUGUST

Let me rephrase— you can't paint. I saw you try it sophomore year, your painting looked like Mickey Mouse got run over by a truck. You titled it, "Tragic," got a C, and dropped the class.

DOROTHY

I didn't have an artistic vision then.

AUGUST

And you have one now?

DOROTHY

Not a specific one. But I'm sure one of these will have something salvageable. Or at least confusing enough that I can call it art and people will believe me.

[DOROTHY motions to all of the canvases scattered around the room, and for the first time AUGUST takes in the state of the apartment. He gets up and moves from the couch, beginning to look at the paintings.]

AUGUST

Jesus, Dorothy, what did you do?

DOROTHY

I told you. I've been busy.

AUGUST

How many paintings are there?

DOROTHY

Fifteen. No, sixteen. No... Fifteen. Yeah, fifteen, I spilled my coffee onto the first one and accidentally destroyed it.

AUGUST

But why? You haven't even finished some of these. You can't even call this one a painting. It's just half a sketch.

DOROTHY

Sometimes you have to get the bad ideas out so you can recognize the good ones.

AUGUST

Why do you even need to have ideas in the first place? You've never cared about painting before now. You've never really cared about anything before now.

DOROTHY

I'm getting older, and I need to start my legacy.

AUGUST

What do you mean?

DOROTHY

I need something to leave behind. You know. For when I'm gone.

AUGUST

Cryptic. But you have some time before that.

DOROTHY

That's not guaranteed. Look.

[DOROTHY picks up the book from the table and hands it to AUGUST. He sits back down and she reads the title from behind the couch, over AUGUST's shoulder.]

DOROTHY

"The Good Die Young: Artists Who Were Taken Too Soon."

AUGUST

What about it?

[AUGUST flips through the pages while DOROTHY continues talking.]

DOROTHY

Van Gogh, James Dean, Freddie Mercury, everyone in this book died of unnatural causes, something that stopped them from continuing whatever work they were doing.

AUGUST

Why is this page marked up so much? Am I supposed to know who Gustav May-ler is?

DOROTHY

It's pronounced Mahler, and no, not really. He was this composer, he was diagnosed with a heart condition at the end of his life, so he wrote a symphony to say goodbye.

AUGUST

Goodbye?

DOROTHY

He knew he was going to die. So he put all of the emotions on the paper. Just pages and pages of literal heartbreak. He grappled with mortality and he didn't let it control him, even though he knew he was going to be taken too soon.

AUGUST

You know, normally when people say someone was "taken too soon," they aren't talking about nineteenth century composers.

DOROTHY

No. I know. That's why I'm a contemporary abstract painter.

[DOROTHY picks up a painting from the floor.]

DOROTHY

Do you think this one could use more blue? Or maybe green? No, definitely—

AUGUST

You're not a painter. And you're not going to be taken too soon. Stop freaking out, you're just giving into catastrophic thinking.

DOROTHY

I'm not thinking of the worst-case scenario, August, I'm living it.

AUGUST

Stop panicking, you aren't going to die. I mean, not now, anyways. Obviously someday we're all going to—

[DOROTHY finds a paper on a nearby table and holds it out.]

DOROTHY

Stop rambling, it's worse.

AUGUST

What, did you take one of those online quizzes that told you when you'd die? Let me guess, you have three years left?

DOROTHY

Read the paper, August.

[He does.]

AUGUST

Why are you showing me a list of cancer support groups?

DOROTHY

Take a wild guess.

AUGUST

Dot...

DOROTHY

Stage three breast cancer. I got the diagnosis... Wednesday. Or maybe Thursday. Whichever day it was raining. Or maybe it was just cloudy, I don't really remember—

AUGUST

And when were you going to tell me?

DOROTHY

I mean, if I'm being honest I hadn't really thought about it. I really only cared about—

AUGUST

No, no, no, let me guess. Painting, right? You only cared about painting?

DOROTHY

I needed to leave something behind.

AUGUST

You're going to be fine.

DOROTHY

You do realize "stage three" is bad, right? It's not like sports, number one isn't the toughest to beat. The numbers don't intensify the lower they get.

AUGUST

No, shut up, I know, it's just... I know. But still, it's not impossible to live with. I mean, the odds aren't great, sure, but it's not necessarily a death sentence.

DOROTHY

No, it's more like a death threat.

AUGUST

Did the doctors say it was terminal?

DOROTHY

Not yet.

AUGUST

Then we have time, we can—

DOROTHY

I'm going to die, August. And not in some metaphorical, "my-life-sucks" kind of way we always used to kid about. I'm actually going to die, and then that's it. There's no reboot button, I don't just use up one of my lives and get two more. It's permanent.

AUGUST

Aren't there ways to slow the process down?

DOROTHY

I'd just be biding my time. Yeah, I can go to chemo, I can lose my hair and feel sick all the time. I'll be bruised and exhausted, and even then they can't guarantee I'll live. And on the off-chance they cure me, I'm still going to have a target on my back. Why try to prevent the inevitable when I can make something bigger than myself.

AUGUST

Okay, but why painting? You don't even like it.

DOROTHY

You don't have to like painting to be good at painting.

AUGUST

No, you have to be good at painting to be good at painting.

[She holds up a painting to AUGUST.]

DOROTHY

Are you saying this isn't good?

AUGUST

Good? It's not even finished!

DOROTHY

No. It's not complete. But it is finished.

AUGUST

I swear to God.

DOROTHY

Every line isn't filled in, there are strokes that are missing, some colors are too bright or aren't bright enough. It's not complete but it's finished.

[There's a pause, DOROTHY proud of how profound she thinks she sounds, before AUGUST continues.]

AUGUST

Jesus Christ, I'm sorry, you're still going to have to elaborate.

DOROTHY

My life's not complete. And by the way things are going it probably never will be, but it's finished. Like this painting— these paintings.

[AUGUST sits on the couch and flips through the pages again. It's setting in.]

AUGUST

Van Gogh, James Dean, Freddie Mercury. *[Beat.]* Dorothy Carlin.

DOROTHY

Dorothy Carlin.

[DOROTHY sits next to AUGUST.]

DOROTHY

I was planning on telling you, by the way. I just needed to get my head together.

AUGUST

I know. I'm just worried about your coping mechanisms. These paintings, they're—

DOROTHY

I told you. I need to leave something behind. To make something beautiful and give it back to the world. When people look at my grave they'd say, "Dorothy Carlin, she had so much to give, we're lucky we had her for as long as we did." Oh, that could be a song. They could write a song about me.

AUGUST

Dorothy, focus! You don't need to labor over this. You—

DOROTHY

I do! I could literally die tomorrow. Jesus, it doesn't even have to be from the cancer, I could get hit by a car and be paralyzed. Someone could break in and stab me, it just happens. If I don't do something with my life now, then what's it all been for? Every single day, I push things off until tomorrow. "Oh, that's a good idea for a poem, I'll write it tomorrow." "That book sounds really interesting, maybe I'll go check it out from the library tomorrow." "Tomorrow I'm going to paint my nails." And then I forget these plans I make because something else comes along. We procrastinate because we think we have time. I don't even know if I'm going to be able to do these things tomorrow. And then we learn we don't have any time left, and we feel sorry for ourselves and we say goodbye, and wish we had a legacy to leave behind. But not me. I'm a Mahler. I make my goodbye my legacy. And I'm making it now.

AUGUST

And you really want your goodbye to be a collection of half-empty canvases left in the corner of your living room to collect dust?

[DOROTHY gets up from the couch and paces the room, grabbing the flannel and smock she set down before.]

DOROTHY

It'll be an ancient discovery in twenty years. Like archeologists discovering pyramids.

AUGUST

You don't need to leave behind some big artistic vision.

DOROTHY

I do.

AUGUST

You're so trapped in thinking about the future that you're forgetting to live in the present.

DOROTHY

I can live in both.

AUGUST

Definitely not possible.

DOROTHY

I'm happy.

AUGUST

You're not.

DOROTHY

So what? Soon I won't even be around to know the difference.

AUGUST

Dot—

DOROTHY

If you're not going to be supportive, then I'm going to have to ask you to leave.

AUGUST

Of course I'm going to be supportive. I am being supportive.

DOROTHY

You're not, you're trying to fix this. So stop.

AUGUST

I just want to understand!

DOROTHY

You can't!

AUGUST I know!

[There's a silence.]

DOROTHY

Thank you for trying.

AUGUST

And you know I'm here for you?

DOROTHY

That basically goes without saying.

AUGUST

Right. Did you eat today? Let's get some dinner.

[DOROTHY doesn't reply, picking up a blank canvas and putting it onto the easel. AUGUST gets up from the sofa.]

AUGUST

Come on. We're going.

DOROTHY

Where?

AUGUST

Dinner. The park. Anything to get you out of here. This isn't helping.

DOROTHY

Fuck you, I'm coping.

AUGUST

This isn't coping, this is unhealthy. Let's go out. Make some memories.

DOROTHY

Why would I make memories when I'll be too dead in a few years to remember them?

AUGUST

Let's ignore how morbid your response was, forget about the fact that I don't have a good answer, and go have some fun.

DOROTHY

I want to paint.

AUGUST

No, you need to find something else.

DOROTHY

I want to be remembered.

AUGUST

Why do you think you won't be?

DOROTHY

If I go out, do the forgettable thing and have fun, then I'm not going to have any impact on the world. I'll just be another person who lives and dies like everyone else. No biographies written about me, no Oscar-winning movies where I'm played by Meryl Streep or— Don't make that face. Why are you making that face?

AUGUST

She's too old to play you—

DOROTHY

Shut up, Anne Hathaway then, who cares? The point is, if I don't do this, if I don't push myself to create, then in the end I'm nothing.

AUGUST

Do you really think your impact is measured by how many people remember you after you're gone?

DOROTHY

Pretty much.

AUGUST

It's so much more than that. You think quantity matters? Who cares how many people knew Marilyn Monroe's name, how many got to say they knew her personally? How many can say they knew what her voice sounded like while saying their name, or what it felt like to hold her hand? How her eyes lit up when they made her smile?

DOROTHY

You sound like you really know Marilyn Monroe.

AUGUST

I don't. I know you. Maybe you're not eternalized on a screen, or your voice isn't heard on a radio every day. Maybe you don't have a symphony that says your farewell for you. That doesn't matter— none of it does. And Mahler? Fuck Mahler.

DOROTHY

Don't you dare say that.

AUGUST

Okay— Fine, just— Okay, forget Mahler? Yeah, forget Mahler. He didn't know how else to say goodbye, and in the end, he still died. But you have other ways to say goodbye. You're immortal. Maybe not in the literal sense of the word, but you are. You have me to tell your stories, and I'm going to do a damn good job at telling them, too.

DOROTHY

So I get this time we have now. What happens after that?

AUGUST

You're going to be fine—

DOROTHY

I'm not talking about me. What about you?

AUGUST

What do I have to do with any of this?

DOROTHY

Once I'm gone— And I know you don't want me to think this way— But once I am, what happens? Soon I'll probably be dead and buried and I'll have some witty headstone describing my time on earth. And, yeah, it's freaking me the hell out, but I have time to accept it. But after that, what happens to you?

AUGUST

I have the memories. And fifteen ugly paintings that I can hang up at home. Or maybe sell. Who knows, maybe the prices will add up and I'll actually be able to buy some decent artwork.

[DOROTHY laughs, and soon AUGUST joins in.]

AUGUST

No one is going to leave you. A diagnosis doesn't change the fact that I care about you.

DOROTHY

Thank you.

AUGUST

I meant what I said. I'm here for you.

DOROTHY

I know. I never doubted that for a second.

AUGUST

You're a living legacy, Dorothy Carlin.

DOROTHY

And you're a walking cliché. Now let's go make a memory.

AUGUST

Where to?

DOROTHY

How about the art museum?

[END OF PLAY.]