

Watching Paint

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Not much in the way of plot. More of a mood piece. Post-Chosen, so beware the spoilers.

Featured fandoms: Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Featured pairings:

A.S.S Story codes: gen

Story rating: PG

"So, Buffy, what are you doing over the weekend?"

Buffy looked up from where she was cleaning behind the clothes store's counter. Cleaning wasn't in her job description, really, but she'd learned that doing it herself was the easiest way to keep some semblance of order there.

"Nothing," she said. It was just past Friday night closing time, and only Buffy and a girl called Clara were still around.

"Nothing?" Clara said. "You really mean that? Like, just sitting around not doing anything?"

Buffy looked at the other girl. She was very typical for the northern Californian town where Buffy had decided to settle after Sunnydale turned into a large hole in the ground. Her entire world revolved around whatever the media wanted her to think about this week. She'd probably never had an original thought in her life, nor experienced anything outside the most utterly ordinary.

Buffy envied her.

"Really," she said. "If I get bored I may paint something and watch it dry."

"You mean, paint like a picture?"

"No. Like a wooden board, about this high." She waved her hand in the vicinity of her shoulder. "It's red now, but I'm thinking of painting it green."

For a precarious moment she could see a thought teeter on the brink of forming in Clara's head. But in the end she just laughed.

"You're such a kidder, Buffy!" she said.

"Yeah, sure am," Buffy said. She tossed the shop key to the other girl. "Your turn to lock up. See you Monday."

She'd stuck the wooden board into the ground, to keep it upright. It was easier to watch it that way. At first, she'd had it lying in the grass, but after the first few coats of paint she'd raised it.

Green suited it. Would have matched the grass, if the grass hadn't been mostly brown from drought. Maybe she should paint the grass too.

The back yard was small, as was the house. She'd bought it with the insurance money she'd got for her mother's house. It didn't need to be big. These days, she didn't have a small horde of friends and allies living around her. It was just her.

Slowly, the paint on the board dried. As the sun climbed slowly towards zenith, Buffy watched the green surface turn from shiny wet green to slightly duller dry green.

Her stomach had begun to insist that it was lunchtime when she heard a car pull into her driveway. With some regret, she turned from her nice green wooden board and walked the nineteen steps that separated the back door from the front door. She opened it and stepped out on the front porch. Which, unlike the board, needed painting.

The car in the driveway was a battered old Range Rover. She'd seen it before. Kennedy had got it from somewhere, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know where.

"Hey, Buffy!"

Dawn jumped out from the Rover's back seat and ran to her sister, throwing herself around her neck.

"Hi, Dawn. You're looking good."

She was, too. She was turning from a gangly young girl into a beautiful young woman with a speed that made Buffy feel old and decrepit. Not to mention that she looked happy and relaxed, rather than stressed-out and scared like she used to back in Sunnydale.

There were sounds of car doors opening.

"Hi, Buffy," she heard Willow say. "I hope we're not coming at a bad time?"

"No time's bad time for you guys," she said. "At least as long as you're not coming to tell me that I have to save the world again."

She frowned. "You aren't, right?"

Willow climbed the two steps onto the porch, closely followed by Kennedy.

"Don't worry," Willow said. "We have no intention to drag you out of your well-earned retirement. Your world-saving days are well and truly over."

"Although," Kennedy said, "with the stories the old gang from the last days of Sunnydale are telling all the new Slayers we find, it wouldn't surprise me if you start getting fans coming here to see the one and only Buffy."

Buffy grimaced. "Maybe I should start going by Anne again."

One lunch later, Kennedy was doing self-defence exercises with Dawn. Buffy and Willow sat in the shadow of the house, watching the two younger women.

"She's really growing up, isn't she?" Buffy said.

"Yeah," Willow said. "I don't think we could've done the whole organizing thing without her. She's taking to the Watcher thing like a fish to water. Sometimes she even sounds like Giles."

"Take care of her, will you? I couldn't bear the lose her, not after all the times I saved her life."

"Don't worry," Willow said. "It's not like the old days. We're not one Slayer and a bunch of scared normals any more. These days, we have a whole bunch of Slayers to do the fighting, while we normals stay safe and sound well away from the violence."

"Sounds more like an army than like the old Scooby gang."

"It is! Vi and Rona have been reading US Army books on small unit tactics and adapting them to Slayer abilities. We've found a couple of Slayers who were into martial arts even before they became active, and they're working on a Slayer martial arts style. I mean, you were always awesome in battle, but these girls, they're something else."

Willow hesitated for a moment. "Do you remember the Sisterhood of Jhe?" she asked.

"Oh yeah," Buffy said. "That was not fun, even with Faith helping."

"They showed up again last month," Willow said. "Vi and few new Slayers ran into them. They didn't even think to tell me and Dawn about it until a couple of days later, because they just wasted them and went on patrolling."

"Well, go them!"

"Yeah. It's not just that they're a group. I mean, even when you had Faith or Kendra to help you, you always knew that you mustn't die, because if you did it was *over*. But these new ones, they don't. If one of them dies, there are dozens more to step in. So they take risks you never would have. It's a very different vibe."

"Sounds like you're having fun. Well, except the dying."

"I am, actually. Ever since high school I wanted to fight evil, and now I am, in a way I'd never have imagined then."

"None of us imagined this last year!"

They sat and watched Dawn and Kennedy spar for a while. Grunts, laughter and the occasional short instruction came from them. Flies buzzed lazily in the summer heat, and the smell of fresh paint permeated the yard.

"So what are you guys doing here?" Buffy asked. "I can't imagine that you drove all the way up here just to have a chat with me."

"We're on our way to Cleveland," Willow said.

"The other Hellmouth?"

Willow nodded. "There are a small group of Slayers watching it. Officially, we're going there so I can take a look and see if it looks like it's going to open or something. Less officially, we're going to give the local Slayers a bit of a morale boost."

"How are you planning to do that?"

"Just by showing up," Willow said. "The new Slayers may see you as a mythic hero, but they sort of see me as the patron saint of Slayers."

"No they don't," Kennedy interrupted. She and Dawn had stopped practicing, and sat down in the grass next to Willow and Buffy.

"They don't see her as anything as paltry as a saint," Kennedy went on. "They see her as the *goddess* of Slayers. And I can't really say that I disagree."

"You're exaggerating," Willow said. "It's just a bit of hero worship. If that."

"Yeah," Dawn said. "The kind of hero worship where they wear little pictures of the hero next to their hearts and pray to her before they go into battle."

"No they don't!" Willow protested.

"Sure they do," Kennedy said. "Just not when you can hear them."

"All their stakes are made out of willow tree wood," Dawn said. "Check the book-keeping if you don't believe me."

"Oh dear Goddess..." Willow closed her eyes and looked pained.

"Well, they have a point," Buffy said. "I just fought stuff. You changed the world, Will. That's pretty heavy mojo."

"Can we change the subject, please?" Willow said.

"Sure," Dawn said. "Buffy, what's that plank stuck in the ground for?"

"So I can watch it more easily."

"Watch it?"

"Yeah. I paint it, and then I watch the paint dry."

The three visitors looked at Buffy.

"What?" she said. "Is that so strange?"

"Yes," Dawn said. "It's freaky."

"It's a relaxing thing. Meditation. Like that, whatsitsname, something boudoir."

"Zen Buddhism?" Willow guessed.

"Yeah. That. But mine. It's Zen Buffyism."

"Don't you get bored?" Dawn asked.

"Bored is good," Buffy said. "I like bored. I haven't had nearly enough bored in my life. Lives." She looked quizzically at Willow. "Does it count as a new life when you get resurrected?"

"I don't think the English language is prepared for the life of Buffy yet, so you get to chose."

"Cool. I chose that it counts as a new life. And in this life, I'm going to be bored. I'm going to be one hundred percent adrenaline free Buffy."

"And we wish you luck in that," Willow said.

Towards late afternoon Willow, Kennedy and Dawn packed themselves into the Range Rover and left. Buffy stood on her front porch and waved to them as the drove away. Seeing their obvious enthusiasm for their work made her feel strange. Part of her wanted to be with them, to see the new world she'd helped create. Another, and larger, part of her remembered the pain and fear and pressure all too clearly. She still often woke up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat and with her pulse racing, fractured dream images of darkness and battle filling her head.

No, she didn't envy them. Not really. Even if the fight had become easier with all the new Slayers, she felt sure that eventually the forces of darkness would rally and level the playing field. And then there would be the fear and pain and pressure again. The knowledge that if they failed, there wouldn't be another day in which to fight again.

She shivered, in spite of the late afternoon heat.

She liked seeing her sister and friends, but they couldn't help but remind her of old times. And remembering old times meant she wouldn't sleep much the night after.

When the sun set she decided to go for a walk. Just a walk, she told herself, not a patrol. Sure, she brought old Mr Pointy with her, but that was just because she was so used to carrying a stake that she felt naked if she didn't. She wasn't going to use it. She didn't hunt demons any more. She was just going for a nice walk.

She walked down the streets of the quiet suburb. Only occasionally did she see other people, and they were all quite normal city dwellers. She glanced into gardens and lit windows as she walked past, letting the quiet normalcy of it all soothe her ragged nerves. She was almost feeling calm enough to be able to sleep when she heard heavy steps behind her and her Slayer sense screamed vampire.

"Well, well, what have we here," she heard a gravelly voice say behind her. "A little girl out walking all by herself."

"Go away," she said. "You don't know what you're doing."

"I don't?" he said. He sounded amused.

"No," Buffy said. "You really don't."

"Strange," he said. "I thought I knew exactly that I was about to get me a little fresh girl blood."

The instant he came close enough, she reached behind her, grabbed him and slammed him hard into the ground in front of her. While he wasted a valuable second dealing with the surprise, she pulled out Mr Pointy and slammed it into his chest.

"See?" she said in the instant before he turned to dust. "You were wrong."

When she returned home she was in a weird mood. Not nearly as upset as she'd been when she left, but still not as calm as she needed to be to sleep. She poured herself a glass of water and brought it with her into the back yard.

The paint on the board looked different in the lamplight. Darker and deeper. She didn't like it.

She finished the water in a single long draught. If the color was wrong she'd just have to change it. Grabbing a piece of sandpaper, she attacked the recent layer of green paint.

She'd probably have it ready to be repainted by sunrise.

And then she'd spend the morning watching it dry.