Paint What's True

Olivia's Story of Big Questions, Hard Days and Hope

Story by Grandpa Ralph
With paintings by Elly



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A companion story to
Understanding Worldview and *Understanding Suffering*

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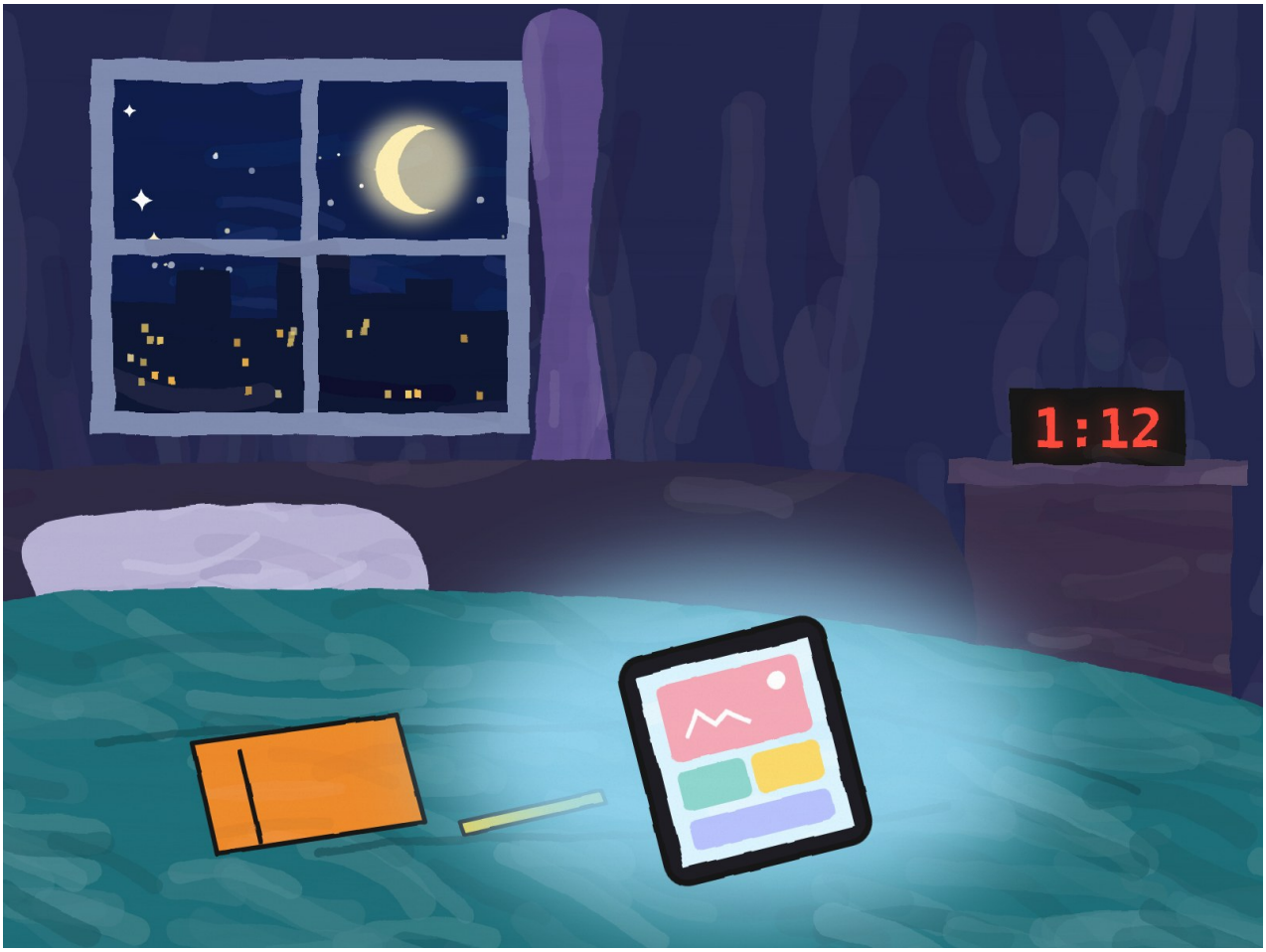
PART ONE

Who Am I?

Questions in the dark

CHAPTER 1

1:12 A.M.



Painting No. 1: The Glow

She felt like a picture of a person.

It was 1:12 a.m., and Olivia Hart was still awake.

Her phone glowed on her chest. She had 612 followers. Her latest post showed last summer's beach trip, her art award and her best friend, Jade, laughing. Two hundred people liked it.

None of them knew about nights like this.

None of them knew that her dad's texts were getting shorter. Her parents had split up two years ago. Her little brother, Leo, still asked when Dad was coming home. Olivia had stopped asking anything.

She scrolled past dances and pranks. She scrolled past a war she didn't understand. She scrolled past a girl who looked perfect and a boy who looked famous. Everybody looked happy. Everybody looked fine.

Olivia did not feel fine. She felt like a picture of a person.

She put the phone face-down and stared at the ceiling. Questions she hadn't asked since she was little came back in the dark.

Who am I, really?

Is anything real, or is it all just a show?

If there is a God, does He even notice me?

Does anything I do actually matter?

She didn't have answers. She wasn't sure anybody did. But for the first time in a long time, she wanted to know.

CHAPTER 2

Pretty Is Not the Same as True



Painting No. 2: Perfect Beach

"It's beautiful. Where are you in it?"

On Monday, Ms. Reyes, the art teacher, wrote three words on the whiteboard:

PAINT WHAT'S TRUE.

"Not just what's pretty," she said. "What's *true*. This is your project for the whole year. I want to see *you* in your work."

Olivia painted a sunset at the beach. She used her best orange and pink. She added three little birds and soft silver clouds. It was the kind of picture that gets a lot of likes.

Ms. Reyes studied it for a long time. "It's beautiful," she said. "Where are you in it?"

Olivia looked again. The beach was empty. No people. No footprints. Just a perfect sky over perfect water.

"I don't know," Olivia said.

"That's okay," said Ms. Reyes. "Keep painting until you do."

That night Olivia wrote in the corner of her sketchbook: *What's true about me?*

She didn't like how hard that question was.

CHAPTER 3

Answers Everywhere



Painting No. 3: So Many Voices

The app had read everything and believed nothing.

Olivia went looking for answers. They were everywhere.

At 2 a.m. she typed into an AI app: *What is the meaning of life?* The answer came back in two seconds. It was kind and smart. It told her to find purpose in relationships and growth, and maybe talk to a counselor. It was a good answer. It made her feel lonelier. The app had read everything and believed nothing.

Jade had an answer, too. “You have to find your truth, Liv. Nobody can tell you what’s right for you.”

Olivia liked that. But the same week, she saw a video of a hospital that had been bombed in a war. Children were being carried out. She knew, deep in her gut, that it was evil. Not “evil for her.” Just evil.

If truth is only personal, she thought, *how can I say that was wrong?*

Online, people shouted about politics as if their side could save the world. A podcast guest said the universe is probably a computer simulation. Another said nothing really matters, so just have fun.

Each answer held a piece of something true. None of them could hold her whole life.

She felt like she had a hundred puzzle pieces and no picture on the box.

CHAPTER 4

The Farmhouse



Painting No. 4: The Long Way to Nana's

"The question isn't whether you have one. Everybody does. The question is whether yours is true."

In October, Mom drove Olivia and Leo out to Grandpa and Nana's farm. The white farmhouse with the red roof sat at the end of a long path. The trees were turning gold and orange. A little creek ran right down the middle of the field.

Olivia had always loved it here. Nobody cared about her follower count. The Wi-Fi barely worked.

Grandpa met them at the car with flour on his shirt. Nana was baking apple bread. Leo ran straight to the chickens.

That evening they sat on the porch while the sky turned pink. Olivia told Grandpa about Ms. Reyes, and the AI app, and Jade's "find your truth."

Grandpa listened all the way to the end. He was good at that.

"Everybody has a way of seeing the world," he said. "It's called a worldview. It's like the foundation under a house. You can't see it, but everything stands on it. The question isn't whether you have one. Everybody does. The question is whether yours is true."

"How do you even know if it's true?" Olivia asked.

Grandpa held up four fingers. "Does it hold together? Does it match real life? Can you actually live by it? And does it answer the big questions, or just the easy ones?"

CHAPTER 5

The Old Barn



Painting No. 5: Half Old, Half New

“It doesn’t start with rules. It starts with a story.”

The next morning Grandpa was up on a ladder, nailing a new board onto the old red barn. Half the boards were faded and patched. Half were new and bright.

“My own grandpa built this barn,” Grandpa said. “A storm tore it up years ago. Then rot set in. I’m fixing it one board at a time.”

“Why not just build a new one?” Olivia asked.

Grandpa smiled. “Because I love this one.”

“I always thought the Bible was just a list of rules,” Olivia said.

“Most people do,” said Grandpa. “But it doesn’t start with rules. It starts with a story. Four parts. Kind of like this barn.”

“First, it was built well, on purpose. That’s **Creation**. Before anything existed, God the Father, Son and Spirit loved each other. He made the world out of that love. And He made people in His image. That means you’re not an accident, Livvy.”

“Second, the storm. That’s the **Fall**. People turned away from God and wanted to be their own gods. Everything got damaged. That’s why the world is beautiful and broken at the same time. So are we.”

“Third, the fixing. That’s **Redemption**. God didn’t tear down His world. He came Himself. Jesus lived the life we should have lived. He died for the wrong we have done, and He rose again. It cost Him everything.”

“And fourth?” Olivia asked.

“The finished barn,” Grandpa said. “That’s the **Restoration**. God promises to make everything new. No more death. No more tears.”

Olivia looked at the patched-up barn. For the first time, the puzzle pieces in her head started to look like one picture.

CHAPTER 6

Small and Seen



Painting No. 6: Under the Stars

God doesn't need the better-lit version. He made the real one.

That night Olivia lay in the cold grass behind the barn. There were no city lights out here. The sky was crowded with stars.

She felt very small.

But she also felt something she couldn't explain. It was as if the sky were saying something. As if she were being spoken to.

If none of this is real, she thought, remembering the simulation podcast, *why does this sky make me feel like Someone is talking to me?*

She thought of a verse Nana had stitched on a pillow in the guest room: "He has put eternity into man's heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Maybe that's what this is, Olivia thought. *Maybe I'm hungry for something because there really is something to be hungry for.*

She thought about her posts, her follower count and the better-lit version of herself that she showed everyone.

God doesn't need the better-lit version, she thought. *He made the real one.*

For the first time in a long time, Olivia didn't feel like a picture of a person.

She felt like a person.

CHAPTER 7

What Are You Looking For?



Painting No. 7: The Lamp

"God, if You're there, I want to know You."

Back home, Olivia texted her cousin Sam. Sam was twenty-six. He used to be the quiet, lonely cousin at every holiday. Lately he seemed different. Lighter.

Can I ask you something weird? How do you know God is real?

Sam called instead of texting back. He told her about a year when he felt empty and alone, even with hundreds of friends online. A guy from his basketball game invited him to read the Gospel of John with a small group.

“Nobody there had it all figured out,” Sam said. “But the story did. Come and see whether it holds up.”

So Olivia read John. In the very first chapter, Jesus turned to two people who were following Him and asked, “What are you seeking?” (John 1:38).

Olivia stopped reading. It felt like He was asking *her*.

What was she looking for? To be known. To be loved without a filter. To know that her life was going somewhere.

That night she turned off her phone, turned on her desk lamp and prayed for the first time in years. It wasn’t fancy.

“God, if You’re there, I want to know You.”

Her questions didn’t go away. But they didn’t feel like an empty hole anymore.

They felt like a door.

PART TWO

Why, God?

Questions in the storm

CHAPTER 8

The Cloud



Painting No. 8: Something Coming

This time the question wasn't Who am I? *It was* Why, God?

In November, Grandpa got sick.

At first he was just tired. Then there were tests. Then there was a word nobody wanted to say out loud: *cancer*.

Olivia painted a giant cloud piling up over a line of trees. It was bright white on top and gray underneath. From far away it looked peaceful. Up close, it looked like a storm.

“The doctors say it’s serious,” Mom said, holding Leo on her lap. Leo didn’t really understand. Olivia understood too much.

She had just started trusting God. She had just started to believe her life was part of a good story.

Now this?

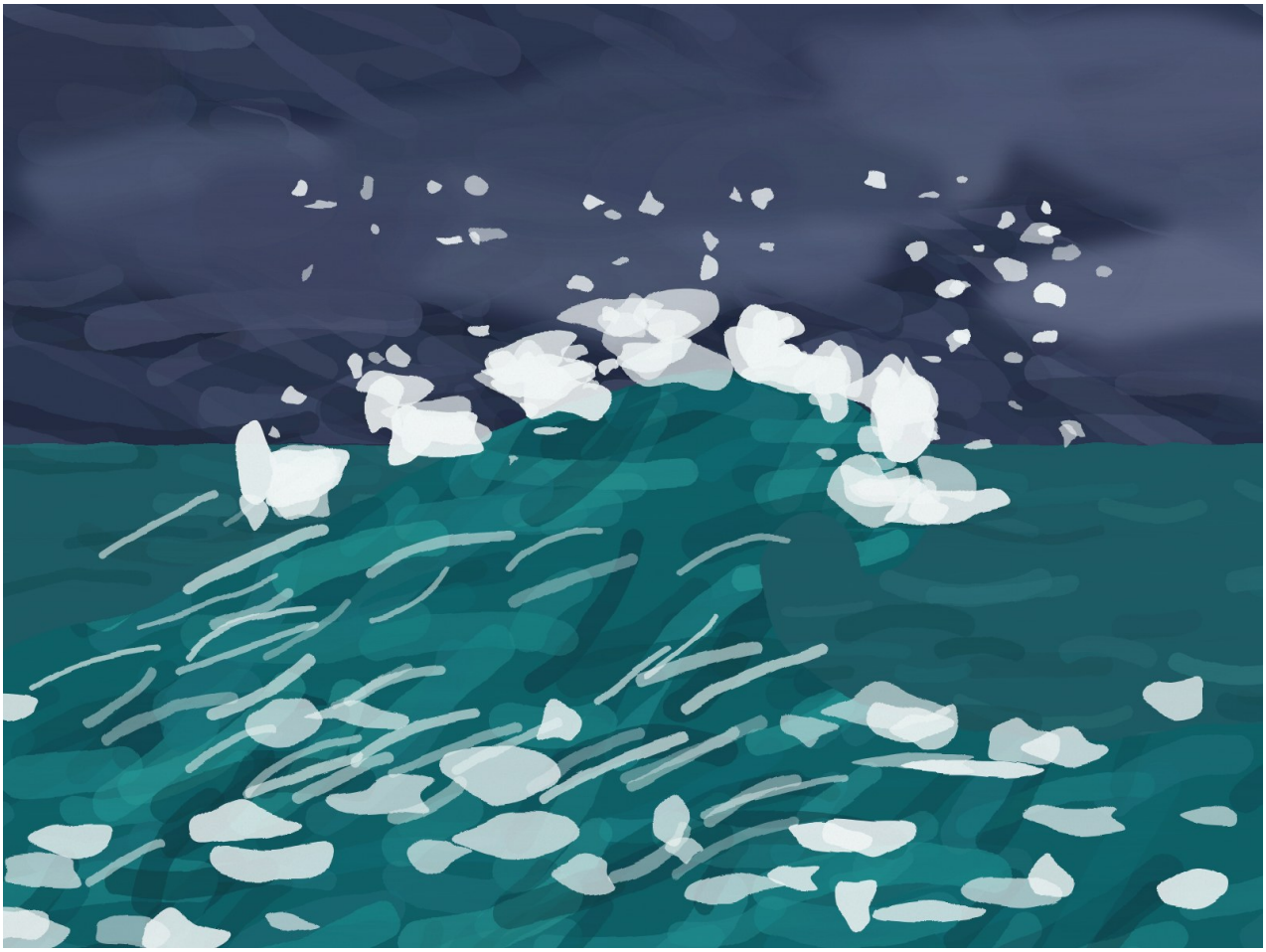
At school, everything went on like normal. People complained about tests and posted about games. Jade was struggling, too. She’d started having panic attacks and missing class. The news showed floods, shootings and wars. Kids were going hungry in places Olivia couldn’t find on a map.

That night she couldn’t sleep again. But this time the question wasn’t *Who am I?*

It was *Why, God?*

CHAPTER 9

Angry



Painting No. 9: Waves

"Say it to God, not just about Him. He can take it."

Olivia was angry. She didn't know what to do with it, so she painted it. Dark water. Huge waves. White spray crashing everywhere.

Then she called Sam.

"I'm so mad," she said. "I'm mad that Grandpa is sick. I'm mad that my parents split up and Dad hardly calls. I'm mad that Jade is scared all the time. I'm mad that kids get bombed and people get away with terrible things. And I'm mad at myself, because my problems seem so small next to what other people go through."

She took a breath. "Is it wrong to be mad at God?"

"Can I tell you something?" Sam said. "When my friend died, I was so angry I walked out of my Bible study. Somebody told me, 'Write it down. Say it *to* God, not just *about* Him. He can take it.'"

"Really?"

"The Bible is full of people being honest with God," Sam said. "Job said, 'I will complain in the bitterness of my soul' (Job 7:11). David prayed, 'How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?' (Psalm 13:1). Even Jesus cried out on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46)."

Olivia was quiet for a while. "So being honest with God isn't the opposite of faith?"

"It's one of the oldest kinds," Sam said.

CHAPTER 10

A Candle on the Table



Painting No. 10: Thanksgiving

“Light doesn’t explain the dark. It just lets you see in it.”

On Thanksgiving, a storm knocked out the power at the farm. Nana lit a fat blue candle and set it next to the pumpkin on the table.

Grandpa was thinner now. He sat wrapped in a blanket, but his eyes still twinkled.

“Grandpa,” Olivia asked, “if God is good and powerful, why doesn’t He just stop all this?”

Grandpa didn’t answer fast. “I don’t know all the whys,” he said. “But I know a few things.”

He counted on his fingers again. “God made people truly free, because love has to be free. We’ve used that freedom to hurt each other. There is a real enemy, and the world is broken by the Fall. And God is patient. He’s holding back the final day so more people can come home.”

He nodded at the candle. “But here’s the main thing. Light doesn’t explain the dark. It just lets you see in it. ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it’ (John 1:5).”

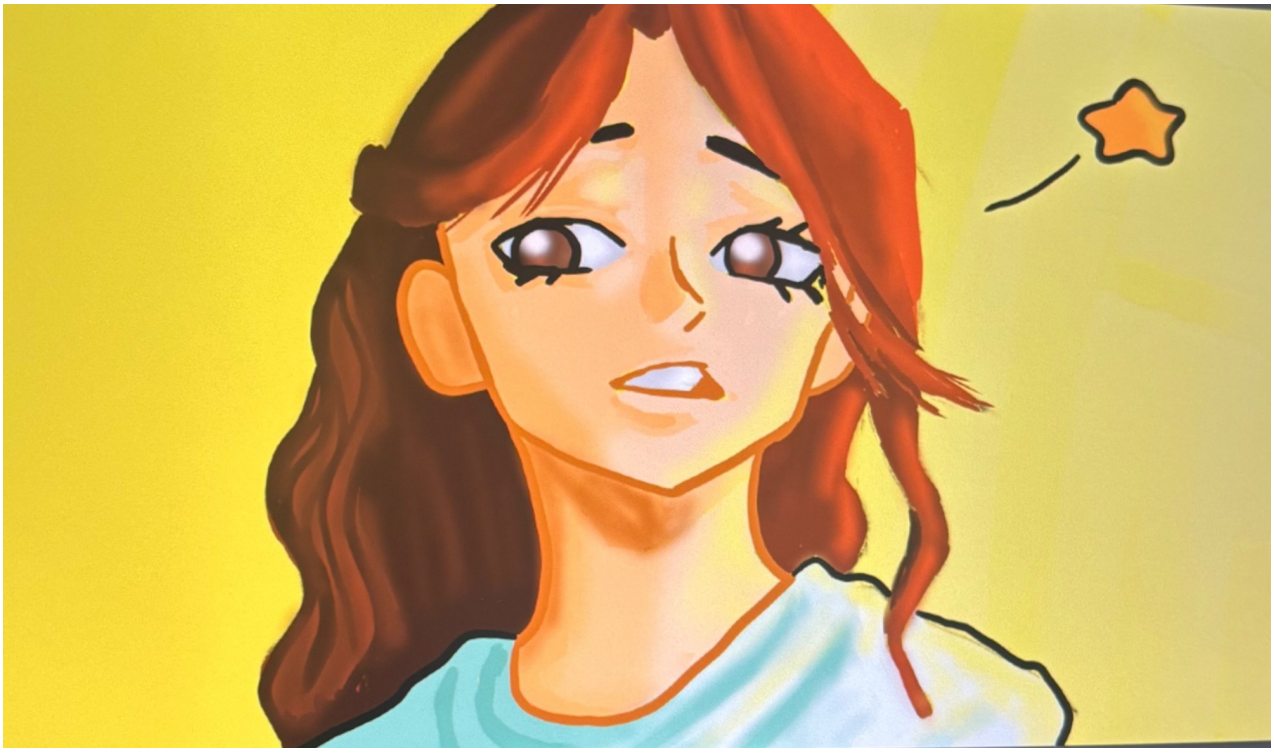
“That doesn’t answer everything,” Olivia said.

“No,” Grandpa said. “But I don’t need to know all the whys. I know the Who. And He’s not standing far away.”

Olivia watched the flame. It was small. The dark was big. But the dark couldn’t put it out.

CHAPTER 11

The Mask



Painting No. 11: Self-Portrait

Deep down, she wanted to believe God was good.

For her next project, Olivia painted herself. She made her eyes big and worried. She left her mouth half open, as if she were about to say something and stopped. In the corner, she added one small orange star, falling.

She called it *The Mask*.

Every day at school she wore one. People thought she was fine.

In her sketchbook, under the painting, she wrote the questions she was too scared to say out loud:

God, are You fair? How can You let this happen?

Do You love us? Then why don't You protect us?

Are You powerful? Then why don't You stop it?

Are You wise? Couldn't You come up with a better plan?

Are You good? Is any of this really good?

Do You even care if I'm happy?

People gave her answers. "Everything happens for a reason." "Just stay positive." "It's karma." "The universe doesn't care." But every answer asked her to stop feeling something she knew it was right to feel.

Deep down, she wanted to believe God was good.

She was just afraid He wasn't. Did she even like God?

CHAPTER 12

First Snow



Painting No. 12: Grandpa's Scarf

Joy and grief can live in the same heart.

At Christmas, Grandpa wanted to see snow one more time. So the whole family rented a cabin in the mountains.

Grandpa couldn't walk far anymore. He sat by the window in his wheelchair, wrapped in two blankets, and watched Olivia and Leo build a snowman.

"He needs a scarf!" Leo yelled.

Grandpa pulled off his own red scarf and held it out. "Take mine."

"Grandpa, you'll be cold," Olivia said.

"I've got blankets," he said. "He's got nothing."

Leo gave the snowman stick arms waving at the sky, and a carrot nose, and a big coal smile. Olivia wrapped the red scarf around its neck. Grandpa laughed so hard he started coughing.

That night Olivia couldn't tell what she felt. It was the best day she'd had in months, and it was also the saddest. She kept thinking, *This might be the last time.*

Sam was at the cabin, too. "Both can be true," he said when she told him. "The Bible says Christians can be 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing' (2 Corinthians 6:10). Joy and grief can live in the same heart."

Olivia painted the snowman that night, scarf and all. She wanted to remember.

CHAPTER 13

Jesus Wept



Painting No. 13: Silk Poppies

"He doesn't stand outside our pain. He climbs into it with us."

By February, Grandpa was in a hospital bed in the farmhouse living room. Nana put a jar of red silk poppies on the windowsill. “The real ones don’t bloom till June,” she said.

One afternoon Grandpa asked Olivia to read to him. He picked John 11. It’s the story of Jesus’ friend Lazarus, who got sick and died. Lazarus’s sister Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21).

Olivia’s voice shook. That was exactly how she felt.

Then she read the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35).

“He knew He was about to raise Lazarus,” Grandpa said softly. “And He still cried. He doesn’t stand outside our pain, Livvy. He climbs into it with us.”

Grandpa squeezed her hand. “There’s a verse I love. ‘In all their affliction he was afflicted’ (Isaiah 63:9). When we hurt, He hurts. And at the cross, He took the worst pain of all. I don’t understand everything. But the cross shows me what God is like when things are terrible.”

Olivia held Grandpa’s hand. It was thin and cold.

She didn’t want to let go.

CHAPTER 14

Poppies



Painting No. 14: Nana's Field

"Not 'don't grieve.' Just not without hope."

Grandpa died in March, early on a gray Thursday morning.

The funeral was at the little white church on the hill above Nana's fields. The pastor read, "We do not want you … to grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

"Not 'don't grieve,'" Nana whispered. "Just not without hope."

In June, the real poppies bloomed. Nana's field turned red, all the way up the hill to the church.

"Did you know poppies grow best in ground that's been torn up?" Nana said. "After the big wars in Europe, the battlefields filled with them. Red for the blood. Black in the middle for the loss. But they still bloom."

Olivia painted the poppy field, the golden hills and the church with its tiny cross. She made the poppies huge in front, as if they were standing guard.

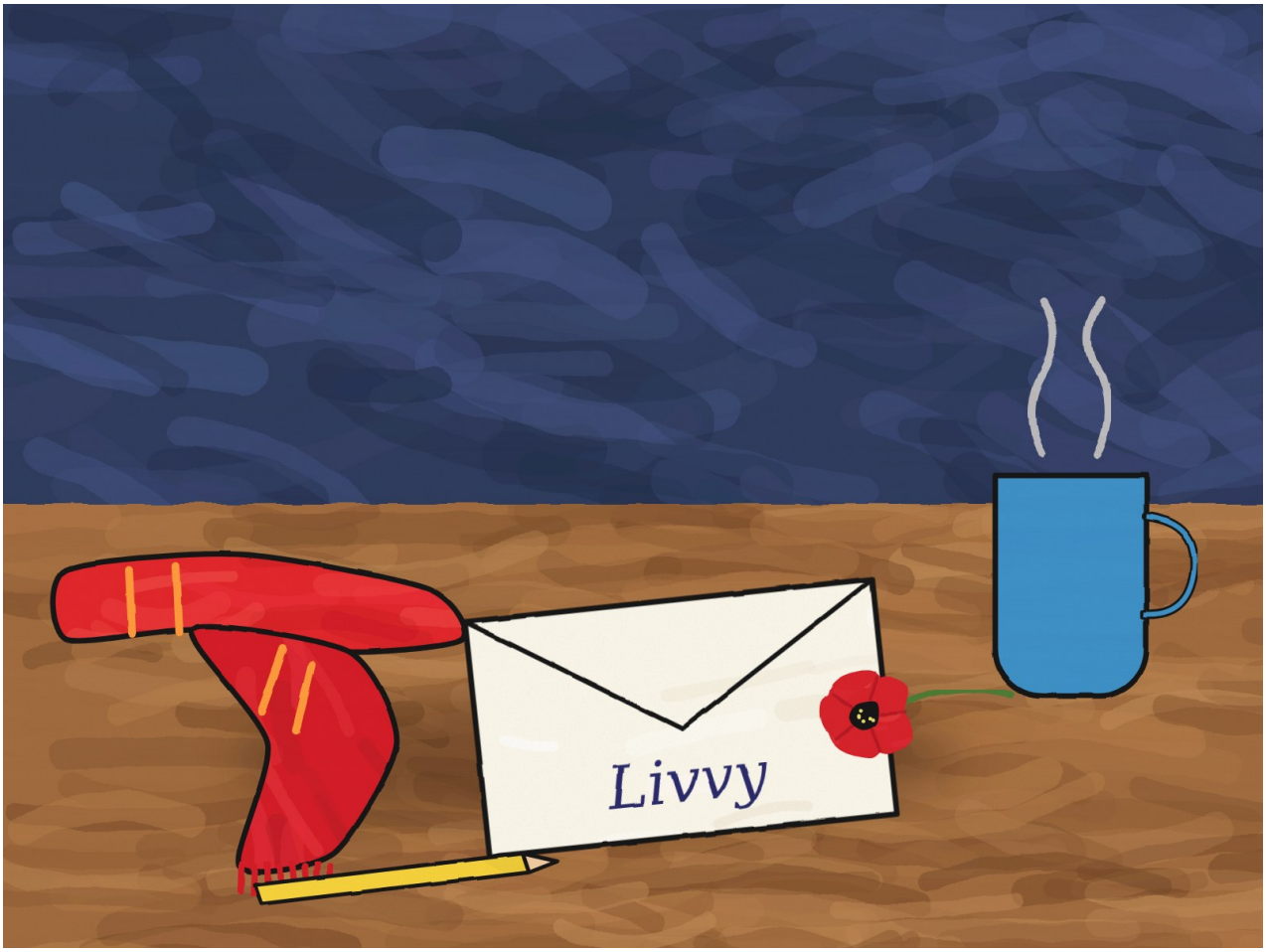
Grief was strange. Some days it was a wave that knocked her flat. Some days it was quiet, like a stone in her pocket. Some days she forgot for a whole hour and then felt guilty for forgetting.

But she was learning that tears weren't a lack of faith.

Jesus cried, too.

CHAPTER 15

The Letter



Painting No. 15: For Livvy

"He isn't grading you."

There was something Olivia hadn't told anyone.

The weekend before Grandpa died, Mom had asked if she wanted to drive out to the farm. Olivia said no. There was a party. She told herself she'd go next weekend.

There was no next weekend.

Under all her anger, there was something heavier: shame. She felt like she had failed the test. Not good enough. Not loving enough. Never enough.

After the funeral, Nana handed her an envelope with *Livvy* written on it in Grandpa's shaky handwriting.

Livvy, the letter said, *you never had to earn my love. You couldn't if you tried. And you can't earn God's love either. He isn't grading you. He already knows everything about you, and He loves you anyway. Paint what's true, girl. I'm so proud of you. — Grandpa*

Olivia cried until her eyes hurt.

Later she found a verse that said Jesus endured the cross, "despising the shame" (Hebrews 12:2). He carried her shame, too. And another verse said God "will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love" (Zephaniah 3:17).

You were never grading me, she wrote in her sketchbook. *All this time, You were never grading me.*

CHAPTER 16

Ducks in a Hot Tub



Painting No. 16: For Jade

She couldn't fix Jade's pain. But she could show up.

That spring, Jade stopped coming to school.

Her panic attacks had gotten worse. She stopped answering texts. When Olivia finally went to her house, Jade was curled up on her bed in a hoodie.

Olivia didn't know what to say. So she didn't say much. She just sat on the floor and stayed.

She remembered something Sam had told her. In the Bible, when Job lost everything, his friends sat with him on the ground for seven days, and "no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (Job 2:13). They did their best work before they started explaining.

Olivia went back the next day. And the next.

On the fourth day she brought a painting: a big wooden hot tub crammed full of yellow ducks with giant, shocked eyes. Two had little towels on their heads. One was laughing. One looked like it had seen a ghost.

Jade stared at it. Then she snorted. Then she laughed so hard she cried.

"Will you talk to the school counselor with me?" Olivia asked. "I'll go with you."

Jade nodded.

Olivia couldn't fix Jade's pain. But she could show up. And she was starting to see that this is what God does, too.

CHAPTER 17

Gerald



Painting No. 17: Gerald

She didn't have to choose.

In May, Mom took Olivia and Leo to the zoo. It was the first fun thing they had done since the funeral.

At the giraffe deck, one giraffe leaned its long neck right over the railing and stared at Olivia. It had giant dark eyes and a goofy, slow smile, like it knew a secret.

“His name is Gerald,” Leo announced. Nobody knew if that was true.

Gerald chewed. Gerald blinked. Gerald slowly lowered his face until it was six inches from Olivia’s nose.

Olivia laughed. A real laugh, the kind that comes from your stomach. She hadn’t laughed like that since before Grandpa got sick.

Then she felt guilty. *Am I allowed to be happy when Grandpa is gone?*

But she remembered the snowman and Grandpa laughing until he coughed. Grandpa would have loved Gerald. He would have named him something even worse.

Joy and grief could live in the same heart. She didn’t have to choose.

That night she painted Gerald with huge eyes and a silly smile on a bright green background. Leo hung it over his bed.

CHAPTER 18

Footprints



Painting No. 18: Footprints

She wasn't asking into an empty room anymore. She was asking a Father.

In July, the family went back to the beach.

At sunset Olivia walked along the edge of the water. The sky turned orange, then pink. Waves erased her footprints almost as fast as she made them.

She thought about this whole year: Grandpa's barn, the stars, the cloud, the waves, the poppies, the letter, Jade, Gerald. She still didn't know why Grandpa had to die. She still had questions.

But she wasn't asking into an empty room anymore. She was asking a Father.

She remembered a verse Sam had sent her: "You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:15). *Abba* means something like "Dad." God wasn't a far-off judge watching her through glass. He was a Father who had walked with her the whole way.

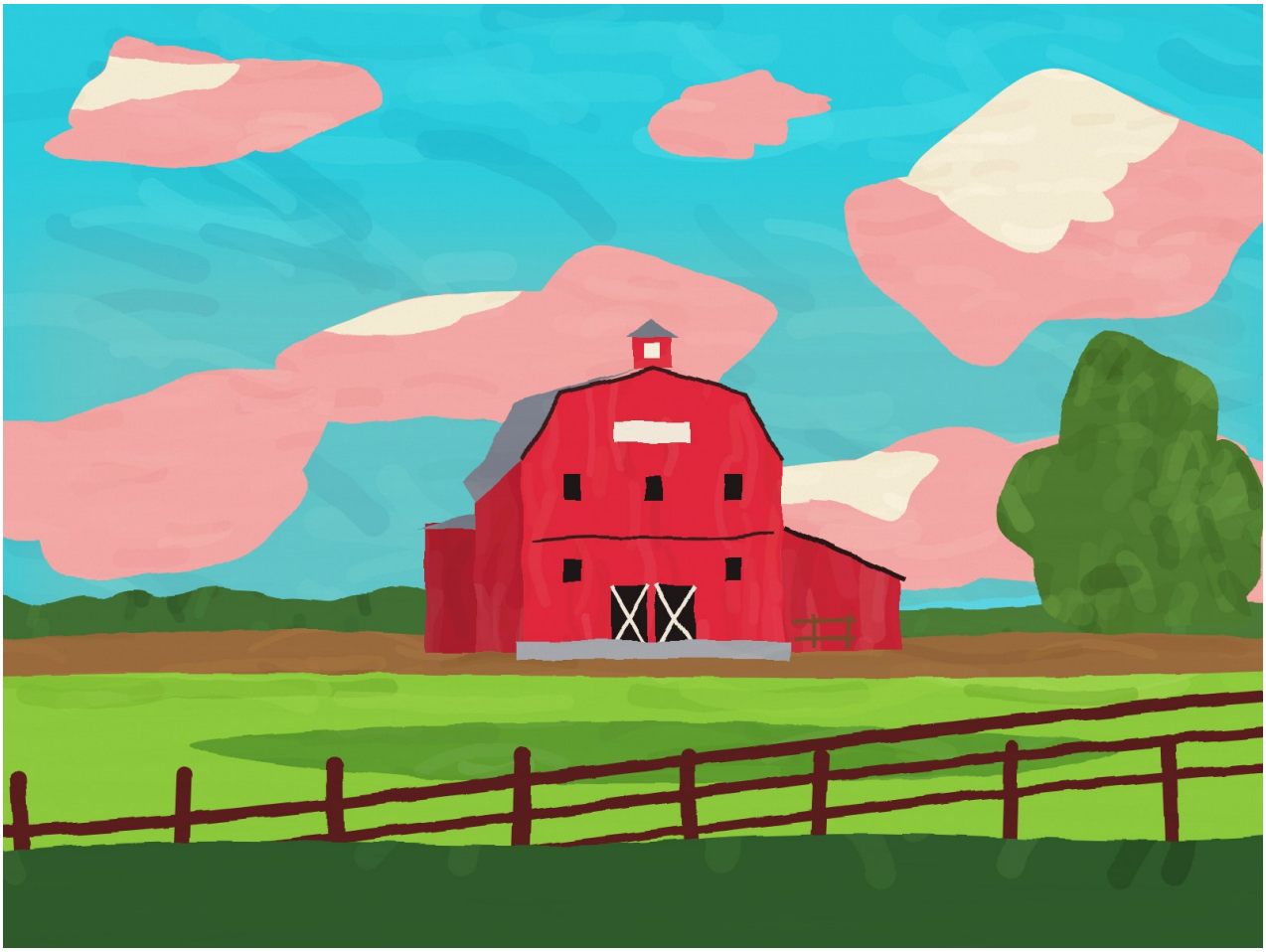
Back home, Olivia painted the beach again. Same sky. Same water. But this time she added footprints in the sand, walking toward the water.

"Whose footprints are those?" Ms. Reyes asked.

"Mine," Olivia said. "But I wasn't walking alone. Someone walked with Grandpa all the way home. And He's walking with me now."

CHAPTER 19

Paint What's True



Painting No. 19: Finished

"Now," she said, "I can see you."

In August, the whole family gathered at the farm. Sam came. So did Jade.

Together they finished Grandpa's barn. Leo handed up nails. Nana painted the last board red. Olivia and Sam hung the old barn sign Grandpa had saved.

When it was done, they stood back and looked. It wasn't a new barn. It was the old one, made new.

That's the story, Olivia thought. *Built good. Broken. Rescued at great cost. And one day, made new*. Grandpa had said God promises a day when "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more" (Revelation 21:4).

That fall, Ms. Reyes hung Olivia's whole year of paintings in the school hallway. Olivia called the show *Paint What's True*.

There was the empty beach and the beach with footprints. The glowing phone and the lamp. The patched barn and the finished one. The storm cloud. The waves. The poppies. The snowman in Grandpa's scarf. Ducks in a hot tub. Gerald.

Ms. Reyes walked down the whole row. At the end she turned to Olivia and smiled.

"Now," she said, "I can see you."

Olivia smiled back. She still had questions. Everybody does.

But she knew who she was. She knew whose she was.

And she knew she wasn't walking alone.

Talk About It

These questions are for a friend, a small group or a class. Pick a few. There are no wrong answers.

Head questions

1. Olivia felt “like a picture of a person.” What do you think she meant?
2. Grandpa said everybody has a worldview, like the foundation under a house. What were his four tests? Try them on a popular idea, like “find your truth.”
3. Grandpa used the barn to tell the Bible’s story in four parts. What are the four parts? Which one surprised you?
4. Olivia knew the bombing was evil. “Not ‘evil for her.’ Just evil.” Why does that matter?
5. Grandpa said, “Light doesn’t explain the dark. It just lets you see in it.” What do you think he meant?
6. Why do you think the Bible includes so many honest complaints to God?

Heart questions

7. Where are you showing a “better-lit version” of yourself?
8. Which of Olivia’s six questions for God would you ask? Do you like God?
9. Grandpa wrote, “He isn’t grading you.” Is that easy or hard for you to believe? Why?
10. Who has been a Grandpa, a Sam or a Jade for you? Who might need you to just show up?
11. If you painted “what’s true” about your life right now, what would you paint?

If You're Hurting

You don't have to carry hard things alone. Talk to a parent, a teacher, a school counselor, a pastor or another adult you trust.

If you ever feel like you might hurt yourself, or you're worried about a friend, call or text **988** anytime to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. If someone is in danger right now, call **911**.

About This Book

Paint What's True is a companion story to two papers by Ralph C. Ennis: *Understanding Worldview* and *Understanding Suffering*. Olivia's cousin Sam is the same young man readers meet in those papers. A 12-session *Head & Heart* reflection guide goes with both.

The pictures are presented as Olivia's paintings. Ten of them are Elly Toole's own paintings. The other nine were created by AI in her style to finish telling Olivia's story.

Reading time: about 30 to 40 minutes.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This book was prepared in 2026 with the assistance of artificial intelligence.

October 2026

Acknowledgments

Ralph C. Ennis, known to some readers as Grandpa Ralph, wrote this story. He has been married to Jennifer for 53 years. They have four married children and 15 grandkids. He is an independent researcher in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the author of *Understanding Worldview* and *Understanding Suffering*.

Elly Toole painted the art that inspired this book. Her own paintings appear in chapters 4 (The Farmhouse), 5 (The Old Barn), 8 (The Cloud), 10 (A Candle on the Table), 11 (The Mask), 12 (First Snow), 14 (Poppies), 16 (Ducks in a Hot Tub), 17 (Gerald) and 18 (Footprints). Her beach painting is also on the cover. Thank you, Elly, for painting what's true.

The allegory was shaped by AI around Elly's previously created paintings and Grandpa's *Understanding Worldview* and *Understanding Suffering*. The other pictures were created by AI in her style to fill in the story.