

Still_Life

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A young woman trailed behind the artist down a dim hallway, past a large dining room with a long table piled with dishes and glasses, as if awaiting company, and opposite, a living room with an oversized couch and chairs flanking a fireplace, the cushions plumped and orderly as if no one ever sat there. The air was thick with the scent of cigarette smoke and red wine, despite the barren atmosphere.

The artist shuffled as he walked, the shuffle of an older man, perhaps dispirited. He said nothing. He had not spoken a word since the girl entered the apartment, merely beckoning to her to follow. When they reached the end of the hall, he paused a moment and she hoped he might speak – an introduction or instructions. Instead, he opened the door to a large bright room, so bright by comparison she squinted against the glare, and without a word, she followed him inside.

She breathed a sigh of relief. The silence, the low light, the dark scratched wood floors along the long hallway had flared a fear the man might chop her up in little pieces. He could mix her into the paint and say she never arrived at all. No one would be the wiser. Such things do happen in this city, she'd been warned.

This room was also spacious, and unadorned, as if it were another apartment at one time, and now, she realized, the artist's studio. He moved toward the center of the room, to an easel with a large empty canvas. A photograph, clipped to the edge, seemed like an old Polaroid, but she could not make out the image. Beneath the easel were two empty coffee tins filled with brushes of various sizes and a large basket containing several paint cans.

All around her, the shade of blue on the walls, a dark aqua, nearly teal, reflected the shade of her eyes, eyes so wide and punctuated with dark lashes they seem painted onto her face. Wood moldings and doors, pristine and graceful, were exceedingly well preserved, perhaps recently remodeled. The girl breathed in the scent, as if the wood had just arrived from the forest, fresh and organic, nearly animate, reminding her of the rural aroma of home, although she scented only the dregs of coffee in a mug near the easel.

The one painting on the wall, the only one she'd noticed anywhere, was an unexpectedly stagnant still life. As inanimate as the wood was alive, as flat as the artist's persona. She had the thought she too would be a still life today, of a sort.

The artist, beyond his silence, had yet to look at her directly, as if he had something to hide. Why wouldn't he look at the girl who would model for him today? She might have felt sorry for him – his age, the sluggish pace, the bleak living space – at least she would have been sympathetic, had he seemed the least bit benevolent or welcoming.

He handed her a plastic covered hanger, and hanging from it a plastic bag with accessories, and pointed to a door at the far end of the room.

Behind the door, a bathroom, a makeshift changing room, painted bright white, top to bottom, the floor and backsplash in rectangular black and white tiles, what they call subway tiles, distinctive to these old urban buildings and which are trendy now. Everything old is new again, her grandmother used to say. A half-used bar of soap lay on the sink, one skimpy blue towel hung on a bar, and a roll of toilet paper sat on the back of the toilet. Several large cans of paint were piled in the bathtub, streaks of dried color trailing the slope of the tub like its own still life.

Uncovering the plastic on the hanger, she found a green dress, the sort of green you don't see much anymore, with fresh brown suede shoes and ankle socks, and to her surprise, the dress fit perfectly.

Seriously? she asked, as she emerged. *I'm to be outfitted like an overgrown schoolgirl?*

Seriously, the artist muttered, without meeting her gaze.

This morning, before the bus ride and the long walk to this distant neighborhood, the girl felt a thrill at the idea of being a painter's model. She's heard stories about artist and muse. The magnetism between strangers for the sake of creation. Now, however, she felt deflated. This artist was all business and she was to be dressed as a girl? She is no child – a young woman on her own in the city, making her way. She likes to think she belongs to no one now, not even the mother and grandmother who raised her.

The artist pointed to the chair placed opposite the easel.

What do you call this green? she asked as she sat.

Again, no answer. He kept his back to her as he rummaged through the can, sorting through a variety of sketching implements.

Pine? Hunter green? she probed.

Maybe, he murmured.

Green is a comforting color, I read that somewhere. Soothes the central nervous system. May have something to do with spring. Renewal. Is that what you're going for here?

What I'm going for is to paint you in a simple pose. Hold on, I'll show you.

Blue, that's about the sky, the sea, she continued, as he continued searching for the right tool.
Also tranquility, I think. And so many shades of blue...

Sit quietly, he barked, his voice gravelly as if only just awakened.

Here's the thing, she said. *I don't sit still very well. I'm a runway model, at least, that's the plan. Sometimes I stand at a design center where they drape fabric over my body to see how it moves before they make the cut. That's about all the stillness I can stand. Ants in my pants, my mother used to say. Busy as a bee, my grandmother said. Undisciplined, the teachers said.*

He sighed. She watched his rounded shoulders rise and fall. *Well then, why are you here?*

The agency said you asked for me. Why me? Did you see me at Bloomingdale's?

She had sashayed the runway there just weeks ago to present the holiday collection for the regional buyers. Most days, the days she has work, she models wedding dresses to entice the richer mothers of the bride or parades seasonal merchandise to the best customers at the better department stores.

From the first, the modeling agency said she was right for the runway. Tall and lean, she has perfected the stare – focused at an invisible horizon line and with a barely noticeable smile, like the Mona Lisa. She strides on long legs suited to high heels. Proud, but not haughty, like the couture models. Her grandmother liked to say she’s the perfectly shaped fruit embedded in a barrel of perfectly ripened fruit.

Well, can you sit still for an hour and then we will take a short break? That’s the deal, that’s the way the day will go. Can you do that? he asked, with obvious exasperation, although she could not see his face to read his expression.

She nodded. She needed this job. The pay is triple the usual rate and she hardly has a spare penny after rent and personal expenses. She doesn’t eat much and her roommate cuts her hair, but she has to look the part and even drugstore makeup and used clothes come at a cost. She was glad for the gig. She told the agency she would make it work, although she would not pose in the nude, not because there is anything wrong with her body, just not her style. One must draw the line where the line needs to be drawn, she told them. Her grandmother also taught her that.

Maybe it would help if I knew what I’m to be thinking about? Or why a twenty year-old woman is dressed in girly clothes with schoolgirl shoes and this very old-fashioned hairdo?

The artist sent an instruction to the agency on how she was to wear her hair. Plaited and turned under, like her grandmother in old photographs. The women of that era always elegant and expectant.

Are you twenty already? the artist mumbled, still sorting through pens and brushes, and then spoke up loudly, as if refuting his own thoughts. *And this isn’t acting, just a pose.*

He stood and stepped toward her and she got a better look at him, even as he kept his gaze to the floor. Tall and barrel chested, he wore a long blue work shirt that could not conceal a belly bloated with age, maybe drink. Wavy, mostly gray hair, thinner at the top than the back, traced the nape of his neck, and he was clean-shaven, no stubble or beard. No jewelry, no hard edges. The sort of man you see nursing a drink at a bar, or reading a book at Starbucks, for hours at a time, as if nowhere to go and nothing better to do. Not at all the Bohemian she had expected.

Barely touching her, he molded her into position. His fingers, long and unexpectedly warm, grazed her upper arms, shifting her one way, then another, and then again, until satisfied. Thick wrists seemed more like those of a ranch-hand than an artist. She was to face a window, away from the canvas, in profile. He pressed one palm against one of her knees to press it back and with the fingertips of his other hand nudged the other leg forward. He nudged her chin forward and she was struck again by the gentle touch from such a large brusque man.

Place your fingers at the edge of the chair, he said.

Like this? she asked.

She looked at him, to try to make a connection, but he averted his eyes.

Look the way you're facing and don't move, he commanded.

His accent reminded her of the farmers who frequented her grandmother's general store. A flat diction better suited to animals than people.

She followed him with her eyes and when he turned back to her, as if he had eyes at the back of his head, he snarled, *don't look at me. Stare ahead of you.*

I'm not much of a daydreamer.

Just try to imagine something outside the window. Paint your own picture.

I have no artistic talent, she said, with a chuckle. Supposedly in the DNA, but not me.

She looked toward the window, as instructed, even as she felt his eyes on her, evaluating the angles, the light. The play of color between the bluer walls and the green dress. The temptation to return his gaze was maddening.

I'm sorry, but I do think I'm a bit old to be dressed this way, she said.

Don't speak, he bellowed. *And don't change position.*

I can move my mouth without moving position, she insisted.

You may think so, but no. Be still.

A few moments later, she asked, *is it time yet?* In her peripheral vision, she saw a hint of a smile on the artist's face.

You are an impatient one, aren't you? he remarked.

I come by it naturally.

Have you ever heard that patience is a virtue?

Patience is overrated, she replied. *I mean, what's to be gained by waiting for something to happen when you can make something happen?*

Just sit still, the artist snapped. *That's all I'm asking.*

Okay, I will. I promise.

And you keep your promises?

Absolutely, she said.

The girl sat quietly while he sketched for what seemed like hours, although the shade of light around the window had barely shifted. She tried to take comfort in the steady stroke of a pencil, like a gentle wind, and the vague sense of life outside the studio.

The women in your family, do they keep their promises? he asked.

I'm sure they mean to, she answered, surprised by the question. *Now their men, that's another matter.*

Hmmm, the artist harrumphed.

The girl turned to face him, and he, caught off guard, looked directly at her. She saw the brooding in his dark blue-green eyes, round, deep set eyes, like her own, and also nearly navy at the edges.

That was the moment she should have stopped to inhale the musty scent in the air, to notice the hum of an air-conditioner, the barking dog in the distance, the light slipping through window blinds shedding shadow lines on the floor, if only to capture the feel of the moment, the moment between then and now. Before and after. The sort of moment people look back on and ultimately cling to in memory. For what is memory but a still life in our minds' eye? Even a portrait is a still life, as if to say, still, there is life. Then again, that's the nature of such moments - one cannot know what's coming or what we have encountered. We realize only after the fact, if then.

Sometimes men don't leave, he said. Sometimes they are sent away.

Her grandmother often spoke fondly of the grandfather who fled long before the girl was born. She mused about the husband who refused the humble life she preferred. She called him the man that got away. The man who needed a larger world, she said, and she, who knew herself so well, knew she could never live in an urban setting, a place filled with strivers and elitists, and armchair philosophers, she believed. Instead, she would raise her daughter on her own, and raise her granddaughter as well when her father died in the first Gulf War, leaving her daughter a widow with a toddler.

Her mother, who had little memory of the father who abandoned them, and little tolerance for sentimentality, told her daughter, in a rare reflective moment, that she remembered him like a ferocious thunderstorm: the supremacy of the squall nullified by the tranquility of the aftermath.

Now the girl noticed the artist's long narrow face, like hers. The squared chin. Her grandmother often remarked that she was made in her grandfather's image, much to her mother's chagrin.

Do you know me? she asked, her voice faltering, her breathing suddenly hurried, simultaneously intrigued and alarmed by the possibility the artist might be that man who left his women behind.

He shook his head no, although, facing her, she thought she saw remorse in those matching dark blue eyes.

Please, turn your eyes to the window, he said, *as you promised.*

She pressed down forcefully on her hands to steady herself. *My very wonderful grandmother taught me to say what I mean, mean what I say, and do what I mean to do,* she said, even as she refused to turn her eyes away, insisting he see her at long last.

The artist put down his sketch pen. Slumping onto the stool, he stared at the photograph clipped there, what she would later learn was a photograph of her grandmother. A black and white photograph, but of course he would remember what she was wearing. He would remember the shade of green of the dress, the creamy hue of her skin, the chestnut brown plaited hair.

Seconds passed and then, without comment or expression, the artist sat up with intent and began again to draw. Not another word passed between them. The girl, less a model than a mnemonic, granted the artist the gift of stillness through the long day, but under a punishing gaze. And when, at last, he completed the sketch that would become the painting, a painting she would see years later, at a small museum, donated by her late grandmother, to whom he had sent the finished portrait and which she had kept for herself as a gift of love, only then the girl would discover he had cut off the image at the eyes – her eyes, his eyes – as if he could not bear to see in his granddaughter what he refused to see in himself.

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Art_Work by Kenton Nelson. www.kentonnelson.com

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