

## THE QUITTER

I had joined the Boy Scouts determined to succeed, but my determination fizzled out in three days of steady rain at some Scout camp on Staten Island where, after a dinner of half-cooked hamburger and raw vegetable chunks scorched over an open flame on my mess-kit, I retired to a corner of my bunk, too drained to join the rest of my troop at the campfire. I thought I would just sit there alone for a while, contemplating stoically the sheer rottenness of this misspent weekend, when a fatal thought crept into my mind: It being 8:00 on a Sunday evening, I knew exactly where my parents and my younger brother were, even where they were sitting. My brother was scrunched between my parents on my living room sofa, some fifteen miles across Gravesend Bay in Brooklyn, and they were all watching “Bonanza,” my own favorite, and they were all warm and wearing dry socks. I looked at my new watch to confirm the timing: 8:01. I computed that the opening credits were blazing to a close, the Cartwright boys had each tipped their cowboy hats to the viewers, and I started humming the upbeat theme music. The “dum-da-da dum-da-da dum-da-da dum-da-da DA-da” was my error, because tears welled up in my eyes, and I started to weep.

I didn’t care if the other Boy Scouts noticed me crying. They already hated me, almost as much as I hated them, and I couldn’t sink much lower in their estimation than I already had. The tears just confirmed that I was finished as a Scout. My only possible motivation to remain a Boy Scout was spite. I had quit playing the cello and, earlier, the recorder, because I had no sense of pitch, I had discontinued my swimming lessons because the chlorinated water burned my palate whenever I accidentally took some in, which was often, I had been a washout at Little League because my mind could not prevent my body from panicking whenever the hardball roared ferociously towards me, or anywhere in the vicinity of home plate. It’s hard to hit the ball sitting on your ass, as the axiom had it, and that was where I spent most of my turns at bat.

All of these activities were worsened by my understanding that my parents had invested lots of money in the musical instruments, in the annual pool fee at the Jewish Community House, in the fuzzy flannel baseball uniform. My parents made it clear that they were willing to pay for these things, and many others; all they needed from me was my word that, this time, I would stick it out to the end. Every time, after my eager promises that this time would be different, I soon confessed to them that I had lost the burning desire to be a musician, a swimmer, a baseball player, and that their investment in my sorry fickle self had gone to waste.

My parents made it plain, too, that they didn't really care about the wasted money (though they took pains to remind me that we were by no means wealthy people either). They didn't care if I were a musician, a swimmer, a baseball player. They just wanted me to be something that I found even harder to deliver to them: A happy child who had friends. That was how I had persuaded them to fork over the annual dues for the Boy Scouts, and the fee for the uniform and mess-kit and all the other crap: Guys in my sixth grade class at P.S. 97 were joining the Scout Troop at the J.C.H., and this would be a chance for me to make friends with them. I wouldn't have to really do anything in scouting; I would just have to join up and go on trips and stuff like that. But now that I thoroughly detested all the guys who liked scouting so much more than I did, who thought it was fun getting lost in these stupid wet woods, who didn't mind sleeping on these scratchy hard bunks, who felt it was fun burning your hands holding the flimsy aluminum mess-kit frying pan close to the fire, and eating the murky gristle in the half-dark so that you couldn't even see if it was cooked or raw or what. If the Boy Scouts had offered a merit badge for slitting the throats of other scouts with a folding knife, maybe I could have gotten interested in earning that, but otherwise I knew I would never devote minutes, much less years of tedious effort, towards acquiring even a single merit badge. No, I'd be better off just quitting right now, and dealing with my parents' disappointment with this further evidence that their oldest son was a hopeless misfit.

My world was, surprisingly, disturbed very little by my grim announcement—my parents seemed to be expecting it, and my fellow Boy Scouts in the sixth grade let up on me as they, too, eventually grew bored with scouting's rigors—and I resolved to make scouting the last occasion that I asked my parents to support my foolish ambitions. But then, a few months later, my mother told me of a new opportunity.

"I was talking to Bunny Spiegelman today," she informed me. Mrs. Spiegelman's Bobby was a member of my class, and ostensibly one of my friends, though the rodent-faced Bobby courted popularity too eagerly for my taste. We played ball together sometimes, though, and as far as our parents were concerned, we liked each other's company. "She told me Bobby and some of the other boys are going to take some painting lessons in the winter."

"Who?"

"Oh, I don't know," my mother said. "Gary Greene, I suppose." Greene was another sixth-grader whom all the parents assumed was tight friends with Spiegelman, mostly because they lived on the same block, and their parents were friendly, and they looked somewhat alike, though in reality Spiegelman resembled a rat in personality, and Greene increasingly resembled a mouse. In a few years' time, Greene would be wearing saddle-shoes and singing in the high school Glee Club while Spiegelman would be dealing psilocybin in the park across the street from the high school, but for now they still seemed to my mother to be the best of pals.

"Yeah? So?"

“I thought maybe you’d like to try these painting lessons, too.”

I shrugged. “It seems kind of--”

“Kind of what?”

I shrugged again. I knew perfectly well what it seemed kind of: Kind of expensive, kind of social, kind of anxiety-provoking. What if my parents shelled out loads of money to buy paints and brushes and all sorts of crap, only to learn that painting lessons were another thing I didn’t get?

“I don’t know.”

“You haven’t heard anything about it yet, Stevie,” my mother said. “Listen first, and then decide.” She explained that this woman, Anna Arena, lived in the neighborhood, and gave private lessons in oil painting three nights a week to children, and the children who’d taken these lessons, even those without any particular talent, all—“all,” my mother repeated—produced actual paintings after a few lessons. Anna Arena had a reputation, my mother swore, as some kind of miracle worker. I must have still looked doubtful, because my mother then produced her greatest (and rarest) persuasive tool, the truth: “You always like to draw,” she said. “Now you can get some training at artwork. You could be good at it.”

I did like to draw, though my abilities had mostly meant trouble for me. My sixth-grade class had studied a brain-snuffingly dull “unit” on the jet airplane, and poor Mrs. Marion, my 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, had struggled to describe the hundreds of engine-parts that contrived to lift an airplane off the ground. (To this day, I just assume heavier-than-air travel is a kind of magic, and can’t even conceive of scientific principles that would make it possible). As Mrs. Marion fumbled with her charts of ailerons and rudders, I sketched out two disembodied buttocks, from the middle of which exploded a gigantic fart. (I represented the fart as a cloud of air, accompanied by the lines that, in comic books, indicated that the cloud was moving rapidly.) I labeled my drawing “JET PROPULSION,” and showed it to the boy sitting next to me. He promptly passed the drawing to his neighbor. As the drawing circulated throughout the classroom, giggles followed it. Laughter in me, especially suppressed laughter, makes me hiccup, and the hiccups gave me away. Mrs. Marion soon confiscated the drawing and ordered me to stay after school that day.

In every grade, my drawings had gotten me into trouble—I was particularly driven to draw accurate and mean caricatures of my teachers’ faces, drawings that couldn’t please them when they inevitably confiscated them. But Mrs. Marion turned out to be kinder than Mr. Dick in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and wiser than Mrs. D’Angelo in 3<sup>rd</sup>. Knowing that the hours I’d spent dreading this afterschool conference was punishment enough, Mrs. Marion, I now suspect, appreciated the interruption of her lesson, which probably bored her worse than it bored us. She handed the JET PROPULSION sketch over to me with a smile, and a request to try to keep my future drawings a little more private. When my mom came

home after the next parent-teacher night, she said that Mrs. Marion was full of praise, especially for my artistic ability.

Actually, my mother was familiar with that ability since I started P.S. 97. The first week of kindergarten, when we were asked to draw pictures of our parents, I raised my hand to ask if we were supposed to put anything else into the picture. I was concerned if we were supposed to show our parents doing something or just standing there, and if we were supposed to draw both parents together or draw two separate pictures, and if we were supposed to draw only their faces or their whole bodies, and if we were supposed to draw them all dressed up or wearing casual clothes, and if we were supposed to draw them in profile or front-view, and I probably asked so many pain-in-the-ass questions that I finally got told “Just draw either parent, any way you like.” When I handed my drawing in, my teacher flushed, and sent home the first of many such notes asking my mother to see her.

What I had drawn was a picture of my mother totally naked. That was why I’d asked if we were supposed to draw background or clothing or other people, and when I was told only to draw a parent, that’s what I tried to do, not bothering to imagine a dress or blouse or anything else. I had taken showers with my mother until fairly recently, and I remembered vividly the huge tangle of black pubic hair right at my eye-level, the deeply textured areolas as wide as yarmulkes just above, and the thumb-like nipples, details I tried my best to capture in my drawing. Even after my mother explained why the teacher had gotten so upset, I couldn’t really understand exactly what I’d done wrong, absorbing only the lesson that my drawings meant trouble, which they always did.

So I had a sense of foreboding as my mother tried to sell me on the painting lessons. I resisted, dreading both the moment that my painting would get me into trouble and the other inevitable moment when I would decide that I need to quit painting lessons. But I had a hard time resisting my parents, particularly my mother. When I disagreed with her, she never conceded a single point to me, so by my early teens, I had long understood that even the most trivial of disagreements meant a long, drawn-out emotional battle. Better, I learned, to pick my spots, and most of the time, to give in without a struggle.

Anna Arena’s painting studio resembled a kind of factory. Being in the basement of her home, it was dark, the only lighting coming from a few bare bulbs suspended from the ceiling. A dozen or more children were crowded around a huge table, their brushes and palette-knives and jars of linseed oil and turpentine all jumbled together on the newspaper-lined table, as Anna circled the room to spend five minutes per hour with each child. She would show each one what he or she needed to be doing, usually by quite skillfully drawing, sketching, painting in the manner that needed to be done, and leaving it to each child to attempt to replicate Anna’s technique after she’d gone. By the time she had circumnavigated the room, (usually, each would-be painter got three sessions with Anna per night) she could correct (or more often simply touch up) what had been done in her absence, and then either assign a new technique or move on to a completely new skill. In this way, every child would, after a few weeks, produce a painting that had been designed and at least partly painted by a talented professional. A technically skilled

painter, Anna herself probably painted a half-hour's worth of every canvas that came out of her shop, and parents were amazed at the astonishing ability their children displayed.

It was a lucrative business—with each child paying five dollars per lesson, Anna could take in a very healthy 200 tax-free dollars per week—and she was quite businesslike, which is to say she was very hardworking and busy and impersonal in discharging her lessons. I'm quite sure she never knew my name or anything about me or any of her students. Rather cleverly, Anna exploited the vanity of parents to believe in their child's natural talent. She set about her business without showing sentimentality or affection for her students. Unsmiling, heavy-set, with huge beefy upper arms, and eyeglasses perched midway down her ample nose, she grimly rushed from one student's station to the next, hardly noticing the individual child she was teaching, instead concentrating on the messed-up canvas before her. In her thin, paint-daubed, sleeveless housedress, exposing the vaccination scar on a massive upper arm, and her black hair tied back with a rubber band, Anna efficiently structured her time with little conversation, and less personal charm. Every so often, her family called downstairs about some crisis requiring Anna's help, and she was always short with them. "I'm working down here," she would snap, and turn her attention back to the canvas she was trying to repair.

As teaching goes, it was almost comically useless. An eleven year old on his first painting (typically, Anna started her kids off with a portrait of a Scottish terrier) would watch Anna draw the outlines of the dog with a charcoal stick on the bare canvas, and then thrust the charcoal into his hands and tell him to complete the drawing. (Anna's students copied stock photos, reproductions of famous paintings, picture postcards, pages from Life magazine or Look). If he had completed a sketch by the next time she came around, she would start the underpainting for him, outlining over the charcoal sketch (which would then be wiped away) in pencil, and then in diluted paint. After three to five weeks of these slow stages, the child (and of course Anna) had finished painting a Scotty that ranged from amateurishly competent to half-decent, depending mostly on how much time Anna had put in on the painting. As I recall, those Scotties usually got quite a bit of Anna's gift, because she wanted the kids' first painting to get an awestruck response from the young painter's family, to keep him coming back for more.

Anna's teaching was, at best, a debased variation of the time-honored studio method whereby an apprentice would mechanically copy what his master had done, slowly acquiring some technical ability of his own, except that Anna seemed to try to discourage any understanding of how those techniques were done. No one, after all, was practicing painting leaves or clouds for the sake of understanding the principles of painting leaves or clouds. No, everything was part of a finished painting, so if you managed to come to understand something of the way roses looked, you might go months until you painted another still-life, at which time you'd re-learn how to paint roses. It wasn't about learning to paint, it was all about producing paintings for parents to hang, or at least to ooh-and-ahh over, as quickly as possible.

The environment was nasty in Anna's basement. There was almost no air, for one thing, and Anna smelled. Each student, essentially, was working in her armpit, and she was

bustling around the room, working quickly, and on her feet the entire time, so it was only natural that she smelled a little bit, and the smell wasn't all stale perspiration, but of her dinner and mentholated cigarettes and a faint whiff of castile soap, but it was definitely an odor. The doors and windows were shut tight (Anna's school was certainly violating about a half-dozen zoning laws, so secrecy was at a premium) so the room grew hotter as the evenings drew on, and since at any moment there were ten or more children wanting Anna's help but not getting any, the room was infernally filled with beseeching noises: "Anna, is this what you wanted?", "Anna, is this right?" "Anna, I need help," "Anna," "Anna," Anna," all night long.

Anna paid almost no attention at all to such cries, sensibly reasoning that the only way to help the child she was with at the moment was to ignore and thus discourage the cries, but being children, we never stopped calling out either. After my first three hours in this hot, noisy, stinky environment, I was most pleased by the rush of the winter wind hitting my face when I finally stepped outdoors into my mother's car.

"So? Tell me," she asked. "How was it?"

"Fine," I said. My Scottish terrier was still a shapeless blob, but I enjoyed drawing it in charcoal and then pencil. In the photograph I was copying from, the dog had a personality that came from a lack of symmetry: One of the Scotty's ears was lower, and more bent-over, than the other, and this contributed to the picture's appeal. I was thinking about other asymmetries, like the pink bit of tongue visible on the side of the Scotty's mouth catty-corner to the bent-over ear, when my mother asked another question.

"How long will it take?"

"Will what take?"

"The painting you're doing," she asked. "Are you almost done yet?"

"I don't know," I said. I didn't even know what constituted "done," or who got to decide when I was done, me or Anna.

The next morning in sixth grade, the other kids who'd been in Anna's studio with me the night before frowned when I asked them questions about Anna. Having begun a few weeks ahead of me, most of them had finished their Scotty and were in the middle of a frontal facial portrait of a sad circus clown, which was typically the next assignment. "How come she never really talks to you?" I asked Bobby Speigelman, who pursed his lips for an answer and shrugged blankly. It was an uninteresting question to him, as were my others like "How do you know when you're done?" and "Did you notice how she holds the brush, with two fingers?" (Despite her thick fingers Anna's hand moved very gracefully.) My questions clearly annoyed Speigelman, and the other kids I asked that day, who seemed to enjoy the novelty of the painting lessons but had no interest in becoming painters.

I had such an interest, from the start. All that schoolday, I kept thinking about the painting I was working on, daydreaming about ways to make the Scotty's white fur look more like real fur and less like titanium white paint, and how dog eyes are all eyeball, no white. That afternoon, when I got home from school, I removed the dark-green painted wood Grumbacher brushes from my painting kit (the actual painting was stored at Anna's) and tried to swish it through the air with Anna's easy motion, getting my elbow and wrist into the movement as she had. By the time I got back to Anna's studio two nights later, I was so eager I didn't know which idea to act on first. I was excited by the drawing process, never having worked in charcoal and pencil, until I realized that, far from a goal in itself, it was just to constrain the kids from going crazy with paints. The line drawings were just a rough sketch to be painted over, and learning how to control the paintbrushes was difficult. I would paint the backgrounds to my paintings first, practicing applying paint with various brushes, wide and narrow, and with various mixtures and thicknesses of paint.

Most of the kids just extruded paint straight out of the tube onto their palettes, and then heaped as much of it on the paintbrush as the brush would hold, and smeared it over the prescribed area of the canvas. My mother had bought me a painting kit, with three brushes and maybe 12 tubes of paint, the names of which I found strangely poetic: "Alizarin Crimson" and "Prussian Blue" and "Cobalt Blue," all of which I hurried on the canvas as thickly as possible. But then I noticed how Anna worked when she was correcting the mistakes on my canvas: Rather than working in paint, she mostly worked in turpentine and linseed oil, each of which we kept in a coffee-scoop next to us. She would dip the tip of her brush in paint and then in each of the two media, and swirl the brush on the palette so that, rather than paint, the mixture would be faintly colored oily turpentine. As she got closer to completing the painting, the ratio would increase, so that by the end, after she layered several versions of the painting on the canvas, the paint would be darker and thicker, and would end up being not quite as dark or as thick as the first attempts by her young students. I started working in the lighter medium, and found that I had more control over the brush without the globs of paint dragging me down.

Whatever I learned in Anna's studio, I taught to myself, which is the only way that learning is ultimately accomplished anyway. For all her mastery of painterly technique, Anna knew almost nothing about teaching or even talking about what she knew. "Um-hmmm," she'd say, when my turn came around. "Okay, you want to do--this now," her hands were already painting brushstrokes, "not like you were doing it, but more like—this, and this. And—this. See what I did here? Okay. Now you do it." And she'd be gone, without a word about how I might do this or this or this. So I watched her hands, the way she held the brush, the way she mixed her colors, the arc that the brush described on the canvas. For all I knew, to be a truly accomplished oil painter, I would have to somehow become a short, stout Italian woman with gigantic upper arms. Strangely enough, if I needed to do that, I would have searched for a way to make that transformation, because I was thirsty to learn how to paint like her. To start with paint and canvas and oil, and somehow to turn those things into interesting, even beautiful, glimpses of the world around me—well, that was amazing. Even magical.

Every session in Anna's basement taught me something, usually something that, on the way there, I had no concept of. One night I learned about highlights, the little dab of paint reflecting off a vase that made it look so real, and all week long in school or in my room, I tried to reproduce the effect with crayons or the pastel set I had, and couldn't wait to get back to Anna's stuffy, noisy studio, where I could experiment with paint again. One afternoon, when the rest of my classmates were multiplying fractions, I figured out, by drawing in pencil in my composition math book, how to draw shadows in human hair, giving it depth and substance. I hardly cared when my notebook was confiscated, and my drawings taken away—I had solved a problem that had bothered me for days.

As satisfying as it was to learn how to paint, I had a different reward ahead of me. When I finally carted home my stupid portrait of the Scottish terrier, seated on a pillow with his stupid head cocked winningly, my parents were properly amazed. They called in the next-door neighbors to marvel at it, and every relative who visited was stupefied that a twelve-year-old could do a painting as good as this first time out of the box. They gave it the highest praise they knew: They termed it “puh-fessional.”

By the time I finished painting my sad clown, my technical skills had advanced so far that I could hardly believe I had ever painted such a simple picture as the Scotty. My third painting, a still-life of a single flower in a simple vase, was also crude, though the tablecloth the vase was sitting on was nicely textured and almost looked like cloth (Anna had painted most of it, of course). On the way home from Anna's, my mother stopped the Plymouth at a shop and bought a frame for it, which she hung in her bedroom.

These first few months of painting lessons marked a great time in my life, when I was getting heaps of praise for doing something that I loved to do, for learning things I wanted to learn. The best part was almost that I knew I had so much to learn. If I could get such rapturous praise for my first crude experiments, I couldn't wait to find out what was in store when I actually got good at painting.

My schoolmates had already begun dropping out of Anna's classes. Some of them had gone through a very slow, discouraging progress, in which Anna, instead of building on what was painted, would have to scrape off what the least talented young painters had done, and then show her technique, and on the next turn would have to undo again the painter's efforts. Because I had some talent, I suppose, I was able to avoid this Sisyphean level of frustration. Instead of feeling bored with the process, as they had, I couldn't wait to get to the studio and paint. Soon, none of my classmates, not even the ones who had started before I had, were taking Anna's class anymore, and I went from disliking the stuffy, hot basement with its smells to loving it, as the acrid odor of turpentine soon gained in allure. Turpentine smelled like ideas to me, and I stank of turpentine.

I needed more ideas, and I knew where great ideas were stored. “I want to go to a museum,” I announced one Saturday. My parents, living four miles from Manhattan, had never been to a museum in their lives, and they resisted my going. But I was twelve, and very insistent, so they let me travel on the subway to the Met and to the Modern and the Frick where I would sit for hours on end copying into my sketchpad the composition of

Juan Gris, the shadings of Corot, the spiky disturbing shapes of everything Van Gogh set to canvas. Occasionally, a grownup would look over my shoulder, and whisper audibly to a husband or a wife, “Look what that little boy is drawing there,” but mostly they left me as alone as the other sketchers in the room. When I got tired, or hungry, I would wander along Fifth Avenue or 53<sup>rd</sup> Street in my peacoat, looking for a vendor’s cart where I would buy a bag of roasted chestnuts. I would often not even finish the bag, pitching the last few sweet and pliable nut-meats that I had shelled into a trashcan, and return to my spot in front of a painting inside the museum.

The Modern was the easiest to get to (the West End local that serviced our part of Brooklyn terminated a few blocks from MOMA), and during the summers, with its outdoor sculpture garden, was the freshest, but during the winter, I changed trains three times to get to the museums on upper Fifth Avenue where I could understand what the artists were thinking a little bit better. I never articulated whatever ideas these dead painters were teaching me, nor did I discuss with Anna even the fact I was spending my time in museums. I can’t remember having a single conversation with her, nor seeing any sign that she encouraged my devotion to painting.

Despite Anna’s exclusive focus on painterly techniques, plans sprouted in my head to do things with these techniques once I had mastered them. Although most of the compositions Anna assigned her students were simple, so the students could finish them easily and the parents could appreciate whatever subject the painting was of, I could see how the compositions could be even simpler. Every landscape Anna assigned, for example, was of something—a river or a grove of trees—but it was always a fairly busy river, with a bird or two wading, fall foliage in the foreground, and a bright clear background of fluffy clouds. I wondered what a closeup of the river would look like, so closeup you might not be able to tell at first glance that it was a portrait of water or that it was even representational. But how could I get running water to look like it was running? I spent a whole weekend at the Met hopping from painted brook to painted lake watching how Watteau and Cole did this trick.

I also knew that I would need to paint figures from my imagination, not just copy other people’s drawings, photos, paintings. But until I could produce these copies as quickly and mechanically as Anna did, I would keep copying. It seemed to take her no effort at all to sketch out paintings in a wash of turpentine and paint, and then to layer on detail after detail. She worked so quickly you would think her goal was to mystify her students, not to show them how to achieve the effect she was supposedly teaching. She would get into these states sometimes, when she was working on someone’s painting, where her eyes would glaze over, frowning over the canvas, as she seemed to remember a complicated set of steps requiring intense focus to get correct. When she was in this state, she would paint so fast that the student she was supposed to be helping was barely able to follow her hands, much less her thoughts. The students all longed for these moments, because if no one interrupted Anna, she might do virtually the entire painting before she snapped out of the trance.

When she finally did catch herself, she would quickly pretend to be all business again. “Okay, that’s it,” she would say. “Do some more of that,” and move to the next easel. Of course, the painting she had just been working on would be far better than anything the student could ever do, and most of us knew well enough to add as little as possible to Anna’s artistry for fear of messing it up. Some students would just pretend to paint for the rest of the session, holding a brush in the air, mixing the palette, but wanting only the session to be over so the prize painting could be taken home.

When Anna got into these states, everyone wanted to look at her rapid hands and watch the painting taking shape before their eyes, but a crowd around her would often snap her out of the trance, so we mostly tried to watch from our stations. I found it especially tempting to watch Anna’s rapid brushstrokes. I would watch the supple motion of her chubby wrists, follow the line of paint that accompanied each different type of hand action. Rarely, in the middle of a trance, Anna would switch brushes, and I knew that it must be important to use a fine bristle to achieve a stippling effect here because it would cost her a few crucial seconds to make the switch, and I tried to remember the exact effect she achieved by switching, and what size and shape brush she had switched to, and switched from.

When I brought home my first few paintings— the Scottish terrier, the sad clown, the single flower in the vase, a landscape with a brook, and a portrait of President Kennedy— my Aunt Dolia, who lived downstairs from us, came up to appraise each of them. Aunt Dolia was Russian-born, unlike the rest of my enormous family (she had married into it), and my mother respected her opinion in cultural matters above anyone’s. Dolia had art-work in her apartment—I was fascinated by an ebony statue of a nude woman on display in her living room, because the rest of my family, and neighborhood for that matter, remained convinced that nudity was no more proper in art than anywhere else, which is to say it was entirely improper. But Dolia had sophistication, by our standards, and she was impressed by my paintings. Instead of telling me what she thought, her habit was to talk to my mother, as if I weren’t in the room. Usually, this would be to scold me: If I were sitting with my elbows on the table, for example, she would say to my mother, “Betty, I never let my children rest their elbows on the table” and my flustered mother would make an urgent face at me, and I’d lift my elbows. “Posture is also important,” she would murmur, and I’d straighten my back.

My mother wouldn’t think of defending me. She was embarrassed, by Dolia’s pronouncements particularly, but by any judgment of any older relative. Both my parents were the youngest children in large families, and very sensitive to criticism of any kind from their older brothers and sisters. These older siblings, a naturally sharp-tongued band of banterers, visited our house often: It was the house that all my mother’s older siblings had grown up in and, until I was seven, the house my mother’s mother lived in. (I shared a bedroom with my grandmother until she was moved to a nursing home.) Even after my grandmother died, her children continued to treat our house as home base, partly because my Aunt Dolia and Uncle Pete lived in the house, too, but mostly because only my mother and father still had kids needing adult supervision. My mother was usually in the position of hostess, which often took the form of serving-girl to her older siblings. So

when my Aunt Dolia took a cup of tea from my mother and walked back and forth approving of my artwork, my mother couldn't have been more pleased.

"This one iss especially fine, Betty," Aunt Dolia pronounced. She had stopped in front of my little landscape. "De reflaction of de trees in the vatter is vell done."

"You like it?" My mother raised her eyebrows at me. "Why don't you take it home?"

"Hhhmmmm," Dolia mused as she considered the concept. "I haff novhere to put it." That was true. Dolia's walls were all filled with reproductions of art, or portraits of her grown children and their families. "Perhaps in the front room. No, I would need something brighter there. This is all dark green and blues. I'd need something vit rads and yallows."

"He could do one with reds and yellows," my mother offered. "Aren't you working on something with reds and yellows now?"

I looked at her. "No."

"Vat are you vorking on, darling?" Aunt Dolia asked. I couldn't remember the last time she had spoken directly to me when my mother was in the room.

"Another still life," I said, "but much darker than any of these." I didn't know the term yet, but it was a chiaroscuro study of a pale vase resting on a light blue pillow with a blue-black background.

"For his next painting," my mother added, "he could do a red and yellow. Couldn't you?"

I shrugged. "I guess."

"All right," my Aunt Dolia agreed. "I'll try to find some space for that."

I was more complimented than anything else that my Aunt Dolia had decreed my work worthy of hanging on her walls. I understood that these paintings were just exercises in technique, so I had no problem making a painting to her specifications, and Anna was agreeable to letting me pick something with a brighter color scheme. She also voiced no objection to my departure from the strict copying of photographs and such: For this still-life, of variegated roses in a porcelain vase, I used one of her stock photos but, in addition to substituting bright pinks and yellows for the more muted white- and peach-colored roses, I tried stealing one of Monet's inventions, that of making the flowers seem far too plentiful for the small vase that held them, so that they would paradoxically seem to be supporting it rather than the other way around. I wasn't absolutely sure that Monet had been making such a joke, but I thought he had, and thought that it was a funny and true statement about the power of the flowers' beauty. Anna didn't say anything encouraging when she saw my strange composition, but she didn't scrape the excess flowers off my canvas either, as she might have done with another student.

When my mother presented this painting to Dolia, the thought crossed my mind that I'd like to keep this one, my first partially original painting, but Dolia had already bought the frame (an elaborate gilded monstrosity) and took immediate possession of it. Since we lived in a two-family house, Dolia's family downstairs and mine upstairs, it was only technically that I would be giving it up—I could walk through Dolia's kitchen door any time I chose to look at it. I had gotten an idea from Dolia's elaborate frame, anyway, that I wanted to work on: Incorporating the frame into the painting, mocking the idea of the limit of the art. I vaguely remembered some painting I had seen at MOMA that did something similar, and I wanted to think about it a little.

I went back to Anna's studio and drew up some sketches and charcoal outlines a few nights later. I was now old enough to walk the mile or so home from Anna's, and when I got home my mother was entertaining some of her friends. They were playing canasta, but when I walked in the front door they were taking a break, eating some pineapples, quartered and cut into triangular pieces speared by multicolored plastic toothpicks shaped like swords, decorated with maraschino cherries, which they ate with Ebinger's pound cake and coffee. "Steven!" My aunt Lillian, who lived six houses down from us, greeted me. "How's the painter?"

"Come here, gorgeous boy," another one of my mother's friends, a violently-perfumed woman named Evelyn, said to me. "I saw those bee-yootiful roses you made for Dolia? When am I getting a painting? Don't I rate?"

They started arguing over who was next in line for a painting, and discussing what their interior decorating needs might be. One of my cousins, newly married, insisted that she was next, and that she needed a horizontal painting to hang over her couch, preferably a landscape of some kind. "I leave it up to you to figure out what kind of landscape," she told me. "Though I always like a painting better with a couple of people, tiny people, running around in it, okay?"

"Now what I need," said a cross-eyed woman named Rita, one of my mother's longtime friends, "is a square-shaped one, doesn't have to be too big, to hang in my vestibule."

"Wait, let me write all this down," my mother said. She was enjoying richly having a resource (me) that all her friends wanted to have a piece of. She was enjoying it so much, I wondered if she wasn't regretting not having had more children, all of whom might have become painters and given her this sort of attention for decades on end.

It was pretty pleasing, too, I have to admit, to have all this fuss made over me, even if it was a stupid fuss, for all the wrong reasons. These same women had fussed over me for years, oohing and ahing over the blondness of my hair (one of them once took me all the way down to Cropsey Avenue to her beauty parlor, ordering her beautician to match my shade of hair for her, an excruciating experience for everyone concerned.) They always tried to kiss me, smearing me with gobs of lurid-red lipstick, and strangling me in veils of thick perfume, their bouffant hairdos so laden with hardened hairspray that I feared

getting jabbed in the eye during one of their unwelcome kisses. Far from validating my objections to their aggressiveness, my mother dismissed my complaints, scolding me afterwards that my evasive tactics during one of these grueling kiss sessions was embarrassingly rude, and reflected poorly on her.

So it was a real improvement to have their attention deflected away from my person and onto my artistic talent. They put on a teasing show of vying for the honor of receiving my next painting, and I realized part-way through that they weren't completely teasing me. "Stevie, promise me," one said with a wide smile, "that I'm first on your list." My mother basked in the attention, devised a chart showing where each friend stood in order, and the date by which each of them could expect her customized painting to be ready. Over the next few weeks, she kept me informed as candidates moved upwards on her list, which she kept folded in quarters, ever-handy, in her purse.

At first, I was just glad to let my mother take over the whole revolting subject of discussion. I didn't care about keeping the first few stupid paintings I had done at Anna's—my technical ability had gone way past that now-- and if this list kept her friends and relatives out of my face, literally, it was a good deal for all concerned.

But then one day my mother informed me that my Aunt Janice's feelings were hurt: According to the schedule, I had promised Dolia a second painting before I'd begin the still life I'd promised Janice. It put my mother in a delicate position. "Do both paintings at the same time," she suggested, "and you won't hurt Janice's feelings."

"Ma, I need to concentrate on one painting at a time," I answered. "I get all—I don't know, confused. It's hard enough, just thinking about one painting."

"Big artist," she said. "I'm only asking you for a favor."

"Ma," I said.

"This is important to me, Steven," she said. "I don't understand. Is it so hard to do things someone else's way for once? Do I ask that much of you?"

Feeling guilty already about the five dollars per lesson that she was laying out, I was in no position to argue. "I'll try," I said.

"That's all I'm asking."

It turned out to be an interesting challenge, working on two paintings at once, and not at all as difficult as I'd supposed, because it allowed me to look at each painting fresh after immersing myself into the other one so intensely, and I presented each of my aunts with their paintings on the same weekend, right on schedule. Although painting took up a lot of my free time, I still maintained a full schedule of school, and Hebrew lessons (my bar mitzvah was coming up fast), and stickball and street football—when there were lulls in my life, though, thoughts about painting filled them happily. I discovered that, because of

painting, I was never bored, and I got into the habit, in school especially, of removing my glasses, twirling them, and mulling over solving some tricky painting problem.

When Anna announced in late April that her studio would close for the summer (it was already oppressively hot in the airless environment) my mother nearly panicked: It was an outrage, she complained, that Anna's schoolyear was so much shorter than public school. Her chart thrown way off schedule, she came up with the idea that I could enroll in a Saturday morning painting workshop for non-matriculated students at Brooklyn College. "It's an eight-week course," she explained, "that starts the same week that Anna's stops. It's for adults, but I'll get you in."

The next Saturday, I rode the B-5 bus to the last stop by Brooklyn College, and walked across the lawn of the campus. I remember how breezy that morning was, how spacious the lawn seemed, how distinguished the red brick buildings looked. Mostly, when I got to the class, I remember finding out how many of the techniques I'd learned from Anna were wrong, or at least not universal: the teacher, an old Art History professor, never even picked up a brush, much less painted our canvases for us. He had us work from live models—sometime people, sometimes bowls of fruits--and introduced me to applying primer paint to my canvas, instead of sketching a outline in charcoal on the bare canvas. "This is a painting class, young man," he said softly, "not a drawing class."

He was also less results-oriented than Anna, as almost anyone would be. "WHAT?" my mother asked in horror, when I got home late that afternoon. "He said WHAT?"

"We're working on one painting for the whole course," I reported. "He says we're doing exercises for the first few weeks—"

"We'll just see about that," she told me. I had no idea what she was going to do—call him up and express her objections to his leisurely timetable, for starters—but I begged her not to embarrass me. "Don't you worry so much about your feelings," she advised me. "I just want to ask him a few questions, is all."

Before she could dial the college's phone number, I made a rash promise to her: "I'll keep up the schedule," I said. "I'll do it on my own, I don't need Anna anymore." That much was true: Anna had had less and less to correct on my canvases the last few weeks. She had taken to bypassing my station almost entirely, nodding her head, grunting, "Okay, that's fine. Fix the shadowing," or some suggestion before moving on to some kid calling her name as if in physical pain. "I'll work in the garage."

Half of our two-car garage, usually rented out, stood vacant now, so when I set up my easel that afternoon and got to work, painting my Aunt Lillian's dead mother (from a sepia photograph), my mother was mollified. Keeping the garage door open for light and air, two elements lacking in Anna's studio, I was amazed at the difference natural light made on the painting, and I stayed in there all afternoon, working quickly and with excitement. By sunset, I had not only copied the photograph well enough, I'd added some small touches—the texture of the out-of-focus doily in the sepia photo, a fold to the coat

the old woman wore. I was not quite working at Anna's lightning-fast pace, but I was working plenty fast, and deemed the painting, then and there, good enough to give away to Lillian. If I were working on it for myself, I'd want to paint the table underneath the doily a little better, but that was a luxury that my schedule didn't allow.

I was impressed by own Anna-like economy and speed: Starting with a blank canvas at noon, I had a competent portrait complete by six-thirty, background and foreground and all. Wedging the painting safely behind my Uncle Pete's lawnmower until it dried, I figured that at this rate I could get out from under my obligations to my family by June. Every living room and entry-hall in my large family's apartments, and the apartments of several of my mother's best friends, would be adorned with a similar painting, and then I would be free to paint whatever subjects I chose.

Of course, every day didn't go as smoothly as that first day. I lost days to school projects, and to the flu, to friends' bar mitzvahs, to weekends visiting my cousin Matty in Great Neck, to my own laziness, but still I made real progress. According to my mother's master list, I was obligated by her lights to paint seventeen paintings for six of her friends and nine of her relatives, and I had finished painting an even dozen by Memorial Day. I wanted to spend that whole three-day weekend in the garage, but we had to travel upstate to look at a new bungalow we were going to stay in that summer. On the ride back home, my mother casually announced that it would be nice if I made a painting for the family who owned the bungalow colony.

"Not for me, it wouldn't," I told her.

I couldn't see her face (she was driving, I was sitting in the back seat of our new Chevy) but from her voice I could imagine what it looked like. "A *small* painting," she said.

I said nothing for a couple of miles. We drove past Middletown, towards Harriman.

"A little landscape," my mother said when we reached the Harriman tolls.

"You already told them what I'd paint?" My tone was more accusing than questioning.

She stopped the car dead at the tollbooth. "What are you carrying on about?" she asked, furiously. "It's one painting. One!"

No one in the car said a word as we drove on, through New Jersey, not my brother, not my dad, and certainly not me. As we drove down the curves of the dark Palisades Parkway, she suddenly twisted her head around at me and snapped, "If I could paint, do you think I'd make a fuss like you?"

I honestly knew that she would not. On the contrary, she would do anything to earn the gratitude of her large circle of friends and family. The difference was, they weren't my friends and only through her were they even my family. Between the ladies whose kisses creeped me out and the men who played cards loudly, keeping me awake on Sunday

nights with their hollering and their cigar smoke, I felt minimal affection for these connoisseurs of art, and sensed that they were only accepting the paintings out of a sense of competition and to give my mother the approval she so desperately needed. Everyone benefited from the exchange, it seemed, but me. And I had no way to voice this, so I sulked for a few hours when we got home.

We weren't talking the next day either. In my head, I kept rephrasing my objections, which were all off the real mark: She had no right to make promises for me, she had no right to get praise for my work, she had no right to treat me like I belonged to her.

But I did belong to her. That was the problem right there. She had bought the brushes, and the canvas, and the painting lessons, and the clothes on my back, and the roof over my head, and the food I ate. As she had so often reminded me when I was younger, squeezing the life out of my lungs, clutching me tightly to her chest, "You are my little boy. All mine!"

Still sulking when I got home from school the next day, a rainy early June afternoon, I retreated to the garage and set up my box of paints. After priming my canvas, I stared at it a good long time and then, furious myself, began slashing the brush across the canvas, outlining the landscape for the family who owned the bungalow colony. With the garage doors open wide, and the rain pouring down noisily a few feet from where I stood, I created a painting they were sure to like, a landscape of the bungalow colony itself on a languid summer's day, oppressively hot, windless, with the only relief to be found in the cool shade of trees. Remembering details about the colony where I had spent almost every summer of my life, I got the red, weather-beaten shade of the wooden benches around the bases of the trees, and the light green of the highest leaves on the oak trees, and the dark shadows they cast, and the yellow thatch on the newly mown grass. It was hard to look at the painting and not to start sweating, even in my chilly damp garage.

That was the first painting I'd ever done wholly from my imagination, and though the subject was tranquil, I felt so angry with my mother that I felt the landscape communicated rage above all else. It communicated the helplessness of being squeezed by the heat, with nowhere to go, when even stepping into the shade demanded an exhausting effort. I had just gotten started a few hours ago, and I'd somehow gotten the canvas to capture some of the stifling stillness of the middle of the day in the middle of August, and I suddenly stopped painting. I wasn't sure quite how I had achieved that effect, but I knew that I risked losing it if I went on laying paint on the canvas.

The white buildings that I knew so intimately still lacked detail, and there were more effects I wanted to add—I wanted to try getting the shimmering effects of heat on the asphalt driveway, and the crisp dryness of the sunburnt tall grass—but I knew to quit painting now. I laid my brush down on the easel, and picked up a detail brush and signed my name.

"Here," was all I said to my mother. "It's finished. Give it to the Luxenbergs when it's dry in a few days."

The next morning, I woke especially early. School was winding down and, to fit in my painting with my final projects and exams, I'd gotten into the habit of priming canvases just after dawn, while my mother and my brother were still sleeping. When I got home from school, the canvases would dry enough for me get in an hour of painting before I'd have to do my homework. Now that I had the time to paint what I truly wanted to paint—and the exciting part was forming those ideas—I had fresh energy. As I was filling the pail with water from the garden hose to rinse out the brushes, my mother walked into the backyard.

“What are you working on, sweetheart?” she said to me. She had brought me down a frosted glass of orange Tang, and handed it to me. “You’re working very hard,” she said.

“Just cleaning up here,” I said, sipping the gritty juice.

“Mmm-hmmmm,” she said absently. “I was talking to Shirley Erasmus yesterday.” Mrs. Erasmus’s family went to the bungalow colony with us. I was friendly with her son Mitchell, who played shortstop on our softball team during the summers. Although they lived near us in Bensonhurst, we hardly saw them except during the summertime, and it was typical of my mother to start socializing with her summer friends by the late spring. “I know you won’t mind.”

I shut off the garden hose. “Mind what?”

She took out her chart of my painting schedule, and showed me where she had added Shirley Erasmus’s name to the list. I looked at it in horror. There, below Shirley’s name, was the name of the family who shared a bungalow with the Erasmuses. “We can’t give a painting to the Erasmuses, and not the Arbesfelds,” she said to me. “It wouldn’t be right. You’re such a good boy. Now come on, don’t be late for school.”

There were over thirty families who went to the bungalow colony, and my mother enjoyed being on the best of terms with all of them. Even if she tried, which she would not, my mother would never be able to resist offering all these families their own paintings. Instead of my commitment being nearly fulfilled, it had barely gotten started. I would spend the summer painting these trite landscapes, these dopey portraits and trivial still-lives--but when the summer ended, her list of paintings I owed would be longer than it was right now. With nausea rising, I realized that I would never get to do my own paintings on themes I cared about, paintings that might take me weeks or even months to get right, risky paintings that I knew wouldn’t even work half the time. And I would certainly never get to own any of my work, which would all be shipped off as soon as the paint had begun to dry.

All day in school, my problem sat on me. I could only free myself from a lifetime of servitude by telling my mother that my painting and my talent and finally myself belonged to me and not to her, but I didn’t know those words. Or rather when I found those words, I understood what would surely follow them: She would turn on the

waterworks, and her tears wouldn't stop until I'd conceded some part of what she wanted, and then that part would grow and grow until she had all of what she wanted. If I tried appealing to my dad for help before her first tear fell, he'd tell me to work it out with her, and if I tried him after the tears started falling, he would be more helpless than I was to resist.

After school, painting no longer soothed me. The gessoed canvasses dried in the garage, perfect for trying out my fresh ideas, but the ideas were nowhere to be found. All week long, I stared at the white surfaces but did not even pick up a brush.

"Not painting this afternoon, darling?"

I turned around. My Aunt Dolia had come out to the garage. "I guess I don't feel much like it," I said.

"You've never been a great vun," she told me, "for finishing vat you start."

I bristled at her unsolicited criticism. What she said had, of course, been true in the past, but painting was so different. The desire to finish what I had in mind, to continue studying techniques, was even stronger now than when I first started six months before. I was just about to voice that distinction, when I had a sudden idea:

"Yeah," I agreed. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right," my Aunt Dolia told me.

The next afternoon, I lay on my bed tossing a Pennsy Pinkie into my baseball mitt, over and over again. My mother opened the garage door downstairs, found me gone, and came upstairs to see what was wrong. "Are you feeling all right?"

I blurted it out: "I've quit painting."

"What are you saying? You're taking a break? For how long?"

"For ever," I told her. "I don't want to paint."

"But you have to," she informed me.

"No, I don't," I said, trying to sound as childish as I could. How had I sounded when I announced I was quitting the Boy Scouts, the swimming lessons, the Little League? I recited my lines in just that tone. "I quit."

And for as long as she lived, I never painted a single brush-stroke again.

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