

**SECOND PLACE
HIGH SCHOOL
11TH & 12TH GRADES**

**IT'S LIKE A SANCTUARY
◀by Kayla Stoler▶**

Winter

In the attic studio, when you are not painting, you sit in a cracked leather armchair. The cranberry red cushions are contoured to your large body and the arms are covered in cigarette burns. You sit in your armchair and I sit across the room from you in a pile of pink insulation that is falling out from the giant planks of wood in the ceiling. This attic is unfinished and there is a gap in the corner of the roof so large that I can sometimes see birds flying south in the frigid morning air. Some days father and I lay wrapped up in blankets, on the pink insulation, just waiting for them to go by. Sometimes mother brings up tea for us. *These are the best kinds of days*, I think.

Spring

Sometimes your hand has a life of its own. It's just the way that it floats across the canvas, creating a tree in two strokes, or perhaps a cloud. Colored energy pulses through the veins in your arm. I can see the streaks of pansy purple and creamsicle orange travel down your forearm, through the tips of your fingers, across your paintbrush, and onto the canvas. As the side of your palm grazes across your palette, it becomes flecked with oil paint. Your hands become speckled with lemonade yellow and cornflower blue. Your fingernails are always caked with paint and dirt, and you have even given up scrubbing at them by now. *It's just the curse of an artist* you tell me. The folds of skin on your knuckles collect oil paint too. Blue like my tricycle. Red like my wagon. Green like the reborn spring grass. They mix in the cracks of your hands and create birdseed brown. When you forcefully squeeze your tubes of oil paint, the folds separate and sometimes the dry paint falls into the wooden slats of the floor. Now the ground is covered in paint and dirt and dust. We have not cleaned this attic studio in a while. But she doesn't mind. She says *we're painters, we're born to make a mess* and then she tosses her head back and laughs.

Summer

Sometimes you let me paint the birds into your ocean skies. We usually do this on summer mornings. You sit me on your lap and my legs dangle on either side of your hard, wide leg. You point to the places where you want a seagull or maybe a crow and I dip a thin brush into your palette. You teach me how to put white onto one corner of the brush and gray onto the other. I lightly graze the canvas with my paint. One stroke, two arcs. This is what it must feel like to be a painter. I think this may even be what it must feel like to be you. Your head is right in front of the biggest crack of the roof and the sun is shining through and your face is nothing but a silhouette. But when I look back up at you I can tell that you are smiling, even though I have to squint into the sun. I can hear your faceless voice whisper that I am good at painting birds and that I must have talent because it is not an easy skill. You point to another corner of the canvas, right above a dark and stormy cumulus cloud and I paint another bird while you hum and bounce your knee up and down, which makes the next bird a little lumpy but you do not even care. We just sit like this all morning with the velvet June breeze

blowing my bangs across my freckled face and by the time we are done the whole canvas is covered in birds. First seagulls and kingfishers and then crows and then robins and even nightingales. You say *it's like a sanctuary* and she hangs it in the parlor.

Fall

She dies on a Thursday morning and it is raining outside. The rain washes her into the river with the brown leaves and the mud and then it washes her away. It washes the colors that run through your veins too. All the colors except for blue. You lose all the colors except for blue somehow. They drain slowly and I watch them. I try to catch them in old yogurt cups but somehow I always miss. From now on it's just a matter of watching the colors seep out of your skin.

Winter

I stand behind you for hours, watching over your shoulder as you paint the end of the world. You paint clouds of gas imploding in Seven Elevens, all in the color blue. You talk to me for hours about the color blue. About cornflower blue and boysenberry blue and turquoise. You say it is the color of daytime and nighttime. It is the color of the ocean and the sky. I ask what color goes in between the ocean and the sky and you do not answer.

Spring

There's a place on the floor where everything collects. It is in the center of the studio, where the wood planks sink low. They did not use to slope down like this, but when the rain leaks through the roof, it collects and sits in a puddle there. This makes the boards stretch and warp and now the rain leaks through this floor too. First, it gushes through the roof, running down your canvases in the attic. It picks up oil paint along the way, collects in the puddle, and drips down to the first floor. Now our parlor is spotted in colored water. The glass coffee table is coated in technicolor drops. The soggy Persian rug releases a shade of forest green water when stepped on. There is even a lavender stain on the white sofa the color of the lilacs she picked for me on the walk to school. Sometimes I sit next to the lavender stain and cry for her because the lilacs are blooming bigger than ever this spring.

Summer

In the far corner of the studio, past my pile of insulation and under the window, you let me paint on the wood wall. I'm eight now and you say I'm better than silly finger-paint. You walk over to the small, white basin sink to the left of the window. You hand me a dirty yogurt cup of brushes and fill the mug you just drank coffee out of with water. Pointing at the wall, you tell me to paint. I ask *what* and you walk back to your own easel, positioned straight across the room next to the other window. I sit cross-legged and stare at the wood planks for a while. Then I touch them with my small hands, stopping each time my index finger catches on a splinter. She used to pull them out when I went barefoot in summers like these. But she's not here anymore, and when father does it, it hurts. I decide to trace the knots in the wood with the thinnest paintbrush. It is a topographic map of curves and swirls and lines and holes. By the time you have stopped working for the day and are asleep in the leather chair, I am enthralled in my painting. I stay up all night brushing over the pattern of the wood in every color. In the morning I show you my masterpiece. You nod and smile as you inspect every inch of my map. You say *this must be the world*.

Fall

You make me wear shoes in the studio because of nails and splinters and other unfinished attic dangers. Everyday I walk up the attic stairs, holding tightly onto the rope you have fashioned in the place of a banister. At stair two I can hear the low buzzing of the attic light. By stair four I can see its faint glow. By stair six I can smell the oil paints. By stair eight I can smell the whiskey. Then I slip on garden clogs you leave for me at stair twelve. I think they may have been pink at some point, but I can no longer remember. They are splattered with orange and speckled with white. I ask you why you do not wear shoes. You say that you do not need to because you know where every nail and splinter is. I say *that is not possible* and you say *why not?*

Winter

I cannot remember the last time I saw you outside the studio. You just began to be there all of the time. You were not and then you were. There was no space in between. Like sea and sky. It was blue and then blue. You have always said you do not need any other color.

Spring

You pin inspiration onto the studio ceiling. Sometimes I bring inspiration home from school for you to put up. A new green bud that I found on my walk to school. Or a pastel still life of seashells from art class. But most of the inspiration is souvenirs from your life. Postcards from Mali and a swatch of our old parlor curtain fabric. Dalí prints and turkey feathers. Black and white photographs and concert posters and untitled poetry written on napkins. Even a few pages ripped out of your favorite books. Inspiration hangs slanted because our roof comes to a point. You stick tacks and shoot staples in the soft, rotting wood. One whole side of the ceiling is covered in the inspiration. There are not even spaces in between. Some days I just lay below the ceiling and look at it all, waiting for one of those moments you sometimes used to get when your eyes lit up and the energy flowed right out of your hand onto the canvas. There was so much energy I could sometimes see it light up in your veins, through your skin. I hope to feel this too, even though you don't anymore. But one day I come home from school and there is no inspiration left on the ceiling. Just slightly discolored wood and thousands of rusted staples and tacks. I do not even ask you where the inspiration went.

Summer

The studio enters different dimensions in different light. In the morning the sun shines through the gaps in the ceiling and the studio is fresh, like it has been reborn. The smell of earthworms and wet bark even masks the paint fumes for at least a little while. We turn the studio's single bulb off and its buzzing stops, leaving us in suburban neighborhood silence. By noon the sun is radiating through the cracks in the roof and you have rolled your linen pants up to your thighs and the backs of your legs stick on the seat of your cracked leather chair. My white-blonde bangs are wet against my forehead and your marigold yellow paint glistens in the midday heat. This is when the smell of primer and oil paint is the strongest. I breathe in deeply and it makes my sinuses push against my sweaty cheeks. *Noon is a time to be restless* I think. But by nighttime the studio is still and cold and inexplicably naked. Only one florescent bulb illuminates our life. It's still so hard to see, these days.

Fall

They turn our florescent bulb off today and the low buzzing stops forever. You always complain about that goddamn eternal hum but now that it is gone, you are angrier than ever. *How can you be angry when it's so quiet?* I ask. But you do not want to listen to the crickets with me and you do not want to enjoy this newfound serenity with me. So the whiskey bottle goes smashing against the wall. It goes smashing across the wall and smashing into my topographic map. My map runs down the wall in lines of poppy red and berry pink and cobalt like the lake she washed away in. Puddles of autumn gray and brown form near the baseboards. They slowly web out across the wood floor, reaching out to touch my dirty garden clogs. I look back up at my dripping wall. *This is the end of the world*, I guess.

Winter

I come home from school today and you are sitting in your cracked red armchair with your eyes closed. I stand in front of you for a while in my garden clogs and my blue jeans that hit me right above the ankle. I just watch you. You are sitting upright, your back barely touching the chair, so I know that you are not sleeping. You know that I am there but you do not talk to me. So, I go do homework in my pile of pink insulation. I fall asleep in my pile, shivering in the cold winter dusk, but mostly shivering in the silence. You do not open your eyes all night.

Spring

I hope for a new beginning this spring but I am old enough now to realize how alone I am. But I can also see that you are far more alone than I, and that you spend your time boxing yourself off in compartments. I watch you do it every single day. First, when she died, it was just us, alone in the house. Then it was us, alone in the studio. Then it was you, alone in the studio. Then it was just you alone.

Summer

It is the hottest time of the year and I can barely breathe. You drink whiskey all day and that night, I sit on the pink insulation and watch you run around the studio, struggling to stand. It is like you are dancing and I even start to hum under my breath as you swirl around the studio of unfinished canvases. You want me to dance with you and when I say *no* you pick me right up and drag me along with you. My garden clogs barely graze the floor. But I do not want to dance and you are angry and you are not my father anymore—swinging your palette knife around you in circles. It cuts the musky air and it cuts the uneasy darkness and then it cuts my cheek. Seconds later I am sitting in the center of the studio where the floor sinks low and the water collects. I am sitting in a puddle of whiskey and paint and blood. You sit next to me in the puddle, your breath heavy and your mammoth body heaving in uneven sobs. We cannot think of anything to do other than to sit together in a puddle of tears and whiskey and paint and blood. Then it starts raining and the water gushes through the cracks in the wooden roof and it's like the world is falling down around us with the pink insulation falling in chunks onto my wet hair and the paint running down your canvases. It's a puddle of rain and tears and whiskey and paint and blood and I ask *is the world ending?* and you say *I don't know*.

