

On The Other Side of the Brush

Maya marched through the halls of Lilybrook High with me. She was squeezing her books like I hug my kitten, babbling about something, something, and “He’s just so... ” something, something, “I want to marry... ” something, something, “... and he’s awfully cute!”, something...

You see, I only heard snippets ‘cause even though I was nodding along and saying “Uh huh...” I was actually just focusing on one thing: sketching. Because, well - do you want to know why? Ok, I can’t wait forever so I’ll just tell you. My school announced that we were entering in a statewide art competition! I know! Exciting, right?! This is the story of how acknowledging a friend can really change everything.

Me and my friend Maya rushed to art class. I had textbooks on my head with a notebook and pen in my hands. When we got there I burst through the door and Ms. Maragold (the art teacher) greeted us as we walked in. “Maya! Iris! You’re here!” she exclaimed. My books fell off my head. Ms. Marigold laughed and I picked up my books as she continued. “Now Maya, I know you aren’t working on anything for the competition, but Iris - why, your painting’s not even close to finished! You’re going to have to bring it home on the weekend! Now I’ll let you two get to work and won’t bother you any longer.”

At that, without even waiting for Maya, I rushed to the other side of the room and thrust the sheet off my painting. Ms. Maragold was right! There was a giant gap in the middle! Off to the left there was a beanstalk in the background of some Renaissance-style shops, filled with fantastical creatures of all sorts. There were ogres making shoes and fairies fluttering around with shopping bags hanging off their arms. And off to the right there was a park with a gazebo in the middle, centaurs serving tea to princesses, and a family of elves having a picnic on the grass. There was a male gnome gardening and a lady gnome walking into a shed with a bucket of tools. On the other side of the park mermaids were splashing in a lake with sea monsters and other sea creatures. I had also painted fairy lights over both areas which were strung together like candy sticks. They even stretched over the empty center of the painting. In the glistening city of Minneapolis a place like this seems a world apart, full of peace. But there was still an empty part in the middle and I had to fix that.

Maya finally caught up with me. “Iris! Hey! Wait, what’s wrong?” she panted, looking at my expression.

“There’s something missing!” I exclaimed. “Look! See that empty gap in the middle?”

“Yes.” she said calmly.

“The deadline’s Monday! I only have the weekend left to finish it! And I don’t know what’s missing!”

“I get it.” she sighed. “Can I help?”

“Sure!” I said, grabbing the painting as we walked to one of the big art tables in the center of the room.

“I have an idea!” she piped up. “Maybe if you put yourself in the character’s shoes then you can think about what the characters might need and want. It could help you figure out what’s missing!”

I nodded. “Great idea!” The rest of the day went by in a blur.

All I remember is hopping on the bus and climbing off when I got home. I rushed into my house, said “Good morning!” to my mom who was making breakfast for dinner, opened the garage door to say hi to my dad who was fixing my little sister’s tricycle, and scooped up my gray and caramel-colored, fuzzy kitten, Waffles who nuzzled me.

I pulled down the ladder that went up to the attic (aka my art studio), climbed and opened the trap door, with the painting under my arm. I set the painting down on one of my empty easels and heaved my backpack off in the corner.

Then I sat down. Waffles curled up on my lap. “Ready to paint?” I asked him. “MEOW!” “I’ll take that as a ‘yes’”. I picked up my brush and thought for a moment. I didn’t quite know what I wanted but I needed to think like the characters.

I sat down to think but the feeling like I was missing something overcame me like artists’ block. I held Waffles close. Suddenly I felt a strange tugging at my waist. Waffles gave a desperate meow but I still held on tight. “Um. . . What’s happening?!” I said worriedly. The tugging got stronger and stronger. I felt like I was going to slam into my painting! But what was pulling me? I tried to stay in place but it was too strong.

Suddenly mom opened the trap door. The tugging stopped. “It’s almost time for dinner!” she said. “OK” I stammered, unsurely. She closed the trap door and the tugging began again. Then suddenly I flew through the air, still clutching Waffles, practically hitting my painting. But I didn’t hit it. I felt like I was falling. Then when I landed, my feet stumbled on a cobblestone street and I almost fell off a cliff edge. I leaned back and looked around me. “This is weird” I thought. “This place looks familiar. But I don’t know why. Where am I?” I asked Waffles, who was still squished in my arms. Waffles just gave a worried Meow.

Then a fairy floated up to me. I blinked. “This isn’t happening” I whispered to Waffles. Waffles looked as surprised as I was.

“Who are you?” The fairy squeaked.

“Who are you?” I said.

“Oh! Sometimes I’m so excited to get to know people that I forget to introduce myself! I’m so very sorry. My name is Adeline Moonberry. And what’s your name?” she asked.

“I’m Iris... Iris McMillan.”

She gasped. “Are you the one?”

“The WHAT?!” Then it all clicked together, like puzzle pieces. I was inside my painting! But how... and why? I needed to know the answers. So I carefully asked her. “What do you mean I’m the one?”

“The one that painted us! You created our world! But we are desperate! We’ve been trying to tell you this since we’ve been alive!”

“Oh! Ok... what?” I said.

“Well the thing is - there’s this giant, straggly empty area in our village. It’s like a cavern. I don’t know how to describe it - it’s like a canyon - well, just see for yourself.” She pointed to the cliff I had almost fallen off of.

“Uh huh” I said awkwardly... “Well actually, the thing is... I’m responsible for that.”

“You are?! I thought it was just magic! There’s so much magic around here. I mean, look! I’m a fairy!” She fluttered her wings.

“Yes, I can see that.” I said.

“So, anyway,” she opened her arms wide, “This is our community!” More fairies fluttered over. Centaurs and princesses ran over with tea cups in their hands. Wet mermaids and little sea monsters clambered out of the lake, elves dropped their plates of food, ogres placed their hammers and shoelaces on their tables and they all ran over to me.

“Quite a nice community.” I said. Waffles hissed and wiggled out of my arms, backing behind me. “Such a cute cat! Adeline commented. “What’s his name? And what’s he doing?”

“Waffles and I don’t know.” I looked around to see what Waffles was scared about and I noticed something (or someone) towering scarily behind the crowd. It was furry and gray with long arms and a black nose.

“What is that?!” I said, pointing behind them. They all turned around.

“Oh! That’s Gigi!” said a princess with a royal English accent. “She’s very kind, though she looks quite scary. You didn’t paint her exactly, but you did paint some eyes coming out of a tree. Giant

ones! To whom did you think those belonged? Well, she's right there behind us all and she is a mammoth sloth."

"Oh hello Gigi! Sorry about that. It's ok, Waffles." I said, petting him. He slowly calmed down and I picked him back up.

"So, I think I'm here to ask you all what you want so I can finish creating your world."

"What do we want, everyone?!" shouted Adeline.

"We want homes! We want homes!" everyone yelled back.

"Homes?" I said. More puzzle pieces were clicking together.

"It's the only thing our village needs." Adeline explained. "We have stores, we have parks, we have a lake to swim in, food to eat, and so many things to do! But we have no homes!"

"Why didn't I think of that?!" I cried.

"And maybe a castle for me?!" asked Gigi the mammoth sloth in a squeaky voice.

I couldn't help but giggle. She had such a twinkly, tiny voice for such a giant creature! A castle? I thought. She was as big as a castle - maybe as big as two castles!

"I'll have to make a really giant castle to fit you! But I'll make it work!" I promised.

"Could you make us acorn houses?" asked the gnome. "Yay!" The entire village cheered along with the gnome.

"Of course!" I said. "Just tell me how you want it to look."

"Acorn houses with tiny sidewalks that lead up to a castle!" an ogre exclaimed.

"But the rows of houses are on either side of the castle!" said an old elf.

"The castle has a drawbridge and there's a river running through the middle, right in between the rows of houses!" a mermaid cried.

"There's a bridge, sidewalks, and bike trails!" a centaur cheered.

"Ok I think I get it!" I said. "Now the only problem is - how do I get home so I can start working on painting homes for all of you?"

Gigi gave a small smile. "Maybe I can help?" She said in her squeaky voice which still amused me. I giggled.

"Sure! I said. But..." I started to say "how?" but before I could get the word out she wrapped me in her giant slothy arms and flung me up into the sky.

"Hooooow?!" I finished in a slight scream but then realizing what was happening I yelled "Wheeeee! Bye!!!!!"

Then splat! Suddenly I was standing, wobbling, in front of the easel. Covered in paint, but back!

Waffles was still in my arms, looking bemused. "That was odd," I said to him. "But at least I know what to paint!"

Mom opened the trap door. "Time for dinn-..." she began. "...er?!" She said in surprise. "Iris! You're covered in paint!"

"Well, I really got to paint on the other side of the brush today." I said, with a small grin. Waffles and I were the only people that knew. I liked having my own little secret, my own little magical painting friends.

"I still have a lot of work to do," I told mom "But after I win first prize, I'm gonna visit that painting style again and again."

After dinner I went back up and painted the houses. So pretty they looked with the rest of the village! Acorns in rows with sidewalks in front, leading up to a beautiful giant pink castle. There was a river with a bridge, and a drawbridge on the castle. The glittering lights looked perfect with trees behind the scene.

After I'd finished painting I took a bath. I was ready for the competition with a day to spare. "I think I'll use that extra day for a visit." I said with a grin as Waffles curled up at my feet. Then I fell into dreams of mammoth sloths.

It was competition day and all the judges held up tens for making them feel like they were inside the story. I was happy about that. I didn't say this outloud, but I realized that night - acknowledging others' needs really can make a difference.