

Inspiration

by

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I didn't mind my mother's boyfriends living with us. But Jack had been with us much too long. I took a slurpy sip of my coffee, extra extra light with two and a half sugars. It was like a milkshake, only warm.

"Claire," he said, "don't you think you're a little young to be drinking coffee?"

I looked across the table at his skinny face. "Uncle Jack," I said, trying to make my voice sound the same as his, "don't you think you're a little old to have a big blob of cream cheese on your cheek?"

He wiped at his face, checked to see how much came off and just said, "Hmmm."

I should have let it stay there all day. He'd never know. "Besides, Mum lets me drink it, and she makes the rules. She says ten is old enough." I crammed a spoonful of Froot Loops into my mouth. "When's Mum coming home anyway?"

He looked up toward the ceiling, playing like he was thinking hard. "Wednesday," he said finally. He tapped a cigarette on the table and lit it. "She's scouting in Madison. She'll be back Wednesday." He seemed to like his answer, and I figured it was as good as any.

"Do you think there's any decent painters in Madison?" I said, stirring my coffee to make the spoon clang in the cup. "I mean, it's Wisconsin for cripes sake!"

"Watch your language, Claire."

"I said cripes."

"Hmmm." He blew a puff of smoke up to the ceiling. "And how do you know there aren't any good painters in Wisconsin? There's talent everywhere. And if anyone can find it, your mother can." He picked up the newspaper and started reading. I stuck my tongue out at him, almost hoping he could see me from behind the sports page. He couldn't, so I

picked up my bowl and slurped down the rest of the sweet milk. Jasper the cat gave me a grouchy look, but I didn't feel like sharing.

"I was just wondering if there's anything out there to inspire people, that's all."

"Inspiration comes from inside," he said. "You know that."

"Uh-huh," I said. I knew all about art, probably more than him. I traced the design on the cereal bowl with my spoon. That's probably what they do in Wisconsin. Paint cereal bowls.

"And speaking of painting..." Jack put down the paper. "I'm missing a new tube of cadmium red." He looked right at me with his fizzy blue eyes. "Would you know anything about that?"

My stomach did a little flip, and I almost knocked over the bowl. "No," I said, looking right back at him. I gulped down the rest of my coffee. "Well, I'd better get going. I've got to meet Audrey." I scooped up my bowl and mug and dumped them in the sink. It was Jack's job to wash the dishes when Mum was away. That was her rule. I grabbed my pink corduroy jacket off the hook. "See you later." I got halfway out the kitchen when he called.

"Claire!"

I poked my head in the door. "I can't be late for school again. What is it?"

"Don't forget your lunch."

"Oh." I grabbed the crumpled bag off the counter and ran out the door. I could feel his smirk all the way down three flights of stairs.

Jack had been living with us since March. Almost seven months. My mother's boyfriends didn't usually last that long. I was getting kind of tired of him. I really wanted me and Mum to have the apartment to ourselves for a while. But it didn't look like he would be leaving anytime soon.

Mum's had lots of boyfriends. They're usually painters or writers, sometimes sculptors. Once she even went out with a glassblower. But never something dull and

boring like a lawyer or a butcher. My mother likes creative people. She's an art agent, and very good at it. She goes off on trips looking for new stars of the art world. It's a glamorous life—flying to meetings, setting up shows, drinking white wine. Jack says she's the toast of Tribeca, whatever that means.

“My mother discovered someone last week,” I was always telling my best friend Audrey. I would make it sound very mysterious. Like she got on a rickety old boat and sailed to South America to cut her way through tall grass and swim across dirty rivers to find some little man, painting in a mud hut, waiting for someone to take him to New York and make him famous. No matter how fantastical I made the story about my mother's latest discovery, Audrey always believed it. Well, she didn't believe the story. She believed me. That's why she was my best friend.

“So where's Jennifer now?” Audrey asked as we crunched our feet through the dead leaves. When we were together we called my mother Jennifer. That's her name. But I call her Mum at home.

“She's in Tokyo.” I knew she'd rather be there than in Madison.

“When's she coming back?”

“Wednesday.”

Audrey blew a big purple bubble and popped it with her finger. Grape was her morning flavor. “So when are you gonna show it to her?”

“You know I can't let her see!” I think sometimes I had to pay for my fibs to Audrey by listening to her dumb questions.

“C'mon. Do you really think she'll get mad?”

“I don't know,” I said, trying to sound casual. “But I'm not gonna find out, either.” I picked up a leaf and twirled it in my hand.

“When can I see it?” I watched the leaf spin, pretending I didn't hear her. I wish I hadn't told her anything. “You are gonna let me, aren't you?” Audrey tugged at her

ponytail. She always did that when she felt nervous. We turned into the empty schoolyard, late again.

“When it’s done, okay?” She smiled a goofy smile, like she had just won a spelling bee or something. “It’s only a painting, for cripes sake.”

I used to ask Mum about my father a lot. But all she ever said was, “Some other time Claire” or “Maybe when you’re older.” And then she’d get quiet. Sometimes she’d even look sad. I didn’t like to make my mother sad, so I stopped asking. Still, I wished I knew something about him. I was in fifth grade, and that was old enough to know.

One day I had a great idea. I would paint my father’s portrait. I saw enough of Mum’s boyfriends to know what she liked, so my father was probably a mix of them. I’d just use my inspiration to paint the right mixture and I’d have a picture of him.

I was pretty sure I could do it. I’d been to lots of galleries and museums and talked to lots of painters. I had a little sketchbook hidden under my bed. Most of the stuff I drew was pretty good. At least I thought so. And it was much more fun than geography and fractions.

But I had to keep the painting a secret. Mum didn’t like me to paint or draw. She said that I should pay attention to my schoolwork, because artists live crazy lives and she didn’t want me to be crazy. So I made a tiny studio in my closet. It was big and had a light, so I just pushed my clothes toward the front and made a secret space in the back. Then I borrowed some of Jack’s art supplies. I picked a canvas that was almost as big as me. And his paint box was a sticky mess, so I knew he wouldn’t miss a few old tubes and some brushes.

That’s how I got started. Every day I’d do my homework really fast so that after supper I could sneak into my studio and paint. The first thing I painted was a dusty blue sky. Just soft strokes with the tips of a wide brush, so you could still see the white canvas showing through. Then in the middle I sketched out a big face shape, and painted my own face. Brown hair and eyes. A few freckles on my cheeks. A long skinny nose and little

round ears. Then I started to paint Mum's boyfriends' faces on top of mine. I would keep putting on layers until I had painted my father's face. And I would know when I was finished.

Jack plopped two bowls of rice pudding on the table and sat down. He wasn't a great cook when it came to the supper part. Mostly frozen ravioli and fish sticks. But he made delicious desserts. Mum always said he was going to make her fat and he'd better stop making so many goodies. But he said he'd love her anyways. Yuck.

I poured a little bit of milk over the top of the pudding and watched it dribble down like a volcano. Then I took a big bite. It was warm and almost creamy, with lots of cinnamon and only a few raisins. Just the way I like it. I almost didn't want to swallow because it tasted so good. Jack put a little bit on a dish and put it on the floor for Jasper. He licked it up fast and then curled up near the stove and purred like a lawnmower. I wanted to do the same, the pudding was so yummy. I swung my legs and hummed instead.

Jack finished his pudding and wiped his mustache. "Good, huh?"

"Yeah," I said casually, licking my spoon. I didn't want him to get a big head or anything. It was only rice pudding.

"Want some more?"

I really wanted to go to my studio, but I felt guilty for taking his new tube of red. "Yeah, okay," I said, and handed him my bowl.

I'd been painting the portrait for weeks. There were so many layers. The paint was getting thick and bumpy, but you could still see all the different people mixed in. I couldn't tell if I was getting close to my father though. Maybe I wasn't a painter after all. Maybe I should move to Madison.

"Here you go, specialty of the house." Jack spun the dessert bowl on the table so it landed right in front of me. Then he put a white box next to it.

“What’s this?” I looked at him suspiciously. I knew all about guys who tried to buy their girlfriend’s kids. Joey Patterson got a whole video game arcade from his mother’s boyfriend. That didn’t make Joey like him, though.

Jack laughed. “What a skeptic you are. Open it and find out.”

I opened the top of the box and peeked inside. It was filled with new tubes of paint and brushes. I looked quickly at the jumble of colored labels, then closed the box.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you like them?”

I looked across the table at him. I wasn’t sure if I was mad or happy or sad. It was like a swirl of all three. And some other stuff I couldn’t really figure out. “They’re nice. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He poured himself some more wine. “I guess now I know where my paint’s been running off to.”

The stuff in the box had made me forget about that for a minute. I felt my face turn red and I tried to squeeze the color back inside. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve done worse myself.” He took a sip of wine and smiled at me. “A painter’s got to paint.”

“Yeah,” I said, but I wasn’t really listening. I thought about the portrait waiting for me in my studio. There was so much I could do with those new paints. Then I thought of something else, and my stomach got all bunched. “So you saw it?”

Jack nodded.

“You won’t tell Mum, will you?”

“I won’t tell.”

I took a big bite of pudding and thought about it. I wasn’t sure I could believe him. But my stomach stopped feeling weird. And I couldn’t wait to find out what was in the box. “Can I go now?”

“Have at it.”

I grabbed the box and looked at him. He looked back at me.

“You’re very good, Claire,” he said.

“You mean he knows?” Audrey stuck her lollipop back in her mouth. Her eyes were almost jumping out of her head.

“Of course he knows. I just told you he saw it. He bought me the paints for cripes sake!” My stomach started feeling funny again. “What if he tells?”

“He won’t tell,” she said in her know-it-all voice. “Besides, do you really think Jennifer would be mad? Her whole life is art. You can be her glamorous artist daughter.”

“But my mother doesn’t want me to be one!” I felt my eyes start to water and my lips scrunch up. Luckily we were the only ones on the swings. “It’s not fair,” I said. “I feel like I already am an artist.”

Audrey licked her lollipop slowly, like she was thinking about it. Then she said, “Why?”

I let out a big sigh like I was disappointed in her. “I don’t know. Not really. It’s just like I see things that other people don’t see.”

“Like what? Show me.”

This was one of those times I wish Audrey would just believe me. I looked around, hoping that I’d see something. “There! See those cracks in the sidewalk? Aren’t they pretty? The way they zig-zag and crash into each other?”

“Mmm,” she nodded. I could tell she wasn’t seeing anything but the sidewalk. I really wasn’t seeing much either.

“Okay. How about those leaves squished up against the fence? See all the colors? And look at the shapes.” I thought it was beautiful, like a magic river or a Chinese rug. “Can you see anything?”

“Yeah...” Audrey gnawed on her lollipop stick. “A pile of leaves.”

“Forget it,” I sighed. Maybe Mum was right. Maybe artists are crazy.

“No, try one more,” Audrey said. “I’ll get it this time. C’mon.”

“Alright,” I said. “But try!”

“I am trying!”

I really did want her to see something. I looked all around the park. My feet started to feel tingly, like right before a math test. Then my eyes saw something good. “There! Look at the sandbox!” Audrey looked with squinty eyes and slowly chewed the paper stick. “Look at those kids. See all the different colors?” She nodded. “And see how they’re all in funny positions and jumping all around? Don’t they look like clowns? Clowns playing on a big birthday cake?”

Audrey giggled. “Yeah, they do. They do look like clowns!”

My feet stopped feeling tingly, and I wanted to give Audrey a hug. “That’s how I see things. It’s called inspiration.”

“Wow,” she said, still looking at the sandbox. “I could never see that.”

“I see art all the time. Everywhere!”

“Everywhere?” she looked at me. I could tell she was impressed.

“Uh-huh.”

“So when you see a booger coming out of Brian Menger’s nose, is that art?”

“No,” I said. “That’s his lunch.” Audrey laughed and I laughed and then we just started swinging, pumping hard to go as high as we could.

My mother called on Wednesday. She needed to visit one more person who lived way out on a farm. But she said she missed me and couldn’t wait to get home. That night Jack ordered a big pizza with pepperoni. We ate the whole thing, and he never said anything about my painting. I didn’t either.

When I got home from school on Thursday Mum was already there. She said she found a woman who painted giant birds on wood from old barns. Her name was Diane and she was very talented. I knew my mother could find a good painter in Madison.

That night Mum made my favorite supper. Roast chicken and potatoes. The whole kitchen smelled warm and buttery, and it made me want to lay down next to Jasper and just breathe it all in. Uncle Jack made a chocolate cheesecake for dessert. Mum and I ate two pieces.

Jack poured a big mug of coffee and said it was time to get to work. He said he always painted better when Mum was home. I watched him to see if he would say anything about my painting, but he just gave Mum a kiss and went into the studio. Maybe he already told her. I couldn't be sure.

I helped Mum with the dishes. She washed and I dried. And we cut a little piece of cake and took tiny bites of it for energy. It was good to have her home. It's always been just me and Mum, and when she doesn't have a boyfriend we're like best friends. Even better than Audrey and me because my mother is smarter than Audrey. Mum says when I get older people will think we're sisters because we look so much alike. I'm glad I look like her, because she's very beautiful.

Mum told me all about Madison and I told her about Audrey's new hamster. She was trying to teach it to do tricks. Then Mum asked me about school, like she always does.

"So how's your long division coming?"

I took a dish and wiped it in a circle. "Okay. I really don't like math though."

"I know you don't honey." She squirted some more soap in the water. "But it's good for you to learn math and science and language. You'll need it when you're grown up."

"I know." I hated math. No matter how much I tried I couldn't figure out what those numbers were supposed to do. And I didn't really care either. I grabbed a handful of silverware. "Mum?"

"What."

"How long is Jack going to live with us?"

Mum got kind of quiet for a second. "Oh, I don't know," she said. "Maybe a long time."

"Oh."

She looked at me. Her hands were lost in bubbles. "Is that okay with you? Do you like Jack?"

"He's okay." I put the forks and spoons in their little spaces in the drawer. "Do you love him?"

She tilted her head like she was thinking about it, then she nodded. “I think maybe I do.” Her face looked a little surprised.

“Oh.” I took some more silverware out of the drainer and dried it slowly. I thought about my painting and the box from Jack. “Do you tell each other secrets?”

“Sometimes. Do you tell Audrey secrets?”

“Yeah. But sometimes she has a blabbermouth.”

“Well that’s not good. You should never tell somebody’s secrets.”

“I know.” I looked at her for a minute, then I went to the table and took a bite of cheesecake.

“Ooh, I need a bite,” said Mum. I brought the fork over and popped a piece in her mouth. “Mmm, dee-lish.”

We didn’t say anything for a little while. Mum started singing a little song. She has a nice voice. It made me feel safe and cozy. She handed me the big serving platter. “Mum,” I said. “What was my father like?”

She stopped singing, but she didn’t say anything. The water from the faucet sounded extra loud. “What’s with all the questions tonight?”

“I don’t know.” I looked at her. The platter started to feel heavy.

“I’m very tired, honey.” She scrubbed the chicken pan hard. “It was a long trip. Maybe some other time.”

“Okay,” I said. But it wasn’t really.

I didn’t paint for a few days after Mum came home. I kept looking at Jack to see if he told her anything. Sometimes you can tell when people tell a secret. I know when Audrey tells. But I wasn’t sure about Jack.

“See, I told you he wouldn’t tell her,” said Audrey. We were playing with her Barbies in the park.

“How do you know?”

“Think about it. Jack really loves Jennifer.” She took Ken and a Barbie and made them do a little play. “Oh Jennifer, I love you. I love you too Jack.” She made them kiss.

“Mmuh. Mmuh.”

“Hey! Don’t make them mushy.”

“Jennifer,” she made Ken say, “I know a secret about Claire. Want me to tell you?” Then Barbie said, “No! No! You never tell secrets about people. Especially my daughter! Now get out of my house. Shoo, you bad boy. Go!” Barbie took her arm and hooked it under Ken’s and flung him into a bush. He landed upside down and we screamed and laughed.

“Do you think Jack wants that to happen?” said Audrey.

Sometimes Audrey was smarter than she looked. “Maybe you’re right,” I said. She nodded and looked proud of herself. “I think I’ll work on the painting tonight.”

“Good. I can’t wait to see it.”

“Me too.”

That night I ate supper really fast and told Mum and Jack that I had to read a book for a report. Mum said to be sure I kept the light bright enough. I was glad she didn’t ask me what book.

I went into the closet, pushed the clothes away and looked at the painting. I wasn’t sure what to do next. Maybe some hair. Or a beard. A little more red might be good if I did hair. But maybe not. I squirted some paint on my palette, mixed some brown and dabbed a little bit on the eyes. But it didn’t feel right. I almost always did brown eyes. I stood with the brush in my hand. There were lots of layers. They were very pretty, with different colors all swirling together. Part of me felt done, like I couldn’t paint any more on the portrait. But I couldn’t see my father in it.

“Sometimes inspiration needs a little help, doesn’t it?”

I looked behind me and saw Mum standing in the closet door.

“Can I come in?”

My arm that was holding the brush felt frozen, and my heart was pumping like I had just run away from a mean dog. “Okay.”

Mum walked up to the painting. She nodded a couple times and said “Hmmm” and put her face real close to the canvas. “This is good, Claire,” she said, looking at the swirls of color in the hair. “The thickness of the paint gives it a lot of soul. And the dry wash background is very light, but still holds the image.”

My body felt like the Tin Woodman when he was all rusted and stuck. Mum looked at me and smiled. “I think it’s wonderful. Who is it?”

I swallowed, but I didn’t have any spit. “It’s supposed to be my father.”

“Oh…” she said.

I watched her face get all quiet, like when we were washing the dishes. She didn’t say anything else, so I made myself start talking. “See, since I don’t know what he looked like, I just started painting your boyfriends. That’s what all the layers are.” I couldn’t tell if Mum was listening. She looked like she was thinking about something else, but I kept talking. “I thought the portrait would tell me when to stop. I thought I could paint the right mix of layers and find him.” It seemed stupid when I said it out loud. The painting just looked like a goopy mess. “It’s not working though.”

“Well, I think it’s a brilliant idea.” She looked at the portrait again. “It’s very creative. I can see it now. There’s Jack’s blonde mustache. And Michael’s big ears.”

“See Tommy’s eyelashes?”

“Boy, I forgot about Tommy.” She started to laugh. “Oh God. There’s Big Glen’s mole.”

I giggled. “I always thought it looked like a fried egg.”

“It did, didn’t it?”

We both laughed. I couldn’t believe Mum was next to me, talking about my painting and laughing. It felt good. But suddenly my brain remembered the white box, and I felt myself get mad. “Did Uncle Jack tell you about this?”

Mum looked surprised. “Does he know?”

I nodded.

“Well, he didn’t tell me.”

“Then how did you know?”

She dropped down to look at me. “You’re my daughter, that’s how.”

“Oh,” I said. But I wasn’t really sure what she meant.

“Besides, who do you think hangs up your clothes when you leave them on the floor?”

I never thought about that. She squeezed my hand and stood up. “Come on, let’s take a look at this.” We moved in close, and Mum started talking about the portrait. “The shadow here adds a good balance. And this is a nice line, very fluid,” she said, tracing it with her hand. “And these layers are so rich.”

I felt like we were in a gallery.

“You know,” Mum said, “your father liked to use thick paint too.”

“My father was a painter?”

“Yes,” Mum nodded. “A very good one.” She was smiling, but her face looked a little sad. “His name was Henry.”

Henry. It sounded like the perfect name for a painter. I wanted to see all of his work. He was probably a master. “Can I see his paintings? Is he in the galleries?”

Mum shook her head. “There aren’t any, honey. He destroyed them.”

“Why?” I couldn’t believe someone could do that.

“He didn’t think they were good enough.” She ran her fingers along the edge of the canvas. “He wasn’t a very happy person.”

The closet seemed extra quiet, and I felt like I had to whisper. “He died, right?”

“Yup,” she said in a tiny voice. “Just before you were born.”

“Oh.” I never thought that my father didn’t ever see me. My insides felt heavy. I wanted to cry, but Mum was already sad. I didn’t want to make her feel worse. “Did you love him?”

“Yes, very much.”

The closet felt really small, and I could hear myself breathing. “Do you think he would love me?”

“I’m sure of it.”

I looked at the painting. None of it seemed right anymore. I wanted to rip it up. Step on it. Paint over the whole thing with black.

I felt Mum’s hand on my hair. “You know,” she said, “your father’s eyes were green.”

“Really?”

“Yes, a wonderful forest green.” She picked up the palette. “Here, let’s make it.” I mixed some blue and yellow on the palette, then a dab of brown. “Add just a smidgen of red.” I scraped in a little bit and mixed it around. It turned into a magical green that was like winter and summer at the same time. “That’s it,” she said.

I brushed the color onto the eyes, and for the first time it felt like they looked right back at me. It gave me little chills, but the good kind. “They’re beautiful, Mum.”

“They sure are,” she said. We both looked at the portrait. “You know, there was something else that made your father’s eyes special. Little flecks of gold.”

I made a little gasping sound like I was watching a scary movie. “I have flecks of gold in my eyes!”

“Uh-huh,” she nodded. “You do.”

I picked up the tube of yellow and squeezed a drop onto the palette. “I know how to make that color.”

“I know you do, Claire.”