

THE MAGIC OF OIL PAINTING

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In 1978, my father bought an oil painting of a lion for \$6 at a flea market and nailed it to the wall above my bed. The painting had a cheap pine frame, surrounding a sky blue background that may have been the sky, or just by coincidence the background color. Like a portrait, only the lion's head was in the painting, proudly staring off at a random point. I imagined a gazelle or a zebra next to my dresser on the opposite wall, standing still and unawares, eating my socks and underwear like tall savannah grasses. The odd thing about the painting, though, was that it depicted a maneless lion, a lioness, a girl cat, in a 12-year-old boy's room, Pete Rose sliding head-first to its left, a sad hobo clown juggling three bowling pins to its right. Whatever possessed my dad to see a girl lion painting and spend \$6 on it, I don't know, but my dad had done a lot of impulsive things of late—the juggling clown included—so when I came home from school and saw the lioness on my wall, it really didn't surprise me.

Since Mom had cheated on Dad with Oscar the butcher, Dad spent a lot more time and energy on my sisters and me, trying to make up for what I would call incompetent fathering. Not abusive, not neglectful, not bad, just sort of goofy. For instance, Dad couldn't perform basic dad functions, like play baseball or even drive a car, so more often than not, playing catch resulted in his nose swelling red, and bus trips landed us in the bad part of town, mugged of our return bus fair and forced to call cheating Mom. He tripped over his own feet a lot, too, though he tried to pass it off as on purpose. Once he ate all our Halloween candy. I loved my dad, and so did my twin little sisters, but maybe in the way you love a character on TV: The crazy neighbor with the once-an-episode catchphrase. The police sergeant with the heartburn in his big heart. Or

maybe one of the Sweathogs. Dad proved steady that way, always good for good-intentioned laughs, but never relied upon to carry the whole show.

Whatever Dad did, the paintings, the failed trips to the museum, pink tube socks balled in the wrong drawer, he was trying his best. Mom, when she left, left us completely, moving in with Oscar in his apartment behind his butcher shop, one room and a kitchen, fuming with the aroma of meat, bloody footprints leading to the bed where she had cuckolded my whole family. She didn't return our calls, never snuck back to get her things, and once, when I walked down to Oscar's to confront her, refused to even see me. Oscar pretended not to know what I was talking about, then asked me to buy something or leave. For a while, I wondered if Mom really was in the back, if maybe we'd imagined the whole thing and Mom was dead or visiting relatives in another state. But I knew Oscar was lying for sure when Dad got home that night and asked me not to go to the butcher shop any more, that he could take care what he called "the Mom situation" himself. Not five minutes later, I heard him swearing and running out to his car, Kellie and Callie still at gymnastics, Dad forgetting to pick them up at the same time he was forgetting he couldn't drive.

The day after I went to find Mom at Oscar's, I found the lioness on the wall in my room. Like I said, it didn't really shock me, and so I wouldn't hurt Dad's feelings, I left the painting where it was, figured I'd get used to it, or if I was lucky, see it replaced with something else Dad took a shine to, something a little cooler, like another baseball player, maybe even a girl in a bathing suit, Farrah Fawcett or somebody like that. During dinner that night, Dad asked me what I thought of the painting, and I told him I liked lions, even the girl kind, and wanted to know if he'd painted it himself. It was the most preposterous question ever asked in the history of questions, but it made Dad laugh, blush a little, too, made him tear into his TV dinner with a vigor I hadn't seen in weeks. While we ate our pudding, made with orange soda instead of milk, he told my sisters that he was going to build them a new dollhouse, that their old one was falling apart, that maybe their dolls could all have their own rooms. He joked he would find a little pommel horse for them to do gymnastics on, and a mini-lion painting to put on one of the walls. My sisters seemed to like the idea, and for what it was worth, I told my father I wanted to help, that I'd always wanted to learn to work with

wood. We did the dinner dishes from that night, all day, and the night before, then watched TV until it was bed time. Dad tucked in the twins, and even let me stay up extra to watch Carson's monologue, something I'd never been allowed to do when Mom was still living at home. So, things weren't all that bad.

Before I fell asleep that night, I heard my father on the telephone, trying to keep his voice down, not realizing the actual thinness of our house's Depression-era walls. When I heard him say "Lucille," I knew he was talking to Mom, doing pretty well at first, speaking like a lawyer in negotiations, asking where the deed to the house was, chiding her for cutting off everyone's health insurance by quitting her job at the college. Before long, though, he was basically begging for her to come back, using me and my sisters as bait, bait Mom wasn't biting on, because I think I heard him cry.

When he finally hung up and turned the TV back on, I thought about getting up to talk to him, but instead stayed where I was and looked around my room. A strip of white shone under my door, but disappeared when I heard Dad switch off the light in the hall and go into his room. The moon between the blinds gave me a striped view of my bedroom door and the sad hobo clown, but I couldn't see much else. Pete Rose, right next to the window, slid undetected into pitch black. The lioness, which should have been watching over me—at least that's what I imagined Dad going for—was completely gone, but if I squinted, I could still make out her outline in the bright background. For a while, I focused on the outline, tried to remember what the lioness looked like, but before long, I only saw the background for what it was—the place where the lioness was supposed to be—and fell asleep that way, my head tilted back, my eyelids failing, staring up into a misshapen patch of sky blue maybe not-sky. In a lot of ways, it was better than the lioness herself.