

STROKES
by
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Ellen stands behind the purple cord with the other parents, special education teachers and clients in the airport terminal, watching her daughter's art teacher drumming gently with her fists across Vicky's vast back. She's not sure why she wants to stop this, why it seems so, what? Manipulative? Unfair? Vicky is clearly enjoying herself, gurgling like a two-year-old, as she slaps green blotches across the watercolor paper. She seems not to notice the people gathered around her, and crowds have always upset her. So absorbed is she in the making of this painting, laughing, jabbing her brush on the paper, shouting "Boom Boom!" that she hasn't seemed to notice Ellen. The art teacher, a little winter bird of a woman named Lucille Golding, is dressed in a pink pants suit with an American flag pin on her collar. She hands Vicky another brush, turns to smile at the onlookers then reaches high to rub the length of Vicky's back. Vicky makes firm, downward strokes in brown beneath the green boom-booms.

"What a wonderful painting you made!" Lucille says, bowing her helmet of shiny blonde curls—*Was it a wig?*—as though she's done it herself, and the audience reciprocates with unwarranted applause. "A wonderful painting of beautiful trees."

"Mom-my paint," Vicky says, kneading her painty fingers. There is a large dot of green paint on the bodice of her untucked blouse. Ellen has never seen that blouse or the brown skirt Vicky is wearing. There was a time when they shared clothes, when Vicky would go off to the sheltered workshop and nursery, wearing Ellen's paint-splattered jeans, and Ellen would throw on the sweatshirt that Vicky had worn to work in the dirt the day before. "Mom-my."

"You made this one, Vicky. Not Mommy," Lucille says.

Vicky doesn't look at her mother, but the way the art teacher gazes at Ellen, you would have thought Vicky has said her mother regularly steals her paintings. Ellen turns to ask the woman standing beside her for directions to the restrooms.

When she returns, the reception for the Special Needs Art Exhibit is in full swing. Ellen waits to congratulate her daughter behind two residents and a young woman she recognizes as staff from the group home where Vicky lives, but now the crowd is too much. Before it is Ellen's turn, Vicky is already covering her face with her hands. Ellen embraces a stiff and cowering woman as tall as she is, but wide, now, at least thirty pounds heavier than when she lived at home. Vicky never lowers her hands, gives no sign that she recognizes her mother. This isn't a surprise. Vicky didn't acknowledge Ellen's presence the last time Ellen visited her. Still, she feels diminished, not herself somehow. The way she's been feeling so much of the time lately. Why had she expected anything different?

Ellen returns to her studio, unable to release her daughter's finished painting from her mind. There, on the larger of the two easels, is her own stillbirth of a painting. She holds her palette knife in her hand and imagines slashing the four-foot canvas with all that expensive new paint—*terre verde*, *caputi mortem*, vermilion—right through the upper left place of deception, place of frustration, place she cannot, despite weeks of trying, get right. Something is wrong with her eyes. It has to be that. Or her balance. In the last few days, she's tripped twice going down the stairs to answer the door. Something's not right. She doesn't slash the canvas, of course. What would be the point? She'll continue, adding more paint, wasting her cadmium next, most likely, until the thing that isn't working is extinguished and something else that isn't working takes its place.

Ellen stares, clutching the knife until her hand hurts. *What's wrong with it?* Then she turns and stabs the invitation to the Special Needs Art Exhibit through to the drafting table. What's wrong with *her*?

Ellen works at home in her studio, living alone, as she has in the year since Vicky turned twenty-one and moved to the group home for retarded adults. Vicky's development got stuck somewhere between ages two and three. Her daughter wasn't the one who was challenged by that. Ellen was, of course. And Robert, who'd badgered her for years to have a child, had been unable to face the challenge.

Vicky is a force of nature, a more-or-less permanent Nor'easter. Her features unaffected by the brain damage sustained during Ellen's bout with scarlet fever, she is beautiful. In fact, she looks a lot like her mother—the long Semitic face, dark eyes and hair—but perhaps less so now in the year they've lived apart. The group home serves too many carbohydrates, too much starch.

Living with Vicky for twenty-one years, kept Ellen honed, fine-tuned, alert, and perhaps redeemed. Paying her debts every day—battling Vicky into clothes, into the bathroom before she had an accident, into a smile—Ellen was free to paint. No further novenas were necessary.

There is no fat on Ellen's bones. Vicky's rage burned it away years ago. She is a long, thin blade of a woman who put her fury in her brush hand and attacked the canvas.

Ellen had resisted when the social worker first suggested the move to the group home. It surprised her, then, how good she actually felt after Vicky left. For weeks, it was like a holiday, and she'd worked unfettered by the endless storms of Vicky's perpetual terrible twos. Yet there wasn't a moment that passed when the memory of Vicky, or anxiety over Vicky, wasn't hovering somewhere, like the threat of a hurricane moving toward shore. And when a month passed and there were no storms, the threat became a kind of yearning. To be caught in the undertow of a feeling, even a rotten one. To be lost at sea, engulfed by a wave that welled up inside her, knocking her off her feet and into her canvas.

Ellen hasn't cried since Vicky left. Nor has she produced a painting she likes.

Ellen moves back in front of her easel, studying the painting. The brushstrokes seem measured. Nothing like those energetic strokes in Vicky's 'best of show.' This thing has too much thought, she decides, pulling off a strip of tape where she divided image from field. No surprise. Her daughter's small watercolors were a shock on the vast white walls of the airport. Even Robert, who left when Vicky's reign of terror began, was impressed by the paintings. Vicky had never painted like that before, had refused to paint, even when Ellen had set up a small easel for her next to her own. While Ellen painted, Vicky hunched beneath the drafting table, looking at the pictures in museum catalogues and monographs Ellen kept on her bookshelves, and huffed out her usual sentence: "Mom-my paint."

Vicky's taste was oddly German Expressionist, running toward Nolde and Munch and Kokoschka. She loved to look at those Paula Modersohn-Becker pictures, almost primitive, of mothers nursing their babies. Those and the picture books Ellen hated that Robert gave Vicky for each birthday, featuring chubby creatures with frightening smiles, which Vicky called, "dog-gy." With Vicky present, crouching, naming the world with the words she owned, sometimes crying for no reason, Ellen had been able to paint boldly, fiercely. For years she had risen from her bed, excited about what she was working on, wanting to move to the unfinished canvas before brushing her teeth or getting Vicky up and ready for the van that picked her up for the sheltered workshop. Still, Vicky's care had always come first. Except on those rare mornings when all that mattered was the hunger in her fingers to paint, when Vicky missed her bus, and Ellen tried to interest her in painting, the days Vicky crawled under the table or puddled into Ellen's bed with her picture books. Those were days of grace, where hand and eye were one with something beyond the self. She hadn't painted in a state like that since Vicky left. When she saw those airport paintings, she wondered if Vicky had taken it with her.

Ellen picks up her sketchbook. At times like this, she must start over, drawing what's there in front of her. She must begin from scratch to draw shells and flowers and objects from nature. She must fuse eye to hand again, as if she's never learned to paint or to work from memory. As if she does not believe herself to be, in her better moments, the last of the abstract expressionists.

Quickly, she sketches the conch shell on her drafting table. The rendering is loose and fluid, but without intensity. She flips a page and begins again, working more slowly, going for detail and precision. What emerges is more exact but not drawn from the core, only the hand. She tries again, pausing to touch the shell as she draws, to hold it in her hand, to raise it to her face, breathing in the musky erosion of time and sea. The drawing

is richer now, less delineated, less like a blueprint, but the essence of the shell and its finer illustrative points have not merged. This drawing is too affected by memory. She wants to work from only the visible object, to draw what's there, but in such a way as to capture the world. Sounds pretentious, she thinks, but it's exactly what she wants to do.

Ellen has been drawing for over an hour when the phone rings. She blinks as though waking up and reaches to answer.

"This is Lucille Golding, Vicky's art teacher, well, senior volunteer, really." Her voice has a peculiar lilt and gurgle to it, as though she were speaking to a young child.

"Yes, Lucille." Back-pounder, thinks Ellen, then immediately feels guilty. She *should* feel grateful. "Whatever they call you at the group home, you're doing good work with her."

"Oh, she's doing it! Vicky's my star. But when she finishes a painting and I praise her work, she insists Mommy did it."

Ellen flinches. "That's coming from all those years when she watched me paint, I guess."

"I think she misses you."

"She ignores me when I visit. The last time, I don't think she even recognized me."

"How long ago was that?"

"Not long." Ellen gazes up to the bookshelf where a Christmas picture with Vicky, the other group home residents and their visitors belongs, but it's gone. Stretching the phone cord, she leans over to look under the drafting table. It couldn't have been as long ago as that. Had she not seen Vicky since Christmas? She can see the snapshot wedged between paint cans, but cannot reach it.

"She hardly says anything but, 'Mommy' when she paints," Lucille says. "I was wondering if the three of us could work together one day."

Vicky had made a house with her fingers and covered her face with it in the Christmas photograph. "That might be interesting."

"If she sees you painting something different, she might understand that her own picture belongs to her, that she made it herself."

Closing her eyes, she thinks of the hours teaching Vicky to draw a circle, the tears of frustration, the broken charcoal, the chewed crayons. In their twenty-one years together, they never shared the private place of making art. And they could have. That's the most disturbing thing. Why hadn't she discovered her daughter's talent years ago? Why had the gift stayed locked inside Vicky until Lucille and her back-pounding came along? "Let me give it some thought."

"I know she'll have a great time painting in your studio with me making boom booms on her back."

"I don't know, Lucille. She never painted with me before, and I gave her every opportunity."

"Well, things are different, now. Vicky's an artist, too. It will be a chance for you to share a wonderful experience."

Ellen sighs, thinks of Vicky fired-up, sobbing, knocking over canvases. Tries to imagine her daughter quietly concentrating, as she paints, as Ellen paints beside her. 'Wonderful' is not the right word. *Worth it*, maybe, if things could be different. But what

if it doesn't work? She looks at the painting on her easel. No great loss if Vicky destroys it. But what about her own tenuous grasp on a routine that keeps her working, even if that work no longer measures up? "Maybe we should try it some time."

"How about next Tuesday?"

Ellen pauses. "Let me check my schedule and call you back."

When she hangs up, she flips through her sketchbook. One or two would make good textbook illustrations of the conch, decent road maps for invading snails, but none of them is real.

She glances at her calendar. There's nothing on it for Tuesday, and yet she hesitates, studying the drawing in her lap. Vicky lacks the intellect to draw this way. She creates from something unharnessed, something as destructive as it is creative. Ellen remembers when the house shook with Vicky's speechless power, the broken dishes, the paintings torn through the center, Vicky weeping, wielding a palette knife, a baseball bat, a pot. A purely physical being, Ellen came to believe, unreasoning, frightening, magnificent. The open conflict between them had shown up on Ellen's canvases in layers of fierce strokes, even a few de Kooning-style lunatic ladies, raving through the paint. Had this Lucille character, this back-boomer, tamed the tornado of anger inside Vicky, turning it into energetic brush strokes that Ellen *herself* can understand, by pounding on her daughter's back? *Boom-booms*? She runs her finger through the empty tape line, then moves to call Lucille back.

At the heavy tread of her daughter's footstep on the stair, she steps away from the side-by-side easels to open the door. She opens her arms with a smile that engages old muscles and feels awkward on her face, but her daughter doesn't stop to greet her. Vicky, large, ungainly, dressed in a pair of astonishing lime pants, charges past with an old energy Ellen understands. And loves. It's something they shared—Vicky present, Ellen painting, something she's almost forgotten in herself, in the anxiety that has led to this moment.

Lucille Golding follows Vicky into the room, wearing a boxy wool overcoat, stockings, pumps, a bulging pink rectangle strapped over one shoulder. A diaper bag? Could it be a *diaper bag*?

"What a nice place to work." She ducks her press of curls—not a wig because Ellen sees white roots—beneath the electrical wires that dangle where Ellen has removed portions of the ceiling to achieve the easel height she needs. Lucille eyes the chipped plaster and broken paneling where Ellen has torn down walls.

Vicky throws off her parka and gallops around the space, a band of newly acquired belly protruding beneath her "I Love New York" sweatshirt. Her attention fixes on everything she sees, but only for an instant. Lucille follows in her trail, unbuttoning her own coat, admiring the canvases that cover the walls. "Your paintings are wonderful," she says. "I don't understand them, but they're very nice. Very colorful."

"Thanks. Nothing to understand, really. You either like them or you don't."

"Oh, I do like them! You're quite well-known, aren't you?"

"Not really. I've had a few awards and shows here and in New York. Nothing lately."

"Well, aren't you proud of your daughter? She's had three shows, and she's only been painting a year."

In schools and churches, Ellen thinks, fund raisers, exploiting the clients'... what? Talent? A series of greeting cards has been produced. Ellen hasn't had a show in two years. "Yes, I am."

"Like mother, like daughter." Lucille removes her coat, pulls out a red smock and puts it on over her yellow suit.

Ellen watches Vicky raise a long feather from the worktable and slide it alongside her nose then over her hair, which has been pulled back from her face with a red scrunchy. Her touch is gentle, contained. Not the Vicky Ellen remembers. Even the way someone has tied her hair back is different.

"I'm not a real artist, you know," Lucille says, taking a box of watercolors out of her bag and setting them on the table between the two easels. "In fact, I've never taken an art class in my life. Maybe you could give me lessons."

"It might put out the magic."

Lucille's eyes widen. "You *do* understand! I call it magic, too."

Ellen is distinctly uncomfortable that she's said something this woman agrees with, clings to, in fact, as evidence of the aesthetic sensibility they share. "There's a pure primitivism at work here," Ellen adds, "through which simplicity is revealed." Ellen hears the arrogance in her voice and wonders why she needs to do this.

Lucille nods her head, but her smile is less than certain now. "Yes. They paint through me, through the power of my touch, but it's their vision. I could do the same thing to each one of them, and every painting would be different. Vicky's are little miracles. When she insists that Mommy did them, it just makes me cry."

"Mommy did do them for twenty-one years, right here in this room while she watched."

Lucille leans forward. "Then what happened?" Her smile seems earnest, sympathetic, pitying.

There is no reason for Ellen to feel guilty, but she does. "I always wanted her to be independent. She seems much happier in the group home."

"Oh, she *is*, she is. Of course, I never knew her before, but she's definitely a delight."

Not the word Ellen would choose. She glances over at Vicky who is caressing the Kilim hanging from the bedroom doorframe. All this talk could set her off. Anything can set her off.

Vicky grins. "Pain-ting," she says.

"It's a rug, Vicky," Ellen says, then immediately regrets the correction.

"But it has beautiful colors like a painting," Lucille adds. She turns back toward Ellen, her eyes offering something Ellen thinks she doesn't want. "You must miss her sometimes."

"Of course."

Lucille's chin tilts and her large chest thrusts forward, and Ellen senses she's about to be embraced. None of the women in Ellen's family had chests like that. She moves

quickly to the sink and fills a jar with water for Vicky and Lucille. "I could never get her to do art." She sets the jar on the table beside the watercolors. "She only watched."

"They take to it naturally. I give them lots of love and praise. What good is it if nobody tells you you're wonderful?"

Ellen smiles. "Art is its own reason, its own good."

"Of course. You're absolutely right. 'Art for art's sake,' I always say when Herbert grumbles about watching something on public television." A smile engages every wrinkle on her face as she looks toward her student. "But the touches on the back are the thing. Vicky loves her boom booms, don't you, Vicky?"

Vicky stops, balls her hands into fists and laughs. "Boom boom," she cries.

"Oh, I see you have everything we need. Lots of brushes and paint, and look, Vicky, two easels! One for you and one for Mommy!"

Ellen moves to the window to take her daughter's hand. "We're going to paint together," she says, leading her to the easel.

"Mom-my paint," says Vicky.

"Vicky paint," says Ellen.

Vicky laughs and runs her hands over the watercolor paper that Ellen has tacked to a piece of plywood. "Paint," she says and claps her hands.

Lucille pulls another red smock from her bag. "Let's put this on first."

Ellen ties an apron around her long, paint-splattered denim skirt and faces her own blank canvas. As Vicky and Lucille position themselves beside her, she runs her hands over the canvas, just as Vicky does. She watches as Lucille dips a thick brush into the jar, then into the blue in the watercolor box. As soon as Lucille hands it to Vicky, Vicky lunges at the canvas, and a smudge of color appears.

"Wait for me, dear," Lucille says. "Wait for my hands on your back." Lucille begins with her palm, standing on tiptoe to make swift rotations near her student's left shoulder. Vicky paints quick energetic circles of blue in the left corner of the paper. "Beautiful, Vicky!" Lucille says. "You're making beautiful balloons."

"Bal-loon!"

The teacher leans against Vicky, resting her head against Vicky's broad back. "Isn't she wonderful?"

Vicky laughs and rocks forward. "Bal-loon! Paint bal-loon!"

Ellen swallows and picks up a brush, dipping it in the cobalt blue on her palette.

"See, Vicky, Mommy is going to paint with blue, just like you. She likes your balloons," Lucille says.

"They're wonderful balloons, Vicky." Not balloons, really, but wonderful, yes. There's power in each stroke. Ellen hits the canvas with her brush, laying on the paint in the upper left hand corner, just as Vicky has done, concentrating on the roundness of the form. She isn't making balloons, but then, as she glances at her daughter's canvas, neither is Vicky.

"Boom boom!" Vicky cries, and thick, quick dashes of color appear.

"We love our boom-booms," Lucille says, pounding up her student's spine.

Suddenly, it's as if Ellen can feel the rhythm on her back. Something unravels like a ball of twine, and her painting arm feels loose and free. She can't help smiling. As Lucille

changes the brushes in Vicky's hand, Ellen changes her own, following the colors and shapes. After a while she stops looking at her daughter's work, so engrossed in how her own painting is progressing, from the outside in and then out again, like meditation. She tries, like Vicky, not to notice how the colors struggle for attention. But slowly, inevitably, she begins to make choices, concentrating on the emerging shapes. Still, there is excitement, and she touches the bare spots, sensing where to go. She isn't seeing it yet so much as feeling it, and feeling the sheer physical pleasure of painting it, and, yes, thinking it, too.

"Beautiful, Vicky! You made a beautiful painting. Look, Mommy. Isn't it wonderful?" Lucille steps away.

Ellen drops her brush in the jar and stares at her daughter's work, admiring the bold dabs, like magnified pointillist marks, but primitive. "It's a real painting, Vicky," she says, placing her hands on her daughter's shoulders, "and you made it."

Vicky leans back against her mother's chest. "Mom-my," she says.

It has been a long time since Ellen has been this close to Vicky. "Thank you," she mouths to Lucille.

Lucille stands with her arms folded across her chest, beaming. "This is Mommy's painting," Lucille says, "and this is Vicky's."

Vicky steps away from Ellen and runs her hands over her own painting. "Vicky paint."

"Your painting needs to dry," Lucille says. "Just like Mommy's." Lucille removes Vicky's hands.

Don't touch her hands, Ellen thinks, but it's already too late. Wrenching herself from Lucille's grasp, Vicky rushes to the drafting table and crawls beneath it.

Ellen feels a quick moment of panic. Something fierce and familiar approaches. There's nothing she can do to avert it, so she will do nothing. Turning from the sight of the hunched form filling the space beneath her table, she steps back to view both paintings. Hers is unfinished, but she knows it's going somewhere. The pulse of a smile beats between her lips. She likes it.

When she turns around, Vicky has emerged from the table on all fours and is staring at her. Ellen knows the look, has learned when to leave her daughter alone, so she busies herself collecting the brushes, then takes them to the sink. Dread booms in her chest.

Behind her, she hears Lucille say, "You and Mommy make beautiful paintings together. We'll come again next week," and an old fear twists through her belly just before Vicky screams and she hears the sound of canvas ripping. Ellen turns in time to jump out of the way, as Vicky rushes toward her, holding the palette knife, her face a red flag, quivering and wet in the sudden heat between them.

"Vicky! What did you do to Mommy's painting?" Lucille cries, as she grabs the arm with the knife and pulls Vicky against her great chest.

Ellen steps away from them, her back against the sink, then turns and throws the brushes in, running the water hard so she cannot hear the sound of Vicky weeping. That's what you do. That's what you have to do.

But when she shuts off the water and turns to face them, Vicky is no longer crying. Her head is bent low, her eyes are closed, and her body rounds into Lucille's. Ellen looks at the Kilim, the drafting table, the ruined painting, anywhere but at them.

"It's my fault," Lucille says over Vicky's head. "I'm so, so sorry. I had no idea this would happen. Your poor little painting."

"The canvas doesn't matter." And it doesn't. Ellen is slow untying her apron. Without Vicky here, she would have ruined it herself, painting it over until the impulse was gone, like all the others, until all that was left was a trail of ideas. She moves toward them. Her hand in the air is ribbed with color. But it's not just this hunger in the fingers that matters to her now. She strokes her daughter's cheek and wonders how much longer she will starve herself. "Boom," she whispers.