

# The Apartment Upstairs

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## The Apartment Upstairs

*Josie Fieger*

Sunday, August 12, 2018

8:57 A.M.

I walk up to a townhouse in Over the Rhine on the east side of downtown Cincinnati, OH. The exterior is modest with weathered red brick and ivy that cascades down and across the upper half of the building. I veer to the right side of the house and squeeze the rusty gate handle to unlock the black, iron gate fence that spans its entire width. As I stand on the doorstep, a bush brushes my arm as I reach for the doorbell. The doorbell is tucked between the cream-colored door frame and a plaque that reads “Law Office 1411 Sycamore Street.” I know to ring at least three times in order to be heard. My uncle, the owner and lawyer of the building, opens the door, and our interaction goes as follows,

“Good morning.”

“Good morning. How are you?” I respond.

“Fine.”

Much like our small talk, the interior of the ground floor is formal and concise—nothing extravagant or excessive. A townhouse located in a notoriously dangerous part of the city may not be the traditional law office setting but inside seemed terrifyingly ordinary. The walls are an off-white color, and a furniture set of brown leather chairs and couches are scattered in his office, conference room, and waiting area. It is so quiet that the hum of the refrigerator from the back can be heard standing in the foyer.

In a room off the main hallway, there is a door in the far left corner. It stands quietly by itself among the deafening stacks of brown cardboard boxes, overflowing with case reports, timesheets, and contracts. Opening the door, a gush of cold wind sends a shiver down my body before I proceed through the doorway. A narrow flight of stairs invites me to the apartment upstairs. White lights wrap around the railing and illuminate the otherwise dim staircase. The walls are crammed with paintings of all different sizes, shapes, and scenes. Some are large landscapes from the mountains of Italy with grand, golden frames while others are small 4x4 squares that feature abstract shapes and fabrics. A majority are religiously based, depicting different types of iconography and portraits. One foot after the other, I climb

the wooden steps that creak with the slightest amount of pressure. This particular staircase is unique as it acts as a gateway to another world. Each step takes me closer and closer to a place widely outside of my comfort zone: a place I have little experience and almost no expertise.

9:02 A.M.

I plant both feet on the top platform and turn left into a repurposed kitchen that has a sink with a small counter on one wall. The other wall has a large table that holds supplies and current projects. My aunt is usually hunched over a painting or frame, detailing the piece, when I walk in. Her face lights up, and she greets me with a soft smile. Almost immediately, she begins her spiel on the work for the day, weaving through different rooms to point to projects that need to be completed. I struggle to keep up with her as I contort my body through hallways and doorframes, trying to avoid knocking over the stacks of paintings. They are hung on every inch of the wall, and then the overflow is pushed up against walls, leaning against each other like folders in a filing cabinet. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of art are packed into a one person apartment, symbolizing the years she has spent dedicated to her craft. To the untrained eye, it appears that art thieves have just completed their tenth heist, hiding their treasures in the most inconspicuous place: plain sight.

My aunt affectionately gave me the title of “apprentice” to anyone that asked what my summer job entailed. At first, I laughed when I heard her tell others this. I’ve never been an artistic person or even artistically inclined. My specialties reside in subjects with definite answers and physical evidence that leave little up for interpretation like math and science. I took the job for the sake of earning some easy money before heading off to college. I didn’t have any interest in learning about the fundamentals of art, much less the extensive process of creating a painting. Even as I became more comfortable at my job, I still did not see myself as an artist in training. I would have classified myself as a glorified handyman at most. I was usually framing paintings, stapling the canvases into the frames and then fitting them with wire. Occasionally, I would strip the original paint of an old frame with sandpaper and then stain it with a new color. I felt like I was cheating her of her money being assigned to such menial tasks. I’d spent hours just sorting beads based on color, shape, and size. My eyes would be so dry and bloodshot by the end of a shift that blinking felt like when I’d scrape my knees on concrete as a kid.

*Do you really need this money?*

I’d ask myself over and over. Then, I was invited into “the room.”

9:46 A.M.

The sun peeked through the unfinished wooden shutters with its blinds sporadically turned up and down. Even through the thick layer of ivy that covered the outside of the building, the sun warmed the front room and clothed it in welcoming hues of gold and orange. An underlying scent of drying paint, wood stains, and spray paints lingered in the air, partially masked behind an antique smell. Looking around the front room, there were shelves filled with oil paints, primers, varnishes, paintbrushes of every size, Q-tips, and paint splattered rags. A flat table served as a desk, adorned with sketches, post-it note reminders, and inspirational quotes. A large easel dominated the middle of the wall with an even larger white canvas balanced between its arms. The sight of the stark white canvas was lifeless, unmotivating, and frankly ugly.

I watched her draw lines—straight, curved, parallel, perpendicular, and diagonal—with an old pencil that had Santa Claus and gingerbread men printed on it. I felt like I was watching an architect lay out the blueprints to a new building. The hundreds of lines of graphite effortlessly floated onto the canvas and connected to each other like magnets. While she sketched, I was assigned to cleaning her palette. Unlike the cartoon pictures of oval-shaped palettes with a hole at the bottom for a thumb, her palette was the size of a small table on wheels. It lacked all order, resembling a mutiny of the color wheel that resulted in layers of dried oil paint. As I scraped chunks of what looked like Fruity Pebbles off the palette, she explained her “artistic process,” comparing it to writing an essay. She said the hardest part was always starting—picking up the pencil and filling the white abyss. Since painting and writing are dynamic works, they are subject to any amount of change, including the dreaded “do-over.” I figured that by having more than thirty years of experience, she would be able to paint anything with her eyes closed, using her non-dominant hand. She reminded me that the only easy paintings were the ones that came in a pre-packaged box that had “Paint by Numbers” on the outside.

10:13 A.M.

Working alongside my aunt as she painted, I found myself in a losing game of Twister every time. I had to crouch under or reach over her as I painted base layer for fields and the outline of trees. I quickly learned how invading someone’s personal space forces an intimate relationship without ever asking permission. We quickly became each other’s closest confidants, giving unbiased advice and mutual support. For most of my life, I saw my aunt in the way most people did—extremely talented, beautiful, and posh. I knew little of her early life in which eating disorders consumed her early twenties, and I would have never imagined the severity of her financial

struggles during the beginning of her career. These types of topics were classified as “family secrets” and were barely audible whispers if they were even talked about at all.

I asked her how she was able to land big commissions with companies and universities especially in a male-dominated art world. She claims it is about being disciplined, which means working seven days a week in order to stay self-sufficient. She is constantly adding to old paintings, giving them a modern, breath of life. Her daily routine consisted of standing under blazing studio lights from sun up to sun down, gripping a paintbrush with white knuckles. Her eyes were trained to continually scan the entire painting while her hand was restricted to making centimeter wide strokes. I would find myself becoming light-headed with beads of sweat seeping from my hairline after a few minutes. I would become nauseous to the point that thick, black dots appeared in the corner of my eyes, robbing me of my vision. My body wasn't used to standing in such rigid and unnatural positions. Meanwhile, my aunt calmly stood next to me dotting the canvas with pink, yellow, and white to create the flower petals on a Dogwood tree in bloom.

11:42 A.M.

Before my eyes, abstract strokes of green, red, and brown became trees, buildings, and roads. The entire painting became clearer, sharper, and more vivid as if I put on a pair of new prescription glasses. I could count the bricks on each of the buildings in the small centralized town and see apples growing on trees on the outskirts of the painting in farmland. A kid was hunched over a stream that ran behind his large colonial style house, in which black shutters made the white paneling glow in the sunlight. The painting was a movie; it developed over time as characters and scenes were introduced. It contained its rising conflicts in trying to incorporate so many elements. Ultimately, it reached a climax, accurately depicting a small town located in the countryside. A rich brown frame with beaded embellishments symbolized the final scene of this particular movie. The frame cemented the scene in time, turning the movie into only a picture. Wrapping the painting to be shipped was like watching the credits roll at the end of a movie; we didn't pay attention and began to think about the rest of the day.

12:00 P.M.

Room by room the lights were switched off as we ended the morning. A small bell sat in the corner of her desk that I ceremonially tapped to signal the end of each productive work day. This particular Sunday would be my last day in the studio—my last Sunday of summer. I stood in front of the bare easel and took a long breath in. I closed my eyes and exhaled, knowing that I was leaving with far more knowledge, experience, and appreciation for art than I ever wanted. Now, I find myself missing the

therapeutic nature of painting and having my stress slip away as I mixed Phthalo blue with Auburn brown paint on an old salsa lid. As we descended the stairs, entering into reality again, I asked my final question, “How do you know when a painting is truly finished?”

“That’s easy. Whenever it’s due.”