

## Family Portraits

When I first moved into an old, wooden farmhouse tacked to the urban heart of a city, my father gave me a gift of four paintings.

Country roads dip and curve through two of them, empty roads hugged by simple, modest houses: a sloping roof, a chimney, sometimes a porch. An unhurried, Sunday morning calm blankets both works.

Autumn leaves shimmer in the cove of another country scene, summer greens rusting into yellows and browns. One tree, bare and alone, seems to be caught in a struggle, its leafless branches snagged in the clouds.

Sunlight bathes a street crammed with houses in the painting that hangs in my bedroom. A soft, blue sky cushions rooftops tethered to electric poles. Alone on a street corner, a young boy in shorts plays with a ball.

Some days I can hear it bounce.

All four paintings do that: they ignore the boundaries of their frames and sometimes forget that they are paintings. So every now and then a ball bounces in my bedroom, or a country road dusts my feet. But then, I cannot separate the art from the artist. Only one painting is signed, but each is a reflection of my father's uncle.

As my father's uncle lay in a hospital bed, his hands sometimes moved in delirious swirls. Fingers held a paintbrush that wasn't there, stroking air. After decades dedicated to the craft, painting had become second nature, an involuntary reflex. He died before I was old enough to sit by his side and watch him work with what I picture as the tools of the trade: a simple stool, a wooden easel, a palette, brushes gathered like reeds in a water-filled glass. All I have to work with are second-hand fragments, a collage of conversations with my father.

Joe was a commercial painter in the days when each billboard was a canvas. I see him, a man with a paintbrush, standing on a scaffold, dwarfed by a blank wall. In his spare time he painted rural scenes, still lifes, portraits.

Five paintings colour my parents' living room wall, displayed with a curator's touch and a relative's pride. Two portraits hang on opposite sides of their bedroom: my grandfather as a young man faces my father in his adolescence.

Head tilted to one side, his hands folded over crossed legs, my father has the self-assured look and posture of a young scholar. His hair is dark and unfamiliar. Thoughtful eyes fill gold-rimmed glasses, in this portrait of an artist as a very young man.

Like his uncle, my father is an artist. Not an artist in the tradition of a cocked beret and a speckled smock, or the bitter, misunderstood genius who toils anonymously in the dank air of a forgotten loft. In his baggy jeans and mussed hair, my father looks like someone who would be more comfortable feeding pigeons from a park bench than sculpting

marble in a studio. But he sculpts, not as a way to make a living but as a way of defining his life. With chisel in hand, his fingers transform inanimate stone into moveable feasts. Stone chips fall to the floor; cold slabs are smoothed and sanded. Released from its hard shell, the beauty of the stone stands revealed.

All of his work is abstract, almost organic. There are no granite nymphs robed in loose cloaks, no headless torsos ridged with veins. He has never done a bust of a local hero, and I can't imagine he ever will. He favours a sweeping curve to the cleft in a stone chin. Each of his sculptures is a paradox. How can something so static have such movement? How does a heavy stone become so fluid? One soars. One rolls. One ripples endlessly. When I look at his carvings words spring to mind. Sensuous. Flight. Sensuous flight. Warmth. Growth.

One of my favourite pieces is on a wooden pedestal in front of my parent's cottage, in a patch of Quebec countryside similar to the rural scenes recorded in Joe's paintings. Abstract work defies concrete descriptions. Yes, it is white and so many feet high. But details are irrelevant; they crumble beneath the weight of impressions. Sometimes, swimming in the lake below, I look up and see it, perched amidst the green trees. I can't explain how or why it soothes me. I only know that it does.

A few summers ago, my father and I spent two weeks together, up at the cottage. He carved; I wrote. We laboured slowly, at opposite ends of the house. My father in his cluttered studio, sculpting. I sat at a makeshift desk in a small bedroom, writing. One day he walked in and simply caressed my head. In the touch of his fingers I felt an assurance, a sign that what I was doing was legitimate, that fiction is worthwhile and important. His wordless benediction is always there, just above my head, never out of reach.

We have our disagreements.

I see a blue canvas and a yellow stripe. That's the problem. All I see is a blue canvas and a yellow stripe. He sees much more. He sees a hundred shades of blue, vivid colours blended into a statement. Modern art, he explains, is a language like any other, with its own codes and symbols and meanings. And like any language, it must be learned if it is to be understood. And so the yellow stripe is there for a reason. And though it's true that it looks like it would take all of fifteen minutes to make — after all, it's only a blue canvas with a yellow stripe — he sees things differently.

But then, this is a man who once spent a summer melting candles. He began with one candle, one candle dripping onto a bottle. One candle became two, two became three. Soon my father was melting candle upon candle upon candle, beautiful rivers of coloured wax flowing, ebbing, hardening in midstream.

Colours drip off a Jasper Johns print that I bought him after a trip abroad. Johns is a modern artist. I look up his name in a book I have borrowed from my father, *The Meanings of Modern Art*. I'm trying to understand why he has put that broom there.

All this language can be confusing. The language of modern art and melted wax. The language of abstract sculptures. The language of fathers and sons.

If I could, I would sit down and talk and ask and listen, so that all the untold stories would begin to be told. I know precious little about the man who has given me so much. I want to sit and talk, but instead I retreat to the comfort of the written word. The truth is, I would rather write dialogue than live it. As for my father, his sculptures are beautifully crafted synonyms for the unexpressed, the unspoken. We speak the speech of a Norman Rockwell painting, where barbershop-talk thrives but intimacy withers, framed by boundaries we dare not transcend. Emotions sit in our mouths like stones.

I stare at a blue canvas with a yellow stripe and wonder where to begin.

Most days I work at home, in a sagging room with warped floors and walls papered with books. Books have always been a part of my landscape. As a child, I joined my brother and sister in regular hunts for a needed book buried amongst the hundreds that lined the small apartment we lived in. My father offered a ten-cent bounty. Necks bent, we scanned the shelves with anxious eyes. Some books, I remember, were labelled. Taped to their spines were letters and numbers that had yellowed with age. We lived in a house where books were valued to the point where they were classified. I was very impressed, and happy to live in a home with its own library.

But then, ours was a different house. Other fathers might have enthralled their children with local sports lore. Watching Jackie Robinson play for the Montreal Royals at Delormier Stadium before he cracked the colour barrier and broke into the major leagues. Or recalling the riots of 1955, when Maurice "Rocket" Richard was suspended in a city where hockey is a religion.

No, my father was in the crowd at another event. He was in the audience for the original New York production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. A slack face blooms with memory as he recalls the opening magical flute music, Lee J. Cobb's monumental performance, the power of a script that moved an audience to tears.

As an English major at university I spent hours building theatre sets, working backstage in some shows, performing in others, staging a one-act Bertolt Brecht piece for a directing class. I wrote an essay on political theatre during the Depression, citing plays, performers and playwrights that are part of my father's vocabulary.

Amidst all the notes and lectures I supposedly absorbed at university, one conversation lingers. One day, in a class on stagecraft, I spoke at length with my teacher about my father's love for theatre, his passion for the arts. I can't remember how long we talked beneath the proscenium arch before he looked at me and said, "You are your father's son."

And my father is his uncle's nephew, imbued with a spirit of art for art's sake, of cherishing the creative and supporting it in his own ways.

One day I noticed an error in my bank account. When you're struggling to write fulltime, it's easy to notice a mistake, and tempting not to point it out. But I had been taught that honesty makes for a cleaner life, not to mention clean prose. After looking into the matter,

bank officials assured me that no error had been made. It was no mistake; my father knew exactly what he was doing.

The phone rings. My father is on the line. Did I know that author Neil Bissoondath was reading in two weeks? I did, but I thank him for calling and letting me know.

The other day he stopped by with a fresh copy of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, a treat for someone accustomed to a diet of second-hand books. Then there was the review of J.M. Coetzee's latest novel, which he knew I would want to read, to be added to the sheaf of articles and essays he clips and harvests.

And so it goes. Copies of John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* and *On Becoming a Novelist*. The addition he built on my desk for my keyboard, so that I could spend hour upon hour at my computer without straining my wrists.

Sometimes, I look into his face and see shades of Willy Loman. Not the defeated salesman who lived in a prison of self-delusion, not the man dreaming of an impossible future while his sore, salesman feet were forever mired in the past. I see the Willy Loman who loved his sons and dreamed the dream bequeathed to every successive generation: you shall reap that which I did not.

My father's story is a story that has been told many times before, in novels and plays, in poems and songs, and surely a few sculptures, too. It is a story that begins in eastern Europe, and a land soiled with the spoor of anti-Semitism. His parents arrived in Canada at the turn of the century, transplanting centuries of culture and traditions. After a merciless workweek in the windowless sweatshops of Montreal, Jewish immigrants found time for theatre and painting and music. Art was vital to community life, but no way to make a living.

Now retired, my father spent a good part of his working life in the garment industry, treading a long path strewn with strain and stress and then, finally, some financial security. I imagine he would have felt comfortable in a bookstore, an old bookstore where books are not commodities but treasures, a bookstore with a few worn chairs for the faithful customers who want to sit and browse through the latest work of a favourite author.

Or perhaps he would have lectured in a small-town university. Not too small, mind you. He needs his regular fix of the Sunday New York Times. I can see him pacing across a lecture room, his bifocals strung around his neck, entertaining a crowd of wide-eyed students with a sermon on why that print clipped to the blackboard is much, much more than a blue canvas with a yellow stripe.

I'm not sure what my father would have chosen to do, given the choice.

His sixty-ninth birthday has come and gone. I sent him a card. Never one for one neckties or aftershave, finding the right gift for my father has never been easy.

Still, he called to tell me how much he liked the card. This was not a generic birthday card for a father. This year I decided it was time to thank him for his support. As I shuffle through a package of blank cards I find one of two children building a sand castle. Modern art intimidates me; greeting cards I can handle. So I make up a very story for children that's suitable for adults. Just beyond the card, I write, out of sight, is a parent. The children call out and ask the father what he thinks of their moat. He tells them it's a beautiful moat. And the turrets? Terrific, he shouts.

I end with birthday wishes, and thank him for being there as I continue to build sand castles, long after others have been told to grow up and put their pails and shovels away.

Lately I've been having a dream, and simple dream that goes something like this:

My father, his uncle and I sit around my kitchen table. A pot of coffee simmers on the stove, the aroma drifting through the rooms of this old house. Fresh flowers, colourful flowers I could never name, bloom from a vase. Slices of honey cake fan across a plate, beside a sugar bowl and a small jug of thick cream.

We sit around the table, just the three of us: the uncle who died almost twenty-five years ago, his nephew, and his nephew's son.

My father's uncle, of course, does not recognize me. I was barely five when he died. He looks at me and asks what I do for a living. I'm about to explain but instead I take Joe's creased hand, speckled with paint. I silently lead him up the stairs, past his own paintings on the staircase wall, past the bedroom where one of my father's carvings sits, and into the room where I write.

He sees the books, the novels and short stories, the poems and plays. He looks at the Oxfam poster: *Literature is a candle lighted in the mind and left alight*. He peers at my computer, at the messages from friends I have taped to the monitor: *Keep writing. Get it down. Get your book written*.

Words, I want to say. I work with words. But he stops me before I can speak and smiles a broad smile. He knows. He knows I do what I do partly because I am my father's son. There's no need to explain. It's written on his face.

Emil Sher  
***Finalist, CBC Literary Competition***  
***Published in Prairie Fire in a special issue on Jewish Canadian Writing,***  
**August, 1996**