Portrait of an American Artist (Growing Older)

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Aubrey Konefsky looked around the restaurant amazed at the amount of glass, the lack of color. It was a new restaurant in an exceptionally clean corner of Southwest Milwaukee. Mrs. Cramer sat with her hands folded on the table and a cloth napkin still snug in her lap. She started to drum her nautical red fingernails on the white linen tablecloth, drawing Aubrey’s sight back to the table — and to her. Aubrey figured her to be in her late fifties and thought she still struck a striking pose, not even handsome yet, still beautiful. He sized her up for a nude, her breasts full and her body slender, and thought of offering her twenty-five bucks for posing. And then thought better of it.

“I thought you wanted an original Konefsky,” Aubrey said.

“Oh, I do, I do,” Mrs. Cramer blurted, “I just want it to be my original Konefsky! You do understand, don’t you?”

“Of course, of course, I understand.”

“I don’t understand,” he told his brother Darvin later as he sat in the middle of his studio staring at a blank canvas and a palette he was really beginning to think had too few colors on it. He started a thick blue border on the canvas.

Aubrey Konefsky’s studio is not really a studio at all, rather a somewhat large, very cheap, apartment in one of the less popular sections of Milwaukee. Rent is only one hundred a month and utilities are included, so Aubrey finds it easy to ignore the spray-painted vandalism on the building’s side and the constant threat from the Laotians across the alley — “As many of them in that building as there are people in a whole town of Iowa,” Darvin would say. Of course he couldn’t possibly meet clients like Mrs. Cramer there so he’d arrange to meet them at their place, or a restaurant, or anyplace else. But then, until recently, clients had never been that much of a worry.

The story of Aubrey’s sudden popularity revolves around a painting he did after a suggestion he received from Darvin one night as the two were out drinking at most of the bars along Greenfield Avenue. Aubrey was primarily sketching and painting nudes and amassing quite a collection that he sold, intermittently, for modest fees at some smaller local galleries. Darvin told him that he should get really ripped, chug a bottle of Daniel’s or something, take a selection of his five favorite paint tubes, liberally apply the paint to one large canvas and finger-paint till it looked nice. Aubrey did this that night while Darvin looked on and told him to stop when it looked “the nicest.” Darvin took the painting to a friend’s shop and convinced him to let it hang there for the hell of it, just to see what would happen.
What happened was some wealthy woman from Shorewood chanced upon it, bought it, showed it to all of her friends and then everyone just had to have a Konefsky. It's all Aubrey can do to keep up with it. Of course to them a Konefsky is a bunch of colors puked out of a tube and smeared about a bit — but the money's good.

Darvin had a real talent for knowing where the money was. When he was younger it seemed to gravitate toward him like he was the god of all dollar bills. They flocked to his hands to be cleansed, to find salvation. To be redeemed. And he'd put them all together and count them, each one, in front of everyone, flaunting, always flaunting the money that just appeared.

Maybe it wasn't that religious. Of course he had to work for the money, but no one was real clear what he did, exactly, to get it. There was a paper route, but there must've been more. Aubrey remembered a stack of four hundred dollar bills at one time and wondered where it came from. Inquiring only led to a weird sixteen-year-old omniscient laugh. After that he always assumed drugs but Darvin never got in any trouble with the police. At least he never brought it home. Darvin was a model son. And rich.

Money clearly led him to his ex-wife. They met on the shores of Lake Michigan, she from some Catholic school in the neighborhood and he raising money. He must've smelled it, above the yeasty odor of downtown and the smell of dead fish from the lake — he must've smelled the money seething from her like the scent of musk from sex. And he fell in love and they married and her father, an eminent man in one of Milwaukee's beer families, put them up in Shorewood and Darvin seemed finally, and utterly, set.

Aubrey admitted, now, that he wondered then what he might be able to accomplish with all that money — a certain yearning for the insidious.

"I'm thinking about opening a bank account, maybe. What do you think?" Aubrey asked, finishing the blue border.

"Why not?" Darvin said.

It was just a year ago that Aubrey quit everything and tried to make a go of it as an artist — full-time. Everyone thought he was so crazy, going it alone like that with no job. Everyone but Darvin, that is, who seemed to admire him for it. But that was before everything went blotto for him — Darvin.

The day Darvin came to see Aubrey's new apartment in the practically war-torn part of Milwaukee he showed a genuine interest in Aubrey's paintings, which were doing little more than holding up the yellowed white walls and certainly not bringing in any income. He walked around and looked at things, commented on the apartment or a painting here and there and just generally gave his overall approval. Aubrey later confided that that really meant a lot more than he might have let on and thanked Darvin. Darvin seemed wrapped up in something else at the time, though. There was one painting, an old nude from a couple of years before, a woman kind of hovering over a bombed-out church, that Darvin was staring at when he said, "Wouldn't it be great if there was no gravity?"
"No gravity? Well, that'd be different," was all Aubrey could muster at the time; he didn't recognize it as a sign of things to come.

But things came. Darvin had been married seven years when he all of a sudden left his job at the brewery and started jumping off buildings. At first they were relatively low buildings, ranch homes and things like that, and then the bluffs at Lake Michigan. Usually he went to the bluffs at Sheridan Park, the ones the kids jump in several steps but that he jumped all at once, a hundred feet into the sand below. No one knew what he was up to, but he flapped his arms like a lunatic while in the air so everyone figured he was trying to fly. He was becoming quite the figure in Milwaukee. Photographers from the Sentinel and the Journal followed him periodically to see if they could catch him in action. And quite often they did. Splashed on the front pages of the papers a couple of times a month was Darvin — flapping Darvin — falling from high places. And it kept getting worse.

Now, several months later, Darvin has managed through a lot of transformations and is still making more than enough money to support his at times incredible drinking habit by mooching off his brother. It wasn't really mooching, though; neither brother considered it that. It was genuine consulting. From the first whiskey-induced fantasy/nightmare to this more planned yet still ridiculous blob that would earn $3,500, Darvin was right over Aubrey's shoulder, his only job being to say "when." To say "uncle" for the canvas, to stop the presses, to, as it were, prepare the work for signature. "Stop." For that one word he earned a twenty-five percent commission. And the company was good.

"I've been thinking, you know, all this money sitting around here can't be good." Aubrey continued, "Especially with the lunatics across the alley."

"World War Three is going to start right over there," Darvin said. "I swear, those little fuckers are stocking up. Probably have a bomb."

"A car blew up down on 27th the other day," Aubrey said.

"Yeah, maybe a warm-up. Some pre-nuke deal."

"I don't think it's that serious."

"Look at your building."

"It's not that bad."

"It's just the start."

"You know," Aubrey said, relaxing and putting down his brush, "I've never actually seen them."

"And?"

Aubrey didn't answer right away but stared at the large yellow triangle he had painted in the upper left corner of the canvas, an inch away from the thick blue border.

"And nothing," he finally said, softly. "Just that I've never seen them. Such a threat, you'd think I'd have seen them by now."

"They're like cockroaches," Darvin spurted, "or rats. Scum."
The Laotians, as Darvin called them (although neither brother had any idea of
where they came from), moved in about six months ago. Like a swarm. No official
count has ever been taken, but there must be at least thirty or forty of them in
that house across the alley. And they're loud, playing a music neither brother ever
heard before and just generally making peculiar noises at all hours of the day
and night. And they did spray-paint the side of Aubrey's building, a nice white
side now glaring with four-foot red letters: "Rude------." Aubrey always agreed
with that, but felt there must be more to it. A name perhaps. Perhaps not. In
any case, the Laotians were not the best neighbors to have.

Aubrey felt Darvin watching as he started on a thick red slash that stretched
from the upper right to the lower left of the canvas, thickening at the base.

"Gravity," Darvin muttered.

"No comments," Aubrey countered almost immediately.

Darvin walked into the darker, windowless, west side of the apartment. He grab­
bed two beers from the small, square refrigerator and, heading back into the larger,
est room, dropped one by Aubrey's feet.

"I think I've been misread," Aubrey said.

"Misread? By who?" Darvin asked.

"By everyone, I suppose."

"It sounds like I'm included in there."

"Aren't you?" Darvin asked, still working on the red slash. Darvin went to
the big window looking out on 37th Street. He took a long drink from the can
of Papst. This particular section of 37th Street was as dismal as a street gets.
in Milwaukee. It wasn't very long, cut off on one end, five or six houses to
the north, by railroad tracks, and on the other, about the same distance, by a
factory. Across the street was just a mirror image of the houses on Aubrey's side:
lightly painted, yet still somehow bleak. Looking out from the second floor of
the tall duplex gave a sensation of being high up, a sensation intensified by the
steep, cliff-like front yard, adding another dozen feet between the brothers and
the street. It was six o'clock in the evening and the street was dead.

"It's not like this is serious, is it?" Darvin asked, not turning from the window.

"You know," Aubrey said, "I'm really starting to think this just isn't enough
color. I'm too restricted."

"Too restricted: You've spent the last — what? — six months earning more
than you have in your whole artistic career and now you feel too restricted?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, okay, but it works. The money's good."

"Good enough to make me want a bank account, to make me afraid of your
terrorists across the alley."

"Speaking of my terrorists across the alley, there's one now. And he's looking
up here, oh christ, he's looking up here!"

Darvin ducked quickly from the window. "Why the hell don't you have any
curtains in this place?"
"We don't have anything to hide."
"Jesus, that little fucker has a gun!"
"Be serious."
"What? I don't look serious? I don't sound convincing here? Huh? He has a goddamned gun, I'm telling you. And he was looking straight at me."
"What would he be doing with a gun out there at six-thirty? It's still light out."
"Hey, I don't know what he's doing with the gun. I just know he has it. You want me to go down and ask him what he's doing with the gun, Aubrey? You want me to do that?"
"No, no. Relax, will you?"
"Relax?" Darvin grabbed his brother by his T-shirt. "I'm going to make you look whether you want to or not." He pulled Aubrey to the window. "There, look, look, see, see?"
"I see 37th Street, now let go of me. You know better than to take me away from the canvas. Come on, I'm down to two colors and you're bothering me with your terrorist's guns?"
"Of course, of course," Darvin said, looking out the window, "he's not there now. But he was. He was!"
"I'll tell you something, little brother," Aubrey said later as he painted a sort of green V in the lower right corner of the canvas, "I do take this serious, okay?"
"Of course, so do I. Who wouldn't take a lunatic waving a gun in the front yard as serious?"
"No, I mean this," Aubrey said, tapping his painting with the handle of a brush.
"Oh," Darvin said, "You're serious."
"Yes."
"About this?" Darvin brushed against the canvas and tapped it with his beerless hand.
"Because of the money?"
"No, not because of the money."
"Then?"
"Because they let me say something, something different."
"In five or less colors, with no mixing?"
"That's not enough anymore."
"Yeah," Darvin said, slowly making his way back to the window, "You've all of a sudden got lots to say, huh?"
"Is your terrorist there again?"
"No," Darvin said, edging his way back in front of the window. "He's gone. Probably casing the place."
"Nobody cases on 37th Street."
"Yeah, I suppose you're right." Darvin stood in front of the window apparently comfortable again with the idea of such total exposure to the barren world of South 37th Street. "You know, I just thought it was for the money."
Aubrey finished the green V in silence. It was plump as though wet with life, fat in the center and tapered off at the tip, with a little inverted mini-V in its base. When he finished he put his brushes down, placed the palette by his feet, lit a cigarette, opened the beer Darvin had dropped by him earlier and leaned back in his chair, staring at his easel. After a few moments he said, "What would it take, Darvin, for you to take this serious?"

"I don't know," he said, not turning from the window, in fact moving closer to it as if he found a sort of shelter, a comfort in the clearness of the glass, the coolness of the glass. It started to rain. "It's raining."

"I don't care about the rain, Darvin." Aubrey tried to picture 37th Street as it must appear to his brother, bleak yet somehow inviting, like all things dangerous can be. His stomach queased with an uneasiness he could only compare to that when he is scared. The tragedy of really being misunderstood by all settled on him like a cat on top of a dirty furnace. In the dark.

The storm rolled in from the west with a typical June vigor and the dusky sky darkened as if into night, but it was still too early for night. The rain began to pound the roof. It would leak through the ceiling in three places within half an hour but neither brother moved for the buckets.

"I'm sorry," Darvin said, "I just never thought it was much more than for the money. I thought it was a joke, like the first one. Fun."

"Oh, it's fun, but it's not a joke. Not even the first one."

"But I meant it as a joke," Darvin countered, "I meant it as a joke, you see, that's the whole thing. When I said pound a bottle of Daniel's and fucking finger-paint for an hour I wasn't saying get in touch with your true feelings. I was saying fuck off. When I took it to Reid I didn't say, 'Here's AJ's real feelings, here's art, here's what it's all about, man, living on the wire for years, right here, man.' No. I said, 'Here, check it out, this bullshit will probably sell for ten times whatever he's sold before.' And Reid thought it was funny too, Aubrey. He thought it was funny!"

There really was no reason to believe that Darvin ever took any of these paintings seriously. Even from the beginning he clearly meant it as a joke; he was laughing when he dreamed up the dare and it was Aubrey who turned it into something serious, knowing Darvin's real intent, but willing to trying anything to get out of the rut he painted himself into week after week after week. And he never told Darvin how he felt while he slipped his fingers through the primordial juices of that first masterpiece. Never. Darvin stayed quiet throughout the whole experience, drunk, more drunk than Aubrey, leaning in a chair and watching. It was Aubrey who tried to create some supernatural link out of that silence, who stopped when Darvin, for some reason, yelled, "Stop." He stopped then and every time since. Unwilling to fully admit that there might not be some strange link between the two brothers during the silences of creation. Not even silences lately, they could be talking, sober, in the morning and Darvin would yell "Stop" and Aubrey
would stop. Another painting finished. But what did it all mean if Darvin took none of it seriously? If there was not even the possibility of something greater than life going on? Aubrey shuddered slightly as he looked up at his brother, who still looked out intently at the street, and, dabbing a brush in an umber bubble of paint, began to work on Mrs. Cramer’s painting — starting a dark moon above the green V.

“I thought,” Aubrey said, “I thought you and I were involved in something more . . .”

“Artistic?”

“Yes, artistic.”

“It’s not that I don’t like any of this, you know,” Darvin said, turning from the window.

“You just don’t understand it.”

“No, I just . . .”

“Thought you could control it — like gravity.”

“What is that suppose to mean?”

“And now you see you can’t.”

Darvin looked out the window again. “I don’t like what you’re saying here.”

Aubrey looked at his brother and lost him in the dark clouds of the resting storm. He realized now that there was never any telepathic-brother-to-brother-secret-bigger-than-life-system-of-communication during these sessions. There was nothing. Darvin looked dead he was so gray.

“You’re a leech,” Aubrey said, “a fucking leech.”

The thing of it was, he was a leech. Had there been some belief, any belief, on his part, some honest participation in the process, then everything would have been all right. But as it was, he just wanted the money.

Well, that made sense. He needed it as soon as his marriage fell apart. His wife and her family did not enjoy the publicity Darvin’s jumps were getting: “Darvin Konefsky, husband of Cheryl Sudz, of the Sudz Brewing family, jumped today from the roof of the Red Star building. Konefsky gave no reason for the jump — his sixth recorded jump in the last four weeks — but was reportedly flapping his arms vigorously upon descent.” The wonder of it was that he kept escaping serious injury. He broke a leg once, but that didn’t stop him. Maybe he was working on gravity. Maybe he was too loaded with whiskey to break anything. After seven months of jumping his wife divorced him and had no problems blipping it through the courts and leaving him as temporarily destitute as when they met. But he wasn’t worried; money, after all, simply gravitated his way.
Money, but not necessarily good fortune. His last — recorded — jump was off the First Wisconsin Bank building downtown, the tallest Milwaukee has to offer, some forty-four stories, and he jumped from the top, flapping like a madman. No one is quite sure how he survived; a burlesque bounce off a van, a garbage truck, and other things is suspected. But he did survive. A few broken bones, some internal damage to the softer stuff inside, but he lived. And he was promptly swept away by the County for a rest. Several months under observation mellowed him.

It wasn't so much the lack of whiskey, but the lack of money. He could feel it on the walls outside, one could imagine, trying to get at him. Money doesn't slip inside those places in any great quantity, though, and he had to wait until his release, at which time he wasted no time suggesting to Aubrey a new direction in which to take his art. A way to produce masterpieces that would knock Milwaukee's art critics off their realist asses and put money in the brothers’ pockets besides. Aubrey, being basically destitute, gave it a whirl. The rest . . .

Aubrey dabbed at the umber moon on the canvas. The music from across the alley stopped and for a brief moment there was the quiet of a nighttime city after a rain. Then there was loud screaming in some foreign tongue, and laughing and the sound of garbage cans flying about and more screaming and laughing and then, like a piercing, clear voice out of a storm, came the words, "Goddamned Lao-tians" belting their way back into Aubrey's apartment. Aubrey tried to hear the voice again. He knew it was Darvin but wanted more proof.

The umber moon was the fifth color but the painting seemed incomplete. The alley noise increased and the rain started pounding again; the ceiling leaks went from dripping to pouring and Aubrey got up and looked out on 37th Street. The rain was beating hard against the street, washing away the litter, dirt and dust from the factory and the trains, the bits of cigarettes and joints, washing away everything but the noise from the alley. The noise kept getting louder, increasing with the intensity of the rain, the laughing now maniacal and high-pitched. Darvin's voice never reappeared. Just the laughter. Aubrey went to the kitchen and pulled a tube of Doxazine Purple from behind the refrigerator. He had just bought it that afternoon at the Woolworth's on Greenfield Avenue. It was the length of his palm and full and cool. It had cost three dollars. He squeezed it a bit in his hand. It felt good. Slowly he removed the cap and let a dollop of the purple plop on his palm. He set the tube down. He felt exhausted. The rain was slowing; the noise was slowing. The purple paint rested on his palm like a large, soft wart, a cool, beautiful wart. He held it upside down; it clung to his palm. He smelled the paint and tried to think of something to compare it to, but couldn't. It smelled like purple paint. It even smelled different than any other color. It was purple.
It was a sixth color. He walked back to his easel and sat down. He put the tip of a brush into the paint and spread it slowly about his palm, enjoying the coolness, enjoying the brush against the skin, his own hand a canvas. The rain had stopped, only the dripping from the ceiling continued. And the dripping of the water on 37th Street, from the gutter to the sewer. The alley was silent. He took the brush and placed it near the green V, just beneath it, and slashed out a big K. The purple filled his eye and his mind. His heart beat faster. He felt every vessel in his tensed body twitch with each heartbeat, every nerve tingle, every sound of water pounding in his head. The purple K demanded action and he watched as his hand blew out the rest of his name like a bloody sneeze. KONEFSKY blazed across the lower right corner in three-inch letters. The brush fell to the floor just as the door pounded open and Aubrey jumped from his seat and stood, wide-eyed, staring at his brother.

"Stop," Darvin muttered as he slumped against the wall by the door, sliding down with a trail of blood and water and dirt, all blending into the wall like a bruise.

by David Konitzer