A Work of Life in Progress

Aaron Kelly*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©2014 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
The door was closed. Corrine sat in the hall outside her daughter’s bedroom, back against the wall, knees drawn up close to the soft wool of her sweater. She sunk her toes into the thick beige carpet, watching the tiny fibers spring slowly back to life as she lifted her pale digits away again.

“Emma, you need to look at this as a beginning. It’s not like you’ll never see him. You’ll visit each other, spend summers … he’ll always be your father.”

As it had been for the past hour, her daughter’s only reply was stubborn silence. Corrine could picture Emma inside the room, curled up on the bed, her red hair smoldering against a mass of cradled white duvet. For the thousandth time she questioned her decision. In two years Emma would be leaving for college. Perhaps it was selfish not to wait.

After a time the door to the breezeway shut with a familiar bang, and the clatter of keys on the kitchen table echoed throughout the quiet of the house, followed shortly by his footsteps upon the stairs.

“Oh—I didn’t expect you to be here,” he said, standing in his suit, a hand extended, supporting his weight on the oak banister. “Corrine, we need to talk. You can’t throw away everything we’ve built together, not like this.”

“We’ve built?” Corrine asked. What part of this life had he been responsible for? She was the one who nursed illnesses, prepared meals, helped with homework, sacrificed her dreams to carve a home from the money he provided and seemed to prize above everything else. When was the last time he’d played the bad guy, dealt with their daughter’s scorn when saying “no” was the only choice?

His face, his hair—receding and always a bit too long—marked him as the man she’d married. But everywhere it mattered that man was gone. It hadn’t always been this way. Once he’d colored their lives with his presence; but with each passing year, each birthday missed, each night spent apart, the fragile intricacy of their creation was fractured, irrevocably split open like a crack in pavement, allowing new life to take shape in the void between.

“Corrine, I work my ass off to provide you with this home, this life,” he said.

“Money buys houses, John—not homes. It’s over. You had your chance to mend this—to be a part of this family.”

Corrine looked away, angry with him for returning. Of course, he knew she and Emma would be there. “What are you doing here anyway?”

He moved closer. She could feel his proximity—like a disturbance in the surface of a lake, each step sent ripples through the silence in her direction.

“I don’t want you to go,” he said.

“Why aren’t you in Houston?” Corrine asked, adjusting her sweater in defense.

He looked tired—beaten down. She could tell from the way he removed his glasses, polishing them needlessly with his tie—the way he always did when he was stressed. Something reminiscent of sympathy flickered inside her, then sputtered, then died.

“I haven’t been able to concentrate,” he said. “I gave the case to Phillip. I think I’m going to take a leave of absence … I need some time to get my bearings.”

“Maybe that’s a good idea. You haven’t taken time off in a long while,” she said.
He released a breath, long, deep. “You’re going to stay here tonight, then?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Corrine,” he attempted, pleading, somehow shaping her name into a question, “what can I do?”

“I’m sorry, John. It’s too late.”

Later, after the sounds of the stairs and the keys and the breezeway door rang out in the opposite direction, Corrine got up from the floor.

“I’m going to make some tea and go to bed. We can continue this in the morning,” she said to the door. Part of her wanted to scream, to beat the barrier down and force her daughter to see. But she remained composed. None of this was Emma’s fault—she had every right to be upset.

“Goodnight,” Corrine said and turned to go down stairs.

In the kitchen she put the kettle to boil and stood over the sink, looking out onto the driveway that turned into the lane that lead to the highway, wondering if she’d miss any of it at all. She could see her dim reflection in the window, looking tired, the lines at the corners of her eyes always deeper at the end of the day. She barely recognized the woman staring back at her. What happened to the girl she used to see there, the one that wanted to travel, to paint? When they had first married, she’d still painted from time to time, but it was never inspired the way it once had been. She had always found her muse in dreams and thoughts of the future, and it had been some time since she’d known either.

“Hey,” Emma’s voice said from the door, startling her. Corrine smiled reflexively, but hid it away before turning from the sink.

“Want some tea?” Corrine said—a peace offering.

“Sure.”

Corrine went to the cupboard. “Oolong, Earl Grey, or Chamomile?”

Emma pulled a chair back and sat down at the table.

“Chamomile.”

Emma’s eyes were tear swollen and Corrine wished she could wrap her up, be her mother, but resisted—Emma was touchy and she didn’t want to lose ground.

“So, Dad knows.”

It wasn’t a question. She had, undoubtedly, overheard the two of them arguing in the hall outside her room.

“Yes, your father knows—he should have known a long time ago, but he’s busy and he has far too many distractions.” Corrine had made it a point not to portray Emma’s father in a negative light.

Emma nodded as Corrine handed her her favorite mug—the one with Miles Davis blowing trumpet on the side.

“That’s it, isn’t it—that he didn’t know? Emma asked.

Corrine sat down across from her daughter. They both had red hair, but Emma’s was thicker and it had that disheveled look it always did after she’d been lying in bed.

“That and other things,” Corrine said.

They drank their tea in silence together.

“I suppose he feels he’s doing it all for us,” Emma said.

“Yes, I suppose he does.”
“Where will we go?”

“Where would you like to go?” Corrine asked, risking a smile.

“I’ve always wanted to go to Oregon. I don’t know why—I guess I saw a movie that was supposedly set there once and romanticized the idea into a gray and rainy paradise for redheads.”

Later after Emma had gone back to her room and Corrine had washed and replaced the mugs in the cabinet, positioning Emma’s in the front so that Miles Davis faced outward, she found herself standing in the living room, again looking out into snowy country night.

Oregon—the rain and the clouds; the mountains and the Pacific—it would be a good place for a painter, a good place for lazy afternoons spent reading or drinking tea in cafes with one’s daughter. Maybe they could open a little one up themselves. She would let Emma pick the name. Emma was good with names, with words. She knew her daughter harbored a secret poet beneath the cover of her omnipresent notebook. Oregon would be good place for a poet.

Inspiration seized her then, filling her up like hot water from a kettle. She was boiling over with it as she ran to the garage a moment later, digging through a lifetime of dusty boxes, her own elegant hand marking the contents of each: Emma’s softball stuff, kitchen utensils, John’s fishing tackle, and there at the bottom, nearly crushed beneath the weight of her married life, Corrine’s painting supplies. She ran a gentle hand across the top of the box, sending dust floating up in a thin, gray cloud. She peeled open the box slowly. The smell of oil paints and spirit-cleaned brushes wafted up to her nose. She closed her eyes and inhaled the scent. It smelled like someone she used to know.

Corrine pulled out the black, white, blue, red, and yellow tubes, as well as several wooden-handled brushes, then found a roll of canvas in another box just behind the first.

Back in the living room, she stretched the canvas over a frame, stapling it hastily into place. She put on her favorite Van Morrison album—“Moondance”—and began mixing colors, sketching, and outlining in pencil the images as they flooded her mind. The brush felt awkward in her hand at first, both familiar and foreign, but after several strokes she found herself, smoothly, carefully turning the brush to a thin line or a wide fan. It felt like standing in a sudden rain on a hot summer night, her old life and troubles steaming out from underneath the years of neglect.

Several days later a husband and father returned to an empty house. In the kitchen he found a note neatly folded with the word “Dad” written on the outside. Inside he found the details: his daughter’s reluctance and reasons for leaving. In the living room he found a painting. In it a redheaded girl sat alone outside a coastal cafe, her head bent, her hand etching private thoughts over wind-curled pages. Overhead, gulls flew in from the ocean against a gray and cloudy sky. In the distance sat a woman at the edge of a pier before an easel and the water beyond. Her back was turned to him, her red hair lifted in the breeze.

**Aaron Kelly** is a senior majoring in English. He enjoys talking about himself in the third person, cultivating facial hair, and reading Chekhov to his dog. After graduating in May, he plans to change his name and move to an undisclosed location to avoid repaying his student loans.