

Still Life

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The blue phone on the wall rang shrilly. Ramona picked it up, pulling the cord out of its twist as she did so. "Hello?" She smiled. "Loralee! How's it going? Where are you now?" Ramona looked around the wall dividing the kitchen from the living room to gesture at her mother sitting on the couch facing the TV. Her mother smiled, muted the TV, and picked up the phone sitting on the circular table next to the couch.

"Loralee? Hi!"

"Hi, Mom. We're in Illinois now, Ramona. Making our way up to Chicago."

"Are you still on the trapeze?" their mother asked.

"Oh yeah. They've got me on the fly bar now."

"So you're the one flying through the air?" Ramona asked.

"Yeah. It's so cool. Oh, don't worry, Mom. We still practice each stunt in the safety harness first. We're working on the Shooting Star right now."

"That sounds great, honey. I'm glad you found such a great job."

"Me too."

Ramona began to think of something to say, but her mother found something first.

"How's everything with the company?"

"It's fine, now. One of the girls in the elephant act had been using my makeup, but I straightened her out."

Ramona tried to say something again, but was cut off.

"Why did she do that?"

"We live in the same train car and she must have thought it was makeup for anyone in there."

"Really? I thought you'd have your own room by now," their mother replied.

"Not until I get big enough to have my name on the posters," Loralee answered. "It's okay. I'm working my way up to it." She paused for a moment. "Oh, I've gotta run. Extra practice for the Shooting Star. If it goes well, we might just show it tomorrow night. I love you, bye!"

"Bye," Ramona and her mother replied. They both hung up their phones.

Ramona walked farther into the kitchen. She paused between the stove and fridge to see if her mother would say anything. When she didn't, Ramona sighed a little and headed out the back door.

The night sky was brilliantly lit up with blazing pinpricks of light. Ramona trudged over to the small grove of trees that lined the edge of their field. She pulled herself up onto the lowest branch of her favorite one and climbed the familiar path up before settling in the tree.

“Last time she called us, they were in Georgia,” Ramona said quietly, looking at the stars. “When did she take off with her life?” Ramona sighed and looked back up at the stars. She settled back against the tree and tried to lose herself in their light.

The next day, Ramona rolled out of bed, grateful that she didn't work this Saturday. Her job at the bank paid well, but she knew there had to be something better than being the voice at the other end of the drive-up service. She rubbed her eyes and blearily pulled open a drawer in her dresser. Ramona grabbed the first shirt on top, then remembered she was meeting Cindy in town today. Ramona looked at her watch and decided she didn't have time for a shower. She grabbed a nicer shirt and pulled on some decent jeans. She ran a brush through her hair and slid in some subtle earrings.

Ramona gave herself a once-over in the mirror and nodded at her reflection. She headed into the kitchen and grabbed a box of cereal. She opened the fridge, but noticed the upside down, empty milk jug in the sink. Shaking her head, Ramona put the cereal back and grabbed some bread to toast. Even though she smeared on the jam as quickly as she could and finished the last bite of toast in her car, Ramona was still almost late.

“There you are,” Cindy greeted her. “I was beginning to wonder about you.”

“I woke up late,” Ramona replied with a sheepish grin. “Come on, let's get inside.”

The two of them walked into the art museum, paid the entrance fee, and began walking up the stairs to the first exhibit. Ramona loved the art museum. In a painting, it didn't matter if someone was too tall, or not that pretty, or just looked weird—they were still art. Here, it didn't matter that Cindy was the one who drew the eye and Ramona was always in the background. It didn't matter that Cindy offered to go on double dates, giving Ramona the guys she'd rejected in a misunderstood idea of friendship. Here, the art was the only thing that mattered.

Cindy and Ramona took their time strolling through the familiar exhibits at the front of the museum, threading their way through the small crowd. They had both seen these paintings before, so they toured the rooms in silence, breaking apart to look more closely at some paintings, and rejoining to observe others. Soon enough, they were about to enter the room with the new exhibit.

“I hear they had to remodel this room and take out the one above it,” Cindy whispered to Ramona.

“I've heard Teresa Akerly uses some huge canvases, but I didn't think they'd be that big,” Ramona whispered back as the two of them crossed the threshold.

It was like being in another world. The room was two stories tall, as Cindy had predicted, but Ramona was not prepared for the vastness of it. Two of the walls opposite each other had enormous paintings on them, which was really one scene of a satyr picnic in a meadow, with curious townsfolk peering at the goat-people from a forest

with their town in the distance. Curling blue streamers dangled from the ceiling hanging down just above the patrons' heads which, on closer inspection, had scenes of merpeople going about their daily business. Different spots in the room had free-standing pillars covered in various scenes from Middle Eastern mythology to Nordic legends. However, Ramona did not stop to investigate any of these. She was drawn immediately to the utterly gigantic canvas that hung on the wall directly across from the door.

This canvas showed a woman with black hair streaming behind her and an up-raised sword challenging a dragon who had pinned a man under his enormous, clawed foot. The man was wearing a suit of armor; the woman was wearing a white shift that was tied around her waist with a rope. The woman, on the left side of the canvas, was about as tall as the canvas was. The dragon was further in the distance, but only slightly shorter than her. Ramona could tell that this was a fight the woman should lose, but she couldn't help but feel that this painted warrior would defeat her foe if given the chance to move.

Cindy nudged Ramona's elbow. "I'll wait downstairs in the coffee shop. You take your time."

"You're done looking already?"

"You've been staring at this piece awhile. Don't worry. I'll wait for you." With that and a smile, Cindy was gone.

Ramona returned her attention to the giant canvas for a moment longer, then decided she should look at the other works. Ramona wasn't sure if she wanted to talk about the giant painting with Cindy, but she supposed Cindy would want to talk about everything in the room. So, Ramona admired the eight-sided pillar that displayed different tricksters at work; the longest blue streamer, which showed the complex love story of two mermaids; and the split scene of the satyrs and the townsfolk. Yet, after she looked at the two smaller paintings, Ramona's eye again pulled her to the painting of the woman facing the dragon. Resolutely, Ramona left the room to join Cindy.

"Ramona! Over here! Come meet Jack."

Of course Cindy knew someone here. "Hi, Jack."

"Jack is in my yoga class," Cindy explained. "I never knew you liked art!"

"Well, I'm more interested in the mythology that Teresa Akerly shows, but I'll admit that I enjoyed the rest of the museum as well."

"Are all of her paintings based on stories?" Ramona asked.

"Most of them are," Jack replied. "I'm not sure about the biggest painting in there, though. In all the stories, it's always the knight that saves the lady, not the other way around."

"But how interesting that she turned that on its head," Cindy replied. "I always like to see cultural norms mixed up."

"But it's not, not really," Ramona protested. Jack and Cindy looked at her. Ramona could feel a blush beginning as she explained. "Society then was really binding for women—"

"Like it isn't now," Cindy interjected with a smile.

Ramona let it pass. "—so if they wanted to do anything, they would have to almost wage a one-person war just to get their freedom. The dragon already has the knight because he's bought into the system. He's lost himself already, but the woman is balanced at the crux. She's wearing a shift, so she's not labeled as anything. She's too clean to be a peasant, but too underdressed to be a lady of the court. It's about a woman deciding whether she wants to fight for her freedom, or lay down her weapon and accept what's going to happen to her."

Jack let out a low whistle. "Do you analyze these paintings professionally?"

Ramona laughed uncomfortably. "No, I just love looking at them."

"You should send in some work to the arts section of a magazine or something. They'd be crazy not to accept it."

"Thanks." Ramona smiled a little.

"So," Cindy asked, "what stories were in there?"

As Jack began to explain the different stories, Ramona couldn't help but think about the woman in the painting again, and wish that she could be standing there next to her.

"Hi, Mom," Ramona called as she walked into her house. As she expected, there was no response. She dropped off the new gallon of milk in the fridge before climbing the stairs to her room and pulling out her sketchbook. She copied the painting that so entranced her, but even as she erased some lines and added others, Ramona knew she wasn't getting it quite right. Still, she worked on that drawing until her stomach finally demanded that she eat dinner.

After she finished washing her dishes, Ramona curled up with a book. She was trying to get the painting out of her head, with little success. Finally, Ramona decided that it was time for bed. She had an early shift tomorrow. As she wiggled herself into comfortableness, the painting appeared in Ramona's mind again. For the millionth time, Ramona wished Teresa Akerly had painted the woman facing the canvas, instead of with her back turned to the viewer. Ramona wanted to know if the woman was bravely facing the dragon, or if her courage was failing her now that she saw the size of her foe.

That night, Ramona dreamed of mermaids teasing her, swimming all around her in the water, but staying just out of reach. Tricksters from the pillar appeared next to her, offering her pearls for a kiss and laughing as they turned back into sand. Then, the dragon was before her. Ramona looked around and realized that she was the woman holding the sword over her head. She shifted her grip, trying to figure out what

she was going to do, when her alarm blared out its usual tone and sent the dream spinning away.

Ramona hurried through her normal morning routine, thinking about her dream. How nice to live in a painting where monsters were easy to recognize, and defeating them was straightforward.

Ramona drove to work and spent the day thinking about the painting and about living in it. She almost asked the person on the other end of the microphone if they were depositing a dragon multiple times. Finally, her shift was over and she could head home. Ramona began thinking about Sunday dinner. That was the one night a week her mom seemed to remember she was there and had a meal with her. They spent most of it discussing Lorelee, but sometimes Ramona's mom asked about her and how her life was going.

Ramona pulled up to a dark house. Confused, Ramona unlocked the door and flipped on a light. There was a note on the table. It had a phone number, Lorelee's name, an address in Chicago, a time, and a date about a week from today.

That was it. No apology. No note. No indication that she had left this information on purpose. Nothing.

Ramona walked over to the phone on the wall and picked it up, listening to the dial tone. She debated about calling for a long time. There was no guarantee that Lorelee was even at that number anymore. She wouldn't be able to tell Ramona why their mother left without saying a word.

Ramona hung up the phone and headed back outside, no longer hungry. She climbed her favorite tree and looked up at the starry night, trying to keep the stars as pinpricks of light instead of the smears they kept becoming as her eyes filled with water. Eventually, Ramona went back inside and went to bed.

The next morning, Ramona turned off her alarm and stayed in bed awhile longer. She leisurely got out of bed and took her time making herself breakfast. Then she went back upstairs to consider her outfit for the day. She chose a brown dress that hung just above her knees, with a v-neckline and some brown pumps. Ramona brushed her hair out, and put it up in a bun.

She got in her car and began the drive into the city. As she drove, Ramona remembered her dream from the previous night. She was a little girl, looking at a painting her mother had of a meadow. Lorelee was hanging from her knees off the banister and their mother was clapping, her smile as wide as can be. Ramona looked outside and saw that it was snowing. Then she looked back at the painting of the meadow. She stepped forward and slid inside. Ramona's alarm had gone off before her dream self could see the meadow, but Ramona remembered what it looked like. The grass had a different quality to it: it felt stiff but supple, and there was no wind to move it. The flowers smelled like new paint, but somehow that was perfect.

Ramona pulled to a stop in the parking lot and locked her keys and purse in her car. She headed into the building with only enough money for the entrance fee. The other rooms echoed quietly with her footsteps, but they held no interest for her now. Ramona headed straight for her destination. When she saw the woman confronting the dragon again, Ramona knew she was making the right decision. She stepped up in front of the painting and looked at it for a moment, gathering her courage. Finally, she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and undid her bun. Her long, black hair spilled to the middle of her back. Ramona opened her eyes, dropped the bobby pins and stepped forward. By the time the pins hit the floor, she was gone.