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Painters

Today I had a half-hour long conversation with the tiny woman who cleans our hall. She has a thick accent, and it's terribly hard to understand her sometimes. She gestures at my self-portrait, leaning against my desk waiting to be hung on the wall, and asks, "You paint?" Yes, I made that, but it was the only really good thing I ever made, I tell her with a grin. And it isn't paint, anyway, it's oil pastel. Oil pastels are much easier to use than paint. "You paint face, hands?" I did not draw my face on my self-portrait, and one of my hands is rather indistinct. It's difficult to get fine details with oil pastels; they're a bit like crayons for adults – blunt, I mean. I'm not sure she'll know what a crayon is if I mention it to her. I'm a bit stung that she doesn't like my hands, though. You try making five clear fingers and shading them properly on a hand barely bigger than the tip of your thumb with an implement as big around as a crayon. So I reach under my bed, grab my sketchbook, and flip through to the page where I did a few studies of my hand, with a brief twinge of anxiety for showing a stranger my innermost thoughts in sketch form.

She looks a little more approving of these hands, though, even if they're

just basic outlines. "My father paint, back in my country," she tells me. "Taught me. I go home, paint." She smiles at me. A humbling jolt. This tiny woman who cleans my hall paints. "Where are you from?" I ask her.

She's from Vietnam, and her family paints. Her father is dead now, but he painted, and taught her and her sister. Her sister married a young American, she tells me, and gives me an expression of affectionate amusement. The colloquialism she would use is cradle-raider, but I doubt she knows that phrase. "But he love her. He love her. And she still paint," she finishes with the smile of an elder delivering a lesson to youth. "My daughter go VCU. Study finance. Finance," she says, and her smile adds, what a thing to study. Now her daughter has two young children, four and three years old. And she still manages to paint. "Paint girls. Paint girls, maybe sad, standing there in garden, mountains, long hair." She brushes her hand down the side of her face, tracing imaginary hair down to her waist. "Long pretty hair. You hair so pretty, if long. Use lemon." Lemon? I ask. Lemon good for your hair, she tells me. In my country, she says, struggling with a language never completely mastered, there is a tree whose fruit holds soap inside it. They boil the fruit and use it on their hair, and then lemon. Hair so soft, she says, once more running her hand down beautiful hair now cut to shoulder-length and relegated to a ponytail. She sits on her heels in my doorway, head cocked to one side, smiling at me perhaps a little wistfully. "You pretty," she says to me, "you pretty." I smile, a little shyly. "So are you," I murmur. I don't think she believes me. I suppose that's fair, since I don't really believe her either. But she is pretty, still, even though she is long past the days of her bloom. She is still smiling at me, wide face, dark eyes, and I insist silently that she would have been beautiful when she was young. That same quiet smile she gives me now, high cheekbones, wide mouth, sharply defined nose. Long, long dark hair falling to her waist, soft and shiny from lemon and the fruit of a tree I've never seen. It is not, perhaps, a conventional beauty, but it is beauty nevertheless.

She doesn't respond to my quiet statement. Instead she says, "You pretty, but you go out, let sun, wind on you face." I laugh, surprised that she would know that I spend too much time inside. It didn't occur to me that she might simply have read it in my pale face. She tells me, "I think you be good painter. You not like noise, no? You not like noise." No, I

reply with a smile, I don't like noise. Now her smile says that she was right, that I can be a good painter. "And you — you quiet, you — " Her brow furrows as she searches for a word. "You keep — things here?" Her fingers hook into her chest. I look at her, thoughtful and almost wary. She's right, I do, and people like that are not comfortable with such easy penetration of self. That isn't something she could know from observing my comings and goings.

Maybe she did see that small inward flinch at showing someone my sketchbook.

"Yes, I do," I say carefully.

"See? You be good painter."

I relax, laughing inside that she thinks so little makes a painter, and shake my head, remembering my attempts at painting in high school art classes. "No, I'm not. I tried painting, it's hard."

"Painting easy."

"Maybe for you it is. It's hard for me."

"Painting easy."

To me, this simply means that her entire family is fantastically talented. "I'm not very good at it."

"You go out, get book, paint. You learn."

"All right."

"Payn-see? Payn-see?" It takes me a moment to realize she is asking for a pencil. I give her one from my drawer and hand her my sketchbook. One quick, dark, sure line, a second, a third, she hunches over the paper and throws down a rough outline of a smiling girl with long, dark hair. "See? Just that, painting easy." She smiles up at me.

A clump of girls walk by, chattering, and she quickly hands back my sketchbook and my pencil and stands up. "I go, let you work. But you paint."

"I'll try," I promise her, and think with a kind of wonder, maybe I will. In a moment she is off down the corridor and gone.

I stand looking after her for a moment, thinking that I don't pay enough attention to cleaning ladies, and realize that I don't even know her name.

[*Anne Marie Salloum*]