

Jerri Jerreat

## The Artist

I saw at once that it had been a mistake to bring her. The sea of silk, wood and colour that washed the park would appear tawdry to Caroline. She stood beside me on the curb, a serious, stolid presence in navy and white, adjusting the wide straps of her leather purse.

"It's going to be hot," she commented. "And windy."

Hope you used the heavy-duty hairspray, I thought unkindly.

My nine-year-old daughter, Anna, had deserted me for a birthday party. "Women in the Park" was an annual exhibition of art of the rich, eclectic variety that she and I usually enjoyed. But what on earth had possessed me to invite my mother? She was the blind one in a family of artists, who ordered living room suites from catalogues. Sighing inwardly, I locked the car door and turned with a determined smile.

"Shall we go?"

We strolled down the first aisle past silver jewelry, birdhouses and still lifes on canvas. On the next aisle a group of wooden bowls and ladles caught my eye. They were oversized, with uneven curves. I stepped off the path.

"A runcible spoon," rasped a cheery voice. "You know. A pea-green boat." I looked up into the face of an aging elf, the artist. "Oh, these. Yes." I stroked a red-dotted spoon carved from one piece of wood. "Is this the natural wood?"

"Yes, I don't stain them. A friend brings me bits from his travels.' She pointed with a gnarled hand covered in silver rings. "This is from a bush in Africa. That one's hickory heart, and that, butternut."

As she moved her earrings swung gently, long curves of wood. She grinned at my admiring look. "Like them? I'm just modelling." She pointed to a small rack of a dozen pairs, each unique.

My hand went straight to the longest, an "S" curve of butternut, following the grain.

My mother had moved ahead impatiently.

"I love these," I admitted, "but I wouldn't have the nerve." They suited an African queen with a long neck and a regal forehead. "I should never have read Power Dressing in my formative years."

The artist tilted her head coquettishly. "Do I dress as an old lady should?" she asked.

That forced a laugh out of me. Her dress was a series of scarves wrapped in various ways. Somehow I couldn't see her playing bridge at the seniors home.

She picked up a small mirror and held it up to show me my reflection. "Here's the only person you need to please. Forget what everyone says and let her enjoy herself."

My daughter had once worn a skirt she had made from two old scarves over sweatpants paired with a top which, in a former incarnation, had been pyjamas. "For the class party!" she'd announced gaily.

I glanced around self-consciously, then reached for my wallet.

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My grandmother Anna had been an artist. She had painting lessons in her teens before the money ran out, after sisters one and two. Later in life, these lessons had stood her in better stead than a high school education or Grade Four piano lessons. She worked in New York City during the Depression, ripping pearls and feathers off mauve velvet hats and quickly pinning them on another to suit her millionaire customers. The other saleswomen sniffed, but Anna had smiled and chatted with the Vanderbilts, Rockefellers and Astors, while rearranging formidable hats to suit them. They had loved her.

Later, back on the family farm in Thomas, Ontario, a woman left with two children, she might have melted into the woodwork with shame. Instead, she offered painting lessons to richer women in the parlour. Then, after teaching herself the art of making silver trays (stenciling designs, pouring acid, crimping the edges), she taught it to others.

So why was it my mother had so disliked my grandmother? And why was I dragging my mother around an art show when she so obviously disliked art? I cut through a row of easels, Chinese screens and painted silk to join her where she waited, sulking by some wooden chests and tables.

"Beautiful inlaid tiles in that chest," I enthused. "Wouldn't that make a lovely wedding present for Selene?"

"A good dresser is really better for storing linen," she pronounced. My mother is a woman of statements, not chat. Is this the first time I've noticed how her upper eyelids have sagged, making her eyes somnambulant? I feel a pang of annoyance. It would have been easier to make Venus De Milo smile.

"There are some lovely silkscreened prints ahead. Let's have a look." I plod forward, passing wind chimes made of shells and driftwood, wishing I'd come alone to admire them.

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I was drawn to a composition of leaves superimposed on hands with, in the corner, a perfect likeness of a copper penny. A young queen's face looked over her shoulder at the leaves. I suppose I stared too long at it, but it felt like a dream half-remembered.

"Do you like it?" asked the artist quietly. "Yes," I replied. Then, more strongly, trying to be unmodified by Caroline's shadow, "Yes, I do. It's wonderful. It makes me think of dreams, and things blowing across your mind."

I could hear the smile in her cultured voice. "I usually work from dreams. Do you too?"

I was flattered at the inclusion. I'd never called myself an artist, merely a painter, a businesswoman. What was an artist? I turned to study her.

She was in her forties, I thought. She wore her thick auburn hair short, and had clear blue eyes and freckles. I looked for scarves, but she was wearing tan linen trousers, and a long, loose blouse. There was a hint of silver at her neck. She seemed very professional, or perhaps it was the confidence in her bearing.

"Um, sometimes," I acknowledged, certain that my mother would be thinking to herself, What utter nonsense. She'd be checking her watch. "I love the colours in that one, there. You don't usually see those together." I gestured at a wild print of leaves in soft yellows, ultramarines and dark purples.

Caroline was checking her watch. I noticed the artist did not wear a wedding ring. How did artists make a living and support children? Or have any time for their children? I found it a constant struggle with just one child. My grandmother had had two. I wished I were alone to ask, for I felt sure she would have been candid.

"Do you, um, work at your art full time?" I ventured, stepping slightly away.

She offered a small smile. "I'm working at it when I hull strawberries," she replied, "or listen to my son's troubles. And I'm working while I sleep. As you can see."

I grinned at that, then peered closer at the price. Two hundred and fifty dollars. God, I wished I had the money. My business came in dribs and drabs, and the money had to go towards paying for chimney repairs, a new muffler or a washing machine.

My mother had moved down the path with an impatient swish of her skirt. I stepped back regretfully.

"You work marvels here," I said, nodding. "Thank you." She seemed pleased.

I turned reluctantly and followed the skirt down the path.

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Why couldn't we just relax together? We used to be close. During high school, I'd come home and tell her tales of my day, trying to entertain her. After working at the bank all day, she probably longed to be alone, yearning to pick up a book and escape. No wonder her attention had wandered. Come to think of it, I had done all the talking. I must have thought she was lonely, just the two of us living together. She never talked to me about things, about her day or herself, never offered stories of her past. Strange, really.

My grandmother had told me stories over long games of rummy. I'd felt so close to her. How could my mother have not? What had pushed them apart? In the last few years before my grandmother's death, my mother had often spoken to her sharply. This had wounded me, the peacemaker.

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The next artists were young, in their twenties perhaps, lounging in modest shorts and Ts on some of their beautiful willow furniture. I was drawn to the shy looks that passed between them, and their short hair and fresh faces, their sudden blushes when someone asked them a question. Were they friends and also lovers? I preferred to think the latter; the romantic in me.

"Beautiful trellises, aren't they?" I asked, distracting my mother away from the flutist, on stage nearby, whose haunting music she had been wincing at.

"Hmm."

I could see she was picturing white plastic fan-tails from a garden store and thinking that anyone could tie a few crooked branches together and why on earth should she pay for it? I wondered again how a daughter of an artist could close off that part of her mind that sees beauty?

I'm not a serious artist. I only stencil walls for clients. My last commission, though, had been an ocean scene for a doctor's waiting room. It had been fairly complex, because I had to draw and cut some sea life stencils by hand, and choose all the colours. But my daughter could compose poems with a rhythm that moved me. She was an artist.

My mother cleared her throat. "These chairs might be comfortable with thick cushions," she pronounced. This was her, giving an inch. "Flowered."

The artists, I could see, had overheard and were stifling something like giggles, glancing quickly at each other then away. I felt the need to defend them, defend all of it.

"Could I sit on one?" I asked.

The taller one opened her arms expansively. I chose a lounge and sat down gingerly, afraid I might break the vines. Surprisingly, they felt more solid than canvas or plastic. I leaned back, lifted my legs, pivoted, then stretched out. Despite all those individual vines and branches, I felt solidly supported by something curved and strong, like hands. I felt safe.

"This is the most comfortable thing I've ever sat on," I announced. The taller artist nodded, smiling wryly. She must have heard this before. "I just wish I were a little richer."

She shrugged.

The price tag read one hundred and fifty dollars. I longed for a big job in a mansion or a bank, its profits to sock into the mortgage, RESPs, a new bicycle for Anna, and one willow lounge chair for me.

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"There are some oil paintings up ahead," I informed my mother. It's no use, of course, she's art-impaired. I thought of her apartment, tidy and modern with pastel prints, mass produced, to fill spaces between family photographs. My grandmother's wild, dark paintings hang in the spare bedroom. How did I ever think we got along? It was a mirage. She must have been putting up with my chatter for years, waiting for me to grow up and move out so she could read in silence.

The artist was on a break. A small sign on her chair read, "Back in five." I glanced around the semi-circle of landscapes on easels, suddenly and clearly remembering my grandmother Anna, wearing a polyester dress in something flashy, burnt orange and black perhaps, cocking her head coquettishly as she explained the palette knife or the influence of the Group of Seven. She was bold and charming, and everyone loved her. To sell one of her poppy paintings she'd talk about the significance of poppies in the East, then the seeds her young soldier had sent her from France decades ago. All made up, of course, but somehow true, too. It became more true with each telling, for she began to believe it. My mother, I suddenly realized, must have hated that. She would have labelled it lying, falsehoods, sins. My mother was a serious church person who attended meetings and washed the altar cloths. Even more so, after my father had left. I'm sure my attitude was a disappointment to her, but praying inside four walls with a crowd always felt fake to me. I could do better with the wind in my face.

One painting was of a mother holding a toddler's hand, walking through a leafy fall path. My mother leaned over to stare at it. She spent a full minute thus, studying a fairly bland scene. Were her lips moving? I eased closer, straining to listen. When she straightened quickly, I nearly fell backward.

"It's junk, that's what it is," she whispered tightly. Her face was flushed. "An artist can be forgiven anything for a bit of talent with a brush. Junk. Junk. But an artist is a mother first and must protect her children."

It was more than she'd said all week. More than she'd revealed, perhaps, in my whole life. I was almost afraid to ask for more.

"Protect her children from. . ."

"From anyone. Anything. Bad men. Bad drivers. Accidents. . ." She shut her lips tightly and turned away. "I'm thirsty and there's not a breath of wind. Can one find a drink around here?"

Silently, feeling as though I had just discovered life on Mars, I led my mother to the refreshment tables. I bought us both iced teas and, on impulse, lemon poppy-seed muffins, too moist to resist. My mother drank thirstily, then sat beside me on the bench and tasted the muffin.

"It's good." She was surprised.

I laughed. "Yes. It's good. Some things just surprise you, don't they?" She coloured slightly, then took out a tissue to wipe crumbs off her lipstick. "I must look a sight."

I ignored this because a hurricane could not have blown her hair out of place, and let my eyes stray to a cluster of children. They were twirling spirals of crepe paper on sticks, laughing. "Anna usually loves the kids' art tables," I commented. "Did you see her clay wildcat? In the kitchen?"

My mother started as though she had been mentally elsewhere. "Hmm? Pardon me?"

I paused, then turned my head toward her like a queen, accepting nothing but the truth. "What accident should an artist mother protect her children from?"

My mother wasn't one to prevaricate once the dice was up. After fifty-odd years, she spoke. "An accident on our street. A streetcar. It hit my little brother. His ball. . ." She trailed off.

"This was Uncle Charles?"

It took her a moment to compose herself, and I saw her swallow hard. I tried to gaze off casually into the distance so as not to embarrass her, but inside my soul was leaping with excitement. A secret!

Her voice was quiet. "He would have been your Uncle Michael. If . . . he had lived."

I shook my head, stilling a shiver that ran up my spine with the idea of a child's death. If I were to lose Anna, I don't know why I'd bother going on.

"Your brother, Michael, must have been little. Five or six?"

"Four, I think. It's hard to remember. We never . . . talked about it. A few months later father disappeared. For good."

I felt puzzle pieces clicking into place. "And your mother?" Mom took a bite of her muffin savagely. "Inside. Painting. Her 'masterpiece.' And I. . ."

Suddenly I knew exactly what she was going to say. She had been put in charge of little Michael. She had not been able to stop him when he'd chased his ball into the city street. She had screamed, but too late. She had run, but too late, had cried, but too late.

I set my cup down, turned, and wrapped my strong painting arms around my mother. And held her, while she wept.