

Michelle Alfano / LANDSCAPE WITH TREES

She tries to rise but can't. We both know she isn't able to but still there is this pretense maintained each time. The disease has taken a strange course. She is emaciated from her waist up, her arms and wrists no bigger than a child's. Her wedding ring has fallen off so many times she keeps it on a necklace. Sometimes the weight of it seems so heavy I think her thin neck might break. I feel her disappearing weight between my clumsy fingers when I shift her. But her stomach, legs and feet are swollen and misshapen, so that she can no longer walk or use the bathroom without my help. Only slippers fit, nothing else.

This is a portrait of her. The canvas is covered in black and an image has been scratched out with a knife. The neck is crooked slightly to the side. Caverns form around the eyes. The hands are clenched and the only things that have colour are the eyes which I paint bright yellow. When it is done I hide it under my bed beneath some sketchpads.

"I've run out of cigarettes. You forgot to buy me cigarettes."

So? I continue watching television, surfing through sitcoms and infomercials.

"I said I need my cigarettes." She smacks her mug of tea on the coffee table. There were already dozens of little dents there that couldn't be erased.

"Alright, alright." I get up and throw my jacket on.

"Not that one, it makes you look fat."

"I am fat," I mumble more to myself than her. She only grunts and grabs the remote control. It is a relief to leave the house anyway. It has acquired a smell, you know the kind I mean. It tells you the old and ill live there. I feel like I've known that smell all my life, you'd think I'd be used to it.

The streets are white with snow and the air so clean it hurts my lungs as I breathe it in. The snow covers the grime of the street. I hate

it when it's winter and there's no snow on the trees. They look so naked, vulnerable. I wonder if the snow acts as a sort of blanket of warmth. I know it's heavy, I've shoveled enough of it. I trudge into the variety store and see old Joe behind the counter smoking a cigarette which he's not supposed to do but does anyway. He's wearing the same old brown cardigan which his daughter bought him a dozen Christmases ago. It's dirty and frayed but Joe doesn't care.

"Hey young Lisa, how you doing?"

Joe always calls me young Lisa even though I'm almost 30. He remembers me from when I used to poke into the candy jars for penny candy or bought plastic milk jugs.

"How's your mother?" he asks as he rings up the cigarettes.

"Aaah . . . you know . . ." I mumble. I never know what to say. *She's fine thanks, she'll be dead any day now.* But of course you can't say that.

"I know sweetheart, go on . . . take some candy." This is our daily ritual now that Ma's sick. It wasn't so long ago that he used to chase me out of his store for loitering.

"That's okay, Joe —"

"C'mon young Lisa, you're not too grown up for candy are you?"

"Naaah, okay. Thanks Joe."

"Say hello to your mom, okay?"

"I will."

I slosh back home. Boy, the lady at Weight Watchers is going to have a fit when I tell her, if I tell her. I pop the strawberries into my mouth, you know the kind, marshmallow inside with sugar and red dye on the outside? I used to love those. When I come home, Ma is looking at one of my paintings. She has an already used cigarette butt clamped in her tightly screwed mouth. Little lines like cracks emanate from her mouth. She sometimes does that until she gets her fresh pack.

"Why is everything you do so ugly and sordid?" she mutters.

"Well maybe I'm ugly and sordid, did you ever consider that?"

"Well, you could be pretty if you wanted to. Did you get the cigarettes?" I take the painting from her as she grabs for her cigarettes. Yeah, kinda like being happy. If we could choose to be happy, wouldn't we all be happy? If I could be pretty, don't you think I'd choose to be, I want to say to her.

I hear her click on *The Wheel* as I go up to my bedroom. I've got an easel set up by the bedroom window with a cloth covering a canvas I'm working on. I don't know why, it faces onto the brick of our neighbours' house. But it just seemed the thing to do. I look at my painting, the new one. The predominant colour is black, that ought to tell you something. I used to give them all short, simple titles like "Death," "Exile," "Prism," "Absinthe," "Quarry," but I heard one of my art college teachers comment to another student that titles like that were sophomoric and trite so now I have long titles like "elderly woman with cane in variety store" or "behind the railroad tracks along belview." They're always in lower case, like e.e. cummings or Pearl Jam song titles.

This is the house, it's gray with many small rooms. I have made them different shapes, triangles, trapezoids, distorted rectangles which look like they have been pulled and tortured into another shape. In one room is a brightly beating organ, perhaps a heart, not red, just pink. This is my room.

"Lisa! It's time for my shot."

"I'm coming!" I hate this part of it. Just before we found out about the cancer she developed diabetes and now I have to give her insulin shots twice a day. Ever since Pa died she'd predicted her own demise every six months. Each ailment was heart disease, cancer, a virus. Now it's the real thing. Her arm is so thin it's hard to find a vein. She hates it too. The idea of the blade entering skin, slicing through —

"LISA!"

"Okay, okay."

"Look at your father's garden," she says as she looks out the window into the backyard. "It'll never be ready in spring, we've let it go . . ." She is hurt that the garden has deteriorated. Since Pa's gone we can't seem to maintain the garden but I can't do everything, work at the store, take care of her, paint *and* do the garden. I say it out loud. I withdraw the needle, wipe it and put it away.

"Your father did." The big hero. When he was alive he was the alcoholic abusive loser. Now he's the hero who took care of everything.

"Yeah well . . ." I stop myself. It'd only start another fight. But

she's already changed the channel. So have I, come to think of it.

At the mall where I work in the afternoon, the smokers are huddling outside like a pack of shivering animals. One of the guys with a cigarette dangling from his lips calls out, the same one as yesterday and the day before, "Hey baby need someone to keep you warm?" I turn my face into the lapel of my coat so he doesn't see me smile. Some guy beside him makes a motion with his hips and hands when I sneak a look.

"See ya!" he yells. I like his hair, it's long and dark. The "dirty look" Ma says.

When people ask me where I work I rarely say Pennington's. If I did, I know they'd say, 'Oh the store for fat women?' so I don't say. They hired me because they wanted to attract a "younger demographic."

"Oh you mean like fat girls as opposed to fat women?"

"Well yes, dear," my boss said. She adjusted the fake pearls across her bosom. The plastic coating is flaking off the bottom of the pearls. I know because I almost lifted them once but then saw they weren't real. She turned to put away dresses left in the changing room. I meant to tell her that her foundation was smeared across the bridge of her nose like a stroke of fresh paint. I can paint better than she can apply makeup.

As I hang up some new dresses, I think about that guy outside the mall. He's thin and tall and, maybe Ma's right, not that clean. But still. Just because you weigh more than 100 pounds doesn't mean you don't have sexual desires.

One time I went to a dance down at the Sons of the Ukraine hall and this guy who was stoned asked me to dance. He wanted to know how much I weighed. I asked why and he said he was surprised that I was a good dancer because I was so big. So I took my big hand and shoved him in the face. He fell down and then I left the dance.

A gaggle of women come into the store — a mother, two daughters all dressed in varying shades of pastel. They remind me of those Russian dolls Ma has at home that fit inside each other, the youngest daughter fitting into the older one and both of them into the mother. I don't know why but it irritates me more when I see women and girls

my size wearing these colours. At least I have the good sense to wear black. I drag myself over to the group. The girls lag behind the mother. It's the first time for them in Pennington's. I can tell they are irritable, curling their fists and crossing their arms. I recognize the look in their eyes. I try and show the girls something nice and not too ugly because I know they will be teased for shopping here by their friends. The youngest one warms up to me, she is more ashamed than angry. I lean over and whisper in her ear, "You've got really pretty eyes." She is a little shocked and she blushes but then smiles and takes my hand as we walk around the store picking out clothes. When I leave the store after my shift I look for that guy but he's gone.

I look at my art books. I prop one on the coffee table and choose a picture. I love the moderns but choose Caravaggio. The contrasts of dark shadow and brilliant colour. I slip my hand between my thighs. I work slowly. I concentrate on the page I've selected. On the sculpted thighs of the man half hidden in shadow. I think it's the Martyrdom of St. Matthew or is it St. John the Baptist? I move up and down slowly, slowly, pushing harder towards the end until the colours of the page are imprinted on my brain.

I get up and go into my bathroom. I look in the mirror and take a lipstick out and start to put it on. I wonder if I add lip liner whether I can make my lips look fuller. I peeked at my boss' fashion magazine and read it somewhere. I worry that I'm getting that pinched look like my mother. I look at my face and instead put a big pink X on the mirror. I almost wipe it off then decide no. I turn sideways, suck in my stomach and mentally lop off half my thigh on each side.

I hear Ma in her bedroom. She has recently started to sigh very loudly with each turn or movement. I help her dress and prepare breakfast, filling her cereal bowl and pouring her tea. I bring an extra blanket into the kitchen. We eat there because it's warmer than the dining room which we used to use "when we were a happy family." This is Ma's favourite phrase lately and I wonder if I should add Alzheimer's to her list of ailments. When exactly were we that, I want to snap. I decide when I get my own place that I will never eat in the kitchen and that the cutlery will match and I'll never buy dishes with

flowers. I hate flowers, their frail and beautiful heads so slender they look like they will snap. Everything will be black. The dishes, the furniture, the bookcases. And no pastels.

Ma settles in her chair and slowly spreads a napkin over her lap.

"You bought the wrong oatmeal again."

"Did I?"

"You most certainly did."

"Try the bran then." I pour myself some tea with lots of sugar and milk. It feels like only a short time ago Ma was preparing my breakfast before school.

"You know I hate that stuff. It's like chewing on twigs. You know I've asked you twice to buy the kind I like."

"I KNOW —" I start to say. I feel my face flushing red.

She is pulling on her long gray braid, doing and redoing it with slow, tentative fingers. It's as if she's underwater and her fingers are fighting the force of it. Her fingers remind me of her doing my braids each morning, scraping my scalp with the brush until the sides of my face stretch up and back in her worn hands. So I just stop yelling.

I get to the mall for work, he's not there. At least I didn't waste the lipstick. Some kids are sniggering at the front door of the mall. I show them my middle finger and watch their shocked expressions from the other side of the glass. "Not all fat people are passive wimps, you little pricks," I mutter. I may be fat but I'm not blind or deaf. It shouldn't, but it bothers me the rest of the afternoon. As I leave the mall after work he is there and walks beside me out the door.

"Hey, 'scuse me Miss, would you like to go for a coffee or something?"

I turn to look at him. "I don't even know you," I say, attempting indifference.

"Sure ya do, I say hi to you every day."

"I don't know your name."

"Willie, my friends call me Hawk."

He extends a hand with bitten down, dirty nails towards me. Ma was right. But he does have nice eyes. So black I can't make out the pupils. Now we are both standing in the middle of Barton Street and I don't know what to say.

"Would you like to go for a coffee?" He gestures towards the Tim Horton's. I nod yes and walk with my head down, my chin and mouth muffled into my scarf the rest of the way to Tim's.

Once we're comfortably settled in those plastic molded chairs we talk for a while. I find out he's not working but then neither is half the city. He lives with his mom. He's broke. But then so am I. I have a coffee and one donut in front of me. I decide to be magnanimous and buy his since he says he forgot his wallet at home. He smiles a wide smile full of white teeth. Two jut out like fangs which is oddly attractive. He eats two, three and then four donuts and three cups of coffee as if he's starved.

"I don't know where *you* put it," I say. He stops mid swallow and gives me a look that says "Well I know where you put it." I decide not to pursue it.

"Are you a virgin?" he asks finally after a very long pause. He turns away and looks out the window. He asks again as if he is about to laugh.

"What are you going to do about it if I am?" That shocks him and for the first time we both laugh.

"Welllll — " But he has nothing to say. We finish our coffee and I wonder if he's trying to find a way to escape. We start to walk home in the direction of my house.

"You know you're really pretty."

"Oh please . . ." I hate those kind of lies.

"No really, you've got — you've got great hair."

I think about what he said. I do have great hair, even Ma says so. It's long and black with just the hint of a wave. I dye it black but usually I have it in a ponytail so it's hard to tell what it's like. He reaches out and touches a strand. He takes it and puts it in his mouth. I let him and I like it. I didn't think I would. He kisses me on the mouth softly when we part like he's had a lot of practice. He even puts his tongue in my mouth and plays with my hair. He leans into the side of my thigh and I feel him there. We make plans to meet the next day after work.

Ma is up watching TV and the nurse, Mrs. Bauer, is gathering her things to leave.

"Where've you been?" Ma asks. "Mrs. Bauer's been waiting for you

so she could leave.” And so has Ma, as I can see from the set of her back.

“Not to worry,” Mrs. Bauer says and winks at me. Her hand, like the colour and feel of softly worn brown leather, pats me on the cheek. She cares for Ma while I work and I know that I am the least of her problems. I walk her to the door.

“Goodbye darlin’,” she says in her sweet Jamaican murmur, picking up some of the warmth that envelops me.

I paint a dark silhouette, just an imprint of a face and neck, elongated breasts and round thighs. In the center, between the thighs is a hard dark fruit. The face of the woman, if visible, could be one of extreme sorrow or perhaps joy. It's difficult to tell.

When we make it, it's in my room while Ma is taking one of her naps in the afternoon. I have the day off. I make her warm milk to lull her to sleep. I turn the radio on low, some classical music to soothe her. In her sleep her mouth is working and her hands twitch slightly. Perhaps it's pain, perhaps it's anxiety. The two remain inseparable now.

He peels away my clothes one article at a time. They make a small black mountain topped with filmy cap of underwear and bra. New and never worn before. I notice the tattoos for the first time. The unmistakable name of a girl, Alison, in garish red and blue etched on the space where his heart is. He sees me stare and covers it with my hand as if to erase or hide it. He is hard and angular in contrast to my many valleys, hills. He travels up and down the hills with tongue and hands. He pulls my hand down towards his thighs. He pushes my hand towards him. I watch him grow, spout spume, then fall backward on the bed with him on top of me.

“You're a painter, paint me,” he says and spreads his seed over my body.

I bite the words back as he leaves by the back door. I will swallow my tongue before I say it. What do you say, *Call me? I'll call you. Will you call me?* In the end I say nothing. I don't know what to say. I should have practised this part. Before he leaves I shove a twenty into his jean

jacket because I know he needs it and don't want to have to say no if he asks. He kisses me in that little space between the bones which ridge my chest. His mouth is warm and sticky and my fingers linger where his mouth was. I hear my mother moan and shift and call out to me. He smiles and I close the door after him seeing him skid on the ice like a small boy down the alley which lines our backyard.

I am like that small tree that Mrs. Bauer bought for Ma one birthday. I saw its bark blistering and tore off a strip thinking that it would grow back healthier but it lay stripped and open with nothing to protect it. It never grew back.

My mother knows that something's happening. Can smell the passion or hear the tiny sounds of something intangible and real which escape me. It is unnatural for me to be pleasant. To be happy. She is suspicious and determined to find out. She picks up the telephone even when she knows that I've answered it. She reads my mail which is just bills, art magazine subscriptions and coupons. I hear her tell Mrs. Bauer that I receive phone calls and stay out late at night. She is worried she says. I could be taking drugs or be a prostitute. You never know she says.

"Oh Missus, Missus," says Mrs. Bauer. "You watch too many of those soaps." Then she laughs and pours my mother some more tea.

This is him. The canvas is shiny, almost wet looking, dark swirls like hair are interspersed. The colours are red, blue, the colours of his tattoos. Sometimes green. I rub my hand against the canvas before the paint dries until it hurts and smear the paint on my legs in a long thick line straight up. I leave the paint on and don't bathe that night or the next.

Ma is deteriorating. She is thinner and thinner. Angrier and meaner. She is more alone than ever because now I won't even fight with her. This is her last link to our old life as we have always fought, no more so than when she became ill. Sometimes I think I hear her crying in her sleep. It is the pain, I think, not me. Or I don't care what is the source. It would be a relief if she died then I immediately erase that thought as if it played on a tape recorder and I can do that.

She hauls out the old photographs of her wedding. They are

tinted black and whites with the bridesmaids in alternating dresses of peacock blue and Pepto Bismol pink. Once I asked her what colour the dresses really were but Ma didn't remember. The photographic fantasy now supersedes the reality. She speaks about Pa and how handsome he looked on his wedding day. She doesn't mention he got so drunk he smashed up the motel room in Niagara Falls and spent their wedding night in jail. Or that shortly after that he started to beat her.

Once I asked in front of guests, "Where is your wedding dress now?" I wanted to see it, try it on. Slip on the yellowed satin pumps and fragile veil. I was small enough and thin enough then that I could have easily done so. But Ma avoided my question and when the guests left she grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into the living room so they wouldn't see us from the driveway as they left.

"Stop asking that question, you little idiot," she hissed and pushed me away. Later I found out from Mrs. Bauer that the dress had been rented and she was too ashamed to tell me. Now she holds the album open and points to her bird like figure.

"Do you see there? I was almost 30 and still smaller than you are now," she says with a great deal of satisfaction. It is something that she points out to me often then clucks her tongue and says, "Touchy, touchy" if I get angry.

"Well, some of us weren't meant to be Barbie dolls, Ma," I say and continue to eat my Häagen Dasz and cookies while watching TV. She is mildly shocked at my insolence and pushes her wheelchair into the bathroom, presumably as far away from me as she can get.

I feel a mild discomfort that we are having sex in the house under Ma's nose but I have no money to go elsewhere and for some reason he won't let me go to his house. His mother would object he says. We don't have dates, unless you count going to Tim Horton's a date. But I don't care. I want him to fill this hole which is my life, even to hear his lies sometimes.

Willie borrows money but I don't care. He says it's for rent but I know his mother takes care of that. It might be for other girls. I think I can smell them on him. The sweet sickly smell of cheap perfume or hair spray. Faint traces of candy pink lipstick on his wrists or stomach

which he thinks I can't see. Sometimes he disappears for days and doesn't call. I refuse to call him back when he returns then break down. I devour him as if I am a starving woman, even though I am embarrassed by his inane cackle while reading comics. He strews his clothing around the house as if tempting my mother to find a pair of underwear, a sock. He casually pushes my art books off the bed until they are damaged or torn and this seems to give him pleasure.

One night Ma calls to me, the urgency in her voice translates in my dreams to a siren turning around and around in my head. Finally I am up and running into her bedroom.

"Call an ambulance." Her words push through the fear in her voice.

"Okay, Okay." I freeze, what number do I call? I can't remember. I beat my fist against my hip.

"9-1-1," she says slowly as if talking to a child. It takes me several tries to get the number right.

In the ambulance she is slipping away, away from me into another place, perhaps where my father is. I imagine that she is either happy now or they have resumed fighting, probably the latter. I sit like a child by my mother's side, transfixed by the machines, the blurring landscape. The attendant looks up at me. She is young and new at this. Her fingers tremble as she adjusts the beeping machines.

"She's in a c-c-coma," she stutters as the ambulance races to St. Joe's.

I call Willie from the hospital and get the wrong number, just a girl giggling, obviously drunk. I hang up. I have no change left. I've brought nothing.

I come home the next morning in my bathrobe and slippers. I didn't realize until I got to the hospital what I was wearing. I make a pot of tea. I switch the television on automatically just to fill the house with sound. I hear a knock on the door. I see it's Willie. I tell him what happened.

"Gee, that's awful. Do you want me to stay?" His voice is hopeful.

"No, I just need to be on my own." I stare out into the garden and look at the small peach tree Pa planted.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Well do you think I could come in and just borrow a few bucks,
I —"

"What did you say?"

"I — uh — needed a couple of bucks just to tide me over —"

"No, I don't think so," I say in my best grownup voice. I feel as if I have been doused with gasoline and set aflame, my voice a disembodied contrast to the rest of my body.

"There's no need to get snotty, you selfish cow —" He stops himself then waits for my response. I take my clenched hand and shove him out the door.

"Lisa!" He brings his face close to the glass and stares at me. I almost put my fist through the glass. He sees this then leaves, kicks the door, the fence, the garbage can as he goes.

I take the phone and remove it from its jack. For good measure I toss it into the backyard and it smashes against the peach tree. I go upstairs and stand by the window, uncover the easel and look at the painting I have been working on. It's unusual for me to work on landscapes. I've always considered them boring. It's the view behind the house towards the mills and the railroad tracks.

Landscape with Trees. They are thin and brown and their branches are barely perceptible. More like the veins on the back of your wrist which peter out into nothingness. The trees are naked, cold. I feel the iciness of each brush stroke down to my fingertips. I paint a thin white line of snow on each branch.