

BRUSHTOWN STORIESFake It Til You Make It

Lydia Bloom's great-grandfather Hershel was a Jewish woodcarver in the old country. Which country depended upon where the Great Powers decided the border was that week. Hershel was an apprentice to the carver of arks for synagogues. These arks were the holy places where the Torah - the word of God was kept - thus this was a sacred art full of subtle details and intricate swirls and shapes. They said a blind man could run his hands over the doors of an ark and see the word of God burning before him. Lydia Bloom's great-grandfather learned to imbue his carvings with symbols from the Talmud and other sacred books. It was said he enjoyed his work even more than red cabbage soup, which at the time was a very high compliment and finest cabbage.

Just as he was about to inherit the trade from his master the old country soured and Jews. Not that it ever had been sweet but things deteriorated quickly and the young man barely managed to scrape together enough to buy the second worst ticket on the third worst boat bound to America.

But Hershel soon found that the rich carved synagogues were not the fashion of this new land. And old world artisans were now a dime a dozen on the garbage filled streets of Brooklyn. And even though dimes were worth more then, they didn't pay the rent. Hershel struggled working in factories barely getting by. But then he found his salvation. Coney Island. More specifically the carnival and amusement parks that lined its shores. It's not well known but most of the great wooden carousels were carved by Jewish immigrant artists. The Holy Ark became the walls of the fun house or the twisted goblins adorning the haunted house. Carnival owners realized the great glut of talent in the slums nearby and suddenly these old world skills were in new world demand.

Hershel himself worked on Steeplechase Park's legendary "trip to the moon" ride. It was said his craters made a state senator give up his mistress and donate his fortune to the Astronomical Society of Greater New York. But carousels were always his favorite. Hershel would travel the country bringing his talents and tools to the wooden horses. From tail to tooth each flick of his chisel was imbued with a spark of the divine -- if you know

where to look. The choice of color, the curve of the horse's leg, all of it was precise and all of it was in praise to God.

This was a story that Lydia Bloom's mother - Betty - liked to tell. Betty had a deep connection to colors and horses herself. Though Lydia's mother was raised by an accountant it was always stories of her grandfather Hershel that stuck in her mind. Betty had one of his horses in her bedroom as a child and would whisper secrets into its ear after everyone else in the house fell asleep. And even though her father told her to be sensible and if she must be a career woman be one in a sensible career - Betty Bloom chose instead to funnel her talents into stickers. But sometimes even stickers can become a sensible career.

Betty Bloom stickers are known for their bright rainbow unicorns, cats, and other creatures. Neon shiny dolphins, tigers with rainbow fur and deep black stripes. It's hard to find a middle school girl that didn't decorate her trapper keeper with Betty Bloom stickers. Betty would ask her daughter Lydia, even from a young age, her thoughts about designs. Lydia's favorite was the zucchini wearing sunglasses series, it was not a big seller. And only stayed in production because of Lydia's love for the ophthalmologically-challenged vegetable. Lydia found her taste in stickers ran perpendicular to general interests.

Lydia did have an artistic eye in part because Betty paid for Lydia to get her MFA in fine art - something Betty was unable to do. And thanks to a semi-generous allowance Lydia was free to find her own way in the art world.

Lydia used her artist's eye to hunt through thrift stores and antique markets to find old paintings of value and worth. She had a seemingly preternatural sense for finding lost work by mid-century artists of middling popularity. They often depicted bland themes like New England sailboats or European horse landscapes. Lately though she focused on abstract work. Much like the painting she was currently showing to Gerry Crisswell in his large home in New Molar. The painting was by H. P. Broule the semi-obscure mid-20th century abscess expressionist who used her own deep tooth decay and pain to create odd images of plaque and roots. This particular painting was unknown until Lydia found it in the attic of a recently deceased 3rd grade teacher in Fremont. Well that's the story she told Gerry Crisswell and the story that Crisswell would go on to tell his guests when he'd show it off to them. The painting would eventual hang in his study and be the pride of all his possessions.

But that wasn't the true provenance of the painting. Rather this painting titled 'Gums #7' was only painted about a month ago. By Lydia herself. Truthfully most of the paintings Lydia "found" were actually forgeries created by her in her small apartment.

After making the sale Lydia returned to her car and opened the glove compartment and took out a couple of pills she kept in her rainbow zebra compact. She was running low. She snapped the case shut and sighed. She'd have to go see him. It used to be once a month or less but lately she was running through her stash at record speed. She blamed it on stress or work or the amount of dust or chem trails. One time she'd even blamed a dogwood tree and its unusual abundance of flowers. Blaming was something she slipped into easily. Unless it involved herself.

Just off route 37 was a strip of service road called the wicker way. In its heyday it was home to over 40 outdoor furniture stores and an above ground pool emporia. That heyday, like most of the county's infrastructure, had crumbled away. Now amongst the cracked and abandoned buildings or empty lots full of tall yellow weeds pushing up through spidering concrete cracks few stores remained. The wicker way became the wicker graveyard. Or so the few last businesses called it.

The most successful of the dying businesses was a store called Rainbow's End Lawn Furniture run by a lanky Irishman named Liam but customers all knew him better by his *nome de chair* - Paddy O'Furniture. He was known for his commercials where - in a green suit - he'd pop out of a large pot of gold and talk about the furniture being the best deal "this end of the rainbow." In the past year he had installed a large arc of plywood painted to look like a rainbow over the store.

Many people thought it was his endless gimmicks and touch of the blarney that kept Liam in business but really it was the fact that he sold pot and oxy out of the back of his store. Drugs were a lucrative business and he didn't really notice a difference between selling a sun lounger or indica gold. There were even times he confused the names of the chairs with the strains of weed.

Liam personally found drugs abhorrent and secretly judged all of his clients. The fact that he took a series of cholesterol meds and Prozac was to him completely different. He had even stronger opinions on patio ware and reserved most of his scorn for the couples who bought the taupe stackable four position aluminum

tan slingbacks. An ugly chair made of inferior quality by people of inferior morals. He hated the chairs but he sold them because he had gotten them below cost because he dated the cousin of Aluminum Al. Aluminum Al was known for forcibly buying up aluminum goods and then reselling them. He was always talking about how aluminum was once the most expensive metal in the world. Worth more per ounce than gold. Why even the cap of the Washington monument is made of pure aluminum. And while his romance with Aluminum Eve ended he was still able to get great deals on aluminum furniture. Even the much maligned taupe stackable four position aluminum tan slingbacks.

As the sun was set Lydia and Liam were sitting on a couch on the warehouse loading dock. She was smoking a joint generously provided by Liam. When she finished she flashed him a wad of cash. He laughed. He knew whenever she had a wad of cash it was because of a recent sale. Liam himself had a few Lydia Bloom original fakes in his house. He gave her a small bag of pills. He was worried she was taking too much. She was worried about not getting more.

Later they put a discontinued floor model brocade cabana chair up against the concrete wall by the dumpster. They then declared the chair guilty of various crimes against humanity and then listed a slew of personal slights the chair had committed against their persons. Then they used the pair of .22's that Liam kept in his desk drawer to shoot the chair full of holes.

After inspecting the body of their brocade victim Lydia sat in the chair and leaned back. As she did the back broke off and she fell to the ground. Liam laughed and she called him a garbage person. She stayed on the ground looking up at the back of the cardboard rainbow. She said maybe her mother should make stickers of the back of rainbows. The unpainted broken parts. Or maybe bright neon orange manatees full of scars from being hit by motorboats. Maybe polka dotted cheetahs with their arms in a sling because their boyfriend's broke it because they were being too mouthy. Liam said that probably wouldn't sell. Lydia mentioned the hipsters who'd buy them ironically. Then they both deeply and solemnly agreed that irony sucked.

Liam asked her why she didn't paint her own things. She gave him a stock answer saying that art is stupid and it's all politics and people only care about the name. If something is beautiful does it matter if Van Gough painted it or someone else. Most

people don't want art they want decorations. They want a status. Then Lydia demanded they order a pizza.

She didn't mention those late nights when she paints for herself. Or that when you make fakes they're never judging you. That when she once saw one of her paintings described as 'the best work Claude Bruemelle ever did' in an auction catalog she cut out the write up and put it on her fridge. Copying is safe because it's not art. Art is created by imperfect people so it'll never be perfect and the flaws will always be picked over and chewed at. And flaws are where they can peel back the stickers you've covered yourself with and see your neon beating heart and -- deep down she knows not even all that really explains it. You might as well ask why day-glo dolphins dance across the red folders of middle school girls. Now where's that damn pizza?

After the store closed and the few security lights flickered on Lydia thought that the backs of the chairs looked like tombstones. She told Liam this and he said the chairs looked like chairs.

She'll need to start another fake soon. She had one marinating in the smoke chamber. 20 days of cigarette smoke gives a nice smell to the canvas like it's actually lived a life. When you fake a painting you have to fake it's whole life. Not just it's birth and sale. All the years in between. She even takes dirt from the corners of old paintings and sticks them in the corners of her new fakes.

People use things like that to authenticate. Who'd go to all that trouble? Who'd think to do that? But why is doing a tea rinse or sticking dirt in the corners any weirder than painting a tree on canvas. Than making art in the first place. Who'd go to all *that* trouble?

She took another tab of oxy and washed it down with a flat Mr. Pibb she found in the breakroom fridge.

Liam suggested they should go for a drink. There's a G. G. Scrumptious on the highway. Where fun is always on the menu. Half price aps after 9 he says.

Lydia demurs. She always does. Next time. He watches her drive away. He wants to tell her that when she shows up it's like that moment at the airport when you're waiting for your bag and all these other bags come out and you get more nervous and more

nervous and then you see your bag tumble down to the belt and are just hit with relief. When he sees her it's like seeing his suitcase after a long flight. But he never does. And he never will.

END OF STORY