

My Life as an Artist

By Frederick William Schroeder IV

By the end of my first day of class, I'd already finished a charcoal portrait. Andy, an upperclassman with hoop earrings, denim short shorts, and a fabulous frosted faux hawk had been my subject. He was amused that I signed my drawing.

“If Groog and Makoo had signed their names, they'd be cultural icons,” I explained. Andy didn't understand. He may have been more fashionable than I, but I was better versed in ancient cave art.

I came from humble beginnings. Homeschooled by my parents in Hope, North Dakota for seventeen years, I finally convinced them to let me broaden my world view by studying at the finest liberal arts school in America, Duck University. I was supposed to graduate with a Business degree so I could take over the family's cattle ranch, but my plans changed in Art History 101. Until that class, the only art I was exposed to were the massive sculptures along the Enchanted Highway back home. But there we were discussing primitive cave smearings of bison, centuries after they were created from smashed berries. If that was possible, I could only imagine the stardom I, William Klug, might achieve by devoting my life to art. So I dropped Business to enroll in Painting 108 that same day. Inexperienced as I was, I enjoyed getting my fingers dirty during our charcoal drawing exercise. You didn't get that with Business. No. Creating was what I was meant to do.

The studio itself was an expansive space, isolated from the rest of the campus in the suburbs of Annapolis. Within its white-walled perimeter stood wooden easels, each unique with splatters of paint left from past experiments. Beside them, wooden taborets with glass palettes on the surface for paints and a shelf below for storage. Bolted to the wall beside large metal sinks were several metal storage cabinets and waste bins for hazardous materials. I felt comfortable there.

With pride, I showed my drawing to Professor Lindenhall. A stupefied look shot across her face.

She didn't make a face like that for anyone else's drawings, so I knew I had something special. And that, dear reader, is where my life as an artist began.

Even the most dedicated artist will not achieve success without a potent source of inspiration. I was lucky to find her my first week as a freshman.

It was in Creative Writing with Professor Schumer where I first found my muse, across from me at the classroom's conference table. Even under the fluorescent lights, her shoulder length hair shone gold. When her rosy lips parted and spoke her name to the class, *Isabella Peressini, sophomore, from Frederick, Maryland*, I nearly melted. Bella! With a voice so lovely it hung in the air like notes from a harp, I was fully smitten by the end of class. I knew it was a once in a lifetime love.

Inspired by love, I planned to purchase art supplies Friday after Spanish class. I had to explain to my parents the incoming charge to the credit card. Quality art supplies weren't cheap. I was sure they would cost almost \$100.

“\$100? For what? We already bought your textbooks,” my mother asked. I told her that I added a painting class, neglecting to mention I had dropped her precious Business.

“Painting? When do you ever paint?” she said. “William, you couldn't paint a cow.”

Why would I paint a cow? What a waste of my talent.

“Is this going to be like the time you decided to be a rock star? Your father and I bought you that beautiful acoustic guitar and paid for lessons,” she said. “You lasted two and a half lessons before moving on to dog-training. I never even got to hear you play.”

I assured her this was different. The guitar (and dog-training and rock-collecting) was a hobby; art was a career. Besides, I brought my guitar with me to college, and I would start practicing again, just as soon as I had settled into a comfortable routine. In any case, my mother's support of my artistic

endeavors would not be given lightly. I would have to prove myself. I suspected that I might not be able to do it alone.

I decided to recruit an apprentice to help with menial tasks. I wouldn't want to stress myself while I was working on my art projects.

Since I'd yet to make any true connections outside of my dormitory hall (and my sweet love in Professor Schumer's class), my first thought was my greasy-haired roommate, Jacob, who'd just made a beer run with his fake ID. He responded to my proposition with a halfhearted laugh before flopping into bed. Oh, how I envied having the luxury of a midday nap, but I knew full well there was art to be made.

I remembered Duck University had an online message board where anyone could post a classified advertisement. Among the ads for old futons and mini-fridges, I wrote a description of what I was looking for (someone strong-spirited, able-bodied, and open-minded). I proposed a salary that included a food stipend and posted it right before my shopping trip. I told my would-be apprentices to meet en masse at Mother Ducker's Cafe at 1 p.m., Saturday for their try-out.

I ended up spending \$426.35 at the A.C. Moore craft store. I filled my cart with everything from Cadmium Orange to Quinacridone Violet paints, flat brushes to filbert, palette knives, palette scrapers, and a multi-level metal toolbox to carry it all in. Apparently those small tubes of paint cost \$10-25 each, and the brushes even more. I worried my parents would be furious about the charge on their account. The quality of materials I used would be reflected in the paintings I'd produce. My parents couldn't argue with that logic, especially once I gifted them paintings for Christmas. Perhaps I'd even paint something for Bella. Still, I thought I'd ignore my parent's phone calls for a while.

I should have given more than a day's notice for the try-out, because the only person who was able to find me at my cafe table piled with sketchbooks was a fellow freshmen named Bobby. He had a friendly, freckled face and gut like a jelly donut. His large hands and strong back would come in handy in the studio. I noticed a shyness to his waddling gait.

“So you're the artist,” Bobby said. “You said you'd provide food, right?”

I assured him two of Mother Ducker's famous bowls of chicken soup were already on the way. We could talk in the meantime. He admitted that while he had no background in art, he was willing to learn anything. How perfect! He was a blob of clay whom I could shape in my own image. I recounted the story of my own brief background in the arts. Bobby hung onto every word I said, and was especially moved when I told him that our ancestors used to mash up berries to paint on walls.

“Seems like a waste of good food to me,” he mumbled, but I pretended not to hear. He'd soon learn the value of fine art far outweighed any prehistoric berries. When the soup came, Bobby's attention wavered. He dove right into that big bowl of salty broth and slurped away, without fear of burning his tongue. An artist had to be fearless in their oftentimes controversial endeavors.

It didn't take long to see that Bobby was everything I was looking for. We exchanged phone numbers and discussed payment, including food.

Bobby's first assignment was to design a webpage on which I could display my art. For what artist, in this modern era, could sustain himself without taking advantage of the vast exposure the Internet provides? Bobby mentioned he didn't really know much about web design, but I couldn't teach him everything myself.

“Okay, I'll figure it out,” he said. “But can we get dessert first?”

Early Sunday evening, with my homework in other classes complete, I surrounded myself with

other freshmen in the Chapman Hall common room. They cheered on some football team on TV. I had no interest in the sport, but was trying to sketch the players' formations on the field. They make some interesting designs, you know.

I received an email from Professor Lindenhall reminding us to bring in our canvases to class the next day. I realized I'd forgotten to get a canvas at all. I leapt up from the couch and dashed out of the common room, down the hall towards my room. I thought about calling Bobby, who had a car, but I thought better of it. He'd probably be hard at work creating my webpage, and I didn't want to pile too many tasks on him on his first full day as my apprentice. I'd want to ease him into the lifestyle. Besides, the craft store was closed on Sundays. I entered my room to ruminate over this predicament, but was at once met with the displeasing smell of gym socks and stale cider. Jacob left the remnants of a wild night all over the room, and was still in bed.

I picked up a sticky bottle of Angry Orchard from my desk and examined the label. I turned the bottle over in my hand, enjoying the illustrations of sentient trees. What a shame. That bottle had served my roommate's needs for one night and would now be thrown in the trash. But did they have to be trashed at all, I wondered?

I asked Jacob if he was done with the empty bottles. He grumbled what I took as an affirmative reply. I gathered the bottles to bring into the bathroom. In the sink, I rinsed each one of any remaining contents and stickiness. Once they were all clean, a dozen of them, I packed them in my bag of art supplies.

Professor Lindy did not take to my idea of painting on empty bottles of alcohol in place of canvas right away. She thought it was just an excuse for being too lazy or cheap to buy a real canvas. That wasn't the case, I told her. Well, it had been, but as I thought about it, I discovered a statement could be made with the very material I painted on. I presented my concepts in front of the class and was met with a positive response from my peers. Even Andy, who planned on painting a still life of a

flower arrangement, commended me on my idea to recreate aboriginal cave drawings on bottles. Lindy, suddenly warming up to the idea, said I'd get better results by priming the bottles with multiple layers of gesso before painting.

“We'll start on that right away,” I said, jotting notes into my sketchpad. I looked up to see Lindy staring at me with a worried expression on her face. I smiled as if to assure her that I (and Bobby) could handle the large task ahead of us. She sighed and moved on to the next student's idea.

After class, a girl named Amber with straight blonde hair, pearl earrings, and an orange spray tan walked with me back to the main campus. She gushed about my idea, saying how unique it was to comment on the wastefulness of modern society by using trash as a canvas. I nodded, basking in the praise. She was interpreting artistic choices I hadn't even made yet. I told her I liked her idea too, though I couldn't recall what it was. Was she planning on painting a landscape with only a palette knife? She thanked me, but said she might need my advice in order to take it to the next level. She gave a brief touch on my shoulder before saying goodbye and disappearing into the library. I went back to Chapman Hall with a smile on my face. I'd begun to build a fanbase.

Bobby already set up a Facebook fan page, but I didn't have any images of original artwork that I could post. I commended him on his hard work and told him not to worry. We'd be making art the very next afternoon.

Bobby agreed to meet me in the studio on Tuesday afternoon, after his classes, as long as I'd ordered a sausage and pepper pie from Dean-O's Pizzeria for us. I set up the back corner as a space for us to work, laying down squares of flattened cardboard so that we could prime the bottles without making a mess.

After he scarfed down three slices of pizza, I had Bobby carry over the buckets of white primer paint so he could start brushing it onto the bottles. As he brushed, I sat on a stool off to the side where I

conducted research for my project on my laptop and kept an eye on him. I'll admit, the first hour of my research was spent looking up Bella on Facebook. I found her, and scrolled through every one of her stunning pictures. I asked Bobby his opinion on sending her a friend request.

“Better wait a week or two,” he said, through a mouthful of pizza. “Don't wanna be a weirdo.”

“You think Van Gogh's girl thought he was a weirdo when he chopped his ear off for her?” I asked.

“Probably.”

My momentary glumness subsided when I checked out my new webpage. There was nothing on the page, and I had no followers, but just having it meant I was on my way. Seeing my name in the title made me swell with pride. I was officially a real artist and anyone who checked Facebook would know it.

Around the time Bobby finished the first coat of priming, I came up with the idea of taking a new profile picture for my page. What better place to take it than in the studio where all the magic happens? While waiting for the first coat of primer to dry, I had Bobby splatter me with the white paint. I didn't care that it would mess up my hair and Superman T-shirt. I wanted to look the part of an artist. Bobby snapped a photo of me in front of my bottles and said he would upload it right then. I made him like the fan page to get some momentum going with my fanbase.

Bobby kept whining about being hungry. I mentioned Picasso was once so hungry he ate his own paintings. Besides, I'd order more pizza while he applied two more coats to the bottles. He went back to work while I made yet another call to Dean-O's.

On Wednesday, with the priming of the bottles complete (three strong coats, at the protest of a hungry Bobby) I was ready to begin mixing colors. I imagined that the background of each bottle would imitate a cave wall. At the advice of Professor Lindenhall, I'd de-saturate the colors, to achieve a

more natural look. The first color I mixed, a warm red-orange, looked like it came straight out of a paint tube, she told me. I decided that was indeed not the look I was going for. Before mixing a new color, I wanted to take a break and check on the progress of my classmates, to see if I had any competition. Many of them were still in the sketching and conceptualization phase. Danielle was having trouble choosing between two equally dull ideas about relationships gone wrong or communication in the digital age. Andy was busy setting up his floral still-life and making sure the lighting was just right. Amber had begun to lay out the under-painting of her lakeside landscape. Looking at her reference image, I was impressed by the composition and asked if she had taken it herself. She had. It was taken at her lakehouse. I thought, one day, Bella and I will retire to a nice lakehouse with a studio overlooking the water.

Amber commented that it looked like I was getting quite a bit done in my corner of the studio. Indeed I was. I told her that I had even designed a webpage to keep track of all of my art if she was interested. When she pulled it up on her phone (Lindy was occupied helping Kayley set up lighting for her own still-life), she looked surprised.

“There's just a picture of you covered in paint.”

“Of course,” I replied. “What do you think I was doing last night? Sitting around on the computer?”

“Fair point,” she said with a laugh, “but I wonder what you'll be doing Friday night?”

And that, dear reader, is how I was asked to my first sorority date party.

That night, in my weekly class with the golden-haired object of my affection, Professor Schumer gave us a writing prompt: *Describe a teenage relationship using playful language.* To my surprise, grimy-faced Elisa on my right began pecking at her notebook with her pen right away. As everyone else began to write as well, I found myself drawing a blank. Heck, even the lazy senior Rex

was scrawling words across his page while he scratched at his beard. Bella was writing with a purple pen. Her long flowing lines were capped with curls. Even across the table, I could see each letter had character. I wondered who she could be writing about with such little effort. While Elisa's face contorted into inhuman shapes, Bella's remained a picture of serenity. And there I sat, pen-behind-ear, like a fool. I settled on hashing out a few lines about the only relationship I'd had up to that point:

*There once was a farm girl named Mary,
Whose family had purchased our dairy,
A real snaggle tooth,
To tell you the truth,
And the kiss that we'd shared was quite hairy.*

I wasn't expecting to have to read such a personal tale aloud. Schumer decided to single me out, of all people, much to the delight of the class. They were in fits of laughter, even Bella. Schumer himself didn't seem as amused.

"I wish you took this exercise more seriously, William," he said. "We're trying to write non-fiction here, not silly limericks."

He didn't understand that Snaggletooth Mary *was* non-fiction, as painful as it was to admit.

Friday night was full of surprises. Not two minutes after walking into the dingy downtown party house with Amber was I approached by the lovely one herself.

"Oh my god," Bella slurred, grabbing my shoulder. "Billy! You're in my writing class. Your poem was so funny."

I was so elated at this compliment that I decided not to correct Bella on my name. Besides, when I showed her my website and she saw "William Klug- Artist" she would see for herself. I asked her if she liked art.

"Oh my god, yes!" she said. I noticed Amber had already gone off to find more alcohol. Bobby

went to assist her. Yes, I brought Bobby along. What good is an apprentice if he cannot act as a chaperone on a date? Besides, he could distract Amber while I was talking with the love of my life.

“I’m actually a painter,” I said.

“A painter? No way,” Bella said, with a smile that brightened the dim living room. “My best friend is a painter.”

It took me a moment to realize that her “best friend” was also her date at the party.

“Hello, William,” Andy said. He smirked at me, his earrings glistening in the strobe lights. He was wearing a denim blazer with a purple bowtie. His hair was gelled back. In other words, he looked fabulous.

“Hello, Andy.” I couldn’t help but grimace as I spoke. I, with my plain navy blazer and striped tie, looked somewhat less fabulous.

“Oh! You two know each other,” Bella said.

I nodded.

“Come on, Isabella,” Andy said, tugging my love away from me with his well-manicured hands. “Let’s boogie.”

Bella nodded in agreement.

“See you around,” Bella said, giggling as Andy pulled her to the dance floor. I grabbed a beer from the makeshift bar and watched as Andy wiggled all around my woman. I sipped the beer, the taste as bitter as the feeling in my heart. I never even got to show her my website.

By then, Amber had put away quite a few mixed drinks and shots. Bobby kept a watchful eye over her. She was getting affectionate. She encouraged me to drink more beer, but later focused her attention on getting me to dance. It should come as no surprise that your narrator is quite the accomplished dancer. I attended a dance school for nearly a month, back when I was sixteen. For this reason, I was able to impress my date with a sequence of moves from the 1920s Charleston era. I was

flailing my limbs and kicking my heels in hopes of attracting the attention of Bella, but not even my most jittery movements could distract her from dancing arm in arm with Andy. When I turned around, I was met with an aggressive liplock from Amber. I pulled back just in time to notice Bella whispering into Andy's ear. Hoping she hadn't seen my moment of infidelity, I yanked my apprentice over to dance with Amber as my substitute. I went to regroup and cool off in the other room. By the time I came back, Bella and Andy were gone. Amber was making out with Bobby against the wall, wobbling without rhythm to blaring house music. I stood alone in the middle of the dance floor.

Even in the midst of her rejection, I did not abandon my date. After a few songs of “dancing” with Bobby, Amber made her way back over to me and said she wanted to head out. Luckily, Bobby was enthusiastic about bringing Amber home. He helped me walk her stumbling self back to Jones Hall. There, Amber asked to walk her to her room. Always the gentleman, I had Bobby hoist her up on his shoulders and we brought her up to the third floor while she shrieked with glee. I made sure Amber had water and an aspirin. She pouted as we left, saying she wanted to hang out. I told her we needed a good night's sleep so we could get work done the next day. I patted her on the noggin and said goodnight.

“Text me,” she chirped before I slammed the door shut. I thanked Bobby for his assistance as we parted, and told him to be up early the next morning for work. As we left Jones Hall, I noticed Bobby hesitate. He was probably worried about Amber's safety, but I assured him she'd be fine.

That next morning, I noticed something off about Bobby. I recited a DaVinci lecture from class while painting the background onto one of my bottles. It was a burnt sienna color I'd mixed myself. Whenever I looked up, however, I noticed a look of solemn vacancy in his eyes. I asked if he was hungover.

“Just thinking about last night,” he said.

“You finally got to see Bella didn't you?” I said. “Didn't I tell you she was beautiful?”

“She was pretty hot, I guess,” Bobby said. “Listen, you don't mind that I hooked up with Amber, do you? She was your date.”

Mind? No, I didn't mind. I was too preoccupied with observing Bella being taken advantage by that no-good Andy. “It's not a problem.”

I put the finishing touches on my bottle's background. It looked transformed. All I had to do was let it dry for a couple of days before I could paint my illustrations upon it. In the meantime, I'd mix up colors for the backgrounds of the other eleven bottles.

“You know, she was a good kisser,” Bobby said.

I thought she'd been a little too slobbery for my liking, but Bobby said this with such reverie that it finally hit me: he'd fallen for Amber. How had I not realized it sooner? He wasn't feeling sick from alcohol, but love! Just as my thoughts were consumed by Bella when I first met her, Bobby's heart had been taken by my well-tanned date.

I handed my apprentice the bottle to bring it to the drying shelf. I was happy for him. In addition to our success in the studio, our love lives were beginning to fall into place, at least as soon as I found a way to get Andy out of the picture. In the meantime, I'd do my best to ensure Bobby's love would not go unrequited. “I'm sure I could get her to go on a date with you, if you'd like.”

Bobby, who'd already begun walking the bottle towards the drying rack, craned his neck around at me with such ferocity I was sure it would snap. “Really?” he started to say, before realizing that in taking his eyes off the bottle, his gentle grip on the bottom had loosened. A piercing crash was met by the surprised scream of Kayley, who'd been quietly painting on the other side of the room. I told her it was okay, but when I saw the glass shards at Bobby's feet like sharp, autumn-painted leaves, I too wanted to scream.

Bobby's immediate look of remorse stopped me from throwing a tantrum. Was this really so bad? Is not one of the most rewarding aspects of art the experience of process? With that comes

setbacks.

“Does this mean you won't set me up with Amber?” Bobby asked.

“Of course not. I'll ask her out this week on a double date,” I said. “I'll bring along Bella.”

With that setback behind us, we got back to work, discussing date ideas and painting the backgrounds onto the non-smashed bottles.

I didn't even have to initiate the first phase of our plan. In class, while I was sitting around waiting for bottles to dry, Amber approached me.

“Those look so good,” she said. “I love how they look so sloppily painted. It really contributes to the aboriginal style.”

I wasn't sure if she was mocking my ability. I was prepared to denounce my biggest fan, until I realized that *of course* the sloppy painting was a deliberate choice. I thanked Amber for noticing.

“No problem,” she said. “I had a lot of fun on Friday, by the way. We should hang out again sometime.”

That was just the opening I needed.

“Why don't we go bowling this Friday then?” I asked. Bowling, Bobby and I had decided, was the perfect date. I've never played, but he says it's a pretty easy game to impress girls with. Plus, he said they had a great selection of snacks at the place in town. Amber must have known this, for she agreed even though her sorority had a mixer with a fraternity that same night. I didn't tell her that Bobby would be there, but I figured she would glad to see my jolly apprentice anyhow. And once she saw me hitting it off so well with Bella, well, she'd fall into Bobby's squishy arms and realize that he is much more suited for her than I.

As Amber walked back over to her own workspace with a smile on her face, Andy came over to me.

“Smooth move, Romeo,” he said with a wink. “Wish a nice guy would ask *me* to go bowling.”

He walked away, and while I knew he was mocking me, I also knew that he wouldn't be in such a joking mood after I won Bella away from him.

It didn't seem like things would go exactly as I planned. I was hoping to ask Bella out after class, but my confidence was shot after being chastised in front of the class by Professor Schumer for putting so little effort into my first workshop draft. He suggested that even a memoir about farm work in North Dakota should be able to reach the page-minimum of eight. I disagreed, and made a mental note to think of a new topic for my next workshop.

When I asked Bella to go bowling with me on Friday, I was met with a negative response.

“I'd love to, but I already have a thing. Maybe next time?” my love said.

I wasn't stupid. I knew that when she said “thing” she really meant that she'd be getting intimate with Andy all night long. I was distraught. I didn't even want to go bowling anymore, but I'd promised Bobby, and he'd already done so much for me. Plus, I couldn't bear to see the disappointment on his face after I'd already seen how excited he was when I told him Amber said yes. I'd go bowling with him and Amber, and make sure that she saw in him for the kind, gentle man I knew he was. As far as the Bella situation, however, I vowed to find a way to eliminate Andy. No, I was not about to advocate violence. I would instead make art so grand that his looked like a child's by comparison. Bella would see that I was better than Andy in every way but fashion sense, and see that I was the one for her. If only oil paint didn't take so long to dry.

My mother called me on Friday afternoon. She wanted to know why I was charging so many purchases to my credit card, many of which were from eating establishments.

“Well, that's how I pay my apprentice. We're doing really great work, you know.”

“An apprentice?” she asked. “Like a tutor?”

“Something like that,” I said.

“Well, as long as you're doing well in Business.”

I decided to change the subject.

“I have a date tonight,” I said. “She has nice teeth.”

“Your father will be glad to hear that,” she said.

The night of the big date, I had Bobby drive all of us to Thunderbird Lanes. Amber seemed surprised to see him. I made Bobby wear an Oxford instead of his usual T-shirt and shorts, which seemed like a mistake when I saw how dingy the bowling alley was. I thought I could repaint the blue and yellow sign to look much flashier. Once inside, I paid for a lane and three shoe rentals.

“Bobby's going to play with us?” Amber asked. I nodded. “I thought he was just driving. Cool, just like last Friday then!”

Bobby smiled, but I hoped we wouldn't have to carry her up to her room *again* tonight.

I had a hard time keeping control of the bowling ball. At one point, I sent it into the other lane. I didn't know my own strength.

Bobby was superb. Each well-placed roll boosted his confidence. He said he got a “turkey”- a very Bobby-like thing to make up. His celebratory dance had us all laughing, especially Amber.

I sat out the second game to rest my wrist for painting. My bottles would finally be dry the next day. I had to come up with something impressive to show Bella.

I eventually bought an order of cheese fries for everyone, but Bobby was so busy teaching Amber proper bowling technique that they didn't notice. As I sat by myself watching them laughing and bowling together, I ate. By the end of the game, I'd eaten all of the fries myself.

I let Amber have shotgun on the way home. I noticed the Thunderbird Lanes sign as we pulled

away. Primitive design, chipped paint. It could have been done by any Joe Schmoe. Even a caveman could have...wait. What had Amber said in class that week? Something about sloppiness reflecting an aboriginal style? Perhaps I'd take it a step further. Instead of painting, I'd chip away at the bottles. Create "negatives" of my illustrations. Make it look like it was scratched by a real caveman...or a drunk frat brother.

I told Bobby to drop me off first. I planned to start writing and sketching before my inspiration ran dry. My muse, the great Thunderbird of Annapolis, had blessed me and I wouldn't let it go to waste. At Chapman Hall, I leapt from the car before it even stopped. I said goodnight, and ran straight to my room, where Jacob was nowhere to be found. No more distractions. I wrote and sketched all night, knowing that I'd just stumbled upon the greatest creative spark of my young career.

I was in the studio for two days straight. I slept in a makeshift nest of cloths used for backdrops, with my backpack as the pillow. My only options for food besides Kayley's ripened fruit models were care packages delivered by Dean-O's Pizzeria. I tipped them well.

During this time, my only human contact was with Bobby. Many times, he hardly seemed to be present at all. He told me that our bowling date with Amber had been the greatest night of his life.

"Who'd ever guess a girl like her would go for someone like me?" he said. I scraped away at my painted bottles with a chisel. His love-struck musings reminded me too much of my failings with Bella. It was better for me to focus on what I did best: creating. When I was done scraping images of college-age partiers into my bottles, everything would fall into place. At our in-class critique on Monday, Andy would feel so outclassed by my advanced art skills that he would admit I was a much better suitor for Bella. Then, all I would have to do is show Bella some pictures of my handywork and she would be mine.

Bobby and I scraped at the bottles until our fingers bled. Well, Bobby's fingers bled, but as the

true artist, I was much more careful in my technique. Though he stayed in the studio with me much of the day, on Sunday night Bobby left to watch a movie with Amber. I remained in the studio until all eleven bottles were covered with scraped illustrations depicting the barbaric nature of partying at our school. With my scraping technique, there was no room for error. I'll admit, I had to improvise a few slip-ups once my eyelids began to droop later in the night. Nevertheless, I finished them all, at which point I collapsed into my nest of cloth for a well-deserved slumber.

I emerged from my nest shortly before the other students in Painting 108 arrived. I had enough time to remove some dried paint scrapings from my hair and set up my bottles on my work table for the critique.

Filtering into the studio before class, my peers each were drawn to my bottle installation. Lindy, surprised at the attention that my first exhibition was garnering, said we could start our critique with my piece.

“So unique,” Ariel said.

“Very gritty,” Kayley said.

“Clear influences from aboriginal cave drawings,” Amber said. I noticed she had a hickey on her neck.

Even Andy, who stood crossing his arms with a sour expression, said it was a bold take on reductive painting that the rest of the class hadn't even considered.

Not wanting me to get too big of an ego so early in my art career, Lindy told me I was off to a great start, but my message would be more powerful if I had more bottles. I agreed. If I was going to show this project to Bella, I'd want it to be clear I wasn't putting in half the effort. My parents, I was sure, would also want to see what I had been working on, and I had to show them something that made it clear I was serious about the arts.

For the rest of the critique, I found it difficult to focus. Not to sound rude, but my classmates simply did not put the same amount of effort or creativity into their projects. Danielle's was too abstract to comprehend. Amber's looked nice but lacked a deeper meaning. Kayley's fruit bowl reminded me that I was starving. I excused myself to the restroom, where I scarfed down some cold Dean-O's pizza I'd stashed in my taboret. I also sent a text message to Jacob, seeing if he could get me a case of alcohol.

When I got back to the critique, the class was looking at Andy's flower still life. It looked to me like it wasn't even finished. He was probably spending so much time with Bella that he had neglected his artistic duties. I was grateful I hadn't been so foolish. I now had concrete evidence that I was better than Andy. Once I finished another round of bottles for my installation, Bella would fall for me without fail. I was halfway to victory.

I texted Bobby asking him to help me drink through the 24 pack of Budweiser Jacob bought for me. I didn't particularly want to to drink them at all, but I didn't want to be wasteful. I knew Bobby could put away the majority of them himself, while I'd sip a few beers at my own pace. I'd even order some food for us to offset the inebriating effects.

Hours went by and I still hadn't heard from Bobby. I needed to have those beers finished that night, so I could start applying gesso the next day. I decided I'd better start on my own. It was unlike my apprentice not to be prompt in answering my text messages. As I cracked open Beer #1, I asked Jacob if he'd like to join. He looked at me like I had the face of a Picasso.

“It's a Monday. Even I don't drink on Mondays,” he said.

“Even for art?” I asked.

“Especially not for art,” Jacob said. He packed up his books and went to the library. It seemed I was on my own for the time being. I sipped my beer, sketching, thinking how much I'd impressed the

class that day. Lindy would give me an A+ for sure, especially after I tripled the size of my installation. If I didn't waste time sleeping or eating, I could finish another twenty four bottles by next Monday.

When I finished the first beer, I opened up another. I disliked the sour taste, but was enjoying the warm feeling in my stomach. I thought about Bella. When I was finished with another round of scraped bottles, she'd be so blown away by my work ethic and artistic ability that she'd be asking *me* on dates. We'd go anywhere but bowling, maybe a nice restaurant, or a walk in the park. She'd ask me endless questions about my inspiration. I'd confess to her that she, along with the mighty Thunderbird, had been my muse all along.

Beer #3. I wondered if we'd talk about exclusivity on our first date. When you know you've found the one, why waste time with anyone else? I put on some Sinatra and sang along to "The Impossible Dream".

I was glad Andy would be out of the picture. I'd have Bobby take some fantastic photographs of the bottles for my webpage to really stick it to him. Beer #4. Where was Bobby?

I'd soon have something to show for all of my hard work. My parents would see that my liberal arts education was not a waste. I'd show them my bottles, and only then, once they accepted I had what it took to be an artist, would I inform them that I dropped out of Business.

I had to urinate, but didn't want to leave my sketches for long, so I let loose a stream from the window while drinking Beer #5. I thought about Lindy. She was probably beginning to worry that I'd be eligible to take her job soon. Lucky for her, I had much bigger plans than teaching at Duck University. Perhaps my work would be displayed on the Enchanted Highway.

I was drunker than I'd ever been. My face felt hot, and my singing sounded better. It became hard to focus on my sketching, and easier to focus on drinking Beer #6.

This project would be so good that Andy would drop out of school completely. Did I want that? Yes I did. He deserved it for embarrassing me in front of Bella.

I realized I hadn't been sleeping or eating much. I thought about ordering food, but the Beers (#7 and #8 and #9) were going down easier and easier. Besides, Bobby would be there soon and want to have input on what I ordered. Where was he, though?

I thought of the hickies on Amber's neck during class. A remnant of her and Bobby's "movie night". Was it possible that he was preoccupied with a double feature that night, and left me to finish the bottles on my own? It seemed unfathomable to me that my apprentice could leave me for a woman, until I realized the power women had. Bella, after all, had influenced me to create magnificent works of art. It seemed that I'd been betrayed by my own apprentice.

This upset me so much that I tossed my sketchbook against the wall and focused on drinking faster. Beer #10, then #11. I would finish every last bottle. I'd show Bobby, everything falls into place, even love, but art comes first. With that in mind, I drank until everything swirled together, thoughts of Bella, Andy, Amber, Bobby, Lindy, and my parents. Old Blue Eyes was singing "Fly Me to the Moon" while I downed Beer #12, but that, dear reader, is the last thing I remember from that fateful night.

I awoke with my mouth tasting stale and sour. My head throbbed so much my vision was blurry. The pain of an artist.

I fell back asleep, dreaming up a life in which I majored in Business. A peaceful life, with a perfectly safe ranch and a perfectly average wife, with perfectly average children who did chores and played sports with the rest of the neighborhood. No glitz, no glamor, no Bella. I'd support my family, my farm. My parents would be proud. Was that how it was meant to be?

When I awoke again, Jacob had already gone to class. This time, as my eyes adjusted to the morning light, I noticed Bobby hunched over at my desk. At his feet were the empty beer bottles, about a dozen. Bobby looked over at me, and asked how I felt. Confused. I felt confused. And nauseous.

"Where were you last night?" I asked.

“I was with Amber.”

I sighed.

“I’m so sorry, William,” he said. “I should’ve been here for you.”

It was hard to hold anger towards a face so genuine.

“Love is a powerful emotion,” I said. No one understood that better than I, who’d just drunk to oblivion in the name of love and art. “All is forgiven.”

“If it makes you feel any better, Amber and I stopped by later on in the night,” Bobby said.

“Amber was here?”

“We came in as you were playing guitar,” he said. “Well, maybe playing is the wrong word for it...but you were singing us something about Bella. Amber thought it was sweet.”

I just about died with shame at that.

“She’s not going to tell her, don’t worry. Amber’s our friend now,” Bobby said. I still felt ashamed, but what if they never showed up to take care of me? Could I have died of alcohol poisoning?

“Maybe I’m not doing the right thing,” I said. “Making a fool of myself. Putting my life in danger for art.”

“All the greats do it. That’s what you told me,” he said. “Da Vinci screwed up his spine painting the chapel. Gaudi was hit by a car while daydreaming. Van Gogh chopped off half his face.”

I’d taught him well. “Maybe I’m not cut out for this. It’s not too late to switch into Business.”

At this, Bobby stood up, pointing a pudgy finger at me.

“You stop that. You’re not switching anything. Those bottles you made...they’re incredible. Amber wouldn’t stop talking about them last night. To be honest, it was making me jealous.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh. I’ve even tried sketching on my own to impress her, but.. I need more practice. That’s why I’m glad to have you, William. You’ve been an excellent mentor. And an even better friend.”

“You mean that?”

“I do. You're an artist, William, and a darn good one.”

I'm not one to get emotional, but at this point, I was welling up. I hadn't realized how much of an influence I'd had on Bobby. That alone made it all worth it. I reached out and embraced my apprentice, no, my friend. So what if Bella hadn't yet come around? With Bobby and I bonded more than ever, it was only a matter of time.

“If only Bella knew what I've gone through to make these bottles,” I said with a laugh.

“You should tell her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Be creative. Write something to go with your art work.”

Bobby was onto something. I even had a workshop in Creative Writing that week. We could use any non-fiction memoir we'd written, and Bella would read it.

“Bobby, hand me my laptop.”

And that, dear Bella, is how my life as an artist influenced my life as a writer.