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## Still Life

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## Still Life

### **Author Bio**

Jackie McMahon '21 is an English major with a writing concentration who aspires to someday become a writer of mystery and suspense. In addition to *The Mercury*, Jackie writes for *The Gettysburgian* newspaper and is a member of College Democrats. In her free time, Jackie likes to spend too much time on her literary-centric Tumblr blog, obsess over fictional characters, and pet all the cats she possibly can.

## Still Life

JACKIE MCMAHON

The stool was beginning to hurt her backside and Eva readjusted her position, careful to keep her left arm draped across her bare chest in what she hoped was a seductive-yet-tasteful sort of way. She'd never been particularly good at being sexy, or at least that's what all the casting directors said to her. Like a Barbie doll, they said to her once. Pretty and thin and blonde, but too wide-eyed and innocent. An ingénue when she needed to be a leading lady.

At his easel, Charlie stuck his paintbrush between his teeth as he stared at his canvas, a splotch of red paint dripping onto his white T-shirt. His eyebrows were scrunched together like they did when he was thinking really hard – he always got that look when he came into the diner, sketching away in his notebook as Eva brought him his food, and he'd had that look earlier tonight when he asked Eva if she would considering posing for him. She liked Charlie, liked his boyish smile and his bushy, scrunched up eyebrows, liked the look of his strong, steady hands as they held his coffee cup or his paintbrush. Her mother had told her once that you could tell a lot from a person's hands, and Charlie's were manly hands, with long fingers and broad nails, a thin layer of red hair covering the pale skin. There was a bandage across his right palm where he'd accidentally stuck himself with a screw while trying to put a bookshelf together, he'd explained. Eva liked that. She liked a man who did his own dirty work.

"How much longer?" she asked. She didn't want to complain, but her back was starting to hurt from holding her pose for so long, a pain tingling down from the top of her spine to her tailbone.

Charlie glanced at Eva, then back at his work, and pulled his paintbrush out of his mouth to dab at the canvas. "Not much longer," he said. "I'm just trying to capture the spirit of you now." His dark eyes met her bright ones. "Try thinking about something else. Watch TV or something."

Charlie had a small TV mounted on his wall, the screen cracked as if it had been dropped on one side, the opposite corner horribly pixelated. The 11 o'clock news was on and Eva watched in silent rapture for several moments, mouthing the words silently to herself, as she was prone to do. Whenever she watched something on TV she always liked to whisper the lines to herself. It made her feel like she was a part of it all. To herself she repeated the words of the peppy blonde news anchor (who, ironically, looked very much like Eva, though Eva thought her nose was much nicer than the anchor's), as

the woman went through stories about the new baby panda born at the zoo and the NFL player who pulled off a grand surprise for a Make-a-Wish child dying of leukemia.

Suddenly the anchor's smile died and Eva closed her mouth, the only sound the sound of Charlie's paintbrush gliding across the canvas as he painted the yellow hue of Eva's hair. "Today, a spokesperson for the NYPD confirmed that the body of a young woman found last week in Central Park has in fact been linked with the Signature Killer. This unidentified corpse is the twelfth known victim..." The images that flashed across the screen were so horrible that Eva wanted to cover her eyes, but her body felt frozen in its unnatural position as she watched in abject horror. Even though the photographs were censored to shield the bloody mutilations of the dead women's naked bodies, the sight was still horrifying to her. As the news anchor read the statement from the police chief, Eva stared at the twelve successive crime scene photographs. One of the victims had been gutted like a fish. Another had been choked with rope tied around her neck. Yet another had been cut from the corners of her mouth up to her ears, her face stuck in a permanent smile.

"It's something, isn't it?" Charlie said, snapping her out of her trance. His eyes had left his painting to stare at the TV screen. "Twelve women in three months, and police don't know why. There's not any distinctive pattern: one a married attorney from uptown, another an unwed college professor from Brooklyn, another a teenager visiting the city on a high school class trip. The girls don't even look alike. And he probably won't stop there either."

"Why do you say that?"

Charlie shrugged a single shoulder and looked back to his canvas, sticking his brush into a jar of white paint. "He's got twelve already. Probably looking for lucky number thirteen, right?"

A shiver ran down Eva's naked spine, and she suddenly wished to put her clothes back on. "How do they even know it's the same guy?" She asked. "If there's no common thread, couldn't it be twelve different killers?"

Charlie didn't look up from his work as he answered her. His bushy red eyebrows were knitted together again. "Because," he said nonchalantly. "He signs all of his works. That's why they call him the Signature Killer. SCW, they must be his initials. Always left near the body, and always signed in red. Seems it's his favorite color..."

"Signed. Like it's a freaking painting." Eva muttered to herself, but Charlie didn't seem to hear her. On the TV, the news anchor had moved onto another topic, a feel-good story about an elderly same-sex couple who had finally wed in their nursing home after more than seventy years together, but Eva's thoughts did not stray far from the images of those dead women. "My mother told me not to move to the big city." She said aloud. "She said they

did bad things to girls here.”

Charlie gave her a thoughtful look. “So why did you come then?”

The arm draped across her chest pressed tighter. “They do bad things to girls everywhere in the world.”

Charlie had no answer for that, his eyes flicking back to the painting.

All of the lingering excitement Eva felt about sitting for a portrait suddenly waned, the old-fashioned novelty of being an artist’s muse gone. She wanted nothing more than to put her clothes back on and flee from Charlie’s apartment, but she’d foolishly left her car back at the diner, having taken the subway downtown with Charlie in their rush to get here. “Charlie,” she said, and she had to repeat his name three times to finally get his attention. “Can you take me home?” She’d forgotten her MetroCard.

“Can’t you wait a few more minutes?” He asked, shooting her that boyish smile that always made her knees weak. “I’m almost done.”

Still, Eva persisted. “Charlie – ”

“I said I’m almost done, all right?” Eva flinched at his harsh tone. He’d never raised his voice at her before. Charlie was usually all polite words and bashful grins. Annoyed, she turned her head and kept her eyes trained firmly on the wall for the rest of the session.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Charlie pulled back to examine the canvas, a self-satisfied smile appearing on his face. “Are you done?” Eva asked, craning her neck in an effort to catch a glimpse. But Charlie took the canvas off the easel, holding it behind his back away from her.

“I know this probably sounds stupid,” he said. “But...well, it makes me nervous showing my work to someone for the first time. If I give it to you, can you promise not to look until I’m out of the room?”

At his words, all of her warm feelings for him returned. It was this shy, good guy demeanor that had attracted her to him in the first place. “Sure.”

Charlie placed the canvas down and Eva got up, scanning the floor for her clothes. Her work uniform was nowhere in sight and she padded about the room naked while Charlie cleaned his brushes. He told her that he’d put it in the washing machine, because Eva had spilled coffee on her skirt at the diner this morning and he didn’t want it to stain. How sweet. Eva thought with reverence.

Her foot accidentally hit something and she looked down, her eyes falling upon a cardboard box filled with books: art books, biographies, true crime tomes. “Haven’t loaded up that new bookshelf yet?”

Charlie only said that he was going to check on the laundry and she was welcome to look at the portrait once he was gone. As the sound of his steps faded away, Eva crossed her arms over her bare chest and approached the easel, nervous with anticipation.

She greeted it with a gasp.

The woman in the painting was naked, legs splayed, with a rope shoved into her mouth and blue eyes wide from fright. Entering the frame were a pair of masculine arms, the hands wrapped about the woman's throat. They were large hands with long fingers, pale skin covered by a fine layer of red hair...

That can't be me, Eva thought with horror. That's not me.

She heard the footsteps reappear behind her and suddenly, Eva's whole body felt cold. "Your name's not really Charlie, is it?" It wasn't really a question.

The sound of the lock on the front door clicking into place was her only answer.