



QuOTeD

The Question of the Day Podcast

QuestionPodcast.com | Rebekah Smith, Host

Episode III: How did that painting end up in my living room?

THE PAINTING

00:00:00;00

Rob: A serene outside scene with one dark vase that has a mysterious reflection in a window that isn't there.

Jenifer: A façade of a building with a window outside.

Craig: The idea of a warmer, brighter summery place when it's cold outside.

Rob: The whole scene is very happy, except for this really, really dark black urn on the center.

Brian: That's a South American painting.

Jenifer: Somewhere in South America.

Amy: It's nice and warm.

Craig: In the middle of summer, the heat and everything... blooming and so forth.

Amy: Arizona or New Mexico. Perhaps Texas.

RJS: This is Rebekah Smith. You're listening to QuOTeD, The Question of Day Podcast. It's an audio montage of on-the-spot answers to one good question.

In this episode, we make up a story about a painting. We try to explain who is the artist and that painting end up in my living room?

Brian and I had some people over. After dinner we sat around the fireplace and improvised a story about the painting that hangs above the piano. So what you're about to hear is the story that we made up that night.

Thank you for listening and enjoy!

- Brian: There was a soccer championship. They had this huge celebration. They tore up the flag because it was carried around so much. Somebody took this giant flag and put it outside to just try to help them remember the victory that their local team had had.
- Judith: It's a fireplace.
- Rebecca: It's a fireplace with a blanket and some flowers and a black vase behind it.
- Isaac: That blanket is draped very closely to the fire and seems very dangerous.
- Craig: It's the middle of summer or something so that that blanket can be there and not be bursting into flame.
- Isaac: This was something hastily put together to be painted. The blanket does look very quickly and casually strewn across the top of the mantel.
- Amy: The colors are very warm.
- Jenifer: There's a lot of orange in this painting.
- Isaac: Which makes the afghan really stick out.
- Paul: It's a painting of a nice fireplace with a lovely wooden mantel upon it.
- Judith: And with these objects on the mantel, like an afghan, a blue striped afghan...
- Isaac: Light blue and deep purple striped.
- Paul: And plants.
- Isaac: It's likely something the artist put there quickly to create an interesting scene.
- Judith: Maybe it's an azalea in a pot that's sitting on half of the blue afghan.
- Margo: Looks like bougainvillea but that's not native to Minnesota.
- Paul: Spider plants.
- Jenifer: The spider plant.
- Judith: The house has a lot of light in it.
- Amy: Homey.
- Margo: Well this is an arts and crafts home with beautiful detail.
- Brian: I want to call it a duplex. There's units on both sides.
- Judith: In the mirror above the mantel there's reflections of windows.

Paul: Flowers.

Rebecca: In the mirror is an open door.

Rob: When you paint it as a fireplace inside with a mirror built into it, it starts to make a lot more sense.

Rebecca: That is actually my favorite part of the painting.

Jenifer: It is indeed a fireplace with a mantel.

Judith: And then there's a black tall thin vase next to it.

Paul: And a bushy grassy thing on the bottom.

Craig: This is not done from a model or something that someone was looking at, but they were trying to capture a feeling or a moment or something like that.

Rebecca: The perspective of the painting is actually fairly interesting to me, which makes me think that possibly the painter might not be a trained artist. But might be somebody who is painting for fun.

RJS: So that's the painting. It's a warm picture of a fireplace. It has personal items sitting on the mantel. You have the blue afghan, the black vase, flowers and some spider plants hanging around. By the way, you can see that painting on the website. It's at QuestionPodcast.com. If you can, please do me a favor and share it on your social media feed. We are in fact looking for the real artist. I would love to have a conversation with that person. In the meantime, let's get back to our story where we pick up with a description of an imaginary artist.

THE ARTIST

00:04:42;00

Margo: This was painted by...

Judith: Helena Susan Adams.

Brian: It was like she was almost gliding. It was almost like she was a dancer. She had the grace of a dancer even in just simple walking, even with clunky boots. It was amazing how graceful she could be.

Rob: Yeah, I remember that she was tall.

Brian: Carried herself very, very well.

- Rob: Most of the women that I know are about my height, they're quite a bit shorter. So it was strange to look up at her.
- Brian: She had long dark hair, green eyes, chunky leather boots.
- Rob: I don't know if was her boots or if she was just really that tall but...
- Brian: Frequently wore her hair piled on top of her head.
- Isaac: Purposely disheveled.
- Rob: She was always looking down on me with these big green eyes.
- Brian: She smelled like green apples.
- Rob: She smelled like apples or something.
- Margo: Was top in Tupperware Sales in Dallas Texas.
- Isaac: It's pretty well known that Helena was interested in Tupperware for quite a long time.
- Margo: But she strived for something more creative.
- Isaac: She grew up in a family of Tupperware salesmen and her father and mother both were a part of that community.
- Neighbor: Very nice. Had a couple of kids. But she was never really fulfilled.
- Judith: She's been alone for awhile.
- Paul: She has a little bit of asthma, which is why she lives in the dry warm climate.
- Margo: (background).... Oh, right she moved.
- Paul: Yeah, she moved there.
- Neighbor: Her goal was to be a good mom and a good wife.
- Larry: I'm Larry Adams. I'm Helena's husband. I guess I should say ex-husband.
- Rob: She took up painting because her father died a few years ago, maybe three?
- Larry: Right after Larry junior graduated school and was off on his own, I thought Helena and I would travel. But things didn't work out. Her dad was sick. She had to go to Dallas. I understood. I was going to be alone for awhile, but it was important to her. So I tried to be supportive.
- Amy: Therapeutic. To help her grieve the loss of her father.

Rob: And that's what that black urn is.

Neighbor: That's what led her to the painting class.

Rob: The painting was a method to get through it.

Neighbor: 'Cause she felt like she needed to improve herself and to be creative and to have something that was hers and not her kids' and not her husband's.

Larry: Well I don't think anybody notices when they start drifting apart. You just drift apart. I mean, there was an age difference. Helena had gone to school, to college right after high school. And I had been in the army. I had done two hitches. I was eight years in and then I went to college on the G.I. bill. So there was the age difference. But we were in love. It didn't make any sense to me. Just suddenly one day it seemed there was a change. Helena seemed a little bit bored. And I can understand that. 'Cause I was still traveling for work and she was home. But as long as Larry junior was around there was stuff for her to do. When Larry junior went away I think that the boredom got to her.

Neighbor: So she decided to take the painting class and um... That was one of her first works that she was incredibly proud of and so she displayed it in her living room for many years.

Larry: During that summer that Helena spent with her dad in Dallas, she started taking art classes.

Neighbor: Well they held them at the community center. It took a little convincing for him to participate in that because he really didn't understand why she needed to take the art class.

Larry: George was sick but he didn't require 24-hour care and she needed something to do.

Margo: Although she lived in Dallas, Texas, she grabbed a scene from the Caribbean that had the beautiful flowers and the blanket and... That was her escape.

Larry: I just think that there wasn't enough to keep her busy and she needed something.

Judith: She stumbled across this wonderful man.

Margo: The father's next door neighbor was this young man. Youngish.

Larry: Maybe if she had kept taking pictures, taking pictures would have provided that for her. But it didn't. She wasn't taking pictures. The camera equipment was gone. It was probably my fault. I shouldn't have let her sell it.

Margo: And he had helped the father. And that's how she met him.

Larry: After college Helena and I got married. I guess we always knew it was going to happen. It was just a matter of when. About, oh I guess it was probably a year a half after we got

married, George came along. George was her dad's name and we named him after him because she was really close to her dad. Once George came along, I was involved with work; we didn't take the trips because it was just so much trouble to pack up the baby and the camera equipment. And then one day were looking for houses and we were really strapped for a down payment and Helena said that she could sell her view camera. And I said, "No, you shouldn't do that." But it seemed to make sense at the time.

- Brian: And Matt was the gentleman who had been sort of caretaking for her father.
- Judith: And I think the reason the afghan is up there on the mantel is because they just had sex.
- Larry: When we were in college we would take weekend trips. One summer we even went out to the West and... Helena always just worshipped photographers like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston and the great black and white scenics. And she wanted to do that kind of work. And I liked camping and being outdoors so I went along with her. We had a great time. We were in love. Nothing was too much trouble. We would hike up to the top of the mountain so she could get a better angle on some stupid sunrise shot.
- Judith: It was like an opening for her. You know. She wanted to commemorate it. She wanted to remember it. It was special for her.
- Brian: She fell pretty hard. But Matt wasn't necessarily all that interested.
- Judith: She doesn't know if she'll see him again, but she hopes so and so there... She makes the painting of it.
- Brian: So this was a moment in time that sort of expresses sort of how she felt at the height of her time with Matt.
- Jenifer: This painting came at the height of her relationship with Matt. But she was also in class with Roger at the time.
- Judith: It's just that moment in time of who she was at that time. But there is so much more to her.

THE ART TEACHER

00:11:32:00

- Isaac: I'm actually friends with the teacher of the class that Helena took. Well, friends? Maybe more of an acquaintance. But his name is Roger.
- Roger: Yes, I do remember her, as a matter of fact. I've had a lot of students and some of them I don't remember anymore, I'm sorry to say. But, yes, I remember her very well.

- Isaac: He mentioned Helena as someone that he thought showed promise and enthusiasm.
- Roger: Well she was a little older than many of the students that come to me. And so she had a little different attitude toward the whole thing. I mean she wasn't a flighty twenty-year-old who – "I want to be a great artist." That was not her goal. In fact, at the beginning I wasn't very sure about what her goal was... where she wanted to go with it.
- Isaac: ...had a good sense for color.
- Judith: There's a richness to it. Either she did it because of her training. Or instinctually she chose complementary colors as her dominant palette.
- Roger: Well, yes. The earliest things that she did... she did some very quick studies and all of that. It appeared to me as I talked with her and looked at her work that she had a conflict. There was something going on. I don't know what it was. I don't know if it was with a boyfriend or God almighty or whatever it happened to be. But she did not seem comfortable in her own skin.
- Isaac: Perspective she was working on.
- Roger: So we started off doing what I call "getting comfortable in your own skin" kinds of work. And that to a large extent means that you just fly. You put a time limit on their painting and you ask them to go at it. And whatever happens is right. And you have to sort of pound that into them for awhile before they get it. But whatever is, is. I am that I am. And that's a very, very important thing for her. Not only in her painting but I'm sure in her life. So we did a lot of studies for awhile. We sort of splashed around, frankly. We did some watercolors, which of course are extremely difficult. You usually don't start off a beginner with that. But we did... We did some finger painting. And we did some... I don't know. We'd throw some things at the canvas to see what will stick. And through that process, something happened to her.
- Isaac: He mentioned this painting specifically, actually, as a way for her to practice that perspective.
- Roger: I really don't think she could have painted this without resolving what was going on with her, which I never did discover, by the way. And... it's none of my business anyhow.
- Rebecca: It looks like it was composed with one or two brushes. Like the background was composed with one flat big brush but then all of the details were created with one or two brushes, which kind of indicates to me that it was somewhat of an amateur.
- Roger: But this still life has a, how shall I say it, very soothing quality to it. The scarf and the green plants... and there she is right in the middle. She is just sitting there quite calmly. And it's a little hard for a vase to do anything but sit calmly. But, that's what I saw. I saw that it was her.

- Isaac: There's some break in the perspective but it's pretty good. But especially the color. The color is very nice and Roger did too.
- Roger: Of course it's not remarkable for any artist to incorporate himself or herself into the painting in various kinds of ways. Often times it's unconscious.
- Judith: As an abstract perspective isn't necessarily... you don't have to do it in perfect perspective. What's more important is your composition and your color.
- Roger: If somebody else looks at it, of course they don't see that. And if I had not had my previous experience with her, of course I would have just said, "Well, it's an interesting still life blah blah blah. Obviously she has some technique."
- Judith: And there's a lot of energy in it and a lot of warmth in it that says something about her... the fact that she would move home to help take care of her father before he died...
- Roger: But after I went through it with her and this is what she came up with, I was blown away. I was absolutely blown away.
- Brian: After her time with Matt was over it changed her emotionally.
- Roger: You can't pack everybody off to a psychiatrist. It just doesn't work that way. If you're talking about an artist, they work out their problems, whatever they need, whatever it is, through their art. That's nothing new. Playwrights have been doing it and novelists have been doing it and painters and sculptors, you know. We can go to any period in history and that's the case. Now, I don't know if she was coming off of that and something had happened, which of course wouldn't be new. That's psychiatrist kind of stuff. And I'm not a psychiatrist. I'm an artist, so...

ABSTRACTS OF TUPPERWARE

00:18;14;00

- Paul: She became a bit more adventurous and tried different things.
- Judith: Maybe why she started a relationship with her painting teacher, Roger.
- Jenifer: Abstracts of Tupperware.
- Paul: She worked with a medium that she understood.
- Brian: And she felt the need to try to do something else because this sort of felt like it was in the past and it wasn't as important to her anymore. So she tried to do some stuff with abstracts. She started with what it was that she knew, which was Tupperware.

- Amy: Some people thought her earlier Tupperware work was offensive in some ways.
- Brian: It wasn't that people were offended by the imagery in it or anything like that. It's just... It's just didn't feel like there was anything terribly original about it and she was kind of derided as somebody not very interesting.
- Margo: However, I think the one show with the stick figures was alienating. The press was right that it was not proper. Not proper, not indicative of some of the higher museums openings that she had in that it was a little... it was upsetting.
- Rob: It was so mundane. It was so simple to most people. However, Tupperware is expensive. It's not something you can just have lying around. So on one hand it was boring. On the other hand, it was exclusive. It spoke of inequality. She might not have had a lot of money, but there was so much Tupperware lying around. This expensive commodity, she could just stack it up and paint it whenever she wanted. Not everybody has opportunities like that. And I think that really goes under a lot of people's skin.
- Craig: And of course let's not forget the literally thousands of people who can't look at pieces like this without remembering the countless bowls of cereal that they ate out of these toxic bowls, the picnics with the deviled eggs in the little egg-shaped carriers. Those are very painful memories for a lot of people when they think about the long-term impacts to their health of what seemed like a blissful part of their childhood.
- Jenifer: I ate a lot of iceberg lettuce out of the lettuce holder.
- Judith: She had a real drive to unveil the ecological damage that's being done by petroleum-based products. And it just happened to be Tupperware was the thing that she used. And I think that she was not able to speak out loud when she was a child because it was so prevalent in her home. And so she worked it into her art. And that's why there was so much resistance to it. Also because you know people use it all the time. They use Tupperware everyday and they don't want that thrown in their face that they're using a dangerous product.
- Jenifer: Is there a piece of Tupperware in this particular piece?
- Paul: Underneath the afghan, if you look really close you can see the edge of the shape.
- Jenifer: And this was the time that she just was sort of taking in Roger's opinions and thoughts. And we know Roger doesn't like Tupperware. She sort of disowned who she was for a moment and she put the Tupperware under the blanket in that time.
- Rob: That's part of the reason the painting is so much of a departure from her original self is her hiding that Tupperware, her trying to move more inclusive.

- Brian: It was just derivative of something and it didn't mean all that much. It was sort of a cheap inspiration because she had been surrounded by it for so long.
- Paul: In deconstructing artistically the Tupperware, she was deconstructing her life in a sense, which was so tightly linked at that time to that product line. And it just kind of brought her to the place where she realized that those are just mental constructs in the end made of petroleum. Likewise she was simply a construct of the culture in her immediate experiences. And so that eventually she dove deeply into that, into that exploration and really came to a new realization of herself and certain aspects of existence in the world itself that brought her to a... transcend to a new understanding of art and the self.
- Brian: She learned from that and used that as the step to kind of make the change to be able to do stuff that I think is much more interesting now.
- Judith: She ventured even into Surrealism. So she had like dripping spoons and melting plates and things like that.
- Jenifer: She began melting Tupperware onto canvas.
- Roger: A very strange thing started to happen. She's obviously wants to be a realistic painter. But...
- Brian: Roger felt like she kind of got away from really what her potential would be. I think maybe she would have disagreed.
- Roger: She kind of reverted back to what we had initially done. And she started working abstractly. And... I mean, abstract is very difficult. I mean the Picassos look simple and da, da, da, da, da. But, they of course they are not. And I think it's in a certain way more difficult to work in the abstract. So she had problems with that, but she pushed on.
- Judith: It seemed to reflect in advance in her awareness that, you know, sometimes life just melted on you.

SOMETIMES LIFE JUST MELTED ON YOU

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- Larry: George died. It was probably late August. And then Helena came back. I was so happy to hear that she was coming back. I mean, I was sad about George. But I missed her so much. I even took the bedroom that George and Larry junior shared as kids and I turned it into a little studio for her. I cleaned out all of the bedroom furniture. I bought and easel and put it in there. I didn't even know what kind of stuff she used. But I was happy to have her back and I wanted to support her art. I don't really have much of an eye for that kind of thing. But it's really important to her and like I said I was just so happy to have her back. Well she seemed kind of lukewarm to the little studio I had set up. But I

thought maybe I just hadn't done much of a job with it. She stacked her paintings in there and put her art supplies in there. One day when she went shopping I went into the room and I was kind of flipping through the paintings that she had sitting on the floor leaned up against the wall. And there was one that... it was just really nice. It was colorful and it was really... just a nice painting. So I took it out of her little studio and I put it up in the living room over the piano. Seemed like a nice thing to do at the time. Helena came home and saw it over the piano and she just looked at me and she was upset, clearly. I don't know why but she wasn't happy. And I said "Look, if I've invaded your space or something like that, I'm sorry. I'll take it down. She said, "No, you don't have to take it down." But I could tell she wasn't happy.

- Jenifer: That's when she really hit her height as an artist.
- Brian: That move into surrealism alienated Roger from her.
- Isaac: Roger would say this painting specifically really... It's hard to, it's hard to point to an inspiration. It's not derived from a different artist. It very much is Helena.
- Roger: I didn't see that any of her work was as promising as the one we had just talked about. She had pushed on. And I felt very good that she had pushed on. And she felt very good that she had pushed on.
- Larry: So Helena had been back from Dallas for about a week. One afternoon I went out to get the mail and there was a package. Pretty good sized package. Kind of squishy. It was in one of those Tyvek envelope things. And it was from Matt. I don't know who Matt was, but it was from Dallas. I brought it back into her. I said, "You've got a package here from Dallas." And she opened it. And it was an afghan. Fairly ugly afghan, I thought, but... I realized it was the same afghan that was in the painting. And I said, "So, what's the deal with the afghan?" She just looked at me and didn't say anything, turned around and walked out of the room. There was a note in with the afghan. I know I shouldn't read it. But things didn't feel very good. The note said, "I changed my mind. M."
- Isaac: Roger felt like she lost that when she moved into the more surreal things.
- Larry: We just kind of looked at each other and I said, "You're not happy." And she said, "I guess not."
- Brian: She found herself repudiating this particular period of her work, which is why she let this painting go. She gave it away.
- Larry: We had one of those very civilized, very cold, very sterile divorces. It was uncontested on both sides. We let the lawyers split up our stuff. I ended up with the house 'cause she didn't want it. The one thing that I got was the painting that she hated so much or maybe she loved it so much. I don't know. But the painting that started the whole argument when she got back ended up with me.

THE PAINTING ENDED UP IN A GARAGE SALE

00:28;21;00

- Judith: It was in a garage sale. I don't remember if was Becky's sister?
- Becky: It came into my hands through my parents.
- Judith: Something like that. And she didn't know what to do with it. And then they had a family gathering and they decided this year that they were going to do... I don't remember again it was mom, cousin, sister... but they were going to exchange gifts. And they were going to do kind of like a white elephant type of thing.
- Becky: My Aunt Sadie, my mom's sister, is not... she's not doing really well. She's still on her own but... her kids are caring for her a lot. I don't know if it's Alzheimer's or dementia or... But she's not who she used to be. She really was a neat woman. She used to have a gift store. I remember being a kid and going into her gift store and she had... you know she had pretty good taste. Not exactly my taste all the time, a lot of diddly stuff, but um, too many candles maybe. But she was a good woman.
- Mom: We go out every night almost for supper because she likes to go out to the bar for supper and two or three drinks and... She just likes to do it and we've been trying to accommodate her. You know that one little thing that she wants to do.
- Becky: And... my parents liked to take her out and give her kids a little bit of a break because she can be a challenge now. She gets kind of "looping", as I like to say, in the way she talks about things. And one of the things that she likes to do is shop. And shopping can be expensive. And she doesn't really want it. She just wants the experience of shopping. So my folks who really... they're not shoppers themselves. They figured out that the way to do it is to bring her to Goodwill.
- Larry: Louise and I had been married for – I don't know – a little over a month, six weeks, something like that. And I had to go to New York for a two-week training. And Louise... I knew she had been kind of interested in the idea of redecorating. After Helena left, my house turned into kind of a guy's place anyhow. I mean, there was a lot of junk around. I had that chair that all guys love and all women hate for some reason.
- But Louise said would it be okay if she changed the furniture. And things were going pretty good for us and so I said sure. She could do it while I was gone. And so she ordered a bunch of new furniture, all modern stuff. It wasn't what I had before. None of it was comfortable.
- Becky: They brought her to Goodwill one day and they saw this picture that was hanging up on the wall at Goodwill. I don't know what they paid for it, thirty dollars or something? They brought it home. She was completely delighted and my dad got out the ladder, put

a picture hanger on the wall and hung it over her fireplace and left. And just she was so happy about it.

Larry: After I got back from that training in New York I was driving down the alley and pulled into the garage and as I pulled in I saw that... well Louise had taken the painting that I liked so much and put it with the trash. It was out there for the garbage men to pick up.

Becky: Well they come back the next week to take her out again, out to dinner and for their shopping expedition to Goodwill and the picture is gone. There it was, just the hook and no picture. Well, my dad's been through this before. So he goes out into the garage and there it is stacked in the stacks of other stuff.

Mom: And she likes being able to go out in the garage and piddle paddle around... I think in some ways it's nice for her to be able to do that because they say the more you do, the better it is for you.

Larry: I knew she didn't like it. But I didn't think that she would just get rid of it. I was kind of broken up about that. I don't know why. I wanted to pick it up, but I didn't. I left it there.

Mom: I said, "Well, you know what we could do..." I said, "You tell me what you want to put in your garage sale and I'll put same tables out front out in the driveway and we'll have a garage sale."

Larry: We had dinner. We went to sleep. The next morning, having coffee in the kitchen. Louise is busy doing something. I don't know what. I hear those big diesel garbage trucks rumbling down the alley.

Becky: So fall time came and they were clearing out the garage and the picture was up for sale. And my Aunt Sadie, who if she loves anything more than shopping it's playing store. Just is in her element. She's got her cash box down there and her change. I think it probably reminds her of the gift shop.

Larry: They're so noisy and so early in the morning. I could hear them getting closer and closer. And I knew that the painting was probably still out there unless someone had taken it overnight. I kind of hoped that someone had taken it overnight.

Becky: My parents came over. They were helping out at the garage sale. And lo and behold somebody comes up and wants to buy the painting.

Larry: I could hear the garbage trucks next door.

Becky: And Aunt Sadie who... it only lasted a week in her house and then ended up back out in the garage... just becomes attached to this thing again.

Larry: So I went out back wearing a housecoat and slippers in the snow. Not the smartest thing to do but... I went out back and I took the painting. It was still there just before the

garbage men got there. They kind of laughed at me for the way I was dressed. We waved and smiled. I took the painting and I put it in the trunk of my car. I couldn't take it back inside. I didn't want Louise to be upset about it. She had clearly thrown it away because she didn't want it around anymore.

Becky: Just slay me if I ever get that attached to things. So anyway, Aunt Sadie who was not the least bit interested in this picture and it could have disappeared and she wouldn't have thought anything more of it was... once it was going to be bought, suddenly was completely consumed by its value again. And she came to find out that... asked this woman what she was going to do with it, where she was going to hang it in her house, I think is what Mom and Dad said that she said. "Where you gonna hang that in your house?" And this woman said, "No I'm not going to hang it. I'm going to paint over it. I'm an artist and I'm going to paint over it." Aunt Sadie turned on a dime and just could not, could not let it go.

Mom: She always looks good. She looks like a million bucks to tell you the truth. She looks better than I do, I'll tell you that. I mean, she looks like she always did. You wouldn't know anything was wrong with her until, you know, talk to her.

Becky: She was not going to have any of it. And they could tell to that if they pressed her too hard that she probably, she'd probably have an episode as Mom and Dad call it, "an episode", which is just really kind of where she blows her stack and starts yelling. They thought it best to just let this woman, customer go by. She kind of, I think, knew that Aunt Sadie was not operating under her full capacity and walked away without buying the painting.

Larry: So later that afternoon, I made an excuse to go out. I went to the Goodwill store and I gave them the painting. So our old furniture and Helena's painting ended up at the Goodwill. I never saw it again.

THE FORD TAURUS, A DINING ROOM TABLE, FIVE CHAIRS AND A PAINTING

00:37;03;00

Judith: She wrapped it up and gave it to Becky for Christmas one year.

Becky: So Mom and Dad came up for Thanksgiving in their Ford Taurus packed to the gunnels. I don't know how they did it. They got that dining room table into their tiny little car. You know, Dad can take anything apart. Those chairs though... I don't know how he got 'em in. Well he couldn't get 'em all in, because they had to leave one behind. But they got five of the chairs in and then had a little slice of space left so popped the painting in.

Mom & Dad [Happy Birthday song]

...and many more. I know you're working. I'm going to call you there and torture you too.

- Becky: You know how sometimes when you have those visits with your parents where you just feel like a grownup. We cleaned the house top to bottom 'cause Mom and Dad, man they are... they might be getting up in the years but they can still spot the dirtballs. Or if they can't, I spot 'em on their behalf. So we cleaned it top to bottom.
- Dad: Hi Becky. This is Dad. Just curious how you was doing. I had a big flock of geese just come right down over the top of the house. Just beautiful. Weird. Anyway, was wondering how you was doing. I had a computer question for you, but that's not important. Hope you're doing okay. Bye.
- Becky: You know there's something special about your dad doing something for you. You know how that is? I mean, he brought his tools up. I'm an adult. I have a hammer. But, you know, Dad brings his hammer. God bless him. He put the table back together and then he had my husband come. They turned it over. Mom got the Pledge out and wiped it down and got the tablecloth ironed and the candlesticks polished. Now Mom's the only one I know that still polishes silver, but she polished the silver and put the candlesticks on there.
- Dad: We had macaroni and tomatoes tonight with Becky's tomato sauce. Wow. That was good. Macaroni and tomato sauce and salmon. It was really good. Just wanted to thank you for it. Bye.
- Tracy: Hi Becky. Hi Brian. It's Tracy. I was just calling to wish you luck and tell you that I love you and that we're thinking about you. And everything's going to be fine. I know that you're probably a little bit stressed out. But you know, let people take care of you and it will all go good. So... love you. Talk to you later. Bye-bye, honey.
- Mom: Hi Becky. Just curious to hear about your trip. I talked to Amy yesterday and she was telling me about how much fun you had. I just wondered how everything was. Aren't those kids the cutest ever? Bye-bye.
- Becky: And then they brought in the painting.
- Margo: But Becky didn't really want it.
- Becky: So Dad, as he had done at Aunt Sadie's, got out the ladder and hung that picture up.
- Margo: She was just being polite.
- Becky: And the minute he hung it up, I just thought, yeah. There was something really satisfying about it. It was original art. Somebody had a creative impulse, had sat down and devised a palette. And it was neat.

00:40:47;00

- Margo: So she puts it on eBay.
- Becky: It's super easy to get rid of something you don't like.
- Dentist: So I was getting my car fixed. I was sitting in Jiffy Lube. And I was going through Facebook and there was this painting. I saw this link to this painting.
- Becky: But if you get rid of something that you're kind of attached to, there's... You spin the karma wheel a little bit better. Like there's something that makes me stronger. It's better exercise. It's like putting the Stairmaster on twelve, if I get rid of something that I'm a little attached to.
- Margo: And the bidding started at 100 dollars.
- Becky: When I first put it on eBay, I put a value on it that I thought was completely ridiculous. You know, a hundred dollars. What the heck?
- Margo: It went to \$150, 2, 250, 3.
- Dentist: Yeah, I was bored. So I bid on it. I bid three hundred seventy-five dollars on this painting.
- Becky: When somebody bid on it... Okay, this is kind of a confession here. This is a little bit embarrassing. As soon as I saw somebody put a hundred dollar bid on it, I called up a friend of mine and I told him to bid on it.
- Dentist: I went and did some other stuff and came back to it and I see somebody else has bid on it. Matt Lonestar.
- Becky: So I'm sort of like bidding against myself on eBay. It's just so goofy.
- Dentist: And I bid again. And he bids. So I'm in this bidding war suddenly just sitting in, getting my car fixed... with this Matt Lonestar.
- Becky: It's up to four hundred bucks. I wasn't sure what the heck was going on.
- Dentist: It was a nice painting. I liked the painting. It looked nice. It was a nice painting but I wanted to get this painting. It was... I wanted to... I wanted to... I wanted to win. To be the one who actually got the thing.
- Becky: It just became. Yeah, it became something else. It became... It just made me feel like Aunt Sadie hadn't really lost it, you know. Here she was. She had a good eye. Part of her that still knew, could pick out, had that good taste that she used to have in her gift store was still there. And I guess we want to feel like people are who they were. So...

- Dentist: I don't know who this guy was. Matt Lonestar. I wondering is this like... is he in a parallel universe? You know, is he sitting in a Jiffy Lube, you know, getting his car worked on like I am, bidding on a painting? Is that's what's going on?
- Becky: You know, now I wasn't sure I really wanted to sell it when it came right down to it.
- Dentist: There I was, determined to be triumphant. And I was.
- Margo: At finally at \$950 the bidding closed.
- Dentist: I probably overpaid for it. But, you know. I guess that's all right. It's not the most convenient time to be buying a painting, since I'm moving.
- Becky: I did have some regrets. The money was just too much. You know I couldn't... I just couldn't justify to not sell it for that amount. It was, you know, almost a thousand dollars. And that's just a lot of money. I had already gotten the check. So I had a deal. There was no way out of it at that point.
- Margo: It ended up in the office of a very well known dentist.
- Dentist: I put the painting up right by the elevator. So as soon as you walk in that's the first thing you see. Made the office, kind of warmed up the office a little bit. Made it look nice.
- Becky: When I wrapped it all up, you know I had to wrap it pretty well because now it's a thousand-dollar, almost a thousand-dollar painting. So I had to like really pay to wrap it up.
- Dentist: Every day I'm going up the stairs, I often say hi to the receptionist of the law office on the second floor. One day I was feeling fairly brave and I stopped in and I asked her out. I wanted to see what she'd say.
- Becky: I guess I had a chance to step outside of my regular self. Instead I sold it. And um...
- Dentist: She said, "Not until you get better taste in art." Not until I get better taste in art? Okay. So, I could take that a lot of different ways. I took it to mean, she's kind of letting me down easy. She wasn't really that interested. She's being nice. I get that. I totally understand. I didn't think too much more about it.

MORE TUPPERWARE

00:45:10:00

- Craig: The value of these paintings really did take off, at least locally, once people understood enough of the history to realize that this was the same woman that in her twenties was a well respected landscape architect.

- Dentist: Every once in awhile, if I was coming in early in the office on a Monday morning, I'd bring her a latte. I'd bring a latte, drop it off, talk you know, maybe make a joke or two, just some small talk before I headed up to the office.
- Craig: The precision of her black and white photographs is so different from what she did later in life after all of these things happened. She had to deal with the death of her father. Everything changed for her and so that contrast, you know, with that precise black and white photography of her, really her early and mid twenties, really made people more interested in collecting this work now.
- Larry: Her black and white photography was amazing. It was really important to her. She did a lot of good black and white work. Made some beautiful big prints. We some of them at the house.
- Isaac: In all of her black and white landscape photography there's actually a piece of Tupperware hidden somewhere that's barely visible but definitely there.
- Larry: One time we were camping and I had left kind of a mess around the campfire. And Helena was setting up for this really nice shot of half dome. It's a big rock formation that Westin had done and Adams had done. When we did our half dome shot I left some Tupperware in the picture by mistake beside the edge of the campfire. Since it was black and white it didn't, you know, stand out. And she just left it in there when she made the print. And after that it was kind of a joke. We would sneak a tiny piece of Tupperware into the edge of the picture someplace. It was a private joke just between the two of us. No one else ever saw those things. But we knew it was there and it was important to us. It was kind of a secret laugh between us.
- Dad: Hey, I just want to thank you for the chili sauce. I already made me a chili sauce pickle sandwich awhile ago, on toast. I used to make those when I was a kid. It was really good. Your Mom had some and she's cooked fried rice tonight so we can put some of that on there 'cause it really goes good with fried rice. Thanks again. You're probably out shoveling the snow from what I seen in the paper. My goodness. Talk to you later. Bye.

THE BIKE ACCIDENT

00:48;29;00

- Craig: So I think the real mystery we're all interested in is how it ended up in Becky's living room.
- Dentist: And one morning she says, "So, have you gotten rid of that painting yet?" I thought, what is that about? Is she serious? And that night I was staying late at the office. The receptionist for our office was gone, the hygienist was gone. I was walking towards the

door. Got my coat. Put it on. Stopped. Looked at that painting. Thought about it for a minute. Took it down. Carried it down the stairs. Put it in the car and that was that.

Craig: It never would have happened... I mean the odds are astronomical, that it would end up back here except for that car accident and the legal trouble that came afterwards.

Becky: I was on my bike. I had a big gallon of ice cream. It was one of those big gallon tubs.

Dentist: I was pulling out of the alley.

Becky: So there I am biking along in a kind of wobbly way on this bike. And there was a car that came out of an alley and...

Dentist: A woman on a bike hit my car.

Becky: Of course, like an idiot fell down. Actually scraped my shin on the side of the pedal.

Dentist: And she was on the ground. I was concerned as any person would be. So I got out of the car.

Becky: I've got those stupid kind of pedals with the brackets on 'em, which are great except when you're... need to get out of them quickly. And the bike kind of came over top of me and I scraped my shin. And I was embarrassed for being on the sidewalk.

Dentist: And she seemed kind of embarrassed. I think she realize she hadn't been paying attention. And she said, "No, no no..."

Becky: The guy could not have been nicer. He was such a sweetheart. He got out. And I think I dented his car a little bit but he was... all he was really concerned about was me.

Dentist: And said, "Are you okay? Can I help you?"

Becky: He said, "Well, at least... I've got some paper towels in the car. Come on over and I'll give you a paper towel to put around where that... your shin is bleeding." So I hobbled over there and...

Dentist: So I opened up back door of the car and got some paper towels.

Becky: And I looked in and... Of course there's no mistaking it. There's only one painting like that... and

Dentist: And I pull of a paper towel for her and she's looking at that painting like she just saw a ghost.

Becky: There it was. The weird thing... He had it upside down. But I of course recognized it immediately. I could not have mistaken it.

- Dentist: I didn't really think much of it. I gave her a paper towel and she wiped the blood off of her leg.
- Becky: I mean the combination of circumstances. Never, I almost never, never ride on the sidewalk. Had I not been trying... balancing that gallon of ice cream, I would have stopped my bike before I hit a car. And you know had he been a jerk he would have yelled at me about the car instead of helping me out. So... and then even to think of well it could have been wrapped up, it could have been in his trunk, it could have been just backwards on the seat. I would have never, ever have known. I was already a little bit embarrassed because I had run into his car and I didn't want to now say... ask him about the painting because he would have thought I was completely ridiculous. So I just let it go and he asked me...
- Dentist: I asked her, "Is there anything else I can do for you? Really, are you alright?" And she said, "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."
- Becky: I just wanted to get the heck back.
- Dentist: I got into my car. Drove down the street. She got on her bike.
- Becky: I'm going the same way he is and he's a couple of blocks ahead.
- Dentist: Traffic's slow and the bikes are moving faster than traffic.
- Becky: There are a bunch of people stopping to wait for a light on that street.
- Dentist: She's waving at me. I'm wondering, is everything still okay? I don't know what's going on.
- Becky: Hopped off my bike, it was like "Hey!"
- Dentist: At the stoplight she knocks on my window.
- Becky: I must have looked a little crazy because he looked, actually looked kind of startled.
- Dentist: So I roll down the window.
- Becky: And he rolled down his window and he said, "Are you okay? Are you okay?"
- Dentist: It's loud. Obviously there's traffic. It's loud. There's a big garbage truck right nearby. It's doing whatever garbage trucks do. And she's talking in the window saying...
- Becky: "Tell me about the picture."
- Dentist: Blah, blah blah painting. My hearing isn't very good on that side.
- Becky: Without even saying anything, he got out of the car right there in the lane of traffic.

- Dentist: My understanding was that she wanted the painting.
- Becky: He opened up the backdoor and he handed me the picture. And he said, "I think it belongs to you."
- Dentist: I said to her, "Take it. It's yours."
- Becky: At that point, he hops back in the car. He closes the door and he's gone. And that was it. The last I saw him. So I'm standing there in the middle of traffic. Now people are honking because I've stopped this traffic.
- Dentist: The funny thing was she left the bike leaning up against a tree and walked down the sidewalk with the painting.
- Becky: I've got a gallon of melting ice cream and this large orange painting in my hand and a bicycle. So...
- Dentist: I never saw the painting again.
- Becky: I couldn't manage it all. I just walk home with this picture and this gallon of ice cream.

WHAT HAPPENED?

00:54;18:00

- Larry: I guess I'm the most gullible guy on Earth. Long story short is that now it's Louise's house and I live in an apartment. I'm on my own. I still don't do much of a job of taking care of myself and my apartment looks like a guy lives there. But I don't spend my time wondering about somebody else's emotions and somebody else's well-being. I've started taking black and white photos again, though. I don't put Tupperware in them anymore. But I'm enjoying spending the time outdoors. And my photos are getting better. Still not as good as the ones that Helena made. But... maybe someday.
- Craig: The brightly colored circles and rectangles stacked on top of one another in one of her more typical paintings today are actually Tupperware and the colors of Fiesta Ware used in a very abstract way.
- Dentist: So the following Monday I brought in two lattes one for myself and one for Berta. And I brought it to her desk and said, "I have something to show you."
- Neighbor: Once they moved out of our local neighborhood my world was just pretty much the cul-de-sac, in our neighborhood. And so... We kind of lost touch. Did the Christmas cards here and there. But I haven't heard from Helena in many, many years.
- Dentist: So we both got into the elevator, went up to the fifth floor. Elevator doors open and we just stood there and stared at a blank wall.

- Rob: Every time there's a spotting of Adams, the values of all her works go up.
- Larry: Louise had been gone for over a year. I went to an exhibition I thought be interesting. It was supposed to be black and white architectural photography. When I got there the place was filled with kind of modern abstract art. And I asked the people at the desk, I said, "What happened to the photography?" And they said, "Oh, that was two weeks ago. You missed that exhibition." Well, I was there. So I went in and looked at the abstract art. And across the room I saw Helena.
- Rob: And so the longer this hangs on the wall, for now at least, the more valuable it becomes.
- Larry: Some of her art was there. She was doing abstracts now. I don't know how good they were. I'm not really into that kind of thing. But she was there and she saw me and I saw her. We couldn't avoid it. So...
- Margo: Even though her latest sighting was in Las Vegas. She was working housekeeping at the Hotel Sands.
- Larry: I asked her if she had found – I don't know how to say this – if she had found another husband. But it's not what I said. I think I said something like "What's going on in your life?" or something like that.
- Neighbor: Well, I think the women in the neighborhood would a little bit envious and admired her... the fact that she kind of branched out and did something on her own and embraced her creative side and looked at it as quite innovative for the time at the time and brave. They looked at her as brave for perusing it and being creative. Yeah, so she did have an impact.
- Larry: And she volunteered that she was still alone, that she was enjoying her art.
- Judith: There's something about that anonymity of just going and working in a hotel and kind of being to get on with like an everyday life and create or paint or do whatever you want.
- Larry: We exchanged email addresses. We probably should have said, "I'll give you my email address, but please don't write me." Because we never did.
- Judith: She's just disappeared into the life, taking care of herself and painting exactly what she wants without any repercussions from anybody. Nobody can get to her.
- Roger: We parted on a very warm note. I said to her, "You know, you've been one of the best students I've ever had." And she looked at me and she said, "Well you're one of the best instructors I've ever had." We both laughed. And she turned on her heel and left. With her paintings, I might add, in tow.
- Narrator: As the party guests found an ending to their story about how a painting of a fireplace ended up in Becky's living room, there was a knock at the door. It was Jim. He and his

date – a tall dark-haired woman with striking green eyes – had just come from a play at the Walker. The couple didn't stay long. But once they finally did head out, the distinct smell of green apples lingered in the air.

RJS: You've been listening the *QuOTeD, The Question of the Day Podcast*. I am Rebekah Smith. Thank you for being here. I had a lot of fun making this episode. A big thank you to everyone who helped me make it. As I mentioned earlier, you can see a picture of the painting we were talking about on the website. It's at QuestionPodcast.com. Question Podcast dot com. Okay. I guess that's all I have. Until next time, take care of yourself.