

I was wearing a sweater accidentally stolen from my dad last Christmas—the weather warranted something warm and it had been conveniently near the front door on my way out. My thumbs escaped through holes that had been worn in the sleeves and I crossed my arms to conserve my internal body temperature. The cold invited itself in anyway though, as it is apt to do, through every exposed pore and hair follicle, creeping towards my core. I shivered. Despite the chill, I was exhilarated to be out in the dreamy morning sun. I wafted down the sidewalk.

I had left the house immediately upon awakening in search of somewhere more peaceful where I could get a sufficient amount of work done. My feet carved their own path into the city, following the impulses that jerked me down different streets until I found myself at the train station—of all places.

There were few bodies populating the station when I arrived, perhaps due to the early hour, and they were all on auto-pilot while their accompanying brains half-slept.

My fingers were sensationally red from the cold and I was adverse to the idea of having them fall off, so immediately after entering the vast marble holding area of the station, I sidled over to a small kiosk to buy a coffee with the notion of warming myself up.

“Two dollars,” the young man behind the counter charged me once I had placed my order.

“For a large!” I marveled. “So *reasonable!* I should have bought two—stocked up for the winter! At a price like that...well, anyway. Here.” I handed him a bankcard and typed in my PIN when prompted. We waited an uncomfortable amount of time.

“It isn’t working,” he told me finally, his expression apologetic. I tried using Visa but he wouldn’t accept it for such a small sum of money, and I couldn’t produce 2 dollars in change. The coffee ended up being free.

So I really *should* have ordered two.

The train station was an ideal place to work because of its endless marble holding court that offered ample seating. Memories from previous visits raced around in the openness until they got caught up in the familiar corners and knitted themselves into a shallow nostalgia. It was too early to be busy; vendors were unfurling their merchandise and the odd patron drifted through, but the vastness of it made everything seem smaller, quieter. The muteness and subtlety of the atmosphere offered me the sought-after camouflage.

I entertained the idea of buying a cheap ticket and taking a day trip to the next town over, since I was so conveniently *here*, but couldn't force myself to decide whether or not I wanted to. Instead I made myself comfortable in a seat by a window and watched as the sun blinked up over the bottom of the windowsill, burning a path in my demeanor—I inhaled the view.

And then I started working.

The scenery around me, populated by sporadic images from my imagination, got transmitted from brain through brush and onto the thick, stark paper in front of me, as if the brush were just another muscle producing an automatic result. The plan had been to do black ink paintings all day, which was not something that took a lot of space or effort, but a good end result required some innovation. There *were* commissions to be completed but I ignored them, focusing more on my own recreational pursuits. No one took any notice of me working subtly in my corner—it was glorious.

All the thoughts that had been building up over the week were leaking out of the back of my brain. The movements of the brush were so rhythmic and the monochrome results were so dramatic. My mind resided in the place where the brush touched the page. It

was a dance—a few brush strokes, more ink, a few more strokes. The sound made by the paper provided the best soundtrack imaginable. I was radiating glory.

And then something happened.

I was shoved back in my brain; the rhythm was gone; my breathing paused on the precipice of an exhale. The atmosphere had snapped. I realized a second too late that I had not hidden myself well enough, not at all.

“Good morning,” said a new companion, who had slid onto the chair next to me while I had been concentrating on my work. “I hope you don’t use language like that when you’re teaching.” She smiled a Lite-Brite smile, denoting the teasing as harmless. She was dressed as if she was about to conduct a job interview, her fashionable dark clothes clinging modestly around her flesh; as if the fabric had wondered if her skin was as perfect as it looked, and had reached out to touch it. My own attire, by comparison, was so over-sized it had hardly even been acquainted with my skin, other than the bunched up sleeves that had been shoved up to my elbows.

“Good morning,” I replied mechanically, after a beat. I straightened my back subtly. I tensed at the realization that there was probably ink streaked in my hair, although hopefully none on my face. Her hair was meticulously straight, which heightened our contrast. Anyone looking at us might have guessed that I was harassing her for change. Upon closer inspection, they would realize that, with the exception of superficial differences of attire and demeanor, we were identical. There was irony dancing around the situation as well: at one point, we had been completely identical in spirit as well as appearance, perfectly in synch as idealistic idiots, but she’d grown up and become a force with ambitions and the means to achieve them. Conversely, I had clung on to my idiocy proudly because I knew my only real desire was to be an artist, that was my only *real* ambition.

“That looks nice,” she said sincerely, gesturing two of her manicured fingers at the paper in front of me and shattering my reverie. Despite being a nightmare, she was fundamentally a good person which I find odd because I was under the impression that the two traits were mutually exclusive.

“Thanks,” I intoned. I inclined my head towards her as if trying to better hear the thoughts going on inside her head, even though I already knew what they were. I even knew in what order she would choose to layer them into the conversation. Most of the items on her agenda, I ventured, would be things I had done recently while stifling better judgment. I knew she wouldn’t ask me why I was running away, though—the same way I wouldn’t ask her how she had found me.

We smiled at each other for a heartbeat. I inhaled slowly, anticipating.

Don’t panic, I instructed myself sternly; and then in response, I assured myself belligerently that I hadn’t actually been panicking. She wasn’t *that* bad.

The first and most pressing thing on her agenda was the lovely dancing Autumn motif that had been stenciled onto the kitchen wall in our apartment the previous night. I reminded her how much we both loved autumn, wasn’t it nice that we both had that in common?, and she explained how our landlord would probably consider it defacement if ‘someone’ didn’t get rid of it promptly. I replicated some of the offending motif on a sheet of paper in front of me using ink, cocking my head sideways and not looking up.

She accepted the defeat.

“Have you gotten any more calls recently?” I asked her, deciding that letting her commandeer the entire conversation would be a bad idea. I looked up, tracing the barely-there bags under her eyes with my own dark pupils. I could tell right away, however, that I had asked an inappropriate question. She exhaled sharply, her eyes turning almost holographic with disappointment and frustration.

“Not since last week,” she informed me severely.

After leaving high school, we had agreed that pursuing a post-secondary form of education would be a good idea; however, I had been at a loss when it came to deciding what to do. It had been her idea for me to become a teacher, and she had graciously gotten me through an entire degree. Now she answered the phone whenever I got a call to substitute; the infrequency of calls gave her a deep sense of failure. “Maybe if you stopped telling them you couldn’t come in, they would call more often,” she added as something of an afterthought. Acid was dripping into her voice.

“They call on inconvenient days,” I mumbled. As soon as she had untangled my incomprehensible slur, her eyes began flashing again.

“We need to pay *rent* sometimes, you know.” Her voice was rising a little but I wasn’t stupid enough to tell her to lower her pitch.

“I know. I’m sorry. I’ll take the next one.”

She inhaled slowly, gathering strength while considering what demeanor to assume.

“I started looking for more long-term positions for you,” she told me. I think she was baiting me. I reached down for one of my brushes so I could keep working and block her out more effectively but my pile of brushes had disappeared. The only remaining one was the one that I had been holding the whole time.

“Come on,” I told her, straddling a laugh. “I don’t even know what mantra I would have to use in order to convince myself to get up every morning if I had a permanent job.”

“That’s another one of your problems,” she pounced on my proclamation. “You keep pretending you’re a little sad, a little *depressed*, but you’re *fine* and you only do it because you think it makes you seem more intellectual, *profound*, more *artistic*.”

Her accusation had been a razor-sharp incision, cutting along my personality. I didn’t even look up at her, I was so wounded. I started developing a new picture but her face

was filling my eyes and was therefore the only thing that would appear on the page in front of me.

“I just had all these expectations,” she explained a little harshly, “and they don’t even exist in your world. My only real desire is to leave so that I can live my own way but I can’t leave *you*.” She hated me, just for that second.

“I don’t care,” I told her flatly, “I have my own expectations.”

“They’re all so unrealistic, though,” she sighed, twisting the knife. I twitched my hand by accident in response and the ink on the brush splattered all over the paper. I reached to get a new scrap of the thick paper from under my chair but the pile had been depleted.

“You won’t have these chances forever,” she warned me. “You have to do something beneficial with your life *now* or else we’ll be meeting with welfare agents.” I snapped my teeth together, trying to decide how to get her to leave me alone for a while so that I could re-compose myself.

There was too much: too much strain and too much presence and too many things that I had to think about too soon. The terrible reality was that the future that I had been looking forward to for so long was already *here* and I had a feeling it was almost over, and I still didn’t know how to mold what I was left with.

“You’re ruining my work,” I said finally, frustrated.

“You’ve got a loose definition of the word *work*,” she snapped. On an impulse, I flung the inky, dripping paper at her, aiming to hit some part of her and smear it with ink. Her impeccable reflexes snatched it out of the air with the same spidery fingers she had used to compliment my work earlier.

“Oh *please*,” she snarled after glancing at the page. “What is *this*?”

“What?!” I said. “What is going on *now*?”

“We’re having a very serious discussion about why your life is going nowhere and all you can do is draw these stupid inkblots! And not even the commissions that you’re getting *paid* to do! You’re painting these idiotic pictures of *yourself!*”

I was enraged. “Now you’re insulting me on purpose,” I countered. “That’s *you*.” I refused her gaze adamantly.

She parried, enunciating “That’s *you*, buddy. It’s all you, all the time.”

“You’re ill,” I told her, closing myself off completely. “Blind and sick and wrong and toxic.”

She slammed the page down on a table next to us and ink leaped off the stark paper. Both of us were at our limit, enraged, breathing so heavily it sounded like a roar. Refusing to look at each other or acknowledge the fact that we were brawling in a public space, we looked down at the page.

And then something happened.

We looked at the picture—studied it, really, and we realized something that neither of us had completely forgotten, although we had both tried. The truth presented to us was a blow to the back of the head, pushing itself to the forefront of consciousness.

We weren’t really two separate people trying to force each other into the other’s lifestyle, we were one person with two opposing ambitions, trying to fit into one mind and reconcile one future, but we were incapable of reaching a satisfactory compromise.