

## Underdrawing

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I don't recognize the stranger in the mirror. There is a foreignness that claws beneath my skin, like maggots drawn to a long-decayed corpse. I do not know what to do with it. I look into her eyes, lined in dark lashes and charcoal liting upward, just barely, at the corners. The flesh of her face curves smoothly down the slope of her cheekbones. The layers of her hair frame her face in blonde curls, bangs resting in soft wisps atop her forehead.

I stare deeper into her brown eyes; the depths of her pupils swallow me, dual black holes set deep within eye sockets.

Her lips part, lush and shiny with sweet gloss. Her teeth are straight and white. When she smiles, and she smiles broadly, there is an ease to the motion that twists my innards like hands upon chicken neck. I watch as her tongue traces over her teeth. The action is casual when she does it, yet I can feel the sickening smoothness on my own tongue, bone pushed and pulled by metal where it used to jut out, contorted now into neat rows.

I envy her ability to smile. I envy the beauty of it, and the feeling of it—how simply she does it, how freely she gives them out, a smile to a pane of reflected glass, a smile to a stranger, a smile to the self, whereas my facial muscles seem to refuse the action, unwilling. They've been strained far too much in practice. Her face does not look as if it is one that has watched itself relentlessly, drilling smiles and expressions in the mirror. She is free from the air of one who has scrutinized their every twitch of muscle, their every word and breath carrying them. To look upon the upward curve of her lips, painted in perfected strokes of cherry, makes me feel as if I

have clawed and scratched my life from charcoal. It smudges my skin and spreads, like a plague of swirling fingerprints, where I touch.

On most days, her constant following is a taunt.

I don't have the time to waste on confronting her today. I have work to complete, surrounded by colleagues watching me and clients listening to me. I have a life I must maintain.

Never have I been good at staying out of my head; but if I can not see her, it is easier to escape from her.

The water from the bathroom sink is cold when it hits my hands. When I grimace, I do not lift my gaze to see if she copies me. I wash my hands. A part of me expects to see charcoal smearing across the paper towels on which I dry my hands. I don't.

Then I leave.

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I don't know if I am able to enjoy the rain anymore. It's raining outside. I always liked the rain—but now my Mary Janes are clicking in furious succession down the office steps, and my ribcage tightens, knowing. My hair will fall to the downpour, despite how long it took me to style it, how many years I spent learning how long to cut it and how to layer it and how to blow dry my hair until it sits *just right* and my face feels as if it is a portrait, perfectly and precisely framed, rather than crayons scrawled by a not unkind, but merely apathetic, hand. The rain does not touch me. I refuse to let it. When I leave the office, I run.

Petrichor used to be my favorite scent. If I am asked my favorite scent, that is my practiced response. I am not sure how accurate it is. When I am surrounded by petrichor on campus, I no longer remember the soothing rhythm of rain on rooftop, nature's metronome, or

how cool the air as it wafts through my bedroom window, or the foggy horizon peeking through endless, flowing treetops on the drive to school.

I think only of my hair.

The car door opens. The handle is wet beneath my fingers.

There is a girl in the passenger seat.

“Sorry,” I say, “I wasn’t able to get out as quickly as I wanted to. I had to scan a bunch of documents before I left.”

The girl does not say anything in response. Earbuds have snaked into her ears, just barely peeking through the mousy strands of hair that obscure her face. People always coveted her hair for its softness; she was always unsatisfied with how it fell.

I start the car.

The engine rumbles.

I flip down the sun visor and open the mirror. Yet, I find that I cannot stomach knowing whether or not the curl of my bangs has crumpled to the rain, and I avoid the gaze of my mirror as I slide it shut.

The girl hides from my gaze as I back out of the office parking lot.

“Do you want to play something?” I ask.

The girl, once again, does not say anything in response.

The car has become a vacuum of sound. Each word I throw out seems to vanish, sucked into the black hole strapped into the passenger seat. All I hear is the rumbling engine.

“Do you like Blondie? I got really into Blondie a while back... actually, she’s why I first cut my hair short. I mean—Blondie isn’t just the lead singer, it’s the entire band, Debbie Harry is just the vocalist. But a lot of people just assume it’s her.”

For a while, I started to believe that I could get people to talk. Years of my life were spent in silence, in fear of speaking to others if their eyes were too sharp, their tones flat with disinterest. Recently, a strange sort of pride lit up in me, like the kindlings of an early flame, when I got the idea that I was someone people felt comfortable speaking to. If I talk enough to people, they eventually start to talk back.

“New Order is pretty good, too. You’ve probably heard at least one of their songs. Right? Dad liked them.”

I look over at the girl. I see only the back of her head.

“His favorite song was ‘Blue Monday’. I guess it’s more well-known among our generation now, but it’s, like, one of their most popular songs. I didn’t want to listen to it when he brought it up, since it’s eight minutes long... but, well, after he died, I finally listened to it all the way through.”

I didn’t mention how I read through the lyrics and cried.

It didn’t matter, anyway. The girl never talked back.

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I don’t realize the girl has gravitated to the photographs upon my walls until she speaks.

“Is this you?”

I have not even had the time to set my keys down and hang my coat up.

She has not looked at the posters that I’ve taped up—bands and video games and ‘90s science-fiction television shows—but, rather, she has been drawn to the photographs I took on my camera, printed, and taped above my desk, alongside tickets for shows I’ve seen and

banquets I've attended and fake awards I've received, drawn on paper plates. Even as she poses the question, her gaze does not meet mine. She is speaking to the photographs.

I walk over to where she stands and follow her eyes. They devour the wall.

In almost all of the photographs, there is a girl with eyes lined in dark lashes and charcoal, liling at the corners; a face that curves smoothly down the slope of her cheekbones; and blonde hair that has been cut short, above her shoulders, and parts in soft, feathered bangs. Her hair must have grown out by now; I have seen it in the mirror.

"Those are kind of old," I say. "They're a year old now, I think."

The girl in the photograph wears a dress in some of the photographs, banquet photos. The fabric hugs her figure, colored like robin eggs and adorned with flowers of pale pink petals and curling brown leaves. It was supposed to have been captured in photograph for her high school graduation. It was not.

"I cried the first time I saw these photos."

The girl beside me scoffs. "Why?"

I look at the gold that shines in hoops from her ears, and falls across the swoop of her collarbone as if it belongs there. I look at the soft curve of her jawline, and the curl of her peach-painted smile, shining and radiant in a way the sun itself, up above, can not manage when captured by camera. I look at the bump, barely perceptible, of her nosebridge; and it is the same bump that I have seen in photographs of my father, as if his nose has been taken and passed on as a gift in lieu of any will or inheritance or life insurance benefits.

"It was the first time that I liked how I looked in a picture. The first time that I ever felt pretty in my entire life," I say, though the photograph looks nothing like me.

"Oh," the girl says. Her voice is stilted, tinny.

“Yeah.”

The girl continues to stare up at the photographs. I notice, then, that we are almost the same height. “You do look pretty in them.”

“Thanks,” I say, even though the compliment does not belong to me.

“You look happy, too.”

“Yeah.” I pause. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

The girl beside me, standing shorter than I, does not have that same happiness. Though I didn’t need to look at her to know that.

“I don’t know what changed. I mean, he died, but I didn’t. I just lived like I died along with him, and I didn’t know how to stop living like that until... I don’t even know. Maybe I lived like I was dead even before he died.”

I look down at the girl below me. I look at her mousy hair, and the thick-rimmed glasses crowding her face, and the mouth full of crooked teeth that mangle her speech into something self-conscious and awkward. Her features are sketches scratched in charcoal. Not the kind of charcoal whose smooth strokes define the light within portraits and landscapes, but the quick scratches that serve as underdrawings for paint’s canvas; the charcoal that is meant to have been covered up, defined solely as the shadow to something more beautiful. It is palpable by the way she carries her body, as if her limbs do not fit her, and she fears she, herself, will swallow the air around her. It is visible in her speech, how her lips never part to reveal anything of herself, yet work, frantically, to produce her words, if only to return back into the safety of silence. She exists in a state of wishing to paint herself into completion, yet, her hands, hidden within pockets, remain incapable. They are too frail to grasp any brush.

When I look at her, I feel pity. She does not deserve it, I know, yet I feel it claw at me all the same.

“I guess I just... got sick of living like that. Living a life I was dissatisfied with, and being the kind of person I wouldn't be able to stand being around.”

The girl says nothing in response.

I don't know how to fill the silence anymore. We stand, side-by-side, staring at the wall before us. Outside, beyond the walls of the room, I hear the metronome of rain pattering down on top of us.

Before I can produce any sort of word-adjacent sounds, she speaks, clumsy and abrupt: “I didn't think it was that bad.”

“It was,” I say. “I just didn't realize it until it got better.”

The silence returns.

When I look back, I stand alone. The girl is gone.