

Canvas

I first met Adam when my mother died. Aunt Jean, my mother's sister, held a reception after the service where he introduced himself. He tried to shake my hand, but I took a step back, guarded. We had a few short words and then I brushed him off.

In the months that followed I floated around the suburbs in a whirlwind, sleeping on couches and crashing at different ex-girlfriends' houses. The commotion of constantly moving got old, and eventually I took Aunt Jean's offer and moved into her garage. Her one stipulation was that I finish school.

We lived together for three years, over the course of which I made no attempt to acquire a degree. My aspirations were to be a full time painter, I argued, but Jean insisted I work toward stability. She was gracious, but tough, and her patience eventually ran thin. She kicked me out at the start of summer.

Immediately, I felt a new weight of pressure as I considered my options. After sleeping in my car for a week I owned up to the sense that somehow I needed to make it on my own. With a new shot of courage, I signed my name to a lease on the world's smallest studio apartment, depleting my miniscule savings account.

I landed a job at Churchill's Pub. It was only by a stroke of luck. Carl, the owner, caught one of the bartenders taking free tastes on a Friday night and when he found him fooling around with a sorority girl in the cold storage, the guy was fired. Carl needed experience that could start immediately. I walked in at exactly the right time. He hired me.

Churchill's Pub was one of seven bars that sat in a row, south of Mahler Street, in downtown Smoggeron. The neighborhood, affectionately known as Seven's Row, was always packed with people. Mindless busy turnover was easy, something I understood.

Painting was the opposite — a slow going slog. Even though I intended to take myself seriously now that I no longer lived with Aunt Jean, my endeavors seemed a mess. I couldn't flee pointless distractions. Downtown kept me inhibited. Painting became my heavy shame of uncertainty.

On a late afternoon in July, Adam walked in to the pub. There was baseball on television as I cleaned glassware behind the bar. He and I made deliberate eye contact before he sat down in view of the game.

Carl cautiously approached and said hello. They shook hands, and Carl asked if I knew who Adam was. I didn't respond, so Carl told me Adam was a regular here. I nodded and poured him a drink.

As the Angels went to the third inning at Camden Yards, Adam watched from under his furrowed brow. His face was beat red. His bulbous nose crooked, with craters. Thin purple splotches marred skin on the back of his hands and around his neck. Weathered texture pulled his cheeks, and his left hand bore only three full fingers. The other two were nubbed. I wondered if he noticed my stare.

Despite his appearance, I saw a boyish way about him. It was familiar. I leaned against the bar and watched him, and I wondered if he ever knew me.

The first time we met came to mind. Whoever thought to invite him to my mom's funeral must've been drunk or senile. The only thing I thought was more pathetic was that he actually made an appearance. It was an unfair surprise to introduce himself at such a sensitive time.

On the day that we buried her I sat in my car afterwards. He tapped on the window and asked to take me to dinner so that we could catch up. I didn't want the pressure. I said I still had a bunch of schoolwork to focus on so it wouldn't work out. He nodded as I drove away from the cemetery.

Now, I polished glassware and he watched baseball. It felt casual. We talked none, except for asking whether or not he'd have another round. He retired at the end of seven innings and five whiskeys. After he paid the bill — not much of a tipper, he pushed in the stool and said it was good to see me. When he walked out I noticed a stiff-legged limp on his right side.

I pried Carl to find out more about him. Carl had viewed the way I interpreted Adam's presence. He quietly analyzed my composure. It was baroque, blatant. I told the truth and Carl was direct with what he knew.

Adam had been coming to Churchill's since before I was born. He drank daily, bet constantly on sports, and dwindled his disability checks in rapid fashion. The man had a perpetual losing streak, and he was occasionally locked up.

Over the course of that summer I served him regularly. We maintained a distant relationship — no conversations carried, no vested interest outside of sports or his next drink, but at least he was there.

My time outside work was nothing but painting. Frustration continued, as I pressed harder to see more than a daunting blank canvas. Discovering the right palettes and mediums seemed an impossible task. I doubted myself and constantly started over. Finding satisfaction with a completed piece was rare. It drained me until I wondered if I even knew how to paint. This uncertainty grew into monotony.

The newness of Churchill's Pub, of Smoggeron's downtown, of the freedom I had in my own apartment, they all wore off. The rhythm was easy, but I grew less and less interested in work, and more consumed by my art. Nights of insomnia forced me to fix strokes and remix colors, but no substance or style made sense. I felt like I missed something.

Carl phoned me at home one evening and I woke up startled. I had dozed off and was late for shift. Rushing out the door, I arrived with an orange paint streak across my cheek.

Luckily, he only laughed.

Then, I saw a gallery a few blocks from Seven's Row that held a weekly show. Anyone could submit a piece. I toiled until completion and entered my best. It was frightening, but I had to get myself out there. Underneath the struggle I wanted to know if I was good. I wanted to be validated.

Late one night after a ballgame, a few weeks before the show, Adam asked how I got along. I brushed over the recent years and told him I did okay. When I said I painted he seemed interested, but when I invited him to the show he raised a furrowed brow.

Insurmountable tension of justifying my insecurities to someone I barely knew took my breath. There was no expectation he came, but at least I offered. The following weeks went by fast and I never brought it up again.

The night of the show was nerve-racking. Displaying my art was lonely, but I actually did it. Aunt Jean stopped by. So did Carl. He said my mom would be proud, and he joked about his concern in losing a good bartender. I told him it'd be a long time off before I left Churchill's to paint.

Adam showed up at the end of the night. Carl had seen him at the pub and reminded him. Sweaty and tired, Adam breathed heavy from running to get there.

Atop his head sat a dirty Red Sox cap, which he nervously adjusted every few minutes as we struggled through conversation. He viewed my work. Said it was nice. He wished he could do something like it. Then, he grumbled, talking about all the effort. Must have been a grueling process, especially without knowing it would be good. I nearly laughed, but affirmed that it took time. The glint of his glassy eyes was lost in a portrait of Mom.

The conversation was uncomfortable, but brief. He asked if I wanted to get a drink afterwards. I declined, telling him that the artists who presented were asked to help tear down

when the show concluded. I'd likely be tired afterwards.

He nodded and dropped his chin. His eyes fixed onto his sneakers and he shoved his fists into his pockets. The denim of his jeans was thin. I could make out his knuckles.

I saw him at the pub only a few times after my show. Baseball season carried on, overlapped by the start of football. He watched the games and drank quietly, keeping to himself.

On a Tuesday in early October, two large, meaty thugs approached Carl. They worked for a local bookie. They wanted to find Adam.

I saw the police report on the news a few days later. Suspects were unknown. The attack appeared planned and vengeful. The victim's face was bloody and dismembered, and it did not appear he put up a fight. Adam was beaten to death in a back alley downtown.