

Mona Lisa Done in Red

I fell in love with him when I was eighteen and he never knew and I never said anything. My life seemed to move along on that same track: one horrible cliché to the next.

He was a genius with a paintbrush. Arresting in his vintage plaid. A sophomore art major and I stuck to his skin like charcoal. Coated his hands, got deep in the crevices.

I was a freshman. Photojournalism. Required studio course. Fair Fortuna apparently took a day job at our school's registrar and we ended up in the same class.

I never stood a chance. That haven't-showered, devil-may-care, shit-can-fly apathy tickled rebellious nerves I never knew hummed under my skin. His easel was in front of mine from day one and I sat transfixed for the three-hour course. Watching great strokes burst from his fingers in fixated lines, languidly stretching across the cream white canvas, sharp jabs curtailed with a flick, wide strokes that suffocated me in their expanse, thin lines barely breathed, light pointillist experimentation in the fine details starting to emerge. I couldn't sit still. Something burst inside my chest that my eighteen-year-old heart couldn't handle. Heart attack fifty-years too soon. Stunned by a stroke of genius. I wanted to fuck his soul. I wanted to feel his brilliance move inside of my meager scribbles. I captured a suffocated life with a dull click. He spoke to an essential essence I never knew I had about lives I didn't know I breathed in. Hyperrealist. He trapped me in the space

between foreign and familiar. Like I'd known him for ten years but I could live for another hundred and never fully understand him.

We reached for the same pot of turpentine on the supply table at the back of the room on that first day of class. He'd gotten up from his stool and I'd followed him, not realizing the steps I took. He made me forget my own feet. I copied his movements and reached out without thinking to the same small pot his fingers grasped at. He apologized and offered it up, asking about the piece I was working on.

"It's stupid." My hand slipped around the jar. "It's just, just messing around really." My thumb couldn't catch a grip on the lid. "I can't decide on a clear focus or, I mean, direction and you know, inspiration is just like...gone."

He stopped. His pause held my eternity.

I shouldn't have said that.

I shouldn't have said anything.

"Too many people rush into their pieces. The idea has to drive it." He pointed to a girl three seats over, hunched over her page, furiously mixing a dense mustard green on her palette. I'd later learn her name was Carol Waters. Her canvas was a sad Rockwell imitation, smiling dogs and chipper boy scouts. But no façade, no thin veneer. She painted gushingly sincere greeting cards. "If you want to really create, it's all in the planning. The execution's just a formality."

I could barely nod. An affirmation fell out my lips and tripped over its legs.

He was already scanning the room. "You sit over there, right?"

And he walked over and he moved closer to my easel and my legs stopped working and he looked at my blank canvas and dull station with nothing but an open

journal and some old polaroids I had stashed in my bag lying in the middle. The pages blew in the breeze of the old A/C unit. The pictures shifted around on the paper.

“You mind?” He nodded at the journal. I felt my head nod.

He flipped through a few pages lingering over some shitty old poems and useless doodles and pointless quotations I’d copied down from a different lifetime.

He lifted a photograph I’d stashed between the pages. I had scribbled the faces out with pen in an attempt to be artistic. Child’s play. I worried my un-talent would sink into his skin and ruin what he could do.

“This is... this is so interesting.” He held it out from his face, turned it towards the light for further inspection. “What was the idea for it?”

Something muffled, underwater, a stranger’s voice in my throat. “I just wanted to see what it would feel like to feel nothing. If they’re faceless, they’re yours to interpret. You can do anything.”

I didn’t sleep that night. Up into the brightening hours, sketching with a fury. No coffee. Raging fit. Crumpled paper. Trashed the room. Shredded shirts and sheets to try and form sepulcher sculptures that could capture the iron fist sinking around my straining, thudding chest. No medium worked: not 3-D sculpture, not photography, no paintbrush could capture the fire I felt. My ribs would surely break. The cage couldn’t take the strain. I threw paint at canvas and let the splatter coat my sheets, my desk, my floor, my face. My roommate left. Headphones in. Bag slung over her shoulder with her boyfriend’s name bubbling from her lips into her barely

dialed phone. I didn't see her again until the haze of the trial when she burst into tears on the stand about how deranged I had been. How manic and wild. How if fire had sparked on my fingers I would have burned down the dorm building. She clutched a handkerchief and I noticed a meager diamond glinting on her bony ring finger. I seethed silently and caught glimpses of the court artist's attempts to sketch his eternal face as he sat at the defense table. Clumsy mortal child's fingers trying to capture the biographic face of God. But, no matter how feeble our attempts at creation turn out, we all want to show the creator our lumbering macaroni sculptures.

We both stayed late one night those first few weeks in the art lab. My critique was the next class and he never seemed to leave the space, always working on his piece even though his first critique wasn't for several more weeks.

The solitude of the room, only our bodies moving around each other, perfect opportunity missed. We fucked only in my mind. The scenario played out perfectly to the soft sounds of his brushstrokes. Our sweat mixed with the colors that stained our hands. Fantasy bled into reality and my painting turned into expressionistic porn – watercolor strokes in anything but soft shades.

My final creation, eleven straight hours of hard labor framed in cheap canvas, was an oil pastel of our artistic sex act. Our nameless bodies lay across all forty-eight continental states and we sprawled our sweating selves across the spangled banner. We saw all fifty stars. Toes tickled by the California Mountains, fingers curling into the waves of the Atlantic. The blurred faces captured motion but disguised true

identity in a very Nouveau Dada way. I left out the freckles on his cheeks and kept them in my pockets.

But I shaded the sex wrong. The red, whites, blues were left unfelt. The purple mountains majesty failed to reach new heights. The singular frozen thrust lacked depth and passion and suggested imitation of something that would never be, that could never really be felt. Desperate imaginings wrapped a hazy aesthetic all tied together with diluted sociopolitical commentary. *Shallow work*, the TA sighed, *You could have really made something. This is just drivel. Again.*

My shaking fingers found the last cigarette in my purse after grabbing and dropping loose tampons and forgotten change. I could hardly flick the lighter. The flame burst sharp like shrapnel and the wheel caught and nicked my thumb. I swore and rubbed the burgeoning bubble of blood down the center of my C- canvas.

He waited for me after class. He was rinsing out the last of his brushes and embodied perfection while I soiled his existence. He walked over to me as I bordered on hysterics and one hand found my shoulder and made small circles.

“Now that’s really something.” He closed an eye and traced the same track my bloodstained thumb smeared with his.

“Now that’s really fucking something.”

We started getting drunk behind the back of the art building and on the roof and up and down the streets of campus.

We talked art and politics and thought ourselves important. Everything smelled like washed plaid, cigarettes, and his deodorant.

We sat up on the roof. He snagged some wine from Walgreens. I always carried condoms, the forever optimist.

“You want to know a secret?” I slurred. The wine sloshed around in the bottle. Five dollars but it was still wine so we were classy and artistic.

His sharp breath traced patterns around my ear as he swayed towards me and back away again like the tides, “Naturally.”

I thought about saying something to him about how I felt. I had thought about it for a while. I’d play games with myself, that if he called twice in a day I’d tell him or if he wanted to see me every day for a week then I’d tell him. But I didn’t. To tell him that I love him would be to shred off my skin in little strips and stand raw before his perfect face, my sinews bright and shiny in the dull streetlights. To tell him that I love him would be to place the planks for my coffin in his Michelangelo hands, strong and sturdy, able to topple my world with one touch.

But I couldn’t admit it so turned to him and whispered in his ear, my chin tickled by the ends of his curling hair, “I can store dead people in my mind.” Stupid scribble I quoted from my notebook. Had that stroke of pretentious brilliance in the bathroom the other day. I said it and collapsed into a fit of giggles like a pathetic eight-year-old with a schoolyard crush, hating each laugh with each breath.

He laid down next to me, pulling two cigarettes from his pocket t-shirt and slipping me one. “That’s the price of being an artist. The bodies start to mix with your brain matter.”

I curled into his chest because the wine told me to and he pushed slightly away.

His first critique, a piece titled: *You May Borrow a Revolver as a Substitute for the Future*.

Screaming girl, mouth fish-hooked wide so you could trace her tonsils. Eyes half closed in orgasmic ecstasy of terror. The gun was silhouetted in cast shadows. The bullet sunk in her temple. Bits of brain hung mid-air in the white walled room. The forever captured moment of impact, the line between life and death seized. I was staring God in the face. It was fucking perfect. Colors so deep that I could taste the copper in my stunned open mouth. Feel the splatter on my face. Hear the echoing screams in my tinnitus ears, hollow and ringing.

My hand shot up first in discussion.

I told him how he painted with an unbelievable photographic accuracy. The light. The shading. The skin tone and the creases and the pores. It was staring into a nightmare photograph from Ted Bundy's bedside, from underneath Charlie Manson's pillow. It was the new face of an abject hyperrealism.

He winked and smiled at me. "Been experimenting with photography actually. Using it as reference. Friend gave me that idea."

And I was Alexander the Great.

And I didn't listen to the small gasp of the girl beside me, mustard yellow mixing Carol Waters, and the whimper of, "May I be excused? This is just... I can't do this" and the TA's reminder to give a heads up for extremely graphic content. Art shouldn't be censored, boundaries should be pushed, but remember to be courteous and keep others in mind.

I found him after class, after washing out my pallet. He was standing and staring at Carol's painting, a landscape, horrific neo-classical imitation with a tacky dash of Van Gogh. There were little sheep in the corner feeding on petals. A rosy-cheeked shepherd smiled fondly on the flock.

"Come on," I dared to brush his back and when he didn't turn away I rubbed his shoulders. "Ignore her. You're brilliant."

He slung his bag over his shoulder and left without a word.

Carol's painting was slashed to bits the next morning.

I cried in the bathroom stall because he didn't call me that night.

I kept going to the rooftop alone with a pack of cigarettes and an old water bottle I used as a makeshift flask, hoping that some presence of him would kick up with the wind. I started sleeping there some nights. It wasn't as cold as my bed. But two weeks later, from the top steps leading up to the roof, I saw the familiar burning tip of his fading lit cigarette, smoke bright in the moonlight.

I fell beside him. "Fancy seeing you here?"

Sounding casual never had been more difficult.

"Tell me about your new piece."

The neck of a cheap bourbon bottle was twirling between his fingers, scraping against the cement.

"I haven't really formed anything definite yet..."

"Just tell me something." His voice snapped like the loose twig I was slipping around my fingers.

“Well it’s a... I have an idea for an impressionist – ”

“Already done before. Again.”

I shook my head. Like a dog. I shook off the fleas. “I guess that I could take it in a more realist- ”

“Perfect.” He settled a bit. “You need a style. That should be it.” His shoulders were still tense under his dark shirt. “And your theme?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it much.”

“Goddamn it!” He threw the dark bottle over the side of the roof and watched it smash onto the pavement below. The glass shattered and the concrete bleed dark grey from the alcohol.

“You need a fucking *idea* behind something. You can’t just go stabbing off into the dark. You can’t just *do*. It has to have a fucking purpose or it isn’t art!”

He stared down the remnants of the bottle; a squirrel was licking the cement.

“I need you.” He pulled a drag from his cigarette.

I traced a response with my lips but the words wouldn’t form.

He stared out across the tops of the campus buildings. “Read me one of those lines from your journal.”

“My-my what?” The notebook in my bag burned at my side. Weighed me down, ripped at my shoulder blade and tried to pull my arm from its socket.

“Your journal. Your poems. Read me a line. One of those things you’re always scribbling.”

I pulled off my bag and slipped out my journal and with each move it was like I shed a piece of my clothing. Slipped my shirt off as I opened the cover of the little

blue book. Unzipped my skirt with each flipping page. Unclasped my bra and stepped out of my underwear, completely and totally open in the night air, intimidating and erotic, when I finally found a line that didn't taste like bile in the back of my throat and vinegar in my mouth when I tried to read it.

"Well?" He exhaled smoke.

"We're all prostitutes. We're just selling different parts." My voice shook like a third grade presentation.

He flicked at the end of his cigarette. "That's just... That's workable."

He walked over to me and rubbed a thumb down the side of my face. "You're my muse. You know that, kid?"

I nodded, feeling the air between our faces, feeling every breath that passed through his lips and slipped around mine.

"You know, I'm having an installation later this month. You should come."

I would have ripped off my arm sooner than missed it.

In class the next morning Carol was missing and he was silent and brooding. I wrote unspoken poetry to his tense neck muscles. Each brushstroke on my humble canvas was an offering. I tried to catch his eye, washing my brushes till the bristles fell out with my hair. I'd stopped eating. I didn't sleep much anymore. His installation fresh on my mind. I saw him only in the art lab and on the roof. The same old game. I'd read out little lines and bits that I'd write, angst-ridden, self-indulgent nonsense, but he kissed my cheek once and I'd nearly thrown up from excitement. But none of my pieces turned out right. I painted only with black. No

colors seemed strong enough. I couldn't make them echo the shadows and crevices of life in the way he was able to. I'd stand behind his canvas, by the sinks in the back of the room and just stare, transfixed. People would push and prod and poke me. One day the professor tried to send me back to my dorm, call a roommate, get me some water, but no one knew who to call, what to say, where to go. I heard their mumblings from underwater, in a tunnel, through a distant plane. But then my Michelangelo flicked his fingers in front of my face and I snapped immediately to his eyes. He told everyone he'd take me back to my dorm and see that I was all right. He told them it was probably just the heat. The building had shoddy A/C and I'd taken to always wearing the sweatshirt he'd left on the roof one night. He took me outside and helped me into his car. We weren't going to my dorm he told me. We were going somewhere different. I'd finally started to break through the veneer of civilization, he said. I'd finally started to tap into something deeper and beyond myself. I was approaching transcendental life and he wanted this raw energy for his newest piece.

"You named it. It seems fitting that you should be the one to finish it."

The tires of his sedan scraped against gravel in front of an old warehouse on the edge of town. He pulled up the garage door and picked the lock with a blonde bobby pin that I recognized as mine. Must have dropped it on the roof, on the streets, in class, in my dreams where we fuck daily and die old together, our lives covered in canvas.

"Studios at school couldn't contain what I was doing. I knew they weren't ready for it. So I moved to a more suitable location. Nice, no?"

Naked lights hung in uneven intervals around the high ceilings. He had stretched canvas between rusting pieces of unrecognizable machinery. Photographs were tacked to the walls. I saw blurred body parts. Graphic shots and demure snippets. Image studies. Black and white and sepia and muted indie colors. Dark sheets were draped over a couple bulky pieces hanging from the rafters near the back wall. I ran a finger over the cotton. He grabbed my wrist.

“Not those. Those aren’t ready yet.”

He pulled me over to the dimly lit corner; the naked, hanging light hadn’t turned on with the rest. The others around us flickered dully.

“This is John. Say hello to my friend, John.”

He kicked a pile of rags and an animalistic grunt blew out with the dust.

He started kneading my shoulders. “I found him living here and thought he seemed the artistic type. Innit right John? Little name I gave him. Don’t think he can really say much.”

I could tell John was homeless. He hadn’t seen a shower or human decency in what looked like years. That much was obvious. Matted and dank, his hair fell around his scrawny shoulders in clumps. He smelt like death. A lone tooth poked out from his cracked gums.

“Now you’re the one who came up with the idea so it’s only right that you complete the last piece for my installation tomorrow. Use any tool you want. They’re all right over here.”

He gestured to a table with a line of spindly delicate instruments that stretched and grew claws and talons and blades and evolved down the line into triggers and barrels.

“We’re all prostitutes. We’re just selling different parts. Remember?” His fingers rubbed between my shoulder blades. “So what’ll it be?”

I told myself that it didn’t matter. Because it didn’t. Because his fingers on my skin confirmed that it didn’t. Art is sacrifice. John didn’t matter, not before this moment. But here, but now, now he would. He’d be something. He’d become something greater than his self. Here was his chance to be somebody. Here was our chance.

I wiped the blood splatter from my eyes and he nestled his chin on my shoulder, his hand moved down to the small of my back, and I could hear his slight laugh in my ear.

“Good girl.” He turned me to face him and smeared falling droplets from my cheek. “You’re so beautiful.”

I could have floated home.

He invited our entire class, the entire school, the entire town to his opening. Even booked a couple local papers to come and cover it. The arts and times section of the town tribune was always looking to explore new culture.

He stood in silence when the first woman walked through the garage doors of the warehouse, her drug store pearls slung around her thin neck, made to dress her up for the occasion of local culture. Her face blanched so her make-up could not hide

her true features. She fainted instantly upon impact with true brilliance. All his previous paintings now in real time. Blood dripped down skin like drying paint.

Carol Waters' parents finally were given their answer as to where their daughter had disappeared. It took them a couple weeks though. They had to use dental records to identify her.

The police showed up within four minutes and locked him in handcuffs. He went without a fight. They didn't understand. This was part of the show.

He told them about me. It was flattering when he did. That I was worth talking about when he had so much to discuss, so much depth to delve into with his work. I was shocked he'd found time during his critique to even mention my contribution.

I used my one phone call on my mother because they wouldn't give a direct line to the state penitentiary where he was. Her worried voice cut through the poor reception.

"How did my beautiful daughter get so hurt?" Her voice choked through the line.

She didn't understand. I wasn't beautiful, but he was making me something close.

They asked me, the reporters who followed me to and from the courthouse steps and the white paneled van that took me back to the county jail, how I could live with myself? How I could sleep at night and wake every morning? Parents

shrieked. Children screamed. They all spat and hissed the same question. I never bothered to give them the answer. Some statements are too artistic for the common, unseeing masses. They wouldn't understand.

Without him, and with no chance of seeing him, the days bled together. Unending time consisting only of those mornings where you want to hang your head and drown yourself in your cracking coffee cup.

But they didn't hang me. I was given life imprisonment and sent upstate to a blur of bars.

He was found guilty of twelve counts of murder in the first degree, all deemed to be acts of an extraordinarily gruesome nature. The judge thought these acts called for a response of public spectacle. Punishment to fit the crime. Hanging from the neck until dead.

The judge didn't know him like I did. Didn't know that he couldn't have been happier with the sentencing. I knew this was all part of the act. And I liked to think that I was to be a part of his final piece.

One of the terms of my plea agreement, apparently I signed one I don't remember, was that I got to see his hanging. I do remember that's all I ever asked my lawyer during every meeting with her. That's all I wanted. That's all he would have wanted. So they led me in chains to his execution.

Everyone needed this whole affair to say something, wanted his death to mean something, so they photographed it. I didn't need a camera. His face is all I ever see at night. It's all I've ever seen.

One of the victim's mothers hung his portrait over her kitchen sink, his frozen eyes cut out with sewing scissors and his mouth a bloody red smear against the sepia tone. She put another on her fridge door lest she ever decide to start eating again. Her daily reminder. Her twelve-beaded rosary she thumbed. She hid the worn raw skin under a thimble while crafting blankets for the other victims' siblings and children. She came to me and hissed this all in my ear, her shaking shoulders covered by one of her homemade shawls. Her sunken eyes and blistered fingers knitted stories of waking nights and coffee dregs of distraction.

"You see," She waved a perfectly embroidered corner, little peonies and daffodils, in my face, "we all can make art too."

I watched as he hanged from the neck until dead. He was twenty-six. We all stared in silence and when it was done I alone clapped in the ringing stillness. That's all you can do. Answer it, whatever it is, with your own feeble applause.