

“Too Loud to Ignore”

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Boston, April 2047

Halfway down the side of the mural, Gabby’s pencil stalled in thought. The pause gave her ticking watch a chance to remind her of Carly’s invitation to join the protest on the Commons. She did not want to go. Setting her pencil down on her notebook, she rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands. Her disinterest wasn’t due to any moral disagreement. Like many of her classmates, she despised the Federal government’s plan to draft young people to fight the rural separatists causing havoc across the country.

No, the reason for her hesitancy was lame, even by her own admission - she had a project due in her Painting Seminar.

The subject: create an “epic” painting.

From the Greek word “epos”, meaning “song”, she thought.

Upon receiving the assignment, she’d sat on her bed in front of an eight-foot wide, four-foot tall sheet of paper taped to her dorm room wall and listened to huge, momentous music for inspiration. Nothing. Carly, Gabby’s roommate, suggested without invitation that she should look at pictures of national parks; Gabby’s sister, Tori Beth, advised her to go by feel, saying, “Let your hand listen to your heart. Your heart is never wrong.”

Letting her intuition guide her hand is how Gabby had ended up with the outline in front of her. Etched in pencil, it captured the view from her family’s mountain cabin - a cliff and its mirror image distorted in the lake below. She’d been drawing this image ever since kindergarten. For this project, its lines had flowed from her pencil in familiar rhythms, although on a much grander scale. Sitting on the bed, she absorbed the outline’s aura and frowned as its silence filled her ears.

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Gabby checked her watch. Noon thirty, as her father would say. Carly and Landon would be heading to the protest at one. Closing her eyes again, she heard only the room’s ventilation system. Grabbing her robin’s egg blue windbreaker and her camera, she left the drawing.

The combination of college students skipping class, the smell of grilled sausage and onions, and indistinct music in the distance gave the Boston Commons a festive atmosphere, a mild irritation to a native Bostonian like Gabby. While Carly chatted non-stop at Landon, Gabby snapped pictures of people and the surroundings. A stage stood at the Beacon Street end of the park. Strung between two poles, a banner lettered in patriotic red, white, and blue paint read “Freedom From”.

“What the hell does that mean?” asked Carly.

Unsure who Carly was addressing, Gabby finally spoke when Landon’s lengthy silence signaled he had no clue.

“It’s a sentence starter,” Gabby said.

The look on Carly and Landon’s faces reminded her of the incredulous looks teachers gave her whenever she raised her hand in high school.

“You can fill in the blank. What do you want freedom from? In this case, it’s the draft.”

“Why did I even ask? Of course you would know that,” Carly said, rolling her eyes. “And leave it to leftists to come up with a slogan that makes you think.”

Gabby ignored her roommate. Given Carly’s allergy to thinking, Gabby had concluded long ago Carly must be in art school because she thought it’d be easy.

Listening to the rally’s speakers, Gabby appreciated their impassioned but unpracticed tirades. Many couldn’t build either an argument or a story. Their focus seemed to be the terror of being drafted, as would be expected of people her age. Fit and sober herself, with no underlying

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health issues, Gabby knew their fear. The draft would come for her. The politicians gave a better account of themselves during their turn, but they were in the minority in Congress and the President had already pledged to sign the draft bill.

To avoid dwelling on the prospect, she wandered amongst the protesters, camera clicking at whomever struck her fancy, gathering faces she could translate onto canvas later. She spotted a woman her own age with luxuriant shoulder length black hair and dusky skin wearing a white cable knit sweater. A delicious contrast.

Helen of the lovely hair.

Gabby raised her camera and snapped a photo.

As if hearing the shutter close, the woman turned to face Gabby. When she approached, Gabby (knowing she'd been caught) pointed her camera away to an anonymous tree at the edge of the Commons.

“Can I least see how the photo came out?” the woman said.

Gabby blushed. “I’m sorry, I can delete it.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Gabby’s large blue eyes gave the woman a sidelong look. The woman replied with a smirk. Frowning, Gabby brought up the photo and turned the screen to the woman.

“Not bad,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting a black and white photo, but I like it.”

The corners of Gabby’s mouth tugged back upward. “Thank you.”

“So, why are you sneaking photos like an influencer?”

“I’m not an influencer,” Gabby spat.

Carly’s laughter intruded on their conversation.

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“I’m shocked she even knows that term. She comes from those Never Social Media families that use the internet only for ‘useful’ things,” Carly said, fingers flashing air quotes.

The woman put her hand on Gabby’s shoulder. “Thank God, at least someone took a picture of me for me and not for clout.”

Carly frowned and looked at Landon for support. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Name’s Anna, by the way,” the woman said. “Who are you all?”

Everyone introduced themselves.

“Gabby,” Anna repeated. “Pleased to meet you. What are you all doing after these windbag politicians finish droning?”

Anna led them through the rabbit’s warren of Boston’s North End to her apartment. Here the buildings crowded so close shadows laid claim the majority of the sidewalks. Gabby’s shutterbug habit slowed them down, much to Carly’s displeasure.

“It’s just bricks,” Carly said.

Huffing, Gabby put the lens cap on and slung the camera over her shoulder. Anna sidled up and looped her arm through Gabby’s.

“What were you capturing with that shutter of yours.”

Gabby couldn’t tell if Anna was teasing or serious. Her gut said the latter.

“I have this project for class,” Gabby said. “We need to create something epic in scope. I don’t have a wide enough lens to cover the whole street, so I was trying to capture enough to remind me of a feeling later on.”

Carly began to comment, but Anna silenced her with a poisonous look and turned back to Gabby.

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“Go on.”

By the time they arrived at Anna’s building, Gabby had covered both the project and her creative block.

“Our professors are fond of vague directions,” Carly said.

Gabby nodded. “On that I agree.”

“Well, maybe you’ll find inspiration on the roof,” Anna said. She winked at Gabby. “I promise not to throw you off.”

Anna led them up the five story walk up, past her apartment, and onto the roof. Gabby zipped her windbreaker up all the way to her chin the second she felt the breeze blowing off the harbor. Unlike the rest of Boston, the North End hosted no skyscrapers, offering the four of them a commanding view of the water and the downtown skyline.

Anna walked backwards holding out her arms.

“Snap away,” she called out. “What can be more epic than the skyline of a modern city on the edge of a continent?”

Grinning, Gabby removed the lens cap. With the low afternoon sun giving the light a depth it’d been missing earlier on the Commons, she spent the next thirty minutes photographing Anna, Carly, and Landon. Carly made numerous suggestions, all of which Anna overruled.

“It’s Gabby’s project, she’ll tell us where and how to pose.”

Catching Anna’s eye, Gabby mouthed, “thank you”.

When Anna took off her sweater for a portrait, Gabby’s stomach fluttered and she felt herself gulp, which Anna heard. Or, at least to Gabby, seemed to hear, for Anna’s gaze lingered on her while discarding the sweater. Giddiness intoxicated Gabby’s brain, manifesting in a

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playful firmness whenever Anna’s pose wasn’t quite right. Anna stuck out her tongue in response but followed Gabby’s corrections.

At last Carly complained she was cold and could they please go in, she needed to pee. Anna retrieved her sweater and led them into the building. The tiny apartment contained two side by side bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchenette, and a living/dining room with a futon and a low table. Landon flopped down on the futon while Carly rushed into the bathroom.

Gabby busied herself by examining the framed pictures of classic covers from out-of-print magazines on the walls: *Life*, *Time*, *Rolling Stone*. Hearing something thud on the table, Gabby turned to see Anna setting up a digital projector.

“Are we watching a movie?” Gabby said.

Anna threw Gabby one end of a bedsheet.

“What I have planned predates movies.”

By the time they’d finished stringing the bedsheet across the back wall, Carly had returned from the bathroom. Anna settled everyone in with glasses of water or tea warmed in the microwave, then held out an open hand to Gabby.

“SIM card, please.”

Gabby whitened. “No...I mean, I haven’t had a chance to go through them. If you want, I can send them to you later...”

“Nope,” Anna said, shaking her head, “hand it over. How are we, and by ‘we’ I mean you, going to see how epic these photos are if we don’t view them on the biggest screen my limited budget can provide?”

Carly and Landon joined Anna in demanding to see the pictures. Gabby made a face between a pissed off mother and Godzilla. Failing to dissuade them, she relented and handed

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over the SIM card. After Carly drew the shades and turned off the lights, Anna held out the remote.

“Maestra,” she said.

Gabby took a deep breath and clicked at the projector.

At first Carly and Landon quipped and giggled at the various pictures, but soon grew bored as Anna kept asking Gabby to go back and forth between various photos and asking her opinion.

“If I needed my prescription checked I’d go to the optometrist,” Carly said.

Anna whirled around. “How the hell are you in art school? Even I can see there are differences between the photos.”

Carly stood up.

“I can see them, okay! But there’s no reason to overanalyze shit. You just pick the one that looks better and then let an AI write out the justification. I’m not in school to write bullshit essays. Come on, Landon.”

She grabbed him by the hand and dragged him to the door. Following the slam of the door, Anna exhaled and brushed her hair back. “I thought they’d never leave.”

Gabby laughed.

“Now, where were we?” Anna said.

The two photos Gabby and Anna ended up haggling over for the title of most “epic” had one key difference. Gabby’s candidate featured Anna standing the roof’s ledge with her back to the camera, fists on her hips in an unmistakable gesture of defiance. Anna’s choice showed the naked skyline of the city.

When asked for her reasoning, Anna gesticulated at the photo fluttering on the bedsheet.

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“Look at it! It’s an epic landscape of concrete, steel, and glass, the brilliance and folly of the world before we knew about climate change.” She paused. “I grew up looking at these towers from the beaches of the South Shore. Even as a little girl I knew they were the reason for those rolling blackouts when the Feds forced the transition to renewables. I knew they were the reason why the sea swallowed my best friend’s waterfront home. These buildings are beautiful in their arrogance. Still are.”

To Gabby, Anna’s relaxed jaw and uptilt chin reminded her of a child observing something spectacular it couldn’t fully comprehend. Gabby’s breathing shallowed as her heart began to race. Clicking the button on the remote, the image changed to the skyline with Anna in front of it.

“I grew up here in downtown, over on Beacon Street,” Gabby said. “So, I never noticed the towers unless the clouds covered ‘em up.”

Anna nodded.

“But you’re right - metaphorically these buildings are the reason why we’ve have to abandon the shore, endure ice storms, droughts, and the climate being overall fucked. Look at the fire the sunset is igniting.”

Gabby stood in front of the projector, her shadow pointing at the crimson clouds streaking over the buildings.

“This isn’t Helios’s chariot parking for the night. We did this. The world is on fire because of these buildings. But see who’s standing up to it. What feeling does that invoke?”

Anna snorted. “I think you want everyone to stare at my ass.”

Without thinking, Gabby replied, “Well, it’s worth showing off, don’t you think?”

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As Anna arched her brows, Gabby opened her mouth to apologize (for what, she did not know). Anna spun around and stuck her butt in Gabby’s direction.

“I know, right?”

Gabby covered her mouth far too late to catch the laugh bursting out of her. Anna threw up her hands in defeat.

“Have it your way. Be the optimist.”

Gabby turned to the picture again. “I’m not. Carly would be the first to tell you that.”

The choice made, Gabby helped Anna put the projector away and take down the sheet. Having an image to work with, a nebulous itch in her drawing hand made Gabby flex her fingers. As she went to leave, Anna hugged her. Heat rushed through Gabby, and she gripped the other woman tight. Loosening the embrace, Gabby met Anna’s eyes. A feeling similar to drunkenness made everything grow hazy and slow. She bit lower lip.

“Say something,” Anna said, drawing Gabby close.

The surge washing through Gabby left her fear of being seen clinging by its fingertips. Clenching her jaw, Gabby extricated herself. She wanted to beg forgiveness. Instead, she fled the apartment.

Gabby stood in front of a brand-new mural sized paper. Covering the entirety of the wall, its intimidating blankness attempted to impose itself on her psyche. It failed; Gabby’s attention was monopolized instead by an 8.5”x11” developed photo of Anna in front of the Boston skyline. The itch in her hand, so real yesterday, had been replaced by a lead weight in her diaphragm.

I gotta try to draw something.

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Setting her sketchpad onto her lap, she willed her pencil to dance and wriggle on the page. Upon completion, the skyline featured in the photo no longer existed. In its place: the sole figure of Anna, her head in profile with one eye on Gabby.

Sing to me, O Muse.

What Gabby did next would've made her romantic younger sister cheer. Gabby rolled up the paper and tied it with a string. Stuffing the drawing into the interior pocket of her windbreaker, she made a beeline to the North End.

As she ascended the stairs to Anna's apartment the heaviness in her chest atomized into energy racing through her veins and put wings on her feet. Only after she knocked did she realize what she was doing. Gabby's beet red face greeted Anna when she opened the door. At first, Anna had a notion to laugh at the skittish blue eyes looking everywhere but at her; however, perceiving the shaking in Gabby's hand as it ran through her short hair, Anna's face softened.

“Come in,” Anna said.

Once inside, Gabby slid her coat off her shoulders and held it in front of herself like a shield. Anna held out her hand. Gabby passed over the coat, which Anna then threw into the air. As the jacket poofed out like a parachute before landing on the futon, Gabby couldn't help but snicker.

“Now, tea, water, wine? Whad'ya want?” Anna said.

“Tea, please,” Gabby said, voice soft.

“What's that, you said? Wine? You got it.”

Gabby made a motion to object, but Anna was already in the kitchen. She pulled down a magnum of cheap merlot from the top of the fridge and snatched two glasses from the dish rack next to the sink.

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“You’re my guest,” Anna proclaimed. “You’re getting my best.”

Accepting the half-filled wine glass, Gabby took a meek sip and fought back a wince.

Loath to admit it, Gabby knew why Anna’s presence made the alcohol bite harder.

“So, how goes the project?” Anna said.

Gabby’s shoulders slumped. “I thought I had something, but…”

Her words ran dry. Anna stepped closer and placed her hand on Gabby’s cheek.

“Don’t go silent. Talk.”

Gabby’s mouth opened and closed.

“Please,” Anna said.

Gabby clutched the glass of wine against her chest, unable to reconcile the paradox of how awkward and effervescent her body felt. Anna closed the distance between them.

“Talk to me,” Anna said.

Gabby kissed her instead.

The world dissolved around them, punctuated by the sound of a door closing, the cold caress of air as clothes became lost, and the sensation of their bodies tumbling into an unmade bed bathed in golden hour light. When the world came back into focus, they discovered the sunset had transposed into twilight. As Anna turned on the light, Gabby pulled the sheet over herself. Anna’s thumb massaged the taut muscles of Gabby’s forearm.

“Are you okay?” Anna asked.

Gabby exhaled through her nose. “Yes. It’s just…this is all so…”

“Surreal?”

“Yes.”

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Turning on her side to face Anna, Gabby noticed they were laying so close together she couldn't make out Anna's features. She moved her head back until everything came into focus and chuckled.

“What's so funny?” Anna said.

When Gabby told her, Anna grew thoughtful.

“That fits with your project, no?” Anna said. “Up close we're just a blur. Get a little distance and you can see the whole picture.”

“I believe you're thinking of the impressionists.”

Anna kissed her, making Gabby's skin simmer. “See, you can talk.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Gabby said. “My brother Matthew used to call me ‘O Silent One.’”

“I want to hear your opinions.”

Gabby scowled. “You're just going to call my ideas stupid. I'm tired of people not listening to me.”

Anna nodded.

As if she understands, Gabby thought.

She started to get out of bed. Anna rose with her.

“No, I actually want to know what you have to say. I like the way your mind works, seeing things how you see them.”

The sincerity in Anna's voice caught Gabby off guard. Anna squeezed Gabby's arm.

“Talk. Please?”

Remembering the drawing in her coat, Gabby grinned her mother's Cheshire cat grin.

“You really want to know what I think?”

Anna returned Gabby's smile.

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“Good,” Gabby said. “Get the wine while I retrieve my coat. There’s something I want to show you.”

The next morning Gabby sat with Anna on the futon drinking coffee.

“I forgot to ask,” Gabby said. “Do you know where the word ‘epic’ comes from?”

Anna tucked her frizzy hair behind her ears. “Tell me.”

“It’s Greek for ‘song’. I’ve been listening to music for days for inspiration. Nothing.”

Anna rubbed Gabby’s back. “So that’s why last night you talked about how it’s pointless to try and capture something ephemeral on something concrete.”

“Exactly. That’s why my first attempt was the view from my parents’ cabin. At least with a mountain you get a sense of appropriate scale.”

“So, you’re saying that the hills weren’t alive with the sound of music?” Anna said.

Gabby snorted coffee out her nose. Anna laughed so hard she started to crawl to the bathroom, exclaiming she had to pee, while Gabby cried from a combination of the coffee’s sting and her own laughter. Both ended up on the floor with cramps in their sides.

“I hate you for that,” Gabby managed to get out.

“Those chuckles say otherwise.”

They lay side by side on the floor. Through the open window a soft breeze wafted in, carrying with it sounds from the street.

“Maybe there’s another way to go about this,” Anna said.

“Which this?”

Anna squeezed Gabby’s hand. “Well, the ‘us’ part of ‘this’ doesn’t need to be defined right now. But I meant the epic ‘this’.”

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Gabby turned to look at Anna. Her features were a complete blur again.

“The Greeks didn’t write things down, yeah? Like, way back when? I remember a book I read in high school called *The Song of Achilles*, about Achilles’s lover Patroclus. Wouldn’t the Greeks have called it the ‘Epic of Achilles’?”

Squinting in thought, Gabby nodded. “I think so.”

“Maybe that’s what you need to paint - not a song but an epic story. One of those Greek myths or something.”

Gabby sat up, fingers in her drawing hand flexing. Scrambling to her feet, she ran into Anna’s bedroom and reemerged in the clothes she wore the day before. Bending to tie her shoes, she noticed Anna sitting cross legged on the floor.

“I’m guessing you have an idea,” Anna said.

Before last night Gabby would have apologized. Today she said, “Yes.”

Anna stood and stretched. The sight of Anna’s midriff made something warm in Gabby’s belly stir. Feeling Gabby’s eyes, Anna grinned.

“Good,” she said, hand reaching out to touch Gabby’s cheek. “I only ask you to kiss me goodbye and promise you’ll be back tomorrow night.”

Anna’s touch sent streaks of lightning down to Gabby’s toe. Sliding her coat over her shoulders, Gabby shivered. Her skin felt delicate, as if she’d just emerged from a scalding shower.

“I may be a little busy,” Gabby said. “Today’s Monday, right? Come to my dorm Thursday night. The food is shitty, but it’ll be on me.”

Anna nodded. “Done and done.”

“Thank you.” She kissed Anna.

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“Just keep talking to me,” Anna said.

“I will.”

Gabby went straight from Anna’s apartment to her family’s brownstone on Beacon Street. Retrieving a photo album from one of the side tables in the living room, she thumbed through it until she found pictures from a Halloween party when she was twelve. Slipping a photo out of its sleeve, she held it in front of her. Dressed in a bedsheet toga, her waist-length hair had been portioned into a dozen braids and threaded into a wire crown to create a nest of vipers - each braid tipped with paper snakeheads. Slipping the photo into a coat pocket, Gabby returned the album and headed back to her dorm.

As promised, Anna arrived at Gabby's dorm Thursday night. Gabby had trouble looking Anna in the face. Peeking to her left and to her right, as if making sure no one important saw, Gabby gave Anna a kiss so hungry it left them both dizzy.

“Can you come upstairs for a few minutes? Or do you want to eat first?” Gabby asked.

“Well, that’s the meekest proposition I’ve ever heard.”

Gabby blushed. “I’m serious. I have something to show you.”

“Of course I’ll come up,” Anna said, “but you really need to stop falling into innuendo traps.”

Gabby laughed and led Anna into an open elevator. When they arrived at Gabby’s door, Gabby held up a hand.

“Before I let you in, I need to explain something.”

Anna crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the wall.

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“My father writes books, historical fiction,” Gabby said. “I grew up in a house full of mythology. We referenced it like other people reference TV or memes. There’s one myth I loved more than all the others, I think all women love and crave its power. For me it was when I realized I really, really don’t like boys, like, at all.”

Anna chuckled. Gabby opened the door to her room and gestured for Anna to walk inside.

A sea of red, orange, black, and gray hung on the wall. In the center of the painting, with her back to the viewer, a prepubescent girl in a white toga stood with her fists positioned on her hips. The girl’s hair was a writhing tangle of snakes, arched and ready for combat; behind her, the various heads of other little girls populated the bottom of the frame. In front of the young Medusa, covering the rest of the canvas, were men. To Anna it looked like hundreds of faces, covering a range of ages, ethnicities, and time periods. Among them she recognized famous politicians and generals. Others she recognized by their clothes: doctors, lawyers, judges, teachers, priests. However, most of the faces were banal, ordinary men tinged in crimson. It dawned on Anna that she was looking at the whole patriarchy, the millennia old system designed to turn the little girls in the foreground into servile beings whose humanity men did not and could not recognize. And it was about to be defeated by a child who chose to stand and fight.

Anna’s fingers intertwined with Gabby’s.

“Epic,” Anna said.

Gabby squeezed Anna’s hand.

“What’s it called.”

“‘*Ena Epos Dynamis*’. ‘A Song of Power’, because force is the only thing men respect.”

Touching the Medusa’s hair, Anna’s face bloomed into an exuberant grin.

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“So, this is your voice, O’ Silent One.”

Gabby did not try to hide. Instead, she pulled Anna into her bed, grateful to be seen.