

## **A Thousand Waves**

There were few things Mia loved more than a blank canvas. It didn't intimidate her or make her feel uncertain, questioning why it was that she ever decided to be a painter. Staring at a blank canvas was like staring at a still pond on a clear day. Peaceful. Meditative, even. Second to her love for a blank canvas was her love for good weed. That's why this was the epitome of a perfect Sunday morning. She sat, centered in the living room of her studio apartment in front of a blank canvas propped up against the easel, with a blunt in her left hand and a thin bristle paint brush in the other. Sunlight poured in from the windows opposite her, and she made a point of, instead of looking at all that was illuminated, noticing everything that was left in the shadows. The flatscreen TV her parents sent her when she asked them to. The vintage coffee table she picked up at a flea market when she was twenty-one. The water stains on said coffee table.

Mia turned her attention back to the canvas and began to paint strokes of brown the shade of cinnamon. This, she had decided, was the closest she could get to her best friend Nabilah's skin color. Mia didn't know if she was painting Nabilah or just Nabilah's skin. She lost interest in the painting for a second, becoming fixated on her own hand in the act of conjuring up Nabilah. Her own slim, paint stained fingers. She paused and took a drag from her blunt, tasting the faint strawberry menthol of her flavored rolling papers as it touched her lips. Buying fancy rolling papers was an act of self love. She took another drag before making two more confident strokes on the canvas. When she put down her brush, there was more brown than there was white, and though theoretically, she had been painting Nabilah's skin, she stared at her canvas unable to find Nabilah at all. Mia reached for a dirty cup on her coffee table, ashed her blunt, licked her fingers, and pinched away the glow at the burning end.

Mia's phone began to vibrate in her pocket and she stood up to answer it, moving towards the open counter of the kitchen. It was like her apartment was one big room with distinctive compartments. Nabilah was an interior designer, so naturally she was always trying to get Mia to let her make the place look better, but Mia liked it spare, simple, and functional. Her paintings, which were hung up, laid down, splayed on the floor, and unfinished, added varying shades of near blacks, deep browns, and rich beiges.

On the phone, Mia said, "Yes, come up. It's on the third floor. 3B. Just tell Alex you're here to see Mia."

Hae, the woman who had photographed Nabilah's wedding last week, was coming up to collect a camera bag she left on the wedding night after driving a drunken Mia home, making sure that she was not so inebriated that she might choke on her vomit, and then hastily leaving.

When the doorbell rang, Mia answered without bothering to attempt to tame her big mass of kinky, brick colored hair, because, she thought, there was no point in trying to look put together. She was sure that after the wedding night Hae would never think she looked put together.

“Come in,” Mia said to Hae after only glancing at her quickly as she stood in the hallway. Mia moved swiftly, abandoning the other woman after the two of them were in the apartment so she could fetch the camera bag from her bedside. When she returned, she found Hae standing in the living room, holding a framed picture that had been set on the coffee table.

“Here’s the bag,” Mia said, awkwardly standing at least three paces away from Hae. “I didn’t open it or anything.”

“Really?” Hae replied, still studying the photograph. “Not once?”

“Nope.”

“That’s considerate.”

Mia grew weary of Hae examining her picture. “It’s not that interesting.”

“You and the bride?” Hae asked.

Mia crossed her arms over her chest. “Uh huh. In high school.”

“That’s a long friendship. What are you now, twenty-four?”

Mia cleared her throat and shifted her weight. “Twenty-five.”

“So like, a decade of friendship.”

“I guess,” Mia shrugged, while in her mind correcting: eleven years and two months.

She stared at Hae, who, she thought, was good at making herself comfortable in a space that didn’t belong to her. Hae set the photograph down, making a point of angling it exactly as it had been

before she'd picked it up, beside a water stain and some dried paint. Mia straightened her arm, offering Hae the camera bag. She felt the weight of it in her hand and felt the weight disappear once Hae took it away. Hae was tall, her body type somewhere on the border of lanky and lean. She wore all black with a thin silver belt looped into her jeans. Her long, straight, jet black hair was unparted and flipped to one side, partially obscuring that side of her face, but not very much. She looked very Vogue. Specifically, Balmain. She could have been Mia's opposite. If Mia were a brand, she'd be something much more accessible, like H&M or Macy's.

"You're painting," Hae stated. "Did I interrupt?"

"You're fine." Mia was unsure how to act in her presence. Especially since, in her mind, the details of their meeting were hazy at best.

"More skin?" Hae asked.

"What?"

"Your painting."

"Oh..." Mia unfolded her arms and glanced beside her, at the canvas. "Yes."

The two stood quiet.

"I'm going to use the bathroom before I leave," Hae said smoothly. "If that's okay."

"Sure. It's—" But before Mia could give directions, Hae was already on her way. This had Mia scanning her memory for more of that night, post wedding. All she could find was a general outline. At the venue, some time after Nabilah and Wendell had driven away in their *Just Married* van, Mia was attempting to unlock her car. Hae confiscated her keys and insisted on driving her home instead. Mia probably protested but Hae was firm. Mia couldn't conjure anything up from the car ride. What she

did remember was having to lean against Hae as they walked up the three flights, one of Hae's hands pressed against her waist. Mia frowned. She couldn't remember exchanging numbers, or even falling asleep.

When Hae returned from the bathroom, Mia said, "I'm not a lesbian."

Hae's first reaction was to raise her eyebrows. Her second was to laugh. Her laughter was a vaguely familiar sound, which only made Mia more nervous.

"I know," Hae said. "You said that the other night." She was still laughing.

"What's funny?" Mia asked.

"Just that you told me quite a few times. Without me asking at all," Hae admitted. "Is there something about me that urges you to assert your sexuality?"

"No," Mia said, annoyed. She looked at Hae again. She was annoyingly pretty, and it didn't even look like she was wearing any make-up. She was also sort of ambiguous; feminine in a way that didn't announce itself.

"You blacked out didn't you," Hae surmised.

Mia didn't answer.

"That's too bad. We got along well."

"What does that mean?"

"Oh gosh," Hae rolled her eyes. "We didn't do anything. Is that what you're wondering?"

This gave Mia relief. "No. I knew we didn't do anything. I wouldn't have."

"Do you remember anything?"

"Not much, honestly," Mia paused. "What do you mean we got along well?"

“At the reception. When you were only slightly drunk. I thought we’d be friends.”

Mia realized that much of the reception was gone too. This, she hadn’t noticed. After the day had passed, she stopped thinking about the wedding all together. Her and Nabilah had gotten into some fight that night, probably over something stupid. That was what had started the transition from tipsy to drunk. Nabilah had been ignoring her since the wedding night, but Mia hadn’t thought too much of it. Nabilah had given her the silent treatment before.

In that moment though, she admitted to herself that this time it felt different. In the past few days, she felt more alone than she had felt in...well... eleven years and two months. Really and truly alone.

“I’m sorry for not remembering,” Mia said. Hae shook her head and grinned, avoiding eye contact.

“It’s whatever.”

“Do you want something to drink? I mean, you can stay. Hang out?”

“No, don’t worry about it. I have plans anyway.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Doing what?”

“I’m going to the beach.”

“Now?” Mia asked.

“Yes. Now.”

“Dressed like that?”

Mia stared at Hae's flat, patent leather oxfords.

"Just to walk the boardwalk and take some photos."

"Oh."

Now it was Hae's turn to shift uncomfortably. All the lightness and familiarity she had come in with was gone.

"I've barely been outside in days," Mia told her.

Hae remained quiet as Mia waited, waited, waited...

"Fine," Hae sighed. "Do you want to come?"

"Oh my goodness!" Mia threw her hands up dramatically. "You're inviting me? I'd love to."

Hae tried not to smile back, but failed.

All that Mia knew about Hae was what could be quickly observed. When Hae walked, she took long strides, her arms swinging lightly at her sides, or her hands buried deep in oversized pockets. Also when she walked, Hae kept her head down, but when she was still, her body was a perfect line, everything stacked on top of the other like a pile of stones. When not talking, Hae was always looking at something in the distance.

At the moment, the two sat on sand at Jones Beach, with at least a yard between them. The blue of the evening sky deepened and glowed overhead. They had spent the day together since their re-meeting in Mia's apartment, walking the boardwalk and talking about inoffensive things. They avoided anything deep or provocative, leaning into long winded discussions about TV shows, music, and food, bantering with each other as the sun moved towards the water.

A group of people were celebrating something on the shoreline. It was the sight of lanterns floating over the water that drew them out to the sand so that Hae could get some photos. From the strip of sand closest to the boardwalk, they watched a group of twenty-five people dressed in white, shuffle at the shoreline as they launched yellow lanterns. There was a long stretch of beach in front of them, so they had enough distance that the people were totally unaware of their presence. In a messenger bag slung over one of her shoulders, Mia carried a sleek black sketchbook, which she then decided to take out. The two of them sat down in the sand. Mia had an idea. She was going to sketch the sky, polka dotted with lanterns. She thought that each lantern looked like a combination of a chef's hat and a hot air balloon.

Mia felt no pressure to look at Hae, or even to acknowledge her presence as they worked separately. This was a comforting thing. This, she thought, was a true mark of friendship. An individual, but harmonic existence. Mia made sure to pay attention to the boundaries of the beach. She noticed the horizon line— the precise, thin line of navy blue that marked the split between the sky and the ocean. From there, the water stretched towards her in a gentle humber. The next boundary was the seafoam gathering where the water met the sand. Mia spent a lot of time thinking about boundaries while she painted. She had to make decisions. Would she render her boundaries hard and sharp or blurred and fuzzy? Often, she thought the best boundaries were somewhere in between. Mia retrieved a 9B pencil from the inside of the spiral of her sketchbook. She began with a boundary.

Mia listened to the quiet clicking of Hae's camera as Hae loaded her vintage Canon with a fresh roll of film. There was the opening of the film door, the adjustment of the film, the closing of the door, the turning of what Hae called an "aperture ring". It was pleasingly procedural; both meticulous



and reliable. Mia could hear every snapshot that was taken, which made her not have to look at Hae to feel her there, no matter the space in between them.

Mia liked space. This was something she noticed, during the course of the day, that they had in common.

“Why not digital?” Mia asked. She dug her toes into the sand, her hands moving with certainty. She felt that if she was not going to make her strokes with conviction, she might as well not make them at all. If an artist was confused, timid, or non committal, you could see it in their work.

“So many reasons,” Hae replied, her voice hushed and quiet.

“Name one.”

“You only get 36 shots.”

“Okay?”

“Not a thousand or whatever the fuck your iCloud plan allows for. Just 36. And you have to make them count.”

“Uh huh.”

“It makes you actually pay attention. Digital cameras make complacent photographers.”

“A declaration.”

“I mean if you’re just taking a quick selfie for giggles then fine. But if not...”

Hae fell quiet and Mia heard another click.

“Why do you think they’re doing the lantern thing?” Mia asked. It was getting chilly, even though the sand was still warm from the sun. “Is this a happy occasion or a sad one? I can’t tell.”

“If I had to guess... happy and sad,” Hae replied. Mia turned her head to look at the other woman as a breeze blew Hae’s black hair in front of her lens. She thought, maybe, she’d be interested in painting Hae’s hair. She’d paint it as a seaweed monster with a secret heart of gold. Perhaps she’d put some skin in between it all. Maybe she’d add herself to the painting, a blur of light brown in the distance.

It got darker by the minute. The people dressed in white played whimsical music through a speaker and continued lighting fire under their lanterns and sending them off. A few people strayed away, either alone or in pairs to sway their bodies to the music. Mia watched the silhouette of one lanky young man who looked like he was possessed by the breeze. After a moment, she felt guilty for watching him in this private moment and looked away.

“What do you hope to capture in those photos?” Mia asked. She was drawing her third lantern and considering adding the moving bodies on the sand.

Hae’s back was curved like a crescent moon as she peered through her viewfinder. It took her so long to answer, Mia thought she had decided against it. But then she said, “The space where one person ends and another begins.”

Mia thought about this, imagining the cool air that separated her from Hae. That was all that was keeping them apart. Air. She could draw what she imagined they looked like. Two women facing in opposite directions, keeping an intentional distance that Mia swore she could feel, every now and then falter.

“Not the people themselves?”

“Not the people themselves,” Hae nodded. “Well. Not today.”

“Isn’t that just space?”

“Just space?” Hae grinned a little, her spare lips bearing her small straight teeth. “No.” The camera clicked.

“And you can see everything from this far away?”

“Mhm.”

“What were you trying to capture at Nabilah’s wedding?” Mia asked. “The same thing?”

Mia wondered how many photographs she appeared in as the maid of honor.

Hae took a pause. “The space in between,” she said finally. “But the people too.”

Suddenly, Mia felt Hae’s eyes on her.

“Are you okay?” Hae asked awkwardly. “Have you heard from your friend?”

Mia pressed her big toe in the sand, thought about an hourglass, then glanced over at their shoes. Hae’s oxfords and Mia’s strappy sandals.

“Yeah, I’ve heard from her. She’s having the time of her life in Hawaii. Sends me an obnoxious amount of selfies.” A lie.

“Glad you were able to resolve things.” There was an edge to Hae’s voice.

“Why do you say it like that?” Mia asked, looking up from her drawing and turning around.

“Nothing.”

“Oh please.”

“Just— I didn’t like the way she left you. Kind of a bitch.” Mia ran over these words in her mind, unsure what Hae was referring to.

“She’s not a bitch.”

“Sorry.”

“And in her defense, it was her wedding day.”

“Doesn’t mean she gets to throw champagne in your face.”

Mia didn’t know that happened at all. She almost asked Hae to tell her all that she new, but decided against it. Whenever she tried to make sense of what happened with Nabilah, she felt anxious. She also felt a sense of longing. This combination, for some reason, unsettled her. Mia dug around in her bag, producing what looked like a bag of gummy bears.

“Edible?” Mia asked. Hae smirked.

“Fuck it. Why not.”

They both ate two and waited for the effects.

“Have you always done photography?” Mia asked.

“For a while, yeah.” She seemed like she wanted to say something else, but was biting her tongue. Finally, she added, “I like studying people.”

“Meaning?”

“Like, just looking at them through the lens... or without it.”

“What, like a voyeur?”

“Sort of.”

“Do I have to pry this out of you or something?” Mia asked as she drew the outlines of the white clothed people.

“You’ll think it’s weird.”

“Try me.”

“Okay. I went to a funeral this morning.”

“Oh— I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t be. It wasn’t mine.”

Mia turned her body towards Hae then, giving her a funny look.

“It wasn’t my loss, I mean. It was just a random funeral I found out about in the paper.”

“I’m lost.”

“I went to watch the people.”

Mia wanted to say, *that’s sick*, but she promised not to judge.

“I’m fascinated by private moments at ceremonies. In other people’s intimacy.”

“Why?”

Hae took a pause. “I’m writing my dissertation on it.”

“So it’s like, a project?”

“Yeah.” Mia listened to another photo being taken. “I find events to go to and I look at the relationships between the people...it’s a lot to explain.”

“Where are you going next?”

“On a road trip. I have a few events I’m photographing.”

Mia listened to Hae talk about her project. She learned that Hae had studied Anthropology with a focus in Relationship Science. She also learned peripherally that though Hae was fascinated by relationships, she didn’t have many. Perhaps this was *why* she was fascinated by them. Hae planned on leaving for her road trip tomorrow and heading towards the West Coast. She’d be gone for a few weeks.

Strangely, this bothered Mia. She was tired of being alone, and this day, it was nice. It was a break from it. She didn't want it to end.

The sun was setting on the lantern people. Besides them, the beach was pretty empty. Mia wondered if it was closed.

"Can I come with you?" Mia heard herself ask.

Hae looked at her funny. "You don't have work? Or a life?"

Mia rolled her eyes at the last part. "I'm in between jobs."

"...I don't know."

Mia began examining the horizon line again. The sunset produced one of those purple and orange kinds of skies, which Mia saw with exceptional vividness. She was sure she could notice very obvious, dark boundaries around every object. Awestruck, she wrapped her arms around her knees and hugged them to her chest.

"We could be like Thelma and Louise," Mia whispered. "Two girls, one car."

"You could have done without that last sentence."

"On the road!" Mia bellowed.

"Oh, you're high."

"I am and it's lovely."

"Who would you be?" Hae asked.

"An architect."

"What? No, I mean out of Thelma and Louise."

"Well obviously I'd be the Thelma to your Louise."

“An architect?”

“Yeah. I always thought if I wasn’t a painter I’d be an architect. Like Mark Ruffalo.”

“Mark Ruffalo isn’t an architect.”

“But he was, that one time with Reese Witherspoon.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you don’t. You probably only watch foreign films with subtitles.”

Hae laughed at this, only this laughter was not like her normal laughter. It was loud and limitless; it seemed to circle around the both of them.

They sat in silence for a moment before Mia said, “Sometimes I’m afraid no one knows me.”

“What’s so scary about that?”

Mia frowned and opened her legs, looking at the sand between her knees. It seemed impossible, but when she looked back up, the sun was gone. She didn’t know if she had her head down for way too long or if the sun left earlier and she was late in noticing its absence.

“Like in the dark,” Mia said simply.

“Huh?”

“In the dark where you’re alone and no one knows you. You know? Were you ever afraid of monsters under the bed?”

“Monsters,” Hae muttered.

As the white clothed people wrapped up their ceremony, Hae continued snapping pictures. The group dispersed and a lone man lit the last flame and released the final lantern, which reminded Mia of an empty plastic bag, or a tumbleweed, which then reminded her of herself.

“Maybe I should get a boyfriend,” Mia stated.

“What did you mean when you said monsters?”

Mia went on, saying, “I mean consistent sex and someone to know me... Monogamy always seemed like a scam but now—”

“Like wooly mammoth monsters or Sesame Street monsters?” Hae asked.

“Hae. Are you asexual?”

Hae messed around with the settings on her camera.

“I ask because a big chunk of friendship is talking about your sex life and guys. It just so happens to be one of my *favorite* parts of friendship,” Mia added.

“That’s so sad.”

“Wooly mammoth monsters?” Mia asked.

“Wooly mammoths are terrifying.”

“I’ve been thinking about messaging one of my old boyfriends from college, just because.”

“Just because what?”

“Just because he’s been popping up in my head lately. Usually when I’m masturbating.”

“Oh god.”

“Does that word bother you?” Mia grinned. “*Masturbating.*”

“No.”

“Say it then! Say masturbating!”

“Masturbating,”



Mia looked at Hae blankly, her manic mood quickly plummeting. Where Mia was made of rounded lines and curving slopes, Hae was made of angles and edges. Hae's eyes were deep set, her eyelids were hooded over them. With defeat, Mia said, "I was sure you wouldn't say it."

Hae and Mia fell silent, sitting next to each other like two parallel lines that would never intersect.

"How can someone that studies relationship science be so disinterested in relationships?"

"I'm very interested in relationships."

"You don't have many, from what you've told me."

"If we're getting personal, I'd like to hear about Nabilah," Hae admitted.

Mia scoffed too quickly. "That's not an interesting story. It's your regular "best friends since childhood" kind of thing. One gets married to a loser named Wendell."

"Do you think it should have been you?" Hae asked.

"What?"

"To get married. Is that why you two were fighting?"

"I'm not high enough for this conversation," Mia announced.

The two left their shoes behind and walked down the beach where they got stuck walking in figure eights, always on opposite sides of the eight. They were good with space. With making sure the other had enough. After a few minutes of wordless walking, Hae came to a halt, blinked twice, and then said, "*Oh.*"

"Oh?" Mia asked, smiling.

“I’m not sure if I like this,” Hae said suddenly. After a moment of thought, Mia crossed the eight quickly, intent on steering Hae’s high back in the right direction. The tips of their toes touched, which Mia noticed with burning awareness.

For the first time, Mia noticed that Hae was the same height as her. Maybe even half an inch shorter. For some reason, Hae’s smallness made Mia’s fondness for her grow.

Mia took her earbuds out of the case she kept in her pocket. “You like music,” Mia said, “Right? I mean everyone likes music.”

“Yes, I like music,” Hae nodded urgently.

“Okay. Relax. We’re gonna listen to some music.” Mia inserted an earbud into Hae’s ear, making sure to avoid eye contact as she did it, but not in a very obvious way. She couldn’t avoid the brief contact that came with placing the earbud, her finger grazing the top of Hae’s ear.

Hae reacted to this touch by turning her eyes down like she was counting grains of sand.

“Sorry,” Mia said.

“It’s okay,” Hae said, staring into Mia’s eyes with boldness and audacity mixed with something tender.

“Do you want to dance?” Mia asked then.

This took Hae by surprise, who immediately said, “I’m not a big fan of touching or being touched.”

Mia grinned. “We’re going to have to figure that out then, because dancing together is an essential part of friendship.”

Before Hae could say anything else, Mia took two large steps back, took out her phone, and began looking for a song. Seconds later, the electric sound of Robyn's *Dancing on My Own*, came through the earbuds. First, they stood still, a comically serious expression planted on Mia's face. Hae raised an eyebrow. When Mia began making wiggly movements with her body, Hae's other eyebrow rose up to join the first.

"No," Hae said, shaking her head. She tried hard not to smile but her face betrayed her.

"No?" Mia repeated, making her strange wiggly dancing even more dramatic. Hae looked around for people.

"No one's here to save you," Mia called out.

Hae cracked up at this, "I wasn't looking for someone to save me. I was looking for the hidden camera."

"Dance with me," Mia pleaded.

"From over here?" Hae asked.

"From over there."

It took her another minute, but surely, Hae started to move her body too. Hae danced with light feet and modest motions, but when she was comfortable enough, she let herself put one hand in the air, and then another. Absent-mindedly, they began singing out, their heads facing the sky. Mia closed her eyes and when she opened them, she saw Hae, her hair falling all in front of her face as she bopped her head, her mouth wide open like she was trying to catch a fly. Mia didn't know what it was exactly, but as she danced, she felt something like warmth, like heat, like electricity—rolling over her in a thousand waves.