

## *Characters Inside*

As I sit here trying to find words to what happened, my fingers refuse to make meaningful movements, and my brain disdains from thinking past the obvious. How can I write about what I have not yet processed? The only thing I'm confident of, I mean absolutely sure of, is that I have no certainty about what happened to me. Why do I assume my perception is worthy of trust when I know how easy it is to distort reality, to appeal to a self-pitying mindset? Though I'll make miserable attempts, I have no desire to relive this time of my life. I was so close to becoming entirely blissful and content, seeing how scenic everyday life was but, I was stolen of such beauty. Nonetheless, I wasn't allowed to feel like this forever, no one has that amount of luck.

I stare into the photo of the young girl sitting on top of the very sheets that my closet holds. Possessing my same curly hair, same slanted smile, same cuddly stuffed frog. She was Nora, I am Deirdre, she is me just untainted.

With wide, glossy eyes that beamed with light, she stared back at me. A koala gray cardigan hung loosely from her shoulders and a pale violet skirt frayed slightly above her knees. It was no surprise she was gripping her sketchbook. Art consumed Nora's life. But, not in a negative sense, she was in love with it, seeing it everywhere she went, finding the beauty and ignoring the danger in everything, even the redundantly ordinary—it brought light to the forgotten. Lately, many things have changed. I haven't spent much time with a yellow Posca in my hand, or a camera pointing towards the sun.

Nora was there each time I had entered the realm of unrestricted internet access. Watching as a young lady in a long black skirt and white button-up stood in front of the blackboard and declared that as a woman, the most pleasurable feeling is knowing that you're the source of someone's indulging gratification, someone's disturbing, purely selfish gratification. That should be enough to keep you happy, regardless of whether you liked it or not.

When I was closer to Nora, I wore rose-colored glasses the size of bowling balls, perceiving the word only in extremities. He wore a fraudulent smile and clutched a marionette in his right hand, jerking his fingers whenever I acted disapprovingly. Dangling the words "I know you're scared," over my head like a treat over a dog's nose, "but to show you trust me, you must do things you're

uncomfortable with.” Remembering what the lady in front of the blackboard had taught me, I gave in, handing him the position of the puppet master.

Nora took a breath and opened her mouth. Nothing, however, came out. I could tell by her perplexed expression that she knew what had happened. I tried to find the words to explain it to her but, my mind was left blank. How could I make someone who had not yet experienced this understand?

Hearing a soft mumble, I look at Nora and she speaks up, “I don’t get it,” she sighed, “without being forced you stayed. And now we’ll never be the same.” Factually, she had a point but truthfully, it seemed beyond my choice. As if there was an AK47 ready to ruin me; to disconnect me from the vessel I so fortunately inhabited, to tear me away from the bonds I had made along the way, to strip me of the only person I felt love from. Unless I wanted the “fury” labeled bullets to fire, I had to give in. I had to please. I had to pose. I had to be okay with continuing even if I said “no.”

I again tried to put this into words. It was her right to know: though I’m older, I really am just as naïve as little Nora. But, nothing came out as if my vocal cords had been cut. Though Nora hadn’t said anything more, her raised eyebrow and scrunched face told me exactly what she was thinking— that she wished we weren’t the same, that she was superior because she carried her heart on the front page of her sketchbook while mine was buried deep inside. In all fairness, she wouldn’t be completely wrong, I layered my heart in bubble wrap yet, it offered no protection.

Avoiding looking directly into her eyes, I admit, “It was my job to protect you, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt us.” In this shame, my heart sinks to my stomach, and my chest feels as heavy as a boulder. At the moment, breathing is impossible. I should’ve stopped it; I should’ve seen the red flags after the first time. I was told about the dangers of the opposite sex from the second I understood that mixtures of sounds can have meaning, “Don’t let them touch you,” I heard at three. “It happened to Mom,” I heard at six. “They just want to hurt you,” I heard at ten. Why didn’t it stick with me? It could’ve saved my life, but it’s too late, now I’m just Deirdre, sorrowful, lacking light. I try to suppress my melancholy, but the feeling of misery overrides my internal gaslighting, I cannot pretend to be unaffected by this. It feels as if I’m enduring a thousand infectious blisters, my body aches, and I can feel myself tremble, my heart rate increases, and my train of thought is lost.

The Nora from the picture is no longer the only one there, I see us at two years old, six, seven, eleven, thirteen, I see all versions of myself. Their faces are red, their hands are in a fist, and their mouth is deafening. Shaking I fall onto my knees,

pleading for forgiveness, I didn't mean to hurt us, I didn't mean to cause this. They storm towards me, their bodies seem giant, and their feet deadly, closer and closer, faster and faster, they storm towards me. I want to run but my body doesn't allow it, all I can do is close my eyes. But when I open them, they're no longer in front of me. I can still hear their angry march. In an instant, I look behind me, swerving my neck as if I were an owl. Behind me stands the puppet masters, the earplug enthusiasts, the art critics, everyone who deteriorated my soul, my child selves are after them; Nora will protect me.

What drove youthful innocence to withdrawn anger was the heightened desire for self-preservation. Realizing my spark had dimmed, I sought to relight it through reliving similar situations in which it faded. Only this time, the roles would reverse, I'd become the extinguisher. I had believed my naïveness led me to assault thus, opposing my naïve self through cynicism and pessimism would help me survive. Allowing yourself to love makes you vulnerable to hurt so, I'd keep myself at a distance, almost being fraudulent, disingenuous. Just like those who hurt me. What I forgot to consider was the hurt that'd come from my -unloving- perspective, and the limitation of human experience I'd face as an extension of my inability to love.

In truth, it wasn't Nora's eyes that painted a manipulator into a savior, it was the result of years of social conditioning through media, the result of assault being presented as normal and inevitable, the result of a manipulator manipulating. I have no right locking Nora in a box, robbing her from light like the others, she deserves to be free. And what is more liberating than taking back control of my identity? Why abandon the love of youth when it can save me from the darkness? They may have paralysed my past but, no longer can they will control over my light. I've got Nora. I am Nora.