

Medusa Camouflage

We got caught, real casual, at 4:23 am on a Tuesday night. Sometime just between the yawning out R.E.M. cycles of beach-town metropolis and a good hour and a half before Rossi's opened for Early Bird Old Timer's specials, and well, us too. Twenty-four felt Old Timer enough anyway and Rossi's was perfect for post art-capade celebrations. On nights of success, Claire and I'd ditch the cans yellin' like boni-fied bandits robbin' banks and shootin' stars. One dread chick. One camo kid. Kickin' up the litter-studded sand and runnin' down the opposite end of the boardwalk, bustin' through the silver doors suctioned like a submarine. Rossi's booths were metallic red, shiny and sticky. We'd smile with syrup snuggling up our noses while the dim lights made us look yellow. Never yellow-bellied, no, no. Yellow-faced was fine. By then, the Ferris wheel and arcade were already deadened out and unlit, abandoned in a Zombie land. All the sunburnt tourists, the screaming drunk teenagers too, would be tuckered out and filled up with overpriced booze and fried, frozen seafood. Everybody finally getting about ready to pass out in their drippy motels sandwiched between the wide street and the tire-tracked sand. A few lights would flicker and shadows would phase across the balconies as we ran. Things would fall in bits down at us and we'd dodge and divide, hoping to not get hit with puke or ash or pee. Tourists were foul, ruthless creatures and we were just natives. Well... me not as much. But I liked to pretend.

If that Tuesday night had gone as planned, I would've been wolfin' down a fat order of hotcakes, usual whipped cream and cherry—can I have two? —on top. I might've went for the blueberry or shoot, *pecan*, if I was feeling extra fine. Like always, Claire would've taken God's sweet time to decide, then feeling pressured, ordered something weird that she wasn't even considering like "Chipped Beef" or "Cheese Blintzes" at the last of seconds. She'd eat two bites and then stab her fork into my chow, wanking around, saying we should just share. Would I share? Yeah. I would

share with Claire. Ha-ha. Sometimes she'd order the damn "Country Boy Special" just 'cause she thought she was bein' all clever. Ha-ha. Again. Hilarious. The red-haired waitress, the older one with all the rings—I swear she had like five diamond ones looking like wedding appropriate with the karats and gold but God, who gets married five-times proud—would pour us coffee and creams and never ask why we were out so late with paint between the creases of our fingers and mischief doodlin' up in our irises. Now come to think of it, maybe it was the diner-folk that caught on and caused to catch us. Beachy bastards. No tip for them next time. Just kidding, of course. Rossi's was best.

That night in particular, Claire had a smattering of purple and gold across her left cheek like a freckled milky way. In the reflection of cop cars, I felt all dazed and spun like I just stepped out of one of those gravity machines that drop out the floor. The ones at the fair? You know. I was feeling trippy but I might've inhaled too much aerosol. No matter. In the window, my hair around my ears looked dusted. Snowy. Not clean-snowy, more like pissed-in snowy 'cause yellow and white paint had splattered and got stuck in little dot clusters. Snow-haired. Paint-skinned. Red-handed. Cop-caught. You'd think my hat should've hid me fine. It was "Mossy Oak"! *Camouflage!* When I thought of that that night, it was funnier. I remember laughing blatant, tippin' my hat at Claire with the grace of a gentleman, my hands still on the vehicle like the poe-lice said. My hat plopped on the car hood like a fart and stuck there, just lingering. Claire smirked at me with handcuffs on. The policemen threatened to call our parents. "What parents?" asked Claire, showing off the gaps in between her teeth and the blueness in her button eyes. She was parent-free and jagged pretty. Abrasive pretty. Not really Ohio-pretty, at all. In fact, my home-friends would've found her dirty and wrecked. Druggie-lookin'. Hippie-shitty. Whatever. She wasn't bell-bottomed or shiny-haired, no dairy farmer's daughter. Luckily, home-friends were way too far for a surprise visit. I was free to like who

I wanted and not get talked about at the football game. Shoot-yeah. I could dig Claire, my Craigslist roommate.

She'd been the very first to answer the ad with a voice all sandpapery in the other end of the earpiece, crackin', "Hi, is this Jud?" and I literally almost hung up. "Jude?" I asked back. "You mean, Jude?" I had said, then tried to find politeness in there. "May I ask who's callin'?"

"Um... hang on." Wind and paper rumbled on the other end. "Nope. Says Jud. That's what it says: 'Jud Evans Needs A Roommate Besides His Cat.'" I laughed, but the voice didn't, as I realized that I had mistyped my own name on the contact information. Hurried up, I guess. "Jude," I said again. "I, uh, sorry. Bad typing, I guess. Nice to meet you...?"

"Claire. Bothell. Both-ell. 'Claire Bothell Needs A Roommate Besides Her Idiot Cousin'", and I think she was mocking me. After we'd lived together like four days, she was making us dinner and said fake-sweetly, "You're too friendly." Then she handed me a steaming plate of scrambled eggs and Velveeta, pounding pepper and hot sauce on top of them without asking. I opened my mouth and she'd said, "Don't you say thank you again." I got used to it soon enough. Did she judge me? Hell yeah. Did I hope she'd never see my parent's basement with marble-eyed game stuffed and prepped in their plastic habitat stands? Animal spirits probably floatin' around the room? Double hell yeah. She somehow found out I'd shot a Model 12. I didn't tell her that I'd been expert status at shooting it way before I'd been taught what in the *hell* a fraction was. Once I told her about my truck being the go-to for mudding when the cornfields dried up back home, just 'cause of the fat tires and big ol' bed, and she'd cackled a not-pretty cackle. "What an honor, Jude-y." God, she sucked sometimes. She had more opinions and culture than me so I tried to mind my business most of the time. She made me take a wheel throwin' class called "Spaneramics" and even though I complained about it, I always went. I made thirty-two half-decent pots by the end of the summer. Somehow she even made her cousin hire me at his tourist shop selling miniature turtles and drawing temporary

tattoos on sandy, pink kids. Claire said tryin' to get out the place where you got to be this or you're goin' to be that and judged pretty awful for it, is a fine thing to do. She said they sounded like a bunch of bastards anyway. I got happy. Florida-me grew out my hair and didn't care about shaving.

So anyways, if you'd asked me, I'd have told you that well, yeah, we should've went at three o'clock in the morning, to avoid those cops but when I had suggested it reasonably earlier that night, Claire had told me, matter-o-fact, "Fuck with the demons, if you want. I'm *stayin'* until four. No earlier, bro." Yup. That is what she said. I'd rolled my eyes 'cause she was being nonsense again. But see, again, the chick was nuts. Stubborn as an old olive jar, twice as salty when people tried to open her up and change her ways. And I thought I knew stubborn. Her brain, a patchy-pilly brain thing, was fueled way up with too many exorcist movies, old-school corn-syrup-green projectile pukes with those contorted virgin girls gone devil. Mothers freakin' out. Fathers in denial. Someone's head turnin' 'round and 'round and 'round. Nasty. And you wonder why she thought spirits and shit swam around the three am air spindles, playin' with the humanoids and ticklin' the toes of sleepers and dreamers. I guess I thought if I whined enough she'd get annoyed, shut herself in her incense room and fall asleep to "Teen Wolf". Oh *yeah*, she knew I knew she watched it. I was just annoyed 'cause whenever we went at four o'clock, it meant we wouldn't finish 'til like five and that was *only* if we painted like there were magnets in our spray can nozzles attracted hard and magical to the wood or brick or concrete, whatever the canvas was of the night. Then, we still wouldn't be done. We'd walk away cacklin' and yellin' crazy like those widowed rich ladies in casinos, waltz into the diner, order our food, get it, eat it, wait for the check *then* finally get out a there at like seven. At the earliest. Usually eight. Don't think I didn't explain this to her 'cause I totally did. "Perfect," she had said. "You got *pub-lenty* o-time to take a shower or do whatever the hell you want before you got work." She stuck out her tongue. "What else have you got to do, Jude?"

“Right... See. I’m just worried about *you*.” I tried, blatant lies. “Don’t you got work at eight?” The Meeting Place, that coffee-shop-bar-juice-bar-thing she’d worked at, opened way early and she’d been assigned a morning shift, finally. I saw it on the calendar in big ol’ blue letters, all caps and circled. Four no-shows and a few dress code violations will get you on thin ice. Claire had got offended but had swallowed her tongue for once ‘cause threats from teenage bosses will teach you manners even if they boil your blood. “Yeah, I know,” she scowled. “It’s whatever. I’ll make it in time.”

I squinted, batted my eyes like a pretty chick. Puppy-eyed, bottom lip-pursed.

“Please, please, Clair-eeeeese?” Bat, bat, bat. “An hour earlier...”

“Cool it, Jude-*ith*.” Claire said, not looking at me but wiping her eyes on her sleeve so blue lines drew over the lipstick stains by the thumbhole. Her makeup was always everywhere, especially when the cat allergies acted up or she got so mad she cried. That day was cat allergies. Even if it weren’t, she would say it was cat allergies. “Clive.” I coughed, my gender-switcher nickname was better. Claire rolled her eyes up until the amber irises disappeared behind yellow lashes and pink shimmer lids. “3:30? *Come on*.” I pressed again. When she whipped her head around, the ropes spazzed out long and erect like Medusa’s snakes gone rigid and fierce. “Four o’clock! Come on, Jude-y. Why throw off the good routines?” I furrowed and pouted, just a little. Humph. Petted Red the cat angrily. We’d been out every single night since Friday on a more scheduled stream of graffiti missions. It was addictive. It was badass. It was legendary. But sometimes... I still liked sleep better. I looked up at the fanlight, staring into it ‘til my eyes started feeling throbby. Pout extended.

“And if you lock your damn door, I’m breakin’ it *the fuck* down,” she said. “Or takin’ the pussycat instead,” She smiled, more evil than usual. “*Me-on*” I said, and got up.

“Wake me when it’s time.”

“Wake me when it’s time,” she mocked, trying to higher the rasp of her voice. But she did, wake me up that is, with a cup of the shittiest coffee. I drank up two cups and dipped the leftover doughnut holes from the gas station in it. They didn’t seem as stale when they were soggy with Great Value French Roast and the coffee didn’t seem as shitty when there were sweet little glaze flakes floating in it. Claire probably took an Adderall. She was prescribed somehow. I didn’t know how that worked. One time, she gave me one during the first couple of weeks; I guess she assumed I was an Addy-child like every other white kid from Ohio. To her unbeknownst, I got so zooted I actually painted something worthwhile and good that I thought, well *shoot*, who says I don’t have A.D.D.? Or the other one. The A.D.H.D? I’m hyper sometimes. My attention is deficient. Why hasn’t someone tested this shit? My head started singin’, “I can be motivated. I can be boom, boom, *get-er-done*.” Those little blue things can make a man productive. A few hours later, I zoomed through about fifteen tubes of our acrylic, even used the spray cans straight in my yellowed left corner wall. I turned my bedroom into a city full of cars and planes and girls with Medusa hair painted colorful and panoramic. I kept the lines straight and the paint clean and unmuddied up. I didn’t drip on the carpets but if I would’ve, I wouldn’t have given a shit. I was like, Picasso, baby, yeah. *Fhyin*.’ I was da Vinci. Van Gogh. Van Gogh-in’ strong as shit. Dali, the Claire favorite. No, no I wasn’t Dali. He did crazier drugs and I’d never even hallucinated. One other time though I took a Perc ‘cause Claire said I was making her anxious with all my knuckle-crackin’, foot-tappin’ so I did. My face melted off a schoolboy smile and my arms felt tingly. That time too, I started thinking, *hey*. Shoot! I bet I got that Anxiety, shoot-shoot. Get me these meds. Oh, Lord. I bet I got Depression too, I mean, if they checked it out. And probably, for real, I bet I’m a sociopath. Scizo. Somethin’. Yeah. I got loads of those problems. Then I fell asleep with my head resting on a dried up paintbrush. Claire said I’m better pill-less, even though she’s the one that’ll give ‘em to me when she wants to share.

That Tuesday night, yeah I was sleepy, but we were smooth. Quiet. At least after we left the gritty apartment and started walking down the path towards the beach. One must be quiet whilst carryin' plastic bags of spray cans with the tendency for clangin'. I was always the one getting shushed. It was the same with the movies. I guess I just like talking but being quiet came with this hobby. "If you wanna say loud thin's, you have to be quiet first." That was Claire's tidbit. I thought it was wise. We hitched up our bikes to the diner and walked down the stone path finally free of the day's joggers and babysitters. It was chilly for a summer night but fall was coming and maybe that's why the beach was so breezy and strange. At 4:03 am, the beach was ours like usual. "Alright. What do you wanna say tonight?" she asked while we walked, the seashells pokin' through the bottoms of my flip-flops like little bird beaks. I decided to just take them off. "Gonna hurt worse if you have to run shoeless, ya know," said Claire, looking out to the ocean. "If." I said. "But, ah... somethin'... nice. Meow?"

"Meow-Meow," she said, plainly, tiltin' her head like a song. "But, I mean, besides the cat."

"Oh. I'm am drawin' the cat then?"

"Yeah? It's your thing. You've tagged too many felines for it not to be. But seriously.

What else?" She was pushy. I wondered if she had run out of ideas. I thought of one, a good one.

"Erm. ... The WORLD." I said wide-eyed, fat-eyed, smilin' huge.

"What kinda world?"

"Happy?" She frowned. "Complacent?" She rolled her eyes. "A... *sad* world," I said really extending "sad" and pulling down the corners of my mouth with my two pointer fingers.

"Just sad?" She asked, ears perking. "And hot!" I added, flappin'.

"Hot and sad. Like boilin'. Boil-*ing* point?"

"UH-oh. Are you excited? Are likin' my idea?" I was jumpin' up and down a little.

“So the world,” said Claire, coolly. “That’s a new one.... I like it.” We kept walking on stones and grass poking through the woody parts. Picking up a rubber band from the path, she pulled back her dreads, restraining the snakes, just a bit. Earlier that week, I told her she should tie little snakeheads to the ends of them for Halloween but she just snorted. We turned at the second lamppost past the diner, hooked around the surf shack and closed ice cream hut to a spread of empty, white sand. Oh, the canvas. We kicked at the sand to feel the dampness, making sure this spot was out far enough reach from the crawl of the waves. The tide was way away. The moon wasn’t even out. We had plenty of time. I threw the shoes and did another dance by the chosen area: the long concrete wall that lined the top of the shore, naked and cracked, just waiting for our cover. Smoothing the concrete with my hand, I felt the bite of its sharper bumps on my palm and a tickle, just a little. I dusted it all off and blew like the wind-man. Calling over to Claire who was dippin’ her feet in the ocean, baskin’. We were allowed to enjoy this. We were allowed to take our time. “Eh! Aerial! Ya done?” I whisper-yelled. “Pier?” She tilted her head as she said it. I pointed to the ocean and its little ocean bridge. She nodded, motioned to me and ran out to the stairs that lead out the black water, like an arm extended to the sea. Claire floated on over to a spot next to a bench, next to those metal standing telescope things tourists use, and pulled out a can of blue. She grinned at me, gaps and red lips and crazy eyes. She made the first mark. A bright blue outline. The spray paint can pointed up high and when she talked her teeth glowed in the dark. “Boiling Point,” she nodded, “Alright, *alright*.” She cracked her neck. Pop-*pop*. Claire colored in the oceans until the earth was blue and white and rippled. She painted the earth so it sagged and deflated like a balloon literally wheezin’ out of its sides. The earth was supposed to be dying. The waves rushed in and out but the tide was way far away.

“You gotta do the crests. They’ll look better if you do ‘em.” She handed me the can, I had a brush already and I swooped. Delicate lines, fire volcanoes, oil spills, mushroom clouds. I painted a

spout on one side. A handle on the other. A little lid on top. “Boilin’ point!” she squealed, grabbin’ my shoulder and shakin’ it. “Cut it out,” I said, laughing ‘cause I wasn’t done yet. I painted swirls of steam, Hercules Disney curls, until the whole thing was bubblin’ and smokin’ and about to explode. “That’s something, Jude,” said Claire. “Oh my god. Graffiti. Graffit...*tea*. TEA! Get it?” My eyes probably got all big too. I smirked then, and said, “Shit. Boilin’ the fuck over.” We stood there. Just admirin’. It was a good one. We stood up there for too long because before we knew, there were flashlights lightin’ up our boilin’ point.

“HEY! Put down the cans!”

Aw, shoot. I can’t even get mad about it. That’s the thing about painting a pier; once you’re on it, there’s two ways to go, forward or back. If there’s people seeing you on one end, you can run the other way. But then, I mean, you’re at the end of the pier, right? You can jump if you want. Or, run back the way you came and Red Rover the straight through that cop-wall. Well, I Red-Rovered and won. Claire got caught by the arm ‘cause honestly, she was too busy puttin’ cans in her cargo shorts. I turned around, and walked back. “Hey,” I said, smilin’ at ‘em. We just couldn’t stop laughin.’

“Names please?” Those guys were all business. We played their game and said our names.

“Clive,” said me.

“Judith,” said Claire.

Unfortunately, they found out anyways and weren’t amused, “No more funny business.” “We’re add-ults, sir,” I said to the policemen closest to me, grinning wide and wishin’ I had something to chew then spit. They got annoyed enough with us and finally let us go, fines in hand and promises of court warrants, “If we catch you two again, you know what’ll happen,” that whole blah-blah-blah. Claire and I walked down the steps and sat under the tiny bob of lights blurrin’ the hotels. The policemen eyed our walks. Counted our footsteps. Calculated our conversations.

Suddenly, Claire elbowed me, grabbed my hand and before I knew it, we were takin' off running. Hand in hand, my right, her left, our opposites sprayin' the sand with green and gold paint just churnin' up like gunfire. Shoot-shoot! Say we were full of dread and camouflaged? Two-bit twenty-something's with nothin' good to give? Impossible. We painted and blasted, sought out and decided. We'd change these something's that nobody seemed to care about until they were different. We'd be significant. We'd be magical. We'd be the legends coverin' those sandcastles.

And we'd myth 'em.

Again and again and again.