

Jack Alexander stood on a bridge, shrouded in mist. The weight of exhaustion pulling his eyes shut is the last thing he remembered. A bizarre rejuvenation roused him, alerting him to step forward.

An ocean of drab, grey cloud spun around him. Jack stumbled ahead, spotting the outline of a bridge hidden in the ghostly mist. Wooden boards creaked beneath his weight.

Sprinting forward, Jack spotted an-silhouette clouded in the haze. He called out with a shout, hoping for some answers to this bizarre hallucination. “Hello!” There was no response.

“Hello!” he shouted again. Just as before, he was met only by a forlorn silence. He didn’t know how far he ran, but the bridge seemed to maliciously extend further with each step. Lost and alone, he felt trapped in a maze of deceit.

He breathed heavily. Hesitant to continue forward, Jack stopped and turned to look back. His eyes widened at the sudden appearance of a ghostly shape growing nearer. Driven by a desperate need to escape the mist, he turned and continued to run toward the figure.

The apparition followed, the fog parting with each step it took, as if it held sway over this ~~terrible~~ nightmare. Jack could see the clear outline of a woman. She was ~~adorned~~ in a dark dress which contrasted distinctly against her deathly pale skin. Despite her vacant expression, Jack suddenly felt a calmness come over him—a pleasant familiarity at the sight of her.

“Do you know where we are?” he asked. “Do you know how to escape this fog?”

She remained as silent as a corpse, her empty eyes fixed on him. Jack was intrigued by her dark, yet angelic beauty. It was as if she were a glimmer from a fleeting memory. Though, any recollection eluded him.

“Who... are you?” he pleaded once more, only to be met with silence. He was unable to look away, drawn to her piercing, midnight stare. From the depths of the nocturnal shadows, he saw his own morose reflection glaring back. She lifted a finger, tapping his forehead.

Jack’s eyes fluttered open, finding a glass of wine perched between his fingers. He stood, and anxiously pacing back and forth, sipped the drink. This art gallery was Chicago’s best; a proving ground for the elite. He’d even put on his most expensive suit and tie, yet somehow Jack was still out of place.

His cell phone rang. Jack slid his hand into his pocket and peeked at the screen. It was his agent. “Hello,” he spoke unenthusiased.

“Jack, my boy! How’s the showing?”

This was Jack’s first solo exhibition. The most important night of his life. Yet, it all felt wrong. He sipped wine, surveying the room as the liquid warmed his throat and spread outward to the rest of his body. His brow furrowed as he watched wealthy patrons flock toward digital abstractions and imitations of popular culture.

“You know me. I paint from a place deep within. Raw emotion.” He answered, frowning with the disdain of a hyena watching lions steal his prey.

“Yeah, I know,” spoke the agent. “The canvas represents a reflection of your inner struggles and demons. That’s what every artist says. Just don’t stand there looking all dreary. Being approachable is how you get your art sold.”

Jack turned to glance up toward his favorite piece; one that had taken him the length of one year to complete. He became lost in the image of a landscape surrounded by a sinister cloud of darkness. All life the shadow touched appeared to be dying slowly, fading into oblivion.

Yet, at the center of the painting was a golden, liberating light that crept down toward the land, instilling it with life. It was nothing less than a true expression of his soul. He had used every brushstroke to convey his search for meaning in this world filled with turmoil.

My paintings have the power to touch others, he thought. To make them see beyond their mask and connect to something deeper within. Jack grunted in contempt as he observed the scrutinizing art patrons. *So why do this damn pop art get more praise?*

As his agent prattled on, Jack’s attention was drawn to noisy, graceful clapping. Jack turned to spot a woman standing at his side. Jack’s words were caught in his throat and he was momentarily taken aback by her striking presence. It was as if a horse-mounted Valkyrie had sprinted the Bifrost to greet him.

“I... need to go.” He hung up the phone without a second thought.

The woman’s fair, rose-tinted skin complemented her raven-black hair. Her mouth was highlighted in sensual red lipstick, identical in color to the red dress snugly illustrating her curves.

Finding a hint of confidence, Jack spoke in a flirtatious tone. “You look like a natural connoisseur. What are your thoughts on this one?”

“It’s gloomy,” she said dryly. “Whoever painted this must be clinically depressed,”

Jack’s smile grew. “Now why would you say that?” ~~he prodded.~~

“A darkness surrounds the entire painting,” she said, tilting her head. “It consumes the light.”

Criticism of his works was not new to him. Yet, her words hinted at a longing to understand this mirror into the artist’s soul. He wanted very much to humor her. “Or perhaps the light is standing firm, pushing back,” he responded.

The woman remained quiet for a moment, inspecting the painting. “No...” She paused, shaking her head in disagreement. “If that were the case, the light would be bleeding through to shatter the darkness.”

Jack smirked, rather pleased by the woman’s willful enthusiasm. “Only, hope does not clash against despair. It stands as a beacon in the sea of shadow. At least... that was what I’d hoped to convey.”

He locked his eyes with hers, as brilliant as a clear blue sky. Not once before had someone debated the emotion of his art. Not once had anyone seen this painting as he had intended.

The woman’s surprise became evident as she realized the man standing before her was none other than the artist she had been critiquing. “Oh... when I said clinically depressed... I didn’t...” She stammered clumsily in an attempt to explain herself.

Jack chuckled, raising his wine glass in a gesture of amusement. “Maybe you can make it up to me over a drink.” He paused for a moment and flashed her a delightful smile. “I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Miranda.” The woman laughed. “I’ll do you one better, Jack. I’ll buy the painting.” A sly smirk trailed her vermilion lips. “A beacon in the sea of shadow. I like that.”

Jack stood frozen, his heart swept away in the wind of Miranda's boldness and her intrigue in his art.

She reached into her purse and retrieved a large, snake-skin wallet. “Drinks are on you though.”

Both excited and a little uneasy at the turn of events, Jack managed a chuckle. Miranda had reignited a flame within him, the likes of which he was, until this moment, uncertain still existed. It was a powerful, all-consuming sensation.

He quickly accepted her offer with a nod and a smile, eager to learn more about the woman who saw his painting in a way no other had. He turned away from the woman to glance upon his favorite painting one last time.

What he saw, instead made the shadow grow darker. In place of his prized painting, there hung a solo mirror. Jack’s gaze penetrated the glass, witnessing himself alone in a dreary ocean of mist. He was swallowed by a cloud of emptiness, echoing his own resounding emotion. The shadow of fear that had lingered inside him as threatening to envelop any brightness which dared shine.

He felt his mind pulsating, barely able to maintain a grip on what was real. His tired eyes peered deeper into the reflection, noticing a woman as pale as snow standing behind him. His eyes grew unbearably heavy as the mist enveloped him.

As if awakening from a dream, Jack stood in the dimly lit streets of Chicago. There, beside him, stood Miranda. He couldn't remember what dumb joke he might have told her, but hearing her adorable laugh was like the chorus of a divine tune.

She was an angel descending into his personal hell to endow some sense of serenity. Only, he knew sooner or later molten flames would burst through the cracks of his hidden kingdom.

As they reached the apartment building, Jack glanced at his window on the third floor. "Well, this is me," he spoke nervously.

Jack had been intent on going in for the kiss tonight. He'd realized tonight marked five dates and he had not attempted to make a move. He leaned forward, but quickly recoiled before Miranda glanced up. With every glimmer of light that presented itself, the black cloud of fear silenced it. He stood a distance from her, his shoulders slumped timidly. Yet, the way she peered into his eyes fueled a desire within him.

She caressed his arm. "So that's it?"

Miranda's question hung in the air with the allure of a siren's song. Her touch alone had shattered the darkness clouding his heart. Mustering newly liberated confidence, Jack pulled her

close. As their lips met in a passionate embrace, the city's hectic cacophony of sound seemed to melt away. Their tenderness became a canvas of pure ecstasy, painted in the most vivid of colors.

With shared laughter they broke apart, breathless and longing for more. The flame within Jack vanquished any sense of fear that might have remained.

"The apartment is a little messy..." he spoke assuredly as the blaze fueled his desire. "But do you want to come up?"

Miranda's eyes pierced him as she twirled her silken hair. Her teeth bit down upon her luscious lip, answering him by a display of yearning. They ran up the stairs hurriedly, eager to find solace in each other's company.

Jack clumsily searched his pocket as if the key were mischievously hiding. He swiftly unlocked the door, then slammed it shut. The paramours' hands began wildly caressing each other's tender forms, hidden beneath layers of soft, constricting fabric.

As their garments cascaded to the floor, their bodies were bared. Jack stood transfixed at the allure of Miranda's every curve. They began to make love with an intensity that left them both breathless, lost in each other. Yet, as his soul entwined with Miranda in a realm of pure ecstasy, Jack felt an unexpected presence in his hand.

His eyes fixating on a rigid, plastic syringe containing yellowish fluid. Ceiling lights flickered intermittently as the room succumbed to enveloping darkness. His hands began reaching wildly, searching for Miranda's enticing touch.

She had vanished, as if never even there. Convinced he must be ensnared in some sort of terrible dream, the man wept, his eyes becoming dreadfully tired. He pushed back against the

haze, desperately fighting to keep Miranda's lingering memory alive. He called out for her, but no answer came.

Abandoned in his apartment, Jack turned and spotted a mirror hanging on the wall. Losing all sense of time or memory, He stared at death's pale face echoing in the mirror's depths. Her icy hand gripped his shoulder, and everything seemed to melt away.

Jack awakened seated at a wooden table, cold sweat pouring down his forehead. This is no dream, he realized, it is a nightmare. Disregarded the persistent growls from his stomach, he remembered spending his last few months in a state of artistic obsession. He often felt drowsy, his mind clouded in a grueling miasma. Jack's creative pursuits held him captive, coercing him to find inspiration for his next great piece.

"What's wrong?" A familiar voice pierced through his foggy confusion. Jack looked up to see Miranda standing in the kitchen, smiling warmly. Even now, she irradiated love, as if fallen from the cosmos to bathe him in pure starlight.

Jack didn't smile back. He looked instead at his most recent works, displayed on the apartment walls. It seemed to him, that all his brush strokes expressed the tender feelings he held for Miranda. The profound pieces he had become known for, were morphing into saccharine depictions of love and bliss.

His phone rang. He looked down, spotting it move across the table as it vibrated. Jack didn't lift a finger, simply waiting for the ringing to end. After a moment, a voice recording began to play.

“Jack, it’s Michael. The art gallery called. They’re uh... dropping you. Your paintings are too commonplace now. Boring, they say.” The man took a deep breath, then spoke sympathetically. “Your pieces used to be something... mean something. What happened?”

Sluggishly, Jack looked down at his hands resting on the chestnut-stained table. They were trembling.

“Daydreaming again, huh?” Miranda cut through the silence, as if she’d not even heard the voice message. Her voice now tinged with mild concern as she turned toward the stove.

This empire he had built was his own. Yet as Miranda’s light pierced his vision, he lost himself in the delight. The brightness she had shone in the underworld of his soul was finally beginning to fade. He felt the shadow returning, stronger and more potent than ever.

Everything he had worked for disappeared in the blink of an eye. With the shadow nowhere to be found, he sought to again welcome its cold embrace. It was inescapable.

“How is your new painting going?” Miranda asked as she grabbed mixed vegetables and dropped them into a pot. “You’ve been working on it for months. I bet it will sell for even more than your last one.”

The water’s furious sizzle called Jack’s adrift mind to attention.

Miranda snapped, “you’re pushing me away aren’t you? Afraid of losing the name you spent all these years building. Jack Alexander; the surrealist painter.” Though Jack remained lost in a haze, his ears perked up. “The art isn’t what made me love you, you know.”

Jack glanced at her as she carried two plates of fresh food to the table. For the first time, he saw his own miserable demeanor mirrored in her face. Just as he feared, his own hellfire had

singed her soul with darkness. Ceramic clinked as she set a plate in front of Jack. He glanced down at the steaming sirloin and vegetables. He felt joyless and devoid of appetite.

“If you’d asked, I would have done something,” Miranda pleaded as she sat to face him. “If you’d turned to me instead of the drugs... maybe I wouldn’t have left you.”

Jack’s eyes opened wide. *Drugs*. He felt a sting in his heart. His mind twisted in agonizing emotion, as if one-thousand strings pulled at his skull.

“Maybe then you wouldn’t be so alone.”

Jack remembered suspecting her cries were merely a means to elude his yearning for her love. As fear consumed him, he ran to the shadow’s embrace, listening to its consoling whispers. There was solace in knowing the shadow answered his deepest doubts.

“Maybe then you’d still be here,” Miranda spoke harshly from across the table.

Yet, hearing Miranda’s words now, Jack recognized her inability to sit by and witness the self-destruction of the man she loved. The shadow sunk its claws into his frail heart, submerging further into it. Desperately, he wanted nothing more than to be greeted by her warm smile.

His head slowly drifted up to find once more he was alone. An empty chair sat across from him, and behind it hung an ominous and familiar mirror. Lethargically, he stood and walked past the table.

Jack felt his foot bump into a delicate obstruction. He looked to the floor, spotting an abundance of incomplete paintings trampled beneath his feet. Gritting his teeth, he trampled these remnants of his failure as he lurched toward the mirror. Immersed in his terrified reflection, memories flooded his mind in a deluge of anguish.

In the mirror, he saw himself gripping a vile syringe tightly in his fist. He felt the shadow stretching its murky tendrils through every fiber of his being. As a deep fatigue again, swept over him. Jack's eyes began to close. His tormented mind swirled in a hurricane of agony, unable to cling to the briefest crumb of hope. He shouted, recognizing the shadow for the menace it had become.

The shadow had fed him only deception, unleashing a world of torment and falsehood. These gaping wounds on his heart were not because of Miranda, but an ever-present loathing he harbored for himself. He was worried Miranda would see past this façade.

Light enveloped Jack's heart as he flung the drug-filled needle from his open palm. Feeling a sense of rejuvenation, Jack's eyes sprang open with newfound determination. There, in place of the mirror, he saw a painting; the most inspired he had ever created. The canvas depicted a woman bathed in radiant light, spreading her glow to dissipate a dismal fog.

He'd not known another way to express to Miranda what she truly meant to him. She was a nurturing, radiant sun that glimmered with tenderness and affection. In the end, she was the only inspiration he needed.

As the man's heart swelled with intense emotion, the walls surrounding him began to crumble. His eyes remained fixed on the painting, every stroke, a testament of his love. Without fear, he inhaled deeply, waiting for the heaps of brick and drywall plummeting toward him.

The rubble, however, burst into a cloud of mist. It was cool and soothing to the touch. The pale woman stood on the bridge, awaiting him. Her face was from his fondest memories; a reflection of the woman he loved.

“Miranda?” he called out with a delighted smile. The woman remained as still as a statue. Her empty eyes echoed a deathly emptiness. “You’re not her are you?”

“I appear as you choose to see me,” the pale woman spoke. “I am a guide, meant to show you the way beyond this purgatory.” The woman paced toward him, her gaze unbreaking.

“I’m... no,” he stuttered as his eyes grew large. “So... all of that seemed so real. It was just... memories?”

“It was real. You experienced imitations of a past life, meant to guide you toward seeing the truth,” The pale woman spoke in an eccentrically comforting tone. “To cross, you must embrace the life you lived, both the light and the dark. You must accept there is no way to reverse the past. No way to go back.”

Jack had often thought of the exact words he would use to apologize to Miranda. Yet, he found misery morphing into bittersweet nostalgia as memories of flooded his mind. He heard the sweet sound of her laughter and smelled the satisfying aroma of her home-cooked meals. He tasted her soft lips. Jack couldn’t help but allow a melancholic smile.

He looked past the pale woman, toward the endless and uncertain expanse. “What’s... beyond the bridge?”

She smiled for the first time. “Shall we find out together?”

Jack simply nodded. The pale woman extended a welcoming hand, and he grabbed it.