

Volume 1

Creative Writing Component

The Lining of the Heart

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## Abstract

When we look at a work of art or an actual landscape, our mental associations are generally subjective. What we ‘see’ is often filtered by layers of previous observational experiences along with memories and emotional responses. How can this process of observation be slowed down and examined in more detail? What can be learnt about the identity of the observer from their engagement with visual subjects?

This exegesis and creative artefact attempt to determine how sketching can be used as a methodology to slow down the process of observation, what happens during and around the engagement with visual subjects, and how these elements can be used for developing character in creative fiction. Two key works are examined in relation to interaction with the visual and how they have influenced my creative work, *Bento’s Sketchbook* by John Berger and *Leaving the Atocha Station* by Ben Lerner. In examining *Bento’s Sketchbook*, I explore how Berger’s process of sketching allows the discovery of the subject’s visual composition while allowing an exploration of the responses the interaction provokes. *Leaving the Atocha Station* is examined for Lerner’s use of character development based on the contingencies surrounding ekphrastic encounters with works of visual art. To unpack how these authors influenced my creative work, I use Anton Ehrenzweig’s concept of “unconscious scanning”, the ability for unconscious perception to take in multiple elements simultaneously before the conscious mind settles on a creative solution. The concept is used to explain how creative connections can be formed when using multiple visual objects and their elements. Employing this method for creative writing also allows greater possibilities for characterisation, the interaction with the visual enabling a development of responses and contingencies surrounding it.

The creative component of this thesis is in the form of a novella titled *The Lining of the Heart*. Sketches are used alongside the text not for illustrative purposes but to develop the formation of narrative and character. Drawing from Berger and Lerner’s practice, the novella demonstrates the engagement with visual art through ekphrasis and sketching.

## **Declaration**

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Signed:

Date: January 21, 2020

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## The Lining of the Heart

# 1

I remember being wheeled into the emergency room on a gurney. Laboured breaths, a pain shooting through my chest like arrows at the pinnacle of each inhalation. I say I remember this, but it was more a series of fragmented images tied to sensations. The inside of a taxi on route to the hospital. Heavy rain like radio static. Fingernails digging into the palm of my hand while squinting at haloes of blurred light through the windshield. Vague recollections, accented by the chalky taste of pain killer in the emergency ward and the proceeding moment of clarity. A moment where I saw the man in the motorcycle jacket. That, I remember.

\*

Light blue curtains were drawn across either side of me as I waited, a view to the pathway between the aisles of beds, a narrow cinema for one. Hearing became heightened over the other senses with little to observe. Groans of agony from unknown locations, rubber soled shoes upon tiled floor, urgent machine noise indicating the status of their tethered human extensions. One sound became louder, a gurney with its legs clanking at pace like a wayward trolley. Sharp voices joined the approaching tumult, incoherent but with the tones of questions and commands. When the origin of sound paused in my view, medical staff were leant over the twisted shape of a bloodied man wearing a leather motorbike jacket, pricks of light from the overhead fluoros catching on its studs. A road accident, I remember thinking. There appeared to be more blood over the man than would be desired outside the body. His upper torso writhed as people around the gurney tried to hold him down, his legs remaining inert and unnaturally bent beneath a sheet once white and now crimson. One of his arms suddenly stretched back as if violently bound by an invisible force, the bloody fingers bent, claw like and protruding from a leather sleeve. After securing the arm back beside the body, the medical team rushed on, a smell of rust mixed with hospital grade disinfectant lingering in their wake. It didn't seem real, like watching a film as people always say, or maybe it was the pain coming back, conflating my reality and fiction.

More fragments, like the jump shots of new wave cinema. A close up shot of my hand with a needle dangling from it where a nurse had left it. Or was it the forearm? No, definitely the hand. There is still a puncture wound. A panning shot to the nurse showed her adjusting an IV drip before she connected it to the needle. The IV bag released its invisible concoction into the bloodstream that began to get colder, as if my veins were becoming crystallised. Then it changed, a warmth spreading and hushing the pain. A metallic taste on my tongue came with it. A nurse told me this was normal when I must have said so. There would be a doctor coming to ask me some questions, they said before leaving. What kind of questions, I wondered. Guilt crept in through the warmth, an apology brewing for my presence in the emergency ward, for causing an inconvenience. The guilt was not new, its origins conceivably attached to a catholic upbringing. The stories of saints and sinners told in Sunday school were now only didactic mythologies for moral conduct, but the echoes of religious doctrine stuck in the brain, like thorns.

When the doctor came, he was followed by an entourage of medical disciples in training, all noting my responses to his questions. What do I do? How had I been living recently? They had found traces of what seemed to be methamphetamine in my blood. A curious revelation but not unlikely with the recent mixing of over the counter pharmaceuticals when they stopped working individually. There would need to be scans and

we'll need to keep you in overnight, he said, see how serious it is. I felt pretty good now, I told him, a warm and light sensation beginning to circumvent the guilt. That's the drugs, he said, you won't feel great when they wear off unless we figure out what's wrong. I don't remember much after, the slide projector of memory running out of images until I woke up in another room. Here the other patients slept around me with machines that sounded less urgent, as if only keeping time. The second hand tick of multiple hearts.

It was a few more tests and an EKG before they found the problem. Pericarditis, the doctor said with no sign of emphasis. I was worried at this point, not knowing what this meant. It was an infection in the lining of the heart, he said, usually caused by stress and a low immune system. We went through more questions of history and reasons that could have caused this. Too much anxiety, too little sleep, too many things that lead to a pain in the heart. Then there was Sam, but I didn't tell them about that. The known cause to a different pain in my heart, the one poets and singers talk about. I was trying not to think about it, doing anything I could to distract myself and ignoring my health in the process.

The doctor told me they would need to keep me in for a couple of nights until they were sure the infection wasn't getting worse. Is it that bad? I asked them. Think about what you've been doing to your body, they told me, how do you think you got here? I wanted to tell them by taxi but it didn't seem like a good idea.

\*

It was six months ago when the life I thought I was working towards fell apart. A window into the future possibilities with Sam now broken from the brick she'd thrown through it. I was thirty, trying to get my shit together and making future plans by dropping the bar work of my twenties for an office job with an internet provider called Optimus. A real job with secure pay and leave that could finance a shared down payment on a house together. Not that it mattered after she left. Work was just a place to go. A distraction.

The workers around me were good people but I'd hardly engaged with them. Our worlds were far apart with their discussions limited to situational comedy series I had never seen, expensive Japanese cars and new movies about robots punctuated with explosions to distract from their incoherent plot development. I observed them from a distance, began to see people once thin in the bloated faces that glowed in the monitor lights. I'd think about these people in the morning before work and poke at the new paunch acquired upon my otherwise slim physique, a result of the nightly drinking habit. The paunch never grew though. I never ate what they did.

At lunchtime, the diets of these people made the office cafeteria smell repellent. A pungent tinge of energy drinks mixed with McDonalds and processed by unfit bodies into sweat, the result unconvincingly competing with deodorant marketed for teenage boys. I chose to eat salads from an Asian fusion place nearby instead, then chain smoke. There's nothing wrong with this job, I'm fine, I'd tell myself in the smoker's alley, lighting one cigarette off another until I had to be back in the office.

When Sam left I began to work overtime. Ten-hour days. Anything to take my mind off the reality outside work. Four years with someone was hard to forget when the bed you shared, the friends you saw and your existence together was all you knew. At home I couldn't sleep, awake for hours drinking beer or whiskey while watching old movies I barely paid attention to, their shifting scenarios allowing a disconnection. I began to tune out, losing interest in anything connected to reality, including social media. Too many people I no longer wanted to connect with after everything happened. I'd felt guilty at first with the prospect of unfriending people who would remind me of Sam, before concluding it was better just to scrap the whole thing. Unfriend everyone by deleting the whole system of

communication so nobody felt singled out. It wasn't much different to the real world I occupied.

I rarely caught up with friends anymore, the questions of how I was doing leading to anxiety attacks in public bathrooms. They stopped contacting me eventually, everyone except Elana. She was the only person I still talked to, who avoided bringing up Sam, but I hadn't told her about the pain when it began.

\*

The pain began a few days before the emergency room after a week of three hours sleep a night, a physical pain unlike the psychological ache I was pretending didn't exist. I ignored it, hoping it would pass like the storm I was avoiding in a café the night it got worse.

Rain fell thick and fast, making the surface of the road outside slick and move like the current of a river. My break from work was nearly over and I'd stood in the entrance watching the street, wondering how I was going to walk back to the office as the canvas awning above me whipped in the wind. Choosing to wait it out, I moved back inside with other people seeking shelter. It was then I began to notice the laboured breaths I was taking, like the air had gotten thicker, but nobody else seemed to be having trouble.

Testing my breath, I inhaled deeply and felt a wave of pain spread through my chest. Attempting to alleviate it with shallow breathes did not indicate anything positive to come. Soon even the short breaths grew harder to take, the pain stabbing on the exhalations also. Panic stricken, I began to attempt large breaths again, filling up my lungs and unable to ignore the knives in my chest that were continuously twisting. There were too many people around me. Bodies too close, making me move out of the cafe and under the whipping awning once more. I spotted a taxi and moved towards it, every part of me held taut, attempting to temper the pain. Hopping into the backseat, the driver's eyes showed worry as they looked at me through the rear vision mirror. I told him through gritted teeth to head to the hospital, trying to look like nothing inside me was going to rupture, trying to make a face that said we both needn't worry.

\*

Disorientated, I woke beneath coarse sheets and dim lighting before I recognised I was still in the hospital, still under observation for the infection. Details of a dream lingered momentarily, a recurring one that had been creeping into the small hours of sleep for the last six months. Scenarios changed but I could never remember much. I was in forests, city streets and a supermarket once, all places where I was trying to find someone. I'd found them a few times, making it far enough into the dream without waking, but it was never clear who they were. No features where their face should have been, only a shadow.

In the dark, bodies stirred in their beds around me as I looked for my phone. As if responding to my thoughts, it glowed briefly by my bedside. 2 am. One message from Elana, still in Beijing on a photography assignment. I replied, vaguely explaining what had happened, downplaying the event and stressing for her not to worry. She wasn't convinced but I assured her I would probably be released soon and keep her updated.

*-You'll be back in a few days anyway, I reassured her, and you can see I'm fine with your own eyes.-*

I put the phone face down, removing the only source of light in the room. Without sight, the sounds of breathing and monitoring apparatus seemed to get louder, the cumulative sound of not having private health cover. Try again, I told my body, try to sleep.

I awoke again in the morning to breakfast being served with a newspaper. An article inside detailed the last day of an Impressionist exhibition I had postponed going to with Elana. She'd wanted to see it with me, suggesting it once a week before she left for the Beijing job, but I kept making up excuses to not go. The image of Monet's *Water Lilies* above the article began to make me regret losing this opportunity with her when the doctor came in with the test results. The infection had not become worse, he told me, and I should be able to go home tomorrow with a course of antibiotics. They were strong and would make me drowsy, an emphasis that I was not to mix them with alcohol, operate heavy machinery or drive while taking them. I didn't drive but the bloody man from last night, the possible road accident victim, came back to me.

'Do you know what happened to the man in the motorbike jacket they brought in last night?' I asked a young nurse when the doctor had left.

'He passed away unfortunately,' she said quietly. 'He went into shock and his heart stopped working.'

I pictured the man's heart straining in his chest, the body sending signals throughout him that something was terribly wrong, until it stopped, no longer useful for anyone. Again, guilt spread through me at the abuse I had put my own heart through, leading it down the road to infection. Nobody to blame but myself.

I called the office to explain what happened and ask about time off. The doctor had recommended a week but I hadn't touched any of my leave. Five weeks they gave me. Forced leave due to accumulation from overtime and their policy on accruing too much. I didn't know what I was going to do without work. A routine had been established. A fragile sequence of events that allowed me to function in the world, however unhealthily. A functioning addict.

In the old films I'd been watching at night I'd seen various depictions of addicts forced to go cold turkey, to kick their addiction. Frank Sinatra's effort in *The Man with the Golden Arm* stood out, his attempt at escaping a locked room while flailing and rubbing at rigid limbs. To me, comparing paid leave with Ol' Blue Eyes shaking a heroin addiction didn't seem too absurd.

No job to go to and nothing planned, I had successfully wasted two days with indecision since getting home from the hospital. A dull and subtle pain still lingered within my chest, but nothing bad enough to stop me from doing anything. I just couldn't concentrate, couldn't complete the actions I'd started, like attempting to throw a ball and unable to let it go. Books were picked up and put down after a few pages, movies started but never watched to the end, all exercises in futility navigating the absence of routine.

On the third morning of this absence I turned to browsing online news sites in sporadic bursts. Hardly reading the articles, I only saw the visual candy of images, their ephemeral piquancy favoured over the dull taste of text. Looking at one of these pictures, the image of a wet cat rescued from a drain pipe, my phone vibrated with a message. Elana, back from Beijing.

*-Hey, how are you feeling? Want to meet up at the art gallery?-*

A twang of guilt came back remembering the exhibition I'd made her miss. The article in the hospital newspaper. Monet's *Water Lilies*. The image no longer representing the art movement with its suggestive painterly marks, but a clear representation of my failure as a friend.

*-Feeling okay considering. An art gallery visit sounds good.* - I replied, hoping to assuage my guilt without a plea for redemption.

*-1pm. Meet me at the hanging horse.-*

\*

The Art Gallery of South Australia's colonnaded portico presented itself as an anachronism compared to the modern façade of student apartments across the street. Views of such juxtaposition had increased near sites of cultural importance recently, while glass and steel continued to obscure most of the city's less desirable heritage.

The marbled tile of the gallery's foyer clicked and echoed under my shoes as I entered the building. Curving above me, a high arched ceiling took the sounds of my steps up with it and left the din of the city outside. I listened for voices and movement, hearing little more than a few whispered remarks. Nothing to indicate a crowd, something I felt too fragile to deal with. Every step taken to get there was accompanied by a voice telling me to turn back, and I would have, if Elana's request had not fuelled my momentum.

The first gallery contained glass cabinets displaying extravagantly designed jewellery with no other purpose than to be looked at. Across from the cabinets, hung paintings of religious iconography, their purpose equally as aesthetic. In the next section, a life-sized sculpture of a horse hung from the ceiling with the aid of an industrial support beam. It commanded attention in the room, its size and incongruity with the other works on display, jarring. A tutting sound came from a man near the sculpture, his body hunched over a walking stick and head raised with difficulty to eye the beast. Bested by its size, or the expected conventions of art held, he retracted his efforts of scrutiny and slowly moved towards the exit.

Ten past one. No messages from Elana.

Alone with the sculpture, something pulled on the corners of my memory, an interaction failing to reveal itself. Closer to the horse and looking at its coat, the hide appeared to be real. While lost in the dark tones of hair, dispersed with a reflective sheen of down lights, a hand grabbed my shoulder.

'Jesus Christ!'

I turned around to see Elana, laughing at the shock she had given me and holding me from falling over. A security guard appeared at the top of the staircase from the next gallery,

looking down at us and glaring at the source of vocal blasphemy. Wincing, I raised my hand in apology while Elana helped me to a standing position, mouthing the word “Tourette’s” to the guard.

He raised one dark eyebrow before putting an index finger to his lips and moving back to where he appeared from.

‘You scared the hell out of me,’ I whispered.

‘I can see that. You look like shit by the way. Some kind of hobo chic you’re going for with this hairy dishevelled look’

‘Thanks. It’s nice to see you too. Also, you can’t say hobo anymore. It’s politically incorrect. I think it’s “urban outdoorsmen” now.’

Elana looked well but she always looked good with her shoulder length hair, her skinny jeans and a loose shirt that never deviated from the monochrome spectrum. “The creative’s attire,” I’d joked. I’d seen other women in similar clothing but they could never emulate her movements, her fluidity and lack of tension removing any suspicions about the authentic persona she embodied.

We moved up the stairs into the next gallery where the guard who had silently scolded us sat in a chair. Watching us through slitted eyes, he made us quickly pass into the next hall. I thought to yell out Shit! Or Fuck! adding credence to Elana’s insinuations, but doubted the guard believed.

‘Is there anything in particular you wanted to see?’ I asked Elana.

‘Not really, I just wanted to get you out of the house. I’ve been worried about you. Even before this pericardidius thing or whatever it’s called.’

I looked away from Elana towards a series of geometric shapes painted in lurid colours.

‘I don’t know what to think of this,’ I told her, gesturing towards the colourful arrangement of what must be in the category of modern art.

‘Nice way to change the subject.’

‘I’m fine, honestly. The doctors told me the infection would be cleared up after a week as long as I took the antibiotics.’

In the next section of the gallery a portrait greeted us with surrealistic qualities of colour and form. *Ern Malley* by Sidney Nolan, a non-existent entity made visible through coarse brush strokes. It looked like the man was coming apart, parts of the face exposed to the bone, ribs showing through a crimson shirt. I sensed Elana wasn’t concentrating on the painting, only waiting for me to elaborate on how I was doing.

‘Feel like a coffee?’ I said, to delay the inevitable.

\*

We sat amongst the afternoon tea pensioners at the gallery’s café, the silence of the exhibition halls replaced with coffee cup rattles, clinking of teaspoons and incoherent conversations. Through the glass windows, various sculptures sat mute upon manicured grass while I stirred my coffee and said nothing.

‘So, what’s been going on with you?’ Elana asked, caving to my reticence.

I looked up at her with a face I tried to shape into an incredulous expression.

‘Come on, you look terrible, you never go out anymore unless forced to and you’ve put yourself in hospital due to a heart infection.’

I willed one of the sculptures outside to spring to life, a distraction to point Elana towards, but they remained inanimate.

‘Is this some kind of intervention?’ I asked, trying not to sound defensive.

‘No, I’m just concerned. I thought things would start to get better with you eventually, then this stint in the emergency room happens. You’ve been getting more distant to be honest, and don’t seem to be interested in doing anything about it.’

I'd spoken about this to Elana one time after drinking too much. An attempt to induce sleep, which resulted in a loquacious phone call to her instead. Words lubricated by intoxication producing a diatribe about not being able to get excited about anything anymore. "Anhedonia," I told her, which the internet had told me, after looking up my symptoms. An inability to feel pleasure in normally pleasurable activities. An overly dramatic prognosis, when I'd thought about it later. I could have just as easily found I had an incurable disease if I'd searched the internet long enough.

'I'm just finding it hard to focus on anything.'

I looked back at the sculptures who had still not moved. Elana placed her hand on mine which had been twirling a teaspoon, making me look back at her. Below her nose, her lips pursed into a slight narrowing. A shape of concern.

'When is the last time you went out and did something interesting? All you seem to do is work at that job you hate. I know things have been hard but it's been six months.'

I was glad she didn't say Sam's name out loud, I didn't even like reading the letters together when unrelated.

'I can't remember really. I don't sit in my house looking at the cracks in the ceiling listening to The Smiths for hours if that's what you think. I'm just working a lot.'

'I think that's your problem. Remember when you used to see live music and go to art exhibitions, made time to do that stuff. You even played in a band.'

'I'm here now, at the art gallery with you, aren't I? Besides, the band was just a bit of fun and I had more time when I was working odd shifts in bars. You also hated that band if you remember?'

'I know, but it was nice to see you doing something. It's been awhile since we caught up too. It's cool, I get it. Like I said, I'm just worried about you.'

Elana reached into her bag and retrieved a small parcel in the shape of a book and laid it on the table.

'Also, I got you a present,' she said.

'Why? It's not my birthday.'

'I thought it might help.'

Opening the package, I saw it was a small, leather-bound book. Flicking through the pages revealed them to be blank.

'A journal?' I asked.

'It could be, but I intended it as a sketchbook.'

'But I can't draw.'

'You told me you once did, until you left high school. Dreams of being an artist and all that.'

'Ha, yeah, but I gave that all up. Just didn't have the talent for it.'

'Hear me out,' Elana began, telling me about a man she'd met in Beijing.

'He was part of the lighting crew and each day I saw him sketching in a small book. A few days passed of the same thing in different locations until I went up to him and asked him what he was drawing. He showed me the page, a rough sketch of the hutong we were photographing for this ad campaign. "Why this?" I asked. He explained it helped him to remember things, where he'd been and what he'd seen. After an accident a few years back, he'd developed some problems with retaining new memories. By sketching things, he said he could remember places better when he looked back over the drawings. He offered the sketchbook for me to look through. Flicking through the pages, I stopped on a picture of a rose in a plant pot.

"What does this remind you of?" I asked him.

"My friend's house in Poland," he replied. "It was raining outside and I sketched the rose sitting at her kitchen table as I waited for her to return. She'd picked the rose that morning and I remember it still had that earthy smell."

‘I was amazed at his recollection,’ Elana continued, ‘and I thought this sketchbook might help you. You know, to create some new memories, like a fresh start.’

I could see where this was going.

‘It might also be something to get you away from only working in that office, do something creative again. And, I know you don’t like me bringing it up, but it might help to get your mind off Sam.’

There it was, I thought. The ‘S’ word.

‘That’s very nice, but I really can’t draw,’ I said, hoping to lead the conversation away from Sam.

‘The man I met couldn’t draw that well either, but he wasn’t interested in how the drawings turned out.’

‘I’m still not sure. I really appreciate the gesture though.’

Elana sipped some of her coffee and made a face indicating she was processing another way of trying to win me over on the idea.

‘Okay,’ I said, knowing she wouldn’t relent. ‘I’m not promising anything but I’ll give it a go.’

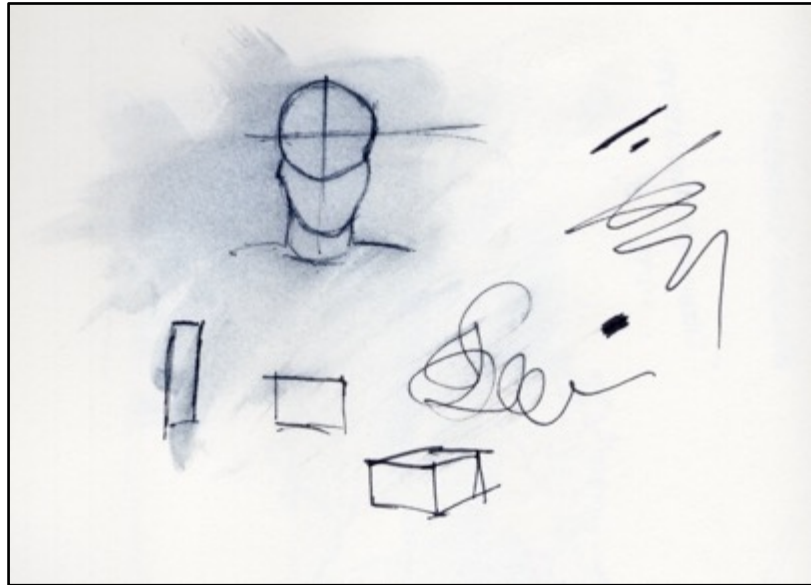
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As I walked home from the gallery I wondered if Elana was right, if I had become lost in a routine, walking down the same path through a neglected garden of possibilities. Aside from not going out much anymore, other interests had lost their appeal since Sam left. Once an ardent reader, a stack of unfinished books sat on my bedside table. Records gathered dust under the stereo system, no longer rotating under the stylus. I’d told myself the overtime had left me too lethargic to engage with these interests, but that wasn’t true. I just didn’t care anymore.

Inside my flat, I poured a glass of water and sat down with the sketchbook. Having not drawn anything for years, not even a smiley face, the blank pages were starkly unnerving. It seemed blasphemous to defile them, but I reconciled to try, if only for Elana.

First, a few squiggly lines, a rectangle and a 3D cube, the usual things a person might absently draw while talking on an old rotary phone. Not really thinking, I drew a circle with two lines intersecting through the centre, the construction lines for a face. A few more details were remembered and added, until the next steps eluded me. Wondering if I still had a reference book with the information, I got up to check the bookshelf, knocking the table and making the glass of water splash the open page.

‘Shit,’ I hissed, trying to wipe the page with the palm of my hand. It blended into the lines and smudged, making a bluish smear over the featureless head, as if in shadow.



I sat and looked at the darkened face, thinking about the reoccurring dreams I had been having, the shadowy figure and its elusive encounters, until a car alarm outside startled me into the present once more. Tired, perhaps from thinking about dreams and how easy it would be to get back into bed, I made some coffee and returned to the sketchbook. The mug of coffee in front of me looked simple enough to draw, no difficult shapes.

Beginning with a few ovals and straight lines, it didn't turn out too badly, providing the impetus to attempt the dozing cat ornamenting its side. Jane, my old housemate, had bought me the mug as a comical gesture in the guise of a present.

'You always complain about being too tired or needing more coffee so I thought this cheap mug summed you up perfectly,' Jane had said.

'You're a cheap mug,' I'd told her, through a smile of gratitude.

Trying to indicate where the shadows fell in the picture, I'd used a few thick lines before remembering the accident with water. Wetting my finger with spit, I pushed it around the paper, mimicking the effect on the previous page. Shadows appeared, giving the sketch some basic tonal depth. I started to realise how much I missed Jane and how close we had been until she moved interstate. The cat on the mug appeared forlorn then, rather than tired.



Jane and her partner Elsey had moved to Melbourne, leaving me with the option to move out of the old house or get new housemates. The thought of living with someone unfamiliar was unappealing and things had recently gone south with Sam, so that wasn't an option. Fortunately, the office job paid enough to allow me to find a small unit in the city near work. There wasn't much tying me to the old house without Jane and Elsey around anyway.

I missed the smells of the previous house though. Jane, being a chef, would cook elaborate meals that I'd never have the patience for, giving the house a homely aroma. Garlic fried in butter, caramelised onions and lingering Eastern spices would mark the presence of Jane's culinary exploits even when she wasn't home. Then again, it wasn't just the smells I missed; it was how the house looked. Elsey had decorated the walls with antique framed prints and paintings accumulated from her online auction obsession. Five months in the new unit and I had done little to improve its aesthetic appeal. Stark, ivory walls reflected the indifference to interior decorating and there was hardly any furniture besides some shelves and the large wooden dining table Elsey left to me. The only colour came from the books and record spines on the shelves, a spectrum of phantom interests.

Finishing the sketch, I sat on the porch step of the unit to have a cigarette. The front gate blocked my view of the street and I realised I had never really taken it in before, usually occupied by news threads or unimportant emails on my phone. It seemed like another simple object I could sketch, rectangular and uncomplex. I didn't want to lie to Elana about trying her suggestion either.

'You're a shit liar.' Elana had told me once. 'Your mouth always makes a straight line after you do it.'

Getting the sketchbook and sitting before the gate, I drew a few straight lines to indicate the rectangular shapes it was composed of. Details emerged as I worked, similar shapes repeating themselves and filling the blank space. A section at the bottom of the gate was missing though, making me pause. I'd kicked it in one night while attempting to open the gate without twisting the key. Using jagged pen marks, I recreated the missing space while memory filled in its absence.

I'd drunk too many whiskeys on an empty stomach that night. Been at the pub after work and ran into my friend Jack who'd asked how Sam and I were doing. Unaware of our breakup, he hadn't paused for an answer, kept telling me how great she was and how lucky I was. Jack and I had been close, catching up regularly for pints until he'd met the love of his life and found more reasons to spend less time with me at the pub. I continued to listen while he talked incessantly, elaborating about his own great relationship and how happy he was for both of us, not noticing the whiskey I continued to signal the bartender for.

Walking home almost blind, I went to a service station for a questionable pie I'd never consider when sober. It didn't help. My vision continued to swim until, bleary eyed and stumbling, I reached the front of my house. Inserting the key into the gate, I found it stuck and attempted to prise it open with a few swift kicks. My foot went through the wood just as I realised I hadn't turned the key. The next day I called the landlord, telling them someone had attempted to break in. Nothing was missing, I assured them, aside from part of the gate and a bit of dignity.

After a few final touches to the sketch, spit and ink together made shadow like before. Looking back at the gate in reality, I made a mental note to fix the wooden letter box missing its door. At least I hadn't broken that, I thought. Weather and time, not whiskey mixed with Sam's name, causing its demise.



### 3

I awoke the next morning lethargic, a side effect of the antibiotics only remedied with strong coffee. Waiting for the kettle to boil, I revisited the previous day's explorations with the sketchbook. Having not drawn anything for years, the drawing of the gate turned out better than expected. There was more though. I felt as though I'd traced its scars as one explores those on the body of another, sharing the memories, the origins for various cicatrix on otherwise smooth skin. Perhaps not what Elana intended, the digging up of old memories instead of creating new ones, but the act was a welcome distraction. A way to stop the kaleidoscopic thoughts that troubled idle hands.

If Elana wanted me to create new memories through sketching, I thought why not draw the sculpture of the horse. I could revisit the gallery and make an attempt, I decided. It could be the rendering of a moment, a reminder of Elana's kindness. Although, the idea of drawing in a gallery wasn't something I liked the idea of, feeling it was an act of posturing in the public eye. I had a similar scepticism about people who wrote on laptops in cafes, visual clichés of the tormented creative watching their cursors blink accusingly back at them. But, if nobody was around at the gallery, I determined I would be alright.

\*

There were garrulous school children everywhere in the art gallery. I stood on the ground level near the hanging horse and listened to the young voices closing in. They began to edge down the stairs, the strained whispers of teachers hissing pleas of conduct behind them. Ascending the stairs to avoid them, I was about to pass a young boy when he stopped abruptly mid stride, his face showing a mixture of surprise and trepidation.

'Is that an actual horse?' The child asked the open space below.

'It was once an actual horse,' a girl further down the steps said confidently.

The look on the boy's face changed, making it contort into one of horror. I wanted to ask him what connection he'd made, what had disturbed him, but remained mute with the fear of how it might be perceived. As the rest of the group moved past me, the room became claustrophobic with energy and sound, making me drift deeper into the halls of the second floor. Abstract portraits leered down from the walls, their painted eyes following me as I killed time waiting for the volume of youthful chatter to recede into a low hum.

After some time, I made my way back to the horse and tried to think of what else was drawing me towards it. It wasn't just the purpose of sketching its likeness as I'd told myself. The French or Germans might have a word for it, I considered, or a word for not having a word for it. Not a feeling of awe or shock like the child on the steps, but something else. Getting closer, I listened for chattering and the exclamations of young voices lacking the etiquette of art gallery volume. Nothing. A few footsteps on polished floorboards and soft voices from a different section. Only a silent couple remained in the room as I stared down once more at the sculpture from the second level. Still unsure about drawing in public, I took a photo with my phone to capture the peculiar positioning of the horse. The sketchbook remained tightly shut in my hand as I moved closer. I was, in my mind, too old to be seen as an eager art student and too young to be seen as a retired drawing enthusiast, only leaving a thirty something who wanted to be perceived as the creative type I was sceptical of. One thirsting for attention.

The couple left and I leaned over and smelt the sculpture. Half expecting to find an aroma of damp hide, I found it odourless, yet could still imagine the smell, conjured from some adolescent memory of my last encounter with a live horse. If not for the fear of being kicked out, I would have felt the texture. Seen if my memory could produce a warmth that

no longer emanated from the creature. It once was an actual horse and it once smelled of hide, was once warm to the touch. Elements of past and present conflating.

The plaque for the work stated: “We Are All Flesh” by Berlinde De Bruyckere, accompanied by a short contextual passage underneath. Its form related to Christian Martyrdom and, in particular, the torture of St Sebastian. Pietro Tacca’s sculpture of St Sebastian, it noted, was also located within the gallery. After searching the room, I found the work referenced. It was a small bronze statue in a corner, minute in comparison to De Bruyckere’s work. The figure depicted a twisted St Sebastian with one arm bound by rope to the top of a tree stump, reminiscent of an idle marionette. A depiction of suffering. I opened the sketchbook, about to attempt a quick sketch with no one around, when I heard a cluster of feet enter the gallery.

‘Here we have Berlinde de Bruyckere’s *We Are All Flesh...*’ said a woman’s voice in an official tone behind me. I turned to see the source of the voice leading a guided tour into the space.

‘Shit,’ I said under my breath, closing the sketchbook.

More footsteps from the second floor, lighter and greater in number, began to close in. The school group again. Indecipherable murmurs from the children mixed with the guide’s gentle lilt that described the provenance of a painting. My heart began to pump more forcibly, as if being squeezed by the pressure of both groups.

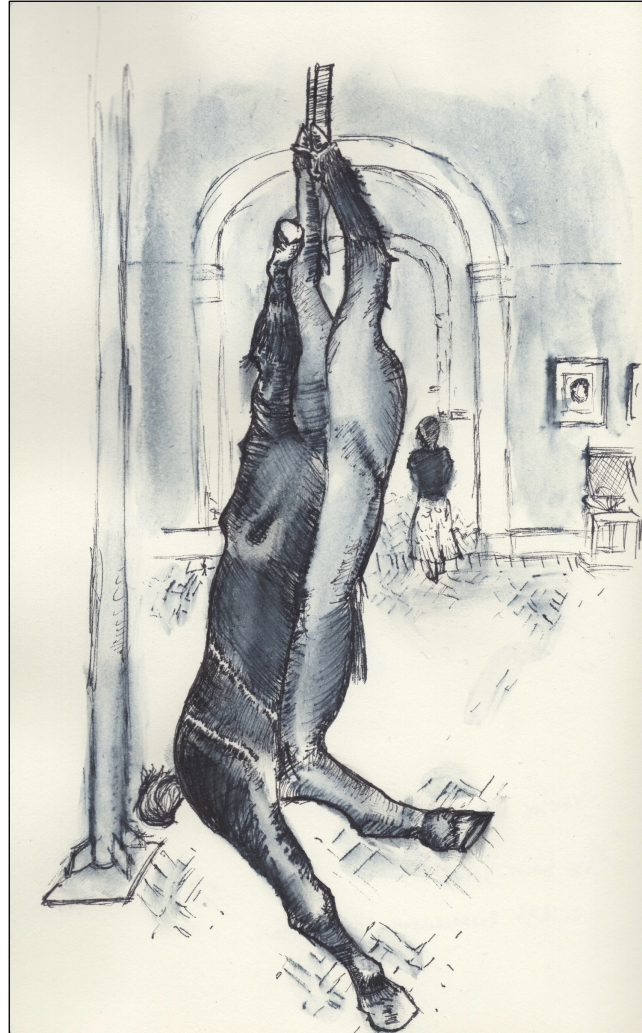
Defeated and unable fulfil the intent of sketching either of the artworks, I shakily aimed the camera of my phone at St Sebastian, taking a deep breath to abate the tremor and get the shot. The school group made their way back to the horse while the guided tour was led in my direction, tightening the vice of proximity. A gap near the exit presented itself, making me walk hurriedly towards it between the two groups. Taking the last step out of the gallery, the sketchbook fell from my hand, falling flat onto the polished wood floor and creating a loud slap. The tour group and children turned towards me in silent unison, the echo of the dropped book lingering in the high ceilings. I crouched down to pick up the book and averted my eyes from the many faces, probably looking like a thirty something who wanted to be perceived as a creative type, posturing with his sketchbook.

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At home with the sketchbook and the photo of the De Bruyckere sculpture, I was determined to attempt the sketch, if only from a photo. Starting with the bound legs, it became clear that there were in fact three, and not two, bound to the suspension pole as I’d assumed. I’d seen the sculpture twice in two days and completely missed this now prominent detail. Continuing to following the body down with my eyes and pen, a further anomaly presented itself in the preconceived notion of its form. There were two horses. Not whole ones, but two parts connected. Headless torsos stitched together creating a confusion of regular quadrupedal horse characteristics. My mind kept pushing me to compare the form I’d drawn to the generic image of a horse conjured whenever the word was heard or read. Perhaps this was the point, I’d thought, for the viewer to struggle with what they saw, to make them feel uncomfortable.

The horse appeared to be floating on the white page as I finished, asking for some background details. Drawing the arched entrance behind it, I saw I had unintentionally photographed a woman under it. Adding her small figure provided a comparison of scale to the sculpture. She was leaving the gallery, perhaps after spending some time looking at De Bruyckere’s work. Perhaps on a lunch break. Refocusing my eyes to take in the completed sketch, the woman clarified the connection I’d failed to make earlier.

Sam and I had gone to see the sculpture when it was first installed. We couldn't get close due to the mass of people with the same idea so Sam had suggested we come back another time. Things weren't great with our relationship then but I'd planned the outing as way to do something together. An attempt at to make things better. A week later I suggested to Sam we go back to see the sculpture, another attempt, but she'd already seen it. Went back by herself on a lunch break, she told me. Alone.



The establishment of connection made my chest feel tight, needing to go outside for some air. I guessed I'd known about this connection with the horse, the reasons drawing me to it, but I'd pushed it into some recess of the mind where it was unable to be reached. My fingers clenched without anything to distract them, idle hands making the thoughts of the past rapid and circular. After a few deep breaths, the feeling began to fade, leaving a trace of the sensation I'd felt in the gallery looking at Tacca's sculpture. A feeling of defeat from being unable to sketch the work. Perhaps sketching Tacca's bronze figure would distract me, I thought, if not be cathartic.

I began with St Sebastian's crooked wrist roped to the tree limb. I'd seen images of St Sebastian before, the bare-chested male stuck with arrows used in various religious iconography. Tacca hadn't used the arrows in his representation, perhaps thinking the form was enough, the twisted body in sufficient pain. The connections to De Bruyckere's sculpture emerged as I worked, starting with the tied limbs. I followed the form of St. Sebastian's corporeal shape with the pen, recalling the same line I'd made to draw the horses as it moved down the page and curved out with the legs. My thoughts drifted as I filled in

details, about the sculptures and their origins. If the horses were once actual horses, as the child suggested, what happened to the other parts I wondered? Had their hearts been saved and used for some other installation or did they sit in a jar filled with formaldehyde? Maybe they were just thrown away with no use for them anymore.



I continued to work on the sketch, spit shading the darker lines of the tree stump then following the torso up to the bent arm. My finger stopped as I reached the end of his fist, its fingers curled inward, sparking another connection. The arm of the motorbike rider from the hospital, bent back in the same fashion, fingers clawed, but there was more. A phantom recollection of the man's legs twisted under a blood-stained sheet fused with the bent legs of St. Sebastian. Depictions of suffering overlaid upon one another.

That night I didn't dream of trying to find the shadowy figure. I dreamt of the motorbike rider, twisted and dragging himself towards me with arrows of light piercing his jacket. A trail of blood, viscous and crimson, following his crooked limbs. *Your heart stopped working*, a voice said, unsure of which of us it was referring to.

A day later, with little to do and the course of antibiotics done, I became agitated, began pacing around the house. I worried that if I sketched anymore pictures to pass the time, they would only remind me of things I'd rather forget. Haunt the dreams I couldn't control.

My Father called mid pace, knowing I was on leave and asking if I would like to spend a couple of days with him in Sydney. I'd forgotten about this ritual, the yearly pilgrimage he'd make to see an old friend. The trip he'd once take with my mother, until she died a few years ago. A heart attack. The reason I hadn't told him why I was on leave, the worry it may have caused with the associations. Unsure, I said I'd call him back in the evening.

Elana thought it was a good idea.

'You need to go,' she'd told me over the phone, 'Get away for a bit in a new environment. Spend some time with your father.'

'Maybe you're right. I'm going a little crazy here with nothing to do.'

'You could even use that sketchbook,' she said, with a tone implying I probably hadn't.

'Yeah, maybe,' I said, trying to sound optimistic.

Telling her I'd already begun to use it would only lead to explaining the memories it brought up about Sam. About the man in the motorcycle jacket, who I hadn't told her about seeing. Connections I didn't want to worry her with. I called my Father back and agreed to go, hoping the time away would help.

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I caught a train from Sydney Airport towards the harbour where my father had booked a hotel. It was two years since I'd been in this city, the last time being with Sam. We had caught trains like this. The interior familiar but with a different view shuddering past the windows. Old houses, thin and tall, crept up the sloping streets in that view. Old dreams, of wanting to live inside one of those quaint structures if we ever had the money. The train moved out of a tunnel. Away from the precipitous edge of nostalgia that failed to take hold as the scenery changed in reality. A crooked skyline of high rises replaced the vision, helping to elude its grip.

With my father not arriving until the evening, I checked into the hotel and left to wander the surrounding area with the sketchbook in a satchel. I had no intentions to use it. I just wanted to walk, directing my feet towards Circular Quay beneath a mist of intermittent rain.

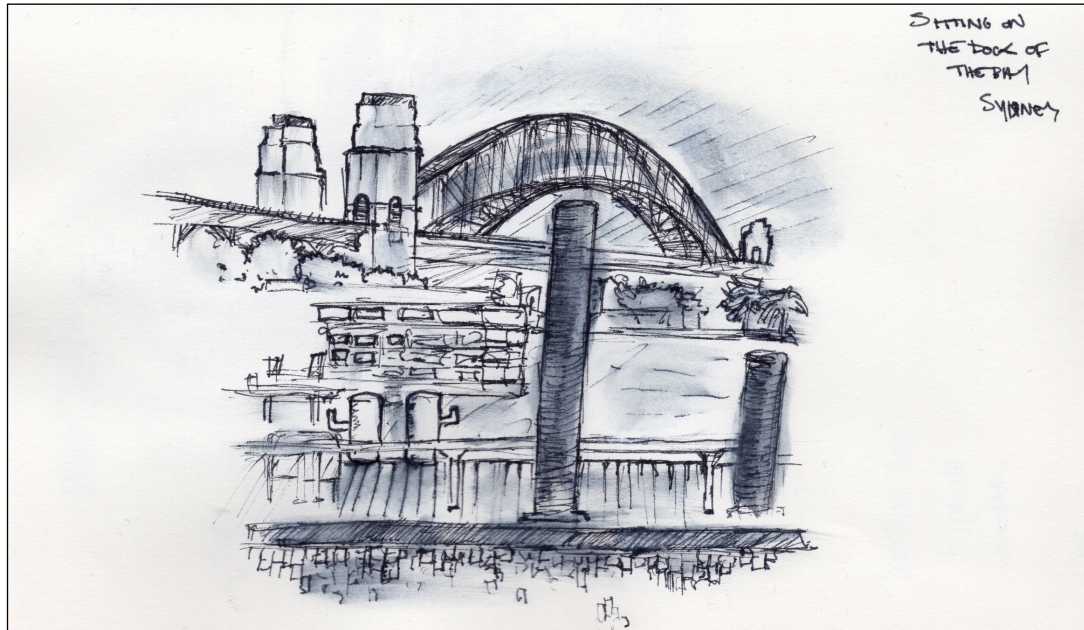
The sky changed to the colour of old plaster as I arrived at the Quay, not dark enough to worry about turning back. I watched the tourists move slowly, pointing and looking, swivelling heads amidst the locked jaws of faster paced locals. How long did it take the Sydney Siders to stop looking at the same sights in marvel? To grow accustomed to their surroundings? It had been six months since Sam left and I still didn't feel used to it, wandering around like a tourist in my own life. I tried to blend in, pretending I was also used to it. No lingering of the eyes towards landmarks for too long. I should have looked though. I was a tourist. I should have thought about what happened with Sam, what landed me in the emergency ward, instead of treating it like the attractions I was trying to ignore. The sting of clarity spread, made me suck the air in through my teeth. A prickliness of panic taunting before it strikes. More tourists seemed to appear, perhaps with the absence of rain, bringing

the claustrophobia felt from the episode in the gallery. To the north it appeared less crowded. Somewhere to breathe.

As I walked away from the apogee of tourist accumulation and my own anxiety, construction seemed to be occurring everywhere. I concentrated on this to ignore the crowds, the city building on top of itself in palimpsestic fashion. Workers with stained hardhats began to replace pedestrians. Heritage buildings became braced with scaffolding. Work in progress, uninteresting to the sightseers. This disappeared too as I came into an open area, unpopulated and with a view of the harbour. Gigantic above it all, the arching cat's back of Sydney Harbour Bridge loomed in the distance. Floating jetties swayed with the cold wind by a bench where I found my breath again, imbibing the smell of salt water carried on the breeze.

The bridge was different from how I remembered it. A shift in the familiarity of my last encounter. It was no longer the iconic structure found on postcards, tee shirts and imprisoned within snow domes. Against the dull grey sky, it appeared ominous, its dark skeletal arches reaching across the harbour. I couldn't see any traffic from where I sat, making it appear abandoned like in some dystopian version of the world I had stumbled into. Sound circumvented the fantastic thoughts of being a lone survivor in this fictional world. Grinding metal of construction work, boat engines propelling their cargo across water, all signals of unseen human existence. I felt a mental shift, became momentarily aware of my own existence, like when artificial intelligence does in films before everything goes terribly wrong. To escape the sensation and busy my hands I took out the sketchbook with an intent to draw the scene. An attempt to ground myself back in reality.

Not knowing where to start such drawings I began with the stone towers supporting the bridge, anachronistic looking against the other buildings in the area. A visible history unable to be removed. Sketching the outline of the bridge itself, I tried to arc my hand in verisimilitude with the shape I could see. The metal rib work of lines intersecting between the soft curved arches blurred in the distance, resulting in a mess of hatch marks. Completing the main outlines, I licked the end of my finger and rubbed it across the shape of a pylon. Sam and I had walked under these, amblers amongst the joggers that ran along the same path. The bridge had towered above us, hiding the sun as we passed below its shadow and marvelled at the supporting stone work. It was the first time Sam and I had seen the bridge in person, a shared moment with hands held firmly. We must have been happy then, I thought, as I pushed my finger around the page, darkening the parts that were too light. But that was a long time ago. The bridge didn't fill me with awe any longer, only a reminder of how things were. I messaged Elana, wanting to tell her all of this but asked how she was instead and told her Sydney was full of tourists.



\*

In the evening I met my father at an Irish pub recommended by the concierge. A traditional front bar greeted us as we entered, aged wood and rectangular in shape, looking like it had supported countless elbows over the years. The décor echoed the counter, no metallic surfaces, only stained wood untouched by modern influence and adorned with relics unsourced from internet auctions. Both my father and I liked these bars, the ones without pretention. Ones where a gin and tonic was as close as they came to making cocktails and history still lingered behind their heritage listed facades.

After finding a table we ordered some food and talked over a beer. I, reticent as usual, told him I had nothing exciting to report, just working a lot. He knew about Sam but never brought it up, just glad I'd found full time employment, that I'd quit working in bars and messing around in bands, I imagined. A few meters away from where we sat, a woman accompanied by a man with an acoustic guitar were setting up on a small stage.

'Do you miss playing live music?' my father asked, as the man tuned his guitar in the background.

'It was fun at the time,' I replied, 'but the money's no good. I probably would have ended up doing these kinds of gigs if I kept at it,' gesturing to the couple setting up. The duo commenced their set with a Creedence cover ruined by an overplayed tv commercial in the 90s, a song played to death by similar performers who still kicked around its bones. It was terrible, a low warbling rendition that hardly sounded like the original. I was probably the wrong audience though, the countless covers I'd heard butchered over the years in bar work providing me with a biased disdain for anyone so much as holding an acoustic guitar.

'These people probably get fifty bucks and a free chicken parmy to play. I think I'm much better off at the internet company,' I said, uncertain if this was true aside from the monetary benefits my job provided.

The acoustic duo finished their song to a tepid applause before following with an equally throaty version of Van Morrison's *Moon Dance*, a song my mother had liked, making my father grimace. We continued to attempt conversation over the music while the covers got worse. When a Britney Spears song began, its rhythm slowed down to a languid dirge from its upbeat tempo and making it sound like ballad about domestic violence, it became too much. We decided the hotel lobby would be quieter, a place get a drink and not be aurally accosted.

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Standing in line at the hotel bar, a man in front of me tilted an imaginary glass in the air and raised an eyebrow to someone at a table. I mentioned the man to my father when I returned with the drinks, how I had never really thought about this common bar communication without words.

‘Loud places,’ my father said. ‘People need to find ways of talking over the noise.’ He pointed to a framed etching hanging on the wall above me depicting a paper mill, it’s smoking chimney issuing a plume of black smoke into the lightly clouded sky. There were a series of these old prints around the lobby bar but this one had caught his attention when we arrived.

The picture, he told me, reminded him of the cotton mills he would run errands for when he was younger, back in the North of England.

‘It was very loud in these mills,’ he said. ‘Louder than a heavy metal concert from all the machines. The women that worked next to each other would communicate through lip reading, not able to hear anything over the sound. They could do this across the room as well. It was incredible. The interesting thing was, you could tell who the mill workers were at the dances on the weekend, them reading each other’s lips across the large halls. This was the only way you could tell mind you. In the mills they would wear their hair up in curlers and wrap scarves around their heads. At the dances, they didn’t look like the same girls. They were all made up, completely different looking. It was only when you saw them reading the lips across the room and replying in the same way that you could tell.’

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The sky was clear the next day as my father and I took a ferry around the harbour, the salt laden breeze whipping at our clothes on the open deck.

‘So,’ my father said, pausing in search of more words. ‘How are you? I know we haven’t talked about it much but I guess things are probably hard after you and Sam broke up. She was a nice lass.’

I didn’t expect this, although I didn’t expect it from Elana either.

‘I’m doing okay,’ I said quickly, hoping he didn’t spot the lack of conviction. ‘Just working things out I guess. Trying not to think about it really.’

‘I can understand that.’

We leant on the railing together and looked out at the mass of buildings from where we’d departed.

‘Ignoring the past doesn’t help though,’ my father said, as if testing out new words. ‘It creeps up on you whether you like it or not.’

‘I’ve been starting to see that.’

Not wanting to elaborate I took a photo of the view, the sound of waves under the ferry helping to fill the silence. My father pointed to where I directed the phone, his finger indicating the smaller AMP building amongst the other towering structures.

‘You see that? When I first came here in the 60s with your mother that was the tallest building you could see. Now look at it.’

‘Did you ever think about living here with Mum? Back then, I mean. Instead of Adelaide?’ I asked while his eyes lingered on the building.

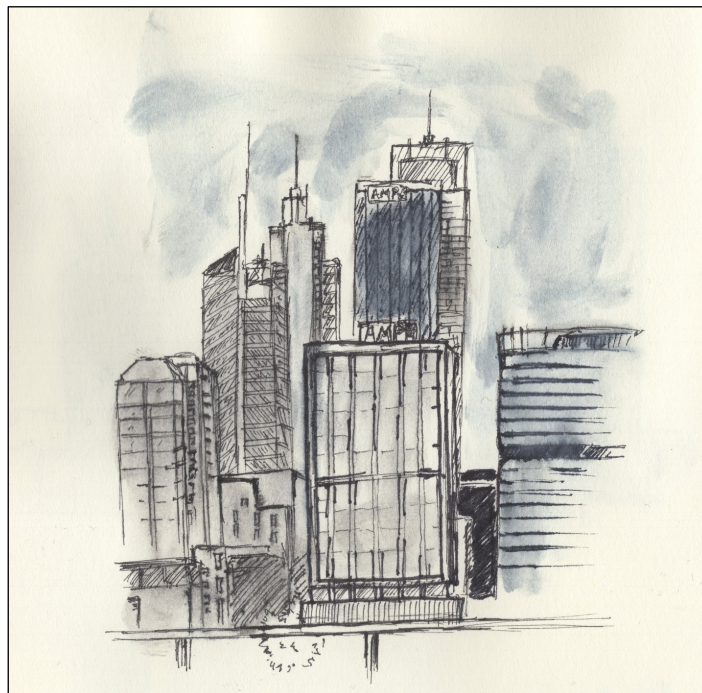
‘I had wanted to,’ he said without moving his head. ‘There would have been more work for us, but your mother wanted to stay in Adelaide and look after your Grandma. She always did care about everyone else more than herself. A saint, your mother was. Always sacrificing her needs before others.’

My father gave me quick smile that didn’t match his eyes before turning back to the buildings.

‘I’m glad you’ve found a decent job and you’re working a lot’ he said, still looking across the harbour. ‘But I also want you to be happy. When your mother passed away I threw myself into work as you know, but it didn’t help. I probably should have spent more time dealing with things then, not waited until I retired. I’m not sure if any of this is coming out right. It’s important to remember the past, but you don’t need to live there, is what I’m trying to say.’

That evening I stayed at the hotel while my father went to see his friend. Not wanting to go out, I sketched from the photo I’d taken on the ferry. The focal point was now the AMP building, a shape that held no significance before. I saw my father’s eyes again as I drew the rectangular structure, the connection he’d made with my mother. I’d never really thought about the ways her death had affected him, why he’d become fixated on his job. They were married for 40 years before her heart stopped working and everything changed. He must have seen the look on my face, perhaps a similar one he’d woken up to in the mirror for all those years. A look that reflected the feeling of upheaval and displacement.

The AMP building stood rectangular on the page, incongruous amongst the modern landscape it had been enveloped by over time. I tried to picture my parents seeing it for the first time in the 60s, looking up in awe, like Sam and I looking at the bridge.



Searching the internet on my phone, I found a picture of the building my parents would have seen circa 1965. The construction had finished in 1962, making it the tallest building in Australia at the time, the caption stated. Beginning a new sketch, I saw nothing else really occupied the skyline save for a couple of ghostly looking developments, like phantom buildings with cranes attached to their skeletal structures. Premonitions of change to come. I smeared some of the black ink with spit around the building, wiping it through the void, the emptiness to be filled in time.



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I met my father in the lobby the next morning to thank him for the trip before he left for his flight, still processing the words he'd said on the ferry.

'Maybe you can come again next year,' he said.

I agreed, giving him a brief awkward hug and forgetting our usual British reticence towards physical displays of emotion.

Not leaving until the evening, I caught a train out to the State art gallery having never been. Its entrance resembled the one in Adelaide, with its colonnaded portico echoing classical architecture. Inside, arched frames amid white coloured walls gave options for various gallery entrances. The first was less crowded, Australian landscapes of the bush with washed out yellow hues meeting me through the archway. Not the outdoor type, my feet led me past these works, nothing enticing me to linger in their bucolic and pastoral representations.

A space opened up to a room full of sculptures and a woman sitting upon one of the leather seats to the side, her pencil moving across a sketchpad. Unable to see what she drew, I watched the connection between her eyes and paper, establishing her subject as the bronze sculpture of nude woman in what seemed like a diving position. It seemed easy for her to sketch in the gallery. She didn't appear to care if anyone observed her, absorbed in the act as I had been with my attempts at drawing in solitude.

As I moved on, the paintings began to leave the theme of the outback and started to depict work inspired by more classical subjects. A painting of a woman with her head down, a halo or moon behind it, made me stop. She wore a long green dress with arms at her sides. A posture of defeat in Art Nouveau style, like one of Mucha's women with their coquettishness removed. *Sadder than a single star that sets at twilight in a land of reeds* by Sydney Long, verbosely stated the plaque. It stirred a memory, a displacement of feeling as if I were in the painting and not in the gallery looking into this dark world. I took a photo knowing exactly who it reminded me of. The topic of concern Elana and my father had felt necessary to broach.

I was running out of time before I needed to head to the airport and made my way towards the exit, passing an ivory coloured statue of a nude man wrestling with a python. Phallic references and adolescent innuendos occurred to me at first before the chaste associations of Edenic reference. Another statue further along looked to be holding a staff and carrying an object, reminding me of the pendant of St. Christopher my mother had owned. She had travelled with it, explaining once to me that he was the patron saint of travellers, another martyr who had been killed for his beliefs. The pendant depicted the saint holding a staff and carrying Christ as a child across a river. I assumed my mother would have taken it with her whenever she visited Sydney with my Father but wondered what had become of it since. Reaching the statue, the staff I saw was a shepherd's crook and the other arm did not carry a child, but an eagle. The bronze man stood over a lifeless lamb, the arm holding the crook raised across his brow, as if he were trying to see something above him in a bright midday sky. His torso twisted in a similar shape to Tacca's St Sebastian, an exposing of the midsection, prompting me to take a photo to compare. *Retaliation*, by Charles Birch, stated the plaque.

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When I'd made it through airport security, I stood holding my plane ticket in the departure lounge and looked with scepticism into an acrid smelling long black. The coffee had been purchased at an exorbitant price from a young barista with the look of a recently smoked joint about his eyes, tell-tale signs of a clandestine reprieve from work on an empty milkcrate. About to throw the unappealing beverage away, I checked the departure times to find my flight had been delayed by an hour.

Sipping the rancid coffee at a table without anything to read or to occupy my time for the next hour, I took out the sketchbook and opened the pictures on my phone from the gallery. The Sydney Long painting. I knew what this had reminded me of. There was no hiding from it. I began to draw the head of the woman, her chin dipped nearly to her chest and casting her face in shadow. The shoulders and arms were pale and bare above the dress, exposed to the light. Drawing these features, everything moved downwards, creating a feeling of sadness combined with the lighting. I smudged the ink around to darken the dress, to bring out the paleness of the exposed shoulders. It was the shoulders that did it. Sam's exposed shoulders when she told me we needed to talk.

She'd been sitting on her bed in a towel, eyes unwavering from the floor between her feet. Without lifting her head, she told me she was breaking up with me and taking a job in Berlin. The lines I'd drawn on the page created a constellation of the memory, forming a pattern like stars when you know what you're looking for. I was shocked at the time, not knowing what to do when she looked back up for my reaction. I left with no argument, no riposte but silence and a feeling of persecution for my belief in our relationship.

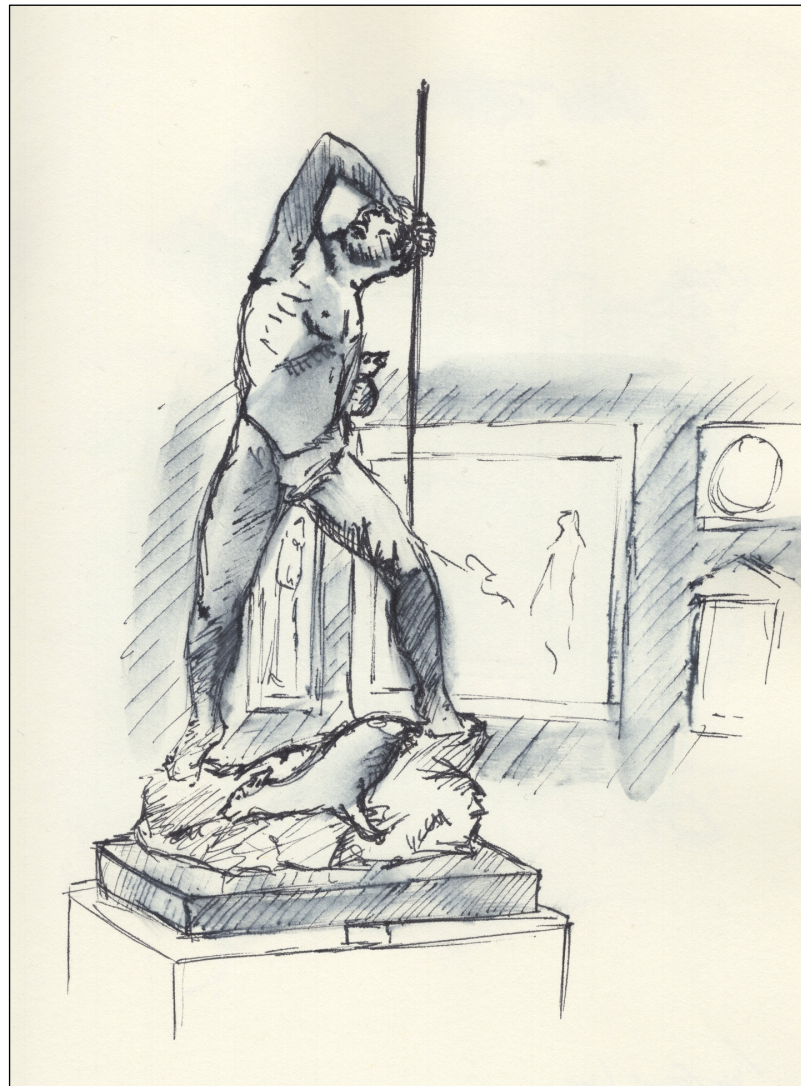
Email correspondence slowly begun when she left, brief and civil, until I began drinking more frequently and suggested the possibility of getting back together. I should have stopped when the first email didn't get a positive response, swallowed the bitter pill I was trying to get down with alcohol and overtime before she stopped replying completely.



I lifted my head up and checked the flight schedules. Another thirty minutes until departure. The memory of Sam had less effect on me compared to the previous images I'd drawn, no longer provoking the same ache in my chest the others had brought. Perhaps it was due to the thoughts of my father coping with the loss of my mother, I'd thought, dulled my self-pity with comparing the loss of Sam. I should have accepted that things weren't working between us and Sam had done the right thing by ending the relationship. The sketching had helped, gave me time to think and see things I was blind to, helped to ease my troubled heart. I flicked through my phone to the statue of the shepherd with time for another quick sketch before getting on the plane.

The ribs of the shepherd exposed themselves under the raised arm, a contortion of line which my pen followed. I could vividly see the association I'd made in the gallery. Tacca's St Sebastian had the same side of his chest exposed, the same arm raised to their right, even if it was restrained. I'd read an article explaining the heart was situated in the centre of the chest, not on the left-hand side as oath affirmation rituals would suggest, but there was a greater percentage of it on the left-hand side of the body. I wondered if this was intentional, these sculptures trying to protect the side of the body with the larger piece of their heart, some type of unconscious self-preservation in their stance, or if it was only the artist showing their mastery of the human form in its agonised state. The man was pained it seemed, had lost what he held dear, but wanting to fight against it, to retaliate. I had to accept Sam was gone and there was nothing I could do about it but fight against the emotions that

still lingered, no longer be the victim of the past. I sketched the shape at the figure's feet, a dead lamb. The shepherd's lifeless remainder of something once cared for, now departed. A voice over the airport speakers droned with an announcement. Flight JQ771 to Adelaide, departing now.



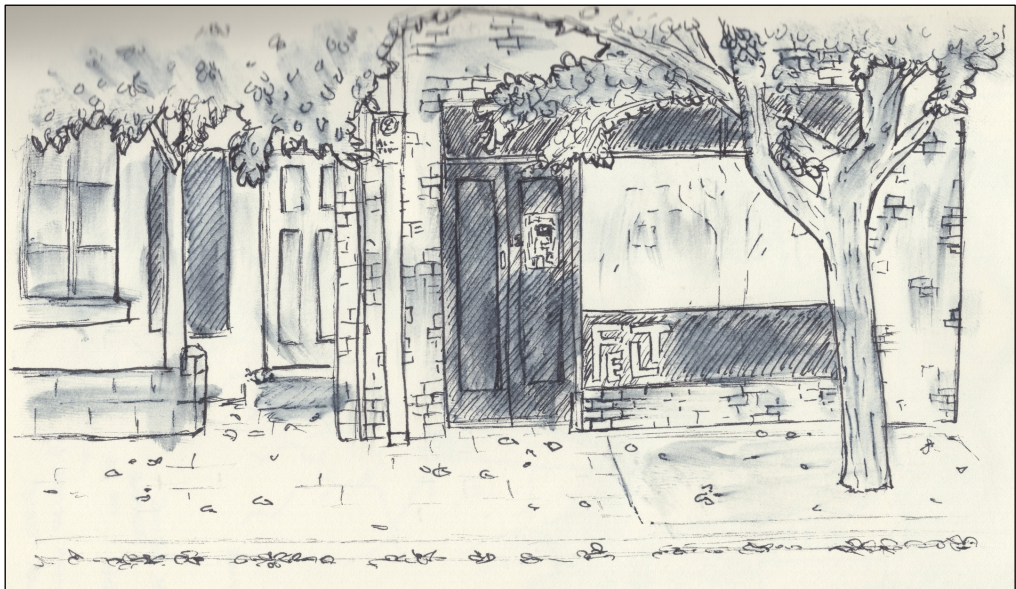
In the backseat of a taxi home, I watched the last of the day's light begin to fade, evening not yet begun, the magic hour. Golden hues adorned the buildings we passed, the sun giving their drab exteriors a flourish of brilliant colour. Traffic began to slow, a possible accident indicated by the short whooping of an ambulance siren in the distance. When movement began again there was little progress, car bumpers inching forward with impatience. My eyes locked with the taxi driver in the rear vision mirror when a metronomic ticking emerged from the dashboard, questioning his intentions.

'A shortcut,' he said, as he turned down a side street. With the same idea, four cars had blocked the passage from the main street, causing the driver to hiss through clenched teeth. A small art gallery stood adjacent to the taxi, one I had been to a number of times for various exhibitions. The light from the west had found its way into the little street and gave the redbrick of the gallery a luminous tinge, a look of warmth. I took a photo, a reminder to check what was showing there currently. An option for the free time I still had left.

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Finally home, I looked through the photos I'd taken in Sydney; a montage connecting the past and present through the sketching. I felt different, more at ease, as if some cumbersome burden had been made lighter through the experience. The last photo, the gallery passed on the way home, seemed to fit into the collection. A structure to be looked back on as a reminder of my altered perceptions, asking for its inclusion in the sketchbook.

After outlining the window to begin, I saw the tree on the footpath was reflected in the glass, a ghostly image of its forked trunk. The tree's branches arched over the entrance and path below, its fallen leaves scattered across the concrete. Beginning to insert the wayward foliage on the pavers, I saw the place I once stood, the concrete beneath my feet the last time I was there.



It was a few years ago. I was there for one of Sam's projects, standing out the front, a different sunset of a different time falling upon the same city. One woman with her back

to me stood smoking and looking into the sky while others from the gallery came to see the preternatural light and take photos of it on their phones.

‘I’ve never understood the need to take photographs of sunsets,’ said the woman as I stood beside her to light my own cigarette.

I looked from the peach and blood coloured sky to her, now in profile, unsure of who she addressed and remained silent. The woman had shoulder length hair and wore a loose black shirt with skinny jeans. An artist probably, I’d thought, as she crossed one arm against her chest and tilted the other upwards, the cigarette dangling from its fingers.

‘I mean, why save the moment as a photograph,’ she continued. ‘No sunset is the same and we should value that, be happy in the experience of witnessing this natural phenomenon each time it occurs. Savour it in the moment.’

I glanced at the others around us pointing and taking photos.

‘What do you consider worthwhile taking photos of?’ I asked the woman.

‘Subjects that tell stories, things that help to remind people of things forgotten. You’re Sam’s partner right? I saw you earlier with her. I’m Elana,’ she said, turning around and holding out her unoccupied hand. I took it, connecting her name with the photography exhibited inside. Sam had been working on a series of documentary essays accompanied by Elana’s photographs but I hadn’t met her then. I’d come to the exhibition because Sam was to present an introduction to the photos displayed based on their collaboration.

‘You’ve been working with Sam then?’ I said.

‘Yeah, she’s a good journalist. I was sceptical of collaborating at first, but she said my photographs would help to complement her work, fill in details that only an image could represent.’

We stood outside and watched the sky turning into night, discussing this infatuation people had with taking photos of sunsets. Perhaps it was that human need to want to capture something that moved them, to retain it so they could access it again, I’d told her.

‘The problem is that people take photos of everything they see these days,’ Elana argued, ‘Who can tell what is important to remember, what experience they had, if they’re too busy looking for things to take photos of? Sometimes it’s just nice to have the experience and let it go,’ she said and looked back at the sky, gesturing towards it with her cigarette and making the embers glow brightly in the twilight.

I continued with the sketch, changing light to dark as needed until my phone vibrated with a message and broke me out of the trance like state. Elana, inviting me for dinner the following night, as if my memories from the gallery had summoned her.

\*

I picked up a nice bottle of red on the way to Elana’s apartment, a token of gratitude for cooking. Pressing her doorbell, I smelt onions cooking in butter, then the sound of a pan scraping across the stovetop.

‘Hey there. Pasta okay for dinner?’ Elana asked after opening the door and stepping aside to let me in.

‘Sure, I love pasta. Here, I got you some wine.’

‘This is a bit fancy. You didn’t need to do that. Might as well open it since you did though.’

‘It’s just something to say thanks.’

Eating a homecooked meal was a rarity, having given up on any elaborate culinary activities since Sam left. I’d been eating most meals standing up, sandwiches or noodles that needed little preparation or patience.

Elana poured the wine and we clinked the thin glasses together, leaving a vibrational tone in the air. Returning to the kitchen with the bottle, Elana relit the stove and continued

to heat the pan of onions. The smell changed to mince with garlic as it was added to the pan, oil crackling against the new ingredients until the sibilant tone of wine added to the mix hissed with a new rich aroma.

‘This shouldn’t take too much longer,’ Elana said from the kitchen.

Looking around Elana’s apartment, not much had changed since I was last there. Her vintage camera collection on the book shelf hadn’t grown from what I could tell, nor had the framed photographs taken by her on the wall above it. I’d asked her once about placing her own artwork on the wall instead of others she admired. It was to remind her of what she had accomplished, she told me, and it was easier to critique your own history if it was in front of you instead of forgotten in a drawer or saved on a hard drive. I looked at the images, Elana’s unseen memories of the past within them.

‘So, tell me about Sydney,’ Elana said, after we’d eaten. I poured some more wine and explained about the sketches, vividly recalling them in my head as I spoke.

‘Did the sketchbook help then?’

‘I think so. I found a few things I wasn’t expecting...’

I sipped my wine instead of continuing, looking at the photographs on the wall and lightly tapping the table, trying to think of how I could word the connections to Sam. Elana closed her hand over mine, looking at me as I had seen her do with art she was trying to figure out, as if she stared long enough, the meaning would become clear.

‘It brought back a lot of memories,’ I told her, giving into her silent gaze and finding comfort in the warm hand over mine. ‘Some of them about Sam, things I’d forgotten,’ I said. Elana’s hand moved away from me and back to her glass.

‘Do those memories still affect you after all this time?’ Elana asked, before breaking our gaze to consider the photographs on the wall.

‘I didn’t think they did. The sketching gave me time to think I guess, and a few things my father said gave me some perspective.’

‘Do you still love her?’ Elana said, without turning.

I didn’t say anything for a moment, trying to be sure if there was anything still there.

‘I’m not sure love is the right word,’ I said finally. ‘It’s hard to forget everything you felt for someone even if they’re not around anymore. I care about her as a person. Things just didn’t work out and she didn’t do anything wrong by me. She was honest at least. That’s something I’m starting to see. Something simple I need to accept.’ Elana looked back towards me, silent, her eyes distant.

‘There’s something I think you should know.’

Various scenarios went through my head simultaneously. Did Sam still love me and had told Elana? Was Sam coming back from Berlin?

‘Sam was seeing someone else before she left for Berlin.’

‘What?’

‘I thought she would tell you eventually, maybe when she went overseas. The months rolled on and I felt I’d left it too long to say anything. I just didn’t want it to make you any more upset than you already were.’

‘What the fuck?’

‘I’m sorry. It really hurt to see you suffering, blaming yourself, the victim complex you were putting yourself through, but I didn’t think it was my place to say anything. I blame Sam for that.’

‘Who was it?’

‘Some German guy she’d been working with. That’s the reason she went to Berlin. To go back with him and work at his magazine.’

‘You really should have told me.’

‘I know, I know. I’m sorry.’

‘I think... I need to leave,’ I said, the words sounding light and unconvincing, having no idea what I thought I needed to do.

'I'm so sorry,' Elana said.

The shock turned to anger. I got up, reeling, and headed towards the door. I was angry that she hadn't told me, angry that I had trusted her and trusted Sam.

'Please let me know if I can do anything.'

'I think you've done enough by not telling me about this. Just... leave me alone,' I said, the last word echoing internally.

In the hallway of her apartment I found the entrance to the stairs, ignoring the elevator I had always used in fear of the dropping sensation I already felt. My heart throbbed as I descended, infected by the revelation. Jesus Sam, I'd thought. Images flashed through my head as I took each step. The hanging horse, St. Sebastian, the crooked form of the motorbike rider and the nurse's clinical words, "He went into shock and his heart stopped working". I felt the blood pump forcefully through my veins while the various connections came together. Sam's downturned face while she sat on her bed merged with the figure from the Sydney Long painting. Her voice flat as she told me she was leaving. She wasn't sad that things hadn't worked out between us, I saw. It was a look of guilt, of shame, that she'd been lying to me. Reaching the ground floor of the stairwell, I looked up at the angular spiral of bannisters above me, and inhaled deeply, letting the breath shudder out of me before walking into the street.

Adrenalin coursed through me as I walked, my body impervious to the night's chill carried on the wind. I felt numb, weightless, like the plastic bag that floated past me with nothing to weigh down its ethereal ascent. A cat sitting on the footpath followed the ghostly bag's journey until I shifted its attention with my approach, its slitted eyes considering me with indifference. Squatting down and blinking back the tears that were trying to push themselves out, I gestured with an outstretched arm for the cat to come closer. It slinked under a parked car instead, uninterested in my offer for affection and joining another cat waiting in the shadow of its chassis.

My house felt emptier than usual when I got home, the lack of decoration jarring and sparse compared to Elana's apartment. Nothing hung from the walls to distract me from Elana's words, each syllable like embers my thoughts continued to rake. In the kitchen I took out a glass and the whiskey bottle I hadn't touched since the hospital. It seemed like a good time to reacquaint myself with that old friend to distress.

With a liberal pour in hand, I sat in the backyard and smoked. The hum of air conditioner units whined in the night like a monotonous dirge to accompany my thoughts. A tremor of unease began, starting in the fingers and making the cigarette they held waver. I'd questioned my relationship with Sam after she left, but things were different with the new information. It was a confirmation. An answer to those questions. The barrage of thoughts collided with one another, the tremor in my hand beginning to work its way through my body, agitating the nerves the whiskey failed to dull.

Glass empty, I went back to the bottle and paused, an image of the broken gate returning. I turned on the kettle instead then tapped out the start of a message to Elana, fingers fumbling on the key pad while the water boiled. Angry short sentences filled the screen of the phone. Question marks punctuating the rising jumble of words as steam rose from the kettle's spout. When the kettle clicked off, its boiling point reached, I deleted the message. What more was I going to say to her, I thought. That I felt betrayed and Angry with Sam. Angry with her. She knew that. Maybe I was angry with myself, I considered, deserving of Sam's infidelity. I poured another whiskey and put Elana's words, "victim complex", into the Google search on my phone.

In psychology a person who has a **martyr complex**, sometimes associated with the term **victim complex**, desires the feeling of being a **martyr** for his/her own sake, seeking out suffering or persecution because it either feeds a psychological need, or a desire to avoid responsibility.  
(Martyr complex – Wikipedia)

Is that what Elana thought of me? That I wanted to suffer? I wasn't sure of anything anymore. The air seemed to get thin, as if some unseen weight pushed from all sides, and made me hold onto the kitchen counter. It was hard to think straight, hard to breathe. Panic. That's what it was. A feeling you forget about until you are in the midst of it.

Through the kitchen window I could make out the familiar shape of the tree beside the house, its thick forked branches extending from the trunk. Concentrate on the tree, I thought, feeling faint. Slow the breathing. The tree seemed to warp slightly while I deepened my inhalations, as if it breathed in time with me. My eyes shifted, between it and the shadowy reflection in the glass, a hunched phantom with clawed fingers biting into the counter. A figure of suffering upon a tree.

The fear passed eventually, the last twitches of adrenalin fading with each sip of whiskey. Feeling flushed with emotion and alcohol, I splashed cold water on my face in the bathroom. Bloodshot eyes stared back at me from the mirror, disliking everything they saw. My hair had grown longer than I usually kept it, the beard unkempt and as tangled as my thoughts, reminding me of Elana's comment at the gallery. Rifling around in the medicine cabinet I found some blunt scissors behind a box of Band Aids. The dull implement shook with uncertainty as I haphazardly chopped at wayward tufts.

When I was done, I felt no different. Shorter hair framing the same look of disappointment in the mirror.

I woke up disorientated and clutching my chest, my heart thumping beneath my palm like an animal throwing itself against a cage made of bone. A residual effect from some dream I didn't remember. Sipping from a glass on the bedside table, an unexpected taste hit, making me quickly spit its contents back. Whiskey, not water. The fire from the sip lingered on my tongue as I searched for my phone. 8am and one message from Elana, which I didn't read.

Arranging my pillow, I found stray hairs covering its surface, evidence of the haircut I'd given myself. It felt much shorter as I ran my hand through it and the beard was almost gone. Getting up to check the damage in the mirror, the floor tilted beneath my feet. Being awake seemed too difficult and led me back under the covers. Thoughts pushed their way in, fighting with each other and trying to outdo their wretchedness. Sam with the German man, Elana keeping this from me when she was supposed to be my friend. I tried to think of the positive things in my life instead, that I was living with privileges unattainable to a high percentage of the world, had a steady income and opportunities to enjoy most things in life. This just made me feel worse as none of these things seemed important.

When I finally got out of bed, I opened the message from Elana and after reading the first line, the beginnings of an apology, I turned the phone off. Still mad. The thoughts of Sam and her mysterious German returned again like the contents of a toilet you realise went flush at a party.

Looking through the kitchen window, I pushed my chest forward with my arms behind my back, stretching the stiffness out of it. More fragments of last night came back, the double image of the tree and myself reflected in the glass. The sketch of St Sebastian I'd drawn was following me. I didn't even know that much about the guy, save for I knew what it was like to be left to hang and have a chest full of stabbing pain.

Googling the saint, I found various depictions, mostly religious and less pained looking than Tacca's sculpture. A lot of them looked like they were rolling their eyes, as if it were merely an inconvenience they were tied to a tree and full of arrows. One depiction of him, *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, by Il Sodoma, seemed the closest to being in discomfort while at the same time confused. An angel floated above him with a crown, distracting his eyes from the punctured skin. Scrolling through more depictions, my attention began to wane with the fleeting images, unlike the recent exercises in sketching. I needed a task to distract myself and turned to a blank page of the sketchbook still on the table, ignoring the last image of the gallery and its reminder of first meeting Elana.

Going back through the images of St Sebastian for one to draw, the Sodoma painting moved me the most. Pain and confusion. As I sketched, new elements of the painting became evident. A ruined temple stood in the background, and further into the distance, Roman architecture with a dome and columns. The rough sketch of St Sebastian tied to the tree with the angel above offered no further thoughts as to what I had seen before with the Tacca sculpture. It was the background details that were new. To the right of the tree, two men in the distance stood talking between what I thought was a horse until I attempted to sketch the creature. It looked like it may have horns, although it was hard to tell because of the image size. A bull, I thought, but left the head angular without the curved horns that might have been there. The symbolism was lost on me if it was a horse or a bull.

St Sebastian, Wikipedia told me, was a Christian who had joined the Roman army, converted a few people and kept his faith hidden. Detected, he was ordered to be killed by arrows while tied to a tree by the Roman Emperor Diocletian. In one version, he didn't die but was nursed back to health by a fellow Christian only to confront Diocletian again. Obviously surprised, he ordered his death once more, this time by clubbing before being thrown into a sewer. I wondered if this had inspired James Bond villains, always ordering death but never sticking around to confirm it.

The bull, if it was a bull, still puzzled me. A few google searches came up with the ox or bull as a symbol of redemption, or life through sacrifice. Martyrdom fit, a sacrifice of death for one's beliefs. I went back to the sketch and drew curved lines on the horse's head.



Continuing to sketch small details throughout the picture I wondered about the intelligence of this man full of arrows. If someone tried to kill me in this way I wouldn't go back and flaunt the fact they had failed, I'd thought, especially to an Emperor with an army behind them. He could have escaped Rome and hidden. I doubted anyone in Rome would have been easily persuaded to convert if they'd just seen someone ordered to be killed twice for the same thing. Then again, I considered that if he'd avoided confronting Diocletian, he wouldn't have become a martyr. It would have been a story about him hiding out in exile feeling sorry for himself for believing in something. Not really a page turner for the church to get their ideas across, I guessed. Trying to find how the story originated, I found another image of Sodoma's painting. This one with a higher resolution. Hoping the bull might be clearer in this version I magnified the area to the right of St Sebastian's legs and found the animal was clearly a horse. Another reminder of how things are not always what they appear to be.

It wasn't quite noon when the hangover I thought I'd avoided began to tap out its presence behind my temples. A Morse code of latent regret. I wondered why the body did this when you got older, bided its time when first waking, tricking you into believing the previous night's indulgence went unnoticed.

Drinking my third glass of water, I stared vacantly into the coloured album spines of the record shelf. The vinyl hadn't been played since I moved in, sitting there as if a display piece, a museum for dead media. If I played some music, I reasoned, perhaps the terrible silence allowing my thoughts to get louder would have something to compete with.

Dust had accumulated on the record player, a visible marker of neglect which I ran my finger through to assess its depth. After blowing the needle and wiping the platter with an old rag, I chose a record at random. Talking Heads. Putting the stylus down and pressing the start button I felt nostalgic for the old pastime of having a record on in the background while pottering around the house. Making coffee, it wasn't long before I recalled how Sam had liked this record. Of fucking course she would like the album I picked at random.

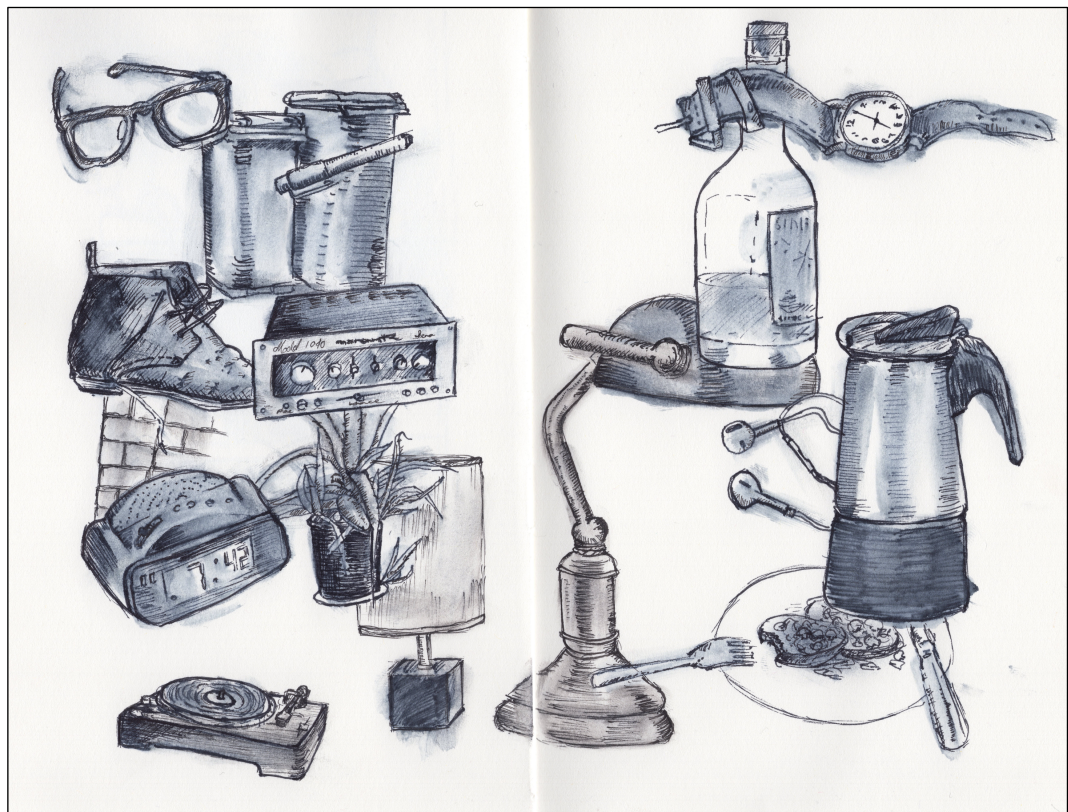
I'd put the record on while we made dinner sometimes, drinking wine and chopping ingredients to the rhythm. The thin stabbing guitar and quick percussion under David Byrne's warm vocals irked me as it played through the speakers. There was a love for that band that wouldn't die but I couldn't bear to listen to it, not then. Why couldn't I have picked something else, I mused, the Chuck Berry album found in second-hand store before I'd met Sam, the Elvis Costello album borrowed from Jack and never returned?

My chest grew tight, made me turn off the hissing percolator and move to the turntable. The speakers whipped to a high whine as I fumbled with the needle, wincing as the tip skidded across the surface of the record. Reflected in the overhead light, an intersecting line cut through the circular grooves as they revolved on the axis of the player's silver nub. Shit, I hissed, thinking the scratch would remind me of everything if I ever played it again. Putting the record back, I looked more carefully through the record spines, running my finger across their indents. One album poked out, stopping my finger. Miles Davis. Sam never listened to Jazz. She didn't get it, she told me. I put the record on a listened to the first tentative piano bars before the bass started up with its questioning hook. The piano responded, then Miles with his trumpet, *So What*. I wished it was that simple Miles. Waiting for something to trigger, nothing happened. Nothing bad. A faint memory of my father introducing me to Miles Davis with another album. I wondered what he would say if I'd told him about Elana's revelation. Probably the same as Miles' trumpet, so what? You can't change the past so move forward and let life play itself out.

After the headache I'd been nursing subsided and I'd had a late breakfast, I began to draw simple items around the house to keep busy. Objects that couldn't be associated to Sam or Elana. The coffee percolator seemed like a good place to start, an object used on a daily basis. Part of the morning ritual and nothing else. A starting point.



There was a handful of old jazz records I hadn't listened for some time in the record shelves. Mingus, Blakey, Coltrane, not a single note stirring any emotional reaction. I played through them all, changing the record when it was over to stretch my legs and find new things to sketch. Focusing only on the shapes they made, I roughly mimicked the lines and tried to fill the empty space while the jazz soundtrack filled the silence.



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In the evening I looked over the jumble of sketches as the last record I'd put on finished, leaving a crackling of static and dust to amplify through the speakers. Lifting the needle from the record, I considered what would be remembered if I looked at these pages in the future. Blank space slowly populated with my surroundings? A representation of progress through time? No. Of course not. I knew it would be Sam. The intention to distract myself from her lies and from Elana's silence. The pages represented this whole mess, and in the epiphany, the realisation that I'd wasted a day on creating another bad memory.



The act of sketching was a double-edged sword. Finding new meanings and associations in the subjects was intriguing to me, yet what I found, I'd rather forget. Halfway to catharsis with no payoff.

Sitting back at the table, I closed the sketchbook with a sigh. The face of the sleepy cat looked back at me from the side of the coffee mug, the first object I'd drawn. It hadn't triggered anything bad, only a reminder of Jane and how much I missed her. Visiting her in Melbourne might be a good idea, I thought, a chance to get away from all of this.

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Back in bed, half watching a movie on my laptop, my phone vibrated with a new message. Not Elana this time, but a reply from Jane.

*-Hey stranger, how are you!? Doing shifts all over the place with this new kitchen job at an Italian place in town but should be able to swing some time off if you come over. When are ya thinkin?-*

I stopped the film and searched flights to Melbourne for the next day which seemed fairly affordable.

*-Is tomorrow too soon?-* I replied.

*-Shit! lol. Yeah, that's cool. You're not dying or anything are you? Lol. I finish around 5 tomorrow. Elsey is in Perth visiting family but you can crash at ours on the couch and meet our new cat Ace.-*

*-Sounds perfect. No, not dying yet. Thanks. I'll come meet you when you finish work.-*

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Packing a bag the next day, I felt a twinge of guilt for ignoring Elana's message. The anger was still there but abating, eased with the imminent departure to see Jane for a couple of days, so I decided to reopen it.

*-Hey, I'm really sorry. I know this must have come as a shock to you and I should've told you sooner. You're really important to me. Please contact me anytime you want to talk.-*

I made myself reply, ignoring what she'd written and explaining I needed to get out of town for a couple of days. That I was going to visit Jane. She texted back within minutes, telling me she understood and to say hello to Jane for her.

Elana had gotten on well with Jane and Elsey. They'd first met at one of Sam's magazine events, chatting together most of the night and ignoring the other guests. I would have done the same but was expected to follow Sam around and mingle with advertising execs, most of whom supplied funding for the magazine's publication. "PR boot licking", Sam had called it, expected of her position as head editor.

When I was finally able to sneak away for a cigarette, I found the three of them drinking from a bottle of wine in the car park. Their laughter died down as I approached in the dark, like kids caught doing something forbidden.

'What are you deviants up to?' I asked them with deepest voice of authority I could muster. Laughing when they saw it was only me, Elana offered me the bottle. She was quite drunk from memory. I'd sat down next to her in the gutter, taking the proffered bottle before stopping her from lighting cigarette the wrong way around.

Finished with my own cigarette, I told them I should get back to Sam.

'Noooo, stay here with us,' Elana said, putting an arm around me and resting her chin on my shoulder.

I leant my head into hers, looking at Jane and Elsey whose toothy grins shone in the dark.

'I should really find Sam,' I said, getting up and wishing I could stay. Elana looked at me, blinking slowly with inebriation and mild annoyance that I was leaving before smiling and leaning into Jane instead.

'No problem, we'll take drunkey here home,' Jane said.

'I'm not drunk,' Elana slurred back. 'You're drunk.'

Standing outside Southern Cross Station, I looked up to see a typical Melbourne Sky, cloudy and pregnant with the colour of impending rain. But that meant little here, the swathes of grey just as likely to break for blue sky within minutes. Google Maps showed Jane's restaurant was a thirty-minute walk from the station, The National Gallery of Victoria, or the NGV as it was known, being the closest landmark. With nothing to repel water I decided to risk the temperamental weather for a scenic path by the Yarra River.

It felt good to walk, to see new things and put some distance between everything back home. When a mist of rain began, it didn't ever matter. Then it started to pour. Purchasing a cheap umbrella from one of the ubiquitous convenience stores, I forged ahead to the Princess Bridge. Others braving the weather didn't carry umbrellas as I did, favouring rain jackets in an assortment of colours.

When the wind picked up, slanting the rain as I reached the centre of the bridge, it validated their reasoning. I staggered on, holding the umbrella like an ineffectual shield while my curses were sucked into the howling wind. On reaching the other side, it completely gave up, the thin metallic supports snapping under the canopy as it blew inside out. The arched entrance of grey stone to the NGV, lacking any influence of classical architecture, promised the only means of shelter.

Under cover and looking into the glass panes of the gallery foyer, an exhibit in itself behind a perpetual cascade of water, I saw the shimmering bleak reflection I cast. A silhouette of a man holding a broken umbrella like some miserable Banksy stencil. Unsure of what to do with the useless contraption, I stuffed it in a bin, the thought of it being mistaken for some Duchampian readymade giving me some satisfaction. There was an hour before Jane finished work and little else to do but wait out the rain and wander the halls of the gallery. An unintentional diversion leading me back to art once more.

Inside, I handed my wet bag to a cloakroom attendant who took it between thumb and forefinger, his mouth retaining the shape of a perfectly drawn line as he handed me a plastic token in exchange. I wanted to explain my journey to him, to ask if he thought I liked walking in the shitty weather outside, but he was already taking the dry bag of another visitor with a smile.

In the first gallery stood a giant sculpture of a recumbent Buddha, its colour manufactured to suggest the illusion of antiquity. Smaller figures, bleach white, covered the sleeping giant, appearing to be deities from Western mythology, omnipotent personas in opposition to the mortal from the East. Taking a photo, I envied the look of the Buddha, his eyes shut to the mythic world that didn't resemble his own. My own eyes, open now, couldn't unsee the world I was blind to before thanks to Elana. But maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

I moved through the second floor of the gallery, past the portraits of depressed British nobility, until I found myself in a large room with a collection of enormous skulls. Their placement was haphazard, mounds of them at different angles as if abandoned. A few other people stood with me, taken with the scale of the sculptures in a unanimous silence. Perhaps it wasn't the size that took our words but being enclosed with an overwhelming signifier of mortality and its finite existence. Or maybe that was just me. The work was titled *Mass* by Ron Mueck, its purpose a symbol of unity shared within the human species, our bones no different under the flesh and blood. It was also a remembrance, a reminder of the mass killings of history, a representation of what humans are capable of doing to each other lest we forget. I felt even smaller in the room after reading the text, another reminder that my

suffering was incomparable with the victims it represented. Elana would have liked this though, art that said something other than exploring the ego of its creator. Alone in the room, I took a photo with the intention of sending it to her, but the absence of people made its scale less impressive. From the next gallery I looked back, the door framing Mueck's work seemingly impenetrable with the abundance of skulls. No way to get past the memento mori, the giant reminder that all things come to an end.

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The rain had stopped when I exited the gallery, the air fragrant with damp foliage. Checking google maps once more, I found the address Jane had given me. It was close, the large windows of the restaurant decorated with intricate borders of faded gold. Through the glass I could make out tables draped with white cloth, an exposed brick interior and the suggestion that a modicum of wealth was required to eat there.

'Hey!' Jane said, coming out of the entrance and waving me over.

'Hey! It's so good to see you.' We hugged a quick tight hug, giving our time apart the feeling of only a short intermission between acts.

'Are you hungry? I'm starving.'

'Sure. We're not eating here are we? I don't think I'm dressed for fine dining. I don't think I could afford this place either.'

'God no, I need to get away from Italian cuisine. Keen for Japanese? I know a good place close by.'

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The restaurant was dimly lit and had the inoffensive jazz of most Japanese restaurants, the dulcet tones piping through unseen speakers at a low volume. A framed print of two deer hung above us in the booth we were ushered to, the composition made from deceptively simple brush strokes. I looked around, seeing similar art in the other booths while Jane ordered a small bottle of warm sake and an assortment of dishes to share.

'Nice place. What's it called?' I asked.

'Sacred Deer.' Jane said, pointing at the framed print. 'Always reminds me of when Elsey and I went to Japan, this deer park we visited. The guide told us they left all the deer to roam freely because they were considered sacred, something about a white deer first coming to the area, a divine messenger or something. I can't remember exactly.'

I sipped the sake in front of me and thought of my father connecting the image of the paper mill in Sydney, his youth coming back and the women who could lip read across a room. We all did this, I thought. Connected our own memories to images.

'So, what's new?' Jane said, pouring sake into one of the small ceramic cups.

'Workwise nothing. Everything else has been chaotic. I got an infection on the lining of my heart a couple of weeks ago resulting in some time off. Nothing serious though.'

'Shit. Are you sure you're okay?'

'Yeah, fine now. Cleared it up with antibiotics.'

'I don't like to bring this up but was it related to your Mum's heart problems. Something genetic?'

'No, just stress and lack of sleep apparently. I caught up with my Dad a few days ago and didn't tell him about it for the same reason you connected. Didn't want to worry him.'

'Yeah, that's understandable. How is your Dad?'

‘He’s good. Just concerned about me like everyone else it seems. Elana says hello by the way.’

‘Oh, how is she? We speak on Facebook from time to time but she seems to be doing well with the photography work.’

‘She’s good, I guess. She dropped some pretty big information on me recently. Stuff about Sam I wasn’t aware of.’

A smiling waitress broke the conversation, putting bowls of miso soup and a plate of fried spheres garnished with brown flakes on the table.

‘Takoyaki,’ Jane informed me when I raised my eyebrows. ‘Octopus balls.’

‘I didn’t know octopus had balls.’

‘Very funny,’ Jane said, waving her hand in front of her mouth to ineffectually cool the fried orb she’d bit into. ‘Now what did Elana tell you about Sam?’

‘She said she’d been seeing some German guy from work when I was still with her and that’s why she moved to Berlin. To go back there with him.’

‘Holy shit. I had no idea. That was six months ago though wasn’t it? Probably doesn’t make much difference now.’

‘I guess it shouldn’t but it does. I thought I was beginning to get over it. That we just grew apart but this changed everything. I’m kind of upset with Elana for not telling me about it too. She said she thought it was Sam’s place to tell me and not hers.’

‘I can see that. She mentioned you haven’t been coping very well since it happened but I can imagine this must have come as a shock. You know Elana probably kept this from you because she cares about you right?’

‘Well, I guess so. We’ve been friends for a long time so I just thought she would’ve told me.’

‘To be honest I always thought you guys should have been together. I saw this happening when you were still with Sam, the way you guys got along so well.’

‘What? Don’t be daft, we’re just close friends.’

Jane rolled her eyes and made a clicking sound with her tongue. ‘Whatever. Ha, ha.’

The waiter came with some more food and I ordered a couple of beers, telling Jane the Sake was going to her head and we should switch to something less alcoholic. Concentrating on picking up a sliver of salmon with my chopsticks, I considered what Jane had said about Elana, that I shouldn’t have been so angry with her. I’d never really thought about Elana more than a friend either but Jane was right, we got along better than I ever did with Sam.

‘How’s the internet job going?’ Jane said through another mouthful of food.

‘Same old. I’m pretty sick of it actually. The money is good I guess.’

‘Why don’t you quit and find something else?’

‘I don’t really have any other options.’

‘Have you thought about working in bars again? An old friend of mine, George, is looking for someone to help him run a small new bar back in Adelaide if you’d be interested?’

‘I don’t know. I hate the job but that would be quite a big change.’

‘Sounds like you need a big change.’

When we had finished all the food Jane sat back in her seat, looking at me as if I was an optical puzzle.

‘Are you really still pining about Sam?’

I started to feel hot, the familiar tremor beginning in my hand, then subsiding to my surprise and relief.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘not pining. I just felt miserable and a bit lost after we broke up. Maybe a bit of pining. Then Elana tells me all this stuff about the German guy and now I don’t know what to think.’

‘When was the last time you spoke to her?’

‘A long time ago. Emails mainly, but they were erratic from my end and I thought she stopped replying because of that.’

‘Maybe you should contact her again and confront her about this if it’s bothering you so much.’

‘I’d rather just try to forget the whole thing.’

‘I don’t mean to sound like a bitch but that obviously hasn’t been working for you. Just send her an angry email or something. Get it all of your chest. I’m not even sure if she’s still in Berlin.’

‘Yeah, maybe I will after I’ve had time to think about all this,’ I said quietly, pushing around a few grains of rice with a chopstick. ‘Feel like getting another drink somewhere?’

‘Maybe one more. I’ve got an appointment early in the morning but we can get lunch somewhere before you fly back.’

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We ended up sitting at the front bar of place nearby called The Matador, its interior decorated with paintings and memorabilia of bull fighting. Aside from the décor, nothing else about the place was particularly in line with the theme. There were a few high end bottles of tequila, Mexican not Spanish. The bar tenders looked like lumberjacks with their flannel shirts and large beards, men who I doubted would ever hurt a tree, would plant them if anything. Jane and I sipped beers and talked, idle chatter about movies and music we’d been listening to, nothing about the discussion at the restaurant to my relief.

‘I should probably get home to bed,’ Jane said after finishing the last of her beer. ‘Are you ready to head back to mine or do you wanna stick around and I can leave the key under the doormat for you?’

‘I might head back a bit later if that’s okay? My sleeping pattern is off recently and I’m not really tired.’

‘No problem. I’ll text you the address and you can just get a taxi when you’re ready.’

‘Thanks.’

I gave Jane a hug.

‘It’s really great to see you,’ I said.

‘You too.’

The atmosphere of a comfortable bar was something I’d missed, unable to remember the last time I’d sat in one by myself. Ordering another beer and a neat whiskey, the comfort began to wane with troubled thoughts once more. Without Jane’s conversation to distract me, I looked at the various trinkets and supposedly Spanish paraphernalia. Behind the spirit bottles on display was a large mirror spanning the length of the bar. It reflected the backs of the bartenders and other customers behind me, along with my serious face, making me look elsewhere. A few paintings hung above the mirror, one showing an arched matador dressed in yellow and green. The paint was thick, large brushstrokes with no clear outlines but captured the movement. To the side of him, a bull twisted under the red billowing cape he held, missing its target. No mistaking the creature for a horse in this painting.

After finishing most of the beer I looked back into the mirror, hoping my face had become less serious with the alcohol, and stopped when I saw the reflection of four people

behind me, one of them a familiar shape. They were sitting in a booth, all engaged in conversation. Two men and two women. The woman, the shape that looked familiar, laughed at something the man across from her said. She really did look like her, but it couldn't be, I thought. Her hair was longer than I remembered, but then again, I hadn't seen her in six months. I downed the whiskey and looked away, telling myself it couldn't be her. With another glance back, I was sure it was. Sure it was Sam.

Jane said she didn't know where she was and the Berlin job was supposedly only a short contract. Although that was probably a lie too. With the din of the bar too loud to hear much, I tried to read Sam's lips, thinking about the mill workers my Father had told me about. I couldn't understand a thing. She was laughing a lot though, I could see that, shaking with happiness amongst these other people I had never seen before. Of the two men, neither of them looked particularly German, or rather they didn't fit the Hitler Youth mould of my imagination. My heart felt as if it was clenching, like a phantom pain from the hospital.

Looking above the mirror and away from the scene I focused on another painting. This one showed a solitary bull in its death throes, spears hanging from its side and crimson swathes of paint where they had pierced the flesh. St Sebastian again. I couldn't get away from that damn guy. It was all too much. I wanted to leave but my legs wouldn't work, wouldn't get me up off the bar stool and walk out like my brain was willing them to do.

One of the bartenders raised his chin towards me, seeing my tumbler empty. I nodded and tried to push my lips into a smile around a clenched jaw, not knowing what else to do. Fuck, I thought, fuck, shit, fuck. Okay, okay, maybe I should go over to her. Say hello? No. Shit. What would I say? I looked back at the painting of the dying bull and concentrated on slowing my breathing, concentrated on the air coming in and out of me.

A part of me felt like I'd been waiting for this, to talk to Sam again, constantly thinking I'd seen her in the distance of a crowd since she'd left. My reflection in the mirror showed not a martyr, not a victim and definitely not a saint, but a fool. A man, who for six months had hung onto a relationship that had dissolved even before the breakup. So what, I thought unconvincingly, while Miles Davis's trumpet echoed together with the internal words. I'll have this whiskey, finish my beer then say hello, I thought, maybe say something, like "How's your German?"

I eyed the whiskey the bartender had set in front of me, not knowing if it was enough to provide the courage I needed and severely lacked. Looking back into the mirror to check on the group, I saw movement. Sam got up and headed towards the bar, towards me. My shaky hand lifted the whiskey to my lips, the other bracing itself against the bar top as if waiting for a blow. I felt like my entire body was pulsing along to the rhythm of my heart.

Okay, get it together, I thought. Just tell her I know about everything then make up some excuse to rush off. It would be easier without anyone else around, no table full of strangers. I drank the rest of the beer and held onto the bottle, like it was a stake in the ground, a tether to the earth where gravity was disappearing. Looking down at my drink when she was nearly at the bar, I could smell the fragrance she was wearing, an unfamiliar aroma redolent with botanicals I couldn't name nor picture. When Sam stood only a few paces away, I still didn't look up, waiting to see if she'd notice me.

'Hi, what can I get you?' The bartender asked her.

'Two gin martinis please.'

The words made me twitch. Sam hated gin. It wasn't even her voice. I looked up to see a woman with an uncanny resemblance, a fringe cut in the same fashion. Similar taste in clothing perhaps or maybe it was the same colour of lipstick she'd worn, a violent red. When the woman started to turn towards me, presumably because of my lingering gaze, I quickly

looked up to the paintings once more. I focused on the matador, the bull beside him confused at missing its mark and distracted by the brilliant red of the cape.

When the woman who wasn't Sam returned to her booth with the drinks I got up and left, the experience leaving me sober as I walked out the door.

I woke the next morning to the smell of sardines and a white cat smacking its lips in front of my face.

‘Hello there. Ace?’

‘Morning,’ Jane said from the kitchen. ‘I think she likes you. You’re also sleeping on her couch so it could be a form of protest.’

‘Oh, hey.’ I stroked my hand down the cat’s back until it laid its chin down on my shoulder and began to purr. ‘Why is it called Ace?’

‘Elsey called it Achilles originally, because of the marks on its heels, but we found out it was a girl and thought Ace would be more gender neutral. Ha, ha.’

I looked down at the one of the cat’s stretched out legs, the black markings around its foot a blemish in the otherwise milky colour of its fur.

‘There’s coffee and toast if you want some. Did you have a late one?’

‘Not really. I thought I saw Sam when you left but it wasn’t her. Freaked me out a bit.’

‘Must have been because we were talking about her. I’ve got to go to this appointment but I’ll be back in a couple of hours and you can tell me about it over lunch.’

I stayed on the couch for some time, enjoying the sound of Ace’s languid purring. Elana always talked about getting a cat if she didn’t travel so much. Thinking she would like it, I took a photo of its placid face and sent it in a message.

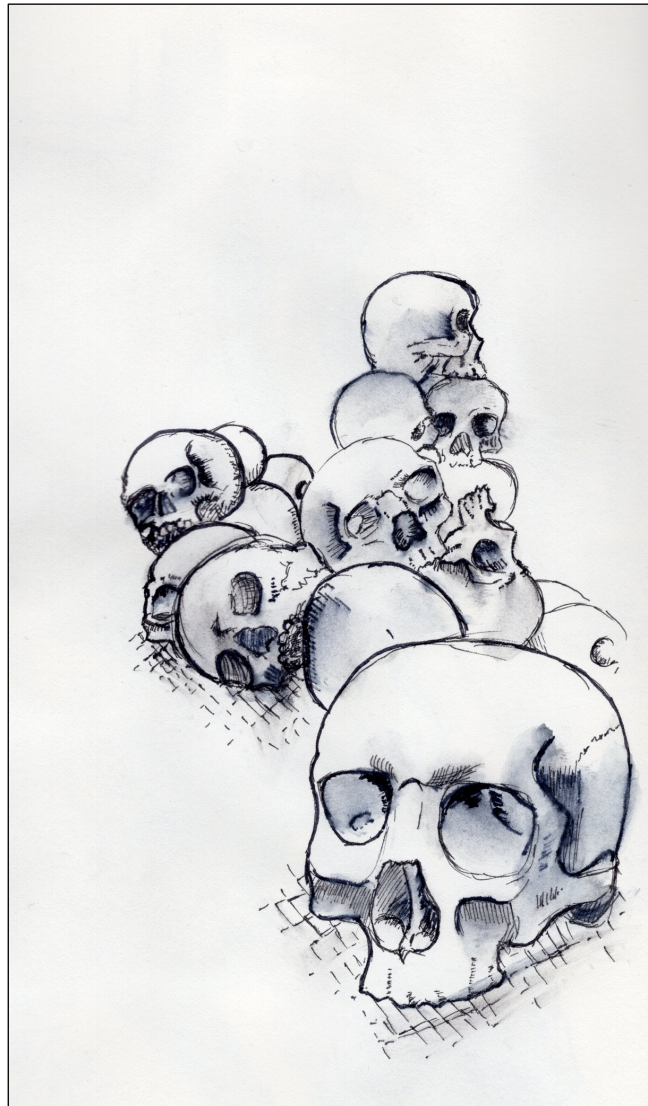
*-Very cute-* she sent back.

With Ace still on me, I sat up, considering if I did like Elana in the way Jane suggested, ignored the feelings because of being with Sam. I did feel awful about how angry I’d been with her and Jane had made a good point, that she was probably trying to protect me by not telling me about the German guy. It should have been Sam who told me, Elana was right. I felt an overwhelming need to tell her about being in the bar and thinking I saw Sam, but it could wait. I still wasn’t sure how I felt about anything.

Getting up to pour coffee, I placed Ace back on her couch, who, unfazed by the movement, circled on one of the cushions before curling into a ball. I felt jealous of the cat’s ability to find comfort in abrupt change. She didn’t care at all.

Once caffeinated, I searched my bag for a clean shirt, finding the sketchbook wedged between clothing. I’d forgotten I’d packed it, thinking I’d left it behind with the things I wanted to get away from. It seemed different now, a connection to Elana’s good intentions, like some mythical book whose stories changed whenever it was opened. With time to kill before Jane returned, I opened to a blank page.

Using the photos taken at the NGV, I began with the skulls, focusing on their shape and the indented eye sockets. It was a familiar shape drawn in my youth on school text books associated with death and pirates, two things I really knew nothing about at the time, aside from my father reading *Treasure Island* to me as a child.



Without having to draw the crossed bones, various meanings tumbled through my thoughts; the artist's contextual reference to sacrifice and the human species, Hamlet's poor jester Yorick and the ominous reminder of death, of endings. I rubbed the edges of the skull's sockets with spit, the shadows like mascara smudged with tears. I wondered if Sam cried after we broke up. I'd pictured her doing so, an act I had no verification of and conjured to believe the feeling of loss was mutual. She probably didn't cry at all, I thought, didn't miss me or the way I used to make her laugh, her man of infinite jest. I was probably just like one of these skulls, a memory from the past, piled on top of other memories she would prefer to forget. I needed to forget, forget her as this unseen affliction, a hairline fracture in my bones, an infection in the lining of my heart.

Persisting, I turned to a new page and continued to draw, using the sculpture of the Buddha as reference instead. The eyelids on the giant face looked heavy, making me slowly draw the curved slits with an increased pressure of the pen. Compared to Christian art, most artistic representations of the Buddha seemed to be devoid of suffering, didn't incite guilt in the viewer, suggesting only peace and acceptance. I'd read somewhere the reason for the Buddha being depicted in this way was related to his moments before death. He'd had a knowledge of what was to come, of going towards parinirvana, the nirvana after death for someone who'd attained nirvana while living. St Sebastian must have attained some peace

before he died, a knowledge that he had stood up to what he believed in before Diocletian's men kicked the shit out him and threw him in a sewer.

I roughly sketched in the figures of Western mythology lying around the sleeping giant, figures from the Roman pantheon that Diocletian would have favoured over Christianity. Leaving them unblemished with my bodily fluids, their whiteness stood out as I darkened the sleeping colossus. What did I look like when I slept these days, I wondered, not feeling a peace with anything, far from reaching any kind of nirvana or acceptance. The thought of sleep made me lethargic, deciding to lay on the couch and wait for Jane's return.



Awaking to Jane coming in the door, I noticed the cat had made itself comfortable on me again, its white shape draped over my arm.

‘Have you moved at all?’ Jane asked, laughing.

‘Yeah, just closed my eyes for a moment and must have drifted off.’

‘What’s this? You and Ace looked just like this picture.’ I looked up to see Jane hovering over the sketchbook still open to the picture of the reclining Buddha.

‘A gift from Elana. She thought it might be good for me to try sketching things I see. Get my mind off Sam.’

‘You guys are ridiculous. And you still didn’t know how much she cares about you? My god.’

Jane flicked through the pages of the sketchbook.

‘I didn’t know you could draw.’

‘I wouldn’t say that I could draw. It’s become more of a hobby to fill time while I’m not working. It’s a good distraction but it also keeps bringing up old memories of things I’d forgotten about.’

‘You obviously like doing it though if you’ve drawn this many pictures.’

‘I do kind of enjoy it.’

‘Come on, go get a shower then let’s get some lunch before you get that flight.’

I gave Ace a scratch under the chin before I had to move her once more, making her drool.

‘She definitely likes you,’ Jane said, taking me a moment to realise she wasn’t talking about Elana.

\*

The café around the corner from Jane’s had been renovated from a bank into its current state, the façade still showing the faded blue letters above the entrance. A few twenty somethings sat around on their laptops inside, perhaps working on something significant or perhaps browsing social media, the glow of the laptops on their designer glasses giving away nothing. Most of them had haircuts that looked more expensive than all the clothes I was wearing. Jane told me not to worry, that the food was worth it, after my face must have shown the scepticism I was feeling.

We found a booth and ordered lunch from a friendly young waiter with tattoos haphazardly inked around one arm.

‘What happened when I left last night?’ Jane asked, when the waiter had gone to place our order with the kitchen.

I explained about the night before, about the woman I thought was Sam.

‘That’s pretty funny,’ she said, laughing.

‘How is that funny? I was freaking out.’

‘It’s pretty funny because we were talking about her before and how you were avoiding things. What would you have done if it was her?’

‘I was going to leave but then I thought about it and considered that I should at least tell her I knew that she’d been seeing someone else.’

‘Do you still have feelings for Sam?’

‘Elana asked me the same thing before she told me about her cheating. You’re not going to tell me something else I didn’t know are you?’

‘Nah, I’m just asking as your concerned friend.’

‘I don’t think so. Not anymore at least. I guess I just needed a reason to let go.’ It felt strange to say the words out loud and mean it.

‘I never really saw you guys working to be honest.’

‘And you never said anything?’

‘What was I going to say?’

‘True. I guess.’

‘You and Elana on the other hand...’

‘I think your food is getting cold,’ I interrupted. ‘You should eat. Give your mouth something else to do besides lecture me.’

‘When has eating ever stopped me talking?’

On the way back to Jane’s we stopped to look at a garage sale. A squat man with a large beard sat on a foldout chair parked over an oil stain on the driveway. There was an uncanny resemblance between the him and one of the garden gnomes by his feet selling for five dollars.

‘Hello,’ I said to the man.

‘G’day,’ he replied absently, concentrating on the voice coming from a portable radio broadcasting a football match. He reached for a can of beer in an esky beside the chair, ignoring us as we moved to look through the random items for sale.

There was an assortment of the usual rubbish one finds at these garage sales, records by Kamal, framed pictures of flowers by artists unknown and mismatched plate sets from the 70’s. The objects looked too dated to belong to the man in the chair who appeared to be in his early forties.

‘Do you think he killed the owner and is selling their stuff?’ Jane whispered to me while we browsed through some yellowed books amongst a stack of knitting patterns.

‘Maybe. I can’t see this guy knitting jumpers with kittens on them like this.’

I went over to the man and asked if he was doing some spring cleaning.

‘Nah, this is just me Mum’s stuff. Passed away a while ago and thought I’d get rid of some of the things before I sold the house.’

‘Oh, sorry to hear that,’ I said.

‘Nah, she had a good run.’

Jane was pulling things out of a box, inspecting them before putting them back, but stopped when she pulled out a small rectangular object with two lenses on the front.

‘Check out this old camera,’ Jane said, holding it up for me to see.

‘I think that’s an old Rolleiflex. They’re pretty hard to find now. Elana would love this. I don’t think she has one in her collection.’

Jane laughed and told me I better buy it then, mocking me with her eyes.

It had no price and the man told me it was ten dollars without a pause to estimate its worth, barely looking at what I held in my hands, his distant eyes watching the last quarter of the football match in his head.

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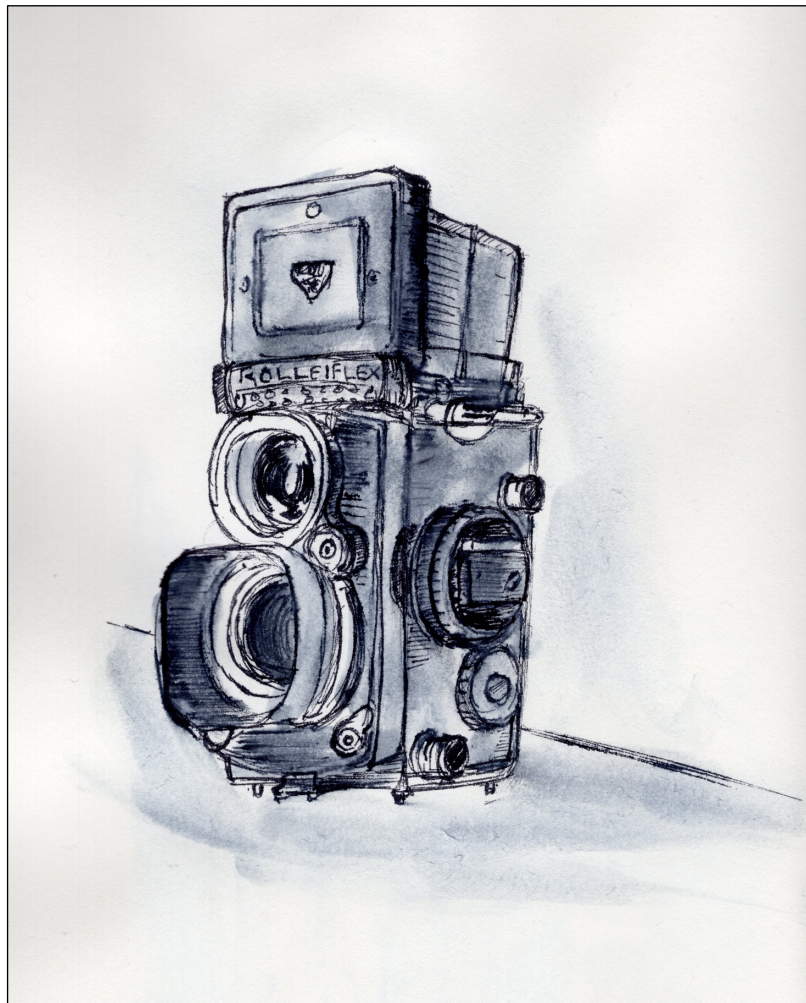
Through the window of the airport lounge, the clouds looked like cooling embers. Having found a discarded newspaper I attempted the crossword while I waited to board, no clues as to what any of the answers were, like the questions Jane had raised about Elana. Flicking to the arts section, a touring American photography exhibition currently in Adelaide caught my attention. It seemed familiar, then I remembered Elana had mentioned it, something she’d wanted to see.

Bored with the paper, I watched as recently disembarked passengers sought familiar faces in the awaiting crowd. A couple found each other and embraced. Their hug was like a heart contracting, and then relaxing, causing a tightness under my ribs. I used to think of Sam at such moments, the sight of affection bringing to mind where my own affections were sought, but it wasn’t her this time.

Home, tired from the flight and about to drop my bag, I remembered the camera. It was precariously wrapped in my clothing, having nothing else to protect its old shell for the trip. Unwrapped, I tried to mentally scan Elana's camera shelf for its shape amongst the assorted contours of lensed apparatus. There were the FED's, the Soviet copies of German Leica models made pre-WWII, sturdy devices with a weighted heft but a typical camera design. Then there were the Nikons, larger than the FED's and with more functions, but still nothing like the boxy apparatus. I unpacked the rest of my bag and found the sketchbook, thinking that drawing the camera would help my memory.

As I drew each line, the intricacies of the mechanism became clearer. There were various adjustable dials and what seemed like an extra lens, details that would probably make sense to Elana. I'd seen the cameras used before, photographers wearing them around their necks and looking into the top of them rather than through the back. A way of looking at the world from a different angle.

Seeking more information, a quick internet search for Rolleiflex cameras on eBay showed they went for hundreds of dollars. It caused a twinge of guilt for the pittance I'd paid. It could be a replica, I reasoned, worthless and good for only its aesthetic qualities.



Even if it was a fake, I hoped she wouldn't see the gift as some ploy, a premediated gesture to make amends for ignoring her message. Putting my anxieties aside, I sent a text, avoiding apologies until I could see her in person.

*-Hey, just got back from Melbourne. Are you free tomorrow? We could go to that American photography exhibition if you haven't been yet?'*

She'd told me about the exhibition a couple of weeks ago. A selection of work by American photographers from the 50's to early 70's. They were black and white photographs mainly, she'd said, some posed and some captured in the early beginnings of street photography. After sending the text, I had a realisation. It was the first time I'd invited Elana to do anything in a long time. She'd always been the one to instigate our outings, maybe out of concern or maybe it was more than that. When my phone vibrated on the table, its reverberation sounded full of promise and anxiety inducing at the same time.

*-I might be able to spare an hour or so tomorrow. 1pm?'*

The corners of my mouth lifted and my heart quickened, an unfamiliar physical response to her texts, but not unwelcome.

\*

The exhibition was being held at a gallery in the North side of the city, a reasonably sized space that specialised in small showcases for touring exhibitions and solo shows. I hadn't been to that side of the city in years having no reason to and no desire to. There were a handful of restaurants, mediocre eateries posing as fine dining, and a large pub on the main drag, The Lord and Castle. Once a rustic bar, it had fallen to the area's edging gentrification, its old fittings removed and replaced with a modern interior which now attracted the sons and daughters of affluent parentage. When the pub shut for the night on the weekend you could see these young people stumble out of its doors, full of unfounded drunken bravado and pushing each other about. One of the reasons I didn't care for the area, the other, to do with the past.

I'd been to an Indian restaurant across from the gallery with Sam a couple of years ago. Nothing special from memory, and priced to fit the area, the food no different than their cheaper counterparts with paper table cloths and sparse furnishings.

We'd had an argument, I remember, something that had been brewing since the entrees and erupted over dessert. The waiter had told us their card payment facilities were down so I took the opportunity to get some air and quickly walked across the street to an ATM. On reaching the other side two police officers approached me, explaining they had witnessed me jaywalking and I would need to pay a fine. I wanted to ask them if they were fucking serious, if they had nothing better to fucking do than fine fucking pedestrians, the nerves from the argument still lingering. But I didn't, managed to hold back and apologise profusely instead of yelling or feigning a foreign accent. They let me off with a warning, Sam laughing when I got back and explained what happened, defusing whatever we had been angry about. If I only knew then, I would have jaywalked into the night and never come back.

Elana was waiting outside the gallery when I got there, dressed in all black with her hair tied up. Nothing had changed from her usual look but she somehow seemed different. In a word, beautiful, as if I'd seen this for the first time. I couldn't tell if she had seen me for the dark sunglasses she wore until I got closer and she flashed me a quick smile.

'Hey, how are you?' I said, giving her a quick nervous hug.

'Okay, just been busy.' Elana pushed her sunglasses back and her eyes moved to my hair. 'Giving yourself late night haircuts?'

Elana had known me long enough to know that my haircuts were usually the results of stress induced intoxication. Vain attempts at cosmetic alteration to incur inner change.

'Oh, yeah, you know, still trying to fight boredom with no job to go to.'

Concern flickered across her face before contorting back into her standard countenance.

‘Ha. Shall we go and have a look? I’ve got a meeting with an editor this afternoon so I can’t stay long.’

There was a coolness to her but I guessed it was due to my actions before I left for Melbourne. We went in, silent as we made our way to the first room of the exhibition. It was the first time I’d felt an awkwardness around her, a nervousness with the prospect of having feelings for the person I’d seen only as a friend for a last two years. The silence continued as we paused in front each photo before moving on to the next. Diane Arbus’s work broke Elana’s silence first.

‘I think this is my favourite,’ she said, gesturing for me to look.

The photograph showed a skinny young boy in overalls, one strap off the shoulder while his arms stretched rigidly down. In one hand he held a toy grenade, the other, clawed and empty. His face suggested a comical menacing, no threat intended, a posture for the camera. I wondered if it would have had the same effect if he wasn’t holding a grenade. It was striking, an unusual shot that prompted many questions. Still silent, I considered telling Elana how I felt, not about the photo but of my possible epiphany. It was as if I was holding my own grenade and wondered whether to let it go.

‘It’s an amazing photo,’ I said, lacking the courage to say anymore.

‘Lee Friedlander’s work is great too,’ Elana said and pointed to another photo beside the one of the child.

*New Orleans, Louisiana, 1968*, stated the placard. It was a self-portrait in a way, showing a ghostly shadow of Friedlander reflected in the window of a storefront. A man in a suit stood behind him against a car, as if waiting for him or only curious of why he was taking photos of storefronts. After taking a photo of the image, a reminder to look for more of his work, the glass of my kitchen window and the tree melding with my reflection came back. The martyr, that I wasn’t so sure about anymore.

‘Hey, are you okay?’

Elana’s voice brought me back to the gallery.

‘Yeah, just thinking.’

I looked around the gallery and found we were now the only ones in the section.

‘Hey, I’m really sorry about the way I acted the other night,’ I said finally. ‘I shouldn’t have been mad with you.’

Elana pushed a loose hair behind her ear and looked at the Friedlander photograph I’d taken the picture of.

‘I know you’re sorry. You’re not a complete asshole. I’m not sure how I would have reacted either.’

‘The news about Sam gave me a bit of a shock and I felt angry towards you for not telling me at first. It should have only been Sam I was angry with. I’m really sorry about that.’

‘I’m sorry too. I should have told you earlier but like I said, I thought it was Sam’s place. I’ve been angry with her for a long time about it. I hated how it was affecting you.’

‘I never really thought of it like that.’

Elana started to say something then stopped and begun again. ‘How much leave do you have left?’

‘About two weeks I think.’

‘Are you free tomorrow?’

‘Yeah, no whirlwind trips interstate planned at this stage.’

‘Good. There’s a screening of *La Jetée* I wanted to go to and I think you’d like it if you haven’t seen it. It’s not very long but we could go for a coffee or something before.’

‘I remember you’ve told me about it before but I’ve never seen it. Sounds great. Also, I found something at a garage sale for you in Melbourne that I’ll bring too.’

‘You didn’t need to get me anything.’

‘It just made me think of you and...’

Someone coughed in the section of gallery behind us, cutting my words short. Elana checked her phone.

‘Hey, I’ve got to run,’ Elana said. She gave me a hug and turned her mouth towards my ear. ‘I really care about you, okay, and I’m glad you’re not mad with me anymore about the Sam thing.’

When Elana pulled back from the embrace, she still held onto my arms, giving them quick squeeze. I gave her a crooked smile in return before she turned to leave and wondered if she cared about me in the same way I was realising I cared about her.

I continued to walk through the gallery, unsure of what to do, not paying attention to anything anymore. I paused before each photograph to read their descriptions, the words not making sense, my mind elsewhere, until I’d seen all of them and my heart felt like it had returned to a normal pace. Feeling like a drink, I made my way to The Lord and Castle, only a short walk away and too early for loud drunken youths.

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The interior of the pub looked like it had been designed by someone who had never been to a bar before, lots of downlights, walls painted the industrial grey you find in modern homes and plastic barstools that looked as if they’d been purchased from IKEA. A few men in suits sat at a table near a plastic fern and ignored the folders in front of them, favouring a football match being shown on a large flat screen television. I stood at the bar next to large man who smelt faintly of cured meat while I waited to order. He nursed his pint, not looking up when I ordered a beer, not looking for anyone to interfere with his drinking.

The bar tender was amiable enough, his smile dropping as he turned around to get a glass and reflected in the bar fridge. When he faced me again, his smile returned, his masks flipped effortlessly like most customer service veterans. I smiled back, playing along with the game, my lips returning to a straight line when I left the bar.

Looking for somewhere to smoke, I followed the cryptic signage for the beer garden and ended up in the gaming room. There was only one man in there, dark bristles around his jaw and a football beanie slouched on his head. He didn’t look up as I moved past him, his eyes reflecting the spinning colours on the screen. As I found the exit to the beer garden, the man on the pokie machine started to violently cough, like an old dog trying to bark that had something stuck in its throat. A few days ago, I would have kept walking, but I felt a need to see if the man was okay, if I could help.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked.

The coughing dissipated into loud breathing and he continued to watch the coloured wheels spin.

‘Yehrr, just thirsty,’ he said, putting another dollar into the coin slot. I went to the bar and bought him a beer, brought it back and placed it down with a ten dollar note. He looked up at me then, his watery eyes curious at the offer.

‘You some kinda poofter or somethin?’ he asked.

‘No mate. Just thought you said you were thirsty.’

‘Er..., ta then.’

I left the man to go back to his machine and the cacophony of electronic sounds, like an arcade full of malfunctioning videogames. When I’d found a seat in the beer garden I wondered why I’d felt a need to get him a drink. It wasn’t to make myself feel better, I knew that. I’d recognised that someone had it worse, that I had nothing much to complain about in comparison, a concern for someone other than myself for a change.

The beer garden didn’t have any plants, not even plastic ones like they did inside. Instead, someone had painted a lurid mural of tropical floral arrangements on the surrounding Besser block wall. The bar as a whole was terrible, but it still reminded of the ways I missed my old job. I missed the conversations with older folk who just wanted

someone to talk to, people who wanted to be left alone and content with drinking a beer in silence, anyone who came in for a drink and shifted my perspective of the world I lived in for good or bad. Everything felt confusing. I hated the office job at Optimus if I was being honest with myself, Sam had lied to me for god knows how long about our relationship and I was possibly in love with my best friend. My chest hadn't given me any trouble since the hospital visit but my heart felt like it was doing strange things, suffering from the recent mental blow and pulsing with life for unknown possibilities.

I finished my beer as the first of the evening's young revellers started to flood into the beer garden. A good time to leave for the walk home, I decided. A walk to clear my head and consider what to do about Elana.

Having come no closer to what to do about my feelings for Elana on the walk home, I first thought to message Jane. But there was no point. I knew what she would have said. She'd made it clear in Melbourne. There were two options, not tell Elana how I was feeling, dishonest like Sam was with me, or tell her, and risk making our friendship awkward. There wasn't much choice. I would talk to her tomorrow, I decided, speak my mind no matter the result.

Not wanting to lose my resolve, I drew the Lee Friedlander photo I'd taken at the gallery to keep occupied. I tried to look at features of the image that might give context to the title as I added small details. The hat on the man in the background gave me trouble as I tried to define its shape, a lack of concentration distorting my perspective. Going over it multiple times, I made the same mistakes, made it worse before leaving it alone and moving on to other elements with the potential to get right.

The cut of the man's suit and the shape of the cars suggested it was taken during the late 60s to early 70s without being given the date, but I wouldn't have picked it for New Orleans, although I supposed that didn't matter. Perhaps the name was only a context for Friedlander, I thought, another connection to trigger memories of being in New Orleans in '68. As I drew his silhouette, I wondered if he'd seen something in the reflection that made him stop, like I had in my kitchen window, a connection he hadn't seen before.



\*

I woke the next morning to a text from Elana.

*-Meet at the Zodiac Café around 4pm?-*

The nervous sensation went through me again, the feeling I'd had the previous day before we'd met at the gallery. I needed to tell her how I was feeling and thought over a coffee might be best. Unsure about my confidence, I looked up an article on La Jetée to see if I could learn anything, find some details to talk with Elana about if I couldn't get the courage to tell her how I was feeling.

Elana had told me about the film some time ago, a film made from still images with a narrator. She'd told me it remained one of her favourite films since she'd first seen it, an example of the power of images to tell a story. A power she hoped to convey in her own photography. Having yet to see it, I knew it could have been any film and I would have said yes to going.

A still from the movie caught my eye in the article, a woman standing on what I assumed represented the jetty or the pier from the title. A black and white image, simple yet striking due to its composition or the use of light, I wasn't sure. I opened the sketchbook and began to draw, to see if there was anything else I could learn to distract me from the nerves that were still quickening my heart.

Beginning with the woman, her shape almost a silhouette against the light of the sky, I noticed she was looking out at something in the distance, as if waiting for something to happen. Sketching the background, the similarities to the composition of Lee Friedlander's photo became clear. A shadowy figure in the foreground, but a woman, shoulder length hair like Elana's and clear details of the scene behind.



\*

On the way to the café I passed the small cinema showing the film, the posters in its window promoting mainly arthouse and foreign language cinema. It rarely attracted large groups with another cinema close by that showed the big budget movies based on comic book super heroes or romantic comedies.

We'd last been there to see a Kurosawa film, *Stray Dog*, and been two of the only ten others in the cinema. We'd both enjoyed it from what I remember, Elana and I talking after about how it had used the Chekov's gun principle, a young detective in the film losing his pistol in the beginning and trying to recover it as it was used in various crimes to advance the plot. I tried to argue that not every element used in stories is necessary but she'd disagreed, telling me that she believed even if something didn't appear to have relevance in

the plot it might have some connection that the viewer or reader isn't aware of. But you can make connections to anything if you try hard enough, I argued back, just look at horoscopes.

When I entered the Zodiac café, I found Elana with her hair tied back, sitting at one of the window tables and browsing her phone.

'Hey,' I said, with a voice that felt like it wasn't my own.

'Hey there,' Elana said, looking up before she noticed the brown paper bag I held. 'Packed your own lunch?'

'No, it's for you.'

'You packed my lunch?'

'Come on. I think you might like it.' I placed it on the table in front of her and watched her eyes peer over into the bag.

'Wow,' Elana said, lifting the camera out of the bag. 'How did you get this? They're really expensive.'

'I'm not even sure if it works. I gave some guy at a garage sale ten bucks for it in Melbourne.'

'Ten bucks! Even if it doesn't work its worth more than that!'

'So you like it? I thought it might go with your collection.'

'I love it. Thanks. Very thoughtful of you. I've always wanted to try out one of these. Diane Arbus, from that photography exhibition we went to see used one.'

'I couldn't remember if you had one in your collection.'

'No, always wanted one though. Sit down and I'll order us some coffees.'

A dull murmur of conversation and the rattle of coffee cups on saucers floated around the café as I waited for Elana to return. I was nervous. Nothing to distract me. The revelations in Melbourne had made the atmosphere around us shift, I thought, my skin feeling like it had been arranged on my body in a different way.

'So, how was Melbourne? How's Jane? I didn't get a chance to ask yesterday,' Elana asked when she returned.

'Melbourne was good' I said, unsure of how much to elaborate. 'Went to the art gallery and spent the rest of the time catching up with Jane. She seems well and the chef job seems to be going okay.'

The coffees came and I asked her how her work was going, forgetting any details I'd learnt about the movie we were about to see. I tried to look into her eyes as she talked, seeing flecked brown spots around the green irises I hadn't noticed before, trying to see if there was any truth to Jane's insinuations and my own questions.

When our eyes met directly, I couldn't hold the gaze, and quickly looked into what was left of my coffee. I wanted to tell her about thinking I saw Sam, about what Jane had said, of how there might be some truth to it, but before going into the movie seemed like a bad idea.

There was only a handful of people lining up for tickets when we got to the cinema as expected, a myopic pensioner manning the ticket sales without urgency. The movie begun with various black and white still images of Orly Airport, grainy in texture, the way only old film cameras produced. Aeroplane sounds accompanied the first images while a man's voice provided a narrative in French. English subtitles were displayed at the bottom of the screen to my relief, although I wondered if the story could be followed through only the images.

*Nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments. Later on, they do claim remembrance when they show their scars, read the text.*

The images changed. A woman's face. The destruction of Paris. Experiments on people underground. The plot progressed and a man was sent into the past, to the image he retained; a woman looking into the distance on a pier and the image that I had sketched in the morning. Elana and I watched in silence as the man was sent back to the woman, meeting her at various places in the past until they were in a museum.

*Other images appear, merge, in that museum, which is perhaps that of his memory.*

The images of the man and woman together exploring the museum, perhaps of his memory, made my chest tighten. It reminded me of Elana and I visiting the various art galleries we had been to recently.

Both of the characters on screen never touched, their movements and interactions frozen, yet expressed in an unmistakable intimacy. I felt an urge to touch Elana's hand but remained as inert, still as the images projected, my hand feeling like it was burdened with an energy never to be used. Like the man, I tried to think of Elana, the Elana of my memory in movement, but found I couldn't. There were images though, moments in time, pictures of her face looking elsewhere with a smile, unsure if it was for me and wanting it to be. I'd never really thought about it before, that my memories were images with a narrative built around it, a context of my own making. The art and views I had drawn were now memories in the sketchbook, I realised, a personal museum.

Near the film's end, the man found himself back at Orly Airport, returned to the woman and his childhood memory where he is killed before he can reach her, finding that time had not been altered, that time cannot be escaped.

\*

It was nearly evening outside the cinema as Elana and I adjusted our eyes to the natural light.

'What did you think?' Elana asked.

'I still can't believe it was made of only photos.'

'Except for when the woman opens her eyes.'

'True.'

I tried to avoid looking at Elana directly, feeling my thoughts would be given away through my eyes, the thoughts other than the movie.

'You look like you want to say something. Are you okay?'

'Yeah. I'm okay, just thinking about...the movie.'

Elana squinted at the sky above us as the clouds broke for the last of the day's light then looked at me again.

'Do you feel like going for a drive? Maybe we could go to the beach and walk down to the pier. I haven't done that in years and the movie made me think of it.'

\*

Elana parked the car and we headed towards the pier, its wooden structure stretching out into the dark water. The air was salty, like the taste of tears, the aroma of the sea increasing in intensity when the wind picked up. Elana stopped to adjust her hair, letting it fall loose before stopping and turning to look at me.

‘So, what’s up? Did something happen in Melbourne? The skin between your eyebrows is doing that scrunched up thing it does when your concerned about something.’

‘Well, kind of.’

I was reluctant to bring up Sam again but I wanted Elana to know everything, how things felt different, especially my feelings towards her. I wanted to tell her new perspectives had been given to me through Jane that I’d been unable to see.

‘I’m an idiot,’ I began, hoping to emphasise the point of what I would go on to explain. I told her about how I thought I had seen Sam in the bar, explaining everything I was feeling and thinking, that the experience had given me the knowledge that I could leave that part of my life behind, even though it wasn’t Sam. I told her about the sketchbook, how the pictures I had been drawing had unlocked memories I was avoiding in some of them and ideas about things I had never thought about in others, like missing details being filled in. Elana listened as I talked and we made our way to the esplanade, her face blank while she processed what I was saying.

‘I feel different,’ I said finally, ‘like new information has been slotted in between old memories.’

We stood at the edge of the pier, our feet on the sandy concrete where it met the wooden planks, and looked out to sea.

‘So you don’t have feelings for Sam anymore?’ Elana asked.

‘To be honest, no. I thought about this after I thought I saw her. I understand why you didn’t tell me about her and the other guy and I’m still sorry I was angry with you about it. Coming back from Melbourne I’ve been thinking of you mainly, how important you are to me and how I feel like I’ve overlooked that for some time.’

Elana turned to look me in the eyes. I didn’t turn away this time. She opened her mouth slightly, as if to say something, then closed it again and put her arms around me instead, resting her chin on my shoulder. I felt like I was holding someone else, someone I’d returned for after a long trip, my heart beating in my ears.

‘Let’s go for a walk down the pier,’ Elana said, and gently broke away from me with a weak smile. She walked along the old planks and paused when she realised I hadn’t moved. I felt unable to walk, trying to find the words I needed to say as I watched the wind move through her hair like a sigh. The evening light made her form into a shadow against the sunset with its fading reds tinging the clouds. She was the image I had drawn from La Jetée, the woman with the same length hair, the woman I was trying to find.

‘What are you stopping for?’

‘I think I need to tell you something else. Elana, I feel...’

‘Wait, before you say anything, and I think I know what you are going to say. I also need to tell you something. I’ve liked you for a long time, even when you were with Sam and I think you know this. The problem was that you never seemed to get over Sam. I wanted to tell you a thousand times about her and that other guy but I didn’t, not only because I thought it was Sam’s place, but because I thought I would be doing it for my benefit, to make you get over it and see that I was there for you. I’m not sure how I feel now. I’ve been waiting for things to change for a long time and I still have feelings for you. I really do, but I’m not sure if us being together would make sense after everything that’s happened. You were so distant for so long and I think you need more time to figure things out before you can be with someone. I’m sorry.’

I felt like I had been shot. My brain didn’t know what to do with all of this new information. The nurse’s words from the hospital echoed back to me, “He went into shock and his heart stopped working”. I saw the final image of La Jetée, the man, arms stretched

back, his death on the pier when he finally made it back to the woman he loved. Elana moved closer and gave me a hug, seeing that I couldn't find any words to respond with. I hugged her back and looked out into the distance, wondering if this was what the woman I had drawn from the film had been thinking, waiting to explain something that wasn't meant to be as the past cannot be altered.

\*

The sketchbook was still open to the image I had drawn when I got home, the image of the woman who looked like Elana. Confused with emotion, I used my laptop to search for the picture of the man being shot from *La Jetée*, the one I couldn't get out of my head, a visual subject to project my feelings. I drew, not knowing what to think, moved my pen on the blank page in the shape of the man's curled fingers and down his outstretched arm to the arched body. St Sebastian following me again, the man with arms stretched back in the same pose as the Tacca statue, the man on the gurney at the hospital in his leather jacket whose heart stopped working. It didn't surprise me anymore.



Nothing had gone to plan on the pier just like the movie, not that I had a plan, more of an idea, something to follow that I cared about. I couldn't blame Elana, I'd been lost in my own world, feeling sorry for myself about Sam for so long. The martyr complex, as she'd said. Elana had told me she had feelings for me, still did, which should be enough, to know that she cared about me as I cared about her. It was hard to swallow but my heartbeat told me it was still working, keeping the rhythm needed to continue on.

I needed find out how to be the person I want to be, to take time to figure things out, as she'd said, but I felt like I couldn't wait. I looked at the date in the corner of the laptop screen. Two weeks left until I was due back at the office job I hated, the one I'd taken because I thought it would allow me to build a life with Sam. It represented a past that I no longer was a part of.

I opened a blank email and began to type a letter to my work, to apologise and say that I would be resigning and the sending of this signified the beginning of my two weeks' notice. Saving the email as a draft, I called Jane.

'Hey, do you know if your friend George is still looking for someone to help run his bar? I think you were right. I need a change.'

The next day I stood at the entrance to George's bar, a black wooden door framed by red terracotta brick. It was down an alley off the main drag in the city with little foot traffic and I wondered if I'd come to the right place. Old stonework skirted the base of the building where it met the sidewalk, suggesting it had been there a long time. I looked up for a number but saw only stain glass windows dotted along the second floor of the brick façade, gothic influence in their framing.

Before pushing the door, I hesitated, decided if it didn't open, I would turn around and go home. George had told me he would leave the door unlocked, that he'd be working on the bar upstairs in order to open in the next couple of weeks. He'd seemed nice over the phone and unsurprised at my call, which I assumed was due to Jane. The door swung open as I pushed, revealing a staircase that presumably led up to the second floor as George had indicated.

'George?' I said, when I'd reached top of the staircase and found another closed door. This one had a frosted glass pane like the offices in detective movies. There was a smell of paint and freshly cut wood so I assumed I had the right place. The sound of a tools being placed into a box of other tools clanked behind the door before a shadow appeared at the glass. When it opened, a slim man with flecks of grey stubble around his jaw stood in the doorway. He wiped his hand on the faded overalls covered with dust and Pollockesque patterns of paint, then held it out to me with a smile.

'Hello, you must be Jane's friend?'

He ushered me inside to where the room opened out, the interior walls the same as the brickwork from outside.

'Take a seat,' he said, gesturing to the wooden bar with a few stools and an antique West End Breweries mirror on the other side of it.

'Sorry if you had trouble finding the place,' George said. 'The building used to be fairly prominent but the city has grown up and around it like most of these old heritage buildings.'

'No, you gave good directions over the phone. Great mirror by the way. Where did you get that?'

'An old friend who'd had a bar in the hills. The fires got to it last summer and it was the only thing left worth keeping. Just reminded him of what he lost though, so he gave it to me when he heard I was opening up this place.'

The bottom edges of the mirror were blackened and unreflective, a story for customers, I thought, a story his friend would rather forget. Around the bar there was no stainless steel or garish decoration, only furnishings that looked to be made by hand and worn from use. The interior brick walls seemed as though they had been recently revealed, a dusty residue left behind on the surface. There were boxes of framed paintings and prints of all sizes around the edges of the room, presumably waiting to be hung upon the bare brick when they were clean.

George went to one of the fridges behind the bar and took out two bottles of beer then joined me on a stool.

'This place looks amazing', I said. 'What was it before?'

'The building was made about a hundred years ago for a bible society, hence the gothic architecture and stain glass windows. When we got it, it was an old law firm, which we gutted. Took out the awful green carpet and the wood panelling. There was a giant old

bookshelf they left behind too and we made it into the bar. Wanted to keep some of the old feel, you know? Not like those refurbished bars with no character.'

'I completely understand that. Is it just you running the place?'

'Did Jane not tell you about Chris?'

'No, she just told me you were looking for someone to work the bar and maybe help manage.'

'I see. Well, I should explain things. I bought this bar with Chris, an old friend, but... he died recently.'

'I'm sorry, Jane never said anything.'

'It's okay. I only told her I was looking to hire someone if she knew of anyone good. I wasn't sure if I was still going to open the place when he passed away but he really wanted this to happen, believed in the bar working, so I thought I should keep going. I think it's what he would have wanted.'

George looked into the mirror across from us then down at his beer.

'Sorry, I don't even know you and I've just given you a lot to take in. Let me show you around the bar.'

George showed me the various areas where shelves would be installed and the set up he'd planned so far. We came back out into the bar and stood near the boxes lined up against the wall.

'Are these all yours?' I asked, pointing at the boxes full of paintings and prints.

'Those were all Chris's. He always talked about putting some of his collection up in the bar and after he died his family gave most of them to me. He'd picked them all by hand, some of them with me, and could tell you about each one. A little memory associated with each of them.'

I looked into a box near my feet and saw a print with a detailed section of a tree branch, the segment knotty and twisted like an old hand.

'What kind of art did he collect?' I asked.

'Chris collected all sorts. Diagrams of anatomy, prints of flora and fauna, oil paintings, anything that struck a chord with him really. Still don't know where I'm going to hang them all yet.'

I looked at the other boxes around it, curious of what other images were within.

'So, Jane said you've managed a few bars before and has nothing but good things to say about you. I've always hated resumes so why don't you tell me about the jobs you've had and what kind of work you were doing.'

We sat back down at the bar and I told George of my past experience while we drank another beer, reminiscing about old bars around town that had closed down or been gentrified for the espresso martini and craft beer trend.

'Well,' George said, 'I plan to open the place in a couple of weeks and I've had a few people apply for the position I'm offering but I think I'm going to try you out. What do you say? I need a good bar manager that I can work with and you seem to have the same ideas about how a bar should be.'

'That would be fantastic. I've still got a couple of weeks paid leave from the office job I'm quitting so that works well.'

'Does that mean you're free for the next couple of weeks?'

'Yeah, no plans.'

'Why don't you come in and help me set up the rest of the bar then. I still need to hang all those artworks and do a few small jobs around the place. It would help a lot having a second pair of hands. I'll pay you for it obviously. We can get to know each other a bit

better that way and I can run you through all the stock as we go. I might be sick of you after two weeks, ha, ha.’ George laughed from the bottom of his stomach, putting me at ease as I watched his shoulders rise and fall.

I agreed to come in the next day and sent off my resignation to my boss at Optimus that night. Elana, not knowing about my inquiry for the job, was surprised but enthusiastic when I messaged to tell her. Still in shock from the pre-empted rejection on the pier, I wanted to keep in contact, even if I couldn’t stop thinking about how things might have been different.

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I spent the next few days helping George set up the bar, fitting shelves and adding the final touches. In the afternoons we went through Chris’s paintings and prints, deciding which ones to use and where they would look best after the mornings of doing odd jobs. It felt strange to be going through Chris’s art collection, getting to know the man through what he found aesthetically pleasing or at least interesting in some way.

A few days before the opening, after we’d been through most of the artwork, I came across a diagram of an anatomical heart in one of the last boxes.

‘Ah,’ George said, looking at the print I held. ‘That was one of Chris’s favourites, one of the last ones he bought. We found it for a song in an old second-hand shop down south.’

‘I like it too. Maybe we should put it somewhere separate to the rest so it stands out. What about above the old West End mirror behind the bar?’

We got the ladder and I stood near the top, holding the print while George called out directions until it was centred and level. When George was happy with its position and I’d nailed it in place, I came back behind the bar and we sat down with a couple of beers.

‘Looks good,’ George said, clinking his bottle against mine.

‘Yeah, I think it would have been lost amongst the other paintings if we hung it down here.’

‘You’re right. I think Chris would have been happy with it.’

‘What happened to Chris if you don’t mind me asking?’

George looked away from me and into the mirror’s blackened edges, as if trying to find a place to start.

‘It was a car accident, I guess. He was riding his motorbike home after helping me in the bar one night and, from what I was told, came across an overturned car in the middle of the road. The weather was terrible that night, the streets wet like rivers and a heavy storm that didn’t let up. He stopped and called an ambulance when he saw the accident then tried to see if he could help anyone in the flipped car. A young boy and his mother were still inside and he managed to get the kid out, carried him to the side of the road, but when he went back to help the mother, a car came too quickly around the bend and didn’t see Chris crouched by the overturned car. The police said the driver would have swerved to miss the car but hit Chris due to low visibility in the storm. This all happened about a month ago’

‘Oh god. I think I remember that night’

The emergency ward. The night of the bad storms. Streets like rivers, as George said.

‘Well, the ambulance he called came shortly after and the paramedics were able to save the mother and the young boy. They took Chris too, but his injuries were too serious and he went into shock. He’d had a bad heart and didn’t make it through the surgery.’

‘I’m so sorry to hear that.’ I went back to that night in the emergency ward in my head. The man on the gurney in the motorbike jacket, twisted and bloody. The nurse telling me that his heart stopped working.

‘He was able to save that mother and the child, sacrificed himself in a way, so I keep reminding myself of that. He didn’t die for nothing.’

George finished the last of his beer and looked at me.

‘Are you okay? You look a little pale?’

‘Yeah. I’m just sorry about your friend.’

‘It’s okay, I keep reminding myself I can’t change the past but I can try to do something he would have liked.’

I couldn’t believe Chris had been the man I’d seen in the emergency ward. It was too strange, too surreal.

‘He would have gotten along well with you,’ George said, after a pause. ‘And I think he would have wanted me to offer you the job.’

‘I, uh...yeah. I really appreciate it.’

\*

Elana and I kept in contact up to the opening night of the bar with no mention of our talk on the pier. Brief messages, updates of our respective lives that felt like they were always on the cusp of saying more. The connections to Chris were on my mind too. The man who had thought only about saving the mother and child and not about his own safety. I should have thought about Elana’s feelings, not thought only of myself, expecting some reciprocated response, some happy ending. She was honest with me though, had told me she cared about me in the same way I cared about her. I wasn’t sure if that made things any easier.

Working on the bar with George occupied my thoughts in the day, but the nights were difficult. I wanted to see Elana, but kept stopping myself from sending offers to meet up, thinking that we needed the space. When I’d invited her to the opening she’d told me she couldn’t make it but would drop past at some stage, perhaps having the same thoughts.

\*

On the opening night George had only wanted a few people, a simple gathering of friends including the ones who knew Chris and anyone I’d wanted to come. Besides Elana, my father was the only other person I’d invited. He seemed pleased and not at all surprised that I’d quit my other job, just as Elana had.

‘It’s good to see you smile for a change,’ he told me at the bar as I served him a beer. ‘I was wondering when you were going to quit that office job.’

‘I thought you were happy that I was working there.’

‘Well, I could see you didn’t like it though. Your mother and I never cared what job you did as long as you were happy with what you were doing.’

George came up to the bar, flushed with alcohol and wearing a grey sportscoat for the occasion. I introduced him to my father and they talked like they known each other for years while I continued to serve, looking up whenever someone new came through the door, hoping Elana had changed her mind.

When the night was over I told George I would be happy to clean up and close down the bar. He nodded appreciatively, looking a little tipsy, and gave me an unexpected drunken hug.

‘I’m really glad you’re here,’ George said, patting my back. ‘Thanks for all your your help. I think you’re going to work out well.’

‘Thanks boss,’ I said with a smile.

‘Jesus, don’t call me that.’

‘Want me to call you a taxi instead?’

‘Nah, I’ll find one. Bit of fresh air will do me good.’

I watched him saunter out the door and it wasn’t until arranging the stools that I noticed he’d forgotten his jacket. As I hung it behind the bar, I wished we could have had a drink together when we’d shut like we planned. Probably it was hard for him to celebrate the opening of the bar without Chris. I would have been drinking a lot too, I thought.

Despite working together those first two weeks, I didn’t tell him about seeing Chris in the emergency room. I didn’t want to bring up his friend’s death again, but I thought about it often. It would have been hard to explain that I’d seen his friend not only just before he died but in the various associations within my own life. Chris’s death in one way was what lead me to this job, back to something I was passionate about. He’d sacrificed himself to save the lives of people he didn’t know and inadvertently given me a new life too, a stranger who’d needed saving from himself.

When I’d finished cleaning, I sat down at the bar with a beer and looked up at the print above the mirror. I didn’t need to sketch it to see the connections, to draw the shape that represented the link between Chis and I, but I felt I needed to. Even though I hadn’t drawn anything since seeing Elana two weeks ago, I still brought the sketchbook with me everywhere, like my own portable gallery of memories.

As I drew, I felt hope. Elana was still in my life. I didn’t feel wronged anymore, no martyrdom complex Elana had rightly accused me of. Chris was the martyr if anyone, sacrificing himself for others. No longer was he the St Sebastian whom I’d connected him to. He was closer to the saint of his namesake, St. Christopher, the one my mother had carried with her. The saint of travellers who guided people through their journeys. I dipped my finger in my beer and applied to the page, a small libation for my dead creator, when I heard movement on the stairs. George, I thought, probably coming back for his jacket and unable to find a taxi. The door creaked open.

‘Couldn’t find a taxi? How about a drink with me?’ I said, not looking up as I finished the last touches on the sketch.

‘A drink with you sounds lovely,’ said Elana from the doorway.

