

Muse

The studio **must** not become warmer than sixty degrees. It will spoil the paintings.

You know this. That doesn't make it any less cold. There is silk around your body—unbelievably soft. Folded here, tucked there. Little else. There are lights. Bright lights—bubbling and flickering through the corners of the room. They catch you in a methodical half-darkness. And then there is him. His worn smock. His dark slacks.

He touches the hair at your crown.

“Raw umber,” he whispers, soft, slow. Trailing to the arch of your brow. “Burnt sienna.”

Down to your cheek.

His fingers are waxen with leftover oil—they stick, ever so slightly, to your skin.

Here he pauses. Deliberates.

“Skin is a tricky thing,” he muses. Like you understand. “So easy to unbalance the color.”

“Too red—” His touch at your lips. “Too blue—” His eyes to yours. “Too yellow.”

He hums to himself. “But I'd like to think I've learned your skin.”

And, oh, how he has. It peels away from your body so easily—a layer like half-dried paint, a wet, clinging scrap. Much too red, you think. Much too red.

The room might as well be covered in mirrors. For upon every wall is your own image—blocks of pearl and rose, deep purples for the shadows. In some you are smiling. In most—you are undressed. In all—you are glowing. Joyful. Happy.

You do not remember meeting him. Only knowing him.

Him, with his dark, clever eyes and pale fingers. Pianist's fingers, you used to call them. He'd smile. Painter's fingers, he would say in return.

He took you to coffee and drew your face in the steam. He enraptured you.

It is really something—to be loved by an artist.

He never called you beautiful. He didn't have to. He called you *fascinating*. The most captivating form he'd ever seen. So full of interesting angles. Exquisite. A muse. *His* muse. It makes one feel a certain kind of special, to be dissected by a pair of eyes as deep and as black as the night sky and have all of your pieces be called *art*.

He would robe you in fabric like shadow made solid. He would disappear behind slats of pale wood, cream canvas, emerging as if for a gasp of air to take you in.

How privileged were you, to be the object of such affection. How **very** special.

He gave words to something that before had only been known, not understood. He became your looking glass; you could not see without him near. He took your hand when you turned your gaze to the sky and told you of cerulean, of cobalt. Of the way white dulls as much as it lightens. How one ought never to paint with black from the tube.

And he spoke. Often. As he worked, as you waited. A burbling stream of information, his process laid out in the clear melody of his voice. So vivid that, on some days, you were almost convinced you could take the canvas from him—take the reins—and create something of your own. He brought everything into color. To life. You have hardly ever seen him make a mistake.

Hardly. But—there was the once.

You, cloth slung crimson over your shoulder. Carefully arranged. Poised. Posed.

Him, slender brush in hand.

Eventually the aching would stop, you knew, the soreness of remaining still for hours on end. It was worth it, seeing the bright glint in his eyes. The pride.

He had become motionless. Almost like he, too, was posing. That was, perhaps, the first sign. The stillness. The silence. His hand hovered, pale flesh muddied, splattered.

Then that terrible *crack*.

He didn't speak. You didn't flinch. But the canvas crumpled, tore, fell to the floor like a corpse. The air was thick with the sharp, heady fumes of the oil. You caught that smell on you often, hanging in a thick cloud like the smoke off a cigarette.

He knelt to gather the pieces. Head bowed. "Sometimes I worry you are not real." It was in a rush. Between the teeth. You shifted. The burning in your arms had grown molten.

"Of course I am."

He scrubbed his hair back from his face. A smudge of pale paint glistened like tears beneath his eye. "Not yet."

And now, you suppose. Now never.

You didn't mean to die. People rarely do.

You wear the thorns of a rosebush. They spiral in black curls, wreaths of leaves lush to the skin. You are distantly surprised that you do not bleed.

Funny thing about oil paint; it never really dries. Sometimes you think blood doesn't either. They simply seal over, grow thick and permanent and forever tacky. But there *is* a point where the both of them cease to stain everything they touch.

And the roses—the perfume of them has always clung to you. He always did love roses. It will hide the underlying rot well.

You cannot cry. You do not want to. Tears will ruin the painting; the salt content is too high.

They say one returns to their original hue, then. In death the closest thing to the beginning of life. First coated in red; scrubbed clean. Your skin glistens like you had just been born. You do worry, though, about the stiffness.

He **never** painted your eyes.

Snapshots of skin; the crease of an elbow, the sienna freckle above your hip bone. Your collarbones, the muscles of your neck. The rosy cupid's bow. Again and again and again. He has painted your lips more times than he has kissed them. Your head, tilted away from the viewer, deep umber curtain of hair before your features. It would turn almost gold, the way he rendered you.

But **never** your eyes.

"I could **never** capture them," he'd laugh. That pale flash of teeth. "I don't believe there is a color that exists that could match your eyes."

They float now in a jar beside his easel.

But marbles—dark, black and inky and smooth—

He can paint marbles.

And he does. Quiet, in the way he's **never** painted **anything**. Smooth. Taking black paint straight from the tube.

The air is frigid, dry, cracked as chapped lips. Your lips are flecked with red. He will paint those too. Alizarin crimson and permanent rose.

"You won't be real," he whispers. And it is deafening. "Until I can perfect you."

The man steps back. Hides the stitches behind thick swaths of pale gossamer. Draws the lids down over black marble eyes. Wipes red from his chin. The organs will have to be moved, he thinks. First thing tomorrow morning.

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