

The Crimson Smile

“Yep, honey, I’ve shown them all of it, and they are telling me the same thing, ‘It’s all very good, but not great,’ okay?” Margaret pauses for a moment, “You still there honey?”

I clear my throat and take a deep breath.

“Yeah, I’m still here,” I thread the phone line through my fingers, “Are you sure they saw the one of the Empire State Building done in all graphite? I’ve gotten all kinds of compliments-”

“Honey, I’m sure. They saw every single one of them,” she tells me, her Brooklyn accent thick.

I plead, “Even the-”

“Even the,” she finishes with a soothing tone.

I hate how sympathetic she sounds. The blatant rejection hurts less.

“Okay, well, thanks again for all your help,” I say, needing this conversation to end.

“No problem, sweetheart. Now you take the day for you, okay?”

I can’t hear any more of this.

“Definitely. Uhh ... I gotta go Margaret, I’ll talk to you later?” I ask before swiftly hanging up, not bothering to wait for her response. I can’t take anymore of her neverending, overflowing kindness. It’s suffocating.

I free fall backwards to collapse onto my bed, clothes and hangers crinkling below my weight. As I lay face up in bed I recall my sister's words from the other day: “Maybe try drawing something you never have before. Something new. Maybe a new medium, a new subject. Not just the same cityscapes you always do. I don’t know, just a thought.”

I stretch out my limbs and yawn.

Maybe a new medium, a new subject.

A new medium. A new subject. It is true that I like to stick to my charcoal and graphite and cityscapes, but that is what I know. What I'm good at. Plus, it's taken me years to perfect what I do now, surely it would take me just as long, if not longer, to start fresh. Thinking about the time that would take makes my head spin.

Time!

I shoot up from off my bed and glance hurriedly at the clock above my closet door. It reads 7:55 A.M. I'm supposed to meet with Jason for breakfast in five minutes! There is no way I'm going to be able to get all the way to Forest Hills from my apartment in Whitestone in time. I can't call him to tell him I'll be late; he's surely already left his apartment. He'll just think I've bailed on him and leave before I can make it.

Well, I'll just have to get there in time.

I grab my coat and purse from off the back of my mirror, glancing briefly at myself in it as I pass, and rush out the door.

I am able to catch a cab as soon as I'm out of my apartment complex. After I get in I tell the driver I'm in a hurry and she speeds away, annoyance at my not quite request plain on her face.

Once I arrive at the bakery I hand the cab driver two twentys, hoping to clear up any hard feelings. Her fingers brush mine as she accepts the cash, making me jerk back my hand and hold in a retch. She glances at me, a question seemingly on her lips, before telling me to get out because she has, 'places to be.'

As soon as I obey her request, I turn to look through the bakery window. Jason sits at a table for two, waving frantically at me through the glass.

A new subject.

I reciprocate his wave, maybe not with as much vigor, and smile to myself as I walk towards the door.

I've been seeing Jason for about three weeks now and I *think* I like him. I know I like his big dorky smile. I mean, don't get me wrong, he's a bit of a weirdo, but so is everyone in this city.

"Tiff! Come sit!" I cringe at the nickname but still take the seat he's holding out for me.

"Hey Jason, look, I'm so sorry I'm late. I was caught up with a call for work and completely lost track of-"

"Don't even worry about it Tiff," he grabs for my hand as he takes his own seat, but I pull away smoothly, running my fingers through my hair. He barely notices the evasion and continues, "I completely understand. Just last week I was having the same kind of day. We all have those moments that time just feels so, so, so..."

His voice fades off, his face in deep contemplation over which word to finish his sentence.

"Variable?" I provide, trying to help him out.

He offers that big smile and says, "Exactly."

After our coffee and muffins have come and gone, goodbyes have been said, and I've hailed a cab, Jason says to me, "Hey, why don't I stop by yours for a bit."

I can't seem to find even a semblance of a question in his tone. I laugh nervously at his forwardness and am about to say "maybe next time," when his mouth breaks into a large beam.

The smile makes me fold.

I nod my head slowly, "Sure, I guess I can show you around."

His already wide grin gets somehow wider.

"Awesome."

He starts to offer his hand to help me into the cab, and after I stare at it for a while, a look of remembrance crosses his face, “Oops, sorry. I forgot,” he says jubilantly, awkwardly lowering his hand.

He piles into the cab after I do and tries to sit next to me. I quickly place my purse in the middle seat, forcing him to sit on the far right side.

So much for remembering.

“So, how’s your art coming along?” he asks once the cab starts to trace its familiar path back to my place.

Although we had already discussed the topic at the bakery, I give him the benefit of the doubt and start to fill him in once again.

“Well, I’m still having a bit of a hard time finding a *steady* ‘gig,’ I guess you could say, but everything’s okay for the most part,” I lie. Everything is definitely not *okay*, but I’m not about to tell Jason that.

“That’s just great. I’m glad that’s working out for you,” he replies, that big grin still dominating half his face.

A new subject.

About fifteen minutes, four topic changes, seven almost touches, and three staircases later we arrive at my apartment door.

Before I open it, though, I am reminded of how out of sorts my apartment is.

“Look, Jason, I wasn’t expecting any company, so it’s a little messy in there,” I tell him, still facing my door.

He replies encouragingly, “Oh, it’s alright. I’m sure my place is about ten times worse.”

And so, with that, I open the door.

He walks in after me, with, you guessed it, a smile brightening the dim space.

“I can make us something to eat or drink if you’d like,” I suggest, hoping that I make a good hostess.

“Yeah, that’d be great, thanks,” he responds, moving towards the pictures on my wall.

I turn from him and head into the kitchen. I think I have the ingredients to make a charcuterie board of sorts, I’ll just have to cut up some cucumbers and cheese. I grab some crackers from my pantry and some cheese, salami, tomatoes, and cucumbers from my fridge. As I am about to grab my cutting knife from its stand I feel sweaty hands on my waist.

My breathing immediately gets faster and I feel like I’m about to pass out. I ask Jason to take his hands off me, or at least I think I do. I can barely *think*. I try to take deep, slow breaths, to calm down, but I can’t. All I can think of is hands, skin, all over me. This isn’t the first time something like this has happened, but it’s the first time since *him*. Since I’ve become like this. His breath is warm on my neck as I reach for the cutting knife, take it out of its stand, and slash out behind me.

The first two things I realize when I can breathe again are that there is a dead man in my kitchen, and that I killed him.

But at least his hands are off me.

For a while, I just stand in front of my sink, washing my hands, scrubbing them, though they are perfectly clean, thinking of what to do next. So many different thoughts cross my mind.

There is a dead man in my kitchen.

I killed him.

He was touching me.

I told him to stop.

He knew I wanted him to stop.

He deserved this.

And, lastly, a low whisper growing louder and louder.

A new subject.

After my hands have dried, I reach into the cabinet nearest me and grab a pair of gloves. I slip them on as I walk to Jason's now lifeless figure.

Even in death he smiles. But this is not a smile I am used to. It is a smile of power. A smile of success and of control. It frightens me.

He deserved this.

My eyes slip down from his face and fall onto his neck, still leaking blood from the deep incision. The red liquid looks so different than how the movies portray it. It is so much darker, thicker. Like paint.

A new medium.

I look back up at his smiling face.

A new subject.

Without giving it another thought, I run across the room to grab a blank canvas and brush, almost tripping on Jason's stiff leg in the process.

I killed him.

But that thought is only a faint echo now.

He deserved this.

A new subject.

A new medium.

Once I get comfortably situated on the ground next to Jason, once I adjust his leer into the sweet smile I know, once I dip my brush into the slit in his neck, still flowing blood, do I stop and look at him. *Really* look at him, this time with an artists' eye. Only then do I lift the bloodied brush to the canvas and begin.