The Very Model

 “Draw me!”

This girl was too beautiful for me to draw. I wasn’t sure how to get out of it, so I put her off for the time being by ordering her another drink. I had hidden myself in the back corner room. Four booths were lined up against the back wall and raised on a platform, offering a rather insightful view of the townie bar I had claimed as my new spot. The waist high divider between this secluded space and the main barroom usually protected me from the throngs of dipshit co-eds. Liv hadn’t let my isolationist tendencies, sketchpad, or bed head stop her. She marched right up the steps of the platform and made a beeline to my table.
“Whatcha working on?”

 I turned my pad around to let her see my recent thumbnails for my logo class. Nothing fascinating, really, but she wasn’t deterred.

 “What class is that for?”

Our conversation ebbed and flowed, but she didn’t seem bored or unimpressed. She was open and easy to talk to; we covered all manner of topics. She told me about the lame magician at her thirteenth birthday party and we debated about the best character on *The West Wing*. We discovered that we were both aspiring guitar players and products of a single parent household. While she grew up in a small town in Maryland and helped her dad with his fishing business, I had moved around the world every few years with my military father. The bar shut down around us as drunken idiots got into cabs and the lights blinked for last call. Of course, I didn’t get any more work done that evening, but I felt so much more accomplished than I had ever before. Our first year together, we had been nearly inseparable.

My lower back was starting to scream as I hunched over the second-hand drawing table in my studio space, working all morning on her birthday present. It had been a long time since she had visited me here. When we first started dating, she would swing by with coffee and a kiss and try to distract me while I worked. Things had been strained for a while now, though, and I didn’t expect her to happen upon my surprise until I was ready to reveal it. In fact, I hoped my birthday plan would help to reignite the spark that had seemingly fizzled between us.

 I had already tossed at least five different concepts. First, I tried to draw her in charcoal, a silhouette piece that showed off her sexy curves and flowing hair. It didn’t do her justice. My next attempt was one that showed her profile using negative space. I was trying to be more romantic lately and intended to convey that her presence in my life so perfectly stopped all the holes that had been bored through my insides. I dismissed it after I realized that she was so much more to me than filler. Also, the concept didn’t allow me to express the beautiful details that I so loved about her, her freckles, her widow’s peak of auburn hair, her dimples. Even now, in our comfortable, casual life together, living together in our little apartment, exposed to all the grossly intimate details of sharing a bathroom and a bed, there were moments that I was still stunned by how strikingly beautiful she was. I was starting to get the feeling that she was becoming less enamored with me. She had asked me on that first night to draw her and two years later, I still hadn’t managed her request. Mainly, it was because I didn’t know how. I was good, but not good enough for her. But now more than ever, she needed to see herself as I saw her, and I was determined to show her.

 I glanced up at the hard thud of the slamming door. Our subject trod into the sculpture studio without a word and disappeared immediately into the attached unisex bathroom to undress. I tucked away my attempts to mimic Liv’s allure and moved to the center of the room with my sculpting tools. When the model emerged, barefoot and topless, she gripped a satin sheet wrapped loosely around her hips. It dragged behind her on the cement floor. She looked haggard as she brushed plaster dust from her eyes. I imagined she would rather be safely secluded between her own sheets than on display in this chilly studio for a handful of sculpture monkeys. She must have felt scrutinized in the classroom of mostly boys, each of us waiting at clumsily arranged steel work tables that formed a circle around her, stool in the center of the room, like a medical science experiment on display. The edges of the room were divided into individual cubicles, our work areas, desks littered with Red Bull cans and works in progress and walls pinned with sketches and other source material. Mine was more organized. The pegboard displayed my references of Liv, a tattoo I was vetting, and some Bernini sculptures I admired. It was one of the only places I felt really comfortably myself.

The professor’s voice echoed against the high ceiling despite the organized chaos and clutter, droning on about our inadequate efforts to manipulate light and achieve shadow. The model deftly secured her sheet with a knot and gathered her long chestnut hair into a high bun, preparing for her sitting. I unpacked today’s tools, the wire end variety, with smooth wooden handles worn down and molded to my grip on one end and viciously sharp loops and toothed hooks on the other. Marble is expensive and time consuming, so clay has remained my most efficient medium, ugly and shapeless until it’s meticulously carved into a detailed form with precise, decisive strokes. I tuned out of the lecture, nostalgically recalling the day I first bought these instruments in Rome.

The summer before my senior year, when I was grasping for something concrete to pursue after high school, I spent the afternoon at the Borghese Gallery surrounded by magnificent frozen figures, etched by the masters. Before I had caught the bus to Rome, I had been forced to spend breakfast listening to my father rant through two cups of coffee about lazy grunts and red tape administration. The gallery was a stark contrast from our small apartment on my father’s base at Camp Darby. High ceilings, ornate décor, and marble floors lent a certain marvelous peacefulness. It was there that I discovered Bernini. I sketched all day, balanced on the plinth of a white column in a room devoted to only one sculpture, *Apollo and Daphne.*  The streams of casually interested tourists weren’t aware that if you waited long enough, the light streaming through the open ceiling of the 17th century villa would shift your focus from the nymph’s strained, panicked expression to Apollo’s delicate, desperate hand. As she becomes a rooted laurel tree, he catches only jagged bark instead of her smooth marble belly. I had identified with the dramatic plight of the immortal Greeks’ souls and started to chase my own dream. When you’re a teenager, everything is always self-involved.

Before I left, I absentmindedly browsed a room of ancient Greek and Roman horns, drums and other instruments and marveled again at Bernini’s skill, rendered without the help of machinery or computer graphics. I recalled Mr. Angelico, my most down-to-earth art teacher, saying, “All you need is the right set of tools,” and I set off to find some of my own. The docent patiently decoded my rudimentary Italian and directed me to the nearest art shop where I purchased this set. Our tiny bachelors’ apartment became ever crowded with my sculptures as I studied anatomy books and toyed with different textures. A transfer to Ft. Stewart afforded me the chance to apply to SCAD and hone my skills. Bernini had helped me to find my own personal Daphne.

Now, the room fell silent. The professor was slouched at his desk, reading *Juxtapose* magazine. I studied the model now as closely as I had Bernini’s muse, the way that an itamae would inspect the fresh catch of the day before purchasing it for his evening’s creation. She was pretty sexy for a student volunteer and this was her third visit to the studio. Her shoulders were strong, toned, and tense, and her collarbone jutted out, her right side angled toward me. I noticed the cute freckle in the crease of her extended elbow and the less cutesy stretch-marks above her right hip. No other scars were visible, but she had a tattoo on the right side of her torso, vines and leaves that curled just above the curve of her waist. Her swollen breasts and distended belly curved gently as she posed for us. Something was different about her this time. She looked worried, tired, and distracted. My usual focus was diverted by the familiarity of her features. This time she somehow reminded me of Liv.

 “Shit.” It was too loud in the midst of the concentrated studio. My ears turned red and my whole body heated up immediately. Even the model broke her freeze and turned to look at me. I mumbled an apology and threw my tools in my bag, the clay smearing all over the inside of my backpack. I hadn’t made much progress on the lump in front of me, and we still had another 40 minutes of class. I rushed out of the room letting the metal door slam behind me. The hallway wall spun as I leaned my back against it, sweat dripped down my temple and my lungs labored.

Liv had looked overtired too, for weeks now, grouchy and critical of everything and everyone. The model had the same sunken expression I saw on Liv’s face when I picked her up from work last night. When I ordered a beer at dinner, she pointedly ordered water and criticized that I was drinking too much lately. She was unusually picky about the menu and only grazed her salad. Over the winter months, she had packed on a few pounds and I had assumed she was just trying to eat healthier, but she seemed mighty bitter about it.

How had I not figured this out before? I had considered myself a pretty observant, sensitive boyfriend. I even remarked when Liv had stopped drinking coffee six weeks ago and started a pill regimen every morning. She must have thought I’d figured it out and refused to talk about it. Why else wouldn’t she have said something? I could feel my heartbeat throbbing down to my fingertips. Everything was slowing down and speeding up all at once, like I was in a time warp. An image flashed through my racing brain, Liv nearly breaking my hand in pain, swearing and writhing in a hospital bed while some annoyingly calm doctor told her to push. Another flash, her friend Amy’s 800 square foot, third floor walk up, cluttered with baby stuff – how does an infant take up so much damn room? I was so woefully unprepared for such a responsibility.

 My beat up Nissan navigated itself straight to the bar, a last escape while I wrapped my head around my impending duties. I could forget spending money on frivolities like this anymore; I immediately allocated my meager income toward daycare bills. In my next barely lucid moment, I found myself already sitting at the bar shooting back a double Jameson. I hadn’t even summoned the courage to propose yet, and a baby was already on the way. I imagined myself engraving heavy headstones or welding highway bridges to scrape together enough money to pay for formula. My real job would be to change diapers for a living. Sleepless nights would be void of any creative genius because I would be impatiently cooing at a screaming infant. My second drink burned less quickly than my future. An hour had passed since the model had revealed my fate. A text from Liv lit up my phone. She was probably expecting me home soon. I turned the phone off before I could read her message and ordered a glass of water. Why would she have kept it from me? She must have known that I would panic.

The drive to the Army recruiting station was just a straight shot down White Bluff Road. As I passed the air field, a jet taxied to the beginning of the runway, paused, and built up speed for takeoff. My foot pressed hard on the gas pedal and I ran the red light before the plane rumbled over me. I parked in the strip mall which contained each military branch’s recruiting office, a realtor’s office, and an Allstate insurance, a new recruit’s one-stop shop to cover all the paperwork necessary for such a life change. A shiny headed, square jawed uniform called me to his desk. As he launched into his spiel, I matched a few of the ribbons on his chest to my father’s rack. I didn’t listen to a word. The heavy pen he leant me automatically etched my signature onto the enlistment form. It would have taken at least 2 more years to complete my degree, and for what? I couldn’t sustain the three of us on an artist’s earnings. My father’s military career had afforded me all the opportunities necessary to find what I needed. In all of my panic, in the studio, the bar, the drive here, I hadn’t once imagined leaving them. I finally understood what I had been chasing all this time.

 Liv was in bed when I finally got home. I silently snuck in next to her, bolstered by my own secret. She turned away from me while she slept, hugging her pillow and sighing. I inhaled her deeply and draped my arm over her waist, my hand on her stomach, and drifted off. I woke when Liv turned on the shower. I rolled out of bed, ran my hands through my temporarily shaggy hair, and joined her.