

6.

Beatrice normally enjoyed the walk home from the train station. She liked moving from the rush of the train station, down the crowded sidewalks of the shopping area, into the narrow, hilly streets of her neighborhood, with its surprise views and permaculture gardens. *Her* neighborhood. Which is what she walked through to get to *her* house.

It had been her house for six months now. After the first few mind-blowing deposits from Invisible Eye into her bank account, it had dawned on Beatrice that she was in a position to realize her dream of living on her own. She was tired of negotiating everything with her housemates—especially how much noise she was allowed to make when Vince was spending the night—and she was having visions of having a place all to herself. Such a thing wasn't possible in the city, but the other side of the bay was a different story: rents were lower; apartments were bigger; parking existed. Beatrice didn't have a car, but her new life as an adult with a real paycheck opened up all kinds of possibilities that she hadn't ever considered. She scanned Craigslist and spent a few Saturdays checking out apartments Oakland and Berkeley. There were places she hated, places she sort of liked, places she almost liked, but nothing worth falling in love with. And since this was going to be her first place that was truly her own, she wanted to fall in love. No subterranean caves. No second bedrooms that were actually closets. No bathrooms without bathtubs. And definitely no wall-to-wall carpeting. Everything she saw failed on at least one of these points, and she was starting to doubt whether the place she was dreaming of actually existed when, on one of her weekend excursions, she walked past a place with a for-sale sign out front and a sandwich board on the sidewalk with the words "Open House Today

1-3” on it. There was a woman standing in the doorway, wearing a name tag, who said hello, asked Beatrice if she was in the market, and told her to come inside and look around.

The house that revealed itself to Beatrice had two bedrooms, a bathroom with white tile and a clawfoot tub, and a kitchen that had enough room for a small table. There were bay windows everywhere. But the best part, the clincher, the thing that made Beatrice ill with longing, was the back patio: facing south, it had windows on three walls, and a huge, wide, deep sink. This was Beatrice’s painting studio. It had to be. No more easels at the foot of the bed, or paint brushes soaking in the kitchen sink, or canvases stretching in the living room. But how could she possibly afford a house, here in the Bay Area? How did *anyone* afford a house?

Beatrice began weeping. The friendly, well-dressed woman, who had led Beatrice from room to room, put a hand on Beatrice’s shoulder and slipped Beatrice her card.

“Interest rates are really low right now,” she said.

Later, Beatrice went over to Vince’s place. She was coveting that house, with that studio, more than she had ever coveted anything in her life, and she needed to supplant the coveting with something else, if only for a couple of hours, and Vince’s body was just the thing to do it. Instead, she ended up bawling on his chest and giving him an unsolicited verbal tour of the house. This was her first emotional outburst with Vince, and given their casual, non-committed status, she wasn’t sure how he was going to take it.

“You could get a loan,” he said.

“I don’t even know how people do that,” Beatrice sniffed.

“My aunt just bought a house, and she’s, like, the most disorganized person in the world. And also broke. She got some kind of loan where you don’t actually need a down payment. If she can do it, you totally can.”

“Really?”

“I believe in you, Beatrice.”

Beatrice called the friendly woman who had shown her the house. She gave Beatrice the name of a mortgage broker—and then patiently explained what a mortgage broker was—and told her to move quickly. The owners had put a lot of work into the house and wanted to sell to someone who would appreciate it as much as they had, but they were also looking to get out from under it sooner rather than later.

The following weeks were a whirl. Beatrice met with the mortgage broker, who dismissed Beatrice’s antiquated notions about home loans. Thirty year mortgages? Fixed interest rates? Maybe that’s how Beatrice’s parents bought their house, but things were different now. Wasn’t there a credit check involved? Not anymore.

“Welcome to the ownership society,” the mortgage broker said.

With the help of the friendly woman (Buffy Cranston, according to her card), Beatrice made an offer. There was a counteroffer, which made Beatrice’s heart pound too hard, but Buffy talked her through it, told her it was a good one, and said she should accept it. Soon there were escrow officers and insurance agents. There were appraisals and inspections. Loan contingencies and hazard reports. There was a final walk-through, which Beatrice could barely bring herself to participate in. She was worried the house would have shrunk somehow, or that it would reveal a massive flaw that both she and the inspectors had overlooked, like an entire missing roof. But the

house was still the same size, and the roof was fully intact, covering every room in the house. Finally, there was a writing of funds, a signing of documents, and a closing, topped off by a shaking of hands.

And then, Beatrice had the keys.

Coming home every day, to her very *own* home, introduced Beatrice to a quiet joy that she didn't even know existed. Never mind that the only furniture she owned was a personality-free metal bed frame, a 1950s-style kitchen table with only two chairs, and a ratty faux-leather couch that no one could get up from. Stepping through the front door into the living room, with its hardwood floors and charming built-in cabinets, was still enough to make her feel like she was the luckiest woman in the world. The living room still contained a ragged collection of unpacked cardboard boxes, six months after moving in, but Beatrice's joy remained undiminished.

Today, there was a little less joy. As she came in the door, she wondered if the true price of this house was her soul, which she had unwittingly sold to Jackson French. She picked up the pile of mail from the floor where it fell from the mail slot, dropped her bag on the floor. She went straight through the kitchen to the painting studio, dropping the pile of mail on the table as she passed.

Beatrice had ignored most of the rooms in the house where decorating was concerned, but the studio had been lavished with attention. Right after moving in, she took measurements of the windows, calculated the position of sunrise on the winter and summer solstices, and placed small, polished rocks on the sill at each location. She installed shelving in the recess next to the sink, where she put her paints and brushes, her rolls of canvas, her frame-building tools. A

wooden chair sat across from her easel so she could sit and examine her work from a distance. To keep her mind clear, she kept the only wall that did not have a window free of photographs, images, or other artwork, with one exception: a small reprint of Gerhard Richter's *Betty*.

The piece that was on Beatrice's easel now was the most recent in a series, the result of the altered state in which she found herself ever since she started working in her new studio. She was striving to capture the dream she'd had the first night she'd slept in her new home. In the dream, she wielded a pair of scissors, with which she was slicing through a map of San Francisco—except that it wasn't a map, exactly, more like the city itself, resized to manageable dimensions. Beatrice had been given to understand that there was a color beneath the city, one that she had not yet seen, and it was her task to reveal it. The scissors were heavy, and the city resisted them. Multiple cuts were necessary, and the new color was only barely visible, and only for a moment each time. Beatrice was informed that, in order to liberate the color, she needed to practice.

The new color existed only in her mind, she knew, tossed up by her unconscious to trick her into discovering something else, something she could only discover by painting towards it.

There were four completed pieces in the series, each one an improvement over the previous. With this fifth one, the one still on the easel, still incomplete, she was even closer yet. There was a striving within it, which had been absent from the previous four. Beatrice felt herself reaching, stretching her fingers, probing the dark like headlights on a foggy road.

Beatrice stared at it. Normally, she would be getting to work on it right now, squeezing in a couple hours of painting before making something quick and simple for dinner. Right now, though, she had to reckon with Jackson French's impending arrival—into her house, and into her

studio. She went back into the kitchen, where she made some tea, sat down at the table, and began stirring it with her spoon. She was still stirring when the doorbell rang.

“This is a *house*,” Jackson said as she opened the door. “I thought you lived in an apartment.”

Beatrice stood there, blocking the door.

“So . . . am I coming in, or what?”

Jackson was wearing a leather motorcycle jacket, orange jeans, and brown leather boots. A helmet was balanced against his hip. Beatrice stepped aside and let him enter the house. As he looked around the living room, Beatrice saw the unpacked boxes and crappy old couch through his eyes, and felt ashamed.

“Nice place,” Jackson said.

“Whatever.”

Jackson unzipped his jacket and put it down on the nearest box, along with his helmet. “Mind if I put these here?” he asked.

“Whatever.”

“Let’s be civilized with each other, Beatrice. How about we have some tea?”

“Fine.”

Jackson followed Beatrice into the kitchen. He leaned against the doorway as she filled the kettle and put it on the stove. He was looking at her ass, and was probably unaware that he was looking at her ass. “All I’ve got is Earl Gray,” she said as she opened the cabinet.

“I see a lot more in there besides Earl Gray.”

“That’s the expensive stuff.”

“And I can’t have any of it?”

“Are you going to fire me if I say no?”

Jackson shifted his weight against the door frame. “Do you really think I would do that?”

“I don’t know what you would do.” She took out a mug and dropped in a tea bag.

“I’m not going to fire you.”

Beatrice stared at him. “Unless I refuse to . . . you know.”

“That’s in the contract. The kind of tea you give me? *Not* in the contract.”

The kettle whistled. Beatrice ignored it.

“Are you going to get that?” Jackson asked.

“Get it yourself,” she said. It was petty, but it felt good, and petty victories were all she was going to get this evening. She sat down at the table and began stirring her cold tea again. Jackson took the kettle off the stove, poured his cup, and took the other seat. Beatrice stared down into her cup.

“Do you have any sugar?” Jackson asked.

“No.”

“Oh, come on—”

“I never put sugar in my tea.”

“What about when you bake cookies?”

Beatrice glared at him. She had never baked a single cookie in her life.

“Sorry, sorry. Just trying to be cute.”

“How long do we have to sit here being civilized?” Beatrice asked. “I’d really just rather get this over with.”

“You know, I really expected you to be a lot more understanding, given the circumstances.”

“Circumstances? What circumstances?”

“I’m broke, Beatrice. You must know that.”

“You can’t possibly be broke. You’re a creative director at Invisible Eye. I can’t imagine what you make. And besides, how would I know about your personal finances, anyway?”

“Because it’s your fault I’m broke.”

“Me? My fault?”

“Remember what we talked about during your interview? Doing right by each other? Balancing the karmic scales and all that? Do you have any idea how much you cost me in legal fees?”

“Jackson. I have no idea what you’re talking about. When you talked about balancing our karma, I thought you meant—I thought you meant the *other* way. Towards *me*.”

“But you’re the one who . . .” Jackson looked at her. “It wasn’t you?”

“I still have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Who brought the complaint. The whole sexual harassment thing.”

“No, it wasn’t me! Everything we did was consensual!”

“Well then who was it?”

“I have no idea! Who else did you sleep with?”

Jackson looked annoyed. “No one else who would have—I mean, I just assumed it was you, after—after everything.”

“Great. So we’re done. This was all one big misunderstanding. I’m glad we cleared this up.” She stood up, grabbed both mugs and carried them over to the sink. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“The contract is the contract, Beatrice. Even if you weren’t the one who filed the complaint, you were still—”

Beatrice threw both mugs into the sink. Neither of them broke. She was disappointed.

“I was still *what*, Jackson?”

“You still . . . you contributed to the climate in which the complaint happened.”

Jackson’s argument was so ass-backwards, Beatrice couldn’t even bring herself to address it. “How much money do you even think you’re going to get? Ten bucks? Fifteen?”

“Oh, lots more than that. I’ve even got a buyer lined up.”

“Who?”

“No one you know.”

“Humor me.”

“A private collector. From an old San Francisco money family. I think he’s a Hearst cousin or nephew or something like that. He contacted me not long after the SFMOMA show. He bought a few of those pieces, and he told me he would be very interested in any of my subsequent work. Sight unseen!”

“What’s his name?”

“You think I’m making this up?”

“Just tell me his name.”

“He’s a *private* collector. There are legalities here.”

“Why can’t you just sell him one of your pieces? Why does it have to be mine?”

Jackson looked into his teacup.

“You’re blocked,” Beatrice said. “You’ve been blocked since your 9/11 work.”

“I wouldn’t put it like that—”

“You haven’t produced a thing in years.”

“It happens to everyone. It’ll happen to you. Don’t think for a minute that it couldn’t.

Mozart. Van Gogh. Goethe. You think you’re immune?”

“Well, I’m not blocked right now. Unlike some people.”

“Good!” Jackson slammed his hands down on the table. “Let’s have a look then, shall we?”

Beatrice’s tea froze in her stomach. Jackson stood up and pushed past her into the studio.

“Wow. This is a great space you have here, for someone starting out. Someday you’ll want more room. Something with more light, a little more spirit, you know what I mean? But you’ve got all the essentials. You’ll do great work in here. I know it. You like that guy?”

“What guy?” Beatrice wasn’t looking. It was bad enough that Jackson was actually in her studio. She didn’t want to pollute her brain with actual images of it.

“This portrait. On the wall. What’s the artist’s name . . . Ricker? Wrecker?”

“Richter. Gerhard Richter.”

“Right!” Jackson snapped his fingers. “Can’t stand him. Totally derivative.”

His voice moved around the studio.

“Is this all you have?” Jackson asked. Beatrice willed herself to turn around. He was squatting down, looking at the other paintings in the series.

“Yes, that’s *all* I have.”

“And you’ve been out of school how long now?”

“At least I have work.”

If this hurt Jackson’s feelings, he didn’t show it. “Don’t you have a basement or something? Houses usually have basements.”

“You’ve seen all my other work, Jackson. How about you just hurry up and choose?”

“Jeez, Beatrice. I just need to be sure I’m making the right decision.”

He looked at the paintings again, this time taking a minute with each one. The makeshift lighting she’d set up so that she could work at night—three hooded tungsten lamps, clamped to whatever surface would support them—only directly illuminated the work on the easel. There was no way Jackson could truly see anything that required more than a moment’s consideration.

Finally, he stood up and put his hands on his hips, turning his attention to the painting on the easel.

“Now wait a second here,” he said, “ just wait one second.”

Beatrice stepped forward. “That one isn’t done yet.”

“That’s what all painters say. The artist himself never knows when the work is done.”

“But it’s *not* done. It’s really not done.”

“You think it isn’t done, but it is. As your former mentor and current boss, I declare it done.”

“You can take *any* of the other ones.” Beatrice cringed at the desperation in her own voice.

“It’s brilliant. The displacement of common consumer objects, the way they disappear into a sky-like field. It’s fantastically jarring. You’re forcing a re-recognition of these objects. And before the re-recognition occurs, the mind waits in a state of total disjuncture. It’s wonderful. And the blue . . . really, it’s like these things are being absorbed by the sky, by nothingness. More so than if it were white. Beatrice. *Beatrice*. This is *amazing*. Does it have a name yet?”

None of them had names yet. They weren’t ready for names. They resisted names.

“Please, Jackson. There are four others right there on the floor that do the exact same thing.”

“No, no. They get close, but they don’t do it like this one. This is it. This is the one.”

She crossed the room. She put her hand on his arm. “Jackson.”

Jackson’s eyes had been fixed on the painting. At her touch, he turned.

“I really don’t want you to take that painting,” she said.

“Sorry kiddo,” he said. “This is the one.”

Beatrice withdrew her hand. “How are you going to get it out of here?” she asked, restraining tears.

“What do you mean? I’m going to carry it.”

“You’re going to carry it on your motorcycle?”

Judging by Jackson’s stunned, vacant look, this had not occurred to him. “That’s a good point. *You* don’t have a car, do you?”

“You know I don’t have a car.”

“How about a portfolio case? I’ll give it back to you tomorrow.”

“You’re going to carry a stretched canvas in a portfolio case. On a motorcycle.”

“You’re right. Dumb idea. Shit.”

It was one of the evening’s tiny triumphs. She sat down in the wooden chair and crossed her legs, reveling in it.

Jackson took his phone out of his pocket and dialed. When the person on the other end picked up, his sheepish hello told Beatrice that this person was already pissed off at him. Like everyone else who knew him, Beatrice thought. He stepped out of the studio and walked into the living room. She looked out the window, into the dark, forcing herself not to listen as his voice trailed away, but the pleading tone could not be ignored. After a minute, his voice drew nearer again.

“You are awesome,” he was saying, “do you know that? You are *just awesome*. Right. I’ll see you later.” He closed his phone and put it back in his pocket. “I’ll be back tomorrow with a car. Right after work. How’s that?”

“Awesome,” Beatrice said, “just awesome.”

Jackson responded with something along the lines of how her attitude really wasn’t necessary, that he understood this might be painful for her but it really was the best way to make things right. Beatrice walked him to the door. Once he was finally gone, she washed both mugs, spending an extra few minutes scrubbing Jackson’s with extremely hot water. Then she went back into the studio, walked over to the shelves, and took down her Polaroid camera.

Vince thought her use of the polaroid camera was quaint. He used digital, like everyone else. And during her first semester at BASAD, so had Beatrice. It was a quick and inexpensive way to archive the development of her work, but it came with the temptation to edit her paintings

in Photoshop. She could nip and tuck, nudge and scrape, all without picking up a brush. It also means that when she returned to the canvas, the path before her was straight, clear, and free of surprises—in other words, boring. For Beatrice, painting needed to be risky in order for it work. She needed to be able to make the kind of mistake that would take her in an unexpected direction. Switching to Polaroids allowed her to document progress without killing the process, and she still got the instant gratification of a photograph in her hand. The film was expensive but worth it. The pictures were wonderful objects in and of themselves. She kept them under her bed, in shoeboxes, one for each painting.

Beatrice turned all the lights in the studio to face the painting on the easel. She pointed the camera and pressed the button. The tiny gears whirred, the picture slid out of the camera. Beatrice held it by the corner and shook it. The white square turned yellow. Shapes and colors emerged. Watching an image appear on polaroid film was like an arm tingling back to life after being slept on. And when the image was of one of her paintings, it was as essential as the returning arm.

The shoebox for this current painting was still on the shelf above the sink. She took it down, opened it up, put this latest photograph inside, and brought the box into her bedroom to join the others.

That didn't seem right, though. This painting hadn't been completed. It had been arrested in its evolution. It wasn't going to be what it was meant to be, and might not ever become that. The pictures didn't belong with all the others. They needed to be kept somewhere else, somewhere protected and safe.

There was another box under the bed. Covered in red felt, it contained her fancy, expensive stainless steel vibrator. The box was gaudy and ridiculous, almost to the point of libido-killing, but it was built to keep the vibrator scratch-free, and so she kept it. It also had a built-in combination lock. Beatrice brought it out and unlocked it. There was a space beneath the felt-lined tray that held the vibrator that was exactly the right size for the stack of Polaroids. She dropped them in, returned the tray to the box, and locked it.