

Brushstroke

by Audrey T. Carroll

Noelle smiled as finally, after weeks, she was putting color on the page again. The three foot wide canvas on her bed was still only pencil sketching's of the ballerina. Her eyes downcast, she sat with her legs pressed together and her tutu feathered out around her, just covering her from indecent exposure. Her wrists hung daintily as she held the lacing of her shoes, not quite looking like she had any intentions of tying them up as Noelle had meant. The ballerina's face was still and fixed, thin and angular, slightly sad, but mostly emotionless. Noelle formed the first bright green leaf in the background of the canvas in front of her as Springsteen's "Human Touch" hummed from her laptop on her desk. The naked woman was much easier to paint.

For one thing, she had a softness to her form. Noelle didn't have to stick to the rigid angles the ballerina needed. She stood in the middle of the forest, fingers touching the ends of her long hair hanging loose around her shoulders. The ballerina was embarrassed, or at least embarrassed enough to cover herself with her tutu before anyone could see her exposed. The naked woman, though, looked up at Noelle, eyes soft, thick lips barely curved into a smile, her face much less serious than the ballerina's. Her canvas was smaller, only about a foot tall.

The sheets on Noelle's bed were folded neatly. Her perfume bottles and lotions stood close together on one half of her desk. Her shoes hung in their compartments on the inside of her closet door, and the clothes inside were sorted by type, from casual on the left to formal on the right. *Organization is key*, her father always said.

Noelle wondered what her mother had liked to paint most. Her mother's paintings still hung around most of the house, instead of framed photographs. Her father had kept them exactly where they were when her mother left for the hospital when Noelle was a child, and now the paintings of Noelle, Mitch, Noelle's toys, ballerinas, and old pets of her mother's still haunted the house. Even the canvases full of color had a sadness to them. There was a knock on the door. Noelle jumped, painting a green line further than she had meant to.

"Who is it?" Noelle called, putting her brush down in the Styrofoam bowl with green paint and sliding that under her bed. She picked up the canvas from its stand and stood up, walking to the nightstand next to her headboard.

"Dad," Mitch called back.

“Just a sec!” Noelle said, opening the top drawer of her nightstand and sticking the canvas inside. She closed it gently.

“Come in!”

Mitch came into the room, stopping by the stand. He sniffed, his eyes squinted as he looked around the floor, first by the stand and then all around. “Have you started painting the ballerina?” he asked. His eyes fell on the sketching on the bed. He frowned, very briefly.

“Oh.”

“I’ll start her soon, don’t worry,” Noelle said, all in one breath. The ballerina was part of her studio concentration in painting at NYU class, and her father had really been looking forward to seeing how it would turn out, to the point where he’d ask her about how it was coming along at dinner every night she was home.

Mitch stared at the canvas for a bit, then looked up at Noelle. He shook his head, almost as if he were surprised to see her. “Oh, um, Adam’s here by the way.”

Noelle had almost forgotten that they had plans for the night. She reached for the black hair clip on her nightstand and twisted her hair, then fastened it up behind her head. Noelle grabbed her denim jacket. “Thanks.”

“Any idea when you’ll be home?” Mitch asked as they left the room.

Noelle shrugged. “Probably by ten. We’re just going to see the movie.” She slid her jacket on over the lilac polo she was wearing.

Mitch nodded. They walked down the stairs, every other step creaking. Adam waited by the door, buttoning and unbuttoning the cuffs of his denim jacket. He had on a green sweater with khaki pants, and his blond hair was combed, neatly parted. Adam usually looked like he was going somewhere, like he had something important to do. Noelle figured that it was just the way the pre-law students acted, as though at any moment they could meet someone who could help them with some hypothetical case they were a part of once they passed the bar. At the bottom of the stairs, Adam placed a hand on Noelle’s shoulder and kissed her on the cheek.

“Hi. Ready to go?”

Noelle nodded. She turned to her father, who was smiling. He approved of Adam, more than she thought possible for him to approve of anyone else. They walked out the door, fingers loosely laced, as she wondered if the green paint on the canvas was dried yet.



Noelle's hand rested on the sticky comfort of the armrest. As the klutzy but adorable blond heroine on the screen tried to make a speech at her sister's wedding, Noelle let her hand rest on her lap instead. She leaned toward Adam, resting her head on his shoulder. He didn't turn away from the screen. His arms were folded over his stomach. He smiled up at the scene as the heroine broke a pyramid of wine glasses. Noelle's hand now hung between them. She rubbed her thumb over his knee, then rested it back on the armrest. Adam continued to watch as the lights went dark in the movie. Noelle willed him to look at her. When he didn't, she thought about trying to get his attention, saying his name, anything. Instead, she turned to the screen. The blond woman was in the arms of some tall dark and handsome—the love of her life, surely. Noelle's fingers were cold.



The breeze was cool. The scent of dry, dusty leaves hung in the air, mingling with the aroma of firewood. Noelle traced the jaw of the woman she was penciling into her sketchbook. The woman was like the one she had been painting. Noelle wasn't sure she liked how her eyes were set on the canvas, staring straight forward. She was a little too brazen like this, and Noelle wanted her to have more to her. It would probably be best if she were looking in some other direction, like she could see something Noelle couldn't. That, Noelle reasoned, would make her more interesting. It was one of the things she'd loved about looking at her mother's paintings. They looked so alive, like they had something to go and do after they were done posing. The smooth concrete Noelle sat on was on top of the foot-tall, gray stone wall in front of the library.

"So that's the ballerina then, is it?" a voice whispered by her ear. Noelle jumped, the pencil digging into the thin sheet of paper, and turned. Nick was leaning over her shoulder, grinning and bringing out the little crevices at the corners of his brown eyes. He was wearing his black sweatshirt, zippered, and a pair of blue jeans, ripped on both knees and worn at the cuffs, and he smelled like pot. Nick had a habit of popping up when Noelle wasn't expecting him to.

Noelle had met Nick in high school in the Studio Art class everyone was required to take freshman year. When she first met him, he would come in late to every class and laugh every so often while he drew, and most of those were doodles of cartoon characters instead of the assignments. Noelle instantly didn't like him, and told her dad that he was just another one of those losers that would only be going to college to collect friends to smoke with. As the year went on, though, Nick had managed to make her laugh, even

if it was at his expense. They never really spent time together outside of class—she had her friends and he had his—but the next year they started to sit next to each other in study hall, and as much as Nick was flighty, that was part of what intrigued Noelle.

“The ballerina for that project of yours? Yes? No?” Nick sat himself down on the piece of concrete next to Noelle. He took out his lighter and started flicking it open and snapping it shut, over and over. “So what brings you to the library, Elle?”

“Adam,” Noelle replied, her gaze wandering toward the white column she was leaning against. “We’re going out for lunch. He said he’d pick me up at...” She checked her cell phone for the sixth time in two minutes. “Ten minutes ago.”

“And where is lover boy taking you this time?” Nick inquired, grinning and batting his eyelashes at her. Noelle snorted.

“Probably gonna go get hitched,” Noelle replied, still laughing a little. “Ah, my dad would like that.” She let her head fall, face first, against Nick’s shoulder. “I don’t know anymore. I just don’t know.”

“What?”

Noelle shrugged, pulling back. Her cheeks burned a little bit. Nick’s eyes were flecked with gold, but the whites in them were a little red. “I dunno. I guess I’m just stressed or something.” Her eyelids were heavy, and her throat was tight. It was getting difficult to keep her eyes on Nick, and even more difficult to speak. Probably allergies, she thought.

“So’m I. Can’t wait for my parents to freakin’ leave for the weekend already.” Nick stared at Noelle, his head tilted. “Is it Adam?” he asked.

Noelle sighed. She continued to sketch jaw line of the woman, making it softer and less angular. It was a process, teaching herself to stray from the ballerina’s structured features. “It’s probably just me, I guess. He’s a nice guy.”

“A nice guy?” Nick said. “Is that all?”

“He’s a nice guy, Nick.” Noelle looked up. “That’s enough, isn’t it? And Dad likes him well enough.”

“True.” Nick glanced over Noelle’s face. “Guess he wouldn’t like a guy like me, huh?”

“Well...” Noelle wasn’t sure what to say. He was right. Mitch didn’t even want them to be friends. He didn’t trust “that pothead John Lennon kid” hanging around her, even when they were only fifteen. *Just because you’re an artist, it doesn’t mean you have to get high on weed all the time, alright?* her father had told her before she started college. “It wouldn’t be easy, anyway. If they’re anything, things with Adam are easy, you know? You can’t fight city hall. Or, my dad, in this case.”

“Rocko fought city hall.”

Noelle looked at Nick, her mouth hanging open, trying to look indignant and not crack a smile. “Yes. We should all take life advice from children’s cartoons, Nick.”

Nick shrugged, sticking out his lower lip. “Hey, it worked for that kid who learned the Heimlich from *Hey Arnold*, right?” The pupil on the left eye of the sketch was too big. Noelle erased it so that she could redraw it, to perfect it.

“So, you working on new shit?” Nick said after a few moments.

Noelle nodded. “Yeah. I’m working on a woman.”

“She hot?”

Noelle looked up and swatted Nick’s arm. “She’s Eve, in the garden.”

“So yes?” Nick swerved away from Noelle when she raised her hand again. She took her cell phone from her pocket. Ten minutes had passed, and Adam still wasn’t there. “Is it fun at least?” Noelle tilted her head. “That new painting of yours, I mean.”

“It is. Especially getting to use bright colors, like greens and stuff.”

“Huh. And how’s that ballerina coming along?”

“Oh, don’t even get me started.”

A car honk. Noelle jumped, twisting around toward the street. Adam was parked out front in the black BMW his parents had given him for his eighteenth birthday. Noelle smiled, closed-lipped, twitching her fingers in a wave. She turned back to Nick.

“I’ll see you later.” Noelle rose from the wall, grabbing her textbooks and sketches and jogging toward the car.

“Wait, Elle,” Nick said, grabbing her arm. Noelle turned to Nick, curls falling into her eyes. He handed her a pen that had fallen out of her bag. Noelle glanced at the BMW, then took the pen from Nick.

“Thanks,” she said, then sprinted to Adam’s car, slipping inside. They drove away from the library.



Adam had ordered a basket of onion rings while Noelle was in the bathroom. As she walked back to the table, he was uncurling his napkin and laying the silverware on it. Adam was wearing a black button-down. Noelle always thought it was funny when it would be dressed so nicely in chain restaurants with Elvis records and baseball bats and movie star posters along the walls. It was like he was wearing a tux in a place where the bathrooms were labeled “Dudes” and “Chicks.” Noelle sat down across from Adam,

readjusting the bottom of her t-shirt as she did.

“So how are you doing?” Adam asked, grinning.

“I’m alright,” Noelle replied. She ripped the paper ring from around her napkin and pulled it open, letting the silverware clink onto the table. She bit her lip as she scooped it all up. “How about you?”

“A little stressed, but alright otherwise,” he said. Noelle looked up from trying to arrange her silverware on top of the napkin. Adam was still grinning, as though he hadn’t talked or moved at all since she last looked at him.

“I’m sorry.” Noelle glanced down, searching for one of his hands to grasp, but they were both under the table. Her eyes returned to Adam. She stared at him, willing him to go on, her eyes burning a little because she was concentrating so hard and refused to blink. He just shrugged.

“Anything you want to talk about?” Noelle pressed. She slid in closer, slouching over the table and leaning on her elbows. “I mean, is it one of your classes or something?”

Adam nodded. He started playing with the silverware on his napkin, arranging it to line up properly and avoiding eye contact. It had become a little weird, how Noelle and Adam could predict something about each other like that lately. It was becoming more evident that they had been together for a little over a year. “You know Russo-Sullivan’s class? The one who has no idea what she’s talking about?”

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned her. That history professor who you said looks like Elton John, right?”

Adam laughed a little bit. “Yeah. She’s the one. I just got another paper back from her, and I got a C minus on it.” He let go of the silverware. Adam’s face was frozen, in a sort of rigid, grayed, almost sick look. He looked up at Noelle, his eyes wide. “I’m going to fail it, I think. That’s my third C minus in a row, and I’ve only gotten Bs on the tests, plus that D on the project ‘cause she wasn’t clear about it. And I’m totally screwed for the final.”

“Maybe you can talk to her?” Noelle replied. Her hands were folded in front of her, clutching one another so tight that she could see faints of blue and purple ribbons under her pale skin.

“Maybe,” Adam whispered back.

“Or you could always drop it,” Noelle offered. To this, Adam shook his head.

“I couldn’t.”

“Well, I know you’ll get charged a bit of money, but I think that the drop/add period is still—”

“Noelle, I can’t,” Adam said again, his eyes locked with hers. “You know that my parents’d be disappointed if I did.”

“It’s not like they’re going to pull you out of school, Adam. I’m sure it won’t be that big of a deal.”

“Have you ever dropped a class?” Adam asked. Noelle shrank back a little bit against the booth, her elbows sliding off the table and her folded hands falling into her lap.

“Well, no, I haven’t.”

“If you did, how would you tell your dad? Let’s say you dropped your painting class. How could you look him in the eye and tell him that you couldn’t handle it, that you weren’t good enough? He’d be disappointed, right?”

“Yeah,” Noelle answered, meek. She hated the look her dad got on his face when he was disappointed. He’d frown, he’d look at the floor, and then his voice would get low, quiet. It was why she spent so much time on her paintings. She wanted them to be as good as her mother’s, so that she wouldn’t have to see him like that. “Yeah, I see your point.”

The tall green-eyed waitress came by, placing the basket of onion rings and a couple of glass plates between Adam and Noelle. “You guys need anything else, or are you alright?”

Noelle shook her head, sipping on the water in front of her. Adam just kept his gaze on the table. The waitress left. Noelle took a plate and placed it next to her glass. She brought a large onion ring onto it, cut it in half with her knife, and watched the steam float up.

“I just want to make them proud, you know?” Adam continued. “Do well at school, become a lawyer, two point five kids, that whole bit.”

“Yeah, I know,” Noelle agreed, looking at her plate. Noelle smiled, running her fingers over the steam and waiting for it to cool, sighing a little. She and Adam understood each other in a lot of ways. It was one of the strongest things about their relationship, though she wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. “Believe me, I know.”



When Mitch was putting the final touches on dinner, Noelle usually stared at the painting that hung next to the dining room window. It was a small canvas, only picture sized, about four inches by six. Noelle couldn’t have been more than four. She was wearing a straw sun hat over her short, black, curly hair, her chin in her hands as she leaned her elbows on the grass. A sunflower stood in front of her, a tiny white butterfly sitting on it. Noelle’s cheek had dirt spots all over it, like she had spent that day rolling around in the mud. The painting fascinated Noelle. She couldn’t remember that day, and she couldn’t remember her mother painting at all. Her memories of her mother were few and fleeting—leaning over and smiling, asking if she wanted celery or carrots, and humming “You Are my Sunshine.” They weren’t anything nearly

as concrete as that painting.

Mitch came into the dining room, carrying two plates of baked chicken and peas. He set one in front of Noelle, then sat down caddy-corner to her, at the head of the table. Noelle took up her fork and started stabbing at the peas.

Mitch cleared his throat. "So how was today?" he asked. "Get any painting done, or was it more studying than anything?"

Noelle tilted her head from one side to the other. "A little bit of both. I got some sketching done outside of the library, anyway, if not painting. Before Adam took me to lunch."

"Sketching, huh? What're you working on?" Mitch wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, cleaning away a pea skin.

"Oh, just the jaw line—" Noelle coughed. When she realized she'd almost told her father she was drawing a naked woman, she decided to chase the peas down with a sip from her Sprite can instead.

"Are you alright?" Mitch asked, his mouth full of chicken, as he dropped his fork and extended a hand toward her, letting it hover over her shoulder. Noelle nodded.

"I'm just working on the jaw line for the ballerina," she said after she gulped down the last of her drink. "Her chin is too angular right now." Her father might understand if she told him she was painting Eve, but she couldn't bring herself to. The thought of telling him she was painting a naked woman for kicks, even if she *was* biblical, at the dinner table made her cheeks burn a little, and she was afraid he'd tell her to stop and concentrate on the ballerina, to "keep her eyes on the prize."

"Well, that's good. I really think you're going to do well with that, Noelle. You're a good artist, after all. Just like your mother, in many ways." Mitch was smiling at his daughter, his eyes shining.

"Thanks," Noelle whispered. She glanced at the painting her mother had made of her, and then continued to eat. "So how was your day?"



The music was playing so loud that the bass made the floor shake. Melissa, a girl Noelle knew from high school who was more Nick's friend than hers, was hosting the party. Her parents were with her grandmother for the weekend. Melissa was nowhere to be found. Noelle guessed that she was upstairs with a boy—Tommy or Jake or Chris. One of those random people Noelle didn't bother to keep track of. Sometimes Noelle couldn't believe how one girl could go through so many boys, or how she could stand not having one steady boyfriend for any period of time. It would have driven Noelle nuts.

Noelle and Adam didn't usually go to parties like this, but Adam's sister, Sharon, was going to see some guy here, and Nick usually shot Noelle an e-mail to invite her anyway. They decided that Sharon should have a ride to Melissa's and back. Adam's parents didn't think that Sharon would actually drink, but Adam told them it was to make sure that there weren't any guys that took advantage of her.

Noelle sat on the window ledge, red plastic cup in hand. Nick parked himself next to her. He was wearing his favorite black sweatshirt. "Oh, Elle. You're not old enough to be drinking," he scolded, smirking. Noelle laughed, then drank from her cup.

"Calm down, cowboy," she said. "It's 7up."

"Damn." Nick snapped his fingers. "And here I was going to try and take advantage of you." Nick's eyes were glassy, and he hadn't stopped smiling since he sat down.

Noelle rolled her eyes. "I'm only staying for a minute. Besides, don't you have some other poor girl's bones to go and attempt to jump?" It wasn't the first time he'd hit on her, especially when he was drunk, and Noelle predicted it wouldn't be the last. She combed her fingers through her hair with her free hand.

"They're boring," Nick sighed. "And wasted." He slid closer. "I'd much rather try to seduce you."

"Lovely." Noelle took another gulp from the cup. "I don't know how many more times I can tell you..."

"I know, I know. You're not interested." He leaned in, placing a hand on her knee and squeezing it. "But you are," he whispered, taking his hand away.

"You know, Nick, I *did* come here with someone."

Nick stuck his lower lip out, pouting. "Elle, I'm hurt." He grinned again. "Where is lover boy, anyway?" Noelle nodded toward the wooden piano against the wall opposite them. Behind the crowd of people, Adam was talking to a small blond girl in a tan skirt, who was smiling up at him.

"Oh, I see. He's trying to pick up a girl while you're sitting here all alone?" Nick shook his head. "No class, that guy."

"Nick, that's his sister."

"Oh." Nick's face twisted up, his nose scrunched, his lip curled, his eyes squinted. He looked like his hangover had kicked in early, and he needed to find his way to the nearest toilet or potted plant. "Sick bastard."

"Oh, come on Nick. I don't have to worry about Adam, okay? I told you, he's—"

"A nice guy. Yeah, yeah." Nick rubbed Noelle's lower back. "The nice guys get boring, Elle. Trust me on this one, huh?"

Noelle watched as he scurried off. He squeezed himself between the backs of a short-skirted redhead and a comparatively built guy in a gray hoodie. Noelle thought that she saw his hand graze the girl's backside, but she couldn't be sure. Nick squirmed into the other room.

"Noelle?"

Noelle blinked herself out of staring at the crowd. She looked to her left, where the voice had come from. Adam was standing next to her, smiling. "How're you doing?"

"Alright." She stood up and kissed him on the cheek. "How's Sharon?"

"She's okay. She was talking to that guy she came to see earlier, and..."

As Adam continued to talk, Noelle looked back into the crowd. It was loud and chaotic. She imagined herself in the middle of it, surrounded by people, a part of the noise. Her heart jumped, just a little bit. She wondered where Nick had gone, if it was anywhere interesting, if he was with another girl who wanted to screw him.

"Noelle, you okay?" Adam asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Huh?"

"Well, you look kinda pissed off. You alright?"

Noelle blinked a couple of times, trying to ground herself. She nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." Noelle forced a smile, then looked back at the crowd.

Adam's parents had set Sharon's curfew at twelve-thirty that night, so they headed back to Melissa's around midnight. The front door was unlocked. As they entered the house, it was quiet. The bass still vibrated in some other room, but in a more muted way, like the stereos had been muffled by pillows. It looked like there were half as many people as before. Some people, Noelle guessed, had gone upstairs together, while others had left, and others were subdued, by pot or maybe more alcohol than they could handle. Noelle wasn't sure what went on at parties like this, though she was curious about something so out of the ordinary for her. Most of the people still on the first floor of the house were making out on couches or sitting together on the floor, just hanging out.

Adam rubbed Noelle's shoulder. Sharon stood by the window ledge Noelle had been sitting on earlier that night, playing with the heavy, dark red curtains. Noelle suppressed a yawn, then patted Adam's arm. "I'm just going to go use the bathroom real quick, okay?"

"It's a short ride back to your house," Adam protested, looking over at Sharon. The boy she'd come to see was upstairs, according to what her text to Adam had said, and he hadn't come down for an hour or two.

“If I have to wait twenty minutes, my bladder’s gonna burst,” Noelle replied. She kissed Adam—a quick peck—then spun around.

Navigating around people, some still talking and others dead silent, Noelle managed to make her way up the stairs, around solo cups and pizza crusts and beer cans, up to the second floor. The second floor was relatively loud—girls giggling, creaking, something hitting the floor once or twice. It was empty, too. The rooms were probably all filled up, but the hall itself had no people hanging around. Noelle had only been to Melissa’s house twice, both for projects in their freshman year of high school. She walked down the hall. Every door was closed, most with a bra or pantyhose tied around the doorknob. Noelle opened the first door that wasn’t marked as occupied.

A pair was already in there. They were asleep, one or both of them was snoring, and apparently they hadn’t heard Noelle come in. Melissa lay in the arms of some shirtless guy. Noelle started to pull the door shut, but stopped herself. Nick’s favorite black sweatshirt was on the floor amidst other clothes. Noelle looked up. Looking at him properly, she didn’t know how she wasn’t able to tell it was him before—the long John Lennon hair her dad joked about, the scrawny body. Though she’d never seen him not smiling, and he looked different. He was pale, nearly transparent, lying there now. The insides of his elbows were marked up.

Noelle slammed the door shut. They might have moaned inside the room, but she might have also been imagining it. Noelle didn’t wait around to find out if she had woken them up. She took quick steps down the stairs. Adam had his arms around Sharon’s shoulders. They were standing by the front door.

“Ready to go?” Adam whispered. Sharon was staring at the floor. Noelle opened the front door and walked out to the car, letting the brisk night air sting her.



When Noelle came down the stairs in a green t-shirt and blue pajama pants the next afternoon, Mitch was standing at the bottom of the steps, her denim jacket in his hand. Noelle stopped halfway down. Mitch was holding the jacket tight, so tight that each of his knuckles was pronounced. It was shaking in his hand, just slightly.

“Noelle, what did you do last night?”

Noelle rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands. “I went to Melissa’s house,” she answered, her voice still mumbled from sleepiness. She continued to the bottom of the stairs. “I was only there for, like, ten minutes. Adam was there. You know nothing happened.” Noelle walked past Mitch.

“Why does your jacket smell like weed, then?” he asked, lifting her jacket to make his point.

“I dunno. I guess someone was smoking pot.” Noelle walked toward the dining room.

“Noelle, I’m serious.” Mitch’s voice was loud, even. Noelle spun around, squinting her eyes. It was bright on the first floor, the white light spilling in through the windows.

“Dad, you know I don’t smoke pot. Come on.”

“I know you don’t smoke. I know Adam doesn’t smoke,” Mitch said, his voice calm again. “What I don’t know is whether or not you were hanging around that pothead again last night.”

“Dad, just because someone was getting stoned doesn’t mean I was around Nick, okay?” Noelle’s eyes fluttered to her jacket. She thought of how the party had ended, and her jaw clenched.

“Simple question, and I want an honest answer,” Mitch said, his voice getting a little louder. He walked toward Noelle and shook the jacket again. “Was Nick there?”

“So what if he was?” Noelle’s arms were throbbing a little, and her eyes were wide, now that they’d gotten used to the light. “What difference does it make?”

“Noelle,” Mitch sighed, tossing her jacket onto the banister. It slid off, onto the floor. “I asked you not to see that kid anymore.” He was shaking his head.

“Well I won’t, okay?” Noelle stared at her feet, breathing deeply.

“You’ve said that before,” Mitch replied. He took a couple of steps toward Noelle, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Noelle, I want to trust you. I really do. Just tell me that I can trust you.”

Noelle backed away, just enough to be out of Mitch’s reach. She stared him in the eye. “I do everything you ask. I do everything you want me to without you having to tell me. And all of a sudden you have trust issues? What I’ve done isn’t good enough?”

Mitch opened his mouth to speak, but a mild little croak came out instead. Noelle scoffed. She stormed past her father and back up the stairs to her room. The corners of her eyes were damp the whole way, but she waited until her door was closed and she was leaning back against it to let out a sob. She covered her mouth, trying to let the air linger in her nose a while before she released her breath again, trying to swallow the swollenness in her throat. Her blurred gaze fell on the partially-painted ballerina propped up on the easel. She was perfect—graceful, strong. She didn’t move or talk. She just sat there, a tutued girl sitting, not quite tying her laces, waiting for her artist to shape her, waiting to be told how to lean over, how to bend her arm, how to position her still, sad face. If one hair was out of place, it could be fixed, painted over, a hidden blemish the world would never know about.

Noelle edged closer to the easel, then kicked one of the legs of the stand. The canvas teetered a little

bit, but ultimately remained in its place. Noelle kicked it again, harder, so hard that her big toe throbbed, the nail stinging from where it made impact. The canvas teetered again, but this time ended up flying to the floor. It landed with a crash, the easel on top of it. After a couple of breaths, Noelle fell to the floor and picked up the canvas. She placed it on her bed, then turned over the ballerina. One of the ballerina's slippers was scratched, marked by a line a lighter shade of pink than the rest. Otherwise, there wasn't much damage, except to her face. The canvas across her cheek was dented, jagged and faint. Noelle could barely tell at first, but couldn't take her eyes off it as soon as she noticed.



As Adam held her hand, Noelle ran her thumb over his short, square nails. His hand was a little bit clammy, but warmer than usual.

"I just feel awful," Noelle whispered. "I shouldn't have gotten so pissed off. I really shouldn't have. And I never have before. We never fought. Not like that."

"Look, Noelle." Noelle glanced at Adam's face, but her gaze immediately shot back down to their hands. "It's okay. If you just talk to him about it, I'm sure your dad'll understand. He doesn't seem like that bad a guy."

Noelle continued to trace Adam's fingernails with her thumb, running over the smoothness, the evenness of them. "I feel like he expects me to be perfect, like the way he remembers mom." Noelle sighed, examining Adam's face. He was watching her, his eyes glued, his jaw clenched into a frown. "I can't be. I'm not Mom. And I'm not perfect. I just really don't want to disappoint him, you know? I just really don't want to be a disappointment."

Adam nodded. He caressed Noelle's cheek. The sudden warmth was foreign at first. It felt like a chill more than anything. But within moments, Noelle relaxed, letting herself fall against his hand a little bit as she closed her eyes.

The softness of his lips against her forehead made Noelle smile. "You're not a disappointment, okay?" As she was listening to his voice, Noelle could almost see, in the blackness of her eyelids, the bright greens in her painting of Eve, the gold of her hair, the way she was smiling, just a little. Content.



The dreams Noelle had of her mother were fleeting moments. Her mother was angelic, the length of her long black curls disappearing behind her back, her lips red, her eyes soft and gray. She was always

smiling, usually humming or singing. There was a white blur around her mother, blocking out anything else Noelle might have seen.

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine,” Noelle’s mother sang, dulcet, echoing.

“Mom, I’m sorry,” Noelle said. Her mother stood above her, leaning over, smiling between lines.

“You make me happy when skies are gray.”

“Mom, I try so hard, and—” Her mother continued to sing over Noelle.

“You’ll never know dear, how much I love you.”

“I don’t want to be like Nick, I really don’t. I just—” Noelle’s voice was becoming more mumbled, like she was chewing on a cotton ball while she was trying to speak.

“Please don’t take my sunshine away.”

Noelle experienced a falling sensation, like she was falling back into darkness. Her stomach was sinking and spinning all at once, and not knowing where she was falling made her arms stiffen, then her legs. She heard her mother’s humming echoing in her head, or maybe it was from around her. Her neck loosened first, then her fingers, then her feet, her arms, and her legs. Her whole body was limp, and by the time she was done falling, she didn’t hit the ground, but landed softly, like she had fallen on some soft set of pillows she hadn’t seen in the darkness.



Eve was finally complete. Her eyes were just right, staring at something out of shot of the canvas, smiling at it. She wasn’t quite as forward as she had been, and she had somehow become gentler. Her canvas was tucked away in Noelle’s nightstand drawer. The ballerina was sitting on the easel.

The ballerina, too, had changed since Noelle had first drawn her. Her background was a mix of brushstrokes, all shades of brown. Her tutu was a bright pink, like her shoes. Noelle managed to paint her fingers closer together and paint her wrist with more of an arch, so that she looked more like she was tying her shoes, as Noelle had wanted her to. Noelle reached over, painting her red lips on, tilting the corners slightly so that if she looked at the painting long enough, the ballerina looked like she was smiling. There was a knock on the door. Noelle placed her paintbrush and the red paint on the floor next to a leg of the canvas, then picked up the bowl with brown, almost blondish, paint. She swirled the paintbrush around.

“Come in,” she called softly. Mitch opened the door. Noelle heard him enter, his feet heavy on the wood as he walked to her bed. He sat down. Out of the corner of her eye, Noelle could see him watching her.

“Noelle, I’m sorry about yesterday, and about getting so upset. I just want what’s best for you. I always have.” He cleared his throat. “And I think that’s why I push you so hard.”

Noelle nodded. She ran a couple of swirls out of the ballerina’s head with the thin brush, letting hair fall in her eyes. “You were right,” Noelle replied. She placed the paintbrush back into its bowl, then dropped it on the floor, next to the bowl of red paint. “I really like the painting of the ballerina.”

Noelle looked at her father. He smiled, then stood up and walked around the easel. Standing behind Noelle, he checked the painting out for a few moments.

“I told you,” he said, “You’re a good artist. She’s fantastic.”

Noelle turned back and watched at her father as he examined the ballerina. For the first time, she noticed how much his smile made his eyes brighter. For the first time, she saw what he did. The ballerina’s face was still cracked and dented, and her slipper had the faint scratch, but he was still pleased with her.

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