

A Weary Soul Who Paints On Eggshells

by

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The rain falls incessantly with a dull roar. The alleyways are dark and damp, silent save for the steady whoosh from the gutter by the street that hides the deepening sewer water. She stands alone. The haze of the streetlamp bathes her face in shadows as she stands in front of a long since closed-for-the-evening Italian restaurant with frosted windows. Wetness glides down her youthful face like a meandering stream—it reaches her nose and launches into the void of night, mixing with the rest of its fraternal brothers before pooling at her feet. Her possessions are little more than her clothes: shoes and socks, jeans and blouse, all soaked to the bone. She is very much alone. Yet she is warm . . .

He finds himself gliding through the rain in his sedan, heat cranked up, CD locked and loaded—feeding soothing jazz sounds that mix with the harshness of night. Blue LEDs in the leather dash announce the hours that quicken toward the dawn. 1:52 am, city closed down, locked up tight, no one insane enough to brave this torrent. Dark hands grip the steering wheel as he takes a corner. The steady, rhythmic, backhanded slap of windshield wipers persistently washes away the fresh precipitation. He feels the German machine underneath him slip and yaw like a boat in an unforgiving storm. Spotting her at the corner, he instinctively slows down.

Her eyes close and she is transported to that place where deep thoughts capture her and hold her attention, like a wonderful book that spins its yarn, keeping her safe. She pictures the ornate room with its cathedral-like ceilings, enormous windows that are sprung open to the summer air—wafting fragrances of oranges and mangoes that permeate her senses. Billowing curtains that flutter and snap in the breeze as she turns on her heels towards the source of her warmth—the tall, dashing handsome man who moves to salsa and meringue . . . he extends his hand to her—calls to her with white gloved, fingers that dance to the rhythm of the sound. She is captured, mesmerized by him, and drawn to his pulse. The beat is overpowering, she can't help but move towards his arms—and to paradise. A kiss, soft at first, a light brushing of lips, as mouths part, and tongues slowly invade. He grabs her waist and pulls her close, a hand running from her shoulder blades down her back as she moves in time to him. Tasting and exploring softly and slowly by means of their tongues, with a growing sense of urgency . . .

He can't help but slow down, his sandal-clad foot sliding involuntarily off the accelerator, wondering what she is doing here this time of night. He pulls to the curb, mindful not to splash her as the sedan slows to a halt. She merely notices the car, giving it a quick, unconcerned once over, and then turns back to her warm thoughts. He pauses, hits the switch to lower the passenger side window just a tad—feeling somewhat out of place. Like she's going to think strange of him: out here in an expensive car on a night like this; perhaps trying to pick her up, the way johns do of the whores down on Fourteenth Street. But it isn't that at all. It's something else . . .

She turns her face up to the sky, oblivious to the car and its presence, opens her eyes to this rainstorm—feels its strength as it hits her fair and square. She doesn't shiver—no need to—the rain is warm and cleansing. She feels the tension slide away like scraps on a plate—sliding out and away from this place, gone for good. The rain is hypnotic in its beat, therapeutic as it massages her neck and shoulders like a good friend. She is safe; no need to fret or worry, the rain will let her be. Besides, she has been transported to a place free of the elements, where she and her strong lover glide across the shiny wood floor. With her eyes closed, she feels the beat from his breast as he twirls her around in slow motion. Grasping her by the arm and reeling her out on a string before pulling her back in with a snap of his wrist—she comes to him willingly.

And in that instant he clears his throat to speak, mutes the jazz from the stereo, and waves her over. Her eyes open and she looks down. She is young, he can tell—seventeen or eighteen at most. She has a youthful face that is still very beautiful, in spite of tonight's punishment from the elements. It doesn't betray her origin.

“Excuse me, are you okay?” He pauses as if unsure of whether he should continue. But he exhales slowly, watching his breath fan against the windshield and fade into the night. The steady beat of wiper blades drone on in the background. “I mean, it's so late and you're out here all alone . . .”

“I'm okay.” Her soft voice is strong and unwavering. No tension at being at this intersection of time and space.

“You sure?” Concern in his voice. He's staring at her and her clothes that drip with fresh precipitation. The window slides down a bit more, allowing rain to spill in, attacking the leathered seats.

“Yes. This is my home. I'm not lost.” She tips her head up to the sky and smiles.

“I don’t understand? Are you—?”

“Homeless? Yes. But it’s okay. You needn’t worry about me . . .” She begins to walk away towards one of the dark alleys and shelter. But he raises his voice a notch, above the dull roar, causing her to pause and turn.

“Listen, I’m not trying to be pushy. But come in out of the rain. Just for a moment. I want to talk with you.”

It’s almost a plea—his eyes, betraying his need to reach out and connect. And she’s drawn to him. And those pleading eyes.

There is an all night diner up Seventeen Street not far from the bridge. They sit in a booth by the window, because she wants to be close to the rain—to watch it and hear its rhythm. They order eggs and coffee from an aging black man who walks with a limp and scratches his wooly hair a bit too much. It’s almost three am—the old man smiles at them because they are his only customers.

He hardly touches his food. He’s too engrossed in watching her eat—the way she holds her fork and licks the tip as she watches him silently. He’s doing most of the talking, asking the questions. What brought her to this place? And how can she, such a young, beautiful girl, be here by herself? Where are her parents? The questions flow without responses. She finishes eating, mops up the last of the yolk with the edge of her toast and reaches for her bag. She pulls out a box. Inside are four eggs, nestled between soft, colored paper—beautifully adorned with intricate patterns and shapes drawn in dark ink. She holds them up for him to see, as if this will give him the answers that he desperately seeks.

“Take one,” she prompts. He carefully lifts an egg and holds it in his hands. It is beautiful; each one hand-painted with a unique pattern that seems to go on forever, circling round and round without end, like the endless rise and fall of the moon.

“I am an artist,” she says, “a weary soul who paints on eggshells.”

She waits until the old man clears the plates away, wiping the table with a frayed cloth. The rain is back with a vengeance, seemingly pounding the sidewalks into sand. She pauses, stares out toward a lone streetlamp that braves this torrent.

“And this, my new friend, is my life . . .”

The rain has ceased. And he is thankful. It's been six days. Six long days of searching, going street to street, probing damp alleyways and underpasses, those unfriendly spaces between bridge spans that provide refuge for those less fortunate. Those without a home.

His eyes close and he is transported to that place from a week ago—the all night diner where they sat by the window and he watched her eat. He recalls what captured his heart that dank, rain-laden night: a beautifully gifted young woman with talent and no place to lay her head. It confused him, made him angry and sad—that could be him, or his sister, God forbid. What brought people to this break in the road called life, staring out past the edge of a cliff toward uncertainty? Him, snug in his sedan with its rich leather seats, home theater-like sound, soft, robin's egg blue-lit cockpit that calms him and keeps him whole. For the past week that vehicle had been his chosen home. How close was he to the edge of that very same jagged cliff—if pushed by some unknown force would cause him to stumble and fall off?

And so, he has been searching for her, that one who has for that unspoken reason captured him, she who paints on eggshells, a weary soul, so captivating and yet, so alone. With each day passing, a growing sense of anxiety overtakes him, consumes him like a stain that spreads. The intricate patterns, painstakingly festooned in dark ink, ancient hieroglyphics that are vivid and clear when sleep finally comes, eyes no longer able to remain open. Rain that grabs him, scoops him up in its arms and rocks him gently until he gives in to its strength and magic. Those patterns that adorn smooth eggshells, so perfect in their form, each one unique, like handprints, beautifully magical because one can only stare and wonder at its language and meaning . . .

Sunlight sneaks up on her like an old friend from behind, slender fingers covering eyes, blinding her. She stretches her limbs and yawns, anxious to leave the confines of her current lair, an abandoned row house in Southwest DC that serves as home to her and her companions. Her tribe, as she is fond of calling them—brave and proud, like the Masai, nomads who are fiercely independent and strong, foraging for a better way for the flock, a better life. But trivial things like bed and linens, fresh milk and water don't get her down, or take her off track. She is a ship that has a course plotted. It's art that matters most to her. Those patterns of fine lines that like a maze begin at the apex and meander like a stream with purpose until the circle is complete; the line that finds its way home. She knows he is looking for her. And in time, he will find her. That she is certain. In the mean time, there are eggshells to paint. And her journey on the road called life continues . . .

Days ago, a time that seemed to stretch out like highways that angle toward the horizon until sky and hot asphalt become one. When he found himself sitting across from her in the all night diner, studying her features, he closed his eyes and imagined her at a gallery opening—no, that wasn't enough—a museum, yes: Guggenheim, Hawthorne, or the Louvre. Opening night, stars and celebrities out in force—a black tie and evening gown affair, exotic hors d'oeuvres, tall flutes of champagne, patrons striding from ornate room to room, taking in her amazing collection, creativity that flows like milk from the breast. This simple, homeless girl who paints on eggshells. And, yes, he is right there, no more than two clicks away, clad in something a bit off from the others, classy, dark, elegant, like the lines on eggshells . . . and he smiles and waves, softly strokes her hand. This is her night, and he is there to share it with her.

She has bathed in the home of a couple that feed her from time to time when they are in town. She is refreshed, pores scrubbed clean and hair smelling sweet. A carton of large, white eggs are snug under her arm as she hums a tune. She spots him at the corner, his car, that expensive sedan that floats on air, and smiles. She knew he'd come at the first sign of light. Approaching the car gently, she waves and notes his obvious relief.

They go somewhere where they can talk and catch up, like old friends, yet there are so many things that are left unsaid and unknown between them. There just hasn't been the time. She has much to show him. Wooden boxes are stacked in her bag. She pulls out one and gives it to him—four beautifully drawn patterns on eggshells that are so similar, yet utterly different. Four eggs, nestled among torn, aging newsprint because that's all she could find—a present for him, something to remember her by when they are apart. For they will part ways, of this she is certain.

He wants to take her home. Give her shelter. Food, a warm bath, fresh clothes, a sturdy brush for her thick hair. Money so that she can come in from the rain, and a bed that's dry and inviting. She merely shakes her head with a sad smile. Touches his face with gentle fingertips. He doesn't understand. He presses her and pleads. But she is firm in her stare and conviction. She needs to move on, like the dark lines on the eggshells that serve as her map, compass, and guide—Egyptian-like patterns that speak to her in a soothing voice that is understanding yet unwavering. It's about her life and what she's searching for. He doesn't comprehend; she can't help him there. He empties his wallet of crisp bills, presses them into her palm, feeling the tears well up and zigzag down his face like the lines of dark ink in her wonderful artwork. She is grateful for his friendship, his caring and compassion that sear her heart

and soul, warmth that keeps her radiating like coals when a chill hugs the ground. But she can't leave the tribe. Those Masai, as strong and independent as they come, need her as much as she needs them. They all are part of a caravan that snake in and out of forest and brush, concrete and glass—one tribe, one family, on highways that stretch and angle toward a horizon until sky and hot asphalt become one . . .

And so, they part as friends, hot tears that eventually dry on smooth faces—man and young girl. They will see each other again, many times. He swooping down from way up high like an eagle in that shiny, luxury sedan, capturing his prey in one fell swoop. The all night diner on Seventeenth Street near the bridge becomes their friend, their sanctuary from the relentless rain, darkness, and their loneliness.

One day, she's going to open at the Guggenheim, he'll swear to that, stake his life on it. And when that day comes, he'll be there. That impressive place by Central Park, black tie—classy, dark, elegant suit, no more than two clicks away, tall flute of champagne in hand, there to stroke her soft hand, praising her work and life to those who whisper and wonder about the young artist: A weary soul who paints on eggshells . . .

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