

I don't know what love looks like. I'm sure if someone were to fish it out from the big, wooden box labeled "The lost and found," and asked me if it were mine, I wouldn't know the value of it to say yes. I wouldn't even wrinkle up my nose and decide whether or not it looked discernible. Perhaps because I'm too skeptical of what love looks like. I'd over think it, over complicate it, add more lines, squiggles, doodles, X's and O's onto it in my head than there ever really was.

It wasn't like I denied my ignorance, but when my art teacher suddenly announced the theme to our next project—love—I nearly fell off of my stool. Shock sat on my face, ugly, thick, and white.

I glanced at my classmates who were at my large, cluttered, square table, stooped on stools, already vigorously, and happily sketching away. I sighed, surrendering, and returned my eyes to my own sketch book. For the next fifty minutes or so, I tested out different shapes and designs, not liking any one of them.

"Hey Picasso," I heard someone yell across the table. "What have you got there?" I glared at him. It was Miles. He'd dedicated his life to ridiculing me ever since elementary school. He ignored my glare, and instead, turned to his pal, whispering, "You see, she doesn't actually need to use an eraser. She's only pretending that she sucks at drawing."

I heard Miles' friend ask. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, she's *only* won the state wide drawing contest four times. Don't let her appearance fool you; she's actually Picasso in the flesh!" I rolled my eyes.

Emmy scooted closer to me, bumping me with her shoulder. She had brown hair that transformed into shades of brilliant copper when she stood in the sunlight. She and I have been friends for two years now. Not to mention, she was basically my entire social life. "Hey," she smiled at me. "What do you think of this?" She showed me her sketch. "I haven't decided completely on this idea yet...but yeah."

My eyes traced along the contrast of dark and light pencil lines. She had drawn a loving mother holding her child's hand. I thought of getting away with something like that: the power of maternal love. I tossed the idea around in my head like flipping a burger on a grill. It took shape, expanded, and then exploded everywhere. The problem was, if I chose that idea for my project, it would feel like I was constructing a lie. I don't remember what my mother's hair smelled like after a warm shower, her voice, or even what she looked like. A pang of jealousy suddenly

penetrated my heart like a single string on a harp being strummed. Emmy's mom was the greatest and most loving person I had ever met. Just the way she looked at Emmy spelled out love in capital letters. But almost as soon as the teaspoon of jealousy had entered my mind, it left, leaving a residue of guilt. Aunt Magdalene was doing the best to care for my brother and me; there was nothing to be jealous about.

Emmy's drawing wasn't proportioned perfectly. The mother's shoulders needed to be wider, and the angle of the mother's and child's arms were kind of odd. None of this was obvious of course; the tiny flaws would only pop out when she started adding color later on. I moved my lips to speak to tell her my observations, but suddenly I felt really tired. The empty space in my head where the idea for my project should have been only seemed to blow outwards like a balloon, filling my head. I decided that I really didn't have it inside me to tell her about the mother's shoulders and their weird angled arms. So instead, I just said, "Yeah, it looks great."

Several hours later, Emmy and I walked towards the entrance of our school where our cars were parked. The hallway went on and on and on, extending forward for the longest time. Just when I thought we'd be walking for an eternity, it split abruptly in two directions. Off to the right was the exit to the parking lot; left was where they kept the lost and found. I headed left.

"Where in the world are you going?" Emmy demanded, walking after me.

"The lost and found," I mumbled.

"What for? Are you looking for something?"

"An idea for my art project."

"That doesn't even make any sense!"

I paused, tilting my head to the side, thinking for a second. "You're right. It doesn't." I continued left anyways.

"Look," Emmy spun me around. "You're making it *way* too complicated."

I thought of squiggles, X's and O's. "Yeah, I know. What do you suggest?"

"Us." She said simply, throwing her thick, silky brown hair behind her. It poured down her elegant shoulders like beautiful curls of flame.

"Us," I repeated. Not getting it yet.

Emmy said, "Just draw us walking down the hall, arm in arm."

"The theme's love."

"And you think you'll find that in the lost and found?" She looked insulted. "I've read books that explained friendship as a form of love. We've been friends for, what, two years now? Come on, I tell you everything." She bumped my hip with hers, smiling. I stood there, considering for a moment. Emmy pulled out her phone from her pocket and glanced absentmindedly at the time. She did a double take, her eyes growing twice as large. "Oh crap, I've got to go. My brother's going to be home from college in ten minutes."

"Wait," I felt confusion tweak my expression. "You have an older brother?"

"Yeah." She turned, "Sorry, gotta run. See you tomorrow!" She said, sprinting down the hall, leaving me alone in the hallway.

I thought of what she had said, summoning a picture of us in my head. She was right; I made things way too complicated. Love was standing right here in front of me and I couldn't even see it. I felt my heart suddenly inflate with a sort of cheerfulness. My fingers already burned with the desire to start my drawing right then and there.

When I drove up the twisted, snake-like driveway, the house stared at me with its big, hallow-looking windows. The large yard looked black, burnt, and dead. This was where Sonny, Aunt Magdalene and I lived: in a great big empty house, painted in a depressing cemetery-gray.

Long, dark shadows stretched across the huge lawn and onto the porch as I walked up the rickety, gray steps. I didn't bother knocking on the ancient, mahogany door, I knew nobody would answer the door if I did, so I just inserted the keys and swung the door open.

Something huge and square flew past my head. The next one came straight at my face but I dodged quickly out of the way with a fluid motion of expertise. I walked quickly past the living room into the kitchen, hunched slightly in a protective way. I knew this was coming when I got home, but what I didn't know was what happened next. Something as heavy as an anchor flung itself at me. I was completely startled by the sudden, unexpected weight, and went crashing downward toward the thinly carpeted floor. The object beat its fists against me as I struggled to pry it off me. "Sonny! Umph." I said, a pillow bit into my face. I clawed it off. "Get off of me!"

"You ate all the chocolate!" He shrieked at me, furious.

"What are you talking about?!" I said, putting up my hands to block his fists.

"You ate all the CHOCOLATE!!!"

"I most certainly did *not*!" I shouted at him, trying to grab hold of his arms.

"I looked in the drawer and it wasn't there anymore!"

My voice was muffled as he reached for my face. "Did you look in the cabinet by the cereal boxes?" He suddenly froze, his fists stopped beating on me for a second as he considered. Then he scrambled and ran into the kitchen. He pulled up a tiny chair nearly as tall as he was, and climbed up onto the counter, straining his short arms, and rummaged through the cabinet. He pulled out the bar of chocolate and plopped down on the kitchen counter, swinging his legs happily as he peeled the wrapper away and bit into the soft, creamy milk chocolate. I got up off the ground from where I'd been attacked, and rolled my eyes. "You better get off the counter before Aunt Magdalene comes home, or else she'll have a conniption."

I went upstairs, into my room, and shut the door. Turning to my desk, I shoved all my books aside and replaced it with my sketch book and drawing utensils. I pictured Emmy and myself walking down the hallway and started with her figure. I sketched out the generic shape of her, and then moved onto me. After finishing the outline, I darkened the lines, and then drew out the outline of our clothes. I added on layer after layer, delicate line after fine detail. I added on thick loopy ringlets of hair, lively eyes sparkling with excitement. I worked until the sun set. I worked until the moon has risen and the temperature had dropped outside.

I picked up my eraser to perfect the pencil lines where the lead on the tip of my pencil had gone flat. As I rubbed my eraser against my sketch paper, I noticed a tiny strip coming off of my eraser's covering. It irritated me—that tiny imperfection, but I resisted the urge to rip it off because I knew if I did it would just unravel the covering even more.

I was pouring every ounce of my heart into the picture, blending all of my experience. But as hard as I worked on it, I couldn't seem to pull the drawing from its two dimensional flatness and bring life to each shape and figure. It felt like there was a tiny trench in the middle of my drawing, sucking it into the two dimensional world. I picked up my sketch book, turning it this way and that, but I still couldn't figure out what was wrong.

Time, I reasoned, would compensate for what this drawing was lacking. That's all I needed. I could figure it out. I turned it sideways again, hoping that this particular angle would whisper the secret to me. It didn't speak, but it was okay. Even in its beginning stages it looked lovely, like a little blossom waiting for its chance to radiate its brilliance. So I only worked harder on it, pouring out the contents of my heart into each and every stroke of my pencil.

It was after school during art club when I worked on my drawing next. I sat on a stool, adding color to my drawing while Emmy leaned casually over the large, cluttered, square table. I

studied Emmy's face as she talked to me, trying to decide if maybe I had drawn the angel of her face wrong. Perhaps that was what was throwing everything off. "I just can't stand him sometimes." I glanced down at my sketch. Nope, I'd captured her face perfectly. "Sure it's nice that he thought of us and came over to visit from college," I noticed how her fingers reached for my eraser. She picked up it up, fidgeting with its cover. She slid it on and off, on and off. "But he just has no concept of personal space whatsoever." I studied her shoulders. Nope, that was fine too. "You don't understand, he came home, and just *dumped* all of his stuff in the center of the living room." My eyes followed her fingers as they found the tiny strip of plastic. Without an ounce of hesitation, they ripped it off and then threw it gingerly into the recycle bin behind where she stood. The flake of plastic landed on the recycling bin's lid, but didn't quite make it in. I glanced at the eraser. There was a patch of white on the eraser's covering where the plastic had been ripped off. My eyes returned to her face. "And it's just so hard you know?—to deal with him with so much stuff already going on in school." She said, her forehead in creases.

"Yeah, you're right." I said. "But it's okay; things will get better."

"Yeah, hopefully." The clock struck four, catching our attention. Her face turned frantic. "Yikes, I've lost track of time again. I'll see you tomorrow right?" She called back at me, already shooting out of the art room. I didn't bother with a reply. She moved so fast, it didn't matter if I answered at all. She wouldn't have heard me even if I had.

I turned my attention back down to the sketch book in my lap. The beauty of it was unmistakable now. It was the perhaps the most beautiful thing that I had ever seen or created. I was right, time did make a difference. I brought it to life with each fine line. In the drawing, Emmy and I walked down a corridor with bright walls. Her arms were folded over her stomach, like it hurt to laugh so hard. I had a hand on her shoulder, my eyes crinkling in a huge smile.

My drawing now glowed with extravagance. It was everything that I imagined—and more. But somehow I couldn't shake the feeling of it being small, like I was trying to fill a big wooden treasure chest with a tiny, glass marble, like the petals on the lovely blossom wouldn't quite unfurl yet. I tried to reach into my heart and find what was missing.

Suddenly, the cell phone in my pocket rang loud and shrill. Startled, I shot up and my drawing fell off my lap and toppled onto the ground. I fumbled for the phone in my pocket. It shrieked and shrieked until I finally found the SPEAK button. "Hello?" I said, reminding myself that I needed to pick up my drawing.

The voice on the other end was so muffled, I strained to hear. “Hello? Who is this?”

“Susan.”

“Oh. Sonny. Hi,” I said. I had no idea as to how he’d found my number.

“I—Aunt Magdalene—” The pitch of his voice was all wrong.

Confusion distorted my face. “Sonny, what’s wrong?”

“I—I—” I knew that the pauses were from his sobs now.

“It’s okay. Just take a deep breath and tell me what happened.” It took a really long time to pull the thread of words out of him, but when I did, I finally understood. Sonny was home alone. I’d told Aunt Magdalene dozens of times that it wasn’t okay to leave him alone in that house, but she always insisted that he was going to be fine. Of course she had the best of intentions in mind. She thought he’d die of boredom if he came along while she ran errands around town, but I’d told her that it was not okay. *Oh God, I told her.* “Turn on all the lights. You still like that movie with the dinosaurs right? Try to turn on a movie okay?” Like a lightening bolt, I realized that I didn’t have the car today. Aunt Magdalen needed to drive it to work and she wasn’t coming to pick me up until five—one hour from now. To make matters worse, she didn’t have a cell phone so there was no way to contact her. I swore under my breath and told myself to think fast.

Suddenly I heard my art teacher announce that it was time to drive people home. He always offered people rides home after art club. A light bulb went off in my head, “Sonny, I’ll be home soon. It’s okay; everything’s fine. Just turn on all the lights. I’ll be home soon, okay?”

“O-okay...Susan?” His voice broke. “I’m scared.”

“Oh, Sonny. I know. Just take a deep breath; it’s gonna be alright.”

Later, as my art teacher drove three other kids and me home, he tried to talk to me about my plans for college, but all I could think about was how slow the car was driving and Sonny’s scared little face in that big, gray house. I was all tense in my seat, sitting on the edge of it, ready to spring out of the car at any moment. Time went by too slow. The numbers on the clock built into the dashboard seemed to be holding their breath.

As soon as the car pulled up into the driveway, I leaped out the car door. I saw Sonny run through the house when he saw that we had arrived. “Thanks for the ride,” I said, the volume of my voice lost a little to the air rushing past me as I leaped up the porch steps. I jammed the key into the door, twisted it, and shoved the door open.

Sonny stood by the door. His face was stained with tears, his body tiny and small; the relief I saw in him broke my heart. I knelt before him, folding him into my arms. “It’s okay. It’s okay. I’m home.” He sobbed into my shirt, soaking it all the way to my skin. I hugged him tightly against me, listening to the sound of his sobs.

When they slowly began to die, I pulled out a blanket and wrapped it around him. “You want hot chocolate?” I looked at him, rubbing his back. He sniffled, his nose a little pink from all the crying. “You know what? I’m going to make you hot chocolate.”

It was six thirty when I sat warily on the couch, facing the front door. I had lain beside Sonny, stroking his hair until his breathing deepened into sleep. Now it was time to face what I had done. I was ready for Aunt Magdelene to burst through that door and order my death sentence. I’d have hell to pay tonight.

It turned out that I was wrong. Aunt Magdelene wasn’t furious. My situation was much worse than that. She was at that level ten meters above furious, at the point where it read explosive. When she walked through that door, I could see the waves of fury rolling off of her like tidal waves. “I waited for you for *eighty* minutes.” Her each word was like a punch in the gut, slow and precise. “You know how worried I was tonight? I thought you had been kidnapped. *Kidnapped!* It wasn’t until I saw the janitor did someone tell me that you’d caught a ride with your art teacher. Is this some sort of sick joke to you?” I didn’t bother keeping up with her, I just stared silently from the couch. My arms wrapped around my torso as if they’d protect me from the feeling of vulnerability and choke back the words in my throat. *You don’t have a cell phone; I couldn’t have contacted you even if I wanted to.* “I don’t want you to stay after school anymore do you hear me?” Her fury hadn’t decreased much, but I could see the exhaustion setting in. It must’ve been some night for her. She could’ve started round two, but instead, she said, “I want you to go upstairs and *think* about what you did.”

The yellow light from the stairwell peered in around the door when I opened it into my room. I was so angry at Aunt Magdalene that there were tears in my eyes. I watched Sonny's tiny body, burrowed in the blankets as he slept, his body turned away from me, facing the wall. Aunt Magdalene’s voice still rang loudly in my head like a clamoring of bells. I didn't care for her greatly, but she still didn't deserve what I'd done to her. I tried to slow my breathing and yank out my anger by the roots. She must have been worried sick.

I pulled the blankets up higher to cover Sonny's fragilely-built shoulder, but stopped when he rolled over to look at me. His big brown eyes were like warm puddles of glossy chocolate. I gently stroked the hair away from his eyes. Tiny brown freckles decorated his tiny, button nose like microscopic splatters of paint. "Go to sleep, Sonny," I sighed. "Go to sleep."

He caught my hand in mid-stroke and held onto it. His warm brown eyes saw the stray tear that fell down my face before I rubbed it away. The fury still churned within me, but as I looked upon Sonny's face I knew that there was no regret in me for what I'd done. "I love you," he said to me.

"I know, Sonny. I know. Now go to sleep." More tears slid down my face. I squeezed his hand and he began to roll away from me, but then he seemed to remember something. "And you love me too." His earnest eyes held mine, in a sort of decisive way, before he turned away.

As I looked at Sonny's face, I felt something deep move into the empty space inside my heart. It struck me, and suddenly I knew that this was the sensation I was missing the whole time as I constructed my drawing. I turned to my backpack, but with a sort of quiet realization, I remembered that I had left my drawing on the dirty floor of the art room. I imagined the mesmerizing colors and carefully crafted shapes mixing with the dirt on the floor. But I felt no panic. I only felt a sense of clam.

The full picture of my drawing bloomed in my mind, but all I could think of was how anything I tried to do, would only pale in comparison to this moment before me: Aunt Magdalene storming through the house like a tornado, Sonny safe and happy, burrowed in my covers as I stared silently at him, knowing that I regretted nothing of what I'd done.

Aunt Magdalene told me to think about exactly what I'd done. So I did. And I realized that I'd done what I would do a million times over, just to get that same relieved expression on Sonny's face when I walked in through that door. In doing so, I'd found the one thing I'd been searching for this entire time.

What I found didn't make me burst with happiness; it didn't make me think of the color pink or red or cutely shaped hearts, but only made me feel a quiet understanding in my heart.

I strained to look at Sonny's face, just to double check that there were no squiggles, X's or O's. Then I kissed him on the cheek, and pulled the blankets over his shoulder before I flicked off the stairwell lights.