

Are You Related to Pierre Monlux?

I'm too skeptical—that's always been my problem. I remember sitting at the back of art class in seventh grade, watching the red numbers on the clock, only half-listening to Ms. Murkle's presentation. The art classroom wasn't bigger than any of the other classrooms, but it felt more important. There were tables instead of individual desks. A row of sinks stood along the left-side wall, their steel escutcheons splotted with paint. The green door to the supply closet was left intriguingly ajar. And the walls: Ms. Murkle did not plaster the walls with our shitty shapeless artwork. Instead they were covered top to bottom by prints of famous paintings. I remember there being a Marc Chagall, I think "I and the Village," and whichever blurry Monet was on display at the Phoenix Art Museum. As I write this, I'm thinking it would be funny to compare the description above to the one I wrote in my college application essay, to study art in New York City—that description was much more shiny. I think I referred to "wide windows focusing the light of the desert landscape onto my canvas, as if the mountains in the distance were watching me work." In reality there was only a small row of windows above the storage cabinets in the back. A few rectangles of damp blue sky.

My best friend Felix sat at the table adjacent to mine, across the makeshift center aisle. Already he was sexy. He was the tallest boy in the grade. His dirty blonde hair descended in a perfect swoop on his forehead. This was Catholic school, so uniforms were required, and you couldn't express yourself through dress—but Felix had these all-white Cariumas that screamed style. I couldn't believe he was friends with me. I was short and wore Skechers. But Felix would glance over in the middle of Ms. Murkle's class, a small smile on his thin lips, and I'd have to look away before I started laughing. The clock showed 2:37, eight minutes until dismissal. I turned my attention back to the presentation. Paul Klee was on the screen. I knew, even at that

age, what I liked in art—what made a painting capture my attention. Klee’s geometric shapes, like Picasso’s, turned me off. His color at least was better. There’s some good symbolism in “Fish Magic.” Then the slide switched to a painter I hadn’t heard of. Ms. Murkle readjusted her glasses and cleared her throat.

“This is the contemporary painter Pierre Monlux. Born in France during the Second World War, he studied in Boston and teaches in Chicago. Look at the way his monochrome portraits make us question the emotions of the subject.”

I was looking. Monlux had what I wanted. The shapes of his bodies...

Felix waved his hand in the air.

“What is it, Felix?” Ms. Murkle said.

“Pierre Monlux is my great uncle.”

Silence. It was rare for Felix to comment in class, so his voice made people pay attention. I looked over at Nadine Thompson. Her perfect mouth was wide open.

“Is that right?” Ms. Murkle asked. “I didn’t even think about that. Have you met him?”

“Just when I was a baby.”

“Holy cow! How cool!” she said.

I didn’t try to catch Felix’s eye. I was shifting in my seat, assessing the accuracy of his claim, jealous of the look he’d gotten from Nadine. Felix’s last name was Monlux, pronounced MON-lucks, but spelled the same way as Mon-LOO. I’d never heard him mention being related to anyone famous. And it wasn’t out of the question for us to lie to a teacher during class. But that was more about getting to do something together (all going to the bathroom at the same time), or pretending we’d done an assignment. When we got back from winter break or summer vacation we told ridiculous stories to see what we could make people believe. This was different.

It didn't seem like Felix stood to gain anything from lying. But maybe he was bored. Or maybe he knew something about Nadine and art class that I didn't.

When the bell rang, and we went back to homeroom, I tried to meet Felix at his cubby, but he wasn't there. His parents both worked, and he was probably walking over to the cafeteria for afterschool program. I did see Nadine Thompson, standing in front of her sequin-covered cubby, removing a thin black hair tie from her ponytail and shaking her head as her brown hair fell down around her. She widened her fingers to open the hair tie, and slid it onto her slender wrist. Then my mom appeared in the doorway, calling my name.

I had a good chance to ask Felix about Pierre Monlux that weekend, at a sleepover in his basement with some of the other boys in our grade. Before that night I'd tried to find the answer to the question myself. At home after school on Thursday I'd slunk into my dad's office and powered on the old Dell desktop. I typed "Pierre Monlux" into Google, skimmed the many accomplishments listed on his Wikipedia page, and scrolled through images of his artwork, which fascinated me. I found a series of babies painted in blue with their mouths open, their forms cloudy and semitransparent, an effect Monlux achieved by painting in subtly different tones. His female figures were clothed—but the way their breasts pushed against the wispy layers of their shirts made me squirm in my dad's office chair. I drew poor imitations of these figures in my sketchbook, even tried painting one, but I didn't have the technique, and the result looked like an accident. There was nothing online about the Monlux family, except that Pierre's only child was a daughter. I didn't recognize her name.

Felix's house was a large white stucco suburban Phoenix house, tucked into the foothills of South Mountain. The basement was fitted with a giant couch called The Pit. The five of us—

Felix, me, Eric, Andre, and Seth—sat on The Pit, watching Eric and Andre play Halo: Reach on the flatscreen. Seth was still wrapped in his towel from the pool party we'd just gotten back from. I wore a baggy black pair of Felix's athletic shorts. In my chest stirred a warm concoction: the thrill of being with boys cooler than me, mixed with the heavy fear of having my lameness discovered. This combo gave me an edge, a buzz I hadn't felt before.

"You know what made Sophia's party so great?" I asked. Eric and Andre looked up.

"The girls from her soccer. So many of these parties are just the same girls we see every day. I'm tired of looking at Trish Pritchard."

Seth laughed. On the screen, green blood spouted from the head of a robot.

"I talked to Molly for most of it," Andre said, fingering his joystick roughly. "She goes to Jefferson. Said the guys there are gross."

"She was pretty," Felix said. He was perched on The Pit's center cushion, one leg bent and one outstretched, like Adam on the roof of the Sistine Chapel.

"I thought Elise was the prettiest," Eric said.

"Yeah, for sure," said Seth. His hoodie was red with gold lettering: *Moss High Football*. His older brother was the quarterback.

I took a sip of Fanta. I couldn't believe how openly we were talking.

"Elise was definitely the best," I said. "Her hot pink bikini—my god."

Felix threw me a glance that made me wonder if I'd taken things too far. A sharp sound came from the flatscreen and I realized the mission was over—Eric and Andre had died.

"Want to?" Eric said, holding out the controller. I took it reverently. My mouth was open to tell the boys I hadn't played before, because Mom and Dad didn't let me play first-person shooters. Thankfully I let this thought pass. I promised myself I'd be more careful.

“Which button shoots?” I asked.

“X,” Felix answered.

Andre chose an easy level. I shot an enemy invader in the head. “I got it,” I said, smiling. Then Seth’s iPhone dinged.

“Oh my god, Felix, it’s Sophia. She says Elise wants your number.”

All of our heads swiveled to Felix. He scratched behind his ear. A few seconds passed before he spoke, but he wasn’t basking in the attention. He was thinking.

“You can give it to her,” he said, “but I might not reply.”

I laughed nervously. We turned our attention back to the game. While I was trying to reload I got hit by a bullet from nowhere. I handed the controller to Seth. Felix was still outstretched, watching us play with mild interest, the thick muscles of his golden calves resting on the cushion beside me.

Seth, Eric, and Andre were asleep on The Pit by midnight. Felix and I went outside to look at the stars over the mountain. We sat on a swinging bench and he pointed out the Big Dipper. The desert air was warm and light.

“So, did she text you?” I asked. He showed me his phone.

Hey! the message read. It was nice meeting you, did you have a good time?

“No response?” I said.

“I didn’t like her that much. I don’t want her to get the wrong idea.”

I sat in silence, trying to puzzle out why this was the cool thing to do. The soft *who?* of an owl floated above us. The radio towers on the mountain twinkled red overhead. I listened to Felix breathe softly beside me. Then I thought of art class.

“Hey, Felix, remember that presentation Ms. Murkle gave this week? With Pierre Monlux?”

I turned to him. The faint light glided a silver outline across his forehead—the edge of his beautiful wavy hair. His arms were crossed over his chest. His feet were planted on the ground. His eyes were shut, and his face was shaped into a peaceful scowl, like he was working out a beautiful math problem. God damn it, he would’ve made a great painting.

I was thinking of these moments from childhood after my meeting this afternoon with my thesis advisor, discussing my senior project. Yep, that extravagant essay worked—I got into the fancy New York art school. Now I’m in my last year, still surprised by the constant sounds of traffic, the immediacy of the horizon line. I haven’t seen Felix for a year and a half, but Pierre has been a great influence on my work. The thesis is a portrait project. I’m halfway through documenting the bodies of the first-years in my old residence hall. Yes, it’s a voluntary sign-up. No, I’m not talking nudes. I never liked working with the nude models—at least have a little presumption.

“And remind me what the goal of this project is,” my advisor said. His office was a mess of art history books and grainy family photos. A stack of vintage New York postcards was spilled across his desk. I’d been begging him to meet for months.

I was getting the sense my advisor wasn’t just busy—he might not like me. He’s six foot three, in his early thirties. Today he wore a gray *Georgetown* t-shirt and deep blue chinos rolled up at the ankles. He sat in his chair with his arms crossed and his legs outstretched. His upper arms were thick, hairless, offensively white. I hadn’t known toxic masculinity could exist in the art world, especially in such a perverse way—but here was its embodiment, yawning before me.

“Well, I think when people get to college, they have a very limited view of their own bodies,” I started. “So what this aims to do is—”

He grinned a stupid grin. His teeth are so fucking good.

“No. Like what is the project’s *goal*. What do you want to do with it?”

“Oh. Well I want to paint abstract portraits of twenty freshmen and twenty upperclassmen, each in its own color, each color made up of different shades, which will sort of evoke the self-confidence the subject presents to me. I want it to be experimental, in that way.”

“Okay. And you’ve got a few done, then?”

I turned my laptop screen and scrolled through the pictures I’d taken in the studio. There was Jeff, in red, looking down and to the right in uncertainty. And then Breanna looking directly at the viewer, done up in shades of purple.

“So these are real people. You use their real names.”

“Yes.”

“It sort of reminds me of the buildings I did a few years back, in a series shown at MoMA.”

“Yes. That is why I asked for you as an advisor.”

“Well, I mean, if you want to show this in galleries you need a much more coherent thematic idea. You haven’t really convinced me this is interesting. Why should you be the judge of a person’s self-confidence?”

“I’m not. I mean, I don’t know. I do my best to present them however they present themselves.”

He looked closer.

“I’m not saying the work is bad. Your technique is impressive. There’s a little Ali Cavanaugh in these. A little Pierre Monlux.”

“Cavanaugh’s work is far too simplistic. This is much more complex.”

He arched an eyebrow.

“Look. Painting is a personal process, and I want you to take everything I say with a grain of salt. But if there’s one important thing I’ve learned—”

He was cut off by a loud buzzing sound. I shuffled through my backpack and found my writhing cell phone. I pressed the button hard.

“The important thing I’ve learned is that—”

“Shit, I am so sorry,” I said. The phone was at it again.

“Why don’t you put it on silent?”

“Yes, doing that now,” I said.

“Okay. I’m late for another meeting, so let me leave you with this. Cavanaugh’s work is not simplistic. Neither is Pierre Monlux’s. The trick of the artist—especially the portrait artist—is to honor a subject’s complexity, while making the artwork itself appear simple.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I will keep that in mind.” What I wanted to say was *your buildings had no emotion. The MoMA’s curators have zero eye for talent. My art Instagram has thirty thousand followers.*

The wind blew fiercely as I shuffled back towards Broome Street. My roommate Zach had left his bike in the hall. As I unlocked the apartment door and slung my backpack off I felt my phone buzzing again.

“Jesus, Mom, I was meeting my advisor,” I said. “I don’t sit around waiting for your calls.”

On the other end, my mom coughed. She kept coughing, short chortles in quick succession, and then I realized she was crying.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

She gathered her breath.

“Honey, I have some horrible news to tell you.”

“Okay.”

“Felix Monlux died. They found him in his ASU dorm room this morning.”

I felt a low buzzing in my stomach, like I was falling from a bridge.

“Oh, my god,” I said. I sank onto the couch. My bag flopped over at my feet.

“Mom, I can’t believe it.”

“He was such a nice boy. I can only imagine Mrs. Monlux.”

“Jesus, Mom,” I said. “Jesus Christ.”

I heard the sound of a doorknob turning. Zach wandered out of his room and walked over to the fridge. He swung it open and grabbed two PBRs. Without looking up he tossed one across the room and I reached out my hand instinctively and caught it.

“The funeral is on Sunday. Dad is booking you a flight. You have to be here, honey.”

“We going out tonight?” Zach shouted, back still turned.

“Yeah, okay. I can come.”

“The fuck are you so qui—oh shit, you’re on the phone.”

“I’ll have him send you the info, honey. We’ll see you soon. Say a prayer, love. Say a prayer for his family.”

The phone clicked silent.

Cloudy days are rare for Phoenix summers—you have to take advantage. Felix texted me in the early morning. A thick blanket of cirrus clouds stretched across the valley. It was the last week of July. Next Monday, Felix would be a freshman at Moss High. I was off to art school downtown, at my own request. I needed to leave the foothills behind.

Felix answered the door when I rang. He'd just gotten back from Mexico, and his golden skin was glowing. His hair was cropped short, less wavy than I'd ever seen it. He looked like a high schooler.

We agreed we should spend the day outdoors. Felix handed me a shiny blue bottle of sunscreen and recoiled at the cold when I lathered it onto his back. We walked down an alleyway between the stucco walls of his neighborhood, towards the golf course. Where the alleyway connected to the cart path the landscape opened in front of us—sloping brown hills, a muted blue lake, large houses on the other side. South Mountain rose up sharply in the distance. I saw a pair of red sneakers in one of the golf course bunkers, and Felix pointed towards two coyotes trotting between the tee box to our left. The course had been shut down for a few years. “The Recession,” we’d say when we passed it, shaking our heads.

I don’t know why Felix was so talkative that summer day, sharing with me pieces of his life I’d never heard before. It could’ve been because the two of us were alone, and usually we hung out in groups. It could’ve been because he didn’t think he’d see much of me once high school started. Or because of the strangeness that had overcome us all, now that we were moving on to something bigger, something unknown. We sat side-by-side in the dead grass, pulling up weeds and watching the clouds parade across the sky, and he squinted when he looked up, which lit the thin strands of his eyelashes a sparkling gold.

“I’ve got something sad to tell you,” he started.

I laughed and looked at him. “What is it?”

“My parents—they argue a lot, all the time. So much that Eden cries every night, and I have to go into her room and stay with her. Andrew never comes home. Just sleeps at his friends’ houses, a different one every week. And my dad sleeps in the guest room now.”

I had just started swearing, and it felt good to say, “Oh fuck.”

“At first I thought it would end, they would get over whatever it was they were arguing about. But my dad talked to me the other day and said the problems they’re having don’t get solved.”

“Probably money or something,” I replied. I had no idea what I was talking about. My parents had been polite to each other for years. No affection, no yelling, just politeness.

“So I don’t know what’s gonna happen, but it’ll get weirder, going to high school.”

“Do you ... do you think they’re gonna get—” I wasn’t gonna say it if he didn’t want to.

“I think they’re too Catholic for that. But it might be better if they did.”

We fell silent. I looked at Felix watching the mountain, his green eyes slanted open, and something became immediately clear to me, something I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of before. This boy was so much *better* than me. I felt this without a twinge of jealousy, without an inkling of contempt. He was kind to everyone, asked all the unpopular girls to slow dance. He got excellent grades, nearly as good as mine. He could play all sports, he was lector at church, he loved his little sister. I wanted to explain to him the depth of his purity, but I thought this would break the spell of vulnerability that had settled between us. So I tried to be funny instead.

“You know. I can’t believe after eight years of school together, I never kissed Nadine Thompson.”

Felix shuddered, as if waking from a dream. Then he looked over and smiled.

“What?” I asked. “She’s hot.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, shut up. Shut the fuck up,” I said. His grin got wider.

“*When?*” I asked.

“At the hotel where we had the promotion party. The ballroom next door.”

“*How?*”

“It was nice,” he said. “She’s a nice girl. I’m going to leave it at that.”

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the grass. I listened to the coo of mourning doves calling from the palo verde branches. I imagined the taste of Nadine’s mouth on mine, her tiny white teeth nibbling my lower lip. I imagined running my hands over her body, feeling the soft, stitched fabric of her school uniform.

After a few moments she faded from my mind. It was beautiful, in a way, that she’d kissed Felix. There’d be plenty of other girls in high school.

“The best thing that could’ve happened was that bitch breaking up with me.” I said this to Zach as we walked down Mercer towards Josie’s. We ducked under the scaffolding hanging over the sidewalk. A car screeched to a halt at the light on Bleeker Street.

My relationship had ended three weeks ago, when Julianne called me, crying, to say that that was that. We’d gotten into a fight related to the pandemic—she asked me to get tested at the student center every week if I was going to stay weekends at her apartment. Around that time she’d stopped wanting to have sex, saying for some reason it had become too painful. Then, in a bizarre conversation outside my apartment, she’d cried and yelled that she didn’t love me anymore. Two days later I got the call. I’d been missing the single life a lot more than I

realized—we'd started dating in the middle of my first year. Zach said that I'd done three years of studying, and now this was my first year of *college*. The sexcapades are fun, but what's better is getting to go out with Zach and Julio and Tanner whenever I feel like it. Drinking in the apartment, drinking at bars, going to clubs Wednesday through Sunday.

On Fridays Josie's is packed with students. Their masks hung loosely like chin straps as they sipped from classy glasses. Josie's is one of the nicer midtown bars, with wood paneling and flatscreens showing NFL games from California. I stood yelling to Tanner and Julio about my asshole advisor as we threw back shots of Jäger. A group of girls pushed past us. The last one had long dark hair and small silver hoop earrings. She was dressed in a tight red top with a queen anne neck, exposing the sharp straight lines of her collarbones. I knew those collarbones. Her blue eyes caught mine for a second, and then she was past me.

For half an hour we listened to Tanner tell a story about blacking and waking up in a bed with our friend's sophomore sister. Then I saw the girl in red approach the bar by herself. I left the guys and stumbled over. She was standing between two stools, ordering a vodka cranberry from the hipster bartender. I touched her on the shoulder.

"Scuse me," I said, "but you look kinda familiar."

She stared at me blankly. Then her blue eyes sparkled.

"You painted me!"

"What?"

"You painted me. Aren't you the senior doing that project?"

"Oh yeah!" I said, with ridiculous enthusiasm. "You came out so good!" I touched her hand, just barely, the one without the drink.

She laughed. She was cute, really cute, and I leaned in closer. There were goosebumps on her little arm.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“What?” I yelled. “Are you going to the Garage later?”

I don’t in kiss women in bars, especially when the lighting’s that good. And I had no desire to stand there and talk. I needed to get back to my friends. “Hopefully I’ll see you there!” I shouted. She smiled as I walked away.

At the Garage my friends and I danced under the soft gray light of a giant yellow taxi strung up over the nightclub. I think it was Tanner next to me, kissing a girl in white. The music warmed my chest, setting my heart to its heavy rhythm. Time was slow and fast, all at once. The ceiling shifted—the car lurched forward—the bass never stopped. Then the girl in red was beside me. Her eyes sparkled. My hand touched her bare back, guiding her forward, and a shiver ran through me. Her head was on the wall. I pulled her waist towards mine. Her lips were in front of me, on me. The edges of my mouth grazed the hair on her face. I pulled away, stumbled slightly, stood over her.

“My best friend died,” I said.

Her mouth was on my ear. “What!”

“My best friend,” I said. I held her waist in my hands. I wanted to kiss those collarbones. “Died. Today.”

She shook her head wildly. “Come here,” she slurred. Her mouth pressed mine. My tongue slid between her teeth. My hand moved to her chest. As her fingers began to undo my belt, I remembered I’d need to pack it before my flight in the morning.

The last time I saw Felix was at Gracie's in Tempe, the winter break of my junior year. I was back from New York for two weeks. We'd lost touch after our first year of high school, but he'd ran into my mom at the grocery store and she'd told him—as moms do—everything she knew of my life in Manhattan. By the time she got home he had already texted to ask if I wanted to get dinner. I agreed without much thought. I felt like I'd learned a lot in college, and I was excited to compare myself to him, to see if he'd ended up as great as everyone had expected.

He showed up ten minutes late, in a gray ASU sweatshirt a size too big. His khaki shorts went down to his knees. But his dirty-blond hair was long and wavy, swept across his spotless forehead like it'd been all those years ago.

We hugged awkwardly and he asked how I liked New York. I told him a bit about the city, the subway, the buildings, the winter weather. I mentioned my art major, talked about Julianne. He said he was dating a girl named Kelsie, a theology major like himself. I was surprised to hear he was studying theology. He said he wanted to do a masters' and teach in a Catholic high school.

The young waitress brought us our food. Felix watched me pick up my sandwich and bite.

"It's so cool you go to school in New York," he said. "I really love this town. I love the sunsets, the mountains, the neighborhoods. But it would be nice to explore."

I nodded. The truth is I couldn't imagine being stuck in Phoenix.

Felix was looking out the window, at the people walking along the Mill Ave promenade. A woman's Doberman had attracted the attention of five or so kids, who were huddling around her trying to pet it.

“Sometimes I think about the things we used to do together,” Felix continued, keeping his eyes on the window. “I think about how much simpler everything was. There’s something to be said for simplicity. Being told what to wear and where to go and what to do. Sometimes I think I’d be fine going back. I might like it, even.”

He scratched at an itch behind his ear. His jawline had grown stronger over the years, and with his face turned I could see the golden hairs of his patchy beard. I sat in silence, holding my fork loosely, trying to think of what to say. No part of me wanted to return to the past.

“Well. You’d get to kiss Nadine again.”

Felix laughed. I felt good about myself, making him laugh like that.

“Hey. You always said you’d call me when you lost your virginity. What happened with that?” I asked.

He turned his head and looked at me.

“I will,” he said.

“You mean you haven’t—don’t you have a girlfriend?” I said.

Felix shrugged his wide shoulders.

“She had a bad experience with sex in the past. Wants to wait a while. I understand it.”

I shook my head, half in wonder, half in admiration.

“I don’t really know you,” I said without thinking. “I always thought I did, but I don’t.”

Felix gave no indication of having heard this. He chewed his salad quietly.

“I think your artwork sounds really interesting, your mom was telling me about it. You’re into painting?”

“I do portraits. I’m trying really hard to get into a gallery.”

“Good for you, doing that. What’s the gallery process like?”

“Well, you need a project, so I’m planning what I’ll do for my senior thesis. I want to paint a series of portraits of my classmates, each in a different color, to sort of represent the student body in a new way.”

Usually I tried to downplay how much I loved painting, how wholly I had given myself over to a hobby that would probably never support me. But I found that hard with Felix. He was sitting in thoughtful silence, looking at me earnestly. I turned my head towards the window.

“That’s really interesting,” he said. “This might sound weird—but it kind of reminds me of those paintings Ms. Murkle would show us in art class.”

“It’s funny you mention that,” I said. “Some of those artists are still my biggest influences.” Rising in my chest was the contempt I had for myself, for spending seven years in high school and college and never growing beyond my childhood heroes. I also thought—for the first time in years—about Felix’s possible relation to Pierre Monlux. I wondered if I should bring him up, ask my old question at last. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I didn’t want to look childish. I let silence hang between us.

The waitress cleared our plates and left the check. Felix and I each slid in a credit card. He got up to use the bathroom. By the time he was back, the waitress was standing over the table, frowning. I wondered if Felix’s card had declined.

“Which one of you is Felix Monlux?” she asked.

“That’s me.”

“Are you related to Pierre Monlux? The portrait artist?”

I blinked. Felix turned his head towards her in surprise.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But I have no idea who that is.”

The woman turned red. She set the check down and walked away. Felix looked at me, with his beautiful green eyes, and winked.

The funeral was held in the church I'd attended until high school, the one on Ray Road. My entire middle school was there—it was fuller even than on Christmas. My mom and I walked past Ms. Murkle as she was lighting a candle in the vestibule, her hands twisted with arthritis.

We sat a few rows back. There was no sign of a casket, no long procession at the beginning, just a photograph of Felix on a tripod stand. It was some professional picture that must've been taken in college. He was smiling in a white button-down and navy blue tie.

The Mass was heartless, boring, like all Masses. I stopped listening after the first line of the homily—"Well, friends, God has called His servant Felix home, and gained another angel." Instead I looked around at all the older versions of people I once knew. I saw Nadine Thompson standing in the back, in a black dress that was unfortunately very sexy. I saw that girl Elise from the party, heavier than she'd been back then, bouncing a baby at her hip. I saw Eric and Andre sitting together looking solemn. Seth had a beard now, and a prim blonde girlfriend. Then I watched a group of kids I didn't recognize, probably Felix's friends from high school or college, crying together in the back. My mom was a mess next to me. When the Mass ended and the eulogies began she became inconsolable, sniffing loudly into Kleenex after Kleenex. Felix's mom spoke, then his brother, then Eden, all grown-up, the golden skin of her forehead reflecting the lights overhead. Her speech made me feel hollow inside, like my weight was getting sucked through my back. My eyes stung, but no tears fell.

Afterwards my mom paraded around, chatting with old friends. The vestibule was packed with people. I scrambled over to the bathroom. When the door swung shut it dimmed the loud

chatter from the congregation, and I exhaled in relief. I was alone except for a man standing tall above the urinal, his regal chin uplifted, his dark gray hair descending softly to his shoulders. I would've recognized him anywhere.

"Pierre Monlux," I said.

He turned. "Hello. Nice to see you."

"I'm an old friend of Felix's. From middle school. And I'm a great admirer of your work."

"That's nice to hear." He zipped up and stepped backwards, looking at me for the first time.

"Ah, wait," he said. "Are you the friend in art school? You do portraits?"

I froze.

"Yes, Felix mentioned you, when I met him over the summer. Your friendship meant a lot to him. He showed me your Instagram. Your work is very impressive."

"Um. Wow. Thank you."

"Many people think portraits need to capture a person's essence, their entire personality. Why, I don't understand. We don't expect this of photographs."

"The key," I said, "Is honoring a subject's complexity, but painting something simple."

He smiled. He reached into his coat.

"Here, take my card. I've given some of my work to the Phoenix Art Museum. They've put me on the board of directors. I have a fair say regarding curatorial decisions. Why don't we set up a meeting, discuss getting your work on display?"

At that moment, the door swung open, and Andre walked in. He'd been crying. He went straight over to the tissues and plucked two or three. When he turned back around he saw me, and pulled me into a tight hug. Then he was out the door.

"Mr. Monlux. I'll give you a call in the coming week. Being on exhibit would be incredible. Thank you."

He shook my hand. As he opened the door, he turned around.

"Also," he said, "I never knew Felix too well. But I'm sorry for your loss."

On my last night in Phoenix, before I flew to New York to finish the semester, I drove down Central Avenue to the art museum. The atrium was empty when I entered and bought a ticket. I walked through the glossy halls towards the contemporary wing. On the silver walls were large black letters: *PIERRE MONLUX: PORTRAITS AT MONROE STATION*.

I wandered inside the quiet gallery and sat at a bench facing the main wall, on which hung three floor-to-ceiling portraits. A black woman tilted her head slightly to the right. A blonde man's mouth was slightly open. A young girl smiled and looked up. The detail, frankly, was stunning. The shades faded in and out in perfect poetry. The lines delineating facial features were invisible just until you looked at them. The color of the paint had no effect on the feeling in the subject's eyes. I stared at them, one by one, and then I pulled Pierre's card from my pocket and stared at it. A kid, tall and blonde, sat down next to me, and I couldn't stop myself from saying aloud, "My work is shit compared to this."

He laughed. His arms were crossed across his chest. He brushed his hair back from his forehead.

“I wanted to ask you, all those years, whether the two of you were related,” I said. “It’s funny that I never did.”

“You didn’t believe me when I said it in class?”

I smiled. “I wasn’t sure if you were making it up.”

Felix laughed again. I shook my head and gently tore through Pierre Monlux’s business card. A pile of scraps settled at my feet.

“I can’t call him up. My work is so complex—there are so many things I’m trying to do at once. Look at these. They’re beautiful in their simplicity. I have so much to learn about technique, about style. I need to be humble when I stand before my subjects. I can’t try to squeeze them into my vision. And when I’m ready, I should get into a gallery on my own merit.”

Felix’s eyes were closed. He rocked gently, back and forth, looking disturbed.

“How is it?” I asked. “You know.”

A darkness came over him. “Oh, it’s hard,” he said. “It’s worse than you think.”

I started to cry. Within a few seconds I was shaking, wiping my eyes with the sleeves of my t-shirt, trying to catch my breath. I couldn’t understand why I got to go on living, when someone like Felix was dead. I said this.

“I don’t think there’s any rhyme or reason to it,” he said. “But try not to feel too bad.”

I closed my eyes tightly, trying to slow the tears.

“When you get good,” Felix said, “You can paint me sitting on the hill of that golf course. Maybe at dusk, with sunset dripping over the mountain.”

“Oh, absolutely,” I said. “Once I know what I’m doing, it’ll be the first thing I do.”

Felix put his hands behind his head and leaned back on the bench. His green eyes looked up towards the ceiling.

“Can I ask you something?” I said. “When you ask me to paint you like that—is it because you want to be remembered? Or because you want to give me some shot at redemption?”

His thin lips stretched into a smile. I know it sounds crazy, but his body was losing substance—he was starting to fade.

“No, I want to be remembered,” he said. “But I appreciate you asking.”

He looked at me and nodded, and then he was gone.