

He breaks down the cigarette, rolling it between his fingers. Crushing the starched white paper with gentle care, tobacco falls like snow. A little pile collects in the ceramic flower pot dish he's using as a rolling tray. Kankan plays in the background from the car stereo as he pauses, taking a moment to extract a rolling paper from the little bundle they come in. I watch as he repeats this loving process, one practiced thousands of times. He places his thumb on the left side of the paper and gingerly sprinkles marijuana into the ceramic dish with the other hand. Blended homogeneously together with tobacco, it's a deadly mixture. One difficult to refuse. He licks the spliff like a lover, sealing it together. It's beautiful. A perfect cone of destitution.

I coerce the spliff it to my lips and light up, a blast of flame flourishing at the other end.

Darkness retreats from the fire in horror, before quickly setting back in. Diminishing to growling red ashes, the fire is gone in an instant- I take another hit. I'm greedy for the smoke, even though it burns my lungs. I need it, and drag deeply. Tiny ashes float from the tip of the spliff, twinkling to the ground before vanishing. It's a personal winter, the way smoke snows down, isolating me and Earl. I pass the spliff to him. The only sound besides the hip-hop is the slight immolation of marijuana and tobacco, sacrificing themselves for our high.

Earl gazes deeply out into the Denny's parking lot. We're roommates- I'm just dropping him off for a shift.

"When are you off?"

"7AM. Can you pick me up?"

"Hell no, I'll be asleep. You can't take the bus?"

"Yeah of course I can take the bus but it's twice as long- much easier to get a ride."

"Yeah whatever." I'll pick him up. "I'm gonna come in and get pancakes, especially since I'm already here."

He puts his hands up unapologetically, "Giuseppe is working today bro, you might not want to touch those."

We continue the casual banter until the spliff is reduced to ashes. I'm high now. I'm feeling good. The nicotine hits my head and I feel a beautiful rush at the wheel of my car. I'm unstoppable, a titan in many ways. At least that's my headspace while I'm high. The drugs blooming in my system make me feel grounded. Certainly ready for pancakes. Earl and I are a sorry sight as we step out of the car.

Adorned in thrashed hoodies, ruined sneakers, and discolored jeans, we're the spitting image of early 20's failures. Earl's cheeky red hair peeks out of his trucker hat, while my inky black hair is totally hidden in my hood. We're in disrepair, but what else would you expect? Both painters by trade, we're a vestige of artistic society, dying slowly like our medium.

The night grips our shadows, cool winter Colorado air seeping through our layers of clothing. My black 02' impala is already coated in a fine layer of snow. Evidently the hot box wasn't hot enough.

Head still rushing from the nicotine, I stroll carelessly towards the front door of Denny's. Earl follows close behind with less gusto. After all, he's about to start an 8 hour graveyard shift in the kitchen. I wouldn't be keen to go in either.

The restaurant is dead inside. Tucked in the corner is an old man, sipping a cup of coffee. It's too cold— not steaming at all. He doesn't seem to notice or if he does, he doesn't care much. He's reading the newspaper and wearing a bowler hat. Total relic.

The only other occupied table hosts a younger couple. It looks like a new relationship, one which still holds magic and promise. I can tell they're not tired of each other yet by the way they sit

ensemble, not at opposite sides of the table. Their hushed voices, betray little to the soundtrack of the restaurant. Every once in a while, a giggle or a single uncontextualized word slips though, but their conversation is mostly masked by the corporate approved ambient Denny's music. I select a table towards the back, away from the other patrons, and start sketching in my notebook, waiting for a server. Earl's already disappeared to the back, ready to start his shift. I'm coaxing a bird out of the page, something I like to get started with before I plan a new painting.

This is one of the bigger commissions I've ever done, for a CEO of some company. I've been struggling to find the motivation to paint. Or sketch. Or do much of anything. Maybe it's the marijuana, I wonder to myself- still high. Probably, but also it's some sort of artistic block. This painting is huge for me. I'm making a lot of money for completing it, but something feels wrong. It doesn't feel like me, it feels too corporate and big. It's the type of painting that I can start truly calling myself a painter off of. No longer will I be a 'painter' in the hobbist sense. In the colloquial sense. This is a real job.

My thought process and aimless mental rambling is interrupted by someone sitting in the booth across from me. I look up annoyed, it's an old man- the same one who was reading the news paper.

"Sorry to interrupt." He says, obviously, obviously not sorry at all.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes you can, actually- would you do a sketch of me?"

I reply dryly, annoyed at the distraction. "Listen I'm really sorry but I don't have a lot of time, I'm working on a pretty important project."

"Sure, sure." He stares absentmindedly at the door.

Something about him is strange, he looks not just old, but ancient. The lines of his face are deep crags, filled with years of tumult and sadness. His cotton flannel shirt is dark green with red accents, and his jeans are dotted with flecks of dust and stains. I'm getting really annoyed now by his intrusion into my space.

"Look, I've got to get to work," I announce. He doesn't even look towards me as he nods slowly. Something in his movement is weird, it seems classical in an ancient way. Everything about him is part of another era. He reaches for something in his pocket and extracts a business card. In large black Helvetica lettering, it reads, 'Beelzebub'. Slowly extending his arm to me, the movement is strained. We're foils of each other, old and young, tattered in different ways. The air grows noticeably colder with every inch closer his hands get. I notice my hand going up to reach for the card without my permission. I start to panic, pulling my arm away, but it won't move according to my instructions.

"I'd really suggest that you draw my portrait."

I try to stammer out words but they won't come. All I can do is grip the business card, clammy in my hand. The room temperature is almost nothing. I can see wisps of my breath in the Denny's. The reassuring corporate music I'd just been complaining about seems eons away, I can barely hear it.

"Sure, ok." Is all I can make my mouth produce. He flourishes a cracked old man smile and the room temperature returns to normal- I'm able to move again.

I flip my bird sketch to the next page and start on a new drawing, a portrait of an old man. He doesn't move much, and I try hard to capture every detail of his visage. Everything from his cracked denim jacket, indigo bursting from the threads; to his dingy green flannel, a garment

reeking of decay and age. He continues his silence before lighting up a cigarette, right in the middle of the restaurant.

"You want to take a drag?" He mumbles through the cigarette.

"I don't think you're supposed to smoke in here..." He interrupts my thought,

"Oh I'm sure they won't mind. I own the joint."

"You own Denny's?" I scoff at him.

"In a sense. I own everything to an extent."

"You're really not that clever, for the devil I mean. You could have been more subtle."

He croaks out and old man laugh, "Well you can imagine that I've had a lot of years to create an image."

"And you chose old man at Denny's? Snoozefest."

He giggles with old man inflection.

"What's it to you?"

"Aren't you supposed to offer me some kind of deal? Aren't you the devil? Are you slow on the uptake?" I spit venom at him. My hand shutters holding the pencil, trying to keep a line straight despite my nerves.

"A deal?"

"Right? Isn't the phrase 'a deal with the devil'? What are you offering me here? A hit of your cigarette? I'm certainly an addict but I'll pass. I think I'll smoke my own later. Was that it?"

"You don't think the devil gets bored?" He parried my line of questioning.

"After sitting in hell all day I'm sure you do."

"Right so here I am, an old men at Denny's, enjoying my coffee."

"So you've come for no other reason than to bother me into drawing your picture, is that it?"

The devil, as he was, didn't have much to say to that. He just went on with his coffee, not really seeming to care what I thought of him.

"Say I did make you a bargain."

"What's in it for me?"

"Say the bargain had almost no upshot for you."

"Well I'd be hard pressed to accept it. I'm sure you're not just doing charity work either."

"Correct. Actually, I'm here to collect you. You'll die in about 5 minutes. Heart failure. A total freak accident. It doesn't happen often, but it's about to be your fate. The bargain I'm offering you is an extra 5 minutes. In exchange, you'll give me your soul."

"My soul? What do you think I am, an imbecile?" I stop drawing, the pencil catches the edge of the notebook.

"You said I have five minutes?"

"Correct."

I pick up my phone and stare at the top of the contacts list. Far too many people to reach out to.

Far too many people to tell them I love them. Nothing seems appropriate. An instagram post?

Too brash. A final tweet? Sort of ridiculous given the circumstance.

I stand up and head to the kitchen.

"Nice to meet you." I leave a passing comment to the old man.

Inside is Earl, tying his apron.

He's shocked to see me.

"Hey- what are you doing in here?" Inquisitively balling his eyebrows up.

"Let's rock another spliff before you start your shift."

"Are you crazy? I'll get fired."

“No worries-“ It’s not worth the time to explain. I leave and head for the car. The old man is still sitting there, peering at the unfinished sketch I left out on the table.

I figure I’ve got about 4 minutes left. *Beep beep*. The car unlocks and I take stock of the interior. A crushed Redbull can decorates the floor along with a collection of unfortunate chips and coins.

The pack of American Spirits and the weed sit daintily on the back seat. I reach for the grinder and start on a new spliff. Rolling paper in hand I dutifully get to work, fingers numbing in the frigid air. Sprinkling weed into the nest I’ve created, quickly I’ve rolled up another spliff. The old man emerges from the Denny’s.

“So this is how you’re choosing to go out?” I light up.

“Sure what else?”

“No goodbyes?”

“Not enough time.”

“Do you want to finish this sketch of me?”

“Not particularly.”

The spliff burns slowly, sparkling the microparticles of snow in the air with its fiery hairdo. The smoke is hot, soothing my lungs, dragging untold numbers of chemicals into my body. I ash it into a bush, as I lean against the Denny’s building. The old man says nothing, just stares at the nearby highway, each headlight reflecting in his two way mirror eyes. I analyze him more closely, pouring over every crack in his face. His skin is leathery, and holds all the Halmarks of an old person.

“What’s my time?”

“A little under two minutes.”

“Thanks.”

“Much obliged.”

As the angel of death prepares a horrible kiss, the spliff burns down. My life, measured in tobacco and weed, reels between my lips as it burns ever shorter. I try to calculate how much I have left, but I’m higher now. The air feels heavy against me and my internal voice grows louder. It’s telling me that there are things to take care of, people to contact. But in the end, it’s me, alone with my thoughts, devil beside me, as my heart stops.