

A GIRL WHO DRAWS

She had no choice but to draw what she could see, if only to make the terror go away.

But what a strange joy this terror was! No one else could see what she could see, she knew, and she had to make it all known to the world. Create from her sight another world entire. She'll start with the easy stuff. Renderings of Jupiter more real than the gas that makes up the planet itself; Black Holes so vivid they'll suck the light right out of the beholders' eyes...

She'll draw the oceans too. She got too sea-sick that one time she went scuba diving with her cousins and puked on her auntie's tampons (what is a tampon? She did not know, but she could read the package label once she wiped away the putrid mush of apple sauce shame). She did not go into the ocean that day or ever after, but she still knew that no one would be able to rip their hearts away from her sketches of apocalyptic maelstroms found only in the most perilous spheres of the ocean.

And when she was done with that she'd draw the real shit. The scary shit. The source of the terror. The pearly fangs that appear like floating daggers in the dusty blackness below her bed. And... well... more on that in bit... for now, terror has no place where adventure reigns—or perhaps they are co-sovereigns of a living kingdom in this girl's soul. But no time to dwell on one's soul! There is work to be done... she's about to show the world entire universes never before conceived by man! She's no man, after all. She's a fuckin' girl, bitch. And yesterday was her birthday, so now she was turned all the way up to age eleven!

Oh, her birthday. What a shit show. A one act play starring her mother. Everything went down-hill after the entrance. Mother bursts in shouting into her cracked flip phone, the girl rushes to her asking if they could go get ice cream and like a bad actor who can never shift their tone of voice Mother responds by saying, *"Your grandpa is getting sued, I can't get you any ice cream! Can you believe this country? Your grandfather has been running that trinket store for fifteen years at least. Some little shit kid tries to steal and like anyone would your grandpa grabs him and takes him to security. They wait for his mother to pick him up, and instead of disciplining the child, she accuses your grandpa of abusing him! Because he was protecting his store! Is that the freedom in America? When the child has power over the grown person? When the thief is more trusted than the honest working man? All these rich American mothers suing over the littlest things! Suing for their dumbass kids who do for thrill what so many do out of desperation. We can't afford a lawyer as good as theirs! They don't care that your grandpa could lose the store! Lose his entire living! He came to this country so that he could run a trinket store and lose it all in the end!"*

The girl really understood none of this, she never felt like she was from another country or that she could not afford as good a lawyer as other kids. She didn't even know what a lawyer was. She also didn't think her grandpa's trinkets were all that good, let alone worth stealing. So she couldn't gather why they were the subject of so much fuss. But she had long ago accepted her role as her mother's unpaid, unwilling shrink.

Enter her brother. Wandering in after taking the long way from school. Every way was the long way from school. But he always took the longest way. He floundered in, music buds blasting his ears into oblivion. Her brother was never one to say, *"hello,"* or *"afternoon,"* let alone *"happy birthday."* But periodically he'd malaisely pop into her bubble and without any

context blurt out something like, “*I will find out how to live forever.*” Or, “*when I get rich I will only eat Japanese beef because the Japanese massage their cows before slaughter.*” The girl sometimes found these episodes unbearably tedious. And sometimes she saw a special charm in them, since they were only for her.

Not a few minutes after her brother came home did their mother begin beating screams out of him for yet another complaint from one of his teachers. At that point, the girl gave up on having a birthday. Well, good then. Birthdays were just another distraction. And the idea was to always be drawing! And that day she drew a sketch of an octopus squeezing a chrome rainbow of sound out of a cow’s throat, and she captioned the work-in-progress as “*Japanese Beef.*” She was never very good at titles.

Her brother and her mother were her strongest inspirations.

Her brother was so skinny she could see his spine. And in this spine she saw a sharp hook. One she saw their mother put there at birth.

Her brother was born first. But she has a memory of his birth before she was alive. At her brother’s birth the girl was sent up from the swirly wirly soul place to watch the doctors in the hospital room cut her mother in two and wrench her screaming brother out of her. And when they sowed her mother back whole her mother took a hook and shoved it into her brother’s spine and it has been there ever since. And after seeing that, the girl was sent back to the swirly wirly soul place to await her appointed time.

And when her appointed time came, the doctors did not have to split her mother in two. And so her mother saw no reason to shove a hook into her daughter’s spine. But her mother grew eight tentacles just in case. And they have been there ever since.

And this was the source of the terror. Even more than the mysterious fangs, who preoccupied her mind in every moment of life except for when she was drawing. The terror that came from the day-to-day reminder of the pain and falseness of family life. A pain and falseness she would not recognize even existed until decades later.

But enough with these distractions! It is time to draw!

Right now, she only had today. Her birthday is gone, and decades later does not exist. Ok... she’s ready. The blank page stares back at her like an old friend from ages past. Waiting to be filled. Waiting to be penetrated by the sharp point of her pencil. She and the blank page go back to since before time. They are bound by the promise of eternity. They are each other’s destiny. Ah! Wait! She has to have that book read for class by Monday! And she hasn’t even started. Ah, fuck Jack London what does he know? She’s an artist! She doesn’t need school. Or books about snow and dogs. She doesn’t need learning. She can be the dumbest person alive and still create works that would come second only to the majesty of the gods themselves. But she never could know if there were any gods, so she might as well believe she was the best of them all!

Ok, her head’s all cleared up now. Only one more thing to do. She always had to check under the bed before she started to draw to see if the pearly fangs were visible, so that she could work with peace of mind. And when she looked under this time she found no fangs but a stray piece of paper. At the top the paper read, “*The Lonely Story Of The letter Z.*” And she read a story about the letter Z, and how lonely Z felt, because no letter came after Z. And in that moment, she had felt that no one had ever before captured that feeling of loneliness like this story did. And perhaps she began to cry a little. Because it was her! She was the lonely letter Z

after all; who wasn't? Such a universal story!

Only her brother could have written this. She did not waste time wondering how it ended up under her bed, because her brother's papers had a habit of flying out to long-range destinations from the origins of his swamp of a backpack. He never took pride in anything he wrote or did, not like his sister. Her drawings were for posterity, and she knew it. But she had to go tell him how much she loved the story! Even though deep in her heart of hearts, she knew this was another way of avoiding her work for the day. Would she ever sit down and draw?

The girl went to her brother. She found him counting almonds meticulously, and their mother had just been beating him for the second day in a row since her birthday, and he looked as though he was longing for whatever-teenage-boys-long-for, that miserable, boring longing that is always at some point forgotten and useless and regretful, and she thought she might cheer him up by saying to him about his story, "*I love this, what you wrote. I almost cried. Hey, maybe Z wouldn't be so sad if instead of looking at all the letters that will never come after Z, Z looked at all the letters that came before. And they got a kind of... you know... strongness, from knowing that all those letters are there for them.*"

Her brother flicked out of his deranged vacancy only to say, not meanly, but not quite matter-of-factly, only with an unshowy twirl of causticness, "*what do you know, you're just a dumb girl.*" And the girl saw his story wrap itself into a butterfly and flutter onto the edge of the hook in his spine as his head collapsed over his shoulders to finish counting his almonds. These were the kinds of things she saw. The reality of others' emotional life represented in eccentric imagery. And moments of brief and surprising wonder. And she tried to draw it all. If only she'd just sit down and draw already!

She was sorry to have succumbed to this useless distraction only to have her ungrateful shit of a brother insult her for being born a girl. Ok, lesson learned.

"*Don't let your brother's weird shit get into your head,*" she chanted to herself walking back to her sketchbook. She had learned the word *shit* from all the tv her mom watched. Along with *fuck*. And *dick*. And *artist*. They were all much easier to understand than *lawyer*. Especially *dick* and *fuck*. She sat back down over the sketchbook. No more interruptions. She's just going to sit her butt down and draw her little fingers off. Here we go. Oh, wait, no... but... seriously?!? Not now! Another distraction. But this one might be the most unbearable of them all.

Bill Macintosh's long, lean, blonde body came into her mind's eye view. She had seen him again yesterday, all tall and wet and smiling. Gorgeous. Ofcourse she had to fall in love with a fucking blondie! But how could it be helped? Bill's a swimmer with all the body and none of the skill. But what matters besides the body? No one gives a fuck how good he can swim he's on the team so that everyone can worship him in that speedo! And all the other girls wanted him so she had to want him too. Typically, she gave no shits about what other girls thought or did. But in matters of love, it's best to humble yourself before the consensus of the tribe. And the consensus around Bill Macintosh was all but unanimous.

But, you know, she knows him better than the rest. Every time she looked at him she knew he was brimming with a desire to divulge his inner most secrets to her, but with a strong patience he withheld his weaknesses so that he wouldn't burden her. Like a true man! Though, when she looked at him, all she could ever want was to be burdened by his weaknesses. His vulnerabilities. She just knew this was the beautiful tension between them. And only them. Oh the agony! The contradiction in terms! This spark of life that was only hers!

Also, she's pretty sure Bill's really good at math. Not for any reason other than, *women can sense these things*. She had heard on one of the tv talk shows the phrase, "*women can sense these things*." And so, she was confident in her ability to sense that Bill Macintosh was good at math, despite a lack of any evidence to the matter. And math is a much better subject for boys than literature or philosophy. Math boys don't go around pompously pontificating their equations the same way lit boys talk about how they're only in sixth grade and already reading Rilke and Marx. Fuck off.

Women can sense these things. But, "*am I even a woman?*" was the last thought to penetrate her cerebral nerve endings all the way through to the hollowest end of her heart chamber before, like a clarion answer to that very question from the gods themselves, her lower stomach began to contort itself and her head started to spin and she felt maybe she peed herself a little. So she went to the bathroom.

And when she slipped her underwear down between her ankles her heart just about dropped down there with it. The bleeding had come for her at last, like all those women on those talk shows said it would. But she had thought they were just making a cruel joke! This was the last thing she needed. This was more distracting than any dream about Bill Macintosh. This violent, harrowing distraction! How would she ever get to drawing today?

She desperately grated her sullied underwear with a wet tissue, weeping her way through the whole mess of it all. She felt so dirty. So scared. She knew she would be punished. All girls were punished for being dirty and scared. "*What is mama going to say when she sees this?*" But mama was already there, for the girl had a habit of forgetting to lock the bathroom door, and when mama saw what was happening she said, "*Oh I'm so sorry honey I will get you a new pair and show you how to use a tampon.*" And, as though her tears boiled into a volcanic well-spring of hot steaming fury, the girl could only scream, "*what do you know, you're just a dumb girl!!*"

There would be no drawing that day, after all. You can't become a woman and draw pictures all in the same day.

And when the girl checked under her bed that night. The pearly fangs were brighter and whiter than ever. And for the first time, a pair of searing yellow eyes appeared just above them. Some patient monster was lusting after her. Waiting to devour her. Waiting to drink her precious womanly blood.

The next day, just before school, the girl dumped all her sketches into the trash outside. Evidently there were far too many other things to worry about. Now that she was a woman, she figured, she had to put away childish things. All this woman stuff was too important and distracting for her to have time to draw. Though, really, she couldn't stand being a woman. She never figured it would come to this. That she would at last be a woman. But women are so annoying! All of them on the tv talking about should I have a baby should I not have a baby my baby's amazing I hate my fucking baby look at my fat pregnant belly oooohhhh sshhhhuutttttt uuuuuupppppp already! With this goddamn baby business!

Walking to class that morning, she caught Bill's eye. And though they did not speak, she thought of how much she would love to have their baby inside of her. She loved that she was a woman, and that she and Bill could make a baby together. She didn't even know that her body could make a baby until she looked at Bill. No one had ever told her! But when she looked at him, it was like biting out of the tree of knowledge. When she looked at him, she knew everything. All the secrets of the heavens and the earth. The whole gorgeous, sordid mess of it

all. And all these secrets were hers and hers alone. And she could share them all with him, using nothing more than a quick glance. She was the first woman. And he, the first man. And they were bound to fall together.

But destiny had other plans.

At lunch that day, she saw Bill Macintosh and some other tough boys calling her brother a name she'd never heard. *Faggot*. She liked the sound of it, and when she said it, it made her mouth feel all tingly like a sweet and sour candy. Faggot faggot faggot faggot she kept muttering. How funny this word! It was her favorite word now. And she saw Bill pick up one of those big Gatorade containers you see at football games all by himself...he's so strong...Bill. And what a delight that he happened to be friends with her brother! She thought her brother had no friends at all, but now that Bill was his friend she could have no care in the world. Already, the two most important men in her life were standing heel to heel with one another. Amazing.

Bill poured all the liquid in the container onto her brother, and all the boys laughed and ran away. And she laughed, and would have loved nothing more than to run away with them too! But she saw that her brother was not laughing, not running. He was on his knees, hunched over so that the curve of his spine protruded as though wanting to make the hook reach up to the clouds. And he was crying. And she approached her brother like one would approach a cold, wet, hopeless animal. For that was, after all, what he was in that moment. And she reached out to touch him but before she could, little pebbles of words began to cobble out of his quivering lips, saying:

"I'm... I'm sorry."

He was shivering. She took off her sweater and started to dry him off, saying:

"Sorry? For what?"

"I'm sorry I don't..."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry I don't look out for you."

And with that he rose. And left. And the girl was alone now. And within her a feeling began to rise which she had felt several times before, but today she had a new name for it. And today that feeling was called *rage*.

She grabbed the handles of the Gatorade container and dragged it over to the lockers where the tough boys were now smoking. And she spun around like a whirlpool seven times before finally releasing it into the immediate nether, screaming, surprising herself and those around with this viscous display.

But the Gatorade container barely went tumble, tumble, tumble, rumble, rumble, rumble, all pathetic like before morphing suddenly into a short wrinkly goblin with no nose and a single eye that shifted suspiciously from left to right before the goblin poofed itself out of existence. She might have been done with drawing, but she could not stop seeing things. And she knew,

even then, that nothing, nothing, could stop her from being an artist. Not even having to be a woman. She was all the better for being a woman, too! Or not. Maybe she'd never be able to tell. Did it matter?

Panting with exhilaration but unsatisfied with the current result, she approached Bill Macintosh head on and said, pointedly, *"Fuck you, Bill Macintosh. I am an artist who can draw your dick better than you can hold it. You mess with my brother again, and I will get a lawyer to sue the shit out of you. And they will be more expensive than your lawyer. The most expensive lawyer ever!"* And poor Bill Macintosh looked to his buddies, cigarette dangling, unsure of what to say. And now at last she could see the inside of his chiseled chest. And in place of his heart was an ugly, croaking frog. Something she had not seen until this moment. She did not love Bill anymore.

For the rest of the school day she stayed in that unloving mood. Not unloving like the opposite or lack of love. Just not having any love to be directed away from herself. She did not feel happy or sad. And she did not pay attention in class any more than she did (or didn't) already. She let the day pass, without ever thinking of how her time could better be spent.

At home that evening, sitting idly, the girl heard her brother calling out to her from outside. And she went out to see his face. Smiling. The affects of the day's events had not lingered on him. He looked strong. She thought maybe her brother was a good man. Maybe the best man. But she knew she'd never really be able to tell.

He called her out because there was a plane passing overhead. This was the one thing they always did together, was wave at the planes that were passing overhead. And whenever she looked deep enough, she could see if the people in the plane waved back. They always did.

And when the plane was gone they stayed to look at the sky. And the stars. Funny how, whenever she was looking at just the sky, she could only see what she knew everyone else could see too. She found herself saying, *"I'd like to go up there someday, and see the stars up close."* And after another long moment her brother, still looking up, said, *"I finished my story about the Letter Z today... I mean, it doesn't matter because it's two weeks late... but I just wanted you to know. You were right. We can look and see inspiration and eternity in all those who came before us, without needing to look at the emptiness that lies ahead. Like these stars here, they are ancient history. They are our ancestors. So thank you."* This pleased her more than he could know.

Her brother looked down at the grass, and back up to her, before saying, *"you're still a dumb girl, though."* She picked at the grass with her finger and without looking at him said, *"And you're a weird little faggot,"* and they looked at each other for three seconds before their bodies gave way to a sudden explosion of laughter which had their half-grown lungs harness all the wind around them.

And when that was over, her brother rolled over and reached to his swamp of a bag and pulled out from the wreckage a clean and crisp manila folder filled with all the sketches his sister had dumped out early that morning.

"Don't you ever give up on drawing," he said. *"You want to visit the stars? You can do that every day if you draw. No one can draw like you do. No one."*

And in that moment the only thing she thought she could ever know about the world was love. And the best part? Tomorrow was Saturday. No distractions.

She spent the whole of Saturday drawing. Except for when she went to get milk and

taffies from the kitchen. She forgot about Bill Macintosh and his frog for a heart and about blood and tampons, and she forgot about her mother's tentacles and the hook in her brother's spine, because she drew them all. And when she drew them, she released their terror from her soul and felt at peace. Each time she checked under the bed, no fangs; no eyes were there. And soon she forgot about those too. And the strange terror became pure joy, if only for today.

And later towards the evening she got rather tired and a little bored. She plopped onto bed thinking, "*well I'm just going to go ahead and waste all of tomorrow.*" And with that she fell asleep, quite, quite happy.

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