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Incendiary

When you walk into the studio, you have to take a smock from the bin. An old wrinkled shirt, splattered with flecks of dried paint, like old scabs. I button it meticulously, passing a corner with easels and a collection of oil paint tubes in a messy stack. Thick rolls of cream-colored canvas lean against the cinder block wall. The air smells sharply of turpentine, which runs on tap in the back. I think about sitting there for a moment before spotting someone’s piece—probably one of the real art student’s that use the same studio space—forgotten at one of the stations. A somber portrait of a woman in regency dress, her inky black hair in ringlets around her forehead like a dark halo. It's impressive. Almost ready to be framed. I imagine myself pouring a layer of crystal varnish over it, snapping the colors into high-definition, her charcoal eyes hardening into polished obsidian. It scares me how real she seems. I shake my head to bring myself back to reality and place myself safely in an uncomfortable white plastic chair next to the watercolors.

“How are you doing today, Agnes? Watercolor again? You could work with the clay if you like.”

Jessica is wearing a long skirt and is peering down at me from her round glasses. She isn’t pushing me but she sounds concerned. She means well. I smile up at her.

“How’s Jessica. I’ll stay here today, if that’s okay. I think I’m making progress.”

She purses her lips and makes a note on her clipboard.

“Just remember that healing doesn’t happen in a straight line.”

I nod and she hands me a sheet of rough-toothed paper. I hate the way it feels. I hate the way the deckled edges refuse to come to a right angle. Dipping a rounded brush in the clear
water, my stomach begins to knot up. The pressure to choose something to create is suffocating. An entirely unhelpful laminated card taped to the table reads:

Guided Therapy Prompt 1: Use watercolor to paint what’s on your mind today.

My brain conjures up countless images that haven’t left my brain for months. The beach, the sticky heat, the candy-coated blue paint of the Jeep before it was shredded to ribbons on the asphalt. Alec’s face, smiling at me, upturned dimples mirroring my own. “Be spontaneous. Take a risk for once.” Alec isn’t here, but when I remember him saying it I can feel the warm breath on the back of my neck and I can smell the soap on his plaid shirt.

Yeah, that’s not happening.

Guided Therapy Prompt 2: Use watercolor to paint what’s in your pockets today.

I check my pockets and like usual find:

- The yellow bus pass I use everyday to get here. It’s almost out of punches.
- Alec’s lighter. One of those hefty chrome ones. I’m still not sure what to do with it.
- A pair of earbuds that Margaret lent me. She definitely doesn’t want them back. Or at least won’t be calling to ask.

I know Jessica doesn’t really care what I paint, as long as there’s some color on the page before I leave. Opting for yellow, I swirl my brush in the pan lazily, taking my time watching the splayed, wet bristles soaking up pigment.

A girl sits across from me. The buttons on her smock are misaligned and her white cotton t-shirt pokes out from underneath infuriatingly, just asking to be stained with pigment. Jessica comes back and gives her three ramekins of colored sand and a sheet of paper with what looks like a flowery designed coloring page. Carefully, the girl pours the red sand to one of the
outlined petals and uses a paintbrush to carve them out perfectly. The part of me that itches for things to be perfect won’t let me tear my eyes away.

Turning back to my own paper, all I’ve made is an abstract yellow blob. I don’t want to be here, but at the same time I feel jealous that I can’t make something beautiful. Trying to remedy it, I grab for the other colors. Green for a stem, blue for the sky, but I take too much water, and it all begins to run into a confused oil slick, which is actually kind of pretty, but then I keep going and suddenly it’s just a muddied, sopping wet mess, the moisture turning the fibers of paper into a gloppy pulp.

Jessica’s voice makes me jump. “Alright everyone, we’re nearly out of time! Please start doing final touches and putting away your materials!”

The girl across from me decisively swipes up the sand messily into a scooped hand, destroying the perfect borders that had kept every color in its place. Some kind of strangled noise must have escaped my throat because she looked up at me.

“You could have at least taken a picture of it,” I say.

“You’re supposed to destroy it at the end. Letting go of desire and all that. It’s a part of the process. It’s some Buddhist thing.”

I peel the soaked watercolor paper from the plastic table and a corner tears off in my hands. I hate it so much. I make a point of plopping it into Jessica’s hands before I go.

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“Be spontaneous. Take a risk for once.” Outstretching his hand to mine, he offers me a small white pill. So I take it.

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After a few hours, I return to the studio. The door is locked, but I managed to swipe Jessica’s key in the hallway earlier. She won’t miss it. Maybe she’d even be proud of me for coming here on my own time. This is probably what she wants.

When you walk inside you have to take a smock, so I do, even though it’s wrinkled and the paint splatters make me uncomfortable. I take my time rummaging through the materials in the closet without Jessica’s watchful eye, waiting to make a note about me on her clipboard. I pretend that I’m a real student, and that I’m not here because something is wrong with me.

The portrait is still there. Someone has been working on it recently, and they left their paints out. It makes me feel so jealous. One of the laminated cards hangs threateningly from an easel.

*Guided Therapy Prompt: Paint someone you have lost.*

I try to. I really do. But the nose is looking as if it had been squished against a pane of glass and the eyes aren’t staring back at me like the other painting, and it looks so wrong.

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“This is getting ridiculous,” Margaret says over the phone. “You remember how you used to be? Every pencil sharpened before class, everything in order? What happened? I haven’t even seen you in weeks. And now you’re dragging Alec down with you?”

I don’t even know what to say so I just end the call. Nothing I can say will make her less angry. It’s all true after all. I find Alec on the couch and ask him for one of the white pills. His eyebrows knit together.

“We can’t keep doing this.”
But he gives it to me anyway, and he takes one too. And then I take another. And then we drive to the beach, because I wanted to, and he wanted me to be spontaneous. This is what he wanted. Him.

My words are slurring into incomplete sentences, and you know I can’t stand how incomplete feels. I am not in control of myself, and Alec is not in control of the car, and we are on a collision course towards a totally incomplete future where he doesn’t make it out of this.

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After that is when, my memory goes blurry. I was so angry and I was sobbing, and all my emotions were running together like a terrible, muddied watercolor. I can’t tell you if I knocked over the jar of turpentine (but I probably did). I can’t tell you how the lighter ended up in my hand, but I know I did light it on purpose. When the flame found the liquid, I felt a burst of heat on my face. A supernova of my own making as I watched the space around me explode into chaos.

I can’t tell you if that beautiful painting survived (but it probably didn’t).

The flames licked up the sides of the cinder block walls, painting the room in a beautiful orange glow. I know what Jessica’s notes say about orange. Orange is a color that represents ego. Maybe she’s right, but the thing about flame is that it doesn’t care how you analyze it, it will just burn up your notes, and you, and any semblance of fuel anyway.

I have to tell you that I didn’t feel bad when it happened. Nothing can be imperfect, or splattered with paint, or refuse to come to a right angle when it burns. It was spontaneous and yet perfectly planned, destruction was simply a part of the process, and it was inexplicably and perfectly beautiful.