

“Of Muses and Men”

It was winter when Elizabeth Siddall found herself floating in a foreign bathtub. She was twenty-three, fully clothed and staring intently at an unresponsive and unquestioning ceiling. With her ears submerged, she could just barely make out the sound of a paintbrush hitting the canvas and the disgruntled snorts of John Everett Millais, her employer of the moment. I imagine Millais would call out to her, “*Lizzie*, raise your hands please” or “*Lizzie*, bring your chest higher”, and she would smile as she adjusted herself in the tub. Perhaps her mind was distracted by *Hamlet*, or perhaps she was just waiting for Millais to realize the heat lamps turned off hours ago and she was lying in frigid bathwater. It didn’t matter either way; Siddall never said a word to Millais. She floated there, frozen in Ophelia’s pose and frozen in *Ophelia*, the piece Millais carried out the bathroom door with him when his work was done.

Siddall was Millais’s muse. Inspired by her fire-red hair and pearlescent hooded eyes, Millais poured his heart into every detail. His depiction of Ophelia is incredible, as Siddall’s facial expression is painted just as serene and listless as Ophelia’s was meant to be in her final moments. It’s Millais’s greatest work, really. I think every artist truly flourishes once they fall under the spell of a muse—The brush work that was tedious becomes a romantic testament to the body, the choosing of the color palette becomes a private pastime, and suddenly the whole piece is just fantasy given physical form. Before my muse, art was just my way of quieting my neurotic tendencies. I need to constantly be in motion for anything in my life to get done, and

toting around a sketchbook everywhere to work in seemed like an effective solution. I only practiced for the sake of practicing, for the sake of giving my hands something to do. All I wanted from my art was the process. Upon meeting my muse, however, I began to want more than that.

My muse is Viktor from League of Legends, a shitty man from a shitty videogame and a less shitty TV adaptation. Viktor is a thin, pale, probably-Russian-but-could-also-be-Czech man. His features are stark, with unkempt brown hair that tangles around his hollow cheeks and accentuates his long nose. He is incredibly lanky, and he walks with a cane propped under his left arm. He's a scientist and an engineer, and for the most part Viktor is interested in innovation that saves lives, so that he can one day give back to the starving slums he was born in. Every so often he lets out a wheezing, bloody cough to remind the audience that the only thing in his way is time. From a writing standpoint, Viktor is the candle burning at both ends, the spark that is destined to burn out before it blazes, the falling Icarus caught between sun and sea. From an artistic standpoint, Viktor is pretty.

Francis Bacon also had a pretty muse—George Dyer. Dyer was a young, dangerous man who had fallen in with gangsters and criminals alike, and Bacon had fallen for him. He'd label almost all of his paintings of Dyer as simply *Portrait of George Dyer*, because there was no better title in his mind. Dyer himself was enamored by the artistic world. Dyer would attend every gallery showing and drink with the critics, scoffing at their claims and choking at the prices. He basked in the privilege of being the art and not knowing the terms behind it. Bacon loved him for it. But Bacon loved Dyer like broken glass loves skin, longingly through the lacerations. Dyer would tempt fate with an undocumented slew of pills, a glass of whiskey at his lips and on the ready to flush them down his pretty throat. He'd say it was because of Bacon. Not

enough attention, too much attention, Bacon hated him, Bacon didn't hate him enough—A coffin was bound to be a better resting place than their bed, Dyer concluded. Then he'd swallow. He'd do this once, twice, then three times would turn into four, and all four times Bacon would swoop in at the last minute to kiss him and gently pump his stomach, ever the untimely savior to his lover's desired demise. Then came the invitation to the Paris Grand Palais, where Bacon was to be honored in the fall. Dyer insisted on attending the showing as he always had, but Bacon refused to acknowledge him at all when they landed in Paris. Dyer likely clung to him like sweat on the Voie Georges Pompidou, and with nails digging into Bacon's skin, he pleaded with him in a hushed tone. *Say something Francis, talk to me, why won't you talk to me?* I imagine he had to let go when he told Bacon what he would do, gesturing wildly to the shallow water drifting timidly in and out below them. If the innocent French civilians passing by gave them pitiful glances, it was only Bacon who noticed.

Maybe Bacon looked out to the Seine then, or back to the Grand Palais where the rest of his life waited for him. Maybe he thought only of himself before leaving Dyer there. *I mean it,* Dyer could have shouted at Bacon's retreating back. They'd find Dyer's body in their hotel bathroom not long after, and Bacon would attend his event alone. He'd never take another muse, continuing to paint Dyer. "If I'd have stayed with him rather than going to see about the exhibition, he would be here now," he'd tell interviewers. "But I didn't and he's dead." Over a hundred slashed paintings were found strewn across his studio after Bacon died. Photographs of political figures and ex-lovers all remained hanging in moratorium as the lawyers and the art dealers stood baffled by the sight. In the end, only forty portraits of George Dyer remain intact today.

I've painted Viktor four times, inked him fifty-six, fully sketched him three-hundred-and-fifteen and etched him in charcoal once. I've built a home for myself in the hollow of his cheeks, the furrow of his brow and the distance between the mole under his left eye and the one sitting just above the right corner of his upper lip. I never realized how deeply familiar I was with his face until I tried drawing my own recently, and I didn't recognize the beauty mark along the right side of my jaw. If my childhood photos are to be believed, it's been on my face for twenty years now, dark and prominent yet continuously unnoticed. I ended up not including it in my self-portrait, because it felt too out of place. This made me realize that while I've only known Viktor for eight months now, I can capture his face more accurately than my own.

Dora Maar was Picasso's mistress, an incredibly popular title she competed with many other women for. Against his wives and lovers, Maar fought the hardest for his affection and approval. She abandoned her photography to paint with him. She took every beating from him with nothing but obedience. There was nothing Maar was not willing to do for him, nothing she was not willing to be to stay his muse forever. So it was only with an inevitable reverence that after he left her for Françoise Gilot, she turned to Catholicism. "After Picasso, only God," she said. Gilot and Picasso had two children while Maar festered with her hands eternally folded and her eyes shut in solemn prayer. She died quietly at eighty-nine while Picasso died immortal.

I had a dream once where I fucked Viktor's best friend Jayce in an airport bathroom.

In his entirety, Jayce looks as though he were sculpted by an ancient Greek artisan, the kind that would have carved out his shoulders by hand and chiseled carefully at his taut back. Built from the ground up to be six-foot-eight and wide beyond belief, the artisan would have graciously tied ropes around his biceps and calves and pulled him onto a white pedestal to pose in some garden forever. Of course, any real ancient Greek artisan would have left out the thin

scar in his right eyebrow and the gap between his two front teeth, the two traits that bar him from Olympus and deem him human. From an artistic standpoint, Jayce is made to be beautiful, made to be adored from the thick, raven hair he gels back to the dignified shadow he casts as he walks by. From an artistic standpoint, Jayce is pretty. From a personal standpoint, Viktor is prettier.

I don't remember the sex, really. I remember movements. I remember flashes. But what I really recall most is the way I sat beside him after, waiting at the gate for a flight said to be close to boarding.

"You know, in real life, I'd never be your type," I suddenly confessed to him, a sentiment I didn't realize I had. It was insecure, whiny even. It didn't sound right in my voice. I didn't have time to take it back though, as he looked at me with a raised, scarred eyebrow and a soft smile.

"You think so?"

"Yeah," I paused as a call was made over the intercom. All around us, people were getting up from their seats and lugging their suitcases behind them. "I think you're looking for someone else."

He didn't say anything to that, wringing his hands solemnly. I looked away from him then, trying to catch a glimpse of that far off front desk everyone else seemed so intent on finding. I only thought of Jayce as a muse-to-be and myself as a taken artist, because in that moment it felt impossible for us to be anything else. But thinking on it now, Jayce has no interest in art. Like Viktor he is simply an engineer looking to do right by the masses. He doesn't believe in muses or their necessity. If I had stopped clinging to the notion of muses-who-are and artists-who-must and just looked at Jayce, truly *looked* at him, I wonder if I could have seen us people.

But I held to my notion and leaning back in my seat, I chuckled at the awkward nature of it all. Before leaving him for the waking world I left him an apologetic addendum:

“It’s okay. I think I’m looking for someone else too.”

Rembrandt van Rijn’s muse was his wife, Saskia. When they married, it was Saskia’s birthright that funded their lovely home in Amsterdam, and it was Rembrandt’s career that maintained it. He often painted Saskia in extravagant hats and headdresses, with cheap jewelry and thin scarves cascading down her neck. Rembrandt was enthralled by her unyieldingly bright mind and unapologetic sense of style. His portraits meant to depict goddesses, *Flora*, *Bellona* and *Minerva* all feature the same rounded chin and dark eyes, because the closest he could get to their grace was his wife. Occasionally he’d paint himself standing with her or holding her in the foreground, a vow in impasto and in life to be by her side. He stopped painting her when she became ill, however. When she stained her collars with blood and her frame dwindled down to fragile bone, his brush remained still in his hand. He would not immortalize her finality. Saskia’s final moments would remain precious to Rembrandt and their family, and the world would remember Saskia as Rembrandt always would, in golden yellows and glossy hues.

When Viktor is twenty-nine, he is unaware of the disease the writers have set inside his chest. It has not taken hold of him like it will when he is thirty-four, and all he can think about is how little time he has left. Instead, his hair is neatly trimmed and there’s a pink flush to the rise of his cheeks. He smiles when he’s twenty-nine, quirking the left corner of his mouth and letting the mole sitting above the right-side fall. This is the way I like drawing him most, handsomely gaunt and stoically gorgeous. I can keep him like this forever. So I do.

If I woke up one day, and nothing of Viktor was left but the ways I've depicted him, I'd be fine. I'd pull out the drawings sitting in the bottom of my desk, move the paintings out of the closet, carefully pry the charcoal sketch off my clipboard and arrange them all around me on the living room floor. I'd run my fingers along the heavy-set lines I save for his eyelashes and trail them gently over the lighter ones I use for his mouth. I'd admire them for hours. Maybe days. Then, when I was done, I'd start a new piece. I wouldn't mourn for him or bury him with poetry and flowers. I'd just move on.

I think there are two kinds of people in this world: Those who can only love and those who can only be loved. I fall in line with the former, because as an artist all I can do is love. Art is about depiction, the depiction of things real and unreal but all of it immortalized by the artist's hand. No one immortalizes something they do not love. If I could tell Viktor this, I would say it while straightening out his cravat and dusting off his vest, feigning intimacy before using him for my fifth painting.

"In a way, I do love you," I'd say. "And in a way, that means you can't love me back."

I wrote a draft of this piece once where I claimed not to know how he'd respond to that. I had said something about how strange it would be to force breath from graphite lungs and words from paper-thin lips. It was poetic and pretty and poignant and a lie. He'd start by tilting his head to the right, then smiling at me with pity.

"You've distracted yourself," he would tell me. Straightforward as always, he'd move in closer, the thud of his cane succinct and sharp. "Don't you remember why you chose *art*? It wasn't to love, or be loved, or settle yourself on one or the other."

I'd try and interrupt him, but he wouldn't let me, ever the infallible, relentless man-of-science. He'd click his tongue instead and place a cold, bony hand over my eyes. In the dark of his palm, I'd hear him whisper, low and close and overwhelmingly reverent.

“It was to create *something*.”

In my head, the scene ends when he lifts his hand, and I realize I'm standing there alone.